

## **INTO PERFORMANCE**



*Into Performance*

**Japanese Women Artists in New York**

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Midori Yoshimoto

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## **INTO PERFORMANCE**



## INTRODUCTION

This study is the first in-depth and comparative examination of the Japanese women artists Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi, and Shigeko Kubota. These artists made significant contributions to the development of international performance and intermedia art in the 1960s by bridging avant-garde art movements in Japan, the United States, and, to some extent, Europe. Unusually courageous and self-determined, they were among the first Japanese women to leave their country to explore their artistic possibilities in New York. While some other Japanese women artists left Japan around the same time, this thesis focuses on these five artists because they departed from traditional art making toward unconventional art forms such as performance art.

While the term *performance art* did not disseminate until the late 1970s, I am using the term retroactively to refer to an art form that emerged in the early twentieth century and was revived in the 1960s, in which artists employ their own bodies as means of artistic expression.<sup>1</sup> I also occasionally use the term *performative*, an adjectival form of *performance*, which was originally coined by the philosopher J. L. Austin and was later applied by art historian Kristine Stiles to describe the ontological nature of the Fluxus movement. Stiles used *performative* in the sense that “the ‘meaning’ of many Fluxus events resides precisely in the act of their performance.”<sup>2</sup> Building upon these former usages, I characterize the art of these five women artists as performative because the utmost value is found in its *performativity*. Their works often involve actions, whether they are part of their creative process or viewers’ interactions.

In addition to performance art, this study also examines other intermedia works by these five Japanese artists. The term *intermedia* was revived in 1965 by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, who discovered it in the writings of the poet Samuel Coleridge. With this term, Higgins referred to the “field between the general area of art media and those of life media” — in other words, otherwise indefinable media that fall between preexisting categories.<sup>3</sup> The term was overpopularized internationally in the late 1960s and became conflated

with *mixed media*, *multimedia*, or *technology art*. In this book, I am using the term in a sense close to Higgins's original definition. The title of the book, *Into Performance*, refers to the transitional period in which the five artists experimented with various media and found their way into a new medium of performance. In this sense, these five artists always worked in intermedia. In breaking down distinctions between art and life, I believe that performance functioned as a catalyst to open up traditional boundaries across various arts, thus existing itself somewhere among them.

Furthermore, I consider that performance helped the five artists to free themselves from existing preconceptions about art as well as from their culturally constructed behaviors. *Into Performance* also refers to the transformation of these artists' lifestyle from that of traditionally confined Japanese women to that of internationally active artists. In its expanded definition, *performance* here suggests the five artist's self-empowerment through the acquisition of their artistic language and their ability to articulate that language. Through tracing these artists' transformations, this study aims to illuminate their experimental spirit.

While the significance of this study lies in the fact that the five artists are examined in the same historical context, I am aware of a danger involved in grouping individual unique artists by their ethnic and gender identity. Not all artists necessarily agree to be discussed in such a sociological context. My intention, however, is by no means to isolate them from the international context. It is, rather, to supplement the previous study with another dimension. Because a large part of the five artists' activities can be considered international, their origins and formative period in Japan lack critical attention. I hope my study can bring to light the often-ignored sociocultural issues involved in their careers. In addition to recontextualizing these artists in a sociological frame work, my goal is to reveal the five artists' originality through comparisons.

Four of the five Japanese women artists in this study began their careers in the male-dominated, conservative Japanese art world. The limitations of this restrictive environment were what led them to leave Japan for New York. Kusama, Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota independently decided to come to the United States between 1957 and 1964. Unlike the other four, Ono spent portions of her childhood and college years in the United States and decided to remain in the United States after 1957. Although she temporarily returned to Japan in 1962, she felt rejected by the Japanese art world and came back to New York City in 1964. While four other artists wanted to pursue their artistic career in Japan, it was relatively difficult for women to live there as artists. Japanese society allowed few alternatives to the traditional women's role of becoming *ryōsai kenbo* (good wives and wise mothers).<sup>4</sup> In addition, patriarchal values and a strict order of seniority controlled the Japanese art world. Although some women became core members of various avant-garde artists collectives in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they were not taken as seriously as their male peers were. Some scholars have investigated Japanese

artists' immigration to New York, but women artists have not been examined fully in these studies. As such, I hope this book will be the first substantial study of Japanese women artists in the West and a significant addition to both Japanese and Western art history.

One of my aims is to fill in gaps in the history of the avant-garde art by bridging the East and West, as the artists in this study have done throughout their careers. Ono, Shiomi, and Kubota were involved in some Japanese avant-garde art movements in the early 1960s before returning to or moving to New York City. As Paul Shimmel's introductory essay for the 1998 exhibition *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979* has demonstrated, Japanese artists set a precedent for the international performance art movement. Starting with the Gutai group and Kyūshū-ha in the late 1950s and continuing onto the Neo-Dadaist Organizers and Hi Red Center in the early 1960s, Japanese avant-garde artists radically purged traditional art making and emphatically used their bodies as the locus of artistic expression, like the Futurists and Dadaists in Europe in the early 1900s.<sup>5</sup> Much of this remarkable history of Japanese performance art, however, has not been introduced to the West in detail. Gutai has been often singled out in this enormous legacy. This is largely due to a small number of studies done on this theme in Japan and the language barrier that restrains Western scholars from studying it. By providing a selective history of Japanese avant-garde artists' collectives and discussing their possible influences on Western art, this study hopes to revise the common narratives in the historiography of the avant-garde, which usually ignore this remarkable artistic and cultural dialogue between East and West.

As a symbol of the land of the opportunity, New York City had acquired a utopian image for Japanese avant-garde artists, and it gained extra importance for Japanese women artists for two reasons. First, by relocating to a foreign city, they freed themselves from Japanese social constraints on women. Second, as the center of the art world, New York provided a stimulating environment for developing their artistic concepts. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, New York saw an explosion of various avant-garde art movements. New Music, Happenings, Fluxus, New Dance, Minimalism, and Pop all emerged within this same short period. Breaking away from traditional concepts of art, these movements sought to blur the boundaries between art and life. While Japanese women artists used New York as a test ground for their individual artistic explorations, they also contributed to the development of American avant-garde art movements, especially as active forces in performance-oriented movements, Ono influencing the formative period of Fluxus; Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota joining Fluxus slightly later; and Kusama staging her so-called Happenings in the late 1960s.

Fluxus offered a community to the artistic activities of Ono, Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota. Organized by Lithuanian artist George Maciunas in 1962, Fluxus started out as a loose-knit group of downtown New York international artists who sought to defy the institutionalization and commodification of

art through the mixing of text, music, objects, and performances called “events.”<sup>6</sup> Ono was influential in the formative period of Fluxus from 1960 to 1961 now known as “proto-Fluxus,” and kept an ongoing relationship with Maciunas and the group through the late 1960s and 1970s. Shortly after her move to New York, Saito became involved in Fluxus in early 1964 and worked closely with Maciunas for four years until she moved to Europe. She made a significant contribution to the group through her production of Fluxus objects and invention of playful chess sets. Shiomi and Kubota joined Fluxus around July 1964. Although Shiomi stayed in New York for only a year, she continued Fluxus activities through the mail after she returned to Japan. Kubota kept her involvement with the group until Maciunas’s death in 1978.

While Kusama’s Happenings did not start until 1966, she produced performative photographs of herself situated within her own environmental sculptures as early as 1963, and some of these caught the attention of American artists, including Allan Kaprow, the initiator of the Happenings movement. While Kusama did not intend to affiliate herself with the movement, Kaprow included her works in his groundbreaking 1966 book *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings*, thus authenticating Kusama’s precedence in the international art context.

Despite their active participation in the New York art scene, these Asian female artists found it difficult to gain recognition in the American art world. In the 1950s and 1960s, most New York avant-garde artists and their supporting critics were still predominantly white men — with a few exceptions. Ironically, by moving to their dream city, Japanese women artists were doubly removed from the center of the American art world by their ethnicity and gender. Memories of World War II, especially the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, had not faded in the minds of older generations of Americans. For more than three decades, racial and gender barriers were among the factors that obstructed these artists’ recognition and led to their marginalization in American art history.

Besides this fundamental problem, the changes in these women’s lives and careers also prevented them from being properly evaluated. After 1967, Ono became so closely associated with John Lennon that her earlier avant-garde activities were forgotten or seen merely as eccentric by the public. Similarly, Kubota’s artistic achievement was overshadowed by that of her husband, Nam June Paik. In Kusama’s case, her presence gradually faded in the United States after she moved back to Japan in the early 1970s. Because Saito was involved in New York Fluxus for a relatively short period and she lived a nomadic life until settling in Germany after 1979, there is a shortage of literature on her work. Shiomi’s stay in New York was even shorter, and she became considered mainly as an avant-garde composer in Japan. These artists’ moves became large factors for their exclusion from American history. Furthermore, as Japanese artists abroad, these artists’ activities outside Japan also fell out of Japanese art history.

After the late 1980s, due to the sustaining efforts of their supporters and the shifts in the art world, Ono, Kusama, and Kubota gained renewed attention from Western art historians. They were studied through both thematic and individual retrospective exhibitions. Scholarly interest on Ono and Kusama is especially surmounting. Unlike the other three artists, Saito and Shiomi have not been given as much attention from art historians; they have, for instance, yet to become subjects for monographs. Thus, the two chapters on Saito and Shiomi in this publication will be the first monographic texts on them. By providing both biographical and art historical narratives for these relatively underrepresented artists, this book hopes to resituate them into a history from which they have been excluded.

While monographic studies have been done on Kusama, Ono, and Kubota, they have never been discussed collectively as Japanese women artists in New York. Hence, the sociocultural implication of their Japanese female identity has never been examined. Despite the geographical diversity and the continuation of the five artists' activities to the present, this study primarily focuses on the period at which their paths crossed in New York. The two decades between 1955 and 1975 roughly encapsulates these artists' periods in Japan, their activities in New York, and their subsequent pursuits of individual careers. In so doing, this publication enables the historical assessment of these five Japanese women artists collectively for the first time.

In addition to achieving these goals, this project contributes to the increasing scholarship in performance art. Until recently, the performance art that these five artists created during the 1960s has been situated on the periphery of art history. Performance art has resisted classification by nature, largely because of its hybridization of the visual arts, theater, dance, music, poetry, and ritual. Fundamentally, its ephemeral and nonmaterialized format has challenged the canonical notion of art as object. Performance art has existed as an antithesis to mainstream art and culture. In recent art historical discourse, it has been reevaluated as a catalyst for the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> In her essay for the *Out of Action* exhibition, Kristine Stiles has stressed the historical importance of "artists' actions" (by which she refers to performance art in a broader sense) in "removing art from purely formalist concerns and the commodifications of objects" and in re-engaging "both themselves and spectators in an active experience by reconnecting art (as behavior) to the behavior of viewers."<sup>8</sup> These two elements are also critical to the performance works by the five Japanese women artists, and thus their works should be considered within the context of the international performance art movements.

While these individuals were certainly involved in the emergence of performance art in the United States, their importance in this history has been generally overlooked for three decades. In the 1960s, Carolee Schneemann, one of the first women artists to use her body in her artwork, was early to credit Ono as "the only artist" she knew who made body art before herself.<sup>9</sup> The limited literature on performance art during the following decades

reevaluated male performance artists first, and then, the women performance artists of the 1970s. A gap in the reception of performance art by male artists and female artists delayed the proper assessment of the latter. As Lucy R. Lippard has pointed out, “Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies they are immediately accused of narcissism.”<sup>10</sup> Such an accusation, however, was also used by feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s, who criticized works by women performance artists of the 1960s as self-indulgent.

Among the wide range of scholarship of performance art, women’s performance art of the 1960s remained one of the most neglected topics. In her discussion of women’s body art after 1970, Lippard merely mentioned that the work of Yayoi Kusama, Charlotte Moorman, and Carolee Schneemann, among others in the 1960s, had “an important element,” but she overlooked their influence on later artists.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, women’s performance art of the 1960s was out of scope in Moira Roth’s groundbreaking publication *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980* because women’s performance art became strongly associated with feminist activism during the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> The significance of earlier women’s performance art was often minimized due to their ambivalence toward feminism. The multivalent intentions of women artists during the 1960s made it difficult for critics to categorize and historicize their works, and in some cases, led to the misconception that their works affirmed the male objectification of female body.<sup>13</sup>

In the mid-1960s, however, women artists still lacked the language for expressing feminist issues and cohesive organizational support for women. While some important publications on early feminist views, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, were available in the United States by 1963, the politically active feminist movement did not emerge until 1968, when the first National Conference of Women’s Liberation was held in Chicago.<sup>14</sup> When asked why women artists did not unite in the 1960s, Schneemann replied, “Because we were one anomaly staring at another. Only men could authenticate us.”<sup>15</sup> Her comment suggests that women artists were evaluated only by male standards. Thus, it is not fair to judge the values of early women performance art by how clearly their work addressed feminist issues.

Despite their different focuses, women’s performance art during the 1960s and 1970s actually had much in common. In her introduction to Roth’s *The Amazing Decade*, art historian Mary Jane Jacob has noted that an overwhelming percentage of performance art in the 1970s was by women. Jacob cites two reasons for this phenomenon. First, performance art was more accessible than the male-dominated media of painting and sculpture. Second, it had greater possibilities for addressing personal and political issues.<sup>16</sup> These two factors may also apply to the first generation of women performance artists. Schneemann has similarly emphasized the feminist nature



of performance art by characterizing it as “subversive in the eyes of patriarchal culture” because it represented “forms and forces which cannot be turned into functional commodities or entertainment, remaining unpossessable while radicalizing social consciousness.”<sup>17</sup> Although the feminist movement did not fully emerge until the late 1960s, women artists such as Kusama, Ono, and Schneemann had begun exploring their female identity in their work and expressing their critical attitudes toward the male-dominated establishment at the beginning of the decade.

Women’s use of their own bodies in art marks a critical turn in art history. In the early 1960s, Pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Tom Wesselmann returned to the female figure in their work after abandoning abstraction. Although the female body had been one of the most popular artistic subjects throughout history, Pop artists blatantly associated it with consumer culture and presented it in a fetishistic, exoticized manner. As historian Sally Banes has noted, “[T]he female body was stereotyped as consumer and consumed in the many ways that the culture at large pictured it: domesticized and made exotic; the passive subject of the male gaze in the fine arts and a fashion item; a symbol of fecund, animal-vegetable nature and of human sexuality. All of these stereotypes were interwoven, for they relegated women’s bodies to strata that were trivial, passive, unassertive, Other.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, many artists of Happenings, as well as Pop artists, treated women’s bodies merely as sexual objects. Amid the proliferation of sexualized female bodies in avant-garde representations, women artists asserted their own bodies as active subjects in performance art. Women artists, including the five Japanese artists of this study, reclaimed their bodies as active agents of artistic creation before the women’s liberation movement emerged. Their impact on women’s performance art, however, has been generally overlooked.<sup>19</sup> By studying these previously underrepresented artists, the book will resituate them within the emerging critical context of performance art, thus contributing to the revision of the common historiography of the avant-garde.

This study ultimately aims to highlight similarities and differences of the five artists in a comparative fashion in order to demonstrate their originalities. Divided into six subsections, chapter 1 contextualizes these artists within a historical context combining both Japanese and American art history. Chapters 2 through 6 will be monographic chapters on the five artists and the content will be discussed in a chronological order. These chapters will include discussions of several consistent themes, such as their identity issues and the importance of performance in their art. The study concludes with observations derived from the previous chapters and a consideration of these artists’ influences on later generations.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Historical Background and Common Issues*

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Buckminster Fuller . . . explains that men leaving Asia to go to Europe went against the wind and developed machines, ideas and occidental philosophies in accord with a struggle against nature: that, on the other hand, men leaving Asia to go to America went with the wind, put up a sail, and developed ideas and oriental philosophies in accord with an acceptance of nature. These two tendencies met in America, producing a movement into the air, not bound to the past, traditions, or whatever.

—John Cage, *Silence*

*I*n this chapter I will lay out some historical background in order to establish commonalities among the five artists—Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi, and Shigeo Kubota—under discussion. The first three sections will focus on Japanese background and the three others on American background. While the five women artists have been discussed mostly in the context of Western art, it is equally valid to situate them in the context of the Japanese art world in which they formed part of their artistic foundations. First, in the section “Particularities of the Japanese Art World,” I will introduce some problems inherent in the Japanese art world, such as the

strict notions of seniority and hierarchy that led many Japanese artists to leave their country.

The second section, “The Emergence of Women Artists in the Postwar Japanese Avant-Garde,” provides a brief history of the emergence of Japanese women artists and a selective history of Japanese postwar avant-garde art movements at the same time. Despite there being considerable lack of literature on contemporary Japanese women artists, I was able to gather the previously dispersed information to form a brief history of postwar Japanese women artists. My aim here is to situate the five women artists in this particular Japanese historical context. This second section then shifts to selective historical narratives of Japanese avant-garde artists’ collectives with a specific focus on their use of artists’ bodies in performance. Among numerous Japanese artists’ collectives that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the groups I have chosen were the most radical, characterized by their inclinations toward action-based art. Since these collectives, with the exception of the Gutai Art Association, have rarely been known in the West, they will be introduced here as contemporaries of Happenings and the Fluxus movement. This section also highlights female members of these avant-garde movements who can be seen as predecessors to or contemporaries of the five women artists under discussion in their struggle in the male-dominated art world and in their employment of multimedia and performance.

The third section, “The Happenings and Events Craze in Japan,” discusses how notions of Happenings and events were introduced in Japan, and how Ono, Shiomi, and Kubota were involved in this process. These three artists in particular had direct interactions with contemporary Japanese avant-garde collectives, and may also have influenced them. Their knowledge of or experience with Japanese avant-garde art movements would contribute later to the New York avant-garde.

The fourth section, “Leaving Japan for New York,” situates the five Japanese women artists within the history of Japanese artists’ emigration to the United States, and points out what particularly attracted them to New York City. The fifth section, “East and West Meet in New York,” addresses the resurgence of American interest in Eastern philosophy and art that paved the way for the reception of Japanese artists in the United States. This section argues that close artistic exchanges between Japan and the United States around 1960 helped enable these five artists to bridge two cultures and their arts. The last section, “Breaking the Mold of Japanese Women,” introduces a brief history of Western reception of Japanese women and examines the sociocultural implications of Japanese female identity in the 1960s.

### Particularities of the Japanese Art World

Unlike Ono, who lived with her family in Scarsdale, New York, after 1951, Kusama, Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota started the early part of their artistic ca-

reers in Japan. Although Ono did not spend the 1950s in Japan, she experienced hardship in the Japanese art world while she was temporarily back from the United States between 1962 and 1964. Although all of these artists were rather successful as women artists at the time in Japan, they eventually realized the limitations of working within the Japanese art world, and decided to challenge themselves elsewhere. Leaving their home country in order to seek opportunities abroad became an established pattern for ambitious Japanese women artists who emerged after the mid-1960s. Despite the fact that this pattern is still present today, only a few scholars have actually made an issue of it. In order to investigate the root problems underlying this phenomenon, I will first analyze the particularities of the Japanese art world and then discuss the situation of women artists within that world.

Mirroring tradition-bound Japanese society, the Japanese art world has been controlled by the strict order of seniority and the politics among various artists associations usually known as *bijutsu dantai* or *kai*. As Bupendra Karia has noted, “Japanese-style painting (*Nihonga*) has a hierarchical privilege over Western-style painting (*yōga*), and male supremacy is the accepted norm.” Karia adds that “[W]omen may also be recognized for their achievements, however, for them, being at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, the scrutiny is much more stringent.”<sup>1</sup> It has long been difficult for women without the right connections to acquire a position in the male-dominated *bijutsu dantai*.

One of the most peculiar problems inherent in the Japanese art world is that there has been a large gap between traditional art and modern art since modern art was imported from the West after Japan’s reopening of its trade in 1868. The notions of *Nihonga* and *yōga* were born in the process of Westernization during the Meiji period (1868–1912). In order to modernize the entire nation, the Meiji government eagerly promoted the importing of Western technology and knowledge, including art. In 1876, the Japanese Ministry of Industry and Technology founded the Technical Art School (*Kōbu Bijutsu Gakkō*) and invited an Italian Barbizon painter, Antonio Fontanesi, to teach oil painting there. Although the nationalist movement in reaction to rapid Westernization forced the school to close in 1883, Western-style painting became accepted as an official medium to be taught at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1896. By this time, Western-style painting, by which was normally meant oil painting, was given the term *yōga*, while the Japanese traditional painting acquired the term *Nihonga*. Since then, *yōga* and *Nihonga* have coexisted as official disciplines, accepted by the government while polarizing the Japanese art establishment, but *Nihonga* has always enjoyed a slightly privileged position over *yōga* in terms of acceptance in the government-sponsored salon and the acquisition of national awards. While *yōga* assumed a counterposition to the established *Nihonga* until the 1930s, it was regarded as a part of the establishment after World War II. In opposition to *yōga*, which was still dominated by modernist figurative styles like Japanized Fauvism, younger artists began to work in more abstract styles, including that

of the French *art informel* in the 1950s; this abstract art acquired the separate, general term *gendai kaiga* (contemporary painting).<sup>2</sup>

Evolving within this complex history of Japanese modern and contemporary art was the equally complex system of the Japanese art establishment *gadan* (literally, “painting platform”). *Gadan*’s original system, established in the Meiji period, was centered on the official government-supported salon called *Nitten* (an abbreviation of the term for the Japan art exhibition sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Education; it was called *Bunten* before 1946), and on semiofficial salons including *In-ten* (the Japan Art Academy exhibition) and *Nika-ten* (the Second Section Exhibition). The frequency with which an artist was accepted at these salons defined her standing and the price of her works in the Japanese art world. The selection of works in these salons, however, was not democratic — it reflected the order of seniority and politics among several powerful *bijutsu dantai* (the term can be used in the singular or plural). In the first half of the twentieth century, *bijutsu dantai* were formed by artists sharing a certain ideology or artistic style; they often held *Kōbo-ten* or “open invitation” exhibitions at which nonmembers could compete with members. A young artist was expected to seek membership in a *bijutsu dantai* whose artistic style and philosophy matched hers. Each *bijutsu dantai* usually had as its leader an established artist who acted as a mentor to younger artists in the group. Essentially feudal in its character, the *bijutsu dantai* provided its members with security and a place in the hierarchy, as well as an opportunity to show works in its regular exhibitions, in exchange for their commitment. Although *bijutsu dantai* originally emerged in opposition to *gadan*, by World War II many of them were regarded as part of the establishment.

During the war the totalitarian government banned all art exhibitions except those dedicated to war propaganda. Contrarily, in the following period of the American occupation of Japan, propagandist art became the focus of accusation,<sup>3</sup> and the conservative style associated with prewar official salons gradually lost its relevance in the Japanese art world. Amid the regenerative atmosphere of rebuilding the nation and its culture, artists reformed and democratized the *bijutsu dantai*, which became the main force of the postwar *gadan*. Synchronized with this shift of power was the start of various juried exhibitions sponsored by newspaper companies, which assumed major economic power in the mass-media renaissance of the postwar period.

By the late 1950s, however, the *bijutsu dantai* and various juried exhibitions became the establishment as well. Mainly due to the fundamentally conformist nature of Japanese society, artists could hardly survive without affiliation with a *bijutsu dantai* because certain *bijutsu dantai* were influential in these juried exhibitions. Emerging in opposition to the entire *gadan* were the avant-garde (*zen’ei*) artists, who worked in unconventional styles and media and who usually remained independent or formed groups of their own, as well as participating in nonjuried exhibitions like the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition (1948–1964), which was supported by the newspaper com-

pany Yomiuri Shimbun. Young artists gradually found alternative venues in which to present their works, but they often had to fund their own one-person or group shows at rented galleries.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentally, the avant-garde artists were not economically well-off. Many public museums of modern art were built after 1951, but the majority of their budgets were spent purchasing renowned Western artists' works or borrowing works from abroad for exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> Because Japanese art history did not cover twentieth-century Japanese art until recently, both curators and critics of modern art studied mainly European and American modernism. Until the 1980s, Japan had only a small number of contemporary art collectors buying works by Japanese artists. Reflecting the Eurocentrism of museums and critics as well as of the mass media, most contemporary art collectors in Japan were interested in works by Western artists whose reputation was internationally accepted. The majority of Japanese collectors were only interested in Western modern masters, including the French impressionists, and Nihonga by renowned artists. Most commercial galleries did nothing more than meet these needs. Only a few commercial galleries, such as the Minami and Tokyo Galleries, contributed to the discovery and promotion of emerging Japanese avant-garde artists.<sup>6</sup> The only known nonprofit gallery in 1950s Japan, Galerie Takemiya, which was founded by an owner of a painting supply shop, held exhibitions of emerging artists curated by the foremost contemporary art critic, Shūzō Takiguchi.<sup>7</sup> Besides these small venues, young artists in avant-garde art had few opportunities for exposure.

### The Emergence of Women Artists in the Postwar Japanese Avant-Garde

Chances for public exposure were even slimmer for women artists, who were often segregated as *jioryū* (literally, artists “in the manner of women”) by the public. The term had a contemptuous connotation of bourgeois women indulging themselves in an artistic hobby, and only in the 1980s, with the emergence of a large number of women artists, did it become obsolete. Before World War II, societal pressures on women to conform to the patriarchal system were so great that many serious women artists needed to remain single by rejecting their families' recommended marriages or by cutting family ties.

Another fundamental problem was that Japanese women did not acquire equal educational opportunities until the late 1940s. Before World War II, even high school education was divided by sex. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Meiji government established girls' high schools (*kōtō jogakkō*), with a curriculum focusing on domestic matters such as education, cooking, and sewing, in order to grow “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*) to strengthen the nation.<sup>8</sup> The highest education most women could acquire was through the Joshi Shihan Gakkō (Teachers College for Women) or *Sen-shū Gakkō* (Two-Year Professional Schools), but these institutions focused

mostly on domestic matters or gender-defined occupational training such as sewing. While several private women's universities, such as the present-day Tsuda Women's University and Tokyo Women's University, offered more diverse curriculums even in the prewar period, only women of higher-class backgrounds could afford to attend these universities.<sup>9</sup> Women were largely banned from four-year national universities until the late 1940s.<sup>10</sup>

For women who wanted to pursue art beyond the high school level before World War II, there were even fewer institutions of higher education available. The earliest was the present-day Joshi Bijutsu Daigaku (Women's Art University), founded as the Joshi Bijutsu Gakkō (Women's Art School) in 1900. Later the Nihon Bijutsu Senmon Gakkō (Nihon Art Professional School; 1916), Tama Art University (1921), and Bunka Gakuin University (1936) were founded—all in Tokyo—to allow women to study art. Another option, which women outside of Tokyo often took, was to learn from particular mentors or go to private painting schools (*gajuku*) or institutes (*kenkyūjo*). Some serious art students in Tokyo went to private schools or institutes in addition to universities. Even though these women strove to become professional artists, art education available to them was much limited compared to what was available to men.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Japanese women had not sought feminist advances such as suffrage before the war. The first demand for women's suffrage is recorded as early as in 1878; the first question-and-answer session on women's suffrage took place in the Japanese House of Peers in 1919, and there was generally a strong organized women's movement for suffrage in the Taisho period (1912–1925).<sup>12</sup> These earlier feminist movements, however, ceased before yielding any significant social changes because a strong nationalist propaganda started to influence feminists to adapt nationalist strategies during the 1930s. After World War II, women's suffrage was finally realized and the Japanese educational system was changed to allow women to acquire an education equal to that of men. Consequently, previously male-dominant fields of study such as art saw a dramatic increase in the number of women students.

Within the field of art, there was yet another gender-based division between traditional Japanese painting and crafts and the relatively new fields of Western-style oil painting and sculpture. While traditional arts were regarded as favorable hobbies for women, the new media were reserved for men. Women were more successful in obtaining higher positions if they pursued Nihonga or other traditional arts.<sup>13</sup> Yūki Ogura (1895–2000), for example, was one of the first women to be regarded as modern Nihonga masters.<sup>14</sup> Employing a Modernistic style inspired by Henri Matisse in the traditional medium, her work received acclaim in such semiofficial salons as In-ten. Fuku Akino (1909–2001), another Nihonga painter with Western subjects, became an associate professor of Japanese painting at Kyoto City University of the Arts in 1949, at a time when there were no women professors in *yōga* at major universities.<sup>15</sup> In the field of calligraphy, Tōkō Shinoda (b. 1913)



became the first prominent woman artist. She radicalized the traditional medium by pushing abstraction and dynamism to the extreme. Her work was shown not only in calligraphy exhibitions but in exhibitions of abstract art.<sup>16</sup> By crossing the boundaries between calligraphy and Western-style modern art, she invented her own field and as such surpassed male artists.

In the fields that were generally associated with Western modernism, on the other hand, women artists had more difficulty acquiring status and recognition. In the medium of *yōga* or oil painting, Yuki(ko) Katsura (1913–1991) was one of the first women to gain relatively high recognition. She was accepted to the 1933 exhibition of one of the most established bijutsu dantai, Kōfū-kai, and subsequently in the prestigious exhibition of Nika-kai in 1935, but she was quite the exception.<sup>17</sup> As a female artist who worked in the pre-war period, Yukiko Shimada recalls that it was difficult for women artists to be selected for the limited number of juried exhibitions, and women could hardly become members of any bijutsu dantai that gave men priority.<sup>18</sup> Even Setsuko Migishi (1905–1999), who was already recognized as a very talented artist by the 1930s, was never given any status in a bijutsu dantai.<sup>19</sup>

While the number of women artists increased, the system of the Japanese art world did not change quickly enough to accommodate this change. Dissatisfied with such a situation, eleven women artists founded the Joryū Gaka Kyōkai (Association of Women Painters) in November 1946 in order to unite women artists to overcome the male-dominated art world.<sup>20</sup> Their annual nonjuried exhibitions allowed any applicant to exhibit her work. Although the exhibition adapted a juried system ten years later, the association served as a center for women artists' activities during the immediate postwar years. Except for this loose-knit association, however, there were at the time no other organized activities among Japanese women artists.<sup>21</sup> Many women artists started to become independent of organizations and sought opportunities in various juried and nonjuried exhibitions. There were more exhibition opportunities after the war because major newspaper companies such as Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri all started organizing annual exhibitions and new galleries emerged.

As the number of women artists steadily increased during the 1950s, more women artists began to work in unconventional media and styles that were inclusively called the *zen'ei* (avant-garde). Their works were primarily in Western media such as oil paints, print, sculpture, and assemblage, although some utilized traditional Japanese materials such as Japanese paper, ink, and mineral pigment. Their styles varied from realism to abstraction. Most of these women artists graduated from two- or four-year colleges and started their careers by presenting their works in various public exhibitions. One of the earliest survey exhibitions on Japanese art of the 1950s, organized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum in 1981, featured only six women out of eighty artists.<sup>22</sup> Although this ratio may not reflect the actual ratio of women artists to the total number of Japanese artists in Western media during the 1950s, it at least suggests the increasing presence of women artists in the

avant-garde arena. More than the half of the six women artists remained independent without affiliating with any particular bijutsu dantai, while others belonged to avant-garde artists' collectives.

The five women artists in this book fit into the category of independent women artists. Coming from relatively wealthy family backgrounds, they were provided higher education in liberal art. The newly acquired equality for women motivated them to pursue the field of art and to remain independent. They disliked politics within traditional artistic organizations and preferred exploring opportunities on their own. Among the five, Kusama experienced the earliest success in the mid-1950s when she gained public exposure for her work and won the attention of some influential critics who introduced her to galleries in Tokyo. Ono had started her artistic career in New York around 1960 before she returned to Japan temporarily in 1962. During her two-year stay in Japan, Ono performed her events at several venues, including the Sōgetsu Art Center, where the emerging experimental artists and musicians were actively presenting their works, and Naiqua Gallery, an alternative space for avant-garde art. The three other artists sought opportunities individually in the early 1960s: Saito showed her paintings through the annual Women's Independent Exhibition; Shiomi presented her solo and group concerts at regular concert halls and the Sōgetsu Art Center; and in 1963, Kubota held her first solo exhibition at the Naiqua Gallery. These venues represented the limited spaces in which women artists could show their works.

Japan in the late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the emergence of many avant-garde artists' collectives. Kusama's first solo exhibitions in Tokyo in the mid-1950s coincided with those of Jikken Kōbō and the Gutai Art Association, though she had no direct involvement with either of these collectives. After 1960, more young artists' collectives emerged. Compared to the hierarchical organization of conventional artists associations, these artists' collectives were relatively democratic, allowing more involvement of female artists. In addition, unconventional media such as assemblages and performance, which these avant-garde collectives were exploring, gave opportunities for women artists to become pioneers. Ono, Shiomi, and Kubota in particular had active interactions with some of these collectives, and their experience in the Japanese avant-garde art scene shaped early phases of their artistic directions. In order to understand this complexly interrelated historical context, it is necessary to trace a history of Japanese avant-garde collectives. The following is by no means a comprehensive history, but rather an overview of the development of performance art with a focus on the female participants in these collectives who can be considered predecessors to the five women artists under discussion in this volume.

Rapidly recovering from the damages of the war, Japan witnessed the emergence of what could be called "intermedia" trends in the 1950s. Borrowing Dick Higgin's term *intermedia*, I am here using it retroactively to call the collaborative experiments across various artistic genres in early 1950s Japan,

represented by those of the Jikken Kōbō (Experimental Workshop) in Tokyo and the Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai (Contemporary Art Council; often shortened as Genbi) in Osaka.<sup>23</sup> The cross-genre collaborations of Jikken Kōbō seem especially close to the notion of intermedia in Higgins' sense.<sup>24</sup> These collectives were characterized by an optimistic progressivism that reflected the regenerative atmosphere of Japan in the immediate postwar period. After the symbolic death of the Japanese empire in World War II, Japan experienced radical sociopolitical, economic, and cultural transformations under American occupation. This dramatic change and the chaos that accompanied it provided a freedom for Japanese artists' radical experimentation.

It was not coincidental that the artistic rhetoric of purging the art of the past and regenerating new art for the postwar period echoed that of the Dadaists in Europe and Japan after World War I.<sup>25</sup> While the performances and intermedia activities of Japanese Dadaists such as Tomoyoshi Murayama and his group MAVO in the early 1920s were not chronicled until recently and were not well known to Japanese artists in the 1950s,<sup>26</sup> those of European Dadaists and Surrealists were introduced through books and art magazines.<sup>27</sup> In the immediate postwar period, Japanese art became internationalized, with frequent artistic exchanges with the West. Japanese artists considerably increased their knowledge of the contemporary Western art that was introduced to Japan through exhibitions and art magazines. This internationalization coincided with a renaissance of the Japanese mass media, which had been suppressed during the war. Observing this rapid change, art critic Ichiro Haryū coined the term *international contemporaneity* (*kokusai-teki dōjisei*), claiming that Japan had become part of the international art community that shared a legacy of modernism and civilization.<sup>28</sup>

The earliest among the Japanese postwar avant-garde art collectives, Jikken Kōbō was founded in Tokyo in 1951 by a group of young artists working in such diverse media as painting, sculpture, photography, music, and light design. Named by Shūzō Takiguchi, Jikken Kōbō's declared purpose was to "combine the various types of art, various art forms, reaching an organic combination that could not be realized within the conventions of a gallery exhibition, and to create a new style of art with social relevance, closely related to everyday life."<sup>29</sup> Through Takiguchi, the group learned about the intermedia works of European Dadaists, Surrealists, and the Bauhaus.<sup>30</sup> Between 1951 and 1955, the group was actively engaged in ballet productions and musical concerts that explored innovative collaborations of the stage set, costumes, lighting, and music. Their most innovative works utilized what was then considered cutting edge technology—the automatic slide projector and the tape recorder.

Hideko Fukushima (1927–97), a young painter with a progressive mind, became the only female member of Jikken Kōbō. Before her engagement in the group, Fukushima was showing her semifigurative oil paintings at different exhibition organizations, such as Joryū Gaka Kyōkai and Shichiyō kai. After her involvement with Jikken Kōbō, Fukushima's paintings left behind

the figurative for an abstraction composed of pure geometries. For example, a semiabstract figure in *MP* (1950) represented the Military Police, then the prominent part of American occupation forces in Japan, while *Response of the Red Wind* (1955) became an amalgam of circles and squares. The circle or bubble form may have been inspired by Fukushima's experience in creating a slide projection show entitled *Minawa wa tsukurareru (Form Is Created)* (1953), in collaboration with her brother, composer Kazuo Fukushima.<sup>31</sup> The form became a central motif in Fukushima's paintings, which explored the constantly shifting relationship between field and form. As part of the group's collaborative work, she also designed a stage set and costumes, respectively, for two ballets, *The Beggar Prince* and *Pierrot lunaire*, in 1955.

During these years of group collaborations, Fukushima was no less active than her male peers. With the support of the group's mentor Takiguchi, Fukushima's paintings gained early international exposure, beginning with the Eighteenth International Watercolor Biennial at the Brooklyn Museum in

1955. During his first trip to Japan, Michel Tapié, the critic and spokesman of French art informel painters, singled out Fukushima as the most promising of the Jikken Kōbō and included her works in several exhibitions in Europe. Thus, by the time of the group's dissolution, Fukushima had become fairly prominent in the group.

In a photograph by Kiyoji Otsuji, another member of Jikken Kōbō, the impeccably dressed Fukushima is juxtaposed to a female nude whose face is covered with a cloth (see fig. 1).<sup>32</sup> Fukushima expresses the discomfort of being seen by averting her eyes from the camera. Whether this gesture is her performance or the photographer's direction, her averted gaze symbolizes the complex situation of the contemporary female artist in Japan. Whereas women used to be the models of male artists, now they had acquired the right to become artists themselves. The paintbrush that Fukushima holds attests to the right of creation for women. Compared to an anonymous fe-

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1. Kiyoji Otsuji, *Portrait of an Artist*, gelatin silver print, 1950. Photo courtesy of the family of Kiyoji Otsuji/Chiba City Museum of Art.

male nude, however, Fukushima seems uncomfortable, facing the persisting reality of a woman serving as an object for male artists. The photograph curiously suggests the ambivalence of a woman's simultaneous roles as subject and object at that time.

Five years younger than Fukushima, Atsuko Tanaka (b. 1932) became a prominent member of the Kansai area based Gutai Art Association (1955–1972), one of the longest lasting of the Japanese avant-garde art collectives. Following the guidance of their mentor Jirō Yoshihara in doing “things that no one else does,”<sup>33</sup> young artists in Gutai employed unconventional media as well as performance. What distinguished Gutai from Jikken Kōbō was the immersion of the artist's body into performance. Inspired by the actions of contemporary Japanese avant-garde calligraphers, art informel painters in France, and American action painters such as Jackson Pollock, they started to present the artmaking process itself as a performance. Gutai's celebrated works include Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* (1955), in which the artist grappled with mud in a hole dug in the ground (see fig. 2). Gutai's performances were documented by photography and film and were introduced to

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2. Kazuo Shiraga, *Challenging Mud*, at Ōhara Kaikan, Tokyo, 1955. Photo courtesy of the Kazuo Shiraga/Ashiya City Museum of Art and History.

the United States through their journals, an article in the *New York Times* in 1957, and a traveling exhibition that originated at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1958. Although Gutai's impact on art outside of Japan is yet to be explored, Allan Kaprow, the initiator of Happenings, acknowledged, "Gutai provided some justification for the early Happening."<sup>34</sup> Unlike Jikken Kōbō, the group Gutai was eager to promote its works abroad, utilizing the emerging power of the mass media. This strategy of self-promotion would be inherited by the avant-garde collectives of the early 1960s.

The prominence of women artists in Gutai also set it apart from other Japanese avant-garde collectives in the postwar period. Among its total of fifty-nine members, the group included as many as thirteen women artists, including briefly affiliated members.<sup>35</sup> Among the early members of Gutai were three women, Fujiko Shiraga (b. 1928), Atsuko Tanaka, and Tsuruko Yamasaki (b. 1929). Yamasaki experimented with unusual media, including tin foil, to make sculptures and paintings, and Shiraga worked with the texture of rice paper and oil painting. Tanaka had worked with unconventional media such as electric-circuit bells before joining Gutai, and she became the only female member to participate in the group's performances.

Tanaka caused a sensation with her work *Bell* (1955), which was first exhibited at Gutai's first exhibition at Ohara Hall in Tokyo and subsequently at the Third Genbi Ten, a juried exhibition organized by Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai that was held at three venues in Kansai. Consisting of twenty round bells connected in an approximately 120-foot circuit, *Bell* created a series of ear-piercing sounds that traveled through the gallery space and returned to a switch that was activated by the viewer. This innovative work prefigured both participation art and sound installation art. An exhibition review in *Asahi Shimbun* reported that "an unexpected work of twenty bells by a young lady [*ojōsan*] managed to enter the Genbi exhibition" and featured a photograph of Tanaka dressed in modern feminine attire, posing to set up the bell circuit.<sup>36</sup> The article's sensational tone implied the "unexpectedness" in finding not only an unconventional artwork but also a well-to-do young woman devoted to vanguard art.

Like Fukushima of Jikken Kōbō, Tanaka was also interested in stage costume as a medium of artistic expression. At Gutai's stage performance in 1956, Tanaka presented a *Butaifuku* (stage costume) performance. She wore many layers of dresses that were made of horizontal bands of cloth so that she could quickly remove one band after another to reveal the dress underneath. Her stripping gesture resembled Kabuki theater's *hikinuki*, in which an actor quickly changes his costume by taking off the exterior layers of dresses. Both the shape and color of Tanaka's dress were rapidly transformed, with colors turning from green to white with black stripes to pink. When she was finally left with a tight-fitting black leotard, light on the stage was turned off, and light bulbs attached to the leotard blinked like Christmas lights.<sup>37</sup> Consisting of two different circulatory systems, the bulbs emitted infinite com-

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3. Atsuko Tanaka in *Electric Dress* at the Second Gutai Art Exhibition at Ōhara Kaikan, Tokyo, 1956. Photo courtesy of Atsuko Tanaka/Ashiya City Museum of Art and History.

binations of blinking, producing what one colleague called an “otherworldly breathing.”<sup>38</sup> Butaifuku performance remains rather unknown in the West, though Tanaka’s earlier work *Electric Dress* (see fig. 3) was highly acclaimed. Consisting of more than 190 multicolored lightbulbs connected by cords, *Electric Dress* was so heavy that it needed to be suspended from the ceiling while Tanaka wore it for a demonstration as a part of the Gutai exhibition in Tokyo.<sup>39</sup>

Documentary photographs of this latter work have frequently appeared in recent publications on Gutai in the West, eventually leading art historian Paul Schimmel to claim that Tanaka “costumed herself in it in the tradition of the Japanese marriage ceremony” and her performance “anticipated 1970s feminist art.”<sup>40</sup> Although Schimmel’s interpretation was solely based on retroactive and subjective judgment and ignored Tanaka’s intention, his reading has situated Tanaka’s work within the context of feminist performance art. According to Tanaka’s statement, however, she did not have feminist intentions in her work; rather, her motivation was to set up the electric bulbs to

show “the extraordinary beauty that cannot be created by human hands.”<sup>41</sup> Electronic lights mysteriously diffused and dematerialized Tanaka’s body into a circulation of energy.

Just as Yoshihara associated electric lights with blood circulation, the bodily metaphor is inherent in Tanaka’s work. But the point of the work was to transcend ordinary reality to reach the extraordinary, which connected the work to the realm of the other world.<sup>42</sup> In this respect, Tanaka’s work may also allude to the challenged condition of a human body after the atomic war. While her male colleagues such as Shiraga had attempted to reclaim the living human body through violent physical actions *against* objects, Tanaka emphasized the transience and fragility of the body through calm actions *with* objects. While members of Gutai were the first Japanese artists to use their bodies in onstage performance after World War II, Tanaka became the first Japanese woman artist to do so.

Like Fukushima’s, Tanaka’s career was influenced by Tapié, whose function as the most powerful art dealer to promote Japanese art in the West resulted in Gutai artists’ concentration on producing paintings rather than making works in a variety of media. After presenting another onstage dress-change performance, *Hikaru enban to fuku (Shining Disks and Dress)*, in 1958 and a gigantic untitled sculptural environment with electric lights in 1959, Tanaka ceased to create multimedia works and came to focus on producing paintings that translated electric circuits and bulbs into an infinite variety of abstract patterns.<sup>43</sup> In the 1960s, Tanaka’s and Shiraga’s paintings became most popular in Europe, and this started to cause some friction among the members of Gutai. While Yoshihara was supportive of Tanaka’s art, it has been also said that he was jealous of her success. Tanaka’s husband Akira Kanayama, another Gutai member, also claimed that Yoshihara kept some of the profits from the sales of Tanaka’s art to himself.<sup>44</sup> Finally, Yoshihara’s harsh comments to Tanaka seem to have led her to a mental breakdown.<sup>45</sup> After Tanaka and Kanayama left Gutai in 1965, Kanayama, then a member of a family connected to a large Buddhist temple in Osaka, supported Tanaka’s artmaking. The couple presents an unusual case in Japan: it is rare to see a woman artist’s career acknowledged and supported by her spouse.

After Gutai, physical expression became a defining feature of postwar Japanese avant-garde art.<sup>46</sup> Kristine Stiles considered these artists’ assertive use of the body as “a response to the threatened ontological condition of life itself in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the advent of the atomic age.”<sup>47</sup> Especially in Japan, which witnessed the world’s first atomic bomb exterminate millions of lives in a matter of seconds, philosophical concerns about human existence strongly affected artists’ works. Their physical expressions may, indeed, have stemmed from their need to reclaim the presence of the living human body, leading them to abandon the Modernist notion of the autonomy of the art object.<sup>48</sup> Instead, they sought artistic meaning in the performative dimension of artmaking — in the process itself or the viewer’s



interaction with artworks. In order to argument this performative dimension, artists started to perform in front of audiences and to create interactive works that induced viewer's reactions.

As a group bridging the 1950s and 1960s, Gutai shared the optimistic progressivism and aestheticism with Jikken Kōbō, but avant-garde artists' collectives after Gutai purged such positive attitude toward art altogether. After his trip in Europe and the United States in 1960, critic Yoshiaki Tōno introduced the term *anti-Art* (*hangeijutsu*) from American art discourse to describe work by Tetsumi Kudō included in the Twelfth Yomiuri Independent exhibition.<sup>49</sup> Kudō's work was representative of the assemblages of junk materials that were increasingly shown in art exhibitions around 1960. Similarly, the artist Genpei Akasegawa was creating assemblages consisting of "unobtrusive articles of everyday life" that were found in mountains of rubbish.<sup>50</sup> These assemblages revealed the dark side of the Japanese industrial development after the war. The term *anti-Art* was soon expanded to include artists' performances that challenged further distinctions between art and nonart and between art and life. Anarchist rebellions and destructive performances characterized the activities of many avant-garde collectives that became categorized under the name *anti-Art*; but some artists, such as Ushio Shinohara, rejected the term, insisting that their intention was not to be against art, but to expand the traditional notion of art.<sup>51</sup> Emerging around 1960, these collectives included Kyūshū-ha, Neo-Dadaism Organizers, Group Ongaku, and Hi Red Center.<sup>52</sup>

The emergence of these anti-Art groups was partly in reaction to the fact that American occupation of Japan began to have negative effects by the late 1950s. In the span of less than a decade, Japan had to shed its imperialist-military past, immersing itself in the democracy and consumerism that America now imposed. Japanese artists active in the early 1960s grew up in this totally ambivalent society, torn between its past and future, between old and new moral values. The tension caused by such a schism eventually led a young generation to revolt against Japan's rearmament under America's Cold War strategy. When Japan renewed the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (Nichi-Bei Anzen Hoshō Jōyaku, known as Anpo) in 1960, tens of thousands of demonstrators formed a barricade around the National Diet building, which resulted in hundreds of injured participants, arrests, and one death. The failure of the movement led the young generation, including many radical artists, simultaneously to a state of introspective pessimism and to a reactive celebration of anarchistic revel. The former state also generated the alienation of the self from others and society. These contradictory reactions characterized the attitude of many Japanese zen'ei artists in the early 1960s.<sup>53</sup>

The object of these artists' rebellions was not limited to the sociopolitical condition of Japan, but extended also to the state of contemporary Japanese art. Postwar Japanese art, which was dominated by social-realist style paintings and subsequently by the French art informel-inspired abstract paintings, became the target of attacks by young artists. Following the revolu-

tionary call of the influential painter Taro Okamoto (1911–1996), young artists strove to “destroy everything with monstrous energy . . . in order to reconstruct the Japanese art world.”<sup>54</sup> As Alexandra Munroe has pointed out, the confrontationalism of Okamoto—to present “disagreeable” art in order to break away from the traditions as well as the Western preconception of Japanese art—influenced avant-garde artists of the 1960s. Summarizing their common attitudes, Munroe notes, “Cultivating methods and images intended to shock and revolt the status quo, artists led culture from the hallowed halls of museums and theaters into the streets, shopping centers, and train stations of Tokyo, striving to make art that would be defined by *experience* rather than medium, author, or commercial value.”<sup>55</sup> These artists were seeking direct contact with society through performances or performative objects, and even turned the museum space into a theater for their performances.

Most members of the aforementioned avant-garde collectives participated in the unjuried Yomiuri Independent Exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum every year between 1957 and 1963. Rebellious against the museum authorities, these artists challenged the limits of what was acceptable as art. Their works rapidly shifted from paintings with mixed media to assemblages of discarded objects found on the street, and finally to physical interactions between objects and the artist’s or viewer’s body.

Among the collectives associated with the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, the Kyūshū-ha (Kyūshū school), a collective of about a dozen artists, was based in Fukuoka in the southern island of Kyūshū. Members of this group started exhibiting their mixed media works at the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition in 1957. Often juxtaposing old machine parts and other industrial materials in an unexpected way, the group critiqued technological modernization by suggesting the animistic power inherent in materials, and they often performed in public spaces. In 1957, the members painted their faces, donned costumes made from coffee bags, and marched on the main street of Fukuoka to advertise their outdoor exhibition, which was set up several blocks away in front of the prefectural police building (see fig. 4). The letter Q painted in white on the costumes matched the sound of the first syllable of the group’s name, “Kyū.” The procession attracted the attention of passersby, some of whom, as a result, came to see the exhibition. This event was very successful in making the group known to the public and creating interaction between artists and the local community.<sup>56</sup>

Two women, Aiko Ooguro (1937–1996) and Mitsuko Tabe (b.1933), were active in Kyūshū-ha, creating multimedia works. While Ooguro’s focus was mostly on abstract painting with rich texture, Tabe experimented with diverse media. For example, her *Jinkō taiban* (*Artificial Placenta*) of 1961 (see fig. 5) was a multimedia installation made of the hip portions of three mannequins propped upside down on three pedestals in front of a wall, with the torso portions of two child mannequins hung horizontally on the upper right side of the same wall. Each mannequin hip had an opening in the middle where a

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4. Kyūshū-ha members in costumes marching on the main street of Fukuoka to advertise their outdoor exhibition, 1957. Photo courtesy of Mokuma Kikuhata/Fukuoka Art Museum.

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5. Mitsuko Tabe, *Jinkō taiban (Artificial Placenta)*, multimedia, 1961. Photo courtesy of Mitsuko Tabe.

radio vacuum tube was inserted in the location of the uterus. The tube was surrounded by cotton and cloth, and the opened area was outlined by ping pong balls. The child mannequin torsos had large slits in the middle, through which teethlike white balls shown. Reflecting her protofeminist awareness, Tabe claimed that the artificial placenta would free women from the burden of childbearing.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, however, the artificial materials with which the sculpture was composed seemed to imply the danger of a placenta becoming a machine. In 1967 Tabe undertook what she called a happening, in which she put soap bubbles all over a female nude model in order to express the idea that women's bodies are like bubbles.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike other contemporary avant-garde artists' collectives, Kyūshū-ha seems to have treated its female members as equal to their male counterparts. Both Ooguro and Tabe have commented that the men in the group "did not see us as women," and on occasion the male artists painted a pair of glasses and a mustache on the two women's faces and took them to strip shows. This episode, however, also seems to suggest that female members needed to behave like men in order to be accepted. After Kyūshū-ha's disintegration, Ooguro and Tabe independently pursued their artistic directions. While Ooguro recently passed away, Tabe still remains active in her hometown of Fukuoka.

Kyūshū-ha's equivalent in Tokyo, the Neo-Dadaism Organizers (later shortened as Neo-Dada; see fig. 6), also included a female participant, Sayako

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Kishimoto (1939–1988),<sup>59</sup> who at the end of her freshman year at Tama Art University in Tokyo encountered the group's first exhibition and subsequently became a member. Deriving its name from the American Neo-Dada represented by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, Neo-Dada sought to purge any kind of conventionalism from art by introducing destructive actions. The group was extremely short-lived, lasting only half a year, but its explosive activities attracted media attention. For example, Betsujin Ishibashi presented himself in meditation atop a table at the group's first exhibition; Kinpei Masuzawa wrapped his body with lightbulbs, and Masunobu Yoshimura wrapped his naked body with the group's exhibition announcements, and the two walked down the streets of the Ginza, the busiest business district in Tokyo (see fig. 7); and Ushio Shinohara demonstrated his "boxing painting" in front of the press by dipping boxing gloves in a bucket of sumi ink and then hitting a large piece of paper from right to left, creating a series of calligraphic marks.<sup>60</sup>

Compared to Kyūshū-ha, which was based in a remote region, Neo-Dada was able to exploit the power of the mass media concentrated in Tokyo. As curator Raiji Kuroda has pointed out, members of Neo-Dada seemed to know the value of getting themselves seen; with the mass audience in mind they performed in front of photographers and television camera crews.<sup>61</sup> In terms of the artists' appearance in mass media, Jackson Pollock set a precedent, but his performance was not voluntary and was somewhat controlled by photographers and filmmakers. Neo-Dada, on the other hand, took advantage of mass media as a tool, as Kusama and Andy Warhol would do slightly later. Unwillingly, Kishimoto became a tool in an advertising event for TBS television that took place on a beach in Kamakura. Her male peers

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7. Masunobu Yoshimura and Kinpei Masuzawa advertising the third exhibition of Neo-Dada organizers in Tokyo's Ginza district, 1960. Photo courtesy of Takeo Ishimatsu.

bandaged her up and hung her in the air from a tree and started fireworks beneath her. Then, they threw dirt mixed with ashes of the fireworks at her.<sup>62</sup> As art historian Mayumi Kagawa has noted, Kishimoto's position in the group was tenuous, and in this instance she was easily reversed from the subject of action to the object of male sadism. While male members saw her as an extraordinary woman who expressed herself through bold actions, they never considered her their equal, and took advantage of her to attract the mass media's attention.<sup>63</sup> Not surprisingly, none of Kishimoto's works from the Neo-Dada period remains, and no one remembers what her work from that time was like.

After Neo-Dada, in 1966 Kishimoto created an astonishing multimedia installation called *Narushisu no bohyō* (*Gravestone of Narcissus*; see fig. 8), which was comprised of plaster walls, male and female figures, a gigantic plaster skull, and plywood gravestones with a silhouette of a baby falling into a grave. This morbid subject shows Kishimoto's determination to live as an artist by denying her feminine side.<sup>64</sup> Neo-Dada's male-centered logic deeply affected Kishimoto, and she believed that she had to behave like a man in order to become a real artist. Although she continued painting figurative subjects throughout her career, she never gained the reputation that she had hoped. The last phase of her life was devoted to various political activities, including protesting the construction of the Nagoya City Art Museum.

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While Kishimoto's case exemplifies the negative effect of women artists' involvement in avant-garde collectives, other cases illustrate the relatively positive. Most of these groups welcomed female participation, but in general the male artists did not want women to affect male-centered logics and agendas.<sup>65</sup> As the artists who remained in Japan, these four women artists form an interesting contrast with the five who left Japan. Although none of these four was known to Kusama, Ono, Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota at that time, their experiments with multimedia art and performance should be seen as a historic precedent to or contemporary of the latter. They all shared struggles of surviving as women artists in the male-dominant art world.

### The Happenings and Events Craze in Japan

By 1962, what we may call performance art had become ubiquitous in the Japanese avant-garde. While the term *performance art* was not employed until the 1970s, artists were calling their bodily expressions "actions" in those days. Once the word *happening* (pronounced *hapuningū* in Japanese) was introduced in Japan, however, many artists started calling their actions happenings. According to music critic Kuniharu Akiyama, the earliest introduction of the happening to Japan seems to be through a critical essay by Jun'ichi Uekusa that was published in the July 1961 issue of the *Sōgetsu Art Center Journal*. In it, Uekusa introduced Allan Kaprow as the artist who coined the term *Happening*, and briefly explained this new artistic expression.<sup>66</sup>

It was in November 1961, during a solo recital of work of the composer Toshi Ichianagi at the Sōgetsu Art Center, that the first happening was presented in Japan. Ichianagi, then husband of Yoko Ono, had recently returned to Japan after studying with John Cage in New York for several years. One of his new works, *I·B·M—Happening and Musique Concrète*, was played by seven performers, including members of Group Ongaku (see fig. 9). Group Ongaku, another avant-garde collective associated with the anti-Art trends of the early 1960s, was mainly comprised of musicology students at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and included Takehisa Kosugi, Shūkō Mizuno, Mikio Tojima, Yasunao Tone, Gen'ichi Tsuge, and the only female member, Chieko Shiomi (before she changed her name to Mieko, around 1967).

Inspired by the "chance operation" of John Cage, Ichianagi employed an arbitrary set of IBM computer punch cards as scores, and the performers were allowed to interpret these scores in their own ways. Instead of playing instruments, the players performed a wide range of nonrelational actions derived from daily life, such as Shiomi's blowing soap bubbles and Tone's breaking a ceramic bowl.<sup>67</sup> These disparate actions deviated far from classical music performance and approached the chaos of real life. With its radi-

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9. Performance of Toshi Ichianagi's *I-B-M—Happening and Musique Concrète* with Group Ongaku, (Mieko Shiomi to the right of the piano) Sōgetsu Art Center, Tokyo, 1961. Photo courtesy of the Sōgetsu-kai Foundation.

cal transformation of music into life, this work preceded first Fluxus concerts in Europe in 1962. In fact, like other students of Cage, Ichianagi was involved in proto-Fluxus activities in New York. Recognizing this performance's potentiality to go beyond borders between music and art, art critic Yoshioki Tōno remarked that the "Japanese notion of 'Art' was changed for the first time" in this concert.<sup>68</sup> Although Tōno's comment was exaggerated, the concert was received as an early sign of the anti-Art movement in Japan and was concurrent with young avant-garde artists' employment of actions as artistic expressions.

While Ichianagi called some of his works in this concert "Happenings," the term did not become popular in Japan until Yoko Ono's recital at the Sōgetsu Art Center a half year later (see fig. 10). Involving as many as thirty Japanese avant-garde luminaries as performers, Ono's first recital in Japan after her ten-year stay in the United States was generally received as the first major happening in Japan. Many artists and critics, including filmmaker Kōichiro Ishizaki, believe that Ono brought the happening to Japan from the United States.<sup>69</sup> On this occasion, the press popularized the term *happening* and introduced Ono as one of the initiators of Happenings in New York.<sup>70</sup> Ono, having been involved in proto-Fluxus events, however, critically distinguished her events from Happenings as follows: "Event, to me, is not an assimilation of all the arts as happening seems to be, but an extrica-



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10. Performance (including Yoko Ono, at left) of Ono's *Audience Piece* in *Works of Yoko Ono*, Sōgetsu Art Center, Tokyo, 1962. Photo by Yasuhiro Yoshioka, courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

tion from various sensory perceptions. It is not 'a get togetherness' as most happenings are, but a dealing with oneself. Also, it has no script as happenings do, though it has something that starts it moving—the closest word for it may be a 'wish' or 'hope.'"<sup>71</sup> Although this statement postdates her period in Japan, Ono contrasted Happenings' theatrical nature with Fluxus events' introspective nature from early on. This view was later shared by her Fluxus colleagues. By comparing with the words *wish* and *hope* she also sought spiritual values in events. Unaware of such differences, the Japanese press often conflated Happenings and events. One article even categorized Cage, Kaprow, and Ono all as "artists of Happenings."<sup>72</sup> Thenceforth most Japanese artists and critics used the two terms interchangeably.<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, the first Japanese concert tour of John Cage and David Tudor, facilitated by Ono and Ichiyanagi in the fall of 1962 (see fig. 11), was received as a kind of Happening in which conventions of music were totally destroyed. Cage and Tudor presented silence, noise, and daily actions as music. Their tour left a deep impact on both Japanese visual arts and music. Besides the fact that the music critic Kuniharu Akiyama called the incident "John Cage Shock," the graphic artist Kiyoshi Awazu saw the incident as "artistic liberation," adding, "Cage's concerts left a strong influence on young people as if they touched the void."<sup>74</sup> Although Japanese action art—or what can be seen as early performance art—had originated from the Japanese post-

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11. Concert of John Cage and David Tudor, with Yoko Ono improvising Cage's *Music Walk* on the piano, Tokyo, October 1962. Photo by Yasuhiro Yoshioka, courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

war artistic condition, it was stimulated further by the artistic exchanges with the West and thus situated in the international context of performance art.

Meanwhile, various kinds of action art presented by artists associated with anti-Art groups at the annual Yomiuri Independent Exhibition grew more radical. At the 1961 exhibition, for example, Nobuaki Kojima presented an oil drum as his work, out of which — for the duration of the exhibition — he occasionally emerged naked. These artists sought to push the threshold dividing art and nonart or art and life. They not only submitted mixed-media works that were ephemeral and dangerous, but they also presented their own bodies as parts of works. They soon caused conflicts with the exhibition administrators, who started to censor their works by prohibiting the use of perishable, dangerous, noisemaking, or obscene objects. Even then the rebellious artists did not comply with the newly imposed rules. The fifteenth exhibition, in 1963, was marked by chaos. For example, a former member of Neo-Dada, Shō Kazekura, presented himself as a work of art, taking off his pants and doing a headstand.<sup>75</sup> In the same year, a dozen members of Group

Zero Jigen (Group Zero Dimension) from Nagoya laid themselves on the floor of the exhibition hall. Simultaneously, in another hall, Takehisa Koguchi, a former member of Group Ongaku, stayed in a large bag (a work called *Chamber Music*) and placed objects in and out of the bag.<sup>76</sup>

Out of this performance craze a new group emerged. Three artists formed a group called Hi Red Center in May 1963. The group name combined an English translation of the first Chinese character of the three members'—Genpei Akasegawa, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, and Jiro Takamatsu's—last names.<sup>77</sup> Before the formation of this group, these artists had already presented unconventional objects and actions at the 1963 Yomiuri Independent Exhibition and other venues. Takamatsu's one-thousand-meter-long rope, for example, started in a room in the museum, traversed Ueno Park, and reached the Ueno train station.<sup>78</sup> Such a performative character and anti-institutional attitude predetermined the group's activities.

Hi Red Center became known for public performances that mocked the authority attached to the institutions of art and society. The group exhibited their works and presented some events at Naiqua Gallery, where Kubota and Ono also presented their works. Ono, Shiomi, Kubota, and Nam June Paik, who was living in Japan at that time, were among the participants in Hi Red Center's *Shelter Plan* held in January 1964. Inviting guests to a room in Imperial Hotel, the Hi Red Center members measured sizes of different parts of bodies of the guests in order to make atomic bomb shelters. A documentary film of the event was produced by Motoharu Jōuchi and includes footage of Ono being measured in various ways (see fig. 12).<sup>79</sup> Although Shiomi does not appear in the film, she remembers the procedures of the whole event; in one of them she had to take off her clothes and enter a bathtub filled with water in order to determine the volume of her body.<sup>80</sup>

In October of that same year, Hi Red Center performed its *Be Clean!* event during the Tokyo Olympics (see fig. 13). Wearing white laboratory coats and masks, the members and their friends cleaned the streets of Tokyo by rubbing alcohol into the pavement; the event mocked the seriousness of the government's campaign to clean up Tokyo for the Olympics. Finding affinities between the antiauthoritarian attitudes and artistic concerns of Hi Red Center and Fluxus, Kubota, Ono, and Paik introduced the group to Fluxus organizer George Maciunas in New York. Although none of Hi Red Center's members physically went to New York, their activities were sanctioned by Maciunas as Tokyo Fluxus.<sup>81</sup> As a result, Hi Red Center's events *Shelter Plan* and *Be Clean!* were reenacted with some modifications by members of Fluxus in New York in 1965.

The year 1964 saw a significant change in the Japanese avant-garde art scene. In January, Yomiuri Shimbun, the newspaper that sponsored the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, announced the discontinuation of the exhibition. Akasegawa, who belonged to Neo-Dada as well as the later Hi Red Center, lamented that "it was as if the only open window was closed. Other

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12. Hi Red Center's *Shelter Plan*, with Yoko Ono as a participant, Imperial Hotel, Tokyo, 1964. Film by Motoharu Jōnouchi, in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. Photo courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

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13. Hi Red Center, *Be Clean!* Tokyo, 1964. Photo by Minoru Hirata.

windows [for the avant-garde artists] were all closed to begin with.”<sup>82</sup> For avant-garde artists who were dependent on the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, its termination meant more than just the loss of exhibition space. Although Hi Red Center expanded their artistic arena onto streets, the anti-authoritarian character of their performances naturally led to serious conflicts with the police and court. Because of a work that copied the one-thousand-yen note, Akasegawa was accused and later convicted for counterfeit in 1964.<sup>83</sup> These incidents altogether signaled that a heated phase in Japanese avant-garde art was over.

### Leaving Japan for New York

In light of the unfavorable artistic climate in Japan, it was understandable that many avant-garde artists would leave Japan for the United States. Emigrating to New York City were many former members of the Neo-Dadaism Organizers: Shusaku Arakawa in 1961, Masunobu Yoshimura and Hiroko Hiraoka in 1962, Kinpei Masuzawa in 1963, Shin Kinoshita and Souroku Toyoshima in 1964, Santaro Tanabe in 1966 and Ushio Shinohara in 1969.<sup>84</sup> Others also included On Kawara, who began traveling throughout the world in 1959 and then settled in New York in 1965; Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota, who arrived in the city between 1963 and 1964; and Ono, who returned in 1964. Their exodus reflected both the lack of support for avant-garde artists in Japan and the rapid internationalization of Japanese art.

The emigration of Japanese artists began in the early twentieth century and increased in volume after World War II. The 1950s saw a dramatic opening of Japanese culture and society to the outside world comparable to that of the Meiji period, when Japan reopened its trade with the West after two centuries of self-imposed isolation. While the first wave of Japanese artists moving to the West beginning in the late nineteenth century was interrupted by a series of wars, the second wave after World War II encountered no such obstacles.<sup>85</sup> In the 1950s many Japanese artists followed the shift of the artistic hegemony from Paris to New York.<sup>86</sup> They were aware of the great success of Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1893–1953), who was given the first retrospective exhibition as a living artist at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1948. Inspired by his success, a group of Japanese painters who had already established themselves in Japan moved to New York in order to gain international attention. Three artists—Gen’ichiro Inokuma (1902–1993), Minoru Kawabata (1911–2001), and Kenzo Okada (1902–1982)—were able to enjoy success among the second generation of American Abstract Expressionists.<sup>87</sup> As curator Masayoshi Homma has observed, “the freedom of engaging in production of his own works at liberty based on individualism must have been a decisive charm” of New York.<sup>88</sup> Although the three artists already held an established status in Japan,

they wanted to break away from the politics of *gadan*, and to solely concentrate on their artistic productions.

From the mid-1950s on, inspired by the success stories of these predecessors, thousands of Japanese artists left Japan for opportunities abroad, especially for New York City. Most of them were still in their formative period, studying in such schools as the Art Students' League and the Brooklyn Museum Art School. Unlike Japanese schools that were often highly selective, most American art schools were relatively open and accepted many foreign students, including women. The relative flexibility in the American education system was attractive to Japanese students, who needed student visas to stay in the United States. After 1964, when the Japanese tourist visa to visit the United States became available, the number of artists who visited New York for a short time grew rapidly.

By 1960, New York City had become a magnet for many international radical artists. Reacting against Abstract Expressionism, younger American artists were exploring new artistic expressions. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg started combining figurative imagery or found objects with painterly abstraction. Pop and Minimalist artists were gradually developing their individual reactions to Abstract Expressionism. Drawing upon the performative aspect of Pollock's action painting and of Cage's chance operation, Allan Kaprow initiated Happenings in 1958. Led by Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, and other dancers, the Judson Dance Theater was launched as a venue for experiments in dance. Around the same time, the Fluxus group became active in downtown New York. The dynamism generated by experiments in various arts became an inspirational force for newly arrived Japanese artists.

Because New York particularly attracted individualists, many Japanese artists in the United States did not belong to any *bijutsu dantai* in Japan, unlike their counterparts in Europe.<sup>89</sup> As historian Yoshio Ozawa has noted, the Japanese who settled on the East Coast "did not bother to form a community of their own like in California and lived as individuals rather than as a minority racial group."<sup>90</sup> There was also an aesthetic difference between the Japanese artists on the East and West Coasts. Curator Masayoshi Homma has contrasted "a kind of calm, peaceful mellowness" found in works of the *Nisei*, the second-generation Japanese Americans, who represented Japanese art in the large part of the United States, with aggressiveness found in the works of Japanese-born artists in New York, who were "digging for new experiments," inspired by the energetic pioneering spirit of the city.<sup>91</sup>

Japanese artists were attracted to New York because its active artistic atmosphere allowed them to be unique and experimental. Shaped by the constant arrivals of international immigrants, New York had acquired a high degree of tolerance to individuality and difference. Tadasuke (or Tadasky) and Rakuko Kuwayama, a Japanese couple who immigrated to the United States in 1958, commented, regarding the different attitudes toward art in the two

countries, “In New York, one always feels that something is pulling you up. In Japan you always feel that something is pulling you down.”<sup>92</sup> During an interview at their group exhibition, Yukiko Katsura, Minoru Kawabata, Yayoi Kusama, and Kenzo Okada agreed that they chose New York because it “abounds in pure uncluttered nothing,” meaning that the city allowed individual freedom. They contrasted New York with Tokyo especially in terms of the artistic establishment. Kusama added, “In New York with nothing to worry about — or Nothing to enjoy, depending on how you look at Nothing — an artist can concentrate on art. Today I am a member of no school, no trend, no movement. My work is my own. It is personal.”<sup>93</sup> In contrast to Tokyo, where artists were controlled by politics among many artists’ organizations, New York was relatively free of restrictions.

It is therefore logical that the emerging generation of Japanese women artists considered New York as their alternative place to succeed. By leaving Japan, they could become free from the social conformism and confined lifestyle of women in the male-dominated Japanese art world.<sup>94</sup> When women artists left Japan, most of them were in their late twenties or early thirties, the age when they were expected to marry and have a family. The choice to become an artist was, for a woman, almost unthinkable in Japan. Because Japanese women were not able to acquire the education available to men, they were not aware of opportunities abroad until the late 1940s, and the immigration of women artists did not take place until the late 1950s.<sup>95</sup> The five subjects of this book constitute the first generation of Japanese women artists to work outside Japan.<sup>96</sup> They all shared the highly educated background, adventurous spirit, and strong determination needed to become independent artists.

### East and West Meet in the New York Avant-Garde

The exodus of Japanese artists to New York preceded the resurgence of interest in the United States in Eastern philosophy and art. The first surge of interest had been seen as part of Japonisme around the turn of the nineteenth century. This mid-twentieth-century phenomenon was largely due to the renewed friendship between the two countries after World War II. While there was still hatred of the Japanese among the older American generation who actually fought in the war, the young avant-garde community was ready for international exchanges. American intellectuals and artists looked to the East for means to break away from European Modernism.<sup>97</sup> Daisetz T. Suzuki and Allan Watts were largely responsible for introducing Zen philosophy and other Eastern thoughts to the United States. The Beat poets and writers, who could be found on both the East and West Coasts, incorporated Eastern thoughts into their underground culture. Within art circles, Cage was influential in disseminating his own view of Eastern philosophy and aes-

thetics through his lectures, writings, and direct discussions with artists. Experimental artists represented by Kaprow, Rauschenberg, and most of the later Fluxus artists found infinite possibilities in the notion of chance, Zen aesthetic, and the merging of art and life, all of which served them as an alternative to Euro-American modernism. Even Warhol acknowledged that some of his films, such as *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964), were inspired by the stone garden of Ryōanji, a renowned Zen temple in Kyoto that he saw while visiting Japan in 1959.<sup>98</sup>

The American interest in Eastern philosophy and culture proved favorable for Japanese artists seeking to break ground in the United States. In the 1950s and 1960s, New York dealers such as Martha Jackson, Miriam Willard Johnson, and Betty Parsons supported Japanese artists who were merging Euro-American modernism with Japanese artistic tradition.<sup>99</sup> Among the Japanese artists recognized by these dealers were Saburo Hasegawa, Gen'ichiro Inokuma, Kenzo Okada, and some of the Gutai artists. Three institutions also made a significant contribution to the postwar Japan-U.S. artistic exchange. Since its foundation by New York business people in 1907, the Japan Society has actively promoted greater understanding and cooperation between Japan and the United States. After World War II, especially under the stewardship of John D. Rockefeller III, it expanded its range and volume of its programming including art exhibitions. The Asian Cultural Council, established by the J. D. Rockefeller Fund in 1963, offered scholarships for Asian artists to study in the United States, consequently attracting hundreds of Japanese artists, musicians, and dancers. The Museum of Modern Art did its part by actively introducing Japanese contemporary art to American audience through such exhibitions as *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture* in 1966.<sup>100</sup> These different factors contributed to the embrace of Japanese artists in New York from the late 1950s onward.

One of the reasons that Kusama came to the United States was that she felt an affinity between the mystic tendency in her art and the work of Morris Graves, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Mark Tobey. She believed that symbolism in art was not understood at all in Japan and that her art would be better received in the United States. Although Kusama was unaware of it, Graves and Tobey were particularly interested in Eastern art and philosophy and sought to incorporate some stylistic elements from Eastern aesthetics.<sup>101</sup> The reverberation that Kusama felt in their works may have partially come from Eastern artistic sources that she and the American artists shared. The oversized white "net paintings" (see fig. 14) that Kusama developed in New York caused a sensation among critics who perceived in her works a meditative quality stemming from Eastern philosophy. Critic Sidney Tillim, for example, wrote in *Arts Magazine*, "What results is a profound symbol of detachment. Conditioned by a tradition of not only in black and white but of self-effacement, perhaps only a Japanese artist could create an art of withdrawal without the polemical emotions of Western Abstract Expression-



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14. Yayoi Kusama in front of her *White Net Painting*, on view at her exhibition at Stephen Radich Gallery, 1961. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

ism.”<sup>102</sup> Although such a comment could lead to stereotyping artworks according to an artist’s nationality, Kusama was not opposed to the critic’s association of her art to Japanese traditions. From early on, Kusama was aware that cultural differences could contribute to an image of originality.

Closely interacting with artists and composers in Cage’s circle, Ono became even more perceptive of American interest in Eastern philosophy and art. Acquiring the best possible education in the 1930s and 1940s in Japan, Ono was knowledgeable about the I Ching, Noh, Zen, and other Eastern traditions. Her wide knowledge became an inspiring force for many other artists.<sup>103</sup> One of such artists was George Maciunas, a Lithuanian architect and designer, who asked Ono to hold her first solo exhibition at his AG Gallery. Inspired by Cage’s electronic music class at the New School for Social Research and the series of presentations of experimental works at Ono’s loft on Chambers Street, Maciunas also held a concert series at his gallery, closely echoing the format and content of Ono’s event series. His concerts were partly intended to raise money for his prospective magazine, to be called *Fluxus*, which would publish works by experimental artists, writers, and musicians all over the world.<sup>104</sup> Reflecting his interest in the East, his preliminary plan for the magazine featured Japanese composers and artists prominently. While Maciunas had considerable knowledge of Japanese history and art, his knowledge of Japanese contemporary art and music was complemented by Ono and Ichiyanagi. Eventually, in 1962, while Maciunas

was living in Germany working as a U.S. Air Force designer, he organized an international tour of unconventional concerts with a group of experimental composers and artists whom became known as Fluxus. Performed in Paris, Copenhagen, and Wiesbaden, among others, Fluxus concerts caused scandals with their sometimes destructive actions, such as destroying a piano. Although Ono did not perform in these concerts, her name was listed as a principal member of the group in most of announcements that Maciunas distributed for the concerts.

Ono's first solo exhibition, at Maciunas's AG Gallery, and her solo recital at Carnegie Recital Hall, both in 1961, contained many elements that would be developed in Fluxus. At the AG Gallery exhibition, Ono placed texts next to her paintings that served as instructions for the audience to complete her paintings. These instructions were among the earliest forms of what would be called "event scores," a central medium of artistic expression in Fluxus. As Alexandra Munroe notes, "Ono's event scores evolved from a range of literary and metaphysical traditions that combined Duchampian poetics and irony with *haiku* and the *Zen koan*."<sup>105</sup> Like *haiku*, most of Ono's event scores consisted of simple and short, often poetic phrases, and they were open-ended and filled with riddles like the *Zen koan*. Ono's dry humor apparent in her works was reminiscent of *Zen*, and that appealed to Maciunas. In describing the nature of Fluxus, Maciunas often used *Zen* as a metaphor. He thought that Fluxus was not a tight group, like the Dadaists, but "more like *Zen*" because it was closer to "a way of life" than to a group with a clear rationale.<sup>106</sup> Ono's hybrid cultural background also allowed her to cross boundaries in Western artistic traditions. Unlike Western art, Japanese art traditionally did not have clear divisions between artistic media. Although it was preceded by some Happenings, her 1961 recital *Works of Yoko Ono* was among the early examples of artists' presentations that broke down conventional boundaries in music, art, dance, theater, and poetry by presenting performance pieces in collaboration with artists in different fields. Also, holding such an unconventional concert at a traditional music venue such as the Carnegie Recital Hall was unprecedented. This format of interdisciplinary performance presentation became a part of the foundation for Fluxus concerts and events.

The Japanese presence in Fluxus was prominent from the beginning of the group. Even before the first Fluxus concert, Maciunas's preliminary plan for *Fluxus* magazine listed a special Japanese issue which was to print contributions from such diverse people as "chirographer Morita," which may have been the avant-garde calligrapher Shiryū Morita; composers Ichiyangi and Ono; artist Ay-O; and critics Kuniharu Akiyama, Yoshiaki Tōno, and Hidekazu Yoshida.<sup>107</sup> Maciunas also planned a series of concerts that would feature works of Japanese composers who were not known outside Japan.<sup>108</sup> Most of these Japanese people were perhaps included in the list without any direct communication with Maciunas. Their names were most likely provided by Ichiyangi and Ono—who in 1961 and 1962, respectively,

returned to Japan — as people who were associated with the Japanese avant-garde. In addition, Korean artist Nam June Paik, who performed in one of the earliest Fluxus concerts in Germany in 1962, lived in Japan for a while in 1963, and he introduced some Japanese artists, including Shiomí, to Fluxus. Some of these Japanese artists actually started corresponding with Maciunas and eventually came to New York. First, in 1963, painter and printmaker Ay-O joined Fluxus. Having moved to New York independently in 1958, Ay-O had been originally introduced to Maciunas by Ono in 1961. Then, through him, his friend Saito flew to New York in 1963, and joined the group in early 1964. That same year Akiyama conducted the first Flux Orchestra Concert at the Carnegie Recital Hall during his stay in New York. Shiomí and Kubota arrived that summer.

While Maciunas had personal interest in a wide range of regions of the world, Japan seemed to be among his most favorites. Some Fluxus artists remember that Maciunas lived in an apartment with tatami mats and that he owned some Japanese swords and other artifacts. The precise and simple manner with which he organized his place gave artists like Yoshi[masa] Wada an impression of Maciunas as “a practitioner of Zen.”<sup>109</sup> Maciunas might have even strengthened his fascination with Japan through hearing about it from his Japanese colleagues. When he was facing the group’s internal conflicts as early as 1963, he started to dream about going to Japan and establishing an artists’ community there. In a letter to Bob Watts, dated circa 1962–1963, Maciunas wrote, “I will move in 1964 to Japan & establish there a permanent collective farm. I am asking several people & you to join me there in 1964. I would initially invest in a farm & we would subsist by growing our own food & doing little things like composting, performing, Fluxing around, publishing all kind of things, swindling idiots & robbing the fat capitalists.”<sup>110</sup> Maciunas’s dream of building an artists’ community may well have been inspired by the posthumously published letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, in which the artist often expressed his admiration for Japan and its people. Van Gogh’s idea of living and working with a group of artists in Arles partially stemmed from his imagination of the Japanese artists’ community. Like van Gogh, Maciunas held a communism-inspired ideal of artists living and working together. Being strongly anticapitalist, Maciunas may have felt a closer tie with the Japanese, whom he regarded as the victim of American capitalism.

The dream of living in Japan was an escape for Maciunas as well, who was feeling isolated from other members of Fluxus. Holding his ideals high, Maciunas constantly had conflicts with some Fluxus members, who would turn against him. Typically, he would call them “egoists” who could not work under the collective philosophy that he had implemented. In his letter to Emmett Williams in 1964, Maciunas complained, “I have to work 8 hours (as a free-lance designer), then 8 hours Fluxus (newspaper, other publications, festival preparations, fixing loft for FLUXSHOP & FLUXHALL) and all ENTIRELY ALONE . . . They are all very involved with their own individual

compositions & have no time (or desire) for 'THE COLLECTIVE.' . . . All New York Fluxus crowd is promoting only themselves. (Japan is still holding out, but there this European tradition of egoism & promoting of one's ego never took deep roots. So I have been very disappointed with Fluxus people and am contemplating phasing out by this summer & maybe going to Japan.)"<sup>111</sup>

This letter shows that Maciunas was projecting his unfulfilled desire onto the Japanese, whom, as far as he observed, still held group ethics. If this letter was written in the spring of 1964, his Fluxus operations would have been already helped by Ay-O and Saito. They might have given an impression of the Japanese as being nonegotistical. After Shiomi and Kubota joined Fluxus in July 1964, the two newcomers and Saito also cooked in order to realize Maciunas's proposition of having a regular communal dinner as the "Fluxus dinner commune." The three Japanese women did not disappoint Maciunas at first, but, having fled from the patriarchal Japanese society, they did not want to repeat traditional women's roles in New York City. In order to earn income through part-time jobs at night, Shiomi and Kubota soon abandoned the communal dinner. Saito remained longer, but she also pursued her own artmaking. Even after these happy communal activities ended, Maciunas kept his dream of going to Japan; his encounter with modern Japanese women had not discouraged him.<sup>112</sup> Thus, Maciunas's positive image of Japan and its people led in part to the embrace of so many Japanese artists members in Fluxus.

### Breaking the Mold of Japanese Women

Although living in the United States was a liberating experience for Japanese women artists, they also had to contend with the disadvantage of being foreigners. Because of Japan's growing military power, the Japanese became one of the ethnic groups whose immigration to the United States was often severely restricted in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>113</sup> Animosity toward the Japanese lessened after the American victory in World War II, but the memory of Pearl Harbor still lingered in the minds of older Americans.

How Japanese women were viewed in the West was also linked to the political relationships between Japan and Western countries. From the late nineteenth century on, amid the fever of Japonisme, the exotic image of a Japanese woman was constructed in the West through art, literature, and theater. In the early phase of Japonisme especially, the Japanese woman as represented by the geisha stirred up exotic fantasies among male Japonists. Novels like *Madame Chrysantheme* (1887) by the French naval officer Pierre Roti, and *Madame Butterfly* (1898) by the American John Luther Long, played a crucial role in propagating the archetype of the Japanese woman as passive, childlike, and servile. *Madame Butterfly* became especially popular after it was transformed into an opera by Giacomo Puccini and later made

into Hollywood films. In this story, the young Japanese woman Cho-Cho-san falls in love with an American naval officer and marries him, but her husband marries his fiancée upon his return to the United States. When the American couple revisits Japan, they find that Cho-Cho-san has given birth to a child. Abandoned by her love, Cho-Cho-san chooses to sacrifice her life so that her child will be adopted by the wealthy American couple. As film scholar Gina Marchetti points out, though the tale may point to the hypocrisy and unfairness of the Western man, the heroine's suicide in the end legitimizes the authority of the Western patriarchy.<sup>114</sup>

Furthermore, the subservient characteristics attributed to Japanese women reflected what Edward Said has called the "male power fantasy," in which Caucasian men imposed their desire onto the Orient, the object of colonialism.<sup>115</sup> The orientalist image of Japanese women was nothing but the projection of the Western fantasy, and far from the reality. Marchetti adds the intriguing observation that such tragic, interracial love stories gained popularity in Europe and America in the advent of Japanese military power, thus serving to trivialize and emasculate Japan in the eyes of the general public.<sup>116</sup>

The image of the passive Japanese woman induced another misconception that Asian or Japanese women were more sexually available than Western women. This view of Japanese women as sexual objects was reinforced by the late-nineteenth-century practice in Japan of giving foreign visitors full access to "special quarters." Even during the years of American occupation, American soldiers were specially admitted to the district of brothels.<sup>117</sup> These earlier situations unfortunately established an image that Western men were promised sexual freedom in Japan apart from prohibitions in their own countries. Accounts of these men's experiences led to the stereotyping of Japanese women as geisha types. They also tended to reduce geishas to prostitutes by ignoring their status as highly trained performers.<sup>118</sup> While brothels have long been officially extinct and only a few areas of teahouses remain in Japan, this exaggerated and exotic image of geishas has been prevalent in the West as emblematic of Japanese women.

After World War II, real Japanese women became increasingly visible outside of Japan. The number of Japanese women immigrants to the West dramatically increased, including a large number of war brides who married American soldiers.<sup>119</sup> In fact, since 1945, the number of Japanese female permanent residents in the United States and Europe has always exceeded that of Japanese men by one-third or more; yet despite this greater presence, the orientalist image of Japanese women did not change easily. For example, some Hollywood films made in the 1950s, such as *Sayonara* (dir. Joshua Logan, 1957), and *The Crimson Kimono* (dir. Samuel Fuller, 1959) repeated the same old stereotype of passive Japanese women. According to Marchetti, these films supported America's paternalistic attitude toward a defeated Japan.<sup>120</sup>

Even after dramatic democratization and industrialization changed the

average Japanese lifestyle in the 1960s and 1970s, the older image of Japanese women persisted in the West. Marchetti suggests that American media's exploitation of the myth of the subservient Japanese women revealed a threatened masculinity in light of American women's growing independence. In such Hollywood films as *My Geisha* (dir. Jack Cardiff, 1962) and *An American Geisha* (dir. Lee Phillips, 1986), American actresses played geisha roles. These films symbolized American nostalgia for a pre-women's liberation view of gender.<sup>121</sup> Japanese feminist historian Tomiko Shimazu also observes that the Western media manipulated the image of modern Japanese women to fit the old stereotype.<sup>122</sup> As a result, Japanese women who deviate from that standard were often regarded as "unusual" or even "outrageous."

These cultural and gender biases have led to the marginalization of the five women artists discussed in this book and have prevented a proper assessment of their work. After coming to the United States, they enjoyed freedom for being unique, but they were nonetheless also automatically categorized within the orientalist view of Japanese women. Ono recalls that, in the 1960s, American scholars of Japanese culture or art did not particularly like it when they approached her and found her contrary to their image. She thinks that they expected to see "just a beautiful, sensitive and passive woman," but she "startled and put [them] off."<sup>123</sup> Gender barriers were still strong in the New York avant-garde circles and Ono often felt that she was not taken seriously as an artist because she was a woman.<sup>124</sup> Carolee Schneemann, who was associated with both Happenings and Fluxus, commented that she wanted to "challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved enough like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men."<sup>125</sup>

The ethnicity of Japanese women artists removed them further from the center of the Western art world. Since white male artists still dominated the American avant-garde art world, artists who were both nonwhite and female were doubly marginalized. Although their ethnicity and gender sometimes worked in their favor, especially in drawing the attention of the media, it generally prevented them from being considered equal to their male peers. As Ono observed in the 1960s, the Western image of the oriental woman in the 1960s was that of either an obedient slave or a dragon lady.<sup>126</sup> Such a polarized view reflected both the Western colonialist attitude toward Asia and their fear of rising Asian power. Throughout their artistic career spanning over four decades, Kusama, Ono, Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota have struggled to reject or subvert the Western stereotype of Japanese women. From the marginalized position, they worked against the Western construction of Japanese women in order to claim their rightful positions in Western society.

*Performing the Self:  
Yayoi Kusama and Her  
Ever-Expanding Universe*

Dissolution and accumulation. Proliferation and fragmentation. The feeling of myself obliterating and the reverberation from the invisible universe. What are they?

—Yayoi Kusama,  
“The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul”

Like Vincent van Gogh, Yayoi Kusama has been associated with a stereotype of a “mad artist” because of her long-term mental illness. Largely due to her oppressed childhood under the Japanese militarist campaign, her parents’ strict discipline, and traumatic experiences, Kusama started to have hallucinations at a young age. As a child, she would draw images of her hallucinatory visions, later these images were developed into various art forms. Her prolific and obsessive-compulsive style of artmaking was established early because it was necessitated by her desire to overcome the symptoms of her mental illness. She would continue the same intensive style of artmaking in New York between 1958 and 1972. Shortly after returning to Tokyo in 1973, Kusama admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital and has lived and worked there ever since. Kusama’s peculiar circumstance has led art historians to presume her psychological state and simplify interpretation of her work. Much of the scholarship on Kusama tends to overemphasize her illness as a solely cause of her artistic creation.



While I acknowledge how much Kusama's illness has impacted her art and value the importance in investigating the relationship between her illness and artistic expression, my focus in this study is to illuminate a rather overlooked aspect of Kusama—how conscious and careful she has been in creating a public image of herself. The manner of her decision making has been far from being unconscious and random. This point becomes especially evident when one examines her self-presentation. The aim of this chapter is to prove Kusama's self-consciousness in the way she projected herself to the public through use of mass media, photography, and performance art. To achieve this goal, I will trace her career from the early period in Japan until 1957, and then to her New York period from 1958 until 1972.

Besides a vast bibliography of recent secondary sources, I utilize many texts from primary sources, including Kusama's unpublished typescripts, other writings, flyers, and interviews. Especially, my extensive research of early Japanese articles on Kusama makes it possible to analyze how she presented herself to the public and how the mass media viewed her in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although Kusama's success was rather exceptional as a young woman artist in Japan at the time, examining her situation in detail will reveal the problematic structure of the Japanese art world that led Kusama and the other four artists to leave Japan.

### The Early Years in Japan

Growing up under the oppression of Japanese militarism, Kusama's childhood cast shadows onto her art and life. Yayoi Kusama was born in 1929 as the youngest of four children to an affluent family that owned a plant nursery in Matsumoto, a city in central Japan. In the early 1930s, the wave of the worldwide Great Depression reached even the Japanese countryside, causing the Kusamas to lose much of their property and experience the economic and psychological hardship that affected the whole world. Kusama spent most of her childhood in a depressive mood. From early on she had a tendency to withdraw herself from others. She found drawing to be her best companion, a method with which she could express her emotions freely. When Japan finally entered into World War II in 1941, Kusama, still in her early teens, was recruited to make parachutes in a military factory. In an interview, she recalled her suffering from the oppression of Japanese nationalism and imperialism that "killed" her mind.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Japan surrendered in 1945, she was so frustrated that she "immediately wanted to go to New York . . . to be free, to build up my art, to build up my philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Munroe posits that Japan's militarism contributed to the development of Kusama's acute anxieties. "To the young child and adolescent, the oppressive regime represented domination and denial, and provoked rage, frustration and emotional instability," she writes. "The



object of her aggression was patriarchal domination and the pressures of social conformity. Outrage at authority and regimes was lodged early in Kusama's psyche and became identical with the expression of her character and in time, of her art."<sup>3</sup> Kusama's outrage was channeled into her art and later developed into her revolt against patriarchal domination.

Even more oppressive than the social and political condition, however, was Kusama's mother, who always obstructed her daughter's artmaking and harshly criticized her eccentricity. Her mother could not accept being an artist as a suitable occupation for her daughter. Kusama's father was often absent, and her mother was the disciplinarian in their household. As it was often the case with arranged marriages in those days, Kusama's father inherited the family's property by adopting his wife's family name, but he only superficially served as head of the family without taking actual control of the household. In other words, her family was a matriarchy. Her mother took care of the household, but she never had a progressive attitude about women's lifestyle or career opportunities. She tried to discipline her daughter to become a proper woman in a sense of feudal morality and strongly opposed Kusama's becoming an artist, which she considered equal to a *kawarajokiki* (literally translated as a river-bank beggar), a contemptuous term for a traveling theater performer in old Japan. Such oppressive patriarchal power seems to have imbued young Kusama with the disdain of women. It also led, contradictorily, to a dismissal of feminism. When asked in an interview if she allowed feminist interpretation of her work, she replied "yes," but also added, "In my childhood, I experienced so much hardship, all thanks to 'feminism.' My mother wielded a tremendous amount of authority and my father was always dispirited."<sup>4</sup> Her reference here to feminism is one that carries the sense that women become overempowered and domineering; her negative interpretation of feminism has thus prevented her from association with it.

Due to social circumstances and her distance from both of her parents, Kusama developed acute anxieties that led her to mental illness. Symptoms included obsessive-compulsive, hysteric, and narcissistic tendencies, hallucinations, and a fear of sex.<sup>5</sup> Kusama recently reflected on the development of her fear of sex during her childhood: "In the house of my youth, my parents practiced strict discipline. In particular, I grew up hearing repeated lectures about the dangers of making friends with the impure opposite sex. Thus, even when I reached the stage of puberty when most girls are interested in the opposite sex, I could not rid of myself of an obsession with sex. My phobia of men and my obsessive fear of men became increasingly severe, resulting in my extreme fear of anything phallic. It reached the point where I was assaulted by countless phallic visions."<sup>6</sup>

Some psychoanalysts attributed one of the causes of her symptoms to the Electra complex, in which a girl unconsciously opposes her mother in favor of her love toward her father.<sup>7</sup> Kusama's love toward her father, however, was rejected by his absence and remained unfulfilled. Her father always had a

concubine elsewhere, and Kusama used to witness quarrels between her mother and father because of his affairs. As she has stated, such childhood memories resulted in her hatred of male sexuality and a fear of phallic forms, and eventually in her (contradictory) obsession with those forms.<sup>8</sup>

Kusama's feelings toward her mother also seem complicated. Through her constant struggle to overcome her mother throughout her childhood and adolescence, Kusama seems to have developed a contradictory identification with her; in an interview, Kusama mentioned that her mother was "smart and very strong" and "good at painting and calligraphy."<sup>9</sup> One of Kusama's earliest drawings depicts her mother as a young woman who is covered with snowlike white dots (see fig. 15).<sup>10</sup> While this drawing can be in-

This image not available.

15. Yayoi Kusama, *Untitled*, pencil on paper,  $9\frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{7}{8}$  inches, c. 1939. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

terpreted as Kusama's attempt to eliminate her mother with dots, it can also be seen as a visualization of her identification with her young and beautiful mother. On this drawing, Kusama recently reflected, "I don't know whether dots are part of her or me — it's an illusion. It is about how I wanted to eliminate my mother or erase myself. Because of society's expectations."<sup>11</sup> This comment reveals that Kusama conflated herself with her mother and that she saw herself and her mother as victims of male-dominated society. The domineering and omnipotent mother in her memory may have served unconsciously as a role model for Kusama, and that may partly explain her obsessive-compulsive and domineering tendencies. Her oppressed upbringing led Kusama to be independent and isolated from her family and society. Art became the only outlet for her pent-up emotions and fantasies.

In 1948, after graduation from high school, Kusama left home for the first time to go to the Kyoto School of Arts and Crafts. Her mother allowed her to leave on the condition that Kusama had to learn Japanese etiquette from her relatives in Kyoto. Ignoring etiquette lessons, however, Kusama concentrated on learning the basics of *Nihonga* techniques (a traditional form of Japanese painting that uses mineral pigment with glue on rice paper), which her high school teacher had briefly introduced to her. This period of school training gave Kusama the opportunity to develop her draftsmanship and observation of nature. Earlier, she had often drawn from her imagination, not from nature. During her Kyoto period, Kusama learned about the works of two earlier *Nihonga* painters, Gyoshū Hayami (1894–1935) and Kagaku Murayama (1888–1939), who often rendered still lifes in an extremely naturalistic way.<sup>12</sup> These artists were successful in creating their unique styles by merging Western realism and the economy of line and color characteristic of Japanese traditional art. Kusama's earliest extant *Nihonga* painting, *Onions* (1948) reveals the influence of the two painters in realistic details of onions, but as Akira Tatehata points out, the background contains unrealistically distorted grid patterns, and "unmistakably foreshadows Kusama's later net paintings."<sup>13</sup> The unique juxtaposition of real and unreal set apart Kusama's early paintings from those of her predecessors.

After her return to her home in Matsumoto a year and half later, Kusama started to experiment with oil painting. Her earliest known oil painting, *Accumulation of Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by a Curtain of Depersonalization)* (1950) expresses the fear of depersonalization that frequently haunted her during this period. The swirling wavelike forms centralize toward a bright opening that contains a pair of tiny trees. The swirls look like curtains or "the furrows in the nursery fields around her parents' house."<sup>14</sup> Without her (retrospectively given) subtitle, on the other hand, the painting seems to refer to the dead corpses in the field during or after the World War II in her imagination, and the bright center may represent another world, the afterlife. In expressing the postwar desolation of Japan, if not directly, this painting relates Kusama to the work of contemporary figurative painters such as

Nobuya Abe and On Kawara;<sup>15</sup> what sets apart Kusama's work from theirs is the internalized horrifying vision that she actually experienced.

In many small works on paper executed between 1951 and 1957, Kusama visualized the hallucinations she had experienced since her childhood. In her hallucinations, numerous dots or nets covered her surroundings and almost dissolved her body. Diagnosed as a depersonalization syndrome, these visions of the dots or nets separated her from the rest of the world. Drawings of 1952 are early examples of the all-over dot pattern for which Kusama would become known in the early 1960s. Dots of approximately the same size hover in the shallow space of uniform color. Inseparable from this dot motif was a net motif, which was also already present in *Infinity Nets* of 1953. Another group of her ink drawings, which were often colored with watercolors or pastel, depict biomorphic forms that can be seen as vegetal, vaginal, or cosmic. Although Kusama produced a large number of similar drawings of figural abstraction in the 1950s, she burned thousands of them before she moved to New York. A photograph in a Japanese newspaper in the mid-1950s shows Kusama sitting amid infinite variations of these drawings spread on the floor and the walls (see fig. 16). Most of the extant drawings from this

period were painted over by Kusama in the 1960s; the original images are hard to distinguish from the new additions, but titles such as *My Heart* and *Flower* suggest that many of these drawings contain biomorphic or vegetal forms in the center.<sup>16</sup>

With these sets of ink, pastel, or watercolor drawings, Kusama acquired opportunities to have nine exhibitions, including six solo shows, between 1950 and 1957. The first one-person show of her over two hundred works in various media was held at the Matsumoto Civic Hall in 1952. Only six months later, she held another one-person show at the same place with 280 new works. By then, Kusama had made herself known in the Nagano region by entering several juried public exhibitions with her Nihonga paintings.<sup>17</sup> These exhibitions brought Kusama to the attention of the foremost art critic of

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16. Yayoi Kusama with her drawings, c. 1955. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

the time, Shūzō Takiguchi, and established artist Nobuya Abe, who became supportive of Kusama's work and wrote about her. Dr. Shihō Nishimaru, professor of psychiatry at Shinshū University became also interested in her work around this time. He was responsible for diagnosing Kusama's clinical condition for the first time, which led to psychiatric treatment. As Munroe notes, "psychiatry gave Kusama what her parents had denied her: justification to express herself and freedom to be mad."<sup>18</sup> In fact, far from being ashamed of her illness, Kusama emphasized it in order to authenticate her originality. This strategy worked in her favor. With the support of influential critics in Tokyo, Kusama was able to earn a place in the center of the Japanese art world in a relatively short time. She held four solo exhibitions in a row at the Shirokiya department store (1954); the Mimatsu bookstore gallery (1954); the Takemiya Gallery (1955); and the Kyūryūdo Gallery (1955).

Among Japanese women artists of the 1950s, Kusama's success stands out as the earliest and most prominent since she was already regarded a star artist by the late 1950s. Though one of the most extreme, her situation typified the difficult position of Japanese women avant-garde artists in Japanese society in the late 1950s. Soon after her solo exhibitions in Tokyo, she became a favorite focus of the press. Many articles on her featured her photograph; one of these is the article that appeared in a leading Japanese art magazine, *Geijutsu Shinchō*, in 1955.<sup>19</sup> Her popularity stirred discussions in the male-dominated Japanese art world. As a rare female artist only twenty-three years old, Kusama's prolificacy and originality were both regarded as prodigy.

Her reputation, however, was split between positive and negative. An unidentified newspaper rightly observed the Japanese reception of Kusama, noting,

It was February 1954, at the time of her solo exhibition at Shirokiya department store, that Yayoi Kusama made her debut in the center of the art world. The art world received an enormous shock from the painting by a previously unknown artist. . . . The best Japanese art magazine, *Mizue*, unexpectedly featured the painting by this unknown twenty-three-year-old girl on its cover in full color. . . . Ever since then, through a couple of solo exhibitions, many enthusiastic supporters of her art have been found among renowned writers, painters, and intellectuals. On the other hand, there are some people who are telling others that those are paintings by an abnormal child or a crazy person.<sup>20</sup>

While art critics praised Kusama's art, they also derided her as a *tokui jidō* (idiosyncratic child). This term usually refers to a child with physical idiosyncrasy or a child with a distinctive talent; both meanings were implied in this context. The press derided Kusama's eccentricity without directly referring to her mental illness. Most of critics also focused on the fact that she was a female artist. One noted that her technique was "connected with phys-

iology without any conflict, which is a very womanly sensitivity,”<sup>21</sup> and another found in her work “womanly delicate sensitivity.”<sup>22</sup> These comments reveal critics’ gender-biased perspective. Authorities in the Japanese art world were alarmed by the possibility that Kusama might disturb their order and hierarchy. From a perspective of an established male Japanese artist or art critic, a woman in her twenties would be normally regarded merely as a “child,” and an artist not affiliated with a *bijutsu dantai* (art association) should not succeed in the highly structured *gadan* (art establishment) system. But Kusama was cutting into this male-dominated hierarchy with unusual popularity in the press. Her existence in 1950s Japan simultaneously served as a hope for the regeneration of Japanese art and a threat to the patriarchal system.

Kusama was not oblivious of such contradictory receptions of her art. In fact, she tirelessly kept clippings of articles on her art from early on. Without being influenced by the public reputation of her art, however, she consciously created a critical distance from the press and the authorities of the Japanese world. Unlike other Japanese artists, and especially atypical as a young female artist, Kusama was very outspoken about her frustration in the Japanese art world. In *Geijutsu Shinchō*, Kusama wrote, “I sometimes feel uncomfortable with the critics, who comment as they look down on art from too a high position to even see a painting. So as with the frivolity of the art journalism which leads *gadan* to the direction far from painting.”<sup>23</sup> Her comment was directed at both critics and the press, who did not try to understand the artist’s point of view. In the same article Kusama further criticized the *gadan*’s poor understanding of her kind of art as “something coming from the utter darkness (*ankoku*).”<sup>24</sup> In her view, symbolism in art was not understood at all in Japan, and that was why her art could not be properly evaluated.<sup>25</sup>

Through several statements published in newspapers and magazines, Kusama projected an image of an independent and self-controlled artist who devoted her time and energy to artmaking. She often mentioned that she preferred quietly working at home to making public appearances. In one review, a critic (possibly the same one who had earlier commented on her split reputation) supported Kusama’s conscious extrication from the “noisy art world that tends to pull artists into the superficial showiness” as a means “to protect the artist’s truth and freedom.” This critic also contrasted her with other women artists who “advertise their names like actresses” and “are proud of people taking interest in them as women rather than as artists.”<sup>26</sup> In her self-proclaimed policy of “not having a mentor and not belonging to any group,”<sup>27</sup> Kusama kept a critical distance from the Japanese art world as a necessary choice to maintain her originality without being suppressed by Japanese society.

Kusama grew increasingly critical of the conservative Japanese society and its closed art world. In an interview she once commented that she felt that

all of Japan was an extension of her home and forbid her freedom, noting, "Japan around 1957 was still a feudalistic society and was very difficult for women. It was so terrible that a woman wearing a red dress could have disgusted people back then."<sup>28</sup> Her feeling of being constricted in Japan led her to seek opportunities abroad. After her first attempt in 1953 to go to Paris to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière failed, she turned her sights toward the United States.<sup>29</sup> In 1955, she was included in the International Watercolor Exhibition: Eighteenth Biennial at the Brooklyn Museum. By that time, Kusama had developed a conviction that New York would become the center of art world.

American contemporary painters such as Georgia O'Keeffe, whose paintings were found in art magazines, served as models for Kusama. Simply by looking up O'Keeffe's address in *Who's Who in American Art*, she wrote a letter to the artist to introduce her work and ask for advice. Kusama wrote, "I hope with all my heart that I will be able to show my paintings [to] dealers in New York. I am well aware that this is hardly possible for such an unexperienced [*sic*] painter like me to have a chance to show the works. . . . I have been aiming for . . . some . . . years that my paintings be criticized at New York."<sup>30</sup> Kusama's strong determination to become recognized in New York is apparent in this first letter. Although O'Keeffe replied that she could not help her directly, another West Coast painter, Kenneth Callahan, who also received Kusama's letter containing her small works, showed them to Zoe Dusanne Gallery in Seattle. The Gallery planned a solo exhibition for February 1957, but it was postponed to December due to a delay in obtaining a visa for travel to the United States.

With the Japanese press widely publicizing her first solo exhibition abroad, Kusama's parents could no longer keep their daughter from pursuing her career, but they still considered Kusama's move improper and shameful to the family. They gave some money for her to go to the United States, but told her to never come home. Meanwhile, Kusama received a second letter from O'Keeffe, which read in part, "When you get to New York take your pictures under your arm and show them to anyone you think may be interested. . . . It seems to me very odd that you are so ambitious to show your paintings here, but I wish the best for you."<sup>31</sup> Kusama followed O'Keeffe's advice literally when she arrived in New York a year later.

### Breaking Ground in New York, 1958–1961

On November 17, 1957, Kusama was finally able to leave Japan, first for Seattle and then for New York. Despite her high expectations for her first show in the United States, she sold only three paintings in Seattle; in a letter to O'Keeffe she commented that her "Oriental mystic symbolism [was] not readily received."<sup>32</sup> Moving to New York City in June 1958, she changed



apartments several times over the next year. Lacking financial support to sustain her life in New York, she was urged to try and sell her works constantly. Following O'Keeffe's advice, she visited dealers and galleries with an armload of paintings. Whenever there was the possibility of selling work at a gallery, she left some works on consignment. This strategy turned out to be effective, and her work gradually made its way into the New York art scene. In November, her works were shown for the first time in New York in the group exhibition *Modern Japanese Paintings* at the Brata Gallery. Two paintings were sold to a private collector in the following month. Art historian Bupendra Karia speculates that Kusama's success in a relatively short period was due to her "audacity to walk into any place," her "helplessness and candor" to persuade people, and a "uniquely American willingness to help."<sup>33</sup>

Within a year in New York, Kusama's paintings responded to her new environment. The scale grew dramatically and the large surface was entirely covered by the overall pattern of dots or nets. She called this series of paintings *Infinity Net*, relating them to her earlier drawings, but also gave individual titles consisting of disparate numbers and letters such as *No. T.W.3*. Kusama felt that the vast and emotionally dry impression of the city environment affected her style, and she consciously eliminated lyrical qualities from her painting. Without this necessary adoption of New York ambience, she believed, she "could not survive in New York otherwise."<sup>34</sup> Although her dot or net patterns originally sprang from her hallucinatory visions, their stylistic development was affected by the atmosphere of New York City. Kusama's stylistic shift was also in response to earlier American Abstract Expressionist paintings. In an article of 1961, Kusama claimed that her endless white net was born partially of her critical response to American pragmatism and its symbol, New York City, and to the expressive style of action painting. She wrote that "the endlessly repetitive rhythm [of brush strokes] and the monochromatic surface presents a new pictorial experiment with different 'light' which cannot be defined by regular pictorial construction and methods."<sup>35</sup> While Kusama emphasized the effect of light on her paintings' surfaces, what essentially distinguished her paintings from Abstract Expressionist works was the "endlessly repetitive rhythm" of her brush strokes, which represented the "cool" aesthetic of a new era while critically defying the expressive and dynamic mode of the art of the previous era. Kusama's new stylistic concerns were shared by American artists such as Frank Stella, who started a series of black abstract paintings in 1959. Their artistic styles were soon categorized as Minimalist.

Kusama's first solo exhibition at the Brata Gallery in 1959 featured five large white paintings, the largest of which was seven feet high and fourteen feet wide (see fig. 5 in chapter 1). After providing an entirely formalist analysis of these paintings, Donald Judd commented, in *Art News*, "The expression transcends the question of whether it is Oriental or American. Although it is something of both, certainly of such Americans as Rothko, Still and New-



man, it is not at all a synthesis and is thoroughly independent.”<sup>36</sup> Sidney Tillim of *Arts* magazine similarly compared her paintings to those of Jackson Pollock, but differentiated Kusama’s work as an “art of withdrawal” or “self-effacement.” For the challenging scale and determinedly original style of her work, Kusama immediately emerged as “one of the most promising new talents to appear on the New York scene in years.”<sup>37</sup>

Her exposure to the European art world followed in 1961. Udo Kultermann, the director of the Städtisches Museum in Leverkusen, then West Germany, selected Kusama along with Rothko as the only two American artists for his exhibition *Monochrome Malerei*. The following year, Henk Peeters, a founding member of the avant-garde art group Nul in Holland, contacted the artist, hoping to include her work in his exhibition *Nul*, to be held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1962. Although Kusama did not like stylistic association with other artists, she never missed opportunities to build her reputation in Europe; she participated in almost any exhibition offered to her. Reflecting her popularity abroad, Kusama’s work was included in the Carnegie Institute’s *International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* and in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Annual of 1961.

Despite her critical success, Kusama was not financially well off. As an unknown painter, she generally could not sell a large-scale work for more than \$350; the best sales she could get from one exhibition was \$800. Group exhibitions rarely led to sales. In addition, her exclusive contract with Stephen Radich Gallery, signed in 1960, limited her opportunities; she terminated it in the middle of 1961. Meanwhile, Kusama was seeking exhibition venues in Japan and even employed an accountant, but it was very difficult for a young independent female artist to break into the strict hierarchy of the Japanese art world. Although Kusama’s clinical condition was relatively stable in her early New York years, the emotional distress of having to produce works and to simultaneously self-promote her art to make a living exhausted her from time to time. At a point in each year after 1960, Kusama became chronically too ill to work. The illness was to recur more frequently after 1964, and its symptoms included heart problems and psychiatric conditions.<sup>38</sup>

### Into Sculpture and Environments

While facing financial and psychological problems, Kusama found a new medium for her expression — fabric sculpture. In September 1961, she moved into a larger studio at 53 East 19th Street, where she started making stuffed fabric protrusions and covered domestic objects and furniture with them. The fabric shop on the first floor of the building might well have been the inspiration for employing fabric as a new medium; Kusama’s experience of sewing parachutes during the war may also have contributed to this devel-

opment. Donald Judd, who had been a good friend of Kusama since 1959, moved into the upper floor and often helped her stuff her constructions. This was the birth of what Kusama called aggregation sculpture. The first series, including a sofa covered with protuberances entitled *Accumulation #1*, was shown at the Green Gallery in 1962, among works by Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, and Andy Warhol. Kusama's use of domestic objects related her sculpture to works by these artists, most of whom became associated with Pop art. In reaction to Abstract Expressionism, which eliminated figurative forms from painting, Pop artists inserted figurations that directly derived from everyday American culture such as consumer products and advertisements. Like Segal, who combined ready-made furniture with plaster figures directly cast from humans, Kusama's sculpture recycled discarded furniture.

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*Into  
Performance*

While Kusama's sculpture displayed some similarities to Pop art in the employment of everyday objects, her constant use of phallic protrusions distinguished her work from others. Critic Jill Johnston observed that Kusama's focus was on the repetition of phallic forms, not the objects themselves. In her article on Kusama's *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (see fig. 17),

which was comprised of a rowboat covered with fabric protrusions and black-and-white reproductions of the same boat covering the surrounding walls, Johnston commented, "[The photographs] are actually a reiterated extension of the boat, suggesting an infinite expansion of the image, expressing the same feeling of indefinite reiteration that Kusama seems obsessed with in the assemblage itself. The power of both the real image and the photographs is an accumulative art of repetitive insistence. The boat is a superficial vehicle for such insistence. Any object will do, and if it were practical, the walls might have been covered with the projection instead of the photographs."<sup>39</sup> A similar point was made by Oldenburg, who was a neighbor of Kusama around 1961. Comparing Kusama's sculpture with his soft sculp-

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17. Yayoi Kusama posed in *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* installation, Gertrude Gallery, New York, 1963. Photo by Rudolph Burkhardt, courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

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18. Yayoi Kusama's studio, c. 1963. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

ture, which he started around the same time, he noted, “The topic was not the object, [but] the thing that was on the object. Her sculpture is a small thing that covers.”<sup>40</sup> As Johnston and Oldenburg pointed out, the found object seemed merely the armature for Kusama’s sculpture; the repetition of the phallic form was central to her art.

Kusama’s selection of the found objects, however, was not random. She typically chose objects from the women’s domestic sphere, to which she could relate in her private life, including high heels, a cooking pan, and a dresser. A photograph taken around 1963 documents her studio filled with these objects (see fig. 18). Kusama produced these sculptures as a way to overcome the obsession and fear of sex that had haunted her since her childhood. Asked if the protrusions were really phallic symbols, Kusama gave an obscure answer in the 1960s,<sup>41</sup> but more recently she openly admitted that they were, telling one interviewer, “I put lots of phalli inside and outside a boat because I had great fear of and disdain for such things as sex and the phallus. I used it as an art therapy to cope with my obsessions.”<sup>42</sup> Through sewing, the work traditionally assigned to women, Kusama castrated the power associated with the phalli, turning them into benign elements that decorate the women’s domestic space.<sup>43</sup> Art historian Pamela Wye furthered

a psychoanalyst reading of Kusama's sculpture, interpreting it as a "willful seizing of the phallus, a re-constitution of the phallic mother of the pre-oidipal phase when the child has yet to discover that her mother doesn't have a penis."<sup>44</sup> Since Kusama had had psychotherapy in New York, she may have possibly been aware of such deeper psychological themes underlying her sculptures.

A rather humorous expression of the female empowerment is found in her 1964 sculpture *Traveling Life*. Women are represented by high-heeled shoes, attempting to climb up the ladder, whose steps are filled with white phallic forms of different sizes. While seeming intimidated by the overwhelming presence of the phalli that sprout from all sides of the ladder, the shoes make their way toward the top; each one of them is glued to one of the steps and one is on the top. As Kusama's contemporary critic Gordon Brown interpreted, this work symbolized "womanhood menaced by men."<sup>45</sup> Although it can be simply seen as a statement on the women's situation at the time, it embodies the hopeful future by enabling the upward move of high-heeled shoes.<sup>46</sup> As Munroe has noted, Kusama's "violent possession and control over not one but thousands of penises represent perhaps a victory, the freedom from subjugation, from dependency and the glorious right to dominate back."<sup>47</sup> Kusama's humorous and yet grotesque domestic scene challenged the patriarchal assumption of the female domain as mundane. In a photograph of the piece (see fig. 19), Kusama looks at the camera directly through the opening under the ladder, holding one of her macaroni dresses. The foreground is dominated by phallic forms spilling out of a bowl. Surrounding herself with these dramatically altered domestic objects, Kusama projected her view of the world as becoming consumed by her fantastic creations.

The feminist and psychoanalyst interpretation of Kusama's sculptures posed questions on the existing interpretations of her work. Due to a lack of feminist critique and the dominance of formalism in the 1960s, Kusama's contemporary critics often dismissed the potentially feminist subversiveness in her work as just strange, or as Surrealism's offspring, because they did not know how to discuss such sexual references. Judd, for example, simply stated that "[t]he boat and furniture that Kusama covered with white protuberances have a related intensity and obsessiveness and are also strange objects."<sup>48</sup> Art critic Lucy Lippard included Kusama's phallus-studded furniture among the emerging works of Postminimalist artists in her 1966 article "Eccentric Abstraction," but she merely commented that Kusama's work "though unquestionably fecund, remained Surrealist in spirit."<sup>49</sup> Although Judd and Lippard, among others, sensed eccentricity in Kusama's work, they did not investigate it further.

Only in the light of feminist critique, however, does the truly subversive quality of Kusama's work seem to emerge. As art historian Sally Banes has pointed out, the male artists of Pop and Happenings often adopted (uncritically) or even saluted "the dominant culture's representations of women

both as consumer and as a sexual object to be consumed.”<sup>50</sup> Amid the proliferation of objectified female bodies in Pop art and Happenings, Kusama presented her sculpture filled with the objectified male phallus from the eye of a female artist. Her numerous phallic forms may also have been intended as a criticism of male consumption of sex. In an article, Kusama angrily stated, “Men believe women exist for sex only and are useful only as a sex tool. The way men look at women, collecting them like pets, forces the women to wear makeup and skimpy clothes.”<sup>51</sup> Munroe has argued that Kusama’s phallus form expressed her “ambition for supremacy over men and over sexuality.”<sup>52</sup> By attaching countless phallic protrusions to the found domestic objects, Kusama ironically visualized the male domination over the female sexuality while posing a potential threat of women’s revenge in castrating phalli.

Kusama related the issues of consumption of sex to broader problems associated with consumerism in her subsequent series of sculptural environments. She extended her motif to food, represented by macaroni. What she called “food obsession” was expressed through macaroni-covered mannequins and dresses. These were first exhibited at the installation *Driving Image Show* at the Richard Castellane Gallery in New York in 1964 and later shown at Galerie M. E. Thelen in Essen, West Germany, in 1966. Comprised of a kitchen, a dressing room, and a guest room, the show presented a domestic interior covered with numerous phallic protrusions and inhabited by macaroni-covered mannequins. The floor was also covered with macaroni so that viewers’ steps made cracking sounds. A European critic noted that, because of the crowdedness of the environment and excessive use of patterns and colors, “separate, distinguishable things tended to dissolve in their over-all texture.”<sup>53</sup> As the artist in-

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19. Yayoi Kusama, *Traveling Life*, 1964, sewn fabric, women's shoes, wooden stepladder. Photo by Lock Huey, courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio. Kusama holds a macaroni jacket.

tended, viewers felt overwhelmed by the amalgam of forms, colors, patterns, and sounds to the extent that her environment could be considered a precedent of the psychedelic art of the late 1960s.

Unlike psychedelic art, however, Kusama's installation embodied her strong social and artistic concerns. In one interview, the artist explained the ideas behind the title, *Driving Image Show*:

I feel as if I were driving on the highways or carried on a conveyor belt without ending until my death. This is like continuing to drink thousands of cups of coffee or eating thousands of feet of macaroni. . . . I cannot stop living and yet I cannot escape from death. . . . I find myself being put into a uniform environment, one which is strangely mechanized and standardized. I feel this strongly in highly civilized America and particularly so in New York. . . .

In the gap between people and the strange jungle of civilized society lies many psychosomatic problems. I am deeply interested in the background of problems involved in relationship of people and society. My artistic expressions always grow from the aggregation of these.<sup>54</sup>

In Kusama's mind, New York's modernized environment heightened the universal fact about human life: one has to repeat daily ordeals until one dies. Kusama found the way to relate her personal obsessions to what she called "the psychosomatic problems" of a "civilized society." The fear of living in a strangely standardized environment with mass-produced objects and food was not only in Kusama's mind, but also shared and expressed by other contemporary artists such as Warhol, for example, in his *Brillo Box*. The mannequins in Kusama's installations were extensions of herself and were the symbols of the standardized humans.

Beginning with *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* and *Driving Image Show*, Kusama started presenting her artworks as environments. Evolved from assemblages, *environments* was the term coined by Happenings initiator Allan Kaprow in his 1966 book *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings*. After developing his artistic format through these three formats from the late 1950s, Kaprow sought to historicize his artistic evolution in this publication. Demonstrating that his theory was universal, the book featured many images of other international contemporary artists' works, including photographs of Gutai artists' performances and Kusama's photographs of her studio. In one of them (see fig. 20), Kusama combs her hair in front of a phallus-covered dresser. She is confronted by a macaroni-covered female mannequin who holds a brush in its left hand. Kusama and the mannequin's faces are reflected in the mirror of the dresser. By equating herself with the mannequin and by wearing a heavily textured shirt whose pattern matched that of the macaroni and the nets in her paintings, Kusama tried to integrate her presence in her environment.

Together with other photographs, this photograph was possibly taken in

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20. Yayoi Kusama with *Mannequin Girl* in front of a dresser and *Infinity Net* paintings, 1964. Photo by Eikoh Hosoe, courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

her studio the time of at her *Driving Image Show*. Kusama's studio filled with her works and her *Driving Image* installations can be compared to environments by Kaprow, such as *Apple Shrine* (1958). In his presentations, Kaprow filled galleries with large assemblages of found objects, such as newspaper, and had viewers experience them as an entire environment. Although Kusama did not actually see Kaprow's works in person, she could likely have heard of it through her artist friends.<sup>55</sup> The inviting and participatory character of Kaprow's environments is also found in Kusama's; and Kaprow's book contributed to authenticating Kusama's work within the context of international avant-garde art.

While the evolution of Kusama's art from drawing to larger painting, to painting to sculpture, to sculpture to environments was largely motivated by her personal obsessions, she was also perceptive of new directions in avant-garde art. By the mid-1960s, Kusama had become acquainted with major figures in the American avant-garde scene. Furthermore, Kusama's increasing confidence in her art and her visibility in the Western art world contributed to the shift in her artistic expression. The enlargement of her artworks, the growing participatory aspect of her environments, and her increasing promotional activities all reflected Kusama's self-aggrandizement in physically expanding the territory of her art.

## Performing Kusama: Merging Art and Life in Photography

Kusama used photography as a medium in the transition from environments to performance. Around the mid-1960s, Kusama started using photographs for promotional purposes, but her self-presentation was too elaborate and constructed to be seen merely as a commercial endeavor. In fact, Kusama often had a professional photographer take pictures of herself posing theatrically amid her sculptures. She looked up the most renowned photographers of the time and approached them about taking pictures of her, and hired many photographers to document performances in her studio and in galleries.<sup>56</sup> In this section, I will examine these photographs in details in order to discuss how Kusama constructed her artist's persona through theatrical postures and actions.<sup>57</sup>

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While Kusama's self-fashioning became prominent in the photographs around 1963, she seems to have been always conscious of how to present herself. Even at the age of ten, she knew how to pose in a portrait photograph by surrounding her face with huge dahlias that she picked from her family's greenhouse.<sup>58</sup> The flowers were overwhelmingly huge, to the point that they appeared unreal. Kusama juxtaposed herself to these flowers to make the photograph unforgettably dramatic. During her adolescence in Japan, Kusama often designed and created dresses on her own, employing such fancy materials as the shiny silk used to make kimonos. Although this effort stemmed from the fact she was too small to fit ready-made clothes, clothing design was integral to her artmaking from early on. The ultramodern, white-and-red sweater that appeared in a photograph around 1952 (see fig. 16) was also designed by Kusama.<sup>59</sup>

Later, in New York and Europe, where self-promotion was a necessary part of breaking into the art world, she started to present herself in a more eye-catching way. In openings of various shows, including the one for the *Nul* exhibition in Amsterdam, she appeared in a kimono in order to make her Asian identity stand out in the crowd.<sup>60</sup> Most of the artists in the picture were middle-aged men wearing dark suits and ties, including Jirō Yoshihara of the Gutai Art Association. While the group included three other women, Kusama stood out as the shortest, yet the most brilliant in her gold kimono. The gold kimono was fairly unusual in Japan and it had to be specially ordered.<sup>61</sup> Kusama's self-presentation was often very deliberate, including the process of designing her own dresses and hairdos. She often matched the color and pattern of her dress to the environment that she created. A reviewer of Kusama's *Driving Image Show* in Essen took notice of her "in an intense pink kimono" with "a great deal of make-up, a Grecian hairdo, and much perfume."<sup>62</sup>

Compared to her earlier photographs, those taken after 1963 seem to increase the degree of constructedness. In particular, those taken by Hal Reiff



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21. Yayoi Kusama on *Accumulation #2*, c. 1962. Photo by Hal Reiff, courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

around 1963 are sexually provocative and suggestive of Kusama's later performances. In one of them (see fig. 21), she reclines on *Accumulation No. 2* and looks at the viewer sideways with her chin resting on her arms. A similar posture on the same furniture piece is repeated in Reiff's nude photograph of her (circa 1966) that was made into a collage (see fig. 22). While the latter is nude and the former is not, both pictures show Kusama in high-heeled shoes, which are suggestive of male fetishism. Such a fetishistic pose could have been instructed by the male photographer, but as photographer Rudolf Burkhardt attested, Kusama often instructed the photographer "exactly how to compose the picture."<sup>63</sup> Her nudity was a creation of her deliberate calculation. Kusama's daring postures also revealed her gradually gained confidence in New York and her assimilation of the way women in the West are posed in pin-up photographs. In so doing, she subverted the fact that the male photographer would usually impose the postures they wanted on female models.

Kusama's appearance in the nude started with a photograph taken by Burkhardt at the time of 1964's *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (see fig. 17). This photograph may have been commissioned by the artist or the gallery for publicity purposes. Inserting an artist's naked body into publicity photographs was, and still is, an uncommon practice. Some photographs of artists, such as those of Jackson Pollock by Burkhardt, usually show them—clothed—at work or casually posing in front of their works. Distinctively,

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22. Yayoi Kusama, *Collage* (c. 1966; no longer extant) with photograph by Hal Reiff of nude Kusama reclining on *Accumulation #2* (c. 1962). Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

Kusama presented herself not as a typical artist, but as a nude, like a model. In this photograph, Kusama stands naked with her back toward the camera and with her lower body hidden behind *Boat Accumulation*. Although her body is less visible than the boat, the oars of the boat angle toward her, directing the viewer's attention to her. Her posing with her back to the viewer is consistent with the 1963 Reiff photographs. In fact, this tilted posture is typically found in depictions of women in Japanese art. Japanese artists preferred the back position of a model with her head turned forward, to the plain frontal position, believing that the former seduces the viewer into hidden eroticism. Kusama may have been conscious of the typical posture with which a Japanese woman had been represented.

Kusama's practice of inserting her body in photographs of her own works can be considered an extension of her artistic creation. Art historian Reiko Tomii claims that such an activity should be considered a part of her "total art."<sup>64</sup> In discussing Reiff's photograph of a nude Kusama lying on her *Ac-*

*cumulation* No. 2 (see fig. 22), curator Lynn Zalevansky also maintains a similar point that the image can also be seen as evidence of Kusama's desire to conflate the representational and the actual, the art and the artist.<sup>65</sup> To these discussions I would also add that Kusama's desire to conflate her art and life originally stemmed from her hallucinatory vision. In her visions, repetitive patterns of dots or nets, or proliferating phallic forms, covered her surroundings and tried to integrate her. By becoming nude, she may have wanted to return to a primordial state in which her art and life could become one. On the contrary, these photographs simultaneously functioned as the ritualistic space for Kusama to emerge from her private world of fantasy to the public life with the constructed self.

The medium of photcollage was also effectively used in Kusama's persistent attempt to fuse herself with her artwork. For example, a photograph of her studio around 1962–1963 (see fig. 18) was transformed into two different versions by pasting parts from other photographs. The first version, which was reproduced in the March 1964 issue of *Art Voices*, shows the insertion of Kusama's body into the original photograph. It is so carefully added that one could miss such a manipulation easily. Kusama delineated the contour of her body in black pen so that the distinction between surrounding dark areas and the addition would not be so noticeable. In the next version (see fig. 23), she collaged clusters of protrusions to fill the dark floor areas, and retouched

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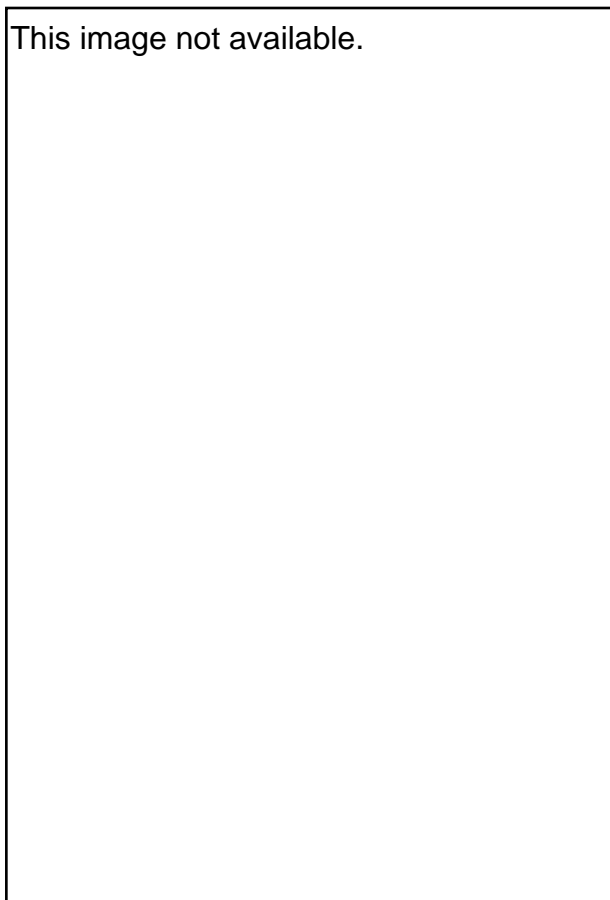
23. Yayoi Kusama, *Compulsion Furniture (Accumulation)*, photcollage, paint, 8 × 9<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, c. 1964. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

the photograph with black and white paint. By diminishing any open area in the photograph with deliberate manipulations, Kusama increased the claustrophobic impression of her studio, thus making visible for the viewer her ever-spreading obsessive vision.<sup>66</sup>

Kusama furthered the conscious construction of her persona in 1965–1966. In a photograph taken at her *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field or Floor Show* at the Castellane Gallery in New York, Kusama stands in the midst of hundreds of polka-dot-patterned phallic sculptures. The red of her body suit matched the color of polka dots.<sup>67</sup> She has stated that these polka dots represented sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea and syphilis. By using mirrors to multiply dotted phalluses, Kusama intended to realize an infinite “field of sex” in this installation.<sup>68</sup> By turning the grotesque subject into a visual amusement and by presenting herself as innocent, Kusama subverted the horrendous reality of sexual diseases. Another photograph from the same installation (see fig. 24), by the Japanese photographer Eikoh

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Hosoe, captures Kusama in a white body suit lying on the floor of phallic protrusions.<sup>69</sup> Seen from behind, Kusama thrusts her right leg upward and grabs her breasts with her hands. Because of multiple exposures, her figure is repeated within the photograph, imitating the multiple reflections on the mirror walls. Here, in a more theatrical manner, she presents herself like a fairytale heroine who resides in the field of phalli. Kusama buried her body in her installation, attempting a more direct fusion of her body with her sculptural environment than in her photocollages. The endless reflections of Kusama's body and sculpture on mirrors must have fulfilled the artist's incessant desire to become one with art.<sup>70</sup>

Kusama increasingly became at ease in front of the camera. Another photograph from the same period (see fig. 25) shows Kusama similarly lying on the bottom part of her sculpture *My Flower Bed*, installed in her studio. The snake-

24. Yayoi Kusama in *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field or Floor Show* at the Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965. Photo by Eikoh Hosoe, courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

like continuous form, made of bed springs covered with cloth, coils around on the floor; a gigantic flower made of stuffed Japanese cotton gloves shoots up toward the ceiling. Though the photograph is privately taken without any audience, Kusama's posture is overtly theatrical and her eyes are averted from the camera. She pretends to be contemplating something, suggesting a fairytale narrative between her sculpture and herself.

In fact, she told a long story about this piece to one writer, part of which reads, "Filled with loneliness, unable to sleep, I curl up for the night in *My Flower-Bed* because flowers are tender and loving. Now I am an insect that returns to its flower during the night; the petals close over me as the mother's womb protects the unborn child. . . . Until

dawn, the flowers in *My Flower-Bed* will sway in the night breeze and caress me gently, for the night is the time of love and sex."<sup>71</sup> While Kusama fantasizes her being protected by the motherlike flower, she also admits that her flower could threaten her by reaching out to grasp her because these are "flowers that trap insects in order to devour them."<sup>72</sup> Kusama's contradictory longing for and repulsion from love is expressed in this performance. By sleeping under the monstrous flower in the shape of hands and dyed in a blood red, she conveys the viewer anxieties. Although these early performance photographs by Kusama have often been overlooked as secondary to her objects and environments and overtly self-promotional, they should be considered as an integral part of Kusama's art. Such photographs contain a strong narrative component in which Kusama could act out her fantasies and artistic ambitions of merging her art and life seamlessly into one.

### *Self-Obliteration* Performances

Kusama's relentless pursuit of blurring boundaries between her body and the environment, her art and life was further developed through numerous performances between 1966 and 1970. The time when her performances became

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25. Yayoi Kusama under *My Flower Bed*, c. 1965–1966. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

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26. Yayoi Kusama in *Narcissus Garden*, Venice, 1966. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

public coincided with the development of her environment-type works such as *Driving Image Show* at the Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio in Milan and *Peep Show* or *Endless Love Show* at the Castellane Gallery in New York in 1966. For the latter, a hexagonal room with mirrors and flashing Christmas lights imbedded into the ceiling was specially designed for the viewers to look in through peepholes. In one of the photographs, Kusama posed for the camera, wearing a red bodysuit and boots with fluorescent circular stickers. The inviting character of the environments perhaps stemmed from Kusama's growing extrovertedness and desire to interact with the visitors. In both shows, Kusama appeared in the gold kimono to attract viewers' attention. For *Peep Show*, Kusama distributed to the visitors white cardboard buttons with the message "Love Forever" to point out the theme of the installation, what she called "unrealizable and interminable love."<sup>73</sup> Her increasing use of the catchword *love* at this time may have been influenced by the beginning of the "sexual revolution."

Kusama garnered wider attention from the international press for her performance at the 1966 Venice Biennale (see fig. 26). After not being selected for the Biennale, Kusama decided to display her installation of 1,500 mirror balls, titled *Narcissus Garden*, in front of the Biennale exhibition hall and sold the mirror balls to passers-by for 1,200 lire (or two dollars) each. She also distributed flyers that printed art historian Herbert Read's positive commentary on her art. Her daring commercial activity, along with a sarcastic sign placed on a side that printed "YOUR NARCISIUM [*sic*] FOR SALE," pointed out the narcissism that lies in the act of art collecting, equating it with money, one of the symbols of vanity. Her assault ultimately hoped to undermine the art collectors who sustained the art world, including that of the

Biennale. By the time the Biennale organizers had the police come to stop her, her performance had already attracted such a wide range of international media that she became the most famous artist at the Biennale. Being conscious of the power structure in international exhibitions in which Western, white male artists dominate, Kusama intentionally emphasized the “otherness” of her identity as a Japanese woman by wearing her quintessential gold kimono with a flower-patterned obi (sash) and long straight hair.<sup>74</sup>

Many public performances followed this event in New York; early performances were less documented than later ones. Kusama often called these events *Happenings*, directly borrowing the term from Allan Kaprow, who had first used it in 1959. Between 1964 and 1966, Kusama had personal contact with Kaprow; he intended to publish her photographs in 1966, the same year that her public performances started to be called *Happenings*. However, Kusama appropriated Kaprow’s term to her performances without any intention of accepting his influence on her art; she employed it rather casually because the term had also been popularized in the New York popular culture to refer loosely to any performance that involved some unexpected aspects. Like her performance at the Venice Biennale, most of Kusama’s performances centered on the purpose of shocking the passersby and interacting with them and did not have the elaborate scripts that most of Kaprow’s *Happenings* had.

The first known public performance by Kusama in New York was *14th Street Happening* (see fig. 27), which was documented by Japanese photographer Hosoe, who had taken photographs of her earlier *Floor Show*.<sup>75</sup> On

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27. Yayoi Kusama, *14th Street Happening*, 1966. One of the slides photographed by Eikoh Hosoe. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

the sidewalk outside her loft on East 14th Street, Kusama laid out a white mat filled with red-dot-patterned, stuffed phallic protuberances and lied down on top of it. Wearing a black one-piece dress possibly of her own design and her hair in long braids, she probably intended to present herself as a young girl out of a fairy tale. A sequence of slides indicates that she sometimes moved off the mat and laid her body on both sides of the mat at different times. Hosoe's multiple-exposure technique records the movement of the passersby, most of who seem to have stopped for a moment to look at what Kusama was doing. A tourist bus also stayed for a while so that passengers could see the event.

Possibly in the same year, another street Happening, *Walking Piece*, was also performed without notifying the public. Kusama, wearing a pink, flower-patterned kimono and holding a large umbrella decorated with plastic flowers, strolled the streets of lower Manhattan near a large electronic power plant.<sup>76</sup> Hosoe again documented this Happening in a series of color slides (see the cover of the present volume). Like an actress in a film, Kusama posed with various emotional expressions: sorrow, anxiety, fear, melancholy, and ambition. Like her performance at the Venice Biennale, her exotic outfit heightened her Asian identity and "otherness" in American society. She took advantage of being seen as an outsider in order to make herself stand out and attract attention.

Not long after these street Happenings Kusama initiated body-painting performances that took place in numerous indoor and outdoor locations throughout the New York metropolitan area between 1967 and 1969. In these performances, Kusama applied polka dots, a Pop version of her signature dot motif, on naked bodies of participants, mostly in red or white paint. While Kusama gave these performances various titles, including "naked performances" and "body festivals," the unifying concept was one of "self-obliteration," the idea that originally stemmed from Kusama's hallucinatory vision of dots and nets comprising her environment and developed through her large-scale paintings and installations. Instead of fighting against her fear of becoming subsumed by the proliferating dots and nets, Kusama tried to overcome her obsession by accepting it and expressing it through art. Through painting, sculpture, environments, and/or photographs, her work has constantly pursued this concept of blurring body and environment, art and life.

With the slogan of *self-obliteration*, Kusama turned her personal obsession into a cultlike practice that could become popularized in New York's popular culture. Titled *Self-Obliteration, an Audio-Visual-Light Performance*, Kusama's first public body-painting performance took the form of a dance party at the Black Gate Theater in the East Village on June 16–18, 1967. Unlike her earlier performances, this performance and subsequent ones were widely publicized through flyers and press releases. One of them read, "[D]uring the course of the happening Kusama will obliterate her environment, live bikini models and herself. All will be asked to wear polka dots for a polka dot



dance party.”<sup>77</sup> Another slogan read, “Become one with eternity. Obliterate your personality. Become part of your environment. Forget yourself. Self-destruction is the only way out.”<sup>78</sup>

According to Kusama, the event proceeded as follows: “[S]everal models in bikinis and pieces of furniture” were all “painted with fluorescent polka dots to the music machines of Joe Jones and his Tonedeads, a chorus of almost 30 amplified frogs.”<sup>79</sup> Joe Jones was a Fluxus artist who produced a number of noisemaking mechanized instruments, including his Tonedeads. It was rather a spontaneous result that everyone finally painted themselves, which became a pattern for Kusama’s later body-painting orgies, often taking place in more intimate environments such as her studio. To hold body-painting performances regularly, Kusama re-created a mirrored chamber resembling her earlier environment, *Peep Show*. The ceiling had flashing Christmas tree lights, which created a polka-dotted environment. In this hallucinogenic environment she painted naked bodies of guests with polka dots, and the guests also took part in painting bodies of other visitors. After painting each other, they intermingled and indulged themselves in orgiastic frenzy.<sup>80</sup>

Kusama’s *Self-Obliteration* performances can be compared to Carolee Schneemann’s orgiastic performance *Meat Joy*, which was presented at Judson Church in 1964.<sup>81</sup> In the climactic scene of Schneeman’s work, four pairs of men and women with bikinis enmeshed each other with raw fish, chicken, sausages, wet paint, and paper scraps. Schneemann called her performance “an erotic rite to enliven my guilty culture,” referring to the predominantly Christian American culture.<sup>82</sup> Kusama’s body-painting events were also directed against suppressed sexuality in modernized society. While Kusama’s body paintings have some affinities with Schneemann’s *Meat Joy*, Kusama’s work clearly differs from Schneemann’s in its direct involvement of visitors as participants. *Meat Joy* was close to traditional theater in the way that it maintained the distinction between the audience and performers. Kusama’s performances, on the other hand, prepared paint and brush for her guests and encouraged them to paint themselves.

In the summers of 1967 and 1968, the outdoor version of the body-painting performance was manifested in what Kusama called “body festivals,” held on Saturdays and Sundays in public parks, including Tompkin Square Park and Washington Square Park. Passersby were invited to take off their clothes and to be painted by Kusama and her artist friend Minoru Araki. Targeting “the nest of hippies,” Kusama expected that they would “like to paint the body nude” and “understand” what her intentions were.<sup>83</sup> These outdoor events met with great attendance and attention from the press; their success in publicity was largely due to the advance distribution of Kusama’s flyers and press releases that used such catchy slogans as, “Please the Body,” “50% is Illusion and 50% is Reality,” “Learn, Unlearn, Relearn.”<sup>84</sup> In addition, Kusama’s outstanding appearance caught the eyes of the press: for these

events she often wore bright red tights and bodysuit with white spots, and a red cowboy hat with white spots. Many newspapers and magazines covered her events and called Kusama “the Priestess of Polka Dots” or “Dotty.”

On the first two days of September 1967, Kusama took her audience-participation performance to the Chrysler Museum in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she advertised it with a slogan, “The Body is Art.” The local papers introduced it as trying “to make people into art,”<sup>85</sup> and Boston television stations broadcasted it in Boston and New York.<sup>86</sup> Through these performances, Kusama had now become a public persona, different from just an eccentric artist in the closed avant-garde art community. She was also seen as representing the hippie culture, Greenwich Village psychedelic culture, and the Beat generation.<sup>87</sup>

The documentary film footages of these performances were collaged together to produce a 16-millimeter film, *Kusama’s Self Obliteration*, in collaboration with filmmaker Jud Yalkut in 1967.<sup>88</sup> The twenty-three-minute film consists mainly of body-painting Happenings, occurring both in indoors and out. The indoor portion is composed of segments from different body-painting events, including Kusama’s first body-painting Happening at the Black Gate Theater; two Happenings at Group 212 in Woodstock, New York; body-painting parties with Kusama’s Electric Circus dancers, and another body-painting orgy in Kusama’s Infinity Mirror Room. Contrasted with the chaotic, sexual energy emitted from these indoor orgies, the first outdoor portion of the film is characterized by a serene, meditative tone. The first sequence includes scenes that were possibly all filmed in Central Park: Kusama riding a polka-dotted horse at the Japan Society’s Japanese Promenade, covering a man and a cat with fallen leaves; entering a pond and scattering red paint onto the water surface to create an ephemeral carpet of red dots.<sup>89</sup>

Through such outdoor presentations, Kusama associated the concept of her performances with nature. In fact, Kusama commented in many interviews that her polka dot signified the sun, the moon, and the earth. As she explained in one, “A polka dot has the form of the sun which is a symbol of the energy of the whole world, and also the form of the moon which is calm. Round, soft, colorful, senseless and unknowing. Polka dots can’t stay alone, like communicative life of people, two and three and more polka dots become movement. Our earth is only one polka dot among a million stars in the cosmos. Polka dots are a way to infinity. When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment. I become part of the eternal, and we obliterate ourselves in Love.”<sup>90</sup> Kusama’s belief was that by painting oneself with such cosmic symbols and by obliterating one’s identity, one could “become one with eternity.” A similar idea was more recently reinforced in Kusama’s writing, in which we read, “Humans are not merely tiny worms even in the vast, eternal universe. They constitute an infinite net of shining polka dots. By Self-Obliteration of myself as a polka dot, my soul will go through incarnations and turn into one of

eternal polka dots in the universe.”<sup>91</sup> Many journalists and scholars have easily dismissed such a deep, underlying theme in Kusama’s “self-obliteration” performances.

The theme of self-obliteration relates Kusama’s performance to Atsuko Tanaka’s performance in the latter’s *Electric Dress* (see fig. 3 in chapter 1). The light emitted from Tanaka’s dress also formed polka dots and had the effect of visually dematerializing her body. Tanaka’s later abstract paintings of electric circuits or dots connected by lines incited further comparisons to Kusama’s works. Although Tanaka’s performance was done in 1955, some twelve years earlier than Kusama’s, the two artists shared an interest in visually dematerializing their bodies and connecting them to the eternal universe. The concept of self-obliteration also relates to the Buddhist notion of a body as a temporary receptacle of a spirit. Furthermore, the association of the female body and the universe preceded that of the 1970s “ecofeminists.”

In 1968, Kusama’s naked performance increased visibility by expanding its venues into business districts and tourist sites.<sup>92</sup> Called “anatomic explosions,” or “naked demonstrations,” these events were more like guerilla performances to shock the public and were held only for a short time until the police stopped them. Compared to Kusama’s earlier Happenings, where the audience was invited to participate, these events had less interaction with the public. In famous sites, such as the New York Stock Exchange, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Statue of Liberty, several male and female models took off their clothes and danced to rock-’n’-roll music while Kusama painted them with polka dots or pasted them with polka-dot-shaped stickers. At the Brooklyn Bridge, the two male performers unfurled a banner that advertised “Kusama: Self-Obliteration” (see fig. 28).

Kusama’s outdoor performance sometimes caused conflicts with other performance artists. At one time, Kusama crashed the annual Avant-Garde Art Festival organized by a rival, cellist and performer Charlotte Moorman. The festival, which had begun in 1965, grew larger year by year, presenting performances by many contemporary artists associated with Fluxus and Happenings. Since Kusama was not associated with any art group and did not know Moorman personally, she was never invited. As soon as Kusama and her group started distracting from the festival, Moorman stopped the procession for about fifteen minutes and asked the police to expel them. The police, however, did not find a reason to do so since Kusama’s group kept on their clothes. Kusama’s actions were directed against the festival itself, which excluded her, and Moorman, whom Kusama acknowledged as “a pioneer of nudist art.” In a letter to the *Village Voice* dated September 19, 1968, Kusama boasted that she had taken “nude art out of theater and put it into the street — made it entirely nude instead of semi nude.” Furthermore, Kusama thought that “a New York Avant Garde Festival without the participation of my group of true idealists is unthinkable,” and that the festival was “stale, stagy, and contrived,” and “in dire need of truly avant-garde events.”<sup>93</sup> The letter pro-

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28. Yayoi Kusama and her performers in *Self-Obliteration Event* at the Brooklyn Bridge, Brooklyn, New York, 1967. Photo courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

claimed the originality of Kusama's performance, but it also revealed her strong consciousness of other performance artists.

Kusama increasingly assumed political positions in her Happenings. In dealing with her increasing publicity, she gradually transformed her performances into "demonstrations" that addressed social issues. For example, her flyer for the event at the Statue of Liberty on July 17 reads, "[T]ake it off, liberty! . . . Nudism is the one thing that doesn't cost anything. Clothes cost money. Property costs money. Taxes cost money. Stocks cost money. Only the dollar costs less. Let's protect the dollar by economizing! Let's tighten our belts! Let the pants fall where they may! . . . Forget yourself and become one

with nature! Obliterate yourself with polka dots!”<sup>94</sup> In this text, Kusama’s standpoint seemed vague and naively antiauthoritarian, associating nudism with a sort of anticapitalism.

On the other hand, at her August demonstration at the Alice in Wonderland statue in Central Park, Kusama’s message seemed to concentrate on the theme of love. Her press release invited people to take a trip to a “world of fantasy and freedom” and paint one another in love.<sup>95</sup> For the event in front of the United Nations in September, however, Kusama clearly changed her theme to pacifism, burning a Russian flag.<sup>96</sup> In November, she held more antiwar events, including one called *An Open Letter to My Hero, Richard M. Nixon* and one in front of the New York City Board of Elections office. The disparate mixture of political messages suggests that they were secondary to Kusama’s performances. Curator Laura Hoptman has pointed out that Kusama’s “thin veneer of progressive political rhetoric did not disguise the fact that their true agenda was Kusama’s ‘symbolic philosophy with polka dots.’”<sup>97</sup> In order to connect her art with social radicalism, the artist was adapting various political discourses from the contemporary society, including anarchism, pacifism, nudism, free love, and psychedelia.

Kusama was especially keen on projecting an image of herself as a sexual liberator. At the time of *Homosexual Wedding* in November 1968, Kusama served as “the High Priestess of the Polka Dots” and made a ceremony for a gay couple who shared a connected wedding gown of Kusama’s design. In it she claimed, “Love can now be free, but to make it completely free, it must be liberated from all sexual frustrations imposed by society. . . .”<sup>98</sup> She had become a priestess of sexual liberation, undermining conservative authorities. On April 6, 1969, she set up *Bust-Out* on a platform in Central Park’s Sheep Meadow, presenting her mock wedding to Louis Abolofia, who later launched his New York City mayoral campaign as the “love candidate.” In the event, Kusama exceptionally removed a bra and veil, revealing her body covered with polka-dots. According to the *New York Times*, the event attracted “500 Hippies and 3500 ‘hippies-for-a-day’” by the time police came to halt it.<sup>99</sup> The years 1968 and 1969 were the height of the hippie revolution and sexual liberation. By holding these events, Kusama sought to assume the role of leader in hippie culture.

The objects of Kusama’s assaults were extended to include artistic institutions. Earlier, in 1966, Kusama had humorously attacked the Venice Biennale with *Narcissus Garden*, her performance of displaying her sculptures and selling them without notice. Her August 1969 event at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York increased her notoriety by using nude performers (see fig. 29). Titled *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA*, Kusama coordinated eight performers who removed their clothing and became naked in the MoMA sculpture garden. Under Kusama’s supervision, the performers struck poses similar to those of adjacent sculptures by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Aristide Maillol, and Alberto Giacometti. Calling

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29. Yayoi Kusama in *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead* at MoMA, 1969. Photo from the front page of the *New York Daily News*, courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio.

sculptures “dead,” Kusama intended to comically undermined the museum as an institution that warehoused old art, as opposed to the “live art” of her performance. Although the performance went on only for a short time, until security officers stopped it, a documentary photograph was largely featured on the first page of the *New York Daily News*.<sup>100</sup> Although critics at the time did not take this performance seriously, Kusama’s attack on the artistic institution was revered by both her contemporaries and later artists who shared her criticism of artistic authorities. Possibly inspired by Kusama’s performance, in November 1969, Guerrilla Action Art Group carried out *Museum of Modern Art Action*.<sup>101</sup> Repercussions of these performances can still be seen today in the Guerrilla Girls’ antiauthoritarian campaigns.

### From 1970 to the Present

After 1967, Kusama’s activities concentrated on performances. One of the self-proclaimed reasons was that she had temporarily lost motivation in art-making in the form of sculpture, painting, and installation, gradually due to her success with psychoanalysis.<sup>102</sup> Another reason might have been that she became so closely identified with her public persona that she hardly had time for self-reflection. The earlier, introspective aspect of her art seemed to have diminished. Instead, the political messages in Kusama’s Happenings grew stronger and the police often came to arrest performers. Because every event was publicized to the press, the information leaked to the police. Kusama even hired a lawyer to resolve legal issues, but her expenditure increased.<sup>103</sup> In the meantime, she started various enterprises including, Kusama Musical Production, Kusama Fashions, and an X-rated tabloid magazine called *Kusama’s Orgy*.<sup>104</sup> While some of her businesses were fairly successful, they did not draw much attention except in the underground culture. Also, her participation in a lecture series at the New School for Social

Research, “The Creative Imagination and the Environment: A Step into the ’70s,” did not lead to any further opportunities. In an attempt to explore new opportunities, Kusama returned to Japan for three months in early 1970. In a magazine interview, she declared that her intention was to “blow away the sexually constipated Japanese.”<sup>105</sup> Most of her plans for public Happenings failed, however—mainly due to Japanese conservatism and censorship. During her half-naked Happening in Tokyo, she was arrested by the police. In a live television program, Kusama took off her clothes, but a male announcer blocked the view from the camera. In Japan, most of the press was scandalized by Kusama’s activities and almost none was interested in her work as an artist. Nevertheless, feeling unsafe in New York and temporarily losing a motivation toward artmaking, Kusama returned to Japan in 1973 in order to live in a mental institution permanently.

In the early 1970s, Kusama devoted her energy to writing poems and novels, including *The Manhattan Suicide Addicts*, published first in Japanese in 1978. Her literary activity has paralleled her artmaking since then. While Kusama became almost forgotten in the Western art world during the 1970s and 1980s, she regained fame by the late 1980s through several solo exhibition opportunities in Japan. Ever since then, Kusama’s visibility in and out of Japan has grown steadily. Her first retrospective exhibition came at the newly opened Center for International Contemporary Art in New York in 1989. With the great success in this exhibition, Kusama came back to the forefront of the international contemporary art world. Soon she was selected as a representative of Japan for the forty-fifth Venice Biennale in 1993. In 1998, her largest retrospective exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York; it traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. Her participation in international large-scale exhibitions has since been increasing at a rapid pace.

Though originally started for a therapeutic purpose, Kusama’s art evolved from the personal to the universal in a constructive way. Her performances were integral to this evolution, allowing her to realize merging of her art and life. With her incredible energy and determination, Kusama turned her disadvantage to advantage. Rather than concealing her illness, she has always openly talked about it. By referring to her work as “psychosomatic art,” Kusama claimed the psychological content of her art as her strength and originality. As a result, she has broken away from the traditional position of a Japanese woman and entered the international realm where her art could reach the universal. Even though Kusama has succeeded to become one of the most well-known Japanese artists in the world today, she never ceases her prolific art production in search of her truth—the one that perhaps lies between art and life, life and death. Through her perpetual reinvention of herself, Kusama continues to engage us in her ever expanding universe.





*The Message  
Is the Medium:  
The Communication Art  
of Yoko Ono*

I realized then, that it was not enough in life to just wake up in the morning, eat, talk, walk, and go to sleep. Art and music were necessities. But they were not enough, either. We needed new rituals, in order to keep our sanity.

—Yoko Ono, e-mail to the author,  
September 13, 1999

Shortly after turning twenty years old, Yoko Ono discovered art out of necessity. “Art is a means of survival,” Ono claims repeatedly today when reflecting back on the role of art in her life from early on.<sup>1</sup> Artmaking helped her overcome many hardships that she encountered throughout her life. During World War II, for example, she often played a game with her siblings to imagine foods that they could not obtain. Using one’s imagination to find hope in life became the point of departure for Ono’s art. One of her earliest artistic expressions, *Lighting Piece* (1955), took the form of a performance as well as an “instruction” consisting of simple words. Although this piece directly grew out of Ono’s personal ritual to calm herself, later—when its instruction was written and performed in front of audience—the piece became Ono’s message to people, to encourage them to contemplate their lives.

As evident in Ono’s concept during the 1970s—that “the message is the

medium” — she became aware that her ideas and imagination could become art via language.<sup>2</sup> As early as the mid-1950s Ono started writing “scores” or “instructions,” in simple words, that were designated for realization by viewers as performances or imagination exercises. In recent scholarship, Ono’s work has been reevaluated as one of the earliest examples of conceptual art, one that preceded that of Joseph Kosuth and others.<sup>3</sup> Unlike most conceptual art, however, Ono’s work does not always center on institutional critique and deconstruction of traditional aesthetics; such ideological concerns are secondary to Ono’s main interest. She prefers to call her work “con art” — a pun between “conceptual” and “con,” suggesting the deceptive playfulness that underlies her art.<sup>4</sup> Rather than directing her work at the art crowd, who would understand her critical take on traditional art, Ono attempts to reach a wider audience, ultimately seeking spiritual and intellectual communication with the viewer.

The basis of Ono’s art was founded in the early 1960s and developed into different forms in the following four decades. Rather than discussing all periods of her activities over the years, my discussions will concentrate on her formative years and early development in the 1960s. Focal points throughout this chapter are Ono’s feminist concerns, the development of her performance-related works, and her role in catalyzing artistic exchanges between Japan and the United States. In the first section, I will summarize Ono’s biographical background and her interrelations with New York avant-garde artists, and investigate how she reached instructions and performance. The second section will focus on the time that she spent in Japan between 1962 and 1964, during which she performed in many places and was active in the Tokyo avant-garde circle. The third section will be on her artistic activities in New York between 1964 and 1966, including involvement with the group Fluxus, and the fourth section will be on her activities in London between 1966 and 1970, which will include discussions about a shift in Ono’s artistic activities, due largely to her marriage to John Lennon. Finally, the last section will be a summary of her art and life of the past three decades.

### The Formative Years: The Birth of “Instructions” and Performance

As if to anticipate her career, Ono’s life was performative and conscious of the public from the start. Born the eldest daughter of a distinguished banker’s family, Ono was always expected to perform. Her first memory was of feeling alone in the large garden outside her home in a high-class residential neighborhood in Tokyo, being watched by her family maids. She was brought up among aristocrats, given the most sophisticated education and musical training that one could obtain in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. Her kindergarten, Jiyū Gakuen, was open only to those who were associated with the imperial family or the Japanese House of Peers. There she began piano les-

sons at the age of four and was taught to listen for and notate everyday sounds and noises by her school teacher.<sup>5</sup> While going to a Christian primary school, she also took private lessons at home in the Bible, Buddhism, and the piano. Because her father was transferred to San Francisco, and subsequently to New York, Ono lived briefly in the United States in 1935–1937 and 1940–1941. In American public school, she felt a constant pressure to be an exemplary student since her mother even told her that she represented the nation of Japan.<sup>6</sup> The performance of a life negotiating between the private and public self may have started at that time.

Ono's hybrid identity suffered hardship during the World War II. In the spring of 1941, right before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Ono and her family sailed back to Japan while her father was sent to Hanoi, Vietnam. After their house was bombed by an air raid in 1945, the Onos escaped to the countryside for shelter and food. Local farmers were not hospitable to them, however, ostracizing them as a rich, Americanized family. Ono experienced hardship in daily life for the first time, such as the antagonism against strangers (she and her family) and a lack of food. After the war, Ono returned to Tokyo with her younger brother and sister, and found her hometown bombed to ruins. Upon seeing the devastation, she did not, surprisingly, feel despair, but instead hope for rebirth. Compared to the hard country life that she had been living, she felt optimistic about restarting her life in Tokyo. Finding hope in the hardest possible situations would become an underlying theme in Ono's art and life.

After the war, Ono started pursuing her own interests in earnest. When she was fourteen, she announced to her parents that she wanted to become a composer. Her father, a talented pianist himself, persuaded Ono not to pursue a composer's career because it was "a field that's too hard for women."<sup>7</sup> He then encouraged her to become an opera singer, but in 1952, against his wish, Ono entered the philosophy department at Gakushūin University as the first female student. One year later, the Ono family moved to Scarsdale, New York, to join her father, who was then working in the Manhattan branch of the Bank of Tokyo. Between 1953 and 1956 Ono studied music composition and literature at Sarah Lawrence College. Apart from studying at school, she independently created poems and some novellas and tried to publish them. Her poem, *Of a Grapefruit in the World of Park*, which was later developed into a score for a performance event, was originally published in the Sarah Lawrence College newspaper, *The Campus*, in 1955.<sup>8</sup>

Soon Ono incorporated her literary interests into music. Having acquired classical musical training earlier in Japan, she was not interested in repeating it in college, and was instead more inclined toward contemporary music, such as the twelve-tone compositions of Anton von Webern, Arnold Schoenberg, and Alban Berg. One of her professors pointed out that Ono might find interest in the works by the avant-garde composers' circle in New York, including John Cage, but she was not interested in learning about other

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30. Yoko Ono, *Secret Piece*, 1953. First version (bottom) and second version (top). Photo courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

people at that point.<sup>9</sup> After attempting to translate birds' singing into musical notes, she realized the limitation of conventional musical scores and began inserting words in scores in a poetic form.<sup>10</sup> One of Ono's earliest word scores, *Secret Piece*, which was composed in 1953 and scored later, simply had one base note and a short description, "with the accompaniment of the birds singing at dawn" (see fig. 30, bottom). Shortly later, it was translated into words without a score, with the instructions, "Decide on one note that you want to play. Play it with the following accompaniment: The woods from 5 a.m. to 8 a.m. in summer" (see fig. 30, top). While the former version was still based on a conventional musical score, the latter radically departed from it. Because of the imperative-sentence format, Ono called this type of work an "instruction."

Ono's instructions can be compared to the "event scores" or word pieces of her future peers, George Brecht and La Monte Young, who individually reached the format around 1960. Both Brecht and Young shared an interest in Cage's unconventional music compositions. Brecht's earliest event score, *Time-Table Music* (1959), instructs the performers to stand in the train station

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31. Yoko Ono performing *Lighting Piece* at Sōgetsu Art Center, Tokyo, May 24, 1962. Photo by Ysuhiro Yoshioka, courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

and make noise individually according to different train schedules.<sup>11</sup> It is similar to the second version of Ono's *Secret Piece* in the way it only defines the place and allows performers to decide what and how to play. Young's series of compositions in 1960 also have close affinities with Ono's early pieces. One of them, *Composition 1960 #5*, instructs a performer to "turn a butterfly loose in a performance area" and the piece is finished when "the butterfly flies away" through a window or door. His interest in incorporating nature into music strikes a chord with Ono's.

While Brecht and Young conceived their early events as conceptual music pieces, some of Ono's works, such as *Lighting Piece* (see fig. 31), evolved directly from her personal rituals. Because of her oversensitivity to sound and light, Ono sometimes had to stuff her ears with sanitary pads, wrap her head in gauze, and stay in a dark room. One day around 1955, she discovered that lighting a match and watching the flame extinguish seemed to give her a moment of relief. She repeated it, sometimes in front of her sister, until she became calm. Although it was a visual experience, the act somehow also had an aural effect on her in that the sounds in her mind disappeared as the light went off.<sup>12</sup> In addition, watching the match flame made her compare its short life to that of humans, which made her feel serene.<sup>13</sup> When she realized the effect of this action, she wrote it out as an instruction: "Light a match and watch till it goes out." As Ono once stated in an interview, she began creating works mostly for a therapeutic purpose, in order to keep herself sane.<sup>14</sup> Both physically and psychologically, she was compelled to recognize the necessity of the "additional act" that was for her "something more than paint-

ing, poetry, and music.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Ono’s hybrid artistic expression was born in the course of her survival. Only after connecting with the similarly “far-out” experimental artists in downtown New York did she learned to share such personal experiences with other people and allow her works to become of public performances.

Shortly after leaving college and moving to New York City in 1956, Ono joined the avant-garde circle surrounding Cage. Her first husband, Toshi Ichianagi, to whom she was married from 1956 to 1962, was a Japanese pianist/composer studying at the Julliard School of Music. Around 1958, he met Cage at Merce Cunningham’s dance studio, where Ichianagi sometimes worked as a piano accompanist. Cage was then teaching a music composition class at the New School for Social Research. His students included those who would become key figures of the Happenings and Fluxus movements, such as George Brecht, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, and Jackson MacLow.<sup>16</sup> Soon after befriending Cage, Ichianagi introduced Ono to him. Upon their meeting, Ono asked Ichianagi, “Do you realize this is it?” Ono was excited at finding her kindred spirit; besides, Cage’s interest in Eastern philosophy stimulated Ono. Around 1958 Cage invited her to attend a lecture by the Zen philosopher Daisetsu Suzuki at Columbia University. Although she had already heard Suzuki lecture at Sarah Lawrence College, she did not decline Cage’s invitation.<sup>17</sup> Ono soon realized many of her American friends, including Cage, were interested in Zen philosophy and other Asian thoughts with which she was already familiar. For Ono, who learned both Western and Japanese culture and arts, merging the two was a natural process. While Ono does not today recognize any particular influence from Cage, she still credits him for influencing her “in the things he opened up, in emphasizing that it was all right to be unique,”<sup>18</sup> which points out how Cage acknowledged Ono’s Japanese heritage as significant and encouraged her explorations of it.

By the late 1950s, Ono, having been brought up around artists in her family, including her mother and her uncles, took up painting as a means of artistic experimentation. By then, Abstract Expressionism had entered the realm of the academy and artists such as Willem de Kooning had become intimidating to young artists. As if intended to make a reference to Marcel Duchamp’s adding a mustache to Leonardo da Vinci’s acclaimed *Mona Lisa*, Robert Rauschenberg erased a drawing by de Kooning and declared the erased paper as his own art in 1953. Ono’s early painting practices and a remark she made in 1967 seem to relate to these two “anti-art” actions. “The ultimate goal for me,” she said, “is a situation in this society, where ordinary housewives visiting each other and waiting in the living room, will say, ‘I was just adding some circles to your beautiful de Kooning painting.’”<sup>19</sup> While Ono’s comment reflected her reaction against the Abstract Expressionist, the underlying message was to reduce the value of an artwork and to bring down the status of artistic creation to the level of everyday life. In addition, by turn-

ing “ordinary housewives” into potential avant-garde artists, Ono comically subverted, with a feminist spirit, the machismo associated with the avant-garde. Further criticizing the “strange false value that people create on artwork,” she claimed that “art should be almost free like water and light.” As it was clear in the former quote, democratization of art was a goal as well as a starting point for Ono’s art.

The impulse to break down the boundaries between art and life was in the air. Happenings initiated by Jim Dine, Allan Kaprow, and Claes Oldenburg, among others, were perhaps the most literal realization of this impulse and played an important role in disseminating it.<sup>20</sup> By placing the audience in the middle of their performances, they were able to have the audience experience what was happening. Because of their detailed scores, however, Happenings seemed theatrical. After 1960, reacting against the theatricality of Happenings, some — such as Brecht and future Fluxus artists — began creating events that concentrated on only a few simple actions derived from everyday life. Modern dancers including Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, who were among the founding members of the Judson Dance Theater in 1962, also started experimenting with repetitive, reduced movements inspired by everyday actions. Ono was in the middle of this dynamic milieu.

From 1960 on, Ono increasingly became a central figure in the New York downtown art scene. She turned her loft at 112 Chambers Street into a performance space, alternative to classic concert halls uptown; it functioned as a lively forum for a *mélange* of experimental artists. Many artists, including sculptor Walter de Maria, sculptor Robert Morris, dancer Simone Morris, and composer La Monte Young, moved from California to New York and needed a place to present their work. For Ono as for others, the loft served as a testing ground for artistic exploration and a place for artistic exchange. More important, the early form of performance art, which Fluxus would later call “events,” was given a home at Ono’s loft. In the winter of 1960–1961, in collaboration with Young, Ono hosted a series of New York’s first loft performance series — namely, presentations of experimental works in music and poetry, and events. In addition to the aforementioned artists from the West Coast, the artists presented there included Joseph Byrd, Henry Flynt, Toshi Ichihyanagi, Terry Jennings, Jackson MacLow, Richard Maxfield, Robert Morris, Simone Morris, and La Monte Young. Among the audience members were John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Peggy Guggenheim, and David Tudor. The so-called Chambers Street concert series proved to be quite influential because it inspired George Maciunas to organize his own concert series, which became the base for Fluxus, the international experimental artists’ group that Maciunas founded. As Maciunas once recalled, “This whole series gave me an idea to imitate it and make an even more extensive series at our new gallery.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite Ono’s initiative in realizing this performance series with Young, her importance has been underrated. Young has been usually credited as the

organizer and Ono was only mentioned as the “owner” of the loft in many historical accounts. A Morris installation within her loft became far more renowned than Ono’s role as the organizer of the performance series. Regarding this, Ono has remarked,

Being a woman and doing my thing in the loft days was especially hard because I was a woman. Most of my friends were all male and they tried to stop me being an artist. They tried to shut my mouth and tried to get me as an owner of the loft who helped in concerts. I had a constant fight with one of the artists who were organizing the concert series. He tried to really shut me up. I had to say “I know you are a very talented artist. All you have to do is to reciprocate that and just realize that I am also a talented artist. You don’t introduce to the critics that this chick is a chick who owns this loft. You don’t say to the reporter. ‘Let’s come to my loft.’” I was not seriously taken as an artist because I was a woman.<sup>22</sup>

The reason why Ono has not been properly credited may be mainly because she did not perform her own work in the series. She performed only in Ichiyanagi’s *IBM for Merce Cunningham* on January 7 and 8, 1961. Her poetry was slated to be recited in future programs, but the recitation was later dropped.<sup>23</sup>

A couple of accounts, however, mention Ono’s performances of her own works. According to one of her interviews, she once performed *Pea Piece*, in which she threw peas from a bag at people while swinging her hair around. Although its inspiration came from a Japanese ritual for the month of February,<sup>24</sup> she conceived the movement of her hair and sounds of peas as a sort of music.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Beate Sirota Gordon, the former director of the Japan Society in New York, gives an account of two of Ono’s performances in combination, *Kitchen Piece* and *Smoke Painting*. “Yoko ran to the refrigerator,” she writes, “took out some eggs, ran to a wall covered with a huge piece of white paper and hurled eggs onto the paper. Then she ran back and got some jello which she threw at the wall. Then she splattered some sumi-ink on the paper and used her hands as paint brushes. When the painting was completed, she took a match and set fire to the paper. . . . Luckily, John Cage had warned Yoko to put a fire retardant on the paper so it burned slowly, and we escaped a fiery death.”<sup>26</sup> The action of splattering food materials and sumi ink onto a canvas was the performance of *Kitchen Piece*, and the action of burning it was *Smoke Painting*; and while the former seems to relate to French nouveau realist Daniel Spoerri’s assemblages of dishes on tabletops, started around 1960,<sup>27</sup> the latter can be compared to Jean Tinguely’s destruction of a gigantic kinetic sculpture, *Homage to New York*, that was performed at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960. Rather than preserving a complete painting like Spoerri, however, Ono immediately destroyed it, like



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32. Yoko Ono, *Painting to be Stepped On* at her exhibition *Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono*, AG Gallery, New York, 1961. Photo by George Maciunas, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

Tinguely. Aside from observing the movement of smoke, the intension of *Smoke Painting* seemed to make a point that her painting was based more on performance and the idea of a painting than its object body.

While *Kitchen Piece* and *Smoke Painting* were performed by Ono herself, other works that Ono conceived around 1960–1961 required viewers' actions to be complete. *Painting to be Stepped On* (see fig. 32), for example, was just a scrap of canvas that was placed on the floor, waiting to be marked with footprints. By focusing solely on the footprints and leaving the canvas unstretched on the floor, Ono clearly undermined the elevated “fine art” status of painting and the notion of the artist as the one with artistic agency. Once Duchamp was among the visitors, and Ono anticipated that he would notice her work lying on the floor, but he did not.<sup>28</sup> Ono, who was aware that Duchamp was her predecessor in using chance elements to complete a work, took one step further than Duchamp toward the demythologization of art by requiring others to participate in its making. Ono called such works “instruction paintings.”

For two weeks in July 1961, fifteen “instruction paintings” were shown to the public at the exhibition *Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono* at Maciunas’s AG Gallery on Madison Avenue. By this time Ono had stopped hosting the performance series at her loft because she felt it had started to become “an establishment.”<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, in the spring of 1961, Maciunas began his own concert series and soon became an important supporter of Ono’s art.<sup>30</sup> Among the works exhibited at AG Gallery were *Painting to Be Stepped On* (see fig. 32); *Painting in Three Stanzas*; *Water Drip Painting*; and *Smoke Painting*.<sup>31</sup> In notes for the exhibition, Ono described these paintings as “all different shades of charcoal-gray pieces of canvas un-mounted and hung (or laid on floor). But the colors created a definite visual effect, and because of that it was easy to mistake them as monochromic paintings in sedate gray colouring.”<sup>32</sup> Although Ono was conscious that her paintings might be misidentified with Minimalist painting, which was emerging around 1960, her presentation method deviated far from that of contemporary avant-garde painters. She left all of her paintings unmounted and hung or laid directly on the floor. Being closer to Japanese calligraphy in their format, these paintings can be seen as Ono’s statement against the Western conventional format of the framed canvas.

Many paintings in this exhibition stressed their ephemeral quality and allusions to nature. An example of a painting on the floor, *Water Drip Painting* was described by one visitor as “a bottle of sumi-ink which hung from the ceiling upside down and slowly dripped ink onto a wetted burlap cloth on the floor.”<sup>33</sup> For this, Ono perhaps drew an inspiration directly from raindrops. Another nature-inspired painting was *Shadow Painting*, a sumi-stained piece of canvas that hung on the wall and incorporated natural shadows as a figurative element of the painting. These paintings clearly manifested the importance of the ephemeral actions over the art object. A review of this exhibition in *Art News* described *Smoke Painting* and *Painting in Three Stanzas*, noting, “Yoko Ono has made a ‘smoke’ painting. It consists of a grimy unstrung canvas with a hole in it. Into the hole she stuck a burning candle, withdrawing it when the canvas began to smolder and smoke on its own. The painting’s limited life was shortened by half a minute for this report, its living presence snuffed out by a damp cloth as soon as the idea became clear. Another picture was accompanied by a poem about life, about death and about the replacement of the ivy growing through two holes in it. \$75–400.”<sup>34</sup>

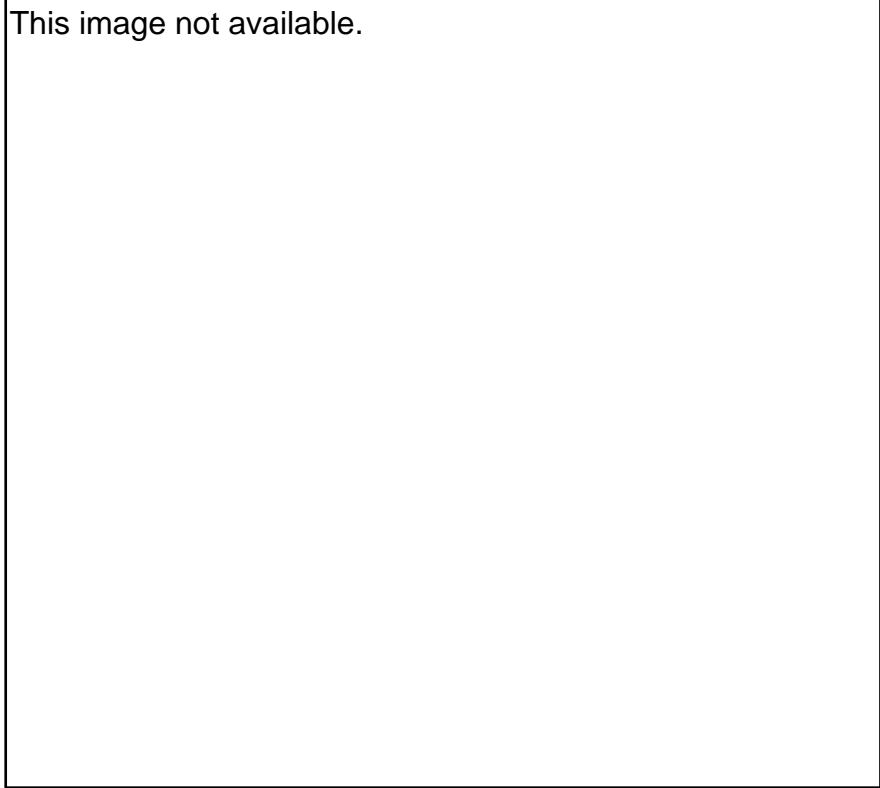
As this review documented, Ono was often present in the gallery in order to give verbal instructions for some paintings to the visitors, and in a few cases, to demonstrate the piece for them. Some paintings were accompanied by written instructions as to how the paintings could be completed. The instruction of *Painting in Three Stanzas*, for example, read, “It ends when its covered with leaves, It ends when the leaves wither, It ends when it turns to ashes, And a new vine will grow, — — —.”<sup>35</sup> Although this writing seemed more like a poem than an instruction, as an accompaniment to a canvas with live vines sticking out from two holes, it also provided viewers with the clues

to complete the painting in their own imaginations. Through these unconventional methods of presentation, Ono made it clear that her visual artworks should be participatory to the spectators, rather than being static objects to be viewed.

In order to engage more spectators in her art, Ono soon conceived stage-performance pieces, most of which involved her avant-garde colleagues as performers in collaboration with her. She premiered her first stage piece, *Of a Grapefruit in the World of Park*, in a three-person concert, *An Evening of Contemporary Japanese Music and Poetry*, at the Village Gate in New York on April 3, 1961. Ono staged and narrated a poem, to which various instrumentalists responded with their improvisations. Her collaborators included pianists Ichiyonagi, Toshiro Mayuzumi, and David Tudor; violinists LaMar Alsop and Kenji Kobayashi; violist Jacob Glick; and cellist David Soyer.<sup>36</sup> According to a review in the *New York Times*, the piece “called for instrumentalists to improvise sounds according to written, rather than notated, instructions, and their effects were supplemented by the amplified flushing of a sanitary facility.” For the flushing noise, Ono had asked organizer David Johnson to go into a bathroom with a stopwatch and microphone and flush the toilet at certain intervals.<sup>37</sup> Human voice, instrumental sounds, and the flushing noise were rather spontaneously intermixed to make a lively composition.

*Of a Grapefruit in the World of Park* was originally a poem published during her college years, but later it was turned into a score for an opera-like stage performance. Retaining the mysterious flavor of the original text, the score took a form of a conversation between a mother and daughter about a grapefruit, clams, and many other nonrelational subjects, intermixed with seemingly nonsensical and mysterious comments such as “would you like to speak to the dead? oh, no I only come here to peel the grapefruit.”<sup>38</sup> When the piece was performed at the International Week of Today’s Music in Montreal in August of 1961, a local paper provided a detailed account, writing, “The work by Yoko Ono took the form of a recitation delivered by the author with her back to the audience. On the top of the dimly lit stage was what appeared to be a canebrake, and the only one decorative item was a garden hat, sprinkled with flowers, and suspended from twenty feet above the stage. As Miss Ono read her poem (picked at random from the script), she was accompanied by a large number of loudspeakers through which was played a tape recording of what might have been the cries of some creature in a terminal stage of idiocy. Sample lines from Miss Ono’s script: ‘Let’s count the hairs of the dead child,’ ‘Drink Pepsi-Cola.’”<sup>39</sup> This account suggests that Ono used loudspeakers instead of instrumentalists in this performance. These speakers would play her experimental vocal pieces, some of which sounded like “cries of some creature.” On principle, Ono’s performances always slightly changed in each presentation, depending on factors such as the availability of performers and the size of the theater.

When the same work was presented at Ono’s first solo recital, *Works by*



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33. Yoko Ono and her calligraphy, image intended as poster for *Works by Yoko Ono*, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, 1961. Photo by George Maciunas, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan

*Yoko Ono* at the Carnegie Recital Hall on November 24, 1961 (see fig. 33), she had many collaborators again, including George Brecht, Joseph Byrd, Philip Corner, Jonas Mekas, and La Monte Young for voice and instruments and Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer for movement. According to Jill Johnston of the *Village Voice*, Ono’s “theatre of events” presented two other pieces, *A Piece for Strawberries and Violin* and *AOS – to David Tudor*, combining “electronic sounds, vocal and instrumental sounds, body movement, and movement of properties.”<sup>40</sup> The “properties” referred to objects such as a table, chair, toilet bowl, and an assortment of boxes. The week before the performance Ono “had given instructions to everyone as to what they should do, so that there would be a feeling of togetherness based on alienation, since no one knew the other person’s instructions.”<sup>41</sup> Although there were scripts for her events, they were not as structured as those of Kaprow’s early Happenings. Ono’s instructions allowed the performers’ own interpretations and improvisations, which as a whole would create tensions.

In order to help the audience sense such tensions, Ono set the lighting of the stage very dim. In so doing she urged the audience to strain their five senses, as in real life where people “have to strain to read other people’s

minds.” Instead of dramatic movements and sounds found in the conventional theater performances, Ono sought to realize such strained movements as “two men tied up together with lots of empty cans and bottles around them” to “move from one end of the stage to the other very quietly and slowly without making any sounds” and “a sound that almost doesn’t come out,” or “sounds of people’s fears and stuttering.”<sup>42</sup> The electronic technical assistance by composer Richard Maxfield enabled Ono to attach contact microphones to the performers, which transmitted the subtle sounds of their movements and even their panting. The review by Johnston confirmed the effect of such devices: “I was alternately stupefied and aroused, with longer stretches of stupor, as one might feel when relaxing into a doze induced by a persistent mumble of low-toned voices.”<sup>43</sup> In terms of music, Ono was moving toward more human voices rather than the electronic sounds used by her contemporary composers such as John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Stephen Wolpe. Regarding dance, Ono’s taste for extremely strained movements matched that of Brown and Rainer, who were concurrently extracting simple movements from everyday life.

With this recital, Ono broke down the conventional boundaries among music, art, dance, theater, and poetry by presenting her performance pieces with artists from different fields. Such an interdisciplinary format of performance presentation became a part of the basis for Fluxus concerts and events. In fact, Maciunas, who was involved in the production of this concert, would organize Fluxus concerts in a similar format in Europe the following year and at the same Carnegie Recital Hall several years later. Likewise, Charlotte Moorman, then a cellist at the Julliard School of Music, who assisted the production of this concert and played cello in one of the events, was inspired to become an avant-garde performer through this experience and would organize New York’s annual Avant-Garde Art Festivals from 1963.

Several months prior to Ono’s recital, during her exhibition at AG Gallery, Maciunas was trying to name the movement that he felt was emerging from the group of avant-garde composers, poets, and visual artists around him. Maciunas asked Ono for an idea, but she was not interested in grouping artists. She felt that all of the artists, including herself, were “independent, each one with a different background” and that the formation of a group would constrict their activities.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Ono was listed in Maciunas’s *News-Policy-Letter No. 2 (Fluxus Festival Only)*, among the members of the festival planning committee for the Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Nuester Musik in Wiesbaden in September 1962, the first major Fluxus performance series.<sup>45</sup> By the end of 1961, Maciunas moved to Germany and invited some New York artists, including Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, to perform under the name of Fluxus. Ono, on the other hand, decided to go to Japan in 1962, because Ichiyanagi had moved back to Japan earlier and set up an opportunity for her to have a concert in Tokyo. In addition, Ono started to feel that the avant-garde circle around her in New York was becoming a sort of establishment, and needed to keep herself independent from affiliat-

ing with any particular group. Ironically, due to her ten-year stay in the United States, Ono would find herself more a stranger in her native country than in her adapted country.

### The Stranger in Japan, 1962 to 1964

Ono's original intention in going to Japan was just "to stay there for two weeks to do a concert,"<sup>46</sup> but she ended up remaining there for two and half years. Although Japan was a difficult environment in which to find opportunities to present her experimental artworks, Ono's stay in Japan was fruitful in terms of meeting similar-minded contemporary Japanese artists. Also, many pieces that she would later perform in New York and London were "inspired directly from the environment in Japan" comprised of its society, culture, and nature. Ono adds, "Had I stayed in New York I would have become one of those grande dames of the avant-garde, repeating what I was doing."<sup>47</sup> Leaving New York for a while allowed her to reflect upon her artistic direction through fresh eyes.

Ono returned to Japan during one of the most active periods of the post-war Japanese avant-garde art. Many artists were radically breaking away from traditions and exploring new expressions through various media. The first venue of Ono's performance in Japan was the Sōgetsu Art Center, which had been actively introducing experimental art and music since the late 1950s.<sup>48</sup> Prior to the event, on May 24, 1962, the Japanese press treated Ono as a novelty, a young female avant-garde composer who had come back from New York after ten years. While *Works of Yoko Ono* consisted of four multimedia sections — events, music, poems, and instructions for paintings, the performance of the events and music left stronger impressions on Japanese audiences than the exhibition sections.

The exhibition sections, which were displayed in a lobby adjacent to the concert hall for a longer duration of time, included *Touch Poems*, a handmade book with human hair inserted between blank pages, that was intended for viewers to touch, and *Instructions for Paintings*, about thirty-eight sheets of paper with instructional text in Japanese neatly handprinted by Ichiyanagi.<sup>49</sup> One of the instructions was *Kowareta mishin no tame no e* (*Painting for a Broken Sewing Machine*) (see fig. 34). A translation of its Japanese text reads, "Put a broken sewing machine in a glass water tank that is about ten times or twenty times larger than the sewing machine. Once a year on a snowy day, take it out in an open space, and have everybody throw stones at it." The poetic yet seemingly nonsensical content of such *Instructions* were not appreciated by many viewers at the time, but they marked Ono's significant departure from the art object; exhibiting only texts as work of art was a big step toward conceptual art. Ono recalled that nobody but critic Yoshiaki Tōno recognized the importance of her *Instructions* back then.<sup>50</sup>

As at her concert at Carnegie Recital Hall, many avant-garde artists par-

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34. Yoko Ono, *Kowareta Mishin no tame no e (Painting for a Broken Sewing Machine)*, approximately 10 × 15 inches, hand printed by Toshi Ichiyonagi, 1962. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

ticipated in the events and music portions of *Works of Yoko Ono*, making it more a collaborative work than a one-person show.<sup>51</sup> As the program noted, Ono's works were performed by over thirty vanguard luminaries, including artist Genpei Akasegawa, music critic Kuniharu Akiyama, composer Takehisa Kosugi, dancer Tatsumi Hijikata, and art critic Yoshiaki Tōno. These essential members of the Tokyo avant-garde art community became witnesses to Ono's debut in Japan.

One event, *AOS – To David Tudor*, was called by Tōno an “opera without the sound of instruments.” This “opera” proceeded as follows: performers read newspapers in different languages by the light of flashlights or match flames; several men bound by rope to different objects proceeded from one side of the stage to the other and back; speeches of historic figures such as Adolf Hitler and the Japanese emperor were played on a tape recorder; and Tōno and pantomimist Théo Lèsoualch gave a twenty-minute French lesson while women's hands and legs moved through openings in a curtain at the back of the stage. The succession of these disparate actions and sounds were suggestive of the chaos in the human life during and after the World War II. At the end of *AOS*, “all the participants lined up on the stage and watched members of the audience becoming [themselves] the ‘audience’”<sup>52</sup> (see fig. 10, in chapter 1). Ono later scored this piece as *Audience Piece*, in which a performer is instructed to watch a different member of the audience until

that person averts his eyes, and then to repeat the same action with a different audience target. While most of the audience left quickly, some people remained for a long time. One of them abruptly came up to the stage to pinch the nose of all the performers, which caused a fight with one of the performers. In the end, exhausted, most of the performers were lying down on the stage. It was after one o'clock in the morning when the event finally ended by order of the concert hall's administrator.<sup>53</sup> With *Audience Piece*, Ono sought to subvert the conventional relationship between performer and audience. The audience—which is usually supposed to just watch the performers—is now being looked at by the performers as if expected to perform.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout the evening, Ono tried to break away from the traditional one-way relationship between performer and audience by urging the audience to assume an active role. To challenge the audience's capacity for perception, the entire concert was conducted in darkness, only partially lit by flashlights or spotlights, or even a match, and sounds were often very subtle. Although most of the reviews criticized this aspect, one unidentified reviewer commented in more positive terms, writing, "The audience seems to have had unusual experiences . . . seeing the sequence of these apparently senseless mundane acts. It is not an art that has already been completed, but an art from which the audience can receive something by witnessing the unfolding of nonsense acts, experiencing the process together with the performers."<sup>55</sup> As this reviewer rightly pointed out, Ono intended her art to be always "unfinished" in a sense that required audience participation. According to Ichiyonagi, Ono insisted that "the work is not something for me to present but for them [the audience] to seek out," and that the audience member should "have his/her unique experience by feeling an 'atmosphere' and a 'flow of air' in the darkness, or by seeing what one wishes to see by lighting matches, or by walking to grope for performers."<sup>56</sup> In other words, to appreciate Ono's work, the audience had to take an active role, filling in the invisible or inaudible parts through its own imagination or by participating in the performance.

As many press reviews documented, Ono's events were received as eccentric, and she was seen as responsible for the introduction of a new American trend, Happenings.<sup>57</sup> After her concert, artists and critics popularized the word *hapuningu* (a phonetic translation of *happening*) because it was flashier than the word *ibento* (event). Ono's events, however, developed partially in critical response to Happenings. With dim lighting, and subtle sounds and movements, she intended to intrigue the audience and have them use their own senses to interact with her performances. She expected the Japanese audience to share an acute sensibility to catch hidden messages in her pieces. Ono wished that even in the darkness, the audience would grope for the invisible *kehai*, or vibration.<sup>58</sup> Since most Japanese critics at the time were concerned with introducing new Western artists and new Western artistic trends, they easily overlooked the potential of domestic artistic sources.

Critic Donald Richie strongly denounced Ono's concert, claiming that



she stole ideas from John Cage.<sup>59</sup> As Ichianagi claimed in response to Richie in another article, Ono's music was far from Cage's.<sup>60</sup> In fact, her essay "Kyokōsha no gen" ("The Word of a Fabricator"), which was written prior to the concert, implicitly criticizes Cage's chance operation as "an attempt to raise men's [*sic*] stature to that of nature, by regarding nature's chance operational characteristic as superior to men's own fictional order, and succumbing to and adopting the chance operation as men's own."<sup>61</sup> Ono found "chance operation" too simplistic because contemporary humankind is "soaked to the bones with a fabricator called consciousness." Instead she believed that "only the most fictional rules" might enable people to transcend their consciousness. Her performances were composed of what she called "the most fictional rules." She did not use chance operations like Cage, but instead extracted some actions from daily life and arranged them in a fictional way. Ono's critical intentions, however, did not communicate to the Japanese audience as much as she had hoped they would.

Disappointment and isolation from the Japanese art world led Ono to a nervous breakdown in the summer of 1962. By this time, she was feeling overshadowed by her successful husband and depressed that she was nothing other than a famous composer's wife. In her isolation and depression, she attempted suicide. After this traumatic incident, she admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital.<sup>62</sup> It was American filmmaker Anthony Cox who often visited her in the sanatorium and aided in her recovery. Supposedly Cox had seen Ono's art in New York and came to Japan to look for her. Cox provided psychological support for Ono to regain confidence. During her hospitalization, Ono started compiling her early instruction pieces in order to publish a book. Her earlier hardship perhaps made her realize the need to express herself more. After leaving the hospital, Ono and Cox moved into an apartment in Shibuya, a central district in Tokyo where many non-Japanese lived.

By early October, Ono was well enough to perform in the Japanese tour of John Cage and David Tudor, which Ichianagi and Ono helped to realize. In Cage's *Music Walk*, which was performed in the middle of *An Evening of John Cage/Sōgetsu Contemporary Series 17* at Tokyo Bunka Kaikan Hall, Ono improvised and laid herself on the top of the piano with her head toward the audience (see fig. 11, in chapter 1). It was her interpretation to make "music walk" into a "conceptual walk."<sup>63</sup> For its outrageousness, the photograph documenting this piece was the one most often reproduced in reviews, but Ono's action was not considered her own improvisation. Similarly, the press ignored Ono's voice contribution to Cage's *Aria and Solo for Piano with Fontana Mix*, which opened the *An Evening of David Tudor* the following day.<sup>64</sup> In addition, in *Flying Chair Piece*—Ono's own idea but mistaken as Cage's work—she sat on a chair that hung from the ceiling of the stage.<sup>65</sup> Most critics not only ignored her presence, but some also criticized her acts as merely eccentric.

In 1963, after marrying Cox and while working odd jobs, Ono continued to create her works. Meanwhile, Ono's and Cox's daughter Kyoko was born

in August. In July of 1964, Ono self-published *Grapefruit*, an anthology of her instruction pieces in a limited edition of five hundred. The book was originally planned to be published through Fluxus by Maciunas, but his plan fell through. Maciunas nonetheless helped the book's distribution through his Fluxus connections.<sup>66</sup> *Grapefruit* thus helped disseminate Ono's early instruction art to a wider audience in the United States, Europe, and Japan. The text was bilingual: about one-third of its 150 works were also accompanied by Japanese versions. In general, the Japanese texts were more abstract in terms of wording while the English versions had more specifications.<sup>67</sup> Some of the Japanese pieces had different titles from the English versions,<sup>68</sup> suggesting that the Japanese texts did not always serve as literal translations of the English texts. Ono conceived most of her works in English in the United States, but she often worked directly in Japanese while living in Japan.<sup>69</sup> The works in *Grapefruit* were divided into five sections: music, painting, event, poetry, and object.<sup>70</sup> These categories did not, however, strictly define the format of each work; her music could easily be read as an event, and poetry as an object. The interdisciplinary nature of Ono's art as reflected in *Grapefruit* was close to that which Fluxus artist Dick Higgins would later call *intermedia* in 1966.<sup>71</sup>

Early 1964 turned to be the most productive period for Ono. She often presented her works and events at the Naiqua Gallery in Tokyo, owned by a doctor of internal medicine (*naiqua* in Japanese) who had considerable interest in avant-garde art. Through this gallery Ono became more connected with avant-garde artists in Tokyo. Regular participants in her events included Nam June Paik and future members of Fluxus such as Takehisa Kosugi, Shigeo Kubota, and Chieko Shiomi. In February, Ono held an event, *Touch Piece*, there. One of the participants, Takahiko Imura, noted that a group of people including Ono sat in a circle and touched each other in silence.<sup>72</sup> Paik joined the event from his home by ringing a telephone in the gallery in a serial manner.<sup>73</sup> On April 25, 1964, Ono's *Fly* was also performed at Naiqua by invited participants including Kosugi, Kubota, and Paik, who were asked to "come with preparations to fly." Ono was absent; she intentionally did not attend in order to make a point that her piece was designated for other people to activate, and that she could also realize it in her mind. Participants jumped from a ladder that was prepared at the gallery; Ono heard later that they seriously discussed whether flying was the same as falling or dying.<sup>74</sup> She encouraged such a free discussion among the participants as a means of expanding the meaning of her work.

Besides these physical performance events, there were conceptual ones. The event *9 A.M. to 11 A.M.*, later called *Morning Event*, took place on the roof of the gallery building on May 24, and on the roof of Ono's apartment on May 31, 1964. According to Ono's notice for the event, "people were asked to wash their ears before they came" and "each person was asked to pay the price of "morning" (see fig. 35). Fifteen people came to the event and bought

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35. Yoko Ono, notice with a price list for *Morning Event*, 1964. Photo courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

different “mornings” in the future for various prices. Shards of broken milk bottles with tags were given as tokens. Many people actually paid arbitrary prices in exchange for these glass shards, but some payment must have been imaginary. For example, Paik gave one morning a price of three yen and fifty sen, obsolete currency that he would never be able to pay.<sup>75</sup> Participants understood the work’s conceptual content. After the event, in order to sell eighteen leftover mornings, Ono made a mail-order sheet with the instruction, “When you order it by mail, make clear what date and type you want (include cash.) Will send you by mail.” “Types” of the mornings were: (A) until sunrise; (B) after sunrise; and (C) all morning. The sheet also included how to handle the morning: “you can see the sky through it. Also, wear gloves when you handle so you will not hurt your fingers.”<sup>76</sup> The entire event, including the mail-order aspect, was conducted on the premise of a mind game.

The roof of Ono and Cox’s apartment became a site for other performances, though only a few have been documented. One of the rare extant photographs, taken by Minoru Hirata, who was recording many artists’ performances at the time, shows Ono and Cox demonstrating Ono’s new work, *Bag Piece* (see fig. 36), in front of him. In *Bag Piece*, two performers usually

enter a large black bag and take off their clothes and put them back on before exiting the bag. The photograph vividly illustrates how Ono’s artistic expression grew out of everyday life and performance was integral to her daily activities.

In July 1964, Ono, with the help of Cox and their friend Al Wonderick (currently Wunderich), realized a three-day program comprised of a concert, an event, and a symposium presenting her work at three different locations in Kyoto. The *Insound/Instructure: Contemporary American Music* concert at Yamaichi Hall consisted of three sections—“Sprout,” “Motional,” and “Whisper”—but which section referred to which pieces was not clear. Performances included *Fly Piece*, *Bag Piece*, *Striptease for Three*, *Word of Mouth Piece*, and *Cut Piece*.<sup>77</sup> For this version of *Fly Piece* several ladders of different heights were set up onstage for the

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36. Yoko Ono, performing *Bag Piece* with Tony Cox, Tokyo, 1964. Photo by Minoru Hirota.

audience to come and fly from. Ono and Wonderick performed *Bag Piece* in the same way that Ono and Cox had demonstrated it on the roof of their apartment. Although it seemed suggestive of a sexual activity, Ono's message of the piece was "what you receive is in your mind" — that our perception is not necessarily reality.

Similarly, Ono alluded to eroticism in *Striptease for Three*, but the piece presented just three chairs in a row without any performer. After a curtain raise, the chairs remained under spotlights for several minutes. Ono explained that "chairs can be as erotic as women," and "if it is a chair or stone or woman, it is the same thing."<sup>78</sup> Again, Ono intended to demonstrate that the audience can imagine what they want to see in their minds rather than solely depending on what they see. In other words, the piece was meant to be a "stripping of the mind." The title *Striptease* may have been a pun on the words *strip* and *tease*, and Ono "teased" the viewers' expectation to see a conventional striptease by "stripping" their minds. The Japanese audience, however, hardly grasped her pun. Later, Ono amusingly noted that "the High Monk" was dissatisfied with her "striptease" because he expected an avant-garde composer to present music rather than doing things similar to Zen practices.

*Word of Mouth Piece* may have been based on the American children's "telephone game" or a similar Japanese game. As a word gets passed through the performers and the audience, it gradually changes and the final outcome may deviate far from the original. What words were actually passed around at the performance is not known, but the action of a word spreading itself seems to have been essential. In a letter to George Maciunas that was published in the beginning of her *Grapefruit*, Ono stated, "Most of my pieces are meant to be spread by word of mouth [and] therefore, do not have scores. This means is very important since the gradual change which occurs [*sic*] in the piece by word spreading is also part of the piece."<sup>79</sup> *Word of Mouth Piece* summarized Ono's concept of art. Her instruction pieces were originally ideas sometimes accompanied by objects or performances, and they could be spread through word of mouth and changed over a period of time. Even after they were written as scores, Ono would often create different variations of similar concepts, as seen in *Grapefruit*, cherishing her works' natural evolutions.

The same Kyoto concert ended with the most sensational work, *Cut Piece*, in which audience members were invited to come up to the stage and cut a piece of the seated performer's clothing with scissors (see fig. 37). As stated in its score, the piece could have been featured anybody—including a man—and not necessarily the artist or a female performer. However, as it featured Ono in this case, the piece created an enormous tension between her and the audience primarily because the audience was unexpectedly put in a position of committing themselves to a taboo behavior. Since the subject was a woman, the act of stripping her piece by piece resembled a rape.

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37. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964. Photo by Minoru Niizuma, courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

The invitation triggered the voyeuristic desire among the audience even though most of them felt restrained from participating in the event and wanted to avoid a troublesome confrontation. The audience was left restless in an inner conflict between desire and repulsion.

*Cut Piece* demanded an action from the audience, reversing the conventional passive role of the audience to the active one of the performer. At the same time, it provoked a wide range of emotions among audience members. Some members unexpectedly found violent impulses in their minds while others remained restrained. The most tension rose in the theater when a Japanese man raised a pair of scissors above Ono as if he were going to stab her. It turned out to be just a theatrical gesture, but such an action revealed how vulnerable the performer was in the eyes of audience. By continuing to sit still in a manner of Zen meditation, however, Ono projected an image of a controlled and confident person. Showing almost no emotion, she functioned as a mirror reflecting the feelings of audience members; through watching the performance, the audience discovered voyeurism or violence within itself.

Ono originally drew inspiration for *Cut Piece* from a story of Prince Mahasattva (the future Buddha) that is depicted in one of the panels of the Tamamushi Shrine, located at Hōryū-ji, the oldest extant Buddhist temple in Japan.<sup>80</sup> In this tale, called “Hungry Tigress of Jataka,” Prince Mahasattva jumped off a cliff to offer his body to a hungry tiger. The prince was out on his spiritual journey after abandoning his privileges. Every time he encountered needy animals, he gave whatever was requested of him. Sacrificing his flesh was an ultimate act of giving. By wearing the best possible outfit she

had for the performance, Ono offered to the audience not only her physical self, but also her mental self. In fact, in later performances of *Cut Piece* she held a scrolled poster with the words, “My body is the scar of my mind.” In a later statement, she explained that “People went on cutting the parts they do not like of me, [and] finally . . . only the stone remained of me that was in me, but they were still not satisfied and wanted to know what it’s like in the stone.”<sup>81</sup> The stone here seems to be a metaphor for the heart, the core of the human existence; even such a private and delicate part of an individual can easily be violated by others. Through intense exchanges between the performers and participants, *Cut Piece* eloquently addressed the issues of the self versus others — namely, private versus public — and violence versus giving.

In its self-sacrificial determination, *Cut Piece* unmistakably echoed the attitude of nonviolence maintained by the Indian pacifist Mahatma Gandhi. Although such pacifist intention may have been overridden with recent feminist interpretation of the piece, it was made clear when Ono performed *Cut Piece* in Paris in 2003, thirty-seven years later. In the statement that accompanied this event, she stated that the performance was an expression of her “hope for World Peace” and related it to how “some people went to Palestine to act as human shields” during the war on Iraq.<sup>82</sup> Ono’s protofeminist consciousness about imposed passivity on women is certainly reflected in *Cut Piece*, but it was only one of many motivations behind the piece. Since there is no recorded public response to this original performance in Kyoto, it is impossible to discuss its reception there.<sup>83</sup>

The Tokyo presentation of *Cut Piece* at the *Yoko Ono Sayonara Concert: Strip-Tease Show* on August 11, 1964, was at least reviewed by several critics, but only indirectly. Ono realized this event with the assistance of Cox and another American artist, Jeff Perkins, at Sōgetsu Art Center in Tokyo. The program was similar to that of the Kyoto concert. According to one of the press reviews, the first piece was *Bag Piece* and the second *Cut Piece*.<sup>84</sup> Another review noted that the performance also included *Chair Piece*, *Clock Piece*, and *Snake Piece*.<sup>85</sup> The audience’s reaction varied. While one audience member was impressed that “a clue of the substance was performed,” others asked to get back the admission fee because “there was no music.”<sup>86</sup> As an explanation of the title *Strip-Tease Show*, Ono told one reviewer that “the ultimate subject that humans want to express is a strip,” and that “art has come to the point where it has to reveal its private parts.”<sup>87</sup> She also mentioned that her stripping was not “to reveal to others,” but for the audience to “see something hidden in humans.”<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, most of the reviews only ridiculed the concert, with such headlines as “Is this art?”<sup>89</sup>

This concert literally became Ono’s farewell to Japan, ending her eventful sojourn. Two years in Japan offered Ono opportunities to affirm her cultural roots and to become involved in one of the most active periods of the Japanese avant-garde. Her exploration of extrasensory perceptions that had begun earlier in New York found roots in the Japanese life style, Zen philosophy and aesthetics, and Japanese traditional arts such as *Noh* theater. Partly

due to the dramatic changes of seasons, the Japanese have developed over centuries a lifestyle and culture that are extremely sensitive to nature and environment. The Japanese mode of communication itself requires “reading between lines,” or speculating the meaning hidden behind what i actually said or written. During her stay, Ono realized that what she and her New York peers were attracted to partially had its origins in Japan. Her interactions with the Japanese avant-garde also helped her affirm her artistic direction. Ono’s daring presentations of events, in turn, inspired some Japanese artists to move to New York, hoping to challenge the international art scene.

These positive aspects of her days in Japan were not enough to counterbalance the negative ones. For many reasons, Ono chose to return to New York, judging that it was difficult for her to continue her artistic activities in Japan. Her dissatisfaction with the Japanese art world was one of the main factors for her decision. In an interview, she made a critical comment on Japanese art critics: “Japanese critics were, in those days, so influenced by Western Europe and the United States that their main work was to introduce artists who were featured in American art magazines. They were just picking and writing on Japanese artists whose works were in a similar style to American trends, such as Neo-Dada and Pop. It was natural then that they maintained a brother-in-law-like attitude to me, being very indifferent to everything I did.”<sup>90</sup> As Ono pointed out, most Japanese critics at that time merely followed the trends in Western art without exploring critical contexts of their own. Because they borrowed the art-historical discourse from the West, they could only write about Japanese artists whose works fit Western criteria. Unable to find the right vocabulary to describe Ono’s works, many journalists and critics instead ridiculed or ignored her art as merely following John Cage.

Other reasons for her departure included financial hardship. Before leaving, she commented, “It is easier to do artistic activities in the United States than in Japan. I will continue making works while working as an office girl.”<sup>91</sup> Another and most compelling reason was her feeling of being a stranger in Tokyo. In an interview, she told that she was determined to live in New York for the rest of her life partially because she could not become accustomed to Tokyo and wanted to escape from it.<sup>92</sup> Her feeling of unfamiliarity in Tokyo was not only due to her hometown’s transformation into a megalopolis, but also due to the change in the political climate. While American occupation was welcomed as a democratizing force in Japan during the years immediately after World War II, it became the focus of protests by the late 1950s, resulting in the 1960 mass riot by students against the renewal of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. By this time, the Japanese had become disillusioned with the United States in terms of its strong influence on materialistic culture and politics. America’s continuous nuclear experiments, especially, made them furious and brought protest against America’s further militarization of Japan. Ono’s hybridity of being both Japanese and American suffered from the reemerging hostility between the two countries. The feeling of being a



stranger in her home country made Ono decide to move back to her adopted country. Ono's departure from Haneda Airport in 1964, in which she was seen off by many artist friends, was recorded in a documentary television program on Japanese avant-garde art. Ono told her friends that she was "going home" to New York City, where she belonged.<sup>93</sup>

### In and out of Fluxus: The New York Years, 1964–1966

Ono's subsequent two-year period in New York was filled with both Fluxus-related activities and her independent activities. Even though she was physically absent for the first two years of Fluxus activities, she was considered one of the movement's founding members. Some of her pieces had been played in Fluxus concerts in Europe. When Ono returned to New York City, she immediately found herself in the middle of the Fluxus circle. Maciunas was ready to produce her works in Fluxus publications and concerts and to promote them.<sup>94</sup> "Ono's Sales List," a half-conceptual sales list the artist composed in 1965, listed several objects that she offered to distribute through the Fluxus network. Among the realized pieces in the list, *Self-Portrait* was the earliest to be made into a Fluxus work. Consisting of a small mirror in a manila envelope, the work was inserted in some copies of *Fluxus I*, the three-dimensional anthology of works by Fluxus artists started in 1964.<sup>95</sup> One of her simplest yet most provocative works, *Self-Portrait* invited the viewer to open the envelope to look into a mirrored reflection of herself. The Fluxus objects actually executed by Ono were few; Maciunas often executed objects on his own, realizing Ono's and other artists' ideas.

One of the earliest of Ono's participations in collective Fluxus events was at the *Perpetual Fluxfest* held at Cinematheque in London's East End Theater, which started in 1964. The festival, which was to present nine Fluxus artists' events on different days, included Ono's events on June 27, 1965. Ono performed *Bag Piece* and *Beat Piece* with other artists including Kubota and Paik. Maciunas performed her *Wall Piece for Orchestra* by literally following the instruction to "hit a wall with your head," and nearly killed himself.<sup>96</sup> Although Maciunas considered Ono one of the principal members of Fluxus, Ono remained ambivalent about associating herself with the group; as a "purist" believing in artist's individual creativity, she was still against the idea of a movement. She pointed out that "Fluxus was George and George was Fluxus. He would list all the names sometimes without the permission of the artists and then drop a name or two because he'd had a personal fight with them. He was headstrong and so was I."<sup>97</sup> Like some other members of Fluxus, Ono continued her independent activities outside of Fluxus. While joining some Fluxus activities, she simultaneously presented her works with Charlotte Moorman, the organizer of the Annual Avant-Garde Art Festival, who was considered Maciunas's rival.

Preceding the *Perpetual Fluxfest*, on March 21, 1965, Ono held a solo con-

cert, separate from Fluxus activities, for the second time at Carnegie Recital Hall. The concert featured five pieces, most of which had been performed in Japan earlier: *Bag Piece*, *Striptease for Three*, *Cut Piece*, an untitled piece, and *Clock Piece*. *Clock Piece* asked the audience to wait for an alarm clock to go off, yet nobody knew for what time it was set. Since the hall was only rented until 11 P.M. and the clock had not rung, the producer asked Ono to close the show. Some members of the audience, however, resisted in order to finish the piece and tried to attack the producer.<sup>98</sup>

In September of the same year, a Fluxus concert was held at Carnegie Recital Hall for the second time. Among sixteen pieces played in the concert, Ono's contributions were *4 Pieces for Orchestra—To La Monte Young* and *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ*. Different from Ono's other compositions, the former utilized actual string instruments, though they were played in unconventional ways: by rubbing a dowel, screwdriver, or file across the hole of any string instrument, by rubbing an eraser on the surface of a wind instrument, and by peeling off tape which had been adhered to the instrument.<sup>99</sup> A unique mixture of tools that Ono chose may have been what she thought as attributes to Young. In *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ*, a chamber orchestra was gradually wrapped in gauze bandages while it performed classical music (see fig. 38). Since John Cage was sometimes called Jesus Christ of the same initials by his friends, this piece also referred to Cage.<sup>100</sup> The act of silencing musicians with bandages also referenced Cage's explorations of silence.

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39. Yoko Ono, *Do It Yourself Fluxfest Presents Yoko Ono and Dance Co.*, 1966. Mechanical for artist's page in *Fluxus* newspaper no. 7, designed by George Maciunas. Courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

Compared to the earlier works Ono performed independently, these two works had more ties with conventional music concerts, and might have been specifically designed for the Fluxus concert.

In February 1966, Ono organized the thirteen-day “*Do It Yourself*” *Dance Festival* as a part of *Fluxfest*, another festival of Fluxus events. The program, whose graphic design was executed by Maciunas, functioned as day-to-day instructions (see fig. 39). For example, it instructed one to “breathe” for the first three days, to “watch” at a Canal Street subway station on the fourth day, and to “boil water” and “watch until it evaporates” on the twelfth day. Although some of the instructions were impossible or hard to realize, such as “Face the wall and imagine throughout the year banging your head against it,” many instructions were actually performed. On the twelfth day, for example, some people gathered at Ono’s apartment at 1 West 100th Street to watch water evaporate. Placed in the center of a white room was a “disappearing machine” — a still in the form of an elaborate contraption with glass pipes, created in collaboration with Maciunas. As the water in the machine evaporated, the room was to conceptually turn upside down. Just before the

audience came, Ono attached several statements to various surfaces, which included “This is the floor” on the ceiling; “This is the ceiling” on the floor; and “This window is 2000ft wide” on the windowsill. These playful texts became main components of her *Blue Room Event*, which would be installed in various places after 1966.<sup>101</sup>

Ono’s venues for presenting her work further expanded to the rooftops, street corners, the Judson Gallery of the Judson Memorial Church, and a restaurant. At the Judson Memorial Church Hall and later at a Japanese macrobiotic restaurant called Paradox in the East Village, Ono was involved in presenting a multimedia environment piece, *Stone*, which was developed in collaboration with Tony Cox, Jon Hendricks, and Jeff Perkins. According to one audience member at Paradox, Takahiko Imura, the audience members were instructed to, one at a time, enter a white room and then a black bag. From inside of the bag, each could see rings of light turning around the room.<sup>102</sup> Ono’s contribution was the large black bag, derived from her *Bag Piece*. Cox and Hendricks were involved in the concept and realization; sound was provided by Michael Mason; and film projection was by Jeff Perkins. Following the conception of another environment piece, *Blue Room Event*, *Stone* marked Ono’s engagement in environmental works.

After her return from Japan, the vibrant avant-garde communities in New York City helped Ono regain a sense of belonging and affirmation. While she felt like a stranger in Tokyo, she was welcomed as one of the leading artists within New York avant-garde circles, including Fluxus. Dynamics within these groups stimulated her to experiment with new forms such as multimedia environments. While exploring presentation venues in and out of the Fluxus circle, Ono started to look into possible European venues. A timely invitation arrived from London to participate in a three-day Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) and its following events in September of 1966. Just as Ono’s sojourn to Japan had been extended, she would remain in London for several years in order to explore new artistic directions.

### The London Years, 1966–1970

Ono was invited to London by one of the DIAS organizing committee members, Mario Amaya, the editor of the new publication *Art and Artists*. Through his connection, Ono was also offered an opportunity to have a solo exhibition of recently created objects at the Indica Gallery, which was housed in an underground bookstore owned by another committee member of DIAS. Although Ono wanted to visit London alone for a change, her then husband Cox and daughter Kyoko came along and stayed together far longer than the two weeks originally planned. London was totally an unknown city to Ono, but she became known to the general public in the course of only a year.

DIAS originated from the idea of the “autodestructive” artist Gustav Metzger to bring together artists from throughout the world to discuss the use of destruction in art and society with the broad range of public. With the help of committee members who were influential in London underground art world, the symposium expanded and drew the attention of the public media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Although the symposium proper was held only for three days, it was followed by numerous Happenings, concerts, and discussions by the invited artists, including Al Hansen, Yoko Ono, and Raphael Ortiz from America; John Latham and Otto Muhl from Vienna; and Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo from Italy. In *Two Evenings with Yoko Ono* at the Africa Center on September 28 and 29, 1966, Ono presented more than fifteen pieces, most of which required audience participation. Among these pieces, *Cut Piece* was received as the most controversial. A female reviewer made a careful observation on the audience’s response in *Cut Piece*:

Some gentle, some vicious participants obey their inner wishes, until Miss Ono is left bare, hiding her nudity with her arms. The audience was hushed and people seemed a little hesitant to cut; one man quietly cut off a button, others deliberately cut the dress in order to expose the body in some self-satisfying erotic manner . . . one aggressive man rushed up to the stage and fiercely chopped off a large part of Miss Ono’s dress, exposing the breast; his work was spoiled by the next participant who, with shaking hands, stitched on his handkerchief to cover the naked flesh. What inward aggressions were allowed expression in these people? Both the man who snipped a button and the man greedily cut the final material from her panties were releasing sexual aggression — one treated her as a naughty child would his mother, the other as a prostitute . . . both appeared to have little feeling for Miss Ono herself, and neither had any spiritual contact with her.<sup>103</sup>

Because the reviewer was a woman, she could critically point out that male participants were releasing their sexual aggressions without trying to understand intentions behind the performance. The way people came up to the stage, how they cut the piece of clothing, and what facial expressions they had when cutting — all of these responses directly reflected individual personalities. The performance functioned like a mirror to reflect a person’s inner self.

Such a reflective quality contrasts Ono’s *Cut Piece* from the male artists’ drastic destruction art represented by Ortiz’s piano destruction and a bloody ritual by Hermann Nitsch. Comparing “destruction art” by men and women, Kristine Stiles made the insightful observation, “While male artists have explored the relationship of that body to the objects and technologies of destruction as well as the assertion and recuperation of identity, women artists

have regularly confined their investigations to the reconstruction of the self.” Stiles noted further that “the vast majority of women’s desctruction art explores the problem of the obliteration of identity and the decentering of the self,”<sup>104</sup> because female identity is often in danger of being obliterated in patriarchal society. In this context, *Cut Piece* offers a good comparison to Yayoi Kusama’s *Self-Obliteration* performance (see fig. 28, in chapter 2) in which the artist covers herself and others with polka dots. If Kusama’s performance was an expression of her mental illness, Ono’s was also an expression of her emotional pain and suffering. For both artists, however, the reconstruction of the self was not the main objective; rather than narcissistically concentrating on themselves, they offered opportunities to the audience to participate in the obliterating act and to reflect upon itself as audience. Specifically, the contemplative atmosphere that permeated Ono’s *Cut Piece* intensified the viewer’s self-reflective experience.

Sharing a transformative experience with viewers has long been a key component of Ono’s art. In November 1966, Ono held her first solo exhibition in London, *Unfinished Paintings and Objects*, at the Indica Gallery. Among exhibited works were audience participation pieces such as *Add Colour Painting*, *Ceiling Painting*, and *Mend Painting*; and contemplation pieces such as *Object in Three Parts*, *You and Me*, and *Eternal Time Clock*.<sup>105</sup> Mario Amaya wrote in the *Financial Times* that Ono’s exhibition might “provide an important first step towards finding our way back to the world of imagination and fantasy away from hog-tied reverence.”<sup>106</sup> This exhibition also led to Ono’s meeting with John Lennon, who visited the opening of her exhibition because he was a friend of the gallery owner. Understanding the ideas behind her works almost instantly, Lennon was to give an important support as well as to collaborate with Ono thereafter.

Shortly after her exhibition, Ono was able to create another version of her film, *No. 4 (Bottoms)*, “sequences of buttock movement of various walking performers,” which was begun earlier as a “Fluxfilm” in New York (see fig. 40).<sup>107</sup> Ono’s newspaper advertisement invited only “intellectual bottoms” to participate in the film, but her message was that there are no intellectual bottoms and that bottoms can reveal one’s true self regardless of social status.<sup>108</sup> Ono’s objective was to make a petition for peace using people’s bottoms instead of signatures. When stripped down to bottoms, people of different social backgrounds looked all similar and innocent. As soon as the news spread over London through mass media as well as the mouths of participants, a curious crowd consisting of actors, artists, businessmen, and others gathered in a house temporarily lent to Ono by a patron for the film’s shooting. Over two hundred people’s bottoms were taken within ten days. After editing, the film became nearly ninety minutes long, consisting of about a twenty-second sequence for each person’s bottom. The repetitive sequences of the close-up view of the bottoms were accompanied by an unsynchronized sound recording of the people being interviewed about their bottoms

while they were being filmed. The publicity about the film and its struggle with the British Board of Film Censors made Ono a celebrity in London. While the Board of Film Censors banned the film, Ono and her friends protested against it and finally won a mature rating certificate and special permission. When the film was finally released at the West End Theater, its box office recorded the third highest sales ever at that time.<sup>109</sup>

With such good publicity, Ono was now more successful than ever in realizing her works, which ranged from events to objects. Her *Wrapping Piece*, in which she wrapped a lion sculpture in Trafalgar Square in August 1967 attracted a large audience, including many members of the press. Wrapping may have originally stemmed from the artist's childhood experience of wrapping gauze around her head to hold in sanitary pads in order to block out sound; to Ono, the act of wrapping meant protection and healing. In her *Piece for Chair IV*, performed at Tokyo's Sōgetsu Art Center in 1962, several participants were wrapped in gauze and stacked on top of each other like dead corpses. In her *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ*, presented at the Fluxus concert at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1965 (see fig. 37), Ono had wrapped the orchestra members in gauze. There was also a chair wrapped in gauze in her exhibition at the Indica Gallery. Extending the idea of wrapping, the event at Trafalgar Square applied it to a political end as an antiwar protest that nullified a part of a war

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monument. Chrissie Iles has interpreted the event further as a “symbolic castration of a phallic war monument.”<sup>110</sup>

Ono’s second exhibition in London, *Half-a-Wind*, at the Lisson Gallery in October 1967, presented her environments grouped together for the first time. Two of the four environments — *Stone*, a white room made of translucent paper and a black bag with lights inside, and *Blue Room*, a white room installed with texts — had been realized earlier in New York. *Blue Room* was made minimal in this installation, with only a text that read “Stay until the room is blue” because the room was like an alcove without any window. Ono instead installed other texts such as “This window is 2000ft wide” in the *Half-a-Wind* room in the front of the gallery. *Half-a-Wind* consisted of a roomful of white furniture — such as a bed, a chest, and a chair — that was all cut in half. Ono mentioned in an interview that the initial inspiration came from the difficulty in her marriage, and the fact that a human is a half-being, the other half of which needs to be filled. The exclusive use of the white color was partially inspired by the Japanese bridal kimono, which, as Ono put it, alluded to the metaphor that “women can be dyed any color.”<sup>111</sup> *Art and Artists* commented that Ono transformed the gallery into “a tangible vehicle for contemplating the illogicalities of the ‘concrete’ and ‘infinite.’”<sup>112</sup>

Besides this exhibition, Ono held events at Bluecoat Chambers, Liverpool, in September, and the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre in London in November. Both venues met with a packed audience. The pieces presented that mostly overlapped with those shown at the Africa Center earlier, including *Fly Piece* and *Bag Piece*, but new pieces were also included. One reviewer of the Liverpool performance called Ono “the high priestess of the Happening.”<sup>113</sup> Ono, in fact, did not mind the press using the word *happening*, which had been introduced as a product of the American avant-garde to England by artists such as Adrian Henri.<sup>114</sup>

Her close involvement with and eventual marriage to John Lennon, one of the foremost popular music stars of the period, brought significant changes in Ono’s artistic activities and her attitudes toward the general public after 1967. Brought up in a working-class family in Liverpool, Lennon was more familiar with the public culture at large and aware of how to exploit the power of the masses.<sup>115</sup> From Ono’s avant-garde artist’s point of view, becoming popular and accepted by the mass was a step down, but Lennon influenced Ono to find populist tactics applicable to her art. Ono recalled how she was before meeting Lennon: “I came from a tradition where if you do a work of yours on the stage and the audience — all of it — walks out on you, then it’s a very successful concert, because that means that your work is so controversial, so far out that the audience could not accept it. If you did a piece that everybody could just enjoy and sit relaxed through until the end, then you were hitting the oldest chord in them. My work wasn’t immediate, it didn’t have a sense of immediacy in terms of popularity.”<sup>116</sup> By the time she had made the film *No. 4 (Bottoms)*, Ono had already realized the limits within the closed avant-garde circle. Many avant-garde artists considered her film commercial



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41. Yoko Ono and John Lennon, *Bed-In for Peace*, 1969. Photo courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

and an attempt to sell her name to the public. Through Lennon, Ono learned about popular, mass culture, which was mainly sustained by the working class as opposed to the avant-garde of the upper middle class. The commercialism and populism of rock'n'roll music gradually made sense to her as a means of communicating with a large number of people.<sup>117</sup>

Blended with Lennon's populist tactics, Ono's urge to communicate to the public produced several major peace campaigns, including *Acorn for Peace*, *Bed-in for Peace*, and *War Is Over!* At their *Bed-in for Peace* event in Amsterdam in 1969 (see fig. 41), the couple explained their intention: "Bed-ins are something that everybody can do and they're so simple. We're willing to be the world's clowns to make people realize it."<sup>118</sup> They believed that showing a couple in bed on TV rather than showing atrocities of the Vietnam War would contribute to peacemaking. Their message for peace was more evident in the billboard campaign—*War Is Over!*—that Ono and Lennon enfolded in major cities in the world. The simple and precise style of the message derived from Ono's earlier conceptual art. The slogan "War Is Over! If You Want It" urged the public to realize that they have the power to change the course of the history if they really wished to do so. Although these events in 1969 were made scandalous by the press and often misunderstood, the public image of Ono and Lennon's going against the establishment and trying to communicate the message of love soon pervaded.

Ono's impact on Lennon was enormous and visible. As Stiles has dis-

cussed extensively, Ono reeducated Lennon, who was basically a “working-class macho guy” without a clue about women’s lives.<sup>119</sup> From the day Lennon met Ono, she demanded “equal time, equal space, equal rights.” Such demands were hard on Lennon at first, but he gradually gave in and came to understand a woman’s position in society, eventually composing songs that even addressed feminist issues. The couple’s mutual influence led to a unique union of talented individuals who constantly challenged the public image of themselves.

### Back in New York, from 1970 to the Present

112

*Into  
Performance*

In 1970 the couple came to New York City to make two films, and partially to contribute their works to a Fluxfest. The series of events, called *Fluxfest Presents John & Yoko +*, was held over three months, from April through and June. For all events, however, Ono and Lennon were absent. The festival consisted of events that were mostly based on either Ono’s or Lennon’s ideas, but some were realized differently by other Fluxus artists.<sup>120</sup> Since Maciunas was also producing Ono’s art objects, to be included in her retrospective exhibition at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, he exhibited some of the completed pieces during this festival.

*This Is Not Here*, the exhibition at the Everson Museum, was the first retrospective of Ono’s works; since it publicized Lennon as a guest artist, the exhibition met with high attendance throughout its run. Featuring a variety of media ranging from two-dimensional works to three-dimensional works, participation pieces, and environments, the exhibition offered the general public an opportunity to learn about Ono’s philosophy and vision. Although many concepts of the pieces had been realized before, most of the objects were produced for this exhibition by Maciunas on Ono’s commission with the assistance of Syracuse University students and others. Three floors of the museum were filled with Ono’s and Lennon’s works: the ground floor housed large three-dimensional works including *Amaze*, a transparent plexiglass labyrinth that contained a toilet chamber in the center; the first floor was filled with instructions and conceptual paintings; the second floor contained two rooms: *Weight Room* and *Water Room*, which consisted of other artists’ contributions to Ono’s ideas. In conjunction with the exhibition, Ono, Lennon, and Mekas appeared in a television program in which they performed several pieces by Ono, including *Fly*.<sup>121</sup>

While the exhibition drew the public’s attention in general, it also garnered art critics’ reviews that tried to situate Ono within the existing art-historical frame. Lawrence Alloway was critical of the commercialism of the Everson show and its failure in accommodating audience participation, but he stressed the fact that Ono’s conceptual works were created early in the 1960s.<sup>122</sup> Emily Wasserman of *Artforum* wrote the most comprehensive and concise review; while criticizing Lennon’s involvement in the show, which

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42. Yoko Ono, *Yoko Ono—One Woman Show* advertised in *the Village Voice*, 1971. Photo courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

“diverted proper attention” to Ono’s works, she noted the fact that the show gave Ono her due regard.<sup>123</sup>

The subsequent exhibition in 1971 became totally conceptual, fictitiously held at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Although Ono did not have the consent of the museum, she advertised her show and catalog in the *Village Voice* (see fig. 42). She hired a man to walk in front of the museum wearing a sandwich board that read, “flies were put in a glass container the same volume as yoko’s body the same perfume as the one yoko uses was put in the glass container the container was then placed in the exact center of the museum the lid was opened the flies were released photographer who has been invited over from england specially for the task is now going around the city to see how far the flies flew the flies are distinguishable by the odour which is equivalent to yokos join us in the search observation & flight.”<sup>124</sup> Ono’s seven-minute film *The Museum of Modern Art Show* documents the responses of visitors to the exhibition, some of whom seemed to know that the exhibition was totally imaginary. In her self-published catalog, pseudo-documentary photographs show the flies being released, their flights, and MoMA’s ticket booth, which put up a cutout of Ono’s advertisement from the *Village Voice* with the message “This is not here,” referring to Ono’s earlier exhibition at the Everson Museum as well as to *The Blue Room*. Although the exhibition was completely conceptual, some museum visitors were deceived into believing that the exhibition was real.

In contrast to Yayoi Kusama’s earlier performance with her models at the Museum of Modern Art, Ono’s event took place rather quietly without the

presence of the artist. While both Kusama and Ono intended to comically assault the male-dominated art world by holding their unauthorized performances, their approaches were quite different. Kusama attacked the museum by breaking the taboo against showing nudity in a public space; Ono, on the other hand, did not employ shocking methods, but experimented with the deceptive use of texts. Through effective use of advertising media and documentary materials, Ono turned an imaginary exhibition into a real event. The event pronounced the conceptual nature and anti-institution stance of Ono's art.

After this event until 1989, Ono did not have any major museum or gallery exhibition of her works. While she continued artmaking and participated in such events as the Avant-Garde Art Festival in New York during the 1970s, her overall attention shifted to her music and her involvement in the women's liberation movement. The birth of Ono and Lennon's first child Sean in 1975 also led the couple to retreat into a protected private life until Lennon was assassinated in 1980. After Lennon's death, Ono's life continued to concentrate on nurturing her son; creating music, including popular songs such as *Walking on Thin Ice* (1981);<sup>125</sup> and managing Lennon's estate. With the exhibition *Yoko Ono: Objects, Film* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1989, Ono returned to full and active participation in the art world. Since then Ono has had numerous exhibitions of her work worldwide, including the recent retrospective at the Japan Society in New York, which traveled extensively throughout North America, South Korea, and Japan.

While Yoko Ono has certainly been one of the most recognizable public personalities in the world since the late 1960s, her artistic creativity has become overshadowed by the celebrity status brought on by her marriage to Lennon. Rather than being constricted by her situation, however, Ono turned her disadvantage to advantage by utilizing mass media and populist tactics to communicate her messages to a wider audience; her peace campaign with Lennon is one of the most successful examples. Today, Ono keeps the peace campaign active through publicizing her messages in newspapers and visiting places all over the world to present her works. Whether it was the tragedy of Mexican workers who died of dehydration in a locked truck, or of Palestine people who lost their residences, Ono has drawn inspiration from world events and created many works as her hope for peace. Regardless of whether Ono's work takes the form of an instruction, an object, or a performance, it is always intended to become a catalyst of exchange between her and her audience. "All my things have to do with the inner life, inner communication and transformation," Ono stresses. As such, the enactment of her object or event pieces is intended to "cause an inner, contemplative reaction" in the spectator.<sup>126</sup> Her art of wishes transcends national boundaries and reaches out to increasingly a wider audience in the world.

*Playful Spirit:  
The Interactive Art  
of Takako Saito*

Fluxus embraced Event, Music, Mailart, Performance, Minimal art, Game art, Conceptual art, Non-art, Theater art, Anti-art, and . . . I think that was the positive thing about Fluxus, and very important for me.

— Takako Saito,  
“Korrektur für Artikel”

As she is, perhaps, the most elusive among the five artists of this study, Takako Saito’s art and life have been difficult for any scholar to study for a two obvious reasons. One is her nomadic lifestyle, which has naturally scattered records of her activities across different languages and places. The other is her lack of interest in writing or speaking about her work. Unlike the other artists in this volume, Saito has rarely employed language as a means of expression. She is not verbally expressive, and she intentionally keeps her ego transparent in terms of the presentation of her works. She believes that others can seek meaning in her works themselves, and that she should not impose any fixed interpretation. Her works are open-ended, and there is a plenty of room for the audience to play. These self-imposed traits may seem disadvantageous in promoting one’s art, but this attitude has served her purpose well; that is, it has kept her life quiet and allowed her to concentrate on artmaking.

Just as her artwork is open-ended, so is Saito’s life, and she has taken many chances at various turning points. She has, essentially, followed the direction

the wind blows, embracing the many mishaps in her life as chances to redirect her sails, her passion for art and people serving as winds. Constantly adapting to new situations, Saito has shaped her life flexibly and spontaneously. Whereas Shigeko Kubota and Mieko Shiomi purposefully came to New York in order to join Fluxus, Saito did not expect to be part of Fluxus when she moved to New York in 1963; the chance encounter was brought by her connection with certain people, but nonetheless this meeting would affect the subsequent course of her life, suggesting many possible ways of expanding her artistic horizons. The wide range of Fluxus activities inspired Saito to take up new artistic genres such as events, game art, and performance, all of which became central to her oeuvre.

Once Saito became immersed in Fluxus, she totally embraced its philosophy, art, and lifestyle. While helping to produce editions of Fluxus objects, she discovered her own talent in building small objects with meticulous details. Although it has rarely been acknowledged, Saito was behind the execution of many Fluxus products, including her own creations. In part due to her modesty, Saito's importance in Fluxus has generally been overlooked. During her New York years, from 1964 to 1968, she was less concerned with her authorship and did not sign her pieces. She also felt uncertain about her status as a member of the group. Before Saito left for Europe in 1968, she left many of her works to George Maciunas, granting him the right to turn them into Fluxus art. Maciunas credited himself for some of her works, and he made his own versions of her ideas without consulting her.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, most of Saito's early Fluxus works were not credited properly until the late 1980s, which discouraged her inclusion in Fluxus-related scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

While Saito's New York years served as an exploratory period in her production of art, her subsequent years in Europe saw the development and fruition of her career. Between 1968 and 1979, Saito moved from one place to another while doing odd jobs and creating a relatively small number of artworks, until she settled in Düsseldorf, Germany. In the early 1970s, Saito became interested in developing performance art. The direct involvement with the audience, which she learned through Fluxus performances, became Saito's central artistic concern. In addition to art production, she has continued to organize performances that involve the general public. Through these performances Saito has sought to lead the audience to discover their own creativity. Her role as an artistic catalyst continues today. In addition to providing the artist's biographical chronology for the first time, this chapter discusses the main artistic themes in Saito's art, such as game and performance.

### Finding Her Own Path

Saito was born in 1929 in Sabae in Fukui Prefecture, situated on the Japan Sea side of the middle of Japan. She was the middle of three children of a

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43. Takako Saito with her family in front of their house in Sabae, 1940. Courtesy of Takako Saito.

distinguished landowner. A photograph taken in 1940, just before the outbreak of the World War II, documents the affluent family in their beautifully appointed garden in front of a large traditional Japanese house (see fig. 43). In the photograph Saito is surrounded by her family members — her brother in front, her sister to her right, and her parents behind her — and a housemaid and a gardener. The shadow of World War II is not yet visible in this family portrait. Two years later, in her second year in a girls' middle school, she and her classmates were taken to a textile factory, where they had to produce fabrics to be used in military parachutes. (At around the same age, Kusama also experienced making military parachutes.) Saito was given a task of spinning threads into rolls, a process that she actually enjoyed for its plasticity. (The repetitive handwork is suggestive of Saito's later artmaking processes.) Although most of her middle school years were replaced with this work for war efforts, Saito always tried to seek the positive out of the negative.<sup>3</sup>

After the war, Saito's father died and democratic land reformation largely reduced the family's property. Left with the responsibility to maintain the property, Saito's mother became more rigid and conservative. She treated her daughters as inferior to her son, who was seen as the "legitimate" (patriarchal) successor in the family.<sup>4</sup> Her mother's conservative attitude led Saito to want to break away from the family and pursue an independent life. Her first experience away from her family was attending Nihon Joshi Daigaku (Japan Women's University) in Tokyo, to which she was recommended by one of her teachers. During four years in college, she majored in child education, but she rarely attended lectures and often went to movies instead. Yet,

she still managed to graduate in 1950 with an education degree. Although Tokyo had been burnt down during the war and there was reconstruction everywhere, Saito did not get an impression of devastation; to her the city seemed to have hopes for new growth.

Saito's first career was as a schoolteacher, the most respected and needed profession for a Japanese woman at that time. She taught Japanese and liberal arts courses at a public junior high school in Sabae for four years. Interested in encouraging children's free will, she allowed some of her students to skip her class and play a baseball game. She thought that forcing children to study was not real education. Eventually, children gradually shifted their interest from playing to studying and attended Saito's class. Although school officials did not like her free-form teaching, Saito's attempt to trust in children's decision making succeeded in the long run.

Her interest in promoting creativity was reinforced through her involvement in the educators' art movement called *Sōzō biiku undō* (shortened as *Sōbi*). In 1953, an art teacher who taught at the same school in Sabae introduced Saito to the movement. Founded by the teacher and art collector Teijirō Kubo, *Sōbi* aimed at increasing the creativity of school teachers in order to promote children's artistic leanings. During a long sojourn to observe different educational systems in Europe, Kubo realized the need for creative art education in Japan. Critical of Japanese art education, which concentrated on imitating Western examples rather than promoting individual creativity, he advocated a reactivation of creative power within Japanese teachers and students. Being one who encouraged children's free will, Saito sympathized with Kubo's ambitions.

Since its foundation after World War II, the *Sōbi* movement rapidly grew and spread itself throughout Japan. Its activities involved not only publishing a newsletter and hosting various events and workshops, but also the dissemination of relatively inexpensive works of art, such as prints, in order to increase the opportunity for teachers to have direct contact with actual art objects. The movement was enthusiastically supported by dedicated teachers, especially those in Tokyo and Fukui. Stimulated by the movement and encouraged by her boyfriend at the time, Saito began learning various ways of artmaking, including oil painting, watercolor, etching, and sculpture. *Sōbi*'s nationwide network also provided Saito the opportunity to become friends with creative teachers throughout Japan. The group held a summer camp and workshop every summer in Karuizawa, a resort town northwest of Tokyo, where members from all over Japan gathered. Saito became acquainted with a *Sōbi* member based in Tokyo, who went by the name of Ay-O. After graduating from the Tokyo University of Education in 1954, Ay-O had been actively engaged in avant-garde artists groups such as the *Demokurāto Bijutsuka Kyōkai* (Democratic Artists Association) as a painter and printer.<sup>5</sup> For Saito, he became an important source of information about avant-garde art activity in Tokyo, and later about the art scene in New



York, where he moved in 1958. Ay-O's experiences in New York were communicated to Sōbi members by Kubo at the group meetings.<sup>6</sup>

After being criticized by her boyfriend for being naive because of her affluent background, Saito left Fukui in 1960 to begin an independent life. She went first to Hokkaido, the north island of Japan, where she was employed as a construction worker for six months. Even though she worked as much as male colleagues, she earned only half of their salaries due to gender discrimination. During this period Saito learned how hard it was to live an independent life as a woman. Although she concentrated on making ends meet for six months, her encounter with an art exhibition in Sapporo, the largest city of Hokkaido, made her aware of her desire to create art. While her mother was willing to support her desire to have a studio in Hokkaido, where living costs were relatively low, Saito chose to move to Tokyo to be closer to the center of artistic activity, and she continued to support herself.

Between 1961 and 1963, Saito explored her artistic direction in Tokyo. She did not belong to any art organizations except Sōbi. Since she was basically a self-taught artist, she was not interested in conforming to the hierarchical system of the academic *gadan* (art establishment). Like Kusama, Saito disliked politics among different art schools and the artists' *bijutsu dantai* (art associations). Most of her friends were educators associated with Sōbi, and Saito was not well-versed in trends in contemporary art. While she rarely exhibited her work in public, she submitted her oil painting *My Limitation* (1962–1963) to the Annual Women Artists' Independent Exhibition of 1963. For an artist with no affiliation like Saito, exhibition opportunities were limited to nonjuried exhibitions such as this. Although this painting is no longer extant and no reproduction is available, Saito has explained that it expressed her struggle with her personal limitations in a semiabstract style.

By 1963, Saito had learned indirectly from Ay-O and various other sources such as art magazines about avant-garde artistic movements in New York. Although she did not know of Fluxus at that time, she vaguely dreamt of engaging herself in the unknown New York avant-garde. In the hopes of traveling to New York, she began learning English at a private school. Contrary to Saito's expectations, her mother was not against her daughter's adventure; she even helped Saito acquire a working visa to the United States through an acquaintance there because a tourist visa was unavailable in Japan at that time. Saito came to America in 1963 with the tentative immigration status of assistant to a textile wholesaler.

### Taking Part in Fluxus

For the first several months in New York, Saito did not have a clear direction except for continuing to explore her artistic expression. It was around then that Saito was introduced to George Maciunas through Ay-O who had met

Maciunas originally through Yoko Ono in 1961, and he had become involved in Fluxus in 1962. Saito had shared artistic interests with Ay-O since their Sōbi period, and she found affinities between Sōbi and Fluxus in their communal activities. Shortly after meeting Maciunas, Saito began participating in Fluxus activities. She considered her involvement as a means of exploring her artistic direction rather than as a full commitment to the group. In addition, she was moved by the way Maciunas devoted his whole life to Fluxus. Although he often imposed his ideas on others and was very demanding, Saito decided to help Maciunas produce editions of small works by Fluxus members, which they called “Flux objects” or “Fluxus multiples.”<sup>7</sup> At one time, she was the only one helping Maciunas make Fluxus editions because most of the artists left him due to personality conflicts.

Saito’s participation in the group coincided with Maciunas’s expansion of his production of Fluxus publications and objects. Although Maciunas originally had an elaborate plan for publishing a series of Fluxus magazines, it was not until 1964 and later that he finally realized his goals. As art historian Owen F. Smith has pointed out, the period between 1964 and 1970 was the second period in Fluxus, in which the group’s activities centered on publishing and the production of multiples. During this period, Fluxus produced editions of the group’s newspaper *V TRE*; the Fluxkit, a collection of individual Fluxus works and publications contained in a briefcase; a series of “Fluxfilms”; and the anthology publications *Fluxus I* and *Fluxus Year Box 2*.<sup>8</sup> Besides these collective products, there was a constant need for production of works by individual artists. The majority of these works were unbound, printed score cards contained in plastic boxes due to the the possibility of adding more cards at a later date.

Willing to learn new things, Saito immediately volunteered to help Maciunas’s production and remained a most trusted helper for him. Maciunas, in turn, taught her various useful techniques such as how to paste labels on boxes without wrinkles. While Saito was basically a self-taught artist, she found herself talented in creating objects with craftsman’s exactitude through the production of Fluxus objects. By the time Shiomi and Kubota arrived in New York later in 1964 and joined Fluxus, Saito had acquired enough skills to train them. Although Saito had not known them in Japan, she soon became friends with them and they enjoyed communal activities. These activities revolved around “dinner communes,” in which artists took turns making dinner for the members of the group every night. Although photographs of these everyday activities do not remain, Saito’s recent drawings recount those happy days in a cartoon-like, abbreviated manner. They depict the three Japanese women artists and Maciunas eating, making Fluxus multiples, and performing other daily activities together (see fig. 44). Abstracted as sticklike figures without clothes on, the artists were represented in a semi-primitive state, making pure pleasure out of their collaboration. Unfortunately, their collaborations did not last long, because Shiomi and Kubota

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44. Takako Saito, drawing of the Fluxus dinner commune, approximately 10 × 14 inches, c. 1998. Courtesy of Takako Saito.

found different part-time night jobs.<sup>9</sup> Although it was difficult for Saito to support herself in New York, she continued helping Maciunas while doing odd jobs such as cleaning in a Japanese grocery store and babysitting the children of Fluxus colleagues.

Like many other Japanese artists in New York at that time, Saito was enrolled in art schools from the second year of her stay in the United States. She registered for classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School between 1964 and 1966 and subsequently at the Art Students League for two years. One reason for her studies was to validate her stay in New York by belonging to some organizations; schools provided Saito the perfect justification to stay in the United States. She majored in painting in schools, but classes focused on painting nude models in oil and were boring for her. She remembers working independently on her first sets of wooden games in the school corridor. Although she never learned how to make sculpture, she quickly mastered how to use electronic saws and other carpentry tools through helping Maciunas create Fluxus objects. She also had a natural talent for constructing objects. As Saito recalled, her childhood memory of watching carpenters and gardeners at work at the family house may have partially contributed to her attention to detail in her craft.<sup>10</sup> Even one of her simplest works, *Magic Boat* (1965 and later), a paper yacht included in the first Fluxus anthology, reveals her skill in folding paper in a precise manner (see fig. 45). The work was derived from origami, the Japanese paper-folding art, and the title stemmed from the fact that its sail and boat could be interchanged instant-

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45. Takako Saito, *Magic Boat*, in *Fluxus I* 1965 and later. Photo by Scott Hyde, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

neously, as if by magic.<sup>11</sup> Japanese crafts and games such as origami, which the average Japanese child learned, may also have helped Saito to acquire more elaborate art-making skills.

In fact, Saito's artistic skill and aesthetic sensibility were often viewed as part of her Japanese heritage by her Fluxus colleagues. In 1976, in a recommendation letter for Saito, Maciunas wrote, "In the work of Takako one can find a rare quality of both — original idea and supports: form and craftsmanship." As Maciunas observed, contemporary art emphasized the "idea or contents rather than form," and he thought Saito's work demonstrated the balance between the two components. He also noted that "her craftsmanship springs from Japanese tradition for perfection and is unmatched among contemporary artists working in wood and paper."<sup>12</sup> Some art historians have

even argued that Saito was possibly the greatest influence on the Fluxus forms and styles that Maciunas produced in the early 1960s.<sup>13</sup> As a professional graphic artist, Maciunas also had a sense of exactitude, but his skill was primarily limited to designing two-dimensional works. For producing box objects, he often used mass-produced plastic boxes instead of handmade wooden boxes. He was an admirer of Japanese art and owned some Japanese objects, such as nicely crafted paulownia boxes in which expensive ceramics were usually stored. Maciunas showed these boxes, which were joined without nails, as models to Saito, hoping that she could emulate the exact craftsmanship of the traditional Japanese in the making of Fluxus objects. Saito met his expectations with the high level of artistry that she infused into Fluxus products.

### Chess, Duchamp, and Games

Some of the Fluxus objects that Saito created were unique chess sets, and these became an interest that would end up a lifelong obsession. In 1964,

Maciunas suggested that Saito create her original chess sets, which he called “Flux chess.” Although Saito was not aware at the time, the game of chess related her to a legendary chess aficionado, Marcel Duchamp. Having sympathy with the iconoclasm of Dadaism, Maciunas revered Duchamp, and he found it amusing that Duchamp and he were both chess fanatics; homage to Duchamp was underlying Maciunas’s suggestion of turning chess into Fluxus artwork. In the late 1910s, while living in Buenos Aires, Duchamp had become increasingly drawn to chess. He joined a local chess club, took lessons, and even designed his own chess set. It was known among Fluxus artists that Duchamp had withdrawn almost completely from artmaking to devote his life primarily to chess by the time he moved to New York in 1942. Duchamp presented chess playing as if it were an artistic practice. He even offered his *Pocket Chess Set*, which he produced in an edition of twenty-five, as his work to the *Imagery of Chess* exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery the following year. Contained in a cigarette case, a paper board with paper chessmen held by pins served as a portable alternative to a traditional chess set. In addition, Duchamp created ten magnetized chess sets in 1964, which may have been known to Maciunas and may have inspired him to make Fluxus version of chess sets.<sup>14</sup>

While it is not self-evident, there seems to be a close relationship between chess and Duchamp’s artistic practice, which may be similar to the relationship between chess and the Fluxus artists. Foremost, Duchamp was attracted to the conceptual nature of chess. As a pioneer of conceptual art, Duchamp’s work relied on analytical and synthetic thought as well as imagination and creativity. It may have been through chess that Duchamp began to understand the way thought processes operate in a closed system, a concept he then applied to art in order to break artistic convention. In comparison to painting, Duchamp referred to chess as “another facet of the same kind of mental expression, intellectual expression,” and also suggested that it “added something” to his life;<sup>15</sup> this “something” may have been a broader perspective on human creativity. Since his Dada period, Duchamp had been investigating the nature of art by challenging the borders between art and nonart, or between creation and noncreation. In a way, chess served for Duchamp as a self-reflective tool for his artistic practice.

Furthermore, chess may have led Duchamp to realize that “the creative act is not performed by the artist alone.” Rather, “the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”<sup>16</sup> Although he was referring to the importance of the spectator in interpreting an artwork, the interactivity between artwork and spectator and/or artist and spectator may have been inspired by chess, which requires two opponents. In general, the interpretation of Duchamp’s work is open-ended. Spectators are invited to interact with his work and contribute their own interpretations. For example, one of his early readymades, *With Hidden Noise* (1916), required

the spectator to lift the object in order to hear its sound. Duchamp's works such as *With Hidden Noise* require two participants: the artist or artwork and the spectator. In this way it resembles a game.

Partly inspired by Duchamp, Fluxus artists were interested in incorporating the playful and interactive elements of games into their artworks. Even in the late 1950s, before their involvement with Fluxus, George Brecht and Robert Watts created works that referenced various games. Watts's *Frog Game* (c. 1961), for example, combined mass-produced tin frog toys and a pinball game board. Around the same time, Brecht invented his own card games. After joining Fluxus, Brecht was the first to introduce games to Fluxus art.<sup>17</sup> Provided small plastic boxes by Maciunas, Brecht created various simple games contained in these boxes, including "ball puzzles" and "bead puzzles." One of the ball puzzles, for example, consisted of a black plastic ball and a card of instruction that read, "Find ball under bare foot. Without moving, transfer ball to hand."<sup>18</sup> The participatory and whimsical character of Brecht's games set an example for the objects to be designed by other Fluxus artists, including Saito. The interactive nature of games may also have inspired Brecht to conceive instructions or "text scores," such as *Exit* (1961), which, in a simple one-word format, instructed people to perform a certain action. His instructions became one of the signature formats of artistic expression in Fluxus. These instructions and games challenged the static and untouchable state of traditional art objects as well as demythologized the artist and the work of art.

Games were also integral to the life of Fluxus artists. Maciunas loved playing chess with Saito after almost every dinner he had with her. Although the "Fluxus dinner communes" with Shiomi and Kubota had been disbanded earlier, Saito continued making and having dinners with Maciunas for a while.<sup>19</sup> As a child in an affluent family, Saito had been familiar with chess, which was not as commonly found in the average Japanese household as Japanese chess games such as *shogi* or *go*. Western chess is more complex than its Japanese counterpart; for example, Western chess pieces are sculptural, characterized in their shapes by various roles while Japanese *shogi* pieces are all uniform in shape, distinguishable only by their Chinese characters. The hierarchy is also simpler in Japanese chess, which has no queens, bishops, or rooks.

Since 1964, Saito has produced numerous variations on chess sets, some of which were distributed as Fluxus products, others as her independent works. The earliest set was *Nut & Bolt Chess* (1964 and later), which was made of a wooden board with various sizes of nuts and bolts combined to stand as the game pieces. Although this work is no longer extant, one can imagine the simple functionality of these metal chess pieces. Another of her chess sets, *Grinder Chess* (1965 and later; see fig. 46), is also imbued with the do-it-yourself spirit of a hardware store. Six different kinds of metal grinder tops paired in two colors function as the game pieces. The hierarchy of the chess pieces is designated by the different shapes of the grinder tops. The

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46. Takako Saito,  
*Grinder Chess*,  
1965. Photo by  
Brad Iverson,  
courtesy of the  
Gilbert and Lila  
Silverman Fluxus  
Collection,  
Detroit, Michigan.

board is a square piece of wood with sixty-four small holes in it that are just large enough to hold the grinder tops in place. The board is attached to a box-shaped lid that contains a Maciunas-designed sign with a checker pattern. By employing hardware tools as the chess pieces, Saito turned the medieval game with imperial iconographic forms into a modern game with industrial forms.

Although Saito's early chess sets conformed to the concept of a conventional chess set, her later chess sets deviated from the original format. While chess pieces normally need only to be seen and touched, the chess pieces in Saito's other sets require a variety of senses that are not routine to conventional chess play. These pieces often need to be weighed, heard, or smelled. Moreover, instead of particularized forms, they are often identical. For example, *Sound Chess* (1965 and later; see fig. 47) contains six different sound-making objects in identical wooden boxes. The volume and characteristic of each sound are the only clues in guessing identification of the piece. The pieces in *Weight Chess* (1965 and later) are also identical except that they are

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47. Takako Saito in front of *Sound Chess* or *Weight Chess*, c. 1965. Photo by George Maciunas, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

of varying weights. Because the wooden boxes are the same size, it is hard for players to visually identify the pieces. In every move, one has to shake or lift up the cubes to examine the contents. Players need to sharpen their senses in order to hear subtle differences in sound or to feel variations in weight.

In Saito's chess, strategy is undermined by the physical need to utilize the five senses. Her originality lies in the unique juxtaposition between the highly strategic thinking required to play the game and the physical senses we use in everyday life. In *Smell Chess* (1965 and later; see fig. 48), thirty-two glass containers with liquids of various odors have to be sniffed and identified, whereas her later *Wine Chess* (late 1970s and later) involved wine tasting. Winning was no longer as important as one's physical interaction with the

game pieces. By involving senses that were normally unrelated to the traditional game, Saito transformed the ultimate conceptual game into a play of sensuous interactions.

The incorporation of multiple senses in artwork, however, was not unique to Saito. Kristine Stiles has pointed out that "the acute attention to multisensuality of Ono and other women artists associated with Fluxus ushers viewer-participants into the personal territories of their own anatomy and focuses on the intimate sense of touch and smell."<sup>20</sup> For example, Ono's text score for a performance titled *Touch Piece* (1963) instructs performers to "touch each other," and her *Pulse Piece* (1963) asks performers to "listen to each other's pulse by putting your ear on the other's stomach."<sup>21</sup> Although Stiles associated "the intimate sense of touch and smell" with female "multisensuality," such senses were not limited to female artists, but were also explored by male Fluxus artists such as Ay-O. For example, Ay-O's *Finger Box* (1964 and later; see fig. 49) is designed for the viewer to insert a finger into a hole to feel what is hidden inside the box; different objects inside the boxes give different tactile sensations to the viewer. A difference between Ay-O's



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48. Takako Saito, *Smell Chess*, 1965 and later. Photo by Lori Tucci, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

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49. Ay-O, *Finger Box*, 1964 and later. Photo by Brad Iverson, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

work and Saito's and Ono's is that Ay-O's provokes male desire for the female sexual organ specifically whereas Saito's and Ono's play with sensuality in general.

Saito and Ono shared more than one interest. Ono created her *White Chess Set* at the time of her solo exhibition at the Indica Gallery in London, in 1966, slightly later than Saito's earliest chess sets. Comprised of a wooden chess table, a chess set, and two chairs that were all painted in white, *White Chess Set* had no distinction between two opponents. A brass plate on the underside of the table had an inscription that read: "CHESS SET FOR PLAYING AS LONG AS YOU CAN REMEMBER WHERE ALL YOUR PIECES ARE." Like Saito's chess sets, Ono's chess set humorously nullified the confrontational aspect of the game, in this case to appeal for peace. Although this work stemmed from Ono's earlier ideas of creating chess variations, including an all-transparent version of the Japanese go,<sup>22</sup> Saito's chess may have been instrumental in Ono's materializing such concepts into actual objects.

Saito's imaginative chess sets immediately became one of the staple Fluxus products and were sold to collectors in the United States and Europe. Saito continued to invent various versions of chess sets, including *Book Chess*, well into the 1980s. A photograph of one of her recent exhibitions shows a wide range of chess sets that Saito produced over the years (see fig. 50). These

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chess sets, according to art critic Gretchen Faust, “perhaps best reflect the Fluxus tendency toward strategic games and gags and balance between serious consideration and whimsy.”<sup>23</sup> Saito’s chess sets became the embodiment of the Fluxus philosophy in their merging of strategy and humor.

Inspired by the artistic possibility of chess sets, Saito invented many other games that exercised her playful imagination. Among them were the series of wall puzzles created in the 1970s and later, many of which were titled *Do-It-Yourself-Picture*, and her *Mystery Boxes* (see fig. 51). A typical *Do-It-Yourself-Picture* was comprised of magnetized puzzle pieces that could be arranged freely on the

magnet board; the puzzle pieces contained profile portraits of people in Saito’s life. A *Mystery Box* was a wooden box with holes on top and sides; every time a bean was dropped into a top hole, it randomly came out of a different hole on the side of the box. Because of a hidden device inside, it was named *Mystery Box*. As gallery owner Emily Harvey once proclaimed, Saito’s “lovingly crafted games and puzzles gave rise to the dialogue between hand-craft and industrial production that made it possible for Fluxus to bridge the many disciplines and technologies successfully.”<sup>24</sup> Although Fluxus advocated mass production as a way to make affordable artworks and to defy the traditional notion of authorship, it did not necessarily abandon the aesthetic quality that could be found in beautiful designs and manual execution. Saito’s skills helped Fluxus to produce multiples of a high aesthetic quality.

At her exhibition openings, Saito encouraged audiences to play with the games on display. Through playing, viewers found themselves temporarily freed of social conventions and able to discover their inner playfulness and spontaneity, often feeling like they were brought back to their childhood. With his readymades and concept-based art, Duchamp had demonstrated that the artist’s role was no longer limited to the creation of original art objects, but extended to serving as a catalyst for creative thinking or imagination. Indirectly inheriting Duchamp’s distanced attitude toward art as well as his playful spirit, Saito and other Fluxus artists have served as artistic lib-

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51. Takako Saito, *Mystery Box Nr. 5a*, 1986. Photo by H. Hensleigh, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

erators by turning mysterious artistic creation into everyday practice. Games, and in particular chess, became a medium through which Saito could explore interactive possibilities of her audiences.

### Performance with Cubes

Saito's interactions with audiences through her chess sets and other games developed into performance art in the late 1960s. Saito's interest in encouraging people to discover their own creativity originally stemmed from her experience as a junior high school teacher in Japan and was reinforced by her encounter with Fluxus and chess. The wooden cubes that Saito created for some of her chess sets, such as *Sound Chess*, inspired the creation of new performances. Saito thought that, despite its simple form, the cube had unlimited possibilities for play. For example, cubes could be stacked on top of one another like toy blocks. She also became fascinated with the sounds they made when dropped. The first cube-form work that Saito conceived separately from her chess sets was *Small Box of Cubes* (1965–1966). It was also one of the earliest objects that Saito created for herself, not meant to be reproduced as a Fluxus product. A limited edition of twenty boxes were made and given to her friends. Consisting of numerous solid wooden cubes of different sizes that tightly fit into a wooden box, this work could be played as a puzzle or as an instrument to make sounds by dropping cubes onto the floor. Although she did not have opportunities to undertake public performances until the early 1970s, she demonstrated how to play with her cubes to her Fluxus colleagues.

The cube form can be consistently found in Saito's works throughout her career. One of the unique variants of cube-form works was *Musical Chair*, also known as *Event Chair* (c. 1964–1965).<sup>25</sup> Twelve different types of chairs were planned for production, but only ten were actually created. Each chair was a fifteen-inch hollow wooden cube that was covered with leather. Sitting activated a device inside, which produced various sounds such as that of a horn or a moving ball. The former was also called *Buzzer Chair* and the latter *Rolling Ball Chair*.<sup>26</sup> In another chair, water was designed to come out through the upper sides of the cube so that the person sitting down would get wet. Saito made these chairs for a surprise party for Maciunas before he was going to Arizona to cure his asthma; her Fluxus friends played with the chairs at the party. Considering this occasion as only a one-time event, Saito discarded these chairs after the party and a group exhibition. Saito conceived her works as tools to induce performances, and was not as interested in preserving them as static objects. The existing chairs are Maciunas's re-creations after Saito's, and they do not function in the ways the originals did.<sup>27</sup>

Other variations of the cube are *Music Bottle* (1967) and *Etching Boxes* (1968).<sup>28</sup> *Music Bottle* was made of a large glass bottle with different sizes of

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52. Takako Saito, performance of *Music Bottle* (1967), Rome, 1975. Photo courtesy of Takako Saito.

white paper cubes inside (see fig. 52). When one shook the bottle, or poured the cubes onto the floor, the cubes made gentle sounds like that of water in a stream. This piece was accompanied with an instruction that read, “Pour as Water.”<sup>29</sup> While water was often used as a primary motif in the events of other Fluxus artists such as Brecht and Ono, Saito used paper cubes metaphorically as water. *Etching Boxes* was comprised of twenty-nine paper cubes contained in a paper box. Their exteriors had different images of figures that were printed by etching. Different kinds of objects were glued inside these cubes so that they made various sounds when dropped.<sup>30</sup> Unlike conventional instruments, the cubes in *Music Bottle* and *Etching Box* were also designed for play, as toy blocks. They could be stacked up to form towers. Like many objects by other Fluxus artists, Saito’s objects were open to a variety of uses.

While Saito created a wide range of interactive objects during her New York period of 1963 to 1967, performances with these objects were never held in public or documented in photographs. All of her official scheduled performance opportunities unfortunately fell through. First, her performance at Café au Go Go, where Brecht and Watts organized a weekly event series, was announced as a jazz concert by mistake. Second, she was invited to do a performance at Al Hansen’s loft, but she declined the offer in order to do a performance with Maciunas. Although many Fluxus artists distanced themselves from Maciunas and undertook their own performances, Saito kept an alliance to him. Of one incident of Maciunas’ conflict with other Fluxus art-

ists, Saito recalls, “When the artists . . . did performances at somewhere else, he was very angry. A group of artists did performance at the Café au go go, he wanted me to take a note of protest to Albert Fine, the owner of Café au go go. . . . He said Albert Fine was a capitalist who took the artists who belonged to Fluxus by using power of money. . . .”<sup>31</sup> Saito did not always agree with Maciunas’s political opinions, but she still remained on his side.<sup>32</sup> Her stance can be contrasted with that of Shiomi, who did not take either side and distanced herself from the arguments. Saito’s consistent alliance with Maciunas did not lead to her success in terms of staging performances.

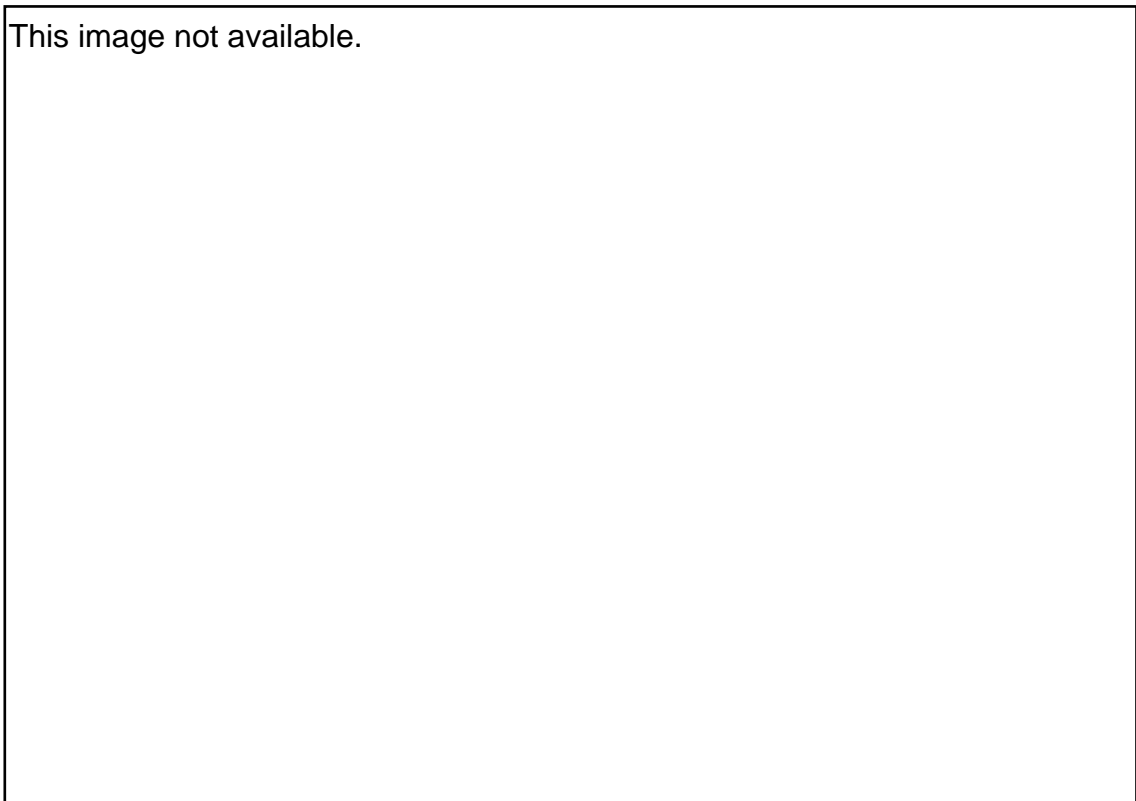
In 1964, Maciunas planned to stage a Saito performance, but it was postponed several times due to the problems in securing the performance space. Shiomi suggested that this situation could be changed into a mail art event.<sup>33</sup> Saito and Maciunas called this mail event *Postpone Piece* and sent people postcards with the postponed dates for Saito’s performance. Announcements included a prospective performance space, the Popcorn Theater, which was totally fictitious. After postponing for three or four times, Saito lost interest in continuing the conceptual event. Saito’s performance, entitled “Amusements,” was finally advertised as part of Perpetual Fluxfest, a festival of Fluxus events, to be held on January 8, 1965.<sup>34</sup> She planned to enact some audience-interactive games. But this event, too, was cancelled, due to the financial problems of the Washington Square Gallery. As in *Postpone Piece*, Saito turned this mishap into a mail event by sending wooden cubes inscribed with various sentences, including, “Event Disappeared into the Bottom of Pacific Ocean.” Rather than expressing her disappointment directly, Saito chose to express it through a lyrical metaphor. Due to cancellations of these earlier events, Saito’s first public performance did not take place until 1971, three years after Saito left New York for Europe. Between 1968 and 1979, Saito nomadically moved around in Europe because her student visa in the United States could no longer be renewed and she had only a tourist visa in Europe.<sup>35</sup> Her first publicized performance took place during her first visit to England for ten days in 1971. When Saito could no longer stay in France, she received an invitation from the manager of the Beau Geste Press, David Mayor, to come to Exeter, England, to participate in a *Fluxshoe* exhibition. Mayor had helped Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg to found the Beau Geste Press at a converted farmhouse in Exeter, and one of their first projects was the organizing of a Fluxus exhibition that would travel throughout England.<sup>36</sup>

Mayor invited many Fluxus artists, including Ay-O, Eric Andersen, and Takehisa Kosugi to present their objects and performances at the venue of Exeter University and its environs. As soon as Saito arrived in Exeter, she presented a game called *Kicking Box Billiard* that involved audience members. While hopping on one foot, participants tried to win boxes by kicking white paper cubes against each other. The boxes were of various sizes, ranging from about one inch square to five inches square. There were rules, such as “Do not hit more than one box,” “If you hit a flower pot, you miss two turns,” and “If you smash a box you’re out.”<sup>37</sup> Saito demonstrated how to play to her

audience first. Taking place on the driveway to the Beau Geste Press farmhouse, this event involved many children and adults from the local neighborhood. For the first time, Saito was able to stage a performance in a public setting.

After this experience in England, Saito gained more opportunities to present her performances. She performed a slightly different variation of *Kicking Box Billiard* in New York on May 19, 1973, as part of a Fluxus Game Fest.<sup>38</sup> She had been invited to New York by Maciunas to help him repair a “Fluxship” and build a harpsichord.<sup>39</sup> New-York based Fluxus artists participated in Saito’s performance, which took place in one of the SoHo buildings that Maciunas owned (see fig. 53). Photographer Larry Miller documented the game, which was played by Fluxus artists and friends, including Nam June Paik and Jonas Mekas. Saito’s return to New York was thus celebrated with artists and friends.

Saito’s stay in New York could not be longer than six months, however, due to the visa problem. Later in 1973 Saito returned to England to work for the Beau Geste Press. During her two-year stay there she learned book-making, including printing and binding techniques that were also useful in her own artmaking. As time went by, she was given the responsibility of



53. Takako Saito, *Kicking Box Billiard* performance at the Fluxus Game Fest, New York, 1973. Photo by Larry Miller.

handling the press's accounts, invoicing, and shipping of books. Such administrative duties gradually occupied her time, and as a result she had little opportunity to perform. Although relocating so frequently was not desirable, Saito had no choice but to continue living like a nomad. Her next destination was Italy.

In 1975, Saito left England for Asolo, Italy, to work with art dealer and publisher Francesco Conz in art book production. Moving again to Reggio Emilia the following year, Saito continued the production of art books for Rosanna Chiessi's edition, *Pari & Dispari*.<sup>40</sup> The flexibility in this job finally allowed Saito more time to create her own works and performances. Soon after her move to Reggio Emilia, Saito wrote to Maciunas, "I had three performances since I've come and [they] went very well. People enjoyed [them] very much [and] I am very happy about it. I am going to continue it, but performances were not paid [and] materials [and] even travel expense also sometimes I paid, even I put a lot of time and energy into it. Well . . . anyway. . . . Now I am planning to do a big performance if I could find a place and set up a workshop here. . . ." <sup>41</sup> The letter records Saito's determination to develop her performance further despite financial hardship. Compared to art objects that could be sold, performance art was an unpaid, far less appreciated art medium. In addition, Saito's performances involved the time-consuming manual labor of the making of hundreds of paper cubes. Because the cubes were fragile and became damaged during the performance, Saito had to re-create them for each performance. Despite such intensive manual labor, Saito presented many performances using these paper cubes, which became her signature motif. Her unrewarded commitment to performance art grew from her personal motivation in having direct contact with her audiences.

Between 1975 and 1978, Saito intensively performed different variations of her works with paper cubes. For example, at the opening of her solo exhibition at Galerie Pepe Mora in Naples in 1976, Saito hung numerous white paper cubes from the ceiling with transparent monofilament and had them swing, each making a subtle sound (see fig. 54). She then cut the threads to drop the cubes onto the floor, which made sounds similar to water dripping. The audience was invited to join Saito in interacting with the cubes on the floor, to stack them up or kick them. The audience was more active than ever this time: they not only joined Saito in stacking cubes to make tall towers, but also started to voluntarily tie cut flowers to the fishing threads hung from the ceiling. The result was unexpectedly beautiful and the feeling of collaboration united Saito and the audience. Using one of the simplest three-dimensional forms, the cube, Saito demonstrated that nothing elaborate was needed to encourage playful responses from the audience. Her performances using the paper cubes have been transformed into different formats and presented periodically up to the present day.



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54. Takako Saito, performance at Galerie Pepe Mora, Naples, 1976. Photo courtesy of Takako Saito.

### Toward “Communicative Art”

In 1979, Saito finally found a place to settle in Düsseldorf. Between 1979 and 1983, she taught art at Essen University. Although she did not teach for many years, the stable funding from the job allowed her to create more works than ever. From her professional experience of producing editions of art objects and books, Saito launched her own bookmaking concern, Noodle Editions, in 1979 in order to systematically sell her works through subscriptions. Before this time, Saito had never had a stable income from selling her artworks. Her increasing productivity met the rise in demand for Fluxus objects that followed the wave of Fluxus reevaluation by art historians, museum curators, and collectors after the 1980s. The number of Fluxus-related exhibitions dramatically increased at this time, providing more opportunities for Saito’s public exposure. In conjunction with many of these exhibitions, Saito presented new performances. At an exhibition opening at the Armin Hundertmark Gallery in 1986, for example, the artist and some of her friends sat among the audience and started performing. Suddenly, their conversations and gestures stopped while the loud sounds of rolling marbles and rattling were played from a speaker. When the same event was repeated for the second time, some of the audience members voluntarily participated in

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55. Takako Saito, *Extra Do It Yourself Shop* "You and Me," 1993–2001. Photo courtesy of Takako Saito.

imitating their static postures.<sup>42</sup> Saito's intention of engaging audiences directly in her performance has been consistent since the 1970s. Through these performances, she has reinforced her vision of using art as a tool for communication.

Saito's direction toward what she calls "communicative art" culminated in her project during the 1990s, *You and Me Market* or *Do It Yourself Shop You and Me* (see fig. 55). There are several variations of the market, which consists of portable shop stands displaying a variety of natural materials such as dried vegetable skins and nut or fruit shells. Most of them are things that people would normally discard, but the artist has turned them into artistic media by dehydrating them. Saito instructs visitors, "This is like a self-service meal. Take a container and fill it with the things you like from the table just as you like. Sign your container—I will do the same." Visitors are expected to pay by containers: an orange rind, an avocado shell, or a coffee filter will cost thirty deutsche marks each, for example. The objects chosen by visitors will become original artworks of theirs made in collaboration with Saito. By claiming easily assembled objects as artworks and by sharing the authorship with visitors, Saito challenges the status quo of the artistic creation. Communication between the artist and visitors are central to this project. Her promotion of the "do-it-yourself" attitude clearly links her work to Fluxus's collective sensibility. With a shop format, Saito pays homage to Maciunas's Fluxshop, which displayed publications and objects by Fluxus artists for sale.

In recent years Saito has been reflecting upon her past with Fluxus, and particularly on the importance of Maciunas. Despite the many disagreements that she had with him, she is appreciative of what he did for the group. She recently commented that “[w]ithout Maciunas’s devotion to the promotion of Fluxus and meticulous management, Fluxus may not have survived until today.”<sup>43</sup> More than a quarter century after Maciunas’s death in 1978, Saito has grown more positive about her involvement with Fluxus and has become interested in reinterpreting and modifying Maciunas’s ideas. Particularly, her recent performances in outdoor settings carry on the Fluxus concept of street performances. With years of experience in staging performances in institutional settings, she realized that she could do performances without any constraints if she organized her own. And by holding events in outdoor settings such as a park or a street, Saito has been increasing the chance of involving passersby.

The first event of this kind took place in a park next to the river in Düsseldorf in 2000. Titled *Kommunikative Modenshau* (*Communicative Mode Show*), this event explored possibilities of using costumes as tools for communication with people. It was basically an outdoor fashion show, using as a runway a strip of fake grass laid on top of real grass. Inviting local people as her performers, Saito presented several different kinds of costumes as game tools between performers and spectators. One of the costumes, for example, let people touch and guess the contents of bags hung from the bottom of a shirt. If they could guess three things right, they could take home a bag full of small objects as a souvenir. Before and after Saito’s two-hour long presentation, younger German artists Erich Füllgrabe and Wolfgang Spanier presented their own interactive costumes designed to induce games with the spectators. By collaborating with younger artists and the local community, Saito aims to realize her lifelong mission of freeing art to the common people. This mission derived from Fluxus, but it also stemmed from Saito’s earlier teaching experience in Japan. Through encouraging individual’s creativity, Saito becomes a catalyst to induce others’ artistic creation. As evidenced by the continuing support from her local community, Saito’s playful spirit will be passed on to younger generations.



*Music, Art, Poetry,  
and Beyond: The Intermedia  
Art of Mieko Shiomi*

I think that all are processes, including doing a performance and living. In addition, I think that art and everyday life should also give feedback to each other. . . . Feedback is our way of receiving or experiencing things in daily life, or of polishing our senses and enriching our imagination. Unless we try to enrich our lives, I feel that there is no meaning in doing art.

—Mieko Shiomi,  
*Mieko Shiomi Intabyū* [*Mieko Shiomi Interview*]

From early on, Mieko Shiomi has explored a way to integrate her art and life. Her intensive musical background and radical interest led her to cofound Group Ongaku, the avant-garde music ensemble based at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1960, and later to join Fluxus in New York in 1964. Although she returned to Japan after a year, she intensively participated in Fluxus concerts and other activities during this short period. Since 1964 Shiomi has associated herself with Fluxus, but, like many other Fluxus artists, she has had an independent professional career outside of the occasional group activities, and has produced many musical works as a professional composer.

While Shiomi identifies herself as a composer rather than an artist, most

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56. Mieko Shiomi, *Event for the Late Afternoon*, 1963. Photo by Minoru Hirata, courtesy of Mieko Shiomi.

of her works often cross the lines between art and music. They can often be realized in the format of events, the action component of music, which she and other Fluxus artists isolated and turned into art. Events sometimes accompany sounds, but they are independent from music. For example, in Shiomi's *Event for the Late Afternoon*, the event score describes a violin that is suspended "with a long rope from the roof of a building until it nearly reaches the ground." Although this event uses a musical instrument, the instrument is not intended to make any sound. Instead, the piece highlights the descent of a violin within space. When she premiered this piece in Okayama in 1963, Shiomi gradually lowered a violin from the top of the monumental Okayama General Cultural Center building to the street level and had a friend photograph the performance (see fig. 56). Generally, Shiomi's events are more concerned with the objects and human body in relation to time and space than they are with making sound.

Although Shiomi has come up with these concerns within herself, they also reflect the artistic concerns and strategies of Fluxus and some other avant-garde artists of the same period. As Douglas Kahn has noted, in the 1960s there was the larger "shift away from sound as music's *raison d'être*," and Fluxus especially investigated every component of music such as "performances, objects and bodies, technologies, texts, discourses, and institutions that have varying, often indirect, relationships to actual sound."<sup>1</sup> Fluxus deconstructed music, and released all the elements back into everyday life. Shiomi's involvement in Fluxus reinforced her determination to explore merging points between music and life.

Shiomi's expression is a combination of visual art, music, and poetry. Hers is a method of turning some elements from everyday actions and natural

phenomena into performances. By presenting these performances “as abstract as possible without adding realistic meaning or literary expressions,” she intends to create “a duration or flow of time that replaces music by its poetic tones and certain tension.”<sup>2</sup> Starting from music, one of the temporal arts, Shiomi has sought her own expression that combines various artistic disciplines.

### Toward Different Dimensions of Music

Like some central members of Fluxus, such as Philip Corner, Yoko Ono, and Nam June Paik, Mieko Shiomi was highly trained in classical music. Born Chieko Shiomi,<sup>3</sup> into a well-to-do family in Tamashima, a small town near Okayama, her earliest memories are of listening to records and singing songs with her parents. Her father was a choral conductor, and her mother sang many classical songs in a beautiful voice; as a child, Shiomi used to listen to her mother’s arias in bed. Conversation in her family was often like an improvisational opera.<sup>4</sup> Shiomi also started practicing piano at the age of nine. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, she was always surrounded by music.

Her engagement in music, however, was interrupted by the devastation of World War II. Toward the end of the war, in June 1945, her hometown witnessed an intensive air raid. During an escape, Shiomi, at the age of six, became separated from her mother. Unknown adults took her to the closest church, which served as a shelter, and she managed to stay safe, but she was not reunited with her mother for a while. In the meantime, the burnt bodies were carried into the church. Out of fear that her mother might be one of them, she looked at the carcasses, one by one. Eventually she was led to another shelter where she found her mother and the rest of her family, but she remembers this experience vividly until today. Although the dreadful experience did not result in lasting trauma, Shiomi felt that she was a war victim because of another reason: the difficulty in learning music immediately after the war. Even though she was determined to pursue music, the post-war environment was so poor that she built up enormous frustration from having to share the piano with others. In retrospect, Shiomi thinks that her pent-up anger turned into the source of her passion and energy for living and artmaking.<sup>5</sup>

The natural environment also influenced Shiomi’s sensitivity and imbued within her a desire to identify with it. Growing up in a scenic village facing the Seto Inland Sea, she was always fascinated by the beauty of nature — the ever-changing blue color of the sea, the pleasant sea breeze, the green hills, and the songs of the birds. Eventually, a strange desire grew within her — to “merge with this beautiful nature” and to “grasp various attractive phenomena on the earth by [her] own means.”<sup>6</sup> Fascinated by the beauty of nature,

Shiomi became engaged in a mission to approach the essences of nature through artistic expressions, and composing became one of her means of realizing that mission.

Upon entering Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1957, she chose musicology—the study of music theory, history, and aesthetics. At the time, more female students aimed to become pianists than composers, but uninterested in following the average Japanese woman’s career path, Shiomi chose one that was rarely traveled by women in Japan. Her bachelor of arts thesis was on the theory and aesthetics of abstract composition by the early-twentieth-century German composer Anton Webern, who developed twelve-tone music. Through theoretically analyzing the work of a contemporary composer, she was seeking a way to break away from it. In addition to school work, Shiomi took private lessons in music composition with Yoshio Hasegawa, who was also one of professors at the university. While her education was theory-oriented, she still continued to play piano throughout her university years and ultimately merged her piano training and theoretical training. In her junior year, she became interested in piano improvisation after playing Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire* (*Moonstruck Pierrot*; 1912). She started collaborative improvisations with two female colleagues, a flutist and a vocalist, but she sought more avant-garde experiments.

Shiomi’s interest in improvisation grew stronger in her senior year; it was then that she founded an avant-garde music group with her musicology classmates, Takehisa Kosugi, Shūkoku Mizuno, Mikio Tojima, and Gen’ichi Tsuge; a literature student from Chiba University, Yasunao Tone, joined them later. Tone named the ensemble Group Ongaku (Group Music), emulating the mock-academic stance of the Dada-Surrealist magazine *L’literature*. The group explored new forms of music, improvised performances, and occasionally collaborated with a group of experimental dancers called Nijū seiki buyō no kai (Twentieth-Century Creative Dance Group) led by Chiya Kuni in order to extend the possibilities of improvisation.<sup>7</sup> Group Ongaku’s aim was to reevaluate improvisational elements in music, which had been lost in Western music since the Baroque era; its members sought to rediscover the meaning of music, which they thought had been minimized.<sup>8</sup>

This gathering of radical and adventurous members produced a kind of music that had never been explored before. In a later article, Shiomi recalled the early days of the group’s activities, writing,

This explosion of activity was characteristic of our insatiable desire for new sound materials and new definitions (redefinition) of music itself. Every week we discovered some new technique [or] method for playing a previously unthought-of ‘objet sonore,’ and argued endlessly about how to extend its use, and what relationships of sound structure could be created between each performer. We experimented with the various components of every instrument we could think of, like using the inner



action and frame of the piano, or using vocal and breathing sounds, creating sounds from the (usually unplayable) wooden parts of instruments, and every conceivable device of bowing and pizzicato on stringed instruments. At times we even turned our hands to making music with ordinary objects like tables and chairs, ash trays and bunch of keys.<sup>9</sup>

The group's exploration of "previously unthought-of" sounds, created by unconventional methods and with nonmusical objects, preceded that of Fluxus. Despite its geographical distance from the West, Group Ongaku was situated in the lineage of avant-garde music that originated with Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo's noise music, developed by such French composers as Pierre Shaeffer and Edgard Varèse, and further expanded by John Cage.<sup>10</sup> Group Ongaku was still unfamiliar with Cage's music, but had already learned about his European predecessors. The group was especially interested in Shaeffer's *musique concrète*, which was composed from altered and rearranged natural sounds — often metallic and aqueous ones — that were made with objects of everyday life. The extant recording of an improvisational session by Group Ongaku in 1960 displays a wide range of extrainstrumental sounds — noises made with voice; a vacuum cleaner; a radio; and various kitchenware items such as metal bowls, an eggbeater, and dishes — that they called *objets sonore*, or sound objects, drawn from *musique concrète*.<sup>11</sup>

While members of Group Ongaku borrowed the term *objet sonore* from French electronic music, they also interpreted it as "sound as object." Shiomi's first set of compositions during her group activity reflected this interpretation. Titled *Mobile I, II, III*, these compositions were attempts to emphasize the three-dimensional quality of music. Shiomi intended her work to be perceived as "a sort of plastic art that goes beyond the time dimension." Clearly aware of American sculptor Alexander Calder's mobiles, which had been named by Marcel Duchamp, Shiomi imagined her music to be perceived in three dimensions, not only in the dimension of time. When *Mobile I, II, III* was performed as part of Group Ongaku's first concert at the Sōgetsu Art Center on September 15, 1961, they were comprised of various sounds made by performers playing both inside and outside the concert hall. For example, Shiomi had arranged for several musicology students to laugh and ring a gong behind the curtains and for Kosugi to play saxophone in the lobby area outside the hall. Shiomi called for the audience's "active imagination" to grasp each sound as an *objet* that had a complete musical substance.<sup>12</sup> The French term *objet* (literally translated as "object" in English) was often used by Shiomi and other Japanese avant-garde artists at the time; its usage stemmed from the Dada and Surrealist notions of incorporating readymade objects in their work in the early decades of the 1900s. Thus, Shiomi and other members of Group Ongaku were well-versed not only in music and literature, but also in visual art.<sup>13</sup>

Shiomi's involvement in Group Ongaku led her to connect with a com-

munity of emerging cutting-edge musicians and artists in Tokyo. In November of 1961 Shiomi, along with other members of Group Ongaku, participated in a concert of works of the avant-garde composer Toshi Ichihyanagi at Sōgetsu Art Center (see fig. 9, in chapter 1). Ichihyanagi, Yoko Ono's first husband, had studied with John Cage in New York for seven years. He approached Group Ongaku and some other composer/musician friends about a concert upon his return to Japan. Among several pieces in the program, *I·B·M—Happening and Music Concrète* was the most radical. Provided with an arbitrary set of IBM computer punch cards as scores, seven performers were allowed to interpret them in their own ways: Shiomi first played an electric-wave instrument similar to a theremin and subsequently blew soap bubbles;<sup>14</sup> composer Toshiro Mayuzumi created a huge web of paper tapes over the stage and the audience's seats; composer Toru Takemitsu played the piano; Tone broke a grinding bowl into pieces with a hammer; Kosugi used a saw and an electric drill against a wooden board; Ichihyanagi drew lines on a canvas; and pianist Yuji Takahashi had a nonsense conversation with a chair.<sup>15</sup> Because of the replacement of instruments with noninstrument objects, this performance shattered the traditional notion of music. Through participating in this concert, Shiomi situated herself in a historic moment in Japanese avant-garde music and art in which every preexisting concept was being challenged.

After this concert, Group Ongaku gradually dissolved due to divergent interests.<sup>16</sup> Although Shiomi stood out as the only woman in the group, she did not feel any gender discrimination from male colleagues.<sup>17</sup> The group had certainly provided stimuli for Shiomi to break away from the conventional notion of music, but she had outgrown it. She realized that her interest was more in investigating the essences of music rather than in exploring new sounds. During one of the many improvisational sessions of the group, Shiomi threw a bunch of keys up to the ceiling for a change of mood. Unexpectedly, the keys' rattling sound became an interesting music. While trying to create a sound of the same strength in equal intervals by controlling the timing and strength of throwing the keys, she suddenly realized that she was not creating sound for sound's sake anymore; she was now concentrating on the very action of throwing keys. She felt herself liberated from the realm of sound and released into the realm of action.

Shiomi compared this experience to "a kind of surprise you would get by entering the world in a different dimension." The experience symbolized that her music moved away from the time dimension to "a dimension similar to the real world where objects and space could also exist." This realization helped Shiomi affirm the artistic direction she already started to explore with *Mobile I, II, III*. She even foresaw a further direction for her art: "In the world where time and existence adhere to each other, it may be possible to create a new form of temporal/spatial art that is different from preexisting music, theater, and dance."<sup>18</sup> This prediction gave Shiomi the motivation to pursue a path that would cross many disciplines in the arts.

After finishing her bachelor's degree program and a subsequent year of graduate study at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, Shiomi went home to Okayama in March 1962. Later that month, she held a solo concert at the Okayama Cultural Center Hall. In it, she presented five new compositions, some of them in collaboration with other performers. She composed some pieces in the style of "graphic scores," which, initiated by American composers such as John Cage and Morton Feldman, employed abstract lines and forms instead of musical notes.<sup>19</sup> In other works, Shiomi used the format of *musique concrète*. Her last piece, *Action Music Kaiten (Revolve)* had its emphasis on actions as much as on sounds. It consisted of disparate actions such as making twenty-three steps, piling up fifteen matchboxes, and playing glissandi on the guitar. Performers did these actions in rounds, according to numerical figures announced at random.<sup>20</sup>

Music composed of daily actions was not practiced exclusively in Japan, but was also being developed simultaneously across the Pacific, in New York by the future Fluxus artists.<sup>21</sup> Partly inspired by modern dance; Cage's event of 1952 and his radical interpretation of music; and Allan Kaprow's and others' Happenings, begun in 1958, experimental composers including La Monte Young and Cage's students at the New School for Social Research started to perform their events in downtown New York around 1960. George Brecht and Robert Watts organized the YAM Festival, a series of events and publications in 1962 that also became a foundation for Fluxus. After making contacts with these experimental artists, Lithuanian graphic artist George Maciunas was planning in Wiesbaden, Germany, a series of experimental music concerts and publications that were to be labeled as Fluxus. In 1962, Shiomi still had no knowledge of them.

Without her knowledge, however, some of Shiomi's works were introduced to Maciunas even before Fluxus was born. Ichianagi and Ono, who had kept contact with Maciunas after they returned from New York to Tokyo, provided Maciunas with some information about experimental music in Japan. Having been acquainted with many Japanese avant-garde composers and artists, Ichianagi sent copies of some scores and tape recordings to New York.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Group Ongaku members Tone and Kosugi also started corresponding with Maciunas through Ichianagi as early as 1962.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Maciunas's earliest written plan for Fluxus, "Tentative Program for the Festival of Very Early Music," included works by Shiomi, other Group Ongaku members (Kosugi, Mizuno, and Tone), and other Japanese composers (Jōji Yuasa and Toru Takemitsu).<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the three works by Shiomi in Maciunas's plan have been lost and Shiomi has no record of them. Although the program was never realized, it became an important record of the unprecedented plans that Maciunas had to include many Japanese artists in Fluxus from the beginning.

Between 1962 and 1963, while in Okayama, Shiomi started to compose music pieces only in text format, without using musical notes. During this period she remembered herself becoming increasingly "conceptual and stoic,

questioning what is the essence of music.” She thought that essence was “the very recognition of time itself—the duration of time that is not necessarily realized as sound, but it can be just a physical sensation or an action.”<sup>25</sup> This realization led her to word scores, which she called “action poems.” Like Ono’s early instruction pieces, Shiomi’s action poems began with imperative sentences to instruct readers to do various actions. They were written in Japanese first and later translated into English. Shiomi’s representative works of this period included *Boundary Music* (1963), which read as follows:

*Boundary Music*

Make the faintest possible sounds of a boundary condition whether  
the sounds are given birth to as sounds or not.

At the performance, instruments, human bodies, electronic apparatuses or anything may be used.

146

Into  
Performance

Comprised of only words, this score described very subtle sounds that would have been impossible to instruct with conventional musical notes. This work challenged the line between audible sounds and inaudible ones, music and nonmusic, that had rarely been questioned before. Reaching the realm of conceptual music, Shiomi’s music departed far from the mainstream. In her definition, any “concentrated duration of activity” could be considered music when it involved “the occurrence of sounds and silence.”<sup>26</sup>

Interest in nearly inaudible sounds was also shared by Ono around the same time; she began writing “instruction” scores of simple actions or imaginary events around 1960, in order to break away from conventional music. For example, in her first concert in Japan in 1962, Ono performed a piano piece called *A Piano Piece to See the Skies* in which she made only breathing sounds while her hands hovered above the keyboard without touching it.<sup>27</sup> Many pieces published in Ono’s *Grapefruit* (1964) refer to such faint sounds as the lighting of a match.<sup>28</sup> While Shiomi became acquainted with Ono in 1963, she did not see Ono’s word scores until later. When Shiomi visited Ichyanagi and Ono’s apartment in Tokyo with her friend Shigeko Kubota sometime later in 1963, she saw several event cards written by some Fluxus artists, including George Brecht.<sup>29</sup> It struck Shiomi that someone was thinking about a thing similar to what she was calling an “action poem.” From then on, she began calling her pieces “events.”<sup>30</sup>

Along with these conceptual expressions, Shiomi was simultaneously exploring visual expressions. As a visualization of the duration of time, she created *Endless Box* (1963), consisting of thirty-four handmade paper boxes of different sizes that could be nested, one inside another, like Russian *matryoshka* dolls (see fig. 57). She called it a visual *diminuendo*, referring to the musical term for gradually bringing down the volume of a sound. For her, this work was also “charged with the sensual reality of removing one box cover to reveal another box, then another, and so on.” In this action of open-

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57. Mieko Shiomi, *Endless Box* (Fluxus version), c. 1964–1965. Photo by Brad Iverson, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

ing boxes, Shiomi found “the same concentrated duration and activity” as she had in the music that she had composed.<sup>31</sup> Visual expression matched aural expression in her mind. Again, like her blowing of soap bubbles in a musical piece, Shiomi translated a musical concept into a visual as well as physical expression.

*Endless Box* finally became a direct connection between Shiomi and Fluxus. Before Shiomi saw some Fluxus works at Ono’s apartment in the summer of 1963, she met Nam June Paik at the Sōgetsu Hall for the first time. Paik, who was visiting Japan at that time, became acquainted with Group Ongaku members through Ichiyanagi and Ono. Upon hearing about *Endless Box* and other works by Shiomi, Paik encouraged her to send them to Maciunas and told her that she was much like a Fluxus artist already. As Paik expected, Maciunas liked *Endless Box* so much that he requested her to make reproductions of it.<sup>32</sup> Some of Shiomi’s early editions of *Endless Box* were included in Fluxkits, the collections of individual Fluxus works and publications contained in briefcases.

Shiomi also started sending Maciunas scores of her pieces after translating them into English. By December 1963, Maciunas had already collected “complete works” by Shiomi and was planning to reproduce them in the form of small cards in a wooden box as part of his Fluxus editions.<sup>33</sup> Shiomi recalls Maciunas asking to publish her scores and split the profits.<sup>34</sup> Maciunas carried out his plan soon and produced Shiomi’s *Events and Games* (1964), which was comprised of approximately twenty-three score cards encased in a small plastic box.<sup>35</sup> Maciunas was making a similar box of scores for each Fluxus artist at that time. In addition, the first two issues of the Fluxus newspaper *V TRE*, published in January and February 1964, included

Shiomi's scores for *Mirror* and *Event for the Midday in the Sunlight* (both 1963), respectively.<sup>36</sup>

Shiomi's early event scores exemplify her interest in the transience of nature and human interaction with it. For example, *Mirror* instructs a performer to interact with the ocean:

Stand on the sandy beach with your back to the sea.  
Hold a mirror in front of your face and look into it.  
Step back to the sea and enter into the water.<sup>37</sup>

While looking at the reflection of the ocean in the mirror, the performer enters the ocean backward. Similar to the simplicity and meditative quality of this work, *Event for the Midday in the Sunlight* involves a performer closing and opening her eyes seven times in seven minutes after noon. The repetition of the eye movement may be compared to playing an instrument; like the quickening of music, the duration of keeping the eyes shut becomes shorter as the time goes by. Under the strong sunlight of midday, the performer may experience dizziness upon opening his eyes and may find her vision changing. Upon opening the eyes for the last time, the performer is instructed to look at her hands. By focusing on the eye movement and its effect, this work makes one conscious that the human body is a living organism that functions unconsciously.

Correspondence with Maciunas opened up a larger world of avant-garde art activities for Shiomi. This was the historic moment when the global postal system and the transportation system improved dramatically, and an unprecedented amount of international and interpersonal exchange started to take place. Even though Shiomi was staying in Okayama, a local town with few cultural activities, she was able to have connections to the avant-garde worlds in Tokyo and New York. While supporting herself with the income from piano tutoring, she also visited Tokyo frequently to become updated with avant-garde movements there. In 1963, Tokyo was still filled with the atmosphere of political rebellions against the Japanese government, which had renewed the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, and this rebellious atmosphere prevailed in the artistic sphere as well. At the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition of that year, former members of Group Ongaku, Kosugi and Tone, both presented kinetic objects (such as a tape recorder) and performances using their bodies as artworks. Kosugi and Tone were befriended by the radical artists of Hi Red Center, who were also exploring performance as a way to involve the public audience and presented their works both within and outside the same exhibition. Although Shiomi did not go to see the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition or other performances, she kept up with what was going on in Tokyo through her friends.

In 1963, Shiomi presented her work in Tokyo as well, though only on one occasion. In December, Shiomi took part in *Sweet 16*, a performance festival

held at Sōgetsu Art Center in Tokyo. It featured forty Japanese performers — dancers, artists, and musicians — including Shiomi’s friends. She performed her *Event for Mr. Jean Jacque Lebel*, in which she appeared onstage with a placard saying “Event for Mr. J. J. Lebel: Be absent,” and exited.<sup>38</sup> With this performance, Shiomi paid homage to Lebel, a French artist who was known for politically motivated Happenings in Paris, Milan, Venice, and New York in the early 1960s. Having read of his notoriety for provocative Happenings, Shiomi subverted Lebel by ordering him to be “absent.” Since Lebel was not in the audience, however, the order to be absent was directed at the entire audience. In fact, Shiomi conceived this piece as a kind of music, in which “the absence would instantly fill the hall like a sound.”<sup>39</sup> If audience members faithfully followed Shiomi’s instruction, they would have left the hall or hidden from their seats. Exiting right after showing the sign, however, she could not observe the audience’s responses. Confused reactions were expected among the audience, especially since many Japanese audience members would not have understood the English announcement.

Shiomi’s *Event for Mr. Jean Jacque Lebel* can be compared to the ballet *Le Relâche*, created by Francis Picabia and Eric Satie in the early 1920s in which the composers put signs reading *Le Relâche* (respite) all over the doors of the theater after selling tickets for the play under the same title.<sup>40</sup> A closer predecessor is Brecht’s event score *Exit* (1961), which simply consisted of the word *exit* with a bullet. Shiomi had seen Brecht’s scores earlier at Ono and Ichiyonagi’s apartment, but interpreted *exit* merely as a noun, not a verb. Hence, she did not associate her *Event for Mr. Jean Jacque Lebel* with Brecht’s event at all. Despite apparent similarities, Shiomi’s event was contrastingly different from Brecht’s, especially in its intention to cause the situation of being absent rather than the action of exiting the concert hall. Her motivation behind the piece was to create in time and space a situation equivalent to a pause or silence in music. In its contemplative nature, her work resembled a Zen meditation. This performance marked Shiomi’s first attempt in realizing an event in front of an audience. Shiomi’s new interest in what she called “action music” or performance art would be developed further in New York.

### Life in Flux

In 1964, Maciunas urged Shiomi to come to New York to join Fluxus, especially in time for the Fluxus Symphony Orchestra concert to be held at Carnegie Recital Hall on June 27. Shiomi was a little afraid of going to New York. She was not sure if Maciunas was a trustworthy person, but was reassured by the words of music critic Kuniharu Akiyama, who was staying in New York that year and was involved in Fluxus, and Ay-O, another Japanese artist who had joined Fluxus slightly earlier. Due to a lack of funding, however, Shiomi’s first plan to fly to New York in the spring was not realized. Even



without her presence in New York, Fluxus artists performed her pieces at the Fluxus Symphony Orchestra Concert in June. To realize Shiomi's *Falling Event* (1963), for example, they folded concert programs into paper airplanes and threw them at the audience from a balcony.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, Maciunas bought ten sets of *Endless Box* from Shiomi for two hundred dollars, which covered a large part of her airfare. Shiomi was surprised that he bought her boxes for twenty dollars each, because it was "almost equivalent to one year's tuition at a Japanese national university at that time."<sup>42</sup> By this time, her friend had Kubota also contacted Maciunas and planned to go to New York.

On July 2, 1964, Shiomi and Kubota left for New York together. Upon their arrival they were welcomed by the New York Fluxus community. A welcome party with Japanese rice balls was held for them by Ay-O and his wife Ikuko Iijima, Nam June Paik, and Takako Saito. As if he were a host for foreign students, Maciunas took care of everything for Shiomi and Kubota, including putting them up in the YWCA for two nights, finding them an apartment, and furnishing it. Shiomi remembers the day of the move vividly: "[H]e found a new air-conditioned apartment on Sullivan Street for us, located only a few minutes from his loft on Canal Street. He offered us some of his furniture, a bed with a big black mat, blankets, a desk, a lamp with a flexible arm, goods for the kitchen, etc. We carried them up the street with the help of Paik, Ay-O and Takako. "This is a "carrying event," ha, ha, ha . . .," said George, laughing. Though carrying them was tough work, I enjoyed the way we looked at this action as performance."<sup>43</sup>

This "carrying event" was perhaps the first Fluxus performance that the two Japanese artists experienced. Already on their third day in New York, Shiomi and Kubota were involved in a typical Fluxus performance that directly stemmed from the activities of everyday life.

There were many communal activities shared by Fluxus artists. Shiomi remembers the "Fluxus dinner communes," in which members took turns cooking large quantities of food for everybody. Although the men went shopping and women cooked for the first few days, women had to take over all the tasks soon. The originally practical idea turned out to be inconvenient, and unfair to the women artists. After the dinners, they often went to Maciunas's loft to make Fluxus products. Shiomi recalls it being "like a small publishing office or a family factory."<sup>44</sup> They performed simple tasks, such as cutting paper or pasting printed labels on boxes. These communal activities did not last long because Shiomi and Kubota soon found part-time jobs at night. Shiomi earned just enough as a typist of music scores to get by. After a few months, she moved from Manhattan to Queens, where the mother of another Fluxus artist, Joe Jones, had a house.

Maciunas welcomed newcomers as new forces in the group. In his letter to Ben Vautier, a French member of Fluxus, Maciunas noted of the two, "Chieko Shiomi and Shigeko Kubota arrived here in New York, very nice girls. Brought many news from Japan activities. New compositions. I will

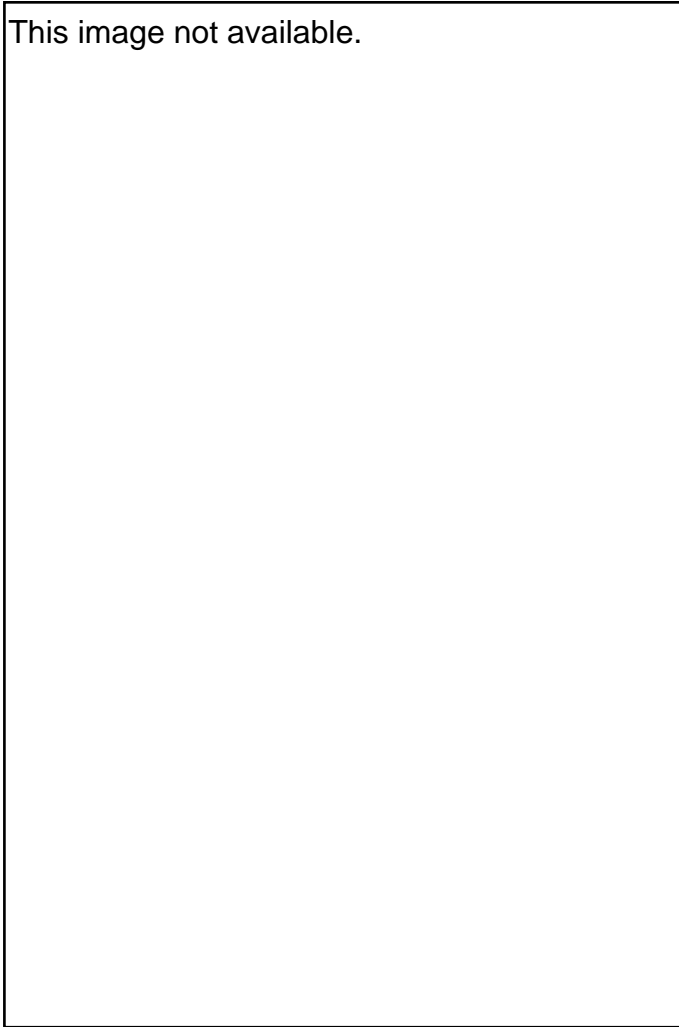


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58. Mieko Shiomi, *Portrait Piece*, included in Fluxus editions of *Events and Games*, ca. 1964. Courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

print them in next newspaper.”<sup>45</sup> By the time of Shiomi’s arrival, Maciunas had already produced the first set of Shiomi’s *Events and Games*, working from texts she’d sent from Japan. It was comprised of cards printed on both sides in two languages on black and white backgrounds — the black side with white Japanese text, and the white side with black English text (see fig. 58). While the English texts were typed, the Japanese texts were written in calligraphic fashion by Saito and photocopied for the editions.<sup>46</sup> Maciunas designed a sophisticated label with Shiomi’s full name. Shiomi had also sent a photographic self-portrait taken by a professional cameraman.<sup>47</sup> In the dark background, only Shiomi’s face appears in profile. Maciunas made reproductions of it and had Akiyama, Ay-O, and Saito crumple them according to Shiomi’s *Portrait Piece*, in which performers were instructed to crumple and smooth portraits of theirs or of those closest to them. By including her own portrait, Shiomi personalized the otherwise anonymous-looking product. *Events and Games* helped disseminate Shiomi’s event pieces among her fellow Fluxus artists and their associates.

Shiomi’s first performance in New York was held as part of the Perpetual Fluxfest at Washington Square Gallery on October 30, 1964. Shiomi performed six pieces, all of which involved the audience as participants. In *Double Windows*, Shiomi laid several playing cards with their front sides down on a little table in front of a window and turned them over one by one to conceptually open another window. Viewers were encouraged to do the same. For *Direction Event*, participants pulled threads attached to Shiomi’s fingers. Each thread had a small card that said “toward . . .” and the direction was decided by each participant. Compasses and maps were provided



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59. Mieko Shiomi performing *Direction Event*, 1964. Photo by Peter Moore, © Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, New York.

as aids (see fig. 59). *Air Event* instructed performers to inflate a balloon in one deep breath (see fig. 60).<sup>48</sup> Participants signed the balloons afterward and sold them in an auction. Another event, *Passing Music*, was comprised of different sounds moving toward different directions in a space. A number of participants moved through the space holding items that made sounds. Shiomi's interest in highlighting the three-dimensional quality of sounds stemmed from her earlier works in Japan, such as *Mobile I, II, III*.

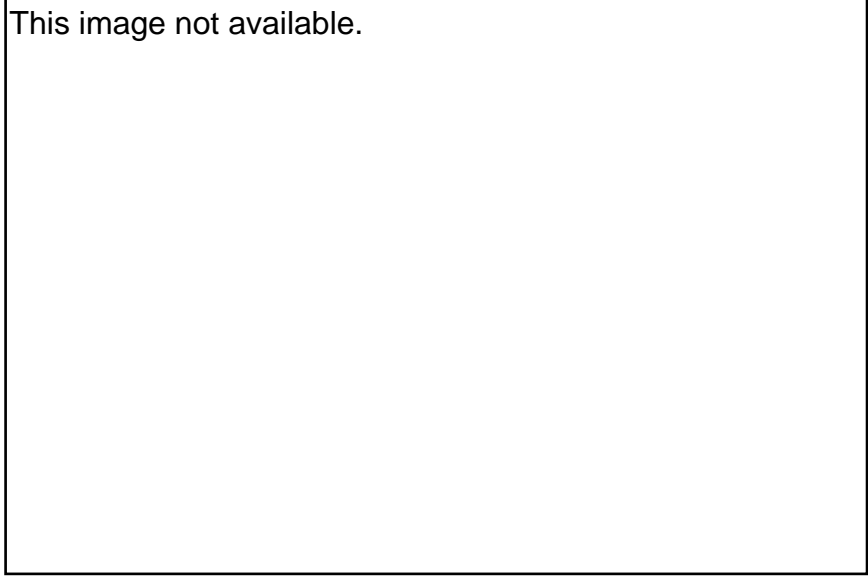
The two other pieces performed at Washington Square Gallery were *Water Music* and *Disappearing Music for Face*. The intention of *Water Music*, according to its score, was to "give the water still form," and to "let the water lose its still form." The first part was already completed by Shiomi, who put water in glass bottles of different shapes (see fig. 61).<sup>49</sup> Visitors were supposed



60. Mieko Shiomi, instruction and a balloon for *Air Event*, 1964. This balloon previously contained the breath of Alison Knowles. Courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.



61. Mieko Shiomi, various bottles for *Water Music*, 1964 and later. Courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.



This image not available.

62. Mieko Shiomi performing *Disappearing Music for Face*, 1964. Photo by Peter Moore, © Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, New York.

to perform the second part of the instruction with the water in the bottles. One person simply drank the water, another spilled it onto the floor. In *Disappearing Music for Face*, performers started smiling and gradually shifted their facial expressions to neutral ones upon receiving a signal from Shiomi (see fig. 62).<sup>50</sup> Shiomi's intention was to visualize a diminuendo of music by human action. In fact, in trying to control their facial expressions, the performers fell silent during the piece, so the expression became both visual and aural. Also, some performers expressed subtle gradations between smile and nonsmile with the highly controlled facial movement.<sup>51</sup>

Shiomi produced another event with audience participation on November 30 of that year. She presented *Music for Two Performers* in a series of performances called *Monday Night Letter* that was organized by George Brecht and Robert Watts at Café au Go Go in the West Village.<sup>52</sup> The piece involved the first meeting of two strangers who share the same year, month, day, or time of birth, and who then are asked to play different exchange games. The pair had to collaborate in order to perform one or more tasks instructed in the score. The tasks included staring at each other's eyes and transporting a cup of water between two cups. In this event, one performer functioned like a mirror, repeating the other performer's actions. The dialogical transactions between self and the other, or self and self-reflection, connects this work to Shiomi's earlier work *Mirror*. Such a contemplative mood of exploring self-identity permeated Shiomi's early works.

Shiomi's year-long sojourn in New York passed quickly. In retrospect, she described it as a period in which she "looked at various things in her daily life

from different viewpoints and transformed them into nondaily actions (performance), and made a feedback of these actions into my daily life again.”<sup>53</sup> Her fellow artists sometimes provided stimulation to her. She was impressed by the works of her fellow artists—in particular, George Brecht’s objects in boxes, Robert Filliou’s poetry, Joe Jones’s mechanical instruments, and La Monte Young’s *Dream Music*.<sup>54</sup> Shiomi found in these works an aesthetic similar to what she had been searching for in her own artistic experiments.

While she enjoyed performing with Fluxus artists, she became concerned with one problem. She explained it as “the inconvenience of communication,” in having to be “physically restrained to one place at a time.” She began to question holding events only at special places like concert halls. Realizing her limitation within a small artists’ community in New York, she felt that “art should be alive everywhere all the time and at any time anybody wanted it.”<sup>55</sup> This idea led Shiomi to produce mail instruction art that could allow people to perform an event anywhere and in any way they wanted.

Shiomi’s idea of global art was realized in *Spatial Poem*, a series of nine mail-art events that took place between 1965 and 1975. A total of approximately 230 people from over twenty-six countries participated in these events. The participants were comprised of Fluxus artists’ friends and her personal friends. For each event, Shiomi sent invitations to over 100 people, asking them to perform the same simple event in their own way and send back documentation of their performances. The discovery of mail as an art medium was a revelation to her, as it enabled her to organize events simultaneously throughout the world.

The term *mail art* can be misleading in describing Shiomi’s art because the term is generally used to refer to any kind of art that utilizes the postal system. American artist Ray Johnson started mailing his collages to people he knew or heard of in the 1950s; he simply used the postal system to share his artwork with people. By the early 1970s, mail art was already ubiquitous and recognized as an art form. Most of artists, however, used it in one way—to send artwork to their audiences.<sup>56</sup> Shiomi’s use of mail was fundamentally different; she used the postal system to make simultaneous events possible all over the world. Furthermore, her communication was not one-way, but reciprocal. She asked the receiver of her letter to participate in an event and send the documentation back to her. Then, she sent back the collective results to the participants. Regardless of the conceptual depth and interactivity of Shiomi’s *Spatial Poem* series, her accomplishment has hardly been recognized in the literature on mail art. This is perhaps partly because Shiomi did not promote her art as mail art and also because the performative dimension in Shiomi’s art lay outside the expected norms of the medium.<sup>57</sup>

The first in the series, *Spatial Poem No. 1*, featured *Word Event*, which asked participants to write a word on cards that were enclosed in the mailing and place them somewhere they chose during a designated time period



63. Mieko Shiomi, instruction for *Spatial Poem No. 1 (Word Event)*, 1965. Courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

(see fig. 63). The idea was to make collages on the earth or to write poems on the earth with people all over the world. It was a realization of her childhood desire to capture nature and her “admiration for the earth.”<sup>58</sup> The word and its place were reported back to Shiomi, sometimes with pictures or other forms of documentation. Out of over one hundred people, about eighty answers were collected.

Shiomi thought of making a world map with little flags, each of which contained documentation from each participant. Although Maciunas suggested making a newspaper for this event, Shiomi argued that she did not want to use two different formats to represent one event and insisted on creating a three-dimensional object, which she called an “object poem.” After this argument, Maciunas became furious enough to almost ban Shiomi from Fluxus. Shiomi ultimately produced her map boards on her own. She printed answers from people on small flags, and located each flag on the corresponding site on the map (see fig. 64). Later, Maciunas made some editions with a cork board instead of foam core. The visualization on the map enabled viewers to grasp the geographical spread of events at a glance.

The entries for *Spatial Poem No. 1* reflected the creative imaginations of participants who were often artists themselves. Takako Saito wrote a word, “MELT,” on a card, which was “supposed to be lying down under snow in woods at Ridgewood in New Jersey,” but was reported as “missing.” Although this report may have been based on reality, it can also be interpreted as a playful metaphor that the word card may have “melted” like snow and disappeared. Also in the woods in New Jersey, Robert Whitman placed a card which read “CHIEKO SHIOMI” along with directions to get there. His contri-

bution became a game of finding the card. Some participants in this event placed more cryptic words in obscure places. Geoffrey Hendricks, for example, left a card saying “RITUAL MEANING” at the Prado Museum in Madrid. The mysterious relationship between the word and the location invited speculation.

Other reports alluded to traveling. Maciunas put a card in a bottle and threw it into the Hudson River “to reach somewhere in [the] Atlantic Ocean.” Bob Watts’s card, which said “HUNGARIAN MYSTERY PRINCESS,” was “traveling from New Jersey to London to Nukualofa, Tonga.”<sup>59</sup> While most of reports seemed legitimate, some were hard to document and thus less plausible. The level of reality, however, did not matter as much as that of creativity. Shiomi later commented on the returned reports, writing, “The reports returned by various people are very diverse and full of individuality—some poetic, some realistic or cynical, some artificial, some spontaneous, etc. When they are all collected together, they present a fantastic panorama of human attitudes. I would like to think the collective anonymous poem can be preserved as a monument for the people of the 30th century—if we survive that long.”<sup>60</sup> Although the events that Shiomi chose seemed esoteric in nature, without any relation to people’s everyday lives, the results reflected the essences of lives experienced at geographically diverse locations. As Shiomi claimed, they served as a sort of historic monument or poems written on the earth. She also considered it a part of this event to imagine the whereabouts of these cards years later, adding, “Most of them will have been



64. Mieko Shiomi, *Spatial Poem No. 1 (Word Event)*, 1965. Photo by Brad Iverson, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

gone after such a long time, but there may be one in a glass bottle floating in the ocean somewhere.”<sup>61</sup> Through imagination, Shiomi’s events can acquire a limitless afterlife, expanded to the present and future.

### Back in Japan: Tokyo Fluxus

Mail art allowed Shiomi the freedom to live anywhere in the world; she did not have to remain in New York. In July 1965, she returned to Japan, partly because her tourist visa could not be extended anymore. Before her departure, Shiomi and Maciunas reconciled their argument about the realization of *Spatial Poem No.1*, and they subsequently continued to collaborate via correspondence.<sup>62</sup> In Japan, Shiomi resumed the remaining eight events of *Spatial Poem*, proving that people did not need to gather at the same place to do a simultaneous event. Similarly, Shiomi’s event or music scores could be performed without her presence. For example, at a 1965 Fluxus concert at Carnegie Recital Hall, Shiomi’s *Falling Event* and *Disappearing Music for Face* were performed by other Fluxus members. Shiomi brought her New York art experiences back to Japan, connecting the two art worlds on opposite sides of the world.

Between 1965 and 1970, Shiomi lived in Tokyo and resumed teaching piano for living. She reconnected with the avant-garde artist friends that she was involved with before going to New York. Many of them had also been to New York or had been involved in Fluxus via the mail. Genpei Akasegawa of Hi Red Center, for example, had never been to New York, but his correspondence with Maciunas through Kubota and Paik led to the inclusion of Akasegawa’s works among Fluxus-produced objects. Tokyo Fluxus was most active in the mid-1960s because several Japanese artists either permanently or temporarily returned from New York to Japan. Music critic Kuniharu Akiyama was involved in Fluxus just before Shiomi came to New York, and he returned to Tokyo shortly thereafter. One of early members of Fluxus, Ay-O, was back in Japan for a some months in 1966. With the Tokyo branch of Fluxus flourishing, Shiomi prominently situated herself within this avant-garde art scene. She was no longer regarded as just a member of a group, but respected as one of the few independent artists who had actually experienced the New York art scene.

During the first week of September in 1965, *Flux Week*, an exhibition and a series of events, was presented at Gallery Crystal, a new gallery in Tokyo’s Ginza district. Organized by Akiyama, Ichiyonagi, and Yamaguchi, the exhibition featured Fluxus publications and objects, accompanied by concerts and events in the evenings. Besides Akiyama and Ichiyonagi, performers included Shiomi, violinist Kenji Kobayashi, composer Toru Takemitsu, and former Group Ongaku member Yasunao Tone. Perhaps to emphasize Shiomi’s New York experience, the program singled out Shiomi’s name in





65. Mieko Shiomi performing *Water Music* at Gallery Crystal, Tokyo, 1965. Photo by Teruo Nishiyama.

English while other participants' names were printed in Japanese and gathered under the section of concerts and events.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the evening of September 8 was dedicated to Shiomi's performance of *Water Music*, *Air Event*, and *A Piece for Two Performers*.

This performance of *Water Music* was a different realization of the event previously presented in New York (see fig. 65). Shiomi prepared "water in a children's garden pool covered with white cloth," picked up the water with various tools such as a syringe and tissue paper, and then released it.<sup>64</sup> These actions corresponded with the score that read "let the water lose its still form." As part of the same event, Shiomi played a record of Carl Maria von Weber's *An Invitation to Waltz* that was covered with dried glue. Some of the glue was softened when the water was dropped from a syringe, revealing the record surface. The record player played music in these areas, but skipped the dry glue part. Shiomi continued adding water to the record's surface until the glue melted away and the entire musical piece could be heard.<sup>65</sup> Shiomi's use of various tools gave the audience the impression that the performance space was turned into a kind of scientific laboratory. Shiomi's friend Tone realized another portion of *Water Music* in a visual and poetic way; he took matches and cigarette lighters from the audience and placed a lit candle in the middle of the pool so that smokers had to light their cigarettes from the candle. Their movements and breathing made slight waves on the water's surface.<sup>66</sup>

In a review of this evening performance, a critic called Shiomi's performance "the latest form of Happenings." As in the case of Ono's concert in

1962, the Japanese press preferred the sensational tone of “Happenings” to “events.” The critic also described things on display, such as a “mechanical guitar” that made faint sounds via electricity, and a “wind radio” that created windlike sound waves. Shiomi owned both of these instruments; the former was made by Fluxus artist Joe Jones and the latter was a theremin. Shiomi’s use of these instruments suggested her continued interest in technology. At the end of the review, the critic interpreted Shiomi’s actions in *Water Music* as “attempts to discover completely anti-daily expressions through ordinary daily materials” and praised her “earnestness” to “seek the purest.” He also added that the audience of about twenty people watched her breathlessly.<sup>67</sup> Although the critic called Shiomi’s actions “antidaily expressions,” they were not intended to be *against* daily life, but rather were extracted *from* daily life and presented in the event format so that the spectators could view water from a different perspective. Staring at Shiomi’s performance in silence, the audience was mesmerized by the sequence of unusual yet contemplative actions.

Shiomi was involved in another so-called happening concert titled *Kūkan kara kankyō e* (From Space to Environment), which was held at Sogetsu Hall on November 14, 1966. The concert was organized by the Kankyō no kai (Group of Environment), a temporarily formed association that consisted of more than thirty Japanese artists, designers, architects, photographers, musicians, and critics who aimed at creating a chaotic environment through works of different media. They also held a group exhibition simultaneously at the Matsuya department store that included interactive multimedia works by thirty-eight artists.<sup>68</sup> Besides Shiomi’s *Compound View No. 1*, the concert section consisted of Ay-O’s *Rainbow Event*, Ichiyonagi’s *Environmental Music*, Takemitsu’s *Blue Aurora for Ichiyonagi Toshi* and *Event of Seven Hills*, and Yamaguchi’s *Signal*, among others. While the performers were mostly members of the Kankyō no kai, they also included Jasper Johns, who was visiting Japan on a Rockefeller scholarship.<sup>69</sup>

Performed with Akiyama, Ay-O, and Yamaguchi, Shiomi’s *Compound View No. 1* was comprised of three sections (see fig. 66). In the first section, one of the performers, Shiomi, walked up to a water tank on a table and put some crystals of copper sulfate into the water. After the copper sulfate caused an immediate chemical reaction and turned the water a vivid blue, she took the temperature of the water and announced it to the audience through a microphone. Next, while a stuffed pheasant swung from the ceiling in the dark, the four performers alternated sitting down and standing up, with flashlights directed at the vessel. In the last part, they brought chairs to the table, wrote words (specified by Shiomi) on cigarettes, and smoked them after announcing the word. The combination of disparate elements and actions created a dreamlike, incongruent world in which things hardly made any sense. Deeply impressed by this otherworldly effect of her work, the Surrealist poet and critic Takiguchi commented, “I don’t know how to describe this out-of-the-ordinary feeling, but it is like a strange *shiteki sungeki* (directly translated



66. Mieko Shiomi, Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, Ay-O, and Kuniharu Akiyama performing Shiomi's *Compound View No. 1* at *Kūkan kara Kankyo e* Happening concert held at Sōgetsu Art Center, Tokyo, 1966. Photo by Yoshiyuki Sakai, courtesy of the Sōgetsu-kai Foundation.

as “poetic short theater”)<sup>70</sup> Aware of the French Surrealists’ experiments with theater, Takiguchi compared Shiomi’s work to theirs, but he did not label her work as Surrealist.

While *Compound View No. 1* reveals some relation to Surrealism, Shiomi’s interest in juxtaposing disparate elements actually stemmed from a childhood game. At primary and junior high school, she used to play a game in which players picked words at random and put them together to create a nonsensical sentence. The game is similar to *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse), a drawing game involving free visual associations that the French Surrealists played to explore the world of the unconscious. Although Shiomi’s aim in *Compound View No. 1* was not particularly to explore the unconscious, the nonrelational elements and actions in her piece created an unexpectedly out-of-the-ordinary world similar to those in Surrealist paintings. The method of unexpected juxtapositions relates to John Cage’s chance operation as well, but Shiomi’s intention of using such a method was not to emphasize the neutral position of the creator as much as to stimulate imagination of viewers by meetings of disparate elements. Later, she would start employing a similar method in the creation of poetry.

On December 18, Shiomi also participated in Ay-O’s *Happening for Sight-seeing Bus Trip* in Tokyo. Besides Shiomi and Ay-O, the performers included artists Ushio Shinohara, and Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, along with critics Shūzō Takiguchi and Yoshiaki Tōno. Each of them invited some friends, and the group reached as many as thirty people, many of whom were young women.

A part of this event involved riding a regular sightseeing bus, called the *hato* (dove) bus, which toured Tokyo for several hours. Inside the bus, performers as well as audience participants read words that they randomly picked from the passing signs, calling the result “Street Poems.”

Once the bus arrived at the Harumi pier, the performers started presenting events in a sequence. These events included Shiomi’s *Water Puddle Event*, Dick Higgins’s *Danger Music*, Allan Kaprow’s *Happening*, and Alison Knowles’s *String Piece*, among others.<sup>71</sup> Shiomi’s *Water Puddle Event* asked participants to stand around a water puddle and “repeat alternate actions of quating and standing up at arbitrary intervals.”<sup>72</sup> The puddle reflected the people’s appearances like a mirror, and participants could simultaneously see their own movements as audience. The self-reflective quality that was found in Shiomi’s earlier work such as *Mirror* had been carried on here. The entire event marked the climax of Tokyo Fluxus activities, which introduced the ideas of Fluxus to a Japanese audience. As one of the few artists who had direct involvement with New York Fluxus, Shiomi played a central role in this dissemination.

### Intermedia Performance Art and Beyond

After these activities within Tokyo Fluxus, Shiomi departed the rubric of Fluxus and started to explore her broader interest in merging technology and art in what was often termed as “intermedia art.” In the late 1960s, Japanese artists began dynamic onstage collaborations with diverse media. Like *Evenings in Art and Technology (EAT)* led by Robert Rauschenberg in the United States, groups of Japanese artists sought to incorporate technological equipment in their performances. They borrowed the term *intermedia*, which Fluxus artist Dick Higgins had coined in the mid-1960s.<sup>73</sup> The term originally referred to the ambiguous distinctions among such different media as text-based scores, painting, sculpture, environment, and performance, but it soon encompassed all of the experimental arts that utilized technological media. Intermedia art, as well as the visual artworks and performances associated with it, came in vogue in Japan by the end of the 1960s, partially because of Japan’s rapid industrialization throughout the 1960s and the artistic exchanges established between Japan and the West.

Shiomi’s earlier interests in technological instruments such as the theremin and her consequent experiments of incorporating such technological media in performance were situated at the forefront of the development of Japanese intermedia art. After her stay in New York, she wanted to extend her events, composed of only single actions culled from everyday life, into more complex performances with multiple actions and media. According to Shiomi, in intermedia, “all the elements (musical instruments, lights, images, performers, electronic apparatus and various objects) should be treated as media or mechanisms to present the particular structure of the





67. Mieko Shiomi performing *Amplified Dream No. 1* at the Intermedia Arts Festival, Tokyo, 1969. Photo courtesy of Mieko Shiomi.

Takehisa Kosugi and Shūkou Mizuno of Group Ongaku, composers Yoriaki Matsudaira and Jōji Yuasa, and Kuniharu Akiyama as one of the piano players.<sup>77</sup> As Shiomi described the procedure,

The performers wore thick gloves to prevent damage to their hands, and each of them varied his performance according to the intensity of light coming from strong blue and white spotlights behind him. The piano sounds were picked up individually by contact microphones attached to the inside of the pianos and controlled by ring modulators operated in conjunction with graphs created according to the same morse code. These circuits were intermittently cut off by electronic relays and lights operating on the windmill. About halfway through the piece a 5-channel taped piece of music, also controlled by morse code graphs, was introduced. Thus, the piano, electronic and taped sounds were all controlled by the collective forces of wind, light and morse code via electronic devices and live operators.<sup>78</sup>

The taped piece of music was created by making random indentations in a plastic phonographic record with a soldering iron; the procedure was the opposite of what Shiomi had done in the realization of *Water Music* at Gallery Crystal. Beside the taped music and the score, the entire piece proceeded in a spontaneous manner. The performers' individual movements as well as the windmill's movement all affected the outcome of the sounds. Humans, electronic devices, light, and wind were all interrelated. The piece was inspired by events in a dream Shiomi had had in which hardly related things



in reality became interrelated, sometimes even by overlapping and transforming one another. Such a complex experience of a dream was reinterpreted by Shiomi and successfully realized as an intermedia performance.<sup>79</sup>

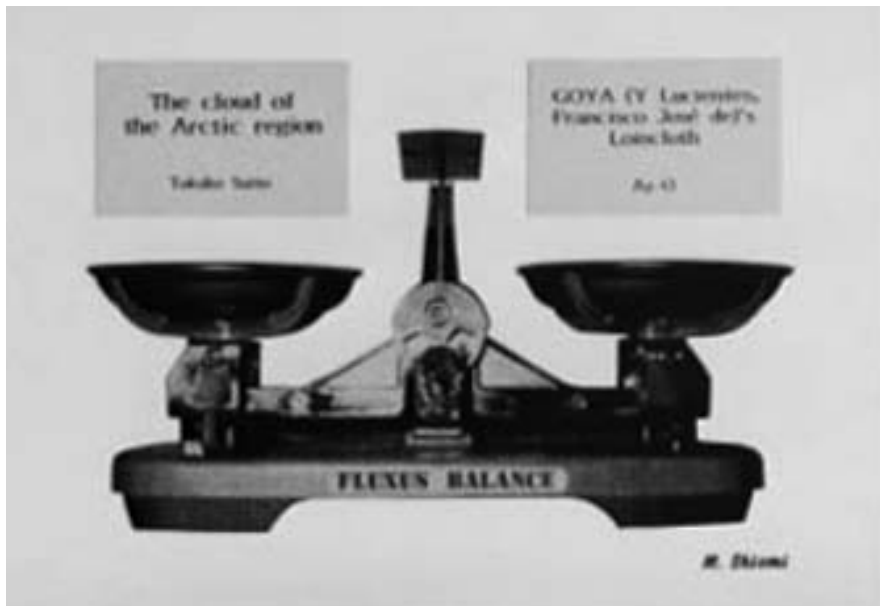
While Shiomi was producing intermedia works in Japan, she also continued her *Spatial Poem*, the mail-art project begun in New York in 1965. With the exception of the first event, which had been organized in New York, Shiomi sent the invitation cards for the remaining events from Japan. One of them, *Spatial Poem No. 3 (Falling Event)*, took place all over the world between June 24 and August 31, 1966. Her call for participation in the event stated, “The phenomenon of a fall is actually a segment of a movement toward the center of the earth. This very moment countless objects are falling. Let’s take part in this centripetal event.” While movements in the previous *Spatial Poem* events were horizontal to the earth’s surface as in *Direction Event*, in which participants moved from one place to another, the falls in *Falling Event* were vertical — against the earth. By drawing attention to such an ordinary yet gravitational movement, this event recalled the legend of Isaac Newton’s discovery of gravity by watching an apple fall. Through such an association, the participants were led to realize their physical existence on the earth.

For this event, over 120 reports came back to her — the most responses she ever received. Five years later, Maciunas turned the results of this event into a daily calendar by printing a different report on each page.<sup>80</sup> Entries included: “Allen Ginsberg opened the invitation letter of *Spatial Poem No. 3* at his friend’s cabin in the woods by the ocean where the pacific tides come in like millions of poodles, hesitated a second, looking around the table in kerosene lamp light, and shook a small cloud of white salt on the floor. San Francisco 11:45 pm July 5.” “When Mieko Shiomi opened the mail from David Mirton in Los Angeles, a U.S. penny fell out of the envelope. On the letter there was written: ‘Did it fall? Please write me and tell me if it was successful. If not I will try again.’ Okayama 11:20 am Oct. 1.”<sup>81</sup> These reports documented witty dialogue between Shiomi and avant-garde luminaries in North America, Europe, and Japan.

The mail system expanded the arena for Shiomi’s performance from local to global. According to Kristine Stiles, Shiomi’s *Spatial Poem* exemplifies Fluxus performance, which is “a sort of metaphysics of the dynamics of social exchange and human action that extends from the infra to the supra — from the personal to the political, from the regional to the international.”<sup>82</sup> These dynamics of social exchange and human action on a global scale were central to *Spatial Poem*. Mail art opened up unlimited possibilities for Shiomi, who had become a housewife and a mother since 1970. Although she never felt constricted by her gender before marriage, “the problems of being a woman” confronted Shiomi after 1970. In 1973, she described her personal conflicts: “Like most married women, the trifling jobs of being housewife and mother began to restrain my activities. My husband is sympathetic to my work, but frequent meetings, rehearsals, concerts and discussions through-

out the night would cause great problems in running a home. And so, for now, my work is limited to the kind I can do at home, and I submit to the inconvenience of the situation because it is only a brief period in my life; in the near future the children will leave me more free time.”<sup>83</sup> During this period when housework took over most of her creative time, the global dimension of *Spatial Poem* enabled Shiomi to transcend the physical and temporal constrictions on her life. While raising two young children in the early 1970s she compiled the text and images from nine events for a self-created publication in 1976.

After 1990, Shiomi was able to return to a more active artist’s career, as her children were now more independent. Since the early 1990s, Shiomi has presented her performances internationally as well as in Japan. As retrospective exhibitions on Fluxus became more prevalent during the 1990s, she became interested in reinterpreting her works from the 1960s. She considered it natural to transform her earlier works and Fluxus scores according to the needs of the present era. For example, at the *Fluxus Media Opera* she organized in Kobe in 1994, she introduced cutting-edge technology to perform Fluxus pieces. This event also involved collaborations among Fluxus artists and younger Japanese artists. She asked her Fluxus colleagues in Europe, the United States, and Japan to submit scores, tapes, and videotapes of their works and, if possible, to participate in events via telephone. Conceptually similar to *Spatial Poem*, it was dependent on other artists’ collaborations, but the artists did not need to be in one place. In addition to new works created by Fluxus artists especially for this occasion, Shiomi had Japanese computer



68. Mieko Shiomi, *Fluxus Balance*, 1993. Photo courtesy of Mieko Shiomi.



engineers and video artists select and interpret the text scores of major Fluxus performance pieces. Approximately thirty Japanese participants performed more than forty works. By presenting earlier Fluxus events in the technological environment of the 1990s, Shiomi realized the immense possibilities for reinterpreting older works and creating different effects.<sup>84</sup>

Shiomi's recent collaborations with other Fluxus artists includes *Fluxus Balance* (1991–1993; see fig. 68). Developing the concept of visual poetry from *Spatial Poem*, Shiomi conceived a conceptual balancing game that would weigh different ideas contributed by sixty-eight participants. The invitation to this project read, "Write down in one of the squares on the balance what you want to balance with something which another person wants to balance. It can be either an object/s or a concept, indicating or not indicating its weight." After collecting contributions from participants over the world, Shiomi turned the result into a conceptual game by printing them on thick paper of business-card-size and creating a game board with an image of a balance. On the board, a player could choose two cards and display them on it while conceptually balancing the weight of the content of the chosen cards. For example, in 1995, when Shiomi tried to make combinations out of sixty-eight cards, she paired Saito's idea of "the cloud of the Arctic region" and Ay-O's idea of "Goya's loincloth." When such a pair did not seem to balance by itself, Shiomi would attach some weights made of small washers to one side of the balance. The set of board, cards, and washers was produced in an edition of 750, a part of which was sent to the participants of the project. Incorporating imaginative ideas by other Fluxus members, *Fluxus Balance* attempts to expand our normative perceptions of objects and concepts.

Comparing the developmental phases of Fluxus to different times of the day, Shiomi called the state of Fluxus in the 1990s "late afternoon" and calls its current state "evening." In 2002, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Fluxus, Shiomi composed eighty short musical pieces for eighty Fluxus-associated people using the letters in their names and adapting each person's style or method. The CD recording of these elaborate compositions, *Fluxus Suite*, epitomizes Shiomi's attitude toward Fluxus and its people. While some critics consider Fluxus to be a part of history and obsolete, Shiomi believes it is still alive and evolving, that although some members are deceased, their spirits will be passed on to younger generations of people. Because Fluxus began with fundamental questions about art and its relation to everyday life, its artistic concepts hold relevance for any generation. Appreciating her long involvement with Fluxus, Shiomi calls it a "mother ship" that has allowed her to continue her trip. Although Shiomi's stay in New York was brief, it expanded her artistic sphere and catalyzed the evolution of her later art. Shiomi's current activities firmly rest upon the dynamic interactions she had with international artists during the 1960s.



*Self-Exploration  
in Multimedia:  
The Experiments  
of Shigeko Kubota*

Looking through my *Video Relief* lenses — mirror, double images like my past and my present. “Are you sure this is you Shigeko? Or is this who you used to be?”

— Shigeko Kubota,  
*Video Sculpture*

Since 1970, Shigeko Kubota has been best known as a pioneer in video art and as one of the first women to work in this relatively new artistic medium. While she continues to create and be known for her video projects, her career as a visual artist started earlier in Japan, in the 1960s.

Kubota was a multimedia artist active in the Tokyo avant-garde art scene before she moved to New York City in 1964. Upon her arrival in New York, Kubota joined in Fluxus activities and started experimenting with a wider range of media, from text scores to performance. While she continued a friendship with George Maciunas until his death in 1978, the objects and performance that she created within the Fluxus circle were concentrated around 1965. It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that Kubota moved on to explore new artistic directions and video, which became the primary artistic medium for the rest of her career. While much of the scholarship on Kubota has focused on her later video works, this chapter will investigate Kubota’s early period in Japan and New York, during which she formed her

artistic direction though interacting with her contemporary avant-garde artists including those of Fluxus.

### First Contacts in Tokyo

In 1937, during Japan's militarist regime, Shigeko Kubota was born to a family of monk's lineage associated with a Buddhist temple in Niigata, a town in northern Japan. She was the second oldest of four girls. Her parents appreciated the arts and supported their children in studying them even though women were expected to work as part of the productive force in those years. Her maternal grandfather was a calligrapher and landowner who encouraged his daughter and his granddaughters to pursue various arts. In fact, Kubota's mother was one of the first female students at what is now the Tokyo National University of the Arts and Music. During her high school years, Kubota met an enthusiastic art teacher who urged her to apply to the Tokyo University of Education. When Kubota entered the university after World War II, she chose to study art. Between 1956 and 1960 she studied various forms of sculpture, and also created works in other media, such as painting.<sup>1</sup> One of her paintings of flowers won an award in the Eighth Annual Exhibition of Niki-kai, one of the juried-exhibition organizations. Though this painting is no longer extant, Kubota's high school teacher praised it for a "uniqueness characterized by strong lines and brushstrokes that do not appear to be executed by a girl."<sup>2</sup> Even though this comment was meant as a compliment, it reveals that women artists were often viewed with a set of sexist biases in Japan at the time.

After graduation from the university in 1960, Kubota explored her artistic direction while teaching art at a public junior high school in Shinagawa ward, Tokyo. Over the next four years she came into contact with the avant-garde artists of Tokyo; her aunt, Chiya Kuni, with whom she was boarding, was an established modern dancer who knew many artists, musicians, and filmmakers and invited them to collaborate with her and her students. Kuni introduced Kubota to these avant-garde artists, among whom were members of the experimental music ensemble Group Ongaku, including Takehisa Kosugi and Chieko Shiomi, who became Kubota's close friends. In order to explore musical improvisation, the group collaborated with dancers at Kuni's dance institute.

These friends were not mere musicians, however; some of them were often stepping into the field of visual arts. Takehisa Kosugi and Yasunao Tone of Group Ongaku, in particular, exhibited their works at the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition in Tokyo in 1962 and 1963, respectively. Tone's tape recorder was once rejected by the exhibition administrator as "music" and therefore "nonart," but it became accepted after he decorated the exterior of the recorder with gold and silver paint. During the 1962 exhibition, Tone vis-

ited the gallery every day and turned on the tape recorder to play a piece of noise music. Since music was accepted as part of a work of art in the renowned art exhibition, other avant-garde artists were encouraged to push the boundaries of what was supposed to be art. In March of the following year, Kosugi submitted a big cloth bag to the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition. While the bag was hung on the wall like a painting, Kosugi sometimes visited the exhibition to use it as an “instrument” to perform a recurring piece he called *Chamber Music*. His performance took the form of a series of movements in which Kosugi climbed into the bag and stuck out his arms and legs through zipped holes. He sometimes threw out pieces of his clothing through these holes, as if performing a striptease.<sup>3</sup> Although Yoko Ono may not have seen this performance, her *Bag Piece*, presented a year later, has affinities with it.

Between 1962 and 1964 Tokyo was exploding with these unconventional and experimental artistic activities. Another memorable event around that time was John Cage’s 1962 concert in Tokyo. Through her friends in Group Ongaku, Kubota had learned about Cage’s music experiments, so Kubota went to Tokyo Bunka Hall in Ueno to witness the event. Observing how untraditional the performers were in destroying every convention of music, she thought to herself that if Cage’s music was accepted in New York, she should also be accepted there.<sup>4</sup> Kubota found affinities between herself and Cage because she felt unappreciated in the Japanese art world because of her unconventionality.

Kubota’s new acquaintances also included Ono, who was temporarily in Japan between 1962 and 1964 and held solo concerts at Sōgetsu Art Center, among other venues. Ono also performed in Cage’s concert tour, which traveled throughout Japan in 1962. Since Ono had been involved in the avant-garde art scene in New York earlier, she became an important contact for Japanese artists to learn about Fluxus and other American avant-garde movements. As Shiomi remembers, she and Kubota visited Ono’s apartment in Tokyo together in 1963 and saw Fluxus event scores, including those by George Brecht.<sup>5</sup> Nam June Paik, who had studied music in Japan and Germany, was also living in Tokyo in 1963, and met Group Ongaku members and Kubota.<sup>6</sup> All of these meetings inspired Kubota, Shiomi, and the other members of Group Ongaku to write their own event scores and send them to George Maciunas, the founder of the Fluxus movement, in New York. Although the thought of considering event instructions as works of art was new to Kubota, she immediately experimented with this new form of artistic expression. Within 1963, Maciunas received Kubota’s first Fluxus works and transcribed them:

*Happenings for Fluxus fest:*

1. *A Beehive 1.*

Make floor with papers which are all love letters for you,  
spread a white cloth on the floor.

*A Beehive 2.*

Fill a room with waste papers which are all love letters for you.

2. *A drop of water*

Have dinner which is served only a white flower.

Put a drop of water from your lips into long nylon pipe after dinner.

Shut the ends of nylon pipe with your little fingers.

Don't move yourself until the white flower in stomach becomes a drop of water.

3. *A blue love 1.*

Prick your lips yourself. Kiss a man who has mustach [sic] in audience.

*A blue love 2.*

Prick your all pores of skin which you can touch yourself with a needle.

*A blue love 3.*

Stop your ears.

Confess your 1st love, 2nd love . . .

*A blue love 4.*

Tell a love with 3 breasts which are two man's.<sup>7</sup>

Because the term *Happenings* was more popular than *events* in Japan, Kubota called these works *Happenings*. Their concise format and poetic content, however, grew out of influences from Fluxus scores, such as instructions by Ono. By the time that Kubota and Shiomi had visited Ono's apartment, Ono had already written many instructions, both in Japanese and English, and she may have shown them to the two artists. Ono's influence is observable in Kubota's work, but it also exhibits Kubota's distinctive combination of interests in the human body and romantic love. The words *love* and *lips* seem to connect the three seemingly unrelated works; all three appear to be interplays of the images evoked by these words. The two versions of *A Beehive* center on a physical mass of love letters. The second, *A Drop of Water*, utilizes lips as they eat a flower and eject a drop of water, but gentle lips as described in this text also evoke lips kissing. In the third, *A Blue Love*, the performer first pricks her lips, presumably with a pin or needle, and then kisses a man. A reader imagines the performer's lips as bloody from the pricking and the man she kisses becomes smeared with blood. Pricking is repeated in the second act on the skin. The physically painful act of pricking seems masochistic and evokes the psychological pains that accompany love. The "blue" of the title may refer to such negative aspect of a love relationship. While *A Beehive* was later realized in Kubota's first solo exhibition, other pieces were left as conceptual works.

In December 1963, Kubota's first solo exhibition, *1st Love, 2nd Love . . .* was held at Naiqua Gallery, a new alternative exhibition space housed in a former office of internal medicine (*naiqua* means internal medicine) in Shinbashi, Tokyo.<sup>8</sup> Kubota's exhibition presented what may be called "environmental sculpture" in which tons of crumpled paper were mounted as high as the ceiling and covered with a large white cloth. This was the realization of *A Beehive*, though most of papers in this work were not actual love letters, but rather scrap papers brought by a truck from a large office building. The invitation to the exhibition includes texts in English, which seemingly combine her scores of *A Beehive 1* and *A Beehive 2* and *A Blue Love 1* and *A Blue Love 2*: "Make a floor with waste paper which are all love letters to you. Spread a sheet of white cloth on the floor. Skin your lips by yourself. Kiss a man who has mustache in the audience."

One notices that "Skin your lips" integrates the "prick your lips" and "prick the pores of your skin" found in the original scores. It may have been meant as mere a play on words, but the act of skinning the lips seems even more masochistic than pricking them. The flirtatious act of kissing a man after this painful act seems contradictory, but again, such a contradiction may be a characteristic of love. Another modification to the original score is the hiding of flutelike welded metal pipe sculptures inside the mountain of paper. Members of the audience were expected to move through this mountain of paper without stumbling on the steel sculptures.<sup>9</sup> The precarious movement of moving through the mountain of paper may have symbolized the transience of love, while the crumpled love letters and dangerous objects hidden among them may have suggested the mercilessness of love. The steel sculptures may have also had a phallic connotation. The environment may have been somewhat biographical, possibly expressing Kubota's experience in love.

The idea of turning the entire gallery space into an environmental sculpture, which is associated with Allan Kaprow's notion of "environments," was still new in Japan, though some artists had already started to experiment with a similar form of expression. At the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition of 1962, for example, the Jikan-ha (Time Group) spread balls in one gallery and invited audience members to interact with them.<sup>10</sup>

The Naiqua Gallery, where Kubota's first exhibition took place, was a magnet for avant-garde artists in Tokyo. The gallery was inaugurated in May 1963 with one of the earliest events by Hi Red Center, in which Natsuyuki Nakanishi walked around in the square in front of the Shinbashi rail station, covered with metal clothespins and carrying balloons. Ono, and former members of Neo-Dada and group Zero Jigen, frequently showed their works and events there as well. Along with the former members of Group Ongaku and members of Hi Red Center, these artists formed a closely knit association that could be called Tokyo Fluxus. These artists often attended or participated in each other's performances; in the mean time, their event scores

and other printed ephemera were sent to Maciunas in New York, who included them in Fluxus publications and disseminated them through the world. These artists' attempts to expand the notion of art through various actions were the highlights of the emerging Japanese performance art, and Kubota played an important role in it.

Kubota's contacts with these Japanese artists and Fluxus-associated artists such as Ono and Paik led her to the development of her work into environments. The Tokyo performances of both Ono and Paik involved many artists as performers interacting with objects or making sounds. Despite the ambitious format of this participatory environment, Kubota's exhibition received no published critical response, and she was deeply disappointed. She realized that artists without connections to critics or to institutions such as the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music would never succeed in Japan; she also thought that there was no chance for a woman artist to receive recognition there.

Her disappointment with the Japanese art world led Kubota to believe that she needed to leave Japan and move to New York in order to be taken seriously as an artist.<sup>11</sup> Deciding to leave, however, was not easy. Kubota was twenty-six years old, an age at which Japanese women were expected to marry (see fig. 69). Although her parents were relatively supportive of their daughter's



69. Shigeko Kubota, self-portrait included in her letter to George Maciunas in scroll format, 1964. Courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.



choices, Kubota still felt societal pressure to conform to the lifestyle of the average Japanese woman. At the time, she was closely involved with her boyfriend, Kosugi, who was active as an avant-garde composer but scarcely earned any income. She supported him with her teaching income while pondering what to do with her own artistic career.<sup>12</sup> She was at a crossroads, for only a few Japanese women artists were able to pursue both their careers and married life in those days.

Meanwhile, Maciunas's letters informed Kubota more about Fluxus and its stimulating activities in New York. Both Kubota and Kosugi wanted to move to New York, but Kubota decided to leave earlier; she felt there was no better opportunity than an invitation from Maciunas. In a letter to Maciunas (written just before her departure for New York) that contained her photograph, Kubota earnestly expressed the mixture of anxiety and hope: "In every day I was very worry which is better to be in Tokyo or to be in New York in order to live as an only artist. But now I made up my mind to go to New York. . . . It's my only hope to go to New York in order to live as an artist, but for you, it's no mention without the biggest trouble to you. But I'd like to touch, to see and feel something by touching a group of Fluxus and living myself in New York."<sup>13</sup>

This letter vividly conveys Kubota's determination to live as an artist and her assumption that her dream could be realized only in New York. She chose a challenge rather than following a prepared path. Although Kubota's letter does not mention her particular problems in Tokyo, she has explained retrospectively that "Japan [was] so conservative" and that it was made up of "all male artists and male-oriented society."<sup>14</sup> Although she willingly supported Kosugi and submitted herself to a rather traditional woman's role of serving men, she was never satisfied with that lifestyle. Realizing how much opportunity lay ahead of her in New York, she decided to leave her familiar environment. The gender barrier that prevented women from being independent artists in Japan ultimately compelled her to stay in New York.<sup>15</sup>

### New York, My School

On July 4, 1964, Kubota and her friend Shiomi traveled on the same flight to New York. Upon their arrival, they were welcomed as members of the Fluxus community. Because there was already a prominent presence of Japanese artists in Fluxus, including Ay-O and Takako Saito, Kubota and Shiomi were integrated into the group smoothly. Maciunas informally called Kubota the "vice president of Fluxus" because she willingly helped him organize events, mail art undertakings, and many other things. Kubota became actively involved in the Fluxus communal activities such as dinners and the production of Fluxus "multiples," editions of small works by Fluxus members.

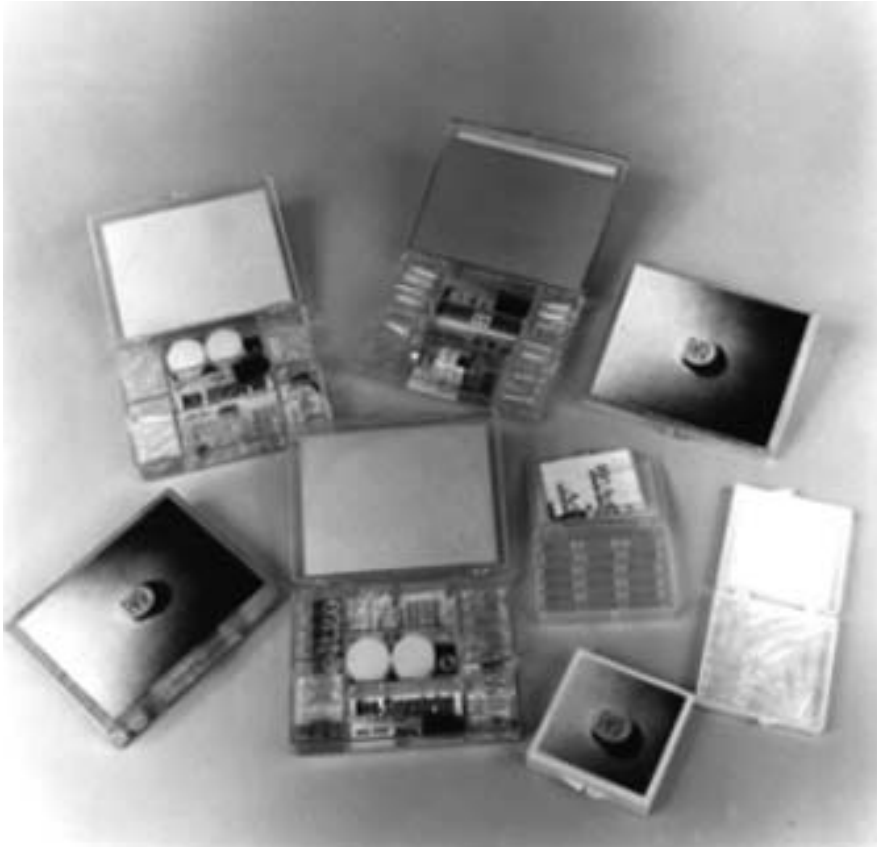
The "Fluxus dinner commune" inspired Kubota to conceive her first



70. Shigeko Kubota, *Flux Napkins*, in *Fluxus I* ca. 1965. Photo by Scott Hyde, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

Fluxus object, *Flux Napkins* (see fig. 70). Originally the napkins were produced in an edition of five for one of the communal dinners. Later editions were made by Maciunas for inclusion in Fluxus anthologies or as independent objects contained in plastic boxes. Following the principle of Fluxus objects to use cheap mass-produced materials, Kubota simply pasted magazine cutouts onto prefabricated paper napkins. The images of women's eyes and lips appeared unexpectedly when one opened the napkin. Although subtle, Kubota's napkins challenged the user to wipe his or her mouth with another's mouth. *Flux Napkins* surprised the viewer with the humorous association of sexualized body parts with food, which was reminiscent in the fur-lined tea cup by an earlier Surrealist artist, Meret Oppenheim. Kubota's napkins also suggested her awareness of the commodification of the female body in mass media.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from *Flux Napkins*, Kubota did not realize many objects during her short involvement in Fluxus. She needed to support herself by taking odd jobs, as a waitress in a Japanese restaurant and as an assistant for Claes Oldenburg in his construction of a soft hamburger sculpture.<sup>17</sup> The only other Fluxus object that Kubota conceived was *Flux Pills* (also known as *Flux Medicine*), a plastic box containing empty pill capsules (see fig. 71). Because Maciunas was suffering from asthma, she wanted to make a Fluxus pill to cure him. Kubota recalls that Maciunas was delighted to receive her object filled with humor and kindness.<sup>18</sup> In addition to being a personal message to her colleague, this object reflected the general concerns of Fluxus artists with employing ready-made objects to demonstrate humorous or critical content. Kubota's interest in objects related to medicine, such as the pill capsules, was also evident in her proposal to make a "surgical kit" as a Fluxus product, which would have contained surgical instruments and a rubber doll upon which to operate. Although this work was never realized, the concept itself was for sale in a Fluxus advertisement, along with many other Fluxus artists' works. This surgical kit



71. Shigeko Kubota, *Flux Medicine*, ca. 1965. Photo by Brad Iverson, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

may have been an extension of Kubota's interest in the human body, which was suggested by the act of skinning lips in the instruction accompanying her *1st Love, 2nd Love . . .* exhibition in Japan.

During her close involvement with Fluxus, Kubota also brought the activities of Hi Red Center to the attention of Maciunas. Even after moving to New York, Kubota kept correspondences with Japanese avant-garde artists in Tokyo, including Kosugi and Akasegawa. In 1965, Kubota edited and translated the printed matter that she had collected from Hi Red Center and designed a Fluxus publication using these materials. Called *Bundle of Events*, this brown sheet of paper consisted of a map on one side and a collage of photographs on the other. The paper was balled up and then bundled by a rope, imitating Akasegawa's bundled objects (see fig. 72). The map contained numbers connected to sites, which described the events by Hi Red Center. Finding strong affinities between Fluxus events and Hi Red Center events, Maciunas tried to assimilate Hi Red Center into Fluxus. In fact, different versions of Hi Red Center's events *Be Clean!* and *Shelter Plan*, were performed by New York Fluxus artists in 1965, and Maciunas proceeded to even plan the distribution of objects created by Hi Red Center as Fluxus



72. Hi Red Center, *Bundle of Events*, edited by Kubota, 1965. Photo by Brad Iverson, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

products.<sup>19</sup> Kubota's introduction of Hi Red Center to Fluxus provided the otherwise unknown Japanese avant-garde group an opportunity for exposure in the West.

Fluxus introduced Kubota to a vanguard life in New York. She immersed herself in the generative atmosphere of the city, joining "all the crazy street events and Happenings." Fluxus was merely a part of what was going on in the city. Since she was used to even more radical activities in Tokyo, she often sought stimulation in other avant-garde art outside the Fluxus circle as well. While she registered for classes at New York University between 1965 and 1966, she did it merely for the purpose of obtaining a student visa. Rather than studying at the actual school, Kubota preferred learning directly from the cutting-edge art activities flourishing in the city. Considering the entity of New York and its downtown art culture as her school, Kubota recalls the 1960s with excitement: "Pop Art was blossoming in New York, and John Cage chance operation was in concert. Poetry reading. And hippy culture. I enjoyed my New York life a lot. [In the] 1960s I thought well, I want[ed] to do something special."<sup>20</sup> New York's artistic and cultural environment stimulated Kubota to respond.

### Culminated Expression

On July 4, 1965, exactly a year after her arrival in New York, Kubota presented her first performance at Cinemateque as part of the Perpetual Fluxfest, a se-

ries of biweekly events held between 1964 and 1965 (see figs. 73 and 74).<sup>21</sup> The audience was mostly comprised of Fluxus artists and their friends. Provocatively titling her performance *Vagina Painting*, Kubota suggested to her audience that she was going to use her vagina to paint. In actuality, however, Kubota painted with a brush that was attached to her underpants. After dipping the brush in a bucket of red paint, she squatted over large rolls of white paper spread on the floor and pressed it against the paper to make marks. She repeated this movement numerous times to make her way across the large floor, since the paint on the brush dried quickly. Every move she made left marks on the paper, creating the effect of red calligraphy against a white background.

Appropriating a horizontal position over the painting surface from the Eastern calligraphy tradition and contemporary action painters, Kubota clearly envisioned her action as a female version of theirs. She also might have conceived it as a parody of the glorified machismo embodied in the actions of male painters, including Jackson Pollock, and Kazuo Shiraga of Gutai, who painted with his feet as he hung his body from the ceiling. Aside from these examples, Kubota also must have been aware of her Fluxus colleague Nam June Paik's *Zen for Head*, performed in Wiesbaden in 1962. Paik interpreted La Monte Young's score for *Composition 1960 #10 to Bob Morris*, which simply stated, "Draw a straight line and follow it." After dipping his head into a bucket of sumi ink mixed with tomato juice, Paik dragged it along a long sheet of paper, creating a thick, calligraphic line.<sup>22</sup> Instead of using a regular brush, Paik used his own head, a mental faculty of his body, to produce Zenlike calligraphy. Aware of such subversive elements in his piece, Kubota may have intended to reference it in her *Vagina Painting*.

In her essay in the 1993 exhibition catalog *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, art historian Kristine Stiles discusses the feminist implications in Kubota's *Vagina Painting* for the first time. Stiles asserts that Kubota's performance "redefined Action Painting according to the codes of female anatomy," adding, "The direct reference to menstrual cycles seems to compare the procreation/creation continuum lodged in the interiority of woman with the temporal cycles of change and growth she experienced in her own art and life after moving from Japan to the United States."<sup>23</sup> Performed exactly a year after Kubota's arrival in the United States, *Vagina Painting* must have held personal meaning for Kubota. In conjunction with the celebration of Independence Day, Kubota perhaps intended this performance as a declaration of her independence from her past and Japan's male-dominated artistic conventions. Beside this personal interpretation of Independence Day, Kubota suggested a clever pun between human procreation and artistic creation by using the vagina as an artistic medium.

Since Stiles's analysis, other art historians reinforced the feminist reading of *Vagina Painting*. In her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones has argued that "Kubota activates the site of the vagina itself—the



73–74 (above and right). Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, performed as part of the Perpetual Fluxfest at Cinematheque, New York, July 4, 1965. (*continued*)

paradoxical locus of “lack” that supposedly dooms women forever to an alienated state of objecthood—as the originary point of the meaningful painterly gesture.” Considering action painting as a masculine construction and exclusive of women, Jones argues that Kubota undermined it in her “exaggeratedly ‘female’ process of menstrual gestural creation on the paper.”<sup>24</sup> Certainly, Kubota’s subversion was directed against male-dominated performance art. Rebecca Schneider has compared *Vagina Painting* with Yves Klein’s *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (1960). Instructing female nude models covered in blue paint to make imprints of their bodies onto white paper on a floor, Klein created an action painting without being directly involved. Dressed in a tuxedo, Klein mimicked an orchestra conductor by signaling actions to the female models. While Klein’s performance became celebrated, Kubota’s became forgotten in the next two decades. In this regard, Schneider pointed out that a “woman with brush” was “dismissed with denigration, accusations of narcissism, sexual innuendo, and mockery.”<sup>25</sup> Not only Kubota, but also other women performance artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, and Carolee Schneemann were undervalued in com-





(*Vagina Painting*) Photos by George Maciunas, courtesy of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, Michigan.

parison to their contemporary counterparts until recently. Within the Fluxus circle, Ono and Schneemann were often regarded as “un-Fluxus” for similar elements in their work, which Schneemann recalled as “Baroque tendencies, overt sexuality, and theatrical excess.”<sup>26</sup> While these qualities were associated with Happenings — rivals to the Fluxus events — these characteristics were also the typical attributes given to women’s performances, such as Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (1964) and Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1965).

Kubota’s *Vagina Painting* was perhaps criticized for its similarities to Ono’s and Schneemann’s performances. In a telephone conversation with Stiles, Kubota mentioned that her colleagues hated it, but she neither specified her colleagues to be “male” nor indicated why they hated it. Stiles concluded from this comment that strong protofeminist elements in her work caused such a negative reaction among other Fluxus artists.<sup>27</sup> Despite the fact that Kubota did not specify her colleagues to be male, Stiles’s interpretation led other feminist art historians such as Schneider simply to assume that “male Fluxus artists” hated Kubota’s performance. Kubota’s audience, however, included some female members like Alison Knowles. Knowles remembers that

she could not continue watching Kubota's performance because it looked uncomfortable and painful since the brush looked like it was coming directly out of her vagina.<sup>28</sup> As a woman, Knowles could identify with Kubota's body and imagine vividly the discomfort involved in painting with the female sexual organ. As this reaction suggests, the impact of *Vagina Painting* was felt more corporeally than visually. Knowles's reaction was perhaps not far from those of male audience members, who would also have perceived discomfort from the performance. In addition to this initial perception, some male members probably felt disgusted because they were confronted by an unattractive side of the feminine corporeality, one of menstruation and child-bearing, which counteracted the male fantasy of sexy women. Pretending to use her vagina to paint, Kubota's performance violated what was normally acceptable for women to do. The combination of strong physical impact as well as transgressive femininity must have been the actual cause of turning the audience away, more so than aesthetic style.

While feminist art historians have emphasized that sexist biases in Fluxus and other avant-garde art circles marginalized Kubota and other women artists' works, this assumption may be one-sided. Considering the controversial content of her work, the negative responses from the audience must have been expected and the shock value may have been well calculated. Kubota most likely intended to put her audience in an uncomfortable situation — particularly male viewers. In addition, Kubota had not presented her work since she had arrived from Japan and her colleagues may have had some expectations of what a Japanese woman might perform. The polite and discreet image of Japanese woman, which may have been in minds of the Western audience, was totally shattered by Kubota's blatant use of her body.

*Vagina Painting* may have also been conceived as Kubota's antithesis to Fluxus's usually simple and rather monotonous events. Having experienced the excitement in witnessing a wide range of radical performances in Tokyo, Kubota could not easily settle on what was thought as a standard in New York Fluxus. Like Ono and Schneemann, she did not fit in with the Minimalist aesthetic mode of Fluxus that was being established by male artists such as Brecht. In order to deviate from this particular mode, Kubota perhaps sought her inspiration in Japanese sources.

A possible inspiration for Kubota's performance is a low-class geisha's trick for entertaining customers, called *hanadensha* (literally translated as "flower train") in which a geisha uses her vulva in various actions, including drawing calligraphy with a brush in her vagina.<sup>29</sup> *Geisha* literally means "one who performs arts" — namely, an artist or performance artist. As a matter of fact, the Japanese word for "fine art" — *geijutsu* — that was chosen after modernization uses the same root, *gei*.

By assimilating the vulgarity of this Japanese underground entertainment art, Kubota may have intended to intersect the divisions between geisha and performance artist, pornography and avant-garde art, low art and high art.



Because such crudity was absent in the Western image of courteous and subservient Japanese women, Kubota might well have anticipated shock from her primarily Western audience. Her employment of a sexual organ in the painting process was a subversive attack on male voyeuristic views of the female body as a commodity, which was heightened in the commercial relationship between the geisha and her customers. Kubota did not allow herself to be seen as an object of male desire, but presented herself as an artistic agent, celebrating her own sexuality and shedding off patriarchal constrictions in both Japanese and American cultures. By this transgressive act of emphasizing her sexuality, Kubota simultaneously subverted the masculine canon constructed in avant-garde art and the orientalist image of Japanese women.

Despite the fact that Kubota's performance was only documented by Maciunas's photographs and became forgotten in the subsequent course of history, its impact can be observed in later art works by other artists. Kubota's colleague in Fluxus, Carolee Schneemann, who had been already creating performance works concerning feminine erotics, remembers defending Kubota's *Vagina Painting* against outraged audience members, arguing that Kubota's actual intention was to reveal the reality of the feminine as well as to free female sexuality. Schneemann performed *Interior Scroll* ten years later in 1975, which partly referred back to Kubota's *Vagina Painting*. Toward the end of her performance, which consisted of a series of movements, Schneemann pulled out a long scroll from her vagina and read texts from it. Directly addressing the women in the audience, the text criticized how "they" (men) exploit "you" (women). Schneemann was surprised by the amount of negativity in the audience's reaction to both her *Interior Scroll* and Kubota's *Vagina Painting* because she expected their performances would have freed or enlightened the audience's view of female sexuality.<sup>30</sup> The legacy of these artists' body art, however, was not immediately felt and can only be recognized in retrospect. As Stiles has stated, Schneemann made concrete the metaphorical connection between procreation and creation suggested in Kubota's *Vagina Painting*,<sup>31</sup> and in so doing, she bridged women's performance art of the 1960s and 1970s.

### From Performance to New Media: Meeting with Duchamp

*Vagina Painting* was the first and last solo performance by Kubota. After receiving negative responses from her colleagues, she turned away from pursuing performance further. Instead, she started exploring new technological media, including video. In the late 1960s, the moves of several central members of Fluxus to Europe resulted in a decrease of collective Fluxus activities, but Kubota continued helping Maciunas in realizing many events until his death in 1978. It was also Maciunas who introduced Kubota to Jonas

Mekas of the Anthology Film Archives, where she would work as a curator from 1974 to 1983. Because Kubota stayed in close touch with Maciunas and she offered help anytime he needed, Maciunas now called Kubota “chairman of Fluxus.”

While Kubota continued her involvement with Fluxus, she also formed a new association with an active group of electronic composers, including Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma. Kubota may have met some of them through the New School for Social Research, where she was registered as a student in 1966 and 1967. She became especially close to Behrman, and soon they were married. In 1966, the four composers founded the Sonic Arts Union, a closely knit, interdisciplinary group that also involved each of their companions, women visual artists — Kubota, Mary Ashley, Barbara Lloyd, and Mary Lucier — though these women were not usually presented as central members.<sup>32</sup> The Sonic Arts Union was one of several new music affiliations founded in different cities in the United States, such as San Francisco’s Tape Music and the Once Group in Ann Arbor, Michigan. These groups frequently collaborated by performing each other’s works and inviting each other’s members to participate in performances. In addition to traveling to many venues across the United States, the members of the Sonic Arts Union toured Europe between 1967 and 1969. Situated amid the influences of John Cage and electronic music, works by the four composers attempted to expand the boundaries of music by using text scores, noises, electronic music, and improvisational instrumentation. Some works took the form of abstract operas in which women members participated as singers and performers. While Kubota’s involvement in many of these performances is unknown, the group introduced her to new possibilities in multimedia artistic expressions.

Meanwhile, Kubota also participated in a theater performance, *Snow*, presented by former Fluxus member Schneemann at the Martinique Theater in New York for eight days from January to February, 1967. This became the last occasion for Kubota’s bodily performance. Born out of Schneemann’s anger and sorrow over the Vietnam War, *Snow* revolved around her film *Viet-Flakes*, in which a camera traveled through a collection of cutout newspaper and magazine photographs of Vietnam atrocities. In addition to film projections, the stage was adorned with a revolving light sculpture, a sound-controlled light system, and three pairs of male and female performers who made various movements such as crawling, grabbing, falling, and dragging.

Within a certain set of determined sequences, the performers improvised their individual and group movements. Corresponding to the Vietnam images in the background, the performers’ movements presented various degrees of torment and ultimately symbolized death. In one sequence, performers painted each other’s face in white and deformed their faces with their hands to resemble death masks. In another, four performers dragged two performers and hung them from the ceiling. Kubota was one of the

dragged and hung people.<sup>33</sup> Asked to take this role by Schneemann, Kubota willingly accepted at first, but she changed her mind and tried— unsuccessfully — to quit at the last minute. Anticipating eight days of performance, she became anxious despite the fact she had already rehearsed the movements several times.<sup>34</sup> The performance was successful and Kubota played one of the leading roles, but it became her last performance.

Partly inspired by Schneemann's and other contemporary artists' use of new technology in their art, Kubota became interested in employing technological media — namely, photography and video — in the late 1960s. Another reason for her move into technology was her new job as a correspondent for a Japanese art magazine, *Bijutsu Techō*, for which she took photographs and wrote articles on the New York art scene until 1971. One of her earliest photographs printed in *Bijutsu Techō* documented a chess event performed by Marcel Duchamp and John Cage at the Ryerson Theater in Toronto in March 1968.<sup>35</sup> Around that time, Kubota had been going back and forth between New York and Buffalo, where her husband Behrman was helping Cage's performances with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. For this event, titled *Reunion*, Cage designed a chessboard connected to electronic circuits. When chessmen touched any square on the board, the electronic circuits transmitted sounds that were produced by several attending musicians.<sup>36</sup> In front of the public, Duchamp and Cage, first, and then Cage and Duchamp's wife Teeny, played chess for hours. Kubota took black and white photographs of these chess players at different stages of the game.

Only four days after this event, Kubota met Duchamp for the second time by chance. On her flight to attend the opening of a Merce Cunningham dance concert in Buffalo, she encountered Duchamp and his wife and started a conversation with them. Because of a blizzard, the airplane ended up changing its destination to Westchester County, New York, and they had to change onto a charter bus from there to Buffalo. For Kubota, this meeting was especially catalytic, leaving long-lasting repercussions of Duchamp's art and philosophy in her own art. Since Duchamp died two months after this meeting, Kubota's photographs of him took on personal elegiac meaning. In the next few years, Kubota edited the images and turned them into a publication that was produced in Japan in 1970. It contained Cage's text dedicated to Duchamp, entitled *36 Acrostics re and not re Duchamp*, and a phonograph record of the sound during the event. Kubota also reused these photographs in her later video works.

### Video as Personal and Organic Medium: "I Video, Therefore I Am"

Kubota's meeting with Duchamp propelled Kubota to create her own work again, but now in a new medium — video. As she recalled in a later interview, she had given up making objects during the 1960s, but by 1970 she felt

an urge to “bring back the image and sound and action.”<sup>37</sup> Video became the perfect tool with which to integrate these elements into a cohesive visual form. Through video as a medium, image, sound, and action are all organically interconnected and are constantly in flux. The performative nature of video attracted Kubota to this new medium.

The 1969 landmark exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*, at the Howard Wise Gallery, informed Kubota of the possibilities of using television monitors as artistic expressions. While this exhibition was ignored by the American media, Kubota wrote a six-page review with color reproductions in *Bijutsu Techō*. At this time, she ended her marriage with Behrman and became more artistically and romantically involved with her Fluxus colleague, Nam June Paik, who had been experimenting with electronic music, robots, television, and video. Kubota eventually married Paik in the early 1970s. Their liaison led to the development of video art. When Paik was given the opportunity to teach video art at the California Institute of Art, Kubota accompanied him to the West Coast. Surrounded by the video technology there, she started her experiments immediately.

Using this new technology, however, was not easy. She recently reflected on her struggles with the new medium: “When I began taking my video diary, the video equipment had just been invented and was very large and heavy. Besides, its battery was even heavier. Since I was carrying around these equipments on my back, I totally hurt my back and hips. In addition, video’s quality was bad. After all the troubles, the image and sound were disturbed. Editing video took a lot of care and money.”<sup>38</sup> Early video equipment was so large and heavy that carrying it cost Kubota a miscarriage.<sup>39</sup> Such harsh experience with the medium did not prevent her from continuing the new mission of videotaping her life. When a newly invented SONY half-inch video Portapak was brought to her from Japan by the wife of Shūya Abe, Paik’s technological collaborator in 1970, Kubota’s video career blossomed. The Portapak’s compactness and lightness mobilized Kubota’s videotaping activities.

The first subject Kubota pursued in video was her own life. Between 1969 and 1985, she accumulated a vast number of videotapes that recorded the “turning points and highlights” of her professional and private life.<sup>40</sup> In 1985, she reassembled these disjunctive video sequences into *Broken Diary*, a series of twelve chapters of videotapes. For example, chapter 2 of *Broken Diary*, also known as *Europe on Half an Inch a Day*, was composed of a selection of video footage recorded every day during Kubota’s trip through Europe in 1972; its title derived from the travel guide *Europe on Five Dollars a Day*. This video work shows Kubota’s “visit to Duchamp’s grave in Rouen, her meeting with Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf, and an organ grinder on the street of Amsterdam, a canal in Venice and Seine River boat trip in Paris.”<sup>41</sup> At Duchamp’s grave, Kubota lamented over the death of her spiritual father. Her weeping is heard throughout the scene as the camera visually caresses

the stone tomb. She recalls that she was moved by Duchamp's unsentimental attitude toward death, reflected by his epitaph, "D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurent (By the way, it is always others who die)."<sup>42</sup> This part of the videotape became her elegy for Duchamp.

In comparison to painting, Kubota considered video as abstract as literature and a suitable medium for writing a novel. As artist critic Ann-Sargent Wooster has pointed out, "feminist art historians agreed on the importance of diaries as women's literature and Kubota extended this genre into the electronic age."<sup>43</sup> Many women artists after Kubota also found video a perfect medium with which to capture their everyday lives and explore their budding feminist consciousness. Although technology has been often associated with men, video became an exception, in which women's sensibility became directly reflected. By expressing personal content through the high-tech medium, Kubota became a pioneer in women's video art.

After her trip to Europe, Kubota approached her female friends to form a group to create collaborative multimedia works. This idea emerged during Kubota's conversations with Mary Lucier, a former member of the Sonic Arts Union. The two artists proposed their ideas to their friends Cecilia Sandoval and Charlotte Warren, whom they met through a common interest in new music. Lucier envisioned dividing work among the four: Kubota, video; Lucier, slides and speech; Warren, music and movement; and Sandoval, speech in Navajo and English. Between December 1972 and April 1973, this loosely knit group named Red, White, Yellow, and Black made seven works together. While the group's name was partially derived from the American flag, blue was replaced by yellow and black to correspond with the racial profile of the group: Sandoval was red (of American Indian descent), Lucier was white, Kubota was yellow (Asian), and Warren was black. The exploration of feminist ideas was another underlying concept of the group. At an early stage, Lucier proposed that the group could "serve as a kind of clearing house for feminist pieces — or not feminist pieces — and perhaps act as a feminist focal point in the avant-garde." As art historian Melinda Barlow has assessed, despite its short span of activities and no longer extant works, the group "made an interesting contribution to early video history," and is "remarkable for its feminist and multicultural orientation."<sup>44</sup> The collective provided Kubota the stimulation and support that she needed to develop her early video works.

Along with Lucier, Kubota took initiatives in Red, White, Yellow, and Black, and her early interest in video influenced the other members. Lucier made her first video work using Kubota's camera, and eventually chose video as her primary artistic medium. For the group's first of three multimedia concerts at the Kitchen in 1972, Kubota created her first video installation, *Riverrun*, which showed black and white images of different rivers and canals on five television monitors. In front of these horizontally arranged monitors was a fountain of orange juice connected to a live video synthesizer

that colorized images of visitors drinking juice, which was shown on a sixth monitor. This video installation became the first of its kind. While video art pioneers like Paik experimented with single-channel video, none had explored the possibilities of using multiple video monitors along with other materials such as water.

Out of the five videotapes shown in *Riverrun*, four videotapes were made during Kubota's trip through Europe; they recorded her trips on the Seine and Rhine Rivers and the canals of Amsterdam and Venice. The fifth video featured the Hudson River in New York. The title *Riverrun* was borrowed from the opening line of *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce, which Kubota referred to as "an autobiography of running time."<sup>45</sup> River or water in general is a recurrent motif in Kubota's art because she grew up near Japan's longest river, the Shinano. Kubota was also interested in the Buddhist symbolism of rivers and wrote, of their relation to video, "I'm of a religious Buddhist family. At the center of Buddhism is always river, running water, Buddha, the stone Buddha is always washed by rain. A drop of rain becomes a brook, a brook becomes a river. The role of water in nature is comparable to the function of video in our life. A river is replicated in video in its physical/temporal properties and in its information-carrying and reflective, 'mirror' qualities."<sup>46</sup>

Although rivers seem hardly related to video, Kubota's personal perception of video provides an insight into the hidden "organic" nature of video that she advocates. Unlike film, whose whole process she views as "very chemical," she saw video as "organic, like brown rice . . . brown curd, very oriental, like seaweed, made in Japan."<sup>47</sup> In addition, the reflective surface of water, video screens, and mirror appealed to Kubota as the medium with which to capture nature and reality and the medium to explore her identity. She also poetically expressed her life as an act of endless swimming, "floating on and on to the endless direction and nowhere . . . where shall I go . . . to end for no end . . . I'm swimming on the current with fishes, half being drowned, looking for myself. . . ." <sup>48</sup> For Kubota, water symbolized life, and she imagined herself swimming in it, in search of her identity.

Kubota's cultural and spiritual roots were explored through the metaphor of water in her best-known single-channel video work, *Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky*. The idea for the work emerged out of her activities in Red, White, Yellow, and Black. In the summer 1973, Kubota visited fellow artist Sandoval and her family on a Navajo reservation in Chinle, Arizona, and found spiritual affinities between her Japanese roots and Navajo culture. The video records the Sandovals carrying water from a distant place because they did not have running water in their home. The experience of carrying water reminded Kubota of her childhood memory of visiting her father's relatives in northern Japan, who also had to travel to get water. The video further narrates an episode in which Kubota found that her name, Shigeko, means "daughter-in-law" in Navajo, and the Navajo word for "hello" resembled "love me" in Japanese. Such transcultural experiences brought



Kubota to the realization that one's identity can adapt to a new land through finding affinities. As Barlow notes, as a woman who left Asia for America, "Shigeeko Kubota has spent her life making works which attempt to fuse the place of her birth with the land she has for many years called her home."<sup>49</sup> Video technology allowed Kubota to transform such personal experiences into universal messages for the viewers of the future.

Kubota's search for identity brought her back to her Japanese roots at the end of 1973, when she visited her family after ten years away. There she took a videotape of her ailing father watching the end-of-the-year music program on television. Back in New York in the summer of 1974, she learned of her father's death. Without knowing what she should do, she videotaped her private mourning of crying over the video image of her father and turned it into a part of her *Broken Diary* series, titling it *My Father*. The result is a direct expression of sorrow made even more tragic by Kubota's gesture of caressing the monitor. She cannot touch her real father anymore; it is only through video that she can see her father alive. A close-up of the television program that she and her father were watching on New Year's Eve shows a female duo whose emotional singing enhances the feeling of lament. Considering video as an evolved form of portraiture that immortalizes humans, Wooster argues that Kubota shows us how video can bring people back to life.<sup>50</sup> Looking at the animate simulacrum of the person on video, however, can be more painful than looking at a still image. By revealing the ironic duality of a video image being so real and yet so unreal, Kubota leads the viewer to consider the meaning of death.

Kubota is one of the few pioneers of video art who has been aware of philosophical implications of video in human life from early on. She has had especially a keen eye on video's relationship to human death. Her husband Paik even declared that Kubota "invented death for video."<sup>51</sup> Because her father was a Buddhist monk, Kubota had often witnessed funerals as a child. She had also spent time alone, supposedly playing with ghosts in a temple room where fresh bones were stored.<sup>52</sup> She drew on these vivid memories in her video art. In the text accompanying her 1981 exhibition, she wrote, "Videotape acts as an extension of the brain's memory cells. Therefore, life with video is like living with two brains, one plastic brain and one organic brain. One's life is inevitably altered. Change will affect even our relationship with death, as video is a living altar. Yes, videotaped death negates death as a simple terminal. This perpetuates a consciousness (reflexive life) that distinguishes homosapiens from the animal kingdom (without reflective self-consciousness). Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I am.' In the pan-cybernated society, perhaps we will be saying, 'I video, therefore I am.'"<sup>53</sup> Kubota's unique perspective on video and its relation to human life allowed her to personalize the technological medium as an integral part of her artistic expression.

In 1975, Kubota had realized her personal meditation on death in her first monumental video sculpture, *Marcel Duchamp's Grave*, shown at the

Kitchen in New York. Consisting of twelve monitors vertically set inside a plywood column with mirrors placed perpendicular to the column on the floor, the sculpture played the video images of Duchamp's grave in an endless loop. The images were excerpted from Kubota's earlier video diary, *Europe on Half an Inch a Day*, but were color synthesized to create a different effect. The mirrors on the floor expanded the limited gallery space and reflected the images on the monitors. Resembling a Buddhist altar, Kubota's video sculpture eternalized her spiritual father, Duchamp. The continually repeated loop of video images also may have been suggestive of the Buddhist idea of endless cycles of life, in which a soul travels from one body to another in different lives. This rare combination of profound spirituality and highly technological media characterizes Kubota's art.

While Kubota began constructing other monumental video sculptures, she also conceived video work on a more intimate scale. In her 1976 *Video Poem*, color-synthesized video images of Kubota's self-portrait are shown on a small monitor peaking through the zippered opening of a purple nylon bag that she had made for her one-time boyfriend, Kosugi. Kubota recalled an episode about the bag: "I used to support him. I worked three jobs. And I said to him, 'Why don't you work? and he said 'Because I am a composer.' So I said, 'So where are your compositions?' 'I give you one,' he said, and he gave me this piece, this bag which I inflate with the air from a fan, with wind, like breath, you know."<sup>54</sup> As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Kosugi had submitted the bag to the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition in Tokyo in 1963, and had used it in a striptease-like performance he called *Chamber Music* during the exhibition.

Knowing the history of this bag, Kubota inserted the video image of her face instead of her body. A fan was also put inside the bag to prevent the monitor from getting too hot, but it ended up creating movements as if the bag were a living creature. The poem accompanying this piece evoked a personal and physical association between video and the artist:

Video is Vengeance of Vagina.  
 Video is Victory of Vagina.  
 Video is Venereal Disease of Intellectuals.  
 Video is Vacant Apartment.  
 Video is Vacation of Art.  
 Viva Video . . .<sup>55</sup>

With the visual and aural repetition of the letter V, Kubota celebrated her current artistic medium. Like her contemporary feminist activists, Kubota used the word *vagina* as a symbol for women. In fact, the opening of the bag resembled a vagina and its zippers looked like teeth, possibly referencing to the *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina), a Surrealist metaphor for the male fear of castration. The video self-portrait shown through a vagina-like opening may



have been her personal declaration of her independence from her old boyfriend, who represented the patriarchal society of her rather submissive past.

### Later Development, 1976 to the Present

After *Marcel Duchamp's Grave*, Kubota continued to pay homage to Duchamp through a series of video sculptures, titled *Duchampiana*, until 1991. Over the span of fifteen years, she created four such video works, some of which referred to Duchamp's sculptures. They included *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976), *Duchampiana: Door* (1976–1977), and *Meta-Marcel: Window* (1976–1991).<sup>56</sup> By incorporating changing color video images into her sculptures, Kubota added another dimension to the French artist's witty, conceptual works.

In *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (see fig. 75)—which literally refers to Duchamp's (in)famous painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912)—a female nude stands at the top of a staircase and begins to walk down within a mass of pulsating foam. The foam seems to vibrate around her as if she were about to be swallowed by it. This sequence has striking affinities with Yayoi Kusama's performances of “self-obliteration,” in which Kusama attempted to obliterate herself and participants' bodies by drawing on or attaching polka dots to them. While polka dots covered up the bodies, their physicality never diminished. Indeed, their bodies seem to have been rather enhanced of their life force by the proliferation of dots. Like Kusama's dots, Kubota's foam or white circles intensify the presence of the female body. In addition, the nude's repetitive descent, realized through



75. Shigeko Kubota, *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (video installation, 1976), on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1981. Photo by Robert Haller.



76. Shigeko Kubota, *Video Haiku* (video installation, 1981), on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1981. Photo by Robert Haller.

video loops, emphasize her movement as she comes closer to the viewer. Here Kubota also makes an implicit reference to the 1960 film *Onna ga kaidan o noboru toki* (*When a Woman Ascends a Staircase*) by Mikio Naruse.<sup>57</sup> In this film, a middle-aged bar owner/hostess, played by Mineko Takamine, has to ascend a staircase leading to her bar; each daily ascent brings hesitation, because she is usually filled with anxiety and tension before work. Paik opposed Kubota in making this video sculpture because of such an obscure reference, but Kubota later realized that she would not have become what she had as an artist if she had listened to Paik.<sup>58</sup> With this monumental work, Kubota succeeded in ascending the staircase of her artistic career.

Aside from these new interpretations of Duchamp's works, Kubota continued to pursue her interest in combining natural elements or motifs with video and other artificial materials. *Video Haiku*

(1981; see fig. 76), for example, is comprised of a round white video monitor suspended from the ceiling and a curved metal sculpture on the floor containing water. The real subject, however, is the spectator, whose image is mirrored on the water's surface. The spectator's reflection is also shown on the hanging monitor, which is connected to a live camera. As a whole, this video sculpture becomes a tool for the viewer's self-reflection and contemplation. While this work utilizes a closed-circuit system between the camera and monitor like that employed in Paik's *TV Buddha*, in which a live camera sent live video images of the Buddha statue watching a television, Kubota's work, however, is participatory in the sense that the viewer's face is echoed in the monitor.

Although Kubota's contribution to video art has been unique, it has been overshadowed by achievements of her husband, Paik, who is considered the father of video art. Kubota realized that none of her attempts would work if she was always beside him.<sup>59</sup> The artistic influences between Kubota and

Paik, however, have been mutual, and Kubota inspired Paik in the development of his video sculpture.<sup>60</sup> With her *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Kubota took a lead in creating a sculptural form that integrated video monitors within it. She approached video as sculpture, a rather classical medium, because she believed that it was the only way to go beyond Paik.<sup>61</sup> With this strategy, Kubota actually succeeded, and her *Nude Descending a Staircase* became the first video sculpture acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Such artistic adaptability and diversity, however, have also made it hard for art historians to contextualize Kubota's art within existing frameworks. The artist did indeed travel through divergent artistic media, from sculpture to conceptual art and performance art, and then to video. Yet, like the other four artists discussed in this volume, versatility was one of Kubota's strengths. Her willingness to explore divergent artistic media led to the creation of unique and experimental works. Kubota's search for identity that started in Japan became intensive in the United States because of her constant encounters with people of diverse backgrounds. Her performance *Vagina Painting* eloquently expressed her determination to live as a woman artist and marked the height of her artistic investigation of self. While she did not choose performance art as her primary artistic medium, her involvement in Fluxus and the performance art world provided her with a new perspective on how to approach art. Finally, video allowed her a more permanent yet virtual space in which to perform her exploration of self-identity. This exploration continues today.<sup>62</sup>



I've always felt like an outsider, that people did not understand me. In a way, I created a power as an outsider. I mean, being an outsider is an incredible power, actually. I always think that you should never be in the center. Center is a blind spot because you can't see anybody. You are being seen, but you can't see anybody.

—Yoko Ono, in conversation with David Ross  
in conjunction with the exhibition  
*Yes Yoko Ono* at the Japan Society

The five Japanese women artists examined in this study have long remained outside the mainstream, both in Japan and the United States. Their pursuit of unconventional art forms has separated them from the majority of society and culture, and even sometimes from their own families. Until recently it was extremely difficult to be different and choose an unusual path in conformist Japanese society given the pressures on women to follow traditional lifestyles. These women's relatively wealthy backgrounds, however, allowed them to receive a high-quality education and exposed them to new opportunities for women. Their education fostered in them the confidence and determination needed to explore experimental art, and eventually to leave Japan. Although these five women artists found kindred spirits

in New York City, their ethnicity and gender placed them on the periphery of the avant-garde community; as such, these artists found themselves positioned on the fringe of both Japanese and Western societies.

These five artists did not merely accept this marginal position, but rather turned the disadvantage to advantage. Yayoi Kusama associated being an outsider with being free. “America has freedom,” she once commented. “And because I was a Japanese in America, I was outside that society, so I had a special freedom.”<sup>1</sup> As a stranger in American society, she felt uncommitted to its social and cultural constrictions. This sense of a “special freedom” allowed Kusama to break social taboos and conventions in her art. Phallus-studded furniture and body-painting performances were the result of her exploitation of this freedom. Similarly, Yoko Ono has felt that her outsider position gave her the “incredible power” to survive and make her presence known. Her power for resistance was transformed into a rebellious and transgressive energy that gave form to performances such as *Cut Piece* (see fig. 36, in chapter 3). Almost contemporaneous to Ono’s *Cut Piece*, Shigeko Kubota’s *Vagina Painting* (see figs. 73 and 74, in chapter 6) partly grew out of her critical response as an outsider to the male-dominated avant-garde art scene.

While transgressive elements are not evident in Takako Saito and Mieko Shiomi’s works, their unique artistic pursuits have placed them outside of mainstream culture and society. Saito chose to live alone outside of Japan in order to be free of sociocultural constrictions on women there. Although she relates that an independent artist’s life without any steady income has not been easy, she has enjoyed the freedom of not depending on anybody but herself. Through constant experiences with other cultures, Saito discovered an open lifestyle, the product of her efforts to live as freely as possible, that revealed itself in the playfulness of her games and performances. Shiomi, who returned to Japan after a year in New York and then married and had two children, continued her artistic and musical interests. She bridged both her art and the traditionally accepted Japanese woman’s lifestyle. To work as a female composer and avant-garde artist has been a rare situation in Japan and has been neither understood nor well supported by the society. But Shiomi found a balance between her artistic pursuits and domestic responsibilities by utilizing the international postal system. While working within geographical and social constraints, Shiomi’s mail-art event series *Spatial Poem* (1965–1975; see figs. 63 and 64, in chapter 5) afforded her a virtually interactive site where her everyday activities converged with her artistic imagination.

For these five artists, the sense of being outsiders may have led to self-reflective tendencies in their art. In her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, French literary theorist Simone de Beauvoir analyzed the woman’s dichotomous self that emerges from looking at herself in a mirror. Beauvoir posited that “she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist *outside*.”<sup>2</sup> This analysis of woman as a self-observer relates to Ono’s

idea of being an outsider who is capable of objective observations, as opposed to an insider, who is too shortsighted. Kristine Stiles has suggested a connection between Beauvoir's idea and Shiomi's *Mirror Piece* (1963), in which a performer is instructed to look into a mirror with her back to the sea and to step backward into the water.<sup>3</sup> Expanding Stiles's discussion, mirrors or other self-reflective objects are commonly found in the works of Kubota, Kusama, Ono, and Shiomi. Ono's *Self-Portrait* (1965), for example, is a small mirror in an envelope that invites the viewer to see a mirrored reflection of himself. Kubota has also employed mirrors and water as recurrent motifs in her video installations, such as *Video Haiku* (see fig. 76, in chapter 6), to set up a contemplative atmosphere. In her work, the water is introduced as another reflective material on which she can project herself. Kusama has used mirrors in her installation, *Infinity Mirror Room* (see fig. 24, in chapter 2). The mirror-covered interior of this room multiply the phallic sculpture and the spectator into an infinite number of reflections, creating a mesmerizing effect. Mirrors not only visually enhance the repetition of Kusama's polka-dotted phallic forms, but also fulfill the artist's desire for self-aggrandizement. Kusama's externalized view of self, or her public persona as an artist, can thus be multiplied to infinity.

In her discussion of women artists associated with Surrealism, Whitney Chadwick has theorized that the doubled image has "provided women artists with a way of complicating otherness by reproducing the sameness, by making the woman Other to herself and engaging her in a dialogue with the self that produces her life as narrative."<sup>4</sup> Although these four artists' use of mirrors in their works are different, the motivations underlying them may have been similar. By having a dialogue with their other self, they have explored and affirmed their self-identities. As Chadwick has also noted, for women artists in general, "[p]erformative strategies also encourage agency and externalized perceptions of self."<sup>5</sup> The artists in this study have used performance as an organic medium to explore their identities. By performing in front of the audience, they have acquired a second set of eyes through which they might view themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

These artists' antiestablishment and freedom-seeking mind-sets have also influenced their choice of artistic media. Their desire to remain relatively free from any preexisting notions of art has led them to choose media that did not necessarily fit within conventional categories. Partially reflecting their awareness of emerging trends in both American and Japanese avant-garde art, their art was initially difficult to define, but eventually found intermedia art as the closest to its nature. Coined by Dick Higgins in the late 1960s, the term *intermedia* originally connoted the ambiguous distinctions among such different media as text-based scores, painting, sculpture, environment, and performance. Its "in-between-ness" manifested itself in these artists' departure from the previously established artistic categories and hierarchies. Although many male artists initially worked in intermedia art, most of them



soon redirected themselves to produce salable paintings or objects. Carolee Schneemann has noted that many women artists, including Ono and Kusama, persisted in working across media while most of their male colleagues such as Jim Dine, Red Grooms, and Claes Oldenburg returned to almost exclusively producing paintings or objects in order to become financially stable.<sup>6</sup> This observation points to the contradiction that, because of these women artists' own "in-between-ness" and resistance to the establishment, their art slipped away from the mainstream and became marginalized in art history.

In the late 1980s, these women's works finally began to attract the renewed interest of critics and curators within the context of Postmodernism and post-colonialism. Since 1989, Kusama has had retrospective exhibitions in North America and Japan and has drawn attention from a wide range of curators and art historians.<sup>7</sup> After Stiles discussed Ono's *Cut Piece* and Kubota's *Vagina Painting* in her essay for the 1993 exhibition catalog *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, these particular works have been discussed by many art historians, often in a feminist context.<sup>8</sup> Although the feminist issues in these artists' works is important, some art historians have emphasized the feminist content to the exclusion of the artists' other concerns.

The narrow focus of feminist approaches in general has raised suspicion among many women artists. While Ono has been rather receptive to feminist readings, the other four artists have not. Kubota, for example, denied the feminist intention in her text, beginning with "Video is Vengeance of Vagina" because it was supposedly composed at the time of conceptual art, before the emergence of feminism.<sup>9</sup> This assertion seems invalid, since Kubota did not start working with video until about 1970, when feminism had already spread nationwide. Kusama similarly repudiates feminist interpretations of her work, arguing that it is mundane to see her creation as an "extension of housework."<sup>10</sup> Although Kusama's repulsion of feminist interpretations seems to have stemmed from her personal view of feminism as merely degrading, many Japanese women artists of her generation are similarly distanced from feminism. This is mainly because feminist activism in Japan in the early 1970s did not develop into an organized movement, and its reception was mostly negative. As a result, even today only a small number of Japanese women believe in the value of a feminist intervention within their society.

Japanese women artists' attitudes can be compared to that of American artist Georgia O'Keeffe in the early twentieth century. As Anna Chave has pointed out, O'Keeffe completely denied any sexual interpretation of her floral imagery or landscapes because she felt critics were imposing their personal views on her work.<sup>11</sup> Unable to separate the artist's gender from her work, critics could not help differentiating O'Keeffe's paintings from paintings by male artists. Like O'Keeffe, who was one of the few prominent women artists in American modernism, Japanese women artists in the 1960s were reluctant to accept interpretations of their works based on gender. This is es-



pecially understandable in Japan, where formalist readings of art have been predominant among scholars and curators until recently. Thus, the ambiguous view of feminism maintained by many Japanese women artists should not lead to the devaluation of their works.

These artists' consciousness of being women is only one of many motivations behind their works. Their art reflects a multitude of concerns and heightened sensibility stemming from their complex experiences of living as outsiders in foreign countries. Their works are also closely related to the rapid and dramatic social change of the 1960s, which eventually led to the national women's liberation movement and protests against the Vietnam War. It is important to note that many of these five artists' works preceded these movements. The main concern of Ono's *Cut Piece* is the human violence and vulnerability that stems in part from her war experiences. In its self-sacrificial act ultimately appealing for peace, *Cut Piece* holds close affinities with Mahatma Gandhi's practice of nonviolence and at the time set a model for the anti-Vietnam War movement. In the late 1960s, Kusama was quite observant of the American underground culture and sought to draw attention from the emerging hippies by interrelating pacifism and nudism in her body-painting Happenings. Her indoor Happenings were closely tied to the sexual revolution. Aside from its profeminist content, Kubota's *Vagina Painting* challenged the formalist concept of artistic beauty by employing a visceral part of the human body in the very act of artistic creation, thus transgressing the border between art and life. The works of Saito and Shiomi are neither gender-specific nor directly connected to social activism. Rather, they are left open-ended, for the spectator's participation and interpretation. Yet this participatory aspect can also be seen as taking part in the larger movement of freeing art into life or converging art and society that took place in the 1960s.

After leaving Japan, Kubota, Kusama, Ono, Saito, and Shiomi developed their individual artistic languages in New York's avant-garde milieu. While the New York art scene played a significant part in their artistic development, they also brought something new to it. They contributed not only to the further internationalization of the New York art world with their unique, culturally hybrid, artistic visions, but also paved the way for other women artists to pursue experimental art. Furthermore, their pursuits were extended beyond the limited locale of New York City. Kubota, Kusama, and Ono spent some time in Europe, and Saito has lived and worked there since the late 1960s.

Among these artists' wide range of contributions to international contemporary art is the precedence that they set for the use of the artist's body in performance. While some of Japanese avant-garde artists had presented their performances in public spaces earlier, Ono's performance at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1961 became one of the earliest examples of an artist's onstage performances.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Ono's encouragement of the audience participation in her early paintings, such as *Painting to Be Stepped On* (1961), may have been instrumental in setting a style for Fluxus events. Her *Fly* (1964)

and *Cut Piece* (1964) were among the earliest audience participatory events. Unlike early Happenings, such as Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959), where a clear division between performers and the spectators existed, Ono's events often erased that barrier. This participatory aspect was common to many of Shiomi's and Saito's events as well as Kusama's later Happenings. Shiomi's mail-art event series *Spatial Poem* would not have been possible without others' contributions. Similarly, Saito's games would have lost meaning without the audience's engagement, and Kusama's body-painting performances would not have occurred if there was no one to paint. These four artists have shared a strong urge to interact and communicate with people throughout their careers. The influences of their participatory events can be found in the work of some younger artists who emerged in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the subversive use of the female body in Kubota's, Kusama's, and Ono's performances impacted American women performance artists of the 1970s, such as Eleanor Antin, Linda Montano, Adrian Piper, and Hannah Wilke.<sup>14</sup> Like the three Japanese women artists, these younger American women artists employed their own bodies in performance in order to strategically disrupt the traditional view of women in patriarchal society. Although these artists' feminist intentions were more pronounced than the Japanese women's, ideas for feminist subversion through the provocative use of the female body was nonetheless demonstrated in Kubota's, Kusama's, and Ono's performances. Their legacy has been passed onto an even younger generation of artists, including Janine Antoni, Karen Finley, and the Guerrilla Girls. While the Guerrilla Girls protest art through performance and their texts inherit the rebellious qualities of Kusama's and Ono's performance art, Antoni's *Loving Care* (1996) and Finley's chocolate-smearing body-performance (1990) are reminiscent of Kubota's *Vagina Painting*.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Asian female artists such as Patty Chang, Nikki L. Lee, Mariko Mori, and Yoshiko Shimada critique the social construction of gender and national identity through masquerade in photographs and video.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the world was not as connected as it is today, these five Japanese women adventurously embarked on a long voyage of artistic exploration. They paved the way for younger Japanese women artists to seek opportunities in the West, prompting a continuous exodus of courageous and innovative women artists from their home country. Women artists employing nontraditional media and content still have limited opportunities in Japan and have better opportunities for success in the West.<sup>16</sup> Along with these younger women artists, Kubota, Kusama, Ono, Saito, and Shiomi continue their journey today, perpetually challenging the limitations of both the Japanese and Western art worlds with their experimental spirit.

## NOTES

*Note: All translations from the Japanese are by the author of the present volume unless otherwise noted.*

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### Introduction

1. See RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: From Futurism to the Present*, rev. ed. (New York: Abrams, 1988).
2. Austin defines “performative” expressions as those that “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constatae anything at all,” and “are not ‘true or false’”; and “the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of the doing of an action.” Examples of such expressions include “I do” and “I bet.” See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 4–7. See also Kristine Stiles, “Between Water and Stone: Fluxus Performance, A Metaphysics of Acts,” in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 96, n. 7. Feminist theorist Judith Butler also used the term *performative* in her discussion of gender construction, claiming that gender is “performative” because it “is real only to the extent that it is performed.” See Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performing Feminisms*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 278.
3. Dick Higgins, “Intermedia,” *Something Else Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (1966): i; reprinted with the 1981 addition in Dick Higgins, *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 18–21. More recently Hannah Higgins expands the discussion on intermedia in *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 91–99.
4. The Japanese government propagated the policy of “Good Wives and Wise Mothers” while enacting the Higher Girls School Order in 1899. For a critique of this policy and its influence on women’s education in Japan, see Kazue Muta, *Senryaku to siteno kazoku — Kindai Nihon no kokuminkokka keisei to josei* [Family as Strategy — The Formation of a Nation and Women in Modern Japan] (Tokyo: Shinyo-sha, 1997).

5. For performance art before World War II, including that of the Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists, see Goldberg, *Performance*.
6. I owe this description of Fluxus to my discussions with Jon Hendricks over the course of my research. His recent publication is insightful in this regard; see Hendricks, ed., *O que e Fluxus? O que nao e? O porque/What's Fluxus? What's Not! Why* (Brasilia: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil/Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Foundation, 2002).
7. See Henry Saye, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993); C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press/New England University Presses, 1993); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
8. Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in Paul Schimmel, *Out of Action: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–79* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames and Hudson, 1998), 230.
9. Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 1997), 52.
10. Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," *Art in America* no. 64 (1976): 75.
11. *Ibid.*, 73.
12. Moira Roth, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Arts, 1983), 17, 45–52. Roth's chronology contains some factual errors. Kusama is mentioned along with Pat Oldenburg as "active women participants" in Happenings in 1959, but she did not participate in any Happenings until her own in 1966. Charlotte Moorman is noted as one of "the leading women participants in Fluxus concerts and Events" in 1962, like Knowles and Ono, but she never affiliated herself with Fluxus. She mainly participated in Ono's and Nam June Paik's events, which were considered separate from Fluxus activities.
13. Lippard, "Pains and Pleasures," 75–76.
14. Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) was published in France in 1949 and in the United States in 1953. The publication of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was in 1963. The first "women's liberation" group was formed in Chicago in 1967, and similar groups were independently organized in New York, Toronto, Detroit, Seattle, San Francisco, and other cities. The women's liberation movement became more visible in 1968 when these groups united for the first time at the first National Conference of Women's Liberation in Chicago and radical feminists disrupted the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey. See Sheila Ruth, *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 1990), 436–37.
15. Carolee Schneemann, *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Tresspass Press, 1975), 36.
16. Mary Jane Jacob, introduction to Roth, *The Amazing Decade*, 11.
17. Carolee Schneemann, "Letter to Editor," *Artforum*, October 1983, reprinted in *Feminism and Art: An Anthology*, ed. Hilary Robinson (New York: Universe Books, 1988), 272.
18. Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and Effervescent Body* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 221.
19. Even one of the most up-to-date sources on feminist art merely mentions Yoko

Ono on the periphery of feminist performance art; see Josephine Withers, “Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Transforming Ourselves,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Abrams, 1994), 160.

## Chapter One: Historical Background and Common Issues

1. Bupendra Karia, introduction to *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalog, ed. Bupendra Karia (New York: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989), 2.
2. Unless otherwise specified, most of the factual information in this paragraph and the following two paragraphs derives from Reiko Tomii, “Infinity Nets: Aspects of Contemporary Japanese Painting,” in Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*, exhibition catalog (New York: Abrams in association with the Yokohama Museum of Art, the Japan Foundation, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 307–19, and glossary, 393–98.
3. Under the American occupation, everything contributing to the imperialist war became the focus of public accusation, including painters who participated in the war propaganda such as Tsuguharu Fujita.
4. The well-known painter Taro Okamoto created a scandal when he removed himself from one of the most established gadans, Nika-kai, in 1961 in order to become independent. See Shūzō Takiguchi, “Gaka, Okamoto Tarō no Tanjou,” *Geijutsu Shinchō*, no. 143 (1961): 110–15.
5. Following the opening of the Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Kamakura in October 1951, the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo was opened in December of the same year.
6. The patronage and market of Japanese art in the 1950s and 1960s are discussed in Ichiro Haryū, *Sengo bijutsu seiruishu* (Tokyo: Tōsho sensho, 1979), 127–42.
7. For the list of the exhibitions at Galerie Takemiya, see Hiroshi Fujimatsu, “Takemiya Garō to Takiguchi Shūzō,” *Bijutsu Techō*, August 1964; reprinted in Makoto Osaka, Tōru Takemitsu, Yoshiaki Tōno, Yoshihisa Tsunioka, and Kokusi Iwatani, eds., *Collection Takiguchi Shūzō* (Tokyo: Misuzu shobō, 1998), 346–48.
8. For the policy of *ryōsai kenbo*, see my introduction to the present volume, n. 4.
9. See Shina Suga, “Daigaku Fujin Kyokai Souritsu no koro” [The Foundation of the JAUW in Japan], in Yōichi Chino, ed., *Gendai Nihon josei no shutai keisei: 40 nendai* [The Formation of the Subjectivity of Contemporary Japanese Women: The 1940s], (Tokyo: Domesu shuppan, 1996), 230–33.
10. Some women still managed to enter national universities. The first woman was admitted to Tōhoku University in 1912 and to Tokyo Imperial University in 1913. See Sandra Buckley, *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 309.
11. Reiko Kokatsu, curator of Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Art, researched extensively the situations of Japanese women artists between 1930 and 1960. Most of information in this paragraph derives from her exhibition catalog; see Kokatsu, *Hashiru Onna tachi/Japanese Women Artists before and after World War II, 1930s–1950s* (Utsunomiya: Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, 2001). For the earlier history of Japanese women artists, see Patricia Fister, *Japanese Women Artists, 1600–1900* (Lawrence, Kans.: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988).

12. See the chronology in Buckley, *Broken Silence*, 306–341.
13. For the *Nihonga* women artists from the Meiji period to the Showa period, see Shinji Hashimoto, “Nihon kaiga to josei gaka tachi/Japanese Painting and Women Painters,” and Kaoru Suzuki, “Zaiya dantai no josei nihon gaka tachi/The Activities of Women *Nihongaka*, Japanese-Style Painters outside the Government Exhibitions,” both in Kokatsu, *Hashiru Onna tachi*, 21–25 and 26–29, respectively.
14. For biographies of other *Nihonga* women artists, see Kokatsu, *Hashiru Onna tachi*, 150–54.
15. One of the few exceptions was Motoko Morita, who taught Western-style painting at Joshi Bijutsu Daigaku (Women’s Art University).
16. After inclusion in the exhibition of Japanese calligraphy and architecture at the Museum of Modern Art in 1953, Shinoda received international acclaim. She stayed in New York from 1956 to 1958 and exhibited at Betty Parsons Gallery from 1965 to 1977. See her chronology in Alexandra Munroe, *Sengo Nihon no zen’ei bijutsu/Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky* (Yokohama: Yokohama Museum of Art, 1994), 213.
17. Katsura was also one of the first Japanese women artists to stay abroad for relatively a long period of time. In 1958, she traveled to Europe, Africa, and then to the United States. Yoko Ono recalls that her loft at Chambers Street had almost been rented to Katsura; Ono, e-mail correspondence with the author, February 16, 2004. After participating in some exhibitions, Katsura returned to Japan in early 1961 due to a family emergency. While Katsura was one of the most respected women artists in Japan, her major retrospective exhibition at the Ibaragi Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in 1998 was posthumous. For biographies of other *yōga* artists, see Kokatsu, 129–49.
18. Yukiko Shimada, untitled statement, in *Joryū gaka kyōkai ten: 50 kai kinen gashū* [The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Women Artists’ Association Exhibition Catalog] (Tokyo: Joryūgaka kyōkai, 1996), 21.
19. Sumiko Osumi, “Migishi sensei,” in *Joryū gaka kyōkai ten*, 19.
20. Founders included the relatively established painters Setsuko Migishi and Yuki Katsura. Sixty-five women artists who had been either independent or belonged to different *dantais* joined the association during the first year. There was also the Fujin Bijutsu Kyōkai (Women’s Art Association), which was founded in 1933 by seven women painters who had been exhibiting through prestigious *teiten* (imperial exhibitions), including Eiko Fujikawa and Kikuko Nakata, but it did not last long because of Japan’s involvement in World War II. See *Nihon no onnatachi: Watashi o hyougen suru* [Japanese Women: Expressing Myself] (Tokyo: Nihon Toshō Center, 1996), 83.
21. Although Shuyō-kai, founded by seven women in 1918, continues to exist today, it was exhibiting together with three other *dantais* between 1949 and 1963. See Kokatsu, *Hashiru Onna tachi*, 16–18, 162–63.
22. Interestingly, half of the six women had experienced living abroad when even traveling abroad was extremely difficult. Toshiko Akamatsu (b. 1912; changed name to Toshi Maruki after 1956) stayed in Moscow in 1937 and 1941. Saori Akutagawa (1924–1966; changed name to Madokoro after 1958) traveled to Europe, Russia, and China in 1954, and lived in the United States between 1958 and 1962. Hideko Urushibara (b. 1928) was born in London and returned to Japan in 1941. See *Gendai Bijutsu no dōkō 1, 1950 nendai: Sono ankoku to kōbō* [Trends



- of Japanese Contemporary Art I, the 1950s: Gloom and Shafts of Light] (Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, 1981).
23. Founded in 1952, Genbi functioned as a monthly study group as well as an exhibition organizer for young and established artists in a wide range of media such as painting, design, ceramics, calligraphy, and flower arrangement. It included future Gutai artists.
  24. See my introduction to the present volume for a discussion of the term *inter-media*.
  25. The exhibition *Dada in Japan* traced the roots of the postwar Japanese avant-garde art to Japanese Dada in the 1920s. See Masao Shirakawa, *Dada in Japan: Japanische Avantgarde 1920–1970, Eine Photodokumentation* (Düsseldorf: Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, 1983).
  26. Sanka (Third Section), comprised of the Japanese Dadaist group MAVO and other artists, did onstage performances in 1925, but their activities were not well known to the artists of the 1950s. Their influence on Gutai and later artists, therefore, is hard to validate. For details of the performances by Sanka and MAVO, see Toshiharu Omuka, *Taisho-ki Shinko Bijutsu Undō no Kenkyū* [A Study of New Art Movements of the Taisho Period] (Tokyo: Skaido, 1998). See also Gennifer Weisenfeld, “Murayama, MAVO, and Modernity: Constructions of the Modern in Taisho Avant-Garde Art,” Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1997, which was recently revised as a book; see Weisenfeld, *MAVO Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1905–1931* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).
  27. Art critic and poet Shūzō Takiguchi was responsible for disseminating the concept and art of Surrealism in Japan. For details, see Masahiro Sawa and Hirofumi Wada, eds., *Nihon no shururearisumu* [Japanese Surrealism] (Kyoto: Sekaishisō-sha, 1995).
  28. Reiko Tomii, “Concerning the Institution of Art: Conceptualism in Japan,” in Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalog (Queens, N.Y.: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 15.
  29. Statements by Jikken Kōbō, cited in Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, “Jikken Kōbō to bijutsu no datsu-ryōiki” [Experimental Workshop and the Deterritorialization of Art], in *Jikken Kōbō to Takiguchi Shūzō/Experimental Workshop* (Tokyo: Sasaki Gallery, 1991), 25.
  30. Jikken Kōbō’s experiments in theater art especially reflected Oskar Schlemmer’s idea of theater as a synthesis of art forms rather than as a dramatic art. It is worth pointing out that Jikken Kōbō’s experiments paralleled those at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which also introduced the art and philosophy of the Bauhaus to the United States. Reflecting the transnationalism of the Bauhaus, the ideas of Carl Jung, Dada, the I-Ching, and Zen Buddhism were often discussed at the Black Mountain College. See Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interactions in Art between East and West* (Zwolle, Netherlands: Waanders Uitgevers, 1997), 62.
  31. It was shown at the Fifth Experimental Workshop Presentation at Daiichi Seimei Hall, Tokyo, in September 1953. See *Jikken Kōbō to Takiguchi Shūzō*, 110, 115. A film of the projected images is preserved as its documentation.
  32. The picture is reproduced and annotated in Yuri Mitsuda, *Josei no shōzō: nihon gendai bijutsu no kao/Images of Women in Japanese Contemporary Art 1930s–*

- 1990s, exhibition catalog (Tokyo: Shibuya Ward Shōtō Museum of Art, 1996), 37, 121. See also *Otsuji Kiyoji Shashin Jikkenshitsu/Kiyoji Ohtsuji Retrospective: Experimental Workshop of Photography*, exhibition catalog (Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 26.
33. Yoshihara quoted in Shin'ichiro Osaki, "Gutai: Kaiga e itaru akushon" [Gutai: Action into Painting], in *Gutai shiryōshū/Document Gutai 1954–1972*. (Ashiya: Ashiya City Cultural Foundation/Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, 1993), 20.
34. Allan Kaprow, "Interview with Allan Kaprow" by Susan Hapgood, in *Neo-Dada Redefining Art, 1958–62* (New York: Universe, 1994), 121. Ichiro Haryū suggests a possibility that Gutai's experiments influenced Kaprow; see Haryū, ed., *Gendai no bijutsu/Art Now 11: Kōi ni kakeru* (Tokyo: Kōdan-sha, 1972), 106.
35. *Gutai shiryōshū*, 404–5.
36. *Ibid.*, 33.
37. The above descriptions of this performance are based on my viewing of the documentary film shown at Tanaka's retrospective exhibition in May 2001. See stills reproduced in Mizuho Kato, *Atsuko Tanaka: Search for an Unknown Aesthetic, 1954–2000* (Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, 2001), 75.
38. Toshio Yoshida, "About Works in the Second Gutai Exhibition," in *Gutai shiryōshū*, 314. Gutai's first stage performance was held at the time of its second exhibition.
39. Tanaka in "Tanaka Atsuko · Jisaku o kataru" [Atsuko Tanaka Speaks of Her Work], in *Circles/Lines*, document of the education programs in conjunction with the exhibition *Atsuko Tanaka* (Shizuoka: Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, 2003), 11.
40. Paul Schimmel, "Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object," in *Out of Action: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–79* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames and Hudson, 1998), 29.
41. Atsuko Tanaka, "Butaifuku" [Stage Costume], *Gutai* 7 (1956); reprinted in *Gutai Shiryōshū*, 299.
42. Art historian Joan Rothfuss views Tanaka's piece as "a metaphor for the circular, intermittent striving of the human spirit as it alternatively inhabits and then disowns the flesh over the course of many lifetimes"; see Rothfuss, "Japanese Women Artists: Art, Identity, and Action," paper presented at the Japan Society, December 6, 2000.
43. Osaki, "Gutai," 15.
44. Akira Kanayama, in "Kanayama Akira, Tanaka Atsuko Intabyū" [Akira Kanayama, Atsuko Tanaka Interview] by Shin'ichiro Osaki and Tokutarō Tamamura, in *Gutai Shiryōshū*, 402.
45. Aomi Okabe, *Atsuko Tanaka Another Gutai*, DVD (Kyoto: Ufer! Art Documentary, 1998).
46. See for example, Shin'ichiro Osaki, "Body and Place: Action in Postwar Art in Japan," in Schimmel, *Out of Action*, 121–57. Osaki's conclusion that "physical and site-specific works were the mainstream postwar art in Japan" is misleading since those works still existed within the limited avant-garde art circles.
47. Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in Schimmel, *Out of Action*, 228.
48. Although Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy," 228, claims "the primacy of human subjects over inanimate objects" as a common denominator for international performance art, I do not agree particularly with this point. Because this concept



- does not apply to some of Japanese performance art, for example, Gutai. While Gutai artists emphasized the physicality of their bodies in the performances, they did not intend to prioritize the human subjects over objects. They rather sought to “collaborate” with objects or materials.
49. Yoshiaki Tōno, “Neo-Dada et anti-art,” in *Japon des avant-gardes 1910–1970*, exhibition catalog (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1986), 329. Art historian Reiko Tomii translates *hangeijutsu* as “anti-Art,” arguing that the Japanese term *geijutsu* clearly refers to Art as an institution rather than *art* in general; see Tomii, “Concerning the Institution of Art,” 17–18.
  50. Genpei Akasegawa, quoted and translated in John Clark, “The 1960s: The Art Which Destroyed Itself: An Intimate Account,” in *Reconstructions: Japanese Avant-Garde Art in Japan 1945–1965*, ed. Kazu Kaidō and David Elliot (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 87.
  51. Ushio Shinohara, *Zen’ei no michi* [The Avant-Garde Road] (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1968), 61.
  52. Many other groups all over Japan are cataloged in *Rokujūnendai ten: Kounattara yakekuso da* [Exhibition of the Sixties: Now, It’s All or Nothing], exhibition catalog (Mito: Mito Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997).
  53. Alexandra Munroe offers the most comprehensive historical analysis in English of Anpo’s impact on the Japanese art of the 1960s. See Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, 150–52.
  54. Taro Okamoto, c. 1948; quoted in Shinohara, *Zen’ei no michi*, 58. Okamoto’s quote is translated in Kaidō and Elliot, eds., *Reconstructions*, 14.
  55. Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, 149.
  56. Mokuma Kikuhata, telephone interview by the author, February 12, 2004.
  57. Shun’ichiro Tashiro, *Kakenuketa zen’ei — Kyūshūha to sono jidai* [The Avant-Garde That Ran Through: Kyūshū-ha and Its Era] (Fukuoka: Kashoin, 1996), 95.
  58. The description of this performance is from Mitsuko Tabe, telephone interview by the author, February 19, 2004. There is no explanation, but a photograph of this performance is reproduced in *Kyūshū-ha ten / Group Kyūshū-ha*, exhibition catalog (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1988), 104 and Tashiro, *Kakenuketa zen’ei*, 94. The following quote and episode in the text are also from Tashiro, *Kakenuketa zen’ei*, 94.
  59. Although Hiroko Hiraoka (b. 1937) also belonged to Neo-Dada, she was more loosely affiliated with the group than Kishimoto.
  60. Genpei Akasegawa, *Han geijutsu anpan* [Anti-art Independent Exhibitions] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1994), 142, 152, 156.
  61. Raiji Kuroda, “Akarui satsurikusha, sono shunkangei no jutsu” [Lighthearted Murderers and Their Art of Instantaneous Expression], in *Ryūdōsuru Bijutsu III: Neo-dada no shashin* [Changing Art III: Photographs of Neo-Dada] (Fukuoka: Fukuoka City Art Museum, 1993), 11.
  62. Ushio Shinohara, “S-ko to Neo-Dada” [The girl S and Neo-Dada] in Sayako Kishimoto Retrospective Exhibition Preparation Committee, *Sayako Kishimoto, 1939–1988* (Kanazawa: Wakakusa Shobō, 1990), 6.
  63. Mayumi Kagawa, “Neo dada, aruiwa houkai no tameno purojekuto,” [Neo-Dada, or A Project for Destruction], in *Neodada kara 21seikigata majo e — Kishimoto Sayako no hito to sakuhin* [The Art and Life of Kishimoto Sayoko] (Yokohama: Josei to Ato projekuto, 1997), 49–50.
  64. Sayako Kishimoto, “Jitsuwan Seishun Zankoku Monogatari” [A True Cruel Story of Youth], in *Sayako Kishimoto, 1939–1988*, 52.

65. Kuroda also pointed out that male Eros dominated the Neo-Dada activities. See Kuroda, “Akarui satsurikusha,” 13, n. 13.
66. Kuniharu Akiyama, “Sōgestu kontenporarī sirīzu: oto to akushon ni yoru ibento no kiten” [Sōgetsu Contemporary Series: Origins of Events by Sound and Action], in *Saigen Sōgetsu Art Center* [Reconstructed Sōgetsu Art Center] (Tokyo: Sōgetsu kaikan, 1987), 10.
- Throughout this volume, I refer to the Happening(s) artistic movement in its capitalized form, following its original origins.
67. Descriptions of this concert derive from Kuniharu Akiyama, “Gendai ongaku no jiyū to bōken” [The Freedom and Adventure of Contemporary Music], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 8, 1961.
68. Yoshiaki Tōno, *Gendai bijutsu: Porokku ikou* [Contemporary Art since Pollock] (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1965), 276.
69. Kōichiro Ishizaki, in Kōichiro Ishizaki, Seiki Hanada, and Yoshida Yoshie, “Kantō zadan kai” [Roundtable Discussion], in Yoshida Yoshie, *Kaitaigeki no maku orite — 60 nendai zen’ei bijutsushi* [After the Curtainfall of a Deconstructive Play—History of the Sixties Avant-Garde Art] (Tokyo: Zōkeisha, 1982), 9.
70. For example, see “Kemuri no chōkoku, moji no nai shishū: Shingeijutsu ‘happeningu’ to torikumu Nihon josei” [Smoke Sculpture, Book of Poems without Letters: Japanese Woman Undertaking the New Art Form of the “Happening”], *Shūkan Yomiuri*, May 6, 1962. Artist Hiroshi Fujimatsu also reported Ono’s event as a Happening in “Ten sen men, gaka no Techō: Kyokō no kurokami” [Point Line Plane, A Painter’s Notebook: Fictitious Black Hair], *Bijutsu Techō*, no. 206 (1962): 83. Shinohara, however, mentions that Ono’s recital was not so shocking because event-like performances were ubiquitous in Japan by then. See Shinohara, *Zen’ei no michi*, 98.
71. Yoko Ono, “To Wesleyan People,” in Alexandra Munroe and Jon Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono* (New York: Japan Society in association with Abrams, 2000), 289.
72. For example, Shinohara conflated both *event* and *Happening* to describe performances by himself or others. See Shinohara, *Zen’ei no michi*, 98–99.
73. Music critic Kuniharu Akiyama, who conducted the Fluxus concert at the Carnegie Recital Hall in 1964, wrote the first article in Japanese to discuss the difference between Happenings and events, but he also commented that exact definitions of these terms was not important. See Akiyama, “Rofuto no geijutsuka tachi, nyūyōku ibento tokushū” [Artists of the Loft, Special Feature on Events in New York], *Bijutsu Techō*, no. 244 (1964): 51.
74. Kiyoshi Awazu, “Abangarudo siteita me no kagayaki” [The Shine of the Eyes When Involved in the Avant-Garde], in *Saigen Sōgetsu Art Center*, 5.
75. Akasegawa, *Han geijutsu anpan*, 197.
76. *Ibid.*, 154, 194.
77. The group could be extended to the other loosely affiliated artists such as Tatsu Izumi, who participated in some of the group’s events. See Ichiro Haryū, *Sengo bijutsu seirui shi* [A History of Development of Postwar Art], (Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 1979), 150.
78. The rope became problematic when an old woman stumbled over it and reported it to the police.
79. One of the copies of the film is in the collection of the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art; the author’s viewing of the film was kindly facilitated by curator Naoko Seki.
80. Mieko Shiomi, interview by the author, July 16, 2003.

81. The flyer for *Be Clean!* listed “Fluxus Japanese section” among the sponsors. See Camnitzer, Farver, and Weiss, *Global Conceptualism*, 21, fig. 10.
82. Akasegawa, *Han geijutsu anpan*, 10.
83. For details about the one-thousand-yen incident in English, see Nam June Paik, “To Catch Up or Not to Catch Up with the West: Hijikata and Hi Red Center,” in Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, 80–81; and Tomii, “Concerning the Institution of Art,” 20–22. See also Reiko Tomii, “State v. (Anti-) Art: Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident by Akasegawa Genpei and Company,” *Positions* 10, no. 1 (2002): 141–72.
84. Raiji Kuroda, “Sakka ryakureki” [Artists’ Biographies] in *Ryūdōsuru Bijutsu III*, 76–77.
85. Alexandra Munroe surveyed the emigration history of Japanese artists with a primary focus on the postwar emigration of Japanese artists to the United States. See “Japanese Artists in the American Avant-Garde 1945–1970,” in Munroe, *Contemporary Japanese Art in America I: Arita, Nakagawa, Sugimoto* (New York: Japan Society, 1987), 12–22; and Munroe, “A Continent Away: Japanese Artists in New York City,” *Winds*, August 1986, 43–51.
86. Some Japanese artists lived in New York as early as in the first decade of the twentieth century. Most of them were engaged in the traditional medium of Japanese painting or in oil painting in a conservative style. See Masayuki Okabe, “Gaka tachi no shinsekai — nichibeibijutsu kouryūshi, 1896–1945” [The Painters’ New World — History of Japan–U.S. Exchange, 1896–1945], in *America ni ikita nikkeijingaka tachi, kibo to kunō no hanseiki, 1896–1945/Japanese and Japanese American Painters in the United States, A Half Century of Hope and Suffering, 1896–1945*, exhibition catalog (Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum, 1995), 13–23.
87. See Jeffrey Wechsler, *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945–1970*, exhibition catalog (New York: Abrams, 1997), and *The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture*, exhibition catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).
88. Masayoshi Homma, “Japanese Artists in America,” in *Zaigai Nihonjin Sakka Ten/Exhibition of Japanese Artists Abroad: Europe and America* (Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 9.
89. *Ibid.*
90. Yoshio Ozawa, English manuscript of a Japanese article, “Yasuo Kuniyoshi and the World War II,” *Bijutsu Techō*, no. 23 (1971): 186. Courtesy Yoshio Ozawa.
91. Homma, “Japanese Artists in America,” 10.
92. Mary Hale Bereday, “Japanese Artists in New York City,” Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1973, 88.
93. “Japanese Artists Say New York City Has Plenty They Like,” unidentified newspaper article, October 1961, from Yayoi Kusama archive.
94. There are some exceptions in which women artists abandoned their artistic careers in the United States in order to support their artist husbands. For example, a former member of the Neo-Dadaist Organizers in Tokyo, Hiroko Hiraoka, stopped painting after coming to New York in 1963, in order to take a job in a Japanese company to support the conceptual art practice of her husband On Kawara.
95. There were some Japanese women who became recognized in the West as early as the late nineteenth century, but they were mostly dancers or singers acting Japanese roles. Tomiko Shimazu mentions five early predecessors including

- Tamaki Miura, an opera singer who became popular performing *Madame Butterfly* in Europe and the United States between 1914 and 1935, and Ragusa Otama (Tama Kiyohara, 1861–1939), a painter who lived in Italy between 1882 and 1933. See Shimazu, “Kokusaishakai de katsuyaku suru nihon josei — āto o chūshin ni” [Japanese Women Who Play an Active Part in International Society with a Focus on Art] in *Onna to otoko no jikū: Nihon joseishi saikou II—Media to josei no hyougen* [Time-Space of Women and Men: Reconsideration of Japanese Women’s History—Media and Women’s Expression] (Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 1996), 354–411. Some wealthy and ambitious women painters studied in Paris even in prewar years, but none was able to cut her way into the Parisian art world. Among them were Teruko Inoue; Yoko Toyama; Yoneko Saeki; Haruko Hasegawa; Natsuko Hirawa; and Masako Kinoshita. See individual entries in *Bunkajin Meiroku* [Name List of Cultured People] (Tokyo: Nihon Chosakuken Kyougikai, 1956).
96. Other Japanese women artists who lived outside of Japan for more than a year include painter and sculptor, Aiko Miyawaki (b. 1929); painter Yuki Katsura; painter Saori Madokoro (Akutagawa; 1924–1966). Miyawaki stayed in Milan, Paris, and New York between 1959 and 1964. See Alexandra Munroe, “Aiko Miyawaki, Art and Thought,” in *Aiko Miyawaki*, exhibition catalog (Paris: Galerie Enrico Navarra, 1996), 86. Katsura traveled to European countries and the United States between 1956 and 1961. Madokoro studied at the Art Students’ League in 1961, but went back to Japan the following year. See Mitsuda, *Josei no shōzo*, 123. For the later generations of Japanese women artists who became internationally active, see Yuko Hasegawa, “Women Artists in Japan,” in *The Age of Anxiety*, exhibition catalog (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre, 1995), 45–62; Janet Koplos, “Some Kind of Revolution?” *Art in America*, April 1990, 99–111, 153, 155; and Yuri Mitsuda, “Flower for Wounds,” *Art and Asia Pacific* no. 2 (1995): 60–69.
  97. Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, discusses the influences of Zen on art of Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, and Ad Reinhardt, among others.
  98. Yoshiaki Tōno, *Tsukurite tachi tonō jikan—Gendai geijutsu no bouken/Chatting with Artists*. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1984), 205.
  99. These dealers also represented American artists who were influenced by Eastern philosophy and aesthetics, such as Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, and Sam Francis.
  100. For the Japan Society, see <http://www.japansociety.org/about/history.cfm>. Other factual information in this paragraph derives from Munroe, “Japanese Artists in the American Avant-Garde,” 16, 20.
  101. Regarding Tobey’s interest in Eastern art and philosophy, see Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 43–56.
  102. S[idney] T[illim], “In the Galleries: Yayoi Kusama,” *Arts* 34, no. 1 (1959): 56.
  103. For example, Ono’s friend Jeff Perkins, who met Ono during his tour of duty in Tokyo in 1963 with the U.S. Air Force and was inspired to become an artist through participating in her events, calls Ono his “spiritual godmother.” He remembers that she directed him toward learning Eastern philosophy and art. Perkins, interview by the author, December 20, 2000.
  104. Owen F. Smith, “Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions,” in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 25.

105. Munroe, "Spirit of Yes: The Art and Life of Yoko Ono," in Munroe et al., eds., *Yes Yoko Ono*, 18.
106. George Maciunas, "Interview with George Maciunas" by Larry Miller in *Fluxus etc. /Addenda I: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, 1983), 26.
107. See Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection/New York: Abrams, 1988), 115. *Fluxus* no. 3, scheduled to be published in August 1962, was going to be called "Japanese Yearbox."
108. Three versions of scrolls by Maciunas in the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit, list tentative plans for series of concerts to be held in Europe. The concerts included not only works by Group Ongaku members, but also works by their contemporary Japanese composers, as well as (mistakenly) some visual artists such as Hideko Fukushima.
109. Yoshi Wada, personal recollection, in *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas, 1931–1978*, eds. Emmett Williams and Ann Noel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 134.
110. George Maciunas, personal recollection, in Williams and Noel, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 128.
111. *Ibid.*, 133.
112. In a letter to Shiomi dated 1972, Maciunas mentions coming to Japan with swords to sell. *Ibid.*, 137.
113. Throughout the twentieth century, the number of Japanese immigrants in the United States remained relatively small compared to those of other ethnic immigrant groups, but every significant increase in the number caused strong animosity among Americans who feared that the Japanese would take over their labor. Their fear was also based on the idea that the Japanese might at some point invade the United States. See Jun Etō, *America to watashi* [America and Me] (Tokyo: Bunshun Bunko, 1991), 237–39.
114. Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 78.
115. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 207.
116. Marchetti, *Romance*, 80.
117. Karen Ma, *The Modern Madame Butterfly: Fantasy and Reality in Japanese Cross-Cultural Relationships* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle, 1996), 20.
118. In Japan, geishas hold a reputation for being worldly and modern, gifted conversationalists, innovative performers, and trendsetters. For more on the geisha, see Liza Dalby, *Geisha* (New York: Vintage, 1985).
119. Between 1947 and 1952, 10,517 American citizens, principally armed services personnel, married Japanese women; after 1950, Japanese war-bride marriages became legal. See Marchetti, *Romance*, 161.
120. *Ibid.*, 135.
121. *Ibid.*, 158, 187.
122. Simazu, "Kokusaishakai," 362, cites a 1988 article from the British *Economist*, "Japanese Women: A World Apart," which portrays an uncommon scene — Japanese women playing golf in kimonos — as if it were typical.
123. Midori Yoshimoto, "Instructions for Life: Rediscovering Yoko Ono," *dialogue* 4, no. 1 (2001): 20.
124. Yoko Ono, "Pacifica Radio Interview 11 September 1971" by Liza Cowan and Jan Alpert, Pacifica Radio Archives, Los Angeles, audiotape.

125. Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 1997), 52.
126. Yoko Ono, in *Yoko Ono: Then and Now*, dir. Barbara Graustark, videotape, Polygram Records, 1984.

## Chapter Two: Performing the Self

1. Yayoi Kusama, interview by Alexandra Munroe, December 16, 1988, audiotape (I. 13), Archives of Oral History, Center for International Contemporary Arts, New York, currently housed at University of Texas, Austin; quoted in Alexandra Munroe, "Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalog, (New York: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989), 13.
2. Munroe, "Obsession," 13.
3. Ibid.
4. Yayoi Kusama, "In Conversation with Yayoi Kusama" by Akira Tatehata, in Laura Hoptman, Akira Tatehata, and Udo Kelterman, *Yayoi Kusama* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 27.
5. Munroe, "Obsession," 11–12.
6. Yayoi Kusama, "The Question of Gender in Art," *Tema Celeste: Contemporary Art Review*, no. 39 (1993): 50.
7. "Kusama Yayoi wa jitsuwa danseiken'o" [Yayoi Kusama Actually Has a Phobia of Men], *Shūkan Bunshun*, May 19, 1969.
8. Yayoi Kusama, "Rankō koso wa waga geijutsu" [Orgy Is My Art], *Shūkan Posto*, March 27, 1970.
9. Kusama, "In Conversation," 27.
10. Although this drawing is untitled, Kusama mentions it as a portrait of her mother. Yayoi Kusama, *Kusama Yayoi hanga shū* [Prints by Yayoi Kusama] (Tokyo: Abe shuppan, 1992), 35.
11. Yayoi Kusama, quoted in Dana Friis-Hansen, "Yayoi Kusama's Feminism," *ART+TEXT*, no. 49 (1994): 50.
12. Akira Tatehata sheds light onto Kusama's artistic training and her early paintings in "Kusama as Autonomous Surrealist," in *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*, exhibition catalog (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 61–69.
13. Ibid., 62.
14. Ibid., 64.
15. The affinity between Kusama's work and that of Kawara and Abe was first mentioned in Munroe, "Obsession," 15). Toshiaki Minemura generalized it in the broader context of postwar social realist painting in the introduction to 1953 *raito appu: atarashii sengo bijutsuzo ga miete kita/1953: Shedding Light on Art in Japan*, exhibition catalog (Tokyo: Meguro Museum, 1996), 14. Tatehata, "Kusama as Autonomous Surrealist," 65, extends the comparison.
16. Her 1967 film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* actually superimposes slide reproductions of her drawings onto various vegetables, suggesting their connections.
17. Bupendra Karia, "Biographical Notes," in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, 70.
18. Munroe, "Obsession," 16.
19. Yayoi Kusama, "Piipuru: Kōten o owatte" [People: After My Solo Exhibition], *Geijutsu Shinchō*, no. 6 (1955): 35.



20. “Gakugei” (Arts), unidentified newspaper clipping, 1956, Yayoi Kusama personal files.
21. Kenjiro Okamoto, “Kitaisareru shinjin: Kusama Yayoi” (A New Hope: Yayoi Kusama), *Geijutsu Shinchū*, May 1955, F4.
22. “Ningen moyou: Kusama Yayoi” [Portrait: Yayoi Kusama], *Shūkan Josei*, December 1, 1957.
23. Yayoi Kusama, “Shinjin no shuchū: Iwan no baka” [Newcomer’s Opinion: Foolish Iwan] *Geijutsu Shinchō*, no. 6 (1955): 164.
24. Ibid.
25. Kusama, “Piipuru,” 35.
26. “Gakugei” [Arts], unidentified newspaper clipping, 1957, Yayoi Kusama personal files.
27. “Kotoshi no hōpu: joryū gaka, Kusama Yayoi” [This Year’s Hope, a Female Painter, Yayoi Kusama], *Chūbu Keizai Shimbun*, January 12, 1955.
28. Yayoi Kusama, “Intabyū: waga tamashii no henrei to tatakai—yōshōki kara genzai made” [Interview: The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul—From Childhood to the Present] typed transcript (Tokyo: Fuji Television Gallery, 1986), 2.
29. Although Kusama obtained admission to the school and a scholarship from the Japanese Ministry for Culture and Education, she was either discouraged by the French language or postponed her move to Paris because of the exhibitions in Tokyo. Karia, “Biographical Notes,” 71.
30. Yayoi Kusama to Georgia O’Keeffe, 1957, quoted in Karia, “Biographical Notes,” 72.
31. Georgia O’Keeffe, to Yayoi Kusama, August 18, 1957, in Karia, “Biographical Notes,” 74.
32. Yayoi Kusama to Georgia O’Keeffe, January 26, 1958 in Karia, “Biographical Notes,” 74.
33. Karia, “Biographical Notes,” 75.
34. Kusama, “In Conversation,” 25.
35. Yayoi Kusama, “Onna hitori kokusaigadan o yuku,” (I Enter the International Art World as a Woman Alone), *Geijutsu Shinchō*, no. 12 (1961): 127–28.
36. D[onald] J[udd], “Reviews and Previews: New Names This Month—Yayoi Kusama,” *Art News*, no. 58 (1959): 17.
37. S[idney] T[illim], “In the Galleries: Yayoi Kusama,” *Arts* 34, no. 1 (1959): 56.
38. Karia, “Biographical Notes,” 79–83.
39. Jill Johnston, “Reviews and Previews,” *Art News*, no. 62 (1964): 12.
40. Claes Oldenburg, interview by Alexandra Munroe and Reiko Tomii, February 21, 1989, quoted in Munroe, “Obsession,” 24. Kusama claims that she started soft sculpture first and that Oldenburg followed her about a year later; see Kusama, “Intabyū,” 3.
41. In an interview, Kusama simply answered, “Everybody says so.” See Yayoi Kusama, “Miss Yayoi Kusama: Interview Prepared for WABC Radio” by Gordon Brown, *De nieuwe stijl*, no. 1 (1965): 162. While Kusama did not openly discuss sexual issues in the early 1960s, she may have later assimilated part of the feminist interpretations of her works.
42. Kusama, “Intabyū,” 4.
43. Munroe, “Obsession,” 12, points out the possible feminist reading of Kusama’s artmaking process: “The devoted, mindless, ritualistic repetition of her artmaking conjures the traditional motions of women’s work.” Misunderstanding

- the intention of feminist critique, however, Kusama opposed feminist interpretation of her work, claiming, “It’s mundane to see my creation as an extension of housework” and added that she had “no such intention.” See Kay Itoi, “Kusama Speaks,” 1997; <http://www.artnet.com>.
44. Pamela Wye, “Yayoi Kusama: In Between the Outside and Inside,” *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, no. 15 (1994): 40. Wye also traces Kusama’s art- historical lineage of obsessive, transgressive eroticism to the work of Hans Bellmer, and finds parallels in the work of Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois.
  45. Gordon Brown, “The Imaginative Critic,” *Art Voices* 4, no. 3 (1965): 82.
  46. Lynn Zalevansky also offers an insightful interpretation of these two works; see Zalevansky, “Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York,” in *Love Forever*, 25.
  47. Munroe, “Obsession,” 24.
  48. Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook*, no.8 (1965): 74–82.
  49. Lucy Lippard, “Eccentric Abstraction,” *Art International* no. 10 (1966); reprinted in Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971): 101.
  50. Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and Effervescent Body* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 219.
  51. Kusama, “The Question of Gender in Art,” 50.
  52. Munroe, “Obsession,” 12.
  53. Ed Sommer, “Letter from Germany: Yayoi Kusama at the Galerie M. E. Thelen, Essen (May),” *Art International*, October 1966, 46.
  54. Kusama, “Miss Yayoi Kusama,” 163–64.
  55. Asked whether Kusama had seen Kaprow’s Happenings, she answered that she had no time to look at other people’s works. Kusama, interview by the author, June 12, 2003.
  56. *Ibid.*
  57. Kusama’s construction of her self-image through photography was first discussed in Reiko Tomii, “Shikaku hyōshou to site no aidentiti [Identity as Visual Representaion],” *Art Communications*, no. 6 (1997): 12–23.
  58. This portrait is reproduced in Hoptman, Kulterman, and Tatehata, *Yayoi Kusama*, 146.
  59. Kusama, interview by the author, June 12, 2003.
  60. For a photograph, see *Love Forever*, 44.
  61. Kusama recently confirmed that she brought a large number of kimonos with her in her move from Japan to the United States because the American government prohibited nonimmigrants from bringing large sums of money with them. Kusama sold kimonos to make ends meet in her early life in New York. Kusama, interview by the author, June 12, 2003.
  62. Anonymous editorial article in local Essen newspaper, April 1966, quoted in Udo Kultermann, “Driving Image in Essen,” in Hoptman, Kulterman, and Tatehata, *Yayoi Kusama*, 88.
  63. Zalevansky, “Driving Image,” 20, n. 46.
  64. Tomii, “Shikaku hyōshou to site no aidentiti,” 21.
  65. Zalevansky, “Driving Image,” 20.
  66. Collage is one media that Kusama frequently employed. In 1962 she produced a series of collages with airmail stickers, name labels, and white circle stickers, constructing accumulations similar to those in her paintings. Similarly, photocollage was used as another convenient way to replicate her vision. The *Accu-*



- mulation of Nets* (see *Love Forever*, cat. nos. 35, 36) and *Accretion* (see *Love Forever*, cat. no. 37) series utilize small photographic reproductions of her net paintings and her protrusion sculptures in a way that relates to photocollage.
67. This photograph is reproduced in *Love Forever*, cat. no. 80.
  68. Kusama, "Intabyū," 5.
  69. Through stylistic comparisons with other photographs, I had previously assumed that the photographer was Hosoe, but it was not confirmed. Recently, Hosoe verified that he took many photographs of Kusama's exhibitions and performances between 1964 and 1966, since he visited New York every year back then. He also explained that effects similar to that of multiple exposure were attained by using a prism in front of the camera. Hosoe, e-mail to the author, February 7, 2004.
  70. Zalevansky views these performance photographs as "exercises in narcissism and vanity"; see Zalevansky, "Driving Image," 25.
  71. Jan Cremer, "On the Cover: My Flower-Bed (Painted Cloth) by Kusama," *Art Voices* 4, no. 4 (1965): 5.
  72. *Ibid.*
  73. Yayoi Kusama, quoted in *Love Forever*, 179.
  74. Kusama has been documented in three kinds of outfits for this installation. The other two were a red body suit (photographs reproduced in *Love Forever*, cat. no. 81) and a long-sleeve shirt and skirt (color unknown because of a black and white image, reproduced in *Love Forever*, fig. 21).
  75. Judging from the clothes of the passersby, the event must have taken place sometime in the summer of 1966.
  76. Munroe dated this Happening around 1960 to 1963, but the reason for such dating is not provided; see Munroe, "Obsession," 28. *Love Forever* dates it circa 1966; see *Love Forever*, cat. no. 84. I also assume it was from 1966 judging from the length of Kusama's hair and its relationship to other performances.
  77. Yayoi Kusama, press release for *Self-Obliteration*, June 1967, reprinted in *Love Forever*, 181.
  78. Yayoi Kusama, flyer for *Self-Obliteration, an Audio-Visual-Light Performance by Kusama*, Black Gate Theater, New York, June 16–18, 1967.
  79. Yayoi Kusama, quoted in Jud Yalkut, "The Polka Dot Way of Life (Conversations with Yayoi Kusama)," *New York Free Press* 1, no. 8 (1968): 8.
  80. This type of indoor orgiastic performance is captured in the film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration*.
  81. Recently Kusama said that she was not aware of Schneemann's work at all. Kusama, interview by the author, June 12, 2003. Schneemann, however, stated that she and Kusama were friends from the early 1960s on; Schneemann, telephone interview with the author, February 8, 2004.
  82. Carolee Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic," *Art Journal*, Winter 1991, 29.
  83. Hugh Wyatt and Donald Singleton, "Find Bodies in East Side Park: Covered All Over with Strange Spots!" *New York Sunday News*, July 16, 1967.
  84. These phrases are from Kusama's flyers, respectively from August 6, 13, and 20, 1967.
  85. "Painting People New Art Form," *Sunday Cape Cod Standard-Times*, September 3, 1967.
  86. Kusama, quoted in Yalkut, "Polka Dot Way of Life," 8.

87. “Call Her Genius or Crazy but She’s an Insight into the Beat Generation,” *Town and Village*, September 14, 1967. Jud Yalkut also believes that Kusama’s *Peep Show* simulated “the mandelic phenomenon which was part of the “psychedelic revolution” in American art of the late 1960s; see Munroe, “Obsession,” 27.
88. Artistic direction was by Kusama and cinematography and editing was by Yalkut. For film stills, see *Love Forever*, cat. no. 82.
89. A photograph of Kusama on a horse is reproduced in Gordon Brown, “In the Galleries: Kusama in Her Japanese Stroll in Central Park” *Arts*, no. 42 (1967): 58.
90. Kusama, quoted in Yalkut, “Polka Dot Way of Life,” 9.
91. Yayoi Kusama, *Yayoi Kusama Ten: Tamashii o moyasu senkou* [Exhibition of Yayoi Kusama: Soul Burning Flashes] (Tokyo: Fuji Television Gallery, 1988), n.p.
92. Kusama did not miss opportunities to propagate her performances in Europe as well. In November and December 1967, Kusama traveled to the Netherlands for her show at Orez Gallery in the Hague. She held performances at several venues including the Catholic Students Center in Delft and the Schiediems Museum. For pictures of these events, see *Love Forever*, 182. The Japanese magazine *Shūkan Posto*, March 27, 1970, 40–41, also quotes Kusama’s descriptions of these events.
93. Yayoi Kusama, quoted in David Bourdon, “A Letter to Charlotte Moorman,” *Art in America*, June 2000, 135.
94. Kusama, press release for “Naked Event at the Statue of Liberty,” 1968.
95. Kusama, press release, reprinted in Hoptman, Kulterman, and Tatehata, *Yayoi Kusama*, 116.
96. The burning of a Russian flag is recorded in Hugh Wyatt, “4 Eves & an Adam Burn Commie Flag,” *Daily News*, September 9, 1968, 5.
97. Laura Hoptman, “Survey,” in Hoptman, Kulterman, and Tatehata, *Yayoi Kusama*, 67.
98. Kusama, press release for *Homosexual Wedding*, November 1968.
99. “Kites, Fists Fly at ‘Love-In, Be-In,’” *New York Times*, April 7, 1969.
100. “But is it Art?” *Daily News*, August 25, 1969.
101. A member of the Guerrilla Art Action Group, Jon Hendricks, spoke highly of Kusama’s performance at the Museum of Modern Art. Jon Hendricks, interview by Lynn Zalevansky, 1996, audiotape, courtesy Laura Hoptman, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
102. Kusama, interview by the author, June 12, 2003.
103. *Ibid.*
104. For a short article on Kusama’s commercial enterprises, see Franck Gautherot, “Kusama Enterprises,” in *Yayoi Kusama*, exhibition catalog, English version (Dijon, France: Le Consortium, 2000, 57–59).
105. Kusama, “Rankou koso waga geijutsu.”

### Chapter Three: The Message Is the Medium

1. This phrase was recently printed on multiples of badges and postcards produced by the artist in 2001.
2. Ono appropriated the influential critic Marshall McLuhan’s signature phrase, “the medium is the message,” which was the title of one of the many best-selling

- books by McLuhan, published in 1967. Ono argued that McLuhan's phrase reflects the thoughts of the privileged and intellectuals while her phrase promotes whatever messages coming from ordinary, working-class people. See Ono, interview by Takahiko Iimura, in *Ono Yoko: Hito to Sakuhin* [Yoko Ono: Portrait, Events, and Works] (Tokyo: Bunka shuppan-kyoku, 1985), 150.
3. Fluxus scholar and Ono curator Jon Hendricks first placed importance on Ono's early instructions and reconstructed her exhibition. See Jon Hendricks, ed., *Instructions for Paintings by Yoko Ono, May 24, 1962* (Budapest: Galeria 56, 1993). Kevin Concannon, Alexandra Munroe, and Reiko Tomii, have persuasively argued Ono's precedence in visualizing conceptualism. See Kevin Concannon, "Unfinished Works and Aural Histories: Yoko Ono's Conceptual Art," Ph.D. diss., Virginia Commonwealth University, 2000; Alexandra Munroe, "Spirit of Yes: The Art and Life of Yoko Ono," in Alexandra Munroe, and Jon Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono* (New York: Japan Society in association with Abrams, 2000), 25; and Reiko Tomii, "Concerning the Institution of Art: Conceptualism in Japan," in Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (Queens, N.Y.: Queens Art Museum, 1999), 18–19.
  4. Yoko Ono, "Pacifica Radio Interview 11 September 1971" by Liza Cowan and Jan Alpert, Pacifica Radio Archives, Los Angeles, audiotape.
  5. Edward M. Gomez, "Music of the Mind from the Voice of Raw Soul," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 231.
  6. Unless otherwise noted, most of the details of Ono's biographical account in this paragraph derive from Yoko Ono, conversation with David Ross at the Japan Society, New York, October 25, 2000.
  7. Yoko Ono, "Yoko Ono," interview by Melody Sumner, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner, in *Guests to Go into Supper*, ed. Melody Sumner, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner (Oakland, Calif.: Burning Books, 1986), 173.
  8. This publication is brought to light in Concannon, "Unfinished Works," 54.
  9. Ono, "Yoko Ono," 173.
  10. Robert Enright, "Instructions in the Marital Arts: A Conversation with Yoko Ono," *Border Crossing*, no. 13 (1994): 35.
  11. For the score of *Time-Table Music*, see *Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957–1963*, exhibition catalog, ed. Joan Marter (New Brunswick, N.J.: Newark Museum and Rutgers University Press, 1999), 70.
  12. Accounts of Ono's first conception and performances of the piece are from Ono's e-mails to the author, September 13, 1999, and February 6, 2000. For more details, see Midori Yoshimoto, "Lighting Piece," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 72.
  13. Anthony Cox, "Instructive Auto-Destruction," *Art and Artists* 1, no. 5 (1966): 17.
  14. Ono, "Pacifica Radio Interview."
  15. Yoko Ono, quoted in Jonathan Cott, "Yoko Ono and her Sixteen-Track Voice," in *The Ballad of John and Yoko*, ed. Jonathan Cott and Christine Doudna (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), 116.
  16. For details of experiments in Cage's class by Brecht and Kaprow, see Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings and Time/Space Art* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965). See also Joan Marter, "The Forgotten Legacy: Happenings, Pop Art, and Fluxus at Rutgers University," and Joseph Jacobs, "Crashing New York à la John Cage," in Marter, ed., *Off Limits*, 1–47 and 65–99, respectively.
  17. Ono, conversation with David Ross.

18. Enright, "Instructions," 35.
19. Yoko Ono, "Interview with Yoko Ono" by Roger Perry and Tony Elliot, *UNIT & Poem Machine*, no. 9 (1967): 27.
20. Ono commented that she had seen one of Oldenburg's Happenings, though it is not clear which piece she saw. See Enright, "Instructions," 35.
21. George Maciunas, discussion on the AG Gallery, Jean Brown Fluxus Archive, J. Paul Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, audiotape.
22. Ono, "Pacifica Radio Interview." In retrospect, it seems fair for Ono to claim this because many publications mention Ono as only the owner of the loft who rented the space to La Monte Young, the organizer. For example, see Owen F. Smith, "George Maciunas and A History of Fluxus, or the Art Movement that never existed," Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1991, 59.
23. The programs of the series are included in the artist's archive, maintained by her curator Jon Hendricks.
24. Ono, "Pacifica Radio Interview." In the Japanese ritual, people throw roasted soybeans at *oni*, a devil in Japanese folklore, wishing to exorcise any bad luck and sickness from the house for the rest of the year.
25. Cott, "Sixteen-Track Voice," 114.
26. Beate Shirota Gordon, *The Only Woman in the Room: A Memoir*; manuscript, 175–76. This and later quotes are from the final manuscript before editing and publication (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1998), provided to Kevin Concannon by publisher Stephen Shaw and used here courtesy Kevin Concannon.
27. For example, Spoerri's *Le lieu de repos de la famille Delbeck* (*The Place of Rest of the Delbeck Family*, 1960) fixated the dirty plates and utensils with a pen and cigarette case on a table top. For an illustration, see Paul Schimmel, *Between Performance and the Object, 1949–79* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames and Hudson, 1998), 42.
28. Jon Hendricks, "Yoko Ono and Fluxus," *Yes Yoko Ono*, 39.
29. Ono, "Pacifica Radio Interview."
30. In fact, most of the participating artists overlapped with the members of Ono's concert series, though Maciunas had them perform different pieces.
31. Some calligraphic works, including the poster of the exhibition, were also presented there because Maciunas wanted something that would sell. The black and white photographs of the works included in this exhibition are reproduced in Jon Hendricks, ed., *Yoko Ono: Paintings and Drawings, July 17–30, 1961* (Budapest: Galeria 56, 1993).
32. Attributed to Yoko Ono, "Paintings and Drawings by Yoko Ono," typed notes of the exhibition, Yoko Ono Papers.
33. Gordon, *The Only Woman*, 176.
34. Gene R. Swenson, "This Month," *Art News*, no. 60 (1961): 17.
35. Tomii, "Concerning the Institution of Art," 152–53, and Bruce Altshuler, "Instruction Paintings," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 75.
36. Ono was one of three performers, along with composers Ichianagi and Mayuzumi at this concert, but was underrepresented in the *New York Times* article compared to her male peers. Even though all three performers were shown in the original photograph, Ono was cropped out from its reproduction. See Ross Parmenter, "Music: Far Out Program, Contemporary Japanese Offering at the Village Gate Proves Unusual Fare," *New York Times*, April 4, 1961. This fact was pointed out to me by Jon Hendricks; the original photograph is included in

Ono's archive. This omission may be due to the gender discrimination or because the music critic identified Ono as a poet, and thus deemed not as important as a composer. Ono's AOS was also misattributed to Ichiyanagi in the program.

37. Jon Hendricks, "Commentaries," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 303.
38. This version of the script, possibly the final version, was published in Hendricks, "Anthology," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 271–73.
39. Eric McLean, "Novelty in Sound Motif of Festival," *Montreal Star*, August 7, 1961.
40. Jill Johnston, "Life and Art," *Village Voice*, December 7, 1961, 10.
41. Cott, "Sixteen-Track Voice," 121.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Johnston, "Life and Art," 10.
44. Enright, "Instructions," 35.
45. George Maciunas, *News-Policy-Letter No. 2 (Fluxus Festival Only)* (Wiesbaden: Fluxus, 1962), courtesy Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
46. Ono, "Pacifica Radio Interview."
47. Enright, "Instructions," 36.
48. Situated at the underground level of the Sōgetsu Kaikan, the headquarters of an established flower arranging school, the Sōgetsu Art Center offered a small auditorium and an exhibition space to avant-garde musicians, dancers, filmmakers, and artists between 1959 and 1971.
49. While the program mentions "Chance Poems," their details are not known. I have recently discovered a photographic contact sheet documenting "Touch Poems" displayed on a table. Ono also confirmed that she still keeps the original "Touch Poems." Yoko Ono, interview by the author, August 21, 2003.
50. Yoko Ono, *Atama no nakade kumitateru e* [Painting to Be Constructed in Your Head] (Kyoto: Tanko-sha, 1995), 8. For more on *Instruction for Paintings*, see Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream against the Sky*, exhibition catalog (New York: Abrams in association with the Yokohama Museum of Art, the Japan Foundation, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 218, and Bruce Altshuler, "Instruction Paintings," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 74.
51. For more details on this concert, see Midori Yoshimoto, "Works of Yoko Ono," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 150–53.
52. Yoshiaki Tōno, "Chansu operēshon (Gūzen sōsa)" [Chance Operation], *Kamera Geijutsu* 9, no. 7 (1962): 126.
53. Although Kuniharu Akiyama, "Sōgetsu Art Center" in *Bunka no shikakenin* [The Entrepreneur of Culture], ed. Kuniharu Akiyama (Tokyo: Seidosha, 1985), 486, notes that the event was over by midnight, Tōno, "Chansu operēshon," 128, and Théo Lèsoualch, "Sakusha no inai kūhaku no go jikan" [Five Hours of Void during which the Creator Was Absent], *Nihon Dokusho shimbun*, July 9, 1962, note that it ended at 1A.M.
54. The humorous yet critical nature of the piece is shared by La Monte Young's *Composition #6* (1961), which instructs performers to look at the audience and do what it does.
55. "Daitan na kokoromi: Ono Yoko no ibento" [Bold Experiment: Yoko Ono's Event], *Asahi Journal*, June 1962, 45.
56. Yoko Ono, quoted in Toshi Ichiyanagi, "Saizen'ei no koe: Donarudo Richi eno

- hanron” [Voice of the Most Avant-Garde: Objection to Donald Richie], *Geijutsu Shinchō* 13, no. 8 (1962): 138.
57. Kōichiro Ishizaki, in Kōichiro Ishizaki, Seiki Hanada, and Yoshida Yoshie, “Kantō zadan kai” [Roundtable Discussion], in Yoshida Yoshie, *Kaitaigeki no maku orite — 60 nendai zen’ei bijutsushi* [After the Curtainfall of a Deconstructive Play—History of the Sixties Avant-Garde Art] (Tokyo: Zōkeisha, 1982), 9.
  58. Yoko Ono, “Waga ai, waga tousou” [My Love, My Struggles], in *Bungei shunjyū*, September 1974; reprinted in Yoko Ono, *Tada no atashi/Just Me!* ed. Takahiko Iimura (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1986), 25.
  59. Donald Richie, “Tsumazuita Saizensen: Ono Yoko no zen’ei shou” [Stumbling Front Line: Yoko Ono’s Avant-Garde Show], *Geijutsu Shinchō* 13, no. 7 (1962): 60–61.
  60. Ichianagi, “Saizen’ei no koe,” 138.
  61. Yoko Ono, “Kyokōsha no gen” [The Word of a Fabricator], *Sōgetsu Art Center Journal*, no. 24 (1962): n.p. The quote here is from its English translation by Ono, provided to the author via e-mail, August 1999. Kristine Stiles offers another insight into Ono’s text by comparing it to that of Umberto Eco and Stephan Mallarmé; see Stiles, “Being Undyed: The Meeting of Mind and Matter in Yoko Ono’s Events,” in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 145–49.
  62. In an e-mail communication with the author, August 27, 1999, Ono claimed that “it’s the same hospital which became famous over a decade later for giving Yayoi Kusama a place to work in.”
  63. Yoko Ono, telephone interview by the author, October 5, 1999.
  64. Ono was mentioned as a vocalist in the concert program included in the special issue of *SAC Journal*, October 1962, n.p.
  65. It is not clear on which evening this piece was performed, and which Cage piece it was a part of, but Ono confirmed this information in her e-mail correspondence with the author, September 14, 1999.
  66. The 1963 *Fluxus Preview Review* announced the future publication of *Yoko Ono: Complete Works* among Fluxus’s special editions. See Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection/New York: Abrams, 1988), 418–19. Later, in a July 1964 letter to Willem de Ridder, a Fluxus artist in Amsterdam, Maciunas mentioned again the possibility of printing “complete works of Yoko Ono who is coming to New York;” see Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 113.
  67. For example, the English version of *Shūshū no kyoku III/Collecting Piece III* has an additional phrase in the middle of the last sentence: “a thousand feet high in the sky over a desert.”
  68. The Japanese equivalent to *Painting to Enlarge and See*, for example, was titled *Meari no shōzō V (Portrait of Mary V)*.
  69. There is no English version of *Atama no nakade kumitateru e I (Painting to Be Constructed in Your Head I)* in the first edition of *Grapefruit*.
  70. The second edition of *Grapefruit*, published in a larger number by Simon and Schuster in 1970, contained John Lennon’s introduction, an additional eighty pieces, and two more sections (film and dance), but it was entirely in English. The 1971 paperback edition from the same publisher added more than thirty works as well as a new architecture section.
  71. See my introduction to the current volume, note 3.
  72. Iimura, *Ono Yoko*, 83.



73. Nam June Paik, “Ono Yoko Contra Yoko Ono,” *Bukku Rebyū*, no. 1 (1970): 32.
74. Yoko Ono, *Symposium -!-*, sound recording (1962), courtesy of the artist.
75. Paik, “Ono Yoko,” 33–34.
76. Yoko Ono, facsimile copy of “NOTICES” (including a mail-order form for “mornings”), sometime soon after May 31, 1964, Yoko Ono Archive.
77. In a telephone interview by the author, September 8, 1999, Al Wunderich confirmed that these five pieces were actually performed. He also remembers that they exhibited, in the lobby, “instructure”—including some toothpicks with which to build a house. I thank him for his generous cooperation.
78. Yoko Ono, “To Wesleyan People,” in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 290.
79. Yoko Ono, excerpt from a letter to George Maciunas, published in *Grapefruit* (Tokyo: Wunternaum, 1964), n.p.
80. Barbara H. Haskell and John G. Hanhardt, *Yoko Ono: Arias and Subjects* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Peregrine Smith, 1991), 91. Kevin Concannon identified the story and traced it back to the Tamamushi Shrine. See Concannon, “Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece (1964): A Reconsideration,” M.A. thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1998, 39.
81. Brenda Jordan, “DIAS,” *Resurgence* 1, no. 4 (1966): 19.
82. Yoko Ono, “Cut Piece,” text distributed by e-mail in advance of her performance at Ranelagh Theater, Paris, September 15, 2003.
83. For two other events in Kyoto, see Midori Yoshimoto, “Evening Till Dawn,” in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 156.
84. “Zen’ei ongakuka no kimyō kiteretsu na shō” [Avant-Garde Musician’s Strange Show], *Shūkan Shinchō*, August 1964, 17.
85. “Kyokumoku wa storippu: zen’ei ongakuka, Ono Yoko no risaitaru” [The Piece’s Title is “Strip”: Recital by the Avant-Garde Musician Yoko Ono], unidentified magazine clipping, August 1964, n.p., Yoko Ono personal files.
86. *Ibid.*
87. “Zen’ei ongakuka,” 17.
88. “Kewashii geijutsu katsudō no michi” [Artist’s Path is Difficult], unidentified magazine clipping, August 1964, n.p., Yoko Ono personal files.
89. “Zen’ei ongakuka,” 17.
90. Ono, “Waga ai, waga tousou,” 26.
91. “Kewashii geijutsu katsudou no michi,” n. p.
92. “Sutorippu wa geijutsu no kyūkyoku yo: Ono Yōko Tōkyo ni najimezu Beikoku e dasshutsu” [Stripping Is the Ultimate Art: Yoko Ono Escapes to the U.S., Unable to Get Acclimated in Tokyo], *Tokyo Shimbun*, August 8, 1964.
93. Chiaki Nagano, *Aru wakamono tachi* [Some Young People], 1964, black and white film, 28 minutes. Yūka Miyata kindly shared her transcripts of Ono’s speeches in this film with me.
94. In a letter, Maciunas wrote, “I will mail you complete works of Yoko Ono! Many good pieces! She is now in New York. One of the best composers.” George Maciunas to Ben Vautier, February 1, 1965, reprinted in Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 419.
95. Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 422.
96. Hendricks, “Yoko Ono and Fluxus,” 44.
97. Enright, “Instructions,” 36.
98. Peter Duffy, “Oh Yoko: Norman Seaman Remembers the Lençons,” *New York Press*, June 16–22, 1999, 20–21.

99. George Maciunas, “Fluxorchestra Circular Letter No. 2,” reproduced in Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus etc. / Addenda I: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection* (New York: Ink &, 1983), 160.
100. Jon Hendricks pointed out this connection; I thank him for the information.
101. Accounts of *Disappearing Event* or the early phase of *Blue Room Event* are provided by Yoko Ono, e-mail to the author, September 13, 1999, and February 5, 2000.
102. Iimura, *Ono Yoko*, 32–33.
103. The information here on DIAS, as well as the quote, are derived from Jordan, “DIAS,” 18–21.
104. Kristine Stiles, “Survival Ethos and Destruction Art,” *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 14, no. 2 (1992): 87–88.
105. For more about these objects, see Midori Yoshimoto, “Eternal Time” and “Objects in Three Parts,” in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 112 and 114, respectively.
106. Mario Amaya, “Games Mistress,” *Financial Times*, November 12, 1966.
107. The Fluxfilm version, shot by Anthony Cox and Jeff Perkins and produced by George Maciunas, contained five-and-one-half-minute sequences of twelve different performers. See the entry on *Number 4* in Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 420–21.
108. Ono, *Tada no Atashi*, 40.
109. Jud Yalkut, “Film,” *East Village Other* 4, no. 30 (1969): 9.
110. Chrissie Iles, *Yoko Ono: Have You Seen the Horizon Lately?* exhibition catalog (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 67.
111. Enright, “Instructions,” 37–38.
112. “Lisson Gallery,” *Art and Artists*, October 1967, 39.
113. Gillian Linscott, “The High Priestess of the Happening,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, October 3, 1967.
114. Spencer Leigh, “Strange Days Indeed: Spencer Leigh Recalls Seeing Yoko Ono’s Happening in Liverpool in 1967” *Beatles Unlimited*, January–February 1998, 50–51.
115. Ono has commented, “Although I was exclusively obsessed by art in those days, I may have become rather social by now. Because the situation has changed. Even before I met John, I did social things such as standing in Trafalgar Square wearing a black bag, but I have become more social, becoming conscious of the fact that any event will have a social meaning these days. For example, there was no speech when you had an exhibition at a museum. I used to think that because my works explain themselves people who understand them can do so and people who do not understand them cannot. Now, however, I have a softer attitude that I will explain if necessary. Once when I had events at Sōgetsu Kaikan I did not explain because it was unnecessary, but I received criticism that was based on a complete misunderstanding. Although I got mad, I didn’t say anything.” Yoko Ono, “Ono Yoko: kachi o tenkanshi, kiseigainen kara no dakkyaku o/An Interview with Yoko Ono” by Takahiko Iimura, *Bijutsu Techō*, no. 350 (1972): 228.
116. Gloria Vando Hickock, “Yoko Ono: Wishes and Surprises,” *Helikon Nine: The Journal of Women’s Arts and Letters*, no. 20 (1989): 11.
117. Contents herein are summarized from Yoko Ono, “Mira wa . . . michisū” [The Future is Unknown . . . ], interview by Takahiko Iimura, in Ono, *Tada no Atashi*, 172–73, 181–85.



118. Cott, "Sixteen-Track Voice," 57.
119. Kristine Stiles, "Unbosoming Lennon: The Politics of Yoko Ono's Experience," *Art Criticism* 7, no. 2 (1992): 25. Lennon's quotes are from this source.
120. George Maciunas, "Press Release—April 1, 1970: Joint Yoko Ono, John Lennon, and Fluxgroup Project." Mimeographed hand-out, 1970, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
121. Yoko Ono, *Free Time*. WNET-TV, October 14, 1971, videotape. Courtesy Kevin Concannon.
122. Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, no. 213 (1971): 477–78.
123. Emily Wasserman, "Yoko Ono at Syracuse: 'This Is Not Here,'" *Artforum*, no. 10 (1972): 69–73.
124. Kevin Concannon, "Museum of Modern [F]art," in Munroe and Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 194.
125. As an extension of her performances, Ono has been recording avant-garde and popular albums since the 1960s, including the groundbreaking *Plastic Ono Band* (1970) and *Fly* (1971), and her tribute to Lennon, *Season of Glass* (1982).
126. Yoko Ono, quoted in Hickock, "Wishes and Surprises," 7–8.

## Chapter Four: Playful Spirit

1. Maciunas's editions are often distinguishable by plastic boxes, versus of Saito's carefully crafted wooden boxes. Unless otherwise mentioned, all the biographical information on the artist here is from Saito's interview by the author on September 10, 2000.
2. Jon Hendricks was the first to credit Saito for works that had previously been attributed to Maciunas. In a letter to Hendricks dated August 18, 1982, Saito stated, "[W]hen I gave all the chess sets to George, I said 'he can use them as the Fluxus chess without mentioning my name.'" See Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection/New York: Abrams, 1988), 456.
3. Takako Saito, telephone interview by the author, March 8, 2002.
4. Takako Saito, personal correspondence with friends in Fukui, February 20, 1996.
5. "Artists' Biographies and Bibliographies," in *Gendai bijutsu no dōkō 1: 1950 nendai* [Trends of Japanese Contemporary Art 1: The 1950s] (Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, 1981), 78.
6. Saito, telephone interview, March 8, 2002.
7. The concept of the *multiple*—namely, an art object fabricated through industrial artmaking techniques—was popularized in Euro-American art in the late 1960s. Drawing on the notion of Marcel Duchamp's "readymades," Pop artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol produced multiples of their works from the mid-1960s on. Fluxus artists, spearheaded by George Maciunas, emphasized the multiple as an inexpensive commodity available to the masses. See Owen F. Smith, "Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions," in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 30–33.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Takako Saito, letter to Gilbert and Lila Silverman, August 18, 1982, George Maciunas file, Jean Brown Archive at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (hereafter referred to as GRI).

10. Takako Saito, interview by the author, September 11, 2000.
11. This work was misidentified as Chieko Shiomi's work in Silverman's catalog. Saito pointed it out in a letter to Gilbert and Lila Silverman, August 18, 1982, Maciunas file, GRI.
12. Maciunas, in his draft for a recommendation letter for Saito on the occasion of her applying for a Deutscher Akademischen Austausch Dienst (DAAD; German Academic Exchange Service) artist's residency in Berlin in 1976, wrote,

In present art, great emphasis is given to idea or contents rather than form. In concept art particularly there is practically no form. In such case the idea being the only component must be inventive—an original art to give the work any value. If it is a copy of someone's else's idea as in the great many present conceptualist work than it has nothing left. No form and no idea. In the work of Takako's one can find a rare quality of both—original idea and supports: form and craftsmanship. The idea of game as an art form is typically Takako's. There are very few practitioners of it and she [*illegible*] it the inventiveness and craftsmanship of this genre. Her craftsmanship springs from Japanese tradition for perfection and is unmatched among contemporary artists working in wood and paper (just as Japanese art of [*illegible*] making was not matched anywhere in the world). There are probably only a dozen or so avant-garde artists in the [*illegible*] today who can match her inventiveness, originality and big quality of craftsmanship. It is unfortunate she has not received great recognition in the art world, or I hope DAAD will remedy this.

Maciunas file, GRI.

13. Emily Harvey, press release for the exhibition *Takako Saito* at the Emily Harvey Gallery, New York, 1990.
14. Both the 1943 and 1964 versions of Duchamp's *Pocket Chess Set* are briefly mentioned in Anne D'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., *Marcel Duchamp*, exhibition catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 305.
15. Marcel Duchamp, "Regions Which Are Not Ruled by Time and Space . . .," edited version of "A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp," television interview by James Sweeney for NBC, January 1956; in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 136.
16. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," talk given in Houston at the meeting of the American Federation of the Arts, April 1957; reprinted in Sanouillet and Peterson, eds., *Writings*, 140.
17. Larry Miller, "Transcript of the Videotaped *Interview with George Maciunas*," in *Fluxus etc./Addenda I: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, 1983), 18.
18. Ina Conzen, *Art Games* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1997), 53–54.
19. Saito, telephone conversation with the author, February 9, 2001.
20. Kristine Stiles further suggests that "such works anticipate themes of 1970s essentialist feminism, as well as 1980s poststructuralism, as they prefigure French feminist Luce Irigaray's argument that women's multiple sexualized zones create a plurality based on the primacy of *touch*." See Stiles, "Between Water and

- Stone: Fluxus Performance, A Metaphysics of Acts,” in Armstrong and Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 79.
21. Both text scores for *Touch Piece* and *Pulse Piece* were first printed in Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (Tokyo: Wuntherhaum Press, 1964), n.p.
  22. Joan Rothfuss, entry on “*White Chess Set*,” in Alexandra Munroe and Jon Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, (New York: Japan Society in association with Abrams, 2000), 136.
  23. Gretchen Faust, “Takako Saito,” *Arts*, no. 65 (1990): 104.
  24. Harvey, press release for *Takako Saito* exhibition, 1990.
  25. Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 454–57.
  26. Two different *Buzzer Chairs* are in the Special Collection of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. For *Rolling Ball Chair*, see Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 458, and Conzen, *Art Games*, 128.
  27. Takako Saito to Ina Conzen, 1998, Archiv Sohm, Staatgalerie, Stuttgart.
  28. A newer edition of *Music Bottles* was also created in 1984 as a commission from Wolfgang Feelisch’s “VICE – Mailorder.”
  29. One extant version of *Music Bottles* is owned by Emmett Williams. Saito, interview, September 10, 2000.
  30. Saito to Conzen, 1998.
  31. Saito to Gilbert and Lila Silverman, August 18, 1982.
  32. For example, at the time of the New York premier of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Originale* by Allan Kaprow and some of the Fluxus artists, Saito joined Maciunas in protesting the concert. Maciunas criticized Stockhausen for his Eurocentric view of music. See Action Against Cultural Imperialism, “Picket Stockhausen Concert!” reproduced in Armstrong, Rothfuss, et al., eds., *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 169.
  33. Mieko Shiomi, *Shiomi Mieko Intabyū* [Mieko Shiomi Interview] by Ken’ichi Sakakibara (Kobe: Hypersonic, 1993), 6.
  34. A poster for the festival is reproduced in Armstrong and Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 168.
  35. Her moves were primarily motivated by the technicality of getting her tourist visa renewed by moving from one country to another. First, in 1968, Saito visited La Cédille qui sourit (The Cedilla That Smiles), a Fluxus shop and workshop that George Brecht and Robert Fillou had started in Villefranche-sur-mer in southern France, but Brecht had gone to England and Filliou was about to leave for Düsseldorf. In her disappointment, Saito went to Paris to make her living doing odd jobs as, among other things, an au pair and a waitress. After Paris, she also did the same in Antibes, and St. Laurent-var. Saito then stayed in England (1971, 1973–75) and Italy (1975–79), helping produce art books while creating her own art works and doing performances. In 1979, she finally settled in Düsseldorf.
  36. Documents concerning the *Fluxshoe* exhibition and the Beau Geste Press are now part of the Tate Archive, London.
  37. Henry Ruhe, *Fluxus: The Most Radical Experimental Art Movement of the Sixties* (Amsterdam: “A,” 1979), 3.
  38. This date has been often confused as 1972. See *Takako Saito: Eine Japanerin in Düsseldorf: Objekte* [A Japanese Woman in Düsseldorf: Objects] (Düsseldorf: Stadtmuseum Düsseldorf, 1988), 30. The original plan was to visit New York in late January 1972, but Maciunas could send Saito a ticket to New York only

toward the end of 1972. Meanwhile, Saito traveled with the money given from Mayor to Amsterdam, Düsseldorf, and back to St. Laurent-var, where she kept an apartment. Takako Saito, letter to George Maciunas, n.d. (probably around late 1972 from the context), Maciunas file, GRI.

39. According to a letter that Saito wrote to Maciunas in late 1972 (Maciunas file, GRI), Maciunas and Robert Watts were planning to purchase a 955-foot boat that needed to be fixed and Saito was considered a great help with her carpentry skills. They envisioned turning the boat into a “Fluxship” in which Fluxus artists could travel around the world. This plan, however, was unrealized. Saito did help Maciunas build the harpsichord, but it was never used.
40. For more on Saito’s book production in Reggio Emilia, see Christiane Fricke, “Takako Saito: ACDKLMNQRUVYZ,” *Kunstforum International*, no. 139 (1997–98): 311.
41. Takako Saito to George Maciunas, c. 1975, Maciunas file, GRI.
42. Fricke, “ACDKLMNQRUVYZ,” 315.
43. Saito, interview by the author, September 11, 2000.

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## Chapter Five: Music, Art, Poetry, and Beyond

1. Douglas Kahn, “The Latest: Fluxus and Music,” in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 108.
2. Mieko Shiomi, “Hassō no daigomi” [The Charm of Invention], in *Onna no kurieito bukku* [The Women’s Creation Book], ed. Eiko Ishioka (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1979), 177.
3. Shiomi changed her first name from Chieko to Mieko around 1967–69 according to a nomancy, a kind of divination that examines the letters of one’s name. Therefore, many works contributed by her to Fluxus editions bear the earlier name.
4. Mieko Shiomi, “Shigoto, yume, hanashimasu” [I Will Talk about My Work and Dream], *Sankei Shimbun*, August 27, 1988.
5. Mieko Shiomi, e-mail to the author, August 9, 2003.
6. Mieko Shiomi, “Shi wa janru o koete,” unpublished Japanese manuscript for a German translation included in Klaus Peter Denckner, *Visuelle Poesie aus Japan* [Visual Poetry from Japan] (Hamburg: Liternatur Haus, 1997).
7. Chiya Kuni, who was Shigeko Kubota’s aunt and ran the Kuni Chiya Dance Institute, introduced Kubota to Group Ongaku members.
8. The group’s philosophy is explained in an interview with Kosugi by Yoshiharu Suenobu, in *Kaisou no John Cage/John Cage Remembered* (Tokyo: Ongaku no tomo sha, 1996), 128–31.
9. Mieko Shiomi, “Mieko Shiomi,” *Art and Artists*, October 1973, 42.
10. Around 1912, Luigi Russolo built *intonarumori* (noise intoners) to produce a variety of exploding, crackling, and rubbing noises that resembled mechanical sounds. His noise music not only extended the domain of musical sounds, but also disrupted tonal movement and relations. In the 1930s in New York, Edgard Varèse expanded on the notion of modern sounds by incorporating newly invented electrical sound-producing machines such as the theremin (see note 14, below). Electronic music was established after World War II in Paris by Pierre

- Schaeffer, who composed a number of works of musique concrète. John Cage built a vast library of sounds on tape and introduced “chance operations” to dictate how tapes should be cut and spliced. His music demonstrated the availability of all sounds in life, including both sounds that were previously called “music” and those known as “noise.” For more on the history of avant-garde music, see Paul Griffiths, *A Concise History of Avant-Garde Music: From Debussy to Boulez* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974).
11. Group Ongaku, *Music of Group Ongaku*, compact disk (Tokyo: HEAR Sound Art Library, 1996).
  12. Both quotations in this paragraph are derived from Chieko Shiomi, “Enshinteki kūkan to fukakutei na jikan no ongaku: Mōbiru I, II, III ni yosete” [Music of Centrifugal Space and Indeterminate Time: On *Mobile I, II, III*], in “Sokkyou ongaku to onkyou obu je no consāto: grūpu ongaku daiikkai kouen” (Concert of Improvisational Music and Sound Objects: The First Concert of Group Ongaku), concert program (Tokyo: Sōgetsu Art Center, 1961), 5–6.
  13. Shiomi learned how to paint by herself during her university years, when she was living with art students in women’s dormitory. She used to paint abstraction by drawing lines with a palette knife and attaching disparate materials such as cut-outs from magazines, black cosmetic bottles, and push-pins. None of these paintings remains because she threw them away when she moved. Mieko Shiomi, interview by the author, July 16, 2003.
  14. The theremin was originally invented by Russian scientist Lev Sergeevich Termen (Léon Thérémin, 1896–1993) in the 1920s. This particular instrument was a later version re-created by a student at the Tokyo University of Science, and Shiomi borrowed it from him in order to play it for the first time in a musical concert in Japan.
  15. The descriptions of *I·B·M* are based on Kuniharu Akiyama’s review in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 8, 1961.
  16. Other members of the group, Kosugi and Tone, joined Fluxus later and thus crossed paths with Shiomi.
  17. Mieko Shiomi to Nobuko Funayama, July 18, 1996, courtesy Mieko Shiomi. It may be worth noting, however, that her former colleagues tend to marginalize Shiomi in their recollections about the group activities.
  18. All quotations in this paragraph are from Shiomi, “Hassō no daigomi,” 176.
  19. Graphic scores were popular among avant-garde composers in Tokyo, including Ichiyonagi and Mayuzumi, who had studied in New York. They held an exhibition of their graphic scores in spring 1962. See Kuniharu Akiyama, “Ongaku o miru tenrankai” [Exhibition to See Music], *Bijutsu Techō*, no. 204 (1962): 39–43.
  20. Mieko Shiomi, “Shiomi Mieko Recital,” concert program, March 26, 1962.
  21. She speculated that, even without any direct communication, people in different worlds could come to similar ideas. They shared something like “collective unconsciousness” under “the necessity of the era.” Mieko Shiomi, *Shiomi Mieko Intabyū* [Mieko Shiomi Interview] by Ken’ichi Sakakibara (Kobe: Hypersonic, 1993), 82.
  22. George Maciunas recorded his correspondences with Ichiyonagi in his notes, written in 1962–63. These are maintained in the George Maciunas file of the Jean Brown Archive, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as

- GRI). According to Maciunas's notes, Ichianagi wrote letters to Maciunas on January 21 and July 28, 1962. Ichianagi's first letter contained tapes and scores of other Japanese composers' pieces, including Shiomi's scores for *For Piano and Paper*, *Ensemble 51*, and *Happening*.
23. Tone recalls that Ichianagi showed him a letter from Maciunas asking Ichianagi to send some scores and tapes of Group Ongaku's music. The letter contained a five- or ten-dollar bill. Tone sent tapes first and some scores later. He then encouraged many of his friends, including Akasegawa of Hi Red Center, to send some pieces to Maciunas. Kosugi notes a similar story. See Yasunao Tone and Takehisa Kosugi, individual recollections in *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas, 1931–1978*, ed. Emmett Williams and Ann Noel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 130 and 134, respectively.
  24. George Maciunas, "Tentative Program for the Festival of Very New Music," possibly written between January and June 1962; reprinted in *Fluxus etc. / Addenda I: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, 1983), 142–45.
  25. The two quotations here are from Mieko Shiomi, interview by the author, July 14, 1998.
  26. Shiomi, "Mieko Shiomi," 42.
  27. According to Ichianagi, this piece consisted of three stages: "repetitions of inaudible sounds," "sounds that reached the sky," and "breaths." Ichianagi, "Saizen'ei no koe: Donarudo Richi eno hanron," [Voice of the Most Avant-Garde: Objection to Donald Richie], *Geijutsu Shinchō* 13, no. 8 (1962): 138.
  28. "Lighting a match" was instructed in *Dance Piece for Stage Performance*. Other faint sounds in *Grapefruit* include tearing, touching, and rubbing in *Pieces for Orchestra to La Monte Young*; whispering in *Room Piece I, II, III*; a pulse in *Pulse Piece*; and underground water in *Water Piece*. Imaginary sounds include the earth turning in *Earth Piece*; snow falling in *Snow Piece for La Monte Young*; stone aging in *Tape Piece I*; the room breathing in *Tape Piece II*, and stars moving in *Tape Piece IV*.
  29. Shiomi, "Mieko Shiomi," 42.
  30. Mieko Shiomi, typed answers to the author's questions, November 3, 1998.
  31. Shiomi, "Mieko Shiomi," 42.
  32. Maciunas tried to sell *Endless Box* to Philip Kaplan as early as in November 19, 1963. See Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection/New York: Abrams, 1988), 477.
  33. As early as the fall of 1963, Maciunas listed Shiomi's "events in wood box" in his advertisement for Fluxus editions in *Film Culture*. In a letter to Willem de Ridder (December 26, 1963), Maciunas mentioned that he had "complete works of Shiomi." See Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 478.
  34. Mieko Shiomi, individual recollection, in Williams and Noel, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 127.
  35. The original sets may have come with handmade wooden boxes, but extant boxes are all plastic. See Maciunas's advertisement for this product, reprinted in Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 478.
  36. *Ibid.*, 93–94.
  37. Mieko Shiomi, score for *Mirror* as it appeared in *V TRE* (Fluxus newspaper no. 1), 1964; reprinted in Armstrong and Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 164.
  38. The message is written in ink on paper, reproduced in Ashiya City Museum of



- History and Art, *Sōgetsu to sono jidai* [Sogetsu and Its Era], exhibition catalog (Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum of History and Art, 1998), 230.
39. Shiomi, interview by the author, July 14, 1998.
  40. Shiomi's performance, Satie's and Picabia's ballet, or Yves Klein's "*Le vide*" (1958), in which Klein presented an empty gallery as an exhibition, may also have inspired Hi Red Center to close Naiqua Gallery for the duration of their exhibition in 1964. Furthermore, Ono made a similar attempt at Naiqua Gallery in 1964. The relationship among these works deserves further investigation.
  41. Similarly, her friend, composer Toru Takemitsu, performed her *Event for the Late Afternoon* at the Festival of Music and Art of This Century held at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Theater, Honolulu, Hawaii, on April 23, 1964.
  42. Shiomi, individual recollection, in Williams and Noel, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 127.
  43. *Ibid.*, 129.
  44. *Ibid.*, 132.
  45. George Maciunas, letter to Ben Vautier, July 21, 1964. Lila and Gilbert Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
  46. Shiomi, interview by the author, July 14, 1998.
  47. This photographer is identified as a Mr. Kinuta (first name unknown). Shiomi, interview by the author, July 16, 2003.
  48. The score reads, "Inflate a small rubber balloon in one deep breath and sign your name on the surface of the balloon (this is your lung). You can buy the lungs of other performers at an auction."
  49. While these original bottles were brought from Japan by Shiomi, later editions were made with small bottles available in New York. Maciunas designed different labels to be put on the bottles. For a picture, see Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 483.
  50. The initial score was comprised of "smile" and "stop to smile," but Shiomi changed the latter expression to "stop smiling" or "no smile" because "stop to smile" suggested to "stop in order to smile." Shiomi, interview by the author, July 15, 1998.
  51. *Disappearing Music for Face* inspired Maciunas to make a film version. He planned it as early as in July 1964, but it was not realized until 1966, after Shiomi returned to Japan. For the film version, Ono performed a transitional mouth movement from smile (open and grinning) to nonsmile (closed). Filmed with a high-speed camera, the sequence could be projected in extremely slow motion. The film focused closely on the movement of the mouth, and the other parts of Ono's face were cut off. Shiomi does not like this film version because "the mouth is not the only body part which can smile"; Mieko Shiomi, fax communication to the author, November 13, 1998. Although this film and a flipbook version of the same sequence are credited to Shiomi, they are not productions she authorized.
  52. While many Fluxus artists participated in this performance series at Café au Go Go, Maciunas, who disapproved of Fluxus artists doing independent activities, considered it totally separate from Fluxus. Shiomi, interview by the author, July 16, 2003.
  53. Mieko Shiomi, "Sousaku katsudou no ryakureki" [A Select History of My Artistic Activities], unpublished manuscript, 1992, 1, Mieko Shiomi personal files.
  54. Shiomi, "How We Met or a Microdemystification," *AQ*, no.16 (n.d.): 65–66.
  55. Shiomi, "Mieko Shiomi," 42. In retrospect, she recognized that this idea

- stemmed from the Japanese tradition of integrating art with life. Shiomi, interview by the author, July 14, 1998.
56. John Held, “From Moticos to Mail Art: Five Decades of Postal Networking,” in *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1991), xv–xxii.
  57. The former point can be speculated from the fact that Japanese ex-Gutai artist, Shozo Shimamoto, who has been eager to promote his art through an international network, is frequently noted in literature on mail art.
  58. Shiomi, “Hassō no daigomi,” 178–79.
  59. Mieko Shiomi, *Spatial Poem*, (Minoo, Japan: self-published, 1976), 2–9.
  60. Shiomi, “Mieko Shiomi,” 44.
  61. Shiomi, “Hassō no daigomi,” 179.
  62. Shiomi, individual recollection, in Williams and Noel, eds., *Mr. Fluxus*, 136.
  63. Shiomi hated this special treatment of her name because it seemed to advertise her as a Westernized person who valued her experience living abroad to the point of forgetting her Japanese roots. On the contrary, she believes that where she is based at any given time does not matter, that wherever she is at that time is the center of her world. Shiomi, interview by the author, July 16, 2003.
  64. Mieko Shiomi to George Maciunas, c. September 15, 1965, Maciunas file, GRI.
  65. Upon hearing about this event Maciunas called it a “spark of genius” and proposed to Shiomi the idea of making a Fluxus edition of it. After Maciunas’s death, Shiomi learned that a record covered with glue was found among his possessions. Shiomi, interview by the author, July 16, 2003.
  66. Shiomi to Maciunas, c. September 15, 1965.
  67. “Sutādasuto: Hapuningū no saishin ban” [Stardust: The Most Recent Version of the Happening], *Geijustu Hihyō*, October 1965, 115.
  68. Environment Group, *Kūkan kara kankyō e* [From Space to Environment], exhibition pamphlet (Tokyo: Matsuya Department Store, 1966).
  69. Ashiya City Museum, *Sōgetsu to sono jidai*, 261.
  70. Shiomi, telephone interview by the author, October 15, 2001.
  71. Ay-O, program for *Happening for Sightseeing Bus Trip in Tokyo*, December 18, 1966, Mieko Shiomi personal files.
  72. This score was titled *Piece for a Small Puddle*.
  73. For more background on the term *intermedia*, see the introduction to the present volume, note 3.
  74. Shiomi, “Mieko Shiomi,” 45.
  75. “Intermedia Arts Festival,” concert program, January 1969.
  76. “Cross Talk Intermedia,” flyer, 1969.
  77. Shiomi, notes for *Amplified Dream I*, 1969, courtesy of the artist.
  78. Shiomi, “Mieko Shiomi,” 44–45.
  79. Mieko Shiomi, “Amplified Dream I,” in “Cross Talk Intermedia,” program, January 1969.
  80. George Maciunas to Mieko Shiomi, early 1972, Maciunas file, GRI.
  81. Shiomi, *Spatial Poem*, 14–27.
  82. Kristine Stiles, “Between Water and Stone: Fluxus Performance, A Metaphysics of Acts,” in Armstrong and Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 93.
  83. Shiomi, “Mieko Shiomi,” 45.
  84. One of the more recent Fluxus performances by Shiomi includes *Fluxus Trial*, held at the Osaka National Museum of Art in 2001. In it several young Japanese musicians and artists participated as performers.



## Chapter Six: Self-Exploration in Multimedia

1. For the two essays that provide the most comprehensive biographical information on Kubota, see Brooks Adams, "Kubota's Video Sculpture: A Biographical Perspective"; and Moira Roth, "The Voice of Shigeo Kubota: 'A Fusion of Art and Life, Asia and America . . .,'" in *Shigeo Kubota: Video Sculpture*, exhibition catalog, ed. Mary Jane Jacobs (Astoria, N.Y.: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), 8–12 and 76–87, respectively; hereafter, this catalog will be referred to as *Video Sculpture*. Kubota's personal résumé, written in about 1993, provided some factual information. I thank Jonas Mekas and the staff of the Anthology Film Archives in New York for granting access to the artist's file.
2. Mary Jane Jacob, "Introduction," in *Video Sculpture*, 6.
3. For Tone's and Kosugi's performances, see Genpei Akasegawa, *Han geijutsu anpan* [Anti-Art Independent Exhibitions] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1994), 182–83, 194.
4. Michael Shapiro, "The Japanese in New York," *Manhattan Catalog* 5, no. 1 (1990): 42, quoted in Roth, "The Voice of Shigeo Kubota," 77.
5. See chapter 5, n. 30 of the present volume.
6. For Paik's biography, see John G. Hanhardt, *The World of Nam June Paik*, exhibition catalog (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2000), 20, 30.
7. George Maciunas, notes, c. 1963, George Maciunas file, Jean Brown Collection, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
8. I confirmed the date of this exhibition by visiting scholar Shigeo Sasaki in Tokyo and going through the documents of the Naiqua Gallery that he had collected over many years. I thank Mr. Sasaki for his cooperation.
9. Roth, "The Voice of Shigeo Kubota," 77.
10. Akasegawa, *Hangeijutsu anpan*, 174–75.
11. Shigeo Kubota, quoted in Yūka Miyata, "Naika datta, garou datta— futatabi (naika garou –60 nendai no zen'ei ten) kaisaimade" ["It Was the Office of Internal Medicine and Gallery" Once More; Until I Held the *Naiqua Gallery Exhibition of the Avant-Garde in the 1960s*"], *Aida*, no. 80 (2002): 31.
12. Shigeo Kubota, quoted in Jeanine Mellinger and D. I. Bean, "On Art and Artists: Shigeo Kubota," *Profile*, no. 3 (1983): 21.
13. Shigeo Kubota to George Maciunas, June 1964, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit.
14. Kubota, quoted in Mellinger and Bean, "On Art," 3.
15. *Ibid.* In the interview, when she was asked whether she had "an easier time being a woman artist in New York," she answered "Yes." She was impressed to find many independent career women in the city.
16. Similar ideas were also central to the work of an American artist, Martha Rosler. Her series of collages titled *Body Beautiful or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1965–74) incorporated women's body parts cut out from various magazines.
17. Adams, "Kubota's Video Sculpture," 10.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection/New York: Abrams, 1988), 265–268.
20. Kubota, quoted in Mellinger and Bean, "On Art," 3.

21. The performance was originally scheduled on January 22, 1965, but like events by other artists, Kubota's was rescheduled. See George Maciunas's poster for Perpetual Fluxus Fest, reproduced in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 168.
22. Elizabeth Armstrong, "Fluxus and the Museum," in Armstrong and Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 14–15.
23. Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone: Fluxus Performance, A Metaphysics of Acts," in Armstrong and Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, 82.
24. The quotes here are from Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 99.
25. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 38.
26. Carolee Schneemann, quoted in Kathy O'Dell, "Fluxus Feminus," *Drama Review* 41, no. 1 (1997): 47.
27. Stiles, "Between Water and Stone," 77, n. 59.
28. Alison Knowles, conversation with the author, November 29, 2000.
29. Typically at an inn that accommodates visitors to a hot spring (*onsen*), some geishas (specifically called *onsen geisha*) present sexually provocative shows to entertain customers at dinner. Such degraded entertainment art is called *enkai gei*. Here *gei* means "art" in a degraded sense. As a matter of fact, the Japanese word for "fine art," *geijutsu*, which was chosen after modernization, uses *gei*.
30. Carolee Schneemann, telephone interviews by the author, February 8 and June 8, 2004.
31. Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in Paul Schimmel, *Out of Action: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–79* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames and Hudson, 1998), 279, n. 128.
32. Barbara Lloyd was Gordon Mumma's girlfriend, and the three other women were the wives of the three composers. For the factual information about the Sonic Arts Union, see Melinda Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 17, no. 4 (2000): 297–312.
33. More than a dozen photographs of this performance that include Kubota are reproduced in Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 1997), 135–38, 142–43.
34. Carolee Schneemann, conversation with the author, October 28, 1999.
35. Shigeo Kubota, "Bannen no dushan to chesu gēmu" [Late Duchamp and the Chess Game], *Bijutsu Techō*, no. 319 (1969): 80–89.
36. Moira and William Roth, "John Cage on Marcel Duchamp," *Art in America* 61, no. 6 (1973): 72–79.
37. Shigeo Kubota, interview by Jonathan Price, February 17, 1976, transcript, 1, Anthology Film Archives, New York.
38. "Pīpuru" [People], *OCS News*, no. 496 (February 17, 1995): 4.
39. Jonathan Price, "Shigeo Kubota and the Video of Wipe, Flash, Crash," *Woman Artists Newsletter* 2, no. 6 (1976): 4.
40. Shigeo Kubota, "Auto (Video) Biography in Twelve Chapters (1969–85): A Broken Diary," manuscript, n.p., Anthology Film Archives, New York.
41. Shigeo Kubota, comments in Jacobs, ed., *Video Sculpture*, 24.

42. Kubota, interview by Jonathan Price, 3.
43. Ann-Sargent Wooster, "Shigeeko Kubota: I Travel Alone," *High Performance*, Winter 1991, 28.
44. Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black," 297.
45. Kubota, "Auto (Video) Biography," n.p.
46. Kubota, comments in Jacobs, ed., *Video Sculpture*, 40.
47. Kubota, quoted in Mellinger and Bean, "On Art," 2.
48. Kubota, comments in Jacobs, ed., *Video Sculpture*, 40.
49. Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black," 310.
50. Wooster, "Shigeeko Kubota: I Travel Alone," 29.
51. Brooks Adams, "Zen and the Art of Video," *Art in America*, no. 72 (1984): 125.
52. Roth, "The Voice of Shigeeko Kubota," 80.
53. Shigeeko Kubota, "Video Sculpture: Two Phases," in the press release for *Video Viewpoints* program held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 23, 1980; Kubota file, Museum of Modern Art, Video Study Center.
54. Ingrid Wiegand, "Video Poems," *Soho Weekly News*, June 12, 1975, n.p.
55. Shigeeko Kubota, invitation card to the exhibition *Video Poem* at the Kitchen, New York, June 7, 1975; Kubota file, Anthology Film Archives, New York.
56. An edition of five was made for *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and an edition of six with different video imagery was made for *Meta-Marcel: Window*. See Shigeeko Kubota, comments in Jacobs, ed., *Video Sculpture*, 28, 32.
57. Shigeeko Kubota, "Interview: Shigeeko Kubota" by Katsue Toyama, *Image Forum*, no. 139 (1991): 21.
58. Ibid.
59. Shigeeko Kubota and Nam June Paik, "Furukusasu no omoide kara (From the Memory of Fluxus)," *Bijutsu Techō*, no. 6186 (1988): 293.
60. Although no one has pointed it out, Kubota's interest in natural motifs and materials may have influenced Paik to combine technology with nature in his later works. The most recent example is the installation of a waterfall at Paik's 2000 retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum; the idea was originally Kubota's. See Ann Landi, "Screen Idyll," *Art News*, no. 99 (2000): 148.
61. Kubota and Paik, "Furukusasu no omoide kara," 293.
62. Kubota's most recent exhibition of video sculptures, titled *Sexual Healing*, literally turned her life into artworks. Since Paik had a stroke and his body became half-paralyzed in 1996, she has been looking after him. In this humorous yet observant work, Kubota focused on her husband enjoying his daily encounters with young female physical therapists. In this case, the video camera allowed her to detach herself from the reality and extract amusing elements out of her hardship. See Shigeeko Kubota, "Sexual Healing," artist's statement, Lance Fung Gallery, New York, 2000.

## Epilogue

1. Yayoi Kusama, quoted in Dana Friis-Hansen, "Yayoi Kusama's Feminism," *ART+TEXT*, no. 49 (1994): 50.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 378.
3. Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone: Fluxus Performance, A Meta-

- physics of Acts,” in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 79.
4. Whitney Chadwick, “An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation,” in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 29.
  5. *Ibid.*, 28.
  6. Carolee Schneemann, “The Obscene Body/Politic,” *Art Journal*, Winter 1991, 32.
  7. See Alexandra Munroe, “Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama,” in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalog (New York: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989); Lynn Zalevansky, “Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York,” in *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*, exhibition catalog (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998); J. F. Rodenbeck, “Yayoi Kusama: Surface, Stitch, Skin,” in *Inside the Visible, an Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 149–55.
  8. Stiles, “Between Water and Stone,” 77–82. Regarding Ono’s *Cut Piece*, a feminist interpretation by Barbara Haskell and John G. Hanhardt’s preceded that of Stiles. In the section entitled “Feminism: Violence and Liberation,” they note, “By overtly enacting the sexually submissive role with which females traditionally have been associated, Ono forces the audience to confront their own attitudes towards sexual aggression, voyeurism, and gender subordination.” See Haskell and Hanhardt, *Yoko Ono: Arias and Objects* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Books, 1991), 91.
  9. Shigeo Kubota, “Interview: Shigeo Kubota” by Katsue Toyama, *Image Forum*, no. 139 (1991): 19.
  10. Kay Itoi, “Kusama Speaks,” 1997; online at <http://www.artnet.com>.
  11. Anna C. Chave, “O’Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze,” *Art in America*, no. 78 (1990): 115–25, 177, 179.
  12. Carolee Schneemann credited Ono as “the only artist” she knew who made body art before herself; see Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 1997), 52.
  13. Young artists engaged in collaborative projects with the audience include Xu Bing, Lee Mingwei, Nobuho Nagasawa, Tsuyoshi Ozawa, Ritsuko Taho, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Jun’ya Yamaide, among others.
  14. For more on these artists, see Moira Roth, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Arts, 1983). More recent literature on women performance artists in the 1970s see Kristine Stiles, “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,” in Paul Schimmel, *Out of Action: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–79* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames and Hudson, 1998); Josephine Withers, “Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Transforming Ourselves,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Abrams, 1994); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, eds., *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Lizbeth Goodman, ed., *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Kathy Deepwell, ed. of special issue on feminist performance art, *n. para-*

*doxa*, no. 5 (2000). There are also close affinities among European women performance artists such as Marina Abramović, Valie Export, and Rebecca Horn, and Kubota, Kusama, and Ono. How Japanese women's performances were received by these European counterparts requires a further investigation. For Export's performances, see *Valie Export: Ob/De+Con(Struction)*, exhibition catalog (Philadelphia: Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art and Design, 2000). For Horn and Abramović, see Schimmel, *Out of Action*.

15. For Antoni's performance, see Kay Larson, "Women's Work (or Is It Art?) Is Never Done," *New York Times*, June 7, 1996. The Guerrilla Girls recently employed the Internet as a medium of expression; see Matthew Mirapaul, "A Stronger, More Theatrical Role for Feminist Activists," *New York Times*, July 23, 2001.
16. Artists such as Mariko Mori and Yoshiko Shimada have presented their performance works internationally from the 1990s. Shimada is now based in Japan, but she frequently works out of Japan as well. The most recent and comprehensive publication on Mori is Dominic Molon, Lisa Corrin, Carol S. Eliel, and Margery King, *Mariko Mori*, exhibition catalog (London: Serpentine Gallery/Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998). One of the most recent publications on Shimada is Yoshiko Shimada, *Art Activism 1992–98*, exhibition catalog (Tokyo: Ota Fine Arts, 1998).



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