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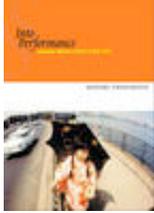
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Midori Yoshimoto

Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York

New Brunswick: [Rutgers University Press](#), 2005. 248 pp.; 76 b/w ills. Paper \$29.95 (0813535212)



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In the context of today's increasingly global art world, Midori Yoshimoto's excellent and timely study, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, fills a lacuna in the history of Japanese art in the West as well as in the history of the avant-garde more generally. *Into Performance* offers fascinating insight into the period between the Zen appropriations of Western artists in the 1950s and the identity art that reigned in the 1980s and 1990s, now so frequently subsumed under the more neutral (or, as some argue, neutralizing) rubric of globalism. The five Japanese women artists who are the subjects of Yoshimoto's text—Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi, and Shigeko Kubota—left Japan to pursue careers in New York City in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Yet ultimately, each found herself marginalized—on the fringes of both Japanese and Western societies. Indeed they were the first generation of Japanese women artists to work outside Japan. Neither Japanese-American nor regarded as wholly Japanese by their compatriots, they occupied positions now not uncommon, but novel at the time.

While Kusama and Ono have been subjects of substantial English-language monographs in recent years, Saito and Shiomi are considered almost exclusively within the context of their Fluxus affiliations. Kubota has fared somewhat better in terms of critical and art-historical attention, yet she remains known primarily as the partner of the late Nam June Paik. This is all the more surprising since, as Yoshimoto points out, Kubota created the first mixed-media video installation, her *Riverrun* of 1972, which included a fountain of orange juice and a live video synthesizer that colorized images of visitors drinking the orange juice and fed these images back to one of the multiple monitors in the installation itself (187–88). While most scholarship on Kubota deals with her later video art, Yoshimoto focuses on her early career with Fluxus. Perhaps more importantly, her extensive research using Japanese sources offers new insights and information on all of her subjects.

All five artists emerged from a cultural context in which, as Yoshimoto explains, “the choice to become an artist was, for a woman, almost unthinkable” (37). They each, however, came from relatively wealthy family backgrounds and were provided liberal arts educations, exposing them to new opportunities for women. Even so, their choices were difficult. By moving to New York, they freed themselves from Japanese social constraints on women. Kusama, especially, saw in her alterity a special advantage: “America has freedom. And because I was a Japanese in America, I was outside that society, so I had a special freedom” (196). Ono, who had grown up moving back and forth between the United States and Japan (and thus had a fundamentally different relationship to the United States), returned to Japan from 1962 to 1964. Political tensions between the two countries reemerged during this period over the U.S. militarization of Japan, and Ono began to feel a stranger in her native land. When she returned to New York in 1964, she told friends she was “going home” to where she belonged (102–3).

The title of the book, *Into Performance*, refers not only to the transitional period in which these artists, after experimenting with different media, move into the medium of performance. It also suggests the issue of agency, as these women moved from their

traditionally restricted roles in Japanese society into active players in the international art world (1–2). Ono was a key figure in the development of Fluxus, which was just emerging as she left New York in 1962. She would officially lead the group in Japan, where she was understood to have introduced the “happening” from the United States. In reality, the Gutai group had already introduced the form, if not the term, in the previous decade. Yet the earliest published reference to happenings per se in Japan seems to be a 1961 article in the *Sogetsu Center Art Journal* that introduced Allan Kaprow, the American artist who coined the term (29). Ono was seen as responsible for what was considered an American trend (94): “Because they borrowed the art-historical discourse from the West, they [the Japanese critics] could only write about Japanese artists whose work fit Western criteria. Unable to find the right vocabulary to describe Ono’s works, many journalists and critics instead ridiculed or ignored her as merely following John Cage” (102).

Cage, of course, was fascinated with Asian culture and philosophy, having been strongly influenced by the work of D.T Suzuki. And it was Cage, more than anyone, who was responsible for the promulgation of what would become known as “happenings” through his influential teaching at the New School for Social Research, a breeding ground for the nascent Fluxus movement. Ono had been introduced to Cage in New York by her then-husband, composer Toshi Ichiyanagi. After Ono reunited with Ichiyanagi, whose return to Japan had preceded her own, the couple were instrumental in facilitating Cage’s tour of Japan, known still as the “Cage-Ichiyanagi Shock.” Ono’s association with Cage, then, was not without basis; but, as Yoshimoto points out, the Japanese critics, interested primarily in introducing new Western artists and artistic trends, “easily overlooked the potential of domestic artistic sources” (94). Japanese social conventions, for example, require a constant speculation on the hidden meaning behind what is actually said or written. This strategy of indirect communication was clearly present in Ono’s inaugural performance upon her return, yet, ironically, the performance was deemed derivative of Cage, most notably and tellingly by the American expatriate critic Donald Richie.

Indeed, Saito, Shiomi, and Kubota would all become involved with Fluxus upon their arrival in New York. Fluxus was unusually diverse, comprising an international group of artists from the United States, Europe, and Japan—as well as several women—at a time when most New York avant-garde artists and their critics were overwhelmingly white and male. While Ono, perhaps enabled by her cross-cultural background, managed to establish an independent career (even as an artist firmly within the Fluxus orbit), Saito and Shiomi would remain identified almost exclusively with the group. (George Maciunas, self-described “chairman” of Fluxus, was fascinated with Japanese culture and even planned to move to Japan in 1964 to establish an artists’ commune there.) Saito, as Yoshimoto notes, was behind the execution of many Fluxus multiples, both those attributed to others as well as her own, between the years 1964 and 1968. By the time Shiomi and Kubota arrived in New York later in 1964, Saito was able to train them to assist in the production of Fluxus works while at the same time providing them with entrée to a ready-made community of artists in their new home. Shiomi and Kubota had been introduced to Fluxus in Tokyo by Ichiyanagi and Ono. Maciunas’s purchase of works from Shiomi by mail, in fact, provided a substantial portion of the funds necessary for her airfare to New York.

Saito quickly began producing her own Fluxus multiples—unusual chess sets such as her *Nuts and Bolts Chess Sets* (1964) and her *Grinder Chess Sets* (1965). And while she had planned several public performances during her stay in New York, they all unfortunately fell through. Her first public performances would not take place until 1971, three years after her departure from New York. Like the chess sets she made as Fluxus editions, her performances were interactive games that required audience participation, often involving paper cubes. Her *Kicking Box Billiard*, for example, engaged audiences in winning paper boxes by kicking them against each other according to a set of rules.

Because her U.S. visa could no longer be renewed, Saito traveled throughout Europe between the years 1968 and 1979. Her relative neglect in the art-historical literature can be attributed at least in part to her nomadic existence. Shiomi, too, had visa problems, and returned to Japan in July 1965, where she taught piano for a living and became a housewife and mother in 1970. Before leaving New York, however, she had begun to make her series of *Spatial Poems*, works that depended upon the mails to collaborate with others around the world. Created between 1965 and 1975 and spanning the entire globe, the works provide instructions by mail that others would perform elsewhere. Reports of the performances were sent back to Shiomi who documented them as elements on world maps, assigning each report to its physical location on the map.

Kubota remained to help Maciunas, who informally referred to her as “vice president of Fluxus” because of her key role in organizing Fluxus events. Kubota’s notorious *Vagina Painting* performance was presented as part of the *Perpetual Fluxfest* on the 4th of July 1965, exactly one year after her arrival in New York. Attaching a paintbrush to her underpants, she dipped it in red paint

and, squatting over sheets of white paper on the floor, made calligraphic marks. Literally marking her own independence from gender barriers in Japan, the performance has generally been understood as a critical comment on the “glorified machismo embodied in the actions of male painters, including Jackson Pollock and Kazuo Shiraga of Gutai” (179). Yet here, too, Yoshimoto identifies a possible Japanese inspiration for the performance: “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” (182). By 1969, Kubota would become involved with video art (and with Paik). In 1972 she formed a multiracial women’s video collective, Red, Yellow, White, and Black. As noted above, she created the first mixed-media video installation that same year.

In contrast to the other artists considered in this study, by the late 1950s Kusama was already regarded as an art star of sorts, but nonetheless subjected to the typical sexist critical reception reserved for the few women artists taken seriously. Her works were characterized, critics believed, by “womanly delicate sensitivity” (52). In spite of her relative success, she, too, determined to leave Japan and seek opportunities abroad. An exhibition opportunity in Seattle brought her to the United States in November 1957, and a few months later she arrived in New York where she would remain until returning to Japan in 1973.

Soon after arriving in New York, her style changed, and she developed paintings of a much larger scale with what would become her characteristic pattern of dots or nets. By 1961, she began the series known as *Aggregations*, objects covered with repetitive phallic forms made of stuffed fabric. Between 1966 and 1970, Kusama presented a series of performances—most famously, a series of body-painting performances (beginning in 1967) that she described variously as “naked performances,” “body festivals,” and most commonly “self-obliteration.” The best-known of these, in the Museum of Modern Art’s Sculpture Garden, was the *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA* of August 1969, for which the eight participants, under Kusama’s direction, disrobed and struck poses in emulation of the sculptures in the garden.

While offering an insightful summary of Kusama’s career, Yoshimoto is most concerned with the artist’s extraordinary ability to manage her public image. And a significant part of this image control was accomplished by emphasizing her otherness; Kusama regularly appeared in traditional Japanese dress in a deliberate attempt to differentiate herself. Of the five artists discussed, Kusama most clearly and deliberately deployed her Japanese identity to professional advantage.

Into Performance offers compelling analyses of each of the artists it covers. In the cases of Shiomi and Saito, it provides the most substantial (English-language) narratives of these artists’ careers to date. Yoshimoto’s stated goal with *Into Performance* is 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” (3). In this she surely succeeds. But beyond its essential and important historical contributions, *Into Performance* offers remarkable insights into not only the histories of Japanese and American avant-gardes, but into performance studies, gender studies, and the emergence of globalism in the field of contemporary art.

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