

Yoko Ono and the Women of Fluxus Changed the Rules in Art and Life

A show at the Japan Society focuses on four innovators who created a blueprint for a new society with postcards, scissors, chess sets and instructions.

By Martha Schwendener

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Squatting over a large paper surface with a paintbrush dangling between her legs. Sitting onstage at Carnegie Hall while audience members come up to snip her clothing off with scissors. Blowing soap bubbles to make musical sounds. These are some of the actions taken in the name of art in “Out of Bounds: Japanese Women Artists in Fluxus” at the Japan Society, an exhibition that focuses on four revolutionary women, Shigeko Kubota, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi, and one you’ve probably heard of before, Yoko Ono.

Fluxus was founded in the early 1960s and paved the way for Conceptual art, Minimalism, performance and video. It saw the future in other words. Rather than create traditional paintings or sculpture, these artists did things like play games, mail postcards, cook meals and offer instructions inspired by notated musical scores. (The composer John Cage was a central figure.) There was a logic — or anti-logic — to this approach. Serious, “rational” society had produced mass destruction in the 20th century. Maybe novel methods of producing culture could serve as a salvo or blueprint for a new society.

But by focusing on four Japanese women, the show asks: Who stands the test of time? Who doesn’t? Was Fluxus really a blueprint for the future? The exhibition, organized by Midori Yoshimoto and Tiffany Lambert, with Ayaka Iida, features around 150 objects, which range from boxes full of curious objects to videos, films and photographs.



Shigeko Kubota, “Flux Napkins” (c. 1967). Estate of Shigeko Kubota/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; via The Museum of Modern Art

One of the things that’s obvious immediately is just how international Fluxus was — a portent of today’s much more global art world. Kubota and Shiomu moved to New York in 1964 — partly because they felt their career prospects were limited in Japan — and quickly became involved with Fluxus. Kubota focused on everyday activities, preparing meals and making “Flux Napkins” (c. 1967).

Kubota’s infamous “Vagina Painting” (1965) was a performance in which she either attached a paintbrush to her underwear or inserted the brush into her body (the details of this are left a little unclear) and waddled over a large paper surface. The idea of “birthing” a painting and using the body in such a crudely basic way was echoed in feminist art by Ana Mendieta and Marina Abramovic, or Carolee Schneemann’s “Interior Scroll” (1975), which consisted of pulling a written text out of her own vagina. In many ways, this serves as a precursor of all the bodily performance you see in the art world today.

Kubota was also a pioneering video artist. (A recent exhibition at MoMA showcased a handful of her video sculptures.) One of her works here, “Video Poem” (1970-75), features a monitor playing close-up images of her face as she nestles inside a sleeping bag. It is a sweet, somewhat sad work (the sleeping bag was her ex-boyfriend’s), but not a blockbuster.



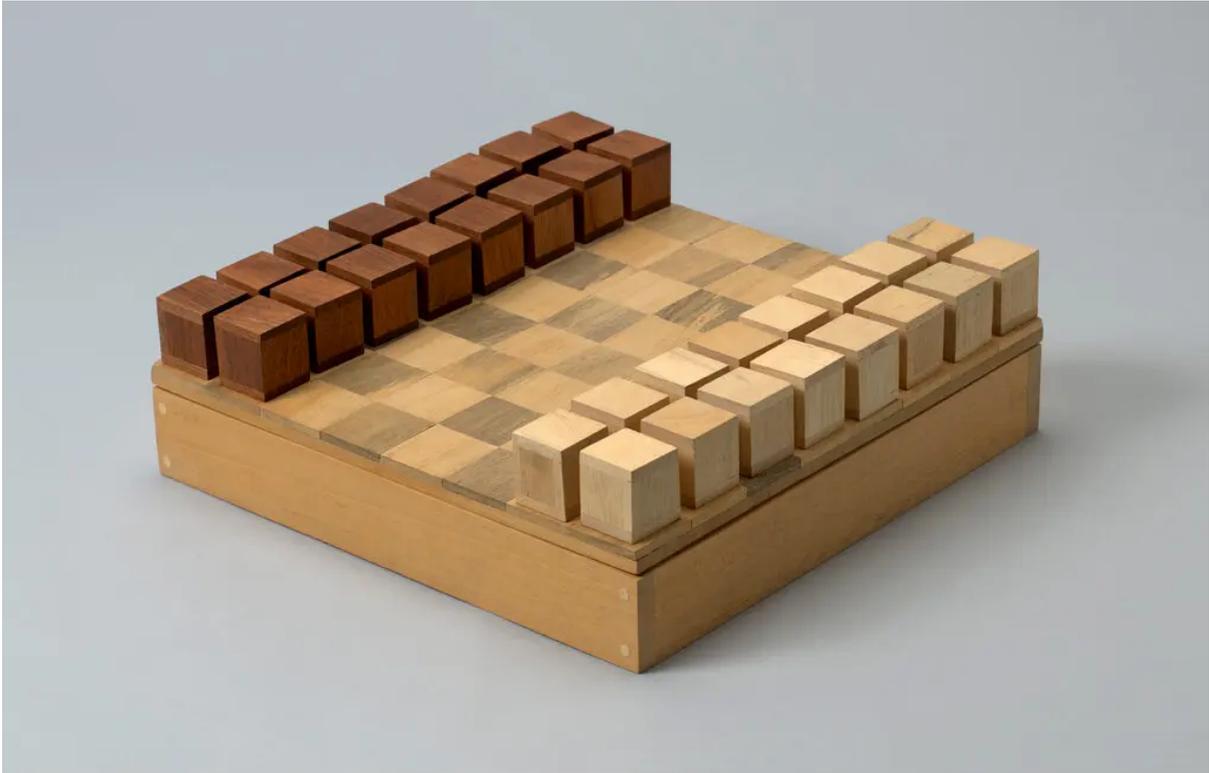
Shigeko Kubota, “Vagina Painting,” performed during Perpetual Fluxfest, Cinematheque, New York, July 4, 1965. The idea of “birthing” a painting in such a crudely basic way was echoed in other feminist art. The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

Technology and its relationship with the body was a mainstay of Fluxus, as it was for other Fluxus artists like Nam June Paik, in the postwar era. Information theory was burgeoning alongside game theory — and games. These artists seized upon chess, a medieval war and strategy game, approaching it in an absurd, playful way, giving it exalted status.

Saito’s wildly imaginative and beautifully crafted chess sets are among the best works here. Saito’s “Sound Chess” from around 1977 is an interactive artwork in the form of a series of identical-looking wooden cubes containing different unknown objects (actually buttons, beans and bells). Pick them up and shake them, or attempt to play using hearing, memory and touch.

The artist’s “Grinder Chess” (c. 1964) uses mechanical drill attachments as chess pieces and designs chess sets made with tiny booklets as playing pieces or a glove as a board. What does it mean to remake chess? It means, quite literally, to remake the rules of the game. And yet, chess has become popular again, on the internet and the Netflix mini-series “The Queen’s Gambit” (2020). (For another take on chess in the art world, head downtown to Hamishi Farah’s paintings at Maxwell Graham’s gallery on the Lower East Side, where paintings of traditional black and white chess pieces are

explored in a racial context.)



Takako Saito, "Sound Chess," from around 1977. An interactive chessboard with 32 wooden cubes containing different unknown objects (actually buttons, beans and bells). Pick them up and shake them. The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

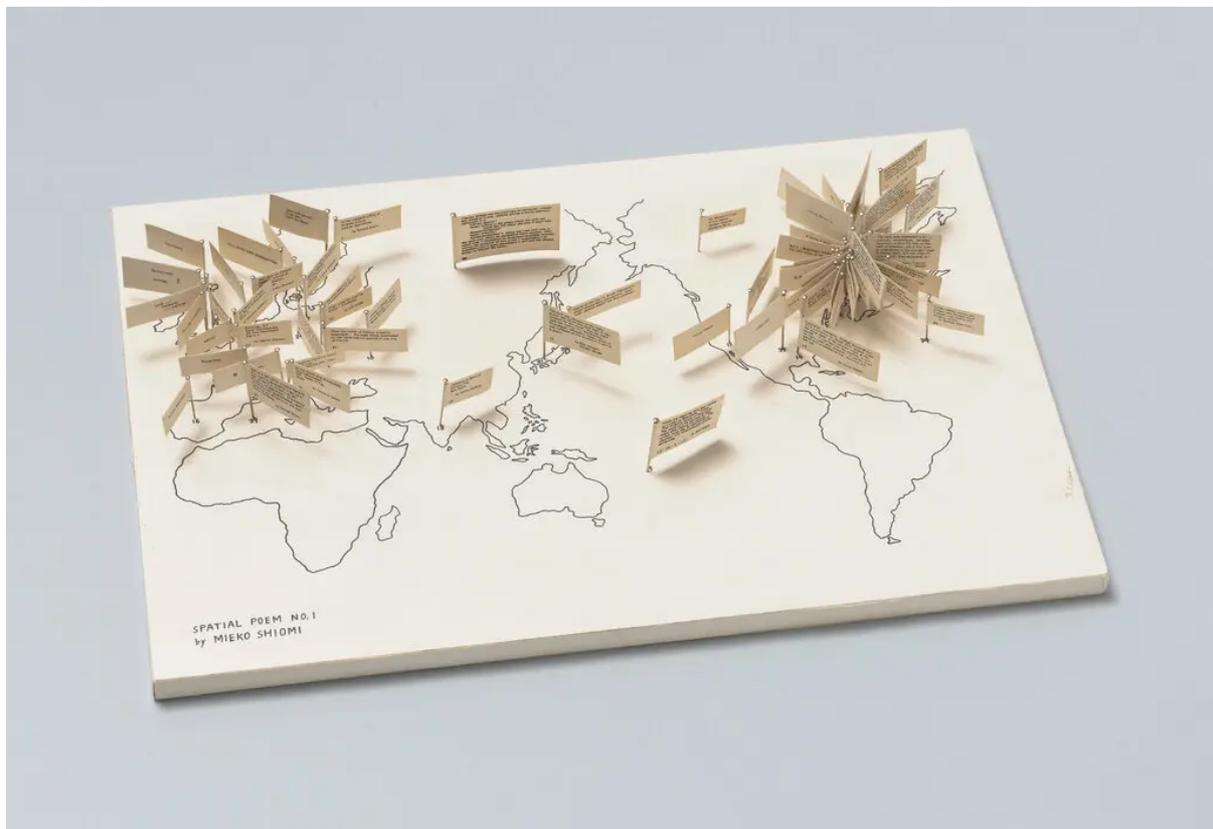
Mieko Shiomi came out of experimental music and improvisation, and that is her strongest suit. A projected video here shows her performing in 1961 with Group Ongaku, a Japanese noise and sound ensemble, blowing soap bubbles. (The video also includes the artist Yasunao Tone, a founding member of the Japanese section of Fluxus who will be performing at the Japan Society in conjunction with this show.)

Shiomi also created "action poems," including "Event for Late Afternoon" (1963) that consisted of lowering a violin from the top of a building to street level without making a sound. Long before the internet and its instant global connections, her "Spatial Poem" treated communication as a network. Shiomi provided participants with cards and instructions to write something on them, place them somewhere and report back to her. Then, like a social scientist, she would track and map the results. These are nice, poetic gestures, but don't carry the punch of some of the others.

And then there was Yoko Ono. Her famous "Cut Piece" performed in New York in 1965 and filmed by the Maysles Brothers, is on view here. You see Ono sitting onstage at Carnegie Recital Hall while members of the audience come up and cut off her clothing. "Cut Piece" — like her terrific "Grapefruit," a book of instructions and drawings that invited readers to do things like laugh, cough or scream for various durations — has been performed by people around the world, taking on a new meaning based on the time and the setting.



Mieko Shiomi, “Spatial Poem No. 3” from 1968. Shiomi provided participants with cards and instructions to write something on them, place them somewhere and report back to her. The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY



Mieko Shiomi, “Spatial Poem No. 1,” 1965. The artist would distribute the poetic work and, like a social scientist, track and map the results. Ink and pencil on board with 69 cards

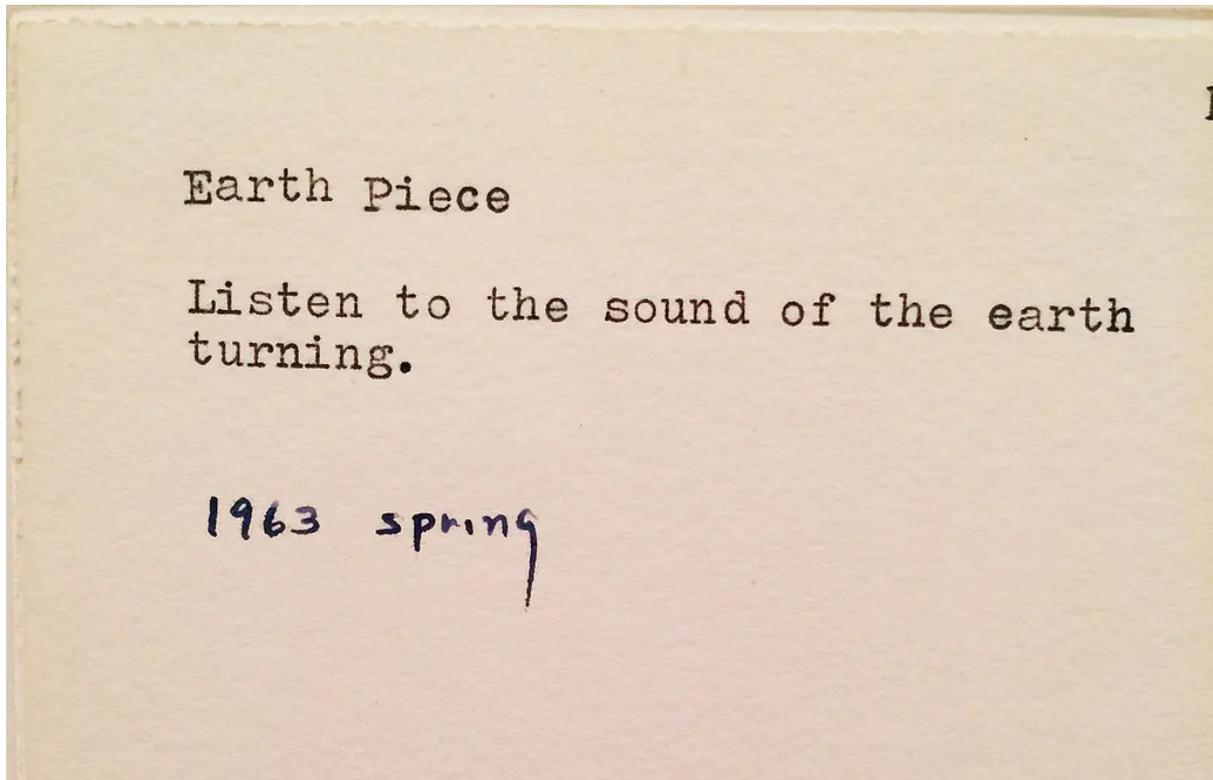
Of course, Ono became best known outside the avant-garde art world as the partner of John Lennon — and, for decades, a scapegoat for the breakup of the Beatles, which many consider to be a convenient misogynist and anti-Asian claim. On the other hand, Ono's infiltrating the Beatles might be among her best, unacknowledged performances ever. (What if Taylor Swift was showing up at art openings instead of football stadiums? That would be a game-changer.)

Peter Jackson's recent film about the making of the last Beatles album, "Let It Be" (1970), captured Ono sitting in the studio doing Fluxus-y things: painting at an easel, eating a pastry, paging through a Lennon fan magazine. As Amanda Hess observed in *The New York Times*, it's "as if she is staging a marathon performance piece, and in a way, she is."

The American artist David Horvitz flips this scenario with a T-shirt that reads: "John Lennon Broke Up Fluxus." This isn't 100% true: George Maciunas, the Lithuanian-born artist who was a driving force behind Fluxus, died in 1978 and the movement foundered after that. After wedding Lennon in 1969 though, Ono did become apprehensive about performing "Cut Piece" — that is, sitting alone onstage as strangers approached her clutching scissors. (Ono's wild, proto-punk music is now considered by some to be more radical and interesting than Lennon's solo musical efforts.)



In 1971 Yoko Ono and her husband, John Lennon, posed behind a copy of Ono's newly-published book of instructions, "Grapefruit" at a book signing session at Selfridge's department store, London. Central Press/Getty Images



A page of instructions from “Grapefruit” (1964), one of Yoko Ono’s instruction pieces, at the exhibition “Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971,” at the Museum of Modern Art, 2015. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Like the Horvitz T-shirt, “Out of Bounds” offers a new way of thinking about Fluxus, placing Japanese women’s contributions at the center, and white European and American men in supporting roles. With a roster of ongoing activities, the exhibition also seems to suggest that maybe Fluxus never broke up at all, but continues every time we play “Sound Chess” or follow Ono’s “Grapefruit” instructions; listen to a heartbeat or the sound of the earth turning; step in all the puddles in a city or, as she suggested in “Map Piece” (1964), “Draw a map to get lost.”

The current art world is characterized by biennials, art fairs and the art market. This runs counter to the ethos of Fluxus, which focused on more ephemeral gestures and less on objects of value. And yet, the whole contemporary art world runs like a giant, high-stakes game. Who is visible? Who is marketable? Who counts? Maybe, with its emphasis on randomness and chance, Fluxus predicted something it didn’t even realize, and Ono & Company plotted, one canny gesture at a time, the world we live in.

Out of Bounds: Japanese Women Artists in Fluxus

Through Jan. 21 at Japan Society, 333 East 47th Street, Manhattan; (212) 832-1155, japansociety.org.

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