

Book Review

Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York

by Midori Yoshimoto (New Jersey:
Rutgers University Press, 2005)

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This book, which derives from Midori Yoshimoto's doctoral dissertation submitted to Rutgers University in 2002, insightfully documents and historicises the long-time underrated and overlooked works and lives of five Japanese women artists involved in the New York avant-garde movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s: Yayoi Kusama, Yôko Ono, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi and Shigeko Kubota. According to the author, this is the first in-depth comparative examination of these artists to fill the gaps in both American and Japanese contemporary art history and illuminate the underrepresented intercultural dialogue between East and West in this revolutionary era for performance art.

Given the prolific body of work that these female artists' produced, spanning nearly half a century, it is astonishing to discover that their achievements in performance and intermedia arts had been neglected in scholarship until Yoshimoto's comprehensive thesis from a feminist perspective finally appeared in 2005. While Kusama, Ono and Kubota gained recognition from the late 1980s onwards, mostly through media exposure and international exhibitions, Yoshimoto's monographs on Saito and Shiomi were the first substantial literature about the two artists to be published.

Even though performance art itself has had a position on the periphery of canonical art history until recently, there is a much more noticeable delay in the assessment of female artists over male artists from the 1960s onwards. Yoshimoto's narration reminds us that it is impossible to discuss arts and academia without bringing issues of gender and race into scrutiny. It is certain that Yoshimoto is aware of the politics and performance or performativities of gender and race, and also that she realises the danger of essentialism inherent in grouping and analysing individual artists based on gender and race. In effect, some female artists like Kusama and Kubota show reluctance and sometimes repulsion to feminist interpretations.

Although the historical background to why feminism was negatively received even by female artists would have benefited from a more detailed explanation, I still agree with her application of a feminist reading.

In order to describe the style of Japanese female artists who employ their own bodies and actions and those of their audiences as means of expression and communication, Yoshimoto uses the term *performance*, along with its derivative forms coined by J. L. Austin and then applied by Kristine Stiles and Judith Butler, *performative* and *performativities*. Although the term ‘performance art’ actually did not achieve recognition until the late 1970s, Yoshimoto intends to use the words retroactively to refer to a form that appeared in the early twentieth century and reappeared in the 1960s. She also adopts the word *intermedia* in a similar way to Fluxus Artist, Dick Higgins: dissolution and transgression of the barrier between art and life, on the supposition that these five artists are always working in the very intermedia that avoids the possibility of categorisation in one existent medium. These new types of media freed the artists not only from hierarchically bound Japanese traditional art forms and their associations, such as Japanese-style painting and Western-style painting, and also the conventional lifestyle for women within the molds of ‘Good Wives and Wise Mothers.’

In the introduction to *Into Performance*, Yoshimoto’s main intentions are explained as follows:

I consider that performance helped the five artists to free themselves from existing preconceptions about art as well as from their culturally constructed behaviours. *Into Performance* also refers to the transformation of these artists’ lifestyle [sic] from that of traditionally confined Japanese women to that of internationally active artists. In its expanded definition, *performance* here suggests the five artists’ 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.
(2)

In order to describe the unwritten history of the Japanese female artists, Yoshimoto poignantly interweaves numerous facts drawn from her research material including interviews with the artists and valuable photographs, and then divides the whole into six units. In particular, she illuminates the artists’ formative periods in Japan and the transitional period from their homeland to New York, an area that has lacked critical scrutiny so far. By so doing, Yoshimoto intends to present socio-cultural issues surrounding Japanese women in the postwar era.

In Chapter 1, titled ‘Historical Background and Common Issues,’ Yoshimoto situates Kusama, Ono, Saito, Shiomi and Kubota in domestic, educational and social contexts, and depicts the problems and challenges that these female artists had in common.

Using this method, Yoshimoto reads private lives as political ones in order to analyse their performances/live-art. As such, the subsequent chapters, which are case studies dedicated to the five artists with a consistent focus on their identity, performance art and lives as Japanese female artists, are effectively presented.

As a result, both the common aspects that these women share as well as their inter-relationships and peculiarities are addressed. Having relatively wealthy backgrounds and high levels of education, they aspired to build independent positions as artists. They rebuked female submissive attitudes in the conservative Japanese art world and patriarchal society in general, and thus left the homeland for New York to explore their originality and creativity. In New York they experienced the explosion of New Music, Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art and Minimalism. Inhaling the air of free expression in the wave of counter-culture, they were active not only in creating and showing their art works but also in international performance scenes by connecting the avant-garde art streams in New York and Tokyo. Their work was instrumental in the development and dissemination of performance art. However, their contribution was often disregarded by fellow artists and critics, who were mostly white men, at that time. As Yoshimoto points out by quoting a note by Sally Banes, several famous male artists involved in Pop Art such as Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselmann used female bodies merely as sexual objects to be consumed by the male gazes of their follower critics. This was a very serious dilemma for these risk-takers who flew to a 'liberal' New York, in the so-called land of freedom and the nation of immigrants, only to find themselves trapped in more complicated webs of discrimination and marginalisation. To make matters worse, the memory of World War Two, particularly the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, as well as the widely spread stereotypical Orientalist illusion of passive yet sexually promiscuous and available Japanese women, tended to cast a dark shadow over the recognition of Japanese female artists in the United States. Although their minority status and exoticism occasionally attracted the attention of the American media, just as in Japan where the art world paid attention to a select few female artists, female and moreover non-white artists were rarely regarded as equal to their white male peers.

These Japanese female artists often struggle with being 'foreigners' or 'outsiders' in both Japan and the United States and their mainstream art industries. But despite this adversity, they tried to turn the disadvantages into advantages by exploiting their bodies and circumstances as alternative and subversive sites of performance. Moreover, the artists share introspective and contemplative tendencies using self-reflective objects such as mirrors, water, portraits, and video images. The sense of outsider often allows one to have more objective observations of the self and others.

In the epilogue, Yoshimoto aptly quotes the words of Ono in conversation with David Ross, in conjunction with the exhibition *Yes Yôko Ono* at the Japan Society:

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. (195)

It is not a coincidence that this radical revelation and re-evaluation of Japanese female artists, which boldly revises the accepted narrative in the historiography of the avant-garde art of the 1950s and beyond, was conceived by a Japanese female scholar who underwent a similar experience to the thematic figures she portrays. The author, currently working as an assistant professor of art history and director at New Jersey City University, moved to the United States after graduating from Osaka University in Japan with a BA Degree in order to conduct postgraduate study at Rutgers University. Even though there is a generation gap between her and the five artists studied here, Yoshimoto is still very aware of the restrictions and frustrations of life that continue to exist in Japanese male-centred society today. In addition, she has the experience of living outside of Japan; the sense of freedom and possibilities that it brings, but also the knowledge of the burden of being an outsider. In this sense her personal position adds a unique and fundamental depth to her feminist reading of the work of these five Japanese female artists and paves the way for future scholarship on women's history.

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Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:
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