Somewhere between Dream and Reality: Shigeko Kubota's Reunion with Duchamp and Cage

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Photograph of *Reunion*
performance by
Shigeko Kubota, 1968

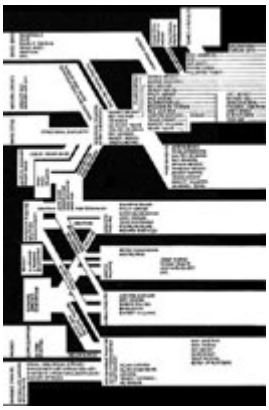

Figure 1
George Maciunas, Fluxus
(Its historical development
and relationship to
avant-garde movements)
Diagram No. 1-2, 1966



Figure 2

Cunningham
Dance Foundation,
Walkaround Time, 1968

More And moRe.
rules are esCaping our noticE. they were Secretly put in the museum. [1]

Born in Niigata, Japan, in 1937, Shigeko Kubota grew up in a monastic environment during WWII and the subsequent postwar period. She later studied sculpture in Tokyo in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during which Japan strived to reestablish its financial, political and psychological welfare from the devastation of the war. This period also offered a chance for Japanese artists to move away from fairly confined notions of presentation and cultural isolation from the global art community. Although such avant-garde group, as Gutai, began to evoke innovative ideas in the 1950s. For instance, painting by foot, crashing through papers, throwing paint, or displaying water in Osaka and Tokyo, a gender-biased phenomenon was still a fixed hierarchy of the society. After the failure of local art community to put up any critical response to her work, Kubota took off on a Boeing 707, leaving her native country for New York in 1964. She was drawn to the glittering landscape of the New York art scene, where Pop art, Happening, Minimal and Conceptual work were the dominant manners of the time. Through Yoko Ono, she was soon acquainted with George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus, and became a core member of Fluxus participating in various street events and performances.

Fluxus' rebellious ideas (Fig. 1) and its multicultural constitution embraced Kubota and provided her with a nurturing environment to explore an innovative outlet for her creative impulse. Kubota had learned of Duchamp and the underlying concepts and intellectual approach of his work when she was still in Japan and became even more inspired by him when she

visited the Duchamp exhibition by Pontus Hulten at the Stockholm Museum in 1967. The next year she met Duchamp in person when she was flying to the opening of Merce Cunningham's *Walk Around Time* (Fig. 2) , a performance based on Duchamp's *Large Glass*(1915-23) with a setting designed by Jasper Johns. In a lovely story vividly remembered by Kubota:

> "I met Duchamp on an American Airline flight to Buffalo for the opening of 'Walkaround Time' by Merce Cunningham. It was a cold winter in 1968. The airplane couldn't land at the airport in Buffalo because there was a blizzard from Niagara Falls. We landed at the airport in Rochester, then took a bus to Buffalo. In Toronto later in 1968, I photographed Marcel and John Cage playing chess at the 'Reunion' concert."[2]

Despite the newly raised confusion with regard to the sequence of the precise dates for these two events from which an anecdote on the beginning of their friendship is woven,[3] Duchamp had a profound impact on Shigeko Kubota. Not only was he the inspiring father icon for the Fluxus group and for Kubota's creative impulses, he also offered an unforgettable friendship during the final year of his life. Kubota took part in and photographed *Reunion*, a chess game organized by John Cage which turned out to be the last public reunion between these two masters of the contemporary creative mind,[4] and it was here that Kubota began to utilize video technology, a novel means through which dream and reality meet. Three works based on this chess event set forth her artist career as a pioneering video artist.

Marcel Duchamp and John Cage (1970; 1971) & *Video Sculpture* (1968-75)

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Figure 3
The wire-up chessboard
for *Reunion*,
Toronto, 1968

Performed at Ryerson Theatre of Ryerson Polytechnic, Toronto, on March 5, 1968, *Reunion* was organized by John Cage and included the musicians David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, and David Behrman and a wired-up chessboard designed by Lowell Cross (Fig. 3). When Teeny and Marcel Duchamp took turns playing chess with Cage on the stage, the pre-modulated photoreceptors served as a gating mechanism to receive messages of movements and to transmit sound and light. Depending on the moves of the chess pieces, the sound was cut off or rerouted to generate a kind of random music by means of the pre-configured chance operation of two “intellectual minds.” With the photographs she took and material acquired later, Kubota slowly developed three works based on this memorable event: a book, a videotape and a video sculpture in a period of time ranging from 1968 to 1975.

Published in 1970 in a limited edition of 500 numbered copies with a blue cover and inserted in a blue cardboard box, *Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* (Fig. 4) consists of photographs taken during the *Reunion* performance and a 33 1/3 rpm blue flexidisc

(phonograph) of the *Reunion*sound recording, accompanied by text written by John Cage under the title of “36 Acrostics re. and not re Duchamp.”

click to enlarge
Click to listen
download QuickTime Player




Figure 4
Shigeko Kubota, *Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, 1970

The videotape of 1972, carring the same title as the book, includes segments of John Cage—telling stories, mediating, playing a piano, sitting bandaged while Nam June Paik measures his brain waves (Figs. 5 & 6)—with still images of Teeny, Duchamp and Cage playing chess in*Reunion* alternating throughout as though they are the interlude in music composition. In addition, footage from Kubota’s visit to the graveyard of the Duchamp family in Rouen in 1972 (Fig. 7)[(5)], captures the fleeting movement of wind dancing with the patchy light that pierces through the shadowy grove. A sense of euphoria generates. On and off for three times, the exotic and shaman-like voice of Kubota chanting “Marcel Duchamp, 1887 to 1968,” is the only literal sound intervening with the seemingly timeless silence. The life-death confrontation in an infinite circle is further reinforced through the repetitive expression. This footage was later edited and colored for Kubota’s astounding installation, *Marcel Duchamp’s Grave* (Fig. 8), at The Kitchen, New York in 1975.

click images to enlarge

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- Figure 5
- Figure 6
- Figure 7

Shigeko Kubota, *Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, 1972 [details]



Figure 8
Shigeko Kubota, installation view of *Marcel Duchamp's Grave*, 1972-75

click to enlarge



Figure 9
Shigeko Kubota,
Video Chess, 1968-75

The concluding work, the *Video Chess* (1968-75) (Fig. 9), a sculptural TV, is constructed and posited on the floor with its monitor facing up. A transparent chessboard with transparent chess pieces sits above the TV monitor. Kubota reworked the 1968 Toronto photographs by having them transferred, keyed, matted, and colorized at the Experimental TV Center in Binghampton, NY with the assistance of Ken Dominik, and later at WNET-TV Lab in New York. The monitor plays the transferred and colorized images of Duchamp and Cage playing chess with the original soundtrack emitting. Every crosspoint of the chess matrix has a hole and light cell which are modulated by the proceeding of a chess game. As viewers/players look down/play chess on this transparent chessboard, in Kubota's words, they are "accompanied by the videotape of the two great masters playing from the otherside of this world." [(6)]

Don't
yoU ever want to win?
(impatienCe.)

How do you
mAnage to live with
just one sense of huMor?

she must have Persuaded him to smile.[7]

The porta-pack video camera is an integral part of Shigeko Kubota's work, given that the video camera is to open up a dialogue with the self that is encountered everyday as well as with unknown natures which are uncovered. Margot Lovejoy pinpoints the benefit for the presence of the first portable video camera to the art world:

> "Some saw video as an agit-prop tool. Installed in closed-circuit elaborated gallery settings, the video camera with a delayed feedback loop could confront and interact with the viewer in a new dialogue which placed the spectator within the production process as part of the conceptual intentions of the artists. Combined with sound/music or spoken dialogue and text, the medium opened up new aesthetic ground for exploring time/motion/sound/image relationships in a broad range of contexts."
>
> (8)

click to enlarge



Figure 10

Shigeko Kubota

During the 1960s, the Fluxus' adoption of video into their happening and performance in Europe and the United States created a different climate of aesthetic discourse which attracted a young generation and resulted in their reflecting on video as an effective medium for new art. The possibility to commit personal testaments to tape in any environment, however intimate, and in complete privacy, has made video an exciting feature. Despite its exhausting weight to carry, video recording equipment has always been relatively simple to operate and it is possible to work alone without the intrusive presence of the crews demanded by 16mm filmmaking. It is also easy and relatively cheap to record long monologues on tape. Kubota bought her SONY porta-pack camera in 1970. The flexibility and easy operation of a video camera allows Kubota to document her daily encounters with herself and others during her travels (Fig. 10). Later, she works on the footage acquired, transforming personal narratives into a confronting public display. It is noteworthy that Kubota is used to handling video work herself throughout the process. Herewith, she gains a total control over what she choses to preserve or erase.

To Kubota, the unique qualities of video with "no past history, no objecthood, and no agree-upon-value"[9]have set up a new category for equal competition among artists. In a long interview conducted by Katsue Tomiyama in 1991, Kubota praises video because "male and female artists began the competition at an equal point." [10] Her attraction to the video, furthermore, is educed by its "oriental" and "organic" nature—"like brown rice, brown curb, like seaweed, made in Japan." [11]—the single-channel TV is capable of bridging two extreme worlds—"TV is always somewhere between dream and reality." [12] She later contemplates, "video 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 effect even our relationship with death, as video is a living altar. Yes, videotaped death negates death as a simple terminal."[13]

the wind-break becaMe
A
woRk of art
(it began Casually
likE
the firepLace).[14]

Closely examining these three works, one can tell the apparent contrast between the independence of individual segments seen in the blue book (1968-72) as well as in the videotape (1972), and the integration of *Video Chess* (1968-75) as the sculptural entity. The 1972 videotape of *Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* in which fragments of images alternate with one another, barely has the trace of editing revealed. In the 1991 interview, Kubota admitted her reluctance to alter the video-recorded images, which is coherent with what we see in the 1972 videotape, an open-ended quality register with a sense of naivety. On the contrary,*Video Chess* is eloquently constructed and presented under an authoritative art form. This time, Kubota ruminates on the overall presentation as a whole as oppose to co-existing fragments presented in the prior video of *Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*. The conceptual connection is reinforced by the absence of both intellectual minds. In other words, the absence of both Cage and Duchamp has turned into an abstract physicality. The spectator can only be aware of their presence by the arbitrary appropriation offered by Shigeko Kubota. It is as if she is the invisible and all-powerful shaman who channels and embodies the men-objects with our living world in a simulated territory where life and death negate each other, forming an endless cycle.

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Figure 11
Num June Paik,
T.V. Cello with Charlotte Moorman, 1971



Figure 12
Peter Campus, *Head of a Man with Death on His Mind*, 1978

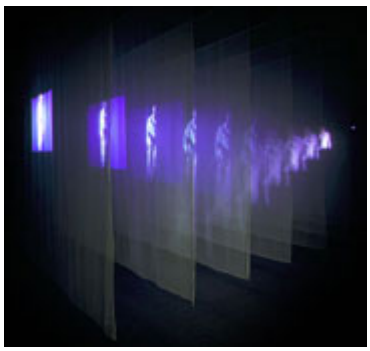

Figure 13
Bill Viola, *The Veiling*, 1995

During visit to Duchamp’s grave, the ritual act of presenting an offering (her blue book) on Duchamp’s grave and chanting was “as in the oriental family custom of putting rice cookies

on the dead ancestor's altar."[15] Usually performed by an official in ancient eastern culture, chanting during the funeral rite is regarded as the emotional mourning toward the loss of loved ones and a communication with them on the other side of the world.

Aesthetically, the poetic and exquisite elaboration of *Video Chess* is quite appealing and from this Kubota would further mature as an original and independent video artist and become a significant figure among her peers, such as Nam June Paik (Fig. 11), Peter Campus (Fig. 12), Bill Viola (Fig. 13), Gary Hill, and Dan Graham, who together mark the first phase of Video Art. However, not so much to deduce the conceptual connection between Kubota's Japanese and Duchampian "roots,"[16] her ability to integrate personal memories and history into an exquisite sensibility substantiates Kubota's identity as a female artist who tackles motifs rooted in art and life and elevates them to the hegemonic discourse of art history. To Kubota, art making is always something deeply associated with nature and culture alike. In the case of these three works derived from the chess*Reunion*, the materialization of Duchamp and Cage is appropriated and manipulated by Kubota. The search for truthful perceptions of history, perhaps, is best summed up by Kubota's self-description for her video sculpture *Adam and Eve* of 1991. An environmental work drawn on Kubota's friendship with Al Robbins and the influence by which Duchamp played Adam with Brogna Perlmutter as Eve in Picabia's *Relâche* (1926), a ballet work inspired by Lucas Cranach's painting, *Adam and Eve* is "an appropriation of an appropriation of an appropriation of an appropriation."[17]From this perspective, the duality between subject and object has been erased because it no longer represents authenticity but a repetition of the past.

Notes

Footnote Return 1. John Cage, “36 Acrostics re. and not re Dcuhamp,” in Shigeko Kubota, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage(Takeyoshi Miyazawa, 1968) no. 19.

Footnote Return 2.Shigeko Kubota: Video as a Form of Spiritual Collision with the World, exhibition catalogue, Fondazione Mudima, Italy (19 May 1994) 38.

Footnote Return 3. During my research on this memorable event held in Toronto, 1968, I came across the confusion of dates as to the first performance of the *Walkaround Time* by Merce Cunningham and that of the *Reunion* performance by John Cage and Duchamp. According to the chronological table available on the web site of the Merce Cunningham Organization <http://www.merce.org/repertory_chronology.html>, *Walkaround Time* was first performed on 10 March 1968, while *Reunion* was scheduled on 5 March 1968, which is five days prior to the Cunningham performance in Buffalo. Judging by the performing dates for these two events, Ms. Kubota couldn’t possibly have known Teeny and Duchamp when she was attending the *Reunion* and photographed the chess game. Unable to reach Ms. Kubota for the clarification of the confusion, thus, it seems more logical that the trip to Buffalo could well have been a planned reunion with the Duchamps and participation in the event, other than an accidental encounter on a plane to Buffalo for the opening of *Walkaround Time*.

Footnote Return 4. Duchamp died a few months later in October 2, 1968.

Footnote Return 5. According to Kubota, “It was a very windy day. I took a train from Paris to Rouen, then took a cab to his

cemetery. There were two entrances. I didn't know which one to take. At the flower shop nearby the cemetery, I asked a woman, 'where is Marcel Duchamp's grave?' She looked at me and said, 'Who is he?'Then she opened the telephone book. I was very shocked. Alone, after a long search in the vast cemetery, the weight of my porta-pack crushing on my shoulder, I finally found Duchamp's grave next to that of Jacques Villon, his brother. …" See Shigeko Kubota: Video as a Form of Spiritual Collision with the World 41.

Footnote Return 6. Shigeko Kubota, 1981.

Footnote Return 7. Cage, in Kubota, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, no. 6.

Footnote Return 8.Margot Lovejoy, Postmodern Currents, Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media (Ann Harbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989) 195.

Footnote Return 9. Ibid.

Footnote Return 10. Shigeko Kubota: Video as a Form of Spiritual Collision with the World, exhibition catalogue, Fondazione Mudima, Italy (19 May 1994) 9.

Footnote Return 11. Cited from Moira Roth, p. 106; first published in Jeanine Mellinger and D. L. Bean, "Shigeko Kubota," interview in Profile 3.6 (November 1983): 3.

Footnote Return 12.Shigeko Kubota, 1981.

Footnote Return 13. Artist's statement in the exhibition

catalogue, Shigeko Kubota, Video Sculpture,ed. Zdenek Felix (Berlin: Daadgalerie; Essen: Museum Folkewang; Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich, 1982) 13.

Footnote Return 14.Cage, in Kubota, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, no. 7.

Footnote Return 15. Mary Jane Jacob, ed., Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture (New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991) 24.

Footnote Return 16. Because of the monastic association of her father's family, Kubota had frequently witnessed funerals as a child. She recalled, "I often did homework inside a temple room where fresh bones were stored. How I plyed with ghosts…all these childhood memories flashed back to my head." Mary Jane Jacob, ed., Shigeko Kubota, Video Sculpture80.

Footnote Return 17. Ibid, 68.

Fig. 2 © Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation, Inc., NY, 2002
Fig. 13 Collection of the artist, courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London