

## An evening with Fluxus women: a roundtable discussion

Moderated by Midori Yoshimoto\*

Featuring Alison Knowles, Carolee Schneemann,  
Sara Seagull and Barbara Moore

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In this roundtable discussion, hosted at New York University (19 February 2009, 7:00–8:30 p.m.) by *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* and the Department of Performance Studies, the participants discuss how they came to and experienced the Fluxus art movement. Topics range from the availability of space in New York City during the 1960s and the formation of artistic communities, to the role of food in Fluxus art and social circles and the question of gender specificity in Fluxus works. The participants also discuss several particular Fluxus works and flesh out the contexts in which these works were produced and received.

**Keywords:** Knowles, Alison; Schneemann, Carolee; Seagull, Sara; Moore; Barbara; Fluxus; feminism and feminist art; fluxus and the body; fluxus and food; fluxus excommunications

**Midori Yoshimoto (MY):** The goal of this roundtable is to shed light on to women's contribution to Fluxus, an avant-garde movement that has thrived since the 1960s. Unbeknown to the earlier art movements, Fluxus included many female creators such as Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi, and Shigeko Kubota. There were also many women artists briefly associated with Fluxus including Carolee Schneemann and Kate Millet. Despite women's prominence in Fluxus, much of their contribution remains obscure in the Fluxus scholarship. In this roundtable I hope that we can illuminate multifaceted ways in which women have been situated and working in and around this avant-garde collective over the years. The approach here is inclusive and not intended to focus on a discussion of, "what is Fluxus?" or "who is Fluxus?" Just to briefly quote Bob Watts' statement: "The most important thing about Fluxus is that nobody knows what it is." So it is kind of meaningless if tonight we end up arguing about what Fluxus is.

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I regret the fact that, for inevitable reasons, the Japanese women of Fluxus could not join us this evening: Yoko [Ono] had a scheduling conflict, though she sent us a box of chocolates [*laughter*]; Shigeko Kubota is ill; Takako Saito resides and works in Düsseldorf, Germany; Mieko Shiomi is in Japan – so they are all dispersed. But I want to present some of their works through photographs in PowerPoint so that they are a part of this discussion. I also received a fax from Shiomi, which I would like to read:

Dear Alison, Barbara, Sara, and Carolee,

How I wish I could be there with you! I miss all of you!! It's too bad to hear that no Japanese artists could attend this symposium. So please allow me to join you through Midori.

First of all, the best thing about Fluxus, I think, is that there was no discrimination on the basis of nationality and gender. Fluxus was open to anyone who shared similar thoughts about art and life. That's why women artists could be so active without feeling any frustration.

Alison has always been at the center of Fluxus: she participated in almost all Fluxus events. She could be compared to Mercury in this solar system. To the contrary, I have been at the position of Pluto. But living in a remote place enabled me to see the outline of Fluxus rather clearly. In 2005 I wrote a book about Fluxus in Japan, which people appreciated.<sup>1</sup> This geographical disadvantage also inspired me to continue collaboration works using airmail. Through the Fluxus address list that [George] Maciunas gave me in 1965, I built up a good network of Fluxus people. By utilizing it I did the rest of *Spatial Poems*, *Fluxus Balance*, and *Fluxus Media Opera*, etc.

The recent touring exhibition "Fluxus East" focused on the *Spatial Poems* for the first time and evaluated it as an early Fluxus network project.<sup>2</sup> Since no other artist did a similar project that time, this may have expanded the Fluxus sphere a little bit.

In a similar way, nobody can replace Schneemann's great performances. Barbara and Sara are dedicated to Fluxus in different ways, for which I am thankful, too. Every Fluxus woman contributed in her own specific way. They kept playing DISSONANCES (borrowing Gino Di Maggio's word).<sup>3</sup> Of course, men did, too. Dissonances could be heard as a complicated consonance.

Can you imagine Fluxus without women? Or can you imagine Fluxus without men? Alison, how did Fluxus look from your position?

With respect and love to all of you!! Thank you.

Mieko Shiomi,  
February 13, 2009.

**MY:** So maybe we should begin with that question. But before we get to Fluxus, I just want to find out what you were doing before your involvement with Fluxus? Alison, Carolee, and Sara were all experimenting with painting. Did all of you feel an artistic impasse in painting and turn to performance? How did your art education affect your artistic direction? Carolee, maybe you would like to start?

### Comings and goings

**Carolee Schneemann (CS):** I am “provisional fluxus”; I really come out of Happenings, where real materials seem to be more complex, more physical, and messier. It’s hard to explain the difference, but my immediate influence when I came from the University of Illinois as a painter was working in Oldenburg’s Store Days, and I was led to that through my partner, James Tenney, who was affiliated with Bell Telephone Labs where Billy Klüver was establishing experimental electronic media. So we were this country couple and we got talked immediately into the center of New York City and the remarkable density of a few of artists that would change the cultural history. My first collaboration was with Dick Higgins at the Living Theatre – the two of us used that space on a dark night. And the first couple that impressed me, because of their work, was Alison and Dick. They had a big loft on Canal Street, right? (*Alison Knowles nods*). There they cooked for friends and made events and it was through them that a seamless motion took me between Happenings and Fluxus. I also began then to choreograph with the Judson Dance Theatre. I was one of the first visual artists to choreograph spatial works and I guess that’s the introduction.

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**MY:** Carolee, you talked about meeting Dick. One of your earlier collaborations with him was this piece at the Living Theatre in May of 1962, “Glass Environment for Sound and Motion” [see Figure 1, in Kubitzka, this volume]

**CS:** Yes, this was my first Fluxus related collaboration with Philip Corner and Dick Higgins. Yvonne Rainer, Judy Ratner, Malcolm Goldstein, Andre Cadet (and Arlene Rothlein) performed it. Dick and I shared the night and there was a sequence of moving furniture sounds with La Monte Young that was the interlude between the two events that Dick and I did.

**Alison Knowles (AK):** Well I think in those times, one studied painting. The ways that fluxus artworks have developed in installations and performance – that was not where it all began. We began with painting. I was at Pratt, studying with Adolph Gottlieb and Richard Lindner, names you may not know. Also, I was admiring Helen Frankenthaler and imagining that I was just two steps away from being some kind of expressionist painter. When this didn’t work out, I had shows and began publishing with my partner, Dick Higgins. We had the Something Else Press and a loft we shared on Canal Street. I think what is very important to speak about is how fluid were the interstitial spaces of the arts. That Barbara would be publishing a book of somebody’s and Carolee would be in a Happening, I would be working on some event on Canal Street with La Monte [Young] and, certainly, George Brecht. It’s only in the last few decades that the traditional boundaries have raised again. So one is again studying painting as opposed to sculpture, as opposed to performance and I hope to really stand against these borders.

**Sara Seagull (SS):** I think I was at the final frontier of studying art before it leapt off the walls. I actually came around a little bit after Alison and Carolee in terms



Figure 1. Speakers at the roundtable discussion looking at Mieko Shiomi's *Portrait Piece*: Barbara Moore, Carolee Schneemann, Alison Knowles, and Sara Seagull. Photo: Mina Cheon.

of being an art student, and I was still in a disciplined art environment that was just about to change. I was at Rutgers University and the visiting artists, because we were so close to New York City, pollinated the air. And suddenly things were happening, like Happenings. We had no idea what would start at that point. We had Milan Knížák who came in December 1968 to present *Lying Down Ceremony* and suddenly we were all lying on the floor waiting for something. And immediately after that it seemed George Maciunas came as a visitor through the organization of Geoff Hendricks and Bob Watts, and they decided to organize Flux Sports and a Flux Mass at the Voorhees Chapel, which was a church. So we had radical events that took place in our school that helped us all get right off the wall and we just leapt into it. We had a lot of female art students – it was a women's art college – yet we had an all male faculty. There wasn't one woman artist teaching in the studio art program. We had a real scarcity of female role models. But the greatest moment for me was when Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro came as visiting artists. After that I never looked back . . . I just sort of went in the direction of "I was never going to need to paint again." So that was me.

**Barbara Moore (BM):** Well, I am not an artist. Peter used the term 'observer' and I at one time even thought that we were neutral but I've sort of abandoned that stance. As observers of what was going on, we were very involved in things besides Fluxus; I don't consider myself a Fluxus woman *per se*. I think to a certain extent because there were women in Fluxus, I sort of took it for granted that this was the way it

supposed to be, so I didn't notice it too much in the rest of the art world – the difference. What happened was that I got to know George [Maciunas] briefly at the AG Gallery in 1961 and I actually got interested in his work through his graphic design. I walked into his gallery, straight off Madison Avenue, just out of curiosity. I was steadily going to galleries and thought I knew all of them but suddenly there was this one I had never seen before. The first thing I saw was a little table near the front door that had all these wonderful little cards and flyers – not flyers, they were more like little panels – those of you who know the graphic design of Fluxus will know which ones I mean . . . they were on card stock. I said to the person who was nearest the table, “Who did these wonderful designs?” And he pointed to the back of this long narrow space that had a window on the second floor of a Madison Avenue building and he said, “That man, George Maciunas.” And George was doing something else incredible at the time – it was so amazing that I have never forgotten this image. He was on a ladder up at the ceiling and the plaster had been taken off the ceiling so you could see the beams. And he was placing sheets of translucent stiff paper in between the beams in such a way that they arched so he had a vaulted ceiling made out of paper. And that was George's architectural method – to use these everyday materials. I actually didn't see George for another two or three years. Peter and I went to a concert at Cooper Union's Great Hall in January of 1962 and Dick Higgins was on the program – there had been a whole series of music and dance concerts at Cooper Union at that time. Dick had gone to Yale with Peter's brother Anthony, so we made that connection and, through these two things, we were contacted when the first series of Canal Street Concerts started taking place.

I like Shiomis statement very much because as I was saying I took it for granted about women in Fluxus. I would also like to say that the gender neutrality was in a very large part due to George [Maciunas]. George was color blind, gender blind, whatever kind of thing you could think of. He was just interested in ideas and he welcomed ideas from anyone who had good ones. I think the best way to show how important that was would be to ask, what would Fluxus have been like if it had been started and organized by someone like Wolf Vostell?

**CS:** I'll just say in regard to George [Maciunas], I was an artist whom he detested and I was excommunicated from anything having to do with George's aspect of Fluxus and it had to do with too much sensuality, too much self expression, basically overt physicality and the explicit body.

We were friends; I was fond of him and I think it's important to know that he had the most engrossing kind of aesthetic life habits – only eating white food for a year and saving every container from which white food was taken; only eating red food for a year and saving every container from which red food was taken. There is a whole complex mythology to be explored there.

**AK:** And then when he had eaten all of the white food out of those containers, they became artworks up the wall – maybe fifty yogurt containers – and egg crates – which as assemblages were really very beautiful. And you would meet these as you walked into 80 Wooster Street, which is where George lived in the basement.

**MY:** Alison, could you go back and tell us how you became involved with Fluxus, because everybody else sort of touched up on it? You traveled to Europe in '62...

**AK:** Yes, and actually I would like to speak a bit about George Brecht. We have a great scholar here this evening, Julia Robinson, who has studied this man's work, starting at the New School in New York.<sup>4</sup> It was George Brecht who invented the event score, a recipe for action. Instead of recipes, I made "propositions" such as: *Make a salad*, or *Child Art Piece*.<sup>5</sup> These ideas stripped art down to the essentials of our everyday life. Unfortunately Brecht spent a great deal of his later life in Germany. But those of us who honor Fluxus and performance still, as I do, will have to know the work of George Brecht. So on Canal Street, we have George Maciunas with a shop with objects where we were making, maybe a Joe Jones electric violin. Joe Jones is a wonderful artist, very few people know about him now. You could plug in a toy violin and a rubber flange connected to a motor and play the different strings or perhaps you could have a whole quartet of small toy instruments playing at the same time. Again we lost the last half of Joe Jones' life to Germany.

**CS:** And smoking –

**AK:** Oh, yes, smoking. We lost a lot of people to Germany for very good reasons: the German situation was that in 1962 there was a Wiesbaden Festival and all of these people including myself, Dick Higgins, George Brecht, Joe, Maciunas – these people all gathered on a stage that was used for concerts – they had a concert series – and somehow Maciunas, who had been living with us in the hills of Ehlhalten, organized to have a week of concerts which sort of blew everybody away. They tried to close the concert hall, people were throwing tomatoes and eggs at us on the stage and it was then that we became empowered with the value of his work. We could see that it was an affront to what traditionally had been considered as concert hall presentations and we not only kept up with it but we finally were able to divide the audience and half of them were in favor of what we were doing and the other half was not, so that we finally had them throwing tomatoes at the other people and we came home really ready to put this work up in New York City. We had some concerts which George arranged on Canal Street and at 365 Canal where Dick Higgins had his loft. So we did our best to bring it over to this country. But the thing about German culture is that they are very serious about it – that is wonderful. But in this country it is kind of in the hands of trends, and art writing, and promotion. The audience in Wiesbaden was just the people in the town. Our audience on Canal Street – they were friends of ours who could come over on a Saturday night.

**SS:** I can't really speak about that era because I really wasn't conscious then of what was going on. But if I could jump ahead, I would really like to speak to what Barbara was saying – to underscore that I did feel that Maciunas was non-gender oriented, that he really believed in people who had the ideas that fulfilled his vision – and he was extremely egalitarian about letting women work, letting men work, letting misfits work, for him or with him. And at the same time he really was like a den mother, an authority figure, and someone who made pronouncements

and judgments. So to weave that back with Carolee, I can see how there were pronouncements made by George that he would have said, “She’s in, she’s not in – he’s in, he’s not in . . .” And a funny story was that he had to excommunicate Charlotte Moorman from Fluxus at one point and he was so disturbed by her wonderful character that he had to go out and shave his head to soothe himself in order to deal with the traumas of excommunicating her. So I think we have to recognize that he was really the “Mother of Fluxus.” I don’t know whether it has ever been laid out in those terms.

**MY:** In his late life, Maciunas was married to Billie Hutching through a Flux wedding and they performed a cross-dressing ritual. Maciunas also hosted many cross-dressing parties at his house in Marlborough, NY.<sup>6</sup> Was the transgression of gender important to Fluxus?

**CS:** Especially because he was interested in gender change, as he got older, having lived a solitary bachelor life, as far as we knew, for many years. How old was he when he married Billie, maybe in his 60s? [The panel responds, “He was in his 40s.”] – oh, so young? – but he was interested in the idea that he was going to be the bride and she was going to be the groom. So this added another complex layer to everything we knew about him.

**BM:** There were two brides and there was an erotic cabaret afterwards. They exchanged clothes. It was an absolutely gorgeous piece.

**CS:** I want to talk about Charlotte for a moment. I guess I wanted to say that most of these artists were magicians – strange, amazing, magicians and shared their remarkable gifts, mentioning Joe Jones and the mechanics of sounds he could invent, highly unpredictable.

**BM:** I too want to get back to Charlotte, Sara. That relationship started in the early 60s and was based very much on an intense competitiveness between these two people rather than personality *per se*. Although I’m sure George would have seen Charlotte as being outrageous anyway – he wouldn’t have liked the explicitness that Carolee was talking about – explicitness of the body. But there was a particular instance that brought their competitiveness to a head. Charlotte was doing these avant-garde festivals every year starting in 1963 – she did 15 between 1963 and 1980. They were huge affairs at the end, but in the beginning they were in a concert hall and included a lot of crossover people that you don’t normally associate with Fluxus or even Charlotte’s and Nam June Paik’s kind of work. There was a dance evening, for example, that might include Yvonne Rainer and Meredith Monk; there would be a jazz evening; there would be a poetry evening; there would be an electronic music evening – it was just incredible; they would be all over the map. George had the first Fluxus orchestra concert in the summer of 1964 and Charlotte had her second festival in the fall and it included Stockhausen’s *Originale* and George was starting to feel that Charlotte was stealing his artists, because there was all this crossover – which was natural – it wasn’t Charlotte really doing anything. Then the following year, the second Flux orchestra concert was in September and Charlotte’s festival was in September and that just really made it all fall apart.

**CS:** I just want to let people know that Charlotte was irrepensible – she was irresistible and incredible – there was nothing in the art world that could resemble the energy that Charlotte Moorman brought in from Little Rock, AK. She would have a vision that she wanted all of these artists from all over the world to come for her festival – she would have no money. She would somehow convince a place that we could all be there. And I like to tell this story of when she wanted Central Park and she called me and she said: “Carolee, I think Mayor Lindsay would like to have us at Central Park, don’t you think so?” And I’d say, “No Charlotte, I don’t think so... We have a transportation strike, they’re not picking up the garbage, and I don’t know if the mayor wants to talk to you.” And so she calls me back a little while later and she says that she spoke to him: “Well you are just the most gracious mayor,” and he says, “Yes, Charlotte, let’s give you what you want.” He then says to his assistant, “Let’s get rid of this lady.” Whether at Central Park, or the railroad station, or the Staten Island Ferry... everything was always late – the technical things were always screwed up. People said I’ll never work with her again, but she was irresistible.

**Question from Audience:** What was the name of this festival?

**BM:** The Annual New York Avant-Garde Festival. It started off as just “Six Concerts of the Avant-Garde,” actually.

**MY:** Alison, going back to the talk of excommunication. I heard that you and Dick were also excommunicated once, briefly, when you went to Europe for a festival.

**AK:** Oh, yes, we were excommunicated. But you have to understand the personality of this man was very strange and wonderful and we never took the excommunications that hard at all – because these things like the avant-garde festival were rolling along and George couldn’t do anything about them. And our little gatherings, our Fluxus concerts on Canal Street, they were going along too. The context of that decade, from 1960 to 1970 would just allow – it would permit – things to go on which didn’t have to be analyzed, or found to be different or found to be contributing to culture or not – they just rolled along.

#### **Food: art and sociability**

**AK:** I wanted to speak about the Japanese women of Fluxus a little bit because I happen to know them all pretty well – I actually went to Osaka and visited Mieko there... just a few years ago and I think, Midori, you referred to George Maciunas’ informal dinners. Because Takako was a diligent kind of person, she overextended herself to help George. I think she actually put together most of those multiples, I’m sure she did most of the cooking, and I had a sense that he worked her up and down. As far as Mieko went, I have no sense that she functioned in the same way – and certainly Yoko did not.

**[Takako Saito’s later response by fax:** I remember helping George produce Fluxus multiples only a few times with Mieko and Shigeo. Since I had a table saw, I helped



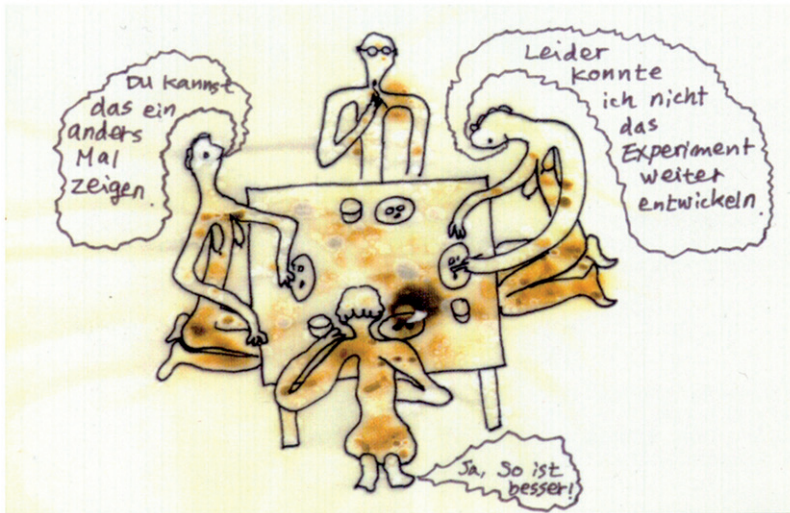


Figure 2. Takako Saito, drawing of the Fluxus dinner commune, c. 1998, pen and ink on vellum and heated with candle, approximately 10 × 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

him build boxes for multiples, but that's about it. Mieko, Shigeiko, and I took turns in cooking for dinner communes which took place every night for several weeks.]

**MY:** This is a drawing that Takako did of the communal dinner in retrospect [Figure 2]. According to Mieko Shiomi's book, it originally started at her and Kubota's apartment and women and men (Nam June Paik and Maciunas) were supposed to take turns grocery shopping and cooking, but in the end women took over most of tasks. When they went to Chinatown and bought fresh shrimp and cooked it and George would complain that it was too expensive. Takako joined later. Eventually Shigeiko and Mieko found part-time jobs and left and the dinner commune was discontinued.

**AK:** But George had ulcers and so the white food – we had to eat with this man all winter in Ehlhalten, Germany. And if it wasn't potatoes, then it was leek soup, and if it wasn't leek soup, then it was leek soup with potatoes. His mother did the cooking. The food was from the PX (army grocery store).

**BM:** But these had a large intellectual basis for George. These were his pieces. He wanted to eat for a dollar a day, of course a dollar was worth a lot more than it is now. Before he had done the walls of food containers, he had gone through several cycles, one of which was he started to have a food co-op kind of thing, where they would buy everything in large quantities – but only a handful of people were involved – so they just simply ordered one thing a week in enormous quantities. His refrigerator would be full of maybe a hundred grapefruits or Lithuanian bread. And there was the Scandinavian smorgasbord restaurant. It was this place in midtown where you could have all you could eat for whatever the price was – and it

was only a couple of dollars. Of course lunch was cheaper than dinner so George would go there and eat and eat and eat, and then not eat for two days and he actually took us all for a party once (this was all when Milan Knížák was in the city so that would have been between 1968 and 1970 and he would invite all of us to eat and he would treat us). Of course, the restaurant shortly went out of business.

I just want to say also that Takako was a fabulous, fabulous cook and Dick wanted her to open up a restaurant in Vermont. Dick was going to set her up in a restaurant somewhere on some highway in Vermont. Takako lived in our house for about ten months in 1972 (after her stay in France and before going to England) and I was working at some office job at the time and I would come home completely exhausted and there would be some incredible meal – even though she wasn't there to cook, she would just surprise me . . . it was just amazing! It was the first time I ever had sushi – there were really no sushi restaurants in New York at that time.

**MY:** You know also that Takako had to support herself by working at various jobs around Europe until she set up her studio in Reggio Emilia in Italy in 1975 and finally settled in Düsseldorf in 1979.

**BM:** Actually she was going to have a catering business through a macrobiotic restaurant she used to work at in New York. I remember because I was doing some press releases for her and Clementine Paddleford was the food editor of the Herald Tribune – she wrote her up as this caterer who did all of these wonderful things. It just didn't really last.

**MY:** Since we are on the topic of food, Carolee, do you want to talk about some –

**CS:** Actually I just wanted to talk a little bit about space. That is, how we would form these communities. Small manufacturers were fleeing New York City and that opened up these incredibly large lofts. These spaces, which are now inhabited by people with funds, were basically abandoned and rough. They were just left with old sewing machines, top floors, AC current, and it was one of the gender advantages that women could find these rough spaces that were 45–60 dollars a month – huge and rough, and we would teach each other. Letty Eisenhauer, who was active in Fluxus, taught me how to wire my space – I had to put my electric grid into the next building. So the community was small – we were active, collaborative, and we had this tremendous territory, this physical territory in the middle of New York City, and the economic situation also allowed us to eat for a dollar a day. Just the immense difference [between that time and now] is hard to imagine. And I also wanted to say, surrounding the cultural activity was a tremendous resistance to women artists – they were denigrated, they were marginalized; they could only exist in an adjacent cosmology to powerful men – and those were the painters and the sculptors. So the Fluxus history was resistant and also made somewhat isolated in its ideology apart from the central, economic rest of the art world at that time.

**AK:** I would think of making a thread between these loft things that we brought up. You simply can't imagine, in this day and age, what it was like to look back at these lofts along Canal Street, and up Mercer and Greene, which only cost 45 to 60 dollars

a month. So you would meet the landlord – I would meet the landlord and say I had a used clothing industry. I had a closet with no curtain on and I would say “I am marketing this clothing here” – I was at 423 Broadway – and he said, “Well I doubt that,” but I never heard from him again. He had to inspect, but he inspected...and that was that. Of course it was illegal for us to be living there! So, at 5 o’clock the heat would go off. Imagine that! So I had a coal stove and I burned the coal, took the ashes out, and put them in the public waste bin. And the police caught me doing that. So it was an underworld and I think maybe that contributed to the effervescence of the ideas that we weren’t really above board... we had nobody really looking at our work except for, really, one another.

### Gendered performance

**MY:** Alison, you mentioned that you were often the only woman in early Fluxus performances starting in the European tour because Yoko left for Japan in 1962 and came back in 1964. For example, one of the performances you had to do in Germany in 1962 was Nam June Paik’s *Serenade for Alison*. I know you felt uncomfortable performing this and I know you made a modification to Nam June’s score, is that right?

**AK:** Yes, I was to take off as many underpants as I could wear on my body and I had 30 or 40 pairs of them. Nam June bought me this wonderful Korean robe, which I had over myself, and then, he was just delighted because his whole emphasis in those years was scandal... scandal, and for him, as a young man, scandal involved women, so he approached me and he said, “You are a beautiful, intellectual woman and I’ve written a piece for you.” What was I to do? So a little table in the Galerie Monet – It was a Wolf Vostell opening – I added a lot to the piece by wearing transistor radios around my neck and I had the weather on one, the news on another and what I was doing aside from pulling off these pants and throwing them into the audience, was changing radio stations and then I got off the table and everyone in the gallery followed me outside. It was kind of an adventure I made of it, rather than a striptease. Then there were two other pieces but they were rather easy to do. One was to take an audiotope, on a reel, and someone would take it around the parliament house of London so I tied it on to a pipe, went all the way around the parliament building and tied it up on the other side. And then the last one was to cut my hair and drop it off the Eiffel tower – this was easy to do.

**MY:** Yes, some of Paik’s pieces are hard to do – I mean he did hard pieces for men as well, like *Young Penis Symphony*... was that ever performed?

**AK:** The piece that I saw was three or four men pissing in a pail on stage. One was Thomas Schmit.

**MY:** I think that’s a different one which was recently reenacted in a Tribute to Nam June Paik orchestrated by Larry Miller, who is actually videotaping for us tonight, at the James Cohan Gallery in 2007. Okay, on this touchy topic, can we talk about Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, were any of you ever there? Were any of you in the audience? What was like to be in the audience there?

**CS:** Yes, Jim and I were there. It was terrifying, did you feel that Barbara?

**BM:** I saw several performances through the years, but I don't think I ever made a cut. It really was just too much. There was something about it. I'm not sure if I was even aware of what it was at the time.

**CS:** Her vulnerability, and unpredictability of the audience – there was no feminist position then; female sexuality belonged to pornography or medical science. I always remind people of that. So, for Yoko to risk this public exposure was so highly unpredictable and it was almost giving prurience permission to what women were most anxious about – which was an aggressive, hostile, dangerous male reaction. And some of the guys were kind of nutty and there were people there who were kind of watching calm elements of the audience.

**MY:** I have a series of slides picked out here: Yes, *Cut Piece* was actually initially performed in Kyoto and Tokyo twice in '64. It might have partially come out of her experience in Japan as well.<sup>7</sup> Also, I wanted to talk about the perception of gender roles within Fluxus. Alison had talked a little bit about her work being somewhat female and intimate as seen in such actions as shaving, putting Nivea cream all over the body, and having a child do a performance. Alison, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about those, in contrast to works of your husband.

**AK:** Well I do want to mention that at the Guggenheim Museum's "The Third Mind" exhibition, right now, you can see Dick's *Thousand Symphonies* on display in a beautiful context, in color. A sheriff shot the music paper. Then Dick sprayed them with color. It is wonderful seeing them in a museum context now. They are just gorgeous, just a beautiful example of indeterminate action and connecting it to sound and music. [Ed., AK adds: The kind of music I produced for the show was *Bean Turner*, an acoustic instrument that made bean sound as I walked down the ramp. I enjoyed direct interaction with the audience; some of them could stop me and ask questions as I performed.]

**BM:** I think we are making a rather selective point here, based on a false premise possibly. Because when you go to the event scores, I can't see a difference between pieces by, say, Shiomi and Kosugi or Brecht. You might say there sometimes is a *stylistic* difference, but it's misleading to take Alison's salad out of the many, many, many pieces she did. Some involved shoes, but we can't just say, "Well, women love shoes." I'm not sure that I agree with that distinction.

**MY:** No, no, I didn't mean to generalize Alison's pieces as just feminine. On that, we have Julia Robinson in the audience who wrote an excellent essay on Alison for *Art Journal*.<sup>8</sup> I was just asking specifically about what Alison said in her recent interview for the *Performance Saga* DVD series from Zürich.<sup>9</sup>

**Julia Robinson in the audience:** Midori, I think what is important is that the shoes are a choice. And there is a female position or even feminist intent in not finalizing that choice.

**BM:** Ay-O did a piece about shoes that was similar to Alison's and Ay-O is a man.

**JR in the audience:** It's not the subject matter, or the title of the piece, it's an approach or attitude – about allowing other things to come up. Alison's shoes piece creates *many* people's reactions to shoes, right? You can't just say shoes and salads, one is feminine, one is masculine; it is what the piece generates differently from other art that may close off the various possibilities of contributions.

**BM:** That's your opinion.

**MY:** I think it is open to all interpretations but I am saying maybe one of the possible ways of looking at it is like some of these pieces partially come from, or inevitably come from, a feminine sense of living.

**CS:** Some come from a domestic set of actions, but then once you get any kind of explicit erotic action – for example Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting*, which is gender specific for sure. For example, Charlotte [Moorman] being constantly topless [as a] cellist for Nam June [Paik] – it seeps in and out of whatever the Fluxus principles are.

**BM:** Certainly, obviously, you can say that about certain pieces but if you really look at the whole corpus of Fluxus, it doesn't necessarily apply; it applies as far as I can tell, selectively. But it's just an opinion.

**SS:** To deal with very broad generalities, and having spent some time listening to Maciunas and his decrees and his authoritative sense of “who was Fluxus,” “who was not,” and “who was original, who was not.” He made a huge chart – that probably many of the scholars here are aware of – that diagrammed the genealogy of the avant-garde. He was very interested in meticulously documenting who had done what, and what work had followed out of what lineage. He included a great deal. He was inclusive, rather than exclusive, and in that sense I think it was all of a large family, of a large milieu, rather than piecemeal (with each piece decidedly gendered). So I do want to remind everybody that he had almost a scholarly interest in the history. He got up to around the 1970s and I don't think his chart went past Vito Acconci and the alternative space work that was starting in the early 70s but I know he meant to continue that chart. It was a great deal of effort on his part to work on that.

**MY:** In preparation for this panel, Sara reminded me that there weren't just certain women, but artists such as Joseph Beuys and Takehisa Kosugi, who was close to Shigeko at this time, who were not really included or who felt excluded from Fluxus, so I know we cannot really generalize anything in terms of just gender. But just getting back to Kubota's piece, does anyone have any recollection of how you felt watching this piece? I'm sorry again that she is not here with us tonight.

**BM:** I was not at this performance. Peter's photographs of this piece preceded the performance. Shigeko came into his small studio and had him shoot some pictures

that she wanted to use for publicity. It was very shocking. I know Peter was particularly disturbed. It was a very intimate situation because his studio was 12 × 15 or 20 feet, a very narrow studio.

**MY:** Those are rehearsal photographs then; I've never seen them.

**BM:** It was what you'd call a photo-op. It was for the photography. She might have also considered this a rehearsal, but I think she considered it more of a photo-op. She performed it for the camera. Those pictures are not usually published because George photographed the performance.

**MY:** But they exist then?

**BM:** Very much so, they do. They're among the half million negatives in Peter's archive.

**Jeff Perkins in the audience:** What is going on here [referring to George Maciunas photo of Kubota's *Vagina Painting* in 1964 shown on the screen]?

**AK:** She is painting with a brush inserted in her vagina and she is making marks on a paper.

**Female audience member:** My question is maybe controversial, but my question is: Is it inserted in the vagina, or is it just attached?

**BM:** She was wearing underpants and it was attached to the pants.

**MY:** So it wasn't stable. [*laughter*]

**AK:** My understanding was that it was inserted in the vagina so that she could grip it with her vagina, so that she could move.

**BM:** We have to ask her, I think.

**MY:** I talk briefly in my book about the relationship of this piece to the works by Yves Klein and Nam June Paik whom Shigeeko knew well by then. He had some very unusual usage of the body parts as a painting brush. Nam June was very provocative in his usage of body in Fluxus performances, as was Carolee. This piece [Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy*] was in '64, so maybe about that time, Carolee, do you feel that Maciunas felt you didn't really belong to Fluxus?

**CS:** Yeah it would have been *Meat Joy*. [*laughter*] I was celebrated and I was hugely resented and considered brainless and offensive – or liberating and fantastic. And then my film *Fuses* [1963] definitely pushed me out of the edge as a self-shot, originating the heterosexual depiction of myself and my lover. And I really later explored every possible kind of erotic interaction between myself and an ardent cat – so between the sexuality and the animal aspects there was no more Fluxus dinner for me.

**MY:** You didn't see *Vagina Painting*?

**CS:** No, but Shigeeko worked with me in my *Snows* [1967]. Her husband at the time was David Behrman, the musician, who did works with my partner, James Tenney, also a composer, so we were all close. But no I hadn't seen it.

**Maciunas's late years and Fluxus beyond his death**

**BM:** Actually, while everybody knew everybody else in these downtown things, and there was all this crossover stuff where everybody went to everybody else's concerts. Fluxus, at that particular time, did not attract a large audience. The theatre at 85 East 4th street where these concerts were performed was small – not only was the theatre small, it wasn't full. Very few people saw those concerts. And actually part of that, it was hostility to Maciunas, against his view of Fluxus. A lot of the Fluxus artists at that time had two lives – in which they had a gallery persona and then their Fluxus work, and they were really somewhat separate. Another thing – it was the way George advertised things. I told you I had gotten to know him for the first time through the graphic design; I've written about his graphic design. I think it's incredible, but, in terms of clarity, it's not always what you would consider good advertising. Those concerts had these announcements that sometimes were barely readable. You had to really know what you were looking for to understand the message. The main one for the Perpetual Fluxus Festival was a wheel and it didn't have a year. The series started at the Washington Square Galleries and then moved to this other theater. There were all these week-by-week dates – October 3, 10, 17, 24, for example – listed around the circle without any particular year. The idea was that each concert would keep recurring every year on the same day *ad infinitum*.

**SS:** Speaking about the graphic design and having worked for George as his production assistant, making some of his graphics later, not in the early 60s, but at a later point, I think that George didn't really want or need to be conventional in any way. Those designs were very distinct from any kind of advertising materials you had in the real or conventional culture at that point, just like the Fluxus art was different than what was in the art galleries at that point – which was still very conventional. The most unconventional art going on at that point was somebody like John Gibson with a gallery devoted to conceptual art, but the rest of the world was almost nowhere near what George was doing with his graphics. He was schooled in revolutionary graphics and schooled in revolutionary socialist thinking as well, which he made a point of discussing a great deal. So you have to contextualize with George that he had a really omnivorous attitude about radicalism in every way. And it extended into his graphics – I don't think he required that his graphic design would read legibly to the average viewer.

**BM:** Oh absolutely!

**AK:** But I do completely agree that often times we didn't know where to go or what was happening and what time it was. These wonderful designs were put out, but on the other hand, we never expected a lot of people to come, and how different that was from Wiesbaden in 1962, when a huge museum gave us a week – I never knew quite how George managed that from being a draftsman for the U.S. Army. Back in this country he would expect friends and friends of our friends – and that was okay because there wasn't really any advertisement.

**BM:** So, you came full circle when you did the event at the Tate!

**AK:** Yeah, salad and three thousand people, I'll never forget it.

**MY:** Well I was showing in these slides, some of the Fluxus newspapers and advertisements that Sara put together – Sara’s first job was working with Maciunas, out of Rutgers – How was the job interview?

**SS:** The job interview? Well I didn’t know I was going to a job interview, but I descended one day into this Wooster Street underground factory that was run by George and I told him that I was looking for work (though not necessarily work from him in particular). So then he asked me if I knew how to use a sewing machine and I said, “yes,” and he said, “Well then you can work for me because I need people to work on this big project I am working on,” which was the exhibition design of Yoko Ono’s one-woman exhibition at Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York. This was 1971, much after this classic period that we’ve been talking about in Germany. No one was really paying much attention to George and Yoko had hired him to design the exhibition and collaborate with her. But the clarity of whether that was a collaboration or a creative struggle was played out on a daily basis, and the problem was also that there was a financial exchange and Apple Records was paying the bills. So it was quite a complicated project for Maciunas because he had to run an enormous amount of things happening. When he hired me he could have and would have hired anyone who was to walk in the door at that point. I don’t think I was very special.

**MY:** How did your relationship to Fluxus change after Maciunas’ death [in 1978]?

**SS:** George’s [death] was so terrible – so much had happened – it’s kind of hard to explain. I guess the question to address is “Did Fluxus die when George died?” and I think anyone who knows anything about the history would feel that he didn’t let it die. There was even a story that George didn’t die. The biography that Larry Miller and Bob Watts were putting together stated that George had really just moved to some other Siberian country. So I think everyone involved tried to perpetuate George’s thinking. And Geoff worked with me, guided me actually, to do 16 pages of paste-ups that this publication took. Because at the time we specked type and used all kinds of methods that nowadays are virtually arcane. But we worked very hard on that project to make something that George would have been proud of. We had I think several pages of obituaries about George too, so a long list of works left after he passed. So everything was topsy-turvy after George left us.

**AK:** I think we should mention that one of the last times we saw George, there was this house in New Marlborough – when he moved out of New York . . . I think for legal reasons. So the New Marlborough house, which was arranged for him by Jean Brown, [was a place where] he could have all his archives [. . .] – he could live there if he wanted, but I remember the last time I clearly remember seeing him in his driveway, pulling up to the New Marlborough house and this very interesting woman with long blonde hair and this red chenille dress and high black heels came running down the big green hill to welcome us – it really took me 3–4 seconds to realize it was George in drag.

**MY:** So he got interested in cross-dressing before his death?



**BM:** Oh it had been going on for a while. When he became ill in the summer of 1977, a lot of this kind of thing became much more explicit. He was on a lot of morphine and his defenses were down, so he became quite public. But going back to that period, it appeared that when George died, Fluxus would die. There was definitely a pause. And I remember Ken Friedman, who was in California, said that he would to come to New York and take over Fluxus – and that got everybody very upset. And when I wrote my article on George in 1982 in *Artforum*, I treated Fluxus as if it was dead because there really had not been much activity – it really had been sort of stumbling along. And what really saved Fluxus was that it reinvented itself. And while it carries a lot of George's ideas forward, it had to change, no question about it. It became more of a gallery art. There was more attention to exhibitions in many ways. The performances of course have gone on, but they are being treated in a different way. George had such a subversive streak in him that he prevented Fluxus from becoming more popular. That very popularity changed it – but it's been a long time, you know, it's been 30 years.

**MY:** There have been many retrospective exhibitions and Carolee has been part of some of these...

**CS:** England had a very intense, small Fluxus band throughout the '70s, [centered around the Flux Shoe festival in 1972]. I remember David Mayor and Felipe Ehrenberg publishing remarkable books, having a commune where artists would come and work while many of them were in political exile. They came to England and began to find each other and go to the obscure farm house in Cullompton Devon where artists were making publications – many of them on mimeo, some of them on food stuffs – there was an entire pancake edition that was very radical! Fluxus was looser, and still relatively obscure: there were poets, painters, and musicians [like] Cecilia Vicuna, who couldn't go back to Chile because of that political upheaval; or Felipe Ehrenberg from Mexico [who was] escaping police riots and had to smuggle out his children. [There] was a constant stream of artists who had fled [their home countries] to be in England.

**MY:** I have a section in my PowerPoint about individual works after Fluxus. For example, Shiomi continued her *Spatial Poem* which she started in 1965 while in New York. She would send instructions to people around the world to participate in events and they would send back reports on what they did and she eventually published it as a book.<sup>10</sup> Many people know Shigeiko Kubota started video around 1970. One of her videos, *Nude Descending the Staircase* is on view at MoMA right now [as part of "Here Is Every" exhibition, featuring a selection of artworks from the permanent collection]. Alison also would develop a series of works using flax paper and also a lot of organic materials to play music or use them as a music score.

**AK:** I loved that saran wrap. A few pieces of saran wrap and onion skins are stamped down inside the saran wrap, which is held up and reflected and then I would actually begin to play the onion skin as a musical notation. Then I began to actually make bean drums...so here is a bean drum...*(demonstration)* [*claps from the audience*].

**MY:** [...] And Carolee's work has also evolved into all sorts of multimedia, installation, sound [referring to the image of *Cycladic Imprints*], but she also always involved sound, and did that extend from Fluxus in any way?

**CS:** Yes, the instruments are interesting in how they occur over and over again in Fluxus – slightly destroyed, reinvented. In my installation, *Cycladic Imprints*, there are motorized violins that make their own plucking noises in an environment of quadraphonic sound.

**MY:** Sara performed Fluxus pieces last spring at the Tate Modern with Simon Anderson. Takako Saito has recently been reflecting on Fluxus in her work, such as *Fluxus Scoops* where each drawer is dedicated to a Fluxus member, such as a drawer full of lentil beans for Alison. I would like to open up some questions to the audience at this point.

**Audience member:** Was Fluxus ever interested in gardening?

**SS:** I think Fluxus has covered nearly everything, I mean there wasn't really anything that Fluxus didn't cover. There was *Plant a Seed* piece, and I thought that was your piece Alison, but it was organized for a bus tour (by Ay-O) in Japan in the 1960s, and the driver, or artist, would stop the bus to allow someone to plant a seed. The event was recently reorganized by the 360 Gallery. Maciunas loved gardening. It wasn't stressed, but I think there was a little bit of everything.

**Julia Robinson in the audience:** Yeah, Carolee, I was just curious about what you said about Ono's *Cut Piece* how you said it wasn't a feminist piece...

**CS:** No, actually I said it was a frighteningly feminist piece, that she was vulnerable and exposed and –

**MY:** I think Carolee was saying that at the time the social background – society – was not particularly feminist.

**CS:** Exactly, society was not and so this would be very dangerous – this was a free for all, there was no acceptance of female sexual authority.

**Julia:** When Yoko first performed this in Japan, she received a strange reaction, didn't she?

**MY:** Yes, [it created] confusion in the press. They called it strip tease in one of the magazine articles and scandalized it.

**Reiko Tomii in the audience:** Actually, [about] that recently identified photograph of the performance in Tokyo.<sup>11</sup> The photographer Minoru Hirata told me that [there] was [a] difference between New York and Tokyo at that time. In Tokyo, very few people actually came up to the stage to cut. In this picture, she was caught right at the moment of the cut, but after that, nobody came to the stage; she was bored, and then ended the performance. I believe that in New York she was really exposed, but in Tokyo, people really didn't want to cut. The interesting thing about this photograph is that it was the first page of this weekly magazine so if you opened the

magazine, that is what you saw. This sensationalization came from the editorial consideration.

**MY:** Oh, and it seems that Carolee has left. She has a gallery opening this Friday and Saturday.

**Jeff Perkins in the audience:** I just wanted to comment on this piece – the Ono piece. When she performed *Cut Piece* in Tokyo, she also performed a striptease piece, lining up three chairs on the stage.

**MY:** That was a separate piece, called, *Strip Tease for Three*.

**Gwendolyn Alker in the audience:** I was recently in Denmark and saw an exhibit of Fluxus that was really my main exposure to Fluxus. It's unfortunate that Carolee left because she had told me about instruments and also how a lot of the early Fluxus artists were used in the visual arts and I was wondering about how music or sound was used within the larger interdisciplinary genre and whether there was a different relationship to sound [in Fluxus], perhaps because visual art was the predominant discipline and whether music happens to be more liberating, and whether it allowed for different types of language?

**BM:** Well I don't see Fluxus as primarily coming out of visual art – Fluxus was basically musical, totally. Before Fluxus performances had never been called concerts. Fluxus often referred to terms of music – there was a Flux orchestra – I could go on and on. So many of the people were composers.

**MY:** You know Yoko [Ono] was trained in musical composition early on and so was Nam June.

**BM:** And the Cage class, of course.

**AK:** So I think you have a double perception: the visual art was very much a base for a lot of pieces, but there was very often a musical element or a sound element. And my work is very much about sound – and now I work with paper and sound and beans.

**MY:** And Maciunas was so knowledgeable about that musical history and he really wanted to insert it into that radical avant-garde.

**Mina Cheon in the audience:** [first part omitted] Barbara, you said that after George had passed away, there was [the] [question] of what happened to Fluxus – did it die with him? I wasn't sure if you were saying that that his legacy sort of died and that was a good thing for Fluxus and opened things up more possibilities for Fluxus, or if Fluxus is still sleeping? Much of today's discussion was on Maciunas. I am more interested in Alison's work, Carolee's work, and Sara's work. I came here today to hear your stories, not stories about him.

**AK:** Thank you. Many stories, many stories.

### Notes on contributors

Alison Knowles is a multidisciplinary artist and founding member of Fluxus. In the 1960s she created *the Notations* book with John Cage, and *the Coeurs Volants* with Marcel Duchamp, both with the Something Else Press. With Fluxus she made *the Bean Rolls*, a canned book that appeared in “The American Century” exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2000). The *Big Book* (1967), a walk-in book with eight-foot pages, as well as *The House of Dust* followed. *The House of Dust* was the first computerized poetry on record, winning her a Guggenheim fellowship. She exhibits and performs internationally. Her recent solo show, *Time Samples* (2006), traveled from Venice to New Jersey to Lyon. In May 2008, she performed *Newspaper Music* and *Make a Salad* at the Fluxus Long Weekend at the Tate Modern in London. Her works such as *Identical Lunch* are included in the recent exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia* (2009).

Carolee Schneemann is a multidisciplinary artist who has constantly challenged the existing notion of art, especially with regard to discourse on the body, sexuality, and gender. Schneemann has shown her video and installation works at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, as well as in Europe. In 2002, *Imaging Her Erotics – Essays, Interviews, Projects* was published by MIT Press, complementing her book, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings* (Documentext, 1979). In 2009, Maura Reilly curated a retrospective exhibition of her early paintings, “Paintings, What It Became” at P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York City. She lives and works in Springtown, New York.

Sara Seagull has worked for over 25 years as a graphic designer, creating print communications for artists, cultural organizations, educational institutions, and publishing firms. She is also known for her designs for Fluxus-related projects, among them newspapers, books, exhibition catalogs, posters, artists’ stamps and promotional graphics. Additionally, she has photographed and videotaped numerous Fluxus events. She studied fine art at Rutgers University and graphic communications at the School of Visual Arts. In 1971 she assisted George Maciunas on the production of Yoko Ono’s exhibition “This Is Not Here” at Everson Museum, and subsequently worked for John Lennon and Yoko Ono in New York City. In 2008, with Larry Miller, she co-organized and performed in the Flux-Olympiad and three days of Fluxus concerts presented at the Tate Modern. She is currently teaching visual communications at City University of New York.

Barbara Moore is an art historian, writer, and former rare-book dealer specializing in artist’s books, conceptual art, and performance of the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s. She was an editor for Dick Higgins’ legendary Something Else Press from 1965 to 1966, curated the first Fluxus exhibition in New York in 1975, and was co-archivist of PAD/D (Political Art Documentation/Distribution) from 1980 to 1990. She has curated dozens of exhibitions and published numerous articles on the late twentieth-century avant-garde and collaborated with her late husband, the photographer Peter Moore (1932–93), in documenting this material. Much of her cultural advocacy has been accomplished through her bookstores, *Backworks* (1976–83) and *Bound & Unbound* (1988–2004). She currently manages the Peter Moore photo archive, a repository of thousands of images of Fluxus, happenings, Judson Dance Theater and other events of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

### Notes

1. Shiomi 2005.
2. The exhibition “Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe” was first held at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, Germany, in 2007, and traveled to Vilnius, Krakow, Budapest, Tallinn, and Copenhagen, and will travel to Oslo in 2010. See [www.fluxus-east.eu](http://www.fluxus-east.eu)
3. Gino Di Maggio, the founder and director of Fondazione Mudima in Milan, along with Achille Bonito Oliva and Gianluca Ranzi, organized the exhibition *Dissonances* at the

Toyota Museum of Art in Japan in September 2008, featuring works of Shigeeko Kubota, Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, Takako Saito, Mieko Shiomi, and Atsuko Tanaka. Yoshimoto contributed an essay to its catalog, titled "Beyond the Avant-Garde: Positions of Japanese Women Artists."

4. Brecht 2006.

5. #4 Child Art Piece (December 1962):

The Performer in [*sic.*] a single child, two or three years old. One or both parents may be present to assist him with a pail of water or a banana, etc. When the child leaves the stage the performance is over.

Printed in *By Alison Knowles* (A Great Bear Pamphlet series) (1965), p. 4. When this piece was performed at the Fluxus Concert at the Carnegie Recital Hall in New York in 1964, the Society against Child Cruelty demanded that a child alone could not perform on stage. Knowles came up with a solution to have a child walking through an aisle with his father and have a spotlight follow them to the stage. The piece ended when they turned away from the stage and sat in their audience seats. Alison Knowles, personal communication to Midori Yoshimoto, 27 May 2009.

6. The photographs from Maciunas's cross-dressing parties are included and discussed in Stiles 2003, 65.

7. For more on Ono's *Cut Piece*, see following: Yoshimoto 2005, 99–101; Stiles 2000, 158–61; Concannon 1998.

8. Robinson 2004, 96–115.

9. Saemann and Grögel 2008.

10. For more on Shiomi's work, see Kawamura's essay in this volume and chapter five of Yoshimoto, *Into Performance* (2005). Chapter six of the same book is devoted to the work of Shigeeko Kubota.

11. For this photo, see Tomii and Concannon 2000, 311.

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