

An Exploration of Shigeko Kubota's Artwork as it Relates to Perceptions of Gender

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Abstract

*This article explores the contributions made by Japanese-American artist Shigeko Kubota, who helped to change gender norms and perception in the art world. Kubota was most prominent during the Fluxus movement of art, best known for challenging conventional art forms through avant-garde experimental performances, sculptures, and most famously, video. While Kubota has a wide range of works, this article will specifically discuss her 1965 performance, *Vagina Painting*, and 1976 sculpture, *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*, and how they answer the question, "In what way can the works be said to function as a motor to change perceptions of gender?" Kubota's early career as an artist in Japan was heavily affected by scrutiny from and bias for men in the Japanese art world, ultimately leading Kubota to leave Japan and join the New York Fluxus movement. *Vagina Painting* would become known for how it challenged the methods of art creation by suggesting the use of female anatomy, while *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* would help diminish and redefine the stigma that the female nude is something to be sexualized. Both works would cement her legacy and establish herself as a woman in art.*

Keywords: art, women, feminism, Fluxus, Shigeko Kubota

For as long as art has been documented, it has been clear that there is a bias towards male artists, perspectives, and standards. The 20th century marked a critical point in art history where many women in art stood to challenge the perceptions of gender in both art and society at large. Shigeko Kubota stands out as one of many women in art who helped to diminish the male bias in the art world. Specifically, Kubota's performance, *Vagina Painting*, and sculpture, *Duchampiana: Nude*

Descending a Staircase, are both artworks which serve as catalysts for changing perceptions of gender.

Shigeko Kubota's early career as an artist began in Tokyo, Japan where she studied art at Tokyo University of Education. It was there that she would study methods of painting and sculpture. One of her early paintings was a still life depicting flowers which was praised for having "uniqueness characterized by strong lines

and brushstrokes that do not appear to be executed by a girl” (Yoshimoto, 2005, p.170). While delivered as praise, this statement identifies a clear and inherent gender bias that existed in Japan that saw men as superior to women in the art world (Miller, 2023, p.2). When Kubota hosted her own solo exhibition in 1963, it received poor reception and little recognition from the media which made it clear to her that women had no chance of proper recognition in the Japanese art world (Yoshimoto, 2005, p.174).

In 1964, following this revelation and an invite from Fluxus movement founder, George Maciunas, Kubota would leave Tokyo for a chance at a career as an artist in New York. The Fluxus movement is defined by its community of artists whose goal was to defy the standards and traditions of art by creating experimental artworks not restricted by medium (Miller, 2023, p.2).

One of the works which defined her early career in New York was her performance, *Vagina Painting*. Kubota performed *Vagina Painting* at the 1965 Perpetual Fluxfest in which she attached a paintbrush dipped in red paint to her underwear and moved across a large paper canvas on the floor.

Figure 1: *Vagina Painting*



Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai. 1965. Shigeko Kubota: *Vagina Painting* [photograph]. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13928786>

Many believe the meaning of the performance to be powerful in diminishing male dominance in the art world. Art historian Kristine Stiles discussed the feminist themes she interpreted from the performance by stating, “[Kubota] redefined Action Painting according to the codes of female anatomy” (Stiles, 1993, p.82). Stiles suggests that Kubota is critiquing the male dominated medium of Action Painting by using her “vagina” to paint (Miller, 2023, p.4). Art historian Midori Yoshimoto corroborates, implying that the performance could have been a parody of male action painters, like Jackson Pollock (Yoshimoto, 2005, p.179). Using her ‘vagina’ to paint, Kubota showed that as a woman, she is capable of being an artist.

Due to the negative reception of the performance, Kubota abandoned performative art. This choice would pivot her career as a pioneer in a newly emerging art form: video.

Inspired after her meetings with famous artist, Marcel Duchamp, Kubota would create a series of sculptures which reinterpreted his works. Her 1976 sculpture, *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*, reinterprets Duchamp’s famous painting *Nude Descending a Staircase No.2*. The sculpture is a large 4 stepped staircase with TV monitors embedded in each step. The TV monitors depict a heavily distorted video of a nude woman descending a set of stairs.

Figure 2: *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*



Kubota, S. (1976). *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* [Super-8 film transferred to video and color-synthesized video (color, silent), four monitors, and plywood]. The Museum of Modern Art; Gift of Margot and John Ernst, Agnus Gund, and Barbara Pine. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.15667071>

Figure 3: *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*



Duchamp, Marcel, French, 1887-1968. (1912). *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. [O/c] [painting]. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.18136638>

Kubota's sculpture helps assert the desexualization of women in art. Like Duchamp's painting, Kubota distorts and deconstructs the nude through extreme video editing. Historically, nude women were depicted through the male gaze, but Kubota subverts this expectation. Kubota encourages the use of the female nude as something belonging to women, helping women to reclaim their bodies from that of the male gaze and the stipulations of the art world (Miller, 2023, p.8). Kubota has stated, "Video is vengeance of Vagina," indicating her willingness to produce video art with the interest of reclaiming women's body autonomy (Miller, 2023, p.8; Wattlington, 2021).

Art has a long history of gender perceptions which depict men as dominant over all forms of art, suggesting that women are just tools to create art and never the creators (Miller, 2023, p.8).

Her performance, *Vagina Painting*, and sculpture, *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase*, are motors which help change the perceptions and norms of gender in art. By challenging the notion of women's inferiority in art, and the desexualization and reclamation of the nude woman in art, Kubota actively changes the centuries of male domination in the art world. While unable to establish her career as a woman in art in Japan, Kubota has since immortalized herself as the mother of video art.

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