



SHIGEKO KUBOTA

(1937 - 2015)

### MEDIA MAVERICK

As a young curator, I first met Shigeko Kubota and Nam June Paik in 1973. I heard a cheery hello when I hopped on a bus and grabbed a seat one row in front of them. We were en route to Syracuse University's Synapse TV studio, where an eager Bill Viola demonstrated his student work. Thirty or so of us video mavens were there to attend a New York State Council on the Arts funded conference at the Everson Museum organized by another young curator, David Ross. The group heatedly discussed particulars of the emerging art form, especially how its production, distribution, and exhibition go hand-in-hand. As disparate members of a fanatical community, we were all working seat-of-the-pants style with an amorphous medium that only the fringe deemed art.

Back in Manhattan, Shigeko and Nam June generously introduced me to their eclectic circle of artist and composer friends. They considered every idea brilliant, or at least plausible. Fiercely loyal, these rambunctious colleagues' enthusiasm encouraged me on.

I came to understand how Shigeko's strong "matriarchal" family of four sisters in Nigata shaped her. Emboldened by a choreographer aunt, she left her

snowy mountainous home along the Inland Sea to study sculpture in Tokyo. I am still struck by her courageous commitment as an artist contradicting Japan's deeply entrenched, hierarchical and chauvinist system.

The photo of her famous 1965 performance, in which she squats with paintbrush seemingly inserted in her vagina and draws on a large sheet of paper under her feet, might appear tame or even innocuous today. Yet we need to recognize the boldness of her action, equal to the strong steps taken in other parts of the world by her peers Carolee Schneemann and VALIE EXPORT. Japan—with its social order based on family, school and teacher (*sensei*), professional affiliation—did not support independent-minded women like Kubota. Outspoken, she broke the mold by not toeing the national line of presenting a polite face in public and a candid one in private. She was comfortable in New York, where she could be herself and develop as an artist.

Loyal and curious, Shigeko loved a funny story and readily exploded with a hearty belly laugh. (But you steered clear, when every once in a while a deep seated anger suddenly erupted.) She often invited friends for dinner in her and Paik's home on Mercer Street. Going up in the old rickety, open cage elevator to their loft on the building's top floor, you felt you were taking your life in your hands. Entering their space, you encountered a hodgepodge of old TV sets, sculpture in disarray, and dusty stacks of magazines and catalogs.

We would sit around their long kitchen table, at first formally drinking cup after cup of Japanese green tea. We would move on to sake, as Shigeko wielded her knife and cut large irregular slices of sashimi, accompanied by rice, oshinko, and miso soup. Their neighbor Frances Whitney would wander in through the back door, wearing a hat or necklace designed by friend Alexander Calder. Yoshi Wada and Ay-o would emerge from their lofts downstairs, maybe Joan Jonas from next door, and Yasunao Tone from around the corner. Boisterous conversations ran long into the night.

One day Shigeko showed me *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976), her video sculpture that evolved out of a chance encounter with Marcel Duchamp.



She excitedly described how both had been grounded in Buffalo during a blizzard, along with John Cage. Her sculpture adds a fourth dimension—time—to Duchamp's conceptual painting. In her hands manmade and natural materials elegantly harmonize in two- and three-dimensions. She melded her electronic apparatus, including four monitors showing colorful abstracted image of a nude walking down a set of stairs, set in the risers within the humble plywood of the sculpture. In my mind's eye, I will always see her friend Al Robbins, who built the sculpture for her. Al was a master craftsman and terrific artist who sported a messy tangle of Rastafarian-style hair, long before Caucasians ever considered dreadlocks.

I raised the monies and MoMA acquired *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the first video installation to enter its collection. This made Shigeko proud and especially happy, because she now had enough money to join a health club.

I have strong memories of Shigeko as the energetic video curator at Anthology Film Archives during the 1970s. These were the days of the 80 Wooster Street space, specially designed by Fluxus instigator George Maciunas. You proceeded with extreme caution, if you walked down the very narrow steps without railings to use the restrooms.

With her keen ear to the ground, Shigeko invited a broad spectrum of local and out-of-town artists to present new work on Saturday afternoons. After lively question-and-answer, most of us continued the conversation over a beer at a joint nearby. Pre-Internet, this was an essential form of information-sharing.

I will always remember Shigeko for her bright smile and meaningful chuckle, as well as her love of fashionable clothes. It was fitting that at her funeral she wore a favorite outfit designed by Issey Miyake and her large round designer glasses.

In December at a memorial in her home, a small group gathered to acknowledge the importance of her roles as artist, curator and friend. Now a dedicated team of executors of her estate is setting up a foundation in her name. Shigeko Kubota is most worthy of greater recognition for her many accomplishments and contributions to a field that she helped transition from fringe to full blown art during a productive lifetime.

**BARBARA LONDON**

*Shigeko Kubota at the Experimental Television Center, Owego, New York, 1983. Photo by Paul Garrin.*