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Women in Post-war Japan: Bodies of the Avant Garde

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Women in Post-War Japan:
Bodies of the Avant Garde

by

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ABSTRACT

The intent of my thesis is to explore the artwork of prominent women artists in the post war Avant Garde art scene in Japan. I plan to analyze their artwork, unique modalities, and innovative subject matter for their time, in the environment of their collaborative artist collectives or groups. Through observation of exhibitions, gallery spaces, and public performances, I plan to create a narrative that is inclusive and accurately representative of these women artists, their stories, and their art. With the research of art historians Dr. Midori Yoshimoto and Reiko Kokatsu, I plan to utilize their preservation of these artists names and works, to further observe their works as early feminist works of the Avant Garde era. Following the devastation of the Tokyo and Hiroshima fire-bombings of 1945, I intend to look at the aftermath in the realm of art, up until the early 1980s.

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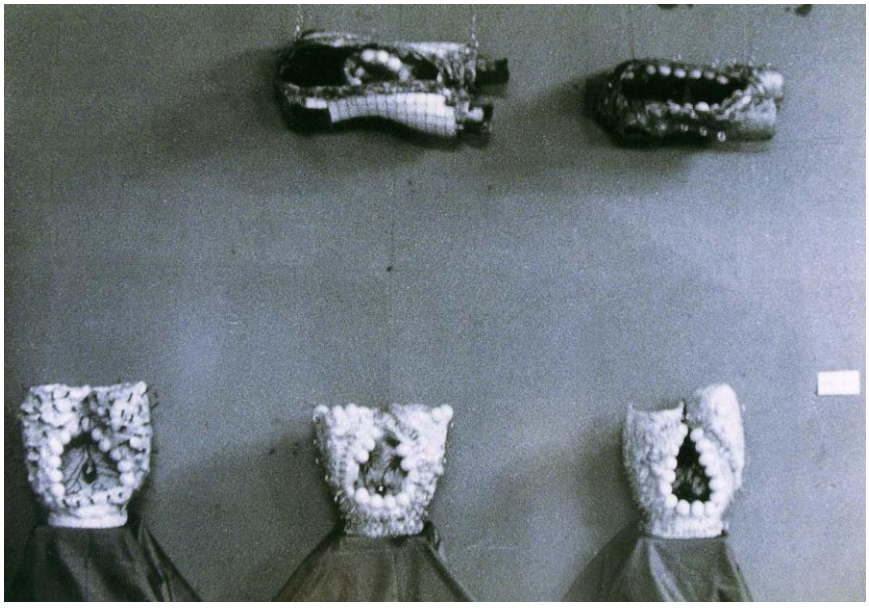

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INTRODUCTION

My honors in the major research project examines women artists in the Japanese post-war avant-garde. Specifically, I will analyze the work of Japanese artists Mitsuko Tabe, Shigeko Kubota, Atsuko Tanaka, Katsura Yuki, and Sayako Kishimoto. Some were involved in the Gutai, Mono-ha, and Kyushu-ha movements, each notable for expanding the definitions of the art object and the artist's role in society following the devastation of World War II. Despite the active contributions of these women to the important transformations of art in this context, their work is under-researched. My insight seeks to re-define and re-analyze how art history is often told from a very Euro-centric and Westward perspective, and one that privileges the contributions of men over women. I will look at these artists, their unique modalities of art making, and groups of which they were a part. In focusing on these women, I seek to expand the current conversation surrounding Japanese women artists during this era.

From 1945 onward, post-war artists in Japan encountered two interrelated challenges: to both adjust to the war's aftermath, and also to create a new visual language which expressed new ideas and emotions. For women artists in Japan, this time of distinct culture change allowed for a re-defining of their role in the art community as well as society. However, there were strict boundaries surrounding the institutional and academic realm of art, one that was not inviting to women, or one that allowed opportunity or growth. Nevertheless, many women artists sought to explore gender roles, the idea of womanhood, sexuality, and expression of the self. These topics were not met willingly by male counterparts or art critics, which forced women artists to constantly engage with a society that did not openly support their work. It was a tumultuous environment; however, women artists of this era truly showcased some of the most influential, explorative, experimental, and exciting avant-garde pieces that deeply affected the history of art.

In the artistic community, new conversations and ideas were challenging the rigidity of a traditional Japanese society. Women artists saw this as an opportunity to insert these challenges into their art. There was an ongoing exploration of ideas that critiqued the rigid structure that the establishment enforced upon artists. In the early ‘50s, many women produced artworks that explored ideas such as self-expression, gender norms and responsibilities of womanhood. Paradoxically, while many younger artists sought to expand the nature of art and art making in radical ways, there nevertheless remained a conservatism regarding women’s participation. The post-war era, for all of its social changes, only further reinforced gendered boundaries, despite many women artists utilizing this time to break free from preconceived notions of what it meant to be a “woman artist.”

In this context of a post-war reimagining of social life, traditions, and cultural norms, women artists such as Mitsuko Tabe, Atsuko Tanaka, and Shigeko Kubota, Katsura Yuki, and Sayako Kishimoto responded to this ongoing conversation by pursuing modes of experimental artistic practice. These include performance, audience participation, using the artist’s body, and a utilization of new materials, such as asphalt, found objects, and other non-traditional media. The ideas circulating at the time created a continuous hunger for artists to use their understanding of the self, consciousness, and action, to amplify their process. For example, the art group, Kyushu-ha (キューシュは) which lasted from 1956 to 1970, encouraged audience interaction in their performance-based exhibitions. Within these dynamic performances, women artists in the Kyushu-ha and similar art groups at the time, created emotionally dense pieces in performance, video, and installation art. For example, in her piece *Artificial Placenta* (1961), Tabe uses cotton, strings, nails, and fabric to render three versions of a placenta inside of a uterus. These soft sculptural objects invoke the female body, understood as a machine for

reproduction. In an era before the emergence of a fully articulated feminist movement, this piece and its subject was dismissed as irrelevant to the concerns of art.

The collaborative artistic groups active in the post-war period integrated new modes and processes of making art. They sought out experimentation with non-traditional materials and media, through the exploration of new subject matter, in order to expand upon what defines the role of the audience in relation to the art object. The audience, viewer, or recorder became necessary witnesses to this art that took up space, but without permanence. The specificities of this avant-garde way of art are fed from *idiosyncratic*—individual or peculiar—*synthesis* of action and chance, which was visibly distinct through its breaking of rigid structures and expectations in theater, performance, and installation art.[1] These works of art were highly influenced by a new social awareness. Specifically, problems surrounding individualism, gender roles, and the unraveling state of institutionalized art. Artists of this time question and reconstruct what it means to create in their own context or experience.

There was a distinct re-evaluation of the exchange between personal consciousness and the larger social environment around them.[2] Notable artists affiliated with groups such as the Gutai Art Association produced artworks that uncovered new ways to address the conditions in which they were living. The reality was that of a society rebuilding itself from fire-bombings, war, and mass social, political, and cultural upheaval. Looking at an artist, Atsuko Tanaka, a member of the Gutai, and her most recognizable piece, *Electric Dress* (1956) illuminates how she sought to expand upon the dichotomy between art and artist; blurring those lines—and risking electrocution—to wear her art piece.[3] This wedding style kimono, which the dress was

[1] Munroe, Alexandra. 1994. Japanese art after 1945: scream against the sky. New York: H.N. Abrams.
[2] Kee, Joan. 2003. "Situating a Singular Kind of 'Action': Early Gutai Painting, 1954-1957." Oxford Art Journal 26 (2): 121–40. doi:10.1093/oaj/26.2.121.
[3] Kee.

fashioned in the likeness of, is composed of an approximated 100 electrical wires and colorfully painted lightbulbs, in which Tanaka would wear and stroll the exhibition hall.[4]

Illuminating with a multitude of colors, Atsuko Tanaka gave a new perspective on the viewing of art; by creating an experience that was present with a varying degree of permeance. There was a different viewing experience for the audience who just saw the dress, versus those who bore witness to her wearing the dress. For Gutai members, the intention to strive for originality and "create what has never before been created" which I believe that sentiment was wholly exemplified by Tanaka's work.[5] The femininity of the traditional wedding-style kimono is created with technology; a symbol for modernity and the spark of light or hope that technological advances brought after the devastation of war. It is almost feminist in its own right by presenting feminine qualities and the progressive ideology of modernity together as one.

From early 1960 until the early '70s, artists began experimenting with the concept of *conscious constructivism*; which is Murayama's artistic theory 意識的構成主義 (*ishikiteki kōseishugi*) and is synonymous with 個性芸術 "constructed art" (*keisei geijutsu*) translating directly into "individual art."[6] It deals with the breaking of borders between life and art; he saw art as a means to express the nature of emotions due to the reality of a technological modern age. Murayama, the unofficial leader of the art group Mavo (1912-1926) expressed that "what is under researched is the important function of art as a means of observing and communicating the nature of life in the technological age."[7] Mavo's group was not a strictly cohesive movement, but rather a loose group whose members had the similar goal of: "revolutionizing art practice to also

[4] Kee.
[5] Kee.
[6] Munroe, 42-43.
[7] Munroe, 257-259.

revolutionize society."[8] This group expanded upon the subject matter and materials used for art; similar to that of ready-mades, but usually featuring multiple subjects or objects in one piece.

The language used to define the key sentiments of the Mavo group are very significant, especially when we take a look at the literal English translation versus (which strips the cultural and societal significance of the word) the true expression in Japanese. For instance, 全人生 (*zenjinsei*) translates into English as "the whole life," but actually is better understood as "the entirety of life."[9] This also goes for a repeatedly used phrase from the Mavo group to describe what their subject matter is about, and its purpose: 生活のかんじょ (*seikatsu no kanjo*), which translates into English as "one's daily life," or "lifespan," but is more true as a sentiment of: "observance of the conditions of life." Mavo preceded the avant-garde post-war artists, giving a foundation for transformative change in the art world.[10] The Mavo artist's ideas and sentiments can be seen in unique subject matter and stylistic choices by artists that come later, such as those involved with later art groups: the Gutai Art Association, Kyushu-ha, and Mono-ha.

The ideas surrounding what artistry could be underwent a change in Japanese society, perhaps due to the overlap between a changing philosophy, ideology, and politics ongoing at this time. Artists came to understand themselves as responsible for expanding upon emotions and assumptions about daily life and repurposed their art to serve a society traumatized by the devastation of war. Quickly, an expansion of modernism (mainly technology and individualism) came to be followed by the rebuilding of areas destroyed by war.

Avant-garde art groups revolved their ideas around utilization of the body, their own being, and the observing audience to express action and movement which reveals the meaning

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[8] Munroe, 149-157.
[9] "全人生." Jisho. Accessed April 22, 2022. https://jisho.org/word/%E5%85%A8%E4%BA%BA%E7%94%9F.
[10] Munroe, 258-259.

through their work. The way in which art held a permanence (or lacked permanence altogether) and the space it occupied transformed entirely in terms of importance. Whether it was installation, performance, video, or sculpture, collaborative groups pushed to explore what role the body played in avant-garde art. The ideas surrounding what artistry could be underwent a change in Japanese society; artists came to understand themselves as responsible for expanding upon emotions and assumptions about daily life and repurposed their art to serve a society traumatized by the devastation of war. What art had been previously, was something heavily guarded by traditional institutions of education—following these parameters were not entirely necessary, but a requirement for some aspects of what it meant to create something categorized as "Japanese art."

Some artists even reinvented what it meant to engage in the creation of art. This meant that the finished product was merely evidence to the process or action of making art; the experience and emotion of the artist held much higher importance. Avant-garde groups emphasized the centrality of their own bodies and the observing audience in actions.[11] The meanings of these works were understood to reside in the ephemeral interactions between the artist's physical movement and the perception of the audience.

The way art held a permanence (or lacked permanence altogether) and the space it occupied transformed entirely. The act of creating was more monumental than the finished product to many iconic artists during this time. The action expelled in the art-making process spoke to the themes of recreating a sense of whimsical emotions, like hope and wonder, during a time of great social and political conflict that even encroached on deconstructing the self as an individual. In a society that rejects the individual's aspirations and thoughts, in favor of the

[11] Shinichiro Osaki, "Body and Place: Action in Postwar Japan," in Out of Actions, ed. Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 121-157.

whole or collective, deconstructing that individual brings emphasis to social normality and frames of thought, which can be communicated and explored through art.

Also, during this period, many artists critiqued the notion of modernity "(近代批判) (*kindai hihan*)."[12] In part, this is due to the Mono-ha artist's influence. Mono-ha artists were a combination of several different art collectives, the most radical of them adhering to set beliefs about what art *must* do.[13] That art must reflect the structure and dynamic process of reality. That it must investigate the phenomenological problems of perception versus illusion, and existence versus cognition.[14] There were also deep concerns with a growing tension between tradition and modernity; the impending forces of Westernization and industrial development were frightening for indigenous cultures of Japan.[15]

Yoshishige Saitō, who organized one aspect of the Mono-ha, was a prominent figure in this critique of modernity. He responds to his students' own exploration of the ideas of relationality (関係) (*kankei*) in the practice of art.[16] His students of the Mono-ha group focused on these key ideas: existence (as defined by the encounter of things), site (as space), and the viewer (as consciousness).[17] Notably, the key theme is that the artist "themselves are a medium of circumstantial events within a larger, continuous process."[18] Mono-ha artists made "transient arrangements," which involved placing things nonchalantly, in a "one-time manner that was fleeting when encountered with the laws of nature."[19]

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[12] H. D. Harootunian, 1989. "Visible Discourses/Invisible Ideologies," Postmodernism and Japan, Masao Miyoshi, Harry Harootunian, 160-161.
[13] Harootunian, 160-161.
[14] Harootunian, 160-161.
[15] Harootunian, 160-161.
[16] Harootunian, 160-161.
[17] Biennale de Tokyo. 1970. Between man and matter: 10th Tokyo biennale '70. Tokyo: Mainichi Newspapers and the Japan International Art Promotion Association.
[18] Munroe, 261-266.
[19] Munroe, 261-266.

These ideas focused on the probability of chance, each with its own unique stakes. For the artist, this meant placing things that would fall, hang, float, or just drop—becoming broken according to the boundaries of gravity and time.[20]

Mono-ha refers specifically to the Tamabi group, a loose cohort of artists consisting of smaller groups from different art schools: Tama Art University, The Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music, and the Fine Arts Department of Nihon University.[21] The members of these groups challenged the notion of "Japanese art" and its perception both within the traditional institutions in Japan and outside of them. During the post-war period, Japan's visibility within the international art world was premised on outdated aesthetic and social models. In the eyes of Western audiences and art collectors, "Japanese art" continued to be understood as traditional decorative objects, similar to those which fueled the European obsession with "Oriental" art during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. By the 1950s and 60s, many young artists had become disillusioned with these expectations and the ways in which they informed artistic training within Japanese art institutions.

While traditional institutions of arts training and exhibition emphasized a more essentializing version of Japanese cultural identity, the artists of the Tamabi group articulated societal displeasure with cultural norms.[22] At the height of the student protests, Mono-ha originated in October of 1968 with Sekine Nobuo's site-specific outdoor work *Phase—Earth*. It consisted of "a cylinder filled with soil that was beside another cylindrical hole in the earth; a dug-out void of the same shape and volume."[23] This piece would influence art students in their

[20] Munroe, 261-262.
[21] Minemura Toshiaki, "What Was 'Mono-Ha?'" Kamakura Gallery: What was MONO-HA?, 1968. https://www.kamakura.gallery/mono-ha/minemura-en.html.
[22] Toshiaki.
[23] Munroe, 271.

own work to explore this concept of "art as an encounter with being."[24] This community of artists would provide a link between the prewar and postwar art worlds.[25]

A moment in history that was cataclysmic for this shift of thought, were the student led riots and protests against prestigious universities around Japan. Art students contributed heavily to these protests; as many students were against the authoritarian, Western-appropriated, and exploitative reigns of university administrators and legislation. What started as exploitation of medical students at prestigious universities in Japan, turned into art students making a political statement through collaborative performances and protests that garnered national recognition. During my research process, I wondered where these conflicts originated, and what actions led to these responses from university students. As briefly mentioned before, the elite University of Tokyo were subjecting their graduate students to exploitative conditions— namely, requiring their medical students to serve a 12-month unpaid compulsory hospital internship.[26]

The University of Tokyo was further emphasized as this "bastion of privilege" and "linchpin of an oppressive and reactionary education system."[27] In response to this factor, and others involving a general distaste for the traditional bases of Japanese power, students would collectively seek change through protests. 全共闘 (ぜんきょうとう) (Zenkyoto).[28] The All-Campus Joint-Struggle Councils were student-formed groups active from 1968-69 in universities across Japan.[29] The protests of '68 and '69 paralyzed the national university system as a whole by preventing functional institutional education from continuing as normal.[30]

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[24] Mika Yoshitake. "TRA." X-TRA, 2006. https://www.x-traonline.org/article/encounter-vs-event-the-emergence-of-non-art-in-japan-circa-1970. Volume 8 #4
[25] Ken Yoshida (2014) Contemporary art and unconditionality: 'the genus of art' in the art criticism of Chiba Shigeo, Japan Forum, 26:4, 486-507, DOI: 10.1080/09555803.2014.930920.
[26] Munroe, 257-258.
[27] Munroe, 257.
[28] Munroe, 257.
[29] Munroe, 257.
[30] Shoten, "Proposal to Artists," agitational flyer, 1969.

The student-led protests that ensued caused chaos through strikes, boycotts, performative demonstrations, and even enduring bloody clashes with riot police.[31] These students sought to actively seek change in this system that was failing them. This militant protest spread throughout the country — as a collective, students demanded a re-construction of the "feudal authoritarian system that regulated higher education in Japan (including Japan itself)".[32] The priority of these students was fighting for control of student facilities and freedom of speech in higher education. As a result, thousands of students were arrested across campuses.

Art students made themselves present by playing a significant role in organizing demonstrations and gaining attention nationwide for their performances against the institution. This 'New Left' became a popular alignment among art students in 1969, this ideology having more radical alliances with political figures such as Mao or Trotsky than the 'Old Left' which was more-so aligned with the JCP (Japanese Communist Party).[33] The New Left were openly against American imperialism in both Indochina and East Asia; and students would use these campus protests to conduct pacifist demonstrations in alignment with the anti-war movement they called '米ヘリ円' (*Beiheiren*).[34] An important figure was Oda Makoto, a university student at the time who gained notoriety for his "Anti-War Tea Shops".[35] These tea shops were set up on campus grounds for students to purchase "U.S. Imperialist Coca-Cola" and "U.S. Imperialist Juice," which illustrated the youth's distrust of the U.S.'s control and influence over Japan in terms of foreign policy and defense.[36]

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[31] Munroe, 257-258.
[32] Munroe, Chapter 11: *The Laws of Situation*.
[33] Munroe, 258.
[34] Eiji Oguma. "Japan's 1968: A Collective Reaction to Rapid Economic Growth in an Age of Turmoil." The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, April 23, 2015. https://apjjf.org/2015/13/11/Oguma-Eiji/4300.html. Translation by Nick Kapur with Samuel Malissa and Stephen Poland.
[35] Munroe, 258.
[36] Munroe, 258.

As a collective, art students proposed this complete topple of the art establishment, and "the establishment," as a whole. This included the Tokyo Biennale, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, The National Museum of Modern Art, and the public competition system, because students felt these establishments were strangled by American influence.[37] Its primary goals were to evolve away from these authoritarian social systems in Japan, as well as shedding itself of political influence in the U.S.[38] These conditions influenced Japanese artists to begin depicting less than favorable aspects of society, culture, and politics that directly impacted them. The actions of art students started these conversations and acted as a cataclysmic movement that gave rise to the solidification of the Mono-ha art movement.[39]

Throughout the post-war years and up until recent contemporary artworks, Japanese women artists are held to a standard for this strict notion to achieve 'originality' (this originality being something never before explored in sense of materials used and processes) through their art. This standard was set by their male counterparts to remove "any sense of femininity" from them. Femininity, in this context, being something historically categorized to resemble the "mother" archetype. It has been simplified to be child bearer, nurturer, fragility, and something conquerable. This was highlighted when "feminine" elements from art were encouraged to be removed, be thrown away, or even in some circumstances— destroyed.

Due to this element of femininity being seen as lesser; as "hobbyist" or amateur work, referring to women as only capable of making tapestries with flowers, decorative painting, and fabric making.[40] Women artists felt ostracized from most art communities. Despite this,

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[37] Lee U Fan, interview with author, Yokohama, 9 January 1993.
[38] Fan.
[39] Munroe, 261.
[40] Alicia Volk. 2003. "Katsura Yuki and the Japanese Avant-Garde." Woman's Art Journal 24 (2): Inside Fro. doi:10.2307/1358780.

influential women artists continuously defend their selfhood (separate from the constraints of what being “feminine” is; and how it is “lesser” in this historical context) by creating exemplary works of their time that encompass a plethora of media: performance, video art, installation, and painting being a majority of the works. Some female artists even keep their femininity and even placing a heavy emphasis on the gendered expression of womanhood itself. This term of femininity is not taken for granted, nor is it universally the same. Similar for the term ‘feminist’ which is not widely understood in the same regard. How women were shaped in culture and how that plays out in art are important questions in order to give appropriate historical context for the role of the feminine.

An artist who personifies this expression of artistic femininity is Mitsuko Tabe. She was one of the artists who helped in the formation of the aforementioned Kyushu-ha art movement. Kyushu-ha was made up of non-traditional artists (“did not receive art education and were ordinary civilian workers,”) and resonated with similar ideas of the labor unions rising during the time, influencing the groups ideologies.[41] The group's materials were very specific and intentional: many artists used wood scraps and other waste, but most notably, asphalt, for its cheap price (due to the urbanization of Fukuoka City) and for its quick drying time and unique texture and luster.[42] The subject matter in her art often points to gender roles; specifically that “wife hood” expectation of women in Japanese society. However, her subject matter ranges from gender issues, the expression of the female body, and exploration of selfhood.

[41] Midori Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko. positions 1 May 2013; 21 (2): 475–488. doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-2018319
[42] Yoshimoto, 481.

Prominent works of Tabe's, such as *Artificial Placenta*, are still relevant to issues today, utilizing themes of sexuality and procreation.[43] This piece illustrates what Tabe imagined to be the true liberation of women.

It may also be in part due to the fighting of this appropriated "Westernization," of art in Japan as well, which leads to non-Western accounts of art history being seen as "peripheral" and a Euro-centric retelling being the accepted timeline. What this means is that typically the entity that is the West, has the privilege of creating the accepted modality in which the chronological timeline is written and perceived in academia. This often goes without regarding historical and cultural accuracies, as well as displaying Europe as the epicenter for mastery of arts. Instead of comparing processes between Japanese and American artists and debating who influenced who, a more productive conversation would be about the unique qualities and ways in which Japanese artists were creating. This should progress without feeling the need to talk about subject matter, materials, and actions of artists with a Western critique or comparison.

While researching, I shared a similar sentiment with art historian and curator of the Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Art in Japan, Reiko Kokatsu's goal to expand upon these women's stories.[44] Kokatsu researched Tabe in-depth, and strived to gain the jurisdiction to re-construct a more accurate and feminist chronologic account of art history; something similar I am trying to accomplish.[45] There is a frustration that comes with seeing male critics constantly diminishing the achievements and works of Japanese women artists; comparing them in relation to that of their male counterparts. This happened, despite these artists belonging to the same art groups and movements. Sometimes, this comparison would be so exaggerated, that artists even

[43] Yoshimoto, 475-476.
[44] Kokatsu, Reiko, and Midori Yoshimoto. 2011. "Mitsuko Tabe: Beyond Kyûshû-Ha." N.Paradoxa: *The Only International Feminist Art Journal* 27 (January): 38–46.
[45] Kokatsu and Yoshimoto, 38–46.

outside of Japan, who had notoriety in the West, would be included in the conversation to further distance the discourse away from these women and their processes of making art.[46]

What I will explain further in my research is a way to push forward and amplify the accomplishments of Japanese women artists during this post-war era and beyond. Women artists manipulated unique modalities, and incorporated new techniques, to make up some of the most revolutionary artworks of their time. These go on to be symbols of their era, groups, and art movements. I wish to contribute a more inclusive and less Euro-centric view of what it means to showcase and analyze these artists and the styles of art they contributed to. This must be done with such a scope and range of research that can accurately strip away the peripheral and appropriated recounts of the accessibility of Japan's art history. What is left is Japanese artists molding visual stories and experiences about their own society, culture, and beliefs that are unique to them; without a need for comparison to the West or Euro-centric values of art history.

Throughout the thesis process, I will tell a story highlighting poignant pieces from iconic women artists during this era following the post-war and rise of large art movements and collaborative groups. I will focus on artists such as Shigeko Kubota and Mitsuko Tabe, analyzing the art movements and groups they were a part of and their accomplishments outside of these art collectives. The artists they influenced and existed within the same space or era as also will take space in my exploration of post-war avant-garde art.

[46] Kokatsu and Yoshimoto, 38–46.

2 ART AS ACTION

Following the tragic devastation of World War II Japanese artists found experimental ways to continue making art. Young artists involved in various avant-garde groups revolutionized ways of living and artmaking by incorporating their bodies and making art into an active event. Many of these artists showcased experimental techniques to redefine the body and selfhood through performance and installation art. This meant exploring inexpensive and accessible non-art media such as earthen materials, industrial paint supplies, asphalt, and electrical supplies. This change in materials echoed shifts in their understanding of themselves as artists working in the post-War context. Many expanded upon emotions and challenged assumptions about daily life, in an attempt to make work that better resonated with a society deeply traumatized by the devastation of war. There was a direct focus on the "body" and "being" which fascinated artists and audiences alike; expressing this new idea of the "self" through action and movement to evoke meaning and emotion. The body was no longer understood as incidental to the act of art making, but rather as an active tool and media in its own right, capable of producing transformative social effects.

This chapter seeks to explore the role of the body in the work of select artistic groups working in the post-war period in Japan. I will first discuss the changing understanding of the body and its relationship to subjectivity that was articulated by thinkers and artists such as Jiro Yoshihara and Sekine Nobuo, and their role in the groups that made up the Mono-ha and Gutai groups. I will discuss their teaching and impact in thought on the groups in which they were involved. I will also observe the works of the key members of these groups, such as Shiraga Kazuo, Atsuko Tanaka, and Sekine

Nobuo. I will conclude with an analysis of the work of the Kyushu-ha members, namely Mitsuko Tabe, whose piece *Artificial Placenta (*人工胎盤, 1961) will be the foundation of my analysis, as her work will be contrasted in relation to that of her fellow artists. This new notion of the "body" served as the locus of post-war artistic activity: seen prominently in the pieces enacted, such as *Vagina Painting* (1965) by Shigeko Kubota, and the multidisciplinary work of Mariko Mori.[47]

During the postwar era, an artist's body was being re-defined as being influenced by action, movement, and spontaneity to express something organic and natural. Art materials were mere additions to supplement and record the expression through the body of the artist. The movement of the body was understood by artists as a kind of witness to the materials. This means that in terms of artmaking, materials were no longer inferior to the artist. Instead, the artist is now no longer superior to the material, and enters a partnership with them. For example, it is not like a painter who clearly has mastery over their paintbrush, but instead, it is the artist and material working together. Neither is subjected to one another, and in tandem, they work together without one being domineering over the other.

As a result, the impermanence of the performance was countered by the materials that were left behind, how they appeared, and where they were located. The materials served as a trace of the physical encounter with the body of the artist and both elements were given equal respect. I will show examples of this partnership throughout this chapter, artists consisting of the Gutai, Mono-ha, and Kyushu-ha group exhibiting this new philosophical technicality of artmaking.

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[47]Midori Yoshimoto. 2005. *Into performance: Japanese women artists in New York*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

When looking at a mixed media performance piece, like that of many artworks produced by the Mono-ha movement, the emphasis of the artwork is no longer focused on the art itself. Rather, the artists emphasize the contingencies of the context surrounding the performance works as well as the elements that remain. In works such as Yoshihara Jirō's *Please Draw Freely*, of 1956 [Figure 2.1]. The artist set up a wood board installation that was left blank. Jiro left art supplies behind, and titled the piece *Please Draw Freely*, to invite the audience to have total creative control over his artwork. In relation to other works at the time, there was an emphasis on the artists' body itself as the main act and is the vessel through which the art is produced. The materials are just supplemental, and serve as a recording of the movement, emotions, and energy of which the body expelled. In a way, the final product was secondary in priority to the artist rather than the moments of "being" in which they created it.

Several artists who were involved in the Mono-ha and Gutai groups were influenced by a philosophical perspective at this time, especially around what and why of "being" an artist. The idea of "being" became a nuanced subject for these artists to play with. This evolved in areas outside of art, such as philosophy, literature, and critique, which can be seen in secondary sources of interviews, media interaction or coverage, and audience participation in artworks, which will be elaborated upon further during specific work analyses.

How this philosophy translated to artists meant their works were intentionally time sensitive. The art lacked permanence outside of the performance of making it; whether that included body art, mixed media painting, performance art, or installation art. Art collectives were privy to redefine the role of the body, or the onlooker, which

influenced this new creation of avant-garde art. With little infrastructure and institutional stability for artists, many turned to art collectives to start producing work together.

Artists sought to express a deeper understanding of their new reality. This transformation of self also served a more practical reasoning. Due to a loss of infrastructure, utilizing the body was the most cost efficient and accessible material: the self. The most affordable materials at the time (such as mud, asphalt, wall paint, wood, etc.) were the materials being used to emphasize the movement and action of the body. Materials were often contingent on the subject matter of the artwork.

The Gutai art group, whose members gained the most notoriety for famous painter and founder of the group, Jiro Yoshihara, brought together artists such as Kanayama Akira, Murakami Saburo, Shiraga Kazuo, Shozo Shimamoto, and Atsuko Takana.[48] The Gutai Art Association represented something new and innovative to art making. Each member brought a creative, free-spirited approach to art through performance, painting installation, and theatrical events.[49] Gutai—meaning "embodiment" and "concreteness"—the group encouraged each other to engage with a plethora of media and presentation, often beyond gallery walls. Frequently, the artists placed more emphasis on process rather than on finished product.

The Gutai artists exhibited this art as an action idea through the shredding of the self-conscious through the process or creation. Even in painting, they “developed the idea of painting as a function that could be reduced to an intense and singular kind of action through the ambiguous conflation of violence and whimsy,” and this was what Shiraga stated was the “shredding of self-consciousness and investigation of those fundamental

[48] Kee.
[49] Kee, p 134.

qualities that we were all born with."[50] The whimsical and childlike qualities of some of their work, seen at the Gutai Art Exhibitions, re-define the creation process. Actions are seen as "innate," when the artist is not hesitant through emotion or response to the environment. The Gutai group explores their bodies' actions in this chaotic state of unconsciousness.

Gutai members were not interested in making timeless art. Instead, they opted for art that would speak to the present moment through action and movement, expressing the subconscious in response to the current art world in Japan. Both internally and externally, artists did so by displacing this unconscious behavior and emotion into art objects. Atsuko Tanaka risked electrocution in 1956 to debut her piece, *Electric Dress,* at the second installment of the Gutai Art Exhibition at the Ohara Hall in Tokyo.[51] *Electric Dress* is a kimono composed entirely out of lightbulbs and electrical wires, in which Tanaka painted with fluorescent colors and wore for the exhibition [Figure 2.2]. This piece is a subject of traditional womanhood or wifehood, and modernity combined.

Shiraga, Tanaka's colleague, utilized his body not as a mannequin or subject matter, but as this vessel to expel motion, action, and energy, to create his pieces. This relationship between the body and the material is so vastly different to that of other Gutai members, expressing Jiro's teaching method of complete creative freedom of expression.

Wet mud recorded the fighting movements expelled by artist Kazuo Shiraga in his 泥に挑む／*Challenging Mud* performance piece in 1955.[52] In the First Gutai Art Exhibition at Ohara Kaikan Hall in Tokyo, Shiraga displayed a rejection of the canvas

[50] Kee, p 126.
[51] Kee, p 129-130. First and second Gutai Art Exhibition at Ohara Hall, Tokyo.
[52] Kee, p 128.

and painting. [Figure 2.3] Instead, it is in favor of the body, its energy, and action necessary to record his artwork through the material. As a member of the Gutai, he "relinquishes the mastery of control over the material and enters into partnership with it."[53] The artist still labels this piece and presents it in the gallery as a painting, just substituting usual brushes--or in Shiraga's case, since he usually, he usually paints with his feet--for his entire body.[54]

This partnership between the material and its user exemplifies this idea of the body versus being. The body is the vessel, and the being excuses itself through action to create. There is a permanence while simultaneously there being a lack thereof. When exploring new interactions with materials outside of the usual realm, the artist is almost at play. An exchange is ongoing between the art and the subject matter. The outcome is secondary to the process itself.

What entails utilizing the body in art, was through action and movement of the artist, or the reaction from the audience. A prominent early piece that synthesizes these ideas, are showcased by Sekine Nobuo and his piece *Phase ー Mother Earth* (1968) [Figure 2.4]. Tama Art University published an analysis of this piece, stating: "through an intervention of procedure, process, and action, they turned a part of natural phenomena into a dualistic phase that was neither existence nor nonexistent" ("磯大地ーまたは関根信夫の出現"Isō—daichi mata ha Sekine "Nobuo no shutsugen" in Tsuitō: Sekine Nobuo [Memorial: Nobuo Sekine] (Tama Art University, 2020). Translated by Ashley

[53] Kee, p 127-130.
[54] Kee, p 127-130.

Rawlings.)[55] A cylindrical hole in the ground, emptied of all of its earthly mass, and that mass placed next to the hole, on top of the earth. The heap then was transformed to look identical to the cylindrical shape missing in the ground.

The physical labor to create this 2.2 x 2.7m cylinder was performed by the Mono-ha group, which was still in its early development at the time. This piece was created with a sense of spontaneity on Nobuo's part. There was no planning, no flier or poster to advertise the digging performance, and no permit from the Suma Rikyū Park in Kobe, Japan to dig despite the potential interference with underground cables or piping.[56] However, it brings up the possibility for this piece to not have been created if the group had requested permission beforehand. This spontaneity adds to the piece which seems to "magically appear overnight," for those who visited the Suma Rikyū Park once it was completed.

The artists of the Mono-ha have produced prominent pieces that lend to this notion of action-based art. The group itself was unique in the conditions of its culmination. There were interesting overlaps between Japanese art and the cultural, social, and political aspects of late '60s and early 70's Japan in which spurred the group together.[57] Art students at the time were facing a violent upheaval at universities from 1968-1969.[58] Throughout that year, protests paralyzed the national universities' usual semester routines due to strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, bloody clashes with riot police

[55] Lee Ufan, "Phase—Mother Earth, or, The Arrival of Nobuo Sekine" in Tribute to Nobuo Sekine (1942–2019) (Blum & Poe Broadcasts, 2020)
[56] Munroe.
[57] Munroe, p 257.
[58] Lee U Fan, interview with Alexandra Munroe, Yokohama, 9 January 1993.

from thousands of students who beset the campuses, resulting in the university having police arrest its own students.[59]

Perhaps the bastion of academic privilege at the time, was attending Tokyo University, who were the initial perpetrators of student exploitation. The university was mandating that medical graduate students had to serve a one-year unpaid compulsory hospital internship, as well as showcasing corruption from administrative authorities when it came to school rules, admissions, and curriculum.[60] Tokyo University was not an isolated incident, and other universities, such as Nihon University, were garnering similar reactions from their students. Art students in particular took action in their artwork, to spread awareness with hopes of institutional change. This led to an organized ぜんきょと (Zenkyoto) (All-Campus Joint-Struggle Councils) group of students which organized a militant protest throughout the country — demanding control of student facilities, rights for freedom of speech, and the re-construction of the feudal authoritarian system that regulated higher education in Japan (extending to Japan itself).[61]

These student-led riots, which were primarily organized by the art majors, sought a total deconstruction of the traditional Japanese "bases of power" in this postwar era. Many students were also a part of the "New Left" (from 1969 onward), different from the "Old Left" which aligned with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). The JCP had more radical alliances with political figures like Trotsky and Mao. The New Left were heavily against American imperialism in East Asia and Indochina; students politically motivated were banding together to form a pacifist anti-war movement during these protests

[59] Munroe, p 267-268.
[60] Munroe, p 258.
[61] Munroe, p 261.

(Beiheiren 米ヘリ円).[62] These riots extended far beyond the realm of higher education and academia for students and were very much so based in the reality of political and social happenings of the time.

A prominent action-based piece was produced by anti-war activist Oda Makoto. The installation pieces "Anti-War Tea Shops " were placed on multiple university campuses, selling "U.S. Imperialist Coca-Cola, "ad "U.S. Imperialist Juice."[63] This installation was to showcase a growing mistrust of the U.S. political pressure and its control of Japanese foreign policy and defense.[64] Due to the political atmosphere, Japan's youth advocated for immediate independence from its former occupier, the United States. In Alexandria Munroe's book *Scream Against the Sky,* it states: "The times force us to reconsider our situation as modern artists in Japan, and to think about the significance of being free from American influence."[65]

For artists to reconsider their responsibility, they felt the need to break free from American influence imposed on Japan. They wanted to add a visual component to express the social dichotomy of living in a postwar world that was rebuilding itself. These students, influenced by their environment, would go on to form the Mono-ha art group. These artists were shaped by some of their more contemporary art professors, to denounce any derivative, symbolic, or exotic use of "Oriental" motifs. This would break free from the institutional and political influence of America over Japan in the arts. Mono-ha refers specifically to the TAMABI group, consisting of groups from different art schools: Tama Art University, The Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music, and the

[62] Henry D. Smith II, *Japan's First Student Radicals*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972.
[63] Munroe, p 258.
[64] Munroe, p 258.
[65] Lee U Fan, interview with Alexandra Munroe, Yokohama, 9 January 1993.

Fine Arts Department of Nihon University.[66] Some of these members studied under contemporary artist and professor, Yoshishige Saito.

Yoshishige influence is clear in the group's artwork which contain notions of: spatial and temporal notions of 余白 (よはく— blank/void). They also carefully incorporated an addition of the ま (the interval or distance between two or more phenomena occurring continuously) in their more dynamic or collaborative performances. There was a new importance placed on "art reflecting the structure and dynamic process of reality," which was shown through the more socially or politically motivated pieces.[67] Saito encountered Dadaist and Futurist groups including MAVO at the Third Section Plastic Arts Association (founded by Murayama Tomoyoshi) and had almost a cultural exchange of ideas when it came to the changes undergoing in modernity. This influenced his teaching style and notions of being an artist that were then instilled as principles into his art students. Saito went on to provide a link between the prewar and postwar art worlds academically and visually.[68] Taking Saito's teachings, the newly formed Mono-ha group had very clear goals through their action-based art, which mostly included performance, installation, and painting pieces.

Mono-ha artists made "transient arrangements," with their art. This meant placing things in a casual, one-time manner that was fleeting in the encounter with the laws of nature. For example, things falling, hanging, floating, then dropped, or broken according to the principles of gravity and time. When adding art materials or substances into these transient arrangements, it allows for the materials to leave behind a trace of their

[66] Munroe, p 262.
[67] Munroe, p 264.
[68] Munroe, p 259.

temporary existence. Mono-ha's members investigated the phenomenological problems of perception versus illusion, existence versus cognition.

The Mono-ha group, beginning in 1968, utilized their artwork "to see the world as it is, without subjecting it to an act of representation that opposes it to man."[69] The movement brought together Nobuo Sekine, Lee Ufan, Kishio Suga, Katsuro Yoshida, Katsuhiko Narita, Shingo Honda, and Susumu Koshimizu.[70] These artists focused on the consciousness of the viewer, the existence or encounter of things, and site or space specific artwork. The idea of object hood and the artist as nothing but a medium of circumstantial events within a larger, continuous process were also prevalent throughout their exhibitions, installation pieces, and overall work produced. Objecthood is something that permeates throughout multiple art groups and individual artists at the time as something to explore and play with in performance and installation pieces of the Avant Garde.

This was not just explored by the Mono-ha artists, but other groups as well such as the Kyushu-ha. Kyushu-ha (九州派), translating to Kyushu School, was an avant-garde art collective from 1957 until the late 1960s. The principal member of the group in which I will be revolving my observations around is Mitsuko Tabe. Founded in Fukuoka City, Japan, Tabe was one of the group's first members. Her early paintings would influence the group's subject matter, even as her medium and materials would evolve during her time in the Kyushu-ha.

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[69] Tatehata, Akira, and Alfred Birnbaum. 2002. "Mono-Ha and Japan's Crisis of the Modern." Third Text, no. 60 (September): 223–36. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,shib&db=asu&AN=505003784&authtype=shib&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[70] Tatehata and Birnbaum.

This "signature Kyushu-ha style" that Tabe incorporated in her paintings such as *Anger of the Fish Tribes (魚族の怒り, 1957)* showcased an application of a thick, textured abstraction of images using unique materials such as asphalt [Figure 2.5]. From the group's beginnings, Tabe's work stood out for being heavily symbolic of her own societal criticisms. Her strong social consciousness bled into her work which included feminist concerns for women in the early 1960s Japan.[71] What was unique about Kyushu-ha, is that it consisted of "everyday people," in the sense that, these artists who were not educated or trained in any art institutions.[72] 19 members of the Kyushu-ha, Tabe included, put together the *Kyūshū-ha Exhibition* in 1961 at the Ginza Gallery in Tokyo, to showcase their ideas to the public.[73] This exhibition was important to Tabe, as it is where she revealed her piece, *Artificial Placenta* (人工胎盤), her first transition piece from large-scale asphalt paintings to three-dimensional objects [Figure 2.6].

Artificial Placenta was an important piece to Tabe herself, and her own feelings on femininity, womanhood, and pregnancy. Tabe was pregnant with her son when she created this three-dimensional piece made to represent the inside of a woman where the placenta forms. Three mannequin hips made out of fiberglass and plastic were propped upside down on pedestals. Tabe removed the front of the mannequin's body in order to expose its interior. Each mannequin contained a valve that Tabe inserted in the hips opening, to represent this phallic object being inserted into the object.[74] Inside the

[71] Midori Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko. positions 1 May 2013; 21 (2): 475–488. doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-2018319
[72] Raiji, Kuroda, and Reiko Tomii. "Appendix: An Overview of Kyūshū-Ha." Review of Japanese Culture and Society 17 (2005): 36–50. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42801110.
[73] Raiji, Kuroda, and Tomii, p 36.
[74] Yoshimoto, Midori. "A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko." positions: asia critique 21, no. 2 (2013): 474-488. muse.jhu.edu/article/509113.

mannequin Tabe place textiles such as cotton balls and fabrics to line the interior's walls. She punctured pins and needles through the fabric to protrude inwards. The outside was then covered in more fabric and cotton balls, which would also be pierced with thick sewing pins and needles. Ping pong balls would be applied with adhesive to the three mannequin hips to outline the opening. Resting above the pedestal's, on the wall were horizontally hung child torsos. The two-child hip torsos were designed with textiles similar to the placenta. Suspended above on the wall with two wires, the two child 's torso hung horizontally. Wrapped in textiles with checkered print and other materials placed haphazardly, randomly, give the child torso's that same, gritty feeling as the mannequin's hips innards.

The idea was for it to serve as her own protest against receiving no maternity leave under Takami Sakurai's union-based schedule during her time in the Kyushu-ha.[75] Sakurai and Kikuhata served as the two co-captains of the Kyushu-ha at the time. Tabe, working in a heavily male-dominated avant-garde environment, faced direct misogyny despite her continuous contributions to the Kyushu-ha group.

Tabe concluded that "true women's liberation would not be possible without their liberation from pregnancy,"[76] and [Figure 2.7] showcases a photograph of Tabe in a maternity blouse, posed in front of two objects of *Artificial Placenta*. There were plenty of art critics and Neo Dada artists present to view Tabe's work, all predominantly male. There was no clear understanding between the meaning of the piece, and its male audience, who it was not intended for. Due to the critique of male art critics, *Artificial Planeta* was featured in the 20th issue of "Doyo Manga" (土曜漫画) magazine, the

[75] Raiji, Kuroda, and Tomii, p 37.
[76] Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko

author titling it: *Artists Who Dwell on Female Genitalia*. Assumedly, it did not resonate well with the male art critic who wrote and published that piece. However, Tabe suspected it did not resonate with other women, either, stating in an interview: *"Ideas of women's revolution, feminism, and gender did not enter Japan yet, so there was no response from women even though I was making an important statement.*"[77]

When exploring Tabe's work, her poignant ideas are showcased in her creative subject matter in which she uses to portray socially conscientious works that include femininity, and what womanhood is representative of her as an artist. Works like *Artificial Placenta*, and her performance in the *Sex Museum*[78] of 1968, uncover areas of thoughts her colleagues did not, would not, or could not express on femininity to her depth. Tabe critiques how women are 'childbearing' machines; and that women cannot be liberated without removing the responsibility of bearing children in pregnancy— that this artificial placenta, if it were to become a medical procedure, would truly liberate women. It speaks to not only gender roles and its inequalities, but the painful and brutal process of growing and carrying a child in a womb; and how the uterus is carrying the result of the pleasure of sexual intercourse. She perfectly showcases the pain the body undergoes through her use of materials which make its first production grotesque in its presentation.

The *Sex Museum*, the Kyushu-ha's group participation in 1968 at the *Potential of Art* exhibition, was a showcasing of multiple united groups works. Tabe's participation in this consisted of her sitting at a desk with a sewing machine to create a long phallic string

[77] Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko, p 484.
[78] "Mistuko Tabe." AWARE Women artists / Femmes artistes. Accessed November 14, 2022. https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/mistuko-tabe/.

while a small gourd with an "umbilical-like" cord attachment spun around in a rainbow-colored washing machine.[79] At the desk, ten wooden Japanese dolls (こけし） that were made to represent dildos were on display. By the end of the exhibition, Tabe had reported that five of them had been stolen.[80] In the *Sex Museum*, Tabe also had some paintings on display, which she donated. In 2013, art historian Dr. Yoshimoto held an interview with Tabe, she described these works: "*I spray painted women's breasts, a milk bottle, an embracing couple, etc. on mirrors. I donated that work to the Fukuoka Art Museum when they held the Kyushu-ha exhibition in 1988. It was cracked and dangerous to keep at my home.*" When asked about how other Kyushu-ha members felt about Tabe's work, namely, *Artificial Placenta*, Tabe replied: "*They were really disgusted by my Artificial Placenta of 1961. They must have wondered why I would make such a grotesque work."*

In 2004, long after the Kyushu-ha disbanded, *Artificial Placenta* was remade due to the first copy being burnt. This second prototype was much more palatable to the audience (or more so, to her male artist counterparts) due to its sugar-coated expression in her use of materials in comparison to the original. For example, after the second making of *Artificial Placenta*, Tabe stated: "*I tried to recreate the original as much as possible by cutting out the hip portion of mannequins, applying white plaster underneath a layer of asphalt-pitch, decorating them with ping pong balls, cotton balls, and gauzes, and inserting a vacuum tube in the middle of each. I also tried to put forth something cute and nostalgic rather than something scary.*"[81]

[79] Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko, p 485.
[80] Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko, p 485.
[81] Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko.

Tabe was surprised by the lack of response, even though she was making a significant statement with this piece. Her *Artificial Placenta* piece was a loud call to action, despite herself acknowledging that "it was a time before women's liberation movement, feminism, and gender were imported into Japan," and in the original of 1961, these ideas are quite prescient. Reiko Kokatsu, an art historian, published an article titled *Mitsuko Tabe: Beyond Kyushu-ha*, and her words on *Artificial Placenta*, lend to the scholarship behind Tabe's influential art. Reiko adds to this conversation that:

> "I*t was remarkably creative to represent the vulnerability of a female body by cotton balls and Q-tips attached to the exterior made of the upside-down mannequin hips and to symbolize a male phallus with a vacuum tube protruding inside of them. The image of the container seems to be a uterus itself rather than a placenta that connects a fetus and uterus. The numerous thick nails that were hammered into the original work are intense, referring to the pain felt in female bodies. The photograph from 1961 of its first exhibition shows two objects representing fetuses on the wall which were excluded from the recreated version."*[82]

Kokatsu praises Tabe for her work, feminist consciousness, and understanding of gendered issues which would not fully influence Japan until the late 1960s. Tabe herself did not receive this level of praise or analysis during her time. Rather, she was met with the harsh reality of being a female artist in a male-dominated environment.

In the *Grand Gathering of Heroes* of November 1962, members of Kyushu-ha attended to showcase their works. Tabe continued to utilize action in her art to redefine

[82] Kokatsu, Reiko, and Midori Yoshimoto. 2011. "Nitsuko Tabe: Beyond Kyûshû-Ha." N.Paradoxa: The Only International Feminist Art Journal 27 (January): 38–46.

this viewing and understanding of the feminine body. During this exhibition, Tabe planned to hammer nails into a female mannequin. However, the action of striking the nails into the mannequin was near impossible and dangerous due to the thick plastic material. Instead, she would arrange mannequin legs in a space and dressed them with stockings. An art critic in attendance, Yoshie Yoshida, who visited the event from Tokyo, commented on the work as a "*chapel for nymphomaniac rituals, characteristic of Kyushu-ha women."*[83]

There is an interesting dichotomy between the female artist and her intentions to showcase the defining wounds that the world inflicts upon womanhood, and the male critic further shaming the woman, degrading her to a "nymphomaniac," for showcasing sexuality in any capacity. Tabe would continue to make liberating art for women of Japan, and in1963, she submitted a body suit titled *Back and Front* to the last Fifteenth Yomiuri Independent Exhibition. This black body suit, [Fig 2.8], in which Tabe had sewn six zippers on each side of the body, and one along each arm, was worn by Michiko Taniguchi.

In 1968, Tabe appeared on a television program *Rediscovering Kyushu- ha, Kyushu's Avant-garde art* created by RKB Mainichi Broadcasting Co., where a friend of hers wore the body suit from 1963. In Tabe's own words, she "*shattered a plaster sculpture of Venus with a hammer, and then tied up Michiko Taniguchi, the woman wearing the body suit, and began combing her long hair*."[84] In this performance piece, the meaning may seem unclear to someone watching the broadcast or to a male critic

[83]Kokatsu, Reiko, and Midori Yoshimoto. "Nitsuko Tabe: Beyond Kyûshû-Ha," page 27.
[84] Kokatsu, Reiko, and Midori Yoshimoto. "Nitsuko Tabe: Beyond Kyûshû-Ha," page 38.

observing it, it may seem radical. However, this expression of Tabe's body suit is representative of covering up herself, sexuality, and spirit. Then, having Taniguchi shatter the symbol of Venus with a hammer while wearing it, could be Tabe seeking to destroy this self-inflicted prison women may feel within their bodies due to outward advances of men and societal pressure, such as being sexualized, objectified, and seen as "child-bearing" machines. In an interview with Dr. Yoshimoto, Tabe comments on the performance: *"It exemplified the constricted daily life that women lived. Venus also symbolized feminine beauty and how women had to conform to the standard of beauty. It did have some feminist content."*[85]

In the next chapter, I will further analyze the idea of femininity in the works of artists: Saori Akutagawa, Mitsuko Tabe, Sayako Kishimoto, and Miyori Hayashi.

[85] A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko, Midori Yoshimoto, 2013.

3 THE PARAMETERS OF THE FEMININE

In 2006, a seven-page article written by art historian and professor at New Jersey City University, Dr. Midori Yoshimoto, titled *Women Artists in the Japanese Postwar Avant-Garde: Celebrating a Multiplicity*[86] was published in the Women's Art Journal. In the article, Yoshimoto contributes heavily to this under researched topic of specific women artists' and their impact on the Japanese Avant-Garde era following the devastation of war. In the opening page, she explains that besides artists such as Yayoi Kusama,Yoko Ono, and Atsuko Tanaka, many Japanese women artists have yet to receive recognition, particularly in the West where a reevaluation of their work would be the most relevant due to their works involving ideas of modern feminism and gender studies. Yoshimoto praises female art historians, who since the turn of the century, have made efforts to rediscover these artists. Reiko Kokatsu, one of these art historians, put together an exhibition in 2005 to honor a group of women artists. Each of these artists that were showcased in the exhibition, delivered what Yoshimoto described as: "*a striking multiplicity of content and styles that enlivened this groundbreaking exhibition.*"[87]

Yoshimoto's article *Celebrating a Multiplicity* introduced to a Western audience these four artists: Saori Akutagawa, Mitsuko Tabe, Sayako Kishimoto, and Miyori Hayashi.[88] Prior, these artists all had their own individual experience of success, but not without their tribulations in Japan's art world.

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[86] Midori Yoshimoto, Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 182.
[87] Yoshimoto, p 26. Woman's Art Journal
[88] Yoshimoto, Midori. "Women Artists in the Japanese Postwar Avant-Garde: Celebrating a Multiplicity." Woman's Art Journal 27, no. 1 (2006): 26–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20358068.

The first artist I will analyze is Saori Akutagawa. She was a painter known for her unique use of dry powder and her large-scale pieces. By her male-counterparts, she was referred to as the "housewife painter," because of her husband who was a famous composer. He was her former classmate at Tokyo National University of Arts and Music, Yasushi Akutagawa.[89] She faced scrutiny at the beginning of her art career, because critics believed she would only receive recognition due to her husband's notoriety in his own artistic pursuits.

However, her artwork was nothing to be diminished to craft or hobbyist work. She often depicted ancient cultural myths as concurrent social themes, something similar to the Mexican mural artists she was inspired by in newspapers and used Indigenous dyes to replicate that deep cultural meaning in her own artwork.

(古事記溶離一こじきようり）*Ancient Chronicle (1957)* is considered to be Saori's masterpiece [Figure 3.1] . The 6 ft high and 44 feet wide scroll is covered in images created by her unique dyeing technique in which she saturates the fabric with an array of shapes and colors. Her method begins with sprinkling the dry powder across the fabric before wetting it. The dye expands with the amount of water used and creates her desired shape. Saori continues this method until her figures are mapped out by shapes and colors piled on top of one another or blended into each other. *Ancient Chronicle* reads left to right, like that of a traditional Japanese scroll. In this piece, Saori is creating her own visual story of the 8th century tale of *Kojiki*, the creation myth of Japan. The most iconographic imagery from the story in her piece, is the god Izanagi and goddess Izanami. Their names translate to 'Male-who-invites,' and 'Female-who-invites,' and

[89] Yoshimoto, p 27.

they are the last generation of the deities in this myth. This traditional subject matter was envisioned through the stylistic choices and unique dry dye powder technique used by the artist. The artist balances each piece of the scroll by alternating cool and warm tones throughout, pairing blues with greens, and oranges with yellows; sometimes overlapping or blending into one another. Her depiction of these deity gods of Japan's creation myth are abstract, with no solid form or body. Her flowy, abstract figures, disregard shape, form, or traditional scene they are supposed to be in, and stretch across the canvas. This large-scale artwork, when hung up, consumes the room from one wall to the other. The creation myth of Japan is unique in the sense that traditional gender norms are somewhat more flexible and intricate than usual Mother and Father roles that are highlighted in these ancient stories. Izanami,

While this unique style of dye painting was innovative and experimental, critics at the time seemed to prefer more traditional materials for painting, such as oil paint. Toshiaki Tono, an art critic at the time, may have altered the course of Saori's career with his comment on her piece, *Ancient Chronicle*: "*She rapidly painted with dye powder on a thin sheet of cloth, so I heard. Yet, I hope the time will come where her work is fixed in an unyielding resistance of oil painting."*[90] Tono's words reiterate Saori's role in the artworld as a "housewife" painter, simply doing it as craft, rather than fine art, such as oil painting. Since her technique was quick, action-based, and instinctual, critics wrote it off as you would a child's arts and crafts project. The reaction from the critic left a strain on Saori and her art career. Her continuing to pursue an art career is ultimately what led to her divorce and departure from Japan. It was not soon after that she traveled to the United

[90] Yoshimoto, p 27.

States after the divorce, to study oil painting under Will Barnet at the Art Students League. She went back to using her maiden last name, Yamada. Unfortunately, Saori Yamada's art career ended earlier than it should have, as she died unexpectedly at 42 years old. Her innovative technique and use of indigenous dyes and dry powder methods are preserved through the work of art historians Midori Yoshimoto and Reiko Kokatsu.

Another artist highlighted by Yoshimoto's article is: Miyori Hayashi (1933-2000). She began her art career after quitting her English literature major, and joining two art organizations: Salon de Moi and Okayama Young Artists Group.[91] Hayashi was a self-taught artist, known for her two solo exhibitions titled *Box* in 1964 at the Naiqua Gallery and at the Surugadai Gallery in Tokyo.[92] Hayashi introduced to these gallery spaces what she called a "void living space," seen by her installment pieces which consisted of painting various sized cardboard boxes and arranging them haphazardly on both the floor and walls of the gallery.[93] [Figure 3.2] shows Hayashi's piece *Untitled* (1964), which is highlighted in Yoshimoto's article. It is minimalistic in essence with four, even wooden boxes painted and stacked in pairs of two, side by side, slightly tilted inward facing a thin square slab of wood on the floor. The boxes themselves are fairly small as well, the bottom, larger boxes only being 14" x 14" x 14" and the smaller boxes being 6" x 6" x 6".[94] This untitled piece introduced to the art world who Hayashi was as an artist, and the type of work she was interested in: installation pieces that were simple in theory, but were extremely dependent on light and sound to emphasize them in the gallery space.

[91] Yoshimoto, p 30.
[92] Yoshimoto, p 30.
[93] Yoshimoto, p 32.
[94] Yoshimoto, p 30.

In the exhibition, *Box,* black and white cubed boxes were painted with opposite colors on the interior and exterior. The light casted a shadow from the boxes on the floor and wall. Some boxes hung from the ceiling at varying heights, and others were stacked on top of each other or placed inside one another on the floor. The boxes interact in a unique manner with the blank gallery, by creating a unique shadowy effect of the space. Yoshimoto, in her article, suspects that Hayashi may have symbolized the box imagery to: "an entrance to another universe, an opening to a new dimension, or suggesting of an expanse of unknown spaces beyond what the eye can see."[95] However, because of Hayashi's exhibit at the second Okayama Seinen Bijutsuka Shudan in 1963, where she dressed in all black while laying horizontally in a rectangular all glass boxed case that was raised above the ground, while a sign hanging on it read: "Look at this person!!,"[96] My own personal interpretation of the box symbolism varies. The box can suggest the boundaries that keep women, and here specifically, artists, contained, due to societal standards and gendered normativity. The glass box is the opportunities women can be exploited for, as in the use of the feminine form, but they themselves cannot create. They are being subjected to embodying the object or subject matter. Here, Hayashi creates a unique juxtaposition by laying inside the glass box she created.

The goal of the "parameters of the feminine" seeks to explore the boundaries in which these women display themselves as artists during the avant-garde movements, when they truly deserve to be made accessible, evaluated and re-evaluated in their own contexts in relation to their time in art history. This is especially relevant for Hayashi, and her follow-up installation, titled *Box Maker* (December 1964), which little to no

[95] Yoshimoto.
[96] Yoshimoto.

information can be researched online at my disposal, minus an online article that is difficult to access without an interlibrary loan: *Consideration of Box by Hayashi Miyori*, a 2011 book that was left unfinished, titled *Hayashi Miyori Project* (p 70-85) in which Dr. Midori Yoshimoto was an author for the listed pages. To even find images of the exhibition, pieces of Hayashi's artwork, or writings on her life are extremely sparse, and would be entirely unknown if it were not for the works of Dr. Yoshimoto and Reiko Kokatsu highlighting her career as an artist.

Within that year of Hayashi's *Box-Maker*'s exhibition, she met with Yoko Ono, and was repeatedly invited to attend Ono's performances, such as *Grapefruit* (1964) and Ono's second performance of her *Cut Piece* at the Sogetsu Art Center, where she kept a piece of Ono's cut up dress.[97] These events gave Hayashi a way to interact with other women artists who were leaving Japan to pursue more international exhibitions and opportunities. Mieko Shiomi, a Fluxist artist who traveled to New York frequently as well as Yoko Ono, influenced Hayashi in her later works, and ultimately assisted her in pursuing her career as art event organizer in her late career. Hayashi had the opportunity to organize the Bizen Art Event, an international art event in Okayama by the Artist Union from 1987 until 1997.[98] Hayashi's own vision was to help promote and enrich Japanese women artists who deserved reconsideration and recognition by providing them a space to do so.

Later in her career, Hayashi began experimenting with larger scale productions: influenced by Shiomi and Ono to showcase her own ideas and experiences through her performance pieces. These performances included Hayashi utilizing a crane to drop an

[97] Yoshimoto.
[98] Yoshimoto.

old, used car in 1971, titled *Event We're going into…*. This piece has little information to be found on it online, but I can speculate that this was a piece Hayashi was experimenting with the idea of sound and the senses with. As well as her other large-production performance of that year titled *Green Revolution*, in which Yoshimoto writes: "*it consisted of a series of mailed instructions and the spraying of seeds onto a large area in Okayama city from an airplane."*[99] These two pieces showcase Hayashi as an artist who wanted to continue growing as an artist— looking to do bigger projects such as the women she looked up to in the field. Later on, she assisted artists in gaining consideration and acceptance in Japan's art community and for the time in which she was living in, encouraged women artists who felt as if they were in an inescapable box in her career. Years after the artist's death, Hayashi was given a solo show at the Art Complex Center of Tokyo, from February until March 2009. This ties into the book mentioned earlier, co-authored by Midori Yoshimoto, *Miyori Hayashi Project*, which was seeking to document her work and legacy. The White Noise Miyori Hayashi Museum sought to organize her work, document her exhibition and photograph her pieces in order to give credit to her work as an influential artist, who championed using light and sound, the idea of void, and white noise, to provide a visual and tactile sensory experience.

Unlike Hayashi, artist Sayako Kishimoto (1939-1988) was not so lucky to receive opportunities and experiences with fellow women artists in the community. Her femininity was not a box she could break out of and explore its edges but was something that kept her within its confines. She faced the brutality of her male artist counterparts as

[99] Both events are described in Sengo Okayama no Bijutsu - Zen'ei tachi no Sugata (Art in Postwar Okayama: Portraits of the Avant garde), exhibition catalog (Okayama: Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art, 2002), 114-15. Hayashi's works and documents may be viewed at the White Noise/Miyori Hayashi Museum in Bizen, Okayama.

the only female member in a short-lived Neo Dadaism Organizers group based in Tokyo. The group's key mission was to "purge conventionalism from art by introducing destructive actions and ephemeral junk art."[100] Her fellow members were known for their shocking public performances which garnered media attention, such as the solo performances by group members Masunobu Yoshimura and Ushio Shinohara. Kishimoto was abused and utilized as a female form, and her body was reduced to an object to extort media attention for their group and for the male artist's individual projects during her time as a member.

For the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), the group organized an event which would be streamed onto live television. Kishimoto was dressed in a swimsuit, bandaged with duct tape, and left hanging from a tree before the performance. During the advertising event for TBS, the group members lit fireworks underneath Kishimoto and threw dirt and ashes from the fireworks at her.[101] If it were not for art historian Mayumi Kagawa, we would not know about Kishimoto's strenuous position within this group, as none of her work remains from this Neo Dada period, and no other member can recall what her work consisted of on record.[102] Kishimoto's time spent in this group subjected her to male sadism, violence against the feminine body, and the humiliation of being subordinate to her other members. It was not until the late 1970s when Kishimoto commented on her time in the group, stating: "*I believed that art could not serve its original role and function as the releasing machine to uplift the mind of the viewer unless*

[100] Yoshimoto, p 28.
[101] Yoshimoto, p 29.
[102] Yoshimoto.

I completely broke with my narcissism as a woman and human being. Those works were the very result of my desperate act of self-annihilation at age twenty-six."[103]

Her femininity was not something the very male-centered Neo Dada logic accepted, and that self-annihilation feeling forbade Kishimoto from expressing herself in such a way. She was told to behave like a man, if she wanted to have an art career. The idea that any ounce of femininity and womanhood had no place in a professional artist's career was expressed to her by the members of this group. In her career, she desperately tried to submerge and deny the femininity within her to appease her male audiences. This is seen in *Gravestone of Narcissus*, a 1966 solo exhibition in which Kishimoto showcased a mixed-media installation. The installation's subject matter was described as morbid, with plaster that Kishimoto would sculpt and paint to create yellow plaster female nudes, a plaster male figure who was positioned to be sitting on a box, a large plaster skull, and a gravestone painted white and yellow with a baby's silhouette falling into a grave painted yellow. The female nude and the baby's silhouette are yellow, while the other objects in the mixed-media installation are white, or blank. She wanted to reject all themes of femininity: motherhood, nudity, the female form-- things that she wanted to annihilate in herself in order to establish herself as a professional artist in the male-dominated field. The exhibition did not receive any harsh criticism, other than the fact that it was described as morbid by her fellow group members. These ideas were fabricated to represent this shedding of the feminine within her, which Kishimoto wanted to do no longer. Shortly after she departed from the Neo Dadaism Organizers.

[103] Yoshimoto.

After leaving the group, Kishimoto explored a solo career. Her first piece consisted of demonstrating an action painting performance at an exhibition in her hometown of Nagoya, Japan. Many of the Neo Dada members as well as Kishimoto's family members were present at the exhibition. Kishimoto used white house paint to spray over her past works, ultimately "destroying" them. This is seen as a removal of herself from the group, and her own self-annihilation. After, she began to spray paint herself. At the end of the performance, once she was covered in the white spray paint, Kishimoto began to chop her hair off in large chunks, letting the hair fall to the floor around her. I observe this exhibition as her laying to rest her self-sabotaging behavior as an artist affiliated with the Neo Dada group, as after this she begins to explore a vastly different breadth of styles for the remainder of her career, up until her death in 1988 from breast cancer. It is no coincidence that many Avant Garde collectives were places for women to join to gain exhibition opportunities from in the 1950s until the '60s, and to quickly then depart from, due to their misogynistic behavior and lack of acceptance. These spaces rejected any sense of femininity and in turn, excluded and turned away some of the most innovative artists of their time.

The last artist I want to highlight is Mitsuko Tabe. Tabe has been previously mentioned, and is a main focus for my research, as her work overlaps heavily with both Avant Garde modalities, and feminist art subject matter. In the article that largely supports this chapter's material, *Celebrating a Multiplicity*, Tabe is praised for providing an early personal and political commentary on the accepted norms of gender, namely due to her work *Artificial Placenta*.[104] This piece was created during Tabe's own pregnancy

[104] Yoshimoto, p 28.

with her son, and in [Figure 3.2] it shows Tabe in a maternity shirt in front of the installation piece. This piece truly encapsulates the idea of freedom and liberation as a woman: removing the responsibility to bear children, through the creation of an artificial placenta. While not being recognized for it in her time, Tabe's works consist of experimental feminist work, early for the time period, which is perhaps why it was previously overlooked as so.

In Tabe's life, she worked to bring visibility and representation to women artists in her region, by organizing an annual Kyushu Women Artists Exhibition from 1974-1984.[105] Throughout the 1980s, she also ran The Earth Art Post Office, where she sought to promote the exchange of art worldwide, seeking to provide opportunities for women artists internationally. Tabe, much like the other women in this chapter, feel obligated to express a certain understanding of social consciousness in their artwork— a burden not necessarily required by their male counterparts. They can create whatever they want and will be critiqued on whether it was good or not, not whether they were too feminine. This social consciousness includes understanding the distaste for their own femininity and expression of womanhood in their art by the male-dominated Avant Garde.

Tabe's artwork and ideas are starting to be re-examined today, which is the reason why I discuss her last in this chapter. From January until March of 2022, the Fukuoka Art Museum had an exhibition titled *I Can't Give Up Hope: The Art of Tabe Mitsuko.* This exhibition highlights her artworks, experiences, and documentation from her interviews, highlighting a response to social issues and to praise her for her early works of feminist art. The statement of intent from those who spent time to organize the exhibition are

[105] Yoshimoto.

closely aligned with my own ideas and goals highlighted within my thesis: *"This exhibition traces Tabe's activities from her involvement in the group Kyushu-ha to the present day, shedding light on her art from the 1970s and 1980s, which have not been extensively examined. Other works are revisited, and materials related to her practice are featured as well."* [106] The leaflet [Figure 3.3] from this exhibit also contributes to the best quality photographs of Tabe's artwork, as well as providing them in color instead of black and white. This provides a more accurate analysis for those seeking to re-analyze her work through the utilization of online sources. The careers of the women highlighted in this chapter vary greatly, and it is extremely valuable the work both Yoshimoto and Kokatsu are doing by preserving the legacies and artwork of these women that may have been lost otherwise. To highlight the achievements of their work and its meaning, allows for a more accurate and representative version of art history to be told. It further preserves their artwork and its subject matter that speaks on the issues of women as artists, and the way in which they persevered. This idea calls to a greater issue of globalization of art, and of the inaccuracies of art history when marginalized groups are not represented properly or given visibility in either online spaces or physical spaces, i.e., a museum.

The exhibit, gallery, or any performance space should be inclusive to all artists. However, these institutional spaces have failed to be both diverse and representational to all genders, sexualities, race, and ethnicities. With the exhibition space being such a crucial one for an artist or group to gain visibility, and recognition for their work, in the next chapter I chose to analyze an important museum of the post-war Avant Garde era.

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[106] Fukuoka Art Museum, Modern and Contemporary Art, 2022. https://www.fukuoka-art-museum.jp/en/exhibition/special-exhibition-tabe-mitsuko/.

The Possibility of Art through Group Union exhibition at Fukuoka Prefectural Cultural Hall in May of 1968 and is often regarded as the last group exhibition of Kyūshū-ha, is my focus for the next chapter. It will focus on specifically the *Sex Museum*, contributed to by Mitsuko Tabe and other members of Kyushu-ha. I will analyze the implications of a *Sex Museum* in media, in relation to her groups work during their last exhibition, the innovative artwork it exhibited, and the effect it had on sexually liberated spaces in art.

4 EXPERIMENTAL EXHIBITION

4.1 The Sex Museum

In 1968, the members of the Kyushu-ha collaborated for what was their last group exhibition. Many of the members at the time were looking to grow their individual identity as artists, and the "art group collective" was dying following the post-war era. At the Fukuoka Prefectural Cultural Hall, they showcased to the public, *The Possibility of Art through Group Union*.[107] This exhibition encouraged members to collaborate with one another to create installation and performance art pieces. One of these collaborative spaces was titled *Sex Museum* in which consisted of artwork and performances from Mitsuko Tabe and was loosely suggested by Kyushu-ha member Obata Hidesuke.[108] There was a Happening the year prior, in 1967, with works that consisted mostly of themes of sexuality, with Tabe focusing on sensuality in the feminine. Happening refers to theatrical art that was prevalent at the time, and Happening laid the foundation for what we now call performance art. It emerged from gallery installations that engaged the audience's senses in a surreal manner. For the event, Tabe participated in a television broadcast on RKB (Mainichi Broadcasting Corporation). Nine of Kyushu-ha's members participated in contributing to the *Sex Museum*, which was featured on the nationwide KBC (Kyushu Asahi Broadcasting) channel, separately from the entire exhibition, *The Possibility of Art through Group Union*.[109] The *Sex Museum*'s contents ranged from art

[107] Yoshimoto, Midori. "Women Artists in the Japanese Postwar Avant-Garde: Celebrating a Multiplicity." Woman's Art Journal 27, no. 1 (2006): 26–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20358068.
[108] Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko, p 484.
[109] Yoshimoto; A Woman and Collectives: An Interview with Tabe Mitsuko, p 485.

focused on intercourse, the sensuality of the body, and had themes of masculinity and femininity throughout.

In an interview with Mitsuko Tabe, conducted by Dr. Midori Yoshimoto, Tabe noted that Kyushu-ha member Oyama Uichi "*worked hard to male huge male genitals,*" for the exhibition.[110] When asked: "*Within Kyushu-ha, as a woman, could you freely discuss sex and gender in your work?*" Tabe replied: "*Yes, very freely, although they didn't necessarily encourage me to. They were really disgusted by my Artificial Placenta of 1961*."[111] The irony is that these artists were typically positive about sexual themes in their work, despite having different opinions and standards for when a woman wanted to express sexuality of the body or form through her work. For the *Sex Museum* exhibition, Tabe prepared multiple mixed-media pieces: a performance, installation piece, and paintings.

Tabe explains in her interview how she painted women's breasts and milk bottles, and a couple embracing across two mirrors [Figure 4.1]. These works were donated to the Fukuoka Art Museum in 1988. The mirror invites the viewer into the conversation of the piece, allowing the viewer to almost become a part of the art. When looking in the mirror the audience sees themselves in the reflection beside the painted breasts, milk bottles, or the couple embracing one another. As a viewer, you are immediately pulled into the artwork, because you have no choice but to recognize yourself in the reflection with the painted mirrors.

Her performance piece, which consisted of a gourd, sewing machine, and washing machine was a symbolic act on Tabe's part. The gourd had an umbilical-like attachment

[110] Yoshimoto, p 485.
[111] Yoshimoto, p 485.

sewed into which she placed it into a rainbow-painted washing machine and rotated it around. As the gourd with an umbilical cord was spun around in the empty washing machine, noises emitted from it hitting the walls, and it could be seen being tossed around in the empty and dry wash cycle. Next to the rainbow-colored washing machine, Tabe was situated at a desk with a sewing machine placed on top of it. Her hands and feet were engaged in sewing a long string meant to resemble a phallus. Tabe appeared busy and focused at her work, despite the clattering of the gourd in the washing machine, as she was sewing the phallic-like object. On the empty space at the desk she was sitting at, Tabe placed ten wooden *kokeshi* dolls that resembled dildos, facing the audience. After the exhibition, Tabe reports five of them stolen after the performance. In the interview with Dr. Yoshimoto, Tabe explains it as: "*A message that Japan was not as prosperous as we were made to think. Japan's economy's dependence was on housewives' and their side jobs at home.*"[112] This work touches on the juxtaposition of sexuality between the masculine and feminine: the working woman and egotism of the man, seen in the phallic objects, overlap to provide a critique on gendered norms in Japanese society following the war.

Her other works with similar themes of sex, showing Tabe's exploration of this theme and her own navigation with expressing feminist ideas through her work. At the 1967 Happening, Tabe showcases two performances that heavily add to the conversation of social consciousness through her use of the feminine body, sexuality, and vanity. Tabe describes one of her performances in the same interview as being inspired by hair mousse gaining popularity through women using it and buying it in stores shortly after its release

[112] Yoshimoto, p 485.

onto the market. Tabe, purchasing several cans, dispensed it and smeared it all over a woman's body. She stated in the interview her intention was to communicate her feelings of: *"All women disappear like foam."*[113] This sentiment from Tabe is important when understanding or analyzing her work: she is almost cynical in the way she presents her feminist issues, her reality as an artist. Her work demands you to look with its bold ideas presented so bluntly, and straightforward— there is no way to disregard the feminine body, themes of womanhood, and misogyny Tabe faced from society, which is implied by her statement of women "disappearing" like foam. She is discussing something dire in the current writings of art history: lack of visibility and representation of women artists. The other performance, which consisted of Taniguchi Michiko wearing a black leotard sewn with zippers, was mentioned in one of the previous chapters. Michiko, who had long beautiful hair, was instructed to wear it down by Tabe during the performance. Michiko, clad in the black leotard that had zippers sewn onto it, would proceed to

The *Sex Museum* was an interesting juxtaposition between hyper masculinity in its most visual form: large genitalia and over exaggerated aspects of the masculine form by members of the Kyushu-ha, and a very metaphorical perspective on femininity. The feminine form is showcasing its problems in relation to society. This overarching theme of the gender binary creates an interesting relationship between the male artists and their work, and the performances of Mitsuko Tabe. Tabe's ideas were subtle in their feminist ideology, which I think allowed for her male counterparts to not "encourage" her work, but neither outright disregard it, either. Tabe's approach to a more philosophical performance about womanhood, seen through her work at the *Sex Museum*, illuminates

[113] Yoshimoto, p 485.

the ideas that she fostered through her art. Overall, despite the *Sex Museum* creating a space free from judgement to produce artwork that was sexually liberated, or sex positive, Tabe's work was met with upturned noses due to the more "gruesome," or accurately described as realistic, aspects of femininity that she decided to display in her work.

This exhibition space served as an open-minded one, which Tabe took advantage of to produce some early works of feminist art. Her performances and paintings are now being re-visited today to be analyzed in a more modern feminist perspective and from a current lens of culture and society. Other innovative performances in exhibitions, in galleries, museums or publicly, have promoted the works of women artists at the time and following Tabe's era. Tabe created a pathway for other women artists to follow down when seeking opportunities in exhibitions and gallery spaces to perform their own femininity through their art.

4.2 Experimental Exhibition: Shigeko Kubota

This idea of sex and sensuality, performed by a feminine body, continued after Tabe's work. Other women of this time were also seeking to break out of their own personal struggles with the self and identity in the art world. Artists such as Shigeko Kubota utilize experimental exhibition to uplift her own ideas surrounding the female body, action art, and performance. Nobuo was a prevalent Avant Garde artist that emerged in the 1960s. Influenced by the art groups and movements such as the Gutai and Jikai-ha, Kubota briefly was a part of the Ongaku group.[114] This collective experimented

[114] AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, Camille Morineau. 2015.

with visual arts, music, and performance. Shigeko Kubota's most notable exhibition was at the 1965 *Summer Perpetual Fluxus Festival*, in which she performed her piece, *Vagina Painting*.[115]

Attaching a paintbrush to her underwear, Kubota performed a painting piece on the ground. Like Tabe, Kubota's work also explores and experiments with femininity in art. During the performance, a white paper laid across the exhibition's stage. Kubota, wearing a dress, crouched down, and squatted above the paper with a paint brush attached in between her legs.[116] With the paintbrush, Kubota, while moving across the white sheet of paper in a crouched position, smeared red lines that dragged from one end of the canvas to the other throughout the performance. It was almost like a crabwalk motion that Kubota utilized to create these abstract, smeared blotches of red paint across the canvas. [Figure 4.2] Showcases the balancing act of keeping the paintbrush sturdy and herself upright to continue walking across the page. Kubota was heavily interested in audience participation and instances of chance, which influenced her works throughout her time as an artist both in Japan, and in New York which she moved to a year prior this piece was performed, in 1964.[117] Shigeko, deciding to stay in New York after meeting Marcel Duchamp and continuing her friendship and collaborations with the composer John Cage.[118] Later, she became the co-president of the Fluxus. This created a connection between the Fluxus movement in Tokyo and New York City, allowing for a better

[115] Morineau.
[116] Morineau.
[117] Lia Robinson, Erica Papernik-Shimizu, "Lecture: Shigeko Kubota: Liquid Reality," Youtube video, 54:49, September 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kk5r2E3i2Zs.
[118] Robinson and Shimizu.

globalization of Japanese artists and their artwork through Kubota's experimental work with not only performance, but the emergence of video art as well.

As an early experimenter of video art, Kubota co-founded the multicultural feminist collective *Red White Yellow & Black*, helping to set up a multimedia concert which was exhibited in 1972, advertising: "video, talk, dancing, fashion, story, and palms."[119] The founders were each from a different culture, Cecilia Sandoval being Native American, Mary Lucier being Caucasian, Shigeko Kubota being Asian, and Charlotte Warren being Black.[120] As a group, they only performed together twice, it helped Kubota solidify her exploration with video art focusing on women, femininity, and feminism. While doing this, Kubota was serving as a cultural ambassador between New York City's art scene, and Japan's. She frequently freelanced for a Japanese arts, culture, and criticism magazine to share the current status of the arts in New York City, for instance, her article, *Marcel Duchamp: His Last Years and Chess Match*.

Kubota was recently exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) for *Liquid Reality* (August 2021 - January 2022). A show about her visionary approach to video, sculpture, and the overlap between forms, mirrors, and water that integrate video art, technology, and the form into one presentation. Kubota labels them as "video sculptures." In Shigeko Kubota's own words: "*I want to break the one prejudice about video that it is lightweight, fragile, and "instant," I will make the video into the permanent and "monumental": transgressing it into the territory traditionally reserved for sculpture."*[121] Kubota expands upon typical notions of what this new, video art could be, and how it

[119] Robinson and Papernik-Shimizu.
[120] Robinson and Papernik-Shimizu.
[121] Robinson and Papernik-Shimizu.

could be multi-modal in encroaching on grounds many would believe to be strictly reserved to that of sculpture.

Curator of *Liquid Reality,* Erica Papernik-Shimizu, associate curator at the MoMA, shares Kubota's legacy and introduced recent research conducted on the artist, while showcasing items from Kubota's archive that have not been showcased in 30 years. The piece that speaks to me in this exhibition as truly encompassing Kubota as an artist, is *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976). This piece acts as a visual for the conceptual idea of video sculpture that Kubota creates. [Figure 4.3] Utilizes an idea by Marcel Duchamp's *A Nude in Motion* to incorporate both film and video into her staircase sculpture. The television screens were encapsulated in vinyl wooden boxes which conveniently hid the SONY labels for Kubota's own copyright reasons. Four television monitors display out of sync video footage of a nude woman descending. Kubota wanted to display Duchamp's painting in a way that would "cut time," by the utilization of video. To slow down, speed up, cut, and freeze an image is to "cut time," in the words of Kubota.

Overall, Kubota is one of the later women artists, after Tabe and Tanaka, who utilizes the connection in artists movements and stylistic choices of the Avant Garde to share information between Japan and New York City. Her work is unapologetically feminine, and her innovation with video art sets her apart as a founder of the video sculpture. With her experimental ideas, unique modalities, and exploration of video, Shigeko Kubota is truly a woman worth researching with a more modern lens, and I am happy to see the MoMA deliver an experimental exhibition that showcases her work and displays her legacy as a Japanese artist prevalent during the postwar Avant Garde.

This idea of utilizing modern institutional spaces of art to re-visit and re-analyze works from the postwar Avant Garde, showcase to a present-day audience, artists who prior did not receive recognition, or visibility in the movement as per art history. It allows for a more properly representational vision of what the postwar art scene was like for women artists, what they were producing, and the concepts and ideas they were creating for an audience devastated by a recently passed war. The goal was for women artists to utilize this time of great change to seek equality for themselves in their respective art collectives, and in institutional spaces such as galleries, museums, and art universities. It has been the work of a select women art historians that have rigorously researched and put together articles, journals, papers, and even museum exhibitions, to solidify these women's impact in history that would be erased otherwise.

CONCLUSION

I intended to navigate philosophical ideas that were being explored in art during the devastation of the war in Japan: the Tokyo and Hiroshima fire-bombings of 1945, onward. This tragic event led to a re-evaluation of materials, modalities, and subject matter that artists were experimenting with at the time.

Reiko Kokatsu, art historian, and curator for the exhibition *Women Artists in Avant-Garde Movements 1950-1975*, took several years of preparation and research. Prior to Kokatsu's work, except for three artists, Yukio Katsura, Yayoi Kusama, and Shigeko Kubota, the 46 women artists that are showcased in the exhibit, have yet to receive museum or art historian re-evaluation or presentation.[122] In Utsunomiya, Japan, this exhibition attracted thousands of visitors, and was all around positively reviewed in major journals and newspapers; despite the exhibition not moving anywhere else afterwards. Dr. Midori Yoshimoto, another frequently mentioned art historian who provides the bulk of research for my own thesis, shares a similar goal that these artists need to be introduced to a wider audience, an audience to appreciate and recognize the multiplicity of content from these overlooked women artists. It is thanks to the scholarship of Yoshimoto, and the efforts of curator Kokatsu, that lend perspective to this chapter on the parameters of the feminine in women artists post-war Japan.

Before World War II, Japan had only one school that accepted female students: what is now Joshi Bijutsu Daigaku (女子美術大学). It was not until 1946 when the Japanese government made changes to women's education and art institutions in

[122] Yoshimoto, p 26.

particular.[123] Only four years later, in 1950, women artists were entering important exhibitions spaces, and began to receive reviews in the art world. Despite many barriers placed upon these women, they persevere as artists and continue to show up in exhibitions, join art collectives, and have their work and performances broadcasted on live television, despite the criticism from male counterparts in the industry. This lends to why so many art collectives of the time (like Kyushu-ha and Mono-ha) were very open about being artists in their own right, lacking educational training in the arts at a university or art school.

While I do not want to focus on the male critics' voices, I do want to point out the dismissive attitude towards some of the most original and influential modes of art (material, process, and commentary) of the avant-garde era. Several times throughout the chapters, the words of male art critics negatively critique the works of women simply because they are feminine, or touch on important subject matter to women. Or they belittle the artist herself, for not doing something like hobbyist or craftwork. It is almost diminishing of the women's work and their expertise— instead of critiquing the work itself. Like Reiko, I myself find it frustrating to read only male recounts of women artists, their work, and their meaning behind it. Who is more qualified to write about women's issues in society than other people who identify as women and who have to live with the experience, besides those who truly understand it? The concept of gender and sensuality (especially eroticism coming from women) is usually shied away from heavily— despite large phallus objects "fitting the bill" to talk about sex in the famous exhibition mentioned prior, *Sex Museum*, conducted as the Kyushu-ha's last collaborative work. I find it hypocritical and surface level to discuss genitalia as male egotism,

[123] Yoshimoto, p 26.

without providing any philosophical concept of it and the weight it carries in art. These women have continued to produce artwork that pushes the boundaries of gender, sensuality, and to them, what femininity may mean, and how it is interacted with in society.

This conversation I seek to add to, aims to disrupt the current notion of how we think about the post-war Avant Garde. It explores how we think about, discuss, and write about women in art history. I believe a resurgence of these artists' work is necessary to move it from this story that has been centered around viewing these women's' works as crude, morbid, or too feminine for the men that deem them lesser than. I prefer their works to be viewed as what they are: abstract expressionism of the subject matter, which I would like to see analyzed from a "non-western" art perspective, so that art historians may re-visit their ideas as early feminist work. I believe that by re-evaluating and re-analyzing these works that have been previously overlooked will benefit the way art historians discuss these vital movements of the post-war Avant Garde era. I am looking forward to the changes that will overgo in our readings and teachings about the Avant Garde when we expand to be more inclusive, and offer proper representation to artists outside of New York City when it comes to movements, groups, artists, and art.

The Western preconception of Japanese women at the time was described by two words: passive and subservient. This was exactly the conditions in which these artists were trying to leave, but other factors of them being "foreigners" and "Asian" placed them into new categories that focused on identity. Artists that traveled to New York, from Japan, were tasked with discussing identity, through experiences of the self, as well as community in terms of ethnic group, gender, and dialogue about this "globalization of art."

Currently, in 2022 we are seeing some art historians in Japan using exhibitions to honor these women, their work, and the movements they played a vital role in. Art historians such as Kokatsu and Yoshimoto aim to solidify their existence with exhibitions, articles, and journals to uplift their stories and art. This re-visiting of history is how I understand the work of my project to keep these women's stories alive and to garner some interest in furthering my own research on specificities that I believe will enrich the retelling of a more accurate non-western art history. I believe for too long non-western art has been deemed peripheral to the "canon" telling of a very white, euro-centric storyline. Creating visibility around these stories and around their artworks allows for a less euro-centric idea of the Avant Garde and of these artistic modalities to perpetuate as the norm, standard, or correct way. The lack of exposure lends to the erasure of women artists. By creating a conversation about them, their work can continue to be reaffirmed as important pieces of the postwar era, especially in the Avant Garde art movement.

Overall, the women artists mentioned here allow for a conversation to grow surrounding their role in the Japanese postwar Avant Garde. Their works consists of early feminist works which pushed boundaries in terms of exploring the self, body, and action through art. Artists like Mitsuko Tabe nurtures this idea of femininity in her art, despite being met with constant criticism from men, and disapproval from women. We see before Tabe, Atsuko Tanaka take on her piece, *Electric Dress*, risking electrocution to wear this traditional kimono styled piece, and give insight on her ideas surrounding cultural femininity in this modern, technology forward performance following the devastation of the war in Japan. The unfair reality of some of these artists such as Miyori Hayashi and Saori Akutagawa who both died at early ages, and the rampant misogyny and sexism that they faced in their career. These two serve as important figures in Dr. Yoshimoto's article, *Creating a Multiplicity*, as it speaks for the voices of women who did not

receive recognition for their works, observation of their careers, or research of their artists groups and acts of violence and silencing against them.

These women are just a handful of Japanese artists that have not received, or are just now receiving, proper re-evaluation of their works. I am looking forward to seeing an expansion in the West of art that is compiled into Non-Western art, as their own definitive subjects: such as, Postwar Art, or Women in the Avant Garde, for example. While researching, there is little accessibility in learning about these women, their stories, or who inspired them, minus Shigeko Kubota being inspired by Marcel Duchamp, which is only known to us due to her traveling to New York City. It is important to keep expanding upon the conversation surrounding not only the physical aspect of their artwork, but the metaphysical as well. The implications of these women's artworks, the unique modalities in which they created their work, and the intentions and context behind them play a vital role in creating an accurate evaluation.

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