

Dr. Franziska Koch

**Questioning authorship, authority, and authorization –
Shigeko Kubota's memoirs "My love, Baek Namjun"**



"So it's time that we see Shigeko Kubota as [...] a supreme artist in the art she was so crucial in assisting. Her video/electronic sculptures have been so rarely seen in public. [...] I can only try to imagine, and it's not so easy to do, Shigeko Kubota's contribution to her life's friend, Nam June Paik. It must have been immense."

Jonas Mekas¹

„In seinen zahlreichen Abbrüchen und den Zwischenräumen, die Texte von Texten, Bilder von Bildern und Bilder von Texten trennen, wird allerdings deutlich, dass dieser Spiegel des autobiographischen Buchs immer schon ein zerbrechender ist und ‚den Riss des Subjekts‘ [Roland Barthes] ebenso inszeniert wie die Unverfügbarkeit autobiographischer Wahrheit.“

Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf²

In 2010, the late Shigeko Kubota (born in 1937, Niigata, Japan) published an autobiographical book in Korean called *Naeui sarang, Baek Namjun* (*My love, Baek Namjun*) together with the Korean journalist Nam Jeong-ho (남 영호). The book is a personal account in which Kubota describes her life as one of the first female video artists and inventor of "video sculpture" alongside the artist Nam June Paik, her partner and eventual husband for over 40 years.

While the book mentions Kubota's achievements as an independent artist, it also emphasizes that nearly every aspect of her professional life – from aesthetic and thematic to media and material related choices, as well as the places she lived and worked in – was fundamentally shaped by her relationship with Paik. Throughout the book, she exposes an almost unconditional admiration for Paik's artistic work and vision while describing – often melancholically – the resulting competition as a major driving force for her own artistic development. Even though, the time and resources that she dedicated to support Paik's growing global career resulted in lengthy periods where she created fewer works herself.

This article will explore the nature of the artistic relationship between Kubota and Paik with a view to (auto-)biographical narrative strategies that delineate conditions and limits of their collaboration in the context of a life-long partnership. Looking beyond reflections of shared themes, aesthetics, and media on the level of their works, gender and transcultural aspects seem key in shaping the very different public and institutional reception of the two artists, regarding both,

their native as well as their diasporic homes. Despite the increased curatorial interest in organizing retrospectives of under-exhibited (Fluxus) women artists, critical engagement with all aspects of their extensive oeuvres, including autobiographical documents – text and interviews – is still rare.³ Typically, their late work receives even less public attention. This has been the case of Kubota's late videos and video sculptures, created when the aged couple had retired to Florida.

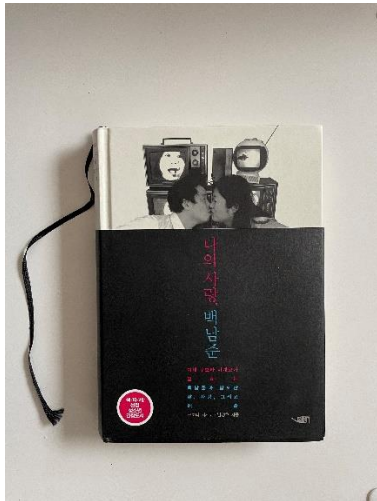
Following a purely aesthetic reading, Kubota's last works are indeed less topical, well-structured and technologically innovative than her earlier videos and sculptures. In addition, art historical methodology and ethos make a point of not taking artist statements as sole source of contextualization or even unquestionable truth. However, I argue that a critical appreciation of any artist's achievement needs to also account for the artist's complex, at times uncomfortable subjectivity and those parts of an oeuvre that resist easy canonization, being strongly situated in personal, every-day life. As it is in the actual "messiness" of such evidence that we begin to understand the meaning of what stands out and the affective labor invested, when artists create things that ultimately point beyond themselves.

This is even more crucial for artists such as Kubota, whose visual practice often deliberately took the form of a personal diary. Accordingly, her videos also document a transculturally situated subjectivity constituted by a cosmopolitan life that connected Kubota with many other Fluxus members. In 1968, she recorded Marcel Duchamp accompanied by his wife Alexina (a.k.a. Teeny) Duchamp playing chess with John Cage in *Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* (1972), and published her own emotional visit to Duchamp's grave in Rouen in *Europe on ½ Inch a Day* in 1972. She filmed Fluxus tours in New York's SoHo with George Maciunas and friends in *George Maciunas with Two Eyes 1972* as well as *George Maciunas with One Eye 1976* (1994), and congenially visualized the vanguard dance practice of Merce Cunningham in *Merce by Merce by Paik* and *Merce by Merce by Paik Part Two: Merce and Marcel* (both 1978). Kubota was also the camera eye that captured Paik paying a visit to the graves of his ancestors in *Trip to Korea* (1984), when he returned to his home country for the first time, aged 52, having left at the age of 18.⁴

While Kubota's *Duchampiana* series, created between 1972 and 1975, constitutes one of her key work and also received early public attention and canonical status by rapidly entering prestigious museum collections,⁵ the more personal videos such as *My Father* (1973-75) or *SoHo SoAp/Rain Damage* (1985), as well as the late films that feature Paik as her disabled husband in private or medical settings,⁶ did not attract equal interest by curators and collectors. But they provide the actual backdrop of her memoirs that I will foreground as a very particular angle to look into issues of authorship, authority and authorization in Fluxus collaboration.

Consequently, my analysis goes beyond conceiving Kubota merely as an early female Japanese Fluxus member and pioneer of video art, the alleged inventor of the new genre of "video sculpture", or as another woman artist whose achievements were tragically over-shadowed by the

magnitude of her husband's global career. It also goes beyond seeing Paik as omnipotent "father of video art," who is portrayed as an understanding partner of an admittedly jealous wife.⁷ Rather, I hope to develop a more nuanced understanding that focuses on transcultural strategies of occasionally shared, i.e. collaborative authorship as well as narrative constructions of (auto-)biographical authority that mark Kubota's works, which – at times – also visually reflects on their partnership. The underlying, larger question is how she negotiated artistic authority in a long-term relationship crossing cultural, national, gender, genre and media related boundaries.



The highly subjective and poetic narrative of Shigeko Kubota's memoirs *My love, Baek Namjun* offers an instructive glimpse into complex issues of authorship, collaboration, and transculturality that characterize her work between Japan, the USA, Germany, and – occasionally – Korea.

Fig. 1: Book cover of "나의 사랑, 백남준" (Naui Sarang, Paek Nam-jun – My Love, Baek Nam June, Seoul, 2010), carrying the subtitle "wife Kubota Shigeko's tale about sharing a life, love, and art with Nam June Paik" and stating the co-authors Kubota Shigeko and 남 영호 (Nam Jeongho) at the very bottom. The black and white photograph at the upper part portrays Kubota and Paik kissing in front of their work and was shot by Tom Haar in 1974.

So far, the book has never been the subject of an academic study, most likely because it was only published in Korean and Japanese and perhaps also, because the co-authorship casts more than a doubt on the authenticity of what is framed as Kubota's voice in a book addressing a broad, non-academic audience. Given that Kubota has a radical repute as a female Fluxus participant, who realized the performance *Vagina Painting* at the "Perpetual Flux Festival" organized by George Maciunas in New York in 1965, but at the same time rejected categorizations of her work as feminist,⁸ the book is striking for its lack of (self-)critical distance or reflection. Instead, it ambiguously oscillates between glorifying memories of both artists' achievements and a bitter-sweet retrospection into the emotional and artistic toll, which living with Paik took on Kubota.

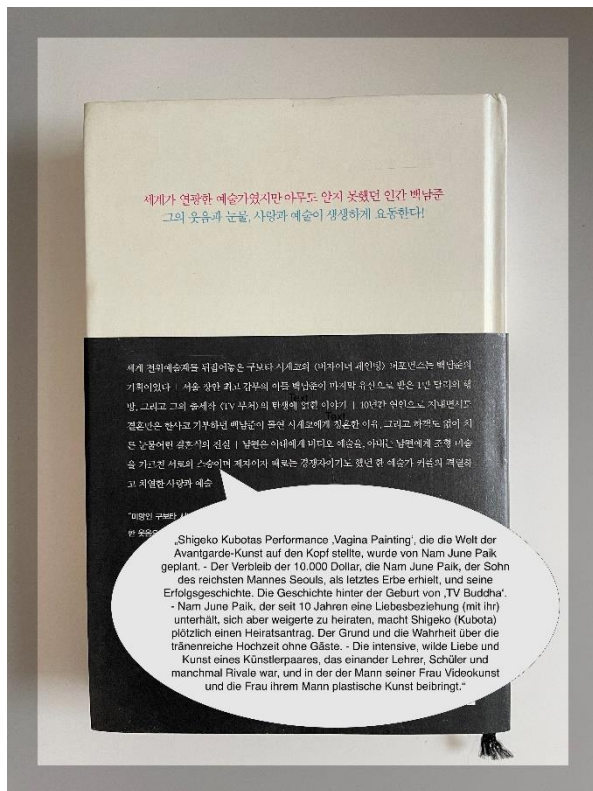


Fig. 2: Back of “나의 사랑, 백남준” (Seoul, 2010) augmented with an English translation of the blur (see speech bubble) by Franziska Koch.

Ambiguous memories and authorial claims: Shigeko Kubota and Nam Jeong-ho co-writing the story of her life with Nam June Paik

The question of authorship and narrative (auto-)biographical authority presents itself already with the cover of the book *Naeui sarang, Baek Namjun* (*My love, Baek Namjun*) and before actually reading the chronologically structured, mostly anecdotal story of their relationship, which starts in 1964, when the art student Kubota meets Paik in Tokyo, and ends with his death in 2006. The cover openly

indicates the co-authorship of Nam Jeong-ho, a Korean journalist, who works for the *JoongAng Ilbo* (*The Central Times*) and lived as a correspondent in New York between 2005 and 2009.⁹ He is a late acquaintance of Kubota and did not know the couple personally before Paik’s death. According to Nam’s *Prologue*, he actually met Kubota for the first time at Paik’s funeral on 29 January 2006, where he asked for an interview with the widow. She requested a copy of the original photographs accompanying the published article in a letter later, which initiated a continued correspondence that saw Kubota occasionally inviting Nam to her exhibitions, too.¹⁰

In the *Preface*, Kubota does not offer any details of the practical ways in which they collaborated, but generally expresses her gratefulness to “Jeong-ho Nam and his wife [...] thanks to whom it became possible for me to write this book.”¹¹ Nam, in turn, points out that he undertook independent research and a series of interviews¹² to support the narrative and add information “that was not known to Kubota herself.”¹³ However, even in the *Prologue* his authorial voice shows no distance to Kubota’s, but follows the competitive thread of comparison between the two artists that characterizes much of the story in the five chapters that follow.

Competition seems to have been a major and not only externally imposed driving force that fueled the relationship of both artists as well as the coming into being of the published memoirs, as an interview by New York based curator Miwako Tezuka with Kubota indicates in 2009. When Tezuka suggested Kubota to be “a collaborator, or a partner, of Nam June,” the artist immediately denied, clarifying: “Well, not a partner. I was his comrade. [...] I never collaborated with him. We are

very different, like water and oil."¹⁴ While Kubota's insistence is substantiated by the fact that there exist only a few explicitly co-authored video works by the couple, there is ample aesthetic evidence for their mutual aesthetic inspiration, shared thematic interests and media approaches. More importantly, choosing to call herself a "comrade" re-orient's our attention to a shared battleground or militant position rather than shared work and fiercely underlines notions of independent authorship and claims of distinct artistic authority. The boundaries Kubota drew here are however less simple and mark collaboration as a tense issue in a time when female artists were institutionally marginalized by long-standing patriarchal structures of the Western art world

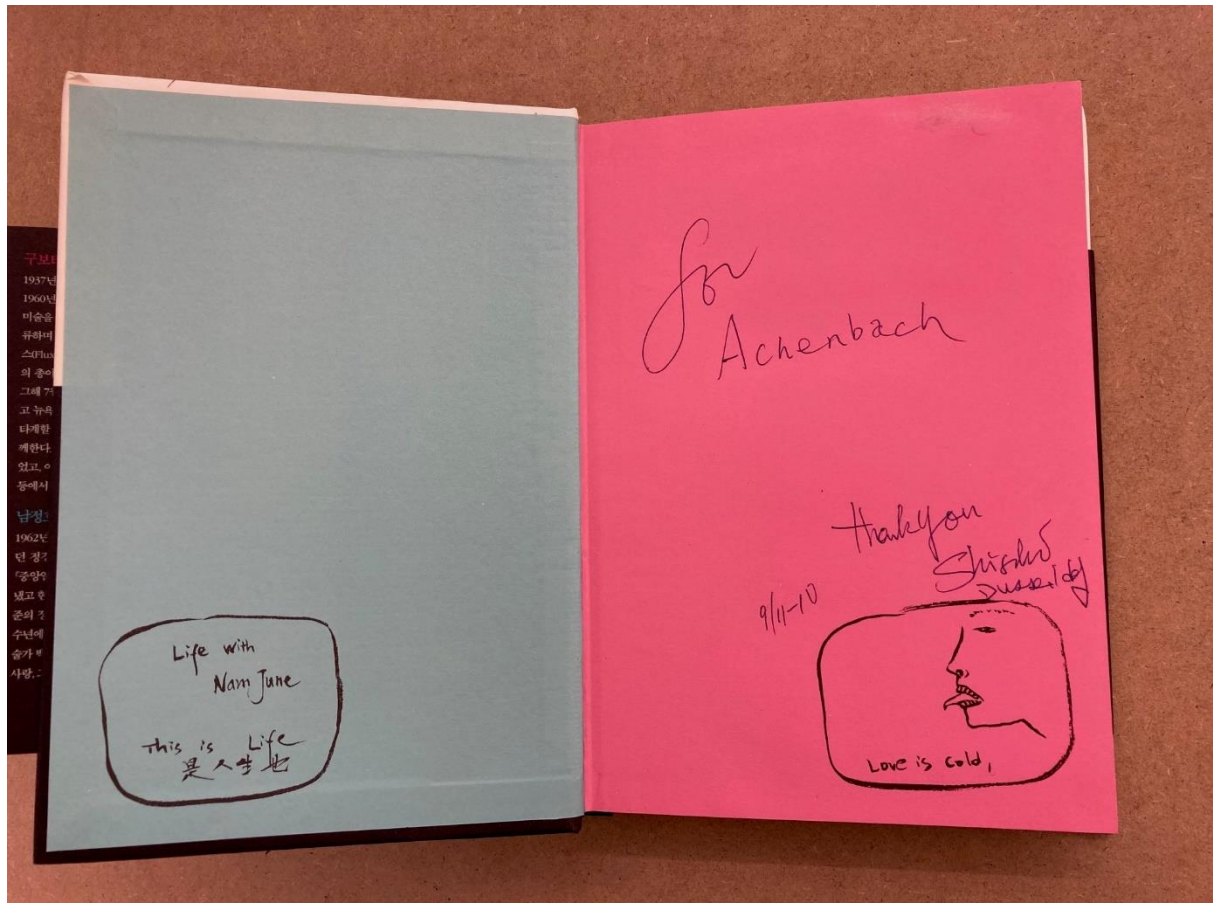


Fig. 3: Antiquarian exemplar of "나의 사랑, 백남준" (Seoul, 2010) that includes a handwritten dedication by Shigeko Kubota to the art consultant Helge Achenbach on the first page. This seems to indicate that the artist also used the publication to personally remind people of her (and Paik's) work. Photograph: Courtesy of basedonartgallery (boa), Düsseldorf-Flingern.

Even after Paik's demise, the structural discrimination that Kubota has met as a female artist in stark contrast to how Paik has been accommodated by the internationalizing art world, must have caused some of the bitterness that permeates the memoirs. Accordingly, it was not an easy decision for Kubota to go for a co-authored publication. In fact, Nam Jeong-ho mentions that it took him "one year to convince Kubota to write the book,"¹⁵ which indicates that the overall authority seems indeed to have lay in her hands. In an interview with me, Nam also affirmed that Kubota embraced the book as her brainchild rather than thinking of it as Nam's or a shared project. The reason for declining his first proposal was that she had actually already planned to publish memoirs all by herself. Only after having written two chapters and consulting over the result with

a Japanese friend, did she reconsider Nam's proposal, because the friend – also a journalist – had advised her to refrain from publishing the personal account.¹⁶

Kubota's agreement to Nam's proposal was based on two conditions: First, that the tone of her story would establish her as a professional artist of equal standing as her partner Paik and not portray her from the inferior perspective of the demure, supportive wife. Second, that Kubota would have the final word on the text before publication.¹⁷ This means that she had realized the strategical advantage of a journalist co-author who would enhance her own untrained writing with professionally honed skills and connections in the publishing industry in order to make the memoirs a commercial success. The result is 380 pages long and an easily readable book that occasionally supports the poetically framed narrative with illustrations such as newspaper clippings, performance and artwork documentation, hand-written poems and drawings by both artists.

With merely 61 references and a bibliography that lists seven English, two Japanese, and eight Korean sources,¹⁸ it is clear that the publication does not strive to be a scholarly book, although it chiefly deals with issues that are highly relevant to art historical research, but from a(n) (auto-)biographical perspective. Accordingly, the publishing company, a sub-enterprise of one of Korea's largest publishing houses, was chosen by Nam Jeong-ho with the aim to market the book as broadly as possible. Consequently, it was published in a popularly designed print run of 3,000 copies that sold well.¹⁹ In 2013, a Japanese translation was released by Heibonsha in Tokyo, while no other translation exists to date.²⁰

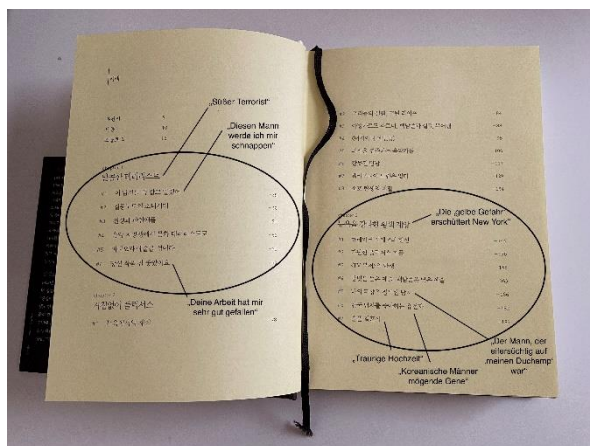
Ultimately, Nam is clear about lacking art historical expertise and the distrust this might garner when publishing a book on Paik, whom he frames as the "world greatest video artist."²¹ But he justifies the publication, being convinced that otherwise "this valuable story would forever be locked away"²² in the memory of Kubota. Consequently, he projects himself as revealing and investigating untold stories, even truths, about the couple and their (artistic) relationship (compare Fig. 2).

The first condition of the co-authorship set by Kubota seems to explain why comparison and competition between both artists has been expressed consistently throughout the book. Nam even explicitly mentions the aim to describe Kubota as being of equal artistic rank as Paik.²³ Comparing his prologue with published interviews of Kubota, he faithfully echoes her, when stressing that the Museum of Modern Art in New York owns the same number of artworks by her as well as by Paik.²⁴ Nam also rhetorically underlines the trope of Kubota as a woman artist, who is unjustifiably overshadowed by her husband, when expressing amazement about the fact that her video sculpture *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976) was installed at a prominent spot in the museum,²⁵ although his surprise effectively reinforces the trope rather than to deconstruct it. His sketchy comparison of Kubota with Paik as an artist, who did not even

graduate from fine arts studies,²⁶ implicitly renders Paik the amateur-turned-star – a suspicious achievement based on the admiration of the many. In contrast, Kubota is described as a hard-working and professionally trained sculptor, who nevertheless remained fairly unknown.

On a practical level, the language of the book – Korean – raises the question to which extent Kubota was actually able to stir every detail of the narrative. According to Nam, the writing process was based on about 12 recorded and subsequently transcribed interviews between him and Kubota, which were carried out in English.²⁷ This basic material was further enriched by details conveyed to Nam in their letter based correspondence in English.²⁸ The whole writing process took approximately two years.²⁹ To fulfill her second condition, Nam used a web-based translator generating a rough translation from Korean to Japanese, which Kubota then reviewed and corrected, because she could not read nor (sufficiently) speak Korean.³⁰

A close-reading of the first chapter "Sweet terrorist" - operating between the documentary and (auto-)fiction



The resultant narrative is an ambiguous fusion of two subjectivities, with the one of Nam clearly vanishing from the reader's attention, given the authoritative "I" identifies as Shigeko Kubota, who often tells the story in emotional register and colorful metaphors.

Fig. 4: Partial overview of content of "나의 사랑, 백남준" (Seoul, 2010), augmented with selected translations of some of the discussed (sub-)sections into German by Franziska Koch.

For example, the first chapter evocatively titled "*달콤한 테러리스트 – Sweet terrorist*" begins with a sub-section bluntly inscribed "이 남자를 꼭 잡겠어 – I will get that man no matter what" and an account of Paik's seminal concert on 29 May 1964 in Sōgetsu Hall (草月ホール) Tokyo (see fig. 4). It is written in great detail and takes young Kubota's perspective as seated in the audience, captivated by Paik's appealing outer appearance –

"the 170 cm long, whip slim body, sharply contoured chin, elevated nose casting deep shadows, [and] tightly closed lips were the same as on the photograph [which I had seen earlier]"³¹

– as well as his daring experimental actions on stage:

"He appeared silently [on stage], but the scene that unfolded reminded [me] of a thundering gush of wind in the dead of a midsummer night. Storming the stage and stirring the theatre, he was a decadent

'cultural terrorist'. It was like [watching] a wild animal struck with an arrow on its side, spilling red blood. All of a sudden, the shiny vanguard Sōgetsu concert hall was turned into a wormwood field."³²

Continuing in such an emphatic tone, the narrative voice Kubota³³ describes how Paik smashed eggs on the concert walls and played two pianos at the same time in ways that produced bizarre sounds rather than classical music. After teasing his audience with the familiar song "the girl's prayer", he pulled-out a plane, with which he attacked the shiny surface of the precious instrument that responded with a "helpless whisper."³⁴ The subjective tone of the story underlines the dramatic atmosphere further with sentences that relate the tortured instrument to Kubota's own corporeal response, literally portraying Paik's performance as getting under her skin: "Involuntarily, my hands went up to my face. It felt as if the skin of my face was being peeled off."³⁵ The picture of a slaughter is further reinforced, when the narrative voice describes that Paik briefly left the stage only to return with an axe, with which he violently attacked the piano, resulting in pieces of wood scattered around the stage reminding the narrator of "bloody pieces of animal intestines."³⁶

The performance continued with Paik's *Zen for Head* (1961),³⁷ in which he drenched his head in a bowl filled with ink and used it as if it were a huge brush to draw a lively line on a long sheet of paper – a transcultural Fluxus interpretation of LaMonte Young's *Composition 1960 No. 10* that instructs performers to "draw a straight line and follow it".³⁸ While Paik seems to have chosen this Fluxus score deliberately to humorously acknowledge the long history of East Asian calligraphy and eccentric ink practitioners with a view to Japanese Chan painting in particular and could count on an well-educated local audience,³⁹ the actual climax of the concert came across as a rude gesture according to the narrative voice: Paik took off a shoe⁴⁰, filled it with water and drank it⁴¹ – a scene that Kubota is described to find physically revolting.

In the end, Paik left the stage without further notice and the audience had to wonder for some minutes, before a phone rang behind the stage. It was the artist calling from the outside to announce that the concert was over – another characteristic Fluxus action that he had invented to conclude his "Aktionsmusik" (action music)⁴² with a surprise that mocks the ritual curtain fall and refuses to grant the audience their moment of applause, let alone negative expressions of response.⁴³

The colorful and dramatic account of the concert is used as a backdrop to stage Kubota's twofold emotional response as an artist and as a woman. The narrative voice describes her as stunned and "breathless from the tension" that the concert induced, with many images lingering in her head like "after images from a horror movie."⁴⁴ According to her, Paik opened up "a strange new world never seen before," showing her a "paradise [I] had long been looking for," giving her the feeling of "finding an oasis in the desert of my mind that had been filled with wind and sand."⁴⁵

Interestingly, the strong metaphors of romantic affection do not continue when the narrative voice describes the actual meeting with Paik and her friends in a teahouse following the concert; a get-together for which Kubota is said to have mustered the courage to ask him. She even calls him a "playboy," who was gossiping about which musician recently divorced his wife, while at the same time generously sharing highly appreciated firsthand information about Fluxus activities in Germany.⁴⁶ Still, she is portrayed as feeling more attracted to him given his lack of a snobbish attitude and the entertaining ways in which he mixed street humor with intellectual charm.⁴⁷

A first hint to issues of cultural difference is established, when the narrative voice recalls the directness with which Paik addressed the unease his performance caused to the "well behaving" Japanese audience, that merits one of the few direct quotes of Paik in this chapter:

"The Japanese audience is too demure. If they were like the Germans, they would have shown a strong reaction by shouting and being excited. So, I don't know whether the Japanese crowd liked or disliked my concert."⁴⁸

The authorial voice's honest guess is that the audience rather hated it, but she and her fellow vanguard artist friends loved it, being aware that their experimental scene was "still in its initial stages [when compared to Germany] with the audience having no clue how to react" to the new, radical practices.⁴⁹

The underlying competitive tension is amplified when taking into account the Japan-related critique does not stem solely from a young female sculptor opposing the conservative and nationalist art world of her own country in the 1960s,⁵⁰ but it also expresses that of a senior Korean journalist as late as 2010 working to "bring home" an emigrated-turned-global artist to Korea. Since Paik disappointed nationally minded compatriots by marrying a woman, whose national identity makes her a representative of their former colonizers.⁵¹ Seen in this light, Paik who supposedly criticizes the demureness of the Japanese audience and prefers the direct emotionality of the Germans is an implicit attempt by co-author Nam to cater to (liberal) Korean audiences. He portrays Paik as a daring, but also partial transcultural mediator, mitigating the risk that readers might negatively identify Paik as the heir of a rich and privileged Korean family, which was complicit with the colonizers to the extent that they had to flee to Japan shortly before the outbreak of the civil war.⁵²

In addition, the narrative voice supports the trope of Japan's lagging behind, which the modernist concept of the avant-garde inevitably invokes by stressing a radical break with the past and tradition as well as the idea of linear progress, when reiterating that she had come across Paik one year earlier in an article published by the newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* (*Yomiuri Independent*) in June 1963. The article titled *The beauty of destruction* featured a large photograph of Paik and portrayed the artist as shocking white European audiences by claiming himself to be the "yellow peril"⁵³ and scandalously stripping his bottom on stage.⁵⁴ In this way, the emotional, very

subjective narrative of the first person narrator is substantiated with documentary credibility and accurateness that enhances portraying Paik as a pioneering and critical transcultural mediator, when operating across German and Japanese settings alike.

The co-authors correspondence actually shows that Kubota had indeed remembered a newspaper article, but it was Nam's archival research that yielded the specific one, finally included in the book to serve as proof.⁵⁵

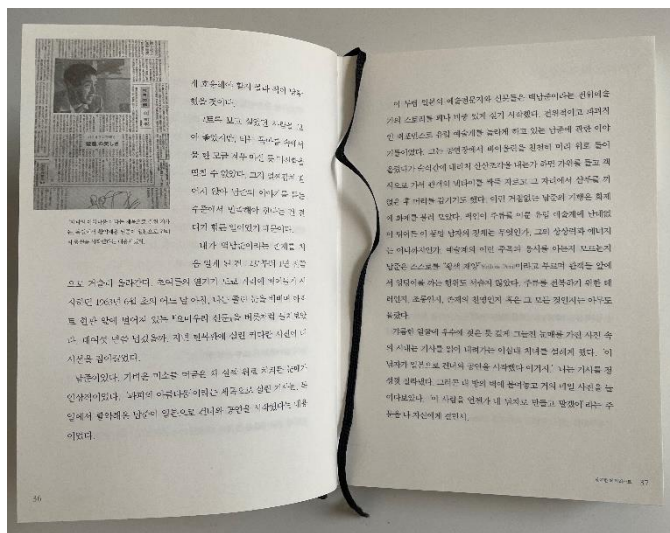


Fig. 5: View of "나의 사랑, 백남준" (Seoul, 2010), pages 36/37, featuring historical evidence of Paik's reception by the Japanese press.

Comparing this chapter with the fragment "Chapter One – Meeting with Nam June" that Nam Jeong-ho received as a copy from Kubota reveals that she had actually dated the first encounter with Paik to December 1963, when she performed herself in a group concert called "Sweet Sixteen" at the Sōgetsu Hall.⁵⁶ Most likely, this meeting was less direct and much less spectacular to narrate than their more extensive encounter after Paik's own concert, which seems to be the reason for its being repressed by the memoirs.⁵⁷

Overall, the affective poetical tone and not documentary precision thus dominates the memoirs that largely keep in line with the conventional tropes of a love story. Accordingly, the co-authors do not shun away from making the main protagonist of the memoirs explicitly express her romantic desire for Paik in ways that problematically collapse with the desire of becoming a prolific professional artist herself. The argument is prepared in one of the final passages of the first chapter: "I cut out the [newspaper] article carefully. Then I put it on the wall of my room and looked at the picture almost every day. 'I'm going to make this man my man someday.'"⁵⁸ The message is reinforced in the final sentence of the chapter with a direct quote by Kubota, who recalls herself responding to a close friend, asking about what she intended to do regarding the unrequited love for the already renowned Paik: "Me too, I will become a famous artist, so that I will get that man no matter what."⁵⁹

As far as comparison with the private correspondence of the two co-authors allows substantiating, Nam's literary authority actually dominates the precise wording of the book. Compared with the electronically and English written original chapter of Kubota, Nam's version is much more detailed, poetically composed and translates the erratic, sometimes vague and briefly formulated memories into a stylistically coherent, rhetorically captivating, and literary structured text with exciting turning points.

Consequently, the above quoted, several pages long, atmospheric description of the concert only amounts to four sentences in Kubota's original wording, while her assessment of the performance seems even in retrospect more art historically and politically connoted than the affective and sensual account ultimately published by the memoirs:

"I was totally taken aback. 'This is *Dadaistic* resistance, the message of a rebel.' It was a philosophy that totally defied our social norms. It embodies the same anti-government spirit as the All-Japan Federation of Students' Associations, *ZENGAKEU-REN* [the word in italics is a hand written addendum to the printed text; Kubota was a member of the leftist association]. It was his [Paik's] desire for the liberation of a race that resisted and rebelled against the social situation of the time."⁶⁰

In contrast, the narrative in the memoirs does not mention Kubota's socio-political stance, but limits and rhetorically intensifies her response to one of corporeal and intellectual attraction culminating in the romantic-cum-artistic confession at the end of the chapter.

A transcultural, collaborative "autobiography after autobiography"? How to set the female, artistic self

Given the oscillation of the narrative between the documentary and the fictional in an autobiographical frame, it is tempting to read the memoirs as a conscious attempt of "autofiction" in the original sense of French author-cum-critic Serge Doubrovsky. He defined it as "the right of every person, [...to] make one's own life public" and as implying "unsparing openness, but...also the conscious use of fictional moments, which are intended to prevent the autobiographical ego from succumbing to its self-imaginings."⁶¹ Following poststructuralist literary discussions on "the death of the author" triggered by Roland Barthes, on the semiotic deconstruction of literary signification by Jacques Derrida, and post-colonial reflections on "mimicry" as an aesthetic principle that overcame "mimesis" by Homi Bhabha, the concept of "autofiction" has changed since the 1970s, now denoting an autobiographical text that "reflects the impossibility of reproducing a lived life 'as it really was' and stages its own constructional character [instead]."⁶² For post-millennial literature of authors, who experienced migration and transculturation and choose to express these in autobiographical motifs and figures, the German literature scholar Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf has suggested to go even further, discerning autofictional strategies in what she calls a multi-vocal and multi-faceted "autobiography after autobiography."⁶³ For the unbrokenly popular genre, she urges us "to acknowledge that it is precisely the knowledge of

linguistic constructivism, the topical traditionality of the genre of autobiography, the imaginary mirror function of a text that makes autobiographical self-representation possible in the first place. Autofiction is then not to be understood in the sense of deficient 'only'-linguisticity, 'mere'-constructedness, as an exhibition of difference, but in the productive sense of a possible self-setting, which only allows a subject to position itself by means of and in the mirror of language."⁶⁴

Used to critically unpack *My love, Baek Namjun*, the theoretical question is if we can only read the publication in the basic sense of Doubrovsky's definition, or if it indeed exhibits autofictional constructedness in more subtle, multi-faceted ways that allow the reader to do both, rejecting and accepting its claims to autobiographical "truth."⁶⁵ After all, Shigeko Kubota has felt the need to publish about her relationship with Paik and thus textually - rather than only visually - "setting herself" in the tense field of post-war artistic (Fluxus) practices. This seems to point to the fact that performing the "I" in her artistic oeuvre was not enough for her to get and feel heard and that public memoirs presented a (self-) empowering supplement or extension to her creative world-making; albeit a strongly mediated one, given her choice of the autobiographical and romantic genres, authorial collaboration, social as well as cultural expectations, and the commercial framing.

While a naïve reader with no means to compare the memoirs with Kubota's visual work nor access to the private archives of Nam Jeong-ho might actually succumb to the lure of the "auto-", easily disregarding the "-fiction" of the memoirs, my examination is meant to tease out the interrelation of both aspects. The detailed reiteration of *My love, Baek Namjun's* first chapter serves to unravel the multi-layered ways in which two very differently tongued, aged, sexed, trained, located, ethically and economically motivated authors collaborate to retrospectively construct a joint authoritative voice that tells a (love) story highlighting collaboration and claiming to constitute an authentic account of the (artistic and romantic) partnership of Shigeko Kubota and Nam June Paik. Considering the practical part of Shigeko Kubota's and Nam Jeong-ho's co-writing and the related narrative strategies of the text, (auto-)biographical authority and actual authorship emerge as densely entangled and authorization as a complex, ambiguous process. While Shigeko Kubota can be identified as the ultimate authority sanctioning the text and the autobiographical "truth" through the commanding use of a first person-narrator, the literary formulation in Korean, formal decisions regarding the structure, format, selective details, poetic phrasing and affective tone as well as the choice of images fell under Nam Jeong-ho's authority. Ultimately, the book is thus the result of an uneasy equation, written by a male author formulating in his native tongue, while assuming the position of a much older female "I", for whom the resulting precise formulation in a foreign tongue remained inaccessible.

However, the most questionable aspect of Kubota's and Nam's collaboration is that by choosing the genre of the romantic love story and tying Kubota's artistic aspirations closely to her wish of sharing a life with Paik, she deprived herself of the possibility to portray her artistic career as that of an independently successful artist. The well-established trope of the daring male artist who is

admired and backed by a sensitive female junior-turned-wife and the fundamental reduction of the (historical) female artist to a self-less, care-taking, and all-forgiving enabler of male creative genius is too strong to balance the fewer instances, in which Kubota's own artistic achievements are highlighted in the book (fig. 6).

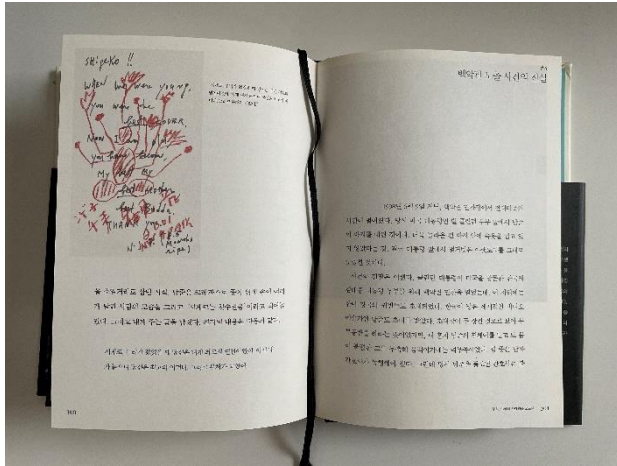


Fig. 6: View of “나의 사랑, 백남준” (Seoul, 2010), pages 300/301, featuring one of many late drawings by Paik, which are dedicated to Kubota explicitly, and serve to underline one of several key narrative threads of the book: Kubota's (selfless) role as lover and care-taker. The English inscription addresses her as a trinity reinforcing the underlying motif of the multi-armed buddha:

“Shigeko!!
 WHEN we were young,
 you were the best LOVER.
 Now I am old,
 you have become,
 My best My
 best mother,
 best budda.
 THANK you.
 N.J.P. (8.5 Months ripe)”

The red ciphers at the bottom seems to state “2001” as the date of creation, which would mean five years before his death.

Doing justice to Kubota's role would have required to directly address the complicated and ill-balanced gender expectations, especially when working across several cultural contexts and living through an extended period that saw tremendous social change on an increasingly global scale.

Taking the published memoirs as a very particular and ambiguously narrated, but illuminating source of how a (late) female Fluxus artist dynamically constructs authorship and claims artistic authority in transcultural and commercial contexts is important when trying to make sense of the aesthetic practice of both artists. As I have shown in my analysis of Kubota's late video “Sexual Healing” (1998), Kubota embodied a radical, very independent and – at least implicitly – feminist stance when portraying her disabled husband in old age. Here, her visual storytelling strongly clashes with the story published in *My love, Baek Namjun*, while not being completely opposed either.

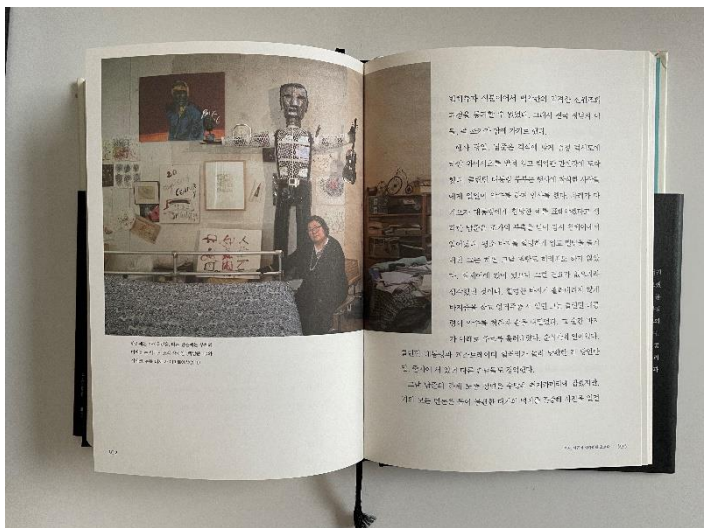


Fig. 7: View of “나의 사랑, 백남준” (Seoul, 2010), pages 302/303, featuring a color plate of Shigeko Kubota (1937-2015) photographed in 2010, seated in front of (her) works commemorating Paik after his demise (on January 29, 2006) in their studio apartment in New York.

General note on the photographic credits: If not otherwise stated, all photographic views of the book were taken by Franziska Koch.

This is why we are well advised to take all sources documenting an artist's life into account and research into how also highly subjective autobiographical verbal/textual documents actually intersect with the visual or otherwise materialized part of an oeuvre. The challenge is to develop more fine-grained methods and criteria when evaluating how affective and partial textual accounts relate to imaging practices of an artist and how both expressive strategies are governed not only by aesthetic, but also by social, institutional and economic powers, which are subject to long-standing gender norms in turn.

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¹ Stendhal, "Press Release. Shigeko Kubota – My Life with Nam June Paik".

² Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Autofiktion oder Autobiographie nach der Autobiographie: Goethe – Barthes – Özdamar", 359.

³ A great exception is the recent biography dedicated to Charlotte Moorman, a long-term collaborator of Nam June Paik, which meticulously used her private archive as foundation: Rothfuss, *Topless cellist*. Compare also with the first retrospective of Moorman's work: Corrin und Granof, *A feast of astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-garde, 1960s-1980s*. Recent retrospectives of early Japanese Fluxus artists include: Saito, *Takako Saito* and the upcoming exhibition at Gallery of the Japan Society in New York titled "Out of Bounds: Japanese Women Artists in Fluxus", from October 13, 2023—January 21, 2024, which will feature works of Kubota next to Takako Saito's and Mieko Shiomi's oeuvre.

⁴ For a complete overview of all her videos see the online database provided by the archive of Electronic Arts Intermix, <https://www.eai.org> (last accessed 14 September 2023). For a pioneering academic account of her work, see Yoshimoto, "Chapter Six: Self-Exploration in Multimedia: The Experiments of Shigeko Kubota". The most relevant catalogues are: Kubota, *Shigeko Kubota – Videoskulpturen 1970 – 1982*. Kubota, *Shigeko Kubota video sculpture*. Kubota, *Shigeko Kubota: video as a form of spiritual collision with the world*. Museum of Modern Art Tokyo, "Viva Video! The work and live of Shigeko Kubota".

⁵ See later in this text about *Duchampiana: Nude descending a staircase* (1976) that was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art New York as the first video work entering the collection.

⁶ The three last videos that almost exclusively feature Paik are "Sexual Healing" (1998), "April is the cruelest month" (1999), and "Winter in Miami" (2005).

⁷ Kubota and Nam, *나의 사랑, 백남준: 아내 구보타 시게코가 말하는 백남준과 함께 한 삶, 사랑, 그리고 예술 (Naüi Sarang, Paek Nam-jun – My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 115.

⁸ Tomiyama, "The End of an Odyssey. Shigeko Kubota's Large-scale Retrospective in New York. An Interview with Shigeko Kubota", 11. Compare for the feminist reception of the work: Yoshimoto, "Chapter Six: Self-Exploration in Multimedia: The Experiments of Shigeko Kubota", 169–93.

⁹ For a brief biography, see Joongang Ilbo, "Jeong-ho Nam – Editorial Writer – The Joongang Ilbo".

¹⁰ Nam, "프롤로그 (Prologue)", 23.

¹¹ All English quotes from the book in the following are translations by the author. Kubota, *나의 사랑, 백남준 (Naüi Sarang, Paek Nam-jun – My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 11.

¹² Nam mentions "many" interviews, some of them via phone and states that he undertook them in "Seoul, Tokyo and New York [...] for example with Abe Shuya, Paik's assistant Jeong-seong Yi and with the former cultural minister Lee O-ryong (이여령)", Nam, "프롤로그" (Prologue), 26.

¹³ Nam, 26.

¹⁴ Tezuka, "Oral History Interview with Shigeko Kubota, conducted by Miwako Tezuka, October 11, 2009, at Kubota's residence in New York City".

¹⁵ Nam, "프롤로그" (Prologue), 26.

¹⁶ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes. Nam recalls the name of the Japanese consulting friend as "Akiko" and that one of her arguments was that Kubota's manuscript mentioned family conflicts too often and that they would have been too personal to be published. Nam Jeong-ho very generously granted access to some copies of his correspondence with Kubota, including some documents related with her final exhibitions. Comparing the information conveyed to him in these letters, it indeed seems like Nam picked up the romantic memories and tone of the late Kubota in a rather faithful way. He deleted the repetitive aspects of her letters that re-iterate some anecdotes several times, while being rather general about specific events, dates, places, or participants. Convolute of several letters and some exhibition related leaflets, private correspondence between Nam Jeong-ho and Shigeko Kubota, dated 10.10.2006 – 3.9.2010.

¹⁷ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes.

¹⁸ Kubota and Nam, *나의 사랑, 백남준: 아내 구보타 시게코가 말하는 백남준과 함께 한 삶, 사랑, 그리고 예술 (Naüi Sarang, Paek Nam-jun – My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 371–72. Many references relate to biographical Wikipedia entries, news articles, and only very few art historical academic sources.

¹⁹ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes.

²⁰ Kubota, Nam, and Ko, *私の愛、ナムジュンパイク (Watakushi No Ai, Namujun Paiku – My Love, Nam June Paik)*.

²¹ Nam, "프롤로그" (Prologue), 25.

²² Nam, 26.

²³ Nam, 24.

²⁴ Nam, 20–21.

²⁵ Nam, 17–18.

²⁶ Nam, 24.

²⁷ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded, and subsequent e-mail correspondence with the author, dated 19 June 2020.

²⁸ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes.

²⁹ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes, and subsequent e-mail correspondence with the author, dated 19 June 2020.

³⁰ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes. Additionally confirmed in e-mail correspondence with the author, dated 19 June 2020. According to Nam (in the interview) the couple used to talk in English and Japanese. This was also confirmed by other friends and colleagues in conversations with the author.

³¹ Kubota and Nam, *나의 사랑, 백남준: 아내 구보타 시게코가 말하는 백남준과 함께 한 삶, 사랑, 그리고 예술 (Naüi Sarang, Paek Nam-jun – My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 28.

³² Kubota und Nam, 28/29.

³³ For the sake of simplicity, the two co-authors will be called "Kubota", the "narrative voice", or the "I" in what follows.

³⁴ Kubota and Nam, *나의 사랑, 백남준: 아내 구보타 시게코가 말하는 백남준과 함께 한 삶, 사랑, 그리고 예술 (Naui Sarang, Paek Nam-jun - My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 29.

³⁵ Kubota and Nam, 29.

³⁶ Kubota and Nam, 31.

³⁷ Medienkunstnetzwerk, "Zen for Head". Paik created "Zen for Head" as a contribution to Karlheinz Stockhausen's "Originale", which premiered 26.10.1961 in Cologne. Nam Jeong-ho does not give any titles of the scores that he describes and his atmospheric description is geared to stressing the scandalizing effects of Paik's performance. But according to a brief documentary list the following scores seem to have been performed: "Homage to John Cage", "Etude for Piano", "To Flynt", and "Simple", see: Miki Kaneda, "Experimental Music at the Sogetsu Art Center", www.post.moma.org (blog), February 15, 2013, <https://post.moma.org/experimental-music-at-the-sogetsu-art-center/>.

³⁸ Compare the illustration of the score in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art: La Monte, "Composition 1960, No. 10".

³⁹ In contrast, the German audience of the "Originale" in Cologne in 1961 or the "Fluxus Festspiele neuester Musik" in Wiesbaden 1962 lacked the knowledge of the salient trope of eccentric (drunk) ink painters painting with their hands or using their hair instead of a brush that also informed Chan related ink painting in Japan.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that shoes are culturally differently coded and considered "dirty" in Japan as well as Korea – a reason why removing them before entering a house is a strict convention based on hygienic considerations as well as a sign of respecting the home of the host.

⁴¹ The narrative seems to refer to Paik's "Simple" (1961), in which drinking water from a shoe was occasionally used as concluding action. It has been described in notes to the New York showing of Stockhausen's *Originale* (8.-13. September 1964, Judson Hall) see Ditzler, "Film Love: Stockhausen's Originale: Doubletakes". See for a photograph of the action in Hanhardt, *Nam June Paik*, 31. Medienkunstnetzwerk, "Simple", www.medienkunstnetzwerk.de (blog), accessed September 6, 2022, <http://www.medienkunstnetzwerk.de/works/simple/>.

⁴² Initially, Paik spoke about composing "A-Musik" meaning "Anti-Musik" (anti-music) as conveyed in a letter to Dr. Steinecke dated 8.12.1958, published in Ralf Beil, ed., *A House Full of Music - Strategien in Musik und Kunst* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 331/32. Later, he referred to his fusion of dramatic actions, sounds, and music as "Aktionsmusik" (action music), to describe the majority of works that he created between 1959 and 1962. For a detailed analysis of his groundbreaking approach see Daniels, "John Cage und Nam June Paik. 'Change your mind or change your receiver (your receiver is your mind)'" , 107/126.

⁴³ Dieter Daniels lucidly analyzes this strategy as "receptive polycentrism and indeterminism of [John] Cage which] Paik transferred through his [principle of] random access in an active multidimensionality and multi-mediality announcing the new potential of freedom of new media", which included a new relation to the audience freed from clear beginnings/endings of scores: Daniels, "John Cage und Nam June Paik. 'Change your mind or change your receiver (your receiver is your mind)'" , 121. Translation into English by F. Koch.

⁴⁴ Kubota and Nam, *나의 사랑, 백남준: 아내 구보타 시게코가 말하는 백남준과 함께 한 삶, 사랑, 그리고 예술 (Naui Sarang, Paek Nam-jun - My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 32.

⁴⁵ Kubota and Nam, 32.

⁴⁶ Kubota and Nam, 32.

⁴⁷ Kubota and Nam, 35.

⁴⁸ Kubota and Nam, 35.

⁴⁹ Kubota and Nam, 35.

⁵⁰ In interviews Kubota herself has mentioned that her first solo exhibition in Naiqua Gallery was actually "well received", while no public review of the show appeared in the newspapers. She also occasionally stressed the vanguard stances of fellow experimental artists in Japan as well as the radicalism of the students association and union that she took part in. While her view on Japan was thus not that of an entirely conservative society, New York seemed still more promising in that it seemed to allow making a living with her experimental art. See for a discussion of the radicality of experimental art in post-war Japan Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness. International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*.

⁵¹ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes. According to Nam, they (Kubota and him) were very clear about the fact that the book addresses a Korean audience first. She had told him that the suspicion she was met with as a woman of Japanese origin, when accompanying Paik on his first visit home, had shocked her and that she wanted Koreans to better know of her role in art as well as in Paik's life. Nam also stressed that it made him particularly happy to see the Korean readers' positive response to Kubota's memoirs, which apparently helped to revise her negative image. Since even conservative readers would acknowledge her deeds as a partner who continued to stand by Paik's side until his end, despite the last decade of severe illness and daily hardship.

⁵² 정, "일제의 군수동원과 조선인 자본가의 전시협력 - 백낙승(白樂承)의 사례를 중심으로 (The military mobilization of Imperialist Japan and the wartime cooperation of Korea capital: Focussing on the case of Paik Nak-seung", 264. It details the coming into being of Koreans first conglomerate and clarifies the role of Paik Nam June's father Paik Nak-seung, who hold close links with Rhee Syng-man, the first president of South-Korea after the civil war, which had allowed him to accumulate substantial capital to form Taechang conglomerate with a footing in the textile industry. After Paik Nak-seung's death in 1956 his eldest son, Paik Nam-il, came in charge. However, the conglomerate was dissolved in 1961 due to illegal accumulation of capital and the money returned to the country, while Paik Nam-il became a Japanese citizen. I thank Ryu Hyun-jung for bringing this article to my attention.

⁵³ Paik ironically appropriates the racist metaphor depicting Chinese – and later all kinds of Asian – people as a danger to European civilization. It stems from discourses of the 19th century, when missionaries and other colonizers faced resistance from Chinese colonial subjects. The metaphor was re-used in later contexts of migration, such as in the USA, where it served to denote Asian immigrants as "stealing" work of white settlers and delivering inferior, cheap results. Compare: John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, eds., *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (London; New York: Verso, 2014), 168–69. Benton Gregor, "The Chinese in Europe: Origins and Transformations", *Religions & Christianity in Today's China* 1 (2011), 62–70. Michael Odijie, "The Fear of 'Yellow Peril' and the Emergence of European Federalist Movement", *The International History Review* 40, no. 2 (March 15, 2018), 1–18.

⁵⁴Kubota and Nam, *나의 사랑, 백남준: 아내 구보타 시게코가 말하는 백남준과 함께 한 삶, 사랑, 그리고 예술 (Naüi Sarang, Paek Nam-jun - My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 37, compare illustration of the article on p. 36.

⁵⁵ Interview with Nam Jeong-ho by the author, 5 June 2020, recorded 1:38 minutes.

⁵⁶ Kubota, "Chapter One – Meeting with Nam June": "I met Nam June for the first time on the occasion of the concert called the 'Sweet 16 Concert' at Sōgetsu Hall in Tokyo, held December 3-5, 1963. This concert was an event in which about 40 young artists participated and I did an event piece as a homage to George Maciunas. Nam June was in the audience for that performance. I had learned about George and Fluxus from Takehisa Kosugi (of Group Ongaku), Yoko Ono and Toshi Ichianagi, Fluxus members, who were living in New York and had come back to Japan for a visit. I, myself, had corresponded with George personally." Also compare the website of the Sōgetsu Hall that confirms the year and mentions "Sweet 16" as being organized by Takehisa Kosugi and Tone Yasunao: Sōgetsu Foundation, "The Sōgetsu Art Center", unpaginated entry under "1963". The website also specifies for the previous year: "The most sensational event of the year [1962] is John Cage and David Tudor's performance for the 'Sōgetsu Contemporary Series.' The event tours through Tokyo Bunka Kaikan [Tokyo Cultural Hall], Kyoto Kaikan [Kyoto Concert Hall], Osaka Mido Kaikan [Osaka Mido Hall]. The Sōgetsu Hall event includes collaborations with Yoko Ono, Ichianagi Toshi, Takahashi Yuji among others. The events cause a great stir and would come to be referred to as the 'John Cage Shock'". For a more critical look into the connections with and relevance of John Cage see: Kaneda, "The 'John Cage Shock' Is a Fiction! Interview with Tone Yasunao", 1.

⁵⁷ London, "Für Shigeko", 10. In the catalogue of this first European solo exhibition by Kubota, which travelled from Berlin via Essen to Zurich, Barbara London confirms this date, while stressing John Cage as the reason for Kubota's migration and dating her friendship with Maciunas only after the move, which is factually not correct, since Kubota has corresponded with the latter already earlier as mentioned above: "Three years later [1963] she [Kubota] came into contact with John Cage through Ongaku, the Tokyo-based experimental music group. Cage was performing a 'chance-operation/happening' with David Tudor at the Sōgetsu Hall [1962]. Kubota was so impressed by Cage's work that in 1964 she left Japan for New York's open, experimental art environment. With an introduction from Yoko Ono and Toshi Ichianagi, she met the artist George Maciunas in New York, and began working closely with him, Allan Kaprow, Ay-O, and Nam June Paik."

⁵⁸ Kubota und Nam, *나의 사랑, 백남준: 아내 구보타 시게코가 말하는 백남준과 함께 한 삶, 사랑, 그리고 예술 (Naüi Sarang, Paek Nam-jun - My Love, Baek Nam June)*, 37.

⁵⁹ Kubota und Nam, 38.

⁶⁰ Electronically written text in the convolute of private correspondence between Nam Jeong-ho and Shigeko Kubota, "My life with Nam June Paik", six pages, undated. On page one, Kubota summarizes the concert as follows, directly before the above-mentioned quote: "The concert was shocking. It consisted of a series of hectic actions. He threw eggs at the walls, knocked the piano over, did an action painting on a large white sheet of paper, dipping his head in a bucket filled with black ink and using it like a brush. He even poured water into a shoe and drank it."

⁶¹ Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Autofiktion oder Autobiographie nach der Autobiographie: Goethe - Barthes - Özdamar", 360. Translated into English by me.

⁶² Wagner-Egelhaaf, 360. She is referring to Claudia Gronemann, who has analyzed Doubrovsky's coinage in greater depth and build on it for her own differentiated methodological understanding of the concept: Gronemann, *Postmoderne/Postkoloniale Konzepte der Autobiographie in der französischen und maghrebinischen Literatur. Autofiction - Nouvelle Autobiographie - Double Autobiographie - Aventure du texte*.

⁶³ Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Autofiktion oder Autobiographie nach der Autobiographie: Goethe - Barthes - Özdamar", 361.

⁶⁴ Wagner-Egelhaaf, 361.

⁶⁵ Compare Wagner-Egelhaaf's instructive elaboration of the poetic topos of truth-claims in autobiographical texts that starts with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's eponymous self-setting as relating "Dichtung und Wahrheit" – "poetry and truth". Wagner-Egelhaaf, 354–55.