

10. Mieko Shiomi: *Spatial Poem*
(1965–75)

Natilee Harren

“Write a word (or words) on the enclosed card and place it somewhere.”

With this simple instruction, titled *Spatial Poem No. 1 (Word Event)* and sent out to an international mailing list of over a hundred Fluxus affiliates, Mieko (née Chieko) Shiomi launched her *Spatial Poem* project in 1965. Ultimately, *Spatial Poem* encompassed nine scores composed across a decade of Shiomi’s practice and engaged more than 230 collaborators who reported their realizations of the artist’s instructions back to her by mail from twenty-six different countries (fig. 10.1). *Spatial Poem* is an apt emblem and metaphor of the global network of intermedial, experimental notation practices that began to formalize in the mid-1960s and continued to expand into the 1970s and beyond. Its structure integrated the composition, execution, and documentation of individual scores and their performance into a single holistic project of a performative-conceptual nature. Shiomi’s project was rare among experimental notation practices of the time for its attempt to actually gather and compare diverse realizations.

Incredibly ambitious in scope by the time it concluded, *Spatial Poem*’s origins were urgently practical. In spring 1965, after a busy season rushing between avant-garde events at various concert halls and artist lofts in New York, Shiomi grew concerned with the limitations of space and time that hampered the full integration of her artistic community. As a response to the “inconvenience of communication,”¹ as the artist put it, Shiomi suggested to leading Fluxus organizer George Maciunas “a do-it-yourself

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List of the participants in SPATIAL POEM (No. 1-4)

Ace Space Co.	Dick Higgins	Serge Oldenburg
Karen Ahlberg	Michael Horovitz	Robin Page
Tukio Akatsuka	Sylvester Rouedard	Man June Paik
Kuniharu Akiyama	Alice Hutchins	Marsha Pelsodan
Dietrich Albrecht	Peter Hutchinson	Joel Peranti
Eric Andersen	Leetmir Janosek	Sara Parker
Tony Andersen	Ray Johnson	Betty Parsons
Gabor Altalai	Danna Jo Jones	Ben Patterson
Ay-o	Joe Jones	Kend Pedersen
Iara Bak	Hans-Werner Kalkmann	Achille Perilli
Lawrence W. Baldwin	Ezra Kaplan	Geza Pernecky
Jeff Berner	Philip Kaplan	Bern Porter
Evanie Bodin	Allan Kaprow	Donald Richie
Robert Boszi	Kirby M. Kasey	Peter I. Van Riper
George Brecht	Michael Kirby	Dietrich Rot
Edson Brock	W. B. Kirchgesner	Gerhard Ruha
Stanley Brown	Per Kirkeby	Phillip L. Ryan
Carolyn Brown	Kitsuno Katsue	Takako Saito
Steve Burgess	Dusan Kline	Winthrop Sargeant
John Cage	Bengt Af Klintberg	S. D. Saverhier
Lilya Calas	Allison Knowles	Tomas Schmit
Meke Carson	Jiri Rynek Kocman	Maruta Schmit
Paolo Castaldi	Arthur Koepcke	Win T. Schippers
Jindrich Chaloupecky	Jiri Kolár	Carolee Schneemann
N. Chatterji	Takehisa Kougai	Paul Sharita
Christo	Stanley Kunitz	John J. Sharkey
Phillip Corner	Vytautas Landsbergis	Mieko Shiomi
Herman Dassen	D. Lauffer	Michael Smith
Robert De Havilland	Norma Leistikio	Daniel Spoerri
Willes De Ridder	F. Lieberman	Marianne Staffeldt
George Drufa	Gyorgy Ligeti	Petr Stenbera
Robert Filliou	Carla Liss	Nichelle Stuart
Albert M. Fine	Bernad Loebach	Francoise Sullivan
Irvin Flinginger	Gerardo Luca	Shuko Takiguchi
Bill Fortinberry	George Maciunas	Paul Thek
Ken Friedman	Jackson Mac Low	Endre Tot
Pierre Garnier	Walter Marchetti	Sorot Trese
Michael Gibbs	Herberta Masarykova	Michael Tylick
Allen Ginsberg	Tutaka Matsuzawa	Janice Urban
Ludwig Giesewitz	William Mayer	Jiri Valoch
Bohumila Groegerova	David F. Mayor	Ben Vautier
Klaus Groh	Barry McCallion	Wolf Vostell
Anne Halprin	Cavan McCarthy	Branko Vucelja
Gerda Halprin	Clement Meadmore	Bob Watts
Ian Hamilton Finlay	Jonas Mekas	Mike Weaver
Richard Hamilton	Pierre Mercure	Peter Weibel
Eaoul Hausmann	Nicodol Miletic	Tom Wesselmann
Henrik Have	David S. Milton	David Whitney
Nyor Hayashi	Aiko Miyawaki	Jean-Pierre Wilhelm
Bernard Heidsiek	Peter Moore	John Willenbocher
Lee Heilin	Barbara Moore	Carolyn Kiewell
Betty Henderson	Victor Musgrave	Yoshie Yoshida
Rich Hendricks	S. Nicod	La Monte Young
Jeff Hendricks	Ladislav Novak	Adja Tunkers
Davi Det Hopson	Brian O'Doherty	M. Sussela
Juan Hidalgo	Makoto Onaka	

Many thanks for beautiful reports !
Please look forward to the book of whole poem after
completion of this series.
As for special issue of each event, please refer to
George Maciunas POB 153 Canal St. Sta. New York 10013

MIEKO SHIOMI
SHIOMI 1-24-38
SAGAMI MUSEO
OSAKA JAPAN

Fig. 10.1 Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi (Japanese, b. 1938). List of participants in *Spatial Poem* (Nos. 1-4), ca. 1972, offset print. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 47, folder 3. Used by permission of Mieko Shiomi.

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work that takes place on the whole earth as its stage, on which many people living away from me can interpret the event in their own ways and send me their reports.”² Enthusiastic about the idea, Maciunas offered to contribute his design acumen to the project’s documentation. The fascinating dialogue between the two artists is captured in the Archive section of this chapter; it includes Shiomi’s sensitive warnings to Maciunas about his increasingly “autocratic” management of Fluxus affairs.

Shiomi launched *Word Event* in New York and orchestrated the remaining eight poems from her home in Okayama and later from Osaka, cities far from Tokyo, the center of the Japanese avant-garde. Tied to these provincial sites due to caregiving responsibilities, she found that “the mailbox outside was a marvelous window open toward the world.”³ Furthermore, Shiomi understood the liberating potential of reframing the everyday through the notion of the event. “We have a ton of obligations, and tasks, and many, many trivial things,” she has said. “But when you look at things as an event, your mind is free from that kind of task. It’s very free and released.”⁴ Shiomi has identified her practice as being rooted in the experience of loss and having to make do with very little, a sanguine outlook undeniably linked to her experience during World War II Japan, specifically the trauma of her childhood possessions being destroyed in a 1945 air raid.

When Shiomi first turned to writing text scores as a young artist in the early 1960s, she initially referred to them as “action poems.” These pieces—including *Mirror Piece*, *Wind Music*, and *Shadow Piece* (all 1963)—encouraged a poetically flexible interpretation of language that might reframe and transform the reader’s experience of everyday phenomena, particularly in the natural world. Shiomi began this work following her musicology studies at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music (also known as Geidai, now called Tokyo University of the Arts), where she wrote a thesis on the twelve-tone technique of Anton Webern and

performed works by Arnold Schoenberg. Crucially during that time, she formed the groundbreaking Group Ongaku (Group Music, ca. 1959–62) with peers Takehisa Kosugi, Shūkō Mizuno, Mikio Tojima, Yumiko Tanno, Gen'ichi Tsuge, and Yasunao Tone in order to probe the boundaries of music through collective improvisation. Shiomi's formative work with Group Ongaku laid the foundation for her individual exploration of the dynamics between the singular event and its simultaneous occurrence with other events. In an essay published in the September 1960 issue of *Nijisseiki buyō* (Twentieth-Century Dance), featuring a number of statements by Group Ongaku members, Shiomi advocated a practice of "sonic collage," which embraces the chance dialogue created by simultaneous yet independently derived sounds.⁵ In March 1962, she presented her new experimental practice in a solo concert at Okayama Cultural Center Hall, including works realized from graphic scores along with examples of what she considered "action music": walking around the stage, piling up matchboxes, and saying numbers at random.

As Shiomi's trajectory illustrates, transpacific conversations between American and Japanese figures in the postwar experimental music, performance, and intermedial visual art worlds that *The Scores Project* highlights were virtually immediate, thereby troubling the idea that aesthetic innovations could be traced to any one center. Following signal encounters with the artists Toshi Ichijanagi and Nam June Paik, Shiomi became involved in Fluxus in 1963. When she first met Paik, at a concert at Tokyo's Sogetsu Hall in 1963, he proclaimed that she was already a Fluxus artist. Indeed, Maciunas was by that time familiar with her work, as Ichijanagi (who had recently returned to Japan after seven years in New York, some of which were spent studying with John Cage) had sent several of Shiomi's scores to Maciunas in January 1962, before the official launch of Fluxus. In the same period of Shiomi's first meeting with Paik, she visited Yoko Ono's apartment in

Tokyo, where she encountered scores by George Brecht, and began to think of her evolving notational language in relation to the Fluxus concept of the event.

Another important moment of exchange that Shiomi likely witnessed during this period was *An Exhibition of World Graphic Scores*, mounted in November 1962 by Ichiyanagi and Kuniharu Akiyama at Tokyo's Minami Gallery on the occasion of Cage and David Tudor's first visit to Japan. By December 1963, Maciunas had in hand Shiomi's complete works and was planning a Fluxus edition. Encouraged by Akiyama and Maciunas, with whom Shiomi was now in regular contact, she traveled with Shigeko Kubota on a tourist visa to New York City in the summer of 1964 to immerse herself in the Fluxus milieu. Her complete works were ultimately published by Fluxus that year under the name Chieko Shiomi (she had yet to take on the name Mieko) and the title *Events and Games* (1964).

Shiomi's *Spatial Poem* series adapted concepts from her early action poems, relating simple actions to highly subjective notions of time and space. Through nine different instructions, interpreters were invited to think about and respond to concepts and actions of direction, falling, shadows, opening, orbiting, sound, wind, and disappearance. Although the scores clearly relate to the genre of Fluxus events, Shiomi hewed to the conceptual framework of poetry, drawing from a longstanding investment in literature that had preceded her advanced studies in music. Additionally, she requested that participants' reports include the specific place and/or time of the action's completion. Anticipating this framework was Shiomi's score *Direction Music for Fingers* (1964), which she performed in New York as part of a solo presentation in October 1964 at Washington Square Gallery, coinciding with a yearlong "Perpetual Fluxfest" (figs. 10.2, 10.3).

The piece not only was a response to her growing concerns about the abiding spatiotemporal limitations on creative activity but also anticipated her discovery of a

Direction music for fingers

One person to be fixed, who should have main experience of this piece.

He takes position near the center of open area.

Other ten performers come to him and each one place finger cover onto a finger of the person's hands.

Each performer makes choice the direction to which finger is to extended, and write it down on the card to show him.
for example

the direction of some person

the direction of the south pole

the direction of the darkest place

the direction from which some sound can be heard

etc.

Each one pull the string which is attached to the finger cover's top, toward his direction and fix it to a right place.
Each direction may be told to the audience by voice.

Sept. 1964

C. Shiomi

Fig. 10.2 Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi (Japanese, b. 1938). *Direction Music for Fingers*, September 1964, photocopy of handwritten score on lined paper. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 47, folder 3. Used by permission of Mieko Shiomi.

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Fig. 10.3 Mieko Shiomi (left, arms raised) performing *Direction Music for Fingers* at Washington Square Gallery (Allan Kaprow is at right, foreground), New York, NY, 30 October 1964. Photograph by Peter Moore; © Northwestern University.

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broader solution to this problem in *Spatial Poem*. For *Direction Music for Fingers*, Shiomi invited participants to write a real or imagined location on a card and then attach the card to a string, the other end of which was tied to one of her fingers. The participant then affixed the card to a point reaching toward the chosen location. Peter Moore's photograph of the event shows Allan Kaprow consulting a map of Manhattan while Shiomi, arms raised, sits at the center of a new, provisional spatial network (see fig. 10.3). Taking up again the notion of direction for *Spatial Poem No. 2 (Direction Event)* (1965), she explained her poetic intent in a letter to Maciunas: "I meant 'direction' not only direction on compass[:] in this poem it is rather the state of consciousness of the relation between yourself and [the] outside world" (fig. 10.4).⁶

Mostly from afar, Shiomi collaborated with Maciunas to create records of the first four *Spatial Poem* events in the form of object editions in line with the aesthetics of ongoing Fluxus publishing endeavors. Each edition plays cleverly with the given poem's concept, inviting quasi-performative engagement as the reader inspects it. We are invited to delicately maneuver tiny paper flags (fig. 10.5), unfurl an enormous paper map (fig. 10.6), let fall the pages of a wacky calendar (fig. 10.7), and gently thread a roll of microfilm through a handheld viewer (fig. 10.8). Like many Fluxus affiliates, Shiomi sometimes protested Maciunas's overbearing designs, but, in general, the two artists sustained a productive long-distance collaboration until Maciunas's chronic illness made this impossible. (Shiomi had wanted him ultimately to design collective reports for all nine poems.)

Spatial Poem transforms the utopian ideal of the indeterminate or open-form work's potential for infinite possibility into a carefully documented program that has been preserved for later cross-examination. Indeed for Shiomi, the opportunity to compare multifarious interpretations is the most compelling aspect of composing

Dear George

Thank you for sending me new publications.

I already mailed out 10 boxes. When I wanted to start making flags, I found that they don't have necessary stuff, paper cement(glue), 1.5 inch or 2 inch straight pins. Could you send me them or shall I send you the printed cards?

If you prefer me to make, please send me paper cement with thinner, 1 lb. of 1.5 inch straight pins (I brought back 1 lb. of 1.5 inch and 2 inch pins) and smallest size of silver stars (200 pieces). I bought them at the stationary section of the souvenir shop on 5th Ave, around 32 - 36 St. west side) I am sorry that I have to trouble you about this. If you prefer to make in New York, I will send the cards, but I must tell you that it is a big job --- maybe I'd better take care of them. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~

I liked your performance of Spatial Poem No.2 very much. That was marvelous. I was walking towards the sounds which were out of distance to reach my ears. I meant "direction" not only direction on compass, in this poem it is rather the state of consciousness of the relation between yourself and outside world. I've got about 40 reports so far, and found that most people took it the direction on compass, though some are very interesting. As the mail are still coming, I will wait a little more and after straight them out, I will send them to you. I would like to trust you the design of it. I found the specialist of sword and armor. But he said that he cannot recommend the repairing stuffs unless he saw it, and it is difficult for normal people to repair it. Besides if he take care of it completely, it will cost about 300 dollars. If you really want to fix it, you'd better to bring it with you when you come to Japan--- any way, sorry to tell, it would not be so easy task.

H. Manarykova gave me a letter. When are you visiting Europe?

Sincerely Chieko

Fig. 10.4 Letter from Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi to George Maciunas, ca. 1965, photocopy of typewritten text on paper. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 31, folder 30. Used by permission of Mieko Shiomi.

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Fig. 10.5 Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi (Japanese, b. 1938); George Maciunas (Lithuanian American, 1931–78). Object edition of *Spatial Poem No. 1 (Word Event)*, 1965, clear plastic box with hinged lid and cork-covered bottom with paper-flag pins. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 225. Used by permission of Mieko Shiomi and Billie Maciunas. getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/525/

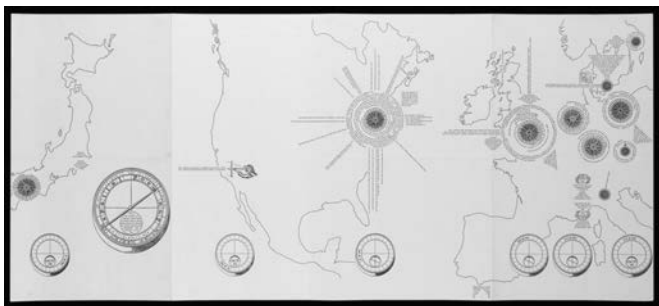


Fig. 10.6 Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi (Japanese, b. 1938); George Maciunas (Lithuanian American, 1931–78). Object edition of *Spatial Poem No. 2 (Direction Event)*, 1966, offset print. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, flat file 37** . Used by permission of Mieko Shiomi and Billie Maciunas.

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Fig. 10.7 Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi (Japanese, b. 1938); George Maciunas (Lithuanian American, 1931–78). Object edition of *Spatial Poem No. 3 (a fluxcalender)*, 1968, two sets of printed calendar pages (14 × 10.8 cm), one housed loose inside a wood box with a hinged lid and metal clasp, the other bolted into book form on a strap of leather. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 223. Used by permission of Mieko Shiomi and Billie Maciunas.

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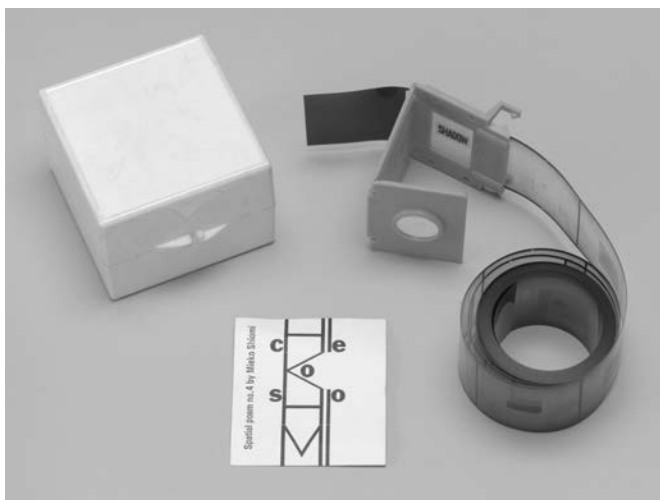


Fig. 10.8 Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi (Japanese, b. 1938); George Maciunas (Lithuanian American, 1931–78). Object edition of *Spatial Poem No. 4 (a fluxmovie)*, 1973, white plastic box with a hinged lid containing a roll of microfilm mounted on a miniature green plastic viewer. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 219. Digital Image® The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. © 2024 Mieko Shiomi. getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/528/

open-ended scores. In 1973 she reflected, “The reports returned by various people are very diverse and full of individuality — some poetic, some realistic or cynical, some artificial, some spontaneous, etc. When they are all collected together, they present a fantastic panorama of human attitudes.”⁷ The resources included in this chapter enable you to compare reports sent to Shiomi by dozens of wide-ranging figures, some of whom are not typically associated with Fluxus: John Baldessari, Stanley Brouwn, Carolyn Brown, Christo, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Allen Ginsberg, Daria Halprin, Richard Hamilton, Sylvester Houédard, Douglas Huebler, Ray Johnson, Vytautas Landsbergis, György Ligeti, Jonas Mekas, Brian O’Doherty, Robin Page, Betty Parsons, Carolee Schneemann, Paul Thek, Peter Van Riper, Tom Wesselmann, Robert Whitman, Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, La Monte Young, and Marian Zazeela, among many others.

Through *Spatial Poem*, Shiomi acted as the conductor of a worldwide action-music composition, illuminating in intimate detail an international social network of likeminded artists allied in a search for sympathetic collaborators and audiences with whom to share their vanguard work. Although *Spatial Poem* is sometimes characterized as a form of mail art, Shiomi did not consider it so, since her focus was on the simultaneity of actions performed rather than her administration of the project. More notable, perhaps, is the way *Spatial Poem* adopts as its very method the Fluxus notion of intermedia, or rather (as the artist has more recently described it) “transmedia” — an artistic practice in which “the original concept is carried into subsequent works even though the form of expression is different each time.”⁸

After completing the final piece, *Spatial Poem No. 9*, appropriately titled *Disappearing Event* (1975), Shiomi self-published an artist’s book chronicling the vast array of responses she had received over the years. The book’s cover

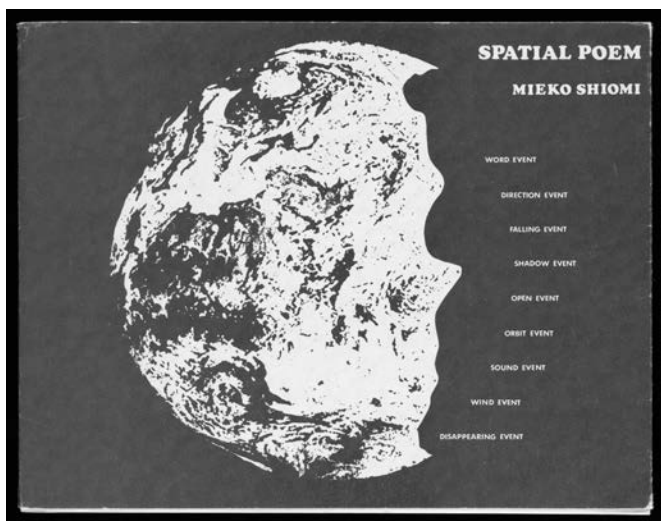


Fig. 10.9 Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi (Japanese, b. 1938). Cover of *Complete Works: Spatial Poem* (Osaka, Japan: self-published, 1976), artist's book. Getty Research Institute, item 91-B36111. Used by permission of Mieko Shiomi.

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and a related promotional postcard feature the titles of each event arrayed alongside a graphically abstracted photograph of the Earth closely resembling the famous “Blue Marble” image taken by the crew of Apollo 17 in 1972, acknowledging that *Spatial Poem* had indeed unfolded alongside an expanding global ecological consciousness among artists and intellectuals of the period (figs. 10.9, 10.10). Imagining the Fluxus network in parallel with our solar system, Shiomi has remarked, “I have been at the position of Pluto. But living in a remote place enabled me to see the outline of Fluxus rather clearly.”⁹ The experience of reading through Shiomi’s compilation of *Spatial Poem* scores recalls George Brecht’s conviction that an event score may be either performed or simply observed or imagined. Impressively, the works guaranteed *both* outcomes: first, in the actual performances conducted by members of Shiomi’s network, and second, in our mental visualization of each performance as we read the gathered reports.

Concluding in 1975, *Spatial Poem* may be understood as an emblematic final bookend to more than two decades of collective experimentations with performance notations. For the artist, however, its audience was potentially much greater. “I would like to think,” Shiomi has written, that “the collective anonymous poem can be preserved as a monument for the people of the 30th century—if we survive that long.”¹⁰

Notes

1. Mieko Shiomi, “Mieko Shiomi,” *Art and Artists* 8, no. 7 (1973): 42.
2. Mieko Shiomi, quoted in Kakinuma Toshie and Takeuchi Nao, “Oral History Interview with Shiomi Mieko,” 1 December 2014, trans. Reiko Tomii, Archival Research Center, Kyoto University of Arts, https://www.kcua.ac.jp/arc/ar/shiomi_eg_1/.
3. Mieko Shiomi, quoted in Michelle Elligott, “Interview with Artist Mieko Shiomi: Chapter 3,” 27 October 2011, Post: Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art around the Globe, website of the Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP) program at the Museum of Modern

- Art, New York, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/22-interview-with-shiomi-mieko.
4. Mieko Shiomi, quoted in Sally Kawamura, "Appreciating the Incidental: Mieko Shiomi's 'Events,'" *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 3 (November 2009): 313.
 5. Chieko [Mieko] Shiomi, "Onkyō no obu je no sokkyōteki korāju: Onkyō to no taiwa" (The Improvisational Collage of Sound Objects: A Dialog of Sound), *Nijisseiki buyō* 5 (1 September 1960): 17–23, cited in William Marotti, "Challenge to Music: The Music Group's Sonic Politics," in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, ed. Benjamin Piekut (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 126.
 6. Mieko Shiomi to George Maciunas, ca. 1965, Jean Brown Papers, 1916–1995 (bulk 1958–1985), 890164 and 2016.M.14, box 31, folder 30, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
 7. Shiomi, "Mieko Shiomi," 44.
 8. Mieko Shiomi, "Intermedia/Transmedia," transcript of a lecture given at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 29 April 2012, trans. Midori Yoshimoto, Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context, website of the C-MAP program (see note 3 above), <https://post.moma.org/intermedia-transmedia/>.
 9. Mieko Shiomi, quoted in Alison Knowles et al., "An Evening with Fluxus Women: A Roundtable Discussion," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 3 (November 2009): 370.
 10. Shiomi, "Mieko Shiomi," 44.