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Analog Video in the Age of Digital Data: A Case Study of Shigeko Kubota’s “Social Practice”

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Fig. 1. Left to right: Robert Harris, Al Robbins, Cath Polisar, and Shigeko Kubota. Photo courtesy of the Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation; photo by Peter Kolb

If Nam June Paik truly is the “father of video art,” as so many scholars claim, then Shigeko Kubota is in many ways its mother, performing the unacknowledged and undervalued labor of managing the “house” of video and taking care of its inhabitants.¹ My digital art history project for *Panorama*, which performs a data-driven deep dive into Kubota’s networks, argues that Kubota’s legacy must be understood as a lived, “social practice” of care for video art and its communities (fig. 1). An émigré from Japan, Kubota (1937–2015) dedicated most of her career to conceptualizing video as a connective tissue; she imagined video as an electronic medium that could bridge geographic divides to build new artistic communities while processing personal and collective experiences.² This philosophy is manifest in her frequent artistic collaborations, including those with Fluxus artists and her short-lived multicultural collective Red, White, Yellow, and Black, as well as her own writings and video work, which often provocatively liken video’s electronic signals to the fluid properties of water.³ “The role of water in nature is comparable to the function of video in our life,”

Kubota writes. “In preindustrial times, rivers connected communities separated by long distances, spreading information faster than any other means. Today the electronic signals speed our messages and connect us globally.”⁴ Finally, when she was appointed the inaugural video art curator at Anthology Film Archives (AFA) in 1974, it was not only an important moment in the histories of video art, reifying video art’s status as artistic medium at such an early stage in its development, but also a meaningful and prescient acknowledgment of her role as a steward of the video art community.

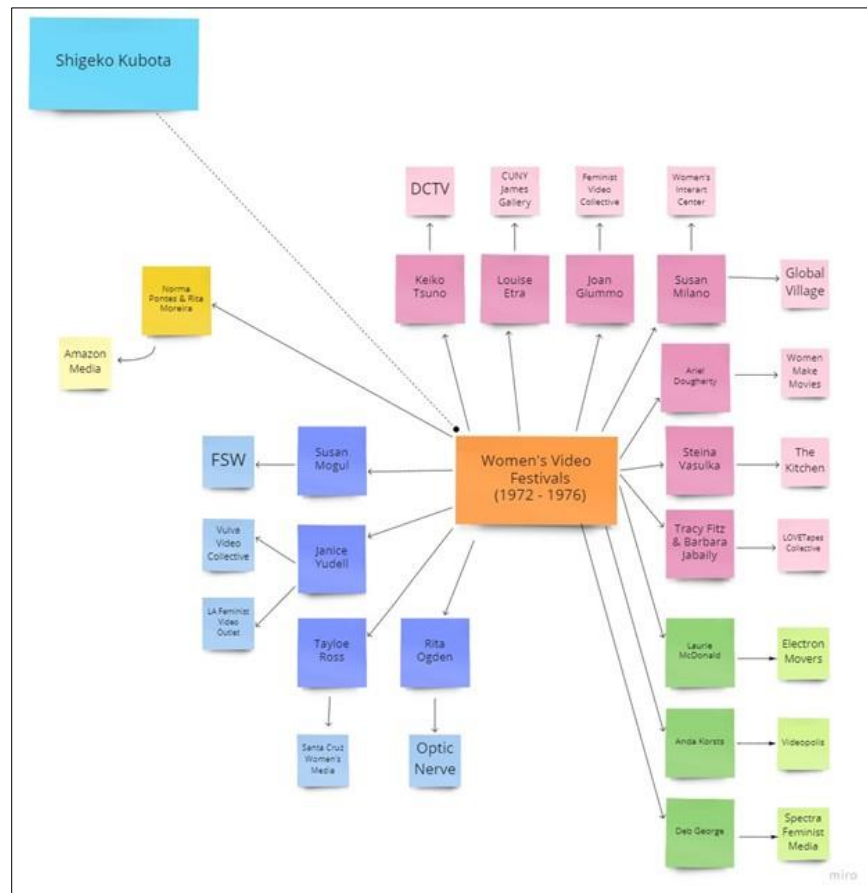


Fig. 2. “Women’s Video Festivals” node of *Shigeko Kubota Network Map*. Color-coded according to geographic locations, the map features artists who participated in the festivals and the video collectives and exhibition spaces they were associated with.

The original data for this project came from a series of interviews with video artists conducted for the digital archive of the Women’s Video Festivals (WVF).⁵ To mine the interviews for patterns, I transformed them into a word cloud, a simple data visualization which correlates the frequency of a term with size and highlights important text by making it larger. The frequency with which Kubota’s name appears in the interviews was one of the surprising results of this exercise and encouraged me to dig deeper. In collaboration with Lia Robinson of the Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation, I began mapping Kubota’s relationships to artists, collectives, and institutional spaces during the 1970s. The map, which is an ongoing project, has already highlighted several interesting connections. For instance, the node related to the Women’s Video Festivals (fig. 2) displays a burgeoning and intimately interconnected network of small artist spaces devoted to women’s video and film.

Kubota not only exhibited her own tapes during the festivals, but also, in coordination with the festivals' curator, Susan Milano, screened many of the tapes during her tenure at AFA and attempted to organize an international iteration of the festival in Japan. As the network map helps further unearth these connections, it will inevitably reveal the transformative role Kubota played in shepherding countless video artists, especially women of color.

Notes

¹ Nam June Paik is referred to as the "father" or "founder" of video art too widely in the literature to recite. For an important scholarly discussion of Paik and his writings, see, for example, John G. Hanhardt, Gregory Zinman, and Edith Decker-Phillips, eds., *We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

² Mayumi Hamada et al., "A Message from Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation," in *Viva Video: The Art and Life of Shigeko Kubota* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2021), 4.

³ For additional discussions of Kubota's collaborations, see Melinda Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 17, no. 4 (2000): 297–316; Emily Watlington, "Red, White, Yellow, Black: A Multiracial Feminist Video Collective, 1972–73," *Another Gaze*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.anothergaze.com/red-white-yellow-black-multiracial-feminist-video-collective-1972-73>; Midori Yoshimoto, "Fluxus Nexus: Fluxus in New York and Japan," *MoMA Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context*, July 9, 2013, <https://post.moma.org/fluxus-nexus-fluxus-in-new-york-and-japan>.

⁴ "Shigeko Kubota, 1976–79," in *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture*, ed. Mary Jane Jacob (New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), 43.

⁵ Founded by Steina Vasulka and organized by artist Susan Milano, the Women's Video Festivals (WVF) represent a significant, but largely forgotten, moment in feminist media. Originally hosted by the Kitchen during the early 1970s, the festivals were eventually moved to the now-defunct Women's Interart Center, a significant hub for feminist art and politics during the 1970s and 1980s in New York City. Featuring tapes, sculptures, and viewing environments created, produced, or directed by women, the WVF included work by influential video artists like Joan Jonas, Shigeko Kubota, and Susan Mogul, alongside more didactic and activist-oriented tapes by grassroots collectives and guerrilla television community groups.