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.” 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.

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). 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.

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.
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).


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.