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Red, White, Yellow, Black: A Multiracial Feminist Video Collective, 1972-73

On two nights – one in December 1972, the other April 1973 –

the multiracial, multimedia feminist art collective Red, White, Yellow, and Black put on what they called a “multimedia concert” at The Kitchen in New York City.[1] The collective was made up of four members who each represented a skin colour:

Red – Cecelia Sandoval, Navajo, storytelling
White – Mary Lucier, White American, slides and speech
Yellow – Shigeko Kubota, Japanese-American, video
Black – Charlotte Warren, African-American, music and movement[2]

The order of the colours was not consistently listed, though Red, White, Yellow, and Black is the most common configuration, meant to evoke the ‘red, white, and blue’ of the American flag. All of the seven works they made have since dematerialised. This essay recreates them in textual form, drawing on archival research, conversation, and cinema scholar Melinda Barlow’s account of the works.[3] I have not seen and cannot see the works themselves. I describe them both in order to preserve them, and to give a platform to an early example of multiracial feminist video art, pushing against the ephemeral nature of their chosen media, but also the frequency with which work by marginalised artists is passively erased when it is not

actively preserved.

Many women artists in the '60s and '70s picked up the video camera with optimism. This medium became relatively affordable when the Sony Portapak was introduced in 1967, and so video art flourished concurrently with the rise of second-wave feminism. Unburdened by history and thus patriarchal conventions, its capacity for live, instant feedback allowed women to image themselves rather than be depicted by men. This was the subject of bodies of work by artists like Friederike Pezold, Joan Jonas, Carolee Schneemann, Dara Birnbaum, and Martha Rosler. "For me," wrote Lucier, "it was fresh, and one felt it could be used as an experimental tool without accounting for a heavy history of great art to overcome or to learn from, unlike painting or even film. It felt free, and I felt free while using it. I felt that my colleagues and I were writing the book, so to speak, establishing the first parameters for creating and evaluating work."[4]

If none of the works by Red, White, Yellow, and Black have been preserved, then what do we make of this utopia? The group was no doubt doing exactly what Lucier claimed, and yet their names are marginalised within the discourse on video art,

their works no longer exhibited or extant.[5] Of course, a lot of media art has been lost from history, but this loss is especially disappointing when we think about their optimism. It is also disappointing when compared to the documentation supporting the equally experimental and ephemeral Sonic Arts Union, a contemporaneous experimental male music group. Kubota and Lucier travelled and collaborated with the group, accompanying the male artists they were married to at the time: Mary to Alvin Lucier and Kubota, briefly, to David Brehmen. I would normally avoid the trope of casting overlooked women artists as such, fearful it only reiterates their marginalised status by speaking of them as overlooked women artists rather than simply artists in their own right. However, cases like this one can be instructive, a way to look at the mechanisms through which racism and misogyny erase deserving works. Yes, video was an important mode of feminist expression around the 1970s, but many of these works no longer exist. Did video, then, fail to deliver its promise of liberation from patriarchal art historical values? In the case of Red, White, Yellow, and Black it isn't too late: several of the works could be restored or re-performed.

RED WHITE YELLOW & BLACK

The works were, of course, seen and surely made an impact at the time, if an unknowable one. But outdated formats have to be continually updated in order to be preserved and playable: many video formats, like two-inch tape, are nearly unplayable today because their playback machines are no longer made and largely in disrepair. Wendy Chun pithily calls this "updating to remain the same".[6] If some live works were taped, I have not been able to locate them. Others, like Kubota's video installation *Riverrun—Video Water Poem* (1972) need restoration (recreation of the ephemeral sculptural elements, and updated tapes) in order to be viewed again. Additionally, for preservation efforts to take place, works must be deemed as valuable and historically significant, thus worthy of monetary support.[7] It's a familiar narrative, but one important enough to repeat – the techno-utopian attitude which inspired and empowered women in many ways ultimately failed in the face of structural misogyny and racism. The works meant to empower

have been erased.

In this case – and with dematerialised, multimedia works by women in general – textual description is as an important site of preservation. So I want to perform what I'm arguing for, not only critiquing an absence and failure, but filling and remedying it as best I can with the available historical materials. It is, of course, still possible to restore some of the works themselves, which would be an incredible gesture.

December 1973

***Riverrun—Video Water Poem,* Shigeko Kubota**

This video installation was made up of six different channels. Four showed footage of rivers and canals Kubota shot during her European travels: the Seine, the Rhine, the Venice canal, the Amsterdam canal. A fifth showed New York's Hudson River. In front of the monitors, a fountain spewed orange juice, and on the sixth monitor was live, colour-synthesised footage of visitors drinking from it. The soundtrack excerpted readings of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, from which the piece takes its title. Water was a recurring theme in Kubota's work: she saw a relationship between the closed feedback loop of video and the cyclical flow of water, and often made reference to the significance of rivers in Buddhism, having come from a Buddhist family in Japan.[8]

Art historian Midori Yoshimoto claims that *Riverrun* was the "first of its kind. While video art pioneers like [Nam June] Paik experimented with single-channel video, none had explored the possibilities of using multiple video monitors along with other materials such as water."[9]

***Black Voices*, Charlotte Warren**

For her performance *Black Voices,* Warren combined both live and pre-recorded readings of works by Black poets including Langston Hughes, Jackie Earley, Mari Evans, and Nikki Giovanni. She was spot-lit against a black background.[10] Among the poems was Giovanni's 'Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis (October 16, 1970)', about Davis's arrest in New York after two months of evading the law, having been being put on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. "But the men who killed the children in Birmingham aren't on the most wanted list and the men who killed Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman aren't on the most wanted list and the list of names," Warren read. Davis was cast as a terrorist by the FBI, yet her supporters felt that the government should be indicted, not her, and so the poem asks who is the criminal really is.

***The Boston Strangler Was a Woman*, Mary Lucier**

Lucier likewise took on the subject of female criminality, prompting Barlow to interpret the collective's poster for the event – which shows all four women in profile in black-and-white – as a series of mugshots.[11] She spoke and performed drunk in front of 80 slides, stills that featured women criminals.

The slides were colored red, yellow, black and white, and also included images of cross-dressing men. When the Boston Strangler was on the loose, Lucier was a Brandeis student. She was told not to open the door to strange men. She made the piece soon after. What if, she thought, the strangler was a woman? Although it's true that the vast majority of violent crimes are committed by men, why not take women seriously as potential threats? Are women more likely to open the door to other women? Or perhaps the strangler – Albert DeSalvo, who killed 13 women in their homes – was able to get women to let him in by posing as a woman.

Lucier drew excerpts primarily from Cesare Lombroso's *The Female Offender* (1895), a horribly offensive text that tries to prove criminality is biological, stating that women who did not look traditionally feminine, such as redheads, Native American women, black women, lesbians, and women with sharp cheekbones or jawlines were more threatening.[12] She also drew from Otto Pollak's *The Criminality of Women* (1950), and *500 Delinquent Women* (1934) by Sheldon and Elanor T. Glueck. All of these texts try to grapple with what makes a woman commit crimes, as if criminal behaviour is utterly contrary to

feminine nature. By being publicly drunk while reading from these primarily male-authored texts on the enigma of the criminal woman, Lucier herself transcended the confines of 'ladylike' behaviour.

> *She was reputed chaste. She was a harlot. She was promiscuous. She was married twice. She was believed to be a lesbian. She became an alcoholic. She had thick hair and a heavy jaw. She had a good sense of humor. She had fits of violent anger. She looks like a man. She had prominent cheekbones. She had a deep voice. She was beautiful. She was often depressed.*

The contradictions created by the intermixing of these texts – she "was reputed chaste," but also a "harlot" – reveal a general fear of women, but especially women of colour and women with masculine or androgynous characteristics.

As she read these descriptions, another performer transcribed, on an overhead projector, De Salvo's graphic description of strangling Sophie Clark: his sole Black victim, a 20-year-old student.

Telephone Song, Cecilia Sandoval

This piece was meant to be a live, long-distance phone call from the Navajo reservation in Chinle, Arizona.[13] However, technical difficulties prevented the performance from happening.

April 1973

The Occasion of Her First Dance and How She Looked, Cecilia Sandoval and Mary Lucier

Sandoval described episodes from her life, factual and fictional, to Lucier, who read them in the third person. As Lucier narrated, Sandoval changed outfits to match the scenes, as well as to express both her masculine and feminine characteristics. She sung and spoke in Navajo, inviting audience members to dance with her as a "mournful refrain of a country-western ballad" played.[14]

The scenes described include her life-long fantasy of having a wedding at a baseball stadium, dressed in a baseball uniform. Another is her first dance: she wore red, and danced with a girl and a man. She also talked about her refusal to participate in

Kinaalda, a Navajo ceremony that girls traditionally participate in when they first menstruate. Sandoval refused because she interpreted the ceremony as being less about the girl herself than as signalling her as "available, on the market, of child-bearing age, marriable."[15] During the ceremony, mothers teach daughters what is expected from them to be good wives and mothers. In fact, as Barlow notes, one anthropological study quotes the artist's own mother, Augusta Sandoval, as saying that Cecelia will be pleased to go through Kinaalda when she comes of age.[16] Sandoval was bi-racial, and struggled to fully identify or be accepted by both her indigenous community and white America. The performance, then, complicates neat categories of both ethnicity and gender.

All this was set against a backdrop of slides and video. Three slide projectors, stacked vertically, showed images of Native American women, and cross-dressing men. An arrangement of monitors showed ghostly images of indigenous dancers, including footage Lucier shot of Sandoval, of an indigenous fashion show, and of a pow wow. The image was purposefully degraded after being copied multiple times. The images and the traditions they represent are thus both preserved and blurred.

***Video Fortune-Telling*, Shigeko Kubota**

Kubota's work similarly deals with her reckoning with her culture's coming-of-age rituals. The artist moved from Japan to the United States at age 26. The idea was planted in her mind after a concert in Tokyo by John Cage and David Tudor, and was also suggested by founding member of Fluxus, George Maciunas. She made the decision after consulting a fortune teller.[17] Twenty-six is the age at which women would traditionally fulfill their arranged marriages and become *ryōsai kenbo,* good wives and wise mothers. The four-channel video showed two channels of Cage and Tudor's *Birdcage*, performed at SUNY Albany the year prior. It "may", according to Kubota's memory in 1997, have also included close-ups of the two men playing chess.[18] The third showed diaristic depictions of quotidian scenes from Kubota's life, like eating breakfast or reading a book. As in *Riverrun*, the final was a live-feed: this time, showing footage of Kubota reading visitors' palms. The work captures Kubota's recurring themes of chess, male avant-garde heroes, and spirituality.[19]

Basic Black, Charlotte Warren

This piece was a dance; no documentation could be found.

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1. ***The order of the colours is not consistently listed in the archival material nor secondary sources, though "Red, White, Yellow, and Black" is the most common configuration, meant to mimic the "red, white, and blue" of the American flag.*** 2. *Mary Lucier. Letter to Charlotte Warren, Shigeko Kubota, and Cecilia Sandoval. October 15, 1972. Mary Lucier Personal Archive.* 3. ***Melinda Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History,"* Quarterly Review of Film & Video *17 no. 4 (2000).*** 4. *Barlow uses the term "multiculturalism," and it's true that cultural perspective are significant, but I use "multiracial," since the group's name is derived from skin color and all share a version of American culture.* 5. ***Tanya Zimbardo with Mary Lucier,***

"Sun Cycles," in **VoCA Journal**, *March 7, 2019.* 6. *While writing this article, two interviews with Mary Lucier were published that focus on her practice but also discuss the collective: one with Alex Klein in* BOMB, *and another with Tanya Zimbardo in* Voices on Contemporary Art. *The interviews came on the heels of her inclusion in* 'Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995', *on view at MIT List Visual Arts Center and Sculpture Center, New York. I served as curatorial research assistant for this exhibition, which also included Shigeko Kubota.* 7. ***Wendy Chun,*** **Updating to Remain the Same**, ***Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.*** 8. *Kubota's work is well-managed by the Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation, though this does not compare to the estate of her husband, Nam June Paik. Lucier now has gallery representation (Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.); she also has an expansive archive which she has maintained herself. Neither Warren nor Sandoval were pursuing careers as professional artists. This is one way in which the models of Electronic Arts Intermix and Video Data Bank can be and have been able to counter this*

occurrence. 9. ***Mary Jane Jacob, ed.,*** **Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture,** ***New York: American Museum of The Moving Image, 1991, 41. This piece could still be restored today, however museums have become increasingly unfriendly to orange juice consumption within their galleries.*** 10. *Midori Yoshimoto,* Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, *New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002, 188.* 11. ***It may have also included a video component. Melinda Barlow, p. 305.*** 12. *Melinda Barlow, p. 299.* 13. ***Cesare Lombroso,*** **The Female Offender,** ***Philosophical Library, 1958. Originally, 1896*** 14. *This is also the site where Kubota shot 'Video Girls' and 'Video Songs for Navajo Sky' (1973).* 15. ***Melinda Barlow, p.313.*** 16. *Sandoval quoted in Melinda Barlow, p.311.* 17. ***Charlotte Johnson Frisbie,*** **Kinaalda: A Study of the Navajo Girl's Puberty Ceremony,** ***Salt Lake City: University of Utah Pres, 1967: 390-391.*** 18. *Synopsis translation by Solha Kim of My Love, Nam June Paik by Shigeko Kubota. Unpublished. n.p.* 19. ***Barlow's 1997 unpublished interview with Kubota referenced in:***

Melinda Barlow, p. 309.

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