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 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ArtSeen

Red, White, Yellow, and Black: 1972–73

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Installation view: *Red, White, Yellow, and Black: 1972-73*, The Kitchen at Westbeth, New York, 2023. Photo: Jason Mandella.

ON VIEW

The Kitchen

Red, White, Yellow, and Black: 1972–73

March 7–April 29, 2023

New York

Born amid the efflorescence of women’s artist collectives and cooperatives in the 1970s, Red, White, Yellow, and Black was a short-lived coalition of four women who held “multimedia concerts” at The Kitchen—then located on Mercer Street—on December 16, 1972, and April 20–21, 1973. The name Red, White, Yellow, and Black riffed on the “red, white, and blue” of the US flag as it foregrounded the distinct ethnicities of the group’s members, who were Native American (Navajo), white, Japanese, and Black. (Such evocations likely nodded to the controversial poster for the early racially integrated exhibition *War Babies* at Huysman Gallery

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in Los Angeles in 1961, in which four [male] artists using an American flag as a tablecloth satirically embodied the country's ethnic and religious stereotypes.) The members of the coalition, not all of whom identified as visual artists, were Cecilia Sandoval (b. 1951), a recent high school graduate assisting in Wesleyan's World Music Department; Mary Lucier (b. 1944), who was then largely working with photography and performance; Shigeko Kubota (1937–2015), a video artist who had come out of Fluxus; and Charlotte Warren-Huey (b. 1932), a writer with an interest in avant-garde performance who had just returned to New York from Belgium.

Across the two concerts, *Red, White, Yellow, and Black* presented seven experimental works that spanned performance, video, sculpture, photography, and text—and to varying extents, took on thematics of identity. In light of the (inbuilt and incidental) ephemerality of the works and a dearth of documentation, the storied concerts were primarily preserved through the writings of feminist video art scholars. Co-curated by Lumi Tan and Lia Robinson, *Red, White, Yellow, and Black: 1972–73* ambitiously revisits and revives the group's legacy beyond the page, interspersing archival material in vitrines or on partitions with several restaged works. In an instance of time folding in on itself, the exhibition is being held—five decades after the original concerts—at The Kitchen's temporary home in Westbeth, where Kubota also happened to have had a studio. "It's then, and it's also now," Warren-Huey remarked in an associated panel discussion with the coalition's living members.¹



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The graphic black-and-white poster advertising the first concert offers a Delphic overview of the work presented there: “TELEPHONE WATER VIDEO SONG SLIDES SPEECH.” It is printed with images of the artists’ faces in profile; the resemblance to police photographs perhaps serves as a reclamation of “outlaw status,” as Melinda Barlow writes², or a reference to Lucier’s contribution to the concert, *Red Herring Journal: The Boston Strangler Was a Woman* (1972), which paired slides of women criminals (tinted red, yellow, white, or black) with physiognomic descriptions excerpted from texts on female criminality. Lucier’s script and slides are included in the archival materials on view.

Among the ephemera, there is a preponderance of written correspondence, some of which is enclosed in envelopes. The letters sketch out relationships between the group members or gesture to the wider avant-garde circles of which they were part, and intermittently contain brief references to the concerts. While the significance of all-women networks at the time bears highlighting, and archival materials that can seem superfluous often play a critical role in art historical reconstruction, redundancy in this arena risks reading as a lack of curation in an exhibition context—particularly in a show that already skews text-heavy, featuring scripts, scores, clippings, programs, pamphlets, transcripts, and press releases.

The three reconstructed works, two of which hail from the first concert, have an animating effect. In *From the Black Experience: Black Voices* (1972/2023), here presented in the form of printed text and audio recordings, Warren-Huey reads poems by prominent Black poets associated with the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The exhibition compellingly intersperses poems from the original reading, like those by Mari Evans, with poems by contemporary writers such as Kevin Young and Nikky Finney. Kubota’s video installation *Riverrun – Video Water Poem* (1972/2023), which also features in sketches, is beautifully restaged with the Hudson River in view. Likening the flow of water to that of electronic communication, the piece consists of a line of video monitors depicting rivers and canals that Kubota encountered while traveling in Europe, as well as her local river, the Hudson. (In drawing out the similarities among and differences between distinct bodies of water, *Riverrun* perhaps also obliquely reflects the coalition’s approach to race at the time of the work’s conception.) Viewers, captured in ersatz colors on closed-circuit video feeds, were originally invited to ritualistically enter the installation’s wet network by drinking from a small fountain spouting orange juice; in the contemporary iteration, the “orange liquid [is] not meant for public consumption.”³

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Tacked to a partition, the poster for the second concert depicts the women sitting around a circular table, their faces blurred by motion. “VIDEO TALK DANCING FASHION STORY PALMS,” the announcement reads. Lucier’s and Sandoval’s *The Occasion of Her First Dance and How She Looked* (1973/2023), a labyrinthine multimedia work in which Sandoval grapples with her identity as a biracial Navajo woman, is delineated by a floor plan, a script, a score, and a partial restaging. The reconstructed piece includes, among other elements, a stage with a roped-off section; black-and-white video showing thrice-copied and thus degraded images of a Native American fashion show at a New York YMCA; and rear-projected slides of Native American women holding fruit and Native American and Black men dressed in female-coded clothing. In the original iteration, Lucier recited a dream that Sandoval had recounted to her, and Sandoval danced with men and women to country music. In the restaged version, it is the 1971 country duet “Lead Me On” and a recording of Lucier’s voice sharing Sandoval’s stories—of a red dress, murderous horses, a wedding at a baseball stadium—that remains. The only collaborative piece in the coalition’s repertoire, the work is all the more beautiful for having been made together; perhaps it indicates a direction in which the coalition might have evolved.

But the coalition didn’t evolve: the group, which was loose knit to begin with, dissolved after the 1973 concert. Kubota and Lucier found deserved success as trailblazing video artists, Warren-Huey became an educator and counselor, and Sandoval joined the US army and entered nursing.

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Though the panel discussion framed feminism as a buzzword, *Red, White, Yellow, and Black* was feminism in practice. So is the effort put forward by the show: to sift through ephemera, restage artworks, reconvene group members, and obtain oral histories, all for the sake of fleshing out what never should have been missing from art history in the first place.

1. Panel Conversation, *Red, White, Yellow, and Black: 1972–73*, The Kitchen, March 11, 2023
2. Melinda Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 2000
3. Exhibition Notes, *Red, White, Yellow, and Black: 1972–73*, The Kitchen, 2023