

CRISTIN TIERNEY

ARTFORUM



Mary Lucier and Cecilia Sandoval, *The Occasion of Her First Dance and How She Looked (detail)*, 1973/2023, video (black-and-white, 28 minutes 2 seconds), digital slide projections, voiceover by Mary Lucier (10 minutes 11 seconds), costume, two chairs, two velvet stanchions; featuring the song “Lead Me On” by Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn (1972). Photo: Jason Mandella.

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

THE KITCHEN

Limned by reflections of a low sun off the Hudson River, the Kitchen’s temporary gallery at 163B Bank Street in New York offered a perfect foil to the

black-box ambience of the institution's permanent space, which is currently under renovation. A row of eight-foot-high, west-facing windows cast a flush of late-afternoon light into the fourth-story loft at Westbeth, a Bell Laboratories building renovated by Richard Meier in 1970 when it became housing for artists. Echoing the space's external fenestration was a diagonal arrangement of ten cathode-ray tube televisions showing grainy footage of waterways, including the aforementioned river. A stack of three additional monitors nearby supplied a live feed of viewers near the installation's centerpiece: a plastic fountain continuously cycling synthetic orange juice.

This kitschy tribute to George Maciunas by Shigeko Kubota—the artist Maciunas dubbed “vice president of Fluxus”—was originally a participatory element in Kubota's first multimedia installation, *Riverrun—Video Water Poem*, 1972. The work is an artifact from one of three multimedia performances Kubota staged between 1972 and 1973 in cooperation with Mary Lucier, Cecilia Sandoval, and Charlotte Warren-Huey at the institution's original Greenwich Village space (the Mercer Arts Center's “kitchen,” from which it derives its name). Documenting the short-lived intersection of their practices in the early '70s with correspondence and ephemera, the Kitchen's current exhibition also re-created several time-based works that debuted at the ad hoc collective's three “environmental concerts.”

“Space separation is more important than time separation,” Lucier wrote to her collaborators in an October 1972 letter on view. Simultaneity, rather than sequence, characterized the group's first public convening in December of that year, when they were scheduled to present four individual but overlapping works: Kubota's installation, presentations by Lucier and Warren-Huey comprising images and speech, and a planned (though technically compromised) song that Sandoval was to perform remotely by phone from a Navajo reservation in Arizona. (In 1973, Sandoval would collaborate with Lucier to make *The Occasion of Her First Dance and How She Looked*, whose script and reconstructed set—including video feeds, projected photographs, chairs, and a hanging red dress—anchored the north side of Westbeth's gallery.) A half century later, the synchronous but separate approach of the artists' collaboration was echoed in the structure of this display.

The cadre's graphic identity cohered in a 1972 poster for their first concert. Photographed in profile, the artists' faces are aligned along a horizontal axis and respectively labeled WHITE, BLACK, RED, & YELLOW in a bold sans-serif font. Subtly alluding to a police lineup, or what the British call an “identity parade,” its design also coincided with elements of the event advertised, such as Warren's reading of “Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis”

(1970), written by Nikki Giovanni after its namesake was added to the FBI's Most Wanted List, as well as Lucier's *Red Herring Journal: The Boston Strangler Was a Woman*, 1972. In this "lecture-demonstration," Lucier orated, while drinking heavily, a textual pastiche of criminal records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Displayed here in print, they read like a mutating profile of antiquated social pathologies: SHE WAS A HARLOT. SHE HAD SUNKEN EYES AND A RECEDING CHIN. SHE WAS OFTEN DEPRESSED. SHE WAS UNINDUSTRIOUS AND A PAUPER. SHE LOOKS LIKE A MAN. The spoken inventory accompanied a slideshow (shown here on a light box) of black-and-white mug shots, some with backgrounds tinted yellow or red. The work destabilized verbal and visual systems of criminological identification, alluding to photography's historical applications for classifying subjects according to physiognomic traits. Perhaps as a formal rejoinder to the stark typology conjured, however archly, by their initial image, the poster for the group's second concert instead shows them in casual company around a kitchen table. Here their conviviality outpaces the camera's shutter speed, leaving facial details a blur.

"I heard the Kitchen has to move out after this June," Kubota wrote in a letter leading up to the show's final two concerts in April 1973, just months before the building that housed the original Kitchen collapsed. The coalition disbanded at a transitory moment in the institution's own history—and their resurrection now comes amid similar circumstances.

— *Kaegan Sparks*