

Shigeko Kubota: *River*

By Ida Pruitt, March 7, 2019

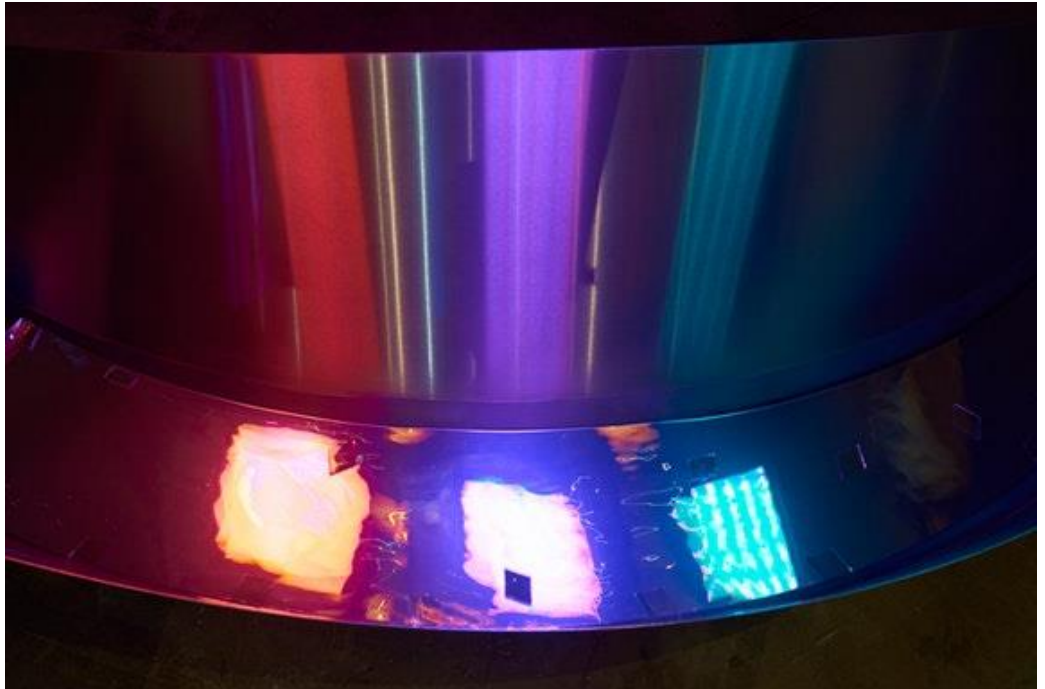


Shigeko Kubota, *River*, 1979–81. Three-channel color video installation with steel trough, mirrors, motor, and water, 32:17 min. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation, New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

In Shigeko Kubota's *River* (1979–81), a curved, stainless steel trough is a vessel for flowing water. Reflected in it are videos from three CRT cube monitors suspended face-down from above. The screens—which, hung at eye level, the viewer must observe with a bend of the back and upward turn of the head—play videos of Kubota swimming. The images are just barely discernible as such: modified by colorful, frenetic filters, and a bold use of basic geometric shapes like stars and hearts, they tend more towards the abstract. The water below serves as yet another filter; it chops them into dapples of colored light. Though silent, the videos are accompanied by the mechanical whirring of the wave motor and sound of turbulent water.

Last fall, this work was staged at SculptureCenter as part of the exhibition *Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974 – 1995*. All eleven pieces in the show used CRT monitors, although in *River*, the monitors act more like projectors. They send video to a receiving surface, the rippling water, that stands in for a screen. In this way, Kubota creates a cinematic setup where an image is thrown at a screen, but with unconventional substitutions. Her answer to the cinematic problem of how to convey a moving image is therefore markedly sculptural, if the essence of sculpture is objects standing in for what

they're not. While the technologies necessary for the display of moving images generally do not carry meaning beyond their function, Kubota turns the monitors into sculptural objects by using them as projectors and imbuing them with metaphor. The monitors, as well as the motor, embody natural processes, and video is the aspect that allies machine with nature.



Shigeko Kubota, *River*, 1979–81. Three-channel color video installation with steel trough, mirrors, motor, and water, 32:17 min. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation, New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

The wave motor on one end of the trough churns the water and simulates the coursing of a river. Its cyclical, repetitive motion stands in contrast to the irregular waves it produces. When Kubota's videos are mirrored on the water's surface, they are subject to this elemental instability, no longer held within the controlled environment of the monitors. But far from drawing attention to their differences, the adjacency of water and video reveals their likeness. The two move in harmony, the waves further animating the video images. Video becomes liquid and liquid becomes a transmitter for the moving image, giving sculptural form to the association between flowing water and the dissemination of media.



Shigeo Kubota, *River*, 1979–81. Three-channel color video installation with steel trough, mirrors, motor, and water, 32:17 min. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Shigeo Kubota Video Art Foundation, New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

In the same instance, the reflection brings to mind sunlight hitting a river. The metaphor of the sun attaches itself easily to the cube monitors' bulging forms, which—relative to their ultra-thin, modern counterparts—hang from the ceiling with a cosmic weight. As monitors do, the sun conveys images, albeit through the interplay of light and surfaces rather than electron beams. The strength of the sun is cyclical, shifting in response to the earth's rotation and orbit, just as the videos play on a cyclical loop of 32 minutes and 17 seconds. The fact of their looping isn't extraordinary in itself, but in *River*, it becomes a way of measuring time. The beginning of a new cycle is akin to the sun's appearance in the east. Loops pass by like solar days, equating the movement of video with that of astronomical objects. Kubota links time-based media back to the very origin of humanity's conception of time. If time did not exist without a means of measuring it, then there would be no precedent for video.