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"Worlding"¹ Love, Gender and Care. Shigeko Kubota's 'Sexual Healing'

The presentation will world issues of love, gender and care with regard to constructions of authorial subjectivity that, since the early 1960s, have marked many collaborative constellations of the Fluxus network. As an art-historically framed case study, it explores the video 'Sexual Healing' (1998, 4:10 min.) by the pioneering female Japanese video artist Shigeko Kubota (1937-2015). The work presents a disturbingly personal document that troubles not only Kubota's own visual archive – aptly called 'video diary' – in motivic and aesthetic regards but the different ways in which Kubota and her husband, the Korean-born Nam June Paik (1932-2006), have been canonised as individuals; i.e. primarily in the downplaying or ignoring of what was a shared (artistic) life of over four decades, spanning Japan, Korea, Germany and the USA, which contributed to such different, but entangled phenomena as nascent new media art and feminist discourse.

The video comes across as ambivalent since Kubota has verbally framed it as an attestation to her on-going love and care for an aged and ailing, but good-humoured Paik, who, she says, would still be attractive in the eyes of younger women. Far from subscribing to this simple narrative, the work shows – mercilessly – how Paik struggles with his physical therapy, helped by several young female caretakers. The underlying eponymous pop song by Marvin Gaye

¹ 'Worlding' is a critical practice used to grapple with the complexities of globalization and transnationalism by acknowledging the problematic limits and impacts of modern Eurocentric epistemologies that have informed artistic practice as well as scholarly discourse worldwide following imperial and colonial expansions.

thus works to ironically deconstruct the implied 'sex appeal' of Paik, whose semi-paralysed body means that he can literally not 'get up, get up' by himself. This is in line with the well-known ironic strategies that also marked Kubota's earliest Fluxus-related works, critically addressing notions of romantic love and questioning stereotypes of the female body/femininity. However, the film also reinforces the utterly sexist lyrics of the song, as the video repeatedly shows Paik abruptly kissing and even slapping his caretakers, who – more or less amused – are focused on the physically demanding task of moving his limbs.

Situating the late work of Kubota in the minefield that Fluxus collaboration often actually constituted, despite its members sharing the aim of working together equally as they fused life and art, prompts us to re-visit an art historical canonisation riddled with gender, cultural and institutional hierarchies as well as the long-standing epistemological boundaries of the discipline. What can we learn by taking the highly personal, embarrassing, encroaching, but also ironic, touching and caring aspects of 'Sexual Healing' into account? How can we world art historical canonisation so that it allows us to discern "textures of affect and [...] different modes of knowledge beyond that of our scholarship – the artistic, the everyday and non-professional"² to write (global) art history in a more personal, intimately situated and transcultural way?

² Monica Juneja, 'A very civil idea... Art history and transculturation with and beyond the nation,' in *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*, ed. Laila Abu-Er-Rub et al. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 293–316, 310.