Beryl Korot, interviewed by Laura Amann

Laura Amann: Your work *Text and Commentary* (1976–7) is now considered a pivotal work, establishing a dialogue between weaving techniques and video. Equally, weaving techniques are now understood to constitute the earliest precursor of computation and programming. I am curious what the reception and critique of this work was like in 1977, when you first exhibited it? And what did you want to communicate to the viewer?

Beryl Korot: How do we know anything? When I began working on *Text and Commentary* I was thinking about the Book of Genesis, the ur-text of the Western world, and wondering how people read it. Is it read in a linear fashion as a single book or with multiple commentaries? I had already realised that communications media like print, video and weaving all encrypt information in lines, though at very different speeds. This was astonishing to me since it brought the ancient and the modern worlds into direct dialogue and was a true expression of how we have constructed our communication tools over thousands of years. Here I wove the text with each of the different media translating the exact same information but within the limitations of each.

Multiple channel work was experientially new to people at that time. It forced the viewer out of the living room into a public space to view. There wasn't much discussion at the time about how the loom was the first computer or that pattern was created from numbers. Tricia Vita, writing for the *Feminist Art Journal*, wondered how something as prosaic as weaving could be fascinating. Jeff Perrone wrote in *Artforum* that 'all converged little by little, after close scrutiny, creating a unified work which reflected a larger reach of human time—from primitive loom to modern video'.[1]

LA: Your work has – I would say – generally a more oblique approach to programming and computing, as it investigates how language has been encoded through time, whether through print media, through video or on a weaving loom; still, I wonder what was the impact of the computer on your practice?

BK: In the early multiple channel works recorded and edited on magnetic reel-to-reel tape, the precision of my editing technique was almost as exact as a computer using just a grease pencil, stopwatch and very good hand-eye coordination. In 1989, I began working on a video opera called *The Cave* with my husband, the composer Steve Reich. In this opera the video created the entire mise en scène, literally the stage set, which was projected onto five large screens placed above and around the performers. The music and video were created from our pre-recorded field work. Synchronising the music and video with the live musicians and singers on stage could not have happened without the computer both in the performance of the work and in its actual creation. In the course of the work, each on-screen individual was embedded in a visual or aural portrait of themselves in perfect sync. Our adjoining studios at home were wired to connect our computers so that I could receive music from Steve's computer, look at the score with its SMPTE timecode and know exactly where I wanted to place my images. In a later work, and others to follow, including another opera, the ability to bring film and video footage, text and drawings, all within a single frame became crucial to my work.

LA: In the magazine *Radical Software*, which inspired the title of the exhibition and of which you were a founding editor, you were looking into media ecology, meaning how communication media affect human perception, understanding, value and feeling. What were your observations and perhaps reservations back then, but also your hopes for future developments of new media and its effect on humans? To what extent does that differ from the way they actually developed?

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[1] Jeff Perrone, 'Review: Beryl Korot Castelli Gallery', *Artforum*, vol. 15, no. 9 (May 1977).

BK: The two key words at the time in transforming and humanising the information environment were access and decentralisation. We had a theatre in our loft where people could come and view videotapes that had been made that very day.

In our current information environment it's hard to imagine a time when that wasn't possible. When Sony introduced the Portapak in 1965, the information environment was dominated by newspapers, magazines and broadcast television. There was a one-way flow of information and control of information from broadcaster to viewer at home. We had faith that through decentralisation people would be empowered to express a greater diversity of opinions and expressions of human concerns than was possible within the existing corporate structure. We even believed cable television with its additional channels would increase access to individuals and communities.

In the early 2000s, as we all became attached to our cell phones and computers, I began to feel strongly that the necessary dialogue concerning these powerful tools was not taking place. Where was the new *Radical Software* critique? People embraced the information highway with open arms, but there was little or no critique of the information environment and its colossal impact on our lives. And we are embarking to the new world of artificial intelligence before any of this has been sorted out.

LA: The labour of weaving and computing has been traditionally considered to be female, as it was regarded as tedious and laborious, hence not interesting enough for men. Was it important for you to position yourself and your work, which created these fascinating connections between seemingly disparate media, within the feminist discourse?

BK: Weaving in the West was not given the stature it deserved, visually or intellectually. It was relegated to the category of craft as apart from art, a distinction not made in non-Western cultures. It was crucial for me to look at the loom as a sophisticated technology, the first computer, and dispel the demeaning notion of women's work while shining a spotlight on a tool that impacted all aspects of human industry, commerce and culture.

LA: A recurring motif within your work is the construction of the Tower of Babel and the unity of language, but also translation of different types of languages (written, visual, pictographic) from one medium to another while also often 'confusing' or 'obstructing' its legibility – similar to the actual narrative of the Tower of Babel – what did this process reveal or mean to you?

BL: I sometimes joke that I was brought up in the Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Whenever we visited the Met when I was a kid I ended up in that wing staring at the written symbols.

In the Babel text in Genesis, bitumen is the new technology which is the 'slime' that binds the bricks to build the ziggurats and to build cities. There is a shift from a God-centred world to a human-centred world. The commentators ask whether the bricks themselves have become more essential than the human beings who make them.

In 1980 I hand-wove my first canvas and invented a visual language based on a four-point grid structure to retell the story of Babel. It was an analogue to the Roman alphabet. In a later video and print work, *Babel: The 7 Minute Scroll* (2006–07)*,* this language made of black squares was reconceived so that the squares became windows into which I drew the Babel narrative. The work implies that there are many languages for describing the world. Does it necessitate confusion, or simply reveal a greater richness which in time suggests a more comprehensive understanding?