BERYL KOROT IN A CONVERSATION WITH HARRY PHILBRICK

Beryl Korot's work reflects her wide ranging intellect as well as her deeply poetic yearnings for the solitude and splendor of what she terms the interior landscape. Drawing on multiple sources from across the spectrum of language and technology she is capable of drawing together very disparate things into a cohesive whole. The Talmud; a rain storm; a bull frog closely observed performing on a summer pond in the morning, weaving and the development of the computer; the languages of Babel—these are just some of the things you will find in this body of recent work.

These varied and disparate sources are the source material for beautiful and elegant work that unfolds over time. Korot is a master of *time* in art; few in time-based media have as fine a control of the passage of time as she does.

Korot uses language as a structure and as a material to be manipulated and abstracted. Language and text have informed her thinking about the structure and form of her visual art over the arc of her career.

As an artist Korot has worked on videos, paintings, and prints; she has also collaborated on complex music and video projects, and, early in her career, on the pioneering journal *Radical Software*. This background in the development of video as an artform, and her long involvement in both the art and music worlds informs her art practice. As you can see from the interview below, conducted via email in August, 2011, Beryl Korot is an articulate and knowledgeable thinker. And as you can see from the work in this exhibition, she is a brilliant and accomplished artist.

It was my great pleasure to get to know Beryl whilst working on her exhibition at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in 2010 that included a number of the works on view here.

Harry Philbrick
Director, Pennsylvania Academy of the
Fine Arts Museum

As an artist you have a rich history of collaborating, from your early involvement with *Radical Software* to your collaborations with your husband, the composer Steve Reich, on such projects as *The Cave* and *Three Tales*.

With this recent body of work you return to a solo practice. Yet you are still, in a sense, working with collaborators. These new collaborators range from Florence Nightingale to a performative bull frog.

Can you comment on why, or how, your creative process has, at various points in your career, led you to work with other voices?

Final two sequences in Dachau 1974

When working with collaborators from other eras, or other species, do they spark your process, or do they serve to further a vision you already have?

Ideas and intuition have always driven me before "I see." What draws me to specific ideas is the bedrock of my work, but then of equal importance is the visible structures I create to present those ideas. In a traditional sense, there were 2 collaborative periods, *Radical Software,* where I was very active for about 3 years, and the period of time working with Steve which spanned a decade. But it was *Radical Software* and the two video installations that followed that layed the groundwork for so much of what's come since.

In the late 1960's, early 1970's I was fortunate to be surrounded by a group of very talented thinkers and pioneering video artists. As the co-editor of a magazine (with Phyllis Gershuny Segura) which was in a sense the ground zero of information exchange about the new video medium and how people were using it, we were in a unique position both to learn about what was going on and to aid in the dissemination of information about it. (And, by the way, as artists we also physically put the paper together.) What people sent to us about their experiments was what appeared in the magazine, and it was a highly engaged group of people submitting material. And I took seriously the notion that new formats for conveying information were as important as people having access to these new tools to convey that information. And that has stayed with me.

I was particularly drawn to the multiple channel work being created at that time, specifically the work of Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette, and Davidson Gigliotti. The multiple channel format offered a true alternative to broadcast television. To view such work people had to leave their living rooms and come to a public space. Through the juxtaposition of monitors one could expand the relatively small tv image, play with timed relationships between them, and introduce live feedback and time delays to add presence to the viewer/object relationship.

Years later when I began to work with Steve on *The Cave,* the sense of creating a theatre of ideas for presenting information to a captive audience was intriguing. Unlike museum audiences, the theatre audience expects to sit and have something revealed over time. My works had always been tightly conceived non-verbal narratives based on weaving structures (the loom being the visual forerunner of all thinking about multiples and the
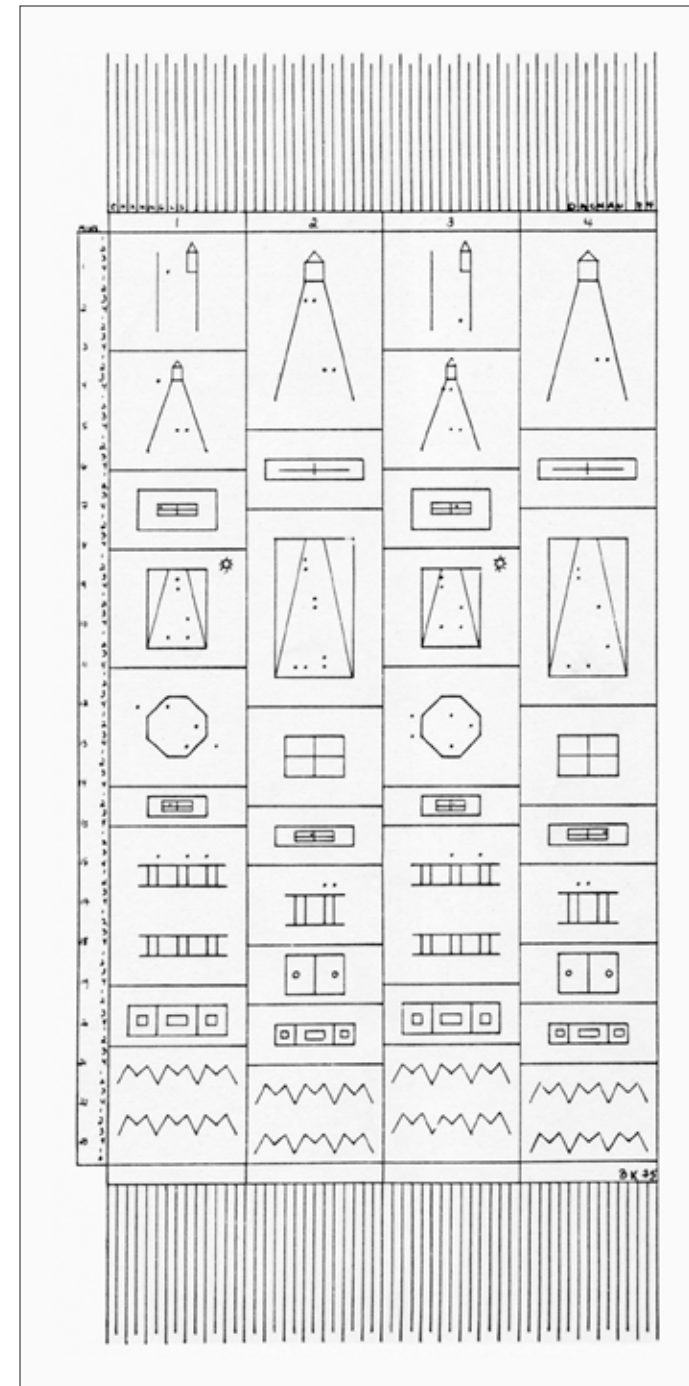

Dachau 1974 structural diagram

precursor of the modern day computer). Early works *Dachau 1974* and *Text and Commentary* were 25 minutes and 35 minutes respectively. That was demanding for most museum goers. But I drew on these works for the basic editing structure and onstage placement structure of the 5 video screens, which in turn provided the mise en scène for the entire work, as well as the physical set built to house the musicians and singers. The pictographic drawings of the early video works became for me a clue to the stylized movements of the singers onstage which was developed by our stage director. So many elements in the early work manifested onstage in a new way with a team of people helping that vision come to life. As far as working with Steve, we both knew our territory which complemented and did not impinge on the other, and we created a method of working on small bits of time separately back and forth in creating this 2 hour work over a period of 4 years. We also shared a keen interest in the subject matter so there was a true meeting of minds. This was true with *Three Tales* as well, but finally with *Three Tales* the complexity with which one could construct an image was now possible on a single canvas inside the computer.

You mention *Florence* and 'the frog.' Well, just a quick word on froggie. He definitely emerged from the water to sing for me that day. I suppose I was very quiet, visiting the pond early mornings for many days, and he felt he could do that. And in fact I was looking for him. It was definitely a good moment, and of course unplanned. But with Florence it was actually the first time that I can remember that a purely visual experience elicited a work, though there were events surrounding the work which made me think of her.

I was sitting at the computer creating a weaving of moving time from snowstorms and waterfalls which I had collected in the previous year. While watching and listening to this image her name occurred to me and I wanted to know more. So being online I went to Amazon, ordered a bunch of books, and several days later they arrived. I then discovered the person behind the cliché and became totally immersed in her words, soon
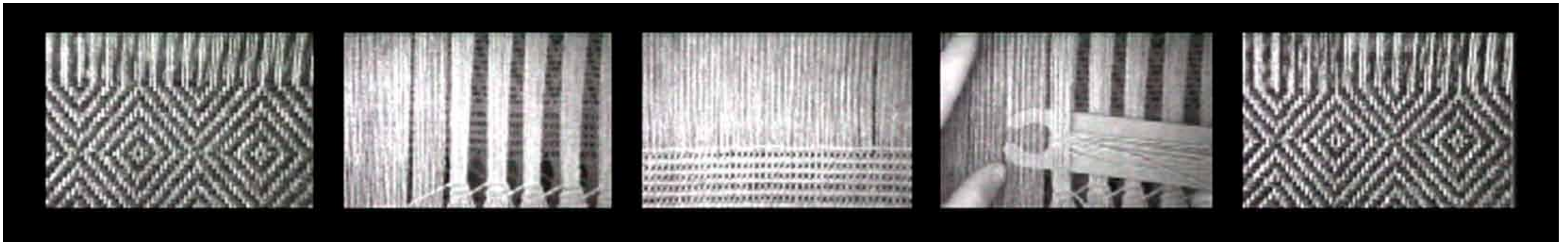
5 channel sequence for Text and Commentary
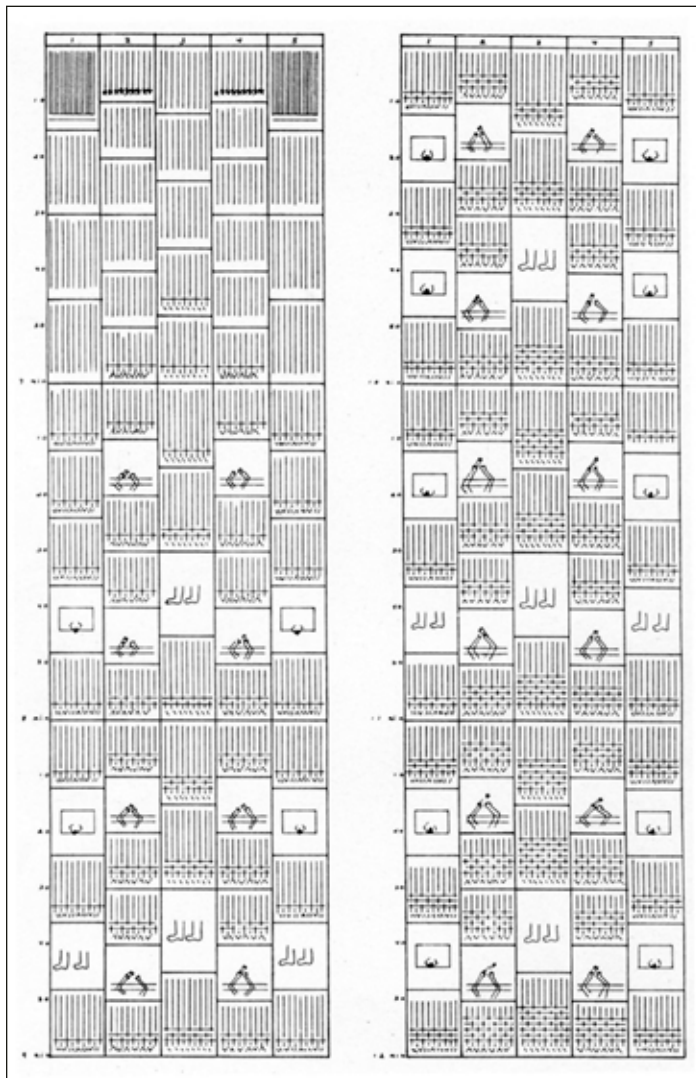
Pictographic notation for Text and Commentary

cutting them up and making a soliloquy or poem from them which I placed one at a time on the screen. Each word travels down the screen vertically, in its own place, at its own speed, creating a new kind of reading, and a new way of making a portrait. I've often felt I was writing poetry with other people's words.

There is often a compression of time in your work. Can you relate your practice, and the choice of media you employ, to your sense of time? For example even in your early work your choice of weaving is intriguing – weaving is a medium that, in a very tangible way, marks the passage of time, thread by thread. Is time something you wish to slow down for the viewer? Or is there a conscious desire for the viewer to actually slip out of consciousness of time, as a way to be truly "in" the work? How does time in your art work relate to poetry or music?

When I made *Florence* in 2008, many years after my first videos, I remember experiencing a certain way the work was paced that felt common to both. It had nothing to do with the image or the structure, but the feeling one gets when one watches the work reveal itself over time.

In the early days of video, people who had been filmmakers prior to coming to video made a big deal of the fact that we now had synch sound. Video was my first visual medium. Therefore I took it for granted that sound and image were one, and have always thought of them that way. I played piano as a child, not very well, but I always considered music my second language in that it

taught me an abstract notational system for representing time and sound.

In 1974 I found myself working in 3 media simultaneously: print, as co-editor of *Radical Software*, video, and weaving. I had become aware of the loom as the first computer on earth in that it programmed pattern according to a numerical structure. It is the original grid constructed by humans with technology, whether from simple reeds and wood and fibre often attached to a weaver's body, or with punched cards, harnesses and treadles, to program patterns and increase speed, as with the original jacquard loom in the early 19th century. When I began to make my first weaver's notations I was struck by the fact that the visual instructions for notating pattern on the loom looked much like a musical staff. I realized that pattern could be sung. I also realized that pattern on the loom was built up line by line, that the video image was created by lines of fields and frames occurring many times a second, and that words on a page organized to create meaning were constructed in lines, whether, horizontal or vertical. Since the loom itself was made of multiple threads organized in a specific way to make the structure of cloth, I looked to it for a way of organizing my multiple channel works. All of this thinking came together in my first installation work, *Dachau 1974*, a work constructed so that the rhythm of the images and sound were one.

I returned in October, 1974 from the site of the former concentration camp in Germany to my studio in New York City to make the images into a work. I'd shot

Installation view of Text and Commentary, Leo Castelli Gallery, 1977; Photo by Mary Lucier

the camp as a tourist site as it existed in 1974, not in 1940. The basic minimal structure for binding a piece of cloth, a tabby structure, under/over, is two sets of pairs, (1 an 3) and (2 and 4). Further, I'd recorded some beautiful sound at the camp, feet shuffling along dirt paths, murmuring tourists inside the barracks, laughter outside the crematoria, bells ringing from a local convent. So on the one hand I organized pairs of images to move the viewer from outside the camp's walls to inside, from outside barracks to inside, from the bridge that led to the crematoria to the crematoria themselves and then finally back to the small bridge that people had recently crossed, but now pointing the camera to the pastoral scene surrounding the bridge with only the sound of water and voices murmuring from the tourists now crossing.

Installation view, Florence, Aldrich Museum, 2010; photo by Chad Kleitsch

Each channel for the duration of the work was assigned its own rhythm of image and 1 second of grey leader blank or pause. Without pause there is no rhythm. Without the break in the thread structure so that some threads are concealed by ones that cross over, there is no pattern. This is a 4 channel and not a 2 channel work. The interrelated pairs have slightly different rhythms. Though the material is the same for each pair, individual actions or events appear at slightly different times to give the work liveness, as in the live time delays of an early Schneider/Gillette work called *Wipe Cycle* that I liked so much.

In the most recent works, *Florence* and *Etty,* where the structure is much more intuitive*,* I chose individual phrases from their writings which had to sound good when read out loud, though within the work words are never spoken. The sound of windstorms and boiling water intensify the meaning of the falling words.

Talk some more about words, or text. You said that, thanks to the arrival of video technology, you were able to take it for granted that "sound and image were one" in the creation of your work and that that informed the creation of your work from the start. Clearly weaving and its inherent digitization also informed your work, and the fact that weaving marks time so clearly. But what

Performance Three Tales, Vienna Festival, 2002; Photo by Wonge Bergmann

about the *words* themselves? There is a poetic quality to your work, and, in some cases, you are actually using poetry in the work. How does text function for you in your artwork?

Text (textus) and weave (texo) share the same latin root. Text is a tissue or fabric woven of many threads. It is a web, texture, structure, a thought, something that can be built, raveled and unraveled.

Writing—the physical act of it—is tactile, words and letters inscribed on stone or on clay, on parchment or on paper. Writing is stored thought, passed along with the help of technology. Ideograms and pictograms evolved into alphabets to store ideas. Images and sound united to create written language. At some point a spoken word became an inscribed image and much later marks on a page represented the sounds of speech. I have come at the expression of these developments from many directions.

In *Florence* and *Etty* a kind of concrete poetry unfolds where each word has its own position and speed as it travels down the screen. In *Text and Commentary* 5 weavings face 5 video screens and reveal a structured patterning of image and sound in the course of the work. The viewer witnesses the creation of the weavings: threads pulled through the warp and then tied, pattern built up on the screen line by line, beater pounding threads and feet treadling pattern possibilities. All 4 visual elements (video, weavings, pictograms, weavers notations) attempt to provide identical information but each do so within their own limitations. In *Babel: the 7 minute scroll*, 3 languages converge to tell an ancient story about technology. The phonetic alphabet in the course of the work is replaced by a coded grid language which contains within it small drawings of the story itself. In *Pond Life* and *Vermont Landscape*, the visual template for the recorded images takes its architecture from pages of Talmud, a schematic representing many voices from many centuries, placed in discrete areas across the surface of a page.

The sources for much of this work reach back to the ancient world. The purpose: the visualization of an interior landscape based on language.