

# Language as Still Life: From Video to Painting

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**Abstract**—The author traces the development of her multiple-channel video installations and paintings from 1974 to 1988. She discusses the development of her thinking about the function of line and of time in both ancient and modern communications technologies, specifically, the weaving loom, the printed word and video. Finally, she describes how this preoccupation led to the creation of paintings based on language.

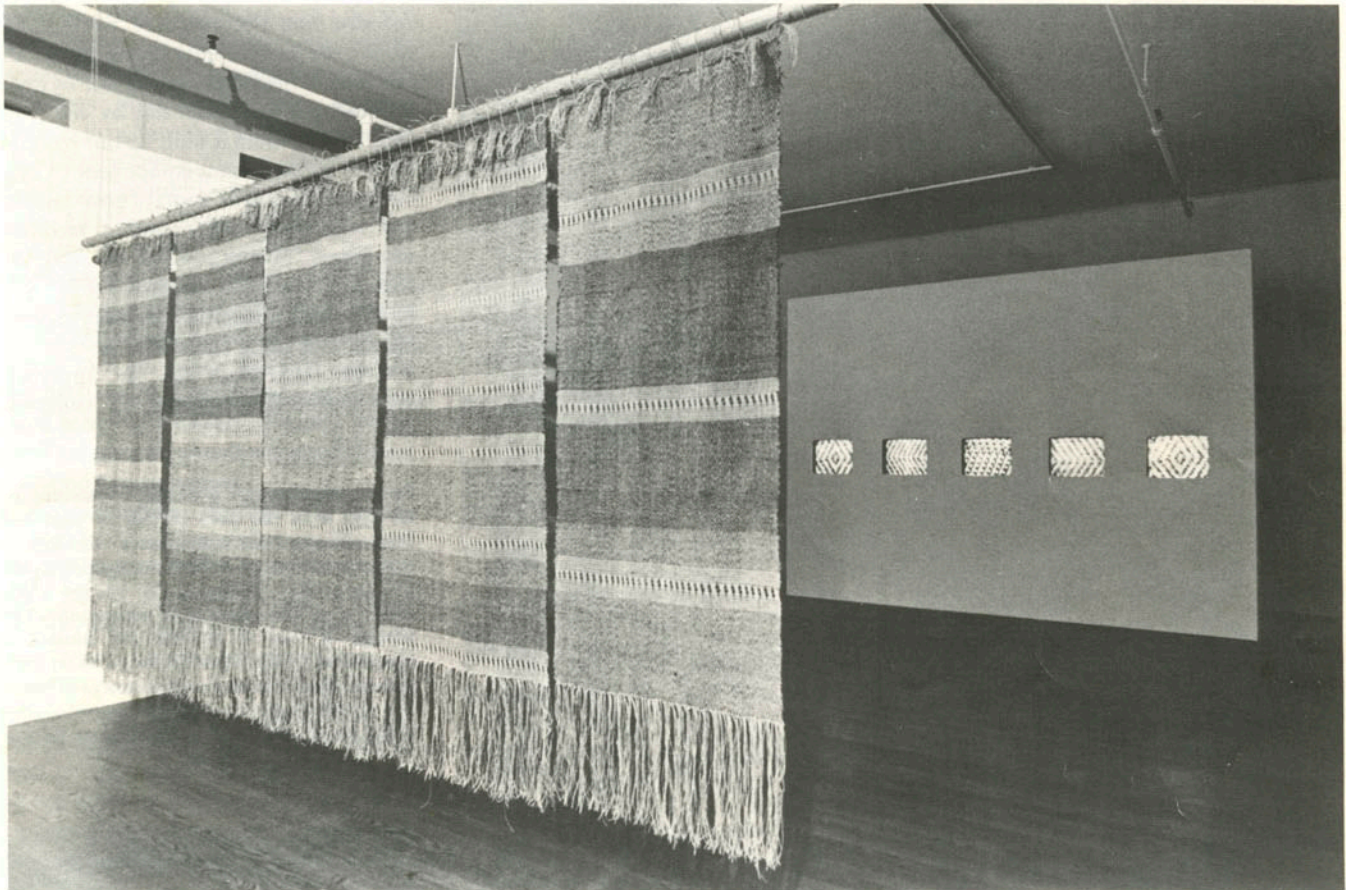


Fig. 1. Installation view of *Text and Commentary* as seen at the Leo Castelli Gallery in March 1977 in New York City. Five weavings programmed with slight changes in pattern structure face five video monitors built into a free-standing wall. The installation also includes notations of enlarged sections of each of the five weavings and pictographic notations of the video portion of the work. All of these provide different perspectives of virtually the same information but in a variety of scales, media and contexts and translated into different systems of composition. (Photo: Mary Lucier)

In the 1970s when people watched my video installations and saw the influence of the weaving loom on the structure and

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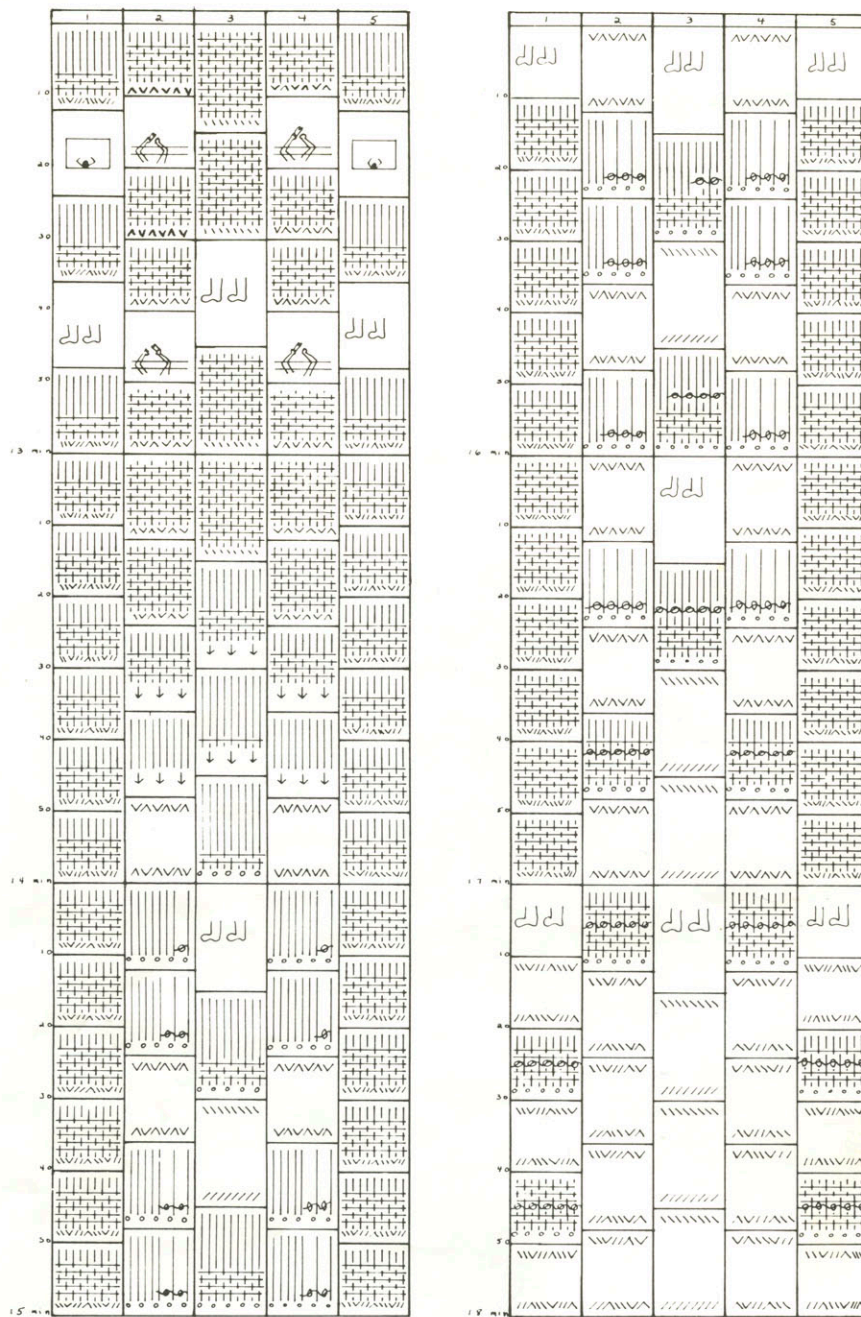
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organization of these multiple-channel works, they often asked if I had been a weaver first who came later to work in video. In fact, the reverse is true. And my journey from video continued until in 1980 I began to devote my time exclusively to painting. At the end of a lecture in the "Video Viewpoints" series at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1977,

when asked what my next work would be, I answered that the ideas of my video work would find their way into a series of paintings on handwoven canvases with a dense information base. That particular journey, and not the current reintegration of video into my work, is the subject of these notes.

In the 1970s I worked primarily making





multichannel video constructions. Before working in video I served as co-editor-in-chief of *Radical Software*, the first magazine to explore the notion of alternative communications systems, primarily video [1]. After beginning video work in a multiple format, I became interested in the handloom as the first computer on earth, as the original grid and as a key to visual structuring. Thus, within a relatively short time, I had intensive experience with one of the most ancient of communication technologies, the loom; one of the most modern, video; and the most prevalent, literature in the form of books, journals and now computers. In all three media, weaving, video and print, the information (in the form of patterns, images or words) is encoded and decoded line by line. In video, the electronic camera reads an image at 30 fields per second, line by line. We read printed matter line by line. The pattern on a loom is built up line by line. Time is an important component of this linear structuring in terms of how quickly and effectively information is received and stored. Instant storage and retrieval systems characterize modern technology, while tactility and human memory remain earmarks of more ancient tools.

What interested me in applying structural insights gained by studying

Fig. 2. Pictographic notations of minutes 13 through 18 of the video portion of *Text and Commentary*. The numbers 1 through 5 represent the five video channels; the images that are appearing simultaneously on the video channels are here represented horizontally. The passage of time in seconds and minutes is represented by the vertical columns under each channel. The horizontal line between each image on a specific channel represents 1 second of grey leader pause, which gives each channel its own rhythm.



Fig. 3. Detail from the painting *A = Girl*, oil on canvas, 54 x 90 in, 1986. (Photo: Fred Scruton) Here the frieze of figures spells the word for language in an alphabet comprised of human figures.



loom programming to the programming of multiple channels of video was the continuity of human thought which spanned millennia. To realize that the structure of woven cloth provided a firm basis for the ordering of video information and time in the creation of nonverbal narrative works satisfied my need to make technological works conform to precedent at a time when the limitlessness and newness of this medium were being extolled. In an age of such tremendous multiplicity of viewpoints, traditions and beliefs as our own, it was a physical way for me as an artist, in an effort to heal my own inner striving for peace, to stretch my arms across millennia to join the ancient and the new in one long embrace.

*Text and Commentary* (Fig. 1) [2] is a work of several components and a pivotal work in my transition from video artist to painter. The work includes five detailed weavings programmed with gradual changes in pattern structure from weaving 1 through weaving 5. Opposite these are five video monitors built into a free-standing wall. The installation also includes a weaver's notation for an enlarged section of each of the five weavings, as well as pictographic notations of the 35-minute video portion of the work. All of these provide varying perspectives of virtually the same information but in a variety of scales, media and contexts and translated into different systems of composition.

The minimum number of threads necessary to bind a cloth is four. The first work I created for video, later to influence *Text and Commentary*, was a four-channel work, *Dachau 1974*, based on this conception of thread structure. Channels (1 and 3) and (2 and 4) formed the interlocking 'thread' combinations of paired images as the work proceeded in time to move the viewer through the site of this former concentration camp. Both horizontally, through the juxtaposition simultaneously of specific paired images, and vertically, through their movement structured in time according to a logical sequence, a video tapestry of Dachau in 1974 is represented. In *Text and Commentary* a looser, more varying relationship is established between the five channels where the center channel (3) often signifies the focal point for introducing change. Each channel was assigned an independent rhythm of image and pause for the duration of the work (the pause is represented by 1 second of grey leader on the tape or a horizontal black line on the notations) (Fig. 2). All five channels always bear a direct relationship to one another, and channels (1 and 5) and (2 and 4) frequently share similar



Fig. 4. A detail from Etty's *Rosetta*, oil on canvas, 90 × 56 in, 1985. (Collection of Renee Levine. Photo: Fred Scruton.) Layers of abstract language interact with figures redrawn from photographs of World War II to create a kind of palimpsest.



though not identical images. The key to the video portion of both works is in the development of a highly organized non-verbal structure created by the inter-relationship of the channels as they proceed and change in time. Corresponding sets of image/time/sound sequences are repeated for each section of the work and create over time what I call image blocks. Each set of image blocks contains an action or idea that is completed before new elements are introduced. By the end of the video portion of the work the viewer perceives the weavings in an entirely different light. Nothing is complete in itself and everything we encounter is shaped and reshaped by new information, in whatever form. *Text and Commentary* is a highly structured artistic model of this fact.

When I finished making *Text and Commentary* a number of problems presented themselves. Mainly, the precision of the editing technique I had developed and the entirely manual construction of images in this work underscored for me the need to have a closer relationship to the image-making process than video allowed.

Just as the loom as the original grid led me to perceive the line as a basis for the visual structuring of information, it also led me to think more specifically about the most flexible and abstract of lines: written language as an analog to human speech. The linear visual structure produced by loom and video technologies is a by-product of human thought. As a visual artist, when thinking about speech and its visual form as written language, I turned to the flexibility of the paint medium in order to continue my work. In painting, as in writing, thoughts are transmitted from brain to eye and hand and imprinted on canvas via the simplest of tools. And with no more than these

simple tools the artist can convey a rich and complex vision. It was this direct assertion of one's control and expression vis-à-vis technology that I found so attractive.

At first, by making my own linen canvas with a bolder grid than traditional canvas, I invented a language based on a four-point grid structure that was an analog to the English alphabet. By abstractly visualizing language, I sought to explore its formal visual power. Written language as the visualization of thought, and, in my language, divorced from specific obvious meaning, reveals one aspect of humanity's organic nature. Whether pictographic or phonetic, writing as visualization of thought always involves small packets of information arranged in a linear manner, horizontally or vertically. The resulting forms are as natural to our organic nature as our external shape. Thus, to use language as the primary subject of my paintings was simply to extend the convention of landscape or still-life painting. The language itself has its own unique shape, sometimes suggests the human figure and often is combined with photographic images drawn in silhouette.

In 1983, on an 11-foot width of handwoven canvas, I transcribed the text and classical Hebrew commentaries of the Tower of Babel story. Completely abstract, this work was a meditation on the formal, visual and expressive power of language, paragraph structures and all. But as in ancient languages, it was not decipherable to the uninitiated, and for a viewer to understand the depth of the story conveyed by the text, more visual information was needed. In other paintings, then, I sometimes presented the language in varying scales: enlarged as configurations of small windows, it could contain pictorial or photographic imagery

that conveyed additional information about the narrative at hand (Color Plate B No. 3). In still other works, a large silhouette of a figure would dominate, with the language functioning as landscape; and sometimes, too, smaller figures would appear, providing further commentary or appearing within an alphabet of figures (Fig. 3). In all of these paintings, the story of the Tower of Babel served as a narrative source and stimulated references to other historic periods, much more contemporary. As an ancient paradigm (according to Hebraic sources) for the positive power that comes from the united effort of people to create great public works through the development of new tools, the story also questions the content of that power.

Through the notion of palimpsest, with thin layers of paint creating a volumetric field in which layers of lines may float, I have attempted to make a visual analog to human memory. By continual erasures, I create an image in which the past disappears, or partly disappears, or is selected to remain present. The final image is perceived as a whole in which the different layers combine to create a simultaneity. Pictorial images of historical, silhouetted figures drawn from photographs coexist with abstract text to form a relationship with the shape of the language itself. What remains is a somewhat ambiguous space in which the markings of time are left to be contemplated (Fig. 4).

## NOTES

1. **Editor's Note:** See Paul Ryan, "A Genealogy of Video", *Leonardo* 21, No. 1, 39-44 (1988).
2. *Text and Commentary* was first exhibited in March 1977 at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York.