

ART PAPERS

November & December 1993

Volume 17

Number 6

BERYL KOROT AND STEVE REICH: THE CAVE

Whitney Museum of American Art

New York, New York

October 14 - November 28

The Cave, a multichannel video installation by noted video artist Beryl Korot and composer Steve Reich, was one of the works exhibited at the Whitney Museum as part of the New American Film and Video Series. Korot's installation is the visual component of a larger, more complex music-video-theater work featuring live musicians and singers, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival on October 13. In addition, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, as part of its "Works and Process" series, sponsored lectures by the artists at the Whitney. This marks the first time these three major institutions have collaborated on a project.

The installation takes its title from the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron where Abraham and his descendants are believed to be buried. It is the only site in the world where Jews and Moslems worship together. Using a series of videotaped interviews with Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans, Korot and Reich reexamine the ancient story of Abraham and his family from a modern perspective. The interviewees are asked, "Who for you is Abraham? Sarah? Hagar? Ismael? Isaac?" Their responses provide the framework for a unique video opera about modern culture, ancient religions, and human relationships. Jews and Moslems defiantly claim Abraham as their forefather. "Abraham for me was my personal ancestor," claims an Israeli Jew. "Ibrahim was neither Jew nor Christian, but a Moslem," asserts a Palestinian. Naively unaware of the religious and racial issues in another part of the world, the Americans offer more imaginative responses in place of traditional definitions. "Abraham Lincoln High School high on a hilltop midst sand and sea—that's about as far back as I can trace Abraham," replies American sculptor Richard Serra.

The process of creating *The Cave* is as fascinating if not as important as its presentation.



Beryl Korot and Steve Reich, *The Cave*, installation view
(photo: Jaap Pieper).

Reich and Korot spent over four years in their interconnected studios transforming documentary footage into a musically and visually compelling drama. Using the audio material from talking heads, Reich composed music that literally reflects and extends the speech patterns of those interviewed, writing down interesting speech samples in musical notation and using them to create a composition for instrument and voice. During the performance of *The Cave*, Reich used thirteen musicians and four singers who doubled and harmonized with the particular speech melody of the speaker. The accompaniment constantly shifts and changes according to the intonations and pitch of the person's voice.

Korot then began working with the composed sections, syncing and editing the visual images to the music's rhythm. She chose to work on five screens, which allowed her visual variety without losing cinemagraphic unity. On the first screen she projected the image of the person. On the remaining three screens, she projected abstractions of that person which she created by zooming in on a particular aspect of their image. By timing the stills to the composed music, she created dynamic rhythms and pauses in the visuals which followed the flow of the music. The result is a unique visual and musical portrait of the speaker.

Korot's unique way of working with video in *The Cave* grew out of her earlier multiple channel installations *Dachau 1974* and *Text and Commentary*. In both pieces, she turned to the ancient art of the loom to determine how to work with multiple images. She spent most of the 1970s painting and weaving, and became increasingly interested in understanding how lines function in all visual mediums to create a non-verbal language.

The Cave is about language. Reich transforms a particular person's language into music and, in doing so, creates a melody that reflects or her individual personality. Abraham and his family only live through the words and thoughts of the living. Korot explores the "language" created from woven patterns of video. By juxtaposing interrelated images on multiple channels and manipulating differently timed images, she developed a narrative form in her video installations.

Susan Tenaglia, *New York, New York*