

# RHIZOME

## Text/Weave/Line—Video: An Interview with Beryl Korot

By Evelin Stermitz, June 2010.

An interview with artist **Beryl Korot** on her exhibition

*Text/Weave/Line—Video, 1977-2010*

at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, USA,

from June 27, 2010, to January 2, 2011.

<http://www.aldrichart.org>

<http://blog.art21.org/category/artists/beryl-korot/>

<http://blog.art21.org/2010/04/23/beryl-korot-radical-software-1970-74/>

<http://www.flypmedia.com/content/beryl-korot's-radical-roots>

<http://www.flypmedia.com/issues/29/#8/1>

<http://www.flypmedia.com/issues/29/#8/7>

Beryl Korot is one of the most important innovators in the realm of video art and a pioneer of multiple channel video work. Two installations, **Dachau 1974** (1974) and **Text and Commentary** (1977) were shown consecutively at an early exhibition of her work at the Whitney Museum in 1980 after their initial premieres at The Kitchen (1975) in New York City, and the Leo Castelli Gallery (1977) also in New York City. By drawing on the structures generated by the most ancient of information technologies, the handloom, and the first punch card computer on earth, she opened up a whole new world of possibilities in her multiple channel works for conveying narrative based on visual and not literary means.

Prior to the video works, in 1970 she cofounded **Radical Software** with Phyllis (Gershuny) Segura and Ira Schneider, and served as its co-editor until 1974. It was the first magazine to explore the notion of alternative communication systems (to the then broadcast dominated airwaves) via video in particular. In the 1980's she left video to weave her own canvases and to create a coded grid based language that was an analog to the roman alphabet. The works that evolved from this language, many based on translations of the Babel text, an early text about the impact of technology on human behavior, are a kind of visual contemplation of language as still life. In the 1990's she teamed up with her husband, composer Steve Reich, to create 2 thought provoking video/music works: one about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, **The Cave** (1993), and the other, once again, about the impact of technology on our lives, **Three Tales** (2002). These works brought video installation art into a theatrical context and created a media based Theatre of Ideas. Since 2003 she has created a body of poetically expressive work created almost entirely on the computer. An exhibition at the Aldrich Museum continues and further develops her interest in the Babel text, presented now as a print and animated video work, as well as presenting 5 other new video works along with the early 5 channel video/weaving work **Text and Commentary**.

**Evelin Stermitz:** To introduce yourself and start right from the beginning - could you tell to the younger generation of artists more about your time as an emerging artist? What influenced you during these times, how was your situation as a woman artist? Did you have any personal gendered experiences and how did you evolve your strength and interest in media art?

**Beryl Korot:** Beginning at age 12, I wrote poetry and figured this is what I would do in the world. This belief continued into my early 20's when I was working as an editorial assistant at The New York Review of Books helping out Barbara Epstein, one of the editors. At about that time the Sony Portapak came out, and I became reacquainted with Ira Schneider, whom I'd met in my first year of college at the University of Wisconsin. Ira had finished all his course work for his PhD and part of his thesis on the neurophysiology of the ancient brain but quit to make films. Then right before we met again in New York he bought a first generation Sony Portapak.

Ira was part of a group called Raindance (a play on words of the military think tank --the Rand Corporation). Raindance was a think tank media group made up primarily of artists and writers: Frank Gillette, Paul Ryan, Ira Schneider, and Michael Shamberg were members of the original group. There were no women per se until Ira and I discussed the possibility of creating an alternate television journal to present some of the new kinds of thinking about information media, and the new type of work being developed. It was in the context of conceiving this magazine, Radical Software, that Ira introduced me to Phyllis (Gershuny) Segura, who'd been thinking along parallel lines, and Phyllis and I set to work to create a forum for new media thinking at a time when there were no venues to see the new work being created.

In the early days of video, there were so many women working with the medium. And I remember we were aware of that...somehow the newness of video made the whole entry into the field so much easier. Everyone was exploring together. But again, I think that was true of many media at that time. If you look at the numbers of successful artists who were emerging in the late 60's to 70's there are many women amongst them. It was a more idealistic period. For video there were no galleries as yet, at first no funding institutions (though that changed quickly), but you had the feeling that if you could think it you could do it. Life in New York was inexpensive, and you could find affordable and decent work places. And people really helped each other out. It was a good time to be an artist in New York. paired images as the work proceeded in time to create a non-verbal narrative to take the viewer through the site of this former concentration camp. (see configurations at <http://pbs.org/auschwitz> -- go to Dachau 1974)

Were there gender related issues that came up?...sure. But I never got into politicizing my situation. For me there were so many fascinating ideas to be pursued. Perhaps my attraction to technology, and that I mastered the different editing and computer techniques I needed to create my work, was my way of competing with and remaining self-sufficient from the men around me. (I suppose it helped that most of the women in my family, from great grandmothers on down, worked both because they had to and because they wanted to and liked what they did. My grandmother, for example, cooked the family out of the depression and became a very successful caterer...my grandfather did the shopping.)

**E.S.:** You are an early pioneer in video art and multiple channel work in particular, co-founder and co-editor of **Radical Software** (1970), the first publication to document artists' work and ideas concerning video, also co-editor of **Video Art**; how did your work as an artist come together with your work as a theoretician and researcher?

**B.K.:** I grew up in a family where current ideas and discussions about the world were commonplace and everyone participated, no matter how young or how old. So in the course of making work you express who you are, how you think. For me, at the beginning at least, it was by developing formal strategies in my multiple channel work, based on the multiple threads of ancient loom patterning. I was drawn to certain tools whether video or print or the loom perhaps because of the ideas that aggregated around them. The theoretical was not separate from the tools that drew me to them. I drew my sustenance from the theoretical and it framed what I was doing.

**E.S.:** Your approach to media art comes from the literally textile and haptical field of weaving, that is interesting in a female aspect, because of using this traditional material and occupation which is since centuries passed on to women, and then suddenly you are interweaving this into media of the current society; how do you explain your approach to this material mix?

**B.K.:** In 1974 I found myself working in 3 media simultaneously: in print (**Radical Software**), in video which I began to explore in 1972, and the handloom, the first computer on earth in that it programmed patterns according to a numerical structure. A silk weaver at the beginning of the 19th century invented the Jacquard loom, really the first punch card computer to create complex textile works through punch card programming, which also increased the speed with which this work could be made. I was drawn to the handloom after being involved in print and video because I was fascinated by the multiple channel genre in video and the loom offered clues about programming multiple channels. But what really fascinated me is that the information in all 3 of these media is encrypted in lines... In video the electronic camera reads an image at 30 frames a second, line by line; we read printed material line by line...pattern on the loom is laid down line by line, or thread by thread. 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.

**E.S.:** How would you define the term "Radical Software" at this time for your magazine? Are there any analogies to what would be understood as radical software nowadays?

**B.K.:** When we made the magazine, **Radical Software** was about creating a new kind of programming; for circumventing the broadcast to home one way type of information delivery system. It was about access and decentralization and for us the new Sony magnetic tape Portapak was the beginning of a new era, a new possibility... to write the medium, not just read it. To leave the livingroom and bring video into public spaces. For a relatively low cost we could buy the equipment that would allow that to happen. I was drawn to multiple channel because it forced the viewer to leave the livingroom and join others in a public space to experience new ways of receiving information. It was modular, spatial and through juxtaposition allowed an artist the ability to physically play with time. You could also take this small image as it was in the 1960's and 70's and expand it through the multiple screens.

Now? There is so much out there...the web sometimes seems so liberating and also so dangerous...I think radical software today is inside us. We're bringing technology into our bodies and our ethical rootedness must be our roadmap.

**E.S.:** In your work **Dachau 1974** you created image blocks of 18 4-channel video configurations, whereby each channel has a separate rhythm of image. The work deals with the left over tragic memories of Holocaust of World War II, please could you tell more about this sensible issue and your articulation of this in video art. (A mock-up of this work is available online at the following links: <http://pbs.org/auschwitz> and <http://blog.art21.org/category/artists/beryl-korot/> )

**B.K.:** I actually arrived in Dachau in late September, 1974. I spent the day simply walking through the former camp, absorbing what I could of this now relatively antiseptic environment inhabited by tourists. In 1974 very little was being said about the Holocaust, even by survivors, and making the work was my response to traveling to Germany for the first time, where silence about that period still prevailed. What struck me was that here, in this place where memory was still so repressed, a bizarre tourist site had been resurrected literally on the ashes of the past.

When I visited the site of the former concentration camp the subject matter for this work began to take shape in my mind: a record of Dachau in 1974 with its present visitors walking amidst the structures that remained. The architecture of the place, the linearity and symmetry, the pathways, guard towers, barracks, crematoria, tourists, would be the subjects of this work.

When I returned to my studio in New York City other questions arose -- specifically, how to bring life to the static and spare images I had recorded primarily using a tripod with very little movement. And for this I turned to the ancient technology of the loom. As already mentioned, I was drawn to the loom because it was a programming tool, I was interested in modern and ancient technologies, and I saw it as a way to understand how to program multiple channels which was the video genre that most attracted me.

The minimum number of threads necessary to bind a cloth is four. Channels (1 and 3) and (2 and 4) formed the interlocking 'thread' combinations of paired images as the work proceeded in time to create a non-verbal narrative to take the viewer through the site of this former concentration camp. (see configurations at <http://pbs.org/auschwitz> -- go to Dachau 1974)

The four screens were placed side-by-side into cutouts in a free-standing wall, like 4 holes puncturing a film screen. Horizontally, through the juxtaposition of specific paired images, and vertically through their movement and interrelationships structured in time according to a logical sequence, a video tapestry of Dachau, in 1974, is represented. Each interlocking channel is given its own separate rhythm of image and pause for the duration of the work, and these paired images on monitors create a non-verbal narrative structure which take the viewer on a journey from the mundane traffic outside the camp's wall to the inside walkways, from barracks far to barracks near, from inside barracks to tourists walking towards crematoria, and finally to a stream punctuated with barbed wire. Ultimately it is an extremely fragile work where the memory of the viewer must endow it with meaning.

**E.S.:** You and your husband Steve Reich have been also collaborating on socio-political issues in art, like the video opera **The Cave**. How did your collaboration as visual and sound artist emerge? How did you experience the collaboration? I am just curious, but find it very interesting, wonderful and rare, that two artists find themselves, while both working in different fields but then find ways to collaborate and are also a couple in their life time.

**B.K.:** What we shared in our two collaborations was caring about the subject matter and the formal concerns for creating a new type of documentary theatre that grew out of the folk tools of our time...samplers and video recorders juxtaposed with live musicians.

It's not easy to work with someone you live with. It was harder for us to have dinner together than to spend the hours, weeks, months and years creating each work. Steve and I care about similar subject matter and share a formality of approach to subject matter which turns out to be a solid basis of a long, sustained and trusting friendship. When you work with someone over a long period of time, you have to have enormous respect for the other person, you have to have a strong sense of artistic territory that cannot be invaded, and you have to be willing to continue even when you feel like throwing the other person down a flight of stairs.

**E.S.:** **The Cave**, your collaborative work about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict has been created in 1993, after a working period from 1989 to 1993, how did you find this issue at that time, and how would you see it nowadays in relation to current conflicts, are there any changes?

**B.K.:** At a time when religion was not in public consciousness in the basically secular West, we were interested in Biblical material and its resonance or lack thereof in people's lives. We asked 5 questions to three different groups of people: first to Israeli Jews, then Palestinian Moslems and finally westerners living primarily in the States. The questions were: who for you is Abraham, Sarah, Hagar Ismael and Isaac and how these questions were answered were a kind of Rorschach of our time...how far away from the cave we are where Abraham and his family were buried. When we were making **The Cave** two important political events took place: the first Gulf War and the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and the PLO. People said to us, "it's too bad you're piece isn't ready yet." And our answer to that was, "don't worry, it'll still (unfortunately) be relevant when the piece comes out." Given the current state of things I'd say the works emphasis on common roots comes off almost as naive, but necessary.

Also, when I began **The Cave**, the computer was interacting for the first time, at a desktop affordable level, with video. Photoshop was first coming out and I felt I had some freedom for the first time visually for creating a complex canvas. I could take a video still, blow it up, cut some parts out, rearrange them, transfer it back to video. However, like **Dachau 1974** and the 5 channel **Text and Commentary** which followed, the complexity of the work lay in the interrelationships created between channels, perfectly timed, but not so much within the image itself. By the time we began **Three Tales**, After Effects had been developed so that there was enormous control over many aspects of the image, and finally I had tools at my disposal which truly engaged me visually.

**E.S.:** How would you explain to bring video installation art into a theatrical context and creating a media based Theatre of Ideas? How would you define a video opera at all?

**B.K.:** As I mentioned before, **Dachau 1974** was a rhythmic work in multiple channels, as was **Text and Commentary** (1977) which followed. By blowing up the monitors to projection screens, by placing them in an arched shape and building a set around them for placement of musicians and singers, the video actually became the mise en scene for the entire work and took what I had done in museums and placed it in the performance space.

It was also the musicality of those early pieces that led Steve to want to collaborate with me in the first place. Because these works dealt very deliberately with measured time, **The Cave** drew on their structure for providing the visual matrix through which the music was set. It was easy to look at a score of Steve's, (we shared SMPTE numbers) and to decide where to make cuts. Whenever a person appears in the course of the work they are placed in a visual and aural portrait of themselves...for me it was abstracting from the image of the interviewee a piece of clothing, or something in the background, and creating a placement of these abstractions along with the image of the person across the 5 screens; for Steve it was using the voice melodies and setting those to music.

Steve had been asked to write operas and in the 1980's contemporaries of his were doing just that, Philip Glass, John Adams. And they were working with historical and contemporary subject matter. Robert Wilson, of course, as well. This was our response to those works, but wanting to use more contemporary tools that we were immersed in to make the work.

We're also both artists who like to work at home, do the technical stuff ourselves, and so until we finally staged the work and got involved with Nick Mangano and Carey Perloff and Richard Nelson and John Arnone, our staging team, the work existed in my studio as a video installation and Steve would send me the music through cables connecting our studios.

**E.S.:** Between 1980 and 1988 you devoted yourself fulltime to oil painting, creating works on handwoven and traditional linen canvas. These were paintings based on a language you created which were an analog to the Latin alphabet. A room in this abstract language was created illuminating the Babel story, as well as other texts. Why did it come to this withdrawal from technologic media during this period of time?

**B.K.:** I withdrew from video technology to paint on the handmade canvas I was making on the loom, and to create a grid based language which allowed me to create a body of work which visualized language abstractly. I wanted to make a handmade work with an ancient and sophisticated technology...to see where it would lead. The language of dots on a grid were an analog to the Roman alphabet, and the finished canvases were like a language as still life, what thought looks like abstracted from meaning, though the meaning was there if you wanted to follow the code.

**E.S.:** Do you have a single work within your corpus of media art, which is most important to your decades of experiences as an artist?

**B.K.:** Well, **Dachau 1974** was the most influential to my work until **Three Tales** which began in 1996 and was not finished until 2002 because of a lot of interruptions. From 1996 to the present, I was working then in programs like After Effects and Photoshop that allowed me to have a completely flexible layered computer based canvas that has impacted all the work since that time.

**E.S.:** How do you view your retrospective of your works at the Aldrich Museum, what was most important for you in the concept of this exhibition? Also your recent works about two women, **Florence** and **Etty**, are exhibited, how did you find and interpret these two females as icons?

**B.K.:** Textere in latin refers to web, texture, structure or translates as to weave. Throughout the years different ways of visualizing thought have been manifested in my work. I think the Aldrich exhibition gives expression to both the variety and consistency of this pursuit which has been sustained over a long period of time. **Florence** (2008/9) and **Etty** (2009/10) - these two of the works in the Aldrich show are also my most personal works.

In 2007 when I began **Florence** I was playing at the computer and made a weaving out of bits of video footage of snow storms and waterfalls, some elements of which were used in another work from that period, **Vermont Landscape**. Having finished a long collaborative period in 2002 I wanted to get back to the studio of the painting years and the years that preceded those to the multiple channel **Text and Commentary** made entirely in my studio, by hand, for the camera. I wanted to keep the recorded material local, around the house or in walking distance thereof.

As I viewed the weaving I'd made on the computer the name Florence Nightingale came to mind, and I realized that though her name had become a cliché, I had no idea who she really was.

And so I sifted through hundreds of pages of her brilliant writings, which included an intense rejection of her upper class English background as she sought to find a life of meaning and purpose apart from what was designated by birth. At 30 she set off with a ragtag group of women to save men outside of Istanbul during the brutal Crimean War, and transformed what had been complete neglect on the battlefield into a system of caring for the wounded.

Through the very slow, rhythmic falling of words against a background literally woven from moving video images, (winter storms, boiling water) a new sense of reading and time is created.

When I finished Florence I sought a companion for her, someone with that kind of intense resolve over a sustained period of time to dig deep inside herself to find the meaning to carry her through a difficult time. Etty Hillesum, a 29 year old Jewish Dutch writer found herself commuting for a year between Amsterdam and the transit camp of Westerbork, while experiencing and witnessing the devastation befalling Dutch Jews. What drew me to her was her ability to internally resist her inevitable physical captivity and death in an effort not to surrender her 'self.' The day she is shipped out, she records "We left the camp singing."

"Weather" as the in-motion, woven backdrop to the falling words is a common element in both works.

These two works are a kind of poetry from other people's words...also a kind of soliloquy.

**E.S.:** How do you see the technological changes in video art, like digital video, video on the internet? Do you think the media video changed as an artistic video during the years caused by its technology? You created your latest media works with digital video, was it a different work for you?

**B.K.:** In the digital realm I've definitely found the tools that I love working with. I still find it fascinating that in a work like **Three Tales**, raw material was gathered with a video camera in the field, imported into the computer where the images were recreated on a time based canvas. From the computer to a tape deck in my studio, the work premiered in Vienna on a 32 foot wide video screen. It was presented as a 'film' on the independent film channel, packaged as a DVD, with sections streamed to the web. And since the early days of video, this all happened within a relatively short period of time. The strategies that were employed early in my career to get a public off the couch and into a public space have been turned on their head with the access and decentralization of the internet and the powerful tools available at the desktop level. Of course, other issues are brought up with the overload of "information" people have to sift through out there, privacy issues, misinformation, a sense that technologic power is an end in itself, but that's another interview. In the early days of **Radical Software** we were involved in thinking about media ecology, the relationship of would send me the music through cables connecting our studios. media to the information environment in which we live. Now the focus is more on the information highway. I think we could be developing more of a **Radical Software** self-critical consciousness. But in the end, whatever tools you use, work is only as good as the artist making it.