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Palimpsests of Art and Mind: Three Video Installations by Beryl Korot

by Joan Boykoff Baron and Reuben M. Baron

Beryl Korot: *Selected Video Works: 1977 to Present at bitforms gallery*

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New York City, 212-366-6939



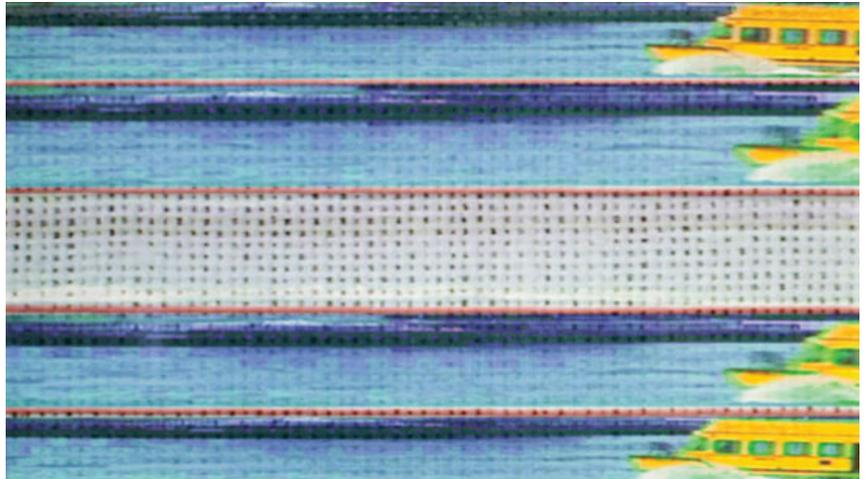
Installation view at bitforms gallery. Beryl Korot, *Text and Commentary*, 1976-1977. Five-channel video installation, black and white, with weavings, drawings, pictographic video notations, 30 minutes, stereo sound. Photo by John Berens. Courtesy of bitforms gallery nyc.

The three installations in bitforms gallery's Beryl Korot mini-survey, incorporating no fewer than six different media formats to capture our attention, exemplifies Marshall McLuhan's celebrated dictum that "the medium is the message." One of Korot's original motives, over thirty years ago, was to get us out of our homes, away from our TV sets and into a public space for viewing multichannel video work of intriguing complexity. In this age of instant messaging and Twitter, it is refreshing to encounter a video artist whose labor-intensive use of the computer as an extension of her hand slows us down so that we can more carefully observe what is before us.

The show begins with Korot's signature installation, *Text and Commentary* (1976-77), first shown the year it was made at the Leo Castelli Gallery. In this multi-modal piece she first prepared a handloom and then made a series of geometric weavings, simultaneously videotaping this rhythmic process. The installation includes five delicate black, grey, and beige weavings hung vertically from the ceiling across from video screens that document their making. On one wall at the entrance to the gallery are soft-edge geometric pencil drawings on graph paper of the central portions of the weavings. The pictographic notations on another wall are used by Korot to choreograph the minute-by-minute coordination of the five different yet related 30-minute videos. Some of the pictographs resemble a blend of computer bar codes and American Indian petroglyphs. While these weavings and the drawings are finished works in their own right, at a deeper level they correspond to César Paternosto's insight, proposed in *The Stone and the Thread* (1989/1996), that the Pre-Columbian Andean textile patterns are not merely decorative but served as a carrier of coded information in the absence of a written alphabet. Quite literally, the medium was also the message.

Through her use of weaving as a medium, Korot links information processing and communications systems both past and future. She recognized how the Jacquard loom, which made modern weaving possible through the use of punch cards to guide the hooks and harness for the weave's design, was a kind of proto-computer. Focusing on the importance of line as the organizer of information across time, Korot has observed how "we read line by line, weavers create their patterns line by line, (and) electronic cameras read an image at 30 frames per second". This can be extended to computers, which use lines of data to perform their operations. Korot stimulates us to see how an object—the weaving—can both encode the history of a culture and reflect the personal mark of the artist, something she herself accomplishes even in technologically based work.

Yellow Water Taxi (2003, 2 minutes) is a visual treat of video mastery. We watch a ballet of bright yellow water taxis pass us by at different speeds. At one point, the taxis stop and park on the right and left edges of the small screen. But the water continues to move with the five blue bands of water becoming fewer as some of them are overtaken by white ones. Although devoid of a specific narrative, the variety of visual elements is more than sufficient to sustain our interest as it massages our sensory-motor system. The video has a hand-made feel. The backdrop is a piece of woven canvas whose texture is plainly seen and felt.



Beryl Korot, *Yellow Water Taxi*, 2003 (video still). Single channel video, 2 mins, stereo sound, edition of 10. Courtesy of bitforms gallery nyc.

Learning later that Korot conceived of this work while taking a walk along the Esplanade where the Twin Towers had recently stood and watching the taxis ferrying people back and forth from New York to New Jersey added a layer of poignancy.

The final video, *Florence* (2008, 10 ½ minutes) is concrete poetry with a definite narrative structure. The backdrop is another weaving, although this time without the threads. There is a black and white grid of snowstorms, waterfalls, and boiling water stitched together on the computer. Superimposed over the visual grid and the sound track of driving rain is a visual display of actual words of Florence Nightingale, creating a haunting sensory experience. The words enter the large screen at the top and move vertically downward at different speeds and in different sizes, pooling at the bottom. The viewer is swept up by the challenges faced by Nightingale in caring for wounded men on the battlefield with no medical provisions. The power of Nightingale's words bombarding us against a backdrop of darkness and rain is so compelling that we also empathize with her suffering. Nightingale used her religious belief to overcome the doubts experienced as a woman to achieve a certain degree of power and autonomy in the male-dominated medical establishment. Korot's magisterial video conveys this struggle in a way that is far more powerful than would be possible from a straight reading of her diaries. The complex combination of cascading words against a stormy background makes the viewer a more active participant in grasping Nightingale's message.

The three works in this show each view art and mind as a palimpsest as Korot creates layers of organization that must be peeled back as part of an embodied search for meaning. The result is a high-tech version of Emily Dickinson's poetry. As with Dickinson, one sometimes has to strain to hear the artist's voice hovering just below the surface. But connection, once made, vindicates the effort.