



**Beryl Korot**  
*Rethinking Threads*

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bitforms gallery nyc



# Rethinking Threads

Beryl Korot interviewed by Valerie Amend\*

**VA:** Throughout your practice, you have brought the ancient and modern worlds of technology into conversation with the application of structures inherent to the loom. Can you elaborate on your discovery of the loom as an ancient programming tool?

**BK:** It's 1974, New York City, downtown. I spend mornings sitting at a small table in Sutters bakeshop in Greenwich Village making weavers notations. The magazine, *Radical Software* which focused on the alternate television movement, has been put to rest. While editing the magazine I make my first video works. Simultaneously I am introduced to the handloom by my friend, Marilyse Downey, a weaver and wife of the Chilean video artist Juan Downey. Marilyse suggests I go to the YMCA on 51st Street in NYC to study weaving with American weaver Claire Freeman. I do that and in a short period of time learn to weave. I am fascinated by the loom and its creation of abstract patterns based on numerical structures. I am quickly drawn to learn more about this ancient tool while creating new video works and I sit on the subway studying peoples clothing and realize that those sitting opposite me, wearing twill cloth jackets, have no idea that they are wearing 4/3/2/1 patterns.

If ever I have an epiphany it is during that period of time when I simultaneously have intensive experience working with one of the most ancient of communications technologies, the loom; one of the most modern, video; and the most prevalent, print. It is a revelation to me to realize that the information in all 3 is encoded and decoded in lines, though at greatly different speeds and through very different processes. Time is a component of all 3. While instant storage and retrieval systems characterize modern technology, tactility and human memory remain earmarks of more ancient tools.\*\* This connection of ancient to modern becomes a crucial foundation for my work, and at the time I apply the insights gained learning loom programming to the programming of multiple channels of video.

**VA:** The last time I interviewed you, you prompted me to rethink the idea of “thread”—and what the word means both as an act and a material. Now a few years later, on the occasion of your third solo exhibition with bitforms gallery, you're presenting a new body of work. You previously shared a few of your connotations with thread, including threading a tape recorder. What encouraged you to print thread?

**BK:** In rethinking thread, I was referring to what I call an information based thread, not just one made of traditional fiber. In 1977 at a Video Viewpoints series Barbara London organized at MOMA, NYC, I talked about hoping to create “a series of woven canvases part woven, part painted, with a dense information base.”\*\*\* That base was a coded language I'd invented and painted on hand woven threads and canvas.

In 1994 I was in Madrid at the Reina Sofia to install the 5 channel video opera *The Cave* which I'd created with Steve Reich. My hotel was walking distance to the Prado and while there I discovered and fell in love with the still life paintings of Francisco de Zurbarán. Then in 2018 a large exhibition of Zurbarán's works, *Jacob and his 12 sons*, was exhibited at the Frick in NYC. I rushed to get there. There were many aspects of the work that were striking to see, but one aspect was the highly adorned, patterned clothing of many of the men. I went online, downloaded the 13 paintings from Frick's site, and began to play around with these patterns in Photoshop. Once satisfied with a composition I was ready to print, slice, and weave. The information for those threads thus turned out to be details from several Zurbarán paintings accessed, reconstructed and printed. It opened my world and my view of weaving to new possibilities and for the first time since my 5 channel *Text and Commentary* and the coded canvases, I engaged with the act of weaving itself and not just as a thinking tool.

**VA:** Your thread contains layered information. For example in *Judah's Cuff 1 + 2*, you use a photograph taken of Zurbarán's painting Judah and bring it into a digital environment, design its configuration, then print it on paper. Once printed, you cut and weave each image together, over and under, as a textile. Your printed thread itself carries information—photographic metadata, texture, saturation—but also speaks to materiality. Canvas itself is a woven material. The differences between painting and weaving have been gendered throughout art history, and you turn this dichotomy on its head, repurposing master painting as a material for weaving. I want to learn more about the connections of your “source material” to the final composition. You touch on different information sets throughout this series of work, even revisiting iconography from a previous work, [Babel: The 7 Minute Scroll](#). How does the information embedded in your threads communicate and influence the overall composition of your weavings?

**BK:** These works and some earlier ones evolved over a 4 year period. In the Zurbarán group, I'm drawn to details in the men's clothing. What I select becomes a major element in the composition of the work, and an elaboration of the original source. There

is a kind of collaborative element to these works as well in that Zurbaran's details are my starting point. In *Judah's cuff 1* and 2, brushstrokes you cannot see at all in the tiny details of the original painting become quite enlarged. Colors I have never worked with become a significant aspect of each work and reference the source. But more specifically, what I select and design from the original source material determines whether I greatly enlarge Zurbarán's pattern detail to dominate the work, or whether the programmed woven pattern structure of small detailed threads as in *Zebulun Zig Zag* dominates. These decisions determine different techniques in assembling the threads.

As in most weaving, whether or not on a jack loom or computer driven jacquard loom which contains the constructed image, and all the myriad decisions that go into constructing that image, the final woven product in the end is not changed. When I reached that point in one of the early works I was making I realized I wasn't satisfied with the result and either it had to be abandoned or altered. And I found that by printing and inserting new threads over the previous ones I could salvage what I was about to discard. In this way I added another visual element by building up the surface of the work itself and increased the flexibility in the actual creation of the work.

And finally, in the course of making the work there are the sutures which bind the 6 square panels I've woven which add a sculptural element. Open areas with no weave at all appear, and the sutures themselves create a vertical structure to the work. The squares which the sutures bind are presented in two rows of three, but there's no reason they couldn't have been arranged in a more irregular layout, even to the point that they could have functioned as my original code: woven squares arranged as words according to my coded alphabetic grid. As for *Babel*, it is a kind of mantra to me. Someplace to return every so often to think about technology and human behavior, about the ongoing conversation in *Babel* of a human centered world vs a G-d centered world. Anni Albers, whom I never met, was a mentor from afar, both to learn from and to push against. Her attention to weaving structures and to weaving technology and innovation in general was coupled with her attention to the structural sophistication of the Peruvian weavers she championed. This probably influenced my thinking when I turned to the ancient technology of the loom in the early 1970's as an impetus to program multiple channels of video according to thread structures. I was also aware that one of her struggles was to bridge the gap between a Western attitude towards Art which relegated weaving to Craft, something non-western cultures did not do. When she was at the Bauhaus women were assigned to the weaving studio, where actually at some point Paul Klee taught design. Later in life, she circumvented the Art/Craft divide by turning to the print medium, particularly lithography, to create work. Perhaps thinking of her print making and printing my threads is a way to bridge the narrowing gap as I bring together an ancient craft with digitally produced threads.

**VA:** I'm glad that you bring up Anni Albers in relation not only to the challenges of bridging craft and fine art, but to the freedom of moving past the traditional grid of weaving. Printing your thread grants a type of versatility akin to sculpture or painting. How does freedom interface with your incorporation of digital source material?

**BK:** I'm not abandoning the grid per se. I am forever interested in the numerical basis of abstract pattern laid down on the grid by programmed threads. The current works abandon fiber as thread and in a sense, the loom. Here my loom is linen adhesive tape stretched across a work table sticky side up. In order to weave one needs taut warp threads. My sliced warp threads on strong heavy paper are placed on that adhesive strip. Once you have that you can weave the weft with your hands which is what I have done here. The freedom in a sense comes from the infinite choices of sourced raw material via camera or digital online files imported into Photoshop and sent to a printer. That I'm printing on paper is one option.

I was also thinking of portability — the portability that came with the first video portapak, which by today's standards was anything but portable. Or the portability of a studio in a suitcase as in a rented apartment in LA where several of these new works were constructed, or the portability of a rug, rolled up and carried. The drawings for *Text and Commentary* were begun in a hotel room in Venice, Italy. I was thinking of the times we live in and people on the move.

In the actual making of these new works it satisfied a kind of simplicity I always seek, yet in conjunction with new tools and materials.

\*Includes excerpts from a magazine interview by Valerie Amend published in *Nichons Nous dans l'internet*, Paris, December 2019 and an email exchange between Beryl Korot and Valerie Amend in 2022.

\*\**Hier Et Après, Yesterday and After*, 1980, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, "Beryl Korot" pp 60-66

\*\*\**Art and Cinema, art and artists - film and video*, December 1978, "Video and the Loom by Beryl Korot," pp. 28-32, 67-68





## **BERYL KOROT**

**b.1945, New York, NY**

**Lives and works in New York**

Beryl Korot is a pioneer of video art, and of multiple channel work in particular. By applying specific structures inherent to loom programming to the programming of multiple channels she brought the ancient and modern worlds of technology into conversation. This extended to a body of work on handwoven canvas in an original language based on the grid structure of woven cloth and to a series of paintings on canvas based on this language. More recently she has created drawings which combine ink, pencil and digitized threads, as well as large scale “tapestries” where threads are printed on paper and woven.

Two early multiple channel works, *Dachau* 1974 and *Text and Commentary* have been installed in exhibitions on both the history of video art and textiles. Her works have been seen at the Whitney Museum (1980, 1993, 2000, 2002); the Kitchen, New York, NY (1975); Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY (1977); Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany (1977); the John Weber Gallery, NYC (1986); The Köln and Düsseldorf Kunstvereins (1989 and 1994); the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, PA (1990); The Reina Sofia, Madrid, (1994); the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2010); bitforms gallery, New York, NY (2012/2018); the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, England (2013); Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany (2013); Art Basel, Basel, Switzerland (2014), The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2014); Tate Modern, London, England (2014); the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (2015); Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, ICI Project 35, Moscow, Russia (2015/16), SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA (2016), Santa Fe Thoma Art House (2017), LOOP festival, Santa Agata Capella, Barcelona (2017), ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany (2017-18); *Thinking Machines: Art and Design in the Computer-Age, 1959–1989* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2017-18). Documenta Politik und Kunst, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin (2021/22), Core Memory, Newcomb Museum (2022), and Krakow Witkin Gallery Boston, 2022, Albers, Korot Marden, amongst others. Two video/music collaborations with Steve Reich—*The Cave* (1993) and *Three Tales* (2002)—brought video installation art into a theatrical context and have been performed worldwide since 1993. Both works continue to be performed and were exhibited as video installations at venues including the Whitney Museum, NYC, NY (1993); the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, (1994); the Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain (1994), the Kunstverein, Düsseldorf, Germany (1994); Historisches Museum, Frankfurt, Germany (2000), ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany, 2008. Korot’s work is in both private and public collections including MoMA, NYC, the Kramlich collection’s New Art Trust (shared with Tate Modern, MoMA NYC and SF MoMA), the Sol LeWitt Collection, the Thoma Art Foundation, and others. She is a Guggenheim Fellow, a Montgomery Fellow from Dartmouth College, a recipient of numerous grants from the New York State Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Anonymous Was a Woman.