

Beryl Korot interview transcript. Running time 9 min, 54 sec.

Conducted via telephone February 25, 2022, by Newcomb Art Museum Curator Laura Blereau. Written interview transcription by Curatorial Assistant Alex Landry and audio editing by Blereau.

This is Beryl Korot. I live and work in New York City and in upstate New York; and I am an artist who pioneered the field of video art, multiple channel work in particular. But as time's gone by, the work has become less screen based and more tactile. What I felt right from the start, in 1970, in working with technology, with video, per se, was the impending loss of tactility. And I felt that the closer I could stay to hand-making my work--meaning that I was my own engineer, my own editor, my own camera person—that that would keep the work as true to my intentions as possible. That's the craftsmanship aspect of the work and I'm proud of that.

In 1970, I co-created a magazine called “Radical Software” which focused on the information environment in which we lived at that time dominated by newspapers and also broadcast media as a one way information delivery system to our living rooms. But it was the realization of a structural relationship between the ancient and the modern, between video and print and weaving that intrigued me at that time; and it still does. All three are communication technologies that encrypt information line by line, an expression of how we think. Weaving actually became my thinking tool, and has stayed my thinking tool, it seems forever--it seems infinitely elastic and fascinating for me to realize that there is a numerical basis to abstract pattern based on the placement of threads on the loom. That the loom itself could become the first computer on Earth, is a testament to its enormous impact and flexibility as a medium, a structure, an idea. To this day, I find it endlessly useful in my work. I was never really somebody who got lost in the fibers, but more in how threads meet one another to create pattern and structure. And then there were all the metaphors that we live with, you know--Penelope waiting for Odysseus and weaving to keep her suitors at bay, “telling a yarn,” “the thread of a story”—all of these are metaphors for an underlying structure that creates cloth. And to me, that's compelling.

My first weaving work was a 4 channel [video] work called *Dachau1974* based

on my visit in 1974 to the former site of the concentration camp in Germany which had become in a sense a tourist site. The juxtaposition of images across monitors based on the simple plain weave structure, (1 and 3) and (2 and 4)—that's kind of under over, under over—bound the work as it proceeded in time. We make a delineation in the West between art and craft that certainly isn't made in many non-western cultures. I think it boils down to the aim of the artist when they're creating that work.

Early-on, all my works were making a statement about the information culture in which we live, about technology—those things were really on my mind. I would say that the digital embroideries I'm exhibiting here was an opportunity that presented itself when I was introduced to the printer Judith Solodkin in 2011 who was an expert at using the digital sewing machine. I was drawing at the time but wanted to combine the drawings with thread, and for threads and the pencil drawings to interact on a piece of paper, for the threads to add depth and additional layers to the original drawn surface. And it was pleasant, because for the first time in my life, I actually worked with another person who programmed and used the machine. I made the drawings, I picked the thread color, I picked how far apart the threads were supposed to be, what the pattern of the sewn layer would be, how open or closed they were to the drawn surface beneath, but I didn't actually do the programming myself. So it was, in a way, a little bit of vacation for me, in a very pleasant way.

I'm basically a self-motivated learner; I taught myself to use the tools I do by asking questions to those who know more than I about what I wanted to learn. But I never went to art school. I was a literature major.

The text for the two hand-woven pieces in the exhibition, "Babel 1" and "Babel 2," appear in Genesis. I selected them because they are actually the earliest example of thoughts about the human use of technology in the ancient world that I'm aware that we have. The text itself refers to a period of time around 3000 BC when humankind was moving from a herding society to one more agricultural and urban. A dramatic shift not unlike where we are now as we shift from analog to digital. Then it was a world impacted by bitumen used as mortar between fired bricks—society moving away from a God-centered world to a more human-centered world, and where large numbers of people gathered in one place to live. I was intrigued by the Babel story itself and the

commentaries on it as an early story about technological invention, about power, about its uses and misuses.

I was obsessed by all the connections. I realized that for hundreds of years artists were making their paintings on woven canvas, and I began to think about the woven canvas, its grid structure in particular. And I decided to start making my own canvases to paint on, but because I was deciding the size and scale of the thread, and I was thinking about language, and Babel, and the beginning of written language, I decided to write the story of the Tower of Babel with my own invented code. It was a way to visualize thought devoid of knowable meaning unless you had the code. Some people would think it looks like a Morse code type of system, but it was in fact based on the grid structure of woven cloth. There were certain dots and groups of dots that formed an A or a B or C or a D, and I translated the story onto these canvases. "Babel 1" and "Babel 2", are a way to contemplate what thought looks like, small packets of information separated by spaces, horizontal or vertical and universal to all cultures.

In a sense I viewed the abstract text on canvas as a kind of language as still life. And the context for the text itself corresponded to a period of time when humanity was transitioning from an oral culture to a written one. Probably one of the most extraordinary technological leaps in human history.

Our technology is so much a part of who we are, how we express ourselves. The act of weaving itself and its myriad of programmed possibilities has sustained my interest over my working life. Through the centuries it's created works of enduring beauty while it is also the fabric on which we paint, the clothes that keep us warm, the fabric that allows us to explore space, so many indispensable uses and applications. I think it's only recently acknowledged as a medium within the fine arts field in part because of its programming aspects which preceded the computer, and because it's viewed as women's work which is more recently being revisited.

When I was an editor of "Radical Software" in the early 1970s, I was very close to the Chilean artist, Juan Downey and his wife, Marilyns Downey, and Marilyns was a weaver. And she and I used to talk together about the programming aspects of weaving, and that pattern on a loom is actually

based on a numerical structure. So that was completely fascinating to me. And Marilyns said to me, "There's a great woman, Claire Freeman, at the Y on 50th Street that's got a room filled with looms. Go and study with her." And I walked in, there were hundreds of looms, it was an unbelievable space. And Claire was a woman of few words. She sat me down, she had me warping that very day, threading the next week and weaving the following week. And she was an amazing instructor, and I guess I was meant to be a weaver. It was a latent trait that was activated in that memorable room.

After the "Dachau 1974" piece, there was a work called "Text and Commentary" that I made in 1977. I had begun to think that I wanted to create a work that linked the relationship between video and print and weaving in a more direct way. Text and weaving after all share a latin root—texere. At the same time, I was reading the text and commentaries of the Torah or the Five Books of Moses, and I was struck by how you couldn't really understand the text without realizing how many voices had previously commented on those texts to open them up beyond the written word after word on the page. I thought, why not create a work made up of a variety of media? Why not take video and weaving and bring them together into a dialogue, and have them describe a common source each within their own limitations. So from source material I recorded from a camera hanging from the ceiling above my loom, I wove and video edited and made weavers notations and pictographic notations of each element of the work and placed them in dialog with one another in a common space.

If ever I had an epiphany, it was in 1974 when I worked simultaneously for the first time with all 3 media. The information in each is encoded at very different speeds, and through very different processes. Time was a huge component, but at thirty frames per second the storage and retrieval system of modern video technology was so much faster than the slow body time of weaving or writing technologies. Speed is definitely a quality of technological development, for good or ill. Yet amazingly all three were encoded to come to us line by line from the discoveries of the ancient world to the present as a clear expression of how we organize pattern and information.