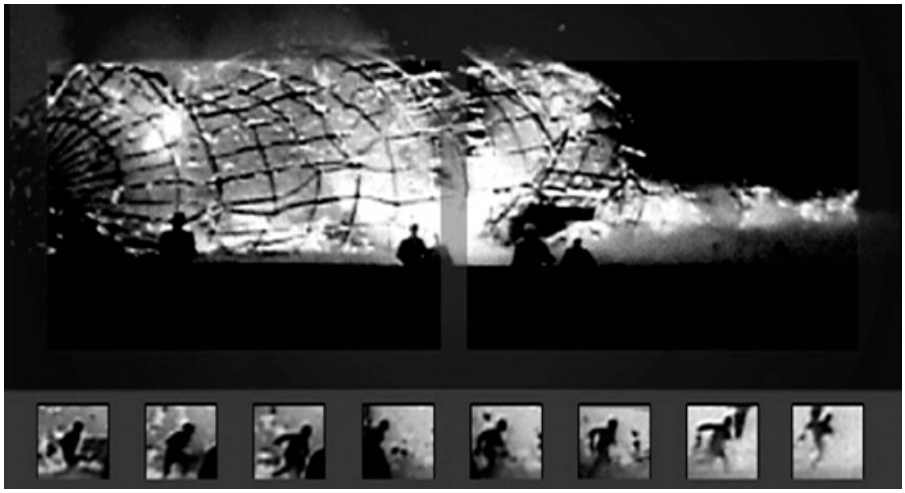
BOMB
A quarterly arts & culture magazine since 1981

Steve Reich and Beryl Korot

by Julia Wolfe

Issue 81 Fall 2002, MUSIC



Video still from *Three Tales*, Act 1: "Hindenburg." Photo: Beryl Korot.

One stormy night this summer in New York, I trekked over to Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's place to see and hear their new video opera, *Three Tales*. Exploring the human relationship to technology, *Three Tales* offers up the question of where our responsibility lies. A quote from the opera indicates just how dire our future could become: "If I scan your brain, download that information, I'll have a little you right here in my personal computer."

Steve and Beryl explained to me that the piece really had to be experienced live in the theater. Nonetheless we huddled into Beryl's studio to view it on the monitor and Steve sang the vocal parts that were not yet laid down on tape. I will see the piece this fall at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, but in this private viewing I was left speechless—swept into the depth and beauty of sound and image. The issues in *Three Tales* have momentous portent, but at the same time the piece is incredibly personal. I had heard about the opera for years. Our friendship spans the births of children (grandchildren in their case), visits to their retreat in Vermont and long dinners with conversation going late into the night. I would hear about their interviews with scientists, new developments in the piece, the times that the computer crashed, the intensity of long work days. It was so moving for me as a friend and fellow artist to see *Three Tales* there in the studio with them.

JULIA WOLFE *Three Tales* is beautiful—it is rich with ideas and so many of the images resonated inside me. It's the kind of piece you need to see again and again to really absorb. But before we get into more philosophical issues, I'd like to ask either one of you: How would you describe the piece to a stranger on the street?

STEVE REICH On the stage you see a 30-foot screen above some black staircase-looking platforms. There are ten musicians: a string quartet, two pianists, four percussionists—two play vibes, two play mini drum sets with a kick and a snare—and the conductor. There are three tenors and two sopranos. The musicians and singers all perform in sync with the video via the conductor, who wears a headphone with a click track.* The *Three Tales* are "Hindenburg," "Bikini" and "Dolly." "Hindenburg" is, of course, the zeppelin that exploded in 1937; "Bikini" is about the atomic bomb tests held at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific between 1946 and 1954. "Dolly" is briefly about the cloned sheep, and then really about genetic engineering, robotics and changing our species. What you see on the screen in "Hindenburg" is material that Beryl got from the National Archives, highly manipulated as she'll describe, and used similarly in "Bikini." "Dolly," on the other hand, was shot in state-of-the-art digital video. We conducted interviews with famous scientists from various fields: James Watson, who discovered DNA and won the Nobel Prize; Richard Dawkins, the biologist who wrote *The Selfish Gene*; Marvin Minsky, who is considered the father of artificial intelligence; Rodney Brooks, the head of robotics at MIT; Steven Pinker, who wrote *The Language Instinct*; Bill Joy, chief scientist at Sun Microsystems, who is very concerned about where all this is going; Sherry Turkle, a psychologist at MIT who studies children playing with robot toys; and many others, as well as Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who has translated the Talmud into modern Hebrew and from there into English, French and Russian, among other languages, and is also learned in Kabbalah. We present a variety of perspectives.

JW There are a lot of people, lots of points of view, and you present these ideas in a way that the audience can look at them and absorb them. Would you say the piece is a statement? A search? I am asking partly because when I watched *Three Tales* I felt the people behind the piece. How did you as the creators react to the information you were gathering?

BERYL KOROT There have always been two aspects to my work: formal innovation and strong content. That goes for Steve's tape pieces as well. To make a work together, we had to be engaged by the subject matter, and we shared an interest in technology as it has advanced. Looking back at the Hindenburg and Bikini atoll, and forward in "Dolly" to new technologies, was a way of rethinking and understanding the soup in which we swim. We call this a theater of ideas, but its success as a work depends on the strength of the video and the music.

"Hindenburg" itself begins with the crash of the zeppelin in 1937 and ends with a view of its burnt-up carcass on the landing field in Lakehurst, New Jersey, taken from an airplane. What interested us here in viewing the archival material and listening to recordings of the period was the overwhelming conviction that technology was the sure way to progress. Naturally, after the atom bomb, a darker view of progress began to appear.

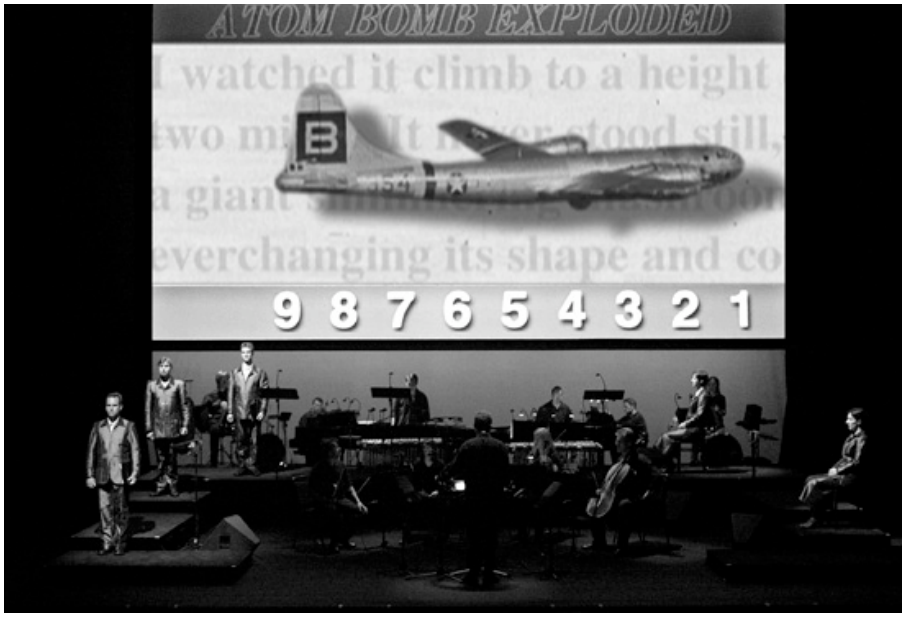
SR I agree with Beryl that the whole work ultimately depends on the quality of the music and the video. However, to answer your question about reacting to the information we were getting, especially during the interviews with the scientists, the thought that kept coming back to me was, humility or arrogance? The Hindenburg burned because it was filled with hydrogen. The Germans were completing the Hindenburg in 1935 and tried to buy helium for it from the United States. We were the only people who had it. Roosevelt refused, because Hitler was in power and Roosevelt was rightly unwilling to sell him anything. The Germans went ahead and built it anyway, with hydrogen. They took every possible precaution with the hydrogen but, of course, it exploded. The real answer should have been, "If we can't do it with helium, let's ditch it because it's too dangerous." When the American Navy exploded the bombs at Bikini, they initially blew up one in the air and one deep in the ocean. The scientists told them that with the one in the ocean, all the radioactivity that would normally be released into the air would instead get trapped in the water. The water would shoot up and then fall all over the target ships, and when they tried to measure what was going on with these ships, they wouldn't be able to get close to them because they'd be glowing with radioactivity. That's

exactly what happened; the whole test was a boondoggle. The only thing that really happened was that the 167 people of the Bikini nation were relocated and are still not able to return. With "Dolly" you see different scientific and religious personalities—it's a theater of revelation through utterance. Some of these people are very adamant about their ideas and others say, "Maybe we don't have it right yet." I suggest the latter attitude may be a useful one to have in a world where playing with some of these things may have catastrophic unintended consequences.

JW How did you both come to do this piece?

SR Klaus Peter Kehr at the Vienna Festival, who had supported an earlier collaboration of ours, *The Cave*, asked if we would do a piece on the 20th century. And we said, "We'll think about it." We went home and thought about it. And we came up with these *Three Tales*.

BK Except that from the very beginning we also decided to use the two stories of the creation of human beings from Genesis. Those two creation stories are absolutely inherent to the work. The first being that man was created, along with woman, to control and have dominion over all the animals and plants on earth. The second, that man was created from the dust of the earth, woman from his rib, and both were placed in a garden to serve it and to keep it. These two creation stories represent two very different types of human reality present in all of us to varying degrees. In "Dolly," the spotlight focuses primarily on the scientists and their words. There is very little said from a religious point of view except in the words of Adin Steinsaltz: "Are you responsible or not responsible for anything?" and "The sin of Adam in eating—he was too hasty." *Three Tales* is really about human beings and how we deal with the powers that are given to us.



Three Tales, performance view, Vienna, 2002. Photo: Wonge Bergmann.

JW That line definitely stayed with me: "He was too hasty." It resonated through every part of the piece. Why are we rushing? What are we rushing toward?

How is this work different from a documentary? Seeing it, I know it's not a documentary, but what does the art allow the viewer, the listener, to experience that a documentary doesn't? My feeling is that you get to a certain depth that you can't get to with a pure documentary.

SR I have used documentary material since I appeared on the scene back in 1965. My first commercial record on Columbia, *Come Out*, was a recording of a black kid

arrested for murder saying, "I had to open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them." The phrase "come out to show them" was the basis for the whole piece. It was said in a remarkably melodic way. It was then looped and repeated over and over on the two stereo tracks, and one gradually moved ahead, or out of phase with the other. First you hear reverberation, and then a canon or round. Later it divides into four voices in canon and finally eight. The difference between hearing the spoken words—documentary—and then hearing the piece *Come Out* is enormous. Similarly, *It's Gonna Rain*, the first piece I did that way, was with a black preacher shouting about Noah and the Flood. The documentary source of the piece gave it meaning that became intensified through musical development. I stopped working with tape in 1966 and only in 1988 with *Different Trains* did I go back to using recorded sources. But with *Different Trains* I thought, "What if you recorded someone speaking and then a viola or a cello doubles their voice when you play it back?" The way they spoke, their speech melody, would be exactly what the viola or cello would play. *Different Trains* was recorded by the Kronos Quartet and won a Grammy as best new composition in 1989. *Different Trains* also suggested a new way to create opera or music theater where video images of people are seen while musicians and singers on stage play and/or sing their speech melody and take that as the starting point for musical development. This led to *The Cave* in 1993, my first collaboration with Beryl. That in turn led to *Three Tales*. So this marriage of documentary sound with musical instruments and voices has been essential to me for years and was the basis of my interest in music theater.

BK Just to backtrack a bit, I was part of a group of people working in video in the late sixties, early seventies, when I coedited *Radical Software*, who were preoccupied with the nature of the information environment in which we were living. We wanted to change the monolithic nature of the broadcast viewing environment, and multiple-channel video was one way of doing that. By making people come to a gallery space, by creating works on multiple screens that expanded the image to fill a room, that allowed you to play with time across multiple channels, the traditional TV viewing environment was usurped and re-created. At the same time, I became interested in the hand loom as an early programming tool, an early computer, in that it programs patterns according to a numerical system. Right away, multiple channels became analogous to multiple threads on a loom, demanding a kind of unity of purpose of the disparate elements to form a whole. However, by the end of the seventies, I wanted more from a video image than the technology would allow. *Text and Commentary*, a five-channel video and weaving work, was literally handmade and videotaped simultaneously. By the time I finished I felt I had created work that was more handmade. For about eight years I actually wove my own canvas and created paintings based on my own language that were made of many layers of images and words. This is where I was when Steve asked me to collaborate with him on *The Cave*.

JW It's amazing how organic the process of you both coming to this collaborative work was—Steve's use of documentary material early on and then discovering that your work, Beryl, was doing similar things in the visual world. Was working together a natural step? Tell me a little bit about that collaborative process. Is it fun? Is it difficult?

SR Throughout working on *Three Tales* Beryl and I were basically always on the same wavelength. If we disagreed about details, we could always work them out because of that basic aesthetic agreement.

BK When Steve asked me to collaborate, I went through a long process of decision making, both because of the personal implications of working together and because, naturally, I had to feel totally engaged by my contribution to the process. Illustrating the talking heads that largely made up *The Cave* would not be satisfying. Once again the computer entered the picture to clarify matters for me. At the time we started *The Cave*, it was just possible to grab stills from the video and blow them up to create abstractions of the clothing or the background of the interviewees themselves. Also, to take the idea of multiple-channel video art

installation and bring it into a theatrical space, to create a five-channel video work for the stage in which singers and musicians were placed amidst the screens, that was an idea I thought was really great. Pictographic figures were in many of my paintings, so it was taking ideas I had worked on in the seventies and eighties and integrating them within a new kind of theatrical space, very frontal and very flat. By the time we got to *Three Tales* I was able to work completely on a computer "canvas." Film and video images, photos and drawings could all be brought into a single frame, placed in any relationship to one another, at any level of scale or transparency. A completely new plastic environment had emerged with which I felt completely at home.

JW This piece was a long time in the making and took a lot of research. How many people did you interview? How many books did you read? What was involved in getting this piece to the point where you had enough material to work with?

SR We actually did quite a bit of homework. We went out to Lakehurst, where the Hindenburg crashed. We read the newspaper accounts of the Hindenburg crash and then the A-bomb tests at Bikini. Before making the interviews for "Dolly," I must have read more than 15 books by the people I was going to interview.

Getting down to actually working on "Bikini" and "Hindenburg" meant that Beryl got the video material from the National Archives and then we sat down and came up with some basic ideas about how we were going to proceed. "Hindenburg" is in four distinct scenes. In musical terms, scene 1, "It Could Not Have Been a Technical Matter" is fast; scene 2, "Nibelung Zeppelin," is a kind of scherzo; scene 3, "A Very Impressive Thing to See," is slow; and scene 4, "I Couldn't Understand It," is fast. It's a form that is reminiscent of that period in history or even much earlier. When we got to "Bikini," Beryl said, "Why don't we work in a cycle of image-sound blocks?" Basically we have three distinct blocks: the B-29 bomber in the air; on the atoll with the Bikini people; and the Navy running the whole show from their control ships. In the air, on the atoll, on the ships, in the air again, on the atoll again, on the ships again and a third cycle and finally the coda where you get to zero in the countdown that goes on throughout the piece. You don't see the bomb and you don't hear the bomb. You see palm trees coming apart with everything orange from the fireball in a kind of Abstract Expressionist slow motion that Beryl created out of one second of footage. There is some slow music and no sound of explosions at all. Something had been destroyed—not a big noise, just achingly sad. So the structure of "Bikini" is a nonstop meditation on the whole event. No scenes that start and stop like "Hindenburg." With "Dolly" we outlined the libretto in sections for our own purposes, but it's hard to put your finger on where one section ends and another begins. You hear certain kinds of music and see certain visual things that recur, but formally it's hard to analyze and pinpoint—which seemed appropriate. Each act is formally more complex and thereby comments on and reflects a still later historical period.

JW Did working with the visual images inform how you work structurally?

SR I only had a general idea of what would be seen.

BK Until I finish a section, Steve never sees much of anything, really. We look through all the documentary material together because that's also the source for some of the sounds. And then we go our separate ways. I work on creating photographic tableaux of a particular section we're working on, and when Steve finishes a few minutes of music he sends it to me through wires connected from his computer to my Beta deck. I use his score to determine places in the video where I want to make edits. The music is always a few minutes ahead of the video, but it's a very back-and-forth process until we're finished.

SR We're living in the same world, the details of which are being worked out independently.

Video still from *Three Tales*, Act 2: "Bikini." Photo: Beryl Korot.

JW You've had tremendous audiences for *Three Tales* in Amsterdam, Vienna and Spoleto, and there's more to come. I'm guessing that these audiences are packed with music and art lovers. Do you have a desire to reach a particular group of people? As I was watching it, I was thinking, What if an audience of scientists saw this piece? What if policymakers were watching this piece? Have you ever thought about pursuing that in any way?

SR No! (*laughter*)

BK No, but I take a Bill Joy position, the "he was too hasty" view. Joy invented JavaScript, which is how we communicate on the Web. He's the one who said, "If we are going to create a species smarter than us, our prospects are dim." As well as, "We'd better take a vote first." Joy and Sherry Turkle cast a cautionary eye toward faster and faster technological development without careful consideration. Joy says, "No plan, no control, no brakes." So I'm happy that somebody like that is in our piece. And Jaron Lanier, who says, "It's a terrible mistake to think of the spiritual impulse as arising from cognitive weakness." He's an inventor of virtual reality and a very smart guy with a really good conscience. They are all part of the scientific community who are creating a dialogue with the public. If this piece does anything to foster their ideas and to present them in a new way for more people to think about, then that's great.

SR On the other side of the coin, I have said it before, but it's worth saying again: Pablo Picasso is obviously one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, and one of his greatest works is *Guernica*, which was done as a protest against the aerial bombing of civilians. Judged as a political statement, *Guernica* is an abject failure. It didn't stop civilian bombings for one millisecond. Now we're seeing suicide bombers attack civilians as their principal means of warfare. So great artists may be moved politically to do something, but judged as to their political efficacy, they are failures. The same for Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht and many others. Someone like Bono can raise money for good causes because U2 has an enormous audience. In the pop world there is a more realistic possibility of changing things a tiny bit because more human beings are involved. But I think that in the fine arts even people who have risen to positions of prominence and world fame have accomplished nothing when it comes to political change.

JW Is there another piece in the planning?

BK Not at the moment. Maybe someday.

SR Beryl says everything comes in threes; if that's the case then there will be one more. But I am devoted now to composing pieces that have no technology beyond a microphone. A number of instrumental and vocal pieces. I need a pit stop. In a few

years, it would be great to do something again.

BK I'm really happy to have a break and pursue these video paintings that I've wanted to make for a very long time. You walk into a room and see one or several video projections that may be quite abstract and then realize they're made up of tiny bits of material that have been taken from the real world. I'm not sure what the content will be, but I'm very clear about the technique. It's all possible because of these new tools that are available right now for video in the computer. And I've started to do some drawings recently—which is really exciting because anything that I've ever done that's worth anything has come out of sitting and doing some kind of work with my hands.

JW Are you returning to drawing?

BK Well, I've always kept notebooks.

JW Talking about video paintings, one of the most intense moments for me was at the end of "Bikini" where the screen turns into a painting and the music engulfs you. I don't know if I have experienced something quite as deep as that for as long I can remember. It seems like the culmination of the collaboration happened, for me, in that low deep moment. It was very beautiful.

BK Thanks, Julie.

SR Thanks.

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