

# LESLIE THORNTON'S 35 YEARS OF RADICAL FILMMAKING

Leslie Thornton interviewed by Dan Kidner  
Frieze  
23 August 2018

With a current show at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, the artist talks about story-telling, 'self-erasure' and the importance of speech and language in her work

**Dan Kidner:** *I want to start in 1983, the year that you started working on the epic film cycle Peggy and Fred in Hell (1983-2015), which includes 16 episodes and a number of feature length edits, culminating in Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding (2015), which you completed for the exhibition I curated at London's Raven Row a couple of years ago, 'The Inoperative Community'. How did you meet the films' main protagonists, Donald and Janis Reading and what were your ambitions for the project when you began shooting?*

**Leslie Thornton:** I moved into a new house in San Francisco and as I was unloading my car these kids popped up over the fence, wanting to see the new neighbour. Within a few minutes, we were sitting down on the front stoop with a sound recorder and I was recording them. They started telling stories and I knew I'd found gold.

The initial premise of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* concerned two children, alone in a post-apocalyptic world. In most of the episodes we see them attempting to hold onto, or reconstruct, a lost world by playing in its technological detritus and also creating a kind of TV show, with them as the stars. What I do not reveal, although it was my own backstory from the beginning, is that they are being observed by an artificial intelligence entity, studied as models of human affect or emotion. AI uses TV to stimulate their behaviour. It keeps TV running and the only other people the children see are on TV. They think they are on TV and they perform.

**DK:** *At the end of the last episode, The Fold (2014), a four-minute coda, we see what looks like a flickering TV screen with*

*a broken cathode ray tube and hear the fragmented voice of the AI – your voice, distorted and polyvalent with multiple layers at different pitches. This is the point at which, if one had been following the narrative closely, it is revealed that Peggy and Fred are being monitored. In one sense this offers up a satisfactory conclusion to the whole project.*

**LT:** At a number of points, over the years, I reached what I thought of as a fully rounded work. But it remained unsettled for me. It did not go far enough beyond itself, meaning, I suppose, that it did not transcend itself. In the last few episodes and finally *The Fold* the children are not the subjects. They are objects. That was the end. *Peggy and Fred* caught up with itself, with our present. Our slow-motion apocalypse, our own self-erasure.

**DK:** *Speech, vocalizations and language formation are ongoing themes in your work. When did you start to become interested in vocalizations?*

**LT:** From birth practically! From the time I was three I can remember being conscious of what I could later label as tone and gesture in the voice. I knew from our pets that there was variability and likely signification in the vocalizations of animals, for instance. My first film, *X-TRACTS* (1975), is very much organized around speech. The linguistic model of morpheme, phoneme, sentence, paragraph becomes significant in the film. I cut up spoken language into units of this order.

I was always tuned into language, especially speech, and this is one reason I was so strongly attracted to working in film, and adept at filming live action, and at directing performance. I was drawn to writings on the female voice by [Julia] Kristeva and [Luce] Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Voice is the focus of *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* (1983), the very first episode. And it shows up in the last episode, *The Fold*. Dehumanized yet sympathetic somehow.

This interest carries through all of my work. It is at the essence of my most recent piece, *Cut From Liquid to Snake* (2018), which presents a series of female voices recorded at different times. It begins with a sequence in which my half of a telephone conversation is heard. I made this call on the morning that Trump was elected President. None of us expected it. It was a very traumatic moment. I called an older, sage friend, who usually has a way of contextualizing disaster on a millennial scale, but this time he could not do it. In the film you hear my agitated voice, with all the gaps between my words cut out, and there is no audio of the other person on the line. It is eerie, ominous, and it seems sped up. The image you see is of soldier ants, which are female, by the way. I had filmed the swarming ants on a digital camera near Los Alamos in 2015, and then rephotographed the footage with a 16mm film camera last year, off a monitor, and hand processed the analogue footage. The hand processing, intentionally badly done, produced an unstable,

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distressed look. There is agitation in the voice – my voice, my persona – and in the video/film of a madly active ant colony. All of this suggests, and even viscerally induces, a high alert state. I had cut out the name Trump, the specificity of that, but an apprehension about the present registers.

*Cut From Liquid to Snake* has five distinct passages, each organized around a vocal event. A second passage involves an eyewitness account by a female of the bombing of Hiroshima in World War II. This woman is interviewed by a US Army sergeant in the Fall of 1945, soon after the event. She speaks in an absolutely chilling way, describing the most horrific deformations of the human body in a matter-of-fact tone. The image for this section is of the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. Bubbles of gas rise through black tar and burst. The sun refracts across the surface, producing an image of beautiful horror, not unlike Bruce Conner's film *Crossroads* (1976), showing footage of H-bomb tests.

*Cut From Liquid to Snake* depends upon the recycling loop for its full resolution, unlike my earlier work, which was linear. Several historical and inter-personal moments, some of great consequence and others more domestic, start to speak to each other across time and demography. It is my most significant breakthrough in placing media in what I would call an ambient context. As soon as you watch the work more than once, and you have to, it becomes something else. Time and history are significant to each other in the present. It all becomes present.

**DK:** *Cut From Liquid to Snake* features in the exhibition 'SPEED', currently on at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart. This is a collaborative exhibition with James Richards, who you also collaborated with on the film *Crossing* (2016). Richards' practice shares some common ground with your own, particularly in your approach to sound and use of montage to convey momentum, if not always a narrative progression. You talked before about the idea of 'the ambient' as opposed to 'the linear'. Tell me about the two projects with Richards, and how you have found working in collaboration with an artist from a very different generation and context.

**LT:** I approach work within the gallery somewhat differently to a lot of gallery artists, because I have a long history of dealing with narrative, within a linear time/space. I use the term ambient to refer to a viewing environment in which the viewer is in charge of the time. The strongest distinction I would make between James Richards' work and my own is that I have a strong focus on an outside. I mean, I embrace the world through my work. I believe that his focus is more fully within the arts, art to art, while engaged with charged references. James has an exquisite sense of space and the visceral. In our recent work together on 'SPEED', a great deal of his time was devoted to creating the physical environment. My own investment is entirely with the media itself.

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James deforms imagery in a manner that is sometimes quite baroque, and then situates this within a powerful, minimalist physical setting – a slight of hand that dislocates the source of its power. I am concerned with meaning, playing on the edge of it, finding an edge that is close to oblivion and can be transformative. I use narrative-like strategies of manipulation to generate and play across a vertically stacked field of possibilities. We have faith in each other however because we are both poking at a related soft spot. Where Jim and I absolutely coincide, where we can really sing together, is in our grasp of the ineffable. It is a hard thing to do – to locate the ineffable, and, upon finding it, to let it be. We recognize it in each other's work, so we can sit there and say 'cut, cut, cut' to each other. And then there is a perfection that settles in, like in nature. One does not start there; you start in the ordinariness of the world and its imagery. Then you compile, and you erase until the whole of it is untouchable.

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