

LESLIE THORNTON

Leslie Thornton on saturation and solitude in her moving image works.

Leslie Thornton interviewed by Hiji Nam
Artforum
16 April 2020

“There are no other people in the world. Something has happened to them, but Peggy and Fred are unconcerned . . . They are adrift in the detritus of prior cultures, cast loose in a world of post-apocalyptic splendor. And they also watch television . . . This constitutes their idea of the Social.” This is how Leslie Thornton describes her epic cinematic series “Peggy and Fred in Hell,” which she has repeatedly edited and reassembled from 1983 to 2016. Thornton’s five-decade output is similarly elliptical and self-theorizing, drawing from shot and found footage, text, and archival material to confound expectations of narrative and legibility. Her exhibition “GROUND,” at Kunstverein Nürnberg, opened February 27 and closed in March due to Covid-19. But the project’s investigation of how truth is produced and decays in unstable systems of power remains, and may always remain, ongoing.

GROUND (2020) MARKS THE BEGINNING of a new work cycle based on a series of recent science residencies at CERN and CalTech, and the self-generated film archive I began shooting at those sites two years ago. The film’s central character—ominous and enigmatic—oozes over Los Angeles, then recedes and comes back and recedes again: a reference to any number of ongoing and underlying threats. There’s a sense that the city is on the brink of collapse. You can make out the figure and voice of a research scientist, but otherwise most everything is reduced to the form of a digital infrastructure—grids, lines, frequencies—such that there is almost no other representational image that shows up in the piece except in the viewer’s imagination.

It’s an apocalyptically oriented body of material, and it was extraordinary how, during the run of the exhibition, *Ground* was redefined by external events. A miasma looking like it’s going to eat Los Angeles became the virus, and for now, that’s what it is. When we get through this, I assume it will go back to being a more general kind of image. This is not something you plan for, but which I care about a lot—that works can continue to evolve after they’ve been completed.

Ground is very much related to *Peggy and Fred in Hell*. The two are paired in the Nürnberg show, the latter

shown in its ninety-five-minute final formulation, *Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding* (2016). The unspoken premise is that, in the post-apocalyptic world that these two children inhabit, they are the only people left. They can go anywhere, have anything. On a simplified level I could point out that *Peggy and Fred* references Kansas (The Wizard of Oz) and in *Ground* you find a wizard. It's not quite that tight a relationship, but it's there. The wizard of *Ground*, who occupies a disembodied, yet very human, space—a voice speaking from the position of science—is committed to truth, so we are not in Oz. But truth is not stable, and that is profoundly the case in science. And that is part of what I love about it, and about the people I have met this year—so passionate and concrete, and honest, and not afraid to try, experiment, and to be wrong. And then, to go on.

My dad was a physicist and my grandfather was an electrical engineer. They both ended up working on the atomic bomb during World War II. We were regular kids, growing up in the Ohio countryside in the Cold War '50s, playing in the yard and jumping in the lake and swinging on willow trees. But we'd also visit our father working with nuclear reactors and on military-industrial projects, which lent us a sense of a bigger order, I think. When you're around people who are experimentalists, it needs to be a really open and ungrounded space, to allow for risk, instabilities, eureka moments. There's a parallel between art and science, a shared sense of intuition engaged in a process where the result is unknown. But science has a goal of knowledge, a prediction toward an outcome. In my definition of art, or in my kind of practice, there's no prediction or goal beyond each work.

Peggy and Fred in Hell is not linear, but a stacked space with its own logic and narrative. It's about time, time in so many different ways, including technological time. Throughout the making of the series, changes in the technical apparatus are reflected in the form itself, from film to video to digital; it's part of the subject matter. Digital manipulation becomes more prominent in the work; it possesses an ambience reflecting shifts in media-making that have been absorbed into the present. I shot most of the footage on 16mm, editing between film and video.

I began *Peggy and Fred* in the 1980s, when I started to feel anxious about a looming explosion of information. Everything was speeding up. The vision for the project was of a world destroyed by excess. What is left after an unspecified apocalypse is everything—detritus—and only two children navigating. At first the children appear as protagonists, building their world. By the end they are fragmentary subjects for data analysis. If *Peggy and Fred* suggested a kind of speculative science fictional space, one of saturation and solitude, that sense of invention devolved as the world changed into this present, our present. Our information overload, our most ordinary sort of YouTube nothingness. It is so much more extreme than we could have imagined.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

In this next series of works, beginning with *Ground*, there will be some sense of an overarching narrative. I can't tell you what it is yet, beyond the fact that it will have an epic character. *Peggy and Fred in Hell* is an epic, but *Ground* will be much more fractal, let's say. You could call it a kind of road movie, with the viewer stopping at different stations along the way. It will be like a looking-for-the-origin-of-the-universe sort of story, and it won't find anything.

— As told to Hiji Nam

<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/leslie-thornton-on-saturation-and-solitude-in-her-moving-image-works-82746>

SYLVIA KOUVALI