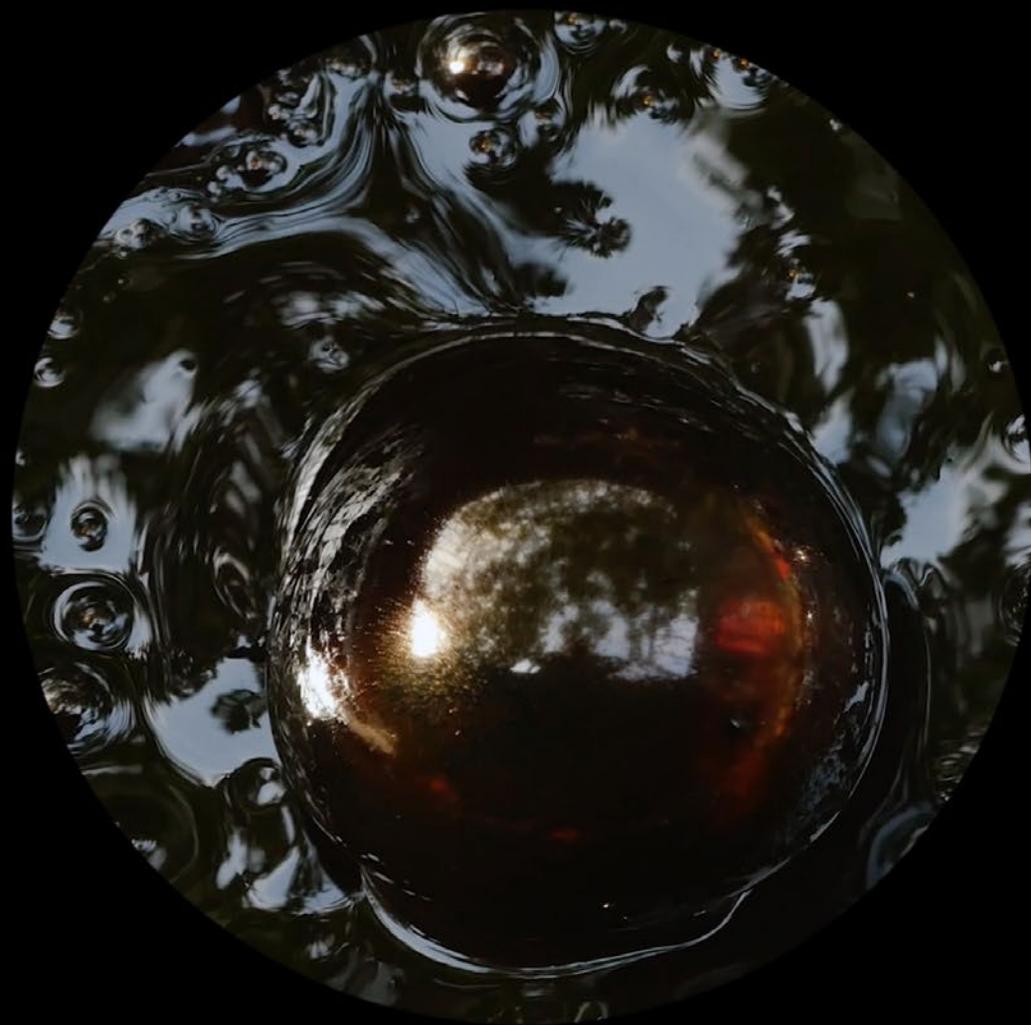


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# Leslie Thornton: Begin Again, Again

October 22, 2021–February 13, 2022



MIT List Visual Arts Center

# Leslie Thornton: Begin Again, Again

Hayden Gallery October 22, 2021–February 13, 2022

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In a career spanning nearly five decades, Leslie Thornton has produced a distinctive and influential body of work across a range of media, particularly film and video. Her early encounters with experimental, structuralist, and cinéma vérité traditions as a student in the 1970s fueled her iconoclastic take on the moving image and gave shape to her practice of weaving together her own footage and voice while sometimes engaging archival film and audio. In part through her forceful and dynamic use of sound, Thornton exposes the limits of language and vision in her works, while also acknowledging the ways that language and vision nevertheless remain central to scientific discourse and narrative in general.

In early works, such as *X-TRACTS* (1975), *All Right You Guys* (1976) (made with Desmond Horsfield) and *Jennifer, Where Are You?* (1981), Thornton contends with the basic conditions of representation in film and how the camera itself wields power. In these unconventional portraits, Thornton's montages of images, sound, and spoken utterances posit a counter-ethics of representation: rather than a singular perspective or authoritative voice, these works offer fragmentation, distortion, and stream-of-consciousness spontaneity that pulls the viewer to what the artist has called "the outer edge of narrative." These films also introduce themes of performativity in the self-presentation of their female subjects (including Thornton herself in *X-TRACTS*) in ways that challenge the presumed authenticity of film and attest to gendered power dynamics.

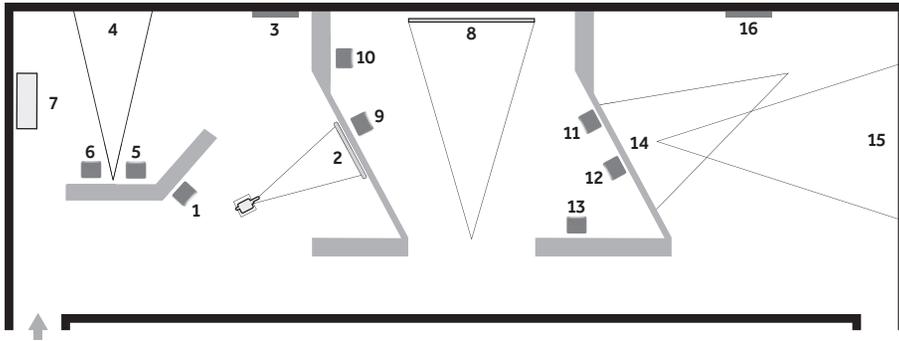
The relationship between technology, power, and violence is an enduring concern for Thornton. In *Let Me Count the Ways* (2004–ongoing) and *Cut From Liquid to Snake* (2018), Thornton takes up the United States' history of nuclear warfare—a subject fraught with personal resonance for her, as both her father and grandfather were involved in the Manhattan Project, the top-secret effort that produced the atomic bombs that the U.S. dropped on Japan in the final days of World War II. In these works, Thornton probes the ethical entanglements of science and war, the ineffability of nuclear catastrophe, and the impossibility of bearing witness—while also alluding to how the camera, itself a tool of witnessing, has been deployed as a weapon of war.

A touchstone of experimental film, Thornton's magnum opus *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1983–2015) holds a central place in the exhibition. Edited and reconfigured over a period of three decades, *Peggy and Fred in Hell* is a multi-chapter work in film and video that surfaces the Cold War-era anxieties that shaped Thornton's formative years, plumbs the psychological impact of technology in the last half of the twentieth century, and ventures a catastrophic vision of the future. The work loosely follows two children who appear to be alone in an incoherent, post-apocalyptic world. They parrot popular music tunes, role-play soap opera scenes or news conferences from a ramshackle domestic space, and wander through forests or barren deserts. Unsettling glimpses into gender, affect, performance, and spoken language permeate the work as the children hold a mirror to postwar society. The cycle's ominous and prescient conclusion anticipates both environmental disaster

and humankind's self-erasure through artificial technology—and perhaps even artificial intelligence's own demise.

Using footage shot at CERN and at Caltech, *Ground* (2020) embeds the voice of a physicist discussing particle decay within elegant yet foreboding technological landscapes. *Hemlock: Handmade* (2021), which debuts in this exhibition, complements and builds on *Ground*. Conversations about particle physics, multi-dimensional universes, bee colonies, and anti-matter hover over shallow-focus shots taken in the woods of New Hampshire that reveal intimate and unusual patterns of growth and decomposition.

The exhibition's title, *Begin Again, Again*—borrowed from a line in *The Fold* (2014), the final episode of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*—alludes to human-made cycles of destruction and renewal as well the hallmarks of Thornton's practice: an accumulation and repetition of images and language and a radically open-ended approach to observing, processing, and understanding.



- 1 **All Right You Guys**, 1976  
16mm film transferred to HD video, black and white, sound, 16 min.  
In collaboration with Desmond Horsfield
- 2 **X-TRACTS**, 1975  
16mm, black and white, sound, 9 min.  
In collaboration with Desmond Horsfield
- 3 **Jennifer, Where Are You?**, 1981  
16mm film transferred to HD video, color, sound, 10 min.
- 4 **Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 10**, 2004  
Video, color, sound, 3:30 min.
- 5 **Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 9**, 2004  
Video, color, sound, 8 min.  
**Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 8**, 2004  
Video, color, sound, 3:40 min.
- 6 **Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 7**, 2004  
Video, color, sound, 4:30 min.  
**Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 6**, 2006  
Video, black and white, sound, 1:30 min.
- 7 Select ephemera from the Thornton family archives
- 8 **Peggy & Fred in Hell: Folding**, 1983–2015  
16mm film and video transferred to HD video, black and white, color, sound, 95 min.
- 9 **Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue**, 1983  
16mm film transferred to video, black and white, sound, 21 min.
- 10 **Peggy and Fred in Kansas**, 1987  
Video, black and white, sound, 11 min.  
**[Dung Smoke Enters the Palace]**, 1989  
Video, black and white, sound, 17 min.
- 11 **Introduction to the So-Called Duck Factory**, 1992  
Video, black and white, sound, 12 min  
**Whirling**, 1995  
Video, black and white, sound, 1:30 min.
- 12 **End in New World**, 2005  
Video, black and white, sound, 3 min.  
**Have A Nice Day Alone**, 2001  
Video, black and white, sound, 7 min.  
**The Splendor**, 2002  
Video, black and white, sound, 3 min.  
**The Expiration**, 2007  
Video, black and white, sound, 1:15 min.
- 13 **High Heels Beloved**, 2021  
HD video loop, black and white, sound, 4:30 min.
- 14 **Ground**, 2020  
HD video, color, sound, loop, 13 min.
- 15 **Cut from Liquid to Snake**, 2018  
HD video, black and white, color, sound, loop, 26 min.
- 16 **Hemlock: Handmade**, 2021  
Two-channel video, color, silent, loop, approx. 7 min.

All works courtesy the artist and Rodeo, London/Piraeus



## **X-TRACTS**, 1975 (Leslie Thornton and Desmond Horsfield)

Thornton made *X-TRACTS*, her first film, with her then-partner and collaborator Desmond Horsfield while the two were MFA students at the Hartford Art School. The film consists of footage of Thornton shot by Horsfield and a fragmented audio recording of Thornton reading from a journal she kept in high school and college, which is heard after the film opens with a male voice counting from one to six. In their structuralist approach to *X-TRACTS*, Thornton and Horsfield established guidelines for how they would organize shots and cut the resulting film and audio reels without looking or listening, simply following the rules they had set out for themselves: "We developed a score ahead of time, a patterning of sound and image in units of six, moving from lengths of a maximum of three seconds to a quarter second incrementally over the course of the film." The duration of each cut of

audio operates similarly, and results in a voiceover where Thornton's speech is at times broken down into single words or even phonemes and morphemes. The text of her diary is reduced to linguistic units without an established syntax or meaning. As a film, *X-TRACTS* is unapologetically formalist, and yet, perhaps against the artists' intentions, it is strikingly diaristic, offering an intimate portrait of the young Thornton as both subject and author. In one rare but significant instance in the film's audio where an entire sentence is unbroken, Thornton utters, "of necessity, I have become an instrument." Although this fragment is the result of a chance operation, it captures a critical concept that has shaped Thornton's practice as she navigates how, as a filmmaker, she might escape her subjectivity through strategies of estrangement, fragmentation, and a refusal of linear narrative.



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### ***All Right You Guys*, 1976** (Leslie Thornton and Desmond Horsfield)

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Thornton's second film, *All Right You Guys*, is composed of six sections that focus on two young women, Eleanor (Thornton's real-life sister) and Liz (a friend of the artist). Quick, fragmented shots of the two subjects are intercut with equally fragmented bits of conversations that seem to focus on the women's bodies. *All Right You Guys* was shot and edited with Desmond Horsfield while the two were studying in the Documentary Film Section at MIT as visiting graduate students from the Harford Art School. Led by Ed Pincus and Richard Leacock, MIT's Documentary Film Section was known for its emphasis on how emerging technologies could further the authenticity and realism of documentary film (for example, they prized the development of hand held cameras that included audio tape recorders that could capture high quality sound to achieve the "naturalism" of synced sound and image).

The film's discontinuous construction, with rapidly intercut shots and obvious untethering of audio and image, makes the viewer aware that it is edited, or composed, and this ran directly counter the department's verité ethos. In fact it was an affront so great that Pincus labeled Thornton and the work "primitive," and dismissed both Horsfield and Thornton from the course. As curator Giampaolo Bianconi has observed, *All Right You Guys* "challenges the conditions of producing an authentic cinematic portrait as delineated by Pincus" and "destabilizes" the notion of realism in "documentary techniques." Even if Thornton and Horsfield were actively seeking to destabilize documentary strategies, within the film, a dual portrait of these women does emerge—effectively implying that the notion of a coherent subject is as illusory as the "realism" of cinema.



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### ***Jennifer, Where Are You?*, 1981**

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*Jennifer, Where Are You?* features footage of a young girl that Thornton had shot for a public service announcement on fire safety. The child messily applies red lipstick to her face, gazes at the camera and at her reflection in a hand mirror, and later holds lit matches, intently watching as one burns out. Every thirty seconds, a man's voice (which Thornton extracted from a soap opera) repeats the phrase "Jennifer, where are you?" and short outtakes from Thornton's earlier film *All Right You Guys*—with images flipped upside down—punctuate the girl's actions.

Already emerging in this early work is Thornton's hallmark use of dense, layered sound as well as a tendency to treat her own footage like found material by estranging it from its original context. Thornton has said that her initial decision to repeat the male voice's calls for "Jennifer" at regular

intervals determined how she structured the entire film, as well as her inclusion of additional sonic elements like frenzied piano music and running water. Although the sometimes cacophonous, almost sculptural audio montage is separate from the images presented on screen, its intensity drives possible inferences and interpretations of the non-narrative moving images. The looped audio of the man's repeated call for Jennifer seems to increase with urgency and becomes linked with the girl's presence in the film, leading a viewer to wonder if this young girl is in fact Jennifer. Alluding to authority and gendered power dynamics that Thornton probes through the camera's "gaze" (as well as her young subject's address of it), *Jennifer, Where Are You?* offers a subtle, psychological take on the formation of young female identity.



*Let Me Count the Ways*, 2004–ongoing. Installation view: Leslie Thornton: *Begin Again, Again*, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

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## ***Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 10, Minus 9, Minus 8, Minus 7, Minus 6*, 2004–ongoing**

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Employing a combination of archival and original footage, audio, imagery, and text, *Let Me Count the Ways* is an ongoing work in five chapters that marks Thornton's efforts to address her family's connection to the Manhattan Project and the atom bomb's devastating impact on Hiroshima—a theme she returned to in *Cut from Liquid to Snake* (2016) and, more obliquely, in *Ground* (2020). Begun in 2004, following her father's death and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, *Let Me Count the Ways* straddles time, personal loss, and collective trauma. Its title is borrowed from a line in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, "How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet 43)," while Thornton's descending logic for the chapter titles (beginning with *Minus 10*) alludes to countdowns that precede military operations or a film reel.

Typically seen as a single-channel work, *Let Me Count the Ways* is presented here as a multi-channel installation comprised of groupings of its chapters (see exhibition map) and a vitrine containing selections from her family's archive: photographs taken and developed by Thornton's father while stationed at Tinian Island, his journal, as well as letters exchanged between Thornton's father and uncle, and a copy of John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (excerpts of which appear as the scrolling text in *Minus 8*). This material forms part of a much larger family collection of artifacts and ephemera that has served as a recurring subject of study and inspiration for the artist over the years.

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## ***Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 10*, 2004**

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In the work's first chapter, *Minus 10* (projected in the List Center installation), Thornton incorporated footage sourced from public archives that includes her father, a team member of Project Alberta, the subsection of the Manhattan Project that worked to deliver the atom bomb. Each time he appears, Thornton identifies him with floating text of the word "Dad," bringing the intimate feel of Super-8 home movie footage to military documentation. He and his colleagues are seen while we

hear, speaking in Japanese, the voice of a *hibakusha* (a survivor of the atomic bomb). This testimony, paired with the personalization and implied complicity of her father's presence (as well as intertitles marking when "Dad observes the bomb drop on Hiroshima"), situates the work as both a tender eulogy and a palpable indictment—capturing, as film scholar Mary Ann Doane has written, "how one person's home movie constitutes another's nightmare."

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## ***Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 9*, 2004**

## ***Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 8*, 2004**

## ***Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 7*, 2004**

## ***Let Me Count the Ways: Minus 6*, 2006**

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The subsequent chapters, grouped in pairs on two monitors, take up different aspects of the atomic bombing and related histories. *Minus 9* features an archival interview with a medical missionary who provided the only English-language eyewitness account of the bombing. (Thornton returns to this troubling audio in *Cut from Liquid to Snake*.) A pulsating light, overlaid on black-and-white imagery of a polaroid camera and pre-9/11 aerial views of lower Manhattan, creates a purplish afterimage and, as art historian Rosalyn Deutsche has observed, associates the photographic flashbulb

with the intense light exposure of an atomic flash-boom (*pikadon*), itself a kind of photographic event. The after-effects of the bomb's radiation on Hiroshima's plant life, regenerating but mutated, are the subject of *Minus 8* and *Minus 7*, seen in rapidly scrolling scientific text that becomes increasingly illegible. In *Minus 6*, Thornton pulses between documentation of Hitler's oratory practice, offering both a meditation on the fascism that incited the Second World War and an acknowledgment of how image-making gives rise to power.



*Peggy and Fred in Hell*, 1983–2015 (still).

## ***Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding***, 1983–2015

*Peggy and Fred in Hell: Folding*, the feature-length final edit of Thornton's cycle, is projected, while select episodes from the *Peggy and Fred in Hell* cycle (1983–2015) and a recent related work, *High Heels Beloved* (2021), are installed on the monitors at the perimeter of the room.

A touchstone of experimental film, Thornton's magnum opus *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1983–2015) holds a central place in the exhibition. Edited and reconfigured over a period of three decades, *Peggy and Fred in Hell* is a multi-chapter work in film and video that surfaces the Cold War-era anxieties that shaped Thornton's formative years, plumbs the impact of technology in the latter half of the twentieth century, and ventures a catastrophic vision of the future that feels increasingly prescient: the collapse of the earth in a storm observed only by an artificial intelligence entity.

Thornton began *Peggy and Fred in Hell* in 1983, while living in San Francisco's Mission District, where her upstairs neighbors, two young children (real-life siblings Janis and Donald, initially ages 8 and 6), took an interest in her recording equipment and became her long-term muses. The work's other "muses" were the pre-Internet "information explosion" of the 1980s—an increasing concern with networks, broadcast information, and the infinitely expanding deluge of data—and a larger Nuclear Age concern with technology growing beyond the control of its human inventors. Grafting together found footage of natural forces and industrial forces, science films from the 1950s, NASA footage, and uncut newsreels amid what is primarily her own footage (including over 15 hours of 16mm footage of the children), the peripatetic and mostly unscripted work moves in and out of the familiar.

The work's protagonists, Peggy and Fred, are adrift in an incoherent world, and though it is never made explicit, Thornton imagined

the two children as the last humans on our post-apocalyptic planet. But they don't seem to know it themselves: they see other people on television and deduce that they too are being filmed and watched by others elsewhere (a kind of one-way mirror of "reality TV" that feels oddly akin to the fantasy of perpetual performance—of always being under the eye of one's followers and friends—that characterizes today's social media). In the artist's conceit, Peggy and Fred are in fact being watched—not by other humans, but by an artificial intelligence. They wander through forests and barren deserts, parrot popular music tunes, and mimic Hollywood actors. The pair role-play an improvisational bricolage of soap opera scenes and news conferences from their ramshackle domestic space.

Although Thornton began the project with the intention of making a feature-length film, by the mid-1980s she shifted to an episodic format, creating modular self-contained works that were also building blocks for various longer edits. (*Peggy and Fred: Folding*, the central projection in the space, is considered the definitive, feature-length edit; select episodes, some of which are part of *Folding*, are grouped on adjacent monitors.)

Unsettling glimpses into gender, affect, performance, and language permeate *Peggy and Fred* as the children hold a mirror to postwar society, sculpting mass media and forging their own language through misunderstandings and reinvention.

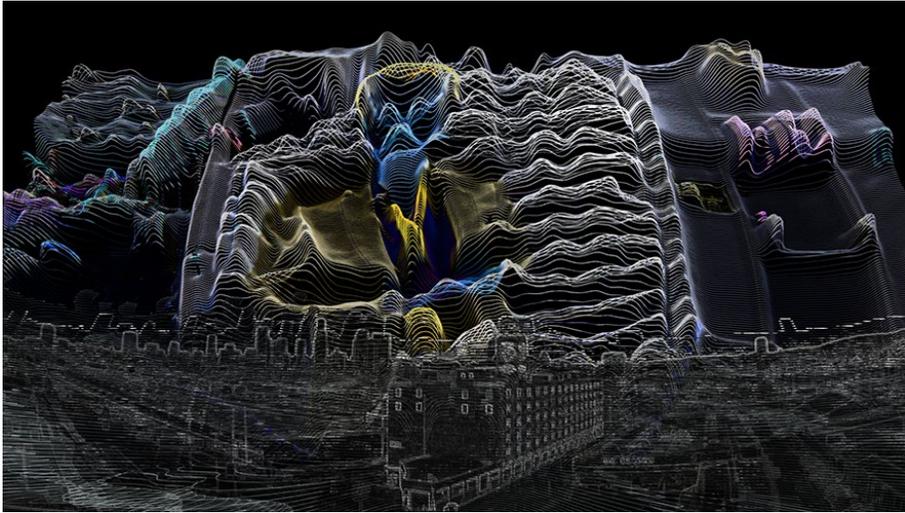
Their world is America's ruins, and Peggy and Fred are, in critic Mark McElhatten's words, "exuberant survivors and expert



impersonators." As such, they also serve as active subjects for the AI entity that studies them silently before revealing itself in the final episodes. The cycle's conclusion anticipates both environmental disaster (suggested by images of floods and barren deserts) and humankind's self-erasure through technological "progress." In the end, the surviving AI entity that loomed, almost Wizard of Oz-like, as the children's observer, seems to surrender to its fate as its synthesized speech breaks down: "Begin again, again" it chirps in one of the last lines of the film, before a final, "Oh, the storm!"

A disinterested style of shooting, neither fixed nor voyeuristic, is another key characteristic of the project and one of the reasons the work is regarded within the lens of experimental ethnography. To this end, Thornton employed black-and-white images in the cycle to engage tropes of both documentary and history films and blur the distinction between what looks historical or current. This tactic also

served to undermine any sense of time or historical progression, and in her words, "denaturalizes the image." Thornton's disinterested approach also signals a raw encounter with the unfamiliar and, as she put it, to "maintain an ecology of mind that allows for constant discovery." It also relates to the artist's conceit of an AI entity observing the children: as filmmaker, Thornton saw herself as that AI, observing, studying, learning, from them. Reflecting on this in 1989 she wrote: "Children are not quite us and not quite other. They are our others. They are becoming us. Or they are becoming other. They are at a dangerous point." In Thornton's hands, true ethnographic filmmaking (a cousin of documentary's "true fiction") is what reveals what the artist calls "culture as fiction," or the constructed nature of the behaviors and norms that make up culture.



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## **Ground**, 2020

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Produced over the course of Thornton's residencies at CERN (The European Organization for Nuclear Research) and the Caltech-Huntington Program in Visual Culture, *Ground* consists of heavily altered footage of the low, sprawling Los Angeles skyline and a CERN physicist who looms above the Californian city. Through digital manipulation, Thornton has simplified both video sources to a series of pulsating lines, waves, and grids that evoke both the "snow" of television static and visualizations of energetic frequencies and transform documentation into something closer to animation. With great enthusiasm, the unnamed scientist shares his research into the particle decay of quarks and kaons, which expounds on the work of American nuclear physicist and 1964 Nobel Prize winner Val Fitch. (Fitch is a figure of interest

to Thornton because he attributed his career in physics to a Norwegian friend, Thornton's father, who had started a ski club with the European physicists at Los Alamos, which the then-chemist had asked to join.) Though most of the scientist's ruminations on his experiments in particle physics are inaccessible to those without specialized scientific knowledge, it is his mode of address that Thornton was interested in conveying. For Thornton, the physicist, who she refers to as an "anti-matter guide," functions as a kind of shaman. What the artist calls the act of "witnessing speech" is a crucial thematic from her earliest works, and, in *Ground*, speech becomes a dominant and impenetrable force that appears to animate the video's abstracted visual universe.



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## **Cut from Liquid to Snake**, 2018

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In *Cut from Liquid to Snake*, Thornton probes the human capacity for destruction through technologies of war, surveillance, and the moving image. Characteristically distorting both footage and sound, Thornton has organized this work in five passages, each of which corresponds with what she refers to as a "vocal event." These include compressed audio of her own voice speaking to a friend on the telephone on the morning of Donald Trump's election, a conversation about defining "thought," an interview with the artist's aunt about two family members' involvement in the Manhattan Project, and an oral history of the carnage wrought in the by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The archival audio of a medical missionary's account of the horrific ravages of the bomb's radiation accompanies Thornton's footage of the blistering obsidian surfaces

of the La Brea Tar pits in Los Angeles. Two circular moving images, on the left a close-up of the shimmering surface of the molten tar and at right a kaleidoscopic refraction of the same footage, sit against a black ground. In its climactic final passage, *Cut from Liquid to Snake* nods to Bruce Connor's iconic film *Crossroads* (1976), which appropriated footage of the Operation Crossroads nuclear bomb tests in the Marshall Islands in 1946. The natural turmoil of the boiling tar pit and its technological mediation, set against the medic's affectless, graphic descriptions of bodies mutilated by the bomb's radiation, reflects on the incomprehensible, almost sublime horror of weapons of mass destruction, and demonstrates how both language and comprehension fail, or break down in the presence of such extremity.



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## ***Hemlock: Handmade*, 2021**

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In *Hemlock: Handmade*, the artist's most recent work and the first in a future cycle, Thornton superimposes what she calls "the space of science" and "the space of the world." Thornton began shooting this body of work in 2020 while weathering the early pandemic months in rural New Hampshire. There, she took many long walks in the woods, capturing details of fallen trees. Their dense and chaotic root systems had been cast into the air by storms or other natural events, and called to mind early images of high-energy particle collisions captured by bubble chambers. (Invented in 1952 by Donald A. Glaser, bubble chambers are filled with a superheated transparent liquid that allows them to detect the movements of electrically charged particles within the chamber.) With what she calls an "open blind eye," Thornton began observing

these forms with her camera, playing with shallow focus and attempting to erase conventional figure-ground relations and isolate unusual patterns of growth and decay. This image bank—mostly stills rather than moving images—became the framework for *Hemlock*, and in *Handmade*, Thornton merges these images with footage filmed at Caltech and CERN. Encounters with particle physics, fluid dynamic studies, and entomology drift by in a continuous upward scroll across documentary footage of the people and technologies concerned with these practices. In a disorienting sleight of hand, this footage is interrupted by a visual flow of old, handwritten data logs, and eerie still images of dying hemlock forests, breaking the possibility of any single stable baseline.

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Leslie Thornton (b. 1951, Knoxville, TN) lives and works in New York. Her work has been exhibited and widely screened internationally at: *documenta 12*, Kassel; The Whitney Museum of American Art, MoMA PS1, and Artists Space in New York; Tate Modern and Raven Row in London; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève; and at the Rotterdam, Berlin, Buenos Aires, and New York Film Festivals, among many others. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions have taken place at Kunstverein Nürnberg (2020); Malmö Konsthall (2019); Secession, Vienna (2018); Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (2018); as well as Brooklyn Academy of Music (2016). Thornton is the recipient of two Rockefeller Fellowships, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Maya Deren Award for Lifetime Achievement, and the first Alpert Award in the Arts.

*Leslie Thornton: Begin Again, Again* is organized by Natalie Bell, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the List Center is co-publishing the artist's first monograph with Sternberg Press. Scheduled for release in Spring 2022, the book will feature contributions by Bell, Erika Balsom, Rosalyn Deutsche, Su Friedrich, Chrissie Iles, Shanay Jhaveri, Dan Kidner, Chris Kraus, Mason Leaver-Yap, James Richards, Milan Ther, and Thomas Zummer.

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**Saturday, October 23, 2021, 2:00 PM**

In-person program

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### LEARN MORE

#### **Read**

Robin Blaetz (ed.), *Women's Experimental Cinema* (Duke University Press: 2007).

Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography* (Duke University Press: 1999).

Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (Fordham University Press: 2020).

#### **Watch**

Luis Bunuel, *Land Without Bread*, 1932.

Bruce Conner, *A Movie*, 1958.

Hollis Frampton, *Critical Mass*, 1971.

Yvonne Rainer, *Film About a Woman Who...*, 1974.

Andy Warhol, *Vinyl*, 1965.

## SPONSORS

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