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For the Hell of It

12.28.09



Leslie Thornton, *Jennifer, Where Are You?*, 1981, still from a color film in 16 mm, 11 minutes.

THE PENULTIMATE INSTALLMENT of Thomas Beard and Ed Halter's "Summer Knowledge" series at Artists Space featured early 16-mm films (1975–1987) by the seminal and enigmatic Leslie Thornton. In keeping with the spirit and format of *Light Industry*, the programmers' home venue in Brooklyn, Beard and Halter facilitated an open, rigorous conversation to complement each of the series's six evenings of work by moving-image artists—William E. Jones, Anne Charlotte Robertson, Michael Robinson, Paul Sharits, Emily Wardill, and Thornton—artists whose practices straddle the film and art worlds and whom some consider unrecognized or underappreciated in the latter. Following last Friday's screening, Thornton was joined onstage by the artist Seth Price, a student of Thornton's at Brown in the 1990s whose work shares an erudite reticence with hers.

With a matter-of-fact, ominous sense of humor, Thornton wished the audience viewing her early works "good luck." The screening began with *X-TRACTS* (1975). Like many of her films taken in their rawest sense, *X-TRACTS* explores language and technology by mixing structuralist strategies inherited from her mentors (including Hollis Frampton, Peter Kubelka, and Sharits) with a more personal style of filmmaking rooted in narrative and its abstraction. Until *X-TRACTS*, Thornton had worked primarily in painting, and she described the work's intention as "primitive": She aimed to replicate painterly gestures by cutting together incomprehensible pulses of sound and image. The pulsing motif recurred in her next film, *All Right You Guys* (1976), and eventually evolved into the usage of phrase repetitions, as in *Jennifer, Where Are You?* (1981), in which the titular question (spoken atop a baroque sound track) plays against a close-up of a young girl's face. The girl circles her mouth in lipstick until she looks something like Heath Ledger's Joker, while, in the foreground, a flame consumes a match.

The notion of "generations" was, according to Halter, a cornerstone of the series, an idea that grew more resonant throughout the evening, as Thornton shared projects that she has revisited and reworked to illuminate a genealogy of her own practice. Following *Jennifer* she showed, for comparison, a one-minute clip of the same work on HD video, and after that a rarely screened short film, *Oh China Oh* (1983), which seemed a coda to her better-known, contemporaneous meta-Orientalist meditation *Adynata*.

The exemplary model for Thornton's tendency to reopen even "completed" works is also her best-known project, *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, a sprawling antimasterwork the artist built over twenty-five years (1984–2008; a "final" version was presented during the 2008 Whitney Biennial). At Artists Space, Thornton showed the first section, known as "The Prologue" (1985), in which the audience is introduced to two children who are "raised by TV" in a world evaporating into a miasma of media. "Writing with media," she says of her work, and indeed *Peggy and Fred in Hell* can be read as a diary of eras shaped by their technologies—or itself as a technological creation with its own dimensions of

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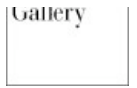
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empowerment/disempowerment. "We're in the hell now," Thornton noted at the screening, describing how the film anticipated an "information overload" and a "loss of agency and responsibility." "And I don't mean hell as a negative thing, necessarily."

— *Kevin McGarry*

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