



The Retrospective of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*

Preservation Perspectives of Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory

(1984-2004)

Pamela J. Smith

December 2, 2003

Introduction to MIAP

Final Paper

Introduction

Leslie Thornton's series of installments that make up *Peggy and Fred in Hell* will culminate in April 2004 as a project twenty years old and growing. This series, comprised at this time of fourteen variations of interrelated 16mm film and video, in black and white and color, and projected/installed in various multimedia formations, challenges our expectations of beginnings, middles and ends as each piece (and the parts of each piece) are constantly rearranged, rearticulated and reappropriated. By combining found footage and archival sounds with live-action performances of two children moving in an environment of dead and resurrected media and other cultural wreckage, Thornton assembles with film and video an expansive, expanding junkyard universe of past and future that feels both familiar and alien. We stumble over these assemblies of images and voices in an unyielding landscape without the comforts of a narrative progression, a bright horizon or happy ending. Raised by television, Peggy and Fred (Janice and Donald Reading) are protagonist devices in a world of disparate dimension and we cling to them as close-to-heroes. As we embrace them, we grow up with them. We celebrate the work of Leslie Thornton with a Retrospective of this particular work's progress during the past two decades, unearthing the material and closely examining the production processes and exhibition practices of the *Peggy and Fred in Hell* series through multiple screenings of its variants alongside the artist's earlier works and culminating with a panel discussion with the filmmaker. As we explore the shifting artifacts of Thornton's work we must ask, what past state has this material come from, what is it presently, and what is going to happen in the future? What is original? What is authentic?

I chose Leslie Thornton and this particular series for several corresponding reasons. First of all, I'm an admirer of her work for its form, imagery and thematic content (I am especially intrigued by the perspective of the apocalyptic child as adult) as well as for its relative accessibility. I wanted to feature a filmmaker with an experimental, explorative bent who encourages various approaches and suggestions in theoretical discourse and spectatorship, who leaves plenty of windows and doors open for interpretation. I also wanted to feature a filmmaker who uses multiple formats and versions of similar material (many experimental media artists have the tendency to rework their material), who challenges the notion of a

work's final authenticity and authority, and consequentially leads us to question and consider what it means to preserve a work that is ever-evolving and (re)contextualizing itself. Lastly, most of Thornton's earlier work and the episodes of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* are available through Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), where I am interning this semester through the MIAP Program. Through EAI's generous open door policy for researchers, I was able to access the tapes and Thornton's artist files (containing bibliographic information as well as publicity materials) plus gain valuable insight into exhibition practices—and the role of the distributor in these practices—from the contributions of the EAI staff, in particular Galen Joseph-Hunter, John Thomson and Rebecca Cleman.

Portraiture of the Artist

Leslie Thornton was born in 1951 in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a town closest to Knoxville. At State University of New York, Buffalo, in the early 70's, Thornton studied as a painter with Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka. She made her first film as a graduate student at MIT, where she studied cinema verité with filmmakers Ed Pincus and Richard Leacock.

Thornton has been considered a “pioneer of contemporary media aesthetics” since she was one of the first artists to bridge film and video as complementary media. Thomas Zummer, scholar, writer and artist who also teaches in the Critical Studies Department at New York University, describes Thornton's work as “ongoing and provisional... she had been unafraid to return to, and rework, and rethink, issues, topics, subjects.”¹ Evidences of the “ongoing” and “provisional” are the two epics *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, in-progress since 1984, and *The Great Invisible*, in-progress since 1990 and sequel to *There Was An Unseen Cloud Moving* (1988). Thornton approaches production as an exploratory process like writing—“I see myself as writing with media and I position the viewer as an active reader, not a consumer. The goal is not a product, but shared thought... I produce the media equivalent of poems, essays and experimental fiction, often all three at once.”² This openness to media's possibility and the active participation of the audience establishes a capricious relationship between the artist, the camera as technological apparatus and the viewer.

Thornton's film and media works have been exhibited worldwide in such venues as The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Whitney Biennial Exhibition, Centre George Pompidou, Paris, Rotterdam International Film Festival, New York Film Festival, capcMusée, Bordeaux, Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley, and festivals in Oberhausen, Graz, Mannheim, Berlin, Austin, Toronto, Tokyo and Seoul. She has been honored with numerous awards, including the Maya Deren Award, the first Alpert Award in the Arts for media, a nomination for the Hugo Boss Award, two Rockefeller Fellowships, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, Jerome Foundation and Art Matters. *Peggy and Fred in Hell* has been cited in several "Year's Best" lists, including the *Village Voice* and *The New York Times*, and she was the only woman experimental filmmaker included in *Cahiers du cinema's* "60 most important American Directors" issue.³

Thornton joined the Brown University faculty in 1984 and is now Senior Lecturer at Malcolm Forbes Center for Modern Culture and Media Studies and a Visiting Professor in the Transmedia Programme at the Academy Saint Lukas in Brussels, Belgium. She lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island and New York City.

Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Pieces

The sections of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, to date, are as follows:

Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue (21 minutes, black & white, 16mm film, 1985)

Peggy and Fred in Kansas (11 minutes, black & white, video, 1987)

Peggy and Fred and Pete (23 minutes, sepia, video, 1988)

[Dung Smoke Enters the Palace] (16 minutes, black & white, 16mm film & video, 1990)

Introduction to the So-Called Duck Factory (7 minutes, black & white, video, 1993)

Whirling (2 minutes, black & white, 16mm, film, 1996)

The Problem So Far (7 minutes, black & white, 16mm film & video, 1996)

Chimp For Normal Short (7 minutes, sepia, 16mm film, 1999)

Bedtime (12 minutes, black & white, video versions, 2000-2002)

Have A Nice Day Alone (7 minutes, video and film versions, 2000)

The Splendor (2 minutes, video, 2001)

Paradise Crushed (7 minutes, video, black & white, 2002)

Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Complete Cycle (single channel variant, 105 minutes, black & white, sepia, color, video, 2002)

The 10,000 Hills of Language- A Peggy and Fred in Hell multimedia installation (2002)

Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Puzzle

In looking at a selected exhibition history of Thornton's work in New York, we can begin to see how this piece has evolved over the years as each episode built upon and expanded from the earlier episodes, stylistically and conceptually, and at the same time changed the reception of the work as a whole. *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* first premiered as part of a series entitled *Neo-Narrative Works* at the Squat Theater in New York City in 1984. The Collective for Living Cinema on April 15, 1984 screened (*Tornado*) *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* along with two earlier 16mm films from the 70's, *All Right You Guys* (1976) and *X-TRACTS* (1975) and three most recent 16mm works before *The Prologue*, *Jennifer, Where Are You?* (1981), *Adynata* (1983) and *Oh, China Oh* (1983). In 1988, *The Peggy and Fred in Hell Series* (the first three episodes) showed at numerous venues in the New York City area including PS 121, Museum of Modern Art, and the Collective for Living Cinema. The same year included a program at the American Museum of the Moving Image that showed *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue*, *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* and *Adynata*. The Collective for Living Cinema and Anthology Film Archives co-hosted the first Leslie Thornton Retrospective in 1990 which included *X-TRACTS*, *All Right You Guys*, *Jennifer, Where Are You?*, *Adynata*, *Oh, China, Oh*, *She Had He Do He To Her*, *There Was An Unseen Cloud Moving*, and the first five episodes of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*. This same year the Knitting Factory showed *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* alone. Anthology Film Archives included *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Series* in their *Recycled Images* program in 1993 and screened the series again in 1996 with her latest work, *Old Worldy*. In 1994, the Collective for Living Cinema hosted a second Thornton Retrospective which

included *X-TRACTS*, *There Was An Unseen Cloud Moving*, *All Right You Guys*, *Jennifer*, *Where Are You?*, *She Had He So He Do He To Her*, *Strange Space*, *The Last Time I Saw Ron*, *Old Worldly*, *The Great Invisible* (work-in-progress), and the first six episodes of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*. Parts of *Peggy and Fred* were featured in the Whitney Biennial in 1989 and 1995.⁴

By glancing over the exhibition of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* between 1984 and 2000, it is important to note that the Series changes and accumulates as each new work is added to the repertoire. As the Series screened all over the world, in small film and video collectives, galleries, museums and other independent venues, individual episodes were screened consecutively, alone, or along with two or three other episodes (not necessarily in any order), and individually or grouped (not necessarily in any order) as part of a program featuring Thornton's other works. The episodes are notoriously interchangeable in content and form. In 2000, excerpts from the single-channel variant, *The First Cycle*, were screened online. "I have treated all my footage as found material," Thornton says. "I would think, 'It isn't going into a place in a script, it's going into a body of material that's accumulating.'... I was trying to refine ways to direct viewers' attention away from the historical meaning of the footage and rearticulate it into a quasi-narrative present. I was trying to do something with the 'address of history,' blurring the lines between the historical image and the current image."⁵ All over the world, with its various accumulations, abstractions and anomalies, spectators experience her work differently in different contexts. Thornton created another new perspective of this work in 2000 at the Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, France with a multimedia installation, *Quickly, Yet Too Slowly* that she designated as a *Peggy and Fred in Hell* "environment," which consisted of an overhead film projection with three video monitors on the floor (one wide, horizontal monitor with two identically sized monitors on top (that showed the same footage). Using already accomplished sections of *Peggy and Fred* episodes along with newly produced sections from the 30 hours of archived footage she has shot with new or found footage, the site-specific environments are edited and set to play in continual loops and randomized patterns so that no repetitions occur between the images on screen over the course of the exhibition. In 2002, Thornton created an environment entitled *The 10,000 Hills of Language*; it is quite possible she will continue to create these installations with new footage, new

configurations, new randomized patterns. By designating the single-channel variant of Peggy and Fred as “the first cycle,” implies there could be second, third, fourth cycles ad infinitum to add to the puzzle.

Somewhat as a side note, the unique characteristics of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* including its various accumulations and Thornton’s desire for dialogue or exchange between the “text” of her work and the audience would relate well in a DVD format. As preparation for this Retrospective of twenty years, it would be a wonderful addition to make a DVD version of Peggy and Fred in Hell available to audiences attending the screenings, along with a monograph of some sort. The DVD and monograph would not only commemorate the series event but it would also be a wonderful fundraiser to add to the preservation pot. Of course, we would have to find funding to make this media available, and we would have to produce it quickly within the year.

Leslie Thornton Retrospective:

Preservation Perspectives of Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory

Overview

Premiering at Anthology Film Archives, in both the Maya Deren and Courthouse theaters, the Leslie Thornton Retrospective would be a benefit series to raise funding for the preservation of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*’s historical material. This vast collection of material includes the individual pieces, their various incarnations, the various edits of each, along with any new and found footage Thornton has shot up to 2004 which could serve as future pieces in the *Peggy and Fred* puzzle. To keep the program costs down, we would borrow prints from the filmmaker instead of renting from a distributor, and Anthology would host the screenings for a small donation toward their own preservation program (leaving us to pay for the time of the projectionist and theater manager). This Retrospective would embrace past, present and future, as it combines the spirits of historical programming of Thornton’s work done in the past at Anthology, the current MoMA’s Mediascope programming that recognizes emerging and recognized artists, as well as the new innovation of programming this Retrospective represents—looking toward the future and considering a preservation plan for new media with specific archival needs (derived from MoMA’s Preserved Film

Festival). Hopefully, the observations, questions and possible answers raised during the series and especially during the panel discussion could serve as an example for future, round-table considerations to preserve “new” (20 years old) multimedia work, especially work by artists who like to reedit and recontextualize.

The Retrospective would not only be a preservation fundraiser but also would be the first Retrospective to include almost all of Thornton’s work (some of it never screened in public) and close to all of the various configurations of *Peggy and Fred*. The series would be divided into four programs over six nights, from Tuesday evening to Sunday evening. The first part would include Thornton’s earlier, pre-*Peggy and Hell* work (1975-1983), the second part would focus on work made alongside the making of *Peggy and Fred* (1983-1999) including the “anti-biography” and “biography” of Isabelle Eberhardt, the third part would screen the four parts of the ongoing *The Great Invisible* and the fourth part would culminate in weekend screenings of the fourteen and running parts of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, opening with a cocktail party on Friday night (with filmmaker in attendance), followed by a panel discussion on Sunday with the filmmaker, the series curator, an archivist and a Thornton scholar. It is essential throughout the program to maintain a level of accessibility in a relaxed environment for the audience and the filmmaker to openly interact and discuss the work. Part of this interaction will stem from the program notes; each screening will have an accompanying filmography placing the night’s show in a chorological context and a transcript of an interview with the artist by Irene Borger, a dialogue that focuses mostly on the “anti-narrative” and “unrelieved discontinuity” of such works as *Peggy and Fred in Hell* and *The Great Invisible*.⁶

Leslie Thornton Retrospective:

Preservation Perspectives of Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory

Schedule⁷

Tuesday, April 20, 2004, Maya Deren Theater

Anthology Film Archives, 7:30pm

Leslie Thornton Retrospective Part 1 Historical Memory: 1975-1983

Total running time: 108 minutes

**Face* (1974)

10 minutes, color, silent, super-8mm

**X-TRACTS* (1975)

9 minutes, b/w, 16mm

**All Right You Guys* (1976)

16 minutes, b/w, 16mm

**noexitkiddo* (1981)

30 minutes, color, 16mm

**Jennifer, Where Are You?* (1981)

10 minutes, color, 16mm

**Adynata* (1983)

30 minutes, color, 16mm

**Oh, China, Oh* (1983)

3 minutes, b/w, 16mm

Wednesday, April 21, 2004, Maya Deren Theater

Anthology Film Archives, 7:30pm

Leslie Thornton Retrospective Part 2 Historical Inversion: 1983-1999

Total running time: 63 minutes

**She Had He So He Do He to Her (1987)*

5 minutes, color, 16mm

**Strange Space (1993)*

4 minutes, color, video

**Old Worldy (1996)*

30 minutes, b/w, video

**Another Worldy (1999)*

24 minutes, b/w, color, 16mm

Thursday, April 22, 2004, Courthouse Theater

Anthology Film Archives, 7:00pm

Leslie Thornton Retrospective Part 3 Historical Interruption: 1988-2002

Remembering Isabelle Eberhardt

Total running time: 83 minutes

**There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving (1988)*

60 minutes, color, video

**...or lost (1997)*

7 minutes, color, 16mm

**The Haunted Swing (1998)*

16 minutes, color, video

Thursday, April 22, 2004, Courthouse Theater

Anthology Film Archives, 9:00pm

Leslie Thornton Retrospective Part 3 Historical Interruption: 1988-2002 continued

Remembering Isabelle Eberhardt

Total running time: 90 minutes

**The Great Invisible*

90 minutes+/-, color, 16mm

Friday, April 23, 2004, Courthouse Theater

Anthology Film Archives, 7:00pm

Leslie Thornton Retrospective: Part 4 Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory: 1984-2004

20 Years Old: *Peggy and Fred in Hell*

Total running time: 126 minutes

Program followed by cocktail birthday party

**Minutiae* (1979)

55 minutes, color, 16mm

**Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* (1985)

21 minutes, b/w, 16mm

**Peggy and Fred in Kansas* (1987)

11 minutes, b/w, video

**Peggy and Fred and Pete* (1988)

23 minutes, sepia, video

**[Dung Smoke Enters The Palace]* (1989)

16 minutes, b/w, 16mm & video

Saturday, April 24, 2004, Courthouse Theater

Anthology Film Archives, 7:00pm

Leslie Thornton Retrospective: Part 4 Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory: 1984-2004

20 Years Old: *Peggy and Fred in Hell*

Total running time: 62 minutes

**Introduction To The So-Called Duck Factory (1993)*

7 minutes, b/w, video

**The Last Time I Saw Ron (1994)*

12 minutes, color, video

**Whirling (1996)*

2 minutes, b/w, 16mm

**The Problem So Far (1996)*

7 minutes, b/w, 16mm & video

**Chimp for Normal Short (1999)*

7 minutes, sepia, 16mm

**Bedtime (2000)*

4 minutes, b/w, video

**Have a Nice Day Alone (2001)*

7 minutes, 16mm & video

**The Splendor (2001)*

2 minutes, video

**Bedtime v.2 (2002)*

7 minutes, b/w, video

**Paradise Crushed (2002)*

7 minutes, b/w, video

Sunday, April 25, 2004, Courthouse Theater

Anthology Film Archives, 7:00pm

Leslie Thornton Retrospective: Part 4 Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory: 1984-2004

20 Years Old: *Peggy and Fred in Hell*

Total running time: 105 minutes+/-

Program followed by panel discussion with Leslie Thornton, Mark McElhattan, archivist and curator, New York Film Festival, and Catherine Russell, Assistant Professor of Film Studies, Concordia University

**Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Complete Cycle* (2004 version)

105 minutes+/-, b/w, sepia, color, video

Discussion with Leslie Thornton

In “Avant-Garde Film in the 1980’s: Does It Have Any Meaning?” Leslie Thornton noted, “I make the work as a kind of site for some exchange- it’s meant to investigate something.” At the time of this statement, in 1984, Thornton was teaching experimental film production at San Francisco State University and had already screened a version of *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* at San Francisco Cinematheque. In an interview with Irene Berger in 1998, after adding six more episodes to the series, Thornton continued to embrace the notion of “unrelieved discontinuity.”⁸ “What’s more important in the work is a kind of thinking or thought process and not a final product...A work-in-progress can be shown in a formal viewing situation; there’s a vulnerability, but that can be part of the charge for the viewer and the maker. I guess the main thing is not to see the value only in finished and exchangeable objects. I like objects but I hope that any work I produce has enough life in it to change over time.” In reference to *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, Thornton claims, “You are not supposed to walk out and feel enlightened about culture or children or cinema. You’re just going through something. You drift and you have moments. Like *Peggy and Fred*.”⁹

With this spirit of spontaneity and immediacy, the *Peggy and Fred in Hell* series would combine intimate screenings of Thornton’s work beginning in the 1970’s and culminate in a weekend screening of the various *Peggy and Fred* episodes, including the single-channel variant of 2004, *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Complete Cycle*. A facilitated discussion would follow the final screening on Sunday night of this “definitive” work. The panel discussion would include the filmmaker, the curator of the series, Mark McElhattan, who programmed numerous screenings of Thornton’s work through the Collective for Living Cinema and the New York Film Festival and could provide archival considerations, and Catherine Russell, Assistant Professor of Film Studies, Concordia University, who has written *Narrative Mortality: Death*,

Closure and New Wave Cinemas and Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video (which included an essay on Thornton's work) and participated in a discussion with the artist in 2000 at Brown University's from today: a conference on electronically mediated work. Emphasizing the experiential process of spectatorship, Thornton said in a recent interview to understand her work is to realize that "there's nothing there not-to-get. I want to say, 'Just relax and if a few things hit you, that's great. The main thing to get is that there's nothing to get here.'" Without necessarily "explaining" her work, steering away from the 1960's format of presenting experimental film with the artist as "sage," and demystifying the filmmaking process, Thornton could offer insights into the production, post production(s) and the potential issues surrounding the preservation of her work from her perspective (perhaps including antidotes of her own "personal archive" at home).¹⁰ This discussion would take place in the Courthouse screening room at Anthology, with an audience of around 200 people... after the series there's a hope the place will be filled to the rafters. Ideally this discussion would revolve around the films screened, the culmination of the Complete Cycle and the program notes/thoughts that accompany each piece into a compare and contrast exploration of the work and the implications of "unrelieved discontinuity" in a conservation context.

The following thoughts or questions could be raised with Thornton or with the audience.¹¹ It is possible that during the open forum these issues will be discussed, linked and exchanged:

To Leslie Thornton-

*How did you begin with Peggy and Fred (what is your relationship to your subjects and to the space you occupied together)? Is there an origin to this work? How has your relationship changed throughout the course of editing this piece? Do you think this will continue to change?

*You've said that you think about making films as if you were writing, "with imagery and sounds and time, and change."¹² Could you elaborate on how much of the process of writing is evident in your work, from

production to the editing stage? How does this relate to the “reading” of the text by the audience? What makes a good “reader” of your work?

*In an interview with William Wees in *Recycled Images* you said, “I’ve thought so much about the use of others’ material, appropriation, that if I use the material in a way that I think is beautiful, or provokes the experience of beauty, I always want to shift it a little to an uncomfortable position. So there’s always something ambivalent about it... I guess I could sum up the direction of what I’m saying as being interested in archival material for its historical presence, but also to make historical presence ordinary, not to regard the historical as spectacular.”¹³ How would you relate this perspective with the idea that your work is also historical material? Do specific parts of your work come to mind that could be considered ordinary, spectacular and/or a combination of the two? Should we preserve the spectacular and the ordinary?

To Audience-

*Concerning the Complete Cycle in relation to the individual episodes screened Friday and Saturday, what are your initial thoughts about the pieces and the puzzle?

*Were there any moments in any of these films throughout this series that struck you in a particular way, for instance, as surprising or suspect?

*We have talked about change and Leslie’s continual reformatting of the image. What about recurring images? Did you see any patterns or repetitions among the various episodes?

Preservation Issues of Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory

Preserving all of the pieces of Thornton’s *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, including new and found footage remnants that may be used in future installments, would require “flexibility and resourcefulness” in the

vein of the Guggenheim's Variable Media philosophy and would defy the "traditional conservation impulse to be conservative."¹⁴ It would be necessary to involve the artist in documenting the production history, recording what material was used at each stage of the process, as well as the work's presentation history, recording how the work has been shown in the past and what are the key components to its exhibition. These considerations are especially relevant in light of Thornton's time-based environments.

It would also be useful to confirm with Thornton an appropriate format for migration that would retain the original integrity of 16mm and 3/4" video. Already the distributors who carry her work, Electronic Arts Intermix (NYC) and Video Data Bank (Chicago), hold archived copies of Thornton's works on BetaSP and widely distribute on this format. It would be worthwhile to know Thornton's opinion on digital formats such as DigiBeta and DVD (would she even approve the Retrospective DVD?).

According to the Guggenheim's Questionnaire, Thornton's work would fall under two categories of media, "reproduced" and "installed." Considerations for reproduced material include the relationship between the artist master, acceptable submasters and exhibition copies, acceptable vendors who hold these versions, as well as permission to compress or digitize the material. Considerations for installed material include access, security, lighting and sound of the space, as well as questions of how the elements of the work are to be distributed and placed, and what equipment should be used.

In consulting the artist, we can define what components are essential in its presentation and installation and the changes that are acceptable as materials and technology evolve. This will help us prioritize preservation efforts as we work to archive all the *Peggy and Fred* elements, using our financial resources as efficiently as possible as the funding comes in.

Budget: Building a Collection

The cost of transferring the 16mm and 3/4" U-matic pieces of Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* series to more stable, archival formats such as Beta SP and Digibeta depends on the year, length and stability of the

original material. On top of these factors is the potential cost of researching and determining who holds the best existing material, comparing the elements case by case and restoring the components that have been damaged. The most time consuming process will be finding the best “source” of the work as it progressed in time, fully documenting the source material used in each piece (perhaps we could limit this search to the filmmaker and the two major distributors of her work, Electronic Arts Intermix and Video Data Bank). Also, we must make considerations for storage. It would be to the artist’s benefit to store the archival formats in a climate controlled storage facility instead of in her home. This would not only stabilize the material but also give the artist the assurance of control over her own elements (instead of at the transgression of a distributor). There is also the possibility that a museum such as MOMA would take interest in purchasing the collection and archiving the material in their own off-site facility.

Due to its transformative nature, it is essential to catalog the collection of Thornton’s work within a chronological time frame by fitting each episode and its variants into the context of its production history, arranging the material in terms of its origin and documenting the how and when of the material’s progression, at least by year, ideally by month. Although chronology goes against the philosophical implications of Thornton’s work, a system ruled at least by time of production provides the organization necessary to control such shifting material, and creates more of a broad, historical perspective of the work. This intention is also evident in the order of the Retrospective program; perhaps by assimilating a narrative cohesiveness with a beginning, middle and end, some kind of pattern or structure will become evident—a clue to further organizing the material according to other criteria such as subject or theme.

Such efforts to restore, preserve and catalog this series would not only take a lot of time but a lot of money too. That is why it is essential to think of fundraising in advance, especially for independent artists with a lot of variable material such as Thornton who work constantly with new formats and forms.

Conclusion

Scott MacDonald in his article, “Avant-garde at the Flaherty,” distinguishes the pleasure provided by the avant garde film experience as being a “function of the fact that this experience directly confronts and critiques our conventional expectations as film (or television) viewers... our pleasure tends to result from our sense of developing awareness about the histories and issues explored in the films or videos we are seeing.”¹⁵ This Retrospective is special because of its extensive chronological history of Thornton’s work, and because the screenings encourage dialogue with the audience on an individual and collective basis (this is most evident with the cocktail reception and panel discussion). Over six nights, direct contact with Leslie Thornton’s body of accumulating material enables people to develop their own relationship with the “histories” presented and to formulate preservation considerations for the “historical” material. The series encourages viewers to go beyond the conventional role of passive consumers. With the input of Thornton, curator Mark McElhattan and scholar Catherine Russell, we place the work on archaeological and anthropological axes within a contemporary, evolving landscape of new media and the new media audience. On this interactive site, the mediation of the spectator would transform preservation into a learning process as we discuss the implications of what is elusive or stable, what is valuable or disposable, and who decides what gets preserved for future generations. Audiences will learn that they actually are a factor in controlling what gets preserved. For instance, they contribute to the preservation fund by walking in the door and paying admission fee, or buying the monograph or DVD, or just telling Thornton her work is worth something to them. The Leslie Thornton Retrospective is unique because it combines public and private interests to raise money, alongside the direct participation and encouragement of the artist.

¹ Zummer, Thomas. "Paradise Crushed, or: "...just stand in that quicksand for a moment, this shot won't take long...": Some notations on the works and life of Leslie Thornton." *Senses of Cinema* online film journal. 2002. <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/thornton.html#film>>

² Thornton, Leslie. artist's statement from Artlink website, courtesy of EAI, Arlink Services, Inc., 1997. See also Borger, Irene, "An Interview with Leslie Thornton."

³ Electronic Arts Intermix. Leslie Thornton Biography. 2003.
< <http://www.eai.org/eai/biography.jsp?artistID=418/>>

⁴ see attached Exhibition History of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* series, courtesy of EAI.

⁵ Milutis, Joe, "All the Girls Without the Cameras in their Heads: An Interview with Leslie Thornton," *Afterimage* Feb. 2000.

⁶ see attached Filmography and Borger, Irene, ed. "Leslie Thornton," *The Force of Curiosity: CalArts/Alpert Award in the Arts 1994-1998*, Los Angeles: CalArts/Alpert Foundation, 1999, pp.2-29.

⁷ Work descriptions, including lengths, gathered from Thomas Zummer's "Paradise Crushed."

⁸ Borger, Irene, "An Interview with Leslie Thornton," in *The Force of Curiosity*, Santa Monica: CalArts/Alpert Award in the Arts, 1999.

⁹ Irene Borger, "An Interview with Leslie Thornton."

¹⁰ Irene Borger, "An Interview with Leslie Thornton."

¹¹ For more insight into the discussion format and other curatorial considerations, see Blakaby, Linda, Dan Georgakas and Barbara Margolis, eds., *In Focus: a guide to using films*, New York: Cine Information, 1980.

¹² Peckham, Linda, "The Aftermath of Intelligence—Peggy and Fred in Hell," *Unsound*, Vol. 2, 1983. See also Peckham, Linda, *Motion Picture*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1989.

¹³ Wees, William, "Speaking of Found Footage: Excerpts from Conversations with Craig Baldwin, Abigail Child, Bruce Connor, David Rimmer, Keith Sanborn, Chick Strand and Leslie Thornton", *Recycled Images*, New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993.

¹⁴ Depocas, Alain, Jon Ippollito and Caitlin Jones, eds. *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003.

¹⁵ MacDonald, Scott, "Avant-garde at the Flaherty," *Wide Angle*, Vol. 17, 1995.

Consulted Resources

Doane, Mary Anne, "The Retreat of Signs and the Failure of Words: Leslie Thornton's *Adynata*", *Millennium Film Journal*, 20th Anniversary Issue, 1986.

Friedrich, Su, "Y2K Time Capsule," *The Independent* Jan./Feb. 2000.

Noriega, Chon, "On Curating," *Wide Angle*, Vol. 17, 1995.

Reinbold, James. "Peggy & Fred, Isabelle & Leslie: The Films of Leslie Thornton." *Brown Alumni Monthly* February 1994: 37-40.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. *Film: The Front Line*, Denver: Arden Press, 1983.

Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

**Leslie Thornton Retrospective:
Preservation Perspectives of Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory
April 20-25, 2004**

Filmography

The 10,000 Hills of Language (2002)

multimedia installation, a *Peggy and Fred in Hell* environment [in progress]

The Great Invisible (2002)

90 minutes, color, 16mm film [B]

Peggy and Fred on Television (2002)

single channel variant, 105 minutes, b/w, sepia, color, video [A]

Paradise Crushed (2002)

7 minutes, video, b/w [A]

Bedtime v.2 (2002)

7 minutes, video, b/w [A]

Document of an Installation (2002)

6 minutes, color & b/w, video

The Splendor (2001)

2 minutes, video [A]

Have a Nice Day Alone (2001)

7 minutes, video and film versions [A]

Quickly, Yet Too Slowly (2000)

multimedia installation, a *Peggy and Fred in Hell* environment

(in *Presumés Innocent*, capcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, France; June 8 – October 1, 2000)

Bedtime (2000)

4 minutes, b/w, video [A]

Chimp For Normal Short (1999)

7 minutes, sepia, 16mm film [A]

Another Worldy (1999)

24 minutes, b/w, color 16mm film

The Haunted Swing (1998)

16 minutes, color, video [B]

...or lost (1997)

7 minutes, color, 16mm film [B]

Old Worldy (1996)

30 minutes, b/w, video

The Problem So Far (1996)

7 minutes, b/w, 16mm film and video [A]

Whirling (1996)

2 minutes, b/w, 16mm film [A]

The Last Time I Saw Ron (1994)

12 minutes, color, video [A]

Strange Space (1993)

4 minutes, color, video, co-produced with Ron Vawter

Introduction To The So-Called Duck Factory (1993)

7 minutes, b/w, video [A]

[Dung Smoke Enters The Palace] (1989)

16 minutes, b/w, 16mm film & video [A]

Peggy and Fred and Pete (1988)

23 minutes, sepia, video [A]

There Was An Unseen Cloud Moving (1988)

60 minutes, color, video

Peggy and Fred in Kansas (1987)

11 minutes, b/w, video [A]

She Had He So He Do He To Her (1987)

5 minutes, color, 16mm film

1,001 Eyes (1987)

multimedia installation

Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue (1985)

21 minutes, b/w, 16mm film, [A]

Oh, China, Oh (1983)

3 minutes, b/w, 16mm film

Adynata (1983)

30 minutes, color, 16mm film

Jennifer, Where Are You? (1981)

10 minutes, color, 16mm film

noexitkiddo (1981)

30 minutes, color, 16mm film

Minutiae (1979)

55 minutes, color, 16mm film

Fiddlers in May (1977)

28 minutes, color, 16mm film

Howard (1977)

30 minutes, b/w, 16mm film

All Right You Guys (1976)

16 minutes, b/w, 16mm film

X-TRACTS (1975)

9 minutes, b/w, 16mm film

Face (1974)

10 minutes, color/silent, S-8mm film

key:

[A] = a section of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*

[B] = an episode of *The Great Invisible*

**Leslie Thornton Retrospective:
Preservation Perspectives of Historical Inversion, Interruption and Memory
April 20-25, 2004**

Interview with Leslie Thornton

By Irene Borger

Irene Borger: I'll begin with a quote from you, Leslie. "My own interest is in the outer edge of narrative where we are at the beginning of something else." What led you, at this time as an art maker, to de-stabilize the narrative?

Leslie Thornton: That grew out of a kind of dislocation for me. The way language works has been a life-long preoccupation, starting in childhood when I was painfully shy and had trouble speaking. The kind of extreme self-focus of shyness, the kind of analysis and appraisal that is nearly constant, and in a way objectifies language, even for a child. Language is something outside. Speech was like an object, an enemy, a barrier. It was externalized. Language was overwhelming, inadequate to describe or convey many things – I had a basic sense of this in childhood. Much later, when I began to study linguistics and also semiotics, I found an intellectualization of something I had already been struggling with – the point being that I didn't get there through a predominantly intellectual process. Then came more complicated questions about culture and language, how culture is embedded in language. Which led – it's not a linear process exactly – to concerns about the dynamic nature of any one culture and cultural proximities and crossing-over, change. I think my own estrangement from speech has very much shaped all of my work, and may account for some of its qualities, because it's deeply rooted emotionally for me.

IB: I'm stuck on this phrase: "to de-stabilize the narrative." To even question form in the way that you're interested in is unnerving because it questions a core of the way we learn to think. The reason that [divergence] is so threatening to people is because it doesn't operate according to the conventional structures or habits of the mind.

LT: Yes, culture as narrative. The mind as narrative. Narrative reflects specific cultural presumptions. Recognizing that, one can't help but think: then there must be other possibilities for narrative – reflecting other times and places and agendas, past, present, and future. I'm not capable of an involvement in the dominant forms of narrative in cinema, for instance. To study, it feels oppressive and limiting. I choose to be engaged on another, perhaps more critical and intuitive side. But on this other side, there's a potential for ecstasy that I don't think you find in conventional forms.

IB: Why is it that ecstasy becomes possible?

LT: It is probably the case that thought is largely structured like language. But, there is a kind of thinking outside of language that can surface sometimes, especially in art-making, probably in a lot of other arenas as well. Intangible, erotic, intuitive, pre-verbal, but precise. Those moments are extremely pleasurable, frightening, or stimulating.

I've been reading and thinking about mysticism lately, because of the film I'm working on, *The Great Invisible* (2002) [about a 19th century woman, Isabelle Eberhardt, who passes herself off as a man and becomes an exalted Sufi in North Africa]. Every form of mystical practice involves techniques for reaching an ecstatic state. However, couched in religious or philosophical terminology, the process is usually body-related and could involve exhaustion, a lot of repetition, a lot of movement, and music or rhythms. One's physical and psychic environment becomes de-familiarized. I think I use a related strategy in film to produce a heightened experience. I will work with a familiar trope like suspense, or anticipation, and then just keep pushing that button, without the expected next step or resolution. There is a familiar residue of narrative form. The exciting part is then bringing in other elements that aren't familiar at all but that are saturating to the viewer.

IB: Like what?

LT: Illogical things, mispronunciations, peculiar combinations of sound and image that are somehow startling, excessive beauty. Working with duration that seems inappropriate. The viewer has to deal with it; it stimulates the mind to cope with boredom, for instance. Generally, in culture these discomforts, stimulations, are blocked out; they are not speakable, packageable, or they are disruptive. The closest to transcendence that we get in pop culture might be violence, the lust for violence.

IB: There are many roots into trance-making but there are two poles, even in meditation practice. One is a saturation, the other is the ascetic. In our culture, you seem to be saying, we just use the mode of over-stimulation.

LT: Probably there are similar things going cognitively at either extreme. I'm interested in boredom. My interest comes out of the experience of the most hardcore structuralist films from the '60s and '70s. I think these films often produced profound boredom, which forced you somewhere else. None of the artists or critics would ever say that [laughter] but in a way, watching three hours of the camera whirling around in a barren landscape, as in Snow's *La Région centrale* (1971) (1), you have a profound response, if you commit to stay. You feel you've had a life-changing experience. A voluntary experience of boredom. The mind becomes very active. All kinds of images and scenarios begin to play. I think of John Cage too.

IB: I was just thinking of him.

LT: There's a kind of mystical aspect to this.

IB: Are you saying that in your way of making films you're very conscious of the experiential aspect for the spectator?

LT: I think that's my main focus. And, as the stand-in spectator, I have to judge by the intensity of my own responses. It's a thinking and feeling moment, where the thinking and the feeling – we don't have a word for it – when they can't be separated. That's the moment I'm always looking for. It's not something that comes back to rational formations or very focused arguments or ideas. It's about a spreading out, spreading and coagulations, chemical reactions in the work that can produce surprising moments and thoughts for the viewer. It's also important for me that the work not just be addressed to an “enlightened” or experienced audience. I'm trying to make things that are stimulating to watch at the same time that a critical voice is operating.

IB: If people are not used to looking at structures that differ from the beginning/middle/end of the classical Aristotelian scheme, how could they learn to enter your work?

LT: Seeing things more than once helps. Seeing that there is a kind of pattern or structure across several works. Talking about it. Relaxing. Often the people who are having the most difficulty are my colleagues, and not, let's say, an audience off the street.

IB: Why?

LT: Conflicting agendas or aesthetics. The crowd that bothers me is the visual artists, the art people who don't get into this kind of work and say they watch films for entertainment only. And the fine arts system that supports one-liner video installations, but can't deal with anything more complex. Avant-garde film and video take up similar issues to those in the art world, yet there's very little acknowledgement of this. The film or video work can be more sophisticated, more developed conceptually, yet media remains the most marginalized of the art forms. It's an orphan. Because media is associated with entertainment and information systems, it's not perceived as a formal artistic medium. The apparatus *per se* is limited by the conventions for its use. Photography went through this stage in the 19th century. Experimental media belongs within the history of art. Photographers fought for recognition. I think media artists haven't done

enough to try to change the system, but they are up against something huge. And now the preoccupation with “new” technologies – that has really become the bandwagon. It will take a long time to sort out what's of value here.

IB: When you were describing that experience in your films as coagulation and expansion, I wondered whether you could talk about your working process in a similar way. That is, not starting out with a master narrative but allowing things to unfold as you work.

LT: I think about making films as if I were writing, but with imagery and sounds and time, and change. What does it mean to say you make films as if you were writing? You're using a very technically demanding, and also a ridiculously expensive apparatus, so you have to deal with this and become adept and resourceful. You have to be intelligent about your limits, and work them into your process, turn them into part of your aesthetic practice, your vocabulary. For me, little money means more sound, for example. It's cheaper, and tremendously powerful. Filmmaking is not just big crews, big equipment, locked-down scripts. The medium itself can be completely fluid and open-ended. A lot of the shooting I do is like taking notes in the field. [Laughs] Research. Digging through things, surprises, making interesting mistakes, getting things in place. Doing a delicate construction in the editing stage.

IB: That's what Bill Horrigan called in your work, “the given,” and “the made.” (2)

LT: Oh, that's interesting. Wait until you see the new piece, *Old Worldly* (1996). It's the *essence* of the given and the made. It's all archival material dealing with dance and also trance. An unlikely string of performances frame each other; there's a whole non-verbal commentary going on about dance and culture that happens because of unlikely and outrageous juxtapositions.

IB: Let's go back a couple of steps. You're talking about “note-taking” in the field. Shooting as a way of collection and writing.

LT: And research.

IB: I'm a little confused about something. Is *There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving* (1988) a short story to the novel of *The Great Invisible*?

LT: No, it's a completely different project. The first piece, *Unseen Cloud*, was a kind of anti-biography – working from the premise that historical reconstruction is based on pretty arbitrary, chance data, and interpretation. It was an attempt to foreground the arbitrary by not going for one coherent image of Isabelle Eberhardt. That's mostly what it's about. Later on I felt it wasn't enough, staying on the surface. I felt I was getting off a lot of hooks and avoiding difficult material. Like learning something about Islam, for example. It wasn't enough in the long run to say, well, we can't really talk about that, because it's not part of our world and we can't know anything. Because we weren't there, we aren't them. All of the authenticity issues. I decided to keep going with Isabelle Eberhardt because I wanted to learn more about her historical context, and to experiment more with narrative structure.

I've gone in and out of her story for 12 years, traveling, reading, talking, shooting and editing, and it's a continual source of amusement to me that I don't even care for her particularly, as a person. It's terrible. But there has to be something in that. I'm drawn by the contradictions and extremes of her story – what was her sexuality like, given that she was a woman who dressed as a man, who loved men and hated women? How “Arab” could she have become? Why was she accepted by the male Muslim community? What does her ambiguous relationship to the French colonialists say about both her and them? Did she have a sense of humor, of irony? She must have, although there's little historical evidence. What could it mean that she was regarded by some as a Sufi saint toward the end of her life? I was impressed to learn during a trip to Algeria in 1992 that she was still respected and studied, and that hers was one of the few European names not replaced on street signs after the Algerian Revolution. And maybe the biggest question of all – what

does Arab culture mean to so-called mainstream American culture, since it has been a virtually invisible part of the world to us for so long?

So there are big questions, but there's a fractured fairytale there too. A crazy, impossible story. I focus on her Russian anarchist background, the fact that her father was a Russian Orthodox priest but was really working for the anarchists. And her mother, a member of the Russian aristocracy, was a classic 19th century neurasthenic. Her father destroyed the vegetation on an entire estate through his failed botanical experiments and then Isabelle fled to the desert where nothing could grow (it's hilarious irony). Meanwhile, in Algeria, we have the French "conquering" the Sahara, for which there was no strategic or economic use; military commanders, ordered by their Parisian superiors not to enter a village, would simply change the name of the village so they could go ahead in. Isabelle Eberhardt becomes a way to observe how much of history is about impossible juxtapositions – how formal history is narrativized and how by not looking for a coherent narrative but looking for a more problematic or branching structure, a rhizomatic structure, there are other possibilities, including serendipity, and something more like life, and possibly empathy and insight. It's the same with *Peggy and Fred*. They were very much an agency for looking at a lot of other things. And they continue to be.

IB: Somebody said that your short stories connected to *Peggy and Fred* were "annexes." I thought that was wonderful. In the course of working on *The Great Invisible*, now you've made *Old Worldy*, and several other films. Are they annexes or ...

LT: They are all inter-related and sometimes with friends I joke about whether *Old Worldy* is the next episode of *Peggy and Fred* or is it part of *The Great Invisible*? It actually could be both. In *Old Worldy* various indigenous dance forms, ethnographic films, especially Middle Eastern, are inter-cut with 1940s Western cabaret dancers, and it's all over-layered by a '90s techno beat. It's sort of old worldy, yet kind of new worldy at the same time... The old infects the new, the new infects the old; the West infects the East, the East infects the West. It's culture as we never see it...

IB: I thought back to the comment you made to Trinh Minh-ha about "stupidity and slowness." (3)

LT: They're still very big in my practice. [Laughs.]

IB: You are using "stupidity" in quotes, aren't you?

LT: Yes. It's a subversive act. I can give you a concrete model. [Laughs] It's a silly problem that I have. I teach a filmmaking course on narrative called "Approaches to Narrative." It's for advanced students who have already made a few films. For me, the emphasis is on the term "Approaches." The premise is that we're going to try to recognize some elemental factors, structural necessities for what constitutes a "narrative event." What must be in place for narrative to occur? What is the function of narrative? Is narrative form fixed in cinema at this point? Are there "stories" that can't be told using conventional narrative form? Better ways of telling some stories? What about audience engagement? Narrative progression? New technologies? Can we imagine different kinds of structures? This is a production course so the students are making work and we're trying to talk about and encourage the work in relation to these kinds of questions. I tell the students that I don't have answers, just experience with the questions, and then I think about half of them wish they were at NYU!

I'm working from an assumption, and that is that we are all media literate, having experienced a great deal of media in our lives. We have learned a common vocabulary. Given a camera and told to make a story, most people would know when to have an establishing shot and how a close-up would help here, or a cut-away there. One of the problems I have in teaching the course is that I feel an obligation for the sake of my own work to maintain a certain degree of ignorance about cinema-as-given. I need to maintain a level of curiosity, mystery and even confusion – so that I can remain quizzical, move through strange territory and make little discoveries. I feel that being too literate would interfere with an ability to recognize something interesting right in front of me. So it's a dilemma. For the most part I have read very little narrative theory

and no how-to books. I've never read a book on scriptwriting. I can't do it. The closest I've come to is reading some books by European writers, other filmmakers, and all of the early Russian theorists. The American writers are always talking about marketing. They *always* are talking about marketing! They don't talk about the art form.

Being slow has more to do with a lack of money, but it also reflects the absence of pressure to produce a commodity, and it means there's more time to think and try things out. On some level, narrative equals commodity. Stories are sold. It seems the quickest way to riches these days is to become a news story. The way we look for "stories" says something about our culture.

IB: You went to other forms – like that description of Noh drama.

LT: Yes. I read once that in Noh drama the equivalent to the Aristotelian beginning/middle/end would be something like "introduction/destruction/haste." *That* is something to try to imagine. I ask my beginning students to make a short film following such a model. It has produced some really sharp and surprising films.

I am not anti-narrative. It's just not my orientation. I would not be a good narrative filmmaker. I do something else.

IB: It sounds as if the narrative forms that we've inherited don't permit you to say what's interesting for you to investigate.

LT: That's right. I'd like to mention something that happened recently with *The Great Invisible*. Under duress – I had a show coming up – I had to finish an episode – I'm doing the feature in episodes now so I can keep working and showing as resources allow. It was for the *Kunstenfestival des Arts* in Brussels, and I had met with the Festival director, Frie Lassen, a few months earlier to raise the money, a little bit of money. I liked her very much and we had an incredible discussion that day about what I was trying to do with the film and where I saw it going. I just happened to be on right then, maybe I had some extra coffee, but I was *on* and I walked out and didn't remember any of it. Later it came back that I'd suggested that there may be an inverse relationship between politics and mysticism as ways of relating to the world, and that *that* was the central arc of my film, the movement from one form of fanaticism to another as a response to extreme and irreconcilable factors. Very millennial. I had been talking out of the blue; it was some kind of crazy pitch at first that quickly turned into an intensely generative discussion. It turned out that somebody was taking notes. A few months later, I received ten written pages about my work, like a film treatment based on what I said that day, including some wonderful misinterpretations. [Laughs...] It was a great gift and reminder. I took this as serendipitous, being presented with the interesting challenge of making a film under pressure, based at least in part on "plagiarizing" certain misinterpretations of things *I* had said. So I made *The Haunted Swing* (1998). I feel like I've found the narrative structure for *The Great Invisible* and it's so simple and it's exactly related to the way I've shot the film all of these years. But I couldn't quite see it because I was always cutting versions for fund-raising purposes, which I thought had to be straight and not too scary. It's polluting. It's a polluting and debilitating process to deal with fund-raising in film. After that conversation, and having my ideals thrown back in my face, on paper, somebody else hearing it – it was a great job. The structure of the project is falling into place.

IB: Do you want to say something about it?

LT: I'm not sure I can say anything yet, but I'll try. I'm working with blocks of material and not fussing with linear narrative connections on the surface from one scene/block of information to the next. But I'm building up stacks of associative material in a deliberate order. For instance, I wanted to talk about a political history in Algeria to the extent that as an outsider I understand something about it. I want to say that there's even something today, like the butterfly effect – a butterfly flaps its wings in one small place and that changes the rest of the world forever. The butterfly effect of an Isabelle Eberhardt and the people she knew has some relationship to things that are going on today. It's also important, especially for an

American audience, to provide some historical background because we haven't had a politically strategic relationship with Algeria and know very little about it. Even with the civil war going on today, it gets a fraction of the coverage of the Balkans. So, to bring in the subject matter I use a variety of genres. I've shot dramatic footage of Isabelle with her friends – a colonel attempting to use her to gain some information about a powerful sheikh, for instance; I have 1960s documentary material from the Canadian Broadcasting Company about the Algerian Revolution. It was made right after the conflict ended in 1963. I was in Algeria shooting film and video in 1992, during the week that the government fell apart. The president stepped down and a military coalition took over. There were big demonstrations in the street and I shot footage of this on film and tape.

In *The Haunted Swing*, which is the first 16 minutes of *The Great Invisible*, I suddenly cut from a domestic scene with Isabelle, set at the turn of the century, to somebody in 1963 in Canada making a comment about Algeria right before the Revolution. In a later episode there's footage of a revolutionary war hero whom I shot during a pro-democracy demonstration in Algiers. He's hidden all his medals inside his coat but he opens the coat up to the camera and explains that he was a hero. Then he repins the medals on the outside of his coat and continues marching. I interview a Leftist Algerian journalist proclaiming that his country doesn't make any sense; he argues that because it has been occupied for so long by so many different peoples, there is no center, there is no Algeria.

I'm not going for a thorough analysis of Algeria's political history, but I am going to give enough information for most viewers to understand what some of the issues are. The important thing is to recognize the complexity, the ironies and contortions of histories, personal and political.

IB: It also changes one's experience of history as the Other.

LT: It does. We can only look from the present. That's another text in this piece, presenting several "presents." We have Isabelle's present, the '60s present and the 1992 present, and maybe not the present 'present'. It's not the job of this film to say what's going on there right now. The job is to say that these things are all related somehow and to suggest something about what we're working with when we look at the past.

IB: Does that get foregrounded by juxtaposition or does it operate at another level of text?

LT: Both. The juxtapositions are suggestive, and cumulative, making an implicit argument. The absence of an explanatory text throws responsibility back on the viewer. Hopefully. You can see why it's hard to raise money for this. I can't say what I just said to people who fund films.

IB: Really? Why?

LT: Because there are too many elements and too much uncertainty. The possibility of using the film medium to explore ideas appears to be inconceivable to the people and agencies who fund film today. You have to have a project that is either 'marketable' or simplistically 'issue oriented'. Especially in America. It's very difficult. Recently some well known film artists have been making video art installations, for which there is art-world money, in part to raise money for their (non-commercial) films. I wonder if the powers-that-be realize how much institutional priorities determine what gets produced in the arts.

IB: But, if someone could look at, say, David Salle, then why couldn't they make the leap?

LT: He's one of many artists working with complexity, and vertically stacked or associative narrative. What I'm trying to do is much more like a David Salle project than a [laughs] David Lynch project. Unfortunately the absence of an object complicates matters. This will change over time, as we develop more refined distinctions for different kinds of practice in the media arts – along the general lines of fine art versus commercial art, poetry versus journalism, etc. I just saw a wonderful William Kentridge exhibition at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels. It consisted of several video installations and the large drawings

from which his animated videos were shot. I thought, he's lucky he draws. It opened the museum door. His drawings are impressive, but what was amazing was the way he constructed his stories. Where can we go to see stories like this? How about nickelodeon/cyber-cafe storefront galleries that charge by the clock? What kinds of venues do we need to invent that are good for the work and reach a maximum audience, and that can sustain and nurture this kind of practice? That's what we have to figure out. I'm certain there's an audience.

Experimental film has a quirky history. I have a theory about it: what people don't seem to realize is that this work actually has to be promoted. There's a purist hangover in the field from the '60s and '70s that's really still hurting us. I know from running organizations and being involved in organizations, the one thing we never had money for was an advertisement. Maybe that was what we needed the most. I'm working with some people here and in Europe who are trying to change the way this work is shown and distributed. Right now it's still screened one night per city, ideally with the artist present. It's crazy. That's part of the legacy of the great personalities of the '60s. The men, the sages who had to be there for each show to spread their wisdom and seed. We're still working with their presentational format. It's the only artform that has to be "explained" after each show.

As a teacher I encounter younger people who feel very attracted to working in an alternative way, a risk-taking way, and who've done some highly original work, but then they don't follow it through. They end up being paid to make websites and become bored and cynical. It's a mess. These younger people are looking at the older people and saying, "I don't want to live like that...I don't want that much uncertainty."

We have to surpass the history of experimental film and video art.

IB: Could you talk a bit about the notion of work-in-progress. It seems like part of the way you work and present yourself.

LT: What's more important in the work is a kind of thinking or thought process and not a final product. For that reason, I feel an affinity with the Wooster Group who do something similar in presenting works which are continually evolving. A work-in-progress can be shown in a formal viewing situation; there's a vulnerability, but that can be part of the charge for the viewer and the maker. I guess the main thing is not to see value only in finished and exchangeable objects. I like objects but I hope that any work I produce has enough life in it to change over time.

IB: How does one learn to read or reckon with "unrelieved discontinuity?" That was a phrase Linda Peckham wrote about *Peggy and Fred*. (4)

LT: I like that phrase. That could be our Hell – unrelieved discontinuity. It's a melancholy thing. You have to say, "okay, this is really a mess, and you can't cut a narrative swath through your day, you don't live in a coherent world," and then you just have to let that be the case, do the best you can. In living and in your work. In the work you have to stop trying to understand everything and you have to keep thinking but you also have to feel comfortable with not holding everything to you, not owning it, not possessing all of it intellectually. Actually, I've often thought that some of the people who don't like my work are feeling intimidated because they feel there is something they don't "get." There's nothing there not-to-get. I want to say, "Just relax and if a few things hit you, that's great. The main thing to get is that there's nothing to get here." That's especially true of *Peggy and Fred in Hell*. You are not supposed to walk out and feel enlightened about culture or children or cinema. You're just going through something. You drift and you have moments. Like Peggy and Fred. Piecing things together as much as you can, and moving on. The moments freeze or hang over you for a while. That's great. But there's nothing to get. That's the most important thing to understand about my work.

During this interview I've been saying about my work, "It's about this and about this and about this," but on another level, you have to be so relaxed about the way you're taking it in and take what you can and never feel it's fixed or you're outside of it or don't know enough or that there's a secret. Unrelieved discontinuity.

IB: I wanted to ask: how do you keep yourself from going crazy?

LT: I don't. That's another reason I stopped working on *Peggy and Fred*. From the beginning I knew that there was something so slippery in what we were doing, that I was walking a fine line. I got a charge from that. I used to have an image of myself as sane because I thought I could see madness and I wasn't uncomfortable with it. Like a lot of people, I had a naive notion of madness as poetic, more open. My working process involved what I'd now call a 'controlled looseness.' I became adept at stirring up serendipitous moments. I learned how much to let things fall apart and then just catch them here and there, to save something, an image, an expression. It sounds awful to me now, but the shooting was sort of like painting with *Peggy and Fred*. My apartment was also the Hell set, which didn't help. It all became too much. Relentless potential. Anything could go into or come out of this maw. There were too many possibilities and complexities. The kids were having a hard time and I was very involved with them interpersonally and it became too painful. There is also something about the lack of narrative. I had fear for them. For their futures. There was no sense of narrative there! Narrative is comforting. I've been thinking lately, maybe that's one of its main functions. It's organizational.

IB: This is not new at all but, when anthropologists started talking about the reflexive, when women began bringing up the actual experience of watching film or reading, describing what the experience is like, maybe it's what you were saying before about boredom. The experiential was never part of the analysis.

LT: It's essential in my work.

IB: I think that relates to something you said, "My aesthetic concerns necessitate a spontaneity and an immediacy which seem increasingly antithetical to accepted film practice."

LT: The general focus of film criticism has been with establishing and reading the "dominant" codes. It has been less effective at dealing with anything that's not following the codes. I've always thought that was ironic because criticism has been seen as a subversive act – opening up the film 'text' for analysis and even suggesting ways that dominant forms may be subverted. But then the people practicing this kind of technology of analysis don't seem to be very open when a film is actually doing things differently. A critic friend once told me that that was because 'experimental' film is self-theorizing.

IB: What would the shape of criticism be, or have to be, to really be perceptive vis-à-vis your work, as a dialogue?

LT: I've been really fortunate in having some incredible essays written about my work. Some of these essays are primarily creative readings; sometimes they are uncanny in reading something that was so important to me but in the back of my mind and wasn't anywhere close to language. That's the incredible thing, to read an analysis that articulates what you couldn't articulate and this is the reason you made the film, and this person can say it. That's a gift. I shouldn't complain. (Laughs.) It's just a more general complaint that I have; I think the field suffers as a whole because of a lack of serious criticism. It is truly frustrating to be stuck with worn-out terms like "experimental film" and "non-linear narrative." We need more of a vocabulary, and we need more creative analysis.

IB: What you said about "there not being anything to get," reminded me of Alain Robbe-Grillet's introduction to the script of *Last Year at Marienbad*. He says, if you try to work this, you'll have the toughest time, but if you simply enter it, it will speak.

LT: It's not about emptiness, chance or indeterminacy. It's a very particular kind of construction; maybe it does relate to mysticism. *Not having to possess, that's the way I think of it.* We're living in a culture that is insanely focused on commodity.

IB: You're really talking about what's ungraspable.

LT: Yes, non-commodifiable.

IB: As in Sufi teaching stories which train non-discursive thought.

LT: I always wonder about that, in reading some of the great Sufi writers. There's a precept for their trainees against the reading of books, experiencing knowledge as it is designated by others. It seems anti-intellectual on the surface. I don't believe it; I think the great Sufi masters were very literate and it's a strategy for getting people to a certain point.

IB: It's about direct perception.

LT: Maybe it's about helping you not get too locked down. It's not a danger to read later on.

IB: It's like the Zen story of the master pouring tea for the disciple who has come saying he wants to learn and has millions of questions. The teacher pours and pours and pours, flooding the table. "What are you doing?" cries the student. "How can I teach you when you are already full?"

LT: There's another line you always hear: "You have to learn the rules before you can break them." This is very common in film studies. The students say this and the teachers at "vocational training schools" like NYU— that's what I call it. Here's the rap: "You have to learn the rules before you can break them." The trouble is, you can't unlearn those rules. They are really sticky. And they are reinforced by everything you see. I don't buy it. I think it's fine to learn the rules, and to make things by the rules but I don't think anybody can learn them and then unlearn them! Maybe Tarkovsky. But I don't think he ever learned them well. (Laughs).

IB: I told you we'd stop at 3:00.

Irene Borger is an administrator for a foundation grant Thornton received called The Alpert Award. This interview was conducted in June 1998.

Reprinted with the permission of The Herb Alpert Foundation, California Institute of the Arts, and the Alpert Award in the Arts. Originally published in *The Force of Curiosity*, ed. with interviews by Irene Borger (Santa Monica: CalArts/Alpert Award in the Arts, 1999)

Endnotes:

1. La R gion centrale consists of an apparatus especially constructed to move the camera through 360 degrees of space in a particularly 'inhuman' manner, dislocating time, space, and horizon in a dizzying evacuation of perspective(s).
2. "Adolescent Junglebook overschrijdt Scenic Paradise/A Note on *Peggy and Fred in Hell*," Bill Horrigan, in *Mediamatic*, Vol. 4 Nos. 1 and 2, Fall 1989
3. See "If Upon Leaving What We Have To Say We Speak: A Conversation Piece," Laleen Jayamanne, Leslie Thornton, Trinh T. Minh-ha, p. 56, in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker and Karen Fiss, eds, The New Museum for Contemporary Art/MIT Press, 1990. See also: "Which Way To Political Language: A Conversation Piece," Laleen Jayamanne, Leslie Thornton, Trinh T. Minh-ha, in *Framer Framed*, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Routledge, 1992
4. See "The Aftermath of Intelligence—*Peggy and Fred in Hell*," Linda Peckham, p. 28, in *Unsound*, Vol. 2, 1983. See also: "Total Indiscriminate Recall," Linda Peckham, *Motion Picture*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1989