

# *LESLIE THORNTON: GROUND*

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*Ground* is the title of Leslie Thornton's latest work commissioned by Kunstverein Nürnberg, a 12-minute video produced from material shot during residencies at CERN and Caltech. The exhibition itself is dispersed across four rooms. The first three present selected video works on monitors (Hantarex perched on square tables for the 16mm videos dating back to the 1980's, flatscreen for the more recent HD of 2018), thereby proposing a retrospective with the projected *Ground* in the final room constituting something of a cinematic finale. And grounded in the home of cinema it is – the lower third of much of the video shows a solarised vista of the cookie-cutter skyscraper horizon of downtown Los Angeles. In the foreground we see lines of trucks parked outside low-rise warehouses and a sign outside one that reads 'DC Stages', indicating the entrance to a movie studio providing readymade sets for film shoots. Superimposed – god-like – in the sky above this is handheld camera footage of a nameless scientist giving something like a tour of CERN, whilst also performing his life's work to the camera. This footage is rendered in fine white lines that resemble the ground levels of an Ordnance Survey map, with contours bending and wobbling as the scientist moves, as if he is but a kink in the fabric of a world his research is attempting to elucidate.

The collision of CERN with LA speaks to a duo of the science of discovery and the theatrically performative which pervades *Ground*. Its lineage can be traced throughout Thornton's works on show here. *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, 1983-2016, loosely presents the activities of two children (Thornton's former neighbours) as they try to make sense of a post-apocalyptic planet. Cryptically revealed at the end, it transpires that a form of artificial intelligence has been presenting the catastrophes of the 20th century to them as a stimulus in some bizarre experiment to observe their behaviour. Consequently, as Thornton has explained, 'they think they are on TV and they perform'. In *Jennifer, Where Are You?*, 1981, a young girl applies smears of lipstick

to her face and gazes at herself in a blue-rimmed handheld mirror, intermittently mesmerised by the mechanics of a flame edging down a matchstick, as if discovering fire for the first time. *Strange Space*, 1993, and *The Last Time I Saw Ron*, 1994, are presented on the same monitor; both depict Thornton's friend, the deceased actor Ron Vawter (1948-1994). The former offers a narrated ultrasound Doppler scan of the venous system of the actor's leg in the hunt for a DVT. This leg recurs in the latter in footage taken for his last role in the play *Philoktetes Variations* in Brussels, the leg this time discoloured by the AIDS-defining illness Kaposi's sarcoma. Bitten by a snake, and suffering from a wound that will not heal, Philoctetes himself was abandoned to perish by Odysseus on the island of Lemnos. As Thornton's voice-over explains, Vawter 'wanted the play to be perfect, because if it was perfect, it might cure him'. He died shortly after it opened.

As for Ron Vawter playing Philoctetes, Thornton's works often speak to a hyper-involved sense of the personal in the collective constitution of history. This is reflected in her practice: over the years, she has amassed an archive of material, sourced from both personal footage and public archives, drawing little distinction between the two. The mechanics of their collisions often constitute her work, and these confrontations are elaborated in the individuals she casts as subjects. In *Ground*, amid the descriptions of particle physics shedding light on the structure of the universe, the sense of objective discovery is memorably punctured by the scientist explaining that 'the ideas came all of a sudden in a summer, a summer of great distress for me' at a time of 'very big personal problems'. As in much of Thornton's work it appears that catastrophe, individual or collective, is the engine of discovery. Endings reign; newfound understanding beckons. Sometimes, it seems to be the other way round: acquired knowledge generates destruction. In *Cut From Liquid to Snake*, 2018, her aunt describes how Thornton's father and grandfather both worked as engineers on the Manhattan Project, which led to the B-O-M-B (as Thornton's aunt spells out, not daring to use the word for their 'terrible project'), though neither knew this at the time due to the project's secrecy. Thornton's father screwed the last bolt into the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima – he had written his and his parents' names on the shell casting, a tribute to be knowingly obliterated in a moment of catastrophic grounding. In *Ground*, I can't help but see the scientist roving around CERN as a stand-in father figure of less ambiguous beneficence.

In the latter stages of *Ground*, another apparent scientist describes how a robotic arm of a machine holding 'magnetic tape storage' at CERN moves in the planes x, y and z as it operates in the background of the video, with the scientist's own arm's looser gestures in focus in the

foreground. Sealed off from people to avoid the interference of their skin cells in this machine, she explains how ‘you’re taking the human away, and you have a very effective set-up’. All the while, of course, this instrument is both generated by us and for us, and in Thornton’s work is narrated by us. In *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, the intelligent machine – AI – makes human subjects into unwitting objects of study; in *Ground*, man and machine, subject and object, seem more symbiotically balanced. *Ground*’s present tense does not yet apparently harbour the impending sense of wanton oblivion. Dare I say it, *Ground* seems cautiously optimistic. I was the last person to see it at Kunstverein Nürnberg before its temporary closure in the face of the coronavirus’s eruption across Europe. In a world now threatening us and our relatives, we again might hope for the science of discovery to bring us protection, not destruction.