

NARRATIVE TRANCE: JAMES RICHARDS AND LESLIE THORNTON

James Richards and Leslie Thornton interviewed by Lucia Aspesi
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The film *Crossing* was part of James Richards's solo show at Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover (December 3, 2016 – February 5, 2017). The show was produced in collaboration with Bergen Kunsthall and ICA London.

Lucia Aspesi: *Leslie, what was it that made you interested in collaborating with James Richards? And how does this initial interest relate to what you have produced, and the way this collaboration has turned out?*

Leslie Thornton: I saw the Francis Bacon sound installation that James did at Whitechapel Gallery in 2015. It was a presentation of Francis Bacon's 1953 painting *Study for a Portrait* placed in a room directly in dialogue, or rather immersed in, a five-channel electronic sound work. The audio mixed narrative, textural, and melodic fragments riffing off the painting. The seductive and subversive way the sound worked with allusion, shock, and pleasure, all unpredictably intertwined, was both striking and not unfamiliar to me as an aesthetic. The project compels reflection upon something we think we already know: a painting. I like work that induces thinking and pleasure at the same time, intensifying experience in a nonverbal way.

James proposed that we might collaborate on a piece for a cinema event at the Walker Art Center, since we were already scheduled to be there for overlapping events. He suggested that we exchange images, sounds, and edits "that maybe you really love, and have really worked on, but never finally found a way to present as part of a finished work." We both produce a lot of work from our own stockpiles of found materials and footage that we ourselves have

generated. I was eager to fold, twist, and bend our collective media, and work with an artist I already imagined as a kindred spirit. James often uses collaged image and sound, and I subvert narrative strategies, producing a kind of “narrative trance.” I wanted to see if we could make something filled with disparity and difference that would hold together, cohere, and compel. Since we live on different continents, we would have to do this mostly remotely. I thought this was metaphorically fitting, because our primary technical vehicle would be the Internet, with its billion-to-one “shooting ratio.” We uploaded about 200GBs of material via Dropbox, and occasionally talked on Skype.

James Richards: For me the most compelling thing is to be subjectively involved in a process rather than just working toward a final product. That is part of the attraction of collaborating. It’s also about sharing normally private parts of one’s practice, the very things you have worked with but chose not to show for some reason. But then in the collaborative context, the trust and admiration that initiated while working together allows one to offer up these offcuts and outtakes and let another artistic logic take them to a different place.

LT: Yes, even if the “surplus” was our own, actively produced and acquired, it was latent in a way, just waiting for something to happen.

JR: There was a feeling of acceleration in the collaboration, as we were so instantly excited by what we were sending each other. The outside sort of drops away and you get caught up in this intimacy and exchange. For a long time I’ve been a fan of Leslie’s work, and the idea of bringing together two collections of media, generated by different sensibilities and logics, was very exciting. I think there was a kind of intuition that working with this surplus content would become the essence of the project. I was keen to see how Leslie would interpret the material I sent her, and in turn to see how I would react to what she sent to me. This unresolved material often has so much potential because it clearly has a certain frisson or oddness, or beauty, but is then perhaps too awkward or hard to place, and that’s why it didn’t end up getting used.

LT: We were generating a different sort of spatiality to the process of editing by collaborating online, and this was completely in keeping with the displaced and broken imagery that formed the content of work. Familiar cinematic and installation aesthetics fell away, leaving traces, but also opening up something entirely different, perhaps “post-cinematic,” and, for me, radical in that I was remembering a place of darkness, the abyss, that space of operating outside of one’s usual modes and tropes and languages that I had occupied when making my very first films.

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LA: *The notion of “excess” is embedded in the way you created Crossing: the offering of oneself to the other, and the idea of “channeling” beyond expectation and desire. Is this project about not knowing one another? About not knowing one another’s methods and process and only knowing the finished product?*

LT: Collaboration is about coming to know one another, yes, which is what James was saying attracted him. However, there was so much serendipity at every stage, from the kinds of things we had previously filmed and collected, to the ways we cut sound and edited. It was not so much about learning each other but about finding out we were already in tune and seeing many of the same things. While we often felt at odds, and we may have somewhat different interpretations of *Crossing*, it was truly amazing, when we sat down side by side, in front of masses of footage, first in a hotel in Minneapolis and then eight months later in an Airbnb in London, and cut straight to the core and made this piece, almost effortlessly, almost magically.

JR: I agree. We exchanged fragments online, adding chunks of sounds, or additional clips of digital effect, and then passing back for the other to add on more. Thus we built up short “phrases” or “sentences” of previously discrete clips that somehow worked together in interesting ways. It was a process of developing a grammar of existing images. I think there is something cannibalistic about the project; we were re-digesting ourselves in the exchange. Meeting to finalize the video for the projection at Rodeo Gallery in London was a kind of distillation moment. And out of all this excess we were able to carve back to this very refined final form. In terms of themes, I think the work speaks a lot to the relationship between nature and civilization/technology. We are both very interested in nonhuman vision (nonhuman eye) and also in a notion of video, and of the edit as itself an act of thinking. For example, in a simple way you can say that the grid implies a vision-machine, a kind of artificial logic rather than an organic one. Also *Crossing* is very much about working with the oscillation between wonder and a kind of blankness, or everyday-ness, such as those passages shot during heavy traffic on dull afternoons.

LA: *Leslie, could you speak about what role language and communication plays in making work? You have said that in the past there wasn’t as much language attached to the making of art as there is now.*

LT: We are from different generations. I think James and I met at an intersection that

we reached from almost opposite places, although we both have an acute awareness of “knowledge-making” that occurs outside of language. In the 1980s there was apprehension about “an information explosion,” a time when there would be an excess of imagery and data via media and computers, an accumulation to the point of collapse, bringing about a concomitant flattening of experience through excess; a flattening of meaning. This was my premise in *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985). And working with James on *Crossing* has meant dealing with exactly the sort of proliferation that was anticipated in the 1970s and 1980s. Having footage to work with was never going to be a problem, nor was the fact that we live on different continents. Both of these things would have presented major hurdles just fifteen years ago.

JR: I am not sure how deeply I was focused on this idea of excess and the archive, but maybe that’s a symptom of my very embeddedness in it. To me the interesting thing is how one can get to a place of purity—refine a language that is taut and clear. It’s like writing: one can type any combination of words or sentences onto a page, but that doesn’t seem so interesting in itself as a subject. It’s finding something that moves and engages people that is the challenge.

LT: Exactly! I come from a place that can make today’s image-landscape very alienating, but while working on this project something happened: in the slipperiness of *Crossing*, and given the very precise shape that we rendered, this sense of alienation slipped away. I started to feel that shape was what mattered. *Crossing* erases the loss of meaning within excess by giving it shape. I realized that surplus is not so much the problem; arbitrariness and indifference are the problems. That’s the screaming white noise.

JR: When I think about *Crossing* I don’t believe that it is about appropriation or about cinema or the Internet or archives. There is logic of excess of material that has been generated; perhaps there is some kind of structure about the work that is a channeling, which has its own implicit grammar and system for images.

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