

OBJECTLESSONS



blanket

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B L O O M S B U R Y

Kara Thompson, Blanket
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At the center of Jeanine Oleson's *Conduct Matters* installation at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (2017) lies a hand-woven rug. *Perspectus . . . a . . . um* (2017) is a light-gray square with a plaid-like grid of woven black bars that contract at one end and widen at the other. Amid this grid, one green bar and one red bar meet in the shape of a large L. Installed in the center of a small, dimly lit gallery, the rug or blanket appears to be innocuous.

On one wall of the room plays the three-channel film *Crossed Wires* (2017). Up against an adjacent wall, a small monitor runs another film, *Ground* (2017). A thick copper wire protrudes from the center of this monitor. Like a needle under the skin to draw blood, the copper is inserted into thick hand-cast glass, an overlay on the monitor's surface. On the floor to the left of the monitor sits a large terra-cotta, wood, and brass gramophone, *Matter-phone* (2016). The copper tubing from the monitor weaves behind the gramophone and meets up with other lines of tubing connected to it.

Ground offers a montage of scenes and images, bound by the presence of copper. Footage plays from Bloomberg News, complete with the crawl of stock losses. An anchor's face flashes up briefly, then cuts to a moving image of a rocky terrain with the caption "BHP Union disagree over pay offer." The copper wire disrupts the view. The scene shifts again to a computer-generated 3D image of a topography that resembles a deep canyon, which reveals itself as an aerial view of a massive open-pit mine. *Ground* then returns to Bloomberg News footage. Periodically, the same 3D topography appears

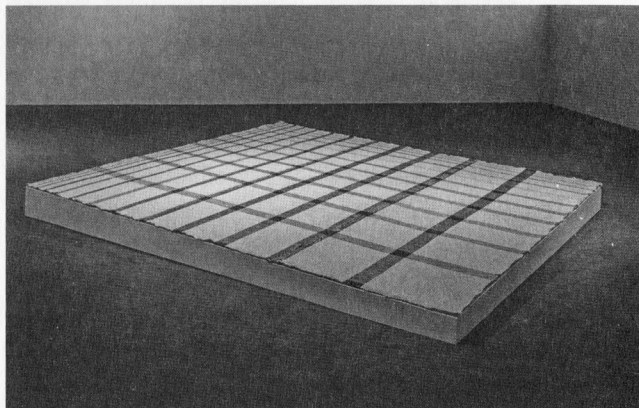


FIGURE 6 *Perspectus . . . a . . . um* (2017) by Jeanine Oleson.

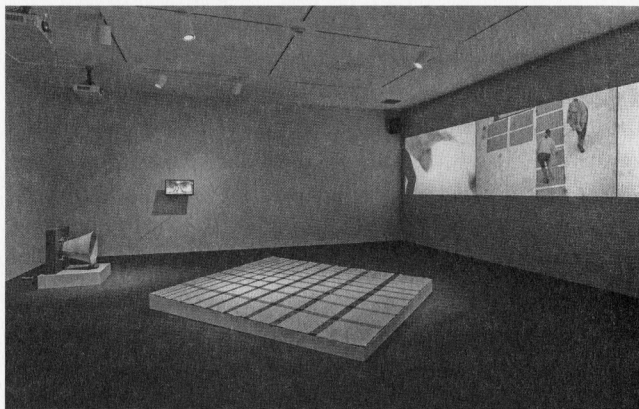
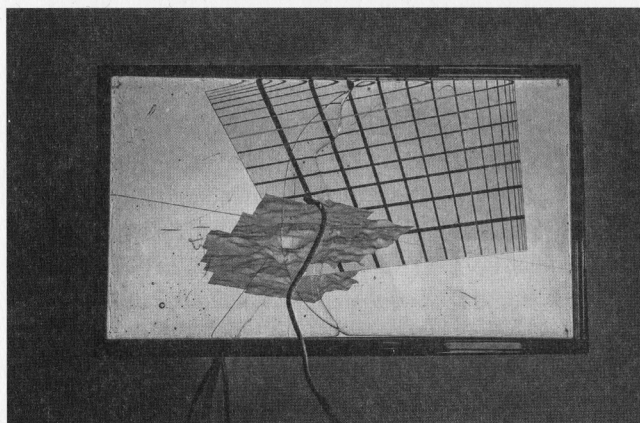


FIGURE 7 *Conduct Matters* (2017) by Jeanine Oleson.



FIGURES 8 and 9 *Ground* (2017) by Jeanine Oleson.

and shifts position—the viewer notices a computer cursor moving, suggesting the agency and presence of another. A 3D model of the installation's woven blanket appears on the screen, and the cursor moves it a few times until it overlaps with the rocky topography. In one scene, the topography juts through the blanket and covers the mine. As we watch a user work the textile in this imaging platform, we see through its “fibers” and grid into a copper mine.

The blanket's title *Perspectus . . . a . . . um* refers to the declension of the Latin transitive verb *perspicio* (*perspectus, perspecta, perspectum*)—to see through, to examine, to observe—and these are the very actions into which *Ground* courts its viewers. The blanket both covers the mine, but also allows us to see through it at points—not quite transparent, it covers just enough to draw our attention to the ground underneath. And as we watch the film, we stand proximate to the protrusion of copper tubing that could have been mined from that very site: Its dimension and scale emerge, literally, from the screen. At a certain point in *Ground*, as we see the blanket grid vertically oriented and moving down into the topography, the scene shifts abruptly to four of Oleson's collaborators (and actors in *Crossed Wires*) busily working around a table together to make the gramophone, and to hammer the copper wires we now have next to us and around us in the present moment of viewing.

Sounds, which almost resemble someone bumping the wall on the other side of the gallery, reverberate at certain intervals from *Matter-phone*. Oleson transferred the labors

figured in *Ground*, including hands hammering copper and the clicking of a computer mouse, to *Matter-phone* via a low frequency tactical transducer speaker.¹³ The sound produced is low and physical. From these images of hands working and cursors moving, accompanied by sounds out of sync with their actions, the viewer gets a sense of labor's transmission and alienation. Much of the film in general is concerned with labor and materiality. For instance, the blanket's grid is based on the "platter" or ground that orients virtual objects in 3D imaging platforms, such as the one that appears in motion in *Ground*.¹⁴ Like Wilson's *eyeDazzler, Perspectus . . . a . . . um* is digitally designed, but also handmade: The blanket comes into being by a co-production of media forms and weaving practices. And the flash of captions and clips—"BHP Union disagree over pay offer," "BHP Billiton stock down .68 points"—refer to the February 2017 strike at the Escondida copper mine in Chile, owned and operated by Anglo-Australian conglomerate BHP Billiton, when workers began a 43-day strike over the onerous terms of their new three-year contract.

Oleson maintains "a physical process of making as a mode of thinking, and that's what the speaker, wire, glass, and weaving provided."¹⁵ *Conduct Matters* exposes viewers to the labor of making art, and the enmeshed relations at work in their act of watching or consuming it: the copper in the television monitor (and in our phones and computers) and the wire jutting out from the screen depend on a miner's labor, on the constant extraction of precious minerals from

the earth. The workers' strike and the artists at work make visible what is otherwise alienated and hidden from view. Meanwhile, the blanket covers, but never fully conceals, the open-pit mine. Its own patterns are fashioned from the grid that orients virtual 3D objects. The platform and grid make possible our view of the virtual mine.

As you stand to watch *Ground*, with *Perspectus . . . a . . . um* lying resolute and currently inert behind, you may be drawn to or distracted by the narration and images from *Crossed Wires* in separate (though sometimes continuous) channels across the perpendicular wall. In one sequence, a character played by Lisa Reynolds, a member of Oleson's four-person ensemble, takes a tour of the Mission Mine, an open-pit mine south of Tucson, AZ. A tour guide explains to the group (who appear to all be white and middle-aged to elderly, except for Reynolds) how the extraction process works. Her matter-of-fact tone, tinged with excitement and didacticism, almost makes the process seem obvious or natural—until the images of the ravaged mine itself reappear. Reynolds then boards a bus—we hear the tour narration continue—and the group pulls up to an overlook above the open pit. Reynolds treats the scene as if it were land art, an earthwork. She asks the tour guide, “So how are you making decisions on the shape . . . the . . . terraces?” The tour guide gives her a puzzled look, but gamely responds with an elementary and gestural explanation of how the layers are blasted away, one fold at a time: “They start up at the top, blasted all that one layer, then blast the next layer.”

Earlier in the film, Reynolds stands behind a chain-link fence with the mine in distant view. She delivers a lecture about land art, labor, and geological time to three other characters who listen carefully, but fail to follow her logic. Reynolds calls the mine a “monumental earthwork, or land art, as I like to call it.” If we were to account for the history of land art, she explains, we see how this work—the mine—“refers directly back to the topography of the geological time before an era of extraction. This way of looking at time lends itself to a calm and reflective approach. Can you feel it?” The irony, of course, is that extraction has made possible the stark visibility of geological time—layers blasted away to reveal folds “of winds, of waters, of fire and earth, and subterranean folds of veins of ore in a mine” (Deleuze 6).

Oleson brings the blanket and rocks, minerals, and elements into a mode of intimate exchange. The blanket and copper are conductive materials: Blankets conduct thermal energy, and copper conducts electricity. Blankets also have an electric energy—the sparks visible in the dark, or hair that stands on end, a little work of electron magic. When *Perspectus . . . a . . . um* interacts with the mine, it reminds us that elements like copper and gold, or resources like oil and water, cover or layer in the land like blankets. And like a blanket, they store energy: the potential to warm and cool our homes, fuel our cars, and make bombs to destroy the world.

Ted Kuntz’s family may have “discovered” gold in Colorado, but another yellow rock would later be mined and extracted from Diné Bikéyah. Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1977 novel