

# **Projects 64 : Diana Thater : Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 24- November 10, 1998**

**[Fereshteh Daftari]**

Author

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64

# projects

diana thater



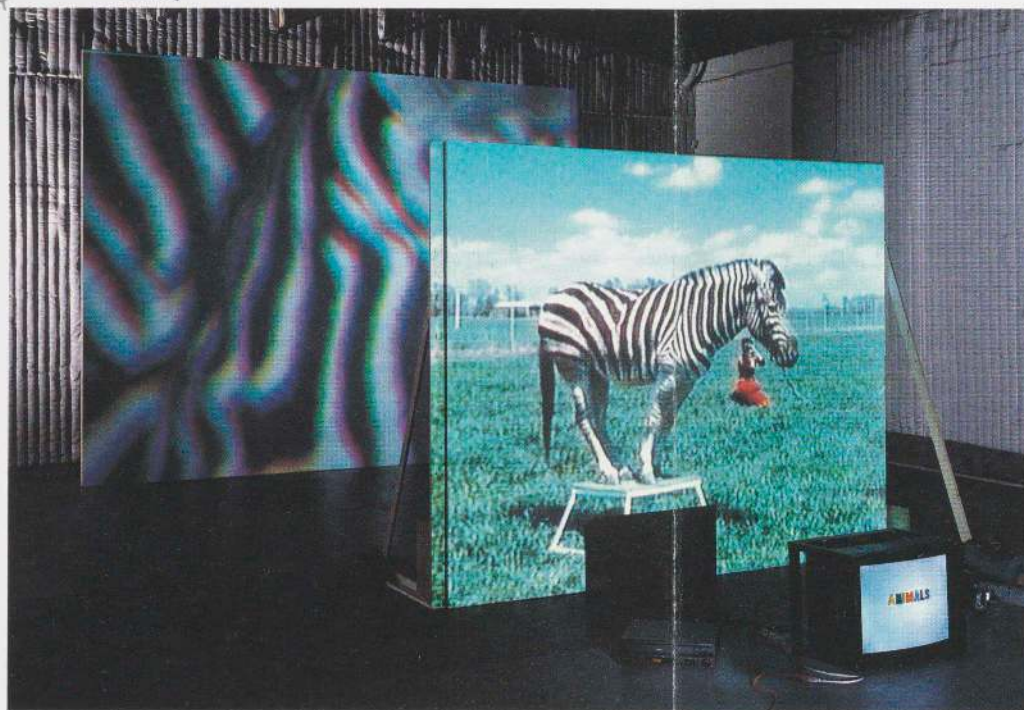
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

September 24–November 10, 1998

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*The best animals are the flat animals.* 1998. Installation view. Video installation with three projectors, one video monitor, four laserdisc players, four laserdiscs; window film; and an 8' x 10' 6" false wall. Edition of two. Photograph by Fredrik Nilsen, courtesy MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles

*Paradox is initially that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities.*

—Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

Stepping into the versatile environment of Diana Thater's most recent video installation is not unlike landing in Alice's Wonderland of unlimited possibilities. The intricate perceptual adventures begin at the threshold of the exhibition space. Here, the colorful projection from the interior spills out of the entrance. Like canvas supporting oil paint, you lend your body to the pouring colors and merge into the work of art. Once inside, however, you shift into the role of a spectator watching images unfold, but not for too long. Glance through the opening leading to the Museum's Sculpture Garden, a view now dissected into distinct colors, and unwittingly, you see the garden as if through the separate lenses of a video projector. Leave that spot and you shed this mechanical identity. Stand in front of the projector resting on the floor and you mutate into an actor whose shadow competes with the zebra performing tricks on the screen. Remove your shadow from that screen and you will see a zebra acting out a human role, your role. Now, look beyond. The same beast dissolves into an abstraction, a painterly condition. Flatness at either end of the room, perceived depth on the central screen, within these projected layers you wander in a gallery which is also a video space, at once pictorial and cinematic, illusionistic and real, stretching and contracting. This is a visual feast, a perceptual field within which you juggle different roles. In this land of formal wizardry you stand on a slippery terrain where both the seeing agent and the object of vision shift conditions. Those who enter abandon the modernist belief in "what you see is what you see."<sup>2</sup> Welcome to *The best animals are the flat animals*.

Repeated on the two side walls, the invasive waves of variegated stripes are overwhelming. These markings are none other than the skin of zebras clustered in a herd—closely scanned on digital video, out of register, in modulated color, and flattened out. They recall the optically vibrating paintings of the British Op artist Bridget Riley. But while sensory illusion activates the undulating lines of Riley's paintings, organic movement and quick-cut editing animate Thater's video. Here, a late-twentieth-century mode of expression has transformed the image of some "primitive" beasts into a hi-tech wall paper. Thater adds another twist to the complexity of the situation by reversing the perspectival logic, relegating an extreme close-up to the distant background. What signals nearness is thus located far, behind a vast expanse of horizon and sky—the landscape behind the exercising zebra on the central screen.

Thater intentionally refers to painting and video, the dual heritage of her imagery. Her rainbow palette and sumptuously chromatic projections and monitor pieces have often drawn comparisons with Impressionism. A case in point is *Oo Fifi* (1992), recorded in the quintessential impressionist garden, Claude Monet's at Giverny. Impressionist or Op, Thater's "postindustrial paintings,"<sup>3</sup> are not simply painting wannabes. Mechanically generated, they flaunt their origin. Yet, the pictorial triggers associations with certain issues such as space and illusion, which, even though shared with the moving image, are more closely linked to painting. But above all this cross-fertilization allows the artist to doubly accentuate the presence of what stands between the viewer and the world: representation. The more you see the process, the less you are inclined to mistake the translation for the original.

Despite allusions to painting, the video camera is unmistakably Thater's primary tool. Whether of fauna or flora, her depictions of nature betray the technological manipulations to which they have been subjected. Multiplied, superimposed, or divided into the red,

green, and blue of the video spectrum, represented nature gives up its claim to documentary veracity and confesses to its artificiality. At other times, as in some of her major video installations, such as *China* (1995), *Electric Mind* (1996), and *Broken Circle* (1997), she exposes the filming process through actual footage of the film crew at work. Rather than expecting the viewer to believe in the projected illusion, Thater, at every step of the way, reminds us that the visible is a mediated product, a construct. Lest you lose sight of that reality you may literally stumble onto her ubiquitous projectors. This highly self-conscious or self-reflexive approach, characteristic of experimental filmmakers of the 1960s, was described by the film historian P. Adams Sitney as "structural film" or a kind of production that "insists on its shape."<sup>4</sup> Thater's method, which discourages passive immersion into spectacle but requires distancing and reflection on the building blocks of her medium, situates her in a lineage that includes structural filmmaker Michael Snow and certain first generation conceptual video artists such as Peter Campus and Bruce Nauman.<sup>5</sup>

Though she emphasizes structure, Thater does not neglect narrative. Not unlike children's literature where zoological creatures impersonate humans, Thater's protagonists are professional animals who are trained to behave like us. Whether cockatoos, wolves, or chimps, they enact a borrowed identity. In *The best animals are the flat animals* the cast of characters consists of a chorus of zebras—who have migrated to the no-man's land of flatness in the domain of abstract art—and, sandwiched in-between that image and its echo on the opposite wall, a single zebra in profile, formally unadulterated and performing outdoors. To make the narrative as persuasive as a documentary, the filmed (rather than videotaped) central action takes place in realistic color and space. Yet it unfolds on a theatrical, emphatically makeshift screen which hints at the fictive nature of the projection. More importantly, this realist



*Oo Fifi: Five Days in Claude Monet's Garden (Part 2)*. 1992. Installation view at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica. Video installation with three projectors, one laserdisc player, one laserdisc, window film, and existing architecture. Photograph courtesy David Zwirner



*China*. 1995. Installation view at The Renaissance Society, Chicago. Video installation with six projectors, six laserdisc players, one sync generator, six laserdiscs; window film; and existing architecture. Edition of two. Photograph courtesy David Zwirner

description of unnatural, anthropomorphic gestures sets the stage for a direct conflict between style and content. The learned behavior of our soloist, even though objectively reported, is as much of an artifice as the abstraction imposed on the herd. Opposing what has been termed monocular vision and instead favoring a multiplicity of viewpoints, Thater situates the viewer where reality and fiction, realism and abstraction can all be visible at the same time.

Such a vantage point, providing insightful access to all sides and layers, takes us to the crux of the matter. In Thater's words, "When we talk about nature, we are talking about ourselves really. Nature is a screen where we project ourselves. Nature is the ultimate other."<sup>6</sup> From this point "projection" takes on a new meaning. To counter the assumption that these creatures are wild and exotic and living in Africa, Thater locates them in Kansas. Hers are rodeo zebras, very well behaved and domesticated. In the wild, explains the artist, the zebra can only survive in a herd. In the footage, Thater emphatically isolates this beast who not only has walked away from its survival instincts but in taking its acting cues from a human source, its trainer, it is rehearsing to become something other. Its anthropomorphic tricks—pushing a barrel, standing on a stool, swinging on a seesaw, nodding, taking a bow and in conclusion abandoning the role—are ultimately clumsy imitations of human gestures. The point, however, is never the animal but what it reflects back on us. Humanized or abstracted, the four-footed creature allows the viewer to scrutinize the distance it has traveled away from itself. Thater's zebra is not the beast roaming in Africa, it is a flattened abstraction, as well as a fully formed creature in Kansas. Nothing is what it should be. It is different. It is other. It is more. It is a screen for our projections, a mirror held to our perception, a product of manipulations, ultimately, a fabrication.

As the title implies *The best animals are the flat animals* is also about paradox. In conceiving the work Thater was inspired by a passage in *The Logic of Sense*, where Gilles Deleuze, reflecting on Lewis Carroll's classic text, argues that "Depth is no longer a complement. Only animals are deep, and they are not the noblest for that; the noblest are the flat animals."<sup>7</sup> In a sense, Thater's reading of Deleuze informs the whole project. In the spirit of Deleuze's text,



*The best space is the deep space.* 1998. Production still. Photograph by and courtesy Diana Thater

Thater's visual conundrums resist "fixed identities."<sup>8</sup> Her spatial permutations, hybrid identities, and multiple identifications are nothing but "the simultaneity of a becoming."<sup>9</sup>

Thater creates situations defying sense, flattening out space where it exists, suggesting it where it does not. She is thus able to combine the formal elasticity in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with the modernist anxiety about depth, pitting Lewis Carroll against Clement Greenberg via Deleuze. In Thater's world flatness does not assert the surface, as with Greenberg. It implies depth by occupying a "background" position.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere you observe the denial of depth. The trickster zebra who has all the room in the world to gesticulate, parades only in a shallow space parallel to the screen. Space also appears squashed when looking at the Sculpture Garden. In actuality the furthest away, it drastically advances to cling to the flat red, green, blue, and yellow window panes. Drained of its coloristic nuances, the view onto this garden becomes the imagery and the property of the monochromatic panels.<sup>11</sup>



*The best outside is the inside.* 1998. Production still. Photograph by Jennifer Lane, courtesy Diana Thater

At every turn, contradictions surface as you uncover the transformation of one medium into another, one identity into another, one viewpoint into another, and one kind of projection into another. Multiplicity and the celebration of possibilities define Thater's adventure. Her fable then is not an innocent lullaby, it is a complex contemporary narrative of subjectivity—who sees what and identifies with what—and representation—what does one see when looking through art.

Refusing finality, the video installation is presented as merely a fragment of a larger body of work, collectively titled *The best animals are the flat animals—the best space is the deep space*. Images taken from the other tableaux play on a monitor placed on the floor. *The best space is the deep space*—with its Andalusian stallion, a circus horse, magically emerging from the mist, a product of fog machines and colored lights—and *The best outside is the inside*—a surreal forest scene shot at the L.A. County Arboretum and lit during the day for a night effect and vice versa, awaiting action—point to further fragmentations and narrative directions. To be continued.

Fereshteh Daftari

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Department of Painting and Sculpture

#### upcoming exhibitions

*The best space is the deep space*

Allen Memorial Art Museum of Modern Art, Oberlin, Ohio

October 2–November 27, 1998

*The best animals are the flat animals—the best space is the deep space*

MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles

October 27, 1998–January 10, 1999

*The best sense is the nonsense*

The Art Gallery of York University, Ontario, Canada

February 11–April 4, 1999

*The best outside is the inside*

The Saint Louis Art Museum

February 18–April 18, 1999

#### notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, (1969). Translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale; edited by Constantin V. Boudas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 3.
2. Frank Stella, quoted in "Interview by Bruce Glaser with Stella and Donald Judd," broadcast by WBAI-FM, New York, February 1964. Published as "Questions to Stella and Judd," Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Artnews* 65 (September 1966): 59.
3. Jody Zellen, "Diana Thater," *Arts Magazine* 65 (May 1991): 84.
4. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 407.
5. See Timothy Martin, "What Cyan said to Magenta about Yellow (Notes from the Apparatus on the Work of Diana Thater)," *Witte de With: Cahiers* #3 (1994): 123–29.
6. Thater, conversation with the author, Los Angeles, June 1998. Roberta Smith has suggested that "Another useful tack is to see her animals as stand-ins for women, and the central, yet invisible, position of the viewer in *China* as implicitly female one." See Smith, "Diana Thater," *The New York Times*, February 23, 1996, p. C32.
7. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 9.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
10. With Thater, what asserts the surface is the skin, a heretical reference in Greenberg's logic where self-referentiality is law.
11. It becomes even more apparent that nature in the Sculpture Garden is itself a manipulated construct.

The **projects** series is made possible by Peter Norton.

Cover: *The best animals are the flat animals*. 1998. Production still.

Photograph by Jennifer Lane, courtesy Diana Thater

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## biography

Born in San Francisco, 1962  
Lives and works in Los Angeles

## education

M.F.A., Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California, 1990  
B.A. Art History, New York University, 1984

## selected solo exhibitions

- 1997 *Diana Thater: Orchids in the Land of Technology*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- 1996 *Diana Thater: Electric Mind and Recent Works*, Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon  
*The individual as a species, the object as a medium. Diana Thater: Selected Works 1992–1996*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel  
*Electric Mind*, Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg  
*China, Crayons, and Molly #1–10*, David Zwirner, New York
- 1995 *China*, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago  
*Le Creux de L'Enfer*, Centre d'art contemporain, Thiers, France
- 1994 *Diana Thater*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam

## selected group exhibitions

- 1997 *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, 1997 Johannesburg Biennale  
*1997 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
*Skulpturen Projekte*, Münster, Germany
- 1996 *Jurassic Technologies: Revenant. 10th Biennale of Sydney*, Sydney, Australia  
*Being and Time: The Emergence of Video Projection*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
- 1995 *1995 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

## selected bibliography

### articles

- Amanshauser, Hildegund. "Diana Thater." *Camera Austria* no. 54 (1996): 22–28.
- Avgikos, Jan. "Sense Surround: Diana Thater." *Artforum* 34 (May 1996): 74–77, 118.
- Fogle, Douglas. "Diana Thater. Being Inside of a Work of Art." *Flash Art* 31 (January–February 1998): 86–89.
- Smith, Roberta. "Diana Thater." *The New York Times*, February 23, 1996, p. C32.
- Spinelli, Claudia. "Gelb, Zyan, Grün, Magenta, Rot und Blau." *Das Kunst-Bulletin* (October 1996): 16–23
- Zellen, Jody. "Diana Thater." *Arts Magazine* (May 1991): 84.

## exhibition catalogues

- Diana Thater: China*. Chicago and Thiers, France: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and Le Creux de l'Enfer, Centre d'art contemporain de Thiers, 1996. Texts by Diana Thater, Colin Gardner, and Timothy Martin.
- The individual as species, the object as a medium. Diana Thater: Selected Works: 1992–1996*. Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1996. Interview with Thater by Kathryn Kanjo.
- Witte de With: Cahiers #3*. Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1994. Edited by Barbara van Kooij. Text by Timothy Martin. Cover by Diana Thater.

## publications by the artist

- Electric Mind*. Ghent: Imschoot, uitgevers, 1996. Foreword by Kathryn Kanjo and a reprint of Pat Murphy, "Rachel in Love."
- The best animals are the flat animals—the best space is the deep space*. Introduction by Carol Reese, with essay by Amelia Jones. Los Angeles: MAK Center for Art and Architecture, forthcoming 1998.