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Diana Thater

Page/Seite 76-77:

DIANA THATER, *DELPHINE*, 1999,

installation view, *Vienna Secession*, January 2000 /

Wiener Secession, Januar 2000.

(PHOTO: MARGHERITA SPILUTTINI)

SARA ARRHENIUS

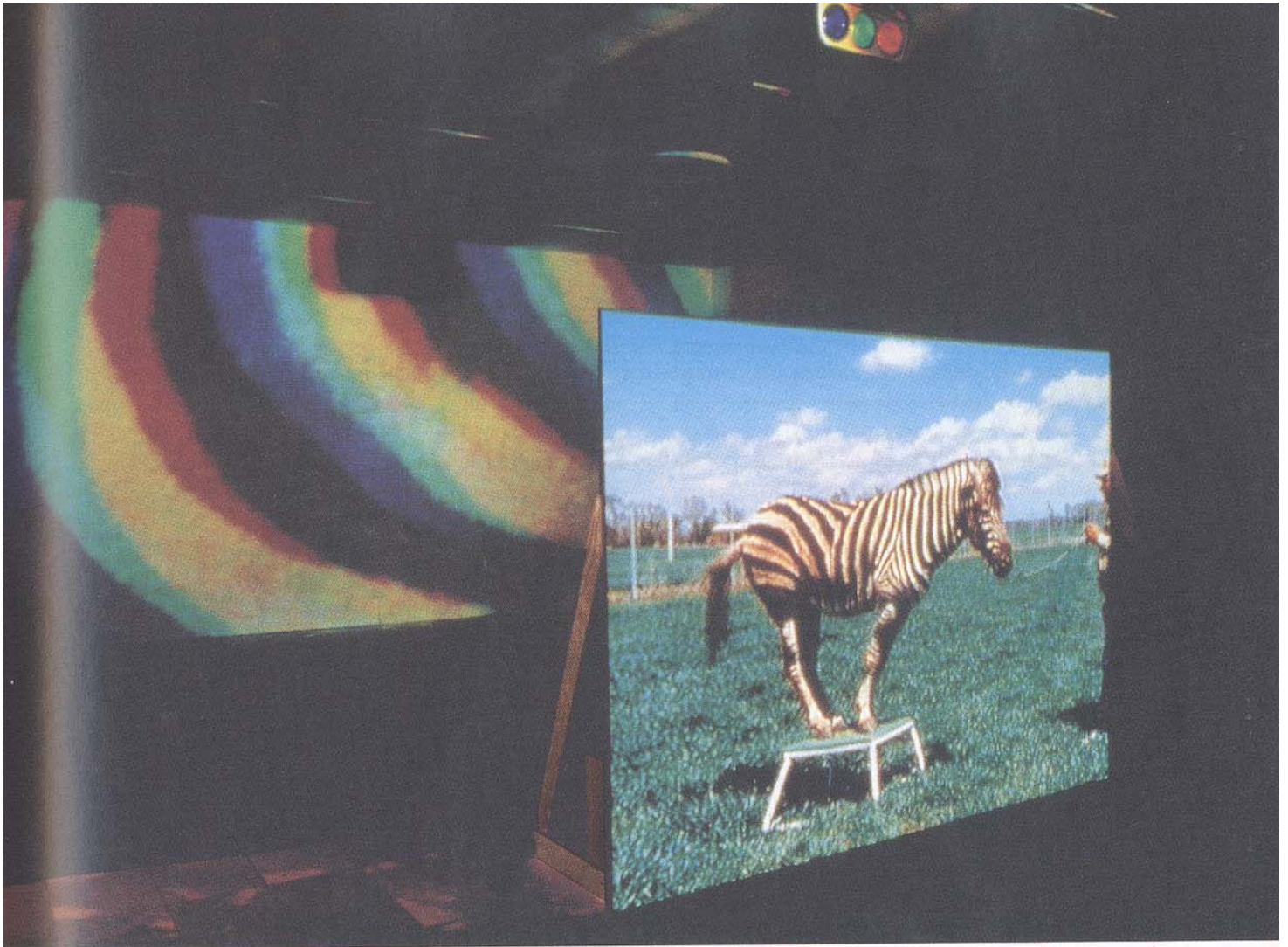
Come Closer

On the Intimacy of Vision in the Art of Diana Thater

Images of animals have always been heavy with signification. The missing link, the short distance that separates us from animals, fills us with both curiosity and horror. When we put ourselves next to animals, the gap between nature and culture takes on a corporeal existence. We think that we are seeing humans as they were in pure nature, in the moment before taking the step into language and becoming

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human. That is why our images of animals have never been about animals themselves. Animals and nature have had to serve as art's other, its raw materials, mute and faithful companions open to every projection. We could be content to describe—and it would still be saying a great deal—the way Diana Thater uses animals and nature in her work as a knowledgeable game with art and the history of photography. The references in her 1997 Münster Sculpture Project video installation *BROKEN CIRCLE* to the grand landscapes of Westerns could be seen as a twist on our contemporary production of the sublime. Or we could see—even though this may be fulfilling our duty to art history a little further than is necessary—the painterly qualities of the tamed zebra's skin in *THE BEST ANIMALS ARE THE FLAT ANIMALS—THE*



BEST SPACE IS THE DEEP SPACE (1998) as an abstract canvas. But Diana Thater goes beyond this. In her work, every interpretation leads to yet another possibility; there is always another story to listen to, another door to open. The tamed ape that the film team is carefully directing in the video installation ELECTRIC MIND (1996), the trained white stallion slowly dancing to the whip in THE BEST SPACE IS THE DEEP SPACE (1998), and, again, the sad, patient zebra that obediently forces itself onto a circus stool, all have the same insistent urgency as the symptom. They persist in coming back, they put themselves in the way and ask that we see and try to understand. But Diana Thater does not assign her menagerie any mythological dimensions or neat roles within a comforting cosmology. Such claims are given no room in

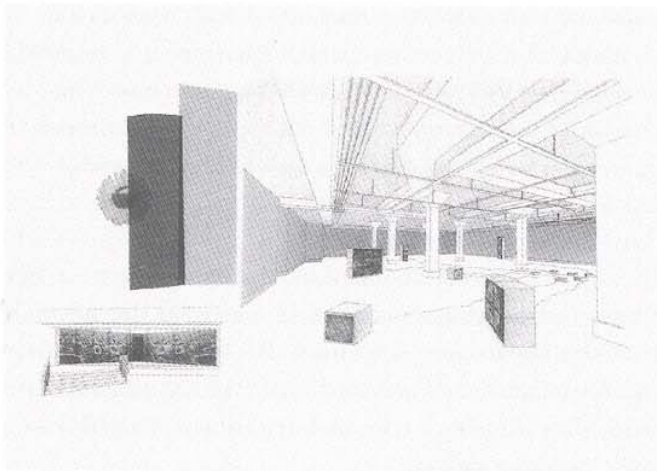
DIANA THATER, *THE BEST ANIMALS ARE THE FLAT ANIMALS*, 1998 (version 1), installation for LCD video projector, 2 three-lens video projectors, video monitor, 4 laser discs and players, window film, false wall (96 x 126"), and existing architecture at the MoMA, New York. / *DIE BESTEN TIERE SIND DIE FLACHEN TIERE*, Installation für LCD-Videoprojektor, 2 Dreilinsen-Videoprojektoren, Videomonitor, 4 Laserdiscs und Abspielgeräte, Fensterfolie, falsche Wand (243,8 x 320 cm) und bestehende Räumlichkeiten.

the open, critical space that she constructs in her work. And it is also no coincidence that the animals that she shows are all trained. Because instead of remaining dumb as a way of signifying the real and the wild, they all play a role in our fantasy of nature as a pure point of origin.

The boundaries we mark out between animal and human, between nature and art, are not self-evident. That is why they are so charged. They are formulated within historical and cultural conditions where the body collides against science, knowledge against values, and the horror-struck inventiveness of the unconscious against the inevitability of matter. Human beings become human by marking out what separates them from animals. The creatures that transgress or contradict these boundaries are the monsters that both scare and fascinate us. They are the creatures that reappear as a running theme in the West's storehouse of images and narratives. The ape in *ELECTRIC MIND*, the screenplay that Diana Thater wrote based on a science fiction story by Pat Murphy, is exactly such a boundary creature. The chimpanzee's consciousness is really that of a young girl's. Her neurologist father has succeeded in making an electronic copy of his dead daughter's brain and her consciousness now lives on in the form of the ape. The touching and bizarre story of how Rachel finally receives recognition as a thinking—and legal—subject can of course be read as a critique of how we divide the world into a system of dichotomies (animal versus human, thinking versus feeling, body versus soul) and arrange these opposing pairs within a static hierarchy. The two monitors in the video installation named after the play flash the words "A mouse is a cat is a chimp is a girl." The monitors are surrounded

by video projections that show how a chimpanzee is trained to become an animal actor in Hollywood. And Rachel's story is also the story of our increasing difficulty in maintaining the boundaries that have established our definitions of human consciousness and intelligent life. But Thater's attraction to these ambiguous border zones cannot be neatly summarized as cultural criticism. *ELECTRIC MIND* is also in its way a pastiche of a *bildungsroman* of development and change. Investigating the possibilities that change and metamorphosis harbor is a central theme in Thater's work, something that becomes even clearer in *DELPHINE* (1999). Here, Thater has constructed one of those fluid, changeable, and fluctuating structures so typical of her work. The viewer is enclosed within a room of video projections that show dolphins swimming in swirling waters. As always in Thater's work, the generation of the work and the act of looking are laid open—the dolphins are seen by the filming divers as a reflection of the viewer's own position. "I'd rather be a dolphin than a man," says Thater in an interview in the show's catalogue, and the work also seems motivated by a desire for transgressing boundaries, for approaching the unknown and experiencing other ways of being and experiencing the world. Literally and metaphorically, animals' dissimilarity stands for the unprejudiced examination of and relation to one's own ego and of the borders of one's consciousness.

If we begin to unfold and describe the different layers in Diana Thater's multi-faceted video pieces, it is remarkable how this examination and reformulation of boundaries occurs at every level of her work. Hers is not a transgressive logic resembling that of the carnival, that is to say, a temporary reevaluation of hierarchies that in actuality serves to render visible



DIANA THATER, *BROKEN CIRCLE*, 2000,
installation sketch for Kunsthalle Tensta, Sweden,
December 2000, ink and collage on vellum, 24 x 36" /
AUFGEBOCHENER KREIS, Installations-skizze,
Tusche und Collage auf Zeichenpergament, 61 x 91,5 cm.

and affirm the ruling order. It is also not a question of the very thrill of transgression, the frisson we see in a mystic like Georges Bataille who has to assume the existence of a boundary so that the taboo can be broken. For Thater, it is more a question of trying to redefine and reconsider the boundaries and definitions on which our understanding of viewer and viewed, subject and object, and image and reality depend. Hence, the fascination with animal consciousness as different yet similar comes to function as a metaphor for a larger set of questions. *DELPHINE* breaks down vision and the distance between viewer and viewed by using the moving image throughout the room, rather than projecting it in front of the viewer like in a cinema. The image turns around corners and moves over the walls, floors, and ceiling. There is no clear distinction between image as image and image as architectural element, between the image's illusionistic space and the space in which the viewer finds him or herself. The images surround the viewer and create a new experience of space where the video's spatiality of light and time overlaps with the solid materiality of the room. In the same way, Thater breaks down the centrality of vision insofar as her video installations do not offer a linear narrative with a clear beginning or end. The installations offer an endless number of possible images and perspectives with no location offering a totalizing point of view and no viewer privileged in any way. There is no location in the room where I can stand in front of the work and consume it with my gaze. I am in the work and it becomes clear, to paraphrase Lacan, that the world looks at me as much as I look at it. I am in the image at the same time as I am in front of it. The dolphins swimming in the streaming, swirling water are looking at me as attentively as I am looking at them. Their gaze sees and shapes the world to the same degree as mine does.

Thater's works consistently reveal their own mode of production. The camera and the projector accomplish part of this task. In certain works, the video's primary colors are made visible by coloring the windows of the exhibition space. Her works investigate video's properties, its specific material conditions and its visual and spatial possibilities, and also account for their own means of production—the ap-

paratus is not hidden to create illusion and to seduce. The works do not appear before the viewer as miracles fallen from the sky; they openly display themselves as composed of material and technique. However the apparatus does not create any sense of distance or alienation in the Brechtian sense. Rather, the visibility of the apparatus appears as an act of inclusion, a new sort of familiarity with the machinery whose role in the production of the image is no longer hidden. Finding ourselves in a symbiotic relationship with the apparatus we see better with the camera than without it. Thater's intimacy with the image and the screen makes projection a conscious artistic strategy in which the viewer can move within and along with the work. By "intimacy" I am not referring to any gender-specific associations of a soft femininity, but to a more general sense of proximity and to the erasure of the divisions that have structured our ways of seeing. Thater's sophisticated examination of the relation between the viewer, image, light, time, and architecture contributes to a decisive shift in the gaze and space of film viewing. The passive film viewer looking at the sparkling screen in a theater or standing before a spatially demarcated monitor has taken a final step into film history and has been replaced by another mode of vision. Unlike video installations prevalently produced throughout contemporary art's development, particularly in relation to film, Thater's works imagine a mobile viewer, moving through the room or through a series of rooms, flooded with moving images where no point can be marked as a beginning or an end, and no place can be designated as the center or the periphery. This is a mode of vision where the corporeality of the eye is recognized and the illusion of an all-seeing eye, capable of dominating the world, has been abandoned. But it is also the image that has become more corporeal, that has acquired spatial volume and presence. The line between image and viewer, between the space of reality and that of images, and between the solidity of architecture and the instability of the image has changed. We no longer stand in front of images whose surface quality has brought us to a standstill. We move toward the image and it takes one step toward us. Where this intimacy will lead remains to be seen.