

Water, Sun, and Thinking

JEREMY GILBERT-ROLFE

Bodies

DELPHINE (1999)—the German for “dolphins,” based on the Greek “delphinos”—was the title of an installation Diana Thater exhibited at the Vienna Secession last spring. The work used glamour to frame content found in nature. Thater colored the space with gels in a range of reds, from orange to magenta. Two nine-screen video “walls” each showed a continuous image of the sun, red on the one and magenta on the other. The sun was in the show as both the source of all energy, and as nature subdivided at will by technology, which can see both the spectrum (heat) and objects as the human eye cannot (for example, as an electronically encoded ball of exploding gas perceived as fluid).

The content framed by the dispersed redness of the gel and the video walls’ composite images of the sun consisted of four video projections, each showing a sequence made up of both video and film shots in which dolphins playfully encounter film and video cameras and their human appendages. The exhibition space was divided into quadrants in one of which the projector was aimed at the ceiling, in an-

other at the floor, in the third at a point three quarters, and in the fourth at one quarter, of the distance between floor and ceiling.

Thater laid out the installation so as to reorient the building through first disorientating it, by replacing its architectural grid with an order (or perspective) that is neither its own nor incompatible with it. Neptune and Venus are both represented by the dolphin in art, but it is also the personification of water itself.¹ The museum was reoriented to a world without ground, where bodies move not on a surface but in a depth. This was a world made of figures not on a field, but within a body of water, not solids and voids but solids and a fluid mass that is itself a more tangible force than are the air or wind. Installation art is usually socio-anthropological or social-realist. Thater’s installations relocate the institutional in relation to a content that, in being found in nature, comes from outside the historicist terms of reference to which we’ve become accustomed.

JEREMY GILBERT-ROLFE is a painter who also writes about art and related topics.



DIANA THATER, *DELPHINE*, 1999, video stills / Videostills.

In each of the four projections all film shots face down, and all video ones up, towards the surface of the sea and beyond it the sun. In each only the first shot isn't underwater, and traces the diver's entry into the water (and is therefore film) and each ends with shots that look up (and are therefore video). No projection has any kind of shot that the others don't, but no shot appears in more than one projection. All the shots are of divers and dolphins, either separately or together, sometimes in combination with the seabed (here entirely a property of film, since only film points down), and sometimes with fantastic rays of light from the sun (here entirely properties of video, since only video shots point up). Radiating through the sea rather than the sky, the rays remind one that the water is to dolphins as air is to us.

The dolphins can swim off and the image decomposes, or morselates, into a sea of pixels. At times shots are slowed down for the sake of revealing the grain of the video image. Thater seems to have been

thinking about how real speed in the water is already experienced as slowed-down movement by perception conditioned by the movements of bodies on land and in the air. The slow movements of bodies moving through water are made even slower but, because video doesn't allow things to be heavy, the dolphins seem to become less rather than more massive when this happens. Video makes materiality the province of technology. Materiality is seen in the grain that shows up as the image slows down, while the same image robs very large animals of mass.

Thater says she chose the title *DELPHINE* because she likes the fact that "Delphine" is a woman's name that is also a plural noun. She named an earlier work *CHINA* (1995) for the same reason: "China" was the name of a female wolf at the center of the work and it can also be a woman's name, as well as being the name of the West's most obvious other, as the wolf is man's. She says that dolphins are "the ideal subject for my work which is... about this kind of living"

twice—seeing twice—of consciously being more than one.”²⁾ If one were a dolphin, one would see the video camera twice: retinally, as we see it; but also as an X ray of itself provided by sonar visioning, which we don’t have. DELPHINE proposes a parallel between two ways of seeing, one of which knows itself to be limited in comparison to the other. It was the movement in the cameras, invisible to the humans using them, which really got the dolphins’ attention.

Thater has described underwater and outer space as the two conditions humans can enter but in which they can’t survive. Dolphins have brains as big as humans do, but they live in an inhuman space. What is more, the dolphin brain is a different kind of brain which leads to different everyday requirements. A dolphin doesn’t sleep as humans do, but turns off only half of its brain at a time. Dolphins are, then, never fully unconscious while, because of their sonar vision, they can’t stand sound waves that bounce around. Unlike humans, they therefore can’t tolerate enclosure. They don’t like caves, the human’s original refuge, and won’t go into them. In making DELPHINE, Thater had the help of Richard O’Barry, who founded The Dolphin Project for the protection and promotion of dolphins’ well-being after becoming disenchanted with what he had been trying to get them to do while serving in the US Navy, and subsequently when training dolphins for the television series *Flipper*. O’Barry compared a dolphin in an enclosed space to someone trapped in a hall of mirrors and never able to forget it. A dolphin’s requirements are, then, the opposite of a human’s, in that they can only be comfortable in an environment that seems to extend toward infinity, whereas even the hardiest human nomad likes to have a tent.

Thater’s public career began with content that described a trajectory in which flowers (OO FIFI—FIVE DAYS IN CLAUDE MONET’S GARDEN, 1992) were succeeded by a field of moving elk (WYOMING ALOGON, 1994) but then proceeded to the wolf (CHINA). At that point the animal became defined as another consciousness than human. The elk were a field but the wolf was a subject (although the lone wolf is an anomaly, as are lone humans). However, where the wolf is an other with which man seems to have much in common, Thater finds dolphins’ differences from

humans more important than any discernible similarities between them.

The wolf is the human’s other in an opposition defined in large part by the relationship to both of the dog, hated for its treachery by the one and loved for it by the other. Man’s nightmare is a wolf-man, but the wolf’s is a man-wolf which, says Thater, is not a nightmare but actually exists, and is the dog. Men and wolves have other things in common. Wolves, for example, are one of the few animals that adopt the abandoned offspring of other members of their species. Affinities such as these have led Thater to suggest that folk stories about boys turning into wolves and behaving as many men would like to behave are scary because they’re believable in a way that the stories about princes turning into frogs are not—unless, perhaps, one is a prince. If wolves fear man because he has guns and fire, it is more than suggestive that man fears wolves despite having them.

In contrast, we do not fear dolphins nor do they fear us, and although she notes that dolphins care collectively for the newly born, Thater is more interested in their perception than their social life. Neither fear, nor hatred, nor familiarity joins us to dolphins, which are at once fearless, friendly, and strange in the sense that they see twice. While one may only film wolves from a distance, the dolphins came right up to the camera, almost ignoring the humans. They could see the camera’s internal movement, and Thater invites one to compare the strangeness of their sonic perception to the technology contemporary humans use to record (and therefore think through) what they see. Watching DELPHINE reminds one of how film and video are prostheses which, in becoming crucial to what humans see, have come to determine how they see. We know that we do not see as cameras do, that the camera approximates human vision, but is quite unlike it because it attributes its own properties to what it records. The prosthesis has become a part of the human and/or the human a part of it. Thater considers, or seeks to present, the perception of animals in parallel with, or complementing, a human perception which may be described as either conditioned by technology (the camera-assisted human) or, and in my opinion more

plausibly, as largely a product of it (the human wholly dependent on the idea of the photographic, i.e., as a post-human realization of itself). What is to be compared here is not the animal and the human as Kant might have conceived them, but the animal and the apparatus, and while the work's content may be projected on the wall, its subject is the viewer in the gallery.

Thater's work always recalls Kant's ideas about nature, the sublime, and beauty. Kathryn Kanjo has pointed out that "The Hudson River School painters" (whom Thater's rays of light in water instantly recall), "John Ford, and Mary Shelley all serve as influences on her work." Kanjo points to two instances in which Thater recalls the sublime as a concept of ungraspable extension found in the presence of nature or the natural (as in the Hudson River School or Ford's westerns, two versions of nature as a cultural promise) and as an uncontrollable terror unleashed through combining technology (in fact, electricity) and flesh. Like the cinematographic apparatus, or writing, *Frankenstein* is about the product of a concept escaping the latter's grasp, exceeding what imagined it, an idea with a mind of its own rather than the other way around. Significantly, Thater has said that Shelley's story becomes truly scary when it becomes apparent that Frankenstein has produced a monster that has its own dreams: no longer a mere mechanism, it has become a complete other, its possession of an unconscious indicating the presence of a consciousness.

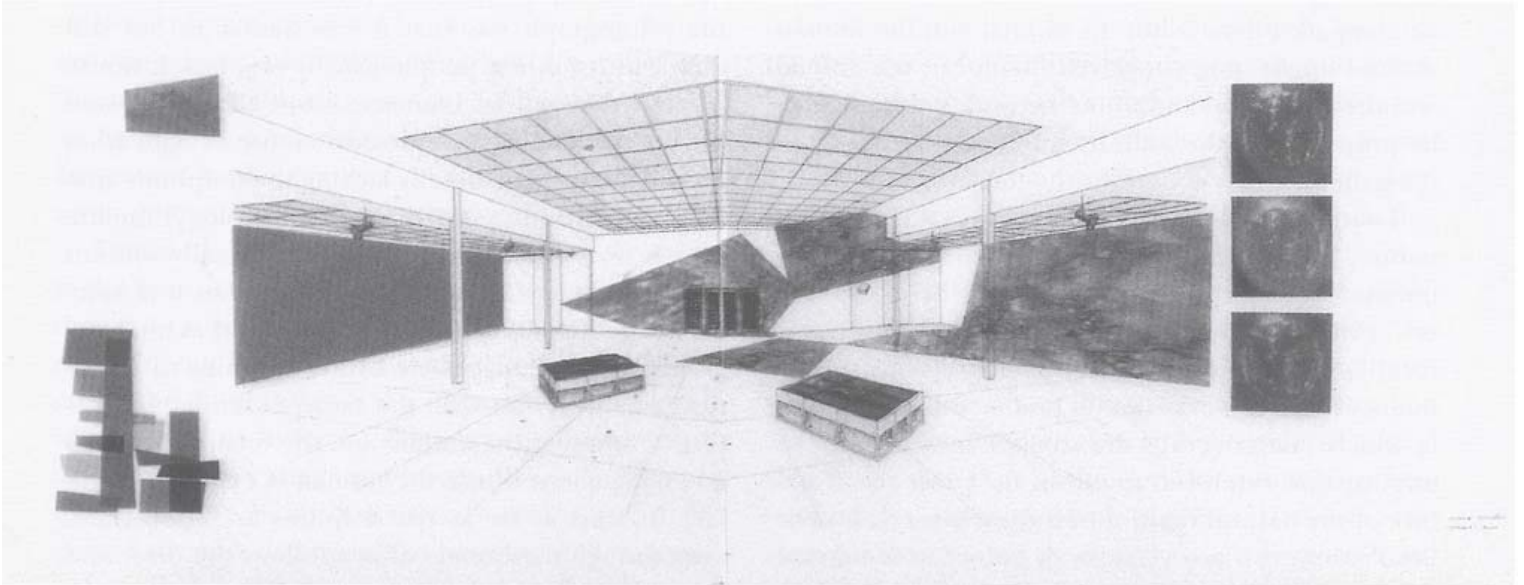
In Kant the human subject is both product of nature and producer of nature as a concept, the latter guaranteeing autonomy. It is not at all clear that the contemporary subject can claim autonomy in a comparable relationship to the technology, which threatens to overwhelm nature. The contemporary subject is suspended between animal perception and a technological visualizing which has become inescapable and unconscious, as is evidenced by every dream in the twentieth century taking the form of a film. Thater has found an animal that is fascinated by the camera while itself naturally seeing twice, at will, and implicitly compares its comfortable movement between the retinal and the sonar with a human perception uncertainly caught between what are known

to be, but cannot be experienced as, two ways of seeing. While there must have been a brief period at the beginning of photography's history when the thrill of the photograph was that it was similar to but still different from how people usually saw, now it would be only through an immense effort that one could hope to be able to separate one's sense of sight from that of the camera. Totally lacking the dolphin's ability to see sonically (save through technology) the human is now also unable to see even visually without seeing an image as much technological as it is natural. If the human can only see the world as a photograph, it was very sensible of the dolphins to go for the cameras rather than the camera carriers. In DELPHINE one sees the animal and the technological in an engagement where the human is explicitly ancillary, at least as far as the dolphins are concerned, even though the camera always follows the diver and never the dolphin.

We see the whole thing in video (a certain kind of photographic image) substituting its own tactility (or lack of it) for that of the things it depicts. This leads to Thater's attitude to and use of beauty, the other side of the differential of which the sublime is one half. Her relationship to beauty is as uncomplicated as her reiteration of the sublime is complicated. It has to be. If this work didn't look good it would be impossible to look at because it would be another documentary about how dolphins are loveable but threatened, its presentation of their potential as a complement to human perception rendered illegible by its pathos. Thater has no intention of letting this happen, and she uses glamour (the secular form of the beautiful) to frame the dolphin projections so that we may instead see a creature that should be protected, but which is important for its potential as a model of ecstasy rather than as a symbol or symptom of doom.

Thater quotes Buck Henry, the screenwriter of the film *The Day of the Dolphin*, to invoke its superior sensitivity and capacity to communicate: "Imagine that every one of your senses has been heightened to a level that in a human might only be described as ecstatic... Imagine that you are able to carry on simultaneous conversations with two members of your species—one right next to you and the other several

DIANA THATER, *DELPHINE*, sketch for Vienna Secession, Jan–March, 2000 / Skizze für die Installation in der Wiener Secession.



DIANA THATER, *DELPHINE*, 1999, video stills.

miles away...”³⁾ *DELPHINE* leads us to the thought that for humans the one is unattainable and the other banal, and neither is involuntary. For us, the first would be a body perpetually (as opposed to intermittently) open to aesthetic stimuli, while the telephone enables us to do a crude version of the second. *DELPHINE* is about the superiority of both nature and technology to the human: nature needs neither self-consciousness nor technology, but the human is made by them, the first precluding permanent ecstasy and the second crudely supplementing the shortcomings of the body. The work aligned the animal with the technological through glamour so as to incidentally ward off pathos while allowing us to contemplate nature within a context of (technologically) heightened sensibility. The red and magenta video suns frame the blue of the projections, where shots were chosen by matching them for color, the orange through magenta gels help to dissolve the solidity of the walls. A depth is projected on the floor, the bottom of the sea beneath the tiles. In Thater’s work the question of beauty is one of indispensability, it is the only means through which she can approximate the condition described by Buck Henry. She wants the human subject standing in the gallery

to be ecstatic, to experience contemplation as excitement. The extremely confident critic who said that beauty stops thought “like a stone wall” was perhaps not thinking clearly about either the truth of his assertion (which is that beauty must therefore be superior to “thought”) or its reversibility (in fact “thought” has tended to define itself as that which can resist beauty).⁴⁾ Furthermore, in works of art, which are made out of thinking, beauty never stops thought because one is obliged to ask what it’s doing there, and questions are thoughts. The answer is that it is there so that we can start elsewhere than the usual thoughts. *DELPHINE* frames nature with glamour so that dolphins could be present, naturally (as it were) through film or video, not as objects in a sea of (however well intentioned) discourse, but as subjects who could relate to the camera.

1) James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 105–106.

2) Diana Thater, E-mail to the author, July 29, 2000.

3) *Diana Thater: Delphine*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Vienna Secession, 2000), p. 21.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 27. On this and related topics alluded to here, see also Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000).