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Diana Thater *A Runaway World* at the Mistake Room

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By Jody Zellen



Diana Thater's latest video installation, *A Runaway World* consists of two works filmed in Kenya in 2016 and 2017 and is an apt progression from her sensational exhibition *The Sympathetic Imagination* which was on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from November 22, 2015 – Feb 21, 2016. This intriguing piece continues her exploration of the relationship between animals, human beings and the natural world and focuses on the plight of two species on the verge of extinction— rhinos and elephants.

For Thater, presentation is everything. How the viewer navigates the space, how the space is lit, the color of the ambient light and the placement and relationship of the projections directs the interpretation and reception of the work. The installation of *A Runaway World* is minimal. It consists of two sets of intersecting translucent screens appearing like large suspended "X's" hugging the floor toward the front and back of the darkened gallery space. Images from four projections fill the screens, two displaying a work entitled *As Radical as Reality* and two presenting imagery from *A Runaway World*. The perpendicular placement of the screens forces the viewer to circle them in order to understand the distinctions between the projections and how they overlap and intersect. The split screen viewing is a bit disorienting because of the positioning of left/right and back/front projections.

In this as in previous installations, Thater's focus is on wild animals in a seemingly controlled or domesticated environment. As the videographers encircle the subject— Thater and her crew shoot from multiple vantage points with different cameras— their image often appears onscreen. They are complicit

participants and therefore part of the action. The way the audience circles the installation parallels the way the footage circles the animals.

In *As Radical as Reality*, Thater and her crew filmed the last surviving white rhinos roaming the safeguarded grounds of Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya. The work explores absurdity and inevitability as Thater exposes the reality of the situation — a male rhino that is not interested in mating with two available females, insuring that when he passes away the species will end— with the horrifying fact that the rhino needs constant protection by armed guards to keep away poachers. That Thater was given open access to follow and film the animals and their guards is unprecedented and her footage documenting their routines and environment creates an uncanny portrait of a protected species “in the wild.”

*As Radical as Reality*, presented in conjunction with *A Runaway World*, was shot in a different animal habitat: Chyulu Hills Park in Kenya. It features protected elephant herds juxtaposed with close ups of the natural landscape. Here, Thater also focuses her camera on the details, intercutting sequences of blue sky with billowing white clouds, branches blowing in the wind and rushing streams with scenes of elephants interacting. Thater again foregrounds the fact that these animals are no longer safe in their natural habitat and have to be quarantined to ensure their survival.

In Thater’s installation, the acts of filming, grazing and guarding are presented as equivalents. None of these activities is particularly enticing and although the animals, guards and filmmakers interact, they take the situation as a given. When asked about her use of animals as subject, Thater states, “My work is about the freedom of animals not to be anthropomorphized or seen as a reflection of man ... I make nonlinear neo-narrative pieces about places, animals and things that don’t live in narrative time.” *A Runaway World* is a thoughtful and meditative installation that is as much a call to action as it is a work of art.

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