

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

### Diana Thater: *The Sympathetic Imagination*

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART  
NOVEMBER 22, 2015–FEBRUARY 21, 2016

Diana Thater's exhibition *The Sympathetic Imagination* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is an installation of installations. In this first museum survey spanning twenty-five years of Thater's work, rather than recreate her chronological development, the exhibition flows both within the museum and across the world, moving from Monet's gardens at Giverny, France, to Chernobyl, Ukraine, to Jaipur, India, as viewers traverse the LACMA campus. Carefully orchestrated, the installation flows through the museum's architecture, moving in and out of specifically designed spaces illuminated by projections and colored lights. The placement of projectors, monitors, and cables—treated as necessary givens and formal props—is conspicuous. Video display, as projection or on monitors, is the platform through which Thater shares her world-view. She composes with light, color, angle, duration, and point of view, fragmenting live-action footage into evocative video collages. Her interests in architecture, perception, and framing are clearly articulated through the presentation of multiple works, each uniquely constructed to fit this new location. Central to Thater's pursuit is the relationship between subject and camera; as she has stated, "the art is the presence of the body within the installation."<sup>1</sup>

---

Installation view of *Life is a Time-Based Medium* (2015) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art by Diana Thater; © Diana Thater; photograph by Fredrik Nilsen



In the LACMA installation, one project seamlessly transitions into another through the careful framing of sight lines. This foreshadowing is constructed via video overflow and glowing colors that beckon viewers deeper and deeper within the spaces. Thater carefully directs the viewer's path through her exhibition. It begins in LACMA's Art of the Americas building with *Six-Color Video Wall* (2000), a work that appropriates National Aeronautics and Space Administration footage of the sun, presenting it on cube monitors in the six primary and secondary colors of video: red, green, blue and cyan, magenta, and yellow. In the next room, viewers encounter Thater's 2001 installation *knots + surfaces*, originally created for the Dia Art Foundation. In this iteration, a freestanding group of sixteen monitors displaying a tight shot of a flower combines with a large-scale video projection splayed diagonally across the floor, walls, and ceiling of the space, in which buzzing honeybees fly over colored hexagons. The work engages with the given architecture, creating a kind of ordered chaos. It also introduces viewers to Thater's ongoing exploration of the relationship between animals, human beings, and the natural world, usually articulated through a well-researched inquiry into a specific set of behaviors. In the center gallery sits *Untitled Videowall (Butterflies)* (2008). Fragmented close-ups of a Monarch butterfly slowly flapping its wings are displayed across six flat-screen monitors set in a star shape on the floor and juxtaposed with fluorescent tubes that illuminate the room with an orange glow that parallels the color of these beautiful and delicate creatures. While formally elegant, this work is about the monarch's migration and how millions were killed that particular year due to a winter frost. The monitors' arrangement leads viewers in multiple directions from this central point. While the six-channel *China* (1995) spills through the doorway out of its space and onto a section of wall, *Delphine's* (1999) blue hues immersed in the next magenta-toned room lead viewers onward. Thater's installation is about looking forward as well as back, and the perceptual phenomenon of oversaturating the field of view with intense color. In some respects, the videos are a respite from the pure colors bathing the rest of the space.

The Broad Contemporary Art Museum building houses

**Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination**, Edited by Lynn Cooke, Christine Y. Kim, and Lisa Gabrielle Mark/LACMA/DelMonico/Prestel, 2015 224 pp./\$65.00 (hb)

The sumptuous *Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination* was published as a catalog companion to the mid-career retrospective exhibition of Thater's work at LACMA. Covering over two decades of the artist's projects, this text is a must-have for anyone remotely interested in Thater's work or video installation in general. It more than holds its own as an experiential text regardless of whether one has seen the exhibition.

The catalog opens with a biography of Thater and moves on to an interview discussion between her and curator Lynn Cooke, setting the stage for the reader by exploring motivation and methodology. Quotes that have inspired the artist introduce the individual projects, and included are a story each by Franz Kafka and Angela Carter that have been important touchstones for Thater's work. Offering them to the reader here demonstrates the commitment of the publishers to realizing Thater's full vision. Four essays that probe and position her work into historical and theoretical contexts add depth and insight. The catalog's beautiful design by Lorraine Wild and Xiaoqing Wang emphasizes the importance of color to Thater's work, employing it with bold restraint throughout. Their generous use of video stills and installation shots with multiple views helps the audience visualize Thater's complex installations. The gorgeous onsite photography of Fredrik Nilsen elevates this tome beyond the ordinary. His wide-angle, full-color images illustrate the visceral nature of the work, often by including exhibition visitors surrounded by and experiencing the work in the galleries.

Although still in the works at the time of this writing, the book offers an online digital supplement.<sup>1</sup> For those unable to visit the exhibition during its stops at LACMA or the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, this catalog might be the next best thing.

**SUZANNE E. SZUCS** is an artist and educator living in Rochester, Minnesota. For more information, visit [www.suzanneszucs.com](http://www.suzanneszucs.com).

NOTE 1. The digital supplement to *The Sympathetic Imagination* can be found at <http://di-anathater.delmonicobooks.com>.

five more works, including the largest, *A Cast of Falcons* (2008). In these pieces, the relationships between people, animals, and nature are further explored. When asked about her use of animals as subjects, 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."<sup>2</sup> *Chernobyl* (2011) is a case in point. Thater filmed animals struggling to survive in the invisibly polluted exclusion zone around the nuclear power plant, then projected her footage in an abandoned theater there. Her installation recreates that experience, encircling the viewer.

*Life is a Time-Based Medium* (2015) depicts a Hindu pilgrimage site, the Galtaji temple outside Jaipur, where Rhesus monkeys, sacred in Hindu culture, run wild around the temple dedicated to the monkey god Hanuman. The temple, a facade with no interior, is given one in Thater's installation. Footage of the intricately carved cliff wall, with the occasional monkey running along its exterior, is bisected by a fluted doorway. This space becomes a projected theatre where Thater shows close-up footage of the monkeys, bringing viewers closer to these wild creatures. Thater states, "I examine the spaces inhabited by animals and those inhabited by humans, as well as how these intersect. The space within the image, the space of the temple, and the space of the museum itself merge."<sup>3</sup>

What makes Thater's installation *The Sympathetic Imagination* extraordinary is not just the power of the selected pieces, but the way the art collectively engages with architectural space. Rather than treat the rooms individually, Thater has choreographed a journey where nonlinear works flow visually and conceptually from one to another. Each doorway, view, and projected light source is carefully controlled to enhance the actual work as well as to maximize relationships between them. "My medium is installation," Thater states. "Installation is somewhere between sculpture and architecture, so I can deal with the sculptural qualities of space and negative space, and I can deal with the architectural qualities of the rooms in which I show. I do tinted lighting, I foreground certain aspects of the architecture, I project directly on windows, ceilings and corners."<sup>4</sup> Thater's approach to video installation goes beyond the single floor-to-ceiling projected image. She creates immersive environments with multiple vantage points, asking her viewers to imagine being subject and spectator simultaneously. In many works the viewer interrupts the flow, unavoidably casting shadows on the walls to become part of the work. Thater indulges in these interruptions that are often paralleled in the camera-work, creating complex relationships between multiple images of actual and represented bodies as they traverse multiple real and projected spaces. It is these relationships, as well as the deconstruction and reconstruction of the video process, which make her work unique.

**JODY ZELLEN** is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles.

NOTES 1. Lynne Cooke, "Interview with Diana Thater, September 14, 2014," in *Diana Thater, The Sympathetic Imagination*, ed. Lynne Cooke, Christine Y. Kim, and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Prestel: New York and London, 2015), 24. 2. Thea Ballard, "Portfolio: Diana Thater," *Modern Painters* (January 2015): 17–19. 3. Diana Thater, *The Sympathetic Imagination*, exh. brochure (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015), 12. 4. Ballard, *ibid.*