



**Diana Thater**  
The Sympathetic Imagination

**November 22, 2015–February 21, 2016**

**LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART**



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Begin your experience on the Plaza Level of the Art of the Americas Building. Two works are located in the Leo S. Bing Theater. The second part of the exhibition is on Level 3 of LACMA's Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM).

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The exhibition catalogue, which includes stunning images of the works on view and a special digital supplement, is co-published by LACMA and DelMonico Books/Prestel. Purchase it at the museum store today or order it online at [shop.lacma.org](http://shop.lacma.org).

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# Diana Thater

## The Sympathetic Imagination

There is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.

J. M. COETZEE

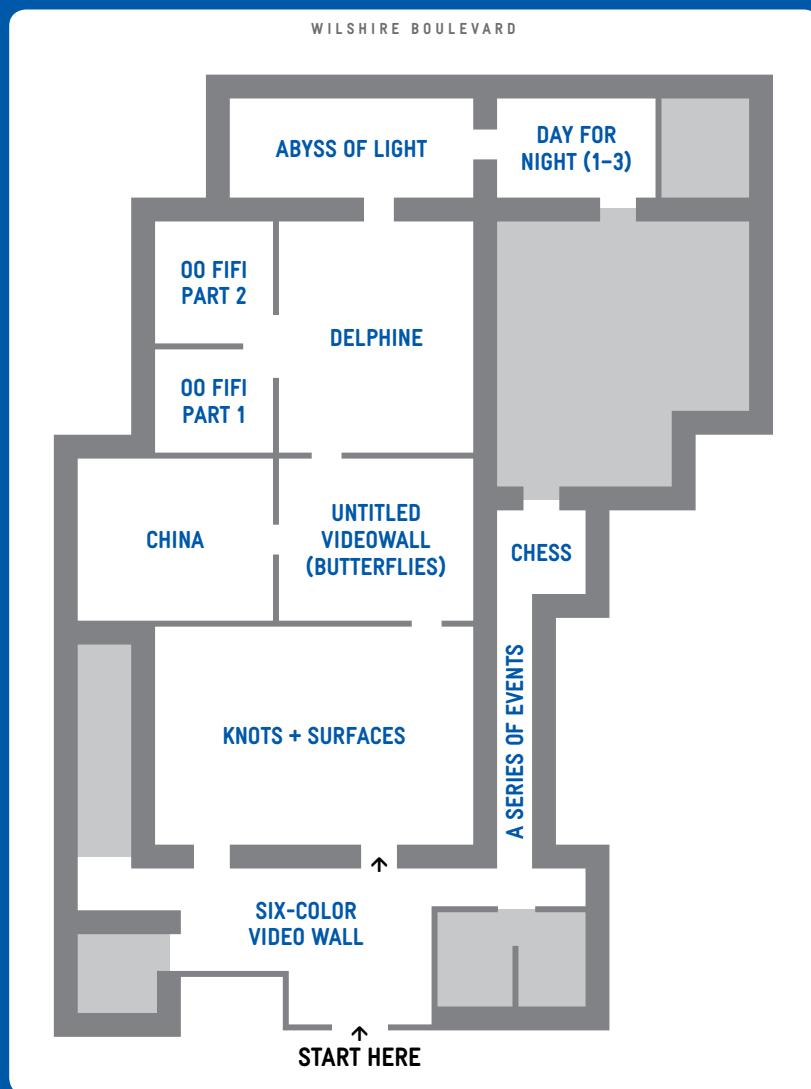
Among the most important artists to emerge during the 1990s, Los Angeles-based Diana Thater creates groundbreaking and influential works of art in film, video, and installation that challenge the normative ways in which moving images are experienced. Her dynamic, immersive installations address key issues that span the realms of film, museum exhibitions, the natural sciences, and contemporary culture through the deployment of movement, scale, and architecture.

At the heart of Thater's work is the tension between the natural environment and mediated reality and, by extension, between the domesticated and wild, the scientific and the fantastical or magical. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, including literature, animal behavior, mathematics, chess, and sociology, her evocative layered imagery engages its architectural surroundings to create complex relationships between time and space. A hallmark of Thater's groundbreaking installations, this nuanced wedding of projected imagery to architectural site literally immerses viewers in her works. Experiencing these installations kinetically, viscerally, and psychically rather than by merely observing passively from a distance, visitors enter into an active dialogue with work that is consistently challenging, disciplined, and intellectually rigorous.

*Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination* was co-curated by Lynne Cooke, Senior Curator for Special Projects in Modern Art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and Christine Y. Kim, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at LACMA.

# ART OF THE AMERICAS: PART 1

## PLAZA LEVEL



← BING THEATER | TICKET OFFICE

BCAM →

## Works in the Exhibition/Artist Commentaries



### Six-Color Video Wall, 2000

Six video monitors and six players; horizontal stack; dimensions variable

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Committee and the Film and Video Committee, 2000.193

I acquired the SOHO spacecraft footage from NASA after discovering that their images of the sun are separated into the component colors of light—red, green, and blue—for study by scientists. I took these images and made the complementary colors—cyan, magenta, and yellow. These six colors are the primary and secondary colors of the video band, which I often deconstruct into its elements: color and light.



### knots + surfaces, 2001

Five video projectors, sixteen-monitor video wall, and six players; dimensions variable

Private collection, courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Featuring honeybees and a hive made of multicolored hexagons, *knots + surfaces* addresses a recent mathematical hypothesis that correlates a six-dimensional spatial model to the map of a honeybee's dance. I often work with animals that exist as individuals and as part of a complex social network functioning as a unit. Initially, the many images seem to form a single picture. However, when viewers walk into the projections, they penetrate the "bee space"; the one picture breaks into five and the surrounding bees become a vision of chaos.



## Untitled Videowall (Butterflies), 2008

Six video monitors, one player, six 48-inch fluorescent light fixtures, and Lee filters; dimensions variable  
 Santa Barbara Museum of Art, museum purchase, the Suzette Morton Davidson Art Acquisition Endowment Fund

Each year, the forests of Michoacan, Mexico, become the overwinter home for tens of millions of monarch butterflies, who make the journey from Canada in November. The year I filmed there, a winter frost killed off millions of the delicate creatures. This “broken video wall” focuses on one butterfly slowly flapping its wings.



## China, 1995

Six video projectors and six players; edition 2/2; dimensions variable  
 Private collection, courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

*China* was made in an outdoor arena on a hillside with a circle of six cameras surrounding two performing wolves: Shilo, a grizzled older male, and China, a young female. The work documents their actions as their trainers attempt to make them stand still in the center of the circle. The six images become one moving picture that wraps around the room, forming a continuous landscape that is divided into the primary and secondary colors of video: red, green, blue, and cyan, magenta, yellow. Wolves, like humans, live in complex social groups. One wolf is always an individual and in a group simultaneously. The viewer is always inside *China*, surrounded by wolves, cameras, and projectors.



## Delphine, 1999

Four video projectors, nine-monitor video wall, five players, and four LED wash lights; artist's proof; dimensions variable  
 Art Institute of Chicago, Donna and Howard Stone New Media Fund, 2005.93

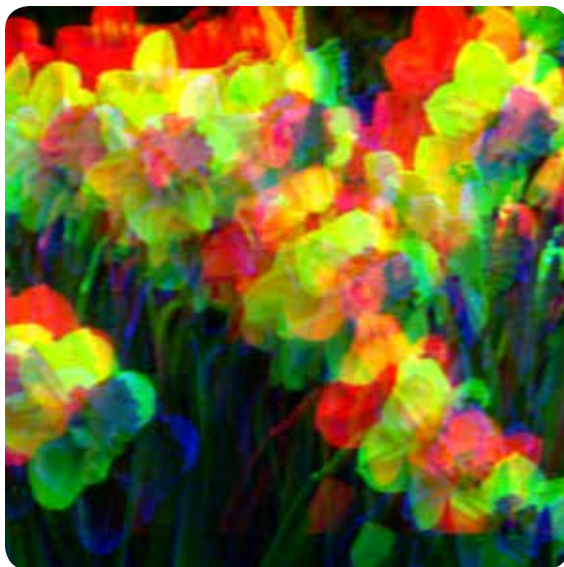
Shot in the Caribbean, *Delphine* documents a camera crew filming a pod of free dolphins, the humans and animals interacting to create the footage. Dolphins live vertically, horizontally, and in depth. They live in a world without boundaries or borders—in continuous space. Thus, in *Delphine*, there are three kinds of bodies in space: dolphins moving through volumetric space; the sun spinning in a vacuum of black space; and then the viewer, moving through “real” space made volumetric by the artificial magenta light filling the gallery and framing the projections.



## Abyss of Light, 1993

Three video projectors, three players, and Lee filters; dimensions variable  
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Robert and Kelly Day, Contemporary Art Acquisitions Fund, the Ralph M. Parsons Fund, and Director's Acquisitions Funds, M.2008.54.1-4

*Abyss of Light* is divided into three screens and into three acts, the traditional structure of classic narrative film. In the first act, all the images synchronize to form a single panorama of Bryce Canyon in Utah. In the second, the screens break away from one another into three parallel sequences wherein each projection shows the same one hundred images at different speeds. In the third, all three images synchronize once again to form a single wrapping panorama of Death Valley, California. In *Abyss of Light*, continuous disruptions of the American landscape document my refusal to see the land as backdrop for man's heroic conquering of the wild; instead I see it as a foreground, a subject to be contemplated for itself and for which wildness is a state of grace.

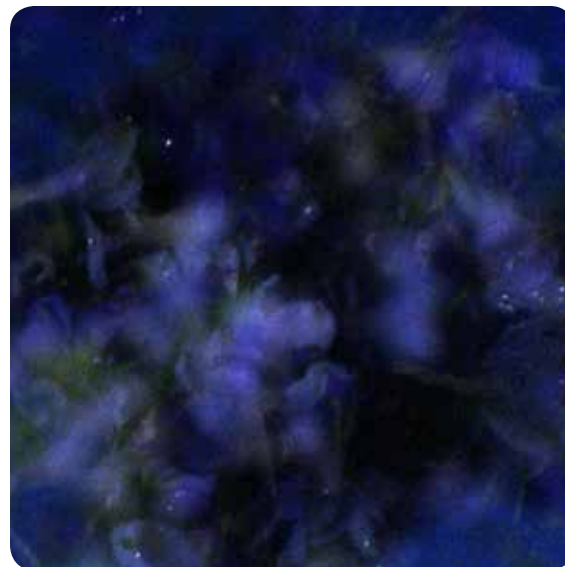


## Oo Fifi, Five Days in Claude Monet's Garden, Part 1 and Part 2, 1992

**Part 1: Video projector and player; dimensions variable**  
 Courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles

**Part 2: Three video projectors and three players; dimensions variable**  
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of David and Monica Zwirner, M.2008.68.1-4

In 1991 I was one of three artists-in-residence at the Fondation Claude Monet. Living and working on the grounds of Monet's home for six months, I set about documenting his famous garden from April through August, as it went from manicured and orderly in the early spring to overgrown and jungle-like at the end of the summer. Taking a cue from Monet's innovative use of color as separated rather than mixed, I separated the video into its component colors, red, green, and blue. In *Part 1* of the piece we see the image of the garden separated into these colors and projected by one projector. In *Part 2* the same video appears with each color projected by a different projector and the image reassembled.



## Day for Night One, Two, and Three, all 2013

**Each: Nine-monitor video wall; dimensions variable**  
**One:** Private collection, courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London; **Two:** Private collection, London/Collection of Patrick J. Healy and Isabelle A. Georgeaux; **Three:** Private collection, courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

Flowers are a recurring theme in my work. Here, shooting in double-exposed 16mm film using a technique called "Day for Night," I filmed during the day with dark blue filters so that it resembles evening. In addition to filming living animal and human subjects on location, I work in the studio with easily obtained signs for the natural—such as bouquets of flowers—a part of my practice I see similar to painting a still life in the absence of a model.



## Chess series, all 2008

**Here is a text about the world...**  
**Written by Mick Bighamian, Senior Master, September 2007**  
**(Played by Nathaniel Lagemann and Mick Bighamian), 2008**

**Video monitor and player; dimensions variable**  
 Collection of the artist

**The Immortal Game**  
**Adolf Anderssen vs. Lionel Kieseritzky,**  
**June 21, 1851, London**  
**(Played by Nathaniel Lagemann and Jennifer Acon), 2008**

**Video monitor and player; dimensions variable**  
 Hort Family Collection

**Object Lesson (Sicilian Dragon)**  
**Written by Mick Bighamian, Senior Master, September 2007**  
**(Played by Jennifer Acon and Mick Bighamian), 2008**

**Video monitor and player; artist's proof; dimensions variable**  
 Collection of the artist

I spent a year working with a chess senior master recreating some of the most famous games of chess in history. This body of work was made at the same time as the falconry pieces in BCAM, and together they represent a contemplation of heraldry and war. While *The Immortal Game* is a reenactment of a game often referred to as the greatest game of chess ever played, *Object Lesson* and *Here is a text about the world...* are both scripted games played once in black and white, and once with all black pieces. The all-black game makes the two sides—the traditionally binary—unclear and indistinguishable. These three pieces, from a larger body of work made throughout 2008, also reference Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which Alice must cross the chessboard as a pawn and reach the opposite side to be queened and win the game.

*events, a series of*

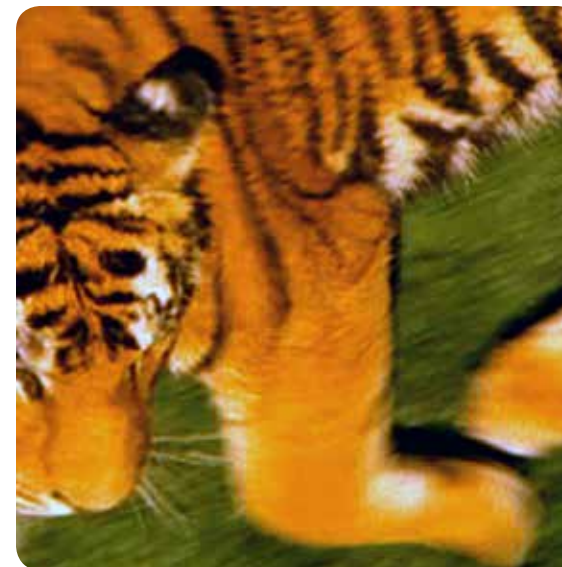
## A Series of Events, 2003/2015

Vinyl text on yellow wall with two  
LED wash lights; dimensions variable  
Collection of the artist

Making text work satisfies my desire to have images that function like poetry. I began writing indices when I began making art, which is also the time when I started reading philosophy and theory. I found those forms difficult to understand so would just read a book randomly using the index as a table of contents. The index has its own logic and forms a kind of bold-faced overlay on top of a complex text.

# ON VIEW IN THE BING THEATER

(ONGOING)  
PLAZA LEVEL



## Perfect Devotion Six, 2006

Six monitors and one player; dimensions variable  
Courtesy the Hadley Martin Fisher Collection

In Acton, California, three tigers—Mona, Simba, and the star of the work, a blind tiger named Zoe—live at a rescue for big cats. I filmed the cats in 35mm film over the course of one day, documenting their reactions to a series of interventions in the large pen in which they live. The animals' actions are seen from a stationary camera suspended overhead from a crane. The shadow of the fenced enclosure around the tigers further testifies to the intervention of architecture in the world of animals, a world in nature that is without walls and where boundaries are invisible.



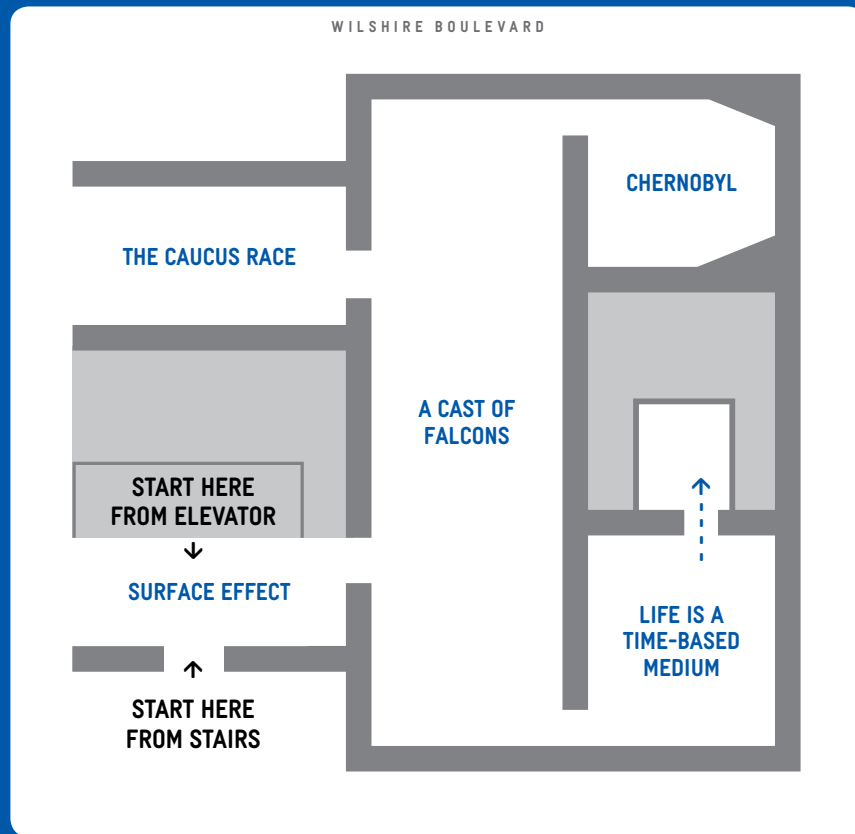
## The best space is the deep space, 1998

Ten-monitor edition; artist's proof  
Each: video monitor and player; dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London

This work is part of a larger body of work titled *The best animals are the flat animals – the best space is the deep space*, which examines conceptions of “the wild” and “the tame.” *The best space* was staged with a performing Andalusian horse and his trainer in a darkened arena, one performing for the crew and one trying to hide in the shadows. Only about ten seconds long, the image tracks an isolated gesture: the horse takes a bow, an incredibly difficult movement for the animal—glaring in its unnaturalness yet beautiful in its falsity.

# BCAM: PART 2

## LEVEL 3



← ART OF THE AMERICAS | BING THEATER | TICKET OFFICE



### Surface Effect, 1997

**Two monitors and two players; dimensions variable**  
Partial and promised gift of Pamela and C. Richard Kramlich to the New Art Trust to benefit the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Tate, United Kingdom

Shot in the Southwest, this video footage was separated into its three component colors and then put back together with each of the colored tapes running at different speeds. Therefore everything that was stationary remains in full color, while everything that moves is in red, blue, green, and the colors that those three hues create when mixed.

This presentation on digital LCD flat-screens has been created by the artist specifically for this exhibition.



### A Cast of Falcons, 2008

**Four video projectors, display computer, and two spotlights; edition 1/2; dimensions variable**  
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London

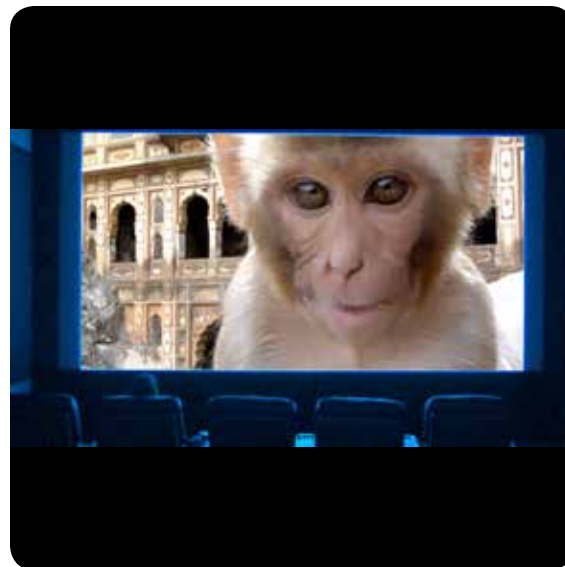
Along with the chess project, I made a body of work with California falconers and their trained birds, some of whom were once severely endangered and have only recently come back from the brink of extinction. Framed by the moon and the sun, this work makes reference to the Egyptian falcon god Horus whose eyes were said to represent these two celestial bodies. Here we see beings who cannot look back at us—that is, until the final subject of the film appears: an owl, the only bird who looks straight into the camera lens, evoking the unanswered question: “What do I see when I look at the other and what does it see when it looks back at me?”



## Chernobyl, 2011

Six video projectors and six players; edition 2/3;  
dimensions variable  
Pinault Collection

I traveled to Chernobyl, the site of the worst nuclear meltdown in history (now possibly surpassed by Fukushima) to film the abandoned city of Pripyat and the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. There I filmed animals and nature struggling to survive in the abandoned and poisoned Soviet site. With that footage, I mounted a six-part projection inside the rubble-strewn movie theater in Pripyat and filmed it so that the room in which the piece is projected here is a kind of “mobile Chernobyl.” The work encircles viewers as they stand watching swirling images of the world just outside the crumbling walls of the movie theater projected on the gallery walls. In this way, they are both *inside* a theater and *outside* in the landscape at the same time.



## Life is a Time-Based Medium, 2015

Three video projectors, display computer, and one player;  
edition 1/3; dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

I filmed a troop of rhesus macaques who live in the cliffs above a temple to the Hindu monkey god Hanuman, just outside of Jaipur, India. Rhesus monkeys, known in the West as the subjects of torturous scientific experiments, are sacred in Hindu culture and allowed to run wild in the temple, whose facade is built up against a stone cliff side—an exterior without an interior. In this installation, I give it an interior, accessible though a door into the temple of the monkey god. 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.



## The Caucus Race, 1998/2015

Video monitor and player; excerpt; dimensions variable  
Collection of the artist

Extracted from a large installation, this single-monitor work takes the chapter titled “The Caucus Race” from *Alice in Wonderland* as its subject. A speech by the Dodo to a group of animals is quoted in full. All the animals run a race, all win, and all receive prizes, which are awarded by Alice herself. I often quote the books that most inspire me as an artist.

THIS EXHIBITION WAS ORGANIZED BY THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART.

Presented by:

Additional support provided by:



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COVER: Diana Thater, *knots + surfaces*, 2001, installation view at Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 2001; © Diana Thater, photo © Fredrik Nilsen

PAGE 1: Diana Thater, *Oo Fifi, Five Days in Claude Monet's Garden, Part 1*, 1992, installation view at 1301PE, Los Angeles, 2012; © Diana Thater, photo © Fredrik Nilsen, courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles

BACK COVER: Diana Thater, *Delphine*, 1999, installation view at Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany, 2004; © Diana Thater, photo © Roman Mensing/artdoc.de

All other images are video stills © Diana Thater



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50

