Yes, there will be singing

Jason E. Smith interviews Diana Thater

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JS: Let's begin by discussing how you arrived at the idea for this show. You've mentioned that you first conceived of it — or at least had the desire to make a piece about "Whale 52" — some years ago. Where did you first encounter the story of Whale 52? And why did it take a few years for it to come to life? Was your initial conception of the show what you ended up making, or did the onset of the pandemic provide a set of conditions that made the piece work?

DT: I always keep ideas floating around in the background and make diagrams in my notebook of things I want to make. I've had this particular piece in mind since I read an article about Whale 52 in 2018. I'd thought about it on and off for the past two years and couldn't conceive of a way to make a work that simply <u>had</u> to be made of sound. It would not include images at all because Whale 52 has never been seen or filmed, he's only been recorded. Film of any other whale would not do since this is a work about a unique individual. So, it had to be all sound and no image. That proved difficult since I rarely edit sound and when I have, I have an image to work with, but to construct a work temporally and spatially using only sound was a new challenge.

The pandemic made it impossible to finish another project I had been working on for two years. I really wanted to work - so I started searching around for an idea that could work online since that seemed to be the best way to reach people. Whale 52 came to mind and I thought about how to install the piece while simultaneously teaching myself to edit sound. My initial conception of the show is so jumbled up with what it became that I'm not sure I can tell the difference between the idea for the show and its realization, which all took place between July 1st and October 1st. It's the fastest show I've ever done, and I don't have quite enough distance yet. I mean, I made what I intended to make; the question is does it do what I want it to do? Whale 52 has never been seen - so the question was, how could I devise an installation with an absent subject? I wanted to conjure the ghost of a being in a ghost of an artwork.

Stepping back from this show for a second, how are your exhibitions initially conceived? Am I right in emphasizing that you primarily think of your work in terms of exhibitions, rather than discrete works? Is it something you've read? A conversation in passing that triggers something? Are there specific formal or technical challenges you want to address? Or to the contrary, does everything take shape once you know when you have a specific exhibition space where you'll show your work? I am guessing it's not this linear…. Perhaps you can compare how this work came together with, say, a work like *Delphine*?

I do work mostly toward exhibitions of a piece. I often make large installations like *Delphine*, for a particular venue, in that case, it was the Vienna Secession. Then I decide on the final layout of the work when I install it – so for me making work and installing/showing work are usually the same thing. With *Delphine*, I was able to bring together an idea I'd been working on for a while with an upcoming exhibition venue, the architecture of which would suggest to me a way of installing the work – a way of giving it shape, form and scale. The shape of the work then remains with it – so there is always the trace of the first venue in each subsequent exhibition of the work.

The question of what triggers something is weird. For example, in the case of a project I did in 2010 (*Between Science & Magic* at the SMMOA, 2010), I was reading a text about the trajectory from magical to scientific thinking. And that, for me, is where art lies – at the intersection of the technology that produced it and the affect that it produces. I was thinking about how to express precisely this and I figured I'd just be obvious and make a work with a magician. And I also thought of something someone who doubted me once said; "Let's see if you can pull a rabbit out of your hat."

In 2010 I made a film of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat over and over with cameras moving around him in a circle like the arms on a clock. The idea is that you always think you're going to see the secret of the trick, but you never do. It's the simplest trick in the book, but the magician had to think about it without a proscenium and from 360 degrees - making it much more difficult. I had no venue when I originally made this work (which brings us back to your question about works that are not made for a specific venue) and so I designed it as a flat double screen projection that could be shown anywhere. The complication comes in the form of the 16mm film equipment in the room (it's a double 16mm film installation with a soundtrack) and the sound of the piece (this actually was my first solo foray into sound.) Like the good student of Structuralist film that I am, I made a recording of the sound of film going through a projector and put that on the soundtrack of the piece. So, you watch the film and listen to the amped up sound of the film going through the projectors. There is the sound of the actual projector running in the exhibition and then the echo of that on the soundtrack of the film itself -- which is being projected from speakers in the room.

There, what I wanted to do was reverse the traditional use of sound in a film. Instead of sound providing emotional cues that transport the viewer, I tried to make sound that brought the viewer into unavoidable contact with the machines themselves and thus to talk about never leaving the here and now of this installation; of being in the world of the artwork and conscious of the artwork at the same time. You know it's a trick but that doesn't stop you from believing in it.

So, as to what triggered this piece, I was ready to make and install a new work – so I looked at the conditions and the limits of our world right now and a sort of installation for no special person and no special space came to mind. I was thinking pandemically of course, of making a show whose meaning would be made via a 24/7 live feed to a website - art being made as you watch it alone. The work would only ever exist online so that anyone with a computer and access could see the *actual* show.

To do this I had to invert something like *Delphine* entirely. Instead of filming the work, editing it and installing it for viewers to experience live, I had to design a work with a "live" element, so it had a *reason* to be streamed 24/7. It had to have constant change built into it or else why would someone return to it? The four cameras that you are seeing in the piece online are filming the room in 360 degrees and these four shots are being edited together *nearly* live and are available to you online as a linear video in something close to what people might call "real time." What I am trying to say is that in *Yes there will be singing* the shoot, the edit and install are not separate steps in the making of the work, as they are in *Delphine*. In this work – the installation and the shoot are put together so what you are seeing is a final artwork being made, edited and viewed in *practically* real time.

The show seems to bring together three primary elements, all "moving" in some way: the sound piece, the constantly mutating light and color, and the live feed that switches from camera to camera. What are the principles or rules in place determining these changes? And how did you arrive at these basic frameworks that govern change in the piece?

In my earlier work (say, before *Delphine*, 1999) I'd use particular time signatures that were significant and that reflected the video or film apparatus (24 frames, 29.97 frames, one roll of 35mm film, etc.) or what the work was doing (30 seconds, one minute, 1 day and so on). I might make everything the same length and synchronize multiple projections and have them all cut every second. This gives a rhythm to the work; it takes on a temporal shape that is then extruded into space when installed. *China* is actually laid out like a clock both in its structure and in its installation. It keeps time like a clock as well. When I made *Delphine*, I edited the shots together not for time, or for reference to the process, but for movement – that is, I wanted it to have dance-time instead of apparatus-time. *Delphine* after all was about *freedom* in space and I wanted that to be expressed by the editing of the work and how that functions spatially.

Yes, there will be singing really has no given shape and form, it just takes the shape of the room, which could be any empty space, studio, warehouse, living room anywhere in the world. The cameras are switching every three seconds with a six-frame dissolve between them, ten lights are going through the color spectrum over the course of one minute. Four additional lights, those that illuminate the columns, are on independent one-minute cycles. This was all timed live while we were installing. I sat and looked at a computer screen with a simulated live feed playing so we could see what it would look like online. I kept timing and retiming the cameras and lights until I got the sequence of smooth edits and color dissolves that I wanted; one which felt unhurried and moved slowly enough for you to look for details and would keep your attention a little longer as you try to figure out the piece. Jumping quickly from one shot to another would annoy the viewer, and lingering too long on something would bore them, I wanted the timing to feel *right* and somehow "natural" to the work.

You've described this piece elsewhere as linking together a "chain of spaces." Can you explain what you mean by this? If I understand it, this description applies to a lot of your work. How do the complex spatial coordinates of this piece — its play or mapping of different sites — differ from other works you've made?

A chain of times, as I described above, is paralleled by the trajectory of spaces that produce, like the sound, a linked sequence going back in time. The whale has never been filmed and the last audio recordings of him were made in the mid-90s. He's somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. You, in your room, connect to the work in its space and that space reaches through sound to the whale thousands of miles away and 30 years in the past. The humpback whale songs I'm using are scientific recordings made in the 60s. So, in a sense, the timeframe of this work extends from the late 60s to the very moment you are watching it.

In terms of the mapping of different sites, this is something I always do – it's in every piece I've ever made. It's a hard question to answer though because it goes so deeply into my work. So here goes. I try to map the space of the shoot onto that of the exhibition space, so you see and experience two spaces at once as well as two times at once: the there-and-then *with* the here-and-now. For *Yes, there will be singing*, I'm mapping sites on top of one another and am also mapping times; natural and animal time, technological time, and the real time in which you experience the work all happen simultaneously, but at a vast unknowable distance from one another. The difference between how time and space are treated in this piece, relative to my earlier work, is that here the "film shoot" and the installation are simultaneous with the reception.

The element of experience in all my work, comes from a consideration of the time that you're in when you encounter it; in what Robert Morris called "the present tense of space." Time and space are really the sites I am mapping. Too many layers and they tend to reiterate themselves and the work becomes a cacophony. Each layer, each site, has to contribute something necessary to the piece. At the same time, I don't want to put so many layers/sites onto the structure or it will sag under the weight of its "meaning." It has to be complex but not complicated. I tend to think an artwork should lead with simplicity. If it's heavy, then at first glance, it must appear to be light.

How would you describe the specific "medium" of this work? You're often thought of as someone who works primarily in video, or video installation. But from the very beginning of your career, you've noted that video installation moves through and among different media and their specific properties or allures: film, sculpture, television. Yet here it seems that you've foregrounded the medium of sound, or even something like "song." Then there's the fact that the "live" elements of the piece make this piece something like a performance, an act that begins and ends at specific points in time…

I kind of don't know how to categorize or qualify it. The thing I most want it to be like is a live webcam of an owl's nest that runs 24/7 and you can log in at any time and look at the eggs or at the hatchlings bumbling around. It's maybe closest to surveillance of something

slowly forming over a long period of time. The work has no real beginning or end; the duration of the show is random. I imagine it kind of just goes on forever out there and sometimes it stops and then starts again somewhere else - the next time it is installed. I like to think about the "out of frame" and here what is out of frame is the nearly infinite field that is time itself. The show is a moment of that time highlighted.

Earlier, you mentioned that with this particular exhibition you had a chance to "teach myself to edit sound." Explain, if you will, what you "do" with the strange, even haunting, sound recordings viewers hear in the show? How did you get them? What did you do to or with them? Are they modified, edited, "refined" in some technological way? Is it given any particular shape, in the show, a shape that might allow an artist to read it in musical ("song") or even narrative terms?

The audio is 30 minutes long and starts every 1/2 hour. It begins just with Whale 52 for a minute then the humpbacks slowly come in. It winds up and then winds down and ends with Whale 52 singing alone again for one minute. Then there's a blip and then the audio starts again.

I was seeing this as my first experimental sound composition, but it turns out that what I really made is a song – not a song in whale terms but a song in human terms. Singing is how whales speak to one another, and, as with any language, certain vocalizations have fixed meanings. I edited the whale songs so what was sensible and decipherable to a whale becomes lyrical and let's say musical to a human. It is no longer the kind of communication it was meant to be. It's been edited and used to say something different to a different species. Their songs are now familiar because they follow patterns recognizable to humans. The pattern is, as you say, one that humans generally recognize as haunting, a tone that I thought fit the work. Whale 52 cannot understand the songs of other whales and they cannot understand him. This knowledge of his incomprehension as well as our own must be present in our reception of the "music" as well. The point however is that something is being said – something that I wanted to highlight as both glorious and sad.

The sound is an edited 30-minute composition. The bass hum that goes up and down continuously is Whale 52. Over top of that I laid tracks of the higher-pitched humpback whales calling and responding to one another. In the edit studio and in the room this soundtrack is continuous. When you watch the live feed on your computer, though, what you are hearing is that continuous audio track broken down and re-edited through the streaming process. There is a delay from the cameras to the computer and from there to the platform, then to the website and from there to your computer. These multiple delays are variable (anywhere from 10-20 seconds) and could not be calculated in advance and built into the audio composition. There are four cameras/microphones and thus four different views with varying delays which produces an audio composition almost at random. What in the studio was continuous becomes jagged, as the audio lags, and echoes itself, effectively jump-cutting back and forth in time. The point of all this is that what you're

watching happened a few moments ago. What you effectively see and hear is the *past* as you sit in the present.

Two of your best-known video installations are *China*, shown at the Renaissance Society in 1995, and *Delphine*, first installed at the Vienna Secession in 2000. There seem to be clear relationships between your new piece and those pieces, both in terms of their formal configuration (cf. *China*) or in their focus on the specific behaviors of cetaceans (*Delphine*). But there are obvious differences as well. How does this work fit into the larger pattern of your work? How important is it, for you, that viewers see this work or others you make as belonging to the arc of your entire body of work? Do you think of each project you develop as exploring the limits or possibilities implied by earlier works, like those I've mentioned?

Every new work I make is an expansion on thoughts raised by a previous work, but it's also the contraction of those thoughts into a new idea that must be made. There are subjects to which I return sometimes 10 or even 20 years later. To understand that trajectory – say from *China* to *Delphine*, and then from *Delphine* to *Yes, there will be singing*, it's best to look at the shifting boundaries of the work; what is allowed in and what is not? What is featured in one work, like the crew in *China* – almost disappears in *Delphine*. What appears in *Delphine* is my first use of theatrical lighting instead of natural light (here we get back to the question of how a venue can force change into the work, the Secession has no natural light, so I decided that theatrical lighting was acceptable and folded it into the work) that becomes, in this new work, a space that is awash in changing colors that are not present to dissolve a video image into its architecture (as in *Delphine*), but to dematerialize an empty room with color.

The technology upon which each work depends is always present. Different pieces place it either in a supporting, or a featuring role. In *China*, the viewer sees that the technology (cameras, camera operators) used to make the images appears in the images themselves. The projection equipment in the installation is installed in a matter-of-fact way and mirrors the exposed circle of cameras around the wolves in the video. *Delphine* gets away from that model completely and is a much looser work. It's about choreography and not so dependent on the lessons of Structuralist cinema; in *Delphine* the tech plays a supporting role.

This new work incorporates both mechanical time (*China*) and fluid time (*Delphine*). The cameras switch every three seconds, the room changes colors over a period of one minute so you have this built-in timing. But then you have the time of the audio, which is mechanical in another way; it is being edited live and, through a series of delays, deconstructs the original composition and builds an entirely new one each time and for each viewer. This work depends on the tech you see in the work (the cameras dominate the images and are focused on the speakers) and the tech you need to actually *receive* the work, your own computer and speakers.

One of the things I find most compelling about your work are the tensions that animate it. For example, I have often seen your work as structured by the desire to render a given life form as objectively as possible, in a kind of ethological documentation, while also mobilizing the particular "subject" you are working with as a kind of figure (as is done in fables and fairy tales). Or, to look at things a bit differently, you work tends to work against any anthropomorphic assimilation of these other life forms, yet these subjects or collaborators often seem to allegorize something about the work you've made about them: they can stand in for or comment on the work, the technological means for its production, or at other times the viewer (a life form often incorporated in your video projections, in negative or silhouette form).

The animals and landscapes that I film become models for how the work is built, and for how I think about the work. These "models" are made up of everything I have ever read, or seen, or thought about them – they are built out of my research.

I try to make the installation reinforce the kind of time and/or kind of space that the subject inhabits in reality and yes, allegorically. I choose the subject not as a model for what the work *is* – but as a model of what the work *does*. Thus, in my recent pieces, *As Radical as Reality* (rhino piece) and *A Runaway World* (elephant piece), I had the idea in mind of folding time in on itself – the beginning and the end intersecting. The elephant and particularly the rhino are like prehistoric beasts – so I placed both the bull elephant herd and the rhino (Sudan, the last male northern white rhino in the world), at the intersection of a simultaneous sunset and sunrise, standing forever at the beginning and at the end of time.

These decisions about how to represent a being have to do with what that being means to us historically, mythologically, etc., I mean what part does the idea of that species play in the human cosmology? How do animals fit into our world view right now?

From what I gather, based on a bit of research, the recordings of Whale 52 that you use in the piece were captured by instruments first developed for the US Navy to detect the presence of stealthy Soviet submarines off the coast of Alaska in the 1980s. While this might be a merely anecdotal or contingent fact in the background of this show, I'm not so sure: your work often deals with, at least as its general condition, geopolitical situations or histories (*Chernobyl*, obviously, but even a work like *gorillagorillagorilla* can be read through this lens). How important is this anecdote (the detection of a mysterious, never-seen whale with technological means first developed for martial purposes?) in thinking about what this show means? And why do you think your work gravitates as much toward geopolitical questions — which might include recent phenomena like climate change and a global health crisis — as it does toward the study of and collaboration with often imperiled animals?

The totality of our relationship to the natural world is fraught with conflict. We observe it with equipment developed for the military or industry, the people who protect it now are the descendants of those who contributed greatly to its destruction (the activists I worked with in Kenya were both sons of "great white hunters"; their fathers literally decimated the very elephant herds and rhino populations that they are now trying to save.) The world's leading cetacean rights activist, Ric O'Barry, with whom I worked on *Delphine,* was the trainer of Flipper, the performing dolphin/TV show that led directly to the creation of places like Sea World. Now he tries to save dolphins from captivity. There is no space that is safe from contradiction.

Larger histories, geopolitical histories are foregrounded in much of my work because all life forms are politicized and representing that is part of this long project. Sudan, the last male northern white rhino I mentioned above, was kept under armed-guard 24 hours a day until his death - so I filmed him with his guards. I filmed most of *Chernobyl* from the roof of a repurposed military vehicle (driven by the chief forest ranger who was former military) while being followed on occasion by the FSB.

Art has to intersect with the world in a meaningful way and these complicated histories and politically fraught situations are always present; they are built into the work; these are the frames through which we see nature.

Your title is a striking one that immediately places the work in the broad "darkness" of our own time. What do you make of the future tense in Brecht's formulation? I am tempted to see the viewer him or herself as located in the present, but the space and time of the show — however "live" it may be — as somehow located in a future, one represented by the strange frequency emitted by this animal whose species scientists are unable to decipher…. And what exactly will the singing — that will happen not now, but in the future — do to the dark times, when it sings of them? Surely song can't dispel the darkness on its own. What kind of light will it shine on it?

The work is composed of some trajectories in time. The audio is from the 60s to the 90s to the present. The "live" stream keeps jumping back and forth within a 20-second time frame. And the title, *Yes, there will be singing,* points to the future. I want different times present in the work; the long duration, the on-going pandemic present, and the yet-to-come. The "Yes" is a yes to fate, or perhaps a yes to faith? The title challenges me and the work to produce something different from either, but I just can't articulate what that is.