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Art Remembers the Animal

REGINA HASLINGER

Not only do all of the animals win the race in *Alice in Wonderland*, they all receive a prize as well. This happy conclusion is due in part to the circular course of the Caucus-race, as the wise Dodo calls it, though without specifying any rules for it. The players only have to form a circle of sorts and with no "one, two, three, and away," they are left to run in any direction they like. In the end, the Dodo thinks long and hard "with one finger pressed upon its forehead," but the conclusion is obvious: everyone has won, there are no losers. Alice, the heroine of this tale, is in the dark as usual but diligently plays the part assigned to her, when the animals all begin calling for "Prizes! Prizes!"

Stories of the kind that only appear in fairy tales or in children's daydreams, which are not yet governed by the primacy of reason, count among Diana Thater's preferred subject matter in her video installations. Common to all of them is a motif that plays a decisive role for the artist but has not yet received the attention it deserves in reviews of her work: the symbiotic cohabitation of animals with people. In contrast to most of the literary sources to which

Diana Thater refers, her representations of animal worlds do not target affective reactions but rather the demystification of our observations. This is expressed for example by the fact that the metamorphosis of humans into animals in works of history or literature quite literally involves the transformation of a human organ or body into an animal body (as in the novel by Pat Murphy, *A Love for Rachel*, which inspired Thater's *ELECTRIC MIND*, 1996), while the exchange and interchange in her representations are not the least otherworldly but "entirely of this world," as the artist says herself. For the sake of such effects, Diana Thater works without illusionary or narrative elements or the traditional total depiction of a subject. With the video installation as a visually and spatially overlapping medium, she replaces the true-to-nature concept of representation and traditional patterns of seeing with principles of construction and projection in which subject matter, beholder, and process are mutually related in such a way that a complex, constantly changing structure results:

*...we move, record, project and see, changing the nature and configuration of what we see through our movement and our being and ultimately find ourselves not looking at the work of art but with it.*¹⁾

This shift of emphasis from content to form, that is, to the artificial character of the medium has been pointed out in several interviews with the artist, underscoring the technical procedures entailed in representing the subject matter. This process might be

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DIANA THATER, *THE CAUCUS RACE*, 1998, installation for 2 LCD video projectors, 4 video monitors, 6 laser discs and players, sync generator, window film, and existing architecture at Patrick Painter, Santa Monica / Installation für 2 LCD-Videoprojektoren, 4 Videomonitoren, je 6 Laserdiscs und Abspielgeräte, Synchronisator, Fensterfolie und bestehende Räumlichkeiten.

interpreted as an artistic response to a mediated world. To the extent that the mediated world may be described through the greater availability of images and the increasing unreality of the pictorial referent, procedures of representation now tend to focus on the fact that a uniform shape or view can no longer be imposed upon the "subject"—the "subject" being both the beholder and the subject matter of the picture. Speaking about *BROKEN CIRCLE* (1997), the artist explains:

...there are multiple points of view and from any point of view you see the herd of horses splitting around the cameras, but every time they are about to do this, we go off to another perspective where we see an empty field or camera people working or a horse in the corner eating grass. You're always distanced from "the shot" and you look back at it and realize that it can't be what it appears.²⁾

For art in transition to the twenty-first century, the procedures developed over the past hundred years of rendering animals in pictorial works and

aesthetic actions have become historical. It does not follow, though, that these forms have become obsolete. Rather, they provide an arsenal of material for variation, restaging and alienation. These breaks articulate an awareness of artistic contemporaneity in a technically advanced civilization. In this respect, technical advances, as in current life sciences, make the direct link to programs like Franz Marc's "Animalization of Art" or Beuys's therapeutic and social-reform-oriented action art more difficult and less plausible. Older forms of empathetic art, as exemplified by Marc's work, represented the attempt to capture transcendental reality or "the greatness of life" in pictures. Contemporary artists tend to work from the realization that the real is what always eludes us, so that the aim of expressing "objective reality" has ceased to prevail. The incorporation of immediate extra-artistic dimensions makes any work aesthetically and ideologically suspect unless related to investigating forms of representation and modes of perception.

For Franz Marc the challenge lay in representing the subject matter the way it "really" is and not in "painting a forest or a horse as we please or as they seem to appear, but rather the way they really are, the way the forest or the horse feel themselves, their absolute being that lives behind the appearances that we see."³ Diana Thater, however, primarily addresses the "truth of animals" as an issue of perception and representation, for it is only between these two poles that the truth can be found. Moreover, as manifestly projecting processes, they dovetail with the artist's wish to reveal the projecting and constructing aspects of imagery, which necessarily entails a multiplicity of viewpoints and forms of representation.

It has long been obvious that art is largely self-referential and has little to do with "extra-artistic reality." This also applies to such an obviously manifestly "external" subject as the animal: its potential incorporation or representation in a work of art is substantially restricted by the idiosyncratic orientation of the modern arts towards the artificiality of their medium. Instead of a "breakthrough" that shows the animal in its "actual truth and reality," instead of cult pictures of animals that serve purposes of a sublime

presence or a numinous aesthetic counter-world, forms of representation now explore the pictorial mediation of the animal presence. Even so, parallels can be observed between Beuys's art actions and Thater's video installations. While Beuys linked up with pre-artistic rituals of interpreting reality, also a manifest technique—the technique of shamanistic communication with transcendental realities—Thater turns to technology as a mediator between various layers of reality. Despite the profound importance of the animal in her work and her worldview, she seeks to combine the technical potential of the medium with indications of the proto-technical intelligence of the animal sphere. She shows a conspicuous number of animals as amateur performers of technical or artistic skills.

Diana Thater does not read modern technology as the antithesis of nature anymore than Beuys did, who affirmed technical innovation under the condition that human emancipation from nature and the preservation of our animal heritage did not rule each other out. Instead of estranging human and animal through progressive separation, as practiced by modern society in its treatment of "resources" of any kind, Thater tries to show that cohabitation with animals can in fact be reconfigured through modern conditions. She sees technical media as a creative tool which can add momentum to change and as a more effective means of finding new, creative and multiple means of describing reality than the latent, monologic and totalitarian character of the traditional metaphysical order.

The way in which Thater processes and installs her concerns signals the emergence of a new imaginative structure which allows a perception and articulation of borders, of mutual touch and transformations of people and animals. Regarding these transformational processes, the artist says:

I'm interested in the layering of identities on top of each other and in exchanges of identity... When I bring these animals into an art space via video it becomes a question of an exchange between viewing subjects and viewed objects.⁴

Technical equipment, which is as essential to Thater's work as "animistically" charged objects are for Beuys, always appears in connection with concrete forms of action:

In the installation environment, things that we traditionally see as objects, which we look at, become subjects who look at us. In the same way, all the video equipment is present in the space and you see it actually making something.⁵⁾

One cannot ignore the fact that these interactive and transformational processes, which are unspectacular for the most part, take a very independent tack in relation to their literary sources. Thus as mentioned, Thater refers to Murphy's science fiction novel *A Love for Rachel* in her video installation *ELECTRIC MIND*. The plot involves the death of a girl, whose father transplanted a computer-generated copy of his daughter's brain into a chimpanzee in order to preserve her individuality in a foreign body. No hint is given of this background in the artist's video installation, which shows pictures of the chimpanzee in different scenes. However, a kind of screenplay on view in a display case does reveal the narrative context. The installation does not show the drama as such but rather the media practice of the people behind the cameras as they follow the animal protagonists from different angles and in different takes. Our attention is explicitly drawn to the medial process of production—an aesthetic strategy derived from the continuum of modern art inasmuch as it is based on the effect of "medial sincerity." According to this term, coined by Boris Groys, we can no longer

treat "things" with sincerity without treating the medium with sincerity as well.

In the video installation *CAUCUS RACE* (1998), an excerpt from the eponymous chapter in *Alice in Wonderland* is projected onto the wall. The excerpt is divided into single words that appear on screen consecutively like film credits. As soon as the final words—"Prizes! Prizes!"—have come up, four monitors, placed on the floor in a semi-circle, alternately start running. They show nature pictures: a giraffe looking directly into the camera; a small orangutan climbing onto a boulder and falling down again; two hippopotami playfully splashing around in the water; open skies and the sun shining into the top of a tree. In the end, a large screen on a second wall opposite the monitors shows a pool of blue water. Suddenly a dolphin leaps out of the water directly at the camera and touches it with its nose. It then turns away and dives into the water again.

In contrast to *ELECTRIC MIND*, *BROKEN CIRCLE*, or *CHINA* (a video piece that shows two wolves—amateur actors again—with their tamers on a training field), *CAUCUS RACE* gives no indication of the location of the animals. One may assume that they are tame animals or animals in a zoo. This option may in turn be read as an indirect indication that it has become a rarity to see wild animals in their original habitat or traditional pets and domestic animals in

JOSEPH BEUYS, *COYOTE: I LIKE AMERICA AND AMERICA LIKES ME*, 1974, one-week performance on the occasion of the opening of the René Block Gallery, New York, May 1974 / *KOJOTE: ICH MAG AMERIKA UND AMERIKA MAG MICH*, einwöchige Performance.

(PHOTO: CAROLINE TISDALL, FROM / AUS: "JOSEPH BEUYS, COYOTE," SCHIRMER/MOSEL, MÜNCHEN 1976/1980/1988)



*Diana Thater**DIANA THATER, CHINA, 1995, installation view
at the Renaissance Society, Chicago / Teilansicht.*

conventional scenes. Nonetheless, Diana Thater still seems to insist that the human ability to empathize with the *conditio animalis* can never atrophy entirely. The loss of animals' natural habitat and the untold threats that menace their lives have actually fostered a sympathizing and moral attitude towards our fellow creatures. The myth of *Genesis* does not tell us whether the animals remained in Paradise or whether they were also somehow involved in the expulsion of Adam and Eve, but given the animal conditions that prevail today one wonders whether they have indeed surpassed humankind regarding their expulsion from primal conditions. An awareness of the painful side of the relationship between human and animal is manifested in Beuys's *I LIKE AMERICA—AMERICA LIKES ME* (1974), in which he underscored the "wound" that cannot be healed until "accounts with the coyote" have been settled—whereby this animal stands for the reality of an entire continent prior to its conquest by Europeans. Unlike this quasi pantheist approach, based on the religious philosophy of reconciliation and idealistic traditions of reform around 1900, Diana Thater's serene and brilliant methods of projection and reflection testify to the potential of contemporary art to address the coexistence of humans and animals in somewhat cooler but still binding tones. They express the insight that especially in the age of artificial life, there is still something to be learned about the elusive truth of the human condition through the looking glass of animal life.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

1) In: *Diana Thater, China*. The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1996, p. 15.

2) Quoted from an interview in: *Flash Art International*, Jan/Feb 1998, p. 88.

3) Franz Marc, *Briefe, Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen*, vol. I (Berlin: Cassirer, 1920), p. 123.

4) Quoted from *Flash Art International*, Jan/Feb 1998, p. 89.

5) *Ibid.* p. 89.



