

DIANA THATER

*1962 IN SAN FRANCISCO. LIVES AND WORKS IN LOS ANGELES.



KNOTS+SURFACES (VERSION #1)

2001

Multi-channel video installation; color, silent; varying durations

KNOTS+SURFACES: A GNOSIS by LYNNE COOKE

"Art is a moment of grace that is not tangible but is felt and thought simultaneously. [...] Just because it is speechless does not mean it is mindless as well."

"An art form distinct from the more traditional genres of painting and sculpture, installation is about sculpting time and space. [...] That installation directly addresses consciousness—that it raises questions about subjectivity—is what most interests me."

"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."

[Diana Thater]

THE threshold poses the problem, lucidly, succinctly. Poised at the gallery entrance, the visitor is confronted with a dazzling vision: a phalanx of radiant hexagonal projections zooming across the gallery, voraciously imprinting everything in its path—floor, walls, columns, ceiling. Nor is the residual space inert. A softer, lambent light suffuses the outer reaches in a magenta glow, while gels on the windows filter viewing beyond. The specifics of location are tempered, never denied: the architecture is visible throughout. From the vantage point of the doorway this mise-en-scene seems about to congeal into a cohesive unified cosmos. But the elusive impression remains fleeting. Lured by the delirious chromatic swirl of geometric forms overlaid and intersected by swarming bees, the viewer is drawn in. Immersing herself in these hallucinatory spatialities she leaves behind the stable threshold from which a detached overview—albeit one endlessly deferred—might still be imagined.

Suspended at varying heights from the ceiling or propped directly onto the floor are five video projectors whose steady hum permeates the entire room. On a squat block of sixteen stacked monitors, angled away from the entrance, a tangerine flower is silhouetted against a cyan ground. As the viewer wanders farther afield, the extreme effects of skewing, warping, and torquing that result from the intersection of the projections and the architecture begin to reconfigure. Absorption is always deferred, however, for from the first moment of entering the space, it's clear to the viewer that all view-points will prove incomplete. Nowhere will the geometrical distortions right themselves; and nowhere will the hexagonal units realign into a seamless continuum. Given that the installation offers no stable anchor from which to apprehend it, the subject will continue to be unmoored, mobile, and nomadic.

Normative ways of looking are also disrupted as material and immaterial reality, vie for dominance. Moreover, Arabic numerals intermittently interrupt the imagery of swarming bees on each projection, creating a temporary pause or hiatus, in their hectic rhythms. Each number recurs at intervals of approximately twenty minutes, as the digital video disc ends its cycle and then recommences. Despite this proof that the imagery repeats, so speedy is its multidirectional motion and so complex the synthetic shots, it's virtually impossible to identify segments within a cycle. From any vantage point, attention drifts and darts until the viewer suddenly becomes momentarily entranced by a detail, or sequence, within the flow. This constant vacillation in attention—this labile shifting in awareness between the actualities of site and the illusionism in the projections—renders the experience of looking highly self-conscious.

Closer examination of the imagery reveals disjunctions and fractures within these illusory realms. Within any single projection, squads of bees may fly in midground and background at different velocities (some footage has been slowed down) or rotated through different axes (shot from varying distances and angles). Distant vistas may suddenly vanish, replaced by close-ups in which myriad frenzied insects assume gargantuan proportions, as if issuing from fissures within the architecture itself, from some dark mysterious nether world.

While all five projections are structured similarly, each contains unique imagery. The bees were first shot against blue screens, then this video footage was superimposed onto film of the hexagons, each of which was recorded from a slightly different camera angle. Montaging several tracks of insects creates an effect of bees flying in an intensely congested realm. Lacking the foundation provided by a horizon, near and far collapse: its coordinates indeterminate, its dimensions indefinable, this space seems less a place than an elusive dimensionless arena. Duration is similarly manipulated to read as both incessant flux and instantaneous disjunction.

Satiated—or unnerved—by the visual feast, the eye seeks refuge in the video wall whose monumental image serves as a magnet and grail for viewer and insect alike. If, at first, the flower's gentle undulations appear to be caused by something unseen, perhaps a light breeze, closer inspection reveals that a hand-held video camera is responsible for its agitation. Once again, technology animates and *filters this world*.¹ ➤

I The shaping of human vision through technology is a constant preoccupation informing Thater's work. Critic and artist Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe argues that *Delphine* (2000), for example, "reminds one of how film and video are prostheses which, in becoming crucial to what humans see, have come to determine how they see. [...] The prosthesis has become a part of the human and/or the human a part of it. Thater considers, or seeks to present, the perception of animals in parallel with, or complementing, a human perception which may be described as either conditioned by technology (the camera-assisted human) [...] or, as largely a product of it."¹



Production still

1 JEREMY GILBERT-ROLFE, "Water, Sun, and Thinking Bodies," *Parkett 60* (Summer 2000), pp. 105–106.



For Thater, such vertiginous spatiotemporal constructs, while irreconcilable with normal everyday experience, become vehicles through which to engage other dimensionalities, perhaps even other consciousnesses. In *Knots + Surfaces*, the spectator's involvement with the camera's viewpoint is radically reduced: the beholder neither identifies with, nor feels integrated into, narrative conventions. Yet the forces that galvanize the act of looking are as resolutely laid open as the act itself. Free to wander at will through the space, free to focus for any length of time on any projection, the spectator becomes aware of where and how her attention might be sustained. Thater's methodology is thus radically different from that typically established in the cinema (and even in much video installation), where the beholder encounters what Gilles Deleuze describes as a situation of "absolute impotence, paralysis, and immobility:" one that typically transforms her into a "subjective and collective automaton:" in the black box theater, where the act of looking is structured, coercing, and disciplining attention, she is destined to purely passive contemplation.¹¹ ➤ In his groundbreaking study of certain fundamental remakings of subjectivity that

have occurred in Western culture over the past one hundred fifty years Jonathan Crary argues that "one of the ways an immense social crisis of subjective disintegration is metaphorically diagnosed is as a deficiency of 'attention.' Much critical and historical analysis of modern subjectivity during [the twentieth] century has been based on the idea of 'reception in a state of distraction.'" ¹² Arguing that distraction can only be understood through a reciprocal relation, that is, in relation to, "attentive norms and practices," Crary takes attention as the object of his inquiry in a radical study of transformations in late nineteenth century subjectivity. If that moment coincided with the birth of cinema, its eclipse by new

II In contrast to her previous works, which all contain references to the shoot, and are consequently internally reflexive, *Knots + Surfaces* has no such imagery or reference. By eliminating all traces of the moment of its making, Thater seamlessly imbricates its spatio-temporal realms into the actualities of the architectural site.

2 GILLES DELEUZE, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. HUGH TOMLINSON and ROBERT GALETA (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 156–157.



technologies at the beginning of the twenty-first century, once again instantiated non-coercive forms of power. Just as cinema in its spectacular modes freezes, immobilizes, and isolates individuals, so "television and the personal computer, even as they are now converging toward a single machinic functioning, are antinomadic procedures that fix and striate," Crary contends. Potent mechanisms for managing attention, they too, he notes, rely on "partitioning and sedentarization, rendering bodies controllable and useful simultaneously, even as they simulate the illusion of choice and 'interactivity.'" ³

Eschewing that symbolic order fundamental to mainstream cinema and to much related video work—an order grounded in verisimilitude, coherent perspectival spatiality, measurable temporality and bodily stasis—Thater seeks experiences that approach the irrational, visceral, mobile, indeterminate, and amorphous. The experiences she constructs are patently artificial, for technology never describes the world, the world is always inscribed in it: that is, the world exists only as a representation, there is no preexisting Real. Conjuring a kind of perception that disrupts conventional signification by repositioning the

observing subject outside the terms of a classic system of vision, her installation is premised on an embodied, if de-centered, subject negotiating a dynamically transforming environment.⁴ Thus, in *Knots + Surfaces* viewpoints and relations continually dissolve and reorganize the world so that it keeps being different not only from every point but also at every moment. The engaged spectator does not merely grasp intellectually the idea of a plurality of perspectives, but directly experiences how each perspective is a particular lived relation of forces and interstices. Cut loose from all anchorage, the eye is unable to arrest the world in order to scrutinize it from a specific axis or viewpoint. One result is that a plural, sensory attentiveness generates a libidinal release that verges on the euphoric: the onset of dissolution, of an intoxicating loss of self in complex, multidimensional spatial structures, creates a feeling of exhilaration. Such jouissance is the very antithesis of the administered perception characteristic of spectacular culture, in which attention is made attentive to everything but itself.

3 JONATHAN CARY, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 1.

This account is deeply indebted to Crary's brilliant analysis of this condition and, in particular, to his discussion of Cézanne's late work in the concluding chapter.

4 Ibid., p. 75.

Thater's figuration of attentive modes within complex space-time relations is informed by ways of conceptualizing other subjectivities and other perceptual experiences theorized by Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida. In addition to Deleuze's influential studies of cinema which have long informed her practice, she has been drawn to texts by Kristeva and Derrida that explore alternative, hybrid, and subversive subjectivities, whether those defined as feminine or those postulated as animal.⁵ However, in *Knots + Surfaces* she was also inspired by the chance discovery of a text of a different order: mathematician and biologist Barbara Shipman's speculations on a mathematical foundation for the dance language of honeybees.⁶ With its bold postulation of a six-dimensional space, Shipman's provocative thesis fascinated Thater who appropriated it as a compelling model for other subjectivities. In *Knots + Surfaces* she conjures a poetic correlative for the bees' complex multidimensional sense of space by interweaving fictive imagery with the specifics of the architecture as site. Reflecting its origins in theoretical mathematics, this installation introduces a level of abstraction unprecedented in her oeuvre to date. The motif of a hexagon plays multiple roles. It references both the honeycomb, the basis of the bee's built environment, and the shape of the facets that constitute the insect's complex eye—that is, it references both architecture and optics. Since six-dimensional space defies direct representation, it must be explored in diagrammatical models conceived not as schematic representations of perceivable or imitable entities or processes but as visualizations based in mathematics. Thus the field of hexagonal projections, which distort and distend as they encounter the phenomenal world, serves both as an abstracted map of human observation of the bee world and as a way of setting out features of that same world that cannot, and never could, be perceived by humans. In sum, they contrast what is revealed by the human perceptual apparatus with what is known by means of the insect's multisensory mechanisms. By means of this dialectical play between visualization and visualizability, Thater yokes representation and abstraction into a novel syncretic entity.

If certain fantastical films, such as *The Matrix* (1999), prefigure aspects of *Knots + Surfaces*, then one of the cinema's classics, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), is its *dark alter ego*.¹¹¹ Common to Thater's work and to Hitchcock's is the resistance of the nominal subject to symbolic interpretation. Attempts to clarify the meaning of the primary motif—whether

bird or bee—only impoverish its rich suggestiveness: the motif is a catalyst, not an allegorical image. Although space assumes pathological qualities in many of Hitchcock's most haunting works, in *The Birds* not space but the protagonists' unnatural behavior, defying rational explanation, begets the horror. An insidiously frightening world is glimpsed via their activity; that is, within, rather than beyond, the subjects' everyday phenomenal experience. Although the affective mechanisms Hitchcock employed to dramatize fear and trauma—polarizations of claustrophobia and agoraphobia—have no direct counterpart in Thater's work, the threat of traumatic annihilation posited in *The Birds* haunts *Knots + Surfaces*—the dark obverse of its loss of self in *jouissance*.

Historic video and installation art also variously inform Thater's practice. For example, she introduced numbers at the beginning of the program on each disc for practical reasons: she needed to be able to differentiate easily among the twenty-odd discs that she was making in preparation for the final version of *Knots + Surfaces*. After having selected the six she would use for the installation, she opted to retain these numerical *aides-mémoires* as a nod to Structuralist film which, due to its self-reflexively analytical mode of inquiry, had been a crucial formative influence on her early work. Comparisons to certain pioneering Sixties video works by Nam June Paik, are also apposite here, for central to Paik's ecstatic visions is a signature elision of the vernacular and familiar into what becomes a fluid, serial, kaleidoscopic imagery.

Since, for Thater, the form as well as the experience of her work occurs at the intersection of consciousness and architecture, the legacy of Minimalism has proven highly influential: "When one moves through the space of an installation and is aware of this movement, one achieves what Robert Morris calls 'present-ness,'" she argues. "One engages what Morris describes as the 'I—living, imageless, here and now in time and space—as opposed to the 'me'—the self remembered in an arrested state, not in motion but as if in a photograph, frozen in

III A devotee of science fiction and related genres, Thater did, in fact, review *The Birds* during her preliminary research for *Knots + Surfaces*. She was particularly interested in the way Hitchcock sandwiched footage of birds in flight for some of his most charged shots.

5 See JULIA KRISTEVA, *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), and JACQUES DERRIDA, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," trans. DAVID WILLS, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002), pp. 369–418. See, also, GILLES DELEUZE,

Cinema I: The Movement Image. For a discussion of Thater's work in relation to Deleuzian cinema, see AKIRA MIZUTA Lippit's "Video Ergo Sum (The Animal That I See)," in *Diana Thater: Knots + Surfaces* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 2002), pp. 8–21.

6 For a discussion of Shipman's thesis, see ADAM FRANK, "Quantum Honeybees," *Discover Magazine* 18, no. 11 (November 1997).

time. [...] This is why my work is so much about molding space and pulling apart the architecture, as opposed to making narratives. [...] It is the sculptural qualities of the work that I am trying to make dimensional, palpable, deep."⁷ In this engagement, the particularities of the site's architecture and its light (both in its natural and mechanical guises), Dan Flavin's practice has proven especially relevant. Since light from both outdoor and artificial sources was, for him, an essential aspect of any context, he seldom eliminated or greatly altered it, recognizing that dimly lit milieus actually enhanced the light and color that were his raw material. Interventions that are neither painting nor sculpture but relate tangentially to both, his installations invite a roaming viewer, a precursor to Thater's visitor who, similarly, encounters interventions in "barren rooms" of luminous projections made from familiar, commonplace industrial equipment directly exposed.

Beyond this rich heritage in video, film, and installation work, *Knots + Surfaces*'s deeper roots may be traced in the art of the past. An engagement with site-specificity, an active spectator, and multiple points of view, forms the basis of certain traditions of monumental painting that instantiate metaphysical inquiry, and nowhere more brilliantly than in Gian Battista Tiepolo's commissions for the church of Santa Maria dei Gesuati in Venice (1738–1739) and the Kaisersaal in Würzburg, Germany (1751–1753). By seeking to embed the fictive world into his actual site—that is, into an architecture governed by shimmering light—Tiepolo gradually came to conceive of painting as congruent with its environment, and peopled by figures who appear to move and change in concert with the passage of the viewer through the venue. Thus, rather than producing intricate linear narratives, he created complex visual constellations that are no more confined by a pictorial frame than they are viewable from a single static vantage point. By voluptuously, deliriously destabilizing us, he makes us acutely aware of our movements, and through that, as Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall persuasively argue, "of our proclivity to make sense." Relying less than most of his peers on symbolic or allegorical programs, Tiepolo created an art that is exceptional in the degree to which it visualizes thought. Alerted to the act of beholding, we "re-experience the process by which we first make sense of the world," Alpers and Baxandall attest.⁸

Like Tiepolo, Thater begins every project by considering the existing space. And, like him, she too reacts to the site's ever-changing daylight while refraining

from modifying the given physical structure. In its forswearing Cartesian perspective in favor of a multidimensional matrix, *Knots + Surfaces* recalls Tiepolo's extraordinarily vertiginous spaces—soft-focused, precarious in orientation, dazzling, and disorienting—in which narrative is supplanted by display. At once contemporary yet deeply informed by the art of the past, this work invites responses that recognize the historically determined nature of perception while nonetheless encouraging speculation that might range outside it. "This is the significance of the work of art, that it can change the way that we see the world," she contends. "It takes a leap of faith to give yourself over to a work of art. [...] If you make the leap there is this life that is simultaneous with your life. [...] It can become a subject to your subject."⁹

An ebullient, capricious spectacle, *Knots + Surfaces* invites the visitor to play—to analyze, question, negotiate, and test whatever appears across its threshold. Grounded in a certain modality of sustained attention, it instantiates an ethic, and not just an aesthetic. "The practical and theoretical life of the whole species, as well as of individual beings, results from the selection which the habitual direction of their attention involves," William James argued in the late nineteenth century at the very moment when film, the first of the new motion-camera technologies, was being born.¹⁰ According to James, "Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit. At any given moment the mind is a potentially paralyzing welter of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists [...] in the selection of some and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention." Referencing his predecessor's seminal ideas, Crary concludes, "For James, the fact that we all seem to inhabit a common perceptual world is due not to the a priori structure of our minds, but rather to the overlapping common choices made by a historically evolving community of free individuals."¹¹ For Thater, working a century later, freedom will be exercised by subjects who challenge the normative, the knowable, and the prefigured.

7 THATER, conversation with CAROL REESE, in *Diana Thater: Delphine* (Vienna: Secession, 2000), p. 25.

8 SVETLANA ALPERS and MICHAEL BAXANDALL, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 10, 15.

9 THATER, "Diana Thater: Being Inside a Work of Art," interview by DOUGLAS FOGLE, *Flash Art* 31, no. 198 (January/February 1998), p. 89.

10 WILLIAM JAMES, quoted in CRARY, p. 62.

11 CRARY, p. 62.

A longer version was originally published in *Diana Thater: Knots + Surfaces* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 2002), pp. 28–35.