

Diana Thater: On Location

Philosophy is not a theory but an activity...

Wittgenstein,
Tractatus logico-philosophicus, 4.112

"Academic" is the term that has been attached by critics to Diana Thater's complex five-site installation collectively titled *THE BEST ANIMALS ARE THE FLAT ANIMALS—THE BEST SPACE IS THE DEEP SPACE*. Far from an epithet of unalloyed approbation, it signals that the incisive conceptual component that informs all her work has been foregrounded more inexorably in this multipartite work than hitherto. What she herself defines as "art in the service of thought," art galvanized by "the pleasure of critical thought," is fundamental to her practice: "Thinking is as relevant to art as making" she contends, referencing a position that increasingly has come to be regarded as controversial. Her last two exhibition catalogues have included essays she authored alongside texts by other contributors.¹⁾ Very different from the indices, or the supplements—those shards of hypothetical narrative that she had earlier published—or the screenplay *Electric Mind*, these are polemics in which she not only expounds her aesthetic and expiates on the particular project that the catalogue records but sharply castigates a species of complacent, jejeune, and unquestioning work that, she contends, too

often currently passes for "new art." Thater's formidable critical intelligence and well-grounded theoretical stance are matched by a rare fearlessness when articulating her position that for some unquestionably proves intimidating. "Academic" thus provides a neat escape clause: While paying lip-service to such issues it short-circuits extended debate.

Specifically devised to elude facile comprehension and neat closure—if not the premature foreclosure epitomized in such cursory reviewing—*THE BEST ANIMALS...* challenges in other ways too. The most complex, and, arguably, the most ambitious work that Thater has undertaken to date, its corpus is comprised of some twenty-seven separate elements. Eight individual works were composed from different groupings of these parts. All eight include footage shot in both film and video and made for projection as well as monitors. Sometimes the footage is slowed, at other times it has been speeded up. Their scale ranges from a full wall projection to the dimensions of a small monitor: An intermediary size is given by a free-standing screen that resembles a theater flat. The three principal motifs were filmed and videotaped in three separate locations. The Hedrick Exotic Animal Farm in Nickerson, Kansas, provided material for images of a herd of zebra shot in close-

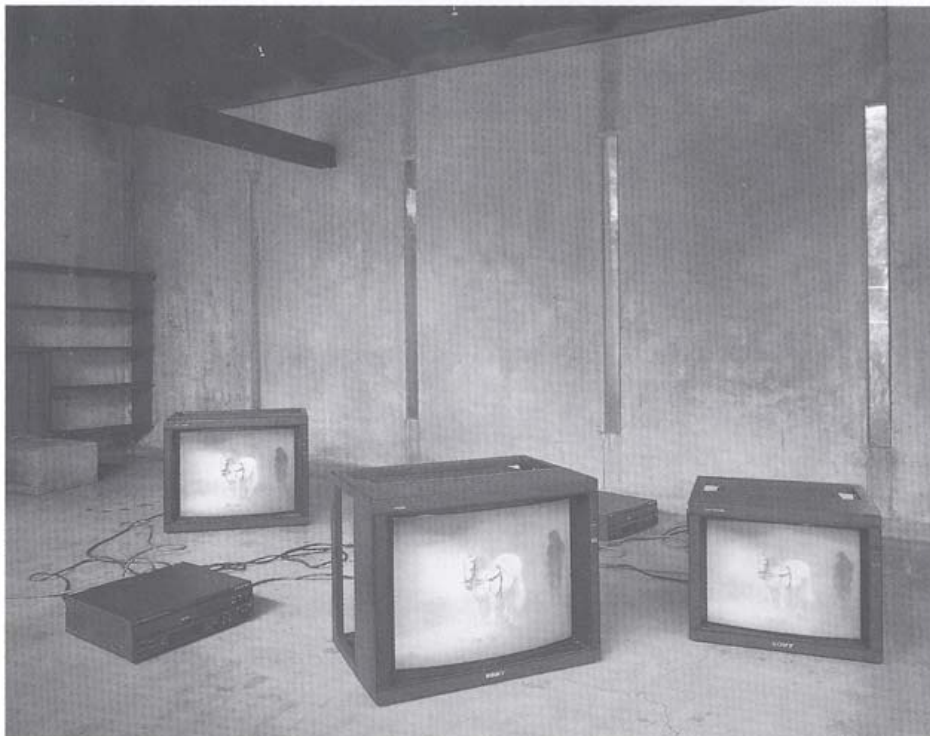
LYNNE COOKE is a curator at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York City and also writes on contemporary art.

up, and of a single zebra isolated in a field where it was performing tricks. The Los Angeles County Arboretum in Arcadia, California, offered the site where the two forest scenes were recorded, one utilizing day for night techniques, and the other night for day. The third, the Medieval Times Performance Arena in Buena Park, California, became the staging ground for documenting the emergence of a trained Andalusian horse from a cloud of smoke prior to its taking of a bow. This trio of domesticated animals and cultivated nature has been variously parsed through the two media, film and video, as well as through Thater's nuanced responses to the diverse contexts for which she developed this composite work.

Planned as a series of overlapping concurrent shows held between October 1998 and April 1999 in five different venues in North America this staging at once challenged Thater to engage with multiple invitations proffered from radically different types of institutions, at the same time as it permitted her to address explicitly the charged issue of site. The five venues ranged from one of the pre-eminent museums devoted to modern art, namely, MoMA, the forging ground for canonical modernist histories and ideologies, to a small kunsthalle located on a campus on the outskirts of Toronto, Art Gallery of York University, an institution known in the international art

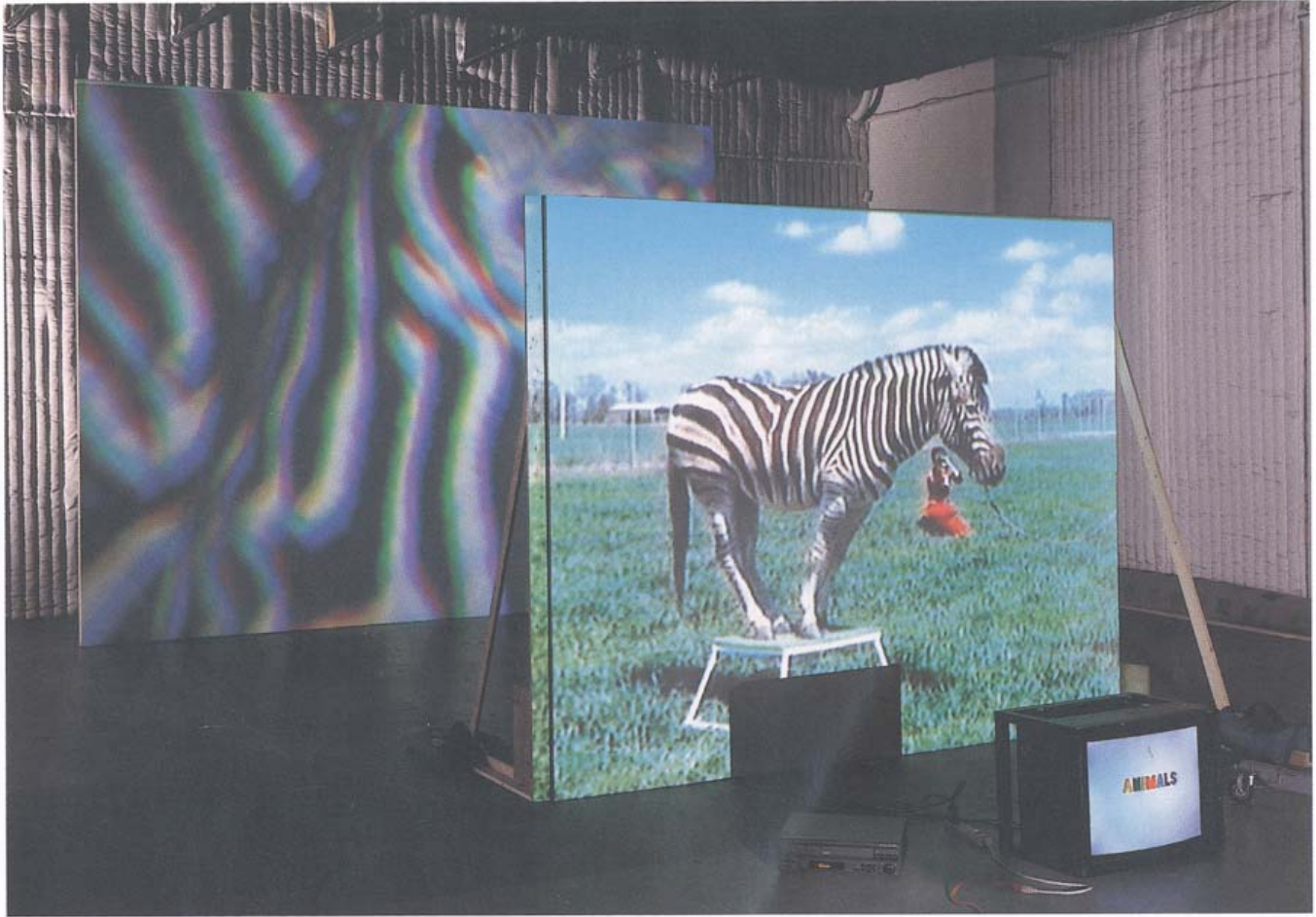
world more by reputation than through direct encounter. In addition, the project included the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, celebrated for its pioneering shows of contemporary art during the 1960s; that beloved architectural icon, the Schindler House in Los Angeles, presently the West Coast outpost for contemporary art installations organized by MAK whose home base is Vienna; and the Saint Louis Art Museum, built on the nineteenth century model of the encyclopedic museum.

To date, Thater's oeuvre encompasses site-specific, site-related and autonomous works. While those works that are site-determined and site-related have always incorporated video installation, her autonomous artefacts range from single monitor pieces to works that combine projection and monitors to monochrome Iris prints. In *THE BEST ANIMALS...* an exceptionally layered notion of site is invoked. Site is that composite entity that conditions, frames, governs and shapes the work and that informs its reception: it also implies an organization with a certain typological history. Site consequently becomes, in this instance, at once a physical locus, a social space, a place of debate, an ideological institution and, not least, a specific concrete situation grounded in the actual and experiential, rooted in the here and now. Fundamental to each intervention however is the



DIANA THATER, 1998, *THE BEST SPACE IS THE DEEP SPACE*, monitor edition, each with 1 video monitor, 1 laser-disc player, 1 laser disc; installation view at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles / *DER BESTE RAUM IST DER TIEFE RAUM*, Edition für Monitor, mit je 1 Videomonitor, 1 Laserdisk-Gerät und 1 Laserdisk.

(PHOTO: FREDRIK NILSEN FOR MAK)



DIANA THATER, *THE BEST ANIMALS ARE THE FLAT ANIMALS (VERSION 1)*, 1998, installation for LCD video projector, three-lens video projector, video monitor, laser-disc players, laser discs, window foil, false wall (84 x 126"), and existing architecture /
DIE BESTEN TIERE SIND DIE FLACHEN TIERE, Installation für LCD-Videoprojektor, Dreilinsen-Videoprojektor, Videomonitor, Laserdisk und Abspielgerät, Fensterfolie, falsche Wand (213,4 x 320 cm) und bestehende Räumlichkeiten. (PHOTO: FREDRIK NILSEN FOR MAK)

problematic of point of view, of how a position is constructed.

At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Thater's show, "The Best Animals Are the Flat Animals," occupied the Project series gallery. A large projection of the close-up of the zebras filled both ends of the room, enveloping the viewer on entry. Midway down the gallery a make-shift flat screen, sandbagged for stability, displayed footage of the lone zebra rehearsing, while to one side two monitors stacked seemingly casually on the ground revealed the landscape material. Blue, red, green, and yellow gels placed over four windows in the adjacent corridor filtered the view of the sculpture gar-

den, the signature site of this museum. The shifting unfocused field of striped animal hide destabilized the visitor who became quickly enmeshed in its undulating organic patterns reminiscent of a giant Op art painting by Bridget Riley. Yet the multiplication of competing vantage points undermined that unitary focus normally a prerequisite for any spectator's sense of stability and coherence as a viewing subject. Just as animal behavior is reprogrammed at these exotic farms to serve human desire, so the conventional habits of the gallery goer are here revised, revealing their structuring conventions and underlying assumptions. For, given that the viewer is automatically suffused into the work, critical distance can

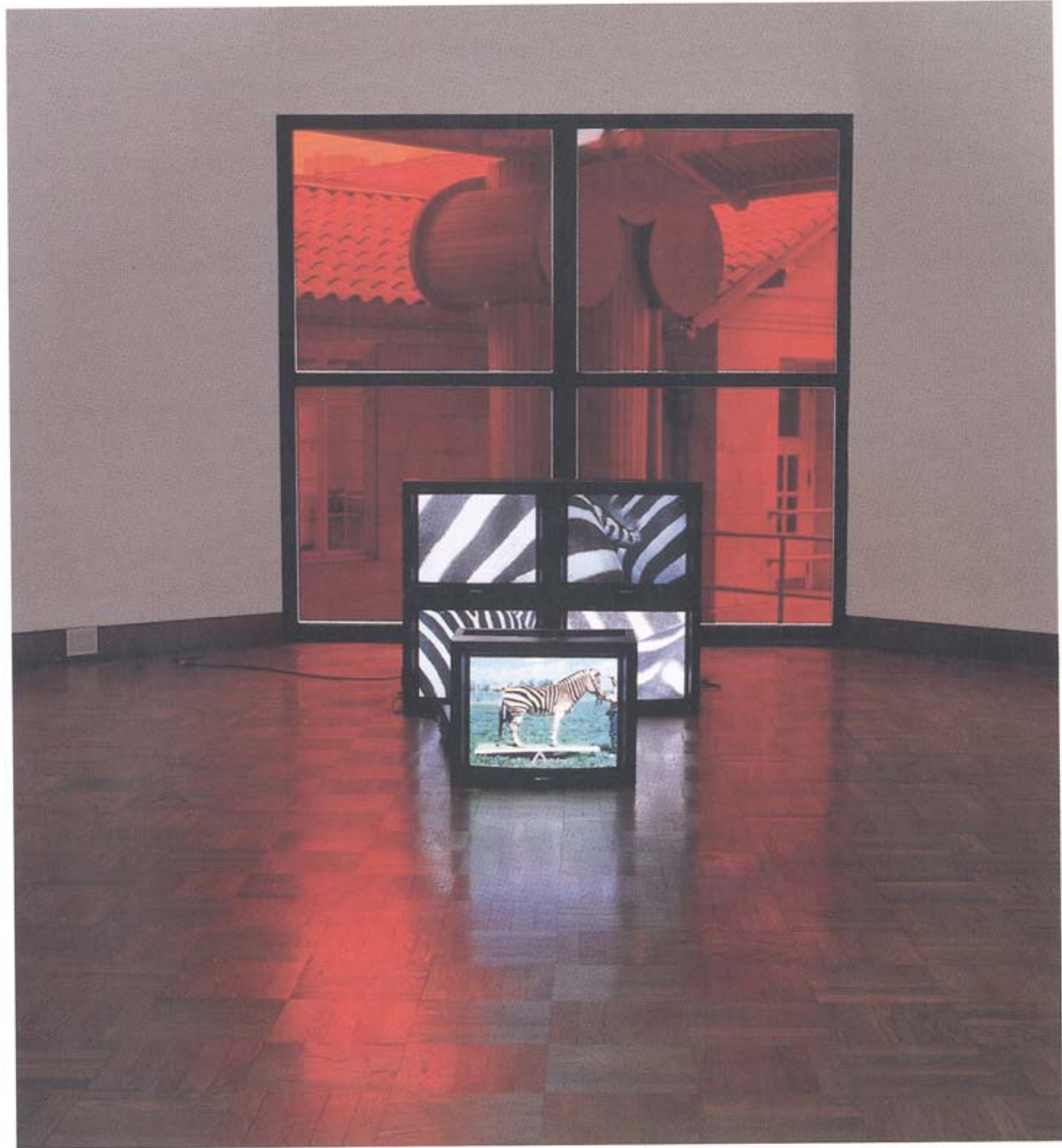
only subsequently be attained via a process that necessarily becomes self-reflexive and discursive. It brings with it the recognition that one's engagement with this institution, represented metonymically by the garden, is always filtered and disguised: The quintessential icon of this canonical repository of modernist art, the sculpture court, is transformed and flattened into a colored picture, an image of itself. The intertwining and entangling of these various forms of projection and staging ensure that the spectator constantly crosses different sightlines, thereby interrupting the beamers. During this meandering trajectory, his or her shadow or silhouette is inevitably cast onto the projected surfaces. Whether registered as a psychedelic outline or as a negative, a blank form, it reveals the viewer's role in this situation of "excessive seeing," to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin's term, to be premised on an unrecoverable distance. "There can be no doubt, of course," Bakhtin argues, "that my own exterior is not part of the concrete, actual horizon of my seeing... I am situated on the boundary, as it were, of the world I see. In plastic and pictorial terms, I am not connatural with it. While my thought can place my body wholly into the outside world as an object among other objects, my actual seeing cannot do the same thing; my seeing, that is, cannot come to the aid of thinking by providing it with an adequate outward image."²)

Thater thus does not revert to a retrogressive Cartesian model of a disembodied spectator but, rather, posits an encounter predicated on an unbridgeable gulf between the viewer and the site, a divorce that is crucial not only to the critical scrutiny the work solicits but to the recognition that this institution can best be engaged as a series of intersecting reproductions and referents. Miming its own identity and role—a fabricated matrix of dematerialized images, a legacy of illusory visions—the Museum of Modern Art is defined primarily as a discursively determined site. Once delineated as a field of knowledge, its identity depends as much on a prescribed intellectual exchange and a well-rehearsed cultural debate as on its material holdings and institutional history.

Spread over the breadth of North America, Thater's five sites are related intertextually rather than spatially, as may be further gauged by a compar-

ison of this presentation in Manhattan with several of the others. At Saint Louis she installed her exhibition, here titled "The Best Outside Is the Inside," in two places: in an alcove in the monumental entrance hall of this vast edifice built for the 1904 World's Fair, and in an upstairs gallery in the contemporary art department that was flanked on one side by a room of Abstract Expressionist painting and on the other by recent German art. In the foyer Thater formed a cube by abutting four monitors broadcasting details of the zebra herd in close-up. In front of that she placed a single monitor with the solitary rodeo performer. Just visible outside through the glass doors of the exits was the large quasi-English park that surrounds the museum, whose nearest institutional neighbor is the state zoo where tamed counterparts to her trained performers may be found. The vast park, modeled on the notion of a planned wilderness, and hence on the tropes of the picturesque, finds its counterpoint in Thater's installation upstairs in the contemporary gallery. This was comprised of a large projection skewed from floor to ceiling on one wall. The same image was then reversed on the adjacent wall so the twin motifs seemed hinged along the connecting seam. Directly opposite this corner, in the middle of the room, stood the makeshift screen on which the night for day version of the Arboretum footage was playing. Turning from one to the other the spectator constantly interrupted the illusion. With his or her shadow the projection of both subjects was slowed. On the smaller screen the crew preparing for the shoot in this forest bower seemed to wander on the set like sleepwalking wraiths. If time shifted less legibly on the wall projection, it appeared nonetheless to be driven technologically rather than by the pace of organic cycles. Whether invoking traditions of landscape painting or of landscape gardening, Thater's work exposed the roles of technology in determining both these histories, together with the alienated nature of our relationship to park lands and nature reserves, stage sets for contemplation, artificial sanctuaries in a world increasingly riven by environmental abuse. Yet she undercut any binary oppositions that would polarize the real and projected, the view and viewed, inside and outside, the natural and its converse, by

DIANA THATER, *THE BEST ANIMALS ARE THE FLAT ANIMALS (STACKED MONITORS)*, 1998,
5 video monitors, 5 laser discs and laser-disc players, window foil, installation view at the Allen Memorial
Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio / *DIE BESTEN TIERE SIND DIE FLACHEN TIERE*
(MONITORKOMBINATION), je 5 Videomonitore, Laserdiscs und Abspielgeräte, Fensterfolie.



overtly manipulating space and time, and hence disassembling the symbolic constructs that we use to create our world. *NATURE IS A LANGUAGE, CAN'T YOU READ?* (1997), the title to an earlier work, signals her abiding preoccupation with the acculturation of nature in both botanical and zoological guises, and with the recognition that nature is always and forever mediated by and for culture. As the installation at MoMA obliquely implied, Thater is engaged with the history and tropes of this representation, not with any necessarily futile effort to undercut, subvert or even simply lament a relationship with the so-called

real world that can only ever be filtered, indirect, constructed. This article of faith was most clearly instantiated in Los Angeles where the house and studio that Rudolph Schindler designed and built for himself in the 1920s is set within a carefully planned domestic garden.

In Ohio, where the exhibition was titled "The Best Space Is the Deep Space," shots of the Andalusian horse that cut between footage that was filmed and footage that had been videotaped was projected simultaneously on the freestanding screen and on the monumental wall directly behind it, so that the

viewer watched one in relation to the other. However, in order to enter this gallery the spectator had passed through a section of the museum that contained the collection of nineteenth century European landscape and genre painting. The important role played by equine motifs in this iconography was not lost on Thater. Similarly, her decision to gel with a blue filter a nearby window that had previously provided the occasion for a site specific work by Robert Irwin paid homage to the older West Coast artist. Thater's colored film tempered the landscape beyond, transforming it into a flattened image, a picture, whereas Irwin, in exactly mimicking the embrasure in negative on an adjacent wall, had drawn attention to the window frame as an intermediary between exterior and interior, as the vehicle of a pictorial way of seeing. Both interventions acknowledge that pictorial imaging is a convention, a shared fiction between maker and audience.

Bearing the full title of this body of work, the installation at the Schindler House was the core of the project. Designed for indoor/outdoor living, this elegant if ultimately impractical residence bears the traces of its creator's formative fascination with the theory and practice of Frank Lloyd Wright. Narrow apertures in the concrete walls in several rooms provide radically truncated glimpses of the rectilinear layout of the sunken gardens beyond. Thater gelled these slit windows, too, but this time with a wider spectrum of hues, metamorphosing them into stained glass visions of an illusory world beyond. The projection of the close-up of the zebra hides was here mirrored and duplicated so that it covered one wall in a closely confined space. The combination of large scale and the doubling of the image in an almost claustrophobic arena imbued the space with a mysteriously primitivist aura, an aura that was very much at odds with the suavity given off by the polished performances of the stallion shown on the trio of monitors in an adjacent room. The idealism that informed the work of Schindler as of many early modernist architects was heralded even while its equally tenacious exoticist and primitivist tenets were sceptically probed. In an installation more richly and finely calibrated to the architecture of the site, an architecture with which Thater has passionate

empathy, the estrangement integral to experiencing the other four exhibitions was tempered by a certain melancholy. Thater at once actively engaged the house and its architectural aesthetic, and historicized aspects of her own abiding thematics.

In recent years artists have frequently been invited to interact with historical collections, to curate from within a museum's holdings, or to insert their works into the permanent displays of an institution. Mechanisms for revitalizing familiar readings, for questioning paradigmatic relationships, and for critiquing museological practice, such exhibitions fall within the broader scope of what has come to be known as institutional critique. *THE BEST ANIMALS...* engages at least tangentially with this area of contemporary practice on several occasions yet ultimately is more focussed on issues of reception.

The degree of estrangement predicated in this project is arguably more extreme than in many of Thater's earlier works whose hauntingly seductive image-scapes not only bore a closer relationship to painting traditions but were permitted to be more intrinsically beautiful in themselves. By stressing the necessarily partial nature of any installation of this complex multipartite work, and by heightening recognition that no transparent felt response can be established, that is, no "connatural relationship" can exist between the audience and the imagery, Thater pushes against that eponymous desire for identification between the subject and the viewer so widely invoked at present. Being misplaced, such desires are, for her, impossible if not, on that account, always devoid of pathos or poignancy. This may prove an uncomfortable recognition for many in the current climate where sentiment increasingly gains ground: It is also likely to be an unpopular one.

1) Diana Thater, "I Wanna Be Your Dog" in: *China* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and Thiers: Le Creux de l'Enfer, Centre d'art contemporain de Thiers, 1996), p. 11; and "Skin Deep" in: *The Best Animals Are the Flat Animals—the Best Space Is the Deep Space*, edited by Peter Noever (Los Angeles: MAK Center for Art and Architecture, LA, and Vienna: MAK Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, 1998), p. 28.

2) Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" in: *Art and Answerability* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 27–28.