



# Mystery Science Thater

Diana Thater  
at LACMA

November 22, 2015–  
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What is it about the moving image that so compels us? Or, rather, what is it about the moving image that *still* compels us? Wonder at film and video technology is perennial, though it has been entrenched in our society well past the point of banality. But the allure of the moving image rarely fades; conversely, it tends to renew in finer and finer detail. Perhaps it's simply the thrill of absorbing the active in an engaged, but passive state: the image(s) of time unfolding along a fixed surface.

Watching a projected bird scroll across a formidable interior wall in LACMA's Broad Building, I could've sworn I heard the faint strains of Angelo Badalamenti's score for *Twin Peaks*. I recalled the Log Lady's cold intonation: "The owls are not what they seem." Diana Thater's bird is not an owl but a (rather large) falcon, and yet not a falcon at all. Rather, it is the recorded incident light of some falcon somewhere in the recent past. Digitized and scaled up, it plods along the wall by means of an impressive chain-link of optical projectors.

The image of the thing and the thing itself are distinct—we know this to be from Joseph Kosuth's classic (and schoolteacher-y) *One and Three Chairs* (1965), if not from our own senses. In *A Cast of Falcons* (2008), part of the Diana Thater's retrospective, *The Sympathetic Imagination*, at LACMA, the artist opens the thing-ness of the falcon to our consideration. Imagery, whether or not it moves, arguably always does. An image (or a reproduction) is, firstly, a repurpose of past reality: a falsehood, in a sense, cleaved from the real.

The perpendicular walls that bookend the falcon projection play host to two large slides: one an ultra-violet sun, the other a warmly-hued moon. Each alludes in color to the physical conditions of the other: the sun cool, the moon baking. These discrete and curious illusory reversals point toward looking as a pleasure, and a partiality: the thing embeds in our vision, without being entirely comprehended. Film tends to distill the sensory down to the primary potency of the visual.

Thater's work throughout the LACMA exhibition hinges on this tension between the pleasures of looking and the impossibilities of really *seeing*. When immersed in it, as we are in several of Thater's room-sized installations, the effect is a combined one: of both familiar joys and subtle oddities.

At odds (with the audience) are the mechanics and staging of much of the work. Several of Thater's installations feature an oppressive array of projections, catching the viewer in an unavoidable net of light beams. Viewers' shadows are flung into the throes of swarming bees and swimming

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dolphins. Only the enduring viewer finds himself anywhere other than against the wall in *China* (1995), searching for openings in the web of projection and finding only overlaps. Projection frustrates the bodies that enter its beam, and Thater's work plays up this irritation. In Thater's hands, the light of the moving image routinely ensnares the viewer, perhaps designed to scrape away at a basic expectation of film: viewed, from a distance.

Elsewhere, Thater toys with the viewer using subtler means. When approaching the cutout door at the base of the wall-sized, projected temple facade in *Life is a Time-Based Medium* (2015), the viewer does so in tandem with her shadow, cast once on either side. Movement here takes three forms: the even, watery light bathing the façade, the monkeys scurrying over and around it, and the meeting of our own casts at the vanishing point of the door. Through the opening, we encounter a relatively cramped room showcasing footage of monkeys eating bananas, in front of the same facade we've just passed through; movie-theater seats in which we cannot sit tease at the lower edge of the projection's frame.

Alvar Aalto balanced intimacy and expanse via the tactic of long, low corridors culminating in double height, expansive rooms. Thater's architectural engagement here is the reverse: a formidable facade gives way to a claustrophobic interior, within which we find only images of the outside, framed in reference to the (once) most common scene of projected imagery—the movie theater. The viewer's passage through the work is privy to movements both within and through the layers of the projected image, as cast shadows cancel only part of the image and movement into the interior reveals only a false theater.

LACMA's staging of the exhibition divides Thater's work into two camps: the raucous, interactive work in the Art of the Americas building and the slower, more contemplative, large-scale pieces in the Broad building. Tucked away in the lobby of the Bing Theater is the Muybridge-inspired *The best space is the deep space* (1998): a set of ten monitors staged on a curved wall along which a looped ten seconds of a bowing horse plays, each monitor a second off from the one preceding. In its quiet, secluded staging, *The best space is the deep space* acts as a kind of winking outlier; a moment of gratitude between viewer and viewed, and a moment about as clear and uncomplicated as contemporary art gets.

For all the immediate accessibility sparking off of its structuralist pretensions, Thater's work can skirt the line between pointedness and aimlessness. The imagery is sumptuous, but essentially secondary, particularly in works like *Surface Effect* (1997) and *Oo Fifi* (1992). In these, Thater foregrounds color separation, undoing, and revealing, the structure by which we actually see many printed and projected images. There is a split here between the image and the visual: *Surface Effect* (1997) underscores this beautifully by pairing the color breakdown with variable speed—flashes of the image here and there align, Thater dissolving the central visual on which the work hangs into the variable sum of its constituent elements.

Thater's work withholds as often as it gives; yet it gives abundantly, particularly in *Day for Night, One, Two, and Three* (2013). Here, beautifully transformative footage of flowers shot with dark blue filters shows on three nine-monitor video walls. *Day for Night* is intimate, dark even, and perhaps the crux to understanding





Thater's intentions which elsewhere—like color separation—occasionally misalign. Thater's work points to the structure of *the thing*, a thing always necessarily and definitively absent (as is the rule of the image). Thater's probing of representation's fine structure gives way to unabashed visual pleasure in *Day for Night*; pleasure, that is, without problematic. Perhaps this pleasure, which we encounter so clearly at the culmination of *The Sympathetic Imagination*—a pleasure in looking culled equally from at what we look and how we go about looking at it—has drawn us through the exhibition all along.

1

Diana Thater, *Untitled Videowall (Butterflies)* (2008). Installation view at 1301 PE, Los Angeles (2008). Six video monitors, player, one fluorescent light fixture, and Lee filters. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and 1301 PE, Los Angeles. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

2

Diana Thater, *Delphine* (2008). Installation view at Kulturkirche St. Stephani, Bremen, Germany (2009). Four video projectors, five players, nine monitor video wall, and Lee filters. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Roman Mensing/artdoc.de.

3

Diana Thater, *knots + surfaces* (2001). Installation view at Dia Center for the Arts, New York (2001). Five video projectors, sixteen monitor video wall, six players, and Lee filters. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.