About the Artist

Diana Thater
Peonies, 2011
9 video monitors, 1 DVD player
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist,
David Zwirner, New York and
1301PE, Los Angeles

Diana Thater (b. 1962, San Francisco) received her BA in art history from New York University in 1984 and by 1990 had completed an MFA at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Since then, her work has been presented at the Museum of Modern Art, Dia Center for the Arts, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles; the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh; and internationally at Kunsthalle Zurich in Switzerland, Kunsthaus Graz in Austria, and Kunstverein Hamburg in Germany. She has also participated in the biennials of Johannesburg, South Africa; Lyon, France; and Kwangju, South Korea. Her work can be found in collections including those of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Carnegie Museum of Art, Castello di Rivoli—Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Turin, Italy, the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Kunsthalle Bremen in Germany.

DIANA THATER IS REPRESENTED BY 1301PE, LOS ANGELES; DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK; AND HAUSER AND WIRTH, NEW YORK.

Photos: Peter Mallet, installation views of *Peonies* at Hauser & Wirth, London, 2011

DIANA THATER: *PEONIES* WAS ORGANIZED BY KATY M. REIS, CURATORIAL ASSISTANT FOR THE WEXNER CENTER FOR THE ARTS.

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Diana Thater: *Peonies*

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ON VIEW THROUGH DECEMBER 30, 2011

Katy M. Reis

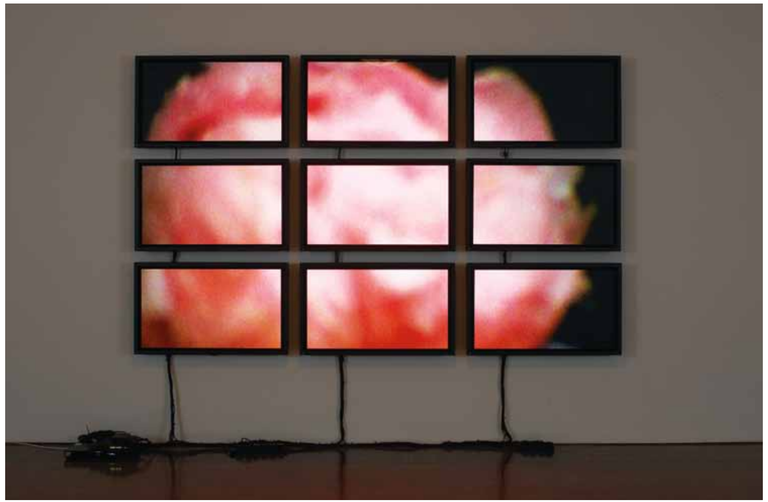
Diana Thater's *Peonies*, a nine-monitor videowall, quietly pans over pink and yellow peony blooms, initially appearing to be a straightforward account of several flowers scattered across a watery surface. However, as in most of Thater's video projects, the technical aspects of the work and the artist's investigations into duration and figure/ground relationships are as compelling as the visual and aesthetic elements of the work.

Thater captures these vibrant flowers by filming with a 16mm camera that has the capability to produce a true filmic double exposure by rewinding and reshooting. The camera meanders from bloom to bloom, initially just as a single shot. But later that shot is overlaid with a ghosted image of presumably the same flowers. The ghosted image reveals Thater's attempt to follow the same path as in her original recording, but it is unclear which path was forged first. As the camera moves among the blooms, the ground is obscured just enough to draw your eye to the negative space. Hastily, your eye tries to decipher whether the blooms are floating in a stream or merely scattered in a puddle before the view shifts focus to the next flower.

The nearly six-minute work was shot on two full rolls of 16mm film. A brief flash of orange and yellow signifies the beginning of the second reel, which takes on a completely different character than the first. Filmed up close, the blooms transform into abstracted washes of almost psychedelic color, morphing from one image to the next, complicating the relationship between the figure and the ground. The blooms become less tangible as physical objects and function instead as a field on which explorations of color, duration, and figure/ground play out. Through a seemingly simple representation of flowers, Thater continues her longstanding inquiry into time and space, using nearly abstract imagery to question our understanding of visual and temporal perception.

In addition to using the rewinding feature of her 16mm camera, Thater employs analogue technology to investigate the difference between capturing color with celluloid film versus recording with digital technology, which uses finite approximations to represent color. Although Thater shot her original footage on celluloid, *Peonies* is a digital presentation—evidenced by the intentionally visible Blu-ray player—and its full-screen views of the peony petals on the second reel give viewers the opportunity to consider how the two recording technologies capture the color spectrum differently. By using different cameras in her work as a whole, Thater critically examines digital color and filmic color, and thus the qualities of film and video themselves. In this respect, Thater is using color to explore the characteristics and capabilities of her medium similar to the way artists like Mark Rothko used color to explore the properties of painting in the 1950s and 1960s.

The 1950s and 1960s, a time of great cultural and political ferment, was also the moment when some artists' practices eventually shifted away from placing importance on materials and instead focused on conceptual investigations. As Pamela Lee argues in *Chronophobia*, the 1960s set the stage for our current understanding of time and speed within digital culture.[1] Among the most widely cited works of the 1960s, Andy Warhol's *Empire* remains a notable example of how art from this period addressed perceptions of time and duration as never before. In 1963 when Warhol tasked Jonas Mekas with filming *Empire*, experimental film was still an emerging medium for the art world. Standing on the forty-fourth floor of the Time-Life building on June 25, Mekas filmed the Empire State Building for over eight hours at 24 frames per second, though the work is shown at 16 frames per second. Effectively creating slow motion through this playback, the work elicits intense feelings of anticipation, anxiety, and even boredom as viewers watch and wait for something (anything!) to happen. This expansion of time within the film alters our notion of linear time, and consequently of real time as well.



Peonies is not a work specifically created in response to Warhol's *Empire*, but an examination of the parallels between these two films sheds light on the way our perceptions of time and technology have changed over the past fifty years. As Lee also points out, Warhol's films *Empire* and *Sleep* are at "one and the same time both representation and experience of duration, both subject and object."[2] The same could be said about Thater's *Peonies*. As in *Empire*, the subject seems immediately apparent—a skyscraper at dusk or peonies in water—but the crux of the work goes far beyond the image on screen. As in most of her work, Thater explores the medium as a subject and is "interested in lost Hollywood filmmaking techniques like double exposures that are now done digitally. The quality of a real double exposure is unmistakable."[3]

She also takes up Warhol's exploration of concepts such as time, but with a decidedly twenty-first-century frame of reference. Where Warhol used an extremely long, static shot to highlight the experience of narrative time, Thater collapses time through double exposure, leaving the viewer without any indication of real time, daytime or nighttime, and thus no sense of linear time at all. In addition to working with temporality as a subject, both works also complicate our perception of the relationship between figure and ground. In *Empire*, the tower seems to be the obvious figure; however, the suspense created by the singular shot for such an extended period of time reveals the true "figure" to be the anticipation of normally minute actions: an office light being turned off or the reflection of the artist in the window. In these fleeting moments, the Empire State Building is suddenly relegated to the background. The conflation and confusion between figure and ground manifests itself through Thater's use of motion in *Peonies*.

As the camera passes from one bloom to the next, viewers are permitted to lose focus for a moment, searching the dark screens for some indication of where these flowers rest. By splitting this image across nine monitors, the search becomes all the more frenetic. Rather than the quiet, anxiety- or anticipation-inducing experience of Warhol's *Empire*, Thater creates a different type of anticipatory moment that requires the viewers to search multiple screens for clues, with eyes darting from one to the next, trying to piece together the full image as well as decipher the location of the blooms.

While technology and ongoing discussions of abstracted time and space often stand at the forefront of discussions about Diana Thater's work, environmentalism and conservation have also been a consistent theme in her art. With years of experience filming animals in their natural habitats and in captivity, Thater contributed her 2008 work *RARE* to the exhibition *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet* organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and the University of California's Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. A sixteen-monitor installation, the work documents many of the endangered species who inhabit the iSimangaliso Wetland Park in South Africa, where Thater filmed the footage in January 2007. Thater notes in an interview for the exhibition catalogue: "My work is a long-term project—I have dedicated all of my life as an artist to the examination and observation of the many kinds of relationships humans have constructed with animals.... Nature is everything culture is not, so I try to enter it in my work in the only way I can—through intense observation and acknowledging in the work (through the inclusion of myself and my guides) my own presence in proximity to the animal subjects."[4]

Thater's interest in conservation parallels that seen in the work of Alexis Rockman, also on view at the Wexner Center galleries during fall 2011. Rockman's vividly expressive paintings acknowledge the potentially impending demise of our ecosystem. Both artists place enormous value on an intense observation of the natural world, and both add elements of critique to their highly nuanced examination of past and current beings in a time of accelerating change to our environment and our technology. Thater states, "[my work] seems to some to be a lament or a tragedy but I am not lamenting, nor do I think nature is tragic. I think it will survive any way it can. Nature *persists* and I persist in her wake."[5] Rockman's primary interest is nature conservation as it has been visualized within traditions of Western artistic representation. Thater, by contrast, folds her environmental concerns into her investigation into near-obsolete technology.

1. Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 4–35. Later in the book (page 275), Lee describes the change in rhetoric in the 1960s, citing Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's 1968 essay about the dematerialization of art, which argues that artists were championing the thinking process and the "ultra-conceptual" and leaving behind the formerly celebrated intuitive process of the abstract expressionists. Notably, artist Douglas Davis began to examine the trajectory in human nature more toward matters of the mind and less toward material, effectively drawing a parallel trajectory to the evolution of art. More than fifty years later, conceptual notions remain relevant to artists such as Diana Thater.
2. Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, 280.
3. Email exchange with the artist, August 9, 2011.
4. Stephanie Hanor, Lucía Sanromán, and Lucinda Barnes, *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet* (Carlsbad, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and the Regents of the University of California, 2008, 55.
5. Email exchange with the artist, August 9, 2011.