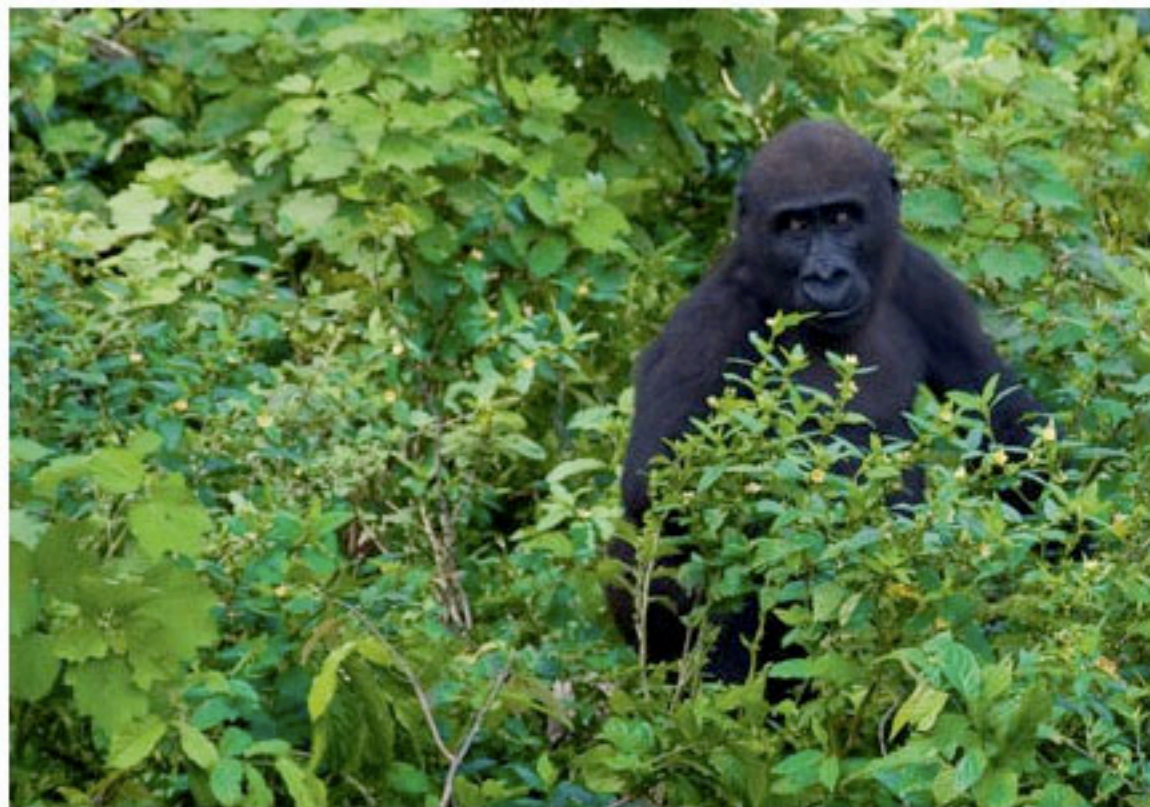


## Current Shows

# Diana Thater

KUNSTHAUS GRAZ, GRAZ, AUSTRIA

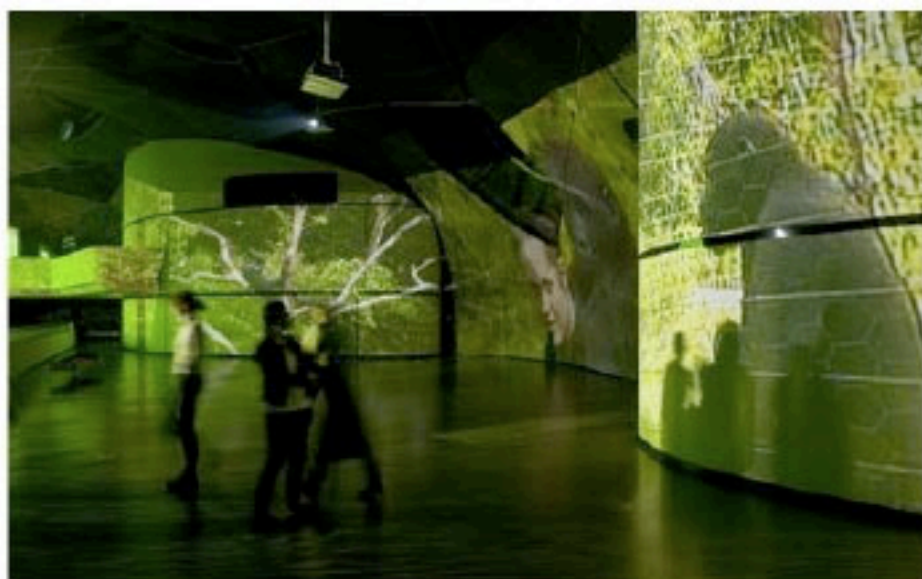


Diana Thater, *gorillagorillagorilla* (2009), production still

For her *gorillagorillagorilla* (2009) installation, Diana Thater has emptied the upper floor of the Graz Kunsthaus, save for several video walls, DVD players and projectors. But what truly lays the space bare is an eerie, visceral silence. Thater completely omits sound from these films, though one may not even notice it at first, since she juxtaposes wall-sized projections of gorillas with jungle brush and chicken wire to a visually rhythmic effect. Images unfold from the walls to the floors and ceilings and into each another, forming abstract, disembodied patterns that suspend visitors in a liquid, green jungle.

Commissioned by the Kunsthaus Graz and the Natural History Museum, London, Thater spent a week last October filming in Cameroon's Mefou National Park lowland gorilla reserve, where the endangered species is protected from bushmeat hunters. It's a new animal for Thater, who has previously worked with tamed zebras and wolves and wild dolphins in questioning the cultural construction of nature – both animal and human. Using film, video and still cameras, she spied on the gangly apes, tussling and swinging on double-bars, and, much of the time, sitting still. Except for one filmed double-exposure, there are no special effects but simple angle shots, zooming and panning to include close-ups of their hands, flattened nostrils and the fence. Melded together, the non-narrative images feel incidental and *National Geographic*-like.

The spatial aspects of Thater's installation are less effective here than in her earlier work. At the Vienna Secession, for example, she twisted the spaces by projecting dolphins, liberated from the video frame, on a tilted ellipse (*Delphine*, 1999), dissolving corners by lighting entire rooms with saturated colours. At the Dia Center in New York, she projected images of bees based on the quantum mathematics of their flight patterns, creating a complex choreography for viewers, where images were only fully visible from specific points in the room (*Knots + Surfaces*, 2001).



Exhibition view. Photograph: N. Lackner, Landesmuseum Joanneum

But unlike both the Secession and Dia Center, the exhibition space of the Kunsthaus Graz challenges the conventions of minimal, white-cube architecture; corners and clear ceiling-to-floor delineations have been substituted for curved walls. Despite the similarity between Thater's ideas and those of the Kunsthaus architect Peter Cook, the filmic volumes Thater usually creates feel punctured.

Thater works by challenging common spatial perception in a disconcerting way. But since this amorphous space already calls attention to itself, it seems the architects have already done part of Thater's job for her. The space remains neutral rather than providing a productive friction for the work. Thater does not achieve a baroque complexity with her projections; viewers congregate in the centre of the gallery instead of roving about the room to view the successive films. The spaces that she usually merges – the flat, video space, the space inside our heads, and the real space enclosed by architecture – remain separate. As immersive as her oversized projections are, space as a medium is never actualized.

But while the installation doesn't fulfill the physical potential of the space, Thater still manages to pull us in psychologically. Through her avoidance of sound and playing on our resemblance to the gorilla, she taps into our consciousness and merges it with those of the gorillas. Her use of familiar-looking images, played without audio, are initially a source of irritation but then rouse viewers to actively participate in filling in the gap with their own narratives. Meanwhile, imagination and memory are conjured through Thater's use of the home-video evoking qualities of grainy Super 8 film.



Exhibition view. Photograph: N. Lackner, Landesmuseum Joanneum

One video wall plays footage of a sit-down interview with a Bristol Zoo Gardens zoologist, conducted by Thater. He speaks blankly into the camera – a staple scene on the Nature Channel – but because Thater forgoes audio, she flattens the difference between the scientist and the object of study. Our attention turns to the ape who sits neatly beside the expert, gamely imitating his gestures, and who has now entered into his own subjectivity.

On one video wall, a gorilla perches in a tree, knees drawn up. He stares into Thater's camera, abruptly looks away, then back again. In between, he diverts himself with picking his toes. We could say he's furtively curious, that he is similar to Thater herself, another voyeur perched on a nearby platform (as seen in another video). But the multiplicity of images Thater projects renders it difficult to interpret the gorillas' behaviour – an impenetrability of the animal environment which Giorgio Agamben terms as being open, yet not revealed, or openable, and which puts into question any excessively anthropocentric interpretations of the apes. If anything, after studying the gorilla's gaze, we begin to sense Thater's presence on the other side of the lens, the gorilla as an eerie self-portrait of herself.

In the final space of the exhibit – a narrow, glassed-in room above the exhibition space, offering panoramic views of the city – Thater has detached the green of the jungle and applied it to the outside world by covering the windows with Lee filters of the same hue. It's a quiet ending to an immense show, an attempt to prolong the perspective through which we viewed the jungle, as well as a transformative experience where viewers, in transit between two worlds, find themselves belonging to neither.