



Althea Thauberger/MATRIX 215

A Memory Lasts Forever

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**University of California
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**Presentation House Gallery
 North Vancouver, B.C.**

MATRIX

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Four teenage girls clad in bikinis and jeans stand in the middle of a suburban street. It is nighttime, and the theatrically lit scene reveals faces full of anguish. Why are they there, and how are we, as the audience, intended to respond? Are we to take seriously the girls, their emotion, and their reality? The work of Althea Thauberger, a Vancouver-based artist working in video, addresses such diverse themes as popular culture, teenage angst and self-awareness, romantic ideals of nature, and the roles gender and spiritual belief play in forming identity. But her perspective is itself not entirely clear. Is she looking at adolescence from the viewpoint of an adult? Or are her collaborations, primarily with female youth who respond to newspaper advertisements, vehicles to fulfill the desires of the participants? And if so, to what end? Thauberger's work succeeds in its duality and tension, balancing an analytical view and the melodrama that often defines girlhood, honesty and theatricality, banality and the otherworldly, art-historical discourse and the lack of artifice in her untutored collaborators.¹ Perhaps most importantly, Thauberger offers no conclusions.

The title of Thauberger's MATRIX project, *A Memory Lasts Forever*, is taken from the lyrics of a song written by one of the nonprofessional actors with whom she worked to create the video installation. She auditioned twenty-five girls who responded to a casting call distributed to musical theater groups in Greater Vancouver. Four were selected, and the group met weekly for five months. In the artist's words, "The heart of the work is in my interaction with the girls and in the fact that they are interpreting my own story." (Thauberger often starts with personal experiences; as she says, "I would hope within the specificity there could be broader social and political implications."²) The story, drawn from Thauberger's youth and performed as a fragmented narrative with four individualized versions of the same event, involves a tragic incident that forces the adolescents to confront death. The subsequent actions and small-scale transformations of the characters are motivated by dread, courage, naïveté, and love. Each performer has written a version of the narrative with herself as the central character, as well as a song—a reflective prayer—performed by the group and set to music written for the project by the Washington D.C.–based composer Bob Massey.

The four teenagers spend the evening getting very drunk at one girl's home while her parents are away. Deciding to go for a swim, they discover the family dog drowned in the pool. They respond by praying. The prayers are songs staged in the style of musical theater. (Music often figures prominently in Thauberger's videos, as both a social and psychological construct.) Two prayers are overtly Christian: "If by calling out Your Name, will redemption be what I find"; "Heavenly Father, it's me, Sky." Another is a wish: "I wish I may, I wish I might, undo the things that happened tonight." Still another is a reflection of the girls' friendships intermixed with New Age elements: "You build, you birth, you bring form, you raise with might never again shall I kneel and cower."

Cover: *A Memory Lasts Forever* (production still), 2004; singlescreen DVD installation with sound; courtesy of the artist.



A Memory Lasts Forever explores adolescence as a time defined by the need to communicate and the desire for visibility. The title further locates the events within the paradigm of girlhood, reinforcing the idea of the teenage years as a time in which we are barely conscious of duration and mortality. For example, an inaccurate sense that things will always be as they are leads to an inability to perceive that geeks will not always be geeks and that those most popular will not always reign. There is a mirroring of loss, psychological and tangible, that occurs in the film: loss of youthful innocence as well as loss (of the pet) through accident. Loss creates an absence, and "those that suffer it may never know why it occurs. Sometimes, consolation is then sought for that very unknowing. Poet Alan Shapiro explained that the act of writing poetry after the death of his brother was, he said, the 'transformation of what I suffered passively into something that I could actively make.' Similarly, the girls pictured are involved in 'active making.'"³

In *Songstress* (2001–02), the project that preceded *A Memory Lasts Forever*, Thauberger employed a similar methodology: an advertisement in a local paper seeking female singer-songwriters aged seventeen to twenty-five. She had their songs recorded professionally and then placed the women in a lush natural environment to lip synch. The camera, which remains static, refuses any commentary as, at least initially, does the artist herself. Critic Jim Ellis wrote, "Unsettling questions are raised by the songstresses' sincere performances: why are the most heartfelt emotions the most clichéd? How is it that the most earnest attempts at individuality so often result in sameness?"⁴ The vulnerability and sense of accomplishment found in the performers is delightful to watch. And it is in the pleasure the viewer feels that the critical questions are turned back onto themselves for us to contemplate. In another, similarly haunting work, *not afraid to die* (2001), a young woman sits in front of a diorama at a natural history museum banally eating a health bar she

A Memory Lasts Forever (production still), 2004; singlescreen DVD installation with sound; courtesy of the artist. Photo: James Prior.



has removed from her backpack. This simple effort is set to an a cappella soundtrack of the artist singing the words of the title. The tune is catchy and lingers in the viewer's mind as both a youthful challenge to mortality and a resolute mantra.

In these works Thauberger's role is primarily editorial. She selects the participants and the locations but the young women are free to express themselves in their actions, gestures, dress, and general self-presentation.⁵ The generosity displayed toward her subjects parallels that of New York–based artist Katy Grannan, who creates photographic portraits of people who have answered ads she places in regional newspapers calling for "Art Models." Working collaboratively with her subjects, Grannan empowers them to suggest poses, locations, and states of undress. Like Thauberger's videos, Grannan's photographs are sexy and provocative, empathetic and elegiac. Empowering their participants is something Thauberger also shares with the artist Harrell Fletcher. In his most recent project, *Learning to Love You More*, a collaboration with Miranda July, the general public responds to assignments such as "Assignment 14: Write your life story in less than a day" and "Assignment 35: Ask your family to describe what you do." Further assignments often reflect or respond to past ones so that a large community of self-selected individuals begins to form. Like Fletcher and July's, Thauberger's projects provide "a container in which to examine the desires of the participants as they arrive at a language of individual expression."⁶ Thauberger can also be identified with the community-based performative works of Jeremy Deller and Christian Jankowski and the social documentary photographs and videos of Rineke Dijkstra. By working with "untutored" collaborators, these artists also question the perceived or inherent elitism associated with art making and thereby present work that is "real" and potentially humbling.

A Memory Lasts Forever (production still), 2004; singlescreen DVD installation with sound; courtesy of the artist.



In answering a question about what is meant by the idea of spirituality in art, artist and critic J.W. Mahoney proposed an analogous term, “anagogic,” which means something that “leads upwards” from a state of relative ignorance to relative awareness.⁷ He writes that “artists are now feeling accountable to the transpersonal—not ‘God’ exactly, but to something larger, even, than answering to the demands of an art world imperative to ironize the known.”⁸ The work of many contemporary artists addressing spiritual issues⁹ seems to suggest a return to the personal as, among other things, an optimistic means to effect positive social change. Art historian Glen R. Brown argues that “pragmatic spiritual art,” of the sort practiced by Thauberger in *A Memory Lasts Forever*, “is clearly a Postmodern development, seizing on the concept of relativity in order to argue for an ability to reinvent the world.”¹⁰

Does Thauberger posit that religious practice, however obliquely defined, has a place in contemporary art? Is she equating art and prayer in their mutually reverential qualities, suggesting each as potentially offering solace in times of trauma? Acknowledging the theatricality of her plot, she offers stereotypical elements of “enlightenment”: abjection, moral confrontation, and spiritual redemption. But she herself may be subtly or not so subtly highlighting the ways in which people find consolation for personal tragedy, and the potential such events hold for transformation. Comparable to Gnostics, a term used by early Christian writers to mean those with “higher, esoteric knowledge of spiritual things,” artists are often similarly defined as those who have an ability to see with heightened clarity. Thauberger asks questions rather than answers them. Neither confirming nor denying the role of art to effect change, hold a transformative power, or be equated with the divine, she is an art-world agnostic.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

A Memory Lasts Forever (production still), 2004; singlescreen DVD installation with sound; courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kerry Tribe.



¹ Althea Thauberger, e-mail to the author, December 13, 2004: “I am interested in the possibility that a vacillation between being emotionally and critically engaged can create a destabilizing and transformative experience.”

² Elissa Barnard, “Thauberger explores youth, nature,” *The Halifax Herald Limited*, October 13, 2004, quoted at www.agns.gov.ns.ca/pdf/Thauberger.pdf

³ Christina M. Gillis, e-mail to Karen Bennett, December 5, 2004.

⁴ Jim Ellis, “Songstress,” Truck Gallery brochure, 2003.

⁵ Alexander Varty, “Songstresses Invent Selves,” *The Georgia Straight*, November 7, 2002.

⁶ Lisa Baldissera, “Althea Thauberger: Sobey Art Award 2004,” quoted at www.sobeyartaward.ca/news/documents/Thauberger.bio.pdf

⁷ J. W. Mahoney, “The Word ‘God’ (in Transmodern Times),” *New Art Examiner* 26, no.6 March 1999, p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹ Several exhibitions have been organized on this subject, including *Faith: The Impact of the Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium* (The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT, 2000); *100 Artists See God* (Independent Curators Incorporated, 2004–2006); *The Invisible Thread: Buddhist Spirit in Contemporary Art* (Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Staten Island, New York, 2004); and *Five Artists, Five Faiths: Spirituality in Contemporary Art* (Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004).

¹⁰ Glen R. Brown, “Toward a Topography of the Spiritual in Contemporary Art,” *New Art Examiner* 26, no. 6, March 1999, p. 27.

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A Memory Lasts Forever (production still), 2004; singlescreen DVD installation with sound; courtesy of the artist. Photo: James Prior.



Althea Thauberger was born in Saskatoon, Canada, in 1970. She received her B.F.A. in photography from Concordia University in Montréal in 2000, and her M.F.A. in Studio Arts from the University of Victoria in 2002. She currently lives and works in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2004
White Columns, New York, NY
2003
La Centrale, Montréal, Canada
2002
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, Canada
Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, Canada
2001
Helen Pitt Gallery, Vancouver, Canada

Selected Group Exhibitions

2005
“inSITE 05,” San Diego, CA/Tijuana, Mexico
“Décarie,” Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montréal, Canada
“Emotion Pictures,” Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, Belgium
2004
“Sobey Art Award Exhibition,” Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Canada
“Land of the Free,” Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, CA
“I Wanna Be a Popstar,” Loop - raum für aktuelle kunst, Berlin, Germany
2003
“Baja to Vancouver,” Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA; San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada; CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco, CA
“I am a curator,” Chisenhale Gallery, London, England
“Orange,” Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Saint-Hyacinthe, Canada
“Bambi,” Institute of Contemporary Art, video lounge, Philadelphia, PA
“soundtracks,” Blackwood Gallery, Toronto, Canada; Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Canada; Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Canada; Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa, Canada
“Commodius Evolution,” Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto, Canada
2002
“Satan, oscillate my metallic sonatas,” Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada

Songstress (video still), 2002; 16mm to DVD; courtesy of Susan Hobbs Gallery and the artist.



Selected Bibliography

Dick, Terence. “Girl Trouble: Teenage Girls in Contemporary Art.” *Border Crossings*, May 2004, 76–81.
Fisher, Jennifer. “Althea Thauberger—Songstress.” *Parachute*, Fall 2003, 138.
Hall, Emily. “Naturally.” *The Stranger*, October 16, 2003, 13.
Helfand, Glen. “Baja to Vancouver.” *Artforum*, December 2003, 150.
Laurence, Robin. “Adults Evoke Childish Impulses.” *The Georgia Straight*, December 12, 2002, 36.
Lovejoy, Bess. “Strange Animals.” *The Stranger*, December 4, 2003, 13.
Roy, Marina. “Althea Thauberger.” *Canadian Art*, Spring 2003, 100.
Varty, Alexander. “Songstresses Invent Selves.” *The Georgia Straight*, November 7, 2002, 36.

Work in MATRIX

A Memory Lasts Forever, 2004
Digital video
Heavenly Father, it’s me Sky
Starlight, Starbright
True Friends Stay Together
Is it ever too late to ask God for Forgiveness?
Each silkscreen

Kory, 2004
Reese, 2004
Sky, 2004
Aleta, 2004
Each: C-print, 19 x 19 in.

All works courtesy of the artist. Digital video made in collaboration with Gessica Griffiths, Gemma Isaac, Kaoru Matsushita, and Natalie Needham.

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not afraid to die (production still), 2001; 16mm to DVD; courtesy of the artist and Tracey Lawrence Gallery.