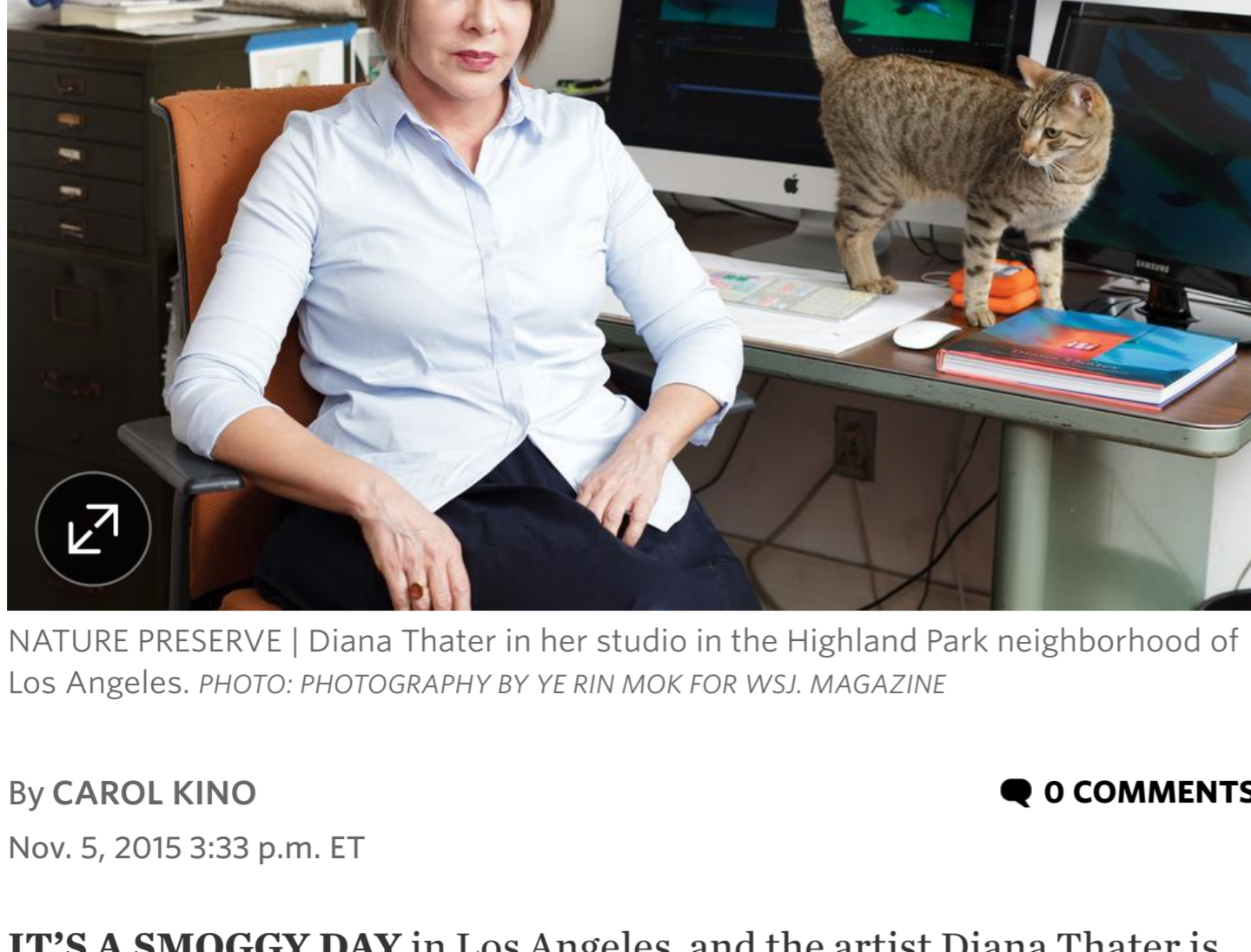


WSJ MAGAZINE | FEATURE | ART TALK

Film and Video Artist Diana Thater's First Retrospective at LACMA

Known for projects that explore nature and the cosmos, Diana Thater is focus of Los Angeles County Museum of Art's largest exhibition focused on a female artist



NATURE PRESERVE | Diana Thater in her studio in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHY BY YE RIN MOK FOR WSJ MAGAZINE

By CAROL KINO
Nov. 5, 2015 3:33 p.m. ET

0 COMMENTS

IT'S A SMOGGY DAY in Los Angeles, and the artist Diana Thater is walking up the steep, winding path toward the Griffith Observatory, one of the city's most recognizable landmarks. Passing a gauntlet of tourists snapping photos with selfie sticks, Thater, 53, says she realizes the destination seems cliché. But as a self-avowed movie buff who creates film and video installations, Thater is also clearly reveling in the moment, pointing out the James Dean statue, the best place to get a shot of the Hollywood sign and the precise location on the observatory steps where Sal Mineo's character bit the dust in *Rebel Without a Cause*. "When I was a child I was obsessed with movies," says Thater. "I must have seen thousands." (Perhaps that's the inspiration for her severe bob, which is reminiscent of the hairstyle of silent film star Theda Bara.)

Thater's interest in the observatory runs deeper than the role its Art Deco dome has played in movie lore. Known for projects that explore nature and the cosmos, frequently from the perspective of creatures like whales, wolves or bees, she has often found both inspiration and raw material in the observatory itself. On display inside are similar images from NASA that Thater has worked with: Her 2000 installation *Six-Color Video Wall* presents six versions of the sun in primary and tertiary colors, on flickering cube monitors stacked in a room of luminous purple light. The sun and moon, their colors swapped, flank the video portraits of hooded birds of prey in her 2008 installation *A Cast of Falcons*. Thater even shot parts of her 2015 exhibition *Science, Fiction* in the Griffith's planetarium; it recasts an art gallery as a spaceship, combining imagery of the Milky Way with footage of dung beetles burrowing across the earth, guided by the stars.



A maquette of the LACMA show PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHY BY YE RIN MOK

Many such pieces will appear in her upcoming show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination* (opening November 22 and running through February), which is the first U.S. retrospective focused on her work. Although she has shown widely in museums—with projects at Dia Art Foundation's erstwhile Chelsea space and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as a 2004 show at Germany's Kunsthalle Bremen—this is also Thater's first major survey in Los Angeles, the city that has been her home since 1988, when she moved there for graduate school at Pasadena's Art Center College of Design. (She grew up on Long Island and received a B.A. in art history from New York University.) She didn't initially intend to be a moving-image artist, but, she says, "when I did pick up the video camera during my first term in grad school, I never went back." The show is significant for LACMA, too: It had already mounted retrospectives for iconic Los Angeles artists like **James Turrell in 2013** and sculptor Noah Purifoy earlier this year, but this is the museum's largest solo exhibition ever for a woman. (Concurrently, the Aspen Art Museum will show Thater's 2009 video installation *gorillagorillagorilla*, shot in Cameroon's Mefou National Park.)

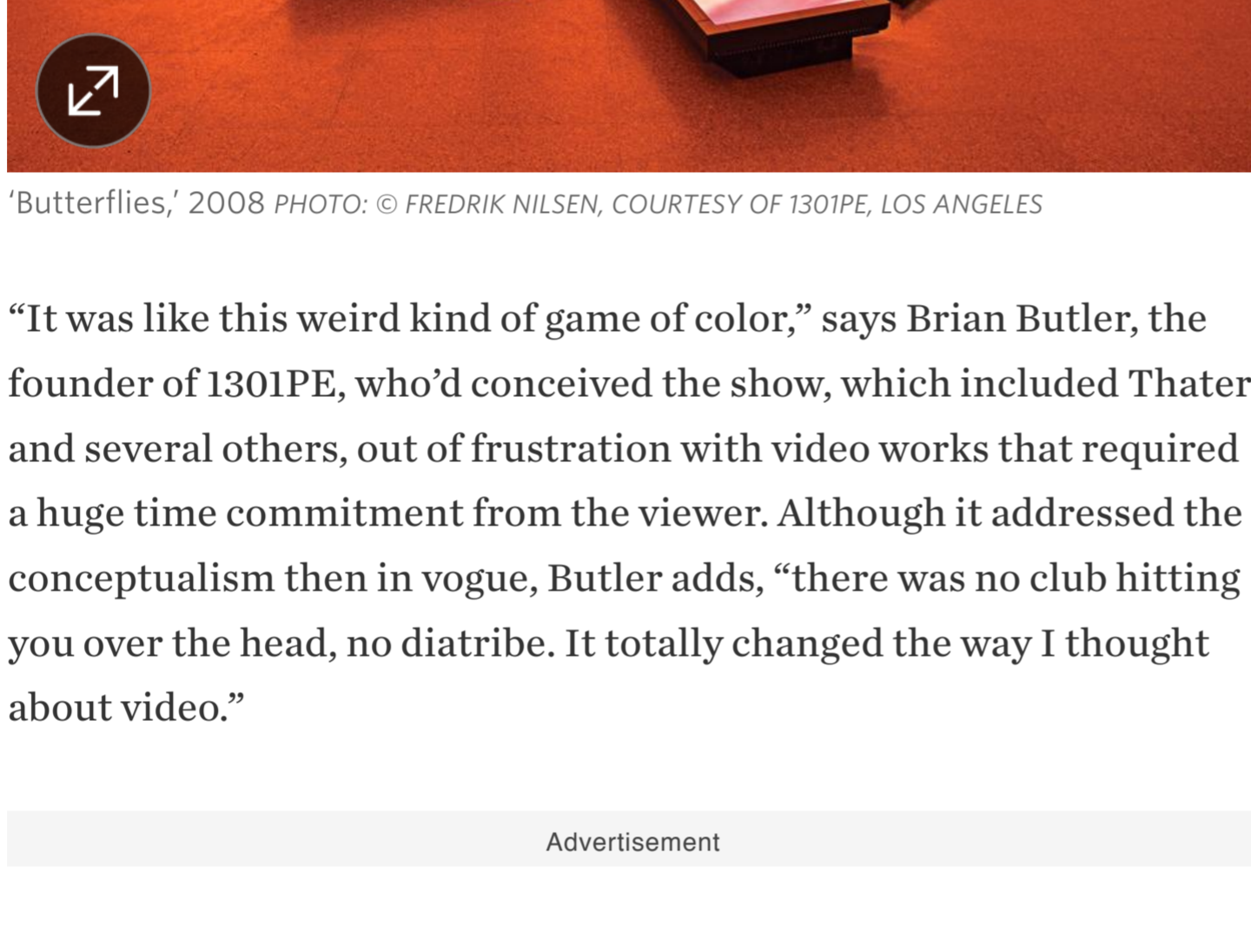
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Michael Govan, LACMA's director, credits her with being the pioneer who freed video from the confines of the monitor

and the anonymous, illusive black-box environment. Instead, Thater has used video as the basis for immersive installations by projecting footage onto every surface of a space, while also revealing the audiovisual equipment and incorporating the viewer into the piece. "Now you see it everywhere," Govan says, including among Thater's contemporaries like Douglas Gordon and Pipilotti Rist. "But people forget where that came from and how really breakthrough, innovative and influential Diana's work has been."

What first drew the art world's attention was Thater's lushly cinematic hand, as evidenced in her first major work, *OO Fifi, Five Days in Claude Monet's Garden, Part 1* (1992), produced soon after she earned her M.F.A. in 1990. Using footage she'd shot in the garden of Monet's house in Giverny, France, during a residency there, Thater transformed a room at 1301PE Gallery in Los Angeles into a jewel box blossoming with red, yellow and blue flowers. She did this by manually splitting the image into primary colors rather than in post-production, skewing lenses inside the projector. The next month, for the second part of the piece, shown at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, in Santa Monica, California, she put the imagery back together again, using three separate projectors, one for each color, and focusing them together to create a fuzzily impressionistic floral environment. Thater's methodology became clear when viewers entered the room and found themselves lit up in different colors.

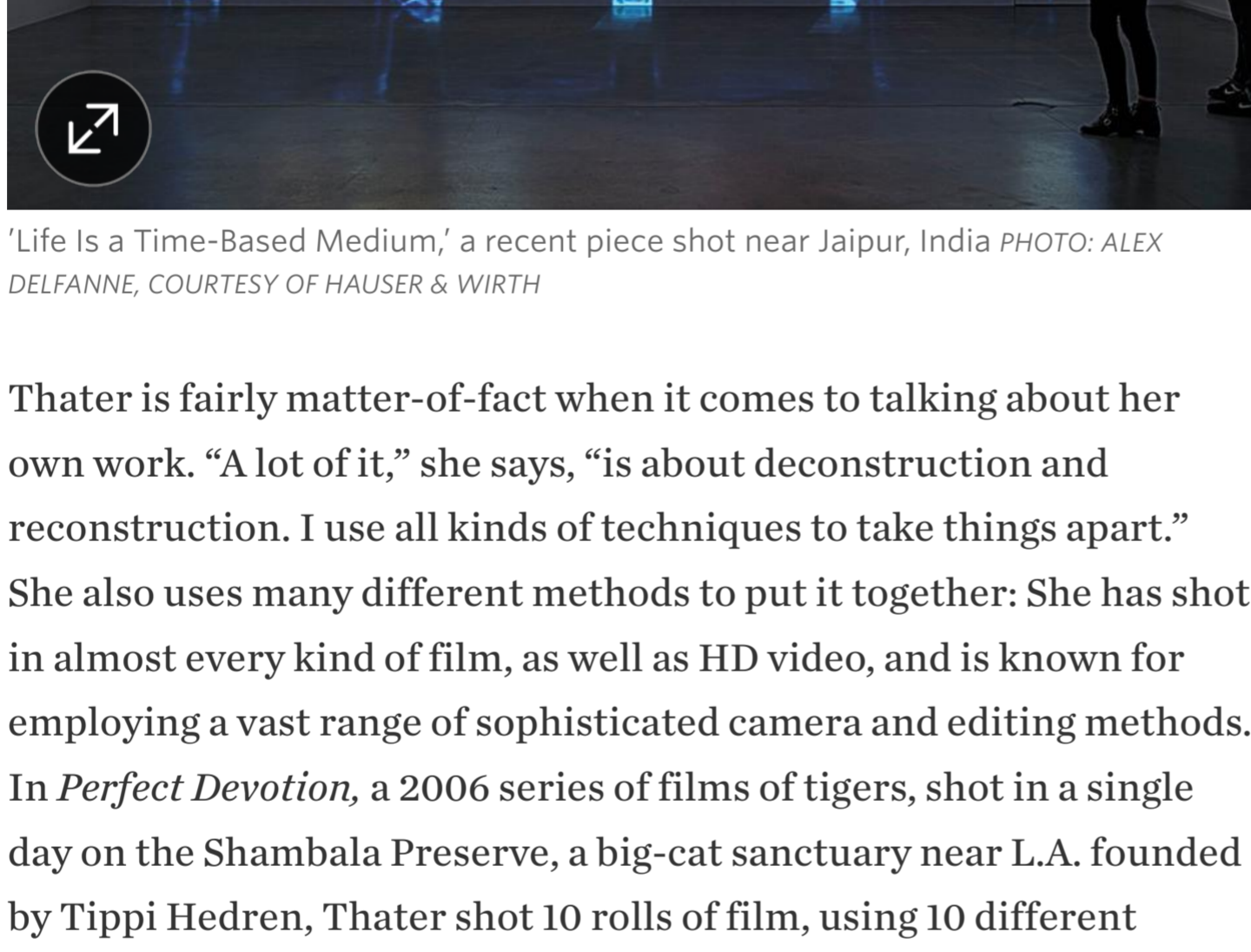


'Butterflies,' 2008 PHOTO: © FREDRIK NILSEN, COURTESY OF 1301PE, LOS ANGELES

"It was like this weird kind of game of color," says Brian Butler, the founder of 1301PE, who'd conceived the show, which included Thater and several others, out of frustration with video works that required a huge time commitment from the viewer. Although it addressed the conceptualism then in vogue, Butler adds, "there was no club hitting you over the head, no diatribe. It totally changed the way I thought about video."

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Govan had a similar response some years later when he saw *knots + surfaces*, first presented at New York City's Dia in 2001. The piece transformed the space into a blaze of supersaturated color as honeybees buzzed, swarmed and danced, anchored by a giant orange daisy sitting on monitors. (As with most of Thater's work, she shot it herself—in this case at the home of an artist in Davis, California. She hires a small crew only when necessary for more complex situations such as operating a crane or shooting underwater.) "I thought, 'This is what the future of art looks like,'" says Govan, then Dia's director. Not only did Thater seem to have "absorbed the lessons from both sides of the '60s"—video artists like Nam June Paik and light and space artists like Robert Irwin—but "you weren't just looking at the piece. You were completely inside it."



'Life Is a Time-Based Medium,' a recent piece shot near Jaipur, India PHOTO: ALEX DELFANNE, COURTESY OF HAUSER & WIRTH

Thater is fairly matter-of-fact when it comes to talking about her own work. "A lot of it," she says, "is about deconstruction and reconstruction. I use all kinds of techniques to take things apart." She also uses many different methods to put it together: She has shot in almost every kind of film, as well as HD video, and is known for employing a vast range of sophisticated camera and editing methods. In *Perfect Devotion*, a 2006 series of films of tigers, shot in a single day on the Shambala Preserve, a big-cat sanctuary near L.A. founded by Tippi Hedren, Thater shot 10 rolls of film, using 10 different camera techniques. She says, "I wanted the entire series to function as a kind of essay on how time is constructed in film."

Over the years, Thater, who loves and is fascinated by animals, has frequently investigated the vantage point of other living beings. "Her recent work speaks to what we're most concerned about—environmental and ecological issues," says Lynne Cooke, senior curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., who is organizing the show with Christine Y. Kim, a curator at LACMA. In *Delphine* (1999), Thater evokes a dolphin's-eye view of the world. It depicts the mammals and two visions of the sun seen through water; scenes overlap onto the floor, walls and ceiling to create the illusion of being undersea while also suggesting dolphins' unique combination of sonar and retinal perception.



'Delphine,' 1999 PHOTO: © ROMAN MENSING/ARTOCOCOE

Thater spent months consulting with the dolphin rights activist Ric O'Barry to create the piece. She and her husband, musician and artist T. Kelly Mason, soon became his official videographers, collaborating with him on *Welcome to Taiji*, a 2004 documentary exposing dolphin slaughter and captivity in Japan, which later inspired the 2008 Oscar-winning documentary *The Cove*. "My whole career as an artist is a succession of me studying something and making work about it; studying something else and making work about it," says Thater, sitting in her home in Highland Park, as three of her cats—all rescues—prowl and purr around her ankles. Her work with O'Barry, she says, "gave me the ability to have a direct effect on the world."

More recently, Thater has taken to building architectural environments, as she did for the most recent piece in the show, *Life Is a Time-Based Medium* (2015). After traveling this past year to the 18th-century Galtaji temples near Jaipur, India, a Hindu pilgrimage site partly dedicated to the monkey god Hanuman, she created an installation that replicates the facade, allowing visitors to walk through a facsimile of the building's arched doorway.

Once inside, you encounter another film, this one of a darkened movie theater, whose screen plays footage of the wild monkeys that, coincidentally, live near the temple—all of them rhesus macaques, so close to humans that they are used in scientific experiments. As the dark-eyed creatures, blown up on the silver screen, groom themselves and gaze at the camera, there's a weird sense of recognition. In the front row you can see a single person—Thater, with her bob—gazing back at them.

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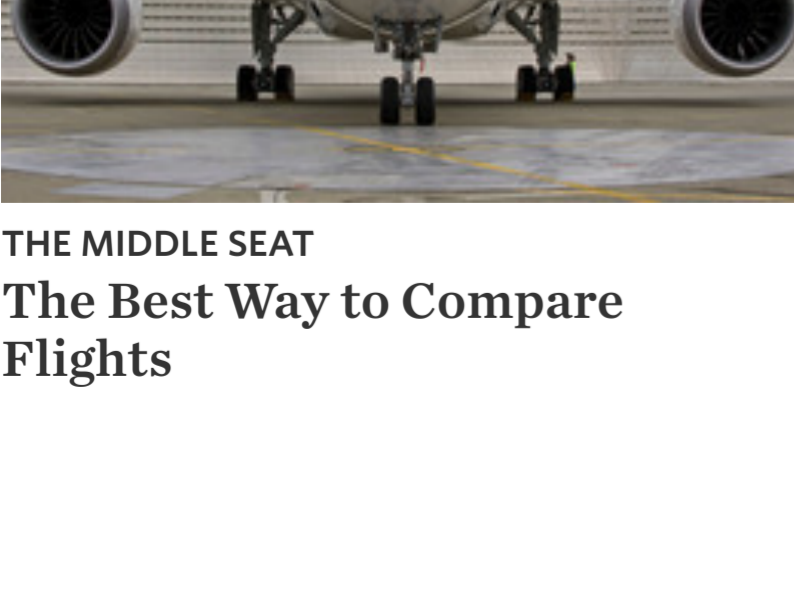
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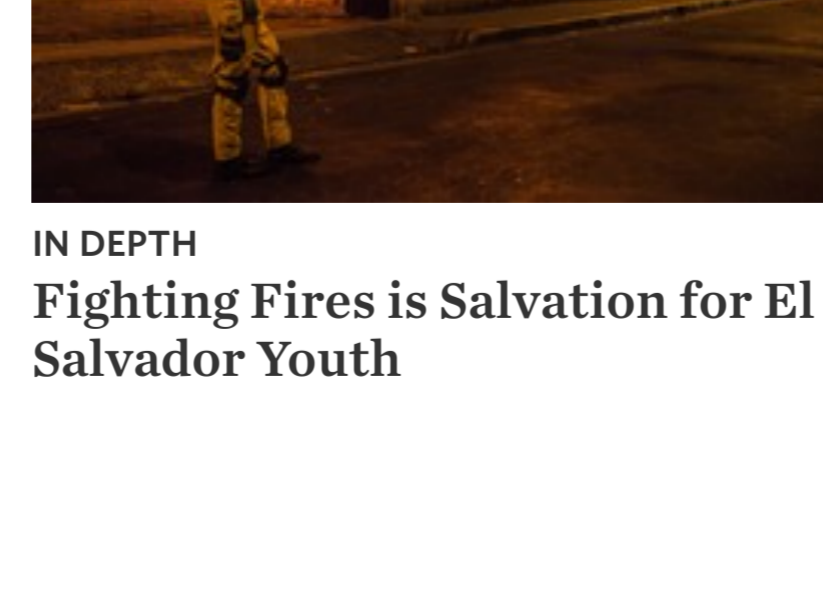
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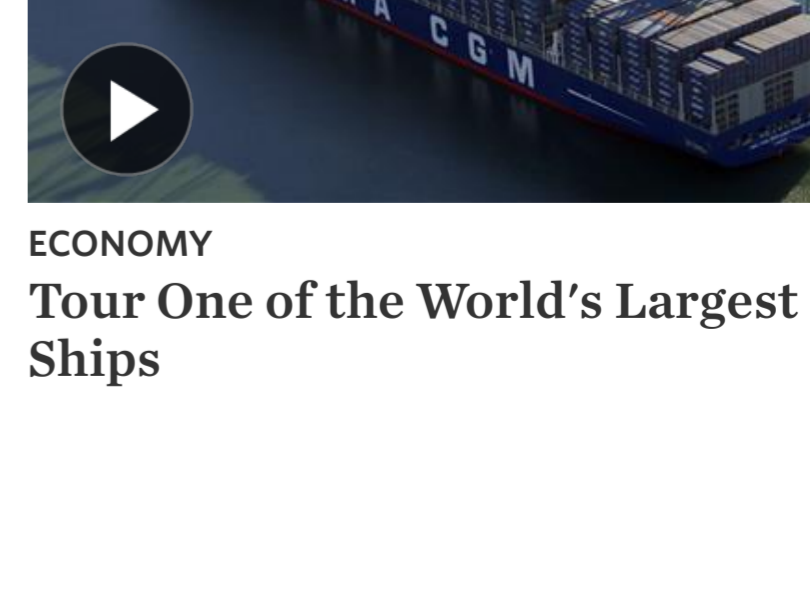
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