

Conversation with Daniel Steegmann Mangrané

* Fábio Zucker

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané



“When I saw an external object, my consciousness that I was seeing it would remain between me and it, surrounding it with a thin spiritual border that prevented me from ever touching its substance directly; for it would somehow evaporate before I could make contact with it, just as an incandescent body that is brought into proximity with something wet never actually touches its moisture, since it is always preceded by a zone of evaporation”

PROUST, Marcel. Swann’s Way Vol. 1. London: Vintage Classics, 1996, p. 98

The first time I met Daniel we were having dinner at a Chinese restaurant in the Liberdade neighbourhood of São Paulo. We were seated at a large table, shortly after the opening of the 30th São Paulo Biennial, in 2012, where he was exhibiting his watercolours, Lichtzwang, and the video 16mm. There were few Brazilians at the dinner and I was busy talking to the foreigners who I had brought directly from work so I didn’t have the opportunity to talk to Daniel at the time.

However, I had the chance to get to know him during the workshops and meetings he hosted at Universidade de Verão, an experimental art and theory school run in partnership with Capacete Entretenimentos, in Rio de Janeiro, in 2012 and 2013. These debates were crucial for better understanding the issues that interest him as an artist, as well as his work.

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané was born in Barcelona in 1977. He has been living and working in Brazil since 2004. This interview contributes to a wider research project, which focuses on the creation of the image of the other – the creation of what is perceived as otherness - throughout the history of art. This research (which I am also developing as an academic essay) engages with different fields of knowledge, such as anthropology and history of art, always centering on political perspectives.

In this conversation about Mangrané’s work, we have attempted to establish a relationship between these different fields by instigating a series of reflections that are dear to anthropology, such as the plurality of ontologies, Perspectivism and questions concerning certain modern divisions, such as the dichotomy between nature and culture or even, in relation to this, the dichotomy between subject and object.

The interview aims to flow from a dialogue with Mangrané and with his work. This type of dialogue, which evokes a sort of contemporary anthropological

practice, allows fluidity in the themes approached. A convergence of layers is present in conversations about specific works (Phasmides, 16mm, Lichtzwang and the publications of Abstract Specific) that attempt to understand the ways they relate to discussions in the fields of anthropology, semiotics, biology and the notion of abstraction itself.

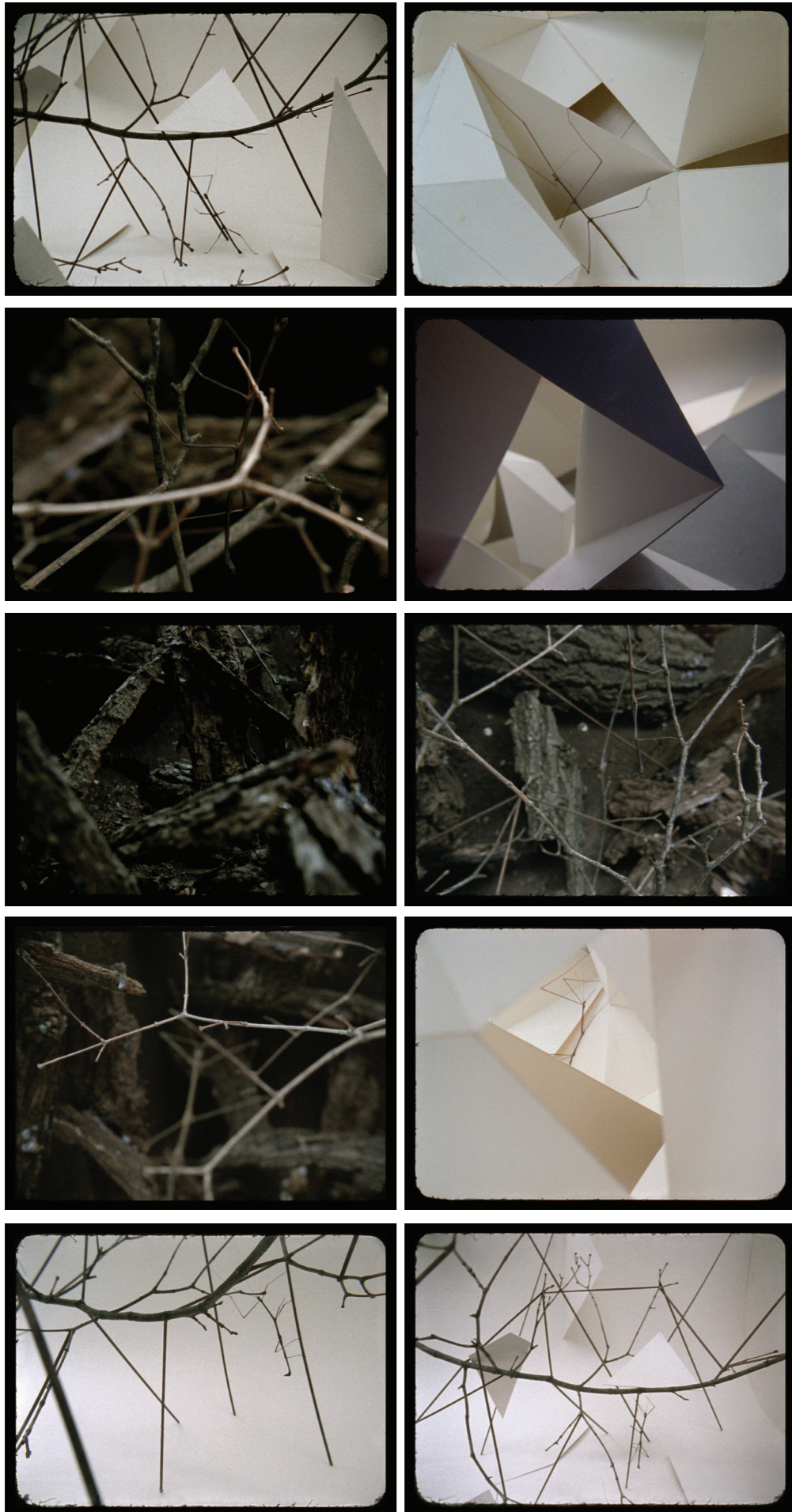
The following text is the result of this conversation, which began informally in January 2013 and was expanded throughout the year via written and spoken interviews.

Fábio Zucker: Could you tell me about the origins of your work Phasmides, your solo show at Galeria Mendes Wood DM in April? I’d like to know more about how you came up with this game of camouflage and the project in general.

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané: I’ll start with the project’s origins. I’m deeply interested in the relationships between nature and culture, which are always present - often in a very formal way - and derive from the opposition between a natural and chaotic form, on one hand, and a cultural and organised form on the other hand.

For example, in my work Equal, which I developed at Ateliê 397, I cut a straight line in the cemented floor and let plants grow inside the groove. This theme can also be seen in my film 16mm, in which a camera traces a perfectly straight line through the chaos of the jungle whilst being engulfed by the forest.





Phasmides
16mm film transferred to HD video, color, mute
22'41" (projection size: 130x95 cm.)
2008-2012

This formal opposition between cultural and natural elements is always present but, at the same time, I try to break with it by showing that the geometrical form can be organic, and that the organic form is, in fact, also a geometric form that is extremely more complex. This is an attempt to think about the relationships between forms, rather than about the forms themselves.

The stick insect proved very fitting for many reasons. It all began at the Museu do Açude, in Rio de Janeiro, where I came across a stick insect in an empty swimming pool. I was wandering around and I was absolutely amazed when I saw it. I had seen a stick insect before, but I had never seen one so close, looking so much like a living stick. This was an intense encounter for me.

The stick insect inhabits the margins: it is obviously an animal, but it truly resembles the object it imitates. You're unsure if you can grab it and split it like a stick or if it's going to bite you like an animal. Anyway, I was fascinated looking at it when I suddenly realised it was not able to get out of the swimming pool. It had fallen in there and I was pretty sure it wouldn't be able to scale the walls on its own.

I grabbed a twig to help it out of the pool. As soon as I placed the twig on the floor the insect climbed onto it. At this point, I turned back to ask my friends to wait a little and when I turned back to the stick, the insect appeared to have vanished. Had it jumped away? I was worried I was going to step on it, but it wasn't on the floor. I looked again at the stick, shook it, and, in fact, the insect was still there.

In many ways this experience had a significant impact on the way I think about images.

FZ: The term 'Phasmida', which is the name of the artwork and the order of insects that resemble sticks and leaves, suggests a game that, in your work, is developed with an insect that can be camouflaged both amongst 'natural objects' (even if these are removed from their environments) and 'artificial objects' (abstract geometric forms) that you build. I would like to know more about how you thought about this camouflage game in your work.

DSM: My fascination with the stick insect results from a wider question concerning the status of the image: how can an image be so strong and so fragile at the same time? I thought a lot about this. The event with the stick insect happened around four years ago, and since then I wanted to create a work with it. When I started to make films, I thought that there was a sort of connection between the insect and film as a medium, given the image's inherent fragility. I began to research about the insect with the idea of making a film, and I learned that the stick insect belongs to the order called Phasmida, a word that is already interesting on its own, as it has the same etymologic root as the word 'phantom' meaning apparition.

Shortly afterwards, I came across an amazing text by George Didi-Huberman, a philosopher I really admire and who had already helped me think about the issue of image fragility.

FZ: What was the text? And how did it influence you in the research you were starting?

DSM: It is called *The Paradox of the Phasmid*, which can be found online [1]. He talks about the stick insect and tells a story very similar to mine: once he was walking around the Jardin des Plantes and he thought a vivarium full of stick insects was a display under repair with dry twigs, until he suddenly realised they were living creatures. Obviously I was astonished by his account, as his experience of the stick insect appearing and disappearing was analogous to mine.

This relationship between background and figure seems to me very important when thinking about art today: in some ways, for the work of art to 'work' we need to place it before a suitable background so it's revealed as a significant figure. There I was facing a metaphor for the status of image and how art operates.

FZ: In *Phasmides*, the stick insect - that can be mistaken for the natural background or abstract geometric forms - highlights this idea. It does not seem to exist per se, rather it's defined in relation to what surrounds it, gaining a new meaning depending on what is closer to it, and assigning a meaning that is different from what surrounds it. In this sense, what are you trying to say with the idea of placing an image on a 'suitable background' in order for it to work?

What kinds of formal and conceptual issues are raised from this correlation between the stick insect's mimetic procedure in relation to its environment and the way in which you transfer this to your work by bringing it closer to abstract geometric or natural forms?

DSM: In fact, the stick insect is not only camouflaged in the natural setting and highlighted in the geometric background. It is camouflaged and highlighted in both. In some way, it is highlighted when it moves, and it is camouflaged when it is stationary, which is something that was of particular interest to me when thinking about the cinematographic image.

The notion of the background-figure - which is so important in cinema, painting or photography - seems to be ideal to think about numerous issues within art in general,

1. "The only things that appear are those which are first able to dissimulate themselves. Things already grasped in their aspect or peacefully resembling themselves never appear. They are apparent, of course, but only apparent: they will never be given to us as appearing. What then is necessary for an apparition, the event of appearing? What must happen just before appearing closes itself within a presumably stable or hopefully definitive aspect? There must be a unique and momentary opening that will mark the apparition as an apparition. A paradox bursts forth because, in the very moment that it opens itself to the visible world, appearing is destined to be something like dissimulation. A paradox bursts forth because, for but a moment, appearing gives access to the here below, to something that suggests the contrary or, better yet, the hell of the visible world - the realm of dissemblance." DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. *The Paradox of the Phasmid*, 1989. Accessible here: www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/3/phasmid.html

within language more generally and within form even more generally.

In semiotics, a sign must be transparent in order to transmit its meaning, that is, when a sign is legible it becomes transparent. Contrarily, if the sign isn't legible it becomes opaque, for example, when we look at a text in Japanese without knowing the ideograms. In this case, we are stuck at the (opaque) physicality of the sign, its colour, form and trace, without being able to see through it. By appearing and disappearing, the stick insect repeats the logic of opacity and transparency. More importantly, it is only legible because it disappears or takes a detour to the territory of linguistic sense creation.

The fact is that things change meaning when brought closer. Deleuze wrote a short book about Foucault, where he talks about the processes of individualisation. If we have A and B in a continuum and we put them together, we have a fold. The inside of this fold becomes subjectivity, as it is isolated from the rest. I don't believe Foucault thought about subjects and objects as we are discussing here, but it is interesting to think about this in relation to our conversation.

FZ: In his book *Métaphysiques Cannibales* [2], Eduardo Viveiros de Castro presents a proposal that questions the classic notion of generating knowledge in anthropology and focuses on the political outcomes related to this transformation. For him, a relevant anthropology would be able to generate a version of a native theory and not a study made by us about the other. That is, to generate knowledge that takes into account the worldview of other people by studying with them, and not just studying them.

Going back to your work, there seems to be a similar movement to the procedure described by Viveiros de Castro in anthropology, in which you explore, in an artistic-cultural sense, the procedure of the stick insect in relation to its environment, that is, you mimic, you make a new version of an existing procedure, you consider new issues with it.

DSM: What attracts me to indigenous ideas is precisely that they can be used as an alternative ontological model, a model that allows me to look at our culture from outside.

If we think with the other (as opposed to about the other) we gain a new point of view, that is no longer within us but with us.

In his "On the Mimetic Faculty" [3], Walter Benjamin argues that the faculty of mimicry (of a child in relation to an adult, for example, or of an inventor in relation to another invention) is the basis of our civilisation. Benjamin always adopts a theological tone, but it is true that everything is culture: the idea itself that something is natural is cultural.

FZ: Phasmides evokes an abstractionist tradition, and the similarities to Lygia Clark's *Bichos* (Creatures) come to mind. When analysing Clark's work, art critic Ronaldo Brito helps us think about some aspects of her exhibition,

mainly when he highlights the dissolving nature of Clark's propositions. He points to her creatures' ability to propose organic mutations and to "break with the world's form, the twice millenary Western idea of 'being' as a stable figure" (idem, p.287) [4].

Her work - by bringing to the surface this procedure of dissolution/prominence of a body in space - seems to be dealing with the same issue of stability. What sort of developments emerge from Phasmides in approaching the issue of instability in a different moment, in a different artistic and social context and through different procedures?

DSM: It sounds stupid but it was only very recently that I thought about the link between Lygia Clark's *Bichos* and my *Phasmides*. This happened when I was working on another exhibition (*Black Tropicalia*, which opened a few months after *Phasmides* at the Museo Experimental el Eco, in Mexico). I created an architectural device that brought together the series *Kiti Ka'aetê*, which I had previously produced, one *Metasquema* by Hélio Oiticica and one *Bicho* by Lygia Clark.

Above all, my interest is in understanding and demonstrating that 'being' is a process, even in those things we see as fixed. An object is a process itself. For example, a rock in the Middle Ages was very different from a rock today, as we now know what silicon is and what to do with it. What changed in this piece of plutonium since we discovered radioactivity and its potential uses?

As Ricard Salvatella once said in a series of paintings: Cézanne's apples no longer exist. An apple today is a legal battlefield against Monsanto, the product of a genetic lab, regulated and deregulated pesticides, perhaps it involves slave or semi-slave labour, and its presence in the market 12 months per year generate a massive migrating flow of illegal workers to harvest them. Today,

2. In contraposition to the post-modern thesis that the non-Western people are nothing but a product of the power games of the West, without an active voice in the writing of the several chapters that constitute the history of anthropology, the Brazilian thinker argues that: "Anthropology is ready to fully assume its new mission of being the practice of the permanent decolonisation of thought [...] every non-trivial anthropological theory is a version of an indigenous practice of knowledge." VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo. *Métaphysiques Cannibales*, Paris: PUF, 2009, p. 4-6

3. "Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role. This faculty has a History, however, in both the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic sense. [...] Of what use to him [the child] is this schooling of this mimetic faculty? The answer presupposes an understanding of the phylogenetic significance of the mimetic faculty. Here it is not enough to think of what we understand today by the concept of similarity." BENJAMIN, Walter. "On the Mimetic Faculty". *Selected Writings: 1931-1934*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005, p.720

4. Ronaldo Brito's full quote is: "Contemporary aesthetic education is therefore the opposite of edifying: dissolving. A sort of positive existential crisis that longs to resuscitate a palpating contact with the reality previous to the secondary formations of subject and object. Creatures (*bichos*) is the fitting name to such geometric entities able to suggest organic mutations [...] The 'climbers' add an extra level of mobility: 'they both aspire to the paradoxical conditions of transitive sculptures, eminently relational, crossing the frontiers between interior and exterior. On the edge, the challenge is to break with the world's form, the twice millenary Western idea of 'being' as a stable figure." BRITO, Ronaldo. *Experiência crítica*, São Paulo: Editora Cosac Naify, 1994, p. 287



500 laws must exist for each apple. In the same way, our notion of what and how a body or object is (a sculpture, not to go too far) is radically distinct and different from Clark's time and, in part, thanks to her.

FZ: The instability of the object, which Ronaldo Brito calls transience, appears in your work as a reflection on the dissolution of a body in its surrounding environment: as the stick insect gets closer to the objects, it is reconfigured.

DSM: It's interesting you mention dissolution, as the other text that helped me understand what I was doing was Roger Caillois' *Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia*, in which he talks about crypsis, the phenomena through which some animals are similar to things in the world.

Caillois challenges the common perception that this procedure is the animal's defence mechanism, and he demonstrates how this is futile by opening and analysing the contents of insectivorous birds and amphibians stomachs: half of the animals found inside them have the power to mimic the surrounding environment, thus as a defence mechanism it is a failure.

Therefore, he develops the theory that these animals become similar to things due to a mythological desire to disappear in the world, to be dissolved in the world. I found this image absolutely beautiful and I often wonder: aren't the different uses we make of forms, all of them, attempts to dissolve ourselves in the world? I'm referring to language, dance, visual arts... every use of forms seems to hold an

implicit desire to be dissolved in the world.

FZ: In the exhibition, as well as the video and holograms, there was a sculpture that created a very interesting game, as we looked at the stick insect amidst artificial structures (both in the holograms and the videos), we were simultaneously standing amidst huge sculptures ourselves, placed in the middle of the room. Therefore, we could see that we are also in the margins that you mentioned when talking about the stick insects; we are also in this zone without definition.

How do you perceive this third extra layer, in which the stick insect's procedures of dissolution/apparition are present not only in the exhibition's works but also integrate the way the viewer sees the works?

DSM: To me, this third layer is fundamental. The artwork must be a personal experience. After all, it's a work about perception so the phenomenological experience must match the conceptual proposal. I always aim to reach the moment the spectator is no longer looking at the artwork but at his or her own experience.

FZ: Today, in the visual arts, there's an increasing interest in the use of 16 mm – which has become a trend. What led you to use this medium, both in the film in the exhibition *Phasmides* and in the film entitled *16mm*?

DSM: I suspected that something would work very well between the nature of the film and the nature of the insect. And, in some way, if this project had been made in video, it would have been very different. Video is like a

pen, it's endless. Film is like a paintbrush and paint, you can draw but when the paint runs out you need to get more paint. The film can always end. The roll finishes, is undone, burnt or ruined by excess of light.

There are many instances of irony in the film, for example, the fact that everything in the film is cellulose: the decorations are wood planks and corkwood and the geometric forms are all made of cardboard or paperboard (which are also made of cellulose, through a process of transformation of the same matter). The stick insect itself also wants to be cellulose (laughter) and the film's negative is also cellulose. Therefore, everything is the same matter: from everything used to record the image to everything that appears in the image. Everything is cellulose!

This work started with the film 16mm. Previously, I spent around four years thinking about making a video but I struggled to decide on a subject. One day I decided to learn the length of a film roll and I found a Kodak table that explained the number of metres of film you needed to film a certain amount of minutes. Or you could add the number of minutes you wanted to film and the table would tell you the amount of metres you needed. You would insert the parameters and the table would give you the answer. The full idea of 16mm came when I saw this. I think it is fundamental to reflect on the medium you're using and why. The work must always be a reflection on its own medium.

FZ: The first time I saw 16mm I immediately thought about Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, in which the main character is determined to build an opera house in the middle of the Amazon forest. In order to do so he needs to trace a straight line that crosses a mountain. In your work, we are faced with the chaos of the jungle, and there is a line and a camera that is taken inside the bush in order to shoot the film. In a way, 16mm re-enacts an issue that we talked about at the start of this interview, that is, the confrontation between a natural and chaotic form, on one hand, and a cultural and organised form, on the other. This is precisely a dichotomy you confront in your work. In one of the most beautiful and enigmatic scenes in Herzog's film, this tension culminates in the moment the protagonist hears with delight the sound of an Enrico Caruso opera projected across the forest [5].

DSM: This is interesting. Firstly, of course, 16mm was my little *Fitzcarraldo*. Obviously I wasn't trying to build an opera house or taking a boat up a mountain (laughter) and I was also not intending to cut any trees down.

I'm now working on a new project, which I'm also going to film in the forest. When observing the mistakes that happened during the shooting of 16mm, I realised that when you're filming you make a pact of non-aggression with the spectator, in the sense that you're creating fiction, an environment, an idea, and hiding everything that

is making this pact possible. You don't allow a microphone to appear in the take, you use the clapperboard at the start and the end of each scene so you know the order they were made, but this is all removed in the end - as if it had never existed - to allow the emergence of a filmic truth.

Herzog deals with this in a beautiful way. There is a take in *Fitzcarraldo* and an even more powerful take in another film - *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* - which is fantastic in this sense. They are going down a river in a boat filming, and all of a sudden water splashes onto the camera. Instead of getting rid of the take, Herzog selects precisely this one. You are watching the film and all of a sudden the camera lens is dotted with water drops. The presence of the camera is asserted in such a clear way that it evidently states: 'this is a film, I am doing a film and these are the actors'.

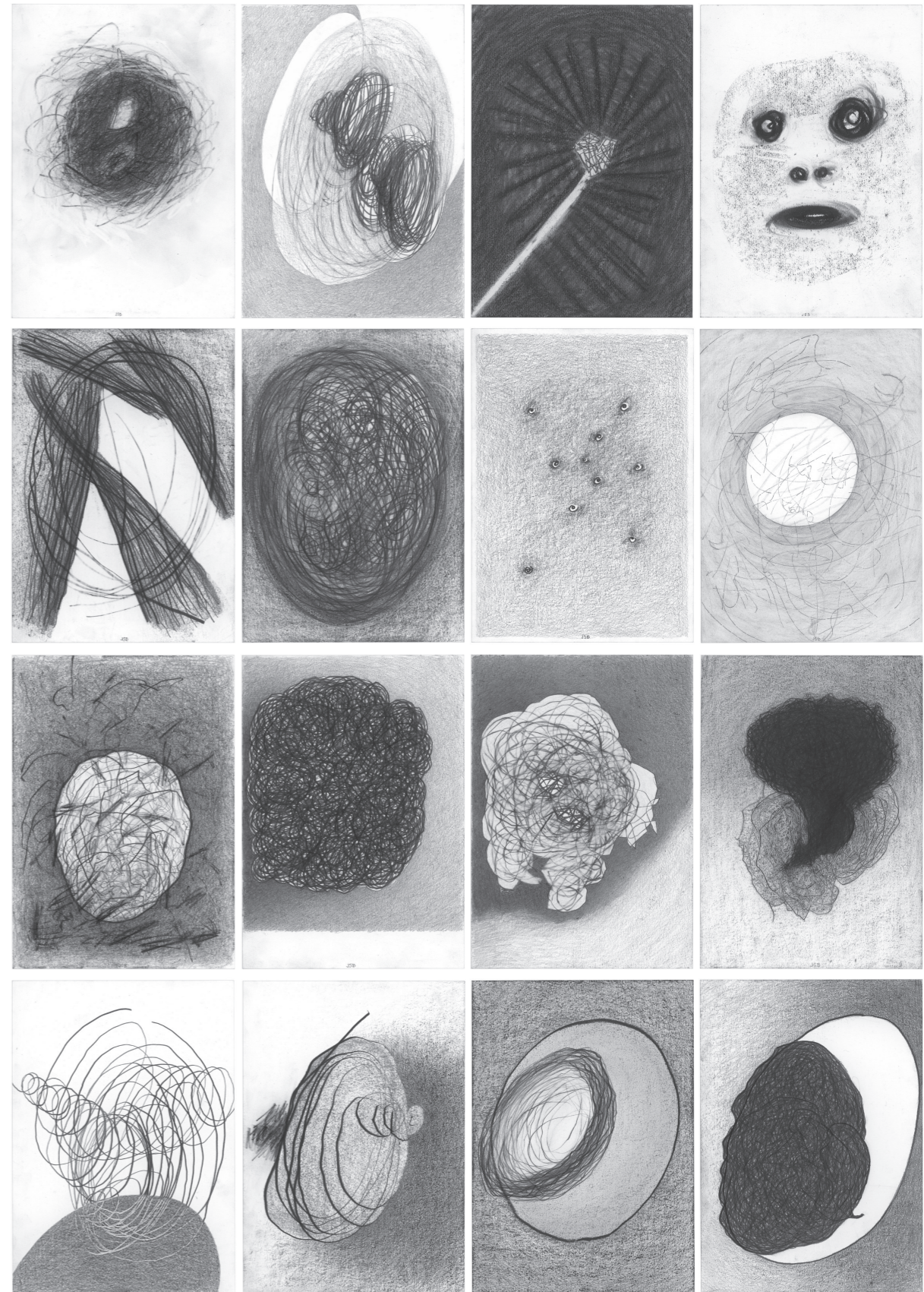
FZ: This brings us back to the issue we talked about before, that is, the artificial and the natural as constructions. Like in the film about the stick insect. You also remove the camera and show that the setting is not real. You reveal that the setting you are presenting is made of cardboard and cellulose, when you turn the camera and show the studio where you are working. That is, the film is as (un)real as the context in which it was made.

DSM: Exactly! And this is why it seemed so fundamental to keep the last scene. Many of my friends told me to remove it but I just couldn't. When you watch *Phasmides* you start to enter the film's mental space. And the film evolves from a space that is darker, more organic and more concentrated to an environment that is lighter, more psychological and more abstract. At this point, which is the only movement the camera makes in the whole film, it retreats and moves to the side, revealing the setting, and the viewer goes back to the studio space.

FZ: In the last São Paulo Biennial, in 2012, you showed a series of watercolours called *Lichtzwang*, which means something like 'forced light'.

DSM: *Lichtzwang* is a book of poems by Paul Celan, who borrowed the term from Hölderlin, who uses this word to describe the moment in which you can't see because of the excess of clarity. I gave this title to the series of watercolours due to the translation André Vidal, a Catalan poet, made of Paul Celan's poems. He translated them as 'Light Constriction', and when I read this I thought: this is exactly what I'm doing with the watercolours!

5. "A vision had seized hold of me, like the demented fury of a hound that has sunk its teeth into the leg of a deer carcass and is shaking and tugging at the downed game so frantically that the hunter gives up trying to calm him. It was the vision of a large steamship scaling a hill under its own steam, working its way up a steep slope in the jungle, while above this natural landscape, which shatters the weak and the strong with equal ferocity, soars the voice of Caruso, silencing all the pain and all the voices of the primeval forest and drowning out all birdsong. To be more precise: bird cries, for in this setting, left unfinished and abandoned by God in wrath, the birds do not sing; they shriek in pain, and confused trees tangle with one another like battling Titans, from horizon to horizon, in a steaming creation still being formed. Fog-panting and exhausted they stand in this unreal misery - and I, like a stanza in a poem written in an unknown foreign tongue, am shaken to the core." HERZOG, Werner. *Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo*. New York: Ecco, 2009



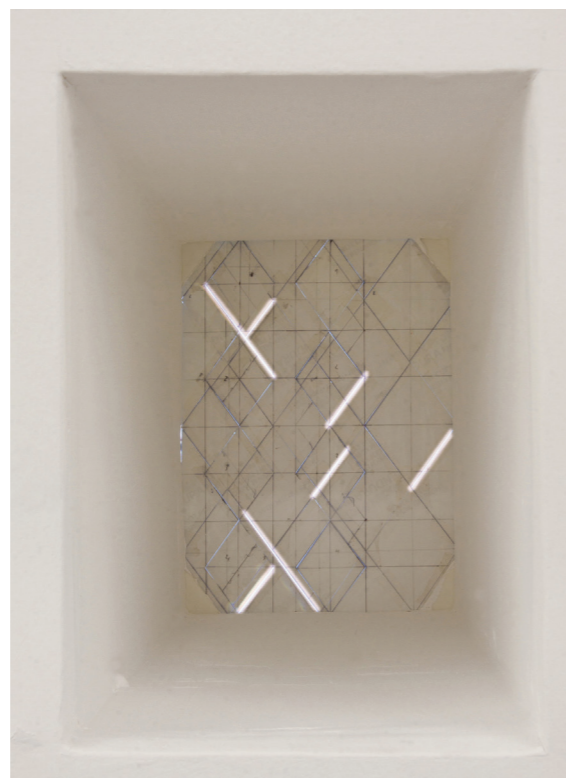


The watercolours are an exercise in structure, colour and different experiments. I am always playing with the paper's grid and exploring the constructive limits of very basic norms, such as, for example, playing with the grid or the fact that a stain of one colour is painted in three watercolours until it disappears and gives way to another.

What matters most is that basically everything that I did afterwards resulted from ideas that I came across in this process. It has been 15 years of on-going work.

FZ: Perhaps this is linked to what we mentioned before about anthropology's 'thinking with' [6] and the ability of subjects and objects - that are often treated as passive - to have an active role. The watercolours' constructive limitations generate concerns that enable this work to progress and others to develop. How did other works develop from your experiments with the watercolours? In which way did the formal issues related to completing the watercolours trigger your later research?

DSM: With the watercolours I developed a work and a rationale that we can call structural, which became the basis of everything I did after that, hence my statement that everything I did resulted from it. The truth is that despite - or perhaps thanks to - the simplicity of this series I started to work with structures, variations, permutations, loops,



and with time, duration and colour... ideas, concepts and realities that I later explored with other media. I can't explain a clear transition (I wouldn't dare sum it up in a brief explanation) but, for me, it's very important that one work flows into another, that each new work opens doors to new experimentations.

FZ: You often mention your interest in writers such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Bruno Latour. Is there any link between their research in the field of anthropology and your research in the field of arts?

DSM: When I arrived in Brazil I didn't know the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. By reading him I managed to understand a lot of things, including the artistic practice itself. In very simple terms, in Perspectivism there is the idea that there are no subjects or objects per se. In the West, our understanding is based on a system of oppositions, according to which everything is divided between what is alive or not alive. Within the living category we have animal and vegetal kingdoms, and within the animal kingdom we have rational and irrational animals and so on. We devise smaller categories until we get to the group that belongs only to us, humans.

However, for the Amerindians, everything is people. Not everything is human, but everything is people.

Kiti Ka'aeté
collage, wall, hole, slide projector, laser cut steel slide
collage 17x13,5 cm overall dimensions variable
2011



And if everything is people, the relationship between subject and object becomes, at least, blurred. The Amerindians don't separate objects and subjects the way we do because for them you're not a subject or an object but you are one thing or another depending on the perspective surrounding you.

FZ: The idea of 'thinking with' so widely debated within contemporary anthropology can be very powerful to reflect on art. For example, for me, this interview is a way of thinking with you and your artworks. But I also believe that we can say that an artist is thinking with his or her artworks.

DSM: The indigenous cosmologies have been very important to me, for one reason in particular: if we no longer have subjects and objects, we no longer have spectators and works of art, but processes of relations of mutual transformations. Combinations of agents that are mutually influenced. And, for me, this is a much more interesting and instigating way to look at artistic production and works of art.

6. "What truly distinguishes anthropology, I believe, is that it is not a study of at all, but a study with. Anthropologists work and studies with people. Immersed with them in an environment of joint activity, they learn to see things (or hear them, or touch them) in the way their teachers and companions do. An education in anthropology, therefore, does more than furnish us with knowledge about the world, about people and their societies. It rather educates our perception of the world, and opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being. The questions we address are philosophical ones [...] But it is the fact that we address these questions in the world, and not from the armchair - that this world is not just what we think about, but what we think with, and that in its thinking the mind wanders along pathways extending far beyond the envelope of the skin - that makes the enterprise anthropological and, by the same token, radically different from positivist science. We do our philosophy out of doors. And in this, the world and its inhabitants, human and non-human, are our teachers, mentors and interlocutors." INGOLD, Tim. "Anthropology is not ethnography", in: Proceedings of the British Academy, 154, The British Academy, 2008, p. 82-83

Tropicalia negra
Architectural display with works by Helio Oiticica,
Lygia Clark for Tropicalia Negra show
2013

FZ: You talk a lot about humanities, but I remember you once said that when you were a child you wanted to be a biologist and that when you arrived in Brazil you spent only a few days in the Southeast, before heading quickly to the Amazon. Your artistic practice introduces a reflection on biology or, at least, questions about the overlapping of culture and nature. If being a biologist is thinking biology, are you - as an artist - also a biologist?

DSM: Yes, I stayed only two weeks in São Paulo then travelled to the Amazon. I believe the difference between me and a biologist is that we're looking for very different outcomes. I'm making a book about the stick insect project, like a Reader. It will include the essays by Roger Caillois and Didi-Huberman that I mentioned before but I also want to invite Professor of History of Sciences, Mauricio Nieto, from Colombia, Michael Taussig and Bruno Latour to contribute. However, I also need to confront the work from the point of view of a biologist.

It's very interesting to think about the overlapping of science, philosophy and poetics. For example, the process through which an animal uses camouflage to mimic its environment is called crypsis. And crypsis comes from Kryptos, which has the same etymological root as cryptic. However, in its origins, Kryptos meant something that is apt to be hidden. Therefore, it doesn't refer to something that can be hidden or that has been hidden, but to something that is visible to everyone despite being hard to see. Whoever named this animal process as crypsis had very clear ideas and a very broad knowledge, as it's the perfect term.

FZ: What is this new project in the forest you're working on?

DSM: It's going to be another film, which this time will focus on the heuristic properties of the photographic/cinematographic medium.

Photography and anthropology are sister sciences. They were born at the same time and they were pushed by the same colonial powers. In fact, the same reasons motivated both. Therefore, they share an epistemological and even semantic structure inasmuch as a document can create a true narrative. However, for this to happen, your intention must be to create a neutral document.

For instance, in the first anthropological films, the moment in which the filmmakers explained to the indigenous people that they had to stay still and not look at the camera, etc. was hidden from the viewer. All these moments were removed so the photographic image could realise its heuristic process of simplifying reality and creating truth. However it's obviously a lie. I want to make a film that does everything you're not supposed to do.

FZ: For instance, to let the water splash onto the camera lens, such as in Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*?

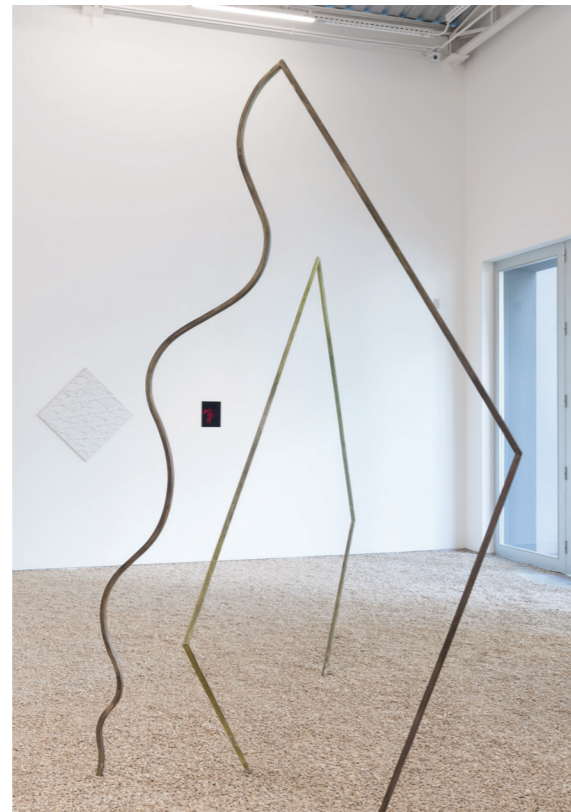
DSM: Yes, more or less. I mainly want to work on filmic processes and protocols, as this is what excites

me most, so perhaps my approach is more structural. There is something that relates to the film set, such as pretending the camera is invisible, immaterial, even though the camera is there, altering the object being filmed. But there's also the extremely complex technical process of the workings of a film, involving light source, the alteration of chemical processes in the negative and the creation of a positive.

This whole process has a correlation, a chain and a protocol that must be respected so the final product is faithful to the object. It's just like that beautiful text by Latour that talks about the forest and how they take the forest's soil to the lab. In order for that soil to be ultimately studied and understood there is a chain of procedures that must be respected. As for the film, there is a process that must be respected so the final object, the film, when it's time to project it, resembles what was filmed.

What I want to do is to play with this second stage, breaking the whole protocol (laughter).

FZ: Your research on abstraction also dialogues with reflections taken from the field of semiotics, mainly in terms of the construction of knowledge and graphic forms. You developed this in a work that you created with researcher Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, at



Werkleitz Halle, a workspace linked to the school where Meyer-Krahmer lectures, in the outskirts of Leipzig, Germany. How did this work unfold?

DSM: We published a series of six posters, mainly drawings. They were all linked to the written word or some sort of graphics. The prints investigated a concept by Charles Sanders Peirce. He argued that the most important element in the work of a researcher/thinker is to find the right level of abstraction.

I thought this was fantastic as it can be applied to everything. If you make a subway map that is too abstract, for instance, it will be too hard to understand. However, if it's not abstract enough, it will also be difficult to understand. Everything must have the right level of abstraction. The other quote by Peirce that we reflected on was when he said he was convinced that you cannot go far in a reflection without placing the ideas in space, in this case, in the space of the paper.

FZ: So how were these prints exhibited? What was the context of the publication?

DSM: We created a collection called *Abstract Specific I Specific Abstract*. There were six initial posters and we will make more. All the posters deal with the issues of graphics. What really interests me in the stick insect is that it has this almost graphic form. And this

form means that it can very easily operate as a sign, in the sense that we talked about before: in the sense that a sign must be transparent in order to transmit meaning. For instance, when you see a traffic light, you're not thinking that it is too red or too low. You're thinking: is it telling me to stop or go? Therefore, it becomes 'transparent'.

There is a quote from Daniel Buren that says that when we work with a sign that is too strong, such as the Nazi swastika or the Christian cross, we are locked into the opacity, into the power of the sign, due to the strength of its presence, as it is too loaded. However, when we use a weak sign - the stripes, in Buren's case -, the sense is not so clear, so all we have is the sign's operation, the ways it operates, or in his words: the sign needs to be sufficiently weak so the chain in which the sign is inscribed - and that configures the sign and its meaning - is visible.

That is, if the sign is weak, the only presence is the sign operation in the world. Therefore, in this series of posters, when you look at all six posters they explain each other. It is very clear that in some way they are concerned with some sort of graphic experimental investigation. But when you look at one single poster alone it's too abstract and difficult to understand.

