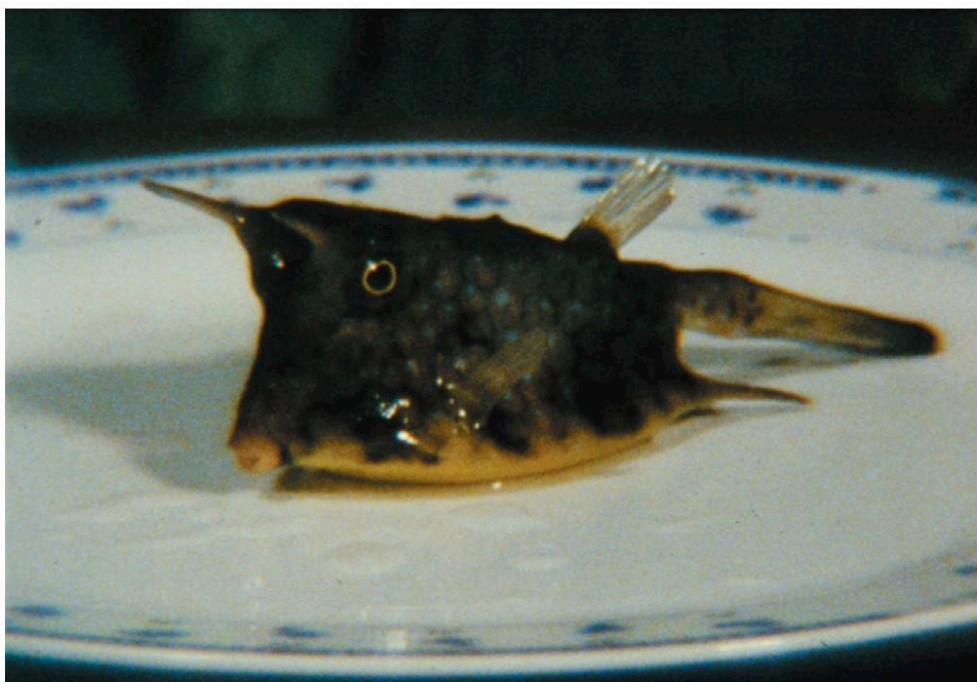


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Publication	GUSMÃO, João Maria; PAIVA, Pedro. <i>Papagaio</i> . Milan: Fondazione HangarBicocca, 2014.		

The artists

João Maria Gusmão (Lisbon, 1979) and Pedro Paiva (Lisbon, 1977) have worked as an artistic duo since 2001. They began their long career together when they were still students, starting with the “InMemory” exhibition at the Zé dos Bois Gallery in Lisbon (2001). They went on to represent Portugal at the 53rd International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (2009), and were invited to take part in “The Encyclopedic Palace”, the main exhibition of the Biennale in 2013.

Gusmão and Paiva’s work involves the creation of movies on 16mm and 35mm film as well as photographs, sculptures and installations, including devices that create projections of moving



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images, called *Camera Obscura*. Their works are characterised by the use of anti-spectacular analogue forms of expression (silent films first and foremost). These enter into an intimate relationship with the viewer, in stark contrast to the compulsive, immediate consumption of images typically found in digital culture.

Gusmão and Paiva's films portray simple "poetic-philosophical narratives", as the artists themselves call them, presented as primordial documentaries about inexplicable phenomena and incongruous scientific experiments, or as accounts of events with unexpected, comical or pathetic endings. Forever suspended in an indeterminate zone between reality and artifice, these "short stories" do no more than convey the irrationality of existence and of the events that take place around us, with their resulting irresistible magnetism related to all that is not immediately clear and comprehensible.

Their films often last just over two minutes (the duration of a standard reel of negative for old Bolex cameras) with the lens focusing on little details of reality, on minor or rarely seen characters, on elements from daily life transfigured by analogy with natural elements, or on animals portrayed during apparently inexplicable moments of their existence. A croissant can thus turn into a physical model of the universe, an egg can acquire analogies with the moon, a dying fish on a dish can appear as the manifestation of the transition between life and death, the

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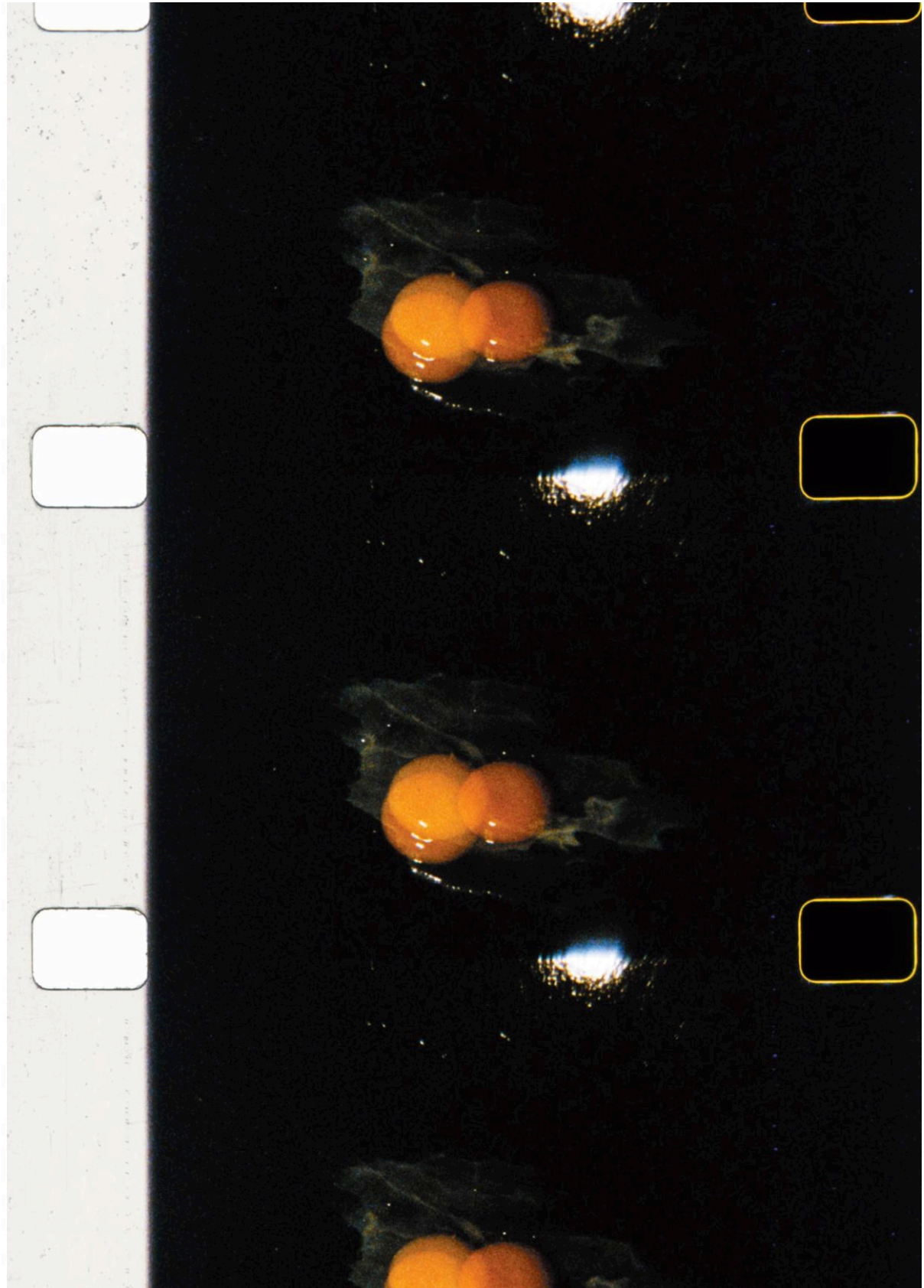
human and the inhuman. A fly landing on a wooden plank can be perceived as an agent of the fundamental laws of physics. The extremely sophisticated use of shadows and interactions of light, and the shots taken with a High-speed Camera that captures over 3,000 frames per second, all help give the film an enigmatic aspect that captures fleeting events and phenomena and imperceptible details.

One fundamental aspect of the duo's artistic process is that of artists books, which they publish in the form of anthologies of texts by authors who represent their sources of inspiration, often accompanied by their own writings. These publications, which form an integral part of their work, give an important insight into the artists' vision.

They contain a complex universe of cross-references, ranging from pre-Socratic philosophy to the optical studies of Isaac Newton (1642-1727), from the theory of the evolution of species of the geologist and naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) to the science-fiction stories by Stanislaw Lem (1921-2006). Literary and philosophical references include works of major authors such as Victor Hugo (1802-1885), who is cited for his less-known works, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and his reflection on the interactions of perception and memory, the poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) and his "recreational metaphysics", an approach exemplified by Pessoa's heteronyms that represent completely different formulations of existential disquiet.

Another important figure is Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), a French writer, playwright and poet and the creator of "pataphysics",

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João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva, *3 Suns*, 2009, 16mm film, colour, no sound, 0'50"
Official Portuguese Representation of 53rd Venice Biennale, DGARTES,
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which is defined as “the science of imaginary solutions” in his book *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll* (1898). Here Alfred Jarry explains the principles and purposes of pataphysics, defining it as a science for which there are no absolute truths but only relative, ever-changing ones. All its proven principles can be affirmed and contradicted, in line with the artist’s absolute creative freedom. Jarry’s ideas, with their tendency to

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subvert the paradigms of the “noble” sciences, represent a corrosive thought that ends up by mocking any attempt by man to reach a definitive, stable understanding of reality and of the meaning of his own existence.

One of the greatest sources of inspiration for Gusmão and Paiva’s artistic research is also the French poet and essayist René Daumal (1908–1944), who took an interest in spiritual doctrines and in experimenting extrasensory experiences. During the course of his brief life, he experimented with drugs and poisons in order to investigate the borderline between reality and the unknowable side of existence.

At the heart of their films, we also find two traditions from early cinema: on the one hand the documentary tradition of the Lumière brothers, Auguste Marie Louis Nicolas Lumière (1862–1954) and Louis Jean Lumière (1864–1948), whose work concentrates mainly on showing everyday life and reality without any interpretation of the event being filmed; on the other, more predominant side, there is the “magical” tradition attributed to Georges Méliès (1861–1938), who is widely regarded as the “father” of special effects, and who was the inventor of science-fiction and fantasy films.

Over the years, the art of Gusmão and Paiva has taken shape in three bodies of works, each grouped around a macro-theme, which the artists themselves refer to as *DeParamnésia* (2001–2002), *Eflúvio Magnético* (2003–2006) and *Abissologia* (from 2006). Over the years these projects have overlapped each other as conceptual tendencies and not as closed compartments. The composite layering of works that makes it possible

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to juxtapose films from early projects and more recent ones gives us a glimpse of what can be regarded as a global conceptual narrative, defining each film as a conceptual experiment of a larger picture.

The projects linked to *DeParamnésia* are based on the analysis of perception and on its discontinuity in space. "Paramnesia" is a medical term that defines memory disorders popularly referred to as *déjà vu*, in which the subject has the false impression that he or she has already seen an image or has already experienced events and situations that have actually never taken place. Even if only for a moment, *déjà vu* has the ability to interrupt the spatial sequence of the progress of time: the present is at once present and past. Starting out from a study of this phenomenon, the two artists have developed a discourse based on the creation of scenarios made using various devices, such as the camera obscura, holography and stereoscopic visions that play on the dysfunctional perception of an event. *DeParamnésia* was created during the artists' academic career and was shown in a series of exhibitions at Tercenas do Marquês (Lisbon, 2001-2002).

Eflúvio Magnético takes its name from the novel by Victor Hugo (1802-1885) *The Man Who Laughs* (1869). One episode in the story tells of a snowstorm at sea in which the protagonists are not able to describe what is going on and are at the same time completely overwhelmed by the awareness that they are going to die in its passage. The artists take their cue from this episode and reflect on our inability to ascribe certainty to natural phenomena and on man's inclination to produce negative fictions that give meaning by analogy to this contingency. Gusmão and

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Paiva, starting from the acknowledgment that the indescribable is also unknowable, relate to certain hydraulic movements perceived in phenomena either by describing them or by metaphors that express this chaotic realm where we are but unreal observers. *Eflúvio Magnético*¹ also led to the publication of a philosophical journal edited by the artists themselves.

Abissologia was first started in 2006 and is still being developed. It takes its name from a neologism in René Daumal's satirical novel *A Night of Serious Drinking* (1938), which the artists use to address the logic behind negative perceptions (what is not seen but is there) or altered perceptions of reality (the fiction of a dream, trance or narcosis) as a sort of criticism of solipsism and anthropocentrism. The project, which they refer to as the "transitory science of the indiscernible", shows on film or in images what was "never seen before" as facticity – a concept first used in opposition to idealism that implies both factuality and contingency. *Abissologia* films are very keen on pursuing the interstices between the visual apparatus, its representation and model, as a way of deconstructing the current hegemonic worldview.

The artists have also founded the *Sociedade Internacional de Abissologia*, a platform for production, publication and communication mid-way between a legal entity and a cultural project.

¹ Gusmão and Paiva have published two volumes on this project: *João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, Eflúvio Magnético vol. 1* (Lisbon: João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, 2005); *João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, Eflúvio Magnético vol. 2* (Lisbon: João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, 2006).

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The exhibition

“Papagaio” is the largest retrospective exhibition ever held in Italy of Gusmão and Paiva’s explorations of cinema and vision. Created by the artists as a single installation in the Shed at Pirelli HangarBicocca, the exhibition consists of thirty-five short films, made between 2004 and 2014, together with three *Camera Obscura* installations and a film about 43 minutes in length. The films are all silent and the only noise that accompanies them is the sound of the many projectors, which form an integral part of the installation.

The exhibition offers visitors a fully immersive experience in Gusmão and Paiva’s films, with a variety of rhythms and settings. The audience can move freely through the spaces, finding their own constantly changing personal points of view. The only exception to this is *Papagaio*, the film from which the exhibition takes its title, which is viewed in a “classic” frontal cinema setting.

The show consists of suspended narratives and visions, often set in the landscapes and atmospheres of the archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe, a former Portuguese colony in the Gulf of Guinea (Africa). This remote location, which Gusmão and Paiva visited in 2011 and then again, to make some of the works for this exhibition, in 2014, is a source of inspiration for their visions, which are far removed from the language of commercial media and from the prevalent codes of representation found in Western culture.

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João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva, *Cross Eyed Table Tennis*, 2014
16mm film, colour, no sound, 4'27". Produced by Fondazione HangarBicocca, Milan

Upon entering, the viewer is greeted by the back of the walls used for the projections. This is a clear statement of intent by the artists, who, right from the arrangement of the display, announce that everything in their work can be interpreted as a reversal of the conventions that govern the way we normally perceive and interpret reality.

The works appear in non-chronological order and are grouped together by indirect similarities that may be iconographic, symbolic, poetic or metaphorical.

The show starts with *Glossolalia* ("Good morning") (2014), showing a couple of parrots while saying "good morning" and ends with *Cross Eyed Table Tennis* (2014), a film which shows

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João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva



João Maria Gusmão
+ Pedro Paiva, *Heat Ray*,
2010, 16mm film, colour,
no sound, 2'27"

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the movement of a tennis ball during a Ping-Pong game, followed by the look of two men affected by strabismus. The slow-motion shots underscore the difference between the movement of the ball and the looks of the men. By extension, this reflects on our inability to capture reality through our senses and on the ambivalence that this creates between illusion and perception, which is one of the key themes in the work of the two artists. This short film perfectly represents the artistic universe of Gusmão and Paiva's films. Starting out from an apparently neutral description of minimal events and phenomena, they create metaphors that touch on issues of universal and philosophical scope.

In the central area of the exhibition space, viewers find themselves in the middle of a diorama of images which appear and disappear at different speeds. The films are shown alternately on the walls of the room, and all of them examine the relationship between fiction and reality, in an attempt to capture something that is by its very nature transitory and unstable. They often contain images, which the artists' call "temporary sculptures", that are crystal clear and yet, at the same time, ephemeral. In *Experiment on the Effluvium* (2009), the artists show concentric circles being created, like little craters, by the impact of stones on the surface of water. The effect is obtained by extremely high-speed filming, which captures even the slightest movements of objects in space. The projection creates a slow-motion effect, almost as though the actions were somehow frozen.

These works also take from one of the duo's main cultural references, which is that of "pataphysics" or the "science of imaginary solutions" of the French poet and playwright Alfred Jarry (1873-1907).

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João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva, *First Abissological Drawings*, 2007
16mm film, colour, no sound, 1'40". Produced by ZDB, Lisbon. Thanks to: MUSAC, León

Lastly, the films in this section feature frequent sequences of images set within other images: in *A Day Without Filming* (2014), the windshield of a car becomes a sort of frame through which, by means of the rear-view mirror, we see a second moving image; in *Heat Ray* (2010), the surface of a white canvas is dotted with moving geometric reflections of light, which form a moving composition. This is also a reflection on the interaction between the screen, pictorial representation and reality, worldview and the actual world in its raw intransigence, a sort of meta-description of representation.

In the next group of works, which use four projectors in divergent positions, the artists investigate the concept of absence,

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linked to *Abissologia*, the theory of the indiscernible formulated by the artistic duo since 2006. These works include *Eye Eclipse* (2007), based on an analogy between the human eye, the egg and the moon, in which the artists investigate the shadow of a hidden planet, the existence of which lies beyond truth or falsehood, and *First Abissological Drawings* (2007), in which apparently esoteric drawings, made with chalk on wooden planks, represent theoretical schemes that relate to the concepts of perpetual motion and potency.

This group also includes films in which the artists explore a number of aspects of the relationship between man and nature, seen as an entity with which man is inherently incapable of relating other than through a wish to bend it to his own vision and to use it. In Gusmão and Paiva's work, nature reveals its most elusive aspects, rejecting any attempt by man to comprehend it. It does so through revelations and events that cannot be known in their entirety, leaving the viewer disoriented and incapable of making sense of it.

Falling Trees (2014), one of the films made especially for the exhibition, is based on a reflection on the role of technology in relation to nature, in the sense analysed by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976): in the hands of man, modern technology becomes an instrument for revealing what is concealed in nature, estranging man from the relationship of poetry and mystery with the world. For almost the entire duration of the film, the camera dwells on the details of the dissection of a tree by a chainsaw, which reveals it, violating its hidden, inner part. Only towards the end does the view open up, showing us a group of loggers deep in a luxuriant natural setting that recalls a possible, but now lost, Garden of Eden.

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One of the fundamental themes of the exhibition is an investigation of the dichotomy between man and animals, which the artists explore by portraying animals in humanised contexts and in actions that tend to assimilate them to human behaviour: in *The Soup* (2009), a group of monkeys is seen grabbing and eating potatoes from a pot full of apparently boiling water. The behaviour of the monkeys thus appears to be incomprehensible and inexplicable, and yet also disturbing and comic, obliging the viewer to bring into question their own patterns of perception and their own preconceived expectations.

A recurrent theme in Gusmão and Paiva's work is ventriloquism. A practice once attributed to oracles, and later adopted by illusionists, in the artists' works ventriloquism becomes a part-ontological, part-pathetic representation of man's inability to give meaning to reality through logos – in other words, through the word viewed as a rational element. The sense of absurdity and uselessness is further heightened by the fact that the film is silent, so words and sounds cannot be heard in any case.

The subject also appears in the film *Papagaio* (2014), shot in the archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe and shown in a small cinema which is itself part of the exhibition. The film introduces a change in the work of the artists, who have so far only made short features. Shot during an animist ritual, similar to the Voodoo rites practiced by tribes on the west coast of Africa, the film shows a highly esoteric ceremony filmed in its entirety, partly by the participants themselves under trance, and it includes dances and banquets, culminating in a state of collective trance. The state of trance includes a sort of ventriloquism, since the bodies in this rite are possessed by inexplicable transcendental presences: the

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João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva, *The Soup*, 2009, 35mm film, colour, no sound, 3'35"
Official Portuguese Representation of 53rd Venice Biennale, DGARTES, Ministry of Culture, Portugal. Thanks to: Jardim Zoológico de Lisboa

ancestral dead, which take control of the identity of the dancers in trance, in order to achieve a collective cathartic purge of evil. The way that the film is shot, at times as though it were under the same spell as the dancers, and the fact that it is silent, turns this work into a metaphor of inaccessibility and incommunicability. Those who watch the film are taken silently through this subjective camera shot, as though they shared the same beliefs, striving towards the transcendental and coexisting with the living dead. The films screened by a group of three projectors in the area immediately after the small cinema explore the representation of movement in its most dreamlike and hallucinatory forms.

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Here the reversal of space and time that appears in the film *Wheels* (2011), the only work in the exhibition to be produced during the artists' first trip to São Tomé and Príncipe in 2011, opens up to an idea based on relative motion and parallel movement. In *Donkey* (2011), on the other hand, the artists use a donkey to minimise the famous *Horse in Motion* (1878)¹, by Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904), the inventor of chronophotography, which was the final step prior to the birth of cinema.

In addition to the films, the exhibition also includes three installations known as *Camera Obscura*. These are settings for screening moving images by means of objects and electrical devices. The viewer cannot see what is going on inside the rooms but only sees the images projected onto the wall: the only way to understand what is happening inside is to put one's eye to the hole and look through the lens. This, however, symbolically loses the "magic" of the projection mechanism.

In the history of pictorial representation, the camera obscura was used to obtain lifelike representations of the outside world inside a dark box, placing the viewer at a certain distance from the reality that was being shown. *Camera Inside Camera* (2010) consists of a timed animation of the shadows cast by a window that gives onto a natural landscape. It expresses the paradox between "reality" and representation, playing on the concept of the window at the heart of perspective, viewing it as a threshold from which one can glimpse the real world.

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1 In 1878, Muybridge managed to prove the theory that, while a horse is galloping, there is a moment when all four of its legs are raised off the ground. To show this, he photographed a galloping horse with 24 cameras, arranged in parallel along the track.

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João Maria Gusmão + Pedro Paiva, *Donkey*, 2011, 16mm film, colour, no sound, 2'
Produced by Museo Marino Marini, Florence in collaboration with Lamu Palm Oil
Factory, Kenya

The new Before Falling Asleep, a pre-cortical image inside a moving train (2014) illustrates the principle of stereoscopic vision, which is the mechanism by which an image appears in two different versions on the retinas of both eyes before being processed by the brain as a single image. The projection in this *Camera Obscura* is an attempt to reproduce the vision of a person who is about to fall asleep in a railway carriage. It is

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obtained by superimposing two images made using two lenses, which are identical but of different colours, placed at a certain distance from each other. Both project the same composition, but in two different images, one slightly shifted to the right and the other slightly to the left. An electrical device in the room opens and closes the shutter in order to recreate the movements of a person's eyes before they drift off to sleep.

Lastly, time and movement are the basis for *Motion of Astronomical Bodies* (2010), which consists of six bicycle wheels, timed images of which are projected onto a single wall. The work is inspired by an episode from H.G. Wells's science-fiction novella *The Time Machine*, published in 1895, which tells the story of a scientist's travels through time. Wells describes in the minutest detail what this time-traveller observes: initially, day and night come rapidly one after the other and the dots of the sun and the stars turn into circular paths, following the rotation of the heavens until they become blurred coordinates in a sky with a bluish tinge. The episode is narrated as though by an external observer who is idealised, rather than human, and who is able to watch what can be likened to eternity – a time that goes by regardless of the existence of man.

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