Dialogue #3

National Archive of Torre do Tombo

André Sier

Time, always incremental and exponential, is an endless accumulation of knowledge, materials, events, books and manuscripts that pile up in storeerooms. Stuffed with signs, symbols and meanings, the archive is a dazzling place and, from an archaic standpoint, not that much different from the landscape. The result is an ever-expansive territory as infinite as time itself, an ever-expansive cultural and historical value, a metaphysical landscape, a crawling, infested terrain of endless life changes. They are also geared towards eternity. White ants also inhabit the landscape, they also build their own archives.

Starting from the photograph Estragos da formiga branca (1929), on view in the Research Portal of the National Archive of Torre do Tombo, Sier takes a closer look at this animal species known as the termite. Considered by humans to be an infesting pest and a danger to property, the white ant lives and feeds on cellulosic substances such as wood or paper and creates labyrinthine structures from the pulp of books and documents. Their presence in the archives and documents is therefore a threat that needs to be got rid of.

However, as previously mentioned, in Ant i Purga (Es7#agos da Formiga Br4nca) (2019), the artist focuses on non-human life and “the works introduce [this] viewpoint of non-human species in extremely inhospitable conditions (designed to deter their presence), alongside drawings elaborated from the electronic micro-observations of the subject’s photography.”

In this context, there is also another layer of understanding of the processing of electronic data and digital technology. In fact, cybernetic landscapes should be considered equally valid, at a time when information technology calls for the digitisation of files, documents, works of art, and so on. The artist goes beyond the limitations of the tangible physical domain to incorporate the imprecise spatial and temporal frontiers of the digital. In an analogy to what the white ants that escape the purge end up doing to the documents, the photographs are subject to the imperfections and limitations of computer data processing, which become corrupted and almost impossible to fix. The reality of image and data become distorted and transformed into an echo, a smudge, a glitch.

Essentially, what André Sier has devised is a detailed study of the white ant and the hostility of its habitat, albeit aware of the tension that its presence entails in the anthropocentric ecosystem. And, as intriguing as the images are, this friction of crossing or overlapping territories (ecotones) is also present in the human eye, enhancing the hypnotic quality of the images produced, which unconsciously trigger in us the fear of loss.

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