Alexandre Estrela

Nature Bores the Monster

7 8 7

6b

6a

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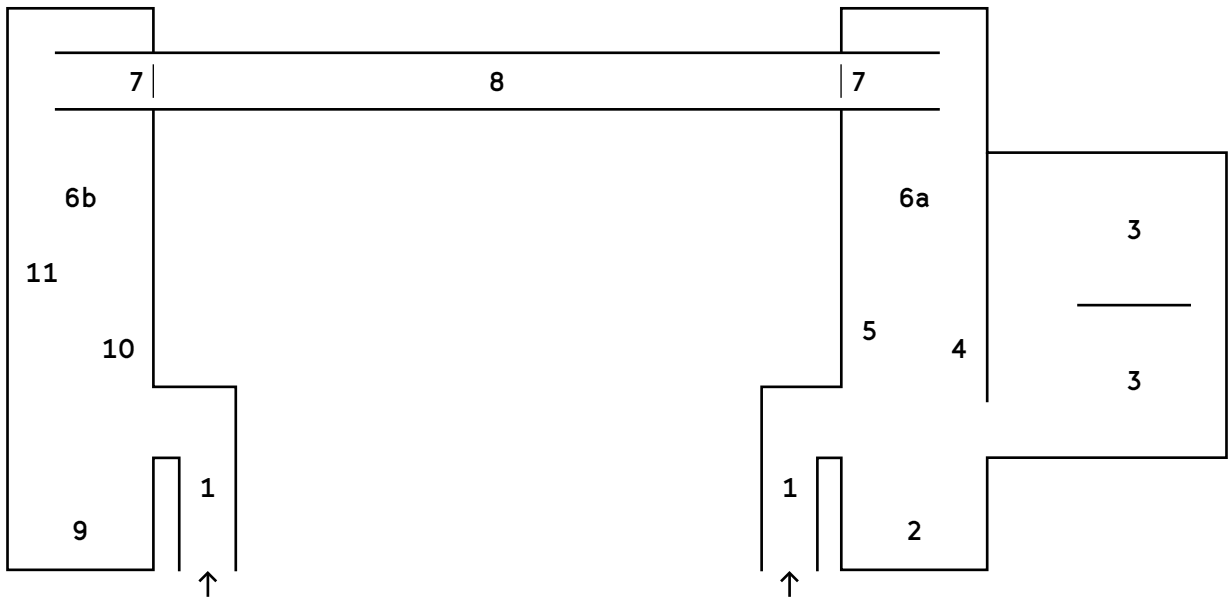
1
Tape Worm, 2024

Computer-generated single-channel video projection
on engraved aluminium screen

Video: Generative HD, colour, endless
Screen: Aluminium plate engraved on both sides
Sound: Field recordings by Martim Melo
Programmed in Max by Borja Caro

Tape worm is a hybrid object, half physical half digital.
A video of a moving virtual audiotape is projected onto
a circuit engraved on a metal screen. The coloured
segments of this tape are generated randomly and
vary in length, having distinct sound sources (red for
forest birds, yellow for mountain birds, and blue for
seabirds). As the tape passes through a reading point,
it creates an ever changing collage of sounds. As the
tape plays, it accumulates noise, as if being corrupted
by the friction with the metal, gradually disintegrating
until it 'breaks'.

2
Rabbid Tuck, 2016

Single-channel video projection

Video: MOV, colour, silent, loop, variable dimensions

The famous 'rabbit- duck' optical illusion forces the
observer to choose between seeing the image of a
rabbit or that of a duck, but never both at the same
time. The video *Rabbid Tuck* proposes a new way of
engaging with this ambiguous figure. The oscillation
between the two images, a rabbit and a bird, along
with their rapid juxtaposition, creates a new being
in-between frames, something that exists only in the
mind of the observer. Between the rabbit and the bird
lies the mental image of a monster.

3
Pockets of Silence, 2015

Double-channel synchronized video installation, controlled
by computer; scientific poster and booklet

1) Video: HD MOV, colour, random, mono sound.
Fiberglass screen and sphere
2) Video: HD MOV, b/w, video still, loop, mono sound.
Metal screen; Plexiglass panel mounted on rotating motor,
set in motion by Arduino.
Programmed in Max by Borja Caro

Poster: "Silent Transmission of Fear", 2015; inkjet print;
Poster by Ana Pereira (Moita Lab, Behavioral Neuroscience
Group, Champalimaud Centre for the Unknown, Lisbon)
Booklet: 2024; offset, graphic design by Ana Baliza

Col. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid
Long-term loan from Fundación Museo Reina Sofía, 2018

This piece intertwines the history of a sound
camouflage for warfare invented by a mercenary
photojournalist with a scientific research on the social
transmission of fear through silence in a community
of rats. Pockets of Silence includes two installations
in adjacent rooms, which communicate danger between
each other through silence.

4
Águas de Março, 2019

Double single-channel video projection on MDF

Video: HD mov, colour, silent, loop
Screen: MDF

On one of the hottest days ever recorded in Minas
Gerais, a soaked piece of tropical cedar was filmed
drying in the sun. The camera could not withstand the
torrid heat and stopped filming within seconds of the
wood finally drying. The video records the temperature
like a thermometer. The image of the exotic wood is
projected onto an MDF board, to which it bonds like
a skin, alternately drying and growing moist in an
eternal cycle.

5
Teia, 2010

Single-channel video projection

Video: HD mov, colour, silent, loop

A small concentric spider web floats around a bamboo
cane. This perfect mathematical structure appears
and disappears as clouds pass in front of the sun.

6a
Plant Circle, 2021 (sleep mode)

Computer-generated single-channel video projection
on sculptural metal screen prepared with speaker

Video: HD mov, colour, silent, loop
Screen: curved painted metal screen

6b
Plant Circle, 2021 (active mode)

Computer-generated single-channel video projection
on sculptural metal screen prepared with speaker

Video: generative HD, colour, endless
Screen: curved painted metal screen
Sound: Alexandre Estrela and Borja Caro based on *Thousand
Year Dreaming*, 1993, by Annea Lockwood, mono
Programmed in Max by Borja Caro

Two moments from the same video—showing an indoor plant—are displayed alternately on the same screen. The distance between the two images continuously changes, generating sound. When the two woven moments intersect (which is indicated by the overlapping of the circle), the video accelerates and the oscillation stabilizes, while a voice erupts with the merging of the two images into one. After this union, the voice stops, and the video splits back into two, returning to the initial oscillation.

7
Entrada/Saída, 2024

Computer-generated single-channel video projection on cast aluminium screen

Video: generative HD, colour, endless
Screen: cast aluminium
Sound: based on *Glass Rod Vibrating*, 1970, by Annea Lockwood, mono
Programmed in Max by Borja Caro

A small tube runs through a horizontal metal screen. On this uneven, rough surface, a video of an underwater cave is projected. The tube blocks the entrance, yet the walls of the cave continue to move. This ever-changing chamber dictates the movement of the tube, evident in the oscillation of its shadow. The continuous motion of the living cave walls shapes the space, which, in turn, alters the sound and the vibrating echo of the tube.

8
Square and Circular Sounds, 2020

Double single-channel video projection on aluminium screen

Video: HD mov, colour, loop
Sound: recorded in loco exploring the sound properties of metal, mono sound; sound capture: Oswaldo Terrones

A photograph of a metal plate with two holes (one round and one square) is projected onto a suspended aluminium screen. The screen is struck twice on different positions, producing two gong sounds that distort the projection. The recording of this action is reprojected onto the same static screen, covering it like a second skin. The undulation of the video, with an illusory anamorphic movement, drags the placidity of the screen, making it appear to move. The geometric categorisation of the sound—whether circular or square—remains at the discretion of the observer.

9
Redskyfalls, 2019

Computer-generated dual-channel video installation triggered by global seismic activity

Video #1: mov, colour, silent, loop
Screen #1: KCS Speaker
Video #2: Projection of the macOS High Sierra desktop screensaver (photo by Russ Bishop and Danita Delimont)
Sound: Bass improvisation with distortion pedal by Miguel Abras, mastered by Borja Caro; amplifier and KCS speaker
Programmed in Max by Borja Caro
Triggered by data received from Every Earthquake API

A screensaver from the macOS High Sierra operating system is projected onto a large screen. In front of it, a speaker is used as a screen for a video depicting a grid covered in aquatic moss. This installation is connected to global seismic activity. When an earthquake occurs, a violent soundtrack erupts from the speaker, activating the background video. The stereotypical landscape shifts in sync with the sound, causing the autumnal image of High Sierra mountain to change to a different season.

10
Barómetro, 2024

Single-channel video projection on silkscreen

Video: MOV, colour, silent, loop

A lens-flair appears spontaneously while filming a tall grass. The video is projected onto a graph with an arbitrary scale. The subjectivity of the scale in measuring the flair frustrates the attempt to quantify the phenomenon, becoming a subject for future analysis.

11
Cupim, 2019

Single-channel video projection on perforated wooden screen

Video: HD MOV, colour, loop, silent
Screen: perforated MDF, one side painted blue

The image of a tropical wood devoured by termites is projected onto a MDF screen, the holes made by the insects coinciding with the holes made in the wood. The back of the screen, painted blue, reveals a constellation.

Works courtesy of the artist and Gallery Travesía Cuatro.
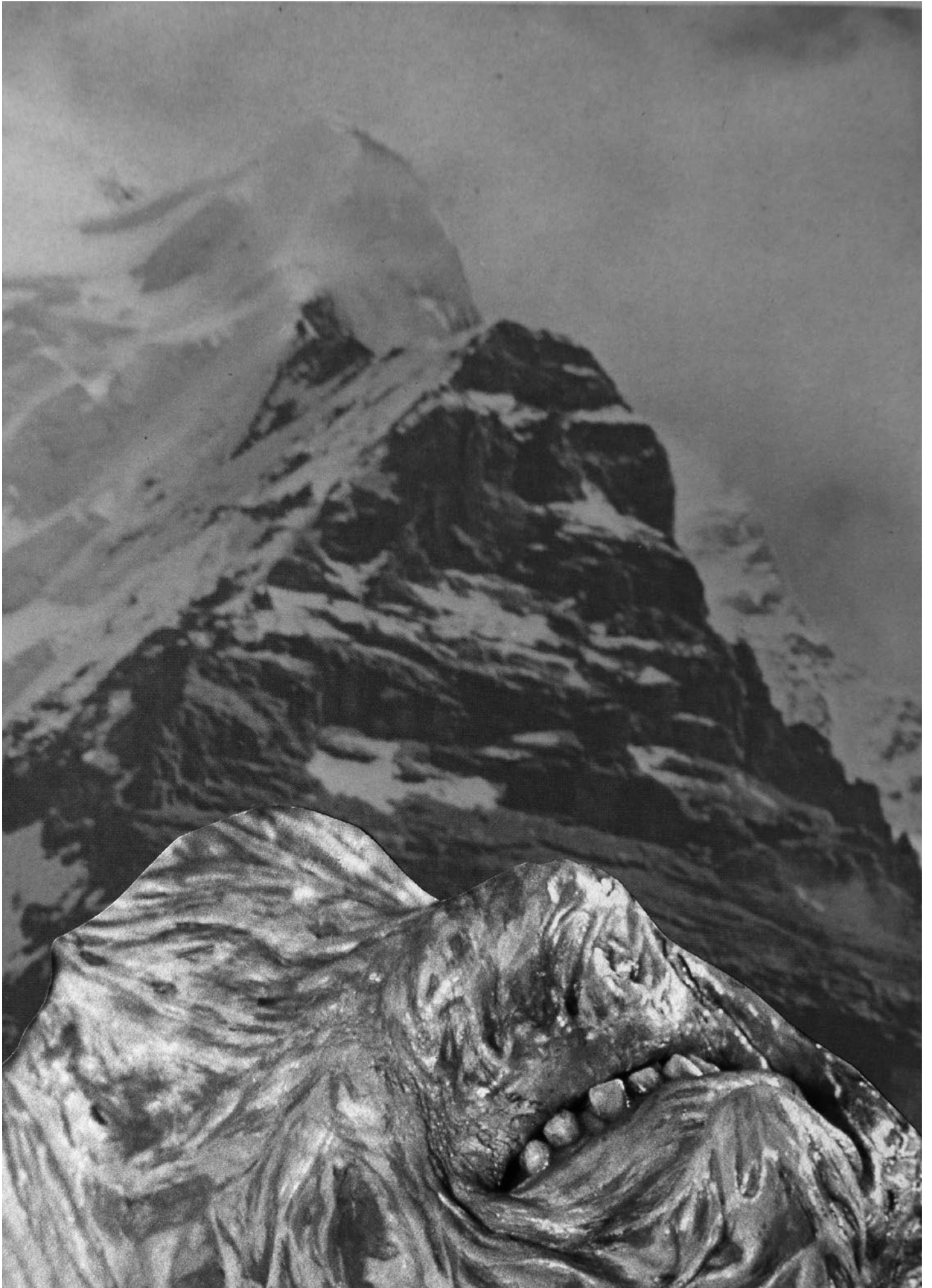
The earliest records of popular science would appear to date back to the Greek poet Aratus (c. 315–240 BC) and, in particular, his two poems *Phenomena* and *Diosemeia*. It is said that the 732 verses of the first were devoted to a detailed description of the constitution and movements of the celestial constellations, at a time when it was still thought that it was the sun that moved around the Earth. The second, meanwhile, consisted of a set of instructions for meteorological forecasting based on astronomical phenomena, accompanied by descriptions of their effects on animals of a wide range of different species. The unexpected success of Aratus' literary initiative was measured by the number of comments and reproductions his poems garnered in the following centuries, inaugurating a tradition of disseminating scientific knowledge among a growing audience of individuals who actively seek the astonishment and perplexity hidden in the things around them.

Alexandre Estrela's work often incorporates information and data from the scientific field. Being neither the starting point nor the endpoint of his work, this information is combined with all sorts of stimuli, references, and artistic elements that contribute to shaping the plastic raw material that gives rise to his pieces. Like Aratu, Alexandre Estrela is much less concerned with the descriptive efficiency of the contents of his pieces than with their ability to be perceived beyond all literalness, in the realm of poetic experience. Like Aratu, what matters to him is the construction of realities whose significant value detaches from the historical contexts and conditions in which they were generated, transcending the concrete circumstances of the space and time that witnessed their emergence.

Pockets of Silence was the first work to be selected for this exhibition. Its genesis combines the story of the Italian mercenary Cesare Dante Vacchi (the unlikely founder of the Portuguese elite troop known as *Comandos*), a laboratory experiment with rats, and the deafening song of Thai cicadas in an attempt to create an absolutely terrifying silence. As can be read in the booklet that accompanies the piece, the laboratory experiment proved that silence—or rather, the sudden interruption of ambient sound—is an unmistakable signal of danger and an irrepressible trigger for the sensation of fear. It is this sensation the piece seeks to create, fulfilling its purpose precisely at the moment when all apparatus is suspended—indeed, this piece is only completed when it stops working or, to put it another way, it works when it is on hold.

This kind of reversal of expectation is of great interest to Alexandre Estrela. The same can be said of the perceptual disruptions and somatic effects that his pieces can provoke. Indeed, most of his works are a means to an end, not an end in themselves: they are designed as catalysts, as agents that promote a certain reaction, in this instance one that, starting in the fine nerves of our perceptive sensors (visual, spatial, auditory), ends up involving the entire body in its multiple and various dimensions.

The fear that underlies the somatic impulse in *Pockets of Silence* has a direct correspondence in *Redskyfalls*, located at the other end of the exhibition. As if inverting the premise of the former piece, *Redskyfalls* is dormant and silent most of the time, triggered only whenever an earthquake is detected somewhere in the world (the piece is permanently connected to a website that publishes real-time information on seismic activity). At that moment, a sound overwhelms the room while the image of a mountainous landscape (actually the screensaver for the macOS High Sierra operating system) changes season, as if to suggest a visual, aural, *somatic* analogy between the violence of a tectonic movement and the colossal amount of energy invested in maintaining a dynamic screensaver when multiplied over several million users.

An operation of camouflage is enacted in this piece. Nature, presented here in all its splendour, conceals its destructive power under a filter of magnificence and beauty. The title of this exhibition (borrowed from the editor, critic, and polemicist Luiz Pacheco) tells us that nature bores the monster. In truth, however, nature itself *is* the monster. It contains it, substantively embodies it, and the exhibition is made up of works that, as a whole, float infinitely between these two points: between the notion of beauty encapsulated in a majestic mountain, in the almost geometric perfection of a spider's web, or in the pristine white down of a rabbit, and the monstrosity that lurks beneath this serene, placid and balanced version of phenomena—a monstrosity that surpasses us and whose power of annihilation returns us to the true scale of our insignificance. Beauty, with its rules and harmonies, is nothing more than an instant in the incessant movement between horror and itself. As such, it is a singular and circumscribed moment, thus becoming an exceptional event and, paradoxically, an instance out of the ordinary.

Symmetry is one of beauty's favourite weapons. The origin of all doubles, symmetry is the yardstick of regularity, proportion, and balance—values that have all guided the architectural design of the rooms in Culturgest's Gallery 1. Perhaps for this reason, the works that occupy these two wings appear mirrored in the spaces, establishing correlations that are, however, more suggested than rigorous. There are, in fact, pieces that repeat themselves (*Tape Worm*, *Plant Circle*, *Entrada/Saída*) and others that are duplicated (Águas de Março, *Teia*), but the unfolding that takes place between the two wings is based essentially on a game of reoccurrences in contexts, references or motifs, much more than on perfect coincidences. In a way, it is a question of a symmetry that has been consciously and purposefully corrupted, bastardised, like a beauty that got disfigured in order to reveal the monster.

The logic of duplication and symmetry that runs through these two wings is best expressed in the corridor that runs between them, a space where visitors are blocked from circulating, suggesting a forbidden space and configuring an insurmountable distance between the two wings. Quite appropriately, the works

that occupy this corridor are exercises that enact the sensation of space, movement, and depth based on optical effects that play on the flatness of its screens: the cave that is uncovered and closed off to the rhythm of random percussion and, further down, a perforated metal plate that, when struck, creates the illusion of a tilting and anamorphic movement of a screen that, actually, has been still all along.

The incommunicability that this obstructed corridor imposes between the two wings of the exhibition reinforces the role that memory plays in the experience proposed here by Alexandre Estrela. The perception of the symmetrical condition of the exhibition can only be supported by an exercise in remembrance that knows that each wing is a twin version of the other, with its singularities and particularities, of course, but engaged in a profound symbiotic relationship. In this sense, the wings are like the two hemispheres of a brain, connected by a callous body that does not communicate. The information from each half remains locked away in its own space, forced to remember its correlate on the other side in the form of a phantom memory.

The poster Alexandre Estrela chose for this exhibition shows an old piece, *Star Mountain*, from 1995, in which we see a collage of the Machiavellian face of one of horror cinema's most famous characters, Freddy Krueger, over the idyllic view of a snowy mountain. Given the title of the exhibition, the choice seems quite obvious, but the intention of this choice goes beyond the more immediate reading, as we might expect, insofar as the naked juxtaposition of these two images inevitably points to a third instance: like the hybrid between duck and rabbit suggested in *Rabbid Tuck*, like the phantom memory between the two mirrored wings, like the substance that transmutes between nature and the monster, this exhibition doesn't seem to be about any of these poles, but perhaps about that Other that persists in between, about that third half, intangible and unnameable, that subsists in the vague space of the interval.