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The Black Snake Project

**Interview of Cécile Hartmann
by Caroline Cournède**

February 2021

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- When I look at your work, I feel like you have gone through two distinct phases. The first phase revolved around performance. I am thinking of your *Orange Project* (2000-2005), for which performers carried mobile objects through industrial areas or natural landscapes. In this project, you “activated” space as you said. The strange actions you orchestrated made it visible, becoming real happenings. The second phase is your current line of work, which is more concerned with documenting historical traces, fragments, and events. How did you make this transition from the visible to the invisible, from action to trace?

For *Orange project*, I conceived plastic fictions in the form of discordant actions set up in transition zones and circulation areas like train stations, airports, subways, and suburban areas. These overtly man-made globalized spaces were “reloaded” by the introduction of monochromatic mobile objects carried by performers. In these spaces dedicated to fast pace, the bodies of the carriers slowed down by the objects they were carrying acted as a signal, a pictorial sign as well as a sign of resistance. These situations were documented through photographs, and the final work consisted in the traces of these actions, as the actions themselves remained anonymous. It was a way to set up reality while revealing and subverting it. It was in Hiroshima that I started transitioning toward this work on traces. I was invited to work in a marble building that had stood through nuclear bombing. I started searching for traces of the explosion, as imperceptible as they might be: stains, burns, micro-changes, cracks on the ground. The impossibility to make visible something that had totally disappeared established a new relationship to time and the photographic gesture. A holed, unfinished story, as Foucault said. When I walked from Ground Zero toward the Ota river, I discovered foliar mutations in young trees growing in the Peace Memorial Park a few meters from the zone of impact. Their roots dug in a potentially contaminated underground. Silent and organic witnesses of the violence of history, their presence opened the possibility of something off-camera, a living enigma for the viewer, a clue to uncover.

- Your projects often interweave the economical, environmental, political, and memorial dimensions of events. These various topics are tied up in your film *Achrone*, which is about the extravagant construction works in Dubai in the middle of the financial crisis. In *Compulsive* too, with the photographs of these trees from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park where you noticed a strange foliar mutation as a consequence of the H bomb. In *Kessoku*, which confronts images of a volcano and that of a Japanese megalopolis, industrial design, and environmental issues. And in *Sediments & Lacunas – Wall Street Hiroshima*, which tackles the subprime financial crisis. *The Black Snake* project presented at the MABA also dives into these issues. What motivated you to tackle such topics?

I am deeply interested in the reversibility of forces. How - economic, technical, and telluric- forces that usually exist in separate orders and worlds meet, clash, and impact one another. Since the 2000s, I have become interested in writing a Natural History that would put the human time in perspective with geological time, to look at all systems as ecosystems. My investigations are guided by questions of time and space scale, a notion that is at the core of my work. This is why I look for unbalance, fragmentation, mutation, repetition, equilibrium and tipping points in the places I visit. For me, nature is the very first medium, in the sense that it is forever alive and expanding. The natural world is the result of a slow transformative process with infinite variations and fluctuations. Although “nature does not make jumps” as Walter Benjamin said, it is now undergoing a fast-tracked global transformation forcing it into a brutal change of pace. As a result, it is losing the balance it needs to remain stable in some places while growing new and complex ramifications in others.

By looking at the realities of the man-made world through the original models of nature, I try to

confront the different forces at work and consider the historical experience as a physical one. I try to look for what resists in the matter, what is created, coexists and coagulates in order to give life to harmonious wholes. It is natural life that sparks and draws the formal and conceptual connections in my work.

The Keystone XL pipeline, nicknamed "the black snake" by the Native Americans whose lands it crosses, creates a collision between the fast pace of the oil economy and the slow time of the earth's fossil memory. At the frontier between two worlds, above and underground, the pipeline connects human and non-human life forms on its path: Native American tribes, farmers, workers, animals, plants, rivers and water tables. My project began precisely at this junction point between entropy and utopia.



Cécile Hartmann
Cut, 2020
Cut wood, black pigment

- As you said, the project draws on the metaphor of the black snake, which stands for the giant Keystone pipeline carrying 700,000 barrels of toxic wastes from Alberta's open-air exploitations through Native American reserves, spoiling the lands and water sources and causing unprecedented ecological damages. Following the invisible flow of the pipeline, *The Black Snake* film (2021) is the centerpiece of the exhibition project, around which unfold many photographs, sculptural elements, wall paintings, and screenprints. Here, you tackle economic issues from two temporal perspectives: the first is the present, with the ongoing exploitation of oil sands causing the destruction of primary forests, the degradation of the soils and water tables; the second is the memory of the expropriation of Native Americans from their lands by European settlers for economic purposes. In the end, these two temporalities meet: today still, native American reserves and their natural resources are threatened to be exploited for economic purposes. In the film, how did you choose to tackle the past and present despoliations and the infringement of the rights of these native populations? Can you tell us how you embedded these references in the project, from the dialogue you imagined between the Missouri River and the pipeline up to the current situation you present through mere fragments and clues? Can you also explain your relationship to time in the film, especially since you chose to present the film in a looping mode?

The film deliberately takes place after the last four years of conflicts opposing Native American communities, activists and the police. In doing so, it breaks with the imagery already conveyed in the media to focus on the physical and emotional effects of the pipeline. I chose not to directly show the violence inflicted on the Native Americans. This violence is expressed through that perpetrated against the land. This dialectical relationship between esthetic and ethic,

documentary approach and abstraction process has become a trademark of my research. I wanted to give some perspective to the violence of these events: violation of funerary sites, contamination of water reserves, confiscation, fragmentation and contamination of the lands. I wanted to deeply interconnect the energies released by the great plains landscape and the psychological shock of the traumas caused by the current and past events. To embody this confrontation between human and natural history, I thought of bringing the camera from above to below the ground and tell the story from a double point of view. My idea was to sequence the narration in chapters paced by a slow descent into the underground followed by an upward motion to rise back up. The temporality of the film is a mental flow as much as an earthly one filled with river sounds, howls of wind and animal songs, pulses of the derrick and vibrations of the excavating machines. The underground sequences take the form of still frames without images that plunge the viewer in complete darkness, evoking the fossil memory of the earth and the darkness of the night before the creation of the world. I wanted them to be moments of mental projection, introspection and silence. The alternation of these two viewpoints creates tension, amplified, as you noted, by the looping mode of the film, which blurs the line between the beginning and the end.

I conceived *The Black Snake* as an organic whole that want to project us in a faraway future, a time after the oil industry, that of the last men and machines. As you said, the heavenly time opening the film could be that of a new cycle beginning. Native American people often talk about their relationship to the land and the cyclicity of time. Men are embedded in a vast ecosystem of forces and vibrations, of movements and rhythms they come to understand in the course of their existence. The beginning and the end of life meet and form a loop. Human time is experienced as a cosmic circular time, a temporal matrix. Today these pantheistic visions find a renewed echo through the environmental issues raised by pipeline pollution and climate change.



Cécile Hartmann
Le Serpent Noir, 2021.
Looping 42-second film, color
and black & white, sound without
dialogue, soundtrack by Terence
Meunier.

- Precisely, our relationship to the ground, to lands, to geology, and, by extension, to a supra-human memory -that of the earth- is a recurrent theme in your work. It appeared in *Sediments & Lacunas - Wall Street Hiroshima*, in *Solaris* -a project commissioned by the CNAP for the exhibition *Nouvelles Vagues*-, a plowed field at the frontier between Germany and Poland, in some shots of *The Black Snake* (taken very close to the ground) and in the underground camera motions. This relationship also appears in your use of clay in several of the exhibited artworks (sculpture, altered photographs) and even in the colors you chose for the screenprints.

In *The Black Snake*, you talked about these plunges into the very heart of the earth as psychoanalytical and introspective sequences. One could also see an allusion to the founding myths of Gaia and Uranus (one of the first sequences of the film seems like a clear reference to me, as it looks like the earth and the sky are splitting). But beyond, it also shows the deep environmental commitment of your work. Could you explain your relationship to the land as well as the militant aspect of your practice?

Working in the field engages the body. When Cezanne talks about his relationship to the Sainte-Victoire mountain or when Robert Smithson looks for the earth perspective, they both express a desire to break with a prevailing viewpoint. I have been working for a long time around the ground and the parallel between the surface of the earth and the surface of images. I like to work very closely with materials and elements whether in a confrontational or harmonious way. I am interested in spaces where frontiers and scales are abolished, and one can get lost. When I shoot, I try to explore the volatility of perception through interspersing abrupt ruptures and shocks with wide frames, switching from a micro to a macro scale without transition. This view of natural elements is present in German romanticism, a deep connection between geography and iconography. It is the idea that the landscape is physically experienced through our five senses. It is a desire to go back to an elementary and primitive world. In *The Black Snake*, I wanted the surfaces of the ground and images to be porous. What I mean is that I knew I wanted to plunge underground somewhat, to part from the Euclidian and anthropocentric perspective.

The Black Snake embarks us on the journey of the earth, from its creation to its infertility, its destruction and possible remission. The lands I filmed along the pipeline form a physical and emotional substrate. The viewer is invited to feel the earthly matter in a tragic and phenomenological way. The various sequences of the film explore a state of surrender to time and space, to roads, paths, the night and day cycles, the resounding presence of the ground... The destruction of the soils caused by the extraction of oil sands in Alberta is irreversible. Primary ecosystems such as the bogs and humus layers of the boreal forest that border the entire subarctic circle need thousands of years to regenerate, a time scale that far exceeds human time. In this area, these layers act like a bandage covering the fossil sediments and the pockets of methane contained in the subsoil. The forest, the lichens and mosses are the regulators of a mild climate that keeps polar cold within its circle. The film is centered around and culminates with the apocalyptic landscapes of the sand oils causing unruly greenhouse effect gases. They are shot from the edges of the gigantic pits created by the excavations, which gives the movie its powerful documentary impact.

The images we know of these sites are generally taken from planes or drones. Here, on the contrary, the viewer is grounded, "back on earth" as Bruno Latour said, back to an animal condition, alert, staggered by the magnitude of the destruction.

To answer more precisely your question, I used a clear to dark grey color palette for all of the exhibited works. A slow process of oxidation and mineralization of the images, which is reminiscent of that of the lands in the film. *Mute* consists of photographs covered with clay colored with iron oxide. Become mute and indiscernible, these images evoke the idea of contamination or the erasure of human memory. Clay is a fascinating raw material in that it regenerates itself, suggesting that the image underneath could be revealed once the clay turns into dust, as a result of the action of time. The texture of these clouded images is also reminiscent of dry grounds or moonscapes. Produced in one gesture and without any tool, their material exceeds their support, thus manifesting strength and weakness simultaneously. For the sculptural piece *Broken Pipeline*, I poured and covered a medium with clay. The drying time revealed the work as it transformed the cardboard tubes into hybrid shapes imbued with serpentine organicity. It could be a pipeline leak or the place of an ongoing mutation.

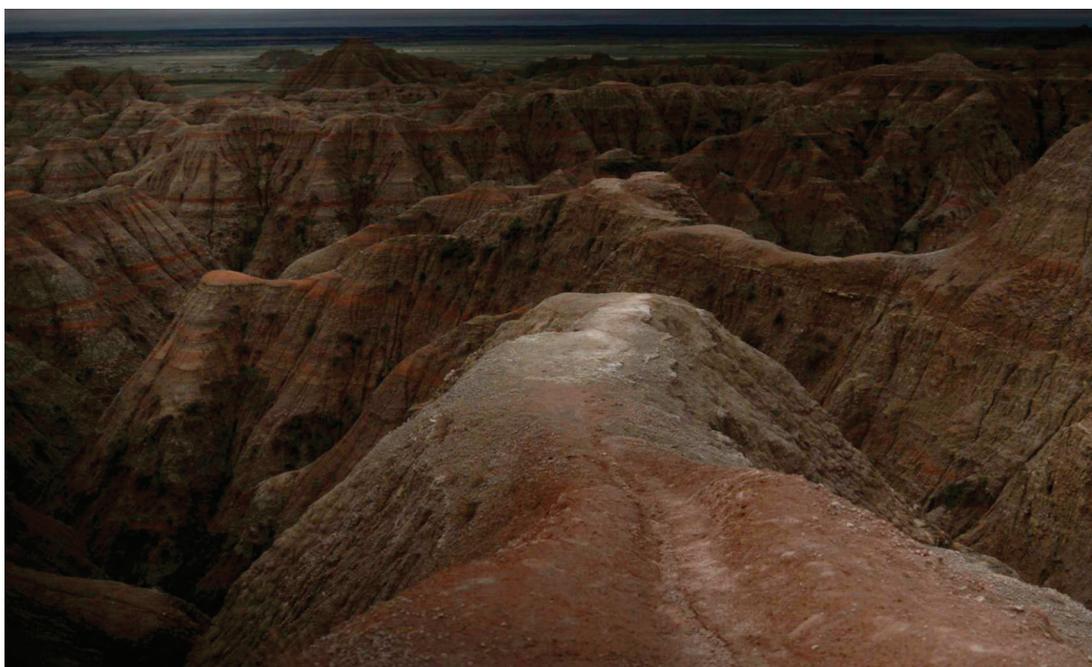
I thought the exhibition as a cycle going from the image seen as a conceptual object to a sculptural one. I wanted some sort of physicality to gradually emerge through the rooms, like

stages of a transformative process. The room with the only human figure of the exhibition is the place of a confrontation between the “human” subject and the “spectator” subject through the black mirror of *Black Narcissus*. Through its mirror effect, the “spectator” subject is confronted with his subjectivity, which was previously “reshaped” by the shades of the *Philosophical Pantone*.

- The notion of an “active” act of looking is also present in the film, which, in large part, adopts a contemplative viewpoint. This almost romantic vision of the landscape is the main narrative thread of the film along with the underground motions of the camera. Men are absent. Only their traces remain: their machine tools, their derelict habitats, their destroyed environment. However, this narrative thread is often interrupted, creating tensions. The rhythm changes, but also the nature of the images. Can you tell us more about these ruptures?

These changes of rhythm and types of images shift the viewer’s perception from contemplative still shots in high definition to erratic ones in low resolution. Beyond the visual impact, they look for a physical reaction in the viewer. They express our condition as fragmented beings. The world is fragmenting. Our contemplation is interrupted. These ruptures also express men’s violence against the slow time of nature. The bogs that cover the grounds of the boreal forest formed over thousands of years, while blasting underground rocks and backhoeing are, as we said before, irreversible acts of destruction.

Finally, these ruptures conjure up the physical experience of the places visited, of chaos, of the earth cracked open and devastated, of the uprooted trees and the contaminated rivers. The viewer is invited to experience the movie through his five senses and his body, to be surprised by the sound of an explosion or a sudden cut, which changes the rhythm of the movie from peaceful to halting. He enters in a progressive state of vigilance. These ruptures also bring him from the real world above ground to the underground world associated with metamorphosis and dream time, from the visible to the invisible, from light to darkness, to access alternate states of consciousness and perception of space and time.



Cécile Hartmann
Le Serpent Noir, 2021.
Looping 42-second film, color
and black & white, sound without
dialogue, soundtrack by Terence
Meunier.

- As you said, you combine heavenly landscapes with images that show the brutality of human interventions: cut wood, trenches in the ground, wire meshes and barb wires, trucks racing on the roads... However, the film is looping, therefore suggesting the idea of a possible repair, of a cycle of creation/destruction as in every myth of the origins. Drawing bridges between romanticism, minimalism and activism, in its different facets, the project proposes an

archeologic look at a devastated and devastating present as much as a prophetic vision of a future where chaos and destruction could become regenerative forces if a new cycle were to begin. Like your other films, *The Black Snake* opens the door to redemption. Non-authoritative, your films show without condemning, leaving the viewer free to position himself. In that sense, you seem close to eco-feminist movements. What is your relationship with these movements?

Very active in the United States, eco-feminism was historically pre-figured by Rachel Caron's book *Silent Spring* published in 1962. There are still many communities of women living in nature proposing to rethink together the relationships of power and exploitation exerted on both women and nature. The eco-feminist approach is based on the sentient understanding of our conditions of existence and co-existence on this planet. I have read Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers and *Dreaming the Dark* by Starhawk. These books have probably inspired and affirmed my desire to propose a certain reading of human sciences as well as an artistic practice based on a sentient experience of the natural world and its relationship to non-human life forms. The Edenic time of the first chapter of the film is also that of the earth without men. It precedes the collapse and re-establishes a balance between creative and destructive forces. It was necessary to replace the whole narration in the framework of a founding story. As Nietzsche said, there is a sort of "tragic joy" to think of time on a scale that exceeds men. The reference to the origins also introduces the topic of natural beauty. After experiencing this mysterious and primal beauty, the viewer feels its loss even more deeply. The screening room created at the MABA for the exhibition is a meditative and metamorphic place where viewers can witness the journey of the earth from an internal as well as external point of view: the cosmic earth on which we build our foundations and the "mother-earth" connecting us to organic and visceral emotions.

- When we met a couple of years ago, you told me about Ursula K. Le Guin's science-fiction books, and in particular about *The Word for world is forest*, an anti-colonialist and anti-military plea against the annexation of lands and species. This literary work explores our relationship to the environment and the link between culture and languages. Did you have that in mind when you shot your film?

I didn't think of Le Guin directly, but my mother used to read a lot of American science-fiction literature from the 70s. I discovered it later as an adolescent and it informed my first political and environmental opinions. The science fiction of that time did not pay much attention to technique. Instead, it developed at the crossroad of human sciences, poetry and anthropology. Le Guin has imagined a rather prophetic dreamlike world without falling prey to any patent spirituality. In that sense her apocalyptic, scientific and utopian visions are interesting. You can sense that she experienced the landscapes she talks about, and at times, she develops an almost naturalistic and romantic approach. Her vision of men remains positive, even if she often questions dead on latent forms of archaism. Her relationship to history is imperceptibly shaped by the echo of World War II and the horror of the concentration camps.

- This "imperceptible" mark of history you mention about Ursula K. Le Guin is quite similar to your way of capturing a (historical, geological, human) memory in your work. In that sense, one could say your photographs and videos serve a documentary purpose, although their formal treatment far exceeds it. Is it the way you perceive your images? There are parallels to be made between the recording of a memory that never fully emerge at the surface of your works – based on "indirect" images, like mental images- and your relationship to the ground, the notion of strata, and overlaps- of times, memories, images ... Often, you create an image that you then erase by altering its medium, undoing your own creative gesture... playing on the notion of cycle and movement, which relates to one of your themes in *The Black Snake*. Do you think that this notion of cycle, of movement, which guides the production of your images, is connected to your previous performance work?

I would say I am on the side of field documentary, of experience, but afterward, I work out formal strategies that disrupt hierarchies, identities and chronologies. I try to immerse myself in the abstraction and fiction underlying reality by confronting myself with the brutal realities of our super-modern era. I am not looking to control reality but to somehow dissolve in matter. The places I choose are often construction sites where the foundations of human civilization -in contrast with the earthly ground- transform landscapes into unrecognizable and unwelcoming moonscapes: the construction site of Dubai, of the Keystone XL, the extraction of oil sands in Alberta. I am also interested in places marked by the violence of history and where traces of past events have disappeared: the site of the 9/11 attacks, the impact zone of the H bomb, the battlefields of the first nations.

To answer your question on the status of my images and the construction of memory, I would say that my images are subjective archives of specific historical moments. They are dialectical images at the intersection of the man-made and the organic. They document the ongoing mutations of our conditions of existence and co-existence while questioning human violence and finitude. They capture the structural and emotional effects of violence through active forces of the material world: light and darkness, the visible and the invisible, the fragment and the whole, silence and words. I look to create an unsettling sensorial visual dynamic, to open the narrative toward a condensed form, to pull images toward vibrant surfaces and colorful sensations that will be tense or released by the events taking place in the areas of the world I visit. Within this mode of thinking, I raise some of my images, if I may say, to the status of icons, like *First Boy* -featured in the exhibition-, the Hiroshima trees in *Compulsive*, the worker walking in the distant dust in Dubai in *Worker*. These photographs are rare because they capture a specific historical moment. They are metaphysical images that stare back at the viewer, talking to his emotions and critical sense.

To go back to this notion of movement, of repetition and cycle, it was two years ago that I started covering old photographs I had previously altered and damaged with thin layers of clay. These performative gestures I used for *The Black Snake* project allude to the ideas of erasure and repair. The image becomes like the plastic echo of the bumps, alterations and mutations observed in the field. This material addition changes the nature of the images and embodies the fragile work of traumatic memory.

- For *The Black Snake* film, you did a beautiful sound work that combined natural elements (rain, howls of wind), fragmentation noise, scream to scare off animals and a composition by Terence Meunier inspired by an Indian lullaby punctuated by silences. How did you work on the soundtrack and how did you connect these various sequences and "layers" of sound?

The whole film is like a musical and visual score. "Everything talks, everything rustles" as Novalis said. Speechless elements talk -the wind, the water, the ground, the machines, the derrick and the pipeline. Like in my other films, there is no human voice. With my assistant Yohan Guignard, we carefully recorded sounds in the places where we shot. Then, as I usually do, I broke everything down into the smallest units that I placed and repeated very precisely on the editing table to create a feeling of growing stupor in the viewer.

To come back to the question of the imagined dialogue between the Missouri River and the pipeline, my first intuition was to give a voice to the pipeline and to turn it into a fictional character in its own right. I wrote a monologue inspired by statements businessmen had given during trials held in 2009 after the Subprime crisis. As I progressed in the editing of the film, I decided to materialize the invisible pipeline mainly through sound; and I invited the musician Terence Meunier to compose a leitmotiv that alternated between mechanical and organic vibration. This motif expresses the metamorphosis of the pipeline into a snake and echoes the flows of toxic waste it carries, the mysterious depth of the underground, the water tables and the spirit of the dead.

I gave Terence the score of a Cheyenne lullaby transcribed by Natalie Curtis-Burlin, an American

ethnomusicologist who lived among Native American communities in the 1900s and wrote their music and songs. Terence Meunier composed his motif from this score. It is beautiful and it enables powerful emotions to flood as we plunge underground. The music follows the camera motions under and above ground, creating a moving soundscape. Then in the sequences left blank, I put up cards like in a silent movie with the names of the rivers contaminated by the pipeline: White River, Wandering River, Battle River, Powder River, Milk River, Missouri River, Cheyenne River... The rivers tell the story.



Cécile Hartmann
Untitled (Duality), 2021
Wall-painting

- As you say, another important element of the exhibition is your use of text in several of the works, the cards shown in the film, the wall-painting, the screenprints and the poster. With the poster and the cards shown in the film, the list of toponyms acts like phantasmagoric projections of the natural landscapes and lands that belonged to Native American tribes or evoke infamous battles. The words conjure up images and landscape, a fictional territory. But in the wall-painting and the screenprints, you confront antagonistic notions– in a radical form borrowed from militant posters- and the texts take on a political dimension.

In Geneva, in 2019, you performed a fictional tale imagining the dialogue between the Missouri River and the pipeline as a work-in-progress of the project. This textual use seems rather new in your work. I am right or was it there before? What led you to use the written and read text this way for *The Black Snake*?

For *The Black Snake*, I tried to give a voice to usually voiceless life forms. My ambition was both political and symbolic. How does a river or a pipeline talk? At the beginning of the 21st century, more and more of us are asking for a new contract between men and nature. New legal representations appear, and lawyers start to advocate for non-human lives in courts. I have performed these two monologues written in a dialogical form between the Missouri River and the Keystone pipeline at a conference in Le Commun of Geneva.

To answer your question on my use of text, I have been writing for a long time. My first university training before studying fine art in Paris contributed to this habit of writing as a primary form of imagination and thinking. It took me about three years to write the texts for the wall-painting *Duality* and the *Philosophical Pantone*, which consists of 16 screenprints. In the same way that I build my films around antagonistic forces, I have written the texts like oppositional dynamic forces.

In the *Philosophical Pantone*, the various shades of grey allude to possible states of rumination

and reflection around contemporary world issues, our relationship to life, our condition, and finitude. I have written this piece as a philosophical development of our emotions and destinies. The first words in lighter shades of grey symbolize an original organic state which gets darker and darker as we progress toward more structural and political notions.

I wanted the *Philosophical Pantone* to enter in visual and almost musical resonance with the exhibition space. The words are repeated in a dialogical and pictorial form. The subjectivity of the spectator is "reshaped" by every shade of color. This piece tilts more toward conceptual art, but it engages the viewer without making any clear statement.

- Your texts are of different nature too: factual, descriptive, philosophical, poetical... How did you choose the range of each work?

I take a lot of notes. I have been writing lists of words for years, words that capture a thought or that I have heard or read. In the same way that I am interested in the amalgamation and hybridization of media -painting, photography and sculpture-, I like to intertwine different ranges of writing to create both mental and physical effects.

- Earlier in this interview, we talked about the environmental dimension of your projects. This commitment takes even more meaning in our current situation, I mean the covid pandemic, a zoonosis caused by the degradation of the environment and the shrinkage of animal habitats. We also see how, since the Enlightenment and the idealized vision of progress and Modernity, the predatory behavior of men on other men, as well as on animal and plant species has led to an ecological dead-end and the appropriation and exhaustion of natural resources. Now that this film and project are over, what are the topics and issues you want to tackle in your future works?

We grew up in a civilization based on power, progress and ontological narcissism. Today, our destiny seems to escape us. We have to make choices and new alliances. Men are walking on shakier ground. Our time is uncertain, between collapse and futurology, acceleration and recession. On one hand, part of humanity sees solidarity as an evolutionary benefit, given that in a hostile environment, those who cooperate survive better; on another, others are developing even more sophisticated systems to dominate time and space, to shield themselves, become immortal and colonize other planets. These two attitudes inspire me a new project around the relationships between political and natural law, and around the images that arise in our collective unconscious when we think of wildlife.

My works document a state of the world while proposing another version of reality. They postulate that history is not over and describe a civilization that is only at the very beginning of its own understanding and evolution. I would like to think about evolution and the first models of anarchic development -like corals and rhizomes- and raise the political and esthetic questions behind these forms.