

Dialogue #3

National Archive of Torre do Tombo

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André Sier

Time, always incremental and exponential, is an endless accumulation of knowledge, materials, events, books and manuscripts that pile up in storerooms. Stuffed with signs, symbols and meanings, the archive is a dazzling place and, from an archaic standpoint, not that much different from a library. Both are depositories of contents of extensive cultural and historical value, a metaphysical territory as infinite as time itself, an ever-expansive continuum.

The mission of an archive is not just to store things. Likewise, the mission of a library is not only educational. The division into two separate entities occurs for reasons purely to do with modern-day systematisation, but they both end up completing similar tasks, by taking care of the knowledge they contain within, preserving, protecting and restoring it when necessary. That said, we must know how to bequeath the archive and awake it.

And, like museums, archives (but also libraries in their regional or national form) are places of power. The richer a nation is, the more knowledge it accumulates in that diachronic and synchronic equation; and the more knowledge a nation's citizens have at their fingertips, the more dynamic it becomes. It is not a coincidence that national archives are almost as old as their respective nations.

Although dated in its architectural language, the Torre do Tombo National Archive is the formal manifestation of its intended purpose: a strongbox of immeasurable value that *tomba* ('entombs', broadly speaking - in archaic Portuguese, *tombar* means to archive), since the 14th century, anything

and everything deemed to be of relevance. With its severe, intractable and impenetrable physicality, fittingly Brutalist in conception, this is a building whose interior areas hearken immediately back to the literary circles of Umberto Eco or Jorge Luis Borges, even if somewhat out of time and space. The hush therein is so very redolent of the weight of time and the feel of an ancient institution, obliging all who visit or work there to act accordingly.

The atmospheric setting of the National Archives of Torre do Tombo welcomes the third edition of *Dialogues*, this time given over to the artist André Sier, whose body of work places him at the forefront of digital art in Portugal.

Sier proposes an about-turn in how we view the ecosystem of this monumental setting, suppressing its usual anthropocentric mission. What the artist seeks to explore here is a crawling, infested world, often invisible to the human eye, and equally submerged in the physical, metaphysical and imaginary territory of archives and libraries. In this sense, the artist explores a non-human shift that references the politics and ethics of deep ecology and, as in previous works such as *Wolfanddotcom* (2017) or *Terrants* (2013), focuses on animals and their conflicts with the human species.

In his own words, the artist articulates the problem in the following terms: "The human archive becomes part of the landscape. It is geared towards eternity. Protected by a structural framework, it needs, however, mechanisms of access that intersect with the landscape. The landscape is the terrain of endless life changes. They are also geared



Estragos da formiga branca, 1929
(<https://digitalq.arquivos.pt/details?id=3681532>)



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 limita-

tions 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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二十八年八月

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