"Disassembled" Images
Allan Sekula and Contemporary Art

Edited by Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder

Leuven University Press

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"Disassembled" Images
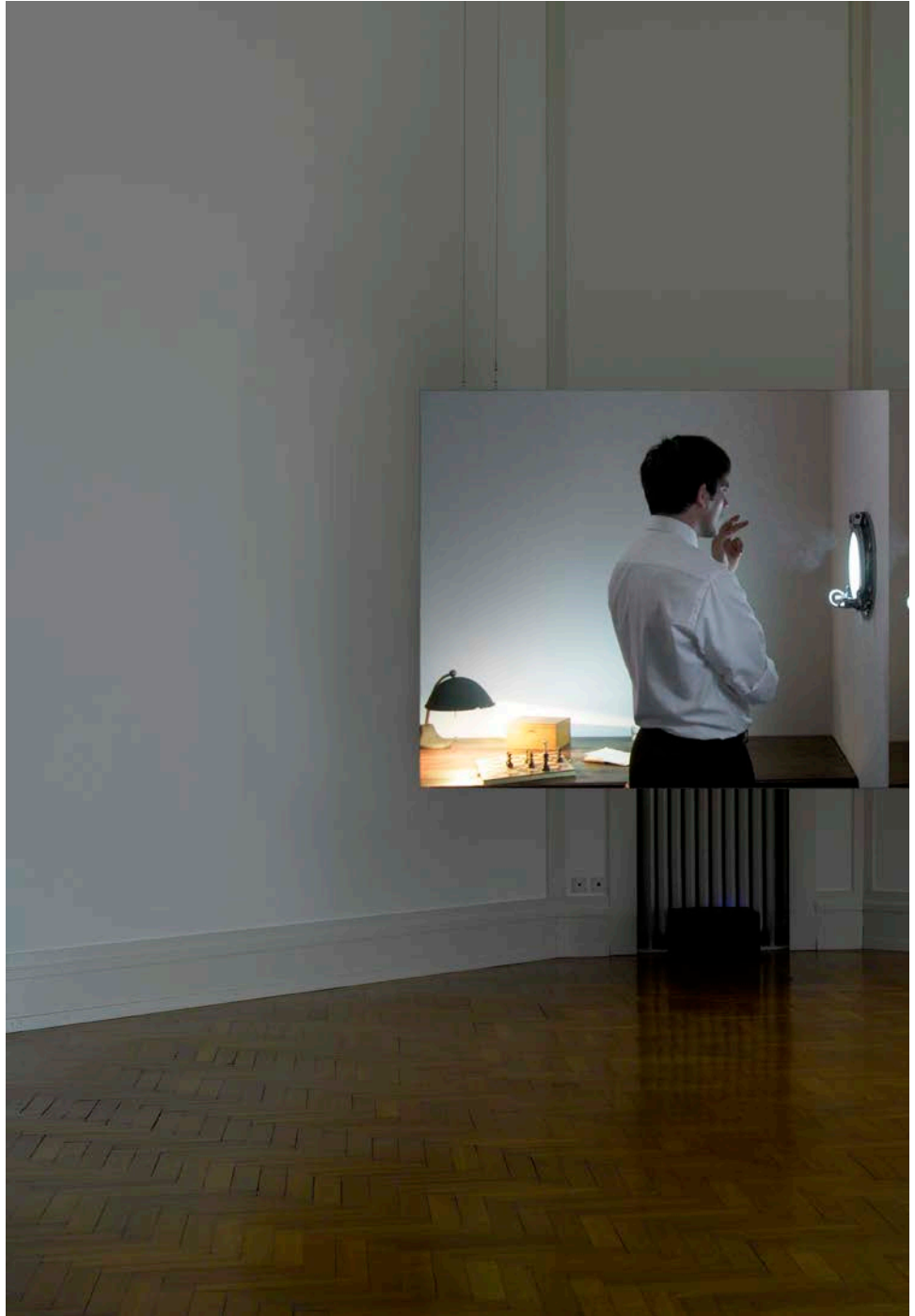## Allan Sekula and Contemporary Art
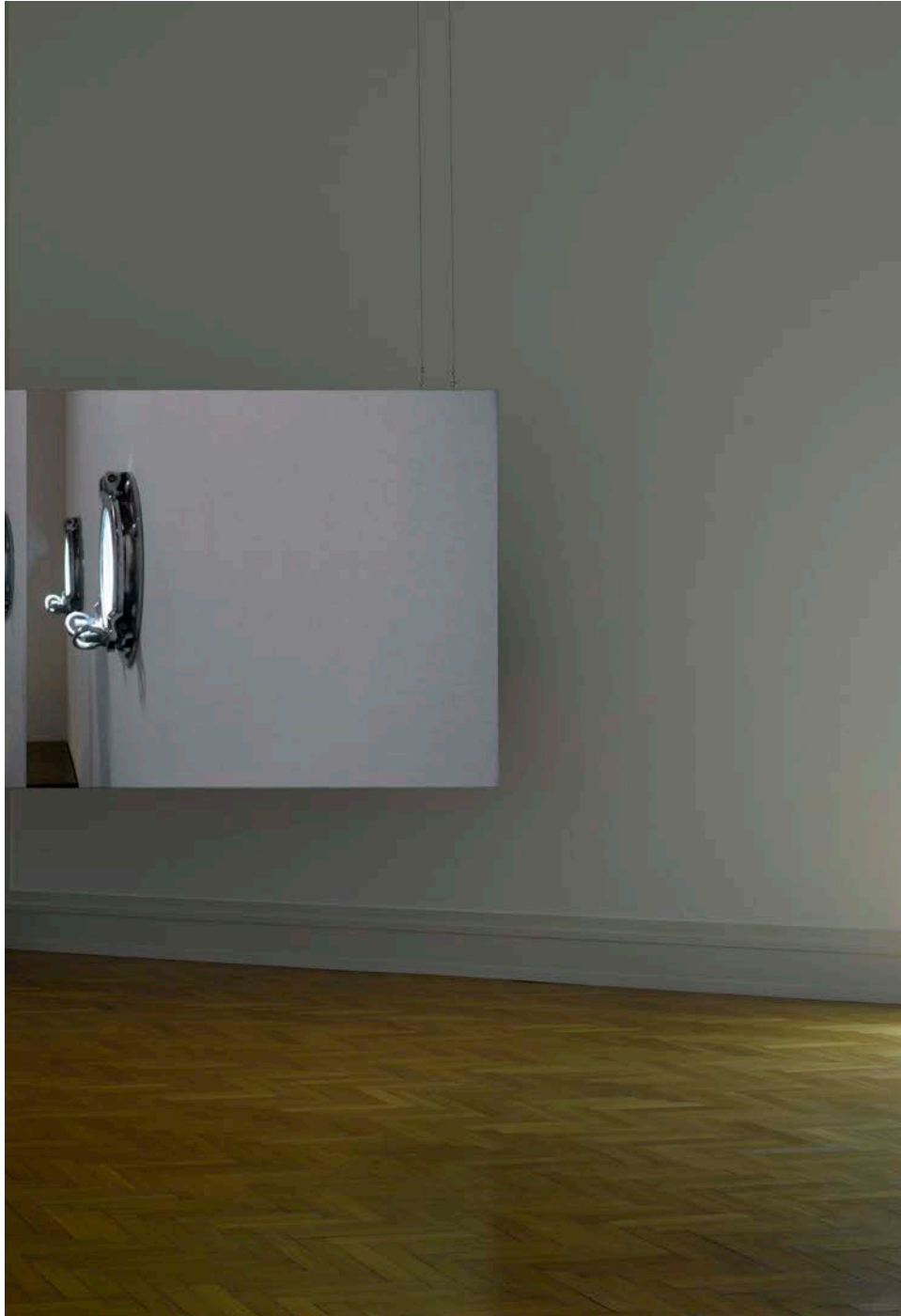
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Ettore Majorana when 23. Courtesy of Erasmo Recami and Maria Majorana.
Reproduction forbidden.

The Land Seen by the Sea

Marco Poloni

In 1938 the Italian theoretical physicist Ettore Majorana sent a note to the director of the Physics Institute at the University of Naples, where he had just been appointed professor. It included an intriguing phrase: "The Sea Rejected Me." In an earlier letter to the director, Majorana had mentioned his decision to suddenly disappear. This new, odd phrase seemed to imply that he had reversed his decision. Majorana eventually succeeded in vanishing at sea a few days later, somewhere between Naples and Palermo. This mysterious statement seemed to intimate that the sea is endowed with intentionality.

Majorana's life and sudden disappearance constitute a shadow line that traces the covert story of the development of nuclear weapons. The late 1930s saw the discovery of nuclear fission, the core process of the first atomic bombs. There is no historical evidence that Majorana contributed to this research. However, theoretical papers and experimental findings were quickly shared in an elite circle of nuclear physicists throughout Europe and the United States. Majorana could thereby not have been able to ignore the militarization of the nuclear project. In 1975 the Sicilian novelist Leonardo Sciascia published a book titled *The Disappearance of Majorana*, in which he postulated that Majorana had orchestrated his own disappearance because of his projection of the deadly outcome of nuclear fission and the immense energy it released. I personally believe there is a reasonable base for this claim. When Majorana made the decision to disappear in 1938, the idea of nuclear fission needed only experimental proof, a validation that came one year later, the same year that saw the start of World War II.

Between 2008 and 2010 I produced a large constellation of works entitled *The Majorana Experiment* comprising films, photographs, objects, and texts that took their cue from Majorana's journey and his mysterious disappearance at sea.[1] I presented this work in the first section of my contribution to "Maritime Failures and Imaginaries," at the second thematic session of the "Disassembled Images" conference in Antwerp. In a second and speculative section of my presentation, I discussed my ongoing research, which will be the subject of this essay. Although my present work is not connected to the Italian physicist,

I would like to describe two elements of "The Majorana Experiment" to introduce my research.

One work in particular marks my debt to Allan Sekula's pioneering body of work. Sekula clearly informed some lines of my practice, both in its scope—the exploration of the sea as a space intersected by geopolitical processes—and in its methodology. "Persian Gulf Incubator," a large constellation comprising photographs, wallpapers, and text panels, narrates a geopolitical plot while attempting to draw a metaphorical connection between the disappearance at sea of a scientist and that of a ship, the Italian luxury liner MS *Raffaello*.[2] Following the 1973 oil crisis, this vessel was put on sale and three years later it was purchased by the Shah of Iran, who used it as a floating palace in the Persian Gulf. It was eventually sunk by Iraki jetfighters in 1983, during the Iran-Iraq war. The wreck is located in shallow waters just a few miles off the coastal nuclear reactor of Bushehr, a strategic facility for Iran's nuclear development, suggesting a remarkable assemblage of two very large machines and a striking entanglement between two geopolitical narratives.
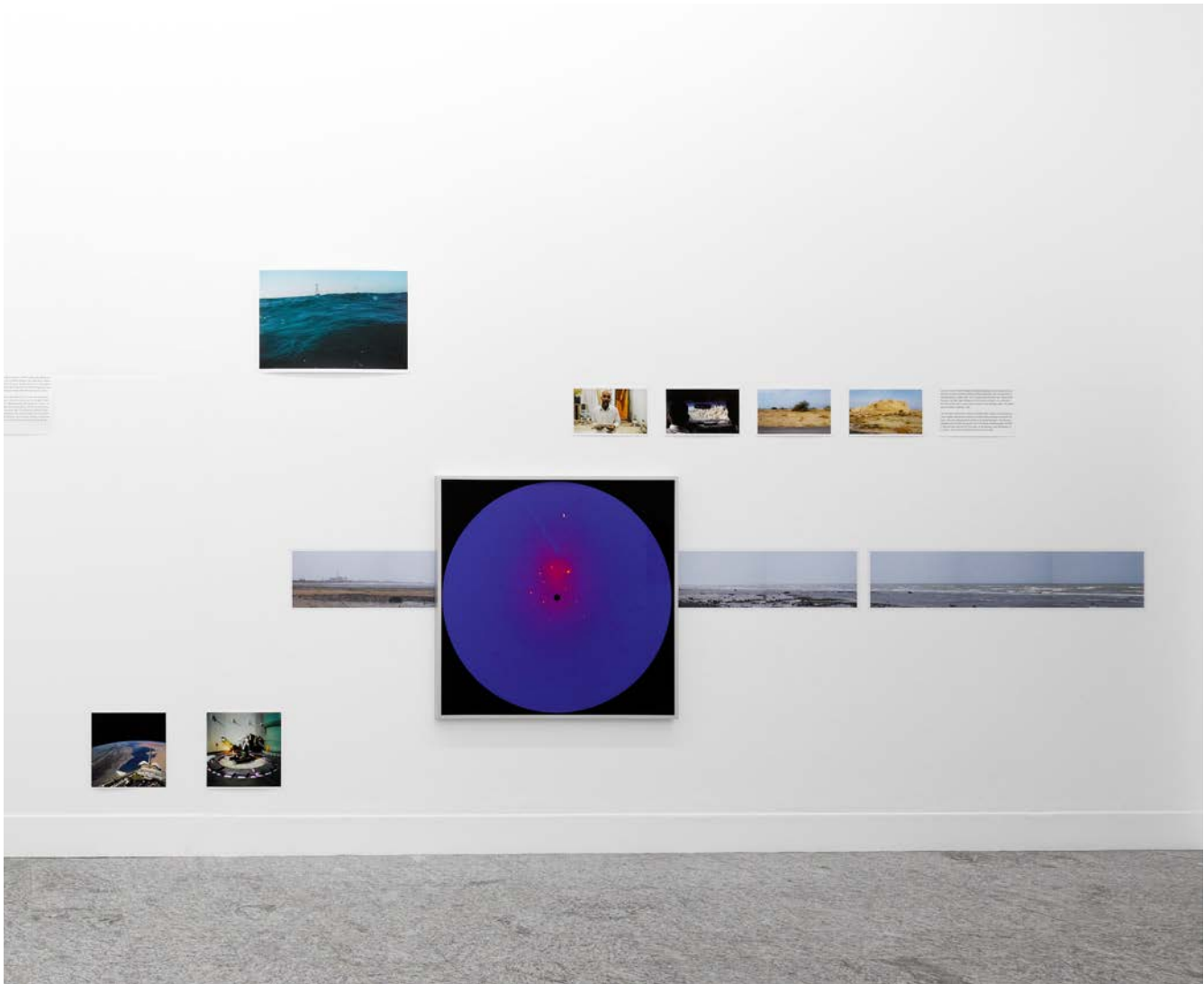
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Marco Poloni, Photograph from *Persian Gulf Incubator*, 2008. Constellation of photographs comprising 32 elements: 24 pigment prints, 3 wallpaper prints, 5 text panels, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Campagne Première Berlin.

My short Super-16mm film *The Sea of Majorana* shows a post-nuclear seascape filmed between Napoli and Palermo, where Ettore Majorana disappeared in 1938. The ambient radioactivity perforates the material support of the film. A voice-over reads an excerpt from a posthumously published essay by Majorana, in which he appears to endow nuclear fission with quasi-human agency: "From a strictly scientific point of view there is nothing that prevents us from considering that a simple, invisible and unpredictable vital fact [the disintegration of an atom] could be found at the origin of human events."[3]

My work about Majorana also serves as an illustration of my research methodologies over the last decade. In my practice I generally take biographical threads as points of departure to expose broader narratives. In 2014 ago I established "The Analogue Island Bureau," an agency that brings together a body of work that started in 2008. The agency attempts to build an index of plots, problems, and tropes involving the Mediterranean Sea.[4]

I would now like to expand on the second section of my contribution to "Maritime Failures and Imaginaries." This section describes the shift I am currently attempting to articulate in my work: what if my starting-point wasn't a human subject but a non-human entity, specifically the Mediterranean Sea? In other words, could the sea be articulated not as a backdrop, i.e. a maritime expanse embedded within and subordinated to various geopolitical narratives, but as a subject in its own right?

In operational terms, this would entail exploring and producing shifts that displace the human as a privileged entity in relation to the non-human, subverting existing hierarchies inherited from modernity, those which govern, for instance, relations between subject and object or nature and culture. This process would include trying to overcome a limiting binary between the human and the non-human, allowing both terms to be entangled with equal agency. If this operation is first of all one of aesthetics, it turns into one of politics of representation.

From the perspective of my practice, which is embedded in cinema and photography, this question entails rethinking the modernist grammar inherent in both forms. Respective to photography, cinema introduces an unambiguous separation between the perspective of the apparatus and the figure of a narrator, while having the power to "make us forget the camera that is really doing the looking."[5] As a result, cinema generates both a more complex narrative space and a more intricate relationship to the viewer than photography, which is why I would like to address my issue in cinematic terms, with a specific view to realism.

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Marco Poloni, Photographs from *Persian Gulf Incubator*, 2008. Constellation of photographs comprising 32 elements: 24 pigment prints, 3 wallpaper prints, 5 text panels, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Campagne Première Berlin.

To a large extent my work about Majorana was a thought experiment. I would like to introduce a second *Gedankenexperiment* taking my cue from a poetic image by the French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard. In 1942 Bachelard wrote that "The true eye of the earth is water." It is "a large tranquil eye."[6] Let's imagine for a moment the sea not as a screen or a projective surface, but as a large eye, maybe also as a large lens. An eye that is not necessarily laden with intentionality, as the sentient plasmic ocean that covers Solaris in Stanislaw Lem's novel. Just a large eye. How would that eye see human entities? How would it see land? How would its vision be translated, if at all possible, in cinematic terms?

This question is absurd a priori. If it is at all conceivable to imagine a non-anthropocentric perspective, it is still very challenging for humans to realize non-anthropomorphic vision for the mere reason that the tools we use to produce representations are isomorphic in relation to our human attributes. Although I am fully aware that this is speculative, I will nevertheless attempt to enumerate a few issues, conditions, and visual strategies to envision cinematic structures inspired by Bachelard's poetic image.

A first and obvious obstacle comes to mind when trying to rethink the position of the human subject vis-à-vis an entity as large as the sea and trying to imagine and represent new modes of intimacy: issues of scale, spatial or temporal. This is a well-known problem in ecology, as there is no single natural scale at which ecological phenomena should be studied. This is because systems are polyscalar and show characteristic variability on a range of spatial, temporal, and structural levels. A second obstacle in relation to scale is that every living entity is an observer of its environment, with its own perceptual limitations and biases. We know this for instance from Jakob von Uexküll's concept of "Umwelt," which is a minute part of the "Umgebung" of a living entity, its physical surroundings.[7] The "Umwelt" of a living entity is constituted only by those features of the environment that are relevant to its self-preservation and reproduction.

In this context, the concept of "hyperobjects" introduced by the American philosopher Timothy Morton is useful. Morton defines hyperobjects as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans."[8] The vastness of their scale defeats classical ideas about what a thing is in the first place. Although hyperobjects are too massive and long-lived for our minds to comprehend them, they "are not simply mental (or otherwise ideal) constructs, but are real entities whose primordial reality is withdrawn from humans." Global warming is perhaps the most apposite example of a hyperobject. Radioactivity, the overarching motif in *The Majorana Experiment*, is a hyperobject. Other such objects are ultraviolet radiation, all electromagnetic waves,

the gravitational field, jellyfish blooms, oil, tsunamis, as well as the desertification and the "tropicalization" of the Mediterranean region. This latter term refers to the arrival and proliferation of tropical species as an effect of water warming.

Global warming cannot be directly seen, but it can be experienced. At my summer home in Southern Tuscany, the beach recedes year after year. This is caused in small part by sand erosion, but it most probably follows from coastal storms and the rise of the Mediterranean Sea level. This shrinking strip of sand is an index of a hyperobject.

An interesting property of hyperobjects is their non-locality. Hyperobjects are vastly distributed in time and space. Sea waves—"gravity waves" as they are scientifically named—seem to come from nowhere before they break on the shore. Very large gravity waves are almost invisible until they materialize in beach shallows. Waves transport energy, not water. This energy is born by wind power. Waves are indexes of a boundless and invisible "sea" of energy lying within the sea. As Christine Guth, the author of a marvelous book about Hokusai's *Great Wave off Kanagawa*, writes: "Waves are bodies that move freely with little regard to geographic boundaries, seemingly erasing borders and transforming the world into an interconnected whole, in the process submerging individual identity within collective identity."[9]

Because hyperobjects transcend spatio-temporal localism, they explode classical divisions of scale such as macroscopic versus microscopic. More radically, they humiliate the human by de-centering it from its place of privilege in the order of things. In other words, the concept of locality is epiphenomenal to a deeper spatio-temporal order. In that sense, non-locality extends the blow to anthropocentrism brought by Copernicus and Darwin, who removed the human from the center of meaning.

Following these introductory considerations, I would like to rethink four attributes of cinematic grammar and syntax toward possibilities for a post-anthropocentric cinema: Scale, Movement, Fragmentation and Suture, and Perspective. This inventory is of course subjective and not exhaustive. Because cinema is an assemblage of moving images and sound, I would need to engage the sonic sphere as crucial as well, but the space I have in this essay is limited.

1. First Attribute: Scale

Is it possible to imagine a scalar approach to the cinematic field, an approach that subverts the classical cinematic division in types of shots and visualizes the co-existence of different orders of magnitude?

A classical answer comes from *Cosmic Zoom*, a 1968 short film directed by Eva Szasz and produced by the National Film Board of Canada, which depicts the relative size of everything in the universe in a sequence of 8 minutes. *Cosmic Zoom* was based on the 1957 essay "Cosmic View" by the Dutch educator Kees Boeke. Szasz's film anticipates by a number of years the more known 1977 film *Powers of Ten* by Charles and Ray Eames, an animated journey into a scalar depiction of the place of the human in the universe. This trope has by now become standard fare in mainstream cinema. Szasz's progression of shots is based on a logarithmic scale, as opposed to the linear scale upon which the traditional division in types of shots is established. Interestingly, logarithmic scales are more "natural" than linear scales in that they more closely represent our perception of physical phenomena such as the change of perceived light or sound intensity as a function of the distance of the subject to the light or sound source.

The cinematic structure just described is a spatial construct. Can we now focus on the much more difficult issue of addressing cinematic time with a scalar approach? Could for instance the division of time authored by Fernand Braudel, the historian of the Mediterranean Sea, be visually representable? Braudel defines three scales of historical time: the short term, the medium term, and the long term (which he called the *longue durée*).[10] These scales correspond to three forms of movement. The long term denotes geographical time: the time of man in his relationship to the environment, which today we would call geological time. The medium term denotes social time: the history of groups and groupings. The short term denotes individual time: a history of events, brief, rapid, nervous fluctuations like "surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs."[11] From the viewpoint of the human subject and from representation as we know it, this division into macro-, meso- and microscopic time scales corresponds to a history whose passage is in most cases imperceptible in the first case, slow but perceptible in the second one, and a clearly perceptible pulsation in the third one.

With this awareness of time scales in mind, can we think of strategies for representing new modes of intimacy between the human and the environment? A sound starting-point is the use of the long take in James Benning's landscape cinema. In *Measuring Change* from 2016, the digital companion to his 16mm film *Casting a Glance* from 2007, Benning filmed Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in two fixed shot takes of

thirty-minutes, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. In *Casting a Glance* he had filmed the earthwork in shorter takes over sixteen trips to the site, recording its shifting ecology.

Benning's cinema does not incorporate the human presence, nor its narrative dimension. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway write, with reference to Canadian film scholar Martin Lefebvre, that "in filmic terms, the distinction between human and nonhuman nature can be configured as the tension between the predominance of narrative and landscape."[12] Classical cinematic storytelling generally entails subsuming non-human elements to narrative logic in order to not interrupt the flow of the story. The function of landscape is thus to provide a backdrop against which the narrative unfolds. If we recognize that landscape is itself a human construction, or, more radically, that in the new paradigm of the anthropocene it co-exists with humans in an entangled way, we can start to rethink the relationship between narrative and backdrop. In order to represent this entanglement, a clear cinematic strategy would then be to flatten out the depictive and diegetic levels, thus narrativizing the landscape and "landscaping"—so to speak—the human body. I develop this below in the fourth section, about perspective.
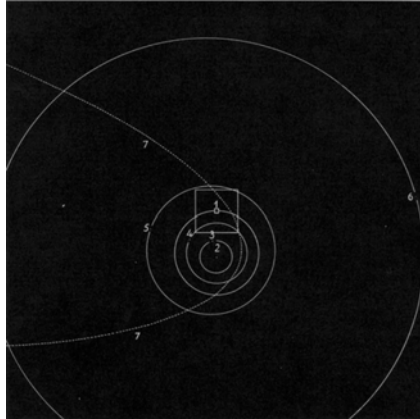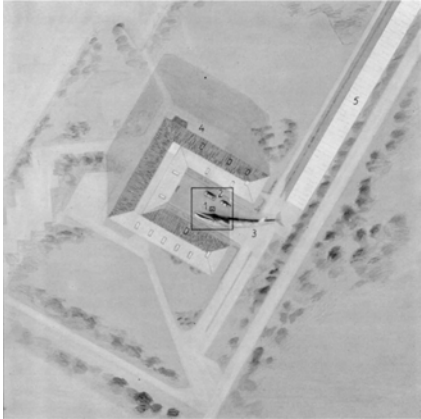
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Illustrations from Kees Boeke, *Cosmic View: The Universe in 40 Jumps*, 1957.
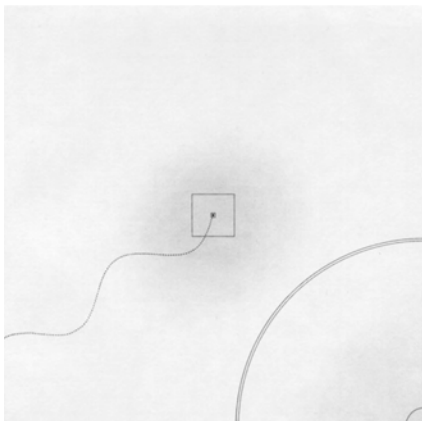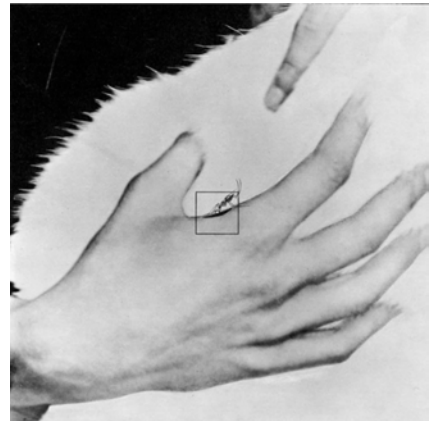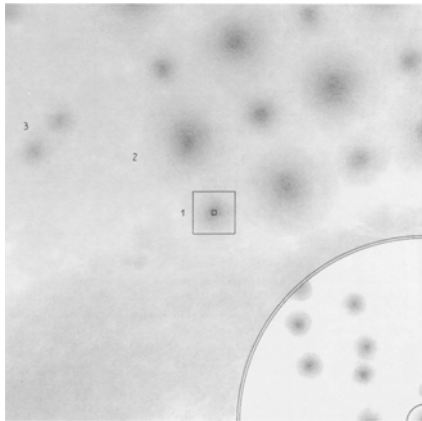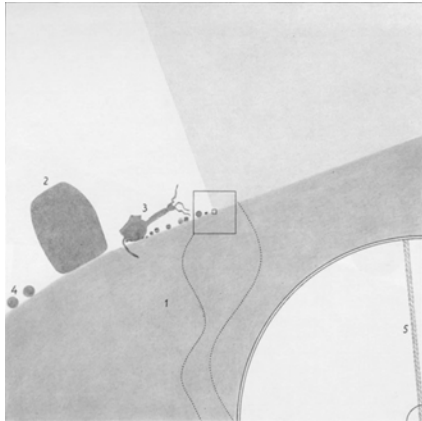
2. Second Attribute: Movement

An overt element of cinematic grammar is movement. I would like to focus on the perspectival apparatus of the tracking shot, which, arguably, can engage objects from a centerless perspective that cuts across the perspectival fixity of traditional interlocking shot formations. This opens the possibility of a displacement from an anthropocentric perspective. Jean-Christophe Royoux, a French art critic, writes that "the tracking shot involves time that stages space itself. It is at once pure time and pure space. It is an image of the duration of time." Additionally, the smooth machinic fluidity of the tracking camera endows it with a non-human, abstract quality. Royoux indicates that "the movement of tracking, which is mechanical, almost indifferent, impossible to humanize, irrecoverable, comes close to the trace of drawing. 'Ça' tourne, 'It' films"—in a Freudian sense.[13] From a non-anthropocentric frame of reference, the eye of the tracking camera would thus be able to engage different entities within their plane of existence, seamlessly shifting from one to the other, cutting across scalar attributes and conceivably bending the perception of their relative dimensions. I will expand on this in the next section, about fragmentation and suture.

As a closing remark, I would venture to say that the eerie quality of an extremely slow tracking shot, becoming, as Royoux argues, an image of time, would be able to engage the imperceptible passage of Braudel's *longue durée*. More speculatively even, a very slow tracking shot could almost make time be perceived as an emergent property of the objects it represents, in the sense of Einstein—that is, contrary to Newton's stable relation between space-time and the objects it contains. Einstein's theory of General Relativity of 1917 postulates that space and time are not an abstract grid of four coordinates independent of the objects it contains, but are a continuum produced and warped by them. The 2017 detection of gravitational waves—ripples in the *fabric* of space-time traveling through the universe—provided experimental validation of the last bit of Einstein's predictions that had yet to be proved.

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Melik Ohanian, DAYS, *I See what I Saw and what I will See*, 2011. HD video with sound. Double synchronised projection on the two sides of a same screen. 2 x 42 min. Exhibition view, CRAC Sète, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel Paris. Photograph Marc Domage © Melik Ohanian / ADAGP, Paris 2018.

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Melik Ohanian, DAYS, *I See what I Saw and what I will See*, 2011. HD video with sound. Double synchronised projection on the two sides of a same screen. 2 x 42 min. Video still. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel Paris. © Melik Ohanian / ADAGP, Paris 2018.

3. Third Attribute: Fragmentation and Suture

Cinema is traditionally structured as a set of coherently articulated interlocking shots. Shot relationships have the dual function of producing the syntax whereby cinematic meaning emerges and of "suturing" the spectator into filmic space, time and narrative. Conversely, in the continuum that the human subject experiences in the real world, articulation is not necessary since meaning emerges as an effect of relations of continuity and contiguity.

Robert Smithson's *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* fragmented the world around them, suggesting the impossibility of a centered, subjective vision. These temporary landmarks, produced in Southern Mexico in 1969, shattered the idea of a viewing self soundly sutured into the world. Smithson's mirrors had the effect of collapsing subjectivity into the landscape. Smithson's idea of displacement is an interesting point of departure for thinking toward post-anthropocentric cinematic structures. An example of such a structure is found in *Leviathan*, the 2012 film by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, two artists and visual anthropologists working at the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard. The film was shot on a trawler off the coast of Nantucket, in the "same waters where Herman Melville's *Pequod* gave chase to Moby Dick" with a dozen cameras "tossed and tethered, passed from fisherman to filmmaker" as the synopsis states. The cameras' eyes engage their objects—fishermen, ropes, fish, birds, water—with a gaze that is more haptic than optic. The multiplication of viewpoints coupled with their disengagement from the filmmakers' performativity, the fast-paced visual reduction of human and non-human entities (fishes, seagulls, and machines) to one single body work to break down subjective vision. The spectator is transformed into a floating entity fully immersed into this flat cosmology while paradoxically de-sutured from this universe.

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Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1–9)*, 1969, Yucatan, Mexico. Nine original 126 format chromogenic-development transparencies. Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Courtesy James Cohan, New York. © 2019 Holt/Smithson Foundation / 2019, ProLitteris, Zurich for SMITHSON ROBERT works.

4. Fourth Attribute: Perspective

I would like to start rethinking the idea of perspective as produced by the gaze and try to imagine some qualities of a non-human gaze by calling into use some concepts from anthropology. Today we know that many non-modern societies present human and non-human entities as multiplicities that are not reducible to Western distinctions between nature and culture, a division that actually emerged quite recently in the narrative of Western history. For the French anthropologist Philippe Descola, non-modern cultures do not construct the sharp opposition between humans and non-humans of modern Western cultures. Descola establishes instead that a duality between physicality and interiority—the corporeal equipment or skin, and the spiritual dimension—is universally present. This universal can occur in a variety of modalities of connection and interaction between the corporeal and spiritual planes. Stated in Western terms, pure physicality would be a body without a mind, and pure interiority a mind without a body. In this scheme of things the Western body-mind opposition is to be considered as a special case of a general dual system. Through the principle of identity and difference, Descola establishes a second duality, that which exists between continuity and discontinuity. From these distinctions between physicality and interiority, and continuity and

discontinuity, Descola defines a matrix of four cosmological categories under which each belief system falls.

I would like to briefly consider two of these categories: "animism" and what Descola calls "naturalism." Under "animism," humans and non-humans—animals, plants, the weather, the sea—possess different physicalities but similar interiorities, which can communicate by continuity. Western Modernism falls in the category of "naturalism," which inverts the premises of animism. Under naturalism, humans and non-humans possess identical physicalities—e.g. two arms and two legs or four legs for earth mammals—that is, a material continuity but different interiorities, which cannot communicate. Under this category, semiosis and the emergence of culture—language, free will, creativity, and so forth—are exceptional and specific to the human species alone.

The question of perspective is wonderfully analyzed by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, an important influence on Descola. Viveiros de Castro coined the term "Perspectivism" to describe the cosmology of the Amerindians he studied. For them, "humanity" is what binds together all beings—humans, animals, and plants. They are separated instead by their different natures, that is, their bodily assets. The perceptual apparatus specific to each body imposes upon each being a specific position and point of view in a general relational ecology. As Viveiros de Castro writes: "The visible form of each species is a simple envelope (a 'clothing') hiding an internal human form that is only accessible [...] to the gaze of members of the same species, or certain perspectival 'commutators,' like shamans."[14] In perspectivism "the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world—gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artefacts—differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves."[15]

If we are keen to accept the validity of native cosmologies, of alternative modes of relation between human and non-human agents, can they inspire us to imagine a cinema in which oppositional concepts such as subject and object, foreground and background, subject and narrator can be collapsed into new forms of intimacy, as entangled co-presences within one single visual universe? To achieve this, can the camera become, in the sense of Viveiros de Castro, a perspectival commutator?

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Kwakiult Mask of Transformation. Collected by G. Hunt in 1901.
Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of
Natural History, New York. Inventory number 16/8942.

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Alfred Clah, *Intrepid Shadows*, 1966. From the film series *Navajo Film Themselves*. 16mm, b&w, 18 min. Film Still. Courtesy of the Penn Museum.

I would like to close this section with some notes about a scene in my film from 2017, *Una Cuba mediterranea*. It is a filmic essay about the failed ambitions of Italian millionaire publisher and revolutionary Giangiacomo Feltrinelli to transform the island of Sardinia into a Mediterranean Cuba in the late 1960s. The film follows filmmaker Antonia, anthropologist Eleonora, and their Sardinian friend Giuliano as they travel across the island.

We filmed one scene at Michelangelo Antonioni's summer vacation house on Sardinia's West coast. The villa is a piece of utopian architecture built by architect Dante Bini and is now a ruin. We had scouted the house in 2013 and filmed in the summer of 2015.

I believe that in *Una Cuba mediterranea* I was tentatively exploring some of the ideas contained in this essay, in particular that of the camera as a perspectival operator able to engage the universe of each entity it films, in an attempt to subvert the human versus non-human binary that I described earlier in this text.

The scene at Villa Antonioni starts with a shot of a tortoise. The camera then slowly approaches the domed house with a viewpoint that could be that of the reptile or of one of the film's characters. Next, the camera films the two female characters as they talk, moving then to frame them as if they were seen by the "eye" of the house (it's main window toward the sea). The camera then follows a lizard moving on sun-heated stones while we hear in voiceover the last part of their conversation. This is their dialog:

"I feel elementary."

"That is?"

"In front of the sea, that looks at you, indifferent. I don't have the perception that I am watched and I like this… If you think about it, how do you know that Sardinia is an island? It's the idea of an island. The only way to be certain that it is a real island would be to go around it by foot to find yourself here again."

"The characters of The Mysterious Island were wondering if they happened to be on an island or a continent…"

"You know, the cliché "an island is a continent" doesn't suffice. For me an island can be the prototype of a continent. It's a question of scale."

The energy of their voices is laid-back—"stoned," yet focused. The image of the lizard combined with the mood of the voices prompts us to feel that we might be following the thought flow of the animal. Arguably, this sequence marks a cinematic limit, in that when a human voice gives a face to a non-human agent it takes that face away, re-establishing the hierarchy of the classical human versus non-human binary. The sequence generates nevertheless a true suspension of disbelief in which the spectator is transported, if only for a brief moment, into the universe of a nonhuman subjectivity.
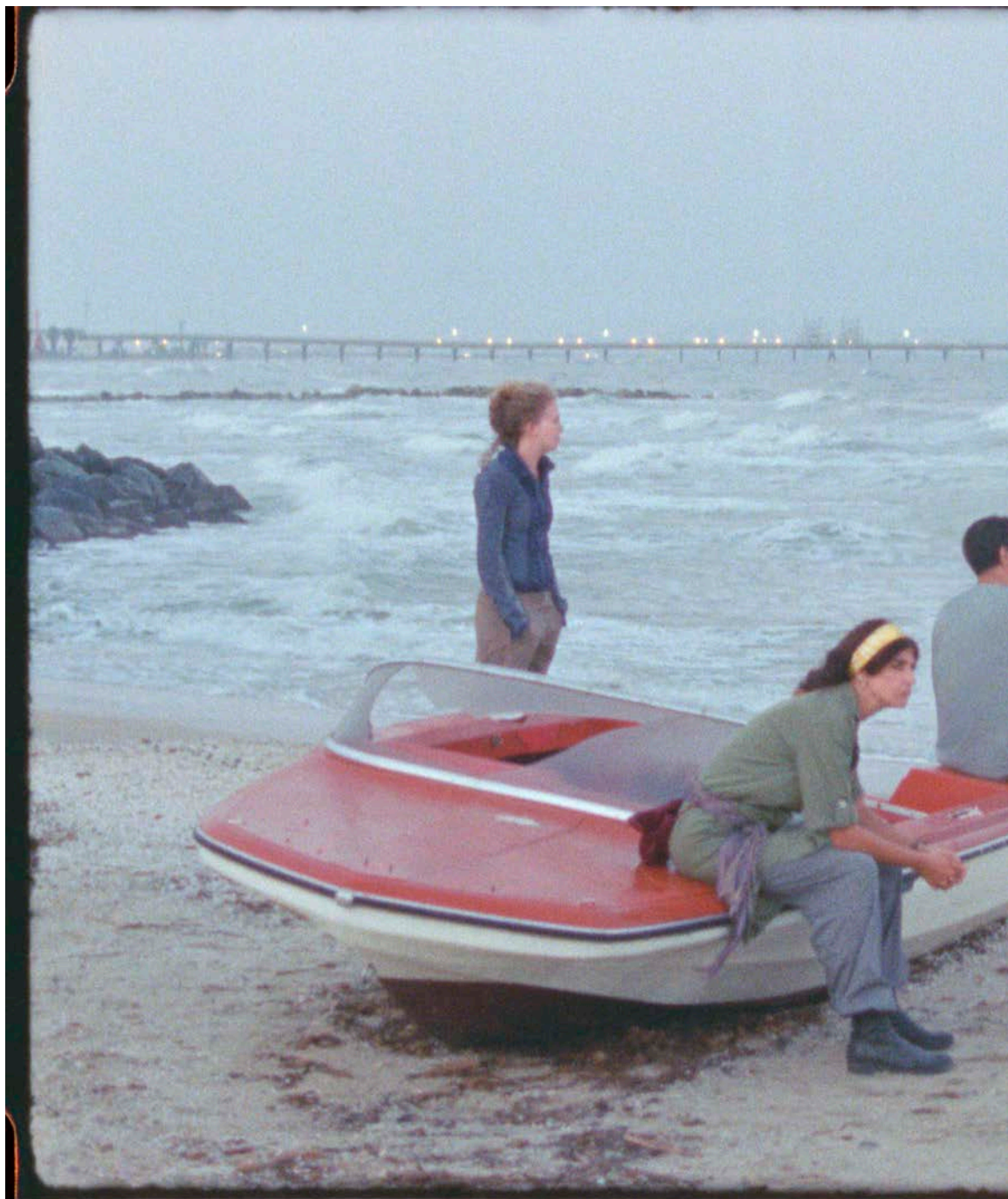
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Marco Poloni, *Una Cuba mediterranea*, 2018. S-16mm, S-8mm and HD Video
on DCP 2K, colour, dolby 5:1, native 15:9 into 16:9, italian with subtitles, 56 min.
Film still. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Campagne Première Berlin.

Marco Poloni, *Una Cuba mediterranea*, 2018.
Production photograph. Courtesy of the artist
and Galerie Campagne Première Berlin.

Notes

1. The Analogue Island Bureau http://www.theanalogueislandbureau.net/projects/01_the_majorana_experiment/index.html (accessed September 17, 2018).

2. The Analogue Island Bureau http://www.theanalogueislandbureau.net/projects/01_the_majorana_experiment/maj11.html (accessed September 17, 2018).

3. Mantegna, 2005: 136.

4. The Analogue Island Bureau http://www.theanalogueislandbureau.net/ (accessed September 17, 2018).

5. https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/narratology/terms/suture.html (accessed September 17, 2018).

6. The exact second phrase is "The lake is a large tranquil eye." (Bachelard, 1999: ix). It can clearly be translated to the pelagic space.

7. Von Uexküll, 1956.

8. Morton, 2013: 2, 15.

9. Guth, 2015: 128.

10. Braudel, 1995: 23.

11. Braudel, 1995: 21.

12. Pick and Narraway, 2013: 8.

13. Royoux, 2016–2017: 128–129. My translation

14. Viveiros de Castro, 2014: 66, n. 25.

15. Viveiros de Castro, 2014: 56.

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Colophon