

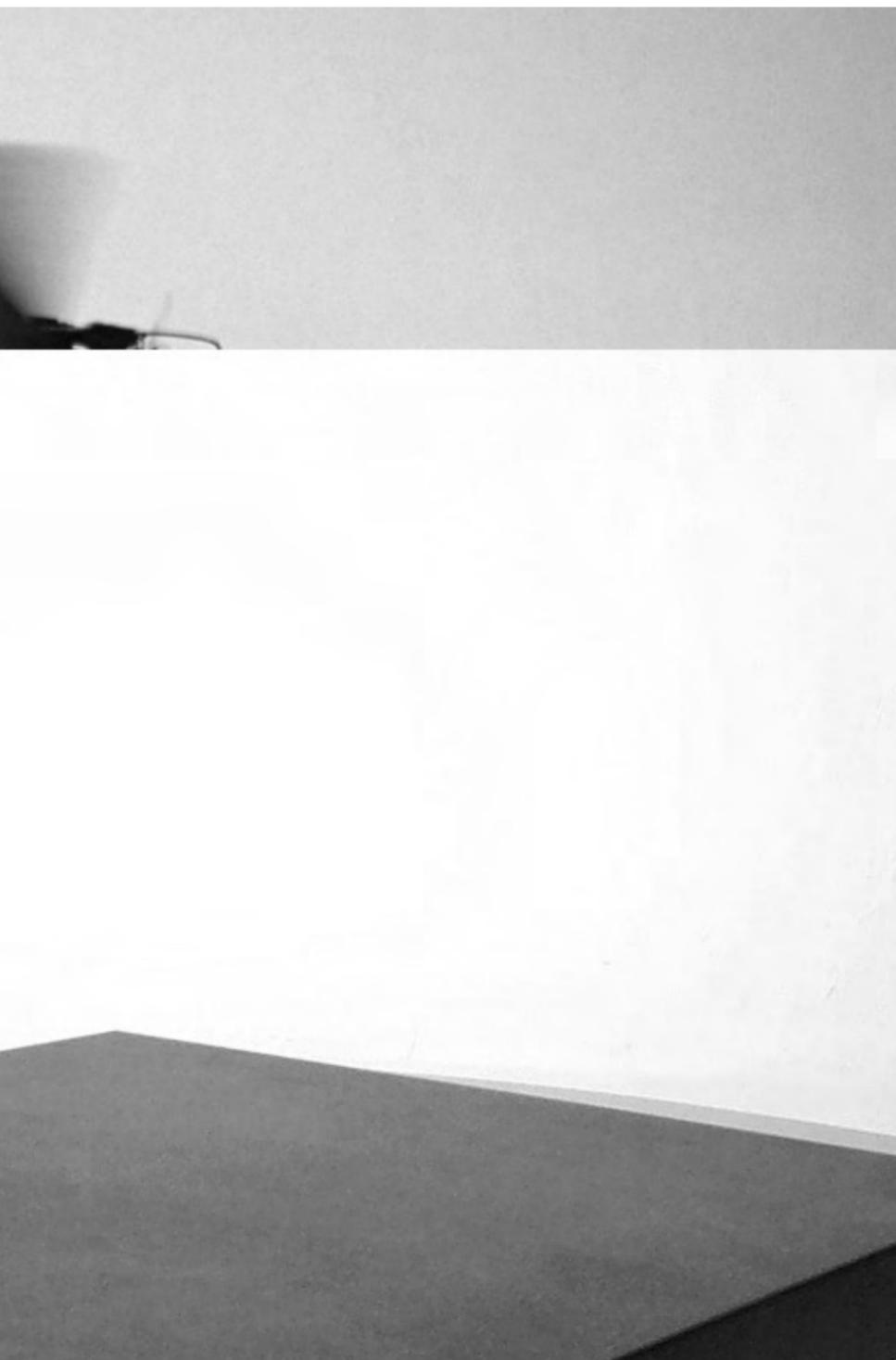


## Pockets of Silence

Alexandre Estrela

December 16, 2015 to March 21, 2016  
Sabatini Building Floor 1  
Fisuras Program





Previous pages:

*Pockets of Silence 2*, 2015. Video still

HD video, b/w, mono sound, video still in loop

Synchronized video projected on metal screen (88 × 66 × 20 cm), motorized acrylic plate controlled by Arduino.

# Alexandre Estrela

## Gaps of Fear

Alexandre Estrela (b. 1971, Lisbon) uses film and video as the core media of his artistic practice, which he describes as an exploration of “formal and conceptual issues arising from the intersection of images and concrete matter.” Drawing on extensive technical and historical knowledge of his chosen media, Estrela explores issues that have a bearing not just on the nature of the image but also on the perception of the spectator. The interferences between physical and mental images, the things that exist and occur before and after a projection, synesthesia, the relationship between moving images and still images, and the relationships between images and sensations are some of the distinctive aspects of his research.

Estrela questions the physicality of images, between their immateriality and the materiality of the devices that he uses to project them, in dialogue with a history of experimental film, video, and photography that includes among its symbolic benchmarks films by Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray’s photos of mathematical models, Gil J. Wolman’s *L’Anticoncept*, Maurice Lemaître’s films, and William Burroughs’s cut-up narratives. In Estrela’s projects, light and sound are revealed to be binary elements, operating as components in the construction of an on-off situation in time and space, in which everything is, and everything could be, different.

*Pockets of Silence* is a project displayed on the first floor of the Sabatini building specifically conceived for the *Fisuras* program. The piece that gives the exhibition its title, presented in Espacio Uno, is based on Estrela’s research

into an incident that occurred during the Portuguese colonial war in Angola: in 1961, Cesare Dante Vacchi, a freelance photojournalist working for *Paris-Match* and a self-proclaimed veteran of the French Foreign Legion, became a military advisor to the Portuguese army. Vacchi's ideas became the basis for a war tactic consisting of reproducing prerecorded sounds that masked the silence of the animals in the jungle in response to human presence. The work is presented in two rooms: in one, a projection on a sculptural object that exceeds the boundaries of its function as a screen shows footage filmed on the Thai island of Koh Libong, with a mysterious spherical element at its center; over it, a black circle (a hole) centers and decenters the movement of the image, like an eye that observes the spectator. Meanwhile, a continuous and deafening sound of tropical cicadas fills the room. In the other, the beam of light produced by the projection of an image of a helicopter is interrupted by a rotating piece of acrylic, intermittently casting a reflection of the light on the four walls. Both projections (eye and helicopter) are activated simultaneously, and, at intervals, the sound in both rooms stops, the images freeze, and silence pervades the entire space.

The artist describes these works as “a military device that absorbs sound and light. Both projections freeze as a sign of danger. The movement of the video around the hole suggests the movement of an eye. The white of the eye sets us apart from other animals, because we use it as a system of communication. Both pieces function like fear in animal behavior.”

In nature and in war, silence is always a sign of imminent danger. When the birds and the murmuring of trees fall silent in a forest, fear appears. In this work, silence operates as a suggestion of this fear staged in the form of a frozen image. The manifestation of death in a lifeless body is always a still image, a convergence between film

and sculpture that can be seen in each of the pockets of silence that the artist presents in the binary dynamic of this work. When the image pauses, it triggers an awareness of the space that had previously gone unnoticed due to the movement itself, but also to the predominance of the sound.

Another work is shown in the Protocol Room: *Vida y Costumbres de Alexander*. Images taken from an entomology book superimposed over architectural sketches, reproductions of Derek Jarman's garden, and children's drawings of spider webs, enlarged and photocopied several times on a Riso copier, are projected onto a glass screen that leans on a wooden structure. The images dissolve, slowly transitioning from one to the other, creating a continuous sequence repeated on a loop. The projection is accompanied by a soundtrack of electronic music composed by Eliane Radigue in 1969.

The transparency and reflective nature of the glass that the copies are projected onto intensify the palimpsest effect, positioning the images at the boundary between two- and three-dimensionality, generating unexpected pictorial effects that intensify the mystery and suggestiveness. If film turns images into time, in *Vida y Costumbres de Alexander* time becomes a propulsion mechanism for a kaleidoscope of images made up of different layers, motifs, and colors.

João Fernandes

Following pages:

*Pockets of Silence*, 2015. Installation view

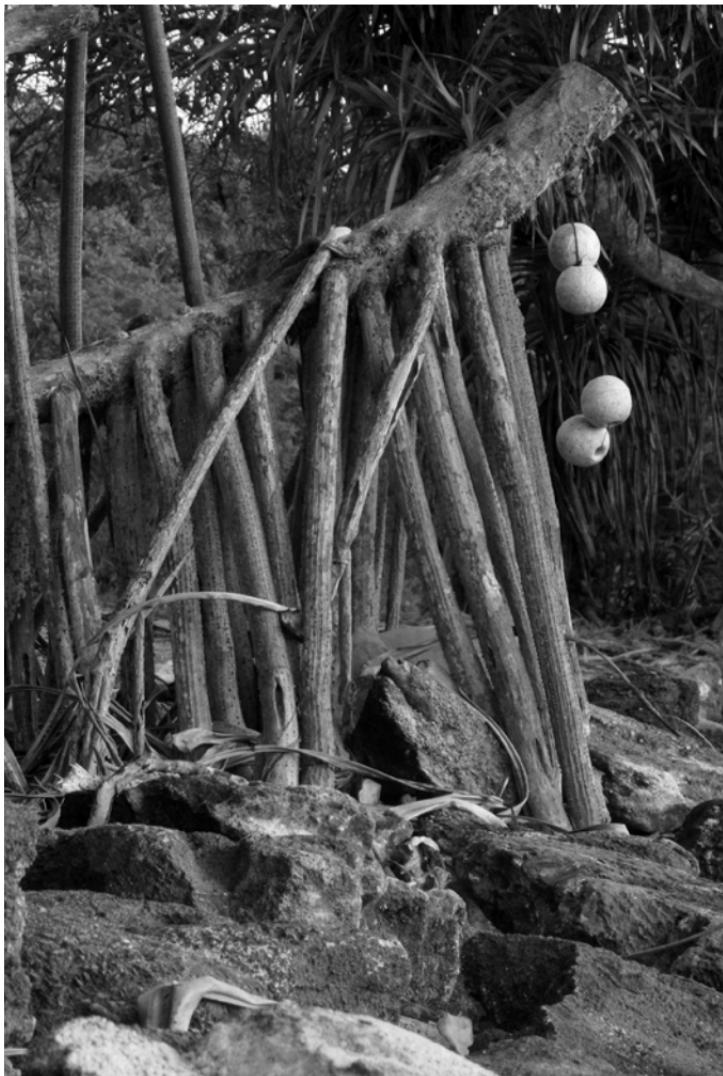
HD video, color, mono sound, 10 min. loop

Synchronized video controlled by Arduino, on fiberglass sculpture.

Plane: 166 x 122 cm, sphere: 90 cm diam.







# Pockets of Silence

We penetrated deeper and deeper  
into the heart of darkness.

Joseph Conrad

In 1961, immediately after the massacres that devastated the north of Angola, Cesare Dante Vacchi, a freelance photojournalist for *Paris-Match*, volunteered to accompany a military column sent to suppress rebel forces in the region. Arriving in Nôqui, he noted the lack of preparation of Portuguese troops for facing a war in the bush.

Vacchi was a self-proclaimed veteran of the French Foreign Legion and, in this new environment, his war stories from Algeria and Indochina rang true, giving him the credibility and authority to become a military adviser on the ground.

In 1962, following the success of a demonstration presented to the Army Chief of Staff in Angola, the photographer was invited, albeit with reservations on the part of some instructors,<sup>1</sup> to coordinate an operation in the north and to set up a training center in Zemba that would be known as unit C.1.21. Vacchi's intention was to create

1. Raúl Folques, one of the eight instructors of the first Special Groups course in Zemba, criticized Vacchi's exhibitionist style and the way general staff officers of the Angolan Military Region had fallen for it. For example, Vacchi had instructed one of the soldiers to "fire a blast of the flamethrower, causing a massive fire, and told another, who had been a football goalkeeper, to leap and shoot some balloons with an automatic weapon while in the air."

a special counter-guerrilla force capable of facing the challenges of the climate and the terrain, which was occupied by an omnipresent and invisible enemy. In his few months at the barracks in Zemba, Vacchi created a special force that he called “Comandos.”

The preparation and training of the soldiers followed a model that was entirely different than those that had been previously applied. On one hand, he focused on the permanent use of live ammunition and direct contact with the enemy. Among other things, Vacchi promoted the use of helicopters in immediate action operations as well as the use of lighter weapons, such as the 37mm rocket launcher that he had himself invented from decommissioned airplane parts. On the other hand, the hard, demanding training was permeated by less orthodox ideas, such as the frequent use of vitamin A injections (supposedly to improve night vision) or the use of magnetic tape recordings for purposes of psychological conditioning, pumping out through loudspeakers either a *commanding voice* giving orders or randomly interrupting the soldiers’ sleep with the song “Donne-moi ma chance” by Richard Anthony, one of Vacchi’s favorites, which is still sung by the Comandos today.

Alongside his mercenary work at the service of Portugal, Dante Vacchi took advantage of the incursions of the military column to penetrate and photograph remote regions and isolated peoples. In Zemba, at a military outpost established in the middle of nowhere, he developed two photographic works together with his traveling companion Anne Gaüzes, two books with conflicting visions of a region that his own advance was destroying but that his own sense of romanticism wanted to preserve. The first, *Angola—1961–1963*,<sup>2</sup> is a linear narrative whose

2. Dante Vacchi and Anne Gaüzes, *Angola—1961–1963* (Lisbon: Bertrand, 1963).

cinematic framework follows the advance of his patrol, the “Grupo de Nóqui,” through the bush. In this volume of obvious military propaganda, Vacchi accompanies the patrol, at the pace of a Francis Ford Coppola screenplay, into *the heart of darkness*, into the heart of an “unknown” war, as he calls it in the preface to the book. The second publication, *Penteados de Angola* (Hairstyles of Angola),<sup>3</sup> is an ethnographic work in which Vacchi produces a meticulous photographic survey of the hairstyles used in the initiation rituals of young Bantu girls. This book, lacking the ideological force of the previous project, was a scientific attempt to capture peoples and cultures whose extinction was accelerated by the war. The book evinces a poetic vision with a certain scientific rigor, and follows a model initiated by Father Carlos Estermann<sup>4</sup> and his ethnographic survey of the peoples of southern Angola.

With his artistic practice, Vacchi had found a formula of *escape* for all that lived in the frontline, a method to insulate himself and keep calm in the face of chaos by turning Zemba into “a paradise in the shadow of fear.”<sup>5</sup> António Palolo, an artist whose fate led him to soldier in a battalion stationed in Zemba, never stopped painting and, possibly under guidelines left by Vacchi, produced

3. Dante Vacchi, *Penteados de Angola*, self-published edition (Lisbon, 1965).

4. Between 1941 and 1973, Father Carlos Estermann published a series of ethnographical books on the peoples of southern Angola. Although an amateur, his surveys became a reference. In 1971, toward the end of his life, the General Overseas Agency commissioned from him a new book in the same vein as the previous, but now with the goal of promoting tourism in the region. In this book, *Etnografia e turismo na região do Cunene inferior* (Ethnography and Tourism in the Region of the Lower Cunene), Estermann adopted the graphic efficiency of Vacchi’s *Penteados de Angola*.

5. Vacchi’s description of the *apocalypse* in the glossary of his 1979 book *La mano monca di Dio*.

INSTRUÇÕES ABREVIAÇÕES  
PARA  
A UTILIZAÇÃO DO LANÇA-FOGUETES DE  
37 mm PARA TROPAS TERRESTRES

Este Lança-Foguetes não tem operações de manutenção a nível de 1º, escalação, a não ser substituição dos ALVEOLOS, que são os dois contactos eléctricos situados na parte de trás do Lança-Foguetes, (ver fig.1) e a limpeza do tubo.

**1. SUBSTITUIÇÃO DOS ALVEOLOS**

Os ALVEOLOS são fornecidos aos pares acompanhados de uma chave, em sacos individuais de polietileno.  
Para a sua substituição é necessário proceder do seguinte modo:

- 1.1. Abrir o saco de polietileno, retirando a chave de aperto dos ALVEOLOS.
- 1.2. Desapertar, com a chave fornecida, os ALVEOLOS a substituir, retirando-os. (Ver fig.1).
- 1.3. Retirar do saco de polietileno os novos ALVEOLOS e parafusá-los no PORTA-ALVEOLOS.



Fig. 1: Montagem dos ALVEOLOS no  
PORTA-ALVEOLOS

**2. PRECAUÇÕES A TER COM O LANÇA-FOGUETES**

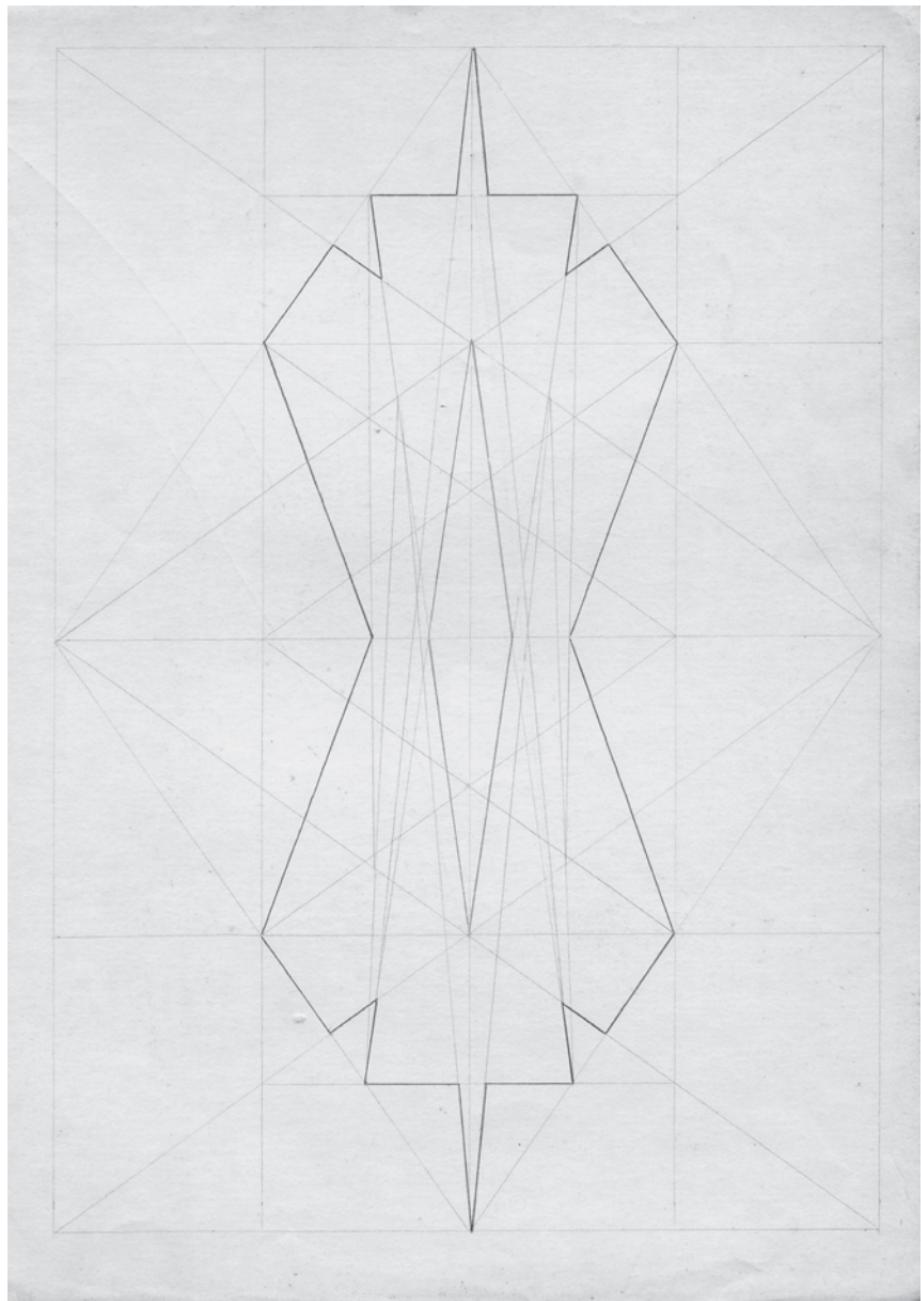
- 2.1. A limpeza do tubo interior é essencial à precisão de tiro, sendo pois conveniente limpá-la frequentemente.
- 2.2. Se por qualquer motivo o tubo interior ficar amolgado ou deformado, o Lança-Foguetes não deve ser utilizado, pois o foguete pode ficar encravado dando-se a combustão do motor dentro do tubo, o que é perigoso.
- 2.3. Qualquer tentativa para reparar o Lança-Foguetes feita por pessoas não autorizadas provocará, a sua invalidação. O Lança-Foguetes só é reparável a nível de 3º, escalação.
- 2.4. As PILHAS do Lança-Foguetes têm vida ilimitada e não são substituíveis sendo portanto proibido tentar violar o PORTA-PILHAS.

### 37MM ROCKET LAUNCHER

Manual of the weapon designed by Cesare Dante Vacchi.

Following page:

ZEMBA  
Manoel Barbosa, graphite on paper,  
18.5 x 25.5 cm, 1974.



a series of small gouache works that were sent by mail to Lisbon and shown at Galeria 111 in 1967.

A few years later, Manoel Barbosa, another artist conscripted into military duty at Zemba, found a large mural painting inside the commander's quarters that had been signed by António Palolo. To the young man, lost overseas, the painting was a vestige of civilization amid barbarism. Like the psychedelic murals at *Devil's Island* described by Adolfo Bioy Casares,<sup>6</sup> Palolo's pop mural suggested an escape plan, which Manoel Barbosa adopted. During that period, he drew a series of small, minimalist, symmetrical compositions made from a geometric grid. Thanks to this *battlefield minimalism*, and copious amounts of cannabis, Barbosa managed to find a way to insulate himself from the war.

Paradoxically, these drawings on letter paper would become, years later, external mechanisms of memory, much like the drawings of the Chokwe,<sup>7</sup> also from northern Angola, formalizations of a difficult time bearing the marks of an inhospitable region and of a past best forgotten.

6. Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Plan de evasión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1945).

7. In the Lunda region, in northeast Angola, the Chokwe draw diagrams on the sand (*sona*) that are formed by complex mathematical algorithms to narrate traditional tales. According to the ethnomathematician Paulus Gerdes, these figures are a “reservoir of symbolic-graphic expressions” with the same magical symbolical value of amulets that mediate communication with the gods and ancestors.

One knows what silence is.  
It exists and it is even propagated  
faster than electric light.

Marcel Duchamp

In 1966, after three years of intense filming, journalists Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi screened the scandalous documentary *Africa Addio* in Cannes. The action takes place in the early 1960s in the heart of Africa and portrays the creation process of new republics and the withdrawal of colonial powers. The film is an avalanche of barbarism with the accent on terror and a Disneyesque score.<sup>8</sup> Audiences reacted with tremendous shock and indignation, to the point that one of the filmmakers was arrested and accused under suspicion of having participated in one of the executions captured on film.<sup>9</sup>

This *shockumentary*, a genre to which the film became forever linked, unfolds between the tenuous borders of Congo, Kenya, and Angola. While in the first two countries their guides were mercenaries caught up in the

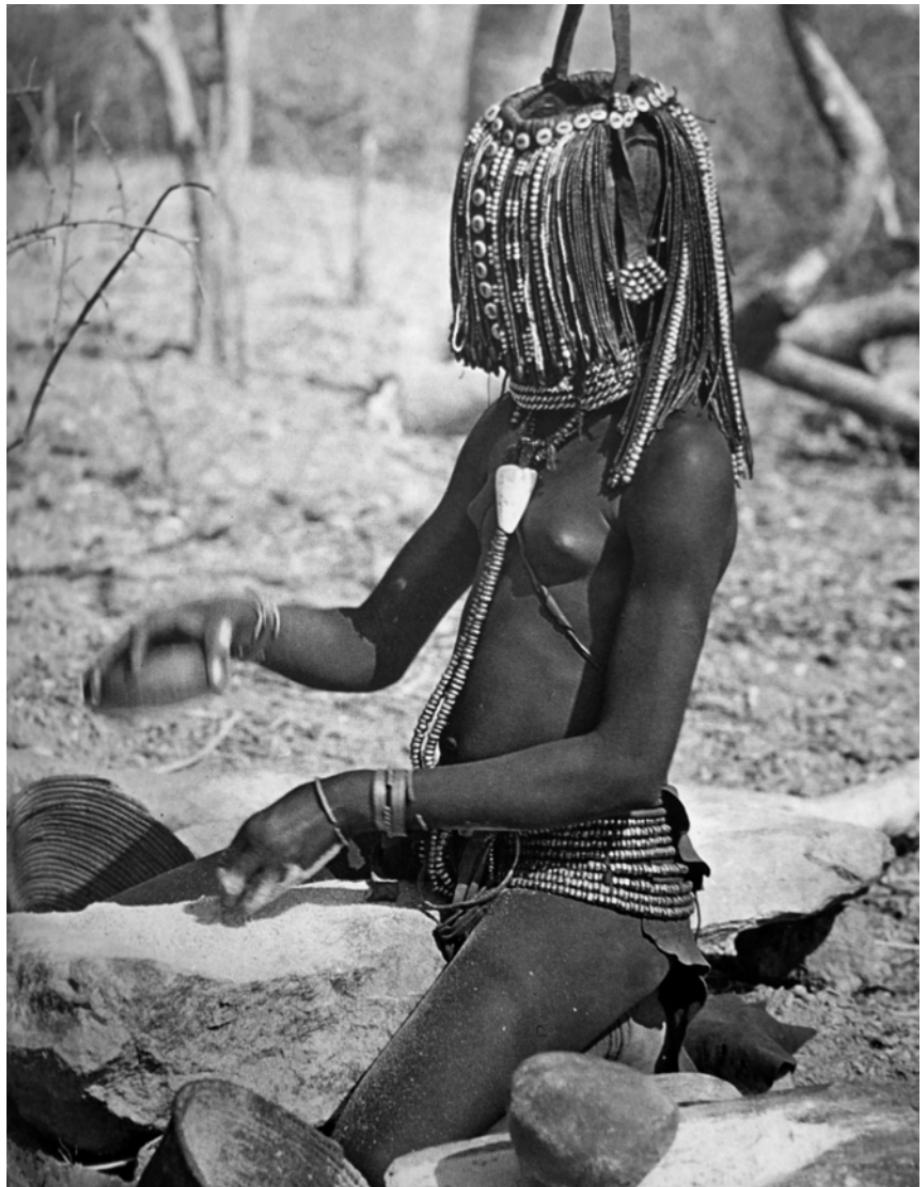
8. Composer Riz Ortolani was inspired by Walt Disney's movie soundtracks to emphasize the action.

9. In the year of the film's release, the Italian government accused Gualtiero Jacopetti of crimes committed abroad. Jacopetti refuted the accusation, claiming to have kept total journalistic neutrality while shooting the conflict. In 1967 he returned to Africa to collect evidence proving his innocence.



PATROL GETTING INTO THE WOODS  
Cesare Dante Vacchi and Anne Gaüzes, *Angola*—1961–1963, 1963.

HIMBA GIRL AFTER PUBERTY RITE  
Cesare Dante Vacchi, *Penteados de Angola*, 1965.



euphoria of pillage,<sup>10</sup> in Angola the filmmakers decided to follow the war cry “Mama Sumé!”<sup>11</sup> shouted by the Comandos, the recently created Portuguese elite force.

In the middle of the Angolan bush, Jacopetti and Prosperi “reenacted” for the cameras a counter-guerrilla operation, thus exposing some of the ingenious tactics used by Portuguese soldiers to compensate for their clear disadvantage on the ground and their inadequate equipment. One of those techniques was an ingenious sound camouflage technique developed after the traumatic experience of successive ambushes. The passing of Portuguese troops through the bush and the forest produced a tell-tale silence that invariably led to a dramatic end. To fill this void, the Comandos began using prerecorded jungle sounds, broadcast through loudspeakers, that would coax nature into resuming its activity and thus camouflage their presence.

10. During the Congo crisis, Gualtiero Jacopetti followed the movement of famous mercenaries, such as the ex-Nazi Siegfried “Kongo” Müller or the Irish Captain Mike Hoare, responsible for the execution of a man in front of the camera. According to Müller, the Italian filmmakers sought the ideal light and camera position to better film the execution.

11. Initiation cry uttered by young Bantu men of south Angola during the puberty rite before lion hunting. In 1964, it was appropriated by the Portuguese Comandos, who translated it as: “Here we are, ready to hunt the lion.”

And on we went again into the silence.

Joseph Conrad

In late 2010 I tried for the first time to work on a piece based on the idea of a terrifying silence, such as the one narrated by Gualtiero Jacopetti in *Africa Addio*. My intuition led me to believe that a pause inserted into a continuous and dense sound, like the deafening sound of the cicadas that I would later hear on the Thai island of Ko Libong, could cause an automatic and involuntary fear.

As I plunged into endless attempts to create a fearsome and material sound, somehow influenced by John Cage, my companion Marta Moita tried, in the same room, to solve a behavioral problem resulting from an experiment developed in her neuroscience laboratory.<sup>12</sup> Using a classical conditioning model, fear was provoked by a low-voltage electric discharge to the feet of an animal. The discomfort triggers the amygdala (a brain structure that regulates fear) and causes a subsequent *freezing*, a behavior in which the animal immobilizes *itself* at the sign of danger. In her laboratory, Marta explored the triggering of the response not through electrical shock but by observing the interaction between two animals, namely the transmission of fear between two rats.

12. Behavioral Neuroscience Laboratory, Champalimaud Centre for the Unknown, Lisbon.

Since at the time I was working on a correspondence between fear and silence, I suggested that fear could, like electricity, trigger a reaction of fear between animals. To prove this idea, doctorate student Ana Pereira set up an experiment based on the technique of sound camouflage used by the Comandos in Angola. It consisted of exposing rats to the prerecorded sound of a moving rat, with insertions of silence. After testing several animals it was verified that they would immobilize, freezing during those pauses and thus demonstrating that the rats read silence as a sign of danger.

Then, using an optogenetics technique of deactivating neurons with the use of light, the researchers deactivated the amygdala of the rats during the moments of silence, noting that the rats that had had their amygdalae deactivated now did not react to the pauses in the sound, having become insensitive to silence and the danger it could represent. This data verified that silence could be a vehicle for fear and its social transmission, culminating in the article “Silence Resulting From the Cessation of Movement Signals Danger,” published in the magazine *Current Biology*.<sup>13</sup>

13. Ana Pereira, Andreia Cruz, Susana Q. Lima, and Marta A. Moita, “Silence Resulting From The Cessation of Movement Signals Danger,” *Current Biology* 22, no. 16 (August 2012), pp. R627–R628.

Exhibition	Booklet
Curator	Design
João Fernandes	Ana Baliza
Head of Exhibitions	Translation from Portuguese to English
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Rafael García	Nuria Rodríguez
Management	Copyediting
Natalia Guaza	Jonathan Fox
David Ruiz	Images
Registrar	Front and Back Covers: details of <i>Pockets of Silence</i>
Clara Berástegui	Interior:
Iliana Naranjo	Manoel Barbosa, <i>Zemba</i> , graphite on paper, 18.5 x 25.5 cm, 1972. Private collection.
IT Programming	Cesare Dante Vacchi and Anne Gaüzes, <i>Angola—1961–1963</i> , Lisbon: Bertrand, 1963.
João Frazão	37mm rocket launcher, <a href="http://www.operacional.pt">www.operacional.pt</a>
Video Postproduction	Texts
Pedro Dinis Reis	Alexandre Estrela, <i>Pockets of Silence</i> , extract from <i>Viagem ao Meio: Meio Concreto</i> , 2015.
3D Modeling and	João Fernandes, <i>Alexandre Estrela: Gaps of</i>
Production Assistant	<i>Fear</i> , 2015.
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The Museum wishes to thank Eliane Radigue for the loan of <i>Usral</i> (1969), from her album <i>Feedback Works</i> , for the piece <i>Vida y Costumbres</i> <i>de Alexander</i> .	

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Related activity

Conversation between Alexandre  
Estrela and João Fernandes  
December 16, 2015  
7:00 p.m.

Auditorium, Sabatini Building  
Entry is free while space is available

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