

# ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2014 POINT IN MY LIFE... INTERNATIONAL

POINT IN MY LIFE...

I'M EXACTLY WHERE I PLANNED TO BE, IT'S AHMEE-ZING !!

I SEE.



IMPOSSIBLE!



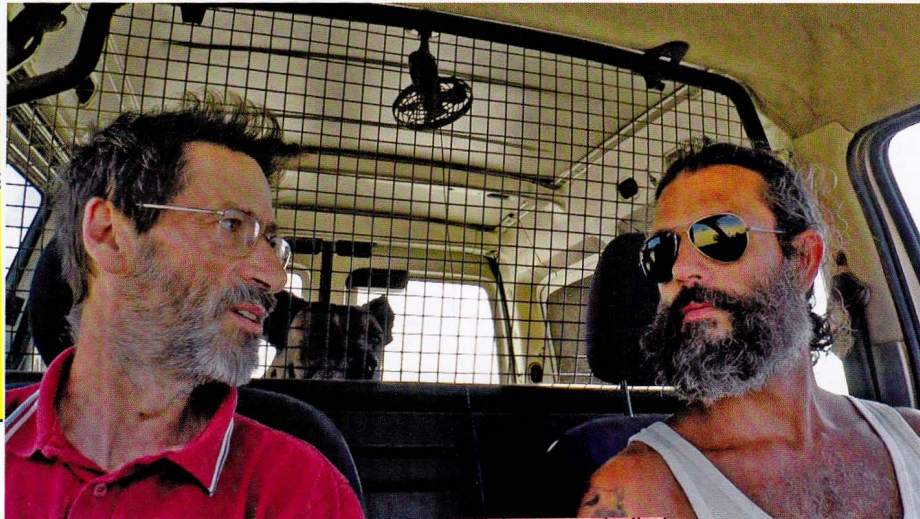
WARHOL'S COMPUTER  
AFROFUTURISM  
ART AND ANIMATION

BUT HONEY, YOU KNOW ...



JAMES QUANDT ON JOAQUIM PINTO'S WHAT NOW? REMIND ME

Joaquim Pinto, *E Agora? Lembra-me (What Now? Remind Me)*, 2013, digital video, color, sound, 164 minutes. Joaquim Pinto and Nuno Leonel.



FILM

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# A Journal of the Plague Years

JAMES QUANDT ON JOAQUIM PINTO'S *WHAT NOW? REMIND ME*

A LIE, A FIRE, and—most drastic—a smile inaugurate Joaquim Pinto's self-commemorating diary film *E Agora? Lembra-me* (What Now? Remind Me). (Both query and command, and tenuous in tense, the title in its very unwieldiness imparts Pinto's precarious state.) In sotto, dolorous voice-over, the Portuguese director introduces himself: "My name is Joaquim. My life is uneventful." His unadorned declaration—first name only, the simplest diction—prepares us for the mundane events that his film will entail, just as the opening sequence in which a gray-green slug hauls its soft body across the screen in a close-up lasting well over a minute forewarns of the patience required to persist with Pinto's slow-paced quotidian for almost three hours. His humble induction may not ultimately qualify as deceitful, but *What Now?*—dense with incident both dire and momentous; with histories extending from the personal to the cosmological; and with far-ranging ruminations about the nature of time, being, and memory—turns out to record a most consequential existence. After lingering on Pinto's ravaged eyes, which will become a motif suggesting the fragility of vision, the film cuts to a wide shot of hills ablaze, the countryside surrounding Pinto's rural home on fire after seasons of drought. The conflagration, likely started by arsonists, later returns as a portent for an imperiled planet; besides functioning in many coincident modes—road movie, personal journal, history lesson, auto-requiem, economic treatise, love story—*What Now?* also serves as an ecological alarm. (The rains return at film's end, as balm and benediction.)

As if to offset the inferno, Pinto then offers a smile to begin his film. A gallows ruse, his grin—in fact an expressionistically superimposed X-ray of his teeth, pitted and ruined by decades of treatments for AIDS and hepatitis C, which, twenty years after Pinto's initial diagnoses, have given rise to cirrhosis and forced him to wear dentures—bespeaks the impending grave. "This film is the notebook of a year of clinical trials," Pinto announces, and by the time *What Now?* has arrived at its ambiguous coda showing a truckload of Christmas turkeys on a freeway headed to imminent slaughter, his modest tablet, now inscribed with countless asides, excursions, and poetic annotations, has transformed into something unassumingly akin to the visionary volume Pinto so prizes, Francisco de Holanda's Renaissance compendium of mystical biblical illustrations, *De aetibus mundi imagines* (The Illustrated Ages of the World, 1545–73). "We are living through sad times," Pinto repeatedly laments in his chronicle of mental and physical deterioration, as his digital *imagines* gather abundant beauty, contesting, if not refuting, the assertion.

The filmmaker claims, somewhat mystifyingly, that after years on interferon, "memory comes very quickly"—an ensuing series of flash superimpositions of images from his past implies just such acceleration—and he later explains to his mother, who frets on the phone over austerity cuts to education and unemployment benefits, that "memory is short." Pinto's recall is neither fast nor fleeting. Fashioned as both memento mori and reliquary—an image-board of things and people the director refuses to lose, even though, by surviving, he is doomed to watch them vanish—*What Now?* summons up various histories: of the filmmaker's family; of Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution and his continent's postwar economic policies; of the national cinema in which Pinto played a key role, as director, producer, and, most notably, sound engineer; of the international gay world he encountered after coming out in the 1970s. Pinto recounts the strange vagaries of his university education (ending up as a student of economics in East Germany, he met a young activist named Angela Merkel); traces the genesis of the AIDS epidemic back to colonialist Congo; and muses on evolutionary theory and the shifting meaning of social Darwinism from prehistoric to current times. (The film takes excursions to local archaeological sites, such as the Gruta Nova caves, once occupied by Neanderthals, and the Columbeira Castro, a fortification that dates

back to the Copper Age.) Amid all these intersecting eras and annals and attempts to chart the infinite and the infinitesimal, Pinto's archival impulse (he roots through old boxes of home movies and journals to piece together the past), his proclivity for lists (of friends lost to AIDS, his adopted dogs, films he worked on, drugs he is taking), and his fondness for statistics (including the alarming fact that more than twenty thousand packets of antidepressants are consumed daily in Portugal thanks to the economic crisis) provide indexical order even as the director fears that the experimental treatments he is undergoing in a Madrid clinic will cause him to lose his senses and reason, "the notion that I exist." His mind unmoored by toxic drugs, he succumbs to

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confusion, the screen suddenly swarming with texts of the reminders he leaves for himself: "I forget the notes I have written not to forget," he wanly quips.

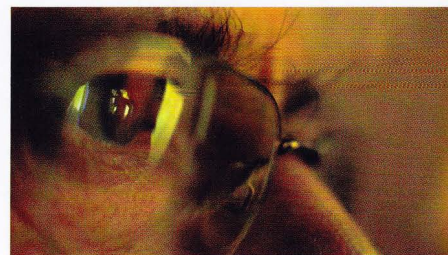
Pinto shores up his fragments against ruin by relying on the loving sustenance of his husband and helpmate, the film's coauthor, Nuno Leonel, a former heavy-metal singer turned dirt farmer with whom Pinto lived (and made short films) in Brazil and the Azores before returning to Portugal for health care. Pinto remarks that the taciturn Nuno wants nothing to do with the film, that he has other priorities, such as preserving life—of the forest and farm from flames, and of the four dogs the

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Top: Joaquim Pinto, *E Agora? Lembra-me* (What Now? Remind Me), 2013, digital video, color, sound, 164 minutes. Joaquim Pinto.

Above: Joaquim Pinto, *E Agora? Lembra-me* (What Now? Remind Me), 2013, digital video, color, sound, 164 minutes.

couple has rescued over the years (long before the practice became fashionable) and that gambol through the film in a series of canine cameos. (Rufus, Cookie, Bambi, and Zorra prove as irrepensible as the kids in *With Six You Get Eggroll*.) Seemingly unimpaired by his own long-term HIV infection, Nuno devotes his existence to others, primarily his husband and their mutts, but also neighbors such as the perseverant Deolinda (whose ancient body is at metaphoric odds with the means by which she communicates with her family back home in France: Facebook). In a film laced with religious imagery, Pinto shows little shame in equating his husband with Christ, most blatantly in a sex scene as explicit as anything in the other great gay film of 2013, Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake*, their fucking sacralized, Pasolini style, by nondiegetic classical music—the Andante of Carl Maria von Weber's Piano Sonata no. 2, played by Emil Gilels. Witnessing the tender, abiding affection of Joaquim and Nuno, one feels moved to utter the phrase that Pinto discovers in the Holanda volume near the end of the film—“*Nunc scio quid sit amor*,” from Virgil's *Eclogues*—“Now I know what love is.”

“*Fiat lux*,” another phrase illustrated in Holanda's compendium, also evokes this most radiant film, in which light ranges from that cast by a bedside lamp that harshly illumines Pinto's exhausted face as he recites, in long take, his piteous afflictions and worries, to the shaft of sunshine that penetrates the men's penumbrous bedroom, falling on aged flesh with sanctifying effect. (One thinks of the opening lines of Derek Jarman's final testament, *Blue* [1993], an obvious precursor to Pinto's film, in which Jarman, almost blind from AIDS complications,

declares: “You say to the boy open your eyes / When he opens his eyes and sees the light / You make him cry out.”) Artfully shot on HD by Pinto and Leonel—some sequences appear to have required a third cinematographer, but the directors insist otherwise—*What Now?* pays special attention to the play of light and shadow in domestic space, as in the Hammershøi-like shot, hushed and monkish, that places Pinto at a small wooden table positioned in the corner of two austere whitewashed walls, a ray of sunlight falling crisply across the floor from lower frame left. Pinto later crafts a stunning bodegon from light and a fly, the insect perched at the apex of an isosceles-shaped beam, incandescent against a black backdrop. The fly, finally crawling toward a coral-colored morsel of food, joins the film's burgeoning bestiary of stalwart dogs and other obstinate creatures—a firefly persistently hovering on a bud, starlings whirling incessantly over a deserted piazza, a voracious wasp gnawing off a chunk of Pinto's cheeseburger, and another, overturned, struggling to right itself. Perhaps in homage to the islands where he previously resided, Pinto accords to a red-veined darter dragonfly, native to the Azores, an intent close-up, reveling in its crimson brilliance as it clings tenaciously to a reed. Among these obvious analogues to the director's own determination, Pinto plants animal *vanitates*: ants spilling over the carcass of a rabbit; a bird flattened on the pavement, a wing and claw all that's left of its obliterated body. But in death it, too, persists, its battered wing disconsolately animated by the breeze.

Loose-leaf as Pinto's “notebook” sometimes appears in its avid massiveness, its structure is far from random.

What is not wrought into motif is left suggestive, so that tangents resonate across the film—an account of Lana Turner's late career, resurrected after her appearance in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), somehow related to Pinto's memory of recording the faint heartbeat of the dying actress Magdalena Montezuma in Werner Schroeter's *Der Rosenkönig* (The Rose King, 1986), for instance, the latter in turn suggesting another memorializing masterpiece, the great, unsung *Vai e vem* (Coming and Going, 2003), the final film of Pinto's beloved mentor João César Monteiro made as he was perishing from cancer. (All three highly stylized films end as requiems.) Pinto's wry remembrance in *What Now?* of his passport being stamped “tolerated” after a diagnosis of gonorrhea at the age of sixteen finds its echo when his camera pans over a scientific display of the grotesquely deformed, abscessed genitalia of syphilis sufferers from a previous century. Sex, it seems, has never been safe. And just as Pinto mistakenly discerns Nuno's name in Holanda's Renaissance tome only to realize that it is the “*Nunc*” of Virgil's pronouncement about love, the “remind me” of the film's title easily morphs in its original Portuguese—*Lembra-me*—into a different directive: “Remember me.” This magnificent, rending work, despite its many aesthetic lapses, ensures that when he is laid in earth, Joaquim of the uneventful life will be well remembered, his fate not forgotten. □

*What Now? Remind Me* made its North American debut at the 2013 New York Film Festival; it opens at the Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center in New York on August 8.

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