nara roesler

antonio dias

antonio dias

b. 1944 in Campina Grande, Paraíba, Brazil
lived and worked between Milan, Italy and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
d. 2018 in rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Antonio Dias began his career in the 1960s, producing works marked by political criticism in the form of paintings, assemblages, installations, and videos. Even though the artist refused to be attached to any artistic movement of his time, his work is often considered a benchmark in Brazilian Pop Art and Neo Figurativism. His practice is interwoven by the legacy of the Neo-concrete movement and an early awareness of the revolutionary impetus of Tropicalia. In 1966, during his self-exile in Paris after subtle criticism from the Brazilian military dictators, the artist came into contact with artists of the Italian avant-garde movement Arte Povera, namely Luciano Fabro and Giulio Paolini. In the European context, he increasingly turns to abstraction, transforming his style.

In Italy, he adopted a conceptual approach to painting, filmmaking, audio-recordings and artist books to question the meaning of art. His playful and subversive approach towards eroticism, sex, and political oppression constructed a unique artistic production, filled with formal elegance transversed by political issues and a poignant critique towards the system of art. In the late 1970s, Dias went to Nepal to learn how to produce a special type of artisanal paper that he would use until later in his career. In the 1980s, his production once again focused on painting, experimenting with metallic and mineral pigments, such as gold, copper, iron oxide and graphite, mixing these with a variety of binding agents. Most works produced during this time have a metallic sheen and feature a vast array of symbols—bones, crosses, rectangles, phalluses—, an underlying correlation with the artist's earlier production.

cover *The Invented Country / God Will Give Days*, 1976 (detail)

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selected solo exhibitions

Antonio Dias: Derrotas e vitórias, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil (2020)
Antonio Dias: o ilusionista, Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM-Rio), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2018)
Una collezione, Fondazione Marconi (2017), Milan, Italy
Antonio Dias - Potência da pintura, Fundação Iberê Camargo (FIC), Porto Alegre, Brazil (2014)
Antonio Dias. Anywhere is my Land, Daros Museum, Zürich, Switzerland (2009); Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (2010)

selected group exhibitions

Dahka Art Summit, Samdani Art Foundation, Dhaka, Bangladesh (2020)
Pop América, 1965–1975, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX, USA (2018); Mary & Leigh Block Museum at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA (2019); Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC, USA (2019);
33ª Bienal de São Paulo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo (2018), São Paulo, SP, Brazil
Mario Pedrosa - On the Affective Nature of Form, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS) (2017), Madrid, Spain
The EY Exhibition: The World Goes Pop, Tate Modern, London, UK (2015)

selected collections

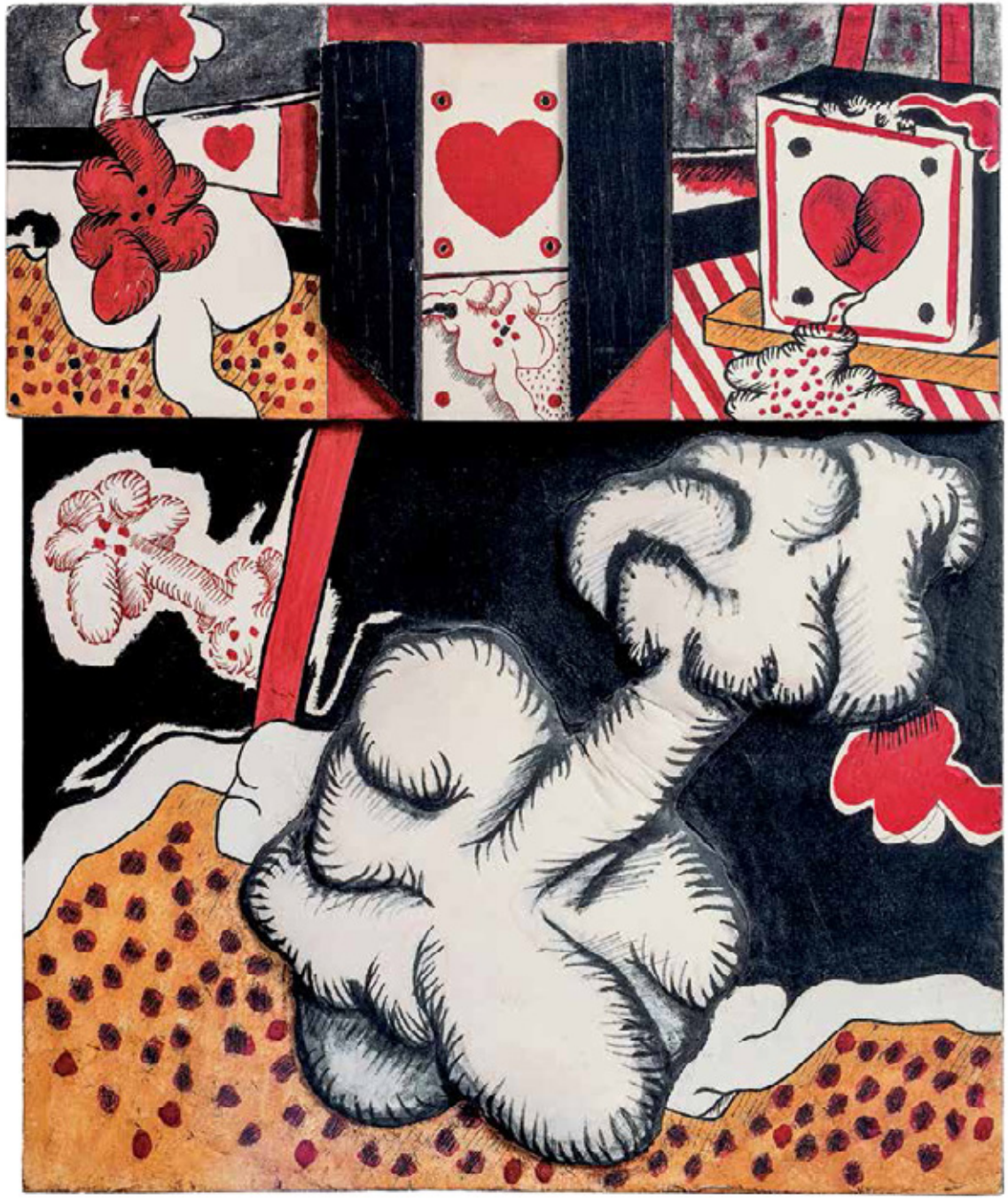
Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zurich, Switzerland
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA
Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina
Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), São Paulo, Brazil

4 the potency of the image
11 transitional period
17 abstraction and formalistic rigor
40 nepal
51 exercises of self-reflection
57 1990s onwards

the potency of the image 1963–1966

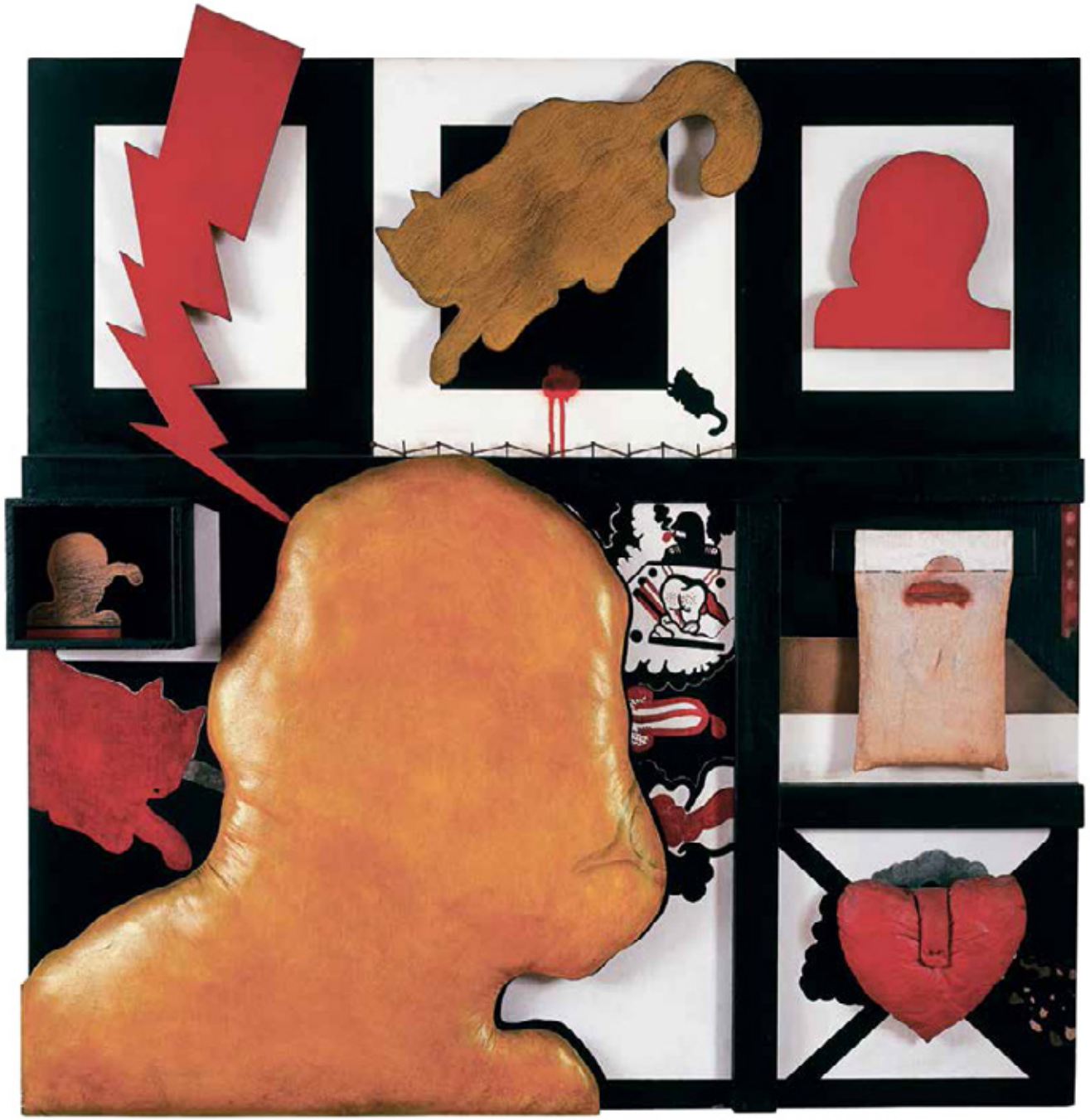
Antonio Dias began exhibiting his work very early on in his career, at the beginning of the 1960s. His first solo show took place in 1964 at Galeria Relevo led by Jean Boghici, allowing him to rise to prominence in the art scene of Rio de Janeiro at twenty years old. The exhibition had an important impact on Brazilian art and was accompanied by an introductory essay by Pierre Restany, one of the most important critics in the country at the time. In the following year, the show traveled to Galerie Houston-Brown in Paris, marking the beginning of his presence in the international arena. During this time and until 1966, Dias produced a large body of work including *assemblages* and drawings which made use of a striking repertoire of violent and scatological imagery, such as bones, body parts, hearts and weapons.

Battle With a Girlfriend, 1964
oil on plaster on masonite
37 x 50 cm | 14.5 x 19.6 in
photo © Vicente de Mello



Sem título [Untitled], 1964
acrylic and plaster on
cushioned canvas and wood
61 x 50,1 x 6,5 cm | 24 x 19.7 x 2.55 in
photo © Peter Schälchli

According to curator and critic Sergio Paulo Duarte, 'The paintings from that time present a true revolution. They are far from the American pop art that some critics rushed to identify them as. Aesthetically, they present themselves in different directions, like rectangles, squares or diamonds; they nearly always project into the surrounding space, with great symbolic violence, assuming a sculptural aspect.' The artist's iconographical lexicon dated back to Brazilian vernacular culture and comic books, while also referencing the country's urban reality during his time—in his works, Dias' figuration becomes infused with poignant humor, irony and debauchery. Famously, artist Helio Oiticica spoke of Dias' iconic work *Nota sobre a morte imprevista*, 1965, stating that 'For me, the turning point in this process within the pictorial-visual-structural field was Antonio Dias' *Note on the Unforeseen Death*, which brought to bear, in one go, deep-rooted problems of an ethical-social and pictorial-structural order, indicating a whole new approach to the problem of the object [...].' In 1965, his works were also exhibited in the anthological exhibition *Opinão 65*, at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro.



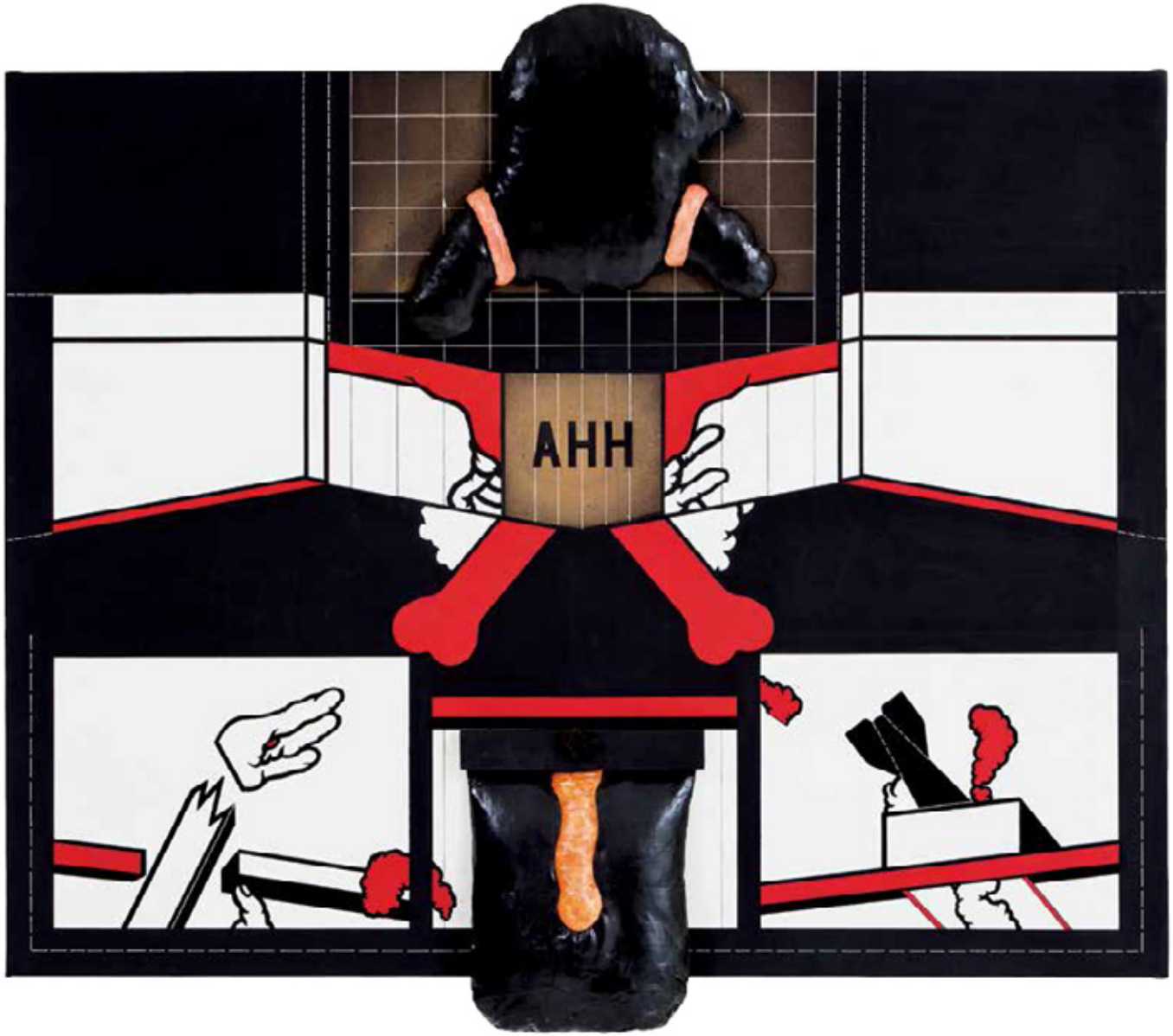
Plan for a Murder, 1964
cushioned fabric, wood,
metallic pigment, vinyl
on canvas and plywood
125 x 122 x 15 cm | 49.2 x 48 x 1.9 in
photo © Vicente de Mello

←
exhibition view
A cor do Brasil, 2016
Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR),
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Note on The Unforeseen Death, 1965
acrylic, oil, vinyl, plexiglass
on fabric and wood
195 x 176 x 63 cm
76.7 x 69.2 x 24.8 in
photo © Vicente de Mello

exhibition view
Memorias del Subdesarrollo: El giro descolonial en el arte de América Latina, 1960–1985, 2018
Fundación Jumex,
Mexico City, Mexico

Accident in the Game, 1964
acrylic, oil, vinyl on wood,
and cushioned fabric
103 x 55 x 77 cm | 40.5 x 21.6 x 30.4 in
photo © Paulo Scheuenstuhl

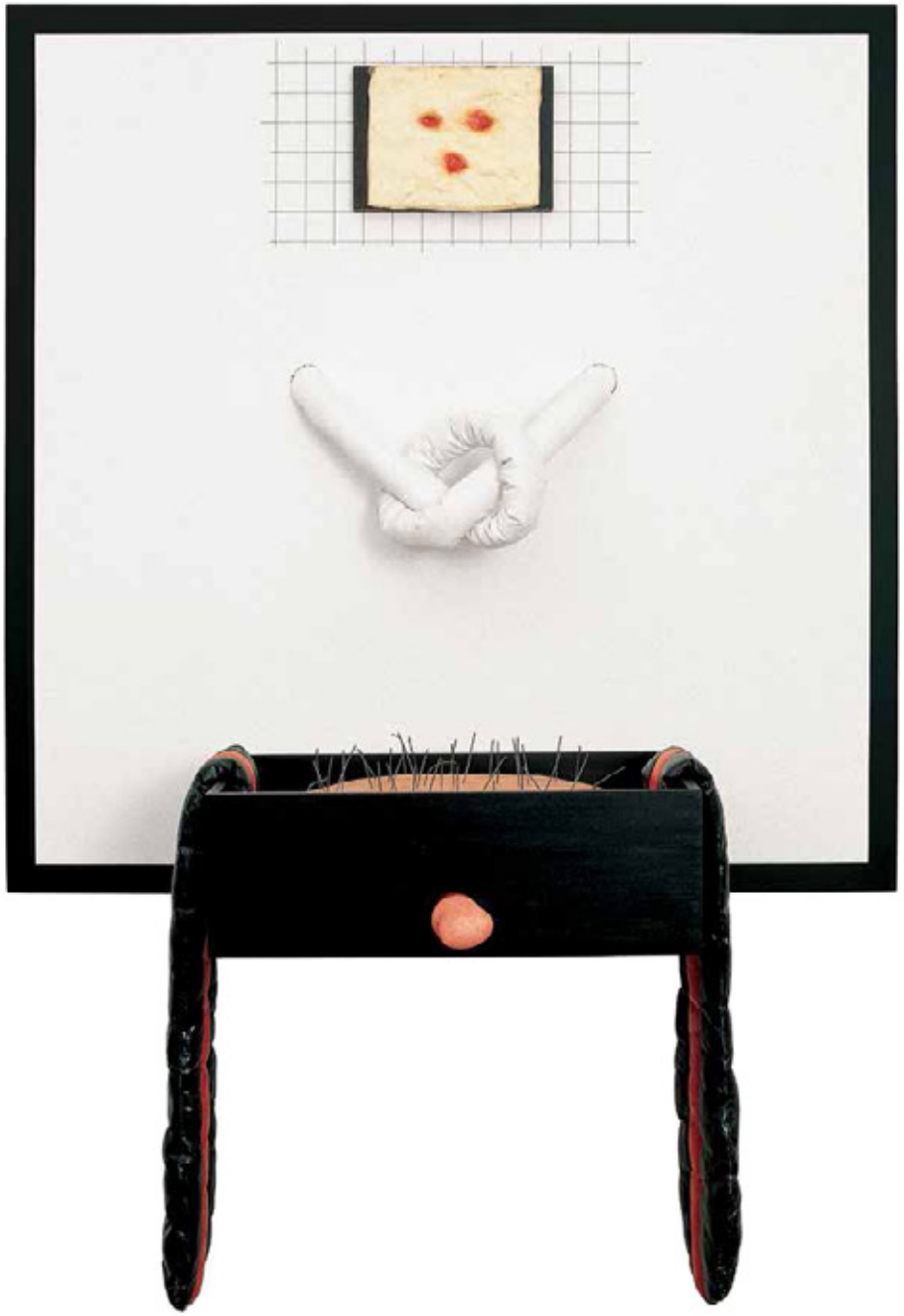


transitional period 1966–1967

At the end of 1966, Dias moved to Paris having earned a scholarship from the French government as a prize for his participation in the IV Paris Biennial, in 1965. The artist's move coincided with a change in the general orientation of his work, preserving his unique iconographic vocabulary while adopting a more simplified aesthetic: his colors became more sober and homogenous, mainly using white, black, red and pink, while his compositions become minimalistic and his surfaces pristine.

The Death of Black Hawk, 1967
acrylic and vinyl on canvas, fabric, and wood
125 x 145 cm | 49.2 x 1.57 in
photo © Daniel Mansur

Emblem for the Murderous Squadron, 1967
acrylic, industrial paint
on canvas, and masonite
photo © Jaime Acioli



My Portrait, 1967
acrylic on canvas, painted
wood, wire, and fabric
170 x 122 x 52 cm | 66.9 x 48 x 20.4 in
photo © Vicente de Mello

exhibition view
International Pop, 2015
Walker Art Center, MN, USA

→
Collective, 1967
laminated plastic on
wood and artificial grass
52,1 x 50,8 x 50,8 cm
20.5 x 20 x 20 in
photo © Peter Schälchli

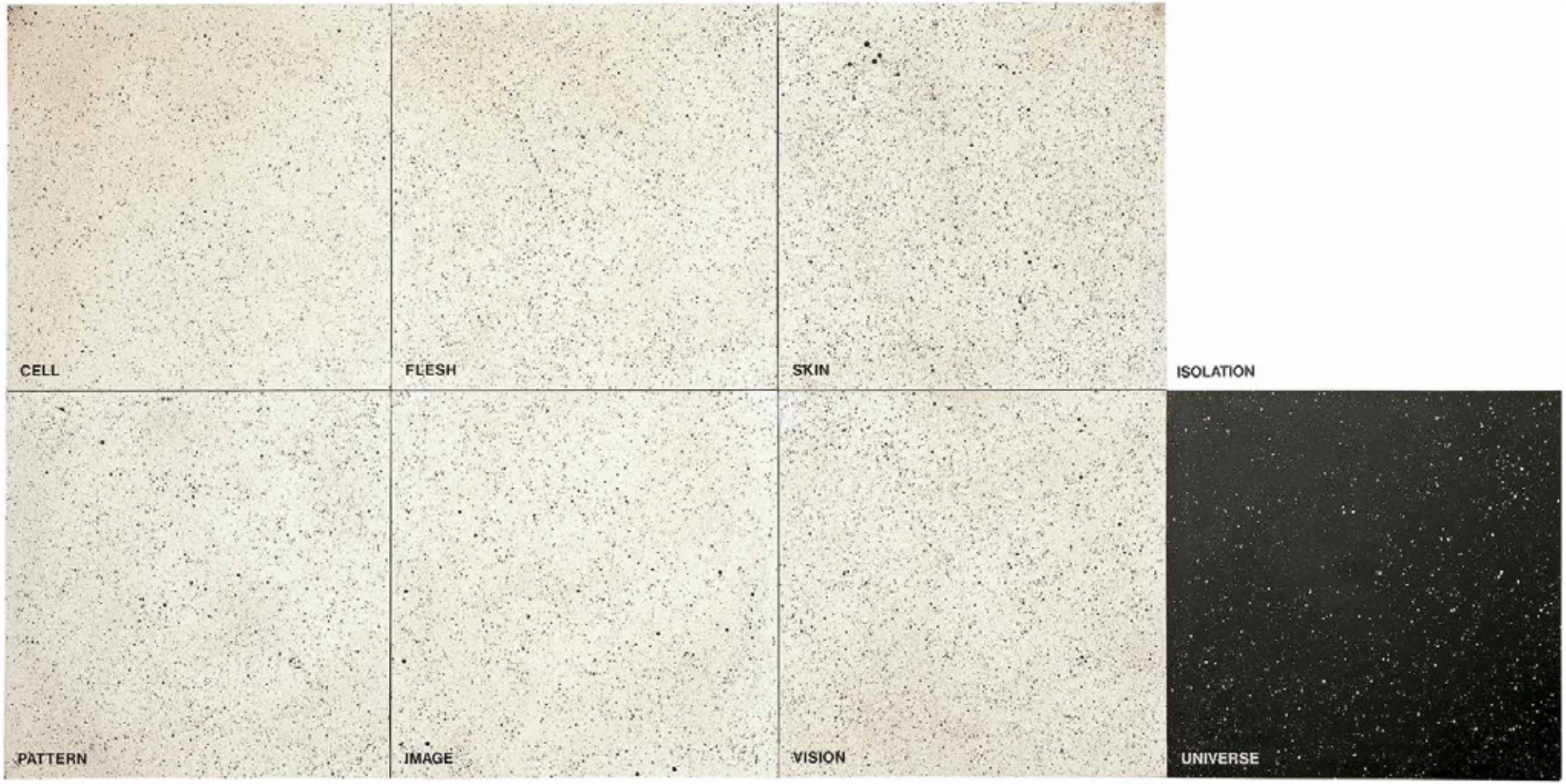
→ →
Solitary, 1967
laminated plastic in wood, rubber,
cotton, glass, and metal
55,5 x 50,3 x 67,5 cm
21.8 x 19.8 x 26.5 in
photo © Peter Schälchli

abstraction and formalistic rigor 1968–1976

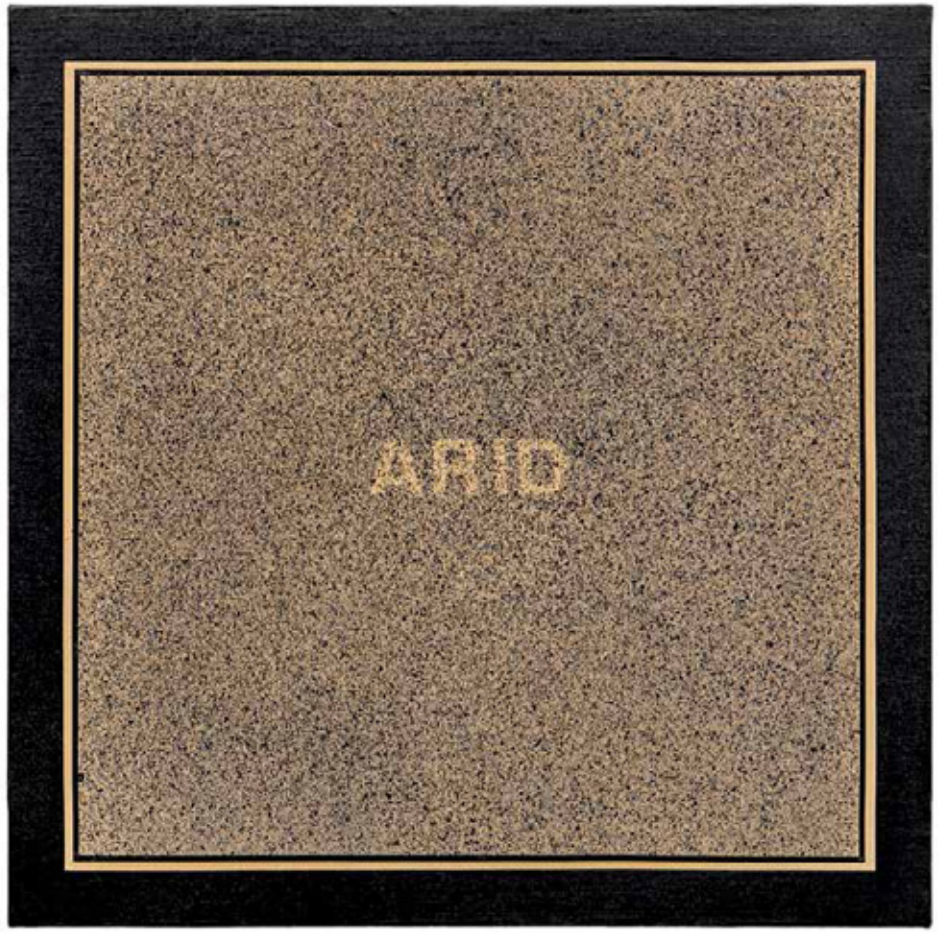
In 1968, Antonio Dias had to leave Paris due to a visa problem, resulting in his move to Milan where he would begin to frequent the circles of Arte Povera. Before leaving, however, he witnessed the historical protests of May 1968, after which he produced the work *History* (1968), a transparent plastic bag sealed with preserves, soil, dust and debris collected from the streets of Paris during this time. According to Art historian Sergio B. Martins, *History* 'takes factuality itself to such an extreme that it loses all self-evidence. [...] the inert materiality of the debris is an obstacle in the way of self-evident assumptions about the intrinsic meaningfulness of history.'

History, 1968
PVC, earth, dust and debris
6,5 x 39,7 x 38,5 cm | 2.5 x 15.6 x 3.3 in

→
Undercover, 1968
cement, linoleum,
and metal chain
2 pieces of approx.
Ø 15 cm | 5.9 in each
photo © Pat Kilgore



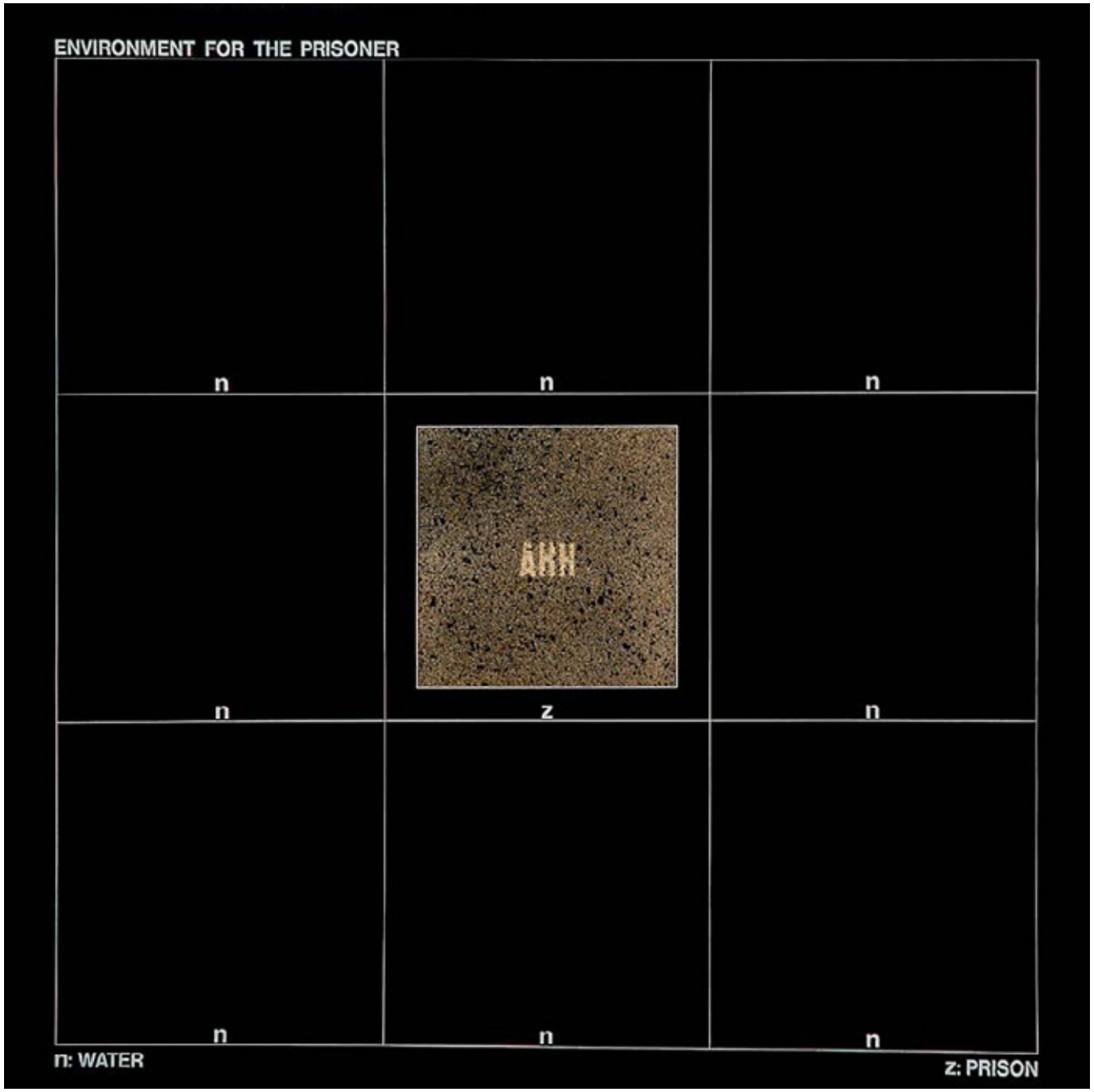
Alphaomega Biography, 1968
acrylic on canvas
190 x 380cm | 74.8 x 149.6 in
photo © Roberto Cecato



Arid, 1968
acrylic on canvas
50 x 50 cm | 19.6 x 19.6 in
photo © Everton Ballardin

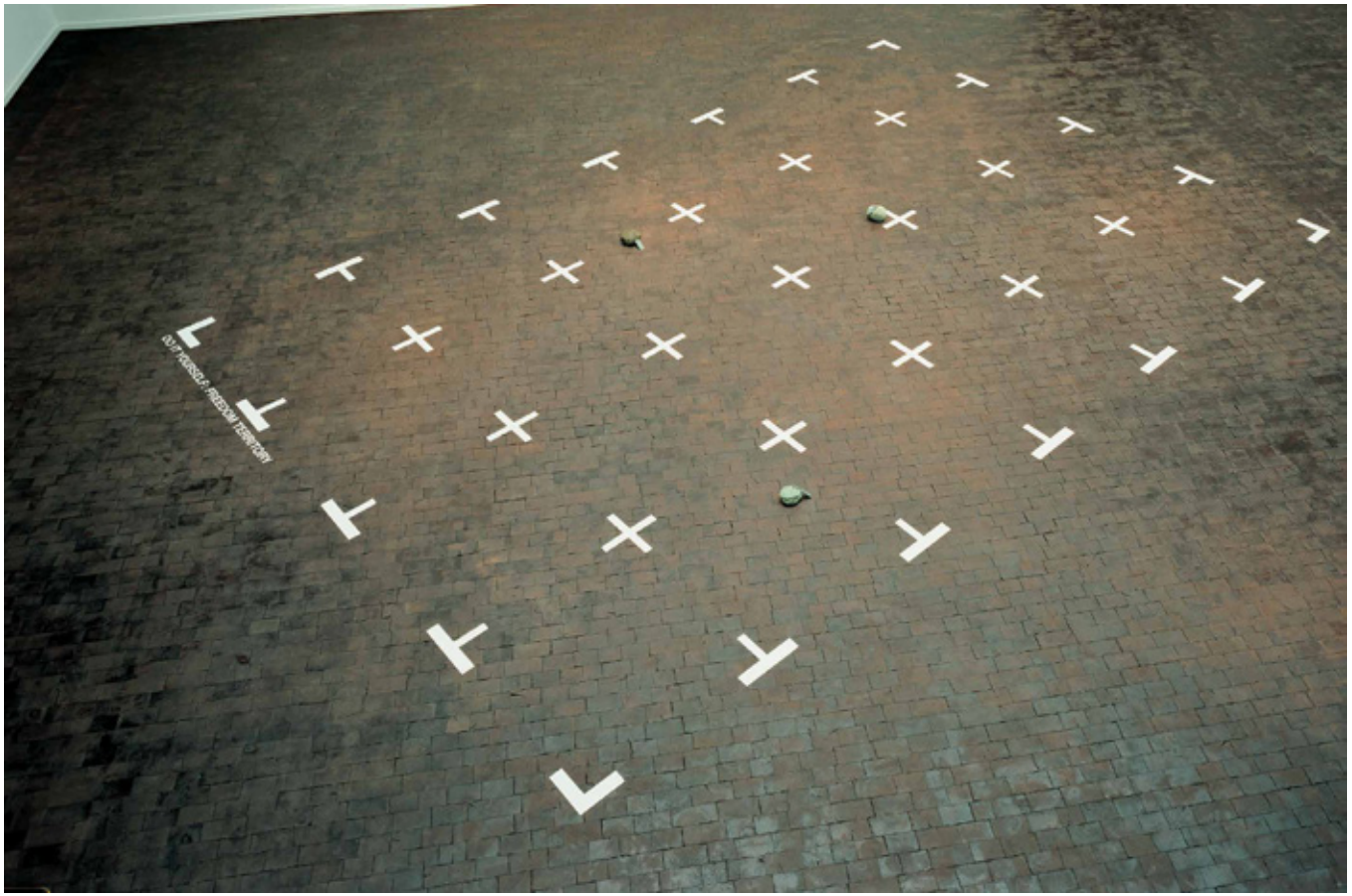
Sun Photo as Self-portrait, 1968
acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm | 59 x 59 in
photo © Maura Parodi

Following his arrival in Italy, Dias established long-lasting connections with artists such as Gilberto Zorio, Luciano Fabro and Giulio Paolini, where, according to curator and Art historian Sonia Salzstein, the artist's work 'opened itself up to new interests, and the elements that in it up until then seemed to refer immediately to the Brazilian political situation—for instance, the term "prisoner" associated with grids of empty an oppressive spaces that constantly appeared in his paintings and papers—henceforth evinced the revelatory strength of a new international order in art and in culture. The formal discipline that, from the beginning, had characterized Dias' work–even when it dealt with excess and decompression—found confirmation in the many variants of international production [...] that demonstrated blanks; ate spirit in those days in addition to a willingness to problematize the institutional boundaries of art.'



Environment for the Prisoner, 1968
acrylic on canvas
100 x 100 cm | 39.3 x 39.3 in
photo © Maura Parodi

Tapa Olho, 1968
acrylic on fabric
84 x 93,5 cm
photo © Everton Ballardin



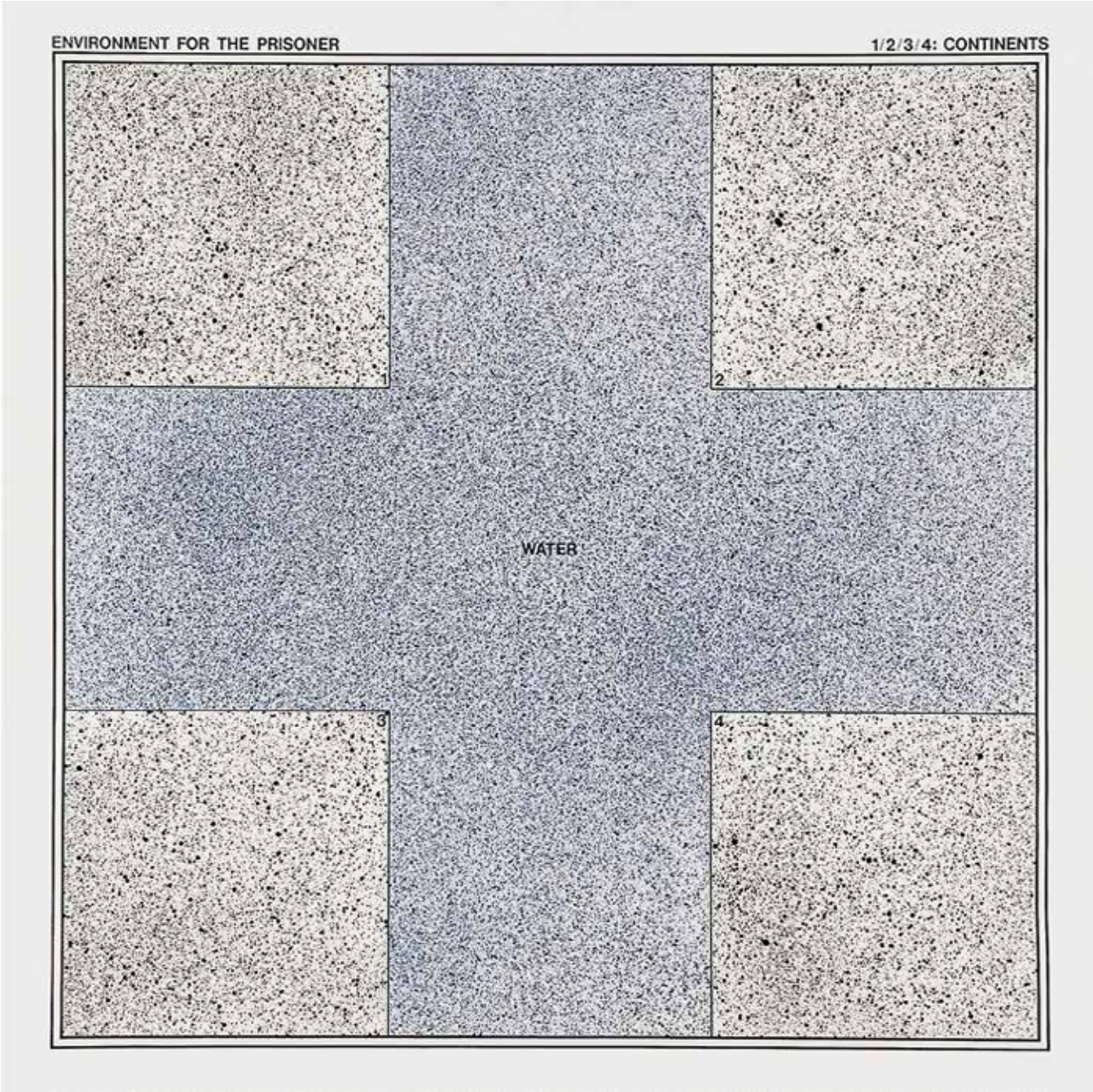
Do it yourself: Freedom territory, 1968
vinyl
400 x 600 cm | 157.4 x 236.2 in

In 1969, Dias created the infamous work *Territory of Freedom* (1969), which he described as 'a basic open structure, which only works from the moment someone uses the space declared free to put on an action, be it mental, physical or visual. It is important that the person adopts a complete non-conditioned stand before penetration the territory-structure.' The work consists of an adhesive tape disposed throughout the ground as markers of a 'territory of freedom', serving as a reflection on the notions of space and place in relation to Art, while also undertaking a socio-political dimension as a haven for autonomy and freedom.

→
The Space Between, 1969/99
white marble and black granite
100 x 100 x 100 cm each
39.3 x 39.3 x 39.3 in each
photo © Vicente de Mello

THE BEGINNING
THE END

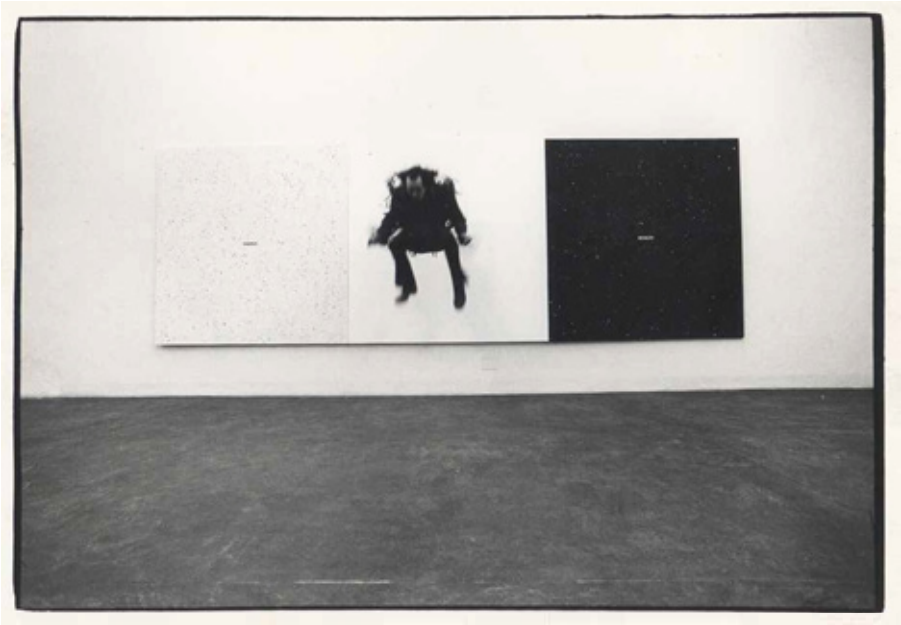
Environment for The Prisoner, 1970
acrylic on canvas
130 x 162 cm | 51.1 x 63.7 in
photo © Maura Parodi



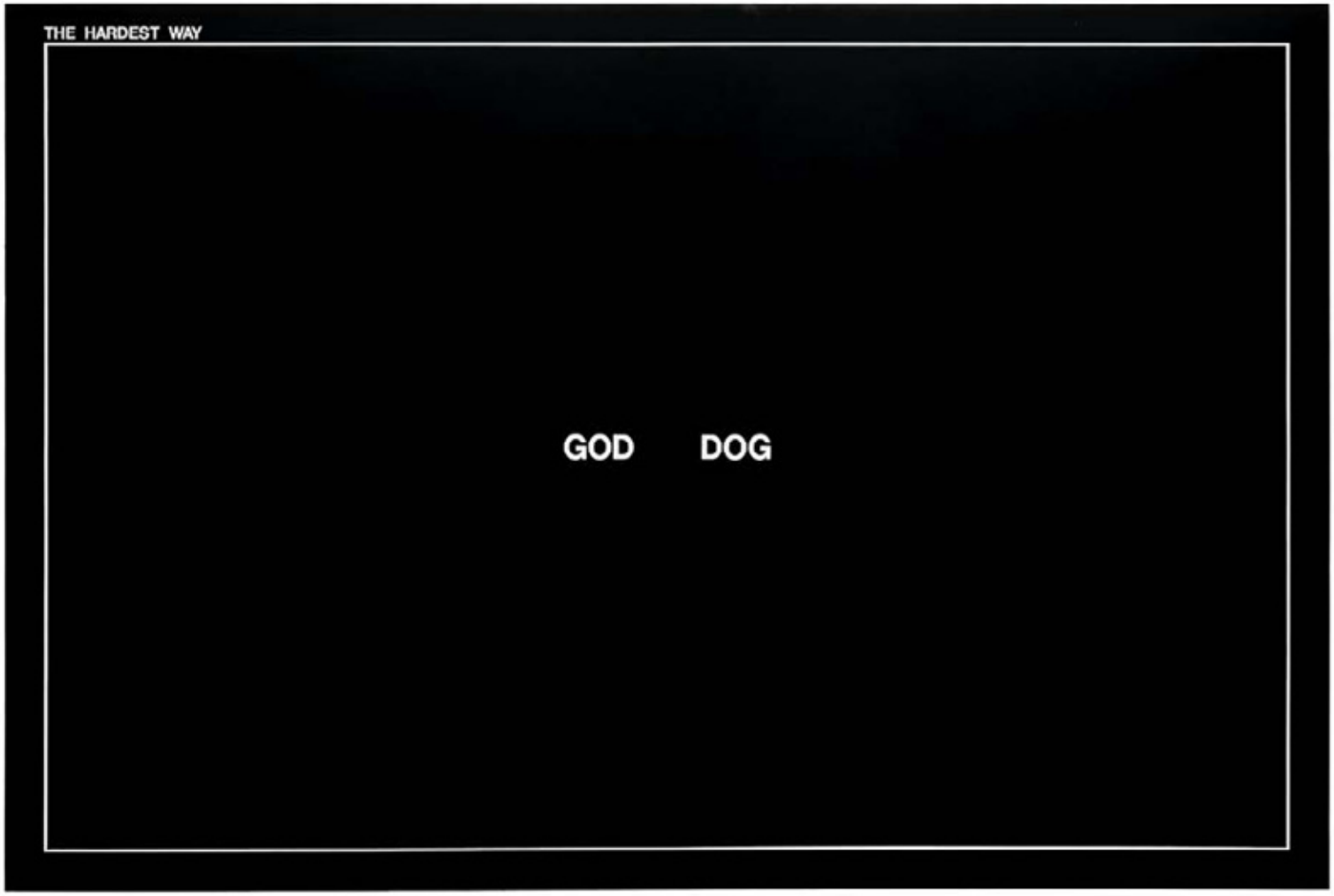
Environment for the Prisoner, 1970
acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 cm | 47.2 x 47.2 in
photo © Maura Parodi

→
Project for 'The Body', 1970
acrylic on canvas
200 x 600 cm | 78.7 x 236.2 in
photo © Udo Grabow

ENERGY
MEMORY



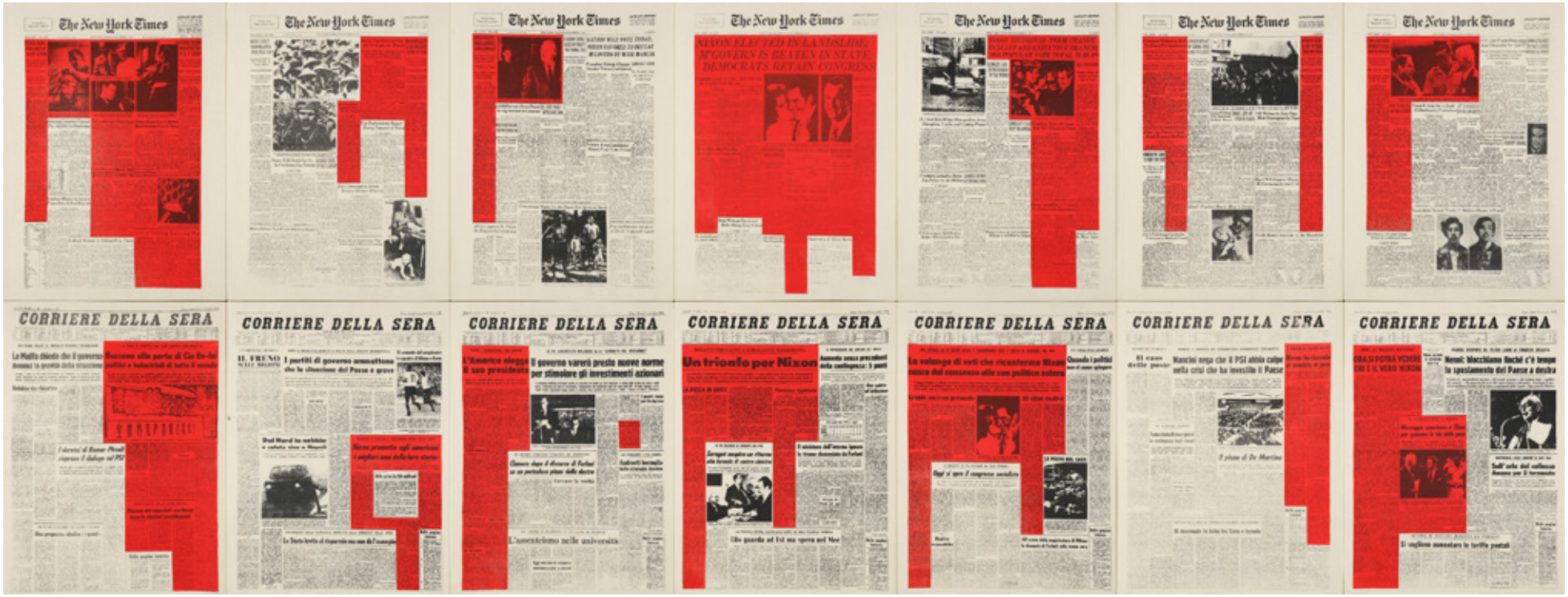
exhibition view
Anywhere is my land, 1970
Studio Marconi, Milan, Italy
photo © Giorgio Colombo



The Hardest Way, 1970
acrylic on canvas
200 x 300 cm | 78.7 x 118.1 in
artist's collection
photo © Roberto Cecato

→
The Illustration of Art / One & Three / Stretchers / Model, 1971
varnished wood
approx. 110 x 700 cm | 43.3 x 275.5 in
photo © Dominique Uldry

Oriente/Ocidente, 1972
india ink on tracing paper, nails,
and twine on cardboard
variable dimensions
photo © Pat Kilgore

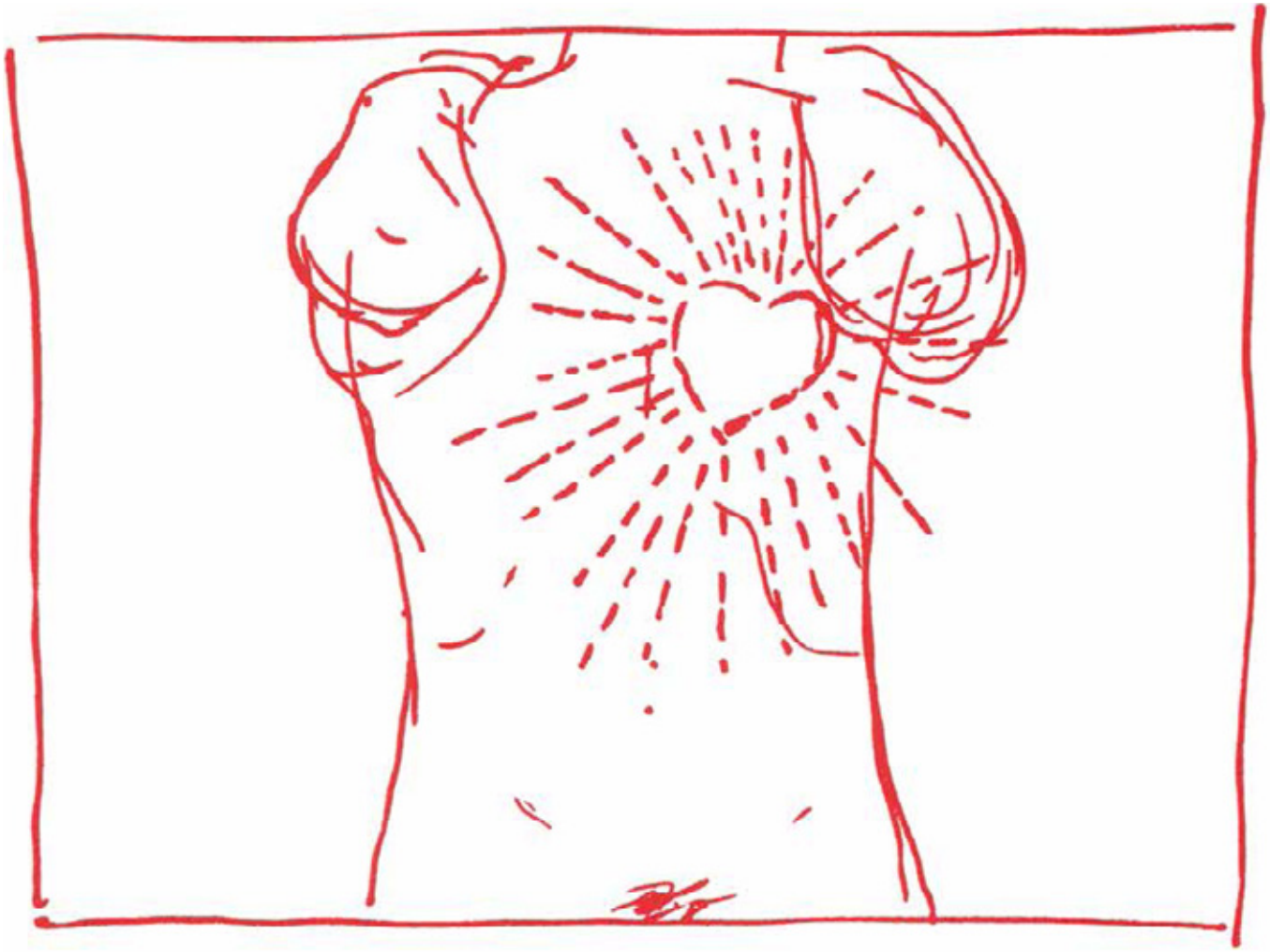


The Illustration of Art/ Dazibao/ The Shape of Power, 1972
silk screen, and acrylic on canvas
121 x 317 cm | 47.6 x 124.8 in
photo © Paulo Scheuenstuhl

→
Ta Tze Bao, 1972
installation in 14 parts, comprising 14 printed sheets of Chinese paper and acrylic on 14 flag shaped canvases
14 sheets of approx. 65 x 100 cm | 25.5 x 39.3 in each

→ →
exhibition view
Tazebao e outras obras, 2018
Galeria Nara Roesler,
São Paulo, Brazil
photo © Everton Ballardin

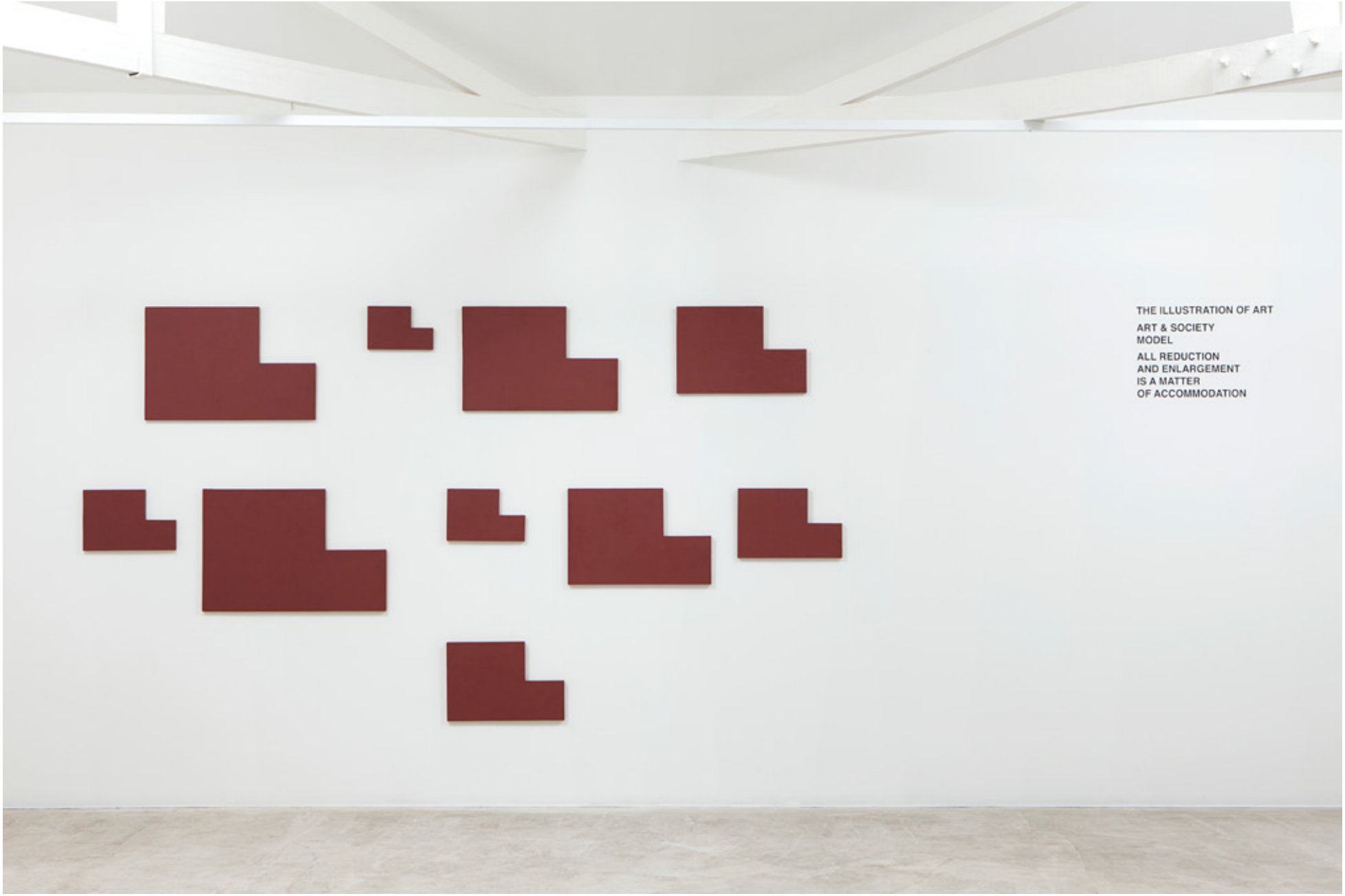
In the following years, Antonio Dias explored a new aesthetic practice, eventually turning to an austere and abstract production. He quickly began to scrutinize geometric shapes such as rectangles, dots, or squares, playing with subtle interjections and modifications. *The Illustration of Art / Economy Model*, which is part of his series *The Illustration of Art*, embodies his new geometrical investigations also revealing a newfound interest in formal vocabulary as a way of reflecting on the means and processes of the artistic system. Antonio Dias also began to systematically diversify his means of making, producing objects, installations, films in Super-8, sound recordings, in addition to his characteristic large-scale paintings of this phase.

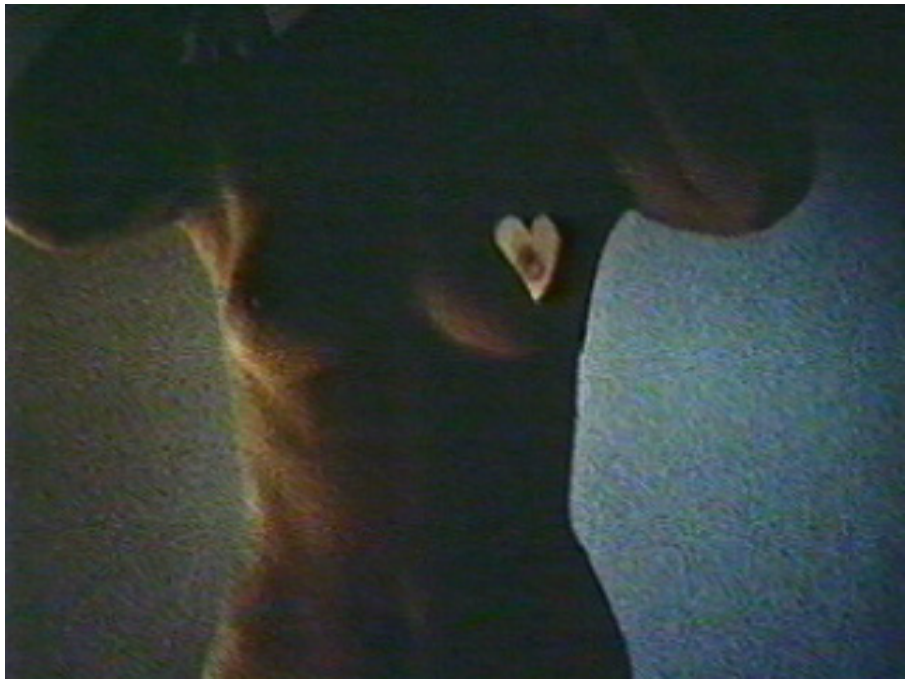


The Illustration of Art

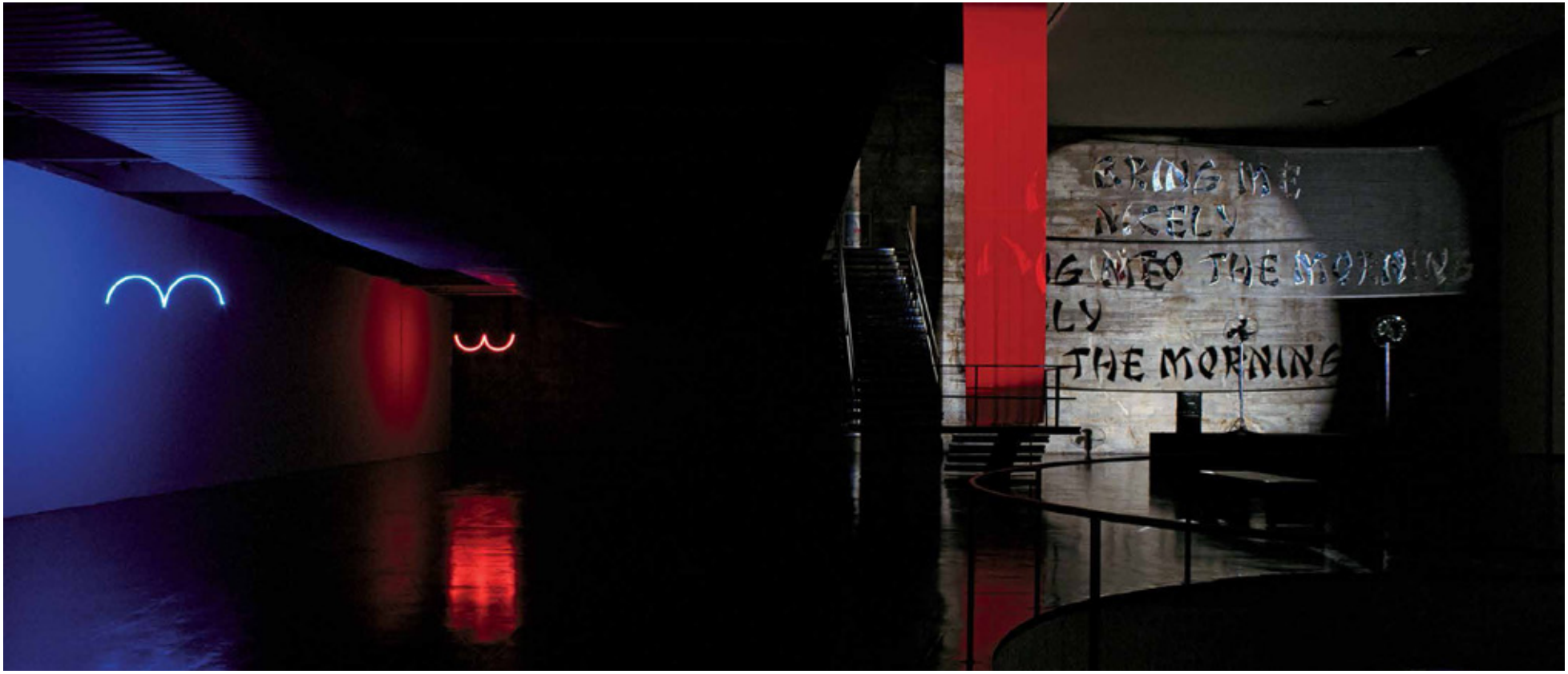
Study for The Illustration of Art/ Conversation Piece, 1973
drawing on paper
21x29cm | 8.2 x 11.4 in

→
The Illustration of Art/ Art & Society/ Model, 1975
iron oxide and vinyl on wood
200 x 496 cm
photo © everton ballardin


THE ILLUSTRATION OF ART
ART & SOCIETY
MODEL
ALL REDUCTION
AND ENLARGEMENT
IS A MATTER
OF ACCOMMODATION



Conversation Piece, 1973
super-8 transferred to dvd, screens
photo © Antonio Dias archive

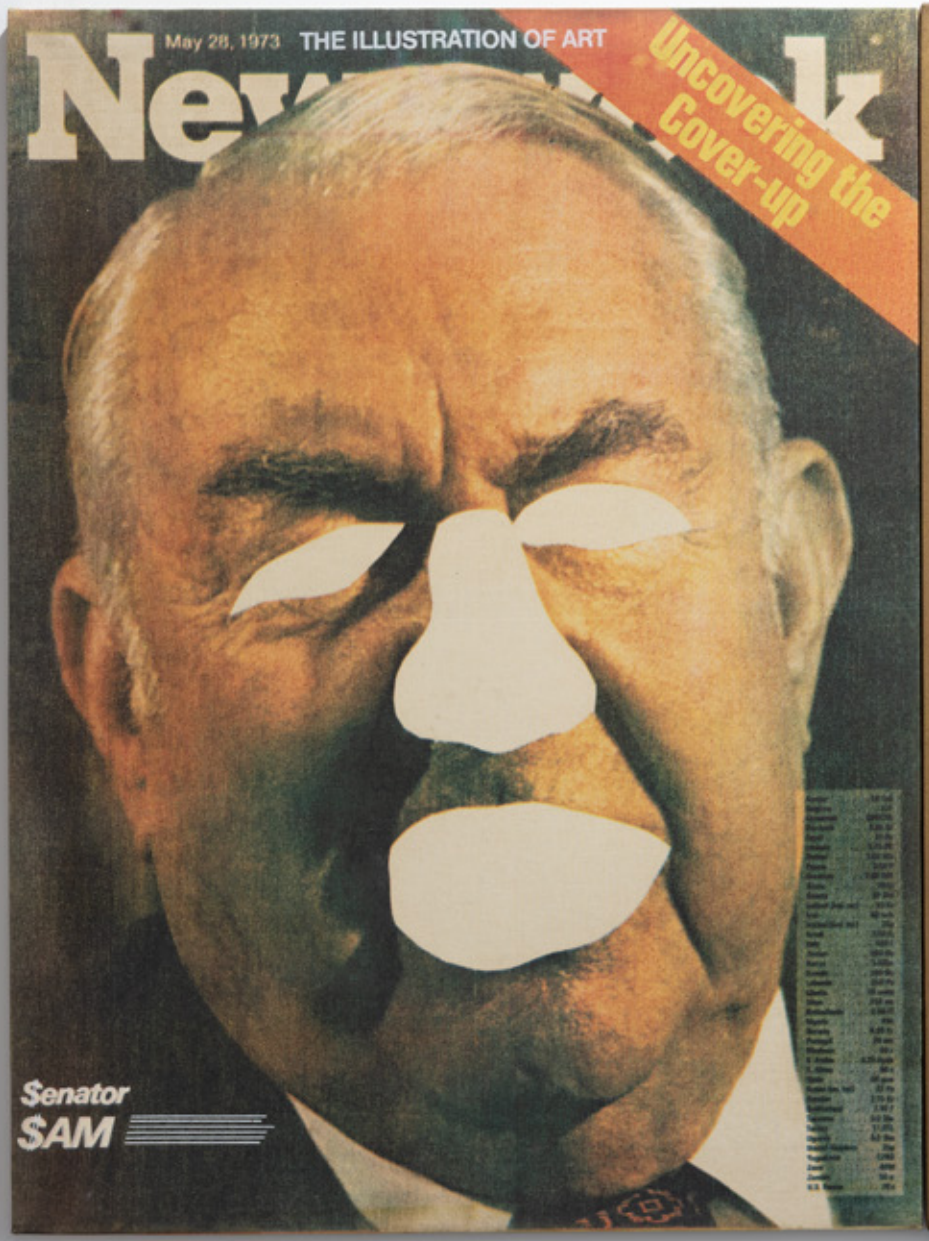


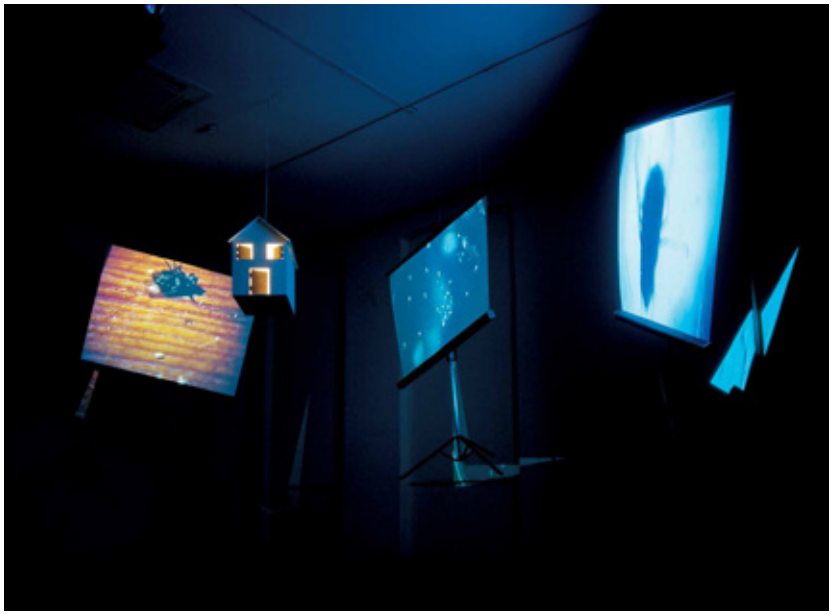
exhibition view
Antonio Dias, 1974
Museu de Arte Moderna,
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The Illustration of Art / Uncovering the Cover-Up, 1973
silk screen, acrylic,
metallic pigment on canvas
91 x 136 cm | 35.8 x 53.5 in
photo © Vicente de Mello

Antonio Dias in Milan, 1973
photo © Antonio Dias archive

→
The Illustration of Art/Uncovering the Cover-Up, 1973
silkscreen on canvas
91 x 136 cm | 35.8 x 53.5 in.


May 28, 1973
THE ILLUSTRATION OF ART
Uncovering the Cover-up
Senator
SAM

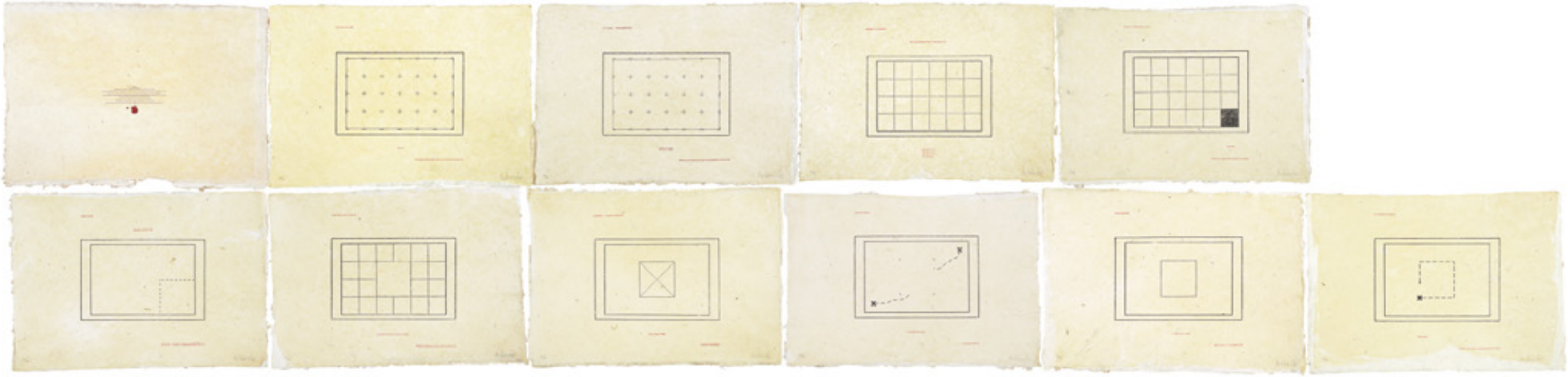


The Illustration of Art: A fly in my movie, 1975
Digital media, wood and light
Variable dimensions

nepal 1976–1977

In 1977, Antonio Dias traveled to Nepal where he stayed for five months, with the aim of investigating and studying the country's unique handcrafted paper production. The artist joined local artisans in their work and developed a method based on a mixture of tea leaves. The paper became a central aspect of his subsequent work, turning into a fundamental axis of his production, around which Dias created his pieces, rather than a mere supporting surface. *Niranjanirakhar* (1977) and *Trama* (1968/77) are notable examples of the artist's distinct engagement with materials.

Niranjanirakhar, 1977
nepalese paper with tea leaves
4 pieces of Ø 140 cm | 55.1 in each
photo © Gabriele Basilico



Trama, 1968/77
album with 10 woodcuts
on nepalese paper
56 x 82 cm | 22 x 32.2 in each
photo © Mario Grisolli

During his time in Nepal, Dias also developed the iconic work *The Invented Country* (1976), which can be described as a pole with a red flag missing a corner—a symbol that would continue to emerge until the end of his career—suggesting in the words of the artist, that 'ideology had gone fishing.' Dias showcased the work as an emblem of failed state-led revolutions and of the smaller utopian efforts that came after.

The Invented Country / God Will Give Days, 1976
satin, patinated bronze
500 cm | 196.8 in (rod length)
photo © Paulo Scheuenstuhl

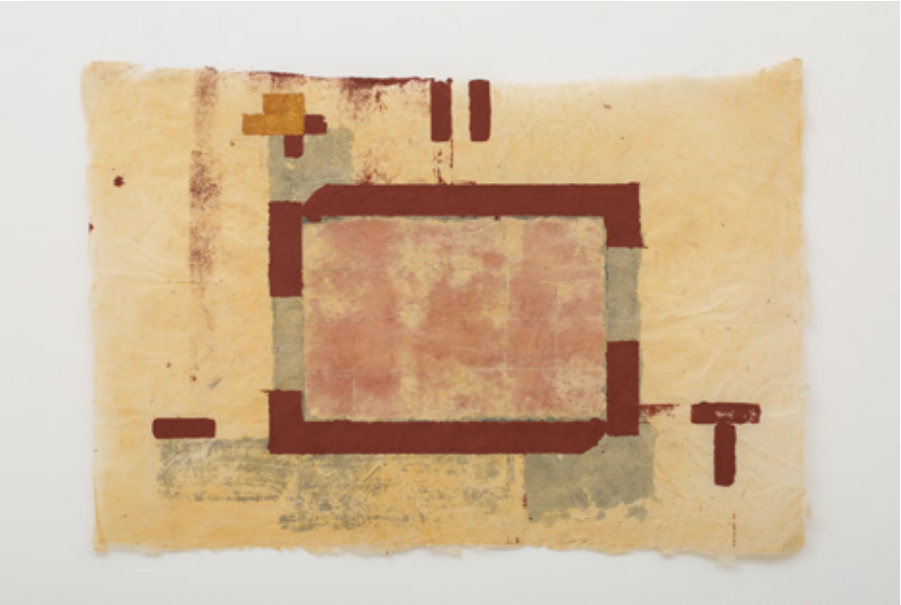
→
exhibition view
29ª Bienal de São Paulo,
2010, São Paulo, Brazil

A PELE DO INVISÍVEL
DO IT YOURSELF: FREEDOM TERRITORY

exhibition view
Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980, 2015
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA),
New York, USA
Photo © Thomas Griesel

The Illustration of Art / Tool & Work, 1977
red clay on nepalese paper
60 x 280 cm | 23.6 x 110.2 in
photo © Pat Kilgore

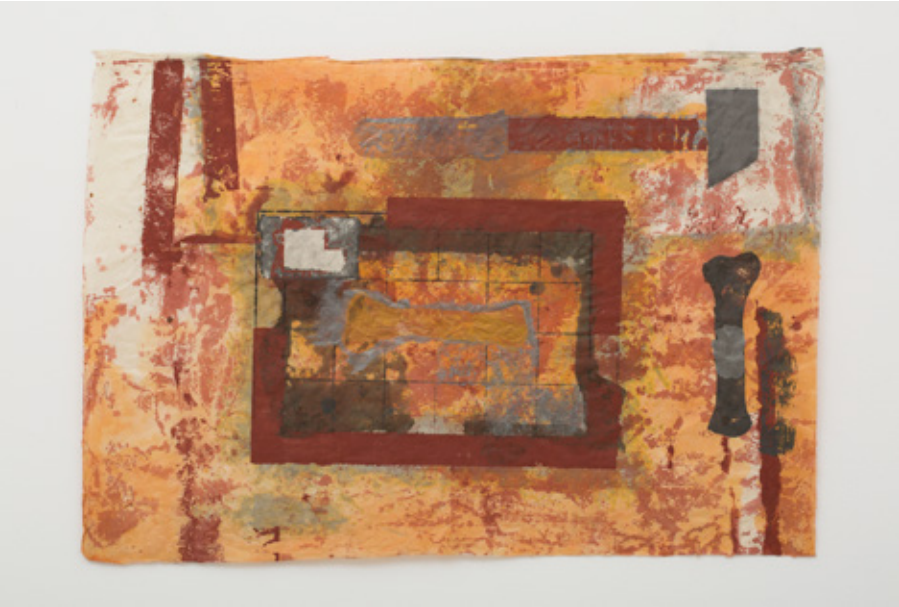
Working Tools, 1986
iron oxide, graphite, metalic
pigments on nepal paper
56 x 81 cm | 22 x 31.8 in



Delimiting territories, 1982
iron oxide, graphite, metallic
pigments on Nepalese paper
58 x 83 cm | 22.8 x 32.6 in

→ [next pages]
exhibition views
Papéis do Nepal, 2016, Galeria Nara
Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil

Demarcationg territories, 1982
iron oxide, graphite, metallic
pigments on nepalese paper
55 x 88 cm



Working in the furnace, 1986
mixed media on Nepalese paper
57 x 81,5 cm | 22.4 x 32 in

→
exhibition view
Made in Brazil, 2015
Casa Daros, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

exercises of self reflection 1978–1990

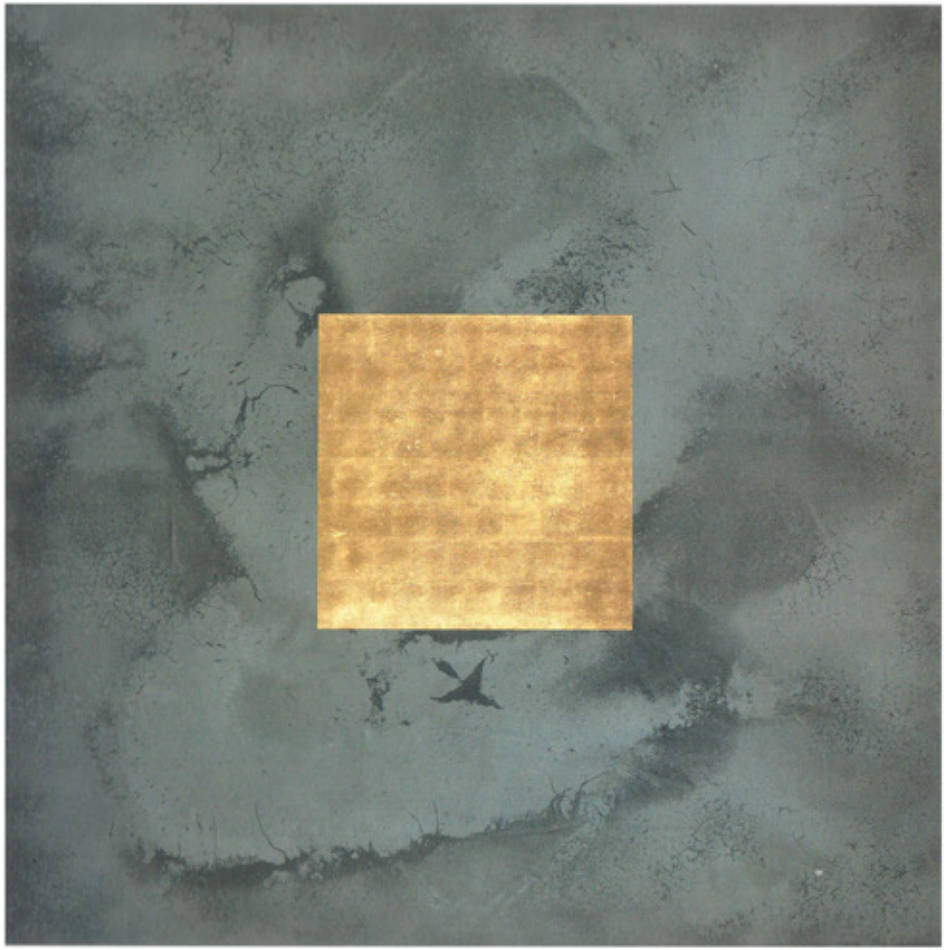
Concomitantly to Dias' extended use of artisanal Nepalese paper, the artist began to explore materials such as iron rust, graphite, and metallic pigments, which he applied to the paper, infusing it with a new material density. With this, the artist also engaged with his long-standing interest in the idea of electricity and conduction, experimenting with his belief that with the right type of circuit one would be able to resolve anything. During this time, and as a derivation from this notion, Dias often chose to employ metals as well as conductive materials, in an attempt to concentrate energy fields and circuits on his canvases. These new techniques came to characterize his later production, which he also began to use on large canvases starting in the 1980s.

Sem título [Untitled], early 1990s
graphite, copper , malachite and gold on paper
76 x 112 cm | 29.9 x 44 in (diptych)

→
Sem título [Untitled], 1988
graphite and gold leaf on canvas
200 x 200 cm | 78.7 x 78.7 in
photo © Antonio Dias archive

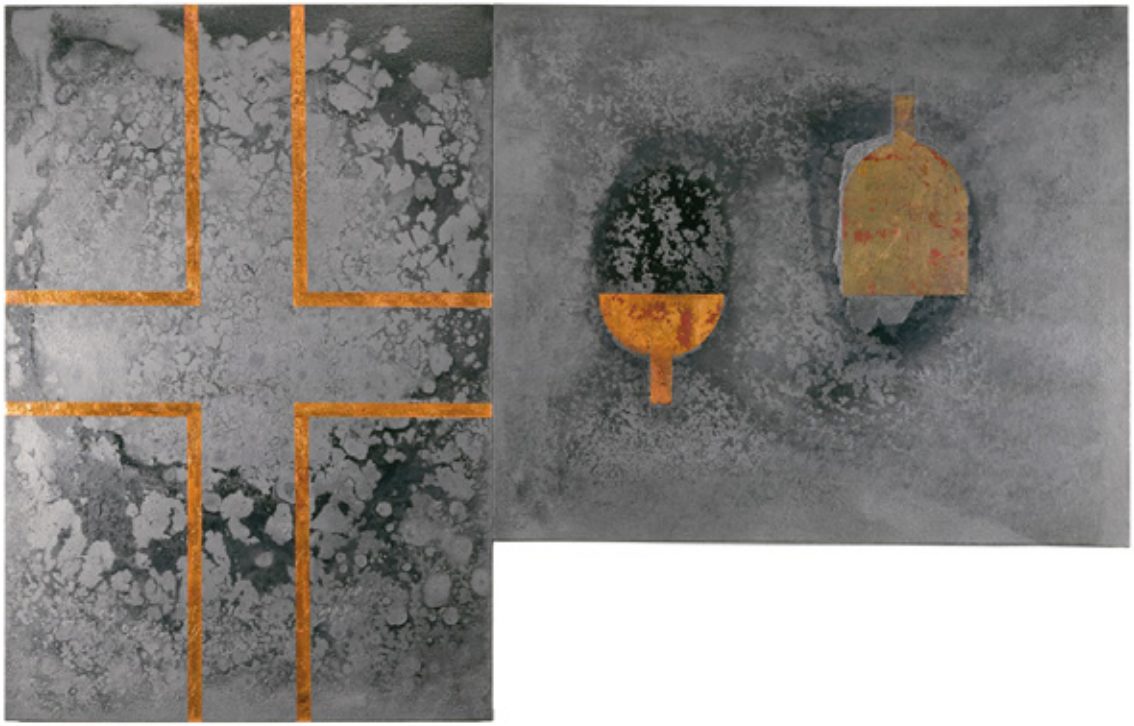
Eventually, certain aspects of his initial practice re-emerged—phallic allusions, crosses, and rectangles return for the most part of the 1970s. Over time, this iconography came to constitute the widest part of his artistic research, with a patient and minute investigation of form and medium, which he undertook both at the beginning and in his later, perhaps more mature, artistic phases. Dias' back and forth preoccupations created a dynamic and exhaustive body of work, made up of life-long innovations in his chosen artistic tools and procedures.

Sem título [Untitled], 1985
graphite, wood, and rubber on canvas
200 x 130 cm | 78.7 x 51.1 in
photo © Paulo Scheuenstuhl



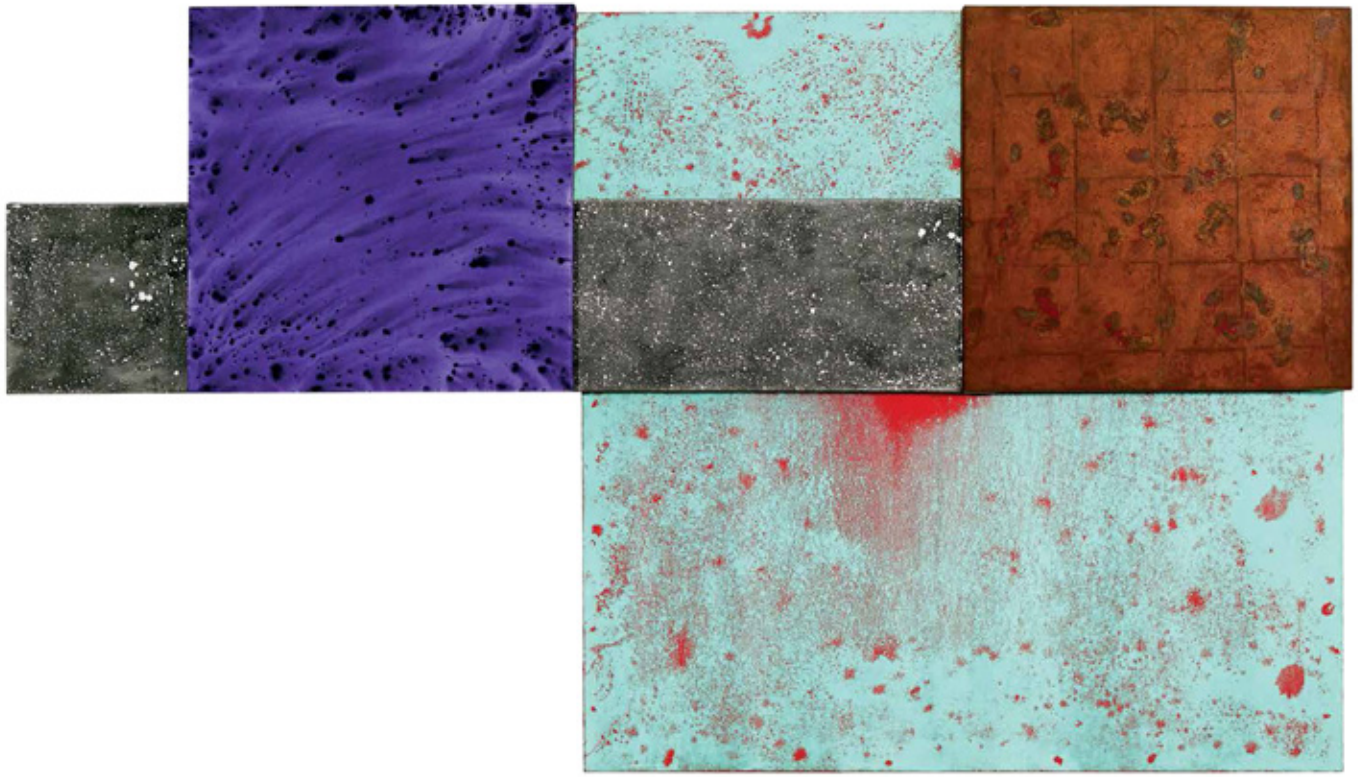
Sun Photo as Self- Portrait / Air Destroying Gorgeous Monuments, 1990 / 1991
graphite, gold and
copper leaf on canvas
200 x 200 cm each | 78.7 x 78.7 in

Sem título [Untitled], 1986
oil paint on canvas
120 x 120 cm | 47.2 x 47.2 in



Perfume & Poison, 1989
graphite, gold leaves,
and copper on canvas
100 x 160 cm | 39.3 x 23.6 in
photo © Roberto Cecato

Sem título [Untitled], 1989
acrylic paint and graphite on canvas
40 x 120 cm | 15.7 x 47.2 in

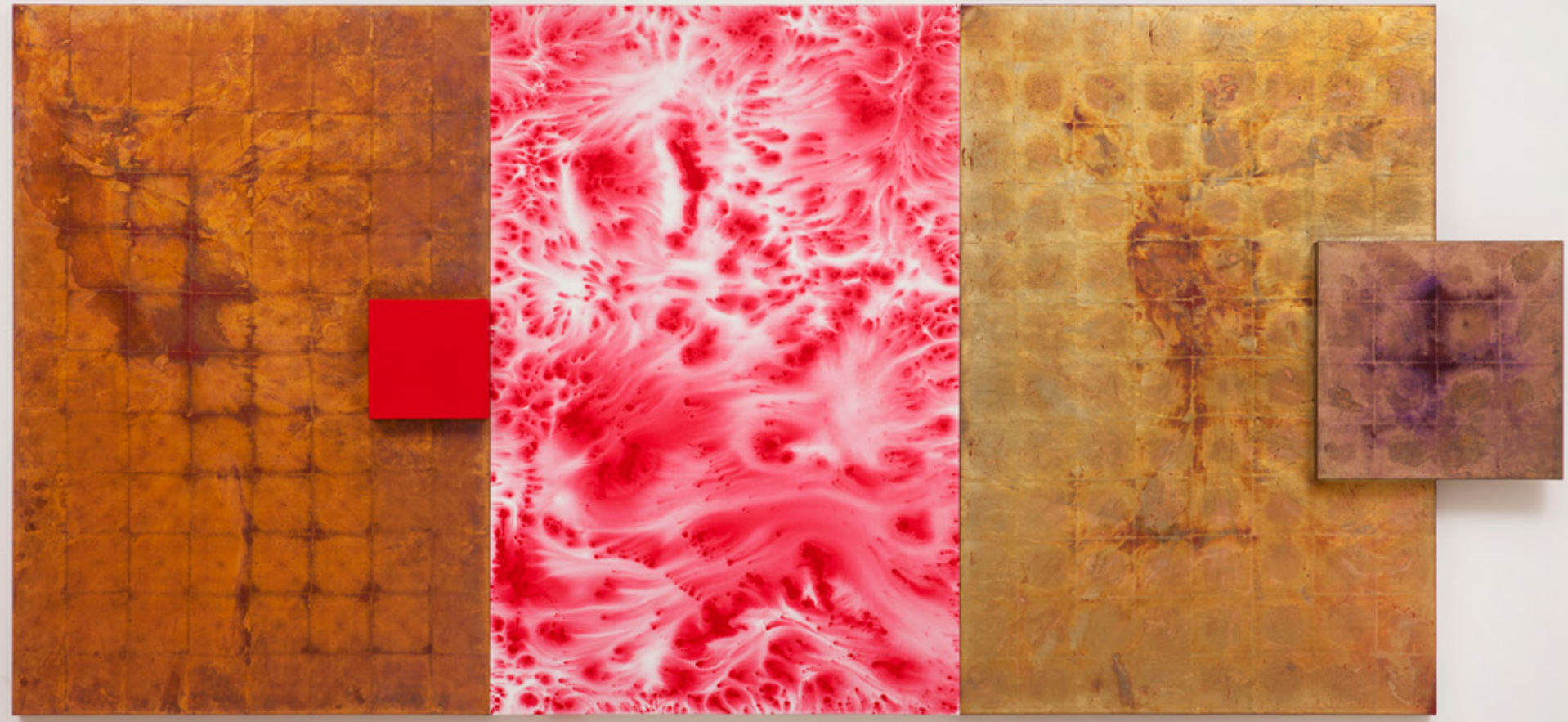


Furnace, 2006
acrylic, gold leaf, and
copper on canvas
120 x 240 cm | 47.2 x 94.4 in
photo © Jaime Acioli

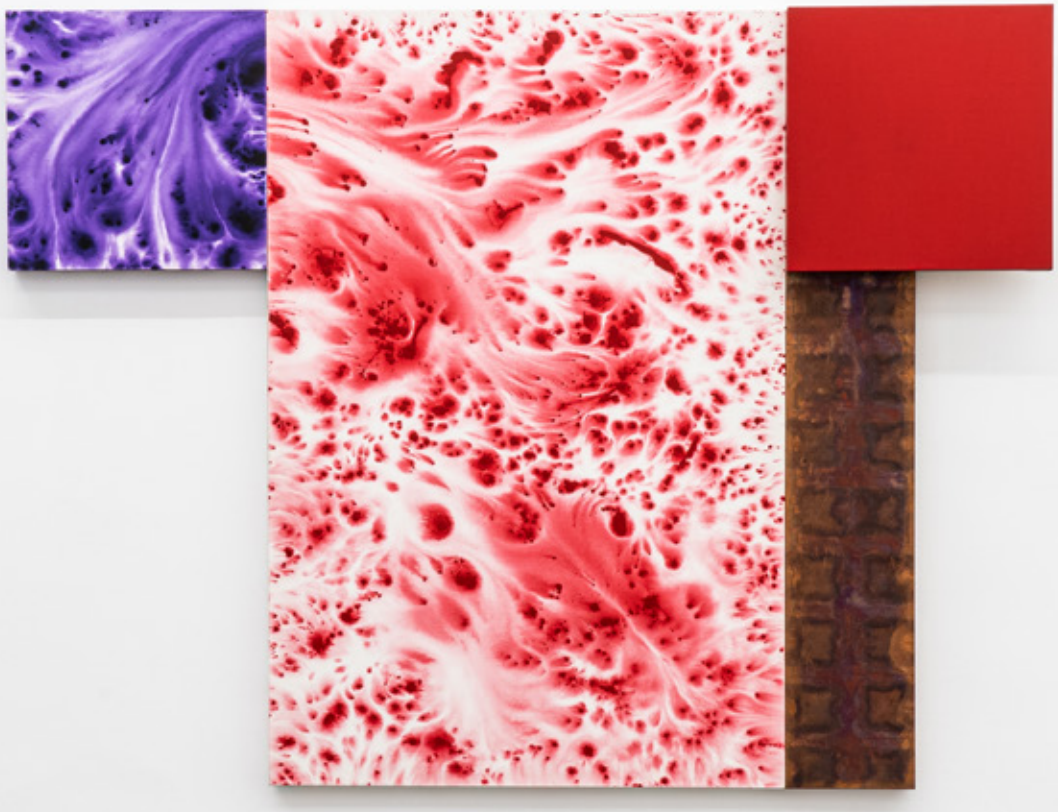
→
Sem título [Untitled], 2011
acrylic, iron oxide, gold and
copper leaves on canvas
180 x 390 x 12 cm
70.8 x 155.5 x 4.7 in

1990s onwards

Beginning in the 1990s, Dias began to produce a series of works characterized by the assembling of several canvases in varying shapes, sizes and orientations, with each surface exploring different planar and dimensional dynamism. In curator and critic Paulo Sergio Duarte's words, 'His more recent paintings create a dispute between these two historical poles (plane and surface), both in terms of metaphorical space and planar painting's attempt at the empirical realization. Concerning space, insofar as the body of the canvas is assumed in a definitive way, space is literal, it has real depth and derives volume from the staggering depths of the stretchers. The paintings acquire volume and bulk by occupying space, projecting outwards from the wall. We do not see them as "paintings" so much as painted bodies that come out to meet us. On the planar level, they feed off the internal tension between the various "paintings", some of which explore this planar issue more evidently, especially on the red surfaces. They look towards idealizing the plane and its materialization on the surface. Others, however, tackle the surface and fill it with original, expressive visual occurrences.'

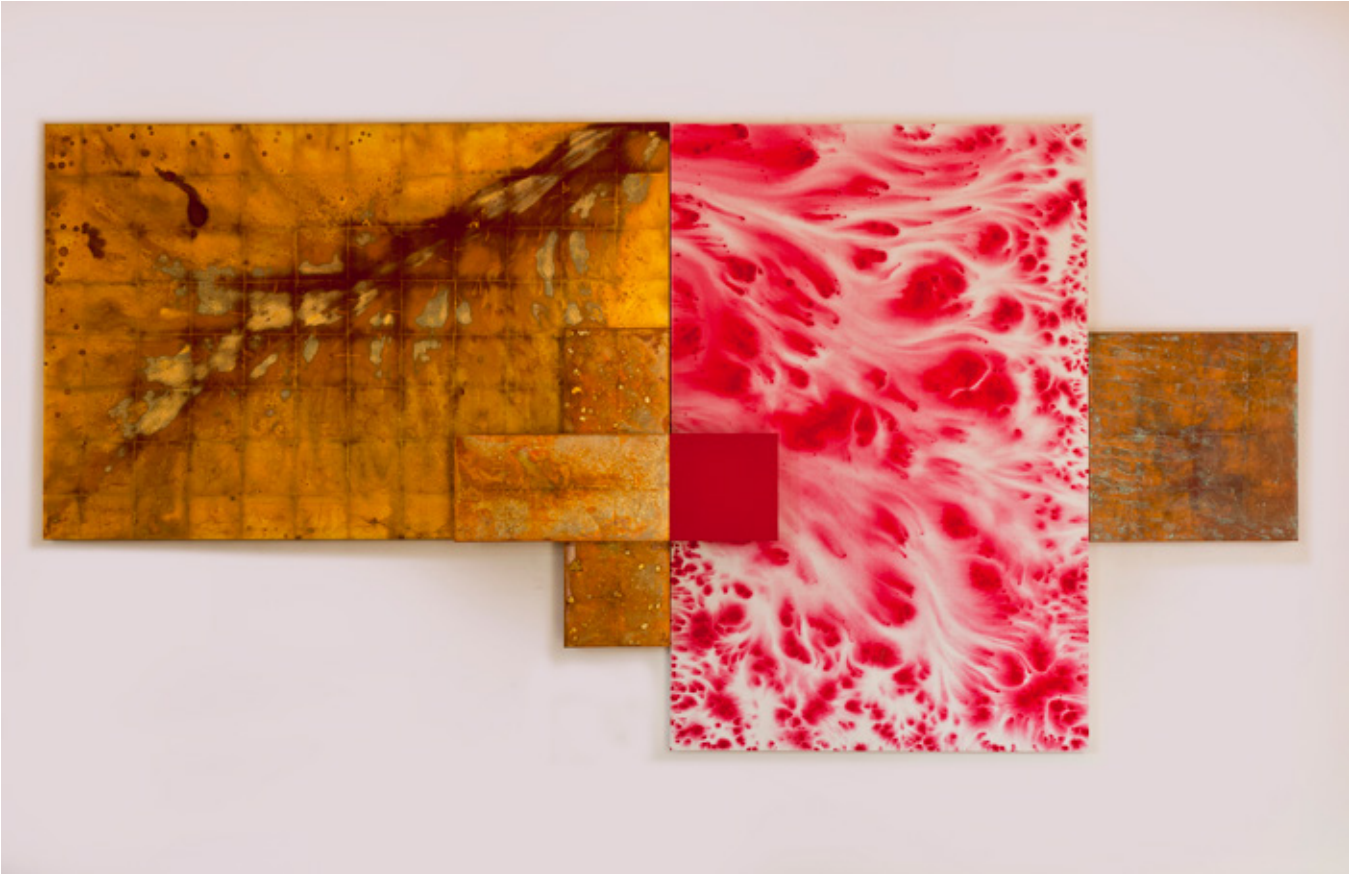


Cranks, 1999
acrylic, graphite, gold leaf,
and copper on canvas, metal,
blown glass, rubber, and plaster
200 x 300 cm | 78.7 x 133.8 in
photo © Bernhard Schaub



Sem título [Untitled], 2012
acrylic, iron oxide, gold and
copper leaf on canvas
180 x 240 x 12 cm | 70.8 x 94.4 x 4.7 in

In fact, the artist recurrently explored the question of 'occurrences': he dropped pigments onto wet surfaces and allowed for them to organically spread throughout the surface, while also pursuing his earlier use of metallic materials, which conduct electricity and react to the atmosphere, also evolving spontaneously. As critic and art historian Achille Bonito Oliva summarized, 'Dias' classicism consists precisely in this aspect of having calmly accepted the intelligent case of life, the availability of the universe. Art becomes the place where the artist formalizes these principles, incorporating them in works crossed by a geometry that is defined by asymmetry and produces dynamism, not immobility. In fact, Dias always makes families of works stemming from matrices that can multiply in complementary but different forms. In this way, the concept of design is invested with new meaning because it no longer refers to a moment of proud precision but to a form of continuous testing, albeit guided by a method of construction based on skill and practical execution. The method naturally indicates the need for a constant and progressive framework, anchored to a historical awareness of context governed by the principle of technique.'



Sem título [Untitled], 2011
acrylic, iron oxide, gold and copper leaves on canvas
180 x 360 cm | 70.8 x 141.7 in

All The Colors of Man, 1996
blown glass, gold, copper, wine, malachite, graphite, mineral water, plaster, strings, and light bulbs
variable dimensions
photo © Mario Grisolli

→
Satellites, 2002
bronze
11 pieces of Ø 16,5 cm | 6.5 in each
photo © Vicente de Mello

It is important to note that during this time, Antonio Dias also produced installations such as *All the colors of man* (1996), as well as, *Your Husband*, *Two Towers*, and *Satellites* (all 2002), all of which seem to stand apart from his main creative process. These works have been understood as surging unexpectedly as artistic declarations or comments, usually linked to personal experiences or particular historical situations. The installation All the Colors of Man (1996), for example, was inspired by something the artist saw shortly after the fall of the dictatorship. It was a scene that would have been inconceivable during the years of repression: four men, of different ethnicities, chatting as a group on a Rio street corner. Scribbled on his notebook, the image took form again years later as a set of glass phalluses hung vertically from the ceiling, each containing five different materials that lent the objects their color: the green of malachite, yellow of gold, grey of graphite, red of wine, and the transparency of mineral water.[1]

Your Husband, 2002
(in collaboration with coopa-roca)
empty soda cans, wire, lycra,
and electric engine
variable dimensions
photo © Vicente de Mello

exhibition view
Made in Brazil, 2015
Casa Daros, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

[1] *Pradilla, Ileana, 'Activations', Antonio Dias, São Paulo: Cosac Naify / APC, 2015. p. 284*

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