

Paul Spengemann

*Walking Stick*

02 Jun–29 Jul 2017

Opening

01 Jun 2017

6–9 PM

Rebekka Seubert

*Wildlife*

Two brightly painted, cooing wooden toucans, a shrunken giant dinosaur made of hard plastic and a photocopied image of a bouncy monkey used as a lampshade are the first markers on the trail leading towards the real protagonist in Paul Spengemann's film *Walking Stick*: 13 twigs, acting in concert as one body, imitating a stick insect, or a "walking stick" as they are known in North America. With slow movements, the walking twigs explore the artist's apartment. There is something inherently handmade about their disguise, as the individual stick-appendages hang loosely together, and the success of their camouflage depends upon their coordination as they co-operate. This animal imitation was brought to life using 3D computer animation programs, like a digital puppet whose numerical strings are controlled by the artist.

With its subjective camera movements and sounds of cracking branches, night views illuminated by shaky beams of light, and long, silent takes emphasizing a sense of anticipation of the appearance of the long-awaited "animal", the film dilettantishly cites the visual language of wildlife documentaries. Its sets out to film the camouflaged twig in its habitat, and the cameraman does his persistent best to hunt out the well-disguised being in various places in the apartment. Although he occasionally manages to get it on camera, with it even climbing on to his lens at one point, it soon wriggles away again. This digital animal cannot really be captured. Even beyond the visual level, the walking twig remains impalpable and evades all attempts to categorize it: a body that appears unified because of the co-operation of its 13 parts; an accumulation of dead twigs that want to be alive; queer little pieces of wood that make the transition from the plant world to the animal world with the help of the artist. The walking twig in the film thus completes a converse transformation to that of the stick insect, also known as the "walking stick", which disguises itself as a dead twig to ensure its survival in a tropical habitat. Perhaps the behavior of the twig in the film marks an impossible undertaking, a desperate attempt to join the club of the living, or a possibility for re-thinking categories. Not only is the boundary between documentary and fiction unclear here, but also the nature of the twig's identity: it remains in an ambivalent place between the dead and the living; a zoomorphic object, the outcome of human projection. It stands facing the wall, immobile and alone in the corner by the radiator, as if longing for the warm southern sun. It stands above the newspaper, letting itself be stirred by the wind like a real stick insect and, with hips swaying, looks like it might be catching up on the latest news. The image of a spiritualized twig fits well into the animated atmosphere of the apartment. As the wind or ghost, or whatever it is, rustles the leaves of the Ficus plant, it seems no coincidence that the stick insect belongs to the family of phasmids (Latin: phasma, "ghost"). But the twig is neither entirely ghostly nor entirely physical matter—it is a fiction with three-dimensional features in a real filmed setting.

The camera's ostensible role as a learning tool, used here to shed light on the identity of the zoomorphic twig, also undergoes a transition at the film's magic turning point. Having fallen out of the potted plant, the twig proceeds to reverse the asymmetrical encounter between the active camera and the passive animal and switch the roles of observer and observed. There is a hiatus in which the stick insect, as if under a spell, launches an attempt at communication, which the camera witnesses as its addressee. Apparently controlled by an external force, the twig, still under shock after its fall, forms letters with its body that spell out the exclamation "Oh Dear".

The fact that this exclamation is homonymous with "Oh Deer" (Old English: Oh animal) not only points to a possible nostalgia for old certainties of distinction between humans and animals, object and subject, but also reveals one of the film's underlying issues, touching on the growing importance of technology in society: Identities fall into crisis when an autonomous will is no longer contained in a living body.

Translated by Charlotte Kreutzmüller

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Director, DoP & Editing: Paul Spengemann

Sound, Animation: Jakob Spengemann

VFX, Animation: Wassili Franko

Focus: Kalle Kallovsky

Production design: Stella Rossié

Light, Grip: Marvin Hesse & Tom Otte

Kindly supported by: Maddels Cameras GmbH, Electric Sun