

# Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj

*Studies for A Minor History  
of Trembling Matter*



Still from *A Minor History of Trembling Matter*, 2017

**Albright-Knox Art Gallery**  
**February 18–June 18, 2017**

Studies for *A Minor History of Trembling Matter* presents a work in progress by artists Tamar Guimarães (Brazilian, born 1967) and Kasper Akhøj (Danish, born 1976) that focuses on their research in Palmelo, a small town in the interior of the state of Goiás, Brazil, with a population of around two thousand people. Half of the town's inhabitants see themselves as practicing mediums and healers—psychic conduits to the world of the spirits—while they also hold day jobs as civil servants. The community of Palmelo grew around a sanatorium that drew people seeking to be healed by the mediums, who were often former patients of the sanatorium themselves. The in-progress film engages with the cosmological perspectives of these mediums and assesses the similarities and differences between their practices and those of the indigenous peoples who used to live in the region.

Although Guimarães and Akhøj have worked as collaborators on several occasions, independently both artists have engaged in long-term research projects and share a fascination with the afterlife of historical figures, objects, and places. For example, Akhøj has been working for nearly a decade on a number of research-based photographic series that follow the present-day lives of modernist innovations. One of these, his series *Welcome (TO THE TEKNIVAL)*, both documents and meditates on the recent controversial restoration of a masterpiece of modern architecture, the once-derelict French seaside villa E.1027, designed by Eileen Gray and built between 1926 and 1929.

The connection between psychic mediums and the supposedly more concrete world is a recurrent subject for Guimarães. For example, her 2007–8 narrated slide projection, *A Man Called Love*,

was based on her research in the São Paulo state archives into the life of Francisco Candido Xavier, a popular psychic writer whose more than four hundred books achieved mainstream success during the years of Brazil's repressive military dictatorship (1964–85). Although Xavier's descriptions of a bureaucratic and rational astral plane were ostensibly dictated to him from the spirit world, some of them seemed suspiciously to affirm and even support the demands for order and compliance coming from the country's brutal government. Guimarães's work connects Xavier's history with Brazil's longer legacy of Spiritism, a philosophical practice that works to reconcile belief in invisible spirits with science and which has as many as twenty million adherents in the country. She suggests ways these two narratives may intersect with Brazil's own political realities and histories of resistance.

*A Minor History of Trembling Matter* builds on *A Man Called Love* as well as the more recent film *Captain Gervasio's Family*, a collaboration with Akhøj commissioned for the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. *Captain Gervasio's Family* juxtaposes image and text to narrate one medium's efforts to map astral cities—invisible and interconnected communities of spirits that the residents of Palmelo believe hover above present-day Brazil. *A Minor History of Trembling Matter* examines the Palmelo residents' work as healers. The artists are specifically interested in their adherence to techniques and a worldview associated with the eighteenth-century theory of "The Magnetic Chain," a Spiritist practice derived from the theories of animal magnetism expounded by Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer. Inspired by Newton's theory of tidal movement, Mesmer argued that there is an invisible, magnetic influence between human or animal bodies—similar to that between the earth and other celestial bodies—that can be harnessed and deployed to cure disease.

However, Guimarães and Akhøj are not terribly interested in the historical context of animal magnetism nor its popular use in eighteenth-century France, its reception in the scientific community, or its connections to Spiritism and Theosophy. Rather, they are



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curious about how one tiny Spiritist community in Palmelo has translated Mesmer's theories and structured them into a rigorously mechanical and extensively choreographed set of actions requiring the participation of both healers and observers. Marshaling and directing invisible forces—day in, day out—the residents of Palmelo operate according to rules and a highly localized rationalism. In contrast with a Western culture that idealizes individualism, their practices are a radically collective endeavor that may share as-yet-undiscovered connections with the longer history of shamanism in Latin America, a tradition that predates the magnetism deployed by the Palmelo mediums.

The "minor history" referred to in the work's title is, for Guimarães and Akhøj, the kind of history that matters the most. They uncover powerful, often political messages within such footnotes and rumors. As the artists have described, their film takes place in a location that is resonant with both known and unknown histories:

Palmelo was built at the edge of the now dried-out Caiapó stream. The Kayapó were one of the indigenous groups who inhabited Goiás, Brazil, prior to the Bandeirantes gold-hunting expeditions of the late seventeenth century. Conflict with the Bandeirantes resulted in the massacre, migration, or integration of the Kayapó into other groups or reservations. One cannot overcome a sense of horror vis-à-vis the traces of peoples and ways of life who are no longer there, yet we would want to argue that despite massacre and migration some of the Kayapó's ways

of knowing might survive in other forms—be it as a resonance with things and peoples that are no longer called Kayapó or incorporated into other systems of knowledge that are still breathing, pulsing, and setting things in motion.

The stories told by Guimarães and Akhøj are hypothetical and alternate approaches to narrative, and *A Man Called Love*, *Captain Gervasio's Family*, and *A Minor History of Trembling Matter* each potentially rehearse and retell the stories found in the others. As a way of highlighting this aspect of their practice, Guimarães and Akhøj present *A Minor History of Trembling Matter* in an unfinished or alternate state at the Albright-Knox. In Buffalo, they spatially fragment their work in progress into multiple video projections, photographs, and seating. This unique installation will inform its next presentation as a completed single-channel film in *A Universal History of Infamy* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This group exhibition is part of *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles taking place across Southern California from September 2017 through January 2018. Following this presentation, the single-channel film will be screened in Buffalo. This is the artists' first solo museum exhibition in the United States.

# About the Artists

Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj's collaborative exhibitions include the 56th Venice Biennale, Belgian Pavilion, 2015; 31st São Paulo Biennial, 2014; *Future Scenarios with an Open End*, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, 2014; *The Encyclopedic Palace*, the 55th Venice Biennale International Exhibition, 2013; Sharjah Biennial 11, 2013; *The Last Days of Watteau*, Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo; and *L'Au-delà (des noms et des choses)*, Jeu de Paume Satellite, Paris, 2012.

Tamar Guimarães's recent solo exhibitions include *Programa Fisuras*, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain, 2016; *The Florists from Beyond the Grave*, SKMU Sørlandets Kunstmuseum, Kristiansand, Norway, 2015; *Canoas, pinksummer*, Palazzo Ducale, Genova, Italy, 2014; *The Afterlife (of Names and Things)*, Kunsthall Aarhus, Aarhus, 2012; *The Work of the Spirit (Parade)*, Gasworks, London, 2011; *A Man Called Love*, Artspace Sydney, 2010; and *A Man Called Love*, IMA Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009. Recent group exhibitions include *As Told*, Lunds Konsthall, Sweden, 2016; *Ver-Revelar*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, León, Spain, 2016; *Rainbow in the Dark*, Malmö Konstmuseum, Sweden, 2015; *Séance Fiction*, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Alberta, Canada, 2015; *Believe Not Every Spirit, But Try The Spirits*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2015; *Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2014; *Better Homes*, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York, 2013; *The Insides are on the Outside*, SESC, São Paulo, 2013; *The Watchmen, the Liars, the Dreamers*, Frac Ile-de-France / Le Plateau, Paris, France, 2010; the 29th São Paulo

Biennial, 2010; 3rd Guangzhou Triennial, Guangdong Museum, Guangzhou, China; and 7th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, South Korea, 2008.

Kasper Akhøj's recent solo exhibitions include *Welcome (To The Teknival)*, Ellen De Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam, 2016; *After the Fair*, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2010; *Welcome (To The Teknival)*, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart and Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, both 2010. Recent group exhibitions include *Invisible Dreams*, CAC Center for Contemporary Art, Vilnius, 2016; *As Told*, Lunds Konsthall, Sweden, 2016; *Believe Not Every Spirit, But Try The Spirits*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2015; *Rainbow in the Dark*, Malmö Kunstmuseum, Sweden, 2015; *Josephine Baker and Le Corbusier in Rio: A Transatlantic Affair*, MAR Museu de Arte do Rio, Rio de Janeiro, 2014; *Host and Guest*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2013; *Abstract Myths*, Nest Contemporary Art Center, The Hague, 2013; *Inside and out, kim?* Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, 2012; *Everything Must Go*, Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York, 2011; *Do You Remember the Future?*, Etagi, St. Petersburg, 2011; *Exposition Internationale*, Meessen De Clercq, 2011; *Lecture Performance*, Teatro Arena, 29th São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo, 2010; *Abstract Derive*, Ludlow 38 / Goethe Institute NY, New York, 2010; and 28th São Paulo Biennial, 2008.

# Works in the Exhibition

*Studies for A Minor History of  
Trembling Matter, 2017*

Three color videos with stereo  
sound

Running times: 21 minutes, 21  
minutes, and 30 minutes, each

Eight LE silver gelatin prints  
14 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 17 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (36 x 44 cm),  
each

All works in the exhibition are  
courtesy of the artists, Galeria  
Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo, and  
Ellen De Bruijne Projects,  
Amsterdam.



**Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj:**  
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**Jacob Kassay: OTNY**

**Willa Nasatir**

**Eric Mack: Vogue Fabrics**

February 18–June 18, 2017

These exhibitions are organized by Senior Curator Cathleen Chaffee.

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**Image credits**

Guimarães and Akhøj: Courtesy of the artists, Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo, and Ellen De Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam.



**Albright-Knox**  
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