



**madre**

fondazione donnaregina  
per le arti contemporanee

sotto  
il patrocinio  
della fondazione  
donna Regina  
per le arti  
contemporanee  
2017

# Collezione Agovino Frammenti di Paradiso

opening 22 Aprile 2017 ore 12

Le Scalze  
Chiesa di San Giuseppe a Pontecorvo, Napoli

22 Aprile - 20 Maggio 2017

 **widiba**





Sergio Vega, *Paradise Burning*, 2008, dur. 6:39 min. Filmed in Mato Grosso, Brazil  
exhibited at *Collezione Agovino - Frammenti di Paradiso*, 2017, Chiesa San Giuseppe delle Scalze, Napoli, IT curated by  
Fabio Agovino and Francesca Blandino





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## The making of *Paradise on Fire*

I was traveling through the state of Mato Grosso in Brazil searching for "Paradise" according to a book from 1650 by Antonio de Leon Pinelo in which he had stated that the Garden of Eden was located in these parts of the world. For my research I was working in collaboration with Instituto Floresta, an environmentalist organization in the city of Alta Floresta. One morning I arrived at the Institute's office and was told that there was a settlement on fire at the municipality of Novo Mundo. Marcos and I decided to leave right away.

*After enduring two long hours on a bumpy dirt road we finally loaded the pick up truck onto a barge and crossed the Teles Pires River, the most polluted affluent of the Amazon. The young captain navigating the boat wore high boots, a dusty cowboy hat and played festive music through his powerful loudspeakers. The large flat iron surface of the barge felt like an exotic floating discotheque.*

*Approaching Novo Mundo we encountered a field burning on the side of the road. The flame had come down and was now mostly smoke and dying ember. Neighbors from the farm across the road had brought a water tank and were hosing enormous logs that lay on the ground half consumed. The dense toxicity of the air carried a Dantesque omen of tragedy I could read in their expressions. They knew their chances were slim, but still hoped to prevent the fire from crossing over and spreading onto their coffee plantation. If the wind decided to return there will be flames everywhere.*

*The Rochedo settlement at the municipality of Novo Mundo is made of a couple of hundred family farms. These families have settled in their small farms within the last five years to raise cattle and grow organic vegetables.*

*On the road we encountered Sebastião Roberto Soares driving his small motorcycle. He was introduced to me as the leader of the community and took us to the farm where his brother José lived with his wife and three sons. Their entire field had burned down with exception of the hut where they lived and a tool shed. They had prepared lunch in*

*anticipation of our arrival. After we ate, José recounted the tragic events with stoic sobriety.*

*We drove into the center of the settlement, an area defined by a small grocery store and a school. We met some of the students who were eager to performed tricks in front of the lens. While filming their testimonies, it occurred to me that this model of settlement is a ludicrous project of self-colonization. Even if some families manage to endure the extremely harsh conditions, there is little hope the youngsters would choose to remain in that environment after they grow up.*

*We approached an area of forest were fire was out of control. Flames spread rapidly in front of us, burning entire bushes of green luscious leafs in seconds. The unleashed power of fire consuming an entire forest revealed an unexpected spectacle of colorful clouds of smoke. Turner's atmosphere of colors blending in ethereal combinations never felt so tangible. I sat the tripod to capture the landscape when the setting sun suddenly sliced through thick clouds. As foreseen by Tiepolo, Apollo appeared heralded by majestic sunrays, riding his triumphant carriage of golden horses across robust clouds of destruction. The visual spectacle was not followed by angelic trumpets, but pierced by the unsettling sound of snapping branches caught on fire everywhere. Given the proximity of combustion, breathing became increasingly difficult as insects big and small swarmed through us, biting us along the way.*

*On the way back a big tree had fallen, burning in the middle of the road. Flames and night were rapidly approaching and we were forced to cut trough thorny bushes for the vehicle to pass. In the seventies, the deforestation of Amazonia became the first sin against nature to be repudiated on a global scale. Forty years later that same forest is still on fire, burning faster than ever before.<sup>1</sup>*

As I begun capturing the scene of the forest on fire I knew the video camera should remain still. This intuitive decision was grounded on the awareness of how our western concept of nature has been constructed through the genre of landscape painting. Since the

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from the diary of "Paradise in the New World" by Sergio Vega

eighteenth century painting had employed the landscape genre as the quintessential symbolic construct of nature as other, the opposite of culture. So this video work was to be embedded into that cultural tradition of representing the landscape, but it had to capture the landscape not as static but in transition. Indeed, the footage consists in the documentation of a landscape in disappearance, a forest being consumed by fire. Thus, the video was meant to function as an animated painting to address the viewers in two ways. On one hand inviting a distracted gaze by presenting a subject of quiet, almost hypnotic contemplation (like staring at a fireplace in the coziness of the home), on the other as a warning on the consequences of our own passivity in front of the devastation of the environment.

Sergio Vega