



What separates us

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What separates us

Tonico Lemos Auad - Adriano Costa - Rodrigo Matheus - Matheus Rocha Pitta



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'What separates us', installation view, 2016



'A Tale in a Thousand', detail, 2016

Foreword

When, in the future, a generation separates us from the conception of this catalogue, it will be evident that only a very unique concurrence of variables could have made it possible for the Embassy of Brazil in London to host such an outstanding collaboration by four of the most representative young Brazilian artists today - Tonico Lemos Auad, Adriano Costa, Rodrigo Matheus and Matheus Rocha Pitta.

The potency, irony and simplicity with which these artists filled our Sala Brasil, transport us to different places and various epochs. The curatorship by HS Projects has skillfully linked these daring works by our four Brazilian artists, with their diversity of technologies and perspectives, to multiple

spatial and temporal references.

To show the best of our contemporary art in the heart of London's lively art scene reminds us that the old flows between Brazil and the United Kingdom permanently acquire new significances and become increasingly multidirectional in an informational era. The compression of the once conventional notion of time and space has been momentarily explored by the talent of four extraordinary leading artists.

When the next-generation reader wonders about this exhibition's title and thinks of the Brazilian 'state of the art', s/he will be led to read this catalogue as though unveiling a palimpsest, and to enquire 'what approximated us'.

Embassy of Brazil, 2016

Introduction

When we were first invited by the Embassy of Brazil, London to make an exhibition proposal, we were filled with awe at the opulence of the space and the fascinating history that accompanied Sala Brasil. With its abundant layers of historical and architectural significance, the former ticket hall for the Hamburg America Line and from 1918 the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company, is heavily encoded, certainly not the neutral white cube space. Highly inspiring, yet also daunting, with elaborate details in mother of pearl, brass and gilt and ornate paintings exploring maritime themes from classical antiquity through to early 20th century naval battleships. All points to the glorification of a global imperial era that led to the exploitation of other lands and peoples, a truly early 20th century colonialist environment. This is where the POSH (port out, starboard home) of the time would come to buy their tickets and check in to voyage to far away lands of America, Egypt, India, China and Australasia.

Ideas around trade, cultural exchange, travel and mobility started flowing around. The inscription 'Quis Separabit' on the facade of the building, became an inspiration for the title 'What separates us'. 'Quis Separabit', inscribed amidst the two figurines, one representing Britannia and the other the Orient, separated by the ocean and brought together through P&O. 'What separates us' becomes a point of departure, the beginning of an artistic journey and exploration.

Sala Brasil's colonial history and historical ties with shipping and international trade, adds a pertinent specificity to the works in the exhibition, as well as new emerging markets

and decreasing trade restrictions, which have been instrumental to exchanges within the complex circuits of trade. In a world of globalisation and technological advancement, 'What separates us' examines ideas of value and mechanisms of exchange.

Through the artists' interventions in this grandiose space, 'What separates us' questions value systems, relationships with commodities, products and exchange mechanisms echoing transatlantic enterprises dating from the sixteenth century to the current international interest in Brazil as a commercial partner. The exhibition examines, as part of this debate, the notion of art as a commodity, capable of being marketable, sellable and collectable.

Rodrigo Matheus' narrative in 'A Tale in a Thousand', built with familiar everyday objects collected in flea markets and second hand shops, is imbued with references to travel and exchange between different countries and societies, banal and valueless for some but with great social, religious or cultural significance for others. Seamlessly integrated into the track lighting system, it creates a multi-directional dialogue with the narrative of the ceiling's paintings that crosses history, architecture, art and design.

Adriano Costa's 'New Contemporaries' installation of white cotton t-shirts displayed on shop sale rails, echo souvenir t-shirts from rock concerts or IT convention companies' logos from an increasingly globalised world. Re-configuring the work into



What separates us, installation view, 2016

Vizinhos saqueiam carne enterrada

Parte das 76,1 toneladas de carne "sem condições de uso", que estavam em área militar, foi usada em churrascos

Até ontem, ninguém havia sido atendido nos postos de saúde e no hospital da região com problemas relacionados à alimentação

ITALO TOGURINA
DA SUCURSAL DO RIO

Parte de um carregamento de 76,1 toneladas de carnes de carne "sem condições de uso", segundo a Receita Federal, e o

Ministério da Agricultura, foi desenterrada de uma área militar e serviu de matéria-prima para churrascos de moradores de Ricardo de Albuquerque, zona norte do Rio.

As peças transportadas do porto do Rio pelo Exército para a área militar terminaram na churrasqueira dos vizinhos do CIG (Campo de Instrução de Geriçinó), onde haviam sido enterradas. Apesar de a carne estar "sem condições de uso", ninguém foi atendido nos postos de saúde e no hospital da região com problemas relacionados à alimentação.

Na quinta-feira, um caminhão do Exército despejou as carnes — o peso equivale ao de 85 veículos Pálio Fire — em um buraco no campo de Geriçinó a pedido da Receita Federal. Logo depois, vizinhos do terreno invadiram o local pela rua Boqu e desenterraram as carnes. As carnes eram carregadas por

famílias inteiras e até em carrinhos de mão.

O Comando Militar de Leste informou que "o Serviço de Patrulha do CIG perdeu a presença de populares que residem nas imediações do campo retirando a carne que havia sido enterrada".

Após expulsar os saqueadores, o material foi transferido para "uma área mais interna", segundo a nota. No entanto, militares ainda fechavam o bu-

raco a cerca de 800 metros das casas ontem pela manhã.

"As consequências geralmente aparecem 24 horas depois de a pessoa ingerir o alimento, mas estamos em alerta para qualquer caso", disse o superintendente da Vigilância Sanitária, Victor Barbara, que afirmou não terem ocorrido casos de infecção alimentar na rede de saúde estadual da região. No posto de saúde que atende o bairro, também não houve atendimentos deste tipo desde a quinta-feira.

Segundo ele, a ingestão da carne é "um risco muito grande". "A má conservação da carne faz com que microorganismos se desenvolvam. Eles podem causar desde uma infecção simples até uma infecção generalizada, desidratação e, dependendo do caso, óbito".

A vigilância sanitária estadual e municipal pretendem fazer uma inspeção no bairro a

partir de amanhã em casas e comércio. Muitos venderam a carne ou guardaram em casa para churrascos no Dia dos Pais, no próximo domingo.

Origem

Receita Federal e Ministério da Agricultura divergem sobre origem e destino da carne. Segundo nota da Receita, a carne veio da Argélia "e foi abandonada pelo importador". Em 5 de julho, foi feita a Declaração de

Perdimento. Segundo o Ministério da Agricultura, a Argélia seria o destino, e não a origem da carne. As carnes têm inscrições apontando como importador de alimentos Sadi Sahly Simier, cujo endereço seria rue de Stade, 7, Rouiba, Argélia.

O mesmo pelo informa o Brasil como país de origem da carne, mas aponta como exportador uma empresa sediada na Alemanha, a "International Meat" (Carne Internacional).

Em consulta ao Ministério da Agricultura, a Receita foi informada de que o carregamento encontrava-se "em desacordo com a legislação vigente" e foi recomendada a destruição da carne. Adesivos colados nas caixas indicavam, em inglês, a data de validade da carne como sendo 5 de outubro de 2007.

Segundo a Receita, a opção de enterrar a carne foi escolhida por ser a que "respeita mais o ambiente".

a souvenir shop, a tongue in cheek reference to the souvenir shops near by, full of overpriced tat, and attributing to it a performative character with the t-shirts for sale at £10 each. 'New Contemporaries' echoes popular cultural merchandising and its commercial distribution, while the humorous play on the commodification and distortion of the indigenous cultural meaning of ayahuasca, makes for an interesting dialogue with the colonial history of the space.

Value systems, the relationship with the commodity and mechanisms of exchange are central to Matheus Rocha Pitta's 'Brazil Series' and 'Stela #18 (carne viva)'. Based on the story of 76 tons of boxed meat, classified unfit for human consumption, seized and disposed of by the authorities in a ground fill site in Rio and then subsequently dug up, barbecued and eaten by the residents from the neighbouring favelas on Fathers' Day. Connecting earth and flesh through colour in the 'Brazil Series' and making a hybrid of cast and collage, based on the common and inexpensive method of manufacturing grave markers for the poor in 'Stela #18 (carne viva)', Rocha Pitta unearths truths and makes commentaries on social, economic and political divisions that are pervasive in the current state of affairs.

The fact that 'What separates us' takes place technically on Brazilian territory, adds charged associations on the works and their intended meaning. At a time of political turmoil and increasing polarisation, there is a sense of urgency in the works. Rodrigo Matheus' 'Workers' with the object taking on the humane quality of labour, feels both virile and eerie at the same time. Equipment such as the harness and the roller both make connections with the ships they are juxtaposed with

(sailors from those days would have loved a safety device such as this, while an early use of the roller was probably painting the steel ships) but at the same time they evoke a sense of unease and discomfort that points to current economic and political instabilities.

Tonico Lemos Auad's immersive sound installation 'Desafinado' installed in the small VIP room, towards the back of the exhibition space, is a poignant response to the peculiar dynamics of the room. All is out of tune from the dramatic chandelier with its blue star globe, perhaps a relic of the Hamburg America Line, suspended from the domed ceiling of the hexagonal shaped room with doors that look like cupboards and cupboards that look like doors to Dilma Rousseff's smiling portrait hung too high. The work consists of a section taken from a durational recording of 'Desafinado' whistled by a blind Brazilian singer. Auad observes the performer's inhaling becoming demonstrably more demanding, selecting a point where the tune begins to break down. The resulting sound is melodious and melancholic and immediately familiar to any Brazilian, but the pauses charge the empty spaces with a distinct longing. There is an increasing feeling of suspense accentuated by the extraordinary room and the political significance that this piece now acquires along with a sense of disorientation, as it is difficult to detect where the sound is coming from.

Adriano Costa's 'Hammurabi' laying on the floor, as though at a crossroads, in the middle of the room, feels like a piece of fallen masonry from a ruined building or edifice, laying low The Code of Hammurabi with a joke!

HS Projectcs
Tina Sotiriadi & Alistair Howick



'What separates us', installation view, 2016

Tonico Lemos Auad: 'Desafinado'



QR link to sound file

Composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Newton Mendonça, 'Desafinado' (Out of Tune) was first recorded by João Gilberto and released as a single in 1958. These were still the early days of the genre that would become the soundtrack for a young generation of modern Brazilians. The song, which was written as a humorous response to old-fashioned critics who dismissed the singers associated to this new style as unskilled, quickly became a sort of Bossa Nova manifesto and is today one of its most recognisable staples. Partly a lover's lament to a contemptuous partner who mocks his lack of vocal prowess, 'Desafinado's lyrics send a playful message to the genre's detractors: If you insist in classifying/ my behaviour as anti-musical/ even though I'm lying I must argue/ that this is Bossa Nova, this is very natural.

Today, the rhythm has become so ubiquitous that it is hard to imagine that it was ever considered too radical, but at a time when the most popular singers were radio

crooners, the minimalist, toned-down delivery of Bossa Nova interpreters probably sounded extremely at odds with the current mainstream music. Over the following years, Bossa Nova's groundbreaking style would become identified with the country's process of modernisation spearheaded by President Juscelino Kubitschek, who was nicknamed "the Bossa Nova president" and Brazil was widely regarded as "the country of the future". However, Kubitschek's term was followed by a period of increasing instability that culminated in the 1964 military coup and a dictatorial regime that lasted for almost 20 years.

Although it is impossible to dissociate this song from all the possible meanings, images and interpretations evoked by it, 'Desafinado' was chosen by Tonico Lemos Auad for his homonymous sound installation primarily because it establishes an almost metalinguistic relationship with the work. To make the piece, Auad asked a singer to whistle the tune uninterruptedly for more than an hour while he recorded her. By the end of the recording, her whistling gradually becomes strained and the melody is increasingly punctuated by pauses as she strives to catch her breath. Edited down to just under four minutes – the length of the original recording by Gilberto – and played in a loop, the work brings into focus the moment when the loss of musical control is perceptible, mirroring the theme of Jobim and Mendonça's song: after all the off-key singer is the one who is unable to master a technique.

But in reality, what motivated Auad to create this piece was much more his interest in the aural properties of whistling than any direct reference to his country of birth's cultural legacy. The whistle is perhaps one of the more mundane expressions of a song, where words and sounds are simplified and flattened into a single melody. It is also a kind of disembodied form of singing – although only attainable through a body - in the sense that it produces a type of sound that doesn't offer any clues as to the whistler's gender or age. Although singing sometimes can produce the same effect, this disembodied condition is an inextricable characteristic of whistling. Furthermore, because it doesn't require any type of special equipment, whistling can be performed virtually everywhere and by anyone.

When we discussed the origins of this work, Auad told me a story about a blind whistling busker he regularly heard in busy Central London tube stations and how it took him a while to realise where the sound was coming from, as the music merged so seamlessly with the environment and could have been produced by any of the passers-by. Another important reference for the artist was Fritz Lang's 1931 masterpiece 'M', the director's first sound picture, where a baby-faced serial killer is identified by a blind beggar due to his habit of whistling the same tune just before murdering his victims.

Auad is mostly known for works in which the physical properties of materials is often a prominent feature, so the use of something as impalpable as sound may appear at first as inconsistent with the rest of his practice. Over the years, perishable elements such as banana skins, sweet potatoes and plants or more enduring stuff like rocks, precious

stones, tin cans and textiles have all been employed by the artist in ingenious and unusual ways but nonetheless always with great significance. The materials in his work appear both as carriers of other meanings they may possess in their original context and as raw matter for the exploration of form or texture. However, rather than being assertive, their physical presence is often characterised by a certain sense of instability that points to the mutable nature of things.

This is more evident in pieces where plants are employed, such as the drawings made by gently piercing banana skins that slowly emerge as the fruit starts to rot ('Drawing on Banana', 2001-03) or the hanging sculpture made of sweet potatoes that gradually sprout over the course of the exhibition ('Clarvoyant', 2008). His 'Carrancas' (2011), a group of sculptural works in wood inspired by Brazilian boat figureheads that were shown at the Folkestone Triennial, were installed by the harbour and alternately hidden or revealed according to the movement of the tide, their features progressively transformed by the action of the elements. In other cases, the temporal dimension is simply implied by the amount of labour required to produce the pieces, as in the series of textile works titled 'Nocturne Landscapes' (2012), where individual threads from a linen cloth are painstakingly removed one by one so that the resulting gaps form drawings on the fabric.

To attempt to make a possible connection between 'Desafinado' and other works by Auad on the grounds that sound is also a time-based medium seems like a superficial claim. More interesting is the idea that when the artist uses it as raw material

he seems to perform an operation of dissolution that can also be found in the eroding figureheads or in the interstitial spaces created on the fabric. While music producers usually require singers to repeat a performance numerous times until they felt they've achieved a flawless recording, Auad takes the inverse route of pursuing the flaw in a professional singer's delivery of a tune through exhaustion. The pauses and unintended inflections found in his version of 'Desafinado' make it sound so mundane that it probably takes visitors

a while to realise where the whistling is coming from — is it the bored invigilator or the annoying member of the public?

Perhaps more than any other medium, sound in its pure form has the ability to acquire new meanings in different settings: because it has no materiality, sound can quickly create associations with everything that is visible within its range. Nonetheless, the presentation of Auad's installation in 'What separates us' at this particular place and time has taken on an unforeseen and immediate political significance

that is impossible to ignore. The installation occupies what appears to be a meeting room accessible via a door located at the back of the vast and opulent former ticket hall of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company, now converted into one of the exhibition spaces of the Brazilian Embassy in London. Above the nondescript leather furniture that decorates this enclosed room, hangs an ornate lamp formed by a dark blue globe covered in golden stars surrounded by a set of black angels holding the bulbs. On the wall, the framed official portrait of a smiling President Dilma Rousseff completes the picture.

This group show opened on the 19th of May 2016, only a week after the Brazilian Senate voted to hold an impeachment trial for Rousseff, who was subsequently suspended of her presidential duties for up to six months or until a final decision is reached by the Supreme Court. The topic of impeachment had been on the local media and the opposition's agenda since the Labour candidate's re-election in late 2014, when the party secured the country's presidency for the fourth time in a row. During this period Brazil experienced the longest period of economic and political stability in its recent history, but Rousseff just barely managed to secure her second mandate on the polls. By then, the extension of corrupt practices across the State-owned oil company Petrobras had been widely exposed by the so-called "Carwash operation", an investigation conducted by the Federal Police. At the same time, as the economy increasingly started to slow down, the President's approval rates quickly plummeted. Currently there is no evidence of criminal wrongdoings performed by Rousseff - which would provide legal grounds for her ousting - and the population is split between those who question the legitimacy of the impeachment process and those who see it as the beginning of an anti-corruption crusade.

Merely entering the empty bureaucratic room at the Brazilian Embassy building in the midst of this political turmoil to find the President's solitary portrait still hanging on the wall would already produce an affecting experience in itself. But to do so to the sound of a Bossa Nova anthem melancholically whistled in a broken melody brings an uncomfortable sense of *déjà-vu*.

Kiki Mazzucchelli, 2016



Image of the room where 'Desafinado' is exhibited, 2016

Adriano Costa: 'New Contemporaries | Hammurabi'

Much has been said about Adriano Costa's use of everyday materials and urban detritus, which are assembled and reconfigured in rigorously constructed compositions. These have included an impressively wide range of both found and purpose-made objects such as Nike trainers, stepladders, newspaper cut-outs, textiles, plants, bronze casts, bricks, handbags, among many others. This variety of material sources is translated into works that are quite schizophrenic in style: like a contemporary Zelig, the artist presents us with his own reprocessed versions of some of the most recognisable artistic tropes of today's art world, which are often displayed simultaneously in the same exhibition space.

But beyond the purely formal reconfiguration of materials or styles, Costa seems to be above all interested in the cultural values they express and how these values can be confronted, manipulated or re-imagined. In an early installation titled 'Tapetes' (Rugs, 2011), for instance, he created a collection of floor works using different types of juxtaposed fabrics taken from old cloths and bath towels, worn out rock band t-shirts, tacky doormats and rugs, which he had been collecting for many years. The artist referred to this work as 'pre-sculptural', denoting 'a moment in the process of constructing a sculpture in which the final form still has not been defined'. In contrast to the solid character of traditional sculptural forms, these pieces, which are simply placed on the ground without any fixing mechanism, are

innately unstable and transitory. Laid out with great geometric rigour, with a strong tactile appeal and a performative character, these works suggest an approximation to the erudite Brazilian Neo-Concrete legacy at the same time as openly incorporating all the possible narratives suggested by the mundane detritus of urban life from which it is built.

Reconnecting art and life was one of Neo-Concretism's most pioneering achievements in the early 1960s, but as the movement increasingly gained international recognition over the past two decades and the market value of its most renowned exponents skyrocketed, pieces that were originally conceived to

be activated by the public started to be widely shown in museums and galleries worldwide behind glass cases, on plinths or simply cordoned-off. While 'Tapetes' borrows the movement's aesthetic, it also reinvests it with the everydayness that first motivated its practitioners. Promoting this type of association between consecrated



'New Contemporaries', 2015



'Hammurabi', 2015

artistic tropes and the mundane stuff of ordinary life - and ultimately, a critical stance towards the over-commodification of contemporary art - is a constant in Costa's practice. At the same time, he does not deny his position as part and product of the very system he questions, and in this sense his approach is more like a humorous reality check than a quest for truth and purity in art.

At the heart of this reality check lies the acknowledgement that art does not emerge from some sacred marble tower of geniuses who are completely disconnected from real life. On the contrary, some of the best art feeds constantly on real life and gives form to thoughts and ideas that are still only being vaguely insinuated in society. An avid collector of disparate references, Costa fully embraces the contemporary condition of image and information overload, capturing its latest developments with indefatigable speed. Having visited one of his solo exhibitions, a critic has

described his experience as "multi-tab browsing made real"¹. This is an interesting analogy in relation to the artist's prolific and vast array of references, although I would argue that it depends entirely on who is browsing. After all, having any kind of agency in times of increasingly consumer-targeted technology requires a lot of skill as well as the ability to process a lot of information at the same time, and Costa navigates quite comfortably in this environment. But importantly his work is not really about reproducing or exposing the logic of the post-internet era. Rather, he seems to be interested in how desire and value are created and circulated these new digital platforms that have become so much a part of everyday life today.

In 'What separates us', Adriano Costa is represented by two recent works that play with the idea of value in art in different ways. The installation 'New Contemporaries' (2015), features a collection of white cotton t-shirts printed

with the word ayahuasca in several designs, which is displayed on a long rail in the exhibition space. Traditionally used by indigenous peoples from the Amazon region, the intoxicating brew has become increasingly popular among a generation of young trendy Westerners and has recently featured in a Hollywood movie. Noah Baubach's 2014 comedy *While We're Young*, tells the story of a couple in their forties played by Ben Stiller and Naomi Watts, who befriend a twenty-something pair of hipsters, inspiring them to add some spice to their boring lives. In one of the film's most famous scenes, the group ends up getting high in an ayahuasca ceremony in trendy Bushwick.

Ayahuasca also featured in a recently published list of the art world's favourite drugs compiled by Ingo Niermann for *Spike Art* magazine² alongside more traditional substances like alcohol, cocaine, nicotine and a range of pharmaceutical uppers and downers that help artists, curators and gallerists survive an increasingly demanding schedule of biennials and art fairs. Niermann observes that the art world has never been "at the forefront of psychedelia", noting that "what is so special about ayahuasca is not just its hallucinogenic properties" but the fact that it is "embedded in a ritual that reliably turns into a cathartic experience". Therefore, rather than qualifying as a merely recreational drug, ayahuasca comes with a spiritual, anthropological and therapeutic kudos, as well as with a connection to indigenous culture and forms of knowledge that are very much in vogue in contemporary art circles. Without questioning the merit of

serious and dedicated researchers who have been not only studying indigenous cultures but actively engaging with securing their rights in countries where their existence is threatened on a daily basis, one cannot help to see the ayahuasca trend in the Western art world as a process of commodification that seems to flatten out the ritual's original meaning and purpose.

Like the Bob Marley or Che Guevara t-shirts found in tourist spots such as Camden Market or Oxford Street, Costa's collection points to the trivialization of certain ideas that were once perceived as revolutionary or original and their rapid transformation into semi-disposable mass-produced items. Furthermore, from the consumers' viewpoint, souvenir t-shirts represent a quick and cheap route into asserting identification with the lifestyle of an urban tribe that shares a common system of beliefs. With 'New Contemporaries', Costa





'New Contemporaries', 2015

highlights the existence of a similar kind of behaviour within the exclusive group of art world insiders, equating the supposedly nobler (spiritual, political or ecological) motivations that underpin their consumption of ayahuasca into just another commodified version of systems of belief that have been co-opted by advanced capitalist societies.

In his other work in the exhibition, Costa turns his interest to one of the foundational moments in the constitution of the modern legal system. 'Hammurabi' (2015) takes its title from the homonymous king of the Sixth Babylonian Dynasty, who famously created one of the earliest surviving codes of law in recorded history. The Code of Hammurabi, allegedly transmitted to the king by the gods, was inscribed in stone or wooden slabs and publicly displayed. Today, depictions of Hammurabi can be found in several US government buildings such as the Capitol and the Supreme Court, while the actual Code is part of the Louvre's collection. Costa's version of the Hammurabi is a small engraved marble slab placed directly on the gallery floor, so visitors have to closely approach the piece in order to read the inscription on its surface. Far from offering any kind of moral guidance, the little joke that is revealed may well reflect what common people are really thinking about while pretending to be following the "codes of law" and "good behaviour".

Kiki Mazzucchelli, 2016

Rodrigo Matheus: 'A Tale in a Thousand | Workers'

Object is a term that refers to what exists outside the subject but is thought by it. It may refer to a concept or an idea, but also commonly refers to inanimate and small things. When this item tends to take on a common and shared history, specific to a generation or a society - one tends to give it a force that exceeds it, because of its power of suggestion. It is this collective unconscious that Rodrigo Matheus tries to reach when he presents his installations built with collected items, combined and exposed, but rarely transformed. It is not really about a concrete application of an animist doctrine but a legitimate method of expression and the will of the artist to provoke, build and solicit concrete stories that emanate from each of them as well as their combination. There is of course on one hand the narrative and unconscious argument of what these objects mean to the artist, but on the other the impact and emotions that arise in the mind of the viewer, recognising here and there tools and familiar elements, such as those from our daily life or childhood. The banality of such objects reminds us of everyday life, not to mention the social context and cultural practices of the viewer; while the lack of familiarity with another object will act as an incongruous disparity, in the manner of a tool whose purpose has been lost, as it would correspond to a forgotten lifestyle (specific tools of trades, religious utensils charged with devotion for some, absolutely insignificant to others).

'Workers', detail, 2016





'What separates us', installation view
showing 'A Tale in a Thousand', 2016



'A Tale in a Thousand', detail, 2016

Rodrigo Matheus proposes artistic installations and sculptures, - we could even speak of poly-dimensional collages - also called environments. His work plays with the idea of ready-mades but does not refer to the logic of displaced elements like Marcel Duchamp nor to Robert Rauschenberg's combined paintings: Rodrigo Matheus chooses to associate the objects taken from reality in the manner of a rebus in space or pawns in a chess game, whose composition evokes an on-going game in which everyone possess the ability to engage in exegesis, always personal and cathartic. The expressive principle of an inanimate object, associated with the context allowing to define the nature of interpretation imposes the idea of a metonymic access to the story. Fragments imported from the surroundings evoke, among other symbols, trades and therefore anonymous individuals and

their activities. A broom, photographer's accessories, a worker's helmet, all are witnesses of usually invisible characters and yet fundamental for the economy. The process of personification facilitates the dialogue between these fragments of reality. No easy element, provocative, seductive or controversial is proposed by the artist. He lurks in its immediate environment, if not that of others, in flea markets or on the streets, he observes and listens to these forms and what their wear tells him. He crosses - literally - the path of these elements, sometimes also of trash, abandoned, silent witnesses of mutations, changes and transformations of society. The action seems simple as he takes, borrows, moves ... and leaves the narration to recompose itself. 'A Tale in a Thousand' - title of the main installation - naturally expresses the intrinsic narrative potential of the works. This ability also inspired the artist with the idea that this

is a performative installation. He willingly emphasises "performance" in which the objects engage. The second work located on the mezzanine is even more evident, since these are hands that are taking actions, holding other items such as gloves, straps, tools...

The immediate environment also activates their expressive power, be it a hollowed context such as the white cube or bourgeois and decorative architecture of a mansion or a palace. A real modesty is expressed in the work and approach of Rodrigo Matheus. With simplicity and a certain economy of means, the objects are attached to metal arms hanging from the tracks of the integrated track

lighting system mounted on the ceiling; nonetheless his work possesses a highly symbolic if not political meaning, and it is again the context that dictates, in part, the scope of interpretation and vocabulary. Because Brazil is going through difficult times, the contents of this installation cannot be without impact on the interpretations that the work can deliver. Rodrigo Matheus acknowledges that showing his work in an Embassy is not without meaning. The Sala Brasil in the Brazilian Embassy in London is a "territorial" environment that is also the homeland of the artist, born in Sao Paolo. Any presence of art in such a space cannot avoid concrete political resonances, and it is impossible for the artist - also

'Workers', detail, 2016



affected personally, like every Brazilian, by the current difficulties of his country – not to take responsibility for immediate political and social interpretations of his work.

To talk about this, Rodrigo Matheus uses the image of a carousel. The viewer walks through the halls and is surrounded by flying objects that appear in convulsion above his head. The circuit knows no beginning or end. The theory of cyclical time could be mentioned here, this non-linear vision of time that leads history to repeat itself endlessly forcing humanity to continually relive the same repetitive cycles. However, 'A Tale in A Thousand' seems interested in detail by giving a prominent place to the individual and his own role in this meta-narrative. This view of history, however, is not necessarily a continuation of identical cycles, but political and economic constants that highlight the fragility of individuals, crushed and absorbed by society. We often

read that Rodrigo Matheus's work brings particular stories and History in resonance together with the environment and cultures that host his artistic practice. By taking these abandoned or invisible objects and giving them a platform, he becomes a sort of shaman. This new visibility allows them to hit the subconscious of the viewer and invites him to question his own place in the current environment, temporal and social.

Critics also frequently note Rodrigo Matheus's capacity to create a captivating dialogue between his works and the architecture hosting them. His installations in the space always contain a form of semantic and formal tension to which is added a sense of balance. It is likely that the artist imagines his arrangements as a conductor does his instrumental ensemble. He offers a tale of civilisation, a "song of heroic deeds", the unfolding of a saga, which contains, as fairy tales do - all of

which have more or less the same popular sources but many incarnations according to the countries - common roots in the psyche and psychosis of the spectators. Nevertheless, he manages to harmonise all the stories, to create without chaos

or exhibitionism, a sober and coherent vision of the changes in society. Rodrigo Matheus seems to question the relevance of a system whose collective success is not invariably achieved in respect to individual happiness.

Matthieu Lelièvre, 2016



'A Tale in a Thousand', detail, 2016



'Workers', detail, 2016

Matheus Rocha Pitta: 'Brasil'

In writing about Matheus Rocha Pitta's work, one is confronted with the question of which method to employ. An art historian would refer to his recurrent use of printed material, the newspaper clippings that he often appropriates and the photographs he takes of subjects inspired by them. A linguist would interrupt us here to argue that the word matter, 'matéria' in Portuguese, refers to both journalism and substance. The art historian, annoyed by the interruption yet not dismissing the point altogether, would continue by making associations between these processes and a long genealogy that goes back at least as far as cubism, passes through dada, re-emerges in pop art and consolidates itself as a contextual currency in contemporary art, one that is often,

albeit superficially, defined by art theorists as post-conceptual.

The art historian might be tempted to make aesthetic associations with other artists, such as Hélio Oiticica's Counter-Bólido, where a square-metre of earth from one location is deposited in another place in a ritual-like act of devolving earth to earth. Indeed, Matheus' series of photographs entitled 'Brasil', intentionally or not, present formal similarities with the Counter-Bólido, whether through the square format of their frame, their subject matter or, as we will see, with the act of translocation itself. The linguist would remind us of the etymology of the word

Below and opposite: 'Stela #18 (carne viva)', 2016





'Stela #18 (carne viva)', detail, 2016

'interment': the act of burial, the entering into earth.

The episode from which these photographs arise is at once extraordinary and banal. We know what a journalist would say about it because it is his word that attracted the attention of the artist in the first place. His article, in the polemic tone that is characteristic of the genre, recounts the events following the interment, within the confines of a military compound, of a batch of 76.1 tons of meat deemed unsuitable for consumption¹. The buried meat was promptly unearthed by the neighbouring population who lighting their barbecue fires, invoked the journalistic health scare that sparked the imagination of the artist.

At this point a philosopher might argue that the disjunction between the art historical genealogy and the current-affairs nature of the news item, is characteristic of the anachronism of contemporaneity itself. The artist is aware of living in his own time, and responds to it by stepping aside from it. The

work's presentness exists at one and the same time with its art historical invocation: the contemporary unearths the historical in the now.

For the art critic, it is the materiality that substantiates the immanent nature of the work. The substance is not quite presented in its brute state, an architectural historian might say in its brutalist condition, for the artist perversely disrupts such purity by contaminating these images depicting the redness of the Brazilian earth with that of meat. The art critic may even refer to theories from other fields, claiming that Matheus in articulating the brute matter of earth, the printed image and the presence of meat, disinters the notion of the 'raw and the cooked'. The artist himself refers to that very same anthropologist, who in reminiscing about his time in Brazil, remembers it as a type of smell². Again the linguist interrupts to mention that it was with the sound of the word 'Brésil' that such an association was made. Matheus, the artist, recalls Lévi-Strauss, not the anthropologist but the poet,



'Brazil Series #5', 2013

who was able to invoke the synaesthetic potential of the word when he claimed that: 'I think of Brazil first and foremost as a burnt parfum.'

We may consider this particular work by thinking about its immanent character: the transformative, synaesthetic potential of the colour red. Within this poetic perspective these photographs of earth become monochromes. Each frame contains two types of red: the red earth and the colour

of meat merge, or more precisely, exist in a syncretic relation. This is a conjunction of disparate entities, of distinct matters that join each other in the colour of the word 'Brazil', a country named after the red-dye extracted from the eponymous timber.

As you can see, these are no ordinary monochromes, they are not composed of exquisite pigment but would be more adequately described as exquisite cadavers. They are somewhat profane, in that they

'Brazil Series #3', 2013



fuse, within the redness of earth, a vision of the resurrection of decaying flesh. They are contemporary in their source but poetically and symbolically they unearth a legacy far more sinister than that addressed by the art historian, one that despite all attempts to bury it, nevertheless insists in resurfacing. While the poet claims that the work reconciles the purity of the monochrome with the putrefaction of flesh, a political analyst would thus draw on the philosopher's ponderings on the anachronism of contemporaneity to state that the title of the work suggests the resurfacing of archaic rot that contaminates the current state of affairs of the nation. A casual passer-by on the other hand, unwittingly recalling a philosophical treatise on difference and repetition or a sociologist's rhetorical affirmation, could simply remark 'there are many Brasils.'

These many 'Brasils' are accompanied by another work that, the art critic may claim, sets them unequivocally within a specific context. It consists of a slab of concrete with one of its surfaces impregnated with newspaper clippings and pigment. The slab itself, according to a social anthropologist, derives from a habit developed by deprived sectors of the population in Brazil, who not having the means of financing the burial paraphernalia for their deceased loved-ones, produce their very own tomb covers. These are made by lining the floor with newspapers over which a wooden frame is placed. For the art historian, this is not

unlike the frame used for the Counter-Bólido, only instead of earth it is concrete that is poured into it. The newspaper becomes attached to the concrete enabling the slab to be lifted from the floor and out of its frame once dry. On its clear top-surface, while the concrete is still setting, inscriptions may be written in homage to the deceased. Matheus appropriates this back-yard manufacturing process and reverses it. It is the newspaper clippings that are of interest to him, those that would usually face the deceased. This concrete slab, entitled 'Stela#18 (carne viva)', not only provides the context for the photographs, but invokes an art historical relation of its own. It is impossible to view this work without thinking of the series of 'Flans' produced by Antonio Manuel in Rio de Janeiro during the late 1960s. Flans, now obsolete elements in the newspaper printing process, were discarded after use. Antonio Manuel retrieved them in order to interfere with their content. There is another reversal at play here: while Antonio Manuel appropriated an item that was used in the process leading towards the printed page, Matheus takes the printed page back to an equivalent stage. Matheus entombs the item of current affairs, and by doing so both denies the newspaper's ephemeral nature while suggesting its possible fate.

This return of the gaze that is nevertheless imbued, at least for now, with that which is current, accompanies a displacement of another kind. The series entitled Brasil is inspired by the newspaper item now set

in stone. It is inspired but is not a document of the fact itself. The artist took these photographs of earth not in Rio de Janeiro, where the event took place, but translocated the scene to the hinterlands around Brasília, in the Brazilian Sertão, where the soil is renowned for its redness. Matheus also claims to have followed Nietzsche's advice: that under

the midday sun, the moment of the shortest shadow, true encounters may take place.

Beyond the encounter of earth and meat within the 'parfum' of the colour red, I would claim, if the specialists will permit, that there are other encounters that take place under that blazing sun of the Sertão: If Nietzsche's advise that

one should live dangerously is countered by Guimarães Rosa's observation — in the novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* — that to live is already very dangerous, Matheus encounters Oiticica in noting that Zarathustra still lives in the favela. Such anachronistic meetings fuel my conversation with Matheus, who as you may have noticed is addressed here by his

first name as is the cordial custom in Brazil, under the not so glaring sun of London's noon, between the professional commission and the endearment of friendship. Friendship, as Maurice Blanchot so beautifully described, is 'the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation'

Michael Asbury, 2016

'Brazil Series', 2013



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NOTES

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1. Eddy Frankel, 'Adriano Costa: Touch Me I'm Geometrically Sensitive'. Time Out, London, 2014. <http://www.timeout.com/london/art/adriano-costa-touch-me-i-am-geometrically-sensitive>, Last access on June 1, 2016. (p.23)

2. Ingo Niermann, Art and Drugs: The Art World's Favourite Mind-Altering Substances: A Sociological Study, Spike (24/05/2016). <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/art-drugs>, Last access on June 2, 2016. (p.24)

Matheus Rocha Pitta: Brasil

1. Italo Nogueira, 'Vizinhos saqueiam carne enterrada pelo exército no Rio, Folha de São Paulo, 7 August, 2007. (p.37)

2. Matheus Rocha Pitta in electronic correspondence with the author, May 2016. (p.37)

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Open in 2012, Sala Brasil is a multifunctional space maintained by the Embassy of Brazil in London. Hosting an ambitious events programme which includes exhibitions, concerts, performances and theatre production, it aims to promote Brazilian culture in all its formats with a particular focus on modern and contemporary art, architecture, design, fashion, music, theatre, literature and dance.

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