

Title Rodrigo Matheus interviewed by Sérgio B. Martins
Date 2012
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Author Sérgio B. Martins
Artist Rodrigo Matheus

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Translated interview, June 2012

Sérgio B. Martins: Let us begin with *Work Station* (2008), the work that is included in *Blind Field*. The physical settings it alludes to – such as LAN Houses (Internet access centers) and telemarketing workstations – may seem very generic, but they have a particular significance in Brazil. They can be read as signs of the country's quantitatively impressive but qualitatively debatable recent wave of economic development. I refer to the widespread talk of "digital inclusion" and the debate around whether a new middle class has emerged in Brazil due to the recent rise in the population's average income. (According to sociologist Jessé de Souza, celebrations of social development often engage in a "fetish of numbers" that obscures more complex cultural rifts.) It is interesting, then, that your digital landscapes aim to reclaim a sense of contemplation out of an aesthetics of rapidity that might seem otherwise in keeping with the uncritical juggernaut of "development." How do you see the impact of such current critical tensions in society at large on your practice, either formally or thematically?

Rodrigo Matheus: It is curious to think that back in 2008, when I did this work, issues such as digital inclusion and the appearance of a "new middle class" in Brazil were still very incipient. They were neither part of our socioeconomic scene nor of any particular political platform. The great global financial crisis of 2008 was then full-blown, which meant that Brazil's newly gained economic stability was threatened. *Work Station* certainly comments on the Brazilian development model and its chronic lack of efficiency, orchestrated as it is by an extremely bureaucratic state that tolerates corruption. But it's not a direct and schematic critique of that system. The moving images displayed on the computer screens do not follow the relationship between form and function suggested by their media. Rather than repeating the idealized nature shown in these scenes, they take us away from "semantic" relations, something typically established with this device. In this game of contradictory meanings, our experience with the case in point is relived, making it possible to see how internalized the system already is. *Work Station* takes us back to that specific time and shows how, in just four years, the country repositioned itself globally. It also shows to what extent our numbers and graphics can rapidly transform the population's psyche. In this sense, I think that all of those changes in the landscape charge the work with new contents and refresh its readings. I always work with "materials" that are available in a specific moment, context, or location. But the forms and themes in my production are variable and remain sensitive to further transformations.

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SM: While your “materials” may change with each context, don’t they often evoke a deadpan or even dystopian sense of shared experience? This seems to play a crucial part in the way your work interweaves both perceived and psychic kinds of landscape. I am thinking of the architectural bleakness (or blankness) of environments such as *Work Station* and *Smoking Area* (2003) (Figure 1), the latter of which offers a secluded and somewhat aseptic room for smokers, and also of *Engeoplan* (2005–06) (Figure 2) and *Centurium* (2004) – fake visual identities you have created of office design and security companies.

RM: I am interested in the circulation of materials in the world and possibilities of meaning for these materials that are not restricted to those intended by their function, by what they represent psychologically, or by the historicity or even power relations behind a given material. The dystopian sense of shared experience that you note comes from the way in which the objects, images, and everyday situations that I work with reveal the way in which our subjectivity is ruled by notions of progress and civilization. *Smoking Area* is a work that subverts those rules. The possibility of the environment actually being used for smoking creates a space of permission for the visitor within the context of institutional prohibition that normally prevails in the gallery and museum. The development of our everyday behavioral language happens within such public environments, and our relationship with nature is mediated by its apparatus, thus dictating what we apprehend as landscape. I see *Engeoplan* and *Centurium* as producing not fake identities as much as fictional identities that are able to operate according to their own logic. It is from within this internal narrative that they mobilize advertising strategies that rely upon idealized landscapes in order to imagine and sell a world that seems efficient and under control.

SM: Some of your recent works, such as *Unfinished – In Progress* (2011) and *Handle with Care* (2010), involve materials such as crates and bubble wrap, which are used for the packaging and transportation of artworks during the production of exhibitions.

You also curated a group exhibition, *Sempre à Vista (Miragem)* [Mendes Wood Gallery, São Paulo, 2010], which involved the work of other artists of your generation. How do you see the latter relating to your artistic activity? And how would you distinguish your works that reflect overtly on the conditions of exhibition from the overworn rhetoric of institutional critique?

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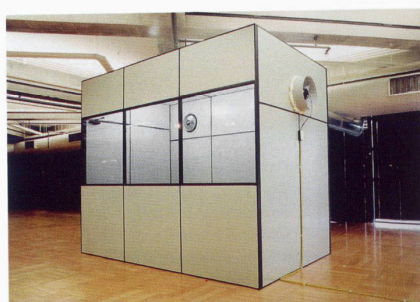


Figure 1 Rodrigo Matheus, *Smoking Area*, 2003. Formica compartments, glass, exhausters, pipes, seats, ashtrays. Courtesy Galeria Fortes Vilaça. Photo: Estúdio Eduardo Ortega.

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RM: I don't consider the exhibition I curated as separate from my artistic practice. It took form, so to speak, in the same part of my brain. It was as if I was curating an exhibition that I would like to see. I began with some works that allowed me to "set the tone" that I wanted, and since I know the artists I worked with well, it was easy to communicate this idea and have them respond in the form of works that fit the space and concept perfectly. I think that being the audience or viewer of works by other artists and relating to them is part of my own artistic practice. So the exhibition was a way of organizing and making explicit that part of my practice.

As for *Unfinished – In Progress* and *Handle with Care*, both have in common, methodologically-speaking, a tendency towards institutional critique, as you mention; both investigate new relations with the institutional space by taking site-specificity as their starting point. The difference is that my works use the results of this investigation not as an end in and of itself, but as materials for constructing objects and environments that unfold in different movements and in various forms, often incorporating contents that ultimately don't belong to the places in which they are exhibited. They deflect literal or didactic discourses about the institutions that display them, in that the trajectory they propose is marked by a fictional layer that is autonomous vis-à-vis both the subject matter they deal with and the space they occupy. There is more to them than a hermetic commentary on the art world and for the art world. They bring certain everyday situations and materials into the structure of the aesthetic field through strategies of infiltration. In my view, the

practice of institutional critique, as it happened in the Northern Hemisphere, is problematic in Brazil, since our context lacks permanent public institutions that might enable a consistent dialogue with that kind of production. This lack of friction between a tradition of public institutions and artistic production preempts practices based on such a discourse. I think that it is important that as artists, we reflect on the formation of a kind of institutional model that is still absent in Brazil. ■



Figure 2 Rodrigo Matheus, *Engeoplan*, 2005–06. Printing on adhesive vinyl over display for media exhibition with interchanging movable images. Courtesy Galeria Fortes Vilaca.