

Title The Weight and the Unfinished
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Publication ZAPPI, Lucrecia. *The Weight and the Unfinished*. Jacaranda, n.3

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Artist Rodrigo Matheus

Jacaranda - Nº 3

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“The nostalgia that permeates my work is wheatpaste on top of a gray zone.” The gray zone, Rodrigo Matheus suggests, is the architecture of walls, of Augusta Street in the center of São Paulo, clipped and destroyed repeatedly. “I don’t feel nostalgic.” The artist from São Paulo smiles with his eyes, weary, concentrated on his own words.

We are in a corner bar, two blocks from his house in Belleville. It’s on top of a hill and all the streets seem to originate from this spot. Paris, as seen from Belleville, is a vanishing point, or a beautiful and vertiginous descent into countless possibilities.

The city is the central theme of the artist’s work. The objects he finds in his wanderings—because Rodrigo doesn’t merely saunter, he observes—feed his imagination. They reveal important social aspects, the constant change in all the things that have lost their function or fallen into disuse but that have become more humanized over time, like the carbon paper sold in the old stationery stores in São Paulo or the envelopes that upon opening are discarded. “In 50 years a lot of things have been invented and discarded,” he says. The homemade glue made with starch and water, cooked at a low heat in a rainy day, serves as a metaphor. It’s what retrieves the excesses of the modern man.

Starting on September 7, at the gallery Nathalie Obadia in Brussels, Matheus is presenting works in paper, sculpture, and interventions. The exhibition is titled “Ornament and Crime,” referring to the essay of the same name by the Austrian architect and theorist Adolf Loos. A predecessor of modernism, Loos advocates for more subtle and smooth surfaces against the grand, ornamental decadence of Vienna, something he finds simplistic and uncultivated.

Devoid of sentimentalism, Matheus separates the objects from their common attributes and takes them to be “designated” as something new, after they’ve lost their initial status. He collects found objects, disjointed elements that he employs in his own sculptures. The combinations have a hybrid quality, showing the different ways of humans beings, keeping in mind that “behind each material is the person who selected it.” “Yes, he says, “the necessity to rebuild landscapes is not about reaching an functional totality but rather about experiencing the relationship between the landscapes.”

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His collages suggest silhouettes of cities. Panoramic and vast, the layers incorporate the memory of the abstract and the concrete in a work of musical prose. The fragments are physically present, suspended by strings. The string is like a line from a drawing, or the mark of time. On the other hand, the strings all originate from the same spot, from the nail on the wall, which gives weight to how they create space, whether vertical or not.

Rodrigo, who has been living in Paris for two years, says that he personally likes to follow a slower, countryside pace. Before living in Paris, he'd lived in London for five years. When Rodrigo talks about the dystopia of housing complexes, about the squares multiplied *ad infinitum*, forming a giant grid, suggesting one tiny window in each square, I think of J.G. Ballard's classic science fiction novel *High-Rise*. Rodrigo contemplates the green neon cross in the pharmacy across the street. He speaks slowly, laughs, takes a turn.

His work points to the irony of the speed and readiness of the transformations in a city. It speaks to city that keeps growing vertically, each day more privatized, making it harder to run through this place where people live a kind of negative freedom. It also reminds me of a passage from *Tristes Tropiques* by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The French anthropologist, upon arriving in São Paulo in 1935, writes that what struck him first "was not the newness of these places but their premature aging." He sees São Paulo as a city that "is developing so fast that it is impossible to obtain a map of it; a new edition would be required every week."

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Discourse, 2015, plaxiglass and aluminium plinth, plastic displays and microphone, 116 x 45 x 45 cm

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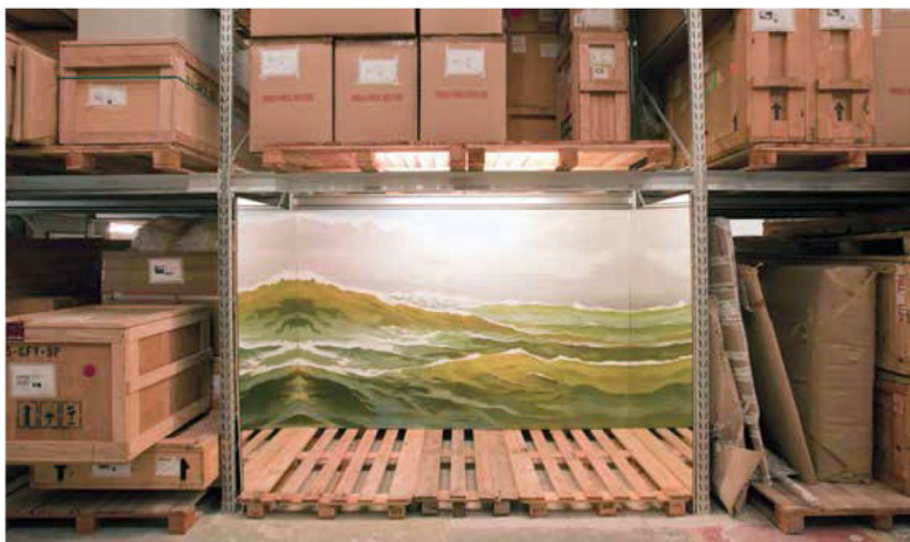
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Ikebana Carioca, 2014, metal, glass, mirror, bricks and artificial plants, 184 x 95 x 81 cm

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For Lévi-Strauss, “Some mischievous spirit has defined America as a country which has moved from barbarism to decadence without enjoying any intermediary phase of civilization.” For Matheus, the city is the accumulation of aggregate and rubble from the construction sites. From that setting comes islets. “You can’t dispose of gravel on the sidewalk. But then we jump over it, get used to it on the streets, don’t see it anymore nor let it bother us. It’s a game of permissions, prohibitions, and subversions”

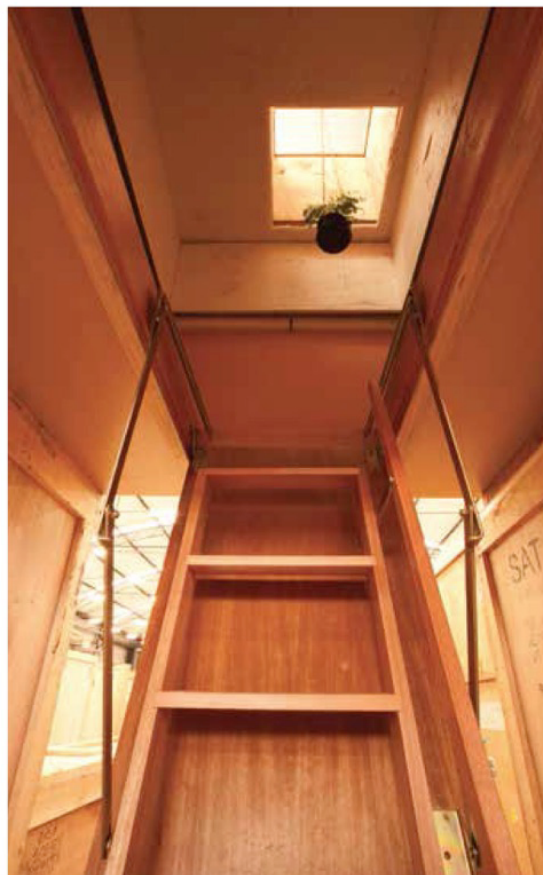
The pile of materials that blocks the way, “the waste in front of the construction site that increases the risk of someone getting run over by a bus,” begins with the excessive amount of material from the old stationery stores. According to Rodrigo, their decline coincides with the digital revolution in the 20th century. “The entire graphics industry died with the popularization of the internet.”

On the São Paulo landscape and its perpetual deconstruction, Rodrigo mentions the physical limitations of social beings. “The public space is a violent space. This is part of the São Paulo experience. There are very few options for public leisure. There are a lot of cultural activities, but there’s no meeting place. People get together at parties in small apartments.”

“It’s the architecture of walls, with this protective screen, this shade of blue that envelops the buildings, that is part of them, from any point of view. The city of Rio de Janeiro found this poetic way of making some ornamental grids that can be coupled with architecture projects that were originally grid-less. A pin on the ground becomes a palm tree.”

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Handle With Care, 2010, installation view,
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This helps create new spaces and, as the artist puts it, makes the new grid be recognized as an aesthetic experience. "At the same time, the grid brings a new way of organizing the world and a pretension to neutrality, so that life can fit in a space to be filled out in a form. No potential aesthetic value. That's what organizes our movements."

Matheus examines the austerity of the materials, the glow from the cold metal that looks slinky, insidious. "In a way, my work deals with the authoritarianism behind design. *That tells us how to behave, what to do.*" His speech also focuses on behavior in public spaces and addresses the mark of time and how objects are humanized. "You know those worn-out posters, maybe from a tourism company, that look bluish, purplish? The passage of time adds another temperature, brings them closer to the human body. It's not just a shade of red and yellow. They're colors that can't be constructed."

And what can be constructed? Matheus's relationship with industrial design, his projects with precise curves from template rulers stand out in the common space of a generic world. It's hard to miss the connection between his work and the work of Cildo Meireles. *Red Shift* (1967-84) is an appropriation of objects or, like the artist from Rio de Janeiro suggests in the piece's subtitle, it's an "impregnation, spill, shift."

Rodrigo says that that he's also been influenced by the minimalism movement in the United States. The funny thing is that it's been exactly 50 years since "Primary Structures" (1966), the seminal exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York that launched the movement in the sense that it found a new way to occupy space. "In 50 years a lot of things have been invented and discarded," Rodrigo says once again, who sees with humor a monumental and robust presence of the material in minimalism, even though the rigor of these constructions intrigues him. "There's something kind of insane about this organizing principle," he notes.

In light of the "primary structures" of the minimalists, Matheus cuts back in his work. He seeks an imperfect balance and criticizes the "tranquilizing" social order as he narrows the wall between the citizen and the spectator. Rodrigo uses the disuse in his work, recycles ways of distancing objects from their original functions, builds landscapes. He comes closer to the "simple action" of postminimalists like Richard Tuttle or Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's *object trouvé* in "Bed" (1955), for example, operates as traditional support. The bed itself is the canvas, which evokes comfort and lullaby at the same time that the painting stains the scene, suggesting tension and even resistance.

Back to the artist's silhouettes of cities, to the windows that open subjectively, Matheus transforms juxtaposed pieces of paper into human distances. In the used envelopes, the color blue is projected from the inside out, or from the negative space in the paper. It gives space to the memories that previously couldn't be, to a sensitive subjectivity, and, at the same time, to the "desublimation" of all that is uncontrollable. "Then there's a composition exercise. In order to open this window you need to position things in such a way that they rise visually in layers."

By using the image of the wheatpaste on top of a gray zone, Rodrigo claims that he doesn't feel nostalgic—"but there is nostalgia in my work." Still at the bar, we remember that in the making of the homemade glue, after stirring well to avoid lumps, a few drops of vinegar are added in the end. Remember that? The vinegar helps with preserving the paste. Or it is nostalgia in the world of things and men. It's the glue that holds the nail to the wall.

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