



Matheus Rocha Pitta: Brasil

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The work of Matheus Rocha Pitta evades simple definition. In writing about it, one is confronted with the question of which critical method to employ. An art historian, for example, would probably refer to his recurrent use of printed matter, the newspaper clippings that he often appropriates, the photographs he himself takes of subjects inspired by news items and/or the raw matter that he gathers, arranges and displays. A linguist would interrupt us here to remind us 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 making associations between these processes and a long artistic genealogy that goes back at least as far as cubism, passing through dada, arguing that it reemerges in pop art and is consolidated as a contextual currency in contemporary art, one that is often superficially defined by art theorists and critics as postconceptual.

In this particular case the art historian might be tempted to make aesthetic associations with other artists. The first that comes to mind might very well be Hélio Oiticica's Counter-Bólide, 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' whether intentionally or not, present formal similarities with the Counter-Bólido, whether through the square format of the frame, their subject matter or the act of translocation itself. The linguist, would add to this association by reminding us of the etymology of the word 'interment': the act of burial or the entering into earth. Oiticica's earth to earth thus quite literally shares its subject, its matter, with Matheus' 'Brasil'.

The episode, from which these monochromes 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 of a batch of hundreds of kilos of meat deemed unsuitable for consumption within the confines of a military compound. The buried meat however was promptly unearthed by the neighbouring population who lighting their barbeque fires, invoked the journalistic health scare that sparkled the imagination of an artist.

A philosopher would argue that the discrepancy between the art historical genealogy and the relation with the contemporary news item, stems from the anachronistic nature of contemporaneity itself. The artist is aware of living in his own time, and responds to it by stepping aside from it. It is this ability of viewing the now as if from a distance that defines the contemporaneity of the act. As such the contemporary immanence of the work 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, whether literally or symbolically, the immanent nature of the work. It is a materiality that is brute, an architectural historian might call it brutalist, as if the artist in a perverse move wants to transform the purity of his substance, of his subject matter, the redness of the Brazilian earth, into the rawness of meat. The art critic may even refer, as is often his/her vice, to theories from other fields, by claiming that Matheus in articulating the brute matter of earth and the printed image, disinters the notion of the raw and the cooked. Indeed, the artist himself refers to that very same famous anthropologist, who in reminiscing about his time in Brazil, remembers it as a type of smell. Again the linguist interrupts to mention that it was with the sound of the word 'Brasil' through which such an association was made. Matheus, the artist, recalls Levi Strauss', not the anthropologist but the poet, who is able to invoke the synaesthetic potential of the word when he claims that: 'I think of Brazil first and foremost as a burnt parfum.'

We thus begin to read this particular work by Matheus by noting its immanent character: the transformative, synaesthetic potential perhaps, of the colour red. These photographs of earth are monochromes. They are plural in number but each and everyone of them is also plural in itself. Each frame is constituted of two types of reds. Red earth and the immanent image of buried meat are merged, or more precisely, overlap each other. This is a conjunction of disparate entities, distinct matters, of different origins, that join each other in colour. These are no ordinary monochromes, they are not composed of exquisite pigment but would be more adequately described as exquisite cadavers, since they merge the redness of earth



with death and decay. They are contemporary, in their source but poetically and symbolically they also 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. If the poet would claim that the work reconciles the purity of the monochrome with the putrefaction of flesh, a political analyst would draw on the philosopher's ponderings on the anachronism of contemporaneity to state that the title of the work suggests the resurfacing of historical rot in the current state of the nation. A casual passer on the hand, unwittingly recalling a philosophical treatise on difference and repetition or a sociologist's rhetorical affirmation, could simply mention in passing: 'there are many Brasils.'

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