

## CASE STUDY

### Matheus Rocha Pitta

How a monumental ruin is turned into gravel, in the Brazilian artist's show 'Dois Reais' (Two Reals, 2012)

by Jörg Heiser

*Matheus Rocha Pitta lives and works in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His work was included in the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010); he had a solo show at Sprovieri, London, UK, in 2011; and the exhibition 'Dois Reais' (Two Reals) was on show at Paço Imperial, Rio de Janeiro, earlier this year. Rocha Pitta will exhibit at Galeria Mendes Wood, São Paulo, Brazil, in October, and will participate in the PIPA Prize for emerging Brazilian artists at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro. He will also realize a public project for Fondazione Volume! in Rome, Italy, in December.*

A slab of reinforced concrete leans against the wall. Numerous fragments are encrusted onto its surface: tiles and red brick; a yellowed newspaper cut-out about the sale of the rubble from a demolished building in Rio de Janeiro for one Brazilian *real*; just beneath that, the enlarged image of the coin. The surface of the slab has two different shades of grey, roughly outlining the form of an hourglass. However, rather than smoothly trickling sand, it looks as if rubble and news clippings are tumbling lopsidedly through its neck, suggesting chronological disturbance.

Positioned at the gallery entrance, this piece served as a kind of calling card to Matheus Rocha Pitta's show earlier this year at Rio's Paço Imperial, entitled 'Dois Reais' (Two Reals). The artist made no explicit reference to the Imperial Palace's history as the residence of 18th-century colonial governors, and 19th-century kings and emperors (today it is a cultural centre). And yet he made use of the building's aura by sharply contrasting it with that of an entirely different one: a wing of Rio's University Hospital that had been left unfinished, and nicknamed 'Perna Seca' (Dry Leg). Conceived during the 1950s heyday of Brazilian architectural Modernism, the dramatically oversized wing had remained a vandalized ruin and was recently demolished.

To Rocha Pitta, who was born in 1980, and has been living in Rio since 1998, the Perna Seca has been a fascinating symbol of Brazil's continuing efforts to modernize. As early as 2002, he took a photograph of a chalk graf-fito he found there: a transparent die, with the dots on each of its six faces showing through.

The sale of the heap of debris resulting from the building's demolition to a recycling company, for the symbolic amount of one *real*, prompted the artist to ask that company to temporarily divert three truckloads of rubble out of that cycle. The show's title, 'Dois Reais', can be understood simply as the monetary amount of two *real* (as if the artist had symbolically doubled the already symbolic payment), but also as two 'reals': two realities.

Indeed, it was as if two or more realities had been superimposed. The provisional white cube of the palace's former servants' quarters had been created by covering up window arches with panel sheets and adding freestanding walls. But rather than tearing down these elements to reveal what's underneath (in the manner of Michael Asher), Rocha Pitta used them as props to stage a scenario of hidden recesses. Plastic-wrapped gravel from the Perna Seca was piled behind fake walls, with narrow doors left ajar. One couldn't help but think of smuggled goods – in the vein of earlier works by Rocha Pitta such as *Drive Thru #2* (2009), which involved pieces of disassembled cars stored in a false wall. Similarly, in *Drive Thru #1* (2007), the artist – during a residency in Austin, Texas – 'confiscated' land and packaged ordinary dirt in plastic foil like drugs, photographing it in car headlights in front of a fence, just like the trophy photos meant to prove successes in the fight against drug trafficking.

And, as with smuggled goods, one question springs to mind: Is there more? One truckload of gravel had been used for the described scenario; another two for a process-based sculptural experiment that had taken place earlier but in the same space, documented on video. One of these comprised chunks of stone or red-brick laid out on newspapers on the floor like forensic findings, while the other involved builders trickling gravel down fold-out tables stacked on top of one another, like a strange meditation halfway between sandbox and archeological site.

Rocha Pitta plays allusions to recycling and confiscation off one other. What is in circulation and what is taken out of it? What is remembered and what is forgotten? These questions affect not only the current clean-up actions in the run-up to the 2014 football World Cup in Brazil, and the 2016 Olympics in Rio – of which the Perna Seca's demolition was part – but more generally the urge to 'clean up', to abandon seeming historical ballast in order to become an economic world leader.

Yet while Rocha Pitta's work may imply such far-reaching questions, he doesn't pretend to be piously aloof from the production of art objects. I ask him what inspired his decision to adopt the curious technique of pouring concrete onto findings, a hybrid of cast and collage. He tells me it is based on a common, cheap way to cover graves: if you can't afford marble or travertine, you use a concrete slab instead. In order to prevent the poured concrete from sticking to the wooden casting mould, the latter is laid out with old newspaper, which thus inevitably becomes part of the underside of the slab as the paper is fixed in place by the hardening concrete. The dark joke is, of course, that the dead will have something to read. Correspondingly, even in the 'dead' art object, crucial insights might still be encapsulated, and wait to be unearthed.



1  
Untitled (still from *Drive Thru #1*),  
2007, colour photograph,  
90 × 120 cm

2  
'Dois Reais' (Two Reals), 2012,  
recycled gravel, plastic, wood,  
pallets and lamps, installation view,  
Paço Imperial, Rio de Janeiro

3  
Figure of Conversion #4, 2011,  
photographs, clothes  
and supermarket goods,  
dimensions variable

4  
Apprehension Table #2  
(pyramid), 2008, earth, tape, glass  
and wood, 1 × 1.8 × 1.1 m



2

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