



SÃO PAULO

Matheus Rocha Pitta

MENDES WOOD DM

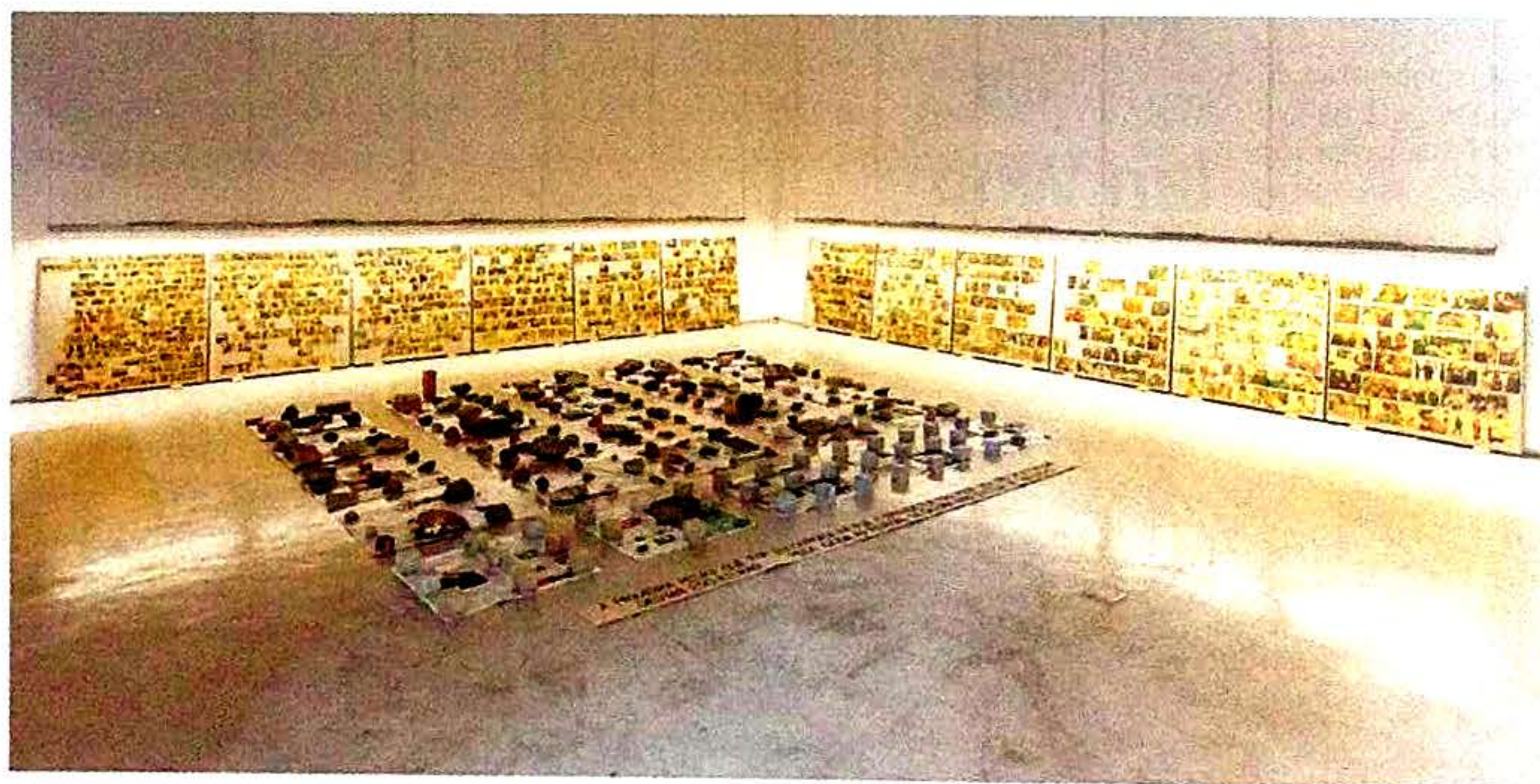
Matheus Rocha Pitta's exhibition "*Primeira Pedra*" (First Stone) made the most of Mendes Wood's opening room by dimming it. The operation was surprisingly simple: The artist installed fluorescent lamps hanging from the high ceiling all the way down to well below eye level. These illuminated a group of eighteen square concrete slabs with newspaper cutouts encrusted on their surfaces. The steles, as the artist calls this particular hybrid of sculpture and collage, allude both to ancient stone monuments and to the make-do slabs that seal the graves of the poor in cemeteries in the Brazilian backlands. In the center of the room, a

sequence of newspaper pages was spread on the floor. A simple sign, also on the floor, informed visitors (in Portuguese) that they could exchange "the first stone found in the streets that fills your hand" for one of the nine cube-shaped concrete sculptures on top of each sheet.

The overall effect was solemn and ritualistic, in keeping with Rocha Pitta's thematic recourse to the *pericopae adulterae*, the biblical passage that has Jesus writing on the floor before daring anyone who deems himself sinless to be the first to throw a stone at an adulterous woman. And yet, the exhibition never lapsed into the mystical, or rather self-mystifying, tenor of, say, Joseph Beuys's displays and performance settings. On the contrary, it was shot through with an almost paradoxical hint of irony.

Dozen of visitors scoured neighboring streets for loose stones on the opening night alone. But finding any was easier said than done: The upper-class Jardins neighborhood lacks common areas, such as parks and squares, and is lined instead with cafés and boutiques. Loose stones are far more likely to be found in landscaped private gardens than on well-kept sidewalks; to take these might have amounted to theft. Indeed, the very search felt strangely wrong and improper in such a posh scenario. Back in the gallery, propriety took a decidedly moralizing turn in the newspaper excerpts, especially given the political scandals that have rocked Brazil in recent months. Both inside and outside, then, the stones became improbable products of deviant gestures or, more specifically, tokens of a deeply disavowed sense of commonality.

Clearly, then, the sculptures are not meant primarily as cheap, reproducible works for visitors to take home, as if gearing contemporary art toward mass consumption offered anything but a merely moral resistance to art's luxury status. Instead, the transaction they set in motion



frames the ideologically reinforced tendency toward social and political immobilism manifest in such phenomena as gentrification and media-driven moralism. To trade for the sculptures is to take part in a communal experience, even if unintentionally; as the work suggests, these gestures do have a life of their own. This particular series of steles, for instance, is named "*O Accordo*" (The Agreement), 2015—: It displays newspaper photos of people such as politicians and athletes embracing or shaking hands. The displacement itself is ironic, at least in the case of politicians, whose "agreements" often lack sincerity. But the accumulation of these gestures lends them an unexpected degree of autonomy, as if their recurrence somehow pointed beyond hackneyed vulgarity and dubious intentions. The steles thus operate like religious frescoes, setting the example for the gestures we are invited to instantiate. This brings "*Primeira Pedra*" far from the proselytism that characterizes much politically oriented contemporary art while offering a subtler insight into the structures of feeling that currently bind culture and politics.

—Sergio Martins

View of "Matheus Rocha Pitta," 2015.