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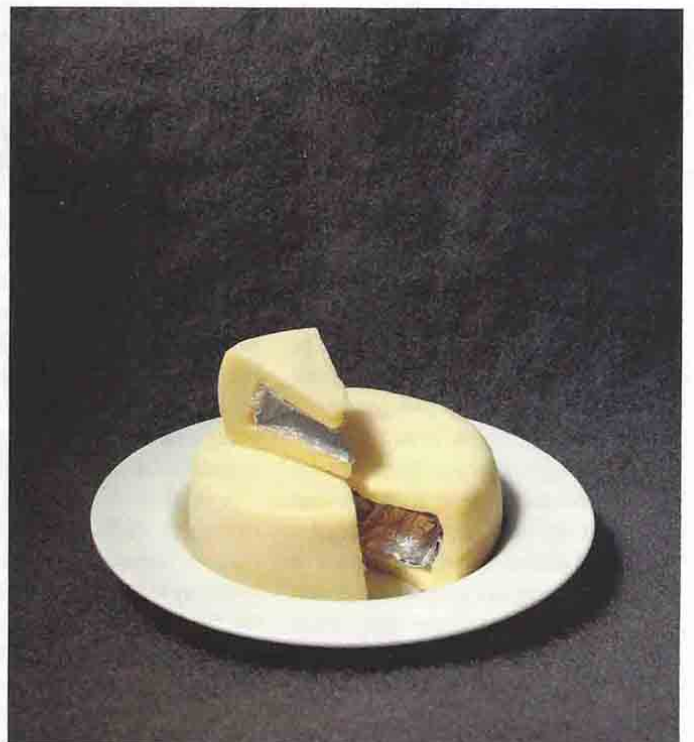
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OPENINGS

Matheus Rocha Pitta

IRENE V. SMALL



FOR ALL THE MYSTERY of the commodity—its “phantasmagoria,” as Walter Benjamin put it, or its “magic and necromancy,” per Karl Marx¹—its convertibility is surely its most spectacular sleight of hand. Commodities are at once solid things and ineffable potentialities, static objects and relational forces spinning within dizzyingly complex circuits of trade. Commodities convert from brute matter to dematerialized value with unsettling ease. But they are also *sites* of conversion in which wildly incommensurate entities (the yield of the laboring body, the symbolic weight of culture, and the texture of social relations) become equivalent and congeal into units of monetary exchange. In the art fair, the supermarket, and the stock exchange alike, the law of the market converts everything to price.

Rio de Janeiro-based artist Matheus Rocha Pitta’s most recent work—*B.O.*, or *Boletim de Ofertas* (Offers Bulletin), 2010—takes shape within this delirium of convertibility. A fourteen-page flyer officially launched this May at SP-Arte, Brazil’s largest art fair, *B.O.* is modeled on the coupon circulars one finds stacked near supermarket entrances and stuffed in the postbox with the mail. With their florid colors, cheap newsprint, and jostling, last-minute appeals, such circulars stage the built-in obsolescence of the commodity in a familiar parade of glistening produce and crisply geometric packages whose contents are subject to the volatility of inflation, expiration, and decay. In the pages of the coupon circular, products

merrily proclaim their use-value at the same time that they broadcast their commodity status with the shriek of ninety-nine-cent deals.

Stripped of the busy chattering of advertising copy and photographed individually against a dense felt ground, the foodstuffs, sanitary products, and household items pictured in Rocha Pitta’s *B.O.* are left to act out this drama of solicitation on their own. Like those in the coupon circular, the identity of the commodities pictured in *B.O.* is conveyed primarily by the formal conventions of packaging: stackable tins of sardines with their thin metal lids, columnar tubes of cream-filled cookies, round discs of cheese. Yet in Rocha Pitta’s images, the enticing containment of the packaged product—all surface, buoyancy, and the promise of future reward—gives way to a pathos of bodily affect (a ham sweats with condensation, a wedge of cheese droops under the weight of its own rind). In addition, the external surfaces are breached and reconfigured to create a series of *fundos falsos* (false bottoms)—concealed receptacles for drugs (or other contraband goods) that have themselves disappeared. Thus, a six-pack of yogurt containers holds smaller, similarly shaped foil voids invaginated within; a roll of toilet paper is splayed open to reveal a hidden cavity; a sausage is sliced in half and hollowed out, its interior lined with protective plastic wrap. These are vessels that appear to have exhausted their role within the circuits of consumption. Ruptured and repurposed, their use-value migrating from the

advertised content of the packaged foodstuffs to that content’s ability to package and conceal yet another value—that of the absent drugs—*B.O.*’s emptied commodities are consummate images of depleted value. And it was precisely *as* images that the products were introduced into yet another circuit of consumption, that of the art fair. Here, in a market designed to convert images from symbolic to financial value, *B.O.* enacted one final displacement, since the circular itself was distributed for free.

IN THE 1970S, seminal works of Conceptual art such as Cildo Meireles’s “Insertions into Ideological Circuits,” 1970, harnessed the circulatory flows of existing economic and political systems in order to interfere with their reproduction of power. By printing



Opposite page: Matheus Rocha Pitta, *B.O.*, or *Boletim de Ofertas* (Offers Bulletin) (details), 2010, ink on paper, fourteen-page flyer, 11 1/4 x 9 1/4" (closed).

Below: Matheus Rocha Pitta, *Untitled* (Still from *Drive Thru #1*), 2007, color photograph, 35 1/2 x 47 1/2".

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Above: View of "Matheus Rocha Pitta: *Drive Thru #1*," 2008, Sprovieri Gallery, London. On wall, from left: *Drive Thru #1*, 2007; *Untitled* (Still from *Drive Thru #1*), 2007. On floor, foreground to background: *Apprehension Table #2* (Pyramid), 2008; *Apprehension Table #1* (Wall), 2008; *Apprehension Table #3* (Fortress), 2008.





Matheus Rocha Pitta, *Drive-In*, 2005, color video, 33 minutes. Installation view. Novembro Arte Contemporânea, Rio de Janeiro, 2005.

In Rocha Pitta's images, the enticing containment of the packaged product—all surface, buoyancy, and the promise of future reward—gives way to pathos.

political messages on Coke bottles or banknotes and reinserting them into circulation, Meireles recast the work of art as a parasitic attachment upon the network itself. As such, the material evidence displayed in the gallery or museum, as Meireles has observed, was intended to be merely “a relic, a reference, a sample” of the work’s embeddedness within the circuit at large.² While such networks seemed at the time primarily closed in character (the efficacy of Meireles’s work, after all, depended on a stable and identifiable target, be it the capitalist corporation or the authoritarian state), the power interests at work within today’s global economy operate within an increasingly diffuse informational landscape dominated by Internet-based transactions and complex electronic relays. Not only do commodities exist as images within networks of images, but value is often produced through circulation in and of itself. In response to the mutation and sprawl of this new virtual field, the imperative for many contemporary artists hinges on identifying blind spots in the mechanisms that link various networks of communication and exchange to structures of power. If, in other words, Meireles enacted a shift from object to system,

artists such as Rocha Pitta concretize nodal points normally invisible within a system’s multiplying frames. One tactic of this strategy, as seen in *B.O.*’s advertisements of loss, is to hollow out dead zones from within a given market’s circulatory desires. Another, meanwhile, involves hijacking images from symbolic and economic networks and spatializing them in installations, photographs, or performative actions—in short, art—not in order to suspend their operations, but rather to unleash alternate potentialities of experience and cognition otherwise foreclosed.

Indeed, Rocha Pitta has described his process as one of “apprehension,” with its double valence of “to take hold or confiscate” and “to understand or perceive.” For example, in creating his 2008 exhibition “Drive Thru #1,” part of an ongoing investigation that involves sculptural interventions on or within cars, Rocha Pitta proceeded from an image genre common in Brazil—photographs of confiscated drugs displayed in a police car. Reproduced ad infinitum on television screens and tabloid pages, such photographs are trophies of a system of power in which authority and governance are intimately tied both to virtual regimes of visibility and to the actual physical boundaries of territories of control. In these press images, illegal commodities withdrawn from material circulation are reintroduced for consumption in the media, where they function as dematerialized emblems of the law. The police image, then, stands as a figure of conversion between matter and image, and of the circuits of meaning each engenders through its use.

In Rocha Pitta’s show, such images were not replicated but rather were reimagined as a video sequence in which the suppressed narratives of this process of conversion are made manifest. In the video *Drive Thru #1*, 2007, a stalled car (the ostensible stage for the police image) becomes a border crossing in reverse: Rather than the car crossing the border, the border moves through the car in the form of literal dirt shoveled from front to back. Having rendered the symbolic as base material, this dirt was then packaged in units mimicking those used for drug transport and arranged on three “Apprehension Tables,” 2008, which framed the video within the gallery. The demarcation of territory as a limit of the law was thus translated and apprehended in a move that, in the terms with which Jacques Rancière described the practice of “dissensus” in these pages, “both crosses the boundaries and stops traffic.”³

ACROSS THESE PROJECTS, Rocha Pitta works in two registers: a phenomenological mode in which knowledge and narrative are made spatial and visceral, often by way of site-specific interventions; and a non-site mode in which images and objects are referential



Above: Matheus Rocha Pitta, *Drive-In*, 2005, 1979 Ford Belina, bricks, cement, black velvet, newspaper clippings, headlights, dimensions variable. Exterior views.

Opposite page: Matheus Rocha Pitta, *Drive-In*, 2005, 1979 Ford Belina, bricks, cement, black velvet, newspaper clippings, headlights, dimensions variable. Interior view.

fragments displaced from a larger world. Though conceptually distinct, these two modes often operate in tandem within a single project. The strategy originated in Rocha Pitta’s first solo gallery exhibition, “Drive-In,” held at Novembro Arte Contemporânea in Rio de Janeiro in 2006. Here, the viewer’s experience was split between the venue’s commercial space, located in a former antique store in one of Rio’s oldest shopping malls, and an underground parking garage, accessible by a pedestrian ramp in the shape of an ovoid spiral carved out of the building’s center. In the gallery, three displaced car seats and a video projection of three horses standing in the mall’s cavernous parking lot made up a makeshift cinema. The video had been shot through the windshield of a parked car and mimicked the view implied by the actual seating arrangement. The familiarity of these coordinates, however, was emptied out by the video’s static frame and lack of action—which together evoked the mechanized surveillance of closed-circuit television.

Two stories below, meanwhile, the viewer found a parked car, lights on and doors open, but little else:



the scene of the video, in other words, but none of its contents. Rather than satisfying the viewer's desire to encounter the "parked" horses that constitute the video's purported subject, Rocha Pitta offered up its frame—the physical car from which the video had been shot—and revealed this structure as yet another representational device. Upon entering the car, the viewer found that the entire back of the vehicle was bricked in to form a kind of vault. Lined with newspaper clippings with images of horses, the chamber obliquely evoked both the gallery above (with its own series of enigmatic images) and the darkened cavern of the parking lot itself. Any attempt to secure such analogies through empirical observation, however, was systematically frustrated. As the viewer retraced her path back to the gallery upstairs, along the winding loops of the ramp, the experience of the underground cavern retreated in memory. By the time the viewer reached the video installation, it once

again appeared to refer to a primary scene in the parking lot below—a scene whose presence, of course, was never delivered but was continually deferred. In constructing the exhibition as a circuit rather than a site, Rocha Pitta's "Drive-In" solicited an itinerant viewer, one whose perambulations, pauses, expectations, and recollections formed, if not quite a narrative thread, an experiential thickness that linked its various parts. Indeed, if the *mise-en-scènes* of the gallery and the parking lot continually redirected the viewer to another time, another space, it was during the transit between the two that the viewer perceived these relays and diversions as content to be experienced in the absence of the work itself. Walking along the mall's ramp, surrounded by a profusion of antique stores with goods whose value is derived precisely from their being *out* of time, the viewer was active, mobile, and eminently situated in time and space. Yet it was also during this interval that the residual

experience of one environment was converted into anticipation of the next. Conversion, in other words, gained a spatiotemporal dimension, a slowness and an amplitude that could be viscerally felt. If the magic of the commodity lies in the imperceptibility of its transmutations and its value in the promise of future exchange, the structuring interval at the heart of "Drive-In" offered another calculus of effects. It rendered conversion into phenomenological experience as a potentiality carved out of the work itself. Like the nested cavities of the false bottoms in the *B.O. circular*, this interval is a void that surges forth, paradoxically, as a figure of value. Such an interval suggests that we might do well to inhabit, rather than resist, the commodity's vertigo of convertibility, and rupture its grip from the inside. □

IRENE V. SMALL IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, URBANA-CHAMPAIGN. For notes, see page 430.