
DRIVE THRU— AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST MATHEUS ROCHA-PITTA by ERIN ALDANA

I IN FALL 2007, THE BLANTON MUSEUM OF Art cosponsored an artist residency with the Iberê Camargo Foundation, based in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Former Blanton Curator of Latin American Art Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro explains how the relationship with the Blanton Museum developed: “I came to know the Camargo Foundation around three years ago when the then director, Fernando Schuler, came to Austin on a fact-finding mission, to discover that we are probably the only U.S. museum with a major Iberê Camargo work in the collection. He then invited me to Porto Alegre to speak at a symposium on museums. This was my first contact with Porto Alegre. At the time, they were sponsoring an artist-in-residence at the Art Institute of Chicago, and I proposed that they refocus to UT, given our connections to Latin America. They agreed, and this was the first year we tried. Last year the Foundation offered a scholarship in Austin and one in France. I was pleased to see that more people applied for Austin.”

Erin Aldana, a doctoral candidate specializing in contemporary Brazilian art, recently had the opportunity to speak with Matheus Rocha-Pitta, the artist chosen for the residency in Austin. He was born in 1980 in Minas Gerais, and studied history at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais and philosophy at the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro. Over the years, his work has focused on the displacement and discontinuity of contemporary life. His residency project, *Drive Thru*, was recently awarded the first edition of the Illy Sustainart and ARCO prize in Spain, an award given to young artists to support the development of their careers.

EA: Maybe you could start by talking about how you became interested in art. Where did you go to school? Did you make art as a child, or was it something that happened later?

MRP: My father was an artist, so I grew up in his studio. It was part of my formation, reading all of the books in his library. But I never had manual skills, so I never thought of myself as an artist because of that. I drew, but not well.

EA: What kind of art did your father do?

MRP: He was a very good painter, so the idea of art for me was associated with these manual skills, so when I was a child, I always thought I would become a writer (*laughing*). When I moved to Rio to go to school, I already had a camera and had taken some photographs that I really liked. I started working in an advertising studio and I really became involved with photography. It was not a conscious decision; it was more conscious afterward when I realized that that was what I wanted to do. I have many divergent interests and being an artist allows me to bring everything together.

EA: So you started out doing photography, and then worked in advertising?

MRP: Yes, I was an assistant to an advertising photographer for a year, and then I became the assistant for Miguel Rio Branco.

EA: Wow, he is really famous, isn't he?

MRP: Yes, I knew someone who had his number and I just called him and said, "I want to be your assistant." With Miguel, I did not learn technique, but learned how to edit and how to produce a discourse through photographs. It is not just about taking good pictures; it is also about focusing on something that was very important to me.

EA: Like telling a story?

MRP: Yes, maybe, but it is more about what you want to say. When you are a photographer, you can take really good pictures of almost anything, so it is really important to know how to edit. To edit your own work is as important as being a good photographer. That was the most important thing that I learned from him.

EA: So now you are working in video?

MRP: Yes, I started to make video about three years ago, and now it has become very important for me, more than photography.

EA: And did you work with anyone, or just teach yourself?

MRP: I am very self-taught. A video camera is completely automatic.

EA: So you never really formally studied art at school or anything like that? (He shakes his head.) So why don't you believe in that?

MRP: First, I think that you do not teach anyone to be an artist, and second, for me it is more important to learn philosophy and history. I studied other artists and worked with other artists and that is how I learned.

EA: So who or what are some of your artistic influences?

MRP: I am really receptive, so the range of material that has influenced me is really huge. There are some artists who are really important for me, like Hélio Oiticica and Robert Smithson. I like artists who write; Smithson's writings are really important for me. For me, they just opened a new ground. I like the unfinished character of their work. I admire that because, those artists, you can work with them, their

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heritage is open. I like this idea of works that are not directed.

EA: Yes, I am thinking about the project in which Smithson buried a shed at a university.

MRP: Yes, my project is very related to this. Also the project by Hélio Oiticica, *Giving Back the Earth to the Earth*

EA: The one where he poured some dirt on the ground in the middle of a box and it left a square shape behind?

MRP: Yes, these two projects were really important for me. I like them because you can respond to them and establish a dialogue; their work is not like something finished, hanging on a wall.

EA: Could you tell me a little more about the residency program at UT and how you became involved with it?

MRP: The program is a partnership with the Iberê Camargo Foundation and the Blanton Museum. There was an open call in Brazil, so I applied for it. The Iberê Camargo Foundation does it every year, and it is always in a different country.

EA: What are some of the other places where they have done it?

MRP: Every year there are two residencies; this year it was in Austin and Rennes, in France, last year it was in Chicago and Buenos Aires, the year before that it was in Chicago and Mexico, the first year it was in London and Paris. So each year they make different connections. You must apply with your work and a specific project as well. The idea of travel is really important, but it is not a vacation.

EA: I know what you mean.

MRP: For me the most important thing here is to be working in a completely hostile environment. In my city, I know how everything works and here it is completely different and that is really challenging, which is nice. When you are working, you start to perceive lots of things that you do not perceive when you are not working; you start to realize the difference between your country and the United States and the difference between public and private space.

EA: Could you give me an example?

MRP: For instance, I had to find a place to make my video. This in Brazil would be very easy. You just go there and do it. The idea of public space in Brazil is completely different from here. I have the impression that public space here is negative, it is where you cannot smoke, you cannot drink. It is actually almost private since it belongs to the state. With my

first attempt to find a place that was very movie-friendly, I called them and they asked me if I had insurance. When I said no, they said they could not help me, because if anything happens, they are liable.

EA: Everyone is afraid of a lawsuit; that is how it is here.

MRP: In Brazil, you are liable for yourself, so this is one aspect that I really started to perceive. Also, the working relations are very different here. In Brazil, the basis is more informal, so for an artist it is very nice because you have more freedom to experiment, there are not so many rules. That is good, especially for me, because I like to work outside of the studio. I could not imagine how things would be here, how this would affect the work. It was very important for the project as well, so it was really nice to know how social space is organized, and the importance of cars.

EA: Yes, cars are very important here. If you live in a city where the public transportation is not that great, you really need to have a car.

MRP: When you are working in your home [country], you take so much for granted, so here you are conscious of almost every aspect of the work. It also makes me reread my former works. It is not exactly the work; it is also the way [working in another country] can give you a different perspective about your work.

EA: Could you give examples of some of the projects that you did before the residency?

MRP: I did a project in 2005 called *Drive In* for which I also used a car. I had a gallery



Matheus Rocha-Pitta

show in a small shopping center that had an underground parking lot, so I used the parking lot as an exhibition space. I was thinking of the gallery as a sort of cave, so I made a circuit between the gallery and the parking lot and disrupted the circuit. I made a replica of the gallery inside the car. The project was about the gallery and the parking lot and changing one for another. A friend told me it was like the two sides of a coin, in which the two sides do not meet. It is related to this project here because it is also involves questions of cinema and movement. When you go to the cinema, you sit, you do not move and everything comes to you. So instead of the car going somewhere, I made the piece go through the car. So instead of the car crossing the landscape or crossing the border, I made everything cross the car. The car becomes a sort of “screen” or container for the movement and not the movement itself.

EA: Usually when you think of a car, you think of a car moving; it is one of the crucial aspects of experiencing being inside a car. In your case, you have a car that is not moving at all. Could you describe this work for someone who has not seen it?

MRP: My first inspiration was police procedures. In Rio, the police confiscate everything: drugs, money, guns, contraband. Sometimes the police build huge displays and call the press. It is a form of self-advertisement. In these operations they use the car as a support for the display; they place the objects on the hood and photograph them. What strikes me in this procedure is that there is a circuit of circulation of goods that is related to the market and when the police apprehend it, they take it out of one circuit and put it into another, which is the media circuit. There is a sort of destruction between image and object, because the object is taken out of circulation, but its image is widespread. And no one really knows what happens to the drugs after that. Also the word “apprehension” has the sense of a sort of capture, an aesthetic procedure of appropriation, and I like to think of this capture as something related.

The project was inspired by this police procedure. When I applied for the residency, my project was very broad. And when I knew that I was coming to Texas, I started to do research.

EA: Did you know already that you were going to use a car?

MRP: Yes, I knew that I would use the car as a display for the objects, but I was not sure what objects I would use: fake guns, or fake money. Eventually, I decided to do a “land apprehension” which is very contradictory, because the land is not an object. I liked this kind of challenge because it made the project broader, and called into question what an object is.

EA: Maybe what you can own?

MRP: The border issue came up, because whenever you put a fence around the land, you are saying you cannot consume this land.

EA: Well, also, Texas used to be part of Mexico; that is an interesting fact in relation to your project.

MRP: It also speaks to the arbitrariness of the border. Of course it has a physical location, but the border is not about being specific. Basically, there is a car with a fence inside it, and the landscape, which is dirt, crosses the car. In order to make the landscape into an object, I packed it with transparent tape, which added another layer, because the packs of dirt look like drugs. In the beginning, you might think that they are drugs, but you realize that it is just dirt. It makes the dirt into a commodity. As the packs go through the car, passing through the fence, they are unpacked, so the dirt returns to its natural state.

EA: So is that what the video consists of, having the dirt move through the car?

MRP: Yes, the dirt and the fence move through the car, so the car “crosses” them without moving. The project is basically the video and the car itself as a form of sculpture.

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