



Rodrigo Matheus, Full Solution, 2007, mixed media sculpture



*Cynthia Marcelle,
Fonte 193, 2007,
video stills of
performance*

My Brazil Diary

by Earl Miller

Having had the good fortune to visit Brazil in summer 2007, I got a first-hand look at an art scene that has recently garnered so much international attention in the art press and on the biennial circuit. Thanks to the remarkable hospitality of the Brazilian art community, I was able to meet many of Brazil's most dynamic artists and view the galleries they exhibit in.

São Paulo

July 17: Ten minutes from São Paulo's frantic Guarulhos Airport, my cab driver rammed the car ahead of us. Looking out the window and seeing no damage, he drove on. Soon we were flanked by black motorcycles making ominous fishtails at Indy speeds. I caught sight of a truck lying on the side of the road, crumpled like tin foil. Endless rows of white high-rise apartments blocked the sky over this city of more than 10 million, leaving one trapped in what seemed – and actually is – an endless, smoggy downtown without a center. It took me an hour and a half to get to my hotel where I did some serious reflecting on my three-weeks to come in Brazil.

July 18: Some of my travel worries were assuaged with an enjoyable visit to the studio of Rodrigo Matheus, one of Brazil's most promising artists. Fernando Oliva – independent curator and writer for *Contemporary* and *Lapis* – joined us. Rodrigo's studio was massive with a splendid view of the scenic neighborhood of Higienópolis (city of hygiene), an area well-treed and village-like despite its concrete surroundings.

Matheus' work typically begins with a bogus corporate identity (*Engeoplan, Centurium, New World Airlines*). Using logos, architecture, furniture, security systems and safety videos, he questions corporate control, security paranoia, bureaucratic blandness, and the commodification of nature. Wryly humorous, his *Centurium*

stickers parody those used by security companies to designate protected buildings. Naturally, his offered no such protection.

July 19: I stood amidst the boxes and shipping crates at São Paulo's Galeria Vermelho during their installation of *The Communism of Forms*, curated by Fernando Oliva and Marcelo Rezende, an omnibus exhibition of the "music video aesthetic" with over 50 artists (including Canadians such as Daniel Borins, Mike Hansen and Peaches). This was typical of the festival-scale events that Vermelho holds.

Opened by Eliana Finkelstein and Eduardo Brandão in 2002, Vermelho occupies two floors of a large building – my introduction to Brazil's spacious galleries. Represented artists emphasize the conceptual, such as the work of Marilá Dardot, who employs literature and language. Her installation *Biblioteca de Babel* (2005) became a library of loaned books by friends and viewers to be considered as essential reading.

Whirring constantly above us was the sound of helicopters. Bodies were being flown to the morgue from yesterday's plane crash at São Paulo's Congonhas Airport, where 176 people were essentially incinerated in the disaster.

Helicopters are commonplace in São Paulo. The wealthy use private ones

to avoid traffic and street crime (there's an obsessive paranoia of robbery and kidnapping among the affluent). Walking everywhere, I had no problems. Extremes of wealth set against ubiquitous poverty is the backdrop to viewing art in Brazil, perhaps explaining why much good art in Brazil involves real life: everyday situations and objects; public art and public collaborations. For instance, one of Vermelho's artists, Paula Trope, chosen for the 2007 Venice Biennale, has for a decade maintained ongoing collaborations with children in Rio's favelas to produce documentary photos and videos as well as a 300 square-metre model of their neighbourhood.

My next stop was galleries and lunch with Cinthia Marcelle, a high energy woman from Belo Horizonte with a passionate, infectious love of art. A measure of her gaining international reputation was her inclusion at the Lyon Biennial last fall. Her photographs, performances, and interventions forge absurdist public events, often seemingly coincidental, questioning and altering the reality of street space. *Fonte 193* (2007) expanded on the idea of a conventional fountain by having an actual fire truck driven in circles with two fire fighters spraying hoses.

The gallery-viewing highlight is Galeria Millan, where a security guard –



Rodrigo Matheus, Smoking Room, 2007, mixed media sculpture



Pedro Motta, *Sem Titulo*, 2006, photograph, 53 x 80 cm

indeed – checks us out before we view an exhibition by Rio artist Matheus Rocha Pitta. Beginning with 700 film canisters found in a moldy basement room at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, about to be discarded because the decomposing film inside them had become toxic, Rocha Pitta photographed mould-covered walls, videotaped the canisters and installed them at Millan to insightfully comment on how museums can become “tombs” for obsolescent art yet “mines” for new artistic possibilities.

Over lunch Cinthia introduced me to Héctor Zamora, a Mexican artist residing in São Paulo and his partner, Marilá Dardot. Zamora’s work involves ephemeral public sculptural interventions such as *Praia Recanto das Crianças*, part of the 2006 São Paulo Biennial, an arrangement of inner tubes at a beach where the public can alter the sculptures by playing on them. I then learned from Marilá that as well as maintaining an independent practice, she also works collaboratively: with Cinthia, as Cinthia and Marilá; or under the combined name, *cinemari*; and with Rocha Pitta, under the name *Dude Miranda*, a fictitious middle-class collector who

copies rather than purchases art that he wants to own. I came to the realization that I’m lunching with people who, in their 20s and early 30s, are integral to the future of Brazilian art.

Tonight became an impromptu party at Rodrigo’s. Intended as a small get-together to meet Brazilian artists, about 40 people show up – the perfect introduction to the enviable social life of the Paulista (São Paulo citizens) artists. I’m assured it’s a meeting not a party. Among those to whom I’m introduced are Thiago Rocha Pitta, Matheus’ twin brother – also an artist; Wagner Morales, a sound artist from São Paulo, who has a piece at Vermelho; and Lucrecia Zappi, a writer for *ArtForum* in town organizing a Pipilotti Rist screening. Most were still dancing to Parisian house music I left at 4 am.

July 20: With galleries in disparate neighbourhoods in the world’s fourth most populated metropolis, I only managed two today: Luisa Strina and Casa Triângulo. Opened in 1974, Luisa Strina was the first contemporary art gallery in São Paulo to carry rigorous, conceptual work; its current selection remains the city’s best. I walk through

sand mixed with glitter – part of an installation by Tonico Lemos Auad, *Arqueologia Refletida* – to enter the gallery. Artists to note include Alexandre da Cunha, whose Process Art-influenced sculptures use banal material including towels and ski jackets; and the Spanish artist, Muntadas, well-known for his politically informed works that question global capitalism. As well, Luisa Strina represents photographer Pedro Motta and multi-media installation artist Laura Belém, both of whom visited later in Belo Horizonte.

A one-hour cab ride to Casa Triângulo went mostly in circles. Hilariously, it got lost around Canada Avenue. The gallery offers challenging art such as Rosana Ricalde’s, whose public interventions include *Visibility* (2002), a wall of bread built in downtown Belo Horizonte or *Soap Wall* (2000), built in Rio de Janeiro, both making issues of food and running shortages publicly clear.

July 20: Studio visit with Marilá to see her and Cinthia’s collaborative work. A highlight is *The Great Bingo* (2003), an actual public bingo game they held with cards designed to make all players win simultaneously.

Later was the opening of *The Communism of Forms*. True to Vermelho’s reputation as the social gallery of São Paulo – hundreds of artists linger until the wee hours, as does the media. *Vogue Brazil* and *Glamurama* (sic) Brazil’s fashion paparazzi website, shot photos despite decidedly missing A-list celebrities. July 21: In Vermelho’s courtyard I met Daniela Bousso, the curator of Paco das Artes, a progressive public gallery with a focus on new media. She has also shown Rodrigo’s work. At a breakneck pace, even shaming cab drivers, Daniela takes us to the Bella Fiori restaurant, where local artists, some now recognizable, drink quarts of the ice-cold beer de rigueur in Brazil.

July 22: Rodrigo hosted an architectural tour of downtown (Centro), highlighted by the landmark modernist Neimeyer building, Edifício Copan, a

marker of the omnipresent Modernism in São Paulo and elsewhere in Brazil. With this rich Modernist history, the post-modern rebellion against Modernism has much more at stake than in Canada, with its negligible Modernist history.

Rio de Janeiro

July 23: With a six-hour bus ride to Rio and arriving at dark, the famous skyline with Christ the Redeemer, an ineffective watch over a city of carnivalesque decadence with a thriving drug trade. I stayed in Santa Teresa, a blissfully non-gentrified artist's neighbourhood, located between two favelas on a steep hill away from the ocean.

July 24: The warnings in São Paulo, which I dismissed as civic rivalry, that Rio lacked the artists, galleries and museum collections proved to be true. Rio has decidedly less galleries in smaller spaces. The best is A Gentil Carioca Gallery, where I meet Marcio Botner, one of three co-owners, all artists (the other two are the promising Laura Lima and the internationally exhibited Ernesto Neto).

The afternoon was enjoyable and relaxed, drinking chops (draft beer) after a backroom gallery tour (the gallery's closed for installation). Stored objects included enticements such as sound artist Marssaes' DIY stereo system and Alexandre Vogler and Guga Ferraz's toy-car sized concrete racetrack.

July 25: Laura Marsiaj Arte Contemporânea in Ipanema was an airy, beach-adjacent space showing work by Rio artist Marcos Chaves, whose best works are an ongoing series of colour photographs of citizen-made assemblages used to indicate holes in sidewalks – say, a tree configuration of orange plastic fencing placed around a post – forming readymade sculptures but also pointing to how Brazilians are by necessity solving public works issues themselves.

July 26: With a limited amount of good weather today, I went for a walk along Copacabana, fed monkeys, and hiked to a waterfall.

July 27: I had a studio visit with Matheus Rocha Pitta, who turned out to be an eclecticist with an equine obsession. *Note Drive-In* (2006) has Rocha Pitta keeping a horse in an indoor parking lot below a nightclub with a car parked in front of the animal to allow viewers to sit and watch it.

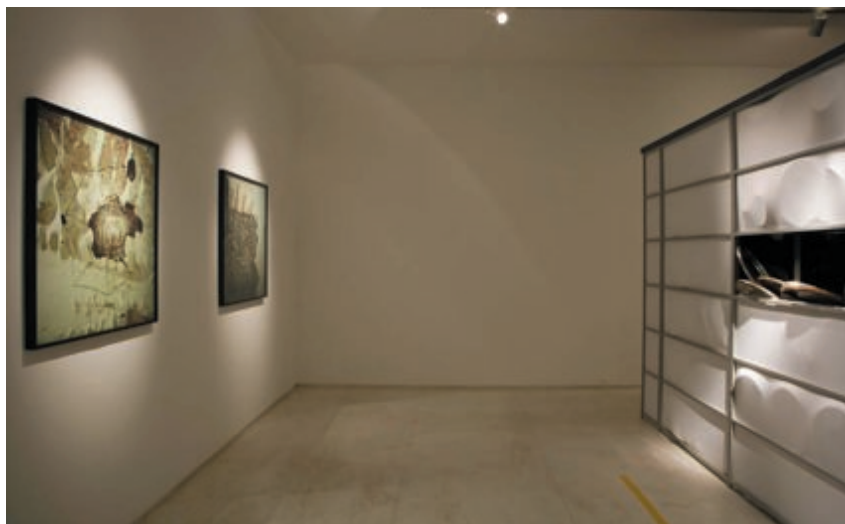
Matheus and I cabbed to an opening at A Gentil Carioca Gallery, where I'm pleasantly surprised to run into Paulista artists and not to mention the heady aroma of marijuana. Four Chilean artists – Diego Fernandez, Cristóbal Lehyt, Felipe Mujica, and Johanna Unzueta – comprise an exhibition titled *Linea de Hormigas*. Outstanding are Unzueta's felt sculptures of architectural infrastructure such as air ducts that appear as absurd, non-functional outgrowths of the gallery. Marcio puts me in a headlock, saying, "Now, what do you think of Rio?" to which I responded, "I like openings here."

July 28: It's Sunday, commercial galleries are closed, as well as Rio's privately owned Museum of Modern Art. As an alternative, I visited the Carmen Miranda Museum, a homage to Brazil's queer icon but also highlighted exploitative, stereotyping Hollywood.

Belo Horizonte

July 29: Another bus ride - to inland Belo Horizonte, capital of the state of Minas Gerais, a city about the size of Toronto that is turning out some of Brazil's strongest artists. Downtown comprises look-alike Modernist high-rises (a small-scale São Paulo), making it difficult to see the surrounding mountains, ironical since the city's name translates to "beautiful horizon." View notwithstanding, the city has an irrepressible joie de vivre, captured semiotically in Marilá's and Cinthia's series titled *Edifício Belo Rio* (2004), consisting of colour-coded objects such as ladders and umbrellas left in parks in Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte: yellow to represent Rio, for sun and pleasure; and red to represent Belo Horizonte, for heart.

July 30: Oscar Neimeyer everywhere: The Museu de Arte da Pampulha and the Palácio das Artes, where at its café, I'm fortunate to meet Rivane Neuenschwander, one of Brazil's best known artists internationally, having, for instance, exhibited at the Venice Biennale, the MOMA and at Nicolas Bourriaud's 2005 Lyon Biennial the same year. Reflecting the participatory nature of Bourriaud's 1998 neologism, relational aesthetics, her work equally



Matheus Rocha Pitta, *Common Stocks*, 2007, installation view



Laura Belém, *Fruit Market*, 2006, installation view with wooden tables, fabric tents, sand sculptures, light string

reflects the desire of Tropicália artists in the 1960s, notably Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, to actively involve the viewer. Consider Neuenschwander's, *Zé Carioca and Friends no. 12 (The Abduction of the Maiden)* 2004, a wall of blown-up frames from Brazilian comic strips with the thought and dialogue balloons blanked out, for which she provides chalk to allow viewers/participants to fill them in. Lunch with Laura Belém, one of my favourite artists, whose work I first saw at the 2005 Venice Biennial. Often working in public and even more often with the ephemeral, she showed me documentation, including images of *Fruit Market* (2006), installed at that year's Miami Basel, a re-creation of a fruit stand common on Brazilian beaches but with the fruit made of sand. The sand fruit blends in material-wise with the beach, and a fruit stand seems in keeping with the beach site, but the inedible fruit and the displacement of a Brazilian market in Miami conveys decidedly alters the perception of what's real enough that viewers are likely to experience either a sense of the uncanny or a transcendence of the ordinary.

July 31: Cinthia provided another gallery tour but of her hometown. First

Galeria Carminha Macedo for Rodrigo Albert's exhibition of conventional figurative and documentary photographs. The newly hired Emanuelle Grossi aims to make the gallery more experimental. Next, to Carminha Macedo's husband's equally huge gallery, Manoel Macedo Galeria de Arte, to see among other things Sara Ramo's work, notably a new photographic diptych of hers, *The Animal House or Spot the Differences* (2003). Based on the children's game, Ramo has assembled an eccentric array of costumes and objects slightly altered in the second image. Her best works though are ephemeral, consequently, difficult to view. *The Garden of Things In the Attic* (2004), for example, is a temporary garden configuration constructed of objects taken from storage at the Museu de Arte da Pampulha.

August 1: Drinks with Laura, Emmanuelle, and Rodrigo Moura, a regular contributor to *ArtForum* and *Flash Art*, and the curator of Inhotim, a contemporary art foundation on an environmental preserve outside of Belo Horizonte housing *Tropicália* installations by Lygia Clark and Cildo Meireles; more recent Brazilian art works including Laura Lima's eccentric vinyl

costumes gallery visitors can try on (*Novos Costumes* 2007); and international art by Janet Cardiff and many others.

August 2: Rushed cab ride to meet Pedro Motta, a promising photographer already represented by Luisa Strina Gallery. Motta's most striking pieces are black-and-white photos of found tower-like structures deliberately resembling Bernd and Hilla Becher's icons albeit more ramshackle. In one, *Untitled* (2006), he computer manipulated a small tower rendering it impossible to stand – a witty satire on what is now perhaps a neurotic need to document the Real in a post-digital photography age.

Pedro and I head to an opening at the Museu Mineiro, a local historic art museum, for a museum installation, *Território* (2007), which Cinthia organized with Lais Myrrha. It consisted of direct interventions questioning how museum art is typically viewed and perceived by, for instance, replacing works on display with grey boxes.

São Paulo

August 3/4: Ten hour bus ride to São Paulo takes up the day. The next, a respite from art.

August 5: Before the flight to Toronto, coffee, port and – bravely – Canadian wine at Fernando's. His six-month old son, Antonio, tried to eat an altered tree sculpture by Laura Belém – a part of a larger installation, *Still Autumn* (2005). Realistic red leaves were mixed to real tropical trees that don't change colour - a faux-fall. Fernando removes the sculptural leaves from Antonio's mouth. Perhaps more than even Debord hoped, art momentarily becomes part of real life – a Brazilian tendency apparently. On this afternoon of drink and art talk, time flows until the airport cab signals a return to more structured Northern days.

A special thanks to Fernando Oliva, Cinthia Marcelle, Rodrigo Matheus, and most of all, to Laura Belém, for introducing me to the people and places in this diary.