Blind Field: Outside/ In

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In 2007, Gilberto Kassab, the mayor of São Paulo, Brazil, implemented a campaign to combat visual pollution of the urban environment. Called *Lei Cidade Limpa* or "Clean City Law," the law banned all public announcements – billboards, advertisements painted on building façades, banners, posters, marquees, and the like – on all public and private buildings in the city. Created in response to the gradual saturation of the urban visual field with advertising solicitations over the previous years, the law had the effect of leaving a series of naked and alienating absences within the texture of the city. Surfaces once covered with commercial solicitation were suddenly emptied of their messages, exposing blank spaces that beforehand had rarely been seen. City inhabitants, once bombarded with appeals for their attention, now encounter vacant spaces in every direction. In some cases, graffiti has penetrated the frame of the previous advertisements to reoccupy their void (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the infrastructure

for the previous visual environment often remains intact, resulting in empty scaffolding scattered throughout the city, standing as a kind of ruin. These frame structures mimic the power lines that

Figure 1   São Paulo, 2008. Photo: Irene Small.

are now the city's primary visual noise (Figure 2).
These ghostly remains are at once highly visible –
their physicality disrupts sightlines – and
inconspicuous, since their function and meaning
are now defunct. As one becomes aware of
these new empty zones, however, their negative
fields strangely become full, foregrounding
their frames and producing a space waiting to
be occupied.

While the Clean City Law was intended to
cleanse and renew the public space of the city, the
resulting absences call our attention to the
fact that in the day and age of global electronic
networks, this very notion of public space has
largely become obsolete. Much of the advertising
that once appeared within the urban fabric
of the city, for example, has already migrated
to the private space of the computer, where
"public space" is now a function of information
on a screen. Indeed, São Paulo's status as a
rising financial capital and Brazil's prestige as an
increasingly dynamic player within the developing
markets of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia,
India, and China) is as much a function of the
virtual capacities of the digital as it is the physical
promise of material resources. The blankness

of São Paulo's empty billboards can therefore
be seen as a double sign of potentiality: a past
potentiality that has already been rendered
obsolete and a future potentiality that has not
yet been fully secured.

Yet Brazil has a particularly complex
relationship with the notion of potentiality. In
1941, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, who
had emigrated to Brazil earlier that year,
published the book *Brazil, Land of the Future*[1],
which has given rise to an oft-repeated
cliché. From the dramatic construction of the
ultramodern capital of Brasília in the late
1950s to the country's current status as an
emerging economic powerhouse, Brazil seems
continuously on the cusp of realizing its
potential. The recent discovery of massive off-
shore oil fields in the Atlantic Ocean and the
resilience of Brazil's economy amidst the global
economic downturn appear to underscore
this ascendency. As Barack Obama proclaimed
to cheering crowds in Rio de Janeiro during
his May 2011 visit, "For so long, you were called
a country of the future, told to wait for a better
day that was just around the corner. *Meus amigos*,
that day has finally come. And this is a country
of the future no more. The people of Brazil
should know that the future has arrived. It is
here now. And it's time to seize it."[2]

Zweig's title, however, has also given rise to
a more complex aphorism – "Brazil is the country
of the future, and will always be." – suggesting
that the idea of potentiality is itself something of
a mirage, an illusion that blinds its citizens to the
reality of the present day. Indeed, while Brazil's
growing international leadership has raised new
ambition for the country, many efforts to address
the ills of its deeply divided society remain

Figure 2   Thomas Mulcaire, (*Estado*), 2008. Archival pigment
digital print on cotton paper. Edition of 9.

unresolved. If such contradictions are indicative of emerging economies, Brazil's tense relationship to potentiality offers a productive point of entry for considering the disparate experiences that make up contemporary global society at large.

In 1970, the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre described what he called a "blind field" – a transitional zone that lies between socio-economic modes of production such as the agricultural, the industrial, or "the urban," the latter coinciding loosely with what we now call globalization.[3] For Lefebvre, because these new regimes are not yet recognized at the moment that the old ones slip away, the resulting "blind fields" escape comprehension within existing ideological paradigms. As he wrote, "The blinding is the luminous source (knowledge or ideology) that projects a beam of light, that illuminates *elsewhere*. The blinded is our dazed stare, as well as the region left in shadow. On the one hand a path is opened to exploration on the other there is an enclosure to break out of, a consecration to transgress." The "blind field" thus isolates *what we do not yet know* within a process of historical transition. Like the emptied advertising structures of São Paulo's Clean City, the "blind field" makes transition perceptible as such.

The exhibition *Blind Field* takes up this notion of blindness as a critical category, a metaphor for the way in which the obstruction of perception can illuminate alternative modes of knowledge and experience. The paradox of "blindness" is at once representational and concrete, aesthetic and political, specific to Brazil and yet symptomatic of an existing world order clearly in a moment of great transformation. As models of perception, works of art are particularly conducive to exposing the "blind fields" of contemporary experience.

Rather than aiming for transparency and factuality, they disrupt and de-familiarize communication, making things opaque so that they may be seen in a new light. Works of art therefore provide a uniquely faceted lens through which to reimagine the changes taking place in contemporary society and to make tangible the structures of perception upon which ideology depends.

This exhibition focuses on twenty emerging and mid-career artists working in Brazil whose practices exploit the paradoxes of transparency and illegibility, perception and opacity evinced by "the blind field." Informed by conceptual practices and working in a wide range of visual media, these artists offer a critical perspective on processes of transition within contemporary society, be it from the public space of the street to the virtual zone of the computer screen, or from local communities to large-scale political action. While much of the work gestures implicitly or explicitly to issues current within Brazil, none of the artists represented in this exhibition subscribe to the idea of a monolithic Brazilian identity or artistic sensibility. By including not only Brazilian artists but artists from abroad who are working in Brazil, the exhibition also resists the impulse to define a national identity through art. Instead, the works speak to the complexity and heterogeneity of an art milieu that is manifestly global in reach.

Many of these artists utilize languages of representation and abstraction in order to blend the imaginary and the concrete. Marcius Galan's *Diagonal Section* (2008) (Plate 6), for example, alters our perception of a single continuous space by subtly intervening in peripheral details – wall color, lights, flooring – in order to create an illusion of two distinct spaces separated by a

pane of glass. The result produces tension and ambiguity for viewers as they confront the new virtual space, encouraging them to re-examine their surroundings. Nicolás Robbio's *Sem titulo (Untitled)* (2008) (Plate 20), likewise focuses attention on ordinary objects and everyday spaces. In this work, Robbio places obsolete overhead projectors on the floor of the exhibition space in order to project images of window blinds onto the walls. Signifying the separation of interior and exterior space, such blinds are intended to obstruct the light that comes in from the outside as well as the image of that outside space. In Robbio's installation, these blinds are themselves an image produced by way of the projectors, which, in an inverse fashion, function by emitting light from the interior of the devices to the exterior space in which they are placed. For both Galan and Robbio, "real" space as such is illegible, and it is illusion that allows the viewer to rediscover new potential in what is hidden in plain sight.

Such questions of perception and illusion are taken up in the work of André Komatsu and Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, only through the lens of the economic. While Europe and the United States are mired in debt, Brazil's recent economic expansion, buoyed by substantial increases in manufacturing, exports, and the discovery of oil fields, has resulted in low unemployment rates and increased wages, which in turn have multiplied the number of consumers in Brazil. This perceived consumer confidence likewise affects the performance and strength of the local market. This financial flux and variation, however, is only perceptible via virtual networks and global links, thus calling attention to the mutual dependence of all markets. Both Komatsu and Steegmann Mangrané create structures that

comment on the vulnerability and instability of financial and commodity systems. Steegmann Mangrané's *Economic Dune/Model without quality* (2011) (Plate 32) takes the dune as a metaphor for the unpredictable change and fragility of global markets, whose individual financial systems can never be secured. The dune is both a formidable force that changes rapidly as a result of winds, and a physical entity that creates a shelter and barrier from these same winds. Its dual function as transformative substance and destructive agent is analogous to the unpredictable behavior of markets, which likewise have the capacity to produce massive change as a result of imperceptible shifts. Komatsu's *Money Talks I* (2011) (Plate 10), meanwhile, uses construction materials such as concrete, gravel, and glass, as well as salt, sugar, and coffee – all commodities symbolic of Brazil's wealth at different points in its history. Reflecting on the explosive development of cities like São Paulo, the installation references the multiple construction sites that have sprung up around the city. While these sites register the increased economic activity of the city, they also gesture to the ways in which commodities and wealth are produced through representation and inflation.

Historically, São Paulo is a city of immense spatial segregation and social inequality, and despite the current economic boom the city continues to face stiff economic, social, and environmental challenges. Graziela Kunsch's *Mutirão Project* (2003–present) (Plate 11) engages various grass-roots social movements that have fought to expand the rights of the poor in the urban peripheries, where activists have long struggled for improvements in infrastructure and conditions of life. Her videos document political

activities, such as the squatter housing and free transport movements, which seek to provide shelter and mobility for all. From extensive footage that she has captured as part of her own involvement with these movements, Kunsch isolates moments of *mutirão*, which refers to a collective and often temporary mobilization of people in order to achieve a particular goal. These ephemeral incidents of collective action suggest the opening up of a space with the potential and agency for change. These video excerpts are then used to initiate a continuing dialogue about living in the urban environment with each new audience to whom the project is presented.

While Kunsch's engagement with the city is rooted in documentary, Marcelo Cidade and Marcelo Solá choose to depict urban movement and experience through the fictitious and abstract. In *Decentralization Map* (2011) (Figure 4, page 126), Cidade uses painted arrows to record dispersal into a multi-directional cartography that could refer to the migratory patterns of people, things, or even energies. Like Kunsch, Cidade's maps are abstracted renditions of action. Unlike Kunsch, Cidade does not picture actual individuals in his work, although the felt material chosen for the map is similar to the blankets used by the homeless in São Paulo for shelter and warmth. His map thus gestures to a kind of anonymous subject created by the harsh conditions of the city. Opposite in approach to this anonymity are Solá's drawings and paintings (Plates 28–31), which act as a visual diary documenting aspects of the artist's personal experience. Solá's lines, colors, and non-figurative forms are at once arbitrary and highly intimate registers of real or imagined events. Words and architectural elements frequently

migrate from work to work, acting to disrupt and erase represented space, as well as to transform it into an unfamiliar, yet strangely familiar world.

While Solá creates a world via the representational surfaces of paper and canvas, Cinthia Marcelle orchestrates altered realities by directly intervening in actual public spaces. In her video *Confronto* (Confrontation) (2005) (Plate 12), Marcelle organized skilled acrobatic performers to juggle fire sticks at a busy traffic intersection in order to interfere with the normal flow of the city's traffic. With each repeated traffic signal, the performers obstruct the path of oncoming vehicles for an increasing length of time, creating escalating moments of tension and conflict. By interrupting habitual behaviors, Marcelle's action proposes alternate circuits for negotiating the social space of the environment while producing a new audience out of a series of shifting and temporary publics.

Héctor Zamora and Jonathas de Andrade, meanwhile, create works that reimagine the city by examining its past. As in Marcelle's *Confronto*, Zamora's *Errante* (Errant) (2010) (Plate 34) constitutes an intervention within actual public space. Yet rather than producing an ephemeral action, he physically transforms the environment as a way of bringing attention to multiple histories of site. For this work, Zamora focused on the Tamanduateí riverbed in the historic center of the city of São Paulo, which once defined the city limits but has since lost its significance due to the subsequent infrastructure of highways. Zamora's public intervention consisted of suspending several trees on steel cables over the river, creating a scene of vegetation in an area where "nature" is scarce. Zamora's action uses this double displacement of the natural to recall the

historical memory of the river while creating an "errant" and implausible landscape within the city's day-to-day reality. De Andrade is similarly interested in excavating memories embedded within the urban context. His approach, however, concerns how history is produced through intimate as well as institutional archives. De Andrade's *Ressaca Tropical* (Tropical Hangover) (2009) (Plate 1) is structured around a found diary that provides an anonymous account of life in the city of Recife in the 1970s. These discarded pages are combined with documentary photographs of the city's development from its high modernist period to its present decline along with photographs from various personal archives. These images and text together construct a narrative – part-fact, part-fiction – whose multiple dimensions of memory both cancel one another out and produce a possible document of urban reality. Confusing past and present, public and private, de Andrade materializes Recife's urban history as a zone of transition and, in this sense, a "blind field" of experience that becomes legible in the present.

If the transformation evinced by de Andrade's photographs concerns the overlapping of urban and psychic histories, Cao Guimarães's photographs from his *Campo Cego* (Blind Field) series (2008)


(Figure 3, Plates 8 and 9), made in collaboration with Carolina Cordeiro, take up this process of environmental change in relation to in-between spaces void of human presence. Guimarães's and Cordeiro's photographs focus on road signs along highways and other throughways that have become covered in red dust. This accumulated dust renders the directions and demarcations of place indecipherable and abstract, while concretizing and making material the passage of time. While the given message of any sign is obscured, the blankness of the resulting monochromes seems to suggest an alternate communicative potential from within the realm of art. Much like the vacant advertising structures of São Paulo's Clean City Law, these signs are suspended between obsolete use and possible signification. Rather than hold out the promise of future realization that haunts the ideology of "the country of the future," however, these photographs insist on the tangibility of opacity as significant in and of itself. "Blinding," here, is an aesthetic operation that rejects the transparency of knowledge that controls and regulates our movement through space. If, as Lefebvre writes, "the blinding" always illuminates "elsewhere," looking at Brazil from a distance also offers a way of revealing the "blind fields" from where we currently see.

1 Stefan Zweig, *Brazil, Land of the Future*. (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1941).

2 "Remarks by President Barack Obama to the People of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil" May 20 2011, Teatro Municipal, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The White House.

3 Henri Lefebvre, "Blind Field," in *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 23–44.

Figure 3 Cao Guimarães and Carolina Cordeiro, *Campo Cego* (Blind Field) #4, 2008. C-print. Courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler.
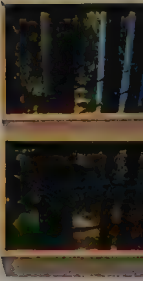
1   (Previous page) Jonathas de Andrade, *Ressaca Tropical*
(Tropical Hangover), 2009. 105 photographs and 140 typewritten
pages. View at Untitled: 12th Biennial of Istanbul, Turkey. Private
Collection Lima, Peru. Courtesy Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo.

2   Tatiana Blass, *O engano é sorte dos contentes* (Deceit is the
Luck of the Contented), 2007. Video still. Collection of the artist.
Courtesy Galeria Millan. Photo: Milene Rinaldi.

4   Marilá Dardot, *A meia noite é também o meio dia* (Midnight is also mid-day), 2004. Clock. Private Collection, New York. Courtesy Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo.

5   Marilá Dardot, *Terceira Margem* (Third Margin), 2007. Books. Collection Andréa and José Olympio Pereira. Courtesy Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo.

6　Marcius Galan, *Seção Diagonal* (Diagonal Section), 2010.
Installation at Instituto Inhotim. Inhotim Collection, Brazil.
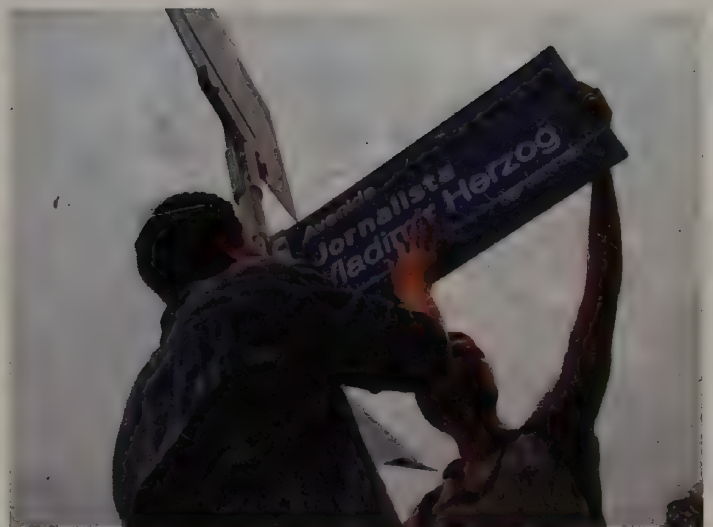Photo: Pedro Motta.

8   Cao Guimarães and Carolina Cordeiro, *Campo Cego* (Blind Field) #2,
2008. C-print. Edition 1/5. Courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler.

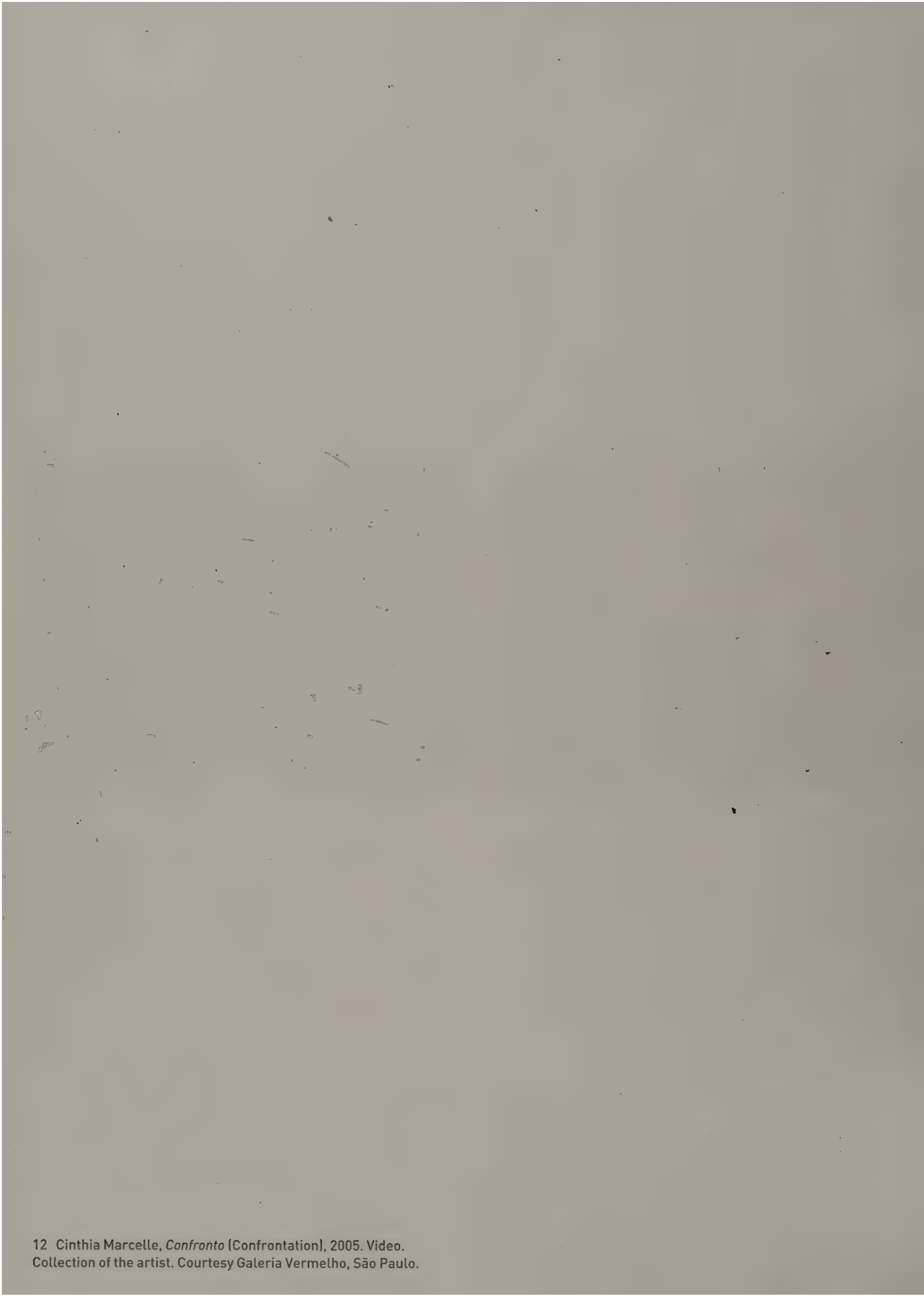9   Cao Guimarães and Carolina Cordeiro, *Campo Cego* (Blind Field) #5,
2008. C-print. Edition 1/5. Courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler.

10   André Komatsu, *Money Talks I*, 2011. Concrete bricks,
wooden shelves, coffee, sugar, salt, gravel. Collection of
the artist. Courtesy Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo.

11 Graziela Kunsch, Excerpts from the *Mutirāo Project*, 2003–present.
Video projection. Courtesy of the artist.

12 Cinthia Marcelle, *Confronto* (Confrontation), 2005. Video.
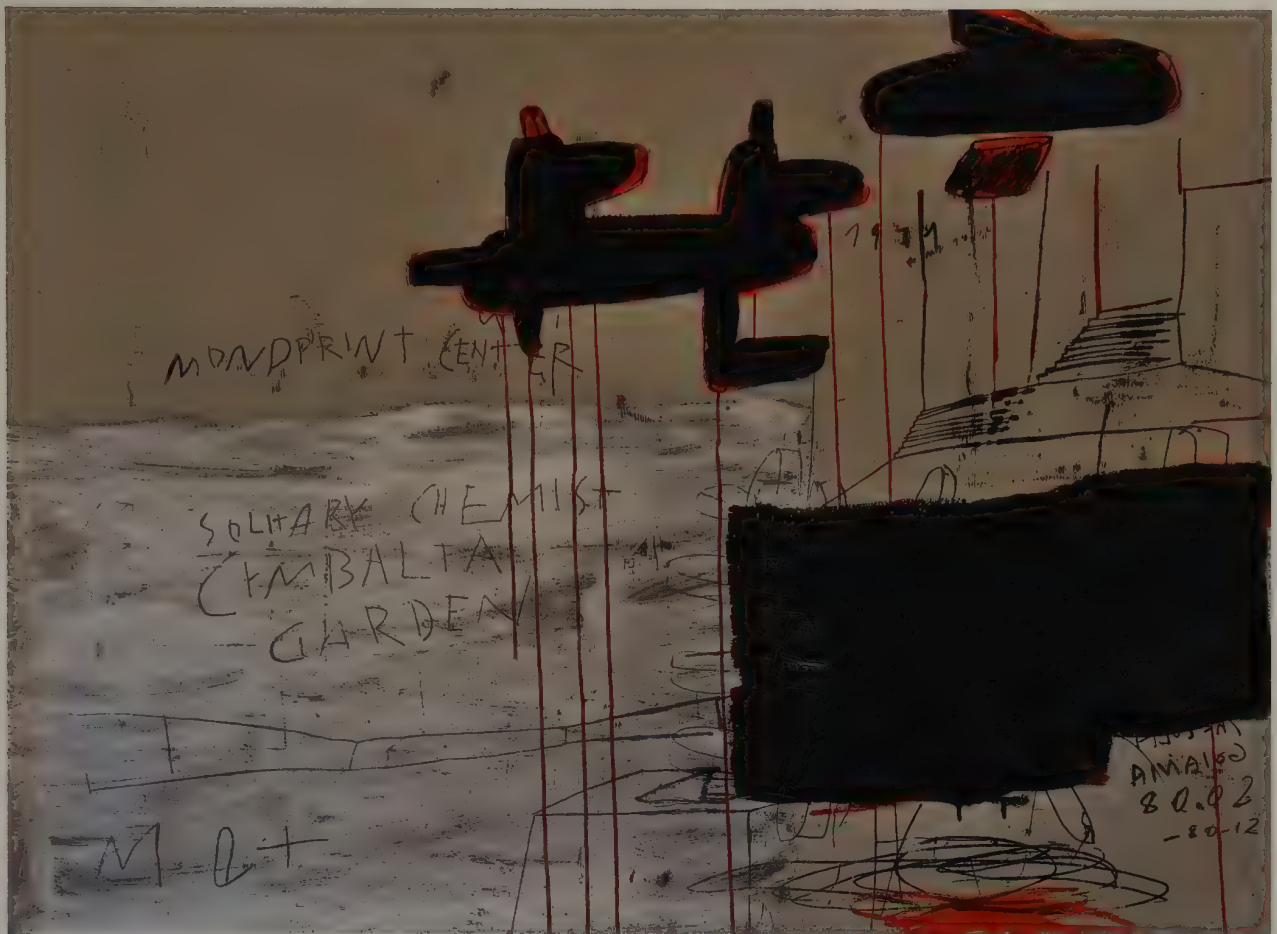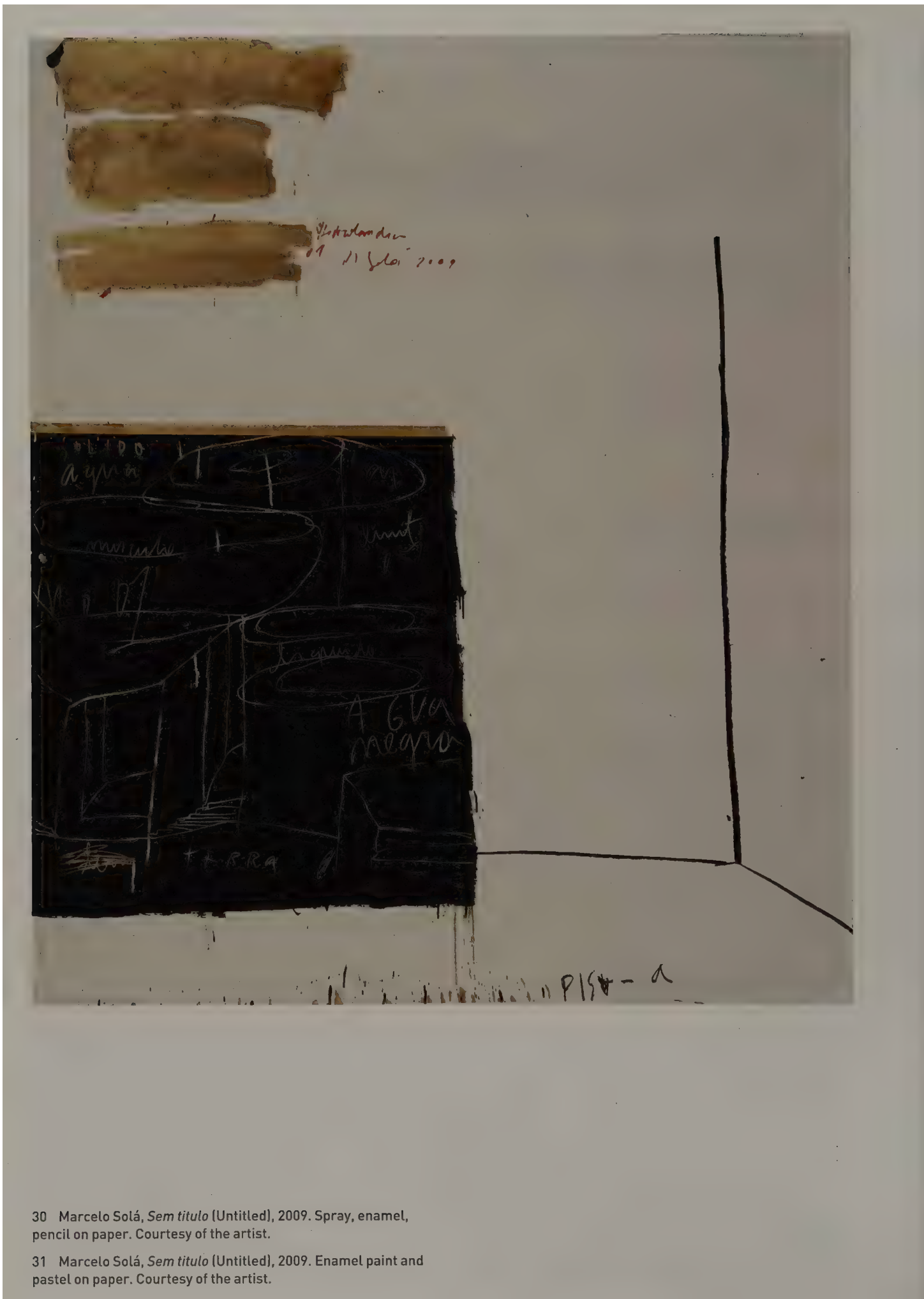Collection of the artist. Courtesy Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo.

20   Nicolás Robbio, *Sem título* (Untitled), 2008. Cut paper and
projector. Courtesy Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo.

28   Marcelo Solá, *Sem título* (Untitled), 2012. Enamel paint and pastel on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

29   Marcelo Solá, *Sem título* (Untitled), 2009. Watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

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30 Marcelo Solá, *Sem título* (Untitled), 2009. Spray, enamel,
pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

31 Marcelo Solá, *Sem título* (Untitled), 2009. Enamel paint and
pastel on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

33   (Previous page) Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, *Teque-teque*,
2011. Mono-channel video installation; color, sound, suspended
screen. 38 sec loop. Courtesy of the artist.

34   Héctor Zamora, *Errante* (Errant), 2010. Digital prints. Courtesy
of the artist. Photos courtesy of the artist, Labor Gallery, and
Luciana Brito Gallery.