ilê sartuzi

vaudeville

**Vaudeville**
installation view
Pedro Cera, Lisbon

**VAUDEVILLE – Ilê Sartuzi**
Fernanda Brenner


"it's / gone, / but you—/ what is it you are / seeing—see it again."
Jorie Graham


The cover of the April 24th, 2023, edition of the New Yorker magazine shows two hands "drawing each other", alluding to M.C Escher's 1948s Drawing Hands. The difference here is that one is human, and the other is an android. JooHee Yoon's clever image illustrates the reciprocity and tension between artists and high-tech tools (is the robot hand drawing the real hand, or vice versa?). Bestselling historian-cum-philosopher Yuval Harari said in an interview for the Telegraph that same week: I don't know if we can survive AI. "This is the first technology in history to create stories", says Harari. Try to imagine what it means to live in a world where non-human intelligence creates most texts and melodies and then TV series and images. We just don't understand what it means. What could be the consequences of AI taking over culture? In 2022, over 700 top academics and researchers behind the leading artificial intelligence companies were asked in a survey about future A.I. risk. Half of those surveyed stated that there was a 10 percent or greater chance of human extinction (or similarly permanent and severe disempowerment) from future A.I. systems.

While halfway into writing this text and after reading too many alarming articles about the fast pace AI is taking over the public sphere and debate, artist Ilê Sartuzi sent me a voice message about a laughing chair. He and artist Gabriel Lemos turned an old cinema chair into a well-humored object by training an AI to produce a sound emulating human laughter. That algorithmic combination of dozens of 'ready-made' giggles found online was the last work to enter the exhibition, his first solo show in Portugal, at Pedro Cera gallery.

Laughter is often considered to be the byproduct of humor. However, it is also a social and contextual emotion, occurring most frequently in interactions. In other words, we are much more likely to laugh with someone else than if we are on our own. It takes two to tango, they say. As their original function prescribes, the chair faces a moving image work. The object's interactive aspects are deliberately unclear. Shall we sit on its mocking seats to watch the film? Or is the chair laughing at our helplessness? Meanwhile, something weird is happening on the screen: a haunting presence dances before our eyes and in front of curtains that never open.

When a curtain is drawn, it means that the show is about to start. We sit anxiously in theatre seats, awaiting the swelling of the music. The large red velvet curtain is a synonym for a certain kind of live entertainment and is a symbol of the grandeur and aesthetics of European theatre successfully exported worldwide. Its heavy imponent fabric incites the audience to sit in anticipation and awe, wondering what the opening set will look like. It provides a palpable barrier between real life and fiction between those on stage and those in the audience. Moreover, lowering the curtain at the end of the show signals that it is finished. Ilê Sartuzi's obsession with curtains, or perhaps more accurately, with what the movement of curtains hides or reveals, is not new.

One of the works presented at the end of his residency at Pivô in São Paulo in 2022 was a clumsy automated voile curtain that never revealed or covered anything. That phantasmagorical object already announced what he would further develop in his latest exhibition, under the revealing title of Vaudeville. A Vaudeville was originally a series of live performance sketches without psychological or moral intentions, based on a comical situation: a dramatic composition or light poetry interspersed with songs or dance acts. Originally from France, it was consolidated as a model for variety entertainment in the United States and Canada from the early 1880s until the early 1930s. Comedians, singers, plate-spinners, ventriloquists, dancers, musicians, acrobats, animal trainers, and anyone who could keep an audience's interest for more than three minutes were eligible as a vaudeville act. Lighthearted astonishment in times of difficulty was apparently the goal.

Time feels out of joint, Hamlet famously said after being visited by his father's ghost. The somewhat nostalgic and, at the same time, unsettling tone of this exhibition made me think about the longlisting entanglement between ghosts, cinema, and machines. In 1928, sound entered the realm of motion pictures, and with it, a new age began for the young medium, and the conventions of an art form were changed forever. Following the success of the first Mickey Mouse cartoon, young entrepreneur-animator Walt Disney, released the short film The Skeleton Dance, in 1929. As its tagline says, the film is a talking picture novelty in which audiences were able to witness a good song accompanied by an animated film, similar to what we now know as a music video. Disney's moving-image take on medieval danse macabre inspired Ilê Sartuzi's 3D-printed, dancing skeleton sculpture of the same name. In the artist's work, the original soundtrack comes out of a contact speaker placed in the automated marionette-like wooden structure holding the figure. The interspersed rhythm of the tune and the squeaking noise of the motor and the strings holding its bones shifts anxious energy around the space, creating a tension that is periodically broken by sequels of absurdist monologues of this work and the other theatrical moving pieces on view.

Ilê Sartuzi's art exhorts us; it always seems to say: look behind you, turn, look down as much as you can, and notice all that disappears. His eerie moving gadgets, paintings, and installations beg us to be present (for at least three minutes) in order to relate to what is absent. He is like a conductor orchestrating multiple claims on our attention while bringing the parts of the exhibition together as a whole. The shifting rhythms and the imminence of action in the works seem to reveal the artist's will to decivilize narrative, to unhinge it from its plot—those clipped-off attempts to tell a story make you think that there might be something recognizable on the horizon, but curtains close again. Sartuzi quickly slams you into a wall that obliterates the view.

His work reveals a lot about itself without necessarily telling us anything. While fluently speaking the uncanny idioms of artificial intelligence, machines, and riddle-me realities, Sartuzi seems to be bringing us to the edge of comprehensibility not to examine anything particular about the human condition and its achievements but to keep the banality of existence at bay. His works point towards the curtain of illusions that could descend over humanity, and we might never again be able to tear it away — or even realize it is there. There is a Beckettian sense of impending disaster in the air, and, at the same time, the chair's laughter is incessant. Can we laugh together? Shall we laugh at it?  This exhibition seems to be dealing with our uncertain future in a non-brutal (and nonlinear) way. Ilê Sartuzi shows us another way of thinking about human and nonhuman presences. His works are a reminder that nothing is entirely fact or fiction and that nothing is set in stone—or silicon.

**four curtains**, 2023
steel, velvet, stepper motor and arduino
46 x 156 x 46 cm

**Vaudeville**
installation view
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**proscenium,** 2023
wood, 3D printed resin, LED, arduino
40.5 x 11 x 12.5 cm

**curtain**, 2023
velvet and pins on wood
170 x 122 x 43 cm

**Vaudeville**
installation view
Pedro Cera, Lisbon

**Four Curtains** presents a choreography of movements for red velvet curtains around a steel structure. In each side, the curtains open in the middle with partial openings. The centre of the piece, however, is empty. Therefore, there is nothing to reveal and nothing to hide behind the curtains. This series of movements draw attention to the functioning of the object itself, its infrastructure; and the different possibilities of the gaze going through the openings of the curtains. In its simplicity and transparency, this machine engages the spectator with expectations that are soon broken by its anarchic choreography.

The **Skeleton Dance** is an animated puppet that dances to the music of the homonymous animation, the first ever done by Walt Disney, in 1929. Following the tune of the "Silly Symphony" a choreography of movements is programmed to match the loose body of the skeleton. It is significative (but also well humored) that the animation gives life to a symbol of death, drawing relations to the medieval "danse macabre". Here, the "memento mori" is intertwined with a celebration of life in this animated dancing object.

**Skeleton Dance**, 2023
3D printed resin, strings, wood, arduino, transducer speaker, servo motors, curtain
variable dimensions | skeleton 48.5 x 23 x 18 cm approx.

> click here to watch the dance

**Vaudeville**
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**curtain (after Fontana)**, 2023
velvet and pins
42 x 34.8 x 3 cm

**Vaudeville**
installation view
Pedro Cera, Lisbon

**untitled,** 2023
oil on canvas
110 x 60.8 x 3.5 cm

**no name**, 2022
voil, thread, cable tray, stepper motor, arduino, sewing bobbin
variable dimensions

> click here to watch in movement

**Vaudeville**
installation view
Pedro Cera, Lisbon

**Vaudeville**
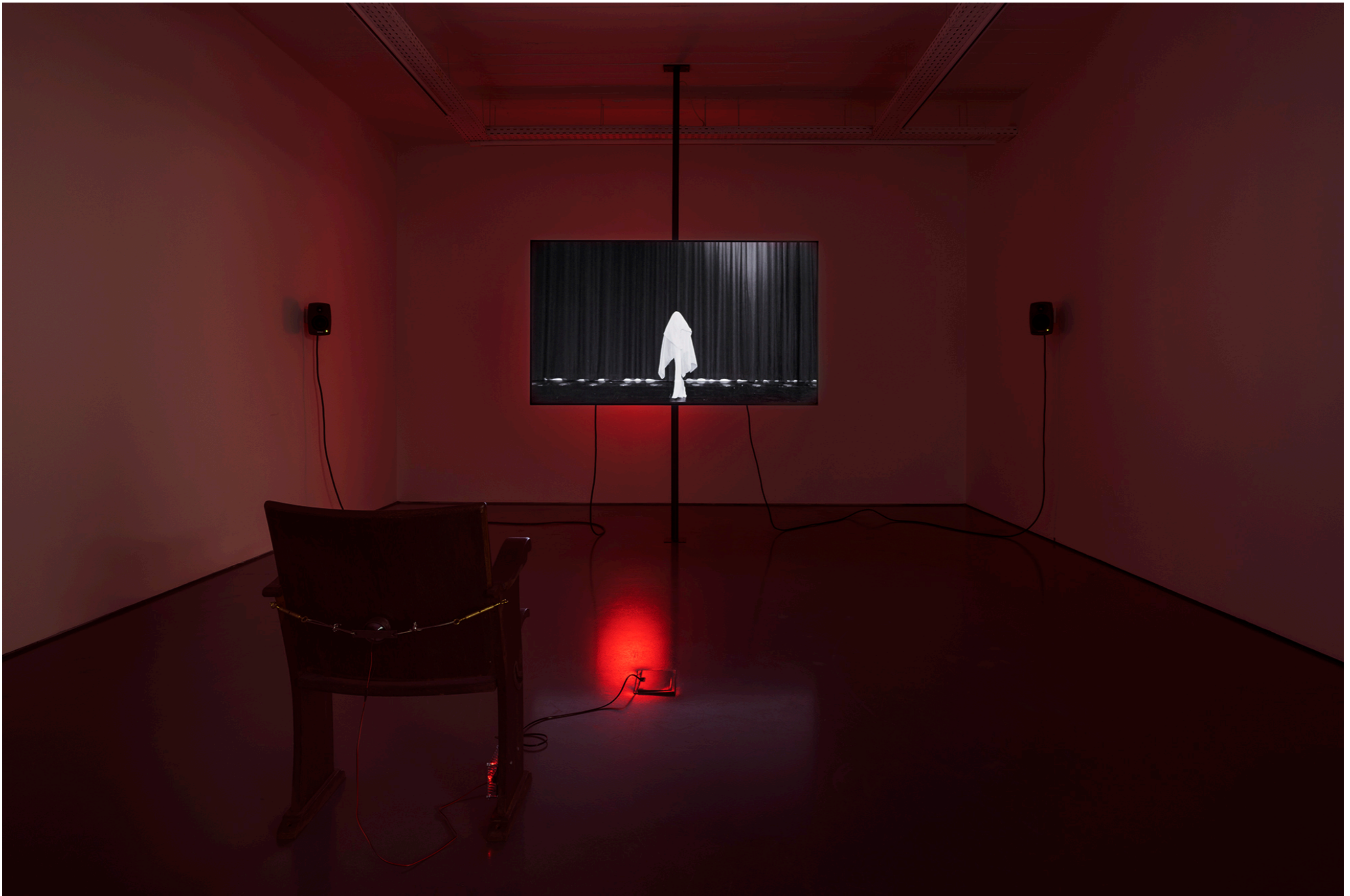installation view
Pedro Cera, Lisbon

**untitled**, 2023
oil on canvas
40 x 30.5 x 2 cm

**Lovebirds,** 2023
light bulbs, ceramic lamp holder, cable, arduino and relay
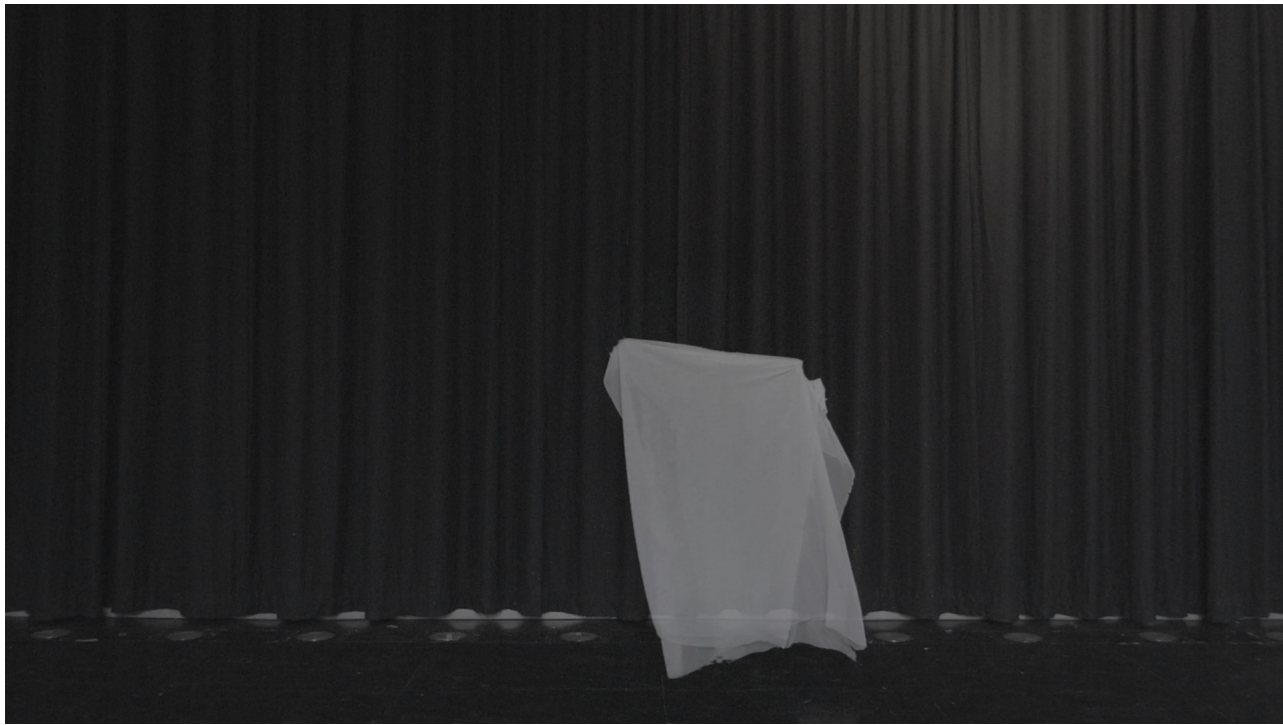20 x 9 x 20 cm

> <u>click here to watch in movement</u>

**Vaudeville**
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**Laughing Chair,** 2021-2023
cinema seat, arduino, transducer speaker, steel cable
80 × 57 × 48 cm

In collaboration with Gabriel Francisco Lemos

**Ghostbuster,** 2023
video HD with sound
9 min

> click here to watch the video

**Ghostbuster** is a short video that draws from the early relations between cinema and magic, exploring montage tools and simple technics that are transparent here. In this "vaudeville" environment, a light voile falls in front of black curtains, sometimes revealing a human figure underneath the fabric. Thus, the relation between revealing and hiding that a fabric could have is inverted and it is only in its presence that we can see the ghostly figure. The sound design by Gabriel Francisco Lemos uses an old *pianola* - which, in itself has a ghostly and an automaton-like feeling - that again goes back to the 1920s.

The **Laughing Chair,** created in collaboration with Gabriel Francisco Lemos, uses a transducer speaker to make the object reproduce a weird laugh. The sound is created by an artificial intelligence that was trained with a database of hundreds of laughing sounds that were downloaded from the internet. Through "machine learning" the algorithm synthesized his own laughter which, in addition to a characteristic background noise, resulted in a more or less successful rendering of a human inhaling and exhaling through (more or less controlled) muscular contractions of the abdomen.

**Vaudeville**
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click here to watch the interview

**Ilê Sartuzi** (1995, lives and works between London and São Paulo) is an artist graduated from the University of São Paulo (USP) and now pursues his MFA at Goldsmisths, University of London. He received the PIPA Award (Brazil, 2021), the prize at the Bienal de Artes Mediales (Chile, 2022), and has been nominated twice for the CIFO-Ars Electronica award (USA-Austria, 2022-2023). His research involves sculptural objects, moving images, mechatronic installations and theatrical plays toying with the idea of animating objects. Building hybrid bodies while also exploring absence as a central element of the works, Sartuzi speculates about a post-anthopocene scenario. With a characteristic theatricality, his objects and installations are animated by mechanical movements and interpret dramaturgies and choreographies, often in an exercise of repetition that leads to no catharsis but, instead, start to reveal the functioning of the machines themselves.

Some of his recent solo exhibitions and projects include "Vaudeville" at Pedro Cera (Lisbon, 2023); "hollow head doll's foam" at SESC Pompéia (São Paulo, 2022) and "A. And A again." at auroras (São Paulo, 2021). He has participated in exhibitions at some of the most important institutions in Brazil, such as Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (2021, 2023); Videobrasil (2021); Museu Oscar Niemeyer (2022); Bienal SUR (2021); Instituto Moreira Salles (2020); SESC (Pinheiros, 2022; Ribeirão Preto, 2019; Distrito Federal, 2018); CCSP – Centro Cultural São Paulo (2018); MAC-USP Museu de Arte Contemporânea (2017); Museu de Arte de Ribeirão Preto (2020; 2017; 2015); Galeria Vermelho (2017; 2018, 2019); all three in collaboration with the research group After the End of Art, which he has been part of from 2015 to 2021. He presented theatrical plays, performing mapped video projections in spaces such as Oficina Oswald de Andrade (2018, 2020); Itaú Cultural (2019); Container Theater (2019) and at TUSP (2019). Working for more than a year on a specific project, he presented his play with absent actors "hollow head doll's foam" at Firma (São Paulo, 2019) and later premiered the play at SESC Pompéia (São Paulo, 2022). His work is in public and private collections including that of Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, Instituto PIPA and Videobrasil.



**+**, 2023
epoxy resin
6,2 × 6,2 × 2,6 cm