

Trick

artist shows his theft from the British Museum
for the first time in São Paulo

The exhibition “*Trick*” consists of a series of subtle interventions — similar to magic tricks — that reveal infrastructural elements of institutional spaces dedicated to culture and art. These works involve technological security elements that are often invisible, playing with the visitor’s experience and focusing attention on peripheral aspects of the museum environment. The exhibition has two main cores: one of them orbits around “Sleight of Hand” (2023-2024) and the other is a series of “Propositions for museum security systems” (2023) that were first published in text format in Revista Rosa.

I. Sleight of Hand

Testing the boundaries of the law, London-based Brazilian artist Ilê Sartuzi performed a sleight of hand, temporarily “stealing” a historical coin from the collection of the British Museum. After more than a year of planning, the artist secretly exchanged a 1645 silver coin minted in Newark during the English Civil War with a fake replica. With the coin under his possession, the artist left Room 68 – the money section of the British Museum – and went downstairs to deposit the object in the donation box of the museum.

“Sleight of Hand” is a trick. It is also a short-circuit. It introjects back to the institution their own (historical) issues. Formally, this work is a simple and direct gesture. It has the elegance of a magic trick, a “legerdemain” that, if not intentionally highlighted, could go unnoticed. In a way, the gesture also resonates Francis Alÿs iconic motto “maximum effort, minimum result”. It is almost silly in its banality. The countless hours spent visiting the British Museum (over twenty times in a year) to map the working schedule of the volunteers contrasts with the split of the second of the sleight of hand and the elasticity of time on the day of the actual heist.

Beyond the provocations of incorporating this figure of the trickster, thinking about sleight of hand as a form, misdirection as procedure and stealing as art; this project raises debates around value, property, the historical violence of law and its role in legitimizing looting as a tool for the foundation of “universal museums” such as the institution in question. By returning the coin to the donation box of the museum, it not only denounces these infamous imperialist bases of said institutions but opens a speculation about the organization of this infrastructure and its administration. As a trick, it both misdirects the attention but also creates a full circle back to the same place. In a scale dimension, the gesture – as small as it is – inverts dynamics of power with the museum, flipping the relation between the colonial authority and the colonial subject.

The fact that the artist chose a coin as the target object of this heist points to an interest in the nature of money as a social construct and medium of exchange that is based on a “leap of faith”. This fetishistic character of money as a form is closely related with the experience of the “momentary suspension of disbelief” that is the basis of magic.

Documentation of this work was first shown at the MFA graduate exhibition at Goldsmiths (London). A two-channel video installation featuring footage of the heist and planning material was shown alongside two replicas of the coin in a museum display and a text. Each new presentation of the work now incorporates different documents that were not in the first exhibition, as well as new works that have been developed around this same project.

II. Some propositions for museum's security systems

Some of the works included in "Trick" were first published in Revista Rosa. Conceptually, these pieces explore different modes of circulation and existence within the art circuit, adapting to various contexts of exhibition and accessibility. Their minimalist interventions in the exhibition space make them less about visual spectacle and more about sharpening the viewer's perception of infrastructural elements that usually go unnoticed. In this way, Sartuzi animates security cameras, sensors and alarms, switches and lights. (For a detailed description of the works, see the full article below)

LINKS FOR TEXTS (SELECTION)

- ATON, Francesca. *Brazilian Artist Steals Historic Coin From the British Museum as Part of Art Project*. published on July 15th 2024 on [ARTnews](#)
- BASCIANO, Oliver. *How to Steal From the British Museum: A Brazilian Artist's Guide*. Published on July 16th 2024 on [ArtReview](#)
- BIERENS, Maribelle. *Ilê Sartuzi "steals" historical coin from the British Museum*. Published on July 16th 2024 on [Where's The Frame?](#)
- D'ALANCAISEZ, Pierre. *Art as Collateral*. Published on August 7th 2024 on [The Critic](#)
- GILMOUR, Claire Isabella. *An artist has stolen a coin from the British Museum as part of a performance piece – but is the artwork ethical?* Published on July 26th 2024 on [The Conversation](#)
- HUERTES, Sarah. *Art Student Pulls Off a (Very Brief) Coin Heist at the British Museum*. published on July 23rd 2024 on [The New York Times](#)
- KHOMAMI, Nadia. *Brazilian artist swaps historical coin in British Museum for a fake*. published on July 22nd 2024 on [The Guardian](#)
- MOFFITT, Evan. *Another object has been stolen from the British Museum - but this time by an artist*. published on July 15th 2024 on [The Art Newspaper](#)
- MOLITOR, Felipe. *O mágico, a moeda, a sala do dinheiro e as negociações simbólicas de Sleight of Hand*. In: *Crítica Infraestrutural*. São Paulo: [Celeste](#), N.02, 2024.
- MOUNT, Harry. *Artist swaps historic British Museum coin for one he faked using egg and coffee*. Published on July 28th 2024 on The Sunday Times.
- MUZAFFAR, Maroosha. *Brazilian art student swaps Civil War coin at British Museum in colonial artefacts protest*. published on July 23rd 2024 on [Independent](#)
- RICHTER, Hani. *Artist swaps British Museum coin with fake*. published on July 23rd 2024 on [Reuters](#)
- ROCHA, Matheus. *Um passe de mágica*. published online on July 31st 2024 and printed on August 6th 2024 on [Folha de São Paulo](#)
- SWARD, Brandon. *Brazilian Conceptual Artist Steals Historic Coin From the British Museum*. published on July 12th 2024 on [Hyperallergic](#)

Ilê Sartuzi - Trick

Opening March 15, 11AM - 8PM

Up until June 15 2025

Tuesday to Sunday, from 10AM – 9PM

Free entrance

Museu de Arte Contemporânea
da Universidade de São Paulo
Av. Pedro Álvares Cabral, 1301
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Ilê Sartuzi (1995, lives and works between London and São Paulo) is an artist graduated from the University of São Paulo (USP) and with an MFA from Goldsmiths, 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).

With a conceptual and research-based approach, my practice involves sculptural objects, mapped video projections, mechatronic installations, tricks, theatrical plays (and more) toying with the idea of animating objects and infrastructural elements. The interest in the dramatic arts has given a theatricality to these objects and installations which are animated by mechanical movements and interpret dramaturgy and choreographies; often in an exercise of repetition that leads to no catharsis but, instead, begin to reveal the functioning of the machines themselves. Meaning, often operating with an empty centre of attention or unidirectional meaning – the idea of absence is recurrent – these systems play with opacity and transparency showing nothing but their own functioning, their internal logics of communication and power relations. More recently, procedures of misdirection and sleight of hand with a special interest for investigating institutional infrastructure were incorporated to the research. Evidentially, in a similar realm, issues relating to the circulation in the art system (and its tropes) and site-specificity are also explored.

These autonomous devices not only replace human actors, they usually perform for no one but themselves, thus speculating about a possible post-anthropocenic scenario. It should be noted that despite the theatricality, the minimalist procedures are usually surgical (simple and precise) offering little room to overtly dramatical situations. They share qualities with the figure of the trickster: as manipulative as they can be, there's always the elegance of a well-performed "legerdemain".

Some of his recent solo exhibitions and projects include "Trick" at the Museum of Contemporary Art (São Paulo, 2025); "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 (Pompéia, 2022; Pinheiros, 2022; Ribeirão Preto, 2019); 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. His work has been featured in some of the main newspaper and art publication including The New York Times, The Guardian, The Art Newspaper, ArtReview, Artforum, Hyperallergic, Folha de São Paulo (among others) and is in public and private collections including that of Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, coleção moraes-barbosa, Instituto PIPA, Videobrasil and the British Museum.