

Did Ilê Sartuzi Rob the British Museum?

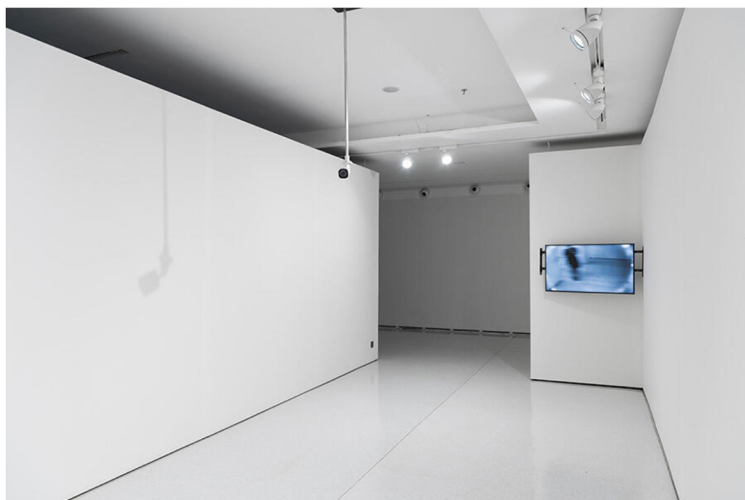
The artist's exhibition at Museu de Arte Contemporânea in São Paulo presents compelling investigations into surveillance, paranoia and museal security

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BY MATEUS NUNES IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 24 APR 25



During my visit to Ilê Sartuzi's current exhibition, 'Trick', at Museu de Arte Contemporânea in São Paulo, an alarm went off, blaring for what felt like an eternity. As if to assert my innocence, I remained seated quietly in one of the galleries, only to quickly realize that the disruption was, in fact, a work from the series 'Propositions for Museum Security Systems' (2023); likewise the strange voice I had heard upon my arrival yelling, 'Turn me off!' Indeed, the entire exhibition is peppered with moments like this. Nearby, *Watchman* (2023–25) comprises a CCTV camera spinning rapidly in the centre of an empty room; alongside hangs a monitor displaying the captured footage. The completely blurred images that result from this restless digital 'eye' prompt us to reflect on the paranoid notion of total surveillance and the disorienting concept of the panopticon as a mechanism of discipline and control.



Ilê Sartuzi, 'Trick', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist

The show's underlying irony is that no alarm is triggered when, in his two-channel video installation *Sleight of Hand* (2023–24), Sartuzi steals a 17th century silver coin from the British Museum's numismatic section. The depicted theft was discovered by the museum much later, through the media, revealing the flaws in the institution's purportedly robust surveillance systems. The footage lasts a few seconds: from the moment the artist removes the coin from the display cabinet in room 68 of the British Museum, replacing it with a replica he created, until he deposits the original in the institution's donation box. Some might not even classify it as a theft, since the object was merely relocated and did not leave the museum's premises.



Ilê Sartuzi, *Watchman* (detail), 2021–25. Courtesy: the artist

Sartuzi's regulatory knowledge is also on display in *Sleight of Hand (Letters)* (2024), precisely argued and politely cooperative correspondences with the British Museum's Legal Service, displayed in a room adjacent to the video. The piece undoubtedly points to a legacy of institutional critique and Brazilian conceptual art, evoking works such as Cildo Meireles's *Ocasão* (Occasion, 1974/2004) – an installation that plays with the idiom 'opportunity makes a thief' – while also resonating with contemporary projects like Glicéria Tupinambá's *Okará Assojaba* (2024), presented in the Brazilian pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale, in which the artist corresponds with European museums about their possession of Indigenous mantles.



Ilê Sartuzi, 'Trick', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist

Highlighting the historically normalized and imperialist heists underwritten by major western art collections, including the British Museum, Sartuzi's *Sleight of Hand* is a brilliantly witty yet almost imperceptible gesture. As such, his work is in dialogue with Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) – a commentary on the Latin American political crisis which saw him invite 500 volunteers to move a dune in Peru a few centimetres using only shovels, inspired by the motto 'maximum effort, minimum result'. Sartuzi similarly stresses the dialectic of such a dynamic: several months of meticulous planning that culminates in nothing more than a slight shift. A small silver coin placed in a donation box mobilizes one of the largest cultural institutions in the world, ignites extensive media attention and questions centuries-old standards. Sartuzi's work is already historic, carving out its place in the panorama of contemporary conceptual art by a mere sleight of hand.

Main image: Ilê Sartuzi, Sleight of Hand, 2023–24, video still. Courtesy: the artist



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