

Ilê Sartuzi to vanish

May 23 – July 30, 2026

Madrid

For the opening of the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in 1986, Richard Serra produced “Equal - Parallel: Guernica- Bengasi”. The sculpture was acquired by the institution in the following year and exhibited again in 1990. Shortly thereafter, it was placed in storage under the care of Macarrón SA. In 2005, amid a systematic review of the museum’s holdings, the institution attempted to trace the sculpture’s whereabouts, only to discover that it could no longer be located. Thirty- eight tons of corten steel had vanished in thin air. Despite the long investigations, the original sculpture was never recovered. The artist agreed to fabricate a replica, that is now the ‘ original’ , currently on display at the institution.

This condensed account serves as the point of departure for the new exhibition by Ilê Sartuzi at Pedro Cera. The Brazilian-born, London-based artist—known for his investigations into institutional frameworks and art-world related tricks—presents a new body of work developed around this unbelievable case. Playing with the notion of ‘parafiction’, presenting propositions that operate between fiction and reality, the exhibition explores multiple strategies for making things disappear. The artist proposes a series of overlapping and at times contradictory readings of the Reina Sofia case, while simultaneously testing possible methods through which the sculpture could vanish once again.

As part of the project, the artist undertook a direct intervention. After several days observing the routines, operations, and security protocols of the museum, he devised a minimal action, temporarily making the thirty-eight tons of steel to disappear, yet another time. On March 14, a Saturday evening, the artist entered the museum with a number of other visitors during the museum’s free admission hours. The artist then performed a carefully studied routine where he closed the doors that give access to room 102 and placed a provisional sign on the door reading, “We lost Richard Serra’s sculpture, again / Sorry for any inconvenience”. With this small and silly action, the sculpture was effectively removed from view – for the eyes of the visitors – for a few minutes.

On the ground floor of the gallery, Sartuzi presents a full-scale replica of Serra’s installation that serves as a support for an array of materials: documents, notes and plans, letters, photographs and newspapers. These elements form a more or less dispersed network of associations around the case. In the basement, additional works extend and complicate these connections, proposing further interpretations of the sculpture and the context that surrounds it.

Engaging with another artist’s work becomes, here, a deliberate method of positioning oneself within an ongoing historical and artistic continuum. Rather than following procedures and a strictly formal investigation, Sartuzi addresses both the mythology that has accrued around the work and its broader conceptual implications. Ultimately, the exhibition approaches a specific historical case as a means to reflect on parafiction, institutional structures, strategies of trickery and deception, the political dimensions of artistic production, and the persistent reverberations of history.

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Ilê Sartuzi (1995, lives and works between London and São Paulo) is an artist who graduated from the University of São Paulo (USP) and holds an MFA from Goldsmiths, University of London. In 2021, he received the PIPA Award.

With a conceptual and research-based approach, Sartuzi develops sculptural situations, choreographies, gestures, contracts, tricks, and spatial dispositifs that investigate the animation of infrastructural elements and narratives. Working across installation, performance, mechanical systems, and moving image, his practice explores the internal logics of communication, circulation, and power relations, often through structures that reveal their own functioning. An interest in the dramatic arts has imbued many of his works with a theatrical dimension, staging dramaturgies and choreographies that unfold through repetition without catharsis, exposing instead the mechanics and conditions that sustain them.

More recently, procedures of trickery, misdirection, and parafiction have become central to his research, particularly in relation to institutional infrastructures and the systems of value and circulation within the art world. Questions surrounding forgery, authenticity, originality, and displacement frequently emerge in works that operate through subtle manipulations of storytelling and perception. Across these investigations, Sartuzi's works often assume qualities associated with the figure of the trickster: disruptive yet precise, ironic yet elegant, unfolding through gestures of sleight of hand that continuously negotiate opacity and transparency.

Some of his recent solo exhibitions and projects include "Contract" at Luisa Strina (São Paulo, 2025); "A CRIME, A CONFESSION AND A TRADE" at NiCOLETTi (London, 2025); "Trick" at Museum of Contemporary Art of São Paulo (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).

Sartuzi has participated in exhibitions at some of the most important institutions in Brazil, including 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; Distrito Federal, 2018); Centro Cultural São Paulo (2018); Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (2017); Museu de Arte de Ribeirão Preto (2020, 2017, 2015); and Galeria Vermelho (2017, 2018, 2019), the latter three in collaboration with the research group After the End of Art, of which he was a member from 2015 to 2021.

His work has been featured in publications including The New York Times, The Guardian, The Art Newspaper, ArtReview, Artforum, Frieze, Hyperallergic, and Folha de S. Paulo, among others. His works belong to public and private collections including Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, coleção moraes-barbosa, Instituto PIPA, Videobrasil, and The British Museum.

He also received the prize at the Bienal de Artes Mediales (2022), and was twice nominated for the CIFO-Ars Electronica Award (2022-2023).

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I

You never quite know what Ilê Sartuzi has in his pocket, let alone in his mind. For an artist known for his sleight of hand, creation (and use) of replicas, and particular way of studying and navigating the web of protocols and theatrical mechanism of institutions, the encounter between Sartuzi's practice and the story of Richard Serra's *Equal-Parallel: Guernica-Bengasi* disappearance+substitution seems like a match made in heaven. When the subject is the relation between individual and institution, Sartuzi has developed the skill of turning his practice into a grain of sand in the institutional engine, small enough to get by unnoticed, yet disruptive enough to force the mechanism to reveal itself. As thoroughly explored by Merleau-Ponty's, all perception is contextual.

The work of Richard Serra is unquestionably a testament to the complexity of perceptual encounter. In this scenario, Sartuzi offers us various extensions of the problem beyond phenomenology alone. Even if a replica can become the original by having the artist's will and blessing, perception remains irreversibly bound to the whole opera of power at play, institutional authority and the production of "aura". Nevertheless, what solidifies the gambling proverb "the house always wins" is that, even when there's an event that upsets an organization such as a big museum, it's the sudden impression of finitude of an object that grants its new added value, so the institution eventually profits from it. For example, part of the experience of going to St Bavo's Cathedral to see *Ghent's altarpiece* is witnessing the apparatus that protects "the world's most stolen art piece", famously taken by both Napoleon and the Nazis. Nowadays the amazing work stands behind a state-of-the-art bulletproof glass worth 5 million euros, operating not only as a beautifully engineered high-security protective translucent glass case, but also as part of the visual and contextual infrastructure that shapes perception.

II

David Copperfield's first tricks/illusions, when he was the youngest person ever admitted to the Society of American Magicians, involved a coin and a board. A coin is a solid metal object and a board is a plain. A metal piece, be it a coin or a sculpture work, by the nature of its material condition, doesn't bend, crumple or vanish by human force alone. The other element, the plain, is the X-Y axis, or floorplan, of any given scale. It is only natural that, as ambitions grow, the magician (or artist, or architect) will want to test out the results of adding scale to the conception of something.

Testing and mastering a model allows for new possibilities. In the short video piece *SERRINHA* (2026), Ilê Sartuzi presents us with a paper model of *Equal-Parallel: Guernica-Bengasi* and the artist himself standing beside it. One gets the impression that a crime scene reconstruction is about to be suggested – an implosion? A hidden tunnel? As an essay and demonstration of making something disappear, Sartuzi takes the model qualities for what they allow and folds up the paper sculpture into his pocket, proposing an impossible and somehow silly solution to the disappearance of the insanely heavy 38 tons of corten steel. In his later self-exposing era that would not have happened if there wasn't a train of lawsuits following various accidents, David Copperfield was once asked how he was certain that the massive rotating turntable platform that changed the viewer's perspective on the Statue of Liberty would not be felt or even suspected – making them believe the statue had actually vanished – and the answer was: loud music and high emotions. Emotions cast a big shadow on perception.

III

Strategies to make a *Richard Serra disappear* (2026), is a true to size replica of *Equal-Parallel: Guernica-Bengasi* that the Brazilian artist presents on the ground floor. Technically, for something to be considered a replica and not a model, the basis it's that scale matches. A replica allows for a relation to the original without the constraints of its singularity. While a replica aims to be close – and at times even pays homage – to the original, a counterfeit is made with the malicious intent to deceive. Apart from artworks, certain objects cannot be freely replicated. Prop money must be one sided.

Toy guns, under US federal law, must have a blazing orange tip (at least 6 mm) or be entirely brightly colored to distinguish them from real weapons. Because emotion is part of the context that informs perception, fear, for example, that comes with the perception of danger, makes a replica gun very close in practice to a real gun. So a replica as mediator between viewer and “true experience” is subject to subjective rules. For those of us who take pleasure in lingering at the peripheries of a plot, there is something almost comical in picturing the Spanish police carrying out a search warrant for four enormous blocks of steel.

The policemen looking for art, having received only a physical description of the missing object, if faced with the replica that would later take its place, could quite reasonably point to it and say: “Here it is!” and enjoy the experience of the aura of a massive, magnetic work of art. The artist, as mediator between his replica – with no malicious intent towards the one that is at Reina Sofia – and the audience, substitutes material fidelity with new layers of information that allow for many entry points towards an experience of context as content and form as phantom.

IV

A blocked room inevitably becomes the most desired room. Restriction produces attraction and scarcity generates value. When Ilê Sartuzi dissects a circuit and plots a route through it, whether or not a live performance ultimately takes place, the effects tend to radiate outward. Reactions may range from a renewed awareness of space and its contents, to outrage at the newly discovered fragility of a system once presumed stable, to the sudden realization that even a grain of sand can possess agency inside an engine.

There is also the secondary spectacle and watching others react. It was only via a kind stranger's email that Sartuzi got familiar with the fact that a while after he performed the coin trick at the British Museum, replicas of his replica began circulating as souvenirs. The power in the tutorial, in the “how-to,” is not to provide recipes for repetition, but to simply demonstrate a stated possibility. And when the fool does something the rest of us wouldn't even care to evaluate the consequences, what we get is a revealed mechanism as a byproduct of sheer curiosity.