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FRICTION: ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PRESENT

ALEXANDRE FARTO AKA VHILS

Friction: Archaeology of the Present

Those who seek to approach their own past must act like someone who excavates. This observation by thinker Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) treats memory as something overlapping in layers—much like the earth, which preserves what once existed upon it. To excavate, in this sense, is to traverse these strata, removing what has accumulated over time to bring its traces to the surface. In cities, it is no different. Beneath one layer of paint lies another; beneath a poster, fragments of its predecessor survive; behind a wall, decades of events remain inscribed in the material itself. At times, fifty or a hundred years of history are separated from the present by only a few millimetres.

It is precisely within these layers that Alexandre Farto—aka Vhils—has developed his unique perspective. The artist grew up on the South Bank of Lisbon, in a landscape shaped by the political, social, and economic transformations that swept through Portugal during the final decades of the 20th century. As a child, he could still find political murals on the walls—remnants from the aftermath of the 1974 Carnation Revolution—featuring utopian, demanding, and at times radical imagery that served as markers of a nation newly emerged from a long-standing dictatorship. Over the years, new layers of imagery began to overlay the old. Portugal's adhesion to the European Union brought with it new forms of consumption and advertising; posters covered the original murals, walls were repainted, and graffiti added further inscriptions. The city evolved without ever entirely erasing its past. Each era left a layer atop the one before it, turning the surface into an involuntary record of its own transformation.

It is from this perspective that Vhils's work operates according to a logic the inverse of which rules much of the contemporary world: rather than adding, he subtracts. Excavating, scraping, drilling, corroding, and exploding become methods for accessing what lies hidden beneath the surface. This approach spans various materials and scales—from concrete to "azulejos" (traditional Portuguese tiles), from doors salvaged from the subway system to video works, as well as site-specific installations and metal structures—some of which are featured in the exhibition "Friction: Archaeologies of the Present", currently on view at Galleria Continua – São Paulo.

Deeply embedded in Portugal's architectural memory, *azulejos* take on an entirely new dimension when their surfaces are breached. By carving into them, Vhils shatters their apparent integrity, allowing an image to emerge through the act of removal—replicating, on a different scale, the same archaeological gesture that defines his engagement with walls. More than mere support, these materials carry their own temporalities: they have been touched, worn down, and exposed to the passage of time and social change. The artist does not seek to restore them or return them to a previous state. On the contrary, he works with what the material itself has accumulated, turning it into a space where the past and the present remain in tension. While archaeology digs to uncover what has been buried, here the excavation takes place within the present itself.

Over the years, this archaeology has expanded in scale. Around 2010, Vhils began traveling across continents—including Asia, Europe, and Latin America—observing and documenting their streets, architecture, and inhabitants. The more he travelled, the more he perceived a paradox: beneath the cultural, historical, and linguistic differences, cities began to reveal increasingly similar processes. Advertising seen in Hong Kong would reappear in London in a different language; the displacement of residents caused by the transformation of neighbourhoods in Shanghai found echoes in Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon. The world seemed to be drawing closer together, even as it erased some of what made each place unique. It is from this realization that the metal structures—covered in layers of torn posters—featured in the exhibition emerge; they are compositions of faces, inscriptions, and images gathered during his travels, like pieces of a contemporary Tower of Babel. Yet, there is no common language to organize them. Instead, there is overlap, noise, encounter, and conflict—a world that is becoming economically integrated while remaining profoundly divided in its lived experiences.

For further information, high-resolution images, or to schedule an interview with the artist, please contact Jéssica (+55 11 93079-1800).
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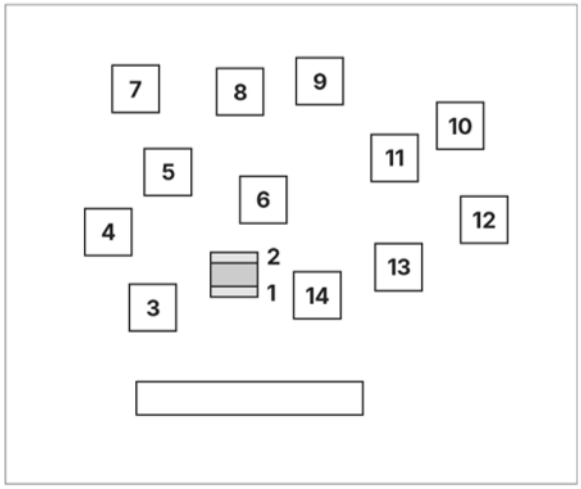
Ultimately, however, Vhils's entire archaeology seems to lead back to the human body. The faces that appear in his work rarely belong to famous figures. They are people he encountered during his travels—inhabitants of the communities with whom he works—anonymous individuals whom he observes, photographs, or sketches. In Brazil, this engagement reached a significant milestone in 2012 at Morro da Providência, in Rio de Janeiro, where he drew upon the stories and memories of local residents to carve their faces directly into the neighbourhood's walls. Some of these individuals lived in homes that had already been demolished or were threatened with removal due to the urban transformations then underway. Excavating these surfaces thus takes on a particular meaning: while the city erases parts of its own territory, the artist inscribes into the material the presence of those who once inhabited it. By bringing these figures to the surface—out of concrete, metal, or other materials—Vhils also inverts the logic of the monument: it is not about perpetuating the image of those whom history has chosen to consecrate, but rather about restoring a sense of presence to those who inhabit these spaces without leaving any visible mark behind. In this gesture, there is an attempt to humanize the material itself—to seek out, beneath the hardness of concrete and the rationality of built structures, which still retains a human dimension. Excavating the city thus becomes a way of excavating ourselves; it is as if, by tearing through the skin of these places, one might uncover, beneath so many layers, traces of who we truly are.

Yet, not everything endures. While these layers may hold signs of what came before, Vhils's work also acknowledges disappearance as an inevitable aspect of existence. A wall may be repainted, a building demolished, an image erased; in the public sphere, his works become subject to the passage of time and the transformations of the site, serving as just one more layer among many—layers that, one day, may themselves vanish. This awareness of impermanence finds its most radical expression in his "explosions," where creation and destruction occur almost simultaneously. Captured at extremely high speed, a gesture lasting a mere fraction of a second can be slowed down to reveal what the human eye would otherwise be unable to perceive. Destruction, therefore, ceases to be the opposite of creation; the two exist instead as moments within the same ongoing process.

In São Paulo, this archaeology of the present is not confined to the interior of a gallery. Both inside and outside, various works establish a continuity between the exhibition space and the city at large, dissolving a boundary that has never been a defining factor in Vhils's practice. The material, ultimately, remains the same: walls, concrete, tiles, doors, posters, images, and fragments plenty with the passage of time. What changes is the way we approach them. While these surfaces often vanish into the blur of everyday urban life, within an exhibition space they invite us to pause our stride and take a second look. Perhaps this is the very gesture that runs through the entire body of work by Vhils: removing material to reveal what lies beneath, slowing down to truly perceive, and excavating what stands before us before a new layer covers it once more.

Ana Carolina Ralston

Curator



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