

*The Guardian*  
20 September 2023

**The  
Guardian**

'Life of trickery'  
... Oiticica in his  
Rio de Janeiro  
studio in 1965



## High art

Hélio Oiticica fled fascism in Brazil, made art out of drugs and filled his flat with nests. Now his wild world is being recreated.  
By **Oliver Basciano**

**I**n the early hours of 13 March 1973, the artist Hélio Oiticica was at his downtown New York loft, high on cocaine, with his friend, the filmmaker and fellow Brazilian Neville D'Almeida. He reached for the nearest thing at hand on which to cut another line – the Frank Zappa & the Mothers of Invention LP *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* – and as he snorted, the artist noticed how the specks of powder sprayed out across the illustration of a man having his face lacerated. This transgressive interruption to what was already a violent image appealed to the pair, and they hit on the idea of using the drug as “paint” to deface the images of a series of similarly boundary-pushing pop culture icons.

“We decided to transform it from cocaine to ‘white colour’. It was no longer cocaine, it was just a colour, it was like transubstantiation,” says D’Almeida, now 82, sitting in the garden of his Rio de Janeiro home. Oiticica – who died of a stroke, aged 42, in 1980 – and D’Almeida added piles of the drug to the cover of a Marilyn Monroe biography, a newspaper profile of film-maker Luis Buñuel, and Yoko Ono’s book

It is lo-fi compared with the kind of immersive art experiences audiences are now used to, but nonetheless disorientating and occasionally claustrophobic. “We were two skinny, starving Brazilians but we wanted to do something that had never been done before,” D’Almeida says.

That Oiticica and D’Almeida were looking for mind-altering escape is understandable given the political hell that Brazil had descended into by the late 1960s – the darkest era of the military dictatorship – when Oiticica was effectively in exile in America. Initially they only dared exhibit the work in Oiticica’s apartment to invited friends, including homeless people and young men that Oiticica would pick up on the street. “The reaction was terrible,” D’Almeida says. “Everybody hated it, everybody was pointing their fingers at us because we used cocaine. There was so much false morality around. It took 20 years for it to be shown in a gallery.”

Oiticica was born to a middle-class bohemian family in Rio de Janeiro in 1937. His father was a photographer; his grandfather had been a committed anarchist. At art college he joined Grupo Frente, an artist movement founded by his teacher Ivan Serpa, alongside Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape, who would similarly become icons of Brazilian art. By the 1960s he and Clark were experimenting with performance and interactive sculpture. “The objective is to give the public the chance to stop being a spectator, from the outside, and become a participant in the creative activity,” the artist wrote. To this end, *Parangolés* was a series of complex multifaceted capes, which the public could wear as part of happenings he staged in Rio’s favelas and at the samba school he joined. At Bexhill, recreated versions of the originals will be on show and visitors will be able to try them on.

The artist’s stay in the US was enabled by a fellowship he received in 1970. The timing was fortuitous as Brazil was becoming too dangerous for him. “I have always liked what is forbidden, the life of trickery. Much of my life has been spent visiting my friends in



Everyone  
hated us  
because we  
used cocaine

Grapefruit. These were in turn photographed and projected on a huge scale in rooms filled with props and loud music.

The 50th anniversary of what became the Cosmococa series - immersive installations, before that style of art was common - is now being celebrated at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea. Images of Jimi Hendix adorned with a mask of cocaine will fill the pavilion, and visitors will be able to listen to the guitarist's riffs from hammocks. (While 90% of Oiticica's work was destroyed in a fire in 2009, the artist left detailed instructions for its staging.)

At the Brazilian sculpture park Inhotim, where the Cosmococa series is on permanent display, the Monroe images flicker on and off in a gallery filled with a tarpaulin-covered sandy beach on which dozens of balloons rest. To view the Ono images, one navigates a gallery of moveable fabric-covered foam, balls, cubes and cones while her music plays. Wandering this psychedelic maze is a strange experience.

prison," Oiticica wrote - but he knew that he didn't want to join them.

It was the law, though, that forced his eventual return to Brazil in 1978. The New York loft had become an overwhelming art project in itself, Oiticica having built a series of "nests": fabric and wood structures in which he could hide with and from the constant parade of people passing through. While initially working as a translator, with his visa long maxed out, he turned to drug dealing. One day the doorbell rang and Oiticica looked down to see a couple of FBI agents staring up at him. As the cops climbed the stairs, he managed to hide his drugs amid the maze of art installations that now consumed the space. It was a close call but one, with the repression back home lessening, that spurred his return to Brazil, and to get clean.

*Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the Internal Sun is at De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, from Saturday to 14 January.*

# APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

## The Brazilian artists who believed in leisure – and wanted to change the world

Robert Barry

13 OCTOBER 2023



Hélio Oiticica at his atelier in Rio de Janeiro, 1965. Photo: Claudio Oiticica; courtesy César and Claudio Oiticica

Of the 20th-century artworks now considered seminal in some way – for forging new paths and founding movements, adding new artistic vocabulary and fresh ways of doing things to the canon – perhaps none were so little seen as the *Cosmococas*. For a long time, these works, created by the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) and film-maker Neville d’Almeida 50 years ago, were a clandestine activity, shown only to the closest of friends and even then, in the strictest of confidence. ‘It was our secret,’ d’Almeida tells me when I speak to him at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, at the opening of an exhibition of Oiticica’s work. ‘We knew!’



What d’Almeida and Oiticica *knew* was that the *Cosmococas* – a set of five light and sound works (plus detailed plans for several more) which surrounded and enclosed their audience in a way that anticipated contemporary immersive installations and environments but were unfamiliar to the art worlds of the early 1970s – might very well get them both into a lot of trouble, perhaps even ‘jail for life’ (or so they thought). The cause of that risk was the prominent place the works gave to an artistic material that remains an uncommon drawing medium to this day: cocaine.



Installation view of *CC5 Hendrix-War* (1973), Hélio Oiticica and Neville D’Almeida. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. Photo: courtesy César and Claudio Oiticica

At the De La Warr, you can lounge on one of eight tasselled hammocks in bright red, blue or green and stare up and around at projected slides splashed across all four walls and the ceiling. The slides show the front of Jimi Hendrix’s posthumous album *War Heroes* (1972), bearing a portrait of the musician’s face. On the surface of the record sleeve, a small book of matches with a Coca-Cola logo has been placed on Hendrix’s chin, like a goatee, and thick lines of white powder snake from his nostrils up to his eyes and temples, as if tracing the very paths of the drug’s effect. Every few minutes, the five carefully positioned projectors click and the slides change. Each time we see the same record sleeve, but with different patterns drawn over them. The amount of cocaine used noticeably reduces with each subsequent image.



From a set of four speakers (one in each corner of the room) one of the tracks from the album, 'Highway Chile', plays at a volume that would certainly be quiet for a gig but feels loud for a museum. Lolling about on the hammocks, rocking back and forth watching the picture show and listening to the music, gallery-goers look supremely relaxed. But after a while, the combination of the psychedelic guitar playing and irregularly flashing projector lamps has a disorienting effect. It feels a bit like being in mid-air.



*Babylonests* (1971), Hélio Oiticica. Photo: Miguel Rio Branco; courtesy of César and Claudio Oiticica

This is a reproduction of *CC5: Hendrix-War*, the fifth and final work D’Almeida and Oiticica created together in 1973. The latter was living in New York at the time, in flight from the military dictatorship occupying Brazil. He had a loft at 81 Second Avenue and twice that year D’Almeida would hop on a flight to visit, staying with a brother who managed a restaurant in the city, but spending most of his time at Oiticica’s place ‘talking, talking, talking’. Since the 1950s, the East Village had been a centre of New York’s counterculture and judging by the images captured in his nephew César Oiticica Filho’s film *Hélio Oiticica* (2012), the softly-furnished *Babylonests* of the artist’s apartment, capsule-like spaces for work and play divided by draped fabrics, were very much a part of that. We see people lounging around, taking drugs and generally enjoying themselves. It was in this bohemian atmosphere that D’Almeida and Oiticica planed and built their *Cosmococas*.

‘We wanted to be radical,’ D’Almeida tells me, ‘to do something that was never done. So we came up this idea of a spatial intervention, to occupy the space with images.’ There were works based around images of Yoko Ono, Marilyn Monroe and Luis Buñuel as well as Hendrix, each one a carefully-selected thorn in the side of American conservatism. Within each installation, the artists placed myriad, pointed cultural references: a thin line of coke across Buñuel’s eye referenced the infamous sliced eyeball in the film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). The hammocks in *CC5*, according to D’Almeida, referred to Hendrix’s time as a paratrooper in his early 20s: ‘He was between the sky and the floor. So that’s why there are these spatial sounds in his music, like *Wahwahwahwah*. Only someone who had been in the sky could do this.’



Hélio Oiticica at his atelier in Rio de Janeiro, 1965. Photo: Claudio Oiticica; courtesy César and Claudio Oiticica

D’Almeida and Oiticica first met a little over five years earlier in Brazil. D’Almeida had just made his first feature film, the nouvelle-vague-ish *Jardim de Guerra* (‘Garden of War’; 1970), only for it to be immediately banned by the authorities in his own country for its depictions of violence and official corruption. But the director was able to organise a small private screening at the request of his friend, the artist and poet Waly Salomão, and Salomão brought along his friend Oiticica. One scene in D’Almeida’s film has the young protagonist being shown a series of projected slides by the shadowy governmental organisation who have arrested him. Oiticica was immediately impressed. ‘He said: “I never saw slide projection in a movie. This is the first time in film history,”’ D’Almeida recalls. ‘I liked him at first sight, and we became friends that day. We went to his house and kept on talking. And we decided to do a work together that could be a bridge between film and art.’

D’Almeida and Oiticica’s collaboration had a long gestation. But then Oiticica was never one to do things in a rush. The *Cosmococas* represented, for him, an example of what he called ‘creleisure’ (or ‘*creleazar*’ in Portuguese), a kind of productive, spiritualised downtime (punning not just on ‘creative leisure’ but also *creer*, Portuguese for ‘belief’). It stood for the utopian eradication of any distinction between work and play, for forms of recreation raised to the status of ecstatic ritual. Cocaine, then, represented processes of transformation and transmigration – between its commonplace acceptance in early 20th-century bourgeois society and the then-recently declared War on Drugs, between North and South America as the former imported drugs from the latter and exported CIA-supported dictatorships in return, and between different states of mind or states of being. ‘We did not make parties!’ D’Almeida repeatedly insists to me. I suspect he protests too much. At a moment contemporary with the first discotheques and club-happening hybrid events at venues like The Loft and The Sanctuary in New York, Oiticica and D’Almeida developed a form of art with the potential to erase the distinction between party and performance, between spectator and participant, between observing and experiencing. ‘Today we live in immersion,’ D’Almeida says. ‘We invented that! We did all of that.’

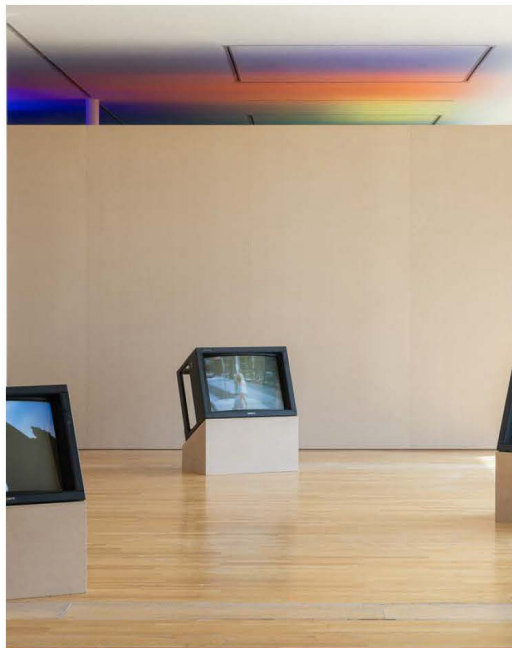
‘Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun’ is at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea until 14 January 2024.



# LISSON GALLERY

*Burlington Contemporary*  
29 November 2023

**BURLINGTON**  
**CON**  
**EMPO**  
**RARY**



Installation view of *Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun* at De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2023. (Photograph Rob Harris).

## **Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun**

by Luke Skrebowski

[Reviews](#) / [Exhibition](#) • 29.11.2023

This exhibition at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, focuses the work of Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) from the late 1960s and 1970s, produced mostly while the artist was living in New York in self-imposed exile from Brazil at the height of the military dictatorship. The diverse range of work includes examples of the *Cosmococa* and *Penetrable* environments, *Parangolé* wearables, experimental films and slideshows, all supplemented with a rich selection of archival material. Well-researched and skilfully curated by Joseph Constable, it is the first major public presentation of Oiticica's work in the United Kingdom for over fifteen years and constitutes an agile response to the travelling retrospective *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* (2016–17) in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Although that exhibition comprehensively covered the artist's later work, it imposed a liberal political framing on his practice, defanging its more radical aspects. While Oiticica's homosexuality,

his embrace of social marginality and his enthusiastic experimentation with psychoactive drugs were all foregrounded, his revolutionary, decolonial commitments – opposing American Neo-imperialism and its authoritarian clientelist regimes in Latin America – were not. By contrast, *Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun* takes its subtitle from a line in the artist's text 'As possibilidades do crelazer' ('The possibilities of creleisure'; 1969) and does much to draw out the still-underappreciated political stakes of this foundational concept, one that oriented his practice throughout the period presented here.

Oiticica's work moved through several discrete but related phases, each with its own conceptual articulation, and each encompassing one or more series of works. As Paula Braga has emphasised, Oiticica's used 'the same word to designate a concept and a project-program, such as *Tropicália* or *Parangolé*'.<sup>2</sup> Creleisure is a distinctive portmanteau combining the senses of creativity, faith, leisure and pleasure, which constitutes one of the most significant of the artist's concept-project-programmes – of which *Parangolé* and *Bólido* are more well-known exemplars. These are all overarching conceptual and material *taxa* that comprise numerous distinct works of art. It did not prescribe 'dropping out' of society, but rather the importance of active struggle within what Guy Debord had identified as the 'battle of leisure': to resist the capitalist stupefaction of the free time that workers had won for themselves through the history of labour struggle.<sup>3</sup> As Oiticica explained in another important text, 'The senses pointing towards a new transformation' (1969): 'Creleisure is the non-repressive leisure, opposed to diverted oppressive leisure thinking: a new unconditioned way to battle oppressive systematic ways of life'.<sup>4</sup>

How then was the battle waged by the artist? In the ground floor gallery, the show opens engagingly, with five little-known short Super 8 films FIG.1 that Oiticica made soon after he had fled to New York in 1970 by means of a Guggenheim Fellowship. In early 1971 the artist enrolled in a film production course at New York University and acquired a Super 8 camera. These rarely seen cinematic sketches register Oiticica's profoundly ambivalent reaction to the city, which he christened 'Babylon'. For him, New York was both a vital hub of transnational cultural energy and the dark heart of an informal empire. *Gay Pride Parade* FIG.2 revels in the uninhibited expression of queer life that Oiticica experienced there, whereas *Wall Street New York* (1971) presents an unflinching look at the drab, phallic monoliths of 'The Street' in the incipient stages of financialisation. *Raffer's Office* FIG.3 records the routine, desk-bound life of a corporate worker in sharp-eyed detail, whereas *Untitled* (1971) shows Oiticica standing outside the loft building where he was attempting to prefigure an alternative way of existing in the city.

Oiticica christened his loft at 81 Second Avenue on the Lower East Side 'Babylonists' and turned it into a space where living, making art, having sex and getting high all blended into and informed each other as experimental practices. Indeed, Babylonists became an artistic prototype for the creation of the liberatory creleisure environments that he hoped to realise and promulgate subsequently at a much larger, urban scale (ultimately without success). The genealogy and development of creleisure as a concept-project-programme bounding several series of works is well communicated in the show by means of a rich, archival wall display FIG.4. Here, an array of documentary photographs are interspersed with an explanatory wall text. The display reveals how the seeds of the notion of creleisure were planted at Oiticica's *Whitechapel Experience* exhibition in London in 1969 and then developed during a residency at the University of Sussex in that same year, just along the coast from the De La Warr Pavilion.

It was during this residency that Oiticica produced *Barracão 1*, a pair of studwork-framed, burlap-wrapped den-like structures, which he designated 'creleisure private group-cells'.<sup>5</sup> Oiticica scaled up this work with many more 'group-cells' for *Barracão 2*, which was shown in Kynaston McShine's group exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), in 1970. After this show, however, the artist became thoroughly disenchanted with exhibiting in mainstream institutions and retreated to his loft using salvaged parts of *Barracão 2* to develop Babylonists as a determinedly extra-institutional artistic space.

Oiticica never straightforwardly finished any of his concept-project-programmes and recursively iterated older ones in dialogue with newer ones. This aspect of his practice is well represented in the show through the inclusion of a sequence of photographs depicting his well-known *Parangolé* capes FIG.5. This includes a number that were produced in New York and worn on the roof of the Babylonists FIG.6 as well as out and about in the city, in front of the World Trade Center and on the subway. Two racks of re-made *Parangolé* capes FIG.7, originally produced between 1967–79, are also included. Yet even as this approach is far truer to Oiticica's intentions than exhibiting untouchable 'originals', it remains unpersuasive as an effective means of (re)animating these historical works. The capes can only be awkwardly donned by self-conscious visitors against the blank backdrop of the gallery space, where they are structurally stripped of any sort of context that might meaningfully reactualise their original vivacity.

In contrast, Oiticica's *Neyrótika* (1973) is revealed in a suggestive new light here by being projected at a relatively small size. The work comprises a soundtracked slideshow featuring numerous portraits of Oiticica's *déshabillé* young male lovers. The intimacy of this scale heightens the recognition, mutuality and frequent tenderness expressed within the desiring gaze that is captured between photographer and photographed. Even as the uneven power dynamics that are also present in these photographs complicate the picture, *Neyrótika* reveals the profound moments of community forged in and through multitudinous erotic encounters.

Can Oiticica's notion of *creleisure* be meaningfully reactivated today? Lying back in a hammock in Oiticica's and Neville D'Almeida's *CC5 Hendrixwar/Cosmococa-Programa-in-Progress* FIG.8, looking up at various large-scale projections of the cocaine-traced cover of Jimi Hendrix's *War Heroes* (1972) and listening to the album blasting out, one has cause for doubt. This now well-known work is exhibited on its own in a gallery on the first floor and serves as a finale of sorts. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that it was highly innovative and transgressive when it was first conceived – having to wait over twenty years to be considered exhibitable – half a century on, long after the co-option of the counterculture and the normalisation of recreational drug-taking across the political spectrum, the work signifies differently. Today, the images of fat lines of cocaine traced on a classic 'underground' record cover conjures a forty-something banker's big night in as much as an act of cultural resistance. Are we therefore constrained to a historical appreciation of *creleisure's* relics?

Oiticica's *Filter Project – For Vergara* FIG.9 suggests otherwise. Originally shown *in absentia* for an exhibition at Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM), Rio de Janeiro, in 1972, this large-scale *Penetrable* is exhibited for the first time in the United Kingdom. As one negotiates this sparse, labyrinthine structure, strip-lit with garish fluorescents, one hears a transistor radio spouting local news, drinks *suco de laranja* (orange juice), the taste of which seems synaesthetically distorted, and stares at a television set endlessly showing a weather map of Latin America. At the end of each of its four corridors one can look out through turquoise, yellow, orange and blue coloured panels that lend the world queasy colour casts – and here cleverly coincide with the front windows of the De La Warr Pavilion looking out on to the English Channel.

Oiticica envisaged the work as a parody of multimedia and a critique of Brazilian society, which was conceived against the backdrop of the military junta's intensified repression post-1968 and its recuperation of the oppositional Tropicalist counterculture that flowered briefly in the country, and within which Oiticica had been an instrumental figure. Here, then, *creleisure* is given a dark, parodic inflection, fully aware of its own potential *détournement* by repressive forces. More generally, the work argues persuasively for the need to salvage some form of liberatory project from the ruins of those that have been co-opted. As such, *Filter Project – For Vergara* is the urgent highlight of this significant show.





## Exhibition details

[Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun](#)

De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea

23rd September 2023–14th January 2024

## About the author

**Luke Skrebowski**

teaches the history and theory of late modern and contemporary art at the University of Manchester.

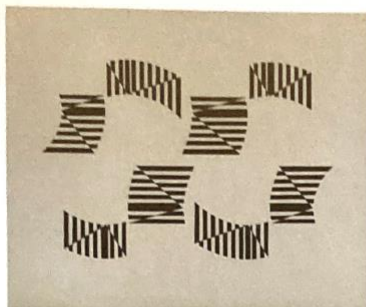
## Footnotes

- 1 L. Zelevansky, E. Sussman, J. Rondeau and D. De Salvo: exh. cat. *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, Pittsburgh (Carnegie Museum of Art), Chicago (Art Institute) and New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2017–18, reviewed by Edward J. Sullivan in *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 159 (2017), pp.170–72.
  - 2 P. Braga: 'Conceptualism and life-experience', in *idem*, ed.: *Fios Soltos: A Arte de Hélio Oiticica*, São Paulo 2008, pp.277–87, at p.278.
  - 3 G. Debord: 'Report on the construction of situations and on the terms of organization and action of the International Situationist Tendency' [1957], in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. T. McDonough, Cambridge MA 2002, pp.29–50, at p.46.
  - 4 H. Oiticica: 'The senses pointing toward a new transformation' [1969], *ARTMargins* 7, no.2 (2018), ed. L. Skrebowski, pp.129–35, at p.132. This important text was originally commissioned by *Studio International* and delivered by Oiticica but never published in the magazine.
  - 5 *Ibid.*, p.134.
-

frieze

January/February 2021

## frieze



### Hélio Oiticica

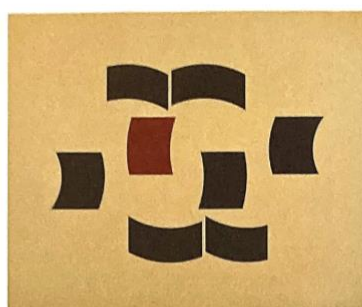
Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil

After months of lockdown, descending the red concrete staircases of Museu de Arte de São Paulo to find a wide selection of Hélio Oiticica's colourful, dancing works hanging from the ceiling and on the walls was a sensorial blast. For almost seven months, the exhibition – comprising paintings, sculptures, installations and relational works – languished in the darkened museum. Now, the public can experience a socially distanced version of the original project, which initially envisioned several possibilities for collective interaction, including the artist's vibrant, walk-in installations from the series 'Penetrável' (Penetrable, 1960–79) and wearable copies of his famous multilayered garments, the 'Parangolés' (1964–79).

Part of the museum's year-long programme devoted to exploring the relationship between dance and the visual arts, 'Hélio Oiticica: Dance in My Experience' immerses visitors in the frenetic rhythm of the artist's heyday antics. Co-curators Adriano Pedrosa and Tomás Toledo reveal Oiticica's irrevocable connection to space and the moving body through 126 of his most emblematic works, installed according to a syncopated choreography inside the museum's lower-level gallery.

In close dialogue with Lina Bo Bardi's iconic architecture, the exhibition follows Oiticica's restless pursuit of expanding the boundaries of pictorial space, creating a red-walled, encompassing environment that nods to what Oiticica defined in his personal notes from the 1960s as 'chromatic environments'. This concept was already visible in his earlier gouache series 'Metaesquemas' (1956–59); here, dozens of these crisp, small-scale, geometric paintings on cardboard densely populate two of the gallery's long red walls, inviting the viewer to follow their sequences of dynamic lines and shapes.

In 1964, Oiticica began spending time at Mangueira, one of Rio de Janeiro's traditional samba schools, located in the



eponymous favela – a radically different environment from his bourgeois milieu. Drawing on the socio-political and relational aspects of his work, Oiticica increasingly advocated for an art of lived experience. Yet, as this retrospective makes explicit, even in his most radical projects, such as the 'Parangolés' wearable sculptures, Oiticica never fully abandoned the formal rigor of his early geometric works, creating relational objects equally informed by shape and colour.

As the artist conceived them, the 'Parangolés' only truly come into existence when worn and danced in; they require

the body to serve as support structure, to become one with the art. Originally designed for his Mangueira friends, the 'Parangolés' had their first art-world outing in 1965, when Oiticica invited a group of dancers to wear them to the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, where he was participating in the exhibition 'Opinião 65'. When they arrived, however, they were barred from entering. If the 'Parangolés' questioned the museum's criteria for what is considered art, the works' activation by Black and Brown bodies exposed the identitarian and class frictions of a society riddled with inequality.

Forty years after his passing, Oiticica's total commitment to the inevitable entanglement of art and life speaks to our present moment and to the importance of co-existing with multiple perspectives while the world stumbles. As his groundbreaking propositions emphasize, significant change requires radical action. Climbing the red stairs to return to the pandemic reality of Avenida Paulista, the city's busiest thoroughfare, Oiticica's famous statement, emblazoned on *Pl6 Parangolé Cape 12* (1965), came to mind: 'From adversity we live.'

— Fernanda Brenner



**Above Left**  
Hélio Oiticica,  
*Metaesquema*, 1957,  
gouache on  
cardboard, 46 × 54 cm

**Above Right**  
Hélio Oiticica,  
*Metaesquema*, 1957,  
gouache on  
cardboard, 45 × 53 cm

**Below**  
Geraldo Viola,  
Caetano Veloso  
wearing *Pl6 Parangolé*  
*Cape 1* (1964), 1968,  
photograph



# LISSON GALLERY

*The Brooklyn Rail*  
1 September 2020

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

**ArtSeen**

## Hélio Oiticica: *Dance in My Experience*



Hélio Oiticica parading with the Samba School Estação Primeira de Mangueira, Rio de Janeiro, circa 1965-1966. Courtesy the Hélio Oiticica project.

New Yorkers who had an opportunity to see the exhibition *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* at the Whitney Museum in 2017 may have tried on his “*Parangolés*”—multilayered garments and capes made of fabric, plastic, or paper often bearing political slogans. Devised to be worn, experienced, and danced with by the spectator, these groundbreaking paintings-in-motion were conceived after Hélio Oiticica began to take part in the Estação Primeira de Mangueira, the venerable samba school located in Mangueira, a favela in Rio de Janeiro, in 1964. Oiticica’s experience was profoundly transformative—so much so that he eventually began parading during Carnival. Initially affiliated with the Neo-Concrete Movement and its tenets of rigor, method, and technical precision, Oiticica shifted his investigations from geometric painting to aesthetic experiences beyond the traditional realm of visual arts, employing dance, choreography, music, rhythm, and the body to incorporate sensorial, participatory, popular, and vernacular elements into his work. To mark the first presentation of the “*Parangolé*” series in 1965, Oiticica invited his friends, residents of Mangueira, to wear them to the Museum of Modern

São Paulo Museum Of  
Art  
March 20–June 7, 2020



Art in Rio de Janeiro. However, the participants were denied entrance. Reacting with expletives, Oiticica left the building, bringing with him the crowd that filled the gallery. The “Parangolés” were then activated by Mangueira members in the gardens designed by Roberto Burle Marx. As the work merged elements of so-called high and low art, it challenged art world standards and the institutional veto of the participation of people from a favela exposed the systemic racism and rampant social inequality in Brazilian society.

The “Parangolés” are now the starting point of *Dance in My Experience*, an exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP). The presentation was already set up when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and like other public and private venues, MASP was shut down. As São Paulo emerged as one of the global pandemic’s epicenters and a reopening became increasingly elusive, the solution was to pivot part of the show to a virtual setting. As a result, the 19 *Parangolés* on view—14 of which are replicas that can be worn—remain hanging in the walls of the museum rather than being experienced by the public. Due to safety measures, it will not be possible to wear them once the museum resumes its activities (at this point, neither the reopening date nor the closing date for the exhibition are clear). While this is disappointing and certainly not the experience envisioned by curators Adriano Pedrosa and Tomás Toledo, the impromptu online exhibition allows it to resonate with audiences in the spirit of the message inscribed on one of *Parangolés*, “*da adversidade vivemos*,” or “from adversity we live.” A guided tour, installation views and images of artworks now form the core of the online iteration. Photographs, writings, videos, and ephemera related to the “Parangolé” series, present in the physical exhibition, are elements that are very much missed from the online show.

Taking its title from a text written by Oiticica and published in 1965, the exhibit revisits his body of work through the lens of dance, rhythm, and choreography, from the “*Metaesquemas*” [Meta-structures], “*Relevos espaciais*” [Spatial Reliefs], “*Núcleos*” [Nuclei], “*Penetrável*” [Penetrables], “*Bólides*” [Fireballs], and, finally, the “Parangolé” series. While dance is intentionally both a thematic and integral part of the *Parangolés*, rhythmic and choreographic elements are present in more subtle and encrypted modes within earlier works. Take the “Metaesquema,” series from the 1950s, as an example. These gouache-painted cards, apparently static and formal, beautifully explore various geometric combinations (trapezoidal triangles, circle, and semicircle) and colors (red, green, blue, and black) to create a hypnotizing sense of movement. While their vocabulary is limited in terms of forms and operations, Oiticica, starting as a 20-year-old, devised several creations from these basic premises. Forms were still attached to Oiticica’s primary references—he considered Malevich’s *White on White* (1918) a supreme example of invention—yet geometric shapes seem to stroll the paper, exploding from the center to its edges. Oiticica’s masterful use of color also creates vibration, adding to the choreography.



Installation view: *Hélio Oiticica: Dance in My Experience* São Paulo Museum of Art, 2020. Photo: Eduardo Ortega.



Installation view: *Hélio Oiticica: Dance in My Experience*, São Paulo Museum of Art, 2020, showing a selection of Metasquemata. Photo: Eduardo Ortega.

Departing from these geometric explorations of color and space that draw upon European constructivism and South American geometric abstraction, shapes become increasingly dynamic and rebellious, until they leave the paper surface altogether, as with the Spatial Reliefs. These structures are in fact three-dimensional painted sheets of wood, suspended in space. Their colors follow variations of the same shade, from orange to burnt yellow. Along with the *Grande Núcleo* [Grand Nucleus] (1960–1966) a nuclear core that unfolds into an array of luminous yellows (an amplified version of the Spatial Reliefs), they make one of the most beautiful views of the exhibit in the context of the museum's architecture. The monumental X-shaped red staircase designed by Lina Bo Bardi makes for the perfect backdrop to this installation, allowing for a stark contrast between yellow and red—two primary colors Oiticica was very fond of.

Following these sculptures and installations, Oiticica's works became increasingly immersive, inviting viewers to engage in progressively dynamic ways. Within these later works, color plays the important role of adding rhythms that create contrast and agitation. The Penetrables for example, pave the way for further interaction and bodily choreography—the public was invited (though no longer) to touch, move, walk about them.

“Parangolés,” the final stage of Oiticica’s lifetime pursuit for a participatory art that dissolved the boundaries between art and life and between fine arts and popular culture, came to life because of his encounter with Mangureira. In the favela, in his interactions with impoverished, illiterate Black Brazilians, Oiticica found the raw material to his “manifestations of color in the surrounding space,” as he described. The dance (a collective improvisation rather than an organized choreography), the rhythms, and the rituals of Afro-Brazilian origins, as well as the affordable materials like natural fibers and sequins (employed in Carnival costumes), became Oiticica’s signature of avant-garde. The *Parangolés* were not art in themselves, as he once wrote. Their purpose was to serve as a vehicle to incorporate the body in the work, and the work in the body. In this sense, the human body was not offering a mere support structure. On the contrary, it was a total incorporation of the two—a concept that Oiticica, a privileged white Brazilian, learned from his disenfranchised Black friends at Mangureira. Oiticica would later explore this notion further, adding messages with political and religious content. Like the one that reads “incorporo a revolta” [I embody the revolt], worn by and built in collaboration with Nildo of Mangureira, who, like other residents of the favela, is often referred to by only his first name or nickname. The slogan alluded both to Brazil’s repressive military dictatorship and the notion of “incorporation” of entities borrowed from Afro-Brazilian religions.



Nildo from Mangureira wearing Parangolé “Incorporo a revolta” (1967), circa 1968. Photo: Claudio Oiticica.

Oiticica’s engagement with Mangureira came from a genuine belief in radical societal change, yet the artist couldn’t escape from the power dynamics in which he was entangled. Feeling progressively drawn to the margins of the society, he wished to leave his bourgeois milieu to occupy a new place, with no social divisions—what he called the “total ‘lack of social place.’” In a letter<sup>1</sup> from 1968 to his confidant Lygia Clark, another towering figure of Brazilian Neo-Concretist movement, Oiticica invoked German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse to explain his desire to be seen as a marginal being. Clark gave her friend a major reality-check: “as for your marginalization I don’t agree” (...) thinking that you are a marginal because you live on the edge of a rotten outdated society is still a bourgeois concept.”

This dialogue may offer some insights into the layered racial and economic circumstances in which Oiticica’s work was produced. While the online iteration of the exhibition doesn’t touch on the subject, it’s now clear that the favela and its residents weren’t simply objects of study, but rather rightful producers of culture, part of a singular cultural ecosystem marked by life experiences shaped by necessity and by survival strategies. A more contemporary reading comes from the catalog<sup>2</sup>, which includes an essay by curator Vivian Crockett, discussing some of the overlooked aspects of black



culture associated with Oiticica's oeuvre. Her take, she emphasizes, is not to disparage Oiticica and his radical work, but rather to move beyond the dominant frame of white cultural hegemony. A necessary revision, as Brazil, and, in fact, the entire American continent, painfully grapples with systemic racism and the lasting legacies of colonialism.

1. Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, *Cartas, 1964 – 1974*, ed. Luciano Figueiredo (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1996).
2. Vivian A. Crockett, "War Heroes: Toward a Poethics of Blackness in Hélio Oiticica," *Hélio Oiticica: Dance in My Experience*, ed. Adriano Pedrosa and Tomás Toledo (São Paulo: MASP, 2020).

---

## Contributor

### **Bruna Shapira**

Bruna Shapira is a researcher, writer, and arts manager based in New York City.

*the* PARIS REVIEW

# Hélio Oiticica in New York

By Elisa Wouk Almino September 6, 2017

ARTS & CULTURE



MIGUEL RIO BRANCO, *BABYLONESTS*, 1971, DIGITAL PROJECTION, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. COURTESY OF CÉSAR AND CLAUDIO OITICICA, RIO DE JANEIRO.

The late fifties and early sixties in Brazil were filled with modernist dreams. The arts were flourishing under the newly elected president, Juscelino Kubitschek, who had promised to achieve “fifty years of progress in five.” Musicians were mixing samba with jazz and developing bossa nova, while visual artists experimented with abstraction and participatory sculpture. Modern architecture would revolutionize the face of the country in 1960 with the inauguration of the newly constructed capital, Brasília. Designed by the country’s greatest modern architect, Oscar Niemeyer, the capitol was a symbol of hope and transformation in a poor country that had been politically unstable for decades. But all that was swiftly overshadowed by the reactionary military regime, which overthrew the government in 1964.

In response to the new government's violent, nationalistic rhetoric, artists began drawing even more heavily from cultural trends abroad to create a new, anarchist cultural movement, Tropicália. Like the indigenous cannibals who ate their colonialist enemies to become stronger, these artists wanted to consume foreign culture and to outdo it. For musicians, such as Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, this often meant fusing psychedelic rock with Brazilian beats; visual artists such as Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape melded the handcraftsmanship of indigenous communities with modernist aesthetics.

Hélio Oiticica, whose work is currently being celebrated in a massive retrospective, "[To Organize Delirium](#)," at the Whitney Museum, was another actor at the center of this movement. Born into Brazil's upper-middle class, he studied painting at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro and became a vital part of the city's art scene. Following the military coup, he began working with the marginal classes in the city's favelas, where he developed many of his ideas of making art in public spaces and designed his famous "penetrables," freestanding, colorful labyrinths that mimic the makeshift architecture of the favelas. In the best known of these, "Tropicália" (1967), two multicolor structures sit on an island of sand, a clichéd Brazilian setting; Oiticica wanted it to be "the cry of Brazil for the world."

As the military dictatorship became more severe, many of Brazil's great artists were censored and declared enemies of the state. One by one, they started to emigrate. Veloso and Gil left for London, and Oiticica departed to New York. Brazil was regressing politically and economically; "falling to pieces," Oiticica wrote in a letter to Clark in 1971.

\*

Oiticica first thought of moving to New York in 1970, when he participated in the Museum of Modern Art's groundbreaking exhibition of Conceptual art, "Information." Writing to Clark, he said, "I really felt that I'm respected by the entire art world ... This trip and now the prospect of coming back have cheered me up so much that it seems I'm alive again." That same year, back in Rio, he was awarded a two-year Guggenheim Fellowship. He promptly left his studio near the city's botanical gardens and moved into a loft in the Lower East Side.





*TROPICÁLIA*, 1966–67, PLANTS, SAND, BIRDS, POEMS BY ROBERTA CAMILA SALGADO ON BRICKS, TILES, AND VINYL SQUARES. INSTALLATION VIEW, WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, 2017.

When Oiticica first arrived in New York, he planned to create a sprawling installation of his penetrables in Central Park. He envisioned the installation as a space for community and called it the “Subterranean Tropicália Projects.” The title, he said, alluded to the disappointing fact that Brazil had essentially “buried itself.” But Oiticica’s attempt to resurface Brazil in the heart of Manhattan failed, as he was unable to secure the funds.

Still, he engaged with New York in quieter ways. He eagerly delved into the city’s art scene, experimenting with film, a new format for him, and he took classes at New York University. In one particularly precious set of photographs from those years, he hands his *parangolés*—bright capes, made from recyclable materials, that he often brought into the favelas for people to dance in—to passengers on the subway, who awkwardly and bemusedly try them on. In another series, a young man, presumably one of Oiticica’s lovers, stands seductively in a *parangolé* on the rooftops of towering buildings, most notably the World Trade Center.

The large, looming city is itself a subject in the movies Oiticica made in New York. In his film *Agrippina Is Rome-Manhattan*, from 1972, he likens New York to ancient Rome. Two eccentric characters, playing a pimp and Roman patrician, pose in front of the city’s neoclassical buildings but do not interrupt the constant flow of the city. Here, Oiticica seems to say, people are free to express themselves while going unnoticed, engulfed by their surroundings.





PARANGOLÉ CAPE 30 IN THE NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY, 1972, DIGITAL PROJECTION, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE.

His most obsessive New York art project was his apartment, the nexus of all of his creations, where he slept and socialized inside sheer-cloth enclosures that he called his “nests.” Oiticica, who was gay, felt sexually liberated in the city, and invited young men into his home, photographing them suggestively and intimately. The television was always on and music, usually rock, played. There were lots of drugs, especially cocaine.

But in the next eight years, Oiticica, who well overstayed his visa, would discover that he didn’t have the necessary connections and resources to thrive artistically in New York. When he struggled to find work, he turned to drug dealing. Over time, he became increasingly withdrawn.

\*

The title of the Whitney’s exhibition, “To Organize Delirium,” is taken from Oiticica’s friend, the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos, who once said that Oiticica was able to “organize delirium” through his art. The curators’ use of the quote is apt: Oiticica experienced delirium in manifold ways, from the chaos and disillusionment he felt in Brazil, to the sensory overload in New York, to the displacement that came with exile, to the heavy use of drugs—and he used his art to organize it.

One of the show’s first artworks from Oiticica’s New York phase is a slideshow of photographs, *Topázion-flor*, from 1975, which he dedicated to Campos. Each frame is dominated by bags full of glowing cocaine, arranged on books about the Incas, Jimi Hendrix records, photos of *parangolés*, and notebooks. Sometimes the bag of drugs is held up, out of focus, almost floating. Suspended in the realm of cocaine and disoriented in a fusion of pop-cultural references, there’s no depth of space—you could be anywhere.





EDEN, 1969, SAND, CRUSHED BRICKS, DRY LEAVES, WATER, CUSHIONS, FOAM FLAKES, BOOKS, MAGAZINES, "PULP FICTION," STRAW, MATTING, AND INCENSE. INSTALLATION VIEW, WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON, 1969. © CÉSAR AND CLAUDIO OITICICA

The galleries are laid out chronologically, and the rooms devoted to Oiticica's New York years are dark, filled with slides and pages of words, much as the artist's apartment would've been. The curators have re-created two of his nine "Cosmococas" installations, which he staged in his loft in 1973 with fellow Brazilian artist Neville d'Almeida as spaces to escape capitalist consumer culture. Around this time, Oiticica had been absorbing the avant-garde art around him, such as John Cage's recordings of street sounds and Jack Smith's improvised films, and reinterpreting it with Brazilian elements.

The "Cosmococas" series, for instance, immerses the viewer in trippy, nonnarrative visuals and chaotic, unpredictable patterns of sound. In *Cosmococa I*, you lie on a mattress, surrounded by giant projections of pages from the *New York Times Magazine* and Frank Zappa albums—objects he kept around at home. Popular Brazilian northeastern music plays, followed by recordings of Second Avenue. The museum offers you nail files to pass the time (Oiticica would've given you lines of cocaine, the inspiration for the series' title).

While Oiticica intended for his "Cosmococas" to be installed in public, he was never able to, only realizing them behind the closed doors of his apartment. (Museums are now able to re-create them because of the detailed notes he made for each installation.) At this point, Oiticica had retreated from the art world and stayed mostly at home, obsessively writing in his notebooks, recording tapes of his thoughts, and photographing visitors; he called his home of nests a "world-shelter."





CC5 HENDRIX-WAR, 1973, THIRTY-THREE 35 MM COLOR SLIDES TRANSFERRED TO DIGITAL SLIDESHOW, SOUND, AND HAMMOCKS. INSTALLATION VIEW, WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, 2017.

Since the sixties, Oiticica had stressed the idea of *vivência* in his artworks: his idea that they were meant to be completely inhabited, even lived in. It would seem that in New York he took this idea to its literal conclusion, living so completely in his art to the point of secluding himself. He wrote long, discursive letters home, though sometimes he couldn't finish them. When he did, they would cause his friends and family to worry for his health and financial situation. Writing again to Clark, only a few years after settling in New York, he said, "I feel as if I'm in a prison in this infernal island."

\*

Walking through the Whitney's galleries, there's a cacophony of sounds. Caetano Veloso's sprightly voice and Hendrix's electrifying guitar seep into the space. In the main gallery, you can listen to audio recordings of Oiticica's notebooks, which he collectively called his Newyorkaises. These notebooks, along with the rest of his output in New York, are generally overlooked, or at least deemed less interesting than the work from his earlier days in Rio. His writing is often dense or cryptic, and you're better off if you know both Portuguese and English. Even I, a Brazilian living in the United States who has this advantage, didn't think I'd have the patience to read through it. But in his words, I felt something familiar.

There's a rich range of artistic influences in Oiticica's writing: Gertrude Stein's impenetrable prose; the visual arrangements of Brazilian concrete poetry; the performativity of American Conceptual artists, such as Vito Acconci and Yoko Ono. Naturally, Oiticica's New York notebooks also reveal someone whose life straddled two places and cultures: he invented his own language that



mixed Portuguese and English, folding wistful allusions to Brazil into his thrilling experiences in New York. One of his favorite refrains was the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter," which he always spelled in capital letters and used as his own chorus when meditating on his *parangolés*.

Anyone who's grown up bilingual will recognize what Oiticica does with language, even if the meaning is at times opaque. Language is often the first, or at least most evident, sign of one's identity being split and rearranged. But this mixing happens elsewhere, too, from the food one cooks to the music one listens to. This mixing happened palpably in Oiticica's art. Inhabiting two cultures at once is an exhausting, confusing, and exhilarating experience. It can be exciting to absorb another country's way of life, but with that comes pangs of loss, as well as the desire to forget—to feel like you can start over, leave things behind.

In 1978, Oiticica returned to Rio de Janeiro. He had been hounded by immigration officials and narcos in New York and, as revealed by his lawyer after his death, had been interrogated about his homosexuality. Soon after moving back, he wrote to a friend that being in Brazil was "much, much, much, much, much better than staying in fucking NEW YORK ... I feel free free free and all the desire for those 'other things' vanished like a miracle and also my old chronic paranoia dissappeared [sic]; I couldn't feel happier."

In a way, it makes sense that Oiticica confined himself in his home away from home. Even before he left Brazil in 1970, Oiticica had already imagined alternate realities and redefined his sense of place. Of his New York apartment, he said, "I want to create a place that is so complicated-complex that it's its own world." This became symbolic of his sense of displacement—in both Brazil and New York—but also of his taste for freedom and escape.

Back in his native country, Oiticica, clean of drugs, felt restored and grounded. His reaction is not unlike that of other Brazilian artists who had been living in exile. Veloso, on returning from London, wrote, "My proximity, the certainty that I am real and vulnerable, brings my legend back to Earth—to my immense pleasure, since in London I was climbing the walls sometimes, like a ghost." And Gil wrote "[Back in Bahia](#)," a song that distilled the longing he felt for home when also in London. "Island of the North, where I ended up out of luck or to be punished, I'm not sure," he sings, "Today I feel it was necessary to leave in order to come back." Returning to Brazil, for all three men, was a rediscovery of the roots they once thought they'd lost.

The last gallery, which is devoted to the final years of Oiticica's life, contains a large penetrable with water on the floors called *Rijanviera*, his homage to Rio. After he came home, Oiticica went back to making sculptural installations, or, as he told the art critic Aracy Amaral, "I wrote all this material, notebooks and notebooks ... This year had a change ... I'm not interested in ideas ... now I want to make physical stuff." It's impossible to know what would have come of this, as Oiticica died of a stroke only two years later, at the age of forty-two.

*Elisa Wouk Almino is the associate editor of Hyperallergic. She is also [a translator](#) of poetry and fiction from Portuguese.*

## **The New York Review of Books**

### **Viva Tropicália!**

**Larry Rohter**



*César and Claudio Oiticica/Matt Casarella*

*Hélio Oiticica: Tropicália, 1966–1967. The installation, on view at the Whitney, includes plants, sand, birds, and a poem by Roberta Camila Salgado inscribed on brick, tile, and wood.*

Amid political turmoil and then systematic repression, Brazil in the 1960s was a nation seething with creativity. Antônio Carlos Jobim and João Gilberto took bossa nova to a global audience. Glauber Rocha, Ruy Guerra, and other directors and screenwriters associated with the Cinema Novo movement won awards at Cannes and Berlin and even got an Oscar nomination. In Rio de Janeiro, Clarice Lispector was quietly writing her radically disquieting novels, while in São Paulo the Teatro Oficina and Teatro de Arena were noisily upending traditional concepts of dramaturgy. In architecture, Lina Bo Bardi and Oscar Niemeyer explored daring new ways to give social content to human habitats.



Then there was the painter, sculptor, conceptual artist, and all-around provocateur and contrarian Hélio Oiticica, the subject of the retrospective exhibition “To Organize Delirium.” Though nowhere near as celebrated as the others were during their lifetimes, he has come to be seen as personifying the ferment of the era. He was at the center of many of the artistic movements and polemics that erupted during the decade, and he would later define his artistic mission as fighting Brazilian society’s “worst enemy: four-century-old moralism” and the subsequent “cultivation of ‘good habits’” that only leads to “national constipation.” “Whoever wants to build (no one more than I, ‘loves Brazil’!),” he wrote, “has to see this and dissect the innards from the diarrhea—to dive into the shit.”

Oiticica, born in Rio de Janeiro in 1937, came by this rebelliousness naturally, almost genetically. His paternal grandfather, José Oiticica, was a philologist, poet, playwright, and prominent anarchist and Rosicrucian who spent several years in prison and was the author of a manual called *Anarchist Doctrine Within Everyone’s Reach*. At his grandfather’s urging and partly under his tutelage, young Hélio was home-schooled until the age of ten, when his father, a polymath university professor and photographer also named José, won a Guggenheim fellowship and moved the family to the United States. After two years in Washington, D.C., where his father worked as a lepidopterist at the Smithsonian, Oiticica returned to Brazil essentially bilingual and eventually began to study painting at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, a renowned center of artistic experimentation and bohemian thought and behavior.

Extremely precocious, Oiticica started painting abstract gouaches while still a teenager; the earliest works in the exhibition date to 1955. He also began writing elaborate artistic manifestos, a practice that would remain with him to the end of his life, and fell in with a group of older artists and critics, most notably Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Franz Weissmann, Mário Pedrosa, and Ferreira Gullar. His work from this period is promising but somewhat lacking in warmth and emotion, and reflects the influence of the European painters he admired and whose essays, lectures, and letters he was reading, especially Mondrian, Klee, and Malevich. At the same time he was devouring philosophy and poetry of every type, and struck up a friendship with the visually oriented Concretist poets Haroldo and Augusto de Campos.

By the end of the 1950s, though, Oiticica had become impatient with the limitations of two-dimensional works, wanting to create something that would gain meaning from the spectator’s physical immersion in it. At the Whitney the exhibition beautifully tracks his solution to that problem, which was to fly into space. Oiticica’s early paintings hang along two walls in the biggest room, but at the center, suspended in the air, is his *NC6 Medium Nucleus 3* (1961), a three-dimensional assemblage in yellow and orange that is meant to be viewed from four directions and appears to be a different work from each angle. In short order, Oiticica progressed to creating similarly colored but larger pieces that came to rest on the ground and were exuberantly three-dimensional.



The next big leap in Oiticica's development as an artist, and perhaps the most decisive, came in 1964. The Brazilian military seized power in a US-supported coup on April Fools' Day that year, overthrowing a popularly elected left-wing government that the Johnson administration feared would turn Brazil into "another Cuba." Around the same time, the sculptor Jackson Ribeiro introduced Oiticica to life in Mangueira, the most traditional of Rio's many hillside squatter slums, called favelas. Oiticica began frequenting Mangueira's samba "school," or association, which competes against those from other favelas in Rio's annual Carnival extravaganza, and both the club's music and visual style, built around its green and pink costumes, had an immediate impact on his work. Nothing seemed to escape his notice: a pool table from a billiard parlor was redeployed as *Appropriation—Snooker Room, after Van Gogh's "Night Café."* And one day he came upon the improvised shelter of a newly arrived favela dweller, made of wood, rope, metal, and burlap, with the word *parangolé* written on it, and had what can only be called an epiphany.

*Parangolé* is an old favela slang term that can mean idle chatter, a noisy party, or street-smart behavior intended to deceive someone: *Qual é o parangolé?* means something akin to "Wussup?" But Oiticica applied the word to scraps of tulle, linen, satin, nylon, canvas, cotton, gauze, and other fabrics that he sewed into colorful cape-like garments meant to be donned by onlookers. Though radical for the art world, Oiticica's *parangolés* share a common ancestry with the showy Carnival garb of Rio's samba schools: at the Whitney, several photographs and a film show Mangueira's mostly black lead dancers wearing *parangolés* in various Rio settings—including the gardens of the Museum of Modern Art after they were refused admittance to an exhibition featuring some of Oiticica's other creations. Visitors to the Whitney can even try on examples of Oiticica's handiwork, some of which are adorned with the charged slogans he favored: "I Embodiment Revolt" or "Sex and Violence, That's What I Like" or "I Am Possessed."

The jerry-rigged shanties Oiticica saw in Mangueira also led him to experiment with a form of art he called "penetrables," three-dimensional participatory installations. Oiticica created his first of these in 1960, but his exposure to Mangueira's hillside landscape amplified his notions of where he could take the concept. The Whitney exhibition includes the most famous of these installations, *Tropicália* (1967), an exhilarating concoction that includes favela-like shacks, tropical plants, chattering parrots in a cage, a television set showing cartoons, a sandy pathway, and a poem inscribed on brick, tile, and wood. This is Oiticica at his best, simultaneously sending up age-old European and North American fantasies of Brazil as a tropical paradise, while celebrating the very items that give rise to those stereotypes. Yet it is also rooted in realism: I first experienced *Tropicália* before I had ever set foot in a favela, but navigating through it again at the Whitney brought back memories of being in Mangueira, Borel, or Rocinha.



When the Cinema Novo producer and screenwriter Luiz Carlos Barreto saw *Tropicália*, he applied the title to a musical movement then just emerging, and after its young musicians themselves visited the installation, they accepted that mantle, began calling themselves Tropicalistas, and forged an artistic alliance with Oiticica. Like him, the Tropicalistas Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Tom Zé, Os Mutantes, and others, most of them from the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia, delighted in cut-and-paste collage techniques, the repurposing of artifacts of pop culture, word games, and challenges to political and artistic orthodoxy. Gil even recorded a song called “Geléia Geral” (“Generalized Jelly”), extolling this eclectic approach. Oiticica responded with a manifesto in which he praised the Tropicalistas for their “direct connection with mass consumption” and desire to “overturn the table with what is set on it.”

It is difficult to think of another twentieth-century visual artist with a greater affinity for music than Oiticica. His fascination extended not only to his kindred spirits among the Tropicalistas and sambistas but also to modern classical composers like John Cage, whom he met in Rio in the 1960s, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. But he was affected too by leading figures of the Anglo-American rock-and-roll scene: Oiticica adored Bob Dylan for his wordplay, Mick Jagger and David Bowie for their carnivalesque theatricality, and Jimi Hendrix and Frank Zappa for their musicianship. When he moved to New York, he even settled into an apartment at 81 Second Avenue, just down the street from the Fillmore East, where he regularly attended shows, and four months before his death he wrote a final manifesto called *What I Do Is Music*.

Indeed, it was Oiticica’s association with the Tropicalistas that eventually got him into political trouble. In 1968, he created perhaps his most notorious piece, a banner showing a black screen-printed corpse lying on a field of red, below which was written “Be an outlaw, be a hero” (see illustration on page 30). The body Oiticica chose to portray was that of Manoel “Horseface” Moreira, a favela drug dealer, pimp, and numbers game runner whom Oiticica had befriended and whom police had executed. As if that were not enough to enrage a military dictatorship that regarded cultural and political resistance as one and the same, the banner was hoisted later that year during performances by Gil and Veloso. If Oiticica and the Tropicalistas weren’t already on the regime’s blacklist, they were now; Gil and Veloso were almost immediately jailed and eventually forced into exile, and not long after Oiticica also departed Brazil.

Oiticica was by no means, however, a reflexive, programmatic leftist, and true to his anarchic tendencies, he could also treat icons of the Marxist-Leninist left with irreverence when it amused him to do so. A *parangolé* from 1968 that is also at the Whitney features an image of Che Guevara, based on Alberto Korda’s ubiquitous photograph of the Argentine-born revolutionary, but subtly altered to produce a different effect. Oiticica first removes the black beret with a red star that was a symbol of Communist militancy, tweaks the expression on Guevara’s face so that his lips are bent into a slight smile and his eyes twinkle, then finishes by sprinkling sequins in



Guevara's hair. So instead of the implacable, glowering *Guerrillero Heroico* that Korda intended, Oiticica gives us an impish child who appears ready to pull a prank. To take such liberties just months after Bolivia's military dictatorship executed Guevara was considered a kind of blasphemy by members of what Brazilians call "the ideological patrol," which in turn helps explain why the doctrinaire left viewed Oiticica, as well as the Tropicalistas, with enduring suspicion.

The second section of "To Organize Delirium" is devoted to the seven-plus years Oiticica spent in New York, where he arrived in 1970 to participate in a show with other conceptual artists at the Museum of Modern Art, with a Guggenheim grant of his own in hand and full of ambitious, grandiose ideas that soon collided with reality. Initially, for instance, he hoped to install a "Subterranean Tropicália Project" in Central Park, but could never get beyond four intriguing maquettes and drawings, included in the exhibition. All four, especially one circular in shape, called for elaborately maze-like constructions, a form that enchanted Oiticica from early in his career because of its mythic associations: "I ASPIRE TO THE GREAT LABYRINTH," he wrote in 1961.

But by the time I first met Oiticica, in the winter of 1971–1972, he had already discovered cocaine and gave the impression of a man adrift, an artist cut off from his natural sustenance and seemingly devoted to *parangolé* in its original sense. His New York years provide the justification for a museum dedicated to North American art to mount an exhibition focusing on a Brazilian artist, but with a couple of notable exceptions, Oiticica's New York pieces are generally less interesting or innovative than the work he did in Brazil before and after his Manhattan sojourn.

For example, perhaps trying to reproduce the feeling of belonging he felt in Mangueira, he gravitated for a while toward some of the toughest Latino neighborhoods of the Bronx, which resulted only in the rather ordinary *South Bronx Series* of photographs. Nor are Oiticica's comparisons of New York to Babylon, in his *Babylonests* and various writings that are also on display, or to Imperial Rome, in his Super 8 film *Agrippina Is Rome-Manhattan*, particularly original. And while he continued to create *parangolés*—one is called *Escrerbuto*, a portmanteau that combines the Portuguese words for "writing" and "scurvy"—away from their original cultural milieu they seem robbed of energy: a *parangolé* worn on the New York subway was met only with puzzlement, as a photograph shows.

In recent years, it has become increasingly common to hear arguments in favor of Oiticica's primacy as a transgressively gay artist; indeed, that notion pops up in some of the essays for the thoughtful and comprehensive catalog accompanying "To Organize Delirium." But this seems overstated. There is no ignoring the homoerotic content of some of the work shown at the Whitney, especially from the New York years: *Neyrótika* (1973) is a collection of eighty slides, most of them portraits of shirtless young men, projected on a wall and accompanied by a taped broadcast from the New York soul music station WBLS and snatches of Oiticica reading the poetry of Rimbaud. But even



in his self-imposed New York exile, Oiticica is largely concerned with issues of Brazilian identity, culture, politics, and social and racial inequality. He thus seems to me to be more a Brazilian artist who happened to be gay than a gay artist who happened to be Brazilian.

Oiticica's *saudade*—the word Portuguese speakers use to describe any yearning, longing, or nostalgia for something forever lost or even temporarily beyond reach—is perhaps most clearly on display in a pair of immensely clever and engaging multimedia installations that he created with the film director Neville d'Almeida for a series called *Cosmococas*. As that title indicates, both works parenthetically employ actual cocaine not just as subject matter but also as compositional material: lines of white powder are carefully applied to images of Jimi Hendrix and Luis Buñuel in much the same way that an Amazon shaman would daub red urucum dye on the faces of warriors in preparation for battle or tribal rituals.

In numerous other ways, these two works reference not only Brazil but specifically the country's northeast, the historic cradle of Brazilian culture and of the Oiticica family. That same region, it should be pointed out, also supplies the Oiticica family with its unusual surname, which is Tupí-Guaraní Indian in origin and derives from a resinous tree that flourishes in the semiarid backlands and produces a flower in shades of yellow and orange similar to those Oiticica used in several of the paintings and assemblages included in the exhibition. At the same time, the northeast has always been Brazil's poorest and most socially conservative region, and its exploited peasants have traditionally migrated to the large cities of the south, many of them ending up in the same favelas Oiticica came to know so well.



César and Claudio Oiticica/Philadelphia Museum of Art  
*Hélio Oiticica: Seja marginal, seja herói (Be an outlaw, be a hero), 1968*

The first of the *Cosmococas* series, *Trashiscapes* (1973), is presented in a room littered with blue mattresses, with nail files of the type used to cut cocaine back in the 1970s available at the entrance. From a reclining position, the spectator is bombarded with a jumble of images projected, though not simultaneously, onto four walls: the cover of the Mothers of Invention's album *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*, a copy of *The New York Times Magazine*, a rotary-dial telephone, a toilet bowl, friends of Oiticica's wearing *parangolés*. It's all rather dizzying, in the manner of the Chip Monck and Joshua Light Show performances Oiticica saw in New York, but still quite enjoyable.

Oiticica heightens the disorienting effect by integrating three very different types of music, which he conceived of as essential components of the piece, not as mere



accompaniment. The soundtrack opens with Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile" but eventually shifts to a passage of dissonant orchestral music—Oiticica was striving for an atmosphere that he describes in written notes, with his characteristic love of Concretist-inspired neologisms, as "Woodstockhausen"—and also features a pair of songs by the Brazilian Luiz Gonzaga. An accordionist and singer from the northeast, Gonzaga was the master of a style of hillbilly music called *forró*, derided at the time *Trashiscapes* was being assembled as "music for maids and taxi drivers" but now quite fashionable.

To round out the sonic salvo, Oiticica includes a recording of another northeastern folk style, played by the astringent fife-and-drum corps known as Banda de Pífano Zabumba, as well as tapes of noisy street traffic. With this eclectic mix, Oiticica was declaring that he continued to embrace Tropicalismo's mix-and-match ethos, specifically Gil's all-encompassing *geléia geral*. (Gil was appointed Brazil's minister of culture in 2003, and during his five and a half years in that cabinet post did much to help elevate Oiticica's profile.)

Hendrix reappears as the focus of the exhibition's other *Cosmococa* installation, just across a corridor from *Trashiscapes* and called *CC5 Hendrix-War*. Six hammocks of various hues are strung across a room onto whose walls are projected images of the cover of Hendrix's posthumous *War Heroes* album; one of the hammocks even has a red-and-white-checked design that echoes some of Oiticica's early abstract paintings, on display in the main room. Viewers are invited to make themselves comfortable in the cocoon-like hammocks as slides appear and Hendrix's music plays. Oiticica would no doubt be delighted with the way this piece turned out: spectators often stand in line waiting for an opportunity to occupy the hammocks, whose design and coloration Brazilians would recognize as clearly northeastern.

Oiticica's appreciation of Hendrix was unlimited: he wrote that "everything starts in MONTEREY POP," the festival at which the guitarist set his instrument ablaze fifty years ago this summer, and described that gesture as a "watershed as important as the MALEVICHian white on white, as MALLARMÉ." Hendrix's sexual magnetism has sometimes been suggested as the basis of this admiration, but I would offer another explanation. To any Brazilian familiar with syncretic Afro-Brazilian religions like candomblé—as Oiticica was because of all the time he spent in Rio's favelas—Hendrix's act would have been read, Gilberto Gil once explained to me, not as a showbiz gimmick but as an invocation of Xangô, the Yoruba deity of fire, lightning, justice, and strength, recognized for his virility, daring, and ability to seek out and punish evildoers. So when *War Heroes* was released, seemingly amplifying that connection, the combination may well have proved irresistible to Oiticica. (Most of his references to this Afro-Brazilian spiritual realm are coded rather than overt, though it is worth noting that an aquatic section of the exhibition's sprawling *Eden* penetrable is named for Iemanjá, the mother of creation and goddess of the sea in the cosmology of candomblé.)



Exhausted by New York, Oiticica went back to Brazil early in 1978, as the military dictatorship was easing its political grip and censorship of culture—part of a policy of *abertura*, or opening. He returned to his atelier in the Jardim Botânico section of Rio—a leafy neighborhood whose serenity was the exact opposite of the East Village’s bustle. Much of his work from this period strives for visual simplicity, eschewing any unnecessary ornamentation, and the pieces from that time chosen for the exhibition, presented in a large room with plenty of natural light, effectively convey that feeling. Oiticica created, for instance, one last great penetrable, called *PN 27 Rijnviera*, its title a playful homage to Rivera in Januero, James Joyce’s name for Rio in *Finnegans Wake*. But the piece is markedly different from the penetrables he had devised a decade earlier: restrained rather than exuberant, its severe lines, muted colors, and use of sand, stone, and water recall the austerity of a Japanese garden, not the lushness of the tropics to which Oiticica had returned.

During the late 1970s, Oiticica was also working with what he called “semi-magical found objects.” Chunks of concrete pavement and pieces of wavy black and white stone mosaics, dislodged from the sidewalks of downtown Rio by jackhammers, yielded *Appropriation No. 4*, while *Manhattan Brutalista* consists of a single fragment of asphalt that attracted Oiticica because it was shaped like the island he had just departed. Similar in spirit are two assemblages from the series *Topological Readymade Landscapes* created as homages to two artists he particularly admired, the Futurist Italian painter and sculptor Umberto Boccioni and his old friend Lygia Clark. The Clark piece is a droll one, consisting of white sand in an aluminum baking pan, nothing more, while the Boccioni tribute comprises a glass bottle filled with liquid detergent, around which curves a meshed wire screen.

Oiticica died of a stroke on March 22, 1980, just a few months short of his forty-third birthday, and while he has posthumously been elevated to the status of national treasure in Brazil, international recognition has come more slowly. “To Organize Delirium” is the first career retrospective of his work in the United States, and it is hard to say what he would think of it. No doubt he would complain that some of the pieces he meant to be entered and explored are closed off to visitors and can only be viewed from a safe distance. But a visit to the museum store made me chuckle: though many other artists might complain about the mass commercialization of their work in the gewgaws typically on sale in such a setting, to encounter T-shirts emblazoned with Oiticica’s slogan “I Embodly Revolt” somehow seems fitting. A T-shirt is a distant cousin of a *parangolé*, and since Oiticica always invited spectator participation, that is what he gets.

Beyond that, however, is the larger issue of art-world hierarchies, especially as they concern the belated discovery of artists from what used to be called the “periphery,” or third world. “What’s this? Thirty years of waiting! It’s taken so long, incredible as it may seem,” his co-conspirator Neville d’Almeida said in 2003, when the pieces in the *Cosmococas* series were mounted together for the first time, in São Paulo. “The world



had to evolve for this work to appear.” That’s a fair assessment, especially at a moment when Oiticica’s friend Lygia Pape, a decade older than he was, has just had her first major American retrospective, at the Met Breuer. Oiticica was a pioneer and inveterate pot-stirrer who would have benefited from greater attention and respect while he was still alive. But better late than never.

## Hélio Oiticica's playful approach to protest

Gabrielle Schwarz

30 AUGUST 2017



*Tropicália* (1966–67), Hélio Oiticica: installation view at the Whitney Museum of Art, New York, 2017. Collection of César and Claudio Oiticica. Photo: Matt Casarella

A young boy, maybe six or seven years old, jumps into a wooden box filled with foam cubes. He squeals: 'I could stay here my whole life!' I agree. We are in Eden, literally – *Eden* is the title of an installation by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, a sprawling, sand-filled playground for all ages, dotted with various structures where visitors can read, listen to music or jump into boxes filled with foam or grass. First created in 1969 for a solo exhibition at London's Whitechapel Gallery, the installation has been reconstructed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where it is currently on show as part of a touring US retrospective of Oiticica's brief but dazzling career.



Alongside *Eden*, both today at the Whitney and in the 'Whitechapel Experience' of 1969, is a reconstruction of *Tropicália* (1967), the installation for which Oiticica is perhaps best known. Replete with tropical plants, signal-receiving television sets and live parrots, the work was constructed as a meditation on the myth of a 'pure' national identity – its title, a word invented by Oiticica, was to become the name of a long-lasting cultural movement in Brazil that embraced fusions of native and foreign influences. Together, the two installations aptly represent one of Oiticica's central principles: the notion of 'creleisure', another of the artist's many neologisms. For Oiticica, leisure – sheer fun – was an ethical imperative, a joyful protest against the oppressive realities of life in his home country, which had been under military dictatorship since 1964.

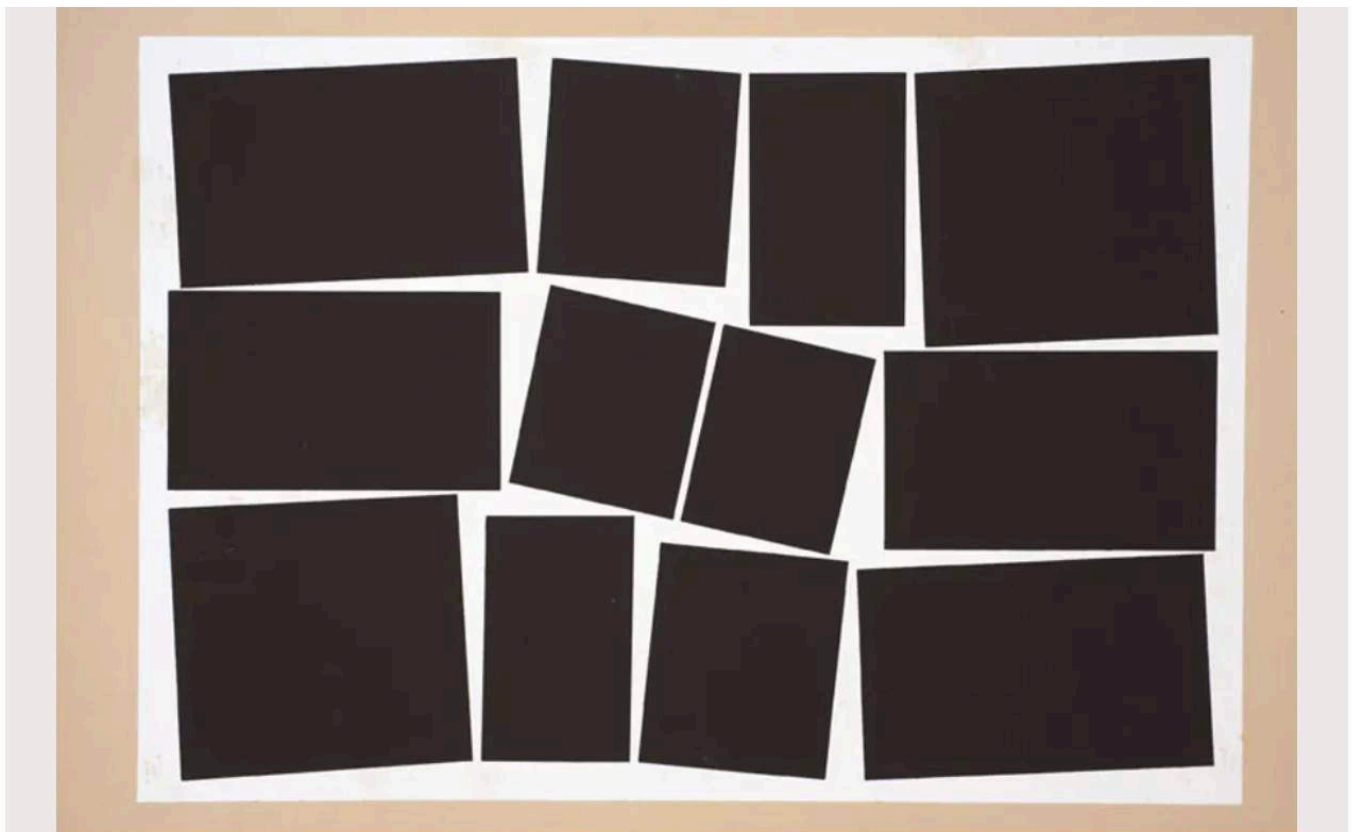


*Eden* (1969), Hélio Oiticica: installation view at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1969. Collection of César and Claudio Oiticica. © César and Claudio Oiticica

Significant as these two works are, both within Oiticica's oeuvre and in terms of their impact on the trajectories of Brazilian culture and global art history, they comprise only one element of the Whitney's retrospective, which takes an expansive view of the impressively diverse work Oiticica produced in just two and a half decades from the mid 1950s until 1980. We encounter (and this list is by no means exhaustive) geometric abstraction; kinetic sculpture; political assemblage; wearable garments; films; cocaine-fuelled actions; a

number of unrealised publications and architectural projects; and, of course, a series of participatory and audio-visual environments.

The exhibition is subtitled 'To Organize Delirium', a phrase that Oiticica's friend, the poet Haroldo de Campos, used to describe the two warring impulses the artist perceived within his own work: Apollonian structure versus Dionysian chaos. (Friedrich Nietzsche numbered, alongside Kazimir Malevich and Mick Jagger, among the most cherished of Oiticica's many and varied influences.) 'To organise delirium' might also be understood as an apt description of the formidable task of putting together this exhibition, of constructing a coherent narrative from Oiticica's artistic journey. In a somewhat counterintuitive step, this journey is presented at the Whitney with no clear beginning or end point. Entering the space, visitors are free to choose their own path – a perplexing introduction to an artist whose work is already so complex, layered and disorientating.

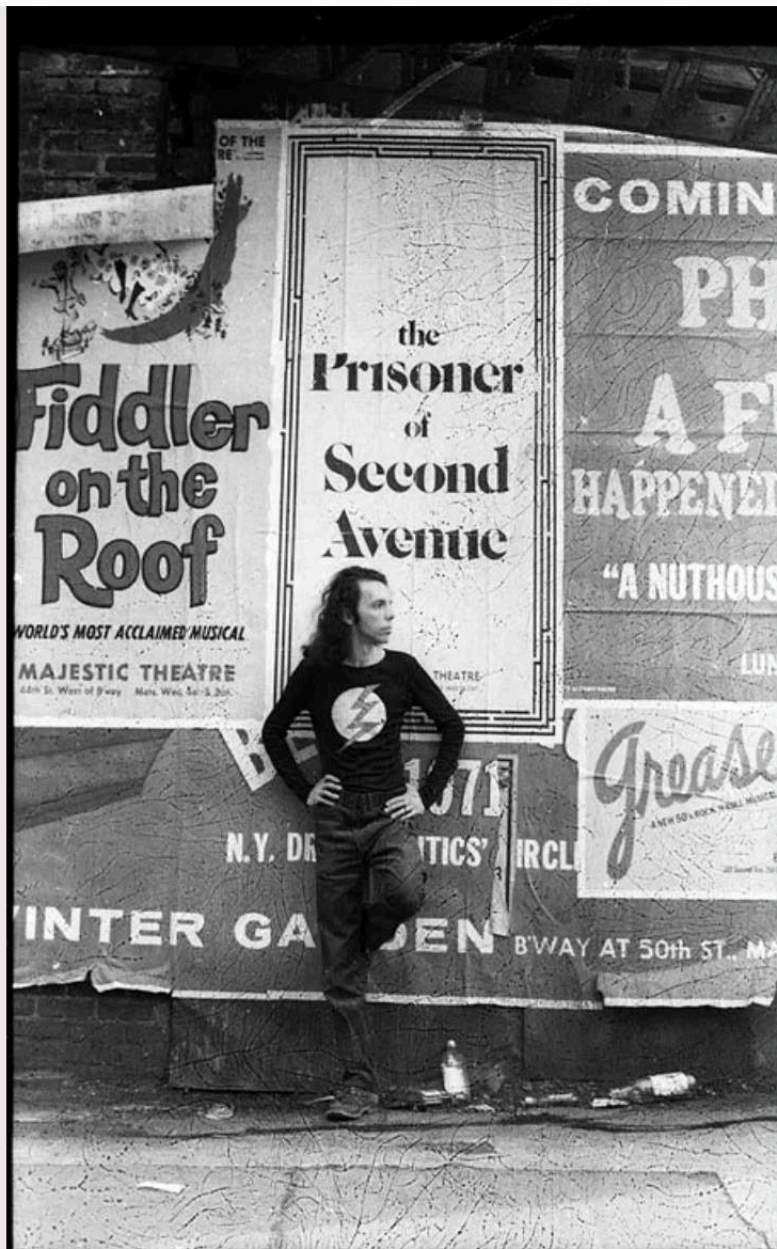


*Metaesquema 362* (1958), Hélio Oiticica. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Edward N. Haskell Family Acquisition Fund and A. W. Mellon Acquisition Endowment Fund

The real starting point, chronologically speaking, is the central gallery, which contains Oiticica's early minimalist abstractions: a series of two- and three-dimensional floating straight-edged shapes. From here, the exhibition carries us through the artist's career in a kind of outwards spiral. As a spatial metaphor, the spiral actually makes complete sense – as well as echoing the labyrinthine structure of many of Oiticica's own installations, it both



Phenomenology, for example, is there from the very beginning: those first geometric explorations of colour and form reveal the same engagement with the viewer's sensorial experiences of space and matter as the early 'penetrables' – walk-in spaces constructed from monochrome painted boards – and the expanded participatory installations, which Oiticica continued making until the very end of his life. Politics, too, hovers either above or just beneath the surface of all Oiticica's work, whether in the form of specific reference to Brazilian political figures – as in the boxed shrine to a murdered friend, *B33 Box Bólide 18, Homage to Cara de Cavalo* (1965–66) – or more generally in the subversive spirit of his years immersed in and documenting his experiences of New York's sex, drugs and rock'n'roll-filled counterculture from 1970 to 1978.



Hélio Oiticica in front of a poster for Neil Simon's play *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, in Midtown Manhattan, 1972. © César and Claudio Oiticica

Oiticica's death from a stroke in the spring of 1980 was unexpected, and brought to a halt the career of an artist still in full swing. The final gallery of the exhibition documents the last two years of his life, spent in his birthplace of Rio de Janeiro. In this large, light-filled space, a series of assemblages, composed of found objects and dedicated to people and places, surround one last 'penetrable': *PN27 Penetrable, Rijnviera* (1979), a spare installation furnished only with water, gravel, sand and music, which simultaneously recalls Oiticica's very first geometric constructions and the increasingly complex sound- and image-filled environments of his later years. By now, the spiralling repertoire of Oiticica's verbal and visual creations has settled into some kind of order, although you can't help but wonder what delirious invention he would have dreamt up next.

**'Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium' is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, until 1 October 2017.**

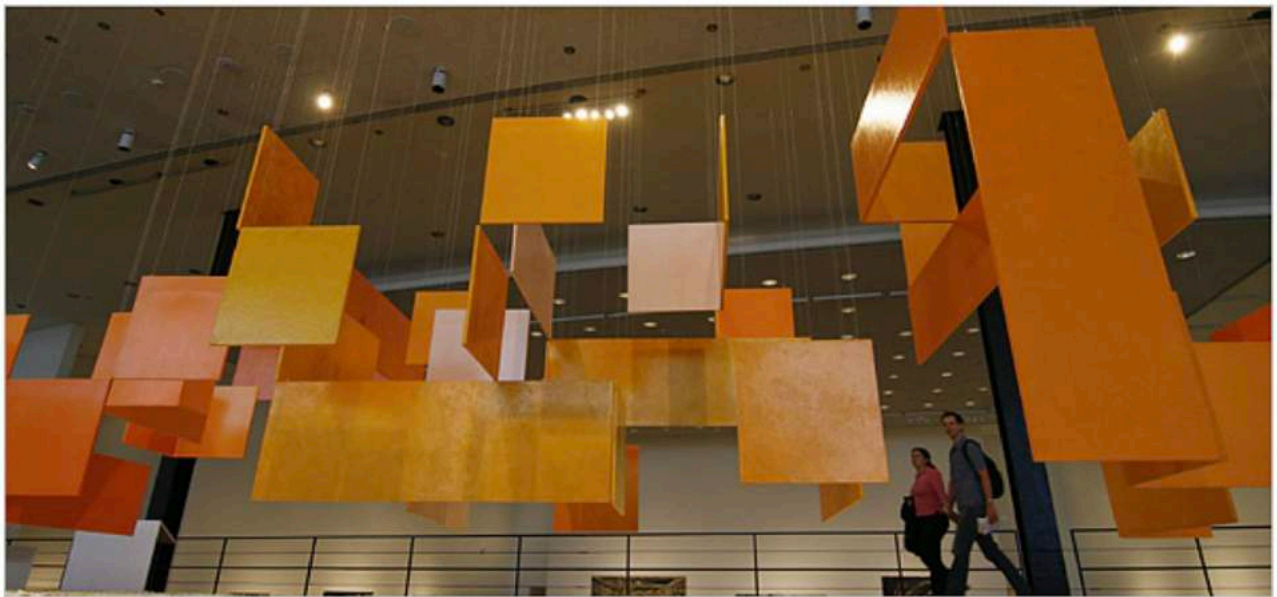


*The New York Times*  
March 2007

## The New York Times

### A Short, Intense Career Marked by Vibrant Color

By ROBERTA SMITH   MARCH 17, 2007



"Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color" includes "Homage to Mondrian," above.  
Michael Stravato for The New York Times

HOUSTON — Maybe it is a new form of cultural colonialism or a sign of its demise, but the term “American artist” is becoming more inclusive, and museums in the southern and southwestern United States are helping. Six years ago the [Museum of Fine Arts](#) here established an International Center for Arts of the Americas to study 20th-century Latin American art. And it has made an enormous commitment to the short, intense career of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937-80).

The first fruit of this endeavor is “Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color,” an exhilarating survey that emphasizes the earlier, lesser-known stages of this artist’s career — a rapid progression from abstract paintings to painted reliefs and objects to performance props and interactive installation art — which was fueled by a passion for color as theoretical as it was obsessive.



This show is like a large stone dropped into the calm waters of European-American art history. With its thick, lavishly illustrated catalog, it presents an enormously productive artist, writer and thinker whose work effortlessly spans the gap between Modern and Postmodern, Minimal and Post-Minimal. Reflecting inspirations from Mondrian to the samba music of Rio de Janeiro's favelas (slums), it also bridges first- and third-world cultures in a way that has seldom been equaled.

The exhibition also looks gorgeous in the glass-and-steel addition Mies van der Rohe designed for the museum in the 1950s: the openness, natural light and spacious proportions perfectly suit the extravagant flow of Oiticica's art. The show's 220 objects span 25 years and include Oiticica's cape-like parangoles of the late 1960s. Made of richly colored fabrics, these are meant to be worn in parades or while dancing the samba or in moments of private, slow-motion reverie (as the artist demonstrates on a video).

But the dominant works here are the paintings, two-sided reliefs and painted, boxlike sculptures that Oiticica (the name is pronounced Oy-ta-seeka) made from 1955 to 1966. They trace his step-by-step progress from a precocious teenager steeped in the work of Klee, Mondrian and Kandinsky to an innovator whose use of color and materials share aspects of work by Donald Judd, Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana and James Lee Byars.

The exhibition was organized under the direction of Mari Carmen Ramírez, the museum's curator of Latin American art and the founding director of its International Center for the Arts of the Americas. She is the editor of the seven-volume Oiticica catalogue raisonnée, which the museum will soon begin publishing. (Both projects are collaborations with Projeto Hélio Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro, a foundation established by Oiticica's two younger brothers, also artists, a year after his death.)

Sometime over the next five years Ms. Ramirez will also organize "Hélio Oiticica: The Space of the Senses," which will address the dematerialized, anti-art efforts for which Oiticica is better known. That show will include works like the walk-in beach-hut environments that dominated "Tropicalia" at the Bronx Museum of Art earlier this season.



Born into Brazil's leftist intelligentsia, Oiticica was a driven, rebellious prodigy whose talents were fostered by his parents, especially his father (an engineer, mathematics teacher and entomologist who was also one of Brazil's first experimental photographers). The young Hélio further benefited from the concerted postwar effort among Brazil's artists, designers and architects to keep pace with international culture, which included a rapid and self-conscious assimilation of aspects of Russian Constructivism and Neo-Plasticism.

In 1954 Oiticica began studying painting with Ivan Serpa, who had just helped found the Grupo Frente, a circle of abstract artists that included Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape. He started exhibiting with them in 1955. He later joined and showed with the Neo-Concrete group that Clark helped form. Yesterday the Museum of Fine Arts announced a significant gain in this area with the acquisition of the Adolpho Leirner Collection of Brazilian Constructive Art, which has lent two works to this show.

---

Oiticica's career is a game of catch-up that moves with almost breakneck speed from conservative to radical and from derivative to original. (He once wrote that his work before 1959 should be ignored.) In the first third of the exhibition, works from 1955 to 1958, Oiticica simultaneously reviews and presages the vocabulary of Modernist abstraction, from Malevich, Klee and Jean Arp to Ellsworth Kelly and Mel Bochner. Made in gouache on

cardboard, these works are small, delicate and often luminous. They use progressively fewer colors, and most share one quality: they are composed of separate shapes and have a kinetic buzz that suggests movement.



In the next third of the show, movement becomes real. This section begins with small monochromes in shades of red on small wood squares that are as much objects as paintings. It proceeds to the “Bilaterals” and “Spatial Reliefs,” two-sided, hanging painted wood pieces whose thin, seemingly folded forms might have been made a dozen years later by Dorothea Rockburne or Richard Tuttle. It culminates in the splendid marigold “Nuclei” of 1960-63, an arrangement of hanging squares and rectangles that form a porous maze (which originally people walked through).

At the heart of the show is an expanse of Oiticica’s “Bolides” from the early 1960s: dozens of the largely monochrome painted wood boxes, which were meant to be handled. Equipped with doors, shelves and drawers, they might incorporate glass vessels and hold caches of bright pigments, fabric, liquids, sand or crushed shells.

Low-tech, clearly hand-built and beguiling, the “Bolides” are the opposite of Minimal sculpture’s usual stand-offish perfection and reliance on predetermined systems. They make you want to reposition their moveable parts to understand them better. But even untouched, they render the whole idea of monochrome inoperative. Their colors vary slightly from plane to plane and also change as the adjustable parts catch light or shadow, or accent texture. The “Bolides” suggest a strange collaboration between Joseph Cornell, Josef Albers and Alan Shields — a kind of hedonistic, Fluxus-flavored formalism — and maintain a beautiful balance between chromatic purity and the eroding, workaday world

By focusing on Oiticica the consummate yet subversive maker of objects, who kept meticulous records about his artistic activities, this show may be an argument against the ephemeral in art. This Oiticica, so much livelier and present than the Oiticica of the capes and beach huts, is less familiar, partly because he disliked selling his work — at his death he owned perhaps 95 percent of it.



But the market's loss is art history's gain. An important component of the museum's effort has been a huge conservation project. Most works here have been newly restored, and many have not been exhibited since the artist's death. Paralleling this effort has been the archiving of the extensive papers he left behind, making possible the sometimes illuminating, sometimes pontificating excerpts in the show's catalog. (At one point he equates his relationship to Mondrian with Cubism's to Cézanne.)

Some of the more impressive writings dissect brushwork and paint texture and their relationship to visual perception in a way that is rare in modernist art writing. There is, in fact, a neat encapsulation of the meaning of painterly touch so basic to all of Oiticica's art: "Texture is a product of intelligence, rarely one of intuition."

*The New Yorker*  
July 2017

THE  
NEW YORKER

## DISCOVERING THE BRILLIANCE OF HÉLIO OITICICA

*The Brazilian artist was sorely under-known in the U.S. while he was alive. A posthumous retrospective reveals the immersive pleasures of his work.*

I'm getting braver at saying the name of a sorely under-known Brazilian artist whose retrospective at the Whitney Museum, "Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium," comes as an overdue revelation. Oiticica died in 1980, of a stroke, at the age of forty-two, after early success in Rio de Janeiro, a brush with fame in London, obscurity during seven years in New York, and a return to Rio that, at one opening, occasioned a riot. Along the way, he turned from superb abstract painting to innovative work in sculpture, film, writing, political action, and participatory installation, much of which remains as fresh as this morning. The sand, huts, potted plants, caged parrots, and inscribed poetry of his sprawling "Tropicália" (1968) await your barefoot delectation, should you choose to park your shoes in the rack provided. So do the multifarious love nests (mattresses, straw, chopped-up foam rubber, water) of a more austere faux beach, "Eden" (1969). Works that he made in New York and, at the time, showed only privately exalt sex, drugs, and rock and roll—delirium aplenty, yet managed with acute aesthetic intelligence. But back to the name. My pronunciation can still come out a little different every time, along a scale from the "Oy-ti-*seek*-a" recommended in the *Times* to the "Whoa-ta-*cee*-kah" that a self-confident Midwestern friend of mine swears by. I mention this because a tin ear for Portuguese makes me typical in an art world that, with exceptions, has long been inattentive to Latin America.



*Oiticica's "Bóides" on display in his garden in Rio de Janeiro, in the mid-sixties.*

Courtesy Claudio Oiticica / Projeto Hélio Oiticica



Oiticica was born in Rio in 1937 to an upper-middle-class and deeply cultured family. His father was a polymath engineer, mathematician, scientist, and experimental photographer whose own father, a philologist, published an anarchist newspaper. Oiticica spent two years in Washington, D.C., starting in 1947, while his father worked at the National Museum of Natural History. He devoured modern philosophy, favoring Nietzsche. Back in Rio, he wrote plays, studied painting, and, in 1955, joined a group of artists who were strongly influenced by European geometric abstraction. (This put them on a course alien to artists in the United States, where Abstract Expressionism—soon to be followed by Pop art and minimalism—sought to eclipse European modernism. The split proved enduring.) In hundreds of small paintings—too few, in the show, to sate my appetite for them—the young Oiticica rang startling changes, mixing homage and rivalry, on the styles of Mondrian, Malevich, and Klee.

By 1960, with like-minded compatriots including Lygia Pape (her own grand retrospective currently at the Met Breuer signals a corrective attention to Latin-American art), Oiticica had developed sculptural expansions of painting, with standing and suspended panels. Those led to his “Penetrables”—booths that could be entered—and “Bólides,” finely built wooden boxes with drawers or flaps that viewers could open to find various raw materials, mostly earthen. He took to frequenting Rio’s favelas, the direly impoverished hillside shantytowns that overlook the prosperous city. The improvisatory folk culture there inspired his “Parangolés”: garments for festive wear, mainly capes, that he stitched together from swaths and scraps of colorful fabric. With concerted study, he became an expert samba dancer. When, in 1965, Rio’s Museum of Modern Art barred entry to Parangolé-clad folk brought by Oiticica to dance at the opening of a show that he was in, the group disported outside in what became a legendary ad-hoc pageant. A military coup in Brazil in 1964 had ushered in a period of governmental oppression, which initially spared artistic activities. Needling of the junta by Oiticica and other artists—“Be an outlaw, be a hero,” he printed in black on a red banner with the image of a fallen youth—ended, in 1968, with a crackdown that drove many, including him, into exile. Like other aspects of his quicksilver character, his politics were ambiguous: leftist in general but what might be termed pop-aristocratic in effect. Jimi Hendrix became a guiding light to Oiticica at least as consequential as Marcel Duchamp.

“Creleisure,” Oiticica termed the principle of his sensual installation “Eden” at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, in 1969. The idea of Dionysian pleasure-seeking as a creative and, somehow, politically meaningful pursuit was much in the air then. (An observer at the Whitechapel show, perhaps in the mood for an orgy, deplored the no-fun restraint of British viewers.) But Oiticica was too tough-minded to indulge in hippieish peace and love. “Sex and Violence, That’s What I Like,” he had lettered on one Parangolé. His gayness became a driving personal cause and may have figured in his move, in 1970, with funds from a Guggenheim grant, to post-Stonewall New York, where he took an apartment on Second Avenue in the East Village. He relished the round-the-clock bacchanal of the West Side piers, photographed hustlers, and filmed the drag star Mario Montez. But he disdained the commercially oriented scene at Andy Warhol’s Factory for, he said, “raising marginal activity to a bourgeois level.” Insuring his own marginality, he took to dealing cocaine, a drug that became something like the love of his life. He gave varieties of it poetic names: Snows of Kilimanjaro, for one, and Carol Channing’s Diamonds, for another. In an undated, lovely still-life photograph, a little heap of the intoxicant rests on a box of Bold laundry detergent.

I never met Oiticica, as far as I can recall, though he lived three short blocks from me and knew artists whom I knew—notably the dazzling Gordon Matta-Clark—in a scrappy SoHo milieu that was minuscule by today’s standards. I get to sample at the Whitney what (perhaps luckily for me in the long run) I missed out on in the hermetic scene that Oiticica hosted. “CC5 Hendrix-War” (1973) is a room equipped with six comfortable hammocks. Projected on the walls and ceilings are overlapping slides of the cover of “War Heroes,” a posthumous Hendrix album, from 1972, as its thrilling songs play from multiple speakers. On the cover, decorating Hendrix’s face like war paint, are lines of cocaine. Cradled in a hammock the other day, I couldn’t imagine anywhere in the world I would rather be, tracking subtle variations in the changing slides: for example, a matchbook first closed, then open, then burning, then, finally, burned. The work’s form anticipates subsequent generations of installation artists, none of whom can beat it for immersive and bracing cogency. Of course, Oiticica’s blitzed afflatus was insane, as any former addict will tell you. After 1975, references to cocaine dwindled in his work.



Oiticica was a great one for planning. His buoyant writings in English, displayed in vitrines and seductively recited through earphones, hatch intricate Utopian schemes, often architectural in character. In 1971, he proposed one that involved labyrinthine spaces, for construction in Central Park, called “Subterranean Tropicália Projects.” Judging by the maquette in the show, I endorse reviving the idea. Oiticica’s feel for spatial arrangement and proportion, developed in his early painting and sculpture, is just about preternatural. Had he lived longer, we would likely be blessed with a number of landmark achievements in public art.

In 1978, weary of New York and of being harassed, for want of a green card, by U.S. immigration authorities, Oiticica returned to Rio. His last major work, “PN27 Penetrable, ‘Rijanviera’ ” (the title was taken from a coinage referring to Rio de Janeiro in “Finnegans Wake”), ends the Whitney show in a spirit of chastening ritual. Entering a pavilion that is made of translucent, subtly hued plastic panels, you wade through running water and emerge on soft sand, amid a rock garden. The work’s solemnity didn’t deter rowdies in 1979 who attended the show in Copacabana where it was introduced, incautiously augmented with blasting Hendrix music. When the installation’s water pump broke, flooding the gallery, a number of the viewers went wild, wrecking a nearby piece by Lygia Pape and forcing Oiticica to physically defend his own (he is said to have hit one vandal in the face with a rock). But the contretemps seems not to have marred his happiness at being back in Brazil—“free free free,” he wrote to a friend. When he died, he had a profusion of projects in development, and a future ahead of him that invites our imagining. ♦

*Published in the print edition of the July 31, 2017, issue, with the headline “Full Immersion.”*



*Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine’s art critic. His latest book is “Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light: 100 Art Writings, 1988–2018.” [Read more »](#)*

*Guardian*  
June 2007

# The Guardian

## And it was all yellow

**Hélio Oiticica's work is as vivid and fluttering as an origami bird - but in his short lifetime, he proved himself to be a serious and influential artist, says Adrian Searle**



▲ Inside the box ... an installation by Hélio Oiticica at Tate Modern. Photograph: Linda Nyland

Colour sings and the heart sings with it in Hélio Oiticica's art. Many of the Brazilian artist's painted shapes hang freely, floating on the taut wires that suspend them, and never seeming to dangle in anything so dull as gravity. These rhomboids, chevrons and compound plywood geometries invite us to turn around them, too: there is always a surprise on another side, along an edge or between their planes.

Looking can be like dancing (Oiticica trained as a dancer), and his spacial reliefs, now almost 50 years old, make willing partners. In the 1960s, he went on to make coloured capes of printed, painted and dyed fabrics and plastic, - his Parangolés - to be worn and to dance in. Painted shapes and shaped paintings: do you wear his paintings or is the art the dance itself?

Oiticica first developed these forms through a series of card maquettes. They look like origami birds, which one can imagine flying out of a 1920s Suprematist or constructivist canvas to alight on a Paul Klee tree. They are



not really birds, but in my mind I see two hands fluttering as they manipulate the card, score, fold and paint them. These sprightly, angular little shapes, with their sharp and flattened edges, also remind me of folded paper wraps passed furtively from hand to hand between drug dealer and client. But there is nothing hidden in these envelopes except an idea.

Oiticica died in 1980, aged 42, following a stroke. Luckily for us, he was prolific and however much of a hippy he appeared (the hair, the flares, the Afghan coat), or how wholeheartedly he embraced 1960s counter-cultural excess, he remained a serious and inventive artist. It comes as a jolt to realise that the works in the first room of The Body of Colour, Oiticica's Tate Modern show, were completed when he was just 18.

This is a captivating exhibition, in which it is a pleasure to linger, even though it takes us only halfway through Oiticica's career. The fact that Tate Modern is mounting this show, and has been buying Oiticica's work for the collection, is testimony to the artist's increasing posthumous reputation and influence, along with that of his friends and colleagues Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape. Theirs was a modernism freed from northern, protestant restraint, and an art that strove to go beyond the gallery and the closed world of the market.

These artists invited viewers to engage with their work in open and sometimes physical ways. As much as they embraced neo-constructivism and rationalism, order and rigour, they rejected hermeticism, or dry academic formalism, even though they were preoccupied by form and rhythm. They managed to take modernism somewhere its European forebears, and North-American contemporaries never imagined.

On Tate Modern's fifth floor, several rooms within the collection have been devoted to Brazilian art of the 1960s, and to Oiticica's sojourn in London in 1968, when, largely through the auspices of critic Guy Brett, the artist installed his Eden in the Whitechapel [Art](#) Gallery. At the time, no one knew what to make of Oiticica's live macaws, nests for visitors to crawl into, indoor beach and jungles of foliage.

Nowadays, we call this kind of installation "relational aesthetics". Art was always about relationships - even the most hard-assed modernism - but most of the time, audiences were too uptight to notice. If Oiticica's art is pleasurable, light and open-ended, it is also deeply serious and rigorous. His paintings and reliefs are well-crafted, handmade things that invite respect. The surfaces are both lush and reserved, painted with a formal rightness that keeps the colour trembling and in its place, but as though it were straining for the freedom of the air. I never realised just how good a painter Oiticica was until now.

In one entirely yellow work, the colour goes from near-olive to acidic lemon, through heavy barium yellow to a dry-leaf khaki. You notice how necessary it is to have dulled colours among the bright, thoughtful gradations as well as straight-from-the tube explosions. How Oiticica's planes catch the light matters, and so too how his colour refreshes, then saturates, then tires the eye. This is why we keep moving on and returning.

His white paintings, from the late 1950s, are the equals of Robert Ryman and Piero Manzoni. Twenty-two near-identical red paintings run the length of a wall, but how different each of them is. Oiticica's small, square paintings are a world of variety and surface applications - paint is stippled, blotted, scuffed and criss-crossed. The brush snakes about, imitates the dancing tip of a rapier before it lunges, drags and churns. Oiticica was interested in transforming paint not into texture, but into time - a sense of extended duration.

Art that is merely colourful is so much visual noise. Colour, like sound, has to be organised or orchestrated in some way to be meaningful. The mechanisms of perception, and theories about colour might tell us a lot, but colour remains somehow unmanageable, volatile, associative, fugitive. When we talk about colour we talk about the way our brains are wired. From the first, Oiticica's art tried to give structure to colour. He never arbitrarily assigned colour to form, the way a map maker assigns colours to countries, in order to distinguish them. Topology didn't interest him.

In a way, Oiticica's paintings prefigured developments in American art during the 60s and 70s - one inescapably thinks of Frank Stella, Robert Mangold, Robert Ryman, Ellsworth Kelly, and numerous later practitioners of what came to be called "fundamental painting". Oiticica got there by a different route, taking on board the lessons of an earlier, utopian European modernism - Malevich, constructivism, concretism, Max Bill, Mondrian and their like - which informed Brazilian art and architecture in the 1950s and 60s in a way it never did in Europe or north America.



In the mid 60s, Oiticica began a series of bricollaged constructions called Bólides, or Fireballs. One of these tantalising hybrid objects, which were always meant to be handled and explored, is a glass flagon wrapped in pigment-soaked burlap and hessian scrim. The material is stiff with patches of dried paint, frozen in billows. The jar itself contains a yellowish liquid. It might be olive oil - the jar would look good set next to a bowl of salad - or linseed, in which case it belongs next to a painter's palette. The whole work has the air of an improvised gift, on which more care than money has been spent. It is entitled Homage to Mondrian, as though this were a present to the painter.

The cumulative effect of this exhibition is breathtaking, though tinged with sadness. With certain artists who have died prematurely, our sense of loss is compounded by how much unfinished business they left behind, how much unrealised potential. With others - Yves Klein, Blinky Palermo, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Piero Manzoni - there is somehow a sense of completion within what they did. Everything one might imagine is already present. There is also a feeling that their projects are continued in the works of those who have come after them. This is also how I feel about Hélio Oiticica. These artists shared something more than an early death. They were Oiticica's unknown peers. The work goes on.

# Frieze



## Hélio Oiticica

The Wexner Center, Columbus, USA

In 1970 Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, encouraged by the receipt of a Guggenheim fellowship and his inclusion in the landmark survey of Conceptual art, 'Information' at MoMA, relocated to New York. It was a move which provoked a shift in his thought and work. Though long fascinated with cinema and antagonistic towards 'spectacular' culture, in New York Oiticica, collaborating with his friend, the filmmaker Neville D'Almeida, began to formulate a complex plan for a series of environmental happenings collectively called 'Cosmococas'. Designed to provide real-life experiences that demanded an imaginative and critical consideration on the part of the participant, these works were 'supra-sensorial', emphasized the body's primacy and sought to defy cultural mechanisms of mediation by activating all of the senses with a disorienting barrage of sound, light, colour, textures, scents, images, and activities. In *CC3: Maileryn* (1973), for example, the floor is covered by a thick layer of sand sealed with clear vinyl. Yellow and orange balloons are scattered about while electric fans blow from various corners, a soundtrack of Latin music blares and a number of slide projectors toss images of Marilyn Monroe, her features outlined with cocaine, across the walls, ceiling and floors.

Furthering Oiticica's aim of 'pure simultaneity', 'Cosmococas' combined aspects of the Burroughs cut-up (Oiticica's own writings from this time echo Burroughs' in both style and concerns), experimental film à la Warhol and Jack Smith; the leisure-based architecture of Constant's New Babylon; Situationist theory; Beuysian social sculpture; the 'revolutionary power of Rock'; and a Symbolist yearning for escape. Playfully promoting passive rebellion ('Artaud's poetry without blood', wrote Oiticica), *CC1: Trashiscapes* (1973) provided emery boards so participants could file



their fingernails while lying on mattresses leisurely contemplating images of Luis Buñuel. Yet the aggressive, fun-house nature of the installations ultimately belied the dandyish, meditative indolence they seemed to offer. In fact, the loud music, flashing projections and claustrophobic enclosures wrestle the spectator into a senseless submission. Cocooned in a hammock, the subject is no more liberated than the chair-bound spectator at the local multiplex. Have we, in the end, simply swapped brands of mediation: mainstream for marginal, cultural for counter-cultural, cinema for quasi-cinema?

But perhaps this question is unfair. The limitations of art, after all, favour effect over real experience. Oiticica himself viewed 'Cosmococas' as 'propositions', suggestions for changes in thinking and doing that people would hopefully carry further in the outside world. As such, the works were undeniably interesting and the installation at the Wexner seemed a real crowd-pleaser something the artist, who died in 1980, would have enjoyed.

---

One of the enigmas of Oiticica's New York projects is their introspective nature. His earlier work in Brazil had been directly inspired by his interaction with the people and the environment of the favelas. His 'Penetrables' and 'Parangoles' depended upon the active participation of individuals from all walks of life. They were interventionist in nature and, significantly, took place in public realms: on the street or in the museums. By contrast, 'Cosmococas' are all interior environments, hermetic and removed from the life of the city. Had New York proven to be impenetrable? One wonders why Oiticica stayed. By all accounts his life there was a struggle and at times he existed in dire poverty. After the high point of 'Information' his CV lists no other shows in New York. Granted, Oiticica seemed little interested in perceiving art as a career, but his life would have been easier and more productive back in Brazil, where his reputation was established and he had supporters.

The concern of 'Cosmococas' with alienation was informed, in part, by Oiticica's own alienated state while in New York. Yet he seems to have revelled in his position as an outsider; one of the things that makes 'Cosmococas' compelling is the hint of darkness at their heart. On a certain level they feel like opium dens or sex clubs. While drug use and sex acts are never explicitly outlined in Oiticica's instructions for 'Cosmococas' (Carlos Basualdo refers to 'Idea 8' in one of Oiticica's notebooks, a description for an early, unrealized, project involving 'acts with strong sexual content'), there is evidence that, in life, Oiticica frequently engaged in such behaviour. I question the prevalent hesitancy to investigate these aspects of Oiticica's existence, especially given how he himself saw his life and work as being so inseparable. More than 20 years after his death a bit more disclosure is in order. One need only look at Wayne Koestenbaum's recent book on Andy Warhol to see how enlightening a sensitive and informed reading of an artist's personal life can prove to be.

**CHARLES LABELLE**

First published in Issue 64  
Jan - Feb 2002