

## CRITICAL VOICES - HÉLIO OITICICA New Museum of Contemporary Art

Critical Voices Series - Hélio Oiticica  
**NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

The following is a transcript of Critical Voices Series for Hélio Oiticica exhibition, Quasi-cinemas that took place on 10/03/2002 at 6.30pm-8pm. The Critical Voices Series at the New Museum of Contemporary Art brings together curators, artists, writers and other thinkers to comment from their personal perspective on a specific work or artist being shown at the Museum.

Participants in the event were:

**Gary Garrels**, Chief Curator of Drawings and Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art

**Bruce Jenkins**, Stanley Cavell, Curator of the Harvard Film Archive, and Senior Lecturer on Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard College

**Arto Lindsay**, artist, songwriter, producer, vocalist, and guitarist, talked about their personal perspectives on Oiticica's work.

**Dan Cameron**, Senior Curator of New Museum of Contemporary Art, introduced the speakers, and summed up the events at the end of their presentations.

**GARY GARRELS:** It's wonderful to have the Cosmococa at the museum. I will talk a little bit about the work that precedes the Cosmococa to give a little more background on Oiticica's development.

The first presentation of Oiticica's work in the United States was in 1988 at PS1, a project that Chris Durkan organized called "The Brazil Projects", which introduced Oiticica's work to me for the first time. That was the first sort of post-posthumous presentation of work. Oiticica was a student in Rio in the mid-fifties at a time when geometric abstraction was extraordinarily a powerful, strong body of work. He began by doing his extraordinary drawings he called "metaschemos," fracturing a geometric space into positive and negative shapes, generally slightly organic, but a very strong geometric structure. In 1959, he became one of the key figures in something called the Neo-concrete art movement, which began to move into space, off the canvas, off the paper, and he was interested in the mixture, the dialogue between color and structure, and time and light. There were still essentially formal concerns, but moving into an experiential realm. He says, "the wall does not serve as background, but as extraneous unlimited space." I think that is picked up then in these slide projection pieces. He made basically plainer reliefs, sometimes just coming directly off the walls, sometimes beginning to hang

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into space. In 1960, he made a work called "Nucleus" where these forms began to hang over a mirror, and you could begin to walk around the work, and the space would become ... your perceptions were fractured between the real object and the reflected object.

The first environment that Oiticica made was as early as 1960. He then did a piece called "The Grand Nucleus," where one began to walk in and around all these elements, and began to interact with other people. In 1960, toward the end of the year, a thing he called the "Penetrable," which was again a geometric structure, but now you could actually literally walk into it and move the walls to change the configuration of space, to change how you might be involved with another person approaching this small structure.

By 1963-65, he began to move out of museums, out of galleries, out of art spaces, into the environment. And he created something he called "Bouillabaisse," which is ... probably the best translation is "Fireballs," which were these sometimes jars, constructed boxes, found objects, sometimes layered with raw pigment, with rocks, with images, occasionally with mirrors. Sometimes they could be manipulated. They could be placed indoors; they could be placed outdoors. But they became these kinds of objects for re-engaging one's relationship to the world around one, and that could be interior or exterior.

Very quickly from that, something that was probably one of the most decisive developments in his work called "Parangolés", which sort of translates as something like "an animated situation." Oiticica was a marvelous writer. The Oiticica catalog that was prepared for the European show in the Walker has extensive selections from his notebooks and letters. And all his ability with language is as brilliant and formal and inventive and conceptual as the artwork itself. And his play of language is fundamental to the work.

This was the moment when he became aware of Samba and the favelas, the shantytowns that ring the inner city of Rio on the hills, the poor neighborhoods. He began to create these kinds of structures that were based loosely on favela structures, sort of ad hoc encampments, banners and texts. And they became performative, one could wear these and one could participate either as a performer or participating with the performers. Some of these were done in the street or in very spontaneous ad hoc situations. Others were more staged. And so in 1965, I think his first major museum show was at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, which was the first public event, if you will, formal event of the Parangolés.

Parangolés was quickly followed by an installation in 1967 called the Tropicalia, which in many ways was the key event in launching the Tropicalismo. Here is a quote again about the Tropicalia, which was an environment that had birds, it had squawking macaws, it had plants, it had these structures that he called "Penetrables" that one could walk into, and it was he said "his very first conscious objective attempt to impose an obviously resilient

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image upon the current context of the avant garde, and national art manifestation in general. It was an experimental image field.”

This was a kind of apex of this going into the environment of Rio de Janeiro, into the city, into the indigenous life of the favelas, and transforming that, bringing it into his work. That work was then shown in London in 1969, along with another installation he called the "Eden," which was a much more abstracted creation. It was no longer so specifically tied to the Brazilian environment, although he was bringing in mats, and sand, and elements of the city. But it was a place for what he called "pre-leisure," that is, of kind of a free creation city.

He was not interested in occupying a specific place in space and time. He was interested in the live pleasure. And then in 1970 came to New York for the first time to participate in the Information Show at the Museum of Modern Art. He created an installation there called the "Nest," and then moved to New York in 1971, living on the Lower East Side on Second Avenue, creating these nests in his loft environment. In 1973, the full development of the Cosmococa are extremely reflective of this shift into the urban environment of New York, no longer in the street, participating in this intense urban interplay of the life of the favelas in Rio, but coming into the interior spaces of New York. It is a very fundamental transformation. He's dealing with space formally, beginning with the metaschemos through the Penetrables through the Bouillabaisse, the Parangolés, and this increasing sort of arena for participation, for the discovery of the interior life of the mind in one's own creative ... a kind of staging for one's own creativity.

**BRUCE JENKINS:** The work we are seeing here really is unimaginable without the relocation of Oiticica from Brazil to New York, and in particular to the Lower East Side. And in many ways his very late work, his work has migrated now from the wall into very much of a living space into a kind of environmental space. Oiticica is very influenced in coming to New York by a performance that he witnessed at Jack Smith's apartment, probably in '71 or '72.

His performances were, to say the least, dilatory and protracted. You could be awaiting Jack's arrival in the beginning of a piece for an hour, and when they began, and they didn't begin in any clear-cut way, they often involved slides and lots of very tacky decor. Jack Smith was part of a movement that Jonas Mekas, the founder of Anthology Film Archive, and True Magazine, I think very aptly described as the “Baudelairian cinema,” the kind of cinema that to borrow from Susan Sontag's piece on Jack Smith, was willfully crude, improvised. The film of Oiticica's, the Roma Agripina, is a good example of that kind of improvisation. It's not 16 millimeter like the Warhol films, it's Super 8. It's done hand-held. The characters in it actually come from the New York art scene.

I want to talk about just two other aspects that really underpin the three environments. Oiticica was very resistant to the notion of multimedia. It's a word he actually hated,

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much as Marcel Broodthaers, the Belgian conceptual artist who did many, many films, hated to think of his films as experimental films.

The three pieces here take place presumably on Second Avenue in his apartment from March to August of 1973. One is an urban example, and one I would want to call a kind of rural or rustic example. In April of 1966, Andy Warhol decided to take his films off the way and into an environment. In the Dome Cafe in the East Village, he created what he called the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, a series of projections including his films like "Vinyl" and the screen tests, live and pre-recorded music including Nico and the Velvet Underground, strobe lights, and all sorts of tacky decor.

Jonas Mekas wrote that it was dynamic and loud. But the biographer Stephen Koch, described it as "barn-like and tacky," and I like the tacky part the best. Warhol's environmental work in the mid- to late 1960s really creates the beginning of this expanded cinema moment in New York. There was also an expanded cinema moment on the West Coast, and it was much more psychedelic, much more about expanded consciousness, and transformative ideas.

The other kind of expanded New York based is the work of a man who's almost all but forgotten, a ubiquitous figure of underground and experimental film. In fact, coined the phrase "underground movies." Stan Vanderbeek was very interested again in moving away from single-screen projection, and he began making "media murals" in the mid-1960s. The culmination of this took place also probably around '66 or '67, upstate New York, where he created something he called the MovieDrome.

The MovieDrome in some ways is a real model for particularly for the hammock environment, because the Movie Drome was a cinema with a hemispheric ceiling, in which you saw many different kinds of projections, magic lanterns, slides, 8 millimeter, 16 millimeter. It was clearly a relationship between the dream-state and cinema viewing that was at the heart of it, but also this kind of expanded consciousness of multi-image.

Being in New York meant being within an artistic arena, not only of artists who were working against the model of the single screen spectacle, but also in an environment where audiences were looking for innovative forms of image making, innovative forms of participatory kind of cinema. These movies are about activating the viewer and involve a singular reversal. And even though it might be an unlikely film to mention, I'll mention a key experimental film also of the period, by Michael Snow called "Wavelength, a film that's ostensibly a single shot, and what it does is reverse the way in which movies ordinarily work.

In most movies, the space in which the action takes place is definitely the background. The narrative, the characters, the event grab our attention. Snow reverses that. Virtually nothing happens in the film for 45 minutes, and very much the same thing is going on in

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the Quasi-Cinemas of Oiticica. He's reversed the usual way in which we attend the cinema. These are not films, but slide shows. He's in some ways deactivated the cinema, slowed it down to almost a kind of pre-cinema, in order to activate you, the viewer.

**ARTO LINDSAY:** I speculate on what is actually supposed to go on in these rooms in museums that are supposed to stimulate you to live, this whole notion of like getting off the canvas, it's flat and then it's broken up, and then it's a relief, and then it's in space, and then pretty soon people are wearing it.

I am a musician but I knew Hélio at the end of his life, a really different time when he was preparing to return to Brazil, and he was working on his large outdoor sculptures, which I think are finally going to get built. These massive walls that kind of slide around, they're primary colors. You can move it around, with these huge concrete panels, they can slide back and forth and make this, whatever, change in space.

My experience with Hélio was that he was a really interesting combination of somebody who was so rational, and whose work looks like geometry in a sense, and it's very much Brazilian, South American, to be interested in that. A continental style, a lot of modernist architecture, and a lot of the painting is very geometric.

The other side of Hélio was very much of a kind of ultimate queen. Like incredibly brilliant, incredibly demanding and witty, and pushing himself as far as he could. The whole Baudelairian cinema aspect doesn't get talked about a lot. It puts a different spin on some of the more formal things. He worshipped Mick Jagger, Caetano Veloso and the Tropicalists, the people that had Gill Costa, and may pop stars. I think he literally put pictures of Marilyn and Hendrix in there, because he loved them, he was in love with them, he wanted to be them. He emulated them and identified with them to a painful point the way that teenagers do with rock stars. There was a real thing, and that gives a real edge to this other kind of stuff, which sometimes seems very schematic.

Even the changes that people go through that sort of go off the canvas, and stop doing this and stop doing that. I watched this movie through, and it's kind of an interesting combination, it follows the building up, it follows the building down. It moves straight along the ground, it's all very sort of geometric and gestural and structural, as it were, and ends with a very Duchampian thing, like that's Antonio Diaz, a very well-known Brazilian painter.

**ARTO LINDSAY:** You discover that Oiticica and Lygia Clark were working with ideas in 1959, 1960, about opening up art, the geometries, the structure, into different kinds of possibilities, potential for opening up your own way of dealing with the work and performance aspects to it.

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At the same time, there was a very distinct development going on, particularly in Rio, and in Caracas, there were different places. Oiticica is not like somebody out of touch with his own time at all. He knew very, very well what was going on with the avant-garde in Europe. He was conversant with the classic modernist project of someone like Mondrian and particularly Duchamp.

His hammocks are a whole new synthesis of the avant-garde, and of his own life. And for me what's interesting is that his life, the way he was living it, and the way he was thinking about it, become indissolubly synthesized. Even though he's an extraordinarily conceptual and abstract thinker, it never becomes disengaged from his own life experience, and the two become very continuous.

**GARY GARRELS:** Let's also add the Brazilian cinema, and Cinema Novo in particular of the 1960s, and also the kind of cinema that Neville D'Almeida, who is kind of co-author of these installations, or Cinema Marchinal, this was a very cinephilic culture. In fact, if you read Oiticica, he's very aware of Godard. But at the same time, there was a kind of decision whether to absorb that Western culture or not. One of the mantras of this period was "to be or not to be," to be being the cannibalistic tribe of Brazilians. Do we consume this western culture or do we reject it? Do we kind of cultivate this relationship with Europe, and then destroy it at the same time. So there is awareness, and in fact there is more of a passing awareness of that European culture, but there is also a kind of radicality.

Also, sex, drugs, and rock n'roll very much were part of the scene. It is really a rejection of bourgeois ideology, a kind of rejection of the society of modern, and at the same time a critique of the culture of drugs or the culture of decadence too. It is a kind of embrace of decadence against the gallery, against the marketplace, against bourgeois ideology. And at the same time, a kind of note taking, a kind of critical note-taking of its impact as well.

By the time he left New York in 1978, he was thinking very much about how to re-engage being in the environment in Brazil. And one of the pieces that finally got built I think last year or the year before is this incredibly, brilliantly colored set of walls and this kind of a geometric-structured environment set in the middle of this kind of lush tropical environment. And so these two polarities, the rational and the romantic, are constantly sort of ebbing and surging in his work. He was in search of what he called the "supra-sensorial," which would be an art that no longer was an instrument of intellectual domination, that art was a liberation.

He was very interested also in Marcusa, those of you who remember the '60s, and the notion of art as a forum. A means for human intellectual liberation and experiential liberation of oneself and one's relationships, within a social culture. And so, it never

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became completely solipsistic at all. It was always in the service of how you'd set up a set of relationships that potentially could shift the structure of the community of relations.

**DAN CAMERON:** Speaking as the curator here, the New Museum is a museum of contemporary art, which means it's ideally focused on art being made now or in the last few years. What we are seeing here are installations that have laid dormant or hidden for really three decades now. What I wanted somebody to be able to comment on, was what relevance do you see this work having in terms of the creative choices and challenges facing artists working today. Because I think that's a question that comes up a lot in terms of how this work is being perceived.

**GARY GARRELS:** I think especially in New York because of the intensity of the marketplace, and the commercialism of New York. I see it a lot, that there are artists again trying to figure out how to breach into other kinds of systems. But this has been going on through the 20th century.

It's episodic and it's biographical, because different artists I think react and respond to those issues at different times in their lives, when they're for whatever reasons, more or less pressing. I mean, it was interesting that Oiticica in 1965, when he was in the midst of Samba, he became a real Samba-iste ...He was dancing the Samba every week. Samba is not something that's just trotted out for carnival. Samba is something that's really essential to the community, to the whole life of the community, of the favelas.

There is a fantastic book called *Samba* by Alma Guillermoprieto that talks about Samba and the relationship of Samba within Brazilian culture, beautifully written. I don't think he was every really so interested in the marketplace. The notion of what kinds of places, what kinds of public sites, and those variety of public sites, whether that's the street or a park, or an institution like the museum, and how institutions can function also as public sites, I think was what was interesting to him.

Moving to New York in 1970, participating in the Information Show at MOMA, he wasn't disengaged from the ideas of museums, or these kinds of systems of power and structuring, but rather how those could be engaged.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** If you look at Warhol now, the Marilyns are becoming more and more like Rembrandt every day, you know, they look like classics already. It is very hard to see them as being transgressive in any way. But these [works] seem very raw still, in a different way.

**ARTO LINDSAY:** It was very difficult to be openly gay in Rio, especially as he was from a really traditional family. And when he joined the Samba school, it was much easier for him to be himself sexually. He was supposedly a great dancer. Those people became his friends and were involved in all his performances. He left Brazil because it was very hard

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to be who he was. The banner that he did that was in honor of a famous bandit, a coke dealer, bad guy, but it was somebody that he knew was a little bit of a Robin Hood and was involved in the concert that some government official saw, and it was a Tropicalia concert of musicians. He did a banner that was Two of the guys were exiled, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto, so [Oiticica] was involved, and he pretty much moved here because it got very difficult to do anything there. It was very hard for him to make a living here, he was a translator and a telephone operator.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I'm wondering since...the artist isn't here, it's like the installations almost look too slick. I'm just wondering what curatorial license was taken with the work?

**DAN CAMERON:** One aspect of the Cosmococa is that it includes not just the three that are on view here, but all of the work created under that title, as there was always a private version and a public version of each piece. The private versions are extensions of the loft spaces that Oiticica created, where very often many of his friends were crashing at any given time. He wanted to create sort of living environments. And so a lot of these kind of spaces were actually given trial runs in what he called the private performance version, which was really for him and whoever happened to be around at that time.

The way the public performances were really as expansions from that. And he left it quite loose in terms of there are no designated dimensions of the space. He's quite specific about many of the details; the number of hammocks, where the hammocks are pointed, how the mirrors work, right down to the volume of the music. He seems to have been very aware that working in this mode would require people to do the works long after he was gone. So you get the idea that the combination of very controlled aspects of the installation, and the completely open and adaptable aspects of the installations were part and parcel of his entire aesthetic, his whole way of working.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I'm interested in the points of interrelationship between his work and Warhol's. To what degree did they know one another, to what degree did Oiticica participate or vice versa in one another's time-based interactive performative activities? Certainly notions of celebrity, of group daily activity among others thread throughout both bodies of work, and I'm wondering, two kind of giants at the same time here, in the context of this show, in the same place: what are the interrelationships?

**GARY GARRELS:** I was thinking about the idea of freedom, and I think the '60s generated notions of freedom. And I think Warhol exemplified freedom of society, and using public imagery, imagery that came ... that was of the public domain. And destroying the hierarchy of images by for example in this magazine, he would equate celebrities with young upcoming people who were nobodies. This has disappeared in the magazine, by the way, which is disappointing to me, which means that they misunderstood Warhol in his idea that *Interview* magazine was this pure democracy. Oiticica I think [manifests] the freedom of the individual, which is the artist himself



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trying to expand through installation art, the control over the complete environment. It doesn't allow the curator or the institution to contextualize the art object.

**BRUCE JENKINS:** I will just say the obvious, that regrettably by the time that Oiticica was here in New York, Warhol had been shot and he had essentially ceased what was about a five year period of intensive work as a filmmaker, in which he made literally hundreds of films, including things that looked not unlike the slide piece over there... But he had two big projects he called I think "Thirteen Most Beautiful Women," "Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys," and he would continually ask people, "Would you be in my film?" And of course he did hundreds of these. I think he did one "Thirteen Most Beautiful" and one "Thirteen Most Beautiful Women." He actually did hundreds of those on the pretext that he was casting for that. It was really this openness to everyone in the culture, an openness to the kinds of beauties that would be available for the camera. One sees it very much in this work of Oiticica.

**DAN CAMERON:** He came to New York in 1970 to participate in the MOMA show "Information," and settled here more or less permanently in 1971. He returned to Rio in '78, which was after the dictatorship had been ousted, went back to a democracy and died in 1980. He lived on Second Avenue from 1971 to '73, and in 1974, he moved to Christopher Street, and lived there from '74 to '78. I have to say one of the things I haven't seen anything written about in the literature is homosexuality. That has been kept totally sotto voce so far.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I'm pretty much of the impression that he didn't hang out with Warhol; they did not spend time together but spent time with the musicians of Tropicalismo. I'd like to know a little bit about whether they collaborated, whether he just participated on the level of Samba, how he was involved.

**ARTO LINDSAY:** They weren't that close at that time, for very long. Basically when they started to make music, they were looking for a name, or people were looking for a name to call them. A film producer suggested they call themselves the Tropicalists, after that. They must have asked him for this banner, and he gave them this banner for a show. Then they went into exile. And there was a kind of artistic relationship more than a personal relationship, because they weren't in the same place at the same time for very long. When he came here, it wasn't like a Warhol Factory kind of situation. When he moved here he was connected to a lot of the other Brazilian musicians and intellectuals here like the great bossa nova singer and guitar player Joao Gilberto who lived in New Jersey when Helio lived here, and I know that they talked on the phone a lot. Another Brazilian was Juilio Bresani, who was a fabulous filmmaker whose work is not very well known outside of Brazil.