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Of Adversity We Live: Hélio Oiticica, Decolonized Avant-Garde and Global Art

Abstract: This article discusses the works and writings of Brazilian visual artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980) as a way to rethink the notions of global art, especially through the lens of the artist's unique vision of a decolonial avant-garde, against the background of Arthur Danto's and Hans Belting's theories concerning the end of art history. Oiticica's entire work is set against the double trap that haunts artists in the geopolitical silent zones of the art world: submission to the international art trends, at risk of becoming mere epigones following the footsteps of what is current in the art world's centers, or the equally melancholic condemnation to a nativist art that doesn't transcend it's local status and can only come in to the international spotlight as the object of some form of "white savior" primitivism.

Keywords: Hélio Oiticica; global art; decolonial avant-garde.

Jean-Hubert Martin, curator of the famous 1989 exhibition *Les magiciens de la terre* – held at the Centre Georges Pompidou and at the Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris and often hailed as the first proper global art event – stated at that time, in an interview for the *Art Press* magazine regarding that show, the following:

> In South America especially, apart from Brazil, we had many disappointments because we found artists involved in a Western art system, with galleries, museums, etc. And the productions of the artists seemed to us very dependent on our great centers, well, what we were looking for was something else – something that could renew the focus, renew the interest [...] I was not interested in showing that artists in Latin America read *Art Forum*.[1]

[1] Ana Letícia Fialho, "O Brasil está no mapa? Reflexão sobre a inserção e a visibilidade do Brasil no mapa internacional das artes," in *Sociologia das artes visuais no Brasil*, ed. by Maria Lucia Bueno (São Paulo: Editora Senac, 2012), 145–46.

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Maybe to the reader in the global North, this statement may look completely aboveboard, a world class curator doing his job. But to the reader in the global South, it sounds like an unappealable condemnation: it implies that artists from places outside the hegemonic geopolitical axis of the art world can only be either "primitives", making *naïve* art as the mythical "other", or derivative figures of no real consequence. Their value may come from authenticity, but never from critical thought. Reading *Art Forum* or, for that matter, *Art Press*, showing their work in galleries and museums, can only spoil their frail originality. Three decades later, such blunt statements may not come as easily as they did then, but one can argue that the balance of power in the art world, especially in its defining structures, both theoretical and institutional, has not changed that much. Nevertheless, in the quoted interview, Martin makes an exception for Brazil and, in fact, two very important and very distinctive Brazilian artists took part in the aforementioned show: Cildo Meireles and Mestre Didi. But here the focus of our argument will be on a third figurehead of Brazilian contemporary art, Hélio Oiticica.

Born in 1937 in Rio de Janeiro, where he also died in 1980, Oiticica's entire work is set against the double trap that haunts artists in the geopolitical silent zones of the art world: submission to international art trends, at risk of becoming mere epigones following the footsteps of what is current in the art world's centers, or the equally melancholic condemnation to a nativist art that doesn't transcend it's local status and can only come into the international spotlight as the object of some form of "white savior" primitivism. In order to build another space for himself – and maybe Brazilian art as a whole – Hélio sought strenuously to be up to date with the international contemporary art of his time (quite a feat, considering the state of worldwide communications in the 1950s and 1960s), as well as to carry out an equally intense research and defense of the avant-garde potential of both the artistic and the lived experiences of the Brazilian people, especially those most removed from its Western and Eurocentric heritages. In a formulation that defies many preconceptions, Oiticica reckoned that an experimental attitude towards art and life was the only truly non-colonized (or decolonized, to use a more current term) stand to be taken. To assert his independence, he often reacted strongly to sectors of Brazil's own art world that insisted in classifying his works as somehow affiliated with American or European currents. During his period in New York as a *de facto* exile from Brazil's murderous US-backed military regime, he also refused certain demands to become something like an avant-garde correspondent, someone who reports the news of the art world's capital to the Brazilian artistic intelligentsia.

As powerful as his answers to these questions were, it is arguable that the notion that Hélio is widely recognized in the centers of the international art world, common nowadays among Brazilian art critics, is still quite an overstatement. Undoubtedly, part of the most recent international art bibliography, for instance the books *Installation Art* and *Participation* by Claire Bishop,[2] places Oiticica's work as fundamental

[2] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Claire Bishop, *Participation* (Londres: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006).

for the artistic transformations of the 1960s in global terms. But it would be foolish to expect non-Brazilians, both from the global South and the global North, reasonably well informed about the art of the last six decades as they may be, to even know his name, not to mention his body of work. In fact, as sociologist Ana Letícia Fialho's research[3] on the geopolitics of the contemporary art world has shown, despite the increasing integration of artists from "peripheral" regions since the late 1980s, the practices and discourses of the agents of the "international" art scene, centered on the Western Europe-United States axis, are in fact still a long way from some form of true global artistic pluralism. Thus it makes sense to revisit Oiticica's work and ideas as a way to fathom a more complete picture of the process described by both Arthur Danto and Hans Belting as "the end of art's history", that is, the process that ended the idea that the arts somehow developed in a somewhat linear fashion toward some kind of end goal, tacitly implying some kind of usually white male and "Western" (meaning European or North American) visionary leading the way, one may add.

From the beginning, Oiticica was no stranger to what Danto[4] called the Age of the Manifestos: the era of competing forms of avant-garde movements trying to define and restrict the direction of art history, after photography stole the representational role that the visual arts used to fulfill since the Renaissance. Starting his work under the guidance of Ivan Serpa, at Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art (MAM), in 1954, still in his teenage years, he had an early commitment to the constructivist tradition. Coming from, in Brazilian terms, a white middle-class left-wing intellectual family – his grandfather was the professor and early 20th century anarchist leader José Oiticica – Oiticica was very much inclined to always look ahead. In a year's time he was already showing his abstract geometrical paintings alongside his teacher and other artists in the Grupo Frente collective. Although his lifelong passion for the works of Piet Mondrian was all too clearly reflected in his early works, Hélio soon started to discover his own voice, while still adhering to the abstract geometrical constructivist language, with a 1957–58 series called *Metaesquemas* – a large number of gouache on paper paintings exploring all kinds of geometric symmetries and anti-symmetries, that sometimes seem to anticipate mid-1960s Op Art. Soon after that, his short-lived participation in the Concretist art and poetry movement was followed by him taking part in the Neo-Concretist group, along with the artist Lygia Clark and the poet and critic Ferreira Gullar, among others. Around this time, in proper "Age of the manifestos" manner, he began to question if the opposition between foreground and background in his abstract paintings was some kind of leftover from figurative art. This led to a series of monochromatic paintings, the same direction taken a few years earlier by both Yves Klein and Robert Rauschenberg. But that in turn didn't settled his quest – for now the paintings themselves became the foreground against a wall that worked as the background. So in 1959 he began to hang painted panels of different shapes from the ceiling, creating what he called "painting in space", in a few different series of

[3] Fialho, "O Brasil está no mapa?"

[4] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1997.

works entitled *Reliefs, Bilaterals* and *Spatial Reliefs*. His work with color in space then developed towards an almost architectural size with the *Nucleus* and *Equali* series, made of three-dimensional grids of painted panels hanging from the ceiling, and the first *Penetrable*, a painted wooden structure that invites the viewer to enter it's "walls". These works had much more in common with what latter would be called installation art (Oiticica's own term was *arte ambiental*, "environmental art" in Portuguese) than with the tradition of sculpture. The idea of art that worked between – or even beyond – the separate fields of painting and sculpture would latter become a touchstone of the US-based Primary Structures or Minimalist movement. Neither of the groups had any knowledge of the other, but there are undoubtedly too many affinities between the work and the thought of Brazilian Neo-Concretists and North American Minimalism to be ignored, as exemplified by a series of comparative studies in recent years[5] – a fact that also somehow vindicates Danto's claim that at that time there was still objective paths for the history of visual arts to unfold.

Hélio Oiticica's next move was even more important to our main discussion. In the mid-1960s, he revolutionized Brazilian art, as well as his own work, through his immersion in the world of the favela and samba – the world of the samba school Estação Primeira de Mangueira and its respective "morro"[6]. In a statement to Paola Berestein Jacques, a visual artist and good friend of Oiticica's, Lygia Pape, recalls what happened:

> Hélio was a young Apollonian, even a little pedantic, who worked with his father in the documentation [service] of the Museu Nacional [Brazil's national museum, an important institution in the fields of anthropology and natural history], where he learned a methodology: he was very organized, disciplined […] In 1964, his father died: after that a friend of ours, Jackson [Ribeiro, sculptor], took Hélio to Mangueira to paint the parade floats [for Carnaval], that's when he discovered a Dionysian space, which he did not know, had no experience. He looked like a virgin who fell on the other side; he no longer had a father who could act as a super-ego. There he discovered the rhythm, the music. He was so excited that he started to learn to dance, to be able to participate in the parades, in the rehearsals; he joined the samba school, made great friends, he discovered sex, then Hélio's life became a total mess, so much so that Jackson said:

[5] For instance, those by Paulo Herkenhoff (2001), Michael Asbury (2005) and Anna Dezeuze (2006).

[6] Favela is the name usually given to the various kinds of Brazilian informal low-income settlements or slums, an integral part of the country's many large urban centers. Since in Rio de Janeiro and many other cities the favelas are often located on the hills, the word "morro", that literally means hill in Portuguese, became synonymous with the favela itself. Although plagued by poverty and violence, Rio de Janeiro's favelas are home to some of the more interesting creations of Brazil's popular culture, namely Carnaval and the intensely complex rhythms of the Afro-Brazilian music that's heard on these festivities, Samba. The organizations that compete on the Carnaval parades there are called "escolas de samba", literally samba schools. One of the most traditional is exactly Oiticica's beloved Estação Primeira de Mangueira, or Mangueira for short, named after the favela it's located in.

> "There's nothing like losing one's father!". Hélio became another person [...] This starts to appear in his work, in 1964. His father's death coincided with the end of the Neo-concrete movement, there were no longer those more orthodox commitments. Then he started to incorporate this experience of the "morro" [...], that starts to be part of his concepts, his experience [...]. It changes him radically, even ethically; he was an Apollonian and becomes a Dionysian [...]. These barriers of bourgeois culture were broken down, it was as if he was another Hélio, a Hélio of the "morro", it started to be a part of everything: his house, his life and his work.[7]

The presence of the "morro" and the samba as a theme, in the traditional sense of the term, did not constitute anything new in Brazilian art at that time. For instance, paintings like *Carnaval in Madureira* by Tarsila do Amaral, dated 1924, and *Samba* by Di Cavalcanti, 1925, addressed related themes using a figurative modernist visual language, typical of the early 20th century Brazilian visual arts.[8] Oiticica, however, came from a trajectory of complete rejection of figurative painting and representation. Instead of using a certain "high art" visual framework to represent scenes from the world of the "morro" and samba, Oiticica used his experience in Mangueira to redefine all of his creative endeavors, transformed through what he called the "discovery of the body". He made a point of asserting the difference between what he did and the typical "folkloric" perspective of the relationship between "high culture" and popular artistic manifestations, common up to then.[9] For the artist, the question was to carry forward the avant-garde fusion of art and life:

> The first time I had this aspiration [to mix art and life in one thing] I looked for a ritualistic form: samba. But samba alone does not transform anyone's life or art. One day there I got what I wanted, samba was no longer a representation for me. In Mangueira, in the life of the "morro" I found my way.[10]

Parangolé, in addition to being a synthesis term for Oiticica's entire artistic program of that period, is a series of wearable works, resembling capes and tents, beginning in 1964. The idea was to invite those who wore them to explore their own embodied presence, especially through dance. In its obvious contrast with the geometric character and impeccable *faktura* of the artist's previous works, the *Parangolés* are preceded in 1963 by the first *Bólides*, objects made for interaction, often made from

[7] Paola Berenstein Jacques, *Estética da ginga: a arquitetura das favelas através da obra de Hélio Oiticica* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Casa da Palavra, 2001), 22.

[8] In Eduardo Jardim's article, in this issue, there's a discussion of Brazilian modernism (Modernismo) regarding aesthetic modernity and folklore.

[9] Hélio Oiticica, *Hélio Oiticica – catálogo* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica/RIOARTE, 1997), 85.

[10] Norma Pereira Rêgo, "Mangueira e Londres na rota, Hélio propõe uma arte afetiva," in: *Encontros: Hélio Oiticica*, ed. by Cesar Oiticica Filho, Sergio Cohn e Ingrid Viera (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue Editorial, 2009), 99.

pre-existing materials (for example, glass bowls containing pigment). Such an approximation of the Duchampian branch of Dadaism was already foreseen a few years earlier by the artist: "The work is born out of just a touch of matter. I want the material from which my work is made to remain as it is; what transforms it into expression is nothing more than a breath."[11] The reference to *ready-mades* is even more direct in the series *Appropriations* which Oiticica defined in a 1966 interview as "things or set of things, that I appropriate from the world declaring them works: this is due to the identification created between what I call the structural sense (that each artist has) and the appropriated thing."[12]

Just like samba immerses the dancer's body in its rhythm, the *Parangolés* invited the public to merge with them, eliminating the opposition between spectator and artwork. For Oiticica,[13] this meant that there were no more spectators in the traditional sense. They had become "participadores", a *portmanteau* word made out of the Portuguese words for spectators and participants. They could experience the work either wearing or watching others wear the capes. But a *Parangolé* cape without anyone wearing it would not even be, strictly speaking, a work of art. At the time, Oiticica said, "the very concept of 'exhibition' in the traditional sense is already changing, since it makes no sense to 'exhibit' such pieces (that would be a minor partial interest), but rather the creation of structured spaces, at the same time open to the spectator's participation and creative invention."[14]

In short, samba as an immersive collective ritual, open to improvisation, averse to hierarchies and centered on bodily performance, becomes a model for Oiticica's propositions, as well as an appropriated element for the artist to compose, together with objects and "participadores", what he called "environmental systems", the basis of his environmental art. But it is very important, as Michael Asbury[15] has convincingly stressed, to remember that the artist didn't fully belong to the favela, where – although he had many significant friendships there – he would remain mostly an outsider. The impact of Oiticica's concept was exactly that it mixed in a very charged manner social, cultural and racial spheres that had remained very much segregated up to then: the white middle-class left-wing intellectuals of the art world with the poor, mostly Afro-Brazilian, people of the "morro", who used to be considered by the first group only in abstract and/or folkloric terms. The event that marked the collision of these two very separate parts of Rio de Janeiro was the opening of the Opinião 65 exhibition in 1965: Oiticica and his friends from the Mangueira favela arrived as "participadores" dancing and wearing *Parangolé* capes, much to the shock of the *vernissage* habitués, and were stopped from entering

[11] Hélio Oiticica, César Oiticica Filho, *Hélio Oiticica: o museu é o mundo* (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue Editorial, 2011), 22.

[12] Marisa Alvarez de Lima, "Entrevista para *A Cigarra*," in *Encontros: Hélio Oiticica*, ed. by Cesar Oiticica Filho, Sergio Cohn e Ingrid Viera (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue Editorial, 2009), 41.

[13] Oiticica, *Hélio Oiticica – catálogo*, 93.

[14] Oiticica and Oiticica Filho, *Hélio Oiticica: o museu é o mundo*, 78.

[15] Michael Asbury, "O Hélio não tinha Ginga," in *Fios Soltos: A arte de Hélio Oiticica*, ed. by Paula Braga (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2011)

Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art. Oiticica protested against the racism displayed by the institution at the top of his lungs and continued to conduct his "environmental system" outside the building, a moment as fundamental for Brazilian contemporary art as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* was for 20th century avant-garde.

From a hindsight perspective, it's also very important to consider that, as Cíntia Guedes[16] has argued, it was exactly Oiticica's whiteness, in the context of Brazil's structural racism, that allowed him to take part in both universes, to go from the museum to the favela and back, to be both at home as a Brazilian middle-class intellectual and a welcome guest as a Mangueira samba dancer. Guedes also reasons that the artist's appropriation, for his own purposes, of favela experiences and aesthetics in itself is not that far from the kind of colonial perspective that provided the background of the European avant-garde primitivism of the early 20th century – the kind that somehow survives in the Jean-Hubert Martin statement that opens our article. To Michael Asbury:

> The artist saw in the disenfranchised sectors of Brazilian society a window that opened onto the outside of Western civilization. He saw the "desire for a new myth", […] as a recurring theme in modern art. He was convinced, at that time, that this theme connected his works to various moments in art history: the early modernist fascination with the exotic, the efforts of Brazilian Modernismo to portray the land's native myths, and the experience that Oiticica's mentors, Mario Pedrosa and Ivan Serpa had with the work of the "insane".[17]

As ambiguous or even paradoxical as his impulses may seem nowadays, Oiticica was deeply committed to this connection between popular experience and avant-garde experiments. In a long text, almost a manifesto, he wrote for the catalogue of the *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* exhibition, to be held once again at Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art, in April 1967, he goes on to rethink the meaning of the work he and his peers were developing as follows:

> How to, in an underdeveloped country, explain and justify the appearance of an avant-garde, not as a symptom of alienation, but as a decisive factor in its collective progress? How to situate the artist's activity there? The problem could be faced with another question: for whom does the artist make his work? Since one can see that the artist feels a greater need, not to simply create, but to communicate something that for him is fundamental, but now this communication would have to be large-scale, not for an elite reduced to "experts", but even against that elite, with the proposition of unfinished, "open" works. This is the main key to a new concept of anti-art:

[16] Cíntia Guedes, "E se Hélio fosse hoje? Ou como a favela chega ao museu," in: *Hélio Oiticica para além dos mitos*, ed. by Giuseppe Cocco, Izabela Pucu, and Bárbara Szanieci (Rio de Janeiro: R&L Produtores Associados, 2016), 122–35.

[17] Asbury, "O Hélio não tinha Ginga," 60.

> not only to hammer away at the art of the past, or against old concepts (as before, still an attitude based upon transcendentalism), but to create new experimental conditions where the artist takes the role of "proposer", or "entrepreneur" or even "educator". […] The correct formulation would be to ask: which propositions, endeavors and actions must be drawn upon to create a wide-ranging condition for popular participation in these new open propositions, in the creative spheres those artists elected.[18]

The *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* exhibition itself is still considered a landmark in Brazilian art, although Oiticica himself thought that some of the work on display was too derivative of the Pop and Op art fads to reflect his vision for the show. On the other hand, his own piece entitled *Tropicália*, a large-scale environment that comprised many elements, was arguably one of the most important works in Brazilian art. In his words:

> The main Penetrable that comprises this environmental project was my maximum experiment with images, a kind of experimental field image. To this end, I created something like a tropical scenario with plants, parrots, sand, pebbles ([…] it seemed to me when walking through the display […] that I was roaming through the alleys [quebradas] of the "morro", which are organic, like the fantastic architecture of the favelas […]). Entering the main Penetrable, after going through several tactile-sensory experiences, open to the participant, who creates his / her own visual meaning from them, you reach the end of the labyrinth, pitch-dark, where a TV receiver is in permanent operation: it is the image that then devours the participant, because it is more active than its sensory creation.[19]

By a series of chance connections, singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso ended up naming one of his songs *Tropicália*, even though he hadn't seen the work and didn't know Oiticica. Soon after, Veloso and his collaborators (Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé, Mutantes, etc.) had become known as "tropicalistas". At first, Oiticica didn't like having his concept used in that matter, but after meeting the group he ended up giving them his blessing. Predictably, the spotlights went to the aforementioned popular musicians, but the tropicalist group was comprised of representatives of many fields: filmmaker Glauber Rocha, novelist José Agripino de Paula, playwright and theater director José Celso Martinez, experimental composer Rogério Duprat, poet Torquato Neto, multiartist Rogério Duarte[20]. What united them all was a focus on the relationship between avant-garde art techniques, the country's multicultural heritage, its emerging consumer culture and enduring social inequality.

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[18] Oiticica and Oiticica Filho, *Hélio Oiticica: o museu é o mundo*, 119.

[19] Oiticica, *Hélio Oiticica – catálogo*, 124.

[20] In Pedro Duarte's article, in this issue, he discusses the tropicalists relationship with the culture industry, with a focus on the popular music side of the movement.

The tropicalist moment of the late 1960s coincides for Oiticica with an increasing awareness of the geopolitical inequality of the art world and also with the consolidation of his strategy of opposing both a subaltern assimilation under the banner of artistic universalism and a folklore-style nativism. His own previous experiences and those of close collaborators (Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Ferreira Gullar) in the context of Neo-Concretism, are rethought, in a 1968 text, through this point of view:

> These experiments […] which tended to dilute the old structures and provoke a critique of the creative experience, did so in an ideal, universalist way: the creative experience was embraced as something disconnected from the cultural context in the broad sense – the people involved wanted a Brazilian experience, that is certain, but the means were still excessively linked to metaphysical concepts, based on the transcendence of the aesthetic experience, although they signed the beginning of its dissolution, by the experimental perspective that they opened, in a way anarchic, anti-aestheticist deep down.[21]

Oiticica had been aggressively defending the originality of the Brazilian avant-garde against that of the central countries for a while. In *Situação da vanguarda no Brasil*, a 1966 text, he stated that:

> As an artist who is part of this Brazilian avant-garde, and a theorist, I say that the collection of creations that we can call Brazilian avant-garde is a new phenomenon on the international scene, independent from the typical American or European manifestations. Some connections exist, of course, since in the field of art nothing can be disconnected from a universal context [...]. What is really pioneering in our avant-garde is this new 'foundation of the object', which comes from the disbelief in the aesthetic values of easel painting and of sculpture, in search of an 'environmental art' (which for me is finally identified with the concept of anti-art) […]. This magic of the object, this unconstrained desire for the construction of new perceptual objects (tactile, visual, propositional, etc.), where nothing is excluded, from social criticism to the penetration of limit situations, are fundamental characteristics of our avant-garde, which is really avant-garde and not an international mimicry of an underdeveloped country, as until now the majority of our illustrious, shabby and stinking pushover critics have considered.[22]

Against the double obstacle represented, on the one hand, by local critics whose inability to understand and/or ill will towards Brazilian avant-garde production

[21] Oiticica, *Hélio Oiticica – catálogo*, 124.

[22] Oiticica and Oiticica Filho, *Hélio Oiticica: o museu é o mundo*, 102–3.

always led them to consider it somehow dependent on foreign currents and, on the other hand, by an international critic that was at that time hardly interested in developments in contemporary art outside the European and American scope – notwithstanding exceptions such as the UK critic Guy Brett – Oiticica continually summoned up the idea of the experimental potential of "new nations" like Brazil.

But the good use of this experimental potential, however, demanded a constant effort, since for Oiticica "Brazil and 'Brazilian culture' [seemed] to aspire to a 'cultural-paternalist' imperialist form".[23] Alongside subaltern universalism, the main trap to be avoided would be the folklorization of culture, that is, to develop a reactionary nativism that, as Haroldo de Campos puts it,[24] sees its own culture through the exotic gaze of a tourist. Against what he considered "provincial feats", he choose to affirm his own autonomy as an artist: "I don't owe anything to anyone – I know what I do and what I think, that's why I have been writing things down for many years to set the record straight."[25]

Oiticica's wrath against such "cultural-partenalist imperialism" only increased when his path became truly international. At the end of 1968, while he was crossing the Atlantic ocean on a freighter bound for London – home to his main contact in international art critique, Guy Brett, and where he would hold a historic solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery – the military dictatorship installed in Brazil since 1964 issued what was called the Institutional Act number five (AI-5), hardening the regime and resulting in the arrest of several people close to the artist – among them Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, who would eventually join Oiticica as exiles. After a brief return to Brazil, where Oiticica found the cultural and political context unbearable, and following his participation in the landmark Information exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in 1970, the artist ended up settling in Manhattan in 1971, returning definitely to Rio de Janeiro only in 1978.

Oiticica's disgust for "provincial feats" was symmetrical to his dislike for "metropolitan feats": "I will never become another firecracker in the New York art scene", said the artist in a letter to Brett in 1972.[26] Justifying his acceptance of the invitation to participate in the forementioned. In a letter to Lygia Clark, Oiticica still showed some respect for what was then the *mecca* of the art world:

> I thought it was important to take part in this, although it no longer makes sense to me to exhibit in a museum or gallery, but since the aim of the exhibition is to inform about international things related to environmental art, etc.; […] I thought it would be ridiculous and pretentious

[23] Ibid. 162.

[24] Haroldo de Campos, "Asa delta para o êxtase," in: *Hélio Oiticica – catálogo* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica/RIOARTE, 1997), 220.

[25] Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, *Lygia Clark – Helio Oiticica: Cartas, 1964–1974*, 2. ed. (Rio de Janeiro: UFRJ, 1998), 101.

[26] Guy Brett, "O exercício experimental da liberdade," in: *Hélio Oiticica – catálogo* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica/RIOARTE, 1997), 233.

> to refuse, since it would be crazy to think that anyone in the US knows about me; you know how it is there; when you don't appear *in loco*, you don't exist; and there's not a more central and visceral place to appear that N.Y.'s MOMA.[27]

Some years later, in a 1976 text sent to the *Status* magazine of São Paulo, however, Oiticica was emphatic: "NEW YORK was never artistically experimental and there may be no reason for it to be so."[28] One can assume that this was a deliberately controversial statement, probably a reaction to those who expected Oiticica to assume the position of art correspondent, whose role was to send the latest trends to the provincial cultural milieu. The Brazilian artist actually knew and was very much interested in a series of New York-based avant-garde artists, namely Vito Acconci, Yoko Ono and John Cage. But, more than anything else, he considered the city as the center of the empire and thus intrinsically reactionary. Refusing to take part in the official art world, Oiticica went underground, developing his work away from the spotlight for most of his New York years.

Oiticica died just two years after returning to his beloved Rio de Janeiro in 1978. The following decade saw the end of 21 years of Brazil's US-backed military dictatorship. The 1980s also saw the announcements, by Arthur Danto and Hans Belting, that the history of art, as understood up to then, was over. At the tail end of the same decade, we come full circle, with the *Les magiciens de la terre* show and the dawn of "global art". One may ask if the "end of art's history" may have also meant the beginning of its geography. Again, it might seem that way for those who sit at the center of the international art world. But certainly not from the viewpoint of its silent zones. It can be argued that Oiticica's case exemplifies how a concept so dear to the Age of the Manifestos as "avant-garde" may actually have paved the way for very different developments outside the helm of hegemonic art history. And, finally, that the realization that the art world might be larger and richer than it was previously thought didn't come initially from it's center, but from its outskirts. To those in the silent zones, the battle cry that ends Oiticica's *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* text still cuts deep: "Of adversity we live".

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