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**Oiticica, Hélio**

**(Rio de Janeiro July 26, 1937 – Rio de Janeiro March 22, 1980)**

Hélio Oiticica was born in 1937 in Rio de Janeiro and studied at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro with Ivan Serpa in the 1950s, later moving to New York and engaging with the 1960s artistic milieu in the U.S. Oiticica was an exponent of the Brazilian modernism group Frente in the 1940s and early 1950s, and influenced by abstract geometric tradition the artist experimented with the two dimensionality of the pictorial field to the point that his works in the late 1950s transitioned to participatory works. Together with other artists of the Neoconcrete group such as **Lygia Clark** and **Lygia Pape**, Oiticica’s trajectory marked an extremely important shift in Brazilian art towards sensorial works with a concern with the place for the spectators. The strategies of Oiticica, particularly from his break with the two-dimensional space, his engagement with marginalized members of Brazilian society, to his large installations sensorial and participative works of the 1960s and 1970s, influenced an entire generation of artists in Brazil and abroad and his works are part of some of the largest collections of Modern art in the world such as MoMA and Tate Modern.

Oiticica began his pictorial works with his *Sêcos* (1957/58): paintings made with gouache on cardboard that were influenced by constructivism. During his time with the Grupo Frente, the artist created two-dimensional works called *Metaesquemas* (1857-58); this series already depicts Oiticica’s master use of color, the element that will remain present in his work all throughout his career. The work produced by Oiticica in this period, however, exemplifies the differences between the experimentalism of the group Frente, and the strict concrete art of the Grupo Ruptura from São Paulo.

In the beginning of the 1960s, Oiticica’s work moved away from the two-dimensional space into the “real world”. This is depicted in his *Bilaterais* (1959), structures that Oiticica called “paintings in space.” Oiticica was influenced by Vladimir Tatlin’s *Counter-Reliefs* and created his *Spatial-Reliefs* in 1960. These structures that hung in space, show Oiticica’s preference for warm colors and were the gateway to his *Nuclei* series (1960-63). Together with *Inventions* (1959-1962) and *Penetrables*, the *Nuclei* series were Oiticica’s first environments. It is interesting that the artist created the *Bólides* (1963-69) and the *Parangolés* (1964-79) later on, but alternated back and forth from larger environmental works like *Éden* (1969) and *Tropicália* (1967). It was Oiticica’s move to the slums and his engagement with the underprivileged people of Rio de Janeiro that really marked a shift in his work. In the 1960s, the artist was reading Herbert Marcuse, involved in the Tropicália movement, and was drawn to the concept of marginality. In his view, the notion of marginality could be defined as a civic resistance against the oppressive and authoritarian context. In a letter in 1968, he develops this: “When I say ‘position at the margin’, what I am referring to is something similar to this Marcusean concept: it is not about marginal gratuity or wanting to be marginal by force, but on putting the social subject clearly in the role of the creator, who not only denounces a society alienated of itself, but proposes a permanently critical position, the demythfication of the myths of the dominant class.” Oiticica was working directly with the people that organized the carnival parades of the Mangueira samba school, which became an important aspect of the process of creating the *Parangolés,* Oiticica’s most prominent series of works.

The *Parangolés* were multisensorial spaces created with simple materials: colored pieces of fabric, plastic and sometimes, pigment. Each had their individuality, they had sentences in the outside—like “I embody revolt”—or references to the individuals they were made for, many times residents of the slums. However, they were also spaces were the participant could experience pure color, and liberate himself from the dominant conditions of its context. The *Parangolés* played a double role: on one hand, they were an immersive experience for the people who wore them, while on the other, as events, they confronted the outside viewers with images and writings placed in the pieces, and challenged the social and political conditions at play. In a country as stratified as Brazil, Oiticica’s choice of underprivileged people from the slums, minorities excluded from society, to parade and dance in his *Parangolés* caused discomfort and even fear in the Brazilian upper class who attended major exhibitions of his works.



Nildo da Mangueira, com Parangolé, 1964

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In 1969, following the AI-5 (Institutional measure number 5) by the military government, which unleashed the most repressive years of the dictatorship in Brazil, Oiticica travelled abroad, first to London where he showed at the Whitechapel Gallery his installation *Éden,* and later to New York, where in 1970 he showed at MoMA’s iconic *Information* exhibition. During the next eight years in New York, Oiticica produces several sensorial installations delving into video and film as in the psychofilmic work *Cosmococa* with Neville d’Almeida where he evokes idols of the pop culture of the period like Jimi Hendrix. Oiticica returns to Brazil in 1978 and in 1980 dies leaving an artistic legacy that would influence several generations of Brazilian and Latin American artists.

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