

# HOW DID NEO-CONCRETISM END?

NICHOLAS BROWN

COMO ACABOU O  
NEOCONCRETISMO?

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## ABSTRACT

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In this article, Nicholas Brown analyses the work of Hélio Oiticica from the 50s – when it was firmly related to the research conducted by the Neo-Concrete avant-garde – to the 70s and demonstrates how these works thematize in insistent ways an experiential aspect that is implicit from the beginning in the work’s literal objecthood, permanently mobilizing the dialectics between the idea and the literal support in space. The author also examines the specific configuration of the correlation between political history and the art-historical sequence regarding the Neo-Concretism. Finally, departing from the productive contradiction between thingly substrate and signifying surface in Oiticica’s work, Brown indicates how the dynamic between social-political and intellectual history is presented in the last years of his trajectory as a re-investment of the art object in odds with commodity society.

**KEYWORDS** Hélio Oiticica; Neo-Concretism; Brazilian Art; Historical Materialism

### RESUMO

Neste artigo, Nicholas Brown analisa a trajetória de Hélio Oiticica desde seus trabalhos da década de 1950, alinhados às pesquisas da vanguarda neoconcreta, até sua obra dos anos 1970, demonstrando como o componente da experiência, tematizado na produção tardia de Oiticica, encontra-se implícito à objetividade do seu trabalho inicial, numa espécie de mobilização permanente da dialética entre ideia e o suporte literal existente no espaço. Examina, ainda, a configuração específica que a correlação entre história política e cadeia histórico-artística adquire no Neoconcretismo. Finalmente, a partir da contradição produtiva entre substrato concreto e superfície significante na obra de Oiticica, Brown sinaliza como a dinâmica entre história intelectual e sociopolítica se apresenta ao final da trajetória do artista como revestimento do objeto de arte a contrapelo da lógica da mercadoria.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Hélio Oiticica; Neoconcretismo; Arte brasileira; Materialismo histórico

### RESUMEN

Em este artículo, Nicholas Brown analiza el trayecto de Hélio Oiticica desde sus trabajos de los años 1950, relacionadas a las pesquisas de la vanguardia neoconcreta, hasta su obra de los 1970, demostrando como la experiencia, tematizada en la producción tardía de Oiticica, se encuentra implícita a la objetividad de su trabajo inicial, movilizándolo de manera permanente la dialéctica entre idea y el soporte literal en el espacio. Examina también la configuración adquirida por la correlación entre historia política y cadena histórico-artística en el Neoconcretismo. Finalmente, partiendo de la contradicción productiva entre el substrato concreto y la superficie significante en la obra de Oiticica, Brown señala como la dinámica entre la historia intelectual y sociopolítica se presenta a los fines de la trayectoria del artista en cuanto validación renovada del objeto del arte frente a la lógica de la mercancía.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** Hélio Oiticica; Neoconcretismo; Arte brasileño; Materialismo histórico



The art-historical movement known as Neo-Concretism came to an end in a moment of pre-revolutionary ferment and post-*coup* disillusionment. The poet Ferreira Gullar, the most advanced and committed theorist of the group, repudiated his painstakingly worked-out vanguard theoretical commitments in 1961, suggesting to Hélio Oiticica that the neo-concretists should mount a final, “terrorist” exhibition in which they blew up all their existing works; he then joined the directorship of the Popular Centers for Culture (CPC). As is well known, the aim of the CPC was, according to a founding document, to support, against artistic practice that “takes artistic forms as ends in themselves, autonomous and separate from the real, developing according to the dictates of a logic immanent to themselves” (MARTINS, 1962 *apud* HOLLANDA, 2004, p. 164)<sup>1</sup>—precisely the kind of art-immanent dialectical movement Gullar, Oiticica, and others had championed — a “popular revolutionary art” (Ibidem, p. 135)<sup>2</sup> that would produce “spiritual weapons for the material and cultural liberation of our people” (Ibidem, p. 138)<sup>3</sup>. The correlation between the art-historical sequence and political history

could not be clearer: the neo-concretist vanguard position belongs to the illusions of the developmentalist 1950s, and the polarized and conflictual politics of the coming era will call for entirely different positions on art and a renewed commitment to an art anchored in the real.

This narrative is so obviously true that it would seem quixotic to take issue with it. For those of us on the left, it has the added advantage of confirming the basic historical-materialist thesis that ideas don't emerge out of other ideas, but from the struggles of actual people living historical and political lives. But if the relationship between history and art history is in the last instance one-to-one or causal, it is hard to see the point in paying close attention to the art itself. Art becomes simply an effect of history – one more thing to study, but not something that can produce its own insights, that can be said itself to know history. In what follows I will try to demonstrate that Neo-Concretism reached a crisis in the early 1960s because its own internal dynamic – an internal dynamic that hinged, despite appearances, on a commitment to the real as Neo-Concretism understood it – had reached an impasse. The true wager of historical materialism is not that social-political-economic history determines intellectual

history, but rather that – in a way still to be determined, and to be demonstrated each time anew – the two are identical.

Within the standard narrative, the arc of Hélio Oiticica's career is easy to read. He begins as a formalist, in the context of 1950s Brazilian Concretism. At a certain point his paintings explode the rectangular frame and acquire shape, at the same time moving off the wall. He then fully embraces three dimensions, soon taking on the architectural implications of that move, at which point the work has already taken on an interactive, participatory aspect. In the mid-1960s, as the creativity of the Brazilian cultural left reaches a kind of fever pitch (but as the political left is defeated and in retreat) he creates his *Parangolés*, fully interactive event-objects that are activated by a wearer, paradigmatically a wearer from the Mangueira *samba* school of which Oiticica had become a member. As the dictatorship hardens and life in Brazil for the cultural left becomes increasingly untenable, Oiticica continues to develop the participatory aspect in London, creating works from the *Penetráveis*, which are meant to be entered and experienced, through the *Ninhos*, which radicalize the project of fusing art and life by becoming actual living spaces. It is as if an entire forty-year trajectory running from high modernism to minimalist anti-modernism to participatory art and gallery experience

was, in being compressed into one artist's fifteen-year itinerary, confirmed as inevitable and therefore in some way correct. Oiticica continues the *Ninhos* in New York, pursuing increasingly radical and unrealizable projects while he is cut off, partly by circumstance and partly deliberately, from supportive institutions and networks. A promising return to Brazil, characterized in part by a return to the Penetrable work open to its environment, is cut short with his death at 42 in 1980.

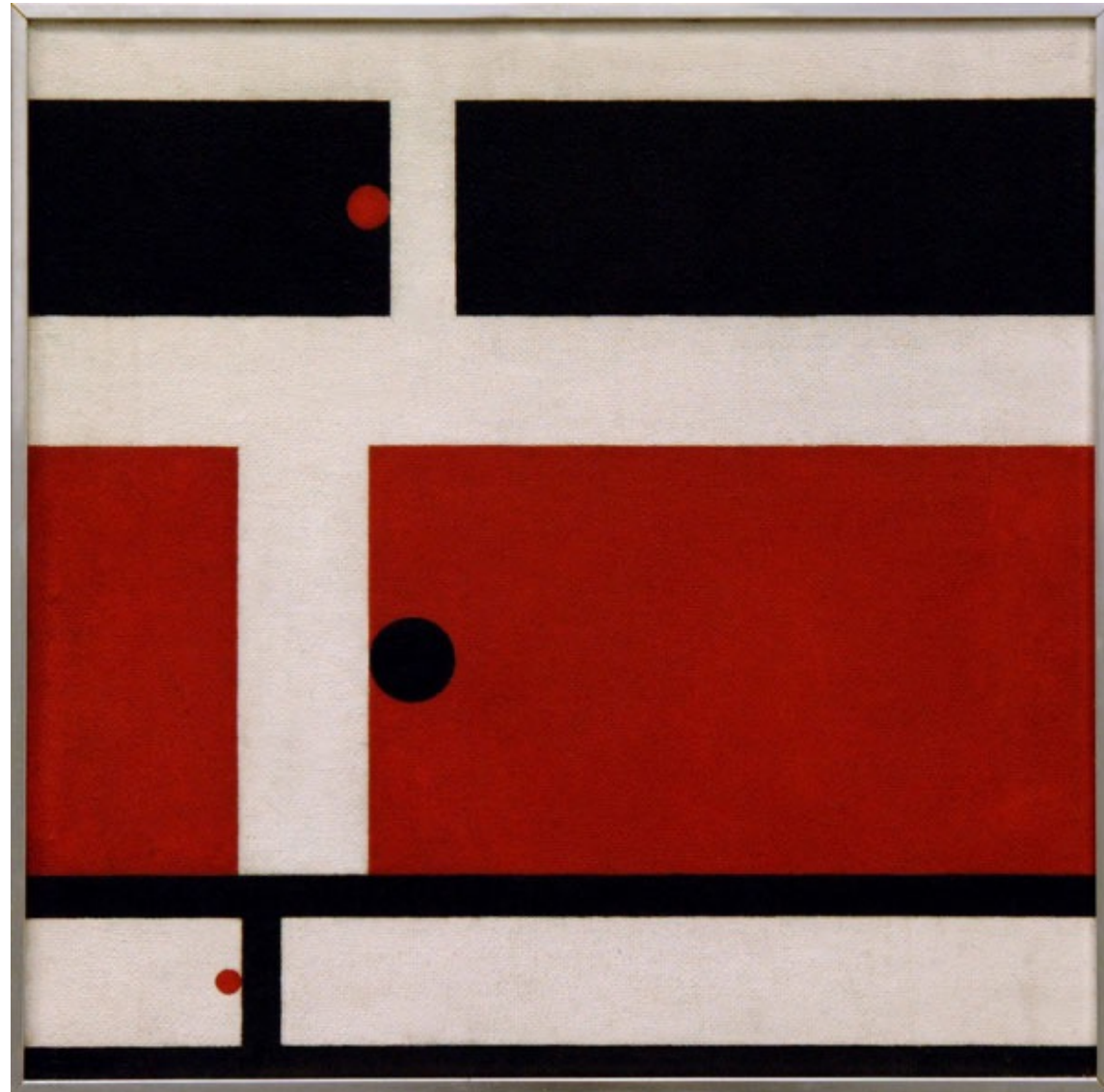
Hélio Oiticica's career tells the story of the democratic leap of art off the wall and into life, out of contemplation and into action and experience, from autonomy to involvement, from elite contemplation to democratic participation, from aesthetics to politics. It is a story that sits well with the recent "upsurge" of what a well-known cheerleader of that upsurge characterizes as "convivial, user-friendly artistic projects, festive, collective, and participatory, exploring the varied potential in the relationship to the other" (BOURRIAUD, 2002, p. 61). It is, furthermore, a story that curators love to tell, partly because the museum is transformed from a specialized and neutral space, subordinate to the objects that populate it, into one that is democratic, primary, and productive<sup>4</sup>. Finally, and most importantly, this narrative carries the authority of being the story Oiticica himself

wanted to tell, at least at one point in his life<sup>5</sup>. There is, once again, nothing false about it. And yet the truth lies closer to the works themselves. Only when we approach the works immanently, with attention to what they do and what they ask us to do, does their relationship to the great political crosscurrents that tore through the Brazilian 1960s begin to make itself clear.



Let us turn first to an early work, produced when Oiticica was still in his teens, under the tutelage of the great concretist pedagogue Ivan Serpa: *Três tempos [quadro 1]*, from 1956 (Figure 1). The painting is precisely square. The palette is restricted to black, white, and primary red; the shapes are restricted to circle, rectangle, and the negative spaces between rectangles; these spaces change from white (between red and black) at the top of the painting, to black (between red and white) at the bottom of the painting, giving black in one area an anomalous positive value; the painting as a whole comprises three bands of different widths, each one consisting of two rectangles, one of which contains, adjacent to its left – or rightmost edge, a circle of a contrasting color. The vertical negative spaces produce a

diagonal axis down the left side of the painting; the circles cleave to alternating sides of this axis. There is a balance to the dimensional relationships that is hard to pin down but may be mathematical: certain ratios approximate to the golden section.



**FIGURE 1.**  
Hélio Oiticica, *Três tempos (quadro 1)*,  
1956. Oil on Eucatex board, 20 x 20 x 1.3  
in (51 x 51 x 3,4 cm). Collection Museu de  
Arte Moderna de Niterói.  
Unknown photographer.



The relationships among the elements seem to be purely formal – black relates to red, red to white, circle to rectangle, large to medium to small, horizontal to vertical, and so on. But the area where black and white switch valences produces an ambiguity between figure and ground. It produces, as it were, a difficult spot in the painting that makes it impossible to regard the relationships as purely formal. That is, the ambiguity about figure and ground that pertains at the difficult spot confirms that we are indeed dealing, however problematically, with figure and ground – and in so doing it posits a beholder for whom figure and ground become, in one spot, problematic.

On this understanding, the painting depicts (again, however problematically) a space. Further, that space is populated with objects. The title *Três tempos* implies a repetition beyond the frame: we are looking at six incomplete objects which, if complete, would suggest three continuous repeating bands, like three conveyor belts of different widths. The painting is depictive, even if the objects it depicts are fictive or abstract. Finally, and most importantly, this space is not only a depicted space, but it is, if I can put it this way, depicted as a depicted space: this depicted space is once again presented as a problem. First of course by the difficult spot. But also, the paint

is applied to the rough side of a kind of commercial fiberboard, so that the texture of the underlying material is clearly visible through the paint. You wouldn't say that the texture of the material is part of the *Three tempos*: it subtends the pattern but is not part of it. But it is part of *Three Tempos*: the other, smooth side of the fiberboard is a favored material in Brazilian Concretism, so the decision to use the rough side is legible as a deliberate choice.

The stupid, material substrate, the thingly aspect of the work, its objecthood, insists through the painterly surface. But this substrate only appears to insist because it is insisted upon; the struggle between object and art, between earth and world, between mute being and signification, is the thematic substance of the work. It is not necessary to affirm that, at this point in his career, Oiticica had precisely this account in mind. As we shall see, the problem of the work's status as a thing encountered by a beholder located near it in space was crucial to the debates taking place within Brazilian Concretism and to the circle within which Oiticica already moved. The point is rather that this productive contradiction between thingly substrate and signifying surface becomes the wellspring from which Oiticica's work develops until his death in 1980. As Oiticica will put it in a notebook entry from February 1962 entitled "Support":

Since linear and calligraphic expression generally requires a passive support, whoever figures, figures on something, and rarely suspends or transforms its structure. An art based in structural transformations is [on the contrary] in constant opposition to the passive state of the support, since the conflict reaches the point where no evolution can take place without a solution being proposed. In truth, who figures on something would do better to figure through something. The intermediary between the meaning [*sentido*] of space and structure, and the beholder who gets the idea [nonetheless] exists [...] Thus the problem of the support asserts itself with decisive force [...] This necessity of our time, the transformation and absorption of the support, is not born only from analytic comparisons or from the dialectic of pictorial evolution. It springs instead from an irresistible, interior aspiration. Before anything else, this. (OITICICA, 1986f, p. 38)<sup>6</sup>

Oiticica's work can't "come off the wall" because it was never simply on the wall in the first place, but always, from the beginning – in a sense which will shortly become much clearer – already about being on the wall.

Along the course of its development this problem acquires an explicit politics. But for now it is important to note that if it has a politics – and there is no doubt that in some way it is bound up with bourgeois-national developmentalist project that understands itself also to be popular and progressive – there is no thematization of this politics in the works themselves, which are understood to undertake

a development internal to the discipline of painting. The “Theory of the Non-Object” (“Teoria do não-objeto”), written in this period by Ferreira Gullar (2015c), a friend and mentor of Oiticica’s and a leading member of the circle in which he moved, is nothing other than an attempt to describe Neo-Concretism as heir to the dialectic of modernist painting from Monet to his present time. The explicitly political aspect of these developments tends to be understood as entailed in the various ways that the modernist dialectic can be appropriated in a peripheral context.

The “Neoconcrete Manifesto”, an epoch-making document of Neo-Concretism also written by Ferreira Gullar, is illustrative. The tone is appropriately radical and unforgiving, but the theoretical content is decidedly – I mean this next word positively – orthodox. Ferreira Gullar situates Neo-Concretism as a specific set of approaches to a formal problem inherited by all “geometric art” – Concretism, Neo-Plasticism, Constructivism, Suprematism, etc. – from the “dissolution of pictorial language” begun by the impressionists, carried out by Cubism, and brought to self-consciousness in Neo-Plasticism. But what characterizes the art Ferreira Gullar champions is, within this universe, its fidelity to the peculiar ontology of the work of art as first formalized by Kant: a being whose “autonomy” is

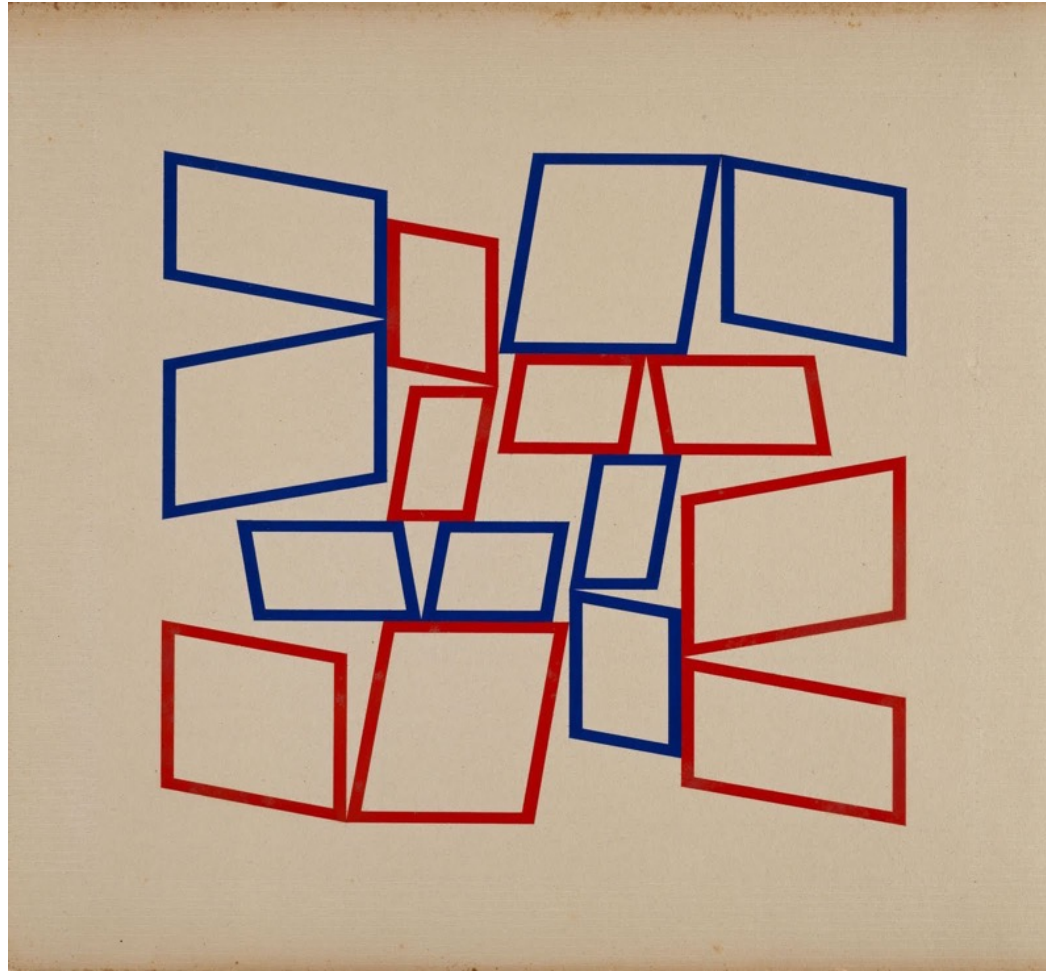
founded on its distinction from other kinds of beings like machines and mere objects, a mode of being that he names here “*quasi-corpus*”, like a body, and elsewhere simply “non-object.” “We believe”, he writes,

that the work of art supersedes the material mechanism that supports it, not by virtue of some unearthly quality: it supersedes its support by transcending [precisely] these mechanical relations [...] and by creating for itself an implicit significance [...] that emerges there for the first time. (GULLAR, 2015b, pp. 145-146)<sup>7</sup>

Ferreira Gullar champions a certain “spatialization of the work”, by which he means, however, something not necessarily literal, and quite specific: “the fact that the work is always making itself present, is always recommencing the impulse that generated it and of which it was already the source (Ibidem, p. 147)<sup>8</sup>.”

The spatialization Oiticica pursues is, then, a kind of active presentness, the setting-to-work of a productive tension that, as we have seen, is already legible in his earliest painting. Oiticica’s next work consists of his *secos* – so-called because they are painted on dry cardboard – that owe perhaps too much to Malevich, and his more distinctive *Metaesquemas* (Figure 2), some of which are also painted

**FIGURE 2.**  
Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema 4066*, 1958.  
Gouache on incised board, 21 x 22 7/8"  
(53.3 x 58.1 cm). Collection MoMA,  
United States. © 2022 Projeto Hélio Oitici-  
ca. Available on: <[https://www.moma.org/  
collection/works/35054](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/35054)>.  
Access: July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022.



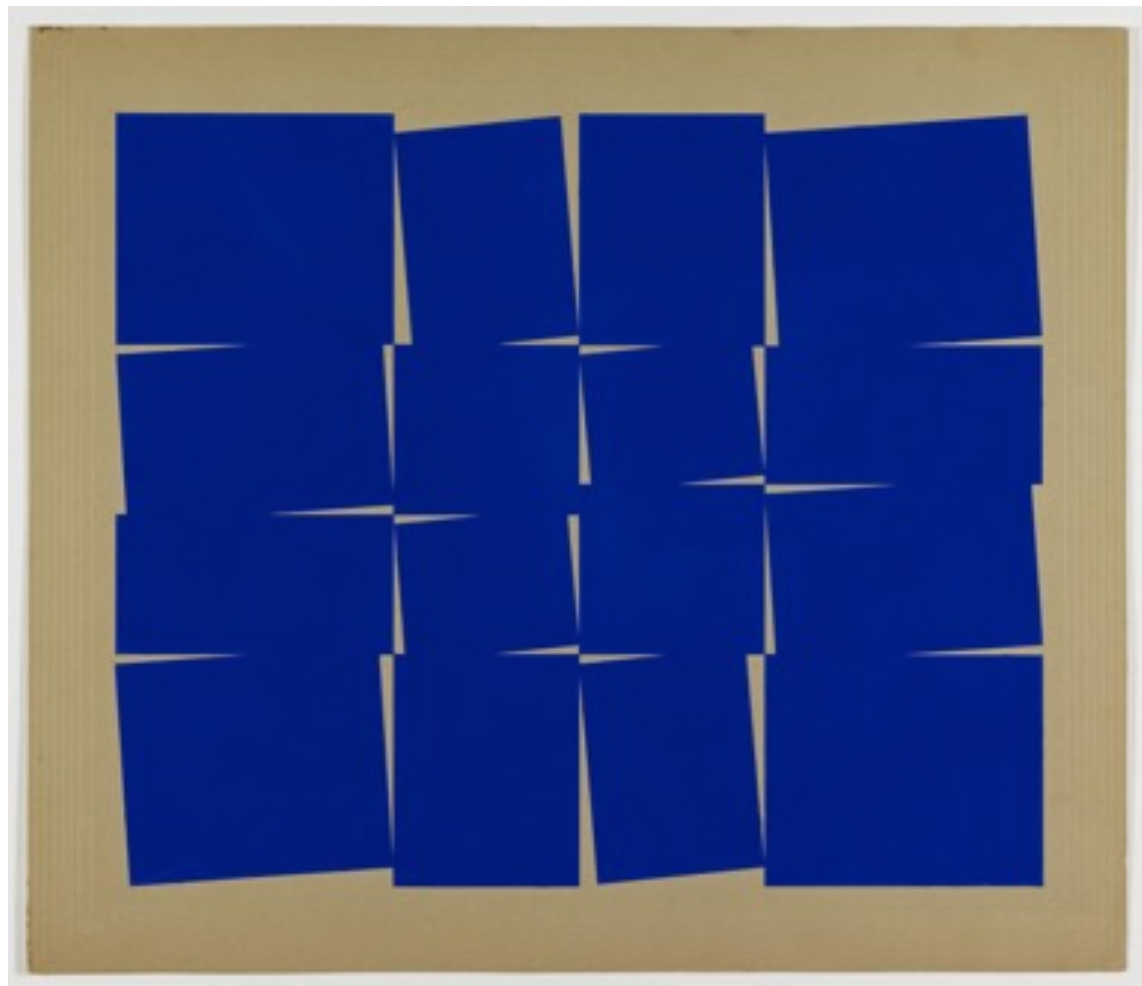
on bare cardboard. These are usually, like *Three Tempos*, square or nearly square, and nearly always in one or two primary colors, on bare cardboard or a light background, consisting pictorially of manipulations and minor distortions of a single shape category. As with his earlier work but now put in his own distinctive pictorial language, the dominant impression is the sense of a geometric

**FIGURE 3.**  
Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema 4066*,  
(detail), 1958.



symmetry whose productive principle lies just beyond one's grasp. But there are two further aspects I would like to emphasize. First, the works on bare cardboard often have a frame, primitive but by no means casual, etched into the substrate itself (Figure 3); second, the negative space between the figures is literalized, in that there is literally nothing, not just a depicted nothing – a lack of pigment rather than a pigment that represents a lack – between the blocks of color. These two aspects play the same game from opposite sides. The depicted frame is also a literal frame – it does the work of a frame

and, as something literally engraved in the substrate, hovers between a literal and a depicted surface. But the literal space between blocks of paint is also a depicted space – in fact, it is very difficult to see some of the *Metaesquemata* as doing anything other than depicting imaginary objects jostling each other in space (Figure 4).



**FIGURE 4.**

Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema*, 1958.  
Gouache on cardboard, 55 × 63,9 cm.  
Collection Tate, UK. Purchased with funds  
provided by Mr & Mrs Franck Petitgas  
2007. Available on: <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/oiticica-metaesquema-t12419>>. Access: July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022.



So the leap off the wall (Figure 5) is not the radical break it initially appears, but rather a literalization of what was already depicted in the *Metaesquemas*. In fact I have skipped several stages of Oiticica's development, important among which would be his white paintings, including an un-numbered piece that deploys a doubled line, both parts faint, the lower one fainter than the upper, that bisects the picture about two-thirds of the way up (Figure 6). The line is very slightly out of square: so slightly that it takes some time with the painting to ascertain that it is, and is deliberately, out of square,

**FIGURE 5.**  
Hélio Oiticica, *Grande núcleo*, 1960.  
Paint on wooden frames.



thus involving an unavoidable temporal, experiential aspect. This series also includes *Tantrum* which is an enlargement in oil of one of his *Metaesquemas*, but which at large scale requires the beholder to move around in front of it, since it appears asymmetrical until it is viewed precisely straight on. *Bilateral Teman* is essentially a white painting with shape like *P34 Série Branca*, but hung in space to give the beholder access, by walking around it, to the substrate's literal shape, thereby thematizing the strong *trompe-l'oeil* effect of a crease brought about by the shaded area; and the spatial reliefs (originally called non-objects after Ferreira Gullar, who himself was inspired by Lygia Clark), which literalize the effect of relief by bringing it into sculptural space while still, because of their insistence on planarity, remaining related to painting.

The point about all of these is not that they progressively introduce an experiential, temporal aspect – because no work of art lacks an experiential, temporal aspect. (As the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall [1995] has pointed out, the point of even conceptual art is that one experiences the lack of an experiential, temporal aspect, which means that even conceptual art only functions by negatively mobilizing the experiential). Rather, these works thematize in progressively insistent ways the experiential aspect that is implicit

from the beginning in the work's literal objecthood. But in saying this aspect is thematized, we are saying that it is depicted; in saying it is brought to presentness in the work, we are saying that it is present in the work. These works mobilize the same dialectic between world



**FIGURE 6.**  
Hélio Oiticica, *Série branca*, 1959.

and earth – between the idea that exists *sub specie aeternitatis* and the literal support that exists in space for a beholder, the literal support that is in a real sense antagonistic to the idea of the work, but with which the idea is nonetheless identical – that characterized Oiticica's very earliest paintings, though now at a higher level since they explicitly thematize what was only implicitly involved in the earlier work.

In this regard I would like to concentrate for a moment on a transitional piece, *Núcleo pequeno 1* (Figure 7). *Núcleo pequeno 1* consists of five discrete three-dimensional shapes, similar to the spatial reliefs, formed of painted and joined wooden planes, hung together from a square lattice itself suspended from the ceiling, such that the five shapes seem to compose a single complex body. The various planes are painted subtle variations of orange, but with different colors rather than illusionistic shades of the same color, so there is *no trompe-l'oeil* effect. This assembled *quasi*-body hangs over a square mirrored surface, itself composed of four square mirrors, though archival photographs suggest that one large square mirror was used as well. One does not naturally, walking around the piece, see oneself in the mirror; only with difficulty can one lean over and catch a piece of one's head. Nor does one see one's fellow museum-

goers; what is reflected in the mirror is the underside of the *quasi*-body and the (significantly planar) scaffolding above it, scaled more or less, depending on one's position, to fit within one of the four square mirrors.



**FIGURE 7.**  
Hélio Oiticica, *NC1 Pequeno Núcleo 1*,  
1960. Acrylic paint on wood,  
13 sq ft (1.21 m<sup>2</sup>).

So while it is not plausible that the beholder participates in the work via his or her own empirical and individualized image in the mirror, it is true that the beholder's participation is strongly solicited. One is asked, in effect, to look sequentially at the body and its reflection, which cannot be taken in in the same glance; one is asked to walk around the body, which is three-dimensional and unavoidably oriented toward the earth – it has a top and a bottom that cannot be switched –, and around the mirror, which has neither top nor bottom but only sides. If the four sides of the square are privileged, as the lattice above and the shape of the body, which both echo it, suggests they are, then none of the four sides is privileged over any other. In relation to the *quasi*-body there is a correct orientation for the beholder to assume, namely upright, but no correct position; for the mirror, there are four correct positions, but no correct orientation. In a sense this merely literalizes and reverses the depictive thrust of the *Metaesquem*s: rather than the square two-dimensional image unavoidably depicting imaginary objects, an imagined – but literal – object is reflected in the square mirror image. Indeed, the significance of the squareness of the earlier *Metaesquem*s now becomes apparent: the sense in which they are, as it were, only contingently and empirically – literally – on the

wall in the first place. Many of them admit four orientations, none of which is immanently privileged over any other, like a birds-eye view. The squareness of the *Metaesquemias* is not always exact; the impression of consistent squareness is partly an effect of the paintings' indifference to their orientation, not simply the cause of it. In a sense the *Metaesquemias* are in their all-overness meant to be, but cannot literally be, walked around, something the small Nucleus both realizes and literalizes.

But once again, that literalness is also a depicted literalness. It is absolutely true that the small Nucleus is activated by a participant. But the piece is not experienced in relation to the contingency of one's own body (one's face in a mirror). Rather, one finds, apparently paradoxically, one's own body posited, *sub specie aeternitatis*, by the piece: the contingent body that activates the sculpture is, non-contingently, free in two horizontal dimensions and constrained in the third. The body that activates the piece is not (only) the literal one that walks around it, but (also) a projected one, not exactly depicted but nonetheless implicitly contained in and communicated by the logic of the piece. Of course, every sculpture can be walked around but is not easily viewed upside-down. The point is not that the small Nucleus is different than any other sculpture as an object,

but precisely that it is different from them as a work of art, in its meaning: in that it thematizes – is precisely about – the relation of the beholding body to the thing it beholds.

The seeming paradox is that by so strongly thematizing experience, the contingency of the actual empirical experience is precisely not the point. As Ferreira Gullar puts it in 1959:

Mere contemplation is not sufficient to reveal the meaning of the work – and the beholder passes from contemplation to action. But what her action produces is the work itself, because this use, already foreseen in the structure of the work, is absorbed by the work, reveals the structure of the work, and incorporates itself into the work's signification. [...] Before the beholder, the non-object [i.e., the neo-concretist work of art] presents itself as incomplete and offers the means for its completion. The beholder acts, but the time of the action does not pass, does not transcend the work, doesn't exist and then lose itself beyond the work: it is incorporated in the work, where it persists. (GULLAR, 2015a, pp. 170-171)<sup>9</sup>

From here it is a short step to the large *Nuclei*, which are meant to be entered – not a very impressive experience, but one that literalizes the immanence of the dual ideal-empirical body to the work, an entrance which is yet again literalized in the so-called penetrables. The later *Bólides* thematize this problematic in a different



way. Contemporary photographs tend to show the *bólides* on the ground. They are meant to be touched – but, as Oiticica makes clear in a much later interview, not really manipulated – but also walked around: the privileged view is being looked into. Only the birds-eye view reveals their formal, compositional element, something simple but unmistakable that empirically may be understood in a flash of recognition or overlooked entirely, but which is in any case implicit in the work, which includes its placement on the ground. An exemplary *glass Bólida* (Figure 8) dates from 1963.

This brings us rather suddenly to 1964, Oiticica's 27<sup>th</sup> year, the year his father died, and the year of the *coup d'état* that began Brazil's long military dictatorship. In fact the suddenness is entirely immanent to the historical material, and Oiticica appears indeed as a latecomer to the new political-aesthetic regime of the early 1960s. Ferreira Gullar had, as we have already seen, rejected vanguard aesthetics altogether by 1961 (JIMÉNEZ, 2012, p. 85). Oiticica, as we shall see in a moment, went in a different direction, but one equally marked by the political rupture represented by the early 1960s and the *coup* of 1964. The point to note for the time being, however, is that while Ferreira Gullar had become convinced as early as 1961 that the only art worth making was art that "the people are able to

make use of” – art that is heteronomous to the revolutionary social field – it is Oiticica who, still in his 1963 writings on the *Bólides*, remains committed to developing the dialectic of autonomy from and identity with the literal support championed by Ferreira Gullar only four years earlier<sup>10</sup>.



**FIGURE 8.**

Oiticica with *B7 Bólido vidro 1*, 1963.

Unknown photographer. Available on:  
<<https://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/obra66449/bolide-vidro-1>>.

Access: July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Brazilian culture and politics in the early years of the 1960s understood itself, with good reason, as pre-revolutionary. The developmental populism of the Kubitschek years had run up against its limits, represented as usual by skyrocketing foreign debt and increasing inflation; explosive economic growth could no longer paper over social contradictions. Jânio Quadros's subsequent presidency lasted less than a year. The left sympathies of his vice president, João Goulart, had, by 1963 – the year Goulart achieved full presidential powers, having first reached the presidency via Quadros's resignation – arrived at the point of implementing reforms, notably land reform and industrial nationalization, that would have amounted to a wholesale reorganization of Brazilian society. In effect, the Brazilian left believed with good reason that revolutionary goals were about to be achieved by peaceful, electoral means. So did the generals<sup>11</sup>.

The substantive political development of this period had been the rapprochement between the intellectual élite and the working class and landless peasantry. This rapprochement took many ideological forms, from enlightened patriarchy to populist mythologizing to genuine engagement, forms that bled into each other, evolved into one another, or, if you like, infected one another. But however

contradictory, mystified, condescending, or enlightened the ideological content, the social content was this sharing of knowledge, experience, and organizational links between classes, a project which was not merely pursued individually but had a real institutional basis in the Popular Centers for Culture and the Movement for Popular Culture originating in Pernambuco – a project which was, furthermore, importantly understood not as the end of revolution but, as we saw with the CPC manifesto, as a means to it. When one considers that in Brazil the right to vote was dependent on a literacy test until 1985, and that still in 1970 the rural literacy rate was under 50%, one realizes how explosive such a rapprochement was even in electoral terms; the fact that this institutional apparatus was the home of Freirian pedagogical theory and practice gives a sense of the real social development taking place. Needless to say, one of the first actions taken by the military government was to shutter the cultural centers; Paulo Freire himself was imprisoned and exiled; Ferreira Gullar's own imprisonment and exile would come a few years later. Significantly, the régime remained tolerant for a time of leftist ideology and culture. It was the left institutions, particularly those that embodied its real, substantive engagement with the rural underclass and urban proletariat, that were immediately shut down.

It is in this context that we should see the next great development of Oiticica's career, his *Parangolés* (Figure 9), which Oiticica will come to see as embodying an experience that he considers an antidote to his "bourgeois conditioning", an experience that hinges on the "overthrow of social prejudices, of group barriers, classes, etc." (OITICICA, 1986a, p. 73).<sup>12</sup> The slang word "parangolé" is multivalent and situationally dependent, but its connotations are of an impermanent, makeshift, or improvised situation. Many of them are garment-like constructions, meant to be worn, amenable to manipulation by the wearer, the later ones containing words or slogans, some clear and some obscure, that can be revealed or not by the wearer. There is no attempt to make them appear polished in execution. In 1964, Oiticica had joined the *samba* school Mangueira, based in the marginal hill neighborhood of the same name in the North of Rio, a decision that is ripe for mythologizing. (The man wearing the *Parangolé* in figure 9 is, we are told, Nildo from Mangueira). In fact Oiticica's integration into Mangueira was far from easy or complete, and was at times marked by violence: a fact which makes his determination to pursue it more interesting, not less.

But in his early writings on the *Parangolés*, the conceptual structure of the work remains the familiar, neo-concretist

**FIGURE 9.**  
Nildo of Mangueira wearing  
*Parangolé P15, capa 11,*  
*Incorporo a revolta [I embody revolt],*  
ca. 1967. © César and Claudio Oiticica.  
ca. Photograph by Claudio Oiticica.  
Available on: <[https://www.artsy.net/  
artwork/helio-oiticica-p15-parango-  
le-cape-11-i-embody-revolt-p15-paran-  
gole-cape-12-eu-incorporo-a-revol-  
ta-worn-by-nildo-of-mangueira](https://www.artsy.net/artwork/helio-oiticica-p15-parangole-cape-11-i-embody-revolt-p15-parangole-cape-12-eu-incorporo-a-revolta-worn-by-nildo-of-mangueira)>.  
Access: July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022.



problematic. The “philosophical standpoint [...] remains, perhaps, a search for the definition of the ‘ontology of the work,’ a profound analysis of the genesis of the work as such” (OITICICA, 1986c, p. 69).<sup>13</sup> The language is the same, but the hesitation is significant. In 1965 and 1966 Oiticica’s notebooks begin to speak, in almost Maoist terms, of a project of self-de-intellectualization<sup>14</sup>. The point is not, of course, that Oiticica suddenly discovers that he is a Marxist. To the contrary, his politics as it becomes explicit is a kind of corporal anarchism characterized above all by a heroization of the marginal that goes hand in hand with the self-marginalization of the artist: a Romantic gesture that goes back at least to Schiller’s *The Robbers*<sup>15</sup>. The point is rather that this attempt, and Oiticica’s work from this period, takes its coordinates from, and cannot be understood except as a position-taking in relation to, the organized left projects of class and racial rapprochement that had been cut short by the *coup*. The signal difference from these being, of course, that Oiticica’s attempt to overcome class barriers and his own “bourgeois conditioning” is undertaken on a purely individual basis.

A heavily mythologized incident from 1965 should also be understood in this light. The *Parangolés* are to be shown as part of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (Museu de Arte Moderna

- MAM) in Rio – not incidentally, a dramatic modernist structure completed only a decade earlier, in 1955. Naturally, the *Parangolés* are to be worn by dancers from Mangueira. But when they arrive in formation at the museum doors, they are denied entry. Oiticica and the *passistas* perform instead outside, on the museum grounds, to general acclaim. The justice of Ferreira Gullar’s turn against the alienated art of the bourgeoisie is conclusively confirmed: “the people” are not even allowed into modernism’s building. The show goes on, only not as art, rather as life itself, vibrating joyously to the sound of *conga* drums outside the museum gates.

Before we endorse this interpretation wholeheartedly – an interpretation that plays suspiciously well in the museum itself, which today would be only too glad to host a *samba* school – we should first interrogate how the *Parangolés* are supposed to work as artworks, even if by 1966 Oiticica will understand them as “anti-art” works (cf. OITICICA, 1986e). Unlike the works we have looked at so far, these are not anything at all until they are activated by the wearer: on the wall or on a rack they are lifeless. As we have seen, Oiticica had been concerned explicitly to highlight the role of the beholder-participant for some time and had been implicitly concerned with versions of the problem since his very earliest works. The *Parangolés* in fact



develop the same dialectic that Oiticica had been working on from the beginning: each new project marks an attempt to literalize the previous state of affairs. The Nuclei and *Bólides* had been activated by a participant who nonetheless remained, apparently paradoxically, a depicted participant: the intended relation between the participant and the work can be confidently described without an empirical participant, who then becomes extrinsic to the meaning of the work even if the necessity of her participation in the work in order for it to realize that meaning is the meaning of the work. “What will emerge from the continuous spectator-work contact is conditioned by the character of the work, which is itself unconditioned”, Oiticica writes in 1964 (1986c, p. 66).<sup>16</sup> But in 1965, what emerges from the interaction between spectator and work is also unconditioned.

The artist’s work, to whatever degree it may be fixed, achieves its import [*sentido*] and completes itself before the attitude of each participator – it is they who lend it meanings [*significados*] – something foreseen by the artist, but the meanings [*significações*] thus endowed, while raised by the object, are not foreseen [...] The work will later take on *n* meanings [*significados*], which add up through general participation. (Idem, 1986e, pp. 77-78)<sup>17</sup>

The difference is subtle, but decisive. In this version of the *Parangolés*, the participant is literalized yet again: only now the

behavior of the participant is no longer depicted, is no longer immanent to the logic of the work. Of course, one could call the wearer an artist and co-creator rather than a participant – the Mangueira dancers are unquestionably skilled – but that would vitiate the democratic point of the *Parangolés* as anti-art, which is that anyone can wear them. If the Mangueira dancers are artists and co-creators, this is only in the sense that anyone can be an artist and co-creator. Life and art are finally – literally – one. “Museu é o mundo”, writes Oiticica (Ibidem, p. 79).

Art in the specific, ontologically peculiar sense emerges for bourgeois societies from the fold generated by Kant’s formulation of aesthetic judgment as a judgment of purposiveness without a judgment of external purpose: first with the romantic elaboration of the concept of poetry in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, then in its formalization by objective idealism in the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup>. When Oiticica describes his *Parangolés* as anti-art, as a kind of participatory practice that would be indivisible from life, he describes an art that would represent an end to precisely this concept of art, the concept that Ferreira Gullar had elaborated to account for neo-concretist practice at the end of the 1950s and then rejected at the beginning of the 1960s. But where Ferreira Gullar in his revolutionary

period wanted to put art at the service of life – giving it external purpose – Oiticica wants to integrate it with life: to do away with its purposiveness, which is left to the participant.

There is nothing implausible in such a scenario, particularly in a pre-revolutionary or revolutionary situation. It is, on the very long view, the norm. The concept of art is – descriptively, not at the moment derogatorily – a bourgeois concept, designed to sideline the kinds of judgments of utility and pleasure that tend to dominate in bourgeois society. If everyday life is, by revolutionary means, really and substantively freed from the norms imposed upon it by the tyrannies represented by the market and the state, it makes perfect sense that the supersession of art, whether in Oiticica's ludic mode or the militant mode of the CPC, would be part and parcel of revolutionary practice.

But depiction cannot be done away with so easily. The *Parangolés* are not instruments of popular expression in the way a hammer is an instrument of carpentry; unlike the hammer, they have, in their very nature, to represent the rapprochement that they, tautologically, proclaim themselves to be. After all, while the performance at MAM-Rio turned out differently than expected, it was always intended as a performance. It seems that the *Parangolés*

represent a happy resolution to the Oiticican dialectic at a higher level. The *Parangolé* is both an instrument of class rapprochement and a representation of class rapprochement: neither aspect sublates the other. But Oiticica's performance takes place not in 1961 or 1963, when a dramatic reordering of society seemed urgent or imminent, but in 1965, by which time the left had suffered a generational defeat and revolution had been taken decisively off the table. Until the hardening turn the dictatorship took in 1968, the left continued its cultural dominance; but its institutions had been decimated, its organizational links to the rural poor and urban proletariat severed. In such a situation, the purely individual integration of the intellectual with the people, the momentary erasure of the distinction between art and life, is not a literal integration of the left with the people, not a literal erasure of the distinction between art and life, but only a depicted one. At worst a badge of good intentions, at best a sign of hope for the future, but in any case, a depiction. The unity of art and life that had been arrived at through a process of literalization and that has generally been taken to be, at the moment of the performance outside the Museum of Modern Art, a momentary but finally literal unity, is in fact only a depicted unity: yet another depicted literalization. But in their literal/depictive duality, the

*Parangolés* represent then a step backward for Oiticica, not forward: he encounters an impasse that is both immanent and historical. The beholder for whom class rapprochement is performed is not the universal Oiticican subject drawn at the same time into an encounter with the Oiticican non-object, but a bourgeois audience for whom a spectacle of class rapprochement is staged. Class rapprochement is literal for the dancers, depicted for the audience, a difference that reinscribes the class antagonism it was meant to overcome. Precisely because 1965 is no longer a revolutionary situation, this absolute cleavage in class standpoint is decisive, despite Oiticica's individual attempt to overcome it. In other words, when Oiticica tries to bring the consciousness of class antagonism into his project of thematizing the relationship between literal and depictive – and by the same move opens up the meaning of the artwork, not just its active presence, to the beholder – it turns out to destroy the relationship between literal and depictive. Which is to say, paradoxically, as we shall see shortly, that Oiticica's project had been about class all along.

For all the drama around the exclusion of the *Parangolés*, Oiticica does not leave the museum and the gallery – not yet. The other work of major importance from the early years of the dictatorship, *Tropicália*, was shown in the Museum of Modern Art

a year after the *Parangolé* incident. It works in the opposite direction from the *Parangolés*, bringing unreconstructed life into the museum. *Tropicália*, an installation containing two penetrables, is sad and ineffective in its current incarnations, but at the time its effect was explosive, among other things lending its name to a musical movement whose influence over the subsequent history of ambitious Brazilian popular music was decisive.

In *Tropicália*, the penetrables are placed in an environment that is a deliberately clichéd allegory of Brazil: some potted tropical plants, a parrot, sand. One of the Penetrables – PN2, “*A Pureza é um mito*” – had originally been conceived independently. One enters a box formed by painted wood panels – red, orange, and yellow – to discover inside the legend “Purity is a myth”, stenciled in white capitals. The second penetrable more obviously continues the allegory suggested by its setting. While the first Penetrable was executed in recognizably Oiticican flat painted panels, the second is composed of more diverse and off-the-shelf materials, reminiscent of the *Parangolés*. The tiny space contains a series of curtains that somehow manages to be disorienting despite the small size of the enclosure. Finally one enters a tiny, dark chamber with a small television tuned to a local station – perhaps Rede Globo, the dominant network at the time,

heavily subsidized and promoted by the military *régime* – perched on a wooden box.

The allegorical tenor of second Penetrable is clearly enough Brazil itself: the cramped, dark, improvised little space of the second Penetrable, arrived at through a path that is confusing despite not covering any distance, translates the space of the *favela* into the museum. But when one enters the inner *sanctum* of the life of “the people” one finds – instead of the joyous autochthonous popular art of *samba* that had animated the *Parangolés* – a television set, tuned to what we are to understand is the degraded national culture of television clowns and variety shows, further tainted by the support of the generals. The television is a completely literal piece of life – there is no part of the television or what it shows to which one can point to and say: “there is the mark of the artist” – directly imported into the museum. But it is by now pretty obvious that this literal piece of life is, in typical Oiticican fashion, also completely depictive, representing a degraded national culture as the truth of the life of the people. More interestingly, it is this fact about the dark Penetrable – the status of the television as both absolutely literal and absolutely depictive – that gives the clue to its dialectical partner, the first Penetrable. *PN2 “Purity is a Myth”* is now both a Penetrable and a

representation of a Penetrable. That is, by its juxtaposition with the dark Penetrable, the first Penetrable becomes an allegory as well, and thereby becomes at the same time the literal object that it never was in the first place.

The logic becomes a bit convoluted, but once you see the dual literal-depictive nature of the television, it becomes inexorable. The first Penetrable – PN2 “*Purity is a Myth*” – existed previously as a separate work. As a part of *Tropicália*, it now – like the television, which not only is but represents degraded commercial culture – not only is, but represents, the advanced culture of late Neo-Concretism itself, free from the pressures of state and market that the television – crappy commercial culture subsidized by the régime – manages in a neat trick to allegorize simultaneously. Of course, the explicit message of the Penetrable is that its own autonomy is false: purity is a myth. On the other hand, considered not as the dull, un-ironized “message” of the work but as part of a literal depiction of a Oiticican Penetrable, that is just what a neo-concretist work would say. The whole point of the thematization of the spectator was to show that the purity of the work of art is a myth: the work of art is also an object and therefore impure, entangled with the subject, its beholder.



But the ability to mobilize and dialectically to develop precisely that motif of impurity, of the artwork's real entanglement with the beholder, was possible only on the basis of a certain remove from the state and the market (from the TV in the other booth), a remove which now itself appears clueless and culpable, which is to say unconsciously complicit with state and market: yet another meaning to the phrase "purity is a myth." Finally, if purity is a myth, then the truth is impure: music to our modern multicultural ears, but the point cannot be to celebrate the heterogeneity of Brazilian culture or its informal cast, since the impurity that is actually represented in the work is, again, not *samba* or the autochthonous, heterogenous culture for which *samba* metonymically stands but the degraded culture that appears on the television in the next booth. The opposite of purity is not then hybridity, but complicity. The dark Penetrable deflates the culture of "the people" into state-subsidized commercial television, while the concretist Penetrable deflates the pursuit of aesthetic autonomy to complacency. *Tropicália* then asserts an identity, an indifference, between two modes of Brazilian culture: frankly heteronomous and pseudo-autonomous. (It should be mentioned in passing that a deliberate mismatching of allegorical levels is required to elevate the theme of complicity over what ought

to be the more obvious one of class. If the second Penetrable represents a *favela*, the first one does not represent an apartment building in Leblon; if the first one represents high bourgeois culture, the second does not represent subaltern culture but rather the mass culture promoted by the exponents of the bourgeoisie). In its context, the ensemble is explosively antisocial. There is no positive element or moment to hold onto: the people and the intellectuals are equally party to the debacle. (If my reading here sounds extravagant, it in fact only draws out the logic behind the spontaneous intuition of the musicians who, recognizing in Oiticica's installation their own total and desperate disillusion, would name their movement after it). Out of its historical context, it simply makes no sense. Either the television shows archival footage, in which case it is no longer a literal piece of life, and the whole dialectic of literalness and depiction fails to get off the ground (only on the basis of the literal/depictive duality of the television does the literal/depictive duality of the other Penetrable disclose itself) or the television remains a literal piece of life by being tuned to a contemporary television station, in which case it no longer works as an allegory.

This poses a difficulty for the next phase of Oiticica's career, pursued in London and New York after the hardening of the

dictatorship. The *pathos* of Oiticica's mid-1960s work is bound up in the world-historical gravity of the political turbulence that characterized the Brazilian 1960s. The *Parangolés* attempt to collapse the two sides of the neo-concretist entanglement of work and beholder, bourgeois art and socially marginal participant, even as on another level the two sides of the dialectic end up falling apart into performers and audience. *Tropicália*, on the other hand, while it continues to set the entanglement of literal and depictive to work, insists on this entanglement to the point of complicity: *Tropicália* not only represents complicity, it insists that it is itself complicit – as is its beholder<sup>18</sup>. The *Parangolés* insist on a collapse of the neo-concretist dialectic that is also a collapse of the distinction between left intellectuals and the people, but that they are unable to enact. *Tropicália* redeploys the neo-concretist dialectic, but in a way that is also meant to collapse the distance between left intellectuals and the people, both of which are now the same in that they are both culpable. The first moment is a celebration of heteronomy, the second a critique of autonomy; but both only make sense from a revolutionary standpoint – one that either, in the first moment, still imagines class rapprochement in some form to present a viable politics or, in the second, does not. (Again, “revolutionary standpoint” is not a function of Oiticica's own

politics, but a question of what is historically on the table). After these developments a return to the pure neo-concretist problematic can only seem artistically regressive and antihistorical, not to mention politically suspect. But absent this historical standpoint – that of the constitution of the people as an emergent political actor, whether stillborn (*Tropicália*) or still to be born (the *Parangolés*) – the road that appears to open is that of the abstract critique of autonomy, the abstract pursuit of heteronomy. The problem is that beautiful objects that are heteronomous to the ugly life we already know are not hard to find, though they are often hard to afford.

But with this, we suddenly understand that Neo-Concretism was in some sense about class all along. As I hope I have been able to show, Neo-Concretism (at least in the case of Oiticica and Ferreira Gullar, though the claim would certainly extend to Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape – in fact Clark may be the paradigmatic case) understood itself to be about something real. What looks like a “formalist” concern with the relation between depiction and material support – itself not a formalist concern in the strict sense – turns out to be, already in Oiticica’s first paintings, a concern with the problem of the beholder, with the situation of the work of art as linking the active, world-making energies of the artist and the beholder (an understanding of

the artwork, incidentally, that Schelling would have recognized). But how is this about class?

Lukács traced the origins of what we now call modernism to 1848, to the violent repression of popular uprisings throughout Europe, but especially and paradigmatically in Paris. Central to Lukács's account is a new experience of class – specifically, the self-experience of the bourgeoisie as necessarily engaged in an antagonistic relationship with the working classes. The world leading up to the French Revolution was understood by the bourgeoisie to be divided between the aristocracy and the people. Emerging bourgeois institutions had stood for the universal interest as against the particular interests represented by the old aristocratic and absolutist institutions. Without its universal address, the revolutionary ideology of the bourgeois class falls to the ground. After the violent repression of the 1848 revolutions, these same bourgeois institutions are revealed as representing the particular interests of their class. Suddenly the gallery, the salon, the critics, the beholder, the art market – all are complicit in the general debacle of bourgeois revolutionary ideals. From this moment onward (think first of the confrontational gaze of Manet's *Olympia*) the presumptively bourgeois audience represents an impediment to meaning – the art market appears

as an immanent threat to the universal address of the artwork, as opposed to its particular appeal to empirical beholders – that will one way or another have to be overcome.

One of the remarkable things about Neo-Concretism, and one of the primary reasons it was able to explore regions of artistic experience that were inaccessible to erudite art in Europe and the United States, is that fundamental to its operation is a programmatic lack of antagonistic tension between the artist (or the artwork) and the beholder. From the very outset, the beholder is understood as unproblematically crucial to the activation of the artwork. (When I say “unproblematic” I do not mean it was not a problem to be explored, I mean it was not a problem to be forestalled, excluded, short-circuited, avoided, defeated, suspended, and so on). The artist and the beholder are conceived as taking part in the same project, namely activating the space around the artwork in a particular way. That is, artist and beholder are conceived not as a particular profession with its own class-fractional ideologies on one hand, and the “audience” representing a class-position on the other, but as universal subjects – and it is only by conceiving the beholder and the artist as universal subjects that Neo-Concretism can explore

the phenomenology of artwork in a way that is rich and artistically original in its time.

But one would have to say, first, that like phenomenology itself (Merleau-Ponty is a major reference point for Ferreira Gullar) Neo-Concretism is essentially limited to exploring the dynamic it discovers, which subtends a great deal but itself turns out to be an abstract principle despite its commitment to concrete, embodied experience. Once this limit is exceeded, the dynamic falls apart. Second, the explosion of Neo-Concretism takes place during a brief moment when the progressive, anti-imperialist bourgeoisie can and does see itself as plausibly standing in for universal interests; in this context Neo-Concretism can deal with the beholder as undifferentiated, universal subjectivity. This plausibility is brought to an end by the failure of the left mobilization in the run-up to the coup, and its real institutional correlatives are destroyed at point of arms by the dictatorship. In a certain sense, then, 1964 is a repetition of 1848. Neo-Concretism's originality lies precisely in the fact that the autonomy of art is not understood as structurally bound up with autonomy from the beholder, as it was (generalizing wildly) after Manet. Rather the beholder is understood as a participant in the artwork, paradoxically essential to its meaning while playing

no role in determining that meaning. This structure is historically original and perhaps unique, and is clearly related to the hegemonic left-progressive stance sketched above. In other words, despite appearances, Neo-Concretism's relationship to world and Brazilian history is mediated by the art-immanent question of the artwork's relationship to the beholder, which here emerges in an unexpectedly non-conflictual way: the beholder activates the work but in doing so does not threaten its meaning. The unproblematic alignment of work and audience becomes a political problem after 1964; but it was already an artistic problem, since the thematization of a phenomenological structure that underlies all art is an inherently abstract, and therefore inherently limited material. The problem with this abstract alignment is something that the *coup* helps to clarify, not to cause.



There remain three major moments in Oiticica's career that I would like to touch on here, two in London and New York, and one back in Brazil. The first of these are the *Ninhos* or nests. They are meant as a critique of the gallery or museum: little spaces, filled



with various kinds of objects of play and relaxation, to be entered for an indefinite length of time by museum-goers. Vito Acconci, who showed with Oiticica at the 1970 show “Information” at MoMA, summed up their importance:

In the middle of the museum there was a place, a place for people. That was very rare at that time. No one thought of art as a place for people, those little compartments, those little capsules, nests... [Oiticica’s work] was about relations between people before mine was.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, as places for people, the nests are a disaster: quickly dirty and discombobulated, cramped and uncomfortable in the first place, they are not places for people but (merely, because they were always this as well) depictions of places for people. But here the dialectic is in the mode of failure, since they are clearly intended, as Acconci understood them to be intended, as literal places for people. This is not to say that the *Ninhos* could not have been successful at some level. They might have been more comfortable. But the force of Oiticica’s Brazilian works in the mode of anti-art and art-against-art derived from the social logic they invoked and from which they took their meaning. Absent that social logic, giving up the vocation to be art leaves nothing for them to be but non-art, which again

is not rare. At the end of a 1969 Whitechapel Gallery exhibition a billiard room was installed that literalized Van Gogh's *Night Café*. In an echo of the aesthetic ideology of the *Parangolés*, Oiticica is said to have been pleased that working class inhabitants of Whitechapel used the billiard room for billiards. But, as great and important as it is to bring new audiences into the gallery, this version can't really count as a democratization of art, since if you're using the billiard table to play billiards, you are not approaching it as a work of art, and if you're approaching it as a work of art, then its functionality as a billiard table is irrelevant. It is either literal or it is not, but the two sides of the dialectic don't require each other, don't produce any spark. The *Ninhos*, as literal spaces for creative leisure, are better suited for a student dormitory commons or a private apartment; both were tried, the latter with more success, as Oiticica's apartment on the lower east side of Manhattan was converted into a labyrinth of nests.

Indeed, for most of his time in New York Oiticica writes and plans prodigiously, but the work remains private, unfinished, or merely planned. One of these projects, a *Cosmococa* or participatory installation in which cocaine is heavily thematized, was "realized" for us in a recent traveling retrospective. Whatever was supposed to

happen in these rooms hung with hammocks, with slides projected on four canvas walls, and with Hendrix playing nonstop – the program included both a public and a private version – was not likely to take place at the Art Institute of Chicago. The most arresting element, however, are the so-called *mancoquilagem*s: books, album covers, and the like, decorated with lines of cocaine. It is difficult to ascertain the status of these as works or parts of works: they are designed by Oiticica’s friend Neville d’Almeida, photographed by Oiticica and meant to be projected on walls for his unrealized *Cosmococas*. And yet is difficult not to see them as purely private allegories of the impasse to which Oiticica’s trajectory has led. An album cover has a top and a bottom, but as a literal square surface with graphic lines on it that are also literal lines of cocaine, it has neither top nor bottom but only four equal sides: it is meant to be sat around. And as the “work” is enjoyed, it disappears into the pure affective experience of the participant: an experience that is also purely literal, which means that it is no different than if the work had never existed in the first place. Oiticica, who subsidized his existence at the time by dealing cocaine, would have had a very clear understanding of the fact that cocaine is a commodity, and that its enjoyment is not different in kind from the enjoyment of other commodities. In societies characterized

by the predominance of the commodity form, the critique of the autonomy of the work of art can issue only in the assertion of a lack of essential distinction between the judgments called forth by the work of art and those called forth by the commodity. In commodity societies, the achieved literalness of the work is its achieved identity with the commodity.

On his by all accounts joyous – and cocaine-free – return to Rio in 1978, it was to a society that was, despite still being under military rule, in the process of “decompressing” itself along liberal capitalist lines. The generals had mobilized the most retrograde sectors of Brazilian society, but their mission was, by their own lights, a modernizing one: integration with Northern capital. At this time Oiticica rediscovered some of his earlier work that he had not seen in seven years, and undertook a number of new projects, two of which suggest a new direction. Both involve the concept of the readymade. The first of these is the idea of the *Ready Constructible*, which to save space I will leave to discuss on another occasion. A second, more complex and radical idea is embodied in the “topological readymade landscapes.” These are simple objects taken from detritus of the world of commodities, stripped of labels and often filled with colored liquid, with a rubber band of a contrasting color snapped

around them. The first was an American cola bottle, a chance object but a formally attractive one – that is, one endowed with a purposive form that has precisely the purpose of being attractive – and one that is both the universal worldwide signifier for consumer society (and, probably coincidentally, historically related to cocaine). The title of the one recently exhibited (Figure 10) insists on a relation to Boccioni; the relation to Oiticica’s own white paintings (Figure 6) is more obvious. While the band that runs across the untitled white painting demands a certain purely visual experimentation on the part of the beholder, the rubber band that bisects the soap bottle is meant to be manipulable, so the thing is directly an occasion for play. But unlike the commodity, whose appropriation is non-normative – once you buy it, the experience you have of it is your own affair – the actions you can take with the rubber band will always produce a two-dimensional, though possibly tortured, shape. (In an interview with Lygia Pape [1978] Oiticica affirms, logically but also astonishingly, that the rubber bands are not to be doubled on themselves). This two-dimensional shape inevitably bisects the object, which inevitably introduces a depictive aspect; inevitably introduces, in effect, a horizon line: a landscape. There is no end to the topological landscapes that can be produced, but the end result

**FIGURE 10.**  
Hélio Oiticica, *Topological Readymade  
Landscape n. 3 (Homenagem a Boccioni)*  
*[Homage to Boccioni]* (detail), 1978.



will always be a topological landscape. In *Três tempos*, the literalness of the support deliberately showed through the formalist painting it subtended. Here, it is rather the work of art that shows through the literal material: the dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy, work and beholder, literal support and depiction, is underway once again. Only now, rather than art being subsumed by the everyday – museum into the street, meaning into experience, intention into appropriation, contemplation into participation, art into the commodity – the everyday (which, as we have known for 150 years, appears in societies like ours as an enormous collection of commodities) is minimally framed by a rubber band, transformed into a minor art. And with this Oiticica embarks on a project that both literally democratizes the work of art – the barrier for entry is the possession of an empty bottle, unmistakably the product of consumer society and yet its valueless remnant – and depicts its own universal address. In Oiticica's final projects, the emphatic pre-revolutionary demand for an art for everyone finds an unemphatic, muted presence within triumphant commodity society as the latter's determinate other. But this is opposition in the mode of idyll; antagonism is once again built into the work of art, as the memory of what might have been.

What the work of art is not is a commodity – even if all its parts are commodities.

The lesson of Oiticica's last projects is not that since art belongs to a few, it should therefore be subsumed under everyday life. In societies like ours, "everyday life" is simply the market (including the labor market): it is democratic only insofar as there is a place for anyone who can pay. Rather, Oiticica's topological readymades are works of art. They modestly insist that if art is, as Brecht said, a "foreign body" within commodity society, it should nonetheless belong to everyone.



## NOTES

- 1.** “[...] toma as formas artísticas como fins em si mesmas, separadas do real e autônomas, movimentando-se segundo os ditames de uma lógica imanente a elas próprias”. Translations are mine except when stated otherwise.
- 2.** “Arte popular revolucionária”.
- 3.** “[...] armas espirituais da libertação material e cultural do nosso povo”.
- 4.** “Art is made in the gallery, the same way that Tristan Tzara thought that ‘thought is made in the mouth’” (BOURRIAUD, 2002, p. 40).
- 5.** For Bourriaud, a progressive work of art “encourage[s] the ‘beholder’ to take up a position within an arrangement, to give it life, to complete the work, to participate in shaping its meaning” (BOURRIAUD, 2001, pp. 60-61); translation (here modified) at BOURRIAUD (2002, p. 59); for Oiticica in 1968, the progressive work of art is characterized by “the open giving over of itself to its own construction through participatory experience” (“[...] dar-lhe aberto [...] para a construção dele pela vivência participativa”). See OITICICA (1986b, p. 120).
- 6.** The failure to acknowledge the centrality of this dynamic to Oiticica’s work, and to Neo-Concretism generally, mars Irene V. Small’s otherwise estimable overview of Oiticica’s trajectory. See SMALL (2016).
- 7.** “Acreditamos que a obra de arte supera o mecanismo material sobre o qual repousa, não por alguma virtude extraterrena: supera-o por transcender essas relações mecânicas [...] e por criar para si uma significação tácita [...] que emerge pela primeira vez”.
- 8.** “[...] o fato de que ela *está sempre se fazendo presente*, está sempre recomeçando o impulso que a gerou e de que *ela era já a origem*”. Originally published in 1959, the “Neo-Concrete Manifesto” was written by Ferreira Gullar and signed by himself, Amilcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Reynaldo Jardim, and Theon Spanudis. Eight years later, in *Artforum*, Michael Fried would invoke Jonathan Edward’s idea that “the world exists anew at every moment” (FRIED, 1995, pp. 116) as the analogue and illustration

of the artistic “presentness” (Ibidem, p. 147) he opposes to objective presence. I hope it is obvious that Ferreira Gullar and Fried do not just say similar things; they conceive the non-objective presentness of the work of art in fundamentally similar ways.

**9.** “A mera contemplação não basta para revelar o sentido da obra – e o espectador passa da contemplação à ação. Mas o que a sua ação produz é a obra mesma, porque esse *uso*, previsto na estrutura da obra, é absorvido por ela, revela-a e incorpora-se à sua significação [...] Diante do espectador, o não-objeto apresenta-se como *inconcluso* e lhe oferece os meios de ser concluído. O espectador age, mas o tempo de sua ação não flui, não transcende a obra, não se perde além dela: incorpora-se a ela, e dura”. This “Dialogue on the Non-Object” [Diálogo sobre o não-objeto] was, like the “Theory of the Non-Object” and the “Neo-Concrete Manifesto,” published in the Sunday supplement to the *Jornal do Brasil*. See GULLAR (2015a, pp. 170-171).

**10.** See OITICICA (1986c, p. 65) whose major point is that in the *Bólides* the idea is identical with its literal support. “In structures totally made by me, there is a will to objectify a subjective structural conception, which only realizes itself by concretizing itself in the ‘making of the work’” (“Nas estruturas totalmente feitas por mim há uma vontade de objetivar uma concepção estrutural subjetiva, que só se realiza ao se concretizar pela ‘feitura da obra’”). In other words, Oiticica’s work before the *Bólides*, as we saw in the notebook entry titled “Support” (“Suporte”), unavoidably encountered the support as a problem: there is an inescapable, literal “intermediary” between idea and interpretation. Oiticica continues: “In the Trans-Objects [another term for the *Bólides*, explicitly making reference to Ferreira Gullar’s non-objects], there is the sudden identification of this subjective conception with the already existent object as necessary to the structure of the work, which in its condition as object opposed to the subject already ceases to be an object opposed to the subject in the moment of identification, because in truth it already existed, implicit in the idea” (“Nos ‘transobjetos’ há a súbita identificação dessa concepção subjetiva com o objeto já existente como necessário à estrutura da obra, que na sua condição de objeto, oposto ao sujeito, já o deixa de ser no momento da identificação, porque na verdade já existia implícito na ideia”) (OITICICA, 1986d, p. 38). Of course, as the very logic of this sentence insists, the *Bólides* don’t solve the neo-concretist dialectic, but rather crank it up another notch. The point here is simply that the *Bólides* are understood by Oiticica to be fundamentally continuous with the neo-concretist problem as theorized by Ferreira Gullar.

**11.** Of course the story is more complicated than this, and Goulart himself hardly comes across as a heroic figure. For an excellent series of analyses of what was at stake in the *coup* of 1964, see TOLEDO (1997).

**12.** “A derrubada de preconceitos sociais, das barreiras de grupos, classes etc.”

**13.** “O ponto de vista filosófico [...] resta talvez uma procura da definição de uma ‘ontologia da obra’, uma análise profunda da gênese da obra enquanto tal”.

**14.** “More than anything else, it must be made clear that my interest in dance [...] came to me from a vital need for de-intellectualization” (“Antes de mais nada é preciso esclarecer que o meu interesse pela dança [...] me veio de uma necessidade vital de desintelectualização”) Notebook entry from November 12, 1965. See OITICICA (1986a, p. 72).

**15.** “Crime is really the desperate search for true happiness, in contrast to false, established, stagnant social values” (“Na verdade o crime é a busca desesperada da felicidade autêntica, em contraposição aos valores sociais falsos, estabelecidos, estagnados”) (OITICICA, 1986e, p. 82).

**16.** “O que surgirá no contínuo contato espectador-obra estará portanto condicionada ao caráter da obra, em si incondicionada”.

**17.** “[...] a obra do artista no que possuiria de fixa só toma sentido e se completa ante a atitude de cada participante -- este é o que lhe empresta os significados correspondentes -- algo é previsto pelo artista, mas as significações emprestadas são possibilidades suscitadas pela obra não previstas [...] esta obra vai adquirir depois n significados que se acrescentam, que se somam pela participação geral.”

**18.** My debt to Roberto Schwarz’s analysis of the culture of this period could hardly be exaggerated. See in particular SCHWARZ (1978).

**19.** Interview with Vito Acconci in the short film *Héliophonía* by Marcos Bonisson, available at <http://www.marcosbonisson.com/Heliophonía>.

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