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“Lygia, I came back from New York on the 19th; I stayed one month, the exhibition was a great success and this time, I feel that I am truly respected by the entire art world; the Americans are more vital and they are more interested in everything...”¹

Oiticica’s entry into the New York art world was hallmarked by his successful participation in the group show *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art that stirred much attention in the summer of 1970. In addition, Oiticica was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim fellowship in 1971 allowing him to settle in New York for a longer period. The following essay highlights some key aspects of Oiticica’s artistic position within the New York art world of the 1970s,² and seeks to elaborate on his prior activities, which were strongly influenced by his immediate surroundings: collaboration, the inclusion of new media, collage techniques and filmic practices.

The first part of the text sheds light on the city's disparate art scenes, the second part introduces *Loft 4*, the artist's home/studio in the East Village and the projects developed there, and the third part looks into Oiticica's cosmopolitan side and his idea of a "world-shelter" ("mundo-abrigo"), which can be found in the *Babylonests* and his New York writings, *Newyorkaises/Conglomerado*.

// HÉLIO OITICICA IN NEW YORK— THE 1970s

Kynaston McShine's exhibition *Information* held between July 2nd and September 20th 1970 incorporated Oiticica's and other Brazilian artists' work³ into the hottest debate about contemporary art. It succeeded the European landmark exhibitions *Live in Your Head*, *When Attitudes Become Form*, *Op Losse Schroeven: Situaties en Cryptostructuren* and *Prospect '69*, all premiering the previous year in the US. Like its unofficial forerunners, McShine's exhibition concept for *Information* was primarily based on artists' proposals for works to be realized on site. These conditions made the exhibition a starting



Hélio Oiticica, *Ninhos* at the “Information” exhibition. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970 [photo Ronald Cultone ©César e Claudio Oiticica].

point for a new debate on Conceptualism and the “artist-worker” of the post-studio era, and an event that undermined institutional frameworks, especially MoMA’s image of being a white-dominated, hierarchical, and uncritical institution.⁴

Information included conceptual, performative and installation art, while strikingly omitting Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, works close to an art market that was just entering a strong phase of post-war consolidation, as well as happenings, Minimal Art and Dada.⁵

According to McShine who especially referred to “the current social, political and economic crises that are almost universal phenomena of 1970,” the works and propositions gathered for the show were “rebellious.”⁶ McShine’s intellectual background for the project was an eclectic medley of “Marcel Duchamp, Ad Reinhardt, Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, the I Ching [sic!], the Beatles, Claude Lévi-Strauss, John Cage, Yves Klein, Herbert Marcuse, Ludwig Wittgenstein and theories of information and leisure,”⁷ a list of references parts of which also appear in Oiticica’s notes for his unfinished book-object-project *Newyorkaises/Conglomerado*.⁸

As Hans Haacke, another participant of the show, recalls, within the international and national political situation of the US at the time, which led to many artists adopting political and feminist stances, the exhibition was a starting point for many to critically observe institutional work⁹ and artistic production structures within the increasing professionalization of the art market in general. Haacke was becoming a prominent political voice. It was Haacke who realized the openly political *MoMA Poll*¹⁰ in *Information*, and one year later *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System* at the Guggenheim Museum, which was canceled shortly before it was supposed to open. The dismissal of Whitney Curator Marcia Tucker in 1977 (due to the harsh criticism of her difficult-to-follow Richard Tuttle show) is one prominent example of how

difficult it was to convince museums to incorporate new formats and influences, despite the revolutionary activities of groups such as Art Workers Coalition, the Guerilla Art Action Group, and the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee or WAR Women Artists in Revolution. Considering the political situation during the 1970s, artists in New York were facing two predominant phenomena: the pressure to “make it” and “be in,” or “drop out” of the art world, and the rapid process of gentrification in Lower Manhattan. As Katy Siegel states, the “impetus to drop out in the late 1960s and 1970s was a complex mix of a deeply anti-social impulse, a protest against contemporary American existence, and a mode of adherence to traditional American values.”¹¹ The issue of attacking aggressive money-making and competition in the art world caused artists like Lee Lozano to stop working as artists, or even leave New York. People like Paul Thek who viewed the gallery system and the mechanisms of the art world critically and were unable to fit into these parameters, went into self-prescribed isolation, while others, such as Hélio Oiticica—also due to his illegal status in the US—moved into anti-commercial underground circles like the queer and independent film scene. Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz aptly describes the phenomenon as an “ideology critique” that turned into a new “post-modern condition” of living.¹² The city’s massive transformation started in the 1950s, its population dropping by 10 % every ten years, not taking into account the rapid increase in homeless people.

This situation provoked and nourished a certain artistic precariousness. At the same time it was a countercurrent to New York's ever speculative real estate venture. It is quite obvious that the demographic change in the city and the growing rift dividing the art scene were closely related, even though this is rarely discussed in art history as a superordinate phenomenon.

Hélio Oiticica can be seen as a typical example of an immigrant artist being thrown into the melting pot of New York during this time. He soon recognized that New York was an amalgam of cultures and individual stories. Not long after his arrival he compared the city with a "scenery of Bosch: a thousand bodies in the streets, piss, blood, injured people, litter, heaps of empty bottles, and people approaching you begging for money, etc."¹³ It was perhaps the extremely capitalist aura of the city's real estate situation that is mirrored in the art scene and that Oiticica disliked immediately. "The decadence of capitalism that devours itself; only the



Manhattan seen from atop World Trade Center, 1972
[photo *Andreas Valentin*].

money is respected,” he wrote to Lygia Clark sojourning in Paris at the time.¹⁴ As Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz states, Oiticica’s idea of “Tropicamp” characterizing “a resistant element in the gradual commercialization of queer aesthetics” can be seen as a critique of the increasing consumerism in New York’s avant-

garde art, especially in the queer aesthetics Oiticica observed.¹⁵ Even though many artists represented in *Information* became members of the institutionalized “in” crowd of the scene, it is unclear why Oiticica was unable to build upon his initial success in the New York art world. American curator Elisabeth Sussman states that “discussions of Oiticica’s time in New York center on the absence of any realized major projects” but clarifies that this does not mean “Oiticica’s New York years were unproductive.” Even though the artist realized many projects, they remained “subterranean.”¹⁶ The reasons behind this were mostly unintended. One major problem, as friend and collaborator Andreas Valentin recalls, was Oiticica’s illegal status in the US.¹⁷ Oiticica’s rare contacts to Americans and other artist-immigrants, Quentin Fiore, Walter De Maria, Jonas Mekas, Mario Montez, Lee Jaffe, and Jack Smith,



Hélio Oiticica in New York, 1976
[photo Thomas Valentin].

were rare exceptions among his otherwise entirely Brazilian friends living and working with him in New York.¹⁸ His first contacts with Willoughby Sharp and John Perreault turned out to be unsuccessful,

and an interview for *Avalanche* was recorded by Sharp and collaborator Liza Béar, but not published.¹⁹ Oiticica moved to a “creative and strategic isolation” in Manhattan,²⁰ putting all his energy into the book-object-project *Newyorkaises/Conglomerado* and a series of films.²¹

US film-maker and performance artist Jack Smith was an important and famous figure in New York and an inspiration not only for Oiticica. “There is a filmmaker who wants to make an actor out of me—silent underground films:

Mercer Street, New York, 1974
[photo *Andreas Valentin*].



it is Jack Smith, American underground myth; I was there once (...) his films are incredible, there was a projection of slides with soundtrack, a kind of quasi-cinema, that was incredible; Warhol learned a lot from him when he began, and took certain things that he lifted up to another level, this is clear; Jack Smith is a kind of Artaud of cinema; this would be the most objective way to describe him...," he wrote to Lygia Clark in May 1971.²² Oiticica and Smith shared a certain resistance to the growing post-war capitalism.²³ Through Smith he also got acquainted with one of Smith's main characters, transvestite Mario Montez, who starred in *Agripina é Roma-Manhattan* (1972), the only New York film Oiticica completed. It may be significant that Oiticica started many film projects in New York without producing a final, public version. *Agripina é Roma-Manhattan* was an exception in a sense that it was shown at *Expo-projeção 73*, an exhibition held at Espaço Grife in São Paulo from June 18–23, 1973, organized by Aracy Amaral,²⁴ even though it was finally merely a substitute for the much larger, more ambitious, and once again, unfinished project, *Neyrótika*.²⁵ The latter was a work containing more than eighty slides of young, partially nude men, shot in Oiticica's *Loft 4*. This place was Oiticica's nucleus from where he continued to collaborate with artists in Brazil, always in constant contention with his immediate surroundings, a new "Babylon," as Oiticica repeatedly referred to Manhattan.



FROM THE INSIDE: PROPOSING AND COLLABORATING IN *LOFT 4*

In July 1968 Hélio wrote a short text about Andreas Valentin, in which he stated:

“Deceived are those who think that by giving children ink to paint or paper to cut and paste or clay to sculpt or instruments to play would make them ‘geniuses’ in the future. To begin with, the concept of ‘genius’ has become obsolete: everyone can be a genius, has the potentiality for such—this concept was created to hierarchize what should be a

collective privilege: isolate the genius, in its origin, model of a feudalistic society. Time has passed. Today, one looks for a collectivization of the experiences once reserved to the chosen, and nothing better than commencing them with growing up itself at an age where everything commences, grows."²⁶

At the time Hélio wrote those notes, the two artists had known each other for nine years. Valentin had begun taking art classes from Oiticica at the age of five. Oiticica came to his home once a week, sat beside him at a large folding table and showed him how to paint with oil and gouache, cut and collage as well as prepare his own paint from color pigments, earth and sand using PVA glue as a binder. He gave Valentin art books and introduced him to the work of artists, from the Renaissance to the modern period. When his student was confronted with an empty canvas or a rectangular piece of cardboard and asked him what he should do, he would answer: "How should I know? Invent, Andreas!"

After these initial years, Valentin reconnected with Oiticica in the fall of 1970. He began attending college in Pennsylvania, and Oiticica had just arrived in New York and settled in his loft on 81 Second Avenue between 4th and 5th street, where he redid the nests he had set up in July of that year at the *Information* exhibit. Years later, artist



Andreas Valentin, *Untitled*, 1962. 65,5 x 54 cm, earth, pigment and PVA glue on canvas [photo *Andreas Valentin*].

Vito Acconci, who also participated in the show, commented on these spaces meant for invention, for individual and collective experiences:

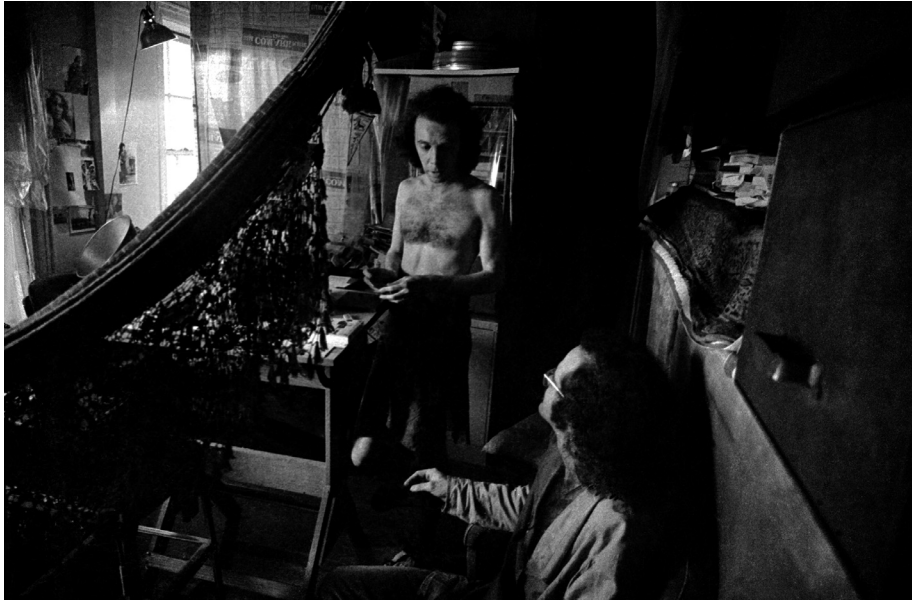
“(…) in the middle of the museum there was a place for people. This was rare at the time. No one had thought, in terms of art, in a space for people. He was creating these small compartments, capsules, nests where people could stay. There were places in the middle of this public space that could be small private spaces [...] Since very early he had a very interesting notion of public space. It was not only for a

large number of people. It was a compound of private spaces. His work was intensely about a set of privacies. You could have your own privacy and have someone right beside you. You could have social contact and a relationship. His work seemed immensely about the relationship among people.”²⁷



View from Loft4 to Second Avenue, 1973
[photo Andreas Valentin].

Oiticica named his living/work space *Loft 4*. In an area of approximately 75 m², he built six nests on two levels which were called *Babylonests*. His own nest was close to the front window. In a corner there was a drawing table and a cabin/penetrable covered with plastic for editing Super 8 films. The small kitchen could be



Hélio Oiticica and Andreas Valentin at Loft 4, 1973
[photo Thomas Valentin].



Hélio Oiticica in his nest at Loft 4, 1972 [photo *Andreas Valentin*].

turned into a photo lab. The poet Waly Salomão, frequent visitor and sometimes resident of *Loft 4*, described it as follows:

“The indefatigable lever or permanent spring that drove him non-stop into new orbits of experience made HO realize that the BABYLONEST (Babylon Nest) of Second Avenue was a compact cosmopolitan city. Kindergarten, playground, laboratory, motel, drug spot, a university campus contained in an environmental capsule. The NEST [of Hélio] had a television and remote control zapping non-stop, newspapers, radios, recorder, cassette tapes, books, magazines, slide projector, viewer, boxes of labeled slides, paper tissue boxes, bottles and disposable cups, straws, agate cut into blades, etc... NESTS and their archipelago structures neither solid nor linear or insular: like a television that transcoded the most secluded corner of private life into windows open to others and to the world: WORLD-SHELTER.”²⁸

Loft 4 was always full of people. Some had their “own” nests, like his friend Chris Freese, others, like Valentin, “crashed” in whatever nest was available. It was an environment in which inventiveness, experimentation, and collaboration flourished. Oiticica himself was the first to encourage this, and certainly the protagonist in the process. His work in New York was marked mostly by writing and propositions. In his notebooks, his handwritten and/or typewritten sheets, his sketches and especially in his letters to his numerous friends, he

invented and suggested projects, some of which were realized, while others were never put into practice. In a letter to Andreas Valentin, he emphasized the importance of putting these thoughts into writing: “This is why when I chat here or propose questionnaires or trivialize I know this is the only way to bring up subjects which have quietened and the crazier and unexpected they might be the more so they should not be laid aside.”²⁹

The most well-known of Oiticica’s propositions and collaborations are undoubtedly the *Block-Experiments in Cosmococa-program in progress* from 1973. The first five pieces in this series (*CC1 Trashiscapes; CC2 Onobject; CC3 Maileryn; CC4 Nocagions; CC5 Hendrix-War*) were done in *Loft 4* between March and August 1973 with Neville d’Almeida, who originally coined the term “Cosmococa” for one of his film projects. In September that same year Oiticica and Andreas Valentin’s brother Thomas collaborated on *CC6 Coke’s Head Soup; CC7, unnamed*, which was conceived as a proposition to art critic and curator Guy Brett; *CC8 Mr. D or D of Dado* (December 1973) included the collaboration of writer Silviano Santiago; and *CC9 Cocaoculta Renô Gone* (March 1974) was proposed to artist Carlos Vergara.

Though highly acclaimed today and regarded as “the most celebrated Brazilian contribution to twentieth-century avant-garde experiments on the threshold of art and cinema,”³⁰ these works were not publicly exhibited until 1992, twelve years after the artist’s death,

starting with the first major Oiticica retrospective at Witte de With, Rotterdam. Oiticica repeatedly mentioned to his close friends how “explosive” the series was, and that he felt he was “sitting on a powder keg wrapped in sticks of dynamite.”³¹

Oiticica collaborated with Andreas Valentin on various projects while he was in New York and after his return to Rio de Janeiro in February 1978. One example of their collaboration was a series of photographs and films in the New York subway, a situation described by Oiticica in the text “CLOUDS IN MY COFFEE,” written between February 18th and March 6th 1973:

“(…) we planned fun things: take the subway with PARANGOLÉ CAPES: it was really cool and part of one of my PARANGOLÉ-phases here: CAPES are made for specific contacts-events with random public in NEW YORK: programs of circumstances-ROMERO the ‘golden boy’ of PARANGOLÉ acts as a PROPOSER first wearing and then offering CAPES for people to wear: we filmed (ANDREAS VALENTIN, who is 20 years old and whom I’ve known since he was 6 when I taught painting when painting still existed, filmed in 16 mm some sequences of the encounter in the subway of the NEW LOTS AVE.),”³²

They also did a series of photos at *Loft 4*, various other photo and film projects, and, specifically, a Super 8 mm film they shot in a translation office called “All Language,” where Oiticica worked the night shift. In a letter to Valentin he commented on those films:



Still from the film *All Language*, 1974
[dir *Andreas Valentin*].

“I liked them very much; I do not think they should be edited by means of cutting: just paste one to the other: the cuts of takes and framings are curiously right: very good (...) it is incredible how people reveal themselves through gaps: they are more the unknown of themselves than what they immediately reveal (...) exceedingly strange: even I am in what I do not know: inflated with madness and demon life: tanned, not by the sun.”³³

In March 1974 Valentin returned from the U.S. and settled again in Rio de Janeiro. He and his brother Thomas—nurtured by the deep friendship and interaction with Oiticica—created works, some of which materialized into films and photographs. Others took the form of projects and propositions, many of them in collaboration with Oiticica. The two brothers kept in constant contact with Oiticica through long-distance phone calls and, especially, letters. Oiticica was very much connected to everyone abroad and knew

what was going on in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paris and London. In a letter to the Valentin brothers, he light-heartedly wrote that, “here, I know more things about over there than you there.”³⁴

Call me Helium was one of those works that was planned and developed amidst that generous collaborative exchange. The Valentin brothers had the idea of inflating a red balloon measuring six meters in diameter over Ipanema beach on a crowded Sunday afternoon. Oiticica immediately suggested the title, taken from an interview with Jimi Hendrix and indicated people who should, “somehow,”

Hélio Oiticica, Andreas and Thomas Valentin, *Call me Helium*, Rio de Janeiro, 2014 [photo *Thomas Valentin*].



participate, among them Carlos Vergara, Lygia Pape, Antonio Manuel, Neville d'Almeida, Waly Salomão, Silviano Santiago, Antonio Dias, and Lygia Clark. Conceived also as a tribute to their friend, the idea gradually took shape, but, for various reasons, it was not realized at the time. In 2014, the project was finally realized in Rio de Janeiro.³⁵

Exchanging ideas and information in spoken and in written form reveals an important aspect of Oiticica's creative process. He valued the participation of artists, writers, filmmakers and friends in his own projects or in those of other people. Collective practices had already been conceptualized in some of his earlier writings, such as in "The Senses Pointing Towards a New Transformation," a text he wrote in London, dated June 18th–25th 1969, which was originally prepared for presentation at the Tactile Art Symposium in Long Beach, California. Reflecting on the "insufficiency of the art-object," he states that,

"Recently, a new demand and important decisions came to me: in the experiences I propose, such as the practice of creleisure;³⁶ the impossibility of 'exhibiting' objects which would lead into it, in galleries or museums, has become evident (...) so, why insist in the old form when a new experimental world demands, and with urgency, complete new ways of communication, mainly relating participating propositions, sensorial experiences, etc."³⁷

“Proposing to propose,” as he mentions there or, as in later notes,³⁸ “propose to propose, as an approach to participatory devices,” was a strategy that would lead to the concretion of collective experience. These could be exemplified by what he called “repertory,” described at the end of the document “about PN 16:” “a collection of propositions for various projects: performances, films, printed matter, sound-tracks, developments of other propositions.”³⁹ He mentions the recorded tapes from the Penetrable *PN 16 NADA* (1971)–people grabbing microphones to record their “idea-suggestions” to be utilized later. Ideas, suggestions, propositions, experiments, collaborations: these were Oiticica’s methods, which, besides materializing in numerous concrete works, established lasting connections and relationships between people, thus generating a creative energy, which can still be felt in his oeuvre to this day.

// A PLACE IN THE COSMOS TO BELONG— OITICICA'S *NINHOS*

According to Nikos Papastergiadis, Professor for cultural studies and Media & Communications at the University of Melbourne, “Cosmopolitanism is an idea of our place in the world and an ideal of how to belong with other people. At its most utopian level cosmopolitanism proclaims a form of belonging that is free of

boundaries and is open to the sensory awareness of the universe.”⁴⁰ In his essay *The Cosmos in Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism*, he outlines the possibilities of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism, one that exists in and through art. He distinguishes this concept from what he calls normative cosmopolitanism coined by philosophers that seek to understand “the connections and meaning in things.” Aesthetic cosmopolitanism on the other hand, is practiced by artists that create “images to connect and give new meaning to things.”⁴¹ While philosophers are restricted to the role of interpreters of the intersections of cosmos and polis, artists obtain an active role in “world making:”⁴² they imagine and create it through their artistic practice.

This concept of aesthetic cosmopolitanism resonated in the artistic practice and aesthetic thinking of Hélio Oiticica in the 1970s. The artist was a cosmopolite in the broadest sense of the word—he studied and read texts by authors, theorists and poets in French, English, Portuguese and Spanish, translated parts of their works and interwove their passages and ideas into what I call his book-object-process project *Newyorkaises/Conglomerado* launched during his time in New York (1971–78). He also practiced what has now become a common lifestyle among artists in the global art world, spending some time in the centers of modern art often referred to as cosmopolitan cities: Paris, London and New York. Like many others, Oiticica left his birth city of Rio de Janeiro at a time when the

country's cultural scene was paralyzed by the brutally oppressive turn the military dictatorship took after IA-5 legislation was introduced in 1968, and returned home almost ten years later. While a cosmopolitan, a world-citizen, should ideally feel at home anywhere in the world, Oiticica's wandering in the northern hemisphere over the following years seems to have "uprooted" the artist. In 1969 he wrote:

“after the Whitecapel (first and last experience)
[in London]

after Paris with Ceres Franco
doing Rhobo by Jean Clay

after Los Angeles with Lygia Clark, whose communication
was revived and grew more frequent through the American
contact

after New York with Gerchman whose work is getting bigger
every day

I am in London again

The cosmopolite Oiticica had to face a political reality: He was living a marginal life in two senses. After his Guggenheim Fellowship had ended in 1971 he decided to stay in New York illegally in order to avoid returning to a Brazil that was terrorized by a military dictatorship to which he was in harsh opposition. Rio de Janeiro's social and geopolitical structure as well as its living realities had deeply influenced the artist's practice before leaving the city in 1969. His *Parangolés* series, *capas to be danced in*, and environmental installations such as *Tropicália* cannot be understood without their link to the cultural practice of samba, living conditions inside the favelas, and the social stratification of the city with its major abyss between the poorest and the richest. These artworks were aimed at a Brazilian public, yet today they are celebrated in a European-American dominated global art world. In his contribution to the catalog of the *Information* exhibition in New York in 1970, he felt the need to position himself against the label of "Brazilian artist:" "I am not here representing Brazil; or representing anything else."⁴⁴ Even today artists from the global south are implicitly expected to create artworks that relate to social realities in their place of origin. After leaving the country, Oiticica stopped creating artworks making a direct reference to Rio or Brazil. Subsequently, the oeuvre created in his New York years has been neglected or even devaluated⁴⁵ until recently⁴⁶.

Some of the works Oiticica produced in London and New York—the nests—embody both Oiticica’s craving for a place at a moment of maximum uprootedness and a state of aesthetic cosmopolitanism as coined by Papastergiadis. The feeling of not having “a place in the world” is key to interpreting Oiticica’s artistic practice in the 1970s because it expresses a need to create intimate and cozy places where one immediately feels “at home” while at the same time interacting with other people in a type of social experiment.

Even though the direct reference to the Brazilian context disappears during his years of “voluntary” exile, Oiticica’s work continued to focus on the human body and its sensual existence in the world, something he had already started in the early 1960s still in Rio. The transformation of human behavior was a core concern in Oiticica’s works starting in the mid-1960s. He wrote *The Senses Pointing Towards a New Transformation* in 1969 for the journal *Studio International*, which was never published but appeared in a summarized version in the *Information* exhibition catalog. In it, he argues that the integration of all senses into art reception and making would open the “possibility for art to influence individuals’ behavior.”⁴⁷ He saw the same potential in architecture and constructed spaces.⁴⁸ As early as 1969, Oiticica invented the concept of *Creleisure* when he constructed the first *Bed Bólido*, “a cabin in which people lie down experience certain sensations and regain modes of living, of ‘being’ in

the world.”⁴⁹ This project was part of the Environment *Eden* Oiticica conceived for his retrospective exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London. *Creleisure* is a concept combining the words “creation” and “leisure.” According to Oiticica it indicates a state of active laziness or creative passivity that involves all the senses and makes people completely open to creations and imaginations of any type just by savoring life.⁵⁰

Oiticica also created the first nests for the *Whitechapel Experience*, as he named the retrospective show at Whitechapel Gallery in 1969. The *B58 Nest Bólide 1: Six Cells* was a conglomerate of six divided spaces made of wooden bars and separated by semi-transparent fabric. Inside the nests were lined with different materials like straw, foam plastics and even books. These nests were explained with the idea of the *Barracão*, a “matrix-cell” to be inhabited as a space that structures behavior and ultimately leads to the formation of a “mother-cell,” a combination of time and people inhabiting the cell-structure that will expand into new modes of living through their behavior.⁵¹ This is a metaphoric but also highly utopian approach to life itself. The *Barracão* concept overlaps with what Papastergiadis defines as cosmopolitanism in general in its utopian idea of how to belong, and live in a certain place without any behavioral boundaries in a state of constant invention and awareness in a sensorial way.

The nests Oiticica made for the *Whitechapel Experience*,

however, and altered for each exhibition, were also constructed at the University of Sussex in late 1969 and eventually at the *Information* exhibition at MoMA in New York in 1970. Renaming them *Babylonests*, Oiticica reconstructed them in his home at *Loft 4* with the materials remaining from the *Information* exhibition after its closing.

The nest-structure became more complex in the years following the *Whitechapel Experience*. For Sussex and *Information* Oiticica tripled the six cells, creating three story structures. The compartments were now separated by thicker burlap, their insides fitted with mattresses and cushions. The idea of living together was taken from a horizontal to a vertical and horizontal structure borrowed from modern apartment houses where neighbors also live above each other. This structure reveals Oiticica's concept of a cell-matrix, a living and expanding organism. In Sussex the construction was a communal project as it was realized by Oiticica together with the university students in their common room.

The nests gave visitors the possibility to be in their private cabin—compared to the nests in London, the burlap was not see-through anymore—yet, at the same time the privacy was restricted because the cells were only separated by a thin fabric. Anyone could enter anytime. They propose intimate shelter for a single person and a collective experience in a state of creation and imagination. The cells could be used for any activity imagined by the visitors who took the

freedom allotted to them seriously.⁵² In this way the nests changed people's behavior as they could use the cells for activities they would normally engage in only at home—in their private quarters—while at the same time being in public and interacting with others.

As stated earlier, artist Vito Acconci emphasized that the ambiguous relationship between private and public spaces was unique to Oiticica's work.⁵³ A very important part of the concept of *Creleisure*, Oiticica repeatedly pointed out, was its "catalysis of the non-oppressive energies" and the "leisure connected to them."⁵⁴ Oiticica's experience from Brazil was that public spaces as they were conceived in the so-called west were scarce, socially segregated, guarded by military-, police-, or private security presence, and ruled by a conservative moral regime. While most middle and upper class life took place in private or semi-private quarters, the poorest part of the population was struggling to construct spaces granting at least a minimum of privacy: In the favela barracks, rooms were often separated only by fabric instead of solid walls due to a lack of construction materials. This complex and interwoven co-existence of various types of public and private spaces informed Oiticica's conception of both his theoretical ideas about *Creleisure* and the *Barracão*, as well as the construction of the nests.

Yet, rather than mediating between public and private spaces, first and foremost the nests explore the possibilities of

belonging, the private aspect focusing on a sense of “Heimat,” while the public aspect refers to a collective belonging in a cosmopolitan sense. Less well known than the concept of *Creleisure* but equally important is Oiticica’s idea of “mundo-abrigo” (“world-shelter”), invented around the same time. The name “mundo-abrigo” points to a paradox: A shelter usually conceived as a construction *in* the world or as a protection *against/ from* the world becomes the world itself. Oiticica described the “mundo-abrigo” as a type of shelter surrounding the body like a husk that protects the individual, while also mediating his or her collective being.⁵⁵ For him to have “a place in the world,” a real place, was a condition for relating with other people—the basis for human existence as creative, sensual and intellectual beings. In his file about “mundo-abrigo,” Oiticica also kept a three-page excerpt from Marshall McLuhan’s book *Understanding Media* he wanted to include in the *Newyorkaises/Conglomerado* project. In this brief epitome, McLuhan states that “housing as a shelter” as well as clothing is an extension of a collective human skin that has a transformative effect on spatial form and serves as a medium “media of communication, (...) in the sense that they shape and rearrange the patterns of human association and community.”⁵⁶

Oiticica was convinced that in a utopian place like the nests people would eventually transform visitors’ behavior and explore the possibilities of *Creleisure*. The nests were an exploration of

the “most utopian level” of cosmopolitanism: Freed from any boundaries, people could experience a type of co-habitation, of belonging, in a place granting them access to what Papastergiadis calls a “sensory awareness of the universe.”⁵⁷

In his writings, Oiticica refers to this “labyrinth-shelter-structure” as a place that enables visitors to perform what he calls “self-theater” or “a circus without ritual or spectacle” where “each one’s self-performance would be the goal-task that connects everything.”⁵⁸ The idea of “theater and circus without spectacle” can be interpreted as a performance that includes everybody, while the audience no longer exists. Visitors are thus invited to play a role, to go beyond their common behavior, and create a new reality through role-playing. Performativity as coined by Erika Fischer-Lichte seeks exactly this transformation of reality: “The term refers to certain symbolic actions that do not represent or express something predetermined, but create the reality they refer to.”⁵⁹ This reality arises only through embodied action. The nests provide a space for visitors to experiment with new types of embodied behavior, which will eventually produce a new reality. The definition of art presented by Papastergiadis—(contemporary) art as a world-making activity—clearly defines Oiticica’s nests. This world-making functions through a complex balance of individual and group performativity always linked to a physical place: the nests. The nests constitute a place built

specifically to exercise utopian forms of collective co-habitation.

The logical consequence of Oiticica's proposal to fundamentally change the way people relate to each other, themselves and the world, was a self experiment: The idea was to actually live inside the artwork.⁶⁰ He thus installed the *Babylonests*, the cell-matrix structure in his own apartment *Loft 4*. The *Babylonests* solved the dilemma of open-coziness: The airy and open structure of the loft was preserved as no walls were built to separate compartments, and yet, the nests provided cozy little cave-like spaces in which people could feel comfortable. They exuded a kind of "motherly comfort" (Silviano Santiago) while serving as a multi-layered, multi-media work spaces (Décio Pignatari).⁶¹ As art historian Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz puts it:

"These spaces functioned as protective cocoons, in which the experience of vulnerability and of being uprooted can be understood as the pursuit of what Mário Pedrosa once called an 'experimental exercise of freedom', or, put more playfully, as alienation from alienation."⁶²

The “experimental exercise of freedom” could also be read as an aspiration toward aesthetic cosmopolitanism. In this sense, Oiticica’s New York years were not only an important time for the development of his aesthetic thinking and acting, but also a very productive period that would have laid the foundations for the artist’s future work if he had not died two years after returning to his native Brazil.



Hélio Oiticica, *Babylonests*, Loft4, 81 Second Avenue, 1972
[photo *Andreas Valentin*].

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- 1 Letter from August 2nd 1970. In Figueiredo, Luciano, ed. (1996), pp. 160–161.
- 2 This time has not been given much attention by researchers until recently. The first comprehensive retrospective of Hélio Oiticica in the US, *Hélio Oiticica: to organize delirium*, focuses particularly on Oiticica’s connection with the US. See Zelevansky, Lynn, et al, eds. (2016).
- 3 The other artists from Brazil were Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles, and Guilherme Vaz. McShine, Kynaston (1970a).
- 4 Haacke, Hans (2007), pp. 31–40.
- 5 McShine, Kynaston (1970b), 140.
- 6 He is obviously referring to the Vietnam War, the Kent (May 4th 1970) and Jackson State Massacres (May 15th 1970), and the Cambodian Campaign (April 29th–July 22nd 1970). In his essay McShine also mentions the politically insecure situation in Brazil and Argentina. McShine, Kynaston (1970b), p. 138.
- 7 McShine, Kynaston (1970b), p. 139.
- 8 Important references were Mashall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, and Herbert Macuse. Brodbeck, Anna Katherine (2016), pp. 157ff.
- 9 Haacke, Hans (2007), p. 31.
- 10 Haacke asked the question: “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina Policy be a reason for your not voting for him in November?,” see Staniszewski, Mary Anne (1998), p. 271.
- 11 Prominent artists that “dropped out” partially or fully for different reasons were Bruce Connor, Richard Tuttle, Lee Lozano, Peter Young, and Paul Thek. These processes are described in more detail in Siegel, Kathy (2011).
- 12 Hinderer Cruz, Max Jorge (2011).

- 13 Letter from August 2nd 1970. In Figueiredo, Luciano, ed. (1996), pp. 160–161.
- 14 Letter from May 14th 1971. In Figueiredo, Luciano, ed. (1996), p. 200.
- 15 Hinderer Cruz, Max Jorge (2011).
- 16 A show at the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York, could not be realized, and there were some events at the University of Rhode Island 1971/72. Coelho, Frederico (2010), p. 212.
- 17 Sussman, Elisabeth (2016), p. 132.
- 18 For more information on his network in New York, see Sussman, Elisabeth (2016).
- 19 Sussman, Elisabeth (2016), p. 134.
- 20 Coelho, Frederico (2010), p. 211.
- 21 Shortly after his arrival in New York he enrolled in film classes at New York University. Brodbeck, Anna Katherine (2016), p. 149.
- 22 Letter from May 14th 1971. In Figueiredo, Luciano, ed. (1996), p. 204.
- 23 Among other common concerns, Oiticica says about Smith:“(…) I think Jack Smith is a kind of pre-Tropicália and post-Tropicália, too, in a way (…).”Hinderer Cruz, Max Jorge, and Marc Siegel (2014), p. 387.
- 24 Amaral, Aracy (1973).
- 25 Brodbeck, Anna Katherine (2016), p. 155.
- 26 Oiticica, Hélio, “Andreas Valentin,” July 1968.
Itaú Cultural Programa Hélio Oiticica, AHO/PHO 0136.68.
- 27 Statement for the film *Heliophonia* by Marcos Bonisson, 2002.
- 28 Salomão, Waly (2003), p. 27.

- 29 Letter from May 11th 1973. Personal archive Andreas Valentin.
- 30 Buchmann, Sabeth, and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz (2013), p. 1.
- 31 Salomão, Waly (2003), p. 103.
- 32 Itaú Cultural Programa Hélio Oiticica, AHO/PHO 0481.73.
- 33 Letter from March 31st 1974. Personal archive Andreas Valentin.
- 34 Letter from March 31st 1974. Personal archive Andreas Valentin.
- 35 See Valentin, Andreas, and Thomas Valentin, eds. (2014), and www.callmehelium.com.
- 36 “Crelazer” (Portuguese) was a concept Oiticica developed in two texts written in Paris and London, 1969: *Crelazer* and *As possibilidades do Crelazer*, published in MMK Museum fuer Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, et al. (2013), pp. 237–241.
- 37 Itaú Cultural Programa Hélio Oiticica, AHO/PHO 0486.69.
- 38 Notebook entry, Itaú Cultural Programa Hélio Oiticica, AHO/PHO 0511.71.
- 39 Oiticica, Hélio “about PN 16, sept. 18, 1971,” Itaú Cultural Programa Hélio Oiticica, AHO/PHO 0413.71. This is the English version of the document “sobre PN 16.”
- 40 Papastergiadis, Nikos (no date).
- 41 Papastergiadis, Nikos (no date), p. 16.
- 42 Papastergiadis, Nikos (no date), p. 1.
- 43 Oiticica, Hélio (1986), p. 123. Author’s translation.
- 44 Misspelling in the printed text. Oiticica, Hélio, in: McShine, Kynaston (1970), p. 103; reprinted in: MMK Museum fuer Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, et al. (2013), pp. 257–258, at 257.
- 45 Hinderer Cruz, Max Jorge (2011).

- 46 Extensive studies on the *Newyorkaises/Conglomerado* and the *Cosmococas* were only published recently. See Coelho, Frederico (2010); Buchmann, Sabeth, and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz (2013); Braga, Paula (2013).
- 47 Braga, Paula (2008), p. 279. The author used Paula Braga's English translation of a text by Hélio Oiticica from the *Newyorkaises* dated September 1971.
- 48 Braga, Paula (2008), p. 281.
- 49 Favaretto, Celso (1992), p. 185. Author's translation.
- 50 Oiticica, Hélio (1986), pp. 113–117. Author's translation.
- 51 Oiticica, Hélio (1986), p. 117. Author's translation.
- 52 A scandal arose when a couple was discovered having sex in one of the nests just when the then First Lady of New York Happy Rockefeller was visiting the show. Favaretto, Celso (1992), p. 194.
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- 55 Itaú Cultural Programa Hélio Oiticica, AHO/PHO 0194.73.
- 56 McLuhan, Marshall (1964), pp. 120–121.
- 57 Papastergiadis, Nikos (no date), p. 1.
- 58 Braga, Paula (2008), p. 282.
- 59 Fischer-Lichte, Erika (2012), p. 44. Author's translation.
- 60 Interview with the artist by Ivan Cardoso, cited in: Favaretto, Celso (1992), p. 194. Author's translation.
- 61 Favaretto, Celso (1992), p. 194.
- 62 Hinderer Cruz, Max Jorge (2011).

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Hélio Oiticica in New York

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