



## AFTER THE BLAZE

A fire destroyed  
the archive of  
**HELIO OITICICA:**  
Which Oiticica  
survived?

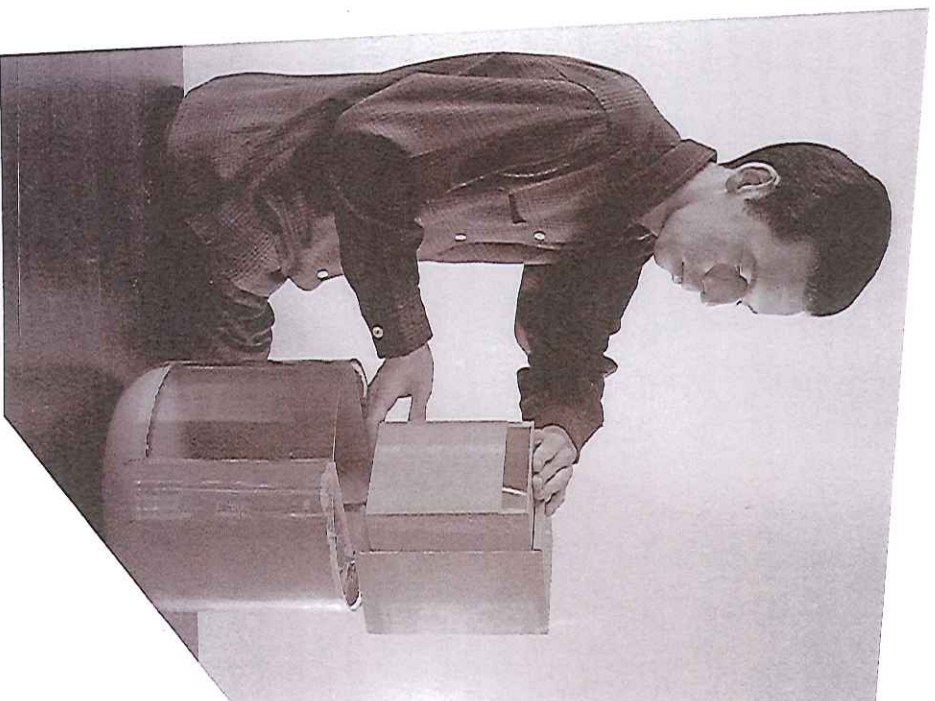
BY LYLE REXER

On the evening of October 16, 2009, César Oiticica was returning from dinner with friends to his home in the Jardim Botânico section of Rio de Janeiro when he saw smoke. His worst nightmare had just become reality: The ground floor of his house, where the archive and remaining artworks of his late brother, Hélio, were stored, was in flames. It was by far the largest collection of material relating to one of the most important figures of postwar Latin American art. The intensity of the fire prevented César from entering, and by the time the firemen arrived, most of the 2,000-odd items—worth \$200 million by some estimates—were lost. “The only victim of this terrible fire was Brazilian culture,” says César.

The conflagration caused more than physical damage. It also rekindled conflicts in Brazil about the way art is cared for and by whom. And it provoked controversy over how to preserve Hélio Oiticica’s legacy—even

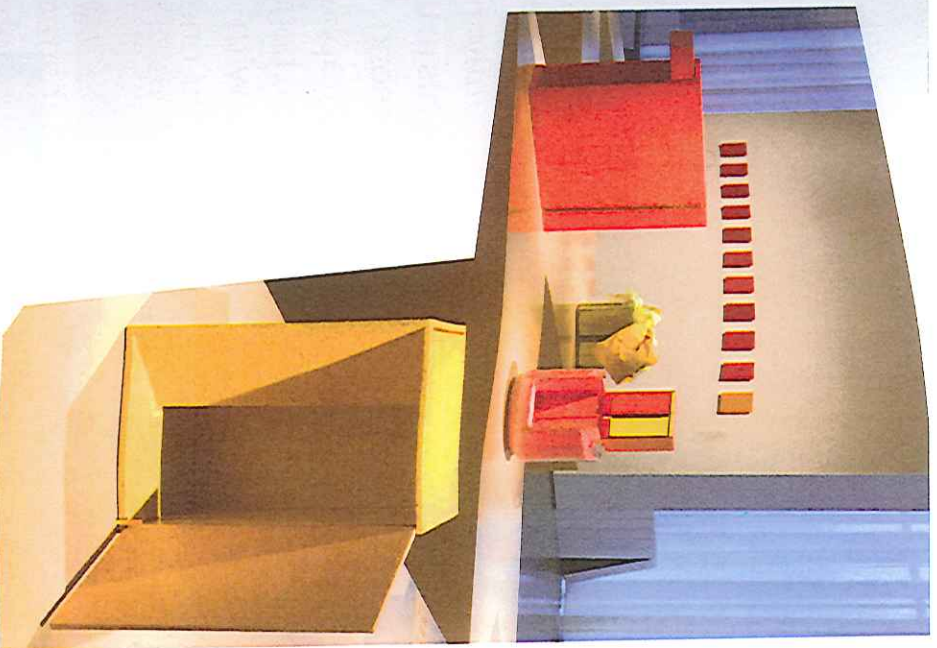
over which part of this legacy ought to be the primary focus: the Neo-concrete paintings and objects, most of them explorations of geometric forms, or the Conceptual and performance-related work of his late career.

Born in 1937 to a middle-class family in Rio, Oiticica was encouraged in his artistic pursuits by his father, José, among Brazil’s first experimental photographers. In 1954 the precocious young man began studying with



above: Hélio Oiticica with *B8 Glass Bêlide* 08, circa 1963.  
opposite: Oiticica with *P4 Parangolé, Cape* 7, 1964, in a film still from *Ho*, 1979, by Nan Cardoso.

Ivan Serpa, one of the founders of Grupo Frente, a circle of abstract artists with whom Oiticica had his first exhibition in 1955. His paintings from this period demonstrate the influence of European movements such as Concretism and De Stijl, but he quickly developed his own style, characterized by experimentation with color contrasts, often on shaped plywood, and by the use of unusual materials in sculptural works. In the 1960s and '70s, he created interactive installations, some blurring the line between object and performance.



# Oiticica died

of a heart attack at age 42 in 1980, and in 1981 his brothers, César and Claudio, founded the Projeto Hélio Oiticica to manage his estate. Originally much of the artist's work was stored at the Centro Municipal de Arte Hélio Oiticica, created by the city of Rio for this purpose in the mid 1990s, but the Projeto withdrew the art in 2007 in a dispute over the adequacy of the facility as well as unpaid lending fees.

Despite his premature death, Hélio Oiticica exerts a strong influence in the art world. For the past decade, signature Oiticica pieces have been touring South and North America as part of the Colección Patricia Pheps de Cisneros, which contains the most important assemblage of modern and contemporary Latin American art in private hands. In 2006 the 27th São Paulo Biennial, with its theme *Como viver junto* ("how to live together"), explicitly invoked his ideas on "construction" and "farewell to aesthetics" in its program. At the same time, replicas of his legendary installations appeared in "Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture," a multimedia exhibition, organized by Carlos Basualdo, a curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that explored Brazil's cultural revolution in the 1960s and traveled to both England and the United States. And in 2007 the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (*MFAH*), working closely with the Projeto, presented "The Body of Color," comprising 200 works by the artist, most of them unseen for decades. It was supposed to be the first of two comprehensive exhibitions of his oeuvre at *MFAH*. That is clearly no longer possible.

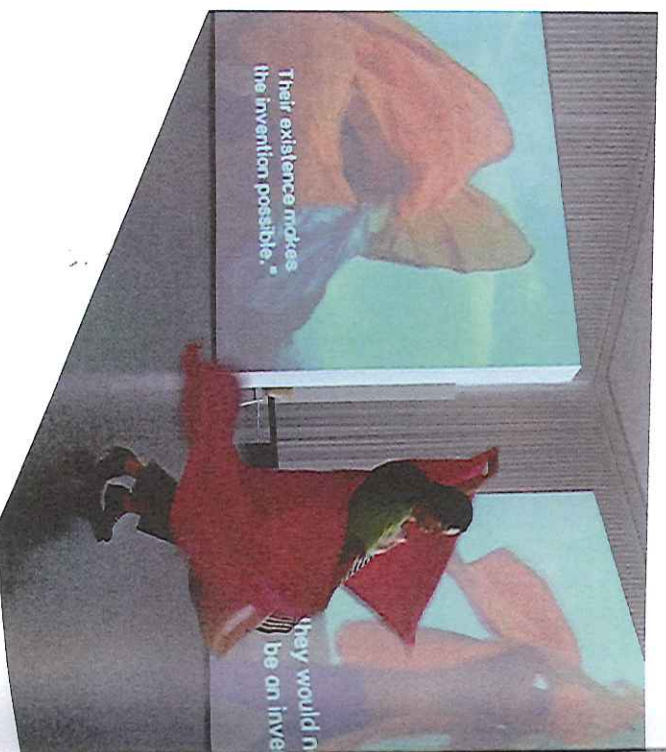
The art world response to the fire was immediate—and so were the accusations. Guy Brett, the pioneering English scholar of Latin American art, expanded on César Oiticica's sentiment by calling the loss of the material "a tragedy not just for Brazil but for the entire world." He laid the blame for the disaster not on the Projeto but on the lack of a government mechanism for the acquisition and management of important art archives currently held by the families of artists, including Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and Mira Schendel. The government,

unsurprisingly, fingered a different culprit: Jandira Feghali, the secretary of culture, insisted that the Centro had been trying for almost a year to get the works back for their own good. César Oiticica Filho, nephew of the artist and curator of the Projeto, shot back that the main reason the Projeto removed them was that the Centro did not want to pay for their maintenance.

Behind this heated exchange lies the traumatic memory of other recent cultural catastrophes. In 1978 a fire at the Museo de Arte Moderna (*MAM*) in Rio destroyed not only the permanent collection—including pieces by Constantin Brancusi, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Pablo Picasso—but also a visiting exhibition of works by the Uruguayan modernist Joaquín Torres-García when equipment brought by the fire department failed to work. A few years later, the apartment of *MAM*'s founder, Niomar Muniz Sodré Bitencourt, went up in flames along with works by Marc Chagall, Piet Mondrian, Candido Portinari, and Alfredo Volpi, among others.

It is no wonder, then, that the Projeto was worried about inadequate protections at the municipal center. The Oiticica house was equipped with smoke alarms and temperature and humidity controls, and according to Wynne Phefan, director of conservation at the *MFAH*, the Projeto had worked to meet international museum standards. As for the condition of the collection, *MFAH* curator Mari Carmen Ramirez, who visited the Projeto regularly for several years before the debut of "The Body of Color," claims that by the time she arrived, significant progress had been made in cataloguing the archive, at least. This was largely the work Lisette Lagnado, who later directed the 2006 São Paulo Biennial. Under the aegis of the Itaú Cultural, in São Paulo, she spent several years in the late '90s organizing Oiticica's project documents and notebooks and transferring them to computer files. (Copies of some 5,000 documents are available on the Itaú Web site, but many of the originals were lost in the fire.)

On the other hand, a substantial amount of money had to be spent on the works before they could travel. The undertaking involved conservators from several *MFAH* departments and occupied Phefan herself for two and a half years. Only funding from Brazilian petroleum giant Petrobras made it possible. Like many of his peers, Oiticica was a tinkerer with industrial materials, looking for paint formulas and materials that would capture and transmit light. The conserva-



Oiticica's nephew César (left) and his brothers, César (center) and Claudio, pose with the *Grand Nucleus* installation at the Tate Modern, London, in 2007. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:** Installation view, "Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color," Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, December 10, 2006–April 1, 2007. A performer wears one of Oiticica's *parangolés* at the same exhibition.



**“THE ONLY VICTIM OF THIS TERRIBLE FIRE WAS BRAZILIAN CULTURE.”**

tion consequences of his choices were, in some cases, harrowing: By cutting his industrial paints with turpentine in his early paintings, some rendered on the cardboard side of artist board, he subjected them to extreme cracking. And his famous *parangolés*—cape-like gowns of cheap plastic and the like, intended to be worn in dance-like performances rather than merely exhibited—quite simply contained the seeds of their own disintegration. Phelan's long essay in the "The Body of Color" catalogue hints at the difficulties involved.

Luckily, Oiticica documented his pigment experiments and kept samples of many of his combinations, just as he kept detailed notes on his constructed projects and performances and pieces that were never realized. The documentation facilitated the conservation work for "Body of Color," and thanks to Lagnado, many (but by no means all) of the writings were already archived before the fire. This has made possible a development whose irony the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges would have appreciated, if he had not already imagined it in his short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," a reinvented Oiticica.

Anyone who saw "Tropicalia" in 2007 had to be mesmerized by the *penetráveis* ("penetrables") at the heart of the show, favelalike environments that visitors entered to experience their transformative and political character. These, of course, were recreations, and there are now discussions about similarly reviving works lost in the fire. Since just a comparative handful of his pieces remain in museums and collections around the world, it seems likely that we might one day see far more Oiticica reproductions than originals—that, in Borgesian terms, Orbis Tertius will displace reality. Even before the conflagration, the Projeto was moving in a far more entrepreneurial direction than was envisioned at its founding. Not only were works like the *penetráveis* being reproduced for exhibition and potential donation or sale, but photoreproductions were turning up in galleries. The original goal of keeping the artist's oeuvre together as a resource for exhibitions and scholarship was easier to achieve when Oiticica was comparatively unknown. As his fame skyrocketed after the 1990s, *fran* was not the only museum to express interest in his works. Many galleries and dealers made direct offers, and at the time of the fire the Pinchot museum, in Minas Gerais, was in the process of acquiring five "spatial reliefs," while the Museum of Modern Art in New York was negotiating for *Grand Nucleus*, 1960–66, a group of hanging installations that Oiticica had combined into a complex architectural space. Will museums around the world soon be showing reconstructions of these?

The prospect does not trouble Guy Brett, who remarks that the individual works should not be fetishized. He himself got the go-ahead

from Oiticica to reproduce works shown at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1969. Others have gone even further, insisting that Oiticica's antiart position, developed in the late 1960s, fully sanctions an "anything goes" approach to his notes and plans.

Ramirez, the *MAN* curator, is less sanguine. "The loss of the actual objects Oiticica made earlier in his career... means that we tend to place weight on the antiart Conceptualist Oiticica. We will forget that all his Conceptual work grew out of these colorful tactile objects. The real Oiticica was both an object-oriented artist and a Conceptualist."

Ramirez, however, may be in the minority. "We are treating Hélio as if he were a Renaissance artist, when he was a creator of ideas, propositions, and interventions, an artist of the future, not an artist of the Neo-concrete past," remarks the filmmaker Neville d'Almeida, Oiticica's collaborator on the 1970s "Cosmoccas" series, interactive environments with slide shows and sound tracks.

Such thinking justifies any reproduction for any motive, and the deliberate blurring of the distinction between a replica and an edition. It can also imply the rewriting of the art historical past into the present. "The problem is already being encountered with the work of other Latin American talents, such as Oiticica's close friend Lygia Clark, the Argentine Conceptualist Victor Grippo, and the Venezuelan kinetic artist Carlos Cruz Diez, who is still creating. "There is a tension between a legal and a moral right to reproduce work," says Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, director of the Colección Cisneros. "Sometimes an artist did not produce a piece from a plan because he didn't want to. We can't make that judgment. The same applies to reconstructing decaying or destroyed pieces with new materials, even when there is a mandate to make such changes. My personal opinion is that when we make those summary decisions, we do an end run around history and how time works on material objects. That is part of what they are: the translation of ideas into material reality, subject to time and chance." MP