



Hélio Oiticica: Get Juiced

Voyage into a maze by the inventor of Tropicália

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Courtesy Projecto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, and Galerie Lelong



Extra good if you're a little thirsty: *Penetrável Filtro*

Details:

Hélio Oiticica: 'Penetrables'

Galerie Lelong

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Brazilian art-wizard Hélio Oiticica (1937 to 1980) was a rough contemporary of conceptual art, but his increasingly highly prized body of work has a funky magic all its own, well in evidence in Galerie Lelong's rare, spare presentation of three of his pioneering art environments (including his very first such work, from 1960). They are well worth exploring—and not just because there's a free glass of orange juice in it for you, either.

Oiticica hailed from a line of privileged lefty intellectuals: His father was an early experimental photographer, his grandfather a celebrated anarchist professor. The '60s were a storm-tossed time for Brazil, with a brutal military dictatorship grabbing power in 1964. It was against a background of democratic energy both thwarted and aggrieved that Oiticica would come to invest phenomenal significance in the then-novel notion of interactive art. Writing in 1966, he declared that his art, designed to empower the viewer, struck "against everything that is oppressive,

socially and individually—all the fixed and decadent forms of government, of reigning social structures."

In essence, Oiticica turned his mind to tapping the popular energy of Brazil's carnival culture. The result was art meant to be worn (his cape-like "Parangolés"), handled (his box-like "Bolides"), or walked through (his "Penetrables," the proto-installations that are the subject of the current show).

Strange as these political pretensions seemed, in the '60s they gained unexpected credibility. Oiticica named an environment full of colors, plants, and parrots, shown in Rio in 1967, *Tropicália*. The term caught on. The name of the art piece provided a handy label for a whole movement in Brazilian popular culture, dedicated to self-conscious native cultural innovation (showcased, not so long ago, at the Bronx Museum). That cultural movement, in turn, took on some serious countercultural force in oppressed Brazil, particularly in its musical incarnation, where it became a vent for discontent. The dictatorship responded by promptly jailing *Tropicália*'s musical leaders. Oiticica packed bags for London and then New York.

Writing as its founding father, the artist would spill a lot of ink trying to defend *Tropicália*'s critical potential. The powers-that-be quickly strip-mined what was left of the style, turning the term into a catch-all name for anything that proudly proclaimed symbols of Brazil: "The glorification of the bananas," Oiticica sniffed. Somewhere there was a lesson: The man who had championed artistic interaction as political redemption now had to face what it meant to have one of his creations used in a way he didn't approve of.

Which brings us to the star attraction of the Lelong show, the re-creation of *Penetrável Filtro* (1972), a winding wooden maze. Entering the structure, you walk through successive sections, each defined by

hanging curtains of colored plastic, so that you pass physically through the rainbow: yellow, green, blue, and so on. The experience of being immersed in colored light conveys an earthy optimism. Turn the final corner, and you come upon a tank of orange juice. There, you are invited to drink the final color, completing the experience.

Oiticica called this particular work, made in the wake of the mercurial rise and fall of the Tropicália movement, a "multimedia parody." I like to imagine that it was meant as more than just a pleasant experience, as something like a sly joke from a man who had seen his legacy converted into images of luscious fruit.

