

Hélio Oiticica: Myth of the Outlaw

A traveling exhibition recently highlighted the 1970s installations and film projects of the late Brazilian artist, most of them never publicly shown during his lifetime.

BY EDWARD LEFFINGWELL

Simply and without much mediation, the New Museum of Contemporary Art's presentation of the road show "Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-cinemas" brought to center stage six examples of the legendary Brazilian Neo-Concretist's excursions into the world of projected still and moving images, which he called "Quasi-cinemas."¹ Three were participatory installations, one took the form of a sequence of slides accompanied by an audio track, and two others consisted of moving images. The least finished and most fragmentary among them were especially interesting as instances of some of Oiticica's particular concerns.

Pharmacologic Cinema

Curator Carlos Basualdo's main event in the specialized world of Oiticica's "Quasi-cinemas" was the presentation of three of the artist's pharmacologically driven environments that go beyond the practice of conventional cinema, the *Block Experiments in Cosmococa* (1973). Inspired by Oiticica's experience of a Jack Smith slide performance in the early 1970s in New York, they were developed in collaboration with the Brazilian filmmaker Neville D'Almeida. The Cosmococas assembled for this traveling curatorial entertainment were conceived as room-sized installations accompanied by dense montages of amplified sound and bracketed by massive projections of images. Photographed by Oiticica and styled by D'Almeida, they were never publicly exhibited in the artist's lifetime. Their presentation was facilitated by D'Almeida's directions and Oiticica's many detailed sketches and notebooks specifying props and instructions for private and public performances.

CC1 Trashiscapes, the first of these Cosmococas, is constructed of slides from a number of sources, including a photograph of Luis Buñuel from a cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, the record jacket of



Slide from Hélio Oiticica's installation Block Experiments in Cosmococa, CC1 Trashiscapes, 1973, showing a photograph of Luis Buñuel on a cover of the New York Times Magazine.

Opposite, view of Block Experiments in Cosmococa, CC3 Mailern, 1973, slide series, soundtrack, sand, vinyl and balloons; at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

Frank Zappa's *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*, a poster of Oiticica's friend Luis Fernando Guimarães, and D'Almeida himself. Leisure devices designed to engage the viewer included exercise mats, pillows and nail files. The second of the Cosmococas, *CC3 Mailern*, consists of slides based on an iconic photo of Marilyn Monroe from the jacket of Norman Mailer's then-current monograph *Marilyn*, wrapped in cellophane. A scattering of balloons on a floor deep with sand and covered with vinyl invested the work with palpable lightness and buoyancy. The projections of *CC5 Hendrix-War* introduce adaptations of images from the fierce cover portrait of the album *jimi hendrix: war heroes*, while hammocks invite a guarded reverie. Installed cheek by jowl, the Cosmococas collectively produced a cacophony of sound, from Hendrix to Yma Sumac.² (Additional Cosmococas featuring Yoko Ono and John Cage as well as a parody of the Rolling Stones' album *Goat's Head Soup* exist in the form of notes and images in various states of completion.)

During the process of shooting slides for the Cosmococas, D'Almeida embellished the bodies and faces in the original printed images—the portraits of Monroe, Hendrix, Buñuel and others—with generous tracings of cocaine as a kind of makeup (*mancoquilagens*). Through this "cosmetic" application of a substance widely indulged in the worlds of art, music and fashion, Oiticica introduced cocaine as a pigment, a medium

that progressively vanished, presumably when ingested, in a radical expression of the dematerialization of the object of art (then a widely shared art-world preoccupation). However sublimated by its social currency, the substance Oiticica had chosen as his transgressive medium remained beyond the law, and consequently the Cosmococas languished, virtually unknown, until the advent of an important catalogue and touring exhibition mounted in Europe in 1992.³



Neyrótika features 80 projected slides, principally of young men, accompanied by an incidental soundtrack of radio broadcasts and readings from Rimbaud.

Golden Kids

The exhibition featured an additional projected-slide program of particular interest: the sensual, homoerotic *Neyrótika* (1973), which is credited to Oiticica alone. *Neyrótika*, which was made after *CCI Trashscapes*, was presented publicly the year of its making in the group exhibition "Expo-Projeção 73," organized by the curator and critic Aracy Amaral for exhibition in Belo Horizonte and São Paulo.⁴ Subterranean and narcissistic in affect, the episodic nonnarrative *Neyrótika* consists of a series of 80 projected slides, principally of young men, accompanied in the manner of Jack Smith by a tinny, incidental soundtrack recorded from broadcasts of the New York radio station WBLS, which routinely scheduled hours for salsa and reggae and introduced its news segment with Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." Oiticica's improvised track is occasionally inflected with his own voice as he reads fragments from the work of another of his culture heroes, the proto-punk, vagabond poet Arthur Rimbaud. A small

radio, a Sony tape recorder, the familiar New Directions paperback of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (with cover design by Ray Johnson) and a microphone appear in several shots in a nod to process. The track ranges from blues to mambo king Tito Puente, and includes a spot for the programs of the Apollo Theatre as well as public service announcements concerning the federal government's fair housing services and the rights of the handicapped. Oiticica's notes suggest that he photographed the radio, book and tape machine as the broadcasts were taped.

Oiticica photographed his models, "the golden kids of the Babylonists" (as he called his apartment at 81 Second Avenue), in curtained, Pullman-style "lofts" that derived from the construction of his participatory environments known as *penetrables*. According to Oiticica's notebooks, among the golden boys are Dudu, Didi, Carl, João, Romero and Cornell, young men variously of color, languorous and louche. The "titles" for the piece were to be shot on Dudu's naked body. Dudu sports shoulder-length, wavy auburn hair and scarlet lipstick, a near twin to the very androgynous Mick Jagger of the Donald Cammell-Nicolas Roeg film *Performance* (1968). He reclines on a paisley throw against a shiny, lipstick-red vinyl pillow propped up on a backdrop of the same vinyl fabric. A brochure tucked into the backdrop promises, perhaps ironically, *Brazilian Information*. The "titles" appear in two of the slides devoted to Dudu as a translucent banner placed diagonally across his torso. Uppercase and

hand-lettered, the sign reads "BRAISES DE SATIN," or "satin embers." In this obscure fragment from Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer*—or conceivably from his earlier *Fêtes de la Patience*, where the expression also appears—the adolescent outlaw poet instructs his lover in the duty to rekindle heat from satin embers and, in the residue of yesterday's passion, to continue to burn.⁵

A Short Life

A third-generation radical and intellectual, Hélio Oiticica was born in 1937, son of an entomologist photographer and grandson of an anarchist philologist. By the age of 20, he had produced a series of handsome paintings and drawings that suggest the influence of European modernists, including Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, whose work was known and admired firsthand in Brazil since the beginning of the São Paulo biennials in the early 1950s.

In 1961, Oiticica's exploration of the retinal experience of color in monochromatic paintings of saturated hue and Constructivist design led him to detach paintings from the walls on which they traditionally depend. Oiticica and his colleague Lygia Clark were soon recognized as among the leading artists of the Neo-Concrete movement in Rio de Janeiro, as distinct from the industrial and rationalist design-oriented Concretists of São Paulo. Oiticica and Clark introduced a humanistic engagement to the experience of art, a matter of intuition, of the senses.

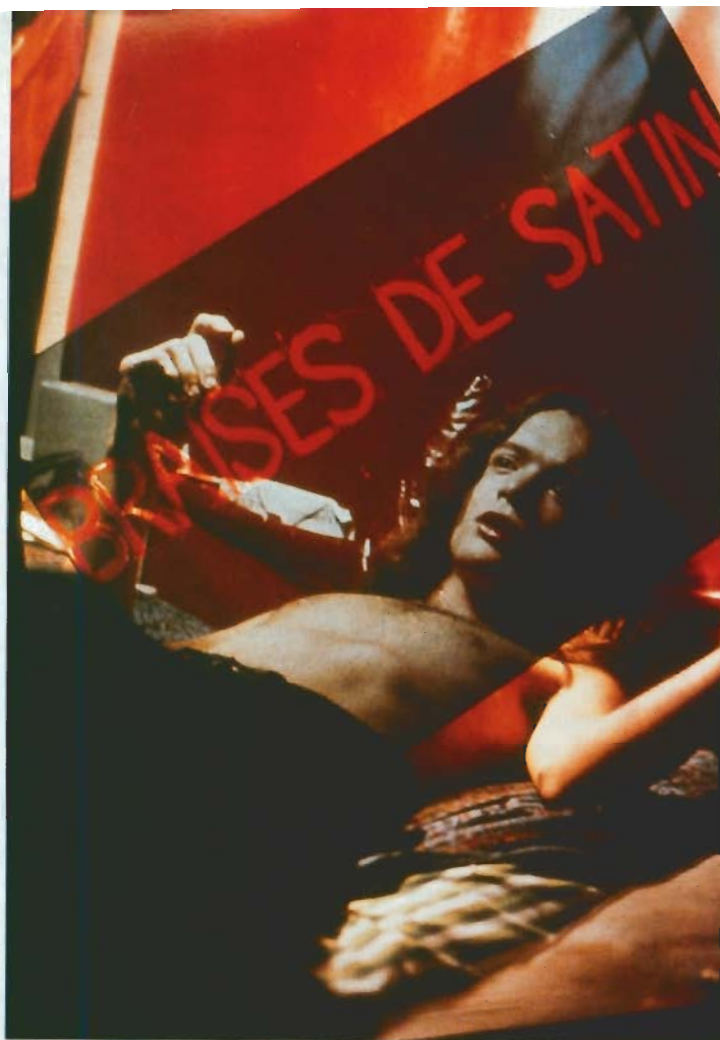
Effectively altering the experience of painting by challenging the nature of its support, he began to exhibit painted boxes and glass bottles containing natural pigments along with other objects that carried a sense of physical history. He called them *bólides*. He then turned his attention to environments of psychological potency that were to be entered, which he called *penetrables*, and in 1964 developed a kind of banner or cape known as *parangolé*, a participatory structure of fabric intended to eliminate the barrier between art and life. As he became increasingly involved in the samba schools of Carnival, which took root in the quarters of the marginalized poor of Brazil, his reputation as an artist of the people grew. In 1967,

Oiticica constructed a celebrated environment, *Tropicália*, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. *Tropicália* became an art movement, a celebration of Brazilian cultural identity in a time of military oppression that rapidly translated into a musical phenomenon led by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil.

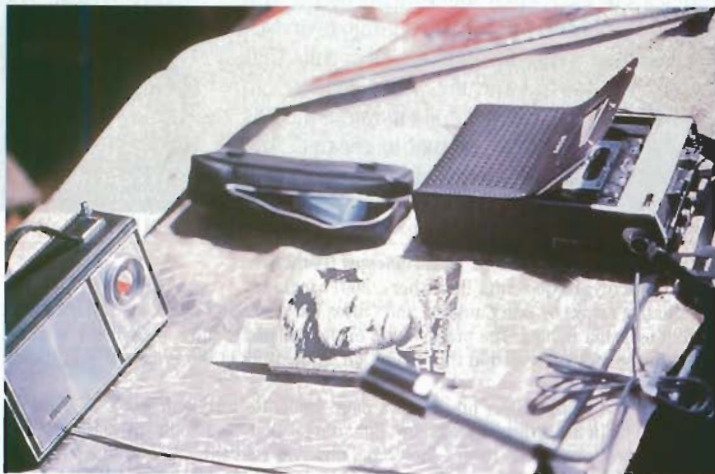
Guy Brett, who encountered the artist's *bólides* in the 1965 São Paulo Bienal, was one of the organizers of Oiticica's 1969 exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London. The following year, Oiticica participated in "Information" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, organized by Kynaston McShine, and after that, with the support of a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, moved to New York, where he remained for nearly a decade. He died in Rio de Janeiro in 1980, where his surviving work was soon gathered and preserved by the not-for-profit Projeto Hélio Oiticica, created by family and friends. In 1988, Oiticica's work came to the attention of the New York art public in the exhibition "Brazil Projects" at P.S. 1 [see *A.i.A.*, Jan.'89] as well as "The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970" at the Bronx Museum. In 1992 a major survey of his work was co-organized through the resources of Projeto Hélio Oiticica with Rotterdam's Witte de With and Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris. This exhibition also traveled to Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; Centro de Arte Moderna da Fundação Gulbenkian, Lisbon; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. His work was seen again in New York in the Museum of Modern Art's "Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century" (1993), Marian Goodman Gallery (1995) and the Guggenheim's "Brazil: Body & Soul" (2001). —E.L.

Outlaws and Heroes

Words and phrases are cast in capital letters throughout Oiticica's writings as expressions of urgency or particular relevance. The same kind of texts appear in his works as a poetic and political voice, particularly apparent in the unfinished works and footage casually shown on monitors at the New Museum. Backland prophets and bandits are popular figures in Brazil's long and often violent history. After the coup of 1964, the country suffered from a deeply entrenched, repressive military dictatorship, afflicted by abrogations of human rights that included censorship, random arrests and torture. In the face of this regime, and as an artist, Oiticica was drawn to the image of the outlaw, as he was to Rimbaud, placing himself and his work beyond the law. Slogans appear on his *parangolés*, the subversive, playfully adaptive capes or banners of poor materials fashioned into costumes and worn or otherwise displayed by performers and spectators, and especially by his friends among the residents of Rio de Janeiro's Mangueira favela. They bear such inflammatory statements as "I AM POSSESSED," "I EMBODY REVOLT" and "FROM ADVERSITY WE LIVE."



Two images from the slide sequence *Neyrótika*, 1973, showing (above) "golden kid" Dudu with banner, and (below) a radio, tape recorder and Rimbaud paperback with cover design by Ray Johnson.



Oiticica's *Tropicália* installation in 1967 had penetrated into popular culture through its inspiration of the *tropicalista* style of music introduced by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. A 1968 concert in Rio featuring Veloso, Gil and the radical group Os Mutantes was censored by the authorities because of the inclusion of a banner by Oiticica reading "SEJA MARGINAL SEJA HERÓI!" (Be an outlaw Be a hero!). Subsequently, the musicians went into exile in London. The banner bore an image of the outspread body of a hero of the favelas, Cara de Cavalo, of whom Oiticica wrote: "I knew Cara de Cavalo personally, and I can say he was my friend, but for society he was public enemy number one, wanted for audacious crimes and assaults." Cara de Cavalo had been killed by

the police.⁶ Oiticica had previously commemorated his friend with a kind of cenotaph or reliquary, *Box Bolide 18* (1966), which contains several images of the outlaw's body and a sealed bag filled with the red soil of Brazil bearing a text that reads: "AQUI ESTÁ, E FICARÁ! . . . CONTEMPLAI SEU SILÊNCIO HERÓICO" (Here he is and will remain! . . . Contemplate his heroic silence).⁷

Film Fragments

In spite of Oiticica's seminal work as a painter, sculptor and installation artist *avant la lettre*, filmmaking and expanding the limits of cinema were of great interest to his restless and polyvalent mind. In 1968 he had appeared in *Cancer*, a film by the Brazilian *cinema novo* luminary Glauber Rocha, whose work was much admired by Buñuel. Rocha's characters, Oiticica among them, improvised dialogue concerning psychological, sexual and racial violence.⁸ Oiticica's incorporation of the text "BRAISES DE SATIN" in *Neyrótika* recalls the imposition of signs by filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard in the postnarrative film *1 + 1* (1968). (Oiticica referred to Godard, another of his heroes, as a "verboclast.") Known to Oiticica through an edit distributed as *Sympathy for the Devil*, the Godard film alternates studio sequences of the Rolling Stones as they incrementally create their anthem of anarchy, "Sympathy for the Devil," with footage of gun-brandishing militants painting revolutionary graffiti and reading passages from Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*.⁹

Signs or slogans appear as "found" voices in the 1972 footage attributed to Oiticica and presented in this exhibition as a somewhat ephemeral footnote to his "Quasi-cinemas." These film fragments are provisionally identified according to labels on the film cans in which they were recently discovered. The cameraperson, presumed to be Oiticica, records carefree moments in the lives of the young gay men gathered on the meadows of Central Park. One of several signs pronounces "HOMO-SEXUALITY IS BEAUTIFUL." The footage includes views of City Hall Park with the World Trade Center's top floors rising in the distance, the Statue of Liberty and the New York Stock Exchange. The camera roams the Wall Street offices of the collector and coffee broker João Roberto Suplicy "Jua" Hafers, then considered Brazil's unofficial cultural ambassador in New York. There is footage from a Rolling Stones television performance, along with cuts from a Hollywood costume movie or two.

Footage dating from 1971 documents the last days and nights of the Fillmore East, the concert venue located on Second Avenue near Oiticica's apartment. He records the theater marquee as it changes through one final calendar of concerts, ending with a somber marquee bearing only black bunting and the American flag as a sign of mourning. In thus far unattributed footage, Oiticica appears in sunglasses and modish shirt, loitering with intent in a street doorway, back alleyway and in his apartment, at one point jamming his hand into his trousers and simulating masturbation. Somewhere among all this there is footage of the record jacket of *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* and the Buñuel portrait, anticipating the still images that appeared two years later in *CCI Trashscapes*. Wearing a snakeskin jacket and wielding a blade like a palette knife, Oiticica is seen drawing thin lines of cocaine across the eyes of the Buñuel portrait in direct allusion to the famous image of a slashed eyeball in Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*.

Agrippina in Miniskirts

Also presented on a monitor, the "Quasi-cinema" *Agrippina é Roma-Manhattan* (Agrippina is Rome-Manhattan, 1972) is credited as the joint work of Oiticica and D'Almeida. To risk a meditation on the pitfalls of appetite and greed, Oiticica, perhaps disillusioned in his chosen exile, turns to history for inspiration and solace. As a candidate for their project, the artists identify Agrippina, the widowed Roman aristocrat fierce with the blood of the Caesars, a warrior in the days before her fall and eventual exile, translated to the New York of now, promenading on the arm of a B-cast pimp. The restless camera roams the majestic architec-

For Oiticica's "Cosmococa" slides, Neville D'Almeida embellished bodies and faces on books and album covers with tracings of cocaine.

ture of Manhattan, pausing to ogle the bare legs of a young woman (Cristiny Nazareth) presumably the Agrippina of the title. (In one Oiticica shot published in the exhibition catalogue, she sports a banner as a sash with the title of the work in progress spelled out across her chest.) She wears a flirty red halter-top minidress more appropriate to the work of a roller-skating cocktail waitress, and strappy sandals that wrap provocatively well above her knees. The camera reveres the daggers of her Egyptoid eye shadow, cavernous nostrils and flickering tongue. Elsewhere, attired as a youthful hooker, she trolls impatiently on a narrow patch of street corner. Jack Smith's superstar Mario Montez appears, well turned out in a smart salsa outfit and heels, endlessly and without much enthusiasm casting dice on stacked sheets of rusted steel with the artist Antônio Dias.¹⁰ By the time of these experiments, much had occurred in the world of avant-garde and expanded cinema in New York and internationally. The relative affordability of Super-8 and video equipment provided artists with more of the tools that had already transformed the notion of what constitutes a work of art.

Crisis of Process

"Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-cinemas" was an exhibition of works left largely unfinished at the time of the artist's death, and its catalogue—however hobbled by its omission of an index—is a great service to those interested in his project. Unfortunately, the time lines constructed in the exhibition's education mezzanine seemed rote, and the accompanying videos were lacking in content and context, a brand of *parangolé*-lite.

Box Bolide 18, Homage to Cara de Cavalo, 1966, mixed mediums. (Not in the exhibition.) All works courtesy Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.



It is significant that Oiticica romanticized the idea of cocaine and its outlaw status. Except for a heady passage in a printed hand-out, the word "cocaine" appeared nowhere at the New Museum, a strategy puzzling to the visitor who may well have recognized the substance. Basualdo does remark on Oiticica's interest in the historic use of the coca leaf. He observes: "For an artist who never ceased identifying with the outlaw as a figure of resistance to the instrumentalization of artistic work (so increasingly evident after the post-war period), the discovery of a substance that signified at once the crisis of this instrumental process and its reversal into illegality and transgression must have appeared barely short of ideal."¹¹

The Argentine artist and critic Eduardo Costa, in an appreciation of the last decade of Oiticica's life, writes of Oiticica's addiction to cocaine: "Because I saw him at different stages in his life I can say that he was quite destroyed by New York City's way of life, or perhaps by the way he was not included in it. . . . And so he went further and further into drugs." In his notebooks, Oiticica acknowledged the psychological isolation endemic to the use of cocaine and, although he found a way to turn the substance of his addiction into art, his health deteriorated. There were at first, like warnings, one or two small strokes. He returned to Rio de Janeiro in 1978. Costa himself moved to Rio at about the same time, in flight from the recurrent military oppression in Argentina. He and Oiticica saw each other almost daily over a two-year period in the company of a group of artists, musicians and intellectuals. Costa recalls that Oiticica heeded the warnings of his doctors, ran on the beach at Ipanema and enjoyed a healthy diet but, on occasion, reverted to cocaine. And so Hélio Oiticica died young, of a stroke, in 1980. He was 43 years old.¹² □

1. The catalogue *Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-cinemas* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001) includes informative essays by Dan Cameron and Carlos Basualdo, and a text on Oiticica's work in film by Ivana Bentes. The preservation of the Oiticica archive, including the slides, films and soundtracks used in this exhibition, is the work of the Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro.

2. Marian Goodman Gallery presented a more elaborate installation of *CC5 Hendrix War* in 1995. In his review of that show, Eduardo Costa notes Goodman's use of 18 hammocks (more than in the recent show) and observes that Oiticica's 36-slide sequence reflected the use of a single, unedited roll of film [see *A.A.A.*, July '95, pp. 84-85].

3. Oiticica discusses his use of cocaine as makeup and camouflage in *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 99. Costa's review also addresses Oiticica's use of cocaine as medium, subject and pigment, and his earlier use of powdered pigment as color, volume and form in his '60s works. On Oct. 5, 1960, Oiticica wrote: "The experience of colour, specific element of painting, has become for me the very axis of what I do, the starting point of every work." On Nov. 21, 1960, he continued: "To pigment-based colour, material and opaque by itself, I attempt to give the sense of light. . . . White is the ideal colour-light, the synthesis-light of all colours." From a selection of Oiticica's writings 1960-80 in the catalogue *Hélio Oiticica*, published for the 1992 retrospective co-organized by Rotterdam's Witte de With, the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, and the Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, 1992, pp. 33-34.

4. According to Amaral, Oiticica was "partly responsible" for the existence of "Expo-Projeção 73," which presented works in new media by many Brazilian artists. The work was presented in Belo Horizonte on June 19, 1973, and traveled to São Paulo; *Quasi-*





Partial view of Block Experiments in Cosmococa, CC5 Hendrix-War, 1973, slide series, hammocks, sound; at the New Museum.

cinemas, p. 50. Oiticica dedicates *Neyrótika* to Amaral, *Oiticica*, p. 125. Ivana Bentes comments that these 80 slides were probably prepared for "Expo-Projeção 73" and that seven groups of nearly 250 slides were discovered in the archives of the Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, at some later date, p. 148.

5. Focusing on the bright red in one of these slides in a talk during the first weeks of the exhibition at the New Museum, Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff established a line of reasoning tracking Oiticica's use of color from his early Constructivist paintings through the *bóides*.

6. The hillside slums of Mangueira often figure in Oiticica's projects. Basualdo refers to the concert in *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 43. Concerning the banners, see Bentes, *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 141. Oiticica writes "I make poems of protest (in capes and boxes) that have a more social meaning, but this dedication to Cara de Cavalo reflects an important ethical moment, which for me is decisive, because it reflects individual rebellion against any kind of social conditioning. In other words, violence is justified as a means of rebellion but never as a means of oppression." Basualdo quotes Oiticica from the catalogue of his Whitechapel Gallery exhibition, London, 1969, in *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 48. A retranslation of the same text appears at greater length in the catalogue of *Oiticica*, p. 25.

7. Translated by Eduardo Costa.

8. The film was shot in four days in 1968 but not edited or released until four years later. It is 86 minutes long and has no story line.

9. In his notebooks, Oiticica enthusiastically equates Mick Jagger with Godard. See *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 98.

10. Bentes takes on a reading of *Agripina* in "H.O. and Cinema-World," *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 147, and Basualdo quotes poet Waly Salomão, an Oiticica intimate, who refers to Mario Montez as "an actress invented by Jack Smith and Andy Warhol in homage to the Mexican icon María Montez," *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 46. Maria Montez was actually Dominican. In "Maria Montez: Anima of an Antediluvian World," Ronald Tavel writes that in Martinique and Puerto Rico she was thought to have medicinal powers: "her films could cure the children of diphtheria, depression, and rickets"; see Edward Leffingwell, ed., *Jack Smith: Flaming Creatures*, New York, P.S. 1 Museum, 1997, p. 92.

11. Basualdo, *Quasi-cinemas*, p. 52.

12. Costa published "Some Thoughts on Drugs, Sex, Career, and Death" in *NYArts Magazine* (May 2000) from a taped phone conversation with curator Sergio Bessa, in anticipation of the New Museum presentation. These and other remarks by Costa appeared at the New Museum in notebooks as part of the exhibition's education program.

Organized by Carlos Basualdo for the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, "Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-cinemas" appeared at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art [July 26–Oct. 12] following appearances at the Kölnerischer Kunstverein, Cologne, and the Wexner Center.

Author: Edward Leffingwell is Art in America's corresponding editor for Brazil.