

ART IN BRASIL: SIXTIES AVANT-GARDE

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In order to free the country from subversive tendencies and the communist threat, the Brazilian military force, together with land-owners, businessmen and politicians, took the power through a military coup on the 1st of April 1964. To avoid any disbelief, they preferred to adapt history and call it “Democratic Revolution of 31st of March”. The military regime ruled the country for 20 years which meant gradual suspension of individual rights, repression and censorship, state terrorism and also the creation of a huge public debt. The government ruled through decrees, the Institutional Acts, known as the AI’s. The AI-1, for example, allowed police inquiries to investigate crimes against the state and the disturbance of the political and social order. It justified persecution, imprisonment and torture. The AI-2, in 1965, suspended secret voting in order to avoid surprises. Student movements were repressed and, in 1968, after student Edson Luís was killed during a protest, 100 thousand people marched in the streets of Rio (as we can see today in the mythical photos of Evandro Teixeira). But things only got more complicated. In December 1968 came the AI-5: the congress was closed and the right to *habeas corpus* was suspended. *Jornal do Brasil* announced the weather forecast for

the 13th of December 1968: “Dark. Suffocating temperatures. The air is unbreathable. The country is being swept by strong winds.” Ironically, while politics lived one of its darkest periods, Brazilian economy boomed. It was the “Brazilian miracle”, driven mainly by exportation and foreign investment. The government would let the cake grow before sharing it; not everyone actually got a piece of it and years later Brazil had enormous debts. An artificial feeling of optimism was created, helped by the advance of the telecommunications and, what cannot be ignored, the fantastic campaign of Pelé’s entourage in the 1970 Football World Cup.

Post-1964 Brazil was the background for a new conceptual artistic avant-garde. It was clear that a radically different conception of Brazilian culture and foremost of the notion of national identity was necessary, and that it also demanded a different attitude from the artists. This was also the moment when institutionalized art was put into question and escaped the walls of museums and galleries through performances and interferences in the public sphere. Cildo Meireles approached the matter directly writing messages and critical opinions on glass Coca-Cola bottles which he returned to circulation, calling it *Insertions in Ideological Circuits*. Later, Meireles used stamps with the question “Who killed Herzog?” on money bills which he also returned to circulation – a very explicit message, although anonymous at the time, about journalist Vladimir Herzog, tortured and killed after being called for interrogation. The political violence was

also transformed, indirectly, in the elimination of boundaries and the demand of direct bodily participation. In order to express a new and complex reality artists needed to reinvent forms which could capture this new reality. According to *Cinema Novo* filmmaker Glauber Rocha, it was necessary to “incorporate the Brazilian problem in a revolutionary level of expression in order to ‘hurt’ the audience”, to put the audience in a state of total nudity, wit-

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hout defense, to incite him/her to initiative. Hélio Oiticica proposed the “anti-art”; the object became the “trans-object”, the collective took over the individual, the spectator became creator, and very often the street became the place where it all happened. Oiticica even created a patent for the terms *suprasensorial* and *Tropicália*, the latter becoming the name of a cultural movement, borrowed from the title of an installation presented by the artist in 1967. It was a work formed of two “penetrables”, spaces where the spectator goes through sensorial experiences and which has to be lived instead of

observed. *Tropicália*, a labyrinth made of wooden structures, sand and stones on the ground, elements like tropical plants, a macaw and television, was inspired on clichés about Brazil but also based on the experience of wandering around the favela. Oiticica’s *parangolés* – capes made to be danced in – had also been a conceptual way of taking the favela to the asphalt, and were worn by samba dancers from Mangueira (a favela in Rio) at the Museum of Modern Art, causing on the occasion the artists’ expulsion from the museum. In the same Museum of Modern Art in Rio happened the group show *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (*New Brazilian Objectivity*) where artist Lygia Clark presented her “relational objects” and “sensorial masks”, together with works of Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica’s *Tropicália*, among others. They defended the superation of traditional supports in favour of new solutions, truly Brazilian instead of imported, and which incorporated the bodily participation of the spectator. “I started with geometry, but I was searching for an organic space where one could enter the painting”, said Lygia Clark. We can see echoes of the proposals of Hélio Oiticica & co in the work of a whole generation of artists working in Rio from the late sixties, like, just to name a few, Antonio Manuel and the performance *O Corpo é a obra* (the body is the work) and Anna Maria Maiolino’s *Fotopoemações* where poetic gestures are invitations to experience. Today, the echoes are still heard; appropriated, recycled, and reinvented – in the best Brazilian fashion – in a totally new social, economical and political context.