
**Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the
internal sun**

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Exhibition Review

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Cover image:

Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun

by Luke Skrebowski • 29.11.2023

This exhibition at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, focuses the work of Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) from the late 1960s and 1970s, produced mostly while the artist was living in New York in self-imposed exile from Brazil at the height of the military dictatorship. The diverse range of work includes examples of the *Cosmococa* and *Penetrable* environments, *Parangolé* wearables, experimental films and slideshows, all supplemented with a rich selection of archival material. Well-researched and skilfully curated by Joseph Constable, it is the first major public presentation of Oiticica's work in the United Kingdom for over fifteen years and constitutes an agile response to the travelling retrospective *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* (2016–17) in the United States.¹

Although that exhibition comprehensively covered the artist's later work, it imposed a liberal political framing on his practice, defanging its more radical aspects. While Oiticica's homosexuality, his embrace of social marginality and his enthusiastic experimentation with psychoactive drugs were all foregrounded, his revolutionary, decolonial commitments – opposing American Neo-imperialism and its authoritarian clientelist regimes in Latin America – were not. By contrast, *Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun* takes its subtitle from a line in the artist's text 'As possibilidades do crelazer' ('The possibilities of creleisure'; 1969) and does much to draw out the still-underappreciated political stakes of this foundational concept, one that oriented his practice throughout the period presented here.

Oiticica's work moved through several discrete but related phases, each with its own conceptual articulation, and each encompassing one or more series of works. As Paula Braga has emphasised, Oiticica's used 'the same word to designate a concept and a project-program, such as *Tropicália* or *Parangolé*'.² Creleisure is a distinctive portmanteau combining the senses of creativity, faith, leisure and pleasure, which constitutes one of the most significant of the artist's concept-project-programmes – of which *Parangolé* and *Bólido* are more well-known exemplars. These are all overarching conceptual and material *taxa* that comprise numerous distinct works of art. It did not prescribe 'dropping out' of society, but rather the importance of active struggle within what Guy Debord had identified as the 'battle of leisure': to resist the capitalist stupefaction of the free time that workers had won for themselves through the history of labour struggle.³ As Oiticica

explained in another important text, 'The senses pointing towards a new transformation' (1969): 'Creleisure is the non-repressive leisure, opposed to diverted oppressive leisure thinking: a new unconditioned way to battle oppressive systematic ways of life'.⁴



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun* at De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2023. (Photograph Rob Harris).

How then was the battle waged by the artist? In the ground floor gallery, the show opens engagingly, with five little-known short Super 8 films **FIG.1** that Oiticica made soon after he had fled to New York in 1970 by means of a Guggenheim Fellowship. In early 1971 the artist enrolled in a film production course at New York University and acquired a Super 8 camera. These rarely seen cinematic sketches register Oiticica's profoundly ambivalent reaction to the city, which he christened 'Babylon'. For him, New York was both a vital hub of transnational cultural energy and the dark heart of an informal empire. *Gay Pride Parade* **FIG.2** revels in the uninhibited expression of queer life that Oiticica experienced there, whereas *Wall Street New York* (1971) presents an unflinching look at the drab, phallic monoliths of 'The Street' in the incipient stages of financialisation. *Raffer's Office* **FIG.3** records the routine, desk-bound life of a corporate worker in sharp-eyed detail, whereas *Untitled* (1971) shows Oiticica standing outside the loft building where he was attempting to prefigure an alternative way of existing in the city.

Oiticica christened his loft at 81 Second Avenue on the Lower East Side 'Babylonests' and turned it into a space where living, making art, having sex and getting high all blended into and informed each other as experimental practices. Indeed, Babylonests became an artistic prototype for the creation of the liberatory creleisure environments that he hoped to realise and promulgate subsequently at a much larger, urban scale (ultimately without

success). The genealogy and development of creleisure as a concept–project-programme bounding several series of works is well communicated in the show by means of a rich, archival wall display **FIG.4**. Here, an array of documentary photographs are interspersed with an explanatory wall text. The display reveals how the seeds of the notion of creleisure were planted at Oiticica's *Whitechapel Experience* exhibition in London in 1969 and then developed during a residency at the University of Sussex in that same year, just along the coast from the De La Warr Pavilion.

It was during this residency that Oiticica produced *Barracão 1*, a pair of studwork-framed, burlap-wrapped den-like structures, which he designated 'creleisure private group-cells'.⁵ Oiticica scaled up this work with many more 'group-cells' for *Barracão 2*, which was shown in Kynaston McShine's group exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), in 1970. After this show, however, the artist became thoroughly disenchanted with exhibiting in mainstream institutions and retreated to his loft using salvaged parts of *Barracão 2* to develop *Babylonests* as a determinedly extra-institutional artistic space.

Oiticica never straightforwardly finished any of his concept–project-programmes and recursively iterated older ones in dialogue with newer ones. This aspect of his practice is well represented in the show through the inclusion of a sequence of photographs depicting his well-known *Parangolé* capes **FIG.5**. This includes a number that were produced in New York and worn on the roof of the *Babylonests* **FIG.6** as well as out and about in the city, in front of the World Trade Center and on the subway. Two racks of re-made *Parangolé* capes **FIG.7**, originally produced between 1967–79, are also included. Yet even as this approach is far truer to Oiticica's intentions than exhibiting untouchable 'originals', it remains unpersuasive as an effective means of (re)animating these historical works. The capes can only be awkwardly donned by self-conscious visitors against the blank backdrop of the gallery space, where they are structurally stripped of any sort of context that might meaningfully reactualise their original vivacity.



Fig. 2 Still from *Gay Pride Parade*, by Hélio Oiticica. 1971. Super 8 film, duration 3 minutes 20 seconds. (Courtesy César and Claudio Oiticica; exh. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).

In contrast, Oiticica's *Neyrótika* (1973) is revealed in a suggestive new light here by being projected at a relatively small size. The work comprises a soundtracked slideshow featuring numerous portraits of Oiticica's déshabillé young male lovers. The intimacy of this scale heightens the recognition, mutuality and frequent tenderness expressed within the desiring gaze that is captured between photographer and photographed. Even as the uneven power dynamics that are also present in these photographs complicate the picture, *Neyrótika* reveals the profound moments of community forged in and through multitudinous erotic encounters.



Fig. 3 Still from *Raffer's Office*, by Hélio Oiticica. 1972. Super 8 film, duration 3 minutes 22 seconds. (Courtesy César and Claudio Oiticica; exh. De La Warr

Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).

Can Oiticica's notion of *creleisure* be meaningfully reactivated today? Lying back in a hammock in Oiticica's and Neville D'Almeida's *CC5 Hendrixwar/Cosmococa-Programa-in-Progress* **FIG.8**, looking up at various large-scale projections of the cocaine-traced cover of Jimi Hendrix's *War Heroes* (1972) and listening to the album blasting out, one has cause for doubt. This now well-known work is exhibited on its own in a gallery on the first floor and serves as a finale of sorts. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that it was highly innovative and transgressive when it was first conceived – having to wait over twenty years to be considered exhibitable – half a century on, long after the co-option of the counterculture and the normalisation of recreational drug-taking across the political spectrum, the work signifies differently. Today, the images of fat lines of cocaine traced on a classic 'underground' record cover conjures a forty-something banker's big night in as much as an act of cultural resistance. Are we therefore constrained to a historical appreciation of *creleisure*'s relics?



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun* at De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2023. (Photograph Rob Harris).

Oiticica's *Filter Project – For Vergara* **FIG.9** suggests otherwise. Originally shown *in absentia* for an exhibition at Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM), Rio de Janeiro, in 1972, this large-scale *Penetrable* is exhibited for the first time in the United Kingdom. As one negotiates this sparse, labyrinthine structure, strip-lit with garish fluorescents, one hears a transistor radio spouting local news, drinks *suco de laranja* (orange juice), the taste of which seems synaesthetically distorted, and stares at a television set endlessly showing a weather map of Latin America. At the end of each of its four corridors one can look out through turquoise, yellow, orange and blue coloured panels that lend the world queasy

colour casts – and here cleverly coincide with the front windows of the De La Warr Pavilion looking out on to the English Channel.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun* at De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2023. (Photograph Rob Harris).

Oiticica envisaged the work as a parody of multimedia and a critique of Brazilian society, which was conceived against the backdrop of the military junta's intensified repression post-1968 and its recuperation of the oppositional Tropicalist counterculture that flowered briefly in the country, and within which Oiticica had been an instrumental figure. Here, then, creleisure is given a dark, parodic inflection, fully aware of its own potential *détournement* by repressive forces. More generally, the work argues persuasively for the need to salvage some form of liberatory project from the ruins of those that have been co-opted. As such, *Filter Project – For Vergara* is the urgent highlight of this significant show.



Fig. 6 *P32 Parangolé, Cover 25*, by Hélio Oiticica. 1972. Photograph. (Courtesy César and Claudio Oiticica; exh. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal sun* at De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2023. (Photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 8 *CC5 Hendrixwar/Cosmococa-Programa-in-Progress*, by Hélio Oiticica. 1973. Coloured hammocks, 35mm slides and audio discs, dimensions variable. (Photograph Rob Harris; exh. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).

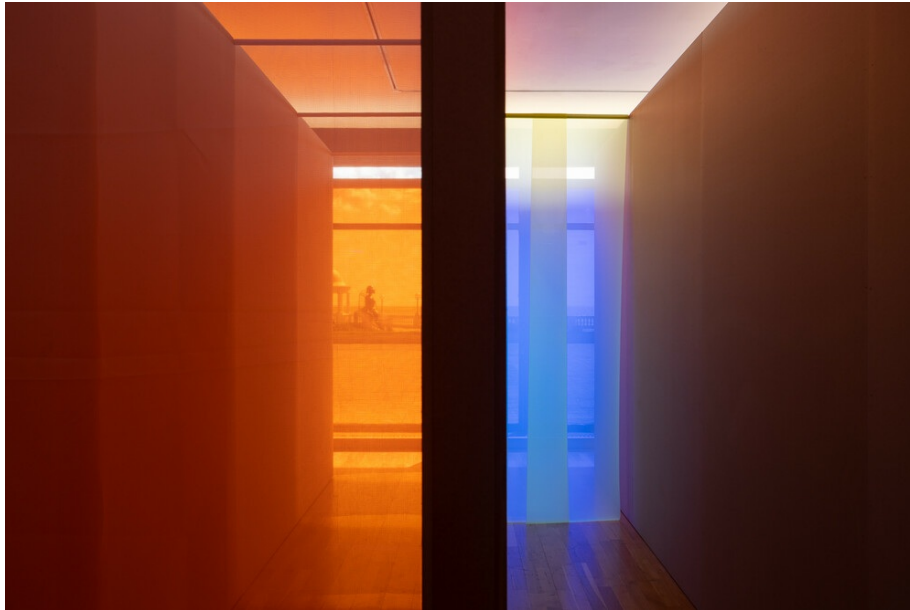


Fig. 9 Detail of *Filter Project – For Vergara*, by Hélio Oiticica. 1972. Nylon, acrylic, plastic curtains, natural-fibre doormat, television set, tape recorders, transistor radio, buzzer, orange juice machine, fluorescent lamps and fibreboard, dimensions variable. (Photograph Rob Harris; exh. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).

Exhibition details

**Hélio Oiticica: Waiting for the internal s
un**
De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea
23rd September 2023–14th January
2024

Footnotes

- 1** L. Zelevansky, E. Sussman, J. Rondeau and D. De Salvo: exh. cat. *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, Pittsburgh (Carnegie Museum of Art), Chicago (Art Institute) and New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2017–18, reviewed by Edward J. Sullivan in *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 159 (2017), pp.170–72.
- 2** P. Braga: 'Conceptualism and life-experience', in *idem*, ed.: *Fios Soltos: A Arte de Hélio Oiticica*, São Paulo 2008, pp.277–87, at p.278.
- 3** G. Debord: 'Report on the construction of situations and on the terms of organization and action of the International Situationist Tendency' [1957], in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. T. McDonough, Cambridge MA 2002, pp.29–50, at p.46.

- 4** H. Oiticica: 'The senses pointing toward a new transformation' [1969], *ARTMargins* 7, no.2 (2018), ed. L. Skrebowski, pp.129–35, at p.132. This important text was originally commissioned by *Studio International* and delivered by Oiticica but never published in the magazine.
- 5** *Ibid.*, p.134.

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