

Press Release

Hélio Oiticica

Curated by Ann Gallagher

26 April – 25 June 2022

27 Bell Street, London

Lisson Gallery is delighted to present the first survey of Hélio Oiticica's work in London in 15 years. Featuring painted compositions, three-dimensional works, film and an environmental structure that invites viewer participation, the exhibition illustrates the extraordinary and enduring influence the Brazilian artist had on the development of international contemporary art. Working in collaboration with the artist's Estate, the exhibition is curated by Ann Gallagher who led the curatorial team on the major Tate Modern presentation of Oiticica's work, *Helio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*, in 2007, initiated by the Museum of Fine Art Houston in 2006.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1937, Oiticica was one of the most innovative Brazilian artists of the 20th century. He produced an outstanding body of painting, participatory sculpture, architectural environments, films and writings from the mid 1950s until his untimely death in 1980. He gave name to a highly influential 1960s cultural movement in Brazil - incorporating art, music, theatre and literature - with his installation *Tropicalia* of 1966-67. This interactive environment was included in the artist's ground-breaking exhibition, referred to by Oiticica as *The Whitechapel Experiment*, held in 1969 at London's Whitechapel Gallery, curated by the late Guy Brett (1942-2001), then art critic for The Times newspaper, and co-founder of the now legendary London gallery for experimental international art, Signals (1964-66). *The Whitechapel Experiment* was the only large-scale exhibition devoted to the artist during his lifetime outside of Brazil. This focused on Oiticica's work up to the time he spent in London, and a display of *Tropicalia*, editions of which are now part of the permanent collections of the Tate Collection, London; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

The exhibition at Lisson Gallery will include early painted compositions made while studying under the artist Ivan Serpa; Serpa founded the art movement, Grupo Frente, alongside artists such as Aluisio Carvão, Lygia Clark, and Lygia Pape, who rejected the figuration and nationalism of the predominant modernist Brazilian painting style. Alongside this will be a series of *Metaesquemias*, which Oiticica began in 1957, representing his subsequent exploration into colour and form, as well as a series of gouaches which led to the evolution of his work into three dimensions. His early sculptural practice is represented by a rarely seen white *Bilateral* and vibrant yellow *Spatial Relief* which invite the viewer to move around them in order to fully experience their physical presence.

Alongside these will be a collection of *Bólides*, an important series of works created by Oiticica from 1963. The term 'bólide' translates as 'fireball', referring in astrology to an extremely bright meteor that explodes in the atmosphere. The series began with box-like structures that were painted as if "possessed or inflamed by colour" (Ivan Cardoso interviewing Oiticica for the film, 'HO') and filled with powdered pigments and earth; by permitting light to penetrate the interior of the structure, Oiticica created the illusion of a luminous centre, which was later magnified by his use of glass vessels. The *Bólides* were also created at an important time given the social backdrop: Brazil's military regime was becoming increasingly repressive, resulting in a tumultuous political atmosphere and increased economic disparity.

The *Bólides* marked a pivotal moment in Oiticica's trajectory, when he began consciously involving spectators in his work, allowing them to touch and manipulate the works and thus expanding beyond the purely visual. The exhibition also includes an important 'Penetrable' installation by Oiticica entitled *Nas quebradas* (1979), works Oiticica described as "movable frescos on a human scale... most importantly, they are penetrable", offering an intense multi-sensorial experience. Oiticica's

'Penetrables' were one of the first examples of an artistic installation, and were hugely influential in the evolution of conceptual art. *Nas quebradas* is modeled on the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, speaking specifically to Oiticica's engagement with the people of Mangueira Hill; the materials of the structure alongside the unstable movement of rocks beneath your feet recall the flux of the community at the time. These works radically re-defined the concepts of painting and participatory art, blurring the line between the two by historically encouraging a more interactive form of experience. *Nas quebradas* relates to others from the series, initiated by Oiticica in the 1960s, such as *Tropicália*, *Penetrables PN 2 'Purity is a myth'* and *PN 3 'Imagetical'*.

About the artist

Hélio Oiticica (1937 – 1980) is widely regarded as one of Brazil's leading artists of the twentieth century and a touchstone for much contemporary art made since the 1960s, primarily through his freewheeling, participatory works of art, performative environments, avant-garde films and abstract paintings. Even before the age of 20, Oiticica was a key member of the historic Rio de Janeiro-based Grupo Frente (1954-56), his radical play with geometric form and vibrant colors transcending the minimal lines of European constructivism and imbuing his work with an exuberant rhythm that resonated with the avant-garde music and poetry of his native Brazil. In the late 1950s, Oiticica would go on to become a leading figure of Brazilian Neo-Concretism (1959-61) that included other ground breaking artists such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and the poet Ferreira Gullar, ultimately giving rise to the artistic movement known as *Tropicalismo*, named for a work of Oiticica's from 1967.

Increasingly, Oiticica became a countercultural figure and underground hero, foregrounding bodily interaction with spatial and environmental concerns over pure aesthetics. "Ambient art," he wrote, "is the overthrow of the traditional concept of painting-frame and sculpture – that belongs to the past. It gives way to the creation of 'ambiences': from there arises what I call 'anti-art,'" which he later defined as "the era of the popular participation in the creative field." This generous and generative practice would become highly influential for subsequent generations of artists, especially his *Parangolés* or 'habitable paintings' and all-encompassing series of installations, known variously as *Núcleos* (ceiling-hung geometric panels forming gradual chromatic experiences) and *Propositions* or *Penetrables* (labyrinth-like architectural environments made of sand and semi-permeable cabins). This supra-sensorial approach continued until his untimely death in 1980 at the age of 42.

Oiticica's work has been the subject of major recent museum exhibitions, including the critically acclaimed retrospective *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, which debuted at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Philadelphia in 2016 and traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2017. *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color* was exhibited at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2006-2007 and in London at the Tate Modern in 2007. His work is included in the collections of numerous international institutions including Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, USA; Inhotim Centro de Arte Contemporânea, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA; Museo de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA; Tate Modern, London, UK; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA; the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; and the Pérez Art Museum Miami, FL, USA, among others. The Projeto Hélio Oiticica was established in Rio de Janeiro in 1980 to manage the artist's estate.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, three across New York City and East Hampton, and one in Shanghai, as well as the newest location in Los Angeles, opening in autumn 2022. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky, Hugh Hayden, Van Hanos and Cheyney Thompson.

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