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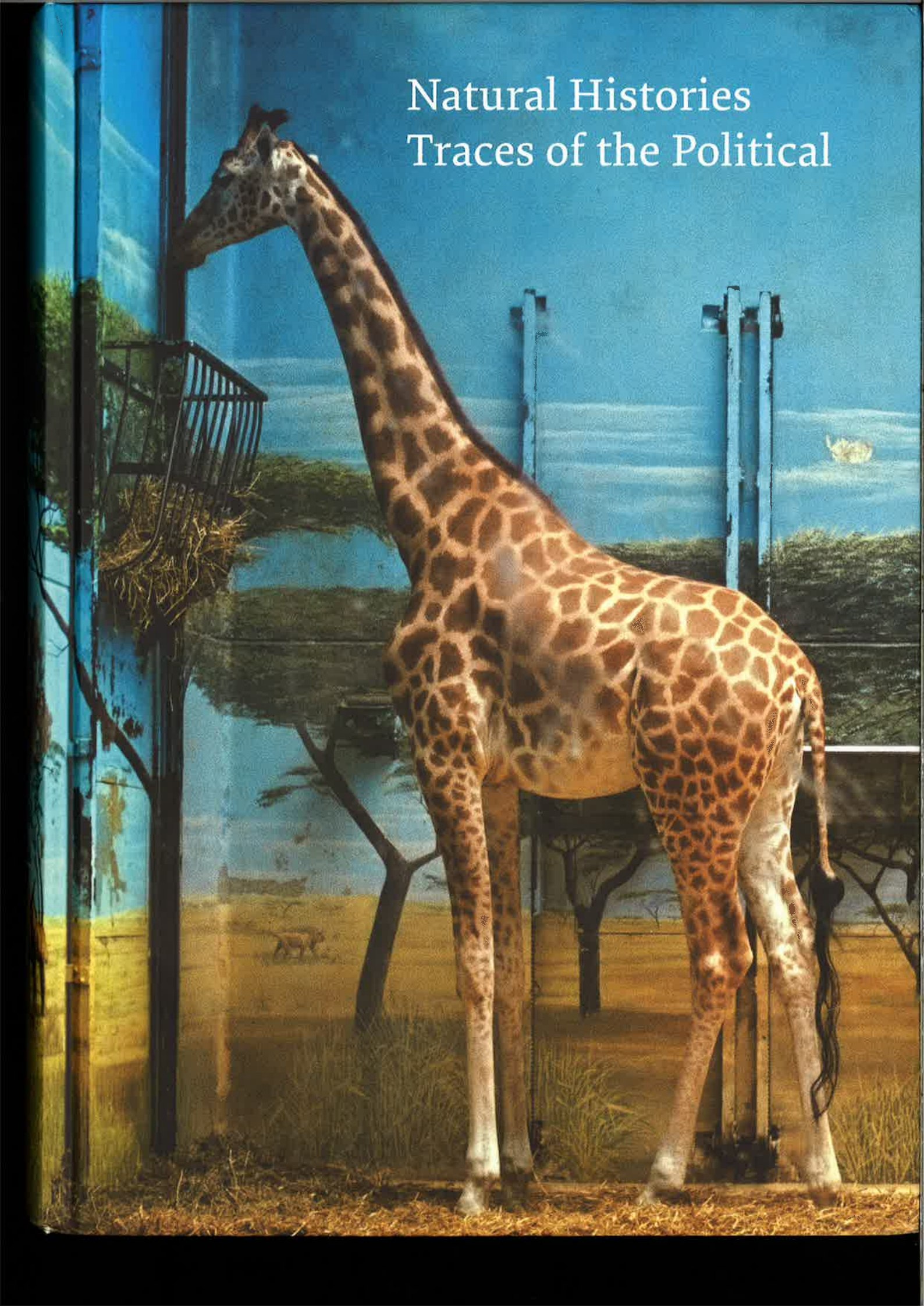
# Tropicália: when "the museum is the world"

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Natural Histories  
Traces of the Political



# Natural Histories Traces of the Political

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Tropicália

When “the museum is the world”

Cristina Freire

Half a century has passed since Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (Rio de Janeiro, 1937–1980) presented *Tropicália* for the first time, in April 1967, at the Rio de Janeiro Museum of Modern Art (MAM). In this environment, plants, birds, vetiver grass, pebbles, and sand are spread about the floor on the paths that should be walked on barefoot. The sand trails lead to impoverished shelters, like the housing where the poorest populations live on the hillsides in the city of Rio de Janeiro. For the artist, this ambience was the apex of an ensemble of works and practices—without the analogies then being made internationally—for which he invented new words: *Penetráveis* (Penetrables), *Parangolés* (Capes), and *Bólides* (Bolides), among other terms, which compose a broader Environmental Program.

In *Tropicália*, two *Penetráveis* (PN2 and PN3) structure the environment. PN2 is entitled *A Pureza é um Mito* (Purity Is a Myth). In the other—*Imagética*—labyrinths link the spaces in narrow passageways on the sandy floor. At the end of the walkway, a blazing television is the counterpoint of electronic animation to the tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic bricolage of the place. In the favelas (shantytowns) at the edges of the city of Rio de Janeiro as well as in the outskirts of large Brazilian cities, the urgency for shelter leads to shacks that, like the *Penetráveis* of *Tropicália*, result from the combined need for a roof and housing inherent to these forms of unstable and spontaneous constructivism.

The artist explains: “I want to convey a global sense that will suggest a new behavior, a behavior of ethical-social order, which brings a new sense of things to the individual. The atmosphere is intentionally anti-technological, perhaps even non-modern. In this sense, I want to get man down to earth; here, there is a nostalgia of primitive man ... at the end of the labyrinth, in the dark, where one encounters a television (receiver) set permanently ablaze: [it] is the image that absorbs the participant in the global informative succession.”<sup>1</sup>

In the nineteen-sixties, expanding mass communication, especially the broadcast television system, imposed the homogeneity consolidated within a national telecommunications network that standardizes tastes, wishes, and affections on operating information control, which was so important at the time of the Cold War in Brazil.

As a counterpoint to uniformity, Oiticica proposes that solitary spectators become transformed into participants (as he calls the public), activating subjective sensations and collective situations with Penetrables. Thus, Hélio Oiticica describes his proposal in *Tropicália*: “To enter each *Penetrável*, the participant was compelled to walk upon sand, gravel, look for poems on the greenery, play with macaws, and so on. The created environment was obviously tropical, like in the depths of a small farm, and, most importantly, there was the sensation of stepping on the ground. I used to feel this sensation while walking about the hillsides around the shantytown, and even the walkway cutting in, out, and back ‘about the

twists and turns' of *Tropicália* greatly recalls the strolls around the hillside."<sup>2</sup> However, *Tropicália* grasps the tension between a direct experience proposed by the artist and its representation in stereotyped, exotic images. Art critic Guy Brett<sup>3</sup> observes: "Around the Penetrable was a simulated tropical scene with live macaws, plants, sand, pebbles and so on. The problem of representation was posed here in all its ambivalence, between the exotic stereotype and what Oiticica saw as the genuine need to 'create a new language which would be ours, characteristic of us, which would stand up against imagetic international *Pop* and *Op art* in which a good part of our artists were submerged'. ... But the underlying meaning of *Tropicália* for Oiticica, 'the process of penetrating it', was missed; only the images, the macaws and banana trees were taken out and repeated *ad nauseam*."<sup>4</sup>

The Environmental Program of Hélio Oiticica brings the ever so lively popular culture in Brazilian society to the forefront. In this context, whatever is called anti-art means a refusal of high art, which is where his artistic and social class (son and grandson of scholars and anarchists) and heritage comes from. For art critic Mario Pedrosa,<sup>5</sup> as for many other intellectuals from that period, high art, no matter what the appreciation given by initiated circles would be, constituted a form of cultural mystification. This mystification, explained the critic, "helps in the transformation of the local cultural wealth into a marginal note, reflected and consumed in the periphery."

In other words, high art in Brazil is related to the devaluation of local culture, itself marginalized by the ranking privileges arising from the colonial legacy that persists in social inequality. In Oiticica's work, the tension is evidenced within the space of the utmost artistic legitimization: the museum.

Two years before the presentation of *Tropicália*, at the opening of the exhibition *Opinião 65* (Opinion 65), in Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art, Hélio Oiticica was banned from entering the MAM accompanied by samba dancers, who were wearing his *Parangolés*. Outside the museum, the artist handed out the mimeographed texts "Fundamental Basis for the Definition of *Parangolé*" and "Notes on the *Parangolé*." On the critical basis of the *Parangolé*, Oiticica articulated popular constructiveness, samba dance, and music with the ways of living and building in a context of adversity. His artistic propositions included banners, tents, and capes, so as to convert the spectator into participant.

For Hélio Oiticica, to wear a *Parangolé* was the equivalent of incorporating the artwork, and he identified his sources: favela architecture, partitions in building sites and in popular housing, often improvised, which we see every day. Also street fairs, homeless people's shelters, popular festivals, religious celebrations, carnival, and so on.<sup>6</sup> It seems that the impact of the ban on samba dancers at the Modern Art Museum has a significance that still evades deeper meanings.

2 Ibid., 50.

3 English critic Guy Brett was responsible for the insertion of Hélio Oiticica's work into international art circuits. In 1969, he organized an important first exhibition in London at the Whitechapel Gallery. In 1989, Brett published the Hélio Oiticica essay "Reverie and Revolt" in *Art in America* magazine, which would trigger the interest of international art criticism, culminating with the retrospective exhibition of Hélio Oiticica, organized in 1992 by Witte de With and the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in collaboration with the Fundació Antoni Tàpies and the Centro de Arte Moderna of the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Europe, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in the United States, to exhibit Hélio Oiticica's oeuvre. The consolidation of this artist's exposure in the 1990 international art circuit occurs when these works, including *Tropicália*, are acquired by the collections of metropolitan museums and participate more frequently in shows abroad and in Brazil. These facts coincide with emerging local and global related issues and with the globalization process bearing down on culture and art.

4 Guy Brett, "Hélio Oiticica: Reverie and Revolt," *Art in America*, vol. 77, no. 1 (January 1989), 117.

5 Mario Pedrosa, "Arte Culta e Arte Popular" (1975), in Otilia Arantes, ed., *Política das Artes* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1995), 326.

6 Hélio Oiticica, "Fundamental Bases for the Definition of the *Parangolé*: November 1964," in Guy Brett et al., *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1992), 85-88.

7 Mario Pedrosa, "Arte Ambiental, Arte Pós-Moderna, Hélio Oiticica," in Otilia Arantes, ed., *Acadêmicos e Modernos: textos escolhidos*, vol. III (São Paulo: Edusp, 1998), 355–60.

8 See Néstor Garcia Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: estratégias para entrar e sair da modernidade* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1995).

9 Frederico Morais, *Cronologia das artes plásticas no Rio de Janeiro: 1816–1994* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 1995), 296.

The Mangueira Hillside (Morro da Mangueira) was for the artist an exercise of "popular initiation." In the essay "Arte Ambiental, Arte Pós-Moderna, Hélio Oiticica," Mario Pedrosa observes how, from the transposition of urban, social, and aesthetic barriers, Oiticica went "from a visual experience, in its purity, to a tactile, moving experience on the sensual fruition of materials, in which the entire body, outlined before in the distant peerage of the visual, enters as a total source of sensoriality ... a dilating state of awareness from a broadened sensorial experience (tactile, olfactory, kinesthetic), the overcoming of limiting conditions, the direct experience-based element." Pedrosa considers Oiticica an "absolute sensory machine" that comes face to face with the limits of ego and with the "tragic dialectics of social encounter."<sup>7</sup>

In Rio de Janeiro, the poorest, usually black and mestizo, populations have been segregated on the hillsides and shantytowns for centuries. In Rio de Janeiro, this is the privileged territory of samba; African-heritage music and dance reinvented in Brazil. On the Mangueira Hillside, Hélio Oiticica becomes a Mangueira Samba School passista (dancer), where his poetic and political choice is seen in one of his banners: "Seja Marginal. Seja Herói" (Be an Outlaw. Be a Hero).

In the sixties, the world as a "global village" was confronted, in peripheral countries, with pre-modern conditions in everyday life. The dissonance between the mass culture and technology that has expanded within the base layers of the economic and social pyramid result in a species of hybrid modernity.<sup>8</sup> Not by chance, one of the Penetrables in *Tropicália* is named "A pureza é um mito" (Purity is a myth).

#### Tropicalist moment / movement

*Tropicália* stands as an icon of a very significant cultural moment in Brazil, particularly the interval of a few years between the end of the sixties and the early years of the following decade. As observed by art critic Frederico Morais, who participated in the conception of the *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity) exhibition together with Oiticica, "It cannot be said that there has been a tropicalist movement in Brazil. No manifesto was published; no exhibition was held, at that moment. More than a movement, with its own aesthetics and a public manifest, tropicalism was, truly, a creative explosion within a moment of freedom."<sup>9</sup>

This is because in the early years after the military coup that installed a dictatorship in Brazil, which would be extended for two decades (1964–85), the country lived through a period of great cultural effervescence staged upon a local artistic language articulating fierce criticism toward the modernization imposed by a dictatorial government.

The tropicalist moment in Brazil, for critics like Roberto Schwarz,<sup>10</sup> has an allegoric meaning, since it goes beyond the national issue formulated by Modernists in the nineteen-twenties. In the sixties, the expansionist political design intended to impose an accelerated rate of growth and internationalization on the country, leveraged by the media and by new consumer standards. As a result, dissonant traces of forced modernization were stressed to the point in which mass culture thrived in contrast with the social structures staged by cognitive and social injustice.

#### Anthropophagy, Tropicália, and ABC da Cana

Emblematic of this moment in a broader cultural scene are the New Cinema by Glauber Rocha, especially with the film *Terra em Transe* (Land in Anguish) (1967); the popular songs of Bahia native musicians Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé, and Gal Costa, among others, who mixed the popular repertoire and electronic music; and the *Oficina Theatre* (Office Theater) of José Celso Martinez Correa, with the performance (also in 1967) of the play *O Rei da Vela* (The Candle King), written in 1933 by Oswald de Andrade. All of them draw upon the principles of anthropophagy when intermixing references diluting the separation between literary and popular, local and universal, cult and kitsch, exclusive and commonplace.

It was poet, writer, and art critic Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) who first used anthropophagy as a poetic and theoretical tool for the cultural interpretation of Brazil. Anthropophagy is considered a ritual practice in which devouring is not motivated for greed or anger as in cannibalism but mainly to inherit the qualities of the enemies.

In the *Manifesto Antropófago* (Anthropophagic Manifest) (1928), Oswald de Andrade defends the mestizo territory of invention in poetics, representations, myths, and rites, where national and international are reunited. “Tupi [pronounced /'tu:pi/] or not Tupi; that is the question” is the expression of these frictions of principles that involve the anthropophagy of external contents.

Anthropophagy is also evoked by Hélio Oiticica in *Tropicália*: “On entering the main Penetrável, after passing through diverse tactile-sensory experiences open to participants, who then use these experiences to create their own imagetic feeling, and on arriving at the end of the dark labyrinth where a tv set is permanently on, it is the image then that devours the participant, since it is more active than their sensorial craft. ... Indeed, this Penetrável gave me a permanent sensation of being devoured; ... it is, in my point of view, the most anthropophagical work of Brazilian art.”<sup>11</sup>

With *Tropicália*, Hélio Oiticica creates a Brazilian image that confronts the “universalist myth” of local culture deriving from Europe and North America. This attack against Western hegemonic culture leverages a twofold movement of refusal: the negation of modern artwork and, of course, of a Eurocentric mentality. These

10 Roberto Schwarz, *Cultura e Política* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2009).

11 Hélio Oiticica, “Tropicália,” in Brett et al., *Hélio Oiticica*, 124.



12 Ibid., 125.

13 Ibid., 124–26.

14 The Tropicology Seminars occurred between 1966 and 1967 and were organized by Gilberto Freyre at the Federal University of Pernambuco. Sociologists, artists, poets, engineers, landscape architects, lawyers, journalists, historians, and philosophers, among others, participated in these seminars.

cultural values and representations should be anthropophagically swallowed by the black and Amerindian heritages turned subaltern in Brazilian social and historical dynamics.

Oiticica writes: “We are blacks, Indians, whites—all at the same time—our culture has nothing to do with European culture, and despite being submitted to that culture, only the blacks and the Indians have not capitulated to that culture.”<sup>12</sup> In this context, *Tropicália* achieves the myth of tropicality, which for Hélio Oiticica “is much more than macaws and banana trees: it is the awareness of a non-conditioning to the established, therefore, highly revolutionary structures all in all. Any intellectual, social, existential conformism escapes its main idea.”<sup>13</sup>

Like it had been to the Modernists in the twenties, the matter of national identity is fundamental to various intellectuals and artists in the sixties in Brazil. Sociologist Gilberto Freyre, for example, organizes the Tropicology Seminars in Northeast Brazil, a region of strong popular tradition, which held the purpose of connecting “ecological, physics, biosocial and sociocultural studies.” According to Freyre, a species of the “anthropology of man situated in the Tropics”<sup>14</sup> was designed in an attempt to create an authentic Brazilian thought within an approach that today would be called the “ecology of knowledges.” The interventions at these referential seminars were staged on the following questions: Would it be possible to think of a direct correlation between nature and society? In the Tropics, would nature have any determination over culture? Would Tropicology be a science? These questions harnessed the interventions of various intellectuals, which included a few artists like Flavio de Carvalho (1899–1973), writer, engineer, architect, and author of a multifaceted artistic work entailing drawings, paintings, architectonic projects, texts, scenography, costumes, and theatrical plays, in addition to performances that he called “experiments in the psychology of the masses.” In the same year that Oiticica presented *Tropicália* (1967), Flavio de Carvalho, at the Tropicology Seminar, reflected on fashion within a historical perspective and emphasized the local contingencies—that is, life in the Tropics. This theme had been occupying this artist for at least the two previous decades. In 1956, in *Experience No. 3*, he walked about the streets in the city of São Paulo with his summer fashion for a new man, *Traje New Look* (New Look Costume): short skirt, puffy sleeved blouse, and sandals, designed by him for the tropical man.

At the seminar, Carvalho insists on the thesis that the new, genuine creation comes “from the bottom up”—that is, the creative force would be at the base of the social pyramid. Thus, the fate of the excluded is inverted, attributing the highest inventive potentialities to the disenfranchised. On analyzing the dynamics of fashion, Flavio de Carvalho evaluates: “I believe the elements that gave origin to fashions in the world are encountered at the bottom layer of the social hierarchy. These are the immigrants, the deranged; those who wander about the streets are the ones who give form to coming

trends.”<sup>15</sup> This bet on the creative and transforming force of the disenfranchised and marginalized individuals also defines the choice made by Oiticica, who encounters, in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro, the poetic and constructive matrix of the Environmental Program he summarizes in the expression “the museum is the world.” The *Parangolés* by Hélio Oiticica, like forms sheltering the body, are also wearable and take on full existence when animated by the movements in dance, in samba.

#### Art, text, and invention

Writing is an important part of Oiticica’s work, who wrote a lot and systematically. He drafted projects and wrote essays, tributes, programs, letters, and programmatic, theoretical, and poetic texts. To name his propositions, he invents numerous neologisms that plot a territory where words seek to assign processes and things that have nothing to do with the categories of hegemonic art.

The *Tropicália* artwork, for example, is accompanied by the text “Esquema Geral da Nova Objetividade” (General Scheme of the New Objectivity) (1967), published in the *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* where Hélio Oiticica lists the main characteristics of vanguard art in Brazil, namely “1. General constructive will; 2. A move toward the object as easel painting is denied and superseded; 3. The participation of the spectator (corporal, tactile, visual, semantic, etc.); 4. An engagement and a position on political, social, and ethical problems; 5. Tendency towards collective propositions and consequently the abolition in the art of today of ‘isms,’ so characteristic of the first half of the century (a tendency which can be encompassed by Mario Pedrosa’s concept of ‘Post-Modern Art’); 6. A revival of and new formulations in the concept of anti-art.”<sup>16</sup>

*Tropicália* is presented as the environmental synthesis of these ideas, and the popular stance has a programmatic and broader sense. Not by chance, the option for popular culture in Brazil is linked to popular education and adult literacy movements.

A related example is the active efforts of educator Paulo Freire (1921–1997), which were interrupted by the dictatorship in the sixties. Freire was responsible for an adult literacy project in poor regions of Brazil, especially in the Northeast. His main pedagogical principle is an ethical and political stance. That is, education in freedom is mainly an exercise of autonomy, in which reading words and reading the world are integrated achievements. In this conception-action, education is staged on dialogue that is based on the sharing of life experiences, which substantiates all and any pedagogical process. Only from that point can the words and the generating themes emerge for learning. This pedagogy steps away from traditional school practice and from the hierarchical classroom model. Thus, it addresses a species of anti-school, for it goes against what is called “banking” education, which assumes that the pupil knows nothing and becomes the subject of values transferred from the

15 Gilberto Freyre, ed., *Tropicó & sociologia, pintura, jardim, estudos geográficos, saúde, traje, indústria* (Recife: Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 1971), 330. Includes works presented and debates engaged in throughout 1967 at the Tropicology Seminar of the Federal University of Pernambuco, under the direction of Gilberto Freyre.

16 Hélio Oiticica, “Esquema Geral da Nova Objetividade,” in Brett et al., *Hélio Oiticica*, 110–19.

haves to the have-nots. For Paulo Freire, the reading of the world precedes the reading of words, and the text comprehension attained by its critical reading first implies the perception of relations between text and context. After the 1964 military coup, his literacy method was banned, and Paulo Freire was persecuted, imprisoned, and exiled.

Artist Jonathas de Andrade (1980) returns to educator Paulo Freire's critical thinking of open potentialities in various works. In *ABC da Cana* (Sugarcane ABC) (2014), for example, the artist demands cane-field workers from a mill in Pernambuco, who wield cane stalks, to form the twenty-six letters of the alphabet for the camera. It was also within the Northeast and with sugarcane harvesters that Paulo Freire conducted the first experiences of adult literacy in the sixties. In *ABC* by Andrade, the letters are mixed with the brown bodies against the backdrop of a monotonous landscape destroyed by the cane fields at harvest time. The tropical nature is transformed from the extensive monocultures into homogenous landscapes of razed lands where men work endlessly in a precarious situation.

Currently, the great sugarcane estates are linked, in Brazil, to the large-scale production of cane alcohol (ethanol), seen by international capitals as an alternative substitution to fossil fuels. But since the sixteenth century, in the history of colonizing Brazil, sugarcane monoculture is at the base of a slavocratic society, where sugarcane and slavery are complementary pairs. This association is also staged on oppositions: masters and slaves, literacy and illiteracy, speech and silence, whites and blacks, privileged and excluded. Thus, in addition to impacting the ecological balance, the production of sugar, a product initially prized as a rare culinary spice, is linked to a social system generating the "codes, customs, and habits" studied so well by sociologist Gilberto Freyre in the 1933 classic book *Casa Grande e Senzala* (The Masters and the Slaves). Brazil is currently the largest sugarcane producer in the world. This global market position has a considerable impact on the contemporary Brazilian human and social landscape. The homogenization of natural biomass ravaged by agribusiness completes the precarious working conditions and the forced displacement of families from rural areas. These are dialectical images that amalgamate different historic times in order to show within the museum of the world the depth of the present.