



HÉLIO OITICICA AND THE COLLECTIVE GENIUS: CONTRIBUTIONS TO A PHILOSOPHY OF SPATIAL ARTS¹

MIGUEL GALLY²

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to explore the theoretical and philosophical contributions of artist and thinker Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) through his artworks, writings, and excerpts. Using the creative principle of the collective genius developed in the 1960s, we set out to explore his political presuppositions in dialogue with contemporary ideas about the arts. A key point in this process is the thematization of the political (and public) condition of art creation through what I am calling communicational space, which is a way of understanding what happens when the artist's own spatiality encounters that of the spectator. In these terms, Hélio Oiticica's theoretical approach can further an understanding of collaborative or participative art through a collective experience of art. This simultaneously involves a minimal consensus with strong traces of dissension that articulates the perceptive body dimension in this anonymous collective presence.

KEYWORDS: Collective Genius; Spatial Arts; Participatory Art; Hélio Oiticica; Spatial Communication.

“Anonymous collective genius” was an expression used by artist and thinker Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) to define a specific creative process that was collaborative or participative in the visual and performing arts. His artistic productions have been widely studied in Portuguese literature but also world widely. However, the meaning and reach of the expression – which is both an artistic concept and practice – are far from being exhausted, because it contains a fragmented and condensed philosophy of visual-performative arts that is rarely explored as such, which I intend to examine and interpret.

In this context I propose to explore firstly the political dimension of the artist-spectator relationship by interpreting this “collective genius” through discussions generated by contemporary European thinkers like Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, Chantal Mouffe, Hilde

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² Professor de Estética & Filosofia da arte e da arquitetura junto ao Departamento de Teoria e História em Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade de Brasília (UnB). Doutor em Filosofia pela Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), com estágio sanduíche pela Westfälische Wilhelms Universität Münster, WWU, Alemanha. E-mail: gally@unb.br.

Hein and Jacques Rancière. These thinkers discuss, in general, the political conditions of the arts and to what extent these conditions affect that which they propose, whether to resist, promote adherence, or even to (agonistically) expose the contradictions within culture. This is based on a debate about the primacy of minimal consensus capable of giving birth to the collaborative perspective (N. Bourriaud, H. Hein), dissension (Cl. Bishop, J. Rancière), or conflicting consensus (Ch. Mouffe). In short, the expression anonymous collective genius presupposes an elementary or basic consensus, similar to what Mouffe defends as a conflicting consensus, that is capable of showing contradictions within culture (Bishop), particularly in the history of Brazil and its colonialist heritage hidden behind hegemonic (elitist) discourse. Additionally, Hélio Oiticica's work tried to shift the social and aesthetic chasms, such as the one created by a hypocritical conservative moralism in a society that is apparently at ease with the body, by exploring the boundaries of its sensitive regimes (Rancière). Oiticica also believed that the microscopic transformations that art provoked in social relations could have a positive effect on society, what has proposed Bourriaud in some way.

What I would like to investigate is how Hélio Oiticica foreshadowed these debates of the late 1990s on when he began thinking and exercising the concept of the “anonymous collective genius” in the mid-1960s. Then, I claim for a connection to this original political dimension thinking about space and the spatialization as its counterpart, its complementation. The apparently contradictory complexity of this collective genius seen in visual and performing arts makes us think about the philosophical reach of what Hélio Oiticica proposes as the political condition for creative activity. To understand this, I intend to first provide a more precise context of the contact points between ideas about public art and its political conditions and Hélio Oiticica's position about the “collective genius”. Then introduce some Hélio Oiticica artworks and ideas by interpreting what he has understood as the collective genius as part of special kind of communication, a spatial one.

1.

I understand that the term “public art” fosters an ambiguity that brings up a wealth of issues. After all, such art can be defined as such because of its presence in public spaces, for being installed by public agencies, or for using public funds, as W. Mitchell has already criticized (1990a, p.38). This pragmatic-instrumental definition of art is often emphasized, which neglects the urgent political dimension that we intend to show here. Hence, I would like to dwell on the political aspect of public art for a moment, since the spectator-artist relation can

be understood in terms of (micro)politics or (micro)public spaces. In other words, I see politics, space, and the publicity of creative activities as inseparable.

In line with a 1990s tendency (Mitchell, 1990b; Miranda, 1998), one of the initiatives that dealt with such subjects was led by Hilde Hein in her paper *What is Public Art?* (1996). She understands public art and its presence as instigators of public debates, thus radically expanding any pragmatic type of definition. Her approach is important because she deals with the idea that art is quintessentially public, which goes against the modern and modernist perspective that accentuated its subjective character as decisive for defining it. She concludes her paper (1996, p.6) by saying that “art is escaping its confinement to private sensibility. It is descending into the streets once more and reclaiming its place in the public realm”. In her view, by recognizing the public dimension of art as central to defining the visual arts in general would help in understanding it. However, she is also aware that it would not eliminate challenges like those undergo qualitative analyses that reinforce the public condition of the space chosen for exhibiting the artwork, of the property (where the artwork is going to be installed) being public, of the public representation at play, and of the effective public interests involved. In other words, when dealing with art in public spaces, there will always be background issues such as coherent spiritual or collective origins, the centrality of the location, and an exigency of a minimal public acceptance of the artwork. The difficulty of joining these and other elements is what leads city administrations to ascribe to pragmatic and condensed versions of public art.

But Hein believed it is important to observe that art exhibited in any public space instigates debates of common interest, whether it be permanent or transitory artworks, immaterial (such as video mapping projections), spectacular or discreet ones, or in spaces that are not necessarily monumental. According to Hein it is not about merely ensuring the public experience of a space – something increasingly urgent in large urban centers around the world – but also of opening space for, or even being the instigator of common interested debates. For this reason, the artwork does not necessarily need to be in the streets, although that would facilitate the process in question. To her, the artwork does, however, need to directly involve those who are in the shadows of those operate the “public.” It needs to involve those that neither represent nor are represented by institutions.

In this sense art is public because it exposes (itself). (Public) art in this sense is political because it fosters debate and creates a path for exposing what circulates in private. This comprehension will be very important to recognize how far was Hélio Oiticica when he

proposed almost 30 years before Hein that visual art should be spatialized to be understood as necessarily public.

From a complementary perspective Chantal Mouffe thinks of all art as necessarily political and is even more assertive about this unavoidable politization of (public) art in her conference, “Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?” (2005). When her political philosophy is used as a basis for art philosophy, art could be presented in *agnostic terms*, although it is Claire Bishop (2004) that has explored this path. From Mouffe’s ontological view, “the political” as inherent to humanity. It is the agonistic dimension or antagonisms within forms of identity that is permanent in history, independent of cultures, regions, or eras (MOUFFE, 2013, pp. 8-14). On the other hand, “politics” is understood as sets of practices and institutions that create specific and dated social orders. In other words, politics is a way of organizing human existence according to its political and agonistic conditions. Therefore, when she thinks of all art as political, it is in the sense that all artistic production is either promoting or resisting the current way of social organization. According to Mouffe, political liberalism, for example, hides this agonistic condition when it turns to consensus strategies. When political issues are addressed in their agonistic dimension, decisions necessarily imply exclusions and dissensus. What she insists on is, in the inevitable separation between an “us” and a “them” – assumed in agonistic politics – the issue of what is on the other side is not enemies to be annihilated, but adversaries that generate political disputes without annihilation, albeit also without conciliation. In this context, art is necessarily political because it chooses which side of the agonistic dispute to serve or resist – always explicitly or implicitly – and this is simultaneously its public condition. Art is understood instrumentally, that is its politics, because they are part of identification process in permanent construction within society. According to Mouffe, this and other aspects help expand a reductionist approach based on modern origins (such as the Marxist or even the vanguardist ones) where art is always resistance (BADIOU, 2008; BOURRIAUD, 2001).

Whether in restricted terms or not, whether as resistance or promotion, what I would like to emphasize is not only theoretical confrontations or debates, but primarily the bodily and material confrontations that are non-violent. In other words, dissension, as Hélio Oiticica has practiced and thought about appears not only as discourse, but also as *miens*, or as occupations. By the latter, we mean a spatial dimension that should orient that which is understood as public in the arts.

2.

Now I will move from this broader comprehension, not just from a theoretical context that sees the definition of visual and performance art politically, toward the political character of the artist-spectator relationship in some of Hélio Oiticica's artwork and writings. I begin remembering that the origins of his Environmental Art [*Arte Ambiental*] slightly defended a special type of consensus (OITICICA, 1966), in that an elementary consensus is required to make the artist-spectator encounter happen and to give the experience of art its place. Hence, it is not a consensus with instrumental aspirations, nor is it naïve, integralist, or merely argumentative. Let us look at this in more detail.

If one looks, for example, at how Europe's history of cultural and economic expansion imposed a consensus that its art history was the one to be followed, and because a consensus implies eliminating differences, it is not difficult to understand why part of contemporary European thought tends to defend an agonistic ontology, a politics or epistemology of dissension, in the context of the arts. In a best-case scenario, it is an effort to self-criticize their unequal and unjust historical process, while in a worst-case scenario it is merely rhetorical. Hélio Oiticica, however, takes on a cultural context that is more complex than one of supposed historical self-criticism, imagining the best-case scenario as really the best. The greatest challenge in this context is, yes, to resist to aesthetic and art impositions, but to also promote a consensus that brings together classes, colors, and genders torn apart by a bloody, cowardly, and ruthless colonialist inheritance that most of us prefer to forget. Even though we are not proud of this inheritance, we Brazilians still have not repudiated it in concrete public policies as we should have. Not in Brazil, not yet! I believe that in the plundered and humiliated southern hemisphere, it is not about simply promoting differences or dissensions (although this is imperative to survival!), but also about bringing together peoples that have been torn away from themselves and (re)invented, thus putting the importance of consensus on other prerogatives and demands.

By beginning with Hélio Oiticica's matured works such as *Penetráveis* (1960-67), *Núcleos* (1960-66), and especially *Parangolés* (1964-66), the first thing I see is that the spatiality he invents between the spectator and artist is quintessentially communicational.



Image 1: *PNI Penetrável*, 1960. Hélio Oiticica: Delirium Ambulatorium Exhibition, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Brasília, 2023. Photography by the author.

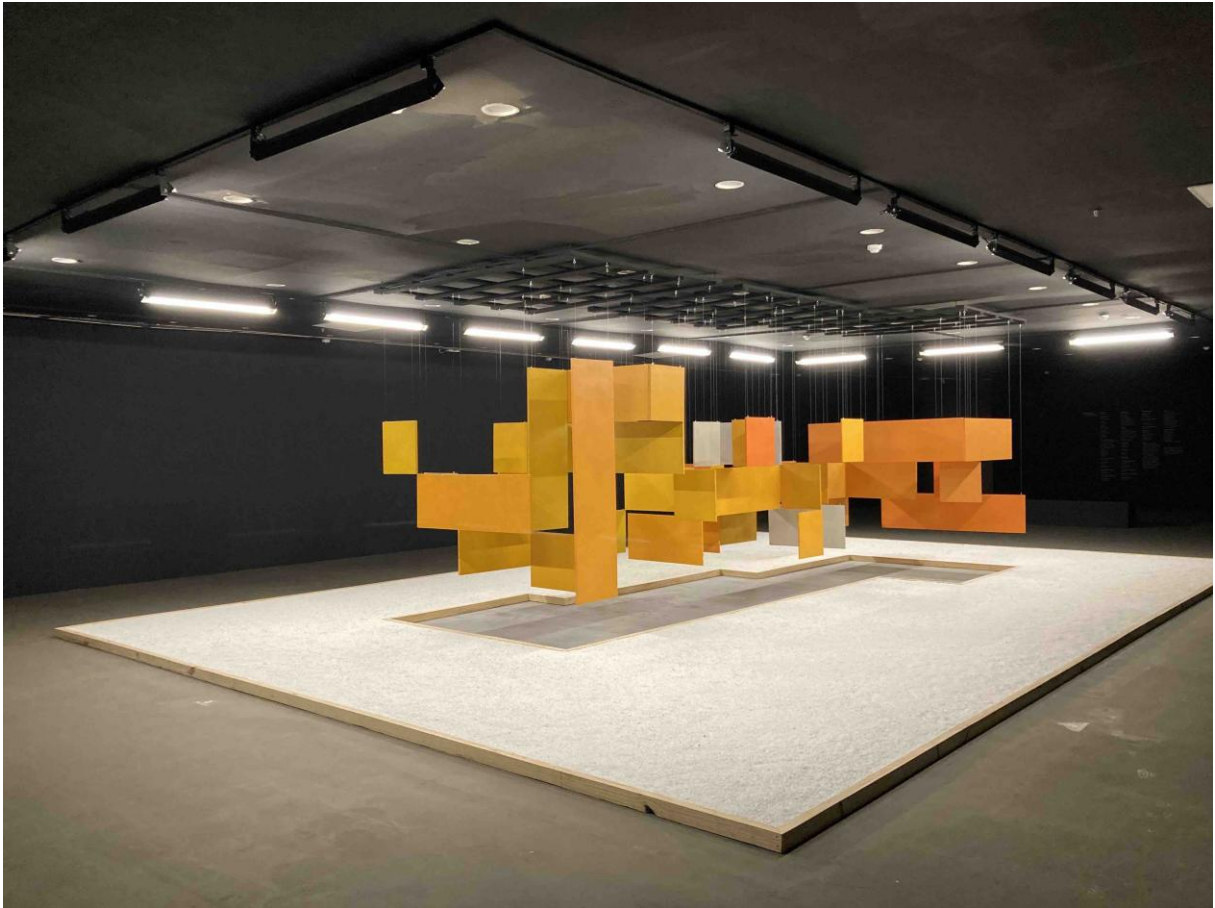


Image 2: *Grande núcleo*, 1966. Hélio Oiticica: Delirium Ambulatorium Exhibition, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Brasília, 2023. Photography by the author.

The *Penetrável* series started in 1960 when Hélio Oiticica exercises how to invite the spectator to the creative process, a timid but clearly opening space for the other. In *Grande Núcleo* (1966) a warm welcome puts spectator to walking inside the provocation brought by the artist and the artwork itself depends on how (s)he will interact and communicate. And by doing so they are creating a liberating and non-contemplative experience, although in huge exhibitions like that, it is ironically prohibited to go inside. Both artworks are already an exercise of spatial communicability. This spatiality is found in an intermediary zone between architecture – thought of as the creation of space, visual arts that abandoned bi-dimensionality; and performance arts that explored new temporalities, specially from *Parangolés* (1964-67) on.



Image 3: *Tenda Parangolé P3 tenda 1*, 1964. Hélio Oiticica: Delirium Ambulatorium Exhibition, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Brasília, 2023. Photography by the author.

Before be assumed as performance, *Parangolé* has appeared as an improvised construction more in connection to *Penetráveis* and *Núcleos*, but the capes and flags were already in presence. The difference was music and how it provokes what only the performance can reach: the creation of unpredicted spatialities with strong ethical implications. But how it happens?

The idea I propose here to understand it better is to imagine a “communicative spatiality” as the public dimension of Oiticica’s art. In other words, when one asks what is ultimately public within so-called public art according to what Oiticica understands as Environmental Art [Arte Ambiental], the answer would be a “spatial communication” that is inevitably (micro)political – what puts him in dialogue with Nicolas Bourriaud, what he had rejected alleging that Oiticica was a vanguardist and was not doing yet the relational art (BOURRIAUD, 2006). I disagree. Bourriaud (2001) insists on a political dimension defending art as “social interstice”, if and only if it invents “forms of sociability”, i.e, provokes non-standard personal relationships to flourish outside artistic contexts. But that is exactly the point for Helio Oiticica, although Oiticica was preoccupied with forms of actions, he was thinking from a liberating perspective. In this sense, more agonistic than actually normative, he has something in common with Claire Bishop philosophy of art. Criticizing Bourriaud’s naïve idea, Bishop (2004; 2012) points out that the relational dimension within participatory art should only expose cultural contradictions, i.e, expose them without having to offer any solution neither norms to urgent social problems.

Let us go back to the argument I have raised about Oiticica’s work that spatial communication is a relationship between distinct spatialities that give birth to a new and unpredictable space (GALLY, 2010; 2015; 2021).

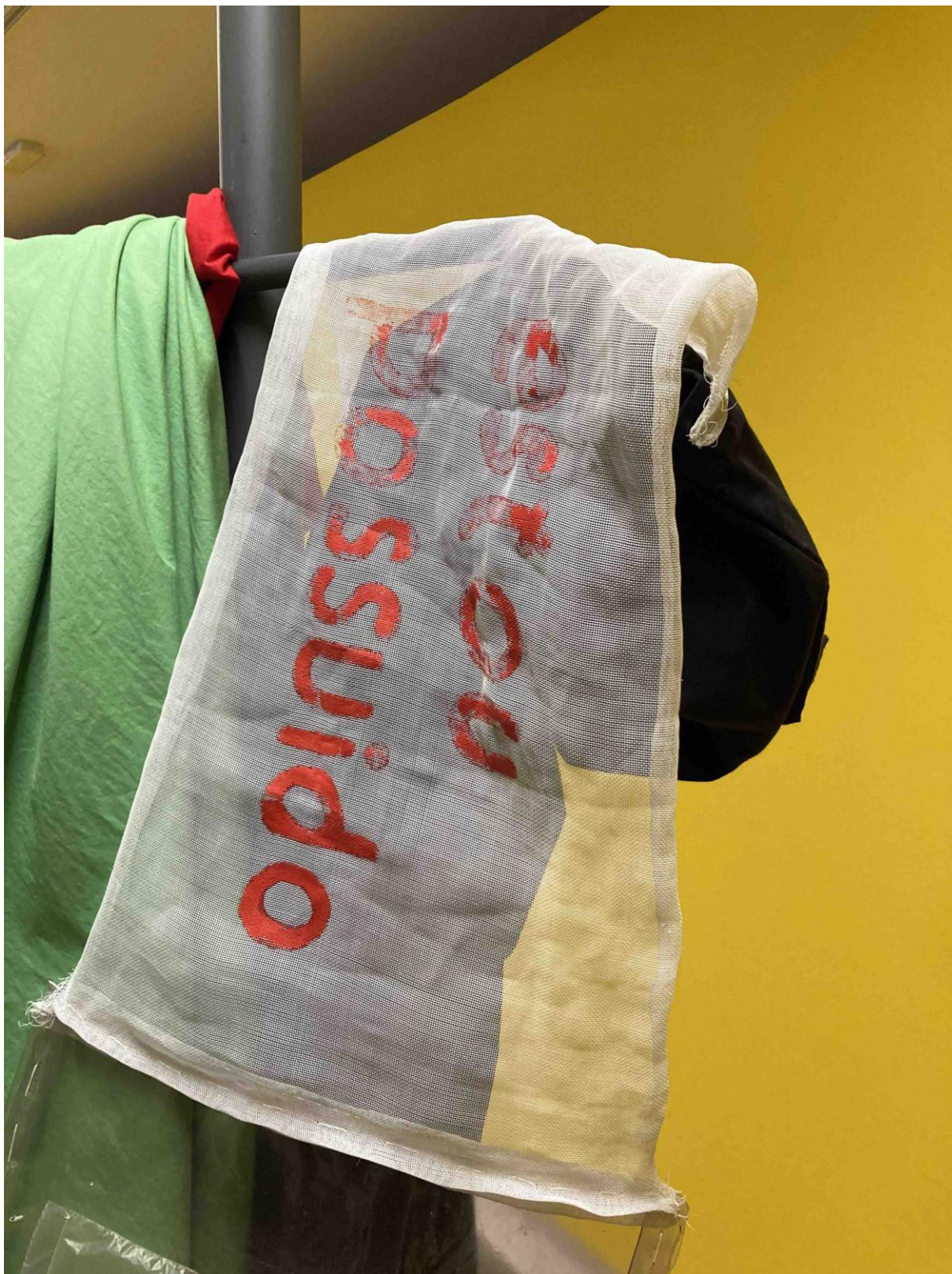


Image 4: P17, *Capa 13* - “Estou possuído” [Cape 13, I am possessed], 1967. Hélio Oiticica: Delirium Ambulatorium Exhibition, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Brasília, 2023. Photography by the author.

I think, especially with the *Parangolés* (1965) exhibit-performance, that when Oiticica brings out capes and flags for spectators to put on to the sound and rhythm of samba [remembering its first appearance in August 1965 in the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro], they become co-creators in a broad, non-individual experience of art.



Image 5: Frame from the short film *H.O.* (1979) by Ivan Cardoso. *Parangolé* in action while playing *Sympathy for the Devil* (The Rolling Stones).

Spectator and artist each create a spatiality as they put themselves in the place of the other. This is only possible because there is in fact, no separation between their positions, and that is what I see in *Parangolés*. What Rancière has recently stated in his criticism of participative or collaborative art denying the separation between spectator and artist, by saying that “tout spectateur est déjà auteur de son histoire” (2008, p.24) had no consequences on Hélio Oiticica thought or artworks, because Oiticica himself was already doing this critic.

These spatialities allow relationships to emerge based on the tension that comes from being together: the artist provokes by putting himself in the place of the spectators, to which the spectators react from an entirely open and creative position, without preconceived expectations or previously established models. In other words, the spatial communication I see happening in his works involves spatialities that communicate through materialities, bodies, sounds, smells, etc., that improvise, thus creating a new spatiality. But does this mean the space is communicational? Yes, because it is the result of bodies coming together and moving to a

rhythm, for example, like a non-choreographed dance of two or more people creating common spaces, as well as when a solitary dance opens other spaces and temporalities. In theorizing this experience and reflecting upon the importance of improvised gestures that create new collective spaces, Oiticica said the following:

Dance is the quintessential search for the direct, expressive act, the immanence of this act; not ballet dancing, which is excessively intellectualized through 'choreography' and seeks transcendence of the act, [...] that is born from the inner rhythm of the collective, that expresses itself as characteristic of popular groups, nations, etc. Improvisation reigns here [...] actually, dance and rhythm are the plastic act itself in its raw form. (OITICICA, 1965: p.73, own translation)

Rhythm is a decisive element for Oiticica because, to him, it meant the discovery of a raw and transparent collective temporality, or the temporality of a space occupied by music that is capable of momentarily and spontaneously uniting people, bodies. Oiticica sees time in space when he identifies the possibility of body connections. But he also sees space in time when he understands that gestures, as the outcomes of dance, create spatial forms. It takes enormous effort to describe and thematize a vital and spontaneous experience of freedom where individuals lose themselves in a collective creation. This is why the anonymous collective genius in fact dissolves the artist/spectator and active/passive boundary, not only because intelligence equality could be presupposed, thus elevating such equality to a bodily level.

But who or what is, therefore, the anonymous collective genius that Oiticica refers to? It is the collectivity he had experimented with in the Mangueira samba rehearsals, dancing to the rhythm he had recently discovered; in belonging to a community that together created *Carnaval* without caring about who did what exactly, because everyone was involved; in the living situations of families (sometime more than one) sharing the same space (like in *ocas*, Brazilian tribal dwellings); and in the sexuality and bodies experimented without taboos in all their carnal vigor. These collectivities of two, four, eight, dozens, or hundreds all mixed up influence the phase when the colors of his paintings became structures, where painting, when the innovative experiences already seen in *Bólides*, *Núcleos*, and in *Penetráveis* project, come together in what he understood as an Environmental Program [Programa Ambiental] in *Parangolés*. It is with *Parangolés* that Oiticica began more radical explorations of this collective temporality created by the meeting of spatialities, which is the basis I am suggesting for comprehending that anonymous genius.

In my understanding, this process also led to communicational spatiality, or a kind of communication thought of spatially. In other words, such space or spatial quality is material,

sonorous, and corporal. Thus, it became extremely important for Oiticica to expose (or even break) the immaterial barriers that provoked the most profound social contradictions, because it would, I believe, enable creating communicational spaces:

Breaking social prejudices and barriers against groups, classes, etc. would be inevitable and essential to having this vital experience. Hence, I discovered the connection between the collective and individual expression – the most important step to achieving it – or in other words, not knowing abstract levels or ‘social layers’ when understanding the totality (OITICICA, 1965: p.73, own translation).

Julio Plaza (1990), an important artist and thinker for the media arts in Brazil, interprets spectator participation in Oiticica’s thinking as one of the consolidation stages in the process of achieving interactivity because it was guided or quasi-imposed rather than “inter-active” or properly free, as himself Plaza has proposed in his artworks. But unlike him, I believe that totality, which for Oiticica was rhythm, imposes nothing with its provocations. Bodies that are free from immaterial constraints are what can open spaces where activities communicate with others and with the music itself. Therefore, Environmental Art is music in Oiticica’s perspective because it waits for spectators that can free themselves. Although it has no intention of freeing anyone or anything, it generates a free event, or an event for freedom. It presupposes the complete or open arrival of those involved so that it can gain existence as an art event. Here I think one could talk about “public creation” or “collective genius” because it both depends on and generates communication between bodies that create without the prejudice that pre-establishes a place and a role for them.

The collective dimension of creating anonymously is the politics that communicational spatiality proposes when it begins to exist. It is a politics that seeks a minimal element of consensus to exist as a communicational exercise through collective temporality. It is a resource required not only for instigating debates or even resistance, but also for agonistic discussion. After all, in order for differences to emerge and be shown, compared, and reflected upon, it is necessary to have a common basis, something even the agonism philosophy of politics, had to maintain: “[...] it needs what I call a ‘conflictual consensus’. We need to accept a common symbolic framework, but within this symbolic framework, of course, there is room for a disagreement” (MOUFFE, 2005, p.165)

I believe Hélio Oiticica’s Environmental Art [Ambient Art] and the resources offered by *Parangolés* and its corresponding phase provide a different meaning for this elementary and subtle consensus that is less symbolic and more concrete. So, it is different because it is not

simply symbolic or formal in argument. It is a minimal consensus and an agreement between bodies, between materialities that can interact to generate other spatialities through *miens* that are necessarily collective or created in common. This does not mean his art promotes or imposes consensus, but rather that we share something in common when our different bodies occupy the same space, from whence other spatialities and temporalities emerge.

Rancière (2008), one of the main spokespersons for disagreement and the philosophy and politics in/of arts, a starting point for a supposed criticism of criticism, saw the spectator and artist as sharing the same intellectual creative forces, and in this sense, are not and cannot be separated. Promoting regions of dissent on the same plane presupposes minimal equality, namely the ability to translate or recreate (RANCIÈRE, 2008, pp. 28-29). Hence, the spectator is not tied to any necessary passivity, nor is the artist connected exclusively to creating. Both are equal in that, as spectators, they are creators; and as creators and translators, they are also spectators. This equal intelligence that Rancière presupposes when thinking about the importance of gestures, I suspect is exactly what Hélio Oiticica discovered, exercised, and explored in his mature works, but from the perspective of simultaneously material and corporal occupation. In this sense, the capacity to translate would be associated to an action, a liberating one, not merely a learning experience or a given meaning.

3. Final remarks

To conclude, the issue for Oiticica was spatiality being translated and associated to the action of living: that of being open and available to the world and the other to see self, this world, and the other go another way. This is an exercise that is both spatial and communicational and conducted anonymously, but that gains existence as occupation through gestures that are always collective or public, never individual. Thus, the effect on society when it reintegrates the collective genius that produced *Parangolés* generates a bold urbanity because it is marked by spontaneity, improvisation, and high levels of generosity: a complete giving of self to building a collective space/time. This reading I am proposing was the beginning or an important foundational moment of what I have defined as being the Spatial Arts from its Ambient perspective, a subject I developed in another piece (2021).

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