

SEJA MARGINAL, SEJA HERÓI

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In: *Structures of Recollection and Perseverance*, Kunstraum

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1937, Hélio Oiticica was an artist who was not afraid of transgression. Growing up among the intellectual middle class and with a Western education, he would later aim to cultivate a specifically Brazilian form of aesthetics and philosophy. This sense of place was something he saw as firmly embedded on the margins of Brazilian society, in the favelas he would visit every day and where he felt truly "alive". Following his mantra "the museum is the world", Oiticica felt that art should be part of everyday life, and believed that it could be found anywhere.

Looking out of a bus window in Rio de Janeiro one day in the early 1960's, Oiticica saw the makeshift structure a homeless person had built for shelter and survival. A piece of light textile was held up by four wooden poles and connected by threads, making it possible to build a wall around the body. Oiticica was fascinated by the simplicity and mutability of the construction, and thus his Parangolé series was born: colorful capes that were meant to be activated by the movements of the person wearing it. The object of a parangolé by itself -- as it also hangs in the exhibition at Kunstraum -- is inherently incomplete, awaiting a participant's contribution.

What does it mean to draw inspiration from something that is foreign to your own reality, and appropriate it according to your own emancipatory projections? Oiticica was infatuated with a structure born out of a precarity he did not know, seeing in it a potential act of transgression and rebellion in terms of what it means to make art. He felt simultaneously close and distant from the reality out of which his parangolés were born, seeing in them the openness and improvisation he strived for, but that he felt was lacking in the circles he grew up in. Oiticica's fascination with the favelas and its community is a familiar trope when it comes to appropriation, especially the artistic kind: it is often the aesthetics of the 'primitive' and the culture of the lower classes that artistic elites seek to elevate and transform into the avant-garde. A canonical work by Oiticica from 1968 perhaps summarises this logic: printed on a bright red flag is the slogan "seja marginal, seja herói", which translates to "be an outlaw, be a hero". A clear countercultural statement, being an outcast here becomes a political position and a desirable life choice.

Apart from Oiticica's parangolé that hangs in 'Structures of Recollection and Perseverance', Jennifer Tee has included many other objects in the

exhibition that similarly speak of an infatuation with the foreign, and of the ambiguity of transgression. For Tee, each of these objects bears a kind of 'resistance' in it -- a force or a will to change existing structures, and push up against conformity. Significantly, these attitudes of resistance are always marked by subtlety and sensitivity, rather than by violence, subverting masculinist forms of rebellion.

In the small photograph hanging on the partition wall, we see Dutch Abstract painter and COBRA artist Eugène Brands wearing an animal-like mask and posing in a dress while retreating into the corner of a room. Taken in 1947 by photographer and ethnographic gallerist Frits Lemaire, the photograph speaks of transgression on multiple levels: Brands appears in between human and animal, male and female, threatening and retreating, domestic and wild. Like many painters of the Dutch COBRA movement, active in the late 1940's, Eugène Brands was interested in bringing the 'uncivilized' into art, emphasizing bright colors, childlike shapes and so-called primitive elements. This was in direct opposition to what the COBRA movement saw as the rigid and oppressive structures of Western society, and the sterility of abstract art at the time. Again, the source material for radicalism is taken from elsewhere, from an Other that Western society has historically denigrated and regarded as lower. But as Brands' disembodied face stares at us from the photograph, he triggers an alternative view of the artist as someone who is not a rational and neutral genius, but rather a hybrid actor, someone deeply intertwined with his own fascinations, and willing to pull us in too.

Then there's Jennifer Tee's upside down palm tree: a highly simple gesture with rich evocations. The palm tree being an immediate signifier of the exotic, the uprootedness of the plant highlights the cultural distance of such a familiar symbol. For Tee, the tree is a reference to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' 1955 memoir 'Tristes Tropiques', where he describes his instant infatuation with the culture and people of Brazil. While his extensive research immersed him in Brazilian communities, he was never able to shake his outsider status, forever remaining a detached observer. The work emphasises parallels between this paradoxical role of the anthropologist and Jennifer Tee's artistic practice: both take the liberty to use references from many different places and cultures and to transform them into a self-reflexive worldview. What further unites Jennifer Tee and Lévi-Strauss is an insistence on incompleteness. As their propositions are marked by an openness towards difference and mutability, we are reminded of Oiticica's claim that his installations gave way to "voids that viewers filled with their imagination".

The ominous, pale face of the 'L'Inconnue de la Seine' speaks of appropriation of a slightly different kind. Around the late 1880s, the dead body of an unidentified young woman was pulled out of the Seine in Paris, France. A pathologist at the Paris morgue was so taken by her beauty,

and the resting smile on her face, that he made a wax plaster cast of her face. In the following years, copies of her death mask became a popular fixture on the walls of artists' homes, and inspired numerous literary works. It's a strange thought: that this 'unknown' girl died in mysterious circumstances, becoming famous in her death in ways she had no control over. The smile, whether real or imagined, was transformed into a philosophical reference, a spiritual curiosity, as everyone spun their own subjective theories as to why she was smiling in death.

These disparate objects, along with the other works and artefacts in the exhibition, are united by Jennifer Tee's logic of the 'soul in limbo'. This is what the artist imagines as a state of the soul characterised by in-betweenness, caught on the border of reality and fantasy, the tangible and the transcendent. In line with Oiticica, the 'soul in limbo' allows for art to become a temporary structure for us to inhabit. At Kunstraum, Jennifer Tee generously welcomes us into her complex web of references, where she has spun a world of her own out of Ancient burial rituals, drowned French girls, a samba dance costume, and domestic plants. Tee does not claim these objects as her own, or assign them fixed meanings. Nor does she detach herself from them completely, in the pastiche, everything goes, post-internet attitude that many artists today seem to adopt. Rather, she assumes responsibility for the artefacts and their historical legacy, embracing their potency to activate different entry points to her practice. The Egyptian canopic jars, which were used to store a deceased person's organs for the afterlife, shed a comical light on Tee's own Pickled Ovaries, two brightly colored vessels purportedly designed for the preservation of female reproductive organs in order to fight the 'biological clock'.

Like Hélio Oiticica, Jennifer Tee appropriates from elsewhere in ways that elevate those influences to another plane, allowing for differences and tensions to emerge and indeterminacy to take center stage. But while Oiticica had the window of a city bus to peer out of and inadvertently encounter a different reality, artists today have access to an almost limitless amount of images and knowledge from which to gain inspiration. Incorporating these myriad influences thus feels highly indicative of what it is like to make art now, and making these processes visible is perhaps today's form of a 'lived' art practice that Oiticica advocated for. This became especially apparent at the opening of 'Structures of Recollection and Perseverance', where artist and performer Marcel Darienzo activated Oiticica's parangolé with samba movements. An abstract object suddenly became a dynamic burst of color, filling the exhibition space and flowing out into the street -- a perfect illustration of how Jennifer Tee's practice is capable of connecting diverse people, objects, and histories together, transforming each of them through their poetic interplay.