

# Art

MONTHLY

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Meat Joy  
Re-performance art

Avant-garde *and* Kitsch  
New painting from the former GDR

Tourism and Travel  
A photographic portrait of the 20th Century

The Russian Avant-garde Book  
A slap in the face of public taste

# Reviews

## ■ Liam Gillick / Hélio Oiticica

Whitechapel Art Gallery London May 3 to June 23

Here are two art environments which result from prolonged reflection on artistic agency yet are polarised by their different conclusions and their historical contexts. Their provocative juxtaposition enhances these shows.

Downstairs is Liam Gillick's 'The Wood Way' which assembles 20 of his recent trademark Plexiglas and aluminium works within a large architectural structure of stripped wooden planks. The title is from the German concept *Holzweg*, meaning a less predictable path taken through life or thought and suggests the indirect, even desultory, manner in which Gillick would like us to approach his work. While conversing under the glow of Gillick's polychrome canopies, he would have us set our thoughts adrift in speculation on future social and political interactions.

Upstairs three of Hélio Oiticica's 'Block-Experiments in Cosmococa', devised three decades ago with filmmaker Neville D'Almeida, invite full-scale surrender to haptic intoxication. *Block Experiments in Cosmococa, Program in Progress, CC5 Hendrix-War* allows us, for instance, to luxuriate in hammocks blasted by tracks from Jimi Hendrix's *War Heroes*, and washed by rapidly-sequenced slide projections of drawings made with

cocaine on the album's cover. These settings develop from Oiticica's concept of 'Creleisure', his neologism for the revolutionary potential of creative countercultures.

Both projects claim their provocation of unexpected and creative experiences is more crucial than their intrinsic properties. Both celebrate the counter-capitalist recreational spectator as key to their agency. Both use extremes of sensory and cultural seduction as their discourse. Writing in relation to his own work, Oiticica acclaimed Jerry Rubin's 1970 Yippie manifesto *Do It; Scenarios of the Revolution* as 'containing an infinity of usable things ... a total work in experimental material'. The 'Cosmococas' were conceived in 1973 as intoxicating bricolages of Brazilian-American pop archetypes whose carefully scripted choreography adopted the inconclusive expenditure of Happenings. Their paraphernalia of nonchalant recreation (which in the work *Block Experiments in Cosmococa, Program in Progress, CC3 Mailerlyn* invites nail filing, inflating balloons, contemplating the cover of Norman Mailer's book *Marilyn* and listening to lounge diva Yma Sumac) envision a camp utopia of engagement through indolence.

In their turn Gillick's works rearticulate the applied modernist vocabularies through whose legacy of flawed utopias we must still clear a way. His installation opens up to vistas of stridently coloured panels with iridescent glitter liberally scattered around the gallery periphery.

Taken as exhibitions rather than as propositions, both projects initially disappoint. Since his death in 1980, Oiticica has been recognised as pioneering many aspects

Liam Gillick  
'The Wood Way' 2002



**Hélio Oiticica –  
Neville D'Almeida**  
*Block Experiments in  
Cosmococa, Program  
in Progress, CC3*  
Malleryn 1973



of late 20th-century practice, most notably in terms of spectator engagement. From making environments of monochrome paintings in the early 60s to the interactive boxes containing pigment, earth and photographs he called 'Bolides', and on to the 'Parangolés' – the customised cloaks as wearable portraits of his barrio friends – Oiticica indicated how art's modernist forms might take on ecstatic and transformative potential.

As part of this legacy, the Oiticica-D'Almeida environments with their rudimentary components of crash pads, bleached-out slides and back-to-back songs have the character of historical reconstructions. These enveloping encounters with materials, images and sound may have been more proportionate to the New York lofts where they originated, but in the sterile setting of the Whitechapel Art Gallery they feel exposed for scrutiny. An exception here is the radical *Neyrótika* of 1973. This rapidly-paced slide series reveals the racial determination of Kenneth Anger's work by using the iconology of Hollywood pinups to construct a gallery of black and Latino homoerotic portraits. Managing to be humorous, camp, poignant and confrontational this astonishing piece anticipates so much of the issue-based and autobiographical photography that has followed.

Oiticica's preference for highly unconventional contexts for art led him to view institutions as workshops for disseminating his subversive concepts rather than as sites for definitive exhibitions and in the end we recognise that the bare economy of the Whitechapel installations bears this out. The 'Cosmococas' were an experiment in using stereotypical icons of sensual

languor to formulate a concept of resistance that would incorporate the contradictions of Brazilian and American leisure cultures. Oiticica felt the activities of barrio criminals to be a quintessential form of anti-authoritarianism and the use of cocaine here may celebrate a subversive Brazilian contribution to American culture as well as criticising the drug's dominance of New York's cultural life in the 70s.

With Gillick we have a different group of paradoxes which in my view are not so easily accounted for. We are asked to accept that this overdetermined vocabulary of modernist visual motifs (deriving from Constructivism and designs for mass housing, and later reprocessed through Donald Judd's work, and in a rather different context by Ashley Bickerton, Dan Graham and Peter Halley) can be taken up again not as projected ideal, nor limit, nor irony, but as motivational contingency. We must take this move on trust since it is not explained how these formally anachronistic objects, developed from rather exhausted orthogonal systems, can become a catalyst for critical sociopolitical thinking, rather than remaining a form of aesthetic necrophilia. Gillick is understandably (if frustratingly) vague about what kind of thinking his work is supposed to stimulate: 'I am working in a nebulous cloud of ideas, which are somewhat partial or parallel rather than didactic'. That these pieces are proposed as indiscernible environmental agents for reflection and dialogue is an important and interesting claim, although one that needs substantiating. Nevertheless, the gallery seems to be the least likely location for this to occur, especially when there is

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Jack Wendler  
selectors

Open Saturday 6 July 6.00 to 9.00  
Lawrence Weiner videos  
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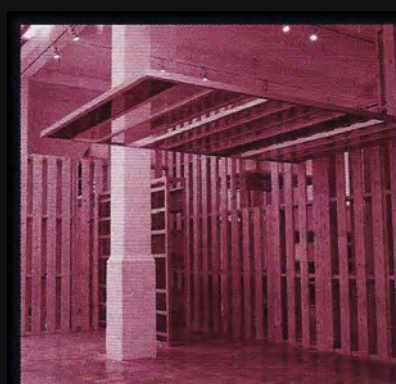
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