

## INTRODUCTION

*When Lives Become Form: Contemporary Brazilian Art, 1960s to the Present*, organized by Yuko Hasegawa, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, is a survey of five decades of works by visual artists, fashion designers, and architects who were part of or inspired by Tropicália. This celebrated moment in Brazilian art is exemplary for its daring break with modernist traditions, cultural hybridity, and openness to the international shift in the delimiting of the art object. The title is derived from the famous 1969 exhibition held at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland, *When Attitudes Become Form*, that featured works which gave concrete form to artistic actions.

The emergence of this exuberant new era in Brazil may best be characterized by Hélio Oiticica's phrase, "Being alive is art itself," distinguishing the cultural scene of the mid-1960s as an "experimental exercise of freedom" in response to the censorship of the emerging military dictatorship, which lasted until 1985. Visual artists such as Oiticica, Lygia Clark, and Lygia Pape were also inspired by a unique concept called *anthropophagia* (cannibalism), introduced in 1928 by the poet and theorist Oswald de Andrade, which formulated for an urban context long-held Brazilian indigenous concepts of ingestion and digestion as a body/spirit convergence.

Hasegawa's Japanese filter on the Brazilian scene is fitting for presentation in the Bay Area and is represented by her selection of works that resonate with the Japanese tradition of improvisation, short poems, and sensitivity towards geometric abstraction in everyday life. Included are several Brazilian-Japanese artistic producers, including legendary painter Tomie Ohtake, younger artists such as Rogério Degaki, and the fashion designer Jum Nakao. This exhibition represents a rare opportunity to trace the legacy of Tropicália and the long-term effects of its break with modernism, which marked the beginning of a more fully realized Brazilian art that continues to flourish in the postcolonial contemporary period.

## TROPICÁLIA

The artists associated with Tropicália were the first to legitimize the appropriation and transformation of a broad range of cultural elements, from high art to mass culture, to establish a Brazilian direction for contemporary visual arts, music, film, theater, literature, and design. The Tropicalist moment took its name from an installation created in 1967, by the visionary artist Hélio Oiticica, which incorporated clichéd tropical symbols such as palm trees and parrots that metaphorically consume popular media. This work embraced an aesthetic of informality, interactivity, and cultural hybridity and demanded a new type of participatory viewership. Tropicália also became the title of one of the most celebrated albums in Brazilian music history, featuring Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and others.

The Tropicália moment in Brazilian culture, lasting from 1967 to 1972, broke with modernist traditions during a time when an emerging military dictatorship was installing censorship orders

and limits on freedom of speech. Syncretic and innovative, Tropicália was inclusionary rather than exclusionary in its approach to artistic products and open to vernacular art forms, pop styles, and mass culture. Since then it has been a continuing source of inspiration for several generations of artists, writers, and musicians shaping the country's national culture.

Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* is a metaphorical explanation of the practice of cannibalism by the Tupi, Brazil's largest indigenous group. For the Tupis, certain body parts of the enemy tribe deemed to be superior were eaten in order to gain the qualities and strengths of that portion of the victim. The aim was not to emulate the strengths of the other tribe, but to incorporate those strengths by ingesting, digesting, and absorbing the flesh and thereby strengthen oneself. Andrade employed this concept, which was lodged deep within Brazilian national history and consciousness, as a critique of the political, economic, and cultural legacy of the colonial artistic and intellectual milieu.

In the 1950s the experimental practices of the Neo-Concrete artists transformed the formalist strategies of the European constructivist models, stemming from Cubism and Suprematism, into a more expressive art form by infusing subjective and popular elements into geometric abstraction. Some of these artists later became identified with Tropicália. Perhaps due to the political context, artists of this period were searching for new ways to express their desire for freedom in both the individual and collective spheres. In addition, **Hélio Oiticica** and **Lygia Clark**, central figures in Tropicália, actively criticized the art establishment's elitism and fetishization of the art object. **Hélio Oiticica** was influenced by his observations and experience with the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, including their social context, music, and dance. Through his artworks he validated and celebrated art forms of the marginalized classes such as informal architecture and samba dance forms that had been scorned by the powerful consumers of art and their circles. **Lygia Clark** asserted that the boundary between the art object and the viewer should be eliminated all together. She devised simple exercises that stimulated the unconscious through the viewer's participation in her sensorial, experimentalist works. **Lygia Pape** also emphasized the viewer's physical relationship to the artwork within the parameters of geometrical form and experience of color.

Architecture and urban design were poised to express this new consciousness on a larger scale. **Lina Bo Bardi** strove to integrate everyday life styles as well as the natural environment into her building schemes, which is demonstrated by her most acclaimed project and a landmark of Brazilian modern architecture, the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP). More recently, **Ruy Ohtake** collaborated with the residents of the Heliópolis *favela* in São Paulo to transform their neighborhood by repainting the outside of their own houses, based on Ohtake's color patterns, in addition to designing new cultural centers, a cinema, and sports facilities.

## POST-TROPICÁLIA

The demise of the military dictatorship in 1985, after twenty years of repression and cultural isolation, was the marker for the emergence of a new direction for Brazilian contemporary art.

This new moment, fuelled by the restoration of freedom of expression and thought, also coincided with the upsurge of the art market worldwide. Echoing a European tendency towards the revitalization of traditional media, historical references, and self-expression, the 1980s saw the entry of Brazilian artists, producing work inspired by national references—Neo-Concretism and Tropicália—as well as contemporary influences from abroad, into the global art scene. Concurrently, the artists of the Tropicália generation were becoming known outside the country, contributing to a revision of the history of conceptual art. The 1980s also ushered in the revival of painting and less politicized art works. Free from the immediate issues of politics, artists working during this time relied more directly on their personal histories, creating works that delved into subjective emotional realms.

**Leonilson**'s drawings and fabric and embroidered works, treating autobiographical themes such as his struggle with HIV/AIDS, display a hand-made simplicity and intimacy and expression of pure emotion. While the personal replaced the political in the decades after Tropicália, evidence of its influence in other ways can be easily traced in the works of this period. Following Hélio Oiticica, **Beatriz Milhazes**'s richly textured, color-saturated works based on floral motifs transform tropical clichés into dense compositions. Lygia Clark's concepts of perception by interaction and bodily experience are incorporated into **Ernesto Neto**'s biomorphic forms of transparent fabric filled with Styrofoam and spices, meant to engage all the senses. These and other artists of this generation transformed the localized references of Tropicália into a more universally recognized visual language for international audiences.

## REVIVAL OF TROPICÁLIA

While the concepts of Tropicália had a place in the work of the artists of the post-dictatorship era, the most recent generation of artists to emerge more wholeheartedly embraced Tropicália in all of its entirety. Attuned to international attention and fascination with the 1960s and 1970s, they updated the spirit of the past in their work while maintaining relevance for the present. This new generation catapulted local historical sources into a global context while preserving the singularity of their Brazilian identity.

The return to the concepts of Tropicália centered on everyday objects, street culture, and interaction with the everyday environment. Improvisation and the use of materials at hand replaced the thoroughly thought out and controlled fabrication methods of the 1990s. In addition to the visual arts, these concepts also took hold in the fields of design, fashion, and architecture.

Fashion designers **Ronaldo Fraga** and **Isabela Capeto** embrace uniquely Brazilian vernacular references. Fraga brings traditional culture into his refined runway shows through a craft-based style, while Capeto references traditional fabrics, handcrafting appliqué patterns and openly adapting stereotypical carnival aesthetics and images into her work. **Erika Verzutti** depicts tropical nature, fruits, and colors in her watercolors and sculptures. **Marepe** combines everyday objects he found locally in Bahia and subtly alters their meaning. In Marepe's hands these

objects are imbued with a poetic sentiment and the rich sensibilities of the local culture. Street artists **osgemeos**, using paint rollers and spray cans, create highly stylized characters set onto the walls of the urban landscape. The work of the artist collective **assume vivid astro focus (avaf)** involves large-scale installations incorporating colorful psychedelic imagery, taking the Tropicalist ideal further into the sphere of carnival pleasures.

The exhibition of over a hundred works, created between 1951 and 2009, by twenty-four artists and artist collectives provides a window into the evolution of Brazilian art as both connected to a national identity based on the urban and natural worlds, as well as a tribute to the relationship between people and their everyday surroundings. Even now, *anthropophagia* and its metaphors still hold sway with artists grappling with the most current conditions of this deeply spirited culture.