

## Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica Letters//1968-69

*Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark shared an intense artistic dialogue throughout their careers. Excerpts of their correspondence below trace the evolution of their thinking, from interactive sculptural objects to group events that addressed external relations (Oiticica) and interior psychological states (Clark). For both artists, a key term was *vivências*, or lived experience: the body's heightened sensory presence as authentic, immediate, and resistant to ideological capture.*

26 October 1968

Dearest HélioCaetaGério,<sup>1</sup>

[...]

Since *Caminhando* [Walking; 1963], the object for me has lost its significance, and if I still use it, it is so that it becomes a mediator for participation. With the sensorial gloves, for example, it gives the measure of the act and the miraculous character of the gesture, with its spontaneity, which seems to have been forgotten. In all that I do, there really is the necessity of the human body, so that it expresses itself or is revealed as in a first [primary] experience. For me it doesn't matter whether I am avant-garde or placed within new theories. I can only be what I am and I still intend to produce those films in which man is at the centre of the event. For me, the stones that I come across, or the plastic bags, are one and the same: they are there only to express a proposition. I don't see why we should negate the object simply because we have constructed it. It is important that it should be expressive. If I feel in my life today the state that you feel and define as hallucinatory, it is because through these propositions I have learnt to feel these same moments, and if I had not done so, perhaps I would have never discovered these same moments that are fantastic. What I want is to avoid schematizing anything, and each day eat a new 'pear', to see if it's good or not. Mario's [Pedrosa] term, as always is excellent, but for me it is not about the moment of chance but the 'fruit' of the moment: Fruit in the fruit sense, such is the flavour and the sensuality of eating, of living this moment. I also found it very good when you said that already in the rudimentary element the open structures are liberated despite the fact that we use it precisely because we no longer believe in the aesthetic concept. At the end your text is splendid with regard to the poetic lived experience [*vivência poética*] and the subjective charge, only I do not believe, as I mentioned above, in the marginality of who proposes;

what's great is this diversity of positions, since as long as there is contradiction and negation there is also confirmation of a reality.

[...]

Thousand of kisses to this new HélioCaetaGério!

Clark

**8 November 1968**

Lygia, my Dear

[...]

Your letter, as always, was fantastic. This issue of being deflowered by the spectator is the most dramatic thing: in fact everyone is, since beyond the action there is the moment-consciousness of each action, even if this consciousness is modified later on, or incorporates other lived experiences [*vivências*]. This business of participation is really terrible since it is what is actually inconceivable that manifests itself in each person, at each moment, as if taking possession: like you, I also felt this necessity of killing the spectator or participator, which is a good thing since it creates an interior dynamic with regard to the relation. Contrary to what has been happening a lot lately, it shows that there is no aestheticization of participation: the majority creates an academicism of the relation or of the idea of spectator participation, to such an extent that it has left me with doubts about the idea itself. The other day with [Mário] Schemberg I discussed this issue a lot over here: he thinks in fact that there is no participation; or this issue, which is perhaps due to his exaggerated generalization with regard to this. What I think is that the formal aspect of this issue was overcome some time ago, by the 'relation in itself', its dynamic, by the incorporation of all the lived experiences of precariousness, by the non-formulated; and sometimes what appears to be participation is a mere detail of it, because the artist cannot in fact measure this participation; since each person experiences it differently. This is why there is this unbearable experience [*vivência*] of ours, of being deflowered, of possession, as if he, the spectator, would say: 'Who are you? What do I care if you created this or not? Well, I am here to modify everything, this unbearable shit that proposes dull experiences, or good ones, libidinous, fuck you, and all of this because I devour you, and then I shit you out; what is of interest only I can experience and you will never evaluate what I feel and think, the lust that devours me.' And the artist comes out of it in tatters. But it is good. It is not, as one could imagine, a question of masochism, it's just the true nature of the business: It's funny, something I experienced the other day has, to a certain extent, a relation to all of this; I'm not sure if you'll agree: the idol, the artist person who uses himself in order to

express. Caetano [Veloso] for example, when he sings and does all of that, is totally devoured, in an almost physical sense: once coming out from Chacrinha [music show recorded for TV], I saw in the corridors millions of students, adolescents, in an incredible fury, grabbing him to ask for autographs, but in reality it was not only that. The true, profound meaning of all of that was of a veritable coitus - Caetano reacted passively, *relax* [originally in English], as you would say, but the whole thing scared me profoundly, such a collective fury in contrast with the noble and delicate intentions of Caetano: a poet, ultra-sensitive, all of a sudden is thrown into an arena of wild beasts, but beasts not in the sense of animals from which you have to defend yourself physically more than psychologically, but human-beasts, like me and you, children almost, each one projecting their own psychological charge in a terrible manner. Something worse happened: at that crap song festival, during the São Paulo preliminaries that I watched on TV, the fury of the organized fan-clubs in the audience functioned as acclamation, equal but in reverse, but ultimately booing and applause become identified with devouring. The audience screamed, booted like I have never seen before, to the point that it was no longer possible to sing. When the song was selected to go on to the next stage, then it was even worse: it was as if the intellectual intention of destruction became conscious of itself. If Caetano had been at people's reach he would have been destroyed in a horrendous manner: everyone shouted queer, queer, queer, and threw objects, bits of wood at him and the Mutantes [pop/rock band inspired by the Beatles and psychedelia] and then they turned their backs to the stage. Then the Mutantes also turned their backs to the audience and Caetano stopped singing and said the most dramatic and profound things I have ever seen, not due to the words themselves but in the sense of their closure and what they represented at that moment. It was incredible, and do you know what it reminded me of? The scene with Abel Gance's Napoleon in front of the tribunal with that travelling that Gance made, imitating the movement of the sea, remember? This is what is terrible: the disjunction between the always noble, etc., intentions of the artist and the fury of the participatory relation. I believe that that moment revealed many things for me, especially the 'well nourished' appearance of people, of the destructive fury; as if that moment of lack of repression was a chance for destruction, which to an extent it always is. But it is a good test of the validity of the proposition: to not accept passively is more important than to accept everything, and in this dynamic of the relation new possibilities arise which, even if painful, are essential. I believe that perhaps in Venice you experienced this in relation to the work-spectator-creator, and the will to kill him, to push aside people's unbearable lust; this is important within the dialectics of the issue; because giving does not push aside the taking; on the contrary, it

stimulates it, in an erotic way too. As Marcuse would say, it liberates the Eros that is repressed by repressive activities: the relax in participation is a non-repressive activity, which confuses and liberates truly unpredictable forces, and in this, I believe; you base yourself on your own experience, which is also highly revolutionary; this is the great current issue.

I believe that our great innovation is precisely the form of participation, that is, its meaning, which is where we differ from what is proposed in super-civilized Europe or in the USA: we have here a far rougher scene, perhaps, because we have reached these issues in a more violent manner. For example, your black with white line phase, or even the one before that, even the breaking of the frame, this type of painting contains a *sui generis* dramaticity that did not occur even in Argentina, since the Argentines, to a certain extent, are more civilized, more European than us: Brazil is a form of synthesis of the peoples, races, habits, where the European speaks but does not speak so loudly; except in the universalist, academic fields, which are not those of 'cultural creation' but those of closure. Creation, even in Tarsila [do. Amaral] and especially in Oswaldo de Andrade,<sup>2</sup> possesses a subjective charge that differs extremely from the rationalism of the European, this is our 'thing',<sup>3</sup> that Guy Brett was able to understand so well and that the Europeans will have to swallow, in fact with appetite since they are fed up with everything and it looks as if that saturated civilization is drying their imagination.

[...]

Kiiiiisses,  
Hélio

**14 November 1968**

Dear Hélio

[...]

As far as the idea of participation is concerned, as always there are weak artists who cannot really express themselves through thought, so instead they illustrate the issue. For me this issue does indeed exist and is very important. As you say, it is exactly the 'relation in itself' that makes it alive and important. For example, this has been the issue in my work since the sixties; if we go back even further to 1955; I produced the maquette for the house: 'build your own living space'. But it is not participation for participation's sake and it is not a fact of saying, like [Julio] Le Parc's group [GRAV; Groupe de recherche d'art visuel] does; that art is an issue for the bourgeoisie. It would be too simple and linear. There is no depth in this simplicity and nothing is truly linear. They negate precisely

what is important: thought. I think that now we are those who propose, and through the proposition there should be thought, and when the spectator expresses this proposition, he is in reality gathering the characteristic of a work of art of all times: thought and expression. And for me all of this is connected. From the option, the act, to immanence as a means of communication, and the lack of any myth exterior to man and more so, in my fantasy, it connects itself with the anti-universe where things are there because it happens now. It would be perhaps the first occasion in which consciousness of the actual absolute is achieved in the now. Another thing that I am very impressed with is today's youth who, like us, want to give themselves meaning from the inside towards the outside as opposed to, as it has always been, from the outside towards the inside. True participation is open and we will never be able to know what we give to the spectator-author. It is precisely because of this that I speak of a well, from inside which a sound would be taken, not by the you-well but by the other; in the sense that he throws his own stone... My experience of deflowering is not quite the same as yours. It is not myself who is deflowered but the proposal itself. And when I cry about this phenomenon it is not because I feel wounded in my personal integrity, but because they ruin everything and I have to start constructing the work all over again. On the contrary, I don't even put on my masks and clothes, but I hope someone will come along and give meaning to the formulation. And the more diverse the lived experiences are, the more open is the proposition and it is therefore more important. In fact, I think that now I am proposing the same type of issue that before was still achieved via the object: the empty-full, the form and its own space, the organicity... Only now, with these new sensorial masks, it is man who discovers himself in all his plenitude; and even when he fills the plastic bags (what is important now is also to make the mask) he feels that he is casting himself (in the sense that he exhales the air and the bag takes shape). This same space that comes out of him, as he becomes conscious of his own bodily space that goes beyond him, takes a form that would fill the actual space around him. I for instance, feel that after formulating these large plastic bags with my own lungs, when lying down on the floor in my flat I could touch, with a simple gesture, the ceiling, which is no less than 6 metres high... It is as if I had created an egg of space that belongs to me and that embraces me. It would be the most organic *Breathe with me* [1966] yet less illustrative! Man when putting on these masks turns himself into an authentic beast, since the mask is his appendix, not like the first ones where there was in fact a *real mask*. They turn themselves into monsters like elephants or enormous birds with great crops. More and more [Mário] Pedrosa's sentence functions for my work: 'man as the object of himself'. As you see, participation is increasingly greater. There no longer is the object to express any concept but the spectator

who reaches, more and more profoundly, his own self. He, man, is now a 'beast' and the dialogue is now with himself, to the extent of the organicity and also the magic that he is able to borrow from within himself. As far as Caetano's problem is concerned, it is different since he is affected as a person but is *an idol*; he is the opposite of myself, who no longer possesses anything, not even as a creative artist who provides what is still a total oeuvre that in the end is my self. Each day I loose more of my apparent personality, entering into the collective in search of a dialogue and accomplishing myself through the spectator. And the crises, when they arrive, appear in a more brutal manner, much more painful, yet they pass by quicker than before...

[...]

Thousand of kisses and do write!

Clark

**27 June 1969**

Lygia; my love

[...]

Your letter:

I very much liked the ideas and incredible relations concerning you; that I wrote about in another part of the enormous text that I prepared for the symposium I mentioned: I'll translate a section and I am sure you will love it, since, in fact after I wrote it, I discovered in Marcuse's most recent book a chapter in which he proposes a 'biological society' that would be unrepressed and based upon a direct chain of communication, the same thing I had thought about when writing about your issues; see below in a certain passage of the text:

'... the most recent experiences of Lygia Clark have led her to fascinating proposals as she discovered that certainly her communication will have to be more of an *introduction* to a practice that she calls *cellular*: From person to person, this is an improvised corporal dialogue that can expand into a total *chain* creating something of an *all encompassing biological entity* or what I would call a *crepractice*.<sup>4</sup> The idea of creating such relations goes beyond that of a facile participation, such as in the manipulation of objects: there is the search for what could be described as a *biological ritual*, where interpersonal relations are enriched and establish a *communication of growth* at an open level. I say open level, because it does not relate to an object-based communication, of subject-object, but to an interpersonal practice that leads towards a truly open communication: a me-you relation, rapid, brief as the actual act; no corrupted benefit, of interest, should be expected – observations such as "this is nothing" or "what is it about?", etc., should be expected; an introduction as initiation is

necessary. The elements that are used in all of these process-based experiences; a vital process, are those that are a part of it instead of being isolated objects: they are *orders in a totality...*'

[...]

A Kiss for you,

Hélio

1. *HélioCaetaGério* – composite name for Hélio Oiticica, Caetano Veloso and Rogério Duarte, suggesting that Hélio was at that moment immersed in his ideas and activities respectively with the singer/composer and the graphic designer/poet/composer [Translator]. For further reading on the collaboration between Oiticica, Veloso, Duarte and others see *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art/São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005).
2. The modernist poet Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) was the author of polemical texts on Brazilian cultural identity which influenced these artists, particularly his notion of 'cultural cannibalism' in the 'Anthropophagite Manifesto' published in *Revista de Antropofagia*, No. 1 (São Paulo, May 1928), translated in Dawn Adès, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820–1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
3. 'Pla': slang meaning approximately 'context'. [Translator]
4. 'Cre': from create, see: Oiticica's concept of *Creleisure*. [Translator]

Letters between Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, reprinted in Luciano Figueiredo (ed), *Lygia Clark - Hélio Oiticica: Cartas (1964-74)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1996) 61–2, 69–73, 83–6; 121–2. Translated by Michael Asbury, 2006.