

Gimme WORLD-SHELTER: The Private Cosmococas and Hélio Oiticica's Relationship with Domestic Space

By Daniela Mayer

Curator of *Cosmic Shelter: Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida's Private Cosmococas*

Oh, a storm is threatening
My very life today
If I don't get some shelter
Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away

— “Gimme Shelter,” The Rolling Stones, 1969

Four years after Mick Jagger and Keith Richards penned the antiwar anthem “Gimme Shelter,” Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980) dissected the song’s lyrics in his text for “MUNDO-ABRIGO” [WORLD-SHELTER], a proposition for free experimentation.¹ Partially inspired by their verse, the artist crafted his own definition of shelter:

shelter: of the first layer-protection of the body
to SHELTER collective-total in which the world is refuge: shelter-protection: collective: which
means: not the sum of individual shields but global shelter-refuge.²

Having left Brazil to maintain his creative freedom and avoid the ire of the nation’s authoritarian military dictatorship (1964–85), Oiticica understood the need for such protective dwellings. Living in self-exile from 1970 to 1978 in New York City—which he dubbed “Babylon” in tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of its decadent excesses—the artist blurred art and life as he created experimental domestic refuges for personal delirium in the margins of Manhattan. Less than a month after Oiticica dreamt up “MUNDO-ABRIGO,” he and the Brazilian filmmaker Neville D’Almeida (born 1941) completed the last four of their five *Bloco-Experiências in Cosmococa–Programa in Progress* [Block-Experiments in Cosmococa–Program in Progress, 1973], or *Cosmococas*, in his East Village loft, known as Loft 4.³

Part of Oiticica’s larger series of *quasi-cinemas* (1973–75), each room-size, participative installation features cacophonous soundscapes, fragmentary slide projections, cocaine drawings, and tactile elements that engage spectators’ full sensory potential. Underscoring the artists’ radical beliefs in individual liberation and social critique, the *Cosmococas* act as dynamic sites for Oiticica’s twin philosophies: *crelazer* [creleisure], which stipulates that unprescribed leisure

¹ AHO/PHO 0194/73. Originally written in a mix of Portuguese and English. Translated by the author. Quotes are originally in Portuguese unless otherwise stated.; Call numbers for documents hosted by the Arquivos Hélio Oiticica by the Projeto Hélio Oiticica (AHO/PHO) will be presented as above throughout this essay.

² Translated by the author. Ibid.

³ Oiticica created four additional *Cosmococas* between September 1973 and March 1974. Of these, only *CC6 Coke Head's Soup* was completed during his lifetime.

is integral to creativity, and the *supra-sensorial* [super-sensorial], which aims, in his words, at the expansion of participants' "habitual sensory capacities, to the discovery of their internal creative center, of their dormant expressive spontaneity, conditioned to the quotidian."⁴

For each of the original *Cosmococas*, Oiticica and D'Almeida crafted two sets of instructions for display: one for public institutions and another for private, domestic spaces. Although the series was not formally shown until 1992, the latter instructions were open propositions that viewers could set up in their homes without prior initiation into any culture—be it “high” or “low”—allowing people of any status or background to enjoy the *Cosmococas*.⁵ The artists further invited improvisation according to each participant's vision and means. While the looping soundtracks and projected images of cocaine-covered figures—Luis Buñuel, Yoko Ono, Marilyn Monroe, John Cage, and Jimi Hendrix, respectively—remain consistent throughout parallel versions, their installations vary widely.⁶ The public *Blocos* include unorthodox locales with oversized cushions, foam geometric objects, balloons, hammocks, and even a swimming pool. In contrast, the private versions are relatively uncomplicated, using readily available materials like bedsheets and water basins. While these everyday settings and furnishings improve the accessibility and achievability of the private *Cosmococas*, they do not negate their *supra-sensorial* potential. Rather, these presentations build on Oiticica's concept of the domestic environment, reconstructing his activation of participants' “creative centers.”⁷

In 1964, Oiticica began frequenting the marginalized *comunidade* [community] of Mangueira in Rio de Janeiro for rehearsals with the neighborhood's renowned samba school, subsequently befriending bandits, brothel owners, and drug dealers. These relationships influenced his self-described “ethical moment”—his desire to resist—and set in motion a series of artistic interventions that would prove influential in developing the *Cosmococas*.⁸ The artist's relationship with Mangueira directly inspired several socially directed series, including his environmental practice of Dadaist anti-art or, rather, anti-architecture.⁹ Initially created for museum exhibitions and inspired by the makeshift, composite dwellings he encountered in Mangueira, these provisional spaces integrated the metaphysically liberating aspects of underground/marginal culture (or Oiticica's perception of it). Beyond negating traditions of structural integrity, longevity, and function, they represented “anti-”architecture in their political stance: against the policies of the Brazilian authoritarian regime, critical of museums that had begun to institutionalize the provocations of the avant-garde, and resistant to the oppression of nonconforming social behavior. Oiticica hoped his in-gallery, semi-private structures would

⁴ Translated by the author. AHO/PHO 0730/68.

⁵ The *Cosmococas*' illicit subject matter kept them clandestine, except among a select audience of friends, until 1992, twelve years after Oiticica's death.

⁶ Each *Bloco* centers on a public figure that the artistic duo viewed as a countercultural revolutionary for their impact on art and culture-at-large. Neville D'Almeida, in discussion with the author on February 12, 2021; *CC4 Nocagions* does not include John Cage's likeness, but rather his name on the cover of his book *Notations* (1969).

⁷ AHO/PHO 0730/68. Translated by the author.

⁸ AHO/PHO 0131/68.

⁹ Beginning in 1966, Oiticica appropriated the Dadaist term “anti-art” to characterize his artistic practice. The term “anti-architecture” is the author's own and is a lens to understand Oiticica's anti-art environmental constructions. AHO/PHO 0253/66.

generate *crelazer*, ultimately emancipating visitors from social-conditioning outside the gallery. He presented in several successful exhibitions in Rio de Janeiro, London, and New York, but by 1969 had come to repudiate formal art spaces as inadequate for conveying his radical behavioral theories.¹⁰ Once in New York, he turned his focus outward through a collection of public installations set in Central Park, the *Subterranean Tropicália Projects* (1971–72). However, bureaucratic and access constraints prevented the work's realization.

Delving deeper into diasporic otherness, Oiticica built protective zones for his increasingly rebellious set of personal politics and behaviors linked to his charged, outsider status as a (legal) South American expatriate, impoverished artist, gay man, cocaine enthusiast, and, eventual, drug dealer. The artist scavenged and repurposed materials to construct six *Babylonests* (c. 1971–74) inside Loft 4. The barrack-like nests were divided into three double-stacked groups enclosed by ad-hoc, frequently changing translucent materials. They served multiple functions, as sites for Oiticica's artworks, creative practice, and openly libertine proclivities for sex and drug use. Brazilian poet Waly Salomão, a frequent guest, described the invigorating scene:

The NEST [of Hélio] was equipped with a TV set and remote control zapping non-stop, newspapers, radio, recorder, cassette tapes, books, magazines, telephone (the phone not underutilized as a mere pragmatic means but as compulsive reel-talk with its vivid interjections seemingly improvised like hot jazz, *talking blues* and rap) camera, slide projector, viewfinder, boxes of classified slides, tissue box, disposable bottles and cups, straws, blade-cut agate stone, etc. etc. NESTS and its archipelago structures: neither solid nor linear nor insular: like a television that transcodes the most private corner into windows open to others and to the world: WORLD-SHELTER.¹¹

Housing a revolving group of friends and lovers, Oiticica's *Babylonests* were a communal, all-encompassing "WORLD-SHELTER" and a shelter from the world; a clandestine cosmos filled with underground *supra-sensorial* endeavors and anarchist ideas.¹²

Oiticica's ability to manipulate his WORLD-SHELTER according to his creative whims informed many aspects of the private *Cosmococas*. The design for the first *Bloco, CCI Trashiscapes*, seemingly takes direct inspiration from Loft 4's aesthetics. In the public version, cocaine-embellished slides featuring "assorted props" and media from the *Babylonests* are projected onto two walls as guests recline on large cushions on the floor, filing their nails and listening to Northeastern Brazilian music.¹³ The combination of unadulterated leisure and *supra-sensorial* elements made the work an open arena for *crelazer* that disrupted all sense of urgency.

¹⁰ Oiticica made an exception for the 1970 *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. AHO/PHO 0486/69.

¹¹ Waly Salomão, "UM REI VORTICISTA: O ELEMENTO HÉLIO" in *Hélio Oiticica: Qual é o Parangolé?* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 2015) 9–20, 14. Translated by the author.

¹² *Ibid.*; Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, "TROPICAMP: PRE- and POST-TROPICÁLIA at Once: Some Contextual Notes on Hélio Oiticica's 1971 Text," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 28 (2011): 4–15, 11, <https://doi.org/10.1086/662966>.

¹³ AHO/PHO 0300/73.

As explained by Salomão, “Time is money, no. Time is pleasure. It’s the pleasure principle that rules, and the reality principle is suspended.”¹⁴ Still distorting time, the private *Bloco* transmutes the frenetic energy of Oiticica’s NEST to share his personal, quotidian pleasures. Participants are requested to scan daily newspaper ads as slides appear on a screen, a color TV plays, and an FM radio blasts rock music. The simultaneous audiovisual elements mimic the sensorial (over)stimulation of Loft 4. An outlandish environment is unnecessary; Oiticica’s sanctuary was inherently *supra-sensorial*.

The artist’s proven understanding that, in the comfort of an unobserved home, one could already achieve the *supra-sensorial* according to their preference, shifts the impetus behind the private *Blocos*.¹⁵ The public versions inspire guests to break norms and awaken their “dormant expressive spontaneity”; the private versions encourage participants to *act* on their newfound creativity.¹⁶ For example, the private *CC2 Onobject*, accompanied by Yoko Ono’s intense vocalizations, includes four slide-sets of Ono’s book *Grapefruit* (1964) projected onto unspecified surfaces covered in white bedsheets. Emphasizing the ambiguity of the suggestions, the instructions continue, “perhaps use them [bedsheets] to cover furniture/inside or bushes and trees/outside,” before concluding with the mandate, “IMPROVISE and PROJECT.”¹⁷ Likewise, *CC3 Maileryn*’s private specifications include two opposing slideshows of Norman Mailer’s *Marilyn: A Biography* (1973), projected onto a wall and a surface of either “white velvet (real or artificial)” or “white/thick/shiny vinyl” as participants transfer between basins of water. The *Maileryn* also invites improvisation that is both “INVENTIVE and MUSICAL.”¹⁸ In each *Bloco*, participants are given options that enable binary decision-making and larger imaginative choices that encourage progressive confidence in their own artistic prowess. As such, participants are transformed into full collaborators in the creative process, responsible for their unique *supra-sensorial* experiences.¹⁹

The juxtaposition between Oiticica’s behavioral expectations in domestic and institutional spaces is best conveyed by *CC5 Hendrix-War*. An homage to Jimi Hendrix, in the public *Bloco*, Hendrix’s visage on his posthumous album *War Heroes* (1972) surrounds guests as they lie cocooned in hammocks listening to his wailing instrumentals. Rather than expect museum-goers to visibly lose themselves in the music, the individual hammocks sway as a substitute for rawer movement. Contrastingly, the private *Hendrix-War* engages all senses in what can be understood as an all-day happening with (a minimum of) four slideshows played in different rooms and multiple sound-systems. Giving a clear directive, the instructions declare

¹⁴ Salomão, “COSMOCOCA” in *Qual é o Parangolé?*, 79–81, 81. Translated by the author.

¹⁵ The possibility that the private *Cosmococas* could more easily accommodate *supra-sensorial* behavioral activities, namely drug use, has not been lost on the author. Although the artists clearly wrote the drug use was not necessary for enjoyment of the *Cosmococas* in 1974, Oiticica also wrote in 1967 that “drug use would be the classic exemplary state of the *supra-sensorial*.” At the very least, due to Oiticica’s own drug habit at the time, cocaine was probably often present at Loft 4, available if not encouraged for use in the installed *Cosmococas* to the limited audience who saw them. AHO/PHO 0301.74-a and AHO/PHO 0730/68; For more on the ways cocaine relates the *Cosmococas* see Daniela Mayer, “Art and Other Drugs” in “An Outlaw in Babylon: Hélio Oiticica’s Transgressive Strategies in the Margins of New York.” (2021). *CUNY Academic Works*. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/818.

¹⁶ AHO/PHO 0730/68. Translated by the author.

¹⁷ AHO/PHO 0300/73.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ The private *CC4 Nocagions* was an open-ended invitation to the Brazilian poets Augusto and Haroldo de Campos to take the slides and “INVENT and/or TRANSFORM the INSTRUCTIONS for a PERFORMANCE to take place in SÃO PAULO or RIO.” This performance was realized in March 2023 at the Casa SP-Arte in São Paulo, Brazil.

that “people should try to turn everything into dance and playful apotheosis: new people from elsewhere should be invited in.”²⁰ Taking advantage of the communal atmosphere of a house party, where ideas and conversation flow with ease, the artists’ turned to rock’n’roll—a musical style with no learned steps—as an ideal, egalitarian vehicle for sharing their ideologies through prolonged delirious dancing with a crowd of friends and strangers.²¹

Although the existence of public instructions suggest that Oiticica was considering a return to museum and gallery exhibitions, the private versions continue his desire to share art with a diverse public, such as his friends in Mangueira, who might not have felt—and often were not—welcome in such spaces.²² “We were very worried,” as D’Almeida said, “with the democratization of art, the democratization of selling art, the democratization of distributing art, because art is for the elite.”²³ At the same time, Oiticica understood the cardinal differences between what was possible in the institutional and domestic arenas and adjusted the *Cosmococas* to maximize their radical interventions for each audience. Despite comparatively simplified appearances, the private *Blocos*’ potential for the *supra-sensorial* is equally profound, and perhaps even more individually liberating, than that of their public counterparts.

²⁰ AHO/PHO 0308/73.

²¹ Sérgio B. Martins, “Hendrix Unbound: Hélio Oiticica’s Tragic Take on Rock,” in *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium*, 211–22, 217.

²² In an infamous incident, Oiticica’s friends from Mangueira were denied entry to the *Opinião 65* [Opinion 65] exhibition opening at the Museu do Arte Moderna de Rio de Janeiro. For more on this event, see Salomão, “ARMOU O MAIOR BARRACO NO MAM!!!” in *Qual é o Parangolé?*, 40–48.

²³ Neville D’Almeida, in discussion with the author, November 11, 2020.