



Ipanema and Copacabana are probably the most famous beaches in the world, and while the days of swinging jazz have long since given way to beach-fronts crowded with glitzy high rise hotels, Rio de Janeiro still exudes an irresistible atmosphere of leisurely cool. For cultural tourists like myself finding an excuse to make the trip for the São Paulo Biennial, the city remains a fitting introduction to a country that is intensely modern, exuberant, and sensual in its people, architecture, food and lifestyle, and, of course, art. There are many museums in Rio which inevitably focus on the heritage of Hélio Oiticica and his circle of Neo-Concretist artists. Indeed there are few commercial galleries with any international aspirations, endowing the city with a sleepy

quality. However, endeavoring to change this situation is a young, ambitious artist run gallery A Gentil Carioca. Established by Ernesto Neto, Laura Lima and Marcio Botner, its roster includes young artists such as Ducha, who famously caused a national scandal by illicitly coloring the lights that illuminate the famous statue of Jesus Christ overlooking Rio, flooding the city in a confrontational red glow. On my visit, the peculiar sunken gallery space was occupied by sensual work by young artist Thiago Rocha Pitta, consisting of a canoe shaped sculpture with a constantly burning charcoal fire. Above this hung a woolen cloud soaked in salt water, which formed stalactites whilst drying from the heat below. A studio assistant to the artist Tunga, Rocha Pitta's work oscillates



◀ The Superflex facade / Facciata dei Superflex, Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo / San Paolo, October / ottobre 2006. Photo Credit / Credito fotografico DING MUSA.

▶ Lida Abdul *War Games (what I saw)*, 2006, 16mm film on / film in 16 mm su DVD. Courtesy the artist and / l'artista e Galleria Giorgio Persano, Turin / Torino. Bienal de São Paulo, 2006.

between material, concept and emotion, rather appropriately reflecting the character of Rio itself.

Rio's uniquely diverse cityscape is most vividly observed from a precarious tram that climbs from the city center to the hilltop bohemian quarter of Santa Teresa. The station sits near Rio's Cathedral, a 60 storey concrete cone, which seems as if it would be more suited to a set in *Blade Runner* than in this old quarter with its fading colonial charm. Many artists stay and even settle in this old town district, perhaps attracted by its laid-back atmosphere, frequently engulfed by low tropical clouds. It is far removed from the tourist and party scene of the beach and its bars and restaurants cater to a hip young crowd. A local artists' residency scheme ensures a lively international flavor

Architecture is equally vital for any aesthete visiting the country, particularly in the light of the special character of tropical modernism and the widely celebrated achievements of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark.

A ferry ride to Oscar Niemeyer's MAC in Niterói is an essential pilgrimage. A short trip on the regular service across the bay takes you to a veritable UFO on the headland.

The ramp winding its way to the entrance is as breathtaking as the views over the lagoon. When Inside, ones senses are confounded by a circular space appearing to have convex walls, a clever optical illusion of Niemeyer's own creation. On my visit, a selection of works by Lygia Clark and her contemporaries, demonstrative of Clark's vital legacy, was perfectly in tune with the building's stylistic peculiarities so characteristic of the Tropical modernist influence. It is surprising that this building, which appears to be in a state of some disrepair, is only just celebrating its tenth anniversary. It is a powerful reminder of Niemeyer's link to that era, and an important monument to his influence not just in Rio, but also in São Paulo.

When flying into São Paulo one is immediately aware of its surface vastness, with traces of Niemeyer's influence already visible from the air. His Copan building, an ambitious experiment in modern living with its mix of luxury apartments and social housing, offices and shops all housed within its elegant s-shaped curves, is perhaps his masterpiece, not least as it is actually functional. Equally impossible to miss from the air is the Biennial's Pavilhão Ciccillo Matarazzo,



▲ Assume vivid astro focus / Abra vana alucinetes fogo. Installation view / Veduta dell'installazione, Casa Triangulo, São Paulo / San Paolo, 2006.

located in Ibirapuera Park, a monumental elongated box lying prostrate, reminiscent of a fallen tower. Linking together other cultural buildings in the park by a covered walk-way, specifically the museum of modern art and a cheese wedge concert hall, the Pavilhão is a beautiful cultural center, exemplifying Niemeyer's playful elegance.

The history of the Biennial runs back to 1951 uninterrupted. It is a major local cultural event, which also draws a significant global audience. Traditionally it has consisted of a combination of curated sections with national representation, not unlike Venice on which it was modeled. With all displays together under one roof, the results have been mixed, with frequent conceptual tensions between exhibits. However, for the 27<sup>th</sup> Biennial the conventional model was re-imagined, as a single exhibition, more in the vein of Documenta. *How to Live Together* (*Como viver junto*) included artists' residencies, debates and commissions extending the project over a 12-month period. The focus on architecture, particularly within Brazil, seemed perfectly in harmony with the experience of the city as a whole. A point of departure was provided by the omnipresent

influence of Hélio Oiticica whose works combined social and liberal contexts with minimalist architecture and aesthetics. Building on this foundation and under the direction of Lisette Lagnado, alternative lifestyles and economics were explored through the work of Marjetica Potrč, Superflex, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Minerva Cuevas. They also probed the ever-fluctuating reciprocal relationship between architectural structures and urban life through the work of Dan Graham, Lara Almarcegui and Meschac Gaba. My personal highlights were Florian Pumbösl's investigative film of the first modernist house in Brazil, and Haegue Yang's elegant *Blind Room*, made as an instinctive response to her family home in Korea. São Paulo has enormous wealth, and as a result contains a number of top-end commercial galleries. Fortes Vilaça is one of the best known internationally, showing a reconstruction of one of Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida's *Cosmococa* "environments." Projected around a swimming pool (which visitors were invited to plunge into) a series of slides showed cocaine being lined up, while psychedelic rock blaring out from all sides added to the sense of hedonism. An underwater light split the pool into a



▲ **Meschac Gaba** *Sweetness*, 2006, model in paper, glue and sugar / modello di carta, colla e zucchero, 9 x 5,5 x 0,11 m. Courtesy the artist / l'artista.  
 Photo by / Foto di Juan Guerra. Bienal de São Paulo, 2006.

geometric pattern as the sequence came to an end. Best viewed whilst drinking a Caipirinha, this work was part social celebration, part geometric abstraction.

Casa Triângulo, located nearby yet with a more urban feel, represents younger artists, including the frequently outrageous Assume Vivid Astro Focus. Also best experienced along with another fortifying Caipirinha, their installation during the Biennial, combined collages of carnival women with photo-collage faces of the artists and their friends, and perverse videos culled from the 80s. Fun, fashionable and occasionally almost unbearably camp, the only real way to appreciate AVAF's work is by total immersion. At Casa Triângulo their unceasing assault of carnival colors and sounds was a joy to behold, as was the warmth and openness of the gallery's staff, a Brazilian trait also very much present at another space, Galeria Vermelho.

Vermelho is an exciting well-established space even younger and more experimental, with a constantly widening social network. Based around a large courtyard, the main gallery is split over two floors. They have also recently acquired the

neighboring building, currently awaiting renovation, where exhibitions by younger artists are staged. Works by the gallery's artists adorn the walls, including a mural by Superflex, and people hang out, not least for the excellent food served from a small gourmet café, also run by the gallery. Interestingly, Superflex's Guaraná Power drink was on tap, and paid for by the gallery, after selling it was banned from the Biennial itself for conflicting with a real commercial product. While this provides a brief overview of the two principle cultural cities, a visit to Brazil should certainly not be considered solely as a trip to Rio and São Paulo, although these will perhaps always remain the most frequented sites. Brasilia and Belo Horizonte would also be of great interest to the cultural tourist, Brasilia for its uniquely modern and brutalist architecture and town planning, and Belo Horizonte for its status as the first modern city in Brazil and its stunning rainforest enveloped museum.

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