



**seja marginal  
seja herói**

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART HISTORY

**TRANSNATIONAL  
PERSPECTIVES ON THE  
ART OF PIERO MANZONI  
AND HÉLIO OITICICA  
FROM ABSTRACTION TO PARTICIPATION**

LARA DEMORI

ROUTLEDGE  


# Transnational Perspectives on the Art of Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica

Establishing a ‘missed link’ between the work of Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica and their respective cultural contexts, this book sheds new light on overlooked aspects of these two artists’ practices, particularly focusing on the shift from painting to performance in the long 1960s.

Lara Demori envisions a transnational juxtaposition, a conceptual dialogue that discloses overlooked resonances between the work and the modus operandi of both artists, repositioning claims of national exceptionalism within a web of constellated practices. This book proposes their oeuvre as heterogeneous critical models to unpack categories of thought used to analyse the postwar decades: Tabula Rasa, Anti-Art, Open Work, and (self-)Marginalisation and Freedom. These, in turn, are charged with specific histories and offer new paradigms for the formal and social inventions perpetuated by the art of Manzoni, Oiticica, and fellow artists in the context of the détournements that crossed the 1960s on a global scale.

This book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, modernism and post-modernism, Italian studies, and Brazilian studies.

**Lara Demori** is a Rome-based researcher and curator, guest fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History.

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### **Transnational Perspectives on the Art of Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica**

From Abstraction to Participation

*Lara Demori*

# Transnational Perspectives on the Art of Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica

## From Abstraction to Participation

Lara Demori

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To Okwui, in memoriam



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# Contents

	<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
	<b>Introduction: Missed Links</b>	1
	<i>Chapters' Synopsis</i>	9
1	<b>Tabula Rasa</b>	15
	<i>Before the Tabula Rasa</i>	15
	<i>The Nuclear Movement</i>	17
	Organicize Disintegration (?)	19
	<i>The Paradoxical Race between Humankind and Science</i>	22
	<i>An Anarchic Humanism</i>	23
	<i>A Psychoanalytical Nuclear Painter</i>	25
	<i>A Constructive Postmodernism</i>	29
	Materiality	30
	What's More POPular Than Bread?	32
	Series	35
	White	37
	<i>Freedom in the Cold War</i>	39
2	<b>Anti-art</b>	57
	<i>Anti-avant-garde or Regressive Utopia?</i>	60
	<i>(Anti) Modernism in Brazil</i>	63
	<i>Antropofagia or the Culture of Ingestion</i>	65
	<i>Concretist Rationality versus Neoconcretist Phenomenology</i>	67
	<i>Conceptual Art in Brazil and Beyond: Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark,</i> <i>and Their Contemporaries</i>	70
	<i>Parangolé Capes: An Anti-art Will to Cultural Zero</i>	73
	<i>Anti-art in Oiticica's Writings</i>	80
3	<b>Open Work</b>	97
	<i>Openness</i>	97
	<i>The Genesis and Content of The Open Work</i>	97

viii Contents

*The Reception of The Open Work in Brazil* 99  
*Hélio Oiticica's Writings: Against The Open Work?* 102  
*What Is Hélio Oiticica's Parangolé?* 105  
*Openness in Time* 110  
*Open Participation in Piero Manzoni's Magic Base and Living Sculpture* 111  
*The Reification of the Body* 114  
*The Spectacle* 117  
*Epilogue* 119

**4 The Freedom of (Self-) Marginalisation** 136  
*Unrealised Projects* 136  
*Tropicália and Éden* 139  
*Project Navilouca* 144  
*The Redemption of the Outlaw* 147  
*Cosmococas – program in progress: Between Marginalisation and the Spectacle* 149  
*The Exhibition Do corpo à terra* 151  
*Piero Manzoni's Politics of Freedom* 154  
*From Neo-idealism to Existentialism* 155  
*The Infinite Embrace of the Lines* 158  
*Anarchism in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* 160

**Epilogue: Marginal Notes** 180

*Index* 187

# Figures

- |     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 0.1 | Hélio Oiticica in front of a poster for the play <i>Prisoner of Second Avenue</i> , in Midtown Manhattan, 1972. Photographer unknown. © Cesar and Claudio Oiticica  | 2  |
| 0.2 | Luzia unfolding <i>Glass Bólido 05: 'Homage to Mondrian'</i> , 1965. Photo Hélio Oiticica   | 6  |
| 0.3 | Hélio Oiticica, <i>Glass Bólido 05: 'Homage to Mondrian'</i> , 1965, textiles, water, pigment, glass, and cork, 30 × 46.5 × 60 cm. Tate collection  | 7  |
| 0.4 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Merda d'Artista n. 68 (Artist's Shit No. 68)</i> , May 1961, tin can and printed paper, 5 × 6.5 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. Photo Matteo Zarbo © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan | 7  |
| 0.5 | Piero Manzoni with <i>Merda d'Artista (Artist's Shit)</i> , 1961. Photographer Ole Bagger, Courtesy of HEART – Herning Museum of Contemporary Art   | 8  |
| 1.1 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Paradoxus Smith</i> , 1957, oil on board, 100 × 130 cm. The Sander Collection. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan  | 26 |
| 1.2 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Senza titolo (Untitled)</i> , 1957, tar on board, 49 × 34 cm. Private collection. Photo Matteo Zarbo © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan  | 27 |
| 1.3 | Piero Manzoni, <i>8 Tavole di accertamento (8 Works of Verification)</i> , 1962, photolithography on paper, 50 × 35 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan                  | 27 |
| 1.4 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Achrome</i> , 1959 c., creased canvas and kaolin, 160 × 130 cm. Private collection. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan   | 28 |
| 1.5 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Achrome</i> , 1959, sewn canvas in squares and kaolin, 100 × 80 cm. Private collection. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan   | 31 |
| 1.6 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Achrome</i> , 1961, rabbit skin and burnt wooden base, 45.5 cm (base: 47 × 47 × 47 cm). Heart – Herning Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo Søren Krogh © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan   | 31 |
| 1.7 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Achrome</i> , 1960 c., cobalt chloride, 40 × 30 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. Photo Agostino Osio © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan  | 32 |
| 1.8 | Piero Manzoni, <i>Achrome</i> , 1961–1962, fiberglass, 61.5 × 46 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan   | 32 |

- 1.9 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1961, straw, reflecting powder, and kaolin, burnt wooden base, 68 × 46 × 54 cm. Heart – Herning Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo Søren Krogh © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 33
- 1.10 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1962 c., bread and kaolin, 31 × 31 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. Photo Bruno Bani © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 33
- 1.11 Piero Manzoni preparing *Uova sculture (Egg Sculptures)* for *Filmgiornale SEDI*, Milan, 1960. Photo Giuseppe Bellone © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 34
- 1.12 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1958–1959, creased canvas and kaolin, 60 × 80 cm. Private collection. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 35
- 1.13 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1962 c., package in packing paper, 60 × 80 cm (each). Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 36
- 1.14 Piero Manzoni, *Fiato d'artista (Artist's Breath)*, 1960, balloon and wooden base, 18 × 18 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 37
- 2.1 Hélio Oiticica, *Pintura Branca, Série Branca (White Series)*, Untitled, 1959, oil-casein emulsion on wood, 97 × 130 cm 60
- 2.2 Mosquito da Mangueira wears Hélio Oiticica, *P10 Capa 6 'Homenagem a Mosquito da Mangueira'* during the exhibition *Manifestação Ambiental N. 1.*, Galeria G4, Rio de Janeiro, 1966. Photo Claudio Oiticica 61
- 2.3 Hélio Oiticica, *Untitled*, 1957, gouache on cardboard, 45.1 × 43.9 cm 75
- 2.4 Hélio Oiticica, *Untitled*, 1956, gouache on cardboard, 49.9 × 50 cm 76
- 2.5 Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé capa 6* (worn by Mosquito) and *B17 Glass Bólido: Homage to Mondrian*, 1965. Photo César Oiticica 77
- 3.1 Participants in Hélio Oiticica's *Apocalipopotesis*, 1969 103
- 3.2 Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé P15, Capa 11, Incorporo a Revolta*, 1967, mixed media. Photo Cláudio Oiticica 107
- 3.3 Piero Manzoni, *Certificato d'autenticità (Declaration of Authenticity)*, 1961–1962, pad, matrix, and stamps. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 112
- 3.4 Piero Manzoni signing a *Scultura vivente (Living Sculpture)* for *Filmgiornale SEDI*, Milan, 1961. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 112
- 3.5 Piero Manzoni, *Base magica – Scultura vivente (Magic Base - Living Sculpture)*, 1961, wood, 60 × 79 × 79 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 113
- 4.1 Drawings and plans for *Placentarium*, published in *ZERO*, no. 3, July 1961 136
- 4.2 Hélio Oiticica, *Projeto cães de caça*, 1960. Courtesy Projeto Hélio Oiticica 137
- 4.3 Hélio Oiticica & Neville Dalmeida, *Cosmococa 5 Hendrix War*, 1973, mixed media. Inhotim Collection 139
- 4.4 Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, 1967, current re-staging at the Tate Gallery, London, curated by Tanya Barson 140

- 4.5 Hélio Oiticica with *P8 Parangolé Cape 5 – Homage to Mangueira*, 1964, at the Whitechapel Gallery, London 1969. Courtesy of Whitechapel Archive 140
- 4.6 Hélio Oiticica, *The Eden Plan*, 1969, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue of the Whitechapel exhibition in 1969. Courtesy of Whitechapel Archive 141
- 4.7 *Navilouca*, 1974, edited by Torquato Neto and Waly Salomão, front cover. Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica 145
- 4.8 Hélio Oiticica, film still from *Agrippina è Roma-Manhattan*, 1972, reproduced in *Navilouca*, 1974. Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica 146
- 4.9 Hélio Oiticica, *Bólido-Caixa 18 B33 “Homenagem a Cara de Cavalo”*, 1965–1966, mixed media, Collection Gilberto Chateaubriand, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro 148
- 4.10 Hélio Oiticica, *Bolide-Caixa 21 B44*, 1966–1967 150
- 4.11 Piero Manzoni *Corpo d’aria n. 44 (Body of Air No. 44)*, 1959–1960, wooden box, rubber balloon, mouthpiece, and base, 4,5 × 42,5 × 12 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. Photo Matteo Zarbo © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 156
- 4.12 Piero Manzoni, *Linea m 15,81 (Line 15.81 Meters Long)*, September 1959, ink on paper and cardboard tube, 31 × 5,5 cm. Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan. Photo Agostino Osio © Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 158
- 4.13 Piero Manzoni, *Linea di lunghezza Infinita (Line of infinite Length)*, 1960, wooden cylinder and paper label, 15 × 5 cm 159
- 4.14 Piero Manzoni executing the *Linea lunga 7.200 metri (Line 7200 Meters Long)*, Herring, 4 July 1960. © Eva Sørensen / Piero Manzoni Foundation, Milan 160



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# Introduction

## Missed Links

The conception of this book emerged while I was deeply engaged in the study of Piero Manzoni (1933–1963), a Milanese artist of noble lineage whose creative journey was profoundly influenced by the international Informel movement of the 1950s. Manzoni's artistic development was also significantly shaped by the Italian Movimento Nucleare (Nuclear Movement), an avant-garde collective that sought to break away from traditional forms and embrace a new visual language reflective of the atomic age's existential concerns. The pioneering explorations of space and materiality by Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) and Alberto Burri (1915–1995) heavily inspired his work too. Fontana's Spatialism introduced radical ideas about the physicality of art, emphasising the void and the dimensional interplay of the canvas, while Burri's innovative use of unconventional materials such as burlap, tar, and plastic challenged conventional notions of art and texture. These resonances are pivotal in understanding the trajectory of Manzoni's oeuvre, which is marked by a relentless quest to redefine the boundaries of artistic expression and the role of the artist in society.

My study focused on the then-unpublished correspondence between Manzoni and the Dutch gallerist and art dealer Hans Sonnenberg, a rich corpus of around 100 letters stored at the Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni in Milan.<sup>1</sup> Those letters held little interest in terms of his declaration of poetics. Still, I was intrigued by the possibility of being the first to work on unpublished material, having trained in an academic environment that fetishises the archive, an approach that I would only later reckon with as a true philological obsession.

I subsequently broadened my research to include the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980) (Figure 0.1). This expansion was prompted by my exposure to his writings during an 'Art. Criticism' course taken as a visiting scholar at Barnard College. Oiticica, who trained under Ivan Serpa, began his career with the Neoconcretists, a group founded by the critic Ferreira Gullar in 1961. His early works, predominantly abstract paintings, reflected the Neoconcretist movement's aim to infuse abstract art with organic vitality and emotional depth, laying the groundwork for his later explorations of immersive, participatory art.

Oiticica swiftly became a focal point of my intellectual interest. I began to devour his writings, which I soon discovered to be roughly five thousand individual notes, essays, and more.<sup>2</sup> Oiticica was indeed a generous writer; he saw language as having an epiphanic character and used it inventively as a malleable tool. He created neologisms and adopted colloquialisms that established a direct correspondence between ideas and practices: *creileisure*, a combination of *creer/criar* and *lazer* that has the double meaning of 'to create (for) leisure' and 'to believe in leisure'; *Parangolé*, a Rio de Janeiro idiom

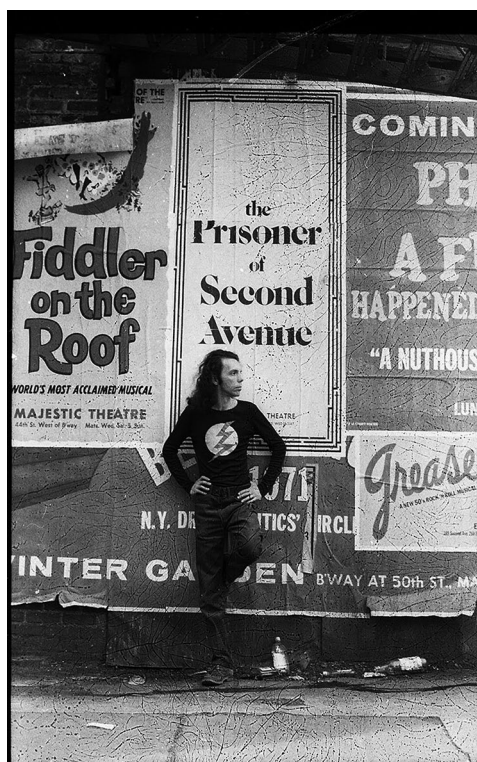


Figure 0.1 Hélio Oiticica in front of a poster for the play *Prisoner of Second Avenue*, in Midtown Manhattan, 1972. Photographer unknown. © Cesar and Claudio Oiticica.

used to describe a variety of situations or behaviours, such as being idle or agitated, or encountering an unforeseen circumstance; *probjeto*, the pairing of the words *object* and *project* to denote something conceptually and empirically open, fluid, and ambiguous; and more.<sup>3</sup> Through language, I discovered Oiticica's practice: participative, environmental art I had not previously encountered in my studies.

As Manzoni was already an important part of my research, I could not resist looking at Oiticica's work as a comparative case study. Not only were the two artists working synchronically, albeit on different continents, they also had the same modus operandi, leading them both to the same conclusion: the ineffectiveness of representation epitomised by the shift from abstract works to participatory endeavours. It is when I began to look at the artists in reverse, to analyse Manzoni's oeuvre as a framework within which to consider Oiticica's approach, that this project, first in the form of a doctoral thesis and now, finally, in that of a book, took shape. By investigating the work of each artist through the lens of the other, unexpected connections, zones of contact, and unexplored parallels came to light.

Thinking of Manzoni and Oiticica together often generates pairs of opposites. However, they also shared important attributes, as exemplified by the following quotes:

I refuse to discuss what has been done before 1958.<sup>4</sup> (Manzoni)

There's no reason to take seriously my pre-'59 production.<sup>5</sup> (Oiticica)

Both considered their work to be ahead of their time, and later trends would prove this to be the case. Under the guise of histrionic and chameleonic personas, Manzoni and Oiticica stretched the modernist project and its teleology to its limits, sometimes falling back onto its boundaries, sometimes tearing through such confines, at other times overflowing beyond them, in a constant and similar bouncing in and out that marked their shift from almost-bidimensional painting to performances. Retracing the modalities in which their work became symptomatic of these multiple dialectics and idiosyncrasies, I envisioned a *conceptual dialogue* between the two, who had no contact in reality. This fictional conversation provided me with the possibility of shedding new light on their oeuvre in an unconventional and original way, repositioning claims of national exceptionalism within a constellation of practices and resonances.

I am building this study on the idea of what I call *missed links*, a hypothesis of a new critical methodology that stands for implicit but unrealised international relationships

between artists, ideas, and cultural agents. To fill these blind spots and reconstruct both affinities and differences, this method aims to connect artists, art histories, and narratives that have not been studied together and promotes a new perspective based on parallelism that goes beyond a philological understanding of art history. Comparing and contrasting practices with similar substrata, even when they lack factual connections, provokes critical, insurgent conversations, which in turn chart the current directions of contemporary global art, highlighting broader connections and transnational experiments based on analogous foundations despite geopolitical and cultural heterogeneities.

Of course, Oiticica and Manzoni did not know each other and never met.<sup>6</sup> Some readers may challenge my assumption and the lack of documentation of an actual encounter. Yet this project has the potential not only to reread the art of both artists beyond national borders and readdress a series of binary oppositions – north versus south, mainstream versus marginal, centre versus periphery, and so forth – but also to rejuvenate the discipline of art history, which often finds itself in a gridlocked methodological position due to its ongoing faithfulness to its Hegelian and historicist roots.<sup>7</sup> At this point in time, my method of inquiry is supported by many international voices of transnational and global art and its circulations that dialogue with mine.<sup>8</sup>

The period in which these artists worked was charged with change. The overturn of notions of the work of art, author, and audience, and its implications – inaugurated by Duchamp's 'The Creative Act' of 1957 and advanced by Umberto Eco's *Opera aperta* (*The Open Work*) of 1962 (the latter preceded by the Brazilian poet and critic Haroldo de Campos' essay 'A obra da arte aberta') – become suggestive of what appears to have been a decade of 'obsessions' affecting the visual arts and beyond.<sup>9</sup> A renewed interest in social activism, spurred by the rise of dictatorial regimes in Latin America and by May '68 in Europe; the troubled fixation on consumer goods; the exasperated search for the 'new', as translated in political, cultural, and scientific revolutions. In the years that followed, those concerns were amplified in various directions: the exploration of (the lack of) colour, as discussed by David Batchelor in *Chromophobia*; a focus on new technologies and media, witnessed by the advent of a novel technocratic regime, as discussed in Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood'; a fixation with time, as advanced by Pamela Lee in *Chronophobia*; the fascination with science and the birth of a new realism asserted by Stephen Petersen's *Space-Age Aesthetics*.<sup>10</sup> The penchant for the new was understood as a novel critical ethos: the anxiety of constantly moving forward, ahead of time – mirroring Hegel's *Aufhebung*, sublation, an uneasy dialectic of denial, overcoming, preservation, and completion. The same dialectic affected Manzoni's and Oiticica's practice, in which each series of works overcomes the previous ones yet retains elements that grant a coherent development across time.

Analysing the specifics of Italy and Brazil in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this book discusses how the margins rebelled against the centre, seen as the Anglophone world, challenging its very existence, rethinking and questioning the dichotomy between such a centre and its edges. This is a necessary operation when considering practices outside the main axis of power in those years, which connected New York with Paris and London.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, my position aligns closely with Reiko Tomii's brilliant call for rearticulating both macro and micro-narratives in the study of what she has named 'international contemporaneity'; Tomii indeed claimed that 'on a macro level, comparisons of "centre vs. periphery" as such are at once too abstract and too general in discussing 1960s art. Narrowing the focus to a comparison of "locale vs. locale" allows us to move away from the ingrained "centre vs. periphery" paradigm'.<sup>12</sup> Equally important is Tomii's assessment

#### 4 *Transnational Perspectives on the Art of Piero Manzoni and Hélio Oiticica*

of the notion of influence, which redirects and complicates the flow of knowledge across the globe:

Long dominant in art history, ‘influence’ is frequently premised upon the paradigm of ‘centre vs. periphery’. The general assumption is that ‘influence’ is transmitted from the centre to the periphery in a singular linear flow of time. With ‘contemporaneity’ and ‘multiplicity’ operating in 1960s art, ‘influence’ cannot be the sole explanation for similarity. It is critical to conduct a more evolved analysis of similarity – especially when some similar instances have no or little evidence of the actual connection of influence among them. These instances – which I call ‘resonances’ for the lack of a better word – are not rare in the sixties art.<sup>13</sup>

While Tomii introduced the concept of ‘resonances’ in her approach to global contemporary art history, Luke Skrebowski suggested the idea of the ‘untranslatable’ to ‘address the issue of mediation of global neo-avant-gardes in a more effective way’ and to go beyond ‘the often nebulous and frequently one-sided notion of “influence”, “interaction”, or “contact” that continues to characterise much of the discourse of the global neo-avant-gardes’.<sup>14</sup> Such putative globality ‘corresponds not to a progressive, post-nationalist imaginary reflecting the ultimate extraterritoriality of art, but rather to ‘the global’ as imagined by globalisation, a cultural corollary of the neoliberal dream – in recurrent but still ‘productive’ crisis – of a borderless marketplace on the Western model’.<sup>15</sup> To avoid a planetary impact on the discipline, Skrebowski acknowledged the model of untranslatability, which reinforces the specificity of a certain artistic or cultural phenomenon and the adoption of a comparative perspective between and across different geographies<sup>16</sup>: ‘The untranslatable is what we must keep on (not) translating’ – insists Skrebowski – to avoid the risk of flattening and homogenising the neo-avant-gardes under a certain point of view.<sup>17</sup> With this in mind, the present book aims to restore overlooked resonances that affected art practices notionally considered impossible to put in dialogue without forcing the translation into one another but highlighting the specificities, similarities, and divergencies of each by disclosing a web of missed links.

Italy and Brazil have a rich history of interactions and migrations, particularly during the first half of the 20th century. Despite the significance of these exchanges, scholarly interest has been notably scant, especially within Italian academia. Art historical research in Italy has predominantly focused on transnational dialogues within Europe or with the United States, thereby neglecting the extensive and influential connections between Italy and various Latin American countries, including Brazil. This oversight underscores a broader trend of Eurocentrism in art historical studies, which has marginalised the exploration of Italy’s cultural and migratory links with the Latin American world. An exception is constituted by studies on the interwar period and on the history of architecture that have investigated the travels of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the reception of Futurism in Latin America; the trajectories of Margherita Sarfatti, Pietro Maria Bardi, and Lina Bo Bardi, among others; as well as the reception of Brazilian modernist architecture in Italy.<sup>18</sup> Similar studies have not yet been undertaken for the postwar years. While this book does not aim to fill this gap, it is grounded on a common substratum of circulations and partly touches on issues of reception, particularly concerning the dissemination of Eco’s *Opera aperta* in Brazil and the response to the spread of Arte Povera. These topics could only emerge from the pairing of Manzoni and Oiticica.

No study comparing two artists from the 1960s who worked on different continents has been published (to my knowledge), and comprehensive volumes on the art of that decade were of little or no use to the methodology that structures this book. Most of this literature acknowledges Manzoni and Oiticica briefly or not at all. For example, Alexander Alberro's *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* traces the establishment of conceptual art from the mid-1960s onwards, focusing exclusively on the well-known American artists Joseph Kosuth, Dan Graham, Sol Lewitt, and Lawrence Weiner and on the role of the US-born art dealer Seth Siegelaub in promoting this trend; Oiticica is not mentioned, and Manzoni appears only in a footnote.<sup>19</sup> In *After Modern Art 1945–2000*, David Hopkins granted Manzoni a section of one chapter but saw him as merely responding to Yves Klein: 'It is useful here to look to an artist who, in many ways, acted as Klein's shadow, producing unambiguously acid materialist counter-propositions to the French artist's excesses'.<sup>20</sup> Hopkins fell back on a series of stereotypical interpretative patterns: the comparison between Manzoni's *Achromes* and Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and the parallels between Manzoni's *Merda d'Artista (Artist's Shit, 1961)* and Duchamp's *Readymade*; moreover, he defined Manzoni's consumption of art as a 'pseudo-eucharistic performance, somehow influenced by the contemporary election of Pope John XXIII', a view adopted earlier in Italian literature.<sup>21</sup> Hopkins' book, therefore, neither contributed a fresh perspective on Manzoni nor gave space to Oiticica. Similarly, in *The Rise of the Sixties*, Thomas Crow discussed only Manzoni, again comparing his practice to those of Klein, Duchamp, and Rauschenberg.<sup>22</sup> A notable exception among these examples is the 2016 exhibition at Haus der Kunst and the resulting catalogue *Post-War Art: Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945–1965*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, Ulrich Wilmes, and Katy Siegel, which broadly charted the political and artistic trajectories that united the planet into a single entity. The publication included the work of Manzoni and Oiticica, acknowledging regions and practices emerging in what at that time were considered peripheral areas, such as Latin America and Italy.<sup>23</sup>

As a matter of fact, from the beginning of the 1960s, a wave of artistic innovation swept across Latin America, challenging the established norms and conventions of the art world. This period marked a significant departure from the late-modernist dogmatics that had dominated the artistic landscape. Similarly, in Italy and Europe at large, various avant-garde movements emerged, contesting the hegemony of abstract-expressionist and Informel tendencies that had held sway during the 1950s. These movements rejected the notion of art as a purely aesthetic, formalist endeavour, instead embracing its potential as a powerful medium for social and political commentary. Simultaneously, they shifted their focus away from the subjectivity of the artist, engaging with the burgeoning landscape of consumerist society. By significantly expanding the range of media employed, these movements immersed themselves in the environment, questioning the notions of permanence and reification. They sought to challenge the traditional boundaries of art, blurring the lines between art and life and highlighting the transient, dynamic nature of contemporary existence. Looking at pivotal, nearly contemporaneous works by Oiticica and Manzoni that emerged in this context, we can begin to explore these divergent yet intersecting approaches to question the established tenets of modernist art.

A black-and-white photograph (Figure 0.2) captures a woman balancing a jar on her shoulder while unfurling a series of diaphanous textiles in front of her face, creating a translucent effect. The lush yet softly blurred vegetation in the background enhances the dreamlike atmosphere, accentuated by the tactile qualities of the fabrics. This work, crafted by Oiticica, is titled *B17 Bólido Vidro 05: Homage to Mondrian (1965)* (Figure 0.3). Here, the artist assembled a combination of diverse media, blending visual

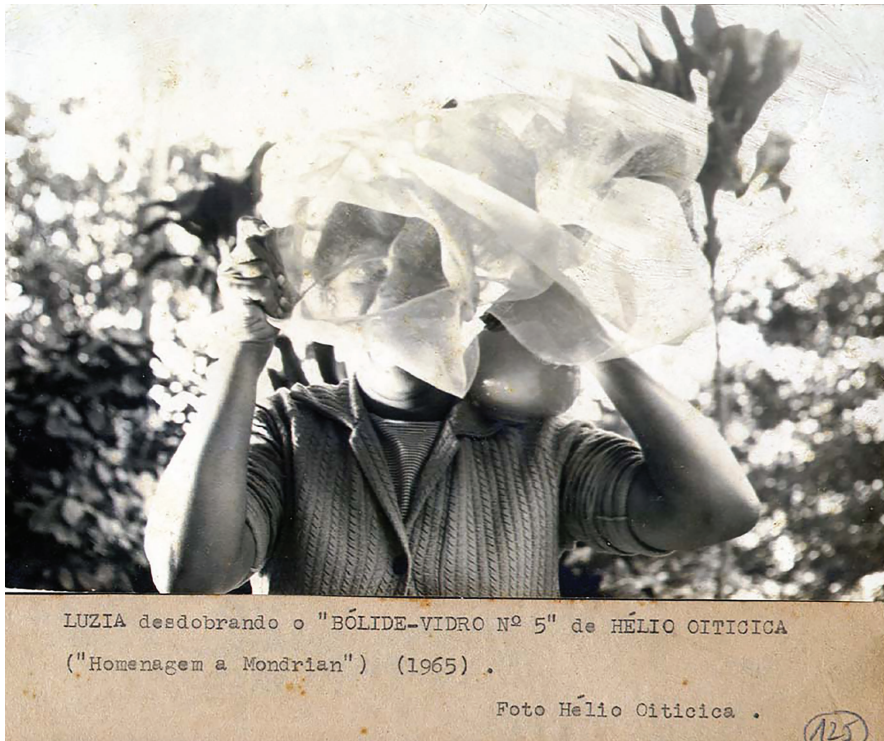


Figure 0.2 Luzia unfolding *Glass Bólide 05: 'Homage to Mondrian'*, 1965. Photo Hélio Oiticica.

and sensory elements to create a compelling, multilayered composition: a yellow liquid fills up a glass ampule closed by a cork; several fabrics – of various textures, materials, and colours – are wedged between the cork and the vase to mimic the spouting of fluids from the container. Among the fabrics, the largest is an eggshell-blue nylon sheet, draped like a garment decorating a classical statue; two pieces of yellow and orange hessian are placed underneath the nylon sheet, partially hidden by it; the smallest piece of fabric is a lacy red mesh, which is brought to the fore by its vivid colour.<sup>24</sup>

The *Bóldes* (*Fireballs*, 1963–1969) are pivotal 'manipulable sculptures' in Oiticica's practice as they manifest a full awareness of the Brazilian artist's position on historical avant-gardes, especially the work of Piet Mondrian.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, they embody a constructive sense of colour and pigment, which acquire a corporeal dimension; confront the conditions of the commodity in a post-painterly practice within the context of developmentalist Brazil; reflect a novel paradigm of the local design industry inaugurated by the newly founded *Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial* in Rio de Janeiro; and offer a commentary on the legacy of Duchamp by using readymade objects such as the glass vessels to give structure and shape to a pigmented liquid.<sup>26</sup> More broadly, they hunt the modernist project at large since Oiticica configures them as 'trans-objects' made to be handled, as well as unstable works between material decay and unfixed aesthetic regimes.<sup>27</sup>

Detached from previous postwar experimentations, Manzoni's practice turned to the re-conceptualisation of the monochrome and moved towards a performative and more speculative dimension, opening his artistic vocabulary to account for audience