

Cultural feiojada

With *Tropicália*, the MCA serves up a trippy stew of Brazilian arts By Ruth Lopez

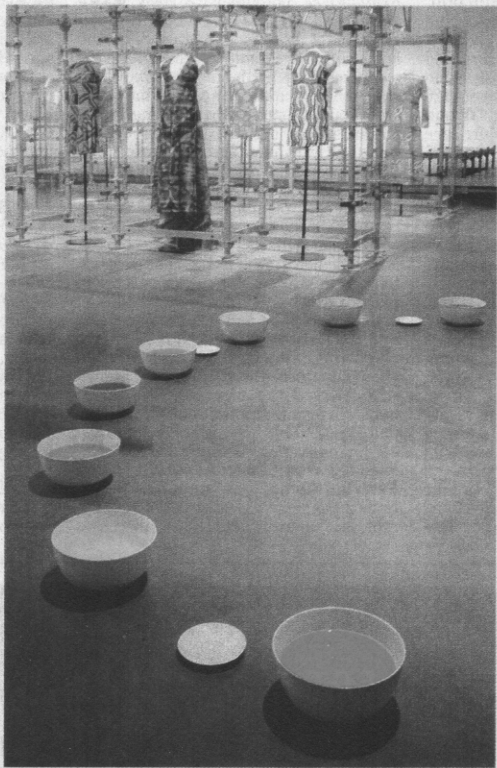
T*ropicália*, the Brazilian cultural movement of the late 1960s, only lasted a few years, but its spirit lives on in a materially dense exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, “*Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture*.”

Guest curator Carlos Basualdo was committed to showing visual art along with the music, theater, architecture, fashion, film and literature produced during this intoxicating period. “Art makes sense in context not because it depends on the context but because it enriches it,” he says.

While the great musicians of the Tropicalist period—Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso and Tom Zé, to name a few—are pop icons in their country and known to savvy music lovers in the United States, the other arts remained, until now, obscure.

Tropicália, the title of an album (and song) by composer and singer Veloso that was emblematic of the period, was borrowed from an environmental installation by avant-garde artist Hélio Oiticica. That installation is replicated here for the first time since it was originally shown in the 1967 exhibition “*New Brazilian Objectivity*” in Rio de Janeiro. Other works by artists Lygia Clark, Antônio Dias and Lygia Pape from that landmark exhibition are the heart of this exhibit.

In short, Tropicalist artists were mostly preoccupied with providing viewers with enhanced sensory experiences that encouraged participation. Clark’s work, for instance, lets viewers try on masks featuring materials like tinted plastic or wire covering the eyeholes, and pouches near the nose containing herbs or spices. Pape’s re-created *Wheel of Delights* is a piece with more than



BOWLED OVER A partial view of *Wheel of Delights*.

a dozen large white bowls on the ground filled with orange, red, green, yellow and blue liquids that are meant to be tasted with tiny droppers—not for the germ phobic. In Oiticica’s *Eden*, large wooden bins are filled with hay or chunks of foam rubber, and viewers are encouraged to climb in.

In pulling together the show, Basualdo saw his role as a con-

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ductor or stage director. Brazilian fashion designer Ronaldo Fraga was tapped to select the clothing and a team of researchers sought out the posters, books, documents and record albums. The show, designed by a Brazilian architectural firm, is organized in modules made of metal pipes and tubes—part of a

sprawling scaffolding system that gives the exhibition a feeling that is still under construction. The design also references the work of the late architect Lina Bo Bardi, whose maquettes and theater designs are included here.

Basualdo wanted to include the work of contemporary artists who have been influenced by *Tropicalismo*, and six artists created new pieces especially for this exhibition. Eli Sudbrack, the

Brazilian-born installation artist who works under the name Assum Vivid Astro Focus, contributes *Garden ten*, a massive trippy wallpaper mural with cutout edges that wrap around the corner of the left wall near the entrance and spill onto the floor. Ernesto Neto’s *that’s the law*, a giant pillow made of stocking material with embroidery, is suspended in the corridor, though its impact is diminished by the scaffolding that runs underneath it to connect the two exhibition halls.

By 1972, *Tropicália* was over. Brazil’s military dictatorship didn’t care much for the freewheeling ideas, and many artists were either imprisoned or exiled. Oiticica moved to London for a year, then to New York where he lived until 1978. Veloso and Gil were forced to leave in 1969 and went to London until 1972.

You don’t have to be a historian to know that we were also going through a social and cultural revolution in the States during the ’60s, which is why viewers may find this particular exhibition both exotic and familiar. The counter-cultural zeitgeist was a global one. And while the artists in Brazil were grounded in their own experience they remained open to the world.

“That is how you can create new things,” Basualdo says. “History doesn’t live in the past. The only way we can relate to history is by factoring it into our daily experience. In a way, the show is an excuse to talk about the present.”

“Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture” is at the Museum of Contemporary Art through January 8.