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Greg Thomas

Hélio Oiticica, Secret Poetics, translated by Rebecca Kosick with essays by Rebecca Kosick and Pedro Erber (SoberSCOPE Press and Winter Editions) \$24

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Contact with the Now

One of the most charming of the 'secret poems' by the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) included in this new edition of translations by Rebecca Kosick reads as follows:

Water,
glassy surface,
plunge.

The reader put in mind of Bashō's famous 'frog/pond/plop' haiku (that hyper-compact translation from Dom Sylvester Houédard) might well be on the money. As Kosick points out in her introduction, '[w]e don't know for sure that a reference to Bashō was deliberate, but we know haiku is a form Oiticica was working with at this time'.

However, as Kosick goes on to note, readers familiar with Oiticica's oeuvre might also sense in this poem from 1964 a pre-emptive linguistic rendering of his artwork *Plunge of the Body* (1966–7). Reproduced in Kosick's book, this consists of a water-filled basin with the title-words 'Mergulho do corpo' inscribed on its bottom-surface, facing the viewer like an invitation to a physical act. (Many of Oiticica's 1960s artworks solicited physical interaction.)

Then again, there is a level of abstraction to Oiticica's language that resists both readings just offered. The absence of any tangible, naturalistic subject matter (like a frog and a pond, say, or a body and a basin) almost seems to nudge it into the realms of metaphysical speculation. It's as if the unbounded, unlocated body of water, and the plunge undertaken by an unnamed subject or object, are metaphors for more general states of being, feeling or knowing.

These divergent readings give a flavour of the manifold resonances of Oiticica's *Secret Poetics*, a sequence created irregularly during 1964–6. Kosick discovered the little cache of verses during research for an earlier book, fronted by two prose pieces that offered hints of method and motive: 'I am not a poet, although an urgent necessity leads me to poetic expression'; '[t]he true lyric is immediate, that is, immediacy that becomes eternal in lyrical poetic expression'.

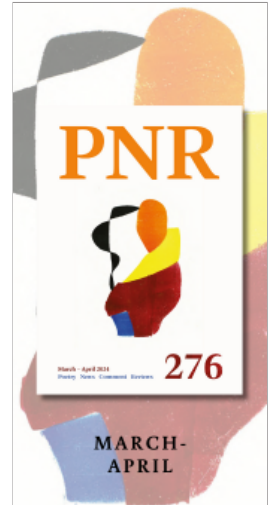
The period when *Secret Poetics* was written was one of violent transition for Brazil. A right-wing military dictatorship seized power in 1964 and maintained it for the next twenty-one years. It was also a time of transformation in Oiticica's personal life. He was coming to terms with his sexuality, and his first gay romantic encounters date to this period, possibly to 1964 when, as Pedro Erber notes in a second essay included in the book, 'he took up dancing and started participating in the samba scene in Mangueira, a favela on the northern side of Rio [de Janeiro, Oiticica's home city]':

Oiticica is internationally recognised as an artist but not as a poet: so what is the value and function of these works? Partly, as Kosick points out, they appeal as 'documents of a contemporary artist's developing ideas and thinking'. There is also a strongly phenomenological bent to the writing which gives an interesting sense of the intellectual discourse within the neo-concrete art movement to which Oiticica was attached. Passages such as 'The smell, / new touch, / restarting of the senses, / absorption, / memory, / oh!' suggest an attempt to somehow immaculately transcribe or preserve the felt moment of writing, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty a particular reference-point, as Erber states.

But most engagingly, as records of the embodied moment, these poems encode the feelings of desire, lust, pain and confusion animating the writing sensorium: 'Black skin, / contact with the now, / vision of the always, / love; // dark, / vision of the tactile, contact. // velvet, / caress of the touch, / the always in the always, / embrace // the arm, / body and I interlace, / lip'. These secret poems are documents of a mind and body realising themselves in loving and lustful relation to others at a time of personal and sociopolitical turmoil.

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