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AnthroPOPhagous

Political Uses of Pop Art in the Aftermath of the Brazilian Military Coup D’état of 1964

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It has been presumed that Brazilian artists in the 1960s thought U.S. pop art to be a devaluation of art without, that is, perceiving the critical implications of that position (e.g. pop art as an attack on art as high culture). Brazilian art historian Sérgio B. Martins has recently given authorial weight to this view in his influential study *Constructing an Avant-Garde: Art in Brazil 1949–1979*. In a critical review of the Brazilian avant-garde and the realist turn that it took in the 1960s, Martins makes a brief but suggestive comment on its anti-reception of pop art. His argument is that the critical standpoint that Brazilian artists and critics took in relation to pop art showed signs of ignorance on their part.1 Martins’ claim is basically that the Brazilians did not know better than to dismiss pop art together with its commercial imagery. To explain this ignorance, Martins points to the peripheral position of the Brazilian avant-garde and its limited access to the original works of pop art. In the 1960s, the only time U.S. pop art was only shown in Brazil was when William C. Seitz curated the American pavilion at the IX São Paulo Biennial, 1967. That year Seitz had put together a selection of American artists into an extended lineage

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of pop art, from the early works of Rauschenberg and Johns, to works of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and others. Today we would certainly object to such all-inclusive notion of pop art, but it does not seem that this objection was raised in Brazil in the 1960s. Instead, it seems that Johns was the one who turned into the official representative of pop art in Brazil, after having been awarded the most prestigious prize at the São Paulo Art Biennial of 1967, known as the “Biennial of Pop.”

Martins claims, however, that the Biennial of Pop did not change much, as the Brazilian avant-garde had already made up their minds about pop art. They presumably did not see anything in pop art more than its commercial imagery, which they condemned with the anti-imperialistic spirit that spread within the Brazilian left in the aftermath of the military coup d’état in 1964. In a sweeping passage, Martins argues that this identification of pop art and commercial images happened when Brazilian artists looked at pop art in bad quality reproductions found in international art magazines that circulated within the Brazilian art world at that time. That transfer then presumably blurred every line that distinguishes pop art from ordinary commercial images. Without the capacity to make such distinction, Martins argues, the Brazilian easily dismissed pop art as “too acquiescent to consumerist society, if not an outright case of imperialistic propaganda.”

In these pages, I will not dispute Martins’ claim that the Brazilian avant-garde refused to adapt the commercialised imagery of U.S. pop art. I argue however that Brazilian artists not only rejected pop art, but also picked it up and used it in their own practices. It is puzzling that Martins, who otherwise shows such acute understanding of the “AnthropOPhagous” tricks played out by the Brazilian avant-garde in the 1960s, fails to distinguish the anthropophagism in their reception of pop art. It is well-known today that the Brazilian modernist writer Oswald de Andrade’s idea about anthropophagism (meaning cultural cannibalism) from the 1920s became actualised from the early works of Rauschenberg and Johns, to works of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and others. Today we would certainly object to such all-inclusive notion of pop art, but it does not seem that this objection was raised in Brazil in the 1960s. Instead, it seems that Johns was the one who turned into the official representative of pop art in Brazil, after having been awarded the most prestigious prize at the São Paulo Art Biennial of 1967, known as the “Biennial of Pop.”

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4 See for example his very interesting analysis of Oititica’s AnthropOPhagous take on the notion of constructive in Martins, 2013, pp. 51–78.
by artists and theorists in the 1960s as a means to rethink Brazilian cultural identity. An anthropophagical notion of identity can be seen to differ from that of traditional Western ontology in which identity is understood as that which remains the same across time. In contradistinction to this, Anthropophagism forms an autonomous sense of selfhood through processes of regenerations. An Anthropophagous subject does not form itself by turning inwards but instead comes about through encounters with others, which, in a double movement, it both places within and without. Anthropophagites differ from cosmopolitans in that they distance themselves from others but, as philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback writes, for them such distancing “is already a coming close.”

The aim of this chapter is to rewrite the Brazilian reception of pop art in Anthropophagous terms. With this, I do not suggest to make an argument for the existence of a Brazilian pop art. Instead I hold on to Martins’ idea that pop art turned into the Other of the Brazilian avant-garde in the 1960s and in that way was kept at a distance. The Brazilian avant-garde never went pop, but I do think it displaced pop art into its own artistic corpus. I set out to argue this thesis via analyses of works by the Brazilian artists Waldemar Cordeiro and Hélio Oititica. My focus question through these cases will be how these artists managed to make a political use of pop art in the aftermath of the Brazilian military coup d’état of 1964?

Waldemar Cordeiro and the Popcretos

Immediately after the rise of the military dictatorship, Waldemar Cordeiro produced a series of circa two dozens of works (some of which are lost today), known as the Popcretos. When read, this term can be understood as a linguistic fusion of pop art (Pop) and arte concreta (-cretos). That this fusion was brought about by Cordeiro in the mid-1960s is surprising when his previous dogmatic approach to concrete art is taken into account. In the 1950s, Cordeiro lead the São Paulo-based avant-garde group; Grupo Ruptura that positioned itself in line with the post-Bauhaus concretism of

Max Bill.⁶ With the secure self-consciousness of a “true” modernist Cordeiro positioned himself in stark opposition to both the Brazilian school of figurative painters (Portinari, Segall, Di Cavalcante, Pancetti, etc.) and what he considered as a “false” form of abstract art that was developed in Rio de Janeiro at that time.⁷

During the early part of the 1960s, Cordeiro however began to question his own position but also the modernisation project of Brazil as such. An obvious reason for Cordeiro’s shift is found in the breakup of Brazilian society that occurred when its utopian project of the 1950s flipped over into stagflation, political insecurity, and social uprisings in the 1960s. It was with the outspoken aim to counteract such disorder that the Brazilian military succeeded so easily with their armed, but unbloody, coup d’état in 1964. Cordeiro started making his first Popcretos at a time coeval with this military coup. In the following, I set out to question what it was in particular in pop art that Cordeiro put into use within this heated political context.

What Is the Pop of the Popcretos?

It is certainly difficult to discern what the pop of the Popcretos is simply by looking at them. They do not have that striking and colourful visuality that we are accustomed to associate with pop art. The Popcretos are also relatively small in scale, with an in median measure of 80x80. On the other hand, they do use mass-media images, often in the form of cut-outs from newspapers; but these images seem empty of drama. In this sense, the Popcretos add nothing to the “love and despair” list that Pontus Hultén

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⁷ For a good discussion of the conflict between concretist from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo that crystallised after the National Exhibition of Concrete Art held in both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in 1956–1957; see Martins, 2013, pp. 19–31.
drew up in his seminal pop show at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 1965. By looking at the Popcretos, I would like to conclude that they are not pop art, nor do they pretend to be.

In fact, the very term Popcretos seems itself a bit suspicious. It was not Cordeiro who coined it but his friend and artistic colleague, the poet Augusto de Campos. When spotting these works, de Campos is quoted to have said that they have “swallowed the experience of North American pop art in a critical and anthropophagic fashion.”

8 Cordeiro then applied the term Popcreto, perhaps because it was quite catchy, to this work series and also “swallowed” it into some of the works themselves. But what was pop about them? There has been but a few previous attempts to answer this question. Within these accounts there is however a general agreement that Robert Rauschenberg was Cordeiro’s main reference on pop art at the time. The thought of Rauschenberg as pop art certainly bends our present conception, but it seems to set it straight when it comes to explain the pop of the Popcretos. After all, the Popcretos are enactments of Combine painting as they mix colours and ready-made objects on the canvas.

The Brazilian art historian Nunes Fabrizio Vaz identifies Paris as the “contact zone” of Cordeiro and Rauschenberg. This seems plausible, as Rauschenberg started to appear in Cordeiro’s writings while staying in Paris from the late spring to the autumn of 1963, which was right before he had started working on his Popcretos series. However this point of transfer is, in fact, a bit more complicated than Fabrizio Vaz wants to make it appear, as it would not have been possible for Cordeiro to actually see Rauschenberg’s works, since they were not exhibited in Paris during this period. Then again, I suggest that it would have been close to impossible for anyone circulating in the Parisian art world in 1963 not to known of Rauschenberg. Although still lacking exact information concerning Cordeiro’s experiences of Rauschenberg, we know for certain that it did

9 The works Popcreto para um popcritico (1964) and Popcreto I (1964) explicitly address the term Popcreto.
10 It has been said that Cordeiro got to know of Rauschenberg after the latter’s historical success at the XXXII Venice Biennial in 1964. This does not make sense, however, as Cordeiro showed his first Popcretos at an exhibition in June at Instituto dos Arquitetos do Brasil (IAB); at the same month, that is, as Rauschenberg won his prestigious award.
not come about after seeing the originals but from reproductions. I differ from Martins’ argument that I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, since I do not think that the lack of access to original works mattered much in this case. Cordeiro was not a connoisseur of pop art, nor did he ever pretend to be one. I would like to show that what he took from pop art, or from Rauschenberg in particular, was on such general level that it could have been transferred even by the worst quality copy.

What do the Popcretos mean?

The first person to ponder what the pop in the Popcretos meant was the German philosopher Max Bense. Bense had come to know Cordeiro in the early 1960s while lecturing on modern aesthetics in Brazil. Bense’s appearance on the Brazilian art scene is best seen as part of the quite intense transatlantic traffic that flowed between Brazilian art institutions and the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, where Bense was a professor in 1954–1958. Bense did not make a trip to Brazil to visit Cordeiro in order to see his Popcretos, however. Instead, Cordeiro sent photographs of them to Bense in Stuttgart and asked him to provide his thoughts. Bense answered in a letter, which was later published in the exhibition catalogue of Espetáculo Popcreto that Cordeiro and Augusto de Campos organised at Galeria Atrium in São Paulo towards the end of 1964. We know from press reports that this exhibition attracted a relatively large audience, with one reporter writing about a bunch of people who were “scratching their heads” when standing in front of the Popcretos.

In his analysis however, Bense did what he could to ease things up. In his interpretation, he divided the term Popcreto into pop art and concrete art. This nominal split, he then argued, is equally present within the works themselves, which stages a form of dialectics of pop art and concrete art. Out of what Bense says, this dialectics sorts into a diagram that looks something like this:

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12 Ivo Zanini, ”Muita gente coçou a cabeça na exposição 'Popcreta',” Folha de São Paulo, 19 December 1964.
At first, Bense’s reading of the Popcretos seems quite plausible. When folding through the photographs of the Popcretos, I find both mathematical figures and everyday objects, although the mathematics is more downplayed. At the same time, I think it is important to ask “what everyday do these objects point to?” Cordeiro’s everyday is not that of commercial mass-consumption. Instead there is furniture, but also different kinds of tools. However, I am not in total agreement with Bense that these tools denote practical use. Of course, the viewers could not use these tools. In that sense, they were out of the ordinary order of things. That suppression of utility, however, highlighted their being as signs for us to think about. In opposition to Bense, I suggest that these tools are for theoretical consumption; they are tools for thought, to be pondered. In that sense, they are not within the realm of the banal. Instead, they can be thought of as conveying ideas. But what ideas? I argue that this is the question that the Popcretos prompts each viewer to ask. That is also why the Popcretos should not be resolved into the closure of a diagram. In fact, I believe the news report of people scratching their heads to be closer to the function of the Popcretos than Bense’s philosophical interpretation. I suggest that this enforcement of thought is what these works are really about.

### Popcretos as semantical concrete art

To grasp the thinking that the Popcretos entails, I find it necessary to bracket the term Popcreto, at least for a while. Cordeiro, in fact, also used another term to designate these works which is less catchy, but perhaps
closer to the point: “semantic concrete art.”¹⁴ I find this term interesting, as it shows how far Cordeiro has travelled conceptually in relation to historical concretism. His paintings from the 1950s were designed with the purpose of deepening an apprehension of form. It is clear that such form was not thought to mean something. Semantics thus appeared on the outside of concrete art where it lingered as nothing more than an archaic trace from old figurative art. This distance was held intact, I would argue, also in the renewed trend of concrete art that spread across Europe through the New Tendencies network in the 1960s. New Tendencies germinated from an exhibition held in Zagreb in 1961, organised by the Brazilian Almir Mavignier, who was then based in Ulm, in collaboration with the Serbian art historian Matko Meštrović. Cordeiro also came in contact with the New Tendencies in Paris during his stay there in 1963, via his close affiliation with the French Groupe de recherche d’art visual (GRAV), then partaking in New Tendencies. In the GRAV manifesto for “progressive abstract art,” written in 1963 by François Molnar and François Morellet, it continued to hold semantics at a distance. In an ironical remark, they speak about “ill-informed art lovers” at pains to understand abstract art. “But,” as they say, “abstract art doesn’t mean anything; it’s a system of signs that refer to nothing but itself.”¹⁵

Theorised as semantic concrete art the Popcretos do indeed set out to mean something. It differs on this point from historical concrete art but also from the progressive abstract art of the New Tendencies. Keeping to Augusto de Campos’ analysis that Cordeiro had “swallowed” pop art in these works, meaning seems to have been one of his most important takes. What this implies however, is that despite their name, the Popcretos are not a fusion of pop art and concrete art. Instead it seems that pop art has taken Cordeiro out of concrete art with its principles of formalist autonomy into the abyssal space of meaning production.


It is my thesis that Cordeiro’s take on pop art had political implications. But what was political about them? In her book *Waldemar Cordeiro: A ruptura como metáfora* (2002), the Brazilian art historian Helouise Costa has attempted to answer this question. It is developed in her reading of the painting *Popcreto para um popcrítico*, exhibited at Galeria Atrium in December 1964 only about six months after the military coup d’état. Costa writes:

On top of a red ground [this painting] presents us with a hoe flanked by some photo clippings. While it is possible to identify images of mouths, noses and strands of hair within the small circles [in the red ground], a tactically situated eye stands out from this arrangement. If we make use of the interpretative liberty advocated to us by the artist and take the political imagination of this period as a reference point; we find that the possibilities of communication of the works amplifies: red = communism; hoe = agrarian reform; fragments of imprisoned bodies tortured and a centralised eye of control.\(^{16}\)

Costa has a good case here. Her interpretations are underscored by historical facts; the agrarian reform was a heated subject in Brazilian politics around the time of the military coup; censorship and dictatorial control came in its wake, and so on. I would suggest, however, that Costa betrays her own premises when reading the Popcretos in the way she does. Would not an “interpretative liberty,” to which she refers, mean that the signs that are encountered in these works (hoe, red ground, circles, body parts, eye) rather than point to fixed connotations open towards the unknown? I think that they do; and find it significant that beside Rauschenberg, Cordeiro also turned to Umberto Eco’s notion of “the open work” around the time of making his Popcretos. Then perhaps the political aspect of these works does not lay so much in the content as in the mode of reading that they propose. I want to make clear that an important aspect of the Popcretos was that they stimulated thinking to unfix itself. That is why I think both Bense and Costa are wrong in their respective attempts to nail the meaning of these works. I argue that what is at stake in the Popcretos is an empowerment of the reader, who is called into the work in order to

think it through. The signs of the Popcretos are then not signs in and of themselves, as it still was in the progressive abstract art that was forwarded by the GRAV at this time, but rather encounters the reader as mental tools. With the help of these tools, the Popcretos are to be processed. Where this process ends up, I suggest, is not given from the outset. There is a conflict here between this form of open process that the Popcretos enacts and the return to order that was projected by the Brazilian military regime at this time. The Popcretos are filled with signs of the broken. If there is an everyday quality in these works, it is one that is breaking down. The ready-made objects shown are either worn out, disintegrating, or mechanically divided up. One gets the same sense of fragmentation when looking at the newspaper cut-outs that appear in the Popcretos, both images and words. A work titled “Jornal” (Newspaper) has multiple front pages folded into each other into a single page. This results in a semantic system of broken sentences, singular letters and gaping holes. At first, I encounter nothing here but semantic noise, absence of meaning. Then, from this noisy space, the phrase “revolução”) (“Revolution, or “Revolts”) suddenly appears. It thus seems that it is in the negative break-down of the system that the Popcretos locates its revolt. At the same time, it sets out to enforce a mode of reading that knows how to sustain an open semantics. This is also where they crash with the dictatorial project of a “return to order.” As epitomised in the work Contra-Mão (Wrong Way), the Popcretos aimed to steer the mind of the Brazilian public in the opposite direction to that of the military regime, simply by showing things that defy the law of concrete and semantic unity (Figure 1).

Hélio Oiticica and Pop Art

In a diary note from 1968, the Brazilian visual artist Hélio Oiticica writes:

For a true Brazilian culture to be created, strong and with proper character, this damn European and American heritage [Oiticica has just explicitly referenced U.S. pop art] had to be absorbed anthropophagously by the Blacks and Indians of this country, which are in fact the only thing of significance, because most Brazilian art is hybrid, intellectualized to the extreme, empty of any proper significance.
In the critical literature on Oititica much has been said about his “absorption” of constructive art into the life of the world of the Brazilian favela in works such as the *Parangolés* (1964) and *Tropicália* (1966). On the other hand, there has been but a few inquiries into Oititica’s relationship to U.S. pop art. This neglect is not without reasons. In his writings, Oititica often manifested an eagerness to distance his works from pop art. Without disagreeing that Oititica showed a critical or even hostile attitude towards pop art, I argue that he also accepted and incorporated parts of it into his works.

Oititica’s anti-pop attitude is explicitly stated in his text *Esquema geral da nova objectividade* (General Scheme for a New Objectivity) that was published in connection with his seminal Tropicália-installation at the Museo de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro, 1967. In this text, Oititica proclaimed the unity of the Brazilian avant-garde unlike internationalist trends such as op art and pop art. For this, he formulates a manifesto with six-points:

1 – general constructive will; 2 – move towards the object, as easel painting is negated and superseded; 3 – the participation of the spectator (bodily, tactile, semantic, etc.); 4 – an engagement and a position on political, social and ethical problems; 5 – tendency towards collective propositions and consequently the abolition, in the art of today, of “isms,” so characteristic of the first half of the century (a tendency which can be encompassed by Mário Pedrosa’s concept of “Post-Modern Art”); 6 – a revival of, and new formulations, in the concept of anti-art.18

Without wanting to dispute Oititica’s claim in this manifesto, I would like to suggest that it also reads as a tactical move. At the time for writing this, Oititica was also reclaiming the notion of anthropophagism. As previously discussed, anthropophagite does not only refuse but also strives to incorporate the other into itself so as to mutate its own selfhood. The other is thus caught in a double movement, where it is simultaneously

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within and without. What we know is that Oititica placed pop art on the outside of the Brazilian avant-garde, and this is beyond dispute; I suspect that he also put it inside.

Rauschenberg and neo-concrete theory

I have located an “entry” in a diary note that Oititica wrote as early as 1963. In this note, Oititica discusses Rauschenberg and Johns and places them in relation to the work series *Bólides* (Bolides) which he had started making that year. It was in the Bolides that Oititica started to make use of ready-made objects. This series changed quite a bit throughout Oititica’s artistic trajectory, but the initial works limited their use of ready-mades mostly to boxes and glass bottles of various different kinds. Ferreira Gullar, a leading critique of the Neo-concrete group in which Oititica participated from 1959–1961, had argued against the use of ready-mades for constructive art in his *Teoria do Não-Objeto* (Theory of the Non-Object). In Gullar’s view, ready-mades, which he knew about through Duchamp and Schwitters, showed a false answer to the problem of spatial construction. What Gullar was after was a type of object that while being distinct from the traditions of painting and sculpture also distinguished itself from everyday objects. Ready-mades, I think, implied too much of the everyday to be accepted in Gullar’s aesthetics; and for which Lygia Clark *Bichos* (Animals/Critters) manifested the seminal example. When Oititica came to accept ready-mades into his Bólides four years after Gullar’s text, while still holding on to many of its main ideas, it was not without reservations.

As mentioned, Oititica’s main reference on the ready-made was the works of Rauschenberg and Johns. Otitica had not been able to see their

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works in the original but instead based his observations on what he had seen from secondary sources. Of this, little is known besides that he had seen an image of Rauschenberg’s *Pilgrim* (1960), of which he writes in a diary note from 1963. Oiticica makes a quite absurd but interesting reading of the chair that stands attached to the canvas in Rauschenberg’s *Pilgrim*, to have the appearance of a “spine” securing the traditional structure of painting (the rectangular structure of the canvas) at a moment when painting is at its closest of leaving it behind. Thus rather than comprehending Rauschenberg as a free-spirited migratory bird, Oiticica sees him to be stuck within the gravity field of traditional easel painting.

What Oiticica seems to suggest in his analysis of Rauschenberg is that just attaching things to the canvas does not take us very far. This form of Combine painting does not escape or even counteract its structural givens. What Oiticica wants at this time, and what he later returns to speak about as properly Brazilian in his 1967 manifesto, is to supersede traditional easel painting. In opposition to Gullar’s Neo-concrete aesthetics, Oiticica proposes to make this transgression through the use of ready-mades. But he wants to have it the other way around from what he discerned in Rauschenberg, by bringing forth painting out of the already existing instead of bringing things into the painting. In that sense, the ready-made enters as a means to enforce a structural displacement of painting. It makes it lose the traditional grounds of the canvas or anything functioning as its structure *a priori*. When incorporating the ready-made, Oiticica certainly does not transform into a pop artist, but it was in reference to pop art that he incorporated it. Through pop art, but also despite it, Oiticica regenerated his practice away from his previous Neo-concrete standpoint on how to spatialise painting.

The aesthetics of the Bolides

But what about the anthropophagical “absorption” of pop art and black culture that Oiticica spoke about in his retrospective diary note from 1968, quoted at the outset of this case study? When looking at the Bolides that Oiticica produced in the early to mid-1960s, it is most difficult to discern

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23 Hélio Oiticica, in Oiticica Filho (org.), 2011, p. 64.
such connection. As I mentioned above, the initial versions of the Bólides were made out of ready-made boxes or bottles. Oiticicas explicit purpose was to use these objects to convey an aesthetical concept.\textsuperscript{24} To get this concept, I find it helpful to dissect the etymological meaning of the term Bolide, which comes from Greek βολίς, meaning “missile” or “flash”; Bolide is also used in astronomy to designate an exploding meteor. Likewise, the Bólides could be seen as an attempt to flash out colour and object as one. I suggest that this idea or concept should be understood in relation to Oititicas attempt to transgress the notion of painting as colour applied to a pregiven surface. Colour was meant to appear as integral to the ready-made structure of the Bólides; these were to be seen as objects of colour and not as painted things. The Bólides also stresses the involvement of the viewer. They are interactive in a perceptual sense. It is the viewer that actualises them but in this actualisation the viewer enters into a kind of creative regression. By using pigments, the Bólides brings the eye back to look at colours in their embryonic state; which is also a state of high intensity. This creative regression is also enacted through the perceptual play that the Bólides works to enact in the viewer by inviting him or her to open drawers or boxes, sneak into narrow spaces, looking closely, touching to know.

Homage to Cara de Cavalo

One Bólide, however, shows a stark contrast to the aesthetical idea found in the others. We can see this work flashing in the foreground at a photograph taken at Oititicas first solo exhibition at Galeria G-4 in Rio de Janeiro, 1966; in front of the children playing, there is another Bólide (Figure 7.2). This Bólide is titled \textit{B33 Bólide Caixa 18, Poema-Caixa 2 – “Homenagem a Cara de Cavalo”} (B 33 Box Bolide 18, Box Poem 2 “Homage to Cara de Cavalo”). On the four sides of this box there is one and the same photograph showing a horrible image of the mutilated corpse of a black man known as Cara de Cavalo. This man gained an infamous reputation for himself after killing a police officer in Rio de Janeiro in 1964. The Brazilian public could follow the police hunt for this

\textsuperscript{24} Oititica, 2011, p. 63.
man through an intense media coverage. When the photograph of the executed Cara de Cavalo (his body had been perforated with over 70 bullets) appeared in the press, one of which Oiticica appropriates for this work, it was framed as a police trophy; a symbol of law and order.

Oiticica’s *Box Bolide 18* is then easily seen as an anomaly within his *Bolide* series. Instead of creative regression, it stands up to touch upon a heated political subject. In passing, it could be noted that such engagement with the social world made this work be received as pop art in a press review of Oiticica’s exhibition at Galeria G-4. While not being in agreement here, it is certainly so that its use of media images makes it appear closer to pop art than other Bólides. The box used in this work is still a ready-made, but through the use of media images it no longer answers only to the transgression of painting. Instead of just pointing towards its own aesthetics, it uses the ready-made as a structure from where to voice a statement on a political subject.

Martins has previously discussed the political aspect of Box Bolide 18. He also looks at this work to stage a different perceptive mode then other Bólides. Instead of trying to “absorb” its viewer, Martins argues that Box Bolide 18 is “thrown like a bomb at the viewer’s face” (Martins’ emphasis). To support his claim, Martins points to a photograph taken of Box Bolide 18 in 1966. On this photograph, Oiticica is seen kneeling down beside his work, looking at the viewer in danger. When staged as in this photograph, Box Bolide 18 certainly does appear to attack its viewers. Even when looking at this photograph today, I feel myself taking a step backwards, as when receiving a blow. But I get quite another feeling when I see another photograph in which I see the black girl Luiza, who was also a friend of Oiticica, looking into this box (Figure 7.3). Martins also discusses this other reception, which instead of attack seems to reflect an emotional encounter, of which he is at pains to legitimate. When Martins defines the agency of *Box Bolide 18* as aggressive, I think he overlooks something quite important. For Oiticica to flash this work open to the camera, at first he had to remove a pink net of iron hanging in front of the images of the dead Cara de Cavalo; screening them, as it were. When ordinary viewers such as Luiza encountered this work as it was exposed at

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Galeria G-4, this net was not yet removed however. What they were invited to do then were to come up close to the work, kneel down beside it and look in. When doing this they were also enabled to ready that brief dedication that Oiticica had written for Cara de Cavalo, as if to a king, inscribed on a transparent plastic bag filled with yellowish pigment laying inside the box like a pillow, reading: “Here he is and here he will stay! Contemplate his heroic silence.”

Rather than exploding like a bomb, *Box Bolide 18* talks about a contemplation of silence. This is a political silence, no doubt. Oiticica proposes that the reader listen to this silenced body. Through slow contemplation, Cara de Cavalo is meant to transform from a trophy of the law to a symbol of resistance. It is within these lines I suggest we are to read Oiticica’s later statement, quoted above, that pop art had to be absorbed anthropophagously by the blacks of Brazil. In *Box Bolide 18*, the ready-made object functions as structure on which the inglorious reputation of the black criminal is turned around into a heroic resistance. I suggest that Oiticica wanted to establish an affective relationship between the viewer and this man. But rather than piercing out like a *punctum*, or exploding like a bomb, *Box Bolide 18* sets the viewer, becoming a reader, becoming a listener, in an contemplative intimacy with the brutal encounter of Black political resistance and the military police.

**Conclusion**

In this text, I have argued that the Brazilian reception of U.S. pop art in the 1960s should be reformulated in AnthroPOPhagous terms. I have shown how the Brazilian artists Waldemar Cordeiro and Hélio Oiticica, while certainly distancing themselves from pop art as such (neither of them wanted to produce pop art in any strict sense), also incorporated it into their respective practices. In my perspective, pop art can be seen as having functioned as a turning point for both Cordeiro and Oiticica in the early period of the military dictatorship (1964–1968). Cordeiro picked up the idea of semantic painting from Rauschenberg and used it to stimulate antagonistic thoughts. Oiticica incorporated ready-made objects, with reference to Rauschenberg and Johns, and also started to deal with the symbolic order. In his famous work *Box Bolide 18* from 1966, these elements were combined and used in order to get the Brazilian public in
touch with the death of the black other. Far from seeing pop art as nothing but a devaluation of art as has previously been presumed, I have shown that these Brazilian artists transformed it into a political instrument.

References

Books


Periodicals


Digital media

Figure 7.1 (previous page): Waldemar Cordeiro, Contra-Mão, Montage with objects in painted iron, 70 x 100, 1964. © Família Cordeiro.

Figure 7.2: Photograph from Oiticicas first solo exhibition at Galeria G-4, Rio de Janeiro, 1966. Photo: Alexandre Baratta. © César and Claudio Oiticica.
Figure 7.3: Luiza com Bólide B33 Bólido Caixa 18 – “Homenagem a Cara de Cavalo”, 1966. Photo: Claudio Oiticica. © César e Claudio Oiticica.