

The Power of Play in the Works of Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark

Scholars, such as Ferreira Gullar, Mario Pedrosa, and Guy Brett, have labeled the artworks of both Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica as interactive and experiential since these objects elicit viewer participation. The trajectories of these two artists' careers concentrated on producing works that provided a sensorial awakening. Oiticica did this by making environments, such as the *Bolides* and *Parangoles* (figures 1 and 2), evoking tactile, auditory and visual exploration. Similarly, Clark generated objects, such as those from the *Nostalgia of the Body* series (figures 3), requiring viewer manipulation and the discovery of all the objects' possibilities. Clark and Oiticica contend that these experiences instigate mental growth and creativity in their participants. How do the participants gain sensorial and developmental awakenings through their experiences with Clark's and Oiticica's works? I propose that the concept of play has an important role for these artists, linking viewer explorations to the development of creativity. Oiticica and Clark use play as an educational tool to influence their viewer's behavior and engender mental growth.

For the purpose of this argument, I must first define play and address the theories that give play a strong importance in development. One of the first scholars to stress the vitality of play in mental development was the Swiss philosopher and psychologist Jean Piaget. In his work *Play, Dreams and Imitation*, he states that play facilitates the assimilation and mastery of newly learned behaviors.ⁱ Play suspends the any normal structure in a child's world so that she can follow her primary desires and emotions.ⁱⁱ

Because the activity occurs outside of the ordinary routine or daily life, Johan Huizinga, the author of *Homo Ludens* (Man Player), asserts that play is free from structured rules.

All players begin equally regardless of their previous status and many types of play force them to work together towards a common goal.ⁱⁱⁱ This type of freedom from structure and status associated with play is embodied by the works of Clark and Oiticica.

Brian Sutton-Smith, a current play theorist, expands these concepts by introducing the idea of exploration in play. He states that exploration engenders learning and play can be exploratory, when new situations or objects are presented. In her article “Play as Learning”, Dorothy Jackson reinforces Sutton-Smith’s claims by asserting that when a novel object is introduced into a child’s world, he begins to test and evaluate it. This kind of investigatory play becomes an educational tool for cognitive and emotional development. Through play, a child learns how to manipulate and master new objects and environments, which is the same experience a participant encounters in Oiticica’s and Clark’s works

Another play theorist, George E. Forman builds on the importance that Sutton-Smith places on exploratory play, by suggesting that it can be used to direct thought and stimulate learning if it is monitored.^{iv} He calls this constructive play and applies it to early childhood classrooms. Guided play becomes an exploratory exercise for students outside of their daily routine, but with specific goals in mind. It is a way to investigate the material world utilizing senses and experiences.^v Furthermore, play fosters creativity. Players are confronted by different situations in play, whether make-believe or object-oriented, which allows them to create different responses and resolutions. The outcome of play does not hold importance for the player, but rather the process of play promotes creative thinking and problem solving.^{vi} The idea of play’s strong connection to the development of creativity performs an important role in the works of Oiticica and Clark. As I will demonstrate, they use play in their works to “instigate creativity” for the participant.

Based on these theories and for the purpose of this paper, I define play as an active experience involving the senses and emphasizing subjectivity. Play, whether individual or collective, occurs outside of the realm of daily life allowing expanded freedom for participants to express their primary emotions. It is exploratory and investigative, which promotes learning and mastering new situations. Finally, play is a creative endeavor. By using this rubric, I will explain how Oiticica's and Clark's work constitute play. Oiticica and Clark use play in their works as an educational tool, developing the participants' minds and bodies.

These two artists first started collaborating with each other while in the collective *Grupo Frente*. They were both influenced by the art critics Ferreira Gullar, Mario Pedrosa and Ivan Serpa. The critics called for the reinstatement of intuition, expression, and subjectivity into artistic practice, focusing on what Pedrosa termed "the experimental exercise of freedom".^{vii} According to Serpa and Pedrosa, art should offer the same intuitive experience as play through sensorial exploration and the suspension of the mundane routine. Pedrosa directly promotes art that induces play when he states that "a work should demand participation from the spectator and he, the spectator, should be playing inside the work". With this comment, Pedrosa acknowledges the importance of play in educating the participant.

Oiticica began experimenting with perception and creativity progressed during the early 1960s with the creation of the *Bolides* (figure 1). In this series, Oiticica encourages the viewer to play with his artwork by providing a realm for creative manipulation and exploration free from structured rules and behavioral norms. For him, they were proposals for altering participant behavior and play performs an important role in making this happen for the participant.

The *Bolides*, or fireball, series consists of over 50 wooden and glass structures of inspection that could be opened in different ways to discover objects inside. Oiticica referred to them as receptacles open to signification and imagination.^{viii} The participant has to touch, feel,

and play with the box and its contents to make the Bolide complete. Upon manipulation of the work, the participant suspends her daily life and her ordinary behavior is transported to a different context. According to Piaget's play theory, the spectator goes from a state of imitation, one in which she merely copies, to a phase of transformation, giving her actions new meaning.^{ix} Oiticica reshapes the idea of opening a drawer, usually performed in everyday life, and makes this action one of discovery. The viewer gains a novel understanding of her physicality in relation to the *Bolide* through guided play. In this way, the participant becomes increasingly aware of the relationship between her body and the artwork, which allows her to analyze each movement she makes. By playing with the object, the participant tests and evaluates its meaning as suggested by Dorothy Jackson in her article *Play and Learning*.

Oiticica's next series, *Parangoles* (figure 2), emphasizes and expands the educational aspects of play found in the *Bolides*. Based on his experiences while living in Mangueira, a favela or shantytown outside of Rio de Janeiro, these capes offer multiple possibilities of kinetic exploration while instigating the participant to consider socio-political aspects of life.^x By putting on the cape, the spectator loses her previous social status and enters a plane of co-existence with other *Parangole* wearers. Previous social norms and structure dissolve, which is indicative of play. Oiticica supports the theoretical notion that playing with the *Parangole* can affect people collectively by allowing an interaction free from social regulations. The artist explains this notion when he stated "The Parangole is against everything that is oppressive socially and individually—all the fixed and decadent forms of government, or reigning social structure".^{xi} The Dutch psychologist Johan Huizinga explained that play can be a culture creating activity, with the participants exploring the formal possibilities of life without suffering the consequences. The spectator is transported to an equal playing field outside of social norms and the repressive dictatorial government occupying Brazil at that time.

In addition to the exploratory experience of *Parangoles*, these works also simulate play in that Oiticica elicits the participant's creativity and subjective emotions. Once the participant has mastered her movements with the *Parangole*, she is encouraged to create a dance to the samba rhythm which accompanies the exhibition of these capes. Oiticica reinforces the importance of creation within these works stating that the *Parangoles* are a process that "completes itself through the dynamic participation of the spectator, now considered as a participator. [It] answers all the collective need for creative activity which is latent and can be activated in a certain way by the artist".^{xii} This forum that Oiticica provides for creativity further connects the *Parangoles* with the educational role of play.

Oiticica's later work, *Tropicalia* of 1969 (figure 4), expands upon the notion of play because the artist creates a complete environment based on sensorial exploration. The work allows the participant the freedom from established social and political structures, so that she can experience primary emotions and develop her creativity. By walking through a novel world of tactile, olfactory, auditory, and visual sensations, Oiticica provides the participant a new context for investigation. Brian Sutton Smith and Jean Piaget describe play as a leisure activity, conducted outside of the working world. Oiticica's idea of *crelazer*, the belief in leisure,^{xiii} emphasizes the opportunity to play with his environment. Oiticica produces a space for joy, pleasure and phenomenological knowledge, which is indicative of play.

Oiticica also calls this work supra-sensorial because it expands the participant's sensorial capacities in an attempt to help her discover her creative centers. The environment promotes guided play through its labyrinth of experiences. This replicates the educational strategies employed by Pedrosa and Serpa in their work with children, in that *Tropicalia* relies on the spontaneous movements of the participant. Once the participant masters the maze, she gains a full understanding of her body and its experiences. Active and pleasurable play is contrasted by

the passive and abrasive element of the television at the end of the work. It raises the awareness of the viewer's previous experiences, demonstrating that play activity encourages mental growth while passive watching does not engender creative or critical thinking.

Like Oiticica, Lygia Clark began using the idea of play in her works during the early 1960s. In her *Nostalgia of the Body* series which includes *Pedra e Ar* of 1966 (figure 3), Clark encourages participant play. In this work, Clark fills a plastic bag with air and places a pebble on one of its corners. The viewer must touch and manipulate the bag. In doing so, the participant becomes increasingly aware of every movement she makes because it influences the state of the stone. Yve-Alain Bois describes the experience of his exploratory play with this object:

[The stone] was balanced precariously and sank a little into the corner of the bag. It hung there, and nearly fell, but even the slightest pressure of my hands caused it to rise again like a floater. The bag was still hot. I felt as though I were clumsily helping a very delicate animal to give birth. The delicate fort/da of the pebble stayed in my memory for a long time, partly because it was related to the idea of a bodily, transpersonal memory...^{xiv}

The art historian testifies to the strong effect created by the process of discovery. At first, his movements are clumsy and then he slowly gains control. This replicates Piaget's assertion that play develops mastery of sensory-motor capabilities. This experience educates the participant by heightening her awareness of her body.

Pedra e ar further comprises the elements of play in that the work creates an experience outside of daily life, enhancing the subjective and emotional response from the participant. Bois' description of the object attests to this in that he underwent primary emotions that he associated with helping an animal give birth. Another author, Suely Rolnik, describes her experience with *Pedra e ar* "like the very inhalation-exhalation motions of the life pulse".^{xv} While these two experiences of the work differ due to their subjectivity, they both intimate the vitality of life that the work induces. This feeling stems from the emphasis that Clark places on primary emotions,

a key characteristic of play. The play situation created by Clark develops psychological growth in that *Pedra e Ar* provide a forum for self-discovery.

With the creation of the *Body Masks* series (figure 5), Clark transforms audience participation to include both an individual self-discovery and a collective experience. Furthermore, she intensifies sensorial arousal inherent in play by limiting vision. The participant must tactilely explore his new world with a partner who has the same visual impairment. Play helps establish a child's physicality,^{xvi} just like the masks create an awareness of the participant's body in relation to the world and people around her. Clark states that the masks help "people to reencounter their own bodies through the tactile sensations operating in objects external to themselves".^{xvii} This investigation of a novel object, in this case the mask, is indicative of exploratory play. The participant undergoes a process of self-discovery which heightens her awareness of her body and its movements. Play becomes an educational tool for Clark. By putting on the body mask, the participant has suspended her previous world and entered a state of explorative and sensorial play.

Clark extends play from an individual realm to a collective experience, which allows for the participant's social development. Like Oiticica's *Parangoles*, the masks suspend the structure and order of daily life, encouraging a new understanding of human connection. Physicality becomes directly linked to psychology, in that the masks elicit a feeling of alienation from the visible world yet offer a way to connect to another human through play and investigation. Clark states that these objects make a participant "feel like a child who needs to learn to balance itself. The primal experience begins".^{xviii} Again, Clark induces the primary emotions indicative of play. She compares to participant to a child, who learns how to interact with the world around her through playful investigation. The playful experience elicits a direct connection between bodily awareness and psychological development. The artist uses

educational play to develop the viewer's heightened awareness of her body and her relationship with others.

In conclusion, these artists use guided and constructive play as an educational tool to engender participant's creative abilities. Whether the works affect social behavior, as in Oiticica's *Parangoles*, or develop physical and psychological facilities, as in Clark's *Masks*, they impart new knowledge upon the participant through sensorial exploration indicative of play. The adult is transported to a world outside of reality where she begins with a clean slate. By playing with the art, the participant creates new meaning from her actions which were previously ordinary and mundane.

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Images



Figure 1: Hélio Oiticica, *Bolide*, 196



Figure 2: Hélio Oiticica, from the *Parangole* series, 1964-66.



Figure 3: Lygia Clark, *Pedra e Ar* from the *Nostalgia of the Body* series, 1966-69

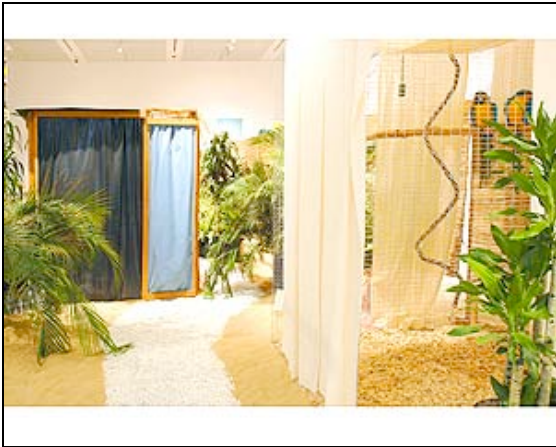


Figure 4: Image from *Tropicalia* installation, 1969



Figure 5: Clark, *The I and You: Clothing-Body-Clothing Series*, 1966

- ⁱ Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imagination in Childhood* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1951), 147-149.
- ⁱⁱ Piaget, 147-149.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Hendricks, “Huizinga’s Contributions to Play: A Reappraisal”, in *Conceptual, Social-Cognitive, and Contextual Issues in the Fields of Play*, ed. Jaipaul L. Roopnarine (Connecticut: Ablex Publishing, 2002), 27.
- ^{iv} George E. Forman, *Constructive Play* (Menlo Park, California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1984), 2-3
- ^v Forman, 2-3
- ^{vi} Brian Sutton-Smith, “Piaget, Play, and Cognition Revisited”, in *The Relationship Between Social and Cognitive Development*, ed. Willis F. Overton (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1983) 232.
- ^{vii} Francisco Alambert, “1001 Words for Mario Pedrosa”, *Art Journal* 64 (2005): 85.
- ^{viii} Lynn Zelevansky, *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s-70s* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 45-46.
- ^{ix} Piaget, 157.
- ^x David, 189-90.
- ^{xi} Moore, 12.
- ^{xii} Moore, 9
- ^{xiii} Moore, 22.
- ^{xiv} Bois, 87.
- ^{xv} Rolnik, 79.
- ^{xvi} Sutton-Smith, 149.
- ^{xvii} Bois, 102.
- ^{xviii} Bois, 103.