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Hypermobile

The Long Distance Relationship Between Calder and Oiticica



Alexander Calder, *Aluminum Leaves, Red Post* (1941) © 2017 Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Brian Kelley

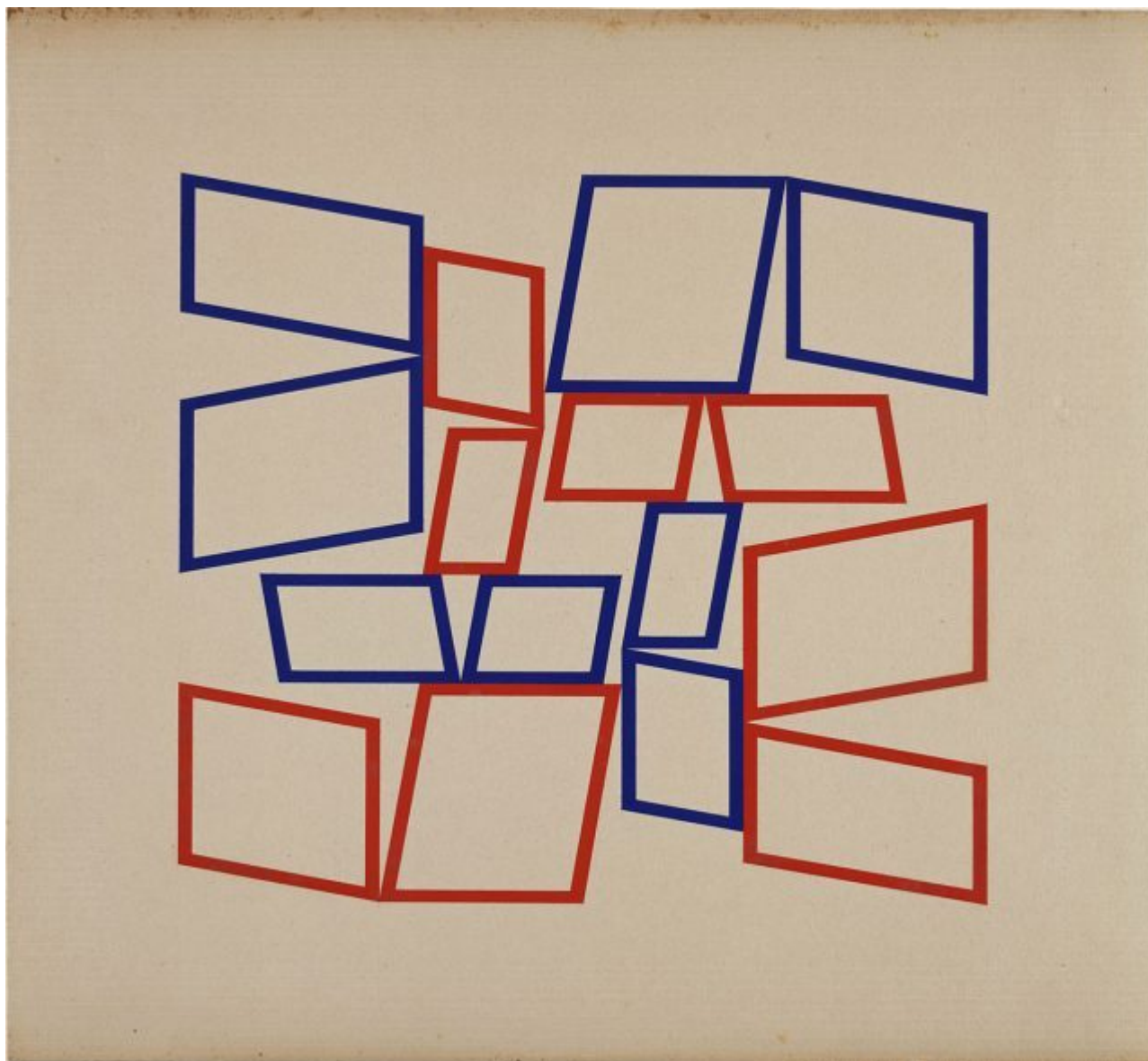
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This summer, two exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art will run in parallel, dedicated to artists who aren't usually mentioned in the same breath, but whose work is closely connected. "[Calder: Hypermobility](#)" (until 23 October) is on show at the same time as the retrospective "[Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium](#)" (14 July-1 October). The overlap will allow viewers to better explore the influence Calder (1898-1976) exerted on the younger Brazilian artist (1937-80).

Both artists radically changed and undermined the privileged status that a work of art held, using color and form to create movement. The viewer is no longer a passive witness: they can touch and move Calder's sculptures, while Oiticica turned the viewer and the work into mutual participants.



Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema 4066* (1958) Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of the Oiticica family © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

Rare talent

One of the most important artists to have emerged from Brazil in the 20th century, a Tate Modern retrospective in 2007 ("[Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Colour](#)") introduced his work to an international audience. Yet, for several reasons his market lags behind other significant Brazilians.

In 2009, a fire destroyed many key works (including *Grand Nucleus* (1960-66), which Patricia Phelps de Cisneros wrote about for [In Other Words issue #3](#)). Oiticica's work is rare and those to whom it belongs are reluctant to sell at the current prices: only 43 pieces have appeared at auction since 1985, and the auction record is \$362,500, paid for a gouache on cardboard *Metaesquema (Dois brancos)* (1958), one of the series titled "Metaesquema" made between 1957-8, in 2010 at

Christie's New York.

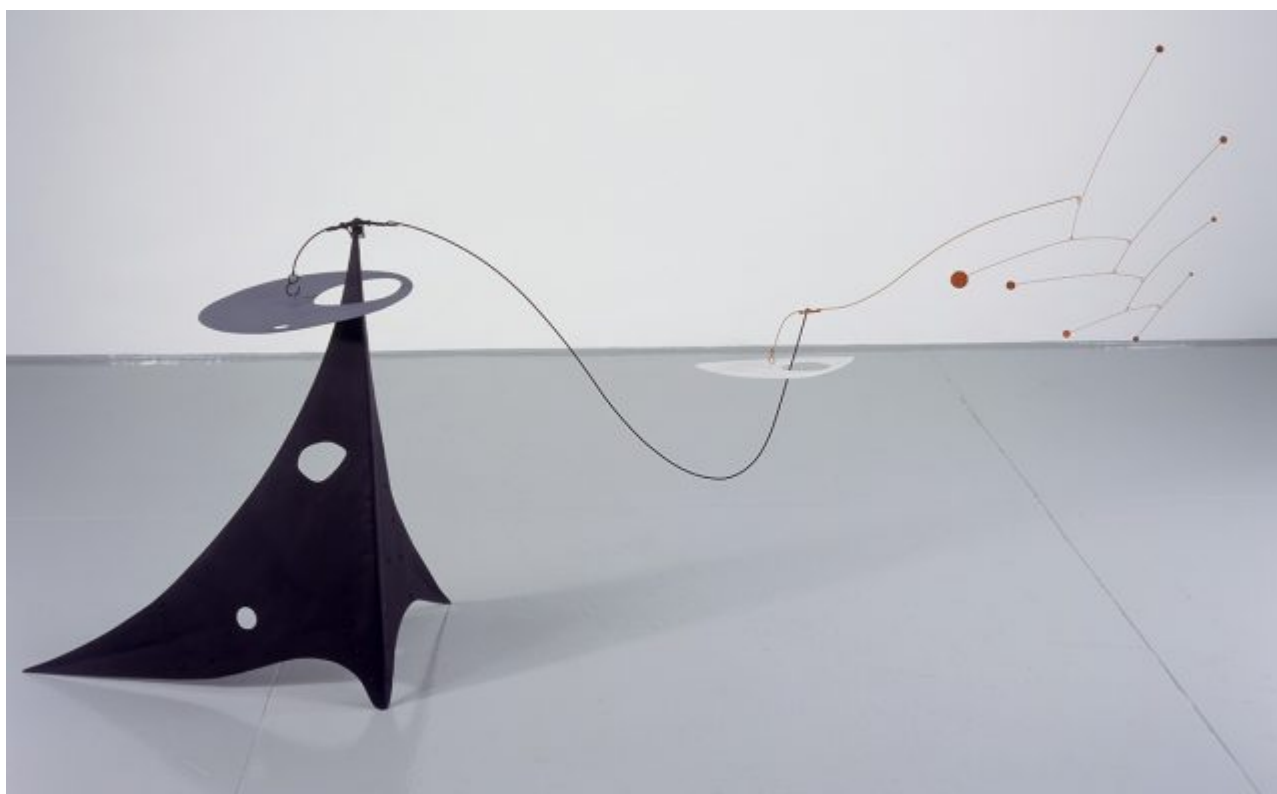
To make matters worse, Brazil is in the midst of an economic crisis that has hampered the local market. So we have seen a stream of *Metaesquemias* selling for between \$180,000 and \$360,000 without the market really gathering momentum. On the private market, larger sums have been paid for Oiticica sculptures—pieces from the “Bólido” (fireballs) series have sold for up to \$4m—but without the frequency required for consistent market success.

These factors all combine to create a negative feedback loop that keeps major works from coming to market.

Hot for Calder

In market terms, Calder's work is as blue-chip as art gets, so it is easy to forget how radical it is. Under the stewardship of [Alexander S.C. Rower](#), Calder's grandson, the Calder Foundation has focused on exhibitions that deal with particular aspects of his work or relationships with other artist or movements, which has been a great boon to his legacy.

In the past five years alone there has been a plethora of major solo shows dedicated to Calder at museums including the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#); the [Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam](#); the [Museo Jumex, Mexico City](#); the [Pushkin Museum, Moscow](#); [Tate Modern, London](#) and [Itaú Cultural, São Paulo](#).



Alexander Calder, *Parasite* (1947) © 2017 Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Demand for Calder's work has never been stronger, with nine of the top ten prices set in the past five years. There have been exhibitions at major galleries including [Gagosian](#), [Hauser & Wirth](#), [Mnuchin](#), [Dominique Levy](#), [Pace](#), [Acquavella](#) and [Venus over Manhattan](#).

In the decade preceding 2010, Calder's auction record was broken twice—each time for large-scale outdoor sculptures (peaking in 2010 at Christie's with \$6.3m (est. \$4m-6m) for *Red Curlicue* (1973)). Then, between 2010 and 2014, the record fell a further three times in quick succession (interestingly all for mobiles, which had traditionally not been considered the most sought-after works). The record now stands at \$25.9m for *Poisson volant (Flying Fish)* (1957) (est. \$9m-\$12m) at Christie's New York.

Breaking out



Alexander Calder, *Aluminum Leaves, Red Post* (1941) © 2017
 Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
 Photo credit: Brian Kelley

Calder created his first “mobiles” and “stables” in 1930-1, shattering traditional artistic categories with painted abstract forms that broke free from the picture plane into 3D. Calder introduced the quality of movement, of the work and the viewer. “The mobile has actual movement in itself, while the stabile [refers back to] the old painting idea of implied movement. You have to walk around a stabile or through it—a mobile dances in front of you,” he said.

No other foreign artist was as closely associated with the growth in interest in Modernism in Brazil than Calder, so Oiticica—who would further this participatory relationship in his series of “Bilaterals” and “Spatial Reliefs”—is likely to have known his work. Calder was the subject of the inaugural exhibitions of international Modernism at two new art museums in the late 1940s in Rio and São Paulo and appeared in the first two editions of the São Paulo Bienal in 1951 and 1953.

In the 1953 edition Calder was given an entire room, showing 45 works ranging from early wire sculptures from 1928-29 to mobiles and stables from 1953.

The repeated presence of this American artist at a nascent stage in Brazilian Modernism had a profound impact on the country’s artists and critics. Oiticica paid close attention to current art theory and would have been aware of Calder, thanks to close friendships with the Brazilian critics Ferreira Gullar and Mário Pedrosa (the latter was inspired by meeting Calder in 1943 to start the first major newspaper art column in Brazil, writing extensively about abstraction).

Up close and personal



Hélio Oiticica *P15 Parangolé Cape 11, I*
Embody Revolt, worn by Nildo of
 Mangueira (1967) © César and Claudio
 Oiticica. Courtesy of César and Claudio
 Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro. Photo credit:
 Claudio Oiticica

Calder insisted upon intuitive interaction: “The aesthetic value of these objects cannot be arrived at by reasoning. Familiarization is necessary,” he said. Speaking about his works, Calder stated: “That others grasp what I have in mind seems unessential, at least as long as they have something else in theirs.”

In Oiticica's art, the viewer is required to take part, sometimes to the point of penetrating the work itself, as in the case of some of his "Nuclei".

The liberation of color was also a major concern for both. Calder's *Untitled* (around 1947), is a complex collection of hanging polychrome discs that insists upon the viewer's participation: only when approaching the mobile does its mutating form resolve into discrete colors.

Beginning with his "Metaesquemas" series, Oiticica wanted to free color from its traditional subordination to line and form by making it an autonomous element. He wanted to endow "color with its own structural autonomy", dispensing with "the two-dimensional plane, thereby annihilating painting itself".

In 1963, in a moment of true innovation, he began the "Bóldes", small boxes painted an intense hue of red or orange that he described as "an energy-center of sensation and feeling". Viewers were encouraged to manipulate the works with their hands. His subsequent series, "Parangolé", comprised layers of fabric designed to be worn, work that are, activated as the participant moves.



Hélio Oiticica, *B11 Box Bólide 9*, at Rua Engenheiro Alfredo Duarte, Rio de Janeiro (1964), Tate, London. Courtesy the Whitney Museum, NY. Photo credit: Desdémone Bardi

Lively or political

Calder eroded the division between high and low art with works such as *Cirque Calder* (1926-31), a complex body of art made from a spectrum of found materials. The liveliness of his early work continued in later abstract works. As the curator and writer James Johnson Sweeney said: "We grin and enjoy it... This is not the way one usually feels in a roomful of sculpture."

Oiticica's move towards the naïve was more political. "Art is no longer an instrument of intellectual domination, can no longer be used as something 'supreme', unattainable, as pleasure for the whisky-drinking bourgeois or the speculative intellectual: the only art of the past which will remain is that which can be apprehended as direct emotion, that can release the individual from his oppressive conditioning, giving him a new dimension which responds to his behaviour," he said in 1967.



Hélio Oiticica, *PN1 Penetrable* (1960) © César and Claudio Oiticica. Courtesy of César and Claudio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro. Photo credit: César Oiticica Filho

There are strong resonances between the work of Calder and Oiticica, who both pioneered new forms in art, prioritizing color, movement and participation. As institutional support continues to increase, international collectors will explore the symbiotic relationship between Brazil's avant-garde and blue-chip artists such as Calder with greater confidence. The idea of hanging a Calder mobile next to a work by Oiticica will, hopefully, seem natural—even necessary.

So, make your way to the Whitney this summer to see the work of these two great pioneers. Look, feel and move together with the art of Calder and Oiticica.



Alexander Calder, *The Arches* (1959), Whitney Museum, NY © 2017 Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Jerry L. Thompson