

Cultural Spaces in Rio de Janeiro

By Denise Carvalho



Cultural spaces have become increasingly popular in Rio de Janeiro. Many are in buildings as old as colonial Brazil, 54 of which have been renovated since the early '80s to become historic and artistic centers, a program originated by professor and politician Darcy Ribeiro. Located in downtown Rio and in the Botafogo district, many of these new cultural centers and museums offer fine art exhibitions, art films and documentaries, courses, theater, seminars, and specialized libraries. The Baroque style of the Fundação Casa França-Brasil results from the intermingling of a sophisticated European vocabulary and rustic simplicity. Other examples of reclaimed architecture are the Museum of the Republic, Paço Imperial, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Espaço Cultural dos Correios, and Centro Cultural Light.

Dating from the 18th century, Paço Imperial was the Portuguese colonial headquarters in Brazil, and later the Palace of the Portuguese vice-kings (Paço Real). During the Proclamation of the Republic it was renamed Paço Imperial. After its restoration in 1985, it became a cultural center. This beautiful building with its large interior rooms, as well as an open space on the ground floor, holds group and solo exhibitions.

From mid-July through August, Paço Imperial held a group exhibition of Brazilian artists including Paulo Paes, Julio Villani, José Resende, Luciana Horta, Zerbini, Anna Linnemann, and Daniel Feingold. A highlight of the exhibition was the work of Paulo Paes, whose installation of brilliantly colored, inflatable cellophane sculptures was eye-popping, especially in contrast to the colonial architecture of the space. Paes's work is inspired by the tradition of balloon making, which is very popular in Brazil. Growing up in the north of the country, among balloon-making aficionados, he learned the trade's tradition

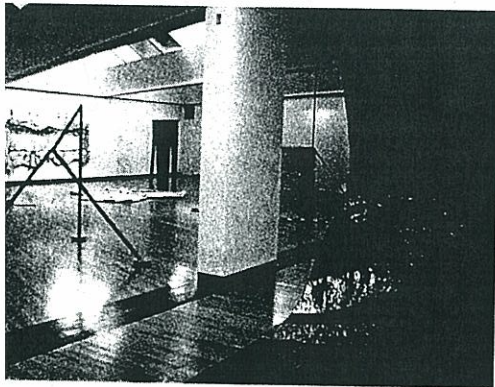
and philosophy. Modeling the surface with cellophane paper is the basic technique of his inflatables. They are three-dimensional designs in space whose structure is provided by air. These weightless sculptures vary in shape and size, sometimes taking over a whole room.

Since the colonial period, balloons have been associated with pyrotechnics, carrying gunpowder explosives or candles, igniting trees and slums, and for that reason forbidden by law. They were seen as symbols of resistance, and their makers marginalized by authorities. Known to be extremely proud of their work, balloon makers consider theirs the most sublime form of art, and their devotion can take all their money, and even tear marriages apart.

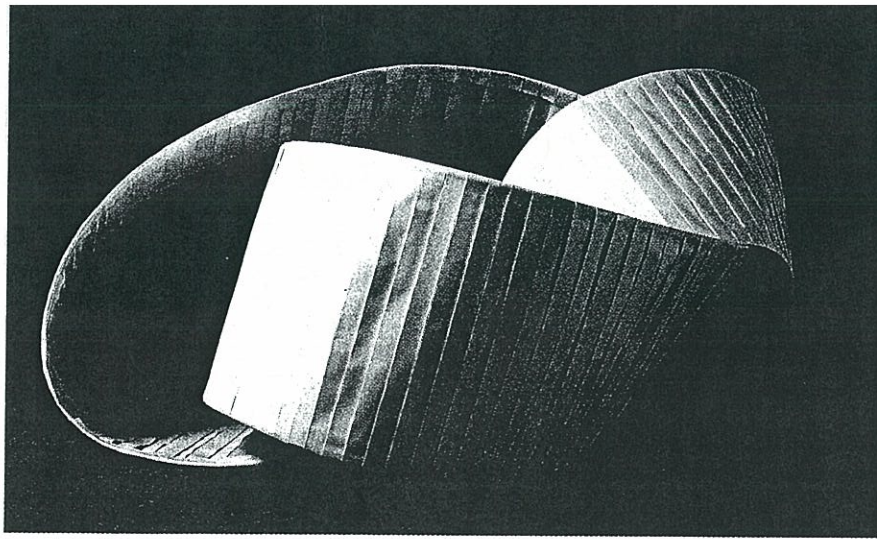
Paes's recent work investigates the aesthetics of this forbidden art, turning it inside out, and opening new possibilities for what has been considered a craft by the artistic elite in Brazil. Although minimal in form, his inflatables emphasize the sensuous shapes of the body, and were used as part of an erotic performance recently held in a public square in Rio. Inspired by Russian Constructivism, the artist demonstrates the integration of mathematics, geometry, surface, volume, materials, and structure. A simple change in any of the parts will force a symmetrical change in all the others.

Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica, the city's newest space for art shows, recently held a retrospective of José Resende's work, including 30 sculptures selected from museums all over the country. The 19th-century, three-story building has been recently renovated to accommodate six gallery spaces. It has been the Music Conservatory and the College of Brazilian Theater, and the site of recitals and seminars by important literary figures such as Olavo Bilac, Coelho Neto, and Viriato Correia.

Having emerged in the '60s, Resende's work has become an example of thriving public art, joining imagination with consciousness,



Top: Julio Villani, *Venus Anthropophage*, 1995. Mixed media, 152 x 15 x 12 cm.
Bottom: José Resende, installation view of retrospective exhibition at Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica, 1998.



constantly redefining the limits of its own language. Resende's sculptures demonstrate an aspect of Brazilian modernity, a formal frugidity reflecting the developing urban landscape. His sculptures can be seen inside public spaces and on the streets of Rio and São Paulo. These works not only provide a diversity of elements and materials such as iron, lead, or brass combined with velvet, silk, or nylon, but they suggest a contrast between feelings of freedom and rigidity. Their shapes, which can vary from elegantly linear to impulsively twisted, are not suggestive of figurative forms. Resende's large, sometimes monumental abstract pieces stand without traditional support, and their sense of irreverence and imagination creates a parallel to the concrete formality of their reduced curves, lines, and

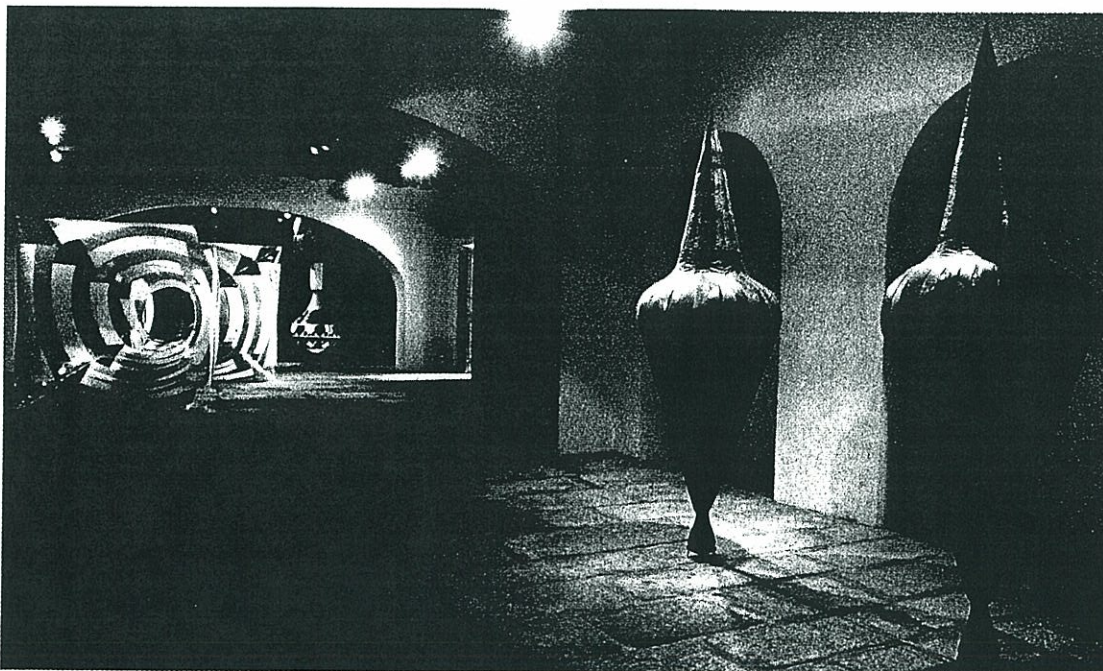
angles. Resende's art can mimic the language of urban development, as in an installation from 1994, in which granite blocks (of one cubic meter each) were piled together and rearranged in the streets of São Paulo during 10 consecutive days. His visual language is freer inside the gallery though, since he experiments with a greater variety of materials, creating more tension, allowing more flexibility, adding more organic materials and shapes.

The Museum of the Republic in the Palácio do Catete recently held an exhibition on the subject of cultural cannibalism, which is also the concept used to organize this year's São Paulo Biennial. Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibalistic Movement* (1928) directed the attention of artists and intellectuals to the

concept that Brazil is a culturally anthropophagic country. This influence is documented in the exhibition entitled "Antropofagia?," curated by Gisela Magalhães, with works by Tarsila do Amaral, Flávio de Carvalho, Anna Bella Geiger, Antonio Dias, Cícero Dias, Gerchman, and others. This exhibition portrays a picture of Brazil's identity, showing influences from its important epochs, such as romanticism, modernism, and tropicalism. It includes paintings, sculptures, photographs, video, crafts made by Tupy Indians, and seminars.

Exciting artworks have surfaced from the creation of these cultural spaces, attracting and informing a growing number of viewers and supporting the founding of more cultural institutions. With these new spaces and organizations, Brazil has taken the step of bringing art to the masses, a process that will allow not only an enriching assimilation of this unique and multifaceted culture, but also surely more funding for the arts in the country.

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Above: Valéria Costa Pinto, *Endless*, 1998. Paper, 16 x 110 x 94 in. Left: Paulo Paes, installation view of cellophane sculptures. Both at Paço Imperial, 1998.