

THE ARTS

VISUAL ARTS

# When samba met modernism

The limited and flawed exhibition of Brazilian art of the second half of the 20th century is nonetheless inspiring, says Lynn MacRitchie

... of painting and sculpture to create works which involved the spectator as part of the experience. For in Brazil, modernism was not just a movement in art, it had been taken up by the government as the symbol of a new society. Oscar Niemeyer designed

hundreds of banknotes strung together on a cord. "Lung" (1987) is made from a pile of what appear to be paper containers for takeaway food. Most successful of the present generation of Brazilian artists is Ernesto Neto, represented here by "Untitled" (2001). Neto often uses herbs and spices to stuff sections of gauze constructions which can be walked through, and have become very popular on the international circuit. While elegant and well-made, the physical involvement they invite has none of the challenge of the rough and ready costumes of Oiticica or the experimental daring of Clark's small objects designed to stimulate interaction.

**The show's ambitions could perhaps never have been satisfied in its selection of work by just 19 artists spread over four decades. So the visitor must work hard to fathom what is happening as the work changes abruptly from room to room**

the architecture of Brasilia, the new capital, as a metaphor for a nation intent on creating a new world. When the economic strains that this produced eventually ruptured and the military took over in 1964, artists such as Oiticica had already taken up their positions. Originally from a cultivated middle-class family, he had moved to the ever-growing favelas or shanty towns on the outskirts of Rio, and became a

leading dancer in a samba school. The *parangoles* worn to dance in, were where samba met modernism, a developing-world challenge to a first-world orthodoxy it was just learning to reject.

But what came after that? Both Oiticica and Clark spent much of their time abroad - she worked in Paris, teaching courses at the Sorbonne on "gestural communication". At Oxford, a film made by her son in 1973 is the only record of her work of this time. None of the small objects seen in the film - the plastic bags with stones balanced on them, the rubber tubes to hold to the ear and listen to - are actually in the exhibition. Oiticica, meanwhile, spent the 1970s in New York, liv-

"Experimental art" - how odd that phrase sounds nowadays, almost embarrassing. For it harks back to a time when there were still institutions, academies, and even cities where the form and purpose of art were defined and upheld. At the end of the 19th century and for the first half of the 20th century, Paris was such a place.

So when, in 1950, the young Brazilian artist Lygia Clark decided to study painting, her husband and family accepted being left behind in Rio de Janeiro while she travelled halfway across the world. She became an accomplished and highly successful painter. But that did not satisfy her. She did experiment with her art, so much so that, as it developed, her work broke down the very tenets of the modernism she had travelled so far to learn. From making elegant, controlled paintings and sculptures, she evolved a whole new way of making objects which were not displayed aloofly on walls, but were made to be held and passed between people, sharing the experience of touch and sight.

Her story, and the story of her extraordinary compatriot Helio Oiticica, exemplify the pioneering years of contemporary art in a post-colonial society. Work by both is included in *Experimento*, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, which attempts to trace the

EDINBURGH MUSIC

## Operas should be seen as well as heard

Now that the fringe festival gets under way a week early, the official Edinburgh Festival has to make an extra big splash. That is not easy, as the opening event - always a concert on the Sunday evening - has traditionally jumped in at the deep end with a huge choral work.

This year Brian McMaster, festival director, chose a concert performance of Berlioz's opera *Les Troyens* - one of those "they-don't-come-bigger-than-this" spectacles

THEATRE NEW YORK

## Stellar cast graces Nichols' Chekhov



Chekhov has not exactly been a staple of the New York Shakespeare Festival's programme in Central Park, and watching Mike Nichols' affecting production of *The Seagull*, it is sometimes apparent why.

The evanescent emotion of plays in which, to quote the story's fragile budding actress Nina, "there isn't much action", can be defeated by the drone of aircraft more easily than is the Elizabethan work we usually enjoy here.

And yet from the first sight of a setting designed by Bob Crowley you know that you will probably forgive the overhead distractions. The opening scenes of this play about eternally loving eternally unloving

EDINBURGH FRINGE

## Debut is jewel in the Traverse Crown

General opinion has it that *Gagarin Way* is the jewel in the Traverse Theatre's crown. Even without having seen everything else on offer at the venue, I am prepared to believe it. Gregory Burke's first play, which transfers next month to the Cottesloe Theatre, fizzles with intelligence, insight and mordant wit, often

One achievement of the Oxford show, flawed as it is, is to remind us just how inspiring such work can still be.

"Experimento. Art in Brazil 1958-2000." Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Until October 21.