

VISUAL ART

Oregano, ping-pong, veg – must be Brazilian art



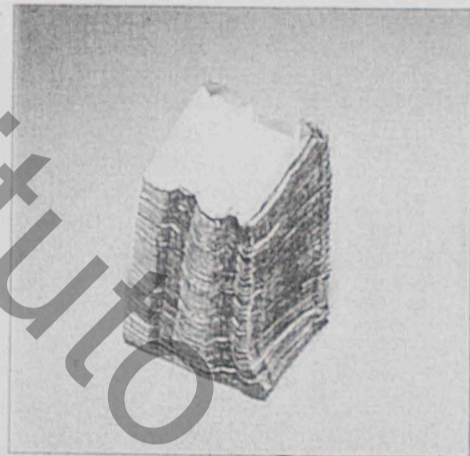
Charles Darwent

Experiment Experiencia
Museum of Modern Art
OXFORD

For no good reason that I can see, 2001 seems to have been declared European Year of Brazilian Art. Maybe it's the weather; at any rate, there's a lot of it about. One of the pitifully few highlights of Tate Modern's "Century City" earlier this year was its Rio section. In Paris, the Cartier Foundation recently staged a show of Brazilian homoerotic photography, and Brazilian artists make up the lion's share of the Foundation's new exhibition, "Un Art Populaire". Come October, there will be five more shows of Brazilian art in Britain – at the Pitt Rivers, Ashmolean, Fitzwilliam and British museums, and at Kew Gardens – all of them pre-empted by one at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford.

Like Europe's 15th-century "discovery" of the New World, this process is open to question. While an outbreak of German or American exhibitions would suggest some kind of art-historical reappraisal, the sudden flowering of 20th-century Brazilian art in Europe seems to be prompted by surprise that it exists at all. The Cartier show is typical in treating artworks from Brazil as something between fine art and ethnography: a visual extension of the well-known Brazilian penchant for dancing the samba, eating goat and wearing hats with fruit on.

So it is a relief to find Moma's Experiment Experiencia not behaving like a curatorial Pedro Cabral. Yes, the show does make a case for the existence of something called "Brazilian art", but it doesn't over-egg it. Instead, Moma's curators make a couple of modest proposals. The first is that modern art in Brazil is an unusually heartfelt thing, largely because as in pre-20th-century Europe – it is

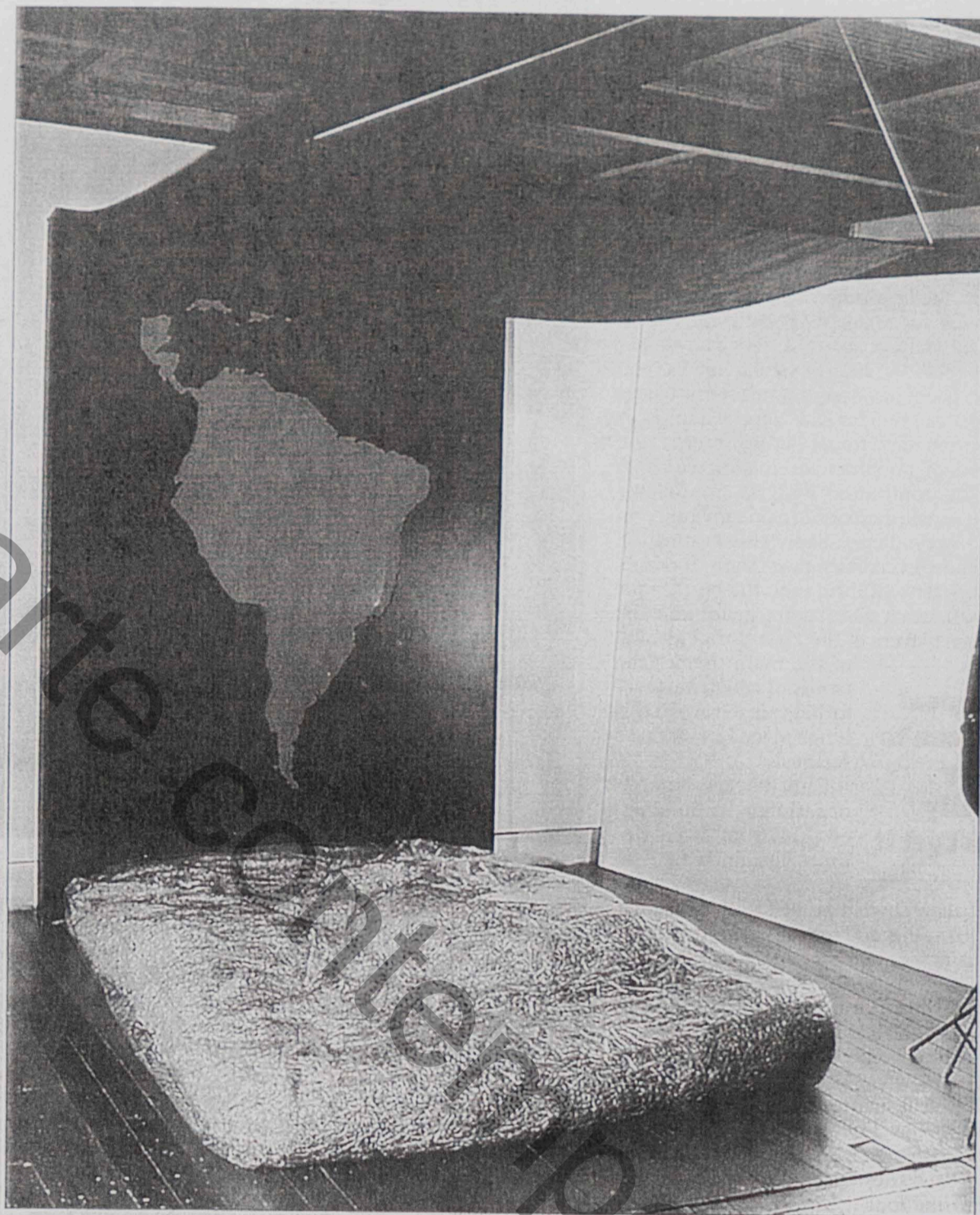


New world order: Antonio Manuel's 'I'm Crazy About You' (1969), right; Jac Leirner's 'Lung (Vegetable, Mineral)' (1987), above

passed on through artists rather than art schools. The show's second, and possibly linked, thesis is that the development of modern art in Brazil has been unusually linear. While the reaction against Greenbergian strictness in the 1950s sent Euro-American art zipping off in a dozen directions at once, the attitude of Brazilian artists to the Constructivist modes of the time was evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Even allowing for a tad of curatorial editing, this seems to be borne out by the work in Moma's show. Downstairs, in the 1950s, we find Lygia Clark making Malevich-ish pieces with names like *Planes on modulated surface no. 5* and Helio Oiticica painting gouaches on the Constructivist dialogue between shape, colour and weight. Upstairs, in 2001, we have Ernesto Neto's *Anatomy of the Hanging Life*: a pendulous thing of polyamide mesh, polystyrene balls and dried oregano. Its visceral forms and blobby humour seem a world away from the high-mindedness of Oiticica and Clark, and yet the distance between them is surprisingly short. Like most of the work in this show, Neto's *Anatomy* is really a dissection of the laws of physics: trying to find some kind of synaesthetic equivalence between heaviness and heavy smells, abstraction and allusion.

The shift, if you like, has been from theory to practice. Fifties Brazilian artists worked like pseudo-scientists – the Experiment, maybe, of the title of the show. Their art was cerebral, empirical, and to do with something called "perception". By the 1960s, those same artists had moved on to speak a much gutsier language – Experience – involving everyday materials (cloth, coat-hangers and, eventually, dried oregano) with strong social



and narrative links. These newer works were about seeing rather than perception, and about smelling, eating and playing.

This is not to suggest that younger Brazilian artists have given up on Malevich and become party people. Their work may be more humane, but it is still, in the main, looking for physical answers. Thus Waltercio Caldas' delightful *Ping-Ping* is literally and figuratively playful. Its name is a play on words, to do with the fact that no little white ball is ever going to bounce back from it. The whole point of ping-pong is that is a dynamic game: but here it is, dismembered in a gallery, its

forces reduced to lines of nylon twine. *Ping-Ping* may even be making mock of early Brazilian modernism, of its propensity for taking the fun out of things. And yet Caldas's work is also serious, and respectful of seriousness. The shapes it makes, its formal concerns, are those of real sculpture. Call me old-fashioned, but I like it.

c.darwent@independent.co.uk

'Experiment Experiencia': Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (01865 722 733), to 21 October

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Ellsworth Ke
White Cube
LONDON

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020 7930 5373;

Juan Cruz: P
of a Sculptor
Matt's Galler
LONDON

Like all the be artists, Juan C hard to pin do you wouldn't l to his work in visual style. In counts is the s ideas, and wit was born in E Spanish paren seem to revol basic question relate the self fractured herit