

DEPARTURES

MAY/JUNE 2010

And Now For Something Completely Different

The Culture Issue

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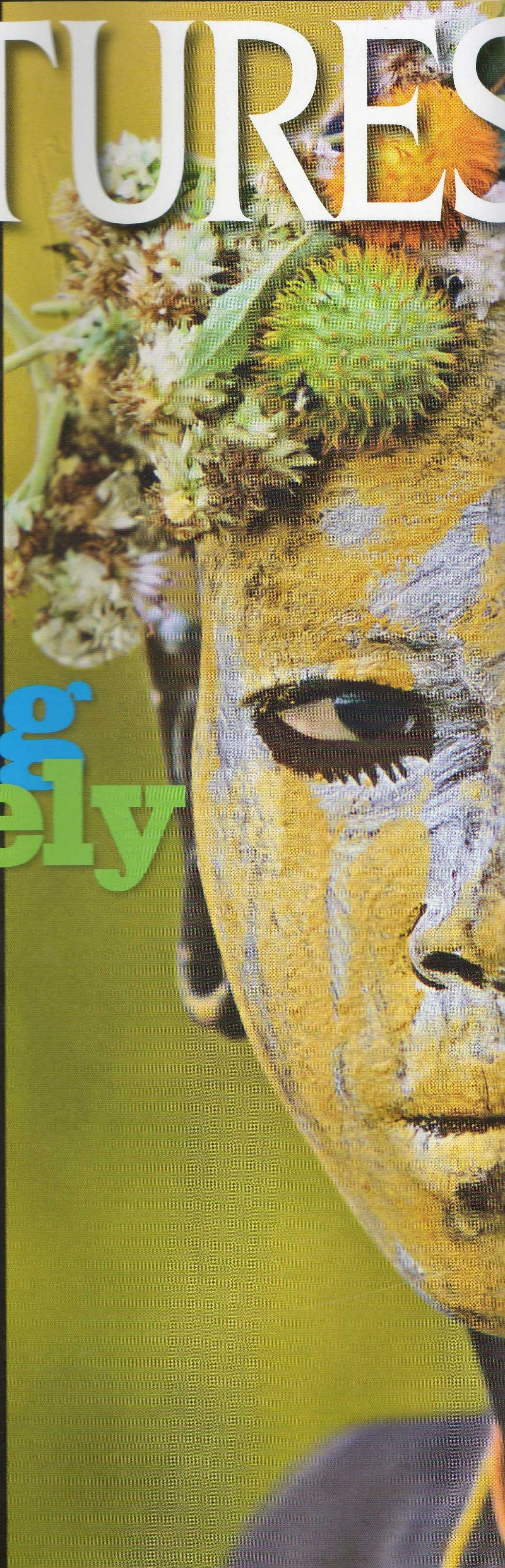
Madagascar's Fantastic Lemurs

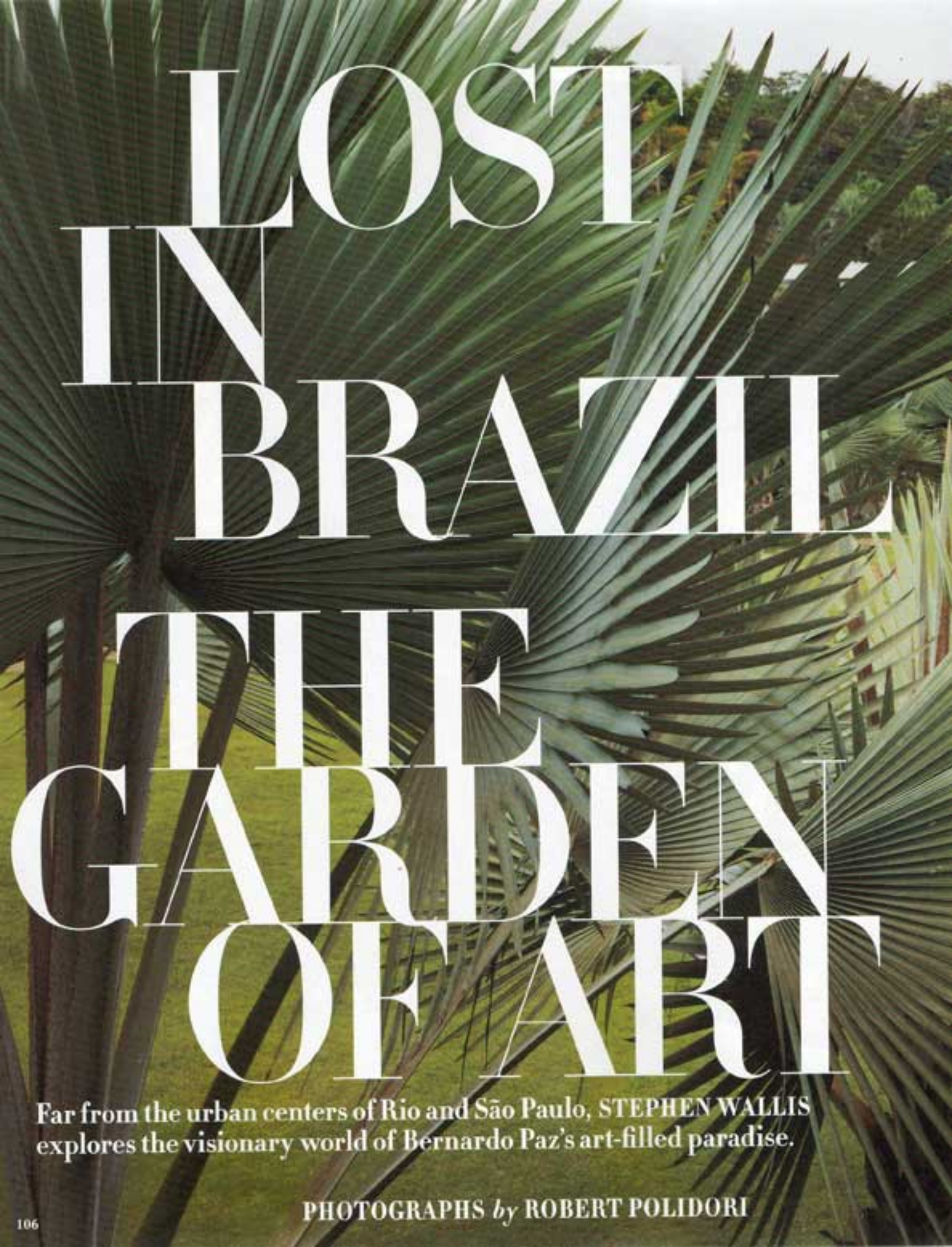
From Italy: Tilda Swinton's Art-House Hit

The Beauty of Skeleton Watches

England's Most Eccentric Hotel for \$200 a Night

The Flower People of Ethiopia



A full-page photograph of a tropical garden. Large, dark green palm fronds dominate the foreground, creating a sense of depth and texture. In the background, a multi-story building with a light-colored facade and a red-tiled roof is partially visible through the foliage. The overall atmosphere is serene and exotic.

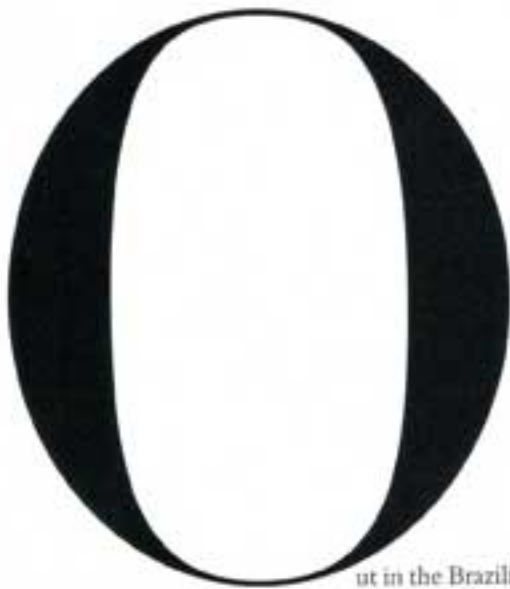
LOST IN BRAZIL THE GARDEN OF ART

Far from the urban centers of Rio and São Paulo, STEPHEN WALLIS explores the visionary world of Bernardo Paz's art-filled paradise.

PHOTOGRAPHS *by* ROBERT POLIDORI



A glimpse of art through
the palms at the Instituto
Cultural Inhotim, outside
Brumadinho, Brazil



ut in the Brazilian countryside, pretty much in the middle of nowhere, there's a place where spectacular outdoor sculptures and buildings filled with top-tier artworks are improbably scattered across lush tropical gardens, wooded slopes, and open fields. This place, the dream of an art world Fitzcarraldo, is also home to one of the largest botanical collections on the planet, with dozens of rare species. And if its eccentric founder, 59-year-old Brazilian mining magnate Bernardo Paz, realizes his vision, it'll eventually include a boutique inn, a hotel and convention center, a science exploratorium, and a whole lot more art.

Word is just beginning to spread about the Instituto Cultural Inhotim, located in the hills outside Brumadinho, a small town some 40 miles from Brazil's third-largest city, Belo Horizonte, and several hours' drive from either Rio or São Paulo. Getting here from abroad takes some effort. Which is why, for the moment, the place remains mostly a destination for locals and art world insiders. Only open to the public since 2006, Inhotim is one of those way-off-the-beaten-path spots, like Marfa, Texas, or the Japanese island of Naoshima, that lure knowing pilgrims in search of a cultural experience that's not easily had—unique, even. And Inhotim certainly is that.

From the moment you pass through the gates, the perfect cobblestones, the manmade lakes, and the stately *allé* of eucalyptus trees (not to mention the heavily armed guards) make it instantly clear that you're entering a world far removed from the conspicuous poverty that surrounds it. Elegant black swans squawk at each other in manicured plantings next to a lake, oblivious to Dan Graham's glass pavilion nearby; its simultaneously reflective and transparent surfaces interacting with the hills, water, and sky. Across the lake, several huge slabs in pink and yellow and orange by Hélio Oiticica form a playfully utopian public square, a Tropicália vision of Stonehenge, perhaps.

Through the gardens, designed by Paz in collaboration with legendary Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, you chance upon such works as Simon Starling's upside-down sailboat, which rests on its mast in a small clearing, looking both comically misplaced and absolutely right at home. Head in one direction and you arrive at a lakeside glass house containing a riotously red tangle of a sculpture by the Brazilian artist Tunga. Wander up a hill in another direction and you come to a circular glass pavilion by Doug Aitken with a hole at its center, several hundred feet deep, inside which geological microphones capture subtle growls and









“Bernardo believes that contemporary art can change the world. And he is inspiring at the highest level.”

—INHOTIM CURATOR ALLAN SCHWARTZMAN

one art world visitor, who prefers to remain anonymous, recounts, "Bernardo sort of emerged from the foliage in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, having just worked out, and proceeded to chain-smoke and give an hour-and-a-half monologue on his vision of the future. I had this extraordinary feeling at the beginning of the conversation that I was sitting with a lunatic. But he's very charismatic and engaging, and by the end of it I was thinking, This is really amazing."

And it is. On a perfect blue-sky day last year, two of Inhotim's three curators led me on a tour of the center, which is essentially an ac-

cumulation of art experiences as you move around the grounds. "It's a place for getting lost and creating your own path," says Rodrigo Moura, the Brazilian member of the international curatorial team. As we strolled along a leafy walk between buildings, head curator Allan Schwartzman, an American based in New York, described how Inhotim was conceived in very deliberate opposition to the conventional white-box museum, which can be "a kind of sensory-deprivation tank." Here, he says, "the experience of art is intentionally integrated into one's relationship with the natural landscape." **CONTINUED »**



Conceived by the late Hélio Oiticica in 1977, *Invention of Color, Penetrable Magic Square #5, De Luxe* was specially created for Inhotim with the artist's estate.





Simon Starling's *The Mahogany Pavilion* (Mobile Architecture No. 1) is a small sailboat inverted on its mast.

As the institute has grown, Paz has put more and more control of the art program in the hands of his curators (the third is Jochen Volz, a German who helped organize the last Venice Biennale). Under the trio's guidance, the collection has become more international—and more internationally trendy, though it's certainly not assembled by checking off a list of today's must-haves. There's no Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, or Richard Prince. No Richard Serra or James Turrell. There's not much in the way of paintings and only a modest number of photographs. The focus is on large-scale and often specially commissioned installations by artists such as Matthew Barney, Doris Salcedo, Cildo Meireles, Pipilotti Rist, Adriana Varejão (who is now Paz's wife—his fifth), and Chris Burden.

One of Inhotim's coups was getting Burden to reprise his famous *Beam Drop*, a work originally created in 1984 at Artpark in Lewiston, New York, and destroyed three years later. It involved releasing several dozen steel beams of different sizes from a 150-foot crane into a huge pit of wet concrete. An exercise in controlled chance, the resultant sculpture sits dramatically in a clearing on a grassy slope, its thicket of variously colored and angled beams set against the mountains and the open sky. It is, in its raw physicality, a kind of sculptural equivalent of the action paintings produced by Jackson Pollock.

"It's the best piece Chris Burden ever made," says Paz, who is prone to speaking in superlatives. He tells me about the time Olafur Eliasson, the artist behind the big waterfalls project in New York City a couple of years ago, "came to Inhotim and saw that it would be the best museum of its kind in the world." The goal, of course, is nothing less. Then again, there really isn't anything of Inhotim's kind anywhere.

The full scope of Paz's ambitious vision includes a sizable amount of non-art development on the 3,000-acre property and adjacent sites. One of the first planned projects is a 40-room inn that will serve as a guesthouse for visitors. A feasibility study funded by the center is currently being done on adding passenger service to the industrial rail line running between Brumadinho and Belo Horizonte, which would make it much more convenient to get to Inhotim. Later will come a science center focusing on biodiversity and climate change, a couple of larger hotels, and, eventually, in partnership with the regional government, a convention facility.

Paz has lived here for years and still owns mining businesses in the region. As a result, he feels obliged to give something back to the nearby communities. He employs more than 400 locals, including what seems like an entire army of young adults in green T-shirts who patrol the grounds as guards and guides. The center hosts more than 30,000 students per year, and it's an increasingly popular attraction among Brazilians. On a typical weekend Inhotim, which is open Wednesday through Sunday, draws 1,500 to 3,000 visitors. And international museum groups are coming through with increasing regularity. In a country where contemporary art receives limited support, Paz has emerged as its most important patron.

Since becoming a nonprofit institution and opening to the public, Inhotim has maintained a robust pace of growth. Nine new art projects, including those by Aitken, Burden, and Barney, were unveiled last fall, and the hope is to have at least one major opening every year for the foreseeable future. There are currently at least a dozen projects in various stages of planning and another dozen under consideration. Among those on the horizon are adapting the site of an old chapel on the property to display an Edenic video installation by Pipilotti Rist (originally shown in Venice's Church of San Stae) and converting a farmhouse into galleries for a series of paintings. **CONTINUED ON PAGE 124**





Chris Burden's *Beam Drop* was created by releasing steel girders from a 150-foot crane into a pit of wet concrete.



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LOST IN BRAZIL

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by Carroll Dunham. A bit farther out is a new, 40,000-square-foot, three-level building that will become the center's primary space for temporary displays.

All this initiated by a man who claims he never plans anything. "The important thing," Paz says, "is to live during the time that you have. If I do everything I want to do, I will make a small difference." Creating Inhotim has become Paz's lifework and, as he noted to me, a legacy for his six children.

"Bernardo is a force," says Schwartzman. "You often hear that as a kind of cliché about people, but in his case it's accurate. He's a visionary who believes that contemporary art can change the world, and he is inspiring at the highest level."

Leaving the sanctuary of Inhotim, it was difficult to imagine the place doing a great deal for Brazil's poor, let alone for the entire planet. But I thought back to my walks through the gardens and my encounters with the art, where time slowed and I felt an intensity of experience. And that, for me, is enough to sign on to Bernardo Paz's unique, undeniably compelling dream. ■

THE BASICS

The Instituto Cultural Inhotim is located outside the town of Brumadinho, about 40 miles south of Belo Horizonte, the capital of the Minas Gerais state. Getting there and dealing with logistics on the ground takes some effort, but the São Paulo-based travel company **Matuete** will set up everything for you, including customized itineraries with trips to the region's historic Baroque cities that lie along the colonial Portuguese gold routes. 55-11/3071-4515; matuete.com.

STAYING IN BELO HORIZONTE Until Inhotim builds a guesthouse (still a couple of years away), the best option if you plan to spend more than a day visiting Inhotim—and one day probably isn't enough to see it all—is to base yourself in Belo Horizonte. The only direct flights are from Miami, so a connection through either Rio or São Paulo on TAM Airlines is usually required. The reliable **Mercure Belo Horizonte Lourdes** isn't luxurious, but it has comfortable rooms and an English-speaking staff. From \$140. At 7315 Avda. do Contorno; 55-31/3298-4100; mercure.com.

LOCAL SIGHTS Belo Horizonte is home to several buildings by the father of modern Brazilian architecture, **Oscar Niemeyer**, the most important of which are located in a

park in the Pampulha suburb. Most buildings are open to the public, including a former glass-walled casino that's now a small art museum, and the jewel-like **São Francisco de Assis church**, with its wave-form roof and blue-and-white mosaics.

WHERE TO EAT Chef Neils Trombino does excellent rustic *mineiro* dishes like *tutu à mineira* (seasoned mashed beans served with pork) at **Restaurante Xapuri** (\$20; 260 Rua Mandacari, Belo Horizonte; 55-31/3496-6198). A very local thing to do is to eat at one of the many *botecos*, casual, often open-air bars like **Estabelecimento** (160 Rua Monte Alegre; 55-31/9666-1569) that serve small, rich plates and lots of beer. (Don't assume English will be spoken.) During the annual Comida di Buteco in April-May, these *botecos* compete with one another in different categories, including best dish, with the winner decided by public vote.

VISITING INHOTIM The center (Rua B, 20, Inhotim, Brumadinho; 55-31/3227-0001; inhotim.org) is open from Wednesday to Friday from 9:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., and on Saturday and Sunday from 9:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. Hiring transportation is recommended, and arrangements can be made through Inhotim. Guided tours of the art installations, galleries, and botanical gardens are available. Creating your own path around the grounds and getting "lost" is part of the experience, but be sure to make time to visit the outlying pavilions by **Doug Aitken** and **Matthew Barney** and, in a different direction, **Chris Burden's Beam Drop**. The very good café offers a full lunch menu.

THE "GOLD CITIES" To the south of Belo Horizonte, two of the Portuguese colonial cities that rose to prominence during the region's gold mining era in the 18th century make for fascinating day trips with their stunning Baroque churches: **Ouro Preto**, a UNESCO World Heritage site (about a two-hour drive) and the even more charming **Tiradentes** (about three hours), which is also home to an elegant inn, the **Solar da Ponte** (from \$215; 55-32/3355-1255; solarlaponte.com.br) and very good restaurants such as **Traqaluz** (dinner, \$50; 52 Rua Direita; 55-32/9968-4837).

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