

DIRECTIONS

Ernesto Neto

March 21–June 23, 2002



Globobabel Nudeline Landmanair, 2000, Lycra, Styrofoam, sand, and clove, 171 x 295 x 726 in (435 x 750 x 1845 cm).
Installation view, ICA, London. Collection Duros Latin America, Zurich.

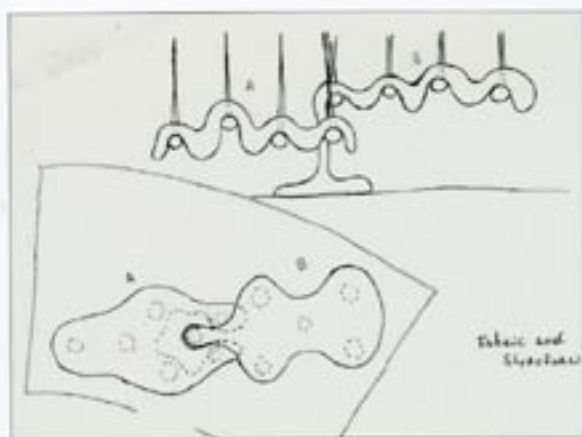


Fig. 1. Schematic for Hirshhorn installation, 2002.

"I am doing a kind of body/space/landscape."

—Ernesto Neto¹

For the contemporary Brazilian sculptor Ernesto Neto, the above quotation defines the primary subjects of his art. Indeed, the artist's bulbous, organic forms fashioned from translucent fabrics and filled with a variety of powders and pellets conjure the microscopic landscape of the body on a macroscopic scale. Droopy sacks and polyp protrusions suggest the linings of bodily organs and internal cavities, while tunnel-like arteries lead to chambers evocative of wombs. Sometimes activated by pungent and sensuous aromas, Neto's sculptures have contained dangling vessels filled with spices, typically clove, lavender, and turmeric. Thin, fleshy membranes of Lycra form these containers and, at times, have even enveloped the viewer, who is frequently invited to interact physically with and traverse his malleable sculptures (see cover). Stretching across the entire expanse of the galleries they inhabit, Neto's room-size Lycra environments create metaphorical landscapes of space and the body that are as architectural as they are corporeal (fig. 1).

It is significant that the artist does not prioritize one concern over the other in his statement. The words "body," "space," and "landscape" are each given equal weight, separated not by commas but by slashes that connote a fluid rather than hierarchical relationship. Based in Rio de Janeiro, where he was born in 1964, Neto has been developing his sensuous "body/space/landscapes" since the late 1980s. Over time both the scale and ambition of his projects has increased as he has become more proficient at tailoring and engineering materials to create his sculptures. Many of his installations have also developed as responses to the architecture of the exhibition spaces in South and North America, Europe, and Asia, where he has exhibited since the early 1990s.

Associated with a group of diverse Brazilian artists emerging in the 1990s, including Vik Muniz, Valeska Soares, and Adriana Varejão, Neto is a leader among them. His concern with the body and the social and therapeutic potentials of art links his work to leading figures in the history of Brazilian culture, such as conceptual artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Seeking the transformation of behavior through art, these individuals made groundbreaking, interactive works in the 1960s that influenced several generations of Brazilians. Clark's large fabric environment *A casa é o corpo* (*The house is the body*), 1968, and her wearable masks, gloves, and body suit pieces from the same period, encouraged a spontaneous rediscovery of the body. Stimulating visual and tactile sensations, Clark allowed audiences to wear and touch objects, as well as explore surfaces inside pockets and hidden zippers in each other's wearable outfits. Comfort, pleasure, and sensorial awakening, which were at the heart of Clark's philosophy, are

also essential ingredients in Neto's art. He credits his mother, a landscape designer, for introducing him to many of the ideas related to art and therapy that were championed by Clark and were prevalent in Brazilian art and design in the 1970s. His father's work as a builder of avant-garde domestic architecture in the mountains of Brazil also informed his thinking, acquainting him with ideas about transparency and light as well as the desire to achieve equilibrium between society and the environment. A course in urban intervention at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio in the early 1980s, which urged students to explore unconventional approaches and venues for art making, also further expanded Neto's understanding about the potential role of art in society.

In addition to Brazilian precedents, Neto affirms that European and American artists over the last century, including modernist sculptors Constantin Brancusi and Alexander Calder, were important formative influences. As a young man he was especially drawn to Calder, whose works he first came to know via the 1976 publication *Calder's Universe*. The whimsy and delicacy of Calder's art and his revolutionary stance in the early part of the twentieth century against prevailing notions of sculpture as solid and static were crucial to Neto as an art student in Rio. In fact, Neto's first sculptures were fashioned after Calder's from twisted wire. It was Calder's sensitivity to the mechanisms and formal order of the universe, however, that seems to have had the most resonance with Neto's own approach to space and form. As Calder once noted, "The underlying sense of form in my work has been the system of the Universe, or part thereof. For that is a rather large model to work from."²

Neto's consciousness about the

underlying order of things—or as he explains, his sense of the "finite and the infinite, of the macroscopic and the microscopic, the internal and the external"³—also reveals a long fascination with astronomy and a more recent interest in quantum mechanics.

Theories about the structure and behavior of atoms and molecules, ideas of fusion and transformation, and concepts related to both the cosmic and biologic exchange of energy inspire his art. It is interesting to note that Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* made a tremendous impression on him early in his career. The film's strong visual sense—the incredible voids and deep silences, the relationship between cause and effect, and the delicate balances between nature and humanity—seems especially relevant. Neto's interest in the fluid movements of modern ballet, in particular the use of flowing fabric props and costumes, also led to his initial exploration of fabric as a sculptural material. In the mid-1980s he made sail-like forms, which eventually led to more formal investigations into ideas of tension, weight, and counterbalance. His *Barball* sculptures of 1987–88 juxtaposed iron bars with rubber balls that rested against the wall and floor, as well as each other.

At this time Neto also began to work with polyamide fabric, a material with a mesh weave commonly used to manufacture women's hosiery. Developing an elemental system of weights and measures, he filled stocking forms with lead pellets, or buckshot, and arranged them in movable bags or clusters he called "colonies." Elongating their forms and filling them with tiny Styrofoam pellets, he created a series of "polyps" in 1990 that could be handled and shaped by the visitor. Interested in the

effects of gravity and spillage, Neto discovered the potential for working with other substances, such as wheat flour and spices, that would bleed through the weave of the hosiery and create colorful abstract patterns on the floor. He then began to suspend and drop the forms, allowing their weight and fall to determine the shape and disposition of his sculptures. Onomatopoeic titles, such as *PUFF*, 1997, reflected the sound and impact of their making. Neto's titles are often wonderfully original and the product of the fusion of existing words with invented language. Despite the relationship of his early work to physics and taxonomy, Neto's sculptures have always been rooted in the physicality of the body. Their anthropomorphic shapes and organic behaviors suggest entities perpetually driven by biological imperatives such as union and proliferation (fig. 2).

As Neto's ambition grew with the size of the spaces in which he exhibited, he began to construct larger environments that he hoisted from the ceiling and anchored with spice- or sand-filled "feet" and "arms" (fig. 3). In 1998 he made his first "nave," a word that means spaceship in Portuguese. This large fabric cave, with translucent walls that resemble skin, filled the entire gallery. The spectator, who was invited by attendants to remove his or her shoes, was allowed to enter and pass through slits or openings in the walls. As the largest and most sensitive organ of the human body, skin—according to Neto—is where "you feel everything." It is where we are most receptive and vulnerable. Exploring the potential of this natural boundary utterly fascinates the artist. Using stretchable Lycra tulle, he has increased the length and dimension of subsequent naves (fig. 4), adding tunnel-like connections



Fig. 2. *O Habitat*, 1999, various sculptures. Lycra, polyamide, saffron, Styrofoam, annatto, dimensions variable. Photo by Vicente de Mello.

between them and bed-like expanses filled with Styrofoam pellets, as in *Globiobabel Nudelione Landmoonaiia*, 2000 (cover). More recently, the artist has been sculpting blocks of medium-density polyurethane foam to create grotto-like spaces that invite the increasing commitment and participation of the viewer.

The viewer is indeed more than a spectator in the seductive realm of Neto's art. If we accept the artist's challenge, we become willing voyagers in spatial, sensorial odysseys that make us keenly aware and sensitive to the spaces inside, around, and between our bodies, as well as the territories that exist beyond our private selves and the rest of humanity. In Neto's universe, the dynamics of our interactions between the world and each other seem all the more palpable and pronounced.

Olga M. Viso
Curator of Contemporary Art

The artist's project for the Hirshhorn was in progress at the time of publication.

1. Ernesto Neto interviewed by Bill Arning, "Ernesto Neto," *Bomb* 70 (Winter 2000): 82.
2. Alexander Calder, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 18.3 (New York, Spring 1951): 8.
3. Ernesto Neto in Arning, 80.

All photos courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo. Cover photo courtesy Yvon Lambert, Paris.

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Fig. 3. *It Happens When the Body is the Anatomy of Time*, 2000, Lycra tulle, clove, cumin, and arratto, dimensions variable. Installation view, The Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri. Photo by Peter Mauss.



Fig. 4. *Anatomia do Aconchego—Casa Nave*, 1999, Lycra, polyamide, Styrofoam, string, and sand, dimensions variable. Collection and courtesy Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz. Photo by Teresa Diehl.

BIOGRAPHY

Born Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1964. Studied in Rio de Janeiro at the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, 1994 and 1997, and the Museu de Arte Moderna, 1994–96. Central Art Prize, 2000, and residency in Cologne, 2001. Lives and works in Rio de Janeiro.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2002 Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland.
- 2001 Matrix 190: "A Maximum Minimum Time Space Between Us and the Parsimonious Universe," University of California Berkeley Art Museum; "A paisagem do corpo e o corpo da paisagem (The landscape of the body and the body of the landscape)," Centro Galego de Arte Contemporânea, Santiago de Compostela; "Humanóides," Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne.
- 2000 "Sister Naves," Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus; SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London and Dundee Contemporary Arts, Scotland; "O Casamento (The Wedding)," Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- 1999 "Nhó Nhó Nave," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.
- 1998 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Carrillo Gil, Mexico City.
- 1992 Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 "BodySpace," Baltimore Museum of Art; 49th International Exhibition of Art and

- the Brazil Pavilion, Venice Biennale; "Brazil: Body and Soul," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York and Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain.
- 2000 "Siobhan Hapaska, Charles Long, Ernesto Neto," Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall; "Wonderland," The Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri.
- 1999 1st Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Tate Gallery Liverpool; "Carnegie International 1999/2000," Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.
- 1998 XI Biennale of Sydney, Australia; XXIV Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil.
- 1997 "Material Immaterial," The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
- 1995 1st Kwangju Biennale, Korea.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- In addition to catalogs from the above exhibitions, Ernesto Neto's work is discussed in:
- Amnesia* (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1998). Exhibition catalog.
 - Arning, Bill, "Ernesto Neto," *Bomb* 70 (Winter 2000): 78–84.
 - Basualdo, Carlos, "Studio Visit: Ernesto Neto," *Trans>* 1.1 (November 1995): 137–142.
 - Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998).
 - Ernesto Neto* (São Paulo: Galeria Camargo Vilaça, 1994). Exhibition catalog.
 - Ernesto Neto: Naves, Céus, Sonhos* (São Paulo: Galeria Camargo Vilaça, 1999). Exhibition catalog.
 - Gallo, Rubén, "Ernesto Neto: Voluptuous, sexy, and floating membranes," *Flash Art* 32.204 (January/February 1999): 78–79.
 - Herkenhoff, Paulo, "Ernesto Neto," *Poliester* 4.11 (Winter 1995): 60–61.
 - Neto, Ernesto, "Figures in Time," *Trans>* 7 (2000): 63–73.
 - Pedrosa, Adriano, "Ernesto Neto," *Frieze* 39 (March/April 1998): 91.
 - Williams, Gilda, "Ernesto Neto," *Art Monthly* 238 (July–August 2000): 46–47.
- Exhibition history and bibliography compiled by Colette Crossman, Research Associate, and Kristen Hileman, Public Affairs Specialist.



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