DIRECTIONS

Ernesto Neto
March 21–June 23, 2002

"I am doing a kind of body/space/landscape."
—Ernesto Neto'

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 unconven-
tional 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, how-
ever, 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.”

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”—also reveals a long fascina-
tion 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 between them and bed-like expanses filled with Styrofoam pellets, as in Globiobabel Nudelione Landmoonai, 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.
3. Ernesto Neto in Arning, 80.

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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

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2002 Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland.
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.
1998 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Carrillo Gil, Mexico City.
1992 Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1998 XI Biennale of Sydney, Australia; XXIV Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil.

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.

Exhibition history and bibliography compiled by Colette Crossman, Research Associate, and Kristen Hileman, Public Affairs Specialist.

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