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Symbols of the Metamorphosis and Development of Bodies

On the Biomorphic Works of Jean Arp and Ernesto Neto

Astrid von Asten

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Ernesto Neto combines various traditions of modernism in a special way and develops them in his fascinating sculptures with contemporary, socio-cultural references.¹ His gently flowing, biomorphic forms are instantly captivating. And it is first and foremost this formal vocabulary that places Neto directly in a line with the painter, sculptor, and poet Jean Arp (1886–1966). Arp's works from around 100 years ago marked the start of one of the most important artistic developments of the twentieth century, where various approaches can be summed up under the term "organic abstraction." He shaped this development probably more than any other artist, so that subsequent generations of artists found and continue to find inspiration in his work. An interesting dialog can be expected when this contemporary artist encounters this pioneering artist of the first generation for the first time in the context of an exhibition.² Admittedly, it is tempting simply to point out the clear analogies in terms of the artists' sensual, organic formal language. And yet, a second look reveals closely linked views of the world and art, views that Neto brings to the present day and expands. "I start where Arp stopped," as Neto puts it.³ In this spirit, let us allow ourselves to be surprised by the currency of these early Arpian principles in the mirror of the present.

In the Great Studio of Nature

The most important link in the work of both artists and thus the basis for our search is the sheer in-

exhaustible source from which Arp and Neto took their inspiration: nature.

The formal language that takes its orientation from nature and makes it possible to experience the natural processes of all things living is called "biomorphic."⁴ Arp's works marked the start of this pioneering development that reached its first pinnacle during the 1930s.

In retrospect, he recalled, "I made my first experiments with free forms ... I tried to make forms grow. I put my trust in the example of seeds, stars, clouds, plants, animals, men, and finally in my own innermost being."⁵ Neto states this in a more succinct, direct way: "I totally believe that nature is our teacher."⁶ Nature serves not only as the point of departure for individual works, but as the backdrop for their entire oeuvres. It is not just about the depiction of individual forms, but linkages and regularities, the inner forces of growth, the cycles of emergence, growth, and passing.

Both take their inspiration from historical approaches to metamorphosis. Ever since Ovid, this term has referred to the mythological transformation from human being to animal or plant. Only later was the term expanded to an organic-biological level. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who was not just a writer, but also a natural scientist, stated at the start of the nineteenth century: "If we consider all forms, especially the organic, we find that there is nowhere something that exists, at rest in itself, completed, but rather that everything finds itself in constant movement."⁷

In numerous, often retrospective texts, Arp described his artistic motivation and his way of working. The title of this essay and its subsections are quotations from these writings. The sources are as follows: 'Signposts,' *Collected French Writings*, ed. Marcel Jean, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London, 1974), 271; 'Concrete Art,' *On My Way: Poetry and Essays, 1912–1947* (New York, 1948), 70; 'With Lowered Eyelids,' *Jean Arp: Collected French Writings*, 341; 'Looking,' in Arp, ed. James Thrall Soby (New York, 1958), 12; 'Concrete Art,' 72; 'Strasbourg Configuration,' *Jean Arp: Collected French Writings*, 47; 'Dadaland,' *Arp: On My Way*, 39.

1. Neto finds numerous points of departure in classical European modernism and the Brazilian neo-concretist movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

2. In the following, I will concentrate on comparing the two artists, using works from the current exhibition as examples. For more on the work of Ernesto Neto in general, see Jutta Mattern's contribution to this volume (pp. 50–57).

3. From an initial conversation on the planned exhibition at Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck.

4. The terms 'biomorphic' and 'organic' are today used almost synonymously. On the origin and derivation of the term, see Guitemie Maldonado: 'Biomorphisme: Une histoire de temps et de mots' in: *Les cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* 70 (Paris, 1999), 62–87.

5. Jean Arp, 'Looking,' Arp, ed. James Thrall Soby (New York, 1958), 12.

6. Petra Joos, 'A Conversation with Neto,' in: *The Body that Carries Me* (Bilbao, 2014), 20.

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In Arp and Neto, we become witnesses of organic processes. Their works are never finally completed, but rather constantly modified and revised. Frequently, they add familiar elements to entirely new work constellations. In addition, they create sculptures that place all elements of nature in relationship to one another. The transitions between man and nature are flowing, the human being is part of nature. Neto makes this clear in just a few words: "We are nature. Nature is inside us."⁸ Arp, in turn, describes this more poetically: "We yearned for the clear flood ... that entwines, penetrates, removes differences, things, life, circumstances, events. At heart we strive for the absolute, for the 'inseparability of nature and mind' ... for the aim that removes contrasts."⁹ While his bronze sculpture *Landscape or Woman* (p. 20) initially seems to present the change from human being to landscape, Neto expands on this: "Our body *is* a landscape. I like the opportunity given by what I call 'body landscape': a continuity between ourselves and the landscape ... The point is that when you are a body inside of the space, everything becomes landscape. When you get out of it, it becomes a figure."¹⁰

As I Work, Friendly, Strange, Evil, Inexplicable, Mute, or Sleeping Forms Arise

The flowing silhouette is characteristic for biomorphic sculpture. Despite their basically fixed material—plaster, bronze, or wood—in Arp's sculptures we can feel a constant force coming from within them,

that seems to make their outer skin move, placing it under tension (*Pagoda Fruit on Bowl*, p. 21). Neto in contrast chooses semi-transparent materials like Lycra for his often monumental works and fills them with spices, stones, seeds, and Styrofoam balls.¹¹ Due to the stretchable quality of the material, they often create the impression that the forms are fluid.

The shapes used by both artists, which initially seem so harmonic, conceal something disconcerting. Apparently uncontrolled growths emerge from the gently breathing volumes, oversized protuberances that reach ominously into the space around them, like tentacles. They evoke associations of unknown sea animals or devouring plants (Little Sphinx, Lingam, Small Leaning Figure called "Egyptian Woman", p. 25). Neto's most impressive example in this context is the work *Léviathan Thot*, originally created for the Paris Panthéon (p. 22). A hybrid being consisting of the Egyptian god of science Thot and the mythological sea monster Leviathan expands in the space and seems to take it over instantly.¹²

I Looked for New Constellations of Forms Such As Nature Never Stops Producing

Inspired by constellations or the pebbles on the riverbank, in the 1930s Arp began to develop what he called "constellations." Formally equivalent elements, "moving ovals," are arranged variably. Each individual form, now differently placed, changes the overall constellation. In Neto's reliefs, like *The Jaguar's Shadows* (p. 14) we encounter these ovals,

7 Quoted in: Ernst Lautenbach, *Lexikon Goethe Zitate. Auslese für das 21. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2004), 768.

8 Petra Joos, "A Conversation with Neto," 24.

9 Hans Arp, *Die Natur der Dinge*, trans. Stephen Lindberg (Düsseldorf, 2007), 40, Note 5.

10 "Take Your Time," Interview with Ernesto Neto, Rome, June 14, 2013, www.lanciatrendvisions.com/en/article/take-your-time-interview-with-ernesto-neto (Accessed on October 12, 2014).

11 Neto prefers the term "sculpture" rather than "installation," explaining: "It is like sculpture because it's something you can walk around, but when you get inside, the sculpture is all around you." Ralph Rugoff, "An Interview with Ernesto Neto," *Ernesto Neto: The Edges of the World* (London, 2010), 20.

12 Neto consciously chose the Paris Panthéon as a site of knowledge and power for the mythological context. Arp also often based his works on mythological and religious references.

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whose flowing outlines evoke associations of cell shapes, regardless of the title. Without a frame, they float freely against the backdrop, as if directed by invisible, pulsating forces; they also seem to change their shape at any time. Arp calls these basic shapes that unite to form a variety of possible forms "cosmic forms." They come from a fantastic microcosm and macrocosm. The world in miniature and the world on a large scale mutually determine one another, whether in a biological, a social, or a cosmological context.

Arp's constellations and Neto's related works show that everything in the universe (and in society) is part of an overarching, complex system and that every minute change leaves traces in the larger framework. "My work does not have a clear identity, everything is interrelated ... And when the components of one of the works fall apart, they become something different,"¹³ Neto explains, and sums up the quintessence of his oeuvre in just one sentence: "My works are all about relationships."¹⁴

The closely linked formal execution is surprising in direct comparison. For example, the sculpture *O Mundo e o Mundo* (p. 17) could be seen as a three-dimensional translation of an early constellation collage by Arp (p. 23).

***Concrete Art Aims to Transform the World.
It Aims to Make Existence More Bearable.***

Arp himself does not call his works "abstract," but "concrete." He does not abstract the object, but cre-

ates his own shapes intuitively. The concept of concrete art in Arp's sense represents a new bridge to Neto's work. The latter sees himself also in the tradition of the neo-concrete art of Brazil, a movement founded by Lygia Clark (1920-1988) and other Brazilian artists in the late 1950s, which decidedly influenced later Brazilian art. The term might be confusing at first glance, for the concept of the concrete in the art of the twentieth century was also claimed by De Stijl's founder Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931) in 1924. Doesburg declared that art "cannot contain any formal aspects of nature, the senses, or emotions."¹⁵ His interpretation is thus a striking contrast to Arp's understanding and the view of the neo-concretists, who in their visual language seek to draw from their inner experience and emotion and to redefine the relationships between art and society. In this context, Neto criticizes in particular the arrogance of human beings, who place themselves at the pinnacle of an imaginary pyramid. According to Neto, however, all life, human and natural, is placed on the same level. "Love and fraternity are healing for people," he remarked at the opening of his current exhibition. More than fifty years ago, Arp used very similar words. Concrete art, according to Arp, can liberate "man from the most dangerous folly: vanity. It aims to simplify man's life. It aims to identify him with nature ... Concrete Art is an elemental, natural, healthy art, which causes the stars of peace, love and poetry to grow in the head and the heart."¹⁶

¹³ Petra Joos, "A Conversation with Neto," 24.

¹⁴ Ralph Rugoff, "An Interview with Ernesto Neto," 22.

¹⁵ Quoted in: Willy Rotzler, "Annäherung an das Konkrete," in: *Museum für Konkrete Kunst*, Peter Volkwein, ed. (Ingolstadt 1993), 47f.

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***I Have Four Natures. I Have Two Things.
 I Have Five Senses.***

Since the rise of modernism, the relationship of beholder, artwork, and space has been of great importance in art. Already in his early reliefs, Arp includes the background through the use of empty forms as a component in his work, an approach that in Neto's wall-filling work *Fantasia Branca do Plano Organico* achieves monumental dimensions (p. 36). The clearly organic forms recall, like Arp's *Plant Architecture*, microscopic shots of leaf structures. In his later threshold sculptures,¹⁷ Arp amplifies perception by properly including the surrounding space in the structure. When looking through the sculpture from ever changing perspectives, the lines separating sculpture and the surrounding space are suspended. *O Corpo na Janela* (p. 4) seeks to achieve the very same effect.

While in the works discussed so far, the beholder remains merely passive, that is, outside the sculpture, the human being becomes a part of the work in Neto's spatial installations. Not only can the sculpture be touched, it can be entered into, fused with, the soft membranes surround the beholder like a second skin and virtually absorb the body. "There is in my work this idea that you have been swallowed by the sculpture, and you're inside a complex of body relations."¹⁸ It is an experience involving all the senses, with the smell of spices and the sounds of seeds rubbing together completing the multilayered sensory perception.

We should not leave out a final interactive aspect that expands both artists' creative process: the intuitive drive to play. Arp in fact places this at the start of his work, stating: "[...] In 1915 I produced my first 'essential' picture. I believe that I was playing with some children's blocks at the time. My 'first successful picture' grew out of this playing and building with elementary forms."¹⁹ The same child-like innocence in approaching forms was explored by Neto in a video that was created to mark this exhibition at Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck: it shows his son Lito playing with abstract Styrofoam shapes as a baby (p. 32).

With the work *Life Is Relationship*, Neto additionally expands the playful context. At small tables and chairs, which in their striking colors recall children's furniture, Neto invites the visitors to themselves become creative (p. 76).

***We Searched for an Elementary Art that
 Would . . . Save Mankind from the
 Furious Folly of These Times***

Both Arp and Neto are undogmatic pioneers of their respective generation who revolutionized the concept of sculpture, each in their own way. Their works reveal numerous parallels. Clearly, the principle that French philosopher Henri Bergson described as *élan vital* or "vital impulse" in 1907 runs like a thread through both oeuvres. The vital impulse is the living and creative force that dwells within all life forms and thus is the foundation of all emergences of form.

16 Jean Arp, "Concrete Art," 72.

17 Arp developed his early relief sculptures that in the late 1920s, marking the transition to his sculpture "in the round."

18 Ralph Rugoff, "An Interview with Ernesto Neto," 23.

19 Jean Arp, "Looking," 12.

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Many of Neto's conceptions represent a further development of Arp's approaches, taking them into 21st century art, and expand them by adding decisive issues, finding individual solutions. With their closely related view of art, both artists react directly to the social, cultural, and scientific contexts of their time. Arp used his work to counter the brutality of the First and Second World Wars. His fascination with organic shapes is also a reaction to the euphoria for technology at the turn of the century. Not least, he took key inspiration from the rapid developments in the natural sciences. Arp was one of the first to declare nature to be the "measure of all things." It embodies the highest order. With its help, he can "teach man what he had forgotten—to dream with his eyes open,"²⁰ according to Arp, for "dreams are more powerful than atomic bombs."²¹ A day without a dream is a lost day, as Neto explains. For this reason, he chooses the title *Falling Dream* (pp. 35, 38) for the sculpture that cascades gently down both sides of the wall, subtly combining both exhibition levels at Arp Museum.

In the worlds he creates, Neto would like to offer the visitor a place of retreat: "My idea is to create a sense of weightlessness and timelessness, a bubble for people: I want them to get lost inside this transparent maze of time, generating new opportunities and questions."²² A place, that is, where we can find our way to ourselves, where we can perceive our environment with all our senses without disturbing external factors, for a moment fleeing everyday life and handing over all responsibility.

In today's fast-paced digital age, Neto sees himself confronted with different problems than those faced by Arp. "We live in a confusing time," as recently the computer scientist and artist Jason Lanier commented upon winning the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Lanier criticized global developments in the realm of computer technology and the unforeseeable dangers of digitalization for the development the international community, in which the human being no longer "can live in a world of free decisions."²³ In this context, the disturbing social dimension was expanded upon by Martin Schulz: "We find ourselves at the threshold of a digital age ... in the midst of a process that questions our social relationships ... our values and our culture."²⁴ In a unique way, Neto's works have the potential to at least temporarily escape the confusing developments of our age.

If Arp had experienced Neto's sculptures, perhaps his own, striking words would have come to mind, lines that today could be read as an homage in anticipation of his younger artist colleague:

Horned swellings dance
Impressive trunks greet thorns.
Hairy shields tap dance.
Six-legged crowns dance the tzardas.
Veils dance with trains,
Curly humps simply wander,
The main thing: dance, dance, dance.²⁵

20 Jean Arp, "Looking," 13.

21 Hans Arp, "Werkstattfabeln," in: *Unsern täglichen Traum*, 96.

22 "Take Your Time," Interview with Ernesto Neto.

23 Jaron Lanier, "Man hat Hegel enthauptet," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Oct. 13, 2014, 13.

24 Martin Schulz, "Ein eminent politischer Preis," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Oct. 13, 2014, 13.

25 Hans Arp, "Sophie," *Zweiklang*, 39.