

Title	Cell – Organ - Organism	Author	Verena Gamper
Date	2016	Artist	Ernesto Neto
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Cell – Organ – Organism

Ernesto Neto's sculptural nature

Verena Gamper

"The roots of my work are definitively related to Rio de Janeiro. The organicity of the urban civilization combined with the extreme presence of nature is really something that keeps nature and culture in shock."

Ernesto Neto, *Organic Accidents*



Ernesto Neto
Paxpa – There Is a Forest Encantada
Inside of Us, 2014 (Detail)
Installationsansicht / Installation
view Arp Museum Bahnhof
Rolandseck, Remagen, 2014

Expansive landscapes of white fabric, gigantic piles of cells, hovering nylon tubes, suspended weights, soft cloth and bags filled with aromatic spices: Ernesto Neto's sculptures are a feast for the senses. He expands the sensory resonance of art, which is generally limited to the visual element, to make it a tactile and olfactory experience as well, thus stimulating the entire sensory spectrum of the human body. The artist addresses the viewer's body with the biomorphic aesthetic of his works as well – works whose fluid silhouettes and animated physicality almost make them seem to be organic, living creatures. The organic element in Neto's work, however, has to do not only with his use of "natural" materials – as he often works with synthetic textiles and artificial stuffing material – but is more of a structural nature. This organic quality permeates his oeuvre, from the sensory spectrum that he addresses and the motific associations he evokes to the creative process he stages analogously to the creative process of nature. The overarching organicity of his art extends to his practice of avoiding gluing, screwing or melting to join components in favor of fitting them together or tying them. As he explains: "Every part is in fact gently joined as a metaphor for organic relations. I never use glue, screws or nails, but connect the various elements as a natural continuum I'm always looking for."¹ Knots as natural products of the collision between organic dynamics and gravity represent the most natural kind of connection. To this end, Neto joins the fabric by using simple sewing machines that crochet two threads together in a continuous knot, inflates them to make enormous networks or has them run riot over the walls as interlaced figures.

In the description of his room-size 2001 sculpture *Esqueleto Glóbulos* (ill. pp. 75, 166–169) Ernesto Neto underscores its organic qualities while at the same time using a decidedly body-based vocabulary: "*Esqueleto Glóbulos* has organic meanings in two ways: both the structure and the content. *Esqueleto* is the textile, which, in the end, is the skeleton of the piece – and gravity pulls it downward. That is, gravity works on the content, the *glóbulos*, and the content is held together by the *esqueletos*. You see, the skin generates the limit, so the skin and the skeleton are kind of the same thing in this situation."² With the term *glóbulos* – meaning "globules," or small globes or balls – in the work's title, Neto applies this double meaning of "organic" in a tangible manner as well: *glóbulos*

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refers to the Styrofoam pellets that form the inside of the plastic body as well as to the round shape of the openings of the porous figure. Neto thus works here with two standards, referring to both the macro- and the microstructure of the sculpture. This is interesting inasmuch as the sculpture resembles less a skeleton than the struts and cavities of bone tissue – an association that goes hand in hand with the change of scale and ensures that the body of the visitor finds itself in the interior of a body. For Neto, the inside of the body represents an expansion of visible nature: “I like the opportunity given by what I call ‘body landscape’: continuity between ourselves and the landscape. Telescopes and microscopes simply expand our perception of a landscape.”³ It is significant that during the period he was creating *Esqueleto Glóbulos*, Neto was also studying the principles of the permeability of cell membranes for nourishment by proteins. The opening of the cell membrane does not occur by means of a formal code; rather, the nourishing proteins execute a kind of dance in order to

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Ernesto Neto bei der Installation von / installing *Complementary Flavor Vibration of Two Body Color Groups*, 2006

be granted entry into the cell.⁴ In view of the way visitors encounter Neto's room-filling cellular tissues, one is inevitably reminded of this dance as a fundamental function in the structural existence of our bodies. In a dissolution of the significance of positive and negative forms, of object and environment, the visitors wander, crawl, stomp and stagger through soft, sensuous worlds.

The cell as the smallest module of the organism was a subject of discussion in the art world as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. The biocentrist movement emerging at that time in Central Europe represented a nature-based romanticism reflecting the new scientific findings of the nineteenth century.⁵ The emphasis was on nature and its vital processes, which were recognized as fundamental principles in art and culture as well, an idea that fit with a holistic understanding of the world. Movement was perceived as an existential characteristic of nature, as it was thought that with movement, the fundamental opposition between material and spirit could be overcome.⁶ This organic approach placed nature and not humans at the center of the world. As applied to art, these organic concepts meant a turning away from the logical and rational, and a refocusing on the sphere of the unconscious through empathy, intuition, meditation and mystical experiences.⁷ Current scientific discoveries and inventions of the time such as the theory of evolution and the x-ray as well as ground-breaking research in the field of microbiology exerted a great influence on the art and culture of the period. Cellular biology, for example, supplied outstanding models for urbanism and sociology, and its insights provided a reference image for the abstract art of the historic avant-garde as well, one that went beyond Cubist-Constructivist rationalism.⁸ On a structural level, the basic elements of abstract art resemble the cells of the human body. The German-French sculptor and painter Hans Arp is certainly one of the artists who most resolutely oriented his work toward nature and its mechanisms, and it is no coincidence that Ernesto Neto regards him as a central point of reference within the European avant-garde. For Brazil's Neo-Concrete art as well – whose central figures, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, are often cited by Neto as crucial influences – not only the establishment of intuition, expression and subjectivity played a central role but also nature. As the "Manifesto Neoconcreto" (ill. p. 16), a document published in 1959, asserts: "If we have to look for an equivalent to the work of art we will not find it in the machine, or even the object

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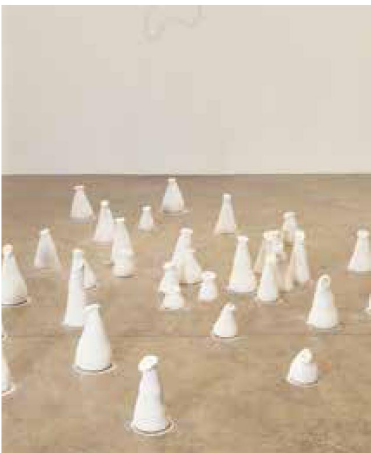


Ernesto Neto
Pólipos, 1990

as such, but . . . in living organisms.⁹ Just as Arp had done decades before, the Neo-Concretists – and subsequently Neto as well – took nature as their model and worked “parallel to the metamorphosis of the natural world.”¹⁰

At this point it is worth briefly examining the understanding of the relationship between art and nature that forms the basis for Ernesto Neto’s oeuvre. It is rooted in the tradition – which on a superficial level would seem to be long obsolete – of the Aristotelian concept of *ars imitatur naturam*, according to which art and nature are to be regarded as structurally equal, with art acting as a mimesis, an imitation, of nature. Aristotle does not ascribe any significant function to the makers of art, since they merely achieve what nature would achieve; for him, nature represents the epitome of all that is possible.¹¹ Neto’s “imitation of nature” could be described as a kind of structural mimicry, resulting in the fact that his sculptures – despite their decidedly artificial materials and dimensions – are intuitively regarded as being organic, animated and natural. Just how nimbly the artist crosses the gulf between art and nature is shown by those works that, as obviously artificial bodies, insert themselves in “nature” without disguising their artificiality, or those that in the artificial setting of an exhibition imitate natural dissemination models, such as the *Lipzoids* that the artist has been creating since the mid-1990s (ill. pp. 79, 129–135), which seem to be grounded through a rhizomatic system. By analogy to French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s dictum that “there is nothing outside the text,”¹² one could consider Neto’s creations as being within a kind of nature that knows nothing “outside” of itself. He crafts his creatures in a post-structuralist field of suspended differentiation between nature and culture, model and reproduction, appearance and reality.

Ernesto Neto
Lipzoids, 1996



Very early in his artistic career, Ernesto Neto began focusing his attention on the human body as the receptor of experiences and sensations, with the skin as its largest organ and at the same time the interface between the inner body and the outside space. He thus followed in the established lineage of Brazil’s Neo-Concrete movement, which had liberated itself from the formalisms of concrete art and propagated experiencing art through participatory elements and by engaging all of the senses. Early works by Neto reveal the influences not only of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, the leading figures of the movement, but also of works by lesser-known artists such as Sonia Andrade. But while Andrade’s self-bondage is rooted in the tradition of body art, Neto’s cleaving of his face (ill. pp. 80, 82/83) seems to be aimed more at underscoring the skin’s cell structure. Skin acts as an organ and a membrane that transports basic sensations such as touch and temperature while also serving as a form-giving enclosure. The twentieth-century French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu referred to the subject-constituting function of the skin as “skin ego,” a theory by which a child, through experiencing its own body surface, develops a concept of itself as a subject.¹³ This is precisely what Neto’s 2001 *Humanóides* (ill. pp. 158, 159) allow: experiencing this outer membrane while at the same time dissolving its boundaries. Similarly, the 1998 work *Follicle Ovaloid (Lili)* (ill. p. 156), with its

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Lygia Clark
Baba antropofágica, 1973

invitation to visitors to submerge their limbs in the objects, plays with the dichotomy between visual amputation and a sensory expansion of the body. The equation skin = boundary = form takes an interesting turn in *Janus Fetus* from 1995 (ill. p. 85): through the mouth of a metallic Janus face passes a length of cord that, seemingly arbitrarily, forms the outline of a fetus. This stage of the development of the human body represents the threshold between an amorphous and an anthropomorphic form and – like a Janus face – has a share in both worlds. That the formative outline also always represents the contact zone linking it with the surrounding space is especially evident in the motif of the unborn child: the skin of the fetus and that of the uterus form the dual membrane that is shared by mother and child as a common boundary, but by which they are also separated. This kind of double membrane can be observed in countless works by Neto. The artist specifically refers to this membrane as a “skin” whose incisions are sewed up before “the skin is nourished by the moving matter that constitutes its cellular mass.”¹⁴ The filler necks, knotted openings that can be seen at various places, are reminiscent of a navel, as a life-giving, nourishment-providing canal. And for all the great sensuality and direct sexual connotations found in Neto’s sculptures, because of his emphasis of the womb as a protective cavity and the source of all life, which is very tangible in his 2001 *Nascimento da Deusa, o Embrião*, these works are never erotically charged, but rather celebrate the (heterosexual) union as a crucial component of the cycle of life.

It is common for associations to be made between Ernesto Neto’s works and organic architecture. This is due on one hand to the sheer dimensions and fluid aesthetic of his works, and on the other to the fact that his sculptures

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create spaces and spatial relationships in which the intermediate space – also considered the place of interaction – is given a central role. For Neto, the visitors' encounters with his works are based on the body, which intuitively experiences and comprehends proportions and relationships. Between the body and the architecture lies the very space that represents a "field in between," one that "has a perceptual presence of its own," according to the German-born art theorist and psychologist Rudolf Arnheim, who wrote that "the architect does not build space but creates it just the same."¹⁵ This is vividly illustrated by *Esqueleto Glóbulos*, which consists to a large extent of "empty space" and thus breaks with the traditional density of sculpture. This is interesting inasmuch as Neto refuses to have his room-size works labeled as installations: "I am very interested in the fact that this is not an installation."¹⁶ When he speaks of his works he insists on calling them sculptures, with the explanation that they function as immersive spaces but can also be perceived as closed objects when one emerges from them.¹⁷ In this regard, Neto – akin to the way he transgresses disciplinary boundaries in other areas – pursues an expansion of the concept of

Ernesto Neto
Janus Fetus, 1995



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Ernesto Neto
Copulônia, 1989/2009 (Detail)
 Installationsansicht / Installation
 view Galeria Fortes Vilaça,
 São Paulo, 2009
 Instituto Inhotim, Brumadinho

sculpture instead of engaging in differentiation and categorization according to media. What Neto utilizes for the purpose of addressing the body as an element that goes beyond the “instrumentalization” of architecture, however, is gravity. Unlike in architecture, which since the vaults and arches of the Gothic period has prominently demonstrated its ability to overcome gravity, and unlike in those types of sculpture that are aimed at a material-independent shape, gravity represents for Neto the principle that unites all earthly material, whether organic or inorganic. In its universal power it exceeds all other terrestrial forces and thus constitutes the most elementary communication basis for everything that exists. The balancing of forces, weights, volumes and dimensions in his elastic membranes filled with Styrofoam pellets, lead shot or spices is a voluptuous staging of this all-embracing force. “The materiality, it’s a way to express . . . especially the idea of gravity. Apart from any local cultural field, gravity is common to all of us.”¹⁸

For all of the emphasis he places on experiencing his sculptures physically and individually, Ernesto Neto’s artistic concern is to “always use his sculptures to formulate the offer of social interaction”¹⁹; with this he takes up and carries on the tradition of the participation-based Tropicália movement. Experiencing the social organism was already possible to a certain degree in body sculptures such as *Humanóides* and in inhabitable spaces of collective immersion, but this becomes the true focus of attention in Neto’s 2014 *Paxpa – There Is a Forest Encantada Inside of Us* (ill. pp. 58–61, 170–175), created for the exhibitions at the Arp Museum and the Kunsthalle Krems. The even greater emphasis on the common body that can be observed here may be traced back to Neto’s encounter and collaboration with the indigenous Huni Kuin people of the Amazon region; for several years he has studied their knowledge of traditions, rituals and connections with nature, knowledge that is anchored in their social organism. Thus the architectural form of *Paxpa – There Is a Forest Encantada Inside of Us* is designed to depict the meeting places of the Huni Kuin and is conceived emphatically to be a site of interaction. Visitors enter a room sculpture that seems to lie on another space-time axis, and one where everything is possible from interaction and meditation to taking refuge.

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Ernesto Neto addressed the social organism in earlier works as well, in a manner independent of the participation of the viewer, such as in his 1989 *Colônia* (ill. p. 108) or his 2007 *Two Colonies Going Somewhere*, a version of the original work with a narrative supplement in the title. The gigantic sculpture *Léviathan Thot*, which Neto created in 2006 for the Panthéon in Paris (ill. p. 90, bottom), represents the culmination of this concept of sculpture: *Léviathan Thot* is both a microstructure in its resemblance to organic tissue and a macrostructure in its room-filling, zoomorphic symmetry derived from the Old Testament sea monster and the ibis-headed or baboon-shaped Egyptian god of science. Finally, it is also a social organism exemplified in all its monstrosity by Thomas Hobbes' social body in his 1651 book *Leviathan* (ill. p. 90, top). Hobbes' concept of statecraft imagines man in a state of nature and the accompanying anguish of a war of all against all. According to Hobbes, only the submission to rule by an absolute sovereign would ensure the peace and security of the people.²⁰ In view of the consequential transformation of the individual through the government organism, the art critic and curator Paulo Herkenhoff refers to *Leviathan* as "a *Moloch* that demands sacrifices"²¹ – the sacrifices of those who once created it. In *Léviathan Thot* Neto's social utopia of a natural state shines through, one not restricted by rigid rulers or demonized by chastening monsters, but promoting the (re)construction of the congruence of the natural and social body.



Ernesto Neto
Anthropodino, 2009
 Installationsansicht /
 Installation view Park Avenue
 Armory (Wade Thompson Drill
 Hall), New York, 2009

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- 1 Ernesto Neto in conversation with Fabio Falzone, in "Take Your Time": Interview with Ernesto Neto," Rome, June 14, 2013, www.lanciatrendvisions.com/en/article/take-your-time-interview-with-ernesto-neto (accessed May 18, 2015).
- 2 Ernesto Neto in conversation with Eva Ebersberger, "Organic Accidents. A Conversation with Ernesto Neto," in *Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary. The Collection Book*, Cologne 2009, p. 274.
- 3 Neto 2013, as note 1.
- 4 See Neto 2009, as note 2, p. 268.
- 5 See Oliver A. I. Botar/Isabel Wünsche (eds.), *Biocentrism and Modernism*, Farnham 2011; Simon Diner, "Le biomorphisme dans la culture artistique moderne," Nancy 2007, <http://www.peiresc.org/DINER/Biomorphisme.pdf> (accessed May 13, 2015).
- 6 See Diner 2007, as note 5, p. 4.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See Botar/Wünsche 2001, as note 5; Maurice Tuchman/Judi Freeman, *Das Geistige in der Kunst. Abstrakte Malerei 1890-1985* (1986), Stuttgart 1988.
- 9 Quoted in "Manifesto Neoconcreto," published in early 1959 in the *Jornal do Brasil*. Quoted in Guy Brett, "Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body," in *Art in America*, Vol. 82, No. 7, 1994, p. 59.
- 10 See Diner 2007, as note 5, p. 5.
- 11 See Hans Blumenberg, "'Nachahmung der Natur.' Zur Vorgeschichte der Idee des schöpferischen Menschen," in *ibid.*, *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben. Aufsätze und eine Rede*, Stuttgart 1986, pp. 55–103.
- 12 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, Evanston, IL, 1988, p. 144.
- 13 See Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, New Haven 1989.
- 14 Ernesto Neto as quoted by Paulo Herkenhoff, "Léviathan Thot: A Politics of the Plumb," in *Parkett*, No. 78, 2006, p. 133.
- 15 Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*, Berkeley 1977, p. 18. According to Ernesto Neto, this is the very space that is missing in the works of Lygia Clark, as her pieces do not allow room between architecture and body. See Neto 2009, as note 2, p. 275.
- 16 Neto 2009, as note 2, p. 268.
- 17 Neto 2013, as note 1.
- 18 Neto 2009, as note 2, p. 275.
- 19 Oliver Kornhoff, "Ernesto Neto. Haux Haux," in *Ernesto Neto. Haux Haux*, exh. cat. Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen, Cologne 2014, p. 6.
- 20 See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (1651), London 2012.
- 21 Herkenhoff 2006, as note 14, p. 133.