

Title	Space invaded. Ernesto Neto	Author	Donatien Grau
Date	2011	Artist	Ernesto Neto
Publication	KVARAN, Gunnar B.; ÅRBU, Grete. <i>Ernesto Neto, Intimacy</i> . Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2011.		

Space invaded. Ernesto Neto

2006: *Léviathan Toth*, Panthéon, Paris

2008: *Mentre niente accade / While nothing happens*, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma, Rome

2009: *A Culpa Civilizada*, Musée des Beaux-arts, Nantes

2010: *The Edges of the World*, Hayward Gallery, London

2010: *Intimacy*, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo

The current omnipresence of Ernesto Neto in the contemporary art world might lead us to ask a very simple question: are we being invaded by his work? Why do galleries and museums so badly want to be inhabited by the sculptures he shapes for their spaces? Joking aside, the question of the art- work's position in its "Umwelt" (environment) can be seen as fundamental to Neto's world view. The evidence is in the titles that have been given to two of his institutional shows in 2010, separated from each other by only a few months: *The Edges of the World* in London, and *Intimacy* in Oslo. An obvious connection exists between them, insofar as they embody the discrepancy, or perhaps the dialectic, within his art: between expansion and concentration; between the venue and everything that surrounds it; between the "cosa mentale", the mind of the artist, and the actual display in which it finds its expression.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote in his 1958 essay *The Poetics of Space*: "These subjectivities and transsubjectivities cannot be determined once and for all, for the poetic image is essentially *variational*, and not, as in the case of the concept, *constitutive*."¹ As a consequence, a work of art created in the perspective of what Bachelard calls "the poetics of space" only exists in and through its context. Since, under the influence of Brazilian Neo-concretism from Lygia Pape to Lygia Clark, the physicality of Neto's production is of such great importance, it seems relevant to analyze the way in which the issues of "space" and "spatiality" are handled in its display. And perhaps the process that best describes the artist's relationship to space is "invasion", a process that manifests itself in three main ways in his work.

The first form of invasion is perhaps the most obvious: the invasion of the place in which his work is exhibited. Neto has a penchant for creating new artworks for famous ancient sites whose context is subsequently given a special meaning: transforming the Panthéon, France's temple of heroes, into a Leviathan can be seen as particularly daring and provocative. When he presents a new creation for the Musée des Beaux-arts in Nantes, famed for its masterpieces by La Tour, Ingres, and Courbet, he refers to the history of slavery and the so-called "commerce triangulaire" between Africa, France, and America. This invasion of space, therefore, is likely to allude to painful wounds both in the memory and in the present. Even when his art does not constitute such a political statement, it often appears as paradoxical: at the Hayward Gallery, a swimming pool was installed in the context of an institutional show, a humorous way of questioning the singularity and the seriousness of the exhibition process itself. This mechanism of invasion, which works syntagmatically with its intellectual contexts, also proceeds paradigmatically: the strange, erratic shapes of Neto's artworks are integrated in the display in a very free fashion. For instance, in his 2008 sculpture, *While Nothing Happens*, the whole room was invaded by a huge structure, and it was difficult for the

¹ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (Boston, Mass. : Beacon Press , 1994), p. XIX.

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viewer to understand how it was built, why certain parts were, in a manner of speaking, brought to a halt in their movement in order to descend to earth.

In this sense, it is possible to recognize another way in which the space is invaded: by the ego of the artist. When we see a Neto artwork, it may seem perfectly legitimate to consider it in the context of what Roland Barthes called “the death of the author”: after all, if the production seems to function freely, following its own rules beyond the existence of the human being who designed it, why would there be any need to acknowledge the artist? But the artwork as a space is itself the object of an invasion, taking the form of the shapes chosen by Neto, which sometimes have sexual or bodily inspirations. Invasion is also visible in the colors he chooses, which often have a symbolic meaning (red, for instance). And finally, even if the artist insists that his productions are connected with science, for instance by using the word “gravity” in their titles, how could one explain these shapes without acknowledging the hand of the artist? Through their idiosyncrasy, they attest to his existence and to his power. The nineteenth-century French novelist Stendhal once said that books have a mission to evoke “un paysage mental”, a spiritual landscape – an expression that Neto has transformed into a reality.

The third invasion is the one that actually constitutes the artwork as such: the invasion of the viewers. As Bachelard stated, art exists within the connection that is created between the artist and his public: indeed, it only exists in “intersubjectivity.” Therefore, the human being who relates to Neto’s production cannot really be described as a “viewer,” since he does not only see it, but also touches and smells it. Because the art is conceived as a synaesthesia, the “viewer” is turned into a “synaesthetic subject.” And this invasion of Neto’s work by these bodies, and egos, provides the artwork with a new life – its real one. Such a production could be summarized with one adjective: “lively.” Indeed, due to the invasions that permanently take place within it, the artwork actually moves.

In a conversation with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Neto mentioned that as a child he would have liked to have been an astronaut, but he became an artist instead. This biographical detail is highly meaningful. When you don’t get to travel into space, you have to invent new spaces to invade.