

Title	Ernesto Neto, Intimacy	Author	Gunnar B. Kvaran
Date	2011	Artist	Ernesto Neto
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## Ernesto Neto, Intimacy

“Força (strength), resistência (resistance), energia (energy), fruto (fruit, fruit of an effort), instante (instant), iminente (threatening, imminent, impending, on the brink of), espaço (space), circular (circular), tempo (time), corpo (body), pensante (thinking), escultura (sculpture), dual (dual), apoio (support, equilibrium), vital (vital), presente (gift or present time), estado (state or the state of your feelings), momento (moment), matéria (material), escolha (choice), fim (the end)”. On the invitation card to his first solo exhibition at Espaço Petite Galerie, Rio de Janeiro, in 1988 Ernesto Neto had already enumerated the main concepts that would come to characterise his artistic research, development and production for more than 20 years to come. This was not just a linguistic exercise: the card also included an image of what appeared to be an abstract object, which contained fragments, or *a pars pro toto*, of his future artistic language impregnated with sensuality - if not eroticism, outright.

The meanings of the words and concepts on the invitation recall the formalist language commonly used to describe the ambitions and intentions of the great modern artists, and they anchor Neto firmly within a rich European and Brazilian modernistic tradition. The artist has highlighted Dutch abstract painter Piet Mondrian as singularly influential upon the Brazilian modernists that would follow in his wake, but other predecessors clearly left their mark as well. The playfulness of surrealists like Joan Miro, for example, is eminently evident, as is the sensuality of Jean Arp's lines and organic forms, and the suspension and mobility of Alexander Calder. Even the choice of common materials like Formica, nylon and Styrofoam that Neto would take up have a distinctly modernist heritage.

Outside of Europe, influences span Brazilian pioneers such as Oscar Niemeyer, one of the greatest modernist architects of all, and later Neo-concrete artists, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. And in America, one witnesses a delicate attention to space synonymous with minimalists like Donald Judd and a proclivity towards physical risk, balance, gravity that we find in the work of Richard Serra. More recent, yet, one could say that Neto is a Neo-modernist in a similar vein as Olafur Eliasson, Tomas Saraceno or even Sarah Morris – each being driven by an insatiable will to create new visions, experiences and narratives of our built world.

In a short article published in this exhibition catalogue, Neto has written: “The Neo-concrete artists (in Brazil with artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark) brought subjectivity to Concretism by defying it. They also defied the developmentism of a ruling and alienating elite who craved modernist aesthetics and modern revolution but didn't want to accept its basic principles or an ideology favoring the integration of the individual into the social system and a functional architecture that promoted a social urbanism.” Some poetic statement for an artist who, in his own right, has arguably pushed the quest for humanity and subjectivity within the notion of modernism and Neo-concretism even further than his closest South American predecessors. By introducing natural and organic elements, the artist has spurred an entirely new kind of formalistic language, rife with tender sensuality and uniquely democratic, social-political perspective. Ernesto Neto is, above all, an artist of his own time, liberally sampling from the modernist palette if only to continuously reinvent its vocabulary and extend it into new, uncharted directions.

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In this exhibition we have, together with the artist, chosen to present a selective body of Neto's work from the past ten years. Our aim is to highlight the diversity of the artistic ideas, innovations and formalistic proposals within his oeuvre. Visitors will experience the sensuality and beauty of the suspended gravity sculptures (*Desiring a Horizon of Gravity*, *While nothing happens* and *Variation on Color Seed Space Time Love*, 2005, 2008 and 2009, respectively) made from delicately stretched translucent fabrics and then partly filled with Styrofoam, glass beads or spices that evaporate and perfume the space. These are far from sculptures in the traditional sense, but esoteric materials that only take on artistic properties once installed through their intangible atmospheric, almost existential, presence; their symbiotic relationship to the architecture of the space, and to one another, enables them to spring to life.

These precepts are taken even further in architectural sculptures like *Stone Lips*, *Pepper Tits*, *Clove Love*, *Fog Frog*, 2008, womblike chambers that museum-goers are invited to enter and be fully enveloped in. Other installations are more directly tactile, such as Neto's floor pieces, which invite spectators to walk, sit or recline directly on the works, themselves. In *Humanoids Family*, 2001, for example, one can wear a "T-shirt sculpture" and plunge into pools of balls – a veritable social event. Then we have the object-based sculptures that play with the notion of "systems" and refer to children's games or popcultural vernacular. And one mustn't forget the wall pieces, formal experiments of lines (that are in fact strings of fabric and laser-cut MDF) in a wide spectrum of colours and materials.

At first sight Neto's body of work can seem purely abstract, but their meanings are layered and far more complex than the surface may suggest. There is not only an interrelationship between the work, the environment and the spectator in a sensorial way, but a powerfully physical one, too. Indeed, Neto's best works induce a complicated state of inter-subjectivity between the forms and the materials, formulating a "landscape" (*Densidade e Buracos de Minhoca*, which premiered at the Liverpool Biennale in 1999) or an "animal" (*O Bicho*, from the 2001 Venice Biennale). More precisely, materials like sugar, spices and glass carry strong socio-cultural connotations: colonialism, or the fragility of political systems. Seen with recent Brazilian political history in the background, there is certainly no innocence or randomness in his chosen forms and materials. And many of the works bear certain formal elements, such as the "feet" of the sculptures filled with sugar, cinnamon or otherwise, that are at once sexually-charged (recalling phalluses and vaginas) and totally androgynous.

Running throughout Neto's practice, one also finds a light-hearted playfulness and a sense of humour that makes it accessible to audiences of all kinds. It is a profoundly anti-elitist body of work that is as much an engaged fusion of communion, festival and even a samba dance as high art, proper.

The artist has entitled the exhibition *Intimacy*. This is particularly apt for it is indeed an intimate occasion for the artist to reflect with us on the development of his artistic production over the past decade. Together, we inhabit a museum space that has become a theatre of multilayered and inspiring forms of all shapes, smells and sizes: organic symbiosis, modernism, formalism, science fiction, design, anthropology, puzzle and play all have their role. In the end,

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the spectator penetrates an enigmatic world of astonishing fantasy and strange exotic beauty that, like life itself, can never be fully disentangled from social reality. Neto's body of work may ultimately be left to History, but it will never stop growing, changing or evolving.

The curating of this exhibition has been a long, interesting and fun process. It has given us the opportunity to become better acquainted with one of our great artists and an enormous body of works in all its complexity and generosity. It has been an immense pleasure to work together with Ernesto Neto and his team on this exhibition and to experience his enthusiasm and never-ending creativity. We have also been immensely fortunate to have his wife, Liliane Kemper, design this unique catalogue – or, as we prefer to call it, artist's book – which has been a truly unique collaboration between husband and wife. Furthermore we would like to thank the authors of the texts in the catalogue who come from across the world (Donatien Grau, Paris, Michael Asbury, London and Florencia Malbrán, Buenos Aires) for their brilliant interpretations of the subject, and insightful and inventive writings. We would also like to thank Ernesto Neto's gallerists in São Paulo, Marcia Fortes and Alexandre Gabriel from Galeria Fortes Vilaça, and Tanya Bonakdar from Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York who together with her gallery director Ethan Sklar have been extremely helpful during the preparation and the organisation of the exhibition.