

Title	Is it day or is it night?	Author	Florencia Malbrán
Date	2011	Artist	Ernesto Neto
Publication	KVARAN, Gunnar B.; ÅRBU, Grete. <i>Ernesto Neto, Intimacy</i> . Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2011.		

Is it day or is it night?

I began by speaking of exactitude, not the infinite and the cosmos. I wanted to tell you of my fondness for geometrical forms, for symmetries, for numerical series, for all that is combinatory, for numerical proportions; I wanted to explain the things I had written in terms of my fidelity to the idea of limits, of measure ... But perhaps it is precisely this idea of form that evokes the idea of the endless: the sequence of whole numbers, Euclid's straight line.¹

Exactitude. Ernesto Neto's work evokes exact calculation. His pieces channel Italo Calvino's reflections on the art of precision, incisiveness, and clarity. His sculptures rely on rigorous systems of tensions, albeit often concealed by a diffused sensual beauty. Neto typically stretches translucent fabrics almost to the point of breaking, dangles drops full of spices, and reckons with the power of gravity, working with counterweights such as sacks of sand. It is thus no surprise to learn that he considers Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* the best theory book about sculpture ever written. In fact, Neto's work reflects more than Calvino's theory on precision. It also shares the inevitable vastness that haunts exactitude. Acknowledging the suggestive power of the indefinite, Calvino's ode to accuracy cannot escape uncertainty. And nor can Neto's art.

Neto's works open up to an infinite connection at the most literal level. Many of his large-scale sculptures include incisions that allow viewers to venture into them. In this exchange, soft fabric completely enshrouds visitors, granting them a second skin. Touching is fundamental. Indeed, Neto concerns himself with questions posed by Jacques Derrida, who wrote a treatise "on touching." Derrida contended that tactility encompasses the entire body, including human thought, inasmuch as it may seem to privilege just one of the five senses. He asked, "When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night?"² From this first inquiry, many others followed: what is touching? Can eyes manage to touch? To make contact? Neto responds to these queries with his pieces. In his works, touching becomes an experience that transcends contesting definitions of the intelligible and the sensible, and goes beyond the lure of the haptic surfaces that formally constitute his works. Touching directly becomes a way of being and understanding. Derrida wanted to examine whether touch belonged to the immaterial and possibly dark space of thought or to the illuminated site of the body. The intensity of such an inquiry led him to reformulate his question, hoping for answers: "Insisting tirelessly, someone is still repeating: at the moment of touching your eyes with mine, like lips, is it daytime or are we already inhabiting our night? Still and always our first night always? Is there still room, place, space, or an interval, *chōra*, for the day's phenomenality and its diaphanous visibility?"³ A place exists between day and night where gazes touch and see simultaneously. And this place is provided by Neto's works.

¹ Italo Calvino, "Exactitude," in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.68.

² "Quand nos yeux se touchent, fait-il jour ou fait-il nuit?" Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy "corpus"* is key.

³ *Ibid.*, p.3. Elizabeth Grosz clarifies, "*Chōra*, which Derrida insists must be understood without any definitive article, has an acknowledged role at the very foundations of the concept of spatiality, place and placing; it signifies, at its most literal level, notions of 'place,' 'location,' 'site,' 'region,' 'locale,' 'country;' but it also contains an irreducible, yet often overlooked connection with the

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His sculptures are matrixes of perception; the possibility of entering his receptacles unleashes permutations between vision and touch, interior and exterior, and stillness and mobility. Immersion confuses the conventional obverse and reverse faces of a work of art. Which is the principal side of Neto's sculptures? Where is the inside and where is the outside? His works blur such distinctions by creating atmospheres that combine excitement and relaxation in unusual ways. Yet there are other reasons why Neto's mists of beauty rest amidst the excitement of nightfall and the full breadth of energy proper to the day.

"The night is dangerous," he said to me once while walking through Madrid's dark streets.⁴ This brief observation recalled an idea that he had clarified earlier. When defining his work, he revealed, "Above all I am interested in pleasure, but not in the sense of fun. I reckon that analyzing our society according to the principle of pain can be very decent, but it can also be very useful to exert social control, and it is inevitably useless for happiness. Happiness lives side by side with pleasure, and pleasure is very close to danger."⁵ Precisely, danger matters tremendously in Neto's work. Upon entering his sculptures, we venture into the unknown. In an age of intangible information – the internet and the news, mediated images, simulacra – we are forced to touch again; our innermost aspects surface. We face the estranged, strangers, other visitors who have also penetrated the work. Neto takes us past our very limits. Yes, our skin, the thin peel that delimits our bodies, needs to abandon its enclosure to actually engage with another – whether with the elastic fabric of the artwork, someone else's fiber, or the threads of our innermost being. However, touching the unknown yields pleasure. From within Neto's works, where unrestrained contact is not just allowed but encouraged, a renewed meaning of ourselves may begin to dawn. Sensorial rushes make us regain subjectivity, and call for a personal response. We find ourselves having to give an account of ourselves. As we begin to answer, to reconstruct our beings, we may also change our sense of agency, reach, and possibilities. We may experience the happy affirmation that, although modestly, we can make a difference in the world.⁶

"Intense daylight allows an excess of life," Neto said to me a year later, in another of our conversations, this time over the phone, while remembering a short trip to Mexico in 1997.⁷ Mexico's unruly vegetation, as well as Rio de Janeiro's tropical forest, changed his whole idea of sculpture. He observed "a sheer diversity of symbiotic relationships in nature" and began to conceive new ideas about connection and fusion. Back in Rio, he developed those first insights into the Naves, the series that over time became a signature of his art. He coined a new lexicon to explain the articulation of these works. The "naves" themselves are ships, vessels, containers rendered in pliable fabric, environments in which to pause and consider the slippages between touch and gaze or space and time. He uses the

function of femininity, being associated with a series of sexually coded terms – 'mother,' 'nurse,' 'receptacle,' and 'imprint-bearer.'" Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.112.

⁴ Conversation with the artist, February, 2008, Madrid.

⁵ Ernesto Neto, "The Fragility of the World. Cecilia Pereira in Conversation with Ernesto Neto," in *Ernesto Neto, o corpo, nu tempo*, ed. Cecilia Pereira (Santiago de Compostela: Xunta de Galicia, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporânea, 2002), p.304.

⁶ I'm following here Judith Butler's riveting discussion on contemporary ethics and subjectivity. Butler states that, "Nietzsche did well to understand that I begin my story of myself only in the face of a 'you' who asks me to give an account. Only in the face of such a query or attribution from an other – 'What is you?' – do any of us start to narrate ourselves, or find that, for urgent reasons, we must become self-narrating beings." Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p.11.

⁷ Telephone conversation with the artist, September 29th, 2009, Buenos Aires-Rio de Janeiro.

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term “copulas” for those drops full of spices that hang in or outside each Nave’s main body, emanating perfume, creating subtle allusions to flowers, fruits, sexual parts. But “copulas” are really knots. When the fabric stretches out to reach the gallery’s ceiling, the farthest ends of the cloth are bound together, as in copulation. The Nave is born. Lastly the artwork needs to be fastened to the ground, so sacks filled with sand offer support. These ovoid weights are the “patas” (feet), the extremities that bear the weight of this novel organism. Still, in spite of the physical association conveyed by these words, a symbiosis also occurs within the exhibition venue itself. While the Nave clings onto beams or descends to the floor, the space reveals unseen coordinates of dimension, expansion and interconnection. Neto hence posits an alternative way of thinking spatially about being. He mobilizes ideas associated with time and space—on many levels. He has included sugar grains when exhibiting artworks in locations whose economies once depended on slavery and the sugar trade, or has pushed reflection on dwelling through titles such as *LéviathanThot*. Even when such explicit references disappear, Neto’s works still harbor the presence of history and are not in any way sealed from the world outside.

Exactitude. “Exactitude is extreme exigency: let us term it an exorbitant exactitude.”⁸ With this dictum, Derrida opposed circumscription and embraced instead a ceaseless openness—an idea already present in Calvino and one that Neto makes concrete again. Despite their sharp structure, Neto’s sculptures in effect exceed any constraints and vibrate with change. This retrospective exhibits his rigor over ten years, which coincides exactly with the turn of the millennium that Calvino addressed in his memos. Here rigor, we are reminded, is not stiffness, narrowness, or withholding. For the territory exposed by Neto’s works prompts us to dispense with foreclosure and open up, allowing for the passage toward the other, and to accept the impermanence of contact. Neto gives us back a life that is not restricted or confined. A life that is impossible without our bodies and meaningless without us. He creates an art between day and night. An art that *touches* us.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *ibid.*, p.26. Derrida is commenting on Nancy’s term “ex-scribed,” meaning “pushing outwardly,” or linking subjectivity and exteriority. As an homage to Nancy’s inspiring contributions, Derrida furthermore highlights how his colleague has something very different in mind from common notions of crucial issues like “sense,” “meaning,” “body,” “soul” and “mind.”