

Title "Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self
Date 2014
Publication Ernesto Neto: *Haux Haux*. Remagen: Arp Museum – Bahnhof Rolandseck, 2014.

Author Jutta Mattern
Artist Ernesto Neto

"Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self

Jutta Mattern

"So too we are dwarfs astride the shoulders of giants. We master their wisdom and move beyond it. Due to their wisdom we grow wise and are able to say all that we say, but not because we are greater than they."¹

Bernhard of Chartres (11th/ 12th cent., died ca 1124)

| | | | |
|-------------|--|--------|---------------|
| Title | "Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self | Author | Jutta Mattern |
| Date | 2014 | Artist | Ernesto Neto |
| Publication | <i>Ernesto Neto: Haux Haux</i> . Remagen: Arp Museum – Bahnhof Rolandseck, 2014. | | |

Bernhard of Chartres' insight on the modern man of the twelfth century has lost none of its relevance today, in my view. With the exhibition *Haux Haux* in Rolandseck, Ernesto Neto takes this insight as his point of departure, and begins to create a harmonic whole in a kind of *ménage-à-trois*. He places his own art in a relationship to that of Jean Arp, a key figure of classical modernism, and to the primeval knowledge of the Huni Kuin, a people from the Amazon region of northern Brazil with a shamanistic belief system.

The initial contact took place with respectful, intuitive approaches, intense and fraught with tension, like the ones that lie at the basis of the magical-spiritual touches practiced by the Huni Kuin. Think of the video of the Huni Kuni Txana Bane, who serenades Arp's sculpture *Kauernd (Crouching)*, singing a healing incantation. And encounters that are about physical feeling and touching, as in the video of Neto and the Arp sculpture *Torso-Profil (Torso Profile)*. And those that deal with a formal affinity in the sense of organic abstraction and the linked processes of transformation. The central and key point of departure here is establishing a connection to the person vis-à-vis. Neto thus developed an impressive web of relationships that we can scarcely escape and into which we are spun. Softly and unnoticeably woven in, we have the opportunity, consciously or unconsciously, to perceive ourselves in new dimensions

and to experience and be open for the new and unfamiliar. Neto's 'sky arch' is spread across all of this, and can be experienced with all the senses: his unmistakable installation cosmos, always consisting of individual works, that makes the borders between our understanding of nature and our experience of nature, art currents, various cultures, bodies, and landscape fluid and dissolves limitations.

In Rolandseck, Neto quite consciously links the culture of the Huni Kuin—one of around 240 indigenous peoples of Brazil, the "true people," as they call themselves—to this cosmos, as also was the case in his 2014 exhibition *The Body that Carries Me* at Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. At issue here is by no means an exotic flavor or an esoteric excursus that promotes his own art, but rather his deeply felt link to—and appreciation for—this people, whom he came to know around one and a half years ago. Since then, there has been close contact and intense exchange with members of the group.

In a special and profound way, the Huni Kuin have introduced and guided him to the secrets of an all-encompassing nature. Mutual visits, Neto's participation in Huni Kuin rituals, in their healing songs and dances, and, as the most important ceremony, the imbibing of ayahuasca, a traditional drink made from extract from the caapi liana and the leaves of other healing plants, has had a great influence on Neto's view of the world, his perception

¹ Quoted in Franz Schupp, *Geschichte der Philosophie im Überblick*, Vo. 2, *Christliche Antike, Mittelalter* (Hamburg, 2003), 203.

| | | | |
|-------------|--|--------|---------------|
| Title | "Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self | Author | Jutta Mattern |
| Date | 2014 | Artist | Ernesto Neto |
| Publication | Ernesto Neto: <i>Haux Haux</i> . Remagen: Arp Museum – Bahnhof Rolandseck, 2014. | | |

of nature. They had an impact on his physical and mental experiences and thus a lasting effect on his artistic creativity.

Neto has said that the influence of his encounter with this indigenous people will surely still be evident in his work ten years from now. To this day, through their way of life, open and eager to embrace the new, they have opened him to new spaces for experience and levels of consciousness. As rainforest dwellers who possess an extraordinary knowledge of the forest, its plants and animals, and through their harmonic approach to this unique, all-encompassing habitat, they have led Neto to new sources of inspiration. Here, their deep spiritual link to the real surroundings, but also the spheres beyond the visible, play an important role. The Huni Kuin preserve the unusual biodiversity of the rainforest by living in harmony with nature, that serves as the foundation of their livelihood. This includes fishing and hunting as well as plant collecting. Beside their use as nourishment, plants are also attributed a great importance as medicines, with applications based on knowledge handed down through the centuries. These healing processes include both the ritual of imbibing ayahuasca already mentioned, which also plays an important role for Neto on his journey of discovery of the self, and the linked experience of the absolute coexistence of art and nature in a symbiosis. In a group, carefully and professionally led

by a shaman as a mediator between superhuman powers and forces, the healing sessions are intended to lead us to find a closer link to our own core, the spirits of nature, and thus to a unity with the "clarified" consciousness. In addition, the ritual is intended to enable access to the unconscious, to overcome illnesses and psychological trauma. These ritual experiences are triggered and lived through by taking a plant mixture in the form of a drink: ayahuasca. It is an extract of the liana (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and a mix of various leaves from healing plants that often contain DMT substances² that increase the visionary quality of the drink. Drinking the substance leads to hallucinations and subjective expansions of consciousness, causing a kind of "journey of the soul" where new levels of consciousness can be explored and healing can take place. For the shamans, the effect of ayahuasca is not due to these ingredients, but rather to the "plant spirits" that reveal themselves during this delirious state as teachers. The word *ayahuasca* comes from the indigenous language Quechua, and when translated means "tendrils of souls." This ritual of the Huni Kuin is closely linked to the myth of the Holy Snake Jiboia, a hybrid being combining a snake and a woman's body (pp. 120-123, 129) For according to traditions that are bound to things actually experienced, drinking the plant mixture brings one into contact with the power and the wisdom of the snake, located

| | | | |
|-------------|--|--------|---------------|
| Title | "Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self | Author | Jutta Mattern |
| Date | 2014 | Artist | Ernesto Neto |
| Publication | Ernesto Neto: <i>Haux Haux</i> . Remagen: Arp Museum – Bahnhof Rolandseck, 2014. | | |

beyond the earthly and the conscious. In terms of transformation and healing, it is supposed to lead us on the path to ourselves in an all-encompassing unity with nature. Interestingly, in Western culture, beside the Biblical tale of the Fall of Man, the snake is also linked in ancient Greek mythology to healing, knowledge, wisdom, and clear-sightedness. One of the important symbols in the medical profession is the staff of the Greek God of healing Asclepius surrounded by a snake, the rod of Asclepius. Among the Huni Kuin, the snake Jiboia according to myth also taught the women the signs that they use as patterns in their pearl jewelry, weaving, and body paintings. Each pattern, including that of the snake, the rhombus, is considered a symbol, a text of nature, that supports and strengthens those who wear the jewelry or clothing in everyday life by way of the respective symbolism of the pattern.³ Every fragment of this all-encompassing knowledge, no matter how small, is always linked to a magical thought that is eminently attractive to us with all our longing, fears, and self-doubt.

In his encounter with the Huni Kuin, Neto also goes once again in search of a complete subsumption of the human being in nature. In his case, this also involves the complete subsumption of the artist in nature. During his intense engagement with the Huni Kuin, nature reveals itself once again as an artistic cosmos that inheres within us, and which,

according to Neto, can let us bloom in steps of development from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens* and finally to "Homo artist." The title of one of the main works in the Arp Museum show *Paxpa – There Is a forest encantada inside of us*, thus seems programmatic: for already before the encounter with the Huni Kuin, Neto drew from the wealth of nature, from the variety of forms, the transformations of fine materials, the fusion of cells, to create new life, a breathtaking microcosm that inheres within all of us and that we find in his sculptures.

As Neto reported to me, his fundamental engagement with the beauty of art and nature and their symbiotic relationship to another, the scientific-artistic work of the German zoologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) is of importance, who published his *Kunstformen der Natur* (Nature's Art Forms) in several volumes from 1899 to 1904 (pp. 54, 55).⁴ They attest to Haeckel's monistic view of our cosmos as an "all-encompassing natural whole." Here, he assigns a special importance to so-called lower forms of life that remain hidden in the depths of the sea or would remain unseen without the aid of a microscope. He takes from the realm of the protists or "single cell animals," the simplest organisms whose entire living body consists of a single cell: radiolarians, thalamophora, ciliata, actinarians, anthomedusae, and others. Haeckel's depictions had an influence on the art of the early 20th century,

2 Dimethyltryptamin is a hallucinogenic tryptamine alkaloid.

3 See Kathy Lewin's contribution to this volume, pp. 106–109.

4 Haeckel, *Kunstformen*, 4.

| | | | |
|-------------|--|--------|---------------|
| Title | "Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self | Author | Jutta Mattern |
| Date | 2014 | Artist | Ernesto Neto |
| Publication | Ernesto Neto: <i>Haux Haux</i> . Remagen: Arp Museum – Bahnhof Rolandseck, 2014. | | |

especially art nouveau. Exemplary here are the crystal chandeliers at Monaco's Oceanographic Museum by Constant Roux (1865-1942), the monumental gate of the French architect René Binet (1866-1911) at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris, and the artistic design of Ernst Haeckel's Jena home with the ornamentation on the façade and the interior design. According to Haeckel, nature reveals an inexhaustible fullness of wonderful shapes, whose beauty and variety surpass all art forms created by humanity.⁵

As so often, Neto succeeds in making the beauty of nature—and what visibly goes beyond this—tangible in Rolandseck, enchanting us in the process. Here, it is the forest as the habitat of the Huni Kuin community: its special atmosphere, the plants, all the green, the light that falls through the trees and creates shadows, the animals, it is the forest as a place of diversity of life, that impresses Neto enduringly and inspires him to transfer his images of perception and experience to his sculptural works. This is true of his work *Paxpa – There is a forest encantada inside of us* (pp. 94–118), which was created for the Rolandseck exhibition. The accessible, corporeal work, surrounded by two delicately colored, transparent membranes that can be cautiously penetrated in many places, like the semi permeable membrane of a cell, with one's hands from the inside and outside, invites us to enter into a closed-off space. If we refer this to the Huni Kuin

word *paxpa*, or frog, from the title, the body casing of transparent, elastic polyamide fabric with its gaps, that allow the beauty of the form to shimmer as a celestially delicate formation, in fact recalls a very small tree-climbing frog that lives in the forests of the Amazon region. Its body is covered in mucous glands that keep the surface wet and allow for breathing through the skin, and which also show bodily glands that beside poisonous protective secretions also produce secretions that strengthen the immune system and heal, and which play a special role in the medicine of the Huni Kuin. With adhesive disks on its feet, Neto's *paxpa* creation seems stubbornly to remain on the dark wooden floor. We now enter this space that combines body and forest to spend time as if in a community house, a *kupixawa*, on soft seating cushions, woven with traditional indigenous patterns, alone, quietly, or to meet with others and to communicate. All of this is created so that we can animate the sculpture. The start of this mutual exchange was made at the opening of the show by three representatives of the Huni Kuin: Siã (Jose Osair Sales, p. 119), the chief, his daughter Tschima (Isa Maia Sales, p. 134), and his son, the shaman Txana Bane (Fabiano Maia Sales, S. 138), as well as the latter's life partner Kathy Lewin, (p. 105). Together with guests, they unveiled Neto's sculpture with various song ceremonies, healing songs, with which the Huni Kuin took up a direct communica-

5 See Astrid von Asten's essay in this volume (pp. 18–25).

| | | | |
|-------------|--|--------|---------------|
| Title | "Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self | Author | Jutta Mattern |
| Date | 2014 | Artist | Ernesto Neto |
| Publication | Ernesto Neto: <i>Haux Haux</i> . Remagen: Arp Museum – Bahnhof Rolandseck, 2014. | | |

tion with the force of nature, and added their own intense and energetic presence in an atmospherically impressive and lasting fashion. Surrounded by nylon bags that smell of cloves and ginger or are filled with amazonite and mountain crystals, which seem, like a kind of dome of trees, to grow out of neuronal network, we find ourselves in a protected space that appears sacred, but remains open and allows us contact outside or inside. Everything is in the spirit of healing, balance, and togetherness. Neto has consciously chosen precious stones like amazonite that have a restful and relaxing effect, allowing sadness and worry to disappear, and which are helpful during mediation.

For their part, the Huni Kuin think it is a great gift to link their traditions and thus the Amazon forest with the art of Ernesto Neto and to share these experiences with the guests, the artist, and the team of the Arp Museum: in a place in which architecture is part of a mountain and part of a river with a special energy. They too were enchanted by Neto's art. They said that it is a pleasure to combine *Paxpa – There is a forest encantada inside of us* with all its elements, which, through the spirituality of the Huni Kuin and their native habitat, inseparable from the forest, form a whole and vitalize it. They hoped to help initiate a place where the mind and the spirit could be freed through meditation, song, and dance. For them, a deep feeling of security res-

onates in this sculptural space that embraces the body and the spirit and forms, according to their belief, an indivisible unity.

This is also reflected in Neto's next work on the other side of the exhibition space. Here, a closed spatial body takes us into a quasi-uterine, slightly pink and yellow illuminated inside.

Two Columns for One Bubble Light, 2007 (pp. 46–65, 67) seems veritably to lead towards uncertain terrain. A vagina-like opening, as so often in Neto's accessible sculptures, opens into a spherical structure. On a soft ground, slightly balancing the body, we approach a place where the preconscious is borne and encourages us to trust this "cave." We find ourselves in a space of retreat, where the sounds are muffled and scarcely reach our ears. Nothing disturbs us, and we have been invited by Ernesto Neto to be truly open, standing, sitting, or lying down, and to fuse to form a unity with the sculpture. Here as well, the form of the work recalls the formal diversity of nature, in this case a microbiological structure, an over-sized cell, perhaps an egg cell, with two equally accessible spaces at its center. These take up the implementation of the male principle of activity and the female principle of rest, yin and yang. Without noticing, we enter into a microcosm that is our own and that emerges from life. Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920–1988), as Neto himself put it, had a great influence on his work, especially her works

| | | | |
|-------------|--|--------|---------------|
| Title | "Tendrils of Souls" or the Discovery of the Self | Author | Jutta Mattern |
| Date | 2014 | Artist | Ernesto Neto |
| Publication | Ernesto Neto: <i>Haux Haux</i> . Remagen: Arp Museum – Bahnhof Rolandseck, 2014. | | |

from the late 1960s. Here, she expanded the limits of art with her interactive installations. Her intention was to include people in her works, allowing them to become part of the artwork. The installations were accessible, they could be touched and felt, experienced with all the senses. This contradicted the classical rules of art reception and was revolutionary at the time. In Brazil it was the neo-concretists who pursued these new, experimental paths. Lygia Clark was one of the central figures of the group. Her sculpture *A casa é o corpo* (The House is the Body) (p. 57) from 1968, which attests to growth, conception, and birth, exemplifies the artistic attitude of experiencing a sculpture as visitors and thus is also able to address various layers of perception.

Our interactivity with Neto's works always includes the dimension of the vaguely felt, beyond the physically palpable: an expansion of our physical limits, in which we leave our shell to temporarily place ourselves under the power of the unconscious and the spiritual. On the way there, Neto does not force us to do anything at all. Everything happens with an intention in mind, but always subtly and carefully.

We decide how our bodies feel with and in his works: How it is to touch his sculptural bodies, to penetrate them, to smell them, or to enter into them, to slip into a second skin, as allowed by his *Humanóides* (p. 66). We are the ones who with our subjective experience provide the answer to this.

Ernesto Neto himself seeks out new situations to explore and artfully implement his horizon of experience, and ventures into unusual terrain. Currently, on the one hand his intense encounter with the Huni Kuin, in Rolandseck it is the engagement with his "formal and spiritual forefather" Jean Arp and his formal language.⁵ This takes place in his two videos as well (pp. 145–151), which were especially created for the exhibition, showing him in a "loving embrace" with Arp's sculpture. Just like Txana Bane who turns in a second video to Arp's sculpture *Kauernd* (*Crouching*), both works are about a kind of conversation and a *pas de deux* with the vis-à-vis, to trace out the 'spirit' of the sculptures, and to give them back their own energetic elements. The space in which we experience this "togetherness" was created by Neto in such a way that we feel as if we were inside the skin of an animal. Perhaps once again an animal from the forest? Gray long hair plush changes the surroundings with its projection surfaces in an unusually soft and muffled site that animates the video projections in an 'animalistic' and three-dimensional way. Restfully, the monotonous song of Txana Bane, the "Song of Connection with the Spirits of Our Nature," pervades the space (p. 92). This song embraces us very much in the sense of Ernesto Neto's drawing of a snake (p. 137):

Hene Yube, People, it is A Breeze that Permeates us