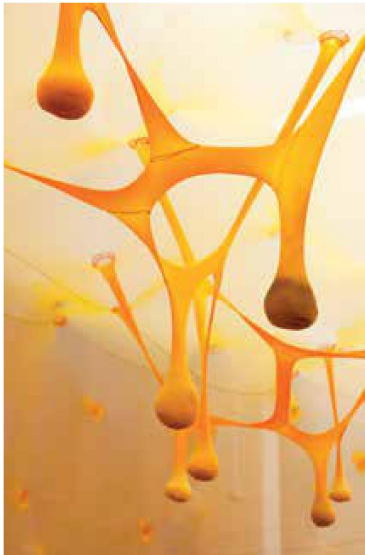


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Date	2016	Artist	Ernesto Neto
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Idyll and Catastrophes

The legacy of Tropicália in the art of Ernesto Neto



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

Thomas Mießgang

“Orange is the color of insanity,” Vincent van Gogh is quoted to have once said. One could defuse this statement a bit and at the same time expand its semantic boundaries: the color of delusion, of psychedelic sensory stimulation, of hallucinatory experience. One might also think of Agent Orange, the chemical that the US used extensively in the Vietnam War to defoliate forests, or the orange overalls of the prisoners in Guantanamo.

Ernesto Neto's 2014 immersive installation *Paxpa - There Is a Forest Encantada Inside of Us* (ill. pp. 58–61, 170–175), however, evokes completely different emotions; the menacing impressions associated with the color orange are present here only on an unconscious level. His airy, transparent tent- or dome-like construction, made of a delicate, stretchable polyamide fabric that exploits the color range between orange and yellow in various graduations, conveys – *encantada!* – a feeling of enchanted warmth and homeyness. *Paxpa - There Is a Forest Encantada Inside of Us* is an ode to the dense, biodiverse primeval forests of the Amazon region of northwestern Brazil. This is the home of the Huni Kuin people, whose everyday life and ritualistic traditions have been a focus of interest for Neto for a number of years.

The color shift from green to orange gives the installation the appearance of a magical forest: from the arches of the domed ceiling hang nylon teardrops, smelling of cloves and ginger and filled with amazonite and quartz: Paleolithic bone structures, bizarrely shaped stalactites, neuronal networks? Affixed to the semi-permeable skin and to the floor of the structures are suction cups, reminiscent of the feet of the *paxpa*, the poison-dart frog native to the Amazon region, and of the mucous glands that keep its skin moist. Ernesto Neto stages an inversion of flora and fauna here, choreographing an interchange between biomorphic and zoomorphic structures and creating a space with an almost sacred atmosphere conducive to contemplation and, with its equally orange floor cushions, to communication as well – much like a *kupixawa*, the common house of the Huni Kuin.

But before one becomes lost in the metaphoric jungle of the idyll that is *Paxpa - There Is a Forest Encantada Inside of Us*, one should bear in mind that there are also completely different theoretical conceptions of nature, among the most radical that of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who categorically states: “Nature doesn't exist!”¹ According to Žižek, what we refer to as nature does not present itself as a consistently existential continuity but as a chaotic succession of catastrophic events. However, people cannot accept this explanation, he says, because they are programmed to repress or deny these kinds of unimaginable occurrences. “What is wrong, I think,” Žižek explained in a lecture in Athens, “is the . . . principal position . . . that there is something like

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'nature,' which we humans, with our hubris, with our will to dominate, disturbed . . . So again what we need is ecology without nature, ecology that accepts this open, imbalanced, denaturalized, if you will, character of nature itself."²

When in his work *Paxpa – There Is a Forest Encantada Inside of Us* Ernesto Neto imagines the idyll against the backdrop of catastrophe³ and evokes the idea that there can be no beauty without danger, he circumvents dogmas and fixed ideologies. In his conception of the artwork as a dispositive of multisensory perception, as a landscape that can be walked through, and as an accessible, touchable texture, he proves himself a legitimate heir to the Tropicália art movement that flowered in the 1960s, in the shadow of the military dictatorship that ruled the country for a matter of decades. Taking as their point of departure a geometrically oriented constructivism in the tradition of De Stijl and Bauhaus, the most important representatives of this group, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, attempted to redefine the relationship between artist, work and recipient: the viewer was to be invited to interact with the work and to participate in creating an unrepeatable aesthetic moment in time. As Lygia Clark said: "The present moment, the now, is the only tangible reality that still communicates something today."⁴

Neo-Concretism and later Tropicalism were intent on liberating art from the reductionist grip of rationalism, science and supposed objectivity, which in the opinion of the movement's proponents permitted only a limited theoretical concept of reality. "We do not conceive of a work of art as a 'machine' or as an 'object,' but as a *quasi-corpus*," the group proclaimed. "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 as such, but . . . in living organisms."⁵



Hélio Oiticica
Tropicália mit / with Penetrável PN2
 und / and *Penetrável PN3*, 1967
 Installationsansicht / Installation view
 Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de
 Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2011

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Among the interactive works that brought about the intellectual and aesthetic shift resulting from the Tropicalistic art rebellion were Lygia Clark's *Bichos*⁶ (ill. pp. 18, 64), which she created between 1960 und 1963. These were small sculptures whose parts were functionally connected with each other and movable. No less important were the *Parangolés* (ill. pp. 20, 21, 62) that Hélio Oiticica began making in 1964, splendidly colored capes inspired by the dancers of Mangueira's famous samba school,⁷ and above all his 1967 installation *Tropicália* (ill. p. 63), which gave the entire movement its name. This was an immersive multiple made of partitions (*penetráveis*), sand and gravel, tropical plants, living parrots and a television set broadcasting local programs unrelated to the artwork. It was above all this emblematic work that anticipated much of what would later come to full fruition in the art of Ernesto Neto: an aesthetic creative drive that manifests itself as art space/spatial art, and which can achieve the sacred epiphany only in interaction with "living organisms," be it visitors or parrots. The resulting "holy moment" is a sensuous, profound experience in which the sense of sight, which conventionally holds a privileged position in the visual arts, is augmented through hearing, touching and smelling. Oiticica's work is not merely a sardonic commentary on the TV dictatorship of the Brazilian military, which used television as an instrument of power, but also a tropical "tap and touch cinema," a carnival of the animals and a multifarious environment that takes up and transforms favela architecture and translates the stylized tropical landscapes of the modernist painter Tarsila do Amaral from the 1920s (ill. p. 12) into a three-dimensional brochure. "We do not preach abstract thought, but communicate live thoughts," wrote Oiticica in one of his many manifesto-like texts. "In Brazil today, in order to have an active cultural



Ernesto Neto
*O Bicho SusPenso
 Na PaisaGen*, 2011
 Installationsansicht /
 Installation view
 Estação Leopoldina,
 Rio de Janeiro, 2012

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Ernesto Neto
Variation on Color Seed Space Time Love,
 2009
 Installationsansicht / Installation view
 Gallery Bob van Orsouw, Zürich / Zurich,
 2009

position which counts, one must be against, viscerally against, everything which could be, in sum, cultural, political, ethical, and social conformity. We live through and from misery and hardship.”⁸

Another Tropicalist was important for the emancipation of the disadvantaged senses in the art of Ernesto Neto as well: in her 1968 *Roda dos Prazeres* (ill. p. 66), Lygia Pape set up bowls of colored, aromatic liquids in a magic circle to create an experimental gustatory arrangement with which one could test and calibrate one’s taste. Neto took up Pape’s idea of expanding the possibilities of sensorially experiencing art and shifted it to the olfactory sphere by suspending stocking-like materials filled with cinnamon, saffron, ground cloves, ginger, turmeric and cumin from the ceiling or placing the spices in sacks.

But Ernesto Neto’s multi-sensory approach to art should also, and above all, be seen in the context of the philosophical concept that inspired and shaped the Tropicália movement from the outset: anthropophagy – literally: cannibalism – as it was put forth as a literary and philosophical trope in the 1920s by Oswald de Andrade. In his “Manifesto Antropófago” (ill. p. 13) the modernist poet introduced the figure of the “mauvais sauvage,” a rebellious and aggressive Indian who violently resists colonization attempts and thus practices a form of individual, chaotic self-empowerment. For de Andrade there was no essentialist vision of a politically and socially united nation under the scepter of Portuguese rulers, but rather only a dynamic and conflict-laden process of critically assimilating various cultural and political influences. From a historical perspective, the “Manifesto Antropófago” draws on the tradition of the Tupinambá Indians, who are said to have ritualistically devoured vanquished enemies in order to acquire their physical and spiritual powers. “Cannibalism. Absorption of the sacred enemy,” as de Andrade wrote in his manifesto.⁹

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Tropicália dusted off the idea of metaphorical anthropophagy and turned it into a concept of cultural cannibalism that would help develop a hybrid post-colonial identity/alterity. Simultaneously, the movement strove to circumvent the orthodoxies and command structures of the dictatorial military regime and artistically anticipate a “different place” as a social heterotopia. In the works attributed to the Tropicália movement, motifs of Pop art were appropriated and permuted, experimental Body art was “Brazilianized,” literary forms in concrete poetry were brought to implosion, *musique-concrète* clichés were recast in rock-and-roll contexts and psychedelic soundscapes were fused together with baroque trumpets and string quartets to make a sort of “Sergeant Pepper” under palms.¹⁰

Ernesto Neto’s Neo-Tropicalistic appropriation of anthropophagic cultural theory and practice, which took place years later under completely different political circumstances, functioned according to the inversion principle: while the Tropicália movement of the 1960s directed their “cannibalization” at foreign cultures, particularly those of the colonial powers, Neto constructs archaic scenarios that recall stalactite-spiked Paleolithic caves and primitive monsters. One enters these biomorphic or zoomorphic assemblages as one would a strange and alien world; one is sucked in, “devoured,” so to speak, and becomes one with an inner landscape of dreams and traumas. It is fitting in this regard that in the *Story of the Cipó*, a myth of the Huni Kuin people whom Neto so admires, the anthropophagic world view proclaimed by Oswald de Andrade is turned on its head: in this legend, an Indian hunter falls in love with a snake woman who lures him into her world and bears him three children. He lives many years in the realm of the snakes, but longing and homesickness ultimately drive him back to his original life. As he sets off hunting one day, he happens upon his youngest child, the snake son: “[The son] called out, ‘Siri, siri, siri,’ and while doing so devoured his father’s toes. Then his elder son came and while he devoured his father’s thighs, his daughter arrived and swallowed his hips.”¹¹

This myth is one of the streams of consciousness that flows through the conceptual canal system of Ernesto Neto’s more recent works. While the Tropicália movement was above all concerned with assimilating the cultural artifacts of the “big Other,” this indigenous inhabitant of the primeval forests, this Huni Kuin tribesman, throws himself at the mercy of the sorcery of nature and is eaten up by it, in the form of his own (snake) children. He does not devour but rather is himself devoured by snakes, *in girum imus nocte* . . .

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One certainly does no injustice to Ernesto Neto's artistic works, which are fundamentally entwined with the fantastic scenarios of the indigenous Amazon people, when one interprets their multi-sensory, convoluted aesthetic as at least an implicit criticism of the destruction of nature through the capitalistic exploitation of the world. This is a nature in a state of chaos, nature run wild, as it were, which Neto, particularly in works such as *Paxpa – There Is a Forest Encantada Inside of Us*, contrasts with the existential richness of the Huni Kuin people as a still reasonably intact residual space. Thus his art, which some have accused of being as effortlessly consumable as a cloud of perfume, is at its core a demiurgic instrument that hints at a *horror vacui* behind all of the beauty. Neto is a concretist who believes in signs, in instruments and in the stars. He is for road maps and against ideas and other paralyses. Or, to quote Paulo Herkenhoff: "In Cartesian space, the baroque, Leibnizian fold is installed as 'fleshless skin.'"¹²

- 1 See Slavoj Žižek in conversation with Barbara Nolte, "Studenten haben meistens keine Ahnung," in *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 12, 2013, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/weltspiegel/sonntag/slavoj-izek-studenten-haben-meistens-keine-ahnung/8628378.html> (accessed May 27, 2015).
- 2 John R. Ehrenfeld, "'Nature' Doesn't Exist," Says Slavoj Žižek," <http://www.johnehrenfeld.com/2011/11/nature-doesnt-exist-says-slavo.html> (accessed May 27, 2015).
- 3 The curator Paulo Herkenhoff, for example, wrote of Ernesto Neto's installation *Léviathan Thot* (ill. p. 90), which was shown for the first time at the Panthéon in Paris in 2006: "Leviathan is a *Moloch* that demands sacrifices. Neto deplores the pitiful crowd of anonymous people 'overwhelmed by the abstract power that we have invented ourselves.'" Paulo Herkenhoff, "Léviathan Thot: A Politics of the Plumb," in *Parkett*, No. 78, 2006, p. 133.
- 4 Luciano Figueiredo (ed.), *Lygia Clark. Hélio Oiticica: Cartas (1964–1974)*, Rio de Janeiro 1998, p. 59.
- 5 Quoted in Raphaela Platow, "Ernesto Neto: El cuerpo que me lleva / Ernesto Neto: The Body that Carries Me," in Petra Joos (ed.), *Ernesto Neto: El cuerpo que me lleva / Ernesto Neto: The Body that Carries Me*, exh. cat. Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, Barcelona 2014, p. 33.
- 6 The title of Ernesto Neto's 2012 work *O Bicho SusPenso Na PaisaGen* (ill. p. 65), a monumental hanging sculpture in Rio de Janeiro's Leopoldina railway station, is a direct reference to Lygia Clark.
- 7 Hélio Oiticica named these multicolored fabric assemblages, which are loosely derived from carnival costumes, after a slang expression used in Rio de Janeiro to describe a spontaneous and sudden event that inspires joy – a kind of transcendental moment, an epiphany. According to the artist's instructions for use, the *Parangolés* require direct physical participation: "They virtually beg the body to move, to dance."
- 8 Hélio Oiticica, "Esquema geral da Nova Objetividade," Rio de Janeiro 1967; in Susanne Gaensheimer/Peter Gorschlüter/Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz/César Oiticica Filho (eds.), *Hélio Oiticica. The Great Labyrinth*, exh. cat. MMK – Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt a. M., Ostfildern 2013, p. 212.
- 9 Oswald de Andrade, "Cannibal Manifesto" (trans. Leslie Bary), in *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 19, No. 38, 1991, pp. 38–47.
- 10 "The idea of cultural cannibalism fitted us, the Tropicalists, like a glove. We were 'eating' the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix," wrote Caetano Veloso in his autobiography. Caetano Veloso, *tropical truth. a story of music & revolution in brazil*, New York 2003, p. 156.
- 11 "The Story of the Cipó (Huni). Jiboia Meets the Earthly Medicine Man Dua Bussin," in Oliver Kornhoff (ed.), *Ernesto Neto. Haux Haux*, exh. cat. Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen, Cologne 2014, p. 127.
- 12 Herkenhoff 2006; as note 3, p. 131.