

Title	Here and there, the body as mediator of Brazilian culture	Author	Ernesto Neto
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Here and there, the body as mediator of Brazilian culture

"Just arrived at Copenhagen airport," I wrote in my notebook while standing in the parallel universe of Europe, ready to start jotting down the first ideas for this text. "Incredible. A wealthy, balanced, Social-Democrat Europe." For us miscegenated Brazilians, a sub-event of European civilization, the scene was difficult to grasp. Everything worked well; the architecture was fascinating and practical; all was very peaceful and well-finished. From Customs to the train, everything was mediated through diagrams, through architecture and through machines. The large number of people waiting calmly at the airport respected the demarcation provided by a straight black granite path that allowed space for those arriving to leave, with no need for handrails, security stripes or steps. Nothing but information, order, and architecture organized the space.

In Brazil, when we arrive at an airport, we find a confusion of bodies: in the immigration line, filling out the Customs' paperwork, visiting the Duty Free shops. Sometimes there are even mulatas¹ and music. At the exit, a small crowd of bodies offers cabs, money-exchange, help. Everything happens with a mixture of gentleness and systemic deception, taking advantage now and losing a great deal in the long-run.

But in Europe, everything is so much in its place that one feels one can no longer stand it, and even that wonderful industrial design becomes tiring. Everything seems to be ruled by practical reason. A socio-mental artificiality mediates relations. Almost every door opens by itself. There's no need for any bodily effort. In the face of such reality, and when passing through other places that stimulated certain ideas and historical conclusions, I took this time to think about Brazilian modernism.

Much has been said about the rupture brought about by Neo-concretism, about the relationship between Brazilian Concretism and the country's development during the 1950s – when Brazil made a clear choice toward modernity and industrialization. Concretism and its mental geometry affirmed a constructive stance. Architecture would make its major contribution to the historical and political progress of Brazil with the construction of Brasília. The country had a project, a campaign for development that promised the nation a wonderful future. Nonetheless, there was something wrong. This constructive utopia failed to bring along with it a social utopian radiance. In truth, people were being called as a mere workforce, as physical or administrative man- power. If you're not part of the social contract you cannot enjoy citizenship. And when one isn't part of the whole, the only thing left is subjectivity. In the face of such an evolutionary but elitist situation, the average citizen withdrew to the subjectivity of his/her ignored desire for participation.

Thus began – not in a politically conscious way, but in a symptomatic manner – the Neo-concrete rupture. The Neo-concrete artists 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

¹ Mulatto women; for many, the stereotypical image of a supposed Brazilian sensuality. (T.N)

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or an ideology favoring the integration of the individual into the social system and a functional architecture that promoted a social urbanism. The Brazilian model was elitist. It wanted the façade, not the content.

When human beings are collectively robbed of their participation in the architecture of the social contract, they lose their potency as citizens. Placed at the margins of objective national politics, all that is left for them is their own bodies. Black people from Rio de Janeiro (long since excluded from the national system) organized *escolas de samba*,² forming a utopian parallel civilization. Poor people worked during the day, often in underpaid menial jobs, and met at night in these socially organized gatherings, where they collectively expressed their subjectivity through singing and dancing: manifestations of the body. During the 1960s, these manifestations expanded with the participation of a middle class who no longer believed in the national project. What did an *escola de samba* represent, especially at that time, when the culture of spectacle wasn't yet dominant? It was the subversive answer to the rationalist status quo. Maximum subjectivity. Just as black slaves culturally survived through capoeira, *candomblé*, *atabaque*, *batucada*, *oxalá*,³ those denied collective participation in the social contract developed their own collective body by dancing samba at night. The *escola de samba* mixed and united misfits who were outside Western Modernism.

The artistic icons Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica blazed a similar path – a Post-Neo-concretism. It isn't by chance that before inaugurating Brazilian postmodernity with his Tropicalist Post-Pop-Neo-concretism, Oiticica went to the favela on Mangueira Hill and became a samba dancer and performer. The body in frenzy. Clark, meanwhile, left modernity behind with her relational objects, turning the body inside-out, introspecting her own subjectivity in the Other's psyche. From the body to the body.

This may be our truth and our tragedy; perhaps our beauty. In the face of a modernism that excluded the citizen, in face of this deformation of our social contract, we live in a kind of social anarchy under the shield of the body, for better or for worse.

² Samba Schools; popular club or dancing communities devoted to the practice of samba, an African-Brazilian rhythm, and traditionally associated with a particular neighborhood, often favelas. (T.N)

³ Manifestations of Afro-Brazilian culture and religions. (T.N)