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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
Department of Art History & Archaeology

O CORPO DO BRASIL:
THE ROLE OF THE BRAZILIAN BODY IN THE ART OF ERNESTO NETO

By Samantha Elizabeth Wilson

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts

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Introduction

Now we know that, despite our power over nature, we are part of it and we depend on it. Despite belonging to different nations, different cultures, in the end we are all the same, and have the same fears. At least, we live on the same planet. The fact is that we can't escape our body. That's all we have – our body changing over our lifetime. And the beauty of our body and our living is our relationship to other people, to nature and to infinity... I want an art that can connect us alone to a kind of spiritual place where we can breathe an idea of infinity, totality, where we can have a continuity between us and the universe. Also I want an art that will connect us to the other, that will help us interact with other people, that will show us the limit. But this limit between you and me is not a wall; it's a place of sensations, a place of exchange and continuity between people, a skin of existence and relationships.

- Ernesto Neto¹

Contemporary Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto is best known for his sensuous and sensual sculptural installations using nylon-stocking material, which is stretched to form structures or canopies from which hang pendulous tubes filled with sand, spice, styrofoam pellets or metal balls (Fig. 1). These artworks cause a physical response and engage the senses of sight, touch, and smell as the participant walks through or into these room-sized installations, manipulates the dangling sacks full of aromatic spices, and plunges hands and arms into the squishy innards of the sculpture. The viewer is (re)discovers his or her own body while experiencing the surrounding world of the installation. The phenomenological bodily activation present in Neto's artworks can be traced to a deep-seated Brazilian tradition, which highly values the body. Neto navigates between his universalizing desire to awaken the viewer to his or her bodily sensations and the very specific Brazilian influences and materials that shape his work. He reinforces the notion that across cultural, national, racial and ethnic identifications "in the end we are all the same," and what we all have in common is our placement on this planet and in our

¹ Ernesto Neto as quoted in *The Venice Biennale: 49th International Exhibition: Plateau of Humankind*, eds. Harald Szeemann and Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, (Milan: Electa, 2001), 180.

body.² By manipulating the experience of the body through his installations, Neto is able to affect each participant and remind him or her of the universality of the physical body through the activation of all five senses.

Neto's installations from the late 1990s to the present explore ideas about the body in complementary discourses: the metaphorical body of the artwork is the location of the process of cannibalism or anthropophagy [*antropofagia*], in which multiple cultures and histories are incorporated into one Brazilian national identity. The body of the viewer, in phenomenological terms, is the locus of sensorial stimulation and self-knowledge through experience. Neto's installations demand both a physical and multi-sensory engagement on the part of the participant because he or she must literally touch, caress, smell, and walk through, over and around his installations over a period of time. Because of the insistence on the body as the location of sensory experience and the interest in the temporal dimension of sensation, I use the phenomenological theories of Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961) as a framework throughout this thesis.³ Bergson's concept of *durée* was that it was only over a period of

² Ernesto Neto as quoted in *The Venice Biennale*, eds. Szeemann and Lavelli, 180.

³ The phenomenological theories of Bergson and Merleau-Ponty played an important role in the Neoconcrete art of the 1960s, and art critic Mário Pedrosa introduced Merleau-Ponty's writing into the Brazilian art world as early as the late 1940s. Additionally, Ferreira Gullar's *Manifesto Neoconcretismo* (1959) mentions Merleau-Ponty as a theorist sympathetic to the movement, and artist Hélio Oiticica quotes Bergson at length in his journals from this period. When phenomenology was taken up by the Neoconcrete artists they used the activated body of the participant as a means to combat the highly restrictive military regime that was in control of Brazil from 1964 to 1985. Thus the emancipating or freeing phenomenological experience had political ends for the Neoconcretists. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 60; Ferreira Gullar, "Neo-Concrete Manifesto," in *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, trans. Dawn Ades, ed. Patrick Frank (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 174; Mari Carmen Ramirez, Luciano Figueiredo, and Wynne Phelan, eds., *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 190; Yve-Alain Bois, ed., *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps De Cisneros Collection*, [Abstracción Geométrica: Arte Latinoamericano en la Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), 88; Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: The First Vargas Regime, 1930 – 1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 163 – 164; Ignacy Sachs, Jorge Wilhelm, and Saulo Sergio de M. S. Pinheiro, eds., *Brazil: A Century of Change* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press,

sustained interaction and experience that an object could be known. This thread of phenomenology moves through my discussion of three of Neto's installations around which each chapter is formed.

Through a close reading of the *Naves* series (1997 - present) I look at the history of anthropophagy and *mulatismo* in Brazil and the phenomenological experience of time (Fig. 2). Then I shift to issues of the activated phenomenological body and the Neoconcrete movement in relation to Neto's artwork *While Nothing Happens* (2008) (Fig. 3). I conclude with a discussion of his installation *Leviathan Thot* (2006) and explore the sexual and gender implications of this project in relation to Brazilian *carnaval* (Fig. 4). Through these close readings and by investigating the complexities and multiple uses of the body in Brazilian artistic movements of the twentieth century, I intend to demonstrate that Neto's work is specifically grounded in a Brazilian tradition while engaging with global themes in contemporary art.

The subjects of anthropophagy, phenomenology, and sexuality are mentioned repeatedly in the literature on Neto, and are recognized and recurrent themes in his work. However, none of these forums has thus far proven able to provide a longer, more dedicated investigation into the meanings and reasons behind Neto's evocation of bodily elements, literally and metaphorically, in his installations. In this MA thesis I will address these more deeply imbedded cultural and historical references and explore the ways in which Neto's installations, which touch a contemporary global audience, are informed through a very particular Brazilian history and aesthetic, and his own *brasilidade*, or

2009), 123; Luiz Camillo Osorio, "Lygia Pape: Experimentation and Resistance," *Third Text* 20, no. 5 (September 2006): 575; Edward J. Sullivan, ed. *Brazil: Body & Soul*, edited by Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 14.

Brazilian identity. This construction of a more fluid identity between global and local is precisely where post-colonial theory places the Brazilian identity. Brazilian cultural critic Suely Rolnik describes moving beyond a rigid definition of identity, and instead proposes that we “detach... from the identity-figurative principle in the construction of an ‘at home.’” She urges that instead we create “an ‘at home’ made of partial, unique, provisional, fluctuating totalities, in a series of constant becomings, that each one (individual or group) constructs using the currents that touch its body....”⁴ The “at home” to which Rolnik refers is her notion of the nation-state and the identity that one forms through identifying oneself as a part of that nation. In Brazil this process of “becoming” starts with the notion of cultural cannibalism.

Antropofagia, or cannibalism, has a long history in Brazilian culture and is traceable to the Tupinamba Amerindians, or Tupi, who populated the vast South American continent before the European “discovery.” After battle, the Tupi ate enemy warriors that they had captured, and they believed that this ingestion fortified them with the strength, courage, and virtue demonstrated by that person.⁵ The practice of cannibalism eventually died out as the indigenous populations dwindled, but the metaphor of anthropophagy has been raised repeatedly in the twentieth century as Brazil struggled to define itself as a nation in the modern world by culturally devouring European, African, and indigenous influences to make a modern nation.⁶

⁴ Suely Rolnik, “Beyond the Identity Principle: The Anthropophagy Formula,” *Parkett* 55 (1999): 190.

⁵ While European colonizers roundly disapproved of cannibalism, the Christian belief in the transubstantiation performed in the Eucharist serves a similar function as followers symbolically eat the flesh and blood of Christ when taking Communion. Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, *Brazilian Cinema* (Rutherford London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 83.

⁶ This trope was first employed by the Modern or Anthropophagist movement, led by writer Oswald de Andrade, author of the *Cannibalist Manifesto* [*Manifesto Antropófago*] (1928), and later by the

It was through this cultural hybridization that the Brazilian body, both literally and metaphorically, was formed in the twentieth century, the result of which is a *mulato*, or mixed, society. Rich and poor, black and white, Catholic and African Yorùbá religions together make up the fabric of the nation. Through this perpetual construction and cultural cannibalism, Brazil was able to incorporate disparate influences into *brasilidade*. However, this amalgamation does not obliterate the cultural and racial differences, but rather keeps these multiples discrete despite being in one body.

There is also a portion of the Brazilian identity that is formed by an interest in the physical, sexual body. As anthropologist Richard Parker observes: “Indeed, Brazilians view themselves as sensual beings not simply in terms of their individuality (though this too is important), but at a social or cultural level – as sensual individuals, at least in part, by virtue of their shared *brasilidade*, or Brazilianness.”⁷ An elision takes place between the body politic of the Brazilian people and the sensual body in this construction of *brasilidade*.⁸ Similarly, Neto’s installations awaken the sensuous body and engage with the very Brazilian tropes of cannibalism and *mulatismo*.

Ernesto Neto was born in 1964 in Rio de Janeiro, which remains his primary residence. He came of age after the military coup of 1964 and under the extreme censoring laws known as the AI-5 regulations, which limited freedom of the press and

Neoconcrete and Tropicalist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. John King, ed., *On Modern Latin American Fiction* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1989), 42; Oswald de Andrade, “Cannibalist Manifesto,” originally published as “Manifesto Antropófago,” *Revista de Antropofagia* 1, May 1928. Reprinted in English in *Latin American Literary Review* XIX, 38, trans. Leslie Bary, 38.

⁷ Richard G. Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 7.

⁸ Carmen Nava and Ludwig Lauerhass, eds., *Brazil in the Making: Facets of National Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 145.

speech, closed the legislature, and led to the capture, torture, murder or exile of thousands of opposition forces as well as artists, musicians, and intellectuals. This regime remained in power until 1985 and left the country in economic and political difficulty. He was fortunate to have been born into a family of some means; in 1982 he followed his father's footsteps and began studying engineering at the university in Rio de Janeiro.⁹ However Neto dropped out after a semester and began taking courses at the Museu de Arte Moderna [Museum of Modern Art] and later at the prestigious Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage [School of Visual Arts of Parque Lage] from which he graduated in 1987.¹⁰ Neto's first show was at the Petite Galerie in Rio in 1988.¹¹ It would be another nine years before he came to international attention after his first solo show at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York in 1997.

Neto claims that growing up during the military dictatorship has had an "X-ray effect" on his artwork, and he directly states that members of his generation of artists felt that

...you can't hide anything as [a] symbolical antidote to the corruption that was flooding every sphere of our society. We also believed that it was more than urgent to rethink our history in an autonomous way, neither copying nor replicating models and methods from the First World. These concerns were reflected also in our works, in our obsession with balance, transparency, with clear relations and an intention to mentally, and especially physically, involve our public.¹²

⁹ Lisa Delgado, "Under the Skin: Artist Ernesto Neto Builds a Creature at the Armory," *The Architects Newspaper* (May 13, 2009).

¹⁰ Dan Horch, "In the Studio: Ernesto Neto," *Art + Auction* (May, 2008): 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ernesto Neto as quoted in *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, ed. Dobrila Denegri, (Milan: Electa, 2008), 11.

Neto's sculptures from this early period of his work reflect this desire for transparency, and he adopts a minimalist aesthetic that shows off the rawness of his materials. It is through juxtapositions of hard and soft, dark and light, inviting and inhibiting objects that Neto creates visual tension in his artworks from the late 1980s through the early 1990s.

Neto's first sculptural series, *BarBall* (1987), consisted of rubber and iron held in precarious balance (Fig. 5). These forms seem to take inspiration from the Concrete Artists of the 1950s in Brazil, who also engaged with industrial objects and minimalist forms. In 1988 Neto's work changed significantly, and he began experimenting with nylon stockings, first filling them with different weights of buckshot (Fig. 6). The color of these sculptures depended on the color of the nylon he used, and the diameter of the circular pool that was formed by placing the filled nylon tubes on the ground varied by the weight of the metal pellets inside. In each of these, the tube was rolled down to create a circular lip through which the raw inner material was visible. These were titled on the basis of weight and size: *Peso*, the smallest and a measure of weight, *Passo*, larger in size and denoting a unit of length, *Dupla* [Couple], which was two *Pesos* connected by nylon, or *Colonia* [Colony], which was any number of *Passos* and *Pesos* in an exhibition space.¹³ During the late 1980s and early 1990s Neto exhibited these artworks in galleries in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, including a solo show at the Museu de Arte Moderna [Museum of Modern Art] in São Paulo in 1992. When asked about the significance of the *Colonias* series Neto states:

¹³ Other members of this family of sculptures were *Prumos* [Plumbs], *Pedras* [Rocks], *Cópulas* [Copulations], and *Familias* [Families]. For a longer discussion of this period of Neto's work see *Ernesto Neto: Eighteenineeight...*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (São Paulo: Galleria Camargo Vilaça, 1998).

One of the most important things in my work is the continuity of touch. In the *Colonias*, the structure-body happens from the very first touch between the elements, thanks to their interaction. The properties of weight, texture, elasticity, etc., are expressed in an intimate manner. Thus, it is not necessary to touch the work, since this touch already exists in the visual sphere.¹⁴

These artworks are important in Neto's oeuvre not only because they are the first example of sculptures created with nylon that is filled with different materials, but also because they are the first instance of his artworks that are malleable and emphasize the process of touching. This is in contrast to his earlier *BarBall* series, which make the viewer feel uneasy about the prospect of knocking them over. Sculptures in the *Colonias* series are not meant to be handled by viewers, but they give the visual impression that they would be enjoyable to manipulate.

In 1995 Neto began his *Lipsoid* sculptures – nylon filled with white powder, either whitewash or flour – which were dropped onto the gallery floor from various heights to create a splattered ring around the sack as the powder penetrated the porous material upon impact. In 1996, Neto exhibited sculptures including various colored spices similar to the *Lipsoid* figure, but with onomatopoeic titles such as *Piff*, *Paff*, *Puff* and *Poff* for his first solo show in New York, which was held at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (Fig. 7). Since his first spice pieces, Neto has created several artworks and installations involving spices and herbs including cumin, chili powder, cloves, black pepper, turmeric, lavender, ginger and the Brazilian spice annatto.¹⁵

¹⁴ Elena Fabeiro, Miguel Fernandez-Cid, Cecilia Pereira, eds., *Ernesto Neto: O Corpo, Nu Tempo* (Santiago de Compostela, Spain: Xunta de Galicia Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 2001), 80.

¹⁵ Other sculptures and installations containing spices include: *We fishing the line* (Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Arts, 1999), *A Maximum Minimum Time Space Between Us and the Parsimonious Universe* (Matrix/190, 2000), *Ó Bicho!* [Animal] (49th Biennale di Venezia, 2001), *Just Like Drops in Time, Nothing...* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia, 2002), *Dropin Fly* (Hirshhorn Museum and

In the late 1990s Neto began his *Naves* series, which continues to the present.¹⁶

These room-like structures are created from the same nylon that he employed in his spice sculptures, but this time pulled into flat scrims that form chambers into which the visitor enters. The participant steps through narrow slits cut in the tightly stretched lycra, and the enveloping space leads to a feeling that one has been swallowed by the sculpture itself, and the curvaceous interior space has a womb-like quality of comfort and ease. However, one must always leave these installations and be ‘reborn’ into the harsh light and rigid forms of the gallery space. Neto’s installations engage with the Brazilian theme of anthropophagy through this process of ingestion, gestation and birth.

During the mid- and late-1990s Neto’s career reached the world stage, and he participated in several group shows not only in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, but also in Italy, Columbia, the United States, Austria, Venezuela, and Canada. He was Brazil’s representative to the first Kwangju Biennial held in South Korea in 1995, and mounted solo shows in Chicago, Santa Monica, and Madrid in 1996.¹⁷ Neto reached an even larger world audience as Brazil’s representative for the 24th *Bienal Internacional de São Paulo* and *Sydney Biennial* in 1998 and the 49th *Biennale di Venezia* in 2001.

Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., 2002), and *Mother Body Emotional Densities, for Alive Temple Time Baby Son* (Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2007).

¹⁶ One of the first in this series, *Nave Deusa* [Goddess Nave] (1998), was Neto’s entry for the 1998 São Paulo Biennial. For more information on the *Naves* series see Adriano Pedrosa, ed., *Ernesto Neto: Naves, Skies Dreams* [Ernesto Neto: Naves, Céus, Sonhos] (Sao Paulo: Galeria Camargo Vilaça, 1999) and Dan Cameron and Katya Garcia-Anton, eds., *Ernesto Neto* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2000).

¹⁷ *L’Educazione Dei Cinque Sensi* [The Education of the Five Senses], Palazzo Pamphili (Rome, 1995), *Suenos Concretos* [Concrete Dreams], Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango (Bogotá, 1995), *Country Code*, Bravin Post Lee Gallery and *The Five Senses*, White Columns (New York, 1995), *Kunstbrau, Next*, Internationales Projekt Für Bildende Kunst, Verin Für Bildende Kunst (Graz, Austria, 1995), *Sin Fronteras/Arte Latinoamericano Actual* [Without Frontiers/Current Latin American Art], Museo Alejandro Otero (Caracas, 1996), Mercer Union Center, Toronto and Sayde Branfman Center, Montreal (1996), *Beyond the Border*, Kwangju (now Gwangju) International Biennale, South Korea (1995). Zolla/Lieberman Gallery (Chicago), Christopher Grimes Gallery (Santa Monica), and Elba Benitez Galeria (Madrid).

Neto emerged at a time when Brazilian art more generally was garnering greater attention. Hélio Oiticica (1937 – 1980) and Lygia Clark (1920 – 1988), who were known within Brazil and avant-garde circles in London, Paris, and New York in the 1960s and 1970s, reached a wide international audience as late as the 1990s and 2000s through various exhibitions and retrospectives.¹⁸ Brazilian art exploded onto the global scene in 2000 when the enormous exhibition *Brasil + 500: Mostra do Re-descobrimento* brought together more than 15,000 objects covering half a millennium and ranging from archeological objects of indigenous origin to Baroque *ex votos* to contemporary artworks. Over 1.9 million people visited the show during its installation in Parque Ibirapuera in São Paulo and over a dozen catalogues accompanied the project. The objects traveled, at least in part, to eighteen venues worldwide under various titles.¹⁹ Moreover, during the last thirty years, a contemporary art scene in Brazil was also emerging after the military

¹⁸ Clark and Oiticica both fled from the military government in Brazil after the AI-5 laws of 1968 were passed. Oiticica moved to London in 1969 and his installation *The Whitechapel Experiment/Experience: Eden* was at the Whitechapel Gallery that year. In 1970 he was the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship and moved to New York. He was also included in the *Information* exhibition of conceptual art held that year at the Museum of Modern Art (NYC), and he remained in New York until 1978 before returning to Rio de Janeiro where he died in 1980. Similarly, Clark was in Paris from 1968 – 1976 where she taught at the Sorbonne and continued producing work. She was Brazil's representative at the *1968 Venice Biennale* and then did not display any artworks until 1986. She eventually returned to Rio de Janeiro where she died in 1988. Oiticica and Clark had a shared retrospective in 1986 and 1987 in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and have also both been featured in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1993), *Documenta X* (Kassel, Germany, 1997), *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Lygia Clark, Gego, Mathias Goeritz, Hélio Oiticica, and Mira Schendel* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2000), *Brazil: Body & Soul* (Guggenheim Museum, New York and Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, 2001), *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 2001), *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004), and *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2005 and Bronx Museum of Art, New York, 2006). Oiticica's work has also had a number of solo retrospectives most notably *Hélio Oiticica* (Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis and Gallery Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1992 – 1994) and *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color* (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Tate Modern, London, 2007). Clark has been a part of several group shows including *Ultramodern: The Art of Contemporary Brazil* (The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., 1993) and *Virgin Territory: Women, Gender, and History in Contemporary Brazilian Art* (National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D. C., 2001).

¹⁹ Most notable of all these traveling shows is perhaps the blockbuster exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York entitled *Brazil: Body & Soul*, which displayed an impressive 350 of these objects.

government relinquished power in 1985 after over twenty years of dictatorship. As critic Alisa Tager stated in *Art in America* in 1994: "...the Brazilian art scene is strikingly energetic, extending wide-ranging art historical traditions. The nation's economic and political torpor has inevitably affected the art market, yet many exciting young artists are emerging whose paintings, sculpture, objects, and installations embrace both visual poetry and theoretical concerns."²⁰

Contemporary Art and Globalization

Contemporary art discourses cluster around concepts such as globalization, the body, identity, and various forms of hybridity; these have been the organizing principles behind various international biennials and exhibits in the past thirty years.²¹ In this period of rapid transportation and still faster communication, improved access to technology – and, therefore, to each other – has made for an ever diminishing art world. In the case of “developing” regions like much of Latin America and formerly colonized countries like Brazil, technology's effects are seen in the increased exposure both twentieth century and contemporary Brazilian artists are receiving domestically and internationally. Globalization, which is the inclusion of many nations in economic and cultural exchange, has had a tremendous impact on the ways in which contemporary art is both produced and seen.

²⁰ Alisa Tager, “Report from Brazil: Paradoxes and Transfigurations,” *Art in America* 82, (July, 1994): 45.

²¹ For example, themes of recent biennials are “Identity” (Venice, 1995), “Anthropophagy” (São Paulo, 1998), “Créolité and Creolization” (3rd Platform, Documenta XI, 2002), and “In Living Contact” (São Paulo, 2008). Also see Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), which includes chapters entitled “The Art World Expands: Globalization,” “the Body,” “Time,” and “Place,” and Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), which includes sections entitled “Markets: Global/Local,” “Countercurrents: South/North,” and “Contemporaneity: Times/Places.”

Globalization has been addressed by artists in the formal content of their artworks as well as through their choice of medium and materials over the past thirty years. While a topic of intense interest at the moment, globalization is by no means a new phenomenon, as intricate webs of trading routes and immigration flows are present throughout history.²² Cultural theorist Stuart Hall distinguishes what he calls the first period of globalization as “one which has been dominated by the nation-state, national economies, [and] national cultural identities” all of which were formed during the period of European colonialism and the subsequent period following independence during which time new nation-states were formed.²³

However, Hall believes that a new kind of globalization is present that is concerned with what he calls “global mass culture,” a type of globalization which cultural theorist Fredric Jameson claims is a “communicational concept.”²⁴ This mass culture is possible at this time because of technology, which is novel and has facilitated the rapid increases in the speed and frequency with which global networks operate. Improved communication has led to greater access to information and increased contact between diverse people and places. As Hall and Jameson describe, there is a dual response to this phenomenon: On one hand, there is a deep fear of homogenization and standardization, and on the other hand, there is the utopian ideal of celebrating and accepting difference,

²² Fredric Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 54.

²³ Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 27.

²⁴ Hall, “The Local and the Global,” 27; Jameson, “Notes on Globalization,” 55.

as “all the cultures around the world are placed in tolerant contact with each other in a kind of immense cultural pluralism.”²⁵

As usual, the reality of globalization is a mixture of these two extremes. Hall posits that this type of homogenization is never truly completed and does not have the intent to destroy or crush local difference. Rather, through a process of absorption these local differences become a part of the larger project of globalization. As Hall states, “...at a certain point, globalization cannot proceed without learning to live with and work through difference.”²⁶ In this way Hall brings forth the paired notions of global and local which he states are “the two faces of the same movement.”²⁷ Moving through both of these channels is what shapes globalization.

Latin American cultural critic Gerardo Mosquera observes that many contemporary artists working in non-American or European centers of production such as South America, India, and Africa take on both the local and the global in their artwork.²⁸ Philosopher Noël Carroll adds, “The emerging transnational institution of art strives, though perhaps not always successfully, to cultivate a cosmopolitan appreciation of the local within the context of a conversation that is intelligible, due to the preceding factors, to participants in far-flung regions around the world.”²⁹

²⁵ Jameson, “Notes on Globalization,” 55 – 56.

²⁶ Hall, “The Local and the Global,” 31.

²⁷ Hall, “The Local and the Global,” 27.

²⁸ Mosquera, “Spheres, Cities, Transitions,” 85.

²⁹ Noël Carroll, “Art and Globalization: Then and Now,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (2007): 141.

One technique employed by many contemporary artists to navigate between the local and the global is installation art. This type of art subverts the easy display and reproducibility of media such as photography, projection, and video art and does not create discrete objects. Additionally, installation art addresses the schizophrenia of the fractured and de-centered modern world through its effect on the body of the viewer and the subsequent re-grounding that one experiences. The participation of the viewer presents a unique experience of the artwork and demands a full-bodied phenomenological activation rather than the passive viewing associated with the appreciation of painting or sculpture. This genre of artwork speaks to both local and global concerns in that its site specificity draws attention to the local while the engagement of the viewer and his or her physical body taps into the universal corporeality of humankind.

Nevertheless, this view of globalization is decidedly European and U. S.-centered, and does not take into account those in non-privileged positions. Historian Bill Ashcroft addresses this in his theory of “post-colonial transformation,” in which he explores “the resilience, adaptability and inventiveness of post-colonial societies, which may, if we consider their experiences as models for resistance, give us insight into the operation of local engagements with global culture.”³⁰ In order to better understand the current conditions, Ashcroft examines the manner by which the local is used to subvert the global and resist homogenization and Westernization. He writes: “Whereas ‘development’ acts to force the local into globally normative patterns, ‘transformation’ acts to adjust those patterns to the requirements of local values and needs.”³¹ Thus, as Ashcroft concludes, the reality of globalization is not merely the co-existence of global and local concerns but

³⁰ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-colonial Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 6 – 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16 – 17.

their direct interaction with and influence on each other. It is in this space of dialogue and negotiation between the global and the local where the most creative responses to globalization are found and in which the artwork of many contemporary artists is situated.

The cross-pollination between artists is not new, but the feeling that amplified international travel and access engenders is that of a post-national world in which contemporary art is globalized in biennial exhibitions and blockbuster shows. An oft-repeated fear is that this biennial circuit is homogenizing contemporary art as a result of the increased exposure almost all artists have to myriad other artists, and that this homogeneity has meant a decrease in local influences. Such biennials and international shows claim to represent a snapshot of the world's art production at that instant.³² Carroll points out in regard to the proliferation of biennials that

...what we are witnessing now differs from the past insofar as what we see emerging is something like a single, integrated, cosmopolitan institution of art, organized transnationally in such a way that the participants, from wherever they hail, share converging or overlapping traditions and practices at the same time that they exhibit and distribute their art in the internationally coordinated venues.³³

Neto addresses the process of globalization taking place in contemporary art, and he states: "For me, it is very good to go through changes along with other artists around the world...in fact the only 'risk' is that Brazilian art will start influencing those from other traditions, which would not be bad at all."³⁴ When asked specifically about the

³² For a longer discussion of biennials see Gerardo Mosquera, "Spheres, Cities, Transitions: International Perspectives on Art and Culture," *Art Nexus* 3, no. 54 (October/December, 2004): 84 – 89.

³³ Carroll, "Art and Globalization," 136.

³⁴ Bill Arning, "Interview: Ernesto Neto," *Bomb* 70 (Winter, 2000), <http://www.bombsite.com/issues/70/articles/2274>.

proliferation of biennials and general artistic diaspora he replied that he was not concerned, and he concluded that “some Brazilian artists who have moved away to New York, their work has changed a lot, but there are still roots and I believe in roots.”³⁵ This belief in roots is evident in Neto’s fascination with the physical body and its engagement with the artwork and the world.

It is by Ashcroft’s process of “transformation” that Neto’s artwork addresses the global and local concerns of contemporary art. The materials and metaphors with which he engages are both deeply rooted in Brazilian history, and are used by Neto to affirm the universality of the sensuous and sensual body. Neto navigates the line between the global and the local successfully by creating artworks that are superficially very accessible and enjoyable for the museum-goer while also engaging in discourses surrounding specifically Brazilian tropes and traditions such as cannibalism (*antropofagia*), creolization (*mulatismo*), Neoconcretism, phenomenology, sensuality, and *carnaval*.

Critical Writing on Ernesto Neto

Most of the extant scholarship on Neto remains narrowly focused on his Brazilian artistic lineage and on the experiential “play” and “sexuality” suggested by the forms of his installations. To be sure, the Neoconcrete artists of the 1960s heavily influenced Neto, especially Oiticica and Clark, and both the formal aspects as well as theoretical concerns of many of his works could be seen as a continuation of this movement. Likewise sexuality, sensuality, and the body are evident in the suggestive forms of the drooping sacks of his nylon installations and the womb-like quality of his *Naves* series. However, thus far articles and catalogue essays have focused on these more superficial elements

³⁵ Arning, “Interview: Ernesto Neto.”

without fully situating his work in a Brazilian context. Contemporary artists often eschew categorization based on nationality in this age when artists change studio locations and gallery venues with ease, and artworks are seen by a global audience. Indeed, Neto claims to feel “more like a human being than like a Brazilian” when creating his artworks, and they do have universal appeal.³⁶ However, I argue that this global appeal is arrived at through a particular Brazilian set of practices concerned with the body. In this way Neto navigates between the local and the global.

Neto has not been the subject of a monograph; most writing on his work consists of catalogue essays and reviews of his installations. This body of writing consistently references two major themes: his status as a Brazilian artist following the Neoconcrete trajectory, and the sexual and sensual elements in his work. Latin American art critics such as Carlos Basualdo, Paulo Herkenhoff, and Adriano Pedrosa were the first to follow Neto’s career starting in the early 1990s; they have written many articles and edited exhibition catalogues about him. Basualdo visited Neto’s studio in 1995, which was right on the cusp of his breakthrough into the art world, and Basualdo wrote with great insight about Neto’s oeuvre at the time, positing that “Neto’s work corresponded to an entire genealogy of Brazilian artists who had formed a modern esthetics inseparable from an ethics of the body, from an exploration of the psychological and social dimensions of artistic work.”³⁷ However, Basualdo also wrote the text for the 1998 catalogue *Eighteenineeight...*, published by Galeria Camargo Vilaça (São Paulo), in which he examines the connection between Neto’s work and the Neoconcrete movement. In this

³⁶ Ernesto Neto as quoted in *O Corpo, Nu Tempo*, eds. Fabeiro, Fernandez-Cid, and Pereira, 307.

³⁷ Carlos Basualdo, “Studio Visit: Ernesto Neto,” *TRANS> Arts, Cultures, Media* (November, 1995): 140.

later essay, Basualdo concluded that Neto's artwork did not have the same political import as the 1960s Brazilian artists.³⁸ Basualdo acknowledges a stylistic affinity between Neto and his predecessors, but he does not explore the deeper ideology and phenomenological influences behind their works. The following year Adriano Pedrosa edited *Ernesto Neto: Naves, Skies, Dreams* which contained several long interviews with Neto in which he discusses the *Naves* series and their power to transform the viewer's perception after experiencing the installations. While both of these catalogues touch on important themes in Neto's work, neither Neoconcretism nor phenomenological experience is discussed in depth.

Subsequent articles such as "Ernesto Neto: Sensation and Time" by Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves³⁹ and Paulo Herkenhoff's "Leviathan Thot: A Politics of the Plumb," begin to explore both the political and phenomenological affinities between the Neoconcrete artists and Neto's contemporary practice, but again, they do not delve into these concerns at length. An MA thesis completed at the University of Illinois in 2004 discusses phenomenology in relation to Neto's work with a focus on the olfactory aspects of the *Naves* series. However, it was outside the scope of this 2004 thesis to consider the wider context of his work in post-colonial Brazil, which is a consideration that might add depth to phenomenological readings of the artist's work.

In the early 2000s, critics began writing about the sexual aspects of Neto's *Nave* series and his spice artworks. In the article "Pushed into Darkness: Eroticizing Abstraction" Gean Moreno proposes that Neto "employs suggestive shapes – slits,

³⁸ Basualdo, *Ernesto Neto: Eighteenineeight...*, 12.

³⁹ Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves, "Ernesto Neto: Sensation and Time," *Art Nexus* 2, no 48 (April/June 2003): 50 – 53; Paulo Herkenhoff, "Leviathan Thot: A Politics of the Plumb," *Parkett* 78, (2006): 128 – 135.

scrotum-like shapes, curvaceous ‘hips’ and ‘shoulders,’ shafts, cavities, drooping phalluses and breasts.”⁴⁰ Neto himself characterizes the thin nylon in his installations as “skin” and states in regard to the spice pieces, “Skin permeability was so clear through these works... colored powders were coming out of the pores of the pieces, like sweat...”⁴¹ Dan Cameron and others posit that this overt sexuality and sensual desire to touch comes from Neto’s Brazilian heritage. As Cameron writes in his essay accompanying Neto’s 2000 installation, *Globiobabel Nudelioname Landmoonaiia*, held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, “Brazilian national character is inherently sensual and emphasizes touch more than most other cultures...”⁴² However, while these sexual references and proposed cultural origins are mentioned, they are not further explained.

The Local and the Global in Ernesto Neto’s Artwork

Neto engages with current trends in contemporary art such as the body, identity, and hybridity, and he claims that his work is universal.⁴³ Due to Neto’s engagement with these tropes, I argue that ultimately his work carries out a global message, but he does so within local Brazilian traditions.

In Chapter 1, I address Neto’s *Naves* series, which was begun in 1998, and discuss the ways in which each translucent structure swallows the participant and fully

⁴⁰ Gean Moreno, “Pushed into Darkness: Eroticizing Abstraction,” *Art Papers* 25, no. 3 (May/June, 2001): 31. See also, Richard Leydier, “Sex and Sacanagem,” trans. L-S Torgoff, *Art Press* 276 (February 2002): 32 – 36; Bernard Schütze, “The Skin of Sculpture: Inside and Outside Ernesto Neto’s Multi-Sensorial Installation Spaces,” *Espace* 75 (Spring 2006): 25 – 27.

⁴¹ Ernesto Neto as quoted in *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, ed. Denegri, 21.

⁴² Cameron and Garcia-Anton, *Ernesto Neto*, 13.

⁴³ Leydier, “Sex and Sacanagem,” 33.

envelops the space to create a sense of weightlessness and timelessness. By creating the experience of being consumed by the *Naves*, Neto invokes a quintessential aspect of Brazilian identity, *antropofagia*. Furthermore, the interactive aspects of the *Naves* physically unite the viewer with the artwork in an act of *mulatismo*. Additionally, the *Naves* tap into European theories of phenomenological construction of time through the process and duration of this experience of ingestion and incorporation. Neto's *Naves* series engages with anthropophagy, *mulatismo*, and phenomenology through the relationship he creates between the body of the artwork and the body of the viewer in the experience of the installation.

In Chapter 2, I discuss Neto's hanging sculpture *While Nothing Happens*, installed at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Rome (MACRO) in 2008, which explores the use of spices as a means to elicit an olfactory response, stimulate the senses, and evoke memories that are associated with a certain scent. Neto also opens up a historical dialogue about the consumption of exotic spices and the trade of these as a commodity in the colonial past. Neto's project is one of individual reflection and reaffirmed grounding in the physical body and surrounding world. This experience also causes the viewer to feel more united with other people, but more importantly, it reminds each viewer that human sensation goes beyond the visual. When the viewer ("toucher" or "smeller" would also be appropriate words) is open to other sensations and experiences, the body is very responsive to touch, smell, taste, and sound.

In this chapter I explore Neto's similarities, both aesthetic and theoretical, to the Neoconcrete movement of the 1960s to whom he is often compared.⁴⁴ These artists used

⁴⁴ See Moreno, "Pushed into Darkness," 31; Yuko Hasegawa, "New Places of Contemplation," *Parkett* 78, (2006): 144; Schütze, "The Skin of Sculpture," 27; and Leydier, "Sex and Sacanagem," 33.

the phenomenological experience of the work of installation in order to incite participants to take a political stand against the oppressive military regime in power from 1964 to 1985. Neto too shows inklings of a political statement, and because of the specific spices that he uses, his artworks have historical references and describe the postcolonial mixed identity of Brazilians in the twentieth century.⁴⁵ Neto's use of spices works in two ways; he creates a universal, phenomenological experience akin to the Brazilian Neoconcrete movement in the 1960s, and he has selected spices that specifically evoke the colonial past and the local *mulato* identity and heritage of the Brazilian people.

In Chapter 3 I directly address the sensuous and sexual aspects of Neto's large-scale installation *Leviathan Thot* (2006) and the interaction of gender, phenomenological experience, and feminism. In this artwork nylon tubes, looking like drips caught in a web, covered the entire interior of the Pantheon in Paris and trailed from the cavernous space overhead; their curvaceous forms echoed the Neoclassical domes and arches while also straining against the hard linear forms and solid marble interior. The juxtaposition of the rigid interior architecture and the history of the structure with the smooth organic elements of *Leviathan Thot* create a tension between the masculine aspects of the space and the feminine forms of the installation. However, the gendered interpretations of this installation are complicated by the fact that the Panthéon was originally a church dedicated to a female saint and the title, *Leviathan Thot*, references both the work of political scientist Thomas Hobbes and an Egyptian god. Thus, a gendered reading of this

⁴⁵ The postcolonial period as Moraña defines it is all of history since the first European "discovery" of Brazil and does not indicate only the time after independence. Mabel Moraña and Carlos A. Jáuregui, eds., *Revisiting the Colonial Question in Latin America* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2008), 2.

installation requires a more nuanced approach and an examination not of discrete genders, but rather of gender-layering or androgyny.

In this chapter I use the writing of French feminists Hélène Cixous (1937 -) and Luce Irigaray (1932 -) to discuss the feminine attributes of Neto's artwork as well as the subversive techniques that feminists used to assume agency in a male-dominated world. The metaphor of the body is used extensively in Cixous and Irigaray and is more physically present in the luscious forms of *Leviathan Thot*. Activating the sense of touch grants agency to the viewer, and in some ways, the strategies employed in the feminist movements also apply to strategies utilized by those in postcolonial situations to create socio-political inversions. Andrea Giunta writes: "an ideological inversion of values" takes place as well as implementation of strategies to "devour, mix, appropriate and reappropriate, invert, fragment and join" the global and the local, and these are the means by which subalterns make their voices heard.⁴⁶ The stereotypical hyper-sexuality of Brazilians that many point to when describing Neto's artworks is made more relevant when grounded in cultural traditions rather than in superficial assumptions and stereotypes. Again, Neto comments on the body, which performs gender roles and is receptive to phenomenological experience, by means of the very local Brazilian tradition of *carnaval*.

⁴⁶ Andrea Giunta, "Strategies of Modernity in Latin America," in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed., Gerardo Mosquera (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 64.

Chapter 1

Cannibal Bodies: Ernesto Neto's *Naves* and *Antropofagia*

Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically...
The spirit refuses to conceive a spirit without a body.
- Oswald de Andrade, *The Cannibalist Manifesto*⁴⁷

Naves are large-scale installations of semi-sheer, off-white nylon stretched into six-sided spaces and suspended several inches from the ground (Fig. 2, 8 - 11).⁴⁸ The corners are weighted down by heavy sacks of sand or tethered on hooks to the ceiling or upper walls of the gallery. The milky-white scrims often echo the white gallery walls and create a more dynamic sense of the gallery space as various layers of overlapping nylon generate shifting levels of opacity. Because of the tension holding the corners in place, the organic, non-Euclidean walls of this room-within-a-room are slightly concave and look like they are imploding or being sucked into a black hole. Indeed, Neto comments

⁴⁷ Oswald de Andrade, "Cannibalist Manifesto," 38 – 39.

⁴⁸ The following descriptions are an amalgamation of several of Neto's *Naves* in order to address different aspects of the *Naves* series that are not necessarily present in every installation, such as the use of spices. *Naves* I include are *Nave Denga* (Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, 1998, now in the Museum of Modern Art New York collection and on display in 2010), *Nave Óvulo Organóid* [Organelle Ovule Nave] (1998), *Nhô Nhô Nave* (Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 1999), *Nave Nude Plasmatic* (Carnegie International, 1999), *Globiobabel Nudelioname Landmoonaiia* (Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 2000), and *Nave, Utero Capela* [Uterine Chapel Nave], (Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, 2000). Unfortunately, I have never experienced a *Nave* personally, and for the descriptive passages I have relied on first-hand accounts of the installations as well as photographs to construct the scene. Direct quotations are footnoted, but to avoid footnotes after every descriptive element, the articles and interviews with lengthy descriptions include: Leydier, "Sex and Sacanagem"; Adriano Pedrosa, "Review: Ernesto Neto at Galeria Camargo Vilaça," *Frieze* (3/3/98); Gilda Williams, "Ernesto Neto: ICA, London," *Art Monthly* (July/August 2000); Arning, "Interview: Ernesto Neto"; Philip Ursprung, "A Daydream: In Ernesto Neto's Globiobabel Nudelioname Landmoonaiia," *Parkett* 78 (2006); and Hasegawa, "New Places of Contemplation." Books consulted include: Fabeiro, Fernandez-cid, and Pereira, eds. *O Corpo, Nu Tempo*, and Pedrosa, ed. *Ernesto Neto: Naves, Skies, Dreams*.

that this cosmic interpretation of his work is precisely what he strives to create.⁴⁹ This shape also evokes a comparison to a tent, and these objects collapse and easily pack into a small bag.⁵⁰ Like a tent in the backcountry, *Naves* create a safe, protected environment from the cold sterility of the surrounding white gallery walls and conditioned air. Neto creates a space at once inside and outside of the gallery. Neto states: “I am wrapping air, making atmospheres physical.”⁵¹ Indeed, Neto is wrapping air, but he is also wrapping the visitor; walking around the *Naves*, stepping over bags of sand that extend like slothful drips plopped on the ground, one finds an entrance to this structure.

A narrow opening through a corner seam that appears to have been slightly ripped leaves a mandorla-shaped gash through which one may penetrate the structure (Fig. 10). After removing shoes, an act reminiscent of Japanese culture, or etiquette when entering a mosque, the visitor gently parts the soft lycra mouth and is swallowed by the *Nave*. As the participant discovers that the inside of the *Nave* is an accessible area into which one can enter, Neto’s sculpture becomes a body, a transporter, and a mystical space. The first step into the springy structure is somewhat unbalanced as the weight of the body further strains the material, which now makes contact with the floor during each footstep (Fig. 11). Depending on the height from the floor, the participant takes exaggerated steps as when walking in deep snow. More effort is exerted to move, but as a result movements slow down. A hazy light penetrates and one feels utterly removed from the gallery, which is now only dimly glimpsed through the knit fabric. The light is diffused, slightly tinted

⁴⁹ “I love the idea of my work looking like a big bang.” Ernesto Neto as quoted in *Ernesto Neto*, eds., Cameron and Garcia-Anton, 31.

⁵⁰ Pedrosa, “Ernesto Neto: Galeria Camargo Vilaça.”

⁵¹ Arning, “Interview: Ernesto Neto,” 80.

by the ivory-colored [*marfim*] scrim, which causes the interior to appear to be a warmer tone. This soft, supple material, often compared to skin, is a seemingly fragile lycra that is surprisingly resilient as it stretches and conforms to each shape, yielding to every movement and touch, as one navigates the space.

When one enters a *Nave*, the experience is typically characterized by a sensation of being swallowed and consumed by the installation itself. Once inside, the *Naves* are often described as “womb-like” because of the curvaceous surfaces, muted light, and soft surroundings that make the visitor feel almost buoyant (Fig. 12). The titles of several of the *Naves* series, including *Nave Deusa* [Goddess Nave] (1998), *Nave Utero Capela* [Uterine Chapel Nave] (2000), and *Nave Óvulo Organóid* [Organelle Ovule Nave] (1998) also suggest that the *Nave* is gendered as a female space in which the participant is gestated for a period of time and then is (re)born into the world. This metaphorical process of ingestion, gestation, and rebirth could also be described as a cannibalistic or anthropophagic encounter in which one body devours another, incorporates and takes in aspects of the other, and eventually produces a new body that is a synthesis of both.⁵² This cannibalist trope resonates throughout Brazilian art and literature in the twentieth century.

Neto’s *Naves* extend into tunnels filled with interactive elements for the participant along the way. Removing shoes before entering the *Naves* establishes a more direct sensation of the ground, which in this case, is buffered by the springy pull of the

⁵² Throughout this thesis I will be using “cannibalism,” “anthropophagy” and the Portuguese word “*antropofagia*” as synonyms. These terms literally refer to human beings who eat the flesh of other human beings. In the Brazilian context a metaphor grew up around *antropofagia* in the 1920s Modern movement referring to the devouring of European, Amerindian and African influences and the creation of a stronger Brazil through this process of cultural miscegenation.

nylon skin. Walking through the encapsulating tunnel, all attention is focused inwards. Dangling sacks of aromatic spices such as clove and cumin hang at nose level (Fig. 10).⁵³ The spices change the scent of the interior space and add color to the installation. The tubes are attached through the ceiling of the space and each ends with a node full of reddish or brownish powder. These attenuated tears appear to be long drops caught in time or uvulas in the giant esophagus that has swallowed the participant. The powder permeates the sack, joins with the ambient particles in the air, is inhaled by each participant, and eventually is incorporated into his or her body. The scents evoke memories of foods and smells associated with different times and places, and thus mentally transport the participant in time and space.

In an interview Neto described his own “discovery” of spices when walking through a part of Rio de Janeiro known as the former location of the great customs house and now famous for its diverse ethnic markets.⁵⁴ He narrates his experimentation with spices, stating that: “...it took some time before I understood that I had to mix different spices in order to break the monotony and create a ‘meaning-personality’ for these works. Different fragrances had to meet each other through atmospheric volumes and their combination created a story.”⁵⁵ Neto uses a variety of spices, each with a distinct color and aroma to excite multiple senses, transport the viewer through his or her memories and engage in the Brazilian narrative of miscegenation. Miscegenation usually only refers to the mixing of different races, but in the case of Brazil, cultures, religions and races

⁵³ I discuss the element of spices and the psychological and neurological effects of scent at length in Chapter 2.

⁵⁴ Denegri, *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

have all interwoven into a mix commonly referred to by the Portuguese word *mulatismo*.⁵⁶ Historian Roberto DaMatta claims that “the result of this *mulatismo* is a context in which sacred and profane, order and disorder, coexist in ambiguity,” which is a state he describes as a “fundamental aspect of Brazilian identity.”⁵⁷

Walking past these dangling bags of spices one is faced with a much larger, ovoid shaped object pushing through the floor of the space and protruding as a kind of button cushion filled with small polystyrene balls. Cautiously coming closer to this mushroom-shaped object, the visitor spies puckered orifices into which one can plunge a hand and arm to feel around the squishy styrene innards of the cushion. The participant not only penetrates the *Nave* as a whole but also delves into internal elements with hands, arms, feet, legs, and even the entire body in the case of the ball pits present in some of the *Naves*. A few more steps lead to a forest of nylon tubes connected at both top and bottom that skewer the interstitial space (Fig. 13). These tubes, like so many tentacles, look as though they are suctioned onto the fabric by the circles that surround their bases and tops. They are hollow, and as one navigates through this stand, the tubes pull and contort, distorting and spreading along with each step. From an elevated position on the exterior of the *Nave*, the top of the installation appears to be a dimpled surface as assorted tubes pull through the fabric, creating vortices and funnels either capturing spices or traversing

⁵⁶ The terminology surrounding the practice of miscegenation can be confusing. Equivalent terms for miscegenation in Portuguese are *mulatismo*, *miscigenação* or *mestiçagem*. The more commonly used term in Spanish is *mestizaje*, or one might refer to a population as *mestiço*. The word *mulato/a* is the Portuguese word for a man or woman of “mixed race.” The equivalent and more commonly used term in Spanish is *mestizo*, which translates literally to “half-breed.” Argentine anthropologist Néstor García Canclini notes more specifically in his book *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* that the term “syncretism” is used when referring to mixed religions, “fusion” is the term for combined musical styles, and “*mestizaje*” is the term for historical or anthropological subjects. Because of the Brazilian topic, throughout this thesis I will use the Portuguese term *mulatismo* more broadly when referring to the mixed cultures, races, and religions of Brazil.

⁵⁷ Sullivan, ed., *Brazil: Body & Soul*, 50.

the *Nave* entirely. As one passes through these various experiences, one becomes more deeply involved in the body of the *Naves*. Walking is easier because the participant's body has found equilibrium, more tactile interactions take place as one no longer hesitates to caress or manipulate the nylon, and the exterior world completely dissolves as these events inside the installation take one's attention away from outsiders. At this moment, the viewer is fully enclosed by the installation, but is also aware of his or her own body and movements.

Eventually, among the cylinders piercing the *Nave*, a large circular cushion rests on the ground, inviting one into a small clearing to recline on the pillowed surface. One sinks into the soft white cloud-like pad and gazes around at the ecru-colored walls and ceiling surrounding the space. One feels a sense of floating, losing track of time, and registers only the slight bounce of others' steps as one drifts off into contemplation, meditation, or sleep. Awakening in the embrace of the white fluffy nest, the participants stand up slowly, careful not to hold onto one of the milky-white hose, which offer no substantial support. Walking towards the end of this tunnel, one experiences a slight empty or melancholy feeling because all participants must eventually leave the soft protection and serene meditative space of the *Nave*.⁵⁸ One is only swallowed by the installation for a finite period of time before being 'reborn'.

Having had one's sense of taste, touch, and smell stimulated while traversing the *Nave*, one parts the gauzy slit at the other end of this maze and is reborn into the world. Stepping out of the *Nave*, the floor feels harder, more stable than the balancing of the nylon. The light is brighter, more direct, and harsh in comparison to the misty atmosphere

⁵⁸ Erin Manns, "Artworker of the Week #63: Ernesto Neto," *Kultureflash* (2006), <http://www.kultureflash.net/archive/187/priview.html>.

of gently filtered light through the opaque material. The world is less soft, less forgiving, less yielding, and now, unenclosed, one feels suddenly more visible, alone, cold. The surrounding space seems to open up. Through the experiences of the interior, the outside world suddenly looks new and time seems to take on a different pace. Understanding these phenomenological implications of Neto's artwork enriches the multi-sensory experiences of his installations with a philosophical framework describing how consciousness and time are constructed through these interactions.

The series title, *Nave*, in Portuguese translates to "vessel" or "ship," and in English denotes the space under the central vault of a church, which also derives from the Latin word for ship, *navis*. In the *Naves* series, Neto conceives of the installations themselves as another type of vessel: a body. He states, "I don't want to make work that depicts a sensual body – I want it to *be* a body, exist as a body or as close to that as possible."⁵⁹ He conceives of the *Naves* specifically as "part of a larger body."⁶⁰ Neto also describes the human body as a "space nave."⁶¹ If Neto's installations act as bodies, then the spectator who enters into the *Nave* can be described as being swallowed, consumed, or eaten by the structure. Several critics have described a feeling of being "devoured" when inside Neto's *Naves* series, and viewers are left with the unsettling feeling that they have penetrated into an organic, perhaps human, body. However, Neto's intent is not the violent appropriation of foreign models, but rather a more universalizing experience that activates the body and gives agency to the participant. To be eaten by the *Naves* is not to

⁵⁹ Arning, "Interview: Ernesto Neto," 80.

⁶⁰ Gonçalves, "Sensation and Time," 52.

⁶¹ "I once said in a lecture in English that 'my body is a space nave,' yet the English word for nave is ship." Ernesto Neto as quoted in *Naves, Skies, Dreams*, Pedrosa, 52.

be crushed and homogenized, but rather to be made aware of one's body, one's surroundings, and the impact that one has on those surroundings. Neto invokes the whole history of Brazilian anthropophagy in his own cannibal bodies: the *Naves* series.

Cannibalism has deep roots in Brazilian culture and comes from the Tupinamba Amerindians who populated the vast continent before the Spanish and Portuguese “discovered” the land. The Tupi were indigenous to the Brazilian region of South America, and they engaged in the practice of ritual cannibalism. In 1500, Pedro Álvares Cabral landed in Brazil, which he dubbed the Island of the True Cross [*Ilha de Vera Cruz*]. Upon landfall, he was met by several tribal groups broadly known as the Tupi that practiced cannibalism and would eat their vanquished foes in order to take in the strength of their former enemies. This literal, bodily, incorporation of an enemy into one's own flesh became a powerful metaphor for the Anthropophagist movement during the early twentieth century as Brazil struggled to define itself as a nation in the modern world and break free from neocolonial dependency and wholesale adoption of European models.⁶²

The trope of cannibalism first reemerged in the twentieth century in Oswald de Andrade's 1924 *Manifesto of Brazilwood Poetry* [*Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil*].⁶³ In this text, Oswald's use of the word “indigestions” [*indigestões*] is a direct reference to this cannibalistic metaphor of cultural assimilation. He pleads for “the counter-weight of native originality to neutralize academic conformity. Reaction against all the indigestions of erudition. The best of our lyric tradition. The best of our modern demonstration.”⁶⁴ In

⁶² King, ed., *On Modern Latin American Fiction*, 42.

⁶³ Oswald de Andrade is commonly referred to as “Oswald” so as not to be confused with another Modernist writer of no familial relation, Mario de Andrade.

⁶⁴ O contrapeso da originalidade nativa para inutilizar a adesão acadêmica. A reação contra todas as indigestões de sabedoria. O melhor de nossa tradição lírica. O melhor de nossa demonstração moderna.

this literary call-to-arms, he urges his fellow Brazilian poets to absorb European influences but balance these with equal parts Brazilian traditional forms.⁶⁵ He uses the example of Wagner's operas, which were integrated into the music played at the *Carnaval* celebrations, to illustrate how deeply European "high" culture had been ingrained and transformed in the Brazilian context. Oswald himself was heavily influenced by the *Futurist Manifesto* (1909), to which he was exposed in 1912 during a trip to Paris.⁶⁶ The title is a reference to Brazil's namesake and first major export, the Brazilwood tree [*pau-brasil*], which was coveted in Europe for its dark red dye that was used in textile manufacturing.⁶⁷ By invoking this key export, a raw material, Oswald juxtaposes the cultural imports from Europe that dominated Brazilian literary and artistic production with what he calls "Pau-Brasil Poetry, for exportation."⁶⁸ Oswald proposes that cultural influence must move in both directions.

Throughout the *Manifesto of Brazilwood Poetry*, Oswald uses the foils of "the forest and the school" to describe the Portuguese colonization and Eurocentric intellectual hegemony in relation to the native creativity, mental agility, powers of cultural assimilation, and adaptive capabilities of Brazilians.⁶⁹ Oswald proposes that true Brazilian poetry exists in the experiences of the everyday world and not in a European

Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto of Brazilwood Poetry," reprinted in *Latin American Literary Review* XIV, no. 27 (Jan - June, 1986): 187.

⁶⁵ Christopher Dunn, *Brutality Garden: Tropicalia and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 15.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Miguel Arraes and Lancelot C. Sheppard, eds. *Brazil: The People and the Power* [Brasil: le Pouvoir et le Peuple] (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972), 24.

⁶⁸ Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto of Brazilwood Poetry," 185.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

tradition that is not their own. He contends that there is “no formula for the contemporary expression of the world,” and instead they must return to the “aesthetic facts” and “*see with open eyes.*”⁷⁰ This grounding in the present moment and in tangible facts and experience is precisely the effect that Neto’s *Naves* have on the participant as he or she is made aware of the surroundings through the experience of stepping into the artwork.

In 1928 Oswald again asks for a Brazilian literary vanguard in his *Cannibalist Manifesto* [Manifesto Antropófago], which begins: “Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.”⁷¹ In this statement, Oswald defines cannibalism as the common feature of the Brazilian identity and establishes the physical body as the locus of true *brasilidade*. The rather poetic *Manifesto* continues as a series of short axioms, often in the form of puns referencing Brazilian culture and history.⁷² The most often quoted line is Oswald’s Shakespearian aphorism, “Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question,” which is written in English in the original version. The irony in this statement lies in both the question, whether to adhere to indigenous traditions, and the structure, adapted from the quintessential text of the Western literary canon, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In the *Cannibalist Manifesto*, Oswald continues to develop the image of the body as the active physical location of this cultural cannibalism and assimilation. He extols “A participatory consciousness” and states that “the spirit refuses to conceive a spirit without a body.”⁷³ In claiming that this spirit of *brasilidade* cannot live without a physical body, Oswald asserts the importance of the corporeal, sensuous, phenomenological experience

⁷⁰ Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto of Brazilwood Poetry,” 186.

⁷¹ Oswald de Andrade, “Cannibalist Manifesto,” 38.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39.

of life in the continual formation of identity. The same year as Oswald's *Cannibalist Manifesto*, Mário de Andrade published a novel entitled *Macunaíma: A Hero without Character* [Macunaíma: Um herói sem nenhum caráter]. The writing combines stories, myths, songs, and rituals culled from indigenous folklore, African religions, Portuguese culture, and Brazilian history. The call for a synthesis of differing forces in Brazilian culture represented in *Macunaíma* was the rallying cry of the Anthropophagist movement. Through the middle of the twentieth century, Brazil continued to coalesce around this multifaceted identity.

Oswald's desire to establish a national literature corresponds with the nation-building taking place politically in the 1920s. After the end of Portuguese rule in 1822 and the conclusion of the Brazilian Empire in 1889, a republic was declared, and Brazil finally gained recognition domestically and internationally as a truly independent nation.⁷⁴ During the early part of the twentieth century, Jose Maria da Silva Paranhos Jr., Baron of Rio Branco, served as the Minister of Foreign Relations and was responsible for peacefully but decisively establishing Brazil's borders with its neighbors, a feat which affirmed Brazil's dedication to diplomatic regional negotiation.⁷⁵ Defining Brazil geographically contributed to the progress towards a unified national identity, which also promoted the shared historical experience, linguistic heritage, and cultural codes of the diverse population.⁷⁶ However, Brazil remained a kind of "archipelago" of semi-isolated regions because shipping remained the primary means of transportation, and trade routes

⁷⁴ Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 1.

⁷⁵ Sachs, Wilhelm, and Pinheiro, eds. *Brazil: A Century of Change*, 101 – 102.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

only serviced agricultural and mining centers along the coast without much contact through the interior.⁷⁷ Oswald observed this focus on exporting raw materials and challenged his fellow Brazilian writers to create literature and art for exportation rather than continuing to plunder the natural resources of the country. Oswald and others sought to enrich the culture of Brazil to a point where its cultural production would be what was moving across oceans and influencing others – not merely raw materials to be consumed such as their Brazilwood, sugar, and coffee.

Brazil's collective identity was thrown into view as the young nation continued to grapple with the colonial past and the modern period. In 1922, the nation commemorated one hundred years of freedom from foreign rule. This milestone was celebrated in Rio de Janeiro as the "International Exposition of the Centennial of Brazilian Independence." As historian Daryl Williams states, "The official version of Brazilian culture put on in Rio declared to the world that the Brazilian nation no longer needed to ape *belle époque* Paris to earn its place in the world system."⁷⁸ This (re)affirmation of independence from European powers, both culturally and politically, was accompanied by a quest to define exactly of what *brasilidade* was made.

Launching this search for *brasilidade*, in February of 1922 São Paulo hosted a Modern Art Week, which included exhibitions of avant-garde painting, sculpture, poetry and prose. These visual and literary works represented the independent and modern Brazil and departed sharply from the traditional styles of writing and the academic

⁷⁷ Sachs, Wilhelm, and Pinheiro, eds. *Brazil: A Century of Change*, 21.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 39.

painting taught in the art schools such as Rio's *Academia Imperial de Belas Artes*.⁷⁹ The Modern movement in both art and literature was born out of this moment of self-definition, and Oswald, along with others, took the opportunity to propose anthropophagy as a means by which Brazilians might devour European intellectualism and reappropriate foreign models to serve Brazilian needs.

In addition to adapting European customs and thinking, the search for *brasilidade* also included a revival of indigenous folk culture, which, when mixed with other influences, was thought to create a stronger, independent, modern Brazil.⁸⁰ However, as Haroldo de Campos reminds us:

Oswald's 'Anthropophagy' is the thought of critical devouration of the universal cultural heritage, formulated not from the insipid, resigned perspective of the 'noble savage' (idealized within the model of European virtues in the 'nativist' line of Brazilian romanticism...) but from the point of view of the 'bad savage,' devourer of whites – the cannibal.⁸¹

Thus the anthropologist movement should not be seen as a peaceful, uncomplicated, synthesis of cultures, but rather as a violent appropriation of foreign models. The concept of cultural cannibalism was taken up in the 1920s for nationalistic and unifying ends in a struggle against Europe's indirect control of Brazil. By using the metaphor of cannibalism, the Brazilian identity was located within the corporeal body, and therefore each person became a representation of Brazil's cultural *mulatismo* incarnated.

⁷⁹ Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 40 - 42.

⁸⁰ The anthropophagist movement took shape in visual arts after Modernist artist Tarsila do Amaral, who married Oswald in 1926, gave her husband one of her paintings in 1928, which he named *Abaporu*, literally "a man who eats man." Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 41.

⁸¹ Haroldo de Campos, "The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe Under the Sign of Devoration," *Latin American Literary Review* XIV, no. 27 (Jan - June, 1986): 44.

However, when cannibalism was taken up again in the 1960s the message of this metaphor had become distinctly different. Anthropophagy continued to be a model for the construction of the national identity in Brazil, and was adopted by the Neoconcrete movement and later the Tropicalist movement in the 1960s and early 1970s.⁸² The project of Tropicalism was to combat the unjust internal military rule in Brazil by re-establishing a strong Brazilian identity among the people, which it hoped to accomplish through taking up the metaphor of anthropophagy. Tropicalism arose in Brazil in the late 1960s during a time of great social and political upheaval around the world and in Latin America.⁸³ Starting in 1964, Brazil was under a strict military regime that promoted rapid modernization, which resulted in a huge economic boom. However, in 1968 there was unrest in Brazil, and a “coup within a coup” established Artur da Costa e Silva as the military head-of-state who immediately took a firmer grasp on rebellious and insubordinate groups.⁸⁴ This was a time of financial success, during which the regime simultaneously dismantled any opposition forces, and the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5) of 1968 was the most restrictive law passed.⁸⁵ In addition to outlawing anti-regime movements, the AI-5 Act granted the executive wing of government full power, closed congress, suspended *habeas corpus*, and most notably, established censorship of television, music, film and theater, which led directly to tens of thousands of Brazilian

⁸² I discuss the Neoconcrete movement in depth in Chapter 2. Susan Martin and Alma Ruiz, eds., *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Lygia Clark, Gego, Mathias Goeritz, Hélio Oiticica, and Mira Schendel* (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 2000), 39.

⁸³ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 2.

⁸⁴ Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti, eds., *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 237.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

artists and intellectuals going into self-exile in Europe or America.⁸⁶ Although the moment of Tropicalism was fleeting, the impact that it had on artists, musicians, and filmmakers of the time is crucial. The artist Hélio Oiticica was a pivotal member of both Neoconcrete and Tropicalist movements.

Tropicalism [*Tropicalismo*] is typically associated with a genre of music that fused “*musica erudite*” and “*musica popular*” along with national, international, traditional, and modern styles.⁸⁷ This synthesis of various musical genres was primarily promoted by the singers Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso and the group *Os Mutantes* [The Mutants]. The Tropicalist movement drew its name from the 1967 installation artwork by Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, and in 1968 Veloso’s song of the same name was hugely popular. In addition to art and music, the *Cinema Novo* [New Cinema] also takes up anthropophagist literature as the basis for several films released in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Cinema Novo began under the rule of President Kubitschek and was generally optimistic about the rapid development taking place in the country. After the military coup in 1964, the films from this movement express confusion, and “they are analyses of failure – of populism, of developmentalism, and of leftist intellectuals.”⁸⁸ Finally, after the uprisings of 1968, *Cinema Novo* adopted a “cannibal-Tropicalist” stance that simultaneously adapted European cinematic influences and addressed the tropical stereotypes of Brazilians held by Europeans and Americans in order to dispel these

⁸⁶ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 2.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁸ Johnson and Stam, *Brazilian Cinema*, 35.

myths.⁸⁹ Anthropophagy plays a central part in several films of this period including Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's adaptation of Mário de Andrade's novel *Macunaíma* (1969) and Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* [Como era gostoso o meu francês] (1971). These films exemplify the Tropicalist appropriation of the metaphor of cannibalism first taken up in the 1920s.

How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman was based on the premise of a captured French soldier who is taken in by a Tupi group, given a wife and a farm, and accepted into the community for a long period of time, only to eventually be eaten in a ritualized manner by this cannibalist tribe. As historian Benedito Nunes observes “[cannibalism is] an organic metaphor... diagnostic of a society traumatized by colonialism; and as a therapy for counteracting the legacy of this trauma through satire and humor.”⁹⁰ Again, when cannibalism was first used in the 1920s it was a tool for building national pride and defining a Brazilian identity out of the fragments of European, Africa, and Amerindian heritage. In the 1960s and 1970s cannibalism is used metaphorically and in a satirical manner to unify the people. However, in this period cannibalism was also used to represent the horrible dictatorship and oppression exercised by the military regime governing the country. Thus cannibalism was both a reminder of the strong Brazilian nation built in the early twentieth century as well as a call-to-arms against the repressive government.

Cinema Novo also used the trope of anthropophagy to criticize the current very restrictive military regime. Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's *Macunaíma* is narrated as the life of a black man born to an indigenous woman in the Amazon, who is then turned

⁸⁹ Johnson and Stam, *Brazilian Cinema*, 37.

⁹⁰ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 19.

white by drinking from a magical spring. The main character's body literally changes to represent each of the three recognized races of Brazil: African, Amerindian, and European. The movie rendition makes the absurd situations, changing characters and cultural idiosyncrasies into a satirical comedy. Brazilian film scholar Randal Johnson suggests that this movie version of *Macunaíma* is "a metaphorical rendering of Brazil devouring its people and ultimately its self through the violence of an economic model imposed by relations of dependency with advanced industrial power and enforced by a repressive military regime."⁹¹ By staging *Macunaíma* in the contemporary moment, director Joaquim Pedro takes a quintessential Modernist text first used for nationalist ends and re-casts it as the Brazilian people's struggle against their own economic and political situation in the late 1960s. In this instance then cannibalism is not used in a nationalistic, empowering and anti-colonialist context, but is rather a critical view of the military government. While both of these examples from Cinema Novo use humor and demonstrate that cannibalist tropes infiltrated popular culture as well as intellectual and artistic circles, they also show the varied ways in which anthropophagy was employed to help define a Brazilian identity as it is elaborated through the corporeal body as well as critique the contemporary situation of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the visual arts, the Tropicalism movement manifested anthropophagy in the sensual, encapsulating, consuming feeling of the art installations exhibited during this time as well as the participatory agency exercised by the audience – all characteristics of Neto's contemporary work as well. Artist Hélio Oiticica designed *Tropicália* for the group show *New Brazilian Objectivity* [Nova Objectividade Brasileira] that was held at the Museu do Arte Moderna in Rio in 1967 (Fig. 14). While Neto's *Nave* installation

⁹¹ King, *On Modern Latin American Fiction*, 41.

lacks the overt political message of Oiticica's *Tropicália*, the sensuous and anthropophagic experience is very similar. The installation consisted of two structures around which wound a pathway bordered by various landscapes. The walk was covered in pebbles, straw, sand, or carpet, which, as Guy Brett says of a similar installation, "is partly to emphasize this passage from the outside to the inside, and partly because much of the sensation of going in and out of the different cabins [*Penetrables*] is conveyed by the primary sensation of *treading*, maybe the least intellectualized and least conditioned of the physical senses."⁹² Bordering these walkways, brightly colored fabric and several cages with live Macaw parrots hung among the potted palms, banana trees, and other "native" vegetation. Along the path were also several interactive elements such as Oiticica's *Bolides* [Fireballs], boxes filled with pigment similar to Neto's spices that one could open and close, and *Parangolés*, capes in which one danced and rifled through the pockets (Fig. 15 – 16). After passing through several environments, one entered a *Penetráveis* [Penetrable], a structure meant to reference the dilapidated and haphazard construction of the *favela* [slums] clustered on the hillsides of Rio. The corridor inside these two shacks wound around in a spiral, and, as the light became more and more dim, a barely discernable noise and flickering light emanated from the center. In this interior chamber a TV was on continuously, standing as a commentary on Brazil's willingness to consume American and European mass culture while also selling a fake version of Brazil as a tropical paradise: a view that totally neglected the poverty, social unrest, and military corruption that plagued Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁹² Guy Brett, *Hélio Oiticica: Eden* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1969), 27. Emphasis in original.

Similar to Neto's description of the *Naves* as bodies, Oiticica described the experience of entering *Tropicália* as directly anthropophagic: "...the terrible feeling I had inside was of being devoured by the work, as if it were a big animal."⁹³ He goes on to call it "the most anthropophagist work in Brazilian Art."⁹⁴ Oiticica wrote his famous piece "*General Scheme of the New Objectivity*" for this show in which he also outlines – in his section describing the Brazilian "constructive will" – that anthropophagy is "the defense that we possess against such external dominance, and this constructive will, our main creative weapon."⁹⁵ Oiticica posits that this desire to create art is parallel to the Brazilian desire to create a cultural identity by absorbing European, African, Amerindian, and now North American influences. Oiticica's *Tropicália* was literally an all-consuming art-body, and the metaphor of cannibalism was his true aim. Oiticica explains:

In reality, with *Tropicália* I wanted to create the 'myth' of miscegenation – we are Blacks, Indians, Whites, everything at the same time – our culture has nothing to do with the European, despite being, to this day, subjugated to it: only the Black and the Indian did not capitulate to it... For the creation of a true Brazilian culture, characteristic and strong, expressive at least, this accursed European and American influence will have to be absorbed anthropophagically, by the Black and Indian of our land, who are, in reality, the only significant ones, since most products of Brazilian art are hybrids, intellectualized to the extreme, empty of any meaning of their own.⁹⁶

⁹³ Brett, *Eden* 16.

⁹⁴ Oiticica as quoted in *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, Frank, ed., 178.

⁹⁵ Carlos Basualdo, *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture (1967-1972)* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005), 221 – 222.

⁹⁶ Frank, *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, 178 – 179.

Again the themes of *mulatismo*, mixing, and cannibalizing various cultures, races, and histories are used to make a strong and independent Brazilian identity.⁹⁷ Unlike the violent cannibal metaphor used by Oswald, this experience is more akin to the ideas of Latin American heterogeneity and hybridity that emerge after the writing of Brazilian cultural critic Roberto Schwarz in the 1970s.

Schwarz questions the utopian aims of an anthropophagic approach to creating a national identity, and claims in his essay “Misplaced Ideas” (1973), that “historical distance allows us to see the ingenuousness and jingoism contained in these propositions.”⁹⁸ While Schwarz admonishes his fellow Brazilians for too easily adopting the latest European and American trends in intellectualism, he rails against the anthropophagist idealism that uses an abstract, classless Brazilian as a prototype.⁹⁹ Schwarz is adamant that nationalism neglects to account for the huge disparities in wealth in Brazil, which he believes are less a result of copying European hierarchical class models than a result of Brazil’s history of slave labor.¹⁰⁰ More economically minded in his argument, Schwarz is critical of anthropophagy as a nationalist concern.

During the 1970s and 1980s the field of Latin American cultural studies continued to form new constructions to describe the Latin American experience, and two competing theories emerged, explored in two prominent books: Antonio Cornejo-Polar’s *Indiginist and Heterogeneous Literatures: Their Dual Sociocultural Status* (1978) and Nestor

⁹⁷ See note 56 for more about these terms.

⁹⁸ This was originally published as the article “As idéias fora do lugar” *Estudos Cebrap* 3 (1973), and was later translated to English and published in the book *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, eds., Roberto Schwarz and John Gledson (New York: Verso, 1992), 8.

⁹⁹ Schwarz and Gledson, *Misplaced Ideas*, 2 and 9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1989).¹⁰¹ The semantics around the terms “heterogeneous” and “hybrid” are still very nuanced and contentious, and understanding both helps to explain another aspect of *brasilidade*: miscegenation.

Canclini begins his book with an examination of the terms used to describe a composite, and he finds that “syncretism” is used when speaking about religion, “fusion” when discussing musical styles, and “*mestizaje*” when describing historical or anthropological topics.¹⁰² However, he believes that there are several key distinctions and conditions that must be recognized when dealing with a hybrid culture. His definition of hybridity refers to

socio-cultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices. In turn, it bears noting that the so called discrete structures were a result of prior hybridizations and therefore cannot be considered pure points of origin.¹⁰³

It is the second sentence of his definition that bears the crux of his argument. Prior constructions of a hybrid or mixed culture, race, religion, or musical genre relied on the false notion that what was being mixed together was itself pure. Canclini urges scholars to recognize that hybridity was inherent in both the European culture and the indigenous culture prior to the colonial period and is ongoing. However, he warns against “the

¹⁰¹ Antonio Cornejo-Polar, “Indiginist and Heterogeneous Literatures: Their Dual Sociocultural Status” in *the Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, eds., Ana del Sarto, Alicia Rios, and Abril Trigo Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 100 - 115. This essay was originally published as “El indigenismo y las literaturas heterogéneas: Su doble estatuto socio-cultural,” *Revista de Crítica Latinoamericana* 7-8 (1978): 7 – 21. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). This was originally published as *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Editorial Grijalbo: Mexico), 1990.

¹⁰² García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, xxiv.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, xxv. Emphasis in original.

reduction of art to a discourse of planetary reconciliation,” which likewise robs hybridity of its nuances by universalizing the phenomenon.¹⁰⁴ Thus, Canclini’s theory of hybridity helps to ground the discourse surrounding these mixed cultures in reality, in which no race, religion, language, or culture is pure and miscegenation continues infinitely.

Cornejo-Polar takes the stance that this type of hybridity ignores the irreconcilable elements of cultures or peoples in the real world. However, he acknowledges that some sort of shared heritage and smoothly blended multi-culture is necessary to construct a “true” nationality.¹⁰⁵ He defines “transculturation” as the instances where two or more elements are blended into an “unproblematic totality (in spite of the conflictive character of the process).”¹⁰⁶ This transculturation is closer to the 1920s Anthropophagy movement in Brazil, which constructed a stronger Brazil through cannibalization, completely consuming and blending, of different ethnic, racial, cultural, and artistic heritages. Schwarz challenged this idea in the 1970s and found it simplistic and utopian. However, when this synthesis of parts incorporates conflict, Cornejo-Polar uses the term “heterogeneity.” He uses this concept to “explain sociocultural situations and discourses in which the dynamics of the multiple intercrossings do not operate in a syncretic way but instead emphasize conflicts and alterities.”¹⁰⁷ Heterogeneity therefore is used when conflictive forces do not reconcile into a *unified whole*, but instead remain distinct despite being *part of the whole*. In the context of Brazil, heterogeneity and

¹⁰⁴ García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, xliii – xliv.

¹⁰⁵ Antonio Cornejo-Polar, “*Mestizaje*, Transculturation, Heterogeneity,” in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, 116 – 117. Originally “*Mestizaje*, Transculturación, Heterogeneidad” in *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latino-americana* 21, 42 (1995): 368 – 371.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

hybridity are both evident in the racial and cultural mixing of Europeans, Amerindians, and Africans. Neto's *Naves* demonstrate hybridity in that the participant becomes part of the installation when he or she enters into the *Nave*, but is also representative of heterogeneity because that person will always remain distinct and never truly meld into the *Nave*.

Brazilians have long had a *mulato* cultural identity because of the country's colonial past. Not only were there native Tupi Amerindians on the vast continent, but, as their numbers dwindled due to sickness and enslavement, millions of Africans, largely from the Benin Gulf, Angola, and Congo, were brought to Brazil by the Portuguese and used as forced slave laborers.¹⁰⁸ As anthropologist Gilberto Freyre finds in his 1933 book *The Masters and the Slaves*, over several centuries of colonial occupation, the usually white European plantation owners procreated with African and Amerindian women as well as their white wives.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, large German and Japanese populations immigrated to Brazil, nearly four million between 1890 and 1930, which further affected this formerly tripartite culture.¹¹⁰ In a 1976 census taken by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, people were asked to provide their own term to describe their race because the standard categories of "white, black, brown [*parda*], Indian, or Asian" were deemed inadequate. The respondents identified themselves in 134 different racial

¹⁰⁸ Rodolfo Konder, ed., *Brasil +500: Mostra do Redescobrimento*, trans. Katica Szabo (São Paulo, 2000), 86.

¹⁰⁹ The offspring of these unions are very specifically categorized in the Spanish colonies into the *casta* system, but are more simply referred to in Brazil as *mestiço* or *mameluco*, if from European and Amerindian descent, or *mulato* or *pardo*, if from European and African descent. Sachs, Wilhelm, and Pinheiro, *Brazil: A Century of Change*, 25.

¹¹⁰ Susan Fisher Sterling, Berta M. Sichel, and Franklin Pedroso, eds. *Virgin Territory: Women, Gender, and History in Contemporary Brazilian Art* (Washington, DC: National Museum of Woman in the Arts, 2001), 130.

categories.¹¹¹ Neto explains this miscegenation, *mulatismo*, as creating “bastards both on the father’s and mother’s side.” He goes on to discuss the effect this has on the present racial composition of Brazilians: “This generated the complex of the *vira lata* [street dog], the ‘image’ with which we Brazilians identify ourselves the most.”¹¹² Similarly, the artist Hélio Oiticica describes Brazil as “a form of synthesis of the peoples, races, [and] habits, where the European speaks, but does not speak so loudly.”¹¹³ The effect of this ethnic mixing is a blurring of cultural order in which hierarchies cannot be based on gradations of race. However, as Latin American scholar Joshua Lund points out, any discussion of miscegenation necessitates a discussion of race, which historically has reinforced segregation based on skin color, and therefore Brazil should not be seen as a racially blind utopia, but rather as a highly complex racial mixture.¹¹⁴

While racial miscegenation had been taking place for centuries, culturally Brazil was patterned on a European model for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is this copying and aping of European forms and recreating colonial hierarchies, from which the Modernists wished to separate themselves. The Modern movement of the 1920s proposed that by returning to the indigenous practice of cannibalism, culture rather than human flesh could be devoured and would make the Brazilian people strong and unique. Ingesting, cannibalizing, processing, and incorporating European, African, and indigenous cultural, religious, and artistic practices would in turn nourish this *brasilidade*

¹¹¹ Levine and Crocitti, eds., *The Brazil Reader*, 386.

¹¹² Denegri, *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, 35.

¹¹³ Claire Bishop, *Participation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 113.

¹¹⁴ Joshua Lund, “Hybridity, Genre, Race,” in *Revisiting the Colonial Question in Latin America*, eds., Moraña and Jáuregui, 115.

in the same way racial miscegenation had integrated these disparate groups genetically.

Brazilian cultural critic Roberto Schwarz deftly describes the Brazilian condition:

Hence, stepping back from the search for causes, we are still left with that experience of incongruity which was our point of departure: the impression that Brazil gives of ill-assortedness – unmanageable contrasts, disproportions, non-sense, anachronisms, outrageous compromises and the like – the sort of combination which the art of Brazilian Modernism, and later on, Tropicalism, as well as political economy, have taught us to appreciate.¹¹⁵

This cannibalization of seemingly disparate and contradictory qualities describes Brazil in the twentieth-century. Neto's sculptures reference both anthropophagy and miscegenation because the viewer is swallowed by the installation, and, while inside the artwork, he or she becomes a part of the spectacle as the silhouetted forms of those inside are evident to those on the other side. When inside the *Nave* the participant is part of the spectacle for people on the outside, but at the time one is unaware of the gaze of those on the exterior. Even more literally, certain elements such as the scent from the spices become incorporated in the participant's body, and one physically takes minute particles of the artwork into one's own flesh. These ships or vessels take the viewer into memories associated with certain scents, and the large sail-like sheets of nylon reference the boats in which Europeans and later Africans traveled to Brazil. Neto sees each *Nave* as a body, and therefore joining the vessel that is the artwork with the human corporeal body is an act of miscegenation. The womb-like feel of the *Naves* contributes to the feeling that the participant is impregnating the installation and is (re)born when he or she exits the soft gauzy sanctuary. The interpenetration experienced in the *Naves* between artwork and viewer is a metaphor for the ultimate manifestation of intimacy possible between two bodies: consummated marriage. Neto was married inside his *Nave Utero Capela* [Nave,

¹¹⁵ Schwarz and Gledson, *Misplaced Ideas*, 25.

Uterine Chapel] in 2000 to his then eight months pregnant partner Lili, which is perhaps an extreme metaphor for the closeness and union engendered during the experience of being inside the *Nave*. However, a union with the *Nave* also prompts a phenomenological experience due to both the tactile and aromatic qualities of the installation as well as for the experience of time that occurs while walking through each tunnel.

Neto's *Naves* as well as his other participatory installations are frequently described as having a fun-house atmosphere, and reviewers often illustrate how children interact and play within the space.¹¹⁶ While this child-like curiosity and elation is often evoked through the elements of Neto's *Naves*, these formal aspects also serve to engage and excite the viewer's consciousness of his or her own body, the surroundings, and the process by which time is constructed and experienced. Neto describes his own concept of time and space: "I try to think of space as hyperspace, as if it could be worked on in a different dimension...I want people to get lost inside this transparent maze, a maze of time."¹¹⁷ Several critics remark upon the timelessness one feels when inside a *Nave* and the heightened awareness one has of one's body and of being "present."¹¹⁸ French philosopher Henri Bergson explains that this embodied cognizance is a result of movement as well as relations to space. He states:

As my body moves in space, all the other images vary, while that image, my body, remains invariable. I must therefore make it a centre, to which I refer all the other images...*My body* is that which stands out as the centre of these perceptions.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Ursprung, "A Daydream," and Gilda Williams, "Ernesto Neto: ICA, London."

¹¹⁷ Gonçalves, "Sensation and Time," 53.

¹¹⁸ Leydier, "Sex and Sacanagem," 36; Gonçalves, "Sensation and Time," 53; Hasegawa, "New Places of Contemplation," 145; Ursprung, "A Daydream," 124.

¹¹⁹ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory [Matière et Mémoire]*, ed. J. H. Muirhead, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 43 – 44. Emphasis in original.

Because of the enclosed, protected feeling engendered by the *Nave* as well as the novel quality of the strange walking surface, pungent scents, diffused light, and odd tactile sensations one is reminded that the body is the locus of these perceptions, and the presence and participation of the viewer is necessary for these aspects of the *Nave* to truly resonate. Phenomenological theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty is also concerned with embodied perception and describes how motion is a key component in constructing both space and time. He states:

The body's motion can play a part in the perception of the world only if it is itself an original intentionality, a manner of relating itself to the distinct object of knowledge. The world around us must be, not a system of objects which we synthesize, but a totality of things, open to us, towards which we project ourselves... The project towards motion is an act, which means that it traces out the spatio-temporal distance by actually covering it.¹²⁰

Merleau-Ponty argues that motion, which is action, aids in perceptions in that a direct physical exchange takes place between the participant and the object. Indeed, Neto's *Naves* cannot be "known" unless they are inhabited, traversed, touched, stretched, smelled, and then left. Again, it is through process that knowledge is gained and time is experienced. Bergson explains that experience is inherently composed of a duration because "we can analyze a thing, but not a process; we can break up extensity, but not duration. Or, if we persist in analyzing it, we unconsciously transform the process into a thing and duration into extensity."¹²¹ In making his installations participatory, a process by which the viewer is consumed by and made a part of the artwork, Neto insists on

¹²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [Phénoménologie de la Perception], trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962), 387.

¹²¹ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. R. L. Pogson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 219.

creating an experience in which the viewer takes agency, performs actions, and makes his or her own subjective relationship to the artwork. The *Naves* then are a mystical space in which time seems to stop and in which time, paradoxically, through motion and experience, is created. Lying down in a pool of plastic balls and gazing up at the ivory-colored nylon as it filters the soft light makes time cease to exist. However, walking through the tunnel, registering each step in order to balance, and coming upon scented sacks or objects to handle makes one hyper-aware of the passage of time and the duration of the experience itself. In a sense, the atmosphere within the *Nave*, like that of a church, encapsulates the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. As one critic described it, the *Naves* are a “*poetic construction of space-time.*”¹²² Thus, through the cannibalist qualities of the *Naves*, Neto uses a quintessential expression of Brazilian identity, which is further augmented by the interactive aspects that mix the viewer with the artwork in an act of miscegenation. Finally, the *Naves* draw on a phenomenological construction of time through the process and duration of this experience of ingestion and incorporation. These themes, which are so closely linked to the physical and metaphorical body, are present in current theories of identity and nationalism in Brazil as well as being constituent parts of Neto’s work.

The metaphor of anthropophagy has reemerged in Brazil in the last decade, perhaps most spectacularly as the theme of the 1999 São Paulo Biennale curated by Paulo Herkenhoff. However, the new construction of cannibalism is not the violent ingestion of foreign cultures, but rather takes into consideration the shifts in thinking about national identity about which Schwarz, Canclini and Cornejo-Polar write. Psychologist and art theorist Suely Rolnik eloquently observes the importance of anthropophagy at this

¹²² Fabeiro, Fernandez-cid, and Pereira, eds., *Ernesto Neto: O Corpo, Nu Tempo*, 211. Emphasis in original.

moment at the turn of the millennium when the concept of identity itself is called into question:

What the anthropophagist voice brings to this impasse that is unique is that it shows not only theoretically but, above all, pragmatically that the problem being posited is not the reconstitution of an identity... the issue is to detach sensation of subjective consistency from the model of identity; detach oneself from the identity-figurative principle in the construction of an 'at home'... An 'at home' made of partial, unique, provisional, fluctuating totalities, in a series of constant becomings, that each one (individual or group) constructs using the currents that touch its body...¹²³

In this more modern construction of identity, it is this subjective experience that informs one about the world and about oneself. While Brazilian tropes of anthropophagy and *mulatismo* are evident in Neto's work, they are not rigid or binding, nor are they limited to a Brazilian audience. The rapid globalization of the twentieth century has called the idea of a "national identity" into question, and hence theories of hybridity and heterogeneity are useful in a world context as well as describing the Brazilian condition. Neto's work has a strong presence and resonates with myriad participants because of the very modern reality of global *mulatismo* that occurs as people live in several countries in a lifetime, combine religions to suit their needs, and gradually abandon categories of race and ethnicity altogether. As Neto describes, "My sculptures are like this, about union, putting things together."¹²⁴ Instead of subscribing to a single group identity, through the *Naves*, the participant realizes that each subjective life experience leads to the fluid re-formulation of his or her identity at any given moment. The body is the locus of these sensuous encounters through which the self is realized, and even the experience of time is

¹²³ Rolnik, "Beyond the Identity Principle," 190.

¹²⁴ Pedrosa, *Ernesto Neto: Naves, Skies, Dreams*, 50.

relative to the individual. Neto seeks to “propose a new idea to feel and understand our universe...where [the public] can find something spiritually calm, that can maybe take them to another level, another dimension of understanding and living.”¹²⁵ Through the cannibal body of Neto’s *Naves*, the participant discovers this other dimension of living as the visitor enters the installation, (re)discovers his or her own body through phenomenological experience, and is born ‘reborn’ with a new understanding of his or her identity and the surrounding world.

¹²⁵ Cameron and Garcia-Anton, eds., *Ernesto Neto*, 30.

Chapter 2

Phenomenological Bodies: Phenomenology, Neoconcretism and Ernesto Neto's *While Nothing Happens*

We do not conceive of a work of art as a 'machine' or as an 'object,' but as a 'quasi-corpus' (quasi-body)... which can only be understood phenomenologically.

- Ferreira Gullar, *Neo-Concrete Manifesto*¹²⁶

Unlike Neto's *Naves* series, *While Nothing Happens* does not physically enclose the viewer.¹²⁷ The first experience of this artwork is the overwhelming scent diffused through the unusual corridor gallery that envelopes the viewer in such a way as to create an impression of having entered into a new space wholly constructed by Neto's sculpture. This phenomenological encounter begins before one even enters the gallery. The scent slips past doors and traces of spice left on people's clothing allow the aroma of cumin and cloves to travel into the adjacent buildings, encroaching on the more traditional viewing conditions and creating a sense of anticipation leading to the discovery of their origin in this giant hanging sculpture.

While Nothing Happens is composed of an octagonal wood frame with a diameter of approximately twenty-three feet over which semi-transparent ecru-colored nylon is

¹²⁶ Gullar, "Neo-Concrete Manifesto," 174.

¹²⁷ I was not personally able to experience this installation, and therefore the first-hand descriptions of *While Nothing Happens* are culled primarily from the catalogue for the show and an interview that was conducted before the sculpture was installed. Denegri, *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall* and Horch, "In the Studio: Ernesto Neto." In addition to these sources I also used articles dealing with similar installations including Adriano Pedrosa, "Ernesto Neto: Tanya Bonakdar, *Piff, Paff, Poff, Puff; Piff Piff; and Puff Puff*, March 29 – April 26, 1997," *Art/Text* 59, (November 1997/January 1998): 87 – 88; Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson and Phyllis Wattis, "Ernesto Neto/ Matrix 190," Matrix Exhibition at the University of California Berkeley Art Museum, Feb 18 – Apr 15, 2001; and Carol Vogel, "Inside Art: Aromatic Installation," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2009.

stretched and from which hang nearly one hundred tubular sacks filled with 1,500 pounds of spices: black pepper, turmeric, ground clove, ground ginger, and cumin (Fig. 3).¹²⁸ The whole structure is suspended from the twenty-six foot high metal armature holding the glass roof of the gallery in place and is counter-weighted by sacks filled with sand. Neto states: “I choose the filling based on the emotion I want... For this sculpture, I want spices in the sculpture’s center, its heart, to raise the emotional temperature, and then sand on the outside... to be cool and neutral.”¹²⁹ The lowest elements of the sculpture hang approximately three feet from the ground. The sacks are roughly the same size but fall to various levels, creating a dense forest of supple stalks each terminating in a compact node filled with colorful and aromatic spices (Fig. 17). Neto refers to these bulbs as “*copulas*,” which derives from the Portuguese word for intimate unity or copulation, and he describes the whole form as “an upside down flower, full of spices’ drops falling down.”¹³⁰ The reproductive organs of this sculptural flower are the spice-filled aromatic sacks, which pollinate the air as well as those museum visitors who happen to brush up against them.

Approaching the work the individual scents become more discernible and take on distinct locations. Sweet clove, earthy turmeric, smoky black pepper, nutty cumin, and sharp ginger emanate from the pendulous bulbs, and colors are also more recognizable in subtle shades of red to sandy browns, light to dark grays, and orange to butter yellows. Finally, when one has walked up to and into this sculpture, one is immersed in smell and

¹²⁸ Horch, “In the Studio: Ernesto Neto,” 72.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³⁰ Florence Malbran, “Review: Ernesto Neto at the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea,” *Art Nexus* 7, no 71 (December 2008/February 2009); Denegri, *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, 39.

the confusion of nylon tubes, which are simultaneously enticing and threatening as the sculpture hangs overhead (Fig. 18). Neto very carefully planned which tubes contain each spice, and he created a swirling pattern much like the whirl patterns in flowers, pinecones, or galaxies (Fig. 19). One might not be aware of these twisting arms because the scent of each spice blends in this vortex, but upon closer inspection of each tube and inhalation of individual scents, the swirling trail can lead one in a circular motion following one spice bag to another to another. Thus, the more attentive participant is directed visually and aromatically to circumambulate the installation. The finely ground spices penetrate the tightly knit nylon and a fine dust rubs off on hands or errant shoulders and elbows as well as lightly dusts the floor. In this way the viewer becomes part of the installation as his or her body pollinates not only the other nodes, but also other parts of the museum as the spice and scent linger.

After standing in the midst of these dangling tubes, one emerges with the feeling that time has slowed down and one has returned to the present after having been immersed in memory and the past. The vast expanse of the glass corridor spreads wide open after the careful maneuvering under the sculpture. The light pours in, unobstructed, much brighter than the softly filtered dappled light that penetrates the floating form. One brushes faint traces of spice powder from clothes and hands and tactile experience takes on great dimension; a rough wool sweater feels harsh in comparison to the smooth, almost fleshy nylon nodules and their fine-grained contents. One is also aware of the other ambient scents because of heightened olfactory sensitivity due to the experience. The title *While Nothing Happens* is ironic, as indeed several experiences take place and the sculpture causes the viewer's relationship to his or her surroundings and to his or her

own body to take on a newly recognized significance. The scent of this installation engages different senses to activate the viewer's body, and places Neto's artwork in the lineage of the Brazilian Neoconcrete movement, especially the artwork of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, who adopted philosophy from Henri Bergson and phenomenological theories from Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The Neoconcrete movement also developed techniques to challenge fixed notions of identity to make political statements in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, Neto's choice of spices evokes the colonial history of Brazil.

Originally intended to be a sculpture courtyard, the "Glass Pagoda" where Neto's sculpture *While Nothing Happens* was installed is flooded with natural light as a slight breeze moves through the length of the former street (Fig. 20). Neto was aware of this gentle air current and specifically created this piece to allow for movement as well as the dispersal of scent through the space.¹³¹ It is significant that the installation, which was shown from May 2008 to February 2009, was commissioned for this space because it introduced the notion that Neto's art is actively rejecting the confines of a white cube display. The space in which this piece is installed is already a break from what is expected. Neto writes in the exhibition catalogue about his antipathy for the anesthetizing effect of white cube spaces:

...the fragmentation in the field of human relationships generates a discontinuity in social structures, so that in the end we find ourselves living in a complex world, which is like the colony of separate micro-worlds. The spaces we inhabit, the rooms in which we sleep, eat, pee and work are structured pretty much in the same way; a series of separated cubes, of closed boxes I would say, that determine not only the dynamics of our interpersonal relationships but also our relationship with our own body. The relation with our body is culturally determined and quite deformed I'd say...¹³²

¹³¹ Denegri, *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, 39.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 23.

Part of Neto's project is to work against these fragmented environments and reconnect the mind and body of the viewer. By situating his sculptures in non-traditional locations, Neto begins to move art away from this concept of "closed boxes" and into a new place where more personal, social, and physical interactions and responses are possible. Neto posits that if art remains enclosed in these "separate cubes," the viewer will remain distant from his or her own body. Furthermore, by incorporating scents into his artwork, Neto escapes the restrictions of the white box both literally and figuratively.

Brian O'Doherty's text, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, was published in 1976, just after a time of great artistic and social upheaval. Although it is now over thirty years old, this description of art galleries and museums is still apt today in many cases. He depicts the museum space as typically white, geometric, void of any trappings of human existence, hygienic, and emotionally unwelcoming.¹³³ Stepping off of the Via Reggio Emilia into the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Rome (MACRO), the visitor abandons the sounds of zooming Vespas, rumbling buses, and honking cars. This participant is also removed from the myriad scents present in the streets of Rome: choking exhaust, lingering animal excrement, pungent bodily odors, and fresh fruit, fresh flowers, and fresh bread of the nearby Piazza Alessandria market.¹³⁴ True to O'Doherty's depiction, the gallery space is, ostensibly, sterile.

¹³³ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, CA: Lapis Press, 1976), 15.

¹³⁴ Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Rome's Modern Art Gallery to Get Permanent Home: Development of the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea," *Art in America* 85 (February, 1997): 27.

MACRO is comprised of buildings from a large industrial complex of the Peroni beer company built at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹³⁵ Architects Francesco Stefanori, Antonio Simbolotti and Mauro Panunti remodeled this core in the late 1990s, and it was planned as an expansion of the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. However, this changed and the museum opened as MACRO in 2002 and underwent another renovation and expansion project by French architect Odile Decq. In its present state the museum structure contains exhibition spaces, a multi-media library, conference hall, art studio, bookstore, and café.¹³⁶ The majority of MACRO's galleries are large white spaces, but between two of these buildings is what is called the "Glass Pagoda." Enclosing an interior alley, this transparent glass hall is thirty-nine feet wide, a hundred sixty-nine feet long and the roof peaks at twenty-six feet. A sense of being outside and inside simultaneously occurs because the pale yellow, slightly rusticated, exterior walls of the two buildings that create the corridor and the glass on either end and overhead present an almost uninterrupted view of the outside world. One is made even more conscious of the difference between this space and the rest of the museum because one has to have walked through several galleries in the main structure before reaching this light-flooded corridor when passing into another building (Fig. 21).

As O'Doherty points out, the effect this sanitization has on the viewing experience is to alienate the viewer from his own body as the "Eye" perceives and the "Spectator" moves around: "Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and

¹³⁵ Vetrocq, "Rome's Modern Art Gallery," 27.

¹³⁶ Shara Wasserman, "Report from Italy: Roma Renovatio," *Art in America* 91, no. 6 (June, 2003): 55.

minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not...”¹³⁷ O’Doherty’s construction of “Eye” and “Spectator” is precisely the mind and body dichotomy that Merleau-Ponty wishes to reunite in his phenomenological philosophy. Additionally, this cleavage is raised in the Brazilian Neoconcrete movement’s juxtaposition of the “eye-machine” versus the “eye-body.”¹³⁸ All this is to say that the museum-going public has come to expect a clean, clinical atmosphere in which to view art, especially modern art, and this has resulted in a distance developing between art and viewer as well as between the viewer’s body and his or her mind.

Due to the artificial and sterile environment of the white cube the modern viewer is aware of the space and becomes divorced from his or her own bodily senses. Removing art from the strictly visual realm is the only way to reconcile O’Doherty’s “Eye” and “Spectator” and again incorporate experience. O’Doherty explains how this occurs:

The Eye urges the body around to provide it with information – the body becomes a data-gatherer. There is heavy traffic in both directions on this sensory highway – between sensation conceptualized and concept actualized. In this unstable rapprochement lie the origins of perceptual scenarios, performance, and body art.¹³⁹

The phenomenological aspects of Neto’s work, namely the introduction of scent, which activates the sense of smell, as well as circumambulation and tactile manipulation, help to heal the fracture between mind and body that takes place when viewing art.

This sterility of the white cube gallery also includes the evacuation of all odors. Without an odor the gallery space can maintain a neutral balance and remove itself from

¹³⁷ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15.

¹³⁸ Gullar, “Neo-Concrete Manifesto,” 174.

¹³⁹ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 52.

the human social arena. This de-odorized white cube is then a universal space into which modern art objects arise from nowhere. As Jim Drobnick writes: “to express an identifiable odor would be to admit to particularized interest,” and therefore a scentless space is experienced as an impartial location.¹⁴⁰ However, while scent, the agent that excites an olfactory response, can be eliminated from museum spaces, the sense of smell and act of smelling cannot.

Smell, a proximal sense like touch and taste, is more problematic than the remote senses of sight or hearing because a physical incorporation takes place. Scent molecules enter the nasal passages and trigger olfactory nerve reactions, which in turn can cause emotional responses and memory recollection in the brain in addition to identification of the scent itself (Fig. 22).¹⁴¹ Because of the physicality of scent, one feels especially violated when unpleasant aromas are inhaled and particles are absorbed through the mouth and nose. Drobnick notes that because of the visceral nature of smell, ethical questions arise as to whether one must be forewarned and given a choice about whether or not to expose oneself when in a controlled environment.¹⁴² While one does not have the choice to smell or not smell when walking down the street, one could choose not to enter a museum space in which powerful scents like human excrement are used in artworks like Angela Ellsworth’s *Actual Odor* (1997), which consisted of a cocktail dress

¹⁴⁰ David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2005), 267.

¹⁴¹ Maria Larsson and Johan Willander, “Autobiographical Odor Memory,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences: International Symposium on Olfaction and Taste*, no. 1170 (2009): 321.

¹⁴² Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, 274.

soaked in her own urine that she wore to an art opening.¹⁴³ Drobnick further contends that the introduction of scent into the museum subsequently opens the space to “behaviors, activities and identities that are not necessarily Western, privileged and masculine.”¹⁴⁴ The sense of smell is specifically banished from the white cube for its potential to activate and arouse the visitor psychologically, politically, and sexually. Theories suggest that the proximity of the olfactory area of the brain to the emotional center, the amygdala, contributes to the more emotional responses to scent.¹⁴⁵

Today smell is not a sense that is commonly spoken about unless it is an extreme. Certainly one remarks upon the foul smell of rotting garbage or the pleasant aroma of fragrant flowers. The cultural emphasis on scent has steadily decreased since the classical period of Greece and Rome, and through the age of Enlightenment and the twentieth century, vision took hold as the primary sense due to science and empirical methods.¹⁴⁶ Martin Jay traces the history of vision in his text *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Through this examination Jay finds that the notion of sight as the “noblest sense” is rooted in the writing of René Descartes from 1637.¹⁴⁷ Vision was released from its use in the religious worship of icons and in the

¹⁴³ Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets, “The Aesthetics of Smelly Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, 3 (2007): 273.

¹⁴⁴ Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, 272.

¹⁴⁵ Wen Zhou and Denise Chen, “Sociochemosensory and Emotional Functions: Behavioral Evidence for Shared Mechanisms,” *Psychological Science* 20, 9 (2009): 1123.

¹⁴⁶ Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3.

¹⁴⁷ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 71.

early modern period was employed for scientific inquiry.¹⁴⁸ Constance Classen similarly maps the history of scent in her text *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. She finds that this emphasis on vision as the primary sense led directly to the devaluation of scent in the modern period.¹⁴⁹ Scent was long vilified as the agent responsible for the spread of the plague in the medieval period and this belief persisted up to nineteenth century London when the miasma of the open sewers was thought to be the cause of cholera and typhus outbreaks.¹⁵⁰ Various sanitation reforms were passed in urban centers that regulated sewers, septic systems, garbage removal and clean water supplies.¹⁵¹ It is through the improvements in vision, however, such as microscopes, that scientists were able to see beyond what is visible to the unaided senses: germs. Thus, while scent was vindicated as the perpetrator, vision was the savior. As a result of these public legislations, scent was systematically eradicated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jay finds that vision's exalted position in the hierarchy of senses holds true especially in France due to the persistence of Cartesian philosophy.¹⁵² As Neto observes:

When you look at countries like France and Switzerland, the relationship between the figure and the background is always distinct. Everyone knows where they stand, there are fixed rules, the order is clear. In Brazil, the relationship between the figure and the background is fluid and blurred. There is a lot of creative thinking and interaction between people... Developed societies are too purely visual. Brazil still has traces of primitive societies that rely on all of their senses. My work is atmospheric and intuitive.

¹⁴⁸ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 44 – 45.

¹⁴⁹ Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*, 3.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59 and 78.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵² Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 69.

We have to feel our way through situations – to swing a little – otherwise we’re going to crash.¹⁵³

Neto, as an outsider to Europe, comments on the rigid, visual societies of the Old World, and professes his “primitive” mentality by using scent, touch, and motion in his installations. Neto’s work continues the dialogue between Europe’s post-Enlightenment reliance on vision to establish fact and the more corporeal and multisensory data gathering of earlier times and peoples.

As the modern era progressed and cities began to rid themselves of the detritus left by urban dwellers, new open spaces emerged that aspired to be “uniform, infinite, [and] isotropic” in order to be of the utmost utility for scientific as well as capitalist aims.¹⁵⁴ It is these spaces that O’Doherty describes in the modern art museum. It is not only sanitation that has fostered this visual environment, but also the ways in which technology has advanced. Classen notes that both computers and televisions are without scent, and Jay posits that part of vision’s importance is promoted because of these technologies and the improvements to vision in order to view the macro (the cosmos) and the micro (atoms).¹⁵⁵ Because of this hierarchical shift, the sense of smell is not traditionally appealed to in artistic practice. Both Jim Drobnick and Larry Shiner recount that smell was excluded on the grounds that it did not merit attention because it was fleeting, the complexity and myriad elements of scent could not be reliably discerned, and finally that scent could not be judged because it is an experience and not an object

¹⁵³ *Economist*, September 9, 2006: 81.

¹⁵⁴ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 57.

¹⁵⁵ Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*, 203; Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 65 – 66.

that one contemplates.¹⁵⁶ However, contemporary artists are using scents for exactly these reasons. Moreover, recent studies performed in experimental psychology discovered the strong associative powers of scent that draw together memory with phenomenological experience. Therefore, when scent is purposely used in artworks such as *While Nothing Happens*, it can be seen as both a sensory component of the experience as well as a critique of the museum institution and challenge to the hegemony of vision.

In response to the Cartesian positivism of the nineteenth century, the philosophical theory of Henri Bergson, who published *Creative Evolution* in 1907, was more metaphysical in nature and addressed the body as the locus of sensation and experience. This anti-positivist movement continued in the mid-twentieth-century in the phenomenological writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who published *The Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945. Both these writers raised questions about the nobility of sight, and some scholars claim that Bergson was in fact the first modern philosopher to refute sight's dominance.¹⁵⁷ Bergsonism and phenomenology are important in discussing Neto because his artworks engender a multisensory engagement with the viewer, and he desires to reunite the mind and the body through an artistic experience. When Neto was asked if he was trying to reconcile "body mind problems" he responded:

For me mind and body are one thing, always together. I don't even feel that they are a complimentary duality for they are fully the same thing. I believe in the sensual body, and it is through the movement of such body-minds that we connect the things in this world, in life...¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Shiner and Kriskovets, "The Aesthetics of Smelly Art," 275 – 277.

¹⁵⁷ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 186.

¹⁵⁸ Arning, "Interview: Ernesto Neto."

The writing of Bergson and Merleau-Ponty are a valid lens through which to consider Neto's oeuvre because of formal qualities of his installations, including the necessity of being physically present as well as the requirement of motion and tactile manipulation – themes that also occur in the artwork of some of Neto's greatest influences: Neoconcrete artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark.

The artwork and philosophical affinities of the Neoconcrete artists are germane to a discussion of Neto because his artwork is seen as a continuation of their artistic trajectory; he refers specifically to Oiticica and Clark as primary influences.¹⁵⁹ When asked about the impact that Oiticica and Clark have on his work, Neto responds: “I feel Lygia close to my skin, while Hélio dances in my mind. Lygia is intimacy; Hélio is movement.”¹⁶⁰ Neto openly acknowledges his indebtedness to these Neoconcrete artists and much of his practice reflects their shared goals for an active viewer.

The Neoconcrete movement's interest in reconnecting the body and the spirit is derived specifically from Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, whose writing would have been known to the intellectual circles of Brazil and to the educated elite, including the highly influential artists Oiticica and Clark. Oiticica quotes Bergson extensively in his journal from 1959, and Clark's biographer and friend since the 1960s, Yve-Alain Bois, claims that the *Neo-concrete Manifesto* by Gullar was “entirely based on Lygia's reinterpretation of the tradition of geometric abstraction through the lens of the phenomenology of perception, quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work, which she had recently

¹⁵⁹ Felipa de Almeida, “Ernesto Neto: Sensory Experiences,” *Sur la Terre* (2005): 12 – 13.

¹⁶⁰ Denegri, *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, 9.

discovered and which would remain a lifelong interest.”¹⁶¹ These dominant and prominent figures in the Neoconcrete movement were aware of much of the philosophy and art developing in France in the 1940s and 1950s, and artistic and literary movements such as these were often discussed in the mass press during the twentieth century in Latin America.¹⁶² Additionally, Clark spent time in Paris under the tutelage of Fernand Léger in 1952 and could have been familiar with other phenomenological writers as well.¹⁶³

Bergson’s and Merleau-Ponty’s writing remained a presence in Brazil throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” was translated into Portuguese as “A Linguagem Indireta e as Vozes do Silêncio” and printed in the philosophy journal *The Thinkers* [Os Pensadores] in 1980.¹⁶⁴ *The Thinkers* also published Portuguese translations of works by Bergson in 1989. Therefore, textual evidence shows that phenomenology and Bergsonism were topics of interest in the artistic and intellectual discourses of the second half of the twentieth-century in Brazil, were known to the Neoconcrete artists, continued to be of interest to later generations, and are a point of contact between Neto and his artistic forebears.

Merleau-Ponty writes in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

What is phenomenology? Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any

¹⁶¹ Ramirez, Figueiredo, and Phelan, eds., *The Body of Color*, 190; Bois, ed., *Geometric Abstraction*, 88.

¹⁶² Sullivan, ed. *Brazil: Body & Soul*, 14; Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 163 – 164; Sachs, Wilhelm, and Pinheiro, eds., *Brazil: A Century of Change*, 123.

¹⁶³ Sterling, Sichel and Pedroso, eds., *Virgin Territory*, 41; Bois, *Geometric Abstraction*, 86.

¹⁶⁴ Osorio, “Lygia Pape: Experimentation and Resistance,” 575.

starting point other than that of their ‘facticity.’ – *all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world*, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a ‘rigorous science,’ but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we ‘live’ them.¹⁶⁵

In this construction, the phenomenological experience occurs when one is physically interacting with the environment as a way to gain knowledge about the world. In this way, to rephrase O’Doherty, phenomena are conceptualized and perception is realized. The core of the phenomenological project is knowledge derived through direct experience. Additionally, the body’s physical character and the philosophical mind are reincorporated to gain knowledge about concepts such as perception and consciousness and root them in the world as we “live” it. Merleau-Ponty finds that a person only knows of his or her existence through a direct contact with that existence, which comes through one’s primitive “sensory fields.”¹⁶⁶

This lived experience is highly subjective and is not universal. In the case of this installation, our direct experience of scent is perhaps the most jarring and also the most subjective. Walking amongst the bulbs of ground clove, a North American participant might recall winter holidays and warm cider, and cumin could raise memories of exotic curry dishes and distant locations. However, these memories and phenomenological responses are purely subjective and vary from person to person. Similarly, the world is created differently for each individual. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself the tradition which I elect to carry on, or the

¹⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii. My emphasis.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 387 and 424.

horizon whose distance from me would be abolished – since that distance is not one of its properties – if I were not there to scan it with my gaze.¹⁶⁷

This subjective experience of the world leads us to know ourselves by way of knowing what is around us. Part of this knowledge takes place in the form of recalling memories, which is of importance to phenomenology as well as Neto's work.

Recent experiments in psychology have found that memory is strongly linked to smell and encounters with scents associated with an event more vividly evoked the past than images or sounds.¹⁶⁸ Studies have also found that these strong memories are often from childhood and have a greater capacity to move people mentally to another time than auditory or visual cues.¹⁶⁹ Because these memories are rarely evoked, there is usually a sudden and shocking feeling that accompanies their recollection.¹⁷⁰ Thus, artworks such as this one are able to simultaneously make one more aware of the present surroundings and the body as well as momentarily mentally remove one to other locations and experiences in time. This idea of time and memory is also discussed in phenomenology as an accumulation or the duration of events – to use Bergson's term, *durée*.

Bergson describes a constant accumulation of moments and believes that each “now” contains every previous instant.¹⁷¹ Bergson writes specifically about how memory and the present meld into one in *Matter and Memory* (1896):

¹⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

¹⁶⁸ Larsson and Willander, “Autobiographical Odor Memory,” 319.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Bergson, *Selections from Bergson*, 173.

There comes a moment when the recollection thus brought down is capable of blending so well with the present perception that we cannot say where the perception ends or where memory begins. At that precise moment, memory, instead of capriciously sending in and calling back its images, follows regularly, in all their details, the movements of the body.¹⁷²

This confusion of past and present occurs when experiencing Neto's installation because the various scents evoke such strong recollections. In regard to the subjectivity of memory and time, Merleau-Ponty states, "Time is, therefore, not a real process, not an actual succession that I am content to record. It arises from *my* relation to things."¹⁷³ He believes in an instantaneous 'now' that is formulated by the embodied presence of the viewer within the physical environment. In the case of Neto, each viewer brings the entirety of his past experience into the work as he or she engages with the space and the scent. The spices call to mind memories and transport the viewer in time as well as space. Thus, Neto's work operates in two ways, through both an accumulation of time as well as the awareness of the present moment. He states that his "main objective is to establish the possibility of belief in two parallel times, one that is absolute, cosmic...and another one that belongs to everyday life."¹⁷⁴ Indeed this sensation of a dual time is manipulated through both the "cosmic" memory recalled by scents as well as the literal "everyday" feeling of entering a new space created by the forest of hanging sacks.

Through these physical and mental phenomenological experiences of the world and of memory, Merleau-Ponty goes on to propose that it is only through this self-

¹⁷² Bergson, *Selections from Bergson*, 54.

¹⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 412. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁴ Gonçalves, "Sensation and Time," 51.

knowledge that we can ever truly achieve freedom.¹⁷⁵ Bergson defines freedom in *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889):

Freedom is the relation of the concrete self to the act which it performs. This relation is indefinable, just because we *are* free. For we can analyze a thing, but not a process; we can break up extensity, but not duration [*durée*].¹⁷⁶

Bergson argues that freedom can only be demonstrated through action because performing an act necessitates a passage of time in which it is completed. He believes that merely existing as an object is to engage in only a spatial dimension and not a temporal one. However, time and the passage of time cannot be fragmented in the way that an object can, and therefore an existential definition of freedom is that we must have an awareness of actions, experiences, and sensations: things that take place over time. Thus, the emancipatory project of phenomenology and Bergsonism call for us to embrace the temporal dimension through our actions, our direct bodily contacts, which give us both self-knowledge and world knowledge. As Neto states, “The actual experience is the most important to comprehend.”¹⁷⁷ This phenomenological theme is central to the ideology of the Neoconcrete movement, which heavily influenced Neto.

The Neoconcrete movement was centered in Rio de Janeiro and was organized from 1959 to 1961, following the publication of Ferreira Gullar’s *Neo-concrete Manifesto* [Manifesto Neo-concreto] in the “Sunday Supplement” to the *Jornal do Brasil*.¹⁷⁸ This group was reacting against the Concrete movement in São Paulo, which arose in 1952

¹⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 453.

¹⁷⁶ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 219. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁷ Arning, “Interview: Ernesto Neto.”

¹⁷⁸ Sullivan, *Brazil: Body & Soul*, 25.

and strove to combine mass communication and industrial production by adhering to strict geometric forms and minimalist strategies.¹⁷⁹ The Neoconcretists split from the São Paulo group over stylistic differences and moved away from the minimalism and geometric abstraction that had dominated the Brazilian art scene.¹⁸⁰ The size and scope of this avant-garde art went well beyond painting or sculpture and became full ‘projects’ with temporal aspects due to their impermanence.¹⁸¹ Installation and site-specific art resists not only the conventional setting of the museum, but also avoids commodification through the art market.¹⁸² Artists such as Oiticica and Clark were interested in moving beyond optical art towards an art that fully engaged and incorporated the artwork, artist, and viewer.¹⁸³

Gullar’s Neoconcrete Manifesto explained the group’s dedication to participatory art: “We do not conceive of a work of art as a ‘machine’ or as an ‘object,’ but as a ‘quasi-corpus’ (quasi-body)... which can only be understood phenomenologically.”¹⁸⁴ He goes on to state that in traditional forms of art “the artist speaks to the eye as an instrument and not to the eye as a human organ capable of interaction with the world; the artist speaks to the eye-machine and not to the eye-body.”¹⁸⁵ Again, the desire to reconnect the body and mind through an art experience is apparent, and the Neoconcrete artists question the

¹⁷⁹ Sullivan, *Brazil: Body & Soul*, 392.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 392 – 393.

¹⁸¹ Kwon, “One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg, 43.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁸³ Sullivan, *Brazil: Body & Soul*, 393.

¹⁸⁴ Gullar, “Neo-Concrete Manifesto,” 174.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

dominance of the museum institution as well as exalting the emancipating properties of subjective interaction with artwork. The experience in which the Neoconcrete artists hoped to engage participants is called *vivência*, or the total-act-of-being. Oiticica articulates the concept as “an unbalance for the equilibrium of being.”¹⁸⁶ He creates this moment of uncertainty in the participant by forcing him or her to enter a new environment or utilize different senses that one might not expect when going to look at art. In the 1970s *vivência* was not only used to denote the physical experience of the body but also used to bring awareness to socio-political issues.¹⁸⁷ For example, Oiticica’s *Parangolés*, which were bright colored capes made from cheap material, were meant to be worn while dancing and were inspired by his interaction with members of the samba school of the biggest *favela* (slum) in Rio de Janeiro, Mangueira.¹⁸⁸ When these were first exhibited in 1965 in the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio, Oiticica invited his friends from the *favela* to the opening to demonstrate how the *Parangolés* were meant to be used, but before they began to perform the museum director had them evicted because of their obvious poverty.¹⁸⁹ Thus, the physical presence of these people at Oiticica’s opening brought attention to their socioeconomic position as they were denied access despite being participants meant to interact with the *Parangolés* at the invitation of the artist.

In addition to an interest in phenomenology, much of the Neoconcretists’ language is culled from the Brazilian modern movement in the 1920s and particularly

¹⁸⁶ Bishop, *Participation*, 106.

¹⁸⁷ Felicity Lunn, ed., *Vivência: Dialogues between the Works of Brazilian Artists from 1960s-2002* (Walsall: The New Art Gallery, 2002), 54.

¹⁸⁸ Anna Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés*,” *Art Journal* 63 (Summer 2004): 59.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

from Oswald de Andrade's writing and metaphorical cannibalism.¹⁹⁰ Anthropophagy and phenomenology are similar in their use of the body literally and metaphorically.

Oswald's *Cannibalist Manifesto* [Manifesto Antropófago] from 1928 calls for a phenomenological and anthropophagic unity between the spirit to the physical body, which was taken up by the Neoconcrete artists and is evident in the continued use of body metaphors that arise in both their writing and their artistic production.¹⁹¹

Despite the group informally disbanding in 1961, Oiticica and Clark continued incorporating multisensory interactions in their artwork, which made it progressively difficult for them to exhibit in traditional museum spaces, as the presence of the viewer was required to activate the artwork. Oiticica never did away with exhibition completely, but as his artistic practice developed, his works took on more participatory aspects and became less easy to place in a static setting. In her artworks, or art therapies as she came to call them, Clark eventually eschewed exhibition altogether in favor of direct experience.¹⁹² Much of Oiticica and Clark's work can only be fully experienced through action.

One of the Neoconcretists' most formative works is Oiticica's 1969 installation entitled *Eden*, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, which is also referred to as the *Whitechapel Exhibition/Experience* (Fig. 23). *Eden* was a full gallery installation composed of several environments [*Penetraveis*] one would walk through with changing sounds, different textures underfoot (sand, carpet, pebbles), and participatory elements

¹⁹⁰ See Chapter 1 for a more thorough analysis of cannibalism in Brazil. King, *On Modern Latin American Fiction*, 42.

¹⁹¹ Martin and Ruiz, eds., *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom*, 39.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 108.

such as containers or boxes [*Bolides*] to open, “nests” to lie down in, and capes [*Parangolés*] in which to dress. In the *Bolides*, which is translated as *Fireballs*, Oiticica fills the containers with colorful powders, which have formal similarities to Neto’s spices, and also require the viewer to open and close the object or remove a piece of cloth in order to fully experience the artwork (Fig. 15).¹⁹³ In this work the participant is asked to move through the space, feel different textures, handle objects, don costumes, and through this process take on other identities. In a 1965 letter to Clark, Oiticica explains the idea behind installations like *Eden*, which he produced years later. He writes:

The things or, better still, the objects that *are* create a different relation with objective space: they ‘dislocate’ the environmental space away from obvious, already known, relations. Here is the key to what I call ‘environmental art:’ the eternally mobile, the transformable, which is structured by both the action of the spectator and that which is static.¹⁹⁴

In this statement Oiticica seems to almost restate Merleau-Ponty’s construction of experience consisting of both the object and the participant. The “dislocation” Oiticica references is an act of decentering the identity that Claire Bishop posits makes viewers “more equipped to negotiate [their] actions in the world and with other people.”¹⁹⁵ Therefore, by forcing the participant to shift his or her identity, the participant is also challenged to empathize with others. Neto claims that this is also his intent and states:

I want an art that will connect us to the other, that will help us interact with other people, that will show us the limit. But this limit between you and me is not a wall; it’s a place of sensations, a place of exchange and continuity between people, a skin of existence and relationships.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Martin and Ruiz, eds., *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom*, 42.

¹⁹⁴ Bishop, *Participation*, 108.

¹⁹⁵ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 133.

¹⁹⁶ Szeemann and Lavelli, eds., *49th Venice Biennale*, 180.

In the installation *While Nothing Happens*, Neto accomplishes this because there is a shared experience of smelling the spices and also a subjective experience of what these scents evoke for each individual. Therefore, we connect to one another through the scent as well as define ourselves by our unique memory, which does not denote a limit between people, but rather is used as a point of contact as visitors express these varied evocations to one another and discuss the memories associated with each scent.

Like Oiticica, many of Clark's projects also engender moments of decentering and expanding identity. Prior to Oiticica's *Eden*, Clark composed her piece *The I and You* (1967), which consisted of two plastic body suits lined in different materials meant to evoke the sensation of being the opposite sex (Fig. 24). Soft textiles were juxtaposed with steel wool in areas where women have smooth skin and men have hair.¹⁹⁷ Again, this process challenged one to become someone else, by wearing certain costumes and experiencing life through another.¹⁹⁸ In this construction, the viewer puts on or casts off different identities in accordance with the roles performed by his or her body. In phenomenological terms each individual is constructing his or her "self" in relation to the sensorial world around him or her through these bodily impressions. After removing the suit, the viewer returns to his or her own "identity." In Neto's work, identity is not made unstable, but rather, after passing through the space of the installation, he intends for the viewer to become more aware of his or her own body and surroundings due to the contrasts.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Martin and Ruiz, *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom*, 105.

¹⁹⁸ Osorio, "Lygia Pape," 577.

¹⁹⁹ Pedrosa, ed., *Naves, Skies, Dreams*, 55.

Owing to this new self-awareness, the interactions between participants, and the micro-communities that form during the experience, critics such as Nicolas Bourriaud find that relational art, as it is now commonly referred to, has the aspiration to unite people politically through this emancipatory experience.²⁰⁰ The crux of this art is its need for an embodied viewer, which addresses what the Neoconcretists called *estar*, or presence. At this time, the theme of presence was of paramount importance to installation artists outside of Brazil as well, such as the American Minimalists. James Meyer remarks that the desire for presence in the 1960s suggested “an experience of actualness and authenticity that would contravene the depredations of an increasingly mediated ‘one dimensional’ society.”²⁰¹ In the case of Brazil, the art world and the museum were becoming institutionalized as Rio de Janeiro’s Museu de Arte Moderna was founded in 1948 and São Paulo’s Museu de Arte Moderna in 1949. Similarly, the São Paulo Biennale began in 1951. The effect of these well-established, government-run art venues was that the former avant-garde movement became a part of the mainstream. Installation art seeks to operate outside of each of these in order to transfer meaning from the object to its surroundings, to place emphasis on embodied experience over a purely intellectual exercise, and to attempt to thwart the capitalist-driven art market.²⁰² The fact that Neto’s installations are not permanent joins them to the tradition of *estar*, which demands that viewers make a pilgrimage to a site in order to enjoy a temporal experience that is fleeting and impermanent.

²⁰⁰ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 118.

²⁰¹ James Meyer, “The Functional Site: or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,” in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg, 26.

²⁰² Kwon, “One Place After Another,” 39.

The project of artists such as Oiticica and Clark became one of subverting the military regime in place after 1964, which plunged Brazil “into darkness” and reduced the country to “absolute intellectual poverty.”²⁰³ Prior to the 1964 coupe, Brazil had a series of leaders, both democratically elected and installed as dictators, and there was almost constant political unrest. In 1930, Getulio Vargas deposed the elected president and ran a provisional government until 1945 when he was removed by the military generals.²⁰⁴ During this time Vargas established the *New State* [Estatu Novo], which unified the nation under a strong federal government and created agencies to address education, health, labor relations, industrial policy and commerce.²⁰⁵ This period was one of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. A democratic government was established in 1946, and in 1955, Juscelino Kubitschek was elected. He went on to found the new capital of Brasilia in 1960. However, he was removed by military coup in 1964 because runaway inflation and debt caused economic and political unrest.²⁰⁶ Brazil was once again a dictatorship. In 1968, Brazil was, like most western countries, in turmoil. Factory workers went on strike, students protested against military police and conservatives in the universities, and radicalized groups went underground.²⁰⁷ A “coup within a coup” in 1968 established a firmer grasp on these rebellious and insubordinate groups.²⁰⁸ Again, there was rapid modernization, during which time a “second industrial

²⁰³ Sterling, Sichel, and Pedroso, *Virgin Territory*, 41.

²⁰⁴ Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 4 – 11.

²⁰⁵ Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 6; Sachs, Wilhelm, and Pinheiro, *Brazil: A Century of Change*, 124.

²⁰⁶ Sachs, Wilhelm, and Pinheiro, *Brazil: A Century of Change*, xi.

²⁰⁷ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 2.

²⁰⁸ Levine and Crocitti, eds., *The Brazil Reader*, 237.

revolution” took place, which resulted in economic growth of 11% from 1968 to 1973.²⁰⁹ However, despite this time of financial success the regime was simultaneously dismantling any opposition forces.²¹⁰ Due to the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5) of 1968, artists and musicians fled the country including Clark, who remained in Paris from 1968 until 1976, and Oiticica, who moved to London in 1969 and then to New York from 1970 to 1978.²¹¹ They continued to produce this multisensory art, which in turn was a protest against this regime. Thus, in the middle to late 1960s Brazilian installation art took on the government directly, and art had a strong revolutionary and transforming role in society.²¹²

Oiticica wrote his “General Scheme of the New Objectivity” in 1967, in which he explicitly calls for artists to take a political stand. He goes on to elaborate:

the artist’s task is not to deal in modifications in the aesthetic field, as if this were a second nature, an object in itself, but to seek to erect, through participation, the foundations of a cultural totality, engendering deep transformations in man’s consciousness which, from being a passive spectator of events, would begin to act upon them using the means at hand: revolt, protest, constructive work, to achieve this transformation, etc.²¹³

Oiticica’s stance was firmly against the military dictatorship, and his work prior to his exile reflects his interest in making the poverty of the *favelas* known to all and glorifying those who fought against the regime. As previously noted, his *Parangolés* capes were a

²⁰⁹ Sachs, Wilhelm, and Pinheiro, *Brazil: A Century of Change*, 132 and xi.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

²¹¹ For more discussion of the AI-5 restrictions please see page 36. Bois, *Geometric Abstraction*, 80.

²¹² Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 39.

²¹³ Basualdo, *Tropicália*, 229.

direct reference to the samba schools of the *favelas*, and his *Penetrable* structures were inspired by the vernacular architecture of these slums. In one of his most outspoken artworks from 1968, Oiticica silk-screened the image of his friend Cara de Cavalo, who had been shot by the police, along with the words *Seja Marginal, Seja Heroi* [Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero] on to a large banner (Fig. 25).²¹⁴ This was shown at concerts by the Tropicalist musicians Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil and led to their arrest by the military. Oiticica had used this photograph in other works such as his 1966 *Box Bolide 18 Homage to Cara de Cavalo*.²¹⁵ Moreover, Oiticica writes in the catalogue to his *Eden* show: “I wanted here to honor what I think is the individual social revolt: That of the so called bandit. Such thinking is very dangerous but something necessary to me.”²¹⁶

While Clark was less overt and vocal than Oiticica, she too was deeply affected by the violence and repression, and she saw artists as “proposers” whose interactive artwork was meant to bring “the participant’s freedom of action to light.”²¹⁷ Despite her position as an artist, she stated that she wished she were more directly involved in politics and was uncomfortable with her more privileged status in comparison to those in the counterculture who were driven underground.²¹⁸ Even though Oiticica and Clark, like many others, were harassed into living abroad by the late 1960s, they both maintained a

²¹⁴ Dezeuze, “Tactile Dematerialization,” 65.

²¹⁵ Cynthia Canejo, “The Resurgence of Anthropophagy: Tropicalia, Tropicalismo and Hélio Oiticica,” *Third Text* 18, no 1 (2004): 67.

²¹⁶ Brett, ed., *Hélio Oiticica: Eden*, 5.

²¹⁷ Lygia Clark and Yve-Alain Bois, “Nostalgia of the Body,” *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 101.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

relationship to Brazil and the aim of much of their artwork and installations remained to combat the government.²¹⁹

Unlike his Brazilian predecessors Neto is adamant about denying a “hidden political commentary,” and he insists that his intentions are “transparent” and his meanings apolitical.²²⁰ He wants every viewer, no matter his or her subjective experience, to be momentarily free of the anesthetizing modern world. Neto is not anti-modern, but states that he seeks to create “a place where the realities of an intellectual universe and those of a sensory universe can be reconciled, where we can breath freely at least for a minute.”²²¹ While Neto maintains that he is without a political agenda, the multisensory phenomenological aspects of his work, especially scent in this case, ally him with the anti-establishment bent of the Neoconcretists, who were directly activating the viewer for political ends. Neto’s pieces themselves might not contain a political message, but he is very socially aware, and his artwork is sewn by women involved in Coopa-Roca, a co-operative venture of seamstresses from the Rocinha *favela*.²²² Additionally, Neto is co-owner of a gallery in Rio called *A Gentil Carioca*, which has as a stated mission to support arts and education as a way to combat the “socio-political catastrophe” that is Brazil.²²³ Despite his apolitical intent, Neto’s choice of spices places this piece in a Brazilian context and tells a highly political story – one of colonialism and cannibalism.

²¹⁹ Dunn, *Brutality Garden*, 39.

²²⁰ Lydier, “Sex and Sacanagem,” 33.

²²¹ Gonçalves, “Sensation and Time,” 50.

²²² Edward Leffingwell, “Brazilian Improv,” *Art in America* 95, no 4 (April 2007): 47.

²²³ Manns, “Artworker of the Week #63: Ernesto Neto.”

Any study of a Brazilian topic must address the colonial history of the country. If not for the interest in the spice trade, Brazil would never have been “discovered” by Portuguese explorer Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1500. As it was, he sailed to the east coast of Africa and then India within six months. He hardly paused to claim the land for Portugal before continuing in his quest for cinnamon, black pepper, cloves, and nutmeg.²²⁴ As a result of this contact between Europe and South America, the Portuguese began what would be over three hundred years of colonial rule in Brazil during which time 90% of the indigenous Amerindian population would die, millions of enslaved Africans would be imported, and large quantities of national resources would be removed.²²⁵ Therefore, the spice trade is relevant to Brazil’s postcolonial history.

Portugal was very active in the spice market, and between 1503 and 1540 supplied Europe with most of its black pepper, a commodity that at the time was traded as if it were gold.²²⁶ Other heavily traded and highly valued spices were cinnamon, clove, nutmeg and chili powder.²²⁷ Most of these plants were indigenous to Indonesia, India, and Eastern parts of Africa, with the notable exception of chili peppers, which were found only in South America and were brought east by the Portuguese and Spanish.²²⁸ After Portugal lost its holdings in the Indonesian Spice Islands in 1662 to the Dutch, clove, nutmeg, cinnamon, and pepper were cultivated in Brazil due to its tropical

²²⁴ Fred Czarra, *Spices: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 68 and 73.

²²⁵ Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, eds., *Colonial Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 107; David Carrasco, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 292.

²²⁶ Czarra, *Spices*, 69.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14 – 16 and 98 – 102.

climate.²²⁹ Of the spices once cultivated in Brazil, only black pepper remains an export today.

While Brazil never became a large producer of spices, it did lead the world in sugar production by 1580, and Portugal used sugar as a means to purchase spices, as trade routes now extended to include Europe, Africa, South America, India, and Asian ports.²³⁰ Due to the rigors of cultivating sugar, millions of enslaved African were brought to Brazil to augment the dwindling indigenous Amerindian population who made up most of the forced labor.²³¹ The ramifications of the colonial period of brutal Portuguese exploitation are still felt today in the huge disparities of wealth among Brazilians and the racism that became characteristic of many Latin American countries beginning in the nineteenth century.²³² Neto's use of spices such as black pepper, clove, and annatto take on these political histories, whether he intended to or not.

In the case of Neto's sculpture, *While Nothing Happens*, the powerful scents of black pepper [*pimenta-do-reino*], ground ginger [*gengibre em pó*], cumin [*cuminho*], ground clove [*cravo em pó*], and turmeric [*curcuma*] mingle in the slightly stirring air surrounding the installation. For a Brazilian viewer (or "smeller" in this case) ginger is associated with a traditional winter drink and is known to be cultivated in the southern coastal regions of Espírito Santo, Santa Catarina, and Paraná.²³³ Cumin also has regional

²²⁹ Czarra, *Spices*, 80 and 115.

²³⁰ Burkholder and Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 64 and 158.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²³² Schwarz and Gledson, eds., *Misplaced Ideas*, 14.

²³³ Burkholder and Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 65; Selma Vital, Ph.D., e-mail message to author, December 2, 2009.

associations in Brazil, specifically the northeast regions of Bahia, Rio Grande do Norte and Pernambuco where it is used more commonly in the culinary practices.²³⁴ Cumin's importance stretches back to ancient Greek times, and it is indigenous to the eastern Mediterranean.²³⁵ Clove is another of the most prized spices that was traded by the Portuguese. Originally, because of their exotic rarity, people believed that cloves were traded by genies, but the plants are native to the Indonesia island of Moluccas and are now cultivated in Madagascar and Zanzibar, both islands off of Africa's eastern coast.²³⁶ Clove is still costly, but its price pales in comparison to the price of saffron, which is forty times more expensive.

Turmeric, which is a robust yellow color, is native to India and is often used as a substitute for the extremely costly but similarly colorful saffron.²³⁷ In addition to its culinary use in sweet and salty recipes, turmeric also promotes mental and physical strength, is used as an herbal remedy, and is rumored to be an aphrodisiac.²³⁸ In Neto's artwork the use of saffron and turmeric becomes complicated as the Portuguese word *açafrão* is variously translated as saffron, turmeric or annatto. More refined descriptions use *açafrão-da-india* to denote turmeric and *açafrão brasileiro* to mean annatto, which is customarily referred to as *urucum*.²³⁹ Due to Neto's worldwide exhibitions and popularity, his materials and titles are often translated and retranslated, which could

²³⁴ Vital, e-mail message to author, December 2, 2009.

²³⁵ Andrew Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 127.

²³⁶ Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes*, 51; Czarra, *Spices*, 12 and 14.

²³⁷ Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes*, 95 – 96.

²³⁸ Gonçalves, "Sensation and Time," 53.

²³⁹ Vital, e-mail message to author, December 2, 2009.

account for the confusion surrounding the specific spices he uses. Nevertheless, by combining cloves from eastern Africa, turmeric from India, cumin from the Mediterranean, and black pepper and ginger cultivated in Brazil, Neto is, in a way, representing the diverse heritage of the Brazilian people as well as referencing the colonial past.

While not a part of this particular work, perhaps the most important spice Neto regularly uses is annatto, which is explicitly and almost exclusively Brazilian and is prized for its intense red color. Annatto it is made from the fruit of the *Bixa Orellana* tree, and was used by indigenous Brazilian Tupi Amerindians as body paint and as a colorant for cloth and food.²⁴⁰ Annatto was also used in hot chocolate to dye the mouth red. The Aztecs believed that drinking chocolate was like drinking blood, and the practice of using annatto substantiated this belief.²⁴¹ While this was a symbolic act for the Aztecs, cannibalism was a reality for the Tupi and was a metaphor used by the Modernists and later the Neoconcrete artists. Thus Neto's use of annatto in addition to other spices both literally and symbolically links his artwork to both the Neoconcrete artists as well as the Brazilian identity forged through cannibalization of differing influences in the twentieth century. It is interesting to note that Neto's contribution to the seminal exhibition *Brasil + 500* (2000), which was organized as a quincentennial celebration of all Brazilian art and traveled to no fewer than eighteen international locations, was a single enormous sack dropped from the ceiling filled with annatto that spilled through the porous material and surrounded the giant drip in a pool of bright red powder (Fig. 26). However, this sculpture of Neto's was not seen at all locations.

²⁴⁰ Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes*, 145.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Ernesto Neto uses these varied spices to tell the story of Brazilian identity, which, as the Cannibalist Manifesto suggests, is a mixture of European, African, and indigenous qualities and characteristics. The combination of these elements in Neto's installations serves not only to activate the participant's sense of smell, but also to connect his practice to a deeply rooted Brazilian history and identity. In the sculpture *While Nothing Happens* Neto uses spices and scent to successfully reject the anesthetized white cube of modern museums, phenomenologically reunite body and mind, continue the Neoconcrete project of participation, and describe the mixed nature of the colonial past and the present Brazilian identity – none of which can claim to be apolitical in the least. Therefore, Neto might claim transparency in his work, but political implications and interpretations are present in these activated bodies.

Chapter 3

Sexual Bodies: Ernesto Neto's *Leviathan Thot*, Feminism, and Brazilian Carnival

Sin does not exist below the equator. - *Proverb*²⁴²

My work speaks of the finite and the infinite, of the macroscopic and the microscopic, the internal and the external, by the masculine and feminine powers, but sex is like a snake, it slithers through everything.
- *Ernesto Neto*²⁴³

Walking down the Rue Soufflot in Paris, one comes to a cobblestone piazza and faces the imposing Neo-classical façade of what has become the secular heart of the French republic: The Panthéon (Fig. 27).²⁴⁴ Originally commissioned in the mid-eighteenth century by King Louis XV as a church in honor of the patron saint of Paris, Saint-Geneviève, the highly decorated pediment now bears the inscription “*Aux Grands Hommes La Patrie Reconnaisante*,” which designates this building as secular and solely dedicated to men. Indeed, it is the burial place of some of France’s most illustrious citizens.²⁴⁵ The shaded portico makes the entrance to this tomb seem cavernous. Entry into the building places the visitor at the far end of the long axis of the cruciform structure. The architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot was selected for the project in 1757, and his pupil, Maximilien Brébion, explained that “the principal aim of M. Soufflot in

²⁴² Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 136.

²⁴³ Arning, “Interview: Ernesto Neto.”

²⁴⁴ Allan Braham, *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 82.

²⁴⁵ This translates, “To great men, the grateful homeland.” Braham, *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment*, 33.

building this church was to reunite in one of the most beautiful forms, the lightness of the construction of Gothic buildings with the purity and magnificence of Greek architecture.”²⁴⁶ The twenty-four freestanding Corinthian columns on the portico as well as the soaring nave and domed crossing accomplish these objectives, and Soufflot’s Neo-classical design resonates with classical and medieval undercurrents despite the many changes made after his death in 1780.²⁴⁷

Spread throughout the entirety of the vast interior, Ernesto Neto’s installation, *Leviathan Thot*, was suspended overhead in a monumental network of nylon scrims and tubes filled with styrofoam beads each ending in a bulbous, drip-like sack (Fig. 28).²⁴⁸ *Leviathan Thot* was erected in the Panthéon in honor of the 2006 *Festival d’Automne* as well as to celebrate the reopening of the monument after nearly twenty-five years of renovation. The materials Neto employs are quite ordinary – he uses nylon stocking, sheer, usually cream-colored fabric, industrial nylon thread, rope, styrofoam, plastic, and metal pellets. With these simple elements, Neto creates complex webs of globular structures, each full to a different capacity, hanging, pendulous, from the ceiling. In this site-specific installation, there are four defined parts that symmetrically correspond to the architecture of the Panthéon and one element that Neto calls “hybrid”: the head and body span the length of the nave, the arms extend into the wings, and the central section of the installation surrounds Foucault’s Pendulum and reaches from the floor to the high dome

²⁴⁶ Braham, *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment*, 36.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁴⁸ Unfortunately, I did not experience *Leviathan Thot* personally, and for the descriptive passages I have relied on first-hand accounts of the installation as well as photographs to construct the scene.

overhead (Fig. 29).²⁴⁹ In addition to Neto's assertion that these are body parts of one organism, one also views the installation as a creature based on the title, *Leviathan Thot*, which conjures up images of the terrible sea monster from the Bible as well as invoking political implications with its reference to Thomas Hobbes' 1651 treatise on the commonwealth. While the body of *Leviathan Thot* looks very organic and asymmetrical in this environment, Neto meticulously planned each section to have visual and literal equilibrium (Fig. 30). However, as he remarked: "My work is very liquid, very adaptable. When I plan, I always leave room to adapt it to the space, to improvise, to be inspired."²⁵⁰ As the creature *Leviathan Thot* wends its way through the Panthéon, the visitor sees unique angles and views, each of which evokes a new interpretation of the environment. Neto's installation creates in dialogue with the surrounding structure.

The curvaceous white forms dangle from unseen points and pulleys on the ceiling, and each balances in a seemingly precarious state as if caught the instant before plummeting to the ground like large water droplets cascading from the dome. Instead, a web of creamy opaque nylon obscures the ceiling as more drips hold up others in an intricate balancing game (Fig. 31). As Neto explains:

The lightness comes from the fight. When you look at the piece there is a certain degree of lightness, but there is a strong energy of conflict between the elements involved. To have this whole environment in a state of balance, there is a power negotiation between the parts and an atmosphere of interdependence.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Jean-Marc Prevost, ed., *Leviathan Toth: Ernesto Neto*, Festival d'Automne (Paris: Editions du Regard, 2006), 35.

²⁵⁰ Horch, "In the Studio: Ernesto Neto," 72. Indeed, Neto was originally commissioned to complete an installation at the Chapelle St-Louis-de-la-Salpêtrière, a space he called "much more feminine" than the Panthéon. However, this commission was changed because of complaints from the priests about the former installation by the artist Nan Goldin, and Neto was given the Panthéon for an installation instead. Manns, "Ernesto Neto: Artworker of the Week #63."

²⁵¹ Fernanda Gomes, "Interview: Ernesto Neto and Fernanda Gomes," *Bomb* 102, (2008): 80.

The nylon is pulled by gravity based on the weight of the contents – light styrofoam, weighty metal pellets, or a combination of both. The bulging ends, heavy with loads, stretch their nylon skin and sag earthward. The round head and diminishing tail of the tubes makes them appear like comets or shooting stars streaking from the sky. Smaller drips higher up are used as ballast against the more massive and intimidating blobs hovering nearly at head height as one walks towards the central crossing (Fig. 32). However, simultaneously these cloudlike forms float as the lithe beast navigates the interior with nimble tentacles. Forgetting gravity, the sprightly forms are agile and slink into every crevice; flexing the supple nylon scrim, the creature maneuvers, arms spread wide, in the massive interior space.

The drips vary in size and weight and thus fall at differing heights. These rather organic forms are reminiscent of drooping breasts, testicles or phalluses. The smooth contours, sinuous shapes, and supple material create an environment composed of the soft intimate components of the human body – neck flowing into shoulder, the curve of the breast as it rests on the torso, ripe buttocks and round hips. The bulbous tubes take on an erotic charge when considered as a fragmented body composed of sexual parts. The nylon, acting as a kind of skin, is permeable, and the soft forms are malleable. The visitor is invited, and indeed allowed, to caress and touch the sacks that hang within reach. The participant is also aware of the interior of the Panthéon itself. Each footstep resonates off of the smooth polished stone floors, which are inlaid in black and white geometric and circular patterns that mirror the coffering of the domed spaces overhead. Columned arcades flank the central nave, and murals present the life of Saint Geneviève completed in the pastel palette of Puvis de Chavannes (Fig. 33).

Walking closer to the central core of this installation, a pale pink column of nylon rises from the ground to the base of the dome. Held to the ground by four sacks, this membranous tower is punctuated throughout its length by large holes. The subtle pink color of this nylon adds to the sense that this is indeed the heart or central vessel of the creature. The gashes in this translucent column are pulled into almond shaped holes reminiscent of anal or vaginal orifices. Looking up at the architecture, each pendentive surrounding the massive central dome is decorated with a different allegorical figure: Glory, Death, Justice, and Country. The dome is supported by a row of columns and windows allowing natural light to enter the massive space. Through this central cylindrical scrim, which extends into the highest reaches of the dome, the light from the windows filters through the opaque nylon illuminating the installation and the white marble of the interior in an incandescent glow (Fig. 34). Like clouds, the top layers of the curvaceous drips and web-like canopy reflect light and the lower, heavier, and denser sacks allow less light to penetrate. The dome extends to a coffered peak with an open oculus. The fresco at the top of the dome glimpsed at through the oculus is the *Apotheosis of Louis XVIII* that is executed in a bright palette of reds, blues, and greens (Fig. 35).

At the center of the Panthéon and at the heart of *Leviathan Thot*, Foucault's Pendulum consistently swings across the diameter of a large circle solemnly announcing the passage of time, the rotation of the earth, and ever-present gravity (Fig. 36). The pale-pink column encloses the pendulum, which continues to swing and visibly chart the rotation of the earth as registered by the gravitational pull exerted on the heavy metal bob hanging from the two hundred twenty-foot wire. Hung in 1851 by Léon Foucault, the pendulum is a physical manifestation of a celestial motion. The pendulum, held as it is in

perpetual motion by gravity, travels across the diameter of a circle, the circumference of which is completed in a thirty-two-hour cycle, which corresponds to the rotation of the earth on its axis. Were the pendulum at the North or South Pole, the time lapse would be twenty-four hours, and it is the latitude of Paris that distorts the rotation to this degree.²⁵² Each traverse ticks off a segment of time, and, in so doing, reminds the viewer of the passage of time. The motion of the pendulum accentuates the stillness of the surrounding droplets, which are frozen or trapped, while the swinging metal ball measures time. The sense of stillness in the installation also gives a feeling of unease because the points of fixation, the pulleys and hooks keeping the scrims in place, all but disappear against the vaulted, domed ceiling, which is highly ornamented, carved, and coffered. The rigid geometry of the interior stands in stark contrast to the voluptuous forms and serpentine lines of *Leviathan Thot*.

In addition to the sexual imagery and contrast between the architecture and artwork, the presence of the pendulum brings a moment of phenomenological presence, a recognition of the continuity of time, and a physical representation or grounding of cosmic and metaphysical abstractions. French philosopher Henri Bergson conceived of time as a continuous flow, unceasing and enduring.²⁵³ The pendulum is a representation of this concept because it is also constantly in motion and demarcates time's continuous passage. Bergson represented time as an ever-increasing "snowball" of past experiences,

²⁵² For a longer discussion of this see Amir D. Aczel, *Pendulum: Leon Foucault and the Triumph of Science* (New York: Atria Books, 2003), 99 – 110.

²⁵³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (London: MacMillan & Co., 1960), 2.

which conflates memory with the present – a present that is forever gnawing its way into the future.²⁵⁴ He describes this passage of time or duration:

My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates... But it is expedient to disregard this uninterrupted change, and to notice it only when it becomes sufficient to impress a new attitude on the body, a new direction on the attention. Then, and then only, we find that our state has changed. *The truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change.*²⁵⁵

Bergson notes that the only constant in life is change itself. However, this change is not recognized until something draws one's attention to it. While Foucault's pendulum was not a proof of the earth's rotation because that had already been verified and widely agreed upon, it was a demonstration, or concretization, of an otherwise imperceptible phenomenon – the ever-changing placement of the earth as it rotates on an axis. One might say it embodies the unfelt, it makes visible the imperceptible, and it grounds the ideal movement of the heavens into the real time and space experienced on the earth. The placement of Foucault's Pendulum within the very organic structure of *Leviathan Thot* draws one's attention to this phenomenon and seems to recommend that the pendulum is the beating heart of the creature whose many parts lie slumbering in the Panthéon. Because of the massive scale of *Leviathan Thot* and the tactile interaction possible with the drops, this installation causes the visitor to pause and reconsider the space of the Panthéon and reconsider his or her presence within this space. Furthermore, the pendulum incorporates the motion of celestial bodies into something visible on a human scale. Neto's inclusion of this element in his installation not only draws attention to the

²⁵⁴ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 4 – 5.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2. My emphasis.

passage of time, but also illustrates the fact that the Panthéon has become a place for worshipping intellect and science rather than one dedicated to religious worship.

After circumambulating the pendulum, the visitor approaches the altar at the far end of the nave, where the body of the beast dangles, and is confronted by the monumental sculpture of the *National Convention* (Fig. 37). Behind this multi-figure composition is another triptych mural, *To Glory*, which depicts a swirl of men on horseback charging into battle with colorful standards waving. This painting is surmounted by a mosaic of Christ with several figures and the Latin inscription “*Angelum Galliae Custodem Christus Patriae Fata Docet*,” which translates to “Christ tells the Gallic angel to guard the fate of the fatherland.” These artistic elements of the Panthéon follow a very French nationalist and patriotic agenda, which is complicated by the original construction of this building as a church dedicated to a female saint. The history of this location is very important to Neto’s installation, as *Leviathan Thot* brings Brazilian history and culture into dialogue with this European “temple of enlightenment.”²⁵⁶

In *Leviathan Thot*, Neto successfully challenges the gendered space of the Panthéon and the paternalistic nationalism promoted by this monument to men. The curvaceous forms of *Leviathan Thot* also evoke a sexual or erotic element in the work, which is rooted in Neto’s Brazilian identity. Neto uses the metaphor of the body as well as the physical corpus as a means to address the manner in which identity is defined and described. In so doing, Neto employs both the performative aspects of gender as well as the biological and sexual body. While others have described Neto’s work in sexual terms and compared the nylon sacks to breast, scrotum, ovary, penis, labia, vaginal, and anal

²⁵⁶ Herkenhoff, “*Leviathan Thot: A Politics of the Plumb*,” 129.

imagery, an additional discussion of masculine and feminine is different because these are performed identities rather than biological parts. As feminist theorist Judith Butler explains, as opposed to sex which is biologically based, gender is constructed through a “stylized repetition of acts,” a performance which itself must be situated in the context of the cultural and historical period.²⁵⁷ Breaking or subverting these acts can lead to the transformation of gender. In the case of *Leviathan Thot*, the feminine forms of the installation itself challenge the masculine architecture, and these forms generate commentary in regards to feminist theory about female identity. However, the space is complicated by the original dedication to the female Saint Geneviève, and *Leviathan Thot* takes on masculine connotations based on the association with the Biblical monster as well as Hobbes’ characterization of the commonwealth embodied in a sovereign male ruler. Therefore, Neto’s *Leviathan Thot* has layered gendered interpretations beyond an examination of the sexual parts of the creature. However, the very sexual aspects of the creature recall the hypersexual Brazilian identity and remind the viewer of the universality of the human, sexual body.

Église Ste-Geneviève was not completed until 1789, which was a time of great social unrest on the eve of the French Revolution, and in 1791 the building was secularized and repurposed as a grand burial tomb for France’s great men, beginning with Mirabeau and Voltaire.²⁵⁸ In this way, it referred to the Pantheon in Rome, which is the burial place of Kings Vittorio Emanuele II and Umberto I among others. However,

²⁵⁷ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 392.

²⁵⁸ François Macé de Lépinay, ed., *Peintures Et Sculptures Du Panthéon*, 10.

Rome's Pantheon also contains the mortal remains of artists such as Renaissance master Raphael and later painter Annibale Caracci. By contrast, the Panthéon in Paris does not house a single artist, as they were not judged as worthy of such respectful burial.²⁵⁹ This illustrates the relative value placed on artists in Italy and France, and creates a greater tension between the Panthéon and the art installation residing inside.

The Panthéon itself is the embodiment of its time based on its architectural features, artistic decorations, and ideological program. Stemming from the revolutionary tide of the time, Allan Braham notes that:

Ste-Geneviève had become by the time of the Revolution a monument of collective national pride rather than the achievement of a single architect...this may seem the inevitable fate of a building that had always been less a church for the worship of God than a symbol of intellectual endeavor.²⁶⁰

Indeed the feeling of national pride and fraternity among men was heavily promoted in the post-revolutionary years, a concept which supported the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, a decree passed by the National Assembly in 1789, which was directly quoted in the Brazilian Constitution of 1824.²⁶¹ However, this edict did not address the rights of women, freemen of color, or slaves, an omission that was challenged by Olympe de Gouges's 1791 publication *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizen*, in which she calls for the rights of women to be equal to those of men.²⁶² While not making an explicit statement, Neto utilizes the patriarchal history of this building in

²⁵⁹ Herkenhoff, "Leviathan Thor: A Politics of the Plumb," 128.

²⁶⁰ Braham, *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment*, 82.

²⁶¹ Schwarz and Gledson, *Misplaced Ideas*, 20.

²⁶² Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 20.

order to create both formal and symbolic contrasts between the feminine aspects of his work and the masculine surroundings.

As critic Paulo Herkenhoff points out, after the 1851 addition of Léon Foucault's Pendulum, which was hung from the dome and demonstrates the rotation of the earth, the Panthéon became a place of scientific experiment dedicated to man's discoveries – a literal “temple of enlightenment.”²⁶³ A woman was not buried there, based on her own merit, until 1995 when Marie Curie's remains were re-interred. While dedicated to a female saint, the paintings and sculptures that ornament this structure are primarily venerating men. The pediment sculptures by David d'Angers depicts *The Nation Giving Crowns to Great Men, Citizens and Military, as Liberty and History Write Their Names*.²⁶⁴ Before entering the building one is presented with five bas-reliefs, one of which depicts the *Apotheosis of Heroes who Died for the Fatherland* and another *Patriotic Devotion*.²⁶⁵ These celebrations of the role of patriotism and fraternity further promote the masculine symbolism of the building itself. As historian Richard Etlin notes:

Laws alone could not fashion the mentality and habits required for a free people to live successfully in a republic...institutions too had to be impressed into this service. The physical world, as controlled by human endeavor that fashioned it into a built environment...would also serve this purpose.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Herkenhoff, “*Leviathan Thot: A Politics of the Plumb*,” 129.

²⁶⁴ *La Patrie distribue aux grands hommes, civils et militaires, des couronnes que lui tend la Liberté tandis que l'Histoire inscrit leur nom*. Macé de Lépinay, ed., *Peintures Et Sculptures Du Panthéon*, 51.

²⁶⁵ *L'apothéose des héros qui sont morts pour la patrie* and *Le Dévouement Patriotique*. Macé de Lépinay, ed., *Peintures Et Sculptures Du Panthéon*, 47 – 50.

²⁶⁶ Richard A. Etlin, *Symbolic Space: French Enlightenment Architecture and its Legacy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 30.

Therefore, the charge of the Panthéon was not merely to commemorate great men, but was seen as actively asserting the national ideals of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity] to educate the people through both the architectural and sculptural programs. As Neto states, “If you think about the transformation of society from feudalism to democracy the Panthéon is a symbol of this movement. The work is an opportunity to think about the state again and how things are now.”²⁶⁷ Neto’s installation can be considered as a comment on the surroundings as well as engaging in dialogue with the changing social frameworks of the state and government. In addition, the title, *Leviathan Thot*, also lends several complicated readings of this relationship between the government and the people.

The Leviathan of the Bible is found in the Old Testament and is described by God in Job 41:1 – 34 as a terrible sea monster with vicious teeth, impenetrable scales, and fiery breath (Fig. 38). God concludes his illustration of the mythic beast with the lines: “Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear. He beholdeth all high things: he is a king over all the children of pride.”²⁶⁸ This last statement suggests that the Leviathan watches over hell, where all those who commit the sin of pride are destined to go. Examining Neto’s installation with this story in mind makes the serpentine nylon forms and heavy dangling sacks seem more ominous and threatening. Furthermore, if Leviathan is a gatekeeper of hell, that makes this Panthéon, burial crypt of France’s greatest men, into hell itself. Are those interred here accused of exhibiting pride themselves, or is it the pride of the country that has condemned them to this fate?

²⁶⁷ “Realm of the Senses,” *The Economist*, 81.

²⁶⁸ Bible (King James Version), Book of Job, 41:33 – 34.

Additionally, this title also invokes the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes' treatise entitled, *Leviathan or the matter, form, & power of a common-wealth ecclesiastical and civil* (Fig. 39). Published in 1651, it is considered by many to be the "greatest work of political philosophy in English."²⁶⁹ Composed in four parts, Hobbes' central argument is that each man must give up some personal freedom in order to be protected under a commonwealth and even God's laws are only executed if they are also adopted as man's laws. This united church and state and gave civil law more power over men. Hobbes calls this commonwealth a Leviathan, and in this sense the name signifies that "which is but an artificial man, though of greater strength than the natural, for whose protection and defense it was intended; and in which the sovereignty is an artificial *soul*, as giving life and motion to the whole body."²⁷⁰ If Neto's *Leviathan Thot* is seen in this context, its placement in the Panthéon would suggest a representation of the French state, now a democracy, and the "monster" Leviathan would be the protector of this once sacred, now secular, heart of France.²⁷¹

As for the second part of the title, Thot is an ancient Egyptian god who is also a gatekeeper of the underworld.²⁷² Thot holds the scales and weighs the heart of the

²⁶⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan Parts I and II*, ed. Aloysius Martinich (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2005), vii.

²⁷⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan Parts I and II*, 9.

²⁷¹ Aside from the political discourse of the book, Hobbes dedicates Part I to a discussion of man, and the first chapter is entitled "Of Sense." In this chapter, he enumerates the qualities of man and describes how knowledge is constructed. He writes: "The original of them all is that which we call Sense (for there is no conception in a man's mind which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense). The rest are derived from that original." Thus, even in a text lauded for political theory, the understanding of the importance of the sensible world is addressed. Hobbes, *Leviathan Parts I and II*, 13.

²⁷² Thot is the Francophone spelling of this name. The anglicized spelling is Thoth and the god is also variously referred to as Thout or Tehuti as well. Denise M. Doxey "Thoth" *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*.

deceased against a feather. If the heart weighs more than a feather it is judged as unworthy of entering the afterlife. Thot is also the god of wisdom and is credited with teaching humankind all languages, arithmetic, rhetoric, music, sculpture, and astronomy. By invoking a god of an ancient Egyptian religion along with Biblical references, Neto includes Christian and pagan traditions, both of which are registered in conjunction with death and subsequent entrance to heaven or hell. The delicate balancing of the various drip-like sacks alludes to both the measuring of the heart as well as the larger juxtaposition of the heavenward thrust of the space counter-pointed with the gravitational pull towards the underworld. Neto brings the viewer into the center between these polarities. The gravity displayed in *Leviathan Thot* is also metaphorically understood as the magnetism of the state as it holds together each individual citizen to create the commonwealth.²⁷³ As Neto states, “And here we arrive at the social body, the Leviathan, a monster we have created... a strange creature that does not seem to be anywhere; it is invisible, untouchable, fleshless, lightless, lifeless...yet it is everywhere.”²⁷⁴ In so describing Leviathan, Neto elides the “monster we have created” – the government, with gravity – that which is invisible but everywhere. Because of the enormous importance of this structure, the fact that *Leviathan Thot* is placed inside of the Panthéon has special resonance. As art critic Susan Benko notes, it is significant that a European nation would ask an artist from a formerly colonized country to create a work housed in the symbolic heart of the national identity.²⁷⁵ The “monster we have created” could be read as the

²⁷³ Herkenhoff, “*Leviathan Thot: A Politics of the Plumb*,” 133.

²⁷⁴ Prevost, ed., *Leviathan Toth: Ernesto Neto*, 71.

²⁷⁵ Susana Benko, “Ernesto Neto: *Leviathan Thot*,” *Art Nexus* 6, no. 64 (2007): 91.

residue of European governments and neocolonial hierarchies found in many postcolonial countries. In addition to these political and religious considerations of the Panthéon itself, a gendered reading of the forms and references of *Leviathan Thot* creates tension within this environment.

The masculine and intimidating space of the Panthéon stands in stark contrast to the organic and feminine forms of *Leviathan Thot*. The rectilinear design of the Panthéon and unyielding marble and stone materials are in opposition to the curvaceous ovoid forms of *Leviathan Thot*'s limbs and the highly malleable nylon, which is at once permeable and fragile as well as strong and resilient. The installation is attached to the ceiling and domes of the interior, an interior that Soufflot designed to reflect a gothic thrust skyward, but the installation itself is weighted down and pulled by gravity towards the earth. This power negotiation between the space and the work of art is a dynamic process in Neto's artwork. *Leviathan Thot* is not only literally balancing itself as sacks are counter weighted against one another, but also the soft nylon forms conflict with the rigidity of the marble interior. Neto claims:

My textile sculptures are built with mathematics and sensitiveness. On the other hand, cloth is a much more delicate material and its manufacture involves a kind of 'feminine' universe, while the more 'masculine' and tough side is reserved for the installation, which sometimes becomes a real war.²⁷⁶

This description precisely illuminates the active masculine-feminine spectrum illustrated by Neto's *Leviathan Thot*, and indeed Neto states that he believes in a "masculine-feminine continuity."²⁷⁷ The layering of genders evident in the installation and

²⁷⁶ Fabeiro, Fernandez-cid, and Pereira, *O Corpo, Nu Tempo*, 302.

²⁷⁷ Ralph Rugoff, *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take On Architecture* (London, UK: Hayward Publishing, 2008), 112.

environment as well as the artistic intent to address different gender connotations allows for a feminist reading of *Leviathan Thot* and a discussion of changing gender roles in Brazil. Through the feminist theories of French thinkers H  l  ne Cixous (1937 -) and Luce Irigaray (1932 -), the gendered qualities of the installation take on new meaning and can be read as embodying the very gender-bending, hyper-sexuality for which Brazilians are known in the Western world.

To date there has been no attempt to either situate Neto's art in relation to the gender politics of Brazil nor to theorize his work in relation to feminism, specifically the writing of feminist psychoanalytic thinkers such as Cixous and Irigaray. The term "French feminism" encompasses many, sometimes disparate, theories, but Cixous and Irigaray are especially well suited to this discussion because of their writing on gender identity and how patriarchal norms can be disrupted. They were both active in the 1970s and specifically addressed the psychoanalytic interpretations of "femininity" put forward by Sigmund Freud and later re-worked by Jacques Lacan. In order to explore the patriarchal relationships between the sexes, both Freud and Lacan point to physical differences in the female anatomy, which "lacks" a phallus. Without a phallus Freud posits that the woman is always envious of the man and tries to possess the phallus first through sexual encounter and then through her child.²⁷⁸ In both of these instances she is the passive recipient or "container" for the phallus.

²⁷⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Terence Hawkes (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), 96 and 99. In Freud's famous lecture "Femininity" from 1933 he describes the feminine as a "dark continent" and positions the male phallus against the female "lack" of a phallus. In Freud's construction this leads to a recognized difference based on visual evidence and creates a jealousy on the part of the woman who desires the male phallus. Similarly Lacan theorizes that in the "symbolic order" the phallus of the father is juxtaposed with the "lack" of the mother.

In response to this biological argument, Irigaray challenges Freud's assertion that what defines the female is the lack of a phallus and instead gives females agency by insisting that identity is formed by the simultaneity with which the woman actively touches and is passively touched by herself. Irigaray writes in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977):

as for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other.²⁷⁹

Because of the physiology of genitalia a woman's labia literally touch one another and are passively touched, which produces pleasurable sexual sensations. Irigaray argues that because a woman is actively causing this pleasure as well as passively receiving it, she has a doubled identity within herself. This idea of simultaneously touching and being touched is also described by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Visible and the Invisible* (1964) in which he uses the example of two hands to illustrate the phenomenological experience of the world, which "can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand..."²⁸⁰ Thus each body is constructed as both the subject and the object, that which sees and that which is seen, that which touches and that which is touched. This is

²⁷⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One* [Ce Sexe Qui N'en Est Pas Un], trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 24.

²⁸⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* [Visible et l'invisible], ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.

empowering to women who are often relegated to the position of passive object and denied the agency afforded the subject.

Cixous, on the other hand, addresses the “patriarchal binary thought” of Freud by imagining a utopia in which the meaning of masculine and feminine is constructed through their mutual play and effect on one another, thus necessitating a co-existence between the two and creating a spectrum of gender which she terms “bisexuality.”²⁸¹ Cixous’s essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) describes bisexuality as “each one’s location in self of the presence – variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female – of both sexes, non exclusion either of the difference or of one sex.”²⁸² This kind of bisexuality is not defined as one who is sexually attracted to both men and women; rather, Cixous’s construction of bisexuality has to do with a gender spectrum and is neither an opposition nor a combined unisex, but rather simultaneity of genders. As Joan Scott writes, the paradox of the feminist movement is that in order to claim gender equality, a declaration of gender difference is necessary.²⁸³ Cixous addresses this problem and defines her idea of “bisexuality” in just this manner. She writes: “this vatic bisexuality... doesn’t annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number.”²⁸⁴ It is in the interplay between the masculine and feminine qualities of both the Panthéon and *Leviathan Thot* that this bisexuality is represented. Because *Leviathan Thot* includes both tactile experiences as well as engages

²⁸¹ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 106.

²⁸² Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *The Women and Language Debate: A Sourcebook*, eds. Camille Roman, Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 84 – 85.

²⁸³ Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 3.

²⁸⁴ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 85.

in a gendered dialogue with the Panthéon around it, the feminist theories of both of these writers allows for a more nuanced approach to Neto's work.

In *Leviathan Thot*, the soft nylon skin twists and turns through the Panthéon, rubs up against itself as paired sacks dangle at similar heights, and, more importantly, invites the viewer to join in this touching by caressing nodes that fall within reach. Both Neto's characterization of *Leviathan Thot* as a beast with skin, flesh, and blood as well as the literal touching that takes place between various elements of the sculpture and the participant and sculpture resonate with Irigaray's description of the female identity. Furthermore, the participant is empowered by his or her ability to literally touch the installation, and in so doing is in turn touched *by* the installation in a phenomenological interchange. While not fully enveloping the viewer, Neto's *Leviathan Thot* penetrates the entire Panthéon and de-centers the expectation of the viewer upon entering the space because of the startling contrast between the rigid geometric forms of the Neoclassical interior and the soft pliable forms of the sculpture, which can be manipulated. In this new space, unanticipated glances, chance encounters, and discombobulating arrangements all lead to an opportunity for a heightened multi-sensory perception. Irigaray posits that this type of perceptual realm is a feminine dimension: "Women...remain within perception without need of name or concept. Without closure. To remain within perception means staying out in the open, always attuned to the outside, to the world. Senses always alert."²⁸⁵ In creating environments in which multiple senses are engaged, rather than a purely optical experience, Neto's work caters to what Irigaray states is the feminine predilection for perception. She believes the visual realm is "foreign to female eroticism"

²⁸⁵ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* [Ethique de la Différence Sexuelle], trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 141.

and claims that women take more enjoyment from physically handling objects rather than merely observing them.²⁸⁶

For Irigaray the notion of touching is central to her rethinking of Freudian psychoanalysis, which uses the visible differences between man and woman to establish superiority. Irigaray's anti-visual stance arises from the double objectification that takes place between a female qua object and male qua viewer. She asserts: "...her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject,' her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see.*"²⁸⁷ In order to move away from registering the visual difference between men and women, Irigaray relies on the tactile senses. Remaining in the realm of tactile sensation rather than the scopic field is a feminist strategy to return power to women who are traditionally the passive objects of the male gaze.²⁸⁸ The phenomenological and sensory aspects of Neto's work cause both a literal change through physical contact and a metaphorical change as one becomes aware of the space around the self. Thus the multi-sensory and perceptual aspects of many of Neto's installations can be seen as characteristic of a particularly feminine construction. Indeed, Neto claims that in his artwork "there is something of a feminine practice...through a masculine hand."²⁸⁹

In Neto's installation, both the image of nylon as a skin as well as the folding, enveloping, caressing forms of *Leviathan Thot* can be read as the very woman Irigaray describes. Critic Bernard Schütze writes: "It is this notion of skin, this doubling and

²⁸⁶ Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One*, 26.

²⁸⁷ Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One*, 26.

²⁸⁸ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 26.

²⁸⁹ Rugoff, *Psycho Building*, 112.

folding of sensual organic space and its inclusion of the observer's bodily experience that are the singular characteristics of Neto's work."²⁹⁰ In the case of *Leviathan Thot*, the nylon acts as the skin of the creature, and it is the interface between the work of art and the viewer when coming into contact with the piece. The drooping forms rub against one another as the dripping sculpture falls from the ceiling to the floor. Movements of air, disruptions from viewers handling different parts, and the settling and stretching of the materials themselves all lead to the subtle caress of nylon against nylon or skin against skin. The assertion that woman can touch herself to derive her own pleasure rather than relying on the male phallus to fill a void is an empowering feminist strategy used to subvert patriarchal norms. The woman needs neither to actively pursue pleasure nor passively await the male presence because she is constantly touching herself.²⁹¹ By this metaphor, *Leviathan Thot* embodies the dual feminine identity described by Irigaray, as the body of the work is constantly touching itself and being touched.

This literal and symbolic touching skin is also of primary importance for identity formation according to Irigaray, who states:

...we only touch each other naked. And that, to find ourselves once again in that state, we have a lot to take off. So many representations, so many appearances separate us from each other. They have wrapped us for so long in their desires, we have adorned ourselves so often to please them, that we have come to forget the feel of our own skin. Removed from our skin, we remain distant. You and I, apart.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Schütze, "The Skin of Sculpture," 25.

²⁹¹ Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One*, 24.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 217 – 218.

Based on this reading, in *Leviathan Thot*, the skin-like material could be seen as a way to reincorporate the viewer in relation to his or her own body and the bodies of others because it is asking to be touched. Through touching the sculpture, the tactile realm is awakened and *Leviathan Thot* revives the child-like desire to reach out and grab at objects. This “tactile birth” is part of what Irigaray defines as a women’s style.²⁹³ Additionally, the nature of this installation is one of simultaneity and continuity. *Leviathan Thot* is formed from a single sheet of nylon that is cut and sewn together to form the sacks dangling down.²⁹⁴ Therefore, when the viewer touches the piece she or he touches all parts concurrently and endlessly. The human skin is also continuous and is the largest organ of the human body. Irigaray imagines that the continuous re-formation of the female identity is derived from the physicality of skin on skin. She continues:

She re-touches herself without ever constituting herself, or constituting herself in another kind of unity. *Simultaneity* would be her ‘property.’ A property that never fixes itself in the possible identity of the self to another form. Always *fluid* without forgetting the characteristics of fluids which are so difficult to idealize: this friction between two infinitely neighboring forces creates their dynamic.²⁹⁵

This notion of a fluidity of identity complements Cixous’s definition of bisexuality that encompasses both masculine and feminine without creating a hybrid or positioning one against the other. The “dynamic” that Irigaray discusses is the very play of masculine and feminine that Cixous wishes to apply to psychoanalytic theory instead of the positive and negative model of gender promoted by Freud and Lacan.

²⁹³ Irigaray as quoted in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Moi, ed., 145.

²⁹⁴ For a detailed description of Neto’s process see Horch, “In the Studio: Ernesto Neto,” 72, 74.

²⁹⁵ Irigaray as quoted in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Moi, ed., 145.

Cixous works against a phallogentric model of difference in favor of the “other bisexuality” in which there is a “multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body.”²⁹⁶ Cixous finds that it is the inclusion of both sexes, the acknowledgement of differences, and the embrace of a range of gender that most effectively subverts the patriarchal Freudian model of gender difference.²⁹⁷ She neither sets women above men nor blends the two into one hybrid. Instead she preserves the possibility for both masculine and feminine to exist in a single identity that is continually formed through their very coexistence. This resonates with the fine layering of gender in *Leviathan Thot* and in the context of the Panthéon. One must be mindful of the fact that Neto, a Brazilian, is a foreigner whose installation is situated in the symbolic heart of the French republic. He is not only non-native, but comes from a formerly colonized country, albeit not a French colony. This sculpture, both physically and symbolically, overwhelms the space of the Panthéon and the core of old European ideology. Similarly, Cixous, Irigaray, and many female thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s were pushed to the exterior of intellectual circles due to their sex and sometimes radical feminist reworking of classically male dominated psycholinguistic and psychoanalytic theories.²⁹⁸ While Irigaray and Cixous’s theories on femininity, and indeed gender more generally, bring new light to the description of *Leviathan Thot*, the influences of the Brazilian feminist movement as well as gender roles in contemporary Brazil are also germane to this discussion.

²⁹⁶ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 84 - 85.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 85.

²⁹⁸ Irigaray was kicked out of Lacan’s École Freudienne after the publication of her 1974 book, *Speculum de l’autre femme*. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 144.

French feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s were known in Brazil, and despite having the longest military dictatorship in Latin America, Brazil also had the largest women's movement in the region during this time.²⁹⁹ As in many Latin American countries, the gender roles of men and women in Brazil were clearly defined by Roman Catholicism, but were challenged by the “exoticism and sensuality” presented in countries with a large African and Afro-Caribbean influence.³⁰⁰ The phenomenon of *machismo* is one in which men exhibit an exaggerated or hyper masculinity and exercise power and control over women.³⁰¹ This male dominance, both sexually and socially, led to women's low status in society and lack of human rights protected by the government. Women's roles were seen as mothers, caregivers, and keepers of the home, and they were meant to be subservient to a husband.³⁰² This role was in keeping with the Roman Catholic depiction of Mary as the loving and docile mother of Christ. However women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s called on this Catholic imagery of the suffering mother as a metaphor for the protection that they needed as well as the poor, the elderly, and the young.³⁰³ Women were instrumental in overturning the Brazilian government in

²⁹⁹ Sonia E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3.

³⁰⁰ Sylvia H. Chant and Nikki Craske, eds., *Gender in Latin America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 131 and 138.

³⁰¹ Sociologist Alfredo Mirandé posits that this machismo arose first in the indigenous population as a result of the “humiliation suffered by the indigenous men not only at their own defeat but at the rape of their women by the Spanish conquerors.” Mirandé as quoted by Chant and Craske, *Gender in Latin America*, 14 – 15.

³⁰² Flavia Piovesan, “Violence Against Women in Brazil: International Litigation and Local Advances” in *Feminist Agendas and Democracy in Latin America*, ed. Jane S. Jaquette (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 116.

³⁰³ Sarah A. Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood, eds., “Viva”: *Women and Popular Protest in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16 – 17.

1964 as they implored the military to do its “manly” or *macho* duty to protect the people and to stabilize the economy by changing the government after a period of rapid inflation and widespread poverty.³⁰⁴ Women’s groups such as Women’s Campaign for Democracy (CAMDE), Feminine Movement for Regimentation (MAF), and Feminine Civic Union (UCF) were just a few of the groups who helped to foment the 1964 military coup.³⁰⁵ However, when the AI-5 laws were passed in 1968, women’s groups turned against the government. Student protests were brutally broken up and violence against anyone seen as subversive caused women’s groups to band together for the “March of the Family for Freedom and Against Repression” and the “March for Freedom Against Dictatorship.”³⁰⁶ The tactics of these groups are problematic, however, because they tend to fall back on entrenched gender roles rather than challenging these traditional roles. For this reason, a topic of debate even today is which groups are “feminist (they challenge the vision of labor along lines of gender)” or are “feminine (they reinforce the divisions of labor along lines of gender).”³⁰⁷ Usually these groups were composed of middle-class white women, and despite their intention to rally lower-income women on issues such as equal pay, safe working conditions, and maternity leave, more emphasis was placed on gaining equality under the law and not necessarily in the real world.³⁰⁸ Until the late 1970s, women were barred from working in certain fields, and women were not granted full, autonomous

³⁰⁴ Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*, 6; Radcliffe and Westwood, eds., *Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*, 91.

³⁰⁵ Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*, 6.

³⁰⁶ Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*, 8.

³⁰⁷ Radcliffe and Westwood, eds., *Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*, 89.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 96 – 97.

citizenship until 1988. Leading up to this constitution, written after the military regime relinquished power in 1985, women's groups fought for equality between the sexes, an end to all forms of discrimination (both legal and social), and protection of their human and reproductive rights as women. These demands were sent in the "Letter from Brazilian Women to the Constitutional Convention" and several of these concerns were addressed in the new constitution and in subsequent legislature.³⁰⁹ However, while equality under the constitution was granted in 1988, "sexism and discrimination against women are still deeply ingrained in Brazilian culture preventing women from exercising their most fundamental rights with full autonomy and dignity."³¹⁰ To be sure, discrimination, denial of reproductive rights, and violence against women continue to be the priorities of current Brazilian women's groups, and domestic violence is especially pervasive and often goes un-punished.³¹¹

Despite the realities of extreme socio-economic disparity and imbalanced gender relations in Brazil, the country is often portrayed as a tropical paradise full of sexually liberated men and women enjoying a purely hedonistic lifestyle of sun and sex that culminates in an annual orgiastic event: *carnaval*. While this is a stereotype of Brazil that is not truly accurate, there are historical and cultural bases for this characterization, and Neto plays with this hyper-sensual trope to emphasize the universality of the biological, sexual body across cultures. Thus *Leviathan Thot* contains references to both male and female body parts as well as embodying masculine and feminine qualities.

³⁰⁹ Piovesan, "Violence Against Women in Brazil," 116 – 117.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 119.

³¹¹ Piovesan, "Violence Against Women in Brazil," 119 and 114.

Viewers and critics alike remark on the sensual aspects of *Leviathan Thot*, and several remark upon the sexual and genital forms present in many of Neto's installations.

As one critic crassly phrased it:

...Ernesto Neto literally invites the viewer to enter, lie on, fondle, fist, finger, and caress his sculptures. Neto juxtaposes two different aspects of the erotic imagination. On the one hand, he employs suggestive shapes – slits, scrotum-shapes, curvaceous 'hips' and 'shoulders,' shafts, cavities, drooping phalluses and breasts. On the other hand, he invites the viewer to interact with the work in a very sensual way.³¹²

While *Leviathan Thot* is not one of Neto's most physically interactive installations, the participant is not prohibited from gently touching the sacks hanging within reach.

Moreover, Neto himself is aware of the erotically charged nature of his sculptures and intends them to be this way. Neto describes his own installations with the Brazilian

Portuguese word *sacanagem*. He defines this untranslatable term thusly: "It is beyond flirting. It's after that, in that moment when both of your faces change into something else because the erotic charge is so high, when your bodies move towards each other. I wanted the work to manifest *sacanagem* without talking about it."³¹³ The term

sacanagem – which also indicates a level of violence, aggression, play, excitement or titillation – does not always have positive connotations, and "implies at least some form of symbolic rebellion or transgression."³¹⁴ Neto seems to refer to *sacanagem* for its sexual meaning, but he simultaneously evokes a sense of rule-breaking or overturning cultural standards, which is itself embodied in the Brazilian identity and made manifest in the annual *carnaval* celebration.

³¹² Moreno, "Pushed into Darkness," 31.

³¹³ Arning, "Interview: Ernesto Neto."

³¹⁴ Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 101 – 103.

Engaging with this highly sexualized imagery, Neto also recalls the lush, eroticized stereotypes of Brazil that have prevailed in the United States and Europe since the early twentieth century. There are several reasons for the perception that Brazil is a fun-loving, sexually free, tropical paradise, including Brazil's indigenous and colonial heritage, ways in which Brazilians are portrayed in twentieth century cinema, and the contemporary experiences of the celebration of *carnaval*, the ecstatic revelry that puts on display for the Western world the very gender-bending, hyper-sexuality for which Brazilians are known.

However, this stereotype of the overly sensual Brazilian is not restricted to the Western point of view, and this trope is a point of self-identification as well as national unity. As anthropologist Richard Parker observes: "Indeed, Brazilians view themselves as sensual beings not simply in terms of their individuality (though this too is important), but at a social or cultural level – as sensual individuals, at least in part, by virtue of their shared *brasilidade*, or Brazilianness."³¹⁵ Thus, Brazilian identity as it is constructed and understood both internally and externally is deeply imbricated with the notions of sensuality and sexual openness.³¹⁶ The origins of the corporeal aspects of *brasilidade* extend as far back as the Tupinamba Amerindians and the first contact with Europeans. Brazil as a territory has been likened to a sort of innocent Eden since Portuguese explorers set foot onto the land and described the inhabitants' shameless display of the naked body.³¹⁷ Along with these European colonizers came two things: the Catholic

³¹⁵ Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 7.

³¹⁶ Nava and Lauerhass, eds., *Brazil in the Making: Facets of National*, 145.

³¹⁷ Letter of Pedro Vaz de Caminha, Pedro Alvarez Cabral's scribe from the 1500 expedition, as quoted in Parker. Several years later Amerigo Vespucci would write: "In truth, if the terrestrial paradise is located in

Church and millions of Africans. The impact that Catholicism had on Latin America is enormous and indelible.³¹⁸ When the explorers arrived, Tupi Amerindians were spread throughout the vast territory. These indigenous people were viewed as morally inferior and religiously corrupt based on their ritual practice of cannibalism and their acceptance of incestuous relationships.³¹⁹ In fact, cannibals, also called anthropophagi, were listed as monsters in early modern texts such as the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493) along with one-footed sciapods, long eared panotii, and headless humanoid creatures with their eyes in their chest dubbed blemmyes (Fig. 40).³²⁰ While the other creatures listed were physically deformed, anthropophagi were seen as morally perverted. Because they judged the indigenous people as sub-human, the Portuguese explorers enslaved and brutalized them.³²¹ Sexual abuse by these colonizers and similar mistreatment of African slaves led to what is still an “unhealed rape” of the entire continent.³²² The result of these forced couplings is a large mixed race or, in Portuguese, *mulato*, population.³²³ As Latin American scholar Sylvia Chant writes: “Contemporary Brazil provides another showcase, *par excellence*, for eroticization, with the *mulata* playing a special role in the symbolic

any part of this earth, I judge that it is not far from those regions.” Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 9 – 11.

³¹⁸ For a longer discussion of Christian influence in Brazil see Chant and Craske, eds., *Gender in Latin America*, 131 - 134.

³¹⁹ Relationships between uncles and nieces were not prevented in Tupi culture. Chant and Craske, eds., *Gender in Latin America*, 132.

³²⁰ Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America* (New York: Verso, 1989), 18 – 19.

³²¹ The level of brutality was significantly higher in the case of the Spanish conquistadors in other regions of Latin America. Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 137.

³²² Chant and Craske, eds., *Gender in Latin America*, 132 – 133.

³²³ The word *mulato/a* is the Portuguese word for a man or woman of “mixed race.” See note 56 for more discussion and alternative terms.

universe...[as] a representation of Brazil.”³²⁴ However, while the *mulata* might be the embodiment of Brazil domestically and refer to the most socio-economically depressed and largest racial population in the country, internationally, affluent white-skinned actresses and dark-skinned sports stars represented the Brazilian people throughout the twentieth century.

Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood and the film industry painted Brazil as a tropical paradise full of voluptuous women and exotic beaches.³²⁵ Films from this period including “Flying Down to Rio,” (1933), “That Night in Rio,” (1941), and “The Gang’s All Here” (1943) each contributed to the stereotype of Brazilian life as purely hedonistic and overtly sexual. Hollywood starlet and bombshell Carmen Miranda, Portuguese by birth but raised in Brazil, was the most well known Brazilian and represented the tropical sexuality of Latin America (Fig. 41). As film scholar Sergio Augusto keenly observes, not only are many of the stereotypically Brazilian elements of these movies incorrect, but also actors from Spain, Mexico, Brazil and elsewhere are conflated into representing “Latin-ness” despite regional distinctions and even major differences such as language and accent.³²⁶ After Carmen Miranda faded from the Hollywood scene, another Brazilian icon emerged: soccer phenomenon Pelé (Fig. 42). In the mid-1950s Pelé became the most recognizable Brazilian on the world stage.³²⁷ He led the Brazilian national team to three World Cup titles in four consecutive showings from

³²⁴ Chant and Craske, eds., *Gender in Latin America*, 139 – 140.

³²⁵ Nava and Lauerhass, eds., *Brazil in the Making*, 142.

³²⁶ As Augusto notes, in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, the character Holly Golightly has fallen in love with a Brazilian coffee magnate and is learning Portuguese by listening to records on a phonograph, but the accent is continental Portuguese not Brazilian Portuguese. Johnson and Stam, eds., *Brazilian Cinema*, 352.

³²⁷ Nava and Lauerhass, eds., *Brazil in the Making*, 142.

1958 – 1970. What unites Carmen Miranda and Pelé is that despite possessing undeniable talent – Pelé was arguably the best soccer player in history – each served as a body meant to represent the entirety of Brazil as portrayed to the world at large. Miranda was the curvaceous “lady in the tutti frutti hat,” and later Pelé became the virile male ambassador to the world. Thus, when art critics reduce their description and analysis of Neto’s installations to the allusion to sexual body parts, they illuminate only a simplistic and oft repeated stereotype of Brazilian people.³²⁸ Neto himself invokes gendered connotations of his works in addition to sexual descriptions:

The masculine and feminine principles have always been a very important part of my work. It is a relationship that makes us think about oppositions and complementarities; some thing begins where the other ends...Maybe it is even more linked to the very origins of Brazil and its people’s mixed identity, generated through intercourse between colonizers and natives...³²⁹

Moving beyond a discussion of the ways in which Neto’s works look like ovary, breast, scrotum, and phallic representations of biological body parts, a more gendered approach addresses the many layers of masculine and feminine in the artwork and presents a dialogue with Brazilian history and especially the Brazilian practice of *carnaval*. While Neto’s sculptures can be read in more erotic ways, bringing the sexual imagery into an authentic Brazilian cultural context allows for a more meaningful understanding of his project. While famous personages in popular culture represented the sensual Brazilian body, the celebration of *carnaval* is the world-renowned expression of this overt

³²⁸ For such accounts see Moreno, “Pushed into Darkness,” Schütze, “The Skin of Sculpture,” and Leydier, “Sex and Sacanagem.”

³²⁹ Denegri, *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, 35.

sexuality and came to represent Brazilian culture as a whole both domestically and internationally.

Carnaval, as in Venice and New Orleans, is celebrated before the beginning of Lent in the Christian calendar.³³⁰ The celebration, also known as Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras, is a final exuberant exultation of excess before the forty-day period of Lenten self-denial. The *carnaval* in Rio de Janeiro is the best known and attracts the most annual visitors to Brazil. In Rio, the main events occur Sunday through Tuesday, but in other cities the festivities can last for weeks. During this time, there are various parades of elaborate floats and thousands of dancers and musicians, each based around samba school groups, who wear costumes and perform in dance competitions, and *blocos*, which are neighborhood groups that march along with musicians, dancers, and a coterie of revelers (Fig. 43). The samba schools were traditionally based around the *favelas* (slums) that surround the city, and samba is a musical and dance genre that sprang from African dances and rhythms.³³¹ A feature of these parades are the fantastical outfits worn by the women, usually including some type of sequined and jeweled bikini, a headdress with jewels and feathers, and wings attached to the back which sprout more feathers and more jewels (Fig. 44). As sociologist Roberto DaMatta explains, these outfits are called *fantasia*, which is “a term in Brazilian Portuguese having a double sense referring both to dreams, illusions, and idealizations of daily life as well as to the costumes used only in

³³⁰ For detailed accounts of Brazilian *Carnaval* see Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, especially “Chapter 6: The Carnivalization of the World,” 136 – 164.

³³¹ Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 156 and 149.

Carnival.”³³² These outfits are usually very revealing and highly provocative, which DaMatta claims is part of the *carnaval* atmosphere, where bodies are praised for their sexual desirability and pleasure capabilities rather than the reserve exercised the rest of the year.³³³

While *carnaval* grew out of Christian tradition, strong African influences changed the festival as it is practiced in Brazil into a riotous and sexually charged pleasure experience. Devoutly Catholic as well as some Pentecostal Protestant sects refrain from this “excessive” celebration or enter far more conservative floats and dancers in the parades. As Chant explains:

The only major sources of religious endorsement for the obvious celebration of sensuality and sexuality in the Brazilian carnival more generally, and particularly in Salvador, are Afro-Brazilian cults such as Candomblé, which does not subscribe to the Christian notion of sex as sin, and is marked by its high proportion of female devotees and tolerance of homosexuality among the priesthood as much as among its followers.³³⁴

The influence African religions had on *carnaval* is seen in the emphasis on the fecundity of the female body as well as the many sex and gender assertions, inversions, and layers on display in the parades themselves. In addition to the nearly naked women on parade, some participants are costumed as clowns wielding giant phalluses with which they beat people. These obvious bodily references are tempered with what is perhaps most central in the overt display of sex and sexuality, the various degrees of cross-dressing and gender layering that take place during *carnaval*. As Parker describes: “Grotesque, diabolical, or

³³² Roberto DaMatta, *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma* [Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis], trans. John Drury (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 40.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 106.

³³⁴ Chant and Craske, eds., *Gender in Latin America*, 137 – 138.

monstrous figures combine the body parts of male and female in order to create ambiguous *androgynos* (androgens). Men transform themselves into women, and women into men. Indeed, no symbolic form dominates the symbolism of the festival as completely as transvestism.”³³⁵ These transvestite figures, known as *travestis*, are examples of the type of layering of sex and gender roles, here both biological and performed, creating the hierarchical inversions that routinely take place during *carnaval*. Like Cixous’s bisexuality these *travestis* demonstrate a spectrum of gender rather than fixed polarities. However, in addition to gender-bending, social reversals and political inversions are also part of the *carnaval* celebration.

These parades and parties are seen as a time when the labor, stress and pain of the daily life of the lowest classes is completely reversed as they don elaborate costumes of kings and rulers reveling in the freedom and play [*brincar*] experienced during *carnaval*.³³⁶ Those traditionally inhabiting the fringes of society, *travestis* [transvestites], *putas* [female prostitutes], *bofes* [male macho prostitutes], and *mulandros* [trickster figures or rogues] take central roles in the *carnaval* celebration. The attention of the hundreds of thousands of spectators is on the samba groups that have come down from the hillside slums, the underground societies of male prostitutes, transvestites, and homosexuals that organize their own floats, and women, liberated from the confines of the home and the restrictions of strict Catholic propriety, who parade around almost naked. The result of this gendered, social and political hierarchical inversion is the utopian feeling that anything is possible. This celebration is a moment of freedom for

³³⁵ Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 145.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 141 – 142.

oppressed groups to transcend their daily conditions of poverty and instead embrace the excesses, sexual and otherwise, offered in this celebration. Parker sums up the feel of carnival:

Linking notions about the sensuality of *sol* (sun), *suar* (sweat), *praia* (beach), and *verão* (summer) to the practice of *sacanagem* (transgressive sexual interaction), then, the carnival embodies a ‘tropical’ vision of the world. Like the carnivals of the northern hemisphere, this *carnaval*, too, offers a vision of the future: a utopian vision of the possibilities of life in a tropical paradise, somewhere south of the equator, where the struggles, suffering, and sadness of normal human existence have been destroyed by pleasure and passion.³³⁷

This notion of freedom established through the body is a key component of the Brazilian identity, and the reversal of traditional roles, whether gender, political, or social, is key to the celebration of *carnaval*.

In *Leviathan Thot*, Neto evokes both the masculine and feminine to create a space in which multiple interpretations, sensations, and experiences are possible. Removed from a strictly visual process, the tactility of the nylon forms of the sculpture creates a feminine aspect that plays against the masculine structure surrounding it. By moving beyond the scopic field and into tactility, Neto’s *Leviathan Thot* functions as the means by which the participant is granted agency and takes control of his or her body in the same way that Irigaray proposes a woman must acknowledge that her own body is active in eliciting its own pleasure. The installation of *Leviathan Thot* within the Panthéon evokes Cixous’s “other bisexuality” as masculine and feminine meet. Irigaray and Cixous challenged the patriarchal norms of their society, and Neto too disrupts the fraternal order of the Panthéon. In so doing, Neto engages with characteristics of bisexuality as it is defined by Cixous as the sinuous and feminine *Leviathan Thot* fills the space of the rigid,

³³⁷ Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 147 – 149.

masculine, Neoclassical Panthéon, which itself is complicated by its history as a church dedicated to a female saint.

Sexuality is a central component of the Brazilian identity, which is *carnaval* in its most raucous embodiment. However, Neto's installation also presented political inversions, and placing this subversive creature in the historic heart of patriarchal French society called into question and complicated the relationship between the colonial hierarchy of Europe and its control over Latin American countries. The location and title of the piece take up political and religious reversals similar to the gender layering of *carnaval*. By examining this installation for its deeper sensual and sensuous meaning, aspects overlooked by superficial description present more complex interpretations, which engender a meaningful discussion of Brazilian identity and the central importance of the body, metaphorically and literally, in this understanding.

Conclusion

If the sculptures are like bodies, they are imaginary animals... when you are there with the sculpture, you don't have anything, it's only you and it. – *Ernesto Neto*³³⁸

The organic forms, sensuous elements, and serene atmosphere of Neto's installations cause the viewer to simultaneously identify with the body of the artwork and re-discover his or her own body while viewing, touching, smelling, and walking. Neto states that "this strange cultural cocktail makes me picture a different idea of time that keeps things in an eternal balance, and gives us more space for contemplation, for breathing life."³³⁹ This universalizing quality in Neto's artwork makes his pieces accessible to a global audience, and indeed, he has been well received both in critical and popular terms since his arrival on the world stage. However, while some fear that in contemporary art, global exposure results in the dilution of individual and national identity, Neto's artworks exemplify the manner by which local attributes, materials, tropes, and styles are adapted to reach a global audience.

Neto's *Naves* series recalls the Brazilian trope of anthropophagy as they swallow up the participant behind layers of gauzy haze. During this journey through the body of the installation, the participant is made aware of his or her own body because of the decentering experience of walking on the stretchy nylon, touching the dangling forms, and breathing in exotic scents. Likewise the spices in *While Nothing Happens* mentally transport the participant in time as well as reference Brazil's colonial past. Finally, gender bending and sexuality reminiscent of Brazilian *carnaval* are demonstrated through the luscious feminine forms of *Leviathan Thot* inside the strictly masculine architecture

³³⁸ Ernesto Neto as quoted in *Naves, Skies, Dreams*, Pedrosa, ed., 55.

³³⁹ Ernesto Neto as quoted in *Ernesto Neto: Macro/Hall*, Denegri, 35.

of the Panthéon. In each of these instances Neto's installation engages with elements of *brasilidade* while simultaneously engendering a universalizing sensuous bodily experience.

Perhaps it is critics and scholars who write about contemporary art in superficial terms and without attention to the details of local identity that are responsible for the perceived homogenization of contemporary art. The global exposure that many contemporary artists experience through biennials and the like leads not to the obliteration of specific local influences, but rather to the incorporation and adaptation of many sources. Contemporary artists, then, are performing their own kind of cultural cannibalism as seemingly disparate influences come together in their artworks. Neto is one such artist who thoughtfully embraces and cannibalizes the local and the global to create nuanced layers of meaning in his own form of artistic *mulatismo*. The bodies of Neto's artworks truly represent the body of Brazil.

Images



Fig. 1
Ô Bicho! [The Animal!], 2001
polyamide stocking, ground clove, cumin, ground black pepper



Fig. 2
Nave Deusa, 1998, polyamide stocking, styrofoam balls, cumin, cloves, and sand



Fig. 3
While Nothing Happens, 2008
wood, polyamide stocking, ground clove, ground ginger, cumin, ground black pepper,
turmeric, and sand

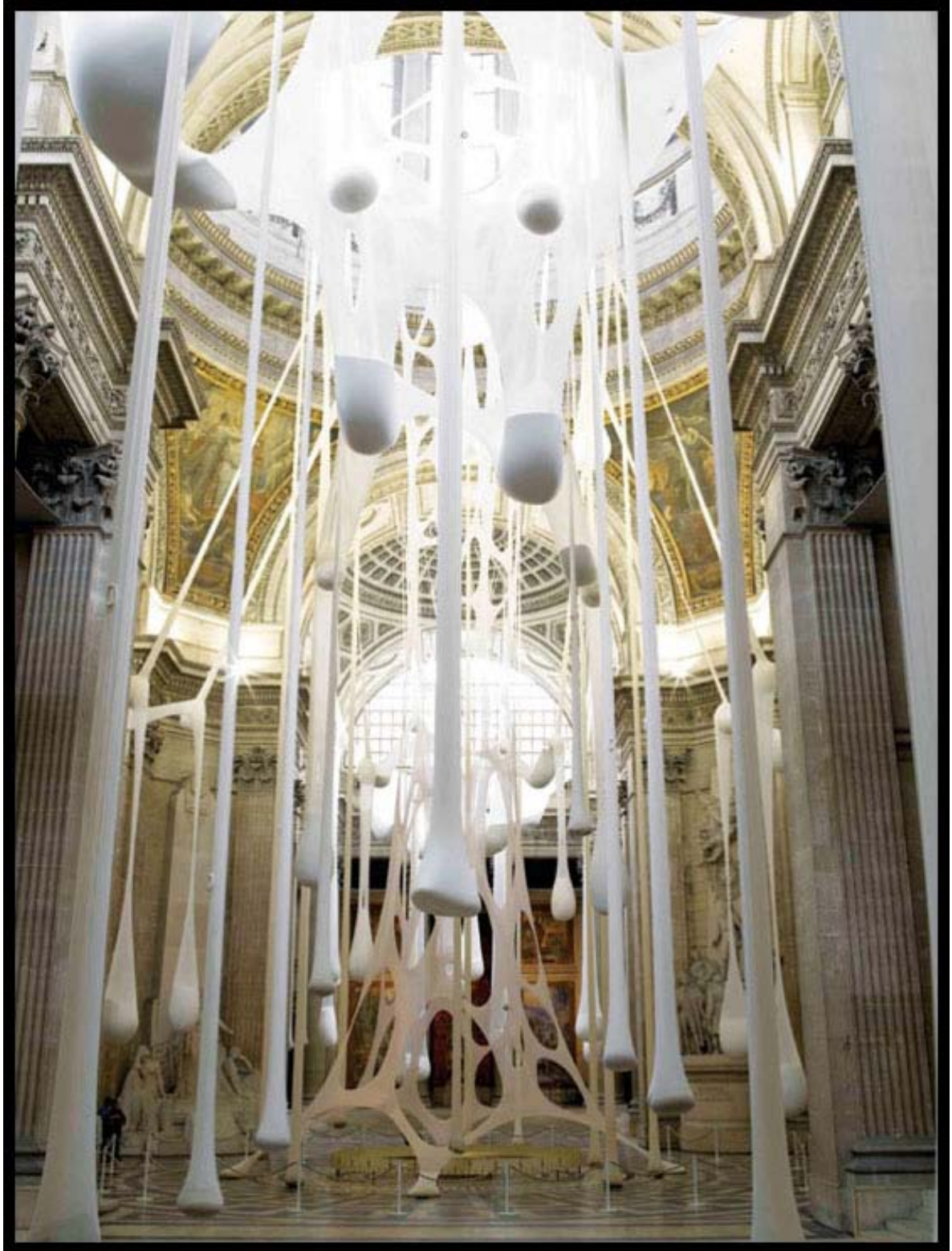


Fig. 4
Leviathan Thot, 2006
polyamide stocking, metal pellets, styrofoam beads, and sand



Fig. 5
BarBall, 1987, iron and rubber



Fig. 6
Colonia [Colony], 1989, polyamide stocking and metal pellets



Fig. 7
Piff, Paff, Puff, and Poff, 1994, polyamide stocking, turmeric, chili powder, cloves, and cumin



Fig. 8
Globiobabel Nudelioname Landmoonaiia, 2000, polyamide stocking, styrofoam balls, and sand



Fig. 9
Nave, Utero Capela [Uterine Chapel Nave], 2000
polyamide stocking, styrofoam balls, and sand



Fig. 10
Nave Óvulo Organóid [Organelle Ovule Nave], 1998
polyamide stocking, styrofoam balls, clove, black pepper, and sand



Fig. 11
Nave Noiva, blop, 1998, polyamide stocking, polyester string, rice



Fig. 12
Nave Utero Capela (interior), 2000



Fig. 13
Globiobabel Nudelioname Landmoonaiia (interior), 2000

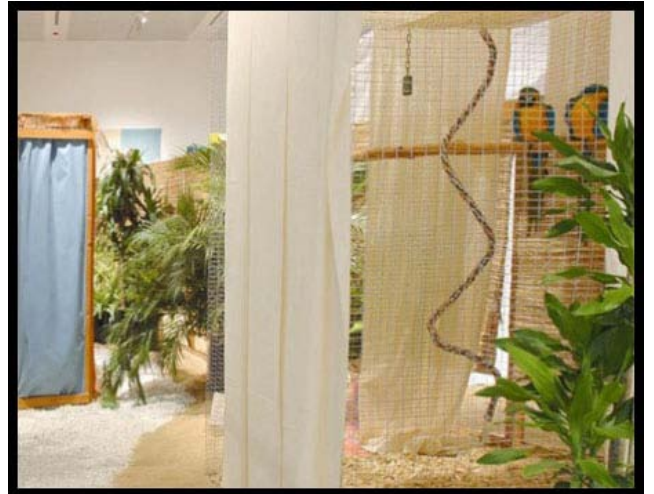


Fig. 14
Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália*, 1967, mixed media

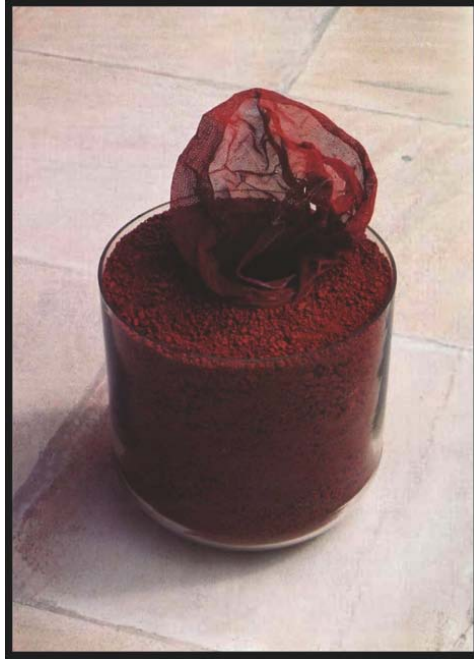


Fig. 15

Hélio Oiticica, *Glass Bolide 4*, 1964, glass, pigment, and cotton cloth



Fig. 16

Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé P4*, 1964, various cloth



Fig. 17
While Nothing Happens (detail), 2008

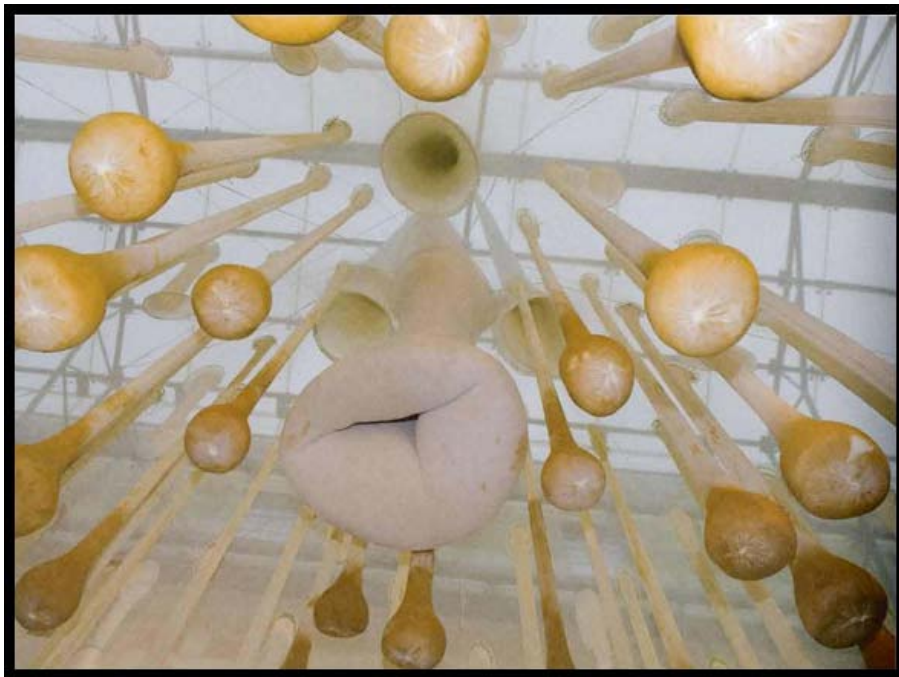


Fig. 18
While Nothing Happens (view from below), 2008

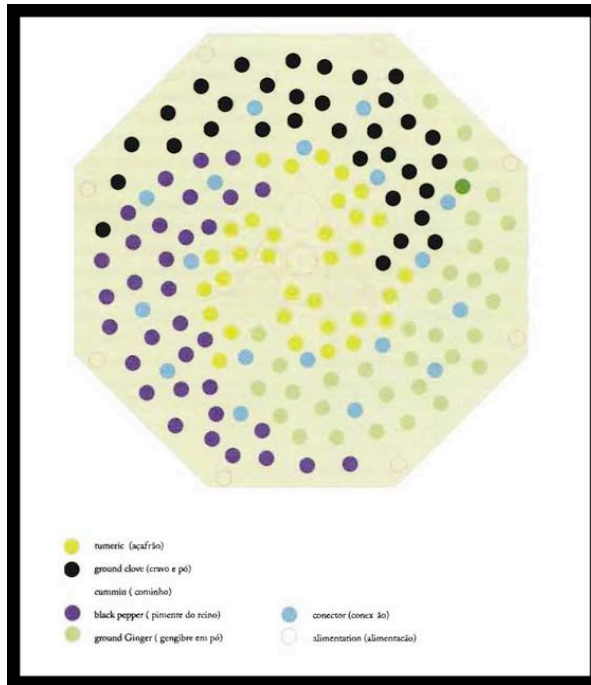


Fig. 19
Spice Diagram of *While Nothing Happens*



Fig. 20
Glass Pagoda, *Museo d'Arte Contemporanea*, Rome



Fig. 21
Odile Decq, *Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome, 2002*

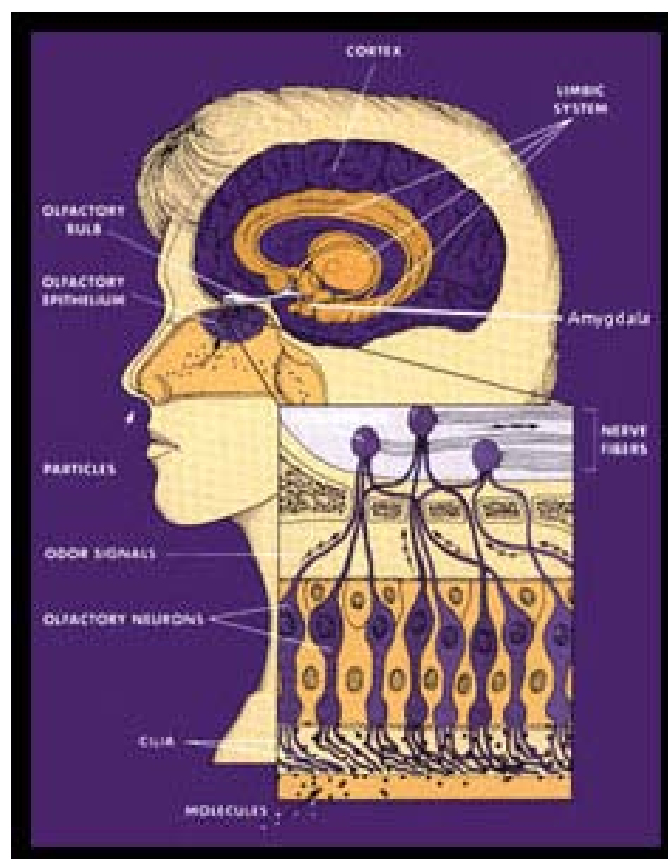


Fig. 22
Olfactory Diagram

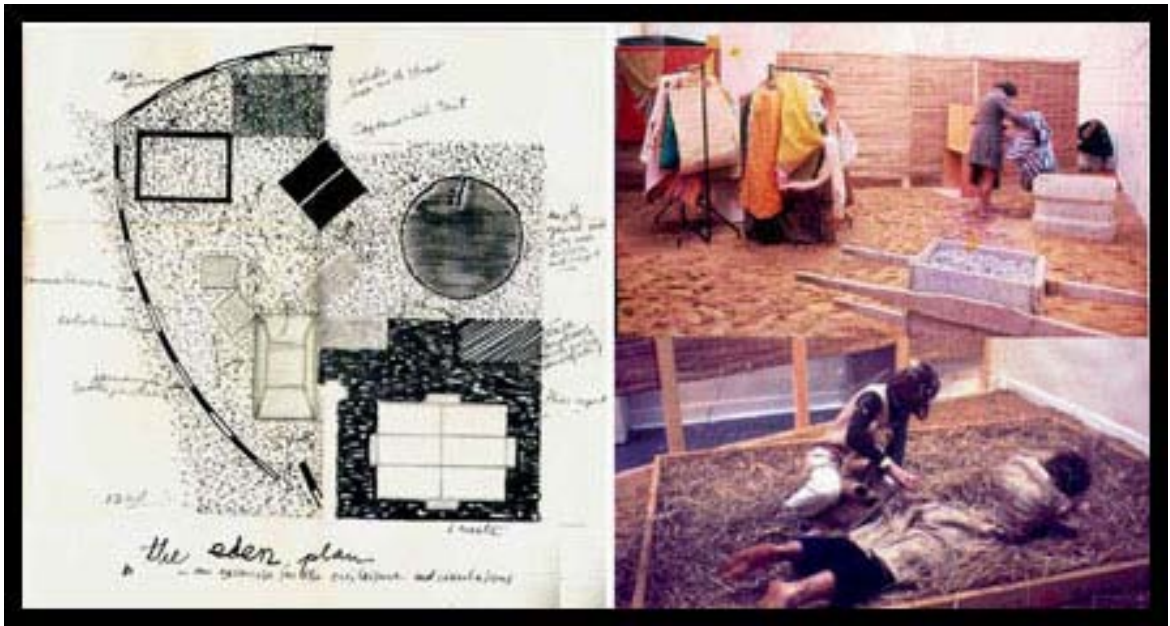


Fig. 23
Hélio Oiticica, *Eden*, 1969, mixed media



Fig. 24
Lygia Clark, *The I and You*, 1967, rubber, silk, steel wool, and mixed media



Fig. 25

Hélio Oiticica, *Seja Marginal, Seja Heroi* [Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero], 1968, cotton



Fig. 26

Ernesto Neto, (title not known), 2000



Fig. 27

Jacques-Germain Soufflot, *Panthéon*, Paris, 1757 – 1790



Fig. 28

Leviathan Thot (detail), 2006

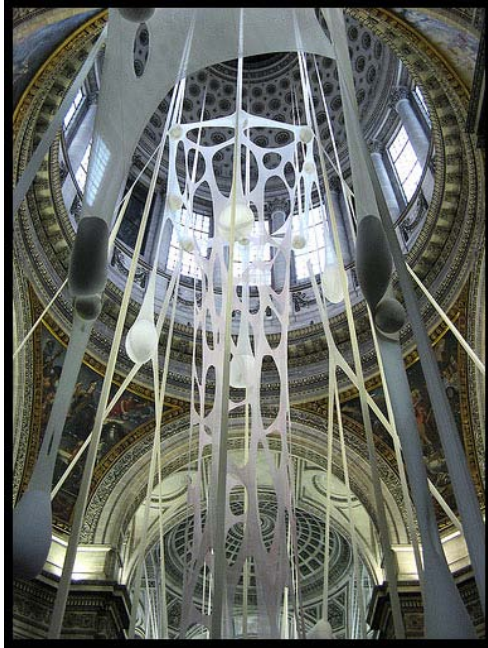


Fig. 29
Leviathan Thot (detail), 2006

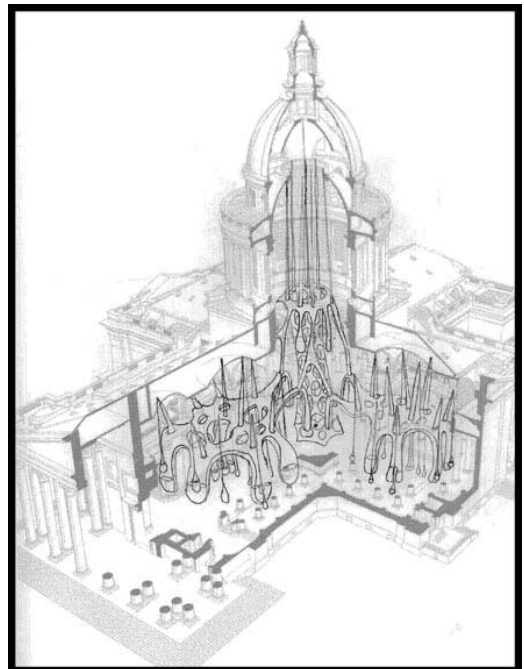
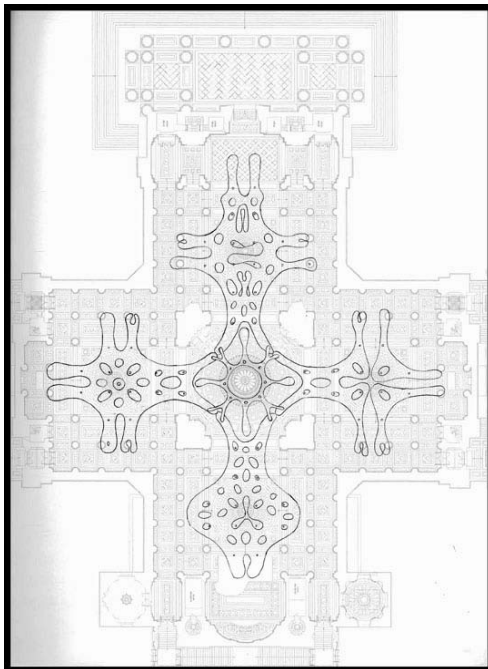


Fig. 30
Plan and Elevation of *Leviathan Thot*



Fig. 31
Leviathan Thot (detail), 2006



Fig. 32
Leviathan Thot (detail), 2006



Fig. 33
Puvis de Chavanne, *Scenes from the Life of Ste. Geneviève*, 1877



Fig. 34
Leviathan Thot (detail), 2006



Fig. 35
Antoine-Jean Gros, *Apotheosis of Ste. Geneviève*, 1811



Fig. 36
Leon Foucault, *Foucault's Pendulum*, 1851



Fig. 37
Francois-Leon Sicard, *National Convention*, 1913



Fig. 38
Leviathan

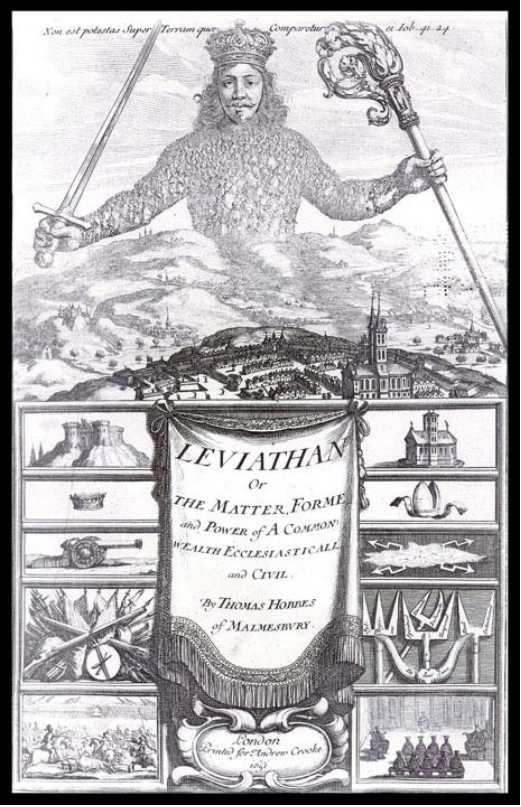


Fig. 39
Frontispiece, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, 1651



Fig. 40
Monsters, *Nuremberg Chronicles*, 1493

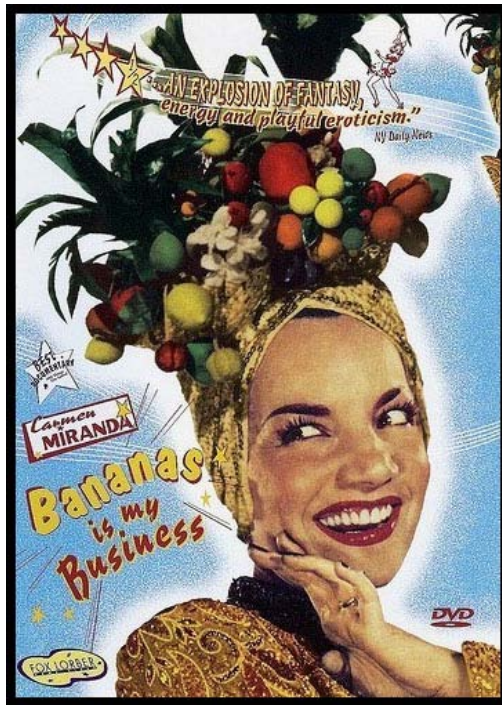


Fig. 41
Carmen Miranda

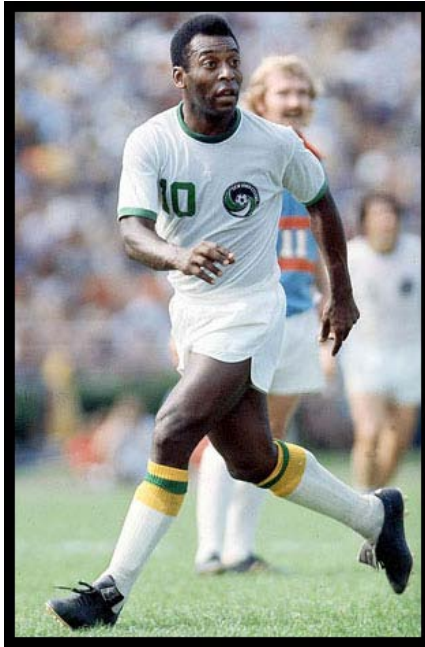


Fig. 42
Pelé



Fig. 43
Brazilian *Carnaval* float



Fig. 44
Brazilian *Carnaval* dancer

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