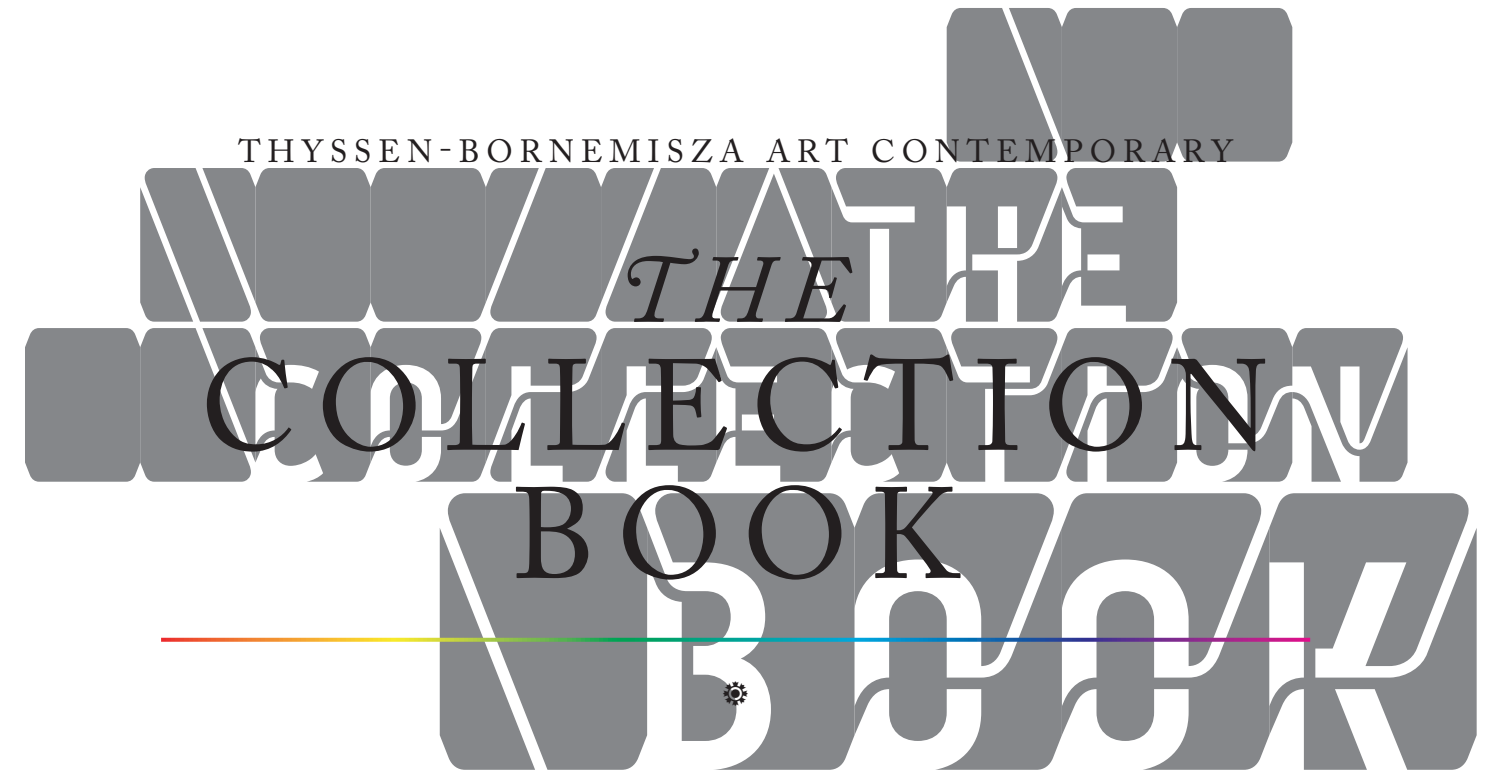


THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA ART CONTEMPORARY

NOO
THE
COLLECTION
BOOK



VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG
WALTHER KÖNIG, KÖLN

ERNESTO NETO

ERNESTO NETO

*1964 IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, WHERE HE LIVES AND WORKS.



ORGANIC ACCIDENTS

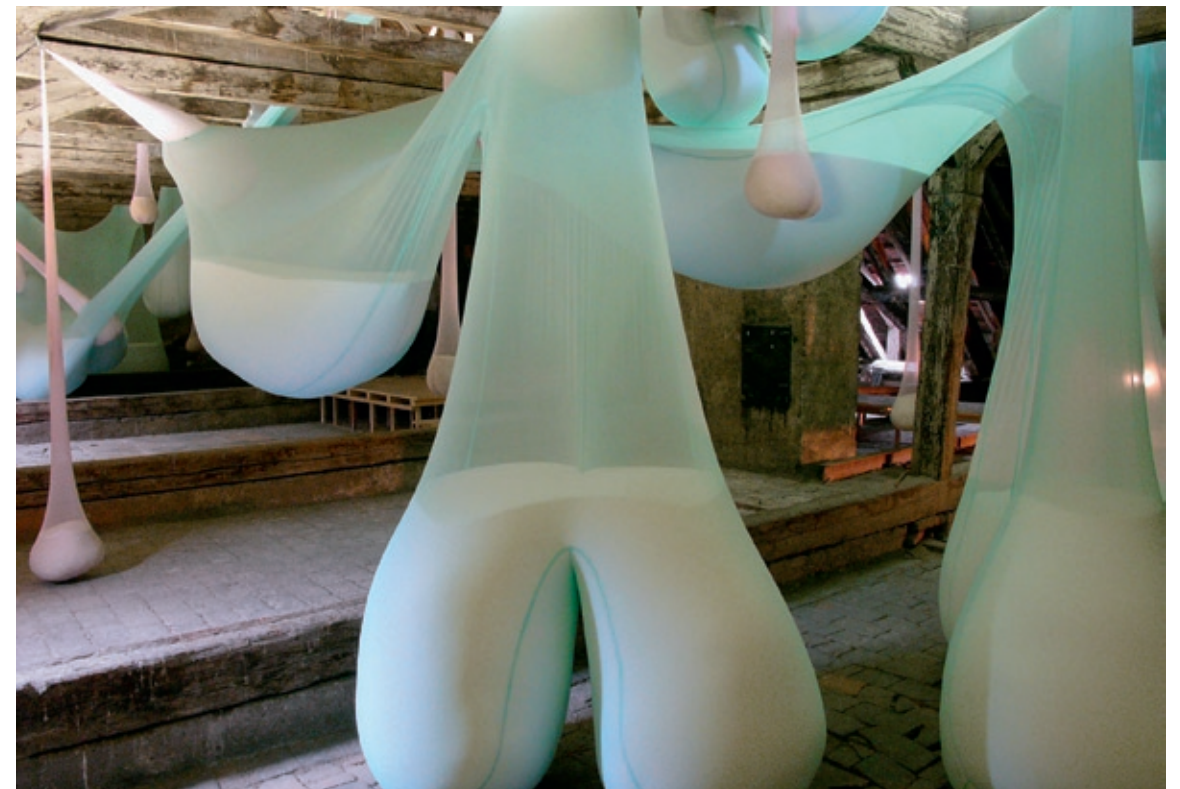
A conversation with ERNESTO NETO

A GENTE SE ENCONTRA AQUI
HOJE, AMANHÃ EM OUTRO
LUGAR. ENQUANTO ISSO DEUS
É DEUSA. SANTA GRAVIDADE
2003

Textile, Styrofoam, and rice; 1475 x 475 x 450 cm

T-B A21: *A Gente ... Santa gravidade* is one of your room-size hanging fabric sculptures that, like all your installations, evokes a sensual experience. You once commented that your works suggest "fertility, sexuality, touching, and kissing"—certain atmospheric qualities that are created by their spatial presence and tactile surfaces. At the same time the work seems to explore the notion of translating samba rhythms into visual art. Is this what you had in mind?

ERNESTO NETO: *Well, I've never had in mind the idea of translating samba into visual art, but in fact that may be an undercurrent of the work I've been generating. Samba is something that we dance under our hips, more in our body than in our mind, and this has a lot to do with my work. Samba lyrics are far away from the idea of protest, which does not mean that there are no complaints there or no critical poetic vision of reality, but it's more about how to deal with it, how to let it move, flow, without hurting too much. There is a kind of sensuality in the samba. Like most of my works, A Gente ... Santa gravidade happens in a state of energetic balance in which every element is involved in the symphony and relates to the others through the interaction with its own properties, revealing its own intimacy. Somehow the sculpture exists in a state of a dance in which there are two bodies crossing each other, swinging with each other, in a diagonal, up and down through space, as if dancing over reality. This piece is an outgrowth of another work I did in 2002 called The Dangerous Logic of Wooing. During that time I was studying principles of cellular membrane*



A Gente se encontra aqui hoje, amanhã em outro lugar. Enquanto isso Deus é Deusa. Santa gravidade

communication, in which a protein brings chemical components to feed the cell. These elements will be able to get into the cell only if there is some interaction with the doors of the cell, the keyholes. The way to open the door is not a classical formal relationship—male-female, positive-negative. The main interpretation is that they do a dance to open the door (it reminds me of bee communication). I think it's very interesting to have the idea of dancing as such a fundamental presence in the structural existence of our bodies, and it's funny that dance many times is considered a secondary means of expression, not "serious." But I can't imagine being alive without dancing!!! Besides, *A Gente ... Santa gravidade* is a piece that has a strong relation with the space it is in, especially with its reinstallation at T-B A21; it has a dance, a swing, an interaction with the reality of the architecture, bringing new significance, meaning, and spirit to it. It reminds me of the samba idea of adaptation to reality, which is basic to our existence. As you know, samba—like blues, jazz, soul, funk, even rock and roll and pop—is the fruit of black African culture, coming from slaves who were in shock over Western culture. But there is something in music beyond the cultural sphere. What is very interesting for me is the sensuality of the music, even though we can localize it, find out where it's coming from, we are surrounded by it. Even though there is the figure, the sculpture, and the background, the architecture in which the work interacts, this is a work that surrounds us; it's difficult to find where it begins and where it ends. I am very interested in the fact that this is not an installation.

T-B A21: The sculpture stretches across the exhibition space, resembling the bodily membranes of organicist architecture. But the fabrics and materials encourage the visitors to touch them, yanking them out of the passive role and into active participation.

EN: *A Gente ... Santa gravidade* definitely stimulates us to touch it through its sensuality. I think we like to touch most things. The sculptor likes and needs to touch sculpture, as when Michelangelo began to go to the academy to touch Phidias's sculptures when he was going blind. Touch is intimacy, and everyone needs and desires intimacy; touch is the closest relationship you can have with someone. Touch also can be an invasion. It is very related to culture: some people touch each other while they talk, while to others that could be so offensive as to generate problems, a little cultural shock. Touch can hurt: when you hit someone, you are touching that person; when you cut or shoot, you are touching, so you can even touch to kill. Besides this concept of body-territory, there is an image that I like very much: the most powerful microscope is blind! It "sees" things that are so small that they do not reflect light; instead there is an electronic bombing that touches the surface and reads its form. Isn't it poetic? We need to close our eyes to think, to kiss, to make love, to feel, to see! Of course you can touch *A Gente ... Santa gravidade*, but there is no need to do so to get closer to the work; there is already a dimensional, physical relationship between our body and the work, which is an indirect extension of the relationship between the work and its parts, and all the concrete and subjective relations of meanings that the piece brings to us. Of course you can touch it, but at the end of the day that's not the kind of work I do, that touch becomes important for the experience of the piece. In this case we can get all the tactile interactions from the relationship of the architecture to the internal structure of the piece, by looking to it, walking under and around it—I would say by "breathing" it.



The Dangerous Logic of Wooing, 2002

HUMANÓIDES

2001

Polyurethan tulle, fur velvet fabric, styrofoam pellets, herbs
dimensions variable

T-B A21: Your works are often described as "experience sculptures" that are configured in playful arrangements, surrounding the viewers, activating their senses. Smell and touch are as important as sight. Your voluptuous figurine sculptures filled with Styrofoam and spices—the *Humanóides*—seem to be a crossbreed of chairs and costumes, inviting the visitors to wear and explore them as seating devices or body extensions. But in a way they envelop the viewer.

EN: *The Naves*, *the cottonrooms*, and *the Humanóides* are three different concepts that allow for a much stronger physical experience through a tactile relationship. When you can get into the work or even wear it, it brings up for me an idea of breathing time. This situation brings to the work three levels of approaching it, of phenomenology if you prefer: the piece exists as a normal sculpture; you can have the experience of seeing people interacting with it, which brings another level of subjectivity; and finally you can have your own interaction with it, as if you have a view from the inside of the work, from the physical to the psychological input. It's interesting to see how people deal with it, how they show their intimacy by having an unexpected and most of the time pleasurable relationship with it, but the pleasure is a revelation of our intimacy, and sometimes people become uncomfortable with showing that in public. It has a lot to do with sensuality and desire; it sometimes makes us feel virtually naked, and at the same time socially this unexpected situation many times generates communication between people who would not communicate in another situation. This kind of social interaction goes a bit deeper with the idea of being playful. The piece becomes a tool to operate unconscious sociability, as Lygia Clark discovered with her relational objects, but not through deep psychotherapeutic exploration of the individual. Especially with the cottonrooms—which developed



Instructions by the artist

out of the Naves and which involve stretchy material that is opaque and brings in a different light—it's still a space body that could lead us to a kind of collective womb, but with different rooms and with a comfortable floor that you can lie down on. The idea of comfort is very important for me. But the moment we relax, it's very special to think, to let our mind come back to us; many times there are people who sleep in some of the works. This is great, because when we sleep, we get rid of all our fears. I also think of these opaque cottonrooms as a place to escape a bit from the overflow of information of our civilization. It would be the opposite of the pop art, an oasis from the pop world. In a way it reminds me of Rio's tradition of going to crowded beaches on the weekends, almost naked and compressed by other people, with the sun and the water touching us. The *Humanóides* are different in terms of the reaction of the public. They are extremely internal, a place to be with yourself, again breathing but denser, as you feel compressed by it, really inside of it. They even generate social interaction with other people, but with them you are protected from the others. The concept is to concentrate the energy, the intimacy, to warm yourself. While the cottonrooms would like to dissolve it.





top: *Humanóides*
bottom: *O tempo lento do corpo que é pele*

O TEMPO LENTO
DO CORPO QUE É PELE
2004

Foam, polyamide rug, wood, and spices; 150 x 680 x 950 cm

T-B A21: *The amorphous carpet-like floor sculpture, woven from red strips of rubbery Lycra, resembles an island with hillocks swelling out of its surface, while the title of the work—O tempo lento do corpo que é pele (The Slow Pace of the Body That Is Skin)—seems to make reference to the architectural membrane, perhaps a wall, a barrier. But it would also seem that the human scale obviously underscores your fundamental interest in the relationship between body and space. How important is the role of the skin as a specific condition of the work?*

EN: *This idea of the skin is very important in all my works: the skin as the place of existence, and the skin as the place where our internal vibrations deal with our external vibrations. This polarity is crucial for me. I see the body very much as a landscape—like a sea, a field—and the sculpture is a landscape. If we look inside our body, which has become very normal these days, there is this new landscape, which has a very important presence in the inspiration for my work, the micro world landscape, the bio landscape. The Slow Pace... is a piece that shows it very clearly; you can see it as a mountain and/or an animal. The figurative image is not really important to me, but in this piece it clarifies the idea of transition from the body to the landscape. This transition is fundamental. Our landscape is the earth, but when you see the earth from the moon, the earth becomes a body, a sculpture, a ball floating in the sky. The transition between the figure and the landscape, it's a question of our position as a viewer, and our position as a viewer is related to our perception and the cultural structure that mediates it, the skin that's in the middle. I'm also very interested in cities, how the various elements and the architecture create a net, a civilized skin that flows on the topography of the ambience, and how that urbanism reflects the human society that exists in that*

place, how the interaction between the individual and the urban landscape informs our psychological outlook. Normally my works are transparent, and the textile is the light part of it. In this case it's the opposite: the content is hidden, and the falling carpet shows its own weight, maybe symbolically the weight of something hidden. The time-space in this piece is related more to the many little knots, the cells, that generate the surface. They were made by the women's cooperative Coparoca. There is something interesting to me about the time they take making knot by knot with their own hands, so there is this craft time revealing the invisible content. The skin transitions also happen with A Gente se encontra aqui hoje, amanhã em outro lugar. Enquanto isso Deus é Deusa. Santa gravidade. The full title would be translated as "We meet each other here today, tomorrow in another place. Meanwhile God is Goddess. Holy gravity." It means that something happens with this sculpture that has been in another place before and now is here. In the transition between the other place and here, it develops a completely different mood. The structure remains the same, but the work adapts to the particular architecture of the space and its placement. Again there's the relation between the figure and the background. The work relates to the limits of the roof, the limits of itself, its skin. Architecture is a skin for me: every wall is a skin; every door is a mouth. When I do a work like that, I have the feeling that it is literally coming out of my body. It is so organic! Even though we make it and think about it, it doesn't look like a product of our mind. Somewhere along the line those thoughts crossed with the body on the way out. This crossing is another level of spirituality or even organic chance or accident, a happening!

overleaf: *Esqueleto Glóbulos*



ESQUELETO GLÓBULOS

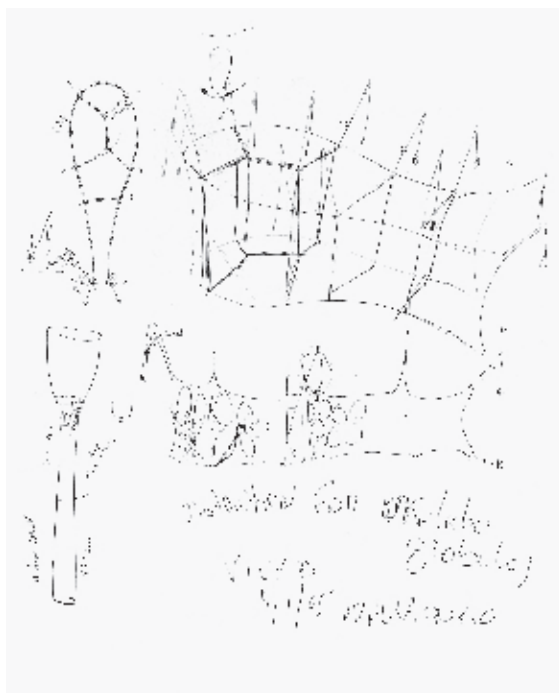
2001

Polyamide tulle, styrofoam pellets, and sand; 450 x 470 x 1475 cm

T-B A21: *The materials you use and the production processes are very modest and simple from the standpoint of technology. Your main material is an elastic fabric that organically stretches across the space as an entire environment, as in the work *Esqueleto Glóbulos*. How does your idea of the material influence the working process?*

EN: *The fabric, which is actually polyamide with spandex, expresses gravity. It generates or promotes the tension involved in the structure of the work. And it is transparent; it shows what's inside of it. This is very important for me! It is interesting to show what's going on. It is less corrupt. I like to work with knots, and I dislike screws, melting, or gluing. The sewing machine is a simple machine that makes knots. It's a very domestic machine. So more important than the material is the process and the material that would be used to carry out the process.*

Seven seamstresses worked on *Esqueleto Glóbulos* (Skeleton globules) with old Singer machines. It is a rather primitive process: first, I prepare the internal and external fabrics, the body and its rooms. We hung it together. And then I draw "circles" on the walls. Then we sew it from the outside, we cut out the internal part, and finally we sew it from the inside. *Esqueleto Glóbulos* was created for the Museo Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, where I did an exhibition with Vik Muniz (Brazil in Venezia, 2001). The space in the palazzo is very long, so the work was developed in this particular shape, so that in the end it's in the form of a long "fabric" bag if you see it from the top: you have the entrance, and then you cross the five internal rooms of the installation to exit on the other side. It's a proposal of an organic structural architecture. As for the title, I thought *Esqueleto Glóbulos* would be an interesting combination of words: *glóbulos* refers to the form, which has a lot of bubble structure and to the filling of course. The sculpture is filled with little balls of Styrofoam. So *Esqueleto Glóbulos* has organic meanings in two ways: both the structure and the content. *Esqueleto* is the textile, which, in the end, is the skeleton of the piece—and gravity pulls it downward. That is, gravity works on the content, the *glóbulos*, and the content is held together by the *esqueleto*. You see, the skin generates the limit, so the skin and the skeleton are kind of the same thing in this situation.



Instructions by the artist

T-B A21: *Your work clearly reflects on the participatory tradition of the Brazilian Neo-Concrete movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, most prominently, equated art with living organisms in a kind of organic architecture. In a sense one can also read your works in parallel to your exuberantly growing hometown Rio de Janeiro. Your work deals with classical sculptural concerns such as gravity, color, and form while exploring the dialectics of lightness and weight, balance and suspension, the structural and the corporeal.*

EN: *When Neo-Concretism began in the mid-1950s, there was not so much participatory tradition—this is more a legend—but there was an idea of incorporating a higher level of subjectivity, while the Concrete artists from São Paulo had in mind an almost mathematical objectivity through the development of Lygia Clark's idea. She moved from the theorization of the organic line to the sculptures called *Bichos*, in which she inaugurated the idea of interaction. This was followed by the *Poemas-Objeto* of Ferreira Gullar and finally the development of Hélio Oiticica's research regarding color in space from the *Penetráveis* to the *Parangolés*. But by that time, in the middle of the 1960s, there was no more Neo-Concretism. Hélio and Lygia were already working independently from the former movement, Hélio dealing with*

the new generation that was coming and Lygia with an interaction between art and psychotherapy. I would say that this interactive spirit was part of the expanding field of Neo-Concretism but not of the movement itself. And in the 1970s the art here had already passed through a neorealist movement, arriving at a kind of Brazilian conceptual art!

*About organic architecture, Hélio was the one for whom architecture was more important but never really organic in the biological sense. I would say that even beyond Neo-Concretism he had always been very concrete in his formalization. Lygia became very organic but besides the incredible piece *A casa é o corpo* never really worked close to architecture. Her work was so close to the body that there was no space for the architecture; architecture involves some space between its own architecture and the body; for Lygia there was no space for this space.*

The roots of my work are definitively related to Rio de Janeiro. The organicity of the urban civilization combined with the extreme presence of nature is really something that keeps nature and culture in shock. The Neo-Concretists, Lygia and Hélio, were followed later by great artists like Tunga, Cildo Meireles, Waltercio Caldas, and José Resende, who were also very important to me. There were also the Minimalists and the Arte Povera guys—this was very strong too, so even having local roots, it's impossible not to be touched by an international field historically and by everything that is going on today.

As you said, I see my work as very classical. I'm also very interested in Greek, Egyptian, and also Aztec, Olmec, and Maya sculptures. The goddesses, like the Venus of Willendorf, are fantastic, and why not also look at the great field of Easter Island statues and at Zen gardens? It would be interesting to compress the whole of history into one single moment! So the materiality, it's a way to express some of these concepts, especially the idea of gravity. Apart from any local cultural field, gravity is common to all of us, so I'm extremely interested in it!

By special request of the artist, we have reprinted an excerpt from an essay by Paulo Herkenhoff on *Leviathan Thot*, which was conceived for the Panthéon in Paris. The work is an outgrowth of bodies of work that Neto has been developing since 2002, following *The Dangerous Logic of Wooing*, which he made for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., in 2002 and *A Gente ... Santa gravidade*.



Venus of Willendorf, 25,000 B.C.

LEVIATHAN THOT: A POLITICS OF THE PLUMB

by PAULO HERKENHOFF

LEVIATHAN Thot brings to mind Jacques Callot's etching *La Pendaison* (The Hangman's Tree, 1633). In 1633, having received a commission from King Louis XIII to depict the sites of his hometown of Nancy, Callot refused to glorify the king and instead produced his edition of dramatically bleak etchings, *The Miseries of War*. *La Pendaison* bears similarities with depictions of hanged African Americans swinging from poplar trees in the southern United States. But *Leviathan Thot* does not relate to the lifeless bodies in the Panthéon or in Callot's etchings; it is rather a living anatomy that has taken up residence in the rigorous architectural perfection of this temple of enlightenment.

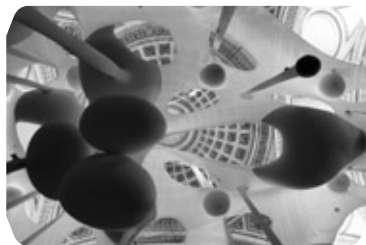
Ernesto Neto views himself as an illegal street vendor from Rio de Janeiro—a typical product of the underground economy exacerbated by the social marginalization attendant on inflated capitalist globalization. To evade state repression, street vendors display their merchandize on blankets that they pack up and swiftly take away the minute they spot trouble. Similarly, Neto works with the portability of large dimensions; his project, so he says, is carried around “inside small eggs, like culture in the time space of the social body.”

The “body” in *Leviathan Thot* is organized into zones. Its development is rhizomatic. The head is the locus of fear, expression, the sharpening of human senses, thought, and confusion in the symmetry of space and spirit. The upper extremities (arms and hands) on the right and left sides of the body are the locus of action, affection, and sensory mechanisms. The artist views them as conveyors of endearment, a moral standing in the Manichean dichotomy of good and evil, touch and blind gaze. Hands implement the mechanics of exchange, of social aggression, of the verdict and its political execution. In *Leviathan Thot*, they represent the action of the state. Here, the values of equality and justice oppose the violence of the world.

Leviathan Thot is symbolically rooted in the tension between gravity and matter, reason and affectivity, or even nature and culture. Symmetry paradoxically undermines this bipolar condition. Neto is well aware of the impossibility of perfect symmetry in the human body, for it is inevitably approximate, at best. The invasion of the Panthéon's symmetry by the biological symmetry of *Leviathan Thot* corrupts the Euclidean model, the balance of its bilateral symmetry demonstrating how its sagittal plane plays the role of an unfaithful imaginary mirror.

The area of the body from the lungs down, including the abdomen and legs, is the center of all movement, desire, will, and courage. The artist describes how in the preparation of his work “the outer skin was folded over and then cut.” In Cartesian space, the baroque, Leibnizian fold is installed as fleshless skin, “its rarefied materiality heightening the sensual experience of matter. The interpretation of the world, and its explanation through science, is critically important for the composition of existence through pulsations, flows, phantasmatics, and the pleasures of an eroticized eye that seeks out the haptic body.

The sculpture's vital center (heart and brain) is situated in the dome. It incorporates Foucault's pendulum and articulates everything. According to Neto, this hybrid element is its body and backbone with, as he says, “swivel parts, the place of the existential essence [...] that ultimately connects the monster.” Individual needs are linked to the central organ to ensure, in his own words, “survival, continuity, the blending of people and souls.” It is the inflection point of the social contract.



Leviathan Thot

FLUID MECHANICS

UNDERSTANDING Leviathan Thot requires investigation into fluid mechanics, geodesy, gravity, and verticality. Neto's works invariably engage the symbolization of physics, as opposed to dealing in the sterile reiteration of scientific concepts. The solid mechanics consist of sand and minute polystyrene spheres; however, the symbolic function of these elements is altered the moment they enter the veins and organic vertebral columns of the sculpture, at which point they acquire the role of blood. “This white blood-cell matter is what nourishes the creature's body,” the artist explains, introducing the concept of circulation. He adds that matter despite being essentially solid, becomes “liquid in its spherical whole.” Matter is perceived as fluid content that is reconfigured every time there is movement within the installation. It is, Neto says, like sand “trickling down from the top of an hourglass, defining the body of the work with its fluid mass.” In Neto's sculptural bodies, viewers discover such attributes as plasticity, elasticity, viscosity, and porosity; the artist has created a form of sculpture that organizes matter in flux.

The great material stress—the rheological dimension of *Leviathan Thot*—exists in the suspension of the sculptural body. The processes of lifting the work, of determining where to attach it and how to install it, required calculations involving fluid mechanics and changes in mass velocity dictated by external forces. During its installation, it was necessary to adjust the velocity of the small bodies so that they could circulate inside the large elastic tubes like a living and uniform fluid, so as to balance the hanging masses and keep them from becoming lopsided. This meant capturing the moment of passage from inertia to the application of force, as defined in Newton's second law of motion. Force is equal to change in momentum per change in time:

$$F = \frac{dp}{dt}$$

In Thot's circulatory system, all interfering influences or accelerations of mass movement affect the stability of the momentum at its control point—at its “zero degree of relation with time.” In the course of installing his work, Neto investigates sculpture as a dynamic conservation of momentum. His gestures seek the continual adjustment of the equation of momentum.

$$p = m_1v_1 + m_2v_2 + m_3v_3 + \dots + m_nv_n$$

This equation gives rise to other issues such as time and viscosity. Here, p is the momentum that ensures the balance of Thot as *Homo erectus*—affected by the force of gravity, whenever there is movement in the course of the installation. As for m , it denotes the mass of materials and also the composition of Thot's blood. Finally, v is the random velocity of the blood's circulation every time the monster moves. The sculpture is rounded out with these fluids at rest, held in plumb position by gravity. In the course of his career, Neto has always designed sculptures in their relation to gravity, beginning with *Prumo Invertido* (1989).

The architecture of the Panthéon absorbs the monster's body in much the same way as the functioning of “mutualism in a tropical forest,” claims Neto. The tensor—representing the effect of surface forces acting on fluids—is soon transformed in to the torsion of muscle tissue. The plasticity of the materials tightens the whole thing up, like the energy of an active muscle. Since it has no spinal column, the body of *Leviathan Thot* is a plumbed structure. Gravity puts a strain on the shape of the work and keeps the muscle power in check. Gravity is its invisible skeleton. It is not the physiognomy that makes the piece anthropomorphic and prepares it for its symbolic existence, but rather the equations of physics.