



by Sabrina Gschwandtner



The exhilarating textile installations of internationally celebrated artist Ernesto Neto are filled with magical spaces designed for interaction and play.

First and foremost, Ernesto Neto's work is fun. The Brazilian artist is best known for creating biomorphic, labyrinthine installations filled with cavernous rooms, unexpected soft sculptures, deliciously scented spices, and cushy pillows. These intimate, playful, and transformative environments inspire viewers to have physical, tactile, and communal experiences that are uninhibited, exhilarating, and beyond words. Viewer response to the experience of Neto's wondrous spaces is often expressed simply, via lip prints left behind after kissing his work.

*OPPOSITE PAGE AND ABOVE: Anthropodino (with details), 2009; polyamide stretch fabric, plywood, spices (clove, black pepper, red pepper, cumin, ginger, turmeric), sand, black gravel, river stones, lavender flowers, chamomile flowers, rice, plastic balls, glass beads, polypropylene string, Styrofoam beads, polyurethane foam; overall area of floor elements: 27' x 122' x 82'; canopy dimensions: 192' x 122'. Courtesy of Park Avenue Armory, New York. Installation photographed at the Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2009. Photos: James Ewing. All images are courtesy of the artist; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; and Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo, Brazil.*

That's not to say that Neto's work is simple, undemanding, or unambitious. The internationally celebrated artist, whose success has resulted in the proliferation of rumpus room-like installations in major museums across the globe, seems to effortlessly combine fun with serious art history and elegant, reliable craftsmanship. Through his interest in social interaction, Neto is often framed in relationship to predecessors Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, two Brazilian artists who pioneered participatory art in the 1960s. His work tends to utilize a larger sense of scale and grander budgets, resulting in teetering, flexible installations that while soft and yielding are also exactly counter-balanced and secure enough to withstand the prodding touch of thousands of visitors.

Consider his seminal work *Navedenga* (1998), acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2007, and displayed there earlier this year. The title refers to the Portuguese word *nave*, meaning "ship." The piece is part of a series that alludes to journeys, balance, and sensuality—key themes in Neto's work. *Navedenga* departs from earlier naves through a more ambitious relationship to architecture and environment. The room-sized structure, made from the artist's now-signature use of Lycra fabric, stretches taut in a hollow rectangular form weighted with sandbags. It attaches to the ceiling at points from which bulbous clove-filled tubes hang down. Visitors are invited to remove their shoes, step inside, and explore the supple, aromatic interior.



A decade later, we see how this work has evolved into Neto's colossal *Anthropodino* (2009), which was shipped to New York from his home base in Rio de Janeiro in just three small boxes. Commissioned by the Park Avenue Armory in New York City (on display May 14–June 14, 2009), the otherworldly work was made specifically for the building's 55,000 square-foot, eighty-foot-high Wade Thompson Drill Hall. Plywood frames resembling children's dinosaur model kits were laser cut in New York from the artist's computerized renderings and then assembled on site into an enormous skeleton without the use of glue, nails,

or screws. Hundreds of yards of translucent Lycra were stretched over the plywood frame, resulting in an amoebic, sci-fi structure. Riggers scaled the ceiling to hang loops of fabric over the wrought-iron rafters and create an immense canopy almost the size of a blimp. Teardrop formations taller than a six-story building and containing pounds of powdered spices, including turmeric, clove, ginger, and black pepper protruded through the canopy. The resulting fabric environment resembled an alien planet, underground cave, or magnified cell. The anthropomorphic installation





looked like a body waiting to be touched, with the Lycra material acting as a kind of skin. The Armory's president, Rebecca Robertson, watched the weeklong installation, which utilized a crew of less than a dozen people. "It was a very complex piece and a very efficient installation," she describes. "These laser-cut 'bones' had to be assembled, and the pods had to be balanced very carefully. It was amazing to watch this body being constructed . . . I remembered when I first took Ernesto to the space. He walked in and just lay on the floor, imagining what the work was going to be like. I thought it was wonderful that his first model was himself—his own body."

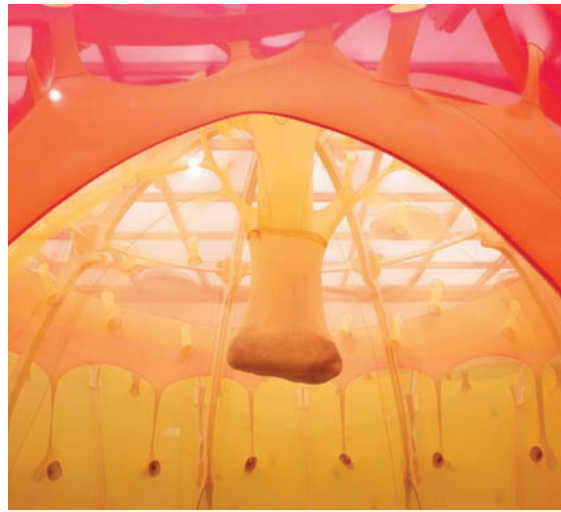
Hidden corners of the plywood structure underneath the large canopy invited people to use their bodies to explore, rest, and play. One room boasted a huge purple bean bag; another lounge contained a large mattress decorated with lavender, chamomile, ginger, and cumin-scented pillows, and yet another space held a pool filled with thousands of sky blue plastic balls. Visitors circling, smelling, touching, and exploring the structures—inside and out—resembled bees drawn to a huge hive. With beguilingly simple materials, Neto completely transformed the former military institution into a dreamy, womb-like, family-friendly space that was gleefully reviewed by art critics in the *New York Times* and reporters covering activities

for the Kids section of *Time Out New York* magazine. The response from visitors was joyous. "The moment people walked into the hall and saw this epic, gauzy, labyrinth, it was always, 'oh my God!'" Robertson confirms. "First was that surprise: both the space itself, and the incredible construction. Then people wanted to run into it. Then there was a calmer, sensual appreciation of it, and an enjoyment of the places where you could sit and relax. We found it wonderful that visiting high school students, who came in expecting to learn about contemporary art, were only asked to physically immerse themselves in the work. They said to us, 'We didn't know that you could throw yourself into art—we didn't know that was possible.'" Neto himself seemed to enjoy the work immensely: "Don't you think it has some arms that look like it's hugging you?" he asked a WNYC public-radio-station reporter when speaking about *Anthropodino* during a 2009 interview.

Neto continues to amuse and challenge audiences in his most recent exhibitions. *Dancing Allowed*, on view at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, through October 31, represents the artist's first foray into two new materials—vinyl and corn. The site-specific installation is composed of fourteen-foot-tall, four-foot-wide, wavy, appendage-like columns in bright shades of red, yellow, blue, and green. The towering vinyl forms are filled with air and weighted at the bottom with corn, in reference to local agriculture. Dispersed throughout the gallery like a cornfield maze, they have a transparency that allows visitors to look through them for distorted views of the space and others in it. Visitors are invited to

ABOVE, LEFT: *Navedenga*, 1998; polyamide stretch fabric, sand, Styrofoam, cloves, cord, and ribbon; 12' x 15' x 21'. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Donald L. Bryant, Jr. Installation photographed at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010. Photo: Jason Mandella © 2010. BELOW: *Dancing Allowed* (with detail), 2010; specially fabricated vinyl structures filled with air and corn (at the base); each sculpture about 14' x 4', installation dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio. Installation photographed at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2010. Photos: Tony Walsh.





gently interact with the wonky sculptures, which were initially inspired by a rectangular concrete column that runs through the middle of the gallery. Rigid and impassive, this structure might serve as a stand-in for the traditionally solemn viewing of much contemporary art that the artist seeks to challenge. Neto's invitation to play is underscored through his choice of words printed in pink on the gallery's white walls: "dancing," "singing," "dreaming," "allowed."

In London, the artist presents *The Edges of the World* at the Hayward Gallery through September 5. The site specific exhibit is composed of several conceptually and physically linked installations that seem to organically flow from the interior gallery spaces outward onto three garden terraces. The myriad of interactive environments include a serpentine tunnel, an observation tower, a swimming pool, and a heart-shaped pavilion with a drum inside. Each space playfully explores the artist's ongoing fascination with the human body as landscape and naves that carry viewers through unexpected and magical experiential journeys. The new works are also inspired by London's intricate network of winding streets and the architecture surrounding the Hayward Gallery located in the expansive urban setting of Southbank Centre. "This ambitious exhibition further enhances Ernesto Neto's reputation as one of the most innovative and influential artists working today," explains Hayward Gallery curator Cliff Lauson. "Including both his signature nylon sculptures and new techniques and materials, it brings together a series of interconnecting spaces, unified by a theme of constantly shifting perspectives and points of view—all various aspects or 'edges of the world' in Neto's mind." 🌍

The artist's work can be seen in the solo exhibitions Ernesto Neto: *Dancing Allowed*, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, through October 31, [www.contemporaryartscenter.org](http://www.contemporaryartscenter.org) and Ernesto Neto: *The Edges of the World*, Hayward Gallery, London, through September 5, [www.haywardgallery.org.uk](http://www.haywardgallery.org.uk).

ABOVE, LEFT: View from inside flavour flower womb domus (2010; plywood, polyamide stretch fabric, turmeric, clove, cumin, foam; 12' 2" x 16' 3" diameter). ABOVE, CENTER: flavour flower womb domus (detail), 2010; plywood, polyamide stretch fabric, turmeric, clove, cumin, foam; 12' 2" x 16' 3" diameter. ABOVE, RIGHT: symbiointes tubetime—the flavour happens in a state of being, 2010; plywood, polyamide stretch fabric, turmeric, clove, cumin, foam; 9' 10" x 41' 7" x 51' 4½". BELOW: circleprototemple . . . !, 2010; plywood, polyamide stretch fabric, foam, cotton corduroy, elastic cord, samba drum, drumstick; 9' 4¼" x 10' 2" diameter. Courtesy of the Hayward Gallery, London. Installation of *The Edges of the World* photographed at the Hayward Gallery, London, 2010. Photos: Steve White.

