

Barbarella, Cravo e Canela

It is quite common in Brazil to name children after the father, uncle or grandfather, adding, as the case may be, “Filho”, “Sobrinho” or “Neto” to the name. Quite often the bearer of the name becomes known solely by the suffix. This is the case of Ernesto Neto and there is nothing extraordinary about it other than perhaps an analogy to the way in which his work has been “related” to his artistic predecessors in Brazil. Yet this correlation becomes problematised and all the more interesting, given that we know that Neto’s grandfather was called Ernesto. Still the artist, by avoiding the use of his surname, leaves us no clue as to which Ernesto precisely he is named after. Taking this analogy further this short essay will explore similar ambivalences in his artistic relations.

Ernesto Neto emerged on the international scene in the 1990s with installations often composed of environments formed by soft-semi-translucent material, stretched and counterbalanced by weights composed of various substances, often spices such as clove (cravo) and cinnamon (canela), themselves contained within the same stretchy material. These are environments that invite the viewer to enter, to feel at ease, relax, touch, smell and play. It was this sensorial emphasis and the clever spatial constructions that led several authors, as well as the artist himself, to claim ascendancy from the Post-Neo-concrete heritage. Yet while Neto encourages the affirmation of this heritage, with titles such as *Ninho* (Nest) or *Neto* (The sky is the anatomy of my body), Ernesto also denies it by inserting a strong anthropomorphic sense to his installations – a reliance on the figurative that would be anathema to those predecessors – and by means of titles that at times suggest quite distinct interests from his artistic forefathers. Think for instance of the many variations on *Nave* (craft or spacecraft): *Nave Denga*, *Nave Noiva*, *Broto Nave*, *Nave Casa*, *Flying Gloup Nave*, *Nave Deusa*, *Stella Nave* and so forth.

This act of announcing while obfuscating the precise nature of his artistic lineage tempts me to diverge from the familiar, to swap Gabriela¹ for Barbarella², not as a gratuitous pun as the rhyme may at first suggest, but as a means of questioning the necessity of legitimising a practice through the affirmation of its national ties.

Neto’s generation of artists emerged in Brazil as the military regime gave way to democracy. Fragile and often inadequate as that transition may have been, there was a sense of unrestrained joy that came to light at that moment which differentiated that generation substantially from its immediate predecessors. In fact, it is not quite clear how much the rejoicing was about overcoming the socio-political hardships and how much was simply about their coming of age. This ambivalence is also

incorporated in their practice a preoccupation with the history of Brazilian art, in the 1980s the established references were quite different from those we currently take for granted. It seems unimaginable today, but Oiticica’s and Clark’s Post-Neo-concrete work remained then largely unacknowledged.³ The principal references for Brazilian artists in the mid-80s were the constructivist avant-gardes⁴, 19th century colonial and post-independence academic paintings⁵, the early 20th century modernists⁶ and the neoclassical motifs that spread across the globe under the rubric of Postmodern aesthetics. Admittedly, Neto’s relation to history was more immediate, being responsive to the work of ar Resende and Cildo Meireles.

"For me the 1980s was a time when Brazil tried to focus on what was happening in painting at an international level, such as in Germany and the USA. This was done with a certain level of carnivalisation referring to comic books for example. I remember Adriana and Beatriz working in the late 80s searching for something more Brazilian, while through Nuno Ramos and Tunga, others proposed the Baroque as a model for Brazilian contemporary art. Although I had been invited to take part in several exhibitions with themes revolving around the Baroque and contemporary Brazilian art, I refused. I was far more interested in the Neo-concrete movement because it was more related to sculpture. I turned my back on the 80s generation because it was all about painting. I was interested in the 50s, 60s and 70s because it was more about sculpture."⁷

This explains why at that moment we find Neto exploring two specific creative avenues whose synthesis would culminate in his maturity as an artist: an acknowledged debt to the Brazilian constructive legacy and a recurrent use of figurative yet disembodied elements.⁸ His sculpture was composed of counterbalanced structures that placed different materials in equilibrium via retaining membranes, that would themselves gradually acquire biomorphic characteristics. The articulation of these distinct sculptural methods – counterbalance, porous membranes that held powder or semi-viscous substances – each one loaded with its own distinct historical baggage reached a resolution with the Naves. This series, for which Neto is mostly known, also brought new references to the work, this time much closer to the Post-Neo-concrete experimentalist work of the 1960s and 70s. It is not coincidental that globe-trotting art critics from the mid-1990s became more aware of Neto's association with the work of Clark and Oiticica, since both received considerable posthumous international exposure at precisely the moment in which Neto and his contemporaries began exhibiting outside Brazil. Yet even if at that juncture the references shift from 1950s Constructivism to 1960s sensorial and environmental installations, to assume that the creative source of Neto's work is contained within this historiographical shift would be restrictive.

"Beyond my interests in Brazilian art, there was Minimalism and Arte Povera that were also crucial for me. The most important question was sculpture and its history since the Stone Age, those small Venuses, the ancient Egyptian and Greek cultures. The Greeks for example had already created new paradigms, such as a type of metaphysics based on their habitat [...] Ok, this may seem very distant but the fact is that we are composed by the landscape that surrounds us. For example, if we had true access to the culture of Zambia that would inevitably become an influence. One Sci-Fi movie that interested me was *Fantastic Voyage* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1966), which seemed to equate the scientific progress that took man, and our imagination, into space, with that which took us inside our own body and mind: if Freud entered one way, biology and medicine entered the other. The formation of the modern individual cannot be thought of without these matrixes. The medieval-religious body was closed, it was a prohibited territory. Its opening modernised the contemporary landscape, which includes both the inside of the body and the scientific vision of the cosmos."⁹

Neto's obsession with spacecrafts and Sci-Fi could possibly be explained by an experience he had as a school boy. Upon being asked by his teacher what he would like to be when he grew up, he answered "an astronaut". Other than an account of an early fascination with space, the teacher's repressive attitude towards his honest display of ambition is far more telling. If in the 1960s and 70s artists such as Artur Barrio, Ana Bella Geiger, Antonio Manuel, Cildo Meireles, Oiticica, Carlos Zilio and so many others, articulated their practice around the political imperatives of the time, such as censorship, persecution, even imprisonment and

torture, Neto's (my own) generation grew up under the perverse institutionalisation of that repression, and nowhere was this more evident than at school. As (middle class) Brazilian children in the 1970s, we were aware of the Space Age, of Hollywood and the trappings of the American way of life, while we also enjoyed the benefits of living in the tropics, the weather and the closeness to nature. The economic prosperity of the early 70s, known as the Brazilian miracle, was nevertheless also accompanied by an awareness that there was something not quite right, even if, as children, we could not articulate what exactly that was. Becoming an adult in Brazil during the mid-80s meant that we were continuously confronted with the 1960s, whether through repeats of old American Sci-Fi TV series or by the re-emergence, from exile or obscurity, of key Brazilian 1960s cultural-political protagonists. High art and Pop, national culture and North American canned trash, the popularisation of the scientific imaginary, the levelling out of seemingly antagonistic cultural spheres was the legacy that the early 1960s had given us and that the late 60s had problematised. This interrupted disruption of the established hierarchies seemed to re-emerge and culminate in the late 1980s as a new possibility, and perhaps this was also evident in the increasing feasibility of an internationally recognised Brazilian contemporary art. Having internalised and articulated that set of cultural disjunctions, today Neto receives so much international attention that the actual form of his pods and capsules has become problematic. Although the artist would probably not admit to this, over the last decade the issue of functionality, an issue more akin to the work of an architect, has emerged in relation to Neto's structures.

It seemed almost premonitory therefore that Katya Garcia-Anton, the curator of Neto's London ICA solo exhibition in 2000, would associate his work with Archigram's 1960s fantastic futuristic cities and with Stanley Kubric's *2001 A Space Odyssey*. The relation of Neto's work with the former is indeed astonishing. Ten years later we find him producing quite literally blow up cities such as *anthropodino* at New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2009, and his 2010 *The Edges of the World* exhibition at London's Hayward Gallery. Kubric's 2001 on the other hand seems now a far less obvious relation if compared to other classic 1960s Sci-Fi movies. In a 1968 article entitled *The Triumph of Software* the architectural critic Peter Reyner Banham exalts the soft and flexible Sci-Fi spaceship environments in the film *Barbarella*. For Banham the film, other than being the "first post hardware SF movie of any consequence", was "about halfway between the Million Volt-Light Sound Rave at the London Roundhouse at the beginning of 1967 and the great Arthur Brown/Jools/Inflatable Rave organised by Architectural Association students [...]".¹⁰ Banham's association was perhaps obvious at the time, given the connections between the Roundhouse, the UFO Club, and its featured bands, Pink Floyd and later Soft Machine. It was also towards the UFO Club that the newly formed Exploding Galaxy gro

(to mention only the Brazilians) to London, upon its closure its principle organiser David Medalla quickly formed Exploding Galaxy which he describes as "a human version of his bubble machines, oozing out living shapes that formed and re-formed."¹¹

However appealing these historical predecessors may seem, the problem today for Neto is that, given the accepted significance of 1960s culture, now most of our generation also wants to experience that Million-Volt-Crelazer-Barbarella-Pleasure-Bubble, yet in an age of mass high culture, of record breaking museum attendance, biennial fever and viral art fair madness, that is simply unfeasible. In order to solve this functional problem that the work has been confronted with - the architectural issue of dealing with visitor numbers - Neto developed two strategies. The first revisited the artist's own earlier ceiling-hung pieces such as *Anatomy of*

Pleasure of 1997 which now gains a monumental scale such as in *than Thot at Paris*' Pantheon in 2006. In his second approach Neto turned to an artistic grandfather. The introduction of rigid bone- like struts into his spatial installations preserved the gallery floor space intact, making it possible for a more fluid flux of people through the majority of the work while still retaining the possibility of providing contemplative/sensorial pleasure bubbles in the in-between- spaces. The introduction of the clip-on (or are they plug-in?) struts emerged during a residency at

, Brazil's most significant art critic of the 20th century, who stood as the cultural father-figure for Oiticica, Clark and so many others. Neto's digestion of Calder, in the most anthropophagite¹² manner, produced toy-like forms that at one and the same time solved a practical problem, maintained the biomorphism of his earlier soft structures, almost as if giving bones to those skin-like shapes, while opening new avenues for the work to develop. Perhaps one such avenue is already perceptible. If at the Armory we witnessed a combination of both these strategies, the monumental ceiling-hung element and the floor-based struts forming complex architectural structures, at the Hayward Gallery's *Psycho Buildings* exhibition, Neto's *Life Fog Frog* installation of 2008 presented a third element (fog) that, being held from the walls, divided the space horizontally. It would be possible to speculate that Neto with this new element is referring to Lygia Pape's *Divisor* of 1968, which consisted of a perforated sheet allowing people, by placing their head through these holes, to become "detached" from their own bodies creating new relations with the other heads around them.¹³ If this is correct, then one could claim that more than simply referring to fixed historical figures, as if paying homage, Neto is actively responding to the rapidly shifting historical paradigms of Brazilian art, in much the same way in which the playful functionality of his installations has had to adapt to the increasing attention that the artist – and Brazilian contemporary art in general - has received over the last two decades.

1. Gabriela, Cravo e Canela is the title of a 1958 novel by Jorge Amado. It was adapted to film in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and remains one of the literary master pieces dealing with the ambivalent forces of modernity and rural oligarchic traditions within Brazilian society.

2. *Barbarella* is a 1968 film directed by Roger Vadim, starring Jane Fonda as a sexy space traveller who fornicates in her soft, inflatable and sometimes fur-lined spacecraft.

, 1986, Paco Imperial, Rio de Janeiro) would readdress this historical lacuna.

4. Such as Geraldo de Barros, Amilcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann, as well as many others like Oiticica and Clark themselves whose recognition until the 1980s remained to a large extent restricted to this period.

5. Such as Jean-Baptiste Debret and Victor Meirelles.

6. Particularly Tarsila do Amaral, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, Candido Portinari and Lasar Segall.

7. The artist in correspondence with the author, July 2010.

8. I am thinking here of an evolution that links three works in particular: *A-B-A* (Chapa-Corda-Chapa) of 1987, *Copulonia* of 1989 and *Janus Fetus* of 1995.

9. The artist in correspondence with the author, July 2010.

10. Banham, P. R. *Triumph of Software in New Society*, 31 Oct. 1968, reprinted in Sparke, P. (ed.) *Design By Choice*, Academy Editions, London 1981, p.134 and p.133.

11. Drower, J. *The Exploding Galaxy*, *Third Text*, V.22, Issue 2, March 2008, pp.229 – 236.

12. *Antropofagia* (cannibalism) was a 1928 concept exposed by the poet and all-round trouble maker Oswald de Andrade who suggested that the authentic modern Brazilian culture could only be achieved

by replicating the attitudes of the natives who devoured the Europeans as a form of ultimate flattery. In this way Neto swallowed Calder and spat out the bones.

13. Following Pape's death there has been a repositioning of her significance in relation to her contemporaries Oiticica and Clark.