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Meistere, Una: From Homo sapiens to Homo solidarius

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# From Homo sapiens to Homo solidarius

Una Meisterere

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## An interview with Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto

This conversation with Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto took place in mid-February, at his studio in Rio de Janeiro. Even though all signs were already pointing to the inevitability of a pandemic, at that moment it all still seemed like something abstract. Now that the pandemic and its still unpredictable consequences have become a reality, we quite naturally wonder what the Covid-19 crisis will change in the existing world order and whether this crisis will turn out to be powerful enough to jar us into becoming better people and make the world a better place.

In fact, Neto has already experienced a somersault of sorts in his own life – about six years ago, when he met Indians from the Huni Kuin community and began his own path of transformation. He has since become enchanted by ancient cultures and knowledge, using his art to stress the need for dialogue between ancient knowledge and contemporary Western culture as humanity's only chance at survival, considering the reality of today's world.

This was already the second time Neto and I had met. I first met him exactly four years ago in Helsinki, at the opening of his solo exhibition at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art. That conversation indirectly also led to a string of unexpected events in my own life that eventually confirmed what we all know, namely, that there are no coincidences in this immensely intertwined network we call the biosphere.

Since 2016, Neto has realised a number of other significant projects that have reverberated widely in society. Among these were the *Um Sagrado Lugar/A Sacred Place* (2017) installation at the 57th Venice Biennale, which elicited conflicting reviews in the media and art world, at the same time confirming how unwilling and unready much of society still is to talk about and accept the different, preferring to remain ignorant and dissociate from it. In the summer of 2018, Neto exhibited an object cum contemplative space called *Gaia Mother Tree* (measuring 40x29 metres and 20 metres high, created in collaboration with the Fondation Beyeler) for one month in the central railway station of Zurich, which is the most-visited indoor space in all of Switzerland. "Not all artists can do a project that would work in this context," commented Sam Keller, the director of the Fondation Beyeler, in an interview with *Arterritory.com*.

Neto's recent retrospective *Sopro (Blow)* could be seen at the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. And just a day before our conversation, he had returned from Buenos Aires, where he had participated in the closing event for his solo exhibition at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA).

Neto also actively supports the local art scene in Brazil. About a ten-minute walk from his studio is the A Gentil Carioca gallery, which he founded in 2003 together with Márcio Botner and Laura Lima with the goal of popularising Brazilian contemporary art both at home and on the international art scene. For the past twenty-two years, he and his friends have also hosted a New Year's Eve open dance party on the sands of Ipanema Beach, no matter what the weather is like.

Neto and I talked for more than two hours as the daylight outside the window slowly gave way to evening. Having returned to Riga, a couple of weeks later I read in the news that Brazil is one of the countries most affected by the pandemic in Latin America. On March 19, Neto wrote in an email to me: "That's the boa – the Gaia boa [*the constrictor snake of the Earth Goddess – Ed.*] – stopping human movement. Yes, it is sad that many people are dying, but it is no more than die every day

here in Brazil (as in many other ex-colonial countries) from violence and the consequences of this economic structure. At the same time, it's incredible – the invisible virus just suddenly stopped us. Something became more important than making money: life, the old magical and beautiful life, anywhere and everywhere, and we have time to stay home and read a book, take care of and play games with our family. We are all separated yet all together at the same time. It's beyond culture; it's nature, placing us together, showing us that there is something else, something bigger than us. The boa constrictor of Gaia, of life, is giving us the time to feel, to think; it's like invisible angels are giving us a chance to stop, breathe and ponder: Where do we want to go? What is solidarity? What is important? I hope we survive and become better humans – from *Homo sapiens* to, who knows, *Homo solidarius*?

**When we met four years ago in Helsinki at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, where your exhibition *Boa* had just opened, you said that meeting the Huni Kuin tribe completely changed your life. Back then, you said: “When I arrived at the Huni Kuin tribe and began to understand this primeval, indigenous spirit, I also began to better understand what I was doing. It was not something that changed the direction of my work, it just created another dimension to it. The idea that was somehow around me all the time is now clear. I can talk about it.” You also said that you had stopped drinking alcohol. Are things still the same now?**

Sometimes I drink. You know, I had a drink last Friday. But I went for something like three years without drinking alcohol. When we met in Helsinki, I was not drinking at all. In a way, I was even afraid of doing so. You have to be very careful about drinking alcohol.

Why do I drink now? That's the key question, you know. One day I was at the house of a friend, another artist, and they wanted to have a toast with beer. I said no to the beer, but then I thought why not, let's have a sip! And something clicked in me with this sip; something happened that I didn't like very much. With alcohol, you can work on spirituality. You can work on other things, too. But I do not have this education. Well, maybe I have it, but there's a fine line, and sometimes a sip can be not very good for the path that I'm on. At least for the time being. Maybe later I'll be more prepared for that.

**The reality is that there is the darkness and the light.  
They go together. Like the indigenous *grafismo*.**

It's difficult, though. For example, we have the carnival coming up, and in some way drinking, dancing and singing is very liberating, like something against all this stupidity. But at the same time, all this stupidity also includes drinking. It destroys society, but at the same time drinking is

liberating. It can have a bad side, and it can have a good side.

But I think the biggest problem we encounter on this planet nowadays is Christianity and the dogmatism that has left its footprint on us, filling our consciousness with a feeling of guilt. The way we tend to look at things – this idea of a hero, of saving the planet, the idea of good against bad. But this is not the reality. The reality is that there is the darkness and the light. They go together. Like the indigenous *grafismo*. Or like the yin and yang also, where you have the black, but the black has a dot of white, and you have the white, and in the centre of the white there's a dot of the black. So, one thing is together with the other, and they're inseparable.

For example, when the indigenous speak about sacredness, they don't say that sacredness is the opposite of the profane. But in our culture and in our way of using our language now, it's very difficult to get out of that position. But I believe that's the most important thing right now, and also to get out of the position of the indigenous way of knowledge versus the Western way of knowledge. Because in a certain way they are opposites, but science has now reached the level where it's starting to talk about these things more and more. Such as quantum mechanics and other things we're discovering.

For example, right now I'm reading the book *O Oráculo da Noite: A História e a Ciência do Sonho* (Oracle of the Night: The History and Science of the Dream), written by Brazilian author Sidarta Ribeiro, who's a neuroscientist and the director of the Brain Institute at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte. He's known on the international scale as well. The book is about dreaming. I might be wrong, but from the 1940s to the 1980s it was almost forbidden to talk about dreams at the scientific level. And then little by little, some people began talking about dreams. The crucial moment came at the end of the 1970s, when J. Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley proposed a new theory that changed dream research, and since then research about dreams continued.

We all now know about the REM state, when dreaming happens, and the importance of all the stages of sleep. Dreams are a kind of digestion of our everyday thoughts and knowledge, and we need this to organise our brain. And if you think about shamans, when they talk about ayahuasca, they're talking about dreaming, too. Ayahuasca is a way to give consciousness to dreaming – through the visions you have during the ayahuasca ceremony.





Ernesto Neto. NixiForestKupiXawa, 2015 / Material: ceiling crochet, painted pattern on the wall, straw matting / 650 x 1550 x 1010 cm / Installation view / Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin – Aru Kuxipa, TBA 21 - Augarten, Vienna / Photo: Camilla Coutinho

For example, I remember when we did the exhibition at TBA21 in Vienna [*Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin – Aru Kuxipa | Sacred Secret, 2015 – Ed.*], I got quite sick at the opening. The press conference took almost three hours, and when I got out of the room, I suddenly felt that I had a fever. Two days later the Huni Kuin pajé (shaman) Dua Busen did a ritual on me and said, “Pay attention to the animal that appears in your dreams and tell me about it tomorrow.” But first, I don’t remember much about my dreams, and, as far I can remember, I’ve not had dreams with animals in them. But that night I had a dream about a monkey, and this monkey was kind of a cartoon monkey. The next morning I told the shaman that I had had a dream about a monkey. “Oh, that’s dizziness, and it can be this, this or that...,” he said. Through dreams, shamans know which plants they can use to heal you. For example, if this or that animal appears in your dream, then it’s this or that particular plant...and if this or that animal appears, then it’s this or that other kind of problem, and this is the plant used to cure it. So, it’s not an interpretation of your dream; it’s quite objective.

People often ask me what the indigenous have changed in me, and things like that. And you know what they’ve changed? They put me more straight, they made me more aligned. For example, I

used to shave my face whenever I felt like it, not regularly, but after this meeting then I began to do it every day. It might seem silly, but it's a way to take care of yourself. It wasn't really a decision I made; I just began doing it. And stopping drinking also wasn't a decision I made. But the medicine began to work inside of me, on a spiritual dimension. And alcohol is not good for this spiritual dimension; it's too anaesthetic. Also, my body was beginning to change the way I eat, avoiding industrial food, opening up more and more space and desire for natural, organic food. My contact with earth become really intense; I felt clearly our fraternity with the plants, animals, mountains, etc.

One of the crises we're experiencing right now is this crisis regarding the society of judgment. The Christian moral crisis – about God and evil, right and wrong, black and white.

**People judge others. That applies to everything, whether it's about climate change or fat shaming or anything. And also, I think that people want to judge – if you do something, for example, to help the world and the others don't do anything, they start to judge you. This is what has happened with Greta Thunberg. She's done nothing wrong, she's just been doing something. But part of the population of this planet started to judge her. I think it's the same as with alcohol – many people don't want to drink, but they do drink, and then they don't judge themselves, but they judge you.**

Already some years ago, during all these ceremonies, I began to understand that indigenous people don't see things as we do. The Huni Kuin, the Yawanawá, other nations. They have a different relationship to the visual field, to the form of the body, to beauty. After six o'clock in the evening, there's no light anymore in the forest, just a fire or a candle. So, the eye become weaker in relation to other senses.

And one day I woke up with a message about the eye and our relationship to it. The eye disturbs, the eye confuses, the eye embarrasses... I remember once reading an article about Bernie Krause, an American musician, a bio-acoustician and soundscape ecologist who records the sounds of nature. Some people wanted to take wood from the forest – a protected forest in the United States – in a sustainable way, and he asked whether he could first record the forest. There was a lot of noise in it, a lot of sound. A year later he went back to that same place – and it looked almost the same. And he thought what a good job these guys did. But then he recorded the forest again, and there was just a woodpecker, no other sounds. So, the eye saw something, but it takes years for

deeper things to reappear.

We live in a society of the image, and what I've begun to discover is that this is also a society of light. To see, you need light. You know, we say this kind of sentences: Did you see what she did? Did you see what she said? We didn't see what she said. We can't see what you say. But we use this word because we're a society of the eye. And our foundation is the Renaissance. What are the symbols of the Renaissance? Painting, perspective. The eye is the most objective of our sensory organs. We are the society of the eye. The Enlightenment is the elevation of the society of the eye – objective, rational, masculine – and we now see the results of this devotion.

Indigenous societies are very subjective. So, there is a difference. Once I was talking with Carlos Papa, a friend of mine who is a Guaraní Mbyá pajé. And he said, you know, darkness is like the feminine, darkness is like the mother. We need darkness to embrace us, to hug us, to take care of us, to put us to sleep. We also need darkness to recover. And when we're in the darkness, we're less judging of others.

That's the important point. And one of the crises we're experiencing right now is this crisis regarding the society of judgment. The Christian moral crisis – about God and evil, right and wrong, black and white. It's like you said – Greta is doing something, and everybody's speaking badly about her, but at the same time, they themselves are doing nothing. Greta is saying that the Amazon is burning, but our president says it's the Indians or NGOs who started the fires in the Amazon to get money from the world foundation. Or, Ernesto Neto brought indigenous people to the Venice Biennale; so, Ernesto wants something from the indigenous. Some people just cannot accept that others are trying to do something. You know, it's always like this in this society. And it's getting more and more extreme, with social media. And we don't know how to deal with it. It's too early for us. These are all people (such as our president and his militias) who are the inheritors of the Age of Enlightenment but who in the end want to close down the Enlightenment, and social media is the newest gun for this gang. It's curious, though, because from my point of view, indigenous knowledge is critical to Western knowledge. And the way I see it, the idea is not to get into a conflict, but to expand the Enlightenment.

We are the society of the eye. The Enlightenment is the elevation of the society of the eye – objective, rational, masculine – and we now see the results of this devotion.



So, what's going on now is very contradictory. But I feel that we are surviving this extreme negative energy that's coming at us. Because on the other hand, there's an expansion of positive energy. You know, the whole feminine transformation of the planet, concern for the environment, shamanism spreading everywhere... It wasn't like that five years ago. Maybe it started fifteen years ago, but in the past five years it has become something gigantic. Like a counterweight to the avalanche of negativity, judgment and lies.

**This can also be felt in global marketing. For example, veganism. Just five years ago, vegans were still more or less considered outsiders, but now global companies – even McDonald's – are doing vegan versions of their meals. Or *The Guardian*, which announced that it's no longer accepting advertising from oil companies.**

You know this guy Ernst Götsch [*a Swiss farmer and researcher who initiated a system of climate- and biodiversity-friendly sustainable farming techniques known as dynamic agroforestry and syntropic agriculture – Ed.*]? There was conference at the national congress about agriculture, where people with different views in agriculture, as well as representatives from the soybean business, took part. Ernst, who is a genius and has developed his famous "Peace Farming" philosophy, made an amazing and passionate speech ending with the phrase "water is planted". His major tool is mimicking nature: working with nature and not against it, or, as he puts it: "Through the strategies that look like the way natural ecosystems work."

At the same conference, one of the participants said that already ten years ago one of the *Coca-Cola* executives was saying that *Coca-Cola* should invest in juice. Many people opposed him – like, "You're an idiot, man, we do *Coca-Cola*, we don't invest in juice." But now *Coca-Cola* has bought *Suja Life* and other juice companies, and it's investing heavily in juice. Because they know quite well that what they're making is poison and that sooner or later it's going to be out of the business. So, they're making business on juice that in Brazil is full of sugar, terrible, but it's a sign of change.

**As we know, sugar is a drug and one of the worst and most toxic ingredients in the Western diet. At the same time, sugar is everywhere. Just read the list of ingredients for any food product.**

Speaking of sugar, and the burning of the Amazon... I've come to understand quite a lot over these years. Who is consuming the Amazon? I mean, all of this soy, meat, oil, gold – it doesn't all stay in Brazil. It all goes out. And slavery had to happen here because of the sugar. Who was consuming the sugar? At that time, it was the Europeans. You understand what I mean? It's great that Europeans are the biggest force against global warming, no doubt about that. But at the same time, Europeans are big consumers of the forests and of everything else, together with the Americans and with China. And industrial businesses everywhere, post-Descartes, are following this way of life – "I consume, therefore I am." I think what we now need is this conscience about



what we're eating.

Who is consuming the Amazon? I mean, all of this soy, meat, oil, gold – it doesn't all stay in Brazil. It all goes out.

Eating meat is one of the worst things for the planet. If you really are against global warming, the first thing to do is to stop eating meat. Because one cow spends like 15,000 litres of water. But also, beyond everything, we need new "old", collective values.

**And what do the major meat eaters do? They start saying that the consumption of avocados is not sustainable, either. Because of the monoculture, because of the large amounts of water needed and so on. They judge those who don't eat meat by blaming avocados. Making excuses has always been characteristic of humans: "It's not my fault that I eat meat," "It's not my fault that I eat sugar, it's not my fault that I have cravings for it..."**

You've described this crossroads very well, this crossroads we need to get through as a society. It's this big wall, a big forest, a big desert, a big ocean that needs to be crossed. Because the reality is that transformation is not about others; it's about each one of us individually. And that's what ayahuasca teaches you – how to be with yourself. Because when you go deep into the Amazon rainforest, there's nowhere to escape. "Hey, Ernesto! What about you, my friend? Now there are just the two of us – you and me." So I think it's amazing the way you put that, because it's really about where we are now. And how to get out – that's going to be our process in our lifetime.

Because the reality is that transformation is not about others; it's about each one of us individually. And that's what ayahuasca teaches you – how to be with yourself.

**But how do we do this? I doubt anybody can do an ayahuasca ceremony for the whole planet. Besides, this problem is ancient and found everywhere. I mean, just the ten minutes it takes to go from your A Gentil Carioca gallery to the studio is a model of the world in miniature. Beautiful historical buildings with shops on the first floor selling cheap plastic things made in China. Tons of stuff. All imaginable sorts of things. The wheels of consumer culture keep turning – if you**

**have lots of money, you buy luxury items; if you don't have money, you dream of luxury items and buy cheap imitations. Or you consume big quantities of sugar to create a short-term illusion of happiness.**

**Artists have always been ahead of the times, able to feel and see processes before they've even begun. Now, too, it's quite noticeable that increasing numbers of artists are taking an active stance. What is the role of the artist today? Is it the artist's task to try to influence processes, and is art strong enough to do so?**

Yes, artists are talking about these issues more and more. That's true. Designers, too. So you're "knitting" a connection in a way, and this is going to help you to grow. But we can't run ahead of time, so to say, and get the rest of society acting the same way. We need to keep doing these things, though, and we need to do them with patience. With ommm... breathing...

Because that's part of the problem – we want to solve everything right away, quick, fast. But things don't work like that. It's sad for me to say that to you, but I realised this after the Venice Biennale – this bunch of events had a very strong impact on me. Nobody there talked about what I said, about the message of my work and that indigenous knowledge is important for Western knowledge. No. Instead, people shouted, "How come someone is bringing indigenous people to the biennale?" As if indigenous people should be in the forest now. The art world and the visitors to the biennale do not want to mix with them.

What I understood is that I went there with my heart too open and believing too much. I need to be more set and take care of myself regarding this communication aspect and let this...*[takes a big breath and exhales – Ed.]*... and do my work.

And this is what I think is the most important. For example, if you see this work of art here, in a way it's a boa. But, unlike the boa in my earlier work, this is more serene and more understandable. I don't think that's a concession at all. It's just another time, and I think it's even more reflective for me. I want to get more inside of this situation, not so much in the stereotype of it.



Ernesto Neto. *Gaia Mother Tree*, 2017 / 2018, installation view at the Zurich Grand Central Station, Switzerland / Cotton voile crochet, cotton voile, cotton knitted rug with drawstring made of cotton voile, cotton blanket, cushions, OSB benches, baskets of straw, sand, spices, ceramic vases, soil, plants, gravel / 19,60 x 33,20 x 48,25 m / Photo Mark Niedermann

In 2018, when I did the *Gaia Mother Tree* installation at Zurich's Central Station, there were people weeping, both when we put the installation up and when we took it down. The level of spirituality that people got inside of it was really strong. The *Sopro (Blow)* exhibition at the Pinacoteca in São Paulo last year turned out to be one of the most visited exhibitions in this museum. People were full of joy there. We had many encounters with different indigenous and Afro-Brazilian representatives, for example, to talk about our first mother, who is an indigenous woman, and about our second mother, who is an African woman, and about all the violence surrounding this story. But the reality is that the Brazilian population is a real mix of people, you know, and this mix is in each one of us. And our main problem is that there's no acceptance of this situation. In our schools here, we just study Western culture, we have teachers who say, "We, the Westerners, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." But we're not Westerners, you know – we're Brazilians. We're a mix of the West, indigenous America and Africa. But Western culture, despite multiculturalism, is based on separation and classification; it's against mixing. Especially extreme Western puritan culture, which, as we all know, has a big cultural voice in our global village.





Ernesto Neto. Gaia Mother Tree, 2017 / 2018, installation view at the Zurich Grand Central Station, Switzerland / Photo: Camilla Coutinho

We made a piece for the exhibition at the Pinacoteca in São Paulo titled *Cura Bra Cura Té*. *Bra* means 'Brasil', *cura* means 'to heal', and *té* meaning 'the earth'. Because the problem is a global problem, yet in some way Brazil is at the centre of it, because the beginning of these mass-production monocultures happened in this country. You know, with the sugarcane, with protocapitalism, slavery, torture, etc. The Portuguese were in the vanguard of Europe at that time. It's good to remember that the most developed place in Europe just before that time was Andalusia in Spain, because of the Arab culture. Back then, there were something like 400 libraries in Andalusia, and just 40 in the rest of Europe – ten times less. All the knowledge came from the Arabs to Europe. And then this mass production was started here, to enrich others.





Ernesto Neto. Cura Bra Cura Té. Exhibition view at the Pinacoteca in São Paulo. Photo: Andre Mantelli



There's a book that I think is kind of a must-read: *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* by Silvia Federici. She talks about the passage from medieval to modern times, from the moment when there was not much difference between women's and men's work, also when the land was communal and people shared food, life and celebrations. Little by little, privatisation began, as well as the undervaluation of women, and with this privatisation and separation between women and men also came poverty, immense poverty. And all this began just before Columbus. First was this European Christian exercise in pre-capitalism, crushing their own people; then they got ready for genocide in America and to divide Africa. And this killing of women was the killing of femininity. It was masculine rationalism, objectiveness and brutality.

An acquaintance once told me about how she had listened to the speeches at a wedding – there was a speech of the men and a speech of the women. And the speech of the men was very enlightening; she saw it as coming from the sky. And the speech of the women was very intimate, very incredible; she saw it as coming from the earth. And then I asked her, "My darling, did you know that the bass drum was forbidden in European music long ago?" In North America, the Africans were forbidden to play drums, because the colonialists considered the sound of the drum to be the sound of the devil. The sound of the earth, our mother, equated with the devil – can you believe that? In Brazil, however, drums were okay, because the Portuguese liked to see the women dancing...

A friend, who's a French musician, once told me, "Do you know, Ernesto, that the treble was the sound that takes us to God, and the bass was the sound that takes us to the devil?" So, it was forbidden. I think it was Richard Wagner who was the first to begin to deal with this. It's a crazy thing! It's the negation of the earth and the negation of Mother Earth. Actually, this was the beginning for how we began to deal with the environment: establishing all these gigantic monocultures, changing the course of rivers and things like that. And by looking at the sky we forgot the earth, and now we're all in this trap. Mama earth, pacha mama, what can we do now?

*Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, which tells about the time of the peasant revolts of the late Middle Ages to the which hunts and rise of mechanical philosophy, addresses this transition to capitalism. And now we have this masculine world that we live in today, which is a part of this situation. Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and others. If maybe we did not know this before, it's clear now. If we didn't have Bolsonaro and Trump, it would not be so clear for us now. So, in that sense, we needed them, it was necessary. So again, the dark

and the light, the dark and the light...this *grafismo*...010101010101... These polarities. But they are together – the problem is our morality. Our Christian morality, or fake morality. And this is the problem of the boa.

The boa gave birth to humanity. If there was no boa, Adam and Eve would still be in Paradise. Good for them, but we would not be having this conversation today. There would be no humanity, museums, magazines, no culture from this tradition or from many others. By the way, I suggest reading *Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge* by Jeremy Narby. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the boa serpent is our mother; she and her apple gave birth to humanity. It's all there, written in the Book of Genesis.



Ernesto Neto. Cura Bra Cura Té. Exhibition view at the Pinacoteca in São Paulo. Photo: Andre Mantelli

**True, although from the Christian perspective, we've been expelled from paradise, while indigenous cultures here in Amazonia and Aborigines in Australia believe that we're still in paradise and together with the gods.**

It's the Bible that took us out of paradise...

Can I tell you something? You are in a paradise, too. All of us. This is a paradise. I have no doubt about that. But when we cannot see, we destroy.

**And we must treat it that way and be concerned about it that way.**

For that, we need to throw the Bible away. But we're in an evangelical country now, and everyone goes around with the Bible in their hands. The evangelical churches here in Brazil are growing like crazy, and they support Bolsonaro and invading indigenous land. It's terrible.

**At the same time, white contact has helped the Indians to regain self-confidence and pride in their culture, which was intentionally exterminated during the colonialism period... The interest of Western society in the ancient knowledge of Indian tribes has allowed the Indians themselves to value that knowledge again. Especially the young generation.**

This began about twenty years ago. I once heard Nixiwaka Bira, the spiritual and political leader from the Yawanawá tribe, saying to us, "Thank you very much, because you guys brought the pride back to us, you guys gave force to us to believe in our own culture, to believe in our traditions and bring it back for you."

It is like that. I have two friends who've been in this movement for already more than ten years. One is the photographer Camilla Coutinho and the other is the translator Bia Maia. I was telling them: "Look, you have important knowledge of this moment; for years, you've always been together with them. All of those records that you've made, the pictures you've taken, all the knowledge you've acquired – this is the historical documentation of the transformation of the world." Now it's all spreading, but fifteen years ago nobody thought about that – people were even super afraid of it.

The point is that the plants themselves have decided to change things. The Huni Kuin pajé Agostinho Ika Muru, who gave light to the book *Livro da Cura* (Book of Healing), which was made in collaboration with the Rio de Janeiro Botanical Garden Research Institute and published by *Dantes Editora* in 2014, died just shortly after the book was compiled. All the shamans from the Huni Kuin tribe had gone to his village, and for ten days they stayed there, exchanging and collecting material for this book. Five days after this encounter, pajé Ika Muru passed away. And this guy told Anna Dantes, the publisher of the book: "Anna, we're not working for the Huni Kuin or others. We're working for the plants. Our clients are the plants."

**Do you think that plants are somehow showing us the way?**

Yes, but we have to pay attention in what we decide. Plants are our mother; plants sprout life on this planet. There was no life here before, and then plants began to appear, began to filter the atmosphere and to build the new environment for us here. Every plant, or most of them, has a pacha mama in the complete dark, and another one directing it to the absolute light, to father sun. The roots and the leaves, in the middle the trunk – they are cosmologic. It's very strong. And again the graphismo: dark light dark light, yin and yang, yes and no, day and night. It's so beautiful, magic, enchanted – LIFE really live, beyond culture, but at the same time also culture.

### **Do you think plants need us or not?**

No, we need them. But look at that... *[takes a deep breath and exhales – Ed.]*... they need our CO2. They love our CO2, but I believe they would find a way to produce their own CO2 if we weren't here. We are the problem. Everything we eat comes from plants. If we eat meat, the cow has eaten plants. This is a plant world. And we are kind of the disease here. But there is also love – they are our mothers, and we just need fine tune ourselves. And let's make it clear, beyond Christian morality maybe it will never happen. It might be too late. But there is hope. There is talk about the present, about feeling the present inside of us, not living the present for the future, but being here and now, breathing...

**Art is everywhere in society. Everything is together – hunting, farming, craftwork, medicine, science, politics – and art and spirituality are in between everything.**

### **Back to art, if we compare the artist with a shaman or a teacher – what is in fact the role of the artist? What is an artist?**

When I came back from the Huni Kuin village after a week and after drinking ayahuasca... Three times, three nights. After being scared and panicked when I arrived there, because I thought I would never come back. And actually I never came back. Like, you could not come back. I did not know what was going on, but there was one very important truth – all of them are artists. Art is everywhere in society. Everything is together – hunting, farming, craftwork, medicine, science, politics – and art and spirituality are in between everything. This whole process involves chanting, dancing, drawing and so on. For me, in our “civilised society”, where everything is separated, all the knowledge fragmented, memory put in books, art is in the relationship that we have with a work of art. It is in between the person and the work of art. Art doesn't happen within the work of art; art

happens between you and the work of art. It's the same thing with music. Some music can touch you, some music you can hate. And the truth is that, in this Western society of separation/classification/separation/classification and high objectiveness, art is the only place of subjectiveness.

Cultural society, they do not go to church; they go to museums, movie theatres, dance places. These are places where we share our spirituality. But the problem is that we are sharing our spirituality, but at the same time no one wants to talk about spirituality. Because when you say "spirituality", for Western society it all goes back to the Church and everyone runs away laughing. And so many wars have happened in the name of God. They invaded Africa in the name of God; they invaded America in the name of God; they went to indigenous lands to "save" the indigenous, to bring the word of God to the indigenous, to take the devil away from the indigenous with the word of God. And now we know that the indigenous were already living in a paradise. But in the name of God the colonisers were destroying that paradise by bringing the devil to their villages.

## Art doesn't happen within the work of art; art happens between you and the work of art.

Is the Bible a book of God? Remember the story of Cain and Abel, the first two sons of Adam and Eve. The Lord (it is difficult for me to use this word), who kicked their parents out of Paradise, was set to arrive, so Cain and Abel prepared beautiful offerings to him. Cain offered agriculture and Abel offered meat (animals). But God turned his back on Cain and received the meat from Abel. Can we call someone who does something like that "God"? People call him the Lord, but a better name would be the Boss. If you have a friend who does something like that – how do you feel about him?

**Isn't it so, though, that the viewer changes as well? Meaning that a work of art can change the viewer of that art. In any case, a work of art can become like a key for the viewer – a blueprint, a ticket, a guide...**

I believe so. Maybe people don't know so much about indigenous people, but they know about the boa, the force of Gaia. The boa is everywhere, in every country, in every tree, in every being, in every river... And sometimes all those people we have, they know more about the boa than about art. Art is a very hermetic thing sometimes. It's a club-like feeling – some might say that the more insulated or sealed off the environment, the better, because if just you and me understand something, that puts us on a higher level.



Another issue that I think is quite important is the fact that most art is untouchable. Physically, but also as knowledge and financially. And when something is untouchable, we put more value on it. Like a very untouchable businessman, whom in order to meet you have to pass through many layers of people to finally arrive at the president of the company. Or all this security around the *Mona Lisa*, which gives value to the painting. But if you let people touch things, those things seem less intellectual, and you do not give them so much monetary value, so much market value. We use our body to feel, and this is good – we really need to take a break from our problematic minds. And this is what I do. You touch the people, and you let people touch the art.

When I went into the forest for the first time, I understood that the “sacred” is not far away, in heaven and untouchable. The sacred is together with us. This untouchability of the Christian God is the same untouchability of the businessman, of capitalism and of all this sickness that’s destroying the world. And the art scene is totally involved with this, because these are the people who buy art. It’s very complicated.

It’s not that we should touch every work of art. I have art that’s better to touch just with the eyes, and we also have complications in terms of public mass exhibitions. But it’s a metaphor, and it’s quite important to begin to feel/think about it. I did not invent this; touching art began with Lygia Clark. But this is our culture. For example, when you have a *roda de Samba*, there’s a table in the centre where people are playing guitars and drums, and around it people are standing up with rhythm instruments, and everyone is singing together and dancing. Just like if there were a fire in the centre and the indigenous were dancing around it. And we are like that, too. Art sprouts up from collective thought and encounters and is based on ancestrality, and it was like that in Europe, too, before capitalism and all the other “isms”.

**Speaking about untouchable art, when was the last time you were at the Louvre? Do you know what it’s like to see the *Mona Lisa* now? You have to stand in line for ten minutes, and then you can go in and take a selfie with the *Mona Lisa* in a special selfie place...**

**How many museum exhibitions have shaken you in recent years? In some way, many museum shows have become predictable, or do you disagree?**

You’re right. This is the problem with the world we’re living in now. I remember a year ago some gallerist asked me, “Do you have an Afro-Brazilian artist you could recommend?” It’s very much about themes now. It can be Brazilian today and something else tomorrow. This reflects our society, the academicism, the art educations, and the expression of cut-out people in our cut-out time. But art is beyond themes; it’s about vital force.

I think the problem is now that you have had the medicine, the medicine is questioning – what is this art world in which we live? You’re questioning that.



Ernesto Neto. Gaia Mother Tree, 2017 / 2018, installation view at the Zurich Grand Central Station, Switzerland / 19,60 x 33,20 x 48,25 m / Photo Mark Niedermann

**But you're questioning it too, I think.**

I am, yes, totally. I think the title of your magazine – *Arterritory* – is absolutely great, because the art ends on territory. I once did an exhibition titled *The Body as a Territory*. The idea of territory is very broad, and it can happen in an abstract or material way.

But there's an important detail. In Portuguese, and I believe in any Latin language, 'territory' is a political body, but it is also *terra*, the earth, mother earth, our body. There's a work Lygia Clark titled *A Casa é o Corpo* (The House Is the Body, 1968), which she called "biological architecture" and "nostalgia of the body". It was exhibited at MoMA in 2014. One day while dancing at a party under a tree, I received a message that was a variation of Clark's statement from 1968, saying "A Terra é

o corpo" (Earth is the body). When we say it this way, we feel like we're inside the earth/terra, as a part of it; we bring back the landscape to our body, and we feel as a part of it and not that it is apart from us.

**We spoke about the network, which is becoming bigger and bigger. The whole planet is already intertwined thanks to the internet and social media. In a good and in a bad way, like everything. But it's completely obvious that the changes can no longer be stopped.**

It's already here – this energy is already taking over the planet. You know, the left wing is always saying, you guys should be resisting now. In fact, the right wing (this is quite old-fashioned), the denialists and so on, they are the ones who are resisting. But the world, with all its freedom movements, feminism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, organic food, co-working, collaborativism, environmentalism and forest spirituality (shamanism), has already changed now. And they are the last barrier. And the last barrier could destroy everything, which is quite crazy. But I don't believe they're going to do it. It's interesting, because when you talk about the *Mona Lisa*, she's like an altar. But then you have the line of people, and that is the boa...

**What project are you working on right now?**

I'm making a crochet sculpture out of plastic!!!

**Something new?**

No, it's something old. I'm working on a commission for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (MFAH). In 2011, representatives from the MFAH went to the ten-year anniversary celebration of the MALBA museum in Buenos Aires. And I was opening the exhibition *O Bicho SusPenso na PaisaGen* (The Animals Suspend/Bug in the Landscape). Have you seen this work? It's a hanging piece, where you can take your shoes off, walk up and lie down in there. It's like a big hammock investigating this aspect of the body made up of cells, and we get inside of it and it becomes a landscape. Which is common in my work, but this time it was hung up in the air and surrounded by crocheted colours. It was all made with polypropylene and polyester and plastic balls with air inside. And for a few years now they've wanted a work like that again, and they came to me proposing this commission. You cannot even imagine how difficult it was for me to accept this invitation. Before signing the contract, I kept trying to convince myself: "Come on, Ernesto, this is important..." and things like that.

And then I drank medicine, and the boa asked me, "What are we going to do with all this plastic there now?" And what I understood was that this is the darkness, the negative. And we need to see this thing.

So now I will have this galaxy of plastic... In 2014 I stopped working with polyamide, polypropylene and polyester and began working with cotton. And now there's this situation, in which my past is calling to me, a sort of ancestrality. But on the other hand, we have plastic everywhere now, and we can say that the 20th century was the Age of Plastic. Plastic makes our life practical, but at the same time it pollutes our life and oceans. There are grains of plastic in every river mouth, and fish and birds are dying from eating plastic. Not to mention the fact that plastic is made out of oil, and all the wars – whether they declare it publicly or not – are going on because of oil. And it's in this kind of global situation that they invited a person who, one year after contact with the Huni Kuin, the spiritual medicines of the Amazon forest and deep indigenous cosmovision, stopped using plastic precisely because of this specific global situation to do this thing and to review this world and this time. It's crazy. But I'm doing it, and by doing so, I'm beginning to learn...as I once heard said, "the fingers teach".

The suspended sculpture has the form of a spiral galaxy with a centre and two arms-fingers coming down. These "arms" are the way for visitors to get up inside of it and back down again. It's titled *SunForceOceanLife* (or perhaps *SunFlowerOceanLife*). The centre is red, and then it goes down to orange, yellow and finally green when touching the ground – as a metaphor for the force of sunlight and the heat coming to our planet and bringing life through photosynthesis. Life that began in the oceans, the same oceans that are now being polluted by plastic.

The crochet installation is made with crocheted spiral cells. We do many cells, rings, disks, tubes, and from these elements we weave the whole net. All the walls – the main cells – have a nucleus in green, as if we were planting the seeds of life.

Even though we have a team of finger-crochet masters, I began doing a lot of the crocheting myself, parts of the work. Afterwards, in order to connect the "cells", we need to fill the voids between them. We do the regular crochet ring made through a spiral – from inside to outside – and at the end, what we call the final weaving, we do a negative crochet, from outside to inside. And every time when we begin a cell or a fill/weaving, we tie the string at the beginning and at the end of the "fill negative spiral cell" process. And every time we tie on at the beginning and end of each spiral, we take a lighter and we burn the end of the string. Like a car or an airplane, a lighter needs fuel to make it work, and through the repetition of this process I began to realise that I'm actually working with fire, an element that comes from the old Grandfather Fire, the primary form of energy, but at the same time I'm using an

old-fashioned fuel of our society, petroleum. And so the piece is an invitation for people to get into the sun, our father made of fire, who burns hydrogen through the mass compression of the force of gravity. So that's the paradox, the negative and the positive of our activities boiled down to the earth over our human nature. We need balance, the work will be in balance, and let's see what the



art can teach us. Life is learning, and learning is not an easy or light process. Sometimes it burns, but we need to just be careful and listen our true heart and to our fingers. The heart blesses, the fingers teach.



Ernesto Neto. NixiForestKupiXawa, 2015 / Material: ceiling crochet, painted pattern on the wall, straw matting / 650 x 1550 x 1010 cm / Installation view / Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin – Aru Kuxipa, TBA 21 - Augarten, Viena / Photo: Camilla Coutinho

### **Is there going to be a boa?**

The boa has always been in my work. Always. That's the point. Nothing has changed in my work. It's just that I've now become aware of the dimension that I've always worked in and for which I didn't know the translation. I didn't know that the Boa's knowledge was behind it until I went into



the forest and met the Huni Kuins and understood that I had found my philosophers. And that with all of the work I was doing, I was preparing myself to meet this situation – to meet them, to meet the forest. And the symbiosis between animal and the landscape, territory and body, body and geography... And beyond that, the in/out, in/out boa line, the out line, the drawings I've been making for thirty years, the boa was there... Well, nowadays I see the boa everywhere...

What the indigenous did in me is a very interesting thing. They made me a better human. I was a drunk guy, because of all these openings and everything, and I couldn't stand that. I was a nihilist, I had an irreverent attitude. I was a heavy drinker, and this was great for ritualising encounters at events, including art openings. There was a kind of irreverence, an anaesthetic approach, as if you took yourself outside the situation while still being inside it. But at the same time my work was about infinity, life, the great spirit...whatever you want to call it.

This relationship with the art scene – the biennales, the exhibitions...walls, walls, box, box, box – I always found that uncomfortable. I didn't really accept this frame of the art scene. I needed to drink litres of alcohol to digest it, or perhaps to digest my own unbalancedness. But then with the boa I stopped drinking, and I began sitting like this [*with a straight back, not hunched over – Ed.*], they got me in shape, in health. I lost fifteen kilos... And now I think that I had been crushed before then... Because there were many things that happened, a lot of fighting as well; it's not an easy world. There is a darkness, very strong. And very much of it is because of us, because of the un-paradise that arrived here in this world.

**What the indigenous did in me is a very interesting thing. They made me a better human.**

**Have you learned to digest all of that now?**

I think I'm learning now. Very much. It's complicated. Because if you go deep into a vision, there's no institution, there's no hierarchy anymore. And all these constructions, they're going to fall down, because the balance is to put our hands together and do things together. There's no possibility to mediate.

**But at the same time, you're also a part of the art world.**

Yes, it took a year or two until I understood that, and I was suffering because of this contradiction. When I did *Gaia Mother Tree* in Zurich, I was very much under the influence of that contradiction. At the Venice Biennale, when we were doing this installation [*Um Sagrado Lugar/A Sacred Place, 2017*

– Ed.], I was almost falling apart. Together with the Huni Kuin, under the force of the medicine, I walked around the city and I saw all these souvenir shops selling bags, bags, bags, glass, glass, glass, feathers, feathers, feathers, notebooks, notebooks...one after the other... And I had the feeling that all our industrial consumer insatiability was mining the Earth. I began to feel as if my family were being sucked out of the ground to become goods for our own cheap pleasure of eating souvenirs.

You understand what I mean? The fires in the Amazon began long before people started talking about fires in the Amazon. And at that time, I didn't even know that people had already begun slamming me just hours after the talk organised by the Goethe Institute during the opening days of the exhibition.

A young woman came up to me and said: "Ernesto, I want to say something to you. I believe you know what the people are saying about you? I was there at the Goethe Institute event, I saw and I heard it. I just want to say something – they are wrong." But I didn't know what people were saying about me. I felt there were some mistakes, but at the same time I was happy, believing in what we were doing – I was feeling it!

I love the curator Christine Marcel, but she was too busy – it was Venice, after all. And as Peter Pakesh told me at another busy Venice opening, "We are paying for our success." So, the audience at an opening is more people who are there for the social event and not for the art in itself. There was also this idea of shamanism (*the shamanism pavilion* – Ed.), of art being beyond it, of spirituality...and these academic "isms" are reducing everything.

And there was another woman whom I met later, on another day. She said: "I came here, I got in. I sat down. I had had ayahuasca before, but I did not know the work was about it. I sat down, I closed my eyes, and I began to meditate. And I felt that I began to enter a force. And there was another woman beside me who was also meditating. And I began to feel her, and afterwards she said the same thing to me. After this experience, I stood up, read the wall text talking about the medicine, and I realised that the force was really part of the content."



Ernesto Neto. Um Sagrado Lugar (A Sacred Place). 2017. Mixed media. Photo: Andrea Avezzù

These two quotes talk precisely about this crisis – the crisis inside myself and I believe inside the art scene, too. Because now in the art scene there are people talking about the forest, about the indigenous and especially the Amazon indigenous force and knowledge, about everything... But when I went to Venice and said that Western society needs indigenous knowledge for the balance of the planet, the critics turned their backs and said, “Ernesto is using the indigenous.” They did not want to talk about it. Capitalism and the Western knowledge model have a key, and we’re allowed to criticise the system; that’s a part of democracy. But you can’t criticise the knowledge model; that’s a heresy. The Huni Kuin who were there, they’re spiritual and political leaders; they represent the knowledge they have, and I’ve been swallowed up by the Huni Kuin boa. It was not just a project I did with some indigenous group – this was life and death, life alive, life for life! People only want to see interest and profits, because it’s easier, it’s a smoke screen.

The Huni Kuin have a lot of problems introduced from our material world. It’s good to remember that our society’s contact with them has been hardcore violent. They became slaves of the rubber

state and were forbidden to speak their language, use their medicines, dance, sing their chants, do their ceremonies. The indigenous were given more rights in the 1970s, and little by little they got back their culture. And they believe that through their culture they can heal Westerners as they heal themselves. Well, they were there, in Venice, and people could talk to them. They still can, but not in Venice anymore.

But this is the world we are in. Now, since Bolsonaro and Trump appeared, now we're beginning to understand it. This negative energy was already there, it was already on the scene. And when you open something like the biennale, there's a lot of energy, every work has spiritual potential. We used to say at A Gentil Carioca that artwork is a pot, a crucible, and that this crucible has a smell, an aroma that it exudes, that is blown around, that impregnates people... So, when we're selling artwork, putting artwork in someone's house, we're putting this pot in it, and with this pot we spread the energy around.

And in these situations, especially places like the Venice Biennale, where there's one work after another, you have all these pots putting out energy from everywhere. We need to begin to have a new way of reading what we're doing as artists on this planet, as curators on this planet, as big institutions on this planet. We must have more respect, real respect towards the artwork. And not this respect of the celebrity or of the power of the market. Well, lots of people are saying that...

We used to say at A Gentil Carioca that artwork is a pot, a crucible, and that this crucible has a smell, an aroma that it exudes, that is blown around, that impregnates people...

**You spoke about hierarchy. Humans have this internal need to institutionalise everything. To go to an institution in order to pray in some way, even if it's art. Like the *Mona Lisa* we've already mentioned. But this applies to much more, not only to works of art.**

Yes, this is the frame. Something should be framed by the museum, should be framed by the curator, by the collector, by the price... It reminds me of documenta 13, where there were a lot of frames and vitrines, and I had a fear of being framed. Even the logo [13] was framed. This is the idea of Western knowledge: separation and classification. We live in boxes: in a bedroom box, a bus box, an office box, a museum/gallery box, a restaurant box, a nightclub box, etc. But we can unframe these things. Sometimes it's well received, sometimes not. It depends on the frame.



But it's interesting that you say "pray", because "pray" is what we need now. It's what the Huni Kuin, the Yawanawá, the Puyanawa and most, if not all, of the indigenous people are doing. Every time they sing, they pray. But the most important is not the praying itself, but the attention you put into praying. And the awareness that joy is the cure.

When you said "pray", I began to think about "play". How to break the frame of the museum? By playing. But if you play, look, you're just playing. The question is how to mix the two – playing and praying.

*...play pray play pray play pray play pray play pray play pray play pray...*

This is so interesting, because these two words are so close to each other. I've never thought about that before. Praying is not just putting your hands together; praying is dancing.

*...I play, I pray, I play, I pray, I play, I pray, I play, I pray, I play, I pray, I play, I pray...*

*Praying without playing is not praying. Playing without praying is not playing.*

This is what our conversation has brought into the atmosphere. And I'm sure there are many other people who think the same as we do.

Title image: Courtesy of Ernesto Neto