Anthropodino: A Conversation with Ernesto Neto

by Jess Wilcox

For its first commissioned art installation, the Park Avenue Armory and curator Tom Eccles invited Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto to design one of his amorphous, interactive installations for the Armory’s Wade Thompson Drill Hall. Anthropodino is a cavernous maze rendered from hundreds of yards of material suspended from the ceiling and spanning over 100 feet across the hall’s truss. Throughout the main cavity, weighted arms drop down like stalactites, dividing the space into the vast series of tunnels and nooks that characterize Neto’s immersive works. Jess Wilcox met with the artist on the occasion of his opening to discuss his latest project.

JESS WILCOX: So let's start at the beginning. What does the title of this installation, Anthropodino, refer to?

ERNESTO NETO: It’s a mix of ideas. Anthropodino comes from the terms ‘anthropology’ and ‘anthropophagia.’ Anthropophagia is an artistic movement that began in Brazil in the 1920’s.
JW: Oswaldo Andrade was the poet-artist who coined the term, wasn't he?

EN: That's correct. This whole orchestration reminds me of anthropology because I am thinking human beings. I began to study anthropology and realized that I am an amateur anthropologist because I live Brazil, which is a very different society than the United States, or France, or Europe. I travel frequently to these destinations and also to Japan, which is also very different. Anthropology is a comparative study between the primitive and the civilized; the anthropologist tries to find a structure for our society. There is an architec tonic relation between the practicality of how [the piece] is built in a very handmade manner, even though I employ technology to generate all the files and make the cuts in these textiles. I'm very interested in because I'm a sculptor, and sculptors think about weight -- about how to put a sculpture up.

When I do a large work like that, I think about how to put humanity in it. The whole anthropodino idea considers the human being in a scientific way, not only as an individual or as a part of society, but in the sense of an organ. In society, the human being must be an organ or cell. So this is a cell. The drawing of this piece depicts a cellular structure -- mytochondria with ribosomes and membranes. This piece acts as a center of energy for the people who move around it.

JW: Some of the titles of your past installations have evoked myth, spirituality, and otherworldly realms. I wonder about the secular nature of this title, and if it has to due with the Armory's history as a military drill hall. The Pantheon in Paris, for instance, where you created Leviathan Thot, had very distinct historical connotations.

EN: There is a brutality to the space at the Armory. It's raw. I like it very much, and I think some of my attraction to the space has to do with the brutality of the civil war. I don't like guns and war, but sometimes we forget that the military makes things change.

I'm not interested in the story of the drill hall. I had to create Anthropodino because the drill hall is empty, both as a space and symbolically. It doesn't represent any particular thing in New York aside from the story of the place. The Pantheon was completely different because it represented transition of Western civilization from medieval to modern time. If you think about it in

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terms of politics and the history of science in that building, then it is a monument for all countries that followed in the steps of the French Revolution.

The drill hall represents a local problem, but I am not local -- I am not interested in the local story. Anthropodino is more artificial in a way. I assume the position of anthropologist as a human being. I am interested in the animal that exists in us -- the monster, the dinosaur, the imaginary. It's weird because the dinosaurs did exist -- archeologists dig up their bones to prove it -- but there is still something imaginary about them because we've never seen them. I was thinking of imaginary animals when I chose this title, and about this image of the bones. These structural joints that hold the piece look like bones. They hold the piece up.

**JW:** When you mentioned that the installation subverts or contrasts with the space, I thought about the structure of the piece, which is made of tulle. It looks like organic tissue, which makes the drill hall function like an exoskeleton around [the piece], protecting its fragile interior.

**EN:** It is a shell, physically and metaphorically.

**JW:** As a point of art historical, rather than anthropologic comparison, your work is often considered in relationship to that of Lygia Clark. You seem to reference Clark directly in mentioning the Anthropophagia movement, of which she was part. Thinking about her legacy, what kind of potential does the large-scale installation or exhibition hold in terms of public interaction?

**EN:** She went from a very general thing to the specific, private universe. I am pushing myself away from intimacy. For me, this is a micro sculpture that grows bigger. With that thought in mind, I can generate a public audience -- I can bring draw people in. Those who are not involved or used to the art scene will be able to come here. I think you can read the work art historically, beyond Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica and through Donald Judd and Richard Serra, or through Brancusi and Mondrian. But you can also have a relationship without that knowledge. We will see what this work is about when people come -- I can't tell you that now. I don't know what this work is about. The people who experience it are going to tell me what it's about.

**JW:** It seems that you've given up a lot of control in this work, both physically and socially. The force of gravity shapes the sculpture, but I'm also giving up authorship -- not completely of course, but the idea that the audience makes the work implies a letting go of some kind.

**EN:** The scary part of the installation is the possibility of it falling down. I always wonder if it's going to stay up!

**JW:** Perhaps that's because it's alive.


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