

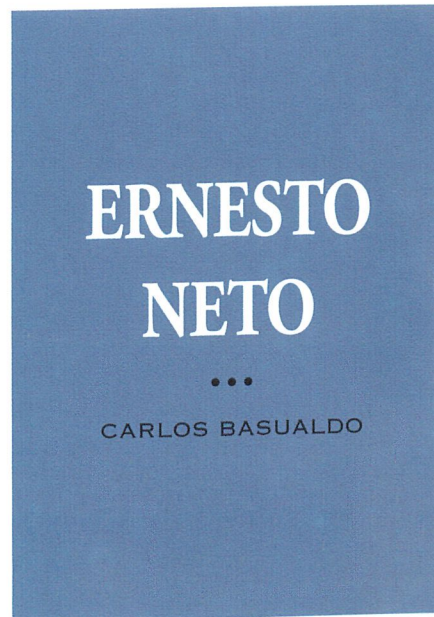
CONCRETA SONHO, 1994*

I dream of Crete, of the house of the Minotaur and the thread of Ariadne, which is also the thread of dreams and their truth. Following the thread through the labyrinth is like trying to reach its umbilicus, the *omphalos*, the very knot at the heart of the dream which Freud said defies analysis. Any search for meaning is thwarted as the analyst finds himself lost in the closed heart of an enigma. The title of Ernesto Neto's work, however, suggests also other directions to be taken.

"Concrete dream" might be another way of reading the title, one which endows the oneiric process with solidity and weight. Any concrete dream would necessarily be clear and shining, well-defined and precise, all adjectives which correspond closely to Neto's work. *ConCreta Sonho* is a lead cast of the artist's face which lies on the ground as if partially submerged in the floor. A cord leading from the mouth is strung over the end of a steel rod, which is like an inverted crutch, and knotted around a small, suspended block of white marble. The materials are clear and differentiated; their articulation specific and defined, their relative weights and colours harmonious but distinct.

The work is so powerfully self-contained, its contrast with the surrounding space so clear, that the viewer gets the impression that the piece is the only real thing in the place that hosts it, which becomes in comparison imprecise and almost dream-like. The white cotton thread emerges from the mouth like a solid emanation of breath.

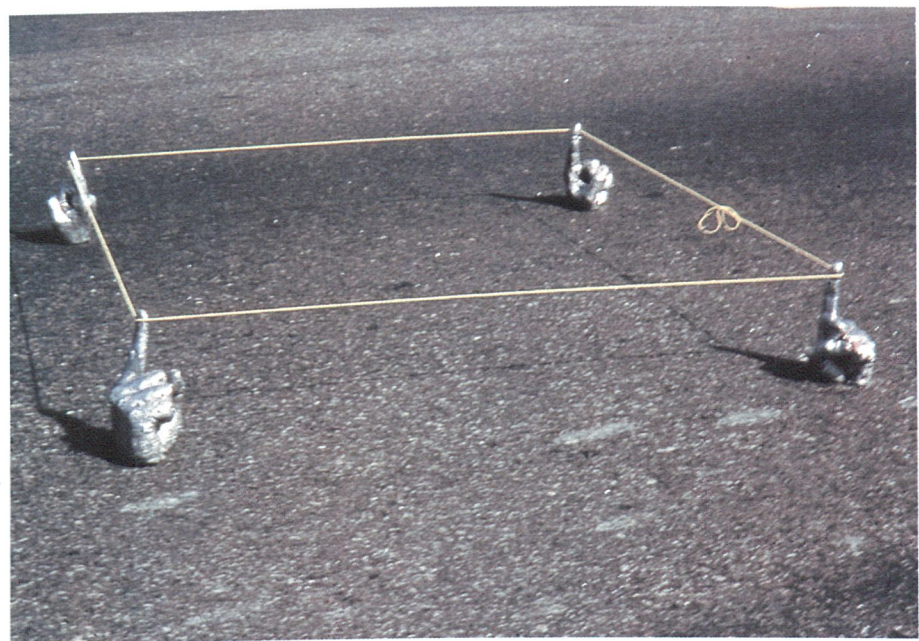
Note: *ConCreta Sonho* can be translated both as *Concrete Dreams* or as *I Dream of Crete*.



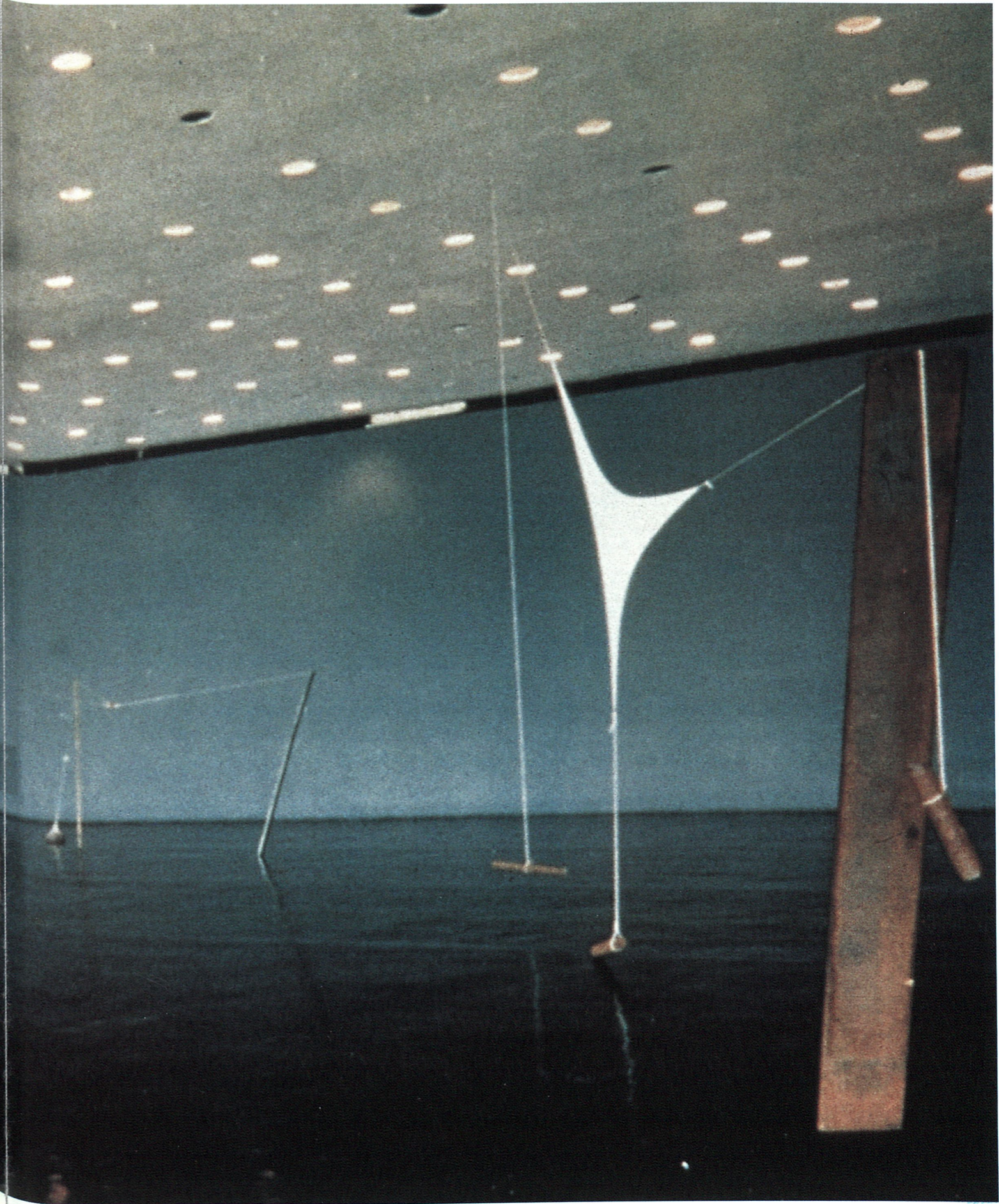
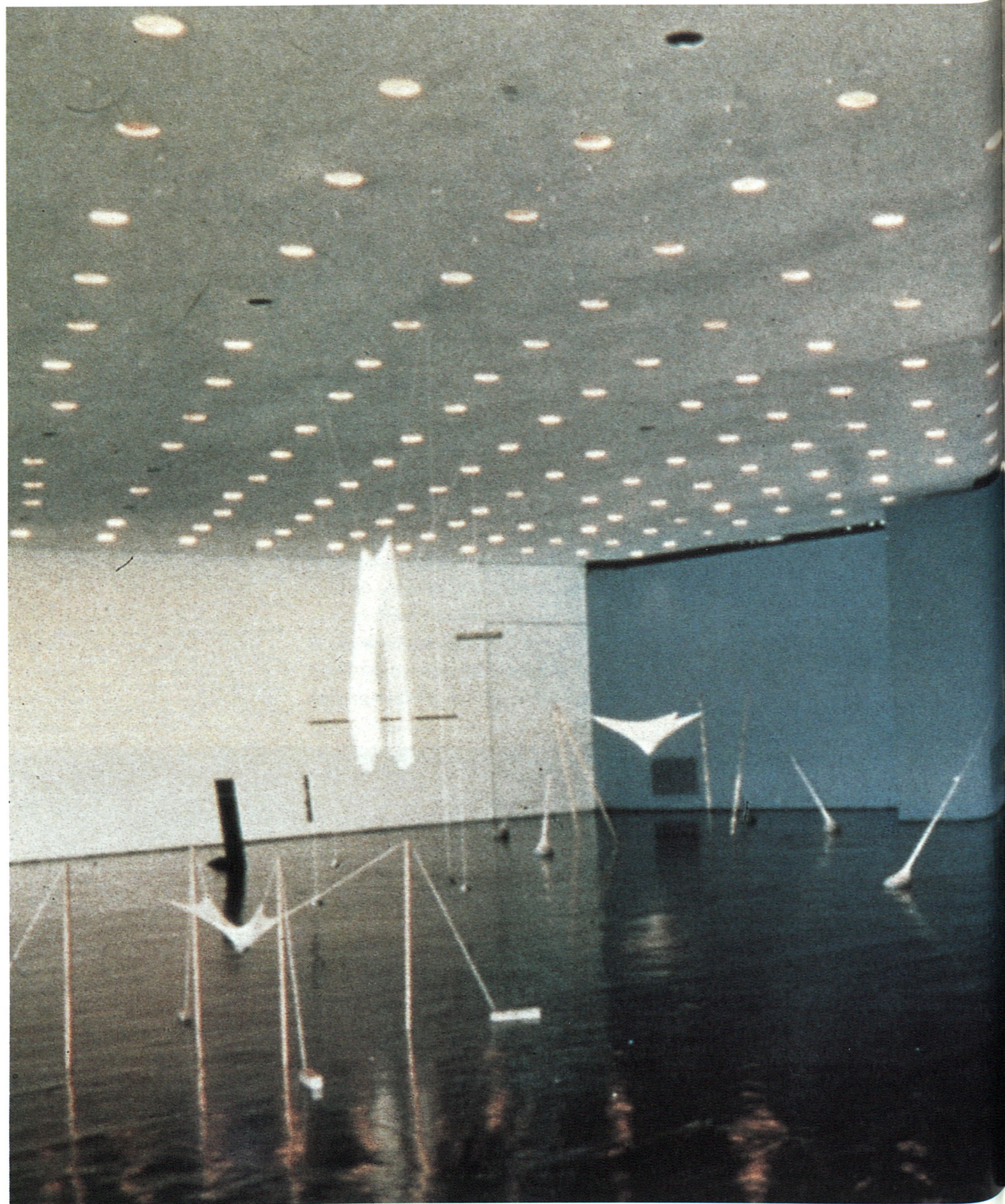
The tension of the thread draws attention to the steel crutch which leans over, as if drawn by the weight of the marble block. It is the tension of the rod which leads us to think in terms of the story of Oedipus and the riddle of the Sphinx. Let's remember here the question posed to Oedipus by the Sphinx: which is the animal who walks with four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at dawn? Oedipus guessed that it was the

man, and that the third feet was a crutch. Oedipus' answer to the riddle was loud and clear, although this very clarity would seal his fate: the same fate that would fall upon his shoulders, just as the thread seems to fall from the vertex of the steel rod to suspend the snow-white block of marble. The heavy marble is Oedipus' destiny, his secret; his very identity as an abyss –the abyss into which the Sphinx threw herself, defeated by Oedipus. The work seems to be saying: 'we are all fatally the same, carrying the weight of our lack of identity'.

The title of *ConCreta Sonho* also contains an allusion to constructivism in Brazil, or, more precisely, the work of those artists belonging to the Neo-concrete group (which includes Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark) who, in the late 1950s, broke away from the Concretist line because of its excessive rationalism and mechanism. For the Neo-concretists, Mondrian was an expressive artist. They were referring, obviously, to the expression of an original kind of subjectivity. The group foresaw a subject



Ernesto Neto. *Ring*, 1995. Lead and Velvet, 140 x 140 cm.



Ernesto Neto. *Ettoxn*, 1992. Installation view at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo.

for which emotion and reason had yet to become opposing terms. That subject had yet to be produced, and this activity would become the main task of the group. They were capable of dreaming of the most precise labyrinths and conjuring up the very site of the *omphalos*. They attempted to undo the heavy knot of dreams.

SONOROUS PERMUTATIONS

On The last page of a catalog from 1989, Neto includes a list of titles and specifications that correspond to sculptures which had been beautifully illustrated earlier. The materials of these pieces are always the same: Polyamide mesh, popularly known in Brazil as silk “stockings”, and little lead balls or “buckshot”. The titles of the pieces, however, are all different and they depend on the weight and number of the units that constitute them. The difference between a *Peso* (Weight) and a *Passo* (Step or Pace, as measure of length), for example, is that in the first case the polyamide stocking contains 5, 7, or 9 kilos of buckshot, while the second piece contains only 5 kilos, but distributed in two points. *Dupla* (Couple) is composed of two Pesos, but a *Colonia* (Colony) is made up of an indefinite number of Pesos and Passos. The system expands to encompass *Prumos* (Plumbs), *Piedras* (Rocks), *Cópulas* (Copulas), and *Famílias* (Families). The phonetic similarity between the names of the different pieces is indeed disorienting. The different names establish qualitative differences between pieces which otherwise seem to belong to a continuum. The titles thus establish cuts in the continuous system of the pieces.



Ernesto Neto. Installation view at Petit Galerie, Rio de Janeiro, 1988.

However, the system of names, precisely due to their phonetic similarities, also seem to display a continuous character. *Peso, Passo, Prumo*: the syllables jump from one phonetic group to the next, like taut springs that extend in order to contract once again into units of meaning. The sonorous tension established when the titles of the works are spoken aloud can only be described as musical. Sonorous permutations. The pieces, in their totality, form a rhythmic taxonomy of the possible combinations of weights and colors obtained by using two simple materials: stocking and buckshot.

A photograph of the installation of those same pieces in Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art suggests the possibility that the coexistence in the space of those diverse forms may constitute a sort of fragmentary totality. The different pieces, gathered together, seem to be part of one single work. The unity of the installation is not contradicted by the multiplicity of the individual pieces. Here, finally, the one differs from itself, and it still possible to

capture the multiple that it makes up in that difference under the instantaneous form of unity. Observed from this perspective, the pieces are differentiated among themselves only by their color, their size, and their position in the space. Since the materials are always the same, the size differences are merely a function of weight, differences in a “feeding” process, as Neto calls it. Thus there are barely three sources of variations: the color of the stockings, the weight of the units, and the positions of those bodies in the space of the room. The taxonomic-musical system of the names allows us to map out of the installation in a specific moment and to identify provisionally its components. The names function like a musical score, and the viewer's perspective, passing through the room, actually carries out an exercise in interpretation, executing the changing chords of a silent music. To be sure, this cartographic exercise has only a provisional character, for the slightest alterations in the grouping of the pieces would immediately modify their names.



Ernesto Neto. *Groupolip walking on the gallery*; 1990. 27 pieces.
Galeria Sergio Porto, Rio de Janeiro.

Ever equal to itself, the identity of the aggregate is nevertheless found in a permanent process of transformation. A *Cópula* detaches and frees the *Prumo* and the *Peso* that it contains; but by shedding the slightest amount of weight, the *Peso* would turn into a *Prumo*, and vice versa. The general impression is not so much one of static-sculpture landscape, but rather one of force-field photography. A silent theater where a play is staged, narrated in terms of elemental physics. A snapshot that eternalizes what does not exist for more than a brief moment in a process of continuous transformation.

Bent on accentuating the multiple and changing character of this work, Neto plans to distribute an undefined number of *Pesos* throughout different parts of the planet. [1] Attracted by their centers of gravity, the different pieces would converge into a virtual colony located on some point at the Earth's center. Present in the literalness of their weight, the pieces would only be completed in the virtuality of a projected space. Nor, in this case, will the identity of the elements that make up the work have a unique

and definitive character, for they are newly mediated by a supplementary dimension that dissociates them from the immediacy of their literalness.

In 1966 [2], seven years after having systematized those pieces using synthetic fabrics and buckshot, Neto completed a new group of works using polyamide stockings. Unlike the previous pieces, this time the content of the stocking did not consist of buckshot, but rather of spices and flour. The titles of the piece are, literally, onomatopoeias: *Piff*, *Paff*, *Puff*, *Poff*. The sound of the onomatopoeias is linked to the weight of the pieces and to the type of fall that they suffer, for the construction of these pieces stems from the process of falling. As was the case with the previous works, these pieces are differentiated as cases of a typology. Unlike the previous works, these do not deal with interchangeable members, given that the extreme fragility of their contents imposes immobility upon their arrangement. Another noteworthy variable is the color of the spices, violent yellows and mustards. The bony white of the flour contrasts with the variety of

colors of the small pieces. As they become more static, the pictorial character of the pieces is accentuated. This exacerbation of the visual aspect of the pieces is accompanied by the stimulus provoked by the smell of the pieces. The minimum presence and harmonic arrangement of the pieces contrast with the sensorial disorder they induce in the viewer. Between a *Passo* and a *Puff*, between a *Dupla* and a *Paff*, there exist family resemblances.

It is interesting to note that a sector of art criticism has attempted to assign a figurative sense to the elements that constitute these pieces. In this regard, we have seen the attempt to point out of the fetishist sensuality of the polyamide, since it is a material used for making women's stocking, and the supposed wink to the postcolonial discourse implicit in the use of spices. But even pointing out the precarious character of the materials becomes secondary in the face of an accurate observation of the pieces. In the words of the artist, the selection of the materials was not chiefly conditioned by any of these considerations, but rather by their literal characteristics: the transparency of the fabric of the stockings, the compact weight of the buckshot, the smell and color of the spices. [3] Strictly speaking, the materials were selected in accordance with the dictates of a modern logic: by virtue of their specific qualities. To be sure, Neto does not conceive the uniqueness of the materials outside what could be called their "affective contents". The stocking is not an allusion to fetish, but rather to the smoothness of the skin. The spices "sweat" through the polyamide fabric. It is a logic of modernity in which a limpid physics of the inorganic is united to the immaterial vibration of the organism

through the bridge of tenderness. That such logic can make room for the problemization of identity and the permanent transformation of its components speaks more of the way in which modernity has been and is thought of in Brazil.

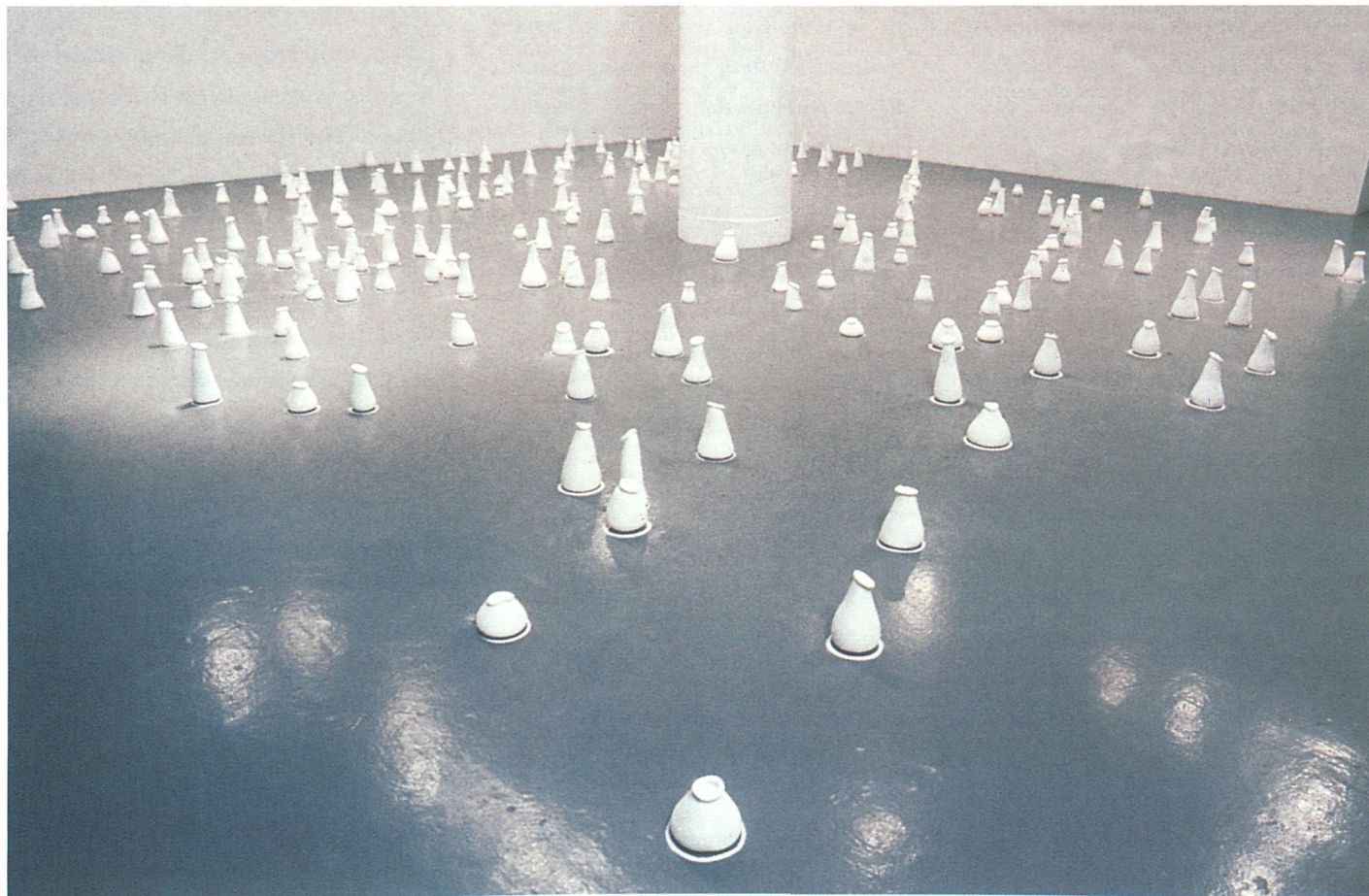
FORM AS PROCESS AS FORM

The first thing that happens is that Ernesto, just off the airplane and not quite in my house yet, shows me a video of his cats prowling around inside his *Nave Óvulo* (Ovule ship). “They are points”, he says, “can you see them?”. On the small liquid glass screen of his Japanese video camera I can see two small, hairy, black figures creeping with

catlike tread—the phrase was never more appropriate—over the undefined reaches of a lycra tulle. But it is true: the cats are like the points on a line drawing that moves forward and throws itself upside down onto the remote tulle background. And the tulle is a sugary cloud that sinks a little with each step, but very lightly, as if receiving the faltering gait of the little animals as caresses.

Neto characterizes the *Nave Óvulo* (1998) as an inverted bubble. It is an enormous cube of lycra tulle, open on one end and suspended in space by its vertices. The entire piece makes us think of a futuristic version of the clear but undulating forms of the best buildings of the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemayer. Due to the formal cleanliness and diaphanous precision with which it is

installed in the space, the piece unequivocally alludes to Brazilian modernism. The presence of the piece in the room has the overwhelming power of a monumental sculpture, and nevertheless it is not a static form but a penetrable sculpture. The viewers enter it and the work is activated, adjusting itself to their steps, becoming deformed here and there, transforming itself into a living body. It is easy to associate this work with Absalon’s *Células* (Cells), with Lygia Clark’s *Casa è Corpo* (House and Body), and Hèlio Oiticica’s propositions concerning the “suprasensuous”. But more than anything else, it made me think of those air mattresses at amusement parks on which we jump around like madmen when we are children, until some covetous bell ends



Ernesto Neto. *Sowing Lipoids*, 1996. Stockings and plaster. Variable dimensions. Zolla Lieberman Gallery.

the game, indicating that our turn is over.

On account of its environmental character, the *Nave Óvulo* forms part of a swollen modern tradition: from Kurt Schwitters's *Mertzbau* to Gego's *Reticularia*, or the environments of Lucio Fontana and James Turrell. These are works that attempt to modify the viewer's relation to surroundings. The project is, in the words of Arthur Rimbaud, that of an ordered disarray of all senses. That is, the alteration of common sense through a sharp stimulation of the viewer's sensory perception. At the same time, the piece belongs to another modern tradition, in a certain way tightly associated to the former, that of interactive works of art that attempt to destabilize the conventional relation between viewer and work of art. In this particular case, criticism of the quasi-religious character of the artistic experience, traditionally defined as contemplative, goes hand-in-hand with a complementary criticism of functionalism. The work lacks both a specific and instrumental utility and an untouchable character that would stimulate contemplative activity. Equidistant from profane contemplation and instrumental work, *Nave Óvulo* instead urges a change, a vague laxity with no defined aim. This piece, in the words of the artist, is a "praise of sweat". [4]

But this aspect of the work interests me less than its formal characteristics, because the form of the *Nave Óvulo* is inseparable from its eventual modifications. So much so that we could affirm without hesitation that *Nave Óvulo* is the unstable matrix of those transformations. Its form is the possibility of a continuous formal transformation. The form of the piece is at once the support and the result of that series of



Ernesto Neto. *Puff, Puff*, 1997. Polyamide and carnation, 25 x 60 x 50 cm. The Art Gallery of N.S.W.

transformations produced as effect of its interaction with the viewers. In *Nave Óvulo* the form is always a configuration, a state of transition in a changing series of diverse formal possibilities. Form as process as form. Few works of art are capable of erasing with such elegance, economy and precision the limits between those two terms whose opposition has founded a great deal of the art produced in the last three decades.

But the cats in Ernesto's video seem to take pleasure in sovereignly ignoring all of the aforementioned. They pompously prowl around the inside of the *Nave*, which must seem to them like an extended and blurry horizon, with no precise boundaries. "They are points", Ernesto repeats to me, "do you see

them?". The drawing they sketch is erased with each step they take, it is neither inside nor outside the *Nave*, it does not recognize its reversible traces, it finds solace in continuing without rest, with no destiny, advancing in the pure succession of non-linear time.

NOTES

[1] Neto describes the project in the following terms: "A biological proliferation, like a large colony that is dismembered into various parts across the globe." "Topología", unpublished manuscript, April 1998.

[2] The first time he worked with dust on stocking material was in *Laboide*, created in 1995. The series was fully developed a year later.

[3] *Conversation with the author*, March 1998.

[4] In a recent letter Neto described *Nave óvulo* in the following terms: "A work of art... (as) an intuitive critique of First World overdevelopment." "Elogio al sudor", unpublished manuscript, April 1998.

Translated from the Spanish by Vincent Martin