The Persistence of Primitivism: Equivocation in Ernesto Neto’s A Sacred Place and Critical Practice

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Abstract: During the 2017 Venice Biennale, the area dubbed the “Pavilion of the Shamans” opened with A Sacred Place, an immersive environmental work created by the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto in collaboration with the Huni Kuin, a native people of the Amazon rainforest. Despite the co-authorship of the installation, the artwork was dismissed by art critics as engaging in primitivism and colonialism. Borrowing anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s concept of equivocation, this article examines the incorporation of both indigenous and contemporary art practices in A Sacred Place. The text ultimately argues that a more equivocal, open interpretation of the work could lead to a better understanding of the work and a more self-reflexive global art history that can look at and learn from at its own comparative limitations.

Keywords: Venice Biennial; contemporary art; indigenous art; Brazilian art; Ernesto Neto; Huni Kuin; equivocation

1. Introduction

During the 57th Venice Biennale, the area dubbed the “Pavilion of the Shamans” opened with an immersive environmental work created by the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto in collaboration with the Huni Kuin, a native people of the Amazon rainforest. In a dialogue with the architecture of the exhibition space, the organic structure of multicolored, hand-knotted crochet, which was titled A Sacred Place (2017), snaked along its columns to resemble a kupixawa, a place of meetings and rituals among the Huni Kuin. Inside the structure, visitors were invited to meditate barefoot, surrounded by elements borrowed from Huni Kuin cosmology. Visitors standing outside the tent could listen to Huni Kuin chants, read fragments of poems on the walls, and look at photographs of the Huni Kuin in close contact with the forest and at other small separate works reflective of different phases of Neto’s work. While A Sacred Place employed a formal vocabulary used by Neto since the early 1990s, particularly his creation of penetrable enveloping spaces, it also made extensive use of both indigenous and popular Brazilian iconography and evoked international art theories such as Joseph Beuys’s concept of social sculpture.
During the opening of the biennial, the artwork hosted a ceremony in which six Huni Kuin members, accompanied by Neto, sang, danced, told stories, and voiced ecological concerns. The performance was consistent with the biennial’s curatorial intention that the Pavilion of the Shamans would highlight “performances reminiscent of therapeutic rituals” (Macel 2017, p. 42). Despite the shared authorship of the work, the international press heavily criticized A Sacred Place and accused Neto of participating in a long trajectory of colonial and primitivist dynamics. These critiques unanimously emphasized the primitivist inclinations of A Sacred Place, reinforcing the well-defined history of primitivism within the avant-garde in Europe as well as its historical links to large exhibitions.

The association between primitivism and modern art has been extensive, as demonstrated by Pablo Picasso’s formalist appropriation of African masks in his Mademoiselles d’Avignon (1907). By the end of the twentieth century, however, critical analyses of such exhibitions as Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (MoMA 1984) and Magiciens de la Terre (George Pompidou and La Villette 1989) had begun to question the binary relationship between the West and its Other that fostered primitivism in the arts and the hierarchies present in the art world that perpetuated it. Since then, more than thirty years of debate has led to a general acknowledgment within the critical community about the dangers of primitivism, including a naïve search for authenticity, the reification of identities, and a self-serving presentation of non-Westerners as an exotic commodity.

This article contributes to this ongoing critical debate by showing that despite Neto’s intention to unsettle rather than sustain primitivism’s binary relationships, the framing of the work within the discourses and expectations of the biennial concealed its profound Amerindian knowledge. As it will demonstrate, critics reviewing the artwork univocally decoded its indigenous codes into art historical terms, obscuring the legibility of the indigenous agency, practice, and iconography in A Sacred Place. This analysis argues that the work demonstrates anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s notion of equivocation by enabling both contemporary art and indigenous practices to be legible. In so doing, the text also argues that the installation was mistranslated by critics, generating an incomplete understanding of the work, and argues that a more equivocal, open interpretation could contribute to a more self-reflexive global art history able to look at and learn from its own comparative limitations (de Castro 2004).

Viveiros de Castro’s work on Amerindian perspectivism helped instigate what became known as the ontological turn in anthropology. His examinations of Amazonian societies propelled a series of changes in the field by introducing ideas that would dislodge older ways of thinking, replacing multiculturalism with multi-naturalism, creation/production with transformation/exchange, and representation with performativity. In the mid-2000s, his work received new attention amid ecological debates surrounding the Anthropocene and became influential within other disciplines, including art history. Both Ernesto Neto and the 2017 Venice Biennial curator, Christine Macel, were aware of his work and cited it within the context of the exhibition in an attempt to explain how A Sacred Place was intended to dislodge binarisms common in primitivism, such as nature versus culture.

In a 2004 article borrowing from Kantian philosophy and using the Huni Kuin as a case study, Viveiros de Castro offers the concept of equivocation to reconceptualize one of the primary tools of anthropology: comparison (de Castro 2004, p. 4). As Viveiros de Castro points out, whenever we try to make sense of other people’s experience, we tend to translate that experience into terms and concepts

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2 Among the critiques of the exhibition that mentioned primitivism and coloniality were (Davis 2017; Fox 2017; Rice 2017; Vega 2018; Ruiz 2017).
3 For discussions of primitivism, see (Torgovnick 1990; Rhodes 1994; Celik and Kinney 1990).
4 Both Ernesto Neto and the curator of the 2017 Venice Biennial, Cristine Macel, have read Viveiros de Castro’s theory.
5 The theory of Amerindian perspectivism enabled new analytical apparatuses in which anthropological differences are reconsidered as being ontological or differences in worlds, in contrast to epistemological or differences in knowledge. See (de Castro 1998).
6 See, for example, Neto’s explanation of the work during Tavola Aperta (Open Table), a parallel event of the biennial at which the public had the opportunity to speak with participating artists over a casual lunch. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqtEhwOjzyc&t=3645s.
that are familiar to our own. In the case of cross-cultural interactions, he cautions, anthropologists must recognize that there is inevitably a lack of absolute conceptual correspondence when translating between their world and the world of others.\(^7\) He termed this recognition *equivocation*, an acknowledgment of observers’ incapability to find a perfect or non-colonial translation because their own experience is always one of the poles of comparison. He provides an example of such equivocation in his work on Amerindian perspectivism, in which he acknowledges a series of disjunctive perspectives: whereas the jaguar sees blood as manioc beer, for instance, the human sees blood as repulsive. According to Viveiros de Castro, any attempt to assimilate one perspective into the other necessarily involves privileging one of those perspectives over the other. Equivocation can thus be seen as both the limit of an outsider’s experience of the Amerindian and its condition: the limit because a series of disjunctive experiences is the closest we can come to translating the Amerindian perspective, and the condition because interpretations that fail to recognize this limit will fall further away from the Amerindian perspective itself. Put another way, the concept of equivocation refers to the unavoidable ontological gap between the native’s and the observer’s conceptual languages.

Like anthropologists, art historians also employ comparisons to understand or translate their object of study. Comparison is a foundational tool of the discipline that enables analogies between artworks, helping viewers and critics to translate images into art historical concepts and terms. An art historian, for instance, might instruct students to use a “compare and contrast” approach to examine Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), encouraging them to focus on the similarities and differences between the two compositions to observe changes in the treatment of the female sitter within the Western European tradition. As this article argues, however, this comparative method tends to break down when the images or concepts in question stem from distinct cultural traditions and may even be deceptive, as when a curator groups a Western artist like Beuys and a Huni Kuin healer together by referring to both as “shamans” or when translating the indigenous term *kené* as “drawing.”\(^8\) This is so because this kind of comparison ultimately leads to univocal interpretation by reducing the lesser-known concept to the better-known one, often by using deceptive synonyms to bridge the interpretive gap. As Viveiros de Castro points out, the problem with such univocal interpretations is not merely that they lead to a “failure to understand” or a subjective error but rather to “a failure to understand that understandings are necessarily not the same” (de Castro 2004, p. 11). How then, the following analysis asks, are viewers and critics to translate works that come from distinct traditions into comparable terms? In the particular case of Neto’s work in Venice, how can we productively talk about artworks that combine Western and non-Western elements and, thus, require decoding both traditions in their own terms to gain a full, plural understanding of the work and its meaning?\(^9\) This article, by doing an equivocal close reading of the work that recognizes both the indigenous practices and the contemporary art influences that have shaped it, questions the simple translatability of images into the conventional conceptual apparatus of art history.

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\(^7\) Besides (de Castro 2004), see Tiago Coutinho’s (2016) article about the urban use of ayahuasca, in which he explores the equivocation between the unconscious and Yube.

\(^8\) Beuys fashioned himself as a healer or shaman able to cure society from its materialistic values through the visual arts, especially in ritualistic performances in the 1970s such as his *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). The Amazonian shaman does not usually express himself visually but through sensorial systems and the use of synesthesia; thus, for example, the importance of shamanic chanting among the Huni Kuin during ayahuasca rituals intended to help the users of the tea to visualize healing images. About Huni Kuin shamanism, see (Lagrou 2018). Neto’s appropriation of chanting as a way to explain his artwork done in partnership with the Huni Kuin therefore actually corresponds to the indigenous practice.

\(^9\) These questions seem particularly timely as indigenous art is slowly entering the art world. There has been an increasing interest in contemporary indigenous art in Brazil. Examples are the collective exhibition *Mira!* (Brasilia and Belo Horizonte 2013–2015) organized by Maria Inês de Almeida, which displayed the work of several indigenous groups in Latin America with an emphasis on the Andean region, and the exhibition *Histórias Mestiças* (São Paulo 2015) organized by curator Adriano Pedrosa and anthropologist Lilia Schwarcz at the Instituto Tomie Ohtake, which included a work co-signed by Neto and the Huni Kuin as well as drawings by the Mahku group organized by the Huni Kuin artist Ibá Sale. Currently, a retrospective exhibition of Ernesto Neto’s work entitled *Sopro* (Blow) is on view at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo (30 March–15 July 2019).
2. From the Exhibition Space to the Forest

Since the 1990s, Neto has focused his artistic practice on the interaction between the body of the spectator with the physical artwork. His earlier work had included small pieces such as Barra-Bola (Bar-Ball 1988), a sculpture in which an iron bar crushes a rubber ball against the exhibition space’s wall or floor, in which the artwork materializes only when activated by gravity: once the bar and the ball are removed from the wall or the floor, the artwork no longer exists.\(^{10}\) Although the later large-scale installations for which he became famous are also aided by gravity and architecture, they are activated instead by the viewer who interacts with the work’s structure through sensory exploration. For his first participation in the Venice Biennial, for example, Neto displayed É o bicho (It is the critter, 2001), in which he used the space of the Arsenale to construct a multi-pendular construction of white Lycra, tulle, and polyamide stockings in which spices nested in its stalactite-like structures produced earthy colors that floated over the structure, potentially staining the room and the viewer, and scented the exhibition space.

The name of that artwork evoked Lygia Clark’s 1960s-celebrated series of Neoconcrete sculptures named “bichos”, the Portuguese word for critters, which she had showed in the 34th Venice Biennial in 1968.\(^{11}\) Clark’s geometric abstract critters made of articulated aluminum plates allowed viewers to participate in the creation of the artwork by manipulating the plates, defining the object’s final shape. Both the title of the work and its shape, in which the articulated hinges of the object resembled a spine, invited the participant–viewer to think about the sculpture as a living being. By rejecting the role of the artist as one who seeks to create a complete individual expression in an artwork without the participation of the viewer, Clark’s objects democratized the definition of artist and opened the concept of the art object to include ongoing ludic and tactile processes.

Until his encounter with the Huni Kuin, Neto had described Clark and her involvement in Neoconcretism, the art movement that she co-founded in 1959, as his main artistic references.\(^{12}\) Indeed, Neto’s works evoke some of Neoconcretism’s main concerns through their incorporation of organic material; their construction of sensuous, biomorphic shapes that promote the simultaneity of internal and external structures, similar to a Möbius strip; and their contrast between the organic and the mechanical. After 2014, the year of his first partnership with the Huni Kuin, Neto’s work began to incorporate elements stemming directly from his involvement with the indigenous group, including ayahuasca rites, songs (in Hatxa Kuin, English, and Portuguese), kenës, the shape of the kupixawa as an environmental structure, and the boa constrictor as a recurrent motif. By the time of his participation in the 57th Venice Biennial, the artist was also associating his work with Huni Kuin ideas of the natural, the sacred, and collectivity.\(^{13}\) As we will see, these new inclusions did not occlude his old Neoconcrete references but rather complemented them, enabling his work to be open to equivocal interpretations; indeed, the artist currently describes his oeuvre as “a living organism transgressing all limitations” (Max Hetzler Gallery n.d.).\(^{14}\)

Ernesto Neto first met the Huni Kuin in 2013, after accepting an invitation from his friend Anna Dantes, who had edited the book Una Isi Kayawa/O Livro da Cura (The Book of Healing).\(^{15}\) Visiting the

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10 Ernesto Neto, Lecture, Artist Talks promoted by the Fondation Beyeler and UBS, Rio de Janeiro, May 3, 2018.
11 The artist represented Brazil and participated in a group show with other artists of her generation, including Mira Schendel. The catalogue is available online as part of the ICAA project. See (Mauricio 1968).
12 Ernesto Neto, interview with the author, January 2011.
13 See, for example, Tavola Aperta (Open Table). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqtEhwOz3yc&t=3645s.
14 In this description, the gallery emphasizes theories of contemporary art such as Beuy’s notion of social sculpture rather than indigenous knowledge, claiming that Neto’s work “renegotiates boundaries between artwork and viewer, the organic and manmade, the natural, spiritual and social worlds. Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto engages with the idea of social interaction.” As noted later, this comparison to acclaimed Western theories makes it easier to insert the work into the commercial circuit as contemporary art.
15 The book records 109 plant species with their respective medicinal applications. The bilingual text (Portuguese/Hatxa Kuin) was transcribed on the basis of shaman and plant expert Agostinho Ika Muru’s explanations. Alexandre Quinet from the Botanical Gardens in Rio de Janeiro provided the bridge between indigenous knowledge and Western science, helping
Huni Kuin in the western Brazilian Amazon, close to the Peruvian border, Neto was first introduced to the indigenous cosmology and was initiated into the ritual consumption of nixi pae, both of which would reorient his artistic production. As he describes the experience:

On the second day of my visit I participated in a ritual in which everybody was sitting in a circle. There was a candle lit in the middle of the space. It was an open place called kupixawa, a little way outside the village, like a ten-minute walk through the forest. [Everybody was] dressed in traditional adornments, covered by kenés, their signs and symbols. [Everybody one by one we drank this tea and went back to our places. And then after about ten or fifteen minutes of silence, suddenly the guy sitting on a chair begun to sing. It was like a fountain of sound washing over me at that moment. And something like twenty minutes later the force began to come. (Meistere 2016)

The “force” that Neto refers to is the liminal visual effects caused by the tea, which are enhanced by the chants performed by the shaman. Under the influence of ayahuasca, the artist had the impression that he was inside plants and was being eaten by the jaguar and the boa, important animals in Amerindian cosmology (Meistere 2016). The boa, in particular, is intimately related to the nixi pae genesis: according to the Huni Kuin, it was Yube, the spirit of the anaconda water snake, that gave the psychoactive beverage to the Huni Kuin. The experience clearly had a powerful effect on Neto, who, when asked if he defined himself as a sculptor in a 2016 interview, answered that he was “thinking and seeing more as a boa” (Cataldo and Neto 2016, p. 183). At the time of the Venice Biennial, the contact with nixi pae and the collaboration with the Huni Kuin had, thus, profoundly reoriented the way that Neto defined himself and perceived his artistic practice.

Neto’s deep affinity with the Huni Kuin can be largely explained by the apparent connections he sensed between their cosmology and the Neoconcrete attempt to challenge the Cartesian separation between mind and body by creating artworks that invite participant–viewers to explore their surroundings as embodied subjects. The Merleau–Pontian notion of the body as possessing knowledge, which was a fundamental reference for the Neoconcrete generation, is one that can be equivocally translated into the Huni Kuin’s conception of humanity. For the Huni Kuin, true humans (the literal meaning of huni kuin) are produced through processes of sociality and relational exchange: for many Amazonian indigenous people, the body is the temporal result of the material elements and agencies with which one has been in contact. Eating, talking, working together, drinking nixi pae, hunting, and sexually relating, for example, all help to form the Huni Kuin body and, consequently, identify the species. See (Muru and Quinet 2014). The book is envisioned as part of what the shamans call xina benã, or “new times” when the indigenous people would open their medicines to cure humanity. As such, the book (as well as the partnership with Neto himself) can be seen as part of the Huni Kuin’s attempts to rearticulate their traditions through new alliances (Sales Huni Kuin Kaxinawa 2016, p. 158).

16 Anna Dantes described Neto’s first trip to meet the Huni Kuin in (Dantes 2016, pp. 29–30).
17 Nixi pae is produced through the decoction of two native plants: the vine Banisteriopsis caapi and leaves from Psychotria viridis, which contains the active principle dimethyltryptamine.
18 Liminal visual events (experienced by the Huni Kuin in dreams, feverish states, and especially under the effect of the tea) allow people to participate sensorially in a world in continual transformation, as explained below. The synesthetic nature of the experience of ayahuasca consumption is analyzed by Lagrou (2018).
19 As Els Lagrou explains in her discussion of visions including jaguars and anacondas, “The ‘songs to see’ take seriously the risk of becoming what one eats, by the process of being eaten, sexually, by what one has ingested. That is, pecary-becoming, spider-monkey-becoming, these are virtual destinies due to the possibility of inversion of the predatory relation, if revenge is not averted. Jaguar-becoming and boa-becoming, on the other hand, are becomings actively sought after by initiating shamans” (Lagrou 2018, p. 41). In this article, the author highlights the political role that nixi pae rites have in negotiating with strangers, indigenous, and non-indigenous. Therefore, Neto and Anna Dantes’s invitation to partake in the ritual was not exceptional but part of the Huni Kuin policy to unveil the intentions of strangers.
20 In addition to giving the Huni Kuin the tea, Yube also taught the women to design kenés, their signs and symbols. (de Lima Kaxinawa 2016, pp. 73–74; Kaxinawa 2016, pp. 169–70).
21 The Neoconcrete artists were influenced by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. See (Gullar 2007).
22 In Amazonian indigenous socio-philosophies, the interaction with non-human agents (certain plants, animals, objects, and meteorological phenomena) enables transformation, exchange, and incorporation, thereby ultimately defining humanity and making everyday life possible. The Amazonian animistic socio-philosophy has been amply examined in the field of
the person. The body is, therefore, a social, thinking body (McCallum 1996). The concept of a social body also underlies iconic Neoconcrete experimental artworks such as Hélio Oiticica’s celebrated Parangolés (1964), which included capes “activated” when worn by the participant–viewer, and Lygia Pape’s performative work Divisor (1968), an enormous piece of cloth containing slits for participants to fit their heads through and move collectively, enacting a “social fabric”.

The maintenance of the Huni Kuin social body relies in large part on nixi pae. The tea is important to the Huni Kuin because they believe that the cumulative construction of the body can be easily unbalanced by external forces that promote a “failure” (such as an illness) in the process of producing real humanness (Virtanen 2016, pp. 64–65). The rituals that include drinking nixi pae are believed to strengthen the body by promoting a cure and knowledge. During the visions caused by the plant and guided by shamanic chants, according to these beliefs, ritual participants can receive non-human powers. These supernatural connections can be acquired by visions and can take the form of the kenés (graphic patterns) observed by Neto. Kenés, which the Huni Kuin employ in body paintings, beadwork, and weavings, represent the skin of animals and plants and, they believe, can materialize the powers of these non-human agents. In the Huni Kuin cosmology, people wanting to enhance their far-reaching vision, for example, will paint the pattern of the eye of the curita (orange-winged parrot) on their bodies during nixi pae rites to transform and strengthen their sight.

These kenés should not be mistaken for drawings, however. Unlike mere depictions of fauna and flora, kenés signal the “connection with the world of invisible beings” (Lagrou 2009, p. 88). As such, their relationship with the world is not mimetic, as in Western representation. Rather, the kené is viewed as an index that makes the invisible visible, reorienting perception rather than being a copy of reality. In traditional indigenous art, as anthropologist Els Lagrou explains, the relationship between the model and the copy is not representational but grounded in agency (Lagrou 2015). For example, when the Wayana describe the tipiti (an object that smashes manioc) as a headless snake, the comparison is based on the way that both the object and the animal act: the snake coils around the victim and crushes it, operating in the same way that the tipiti grinds manioc. In another fundamental connection between indigenous art and Neoconcrete art, this conception evokes the Neoconcretists’ attempts to create art objects that go beyond mimesis. In their 1959 Manifesto, the poet Ferreira Gullar coined the term “non-object” to refer to an artwork that “is not a representation, but a ‘presentation’ (in sense of apparition). If the object is at one extreme of the experience, the non-object is at the other and the representation of the object is in between” (Gullar [1959] 2007). It is important, however, to underscore the differences between Neoconcretism and indigenous art: while the urban group from Rio de Janeiro was working within and against the Western artistic tradition when trying to go beyond mimetic representation in the 1950s, the Huni Kuin are concerned with accessing the invisible world. Nevertheless, the similarities among them enabled Neto to expand his own category of art.

In a 2015 interview, Neto made clear that he was aware of the resonances between the two poetics, indigenous and Neoconcrete. Even before his encounter with the Huni Kuin, he stated, his work “was trying to bring the spirit of life, not as representation but through the possibility of being able to touch the art, smell it, following the organic line brought into the field by Lygia Clark” and, hence, “was trying to find a continuity from the body to the landscape, as if both could become just one” (Von Habsburg et al. 2016, p. 27). During his participation in ayahuasca rites, Neto explained in a 2016 interview that he was aware of the resonances between the two poetics, indigenous and Neoconcrete. Even before his encounter with the Huni Kuin, he stated, his work “was trying to bring the spirit of life, not as representation but through the possibility of being able to touch the art, smell it, following the organic line brought into the field by Lygia Clark” and, hence, “was trying to find a continuity from the body to the landscape, as if both could become just one” (Von Habsburg et al. 2016, p. 27). During his participation in ayahuasca rites, Neto explained in a 2016 interview that he was aware of the resonances between the two poetics, indigenous and Neoconcrete. Even before his encounter with the Huni Kuin, he stated, his work “was trying to bring the spirit of life, not as representation but through the possibility of being able to touch the art, smell it, following the organic line brought into the field by Lygia Clark” and, hence, “was trying to find a continuity from the body to the landscape, as if both could become just one” (Von Habsburg et al. 2016, p. 27).
speech, that he experienced this continuity between body and landscape in a new way as he had visions of himself immersed in nature. As a result of his contact with nixi pae, the artist stated, “all of [his] work came together. In a way, everything [he]’d been looking for over the past thirty years arrived at that moment” (Meistere 2016). Neto, thus, included in his artworks both traditions (Neoconcrete and Huni Kuin) thereby illuminating how they correspond with and enlarge upon one another. In various talks and interviews, Neto has referred to the Huni Kuin as masters or teachers who were able to show him the sacred connection with nature that he had been searching for through his artwork. Upon his return from the Amazon, the artist started to participate in urban ayahuasca rites in his native city of Rio de Janeiro and began a series of collaborations with some members of the Huni Kuin people.

Neto’s involvement with the Huni Kuin resulted in the incorporation of indigenous concepts and iconography in A Sacred Place in a way that situates the Huni Kuin as the active co-producers of representation rather than the passive objects of it, as is common in European primitivism. Yet, the collective dimension of A Sacred Place and its engagement with indigenous iconography and poetics appear to have escaped the art critics in Venice. Rather than examining the artwork as incorporating indigenous practice into the context of a large international show, art critics claimed that Neto was inserting indigenous elements into an easily consumable web of representations as exotic commodity. Most, for instance, dismissed the willing participation of the six Huni Kuin members in the opening ceremony as a “spectacle and the fetishization of primitivism” and understood it as simply part of Neto’s display of “his art under a tent,” thereby nullifying any indigenous agency (Rice 2017).

3. From the Forest to the Biennale

These critics’ quick dismissal of A Sacred Place as primitivist can be largely traced to the historical link between European international exhibitions and colonialism. The wildly popular world’s fairs in the second half of the nineteenth century showcased, amid a wide variety of industrial, scientific, and cultural items, exotic colonial products and subjects to the delight of European audiences. For example, the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition constructed, alongside the Eiffel Tower, a Village Nègre, an ethnographic exhibit that displayed over four hundred indigenous people from a host of French colonies that operated as propaganda for French colonialism. The Venice Biennial, inaugurated in 1895 to showcase the artistic achievements of nations, was born out of the ontology of these large international exhibitions. Following the structure of its predecessors, the biennial’s organizers built national pavilions in the space of the Giardini to display artworks according to nationality. Despite several adaptations during its existence, including the institution in 1980 of the figure of a main curator who organizes an overarching thematic exhibition in the spaces of the Giardini and the Arsenale, the legacy of the biennial’s origins is still visible in its structure and its expectation that art serves as a diplomatic cultural representative.

In that tradition, the 57th Venice Biennale’s theme was “Viva Arte Viva”, a joyful title for a show that was “designed with artists, by artists, and for artists, about the . . . practices they develop and the ways of life they choose” (Macel 2017, p. 38). The curator Christine Macel, inspired by the idea of a “journey”, structured the exhibition to unfold over the course of nine curated spaces referred to as “trans-Pavilions” (Macel 2017, p. 38). To the curator, the term “trans-Pavilion” was intended to simultaneously evoke the historical organization of the show according to national identities and hint at the fact that the spaces were composed by artists of all generations and origins (Goldstein and Macel 2017). Macel conceived of each trans-Pavilion as a journey through a book, with two introductory chapters in the Giardini (the Pavilion of Joys and Fears and the Pavilion of Artists and Books), followed

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26 See, for example, (Von Habsburg et al. 2016, p. 28).
27 About urban nixi pae rites, see (Coutinho 2016).
28 It is important to note that during the Tavola Aperta event, Neto explained that the idea for the partnership between him and the Huni Kuin came from the latter: that they invited themselves to join the artist in Spain and participate in his 2014 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.
The Pavilion of the Shamans, which hosted Neto’s work in collaboration with the Huni Kuin, grouped together a number of artists who, according to Macel, “ subscribed to the definition of artist as a ‘shaman’” (Macel 2017, p. 41). Citing Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp as precursors, the curator explained that the figure of the artist as shaman had come to take on a new dimension today, “ a time where the need for care and spirituality is greater than ever” (Macel 2017, p. 41). This construct of the contemporary artist as a shaman — while perhaps intended to draw cultural correspondences rather than hierarchies — nonetheless encouraged the public and critics to perceive Ernesto Neto as the shaman rather than, for example, Fabiano Txana Bane, one of the actual Huni Kuin healers present at the opening. This framing was reinforced by the fact that Ernesto Neto was the only contributor whose individual name was featured in the catalogue, as the Huni Kuin were cited collectively. Therefore, Neto’s acknowledgment of the Huni Kuin as co-authors was not enough to unsettle expectations of individual authorship in contemporary art. Rather than disrupting the ontology of the “artist and his/her body of work,” his collaboration with indigenous people was perceived as exemplifying primitivism’s relationship between an active artist who signs the work and the passive subjects who inspire it. Hence, critics and viewers univocally translated indigenous participation into better-known Western histories, contributing to the unanimous critical dismissal of the work as primitivist.

Thus, even though it can be argued that this critical reception of the installation as a throwback to primitivism might have been anticipated and more directly addressed by the curator and the artists to minimize it, adopting a more equivocal reading of A Sacred Place’s conceptual choices, materials, and processes could have allowed critics and viewers a richer appreciation of its indigenous practices rather than simply dismissing it as a reductive appropriation.

As a closer reading will show, A Sacred Place offered viewers a hybridized space in which contemporary art and indigenous practices synergize, mutually influencing each other. Formally, the work was united by elements of the invisible world visualized by Huni Kuin shamans during the nixi pae rites that were materialized using Neto’s distinctive formal vocabulary. To construct the kupixawa, Neto employed a modified version of the crochet knotting that he first used in his works in 1993. The resulting woven canopy read as a conglomerate of geometrical shapes, all of which were derived from Huni Kuin kenés. This knitted net provided the artwork’s preponderant colors: lime green, bright yellow, and pinkish-orange, acidic tones that are a direct rendition of the hues viewed under the influence of ayahuasca. Kenés woven by the Huni Kuin spiraled up the columns of the Arsenale, framing the tent and evoking Yube, the spirit of the boa. In addition, kenés appeared in a beaded necklace placed on the wall, in the center of the kupixawa, and in woven cloths dangling on the exhibition space. A wall label explained these graphic motifs as “sacred geometry.”

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29 The work’s main wall label inside the exhibition space featured only the name of Ernesto Neto. Adjacent labels in the space referred to the Huni Kuin collaboration and gave individual authorship. For example, Dua Busen Spirit (2017), a crayon drawing on paper depicting the myth of the nixi pae, was credited to Kea Huni Yusina.

30 The terms of this partnership are, of course, complicated. For example, during the biennial, Neto proclaimed that A Sacred Place was on sale and that 40% of the purchase price would go to Neto, 40% to his gallery, and 20% to the Huni Kuin. Again identified as a collective. For more about the complications created by the work, including the legal use of ayahuasca inside art institutions, see (Goldstein and Labate 2018, chp. 5).

31 “When we stretch the crochet net, the ‘cells’ always take the form of a lozenge or diamond. I now emphasize this diamond more strongly, adding a ‘membrane’ line at the edge of each cell ( . . . ) you can see the cells as a kene” (Wildförsters and Zyman 2016, p. 52). The text cited Neto’s explanation for the work done in Austria. He used the same modified type of crochet in Venice. It is important to note that traditionally, kenés are designed by Huni Kuin women, who weave and draw patterns enacting animals and plants. Although the artist digitized these patterns and modified them, he did not mention the individual authorship behind them.

32 “The Kene is the sacred geometry. It is a part of the spiritual visions we have during a huni ceremony. In the ancestors’ time, the women started to decode some symbolic patterns used on the huni kuin graphism. For them, it is a kind of cosmologic writing.” “Kene kawe bawe,” exhibition label.
droplets of crochet hanging from the ceiling represented the energy that flows from the sky to the earth. These structures served as counterweights to the construction and are an emblematic part of Neto’s oeuvre. Combined with motifs and concerns from the Huni Kuin universe, they both gained new meaning and evinced a continuation of the artist’s characteristic trademark.33

Inside the kupixawa, a crocheted helical staircase was a reference to the myth of the vegetables, in which a staircase allowed the Huni Kuin ancestors to reach to the stars and the moon. According to Neto, the twisted shape of the staircase also represented two boas going up in a double-helix shape that mimics the structure of the DNA—an association noted by Jeremy Narby in the book *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*, which he wrote after spending time with the Ashaninka from Peru and that had a profound impact on Neto.34 The floor inside the tent was covered with wood chips, pillows, woven kenés, and plants, creating a relaxed atmosphere that invited viewers to linger barefoot. The space, thus, also resonated with paradigmatic Neoconcrete installations, in particular with Oiticica’s (1970) *Barracão Experiment 2*, a “leisure proposition” that created intimate spaces within the museum where participants could lounge. By inviting viewers to inhabit the art gallery, these artists aim to bridge art and life, enabling participants to stop and contemplate their own actions. In Neto’s newer works, this pedagogy is imbricated with Huni Kuin knowledge, creating a bridge between Neoconcrete-inspired propositions and indigenous practice. In an attempt to explain this to viewers, the Venice artwork’s label read, for example, “The Huni Kuin repeat traditional rituals aimed at making each participant aware of his connection with nature ( . . . ) Together, the artist and the Huni Kuin Indians invite spectators to imagine a necessary transformation in society.”35 This text, which was not mentioned in criticisms of the exhibit, presents the work as a collaboration and attempts to frame it within the ecological debates current in contemporary art.

Outside the kupixawa, viewers could sit on benches covered in graphic patterns and listen to Huni Kuin chants in Hãtxa Kuĩ recorded during the performance at the opening of the biennial. At separate tables, the public could read the book *Una Isi Kayawa*, which first connected Neto to the Huni Kuin, and browse the cloth photo-book *A Slit of Time*, which contained photographs of the Huni Kuin in close contact with nature taken by Camilla Coutinho.36 The walls surrounding the installation were dotted with hand-written texts in Hãtxa Kuĩ and English that conveyed both traditional Huni Kuin myths (“boa is the shaman”) and statements referring directly to art (“art is the connection”) accompanied by onomatopoeic lines (“eeeaee eeaee”) reflecting the Huni Kuin’s dual and gendered cosmology, in which the sound “e” symbolizes the masculine principle and creation and the sound “a” stands for feminine knowledge and craft. That this explanation was not included in any of the exhibition labels doubtless contributed to their being mistakenly described as ‘’noble savage’’ boilerplate” in one critique of the artwork, although the attempt to allow the Huni Kuin to speak in their own language went largely uncredited (Davis 2017).

Alongside Huni Kuin elements, Neto broadened the voices and cultural references of the work by incorporating elements typical of Brazilian popular culture into the installation. For example, he included a clay water filter, a widely disseminated Brazilian invention, and studded the floor with the popular houseplant *Epipremnum Pinnatum*, which is commonly known in Brazil as jibóia (the Portuguese word for boa). In addition, he placed carpets and cushions created by Coopa-Roca.

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33 This continuity with the artist’s previous work was reinforced by Neto’s self-referential gesture of placing a small nylon sculpture containing spices on the floor, a direct allusion to his previous individual participation in the Venice Biennial in 2001. Although the fact that the collaborative artwork can be easily inserted into the corpus of Neto’s work probably ensures the continuous invitations to participate in traditional art events such as the Venice Biennial, it also obscures the co-authorship of the work.

34 The motif of the two spiraling boas was also reproduced in the wall surrounding *A Sacred Place*. Jeremy Narby was invited to give a talk as a parallel event to Neto’s exhibition *GaiaMotherTree* (Zurich, 29 June–29 July 2018), an artwork also made with the collaboration of the Huni Kuin. In 2018, Narby’s book was translated into Portuguese and published by Dantes, the same publishing house responsible for *Una Isi Kayawa*.

35 *Um Sagrado Lugar (A Sacred Place)*, exhibition label.

36 A video of the book is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0OGMKxmbFs.
(a women’s cooperative based in Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro’s biggest slum) using the traditional handicraft technique named nozinho (little knots) that had already appeared in his previous individual artworks, such as O tempo lento do corpo que é pele (The slow pace of the body that is skin, 2004). Popular culture had also been an important reference in works by the Neoconcrete generation. In the mid-1960s, for instance, Oiticica famously worked closely with the community of Mangueria, a slum in Rio de Janeiro that is associated with a samba school of the same name, and Pape directed the documentary “The Hand of the People” (“A mão do povo”, 1975), which focused on indigenous art and traditional Brazilian handicraft techniques that were positively contrasted to urban commodities. To these artists, vernacular materials and techniques represented a connection with a “purer” and more creative lifestyle that was still practiced in places such as the slums and the countryside. The Brazilian intelligentsia historically viewed these loci as representing a more authentic form of nationalism rather than the result of colonial socio-political dynamics. This view reflects the idea that life is a social sculpture that everyone can shape and thereby transform society. Beyond the Brazilian references purposely inserted in the artwork by Neto, therefore, the installation also converses with large international art movements, making Neto’s work in conjunction with the Huni Kuin comparable not only to famous Neoconcrete installations such as Barracão Experimento 2 mentioned above but to other major Western works of art as well. Although on the one hand, this ample set of contemporary art references enables the work to be easily commercialized by the art market and inserted into prestigious international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennial, an equivocal interpretation recognizing both the indigenous and contemporary art practices at play also reveals aesthetic choices that are indebted to non-Western knowledges. Trying to translate both these sets of practices into its critical discourse should be the task of an art history that wants to expand its boundaries beyond its narrow Western history.

Paradoxically, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the greater the visibility that the work gained through its inclusion in the global art circuits, the less obvious and more elusive its indigenous collaboration seems to have become. One of the problems of exhibiting such a equivocal, hybrid work in a place like the Venice Biennial is that the participation of the Huni Kuin was unavoidably mediated by the

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37 This view reflects the idea that racial miscenogenation constitutes the “true” Brazil, a concept dear to the local intelligentsia since the end of the nineteenth century. On the importance of miscegenation for understanding Brazil and the resulting myth that the country constitutes a “racial democracy,” see (Schwarcz 1999).

38 This aspect of Neto’s work was further developed in a commissioned work for his retrospective Sopro, currently on view at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo. The installation Cura Bra Cura Te (2019) combines the nozinho technique with Tupi, Huni Kuin, Guaraní, and Yorubá references in an attempt to heal Brazil, which is at the moment plagued by political and economic turmoil. The installation contains at its center a map of Brazil colored in black, white, and red, alluding to the three races that historically were understood to compose the Brazilian population. The wall text presents a long chant derived from the Huni Kuin practice composed by the artist to explain the artwork: “Brazil is born out of the violent encounter between a European man and an indigenous woman. In gratitude to our indigenous mother, of her belly the first Brazilian is born, her wisdom is inside us, hooray! In gratitude to our second mother, our African mother, violently taken from her land, her wisdom is among us, hooray! ([…]) Let’s cure our colonial tragedy, let’s summon the forest spirits, reforest our planet, our body, our spirit, our mind, our culture ([…]).” Like the installation itself, this discourse subscribes to the concept of Brazil as a racial democracy, explained in the note above. Although the myth of racial democracy has been criticized for dismissing real social divisions and ultimately perpetuating racism in the country, Neto’s exhibition attracted more than six thousand viewers in its first weekend. Conversation between author and Pinacoteca curator Valéria Piccoli, April 2019.

39 Ernesto Neto, Tavola Aperta (Open Table). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgtEhwOjzyc&t=3645s.

40 Despite the recent biennial-boom (i.e., the emergence of 80–140 biennials and triennials since the 1990s), which has been especially prolific in the Global South, the “art world” is still largely conceptualized as a Eurocentric phenomenon. For a canonical definition of the art world, see (Danto 1964.)
dynamics of the international art scene—and in the case of biennials, an art scene that is generally understood as an extension of the art market and an example of nomadic misadventures of global capital.\textsuperscript{41} But it is not necessary to argue for the autonomy of art to suggest that acknowledging the conceptual and material richness of works like \textit{A Sacred Place} and concentrating more clearly on their internal movements, poetics, and intentions could lead to a more open and sophisticated art criticism, and, ultimately, to a more inclusive art world.

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\textsuperscript{41} On biennials see, for example, (Bydler 2004). Pamela Lee in \textit{Forgetting the Art World} suggests that the contemporary work of art has a formative role to play in the processes, histories, and competing definitions of a new global order. She thus advocates concentrating on the world of a work of art rather than performing socio-political analyses of the art world as a way to solve the new crisis of representation and invisibility. See (Lee 2012).
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