

Ernesto Neto – *GaiaMotherTree*

Michiko Kono, Associate Curator, Fondation Beyeler

GaiaMotherTree by Ernesto Neto forms a highlight in the series of public art projects realized by the Fondation Beyeler since its creation in 1997, including works by artists such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Louise Bourgeois, Jeff Koons, and Jenny Holzer. For Neto and for the Fondation Beyeler, this is a major, ambitious undertaking, requiring four years of preparation. *GaiaMotherTree* is a gigantic tree, 20 meters high, with a crown extending over an area of 40 x 28 meters. It is made from woven cotton fabric, supplied in bolts with a total length of 10 220 meters and cut into strips, which were dyed. In the next step, extending over several weeks, ten members of Neto's staff and 17 helpers working under the artist's supervision knotted the strips together with a finger-crocheting technique to form a giant sculpture. The work took a total of three months to produce and a further four weeks were needed to ship the sculpture across the Atlantic. The structure is shaped and stabilized by drop-shaped counterweights, suspended from the tree. These elements are filled with ground spices, weighing a total of 600 kilograms – turmeric, cloves, cumin, and black pepper. The central counterweight contains 30 kilos of plant seeds. At the exhibition venue – the magnificent concourse of Zürich's Main station, dating back some 150 years – it was unnecessary to drill a single hole or hammer in a single nail to support the installation. The counterweights hang over the metal ceiling girders above the concourse. The work is also secured from below with 840 kilos of earth and anchored at points in the floor around the sculpture. Since Neto's early works of the 1980s, this playful approach to the physical laws of gravity, combined with a striving for balance, has been characteristic of his artistic endeavors.

With *GaiaMotherTree*, Neto establishes a connection to the story of creation. The work's title refers to Greek mythology: Gaia, the personification of the Earth, emerges from chaos, the origin of all things. She is the Mother Earth goddess, bestowing the gift of life, but also the goddess of death, to whom the dead return. Neto places "Mother Earth" at the heart of his sculpture. First, the carpet inside *GaiaMotherTree* bears a woven image of a map of the world, with the Atlantic Ocean at its center. Second, the image of the tree alludes to the Biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden and the tree of knowledge. The benches inside the walk-in sculpture, with their snake-like appearance, and the snake's head shape of the entrance tunnel to *GaiaMotherTree*, recall Adam and Eve and the fall from grace. These parallel evocations of the cosmogony of classical antiquity and the Old Testament story of Genesis correspond to Neto's conception of a universal element common to all spiritual traditions.

Ernesto Neto is committed to opposing the general loss of spirituality among civilizations in which material wealth is paramount. A counterpoint to this is found in the spiritual connection with nature cultivated by the Huni Kuin, the members of an indigenous community living in the Amazon region of Brazil, who have had a deep impact on Neto's artistic practice. He has been working in close cooperation with the Huni Kuin since 2013. Their culture and customs of the Huni Kuin, their knowledge and craft skills, their aesthetic sense, their values, and their world view have become integral elements of his art. In the thinking of the Huni Kuin, the collective unit and the concern for common welfare play a decisive part. In a similar way, community is a characteristic of Neto's art. His sculptures, exploring the senses of sight, touch, hearing and smell, invite active participation. Viewers can touch the work and walk through it or set it in motion; they are enjoined to concentrate on their own perception and interact with the work and its environment. *GaiaMotherTree* offers a place to meet and discuss, or linger and rest, and a space for meditation.

In addition, Neto has created in advance an opportunity for personal involvement, asking members of the public to collect fruit pits and stones. These, together with dried pulses such as beans and chickpeas, are to be inserted in the drop-shaped containers that serve as counterweights. The contents will then be distributed at the end of the exhibition. In using these seeds as a further symbol of the life cycle, Neto also

points to the rapid proliferation of transgenic seed strains and their disturbing implications for the environment and health, including the permanent loss of genetically unmodified strains, the monopoly position of giant multinational companies in the food industry, and the threat to biodiversity.

The interior of *GaiaMotherTree* is designed as a community space to facilitate the exchange of ideas on topics of this kind. On the weekend of the opening, the space will be the venue for the *Assembleia MotherTree*, a forum open to the public for interdisciplinary and intercultural exchange between members of the Huni Kuin, Yawanawa and Tukano communities, and scientists, researchers, activists, and artists from across the globe. The *assembleia* (Portuguese for “general assembly”) is a type of meeting rooted in the traditions of Huni Kuin, but also corresponding in some respects to the district assemblies held in some parts of Switzerland. For two full days, the participants will address topics relating to the development and future of Planet Earth that are also central to Neto’s art. The aim is to foster a collective awareness of the dangers facing the environment and the possible means of mitigating them.

The motif of the tree, employed in *GaiaMotherTree*, has a vast range of associations, extending into every area of cultural history. In all cultures – in popular superstition, in fairy tales, myths, poetry, religious writings, philosophy and mysticism – the tree has served as a symbol of majesty and power, of longevity, stability and fruitfulness, associated with shelter and security, but also with danger. In art, it has been depicted in innumerable works, as an embodiment of nature or as an image with a wider symbolic significance. In 1911 Gustav Klimt created a mosaic frieze for the dining room of the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, taking the Tree of Life as its central motif. For Piet Mondrian, the stylized depiction of trees marked an important step on the way toward abstract painting and constructivism. As part of the 1982 *documenta* in Kassel, Joseph Beuys planted the first of the oak trees for his work *7,000 Oaks*, as part of an ecologically motivated project with the title *Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung* (“City Forestation Instead of City Administration”). Giuseppe Penone is well known for his works in which the tree, which he describes as the perfect sculpture, forms the basis for his reflections on sculpture as a medium.

In the context of *GaiaMotherTree*, moreover, some interesting relationships emerge between Neto’s artistic tree and the tree in botanical terms. Neto’s early work *Colonia* – created in 1988, a few months after his first solo exhibition – which is being shown at the Fondation Beyeler in parallel with the presentation of *GaiaMotherTree*, comprises a series of thin, fragile nylon stockings, stuffed with hard, heavy lead pellets of the kind used as shotgun ammunition. Here, the female and the male directly collide. When held up, the filled stocking takes on the shape of male testicles; laid flat on the floor, it discloses an opening with a vulva-like appearance. These male and female principles of form, and the conjoining of the two sexes, are vividly illustrated in several works by Neto, corresponding to tree species, such as fruit or magnolia trees, that are bisexual, with flowers that contain both a male stamen and a female pistil.

A further aspect that establishes a connection between *GaiaMotherTree* and the plant world is the communication among trees that has become the subject of scientific research, for example at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. It has been revealed, for example, that the root systems of trees form a network for the exchange of carbon, nutrients, and information. A tree attacked by pests will send signals through its root system to other trees, instructing them to prepare defensive substances to ward off the threat. If a tree is weak, the surrounding trees will provide it with nutrients transferred through their roots. The oldest trees with the thickest trunks are especially well connected, and show particular concern for the welfare of the tree community. These “hub” trees have also been dubbed “mother trees,” a term with a special resonance. In our civilization, plants are not considered capable of intentional action, but the Huni Kuin take a very different view. Their shamans define themselves by their ability, inter alia, to communicate with plants.

The use of textile materials is typical of Neto's oeuvre. Starting with synthetic fabrics and then increasingly favoring natural materials, he has devoted himself throughout his career to the creation of sculptures whose forms are biomorphic and whose surfaces are characteristically fragile, elastic, and transparent. In the mid-1990s he extended his formal language by the introduction of powdered spices, with delightful aromas and powerful colors. The spices, like the textiles, have associations of fragility and impermanence. The aromas fade over time, and the consistency of the material makes it liable to disperse. Nevertheless, although his materials are frail, Neto insists that the viewer must be allowed to touch his works and experience them in direct physical terms. Thus he places his trust in the viewer, who in turn assumes a large measure of responsibility. But at the same time, his intention, with spaces such as *GaiaMotherTree*, is to provide the viewer with an enjoyable experience. The message, in his own words, is: "Take off your shoes and feel free to walk in, lie down, take a nap, dream."