

Tellingly, Billingham's mother is presented on that most domestic of objects, the television, in the video display of *Liz Smoking*. The other three videos are projected onto walls, thereby creating proportionately larger images of the males they depict smoking, engrossed in a Playstation game and lying in bed. Similarly, while the snapshots of Billingham's family are unframed, his landscape photographs are ostentatiously placed behind glass, and this unashamedly reflects social and artistic hierarchies within capitalist society. There is nothing to indicate irony or critical intent in these modes of display and as a result Billingham comes across as bluntly reactionary. He seems to be telling us that there is wisdom in being able to accept and stoically endure poverty. This is something that bourgeois hacks are always pleased to hear and producing work that unequivocally reiterates propaganda of this type (and denying its political status is a key feature of such propaganda) has long been a means of social advancement for turncoat writers and artists from lower class backgrounds.

Nevertheless, Billingham could easily reverse my reading of his work. All he'd have to do is announce that the man who appeared as his alcoholic father in various pieces was an actor hired to play the part and that his entire output was a prank carried off at the expense of the bourgeoisie. On the basis of this show Billingham appears to be an aesthetically impoverished praetorian. However, I'd prefer to be proved wrong about this and instead have it confirmed that Billingham's throughput is part of an elaborate hoax. ■

Stewart Home is the editor of *Whips & Furs: My life as a bon-vivant gambler and love rat by Jesus H. Christ*, Attack Books, London, 2000.

■ Ernesto Neto

ICA London June 2 to July 2

Ernesto Neto is one of Brazil's most successful artistic exports and it's not difficult to understand why. His signature champagne-coloured, room-size installations in transparent lycra tulle are undeniably delightful. You step cautiously (shoes off) into the oesophagus-like entrance and proceed to roam like a kid in the stretchy, bouncy-castle-like interior or, if you wish, lie down in one of the soft, beany mattresses. These installations are exciting, pleasurable, supremely elegant to look at. Sculpturally they have been beautifully resolved, anchored to the floor (or suspended, in other works) by weighty sacks of sand or spices. And Neto's art looks like almost nothing else out there; he seems truly a man with a vision, real and passionate.

As you sink into one of the round white mattresses, the words 'womb' and 'cocoon' spring instantly to mind, the giant-mother effect reinforced by what looks like a forest of beige-coloured pantyhose stretching floor to

ceiling. I've always associated my mother with beige-coloured pantyhose. So, as I inserted my hand (incestuously) into the sculpture's deep, obscene, silky orifices, and lay down and actually fell asleep, nestled in the haze of Neto's seductive trap, I remembered thinking well, this art's really done its job on me, and soon drifted off, as if intoxicated.

Waking up to notice for the first time an unidentifiable, yellowish stain nearby, next to which I caught sight of a smear of somebody's pink lipstick, I had to admit to myself that I had swallowed Neto's art as much as it had swallowed me. 'Swallowed' indeed, given that the idea of 'anthropophagy', or cultural cannibalism, is the recurring concept in most discussions on modern and contemporary art from Brazil. Suggested in the Pau-Brazil Manifesto of 1924 and then definitively coined in the *Anthropophagite Manifesto* of 1928, 'anthropophagy' analogises the experience of a people robbed of their indigenous culture (wiped out by 16th-century invaders) who emerged out of the coexisting cultures of Portuguese tradesmen, Black African slaves and European immigrants. 'Anthropophagy' was the theme behind curator Paolo Herkenhoff's 1999 São Paulo Biennale; it is also the key concept in Ivo Mesquita's essay on Brazil for *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press, 1996) as well as Andrea Giunta's 'Strategies of Modernity in Latin America' anthologised in Gerardo Mosquera's *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (inIVA, 1995). As Haroldo de Campos explains in the anthropophagy of Pau-Brazil 'the theory of a critical swallowing of a universal cultural legacy [was] developed not from the passive and acceptable perspective of the "noble savage" ... but rather from the uncompromising viewpoint of the "bad savage", the one that eats the white men, the cannibal. Any past that is for us "other" should be ignored. In other words, it should be eaten and devoured.'

Neto is the perfect cultural cannibal, savouring, to start with, the art of Lygia Clark, the first Brazilian artist to use spectator participation in the perpetual recreation of her work back in the early 1960s. Consider, moreover, the words of Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica, who listed the following qualities for his *New Brazilian Objectivity* in 1967. Art must have: '1) a general tendency towards constructivism; 2) emphasis on the object, having exhausted the possibilities of easel painting; 3) an interest in spectator participation: corporal, tactile, visual and semantic; 4) addressing and taking a stance on all political, social and aesthetic issues; 5) a tendency towards collective art and abolishing the various "isms" characteristic of the first half of the century; and 6) the re-emergence of new formulations of the concept of "anti-art".' Oiticica could safely be describing Neto's sculptures 30 years later save, perhaps, for the political stance, which is more clouded in Neto's work than in that of his illustrious predecessors of the 60s.

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Ernesto Neto
Pé de très tempos
 (Foot of dream, dream, dream) 2000

However, Neto's anthropophagy seems to swallow not only instances of this mongrel Brazilian past, 'the past that is Other', as Giunta described it, but extends to any variety of cultural flavours. Any non-western source is brought to the table in a kind of generalised, updated version of exoticism, served raw for hungry western audiences. For example, there's an awful lot of weirdly orientalist overtones in this boy from Brazil: the removal of one's shoes as if entering a mosque or Japanese home; the silk-route aroma of clove, cumin and curry; the harem-tent atmosphere, complete with cushions and veils. Neto's work seems to trade on all brands of otherness – eastern, southern, whatever – in a kind of global anthropophagy. On top of that, you toss in a touch of techno/sci-fi aesthetic: the mothership-look; the strange pods and growths in NASA-inspired materials; the anti-gravitational weightlessness of these suspended spaces, all suggesting Neto isn't simply from a distant country, but indeed from that place we all know from movie trailers, 'a galaxy far far away'.

Neto's work is a kind of medley of exotic triggers, merging into its own contemporary, generic otherness. And although Neto is probably innocent of its effect, the anthropophagy blurs the visual cues of otherness all together – savages, odalisques, conceptual artists, martians – they're all the same. Though Neto's work means to be purely visual and sensual, disconnected from theory, and succeeds quite well in the aesthetic pleasure it offers, its anthropophagistic exoticism is inadvertently steeped in theory, not just post-Fanon and post-Said, but post-George Lucas as well. ■

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■ Roman Vasseur

Austrian Cultural Institute London June 12 ongoing

The protagonist of Bram Stoker's famous novel, an English man by the name of John Harker, is first described by the author as being in a feverish state, babbling about a monstrous force he has encountered. The nurses who care for him do not know whether the horror he describes is fact or fiction and by the end of this most famous book, Harker himself does not know whether his subsequent struggle against the evil force was real or imagined; or, as the writer Elizabeth Bronfen suggests, whether the evil force was an hallucination, that is, an episode of hysteria.

On June 12, a wooden crate arrived at the Austrian Cultural Institute, packed with earth from the Borgo Pass in Transylvania. The one metre cubed box of soil was harmless enough, as verified by the exhibited documentation. In fact the crate had been awarded a phytosanitary certificate in Romania which guaranteed that the cube of Transylvanian dirt posed no threat to the European Union environment. And the artist responsible for the consignment, Roman Vasseur, has been keen to communicate the ordinariness of the box and its contents, both in literature for the exhibition and in interviews for the press. In an image accompanying the box the artist can be seen digging for the soil he sent to London. Not top soil, I was informed, which teems with vertebrate life but sub soil, excavated from 12 feet below the earth's surface. Vasseur has even gone so far as to say that all attempts had been made throughout the project to avoid referencing the myths associated with Eastern Europe and Transylvania; which of course was a convenient way of drawing attention to such