Chapter 4: Ernesto Neto’s *Célula Nave*: extending the lifespan of a temporary, site-specific installation in a museum

“I think architectonically in a biological way”. Ernesto Neto.\(^{213}\)

*Célula Nave. It happens in the body of time, where truth dances* (2004) by the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto is an interactive installation artwork, created in commission of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. The artwork consists of a spacious construction of turquoise coloured fabric – the ‘nave’ – hanging on a series of aluminium poles. Visitors are allowed to enter the nave and touch the fabric with their hands and feet. The spatial design of *Célula Nave* is intertwined with the museum’s Bodon Gallery, for which the artwork was created. The size of the installation has been adapted to its large-scale dimensions; the turquoise colour of the fabric matches the greenish floor of the gallery and the daylight falling into the room enhances the fabric’s translucency.

*Célula Nave* was intended as a singular manifestation, meant to resist interactive use during a display period of three months. However, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen purchased *Célula Nave* after the show and put the installation on display again in 2009. As Tina Fiske observes for a larger group of spatiotemporally defined artworks, such unforeseen prolongation of an installation implies that the institution “might accession a work that may not be fully or ‘finally’ determined in terms of their re-installation.”\(^{214}\) This appeared to be true for *Célula Nave* and its transition of a temporary, interactive installation into an artwork of a permanent collection is the main focus of the case study.

By applying Lefebvre’s Triad of Spatiality, the chapter discusses various modes of *Célula Nave*’s site-specificity, focusing primarily on its function as an interactive, site-specific installation and its fabrication process at various geographical locations. The institutional policies of commissioning and collecting site-specific installations will bring to the fore the function of ‘representational space’, in relation to the Bodon Gallery. Also, Lefebvre’s notion of ‘social space’ will be discussed in two different ways: first, in regard

---

\(^{213}\) Statement by Ernesto Neto during an interview with Nathan Gulick at the occasion of the installation of Animal Architecture, January 2007. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0MSbpiXs1w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0MSbpiXs1w) (accessed 13 August 2019).

to the visitors’ interaction with the artwork – interpreted here as a definition of the relationship between the artwork and its surrounding context. As a result of the interactive use, the artwork is currently in poor condition and cannot be exhibited again. Hence, the case study not only examines biographical stages of the past, but also explores scenarios for extending the lifespan of Célula Nave. The second function of ‘social space’ concerns the spaces of fabrication and the social networks involved with the production of Célula Nave. Because the artist considers this social production practice a meaningful constituent of the artwork, the question arises where a refabrication would be executed, and by whom, and how this would affect the spatial functions of the work (if a remake was considered).

Many different actors play a role in this case study, varying from the artist and his co-workers / co-fabricators to the interactive audiences and custodians involved with the acquisition and perpetuation of the work. In the analysis of the causes of damage and the performance of the work various dimensions of the notion of script will be applied. Following the proposition made by Latour and Akrich, I will suggest that the interaction with the visitor was “inscribed” by the artist into the materiality and spatial design of Célula Nave, which is also the reason the artwork suffered during display. Furthermore, by “de-scripting” the artist’s statements and the museum’s acquisition and display policies, light is shed on the contradictions and dilemmas of extending the lifespan of a temporarily intended site-specific installation.

This chapter begins with a brief introduction of the artist Ernesto Neto and his site-specific installations; followed by a description of the first and second staging of Célula Nave, including the shifts of site-specific functions leading to the current deadlock of the artwork. Furthermore, by examining the spatial functions and tracing the underlying scripts, suggestions are made for future scenarios. To this end, I will draw on a number of additional information sources. Firstly, a study into Célula Nave’s material composition, executed by conservator Carien van Aubel. Her research helps understanding the reasons of damage and provides options for a restoration or a remake of Célula Nave in the future. Secondly, this case study draws on observations made by conservators, technicians and exhibition makers in relation to a number of comparable cases: two site-specific installations created by Ernesto Neto (in the collections of Tate and MoMA) and one site-specific installation created by Pippilotti Rist (in the collection of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen).

Ernesto Neto as a site-specific working artist

Ernesto Neto (Rio de Janeiro, 1964) became world-famous for his spatial constructions made of stretchable fabrics (lycra) that provoke a multisensorial experience of vision, touch, smell, movement and, sometimes, sound. It is often said that two Brazilian artists of a previous generation have influenced him to focus his attention on the position of the body in the
experience of his art. Lygia Clark, whose series of ‘wearable objects’ – consisting of hoods, suits or gloves – invited visitors to physically interact with the art objects she created. Hélio Oiticica, who is famous for his Tropicália environments, included biological elements into his works, such as parrots and plants, and radically rethought the process of art making. Neto, however, does not share the political ideologies of his Brazilian predecessors of the 1960-70s. On the contrary: he embraces today’s communication and ‘spectacle’ society. In form and content, the specifics of the site are always part and parcel of his installations: they make the viewer aware of the actual space of the artwork and its surrounding, while simultaneously raising consciousness of the recipient’s ‘inner space’. The excitement – and also the conservation challenge – of Neto’s spatial constructions lies in the fact that these artworks involve delicate, textile materials and are often interactive.

At the Venice Biennial of 2017, Neto created a Shamanic Pavilion – in reaction to curator Christine Macel’s call to celebrate art as “the favourite realm for dreams and utopias”. Neto’s colourful, site-specific installation consisted of a huge structure suspended from the beams of the ceiling of the Arsenale. The pavilion was made of manually crocheted, polyamide fabric and visitors could gather inside for a ‘ritual’ and play the drums or relax on the cushions placed along the sides (fig. 4.1).

In a much older installation, Leviathan Thot (2006), Neto transformed the austere space of the Panthéon in Paris into a sensual, organic architecture of draped nets and pods suspended from the ceiling. Similarly, the extra-large exhibition space of the New York Armory Show (2009) was covered with a ‘membrane’; pods attached to its ceiling and spices adding an extra flavour to the experience. The artwork literally became a stage for a site-specific performance when the Shen Wei Dance Company combined a performance of professional dancers with members of the public moving and running around the installation’s interior.

Key to understanding Neto’s work is (to paraphrase the artist) his search for a symbiosis between the “spirit” of a place and the “texture” of the work. He seldom works from a pre-defined script for the artwork’s materialization, but as he states: “I am really developing the piece when I am

---

doing it.” Most of his installations are commissioned by galleries, museums and other venues and are intended as temporary works of art. Such was also the case with Célula Nave, one of his earliest large-scale, site-specific installation artworks.

**The first display of Célula Nave**

Participating in the group exhibition ‘Perception of Space’ (2004) in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Neto created Célula Nave for the central room of the Bodon Gallery (Fig. 4.2). In technical terms, the shape of the installation resembles a ‘tent’, because it is suspended on 12 aluminium poles and can be mounted as a single entity in space. The large construction of the nave, composed of various shades of turquoise polyamide fabric, is counterweighted by a number of bigger and smaller bags placed on the ground and filled with river sand. Visitors can enter the nave – or ‘spaceship’ as Neto occasionally calls it – after which they have to push the fabric to the ground with their feet in order to move around, meanwhile seeking balance by touching the membrane at the sides (Fig. 4.3).

The artwork has a sensual appearance, due to the softness and colour of the fabric; it is a multi-sensorial experience to enter the nave and touch it. When visitors stroll around the interior spaces of the nave, they can literally reshape its form. According to Neto, this physical contact with the artwork offers “a state of sensuality [that] will give you the idea of a risk, an idea of how delicate things can be.” From this statement it can be deduced that the artist considered bodily interaction and the visitors’ movements essential for the meaning of Célula Nave and secondly, that the material of which it was made contributed to this sensation.

After the show, the installation was accessioned, followed by a second term of display in 2009. This time, the physical interaction appeared to be disastrous for the fragile material and spatial design of the artwork. Later on in this chapter I will elaborate on this problem, but let us first take a closer look at the spatial design and materiality of Célula Nave, in relation to the surrounding space and the values attributed by the museum to visitors’ interaction.

---

219 See footnote 1 of this chapter.
220 The exhibition ‘Perception of Space’ run from May 20 – August 1, 2004, featuring (next to Célula Nave) works from Mark Bain, Massimo Bartolini and Ann Veronica Janssens.
222 Idem.
4.1 The spatial design and materiality of Célula Nave

*Célula Nave* is composed of hundreds of meters of turquoise polyamide fabric, an elastic material normally used for the fabrication of stockings. The measurements of the construction (20 x 24 x 4.75 meters) surpass the usual size of an artwork, even compared to other large-scale installations. The spatial design is attuned to the surrounding architecture of the middle room of the Bodon Gallery – built by Alexander Bodon in 1972, as an annex to the original museum building. The first floor consists of three spacious and flexible galleries, which can be reconfigured depending on the needs of the exhibition. Neto geared the floor plan of *Célula Nave* to those dimensions and used the height of the room for the suspension construction of the nave.

The entire nave is supported by 12 aluminium poles. Their mutual distances determine the stretch on the fabric when the poles are put upright. The tension increases when visitors are strolling around the nave’s interior and press the fabric to the floor. Bags made of the same fabric and filled with river sand serve as counterweights placed around the poles; several clusters of small bags are connected to the nave’s ceiling by means of strips folded over the top of the poles; in addition, an inner series of counterweights keep the nave’s floor in balance. This delicate construction, the colour and translucency of the stretched polyamid give the impression the nave is ‘floating’ in the air. Daylight falling into the room through a series of skylights and windows of the façade of the Bodon Gallery grants the top layer and sides of the membrane a vibrant translucency, which is even further emphasized by the greenish colour of the gallery floor.

Neto often gives biomorphic titles to his work and he did so too with the above mentioned constituents: the counterweights attached to the inner nave are called ‘feet’, the clusters of counterweights around the poles are ‘fingers’, and the strips of fabric connecting them with the ceiling are ‘arms’.

The museum archive holds a floor plan indicating two openings in the membrane, through which visitors can enter and leave the nave (Fig. 4.4). Inside the nave, a rhythmic structure of vertical tubes (indicated with numbers in the drawing) alternates with a number of empty spaces. In terms of Lefebvre’s Triad of Spatiality, the drawing can be considered a representation of the spatial design, but is it not a very detailed description. Photographs give an impression of the installed artwork, although these convey little about the forces put on the fabric when the artwork is installed.

---

*224* The three upper rooms of the Bodon Gallery are located at the first floor and measure appr. 1450 square meters in total. The central Bodon Room covers appr. 800 meters and has a height of 5 meter. The rooms were especially designed for extra-large works of contemporary art. In principle, they have no walls that would obstruct the visitor’s visual perception but, if necessary, the rooms can be subdivided into smaller compartments and still keep the spatial qualities of the room. Windows and skylights allow for fluctuations of daylight to enter the room. See for a detailed description of the history of the museum building Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display*, 150-157.
and actually ‘in use’. Other files include a remark that three voids, called ‘bubbles’, are not accessible to the public. One large open space has a round circle in the middle, representing a pink mattress placed directly on the floor. This is the largest void and a ‘playground’ for visitors, who can relax on the mattress and watch a turquoise pod hanging from the ceiling, or they can bounce on the mattress, reinforcing their experience through physical interaction.

According to visitors’ accounts, Célula Nave is “a sensory installation that allows visitors to immerse themselves into a fluid and cellular symbiosis after they have taken off their shoes.” Or, as someone else observes:

In this work, the visitor enters, lies down, lets himself go, goes through an experience of abandonment and displacement in an almost organic structure that rocks him and detaches him from the outward life to reconcile him with the inner one.

The public loved the artwork, as some museum staff members confirmed during the interviews I conducted for this case study. It was considered a highly experiential and playful work, with a touch of entertainment. Looking upon site-specific installations as performances, I would deem the visitors, in this case, both spectators and actors: interacting with the artwork, they can watch each other ‘play’, both from the inside and from the outside of the nave.

4.2 The functions of ‘social space’ and ‘representational space’ of Célula Nave

According to Sjarel Ex, director of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, the aesthetics of Célula Nave and the interactive experience were reasons to acquire the installation. Ex describes his enthusiasm for the playful aspects as follows:

At the opening night people were excited, waiting in the line to get in. They had to take of their shoes and then they could enter the nave. I saw people diving into the pink mattress. (...) You really jump into it. Just like that, flat on your stomach. It’s great. It’s life. Célulife.

In terms of the triadic model for site-specificity, the director’s statement can be read as a reference to Célula Nave’s social space which, according to Lefebvre, is intertwined with perception and spatial practice. As explained in

---

227 Interview conducted with the director of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Sjarel Ex, on 5 December 2011.
228 Idem.
the previous chapter, Lefebvre suggests that spatial practices presuppose the use of the body and the senses for spatial orientation. Social space is an active and real space – corresponding to the activities, routines and practices of the ‘inhabitants’ of a space, employed at a particular moment in time. Applied to Célula Nave, the production of social space starts when visitors stroll around or jump on the mattress. By using their own bodies and senses, they are coproducers of the social space and bring variation into the spatial design of the artwork.

Furthermore, the Bodon Room is an important parameter for Célula Nave’s physical site-specificity, offering the conditions in dimensions and aesthetics for the above described experience. Moreover, at a conceptual level – and in accord with the proposed model – a juxtaposition can be observed between this actual, physical site-specificity and the ‘representational space’ of the gallery. The museum has a long history of granting commissions to artists, who create their work specifically for the Bodon Galleries; commissions are often followed by an acquisition.

As Julia Noordegraaf elucidates in Strategies of Display. Museum Presentation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Visual Culture (2004), the spacious rooms of the Bodon Gallery offer ample possibilities to contemporary artists to create artworks in situ. Especially under the leadership of Wim Beeren (1978-1985), the galleries became a substitute for the artist’s studio: “[…] a place where the artworks were born” and where visitors could witness the moment of creation.229 Later directors continued with Beeren’s approach and there is still a close relationship between the museum’s acquisition policy and the architecture of the Bodon Galleries, as the current director states:

We conduct an active commission and acquisition policy towards artists who explore architectural space and seek to collect installations specifically made for the Bodon Gallery. This goes back to the 1980s, when we acquired the large Corten-steel Waxing Arcs by Richard Serra [discussed in Chapter 3, TS] and a floor piece by Walter de Maria.230 We still feel very much attached to these older works. The stainless-steel by De Maria are frequently re-installed and the Serra piece is on permanent display. We follow these artists, but we also follow the talents of the building.231

His statement underlines the symbolic meaning of the Bodon Room for Célula Nave, the representational space which Lefebvre denotes as “lived space”. This space embraces “the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and

229 Noordegraaf, Strategies of Display, 192.
230 Sjarel Ex refers to Walter de Maria, A Computer which will solve Every Problem in the World / 3-12 Polygon (1984).
231 See footnote 15 of this chapter.
thus immediately implies time.”\textsuperscript{232} The Bodon Room offers this representational space to the artwork and, vice versa, the acquisition of \textit{Célula Nave} confirms that Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen ‘performs’ as a prominent contemporary art museum and represents world-famous artists.

In summary of the above and in view of Lefebvre’s Triad of Spatiality, we can identify the first staging and acquisition of \textit{Célula Nave} as an ‘ideal’ performance of interrelated site-specific functions of the artwork. Neto created an inseparable bond between the spatial design of the artwork and the surrounding architecture (designed space); a social space was produced by the visitors’ interaction with the spatial design of the artwork (perceived space); and \textit{Célula Nave} represented a progressive commission and collection policy of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (lived space).

4.3 The fabrication of \textit{Célula Nave} and ‘spaces of production’

Throughout his career, Ernesto Neto uses polyamide fabrics and employs their sensual appearance and properties of translucency and elasticity. For \textit{Célula Nave}, the artist purchased the materials from the Rosset Fabric Industry in Brazil: various shades of turquoise were used for the membrane (and additional elements of the tubes, arms, fingers and feet) and a pink colour for the mattress.\textsuperscript{233} In Neto’s studio in Rio de Janeiro, co-workers and assistants sewed the large pieces together and produced the elementary shape of the nave. Looped lace ribbons were added to the edges of the tubes, in order to establish – at a later instance – a connection between the tubes and the ceiling of the nave.

After the preproduction in the factory and the artist’s studio, the production process was relocated to a different site: the Bodon Room of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. Together with the artwork to be, a group of Neto’s co-workers travelled to Rotterdam and ‘occupied’ the gallery space. The final production process consisted of stitching the large parts together and creating the joints between the columns and the rest of the membrane. Wout Braber, the museum’s Head of Technique, recalls:

> For three weeks, no less than 10 to 12 Brazilian men and women worked on a daily basis in the gallery space. It is all handcraft, sewing together the large pieces that were prepared in Brazil. It was amazing.\textsuperscript{234}

These production practices introduce a second dimension of Lefebvre’s notion of ‘social space’ to this case study, namely: the succession of

\textsuperscript{232} Lefebvre, \textit{Production of Space}, 42.


\textsuperscript{234} Interview conducted with Wout Braber and Jaqueline Rapmund on 28 November, 2011.
production spaces and networks of human actors that are involved in the fabrication of the artwork at different locations. Neto himself emphasizes the significance of the production practice in Brazil when he states that the craftsmanship and physical labour needed for the fabrication of his works is part of its meaning: “[…] to use one’s own body for an act of creativity reflects the Brazilian way of celebrating life and art.”

According to Lefebvre, each production space has “a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance” (original emphasis). In this respect it is worth noting that Neto migrated his coworkers from one geographical region to another for reasons that relate to competence and performance: the craftsmanship he deemed necessary for the fabrication of the nave (Fig. 4.5). Looking in hindsight at this production process inside the Bodon Gallery, he stated: “We were building it here like primitive people.” The artist came over to the museum for the ‘finishing touch,’ determining the exact position of the poles and the stretch of the fabric. Neto describes this as his own “physical relationship with the piece”:

It comes from the mind, than to the arm, than to the hand. Of course, that’s not the way you do it. It takes a long time, from the head to the hand and to the earth. Art is something that goes away from my fingers, like that [he makes a spontaneous gesture with his hand, TS] Wow. Like magic!

The above observations highlight some of the problems that will be addressed later on in this chapter when I discuss possible scenarios for the perpetuation of Célula Nave: should the artist be present when the work is reinstalled, accommodating the nave’s shape to the specifics of the site? In case of a restoration or remake, should the same trajectory of successive production spaces be followed involving the same network of skilled co-workers? These questions did not come forward during the first period of display and the problem would not occur if the installation had not been acquired for a museum collection. Since its lifespan has been prolonged through the acquisition of the artwork, however, these questions have become highly relevant for further research.

Already during the first period of display the museum’s technicians had to take care of small holes and ladders (caused by nails, jewellery or belts) at a regular basis; sometimes larger tears had to be stitched at places where the

---

236 Lefebvre, Production of Space, 33.
237 See footnote 9 of this chapter.
238 See footnote 1 of this chapter.
fabric had been put under stress. At the time of the acquisition, the damages were communicated with Neto’s assistants, who made a condition survey of the nave. The conclusion was that the work could be reinstalled and, apart from the above mentioned floor plan and general instructions for repair, the studio provided a set of sample materials of the various fabrics to be used in case of a restoration. In the instructions it was stated that the museum could take care of restoration if needed. Apart from this the artist was, in theory, positive about a remake in case the condition of the artwork demand it. Detailed instructions were provided for replacing individual parts of the nave, and in particular the floor, were damages would be most severe. The entire set of instructions for reinstallation and restoration provided by the artist’s studio can be read as a ‘script’ for the perpetuation of Célula Nave.

4.4 Reinstallation of Célula Nave without the presence of the artist

In 2009, on the occasion of the exhibition ‘Brazil Contemporary’, Célula Nave was staged again in the Bodon Gallery. Neither the artist nor his co-workers were present and the museum staff was entirely in charge of the reinstallation. The preparations consisted of collecting all parts and support material (such as a large volume of river sand to fill the ‘feet’ and ‘fingers’, and Styrofoam balls for the mattress and the pod). The membrane was spread out and the poles were placed at their proper position on the gallery floor. As Wout Braber recalls, the crucial moment was when the aluminium poles were set up in a vertical position, pulling up the nave like a ‘tent’, (Fig. 4.6):

---

239 One of the technical staff members recalls that she worked on the repairs while sitting within the nave with her toolbox, which intensified her relationship with the artwork (interview conducted with Marjolijn de Bakker on 15 March, 2012).

240 The instruction file includes the following paragraph: “These instructions teach how to remake the whole Nave. But we believe that just remaking the floor will be sufficient to restore Célula Nave. In the future, if necessary, the whole piece can be remade as an "exhibition copy." Nevertheless, the original Nave must be kept by the institution (by its owner), to always be used as a reference and "since the proposed restorations of the piece concern it's daily use and not its existential state in time. The piece's trajectory in time is extremely important." Statement made by Ernesto Neto, part of the archive of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

241 Célula Nave was acquired through the Willem van Rede Fund, which is officially under the administration of the Dutch State. However, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen is in charge of the work’s preservation and presentation. The museum follows the policy to show purchased installation artworks every five years. The exhibition ‘Brazil Contemporary’, was a shared event organized by Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Netherlands Architecture Institute and Netherlands Photo Museum, Rotterdam, 30 May - 23 August 2009. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen featured artworks by Hélio Oiticica, Rivane Neuenschwander, Cao Guimaraes, Ernesto Neto and Ricardo Basbaum.
We started with measuring the exact distances between the poles in relation to the height of the entire structure, from the top of the poles to the arms, and fingers and feet resting on the floor. These distances determine the flexibility when people are navigating the tent. We needed 12 persons to keep an eye on their own poles, fingers and feet, because if the tension would get wrong, the whole structure would collapse. And then I gave the sign ‘fire under control’. From the inside we controlled the flux of the poles, how they would bend inward and outward when the work was “in function.”

The poles are flexible and their inward and outward bending is decisive for the pressure on the fabric when visitors move around the interior spaces of the nave. Their lengths and the shape of the membrane are indicators for the right position, but this is no hard science. Since the instruction for reinstallation was mainly based on the floor plan, staff members had to make their own decisions. It was a matter of getting the right ‘feeling’, as the technician said, just like Neto would perform the act.

A few days after opening night, the artist came over and authorized the installation. Whereas for the original manifestation he had used his own body to position the poles, therewith determining the stretch on the fabric, this time he agreed with the way the staff members had measured the installation. Among the museum staff members, however, there were differences in opinion with regard to the stretching of the fabric. According to the technicians, the height of the poles was similar to the initial staging, but the director took the stance that the poles were put more upright the second time; so, the membrane seemed taut, in contrast to the intended appearance:

[Célula Nave] is like a spider. Some sort of big animal walking through the exhibition space. It should look like a living creature, not so much like a rigid work of art.

An extra argument for the technical staff to put the poles upright (perhaps slightly higher than previously) was to prevent them from toppling as sometimes happened during the first iteration. Those different voices show how sensitive the work is to the slightest variation in stretch, especially since mechanical pressure is being exerted on the fabric when the artwork is in use. During the second iteration the number of holes and small tears in the membrane multiplied, due to the visitor’s physical engagement. A dramatic situation occurred when, alongside a repaired large tear in the nave’s ceiling, a new tear – larger than the previous one – appeared. This occurred exactly in the area where visitors would play on and around the mattress. Since the

---

242 Interview conducted with Wout Braber on 28 November, 2011.
243 Interview with Sjarel Ex. See footnote 15 of this chapter.
244 Idem.
245 Interview with Wout Braber. See footnote 30.
ceiling could no longer hold the structure together there was a serious risk the poles would topple. Hence, for safety reasons Célula Nave was shut to the public and is now considered a ‘total-loss,’ to this very date. The nave and poles are kept in storage until a solution is found.  

4.5 Shifts in the spatial network of Célula Nave and refinement of the conceptual model

In the above discussion, I argued that the first biographical stage of Célula Nave shows a well-balanced spatial network established by the spatial design of the artwork, the representational space of the Bodon Gallery, and the social spaces of production. The surrounding architecture, important for the artwork’s physical site-specificity, did not change during the second iteration. At a conceptual level, the museum’s policies of commissioning experiential installations and their subsequent acquisition can be seen as a function of the representational space – a ‘lived space’ that was activated by the acquisition in 2004 and the reinstallation in 2009. Furthermore, social production spaces could be allocated to a diversity of places and productive activities: the factory and the artist’s studio in Brazil, as well as the Bodon Room during the fabrication of Célula Nave (emphasizing the skills and craftsmanship of the artist’s co-workers). Besides, the visitors’ interaction denoted a meaning-producing activity and a mode of social space in the perception of the work. And yet another mode could be discerned in the practices for the perpetuation of Célula Nave, in particular regarding maintenance procedures. During the first iteration relatively little action was required to keep the artwork in shape, but this demand intensified during the reinstallation. When the number of holes and ladders in the membrane increased due to physical contact with the visitors, considerably more actions were needed and this production space expanded through the daily maintenance. Marjolijn de Bakker, one of the museum’s staff members, recalls how she performed dozens of repairs, kneeling inside the nave. Or how, sitting on a stool, she had reattached numerous buttons to the mattress, which had jumped off during the public’s interaction.  

Based on these findings, I propose to apply a refinement to the conceptual model, concerning the function of the social production space. As we have seen, the production places were highly significant to Ernesto Neto for the fabrication of Célula Nave. This aligns with the stance taken by Lefebvre that production processes are intertwined with the production spaces. In the following research stage, I will scrutinize the options for the perpetuation of the installation and to this end, I propose a further breakdown of the function of social space into three categories: the social

---

246 Conservators explain the new tear as resulting from the fact that the first tear was sewn together with fishing line, creating a rigid seam that does not give way under pressure. See footnote 11 of this chapter.

247 Interview with Marjolijn de Bakker. See footnote 27 of this chapter.
spaces of the production of the artwork, the social spaces of the artwork’s perpetuation and care, and the social space of the visitors’ experience in the exhibition room (see Diagram 6). This enables me to analyse spatial practices at diverse biographical stages - of production and refabrication, of caretaking and the perpetuation of the artwork in a museum environment, and of experiencing the staged work of art. As a consequence, the triadic model I derived from Lefebvre’s Triad of Spatiality evolves into a pentagonal structure (see Diagram 7). In the analysis, the influential factors – denoted as ‘actors’ and ‘script’ – can be identified for the various functions of the spatial network, although their influence will not always be of a significant degree. As we shall see hereafter, sometimes the influence of the actors has an evident relation to a spatial function and the underlying script can be traced, but this is not always the case. Besides, (as suggested in Chapter 3) a distinction should be made between the script as implicit instructions for the interactive ‘use’ of Célula Nave embedded in the material construction, and the explicit instructions and statements provided by the artist, or a reconstruction of the underlying motives of the custodians, which I attempt to trace in the analysis. That said, I propose to envision the conceptual model for all site-specific installation artworks as a pentagonal network of spatial functions, with the influential factors of actors and script (Diagram 8).
DIAGRAM 7 The expanded version of the model with a pentagonal structure.

DIAGRAM 8 Pentagonal model for the analysis of site-specific installation art with the additional toolbox of script and actors.
Interactive visitors’ engagement

In this case study, the main problem was specified as the transition of an artwork that was intended to be temporary to an installation of the permanent museum collection. In fact, the problem of the current state of ‘total loss’ is directly related to the public’s physical interaction during the second iteration. According to the proposed conceptual model, this could be explained as a friction between the artist’s intent to create a ‘social space’ for visitors (when strolling around) and the spatial design of Célula Nave that could not resist such forces. An underlying motive for the acquisition – and an additional cause of the problem – can be found in the museum’s underlying motive to give the audience access to an experiential – delicate – work of art. Hence, it could be argued that the performance of Célula Nave (as an interactive installation) gained priority over the protection of the physical artwork, especially since no strict regulation was imposed on the visitors in their engagement with the delicate construction of the work.

This situation is not unique. Many more examples could be mentioned of interactive artworks that suffer from the public’s interaction and have nonetheless been accessioned and re-exhibited. In this respect, Célula Nave could be seen as just another example of the problems and dilemmas contemporary art museums are confronted with when offering their publics a space for art experience – a zone of ‘purposeless free play’, as the art historian Julian Stallabrass would say.

Finally, in the case of Célula Nave, the problem was partly caused by the fact that Ernesto Neto had given no instructions for the visitors’ behaviour. The instructions provided by the studio regarded only reinstallation and repair, and the artist had expressed his intentions only in fairly general terms, such as: “I think this piece is very much about a hug”, or “Beyond the whole architecture, beyond the whole biological idea, I think there is this point of human psychology: the need to touch”. The measures taken by the museum were limited to a few regulations, such as allowing only a certain number of visitors to enter the nave simultaneously, and the instruction that visitors should take of their shoes and leave their bags behind. Furthermore, two large openings in the nave’s membrane were appointed as entrance and exit of the installation.

---

248 Time-based media installations offer notorious examples of failure due to visitors’ interaction. It is not always the artwork that suffers. Sometimes interactive installations have to be accommodated in order to meet safety requirements for the public.

249 I am referring here to the art historian Julian Stallabrass, who states that contemporary art museums and in particular installation artworks persuade “an audience to travel to a museum or other site”, where there is “freedom in appreciating the purposeless play of ideas and forms, not in slavishly attempting to divine artists’ intentions, but in allowing the work to elicit thoughts and sensations that connect with their own experiences”, and to get “the feeling of a body moving through a particular space surrounded by huge video projections or work that has weight, fragrance, vibration, or temperature”. Stallabrass 2006: 3 and 17.

250 See footnote 9 of this chapter.
In the absence of instructions for the behaviour of the audience, *Célula Nave* fell prey to both foreseen and unforeseen movements. As Marjolein de Bakker observed:

> At first they were really careful, touching the fabric with care. The turquoise fabric gave you the feeling of being under water and one had to take real big, careful steps to push the fabric to the floor. But when visitors approached the mattress, they jumped onto it and you could see that it was really fun to do that. Especially for children. Sometimes they entered the bubbles where they were actually not allowed. The openings were too small and too much pressure was put onto it.²⁵¹

Looking at the various scripts for a performance of *Célula Nave*, the public’s playful behaviour could be traced back to the haptic material and spatial design (inviting people to touch the membrane) and the artist’s intent to encourage interaction with this installation. As Akrich elucidates (see Chapter 3), the ‘designer’ of a piece may ‘inscribe’ a specific form of action into an object, although obviously the artist never intended damage due to over-excitement. The fact is that neither Neto himself nor the custodians – who likewise encourage the public’s interactive experience with art – provided visitors with explicit guidelines how to act when inside the nave. All in all, it is not surprising that the current deadlock occurred, as a result of the friction arising between these various interests and the insufficient resilience of the material to the interactive use of the exhibited work of art. (See for a schematic representation of the two biographical stages and shifts in the spatial network Diagram 9.)

²⁵¹ Interview with Marjolijn de Bakker. See footnote 27 of this chapter.
In the following section, three different scenarios for the future will be outlined, using the outcomes of the above analysis of the production and the two biographical moments of staging *Célula Nave* in the Bodon Room. In this respect, it should be noted that several attempts have been made to explain the problem to the artist and his studio, and to engage him in the question of *Célula Nave*'s perpetuation.\(^{252}\) Since this approach proved unsuccessful, the scenarios focus on what *could* happen in the future. The following discussion

\(^{252}\) For her master’s research project, Carien van Aubel contacted Ernesto Neto’s gallery Tanya Bonakdar. The request for consultation was sent to Neto’s studio in July 2016 (confirmed by his gallerist). A similar attempt was made by the Head of Collections and Research of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Sandra Kisters, in September 2016, followed by a request sent to the studio by myself in May 2018.
will include two comparative case examples of site-specific installations by Ernesto Neto in the collections of Tate and MoMA. A third comparative example is a site-specific installation by Pipilotti Rist, in the collection of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. (See for a schematic representation of the three scenarios and their impact on the spatial network Diagram 10.)

**Diagram 10  Célula Nave - Three options for future scenarios**

The diagram shows the effect on the network of spatial functions for the three scenarios. Restoration would reduce the social space of experience and emphasize the social space of perpetuation and care. A remake following a similar trajectory would keep the spatial design intact, but likewise reduce the social space of experience and emphasize the social space of perpetuation and care. The option of a remake in a more durable version would reduce the value of the original spatial design, but allow more interaction and emphasize the representational space as well as the social space of perpetuation and care.
4.6 *We Fishing the Time*: the relocation of a temporary installation to the permanent collection of Tate Modern

To gain insight into Ernesto Neto’s views on the relocation of his site-specific installations to a permanent collection, a comparison with *We Fishing the Time (densidades e buracos de minhoca)* (1999, Coll. Tate) is beneficial (Fig. 4.7). This artwork was fabricated in Brazil and installed by the artist for the Tate Liverpool Biennial. After the venue, Tate purchased the installation and moved it to the storage facilities in London, where it became part of Tate Modern’s collection. In 2002, staff members of Tate Modern researched the possibility of reinstalling the piece in a newly appointed gallery space and conducted an in-depth interview with the artist.²⁵³

*We Fishing the Time* consists of several large hanging pods made of the same type of polyamide fabric as used for *Célula Nave*. The pods were suspended from a stretchable structure made of a similar material and attached to the ceiling of Tate Liverpool’s gallery. The pods included various spices and alternated in height; some touching the ground, others reaching halfway the pillars of the room. In an interview, conducted by Tanya Barson of Tate’s conservation department, Neto describes the installation process and explains the meaning of two different sociocultural production contexts:

> One part [of the title] is in English, the other part in Portuguese. It was calculated and sewn in Brazil but the whole putting it up was there [in Liverpool]. I didn’t know if [the structure] would hold everything, I mean I was sure that it would, but it was extremely emotional. It was one of the most emotional pieces I have ever made, because when I work with this kind of materials, which are the spices, it is very colourful, a very strong smell. When you work with these things hanging, not touching the ground, it becomes even more emotional. [The] first installation in general is part of the creation, for example, why this [pod] is bigger than that one, why the yellow one is here and the brown one there. I decided on that in that moment (...), the sensible decisions [are made] in the place.²⁵⁴

Regarding a future reinstallation of *We Fishing the Time* in Tate Modern, the artist stated that staff members, who had assisted with the installation in Liverpool, or one of his own assistants, could perform the preparatory work.

²⁵³ For all information of this case example, I am indebted to the staff members of Tate’s Conservation Department, who kindly provided access to the archives and to an interview conducted with Ernesto Neto in 2002.
²⁵⁴ Interview conducted with Ernesto Neto by Tanya Barson, Conservation Department of Tate, on 18 February 2002 (Archive of Tate Conservation Department).
He preferred to be present when the work was reinstalled for the first time in a different gallery space. When asked about using documentation for future iterations, he answered that preferably a staff member would learn from his assistant “a kind of sensibility of understanding how to do it.” At future occasions, this staff member could then transfer the knowledge obtained from practical experience to others. Documentation was only considered an option for future staging when this concerned a recording of the installation process, but not a guideline with elaborated instructions.

From those statements it can be deduced that Neto is willing to delegate to future custodians the “emotional moment” of deciding on the exact spatial arrangement and height of the individual parts of the installation, provided that they have learned “how to do it”; which means, a transfer of knowledge from the artist or his assistant to the custodians, who would then be able to act in a sensible way and in accord with the conditions of a given space.

Neto’s viewpoint calls to mind the concepts of ‘embodied knowledge’ and personal transfer of ‘understanding how to do it’ as developed in the conservation literature in recent years. With respect to time-based media and other performative art, Joanna Phillips, for example, points out that if in such cases embodied knowledge is not transferred to custodians, there might even be the danger of misrepresenting the artwork’s identity. She states that: “the institution may not be able to implement essential aspects of the work and inadvertently create a distorted experience of it.” In the case of site-specific installation artworks the connectivity with the surrounding is important and, given the variables of the ‘site’, custodians need to know how to adjust the work to new circumstances. As shown above, with the reinstallation of Célula Nave the technicians took a different stance than the director envisioned. A solution to this ‘dilemma’ could be to establish a knowledgeable network around the site-specific work of art.

Establishing ‘knowledgeable networks’ around performative installation artworks

An ideal scenario for the perpetuation of Neto's site-specific installations would imply a continuous transference of knowledge about the artwork’s manifestation, from one person to another. Conservation researchers have pointed out that documentation strategies are part of the wider conglomerate of actions taken for the perpetuation of contemporary artworks (as explained in Chapter 3). However, documentation is not always considered the most effective strategy in the case of performative – and for that matter, site-specific – installation artworks. The personal transfer of knowledge can certainly be added as a means of perpetuating ‘open-ended’ installations that

---

255 Idem.
were not created with the purpose of being accessioned by a museum collection. As, for example, Tina Fiske observes, documentation is usually considered a way to record ‘objective’ facts of the work “on which future decisions can be based.” However, when there is ambiguity in “what it is exactly that a collection commits to” a documented set of instructions might be less self-evident as a conservation strategy, given the uncertainties about what is intended by the artist.\textsuperscript{257} Moreover, at the moment of acquisition, it is not always clear how the installation should perform at future occasions or what kind of documentation or installation instructions would be needed. Therefore, Fiske suggests that personal accounts of earlier manifestations or experiences with other works form the same artist might offer a more suitable alternative. In the case of \textit{Céu}lula Nave, I would argue that this is exactly the crux. At the moment of the acquisition, it was unclear what would happen with future staging of the artwork’s physical construction.

A comparable statement has been made by Laurenson and Van Saaze in their publication \textit{Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives}.\textsuperscript{258} The authors elaborate their argument around the work of performance artist Tino Sehgal, who prohibits any form of documentation. His live works in museums leave the visitor to an unexpected encounter with one or more performers (never the artist himself) who, for example, present themselves while singing, shouting or posing questions to the visitor. The performers are either instructed by the artist or they pass on their knowledge of the performance from memory, from one performer to another. The authors explain that Sehgal’s works can be “collectible” because, despite the non-material characteristic of the performance, there is a set of regulations (such as a limited edition of the performance or its duration, etc) which integrates these artworks into a museal structure. They differ from collected artefacts is this inter-personal, non-registered knowledge transfer. To a wider group of performative artworks building knowledgeable networks might apply as a productive strategy to keep the artworks alive, especially if characteristics are not easily captured in existing documentation systems. The final point the authors make is that “maintenance” in this context can be conceived in terms of an “active engagement” with the “networks of relationship” established around the work of art.\textsuperscript{259}

Although this reasoning has been developed for actual performance artworks, the concept of establishing knowledgeable networks seems to apply to site-specific installations too, in particular to the functions of site-specificity that are performative and depend on the context of display. For this type of art, it may be beneficial to establish networks of stakeholders who

\textsuperscript{257} Fiske, “Accessioning Ernesto Neto,” 22.
\textsuperscript{259} Idem, 39.
are well-informed about the work and/or were involved with past iterations, and who can ‘replace’ the artist when the artwork is being staged.

Because of the absence of detailed instructions in respect to reinstallations of Célula Nave and the visitors’ behavior, as well as the lack of interest on the part of the artist, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen had to develop its own display strategy in the past and is confronted with a similar question for the future life of the artwork. A beginning to create a knowledgeable network was made by conservator Carien van Aubel, who carried out a Master Research Project in 2014 and established a network of students, conservators, university teachers and museum staff members around Célula Nave. Extensive scientific research into the material composition was carried out and a condition survey of the nave was made (Fig. 4.8 and 4.9). In addition, preventive conservation measures were taken, such as proper storage conditions and documentation, and, last but not least, the stretch properties of the polyamide fabric were investigated. It was concluded that – after restoration – the artwork might survive three to five more display periods before the fabrics would lose colour and elasticity. In my discussion of possible scenarios for Célula Nave’s perpetuation, I will gratefully make use of Van Aubel’s research project.

In the following discussion, the focus is aimed at on the options of restoration and refabrication of Célula Nave, bringing to the fore fluctuations in the spatial network. Each option is connected to the production place and has consequences for the visitor’s interaction and the representational function of Célula Nave in relation to the collection of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

4.7 Option 1: restoration of the original artwork

Van Aubel’s research shows that restoration of Célula Nave is a feasible option, because a spare piece of the original fabric could be inserted into the ceiling, covering the large tear running through it which causes the current state of ‘total loss’. Her recommendations include a removal of the old rigid stitches and repair of the ladders and holes with a kind of thread that gives

---

260 For example, the artist studio provided general instructions, e.g. the floor plan, but no detailed information about the amount of stretch put on the fabric. As a guideline for future staging, the museum recorded the reinstallation process. See footnote 9 of this chapter.
262 The condition survey was carried out on 31 March 2014. The nave was spread out on the ground floor of the Bodon Gallery. The group consisted of around ten students and teachers, external conservators and museum staff, and myself.
way when pressure is put on the membrane is put. The option of restoration was also suggested by the artist, as confirmed by a document in the archives; for that same reason, spare pieces of fabric were provided by the studio. A restoration could be performed either in the museum or in a nearby conservation studio, keeping Célula Nave close to the final production space of its first iteration in the Bodon Gallery.

The overall spatial design would not significantly be changed after restoration, although an extra layer of fabric would affect the artwork’s aesthetics. Besides, as Van Aubel explains, the double layer would diminish the stretch properties of the membrane and increase residual stress at places where point loads are most intense (i.e. where visitors push the fabric to the floor). Especially the area around the pink mattress would be subject to this pressure. Hence, Van Aubel suggests strengthening the junction between the arms and the ceiling with a protective layer. This way, the restoration would not be restricted to adding an extra layer of fabric to the ceiling but involve a reinforcement of the structure. The conclusion of this conservation research is that a restoration would prolong the lifespan of Célula Nave with 3-4 exhibition terms.

From the perspective of the site-specificity of Célula Nave, the consequence of a restoration would not directly affect the spatial design of the artwork (except for the changes in translucency and stretch of the fabric). However, the social space of the experience would be reduced, because visitors would be instructed to behave cautiously and would, for example, no longer be allowed to bounce on and around the mattress. As Van Aubel furthermore proposes, fewer visitors should have access to the nave; jewellery and watches should be taken off and visitors should wear protective gloves and shoes. To safeguard the artwork, more room guards and conservators would be needed to instruct the public on the spot and to monitor their behaviour. In short, not only the aesthetics and perception would be affected, but also the physical contact with the nave. Visitors would become more conscious of the damage they might cause and suppress spontaneous movements, diminishing the experiential values and therewith the ‘representational space’ attributed to Célula Nave by museum staff and visitors at previous stages of display.

4.8 Option 2: remake by a textile factory in Brazil and the artist’s studio

According to the instructions provided by Neto’s studio, the artist would agree to a remake, although restoration was the preferable scenario. Apart from practical issues, like the considerable costs, this option raises a number

---

264 Replacement of the rigid sews with more flexible stitches would prevent new tears from running next to the old ones.
266 Report by Jaqueline Rapmund, 10 September, 2009.
of questions in view of the network of spatial functions. For example, no pattern for the spatial design of the nave exists. Should and could such a pattern be produced in hindsight? And most relevant for this case study, where and by whom should a refabrication of the nave be executed? Should the same trajectory be followed as before? Earlier in this chapter, we have seen that the artist deems the sociocultural places of production important for the meaning production of his art. Could we thus speak of an ‘authentic’ production place?

Van Aubel’s research clarifies that the preproduction process of Célula Nave started in the Rosett Factory in Brazil, where the polyamide fabric was woven and knitted. The artist’s studio continued the production by modelling and sewing the large pieces together, and the installation was finalized in the large Bodon Room. Hence, three different production places were involved, two in Brazil and one in The Netherlands. And, as we have seen before, the artist attributes meaning to the locations of production. In the following comparative case, the trajectory of a remake will be followed, taking a closer look at the option of a refabrication in Brazil under supervision of the artist.

The installation Navedenga (1998) consists of a similar, though less complex, spatial construction as Célula Nave, and belongs to the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The membrane is white and made of a similar type of polyamide fabric. The ‘tent’ or nave is accessible for visitors, who are allowed to move around in the interior of the nave. The installation was first shown in the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (New York) in 1998. In contrast to Célula Nave, the artwork was designed and created for a gallery space and could thus be considered a moveable installation artwork instead of a site-specific installation. And yet, as photographs show, the light conditions of the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery contribute to the translucency of the fabric, similar to Célula Nave installed in the Bodon Gallery (Fig. 4.10). Daylight falling in through the skylights enhanced the experience of the materiality and spatial design of the installation during its initial performance.

In 2007, the work was acquired by MoMA and was later on shown in a different spatial context: the White Cube gallery space of MoMA, provided with artificial lighting, and with a ceiling that was lower than that of the gallery in which the artwork was first presented.

In 2010, MoMA planned to put Navedenga on show. From interviews conducted with MoMA’s freelance conservator, Margo Delidow, and the exhibition designer and production manager of MoMA, Eric Meier, I learned that in agreement with the artist it was decided not to reinstall the original: the work had suffered from the initial display and would be damaged even

further when people would be strolling around the nave.268 Ernesto Neto was in charge of the refabrication and the accounts of this process are instructive for what might happen with a remake of Célula Nave.

In comparison to Célula Nave, Navedenga is much smaller (circa 370 x 450 x 640 centimeter) and its refabrication can be considered less complex. The membrane, made of a similar stretchable, white polyamide fabric as Célula Nave, encloses only one interior space. The nave is suspended from the ceiling by means of four ‘arms’ folded over hooks and with pods at their tail-ends, filled with river sand. Together with four ‘feet’ placed on the ground, the arms hold the construction in balance while people are strolling around. A big, soft bollard (filled with Styrofoam balls) is placed in one of the side compartments, and in the middle of the nave a large pod is suspended, filled with cloves.

Meier and Delidow note that Neto could not purchase the original type of fabric from the Rosett Factory and had to accept the “next best thing, a kind of aerospace fabric”. This material has a slightly different appearance, but its stretch properties were acceptable to the artist. A team of co-workers of Neto’s studio fabricated two exhibition copies and his assistant installed one of the remakes for the venue (Fig. 4.11). MoMA keeps the original Navedenga in storage as a reference object that should not be exhibited again.

When Navedenga was on show in MoMA, the museum’s staff members had to take several measures in order to stabilize the structure on the slippery, wood-waxen floor of the gallery. One solution was to position tennis balls, cut into halves, at the inside of the feet in order to prevent them from sliding. Another adjustment regarded the position of the arms, because visitors liked to touch them when they were waiting in line before entering the installation. As the conservator states: “People loved it and touched it, any chance they got. We put the arms higher, so the people could not knock them.” These were relatively minor adjustments meant to accommodate the installation to the conditions of the gallery space, implying that they were not discussed with the artist. According to the conservator, Neto would agree as long as the work’s visual appearance was not affected: “[Neto] “is pretty easy going, only when you would change something visible this would have bothered him”.269

In terms of the site-specificity of the refabrication of Navedenga, I would like to make a few comments. First, the reproduction process took place in the same geographical region and (almost) the same production spaces as with the original version. Apart from the symbolic meaning of the Brazilian factory and the artist’s workshop, which resonates with Lefebvre’s notion of representational space, the craftsmanship was similar, which would be in

---

268 Interview with Margo Delidow, conducted on 8 July, 2012.
269 Idem.
accord with Lefebvre’s notion of shared ‘competences’ of a given social production space. As Glenn Adamson and Julia Bryan-Wilson also observe in Art in the Making: Artists and their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing, it may be important for the fabrication process of contemporary works of art that fabricators and artists are located in the same geographical region. This way, they can develop a strong bond and in many cases “artists do not simply outsource production to these firms, but remain actively involved throughout the process.”

Regarding Navedenga, the repetition of the production process in Brazil sets the remake alongside the original artwork and in that sense I would argue that the original geographical region could be considered an ‘authentic’ production place. A detail which is not insignificant in relation to a possible remake of Célula Nave, is that no pattern was used for the reconstruction of the nave, as the production manager stated during the interview.

After the work moved to MoMA, Navedenga was installed by one of Neto’s assistants, not by the artist himself. This marks a deviation from the original production which, in addition to the changed materiality of the nave, preludes a shift in the site-specificity of Navedenga.

My second comment addresses this shift in site-specificity, after the artwork was obtained and staged in the White Cube gallery of MoMA. The ceiling of the space was lower than in the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery and it had no skylights, turning the transparent membrane into a more opaque cubicle form (additional spotlights helped to overcome this problem). An even more fundamental challenge concerned the ‘social space’ of the visitors’ experience. Every day of the week, MoMA welcomes a large number of visitors, including school classes, which poses serious risks to the delicate fabric. To adjust the artwork to these circumstances, the spatial design of Navedenga was slightly modified. The tail-ends of the arms were pulled up higher by repositioning the four hooks in the ceiling, so that the public would no longer be able to touch the pods. In addition, safety measures were taken by adding tape around the nave in order to keep the audience at a distance. And furthermore, a number of museum guards were positioned in the room giving instructions when visitors became too excited. As Margo Delidow recalls:

I remember that people would laugh. It wasn’t serious to go in. It was something about the piece that made people happy. It was a fun house to jump around, the aesthetic appearance. That is the whole meaning of the work.

---

271 According to Eric Meier, “Neto does not use any computer he does everything by hand.” Interview with Eric Meier, conducted on 8 July, 2012.
272 Interview with Margo Delidow, conducted on 8 July, 2012.
It is unknown what Ernesto Neto thought of the adjustments made, but according to the conservator he would agree with measures to regulate visitors’ behavior.

At this point it is interesting to return to a statement the artist made on the occasion of Tate’s acquisition of *We Fishing the Time*. Although Neto is in favour of physical interaction, he was dissatisfied when visitors would touch his work in an unintended manner. Referring to the imprints of finger dots on the fabric or names and hearts scrabbled onto the surface, he expresses his reluctance:

I have to say I prefer it if you don’t touch it. I think this is a piece much more to touch with your eyes, your nose, you know, with the senses.273

Neto’s statement that “touching it with your eyes” would be preferable to physical interaction casts a different light on what I have earlier described as the artist’s intent towards the spatial design and social space of *Célula Nave*: that is to perceive the artwork through a cheerful physical experience. This point was also acknowledged by the custodians of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen as one of the main values of the installation and in that respect it also denotes a representational function of *Célula Nave* (as noted above). Does this mean that my earlier understanding of the meaning of the work should be reconsidered? In reference to *Navedenga*, Neto declares:

I don’t know if the idea is play, exactly. *Navedenga* fully exists by itself as sculpture which can simply be looked at like any traditional sculpture, but it is in the interaction with people that it shows other levels of itself. Interaction provides a more intimate relationship between the artwork and the viewer. When people climb into new pieces for the first time, I watch new aspects of the works being born. Also, when someone decides to get inside of a piece, they have another level of experience through the atmosphere created by these unexpectedly organic bodies.274

Following the conceptual model proposed in this dissertation, I argue that the artist’s statements cause a shift in perspective from the function of the social space of the interactive experience to the function of the spatial design and aesthetics of the installation. What matters most would be the visual effect of the visitors’ bodies, reshaping the form of the installation through cautious, ‘dancing’ movements. In fact, Neto may have never intended the excitement of play and entertainment, or, as he stated earlier the “idea of a risk.”275 In this

273 Statement made by Ernesto Neto during an interview conducted by Tanya Barson, Tate Conservation Department. See footnote 42 of this chapter.
respect, it is interesting to notice that Neto positions himself often as a sculptor, who’s works fit well into the modernist tradition of Calder, Brancusi and Minimalism.²⁷⁶

In conclusion, the variation in statements suggests that the artist may intend different things under different circumstances. This (again) touches upon the absence of clear instructions, which the artist never stipulated in regard to the visitors’ behaviour: When applied to the examples of Navedenga or Célula Nave, Neto may not have foreseen the consequences of physical interaction and may have preferred a minimum of physical contact from the moment it became evident the artwork would suffer, reducing the interaction to the extent that visitors’ movements contribute only to a visual, aesthetic sensation.

Transposing the above findings to a remake of Célula Nave, it is feasible that Ernesto Neto would prefer a remake in Brazil under his supervision – following the same trajectory as with the original version. This way, the social production practice and sequence of production spaces would be continued and the production network would remain more or less the same. However, the new site-specificity of Célula Nave – being a ‘permanent’ work of a museum collection – would need adjustments to the social space of the visitors’ experience, regulating their behaviour more strictly. Arguably, the museum staff members would be more involved than with the original version. And last but not least, the longevity of the remake would be a point of discussion in this scenario as well. The problem of damages, due to interactive movements of the visitors, would not be entirely solved. As Meier and Delidow observed with the display of Navedenga, an exhibition copy “will have its lifespan” nonetheless, since the material would lose its elasticity in due time and suffer from the visitors’ bodily interaction.²⁷⁷ Even if Célula Nave was refabricated as is suggested here, the copy would not last forever. This brings into focus the third option for the work’s perpetuation: a relocation of the production process to another geographical region, in order to produce a more durable version of the nave.

4.9 Option 3: remake by another fabricator aiming at a more durable version

Although it would be a radical solution in order to overcome the current deadlock, in theory the fabrication of Célula Nave could be outsourced to a factory located in a different geographical region. To DSM in The Netherlands, for example, a company specialised in polyamide fabrics. Whereas the remake

---

²⁷⁶ See, for example, the following interviews with Ernesto Neto: by Bill Arning in 2000 (see footnote 62); by Tanya Barson, Tate Conservation Department, in 2002 (see footnote 61); by Nathan Gulick in 2007 (see footnote 1; and the presentation by Ernesto Neto himself at ‘Spaces of Transformation: Edges of the World’ in 2012 (see footnote 23).

²⁷⁷ Interview with Margo Delidow, conducted on 8 July, 2012.
of *Navedenga* was fabricated from a similar type of material, it is not unthinkable that a stronger type of fabric is available on the market. If the polyamide fabric was less susceptible to wear and tear and retained its elasticity for a longer period of time, the lifespan of the physical object could be expanded.

A prerequisite for this option is that the substitute material meets the same criteria as the original, respecting the aesthetics – colour and translucency - and stretch properties when the nave is suspended from the aluminium poles and ‘in use’. A specialized company could deliver the fabric, leading to two different scenarios: either the artist’s studio could create the basic forms of the nave or this task could be assigned to another sewing workshop. As for the final stages of production, the same process as with the original could be repeated, when the nave was assembled in the Bodon Room by stitching the large parts together, either by co-workers of the artist or by other craftsmen. For the finalization and authorization of the installation the presence of the artist would be needed and Neto would again be able to decide on the final stretch and shape of the installation.

This option would have considerable impact on the social spaces of production and the production networks involved. Relocating the production to another geographical and sociocultural region would influence the meaning of the artwork, according to the artist’s statements. On the other hand, Neto himself has been in favour of a liaison between different geographical contexts, as expressed for example in his explanation of the bilingual title *We Fishing the Time (densidades e buracos de minhoca).* Given the above observations, I would argue that a remake by another fabricator could be a point of negotiation between the custodians and the artist, weighing the advantage of a stronger substitute material against the shift in the production places when the nave would be produced partly or entirely in a different geographical region.

The scenario of a remake with stronger material opens up the vista of an expansion of the social space of the visitors’ experience, in the sense that more physical interaction would be allowed than with a restoration or a remake with similar materials as the original. In fact, this option was suggested by the museum’s Head of Technique, Wout Braber.278 The main argument for suggesting this option was the technical department’s practical experience with a comparative installation on permanent display in one of the stairways of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen: Pipilotti Rist’s *Let you hair down* (2009) (Fig. 4.12). This interactive installation is composed of a giant network of polyamide ropes, with similar stretch properties as the polyamide fabric of *Célula Nave*; only, the ropes are much thicker and stronger than the ‘stocking material’ used for the nave. Visitors can climb into the net and when they reach the top level, several meters above the ground, enter a ‘safety net’ suspended approximately one meter underneath the stairway’s ceiling. Here, they can relax and watch video artworks created by Pipilotti Rist herself and

---

278 Interview with Wout Braber, conducted on 28 November 2011.
other artists. As the technician explains, the ‘net’ is checked and maintained regularly:

Once in a while we have to tighten it again when the construction becomes feeble. We have left spaces at the sides and the company who installed the artwork tightens the ropes until the right tension is recovered. Obviously, there is a limited number of times one can do this, it’s the same story as with Célula Nave. The more times you do it, the more the structure will lose its stretch. And the more visitors are using it, the sooner material fatigue will occur.279

His statement suggests that even with a more durable version the lifespan of Célula Nave would not be infinite and regularly check-ups would be needed. On the other hand, it would allow visitors to stroll the nave more freely and without too strict regulations regarding their behaviour. At a conceptual level this would return Neto’s original ‘idea of risk’ to the experience, without the consequence of putting the material object at risk.

In terms of the site-specific functions of social space and representational space of Célula Nave, this option would restore these functions to a greater extent than in the case of the two other options discussed above: the installation would once again fulfil its function of experiential, interactive installation and would represent the values attributed to the commissioned and accessioned installations created for the Bodon Gallery.

Last but not least, the refabrication with a stronger material and carried out primarily under supervision of the museum’s staff, would anchor the artwork in the social and professional space of the institution. It would activate the social space of perpetuation and care, to an even greater extent than with a restoration, because the staff members would engage with in-depth research into the material composition regarding the function of the spatial design of the artwork, and the actions of finding an appropriate fabricator. In order to effectuate this option, first and foremost the communication with the artist or his studio needs to be re-established. More than in the case of the other two scenarios, this option would expand the lifespan of Célula Nave, replacing its temporariness with ‘permanency’, and reinvigorating its function of representational site-specificity.

4.10 Conclusion of the case study

This case study highlighted the dilemma of acquiring a temporary, interactive installation for a permanent museum collection. The analysis explained the site-specificity of Célula Nave in relation to the physical surrounding of the Bodon Gallery and its representational function for the museum’s policies regarding experiential installation artworks. The current state of ‘total loss’

279 idem.
was analysed as a friction (occurring during the second iteration) between the intended physical interaction (and representational function of Célula Nave) and the ‘failure’ of the delicate, stretchable material and spatial design of the nave. An underlying reason for the damage of the artwork was appointed to the absence of instructions regarding the reinstallation of the work and the visitors’ behaviour. Neither the artist nor the custodians had stipulated a ‘script’ for the movements of the visitors and their interaction with the nave. If the nave was to be restored or refabricated in a similar material as the original, a strict set of instructions would accompany the ‘performance’ of Célula Nave in the museum gallery. The option of a remake in which a stronger material is applied, would reduce this problem, although in all three options discussed for the future of Célula Nave the interactive use of a stretchable material would limit the lifespan of the artwork.

Another insight this case study brought forth, is a reconsideration of the assumption that Ernesto Neto favours bodily interaction with site-specific installations like Célula Nave or Navedenga. Given his statement that visitors could experience the aesthetics of the work ‘with their eyes’ and that bodily movement should be cautious instead of ‘playful’, a more restricted approach might be in accord with his current intention. On the other hand, this limitation was considered a contradiction to other statements made by Ernesto Neto and to the creation of the artwork. Besides, it would reduce the function of representational space of Célula Nave for the Bodon Gallery, in the sense aspired by the curator and director of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen at the time of the commission and acquisition.

The function of Lefebvre’s social space was key to the analysis of this case study and the proposition was made to refine this function into three elements: the social space of the visitors’ experience, the social space of production, and the social space of perpetuation and care. As a consequence, the triangular model of spatial functions – as developed in Chapter 3 – transformed into a pentagonal structure. I have argued that visitors produce, with their own bodies, a social space during their exploration of the nave, meanwhile perceiving the impact of other visitors and sharing the excitement of play. A second function of social space was allocated to the various production locations, including the networks of human actors involved. Statements by Ernesto Neto illuminated the importance of the places of production in Brazil and the craftsmanship of his co-workers; followed by the final production process in the Bodon Room (prior to the installation in 2004). The suggested scenario of a restoration of the original would make little difference regarding the ‘authentic’ location, since the geographical coordinates of the production would not be affected and the restoration would take place in the vicinity of the museum.

The comparative example Navedenga helped to examine the other two options for a remake. The refabrication of Navedenga followed a similar trajectory as the original, as it was produced in similar places, under the supervision of the artist. Although Célula Nave has a more complex spatial design, this option might be feasible. The third option would imply the
relocation of the production process to a factory specialized in durable polyamide fabrics and, possibly, draw in another workshop for the construction of the nave. The latter option might affect the aesthetic appearance of the spatial design to a greater extent than a restoration or remake executed under supervision of the artist.

My final comment in this case study is that Célula Nave would gain a new form of site-specificity when custodians would directly be involved in the processes of perpetuation, that is, in the options of a restoration or a remake by another fabricator. Those options would anchor Célula Nave in the institutional practices and the social space of perpetuation and care. We have seen that for the perpetuation of Célula Nave, each scenario has a different impact on the spatial network and implies its own pros and cons. Some site-specific functions of Célula Nave might be reinvigorated, while others might change or disappear. Decision-making regarding the perpetuation of a temporary site-specific installation artwork and its transformation to a work of the permanent museum collection is a complex process. Considering the current state of ‘total loss’ of Célula Nave, action will be needed, one way or the other, and the preceding process of weighing the options has just started. My plea would be to focus on the network of site-specific functions of the artwork, as decisions regarding the perpetuation of the physical construction will have a reciprocal relationship to spatial practices in the production and experience, and with the representational context of the artwork on display.