

Emanations
On Leonilson

Andrew Durbin

After the artist Leonilson was diagnosed with HIV on April 22, 1991, his doctor wrote him a strange prescription: liquid gold. By the early nineties, AIDS had become a leading cause of death among young men in the United States,¹ and roughly 10 million people were living with HIV world-wide;² early treatments, such as AZT, often caused debilitating side effects and were unavailable to many people outside wealthy countries, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South America.³ Out of desperation, out of pain, many patients commonly sought alternative therapies and unproven cures, from both well-meaning physicians and predatory quacks.⁴ Liquid gold, Dr. Fernando told his thirty-four-year-old patient, would restore Leonilson's "energy," rebalance his body, and address one of his most distressing symptoms: an allergy to paint.⁵

The treatment seemingly surprised the curator Adriano Pedrosa when the artist told him about it a few months later, leading to a momentary confusion between the two close friends—and intellectual companions—during a long conversation about Leonilson's life and work. "But have you used it, that is, in the last ..., " Pedrosa began to ask.⁶

Leonilson interrupted him: "I always use what I can." He was already taking AZT, though like many people living with the disease, he was open to almost any treatments, any proposed cure. But Pedrosa was wondering whether Leonilson had incorporated the gold into his drawings and paintings yet. There was little from Leonilson's life which the artist hadn't somehow found a use for, from the traditional materials of the studio to the refuse of the street, from his deepest relationships to his passing crushes. "The works are all a diary," he once declared. "They are completely personal."⁷ So,

yes, Leonilson clarified, he had blended gold with other colors in recent works to create what he called an "emanation," a feeling of the "sacred."

One of those pieces possibly referred to Pedrosa himself: *A.P.* (1991), which opens *Leonilson* at Lisson. The work consists of two strips of voile, each painted with a gold U-shape, one thin, one wide. This minimal piece exudes a kind of religiosity, that feeling of the "sacred," and it is laced—embroidered—with the double meanings found everywhere in Christian theology and Leonilson's own symbolism. Gold is the most exultant color of the priestly vestments, worn at Christmas to celebrate the birth and at Easter the Resurrection. At Mass, wine transubstantiated into the blood of Christ tends to be served in a gold-plated chalice. For Leonilson, blood transformed by the disease into a carrier of death becomes art, its perceived threat evoked yet neutralized by the gold which delivers both salvation—from paint's sudden hostility—and a love letter to his friend A.P.⁸ It is a fundamentally hopeful work, even if the liquid gold ultimately failed to cure his paint allergy.

Leonilson's diagnosis marked a shift in his practice. Though, it wasn't an unexpected one. The artist came to prominence in 1984, during the first fragile years of Brazil's democracy, when he was included in the legendary exhibition *Como vai você, Geração 80?* [How are you, 80s Generation?] at Parque Lage in Rio de Janeiro. The show brought together 123 young artists, some of them Leonilson's closest friends, whose work was celebrated by critics for its return to figuration and rediscovery of the "joy" of painting. "Like it or not, whether you want it or not, it's all there," wrote one of the curators, Marcus de Lontra Costa. "All the colors, all

the shapes, squares, transparencies, matter, painted mass, human mass, sweat, paper airplanes..."⁹ Years later, Leonilson dismissed the critical response to all this as mere "marketing"; the emphasis on joy and pleasure—fairly suspect, it would seem—softened the radicalism of the 80s Generation and their rebellion against the old aesthetic order which prevailed under twenty-one years of dictatorship. Leonilson reflected: "Whatever people said wasn't art, we did."¹⁰

This approach also aligned him with a diverse array of artists from the global north, whose work he encountered on his frequent trips to New York and Western Europe beginning in 1975.¹¹ In interviews and conversations with friends throughout his brief life, Leonilson often cited Eva Hesse, Paul Klee, Duane Michals, Blinky Palermo, and Robert Ryman as important influences, along with key Brazilian artists, such as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Arthur Bispo do Rosário—all of whom adopted innovative approaches to both material and abstraction, who used what they could, when they could. He was especially taken by Hesse's materiality, the semitransparent shrouds and objects of latex, fiberglass, plastics, polyester resin, and cheesecloth, as well as her interest in the role gravity plays in shaping a work of art. Her practice proposed material and imagistic possibilities which fed directly into Leonilson's own. At Lisson, Hesse's influence shows up in the metal disks anchoring *Untitled* (c. 1975), the holes cut into *A caída* [The fall] and the pig-shaped *Robe de soir* [Evening robe] (1985), the wires sewn onto velvet in *Rifat* (c. 1988), and, in multiple works, the use of metallic paint, typically meant for cars.

What Hesse offered for materials, Palermo did



A caída, 1985
Acrylic paint and collage on canvas
180.3 x 156.2 cm (71 x 61 ½ in)



Robe de soir, 1985
Acrylic paint, metallic paint and
cutout on cut checkered wool fabric
236 x 150 cm (92 7/8 x 59 in)

for abstraction. Throughout Leonilson's works from the 1970s and '80s he played upon Palermo's oddball sense of color and shape (and use of fabrics as paint surface), boosting the intensity, escalating the clash, as if filtering the German artist's work into a machine programmed by Kenny Scharf and David Wojnarowicz. At Lisson, you can detect a note of this subverted influence in the two figures crouching against a spotted yellow background in *Capaz/capaz* [Capable/capable] (1982) and in the two slightly off-center black circles puncturing the flag-like *Untitled* (1986). Though Leonilson never mentions Wojnarowicz in interviews, the work of these near contemporaries shares common themes, including a highly personal symbolism, a passion for language and writing, and the map as material. Both men kept audio diaries, and both men became icons of a generation lost to AIDS. When I look at Leonilson's bridge in the rain—made with electric tape—in *Ponte sob chuva* [Bridge under rain] (c. 1987), I always think of Wojnarowicz's "burning house" stencil from 1982.

These influences worked differently over time, especially as the AIDS crisis intensified in the mid-to late 1980s, which Leonilson took up almost immediately. Entering his thirties, with the disease taking hold of the gay world, his work became more introspective, less riotous in its palette, and instead contended "with the rich emotional cadence of contradictory feelings," as Jenni Sorkin writes, namely "one's own mortality, suffused with a nostalgic melancholy and staunch belief in the expressive possibilities of tenderness, yearning, and the poetics of (semi-forbidden) homosexual love."¹²

During this period, perhaps no artist was more significant to Leonilson than the photographer

Duane Michals, whose work he first saw around 1988.¹³ Michals is best known for his dreamy portraits and ghostly interiors captioned by the artist's handwriting. Often arranged in lyric sequences, the photographs meditate on the sad passage of time by concentrating on the "internalized realities," as artist Jeff Perone writes in *Artforum*, of the photographer and subject, rejecting "objective truth" in favor of a "mythic relativism, where self is also discovered to be a mere apparition."¹⁴ They are beautifully charged pictures: To look at an image by Michals is to feel you have been invited to witness an intensely private revelation forged in light. These aspects of Michals would propel much of Leonilson's later work, particularly his self-portraits, which often deal with loss and disappearance. But above all, Leonilson told Adriano Pedrosa, Michals gave him "strength" and "courage."¹⁵

Unable to paint after his diagnosis, Leonilson found other ways to work. He drew; he embroidered. The works of these final years, transformed by his diagnosis, are startling for their simplicity and emotional power, their raw feeling: they have a directness which comes only from a confrontation with death. In his drawings, which found a wider audience after he began illustrating a "Talk of the Town"-style column in Brazil's most popular newspaper in 1991, he discovered the poignance of empty space and the potency of fragments.¹⁶ The captions and titles of these works often mix languages—Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English—while occasionally dispensing with normal spelling, grammar, and verb conjugation. This means that some of Leonilson's captions are difficult to translate, which was in keeping with his

sensitivity to the specificities of every language. Only certain words, in certain languages, could express what he was feeling at times. For instance, *el desierto*, the Spanish for "desert."¹⁷ "A feeling that only exists in Spanish," he said, and looking at the word, with its lonely "i," you know what he means.¹⁸ How else could he capture what was inside him, the isolation, the loneliness, the longing? In other drawings, a female noun attaches itself to a male article, the verb is wrong, or a noun is misspelled. Even occasional "mistakes" in his writing were generative and revealing. In the drawing *El Desierto* (1991), he includes a line from a song he overheard: "o que é verdade para certos rapazes" [What is true for certain boys]. Later, he realized he'd misheard the lyrics. The actual line was, "What is true, what is true, when someone dies." Leonilson preferred his version.

The other strand of his late works, embroidery, traditionally dismissed as "women's work," returned him to his childhood and the earliest stages of his practice: his father owned a fabric store in Casa Saudade, and he spent many hours of his youth with his mother in the family sewing room.¹⁹ The artist's earliest surviving work, *Mirro* (1975), on view at Lisson and created when he was only eighteen, frames a piece of jeans stitched with a possible corruption of the French word for "mirror" [*miroir*], reversed and upside down. As Ricardo Resende observes, "One might imagine that the piece is a self-portrait, for the composition of its materials is reminiscent of crossed lines, one horizontal and one vertical, which form the simplified figure of a face."²⁰

Sixteen years later, Leonilson would embroider other deconstructed or simplified self-portraits—



Mirro, 1975

Acrylic paint, felt, and thread on cotton twill fabric;
cardboard, wooden frame, glass, and metal
38.4 x 39.7 x 7.3 cm (15 1/8 x 15 5/8 x 2 7/8 in)

self-portraits which simultaneously represent and disappear the “self as apparition”—out of salvaged or inexpensive fabrics. He did so at a time when many artists living with HIV/AIDS in the global south and north had begun to stitch, sew, and embroider, as the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson writes. From Andreas Sterzing’s gruesome and iconic portrait of David Wojnarowicz with his lips sewn shut (*David Wojnarowicz (Silence=Death)* (1989/2014)) to José Gonzalez (Pepe) Espaliú’s “Máscara” series (1989) to Zoe Leonard’s *Strange Fruit* (1992/1997) to the largest and perhaps most famous representation of the AIDS crisis, the AIDS Memorial Quilt (1985 – ongoing).²¹ At a time when Leonilson was often exhausted, embroidery grounded him by giving him a less physically draining way to work. He told Lisette Legnado: “I put all my energy into it. It keeps me from fading away. I keep doing these works like prayers ...”²²

Two of Leonilson’s late self-portraits appear at Lisson. Both dwell on the disappearance of the self. The first, *José* (1991), features voile stretched over a wood frame and stitched with the artist’s first name. Voile—the same fabric painted with gold in *A.P.*—is often used for so-called modesty layers, such as lingerie, the garments we don’t see, and which cling to the skin. The work suggests a mirror—he has stitched his name in reverse on the back, only like so many of the artist’s self-portraits, the surface is non-reflective. Here again you might detect a note of the sacred, this time by way of the Shakers, whom he greatly admired after seeing their work at the Whitney Museum’s 1986 exhibition *Shaker Design*. The Shakers transformed “domestic objects into works of uncommon grace,” writes June Sprigg in the exhibition catalogue,²³ and Leonilson was

especially inspired by the embroidery samplers on display at the museum—both for the artist's care and their understated way of declaring softly, "I am here." Stitched carefully by craftswomen, these samplers wove spare biographical details among letters and numbers, such as the artist's name and birthplace. This austere convention finds its way into Leonilson's own final embroideries, including a second important self-portrait at Lisson, *El Puerto* [the harbor] (1992).

In this work, Leonilson has stitched one of his nicknames, 'Leo', as well as his age, weight, height, and the work's title onto striped cotton fabric covering a salvaged mirror. Reducing his body to its barest facts was itself a radical act of intimacy, he believed. "The name is the most important thing I can reveal," he said.²⁴ But it is more of an invitation than a confession: Reflecting on *El Puerto*, Leonilson remembered liking the title for its "receptiveness." He added, "The harbor receives ... I think I receive much more than I give...." The work is "an object of desire," and he could imagine "the people who will pull up the curtain and see themselves. They may be shocked, or surprised. The work is very simple, but it doesn't deliver a truth."²⁵ Of course, a harbor is also a point of departure, a leave-taking—a poignant image for an artist who felt himself fading away.

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El puerto, c. 1992
Thread on striped cotton fabric, nail,
copper wire, and acrylic paint on a mirror frame
23.5 x 17.1 cm (9 ¼ x 6 ¾ in)

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Mortality Attributable to HIV Infection/AIDS Among Persons Aged 24-44 Years – United States, 1990, 1991." Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. July 2, 1993. Centers for Disease Control. <www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00021017.htm>
- 2 "The HIV/AIDS Epidemic." Debate in the House of Lords, UK Parliament. February 5, 1991. <api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1991/feb/05/the-hiv-aids-epidemic#column_1108>
- 3 However, by 1996, treatment in Brazil dramatically improved after Brazil's Congress enacted legislation which provided free treatment to people with AIDS. See Okie, Susan. "Fighting HIV—Lessons from Brazil." *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Vol. 354. No. 19. May 11, 2006. <www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp068069>
- 4 Recent studies at the National Institutes of Health, North Carolina State University, and elsewhere have shown that gold compounds have proved beneficial in the treatment of HIV/AIDS.
- 5 Pedrosa, Adriano. "Concentrated Conversations." *Leonilson: Drawn*. Edited by Krist Gruijthuisen. Berlin/ Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2020.
- 6 Pedrosa. Ibid.
- 7 Pedrosa. Ibid.
- 8 Not only did Leonilson stir gold meant for his blood into paint, but he also mixed (or at least represented) drops of blood with ink too, evoked as *o perigoso*, or "the dangerous," as he does in one of his final works, *Projeto para catálogo* [Project for catalogue]: Leonilson 1993 (1993).
- 9 Poster for Como vai você, Geração 80?. <stickel.com.br/atc/arte/42532>
- 10 Pedrosa. Ibid.
- 11 Brazilian art historian Aracy Amaral once called Leonilson "the eternal traveller," and other critics have noted that he was perhaps the most well-travelled member of his generation. See Kawasima, Yuji. "Frequent Traveler Program: Jose Leonilson, the Professional Tourist." *Jose Leonilson: Empty Man*. London: Koenig Books, 2017 and Catunda, Leda. "Leonilson and the Desires of the World. *Leonilson: Drawn*. Edited by Krist Gruijthuisen. Berlin/ Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2020.
- 12 Sorkin, Jenni. "Running Stitch, Outrunning Time." *Jose Leonilson: Empty Man*. London: Koenig Books, 2017
- 13 Pedrosa. Ibid.
- 14 Perrone, Jeff. "Duane Michals: The Self as Apparition." *Artforum*. Vol. 15. No. 5. January 1977. <www.artforum.com/features/duane-michals-the-self-as-apparition-212563/>
- 15 Pedrosa. Ibid.
- 16 For a complete account of Leonilson's illustrations for Folha de São Paulo, see Nicholas C. Morgan's "Forging a Public Sphere: José Leonilson in Folha de São Paulo." *ARTMargins*. Vol. 9. No1. February 2020.
- 17 Pedrosa. Ibid.
- 18 Pedrosa. Ibid.
- 19 Figura, Starr. *Projects 53: Oliver Herring, Leonilson*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996.
- 20 Resende, Ricardo. "In Search of Communication." *Leonilson: sob o peso dos meus amores*. Edited by Ricardo Resende. Porto Alegre: Fundação Iberê Camargo, 2012.
- 21 Bryan-Wilson, Julia. "Hands on Fire: Leonilson Within Queer Needlework Networks." *Leonilson: Now and Opportunities*. Edited by Adriano Pedrosa. São Paulo: Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, 2024.
- 22 Figura, Starr. *Projects 53: Oliver Herring, Leonilson*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996.
- 23 Sprigg, June. "Introduction." *Shaker Design*. Edited by June Sprigg. New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1986.
- 24 Oramas, Luis Pérez. "Leonilson: Parangolé-Poem." *Jose Leonilson: Empty Man*. London: Koenig Books, 2017
- 25 Lagnado, Lisette. "The Dimension of Speech: Interview with the Artist." *Leonilson: são tantas as verdades*. Lisette Lagnado. São Paulo: Projeto Leonilson, 2019.

