



In March 2021, *Cult* magazine published the article *Leo não consegue mudar o mundo* (“Leo can’t change the world”), by author and researcher Fabrícia Jordão. The title is an appropriation of the name of a painting by Leonilson<sup>1</sup>, which repeats throughout the text and the author affirms to be essential to support her arguments. The choice of the phrase triggers the reader’s reflection and seems to confirm Jordão’s claim that critical appreciation of the artist’s body of work has kept its political character in the background and highlights its autobiographical and confessional characteristics. To her, by electing the theoretical perspective focused on the personal as the main narrative in Leonilson’s work, the authors often present the artist’s pieces as depoliticized propositions. Jordão, however, doesn’t specify names when she makes this claim.

Her reading kindled our interest in going back to some articles written about the artist and published since the 1990s, in addition to the documentary audiovisual production about his life and work. The analysis of these written pieces from different periods and of Leonilson’s own statements, together with Jordão’s reflection, served as important exercises for the writing of our master’s dissertations<sup>2</sup>.

By evoking the discussion about what is political, one can go back to the Aristotelian conception and consider that living in society makes every human being a political animal. Thus, everything we do acts – or reacts – upon all of society. One dimension of art, even if not explicit, may be the one referred to by philosopher Jacques Rancière (2012) in *The Emancipated Spectator*: reacting to economic, political, and ideological domination, producing a response that is often discordant, non-adherent, dissonant. For Rancière, the dissent with which art operates is already a political attitude, in the sense that art and politics are ways of reconfiguring the common experience of the sensible. For the author, “the efficacy of art does not

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1 José Leonilson Bezerra Dias was born in Fortaleza, state of Ceará, in 1957, and died in São Paulo in 1993 because of complications caused by AIDS.

2 Aline Siqueira is currently studying for a master’s degree in the research programme of Art and Reception under supervision of Prof. Fernanda Pequeno da Silva. Her research, which addresses the representation of AIDS in visual arts, focuses on the body of work of Leonilson and Félix González-Torres. Her study identifies factors which have influenced artists’ productions in the early 1990s, in a circuit enmeshed in personal narratives by HIV-positive subjects. In his master’s research project, also part of the Art and Reception research programme and under the supervision of Prof. Alexandre Ragazzi, André Sheik analyzes artists by cross referencing their work and their personalities. One of the groupings gathers artists that use art to express and, to a degree, deal with their emotional and existential issues.

consist of transmitting messages, providing models or counter models, nor in teaching one to decipher representations”<sup>3</sup>. According to him there is a logic of bodies that creates a distribution of the common and the private, of the visible and the invisible, of the word and the noise.

Regarding Leonilson’s production, there are many critical essays, as well as publicly available sources containing his own words about his work. Through such material one can verify the intimate relation between his life and his work. The artist was the fourth of five children in a traditional Catholic family and grew up attending Catholic schools. The inaugural show of his career was a group exhibition in 1977 (while he was still an art student), his first solo exhibition happened in 1980, *Cartas a um amigo*, (“Letters to a friend”), at Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia.

In 1982 Leonilson sold works to important gallerists in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and had his work presented at Art Basel, the prestigious international art fair. He took part in the emblematic group exhibition *Como vai você, Geração 80?* (“How are you, 80s Generation?”) at the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage in Rio de Janeiro, in 1984. However, he is considered to be the outsider of this generation, mainly because of the strong autobiographical nature of his work.

Some of his works are part of important collections both in Brazil and abroad, of institutions such as the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM Rio); Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP); Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói (MAC Niterói); Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York; Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris; and Tate Modern, in London, just to name a few<sup>4</sup>. Leonilson had a prolific career, there are more than 4000 artworks<sup>5</sup>, alongside a vast archival collection.

In the book *Leonilson: são tantas as verdades* (“Leonilson: there are so many truths”), a publication linked to the eponymous show hosted by Galeria

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3 RANCIÈRE, Jacques. Paradoxos da arte política. In: RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *O espectador emancipado*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2012. p. 55. (Our translation). The original text: *a eficácia da arte não consiste em transmitir mensagens, dar modelos ou contramodelos de comportamento ou ensinar a decifrar as representações*.

4 A detailed list can be found on the website of Projeto Leonilson. Available at: <<https://projeto-leonilson.com.br/conteudo.aspx?id=4&ids=3&seq=0>>. Accessed on 5 June 2021.

5 According to the website of Projeto Leonilson. Available at: <<https://projeto-leonilson.com.br/conteudo.aspx?id=2&ids=1&seq=0>>. Accessed on 13 June 2021.

de Arte do Sesi, in São Paulo, the curator and art critic Lisette Lagnado made her own division of the artist's trajectory. She highlights three main formative nucleuses:

[...] in the first years (1983-88) there is a search for an aesthetic definition through the "pleasure of painting"; next, (1989-91) the artist finds support in the theme of "abandonment" and his inclination towards romantic values; in the last two years of his life, the allegory of illness dominates the language completely.<sup>6</sup>

In a nutshell, the first phase is the period of the so called "return to painting": there is a boom of painting in the art market, with special appreciation for those that convey "a cheerful, colourful, and ironic message"<sup>7</sup>. In the second moment of his production, Leonilson works more with embroidered drawings. From 1990 to 1993, however, "the painting becomes almost monochromatic, with small drawings over a single colour, deep and active"<sup>8</sup>, and AIDS, in these last years of his life, is the main theme.

The urgency of the so-called "80s Generation", this once joyful and carelessly colourful movement, became a tragic burden in which urgency becomes synonymous with death – thence the ambivalence which imprints in its author the feeling of being his own executioner.<sup>9</sup>

A contemporary reading doesn't exclude Lagnado's mainly biographical perspective. In the documentary *Leonilson, sob o peso dos meus amores* ("Leonilson: under the weight of my loves") (2012), directed by Carlos Nader, all the testimonies – from curators and artists who knew Leonilson – are unanimous in bringing together his art and his life. The artist himself says: "To live, I need to paint. Life and art are part of the same plunge into

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6 LAGNADO, Lisette. O pescador de palavras. In: LAGNADO, Lisette. *Leonilson: são tantas as verdades*. São Paulo: Projeto Leonilson: Sesi, 1995. p. 29. (Our translation). The original text: [...] os primeiros anos (1983-88) buscam uma definição estética por meio do "prazer da pintura"; em seguida (1989-91), o artista encontra um ponto de firmeza no tema do "abandono" e na sua inclinação para os valores românticos; nos dois últimos anos de sua vida, a alegoria da doença domina por completo a linguagem.

7 LAGNADO, Lisette. O pescador de palavras. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 30. (Our translation). The original text: uma mensagem alegre, colorida e irônica.

8 LAGNADO, Lisette. O pescador de palavras. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 37. (Our translation). The original text: a pintura se torna quase monocromática, com pequenos desenhos sobre uma única cor, profunda e ativa.

9 LAGNADO, Lisette. O pescador de palavras. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 51. (Our translation). The original text: A urgência da chamada "Geração 80", esse movimento antes alegre, de cores sem compromisso, tornou-se um fardo trágico no qual urgência agora é sinônimo de morte – donde a ambivalência que imprime no seu autor o sentimento de ser algoz de si mesmo.

the abyss I decided to take”<sup>10</sup>. In a 1993 interview, when talking about his most recent output, Leonilson declares: “These works are my autobiography. They are my diary”<sup>11</sup>.

Leonilson adds words and phrases to his paintings, drawings, and embroideries: elements that help him in the creation of his poetic imagery and communicate the messages that exist in his works. Using the repetition of symbols, Leonilson creates social metaphors for human relationships, the world, and himself. The autobiographical nature of his work opens up space for the understanding of art as knowledge of the world. His experiences are part of a sociocultural scene and thus can’t be understood solely as isolated issues that only belong to the artist.

Even Lisette Lagnado (1995) – although it is her priority to talk about personal aspects of Leonilson’s work – exposes the political consciousness of the artist on account of his homosexuality and, in this final moment of his life, also on account of him being HIV-positive.

I’m a dangerous person in the world. No one can kiss me. If I have a cut no one can care for my open wound. I have to go to a clinic for that. There are people who are dangerous because they have a gun in their hands. I have something inside of me that makes me dangerous. I don’t need a gun. I just have to cut myself. Look at the guys in jail who are HIV-positive: they cut themselves and threaten to contaminate the others.<sup>12</sup>

The statement in the quote above appears in the 1991 series of works *O Perigoso* (“The Dangerous One”), composed of seven drawings made during one of Leonilson’s hospitalizations because of pneumonia. The first work in the series combines, on a white towel, a little drop of his coagulated blood, together with the title of the work. The others are small drawings, sometimes with representations of daily situations created by the disease – like

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10 LEONILSON, sob o peso dos meus amores. Dir. Carlos Nader. São Paulo: Instituto Itaú Cultural, 2012. 1 video (42 min). Documentary. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8T-KHN2LcChA>>. Accessed on 21 May 2021. (Our translation). The original text: *Para viver, eu preciso pintar. A vida e a arte faz [sic] parte do salto no abismo que eu resolvi dar.*

11 LEONILSON, sob o peso dos meus amores, 2012. (Our translation). The original text: *Estes trabalhos são a minha autobiografia. Eles são o meu diário.*

12 LEONILSON. A dimensão da fala. [Interview by] Lisette Lagnado. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 123-124. (Our translation). The original text: *Eu sou uma pessoa perigosa no mundo. Ninguém pode me beijar. Se eu me corto, ninguém pode cuidar dos meus cortes. Eu tenho que ir numa clínica. Tem gente perigosa porque tem uma arma na mão. Eu tenho uma coisa dentro de mim que me torna perigoso. Não preciso de arma. Basta me cortar. Veja os caras nas prisões com HIV positivo: eles se cortam e ficam ameaçando contaminar os outros.*

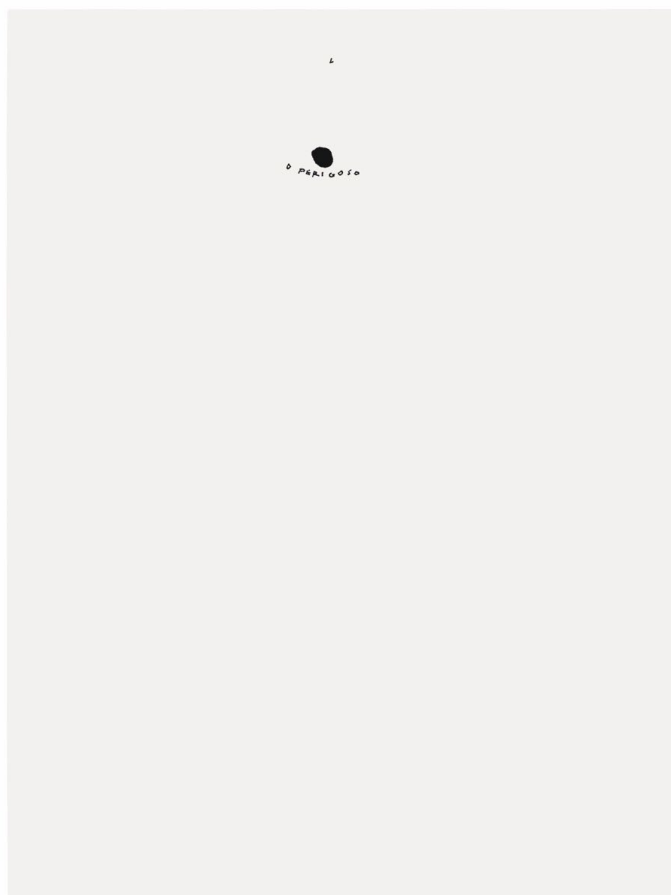


Figura 1  
Leonilson. *O perigoso*  
(da série *O perigoso*),  
1992. Permanent  
marker pen ink and  
blood on paper, 30,5 x  
23 cm Projeto Leonil-  
son, Rubens Chiri

a bottle of pills, a blood exam, the application of intravenous medication -, sometimes with references to Catholicism made by inscriptions and representations of religious objects.

During a series of seven meetings held between October and December 1992<sup>13</sup>, Leonilson and Lagnado commented on the latent irony in the first drawing: the demystification of something grandiose as the only source of power and the presentation of a drop of blood as something dangerous. For the artist, contamination by HIV transformed him, as small and weak as he felt, into the most dangerous person in the world at that moment.

Returning to Fabrícia Jordão's text (2021), the author situates the reader in the social context in which Leonilson lived, especially the political situation of that time. Slow, safe, and gradual opening; end of the dictatorship;

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13 LEONILSON. A dimensão da fala. [Interview to] Lisette Lagnado. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 76-136.

80s Generation; AIDS epidemic: these are the terms which sum up that time. Jordão stresses that the scene of the first years of Leonilson's works coincides with the end of the "ethical, political, and utopian-revolutionary ideal"<sup>14</sup> represented by conceptual art produced during the dictatorship. The author declares that after the political opening, the artist is among those who recover the poetry which lay dormant in the 1960s and 1970s because of the fear of political repression by the military.

Jordão also highlights that the artworks that Leonilson produced during the last years of his life are the works most often included in publications and curatorial projects. The period between August 1991, when he found out he was HIV-positive, and May 1993, when he died, is the period of the most intense physical fragility for Leonilson and is marked by a change in theme and media, resulting in smaller scale works.

When we made large paintings I thought that we had to use violence, strength; but now I find all of that rather stupid. One needs to go through all of that to arrive at this little cloth here.<sup>15</sup>

It was a selection of works from this final period that critic Ivo Mesquita (2006) chose to investigate in *Corpo vidente, corpo invisível* ("Vivid body, invisible body", his essay published in the book *Leonilson: use, é lindo, eu garanto* ("Leonilson: use it, it's beautiful, I guarantee")<sup>16</sup>. The publication focuses on the illustrations Leonilson made between 1991 and 1993 for journalist Barbara Gancia's column *Talk of the town* in the daily newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*. The images were developed starting from the weekly theme of the column and without the artist having access to the entire text, which allowed the drawings to have a certain autonomy. This was the channel used by Leonilson to distill his most severe criticism to the government and the society of that time.

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14 JORDÃO, Fabrícia. Leo não consegue mudar o mundo. *Cult*, São Paulo, year 24, ed. 267, Mar. 2021. p. 37. (Our translation). The original text: *ideário ético, político e estético utópico-revolucionário*.

15 LEONILSON. A dimensão da fala. [Interview to] Lisette Lagnado. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 89. (Our translation). The original text: *Na época em que a gente fazia pinturas grandes, eu achava que a gente tinha que usar a violência, a força, mas agora acho tudo aquilo muito babaca. É preciso passar por isso tudo para chegar num paninho como este*.

16 MESQUITA, Ivo. *Corpo vidente, corpo visível*. In: LEONILSON: use, é lindo, eu garanto. 2. ed. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2006. p. 11-16. The year 2006 refers to the 2nd edition of the book, which was originally published in 1996.

In 2020 Ivo Mesquita revisited his text for the catalogue of the European exhibition *Leonilson, Drawn 1975-1993*<sup>17</sup>. In the new essay, titled *Vivid Body, Visible Body: Revisited*, the author says that although these illustrations are dated and a reflection of the political and economical situation in Brazil during Fernando Collor de Mello's presidency (1990-92), his representations are very similar to the current national scenario:

[...] one cannot fail to notice the similarities and persistence of certain debated issues. There are mainstays of the country's political, economic, and social culture that reappear over time, meaning that the drawings from the *Folha de São Paulo* remain relevant and critically powerful.<sup>18</sup>

The author claims that it's possible to find at least one drawing by Leonilson to illustrate every characteristic of the current government, namely: authoritarianism, patronage, negligence, violence. A government that promotes, according to him, coordinated attacks on democratic principles and institutions; discrimination against ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities; obscurantism regarding education and culture; the destruction of the environment and of *quilombolas*<sup>19</sup> and indigenous populations. He also notes that the biggest woe is not only the repetition of the social landscape of that time, but the incapacity to overcome the issues and the lack of effective solutions to the same problems as before.

For Mesquita, the newspaper drawings reveal a citizen of the world, engaged, an individual who was committed to his time and place. Thus, they can be simultaneously personal and political, even if the images vary, in consonance with their author, from the manifesto to the banal; for, according to him, they directly and widely reflect the time in which the artist lived, transforming his practice into a sphere of political activism. The artist's observations on the world (he was a sharp and sophisticated observer), his perspective, everything was registered in his drawings as in a diary (one of his activities), and so they function as a chronicle of the period. His sensations and feelings are a biting and provocative criticism, according to the author.

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17 The exhibition currently at Malmö Konsthall, in Malmö, Sweden, has been presented at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, in Berlin, and is scheduled to go to Fundação Serralves, in Porto, Portugal.

18 MESQUITA, Ivo. *Vivid body, Visible Body: Revisited*. In: GRUIJTHUIJSEN, Krist (Ed.). *Leonilson: Drawn 1975-1993*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020. p. 221.

19 The author explains: "*Quilombolas* are Afro-Brazilian residents of *quilombos*, the rural settlements originally founded by freed or escaped African slaves [...]". MESQUITA, Ivo. *Vivid body, Visible Body: Revisited*. In: GRUIJTHUIJSEN, 2020. p. 235.



Mesquita makes a symbolic reading of some elements of Leonilson's work that underline its political aspect. For him, the podium, for example:

[...] serves as a metaphor for social structure; inequality and injustice; the abuse of power; the pillaging of the public realm and disrespect for common citizens; and the race for money, status, and fame.<sup>20</sup>

Like his images of people, houses, and cars on stilts, the podium wasn't, for Mesquita, only a symbol of economic and social triumph, "[...] but also an ironic sign of political and moral deterioration, frivolity, consumerism, snobbery, and the vanity fair of globalized urban culture"<sup>21</sup>.

The ethical dimension of these works produced for *Folha de S. Paulo* can be found, for the author, in the production of ambiguities and in the defiance of absolute truths by means of the artists' unique vision and point of view. Thus, his view is political and expresses itself in the work. For Mesquita, the drawings become caricatures, revealing the artist's strategy for expressing his opinions and making explicit his direct commitment with questions from the social and political field.

[...] the figure of the disease appears in the column for the first time in *Os chatos unidos foram enfim vencidos* (United bores are finally defeated, September 4, 1991), in which five empty cups are labelled with "the undesirables" and "those with poison" – AIDS victims, Indigenous peoples, communists, gypsies, and prostitutes. After the first AIDS-related column, the artist's focus turns to those dispossessed and discriminated – the shanty-town youth, the LGBT community, the HIV positive, and Indigenous peoples – clamoring for humanitarian values like understanding, inclusion, and dignity in an intense search for meaning within the brevity of life.<sup>22</sup>

Leonilson's drawings end up, at times, contradicting the opinions expressed in the text of the *Folha de S. Paulo* columnist. We associate these oppositions with what Jacques Rancière calls "a labour of fiction"<sup>23</sup>, not as invented creations of the real world but as alternative manners of presenting the sensible. For Rancière, this action is also marked by dissent and causes a shift in our perception of events; thus, a shift in our relationship with these subjects.

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20 MESQUITA, Ivo. Vivid body, Visible Body: Revisited. In: GRUIJTHUIJSEN, 2020, p. 226.

21 MESQUITA, Ivo. Vivid body, Visible Body: Revisited. In: GRUIJTHUIJSEN, 2020, p. 226.

22 MESQUITA, Ivo. Vivid body, Visible Body: Revisited. In: GRUIJTHUIJSEN, 2020, p. 231-233.

23 RANCIÈRE, Jacques. Paradoxos da arte política. In: RANCIÈRE, 2012, p. 64. (Our translation). The original text: *um trabalho de ficção*.

[...] the strategies of artists who propose to change the referential standards of what's visible and utterable, to show what had not been seen, to show in another way what was not easily seen, to correlate what wasn't correlated, with the objective of producing ruptures in the sensitive tissue of perceptions and in the dynamic of affections.<sup>24</sup>

By dividing Leonilson's production into two phases – before and after the HIV diagnosis – one can see the change in his thinking in the paintings: *Leo não consegue mudar o mundo* (“Leo can't change the world”, 1989), which has its title written on the canvas and *O Monte das Oliveiras* (“The Mount of Olives”, c. 1992), which contains the phrase “Leo pode mudar seu mundo” (“Leo can change his world”). The sayings in both works signal a kind of shift in the possibilities of change Leo feels capable of enacting.

In 1989, the production year of the first work, many landmark events happened in the world, such as the first presidential election in post-dictatorship Brazil, the fall of the Berlin wall in Germany, and the Tiananmen Square protests in China, just to name a few. There was a strong optimism in the air, despite AIDS having brought fear to sexual relations. Political fights were rowdy. Leo paints, draws. Small gestures, almost silent actions.

In *Leo não consegue mudar o mundo* (1989), the artist sees himself – or perceives himself – as incapable of enacting any change in the world, of altering the chain of events and social injustices he witnesses. In the uppermost part of the work one reads that he can't change the world. Beneath the saying, his heart is flying over the “abismo” (“abyss”) and the “luzes” (“lights”), both words also painted on the canvas. That representation of a heart seems to be sitting on a bifurcated support, maybe indicating a rooting that prevents the desired movement. They could also be blood vessels connected to the heart – however, such structures, in the way they're depicted in the work, don't really exist in human anatomy. On white banners, one on each side, one reads: “inconformado” (“dissatisfied”, on the left) and “solitário” (“lonesome”, on the right). Thus, Leonilson seems to affirm being lonesome and dissatisfied, either simultaneously or according to the throbbing of his heartbeat. Or even that he's divided between one thing and the other. In this work's composition, words (over a bright background), distributed on the canvas, have the same weight as the representation of the heart in the centre.

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24 RANCIÈRE, Jacques. Paradoxos da arte política. In: RANCIÈRE, 2012, p. 64. (Our translation). The original text: [...] as estratégias dos artistas que se propõem mudar os referenciais do que é visível e enunciável, mostrar o que não era visto, mostrar de outro jeito o que não era facilmente visto, correlacionar o que não estava correlacionado, com o objetivo de produzir rupturas no tecido sensível das percepções e na dinâmica dos afetos.

The second possibility for Leonilson, after the diagnosis, was to change himself or his own world. Even if one can interpret Leonilson's world as being the same one as everyone else's, our reading is that the phrase "Leo pode mudar seu mundo" ("Leo can change his world") indicates a possibility for internal, personal change. In *O Monte das Oliveiras* (c. 1992) the words are almost hidden, almost imperceptible among the figures depicted (as opposed to the other examined painting) and distributed on a surface of uniform color. The figures have no clearly recognizable shape, despite vaguely evoking real objects. There are other equally almost invisible sayings on the painting (besides the one containing the artist's name): "a consciência" ("the consciousness"), "eu sou" ("I am"), "o firme pensamento" ("firm thought"), "a palavra viva" ("the living word"), "a minha maneira" ("my way"), "o monte das oliveiras" ("the mount of olives").

Leonilson's strong link with his Catholic upbringing allows for the association of his work with elements of Christian iconography. This can be seen in the two works discussed here: in the first one, through the presence of the heart and the dichotomy of "abismo" ("abyss") and "luzes" ("lights"); in the second, through the very title of the work. *O Monte das Oliveiras* ("Mount of Olives") is a religious reference to the area on the outskirts of the Old City in Jerusalem where, according to the Bible, Jesus taught his disciples. Other references to Christian teachings and to this holy site appear in *As Oliveiras* ("The Olive Trees", 1990), belonging to the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo<sup>25</sup>. In that work we find again the depiction of the heart – this time surrounded by various sayings, including the artist's signature and the date, some phrases that seem to be verses of poems, and a long list of substantives and adjectives that constitute human relationships.

Even the drop of blood, mentioned earlier as part of the work *O Perigoso*, can be understood as part of this iconography, since it evokes Jesus Christ and the suffering of crucifixion. Other links can be established between the artist's self-recognition in the figure of Christ: the brevity of his life and his sensibility towards the socially excluded, for example. Ivo Mesquita (2020) points out that the imminence of death caused by his disease brought the artist closer to the marginalized, to those to whom society gave and gives little or no value.

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25 Donated by Carmem Bezerra Dias and Theodorino Torquato Dias.

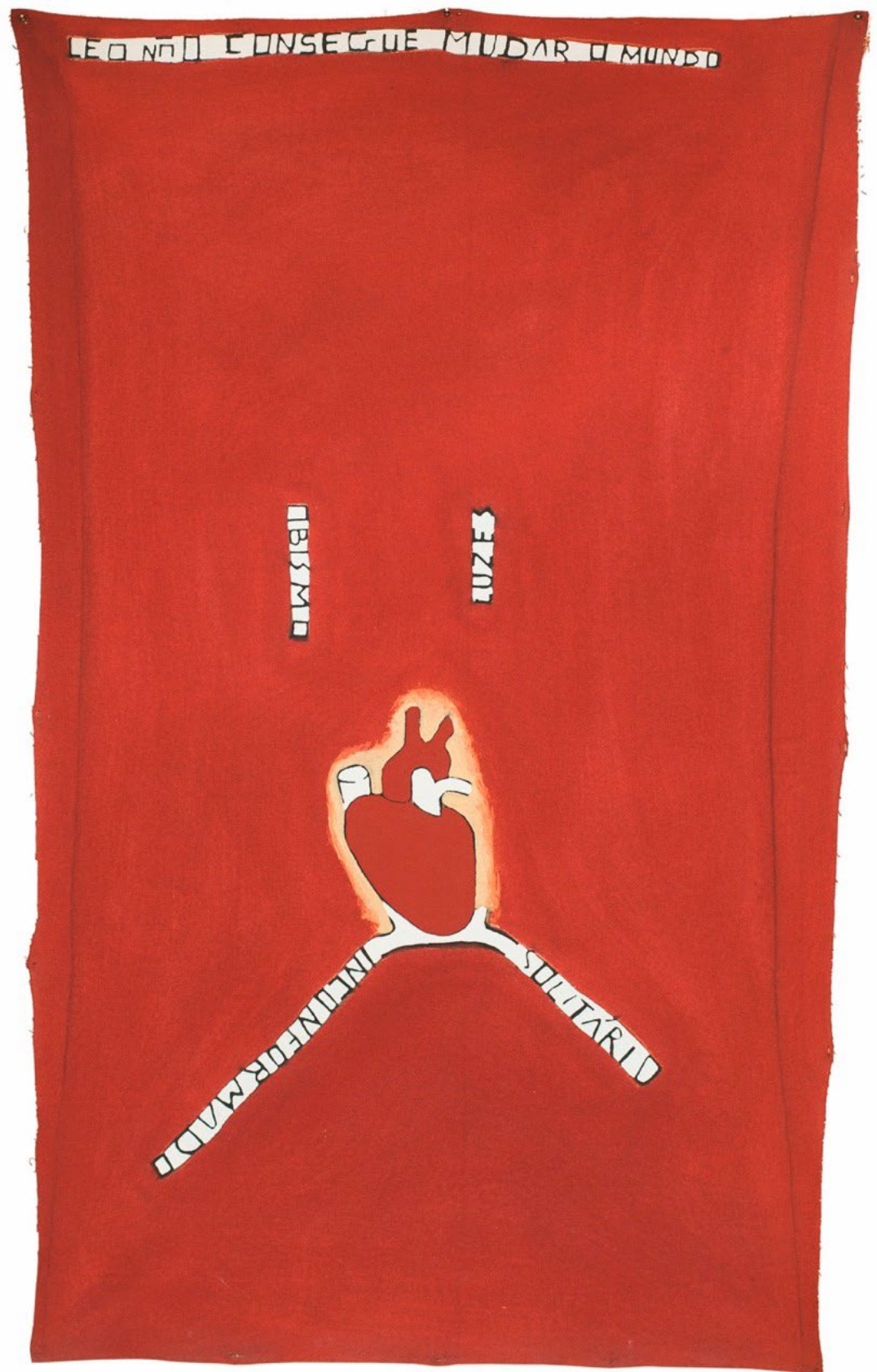


Figure 2  
Leonilson. *Leo não consegue mudar o mundo*, 1989. Acrylic paint and metallic paint on canvas, 156 x 95 cm. Projeto Leonilson, Edouard Fraipont





Figure 3  
Leonilson. *O Monte das Oliveiras*, c. 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 166 x 98 cm. Projeto Leonilson, Sergio Guerini

Another central point of attention is that, although his works are extremely personal, Leonilson considered them to be significant for the general public, since they could create their own connections between the pieces and their emotional issues. In Carlos Nader's movie *A Paixão de JL* ("The Passion of JL", 2015) there is a moment in which Leonilson comments on Brazil's political situation of the early 1990s and talks about himself in the third person and about his emotional investment in his work:

I think it's awesome [...] that in the middle of this madness [...] there's a guy who dedicates his time to making an artwork, something delicate [...], who places his heart in other people's hands, in other people's eyes.<sup>26</sup>

To counterpoint this delicate approach, Leonilson also resumes the theme of violence in the final phase of his work. Different from the literal violence that's part of the creation of his big format paintings in the 1980s, this phase's violence is symbolic and shows up in the content. Fabrícia Jordão (2021) quotes Leonilson on his awareness that even poetry can hurt if it approaches a theme that people don't want to hear about:

I don't overflow with violence, nor with the use of power, but I think that these little calm things are as uncomfortable as a gunshot to the forehead. Gay poetry, for people, hurts a lot. I wrote a poem about a boy I met on a plane, can you imagine? And told details...<sup>27</sup>

Part of Leonilson's artistic production in the last two years of his life is marked by exposing themes related to the finitude of life and by melancholy, solitude, and pessimism. That's what Ivo Mesquita (1995) comments on in *Para o meu vizinho de sonhos* ("To my dream neighbour") when he explains the influence of the AIDS crisis on artistic production of the time. Besides the negative aspect of it, however, the author lists other political possibilities for the understanding of the disease in the contemporary artist's imagination:

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26 *A PAIXÃO de JL*. Dir. Carlos Nader. São Paulo: Instituto Itaú Cultural, 2015. 1 video (82 min). Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNUsY1un51w>>. Accessed on 21 May 2021. (Our translation). The original text: *Eu acho o máximo, [...] que no meio dessa loucura, [...] tem um cara que dedica o tempo dele para fazer uma obra de arte, uma coisa delicada [...] entrega o coração dele na mão das pessoas, nos olhos das pessoas.*

27 LEONILSON. A dimensão da fala. [Interview by] Lisette Lagnado. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 88. (Our translation). The original text: *Eu não extravaso com violência, nem com o uso do poder, mas acho que as coisas calminhas cutucam tanto quanto um tiro na testa. Uma poesia gay, para as pessoas, machuca muito. Eu fiz uma poesia de um menino que eu encontrei num avião, você imagina? E contei detalhes...*





Figure 4  
Leonilson. *As Oliveiras*,  
1990. Watercolour,  
permanent marker pen  
and graphite on paper,  
25,4 x 20,1 cm.  
Projeto Leonilson,  
Edouard Fraipont

Taken up by some artists as a personal cause, as a way for the politicization of plastic language, the theme of AIDS becomes a matter of principle to save the erotic body from the delusions created by conservatism and prejudice.<sup>28</sup>

28 MESQUITA, Ivo. Para o meu vizinho de sonhos. In: LAGNADO, 1995, p. 193-194. (Our translation). The original text: *Tomada por alguns artistas como causa pessoal, como forma de politização da linguagem plástica, o tema da Aids se configura como uma questão de princípio para salvar o corpo erótico dos delírios do conservadorismo e do preconceito.*

In Jordão (2021), the author calls attention to Leonilson's choice to prioritize relationships of desire, eroticization, and affection in the representation of bodies, even in the bleakest moments of the AIDS crisis, as a counterpoint to the massive mediatic exposure of people debilitated by the disease. Even if his poetics are not militant, Jordão defends that his subjectivity provides a politics of affection and repositions what it means to be political in art.

Rancière (2012) demonstrates that the political being doesn't always present the features of revolt and opposition that are expected in its representation. In the dispute between what is or isn't political in art, the philosopher proposes a shift in perspective in order for us to understand to which models our expectations and judgement correspond according to that analysis. That construction is what defines which objects and subjects are socially accepted for political discussion and which are the relationships that define a political community.

Distancing himself from these models, the author then lists the existing variations in the approach of artists who aim to convey a message that promotes awareness; in order to do so, the author quotes examples that are completely diverse from each other. Thus, he concludes that:

The desire to re-politicize art manifests itself in very different strategies and practices. Such diversity doesn't only reflect the variety of means chosen to reach the same end; it reflects a more fundamental uncertainty about the end itself and about the configuration of the terrain, about what politics is and about what art does.<sup>29</sup>

Related to this thought, one can consider Leonilson's work for *Ano zero km sai por preço de banana* ("Brand new, never-driven year the same price as peanuts"), by Barbara Gancia, published in the column *Talk of the town* on 8 January 1992. In the text, the journalist comments pessimistically on the arrival of the new year, makes an ironic retrospective of 1991, and suggests possible new year predictions for the following months. In his drawing, Leonilson depicts a stairway that ends abruptly, indicating a steep and sudden fall, and with on the last step the saying "ano q. vem" ("next year"). Under the stairway one can read the sayings: "honestidade não dói"

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29 RANCIÈRE, Jacques. Paradoxos da arte política. In: RANCIÈRE, 2012, p. 52. (Our translation). The original text: *A vontade de repoliticizar a arte manifesta-se assim em estratégias e práticas muito diversas. Essa diversidade não traduz apenas a variedade dos meios escolhidos para atingir o mesmo fim. Reflete uma incerteza mais fundamental sobre o fim em vista e sobre a própria configuração do terreno, sobre o que é a política e sobre o que a arte faz.*



(“honesty doesn’t hurt”), “dignidade não fere” (“dignity doesn’t wound”), “namorar faz bem” (“dating does one good”).

That stairway can be read as the artist’s own trajectory, as a symbol for his own history, in which the abrupt end of the way and the implied fall are alluding to the end. According to this reading, the artist, in a premonitory manner – considering that he did die in 1992 –, points to the proximity of his own death; the prediction, however, doesn’t seem to frighten him, considering the optimist and advice-like tone of the phrases one can read in the drawing. The mention to “honestidade” (“honesty”) and “dignidade” (“dignity”) – also present in the work *As Oliveiras* (1990) – can be seen as another reference to Christian symbolism, since they also appear in religious writings. Furthermore, the phrases these words appear in, placed at the bottom part of the work, seem to suggest an absence of regret and the self-affirmation of the path his life has taken.

In all of his artistic production, the artist showed interest in the human body, in anatomy, and in metaphors for love. At the moment in which the fear of AIDS tries to confine the sexually free behaviour idealized in the previous decades, the artist, by adding “namorar faz bem” (“dating does one good”) to his work, tries to subvert the negation of body and sexuality, hardships brought about by the conservatism surrounding the disease.

Since then, his work strives to unmask rules, taboos, constraints, and limits of moral injunctions imposed on body and desire.<sup>30</sup>

Nowadays, identity manifestations have gained greater visibility in the art circuit, resulting in a greater number of artworks that approach these questions. The externalization of individualities, even when they are part of collective agendas, has acquired a far greater degree of acknowledgement in the art system. Various political struggles have been drawn anew and are often more explicit, including in art.

No one has the monopoly over the discourse about a work of art. The reading of an artist’s work is always open to the most diverse perspectives, which can vary with each period. Similarly, political positions manifest themselves

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30 MESQUITA, Ivo. Corpo vidente, corpo visível. In: LEONILSON: use, é lindo, eu garanto, 2006, p. 16. (Our translation). The original text: *Seu trabalho empenha-se, a partir de então, em desmascarar as regras, os tabus, os constrangimentos e os limites das injunções morais impostos ao corpo e ao desejo.*

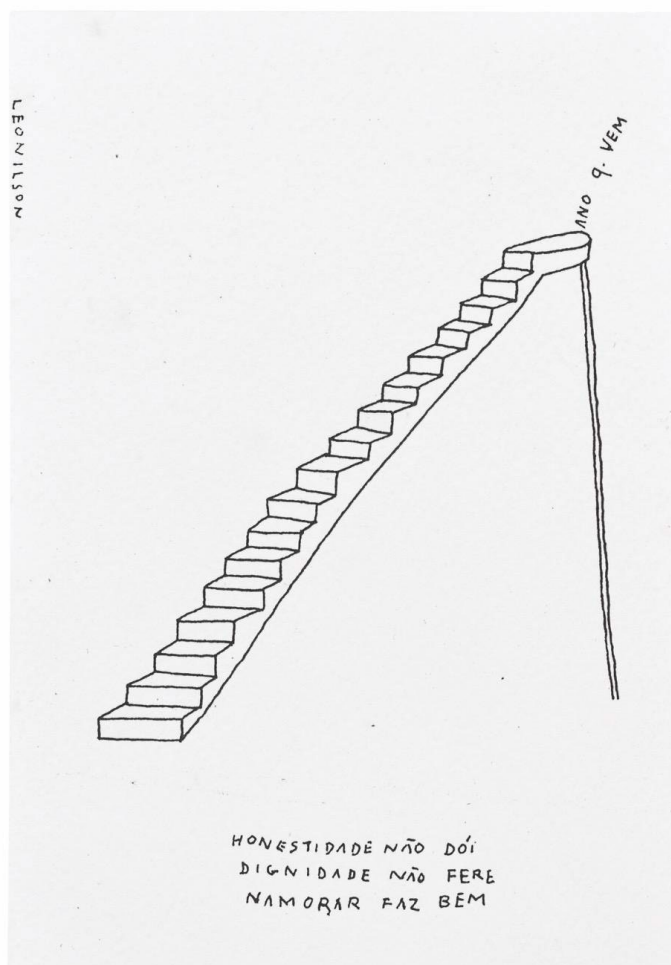


Figure 5  
[*Ano zero km sai por  
preço de banana*],  
1992. Permanent ink  
marker pen on  
paper, 18 x 12,5 cm.  
Projeto Leonilson,  
Eduardo Ortega

differently over time. The way these themes were approached by Leonilson in his work was perhaps not regarded, at the time, as explicitly political. That doesn't mean that a contemporary reading can't focus on the political nature of the work.

After analyzing the views of the authors discussed here in light of the perspective adopted by Fabrícia Jordão, we can, to answer the question in the title of this paper, propose an inversion of the hypothesis and conclude: biography and politics, that is Leonilson's body of work.

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