Leonilson and the Desires of the World

> A wonderful serenity has taken possession of my entire soul, like these sweet mornings of spring which I enjoy with my whole heart. I am alone, and feel the charm of existence in this spot, which was created for the bliss of souls like mine.
>
> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
> *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774

You, what do you desire the most in life? If you were going to a desert island and could only take one person, who would that be? And what would be your three wishes upon finding the ancient lamp? If you believe that these are fantastical, inconsequential questions, arising from Neverland, you are quite mistaken. Desire is the basis of all creation; in its absence, there is no reason to embark upon anything new. Whether in art or science, it is desire, either intuitive or intentional, that drives the person into the unknown, toward that witch has yet to be invented. From our tenderest age desire takes us through the mysterious pathways that will lead to what we might call destiny, but which is, in fact a well-seasoned mix of wishes and choices. The reason why the genie only grants three wishes, or why only one person can accompany you to the desert island, relates to the dilemma of choice.

To choose is to abandon. In the case of the artist, this means leaving behind what is not of interest and taking on risks, investing in one's personal view of the world and of one's own existence. Betting on all options is not only an impossible task, it is also uselessly dispersive. Essential for a deep and vertical dive is to concentrate and organize one's energies around a single and true intention. The challenge is to make the choices that refine this intention, defining what to do, and the best way to do it, working toward potentializing one's poetics, rendering them eloquent and effective through various attempts, calculations, lucubrations, and the demarcation of one's own criteria. This is how artists organize their desires, and subsequently organize the desires of the world.

***

The period of Leonilson's practice that I am reflecting upon here coincided with the end of twenty years of military dictatorship in Brazil, a period of no freedom of expression and harsh repression. The cultural forms tolerated by the regime went little beyond carnival and soccer. Museums and art institutions conjured a bleak, withered landscape, and the number of art galleries could be counted on the fingers of one hand. A glimpse of the possibility of presidential elections and a return to democratic freedoms brought a feeling of true euphoria about the future. The enthusiastic Léo, as he was known, was one of the 1.5 million people demanding *Diretas Já* (Direct Elections Now) at a rally held in April 1984 in São Paulo.

The art world, previously smothered by the heavy hand of censorship, and having suffered embargoes from foreign delegations to the Bienal de São Paulo, began to show signs of a vigorous return. New artists emerged from all over the country like water furiously spewing from burst dam. The groundbreaking exhibition *Como vai você, Geração 80?* ["How Are You, 80s Generation?"], held at the Parque Lage in Rio de Janeiro in 1984, featured123 artists, and had a thunderous, festive opening. The 1985 edition of the Bienal de São Paulo brought together several of the Italian and German members of the Transavantgardia, including its creator, Achille Bonito Oliva, reconnecting Brazilian culture with the international circuit. Leonilson participated in both events with the aplomb reserved to someone who had become "the best known" of the contemporary artists on the São Paulo–Rio axis, due to the successful media coverage of his simultaneous solo shows in 1983. The power of his imagery, along with his strong personality and assertive attitude, would influence a number of artists who were beginning to paint at that time.

***

Leonilson was born ready. All artists trust that they are special, that they have something to communicate that is unprecedented, but Leonilson's absolute certainty in this belief was truly astonishing. While many of his peers rehearsed imprecise affirmations and subjectivities in their work, Leonilson declared his poetics with utter

eloquence, confident in his artistic choices, whether in the execution of his paintings, drawings or installations. He knew the road he was travelling well, and beyond his art, he evoked a peculiar aura, whereby people became impressed by his personality and unique way of navigating the world. This would intuitively generate the circumstances that later would contextualize his journey. Leonilson's natural self-confidence came, in part, from his close proximity to experienced artists like Antonio Dias and Antonio Peticov, with whom he stayed in Milan, and also Jorge Guinle, who he saw during frequent visits to Rio de Janeiro. Leonilson extended bridges to the world around him and was infatuated with the generous range of possibilities that life offered, especially opportunities for exchange and travel that could push him towards rapid change. He always kept up with the times, subscribing to several international magazines, and visiting and hosting friends and artists from a slew of places. This intense social network fed both his artistic repertoire and romantic spirit, and ignited new friendships and collaborations. One case in point was Albert Hien, the German artist he met at the 1985 Bienal de São Paulo. The following year, they worked together in Germany, collaborating on sculptures and installations, which led to an exhibition at Walter Storms Galerie in Munich.

***

Obsessive is a good word to describe how Leonilson worked. With a restless mind that seemed unable to switch off, he would start the day early, in the converted garage studio of his home, located near his mother's house. He would paint standing up, resting the canvas on a high, wrought iron table, made especially for that purpose. At night he would sometimes continue to draw at the table in his bedroom, where he kept paper pads in a variety of sizes. At the beginning he used colored pencils, and at some point he switched to a Japanese black pen. It was unusual for him to make only one drawing; normally he would produce them in groups of three to five. Maintaining a state of intense yet relaxed concentration, he would make drawings imbued with an acute sense of synthesis, using clear and concise strokes, without wasted gestures. His images were organized with precision. Almost always narrative, figurative, and symbolic, they were often accompanied by equally concise texts with strong poetic

character. The words --written in block capitals like those used in handwritten notes-- did not necessarily make the works more understandable, but instead created double meanings that resulted from the dovetailing of what one sees with what one reads. The combination of these elements produced allegorical drawings that were rich in metaphor, with images whose meanings would change depending on how they were laid out. This way, Leonilson built a collection of signs, as if he were generating codes for secret messages. Certain images kept recurring: the heart, bridges and stairs, ships, bottles, and swords. In a sense, his images are close to those created by Joaquín Torres-Garcia, although Leonilson's visual language operates according to a highly personal narrative, communicating secrets and romantic conflicts. Metaphors thus emerge, such as a recurring small, erupting volcano, which evokes the potency of explosive events.

Leonilson's paintings required more of his energy. They were composed of additional elements, so they entailed greater risk overall, a larger number of decisions, and more time for organization. The paintings were made as directly as possible, with basic gestures, dispensing with multiple layers or coats of paint. With a defined image in mind, he would drag the paint over the canvas, which had already been prepared with a single-color background. He would form the figure as he applied the paint, using the brush as a broom. It was a continuous, uninterrupted process. He would make the paintings in a single go, from start to finish. Leonilson derived great joy from the results of each group of paintings, and rushed to hang them on the walls of his home, so that he could better observe them— and so that they could be seen by all of us.

The work had a strong diaristic nature and portrayed his experience of everyday life— dreams, loves, pains, films, and any kind of stimulus that moved his spirit. The characters were people who had crossed his path, recast with their personal stories into the subjective dimension of paintings, to live out a new existence perfected in intensity within a sentimental narrative as nuanced as a good cult film.

The elaboration of a deeper, more introspective identity came with time. Musings on loneliness, unrequited loves, and anguish became Leonilson's focus. Against this more disquieting backdrop, Leonilson came to develop, in his images, the incongruities

of the unknown, and the sudden amazement of encountering the unexpected. As a result, ample space around the figures began to appear in his work of this period. With this drastic spatial dilation, the figures came to inhabit an emptiness that could be read as a representation of uncertainty, of the reality of someone who is floating, existing without the ground under his feet.

Change was gradual and continuous, step by step. In 1991, a positive HIV test result was the determining factor for the acceleration of Leonilson's process of poetic synthesis. The tragic prospect of an abbreviated lifespan created a path where Leonilson's artistic practice increasingly reflected his interior landscape, rather than the outside world. Following his intuition and given his new medical circumstances, Leonilson turned his efforts to reaffirming the work he had developed so far, while also digging deeper. He drew upon and refined his earlier experimentations, and meticulously selected his supports: smooth fabrics, like felt and velvet; soft and thin fabrics, like silk and taffeta; or fabrics from daily use, like striped bed sheets, embroidered pillowcases, and cotton shirts. What stands out the most is his masterful use of voile as a visual element, creating extraordinary pieces that appeal to the senses through their gentle transparency and delicate texture, combined with precise embroidery in black thread, and the potent use of carefully chosen words.

Although Leonilson had previously appropriated objects such as buttons and pendants into his work, it was only through sewing and embroidering soft fabrics that his pieces became more sculptural and volumetric. In the works that evoke articles of clothing—the bag of *Mentiroso* (Liar); the long light-green skirt of *Fertilidade, coerência e silêncio* (Fertility, coherence and silence); and the curtains, or perhaps dress, of *O Penélope*—new associations between the meaning and form of each object are generated. Working at a rhythm that was somewhat too fast for his fragile physical condition, the artist conceived what came to be the final work shown during his lifetime. The installation *Sobre duas figuras* (About two figures) at Morumbi Chapel, São Paulo, in 1993, was made up entirely of elements which we might call soft objects. Mirrored cotton shirts—one upright, sown onto another, upside down—and two other shirts, with sleeves so long they dragged along the floor, were draped over three chairs and a

garment rack, placed around the rustic space of the chapel, creating a silent scene. The visuality of these objects, combined with the dramatic meaning of the embroidered texts that give them their titles—*Do bom coração* (About the good heart), *Da falsa moral* (About false moral), *Lázaro* (Lazarus), and *Los delícias* (Delicious Men)—produced ambiguous, oscillating, and dense poetic meanings. The humble architecture of the old chapel and its altar infused the installation with the sacredness of Catholic rituals, intensifying its overall theatricality. Leonilson's idea for this project was carefully drawn in a notebook that served as a guide for the installation. He lacked the strength to visit the exhibition in person, viewing it only via photographs.

***

Observing the positive reception of Leonilson's work after his death, and the ways in which it has been understood and appreciated, the extent to which his poetic discourse has been embraced is palpable. This is not a common phenomenon, not something that generally happens to artists who pass away, leaving behind their life's work. On the contrary, what often occurs is a gradual forgetting. In order for that posthumous identification on the part of the viewer to occur, it is necessary that the work embodies urgent issues relative to his time and moment. The work must contain something truly significant through which viewers can recognize themselves—something that, when revealed, connects with their perception of the world. The widespread desire of his audience to share Leonilson's diaristic imagery--containing the records of his experiences, feelings and confessions--confirms this identification.

Enchanted by the ideal of romantic love, Leonilson read Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in the first half of the 1980s and fully identified with the protagonist, perhaps more than he would have liked. He was struck by the young man's honesty and suffering, caused by the pain of unrequited love. The devastatingly romantic nature of the text, of the character who succumbs to destiny without the weapons to confront it, in some ways resonated with the reality of the early fatal cases of the AIDS epidemic. This reality brought with it the early recognition of the tragedy of untimely death, which came to haunt Leonilson's thoughts from then on.

After his death, Leonilson became someone different from the person that he was in life. A persona, as they say. This phenomenon happens to many artists who, due to the admiration they earn from the excellence of their work, are idealized. He now tends to exist as a loosely constructed and romanticized personality, born of the sum of the efforts to imagine him by those who did not know him, along with the efforts of those who knew him and fight not to forget him.

Leda Catunda, São Paulo, March 2020