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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Documenting the Queer Experience:
Self-Preservationist Tendencies in Gay Brazilian Artists

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Jesse M. Rocha

September 2022

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Aleca Le Blanc, Chairperson

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2022

The Thesis of Jesse M. Rocha is approved:

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Dedication

To every friend along the way.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Documenting the Queer Experience: Self-Preservationist Tendencies in Gay Brazilian Artists

by

Jesse M. Rocha

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Art History
University of California, Riverside, September 2022
Dr. Aleca Le Blanc, Chairperson

During the second half of the twentieth century, Brazilian society struggled with dictatorship, power struggles, and the HIV epidemic. Nevertheless, it was in these years, particularly the 1970's-1990's, when gay male artists in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo began experimenting with various media as a form of expressing their sexual identities. While much attention has been paid lately to networks of queer artists in white American and Chicax communities, scholarship on Brazilian gay artists from this era tends to look at them in isolation, if at all. Through a framework of analysis which draws on Freud's theory of narcissism, I assess the works of Alair Gomes, Hudinilson, Jr., and Leonilson as innovative method of self-preservation. These artists are each case studies of a distinct moment in Brazilian history: the dictatorship, Gay Liberation, and the AIDS crisis. Through this masters thesis, I begin a project which begins to put these artists into conversation with each other as contemporaries.

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Introduction

In 1979, the Brazilian artist Hudinilson, Jr. (1957-2013) began exploring the reproductive possibilities of mimeographs.¹ Xerox had just introduced their machine to Brazil, and over the course of the next two decades, Hudinilson made at least ten wide-ranging projects with it, spurred on by the machine's capacity for immediate mass reproduction. One series, *Ações Xerox* ("Xerox Actions;" 1979-80), signals two of the overarching themes discussed in this thesis: self-preservation and narcissism. Completely nude, Hudinilson climbed atop the photocopier's glass, contorting his body into new positions after each press of the button. At its core, *Ações Xerox* is a form of self-portraiture; the artist chose which parts of his body and from which angles to document himself through mimeographic reproduction. Self-portraiture in turn reflects an artistic instinct towards self-preservation - the documentation of the hand behind the brush. Similarly, self-portraiture is closely tied to narcissism, positing the artist's own self as the focal point for an audience. Artists throughout art history have created self-portraits to both ends: Diego Velazquez sought to elevate his social standing through his self-portrait in *Las Meninas*, while Frida Kahlo preserved various components of her identity through self-portraiture, such as in *The Two Fridas*. In this vein of art historical tradition, Hudinilson's Xerox works immortalize the artist's body as an act of narcissistic documentation, preserving the artist's sexual self against both time and social suppression.

¹ As it was recently introduced to and rapidly proliferated in Brazil, the Xerox machine gained popularity amongst contemporary artists for its relatively cheap and accessible nature.

Self-preservationist tactics were frequently deployed by avant-garde artists in Latin America over the twentieth-century. The artists discussed in this thesis, Alair Gomes (1921-1992); Hudinilson, Jr.(dates); and José Leonilson (1957-1993), were three gay men working in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro between the 1970s – 1990s and who deployed a range of strategies in their artworks as a form of immortalization. These tactics are particularly poignant in queer contexts in which artist’s legacies are often misconstrued, damaged, or erased due to stigma and prejudice. As art historians and curators C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz note in their 2017 exhibition *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, queer histories are often omitted from museums and libraries.² The estate a queer artist leaves behind is typically left in the care of loved ones with their own agendas, who may or may not elect to sanitize these belongings of any LGBTQ+ narratives. In addition to forms of self-portraiture, as with the previously described work by Hudinilson, and other biographical content they incorporated into their works, each artist also attempted to further enshrine or document his career by generating vast archival projects. These bodies of documents constitute counter-histories to the predominant narrative of mainstream scholarship by foregrounding the emotional in addition to the empirical. Alair and Hudinilson, for example, created expansive catalogues of their artworks and personal belongings, which were then maintained by family members and later donated to large museums and national libraries. All of the artists produced some form of a diary, with Alair writing

² C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, (Los Angeles and Munich: Prestel, 2018).

prolifically about his artworks, Hudinilson creating reference notebooks full of collages, and Leonilson recording audio diaries in his final years. All of these actions are a part of a larger desire to preserve one's memory.

I understand this as a response to the political oppression and violence of the totalitarian regimes that governed across the region, especially during the era of Operation Condor (1970's-80's), an alliance of right-wing governments.³ Individuals living under these Latin American dictatorships were subject to the very imminent threat of being "disappeared" at any time, referring to the system of forced abduction and murder conducted by government agencies or affiliates. These "*desaparecidos*" (disappeared) were abducted without a trace, leaving their whereabouts unknown. Under such a threat, the act of self-portraiture documents one's existence, thus serving as a political form of self-preservation. Totalitarian regimes and their censorship laws also severely policed or eliminated channels for information distribution and historical documentation which typically operate under democratic societies.⁴ Artists often secretly preserved their own records in their homes as a countermeasure to the strict censorship of the governments of the time, with many turning to media such as photography, video, and xerography as ways to document their own bodily presence.⁵

³ Operation Condor was a system of state terror which was supported financially by the United States, and enacted by Latin American regimes. Governments involved in Operation Condor included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and the United States.

⁴ Dictatorships of this type held power across Latin America for decades, including: Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina, Hugo Banzer in Bolivia, the Brazilian military dictatorship, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, among others.

⁵ Scholarship on art and archives in the U.S. often cites Hal Foster, "An Archive Impulse," *October* (Autumn, 2004): 3-22.

Self-preservation serves as the overarching thematic framework of this thesis, through which I interpret various artistic practices by gay men in Brazil in the 1970-90's. Building on a body of literature that incorporates archival theory, psychoanalysis, and social/cultural/political histories, I consider three case studies of the preservationist instinct within a specific demographic of Latin American artists. Emphasizing their shared identity as gay men, I will draw on psychoanalytic literature, specifically the concept of narcissism, as an applicable lens through which to understand the preservationist impulse. Weaving together socio-political, cultural, and art historical reference points, I contextualize these artists within a milieu of oppression, silencing, and bodily violence in order to interpret their artistic output as a form of self-defense and as protection of their memory.

Narcissism in Queer Art

Psychoanalytical practices have been championed and contested by art historians over the past five or six decades.⁶ While the methodology is no longer common, certain theories are useful as thematic throughlines which illuminate connections between the artists of this text. I focus on the psychoanalytical lens of narcissism to understand select works by the artists mentioned above and their propensities towards self-reflection and documentation. For the purposes of this project, I use the psychoanalytical definition of

⁶ For key art historical scholarship on the psychoanalytic method, see Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art.*, 1st edition (International Universities Press, Inc., 1952); Howard Hibbard, "A Psychoanalytic Approach to the History of Art," *Comparative Literature Studies* 4, no. 4 (1967): 357–62; Jack Spector, "The State of Psychoanalytic Research in Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 1 (1988): 49–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3051153>; Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429502200>; and Harvey Giesbrecht and Charles Levin, *Art in the Offertorium: Narcissism, Psychoanalysis, and Cultural Metaphysics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012).

narcissism that describes significant attention paid to the self, the self as an object of desire, and the self as an object to protect and preserve. For example, in Hudinilson's *Açôes Xerox* project described above, the artist's act of having sex with a machine capable of reflecting, yet never quite recreating the artist's body fosters an idea of self-pleasure which is paradoxically viracious. Furthermore, the mimeographic reproduction of the artist's body creates literal documentation of the artist's presence, sexuality, and virility. Across three chapters, I consider how Freud's theory of narcissism applies to specific projects by each artist, which I conclude function as forms of emotional and erotic self-preservation seen in their practices.

In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), art historian Kaja Silverman draws on sexuality and narcissism as a framework for understanding atypical expressions of masculinity. Drawing on Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976), Silverman analyzes sexuality as a human experience predicated upon its existence in, and which reaps eventual consequences from, the larger social order; she terms this dynamic "libidinal politics." Critical to her elaboration of a libidinal politics, which understands all sexual identification as implicated within a power dynamic, is the understanding of narcissism as a transgressive expression of power through which humans prioritize, and therefore cherish and protect, themselves and their bodies.⁷ Silverman focuses primarily on alternative masculinities, "masculinities whose defining desires and identifications are "perverse," in that they defy traditional power structures and occupy spaces traditionally

⁷ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992).

seen as feminine.⁸ Her argument is also useful in regards to alternative sexualities (here, in regards to homosexuality) in that at its core, Silverman's thesis deals with atypical negotiations with power.

Silverman draws heavily on a handful of scholars and sexual theories, especially on Austrian psychoanalyst and theorist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and his concept of narcissism put forth in "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914).⁹ While Freud's ideas are now considered highly controversial, from their publication until well into the 1990's, they garnered a significant following – art historians of the twentieth century commonly turned to Freud's theories as a method of interpretation. This is partially because several artists began to take interest in the field of psychoanalysis, of which Freud is regarded as a founding father. Yet Freud's theories of narcissism are not without their detractors: as psychologist Edward Sharpless notes, agreeing with Freud's theory implies agreeing that all human relationships "derive secondarily out of primary narcissism."¹⁰ Such a theory is often seen as simplistic and underdeveloped, reducing human relationality to the outcome of a singular stage of childhood development.¹¹

⁸ For more on alternative genders, see Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 2019).

⁹ Freud was active in Austria in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, formulating innovative theories on psychology and sexuality, building on a legacy of sexual psychoanalysts which included Paul Näcke, Havelock Ellis, and Isidor Sadger.

¹⁰ For other common problems associated with Freud's theory of narcissism, see Brian A. Sharpless, "The Critique of Eros: Freud on Narcissism and the Prospects for Romantic Love," *Psychodynamic Practice* 21, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 210–25.

¹¹ Eugene T Gendlin, "A Philosophical Critique of the Concept of Narcissism:," in *Pathologies of the Modern Self. Postmodern Studies on Narcissism, Schizophrenia, and Depression*, ed. D.M. Levin (New York: NYU Press, 1987), 40.

Put simply, Freud defined narcissism as a psychological phenomenon in which the individual chooses to pursue a sexual object which reminds them of themselves, as opposed to the more Oedipal impulse to pursue the image of the parent of the opposite sex. This impulse is attributed by psychoanalyst Isidor Sadger, one of Freud's contemporaries, as a symptom common to homosexual people, defining same-sex desire as an endless search for the self. Yet Freud theorized that narcissism plays a larger role in human sexual development, arguing that it constitutes a stage of growth all human beings experience which he termed "primary narcissism." In this stage, the human libido (the force which drives us to the fulfillment of life instincts such as survival, pleasure, and reproduction) is directed towards its own body during early childhood. The child's body is the only referent it has for pleasure, causing it to become its own ideal pleasure-object. We emerge from this state when the ego (the reality-principle) develops, and we look to the outside world for pleasure. Nevertheless, Freud posited that narcissism persists in tension with the ego, and it is then that homosexual desires form as we seek to regain the state where we were our own ideal. In Freud's words, "narcissism...[is the] libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature."¹² Narcissism in this light acts as a form of survival through sexual impulses.

While Freud's theory of narcissism extends beyond homosexuality, the two have become closely linked in gender and sexuality studies due to the widespread nature of the

¹² Sigmund Freud (1914), *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, (Reiditch, England: Read Books Ltd., 2013), 73-74.

model of sex-object selection that Freud proposes as the basis of homosexual attraction. In his writing on sexuality, Freud theorized that homosexuality was inherently narcissistic, arguing that the chosen sexual object for same-sex desire reflected a fetish for the self.¹³ Indeed, many scholars of queer culture promote Freud's theory, arguing that homosexual practices, including libidinal transactions and creative productions, are in truth a search for the unattainable self.¹⁴ In the chapters that follow, I use Freud's theory as a starting point to interrogate acts of narcissism in the works of Hudinilson, Alair, and Leonilson. These artists were homosexual men. Hudinilson possessed a strong interest in the psychological foundations of sexual attraction and homoeroticism, although his analytical endeavors were more introspective than academic. In *Açôes Xerox*, for example, mimeographs and photo-documentation of the piece produce visual records of the artist's body as a sexual object of desire. While these artists' desires and reflections may not be as psychological as Freud theorized, these men certainly did display significant tendencies towards self-reflection, auto-libidinal desire, and self-preservation as will be discussed in the analyses of their work.

While Freud, a Viennese psychiatrist from the early twentieth century might appear incommensurate with three Brazilian artists in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro decades later, in fact, his theories are relevant in this context due to the close ties between

¹³ See Sigmund Freud (1914), *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, (Reiditch, England: Read Books Ltd., 2013).

¹⁴ See Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992); Earl Jackson, Jr, *Strategies of Deviance Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Steven Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

Brazil and Europe, and a history of the former emulating the latter. Alair, Hudinilson, and Leonilson belonged to a sector of cosmopolitan Brazilian society that felt a strong affinity with European culture. Their numerous travels exposed them to European culture and philosophy, which were not inhospitable to affluent and educated white Brazilians. While the nation shares a political and linguistic history with Portugal, the nation saw itself as the inheritor of a broader European system which drew strongly on British and French customs. As Britain offered the nation protection in exchange for access to Brazilian trading ports, the British crown began to exert more and more economic influence over Brazil, even as it remained a dominion of Portugal. France, on the other hand, became the paragon of aesthetics that Brazilian arts sought to emulate.¹⁵ Brazilian preparatory schools taught French as a second language, as the language was viewed as synonymous with culture; and affluent youth often went on grand tours of Western Europe.¹⁶ White Brazilian culture during the twentieth century did not view European ideas as incompatible with Brazilian ones. Rather, these elite Brazilians saw Europe as a model upon which they might improve. As Brazilian literary scholar and critic Santiago Silviano notes, “the (American) copy can only be “real” at the moment in which it surpasses the (European) model.”¹⁷ During the twentieth century, numerous European individuals

¹⁵ Rafael Cardoso Denis, “Academicism, Imperialism, and National Identity: the Case of Brazil’s *Academia Imperial de Belas Artes*,” in *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2000): 53-70.

¹⁶ Renata Archanjo, “Moving Globally to Transform Locally? Academic Mobility and Language Policy in Brazil,” *Language Policy* 16, no. 3 (August 1, 2017): 291–312.

¹⁷ Silviano Santiago, *The Space In-Between: Essays on Latin American Culture*, trans. Ana Lucia Gazzola, Tom Burns, and Gareth Williams (Duke University Press Books, 2002), 23.

served as sources of inspiration for Brazilian intellectuals, such as the Swiss architect Le Corbusier and French philosopher Michel Foucault. Furthermore, the displacement of a high population of innovators from Europe to Brazil during the mid-century meant that cultural connections between the two continued to grow: photo theorist Vilem Flusser and architect Lina Bo Bardi were both influential thinkers in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It is therefore not particularly anachronistic to utilize Freud in this context – the European and white Brazilian identity share several overlaps.

A critical component of narcissism is the impulse of human beings to archive their lives and protect their memory. This practice is particularly evident in the artistic practices of Alair, Hudinilson, and Leonilson. In his photographs of young, muscular men in various stages of undress, for instance, Gomes documented his own libidinal desires. In Hudinilson's case, through the intensive archiving he conducted over the span of decades, he created his own repository in order to protect his legacy. Leonilson produced nontraditional self-portraits as an act of immortality. These practices adhere to a narcissistic principle, the attempt to preserve a form of the self which will inevitably disappear. As Silverman interpreted, a key tenet of Freud's theory of narcissism is the search for an earlier version of the self, one which is deemed unattainable due to its existence in the past.¹⁸ In this sense, libidinal desires such as those displayed by the artists are also quasi-archival in nature, with the individual attempting to reconstruct a memory of what he once was.

¹⁸ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 179.

The Archive

This thesis explores three artists who produced transgressive art works, and managed to preserve and record their legacies despite operating outside of traditional notions of the archive. The artworks addressed involve the visual, indexical, or literal presence of bodies, such as a photo series on sex and virility, photodocumentation of an erotic interaction with machinery, and the incorporation of human blood into a drawing. While there are textual elements to some of these artworks, they are often marginal or ornamental.

Archival practices in particular are significant for writing histories and creating and sustaining power.¹⁹ As historian Kirsten Weld notes in her book *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (2014), archives act as “instruments of political action...enablers of gaze and desire, and sites of social struggle...”²⁰ Her assessment aptly points to the agential potentials to be found in historical documents, but also to the humanistic nature of knowledge production such as cadavers, desire, struggle; these all function as reminders of the human presence in history. When governmental policies eliminate certain histories from the archive, they simultaneously deny certain communities as well. To quote Weld, “the writing of history *is* political.”²¹ Therefore, it

¹⁹ For more on the archive as a mechanism of power, see Michael Lynch, “Archives in Formation: Privileged Spaces, Popular Archives and Paper Trails,” in *History of the Human Sciences* 12, no. 2 (May 1999); and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

²⁰ Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014), 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

is not surprising that artists living during Brazil's dictatorship turned to the personal archive as a way to circumvent their erasure.

Forms of archiving which eschew the traditional written text are particularly poignant in Latin America, as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor notes in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003). Throughout the text, Taylor presents two forms of knowledge transmission which exist in tension: the archive, a textually-based system of documentation; and the repertoire, an ephemeral cache of gestures performed by a living body. Performance as an embodied praxis, she writes, is “vital in redefining Latin American studies because it decenters the historic role of writing introduced by the [European] Conquest.”²² Taylor's theories on the archive are a starting point for understanding the difference between forms of knowledge and its transmission. Her emphasis on the prevalence of embodied knowledge as key to archival practices is critical to this thesis, yet I nuance her argument in order to better understand how these artists created subversive documentations of themselves. This thesis takes Taylor's assessment further to note that through their innovative appropriation of diverse media, all of the artists included in this text defy the mainstream mode of history-making. Through covert photography, the transformative repurposing of a conventional office machine, and the evocative use of a feminist medium, Alair, Hudinilson, and Leonilson evade the limitations of state-written histories, inserting their own bodies and desires into their practices.

²² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 17.

Beyond their political and material natures, the archival practices of these artists are even more transgressive in that they are queer. All three identified as gay men, and while they would not have referred to themselves as “queer,” we can still look at these case studies through the lens of queer archival theory in order to illuminate how each artist subversively documented their presence, thus taking ownership of their legacy. Queer archival scholarship is characterized by discussions of those qualities which make the archive imperfect; in other words, there is a depth of scholarship that attempts to explore the gaps and biases of the archive. These qualities are those which the empirical tradition of academia has deemed unscholarly and therefore not worth acknowledging as worth saving. Such objects evoke qualities like the romantic, the ephemeral, and the fragmentary.²³ These qualities appear often in, for example, Leonilson's documentations of his emotions, in Hudinilson's performance pieces, and in Alair's fragmented photo narratives. Scholars of queer Latinx culture such as José Esteban Muñoz and Robb Hernández have written on these archival concepts not as flaws but as mechanisms through which academic can interpret queer histories outside of the heteropatriarchal framework that has thus far marginalized these communities; these qualities importantly allow for nuanced understandings of the human experience and intersectional interpretations of archival records.

²³ For information on the romantic element in the archive, see Richard Cox, “The Romance of the Document,” in *Records and Information Management Report* 22, no. 1 (2006): 1-13. To read on the ephemeral element in the archive, see José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (January 1, 1996): 5-16; To read on the fragment in the archive, see Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana Avant-Garde* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

Historical Context

The trio of artists included here witnessed events of major political and social consequence in Brazil's two major cities; a military dictatorship (1964-1985), the Gay Liberation Movement (c. 1978-1981), and the HIV/AIDS crisis (c. 1982-ongoing). In their works, Alair, Hudinilson, and Leonilson responded to the violence of the authoritarian regime, the self-realization of their homosexual desires, and the trauma of the epidemic, both head-on and obliquely. Even though they were not collaborators, this project brings them into dialogue as introspective explorers who each turned to a specific array of media as channels for examining their own emotional lives and experiences within a particular time and place.

The international wave of gay civil rights activism arrived relatively late to Brazil, compared with other nations on the global stage. While the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York catalyzed the movement significantly, gay civil rights efforts had gained momentum in such places as the United States and United Kingdom as early as the 1960's. Demonstrations in coastal metropolises in the U.S. sparked a nation-wide movement, which led to the world's first gay pride parades in 1970.²⁴ In London, a collective Gay Liberation Front manifesto was penned in 1971, and soon after activists produced conferences and independent media publications to disseminate information. In Latin American countries, the beginnings of the gay rights movement were evident in the early to mid-seventies. In Argentina, a nation that struggled with oppressive dictatorships

²⁴ Some of these demonstrations in the U.S. include the Cooper Do-Nut Riot in Los Angeles, 1959; Compton's Cafeteria Riot in Oakland, 1966; and the Stonewall Riots in New York, 1969; the first pride parades took place in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York in 1970.

for much of the twentieth century, the seeds of activism sprouted as early as 1969 with the founding of Latin America's first gay rights association, *Grupo Nuestro Mundo*.²⁵ In 1971, a secret movement, the *Movimiento de Liberación Homosexual*, arose in Mexico City.²⁶ Fear of persecution ended the Mexican movement after a year. Likewise, homophobic violence and political instability had halted the Buenos Aires movement by 1974.

The first waves of queer activism in Brazil were centralized in the urban cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, two of the nation's largest and oldest metropolitan centers. Queer communities often find refuge in urban climates, as the larger populations and fast-paced environments often allow for a certain degree of anonymity. Inversely, the large population also means there are greater numbers of queer individuals who can collectivize, support one another, and create safer spaces for themselves. *Posto 9* beach in Rio's Ipanema neighborhood and *Rua Frei Caneca* in São Paulo's Jardins sector have for decades been the sites of queer community in which performativity, networking, and exchange occurs. Beaches in Rio, where men scantily clad in their *sungas* (a popular Brazilian swimsuit) exercise and socialize, often provide a welcoming atmosphere for homosexual men to gaze upon their objects of desire. In the 1940-60's, São Paulo's economic boom expanded the cities' consumer culture, bringing bars, clubs, and saunas, where gay men could meet amidst the hustling crowds of the city. Large parks such as

²⁵ Stephen Brown, "'Con Discriminación y Represión No Hay Democracia': The Lesbian Gay Movement in Argentina," *Latin American Perspectives* 29, no. 2 (2002): 119–38.

²⁶ Abby Peterson, Mattias Wahlström, and Magnus Wennerhag, *Pride Parades and LGBT Movements* (Taylor & Francis, 2018).

Parque do Flamengo in Rio and *Parque do Ibirapuera* in São Paulo encouraged nighttime cruising, protecting clandestine trysts between closeted men in their dark recesses. It is in these cities that Alair, Hudinilson, and Leonilson lived, worked, and drew inspiration from the urban landscape, and where queer activism gained a foothold within the nation.

Historians such as James N. Green, an expert on the rise of homosexual communities in urban Brazil, often situate the beginning of the Brazilian Gay Liberation Movement with the beginning of *Abertura* (literally, “Opening”) in 1978. *Abertura* can be described as the period of democratic expansion in the final years of the military dictatorship that held power from 1964-1985. While there was surely some element of queer community and production before this year, those bonds remained underground and decentralized during the dictatorship. Green and other historians argue that 1978 demarcates the time when homosexual groups began to establish official, traceable networks. That is the year that democratic re-opening began, in earnest, with the repeal of *Ato Institucional 5 (AI-5)*, one of the dictatorship’s most oppressive laws, enacted a decade prior, that suspended habeas corpus, closed national congress, legalized the censorship of all media, mail and cultural events, and indoctrinated capital punishment and torture of suspected perpetrators. The repeal of *AI-5* meant that social movements began to re-emerge from the periphery, with groups dedicated to advocating for women’s rights, Afro-Brazilian rights, workers’ rights, among other issues. It was then that gay activist groups truly began to make explicit challenges to the status quo.

Academics in Rio and São Paulo spearheaded an alternative newspaper in 1978 called *Lampião da Esquina* (“The Lamppost”), a periodical by and for gay men, which

aimed to highlight gay issues and begin to bring homosexuality away from the margins of society.²⁷ In its inaugural edition, the editors outlined the newspaper's goals as such:

“What matters to us is to destroy the average image of the homosexual, according to which he is someone who lives in the shadows, prefers the night, views his sexual preference as a curse, is prone to affected gesturing, and always fails in any attempt to realize himself more broadly as a human being...”²⁸

Such a mission statement reflects a broader attempt in gay liberation movements to shift the public understanding of a homosexual man from a depraved, superficial individual, into a nuanced, intellectual being. The wording of the phrase itself highlights the activism-based nature of the periodical. The “destruction” of an accepted image and the concept of self-realization resonated with other political movements fighting for civil rights during *Abertura*. The publication's founders capitalized on the newly relaxed press laws, disseminating information on homosexual culture, musings on identity, and commentary on social and artistic productions across the nation until 1981.

It was also in these years that the first gay rights groups were founded. Brazil's first gay liberation collective, *Somos: Grupo de Afirmação Homossexual* (We are: Homosexual Affirmation Group), founded in São Paulo in 1978, served as a

²⁷ The publication put out thirty-eight issues between 1978 and 1981, reaching a national circulation of up to 15,000 copies at its height. The founders and editors of *Lampião da Esquina* included film critic Jean Claude Bernardet; poet and art critic Francisco Bittencourt; journalist Adão Costa; journalist Antonio Chrysóstomo; journalist Gasparino Damata; anthropologist Peter Fry; journalist Clóvis Marques; journalist João Antônio Mascarenhas; visual artist and writer Darcy Penteado; journalist Agnaldo Silva; and filmmaker and writer João Silvério Trevisan. For more see Alexandre Magno Maciel Costa e Brito, “O lampião da esquina : uma voz homossexual no Brasil em tempos de fúria (1978-1981)” Masters thesis, (Universidade de Brasília, 2016); Carlos Ferreira, “Imprensa Homossexual: surge o Lampião da Esquina,” *Revista Alterjor* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–13.

²⁸ *Lampião de Esquina*, Edition 0, April 1978, 2.

“consciousness-raising group” in its early years.²⁹ In an homage to Argentine homosexual activism, the group took its name from the Buenos Aires periodical *Somos* (1973-76).³⁰ In the late 1970’s, members of the Brazilian *Somos* participated in university panels, debates, and protest marches against racial discrimination and the oppression of workers’ unions. These actions underscore the intricate connections between education, activism, and identity, which were developed in São Paulo by grassroots activists of the 1970-80’s.³¹

The delay to Brazil’s Gay Liberation Movement is largely due to religious customs and political extremism. Brazil is a nation founded, in part, on Catholicism. Church and state have been officially separated since the nation’s founding in 1888, yet the church’s doctrine was hegemonic well into the late twentieth century.³² As the largest nation of Catholic practitioners, Brazilian identity is closely intertwined with religious affiliation. While the population continues to become less devout,³³ Catholicism is still a

²⁹ James N. Green, “The Emergence of the Brazilian Gay Liberation Movement, 1977-1981,” *Latin American Perspectives* 21, no. 1 (1994): 44.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ The legacy of these early efforts persists in the city today. According to Guinness World Records, São Paulo has been the home of the world’s largest LGBTQ+ pride parade since 2006. It is also the site of Latin America’s only museum dedicated to sexual identity, the Museu da Diversidade Sexual, established in 2012.

³² Catholicism has lost a great deal of its influence in Brazil over the past century, with polls indicating that Catholic Brazilians will cease to be the country’s religious majority in 2022. This is due, in part, to the rise of evangelicalism and secularism, as well as discontent in the population with the strict traditionalism of Catholic customs. James Roberts, “Brazil to Stop Being Majority Catholic This Year, Polls Suggest,” *The Tablet*, January 18, 2022.

³³ Reports indicate that since 1970, there has been “an almost sevenfold increase” in the number of Brazilians with no religious affiliation. Curtis P. Ogland and Ana Paula Verona, “Religion and the Rainbow Struggle: Does Religion Factor Into Attitudes Toward Homosexuality and Same-Sex Civil Unions in Brazil?,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 61, no. 9 (September 2, 2014): 1334–49.

common component of a Brazilian upbringing, and often leads to a certain level of internal conflict for homosexual men. Alongside its deep-rooted Catholic heritage, twentieth-century Brazil was marked by a gradually strengthening evangelical Christian movement. In the 1950-80's, evangelical leaders were adaptive to national sentiments and capitalized on the rapidly growing urban centers of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to gain followers.³⁴ Utilizing television programming and other forms of mass media to reach broader audiences, they tied *brasilidade*, a patriotic notion of “Brazilian-ness,” to religion, employing nationalistic rhetoric to exploit the everyday citizen’s identity. They equated moral sanctity, including heterosexuality, with the essence of the Brazilian citizen.³⁵ This growing trend of moralizing politics existed concurrently with gay rights movements in Brazil, causing conflict in the social sphere.

In addition to religious tension, gay Brazilian men also had to grapple with political polarization; the military dictatorship that held power from 1964 until 1985 exacerbated pre-existing tensions. Colonial Brazil had outlawed sodomy as an offense punishable by hard labor, property seizure, and even burning. While references to sodomy were later removed, other laws such as Article 280 of the Imperial Penal Code of 1830 allowed law enforcement a vast amount of leeway in interpretations of public indecency. Under such ambiguous terms, men and women who appeared to deviate from

³⁴ Paul Freston, “Pentecostalism in Brazil: A Brief History,” *Religion* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 1995): 119–33.

³⁵ Over the past thirty years, Evangelical leaders have made inroads into Brazilian politics, notably gaining congressional power, pushing for the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff, and winning the presidency with Jair Bolsonaro. These politicians instituted a series of conservative legislation which continues to threaten the LGBTQ community.

the heterosexual norm were subject to up to forty days of jail time.³⁶ The twentieth century, with the arrival of modernity, industrialization, and urban expansion, appeared to offer new opportunities for queer communities to thrive, yet this was short-lived. When the U.S. began to suspect pro-Communist sentiments in Brazil, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) lent support to a military coup that resulted in the overthrowing of President João Goulart in April 1964. The following regime quickly restricted civil liberties. The strictest form of censorship, the aforementioned *AI-5*, was the most severe of a number of laws which curtailed possible avenues for dissent and perceived deviance, even going so far as to dissolve congress. The military government's new policies prohibited publications, artistry, or public displays that offended *moral e bons costumes*, or "morals and public decency." Overt homosexuality, included in this list, conflicted with the conservative agendas of the regime. The rise of a progressive social movement posed a threat to the government's power, and the bureaucrats took great care to eliminate all possible societal transgressions.

The Brazilian Left and underground rebel networks, the second most-publicized political faction during the dictatorship, did not offer a safe haven for homosexuality either. The rebels viewed homosexuality as feminizing and detrimental to manhood, a deviance which, James Green notes, "disrupted a pervasive construction of revolutionary masculinity." This sentiment is not surprising, as revolutionaries often turn to notions of

³⁶ James N. Green, "LGBTQ History and Movements in Brazil," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, September 28, 2020.

fraternity and ideal manhood in order to garner support and unity.³⁷ Furthermore, many of the rebels were raised Catholic, and there is little evidence that many of the prominent members of the radical Left questioned the predominant, negative view of homosexuality in religious doctrine. Catholicism as a key component of Brazilian identity played a role in the homophobic policies of both the dominant political factions of the time.³⁸

According to Green, both the military and the revolutionary Left “relied on the traditional Catholic teachings that considered homosexuality to be a moral abomination.” In this lens, homosexuality equated to not just a moral, but also a civic vice, which had the power to weaken the strength of any political faction. This damning view of sexual “deviation” led gay men to feel alienated from their communities, pushing them out of their homes and often towards the anonymity they could find in the metropolitan centers of Rio and São Paulo. In 1978, the military government began to repeal censorship policies, as the initial stages of *Abertura* began. This would continue until 1985, when the dictatorship officially ended. This period of time overlaps with yet another struggle within the gay community: the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

³⁷ In Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierette Hondagnue-Sotelo and Michael Messner’s “Introduction: Sex and Gender Through the Prism of Difference,” the authors describe how masculinity is defined by the need to assert dominance over femininity, and therefore, it is often intertwined with conceptions of and struggles for power. Baca Zinn, Maxine, Pierette Hondagnue-Sotelo, and Michael Messner. “Introduction: Sex and Gender through the Prism of Difference”. In *Gender through the Prism of Difference*, edited by Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierette Hondagnue-Sotelo, and Michael Messner, 1–10. 3rd ed, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 4.

³⁸ Even in the early stages of U.S. involvement in Brazil, Catholicism played a role as a supporter of intervention in the politics of Brasília. In 1963, Cardinal Cushing of Boston began publishing *Latin America Calls!*, a magazine dedicated to illuminating the threat that Communism posed on Catholicism in Latin America.

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first reported in 1981 as clusters of gay men in the United States fell ill with unusual conditions that signaled a weakened immune system. A year later, the *New York Times* labeled the condition “GRID,” or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, an appellation that reflected the mystery surrounding the virus and its negative association with male homosexuality. AIDS was originally seen as a rich white gay man’s disease, with newspaper headlines such as “Gay Cancer Researched in the U.S.,” and references to the disease as the “gay plague” tainting public perception of the virus as a strictly homosexual issue. Later in 1982, the United States Center for Disease Control officially coined the term AIDS, removing the association with homosexuality in a clinical setting. Yet the cultural connotation of the disease was already ingrained. It would be another year before French scientist Dr. Françoise Barré-Sinoussi and her team would discover the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV, which causes the condition. The perfect storm of a mysterious disease, marginalized demographic, and bureaucratic negligence resulted in chaos and paranoia. This only served to exacerbate prejudices against gay men to the point where the grassroots activists had to act alone in the push for acknowledgement and action.

By 1982, HIV/AIDS had a global presence, with reports coming from countries across Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Brazil reported its first case in 1982. A strong tide of grassroots activism emerged in the early 1980’s; in several locations, small and grassroots organizations took action to spread awareness and curb the spread of the virus. Numerous artists played a role in this activism, including Hudinilson, Jr., who credited

himself as the designer of the first AIDS poster in Brazil (Figure 1).³⁹ The movement benefited from key precedents in the 1960-80's, such as major healthcare reforms that established free universal healthcare. Many of the advocates also were part of the healthcare movement, plus several members of the 1970's Revolutionary Left, participated in HIV/AIDS prevention activism.⁴⁰ These combined factors allowed the nation to react to the epidemic swiftly and efficiently.

Pre-existing sociopolitical infrastructure in urban hubs in Brazil made them prime locations for mobilizing against HIV/AIDS. São Paulo was the first state in all of Latin America to respond to the epidemic, establishing the AIDS Reference and Treatment Center in 1983. *Grupo de Apoio a Prevenção a AIDS* in São Paulo (GAPA) and the *Associação Brasileira Interdisciplinar de AIDS* in Rio (ABIA) were two non-governmental organizations established in 1985 and 1986, respectively, by grassroots networks of queer Brazilians. Government bureaucrats were especially receptive to HIV/AIDS activists, as civic officials sought to distance themselves from the dictatorship through progressive legislation. These bureaucrats and activists established a public-private framework in 1985, which involved a progressively increased amount of collaboration between the two in order to disseminate productive and inclusive prevention materials to target audiences. In 1989, the World Bank began funding national

³⁹ Paulo Miyada, "To Caress, To Fondle, To Covet: Hudinilson, Jr.," *Mousse Magazine*, July 14, 2020.

⁴⁰ Former guerrilla radical, Herbert Daniel, was particularly active in this movement. He founded Grupo Pela Vidda, the first domestic organization for HIV-infected individuals and their loved ones, in 1989, and served as the director of ABIA in 1991. For more on Herbert Daniel and his activism, see James N. Green, *Exile within Exiles: Herbert Daniel, Gay Brazilian Revolutionary*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018).

initiatives to curb the spread of AIDS and finance treatment for the infected. This funding was critical to Brazil's HIV/AIDS response, which quickly became known as an exemplar of success on the global stage.⁴¹

Chapter Descriptions

In the three chapters that make up this thesis, I focus on a single artist in each, constructing a case study of how three individuals working under the dictatorship, emergence of Gay Liberation, and the AIDS crisis utilized various media in order to construct alternative narratives to the mainstream art scene. There are some significant commonalities among the three that are important to note: they are affluent white men, with prestigious educations and supportive families. In future stages of this project, I intend to explore the absences of female, AfroBrazilian, indigenous, and transgender artists in this narrative, and hopefully to illuminate more intersectional histories in this context. In the following three chapters, I interpret how three men of similar backgrounds and identity all displayed tendencies towards narcissism in their artistic productions, and how this characteristic is in fact a symptom of a survival instinct.

The first chapter of this thesis deals with Rio-based photographer, Alair Gomes. Living under the censorship of the dictatorship for most of his artistic career, Alair worked in various states of privacy, usually taking photographs within or from the safety of his own beachside apartment. In his vast cache of black-and-white images, Alair captured the sensual eroticism and physical virility of the nude or semi-nude male body,

⁴¹ For more, see Rafael de la Dehesa, "NGOs, Governmentality, and the Brazilian Response to AIDS: A Multistranded Genealogy of the Current Crisis," *Feminist Studies* 43, no. 2 (2017): 262–90, <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.43.2.0262>.

while drawing on canonical aesthetic traditions in a manner which illuminates the beauty and respectability of the pornographic image. His chosen medium, photography, loudly echoes the themes of documentation and preservation inherent to theories of narcissism. The men of Alair's repertoire are not merely models – they are visual records of Alair's libidinal impulses. Furthermore, Alair's decision to photograph these young men hints at a yearning for his own past, as they possess a youth and virility which the middle-aged artist had already lost.

In the second chapter, Hudinilson, Jr. takes the foreground. The São Paulo-based artist came of age in the final years of the dictatorship, and was particularly active in activist circles. His use of a broad spectrum of visual media was a reflection of the artist's prolific interests in communication, innovation, and sexual exploration. Fascinated by the myth of Narcissus, Hudinilson turned to art, particularly xerography, as a means through which he could not only discover, but immortalize himself as an object of desire. He displayed archival impulses in his use of collage as well, and his meticulously curated personal records further buttress this reading of the artist's practices as narcissistic.

The third chapter turns to another São Paulo native, the draughtsman and embroiderer Leonilson. Well-known in Brazil as one of the most promising artists of his generation, he used his artworks as cathartic manifestations of his own emotional journeys, reconciling first with his identity as a gay man in a Catholic society, and then with his diagnosis with HIV, from which he died at the age of 36. Through embroidery, Leonilson worked against the trauma of contracting and living with AIDS, creating

nontraditional portraits of himself that defied the decay of his physical self and seeking to preserve himself against the natural instincts of death.

Figures



Figure 1.1 Hudinilson, Jean-Claude Bernardet, and Darcy Penteadó. Poster for HIV Prevention. Date and dimensions currently unknown.

Chapter 1: Cataloguing Desire: Alair Gomes' Sexual Icons and Idols

The oeuvre of Brazilian photographer Alair Gomes (1921-1992) is an immense catalogue of over 170,000 photographs, taken over the course of almost three decades, from his first experiments with the camera in 1965 until his death in 1992. The artist organized his vast image corpus into over ten distinct projects based on the conditions under which the photographs were taken: during trips to Europe; with lovers in his apartment; from his window; or, down on the beaches of Ipanema. Despite the seemingly discrete categorization of these projects, many of these projects overlap chronologically. Such lengthy and concurrent projects make it difficult to elucidate the stylistic evolution of the artist's work, a standard narrative approach that scholars employ in art history. In the absence of such a method, it is more difficult to make claims about the artist's understanding or relationship to his medium (photography), or relate artistic stages to major biographical moments. On the other hand, this allows us to analyze Alair's various projects in conversation with each other without issues of priority or progression. Yet it is clear that almost every one of his projects is unified by a single motif: the male form.

Aesthetically, Alair invested himself in extricating the nuances of the beauty in images of male nudes. In his view, there were three categories of such images in photography: first, the "artistic nude;" second, images of erect phalluses under threat of castration; and lastly, pornography.⁴² Understanding these categories, and where his work lies among them, is complex. This is largely because Alair contradicted himself

⁴² Alair Gomes, "Introduction: Alair Gomes, Rio de Janeiro, Feb 1983," in *Alair Gomes* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2001), 15-16.

throughout his writings and interviews on the subject. Alair differentiated between these three categories based on the inclusion or omission of a liberated erect phallus. In the first category which draws on the art historical canon, traditional male nudes, in the legacy of classical statues, only included limp phalluses. These images, according to Alair, were respectful and tasteful according to an established artistic tradition. Examples of the artistic nude abound, from the classical *Laocoon and his Sons* (c. 42-20 BCE) to Michelangelo's *David* (1501-04). The second category referred to images that did include an erect phallus, yet it was always depicted in preparation for castration from a nearby blade. Images of castration are less plentiful than traditional nudes, yet the theme appears in woodcut prints and illuminated manuscripts which depict the castrations of Uranus and Saturn by their respective sons (Figure 1). The final category was the pornographic, composed of explicit images of sexual intercourse. In his lifetime, pornography was largely produced as magazines and video cassette tapes, not in traditional artistic mediums. Unlike the first two categories of male nudes, commercial pornography is meant for titillation, but devoid of the aesthetic sensibilities of traditional art.

Alair took the pornographic as his muse, and in his work strove to emphasize the aesthetics of the erotic. He was a rapacious consumer of pornography, and his personal collection of professionally-produced pornography amassed around 400 video tapes, catalogued by actor. Alair was so attached to his collection that he followed the lives of the films' actors as if they were Hollywood stars, even going so far as to mourn their

deaths.⁴³ Similarly, in his artwork, the artist strove to elevate his subjects and their bodies, representatives of his sexual desires, to the status of icons and idols. While he did not believe that the pornographic needed redemption, he strove to illuminate the beautiful in the erotic.

Alair's categories and intentions were fraught – categories such as he described are academic and empirical, yet rarely is reality so distinctly organized. Categorization is often understood as a means through which we can simplify concepts for ease of learning. Nevertheless, the fervent, chaotic passion with which he theorized about beauty and sex reflected a desire to understand how they might coalesce visually, for his own appreciation as well as that of a broader audience. He believed that it was his place in art to “liberate the erotic”⁴⁴ from the debasement of the merely pornographic. Alair himself does not explicitly define how he intended to “liberate the erotic,” leaving his audience to draw their own conclusions. The logical deduction would be that his work straddles both the aesthetic and the pornographic, blending the qualities of the two. The artist states in his essay “O Corpus,” which was used as the introduction to his 2001 retrospective, that this is his goal, the niche which his image corpus would fill.⁴⁵ Yet in other writings, he claims that the aesthetic was never a motivation in his work, and that he has striven to be

⁴³ According to close friends of the artist, when his favorite actor died, he placed a black shroud over his television set in an act of mourning. Lauro Cavalcanti and Maria Claudia Coelho, “From Sublimation to the Sublime: A Life Portrait of Alair Gomes,” in *Alair Gomes* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2001), 138.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ “I have simply insisted on the confronting coexistence of the unabashedly erotic outlook with the classical or quasi-classical, up to a point when each becomes imbued with features of the other and any initial opposition is overcome.” Gomes, “Introduction,” 17.

unabashedly pornographic.⁴⁶ To further complicate our understanding of Alair's influences, work, and legacy, he stated at length that his exposure to classical and Renaissance statuary was a critical factor in his decision to focus on the visual arts,⁴⁷ and yet, he denied any attempt to replicate canonical aesthetics.⁴⁸ However, as I will show in this chapter, the blatant similarities between his photographic compositions and artistic tradition such as classical statuary, European painting, and devotional objects, which he was well-aware of, betray this sentiment.

Alair's oeuvre comprises an archive which reflects the intersection of the personal and the social, a notion theorized by archivist Catherine Hobbs, where his psyche encroached upon the physical bodies of others.⁴⁹ Alair allowed his own sexuality to heavily motivate his work, as he visualized his own fantasies in photomontage. Several scholars have written dissertations on the artist's corpus and his desire to venerate the ideal male form.⁵⁰ Such arguments take the artist's own intentions as their central focus, a

⁴⁶ According to Christian Coujolle, Alair rejected the prettiness of pictorialism. Christian Coujolle, "Music on the Beach," in *Alair Gomes* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2001), 144; Alair himself wrote that any relations between his work and traditional practices would have been "accidental or secondary...[and] any attention [he] may have given to spatial and painterly composition...should be neglected." Alair Gomes, "On the Symphony of Erotic Icons," in *Alair Gomes* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2001), 150.

⁴⁷ The artist acknowledges that his first experiences with photography involved photographing "his favorite themes, paintings, and statues [of male bodies]" while in Europe. Furthermore, he admits to an "irresistible attraction for Greek and Renaissance art." Alair Gomes and Joaquim Paiva, "Interview" in *Alair Gomes* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2001), 109; Gomes, "Introduction," 16.

⁴⁸ "The whole work follows my purpose of rejecting any endeavor for making photography work like, or look like, painting or kindred media." Gomes, "On the Symphony of Erotic Icons," 150.

⁴⁹ See Catherine Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals". *Archivaria* 52 (February 2001), 126-35.

⁵⁰ See Bruno Perreira, "Symphony of Erotic Icons: Erotismo e o corpo masculino na fotografia de Alair Gomes," (PhD. Diss., Universidade Estadual Paulista, 2017) and André Pitol, "Ask me to send these photos

commendable yet impossible task. Therefore, where other scholars have focused on Alair's reverence for the male form, I interpret his photography as an outward expression of the artist's own internal self, a narcissistic documentation of a man's sexual urges. While Alair's oeuvre focuses on the bodies of others, I also argue that a Freudian interpretation of his photography emphasizes the centrality of the artist's sense of self and focus on his own desires. Both his sexual life and artistic practice were heavily transactional. Each consisted of an exchange between one body and another, even if the exchange was one-sided or inequitable. While he held his subjects in high regard as ideals of manly beauty, he reduced his models to objects of his own sexual desire, with or without their permission. The artist's position as voyeur rather than subject further underscores the power dynamic between Alair and his subjects: through his camera, Alair asserts his gaze over the bodies of other men.

Due to his pursuit of this art historical niche, Alair is widely credited as one of the "precursors to homoerotic photography in Brazil,"⁵¹ obsessively capturing images of the male body in various states of nudity. This chapter will consider three of his most famous corpuses. One of his best-known projects, *Symphony of Erotic Icons* (1966-77), includes 1,767 photographs in total. The entire series is composed of photographs of nude men in Alair's apartment. Most of these men were the artist's lovers. Another series, *Sonatinas, Four Feet* (1966-1986), includes photographs shot by the artist from the window of his

to you": a produção artística de Alair Gomes no circuito norte-americano," (PhD. Diss., Universidade de São Paulo, 2016).

⁵¹ Alexandre Santos, "Duane Michals e Alair Gomes: documentos de si e escritas pessoais na arte contemporânea," *ArtCultura* 10, no 16 (2008), 59.

apartment. These images capture male sunbathers lounging or exercising on the beach. None of these men realized that Alair had photographed them. The final series is *Beach Triptychs* (c. 1980's), a set of photographs of male bodybuilders on the beach. Unlike his voyeuristic position in the *Sonatinas*, Alair took down to the shoreline, photographing these men without their permission, yet where they could see and confront him should they choose to (although it appears that his subjects never did). Nevertheless, the men of *Beach Triptychs* were not necessarily willing models. Alair's selection and/or appropriation of other male bodies therefore represents more of a reflection on his own sexual impulses than of the exaltation of the male form.

In this chapter, I will employ biographical study and object-based analysis in order to explicate how this artist's work integrates the subversive with the canonical, testing the limitations of what a male nude can and cannot be. Furthermore, I analyze how Alair used methodical photographic strategies and meticulous archival practices document not merely beautiful men in Rio de Janeiro, but also to indirectly preserve himself as sexual agent and object of desire through visual means. By focusing on three diverse projects, I unravel a dynamic narcissistic impulse which the artist displayed during his expansive career.

Education, Travel, and Engagement with the Canon

Alair spent his life from childhood to his death in Rio de Janeiro. Born in the suburb of Valença, located about fifty miles outside of Rio, he moved with his family to what was then the nation's capital as a child. This cosmopolitan locale exposed Alair to all of the amenities of metropolitan living: education, the arts, and a thriving underground

gay scene. Rio had served as the nation's capital until 1960, when Brasília was inaugurated, in addition to its previous central role in the Portuguese empire. Such a strong political and cultural history meant that Rio had much to offer: the *Museu Nacional do Brasil*, the *Universidade do Brasil* (currently the *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*), and the *Theatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro* all catered to the academic and artistic needs of the city's affluent inhabitants. The son of a civil servant, Alair was not born wealthy, yet his parents possessed ample means to provide him with opportunities for education and artistic engagement.⁵² By the time of his death, he spoke Portuguese, English, and some French. As a child, he took violin classes and dabbled in photography, winning a local photo competition in the 1920's. Yet despite these early interests in music and photography, Alair pursued a degree in civil and electrical engineering at his father's behest, graduating from the *Escola Nacional de Engenharia da Universidade do Brasil* in 1944.

Despite his choice of degree, by his forties in the 1960's Alair had dedicated himself to the arts. Through a 1962 Guggenheim fellowship, the artist traveled to the United States for a year, where he studied philosophy and science at Yale University and engaged with the academic and artistic communities in New York.⁵³ While he pursued a scientific project, the arts were significantly integrated: one presentation he would later give analyzed psychological creativity in the minds of the Old Masters.⁵⁴ Additionally,

⁵² Pereira, "Symphony," 24.

⁵³ Gomes and Paiva, "Interview," 109.

⁵⁴ The title of this presentation was "A morte do neurônio" (The Death of the Neuron), in 1973.

the exposure to what he described as the “American erotic experience,”⁵⁵ the visual influx of beautiful men at pools, sports fields, and cafeterias, drove him to begin documenting his sexual desires in diaries. This experience significantly contributed to his extensive theorizing about eroticism and the visual arts. For six months in 1965, he traveled to Europe for the first time, borrowing a “pre-war Leica” camera, “in bad condition,”⁵⁶ from a friend. On this trip he began to photograph primarily paintings and sculptures he saw on his travels. The following year, he invested in a camera of his own.⁵⁷

A 1969 trip to Europe brought the artist to England, France, and Switzerland, where he found himself drawn to classical Greco-Roman statuary, and its depiction of masculinity.⁵⁸ Well-read on classical Greece and the Renaissance, Alair understood the value placed upon the athletic male form. Classical artists turned to male athleticism as a foundation for its aesthetic ideals, creating works which went beyond mimesis towards a surreally Adonis-like body.⁵⁹ To quote art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “[Greek] bodies received great and manly shape through exercise, which the Greek

⁵⁵ Alair does not elaborate on what makes the American erotic experience different from the Brazilian version, yet his self-proclaimed status as an Americanophile might suggest a certain romanticization of U.S. men. Gomes and Paiva, “Interview,” 110.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

⁵⁷ Santos, “Duane Michals e Alair Gomes,” 59.

⁵⁸ “The art I have chiefly, but not exclusively, concentrated on is that of Greece, Roma and Italy in the Renaissance and the previous centuries. My visions of art works and art places, as well of live young men in the countries I visited [...] are commented on in such a way as to gradually outline a basically erotic view of art.” Alair Gomes, *A new sentimental journey* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2009). Originally written in 1983.

⁵⁹ See Charles Heiko Stocking, “Greek Ideal as Hyperreal: Greco-Roman Sculpture and the Athletic Male Body,” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 21, No. 3 (Winter 2014).

masters gave to their sculptures.”⁶⁰ In the Renaissance, this homage to masculinity was revived in the works of artists such as Michelangelo, whose *David* (1501-1504) transformed the nubile youth of the Bible into a heroic archetype of manhood. In these canonical artistic works, beauty and divinity mutually informed one another; building on this dynamic, Alair then emphasized how erotic beauty is intrinsically tied to the venerable.

These international excursions and the aesthetic experiences of classical ideals are critical to understanding his artistic trajectory.⁶¹ It was only in Europe, when he was already out as a gay man, that he began to explore his sexual proclivities in visual media, using his camera to photograph classical sculptures of male athleticism in a lesser-known series, *Viagens (Europa, 1969)*. In these images, Alair focused on the masculine erogenous zones of statues, captured from oblique angles. Figures 2 and 3, for example, highlight the rear and lower back, and the abdomen and pubic region respectively. His later photographs of male nudes in Rio echo this series, as they replicate compositional strategies that he first discovered with classical statues. As curator Eder Chiodetto noted in the 2015 exhibition catalogue for “*Alair Gomes: Percursos*,” the classical bodies which he photographed served as models of “power and virility” which his later male nudes would emulate.⁶² Through his travels, he developed an avid interest in art history,

⁶⁰ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks [1755],” in *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, ed. David Irwin (New York: Phaidon, 1972), 62.

⁶¹ For more on Alair abroad, see Pitó, “Ask Me to Send These Photos to You.”

⁶² Eder Chiodetto, *Alair Gomes: Percursos*, (São Paulo: Caixa Cultural São Paulo, 2015), 12.

technology, and eroticism (philosophically, as well as in the literary and visual arts), which began to coalesce into a transgressive approach to photography.

Producing Pornographic Icons

Alair forged a connection between the pornographic and the canon by rendering his nude models (who were often his lovers) into aesthetic creatures for contemplation. His knowledge of classical and Renaissance male statuary from his travels enhanced his appreciation for the muscular male form, and he particularly appreciated the male form in homoerotic materials. One of his favorite hobbies was collecting and consuming pornography, in both magazine and video formats. Homoerotic magazines would have included pages, spreads, and collages of muscled men in various stages of undress, somewhat similar to the arrangements of erotic photographs which Alair himself generated throughout his career. According to Alair, there was beauty to be found in these visuals. Each erect phallus or the curvature of buttocks could inspire desire but also appreciation.

Symphony of Erotic Icons (1966-77), one of the artist's most famous and longest-running projects, integrates the titillating intimacy of the pornographic with references to canonical artistic traditions in a manner which rhetorically validates the erection as an image of aesthetic value. Consisting of a vast collection of 1,767 photographs, images of nude young men display an erotic intimacy. These photos, like most of the artist's oeuvre, were meant to be seen in groups of varying sizes and arrangements,⁶³ creating small networks of images which coalesce into compositions. Each of these photographs

⁶³ Gomes, "On the Symphony of Erotic Icons" 150.

measured around 30 x 24 cm, fairly intimate on their own yet immense when seen in groups of eight, nine, or ten. *Symphony* was organized into five sequences, each titled with musical terms: *Allegro*, *Andantino*, *Andante*, *Adagio*, and *Finale*. Drawing on music terminology for tempos, Alair's subtitles indicate a visual pacing: "quick and lively;" "slightly faster than a walking pace;" "walking pace;" "slow and stately;" culminating in the *finale*, which in music, is lively and acts as a sonic resolution.⁶⁴ Alair's image sequences are thus composed into visual manifestations of rhythm, each individual image acting as a beat.

The title of *Symphony of Erotic Icons* also evokes two artistic traditions: first, the symphony harkens back to musical compositions, reflecting the arrangement of this series in sets of seven or more⁶⁵; second, the use of the term "icon" evokes a tradition of worship, images meant to be venerated and replicated. Notably, both of these terms also hint at an artistic practice meant for public reception. Ironically, *Symphony*'s sheer volume renders it nearly impossible to experience in one time or place, and it has only been available to the public in smaller sequences. That Alair chose this title for his first major opus is indicative of his belief in new possibilities for the pornographic. The erotic is not incompatible with the venerable. The intimacy of titillation and all the sensations which occur below the belt could be appreciated by a broader public in an unprecedented

⁶⁴ "Finale," Britannica.com. <https://www.britannica.com/art/finale>

⁶⁵ Paulo Herkenhoff, "The Melody of Desire. The Art of Alair Gomes," in *Alair Gomes* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2001), 134.

way. As he himself acknowledged, Alair began producing his own pornographic materials.⁶⁶

In a set of images from the sequence, *3rd Movement, Andante* (#980-986, c. 1970's) (Figure 4), black-and-white photographs show a male figure reclining languidly. The body is centered against a black background, filling the frame from top to bottom with the model's torso and thighs. The model folds his arms behind his head, gazing across his body to his legs. His pose harkens back to images of reclining female nudes,⁶⁷ echoing Alair's own fascination with art history, and blurring the masculine body with feminine ideals. The virility and sexuality of a naked, aroused man is undercut by a softer, languid, unassuming pose.⁶⁸ This allows the audience to take in the male erogenous zones more casually: armpits, nipples, genitalia, inner thigh. The camera offers the viewer an elevated vantage point, gazing down as the model lays vulnerable, open to the audience's eyes. Yet he averts our gaze, casting his own face in shadow as he stares instead at his own erection, potentially the most transgressive element of this image. The viewer is inclined to follow his gaze. To further highlight the phallus as focal point, the man's pelvic area is illuminated in light, whereas the rest of his figure is cast in shadow. What appears to be a trick of photographic chiaroscuro,⁶⁹ a modern twist on a painterly

⁶⁶ Gomes, "Introduction," 17.

⁶⁷ An example of similar poses would be Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534).

⁶⁸ In his dissertation, Perreira discusses this desire to deny the hegemonic depiction of men as virile and strong, allowing for a degree of gender-fluidity. See Perreira, "The Symphony of Erotic Icons."

⁶⁹ Alair has noted that his photographic work was meant to reject affiliations with the plastic arts. Nevertheless, his self-professed fascination with classical statuary and art history cannot be ignored. Additionally, his tendency to juxtapose photos of classical architecture with photos of young nude men implies a correlation between the two. Gomes, "On the Symphony," 149.

visual lighting effect, is actually the man's untanned skin, hinting at numerous days spent in beach trunks on Rio's shores. The visual composition of this series makes the pornographic beautiful, or, put in another way, the references to classical nudes transform the artist's sexual desires into objects for aesthetic contemplation.⁷⁰ It also renders the intimate scene of a nude lover in the artist's apartment visually accessible to a broad public.⁷¹

The production and procurement of pornography in twentieth-century Brazil was a tedious process burdened by censorship. While pornography was indeed produced in Brazil before the military dictatorship took control in 1964,⁷² it appears to have not been widespread and to have been relatively clandestine due to its taboo status in society. Historian James Green makes note of at least one publication, *Rio Nu*, a periodical showcasing seminude women, which operated between 1898 and 1916.⁷³ Inversely, there is no evidence that pornographic magazines oriented towards a gay male gaze were domestically-produced until the end of the twentieth century.⁷⁴ For gay men in Brazil, the

⁷⁰ Interestingly, Alair wrote that this portion of *Andante* was meant to reflect indifference, vulgarity, and increasing tension. Nevertheless, the visual qualities of these images reflect an evident homage to statuary and posed beauty. Gomes, "Appendices," in *Alair Gomes* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2001), 148.

⁷¹ The artist meant for these to be shown. He had specific logistical intentions for exhibiting these, which are included in Gomes, "Appendices."

⁷² I make this assertion based on knowledge that Hudinilson Jr, a São Paulo-based artist, was in possession of domestically-produced heterosexual pornographic magazines during the final years of the regime. Further research is needed to assess the full extent of these productions.

⁷³ James N. Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Brazil*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 31.

⁷⁴ This statement is based on current research and the claims of various authors. There may have been small, amateur productions which circulated through unofficial channels, but such information is not available to me at this time.

only alternatives available were men's fitness magazines, which often displayed men in minimal clothing in order to emphasize their musculature.⁷⁵ As art historian Richard Meyer notes in his 2002 book, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, American physique magazines in the mid-1900's intentionally catered to a homosexual readership: "[These] publications...employed the alibis of art, health, and classicism to picture erotically exposed male bodies while avoiding prosecution on charges of obscenity."⁷⁶ Brazilian publications worked under the same premise, thinly veiling their homoerotic nature through the inclusion of classical motifs.

With the onset of the military regime in 1964, the few Brazilian pornographic productions went underground or ceased altogether due to the strict media regulations imposed. Explicitly sexual materials were in violation of *morals e bons costumes* ("morals and public decency"), the set of guidelines set by the regime for cultural productions. Surprisingly, a genre of heterosexual soft-core porn movies developed in the 1970's, known as *pornochanchadas*, a combination of the words for "porn" and "romantic comedy." These were approved by state agencies due to their lack of explicit sex, and their lack of criticism towards the government.⁷⁷ The other, more popular

⁷⁵ Valmir Costa, "Revistas gays made in Brazil, mas com sotaque estrangeiro," *Revista Gênero* 12, no 11 (2011), 189.

⁷⁶ Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-century American Art*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 170.

⁷⁷ Antônio Reis Junior and Caio Túlio Padula Lamas, "Film Industry, pornography and censorship in Brazil: the case of *Coisas Eróticas*," in *E Pornô, tem Pornô? A Panorama of Brazilian Porn*, ed. Mariana Baltar, (Gorizia: Mimesis International, 2018), 3.

solution to access sexually explicit materials was to import foreign movies and magazines. In the vein of mail art and protest music produced by artists in the 1970's, such illicit content would have been clandestinely procured with money orders and circulated in neutral packaging.⁷⁸ It is likely, given Alair's numerous travels to the United States and Europe, that he began collecting while abroad in addition to whatever he may have imported.

Like his imported pornography, Alair produced *Symphony* clandestinely, from the privacy of his own home. Perhaps because of this private environment, the subjects of the project exhibit direct sexual ties between Alair and his models more than any other series in his oeuvre. In fact, this series is the only one to include a photograph of the artist (Figure 5). In this image of a mirror reflection, Alair appears upright and shirtless, gazing into a mirror, while below him, a second naked man lies on his back. The positioning of the artist and his fellow subject causes their forms to blend, making it difficult to initially decipher whose limb is whose. Hands holding the camera emerge out of the entanglement, revealing that the nude man captured the photo, not the artist. This is the only image of the artist's corpus that I am able to confirm he did not take himself. While Alair is the subject of the photo rather than an agent of desire, his gaze returns and confronts ours to evoke sexual power and agency. The man beneath him is rendered faceless whereas Alair is not, his genitals fully exposed while Alair's remain hidden, and he lies beneath the artist in the composition. While the nude male remains anonymous, Alair asserts his identity, making it the essence of the image. This twist on a self-portrait

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

creates a nuanced visual manifestation of power dynamics, where the artist seemingly steps into the role of an object of desire and yet asserts a sexual virility.

The photographs of this collection document the artist's sexual interactions. The nature of Alair's relationship to his models, one of erotic power dynamics and complex desire, both praises male physical beauty and creates a visual record of the artist's sexual experiences and identity. Simultaneously, the incorporation of canonical aesthetic traditions, such as lighting, posing, and vantage point, allow the viewer to enjoy the physical beauty of each young man the artist brought back to his apartment. The apartment, in turn transformed into a metaphor for the artist's mental realm: a sexualized space of art, sex, intimacy, voyeurism, and experience. It is crucial to remember that the apartment itself was a significant component in Alair's legacy. This living space was not just a personal pleasure palace, but an atelier, photography studio, and record repository. It was here that the artist engaged models, shot photos, arranged compositions, and maintained his personal histories in his own makeshift archive. The personal location of Alair's apartment and its multiplicities of functionality bolster the power behind preserving one's own marginalized history.

Voyeurism and Scenes of Flirtatious Frivolity

Displays of homosexuality during the military regime were explicitly outlawed, and even before the dictatorship began, such displays were socially prohibited. A gay male such as Alair Gomes would likely have felt isolated from time to time, with no major community centers or media outlets catering to his demographic. We know that Alair satiated some of his desire for homosexual interaction through sex, photography,

and pornography, and sometimes in combinations of the three. Yet Alair also took advantage of his proximity to the beach to take photos of young men, which he then manipulated the sequences of in order to construct what he saw as narrative fantasies. These visual stories imbued their subjects' encounters with seemingly playful, flirtatious, and intimate connotations. The resulting images manifest and document Alair's internal desires.

Alair took these photographs from his home - a sixth-story flat overlooking Rio's *Ipanema* beach,⁷⁹ a popular hangout for sunbathers and sporty young Brazilians.⁸⁰ The apartment was located at the back of a building on *Rua Prudente de Moraes*, near *Rua Montenegro* (now *Rua Vinicius de Moraes*). Through his window, he could peer between two tall buildings on *Avenida Vieira Souto* towards a strip of beach known as Posto 9, well-known as Rio's gay beach. He often used this vantage point to take clandestine photographs of the beautiful young men who passed by.⁸¹ Such photos make up the *Sonatinas, Four Feet* series (1966-1986). He produced these voyeuristic sets of images in batches of varying amounts, with one even including twenty-three separate photographs. The artist would rearrange these images from their original sequencing in order to construct erotic stories that manifested his own erotic fantasies.⁸² Alair captured these

⁷⁹ This strip of sand garnered national attention in 1979 when former rebel Fernando Gabeira, recently returned from exile, was photographed at Posto 9 in a brightly colored *tanga*, a thong-like swimsuit. The image and beach both came to be associated with sexual, and homosexual, liberation. See Ruy Castro, *Ela é carioca : um enciclopédia de Ipanema*, (São Paulo : Companhia das Letras, 2021).

⁸⁰ The distribution of gym equipment along Rio's beaches in the 1970's brought Alair's desires practically to his doorstep.

⁸¹ Pedro Vasquez, "A janela indiscreta da Alair Gomes," *Revista Zum* 6, July 29, 2014.

⁸² Herkenhoff, "The Melody of Desire," 133.

young men in *sungas*,⁸³ typically in pairs, lounging in the sand or exercising together with the public athletic equipment installed along the beaches in Rio (e.g., *Sonatinas, Four Feet, no. 42, 1977*). The artist carefully edited the order and composition of these polyptychs,⁸⁴ printing them at the small size of 11 x 17 cm each, half the size of the *Symphony* and *Triptych* photographs. Such a small print size emphasizes the nature of these works as erotic narratives, meant to be enjoyed intimately like pages in a book. The *Sonatinas* generate what Alexandre Santos calls love stories which subtly hint at intimate actions that never transpire: a kiss between friends, a gesture which may have led to a caress.⁸⁵ These fantasies, like the statuesque nudes of *Symphony*, had their own referents in the art historical canon. The carefully crafted narratives of flirtation and leisure in *Sonatinas* are reminiscent of the scenes of frivolity evident in French Rococo. They possess a calmness, despite their presence on a busy beach in Rio de Janeiro, that recalls the idyllic quietude of French pastoral scenes. Furthermore, like Rococo paintings, Alair's subjects allowed the artist to evoke his own sensuous desires onto a visual image. As Santos has noted, these fictionalized sequences act out a "metaphorical fulfillment of the artist's personal desires."⁸⁶

Such sensually charged imagery is visible in Figure 6, where a young man (Male #1) lounges on a metal bench, while his companion (Male #2) lays on the sand beneath

⁸³ *Sungas* are a popular bathing suit among Brazilian men, similar to a fitted "trunks" style in the United States.

⁸⁴ Herkenhoff, "The Melody of Desire," 133.

⁸⁵ Santos, "Duane Michals e Alair Gomes," 60.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

him. Male #1 displays: a leg raised, or intertwined with the other leg in a resting pose, a movement which is commonly associated with images of youthful play and flirtation. He appears coy, resting his head on the bench and casting his gaze away from his friend. Male #2 mostly faces away from the camera, looking instead towards the sand, or at his companion. In the latter case, his face, cast in shadow, fixates on Male #1. The final image of the series (Figure 7) is particularly evocative: Male #1 lounges, hip jutting out so that the curvature of his body is accentuated, hand resting just below his posterior. His head is perched on his other hand, turned to gaze upon Male #2. Down on the sand, the other figure lays back, his face looking up towards the other male on the bench. Male #2's pose almost mimics the male figure on the bottom left of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* (1767). Like *The Swing*, these visuals construct a playful air of flirtation. Were these young men truly engaged in a public display of coquetry? We have no way of knowing. Instead, they are characters in Alair Gomes' fictional enterprise.

While constructing flirtatious visual narratives, Alair's tactic of photographing these men from his inconspicuous position above his subjects and through the alleyway is reminiscent of the culture of surveillance taking place in Brazil at the same time. The military government monitored its citizens and domestic cultural output closely, with violators often imprisoned, exiled, or murdered for their actions. His inconspicuous activities also echo those of rebels living secretly in city apartments, carrying out sudden operations from their seclusion, mingling the public sphere with the privacy of

seclusion.⁸⁷ In large cities, the presence of a camera could easily be misconstrued as a form of official surveillance, which would have stuck fear into urban dwellers. To further complicate matters, by illicitly capturing photos of these men, Alair assumes a certain right to their bodies. He recodes their leisure time and invades personal space, prioritizing his own desires. Then he compromises them, appropriating their bodies into homoerotic narratives that would be inevitably shown in gallery shows, likely within their lifetime. In this process, he dehumanizes them, reducing them to beautiful characters in his own fantasies.

These visual love stories that Alair put great effort into manifesting allowed the artist to insert himself into these innocuous moments, as ways of vicariously living out his own erotic fantasies. From his window, Alair incorporated himself into these casual friendly transactions. The window becomes yet another screen through which Alair watches and imagines gay love. The lens functions as a portal, “a means of access to the photographer’s world.”⁸⁸ The young men are unwitting participants in this imaginary, unaware not only that the artist has inserted himself into their leisure time, but also that they have been included in the margins of Alair’s personal realm. The beach becomes an extension of the artist’s apartment, a personal space of hedonism and pleasure. The young men on the beach who he sexualizes are parallels to those he brings into his bedroom for sex. Scenes of public leisure become a part of the artist’s personal queer manifestations.

⁸⁷ For a detailed account of rebel tactics, see James N. Green, *Exile within Exiles: Herbert Daniel, Gay Brazilian Revolutionary*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁸⁸ Herkenhoff, “The Melody of Desire,” 133.

Finding New Idols to Worship

As Gay Liberation began to take hold in major Brazilian cities in the late 1970's, Alair capitalized on the wave of progressivism. *Abertura* and the reduction of restrictions placed on public displays of homosexuality, coupled with the rise of Gay Liberation in Brazil in the late 1970's, meant that Alair could express his same-sex attractions in public. Photography, with its portability and ability to produce tens if not hundreds of images in a single day, allowed Alair to bring his artistic practice with him to the streets. Despite this new freedom of mobility, Alair stuck to a familiar space: the sand and workout equipment situated near his apartment on *Posto 9*. It was here that he generated his *Beach Triptych* series, a cache of images organized into trios meant to be displayed in a horizontal manner. Alair intentionally drew on the model of Catholic altar triptychs, which featured religious idols for devotees to pray to. The term "idol," in its traditional usage, refers to objects or images meant to be worshiped. In *Beach Triptychs*, Alair appropriated canonical modes of worship in order to idolize the beautifully muscled men whom Alair devoted himself to daily.

The triptych structure was central to this series. As the artist himself noted, the triptych has a strong history in religious devotion, particularly since the Medieval era (yet another connection to canonical art in his work).⁸⁹ At around 35.75 x 27 cm each,⁹⁰ these photos tend to be larger than those of the other projects described in this chapter. The

⁸⁹ "Triptych." Grove Art Online.

⁹⁰ It is worth noting that while Alair Gomes was known to be rather specific about the printing, arrangements, and sales of his works, there are some discrepancies amidst the sizing of his pieces. It would require further time and research to discern the exact parameters set forth for printing each of his projects.

Beach Triptychs were intended to be devotional images, compositions which enticed the viewer to worship the beauty of these athletic men. In *Beach Triptych no. 20* (Figure 8, c. 1980), there is no doubt what we are meant to worship. The flexed, bulging muscles of the male figure are a sign of successful bodybuilding, light and shadow accentuating every well-defined contour of the man's torso. In the far-right image, the man even appears to be looking down, as if a male god looking down on normal men. I selected this triptych for the peculiar nature of this image in comparison to the *Symphony* and *Sonatinas* series: unlike the former, the subject does not pose for the camera, yet unlike the latter, he is not wholly unaware of the photographer either. Rather, he appears indifferent to the camera lens, going about his exercise routine as normal. Furthermore, Alair shoots the man from below, positioning himself beneath the subject in the traditional position of a devotee. By capturing his subject in such a state of power and nonchalance, Alair elevates the man to the status of an idol.

In the *Symphony* series, Alair depicted his lovers within the confines of his flat; with the *Sonatinas*, he mediated between the interior and the exterior; for the *Beach Triptychs*, he ventured out of his living quarters and down to the sand. The artist sometimes experienced protests during his photographic process, when he ventured down to the shores of Ipanema to photograph young men. These protests came almost exclusively from "ugly" boys he chose not to photograph.⁹¹ Alair's choice of models was completely founded on his own physical attraction to them. Those he chose not to photograph were simply men who did not catch his eye, and by calling them ugly, Alair

⁹¹ Gomes and Paiva, "Interview," 118.

implied that they were unworthy of his artistic attention. Rather than believing they were upset by Alair's invasive photographic maneuvers, he attributed their protests to their own jealousy. Nevertheless, the social nature of *Triptychs* illuminates the nuances of how Alair's photographic practice was received when the objects of his desire became aware of his unwanted gaze.

To understand the variations of privacy and publicity between *Symphony*, *Sonatinas*, and the *Triptychs*, one must assess how their respective chronologies reflected the state of Brazilian politics. *Symphony* and *Sonatinas* both began in 1966, when Alair was 44, just two years into the military dictatorship. *Symphony*, the most private of the three, ended around 1977, a year before the beginning of *Abertura*. It is fitting that the most intimate and private of his series occurred during the years of the most severe social restrictions. Meanwhile, *Sonatinas* continued until 1986, a year after the end of the dictatorship. Although Alair himself could not have predicted *Abertura* beginning in 1978, the symbolism of the photographer gazing outside from the confines of his home can be related to his contemporary citizens looking to the future as democracy expanded across the nation. The *Beach Triptychs* were conducted entirely during the 1980's. The public nature of the *Triptychs* photographs capitalized on the expansively democratizing wave that swept through the decade as the dictatorship came to an end. The developing fluidity between the private, public, and their intermediary manifests in Alair's major image collections, serving as an artistic reference point for the growing Gay Liberation movement in Brazil. The *Triptychs* document the social dynamics and contexts of

homosexuality in Brazil at a time of expanding liberties, preserving the surroundings that informed the evolving queer landscape.

A Culture of Beauty and Race

References to corporeal beauty in Alair's writings and interviews abound, and it is therefore necessary to address a certain culture of beauty and personal upkeep which exists both in Alair's cultural milieu of Rio de Janeiro, and his personal community, the LGBT scene. Anthropologist Alvaro Jarrín has commented that beauty has "become a part of the Brazilian ethos,"⁹² a result of a thriving beach and exercise culture, international dynamics, and racial politics. Understanding the images as manifestations of Alair's desires, the context of contemporary beauty standards adds further depth to these works.

Harkening back to Alair's engagement with Greco-Roman statuary, the legacy of classical masculine aesthetics has been sustained by the rise of body-building, gym culture, and pornography, leading to an obsession with the ideal male form in both civic and homosexual contexts. As visual culture scholar Sharif Bey has noted, contemporary bodybuilding has been based on ideas of "Greek god" physiques, with Hercules serving as a beacon of masculinity and prowess.⁹³ The Olympic games, an international display of each country's most accomplished athletes, draws on a classical ideal which equates bodily strength with civic rectitude. These games create a global stage for the display of

⁹² Alvaro Jarrín, "In Brazil, Plastic Surgery is About Power, Not Culture," *UC Press Blog*, May 24, 2018.

⁹³ Sharif Bey, "An Autoethnography of Bodybuilding Visual Culture, Aesthetic Experience, and Performed Masculinity," *Visual Culture & Gender* 9 (October 1, 2014): 40-42.

well-honed and meticulously maintained physiques. If one considers the racial and military implications associated with a country of beautiful, strong men, masculine physical prowess can be equated to a country's strength. We can interpret the prevalence of a focus on physical beauty as a symptom of societal narcissism, wherein the masculine is informed through the social interplay between beauty, physicality, strength, and power. To quote classicist Maria Wyke, "the [modern] muscled male body... has been shaped by notions of the Classical."⁹⁴ Alair would have been acutely aware of this connection – he understood the presence of male bodybuilders on Rio's beaches as a sign of their need to be seen, worshiped, and desired.⁹⁵ In the 1960's, President Juscelino Kubitschek allowed plastic surgeon Ivo Pitanguy to open a clinic in Rio which would offer low-cost cosmetic surgery to the poor, under the premise that ugliness was a societal ill and every Brazilian possessed a "right to beauty."⁹⁶ Since then, access to plastic surgery has become widespread, with many hospitals in Rio offering low to no-cost cosmetic or reconstructive surgeries, and consumers have been eager for these opportunities.⁹⁷ Rio has since become recognized as one of the plastic surgery capitals of the world. Jarrín has noted that the rise of plastic surgery in Brazil has roots in the myth of miscegenation, with the desire of replacing non-white features with more European

⁹⁴ Maria Wyke, "Herculean Muscle!: The Classicizing Rhetoric of Bodybuilding," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 4, No. 3 (Winter, 1997), 52.

⁹⁵ Gomes and Paiva, "Interview," 118.

⁹⁶ Ivo Pitanguy, *Direito à Beleza: Memórias Do Grande Mestre Da Cirurgia Plástica*, (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1984).

⁹⁷ Alexander Edmonds, "The poor have the right to be beautiful': Cosmetic surgery in neoliberal Brazil," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no 2 (2007).

attributes driving the public to go under the knife.⁹⁸ To further underscore the relationship between corporeal beauty and whiteness, Brazilian businesses often required their applicants to possess *boa aparência* (good appearance), a euphemism for whiteness popularized after racial discrimination in hiring processes was outlawed in 1951. This new phrasing wouldn't be outlawed until 1995.

It is worth noting that seemingly all of the men photographed by Alair across his many projects are light-skinned.⁹⁹ It is perhaps ironic that Alair worked with black-and-white photography, a title which is in itself paradoxical, as in actuality the images are composed in grayscale. This observation exemplifies the issue of race in Alair's oeuvre: a concept which is much more complex than it seems, made more present by its reduction. Little scholarship has touched on race in Alair's work, nor in Brazilian art history in general. Alair did not write about his thoughts on race, yet a few factors could have contributed to this lack of representation. One component could have been his location near Ipanema beach between *Postos* 8 and 9, a privileged location at the time, and to this day.¹⁰⁰ Class disparities such as this would have been but one factor in the seeming preference for white men over Afro-Brazilian men in Alair's images. A more historically-based analysis would conclude that this absence of men of color is due, at least in part, to Brazilian race history.

⁹⁸ Alvaro Jarrín, "Towards a Biopolitics of Beauty: Eugenics, Aesthetic Hierarchies and Plastic Surgery in Brazil," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 24 (2015), 536.

⁹⁹ This statement is made based on the images available to me at the time of writing. Without accessing Alair's archives in Rio de Janeiro, it is impossible to say with certainty if he did photograph men of color or not.

¹⁰⁰ Pereira, "The Symphony of Erotic Icons," 52.

Racism in gay male communities has been a rampant issue for decades. From the racial make-up of common gay neighborhoods (in the United States, think San Francisco's Castro district and Los Angeles' West Hollywood) to the exclusionary atmospheres of gay nightlife, the aestheticization of white bodies in gay communities is a clear symptom of ingrained racism. Thus, beauty and race became intricately intertwined in Brazilian culture, and whiteness became a synonym for civic wellness, occupational viability, and sexual desirability. Given Alair's primary motivation being his own desires, it is plausible that his omission of black men from his oeuvre reflected a racial prejudice ingrained in both his sexual and societal contexts. These cultural and historical factors contributed to the formation of Alair's understanding of agency and desire. Once again, Alair's practice preserves the social conditions that informed its development.

Conclusion

We know from his writings that Alair always intended his works to be displayed. He organized multiple exhibitions of his works, showing various series of young men on the beach, or nude. However, he only had one solo exhibition during his lifetime, at the *Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes*, a small university gallery not far from his flat in *Ipanema*. The artist has noted in his essays that he "never intended to present photos which could or should assert themselves alone,"¹⁰¹ preferring instead to generate sequences which played with notions of time, creating organic visual narratives. Such strict parameters around the display and collection of his work might have made his work

¹⁰¹ Alair, "On the Symphony," 150.

less appealing to curators and collectors alike: they would require more display space, narrative specificity, and could only be sold in distinct sets.

At this time, the Brazilian art market was not particularly profitable for artists working in photography. Alair noted in an interview with journalist Elaine Sendermann that “the *carioca* public [did not] buy photographs” in the mid-1980’s.¹⁰² He explicitly noted two Brazilian collectors who did buy photographic art: Gilberto Chateaubriand, a prolific collector of modern and contemporary Brazilian art, and the son of media mogul Assis Chateaubriand (who also founded the *Museu de Arte de São Paulo*); and Joaquim Paiva, a photographer and avid collector of photography. Both men collected Alair’s work, were close friends with the artist during his later life, and were strong promoters of his work after his death, especially in regards to his major 2001 retrospective put on by the Cartier Foundation in France. Regarding the retrospective, Paiva lamented that Alair’s work was neglected for so long in Brazil and what a shame it was that it “had to earn a large exhibition in France to be able to prove that it is good.”¹⁰³ Chateaubriand noted that Alair “left a work of universal character.”¹⁰⁴ It is rather interesting to note the undertones of these remarks, Paiva’s with its remorseful reflection on the close-mindedness of the Brazilian art world, and Chateaubriand’s seemingly un-nuanced opinion neglects the realities of Alair’s highly personal aesthetic. Especially when put in context with Alair’s own self-aware assertion that there existed no niche in art history for

¹⁰² Elaine Sendermann, “Fotografia tenta a vez no mercado,” *O Globo*, August 27, 1984.

¹⁰³ Perreira, “The Symphony of Erotic Icons,” 20.

¹⁰⁴ Attis Chateaubriand as quoted by Luiza Pastor, “Apolos de areia,” *Istoé*, April 4, 2001.

a pornographic style such as his,¹⁰⁵ we might deduce that Alair's work was a victim of poor timing, unable to sell due to its unprofitable medium and taboo subject matter, two trends which would change with the tides that came in the 1990's, only after the artist's death.

Despite the high stakes of displaying such a controversial corpus of images, the artist claimed indifference to the possibility of negative reactions in his interview with Paiva. He recounted a specific instance of a man protesting the "immoral" nature of the artist's exhibition at the *Cassino Atlântico* shopping center in 1980, to which he replied that there would likely always be another protesting spectator.¹⁰⁶ We know from his interviews, however, that he believed Gay Liberation and the progress it had made in the nation had begun shifting Brazilian perspectives on homoeroticism and that young audiences would have more positive reactions to his work. As the artist himself noted, the sociopolitical moment had allowed for sexual evolution: "no matter how great and perennial the wonderment in the classical nude, some adventure and some change is required. Our times gave us new freedom concerning the erotic."¹⁰⁷ In the end, he expressed his hopes to Paiva that the encounters between his visual preservations of desire and the public might even inspire personal questions in those who stopped to look.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Gomes, "Introduction," 17.

¹⁰⁶ Gomes and Paiva, "Interview," 118.

¹⁰⁷ Gomes, "Appendices," 148.

¹⁰⁸ Gomes and Paiva, "Interview," 118.

In his work, Alair explicitly employed the homoerotic in manners which subverted traditional artistic and social practices. He saw art as a means through which he could bring the intimacy of gay sex to the public eye, using his camera to carve out a space for homosexual aesthetics in art history. His photos were unabashedly pornographic, presenting a transgressive aesthetic and lifestyle to a Catholic public in a country burdened by dictatorship. Yet he drew on his rich knowledge of art history, appropriating traditional styles and methods in order to highlight the aesthetic qualities of such nontraditional subject-matter. What resulted is a multilayered corpus of erotic images which teeters on the precipice between the pornographic and the canonical

Figures



Figure 2.1. Artist unknown. *Castration of Saturn*, c. 1400's. Illustrated manuscript.
Dimensions unknown.

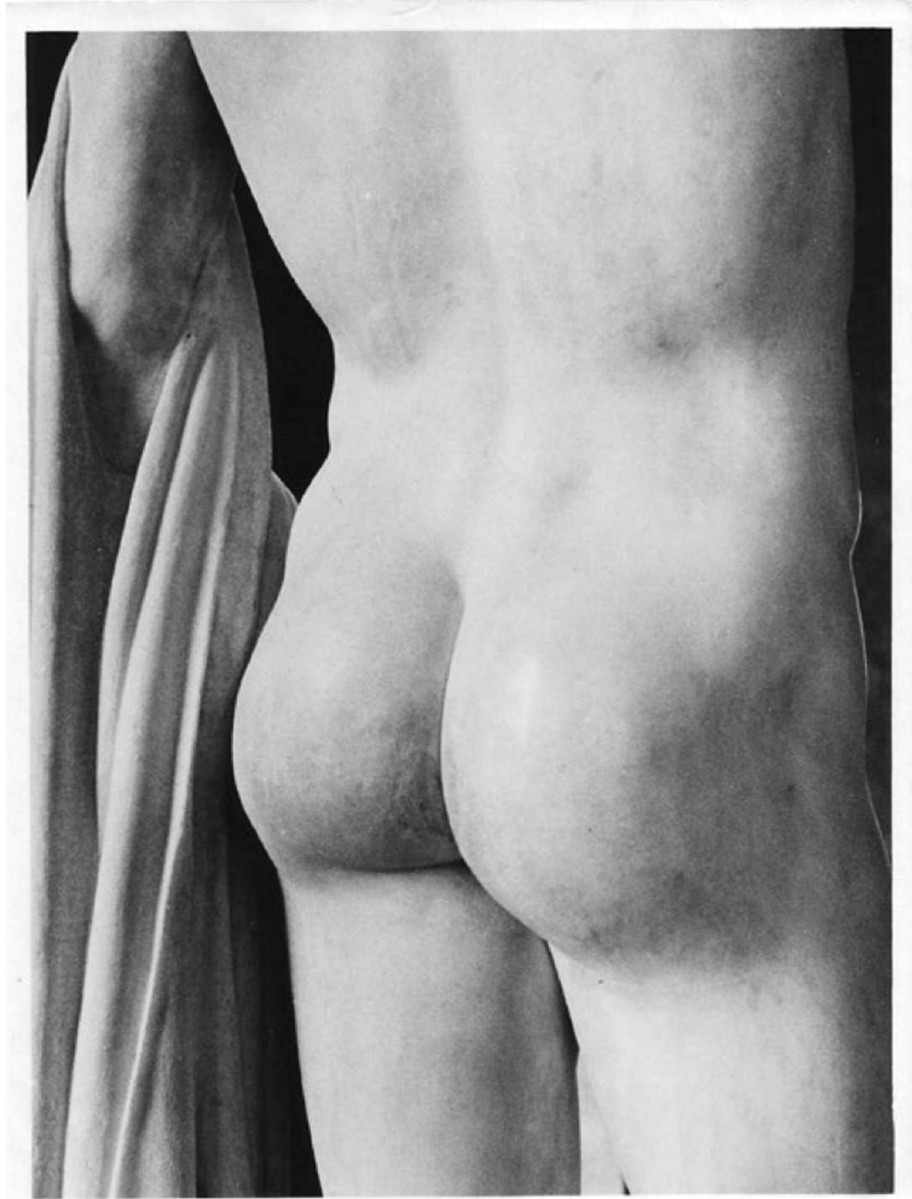


Figure 2.2. Alair Gomes, Image from series *Viagens, Europa 1969*, 1969. Black-and-white photography. Dimensions unknown.



Figure 2.3. Alair Gomes, Image from series *Viagens, Europa 1969*, 1969. Black-and-white photography. Dimensions unknown.

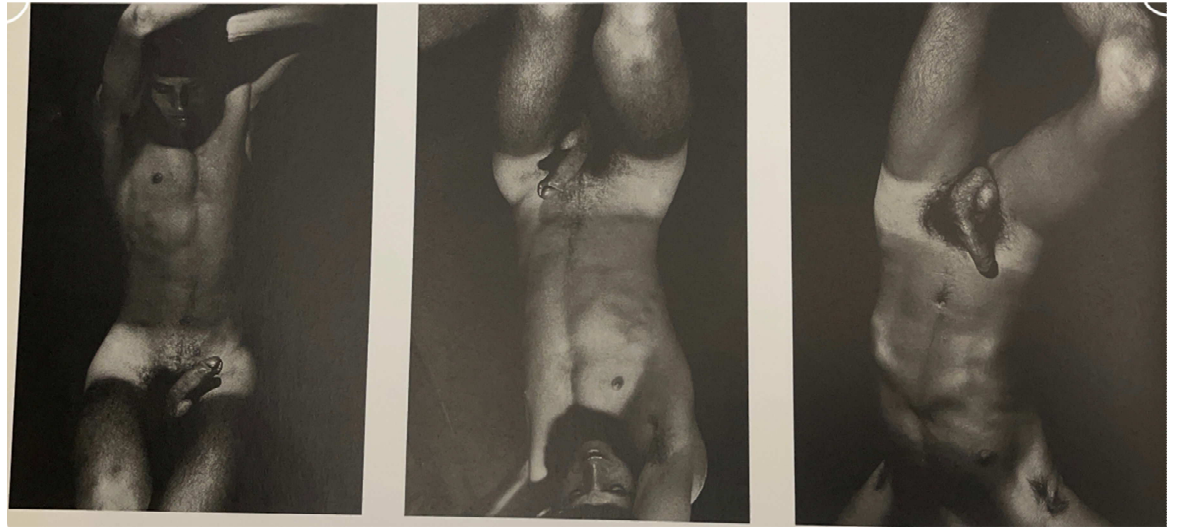


Figure 2.4. Alair Gomes, *Symphony of Erotic Icons, 3rd Movement, Andante* #980-983, c. 1970's. Black-and-white photography. Dimensions unknown.

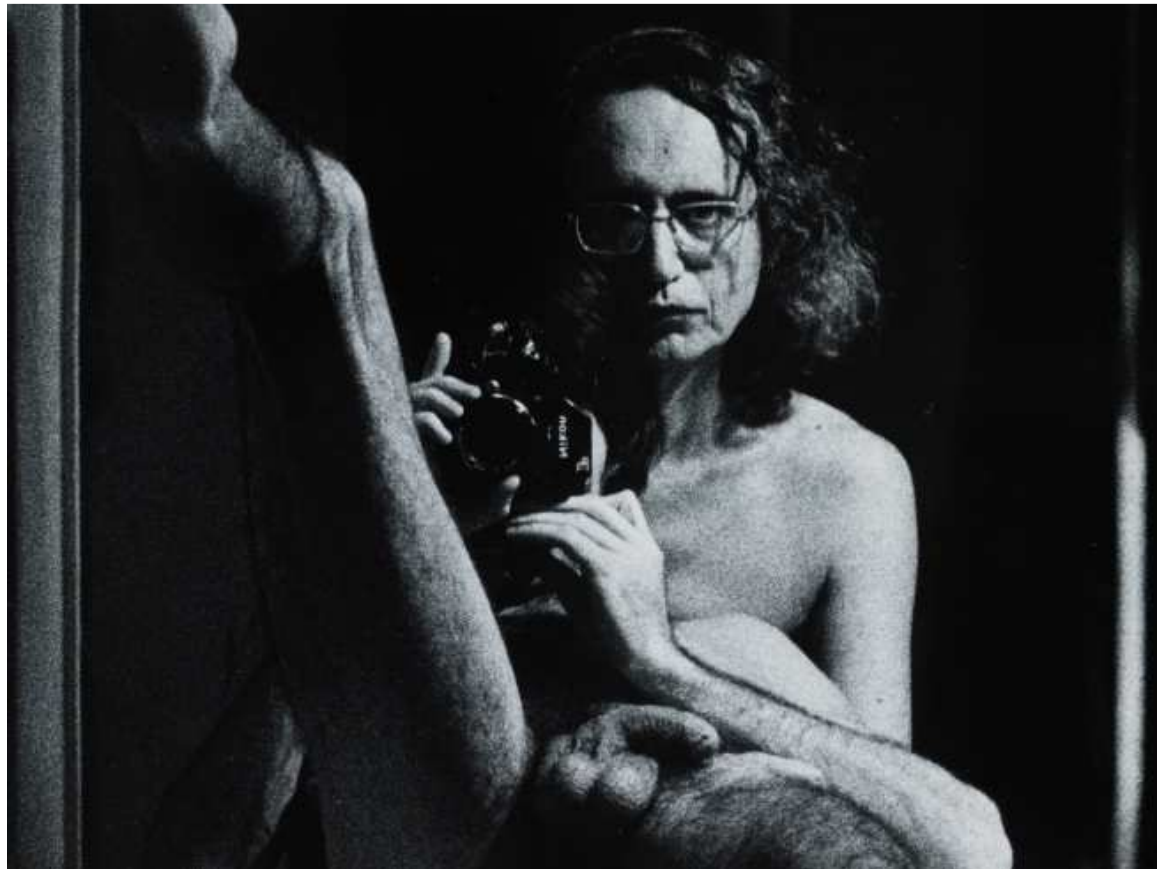


Figure 2.5. Alair Gomes, photograph from *Symphony of Erotic Icons*, Date unknown. Black-and-white photography. Dimensions unknown.



Figure 2.6. Alair Gomes, *Sonatinas, Four Feet no. 42*, 1977. Black-and-white photography, 11 x 17 cm each.



Figure 2.7. Alair Gomes, Final image of *Sonatinas*, *Four Feet no. 42*, 1977. Black-and-white photography, 11 x 17 cm each.



Figure 2.8. Alair Gomes, *Beach Triptych no. 20*, c. 1980. Black-and-white photography.
35.75 x 27 cm each.

Chapter 2: Hudinilson, Jr.: Reflections of the Self

Over the course of four decades, Brazilian artist Hudinilson Urbano, Jr. (1957-2013) created an artistic corpus characterized by vanity, exhibitionism, and introspection. In numerous interviews, Hudinilson characterized himself as vain, even going so far as to identify himself in interviews and his works as *Narciso* (Narcissus), the Greek personification of beauty.¹⁰⁹ He took great care throughout his life to preserve all of his artworks, personal effects, and correspondence in order to avoid falling into obscurity, creating an archive of himself that astonished art historian Ricardo Resende by its sheer volume.¹¹⁰ It is fitting, then, that his work should be analyzed as a visual documentation of his life and personality.

It is clear from the artist's archive and interviews that he turned to homoerotic or coquettish motifs throughout his entire career. According to interviews published in the catalogue of his posthumous exhibition *Posição Amorosa* (Loving Position), Hudinilson knew of his attraction to the same sex from a young age.¹¹¹ He recounted his first erotic dream, which occurred when he was about eight or nine years old. He described how this experience of "premature desire for another man" brought him to the precipice of sexual discovery. Whether or not this dream ever occurred (for the artist was known for his hyperbole and love of a good story), it does reflect that eroticism and sexual discovery

¹⁰⁹ Ricardo Resende, "Sexuality in Hudinilson Jr.'s Art: In Praise of Male Beauty," in *Posição Amorosa* (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), 393.

¹¹⁰ Ricardo Resende, "Art That Rubs Against Life," in *Posição Amorosa* (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), 365.

¹¹¹ Resende, "Art That Rubs Against Life," 368.

were both foundational aspects of the artist's ethos. He employed such themes in every media he worked in, returning time and time again to specific visuals: a male silhouette, his own naked body, flirtatious graffiti messages, or pornographic imagery. Focusing on bodily urges and psychological needs that made sexual intercourse so beguiling, Hudinilson utilized the image of the male nude across various media.

Hudinilson's aesthetic and personal identities were heavily influenced by his love of history and homoeroticism. Like Alair Gomes, Hudinilson looked to the classical realm for aesthetic inspiration. Both artists juxtaposed the erotic naked bodies of the pornographic with the aestheticized nudes of the canon in a way which exposed the beauty of the former and the sensuality of the latter. But for Hudinilson, one classical male in particular captivated his mind and inspired his art: the legendary male beauty, Narcissus. As the tale goes, Narcissus was an impossibly beautiful youth who, upon catching a glimpse of his own reflection in the lake, became enamored with the image, to his own mortal detriment. As his body faded, an eponymous flower remained. The artist took Narcissus not only as his mythic muse, but also as an alter ego, creating stamps of the name in Portuguese, "Narciso," or the *narcissus* flower, which acted as his signature in several of his mail art pieces.

Hudinilson likely identified with Narcissus because of the queer undertones which characterize the myth of self-enthraling beauty. In the story of Narcissus and Echo, the man spurns the romantic advances of a woman, yet finds himself taken by the image of another man – his own reflection. Some iterations state that Narcissus, having never seen his own reflection, believed the visage to be that of another man. It is easy to see how a

young gay man such as Hudinilson might interpret Narcissus as a queer legend. As literature scholar Lacey Wolfer notes, later retellings of Narcissus's tale tend to note that the youth rejects the societal norms of marriage and heterosexuality.¹¹² This situates Narcissus within what gender studies scholar Judith Halberstam calls a "queer temporality," a form of existence which is "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction." This theoretical analysis may have been appealing to the generation of gay men who came of age in the 1970's, during counter-culture, Tropicália, and Gay Liberation.

Some scholars of queer theory argue that same-sex attraction is actually an endless search for the unattainable self, in which men or women seek out their own likeness in their sexual partners.¹¹³ In his writing on sexuality, Sigmund Freud theorized that homosexuality was inherently narcissistic, arguing that the chosen sexual object for same-sex desire reflected a fetish for the self.¹¹⁴ Art historian Kaja Silverman has elaborated on Freud's theories, stating that a key tenet of Freud's "narcissistic object-choice" theory is the search for an earlier version of the self, one which is deemed unattainable due to its existence in the past.¹¹⁵ Hudinilson himself adhered to this belief, according to Ricardo Resende. In his works with Xerox machines, Hudinilson imagined

¹¹² Lacey M. Wolfer, "Narcissus in Queer Time," *Accessus* 5, no 2, (2019) 4.

¹¹³ See Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, (London: Routledge, 1992); Eark Jackson, Jr, *Strategies of Deviance Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Steven Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

¹¹⁴ See Sigmund Freud (1914), *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, (Redditch, England: Read Books Ltd., 2013).

¹¹⁵ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 365.

himself as the ill-fated young Narcissus, gazing into the reflection of the scanner glass as Narcissus gazed into the reflection pool.¹¹⁶ We can deduce that Hudinilson's interest in Narcissus was in truth a manifestation of the artist's own identity exploration, constantly seeking to better understand his own desires and sexuality. In a Freudian sense, he experimented with xerography in order to capture moments of his physical self as they dissolved into the past.

According to the artist, homosexuality was not a novelty. "Sex is sex. Gay sex, homo sex, it's still sex," he said.¹¹⁷ In his eyes, homosexual intercourse was no more outrageous or provocative than heterosexual intercourse. He clarified to Resende that he was not fazed by his own sexual difference, but by the inability of others to accept him for it.¹¹⁸ However, the artist was notoriously open about his sexuality, and was supported by his parents, academic mentors, and his friends. It is unclear how much of the artist's underdog reputation was the result of his own personal perspective. Whatever the reason, the artist continued to express feelings of not belonging throughout his lifetime. This feeling of ostracization may have contributed to his drive to preserve his legacy himself.

Years before Hudinilson began his projects with xerography, he experimented with a wide range of media. His artistic practice can be characterized by the combined use of traditional mediums and new technologies. For example, during his early career in the 1970's, he made woodcut prints-- the oldest form of printmaking-- as well as mail

¹¹⁶ Resende, "Art That Rubs Against Life," 365.

¹¹⁷ Resende, "Sexuality," 393.

¹¹⁸ Resende, "Art That Rubs," 365.

art—a type of avant-garde tactic that was able to avoid censorship. He also worked with graffiti, a highly subversive and rebellious form of street art. The immense reproducibility and low cost of these mediums made them popular for political activists. Artists such as Hudinilson utilized these materials to create highly legible works with a broad reach, without requiring too much technical training with the mediums themselves. From 1979-1982, Hudinilson also co-founded the artist group 3Nós3, alongside his university peers Rafael França and Mário Ramiro. Together, the group took to the streets of São Paulo, creating urban interventions which they referred to as “happenings” - a term coined by the U.S. artist Allan Kaprow in 1958 and commonly deployed by artists in Brazil since the 1960s, as a way to critique their social and political context.¹¹⁹ Yet Hudinilson’s work was best captured through the artist’s relationship to the xerox machine, a technology so new and seemingly innocuous that it went uncensored by the military government. It is through this medium that the artist truly began to delve into his sexual identity and desires.

Formal Artistic Training

A life-long *paulista*, Hudinilson Urbano, Jr. was born in 1957 to a bourgeois family in the Aclimação neighborhood, a prosperous region in São Paulo’s city-center.¹²⁰ His father, Urbano, taught high school, before eventually rising to the status of a

¹¹⁹ Happenings were conducted by artists in Brazil as early as the 1960’s, such as the artist collective Rex Gallery & Sons. The art form became increasingly popular after AI-5 was enacted in 1968, with pieces such as Artur Barrio’s Situação . . . ORHHHHHHH . . . ou...5000 . . . T.E....em . . . NY . . . CITY . . . 1969 (1969), Antonio Manuel’s O corpo é a obra (1970), or Cildo Meireles’ Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner (1971).

¹²⁰ Cynthia Garcia, “Beyond Categorization: The Provocative Beauty of Hudinilson, Jr.,” *New City Brasil*, September 3, 2019.

Linguistics professor at USP in 1972. As a young teenager, Hudinilson worked as his father's secretary, archiving newspapers and other materials. In his lifelong artistic projects, he often built on the skills he had acquired working for his father in his youth, particularly in his use of documentation and the media. His mother, Cida, encouraged his passion for drawing, and paid for classes at the expensive *Instituto de Arte e Decoração* (IADE) during his high school years. Even before he enrolled at IADE as a teenager, Hudinilson was already familiar with the artistic landscape of São Paulo. When he was thirteen, he started attending French film screenings on Impressionist artists, held at the *Museu Lasar Segall*. During these excursions, he perused the galleries of Segall's Expressionist paintings, familiarizing himself with modern art. He soon began visiting art galleries around town,¹²¹ reading through his father's newspapers to find exciting shows he could see.¹²²

When he enrolled at IADE, he took up painting first, one of the most traditional mediums, although he did not produce very many.¹²³ In one series of early paintings, entitled *Amantes e Casos* ("Lovers and Affairs," 1970's), he configured compositions of nude bodies, a subject matter that would later return throughout his career. Although not

¹²¹ As art historian Aleca Le Blanc notes in "A History of the Field," gallerists such as Raquel Arnaud and Luisa Strina started galleries in São Paulo, "laying the foundation for today's lucrative art market in Brazil." Arnaud and Strina opened their doors in 1973 and 1974, respectively. For more on the gallery industry in Rio and São Paulo, see Aleca Le Blanc, "A History of the Field," in *Purity is a Myth*, ed. Zanna Gilbert, Pia Gottschaller, Tom Learner, and Andrew Perchuk (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2021), 263-277.

¹²² Resende, "Art That Rubs," 377.

¹²³ If Hudinilson did paint often, these are not well-documented. At present, the *Amantes e Casos* series is his best-known set of paintings, conducted during his time at FAAP. I am not currently aware of works from his time at IADE.

explicitly pictured, he added subtitles to create sexual connotations within the paintings: “*Ménage à trois*” (“Threesome”); “*Dueto do ciúme*” (“Duet of Jealousy”); “*Sentença da morte*” (“Death Sentence”). The composition for *Ménage à trois* (1978; Figure 2) contains a sewing mannequin flanked on both sides by two human bodies. Behind them, the artist painted an ambiguous background, with black vertical curvilinear shapes, which echo Art Deco ironworks. Art Deco as a style is associated with luxury and modernity, thus situating the figures in an indulgent setting. The leftmost figure he painted in profile, cut-off below the thighs and above the shoulders, with a muscular chest and exposed groin without genitalia. The rightmost figure is painted in a half-length portrait pose, with its face turned to the viewer, obscured by a Venetian *commedia dell’arte* mask.¹²⁴ These masks were traditionally worn by theatrical harlequins, characters known for their impulsive and highly sexual antics. While the mannequin in the center is missing both arms and a head, the bodice has a pair of breasts. The piece is entirely done in cool yellows, greens, and slate grays, except for the mannequin, which is composed in a light pink, contrasting the cooler tones of its companions. Despite the suggestive title of the piece, Hudinilson has not put the figures in contact with one another, and these figures even lack the necessary body parts or human agency to engage in any sort of interaction, let alone sexual intercourse. The explicitly erotic nature of the titles in this series coupled with the sterilized bodies reveals a tension between the sensual and the restrictive.

¹²⁴ These masks typically are monochromatic, with holes for eyes and emotive facial expressions. Rather than identifying a distinct character, they were useful for pantomime.

After training at the IADE, Hudinilson studied visual arts from 1975 to 1977 at the prestigious *Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado* (FAAP). Here, his artistic interests were reciprocated by his peers and encouraged by his faculty mentor, the contemporary artist Regina Silveira. As his mentor, she encouraged Hudinilson to experiment with xerography, as well as other avant-garde mediums such as mail art. She also introduced him to his future collaborators, Rafael França and Mário Ramiro, with whom Hudinilson would form the group 3Nós3 (1979-1982).

Yet despite this, Hudinilson dropped out of his collegiate program prematurely. Varying accounts describe the reasons why, ranging from a voluntary departure over a disagreement over teaching methodologies and vague mentions of “financial reasons,”¹²⁵ to the assertion that Hudinilson’s father forced him to leave when he discovered that his son was pursuing art instead of industrial design.¹²⁶ What is certain is that Hudinilson did not feel completely welcome, a symptom of his lifelong internal struggle with feeling ostracized. This is particularly perplexing, as his brief university career consisted of opportune interactions which defined his career throughout the seventies and eighties. If the stories about disagreements over pedagogy are to be believed, then Hudinilson’s departure reflects his commitment to his personal convictions; yet, according to curator Ricardo Resende, who organized the artist’s first major retrospective, Hudinilson’s own fervent emotions and passions often permeated his stories.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Resende, “Art That Rubs Against Life,” 375.

¹²⁶ Tobi Maier, “Hudinilson Urbano, Jr.” in *Aperture* 84, (Summer 2014), 85.

¹²⁷ Resende, “Art That Rubs Against Life,” 366.

Hudinilson abandoned painting and turned his attention to woodcut printing during his final years at FAAP, around 1977. Cheaper and requiring less technical skill than painting, the medium was popular across a variety of cultural productions. In Brazil, woodcuts prints were common within the visual culture because they were used to illustrate a genre of popular literature published as pamphlets of fables, songs, and poems. The genre, *literatura de cordel* (literally, “string literature”), was named as such because vendors would clip the pamphlets to a string outside of a news kiosk, and the striking covers were typically woodcut prints. Hudinilson’s interest in the technique was first piqued as a teenager after seeing Lasar Segall’s prints on display at the *Museu Lasar Segall* and later expanded his practice with the technique at FAAP. Fascinated with the medium’s potential to easily replicate an image, Hudinilson could easily generate, alter, and recreate images with great immediacy.¹²⁸ In his first exhibit in 1979, Hudinilson displayed a series of woodcut prints he had generated in his final years at FAAP. These prints portray silhouettes of nude male bodies outlined in black. In one of these early prints exhibited in this show (1978, Figure 3), the artist depicts a male body semi-immersed in a moonlit body of water. The image is an early instance of the artist’s interest in Narcissus, the mythic figure through whom he attempted to understand sexual desire. In prints such as this, we see Hudinilson’s approach to portraying the male nude evolve so that the musculature of their torsos and buttocks become increasingly

¹²⁸ Woodblock prints in the West garnered immense popularity in the European Renaissance, largely due to their low production costs and compatibility with movable type, making them ideal for producing illustrations to accompany text. Political pamphleteers across various countries and centuries often employed woodcut prints in order to mass-produce straight-forward, eye-catching designs that could create an almost endless supply of propaganda.

accentuated. Furthermore, Hudinilson's exploration of the male form coincided with his exploration of his own sexual desires, meaning these prints exist as both experiments with a historical medium and documentations of the artist's sexual impulses.

Hudinilson used the lessons he learned in his painting practice and experimentation with woodcut printing as building blocks in his career. When he eventually turned to graffiti and xerography, his facility with the media and compositional strategies drew on these early works. His engagement with the male nude would soon evolve from aesthetic experiments into political statements and introspective explorations.

Activism

During his time at FAAP and immediately after, Hudinilson became politically active and took up media that he could leverage in his mission to critique the social landscape of São Paulo, such as mail art, graffiti, and urban intervention. In all, his objective was the circulation of information in spite of regulations and censorship. Through his focus on activism and communication, Hudinilson brought his practice, quite literally, to the streets. As his fellow 3Nós3 artist Mário Ramiro has written, in Brazil the streets are the space of *Carnaval*, parades, protests, “the stage where the joy of life, the fervor of religion and politics, and the grief of death are collectively acted out.”¹²⁹ Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta further characterizes the street as the embodiment of “the world with its unpredictable events, accidents, and passions... The

¹²⁹ Mário Ramiro, “Between Form and Force: Connecting Architectonic, Telematic and Thermal Spaces.” *Leonardo*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1998, pp. 247.

street implies movement, novelty, action.”¹³⁰ These are spaces of culture and community, where one might encounter a public art exhibition or a festival, run into a neighbor, or be confronted by a salesman. There is also a connotation in the phrase, “to the streets,” which conveys a grassroots aesthetic, synonymous with protest marches and public demonstrations. Such a connotation is particularly apt when considering Hudinilson’s graffiti work, mail art circulations, and urban interventions with 3Nós3, as all three practices involved political commentary facilitated through the normal forms and operations of the cityscape. When Hudinilson came of age in the 1970’s, many artists maneuvered the censorship laws of the military regime by turning to new or nontraditional media to communicate with one another.

Indeed, the oppression of the military dictatorship cast a veil over Hudinilson’s youth. The coup of 1964 occurred when he was only seven years old, and the Institutional Act (AI-5) that terminated civil rights and legalized surveillance and censorship came into effect right as he reached adolescence. This was a period where all communicative and creative outlets, such as newspapers and other media-based mass communications, were subject to heightened scrutiny and censorship. This also included films, music, television, theater, and museums. Those who disobeyed the censors or agitated against the military were arrested, tortured, and disappeared. Many of the more famous and established cultural figures, such as musicians Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, and artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, left the country for self-imposed exile. However,

¹³⁰ Roberto da Matta, “The Many Levels of Carnival,” in *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma*, trans. John Drury (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 64.

those who remained or were just coming of age sought out new modes of communication and aesthetics in order to escape censure and persecution.¹³¹

The large presence of workers, students, intellectuals, and artists in São Paulo made it a breeding ground for activism and resistance. Visual culture played a significant role in garnering both publicity and a lasting legacy for these actions. In 1967, São Paulo-born artist Nelson Leirner submitted a piece to the IV Annual Brasília salon entitled *O porco empalhado* (Stuffed Pig). This piece consisted of a taxidermied pig forced into a wooden crate which was nearly too small to contain it. As art historian Elena Shtromberg notes, Leirner used his piece to make a “symbolic allusion to the censorship affecting artists whose expression made them subject to another type of cage, prison.”¹³² During the 1968 global student movement, São Paulo was a site of substantial student protests and resistance, including the Battle of Maria Antônia, which took place in October of that year, just two months before AI-5 was enacted.¹³³ This conflict led to the shooting and subsequent death of 20-year-old José Guimarães, after which students from USP took to the streets with his bloody shirt acting as their banner, shouting, “They killed a student.”

¹³¹ For more on the subversive practices of Brazilian artists in the 1970’s, see Elena Shtromberg, “Contemporary Art in Brazil, 1960s and 1970s: Forging the “New,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, November 29, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.870>

¹³² Shtromberg, “Contemporary Art in Brazil.”

¹³³ The 1968 student movement saw protests by university students across several continents. Scholars such as sociologist Michael Lowy cite Brazil’s student movement as reaching its fullest form in 1968, yet the União Nacional de Estudantes (National Student Union) was meeting as early as 1966, and demonstrations did occur throughout 1966-67. Michael Lowy and Stephen M. Gorman, “Students and Class Struggle in Brazil,” *Latin American Perspectives* 6, no. 4 (1979): 101–7.

¹³⁴ One year after the enactment of AI-5 in 1968, the 1969 *X Bienal de São Paulo* became a battleground of political protest, with hundreds of domestic and international artists boycotting the event as a critique of the military government's oppression. Brazilian artists continued this trend to varying degrees for ten years, until the beginning of *Abertura* in 1979. ¹³⁵ In May 1977, upwards of ten thousand students took to the city center, demanding amnesty for political prisoners and the re-establishment of democratic liberties. ¹³⁶ During the 1984 *Diretas Já* movement, which featured protests across the country calling for direct elections, São Paulo saw 1,500,000 protestors march through the city, the largest public demonstration in the country's history. ¹³⁷ In support of the political protests, the periodical *Folha de São Paulo* collaborated with a group of artists to produce a public exhibition entitled *Artistas brasileiros pelas Diretas* ("Brazilian Artists for Direct [Elections]"). The exhibition was seen as a demonstration of the commitment of contemporary artists to fight for democracy. ¹³⁸

¹³⁴ A similar demonstration was conducted in Rio de Janeiro that same year after the death of student Edson Luís. See Victoria Languard, *Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the Making and Remembering of 1968 in Military Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 149-150.

¹³⁵ Elena Shtromberg, *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016), 66-68.

¹³⁶Lowy and Gorman, "Students and Class Struggle in Brazil," 101.

¹³⁷ Mitchell Torton (1984), "Brazil Diretas Ja Yields to Negotiations," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 18, no. 4, 17-19, DOI: 10.1080/10714839.1984.11723523

¹³⁸ Among the artists involved in this exhibition were Darcy Penteado, Claudio Tozzi, Mario Gruber, Marcello Nitsche, Alex Flemming, Luis Paulo Baravelli, Guto Lacaz, Rubens Gerchman, Dudi Maia Rosa, Glauco Pinto de Moraes, Antonio Henrique Amaral, João Câmara Filho, Ivald Franato, Carlos Lemos, Thomas Ianelli, and Gregorio. See "Folha inaugural mostra de artistas pelas diretas," *Folha de S. Paulo*, February 28, 1984, 25.

Given the inherent risks of participating in conventional museum exhibitions, Brazilian artists turned to more unconventional and public media, such as graffiti. Today, São Paulo is known for its graffiti culture – due in part to the emergence of internationally-known artists such as Nunca and the street art duo, OSGEMEOS – but it grew out of the protests of 1968. As writer Philip Monk describes, *paulista* graffiti traces its origin to students spraying buildings with slogans like “*abaixo a ditadura*” (“Down with the dictatorship”).¹³⁹ Anthropologist Teresa P.R. Caldeira has noted that São Paulo graffiti in the 1970’s and 80’s drew on pop art and modernist movements, using paint stencils to mark building facades.¹⁴⁰ A São Paulo-specific genre of graffiti known as *pixação* grew out of political statements written in tar on public walls in the mid-century.¹⁴¹ It is characterized by a cryptic font, often done at high elevations which put the artist in a precarious situation. Predating the spray can (which emerged in the 1970’s), the use of tar meant that removal of the tag would be incredibly difficult. The advent of spray paint changed the medium of this style, yet the conceptual premise remained the same: to make oneself seen. *Pixação* has come to be understood as an assertion of presence by low-income men from the periphery, tagging the inner-city neighborhoods that would otherwise have them obscured.

¹³⁹ Philip Monk, “O Narciso: The Streets Look Back at Hudinilson Jr.,” *Momus* (September 5, 2018).

¹⁴⁰ Teresa P. R. Caldeira, “Imprinting and Moving Around: New Visibilities and Configurations of Public Space in São Paulo,” *Public Culture* 24, no. 2 (67), (Spring 2012), 393.

¹⁴¹ Also stylized as *pichação* by some authors. In *From graffiti to pixação*, Paula Gil Larruscahaim clarifies that “*pichação*” refers to a form of graffiti in Brazil that is multifaceted and changes by location. Meanwhile, “*pixação*” refers to a specific rune-like style of tagging unique to São Paulo.

Part of this first generation of graffiti artists in São Paulo, Hudinilson took up the medium after his time at FAAP. He shifted towards a public practice that went beyond the gallery space, making his mark on the urban landscape. Armed with a spray-paint can and a litany of stencils, he tagged the cityscape with audacious, queer-coded messaging (Figure 4). Unlike the more sexually subtle subjects in his early paintings and woodcuts, Hudinilson crafted increasingly brazen and provocative graffiti stencils. Through statements like those shown in the images – “Ahh! Beije-me” (Ahh! Kiss me) and “Pinto não pode” (No dicks allowed) – he taunted his audience in flirtatious or brash messages. He directly references bodily interaction - “kiss me” implying physical contact, “dicks” referring to male genitalia - while simultaneously, the act of spray painting is embodied in itself. By exposing the erotic to the public through personal markings on the urban landscape, Hudinilson appropriated public space in order to visualize a bold human sensuality amidst oppressive censorship.

Building on the visual vocabulary that he developed in his graffiti, Hudinilson also worked in another medium which has come to be linked with political protest and networking: mail art. While it is widely understood to be a “democratic art” with roots across almost every continent, mail art’s existence in Latin America is distinct.¹⁴²

Brazilian artist Paulo Bruscky wrote that *arte correio*, as it is often called in Portuguese, “regains [art’s] principal functions: information, protest, and denunciation.”¹⁴³ Artists in

¹⁴² Ricardo Resende, “Mail Art,” in *Posição Amorosa*, (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), 384.

¹⁴³ Translation my own. Paulo Bruscky, “Arte correio e a grande rede: hoje, a arte é este comunicado,” in *Escritos de Artistas: anos 60/70*, ed. Glória Ferreira and Cecília Cotrim (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2006) p.374.

Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, among other South American countries, turned to mail art as a subversive means of communicating that defied the censorship which monitored other channels, forging international cohorts of correspondence artists in the process. Uruguayan artist Clemente Padín, Chilean artist Guillermo Diesler, and Argentinian artist Edgardo Antonio Vigo constituted but one such international network of mail artists during the 1970's and 80's.¹⁴⁴ In Brazil, artists used mail art as a means of subverting censorship and circulating their ideas, utilizing various methods from stamps to xerox to create reproducible images.¹⁴⁵ Hudinilson often used stencils, a graffiti tool which allows for exact replicas quite similar to woodcuts, to embellish postcards and letters with stamp-like images. The stencils ranged from text, such as “Pinto Não Pode,” to images of Michelangelo's *David*, male bodies, or the narcissus flower (Figures 5 and 6). With stencils, artists can better hide their personal style to evade recognition. Nevertheless, Hudinilson still showed his uniquely bold and sensual artistic lexicon, while theoretically remaining anonymous. Through mail art, Hudinilson translated the public nature of the artist's wall graffiti to a different, more mobile medium which was no less public. The mail system allowed for chance. Mail could be destroyed or misdelivered, or sent out again to new recipients. The artist lost control of the works once mailed, sacrificing physical possession in the name of communication. In the

¹⁴⁴ John Held, Jr., “Fifty Years of Latin American Art,” *SFAQ*, December 16, 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Hudinilson's mentors at FAAP, Maria Irene Ribeiro and Regina de Silveira, both were avid mail artists. Other Brazilian artists active in the genre included Anna Bella Geiger, Cildo Meireles, Julio Plaza, Paulo Bruscky, and Walter Zanini.

multifaceted system of mail art, Hudinilson utilized his knowledge of other media in order to disseminate his work and build his reputation.

If Hudinilson's graffiti and mail art presented practices more political in theory than in their subject matter, then his urban interventions were explicitly critical of the government and the state of Brazilian society. Between 1979-82, Hudinilson allied himself with two of his fellow students from FAAP, Rafael França and Mario Ramiro, to form an artist's collective known as 3Nós3. As a collective, they manifested a series of well-publicized urban interventions, calling attention to social inequities and censorship.

¹⁴⁶ The artists took to the streets of São Paulo under the cover of night to stage their "irreverent and polemic" happenings. ¹⁴⁷ Their most widely known happening took place in the early morning hours of April 26, 1979. Known as *Ensacamento* ("Bagging"; Figure 7), wherein the artists covered the heads of statues representing classical figures and political heroes with plastic bags. Following the interpretation of writer and curator Philip Monk, the effects of this "bagging" is two-fold. On the one hand, the visual critiques the military regime, desecrating and thereby destabilizing the symbolic power of national and regional heroes, while the act of obscuring their faces and identities recalls the many Brazilians who the government had disappeared. Additionally, individuals arrested by the police were often bagged so they would not be aware of their surroundings, thus denying them knowledge or a sense of security. However, Monk notes, a homoerotic

¹⁴⁶ 3Nós3 bears a certain resemblance to the Los Angeles-based collective, Asco. Both groups were composed of student artists, with mail art backgrounds and queer affiliations, who used the cityscape as their canvas for irreverent happenings.

¹⁴⁷ Ricardo Resende, "3Nós3" in *Posição Amorosa*, (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), 390.

interpretation is also possible: “by stripping [the statues] of their facial features in favor of their often-nude torsos, [the artists] created a psychogeography of desire.”¹⁴⁸ The symbolic act of bagging recalls asphyxiation (a common sexual fetish), and the nocturnal and public nature of these happenings can be related to the nighttime cruising culture that was common in the 1970’s. Likewise, this is also an instance in which Hudinilson publicizes homoeroticism, subverting political repression and censorship through social collaboration and the body.

In order to document their happenings, the artists anonymously contacted the local press to inform them of what they had done.¹⁴⁹ Just as mail art capitalized on the reliability of the pre-established government postal system, urban interventionists took advantage of the dependable, predictable media networks of large cities. This was the only reliable outlet to photographically document and distribute their work to the masses before it was removed by the authorities. 3Nós3 had fooled the press into “[producing], unconsciously, the artists’ portfolio.”¹⁵⁰ At the same time, they appropriated the government’s own apparatus in order to broadcast criticism of it. By “betraying” their work (albeit, anonymously) to the press, the artists defied censorship by flaunting their rebelliousness to the people, the media, and the regime. The men created 3Nós3 as a collaborative practice which kept art and activism at the core of its initiatives, using the media to subvert the censorship imposed by the government on the arts. 3Nós3 would

¹⁴⁸ Monk, “O Narciso.”

¹⁴⁹ Ramiro, “Between Form and Force,” 247.

¹⁵⁰ Lara Tannus, “3Nós3 e a arte clandestina,” *Centro Cultural de São Paulo* website. <http://centrocultural.sp.gov.br/2020/03/11/3nos3-e-a-arte-clandestina/>

only last three years, until França moved to Chicago to pursue a Masters of Fine Arts. Nevertheless, their remarkable appropriation of systematized communications channels for their own purposes highlights the radical innovation of Hudinilson and his generational contemporaries.

While Hudinilson had been an outspoken critic of Brazil's military regime all his life, his engagement with activism and its associated media is much more multifaceted than a disdain for totalitarianism. In his works in graffiti and urban intervention, he transformed the cityscape into his canvas, bringing his art to a living, ever-shifting terrain. While government censorship had erased certain bodies and histories, the tactility and sensuality of Hudinilson's activist practices document certain human presences. In mail art and his work with 3Nós3, he appropriated the government's own systems in a subversive way. Communication was a central theme in each of the practices discussed, with rapid image reproduction, efficient mail circulation, and press distribution allowing the artist to reach an immense audience across São Paulo. Hudinilson continued his engagement with the community and public realm throughout the rest of his career.

Introspection

At the same time that Hudinilson was working with activism-oriented media, he was beginning to experiment with various forms of documentation and archiving. The key projects of these themes include his *cardenos de referência* (reference notebooks), and works with xerography. In the former works, he created numerous notebooks filled with collages of erotic imagery; in the latter, he often produced scans of his own erogenous zones. These simultaneous practices reflect the artist's dual personas – the

public Hudinilson, who tagged buildings and critiqued society through erotic references to the body; and the private Hudinilson, who explored his own gay identity through his reflection in photocopies.

The first of these projects, the *cadernos*, is a series of over one hundred notebooks, the pages of which he collaged with found imagery resulting in volumes of homages to the male nude. From the 1980's until his death in 2013, Hudinilson worked tirelessly on these compositions and pasting clippings of images into datebooks. If we consider these as visual diaries as curator Ricardo Resende did in *Posição Amorosa*, they provide insight into how Hudinilson visualized and aestheticized his sexuality and experience, turning the homoerotic into constellations of his own desire. An impulsive collector of images, Hudinilson drew largely from pornographic magazines, interspersing scenes of homosexual intercourse with images of male athletes, models, and celebrities (Figure 3.1). In the bottom left corner, a tiny reproduction of da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* is surrounded by photos of male celebrities and an athlete on a treadmill, creating a centuries-spanning dialogue of ideal manhood. Just to the right of the jogging athlete, images of two men engaging in felatio and sexual foreplay contrast the heteropatriarchal masculinity of the other photos with the virility and excitement of homosexual intercourse. In such drastic juxtapositions between images such as porn, the fine arts, celebrities, and athleticism, Hudinilson calls our attention to how prolific eroticism and fetishism are in the media and our collective consciousness.

Within these collages, Hudinilson incorporated images from other printed material as well. Postcards, phone numbers, bees in their hives – in their juxtaposition,

they take on new meanings. These images, while not as explicitly erotic or fetishistic as the cut-outs of male bodies, are indicative of relationships and social interaction.

Postcards suggest correspondence – a theme which the artist explored heavily in his mail art practice. Similarly, phone numbers reflect who the artist knew and socialized with; furthermore, they imply flirtation. Getting someone’s number is and has long been evidence of a reciprocated attraction. Even a close-up image of bees, which crawl over one another on a piece of honeycomb in an orgiastic manner, reminds the viewer of bodies pressed close together. The communal nature of the beehive reminds the viewer of collectivization and reciprocity, emphasizing the beneficial nature of interpersonal exchange. Appropriating these visuals from their original contexts and putting them into conversation, the artist’s practice of preservation thus emphasizes the social nature of the erotic.

The artist also included imagery of contemporary architectural feats, including Oscar Niemeyer’s *Edifício Copan* (1966).¹⁵¹ This massive building with its 38 stories and sinuous façade, was a monumental undertaking at the time. The building is a phallic image, representing industrial prowess as well as masculine labor. Additionally, by including *Edifício Copan*, Hudinilson contextualized these men and their sexual engages within the contemporary urban realm of São Paulo in a specific moment, just as Alair Gomes’ beach scenes captured male same-sex desire on the shores of Rio. The São Paulo that Hudinilson references is urban, industrial, and exciting. Through these *cadernos*,

¹⁵¹ Hudinilson Jr. as quoted by Gabriel Lima Rett, “Ethos Queer e a Transgressão Erótica da Imagem: O espelho fragmentário de Hudinilson Jr.” (PhD. Diss., Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2020), 59.

Hudinilson created landscapes of desire in which he interwove sex, art history, tradition, modernity, and his immediate surroundings in São Paulo. In effect, Hudinilson documented his own experience of São Paulo, one of disregard for the rules, where sensuality took precedence.

Another common visual in these notebooks is classical statuary of nude men, specifically Michelangelo's *David*.¹⁵² Like Alair, Hudinilson also explored the relationship between classical aesthetics and homoeroticism. Both juxtaposed the chiseled male bodies of their lovers, magazine models, or male porn stars with Renaissance statues, the epitome of the art historical canon. Through their work, each artist created his own artistic style that blurred the lines between the canonical and the erotic. In this manner, both artists turn to art history to preserve their own urban homoerotic experiences.

While these notebooks were not displayed at the rate that his other mediums were, by the end of his life the artist planned to exhibit them in a large-scale solo exhibition.¹⁵³ Given the material state of these notebooks, it is somewhat curious that he planned to show these to the public. To the casual viewer, the pages don't seem to display a particular rhythm or rationale, with some being filled to the brim with cut-outs and others having plenty of negative space between images. Color photos contrast black-and-white images, large cut-outs dominate entire pages where the following page is littered with numerous tiny ones. Some of the photos have faded, while others still shine with

¹⁵² Ibidem.

¹⁵³ See Ricardo Resende, "Introduction," in *Posição Amorosa*, (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), 361.

saturated colors.¹⁵⁴ Amateur pasting techniques texturize the images, creating crinkles, waves, and wrinkles. Yet these characteristics, whether intentional or not, reveal much about the collages' creation and the inspirations behind them. The energy of the pages culminates in a sexual aesthetic which is confrontational, abrasive, and frenzied. We as viewers can draw parallels between the hectic collages and the visceral rushes which overwhelm the mind during arousal. The notebooks document and bind the erotic whims of the artist with his creative process.

While the notebooks are extensive and plentiful, it is his work with the Xerox machine that has given Hudinilson fame in contemporary art. The artist was so captivated by xerography, producing numerous performance works with this new medium, that he is considered one of the medium's pioneers and is best-known as a xerox-artist. Extremely modern, efficient, and unassuming, photocopiers slipped past the military government's surveillance, which was more concerned with photography, the art market, and the media. This could be because the photocopier presented itself as a simple office tool, meant to increase an organization's efficiency. Regardless, the potential of the photocopier to facilitate political commentary at rapid rates and vast quantities was definitely underestimated.

This new technology quickly gained a foothold in the artist and activist circuits, with Maria Irene Ribeiro and Regina de Silveira, Hudinilson's mentors at FAAP, among

¹⁵⁴ Hudinilson, Jr. has remarked on the variation in the longevity of these magazine images. As homosexual pornography was prohibited during the dictatorship, the artist originally utilized imagery from Brazilian heterosexual porn. Later, he began purchasing gay male porn from the United States. According to the artist, the high-quality printing of American publications tended to outlast their Brazilian counterparts, which sometimes faded to the point of near indecipherability. See Resende, "Sexuality," 393.

its champions. Hudinilson began utilizing FAAP's Xerox machine with Silveira's permission in 1975. He had always been drawn to modes of rapid production, beginning with woodcuts. Described by the artist as "the apple of [his] eye throughout [his] career," this machinery allowed him to rapidly, and cheaply, reproduce images at an unprecedented volume. Hudinilson thus circulated these reproductions as mail art, linking conventional activist channels with modern technology.¹⁵⁵

There is more to Hudinilson's engagement with photocopiers than correspondence art: he imagined the medium as an erotic interaction between man and machine. Hudinilson has stated that his *Ações Xerox* (Xerox Actions, 1979-80) constituted a performance piece in which he "had sex" with the machine.¹⁵⁶ In Figure 8, a contact sheet of film strips shot by an unknown photographer documents the artist's performance. We see Hudinilson completely nude, straddling, squatting, laying, and sitting upon a xerox screen across multiple film stills. The vantage point of the camera shifts sporadically, at times above, level with, or below the artist. Lighting from a window out of frame casts latticework-like shadows across the artist's body. Each frame is numbered, yet the numbers do not correspond to the true progression of the performance, as we can see from the chronological arrangement in the contact sheet. In the photocopier's scanner glass Hudinilson saw the realization of the myth of Narcissus. The endless abyss of darkness in the glass, through which the machine allowed him to

¹⁵⁵ Ricardo Resende, "Xerox Art, by Hudinilson, Jr." in *Posição Amorosa*, (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), 407.

¹⁵⁶ Hudinilson, Jr. as quoted by Ricardo Resende, "Loving Position," in *Posição Amorosa*, (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2016), 417.

gaze endlessly into his own visage, reminded him of the waters in which the mythical anti-hero admired his own reflection. Yet unlike Narcissus, Hudinilson found some gratification from the Xerox machine. *Açôes Xerox* represents the most explicit example of self-insertion of the artist's oeuvre, blatantly serving as a means of self-exploration. The very categorization of *Açôes Xerox* as a performance reflects an involvement of the artist on a more physical and visible scale. He presents his own body to the viewer as an agent of desire, but in the reflection of the photocopier, it becomes an erotic object as well.

Hudinilson mined his sexual identity for artistic inspiration, and it was frequently the centerpiece of his artwork. In Narcissus, Hudinilson found a sympathetic character, one whose perceived flaws distract from a deeper search for love and pleasure. He used xerography to carry out highly metaphorical performances, which served as a platform through which he could engage himself in a manner unprecedented. This introspective experimentation documented not only his body, but also the subversive ethos present within his more public-facing projects.

Conclusion

Hudinilson turned his artistic practice into his own mischievous playground, where he blurred lines, broke rules, and thumbed his nose at restrictions. While I have endeavored to characterize, and to some extent categorize, Hudinilson's work, even my own attempts are fraught. The artist's work is too complex to truly distill down to simple terminologies or themes, as it oscillated between camp, politics, and sex. However, the reflection of Narcissus applies to the general ethos of his artistic practice, wherein his

varied works preserve the multifacetedness of the investigations into the body, both public and private.

His self-perception as an outcast as a gay man in heterosexual society and as an artist may or may not have been quite so extreme in reality. He worked tirelessly to make a name for himself in the art scene, and yet even at his death he still felt unaccepted by the museums which had sparked so much creativity in his artistic practice. Hudinilson spoke at length about his own feelings of marginalization, from his childhood peers, the academy, and the art market.¹⁵⁷ He often cited that his rotating selection of media and outspoken homosexuality made the industry uncomfortable. While in his interviews he expressed an evident frustration with this perceived ostracization, it also drove him to cultivate a proudly defiant style. His brazen contempt for the status quo, bold irreverence for rules and strictures, and eagerness to appropriate existing traditions in new ways has forged a legacy that lasts beyond his lifetime.

While Hudinilson's most well-known works were largely inspired by both the dictatorship and his own sexual identity, his engagement with activist channels extended long after the dictatorship officially ended in 1985. The second half of the 1980's brought the AIDS epidemic to Brazil, and he was one of the first artists to participate in the grassroots prevention movement in São Paulo. He claims to be one of the artists who co-produced the first AIDS prevention poster in Brazil.¹⁵⁸ In the end, he was fortunate enough to survive the epidemic without contracting HIV, yet the death of his close

¹⁵⁷ Resende, "Art That Rubs Against Life," 368.

¹⁵⁸ Paulo Miyada, "To Caress, To Fondle, To Covet: Hudinilson, Jr.," *Mousse Magazine*, July 14, 2020.

friends and the destruction of the queer community around him was immensely impactful. Rafael França, his 3Nós3 collaborator and close friend, succumbed to the virus in 1991. His commitment to his community and the emotional impact he felt from this time period manifests itself in his dedication to artistic activism.

Hudinilson died in 2013, at the age of fifty-seven, in the midst of talks for his first major solo exhibition, *Posição Amorosa* at the Galeria Jacqueline Martins in São Paulo. In the years since, he has become recognized as one of the most prolific and dynamic artists of his generation. His vast personal archive, which he had assembled in his apartment, was maintained and processed by his parents before donating portions to several museums.¹⁵⁹ In the past year, his work has been placed in dialogue with several of his contemporaries, including Kupfer Gallery's 2021 show *Let X=X*, a show on Hudinilson and Alair Gomes, as well as Galeria Jacqueline Martins' 2022 show *Hudinilson Jr and Leonilson*.

¹⁵⁹ Hudinilson's collection was eventually donated by his parents to the Central Cultural do São Paulo; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Migros Museum, Zurich; MAGA Museo d'Arte, Gallarate; MALBA, Buenos Aires; MASP, São Paulo; Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo; and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo.

Figures

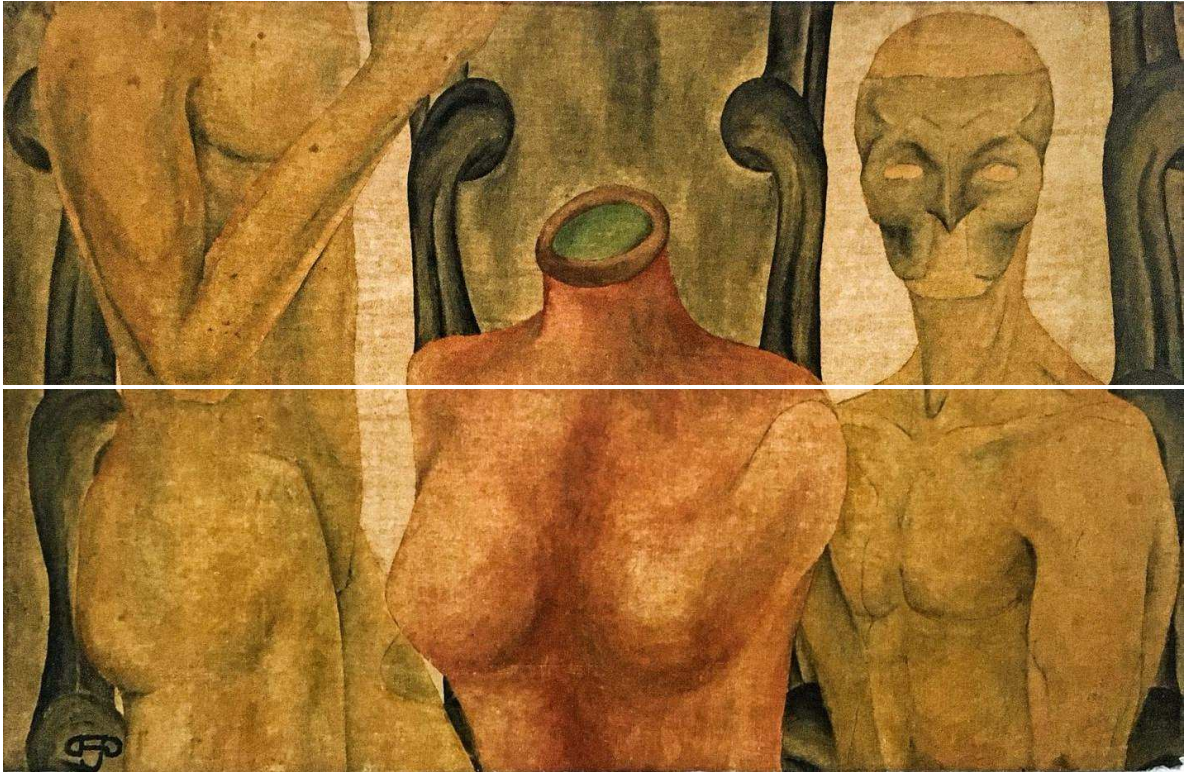


Figure 3.1. Hudinilson, Jr., *Menage a Trois (Threesome)*, from the *Amantes e Casos* series (Lovers and Affairs), 1978. Acrylic paint on canvas. 70 x 45 cm.



Figure 3.2. Hudinilson, Jr., *Sem titulo*, 1978. Woodcut on paper. 29 x 28 cm.



Figure 3.3. Hudinilson, Jr., Stencil used for graffiti and mail art with words “Pinto Não Pode” (No Dicks Allowed). Dimensions unknown.



Figure 3.4. Hudinilson, Jr. Mail Art Stamp Stencil, undated. Stencil on paper. 47 x 32 cm.



Figure 3.5. Hudinilson, Jr. Mail Art Stamp Stencil, undated. Stencil on paper. 47 x 32 cm.



Figure 3.6. 3Nós3, *Ensacamento*, 1979, photographic documentation of the happening.



Figure 3.7. Hudinilson, Jr. *Caderno de referência* (Reference notebook), c. 1980's. Prints, newspapers cutout, magazines cutout, docs, photocopies, prints on paper. Book size: $13 \times 8 \frac{7}{10} \times 2 \frac{4}{5}$ in. Open pages: $33 \times 22 \times 7$ cm.

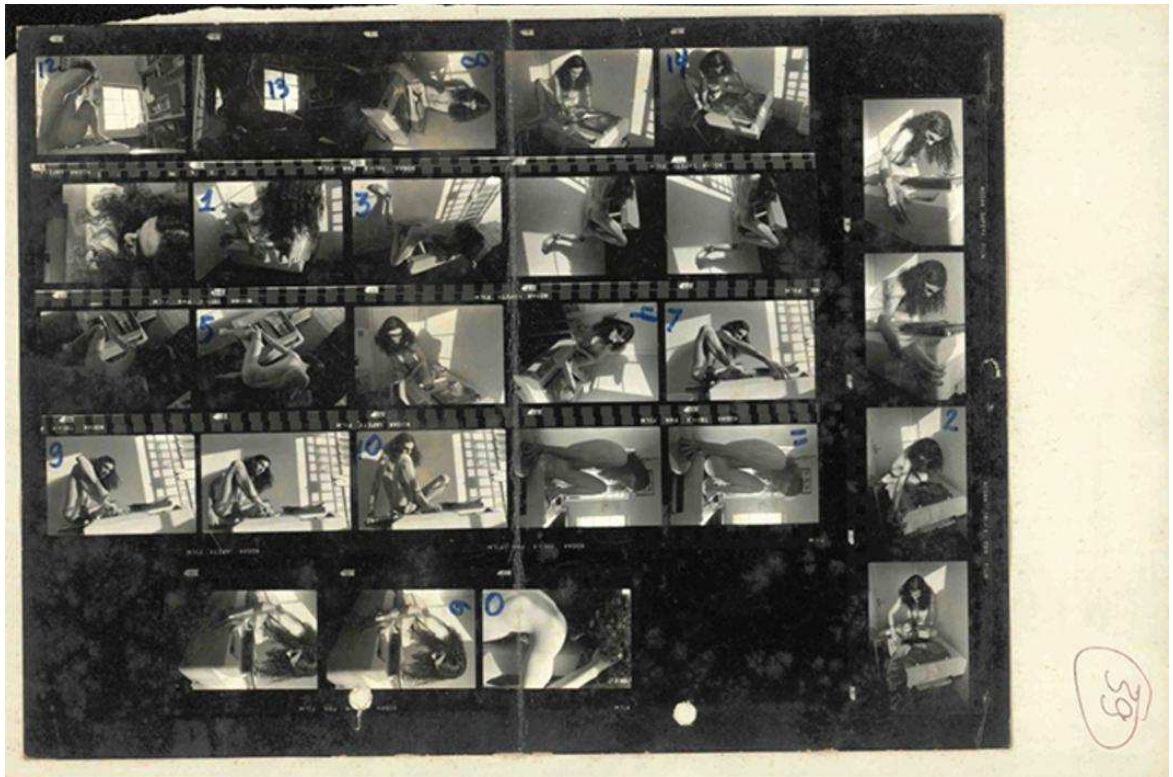


Figure 3.8. Hudinilson Jr, Contact sheet for *Ações Xerox*, 1980. Film strips documenting performance. Photographer unknown.

Chapter 3: Preserving and Transcending the Body in Leonilson's Mature Years

Artist José Leonilson Bezerra Dias (1957-1993) worked in a variety of media throughout his sixteen-year career, most notably paint, drawing, and embroidery. Throughout the 1980's, he made a name for himself as an accomplished draughtsman, producing hundreds of drawings for exhibitions and news publications alike. For the majority of the decade, he tended to create works that were abstract in nature, yet in his final years, he produced more autobiographical content. At the start of the 1990's, his works drew heavily on his own experiences as a homosexual man attempting to reconcile his identity with his Catholic upbringing. In 1991, he discovered he was HIV-positive, and then turned to embroidery as his primary medium. This period of his work deals with his sexuality most explicitly.

Leonilson enrolled in the Visual Arts program at *Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado* (FAAP) in 1977, the same year Hudinilson, Jr. left the department.¹⁶⁰ Here he studied under artists Julio Plaza, Nelson Leirner, and Regina Silveira.¹⁶¹ Plaza and Silveira's practices both incorporated communication forms as a central component. In particular, Plaza's use of text in works such as *Poémobiles* (1974) resonates with Leonilson's consistent inclusion of hand-written or sewn text in a large number of his works.¹⁶² Leirner was known for his multi-media practice, which often included textile-

¹⁶⁰ He too would leave the program in 1980 without graduating, choosing instead to focus on his career.

¹⁶¹ Leonilson and Hudinilson both studied under Silveira, though at different times.

¹⁶² Julio Plaza created the *Poémobiles* with writer Augusto de Campos, consisting of three-dimensional mobile object-poems. For more, see Lucia Santaella Braga, "Brazil: A Culture in Tune with Semiotics," in *The Semiotic Web 1989*, ed. Jean Umiker-Sebeok, Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 123-176.

based works. He was the son of a textile industrialist, like Leonilson, and had studied textile engineering in college. Works such as *Homage to Fontana* (1967) utilized fabric and zippers in a painterly fashion. His guidance surely impacted Leonilson, as he too used various unconventional fabrics in his works throughout the 1980's.

In 1983, he met Brazilian artist Leda Catunda, who often appropriated raw materials such as strips of fabric for her paintings. The fabric in these works tends to take on organic shapes as it hangs from the wall. A fellow FAAP attendee and student of Lerner, Catunda used fabric as both the foundation and the embellishment in her pieces. Her works from the mid 1980's possess a bodily nature that Leonilson's later embroidery works would also display. This connection would last for years, with Leonilson exhibiting alongside Catunda throughout the 1980's.

In 1984, curators Marcus de Lontra Costa, Paulo Roberto Leal, and Sandra Magger organized *Como vai você, Geração 80?* (How are you, Generation 80?), a group exhibition held at the *Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage* in Rio. Bringing together 123 artists from Rio and São Paulo, the show defined a new generation of Brazilian artists as the dictatorship drew to a close.¹⁶³ Leonilson was invited to participate and exhibited abstract paintings done on fabric from beach tents, which helped catapult him to the forefront of the Brazilian art scene.¹⁶⁴ Figure 4.1 shows one such piece, *Untitled* (1983), done in acrylic on a strip of tarp. Red lines against a dark blue background depict an abstract human silhouette, an image which dominates many of his famous drawings.

¹⁶³ It is worth noting that a significant amount of the São Paulo participants were students at FAAP, where Leonilson and Hudinilson, Jr both attended in the late 1970's.

¹⁶⁴ Adriano Pedrosa, "Introdução," in *Leonilson: truth, fiction*, (São Paulo: Cobogó, 2014), 14.

Alongside his co-exhibitors, which also included Catunda, Leonilson gained recognition for his return to painting, a medium considered abandoned by the artists of the 1970's, and for his innovative use of alternative canvas materials.

Alongside this major show, Leonilson also participated in several other local exhibitions, including the *6º Salão Nacional de Artes Plásticas* at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro in 1983, and the *18ª Bienal Internacional de São Paulo* in 1985. In Europe, he participated in the 1985 *Nouvelle Biennale de Paris*. That same year, he accepted an artist residency in Munich at Villa Waldberta, which culminated in the 1987 exhibition "Moving Mountains," held at the Kunstforum.

Part of his commercial success was due to key networking he did throughout his career. In Brazil, he came into contact with Thomas Cohn and Luisa Strina, gallery owners in Rio and São Paulo respectively, who would purchase and exhibit the artist's work throughout the eighties and until his death in 1993. These contacts established him as an artist across both of Brazil's major artistic metropolises. Abroad, connections with art critics and dealers brought his work to a broader audience. Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva briefly integrated Leonilson with the Italian collective *Giovane Arte Internazionale*, whom he exhibited with in 1981 in Lecce, Italy.¹⁶⁵ Bolognese art dealer Fernando Pellegrino represented the artist at the 1982 Art Basel fair, and after meeting Dutch gallery owner Jack Visser in 1988, he began exhibiting at Visser's Amsterdam gallery. In addition to the countless artists he met along the way in the U.S. and Europe,

¹⁶⁵ Leonilson's involvement with the group was short-lived, only lasting for the duration of one collective show in 1981. Leonilson was introduced to Oliva through Antonio Dias, another Brazilian artist living in self-imposed exile in Europe.

these connections established Leonilson as one of the most renowned Brazilian artists of his generation.

While his artistic reputation flourished, Leonilson kept his career relatively separate from his sexuality until his seropositive diagnosis in 1991. At this point, he decided to “out himself” to his family in order to receive their support and care. While he maintained close relationships with his parents and many siblings, he did not disclose his homosexuality to them until after his diagnosis. In fact, he was not even “out” to many of his friends, a notable difference from the overt sexuality of Alair Gomes and Hudinilson, Jr. This is one of the reasons why the artist’s work has been retroactively analyzed through a queer lens since he publicly came out as a gay man. In a 1992 interview with curator Lisette Lagnado, the artist commented that homosexuality in Brazilian society was the “lowest of the low,” the thing parents fear above all else for their children.¹⁶⁶ He attributed this in part to Catholic upbringings. It is clear from his interviews that the artist felt conflicted by his sexual identity, and we know from his audiotapes that his struggle with AIDS exacerbated this internal dilemma. It was after his diagnosis that he turned primarily to embroidery, a more practical, portable, and personal medium, which could be done in bed, at home, or in a hospital on a number of easily available materials. Leonilson often stitched scars, hearts, and solitary bodies into the material, perhaps as an attempt to visualize the trauma of the disease as well as the internalized homophobia which loomed as a specter over his final years.

¹⁶⁶ Leonilson in interview with Lisette Lagnado, “Entrevista com o artista: A dimensão da fala,” in *São tantas as verdades = So many are the truths* (São Paulo: DBA Artes Gráficas; Melhoramentos, 1998), 104.

It is worth noting that throughout his career and his struggle with AIDS, Leonilson lived and worked in São Paulo, one of the epicenters of gay community formation and grassroots networking. It was here that some of the earliest and largest AIDS-prevention NGOs were founded: GAPA-SP, *Grupo de Incentivo à Vida*, among others. The local community center, SESC Pompeia, hosted workshops and art shows meant to bring attention to the realities and emotional fallout brought on by the epidemic. All of these resources seem to point towards a more accepting location where Leonilson could feel included, yet the artist continuously lamented in his own records and in interviews that he felt isolated from those around him. We might attribute this to his constant travels, religious upbringing, and the pressures of the art market. Whatever the reason, Leonilson's artistic repertoire often focuses on his own intimate, private spaces, rather than the urban world around him.

In this chapter, I interpret the works of Leonilson's mature years (1990 to 1993) as a documentation of the private emotional processes of a gay man coming to terms with his sexuality and, subsequently, the AIDS crisis. I focus particularly on his shift towards embroidery, but also certain later drawings which offer insight into the artist's internal state. Accounts of Leonilson during this period describe him as particularly introspective, using his art as a forum through which he could come to terms with his sexual identity, his struggle with AIDS, and his legacy.¹⁶⁷ For this analysis I will draw connections between the artist's works in various media and his biographical experiences. Amidst the

¹⁶⁷ Cecilia Brunson, as quoted by Elisa Wouk Almino, "Falling in Love with an Empty Man: The Work of José Leonilson," *The Paris Review*, January 19, 2018.

hysteria of the time and the obscurity associated with death, Leonilson created works which preserve his psyche and protect his legacy through visual modes of documentation.

Coming to Terms With His Homosexuality

Throughout the 1980's, Leonilson composed simple, subtle linear drawings of featureless masculine silhouettes. These drawings hinted at, yet did not explicitly call out, his own experiences as a homosexual man. Rather, it is through interviews with the artist and knowledge of his biographical and emotional histories that scholars understand his later works as a form of self-exploration as he worked through his sexuality and feelings towards love and relationships. In several of his drawings, we can interpret these works in relation to the personal experiences he recorded, revealing a narcissistic impulse where the artist navigated and documented his own emotions.

One of the emotional dilemmas which Leonilson visualized in his work was that of authenticity. As a closeted gay man who led a fairly public life as an artist, Leonilson teetered between, as art historian Sofia Gotti writes, “sincerity and façade,” his public and private personas at odds with each other.¹⁶⁸ He contemplated this dichotomy of truth and fiction in *Favorite Game* (1990; Figure 4.2), a drawing done in permanent marker on a sheet of paper. In the center-left, he drew a simple silhouette of a human body in the middle of a blank page. The figure faces the left-hand margins of the page, yet it is completely featureless, other than a small line between its legs, possibly denoting male genitalia. On either side of the figure's legs, two rectangular banners protrude: the one on

¹⁶⁸ Sofia Giotti, “A State of Alert: The Politics of Eroticism in South American Drawing,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Drawing*, ed. Kelly Chorpene and Rebecca Fortnum (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 48.

the left contains the word “Truth,” while the other reads “Fiction.” The figure stands in between the opposing concepts. With no identifying features, the figure in the piece can be a stand-in for the everyman or the individual, caught in the zone between reality and lies. The lack of features also suggests the difficulty of knowing whether or not a person’s self-presentation is truthful. The artist stated in interviews that this tension between truth and fiction was his “favorite game,” as the title reflects.¹⁶⁹ It is one he must have been familiar with, as he had hidden his queer identity for over a decade. While the piece is not explicitly related to the artist’s homosexuality, it lends itself to a queer-coded analysis which pokes fun at the idea of leading a double life. In this way, *Favorite Game* is a documentation of a gay man’s struggle with his own identity.

While in *Favorite Game*, Leonilson reflected on authenticity and personas, in other works he explored interpersonal relationships. In the 1990 piece, *Jogos Perigosos* (Dangerous Games; Figure 4.3), Leonilson visualized his interest, and his fear, of love and vulnerability through the depiction of an exchange between two masculine silhouettes in black and white acrylic paint on a blank canvas. He delineated the silhouettes in simple black lines with pure white bodies, only including the figures’ torsos. The figures appear in profile to the viewer, and “face” each other, although they lack any facial or bodily features whatsoever. By reducing them to nondescript outlines, the artist makes them resemble each other almost exactly.¹⁷⁰ Despite being abstracted, it

¹⁶⁹ Leonilson and Lagnado, “Entrevista com o artista,” 123-124.

¹⁷⁰ While he did not explicitly reference Freud’s narcissistic analysis of homosexuality like Hudinilson did, Leonilson’s depiction of two male silhouettes echoes the same concept of seeking a lover similar to oneself. For more on Freud’s theories on homosexual narcissism, see Sigmund Freud (1914), *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, (Reeditch, England: Read Books Ltd., 2013).

is clear that the figures are masculine. Focusing on mutualities, Leonilson explored the possible relationships between like bodies, such as same-sex love and intimacy.

Between the figures, a cartoon-like depiction of a road runs vertically, dividing them, yet horizontal rectangular blocks which seem to represent a bridge cross from one body over the road to the other, creating a link between the bodies. It is unclear, as communications scholars Ádrian Felipe Meneses Teixeira and Alessandra Oliveira Araújo note in their collaborative article, whether the connecting structure between the two bodies is a manifestation of bridging the gap between two lovers, a visualization of the distance between oneself and the object of desire, or some combination of physical and/or emotional distance. Beneath the image, in thin black handwriting, he included a sentence in Portuguese which translates to: “These dangerous games are not war nor are they in the sea or in space, but behind glasses and a pair of jeans.”¹⁷¹ The cryptic message alludes to the emotional vulnerability one faces when engaging in a relationship. Leonilson euphemistically states that sex and desire are at the core of this danger, with “behind glasses” referencing the exchange of gazes and “behind a pair of jeans” referencing sexual arousal and interaction. Through the title, written text, and the ambiguous link between bodies, Leonilson documents his own ambivalence towards love and romance.

Leonilson, like Alair Gomes and Hudinilson, Jr., the subjects of the past two chapters, used his art to process how he understood his own homosexuality. Yet unlike

¹⁷¹ Ádrian Felipe Meneses Teixeira and Alessandra Oliveira Araújo, “Sujeito e Objeto: Uma Análise Da Corporificação Nas Obras De José Leonilson” (paper presented at the 42^o Congresso Brasileiro de Ciências da Comunicação – Belém, Intercom – Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos Interdisciplinares da Comunicação 7 Sept 2019), 9. <https://portalintercom.org.br/anais/nacional2019/resumos/R14-0830-1.pdf>.

Alair's sensual photographs and Hudinilson's humorous and rebellious media practices, Leonilson's drawings tended to have more cynical and subdued tones. Perhaps Leonilson's ambivalence towards his identity was due, in part, to his burgeoning artistic career, forcing him to visualize his internal feelings only implicitly. Another reason for this ambivalence towards love can be found in the words of the artist's close friend Carlos Nader: "Leonilson felt alone in the sense of not finding true love. When he did find it, he discovered he had AIDS."¹⁷²

Processing Death

In 1991, at the age of 34, Leonilson tested positive for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). As life-sustaining antiretroviral therapies did not yet exist, Leonilson's diagnosis was terminal. A series of audiotapes he recorded from 1990 until his death state that he was lonely, needy, and questioned his lack of a boyfriend.¹⁷³ Alone in his grief, he struggled to come to terms with the fact that his body was betraying him. Leonilson used embroidery as a documentary practice, where he created emotional records of his physical body.

The artist struggled with the stigma associated with living with HIV, one which he himself had internalized. He once stated, "Some people are dangerous because they have a weapon in hand. I have something inside me that makes me dangerous. I don't

¹⁷² Carlos Nader was the friend who discovered Leonilson's audiobooks after the artist's death. He compiled them into a documentary, entitled *The Passion of JL* (2015). See Ela Bittencourt, "Carlos Nader on Passionate Drawings of Artist José Leonilson," *Lyssaria*, July 16, 2018.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

need a weapon.”¹⁷⁴ In *O Perigoso* (“The Dangerous One,” Figure 4.4), a drawing from 1991 he created soon after his HIV diagnosis, Leonilson stained the paper with a single drop of his own blood. While the drop now appears black like ink, the artist has noted that the blood was originally a vivid, bright red.¹⁷⁵ He hand-wrote the titular words, “*o perigoso*,” immediately beneath the droplet. Otherwise, the paper is completely blank. Leonilson was obviously aware of his own body’s volatility, as he labeled his blood, and by association himself, as dangerous. We can imagine that the original poignant red of the blood would have added a sense of alarm to the simple composition. Interestingly, it was in this same year that the artist chose to pursue needlework as his primary medium. Using a needle, with its ability to prick the skin and draw blood while stitching, meant that Leonilson’s blood, his “weapon,” could have stained any of his works, embedding his DNA permanently into the materials.¹⁷⁶

Embroidery is a tedious, time-consuming practice. The miniscule nature of a needle and thread means a single project can take weeks, depending on the complexity. The process strains one’s eyes and neck, and excessive sewing often leads to pain and discomfort in the hands and fingers. Alejandra Mayela Flores Enriquez, an art historian specialized in feminist embroidery, notes that “you put your body into the act of embroidery, your time, your concentration. It carries pain; sometimes it carries literal

¹⁷⁴ Leonilson and Lagnado, “Entrevista com o artista,” 123-124.

¹⁷⁵ The drop of blood on this piece has lost all traces of red. Leonilson has noted that originally the droplet was a vivid, bright red. Leonilson and Lagnado, “Entrevista com o artista,” 121.

¹⁷⁶ Without further research, it is impossible for me to know if there is indeed any blood on the artist’s fabric pieces.

blood because you get pricked in the process.”¹⁷⁷ The possible presence of Leonilson’s blood, as in *O Perigoso*, adds another poignant layer to this practice, as bodily fluids represented the immediate threat of the virus. Thus, Leonilson found in embroidery a paradoxical catharsis: a medium associated with mending yet also rife with pain.

Embroidery bears a medical connotation. The needle and thread suggests stitches, causing the punctured fabric to be reminiscent of flesh being poked, prodded, or mended. As art historian Jenni Sorkin notes in her essay “Running Stitch, Outrunning Time,” “stitches are themselves a medical suture...[and] cloth becomes a stand-in for the body and its fragility.”¹⁷⁸ This association necessarily implies both trauma and healing, with all of the pain and emotion inherent in mending a wound. Leonilson explicitly references notions of healing in works such as his 1991 embroidered piece, *34 with Scars* (Figure 4.5). Leonilson worked on a 16x12” cut of off-white voile fabric. With black thread, he hemmed the perimeter of the material, and embroidered two sets of repeating lines along the center-left of the fabric, one vertical, one horizontal. The lines are done in a way that resembles sutures on wounds which would become scars, a resemblance which the title confirms. Before performing the stitching, Leonilson painted two thin rectangles of white acrylic to the fabric, which the thread then covers. The paint’s color only slightly differs from the fabric’s, somewhat like how the healed skin of a scar remains slightly discolored as the wound heals. On the upper right corner, in black thread, the artist stitched the

¹⁷⁷ Alejandra Mayela Flores Enriquez, as cited by Whitney Eulich, “Radical Stitches: Embroidery Gives Voice to Latin American Activists,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (May 6, 2021).

¹⁷⁸ Jennifer Sorkin, “Running Stitch, Outrunning Time,” in *José Leonilson: Empty Man* (New York: Americas Society and London: Koenig Books, 2018), 200.

number “34,” his age at the time. By including his age in the composition, Leonilson not only signposts a moment in his own life, but also makes clear that the piece is an extension of his own experience. The fabric of the piece becomes a metaphor for the artist’s own flesh, with the stitched scars indicative of both pain and healing.

Beyond ideas of physical recuperation, embroidery also held deeply personal ties to Leonilson’s family, adding another layer of emotional intimacy to this work. As the child of a fabric trader, born in the textile hub of Fortaleza, Leonilson was surrounded by embroidery throughout his childhood and upbringing. His mother, Carmen, was a professional seamstress and embroiderer. His childhood home had a room where his mother and sisters would sew and embroider together. In conversation with Lisette Lagnado in 1992, the artist acknowledged that his turn to embroidery was inspired by watching “[his] mother’s embroidering at home every day.”¹⁷⁹ By taking up embroidery as an artistic practice, his actions echoed the labors of his mother as homemaker and caregiver, manufacturing his own safe space through which he could care for himself.

In one such piece of domestic embroidery, the 1992 work, *Ninguém* (“Nobody”; Figure 4.6), Leonilson dealt with his own bodily ailments and emotional turmoil. The piece consists of a bed pillow within a pink case.¹⁸⁰ The pillow is a standard bed pillow, at 9x18”. The fabric is covered with delicate machine-embroidered embellishments: an undulating garland of ribbons, flowers, and clovers extend across nearly three-quarters of

¹⁷⁹ Leonilson and Lagnado, “Entrevista com o artista,” 85.

¹⁸⁰ Photographs of the piece often included glimpses at the reverse side of the pillowcase, which seems to have a red, tartan pattern. At present, I am not able to verify what the reverse side looks like, and if it was intentional on the artist’s part.

the pillowcase. The rest of the case is covered in a series of white or pale pink circular stitches in a dotted Swiss pattern. In the upper left corner, the artist embroidered, “NINGUÉM,” in black thread. This amateurish stitched lettering is the only addition the artist made into the fabric. Two holes in the two upmost corners of the pillowcase designate where the piece is to be hung - Leonilson originally mounted it to metal rods on a wall. The pillow within sags towards the bottom of the pillowcase due to gravity, creating a belly-like pouch.¹⁸¹

Ninguém is complex in that it denies the presence of a person with the word “Nobody,” and yet intrinsically suggests an emotional and bodily presence. In Portuguese, “ninguém” implies not only the antithesis of the specific “someone” or “somebody,” but also a lack of substance: “none.” The word suggests absence, yet there are definite connections in the piece to Leonilson’s physical self. His choice of medium is suggestive of prone bodies, as textile arts bear a metaphorical relationship to the flesh. We as viewers assume a head has once, or should be, rested on the pillow.¹⁸² As art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson states in her text *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, fabrics, “[with their] implicit reference to bodies and bed-coverings, connect the private and

¹⁸¹ Over the years, the materials of *Ninguém* have become more fragile, and the piece is no longer displayed vertically. Rather, it is laid horizontally on a table. Like the human body which ages and requires more care, *Ninguém* now must be preserved with delicacy. The metaphorical possibilities of this are numerous, yet the main relevance of this fact is that Leonilson originally intended the piece to be hung, which gave the work its bodily resemblance. For reasons outside of the artist’s control, these intentions must be ignored for the sake of conservation; in the end, the piece lays flat and becomes disembodied.

¹⁸² A similar motif can be found in Chicano artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ 1991 billboard installation, “Untitled,” where a photograph of an empty bed reveals the presence of its former occupants through the indents on the pillow and sheets. Gonzalez-Torres and his partner both died of AIDS-related complications in 1996 and 1991, respectively.

public.”¹⁸³ By utilizing a pillow, that which individuals use for physical comfort, Leonilson signals the emotional space of one’s bedchamber. The method of display further implies a bodily presence. Wall-mounting the piece causes the pillow to sag in a belly-like fashion, creating curves, folds, and organic shapes in the soft pink fabric. The metaphor of fabric as skin made by Jenni Sorkin is more obvious in this manner.¹⁸⁴ If we assume the fabric to be flesh and the pillow to be bodily organs, then the nails and holes for hanging also imply crucifixion, a particularly poignant theme for a man whose lifelong Catholicism was difficult to reconcile with his sexual identity.

Works like *34 with Scars* and *Ninguém* emphasize the bodily essence of Leonilson’s bout with AIDS. While these pieces make use of fabric in a manner which preserves the artist’s physical self through direct references to the body, in other works Leonilson used textiles in ways which abandon the body and its ephemerality. By doing so, he began to take control of his own narrative and legacy.

Stitching Alternate Narratives

Beyond interrogating his own emotions and documenting the changes to his body, Leonilson used embroidery to take control of his memory. As Julia Bryan-Wilson has noted, queer artists of the AIDS crisis “used stitching and mending to figure loss and remembrance.”¹⁸⁵ This reparative mourning, in the face of the shame and blame perpetuated against gay men in the era of the AIDS crisis, negates the censure many gay

¹⁸³ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 243.

¹⁸⁴ Sorkin, “Running Stitch,” 200.

¹⁸⁵ Bryan-Wilson, “Fray,” 243.

men endured. There is a defiance to living and controlling one's narrative when the system would have you erased or misrepresented. By utilizing a medium which fell outside of the canonically regulated plastic arts, Leonilson maneuvered around a heteropatriarchal system, creating his own emotional archive and refusing erasure.

Leonilson's use of a feminine practice was in itself transgressive. Sofia Gotti argued that the artist's appropriation of a feminine craft "heightened a sense of femininity in his practice, which...sought to challenge gender stereotypes."¹⁸⁶ Critical to the field of embroidery scholarship is feminist art historian Rozsika Parker's 1984 foundational text, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, as well as the works of Julia Bryan-Wilson, Jane Przybysz, and Jenni Sorkin. Originally a male-dominated practice in the Medieval era, embroidery has since been reconceptualized as a woman's craft. This has led to the conflation of embroidery with femininity, and more specifically, a patriarchal ideal or stereotype of femininity. As French philosopher and activist Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, "it is evident that a woman's "character" – her convictions, her values, her wisdom, her morality, her tastes, her behaviors – are to be explained by her situation."¹⁸⁷ Thus, a traditional construction of femininity in industrialized nations is arbitrarily based in female pursuits and pastimes, which are in reality prescribed to women by men.

Leonilson grew up with a gendered understanding of embroidery, witnessing his mother and sisters perform the task regularly. One example of the feminizing of

¹⁸⁶ Giotti, "A State of Alert," 48.

¹⁸⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 635.

embroidery is the tradition of the *trousseau*, a collection of embroidered textiles compiled by a bride, with the help of her female family members, as a part of her marriage dowry. Such textiles typically included household linens, including bedding and pillowcases. This task is traditionally seen as women's work, supposedly indicative of their domesticity, yet there is little appreciation for the years' worth of collaborative female labor which goes into filling the *trousseau*.¹⁸⁸ In works such as *Ninguêm*, Leonilson signals the femininity which he grew up with. He also alludes to the home and the domestic sphere, as well as marriage and love. Since Leonilson was a man and never married, he would never have had a *trousseau*, but in embroidering pieces such as this, he echoed the familiar gendered practices of his female family members.

Embroidery and other textile arts are consistently categorized as crafts, a subordinate to the plastic arts which is associated with the working-class, uneducated artisan. The *trousseau*, a component of an economic exchange such as a dowry, is but one example of this. In this light, female embroiderers are connoted as less sophisticated, with work which is of less artistic and economic value, than male painters. To further underscore this association of arts/masculinity and crafts/femininity, Parker notes that “when women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of

¹⁸⁸ For more on the *trousseau* in Brazil, see M C Latkum et al, “Trousseau: economic and design aspects from the second half of 20th century in Brazil” (paper presented at 17th World Textile Conference AUTEX 2017- Textiles - Shaping the Future, IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering 254, 2017).

femininity.”¹⁸⁹ By denying embroidery the status of an intellectual pursuit, this implicitly constructs both the craft and the female sex as inherently unartistic and apolitical.

In opposition to this trope, women artists in the twentieth century utilized embroidery and other textile arts to voice grievances against systemic violence or oppression.¹⁹⁰

Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock notes in “Differencing: Feminism’s Encounter with the Canon,” that the championing of feminine-coded practices (specifically citing embroidery) inherently maintains the canonical status of masculinity as universal, and that feminist discourses and practices possess “subversive force.”¹⁹¹ In this vein, embroidery often functions as a form of communication. For Rozsika Parker, embroidery can serve as an “emotional gesture;”¹⁹² according to Julia Bryan-Wilson, textiles are “tactile forms of communication or kinds of writing;”¹⁹³ or, as scholars Armida de la Garza, Claudia Hernández-Espinosa, and Rosana Rosar state, it enacts an

¹⁸⁹ Rozsika Parker, “The Creation of Femininity,” in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 5.

¹⁹⁰ Embroidery was popularly practiced by feminists in the U.S. Faith Wilding’s *Crotched Environment* (1972), a woven installation piece first shown in the *Womanhouse* exhibition led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, commemorated spaces of shelter which are inherently female, yet as the artist herself stated, with the “added freedom of not being functional,” a liberatory component which is anti-capitalist and relieves women of their burden as homemakers. Judy Chicago herself is heralded as a champion of feminist art. In her 1979 installation piece *The Dinner Party*, she utilized weaving and embroidery to celebrate a selection of historical female figures. Journalist Lester Strong notes how Chicago’s piece both educates the public “about women’s contributions to human culture down through the ages,” but also presents a defiantly female presence and sexuality, shaped neither by nor for a man. See Faith Wilding, “Crotched Environment,” Chicago and Schapiro, *Womanhouse* (1971), 11; Lester Strong, “Painting a Revolution: A Talk with Judy Chicago on Art, Gender, Feminism, and Power,” *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (October 2002), 309.

¹⁹¹ Griselda Pollock, “Differencing: Feminism’s Encounter with the Canon,” *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London: Routledge, 1988), 25.

¹⁹² Rozsika Parker, “A Naturally Revolutionary Art?” in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 213.

¹⁹³ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

“emotional translation,” legible due to the uniform nature of stitching across cultures.¹⁹⁴

Garza et al argue that embroidery as emotional translation is particularly relevant in Latin America, due to the region’s rich histories of colonialism and multilingualism. Their take on embroidery as an unassuming practice by a seemingly powerless demographic in order to subvert power is especially poignant here.

During the 1976-83 “Dirty War” in Argentina, a female collective by the name of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) began embroidering handkerchiefs with information about children and grandchildren who had been disappeared by the regime. Defying silence and censorship, this practice drew on feminine craft in order to remember those who had been erased. In Brazil, artist Leticia Parente incorporated sewing into her 1975 video piece, *Marca Registrada* (Trademark). Using a needle and thread, the artist sewed the words “Made in Brasil” into the flesh on the sole of her foot. Parente calls attention to the current state of production and economy in Brazil. She also criticizes the government’s authoritarian nationalism. Through her own bodily mutilation, she makes sewing into a violent political act. Meanwhile, under the Chilean Pinochet dictatorship, artist Catalina Parra employed mixed media to call attention to the population who had been disappeared by the regime. In her 1977 piece, *Cicatriz* (Scar), Parra used gauze and red thread to sew together a torn photograph, which shows a victim of the dictatorship. The artist’s use of red thread and medical gauze evokes a scene of bodily mending, with the red thread hinting both at blood spilt and

¹⁹⁴ Armida de la Garza, Claudia Hernández-Espinosa, and Rosana Rosar, “Embroidery as Activist Translation in Latin America,” *TEXTILE* (2021), 5.

stitching a wound. Parra's work therefore calls attention to the destruction of life by the government, and employs feminine craft as a method of healing and resilience. These methods of healing and remembrance through embroidery reflect how women navigated brutal dictatorships, finding a voice where they would otherwise be silenced. These case studies and their themes of healing and memory, although not precedents for Leonilson, are evidence of how a feminine-coded medium has been used to subversively process and document traumatic circumstances.

Communication and remembrance are key themes in much of Leonilson's embroidered works. In the 1992 piece *El Puerto* (1992; Figure 4.7), he explores self-reflection and inter-relational exchange. The title is notably in Spanish, referring to a concept which Leonilson describes as unique to the Spanish term: a port of reception, or an exchange of ideas and experiences between individuals.¹⁹⁵ At 23x16 cm, the work is small and intimate. A green and white striped curtain hangs on a small bronze rod, covered in angular, amateurish embroidery. Spaced evenly from the top register to the bottom are legible words and numbers, created in angular, black embroidered characters. In descending order, they read: Leo; 35; 60; 179; el Puerto. The characters denote the artist's nickname, age (35), height and weight in meters and kilograms, and the work's title. This biographical information makes clear that the work is, in some sense, a self-portrait. This is fitting, as the structural foundation for the piece is a personal wall mirror,

¹⁹⁵ Leonilson explicitly stated that he was drawing on the the concept of "*el puerto*" specific to the Spanish language: a point of reception and exchange which he viewed as a metaphor for life. See Leonilson and Lagnado, "Entrevista com o artista," 98. As curator Adriano Pedrosa describes, "El Puerto [as concept] is the subject as a port that welcomes other subjects and objects, histories and sentiments, fact and fiction." See Pedrosa, "Introdução," 18.

perceptible only by the vibrant portions of orange frame which peak out from behind the fabric. The existence of the mirror's reflective glass is entirely hidden; without lifting the cloth, one might suppose the frame underneath to be a simple picture-frame. The curtain suggests an interactivity, simultaneously urging the viewer to "open" the curtain.

Leonilson noted in interviews with Lagnado that after his HIV test came back positive, he began taking yoga classes for his mental and physical stability. The yoga room he attended was full of mirrors covered by striped curtains, which served as inspiration for *El Puerto*. In his own words, "the work is similar to a giant yoga room because [he] wanted to create an object of desire."¹⁹⁶ Mirrors are reflective surfaces associated with vanity. We look into mirrors to admire our own beauty; in a Freudian sense, we narcissistically admire ourselves as objects of desire.¹⁹⁷ By obscuring the mirror with cloth, Leonilson denies the viewer access to their objects of desire. A potential parallel to this in the artist's life can be drawn if we consider how his HIV diagnosis: through the revelation of his own seropositive status, the artist is effectively cut off from his desires – lovers, love, and being loved.

Another reading is the refusal to confront oneself. Leonilson told Lagnado that he hated to see himself in the mirror.¹⁹⁸ Given the artist's well-known insecurities which he documented in his audio tapes, this could be for a litany of reasons. Covering the mirror

¹⁹⁶ Leonilson and Lagnado, "Entrevista com o artista," 100.

¹⁹⁷ See Freud, *On Narcissism*.

¹⁹⁸ Leonilson and Lagnado, "Entrevista com o artista," 99.

might be seen as a coping mechanism, where the artist avoids his realities.¹⁹⁹

Nevertheless, in the “port,” as the piece is defined, Leonilson confronts himself: he is face-to-face with his height, his weight, his age. This complicates things, as we know that Leonilson himself embroidered this autobiographical information onto the fabric. The information he uses is, at first glance, superficial and transient – age is fleeting, weight fluctuates. Yet Leonilson may have been creating a narrative of his life in that moment that he could control. While obscuring one reflection of himself, he hand-stitches an alternative. In contrast to the popular media image of gay AIDS patients as diseased and undesirable, Leonilson created a simple record of himself with subtle hints at the nuances of his reality. For a terminally-ill patient, one’s weight reflected the rate at which one withered away, succumbing to the virus. Age became a countdown, ticking away at the finite years, months, or days one had left. By documenting his bodily statistics as they were, Leonilson reduces his self-portrait to numbers. These statistics possess a permanence that a mirror’s reflection does not. Every time Leonilson looked into the mirror, he was older, more sick, closer to death. The indexical nature of a mirror’s reflection betrays its temporality, and for an artist terrified of his own transience, the longevity of an embroidered cloth may have been more comforting. The juxtaposition of curtain and mirror creates a multilayered dichotomy of cloth/glass, soft/hard, and warm/cold. In *El Puerto*, the artist allowed himself to redefine his reflection in a medium which was closer to home, which would long outlive his physical body.

¹⁹⁹ This practice is also a common mourning ritual in Judaism. When a family member dies, practitioners cover all of the mirrors in the house in order to avoid thoughts of vanity and focus exclusively on the grieving process.

In the end, the mirror is still available to the viewer. Multiple narratives of the artist's self in that moment could have been accessed. Leonilson stated that the revelation of the mirror would not deliver a truth to the viewer, but could offer many options.²⁰⁰ By toying with ideas of narratives and reflections, Leonilson utilized his agency as an artist to create his own rendition of his life with AIDS, one which exists alongside the mainstream narrative.

Conclusion

Even before he became a crucial figure in art history of the Brazilian AIDS crisis thanks to his documentation of his battle with AIDS made him, Leonilson was regarded as one of the vanguards of his generation. Nevertheless, the artist's own exploration of his emotional self continues to fascinate scholars, and this framework of analysis dominates the literature produced on him. Retrospectives on the artist, of which there have been several since his death in 1993, tend to focus on his struggle with illness, overshadowing the earlier works to which he initially owed his fame. However, these analyses also breathe life into the artist's work, contextualizing him within a network of gay artists which he himself did not actively participate in.

As Leonilson stitched his way through the last years of his life, he inserted himself into a heritage of textile crafts that included feminists and activists, but more importantly, his family and his peers. The artist worked through his own trauma in a medium which he associated with the women in his family, whom he loved dearly. Furthermore, embroidery has a history of communicating memories and histories outside

²⁰⁰Leonilson as quoted by Adriano Pedrosa in Pedrosa, "Introdução," 18.

of the heteropatriarchal system. By taking charge of his own narrative in self-portraits like *El Puerto*, Leonilson subverted the homophobic narratives of AIDS in the media, while simultaneously refuting the drastic physical changes his body was going through.

Jenni Sorkin wrote, “when using running stitch, as Leonilson did, a single stitch becomes part of a community.”²⁰¹ As viewers of his emotional trauma, we become participants in Leonilson’s journey. Certainly, Leonilson’s stitches form a continuity as well, a narrative of days spent stitching in hospital beds, weakening and losing coordination. These embroidered works refuse to allow Leonilson’s memory to fade. They embody his labor, pain, metaphors, and even blood. All of these legacies of embroidery, whether conscious or intentional on the artist’s part, inserted his final corpus of works into a lineage of activism and emotion. Through these labors of cathartic craft, the artist has defied the finality of death.

²⁰¹ Sorkin, “Running Stitch,” 207.

Figures



Figure 4.1. Leonilson, *Untitled*, 1983. Acrylic paint on tarp. 203 x 104.5 cm.

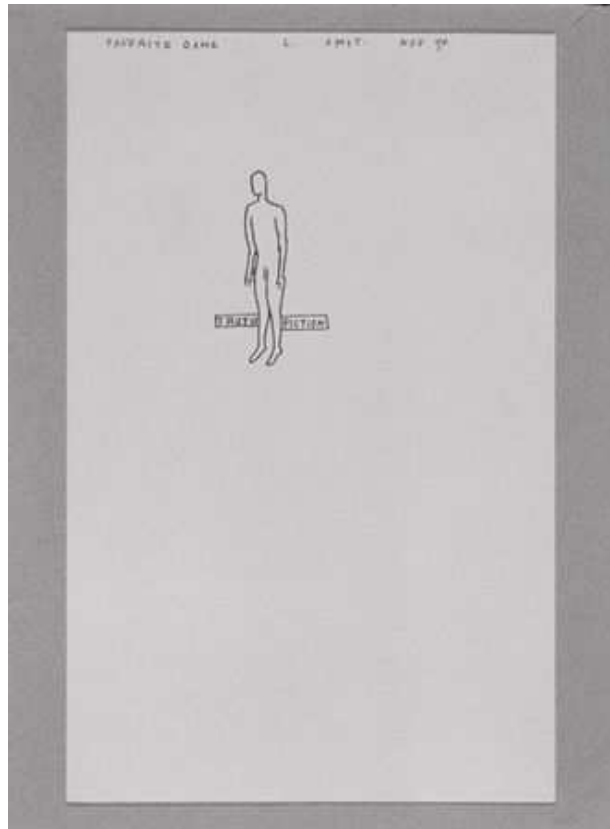


Figure 4.2. Leonilson, *Favorite Game*, 1990. Permanent marker on paper. 21 x 13.5 cm.

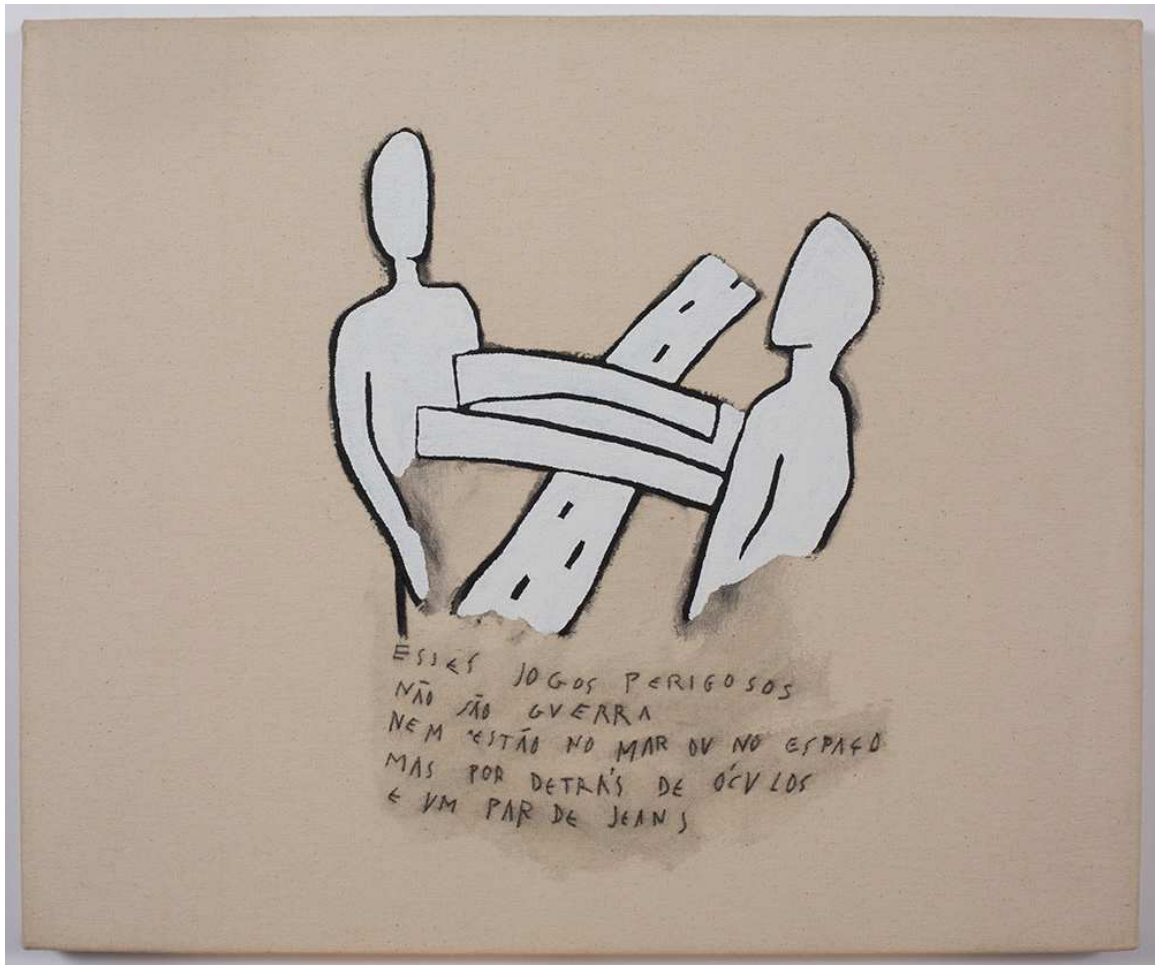


Figure 4.3. Leonilson, *Jogos Perigosos* (Dangerous Games), 1990. Acrylic paint on canvas. 50 x 60 cm.

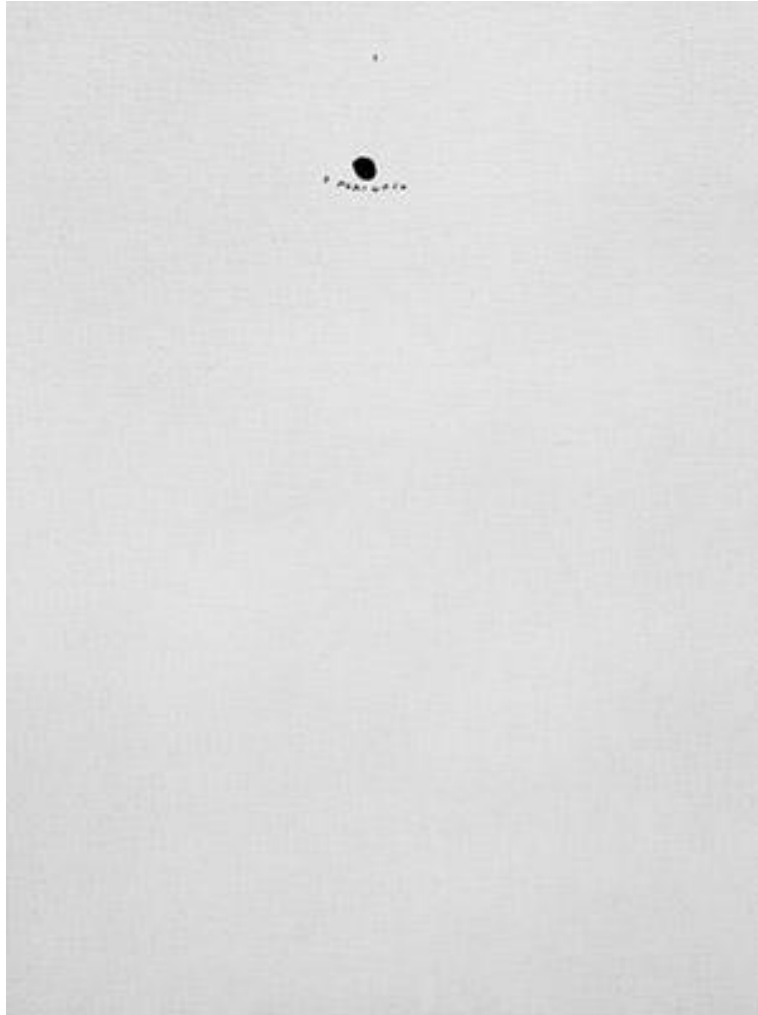


Figure 4.4. Leonilson, *O Perigoso* (The Dangerous One), 1992. Blood and permanent marker on paper. 30.5 x 23 cm. From the series *O Perigoso*.



Figure 4.5. Leonilson, *34 with Scars*, 1991. Thread and acrylic paint on voile. 41 x 31

cm.



Figure 4.6. Leonilson, *Ninguém*, 1992. Thread over embroidered cotton pillowcase, checkered cotton fabric and pillow. 23.5 x 46 x 5 cm.



Figure 4.7. Leonilson, *El Puerto*, 1992. Thread on striped cotton fabric, nail, copper wire and acrylic paint on mirror frame. 23 x 16 x 2.5 cm.

Conclusion

This thesis arose from a curiosity I had in the visual culture of the AIDS crisis in Brazil, a field of art history which has been largely ignored in United States academic circles. I initially was intrigued by the annual HIV prevention campaigns which have been disseminated by the Brazilian federal government, which included posters, pamphlets, t-shirts, stickers, cd cases, condom wrappers, musical jingles, and more. These materials did not make it into my final thesis. In time, it became clear that the materials I had researched were more cultural than art historical, and the constraints of a two-year master's program would not allow me to gain the necessary training to properly bring those materials into context with the larger artistic milieu of Brazil in the AIDS crisis.

The questions I have asked here reflect the main trouble of my research process: why are these artists so difficult to discover? As I have shown in my studies of these artists, the canon has for one reason or another omitted or significantly altered the histories of these men. Alair Gomes worked in a transgressive subject matter which the public would not accept, but European art markets eventually validated ten years after his death. Hudinilson was rejected by his contemporaries for his irreverence, yet is now accepted as a vanguard of his generation. Leonilson, on the other hand, carefully cultivated one public persona, until an unforeseen HIV diagnosis consumed his legacy forevermore. In short, the stories of these men are difficult to find because they were in charge of their own legacies, without the support of the larger art market. What is

available currently is a result of their own efforts in life, and those of their loved ones after their deaths, to preserve their memories.

My decision to write on Alair, Hudinilson, and Leonilson was influenced in part by necessity. Despite being relatively unknown in the United States, each held a degree of fame at some point in the metropolises of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. This was due to several favorable factors, including skin color, economic backgrounds, access to cosmopolitan centers and elite education, and connections to gallerists, dealers, and other artists. The ability to travel during the dictatorship was in itself a symbol of their advantageous standings in society. That these men are among the most widely researched gay Brazilian artists is no accident. After all, there doubtlessly existed a diverse queer community in league with that of New York City or Los Angeles at the same time, yet it is the white male artists who have been immortalized in scholarship. As much as I have argued that their self-preservation in art and archives was a feat of their own doing, their efforts were only feasible with the numerous advantages they already possessed.

Nevertheless, completing this thesis is a joyous occasion – the stories I have had the privilege to research, become intimately familiar with, and interpret here have been neglected on the international stage. Further still, the culmination of this thesis does not equate to the cessation of the project. Rather, I am now more aware of the limitations of my research, and through this process I have identified critical new questions I intend to explore next: who were the key artists in queer Afro-Brazilian, indigenous, female, or transgendered circles; how they did know one another, share ideas, and collaborate;

where were their communities centralized, officially or covertly? Community relationships are the essence of where this project goes next. In the 2023 calendar year, I will have the privilege of researching exactly these questions in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, with funding from the Fulbright Student Program and under the tutelage of Dr. Victoria Stigger, Professor of Art History at FAAP. This excursion will hopefully enrich my understanding of the cultural texture in those cities, provide access to resources and records unavailable to us in the United States, and allow me to pursue the stories of Alair, Hudinilson, and Leonilson, all in context with their friends, colleagues, and contemporaries.

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