

Leo  
nilson  
Drawn

(1975  
— 1993)

KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Moderna Museet,  
Malmö Konsthall and Serralves Museum

HATJE  
CANTZ

Leonilson

Drawn

Edited by  
Krist Gruijthuisen

Hatje Cantz

1975 — 1993

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# A LETTER FOR LEO

By Krist Gruijthuisen

Dear Leonilson, José, Zé, Leo,  
As you can see, I am not even sure how to address you. When I began to research your work, talking to your colleagues, friends, and family, I learned that each addressed you differently. I had always thought that your name was Leo and your surname Nilson, which, I guess, is a typical Northern European mistake, given the fact that Nilson is a rather standard Scandinavian name.

The question is, why am I writing to you nearly twenty-seven years after your death? As to that, there are many answers, just as you have many names. Letter-writing often operates as a form of self-reflection, a way to vent, project, and share. Maybe I am talking to myself here, with you as a silent listener.

It's April 16, 2020, and I'm sitting at my kitchen table in Berlin. Along with the rest of the world, I have not been allowed to leave my home for over

a month now, except to go for walks and shop for groceries. A virus called SARS-CoV-2 has spread rapidly, causing a full-blown global pandemic. Search for it on the internet, and Wikipedia describes it in the following terms: "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Common symptoms include fever, cough, and shortness of breath."

Wikipedia, you ask? The internet? Right, where to start. You died in 1993, when the internet was being established, so I don't think you were familiar with the digital world. Since 1995, it has dramatically changed not only our behaviors, the ways we communicate and socially engage, but commerce too; it is, even now, reshaping our political landscape and invading our right to privacy by tracking and analyzing our data. And while I am not writing

only to explain how much the world has changed since you died, I do want to draw some parallels and establish a dialogue that reflects how you, too, reflected on your world.

During the process of curating your first European retrospective, I have come to know the people who were most dear to you: Eduardo, Jan, Nicinha, Gabriela, Albert, Lisette, Adriano, Ivo, Leda, and Luiz, among others. Their warmth, support, and dedication to you and your work are inimitable. "Precious" is a word that comes to mind when I think of you. "Cherished" is another, one which calls to mind that post-mortem documentary of you reciting your diaries to a cheesy cover version of Madonna's "Cherish" (1989).

I came across your work through Adriano, who, together with Jens Hoffmann, curated the 12<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial, which took the work of the Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres as its starting point. Like you, Gonzalez-Torres died of an HIV/AIDS-related illness.

There is something so intimate and vulnerable about your work; the way you drew, painted, and embroidered was so careful, thoughtful, and fragile in its execution, while you were so brash and provocative in writing. You once mentioned, in an interview with Lisette, that you believe small, quiet things can pierce you sharply like a bullet in the head. I had exactly that feeling when I saw your work in Istanbul, amid the biennial madness—there I was, in the eye of the storm with you.

You once referred to your work as being ambiguous. I believe ambiguity is the key to art and its production: it is precisely that which underlies its necessity in the world, unfamiliar yet strangely intriguing.

In your case, the ambiguity lay not only in your work but also within yourself as a person. The son of a religious family from the impoverished northeast region of Brazil, you suffered injustice because of the color of your skin and your sexual orientation. Your preferred style of dress was classy, as you didn't want to come across as poor. You were not interested in clichéd forms of cultural representation; your own depictions of gender, race, and sexual orientation were more complex. Making embroideries, for example, was an activity at odds with conventional ideas of masculinity. Being from one minority and belonging to another shaped your sense of self, in ways you chose to speak with softness, smallness, and intimacy. This state of being was not a chosen one but one that was simply placed upon you, as you were labelled as an outcast, away from the norm, contaminated—by birth, by sexual orientation, and, later, by disease. A permanent danger, dressed up in preppy clothes as harmless as your embroideries. It was a form of forced isolation, and now here I am, sitting at my kitchen table, living through a different kind of forced isolation.

So little was known about the disease that you died of at the time. It was positioned as a sex-race-class

problem—a virus so stigmatized that, even today, thirty years later, it’s hard to openly discuss one’s status. While it remains an epidemic in the Middle East and Africa, HIV is now a chronic disease in the West, where contracting the virus does not automatically equal a death penalty. No cure has been found, but there have been major improvements: you simply cope with it, take your daily medication, and live on. As someone who is HIV negative, I nonetheless take medication every day to prevent me from contracting the virus. It’s called PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), and is becoming more ubiquitous among the (Western) gay community. My feelings toward it are ambivalent. On the one hand, I am polluting my body “just” in order to feel safe; on the other, I do finally feel relieved of a formerly constant state of stress in mind and body.

When you died I was thirteen, an age when I was slowly becoming aware of my own body and sexual interest. I was mortified by the idea that I was gay and, indeed, death came to mind; an association which was echoed by my mother, later on. Today, I share my life with an HIV-positive man and my relationship to mortality has completely changed, in ways one could have never imagined during your lifetime. My mind and body feel liberated, like I can finally catch my breath when thinking of the future. Or did, until recently, that is—the feeling vanished amid COVID-19. Maybe I am exaggerating, yet from one day to the next, this new

virus has propelled a new and frenzied notion of contamination. In a world so clean, hygienic, and paranoid, every human being is suspect, nobody is to be trusted. Our lives are currently evolving around hand sanitizers, masks, and “social-distancing” protocols. The news scares us, as we relentlessly share the rising numbers of infections and deaths, as if the world’s other problems have simply evaporated.

Racists target Asian people as if they are to blame for COVID-19, like how gay people were held responsible for HIV. And again, it is people who are marginalized by racism, classism, and misogyny who bear the brunt of this new virus—financially, physically, and socially. As with HIV, this pandemic gives carte blanche to dirty politics.

You were born in the midst of Brazil’s fraught history of military dictatorship, a period of cruel repression with little freedom of expression. Suddenly, Brazil had a future, and many outside influences flooded in. Sadly, history repeats itself: today, Brazil is in one of the worst predicaments it has faced for decades. Since 2019, the country has been led by President Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a misogynist who is destroying the country and the lives of its inhabitants for the sake of capital. It is easy to draw parallels between the Brazil and the United States of today, and those of the 1980s and early-1990s. Corruption abounds: Bolsonaro is the new Fernando Collor de Mello, and Donald Trump is no better than Ronald Reagan, preferring to turn a blind eye

and caress his ego. (Yes, believe it or not, Donald Trump became the president of the United States.)

The drawings you published in the São Paulo daily newspaper are so poignant, and chime easily with our current times; I have asked your dear friend and colleague Ivo to elaborate on them for this catalogue. In fact, I have invited most of the people who were dear to you to be part of it, to give a complete overview of your work and the context of its production. Lisette offers an intriguing perspective on Brazil and the various protagonists that played a pivotal role in your thinking. Adriano’s contribution is an in-depth conversation that he had with you just before you passed away. Your “partner in crime” Leda’s is a look at your work during the period in which you were considered to be a “rising star” of the new generation. The one person here that you don’t know is Yuji Kawasima, a Brazilian-Japanese scholar whom I asked to reflect on your extensive travels, which were rather unusual at the time. Your dear friend Albert has been kind enough to let us publish the beautiful postcards that reflect your long-lasting friendship with him. Finally, there are the two separate interviews I did with Jan and Eduardo, asking them each about the special and irreplaceable relationship that you shared with them.

Your work has come to be among the most important signifiers to have emerged from post-dictatorship Brazil. It is currently in over 500 collections

worldwide. I was therefore astonished to learn that, until today, you were yet to have a survey exhibition of your work outside of the Americas. So I wanted to write to let you know that we have managed to finally make this happen. The show is titled *Leonilson: Drawn 1975–1993*, and it includes over 250 works. It will start at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, in Berlin, of which I am the director, after which it will travel to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Malmö Konsthall in Malmö, and the Serralves Museum in Porto.

The exhibition and catalogue are the result of the work and the efforts of your family and friends, the galleries who represent your work, my team at KW, and the touring venues, as well as the editorial team and designers who have shaped this book. We have done our utmost to do you and your work justice and create the visibility it so fervently deserves. I hope you will agree.

Yours faithfully,  
Krist Gruijthuijsen

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