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## The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release  
January 1996

PROJECTS: OLIVER HERRING/LEONILSON

January 18 - March 12, 1996

Works that commemorate life and mortality in the era of AIDS by artist Oliver Herring (b. 1944) and Leonilson (1957-1994) are the subject of the *Whitopia* exhibition, on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 18 through March 12, 1996. Organized by Starr Figura, Curatorial Assistant,

### Oliver Herring/Leonilson

MoMA exh. # 1732, 1/18/96-3/12/96

Project #53

Herring, who was born in Germany and lives in New York, talks...  
transparent objects from transparent tape, silver...  
Part of an ongoing series he calls *A Figure for Ethel*...  
these white works originated as a response to the death of...  
a performance artist who committed suicide in 1986, after...  
suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS. Herring's figures, titled *White*...  
and *White*, many of which are on view for the first time, depict...  
and smiling.

The artist has said, "Although the project is a portrait meditation on...  
the death of someone I admired, by continuously adding pieces over time, the

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## The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release  
January 1996

### PROJECTS: OLIVER HERRING/LEONILSON

January 18 - March 12, 1996

Works that commemorate loss and mortality in the era of AIDS by artists Oliver Herring (b. 1964) and Leonilson (1957-1993) are the subject of the next **PROJECTS** exhibition, on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 18 through March 12, 1996. Organized by Starr Figura, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, **PROJECTS: OLIVER HERRING/LEONILSON** presents ethereal, elegiac knitted and embroidered works created from such mundane materials as Mylar and fabric. While both artists are indebted to the formal inventions of Minimalist, Conceptual, and Process art, their works arise from highly personal, emotional impulses rarely manifested in those earlier movements.

Herring, who was born in Germany and lives in New York, knits nonwearable clothes and sculptural objects from transparent tape, silver Mylar, or paper. Part of an ongoing series he calls *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*, these knitted works originated as a response to the death of Eichelberger, a performance artist who committed suicide in 1990, after suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS. Herring's figures, knitted coats, and panels, many of which are on view for the first time, suggest desire, disintegration, and mourning.

The artist has said, "Although the project is a personal meditation on the death of someone I admired, by continuously adding pieces over time, that

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meaning is transformed into a metaphor for AIDS in general. And since each piece is made through the cumulative process of knitting, every stitch is (like the overall project) a measure of both commitment and time."

Brazilian artist Leonilson (born José Leonilson Bezerra Dias), who died of AIDS in 1993, began to embroider cloth panels with personally symbolic imagery and words after his illness forced him to give up painting. Generally intimate in scale and content, the works were created as private meditations and were sometimes made from pieces of his own clothing. With these poignant and soulful embroideries, some of which are on view for the first time in this country, the artist crystallized themes that preoccupied him throughout his artistic life, including abandonment, the expression of love, and the fragility of the human body.

Ms. Figura has stated, "In making these delicate, crudely stitched panels Leonilson was influenced not only by the conceptual investigations of such twentieth-century artists as his fellow countryman Hélio Oiticica and Eva Hesse, but also by the obsessive impulses of such outsider artists as Arthur Bispo de Rosário and by the tradition of nineteenth-century American fabric samplers."

The **PROJECTS** series is made possible by generous grants from the Lannan Foundation and from The Contemporary Arts Council and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

The next exhibition in the series is **PROJECTS: HIRSCH PERLMAN**, on view from March 28 through May 21, 1995.

\* \* \*

For further information or photographic materials, contact Alexandra Partow,  
Department of Communications, 212/708-9750. No. 60

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# oliver herring leonilson

projects

The Museum of Modern Art  
New York  
January 18 – March 12, 1996

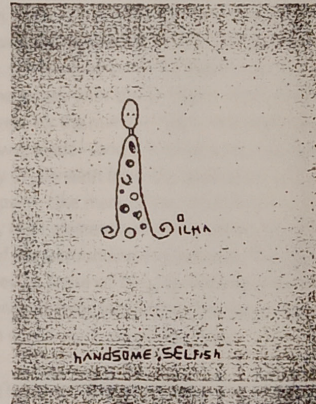
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samplers, in which religious inspiration and moral instruction are combined with stylized narrative and decorative motifs.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately it was his own personal and spiritual circumstances that compelled Leonilson to focus on sewing and that make the embroideries from his final years his most poignant and soulful works. In 1991 Leonilson learned that he was HIV positive. Between that year, when his illness forced him to give up painting and sculpture, and his death in 1993, he concentrated on stitching panels and embroidering pieces of fabric with personally symbolic words and images. Often this activity was like making entries in a diary or writing a love letter. Several of his works were created as gifts for friends, tender offerings to people who were special to him. Sometimes he used cloth they had given him, sometimes pieces of his own clothing. With this body of work, mostly intimate in scale and content, the artist crystallized many of the themes that had preoccupied him throughout his artistic life: abandonment, the expression of love, the fragility of the human body. The awareness of an imminent end compelled him to delve more fearlessly and honestly into these private obsessions.



Leonilson. *O Ilha (The Island)*, 1990. Embroidery and mixed mediums on canvas, 13 1/4 x 10 1/4". Collection Raquel Nosek

*O Ilha (The Island)* (1990) is typical of Leonilson's use of small simplified shapes combined in a largely empty space with a few words or symbols that have a personal, evocative resonance. The central image in this work is an abstracted lighthouse. At the bottom, Leonilson stitched the words "handsome, selfish." In the Portuguese title, *O Ilha*, the artist paired a masculine article with a feminine noun, as he did in several other works (the correct combination would be a *ilha*). This change implies that the image refers to a person, most likely the artist or someone he knew, who is like an island, isolated and lonely. Leonilson embraced the image of the romantic rebel or outsider, and while at times he could be reclusive, he also enjoyed traveling and made frequent trips to Europe and the United States. While *O Ilha*'s title suggests solitude and separation, the lighthouse is a romanti

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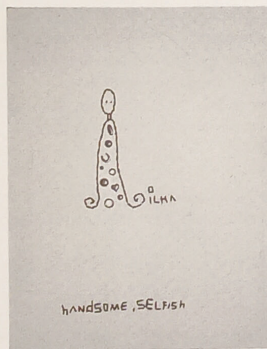
Oliver Herring and the late Leonilson are artists of different backgrounds who have approached art-making in similar ways. While both are indebted to the formal inventions of Minimalist, Conceptual, and Process art, their works arise from highly personal, emotional impulses rarely manifested in those earlier movements. Transforming mundane materials through their own handiwork into ethereal, elegiac panels and sculptures, Herring and Leonilson have focused on loss and mortality in the era of AIDS.

Herring, a German-born artist who lives in New York, had been primarily an abstract painter until 1991, when he began a project called *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*, an homage to the actor, performance artist, drag queen, and playwright who committed suicide in 1990 after suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS. The first work in the project was a giant flower made of Scotch tape. Searching for a way to come to terms with Eichelberger's death, Herring learned to knit and has added to the project by knitting nonwearable clothes, objects, and panels from transparent tape, silver Mylar, and paper. A solitary and repetitive activity, knitting is traditionally undertaken out of the desire to comfort or protect a loved one. As Herring's knitted coats and panels lie on the floor or hang from the wall, they quietly suggest desire and mourning through the absence of an implied human presence. The artist has said, "Although the project is a personal meditation on the death of someone I admired, by continuously adding pieces over time that meaning is transformed into a metaphor for AIDS in general. And since each piece is made through the cumulative process of knitting, every stitch is (like the overall project) both a measure of commitment and time."<sup>1</sup>

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symbol for the light that safely guides a traveler through a sea of darkness. It is a sign of hope, salvation, or sanctuary. Lighthouses, towers, and other vertical constructions are recurring motifs in Leonilson's oeuvre. Beyond any phallic or figurative references, they are images of transcendence, associated with the artist's search for the sublime.

Herring too has explored the metaphoric implications of an island in his work. He created *Raft* as part of a 1994 installation called *Island*,<sup>6</sup> but he has said that the raft itself is also an island.<sup>7</sup> Three coats knitted from transparent Mylar are encased in a large mattresslike shell made of the same material. Cast away and left adrift, they seem to exist in a ghostly state of limbo. Though nestled together in their diaphanous cocoon, they remain somehow abandoned and alone. This effect of isolation and loneliness is heightened by the use of clear Mylar, which, while seductively glittery and see-through, also suggests fragility and immateriality. Discussing *Raft*, Herring has said that with "the play between the materials and the light . . . the piece always changes. You'll never exactly see the whole thing, you have to walk around it. And while one coat appears in front of you, because of the way the light works, another coat disappears. You have three coats lying in a circle, and it's this thing that comes and goes, almost like life."<sup>8</sup>

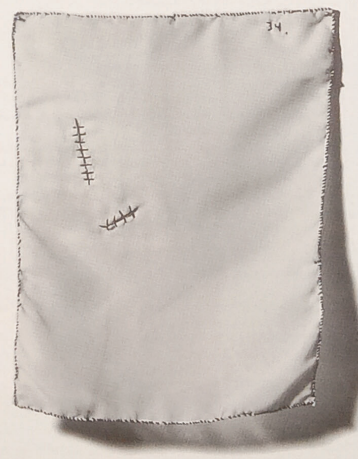


Oliver Herring. *Raft*. 1994. Knit Mylar, 10 x 88 x 88". Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery

The idea of disappearance is related to a fear of disintegration evident in works by both artists that incorporate imagery of scars or wounds. In Leonilson's *34 com scars (34 with Scars)* (1991), a small white panel of fabric has been stitched all around the edges with black thread. The rest of the piece is empty except for the number "34"—the artist's age at the time the work was made—and two small scars, also stitched in black and crusty underneath from the application of a small amount of acrylic paint. Like many of the works from the last two years of his life, each element is minimal yet highly charged, in part because of the surrounding empty space. The use of sheer voile also conveys a sense of longing and impermanence, and the near absence of color accentuates the notion of dematerialization, both of the work and of its creator.

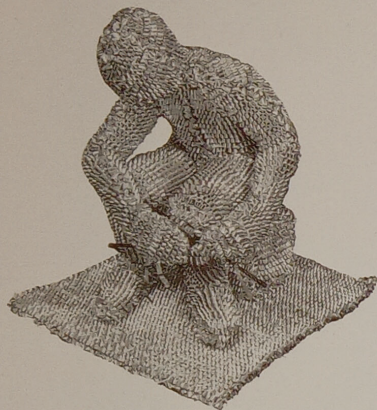
In Herring's *Wounded Knee* (1995), a seated figure made from knit silver Mylar bends down in an effort to mend an unraveling hole in the stitching at his knee. The figure's childlike proportions add to its pathos and vulnerability. One of Herring's first knitted figures, it possesses an anxiety and tension in marked contrast to the passive serenity of the coats and panels. Whereas those earlier works are memorials to a being or action that has already passed, this figure is an animated personification of the fight against disintegration.

Although their works are related to those of other contemporary artists who have explored the loneliness, fragility, or pain of the human condition,<sup>9</sup> the process-oriented nature of Herring's and Leonilson's works adds a temporal element that heightens the sense of mortality. These handcrafted objects, dependent upon and suggestive of the time and meditative quiet necessary to produce them, are evidence that both artists have used their art to come to terms with issues of desire, loss, and healing. For Herring, the repetitiveness of the knitting



Leonilson. *34 com scars (34 with Scars)*. 1991. Embroidery and acrylic on voile, 16 1/4 x 12 1/4". Collection Theodorino Torquato Dias and Carmen Bezerra Dias

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Oliver Herring, *Wounded Knee*, 1995. Knit Mylar, 34 x 30 x 30".  
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery

process underscores the passage of time, both affirming life and reminding us of the inevitability of death. "Every moment I knit," Herring has said, "time is accounted for. I associate certain pieces with certain events; it is as if the events themselves were knitted into the work."<sup>10</sup> The aesthetic product is secondary to the experience of making it. "The actual object becomes almost like a remnant of a performance, whereas whatever happened to make this is the [important] thing. [Knitting] allows me to engage in a thought process. . . . It becomes about me learning how to experience myself in a way that I wouldn't otherwise."<sup>11</sup>

Leonilson similarly explained that the process was therapeutic, almost spiritual: "My work is not as important as the apprenticeship. It is really important to learn from what you do."<sup>12</sup> He added, "I get very tired. Work helps me. I put all my energy into it. It keeps me from fading away. I keep doing these works like prayers, in the same way as the Hindus embroider. . . . My work is guided more by this feeling than by [a]esthetic values."<sup>13</sup>

In dealing with intimate experiences like fear, suffering, and grief, Herring and Leonilson turned to traditionally feminine practices as alternatives to the "fine arts" of painting and sculpture. Although many aesthetic choices today are understood to be influenced by issues of identity and informed by revisionist critiques of the history of art, Herring's and Leonilson's approaches are more personally than politically motivated. In the 1970s, many women artists, such as Harmony Hammond and Miriam Schapiro, created works derived from the domestic environment as a feminist challenge to the distinctions between so-called high art and applied art. More recently, artists like Mike Kelley and Rosemarie Trockel also

have used needlework as a deliberate subversion of traditional notions of sexuality or of painting. Herring and Leonilson, addressing more private concerns, have employed such techniques to explore their own existential condition. Their efforts to deal honestly with certain ineffably painful issues are especially moving when post-modern irony and skepticism are the postures of the moment.

The temporal, metaphoric, and aesthetic issues surrounding the use of craft techniques are perhaps most concisely conveyed by Leonilson's incorporation of the words "O Penélope" in two of his works. The artist again placed a masculine article in front of a feminine noun, which in this case refers to the wife of the Greek hero in Homer's *Odyssey*. At the beginning of the tale, Odysseus is presumed dead because of his continued absence long after the end of the Trojan War. Penelope is surrounded by suitors whom she repeatedly puts off with the excuse that she must first finish weaving a shroud for her father-in-law. Each night she secretly undoes her day's work. As an allegory of patience, faith, and hope, the story of Penelope has an obvious appeal for anyone confronting an unacceptable fate. The image of a weaver working all day only to unravel her work at night also points to an existential absurdity that resonates through the process-oriented work of Oliver Herring and Leonilson. A seemingly futile making and unmaking is also the desperate, hopeful, regenerative attempt to cope with the present and forestall the future.

Starr Figura  
Curatorial Assistant  
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

1. Oliver Herring, artist's statement, in Nina Felshin, *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1994), p. 40.

2. For biographical information about Leonilson and many insights into his work I am grateful for my numerous conversations with Lisette Lagnado and Regina Teixeira de Barros of the Projeto Leonilson, São Paulo, as well as for their texts in Lagnado's *Leonilson: São tantas as verdades/So Many Are the Truths* (São Paulo: Galeria de Arte do SESI, 1995).

3. Cordel books are rhyming folktales sold at street markets.

4. In Lisette Lagnado's interview with the artist, Leonilson says he saw the exhibition *Shaker Design* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York around 1986. He expresses admiration for the narrative aspect of the Shakers' embroidery and the range of uses they found for it (see Lagnado, p. 85).

5. Leonilson used different languages somewhat indiscriminately, including Portuguese, Spanish, English, and French. The choice seems to have depended partly on the musicality of the words or phrases.

6. Raff was one of several knitted works that rested on the banks of a large mound of sand in Herring's installation at the Space Untitled Gallery in New York City in 1994.

7. From a conversation with the artist, December 9, 1995.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, among others, whose works involving issues of the body and the spirit have become especially prominent in recent years.

10. Herring, quoted in Maurice Berger, "A Monument for Ethyl," in *Oliver Herring* (Mannheim: Mannheimer Kunstverein, 1993), p. 7.

11. From a conversation with the artist, December 9, 1995.

12. Leonilson, quoted in Lagnado, p. 116.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Special thanks to Lilian Tone for introducing me to Leonilson's work and for her help with translations from the Portuguese.

The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the Lannan Foundation, and The Contemporary Arts Council and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

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### oliver herring

Born Heidelberg, Germany, 1964. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York  
B.F.A., Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford University, England, 1985–88  
M.F.A., Hunter College, New York, 1990–91

### selected exhibitions

- 1995** *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York  
*Color in Space: Pictorialism in Contemporary Sculpture*, David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, Brown University, Providence  
*Construction in Process V: Coexistence*, Artists' Museum, Mitzpe-Ramon, Israel
- 1994** *Island*, Space Untitled Gallery, New York  
*Guys Who Sew*, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara
- 1993–96** *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art*, The Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase
- 1993–95** *Ciphers of Identity*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore
- 1993** *Oliver Herring: A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger/ Bedding*, Mannheimer Kunstverein, Mannheim  
*A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York  
*Beyond Loss: Art in the Era of AIDS*, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

### leonilson

Born José Leonilson Bezerra Dias in Fortaleza, Brazil, 1957. Died 1993. Lived and worked in São Paulo  
Studied at Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado, São Paulo, 1977–80

### selected exhibitions

- 1995–96** *Leonilson: São tantas as verdades/So Many Are the Truths*, Galeria de Arte do SESI, São Paulo
- 1995** *Infância Perversa—Fábulas sobre a Memória e o Tempo*, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, and Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia, Salvador  
*Art from Brazil in New York*, The Drawing Center, New York
- 1993–95** *Cartographies*, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
- 1994** *Brasil Século XX*, Fundação Bienal, São Paulo  
*Projeto Leonilson*, Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, and Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo  
*Brazil: Images of the 80's & 90's*, Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, D.C.
- 1993** Galeria São Paulo, São Paulo
- 1992** *Hien, Leonilson, Ebinger*, Pulitzer Gallery, Amsterdam
- 1989** *Fabio Cardoso/Leonilson/Daniel Senise/Luiz Zerbini*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, São Paulo

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oliver herring  
leonilson

projects

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January 18–March 12, 1996

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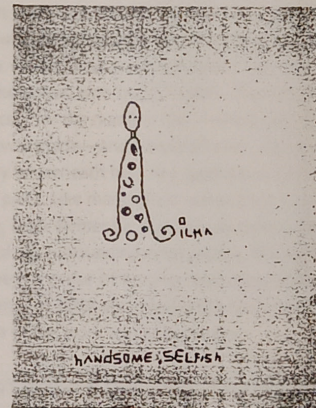
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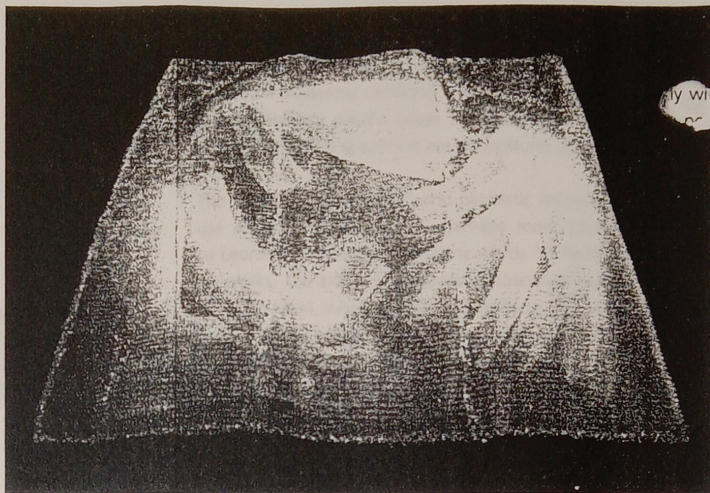
Leonilson. *O Ilha (The Island)*. 1990. Embroidery and mixed mediums on canvas, 13 1/4 x 10 1/4". Collection Raquel Nosek

*O Ilha (The Island)* (1990) is typical of Leonilson's use of small simplified shapes combined in a largely empty space with a few words or symbols that have a personal, evocative resonance. The central image in this work is an abstracted lighthouse. At the bottom, Leonilson stitched the words "handsome, selfish." In the Portuguese title, *O Ilha*, the artist paired a masculine article with a feminine noun, as he did in several other works (the correct combination would be a *ilha*). This change implies that the image refers to a person, most likely the artist or someone he knew, who is like an island, isolated and lonely. Leonilson embraced the image of the romantic rebel or outsider, and while at times he could be reclusive, he also enjoyed traveling and made frequent trips to Europe and the United States. While *O Ilha*'s title suggests solitude and separation, the lighthouse is a romanti-

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symbol for the light that safely guides a traveler through a sea of darkness. It is a sign of hope, salvation, or sanctuary. Lighthouses, towers, and other vertical constructions are recurring motifs in Leonilson's oeuvre. Beyond any phallic or figurative references, they are images of transcendence, associated with the artist's search for the sublime.

Herring too has explored the metaphoric implications of an island in his work. He created *Raft* as part of a 1994 installation called *Island*,<sup>6</sup> but he has said that the raft itself is also an island.<sup>7</sup> Three coats knitted from transparent Mylar are encased in a large mattresslike shell made of the same material. Cast away and left adrift, they seem to exist in a ghostly state of limbo. Though nestled together in their diaphanous cocoon, they remain somehow abandoned and alone. This effect of isolation and loneliness is heightened by the use of clear Mylar, which, while seductively glittery and see-through, also suggests fragility and immateriality. Discussing *Raft*, Herring has said that with "the play between the materials and the light . . . the piece always changes. You'll never exactly see the whole thing, you have to walk around it. And while one coat appears in front of you, because of the way the light works, another coat disappears. You have three coats lying in a circle, and it's this thing that comes and goes, almost like life."<sup>8</sup>

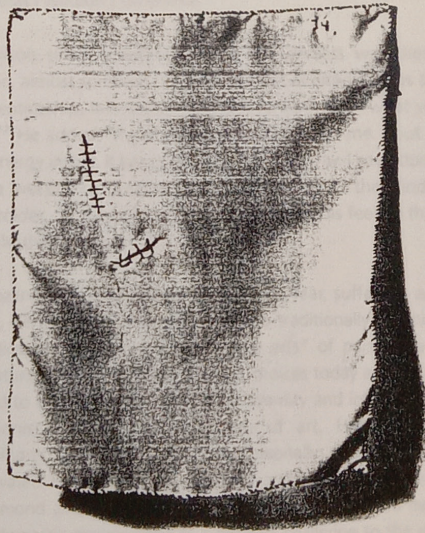


Oliver Herring. *Raft*. 1994. Knit Mylar, 10 x 88 x 28". Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery

The idea of disappearance is related to a fear of disintegration evident in works by both artists that incorporate imagery of scars or wounds. In Leonilson's *34 com scars (34 with Scars)* (1991), a small white panel of fabric has been stitched all around the edges with black thread. The rest of the piece is empty except for the number "34"—the artist's age at the time the work was made—and two small scars, also stitched in, and crusty underneath from the application of a small amount of acrylic paint. Like many of the works from the last two years of his life, each element is minimal yet highly charged, in part because of the surrounding empty space. The use of sheer voile also conveys a sense of longing and impermanence, and the near absence of color accentuates the notion of dematerialization, both of the work and of its creator.

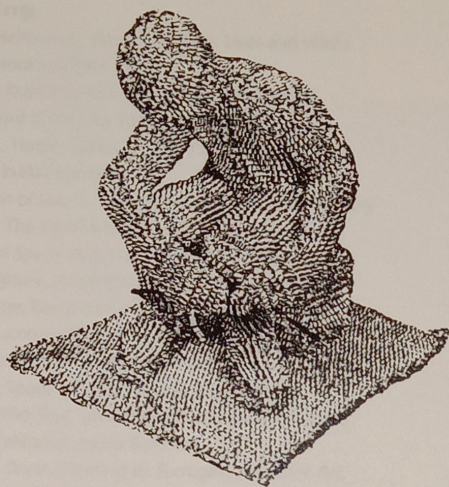
In Herring's *Wounded Knee* (1995), a seated figure made from knit silver Mylar bends down in an effort to mend an unraveling hole in the stitching at his knee. The figure's childlike proportions add to its pathos and vulnerability. One of Herring's first knitted figures, it possesses an anxiety and tension in marked contrast to the passive serenity of the coats and panels. Whereas those earlier works are memorials to a being or action that has already passed, this figure is an animated personification of the fight against disintegration.

Although their works are related to those of other contemporary artists who have explored the loneliness, fragility, or pain of the human condition,<sup>9</sup> the process-oriented nature of Herring's and Leonilson's works adds a temporal element that heightens the sense of mortality. These handcrafted objects, dependent upon and suggestive of the time and meditative quiet necessary to produce them, are evidence that both artists have used their art to come to terms with issues of desire, loss, and healing. For Herring, the repetitiveness of the knitting



Leonilson. *34 com scars (34 with Scars)*. 1991. Embroidery and acrylic on voile, 16 1/4 x 12 1/4". Collection Theodorino Torquato Dias and Carmen Bezerra Dias

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Oliver Herring. *Wounded Knee*. 1995. Knit Mylar, 34 x 30 x 30".  
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery

process underscores the passage of time, both affirming life and reminding us of the inevitability of death. "Every moment I knit," Herring has said, "time is accounted for. I associate certain pieces with certain events; it is as if the events themselves were knitted into the work."<sup>10</sup> The aesthetic product is secondary to the experience of making it. "The actual object becomes almost like a remnant of a performance, whereas whatever happened to make this is the [important] thing. [Knitting] allows me to engage in a thought process. . . . It becomes about me learning how to experience myself in a way that I wouldn't otherwise."<sup>11</sup>

Leonilson similarly explained that the process was therapeutic, almost spiritual: "My work is not as important as the apprenticeship. It is really important to learn from what you do."<sup>12</sup> He added, "I get very tired. Work helps me. I put all my energy into it. It keeps me from fading away. I keep doing these works like prayers, in the same way as the Hindus embroider. . . . My work is guided more by this feeling than by [a]esthetic values."<sup>13</sup>

In dealing with intimate experiences like fear, suffering, and grief, Herring and Leonilson turned to traditionally feminine practices as alternatives to the "fine arts" of painting and sculpture. Although many aesthetic choices today are understood to be influenced by issues of identity and informed by revisionist critiques of the history of art, Herring's and Leonilson's approaches are more personally than politically motivated. In the 1970s, many women artists, such as Harmony Hammond and Miriam Schapiro, created works derived from the domestic environment as a feminist challenge to the distinctions between so-called high art and applied art. More recently, artists like Mike Kelley and Rosemarie Trockel also

have used needlework as a deliberate subversion of traditional notions of sexuality or of painting. Herring and Leonilson, addressing more private concerns, have employed such techniques to explore their own existential condition. Their efforts to deal honestly with certain ineffably painful issues are especially moving when post-modern irony and skepticism are the postures of the moment.

The temporal, metaphoric, and aesthetic issues surrounding the use of craft techniques are perhaps most concisely conveyed by Leonilson's incorporation of the words "O Penélope" in two of his works. The artist again placed a masculine article in front of a feminine noun, which in this case refers to the wife of the Greek hero in Homer's *Odyssey*. At the beginning of the tale, Odysseus is presumed dead because of his continued absence long after the end of the Trojan War. Penelope is surrounded by suitors whom she repeatedly puts off with the excuse that she must first finish weaving a shroud for her father-in-law. Each night she secretly undoes her day's work. As an allegory of patience, faith, and hope, the story of Penelope has an obvious appeal for anyone confronting an unacceptable fate. The image of a weaver working all day only to unravel her work at night also points to an existential absurdity that resonates through the process-oriented work of Oliver Herring and Leonilson. A seemingly futile making and unmaking is also the desperate, hopeful, regenerative attempt to cope with the present and forestall the future.

Starr Figura  
Curatorial Assistant  
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

1. Oliver Herring, artist's statement, in Nina Felshin, *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1994), p. 40.
2. For biographical information about Leonilson and many insights into his work I am grateful for my numerous conversations with Lisette Lagnado and Regina Teixeira de Barros of the Projeto Leonilson, São Paulo, as well as for their texts in Lagnado's *Leonilson: São tantas as verdades/So Many Are the Truths* (São Paulo: Galeria de Arte do SESI, 1995).
3. *Cordel* books are rhyming folktales sold at street markets.
4. In Lisette Lagnado's interview with the artist, Leonilson says he saw the exhibition *Shaker Design* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York around 1986. He expresses admiration for the narrative aspect of the Shakers' embroidery and the range of uses they found for it (see Lagnado, p. 85).
5. Leonilson used different languages somewhat indiscriminately, including Portuguese, Spanish, English, and French. The choice seems to have depended partly on the musicality of the words or phrases.
6. *Raft* was one of several knitted works that rested on the banks of a large mound of sand in Herring's installation at the Space Untitled Gallery in New York City in 1994.
7. From a conversation with the artist, December 9, 1995.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, among others, whose works involving issues of the body and the spirit have become especially prominent in recent years.
10. Herring, quoted in Maurice Berger, "A Monument for Ethyl," in *Oliver Herring* (Mannheim: Mannheimer Kunstverein, 1993), p. 7.
11. From a conversation with the artist, December 9, 1995.
12. Leonilson, quoted in Lagnado, p. 116.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Special thanks to Lilian Tone for introducing me to Leonilson's work and for her help with translations from the Portuguese.

The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the Lannan Foundation and The Contemporary Arts Council and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

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**oliver herring**

Born Heidelberg, Germany, 1964. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

B.F.A., Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford University, England, 1985–88

M.F.A., Hunter College, New York, 1990–91

**selected exhibitions**

- 1995** *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York
- Color in Space: Pictorialism in Contemporary Sculpture*, David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, Brown University, Providence
- Construction in Process V: Coexistence*, Artists' Museum, Mitzpe-Ramon, Israel
- 1994** *Island*, Space Untitled Gallery, New York
- Guys Who Sew*, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara
- 1993–96** *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art*, The Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase
- 1993–95** *Ciphers of Identity*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore
- 1993** *Oliver Herring: A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger/ Bedding*, Mannheimer Kunstverein, Mannheim
- A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
- Beyond Loss: Art in the Era of AIDS*, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

**leonilson**

Born José Leonilson Bezerra Dias in Fortaleza, Brazil, 1957. Died 1993. Lived and worked in São Paulo

Studied at Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado, São Paulo, 1977–80

**selected exhibitions**

- 1995–96** *Leonilson: São tantas as verdades/So Many Are the Truths*, Galeria de Arte do SESI, São Paulo
- 1995** *Infância Perversa—Fábulas sobre a Memória e o Tempo*, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, and Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia, Salvador
- Art from Brazil in New York*, The Drawing Center, New York
- 1993–95** *Cartographies*, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
- 1994** *Brasil Século XX*, Fundação Bienal, São Paulo
- Projeto Leonilson*, Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, and Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo
- Brazil: Images of the 80's & 90's*, Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, D.C.
- 1993** Galeria São Paulo, São Paulo
- 1992** *Hien, Leonilson, Ebinger*, Pulitzer Gallery, Amsterdam
- 1989** *Fabio Cardoso/Leonilson/Daniel Senise/Luiz Zerbini*, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, São Paulo

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THE BRASILIANS  
New York, NY



ist who committed suicide in 1990, after suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS. Herring's figures, knitted coats, and panels, many of which are on view for the first time, suggest desire, disintegration, and mourning.

The artist has said, "Although the project is a personal meditation on the death of someone I admired, by continuously adding pieces over time, that meaning is transformed into a

contemporary work in the tradition of German man Hélio Oiticica and Eva Hesse, but also by the obsessive impulses of such outsider artists as Arthur Bispo de Rosario and by the tradition of nineteenth-century American fabric samplers."

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THE BRASILIANS  
New York, NY

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New York, NY



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THE BRASILIANS  
New York, NY

K16339

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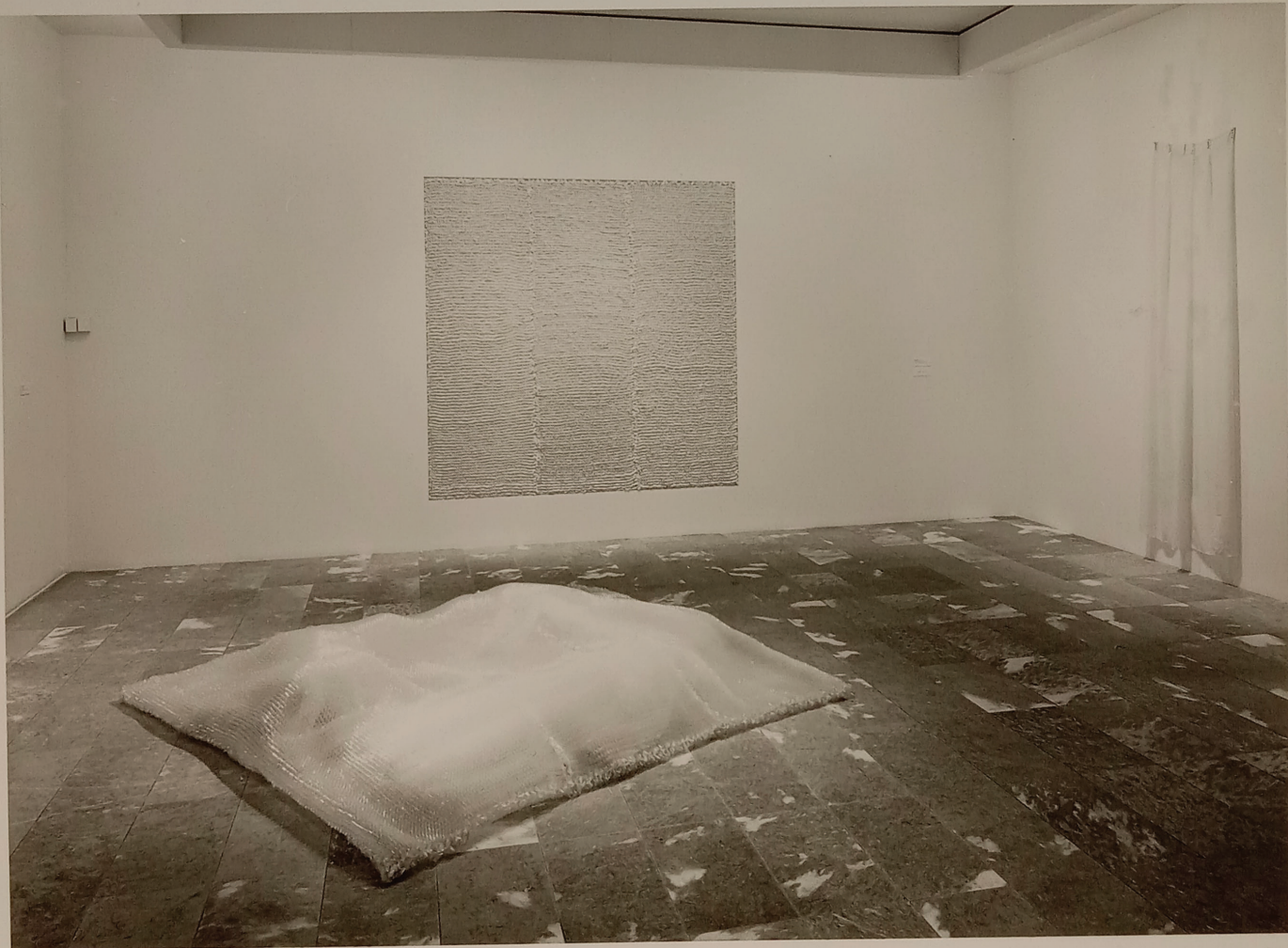
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New York, NY



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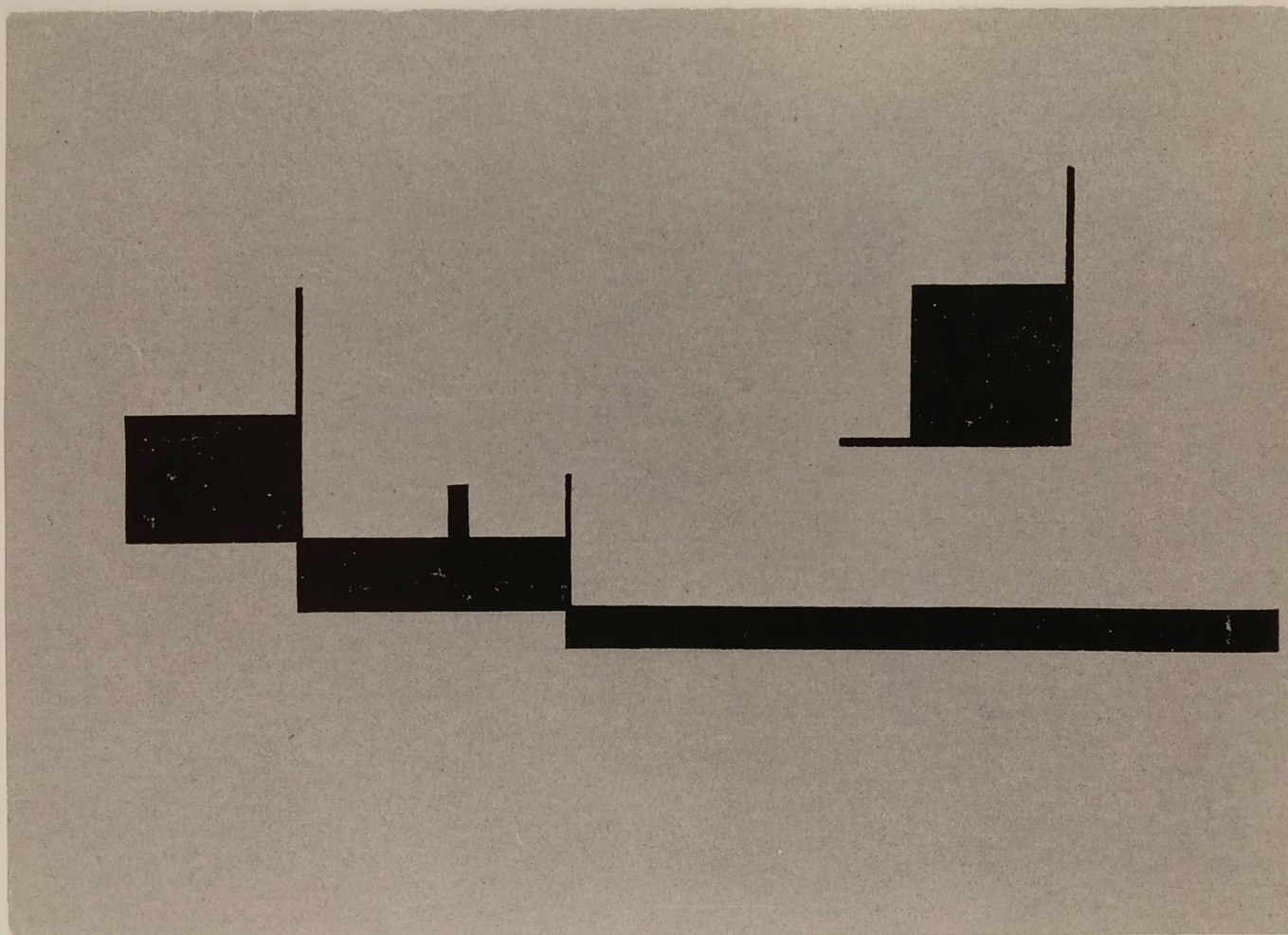
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THE BRASILIANS  
New York, NY  
January 1996



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THE BRASILIANS  
New York, NY  
January 1996

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THE BRASILIANS  
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ART  
New York, NY  
January 1996  
THE BRASILIANS

K 16337

AIDS. Herring's figures, knitted coats, and panels, many of which are on view for the first time, suggest desire, disintegration, and mourning.

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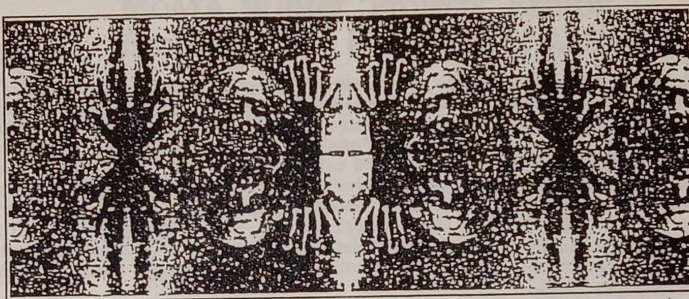
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THE BRASILIANS  
New York, NY  
January 1996

## What's Going On

### The Museum of Modern Art



Works that commemorate loss and mortality in the era of AIDS by artists Oliver, Herring and Leonilson are the subject of the next PROJECTS exhibition, on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 18 through March 12, 1996. Organized by Starr Figura, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books.

Oliver Herring and Leonilson present ethereal, elegiac knitted and embroidered works created from such mundane materials as Mylar and fabric. While both artists are indebted to the formal inventions of Minimalist, Conceptual, and Process art, their works arise from highly personal, emotional impulses rarely manifested in those earlier movements.

Herring, who was born in Germany and lives in New York, knits non wearable clothes and sculptural objects from transparent tape, silver Mylar, or paper. Part of an ongoing series, these knitted works originated as a response to the death of Eichelberger, a performance artist who committed suicide in 1990, after suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS. Herring's figures, knitted coats, and panels, many of which are on view for the first time, suggest desire, disintegration, and mourning.

The artist has said, "Although the project is a personal meditation on the death of someone I admired, by continuously adding pieces over time, that meaning is transformed into a

metaphor for AIDS in general. And since each piece is made through the cumulative process of knitting, every stitch is (like the overall project) a measure of both commitment and time."

Brazilian artist Leonilson (born José Leonilson Bezerra Dias), who died of AIDS in 1993, began to embroider cloth panels with personally symbolic imagery and words after his illness forced him to give up painting. Generally intimate in scale and content, the works were created as private meditations and were sometimes made from pieces of his own clothing. With these poignant and soulful embroideries, some of which are on view for the first time in this country, the artist crystallized themes that preoccupied him throughout his artistic life, including abandonment, the expression of love, and the fragility of the human body.

Ms. Figura has stated, "In making these delicate, crudely stitched panels Leonilson was influenced not only by the conceptual investigations of such twentieth-century artists as his fellow countryman Hélio Oiticica and Eva Hesse, but also by the obsessive impulses of such outsider artists as Arthur Bispo de Rosario and by the tradition of nineteenth-century American fabric samplers."

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ANTIQUES & THE ARTS WEEKLY  
Newtown, CT  
January 26, 1996

## MoMA Winter 'Projects' Exhibit Examines Loss in the Era of AIDS

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NEW YORK CITY — Works that commemorate loss and mortality in the era of AIDS by artists Oliver Herring (b. 1964) and Leonilson (1957-1993) are the subject of the next "Projects" exhibition, on view at The Museum of Modern Art through March 12.

Organized by Starr Figura,

curatorial assistant, department of prints and illustrated books, "Projects: Oliver Herring/Leonilson" presents ethereal, elegiac knitted and embroidered works created from such mundane materials as Mylar and fabric. While both artists are indebted to the formal inventions of Minimalist,

Conceptual, and Process art, their works arise from highly personal, emotional impulses rarely manifested in those earlier movements.

Herring, who was born in Germany and lives in New York, knits nonwearable clothes and sculptural objects from transparent tape, silver Mylar, or paper. Part of an ongoing series he calls "A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger," these knitted works originated as a response to the death of Eichelberger, a performance artist who committed suicide in 1990 after suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS. Herring's figures, knitted coats, and panels, many of which are on view for the first time, suggest desire, disintegration, and mourning.

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THE VILLAGE VOICE  
New York, NY  
March 5, 1996

## GUY TREBAY

*Oliver Herring Takes  
a Stitch in Time*

# Knitting Factory

**"I FELT** that  
my work  
resembled the  
AIDS quilt:  
I'm always  
adding pieces,  
they're on  
the ground,  
they cover the  
earth, but  
they also rise  
up from it."

**O**ut of death comes art. Wasn't that one of the early clichés of the AIDS pandemic? A more difficult truth is that out of AIDS has come, mostly, kitsch, death the immutable recast as death the genre, pretty much leaving the culture with *Longtime Companion* and Adam Mars-Jones.

There are exceptions. In a small gallery on the ground-floor Projects room at the Museum of Modern Art is a show by two men. One, the Brazilian-born artist Leonilson (born José Leonilson Bezerra Dias), died of AIDS in 1993. Before his death, in the final stages of illness, Leonilson found himself unable to paint, and so turned to making crudely embroidered panels of cloth. Flimsy and roughly stitched, these are childlike yet impressively controlled: abandonment, frailty, love are the themes. In spirit they resemble nothing so much as Tibetan prayer flags; one can easily imagine them held by a stone to a roadside stupa, shredding away to nothingness.

With materials no weightier than strips of Mylar and transparent tape, Oliver Herring also makes work that appears deceptively fragile. Employing a traditionally feminine craft to knit large-scale sculptures, Herring creates elegiac artworks that make symbolic reference to time and memory and also to the always present process of disintegration. The sculptures at MOMA

continue a project entitled "A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger," begun as an homage to the late performance artist following his AIDS-related suicide in 1991. The knitted works are, as the artist told a visitor to his studio beneath the Williamsburg Bridge, "a meditation on the death of someone I admired." They're also, he adds, a metaphor for AIDS in general: "I'd been a painter most of my artistic life," says Herring, an angular, intense Heidelberg native, son of an English father and German mother, a thin 32-year-old man with a sly smile, an intense gaze, a mop of brown hair. "I'd gone to Oxford, to the John Ruskin School," Herring continues, on a morning so mild that he's able to open the windows of his storefront workspace. "When I left there, I came to America with my boyfriend, Peter Krashes, and moved to Wooster, Massachusetts. The two of us wanted to start an arts community project there.

"I was into Joseph Beuys at that time, and I thought Wooster needed me. It was totally arrogant and ridiculous, since everything we hoped to do was already there in Wooster and to a degree we could never have imagined. Peter and I went ahead and did an art 'book.' The idea was to let it travel. Everybody who has the book adds a page. We sent the book to garden clubs and cooking clubs and Elks clubs and it got to be sort of a competition among them to make another, better page. The

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THE VILLAGE VOICE  
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idea was that it should be exhibited in a public place, but I had to leave the country because of visa problems and I never knew what became of it.

"When I returned, I went to college again in order to remain here on a student visa. I picked Hunter because they had the cheapest program and best studio space. In those years, before 1991, I'd seen Ethyl Eichelberger perform and was totally impressed. The first time, I even went back and bought a ticket for the following day, which I'd never done before—for one thing, because I didn't have the money. Ultimately I saw him as Phaedra, Nefertiti, in *Das Vedanya Mama*, and in *Lear*, which I think was his most brilliant work. I was floored by the intelligence he used, and how his drag was not drag in the conventional way. It was drag used to neutralize rather than to exaggerate gender. It dealt with degendering.

"Ethyl Eichelberger had only been diagnosed with HIV six months before he died, but, as I've learned, he was under a lot of pain and was really miserable physically and emotionally. His suicide came at a point when he was turning into something bigger. It left people very confused. I found out he had died at Wigstock. Lady Bunny announced it from the stage. I was devastated, I suppose, because he had made a quest for individuality in mundane settings, had taken these ordinary theatrical situations—of drag, of playing the accordion, of singing, of showing off this enormous tattoo—and subjected them to an intelligence that shone through all the layers. I wanted to do something personal.

"At the time, people were in the habit of floating clear balloons when someone died of AIDS. This struck me as a beautiful, poetic gesture. I had seen some transparent bubbles of tape, and I decided to make a flower for Ethyl. It was odd because I'd never done anything like that before. I hadn't painted anything figurative for over six years. But I took some tape and wound it, twisted it into itself, the way you would with spinning, so that it sealed the sticky part inside. And I wove it together and made this huge flower.

"And I was unexpectedly moved by this work. For one thing, it was more specific than anything I'd done. It was about something. It was a reaction to something real. It was liberating to me to do something I hadn't done before, and there was something else: Living in New York, I was for the first time in a place where you could graphically see the effects of AIDS. I was personally terrified. And I was convinced that I had AIDS and certain that I was going to get it. I was under the impression that I was living on borrowed time. Ultimately, I had the test and I was fine. But somehow I felt a need to make understandable this fact that the

key factor is time. Or lack of time.

"When you knit, you very systematically mark your way through time. I start here, and two hours later I'm 10 inches ahead. It's a hellish task, and I have to invent little games to keep myself going. I'm like a prisoner marking his way through every day. But you can also shut out the noise when you knit, and it provides you with the luxury of actually thinking. One thing I thought about, in the first year, while I tried to get the hang of it, was 'Have I done all this work, all this study, to sit here knitting?' I thought, 'Is this the cliché, a gay man knitting?' And I thought, 'Is there a gene?' My mother had showed me how to do it on a three-day trip to Germany. She gave me a short lesson, and, after that, I taught myself. At first, I did pieces of clothing. I tried to come up with something like a remnant of a garment because, when you put a piece of clothing on the floor, it looks discarded. At the beginning, the work had a lot to do with Ethyl Eichelberger directly. But you can only brood so far, and, after a while, it became about myself. Although I never really thought that these works would be shown, I began to realize the sculptural potential.

"At the time, I was using plastic tape and not silver Mylar. It was a wonderful material because it was opaque and shiny and looked almost like snow. From a distance, it was hard to decipher. I had seen the AIDS quilt and it moved me tremendously, this long mass grave, and I felt that my work resembled the AIDS quilt in the sense that I'm always adding pieces, they're on the ground, they cover the earth, but they also rise up from it. You can't read them well from a distance.

"And weaving, like sewing, is not at all about death. It's about life. I've never liked it when people find my work morbid. The fact that I sit there and knit eight to 10 hours a day seems to me positive, almost like activism. I'm connecting myself to life and to the viewer. I'm creating this little secret between us, an understanding of the contradictions in a material that looks weighty, but is not, and that looks precious, but is not, and of the fact that a lot of the beauty in something is not what's revealed, but what's held back. For me it's a metaphor for the struggle to keep living. The material amplifies the metaphor. Knitted Mylar is stable and strong and will last forever. But if you rip it the whole thing unravels and there's not a darn thing that you can do." ❖

*Oliver Herring's work is represented by Max Protetch Gallery, 560 Broadway, and will be included in a group show at Mary Boone Gallery, 417 West Broadway, opening March 2. The Museum of Modern Art Projects room show continues through March 12.*

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SYLVIA PLAGIY