

Bleeding Words: Louise Bourgeois's and José Leonilson's Love Images

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As one tries to grasp love and its images within José Leonilson's production, a multiplicity of aspects and meanings are seen that also relate to Louise Bourgeois's oeuvre in regard to the interest in human relations. Through a comparative approach to both artists' poetics, an understanding is created that love is not a simplistic action and all the words read in or applied to their visual discourse must be considered within a wide range of love in visual and literary images.

Keywords: literature and visual arts / love / creativity / Bourgeois, Louise / Leonilson, José / word and image

Coisas e palavras sangram pela mesma ferida.

—Octavio Paz

“Things and words bleed through the same wound,” says the poet (Paz 37). This image recalls interesting relations regarding love and its meanings as well as the creative procedures of two visual artists, José Leonilson (Brazil, 1957–1993)¹ and Louise Bourgeois (France/USA, 1911–2010).² First, this passage marks the verbal development of an image as the de-

¹ José Leonilson Bezerra da Silva Dias, a.k.a. Leonilson, was a Brazilian artist famous for being part of the “80s Generation” in the Brazilian art scene. This movement marked a strong return of painting after the previous decades of strong conceptual production. Hence, Leonilson's subjective approach, his use of words, and his fabric works were viewed as quite an exquisite production with strong influence on Brazilian contemporary art. More information about him is available at <http://www.projetoleonilson.com.br> and <http://mam.org.br/artista/leonilson-jose/>.

² Louise Bourgeois was a French-born American artist well known for her significant production over five decades of sculptures, drawings, and fabric works with a strong subjective theme related to her personal emotional life. Although she was recognized quite late in life, with her first major retrospective at MOMA in 1982, the artist became an important reference for any discussion regarding the relation between art and the self. A large number of her artworks are currently being catalogued by MOMA, available at <http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/lb/about/chronology>.

velopment of the verbal content's meaning itself. Such meaning is presented through the association between the images of bleeding things and bleeding words. However, if this poetic use of language tries to clarify an idea, it also implies a formidable task: relying on one's ability to imagine that things and words could be as alive as our own bodies and, furthermore, relying on the understanding that both could bleed— that words, like people, could be wounded. Or is it that some words so deeply connect one to feelings like that of being hurt, of being alone or afraid, that words themselves are understood to bleed as much as a person would? And what would a word bleed for? Would it bleed for love?

If it is possible to envision meaning through the association between images, could one do the same to understand love and to reflect upon it as a notion? We rely on this possibility, also because it appears to be a suitable method for grasping love by attempting to unite diversity and differences. As Kristeva points out: "Do we speak about the same thing when we speak of love? And of which thing? The ordeal of love puts the univocity of language and its referential and communicative to the test." (Kristeva 2) With a title intended to present and analyze distinct literary and historic meanings of love, Kristeva presents the central problem of the notion of love: love has many and different meanings, and these spread through a variety of verbal and visual images. Although Kristeva does not indicate it, this multiplicity relates to a variety of human experiences connected to love. The variety of experiences is related to both desire and matter, body and spirit. This is a multiplicity that one tries to unite through the use of one and the same word. Thus, at the very core of this usage, resides its univocal impossibility. This is because love undermines univocity by always being grounded in experience, with multiple experiences related to a desire to love and be loved. People relate experiences to a multiplicity of images and meanings that fundamentally reside in contrasting references. Therefore, the second assumption that this article embraces is the following: one would have to accept multiple images and descriptions as being related to love because embracing such variety would be the only possible loving gesture.

Not only are these primary assumptions with regard to the notion of love itself, but they also seem to be the best possible way to approach love in the artistic production of Leonilson and Bourgeois. Furthermore, by relating visual and literary images to love, one may recognize not only these artists' verbal discourse, but also the acts through which they invite viewers to consider one possible image of love, if not in univocal, foundational terms. Questioning language referentiality is always a formidable enterprise, the very one that develops one's own meanings.

Struggle

As a fundamental aspect, Leonilson's and Bourgeois's images of love, as well as their creative practices, have to be considered as originating from life experiences such as the ones perceived by Hemingway's character Helen Gordon:

Everything I believed in and everything I cared about I left for you because you were so wonderful and you loved me so much that love was all that mattered. Love was the greatest thing, wasn't it? Love was what we had that no one had or could ever have? And you were a genius and I was your whole life. I was your partner and your little black flower. Slop. Love is just another dirty lie. Love is Ergoapiol pills to make me come around because you were afraid to have a baby. Love is quinine and quinine and quinine until I'm deaf with it. Love is that dirty aborting horror that you took me to. Love is my insides all messed up. It's half catheters and half whirling douches. I know about love. Love always hangs up behind the bath-room door. It smells like lysol. To hell with love. Love is you making me happy and the going off to sleep with your mouth open while I lie awake all night afraid to say my prayers even because I know I have no right to anymore. Love is all the dirty little tricks you taught me that you probably got out of some books. All right. I'm through with you and I'm through with love. Your kind of pick-nose love. You writer. (Hemingway 183–184)

While speaking about love as perceived in her conflicted and contrasting feelings, Helen struggles to bring these differences together within her experience of love. Helen feels unbalanced between two distinct places. Her discourse addresses a struggle with conflicted feelings and ideas she cannot relate to univocal meaning, but that she still names with the same word: *love*. If Helen's criticism might be diminishing her husband's literacy, it also further implicates the conceptualization of love. Namely, one's reading, listening, and watching experiences ground the development of images for love because love is a concept understood in terms of an approximation between given socialized meanings and personal experiences marked by feelings and emotions. It is through personal acquired experience of reading literature, art, and music, relating them to life, that one slowly begins to develop love. Thus Hemingway's character shows love as something not only related to her struggle with her husband, but to the contrasting characteristics between her husband's idealization and her own embodied perception of reality and things within their relationship—or, as she puts it, between her husband's literary references and her own perception of daily life and her suffering marked in the body through endurance after an abortion. One could even imply that, if words should bleed, it would be Helen's—not her husband's—to do so.

One possible explanation for such bleeding would be the clash between Helen's physical and bodily suffering and idealized literary notions. Helen struggles to accommodate her incarnated suffering within love as a notion. She struggles to bring together what she perceives in the outer world and what she feels inside. In this passage, being all messed up suggests not only her groins but her own inner self. The poetic aspect involved is that, even though denying her experiences as love, the use of the word persists in her discourse. Love is still there, being related to both ideals and wounds. Thus the meaning of love would have to comprise both perspectives. Such use of language—of love itself, for that matter—could be understood if one imagines love not only to be a very common word, but also to be a concept. This means that love questions language referentiality precisely because the idea of its meaning directly relates to the conceptual basis of language, as understood by Johnson. According to him, “concepts have to be understood as the various possible patterns of activation by which we can mark significant characteristics of our experience.” (Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body* 160) Johnson understands conceptualization as born from experience, which means that he theoretically discusses a principle that is implicit in Helen's words and Kristeva's assumption: all meaning is born from embodied experience. The latter easily puts the former to the test, especially when it comes to love. We would also like to imply that probably no other word or notion better exemplifies this intricate relation than love does. The second aspect implicit here—and easily identified in Helen's discourse—is that the use of the word resonates the multiplicity of experiences that are recapitulated through each and every person's own loving experiences. This is something that Helen intuitively knows, whereas Mr. Teste's wife (Valéry, *Monsieur Teste*) theoretically thinks about relating such thoughts to her perception about her own relationship to Teste. On a further note, both Helen's and Teste's wife as characters are interesting depictions developed by men (Valéry and Hemingway) that contrast men's idealization and literacy to women's connection to reality in terms of love conceptualization. Regardless of any implied gender issue, the image of difference within a couple appears to be fruitful ground to develop a vivid image of the tension between idealization and reality, like body and spirit, with regard to love.

The intricate and tensioned relation in love constituency is fundamental ground for the ways through which it becomes a presence in Leonilson's and Bourgeois's *oeuvre*. Love is present in their works in a variety of ways and with a number of images that resonate different meanings. The word *love* itself does not appear as such very often in their pieces. Yet its presence as a notion, and its own questioning, is undeniable. Actually, the

absence of the word emphasizes how much they bring the notion to the test in their artistic enterprise.

The presence of love can be sensed in the fundamental ground the artists reclaimed for their creative practice, their relations with others. In both artists' production, relationships viewed as a dynamic encounter between "I" and the "Other" are presented as something that demands creating balance between contrasting feelings and emotions, thus recalling the fundamental tension presented by Helen Gordon between idealization—which could also be understood in terms of desire—and reality itself. In this regard, both artists made declarations associating their creative practice and their pieces as a means to deal with, develop, organize, understand, and surpass emotions and feelings related to their own personal love relationships.

Sugar cubes and chaos

According to Morris (31), the entirety of Bourgeois's production relates to her relationships, something attested by declarations by the artist in interviews as well as in her pieces in terms of symbolism, use of words, and procedures. Bourgeois herself addresses her creative process and the making of the pieces as a process similar to psychotherapy, which enabled her to face emotional dilemmas related to her relationships, especially her fears (*Louise Bourgeois in Conversation with C. Meyer-Thoss*). The spider, for example—her best-known work being giant iron spider sculptures—is related to Bourgeois's relationship with her mother, which on many occasions is considered comparatively between her own motherly competence—or "incompetence" in Bourgeois's own understanding (Muller-Westermann 18)—and her mother's ideal motherly figure (Kuester 183–189). In other productions, forms such as the house or the human body are treated in two-dimensional or three-dimensional forms, also recapitulating feelings and stressing situations identified with regard to her personal relationships. However, the emotional aspect and its relation to subjective elements of Bourgeois's emotional history is also present in procedures such as stitching, embroidering, and sewing, which acquire artistic status but, at the same time, are actions filled with emotional meaning that recapitulate the artist's mother's task of "being diligent" as much as a mother as a tapestry renewer expert. From a variety of works that relate to her relationship to her mother, her father, her husband, her children, or her assistant, which are aspects discussed in depth by various critical approaches, we address a broader idea of relationships in general, as can be perceived

throughout her production. Thus we refer more directly to two pieces that address relationships with the use of words integrated in visual production. These are the series *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (1947/2005), and *Sublimation* (2002). In both series, Bourgeois presents verbal content side by side with drawings. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is arranged in plates with texts presented on the left side and engravings on the right. The images range from a more realistic depiction of elements to the spatial organization of abstract forms that resemble both realistic elements, such as stairs or houses, and more abstract organizations of the form, thus establishing an indirect relationship between images and text. In *Sublimation*, on the other hand, the verbal and visual contents are slightly more integrated, with the text handwritten and exchanging place with the drawings, placed sometimes on the left, other times on the right, or even below the drawings, which are much more abstract and with fluid, organic lines contrasting with the geometric orientation of the form in the previous series. In both series, verbal and visual elements are handled as two distinct aspects related to the same issue, yet not necessarily visual and verbal organization of the same “information.” It is as if the artist understood images, as well as words, as a necessary means to handle subjectivity.

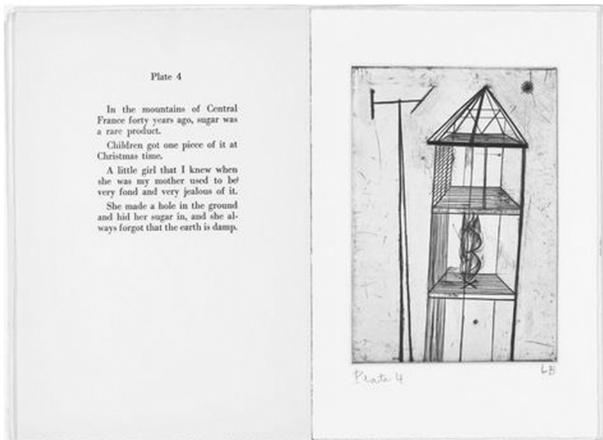


Figure 1: Louise Bourgeois. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, 2005, engraving over photogravure (www.moma.org/collection/works/illustratedbooks/121469?locale=en).

In *Sublimation*, Bourgeois presents the organization of the form in the work itself as an action that balances the chaos created by disputes within a couple's relationship. This aspect is not literally indicated, but can be

assumed through reading the entirety of the texts, and through one very discreet visual element. Most of the drawings at the beginning of the series develop abstract images in which circular forms and lines are predominant and always oriented from two distinct small black or red points opposed in space. This organization of the visual form changes towards the end, with the development of more integrated forms and lines not derived from two different points, but resembling instead a flowering or growing plant. From the point view of a child, Bourgeois refers to how an ordinary incident leads someone to burst into tears and feelings of chaos. The use of a broom, introduced into the scene at a certain point of this fifteen-page story, is viewed as a concrete, embodied action capable of organizing the former emotional disarray. However, in the following pages, this relation between an objective action and the organization of chaos is unfolded in a symbolic act similar to the process of creation. As written in the sheet: “at that point you operate a symbolic action. And in my case you begin to work on a sculpture;” it is a passage that turns the viewer back to an image at the beginning of this series, in which the workshop is considered a place of silence, which contrasts with the clash of voices and chaos. Thus the symbolic action of creating and doing is considered a necessary act to reorganize life and feelings as well as to compensate and sublimate the emotional chaos brought up by difficulties in a relationship.

According to Bourgeois’s visual creation and her discourse, a return to action and to the embodied (i.e., the broom, the artistic object) demanded positioning herself in such a way that the emotional turmoil would be reorganized into a balanced position. Although it is debatable whether Bourgeois’s discourse is also a creation *per se*, and not necessarily a sincere confession about her working process, it is interesting to note two enlightening aspects to think about love. One of them is the perspective similar to Helen Gordon’s, which understands love as a notion that struggles with the daily and real difficulties of a relationship. The second one, which is Bourgeois’s perspective (and, as will be seen, Leonilson’s possible perspective as well), is the contrast between love as a notion and the emotional field constituted by one’s own experiences, which will necessarily be reintegrated not simply by mental or intellectual development, but by a return to action. In Bourgeois’s case, that action will be characterized as the creative process yet that gives one a lot to think about regarding the necessary condition for love to organize itself from a notion to an effective act, which, by so doing, gains a symbolic dimension that establishes meaning.



Figures 2, 3, and 4: Louise Bourgeois. *Sublimation*, 2002, mixed media book (www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/list-of-works/view?exhibition_id=55&p=5).

The idea that Bourgeois might have been handling the meanings of love and the relation between this aspect and her creative process, as well as her emotional life, can also be noted in a far more liberal way in *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*. In the plates of this series, various short stories describe the manners and acts of different characters. Mostly, she speaks about “a man,” or “a mother and a son,” and, in plate 4, a little girl, as follows:

In the mountains of Central France forty years ago, sugar was a rare product. Children got one piece of it at Christmas time. A little girl that I knew when she was my mother use [sic] to be very fond and very jealous of it. She made a hole in the ground and hid her sugar in, and she always forgot that the earth is damp. (Muller-Westermann 31)

This story is placed alongside a drawing of something resembling a house on whose third floor a fire burns, the house being a very common image in Bourgeois's *oeuvre* related to her childhood house, according to her. Yet here the artist once more creates an overlap between the child as an image for herself, her own mother in this case, or her children. In our understanding, the characterization of the child's attitude has to be considered in regard to the contrast it establishes with the artist's gesture throughout her production. This text once again emphasizes an action taken into relation to something considered precious, as Bourgeois herself would refer to her mother's love. So, if it is possible to think about the sugar cube as a symbol for love, and not simply as the object the artist's mother might have really received as a present, two very distinct acts towards love have to be identified in Bourgeois's production. One of them is characterized by the image of the little girl hiding the sugar cube, and the other one by the act of creation by Bourgeois's, who exposes her emotions and feelings in her *oeuvre*. Thus, if Bourgeois's mother used to hide away precious things in order to keep them, this very action was responsible for the loss of the thing itself. Within the framework of the

art piece and regardless of the veracity of the actual facts, Bourgeois creates a piece that addresses and overlaps the figures of the mother and the child, facing her mother as a child, yet looking at her own self as a mother through the eyes of herself as a child. Furthermore, even though the artist stated in many interviews that she was a “bad mother” (Muller-Westermann 18), in comparison to her own mother, she also implies that her mother’s ability to endure relied on silence about certain familial events. Bourgeois seems to break and confront the same silence in her work. Thus, in her working process, the artist reclaims an attitude that is the exact opposite of the acts she identified as central to her mother’s competence to care for the family and keep the family together. Whereas the ideal and adored mother hid what was precious, the artist decides to deal with it and expose it to public. By struggling with love—that is, by acknowledging the perpetual tension between an ideal love (the mother’s) and her own real experience of being a mother—Bourgeois somehow develops her own notions of love and, furthermore, incorporates such diversity, as well as its disagreeable aspects, in her artistic discourse. If one confronts the different aspects present in her pieces, one sees a production that handles a notion of love, motherly love included, not as something whose difficulties and problems must be hidden, but rather something that must be embraced and faced within the intensity of the encounter between I and the Other, between ideal and reality, between idealized notions and the harsh reality of emotions that are so strong they need to bleed into the world.

Could Bourgeois’s *oeuvre* be suggesting that her mother’s silence upon her father’s misgivings was the action itself that made Bourgeois’s sugary love for her father fade? Maybe not. However, in any case, this action contrasts enormously with the creative decision of bringing to the work the many sides of her experiences of love as a child, as a mother, as a spouse, and as a woman. The female artist, more than creating a feminist discourse (one centered more exclusively in women’s issues) develops real pieces that, as indicated by Collins, are able to incorporate contrasting and opposed characteristics (even in relation to gender and sex) in the same piece, thus transgressing dichotomies and differences. If that aspect is clearly identified in her sculptures and fabric works as in *Seven in Bed* or *Janus Fleury*, as Collins demonstrates, we consider this aspect to also permeate other works, such as the ones considered here with regard to handling notions such as love. Hence, Bourgeois establishes pieces whose fundamental characteristic is understandable through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a *chiasm* of the flesh of the world (Collins 48). By incorporating contrasting characteristics into her *oeuvre* through the body of the pieces themselves, as much

as for claiming her own subjectivity (and in that regard her own struggle with love), Bourgeois establishes a creation that has a contribution towards the exercise of what could be called an emotional critic. When it comes to love, the artist invites the viewer to consider it as something that finds a place in many houses, warm ones and the cold ones alike. Its glorious feelings as much as its hurting ones shall be a subject of human wonder and discussion because the other side of love should never be ignored. Things one loves should not be kept away or hidden—even if they bleed or hurt, for they are the fundamental way for a person to understand existence. This is what unfolds love from a personal inner place to the outer world, to again be flesh as understood in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy:

Our flesh is that irrevocable combination and composite of body and mind, intertwined into that being whom we live, and through which we communicate and interact with the real world of the things themselves. . . . This is possible because our flesh is part of the flesh of the world—part of the “prose of the world.” The flesh covers both idea and body, Being and Nothingness, subject and object, essence and fact: all part of the flesh of the world. (Primožic 63)



Figure 5: Louise Bourgeois. *Seven in Bed*, 2001, fabric, stainless steel, glass, and wood (www.hauserwirth.com/artists/1/louise-bourgeois/images-clips/68/).

Vapor and solitude

For the most part, as viewed by many critics (Lagnado; Cassunde and Resende), Leonilson's production relates to a personal diary whose primary note resides in a depiction of a search for love, a desire to love and to be loved. In such terms, his *tour de force*, within the framework of his artistic production, is in establishing a *corpus* constituted by putting himself in the outer world as a means to find love as much as for putting his own heart on public display. If these assumptions are correct, one would have to consider that love resides in his *oeuvre* precisely in the permanent tension created by these opposed movements of putting desire in the world and letting the encounter between them be internalized as well. Leonilson is primarily known for pieces that speak about a search for love, one that forever fails because his desire clashes with hard reality, being conditional for a perception of his state as one of permanent solitude. Nevertheless, a broader analysis of his production makes it clear that the artist's search for love was permanent not because he did not have relationships, but precisely because of his interest in dealing with the various aspects involved in the search for love. This means that his *oeuvre* relies as much on the encounter with the Other as on its search because the encounters and their residues are as permanent as the search. The Other is at times the outer world, and at other times the loved one's body, which reciprocates and accepts his passionate feelings, even feelings lingering after the encounter has passed or the relationship has failed (Pedrosa 237). Because love is a permanent presence in his creative process, Leonilson's fundamental notion of love, in its connection to his creative process, is close to the troubadours' love. It is a courtly love centered in incantation, be it his audience or a desired love partner as one to be courted and enchanted. This might also be the decisive reason for the development of a visual and verbal rhetoric that, like the courtly song, has an ambiguity that is "erotic and sentimental at the same time" and refers much more "to its own performance" than to the achievement of the loved one (Kristeva 286–287).

However, how does Leonilson develop his courtly song? What are the different aspects he recalls for love? We look at a few works with contrasting aspects; works that relate to other pieces that address similar characteristics within a wider group with contrasting implications that can be considered general tendencies. These include works that mark solitude and loneliness, works that clearly address sexual and passionate encounters, works that relate to the idea of Christian love, and works that connect the artist and his production as "giving back" love to others.

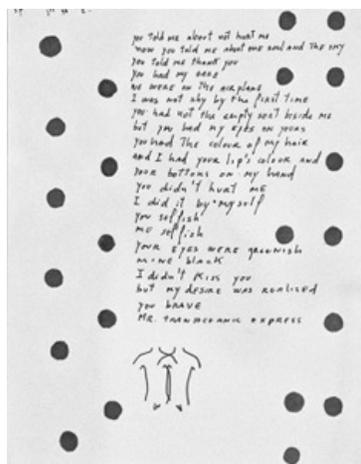
There are a number of fabric cloth pieces and drawings that develop an idea of loneliness in Leonilson's production. The most significant piece to convey this feeling is a small pillow sewn with light pink embroidered fabric and a non-matching fabric pattern on the back, which Leonilson produced as an object to be hung on a wall and on whose corner the word *ninguém* ('nobody') was embroidered with contrasting black thread. A sense of loneliness and solitude can be perceived in the embroidered word, but this significance is enhanced by its presence in this small sleeping pillow. This presence is far more significant once one recalls a tradition still present in Brazil in those days of sewing and embroidering a bride's trousseau. More than suggesting the feeling of solitude, this realization, which recalls a bride's expectation towards a match and a marriage, does not suggest expectation and excitement, but rather a sad realization or even lack of trust in the possibility of meeting a special someone. Would it then be possible that the artist is not only suggesting certain disenchantment, but precisely this large gap between his idealizations of romantic love and the reality of the relationships he had?



Figures 6 and 7: José Leonilson, *Ninguém*, 1992, embroidered pillow (Pedrosa, 67) and *O vapor*, 1991, watercolor on paper (www.simoedeassis.com.br/pt-BR/Exposicoes/Obras?exposicaoId=13).

Of course when it comes to Brazil in the late 1980s and early 1990s, gay life was still a taboo, especially within middle class Catholic families such as Leonilson's. Regarding this aspect, a closer look at his production and a comparison between his drawings and paintings and his interviews and notebooks reveals someone that understands his own love feelings and

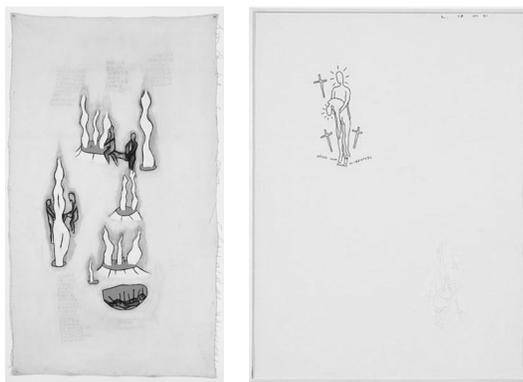
passionate desires as something “pure,” something far closer to love than lust, something spiritual in his words (Pedrosa 238). However, at the same time, it is clear that the artist also perceived the great distance that existed between his very personal feelings and how society thought about homosexual love and homoerotic aspects, at least in more open manners and behaviors. This distance between his loving feelings and the possibility of living an actual encounter within society and the family circle is probably one fundamental reason why the artist established visual narratives that address love encounters, but many times do so through very concealed symbolism. The best possible example in such terms is the drawing *The Vapor*. It is a letter-sized sheet of paper with a small watercolor drawing of something resembling a playing card. In this playing card, small hearts recalling the suit of hearts are mixed with small red crosses that separate the two red hearts through diagonal disposition inline. Under this small card, as if lost amidst the wide white space surrounding it, a discrete notation is written: *o vapor* (“the vapor”), in a clear suggestion of vapor rooms, a very common place for gay men to meet. However, the possibly gay and sexual implications are discreetly hidden in the presence of the words, which do not clarify the image, but in its company develop a suggestion of both division and the sensuality implicit in the vaporous location. This is a division related to the contrast between the “heart” and “reason” as present in a variety of other drawings and paintings, which somehow conceals the moral dilemmas the artist faced being gay and Catholic.



Figures 8 and 9: José Leonilson. *Tranquility*, 1992, embroidery on voile and *Mr. TransOceanic express*, 1990, black ink and watercolor on paper (Cassunde and Resende 151 and 86).

However, if Leonilson is at times very discreet, at other times he also directly indicates the amorous encounter between bodies. There are very poetic suggestions such as in the cloth piece executed in sheer orange voile called *Tranquility* (Pedrosa 135), or very accurate verbal descriptions presented in visual compositions, such as in *Mr. TransOceanic Express* (Cassunde and Resende 86). Whereas *Tranquility*, a light square fabric object, sewn completely by hand with very light thread, reveals a very candid emotion in the embroidered sentence “Tranquility is watch your face, hear a voice,” a sentence that is also a solitary visual mark in this piece’s margins, *Mr. TransOceanic* consists of a white sheet of paper, full of bright green dots and with the discreet representation in black pen of two male torsos, describing an encounter in an airplane with a man with green eyes, marked by hands, desire, and no kisses. It is a work that makes all the more explicit aspects that are present in very concealed images and words in other pieces.

The religious references related to a Catholic upbringing and to productions such as Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane* from 1976 (Pedrosa 238) are present in paintings such as *Pobre Sebastião* (Pedrosa 174), a large painting on canvas executed in different white hues and with discreet black and blue, with three not very detailed images related to different chapters of the saint’s life, and many forms resembling flames, a symbol of passion, according to the artist himself. However, the very light visual depiction, which hides in its background lists of words such as “danger, success, defeat, possession, will, desire, consciousness,” are exemplary of how references like a movie were taken as a contrasting reference for the artist to problematize love as something he himself perceived as being related to freedom and purity, a notion that he was well aware was uncanny with regard to gay love experiences. A work like this exemplifies Leonilson’s bifurcated references for love but also emphasizes the presence of a notion of love that at times also recapitulates the notion of *caritas*, especially in a drawing such as *Jesus com rapaz acidentado*, a small ink drawing in which the same image of Jesus holding a body in his arms appears surrounded by three crosses. In opposite corners of the paper, one of the drawings is covered with white paint, being somehow erased. It is a work related to a sense of compassion in Leonilson’s love.



Figures 10 and 11: José Leonilson, *Pobre Sebastião*, 1991, acrylic paint and *Jesus com rapaz acidentado*, 1991, black ink on paper (mam.org.br/artista/leonilson-jose/).

A great part of the artist's production relates to his view of the world, which actually unfolds love from a feeling centered in self-realization into a broadened image of a human condition of being connected to others. In this regard, Leonilson unfolds love into strong criticism when making drawings for the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, and in some drawings and installations where he addresses marginalized minorities and inequality within Brazilian society. Therefore, it is important to recognize an understanding of love in more universal terms as an emotion closely related to the compassion perceptible in a passage such as the following, written during a visit to Paris:

21/sep. The sunset by the Seine, the Eiffel Tour. A beautiful day. And how many others will come, how many to catch men in different times of history[.] The sunset, how many have seen it[,] how many will see it, how many will see one more and many others following. Everything they saw, these brave men, cowards, jumps, fear, destruction, poor armed men. If only they were as strong and fast as their weapons. If only they could see as far as they are good in targeting (if they are). And nothing of this ever interrupts the sunset or the sunrise on the Seine, the Amazon, the Yang-Tse, the Mississippi, or the Nile. And there are the ones who think of themselves as rich and famous, that consider themselves nationalists (poor ones). And there was that old lady with a shredded coat and very simple sandals, sitting and waiting for the sunset[,] and it went on in its farewell and she kept taking as much of it as she could, taking each ray of light for herself[.] When one could not see any more of it, she stepped onto a bench and kept talking nonstop, swallowing the last rays[.] When one could not see anything anymore, she stepped onto a bench and kept talking nonstop, it was like a cult, me at her side only knew of staring at such spectacle and at her, when we could not see anything anymore, she stepped down of the bench and went off, she didn't have any teeth in her

mouth and she dashed away in her energetic fountain. I was also caught by emotion when I saw a young guy wearing black leather as if praying for the fading sun. Was he asking for something? Maybe for protection or cure.³ (Leonilson 15–16).

Leonilson's notes seem to stress love feelings in relation to his production as not solely related to a search for a special someone with whom to have a romantic relationship. His gaze and reflections address a broader sense of love as a feeling of connectivity with other people through the recognition of similar meaningful relations with the world, a gesture that sustains the communicative power of his work in a more universal manner. If that is possible, then Leonilson is not simply addressing a romantic notion of love—one considered in terms of *eros* as an aim for happiness—but a compassionate attitude towards the other, one that relates to the notion of *agape* or *amor sui*, reinforcing his suggestion of love as a “disinterested gift.” (Kristeva 139) Thus, this compassionate gaze might be what sustains the possibility of letting himself bleed to talk to others about love. It is not only about his romantic, sexual or spiritualized love experiences, but about his sense that life must be sustained by this thing called love.

By embracing contrasting notions of love, the love from the soul related to purity and God as much as gay experiences closely marked within the body, Leonilson is truly neo-platonic for addressing love as appointed by Kristeva when recapitulating the Plotinian notion of a “new conception of love—a love centered in the self although drawn toward the ideal Other whom I love and who causes me to be.” (Kristeva 59) In this regard, Leonilson's search for love, despite having been so many times depicted in his production as a failed task, once one acknowledges this compassionate aspect as much as its implications within the constitution of the creative process and its gestures, must be understood in relation to an Other (the world) that causes the artistic production to be. In such terms, love in Leonilson can also be approximated to Comte-Sponville's notion of love as “what is real;” that is, “what is never missing.” (76) If love could not only bleed, but sustain its own absence as well (being the absence; not its essence, but the response one gets from the world), then it would indefinitely cause people to be by letting them truly know themselves:

[A]ny really deep understanding of why we do what we do, feel what we feel, change as we change, and even believe what we believe, takes us beyond ourselves. Understanding of ourselves is not unlike other forms of understanding—it comes out of our constant interactions with our physical, cultural and interpersonal environment. At a minimum, the skills required for mutual understanding are necessary even to approach self-understanding. Just as in mutual understanding we con-

³ Translated by Ana Lucia Beck.

stantly search out commodities of experience when we speak with other people, so in self-understanding we are always searching for what unifies our own diverse experiences in order to give coherence to our lives. (Lakoff and Johnson 232)

Cutting and stitching

To conclude, both Leonilson and Bourgeois not only accept love diversity and their own necessity of developing coherence from the diversity and difficulties of their love experiences, but might also be suggesting that giving oneself to love—regardless of its apparent impossibilities, difficulties, loss, or distance from one’s own or other’s idealizations—is a fundamental gesture through which people pertain to the world, being effectively alive. This is something that James’s character realizes in old age, when he finally understands what the great fear was that he tried to escape from during his lifetime:

The escape would have been to love her; then, then he would have lived. She had lived—who could say now with what passion?—since she had loved him for himself; whereas he had never thought of her (ah, how it hugely glared at him!) but in the chill of his egotism and the light of her use. Her spoken words came back to him, and the chain stretched and stretched. The beast had lurked indeed, and the beast, at its hour, had sprung; it had sprung in the twilight of the cold April when, pale, ill, wasted, but all beautiful, and perhaps even then recoverable, she had risen from her chair to stand before him and let him imaginably guess. It had sprung as he didn’t guess; it had sprung as she hopelessly turned from him, and the mark, by the time he left her, had fallen where it was to fall. He had justified his fear and achieved his fate; he had failed, with the last exactitude, of all he was to fail of; and a moan now rose to his lips as he remembered she had prayed he mightn’t know. This horror of waking—this was knowledge, knowledge under the breath of which the very tears in his eyes seemed to freeze. (James 74–75).

The only possible way to be really alive would be to embrace love, even in the face of multiplicity or fear. This is because love itself is the possibility of embracing vast distances related to one single ideal: having significant life experiences that maintain life as well as poetic creation. As put by Kristeva: “Man, as he displaces his desires onto the field of knowledge, finally works out the recipe of Diotima who relieves him of the deadly unleashing of his erotic passion and holds up to him the enthusiastic vision of an immortal, unalterable object” (Kristeva 75); we would say: art itself. Then, on the other hand, it could be love. Moreover, love and creation could be forever entangled because, as Bourgeois considered, “To admit love is to conquer a fear.” (Muller-Westermann 246)

It is in such ways that creation could be considered “born by bleeding.” Both Bourgeois and Leonilson disseminated verbal discourses about their creations that present the creative process as happening by metaphorically cutting their own skin, a significant image for this exposure of love desires, fears, struggles, and wounds. It is with such a gesture, of objectively presenting their subjectivity and of metaphorically letting themselves bleed into the world, that they create, hence developing love. By embracing love as a fundamental aspect of their artistic creations, a love with no univocal meaning, but rather as something whose variety of experiences and meanings could be dwelt with and organized within artistic creation—be it through a gesture of giving one’s self to creation while opening one’s subjectivity to the public—Leonilson and Bourgeois approximate themselves to an image of the creative process as happening through bleeding as an original act of creation:

First, you peel yourself.
You take a small peeling knife
and scrape off a layer of your self.
Sweet, salty fluids
come gushing out
through your pores.

Then, living bait,
you step out into the sun, the salty sea,
the windy desert;
you wait for the words
to stick, to sting
and stay.

When you are covered in them
you step back in, poisoned;
you pick off
word after word,
you lay them out,
you arrange them in lines.

You’re left there standing,
covered all over with small scars.
(Barbara Korun)

Korun presents a vivid image of poetic creation as a movement that originates in peeling and cutting one’s body. However, the body suggests opposing aspects: the carnal body as much as the self. There is an entanglement of body and self during creation; there is, however, a third party involved in the task, the world. Hence, poetic creation can be thought of as a

balanced movement oscillating between opening to the world and bringing the world inside. Such movement must find balance between the body and the world. The poem unites them as significant things meaningfully related to elements such as light, warmth, blood, wind, sweat, and flavorful tastes from salt and sugar. The splendid image of tasting the world as an embodied self is further unfolded in the suggestion of creation as something that happens through bleeding, thus emphasizing the image of poetic creation as per passing incarnated experiences, those one internalizes, those one slowly investigates by letting them hurt if necessary, and, even so, that one balances with the ability to watch, select, arrange, and endure.

Similar characteristics relate the poet's image of creation to a movement that originates meaning by dealing with one's inside out. In this regard, if Leonilson's and Bourgeois's creations relate to their inner side in relation to love experiences, one could assume that they also create by bleeding. This image of bleeding, as connected to creative practice, reinforces these artists' important contribution in social terms. Reclaiming art as a field in which they can deal with and rethink their emotional world, and by including in this review notions such as love, Bourgeois and Leonilson acquire a poetic with values similar to an "antiphilosophy" (Bouveresse) as developed by Valéry, who contrasts his own practice with that of philosophy in the following terms: "Philosophy is a literary genre that has the peculiar characteristic of never being owned as such by the people who practice it. Hence it follows that this art has remained imperfect, is still criticized in its wrong not its right object; is never taken to its own perfection, but extended out of its own field." (Valéry, *Cahiers* 1:579 cited in Bouveresse) Undergoing an enterprise contrary to common philosophy, these artists do reclaim their right (as much as necessity) to recognize and own their own meanings as much as their own love. However, as Valéry implies, acquiring one's own meanings demands a thinking that becomes action—or, in other terms, a desire that goes back to the body of matter. The main issue implicit in this is that love itself might acquire meaning more through actions than words. Love as a notion necessarily needs to become and act. It is in this sense that Leonilson and Bourgeois think of it as a matter of art. However, this creative act needs to be a balanced act that would thus embrace multiplicity and difference:

Love is a state of reunion and participation open to every man: in the amorous act, consciousness is a wave which by surpassing obstacles, before collapsing, stands up for a plenitude in which everything—form and movement, upward pushes and gravitational forces—gain a balance with no foundation, one which sustains its own self. Stillness of movement. And as much as we gaze at a more fulfilling life through the loved one's body, at a life greater than life itself; so do we gaze

at poetry's thunder through the poem. This instant contains all instants. Without ceasing to flow, time stops, filled in itself.⁴ (Paz 33)

We conclude by suggesting that Leonilson's and Bourgeois's struggle with their own relationships, by the very act of turning back to the reality of the work as a mean to achieve emotional balance, creates a state or condition similar to that portrayed by Paz of stillness of movement; of a movement capable of sustaining its own self in balance despite the fundamental differences, contrasts, and forces implicated and incorporated.

To be an artisan in love would be to create a body for love, whether that is in paper, cloth, marble, or flesh. To love is to be. Yes, to be an artist would be to love a lot, but that means to do, rather than to idealize the act of love. This might be the fundamental perception of Leonilson, the proximity between love as an act and the gesture of creation: one of acceptance and of giving, one of living through matter. In similar ways, one could understand Bourgeois's act of creation—and its bond with a deep questioning and reasoning about her feelings—as the basis for an understanding of the reality of love in opposition to an idealization she might have perceived as being a social construction, whereas Leonilson appears to be accepting the encounter between his idealizations and the reality of the world by embracing love's multiplicity.

Somewhere else we would like to characterize such a gesture as a deep "listening to." To have been listened to must have been the ultimate desire of the wife in James's short story—the very desire her husband was unable to fulfil. It is the desire that made Bourgeois resent being left in complete silence when "he" disappeared. It is the silence Leonilson identified as the absence of love. It is a silence only spoken about with bleeding words.

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⁴ Translated by Ana Lucia Beck.

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Krvaveče besede: Podobe ljubezni v delih Louise Bourgeois in Joséja Leonilsona

Ključne besede: iteratura in vizualna umetnost / ljubezen / ustvarjalnost / Bourgeois, Louise / Leonilson, José / beseda in podoba

Julia Kristeva v delu *Histoires d'amour* trdi, da ljubezen ni nikoli nedvoumna in da v množici literarnih del obstajajo raznovrstne podobe ljubezni. Če je njena domneva pravilna, je ljubezen raznolična. Teze Julie Kristeve so izhodišče za refleksijo o pojmovanju ljubezni v kreativnem procesu in v delih Joséja Leonilsona (Brazilija 1957–1993) in Louise Bourgeois (Francija/ZDA, 1911–2010). Podobe ljubezni, ki jih lahko zasledimo v delih teh avtorjev, primerjamo s podobami ljubezni v literarnih delih Ernesta Hemingwaya in Henryja Jamesa. Če upoštevamo, da raznolikost ljubezni zadeva tudi utelešeno percepcijo življenjskih izkušenj, ugotovimo, da je v delih Leonilsona in Bourgeoisove upodobljena kot temeljni spopad med idealizacijo in realnostjo. Ta boj je vedno prisoten v medčloveških odnosih, ki so prvenstvenega pomena za Bourgeoisovo. Poznal ga je tudi Leonilson, ko se je soočal s težavami istospolno usmerjenega moškega v tradicionalno katoliški družini in državi. Prisoten ni le v njenih umetniških delih, temveč tudi v samem ustvarjalnem procesu. Ta krvavi boj v drugačni podobi izpričuje tudi Barbara Korun v svoji poeziji, ki jo citiramo v tej primerjalni študiji. Tako pridemo do ugotovitve, da sta si ljubezen in ustvarjalnost podobni: v obeh primerih gre za gibanje, ki se mora uravnovežiti, ali pa – kakor pravi Octavio Paz – za mirovanje gibanja. Ljubezen, ki ni zgolj beseda, temveč dejanje, sprejema svojo raznolikost.