

Text by Luísa Santos

A vida longa das linhas rectas

Pedro Pires's work (1978, Luanda) generally begins with an appropriation of objects or ideas. This appropriation, however, is not of the objects themselves but of their contexts. In the project *The Green Line*, which precedes and forms part of **A vida longa das linhas rectas**, and which was presented in 2022 at the gallery This Is Not A White Cube in Lisbon, curated by Lourenço Egreja, he appropriates the title of a work by Francis Alÿs from 2004–05, which in turn takes the name of a border. Francis Alÿs walked along the armistice border, known as the "green line," because it had been drawn in pencil, provisionally, by Moshe Dayan, commander of the Jerusalem front in the Arab–Israeli War, on a map at the end of that war in 1948. This line remained a border until the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel occupied territories inhabited by Palestinians east of the line. Francis Alÿs's action, which consisted of letting green paint drip behind him as he walked, revived the memory of this green line at a time when separation gained new meaning — between August and September 2005, Israel implemented a unilateral plan that determined that the entire population of the Gaza Strip should be evacuated. Later, Alÿs invited commentators from Israel, Palestine and other countries to reflect on his artistic action. Although it becomes clear that poetics and politics have a difficult relationship, with this physical action (the walk and the demarcation in space) and with the invitation to listen to diverse perspectives — something that could hardly occur in these terms within a formal setting — Alÿs speculates on the transformative potential of poetic acts in political situations of conflict.

A vida longa das linhas rectas again adopts the title of an existing work, a 1999 essay by the historian and specialist in African history Wolfgang Döpcke. The essay presents itself as a study of political borders in Black Africa in their historical and current dimensions, discussing and proposing a critical analysis of stereotyped narratives, which the author calls "five myths about borders in Black Africa," in both popular and academic discourse about African borders. He explains how these borders were drawn, with all their imperfections and flaws, and how they appear in narratives of resistance and change. Borders and the nationalities that are supposedly divided by them are constant motifs in the artist's practice and personal life, as he holds dual nationality (Angolan and Portuguese). In contemporary societies, often described as global, this duality has become an increasingly common condition. Bodies that move from one territory to another — between nations, continents, cultures, religions, habits, and legacies — are in constant mutation in a relationship of mutuality with the other bodies and places they encounter. While borders, from a geographical perspective, are physical or artificial lines that separate geographical areas, political limits that separate countries and define an area controlled by an administrative or political power, bodies that move across borders demonstrate, on the one hand, that these are living organisms, in a constant process of exchange and transformation. On the other hand, as Jimmie Durham reminds us in his project to become Eurasian, the movements of bodies are always placed at the margins: "the fact that Europe is recognized as a continent and Eurasia, the continent, is not known as a continent, means that we are taught to think politically and never physically" (Durham, 1996).

In attempting to understand the conceptual frameworks that contain ideas such as global, international, and transnational — and that reduce cultures to fixed definitions such as African or Portuguese — Pedro Pires reminds us that the border is embodied in various ways and that the skin is the first border we have with the world; it is what simultaneously protects us from the outside and allows us to survive and coexist with everything that is external to us. In the first room of the exhibition, we are welcomed by an installation with four vertical drawing-sculptures (*Body*, *Concrete*, *Pixel* and *Structural*, all from 2023), about two meters high, suspended from the ceiling, forming a square that defines a space within the space of the gallery. We can enter through the sides of the square formed by the drawings, which allows us to access them from both inside and outside. The four drawing-sculptures are made with an iron welding machine — the sparks hit the paper and burn it, creating holes that together form drawings of bodies, on the front and back of the paper, at human scale. While the title of the exhibition appropriates Wolfgang Döpcke's essay, the drawings incorporate a functional and neutral technique and object. The function of the welding machine is nothing more than to join two parts — it provides the energy necessary to unite pieces of metal. While the borders indicated by the title divide, the weld and the bodies drawn through it unite, neutralizing and reinforcing the process of imagination in the construction (and destruction) of borders.

The upper gallery space is inhabited by fifteen drawings, among which two were previously presented in *The Green Line — Fraccional* (2022) and *Wall* (2022). Unlike the first room, in which the bodies stand in a static position that, together, forms a space within a space, inviting the movement of our own bodies, in the upper room the bodies drawn with the same welding technique are in motion. In the cases of *Fraccional* and *Wall*, they are not only in motion but also appear fragmented, each fragment framed — that is, delimited by borders that separate each portion, each part of the body. In the same room there are also four sculptures made with resin and Vlisco fabrics: a body (*154 Meters*, 2023); two heads (*Camouflage for the future* and *Doppelgänger for the future*, both from 2023); and a bust (*Transparency for the future*, 2023). The sculptures are bodies or parts of bodies with a second skin, or a mask, which are themselves borders. In this case, made from opaque fabric, they prevent access to the elements that make bodies recognizable, with a unique identity.

Just as the choice of objects taken from everyday life for his works is not random, the choices of what we use in our own lives are not merely arbitrary selections: “the object is the mediator between man and the world” (Moles, 1981:11). Vlisco is one of the few companies producing wax hollandais — a print made on cotton fabric derived from the mechanization of Javanese batik, which was brought to the African continent in the nineteenth century and spread across several countries, becoming part of local cultural traditions — that has continued to operate since the nineteenth century. Its communication strategies contributed to the visual narrative of wax hollandais as African textile printing. Since the nineteenth century, these fabrics have been sold by local agents, mainly women, with hereditary licenses — a system that helped their assimilation into African cultures. Over the course of its two centuries of existence, the fabric has undergone multiple mutations and cultural exchanges. Systematically associated and communicated as part of African culture, both by Vlisco and by designers and fashion journalists, this association is then confidently adopted by the receivers of the message (any of us) who wear these fabrics

around the world. Yet it is never linked to specific cultures or ethnic groups, blurring geographical, cultural and political borders. The imprecision of the time in which the assimilation and appropriation of these fabrics occurred facilitates the invention of a tradition. After all, when the borders of time become blurred, spaces open up between them for constructions that, by distorting the past, become alterna(rra)tives to it. However, as Dandara Maia says, “an invented tradition is not necessarily a false history. They are complex developments, present mainly in modern societies that have undergone processes of colonization, forced interactions and homogenization of their cultures” (2019:6). It is precisely from these complex developments, in constant tension, mutation and exchange, that the exhibition **A vida longa das linhas rectas** takes shape. Ultimately, it operates as a set of living lines that are sometimes fixed and opaque, and at other times adopt a floating and transparent form.