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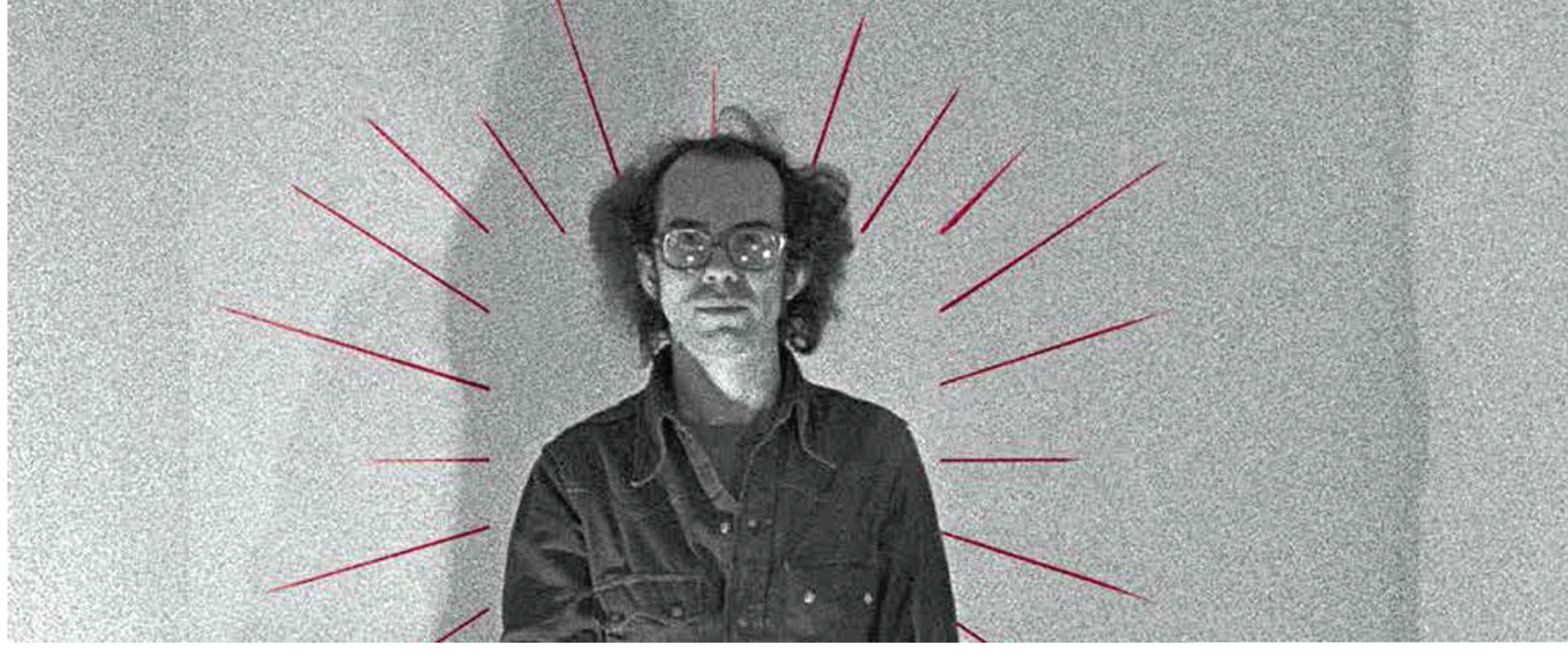
# Remembering the Fragile Unity of Brazilian artist Antonio Dias (1944–2018)






BY TIAGO MESQUITA  
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From fleshy, distorted paintings, capturing the malaise of the 1960s, to colourful abstractions made in exile, the artist was an example to live by



On 1 August, Brazilian artist Antonio Dias lost a long battle to cancer at the age of 74. Beginning in the 1960s, the artist produced a vast body of work that, in formal and conceptual terms, stood in stark contrast to the sunny output of the previous decade. His early paintings eschewed the hedonistic sensuality of artists such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark in favour of a radical and confrontational figuration: in paintings such as *Querida, você está bem?* (Dear, are you all right?, 1964), crudely drawn or painted figures occupy grids redolent of comic strips, photo-novels and Brazilian *cordel* literature, though their forms are flabby, the lines separating them askew. Some resemble phalluses or corpses, tumbling from the grid into three-dimensional space. In many of these pieces, Dias's grotesque palette invokes skin, hair and (wounded) flesh.



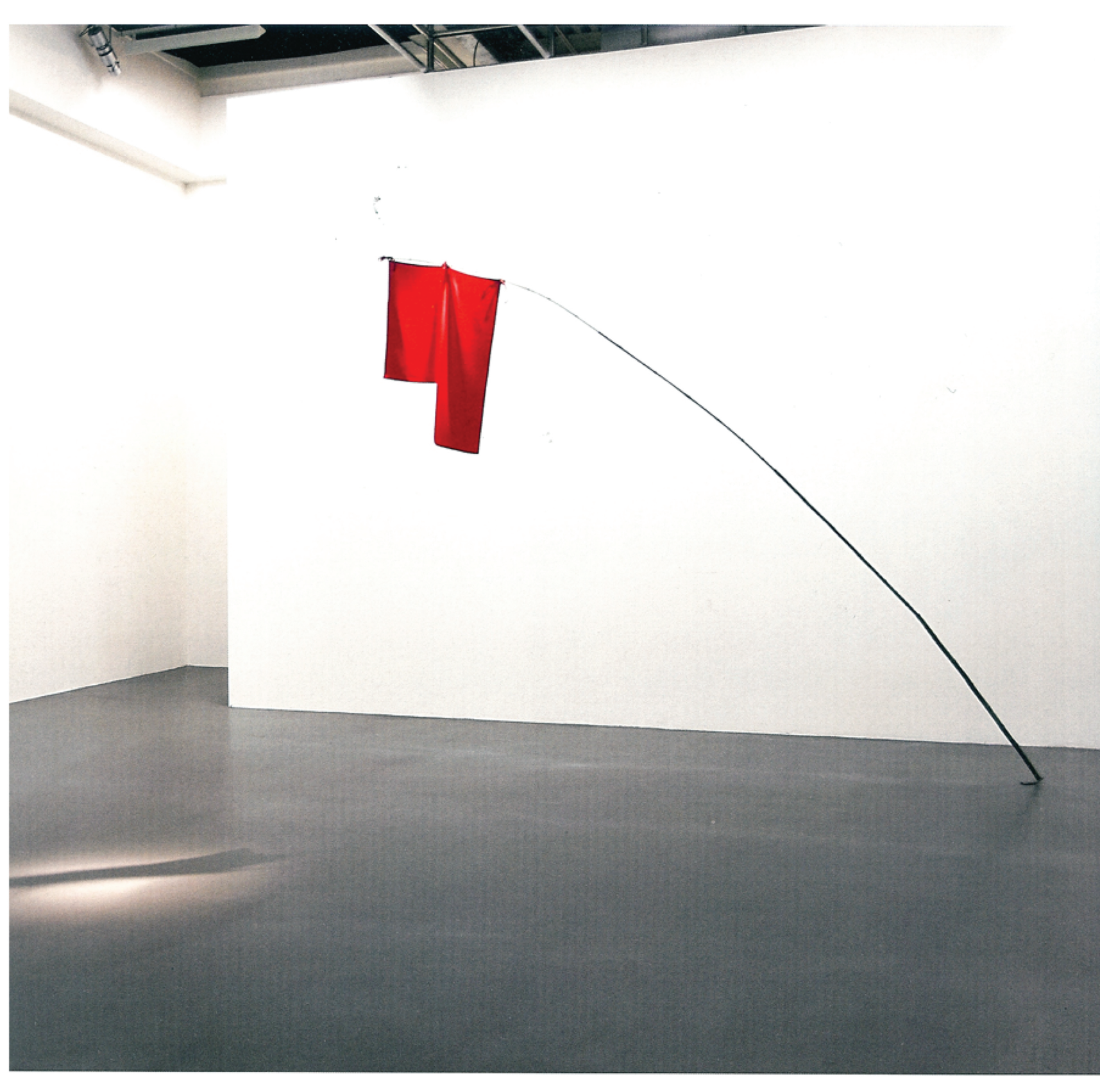
Antonio Dias, *Nota sobre a Morte Imprevista* (On Unforeseen Death), 1965, oil, acrylic, vinyl, plexiglass on wood and fabric, 195 x 176 x 63 cm. Courtesy: Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo / Rio de Janeiro / New York

On April Fool's Day, 1964, a military and civilian coup d'état changed the course of Brazil's and Latin America's history. Five years after the Cuban Revolution, the Brazilian Armed Forces – supported by the United States – overthrew the country's democratic President João Goulart. Overnight, the optimism of the 1950s was gone. Antonio Dias's distorted, fleshy paintings seemed to capture the malaise of the moment.



Antonio Dias, *Niranjannirakhar*, 1977, Nepalese paper with tea leaves, 1.4 x 5.6 m. Courtesy: Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo / Rio de Janeiro / New York

Born in 1944, in the state of Paraíba in northeastern Brazil, Dias taught himself how to read by studying comics and cordéis and became a professional designer while still in his teens. He studied engraving with artist Oswaldo Goeldi, from whom he learned about the somber side of Brazilian urban life. It's perhaps for this reason that Dias's work – in contrast to American Pop Art – never celebrated the triumph of industrial mass production. The modernization of Brazil and the spread of mass media occurred under a bloody dictatorship. Instead, Dias's subjects are bodies: sliced and rending, viscous and overflowing. As the critic Mário Pedrosa put it: 'The linear narrative of the cartoon is for Dias a vegetarian meal. For quenching his thirst and feeding his appetite, only the thickness of the Real and the substance of flesh and blood will do.'



Antonio Dias, *The Invented Country*, 1976, satin, patinated bronze, length: 5 m. Courtesy: Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo / Rio de Janeiro / New York

After a self-imposed exile in Paris in late 1966, Dias distanced himself from figuration. The artist narrowed his palette and began painting block-letter titles atop usually monochromatic, gridded fields, in works like *Trama* (1968/77) and *Find an Island called Oasis* (1970), inspired in part by his dialogue with the artists he met in Europe and the United States, such as Luciano Fabro and Luís Camnitzer. Dias's fields are not neutral surfaces but screens through which we view ample, untamed space. The text on each work – often titles placed above the grid, or words inscribed in each square – suggests the presence of something representational, though the relation between word and image is tenuous, as through the referent is slipping into a void. The difficulty of locating a specific place, horizon, figure or context in these works seems to mirror Dias's experience of exile. Not coincidentally, several of these works bear titles such as *The Prison* (1968), *Anywhere is my land* (1968), and *Occupied Country* (1971). Their refusal to communicate anything further about their context also affirms the nature of aesthetic experience as always a fleeting mirage: as such an image materializes, it leaves us with little more than the debris of memory.



Antonio Dias, *Cranks*, 1999, acrylic, graphite, copper and gold leaf on canvas, wood, aluminium, blown glass and latex, 2 x 3.4 m. Courtesy: Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo / Rio de Janeiro / New York

In the late 1990s, Dias began to play again with bright colours and painterly form, albeit on a structural level, pairing canvases of different sizes and shapes to create slightly sculptural yet planar abstract compositions. From the beginning of his career to the end of his life, Dias strove to achieve a fragile unity in the various contrasting elements of his work. Amidst another depressing political cycle in Brazil, when reconciliation appears increasingly difficult, his is an example to life by.

*Translated by Joaquim Toledo Jr.*

Main image: Antonio Dias, *Milan*, 1973. Courtesy: Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo / Rio de Janeiro / New York; photograph: Gabriele Basilico

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OBITUARY

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