

MATERIALIZING ABSENCE, ABSENT MATERIALS: MIRTHA DERMISACHE, ROLAND BARTHES, AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT — This article reexamines Mirtha Dermisache's (1940–2012) art by shifting the focus beyond her widely discussed asemic writing to her engagement with the materials and political dimensions of publishing. Working at the intersection of literature and visual art, Dermisache used media-reflexive strategies to interrogate the conventions of both fields, emphasizing the material and formal aspects of communication. Drawing on unpublished archival materials, including her correspondence with Roland Barthes (1971–1978), the article reconstructs their plans for a collaborative publication. By analyzing her publishing activities—particularly the under-explored beginnings of her practice—within the socio-political constraints of her time, it highlights how Dermisache negotiated the tension between artistic ambition and the practical realities of dissemination, offering a nuanced understanding of her contributions to Conceptualism and the challenges faced by female artists in the Latin America of the time.

— The Argentinian Conceptual artist Mirtha Dermisache is known for her illegible or asemic writing, consisting of marks that resemble writing yet remain devoid of semantic content. In Peter Schwenger's words, asemic writing "does not attempt to communicate any message other than its own nature as writing" and is, fundamentally, something "we are seeing—not reading" (Schwenger 2019: 7). Dermisache was adamant that her work should be presented in the form of publications—books, newspapers, magazine inserts—or other familiar media of communication, such as letters, postcards, and posters. By employing these already codified formats, she ensured that her works would be immediately recognizable as textual objects, encouraging an act of "reading," even as their lack of legible content redirected engagement toward a primarily visual experience.¹⁾ As she emphasized on multiple occasions, her aim was never to create precious art objects to be collected and displayed, "to [be] put on the walls" like "painting[s]" (cit. in: Rimmaudo/Lamoni 2011: n.p). Instead, from the very beginning of her practice, she sought to have her manuscripts published and circulated in larger editions—an expanded distribution that, in her view, constituted the "true way of showing them: in the form of the book" (Dermisache

1)

For an in-depth discussion on the positioning of Mirtha Dermisache's artist's publications with asemic writing at the intersection of reading and viewing, see Ehleiter (2025: 6–24). The research for the present article was partly funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy in the context of the Cluster of Excellence Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective – EXC 2020 – Project ID 390608380.

1971: n.p.) in order for her work “to be read” (Rimmaudo/Lamoni 2011: n.p.).

NEGOTIATING VISION AND LIMITATION: *LIBRO N° 1*, 1967 — Between her first artist’s book in 1967 and her temporary move away from bookmaking, in 1978, to focus on pedagogical work,²⁾ Dermisache produced a rich and varied body of over 40 artist’s publications (Dermisache n.d., c. 1981). Despite her ambition to publish and widely disseminate these works, many of her artist’s books remain unica to this day, existing only *in potentia* as publications with a wider print run. This tension between aspiration and material limitation underscores a central paradox in her practice: while her works critique the conventions of communication and publishing, their limited circulation often confined them to the very institutional and economic constraints she sought to transcend. This contradiction is most evident in her first artist’s book [Fig. 1], whose history is difficult to reconstruct due to the scattered and sometimes conflicting information about it that has survived. Rather than working on loose sheets, which would be subsequently compiled into book form, Dermisache deliberately began work on the pages of a bound blank book. Given the unavailability of industrially produced blank books in Argentina at the time, she approached a local printing company to bind 500 blank pages, which she then filled with her graphisms. As she later recalled:

I started with books, at a time when books with blank pages were not available. They practically did not exist. Thanks to an acquaintance of a Fine Arts classmate, I found a printing company that would bind my 500-page book with blank pages. It was the only book I had. (Dermisache. In: Rimmaudo/Lamoni 2011, n.p.)

— In another context, Dermisache explained that she started to work with asemic writing during a period of travel and initially experimented on loose sheets of brown paper. She soon realized that “it was necessary to have this book bound: an arbitrary size and volume but consciously chosen” (cit. in: Cozarinsky 1970, n.p.). This reflection shows her early prioritization of the book form as an essential conceptual framework, and its significance in her artistic practice from the outset.

2)

In 1971, Dermisache founded the *taller de Acciones Creativas* (tAC), a workshop aimed at fostering creativity and free graphic expression in adults through diverse artistic techniques. The sessions, held weekly without fixed schedules, emphasized process over outcome, creating a space for exploration rather than professional training. This pedagogical focus continued with her *Jornadas del Color y de la Forma*, public events she ran from 1975 to 1981. During this period, Dermisache paused her publishing activities, resuming them only in the 1990s. Later in her career, she collaborated with French librarian and curator Florent Fajole, exploring the form of the unbound book in a series of exhibitions.



// Figure 1

Mirtha Dermisache with *Libro N° 1* (1967), Buenos Aires, 1967

— If her working in a blank book imposed certain limitations and constraints, binding her to a fixed sequence, with no possibility of revision, replacement and reordering of the pages, it also imposed a narrative structure onto her working process. Rather than approaching each page in isolation, she remained in dialogue with the preceding ones, allowing each page to shape the next in an evolving sequence of marks and gestures. Through the sequence, she could create rhythms by oscillating between more conventional and experimental organizations of her graphisms.

— The first pages of what is now known as *Libro N° 1* [Fig. 2–4], 1967, exemplify this approach. The book begins with paragraph-style “writing” in purple ink on the right-hand page, its last line resembling a final salutation. The next spread continues the sequence in ochre ink, followed by another in bright yellow, with broader, firmer strokes concentrated in the lower two-thirds of the page. Shifting to orange, Dermisache now breaks with conventional page composition and introduces a more experimental spatial organization, in which the direction of her marks seems defined by the position of the reader’s hands when holding the book. One line extends vertically from the lower margin, positioned where a reader’s thumb could rest, before branching into a wavy double line that reaches the right edge, again aligning with the reader’s hand movement when turning the page.

— Throughout this composition, Dermisache draws attention to the structure of the book and the act of reading, exemplifying what Johanna Drucker has described as the “self-reflexivity in book form” characteristic of artists’ books—a concept she explicitly links to Dermisache’s work (Drucker 1995: 164).³⁾ Despite their illegibility and the unconventional placement on the page, the more experimental graphisms—such as one reminiscent of a brushstroke, self-ironically bringing to mind the crucial question of whether this is painting or writing—are still perceived as text when paging through the book, having been introduced as such on earlier, more conventionally composed pages.

3)

Drucker: “Mertha [sic] Dermisache’s *Diario No. 1* (Guy Schraenen, ed., 1975), like Carrion’s piece, ‘interprets’ a newspaper layout with an invented sign language of glyphs.”



// Figures 2–4

Mirtha Dermisache, spreads from *Libro N° 1*, 1967. Video: MALBA

DECONSTRUCTION AND THE OPEN WORK: DERMISACHE'S FRAGMENTED BOOK

— In April 1970, upon encountering Dermisache's 500-page book, the artist Edgardo Cozarinsky remarked on the sequencing of her pages: "[S]tarting from the page as a conventional space, from the successive lines as an equally conventional arrangement, the signs inscribed on them move away from writing and refuse to approach the fine arts" (1970: 51). He identified the central tension in her work—its oscillation between literature and visual art. The interplay between textuality (graphisms imitating text) and visuality (increasingly abstract forms) that she introduced through the arrangement of the book's pages would lose its temporal dimension if presented as individual sheets on the walls of a gallery rather than within the sequential structure of a book. As Dermisache explained to Cozarinsky:

There were people who suggested that I present a folder, with an introduction and, let's say, twenty reproductions. But that would give these pages the category of engravings, of objects whose meaning and use are different. I wanted them to be pages of a book, of an object with front and back cover, bound on one side and open on the other. If someone wanted to stick one of these pages to the wall, they would have to break it, to perform the act of tearing a page out of a book and putting it elsewhere. (Cit. in: Ibid., transl.: cit. Mezza 2017: 261)

— The statement reflects on her experience of submitting her book to Paidós, a renowned Buenos Aires publishing house, to which the art critic Jorge Romero Brest had introduced her in 1967.⁴⁾ The publisher deemed the work unsuitable for publication due to its length, thwarting her ambition for a larger print run, and disregarding the book's fixed form as essential to its meaning. Cozarinsky, in his 1970 article "Un grado cero de la escritura" (A Zero Degree of Writing)—a title echoing Roland Barthes' (1953) seminal work on semiology—affirmed Dermisache's insistence on the book form.⁵⁾ He described the original 500-page volume, bound in "a hard, red cover," which, although intact at the time of his writing, no longer exists in its original form. Contrary to her initial vision, Dermisache eventually yielded to practical considerations, dividing the work into parts in order to facilitate publication and improve accessibility, thereby necessitating the very act she had initially resisted: extracting pages from the bound volume.

— This act of destruction/deconstruction—both a literal dismantling of the book's structure and a conceptual disruption of its

4)

Jorge Romero Brest played a key role as an advisor and curator for the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella's Centro de Artes Visuales and was a strong advocate for emerging experimental practices in Buenos Aires at the time.

5)

Cozarinsky: "Que sea un libro importa." (Whether it is a book matters. [Author's translation.])

narrative continuity—resonates with contemporaneous semiological theories that emphasized the fluidity, instability, and relativistic nature of meaning. French thinkers such as Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault, who were associated with the concept of literary deconstruction, explored how a text's meaning is shaped by its contextualization within the culture out of which it emerges rather than by its intrinsic qualities. Dermisache's work seems capable of exploring these ideas. Her illegible writing, by definition, demands a consideration of the broader context in which it was situated and by which it was influenced. As she explained in her 1971 Guggenheim Fellowship application: "I write (inscribe) my books, which are perfectly illegible and that tenuous structure of *voids* is filled as soon as it reaches the *reader*, and only then could it be said that what I write becomes a message and the empty signifiers become signs" (transl. cit. Freire 2023: 46).

— Dermisache's insistence that it is the reader who completes the creative act and gives meaning to her publications recalls Barthes' concept of the instability and relativity of the sign, and his re-definition of the author as a compiler of intertextual meanings and relations. With reference to the form of the book, her fragmented 500-page volume evokes Umberto Eco's 1962 *Opera Aperta* (*The Open Work*), in which he illustrates his ideas by describing the "open" and "dynamic structure" (1989: 13) of Stéphane Mallarmé's project *Le Livre* (*The Book*). Mallarmé, as he recounts, envisioned it as a "mobile apparatus" (ibid.) which would invite the reader to arrange its pages for themselves in a variety of different sequences, thereby creating a deliberately ambiguous reading experience. While there is no evidence that Dermisache engaged with Eco's work,⁶⁾ or with Mallarmé's *Le Livre*, her decision to divide her book, beyond pragmatism, aligns with the conceptual spirit of the time, favoring deconstruction over finished products and reader participation over grand authorial statements.

FROM BOOK TO MANUSCRIPT TO MANUSCRIPT BOOK: LOCATING ABSENCE

— The historical details of when and how Dermisache divided her original 500-page book remain elusive, leaving room for speculation that is akin to the open-endedness of "reading" her illegible writing. While most archival documents suggest that she split the book into three parts—*Libro manuscrito N° 1, 2 and 3*—a handwritten annotation in an early curriculum vitae and inventory, held at Archivo Espigas in Buenos Aires, indicates a further subdivision (Dermisache, undated, c. 1978). According to this source, the first book was divided into a 116-page volume (*Libro manuscrito*

6)

The book was translated into Spanish only in 1979.

Nº 1–1) and a 96-page volume (Nº 1–2). Combined with the 78-page *Libro manuscrito* Nº 2 and the 85-page *Libro manuscrito* Nº 3, these four sections total 375 pages—significantly fewer than the original 500-page volume. The fate of the additional 125 pages remains unknown.

— *Libro manuscrito* Nº 1–1 appears only once in her records. In other versions of her inventory, Dermisache omitted any reference to the additional subdivision, effectively erasing its existence.⁷⁾ The reasons for this omission are unclear: she may have discarded the 116-page volume, deeming it still too unwieldy, or given it away, possibly in exchange for printing or binding services, as she did with the original title page of her newspaper *Diario 1: Año 1* [Fig. 5], Pérez Rubio 2017a: 67).⁸⁾ Another possible explanation is that she sought to streamline her CV, aligning her early works with the systematic titling convention she adopted later, in which each work's title included its medium, full (unsubdivided) number, and year of production.

— The specifics of her disassembling of the book and its partial reassembly remain difficult to reconstruct. The posthumously published catalogue for her 2017 MALBA exhibition, supported by her estate, describes *Libro Nº 1*, 1967, as comprising 108 pages (Pérez Rubio 2017b: 291), yet Dermisache's own records initially note 78 pages for *Libro manuscrito* Nº 1, later revising this to 96 pages. These discrepancies highlight the challenges of collating her indeterminate archival documentation and reconciling it with posthumous interpretations, underscoring how the question of “readability” extends to the complexities of her legacy. The gaps and contradictions in her archive correspond to the themes of absence and fragmentation that define her work.

— Dermisache's fragmentation of her first book, which contributed to the lack of a coherent archival record and historical narrative of her earliest practice, reflects both the circumstances that necessitated her actions and, ironically, the thematic core of her work: the exploration of absence—of sense, reason, facts, even that of bodies, evoking the thousands who were forcibly “disappeared” during Argentina's military dictatorship.⁹⁾ The illegibility of her artistic trajectory, marked by gaps and modifications, must be understood within this broader political context, where state violence systematically silenced voices and erased histories. Her struggle to secure institutional support in an oppressive environment was further

7)

Curiously, the other half—*Libro manuscrito* Nº 1–2—consistently reappears, titled *Libro manuscrito* Nº 2. The 78-page book (originally labeled Nº 2 in her handwritten note) is later consistently recorded as *Libro manuscrito* Nº 1.

8)

Pérez Rubio: “[S]he sometimes sacrificed original works so that they could be printed. [Add. explanation in fn.:] This was the case, for instance, with her famous *Diario* [Newspaper], which Mirtha gave to a printer in exchange for an edition; the original cover was lost.”

9)

The individuals who vanished are referred to as “los desaparecidos,” meaning “the missing ones” or “the disappeared.”



// Figure 5

Mirtha Dermisache, first and last page of *Diario 1: Año 1*, 1972/1995, fifth edition, 47 × 36.6 cm, offset print on paper. A second edition was published by the artist herself (Buenos Aires, 1973); a third edition by Guy Schraenen (Antwerp, 1975); a fourth edition (a four-page facsimile) by Silvia de Ambrosini, published in *Artinf* journal (Buenos Aires, 1995); and a fifth edition by Mirtha Dermisache (Buenos Aires, 1995).

compounded by her position as a woman in a male-dominated art scene, facing, as did many others, “discrimination by gender and by geographical origin” (Freire 2023: 26). These intersecting challenges underscore how Dermisache’s practice and legacy are inextricably tied to the socio-political and gendered realities of her time.

“MY WORK NEEDS A PRINTER”: REDEFINING CONCEPTUALIST PUBLISHING STRATEGIES

— In his study *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, art historian Alexander Alberro (2003) explored how Conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s critically engaged with mass media, consumer culture, and institutional frameworks, focusing on the innovative curatorial and publishing practices of New York-based curator and dealer Seth Siegelaub whose “catalogue exhibitions” featured Conceptual art commissioned for display on the pages of publications. Siegelaub’s projects emerged around the same time as Dermisache began to produce her books in Argentina. However, their contexts and motivations diverged significantly. While Siegelaub and his contemporaries aimed to critique the commodification of art by shifting the object status from the physical work to the catalogue, Dermisache operated in a context largely devoid of a functioning art market. Her approach was shaped by the socio-political realities in Argentina, where the absence of financial support and an oppressive political climate necessitated alternative strategies for publication and display.

— Unlike her New York counterparts, who sought to circumvent institutional frameworks, Dermisache actively engaged with local institutions such as the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC), a prominent exhibition space for contemporary art in Buenos Aires, founded in 1968 by Jorge Glusberg. It played a crucial role in attempts to foster international cultural exchange and promote the dissemination of Conceptual art by Argentinian artists abroad (Herrera/Marchesi n.d.). CAyC published the first edition of her artist’s publication *Diario 1: Año 1* in 1972, following her participation in their seminal 1971 exhibition *Arte de sistemas* at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (Mezza 2017: 261).¹⁰⁾ Reflecting a common strategy of the time, the exhibition catalogue featured works created specifically for its pages, rather than merely documenting the museum exhibits. Dermisache’s contribution [Fig. 6] appropriated the design of CAyC’s internationally distributed newsletters¹¹⁾ by presenting a grid-like composition with a statement in ten languages: “I use this space to say: my work needs a printer,”¹²⁾ followed by her name and address. Rather than showcasing a sample of her work, she repurposed her catalogue contribution as a direct

10)

Dermisache participated in several exhibitions organized by CAyC, often showing artists’ books, for instance in the 1971 exhibition *De la figuración al arte de sistemas* at the Camden Arts Centre in London. For *Arte de sistemas I*, held at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires in the same year, she exhibited books dating from 1967 to 1970 and fourteen letters. Based on Egidio Marzona’s collection of CAyC publications, I verified Dermisache’s involvement in the following seven publications, dating between 1971 and 1976: (1) Exh. cat. *Arte de Sistemas. Centro de Arte y Comunicación en el Museo de Arte Moderno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*, 1971; (2) Exh. cat. *Center of Art and Communication in Camden Arts Centre – London*, 1971; (3) Exh. cat. *Arte e Ideología. CAyC al Aire Libre. Arte de Sistemas II*, 1972; (4) Mirtha Dermisache, *Dermisache*, edited by Jorge Glusberg in Buenos Aires for CAyC, December 1973; (5) Exh. cat. *Kunstsystemen in Latijns-Amerika*, Internationaal Cultureel Centrum, Antwerp, 1974; (6) Exh. cat. *Art Systems in Latin America*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, December 1974; (7) Exh. cat. *América Latina 76*, Fundació Joan Miró, Parc de Montjuïc, Barcelona, 1976.

11)

The CAyC newsletter had an exceptional design: with its lower left and upper right corners cut off, it created the illusion of a three-dimensional volume on a flat page. Printed in 900-plus editions on thin paper to fit several newsletters in a single envelope, it contained programme announcements as well as reviews and artists’ texts. It was sent, sometimes on a weekly basis, to international artists and institutions around the world.

12)

It seems that “printer” here was a poor English translation of “publisher”, given the other interpretations of the word as “Verleger” (German), “editeur” (French) and “editor” (Spanish).

appeal for a publisher, highlighting the challenge of simply getting a book published in a context where such opportunities were scarce. Her pragmatic, tongue-in-cheek approach not only illustrates the starkly different realities faced by a female artist in Argentina, struggling for visibility and dissemination, but also reveals her wit in taking Conceptual art's promises of internationalism and participation at face value.

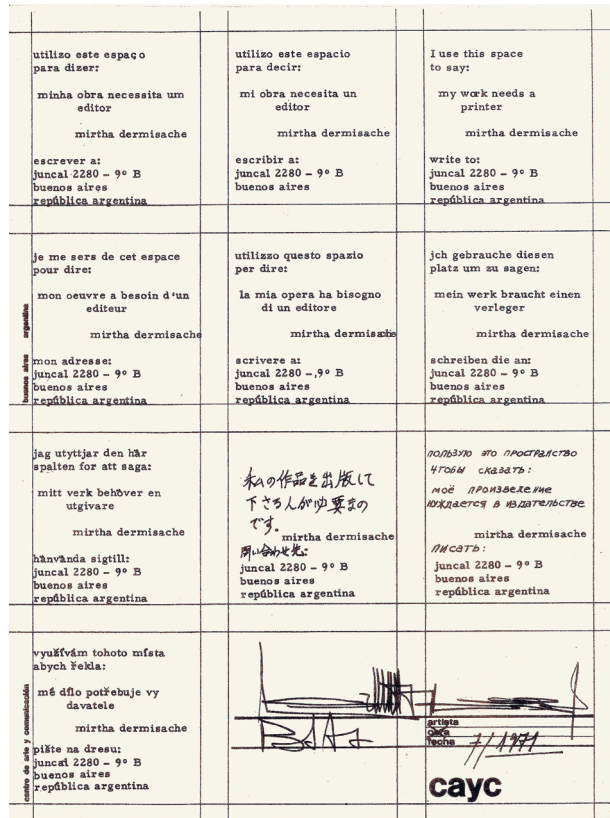
— With the rise of Conceptualism in the late 1960s, artists' publications seemed perfectly suited to a shift in artistic practices from object to language, operating—particularly in the case of works distributed by mail—partially outside of established channels. As Louis Camnitzer (1999: xiii) observed: “Dematerialization broke the stranglehold of the state in relation to the display of art.” Martha Wilson’s (2013) assertion that Dermisache’s *Diario 1: Año 1* (see **Fig. 5**) likely “made it past the censors” because they failed to recognize she “was drawing a portrait of the nonsense that passed for news in government-controlled newspapers” seems apt. In line with Argentina’s “arte de los medios” (mass-mediatic art), which embedded artistic production within mass media itself (Ramírez 1999: 96), Dermisache’s work exposed the mechanisms of the publishing industry. By voiding her publications of legible content—as in her “empty” newspaper *Diario 1: Año 1*—she mirrored the vacuity of state propaganda, stripping it of its disinformation and subverting its coercive mechanisms from within.¹³ In doing so, Dermisache not only challenged the conventional modes of communication but also positioned her practice as a subtle yet potent form of resistance within the socio-political landscape of her time.

THE ELUSIVE PREFACE: DERMISACHE AND BARTHES' UNREALIZED BOOK

— Dermisache’s artists’ publications closely align with the structuralist, semiotic, and communicational theories of her time, particularly through her use of asemic writing. Freed from functionality, its illegibility invites reflection on the nature of communication itself—a point Roland Barthes (2006) articulated in his 1973 essay “Variations sur l’écriture,” where he argued that “[a] piece of writing need not be legible to be a piece of writing in the full sense of the term” (78), explicitly referencing “Dermisache’s notebooks

13)

I discuss this work in detail in my essay: “Between reading and viewing: The asemic writing of Mirtha Dermisache’s artists’ publications.”



// Figure 6

Mirtha Dermisache, artist's page in the catalogue for the exhibition *Arte de sistemas*, 1971, 21 × 16.5 cm

with graphisms” (76).¹⁴ Barthes, who had initiated an epistolary exchange with Dermisache in March 1971 after encountering her work through intermediaries, praised the “extreme intelligence of the theoretical problems related to writing” in her practice, suggesting that her work conveyed “the idea, the essence of writing” (Barthes 2004: 11; transl. cit. Mezza 2017: 264).¹⁵ Their correspondence, which spanned several years, largely revolved around a planned book of Dermisache’s graphisms, for which she asked him to write a text—eager to hear his interpretation of her work and hoping his participation would secure a publisher and wider dissemination. Following her publication of *Diario 1: Año 1* (1972), she wrote to him:

Despite the unprecedented interest aroused by this journal of illegible writing, no one has dared to write a single word about it. I’ve always thought that these motives weren’t sufficiently important enough to allow me the right to ask for your help. But now I beg you to consider the possibility of writing about my work.¹⁶ (Dermisache 1972a: n.p.)

Barthes (1973a) offered to “write a text of two or three pages” on her work, but made his contribution contingent on a publisher having consented to publishing it, asserting that “the destination influences the writing” (ibid.). This created an impasse: Dermisache needed Barthes’s text to secure a publisher for the book (1973a; 1973b), while Barthes, in turn, demanded that a publisher had confirmed its acceptance of the text before writing it.

To advance the project, Dermisache compromised on the publication’s format as a book and obtained a commitment from the cultural supplement of *La Opinión* to publish Barthes’ text in a 12-page section alongside her work (Dermisache 1973c). However, overwhelmed by other commitments, Barthes (1973b) submitted only a brief text referencing his original 1971 letter, which the editor ultimately deemed unsuitable for the planned publication (Dermisache 1974). Following a two-year silence, both Barthes and Dermisache contributed graphisms to the experimental magazine *Luna-Park* in a themed issue titled “Graphies” [Fig. 7].¹⁷ Between 1971 and 1978, Barthes produced approximately 700 works, including his own experiments in asemic writing (Benincasa 1981: 10), reflecting his notion of writing as an “object of pleasure” (Barthes 1973).

14)

“Une écriture n’a pas besoin d’être ‘lisible’ pour être pleinement une écriture.”; “[T]els que les cahiers de graphismes de Mirtha Dermisache.”

15)

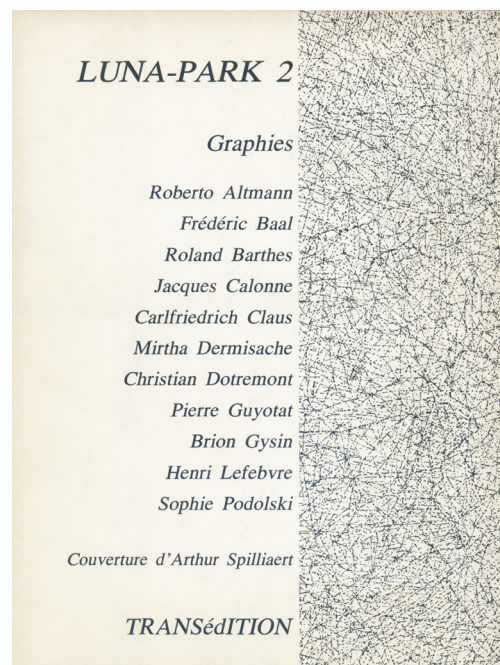
Barthes had been shown one of her books through an Argentinian friend of Dermisache’s, Hugo Santiago, a filmmaker who had moved from Buenos Aires to Paris.

16)

“Malgré l’interêt inusulé que ce journal d’écriture illisible a éveillé, personne n’a osé écrire un seul mot à propos de lui. J’ai toujours pensé que ces motifs n’étaient pas suffisamment importants pour me permettre le droit de vous faire cette demande d’aide. Mais, maintenant je vous prie de considérer la possibilité d’écrire de mon travail.”

17)

The Brussels-based artists’ periodical existed from 1974 to 1985 and published experimental art and literature. It was edited by the Belgian art critic and curator Marc Dachy.



// Figure 7

Cover of *Luna-Park 2* (“Graphies”), edited by Marc Dachy in April 1976

— In 1976, at the apex of his creative practice, Barthes famously wrote about another artist's work, Cy Twombly, in his essay "Non Multa Sed Multum," which first appeared in 1979 in the sixth volume of Yvon Lambert's catalogue raisonné of Twombly's works on paper, along with his second essay, "The Wisdom of Art." During this period, Dermisache wrote to Barthes again, inviting him one last time to contribute to a planned book with the Belgian publisher Guy Schraenen, who had previously published *Diario 1: Año 1* (1972) and *Cahier n° 1* (1975). In her letter, Dermisache (1978) expressed her confidence in Schraenen's involvement, stating: "I trust him." However, Barthes—likely preoccupied with personal matters following his mother's death that year—did not commit to the project. That same year, he ceased his interventions in the realm of visual art, and Dermisache's publishing activities also came to a halt, marking the end of their epistolary exchange.

— The collaborative publication they had discussed over a seven-year period therefore never materialized. This unrealized potential, frustrating as it seems, can be seen as conforming to the overall thrust of the work of both Dermisache and Barthes. It recalls Barthes' (1971, cit. 1985: 57f.) distinction between the "work" as a "fragment of substance"—a tangible object found in bookstores or libraries—and the "text" as "a system without end and center," "experienced only in an activity, in a production" and "held in language." Similarly, Dermisache's unsignifying mark-making, suggesting the conveyance of semantic meaning but ultimately withholding it, offers what seems to be a functional form, only for it to turn out to be its representation. In the hands of these two 'writers,' an accident of circumstances—that the planned publication failed to be realized—doubles as a reflection on the nature of language itself: its projection of a reality it can neither establish nor prove.

// Archival Material

Barthes 1973a: Letter to Mirtha Dermisache, dated March 21, 1973. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.

AR_UNSAM_EAYP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

Barthes 1973b: Letter to Mirtha Dermisache, dated October 25, 1973. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.

AR_UNSAM_EAYP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

Dermisache 1971: Letter to Guggenheim Foundation, dated December 22, 1971. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache. AR_UNSAM_EAYP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

Dermisache 1972a: Letter to Roland Barthes, dated November 2, 1972. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.

AR_UNSAM_EAYP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

Dermisache 1972b: Letter to Roland Barthes, dated November 27, 1972. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.

AR_UNSAM_EAYP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

Dermisache 1973a: Letter to Roland Barthes, dated April 5, 1973. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.

AR_UNSAM_EAYP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

Dermisache 1973b: Letter to Roland Barthes, dated May 7, 1973. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.

AR_UNSAM_EAYP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

Dermisache 1973c: Letter to Roland Barthes, dated August 27, 1973. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.

AR_UNSAM_EAyP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.
Dermisache 1974: Letter to Roland Barthes, dated February 14, 1974. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.
AR_UNSAM_EAyP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.
Dermisache 1978: Letter to Roland Barthes, dated April 3, 1978. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.
AR_UNSAM_EAyP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.
Dermisache n.d., c. 1978: Annotated List of works. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.
AR_UNSAM_EAyP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.
Dermisache n.d., c. 1981: CV listing works for the years 1967 to 1978. Fondo Mirtha Dermisache.
AR_UNSAM_EAyP_CEE.000016. Centro de Estudios Espigas (UNSAM) – Fundación Espigas.

// References

Alberro, Alexander (2003): *Conceptual Art and The Politics of Publicity*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.
Barthes, Roland (1953): *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil.
Barthes, Roland (1973): *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil.
Barthes, Roland (1985): *Cy Twombly: Works on Papers [Non multa sed multum] (1979)*. In: Roland Barthes. *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard. New York, Hill and Wang, pp. 157–176.
Barthes, Roland (2004): *Fragment d'une lettre de Roland Barthes adressée à Mirtha Dermisache, le 28 mars 1971*. In: *Cahier du Refuge 130*, Marseille. Centre International de Poésie Marseille.
Barthes, Roland (2006): *Variations sur l'écriture. Variationen über die Schrift*. Mainz, Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
Benincasa, Carmine (1981): *Roland Barthes e la polifonia di piaceri*. In: *Exhibition catalogue. Roland Barthes. Carte Segni. Casino dell'Aurora at Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi*. Rome, Electa, pp. 9–16.
Camnitzer, Luis et al. (1999): *Introduction*. In: *Exhibition catalogue. Global Conceptualism. Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*. New York, Queens Museum of Art, pp. vii–xi.
Cozarinsky, Edgardo (1970): *Un grado cero de la escritura*. In: *Panorama magazine*, Buenos Aires. Vol. VII, issue no. 156 (April 1970), p. 51.
Drucker, Johanna (1995): *The Century of Artists' Books*. New York, Granary Books.
Eco, Umberto (1989): *The Open Work*. Transl. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
Ehleiter, Regine (2025): *Between reading and viewing: The asemic writing of Mirtha Dermisache's artists' publications*. In: *EXC 2020 Temporal Communities*, Regine Ehleiter (eds.): *con • stel • la • tions 02. Reading Mirtha Dermisache*. Hamburg, Textem, pp. 6–24.
Freire, Mela Dávila (2023): *Off-Register: Publishing Experiments of Women Artists in Latin America, 1960–1990*. In: *Exhibition catalogue. Off-Register: Publishing Experiments by Women Artists in Latin America, 1960–1990*. Center for Book Arts, New York 2023. Freire, Mela Dávila (ed.), New York, Center for Book Arts, 2023, pp. 8–85.
Herrera, María José and Mariana Marchesi (n.d.): *The Centro de Arte y Comunicación: Its History*. The CAYC Files. Online: <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/caycfiles/page/cayc> (accessed February 7, 2025).
Mezza, Cintia et al. (2017): *Mirtha Dermisache, Life and Work 1940–2012*. In: *Exhibition Catalogue. Mirtha Dermisache: Porque ¡yo escribo! (Because I Write!)*. Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires 2017. Pérez Rubio, Agustín (ed.), Buenos Aires, Fundación Espigas, MALBA, 2017, pp. 255–289.
Pérez Rubio, Agustín (2017a): *Methodology for Free Expression*. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 67–77.
Pérez Rubio, Agustín (2017b): *Works Reproduced*. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 291–296.
Ramírez, Mari Carmen (1999): *Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980*. In: *Exhibition Catalogue. Global Conceptualism. Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue. New York, Queens Museum of Art, pp. 53–71.
Rimmaudo, Annalisa and Giulia Lamoni (2011): *Entrevista a Mirtha Dermisache*. In: *Exhibition catalogue. Mirtha Dermisache. Publicaciones y Dispositivos Editoriales [Mirtha Dermisache: Publications and Editorial Devices]*. *Pabellón de las Bellas Artes de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 2011. Online: <https://hipermedula.org/2017/08/entrevista-a-mirtha-dermisache/> (accessed February 7, 2025).
Romero Brest, Jorge (1975): *Una mosca blanca*. In: *Crisis*. Vol. 3, issue 27, p. 51. Online: <https://ahira.com.ar/ejemplares/27/> (accessed February 7, 2025).
Schwenger, Peter (2019): *Asemic. The Art of Writing*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press.
Wilson, Martha (2013): *Diario No. 1: Año 1*. In: *Reading List. Artists' Selections from the MoMA Library Collection*. Online: <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/readinglist/> (accessed February 7, 2025).

// Image Credits

Figures 1, 5: © 2026 Legado Mirtha Dermisache.
Figures 2–4: © 2026 Legado Mirtha Dermisache / video production: Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA).

Figure 6: © 2026 Legado Mirtha Dermisache / ICAA/MFAH and ISLAA; reproduced in: Ehleiter 2025, p. 9., **Figure 7:** Reproduced in: Ibid., p. 29.

// About the Author

Regine Ehleiter is an art historian and curator based in Berlin. She holds a Ph.D. in Art History from the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig and currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at the Universität Witten/Herdecke. During her previous position at the Cluster of Excellence "Temporal Communities" at Freie Universität Berlin, she organized the first exhibition of Mirtha Dermisache's work in Germany (*To Be Read*, June 7 – August 11, 2024, A—Z, Berlin) and co-edited the volume *con • stel • la • tions 02: Reading Mirtha Dermisache* (Textem, 2025). In her book *Ausstellen in Publikationen* (Edition Metzler, 2024), a transnational study of 1960s exhibitions presented through publications, she demonstrates how this phenomenon extended beyond New York Conceptual art circles in Fluxus and visual poetry, mail art, and Conceptualism.

// FKW is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and Cultural Critique / Cultural Analysis in the Arts ZHdK

Sigrid Adorf / Kerstin Brandes / Edith Futscher / Kathrin Heinz / Marietta Kesting / Franziska Rauh / Mona Schieren / Rosanna Umbach / Kea Wienand / Elena Zanichelli / Anja Zimmermann

// www.fkw-journal.de

// License

This work is licensed under the CC BY-NC-ND License 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

