




MIRTH 

DERMISACHE 



 TO 

 BE  U 

 READ 

The exhibition 'Mirtha Dermisache: To Be Read' is a collaborative project between the Cluster of Excellence 'Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective' of the Freie Universität Berlin and A—Z Space for Experimental Graphic Design, oxfordberlin and the Legado Mirtha Dermisache.

Exhibition dates

7 June–11 August 2024

Venues

A—Z, Torstraße 93, 10119 Berlin (main venue) & oxfordberlin, Oxforder Straße 3-11, 13349 Berlin (satellite venue)

Curated by

Regine Ehleiter (EXC Temporal Communities / FU Berlin)

Co-initiator and exhibition designer

Anja Lutz (A—Z, Berlin)

EVENTS PROGRAMME

Thursday, 6 June 2024, 7 PM

Opening of the exhibition 'Mirtha Dermisache: To Be Read' at A—Z (Torstr. 93, Berlin-Mitte) with a 'reading' by sound artist Paolo Dellapiana (Torino)

Friday, 7 June 2024, 10 AM – 6 PM

Workshop with antoine lefebvre editions

Asemic Writing at A—Z, participants will produce a new issue of *Asemic Journal*

Thursday, 18 July 2024, 6:30 PM

'Reading Artists' Books: Asemic Writing'

at A—Z and online (hybrid event)

How is asemic – that is illegible – writing to be read, or is this a contradiction in terms? What does it mean to speak of 'reading' marks that do not form letters, words and sentences, or even constitute signs? Does reading require language?

Participants: Josefina Barcia, Sebastián Barrante, Barbara Bausch, Konstantina Benaki, Antoine Lefebvre, Tabea Nixdorff, Oscar Salguero, Monique Ulrich, Ivana Vollaro. Curated by Regine Ehleiter. The series 'Reading Artists' Books' is a collaborative project by Tabea Nixdorff and Regine Ehleiter, in memory of Doro Boehme (1957–2022).

To follow the event online via Webex, please register in advance at asemic@temporal-communities.de

Sunday, 11 August 2024, 3 PM

Finissage with guided tour by Regine Ehleiter and Anja Lutz, starting at A—Z, followed by a joint visit to oxfordberlin for the closing of the exhibition.

MIRTHA DERMISACHE: TO BE READ

REGINE EHLEITER

From the late 1960s onwards, the Argentinian conceptual artist Mirtha Dermisache (1940–2012, → p. 6) produced numerous publications containing marks that resemble writing. Although the pages of these works imitate familiar graphic formats, most famously in the case of her newspaper *Diario 1: Año 1* (1972, with several later reprints, → p. 12), the signs filling these pages do not convey semantic content. Her work is therefore often described as illegible or 'asemic writing' (→ p. 22) – a term coined by Gillo Dorfles in 1974 in response to works by one of Dermisache's contemporaries, the German-Italian artist Irma Blank (1934–2023).¹

In 1967, Dermisache produced her first book, the 500-page *Libro n° 1* (→ p. 8). Other publications followed, always referencing well-known formats of communication – book, text, postcard, letter, bulletin, poem, comic and newspaper – which usually featured in the work's title along with its respective number and the year in which it was produced. Conceptualism was flourishing in Buenos Aires in the late 1960s. In 1968, Jorge Glusberg founded the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC, → p. 16). Artistic appropriations of structuralist, semiotic and communicational theories gave rise to an 'arte de los medios' (mass-mediated art), which aimed to locate the work 'inside mass media itself'.² Mirtha Dermisache's citing of standard layout formats and her interest in various forms of distribution and display corresponded to these ideas. In March 1971, Roland Barthes (→ p. 24) wrote to Mirtha Dermisache that the 'illegible writing' in her publications 'suggests to its readers, not exactly messages nor the contingent forms of expression, but the idea, the essence of writing'.

¹ Gillo Dorfles, *Le scritte asemantiche di Irma Blank*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Cenobio-Visualità, Milan, April 1974. See Dorfles, *The Asemic Writing of Irma Blank*, Engl. transl. by Nerida Newbiggin, transcription of original Italian text by Tim Gaze, Coromandel Valley, Australia: Coromandel Valley Books, 2014.

² Mari Carmen Ramírez, 'Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980', in: *Global Conceptualism. Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999, pp. 53–71, here p. 66.

³ See passage on 'Tucumán Arde', in: *Ibid.*, p. 55f.

⁴ Mirtha Dermisache, cit. in: Annalisa Rimmaudo and Giulia Lamoni, 'Entrevista a Mirtha Dermisache', in: *Mirtha Dermisache. Publicaciones y Dispositivos Editoriales* [Mirtha Dermisache: Publications and Editorial Devices], exhibition catalogue, Buenos Aires: Pabellón de las Bellas Artes de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, 2011, online: <https://hipermedula.org/2017/08/entrevista-a-mirtha-dermisache/> (Accessed 5 May 2024).

It was a perilous act to explicitly dissent from the regime during the Argentinian military dictatorship of the 1970s. Instead, in works such as *Diario* – its newspaper format voided of the content for which it is usually a vehicle – Mirtha Dermisache employed conceptual tactics to engage with 'the real' and address its precarious status in these political circumstances.³ As explored in this exhibition, the illegibility of her publications constitutes a subversive gesture by mimicking the emptiness of state propaganda, divested of its coercive disinformation. Her persistence in continuing to 'write', publish and distribute her work under a military dictatorship and political oppression was itself an act of resistance.

Although her work has received critical attention in parts of South America, the US, France and Belgium in recent years – including, most notably, a large-scale retrospective at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) in 2017 – it is still absent from art historical and literary discourses in Germany. The exhibition's title 'To Be Read' can be understood both as an invitation to explore Mirtha Dermisache's rich body of work and as a reflection on the artist's desire to have her work circulated widely. As she pointed out on several occasions, her interest was not in producing precious art objects, in book form, to be collected and displayed 'like paintings'. Although her earliest artist's books are mainly unica, now held in private collections, she wanted them to exist in larger editions. This more extensive circulation created the 'only appropriate space' for her work 'to be read'.⁴

Dermisache was keen to collaborate with artists and scientists in order to explore new ways of approaching her work. In 1971, she engaged in musical experiments with Fernando von Reichenbach and other composers at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (CLAEM) in Buenos Aires. Von Reichenbach invented a 'graphic converter' and used it to translate Mirtha Dermisache's 'graphisms', inscribed on a large

roll, into sound. Considering various ways of engaging with Dermisache's work, the exhibition also spans a series of readings of artists' publications related to the theme of 'asemic writing' ('Reading Artists' Books: Asemic Writing', → p. 2) as well as a workshop by antoine lefebvre editions, during which a new issue of the 'Asemic Journal' will be developed with the participants.

The exhibition puts a special focus on how Mirtha Dermisache's publications developed according to a specific sequence and logic. Taking inspiration from the artist's own approach to making art accessible to the public, it offers a hands-on experience, giving visitors the opportunity to browse exhibition copies of her books and journals. In addition, a reprint of Mirtha Dermisache's asemic 'Article' (1975, → p. 20) – which originally appeared in issue 1 of *AXE* magazine, edited by her long-term collaborator Guy Schraenen – is available for visitors to take home. Legado Mirtha Dermisache, the artist's estate in Buenos Aires, and publisher Florent Fajole are supporting the exhibition by donating objects that will later be made available to a wider public at Freie Universität Berlin's libraries. Apart from A–Z, its main venue, the exhibition also features a satellite space, the bulletin-board-as-exhibition-space oxford-berlin in Berlin-Wedding, and expands even beyond, by means of a reprinted postcard by Mirtha Dermisache, which may travel to unforeseen places.

MIRTHA DERMISACHE (1940–2012)



III. 1
Mirtha Dermisache,
working in the Guy
Schraenen éditeur's
printing workshop,
Antwerp, 1978.

Mirtha Dermisache was born on 16 February 1940 in Lanús, a town on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. She first got a teaching degree and one in art education, and then attended the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes Prilidiano Pueyrredón, currently the Departamento de Artes Visuales of the Universidad Nacional de las Artes (UNA).

In 1971, she began participating regularly in exhibitions and other projects, and became an active member of the contemporary art scene. At the same time, she opened the Taller de Acciones Creativas (TAC), a space for the teaching of different art techniques with the aim of developing the creative capacity and free graphic expression in adults. From 1975–81, she ran the public Jornadas del Color y de la Forma (Intensive Work Sessions in Color and Form). Music was a key part of her exploration and personal creative process, and she used it as a tool in her original teaching method.

After Mirtha Dermisache died on 23 January 2012, her heirs formed an Estate, Legado Mirtha Dermisache,

to keep her legacy alive. For more information about her work and a comprehensive biography, please visit: www.mirthadermisache.com.

In 2018, Mirtha Dermisache's archive was handed over to the Centro de Estudios Espigas at the Escuela de Arte y Patrimonio of the Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM) in Buenos Aires. Here, all archival material related to her work is available to the public for consultation: www.espigas.org.ar.



III. 2
Mirtha Dermisache with
her first artist's book
Libro N° 1 (1967),
Buenos Aires, 1967.

5 See Mirtha Dermisache: *Because I Write!*, pp. 67, 261.

6 See Mirtha Dermisache, in: Edgardo Cozarinsky, 'Un Grado Cero de La Escritura (Zero Degree of Writing)', in: *Panorama*, Buenos Aires VII/156, 21 to 27 April 1970, p. 51.

MIRTHA DERMISACHE: LIBROS [BOOKS]

III. 3
Mirtha Dermisache,
Libro N° 1, 1967, 25.7
x 20.8 cm, ink and
coloured markers on
paper, sole copy, 108
pages; 108 images.



See here for eight videos
of her artists' books,
produced by Museo de
Arte Latinoamericano de
Buenos Aires (MALBA) in
2017 in conjunction with
the exhibition 'Mirtha
Dermisache: Because
I Write':

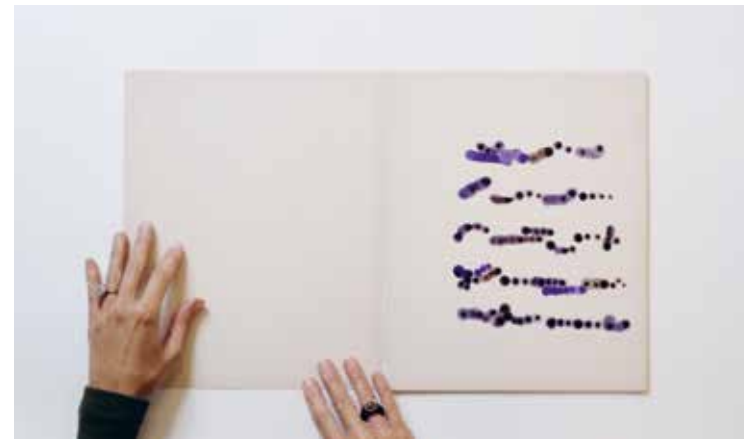


Mirtha Dermisache's first major artist's book consisted of 500 pages. The artist subsequently split it into two parts: The first is known as *Libro n° 1* (1967); the second is a bundle of loose sheets, now held in her archive.⁵ Reflecting a desire of many conceptual artists to avoid manifesting subjectivity and keep arbitrary decisions to a minimum, the artist noted in an early interview on the subject of her first book: 'It's a product; I want it to be independent of my person'.⁶

III. 4
Mirtha Dermisache,
Libro n° 1, 1972 / 2010
(reprint), 29 x 23.6 cm,
offset print on paper,
bound in a white hard-
cover, 44 pp.; 37 images.
Reprint edited by Philipp
Cyroulnik, Montbéliard;
Le 19, Centre régional
d'art contemporain
(CRAC), 2010.



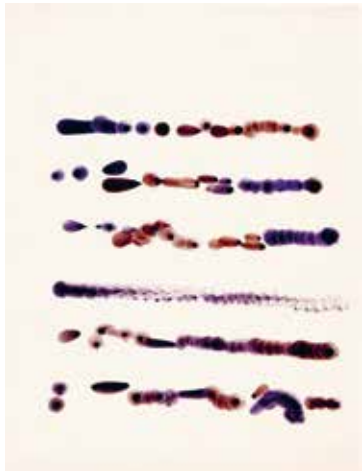
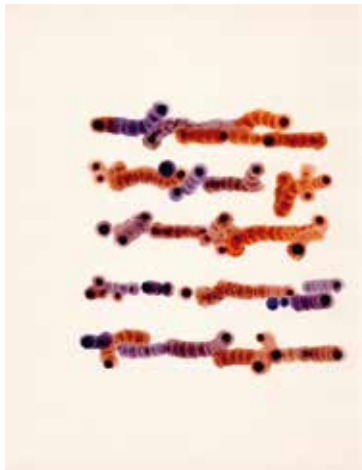
III. 5
Mirtha Dermisache,
Libro N° 6, 1971, 30 x
27 cm, marker on paper,
18 pages; 25 images.



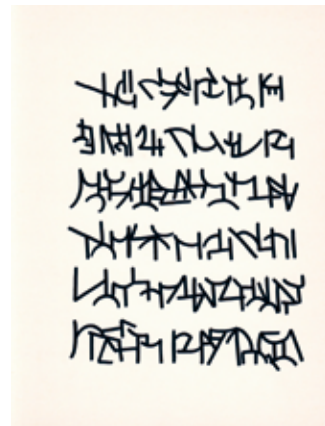
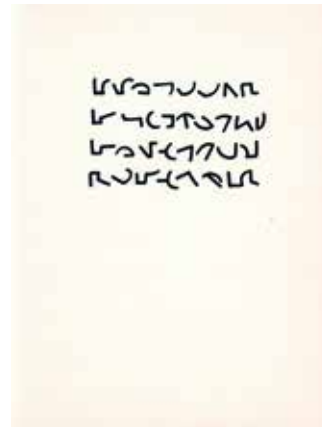
III. 6
Mirtha Dermisache,
Sin título (libro), 1974,
28,2 x 23 cm, coloured
ink on paper, unbound,
sole copy, 30 pages;
13 images.



III. 7
Mirtha Dermisache,
Libro N° 5, 1972, 30 x
26,7 cm, ink on paper,
black hard cover, sole
cope, re-bound in 2000,
20 pages; 23 images.



III. 8
Mirtha Dermisache,
Libro (ambos manos),
1974, 28.2 x 23 cm, typing
with both hands, ink on
paper, without binding.
15 sheets (13 pp. with
graphics).



III. 9
Mirtha Dermisache,
Sin título (Libro),
c. 1970, 24.4 x 18.2 cm,
ink on paper, book with-
out binding. 10 sheets
(10 pages with graphics).

MIRTHA DERMISACHE: *DIARIO 1: AÑO 1 (1972)*

Diario N° 1 Año 1, Dermisache's best-known publication, is exemplary of the artist's oeuvre as well as an exception within it. As with most of her works, its title references a common 'communication format', in this case a newspaper ('diario'). Rather than referring to a specific publication circulating at the time, such as *Clarín* or *La Nación* – the two largest newspapers in Argentina – or to *Río Negro*, with its iconic title set in large capital letters, her newspaper only alluded to these media through the formatting of its elements. Similarly, the 'writing' refers to nothing but itself. Dermisache explained in an interview with Annalisa Rimmaudo and Giulia Lamoni that she made one exception to this refusal to signify, on the last page of *Diario N° 1 Año 1*:

The only time I referred to the political situation in my country was in the *Diario*. The left column on the last page is an allusion to the dead of Trelew. This was in 1972. Outside of this massacre, which impacted me, as it impacted many, I never wanted to give a political meaning to my work. What I did and continue to do is develop graphic ideas regarding writing, which ultimately, I believe, have little to do with political events but with the structures and forms of language.⁷

The left column on the last page of *Diario N° 1 Año 1* features a large, black rectangle. The bold marks below stretch across 16 lines of varying length. Not limited to the designated space of the column, they transgress the space of the neighbouring column, partially overwriting its content. In disrupting the editorial layout of the page, Dermisache explores ways of typographically translating an event known as the 'Trelew Massacre': the mass execution of 16 political prisoners, mostly

members of leftist and Peronist organisations, who tried to escape prison, but were recaptured. On a navy airbase near the city of Trelew, they were forced by marines to simulate a second attempt at escape, then shot down as they did so as revenge for the successful escape of some of their comrades during the initial prison break.⁸

⁸ See *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, p. 267.



III. 10
Mirtha Dermisache,
Diario 1 Año 1, 1972/1995,
fifth edition, 47 x 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 éditeur
(Antwerp, 1975); a fourth
edition (a four-page
facsimile) by Silvia de
Ambrosini, published in
Artinf journal (Bue-
nos Aires, 1995); and a
fifth edition by Mirtha
Dermisache (Buenos
Aires, 1995).



9 The 'Trelew massacre' took place in the early hours of 22 August 1972.

10 The exhibition opened at CAyC on 23 September 1972.

CENTRO DE ARTE Y COMUNICACIÓN (CAYC)

Dermisache published *Diario N° 1 Año 1* in September 1972, almost exactly one month after the massacre⁹ and in conjunction with an important exhibition of conceptual art titled *Arte e ideología. Arte de sistemas II. CAyC al aire libre*, at the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Art and Communications Center, CayC).¹⁰



III. 11 Photographs of *Diario* on display in a public bus, as part of the installation *Escenas de la vida cotidiana o La gran orquesta* by Mederico Faivre in the exhibition *Arte e ideología. Arte de sistemas II, CAyC al aire libre*, 23 September 1972.

Founded by Jorge Glusberg in 1968, CAyC was a prominent exhibition space for contemporary art in Buenos Aires, programming activities that had reverberated beyond Argentina, instigating international cultural



III. 12 CAyC announcement for the exhibition *arte de sistemas en el museo de arte moderno*, dated 28 June 1971, in which Mirtha Dermisache participated.

III. 13 Mirtha Dermisache, *Fragmento de historieta*, 1974, 30 x 22.2 cm, offset print on paper, edition produced by the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC).

exchange and the dissemination of conceptual art. CAyC published a newsletter with an exceptional design, with its lower left and the upper right corners cut off, to create an illusion of a three-dimensional volume on a flat page.

The 1972 group exhibition *Arte de sistemas II* (Systems Art) in Buenos Aires was preceded by the 1971 show *De la figuración al arte de sistemas* at the Camden Arts Centre in London, in which Dermisache exhibited some of her artist's books, and the group exhibition *Arte de sistemas I*, held at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires in the same year, in which she also exhibited books dating from 1967 to 1970 and fourteen letters from her series of 'cartas'.¹¹ One of these letters, along with a portrait of the artist and some brief biographical information, was reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. It was followed by a site-specific 'page work', in which Dermisache presented the following sentence in ten different languages: 'I use this space to say: my work needs a printer', followed by her name and postal address in Buenos Aires.



11 Rimmaudo and Lamoni 2011, n.p.; Mezza et al. 2017, p. 261.

III. 14 Mirtha Dermisache, artist's pages in the catalogue for the exhibition *Arte de sistemas I*, 1971, 21 x 16.5 cm.

12 On this 'semblance of syntax' see Wayne Stables, 'What Is the Matter? A Meditation on Illegible Writing', in: *New Literary History* 52, 2021, pp. 285-309, esp. p. 287.

13 Mezza et al. 2017, p. 268.

14 Dermisache, in: Rimmaudo/Lamoni 2011, op. cit.

MIRTHA DERMISACHE: REPORTAJE (1973)

At first glance, Dermisache's untitled work from her series *Reportaje*, published in the science journal *Ciencia Nueva* in 1973, looks like a regular article: large headlines with plenty of white space dominating the upper third of the page. Below it is the main body of the text, set in three columns structured into what appear to be paragraphs.¹² Looking closer, however, one finds that what appears to be writing on the page cannot be deciphered. For this series, the artist specially prepared printing blocks (matrices) for mass printing. In terms of style, the graphics selected for presentation on the pages of this magazine resemble those of *Diario N° 1 Año 1*.



III. 15 Cover and double spread with Dermisache's 'page work' (left, p. 48), in: *Ciencia Nueva. Revista de Ciencia y tecnología* 24, 1973.

Of her contribution, the artist recalled: '[In] Buenos Aires, in the 70s, the only one who asked me to participate was the director of a science magazine, which was titled *New Science* (*Ciencia nueva*). I told him: I can write an article. [...] In the magazine's summary the same graphics appeared as the title. There was some reaction but, well, it was the only magazine that accepted an article from me'.¹⁴

In the following issue, an explanation appeared next to the editorial credits: 'The surprising graphics on page

48 of issue 24 of CN are more than just humour. They are a sample of the original aesthetic creation of Mirtha Dermisache, a porteña¹⁵, 33 years old, whose talent was recognised by artistic personalities such as Amacio Williams, Jorge Romero Brest and Basilio Uribe'.¹⁶ For further explanation, the editors reprinted excerpts of an essay on Dermisache's work.¹⁷

The last page of the journal, among the readers' letters to the editor, features a curious response from an anonymous reader, written in a style resembling that adopted by the artist. At the bottom, it says: 'Mirta! I love you'.



15 Term for someone residing in a port city, in this case Buenos Aires.

16 Editorial remark, in: *Ciencia Nueva. Revista de Ciencia y tecnología* 25, 1973, p. 2.

17 The author is unnamed and the excerpt reads: 'The structure of the phenomenon is not what can be described in common language, but becomes a different reality in front of our perception. [...] The meaning of these operations corresponds to the truest reality of our times, because our absolute and our definitive values have been replaced by dynamic values in a constant state of change. This has reached all levels, scientific, philosophical, sociological, technological, as well as in the everyday'. Ibid. (Own translation from Spanish.)

III. 16 Anonymous fan letter to Mirtha Dermisache (left, middle), in: *Ciencia Nueva. Revista de Ciencia y tecnología* 25, 1973, p. 64.

18 See Cintia Mezza et al., 'Mirtha Dermisache, Life and Work 1940–2012', in: *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, pp. 268.

19 Three issues were published in total with a print run of 500 copies each, later distributed by Guy Schraenen éditeur, also as a set in a slipcase.

20 <https://www.guyschraenediteur.com/magazines-series/> (Accessed 8 May 2024).

MIRTHA DERMISACHE: ARTICLE (1975)



Through her participation in several CAyC activities, publications and group shows in Europe, Mirtha Dermisache met Guy Schraenen, the founder of the publishing house *Guy Schraenen éditeur* and the *Archive for Small Press & Communication* (A.S.P.C.). He became a long-term collaborator and supporter of her work as well as her first editor in Europe and her adviser on matters relating to her publications.¹⁸

In 1975, he invited Dermisache to contribute a work to the first issue of *Revue Axe*, a multimedia magazine edited by him between 1975 and '76.¹⁹ The issue included contributions by Eduard Bal, Brion Gysin, Henri Chopin, François Dufrêne and John Giorno, among others, and focussed mainly on poetry, but also on conceptual art. Avoiding the format of a regularly bound magazine with articles in a fixed order, it contained individual elements on various types of paper – writings, posters, postcards, cut-outs, fold-outs etc. – printed in offset, typography and silkscreen as well as a 17 cm vinyl record and a Super-8 film. According to the editor, *AXE* served 'as an exhibition space of its own.'²⁰

With permission of the Estate and Guy Schraenen editions, 500 copies of Mirtha Dermisache's 'Article' in *AXE* magazine have been reprinted for this exhibition as complimentary copies for visitors, in line with the

artist's understanding of exhibiting as a way of making her art public and distributing it as publications.²¹ Free from paratextual information on the pages, this work functions as 'a semiotic space' of its own.²²



21 See Mirtha Dermisache, in: Cozarinsky 1970, cit. op.

22 Florent Fajole, 'Éditer et Diffuser les Publications de Mirtha Dermisache', in: *Exhibition brochure, Mirtha Dermisache: Livros, Florent Fajole: Dispositif editorial*, Centre des livres d'artistes, Saint-Yrieix-la-Perche, 4 October–20 December 2008, n.p.

III. 17
Mirtha Dermisache, 'Article', 1975, 30 x 21 x 4.5 cm, offset print on paper, in: *Revue Axe* N° 1, April 1975, ed. by Guy Schraenen.

23 Peter Schwenger, *Asemic. The Art of Writing*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2019, p. 7.

24 Oscar Masotta, 'Depués del pop, nosotros desmaterializamos', lecture delivered in July 1967 at the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires, published in: Oscar Masotta (ed.), *Happenings*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1967, p. 11; Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', in: *Art International* xii/2, Feb. 1968, pp. 31–36.

25 Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', in: *Studio International* 178, October 1969, pp. 134–137, here p. 135.

26 Dorfles 1974, n.p.

27 Irma Blank, 'Irma Blank in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist', in: *Irma Blank. Blank*, exhibition catalogue Culturgest, Lisbon, ed. by Johanna Carrier and Joana P. R. Neves, London: Koenig Books, 2019, p. 297.

28 See Peter Schwenger, 'The Draw of the Mark', in: *Critical Inquiry* 50/2, Winter 2024, pp. 335–51, here pp. 348f.

29 Dorfles 1974, n.p.

ASEMIC WRITING

In his 2019 book *Asemic. The Art of Writing*, Peter Schwenger defines 'asemic writing' as 'writing that does not attempt to communicate any message other than its own nature as writing'.²³ With the rise of conceptualism in the late 1960s and 70s – the period when Mirtha Dermisache produced her first publications – contemporary art similarly turned inwards to investigate its own character and forms of practice, as evident in claims of art's 'dematerialization' (Lucy Lippard, Oscar Masotta)²⁴ and in statements such as that 'being an artist now means to question the nature of art' and that 'in the philosophic *tabula rasa* of art, "if someone calls it art, [...] it's art"' (Joseph Kosuth).²⁵

The Italian critic and painter Gillo Dorfles coined the term 'asemic writing' in 1974 to define drawings by one of Dermisache's contemporaries, the German-Italian artist Irma Blank (1934–2023), as 'writing'.²⁶ The asemic aspect, in her case, gestured towards the unsayable. In her *Eigenschriften* (Self-Writings, 1968–73), the painterly marks, as she put it, 'filled the emptiness [of being a foreigner]'²⁷ after she had moved with her husband to Sicily in 1955 and felt herself to be suspended between languages.²⁸ For Dorfles, Blank's 'asemic writing' was based on 'a sort of graphic orthography which uses a sign that is quite individualised [...], but devoid and empty and purged of all explicit semantics since it is not constituted by – nor is it divisible into – "discrete signs", into letters of some nevertheless modified alphabet, nor into altered or new-formed ideograms'.²⁹

His insistence that 'asemic writing' was neither an alphabet nor a system of recurring letters and therefore was indivisible into 'discrete signs' can be traced back to a definition of the term 'asemic' by Jim Leftwich, who claimed: 'A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous

with phoneme). An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning'.³⁰ Leftwich conceded that an 'asemic' text can only exist as 'an ideal, an impossibility, but possibly worth pursuing for just that reason'.³¹

More concretely, the term featured in Roland Barthes' *The Rustle of Language*.³² Considering the extent to which mistakes in a text can be meaningful, he defines an 'asemic word' as one produced accidentally: 'for example, instead of writing "officer", I write "offiver", which is meaningless'.³³ He calls the resulting 'asemic word' a 'pure signifier', given that it 'dismisses all meaning of the support text' and concludes that, in this case, the reader, instead of deciphering, 'gain[s] access, by the mistake, to the *right of association*', that is to 'make "offiver" explode in the direction of "offer", of "olive", etc.', thus creating new phonetic sounds or, in Barthes' words, 'a new music'.³⁴

In *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida defines the spacing between words as 'asemic', given that it facilitates meaning without signifying anything itself. 'Asemic spacing' for him is the 'supplementary mark of the blank' between words.³⁵ The fact that this asemic spacing is a universal phenomenon suggests that we see the history of 'asemic writing' as reaching back to ancient forms of Chinese calligraphy from the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) and forward into the 20th century literary avant-garde, including lettrists, artists and writers such as Henri Michaux and Cy Twombly.³⁶ Expanding across various geographies, it extends beyond the human, as for example in 'The Interspecies Library' (curated by Oscar Salguero, New York) or in the AI-based literary and publishing practices of contemporary poet and programmer Allison Parrish and her generative novel of asemic text *Ahe Thd Yearidy Ti Isa* (2019).

30 Jim Leftwich, letter to Tim Gaze, dated 27 January 1998, cit. in: Schwenger 2019, p. 7.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

32 Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, transl. Richard Howard, Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986 (first published in French, 1984).

33 *Ibid.*, p. 323. From this example, he distinguishes other mistakes by which meaningful words are created, such as: 'if I write "ride" instead of "rude", the new word exists'.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 324.

35 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, transl. Barbara Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 (first published in French, 1972), p. 258.

36 See overview in Tim Gaze and Michael Jacobson, *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*, Minneapolis: Adelaide Books, 2013; Andrea Polaschegg, 'Enigmatische Ästhetik. Zur Kulturgeschichte unlesbarer Schrift und ihrer künstlerischen Transformation', in: Jutta Müller-Tamm, Carolin Schubert and Klaus Ulrich Werner (eds.), *Schreiben als Ereignis: Künste und Kulturen der Schrift*, Paderborn: Brill Fink, 2018, <https://brill.com/edcollbook/title/53444>.

37 Dermisache got in touch with Hugo Santiago through Silvia Sigal. Santiago first gave Barthes a book and letter from Mirtha Dermisache and, later, her *Diario 1 Año 1*. See Mezza et al. 2017, p. 263.

38 Dermisache, in Rimmaudo/Lamoni 2011, op. cit.

39 Ibid.

40 Cit. in: *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, p. 263f.

ROLAND BARTHES, MIRTHA DERMISACHE AND THE PLEASURES OF ILLEGIBLE WRITING

When the Argentinian filmmaker Hugo Santiago (1939–2018) moved to Paris in 1969, he asked Mirtha Dermisache for one of her books, which he later showed to Roland Barthes (1915–1980).³⁷ Inspired by her work, the French literary theorist, philosopher and semiologist wrote a letter to the artist in March 1971, praising the ‘extreme intelligence of the theoretical problems related to writing that [her] work entails’, suggesting to its readers ‘the idea, the essence of writing’ (see illustration).

According to Dermisache, his words were crucial for her evolution as an artist: not only did his letter help to make her work known to a broader audience and confirm its worth – as Dermisache remembered, from the moment she received ‘a letter from Roland Barthes [...], the doors opened. Everyone was interested in seeing my books and my things’.³⁸ As important was the self-recognition and self-affirmation it provided, as she herself emphasised: ‘[F]rom that moment on, I understood what I was doing. [...] The day in 1971 when I got the letter from Roland Barthes – especially when I read the part where he says “You have managed to produce a certain number of forms ... that could be called illegible writing” – I felt that, after having said “I write” for so many years, someone was finally, for the first time, calling my work writing’.³⁹



III. 18
Roland Barthes, letter
to Mirtha Dermisache,
Paris, 28 March 1971.

English translation: ‘Dear Miss, Mr. Hugo Santiago was kind enough to show me your graphics notebook. Let me just tell you how impressed I am, not only for the highly artistic quality of your strokes (which is not irrelevant) but also, and especially, for the extreme intelligence of the theoretical problems related to writing that your work entails. You have managed to produce a certain number of shapes, neither figurative nor abstract, that could be defined as illegible writing—leading to suggest to its readers, nor exactly messages nor the contingent forms of expression, but the idea, the essence of writing. Nothing is more difficult to produce than an essence, i.e., a shape that refers to its own definition. Haven’t Japanese artists devoted a lifetime to learn how to draw a circle that does not refer but to the idea of the circle itself? Their work is akin to that requirement. I fervently wish that you may continue and publish it. Please receive my best wishes for success, particularly in your work, and my most cordial feelings. Roland Barthes’.⁴⁰

⁴¹ See entry on 'asemic writing' in this booklet.

⁴² Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, transl. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, London: Jonathan Cape, 1967 (first published as *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, in 1953).

⁴³ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1968), in: Barthes 1986, cit. op, pp. 49-55, here p. 53.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *Variations sur l'écriture. Variationen über die Schrift*, Mainz: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2006, p. 78. Own transl. In French: 'Une écriture n'a pas besoin d'être "lisible" pour être pleinement une écriture'.

This is noteworthy, given that her drawings, as much as they resemble writing, defied standard definitions of writing in the sense of recurring symbols, such as letters of the alphabet, used to communicate thoughts and ideas. None of the marks in Dermisache's drawings repeat, each one is different, they cannot be deciphered as symbols but are 'asemic'.⁴¹ Barthes' conclusion, in other words, was not evident. Instead, it emerged from contemporary literary and philosophical debates, the rise of poststructuralism and, in particular, new theories of intertextuality, which were first outlined in his publication *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), offering an alternative theory of French literature based on a theoretical analysis of the relationship between language, style and what he called 'écriture' (writing).⁴²

Barthes proclaimed the instability and relativity of the sign, and re-defined the author as a compiler of intertextual meanings and relations. In his groundbreaking essay 'The Death of the Author', Barthes stated:

the writer can only imitate an ever anterior, never original gesture; his sole power is to mingle writings, to counter some by others, so as never to rely on just one; if he seeks to express himself, at least he knows that the interior "thing" he claims to "translate" is itself no more than a ready-made lexicon, whose words can be explained only through other words, and this ad infinitum [...].⁴³

If meaning is located neither in the sign nor the author but is always comprised of what is handed down from pre-existing texts, then the definition of writing is no longer limited to communicating thoughts and ideas according to the author's intention. Consequently, Dermisache's illegible marks, entirely freed from signification, qualify as 'writing' for Barthes.

Barthes underscored the point he had made in his letter to Dermisache in an essay⁴⁴ entitled 'Variations sur

l'écriture' (1973). Arguing that '[a] piece of writing need not be legible to be a piece of writing in the full sense of the term', he again calls into question the assumption that writing must have a communicative function.⁴⁵ Illegible writings, in his words, 'tell us (only) that there are signs, but not sense.'⁴⁶ Freed from functionality, writing, in its illegible form, could open new avenues of thought, prompting reflection on the very nature of communication.

In the same passage of the essay, Barthes mentions Dermisache, as well as the artists André Masson and Henri Michaux, who were also concerned with the materiality of the sign. His description of Dermisache's work is worth closer consideration, given its ambivalent phrasing and its suggestive contextualisation of her work. He notes that '[t]here are writings that we cannot understand, and yet, we cannot say they are indecipherable, because they simply are beyond decipherment: those are the fictitious writings that certain painters or certain subjects imagine (this may in fact be an "amateur" practice, far removed from the work of an artist proper: for example, Mirtha Dermisache's notebooks with graphism)'.⁴⁷

It could be inferred from his description of her practice as 'amateur' that Barthes was situating it outside of a fine art context, which would, in effect, have misclassified it. This seems unlikely given that he knew of Dermisache's academic training at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes Prilidiano Pueyrredón,⁴⁸ among others, and her participation in international group exhibitions.⁴⁹ Before his essay was published, in the spring of 1973, he had written a letter of support for Dermisache's application for a Guggenheim Fellowship.⁵⁰ Evidently, he was aware of her purpose to establish herself as an artist. The term 'amateur' here might instead suggest a certain freedom from academic art and an 'official', state-sanctioned way of working.

⁴⁵ On this aspect, see also Belén Gache, 'Reflections on Asemic Writing: The Case of Mirtha Dermisache', in: *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, pp. 15-30, esp. p. 19.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Barthes 2006, p. 76. Own transl. In French: 'Il existe aussi des écritures que nous ne pouvons comprendre et dont dépendant on ne peut dire qu'elles sont indéchiffrables, parce qu'elles sont tout bonnement hors du déchiffrement: ce sont les écritures fictives imaginées par certains peintres ou certains sujet (il peut en effet s'agir d'une pratique d'"amateur", située loin de toute carrière artistique: tels les cahiers de graphismes de Mirtha Dermisache).'

⁴⁸ This is currently the Departamento de Artes Visuales of the Universidad Nacional de las Artes (UNA). See *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, p. 256.

⁴⁹ *From Figuration Art to Systems Art in Argentina. CAyC in Camden Arts Centre*, February 1971, Camden Arts Center, London; *CAyC: Arte de Sistemas*, July 1971, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires; *Arte de Sistemas II: Arte de Sistemas Internacional, Arte de Sistemas Argentina, CAyC Al Libre. Arte e ideologica*, September 1972, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires.

⁵⁰ See *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, p. 264.

51 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p. 98f.

52 *Luna-Park 2* ('Graphies'), ed. by Marc Dachy, Brussels: Transédition, April 1976. 144 pages.

53 Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazine. An Alternative Space for Art*, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT, 2011, p. 274.

54 Guy Schraenen, 'A Transatlantic Affair', in: *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, p. 33–47, here p. 37.

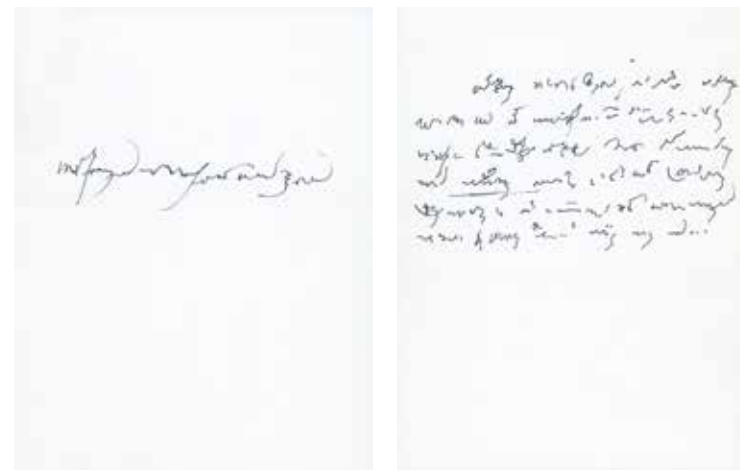
55 Roberto Altmann, Frédéric Baal, Roland Barthes, Jacques Calonne, Carlfriedrich Claus, Mirtha Dermisache, Christian Dotremont, Pierre Guyotat, Brion Gysin, Henri Lefebvre and Sophie Podolski.

56 Seth Siegelaub, 'On Exhibitions and the World at Large', in: *Studio International* 178/917, December 1969, p. 202f, here p. 202.

In his short book *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, published after Barthes' epistolary exchange with Dermisache had slowly petered out, he characterised the 'amateur' as someone usually 'defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot — or will not — achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the *noeme* of Photography'.⁵¹ With 'noeme' he referred to 'the essence' of a practice. Hence his positive understanding of the 'amateur' as somebody who is particularly skilled in getting to the idea or essence of photography — or in Dermisache's case, writing — should not necessarily be understood as a pejorative use of the term.

Furthermore, Barthes' sense of his own identity as a visual artist was that of an 'amateur' who practiced art for his own enjoyment and satisfaction. Consequently, and to this day, his own experiments with 'asemic writing' remain underexplored. In April 1976, Barthes and Dermisache both contributed artwork to a thematic issue of the magazine *Luna-Park*, edited by Marc Dachy (1952–2015).⁵² This Brussels-based artists' periodical, which existed from 1974 to 1985, published experimental art and literature.⁵³ For the second of nine issues, the Belgian art critic and curator Marc Dachy, who was introduced to Dermisache by Guy Schraenen,⁵⁴ decided to publish an issue on the theme of graphisms ('Graphies'). *Luna-Park 2* contains work by eleven artists, many of whom engaged with forms of (visual) poetry or asemantic writing.⁵⁵ Their work was featured in alphabetical order, introduced by an unpaginated sheet featuring only their name. Apart from short biographies, the magazine offered no contextualising art historical information, which was typical of the conceptual period and its rejection of curatorial writing, believed to 'prejudice the "seeing" process'.⁵⁶

Asked for a short biography, Barthes consequently replied to the magazine: 'Si mes graphies sont illisibles, c'est bien précisément pour dire non au commentaire.' (If my writing is illegible, it seems best to deny any commentary.) His contribution spans five pages. While the first series of works consists of single lines of handwriting, resembling the heading on a handwritten manuscript of a novel; the writing of the second series spans several lines and resembles hastily composed notes, with some parts underlined and others in what appear to be quotation marks, sometimes complemented by a signature below the main body of the 'text'.



57 *Text-Sound-Image. Small Press Festival*, Ghent, April 1976, organised by Guy Schraenen. See Schraenen 2017, p. 39.



In contrast, the ten 'graphisms' Dermisache selected for *Luna-Park 2* are less clearly assignable to specific genres of communication than Barthes' writing, or even her own earlier works in the series 'Cartas' (letters, dating c. 1970). Rather, they resemble the large-scale sheets that she contributed to *Text-Sound-Image. Small Press Festival*, a prominent international overview of the contemporary artists' publication scene, which took place in Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent in the same month.⁵⁷ Relating more to her 'texto' series — graphisms that resemble blocks of texts of varying length — these works appear to have been conceived for presentation on a larger scale and lose detail

III.19
Roland Barthes, untitled (c. 1976), published in: Luna-Park 2 ('Graphies'), ed. by Marc Dachy, Brussels: Transédition, April 1976.

58 Rimmaudo and Lamoni 2011, op. cit.

59 Carmine Benincasa, 'Roland Barthes e la polifonia di piaceri', in: *Roland Barthes. Carte Segni*, exhibition catalogue, Casino dell'Aurora at Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome: Electa, 1981, pp. 9–16, here p. 9. Own transl. from Italian: '[...] R. B., su Barthes pittore, che nessuno conosce [...]']

60 Ibid., p. 10.

61 Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1973, quoted from English version, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 12.

when reduced to the dimensions of a magazine page. Indeed, the artist remembered: 'For Luna-Park, Marc Dachy took a book of mine and reproduced it or rather reproduced a part of it. It was not an original contribution, but rather the reproduction of a book that also had another format'.⁵⁸

One year after Barthes' death in 1980, an exhibition held at the Casino dell'Aurora in Rome offered a first overview of his work as a visual artist. In her introduction, curator Carmine Benincasa speaks of 'R.B., the painter Barthes who is not known',⁵⁹ and points out that he began to paint in 1970/71 after his return from a journey to Japan: 'He used many techniques: watercolours, tempera, markers, Indian ink, wax crayons, sometimes he also painted in oil, but always on paper', producing around 700 works that date from 1971 to 1978.⁶⁰ With the death of his mother in 1978, he stopped. It could be said that, for him, his experiments with 'asemic' writing epitomised the 'pleasure of the text' that, in 1973, he had famously described as 'that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas as I do. I pass lightly through the reactionary darkness. Boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure'.⁶¹

Barthes drew with his right hand and applied colour with his left hand, additionally employing collage techniques, cutting, sewing and reattaching objects with pins onto his manuscripts. He filed and classified all his works: almost all of his drawings and paintings have a classification number, according to an enigmatic system that, most likely, corresponded to the groups of notebooks and albums on which he painted or drew.⁶² Benincasa suggests that Barthes' work is 'that of an "amateur" [*dillettante*], in the sense of someone who enjoys "delight" in doing something'.⁶³ Read in the context of this suggestion, Barthes' definition of Dermisache's practice as a 'dilettante' holds true.

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