

Mirtha Dermisache

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Mirtha Dermisache's artist's books and myriad works on paper all sparkle with the suggestion of glyphs and characters that we might be able to discern if we only had the right key to crack their code. Yet, ultimately, none are legible. The under-known Argentinian artist, who passed away in 2012, always referred to her pieces as "writings." Does it matter if we can't read them?

Dermisache titled and grouped her works according to their easily recognizable format—*Text*, *Book*, *Letter*, *Sentence*, and so forth—and all play with the architecture of language through invented lexical and syntactical structures. They've long been cited as visual poetry and as asemic writing (though to say they are entirely without meaning or any semantic content is off). In 1971, Roland Barthes noted the "extreme intelligence of the theoretical problems related to writing" of Dermisache's art "as a shape that refers to its own definition." Some of the *Diez Cartas* (Ten Letters), 1970, represented here as printed

editions, for instance, evoke correspondence, with a salutation and a signature.

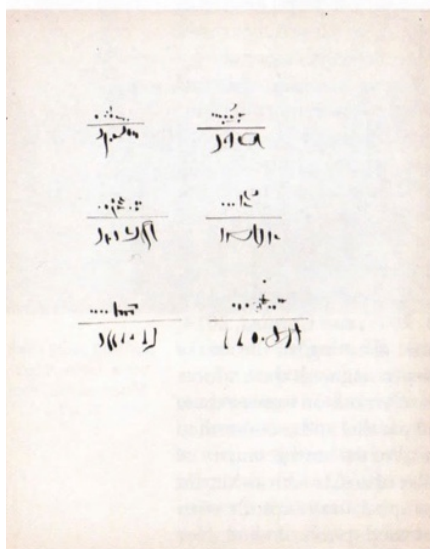
Those works were among the various pieces dating from 1970 to 2006 in this overdue exhibition, which featured velvety blots made by pressing ink-stained tips and backs of fingers to paper, and lithe, undulating lines that nearly resemble Arabic script or calligraphy. However, none of the works looked too much alike: Each one presents its own little universe, as if the artist were creating the process from scratch each time. *Tabula rasa*. That's not to say that Dermisache worked in a vacuum, or that her art is without international predecessors or heirs. While Irma Blank and Hanne Darboven are obvious touchstones, the colorful, coded dashes in On Kawara's *Voice from the Moon*, 2011, also came to mind, as did Cy Twombly's day job as a cryptologist for the US Army.

Despite the elegant installation and minimal framing of these pieces, Dermisache was, in truth, never interested in the discrete, untouchable, and static object; she wanted her writings to be published, distributed, and read. (And fortunately, this spring, Siglio and Ugly Duckling Presse are releasing her *Selected Writings*, the first collection of her works published in the US.) "I 'write' (inscribe) my books, which are perfectly illegible, and that tenuous structure of 'gaps' is filled as soon as it reaches the 'reader,'" Dermisache once said. Her Duchampian take, akin to that of other artists of the time (Charlotte Posenenske, for example), extended to participation: She wanted her work to be edited and republished. To emphasize this, Florent Fajole, Dermisache's last editor and the curator of the show, produced a trio of new offset editions riffing on the seedlike dots from one of Dermisache's most beautifully cryptic

works, *Texto* (Text), ca. 1970. The variations were stacked on three separate tables and free for the taking.

Dermisache's aim for interaction creates a dynamic tension with the private language we encounter in her writings. She was, of course, well aware that a writer always writes to a reader. But her deconstruction of that intimate act is one that, in the end, seems to go against her hope that a reader fill in the "gaps." Tapping into her equivocal code just isn't possible, or even logical. In place of being able to read her art, in some cases, she offered the viewer a different kind of agency, another form of action: to edit.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Mirtha Dermisache,
Untitled (Letter),
1970, ink on paper,
11 x 9".