

## HYPERALLERGIC

BOOKS • WEEKEND

## Mirtha Dermisache's Writing Is a Rorschach test

Dermisache's drawings posture as communication yet undercut it through illegibility.



Louis Bury 3 days ago



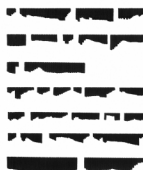
Sin título (Textos), no date, c. 1970s, ink on paper, 9.6 x 7 inches, from Mirtha Dermisache: *Selected Writings*, published by Siglio and Ugly Duckling Presse. (All images courtesy of the Mirtha Dermisache Archive)

Since the 2012 death of Argentine artist Mirtha Dermisache — who was known but underappreciated in her lifetime — her legacy has steadily consolidated as her work, which straddles the line between writing and visual art, receives posthumous attention. In 2014, *BOMB* published a folio of her work, New York's Drawing Center and London's Drawing Room included her in a joint exhibition, and the American poet Patrick Durgin penned a thoughtful appreciation of her oeuvre for *Jacket2*. In 2017, The Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires exhibited the first ever Dermisache retrospective. And in 2018, Siglio and Ugly Duckling Presse, two of the foremost American presses at the nexus of art and literature, have teamed up to publish *Selected Writings*, an enticing selection of her early output.

It's far from uncommon for an artist's death to bring attention to his or her career. But there's something about Dermisache's oeuvre, produced in the era of the Argentine coup d'état, that makes it feel relevant to contemporary concerns. With a gestural vocabulary of squiggles, lines, blots, swirls, and other pen marks — evoking script, calligraphy, ideograms, and glyphs, but lacking recognizable semantic content — her work is a Rorschach test, through which we can perceive our anxieties about the digital era's surfeit of written communication.

*Selected Writings*, edited with a keen eye and unobtrusive touch by Daniel Owen and Lisa Pearson, is organized in two parts. "A Selection of Sixteen Texts" comprises a cross section of mark-making styles from *Textos | 1970 – 1979*; "Two Books" reprints two books in full: *Libro No. 1, 1972* and *Sin Título (Libro), 1971*. This structure gives the book the feel of a three-course meal, in which the opening section is an appetizer sampler and the two books, each about 35 pages long, are main courses that allow the reader to experience a particular flavor of the work in greater depth.

The various styles in the book's first part suggest many visual forms — for example, seismograms, cryptograms, drip paintings, tally marks, or doodles — but Dermisache associated her marks predominantly with writing; she called them "texts" and "books" and published them accordingly and then exhibited them on tables at which gallery audiences were invited to sit. Several plates in *Selected Writings*, most taken from the *Sin Título (Textos)* (no date, c. 1970s) series, resemble indecipherable English-language cursive, composed in paragraph-like blocks. Other plates from the series draw on the gestural idioms of Arabic script. Still others call to mind crossed-out text.



Page from *Libro No. 1, 1972*, unique artist's book, ink on paper, 11.8 x 9.5 inches

Throughout, a recalcitrant streak permeates Dermisache's work. Her drawings posture as communication, only to undercut it through illegibility and withdrawal. *Libro No. 1, 1972* is representative in this regard: 37 pages of narrow black rectangles, lineated and clustered together in groups that resemble inverted bar graphs, as well as redacted stanzas of poetry. Similar to Doris Salcedo's austere, politically freighted concrete-filled furniture sculptures, *Libro* enacts, in its chosen medium, a poetics of opacity.

Art that thwarts linguistic communication even as it gestures toward it is not unique to a time period or culture. Examples abound — from the illegible drunken calligraphy of Zhang Xu circa 800 CE to Henri

Michaux's crazy-quilt alphabetic scribbles from the 1920s. But in the past two decades, this style of work, dubbed "asemic writing" by poets Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich in the late 1990s, has coalesced into a movement with a sophisticated awareness of its own prehistory. Aided by its ease of digital dissemination, and thanks in part to the editorial efforts of North American poets such as Michael Jacobson, Nico Vassilakis and Derek Beaulieu, asemic writing — kissing cousins of both concrete and visual poetry — has a devoted, if modest, group of international practitioners.



Sin título (Textos), no date, c. 1970s, ink on paper, 9.6 x 7.3 inches

Dermisache's warm posthumous reception should be understood in this aesthetic context. There's not necessarily a causal relationship between the asemic movement and any given Dermisache exhibition or publication. It's more that her work feels newly resonant in the post-internet era. The ersatz signifiers and hermetic communiqués of today's asemic writing represent one variety of artistic response to an information glut facilitated by machines whose source code is scrutable only to specialists. Dermisache's writings will never disclose all their flinty secrets, but lately it has become easier to understand something of what they've been trying to tell us all along.

*Selected Writings by Mirtha Dermisache (2017)*, edited by Daniel Owen and Lisa Pearson is published by Siglio and Ugly Duckling Presse and is available from Amazon and other online retailers.