

Art Books

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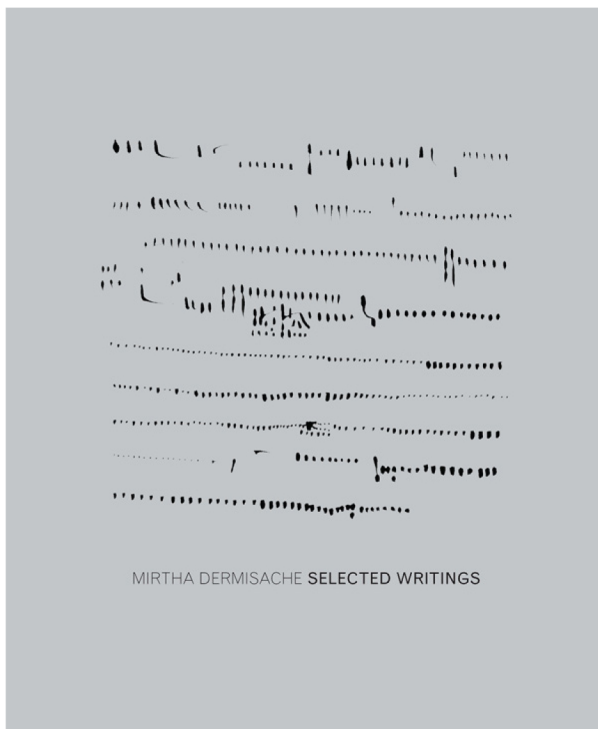
Mirtha Dermisache's *Selected Writings* and Renee Gladman's *Prose Architectures*

by Megan N. Liberty

Mirtha Dermisache
Selected Writings
(Ugly Duckling Presse / Siglo, 2018)

Renee Gladman
Prose Architectures
(Wave Books, 2017)

Imagine if writing was a purely visual endeavor without linguistic or syntactical meaning. Could we read the curves and slants, thickness, and size of the lines like we would alphabetical or pictorial characters?



The writings and drawings of Mirtha Dermisache and Renee Gladman beg these questions.

Dermisache, an Argentinian artist who died in 2012, completed her first “writings” in 1967. *Selected Writings* includes sixteen of her texts (*textos*) and two books (*libros*), all from the 1970s. Though organized

under the sign of writing, her lines include no recognizable alphabetical markings; instead, they gather and space in such a way as to evoke language without producing it. Her scripts simultaneously appear handwritten, irregular and oddly shaped, and digital, like the characters that appear when the computer cannot recognize a font. Her texts vary dramatically in style, from looping to sharp-edged lines like those created by a lie detector machine. At other times she uses a thicker line to form blocks that rise and fall like city skylines or that sit heavy on the page like redacted text. Neat and organized shapes read like explanatory narrative while the more energetic and wild markings suggest emotive poetry. Her evenly spaced lines and strings of characters mimic the patterning of text and speak to us like written words.

While Dermisache pushes her visuals to approach the status of text, Gladman's drawings in *Prose Architectures*, made from 2013 to 2014, push text to approach the purely visual. Known as a poet and for her recent series of novels about the fictional city-state of Ravicka, Gladman explains in her introduction to *Prose Architectures* that “[d]rawing was something I did between books,” a way to rest between writing one book and the next. For a while she clearly separated these practices. Her individual drawings approximate the effect of single blocks of Dermisache’s lines, but the placement and size of Gladman’s drawings, centered on the page, keep them in the realm of images. While Dermisache’s lines refuse to be visual alone, with their patterns, spacing, and density so textual, Gladman’s pages have clusters of looping ink lines that gather centered on horizontal pages. Her script is tight and bottom heavy, with arches and rectangles rising upwards out of the clusters. And though she meant to keep her drawing and writing practices separate, they inevitably bleed together, with some images even including (barely) legible lines of script. She buries words in the foundation of these lines and blocks. “I went away but something drew me back,” begins a paragraph of text before descending into indecipherable scribbles. Gladman makes the verbal visual.

Dermisache always considered her work to be writing. “I started writing and the result was something unreadable,” she explained in a 2011 interview quoted in *Selected Writings*. “I must admit that all my works create some tension between the communication forms offering a stable framework and the act of writing, which provides the unstable dimension.” The familiarity but illegibility of her text destabilizes our predetermined conceptions of what writing *is* and what it *does*. This is especially the case in *Sin titulo (Libro)*, the second book included in the collection. Comprising 36 pages of writings in blue ink, evenly spaced between lines and tightly scripted, this book’s characters have sharp edges with curves over the tops, sometimes even circling in on themselves. But the uniformity of the flat lines and curved edges makes me sure that if I just look hard enough, the hidden character system will emerge and I will be able to decipher the text. Yet, there is no underlying text to uncover. Dermisache and Gladman, then, seem to contradict the very structures they inhabit—text that is not text, abstract drawings that are in fact text, blurring the lines between visual and verbal, making the images speak and words appear as images. In both cases there is a clear refusal of the established roles in the visual/verbal paradigm of meaning-making in favor of an illegibility that pushes image and text toward one another.

The references to architectural forms in both collections heightens this play with linguistic structure. Gladman’s work more directly references architecture: the rise and fall of her masses of markings, the sharp edges and uneven spacing that imitate cityscapes, recall the architectural structures of her novels. Dermisache does so more subtly, with rows suggestive of horizons, small open planes with clusters of buildings jutting up from them. Language is also planned like cities, not just in its structure, but in how it’s built from the ground up, how it’s planned out, and how it interlaces the structure of each letter into the

structure of a word into the structure of each sentence, each with its own rules and guidelines. Dermisache and Gladman visualize language as a city we can wander through and in doing so they break all the rules. They walk the wrong way down one-way streets and climb the exteriors of buildings. They take fundamentals of the structure, rules of building and assemblage, and turn them upside down forcing us to rethink how we read and what it is we want to build.

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