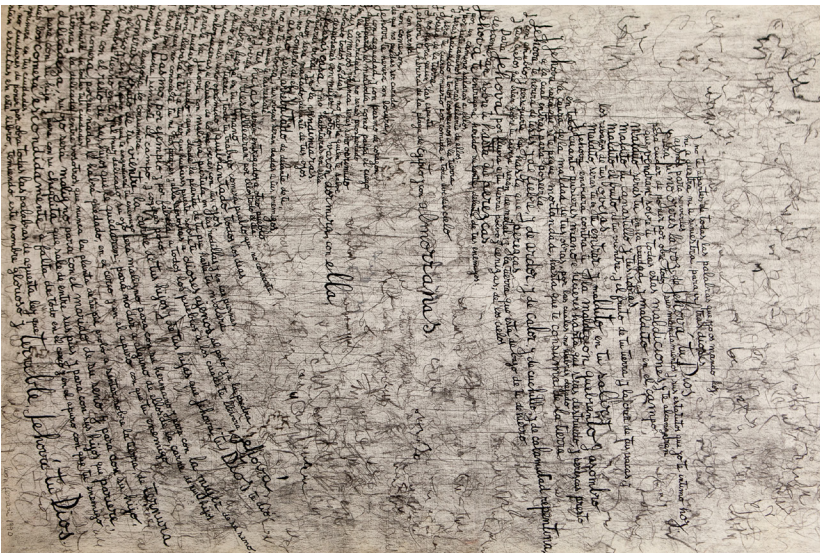


Sicardi Gallery

# León Ferrari

## To Write



León Ferrari, *Untitled*, 1990.  
Ink and graphite on high-impact polystyrene, 25.7x17.3in.



León Ferrari, *Untitled*, 2001.  
Sculpture from found objects, 17.6x10.75x9.75in.



León Ferrari, *Untitled*, 1986. Collage.  
12.75x9.2in.

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# October 13 to December 19, 2015

## To Write

*Even at its most silent, intimate moments, their art is imbued with the protean tumult of language’s countless faces and incarnations, from voluntary silence to aphasia, passing along the way through whisper, prayer, accusation, sermon, dialogue, quotation, stutter, shout, onomatopoeia, collage, argument, alphabet, and poetry.*

Luis Pérez-Oramas, Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel

As early as 1960, León Ferrari was abstracting, mimicking, and deforming writing, and challenging the meaning-making power of words. Simultaneously, he began keeping a meticulous record of his working process and materials. In 1962, he writes, “From now on I will number each work, beginning with the first [one in] color, a sheet of paper with a few stains that I made on 10/3/62.”<sup>1</sup> The earliest piece in *León Ferrari: To Write* is dated a few days later, 10/10/62. In nine intricate lines, Ferrari replicates the patterns and shapes of writing on a simple piece of wood. His looping, intertwined strokes vary in emphasis; some of the lightest lines fade into the grain of the wood. The dark, emphatic marks suggest a confident, but unreadable, cursive. The following year, one of Ferrari’s drawings was included in the *Schrift und Bild* exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Kunsthalle in Baden Baden, alongside works by Klee and Pollock, among others. From the very beginning of his artistic exploration, Ferrari looked to writing as a touchstone in his production. He would develop new alphabets and vocabularies, create artist books, write and produce a play, write treatises, and deploy the mail as a mode of mass communication. He would point to

language’s inherent subjectivity over and over again in his more than 50 years of production.

To write is to organize certain agreed-upon symbols into formations that trace the writer’s line of thought, however imperfectly.

To write is to make a mark upon a surface.

To write is to shape something from an abstraction.

For Ferrari, to write was a multidisciplinary practice of facing off with some of human civilization’s most cherished organizational systems: religion, politics, and history. What does one write to counter the violence of a national dictatorship? Ferrari’s 1963 *Carta a un general* (Letter to a General) careens toward madness as recognizable words mutate into indecipherable angles and curves. Sometimes there are no words, even though the impulse to write remains.

Ferrari was born in 1920 to Augusto Ferrari and Susana Celia del Pardo. Augusto was an architect, painter, and photographer, who built and painted numerous churches in his native Italy and, later, in Argentina. The young León studied engineering, and worked with his father in designing the plans for some of his projects. In 1946, León married Alicia Barros Castro and, that same year, he began painting and drawing. He continued his career as an engineer, but was increasingly experimenting with different visual media, including film and ceramic sculptures. By the late 1950s, he turned to cement, plaster of Paris, and wood to construct his sculptures.

In *Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel*, curator and writer Luis Pérez-Oramas

writes that the 1960s and 1970s were a historical moment marked by text. Many fields—including anthropology, film, philosophy, sociology, psychiatry, and psychology—were attempting to understand the world through linguistic models. For Ferrari (as for the Swiss/Brazilian artist Schendel), “writing [was] both verbally intelligible and purely visible matter.”<sup>2</sup>

For Ferrari, the role of the artist was to agitate, to disrupt, and to challenge. “Art will not, then, be beauty and novelty, but efficiency and agitation. The successful work of art will be the one that produces an impact on its milieu that is very much the equivalent of guerrilla action in a country fighting for liberation.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1965, Ferrari submitted a sculpture of Christ crucified on a U.S. bomber jet for an exhibition at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella (ITDT). The sculpture, which he titled *La civilización occidental y cristiana* (Western Christian Civilization), was removed from the exhibition before it opened by the ITDT’s then-director, Jorge Romero Brest.<sup>4</sup>

One of Ferrari’s radical propositions was that the institutions by which we organize our beliefs—the state, the law, the military, and the church—are often on the wrong side of history (notably, Ferrari’s 2004 exhibition at Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires was called a “blasphemy” by then-Archbishop, now-Pope Jorge Bergoglio). “Meaning, of course, does not constitute a work of art,” Ferrari writes in 1968. “Newspapers offer much meaning that people read with supreme indifference. Our task as avant-garde artists is precisely to organize such meanings, along with other elements, in a work of art that will efficiently reveal, indicate, and convey them. Our task is to look for aesthetic materials and formulate laws for their meaningful organization, to seek efficiency in conveying this with persuasive strength and clarity so that

our denunciation’s unavoidable character forces the media to make it public. The work should be a factor for spreading scandal and disruption.”<sup>5</sup>

By the 1976 coup d’etat in Argentina, the militarization of the state and the disappearances of thousands of dissidents and students made life in Buenos Aires untenable for the Ferraris, and León and Alicia moved their family to Brazil that year. Ferrari’s drawings from 1976 are some of his most powerful evocations of the failure of language to address violence. With pencil, watercolor, and ink, he raged on paper; in these works, any semblance of language disappears, except for the linear arrangement of the drawings, which continued to replicate the visual structure of lines of text.

While Ferrari was a master of scandal and disruption, he was also deeply interested in the ways in which information was absorbed or ignored by groups of people, especially as the dictatorship in Argentina became more overtly militarized and violent. He began collecting newspaper reports of assassinations, disappearances, and violent events, collating them into undeniable bodies of evidence. Titled *Nosotros no sabemos* (We Didn’t Know), the collaged pages of newspapers demonstrate that the information was widely available about these abuses of power. During this time, Ferrari also began working with photocopies and Letraset, and he mailed his works to museums, curators, friends, artists around the world. At the same time that he was calling attention to public dissemination of knowledge, he was making his work available to countless institutions and future viewers by using the mail. The act of collecting is a simple, unequivocal recrimination against silence and complicity.

In 1982, León and Alicia returned to Buenos Aires to try and find their son, Ariel, who was disappeared by the military. Ariel was never found.

More than 30,000 Argentine citizens were killed during the Dirty War.

Sometimes to write means to remember.

During the years surrounding Ariel’s disappearance, Ferrari began making collages that followed the themes of *La civilización occidental y cristiana*. In these works, he paired military airplanes and rockets with art historical paintings of saints and biblical events. The saints appear to herald the rocket’s blast-off, or to swipe the scythe of death over a bomber jet. One offers a benediction above a nuclear plume. Ferrari was an outspoken critic of the Catholic church, condemning it for its support of the Argentine dictatorship. His political position, of course, suggests certain interpretations of the collages, but the images themselves remain somewhat ambiguous, even enigmatic. These are surreal moments of juxtaposition, heretical and fierce.

In 1986, the year of many collages on view here, Ferrari also published a book of collages that paired reproductions of Dürer prints with erotic drawings. Brazilian critic and essayist Claudio Willer reviewed the book—titled *Paraheroges* (For Heretics)—and found parallels between imagery and language. “Might the visual arts constitute a language? For many—Octavio Paz, among others—the answer is no. Only verbal language can receive this name, inasmuch as it differs from other systems of signs, like visual signs, from the visual arts, and auditory signs, from music. Nonetheless, this series of collages edited in visual artist León Ferrari’s book raises doubts regarding this thesis. In spite of the fact that the book consists only of visual images, it can be read like a text, like a treatise on the theme that it proposes, in other words, on heresies.”<sup>6</sup>

In the early 1990s, Ferrari began his series of *Errores* (Errors). These drawings on paper and high-impact polystyrene are imperfect repre-

sentations of the mathematical curve called a sinusoid, recurring over and over, across the blank page. “The idea of using something so cold was, perhaps, that of looking for a contrast between science and people,” Ferrari writes, “... drawing the curve by hand, it lost its perfection, it becomes messy, becomes more human, you could say...”<sup>7</sup> These are among Ferrari’s most poignant, humanist reflections on abstraction, and they recall his *Cuadros escritos* (Written Paintings) and *Dibujos escritos* (Written Drawings) of the 1960s, in which he describes with words the paintings he wishes he could paint. In these written paintings, Ferrari posits the limits of what he is able to create. Words describe the thing and they are, simultaneously, the thing. Curator Mari Carmen Ramírez has described Ferrari’s pairing of abstraction and subjectivity as a singular inflection of Latin American conceptual art: “Ferrari reinserted subjectivity into the conceptual proposal,” she writes.<sup>8</sup>

In an untitled drawing from 1990, Ferrari deftly combines Biblical reference with drawing. Quoting Deuteronomy, chapter 28, he lists the many curses that will befall the person who strays from the word of God. Here, disloyalty to language is the subject: “Y no te apartes de todas las palabras que yo os mando hoy, ni a diestra ni a siniestra, para ir tras dioses ajenos para servirles....” (“And thou shalt not go aside from any of the words which I command thee this day, to the right hand, or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.”)

The text continues (using the King James version as my translation): “... all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee: Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store. Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field. Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kind, and the flocks of thy sheep.

Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and cursed shalt thou be when thou goest out. The Lord shall send upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings, whereby thou hast forsaken me. The Lord shall make the pestilence cleave unto thee, until it has consumed thee from off the land, whither thou goest to possess it. The Lord shall smite thee with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an inflammation, and with an extreme burning, and with the sword, and with blasting, and with mildew; and they shall pursue thee until thou perish...”

And the curses continue.

“The Bible is an anthology of cruelties,” Ferrari writes. And with his signature sense of humor, he catalogs those cruelties by placing figurines of saints and religious figures in blenders, on skillets, in microwaves, and on ovens. When the Bible describes purgatory, Ferrari envisions it (albeit in its most absurd, even kitschy version).

What Ferrari has asked us to consider, from the very beginning, is the fallibility of language, its failures and absences, and the points at which meaning abuts meaninglessness. He asks us not to avoid the act of writing, but to face it full on, aware of its permeabilities, its imperfections, and—because we acknowledge these things—to understand that it can also be a source of respite and of meditation, perhaps even a space for the making of new worlds, better than the ones that are being written for us.

Laura A. L. Wellen, PhD



1. Andrea Giunta, *León Ferrari: Retrospective, Works 1954-2006*, 396.
2. Luis Perez-Oramas, *Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel*, 13.
3. Ibid.
4. Houston viewers will remember *La civilización occidental y cristiana* from the 2004 exhibition *Inverted Utopias* at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The sculpture is currently on view at the Dallas Museum of Art as part of the exhibition *International Pop*.
5. Excerpt from “El arte de los significados,” (The Art of Meanings) a paper prepared for the *Primer encuentro nacional de arte de vanguardia*, the first meeting of Tucumán Arde, Rosario, 10-11 August 1968. Reprinted in Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, p. 534.
6. Claudio Willer, cited in Andrea Giunta, *León Ferrari: Retrospective. Works, 1954-2006*, 411-412.
7. Andrea Giunta, *León Ferrari: Retrospective. Works, 1954-2006*, 413.
8. Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America,” in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, 420.

# León Ferrari

1920-2013

Born in 1920 in Buenos Aires, León Ferrari’s artistic practice encompassed the media of painting, collage, sculpture, poetry, and printmaking. Known internationally for his often-provocative social and political critiques, Ferrari made work that was highly critical of war, social inequality, discrimination, and abuses of power. In the 1950s, Ferrari traveled repeatedly to Italy, where he began making sculpture. In the early 1960s, he began exploring the connections between word and line in *Cuadros escritos* (Written Paintings) and *Dibujos escritos* (Written Drawings) and he continued these explorations throughout his career. These abstract “writings” on canvas and paper combine dry pastel, graphite, watercolor, and colored pencil to make lyrical, almost calligraphic imagery.

In the late 1960s, Ferrari participated in the collective known as Tucumán Arde. The group intended to draw attention to the conditions of the Tucumán Province through an intervention into the circuits of mass communication, countering the official news media of the Argentine dictatorship. During this period of increasing political activism, Ferrari published what would become a famous manifesto and call-to-arms for artists, in which he wrote, “Art is not beauty or novelty, art is effectiveness and disruption...” He continued throughout his career to pair a lyrical abstraction in sculpture, drawing, and painting, with a critical voice against political repression.

His work has been shown in major international exhibitions since the 1960s, and he has had solo exhibitions at Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (MAMBA), Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Museo

del Banco de la República de Bogotá, Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil in Mexico City, Pinacoteca do Estado do São Paulo, Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, and The Drawing Center in New York, among numerous other institutions.

Ferrari’s work is included in the collections of: The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, USA; Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY, USA; Casa de las Américas, Havana, Cuba; Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, Cuba; Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO), Miami, FL, USA; Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zürich, Switzerland; Davis Museum, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, USA; Diane & Bruce Halle Collection, Scottsdale, AZ, USA; Harvard Art Museum, The Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA, US; The Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX, USA; Museo Carrillo Gil, Mexico City, Mexico; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Bahía Blanca, Argentina; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Argentina; Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Argentina; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), TX, USA; The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, NY, USA; and Tate Modern, London, UK; among others.