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Reading •
Mirtha • *Dermisache*

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Reading Mirtha Dermisache

Textem Verlag

Regine Ehleiter

Between reading and viewing: The asemic writing of Mirtha Dermisache's artists' publications

From the late 1960s onwards, the Argentinian conceptual artist Mirtha Dermisache (1940–2012) produced numerous publications containing marks that resemble writing. Although their pages imitate familiar graphic formats, these marks do not convey semantic content. They have been described as illegible or "asemic" writing—a form of writing that, according to Peter Schwenger, "does not attempt to communicate any message other than its own nature as writing" and which, in essence, "we are seeing—not reading".[1] In the case of Dermisache's work, this statement calls for closer scrutiny, given the artist's decision to present her "asemic writing" on the pages and loose sheets of various forms of artists' publications: from postcards, letters, newspapers and posters to more extensive volumes, such as her first artist's book *Libro Nº 1* (1967). All reference familiar media of communication, thus inviting those who encounter them to engage in an act of *reading*. At the same time, the artist's spurning of legible content calls for a different mode of interaction, that of *viewing* the work, which straddles the contexts of literature and visual art.

Dermisache's challenge to this distinction is two-fold. Firstly, like any visual literature, her use of asemic writing engenders unorthodox modes of reception, such as seeing 'images' as 'words', and vice versa. While, in a regular text, symbols, letters, or words become representations of familiar meanings, the conventional ways in which we construct a mental 'picture' of a text, in which different textual elements are connected and form meaningful relations between each other, barely applies when reading asemic writing. While often presented in similar ways as texts, the connections between the pseudo-textual

1 Schwenger, Peter. *Asemic. The Art of Writing*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019, p. 7.

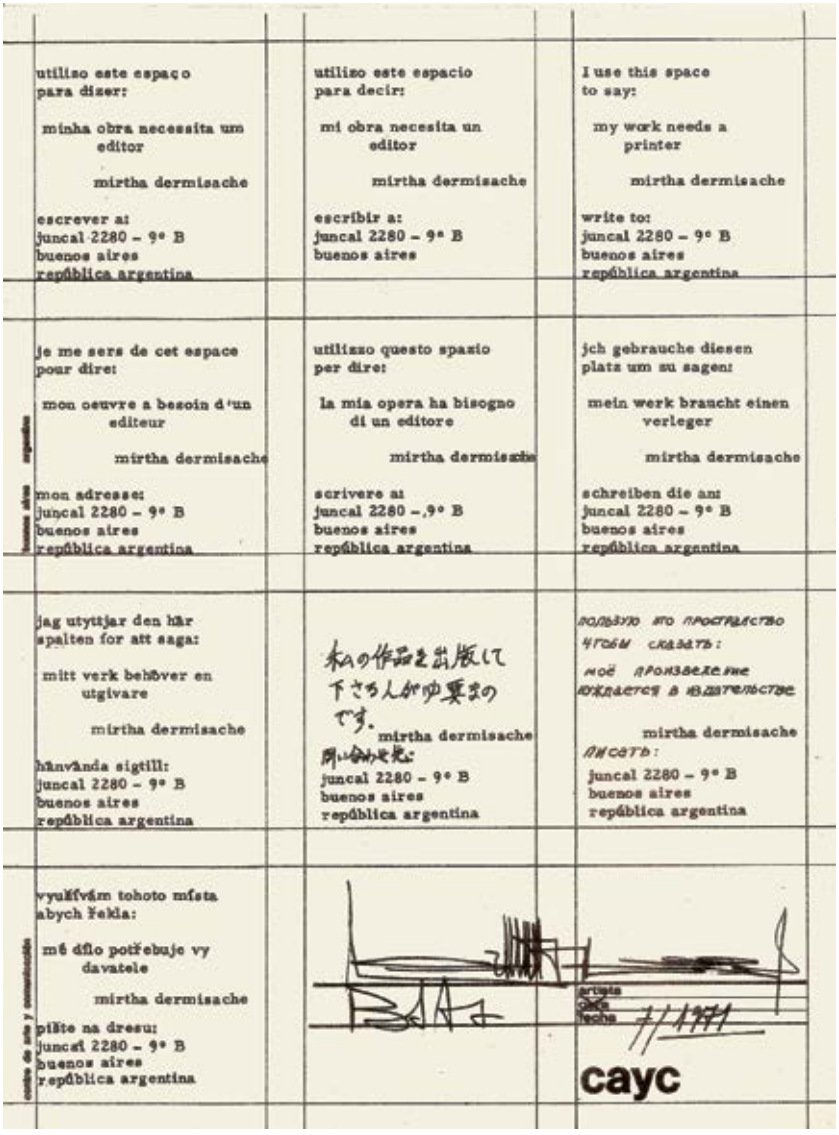
elements of asemic writing are visual and do not form a coherent, fixed system of relations, as would the text of a novel or story, or any text based on the use of signs that are decipherable according to a system based on customary usage.

Secondly, Dermisache contests the division between literature and the visual arts by presenting her work in the form of artists' publications, which, by definition, pit the interpretative strategies of reading and viewing against each other and question the recognised norms of production and reception.[2] It is this second aspect – Dermisache's use of artists' publications – that I would like to focus on in this paper, given that her choice of media and their histories and specificities in regard to the acts of viewing and reading have not been given sufficient attention in scholarship on her work to date. It seems crucial when dealing with asemic writing, which questions the act of reading, that, as Ward Tietz puts it, "the problem of reading artists' books is not the same one that we encounter in more uniform texts where viewing does not intercede and where a concept of reading comprehension would apply".[3] Reading artists' books by definition implies that we are "asked to sustain simultaneously two cognitive states" – that of viewing and that of reading the work.[4]

Similar to other forms of conceptual art, with its frequent use of language and visual systems, Dermisache's work seems "better suited for presentation in book form than on the walls of a gallery, simply by virtue of the intrinsic superiority of the book as a vehicle for this kind of information", as the artist book historian Clive Phillpot has observed.[5] Such work, particularly if conceived for display in publications, promised to "not [be] altered by the multiplication process", making it possible, in theory, to exhibit it "inexpensively and […] simultaneously around the globe".[6]

Dermisache understood the potential of using artists' publications as an alternative means of distributing her work. As she pointed out on several occasions, her interest was not in producing precious art objects to be collected and framed but to circulate them widely. Although most of her earliest books are unica, now in private collections, she

2 See Tietz, Ward. "Artists' Books: Between Viewing and Reading". *Journal of Artists' Books* (21), Spring 2007, pp. 17–26.
3 Tietz, "Artists' Books", p. 18.
4 Tietz, "Artists' Books", p. 18.
5 Phillpot, Clive. *Booktrek. Selected essays on artists' books (1972–2010)*. JRP Ringier, 2013, p. 38.
6 Phillpot, *Booktrek*, p. 38.



utilizo este espaço
para dizer:

minha obra necessita um
editor

mirtha dermisache

escrever a:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

utilizo este espacio
para decir:

mi obra necesita un
editor

mirtha dermisache

escribir a:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires

I use this space
to say:

my work needs a
printer

mirtha dermisache

write to:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

je me sers de cet espace
pour dire:

mon oeuvre a besoin d'un
editeur

mirtha dermisache

mon adresse:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

utilizzo questo spazio
per dire:

la mia opera ha bisogno
di un editore

mirtha dermisache

scrivere a:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

jch gebrauche diesen
platz um zu sagen:

mein werk braucht einen
verleger

mirtha dermisache

schreiben die an:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

jag utyttjar den här
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mitt verk behöver en
utgivare

mirtha dermisache

hänvända sigtill:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

私の作品を出版して
下さる人が必要なの
です。

mirtha dermisache

問い合わせ先:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

ПОЛЬЗУЮ ЯТО ПРОСТРАЛСТВО
ЧТОБЫ СКАЗАТЬ:

МОЁ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЕ
НУЖДАЕТСЯ В ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВЕ

mirtha dermisache

ПИСАТЬ:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

využívám tohoto místa
abych řekla:

mé dílo potřebuje vy
davatele

mirtha dermisache

píšte na dresu:
juncal 2280 – 9° B
buenos aires
república argentina

artista
firma
fecha 7/1971

cayc

Fig. 1: Mirtha Dermisache, artist's page in the catalogue for the exhibition *Arte de sistemas I*, 1971, 21 × 16.5 cm.

wanted them to exist in larger editions.[7] This more extensive circulation created, in her words,

> the only space adequate for the graphics to be read … I was radically opposed to putting them on the walls like a painting. There are people who saw the books and told me to take out the pages and put them in frames on the wall. I said no, this is not an engraving. It is not a painting. It has to be inside a book, to be read.[8]

Dermisache's contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition *Arte de sistemas I* (1971, fig. 1), organised by the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Art and Communications Centre, from here on: CAyC),[9] illustrates the keenness of her understanding of these mechanisms of international distribution.[10] In a site-specific 'page work' for the catalogue of the exhibition *Arte de sistemas I*, Dermisache took up the striking

7 See Andrade Kobayashi, Megumi. "'Yo los quiero como páginas de un libro': las escrituras ilegibles de Mirtha Dermisache". *Universum* 38 (2), 2023, pp. 455–485, online: doi.org/10.4067/s0718-23762023000200455

8 Mirtha Dermisache, cit. in: Rimmaudo, Annalisa and Giulia Lamoni. "Entrevista a Mirtha Dermisache", in: *Mirtha Dermisache. Publicaciones y Dispositivos Editoriales* [Mirtha Dermisache: Publications and Editorial Devices], exhibition catalogue, Pabellón de las Bellas Artes de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, 2011, online: hipermedula.org.

9 CAyC was a prominent exhibition space for contemporary art in Buenos Aires, founded by Jorge Glusberg in 1968. It played a central role in attempts to foster international cultural exchange and promote the dissemination of conceptual art by Argentinian artists abroad. See Herrera, María José and Mariana Marchesi. "The Centro de Arte y Comunicación: Its History". *The CAYC Files*, online: icaa.mfah.org.

10 Mirtha Dermisache participated in several exhibitions organised by CAyC, often showing artists' books, for instance in the 1971 exhibition *De la figuración al arte de sistemas* at the Camden Arts Centre in London. For *Arte de sistemas I*, held at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires in the same year, she also exhibited books dating from 1967 to 1970 and 14 letters from her series *Cartas*. Rimmaudo and Lamoni, "Entrevista", n.p.; Mezza, Cintia et al. "Mirtha Dermisache, Life and Work 1940–2012". *Mirtha Dermisache: Porque ¡yo escribo!*, p. 261. Based on Egidio Marzona's personal collection of CAyC publications, the author verified Mirtha Dermisache's involvement in the following seven publications, edited between 1971 and 1976: (1) Exh. cat. *Arte de Sistemas. Centro de Arte y Comunicación en el Museo de Arte Moderno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*, 1971; (2) Exh. cat. *Center of Art and Communication in Camden Arts Centre — London*, 1971; (3) Exh. cat. *Arte e Ideología. CAyC al Aire Libre. Arte de Sistemas* II, 1972; (4) Mirtha Dermisache, *Dermisache*, edited by Jorge Glusberg in Buenos Aires for CAyC, December 1973; (5) Exh. cat. *Kunstsystemen in Latijns-Amerika*, Internationaal Cultureel Centrum, Antwerp, 1974; (6) Exh. cat. *Art Systems in Latin America*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, December 1974; (7) Exh. cat. *América Latina 76*, Fundació Joan Miró, Parc de Montjuïc, Barcelona, 1976.

design of a series of newsletters that the CAyC sent regularly to artists and institutions internationally, beginning in 1970.[11] On a gridded page, she presented the following sentence in ten different languages: "I use this space to say: my work needs a printer",[12] followed by her name and postal address in Buenos Aires. Rather than calling for gallery representation or museum exposure, her main concern, in addressing the international readers of this catalogue, was to get her work printed and made available to an audience beyond the limits of Buenos Aires.

The use of the medium of publications promised impact beyond borders, offered opportunities to establish contacts, build transnational networks and contribute to the growing internationalisation of the art world and the flow of free communication in the 1960s and 70s. In addition, it was a tool for artists working under conditions of political oppression to reach audiences abroad. As Luis Camnitzer has noted: "In countries with repressive political regimes, dematerialization broke the stranglehold of the state in relation to the display of art. […] 'idea art' was easier to slip by the censors […] an affordable way for artists on the geographic margins to participate in international venues."[13]

It should be remembered that it was a perilous act for artists in Buenos Aires to explicitly dissent from the regime during the Argentinian military dictatorship of the 1970s. By voiding her publications of legible content, for which such formats would usually be the vehicle, Dermisache mimicked the emptiness of state propaganda, divested of its coercive disinformation. The use of the mail to distribute publications and ephemera created political freedom, as mail art operated independently of the exclusive distribution channels of the Western-dominated art industry. Dermisache's use of artists' publications enabled her to not only be part of a network of artists who exchanged works by mail internationally but was key to her fundamental ability to make her work visible.

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11 The CAyC newsletter had an exceptional design: with its lower left and upper right corners cut off, it created the illusion of a three-dimensional volume on a flat page. Printed in 900-plus editions on thin paper to fit several newsletters in an envelope, it contained programme announcements as well as reviews and artists' texts. It was sent, sometimes on a weekly basis, to international artists and institutions around the world.

12 It seems that 'printer' here was a poor English translation of 'publisher', given the other interpretations of the word as 'Verleger' (German), 'editeur' (French) and 'editor' (Spanish).

13 Camnitzer, Luis et al. "Introduction". *Global Conceptualism. Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exhibition catalogue, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999, pp. vii–xi, here p. xiii.

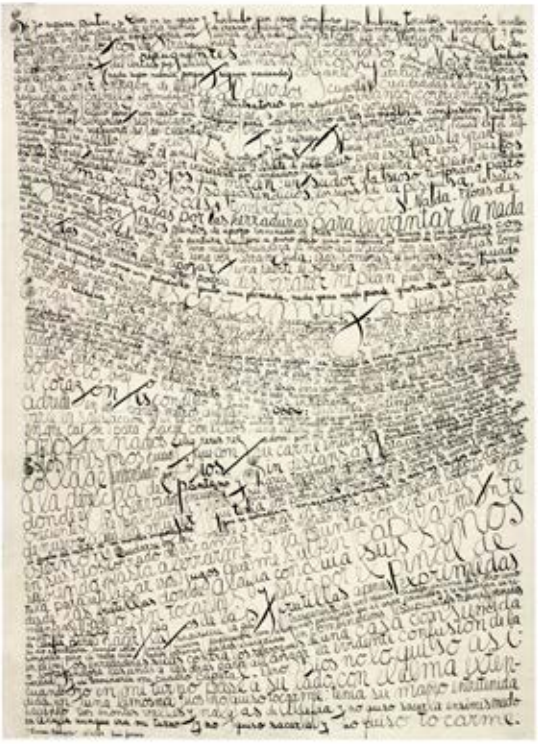


Fig. 2: León Ferrari, *Cuadro Escrito*, 1964, ink on paper, 66 × 48 cm. Eduardo F. Costantini Collection, Buenos Aires.

Like other conceptual artists operating contemporaneously in countries with repressive governments, she fluently navigated the border between visibility and invisibility, the sayable and the unsayable, engaging in acts of refusal that exposed as much as they concealed.[14] Similarly, her work resonates with her more immediate surroundings: in the early 1960s, Argentinian artist León Ferrari had begun to explore and challenge ideas about language and expressibility through his drawings, leading to his 1964 work *Cuadro Escrito* (*Written Painting*, fig. 2), in which painting transforms into words. It is surely not coincidental that the work of both artists emerged in the Buenos Aires of the 1960s, where they were building on a Latin-American literary tradition of "erratic writing", as literary scholar Julio Prieto has emphasised.[15] Unlike Dermisache, who insisted on working in the medium of artists' publications, Ferrari was not opposed to presenting his asemic writing "as paintings". Fernando Bruno elegantly summed up the difference between the two artists' work as follows: "[W]here Ferrari writes a painting, Dermisache paints a writing."[16]

In Argentina, the artistic appropriation of structuralist, semiotic and communicational theories gave rise to a form of mass media

14 Her work offers intriguing parallels to that of conceptual artists elsewhere, such as the Hungarian Endré Tot, who, like Dermisache, produced numerous artists' publications, or the Japanese artist Sunohara Toshiyuki, who shared with Tot a fascination with 'Zeros', the politics of refusal and the annihilation of meaning. A vast collection of Endré Tot's artists' publications can be accessed online on the website for the exhibition *Ich bin sehr glücklich, und du?*, shown at Galerie aKonzept, Berlin, from 19 January to 28 April 2024, online: ichbinsehrgluecklichunddu.com.

15 Prieto, Julio. "La línea pseudoalfabética: apuntes sobre lo ilegible en Mirtha Dermisache y León Ferrari" [The Pseudo-Alphabetical Line: Notes on the Unreadable in Mirtha Dermisache and León Ferrari]. *Cuadernos LIRICO* (21), 2020, online: doi.org/10.4000/lirico.9627.

16 Bruno, Fernando. "On Language and Its Limits: The Illegible Writings of Mirtha Dermisache". *Post. Notes on Art in a Global Context*, 14 Nov. 2018, online: post.moma.org.

art ('arte de los medios') that aimed to locate the work "inside mass media itself", echoing the "strong ideological and ethical profile" of Latin American conceptualism, as Mari Carmen Ramírez puts it.[17] The common impulse among artists based in Buenos Aires was, in Daniel R. Quiles' words, "to convert a given medium into information transmitted by another".[18] Dermisache's best known work, the newspaper *Diario Nº 1: Año 1* (fig. 3), serves as an example to illustrate this widespread interest in mass communication and analyse the specific ways in which 'viewing' and 'reading' are entangled in her artists' publications with asemic writing.

It was originally published in conjunction with the exhibition *Arte e ideología. Arte de sistemas II. CAyC al aire libre*, in September 1972. As with most of her works, its title references a common 'communication format', in this case a newspaper ('diario'). The first page of *Diario Nº 1: Año 1* has a rectangular section at the top, framed by a thin black line, which, in its centre, features a group of black strokes of varying length and width, with spaces between them. Below what appears to be the name of the publication, there is a more compact horizontal area with similar, albeit smaller and less cluttered, groupings. They suggest paratextual information, such as the date, the number of the issue, its place of publication and its price. The rest of the page is divided into six areas, each introduced by a 'headline' spanning between one and four lines, with more extensive blocks of 'text' arranged in columns below.

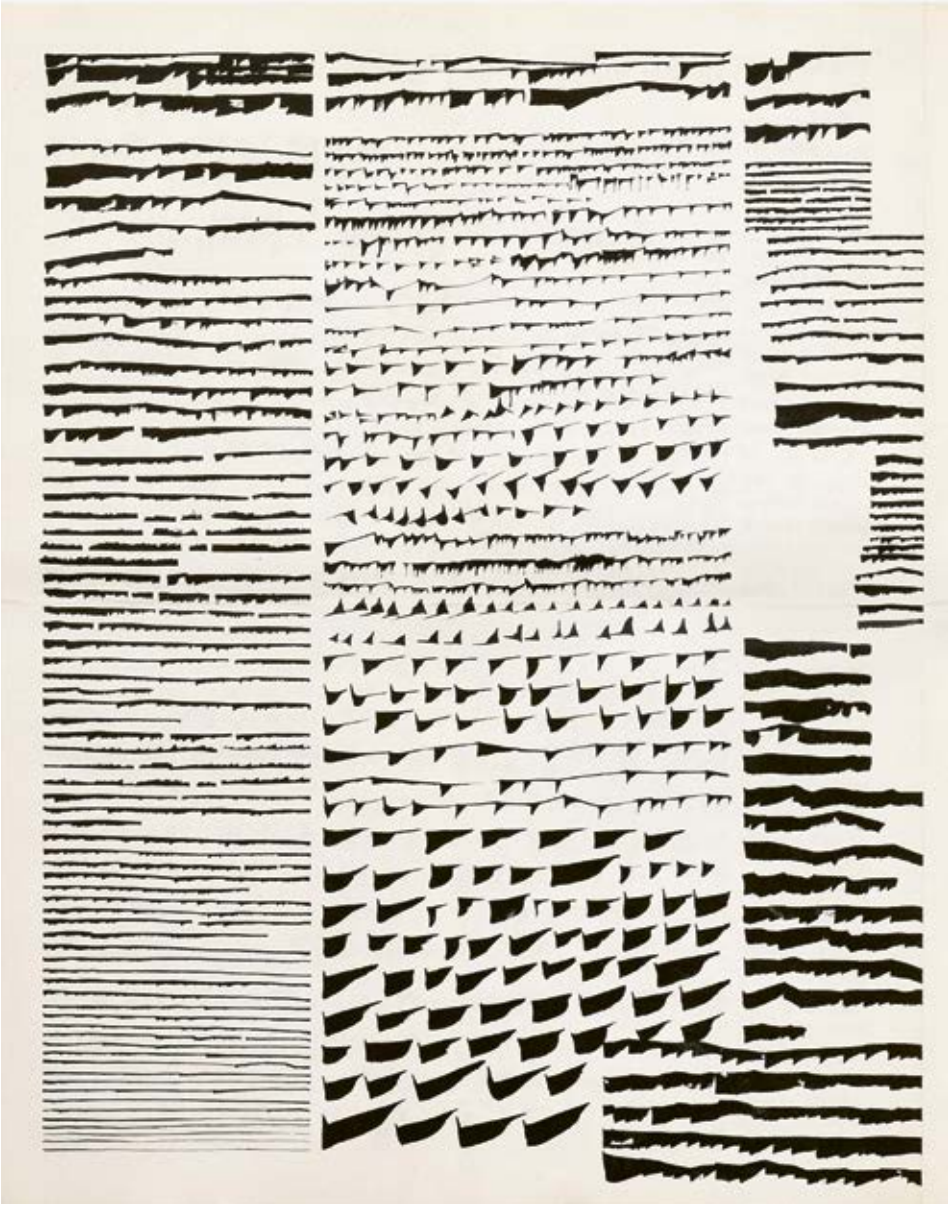
While none of the elements are decipherable, precluding the accumulation of semantic meaning, the combination of the marks, in a pictorial and material sense, along with the pages' relatively large format (47 × 36.6 cm) and the thinness of the paper, can be easily identified as a representation of newsprint. Rather than referring to a specific publication circulating at the time, such as *Clarín* or *La Nación* – the two most prominent newspapers in Argentina – or to *Río Negro*, with its iconic title set in large capital letters, *Diario Nº 1: Año 1* only alluded to the idea of these media through the formatting of its elements. In other words, viewing Dermisache's asemic writing in *Diario Nº 1: Año 1* conjures the image of a newspaper, while simultaneously disabling its function by denying the possibility of extracting linguistic information from it.

17 Ramírez, Mari Carmen. "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980". *Global Conceptualism*, pp. 53–71, here p. 66.

18 See Quiles, Daniel. "Mediate Media: Buenos Aires Conceptualism". Essay in conjunction with the exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*, MoMA, New York, 2015, online: moma.org.

Fig. 3: Mirtha Dermisache, *Diario Nº 1: Año 1*, 1972/1995, fifth edition, 47 × 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 (Buenos Aires, 1995); and a fifth edition by Mirtha Dermisache (Buenos Aires, 1995).

Fig. 3 (continued)



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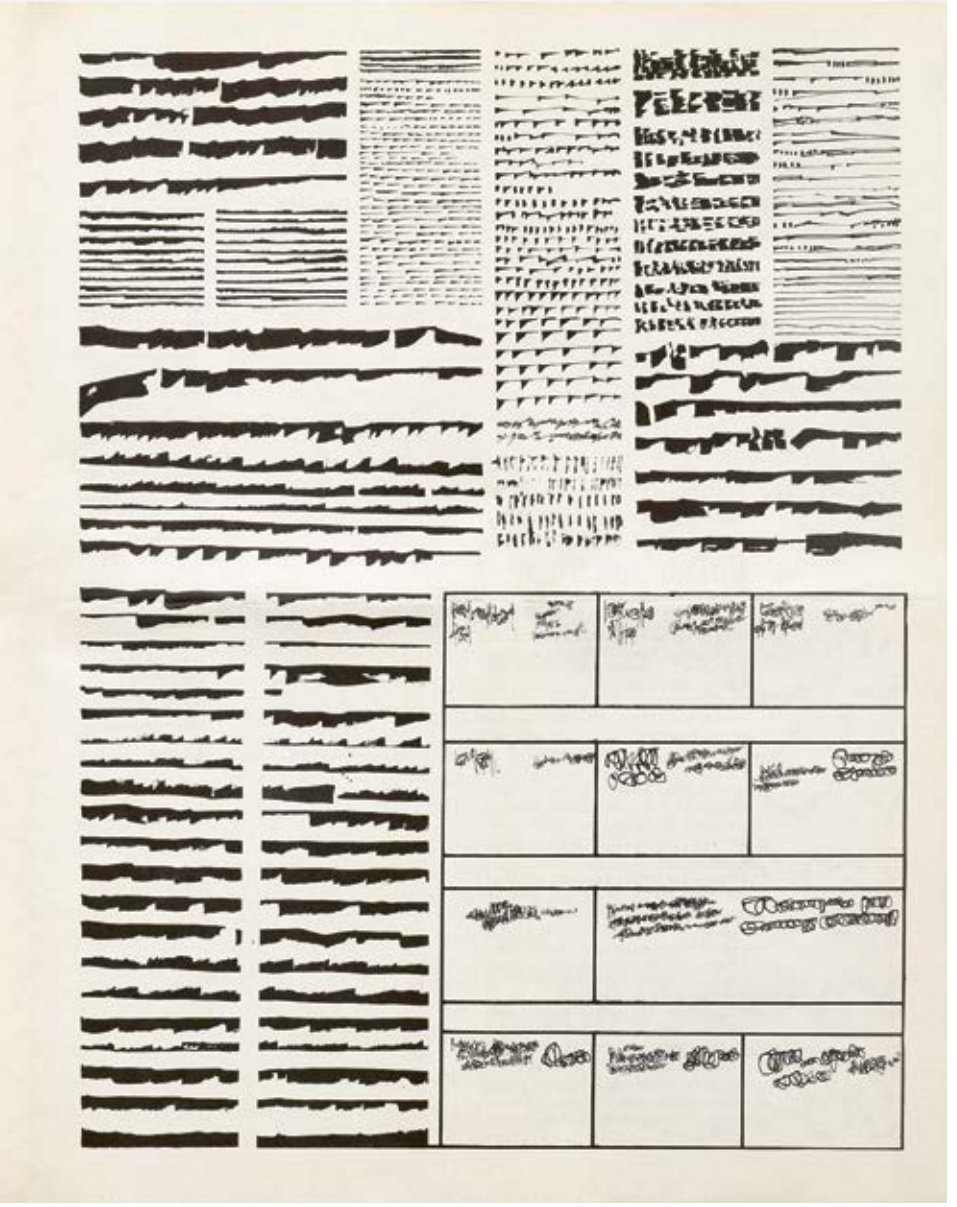

Fig. 3 (continued)

The tension arising from the specific interplay between content (non-textual representation) and form (pictorial and material representation as text) is characteristic of her work but also a feature of artists' publications per se, which makes the medium ideal for the presentation of asemic writing. As critic Tony Whitfield has pointed out, artists using the medium of books are faced with "[t]he problem of adequate content development, […] a process that requires the transformation of information, often arrived at through extensive research, into statements that are cogent in both form and content".[19] Reading artists' publications, which are in themselves works of art, implies not only looking at a single page or element but viewing them in total, as a sequence of pages in relation to others, and considering how textual elements – in this case, marks on paper that imitate text – are arranged on the page and how pictorial and material aspects interact.

Taking the example of *Diario Nº1: Año 1* once more: on the final 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 subsequently recaptured. On a navy airbase near the city of Trelew, they were forced 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. For *Diario Nº1: Año 1*, Dermisache transformed these facts – which one would expect to find in a newspaper but would have looked for in vain at the time – into an abstract visual allusion, only subtly echoing the events rather than spelling them out or depicting them figuratively. Below a large, black rectangle in the left column on the last page, a series of bold marks stretch across 16 lines of varying length. Not limited to the designated space of the column, they transgress the space of the adjacent column, partially overwriting its content and disrupting the editorial layout of the page.

Since the black square can be read as a symbol for death in art and religion across various cultural contexts and one can directly connect the 16 lines to the 16 executed prisoners in the narrative, *Diario Nº1: Año 1*, to some degree, forms an exception in Mirtha Dermisache's practice, as these visual representations offered a possibility for decipherment. For readers at the time, who would have known about the massacre, which had taken place only a month before the publication

19 Whitfield, Tony. "A Focus on World Reading". *FUSE*, May 1980, p. 232.

of newsprint,[20] the symbol would have been functional: they could have deciphered its meaning and linked it to contemporary events. Yet this window into specific meanings only appears on a formal level, not in the writing, which, as ever, carries no semantic meaning and therefore refers to nothing but itself. Dermisache reflected on this instance in an interview later in her life:

> 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.[21]

Signifying and non-signifying systems overlap in *Diario Nº1: Año 1* and access to the hidden significations depends on each reader. Dermisache herself emphasised that, in almost all her publications, she was "not saying a thing, not with the graphisms nor with the periodicals […]. The reading is in the hands of the one who picks it up […]."[22] How her asemic writing is 'read' therefore depends on the context in which and by whom it is encountered.

This applies to asemic writing in general: to any reader who is not able to read the respective writing systems, it will be hard to distinguish asemic from alphabetic or other forms of writing, as the artist Xu Bing's famous books featuring asemic writing that resembles written Chinese demonstrate.[23] Roland Barthes, with whom Dermisache corresponded, suggested that "every reading derives from trans-individual forms: the associations engendered by the letter […] are always caught up (sampled and inserted) by certain codes, certain languages, certain lists of stereotypes and based on subjective interpretation".[24]

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20 The 'Trelew massacre' took place in the early hours of 22 Aug. 1972. The exhibition *Arte e ideología. Arte de sistemas II. CAyC al aire libre*, in which Mirtha Dermisache presented *Diario Nº1: Año 1,* opened at CAyC on 23 Sept. 1972.

21 Dermisache, Mirtha. Cit. in: Rimmaudo and Lamoni, "Entrevista", n.p.

22 Dermisache, Mirtha. Interview with Zavala, Sofía. "En el terreno de la Libertad". Nov. 2011. Audio archive housed in the AMD. Cited in: *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, catalogue in conjunction with the exhibition *Porque iyo escribo!* at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, edited by Agustín Pérez Rubio in co-edition with Fundación Espigas, MALBA, 2017, p. 66.

23 See, for example: Bing, Xu. *Book from the Sky*, c. 1987–1991.

24 Barthes, Roland. "Reading Writing". *The Rustle of Language*. Transl. Richard Howard, The University of California Press, 1986 (first published in French, 1984), pp. 29–32, here p. 31.

Such contextual specificities are characteristic of artists' books to the extent that the resistance to being read in an orthodox manner—with a form as a mere vehicle for content—invests an artist's book with its specific meaning. This certainly applies to Dermisache's use of artists' publications: her refusal to present unambiguous statements, her allusion to well-known media of communication and her concurrent deviation from them, all contribute to the artistic value of her publications. The impossibility of reading them 'as usual' calls for reflection on the act of reading itself, the ways in which it is performed and what it is predicated on.

This self-reflexive impulse—typical of the conceptual movement, in which contemporary art turned inward to investigate its own character and forms of practice[25]—gave rise to a new type of artists' publication that emerged in the late 1960s and early 70s, when Dermisache produced her first books and ephemera. The Mexican artist Ulises Carrión, who, in the 1970s, ran the pioneering bookstore and gallery *Other Books and So* in Amsterdam, defined this new type of artists' publication as 'bookworks', meaning "books in which the book form, a coherent sequence of pages, determines conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work".[26] In a later text, he elaborated: "Bookworks must create specific conditions for reading. There must be a coherence between the possible, potential messages of the work […] its visible appearance […] and the manner of reading that these two elements impose, or suggest, or tolerate".[27]

Dermisache's asemic writing publications not only meet these criteria but might have inspired Carrión in developing some of his thoughts. In 1978, Carrión invited her to exhibit in his 'bookshop-gallery'.[28] That same year, he prominently featured a postcard Dermisache had sent him in his monthly journal *Ephemera* (fig. 4). It was part of her *4 Cartes postales* (1978), a set of four postcards published by Guy

25 This is evident in statements such as "being an artist now means to question the nature of art" by the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth. Kosuth, Joseph. "Art After Philosophy". *Studio International* (178), Oct. 1969, pp. 134–137, here p. 135.

26 Carrión, Ulises. "Bookworks Revisited". *The Print Collector's Newsletter* (11/1), Mar.–Apr. 1980, p. 8.

27 Carrión, Ulises. *Quant aux livres—On Books*, Heros-Limite, 1997, p. 169.

28 Mirtha Dermisache could not be present but had left Schraenen "many of her original works and books on consignment", which is why Schraenen organised the exhibition in her absence and on her behalf.
Mirtha Dermisache and Ulises Carrión met when he was invited to give a lecture on "The New Art of Making Books" at the CAyC and stayed at her home in Buenos Aires.
See Schraenen, Guy. "A Transatlantic Affair". *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!,* pp. 33–47, here p. 36.

Fig. 4: *Ephemera* magazine, year 8, no. 8, June 1978, p. 2.

Schraenen editions.[29] But reprinting the postcard reduced Dermisache's work to an illustration, a fragmentary documentation of the actual work, voiding it of the very "conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work". Although on a textual level its contents can be 'read', to experience the work necessitates a different mode of reception, involving physical contact. One would need to hold this enigmatic object, to turn it around in surprise or puzzlement, given its simultaneous status as a postcard and a square piece of printed paper, devoid of content and message (except for the legible address of the recipient). The postcards of Dermisache's *Postal* series are characteristic of the new kind of artists' publication, which were works of art in published form that drew on the structure of the publication itself for their artistic statement.[30]

Dermisache's asemic writing is presented in a form in which we expect to find linguistic content—a content that the artist deliberately denies, thus echoing the suppression (censorship) and shortage (mass media) of information under the rule of Argentina's military regime in form rather than direct political content. The ostensibly innocent form of her work via the display of (non-)information presented on the pages of artist's publications becomes the source of its subversive character. This focus on form corresponds to a new type of media-reflexive artists' publication predicated on the structure of a book as a significant part of its content. Asemic writing's denial of legible content for the benefit of form finds its counterpart in the media-reflexive artists' publication, which must be approached through the dual modes of reading and viewing, with the one necessitating the other.

29 *Ephemera* (year 8, no. 8), Jun. 1978, p. 2.

30 This is loosely based on the definition of 'bookworks' brought forward by Clive Phillpot in several of his publications: see Phillpot, *Booktrek*; Lauf, Cornelia and Clive Phillpot (eds.), *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books*. Distributed Art Publishers: American Federation of Arts, 1998.

Megumi Andrade Kobayashi

Reading an asemic artist's book: Libro Nº 1, 1972 *by Mirtha Dermisache*

The Argentinian artist Mirtha Dermisache (1940–2012) consistently emphasised the importance of having her books published and disseminated. Despite this, it is notable that she often rejected the use of peritexts, a key component of the traditional book form. The peritextual concept, introduced by literary theorist Gérard Genette, refers to the array of verbal and non-verbal elements that accompany a literary text, supporting its presence and ensuring its reception as a book.[1] One of these elements is the peritext, which is a materialised message that "necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance": author's name, title, legal page, dedications, epigraphs, preface, intertitles, notes, table of contents, colophon, etc. According to Genette, we recognise a book as a book largely because of the existence of paratexts and peritexts. In fact, they enable "a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public".[2]

What I find particularly interesting is that, despite the absence of peritextuality, it is difficult to question the bookish nature of Dermisache's work. I believe that this is due to an idea that seems central to Dermisache's artistic practice: her illegible writings can be understood as a system of communication and artistic exchange that challenges and interrogates the traditional mechanisms of communication, which rely on the mere transmission of information and position the reader/spectator as a passive receiver. Both the titles and the visual and material characteristics of these works—which configure a wide and varied scriptural vocabulary—form a lure that

1 Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*. Transl. Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge University Press, 1997 (first published in French, 1987), p. 3.

2 Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 3.

forces us to recognise them in their textual and book quality. In addition, Dermisache's awareness of the processes of book circulation led her to devise instances that would lead and encourage a reading experience. This allows us to accept, without much resistance, that a set of graphics bound and protected by a cover is in fact a book, despite its unique condition, despite containing asemic writings only on the front of each page, in most cases, and despite not having a title or an author on the cover.

If we take a closer look, most of the books Dermisache produced during her lifetime, especially in the 1960s and 70s, do not have these central features of what we conventionally understand as 'books'. Regarding these disruptions, her *Libro Nº 1, 1972* is quite particular. In addition to omitting peritexts in its original edition, it simultaneously challenges the conventions of both writing and drawing. As we can see, in this book she inverts the usual direction in which the strokes are drawn (fig. 1).

Instead of a line—visible or not—that acts as a guide from which each graphism is built upwards, this functions as an upper limit. This generates a series of horizons from which lines descend, and, by accumulating, they form spots, each different from the previous one. I am interested in pointing out the inverted nature of the graphics, as normally horizontal stripes tend to function, in terms of composition, as a representation of a ground on which figures are held. It is not common to write or draw by moving the pencil—or any other writing instrument—in a downward direction. The fact that Dermisache abandons the ground of horizontality is deeply meaningful because, in doing so, as we have already seen, she challenges the conventions of both writing and drawing.

Although the strokes in this book do not allow us to guess in which direction she drew them (either from left to right or from top to bottom), what does seem evident to me is the special attention to detail in each one of the pages. From its appearance, it is likely that she used a marker or a felt-tip pen, an instrument that, in addition to housing its own ink, has a felt or sponge tip that is responsible for distributing the ink evenly. I am paying special attention to this detail because a felt-tip pen tends to leave a semicircular imprint at the end of each line, particularly if the hand movement is accurately stopped and carefully lifted from the paper. These semicircles are especially visible if the tip of the marker is more than a millimetre in diameter, as is undoubtedly the case in *Libro Nº 1, 1972*. Considering this, the end of each line shows precise and careful workmanship, a fact that

Fig 1: Mirtha Dermisache, *Libro Nº 1, 1972*, 1972, ink on paper, single copy of 42 pages, 37 images, 28, 5 × 23.5 cm.

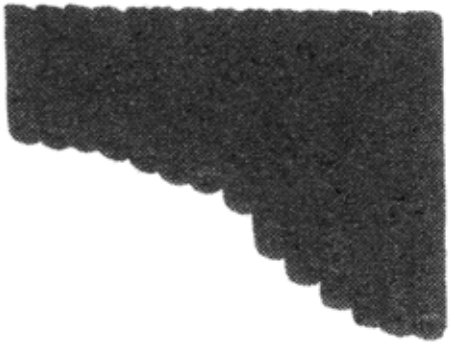


Fig. 2 [detail]

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5 [detail]

Fig 2–5: Mirtha Dermisache, *Libro Nº 1, 1972*, 1972, ink on paper, single copy of 42 pages, 37 images, 28.5 × 23.5 cm.

can be verified when observing any of the larger figures. For example, in the next image, its rigorous verticality is striking (fig.2).

I find it important to note that, despite being able to do so, Dermisache resisted moving the marker in other directions, which would have facilitated the composition of these black spots. In other words, she avoids painting their interior as if they were drawings and not writings. She insists on the fact that they are lines, which, instead of delimiting figures, configure strokes.

Each page of *Libro Nº 1, 1972* is composed of a variable number of lines and each line has spots with different attributes: brief, extensive, regular, irregular, prominent or discrete (fig. 3). Although it is evident that the book is composed in the same style from beginning to end, the degree of diversity that exists between each page is such that it creates a distancing from basic conventions of written language.

As we saw in the first image, instead of seven relatively uniform lines, there are five in this last image, one of them clearly leading the figure, which is at odds with the relative evenness of all conventional writing. Moreover, as in Dermisache's other works, there are no periods, commas, accents or other orthographic signs. In spite of this, some blank spaces imply the existence of paragraphs, which suddenly brings us back to the field of textuality (fig. 4).

As I went through the pages of this book from beginning to end, I noticed subtle variations that break the upper levelness of each stain, as we shall see below (fig. 5).

This sort of anomaly is repeated in a total of ten out of thirty-seven pages. Interestingly, they begin to appear progressively from page twelve, which could be interpreted as a subtle disintegration of the very system that Dermisache builds and exhausts within the same book.[3]

Dermisache comments on this disintegration in an interview from 1970: "If someone wants to stick one of those pages to the wall, let him tear it up, let him give his gesture the sense of tearing a page out of a book and putting it someplace else."[4] This position is particularly insightful regarding an issue that seems significant to me in

3 Even though they are not numbered, these variations appear on the following pages: 12, 19, 21, 22, 24, 28, 34, 36 and 37.

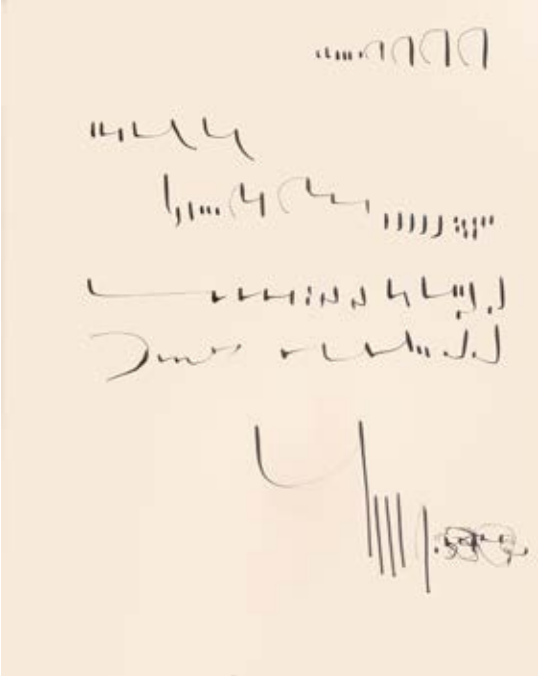
4 Cozarinsky, Edgardo. "Un grado cero de la escritura". *Panorama* 7 (156), 1970, p. 51. Own translation. Original: "Si alguien quiere pegar una de esas páginas en la pared, que la rompa, que le dé a su gesto el sentido de arrancar una página de un libro y ponerla en otro lado."

Dermisache's work: the book is a format that weakens the image status of her graphisms. The wall limits the circulation of her writings, but it also positions her work in the spectrum of observation rather than reading and interaction.

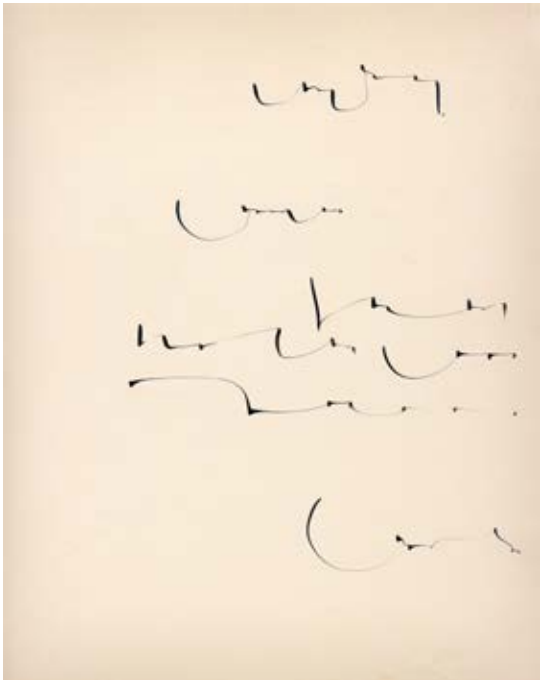
There are several 'againsts' in Mirtha Dermisache's graphic work: against learned language, against the conventional nature of the formats she imitates and against the idea of the signature as a signal of authorship and guarantor of value.[5] I might also add here: against the unique work of art. This, however, remains somewhat ambiguous since, despite her desire for multiplication, her writings had to circulate as unique objects for decades. Although peritexts are often omitted or replaced within these ambiguities, this does not lessen her work's capacity to evoke textual and book-like recognitions, thus creating reading experiences that are always open and co-creative. Each of Dermisache's illegible writings was conceived to be part of a system of production, circulation and communication, ideally existing in a continuous process of elaboration and re-elaboration. In this brief essay, I have sought to engage in this ongoing process: by examining the uniqueness of her pages and closely reading her texts, I accept the invitation extended by Mirtha Dermisache's silent art.

5 I discuss these issues in greater depth in my article: "'Yo los quiero como páginas de un libro': las escrituras ilegibles de Mirtha Dermisache". *Universum* 38 (2), 2023, pp. 455–485, online: doi.org/10.4067/s0718-23762023000200455.

Barbara Bausch
Reading, unlearned. Mirtha Dermisache's Cartas



Mirtha Dermisache, *Sin título (Carta)*, 1970, ink on paper, 28 × 22.9 cm.



Mirtha Dermisache, *Sin título (Carta)*, c. 1970, ink on paper, 28 × 22.9 cm.

Once we have read the titles of these two works by Mirtha Dermisache, we no longer simply see them as pieces of paper with indecipherable writing on them but as *cartas*, letters. The letter is a textual genre that can be immediately identified by its visual structure:[1] While a letter's

1 Cf. Rühl, Meike. "Der Pakt mit dem Adressaten: Kommunikation und Kommentar in Brief und Epigramm". *Brief und Epigramm: Bezüge und Wechselwirkungen zwischen zwei Textsorten in Antike und Mittelalter*, edited by Thorsten Fögen and Nina Mindt, De Gruyter, 2024, pp. 105–128, p. 109. On the spatial organisation regarding the typographic dispositive of the letter, see also Drügh, Heinz. "Topologie". *Der Brief – Ereignis und Objekt*, edited by Anne Bohnenkamp and Waltraud Wiethölter, Stroemfeld, 2008, pp. 99–116.

content can be chosen freely, its form is defined by distinctive criteria.[2] An address is one such characteristic, which is not limited to the exterior, such as the envelope, but also appears in the text of the letter itself by including the place, date, form of address, standard phrases for opening and closing, and the signature. We always write a letter with the absent addressee in mind, who reads it at a later point in time – through its spatial arrangement of writing on paper, the letter sets a "long-distance relationship" in motion.[3] However, if a letter as a medium of communication is defined by its writtenness and therefore relies on being read, the first question that must be asked is: can we even speak of 'reading' in relation to Dermisache's letters?

REMARKS ON READING

We commonly understand 'reading' as a complex mental technique that includes the visual recognition of written signs, the actualisation of the sound image of words and the comprehension of their meaning. Reading is one of the fundamental cultural techniques of modern societies and is therefore a skill that must be purposefully acquired. In writing cultures, once learned, reading modulates our relationship to ourselves and the world: it creates connections across time and space and is one site of society's understanding of itself.[4]

Yet, at the same time, reading is a "black box" that is difficult to

2 Cf. Rühl, "Der Pakt mit dem Adressaten", p. 125; Fögen, Thorsten, and Nina Mindt. "Einleitung". *Brief und Epigramm*, edited by Thorsten Fögen and Nina Mindt, pp. 1–20, p. 2 and 5.

3 Cf. Ehlich, Konrad. "Eine kurze Pragmatik des Briefs". *Fontanes Briefe ediert*, edited by Hanna Delf von Wolzogen and Rainer Falke, Königshausen & Neumann, 2014, pp. 14–35, p. 19 and 23; Thiedeke, Udo. "Der Brief als individualmediale Kommunikationsform: Eine mediensoziologische Beobachtung". *Handbuch Brief: Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, edited by Marie I. Matthews-Schlinzig, Jörg Schuster, Gesa Steinbrink and Jochen Strobel, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 187–202, pp. 195–197, quotation p. 197: "Die mediale Kommunikationsform des Briefes bringt auch die Mitteilung selbst in die Form einer adressierten Fernbeziehung."

4 Cf. ex. Otto, Isabel-Dorothea. "Leser". *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik Online*, edited by Gert Ueding, De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 170–171; Honold, Alexander, and Rolf Parr. "Einleitung: Lesen – literatur-, kultur- und medienwissenschaftlich". *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Lese*n, edited by Rolf Parr and Alexander Honold, De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 3–26; Griem, Julika. *Szenen des Lesens: Schauplätze einer gesellschaftlichen Selbstverständigung*, transcript, 2021.

fully apprehend[5] and when we do, then only "in flagrante".[6] The act of reading is so automatic for literate users of writing that, as Andrea Polaschegg notes, it is almost impossible to distinguish between seeing the shapes of the written signs and deciphering them, between the written and the read.[7] This is precisely where the *un*readable becomes interesting. When we look at Mirtha Dermisache's letters, reading as deciphering is not possible. Nevertheless, by ostensibly presenting what appears to be writing, the *Cartas* simultaneously demand to be read: they expose writing's "fundamental promise of communication".[8]

Successful reading operates in the mode of 'looking through', as a process in which we look 'through the written signs' to their meaning. In obstructing the comprehension of meaning, by contrast, the sensory aspect of reception and thus the mode of 'looking at' becomes foregrounded.[9] The writing disappoints our expectation that it is a transparent medium for transporting information – it loses

5 Aust, Hugo. *Lesen: Überlegungen zum sprachlichen Verstehen*. De Gruyter, 2011 [1983], p. 235: "Allgemein gesprochen, handelt es sich im Fall des Lesens um eine 'black box'". See also Darnton, Robert. *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History*, Norton and Norton, 1990, p. 155.

6 von Herrmann, Hans-Christian, and Jeannie Moser. "Nachwort". *Lesen: Ein Handapparat*, edited by Hans-Christian von Herrmann and Jeannie Moser, Klostermann, 2015, pp. 227–231, p. 230: "Die in diesem Band […] zusammengestellten Beiträge teilen die Auffassung, dass dem Lesen nur in flagranti auf die Spur zu kommen ist."

7 See Polaschegg, Andrea. "Enigmatische Ästhetik: Zur Kulturgeschichte unlesbarer Schrift und ihrer künstlerischen Transformation". *Schreiben als Ereignis: Künste und Kulturen der Schrift*, edited by Jutta Müller-Tamm, Caroline Schubert and Klaus U. Werner, Fink, 2018, pp. 173–197, pp. 176–181, in particular p. 181; Aeberhard, Simon. "Unlesbarkeit". *Lesen*, edited by Rolf Parr and Alexander Honold, pp. 194–210, p. 194.

8 Müller-Tamm, Jutta, Caroline Schubert, and Klaus U. Werner. "Einleitung". *Schreiben als Ereignis*, edited by Jutta Müller-Tamm et al., pp. 1–14, p. 6: "Phänomene von Unlesbarkeit, ihre Bedingungen und Folgen bergen jedoch gerade ein großes Forschungspotenzial: Unlesbarkeit unterläuft auf irritierende Weise das fundamentale Kommunikationsversprechen der Schrift."
See also Polaschegg, "Enigmatische Ästhetik", pp. 176–177 and, specifically on Dermisache, Gache, Belén. "Reflections on Asemic Writing: The Case of Mirtha Dermisache". *Mirtha Dermisache: Because I Write!*, catalogue in conjunction with the exhibition *Porque iyo escribo!* at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, edited by Agustín Pérez Rubio in co-edition with Fundación Espigas, MALBA, 2017, pp. 15–30, p. 18.

9 For seminal reflections cf. Jäger, Ludwig. "Störung und Transparenz: Skizze zur performativen Logik des Medialen". *Performativität und Medialität*, edited by Sybille Krämer, Fink, 2004, pp. 35–73; on asemic writing in particular: Schwenger, Peter. *Asemic: The Art of Writing*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019, in particular p. 5.

its referential function.[10] Instead, it reveals itself in its intransparent materiality. As a visual form, as a line on a background and, in the case of the *Cartas*, as thicker and thinner traces of ink on paper. Instead of reading, we see something written. Something written that refuses to conform to the conventions, rules and norms constituting any system of writing—and which thus closes itself off to being read in the conventional sense.[11]

LOOKING AT LETTERS

"All my works", wrote Mirtha Dermisache, "create some tension between the communication formats offering a stable framework and the act of writing, which provides the unstable dimension."[12] Let us return to this "framework" for a moment, the format, namely the form of the letter. As a written "medium of a time-delayed communication that takes place across a spatial distance", a letter contains all the elements necessary for communication: sender and recipient, a message in a specific code or medium, and (in the standard opening and closing phrases), the beginning and end of an utterance. The letter, which is "in equal measure a text, a material object and an event/act" is therefore an ideal model for reflecting communication.[13]

This applies even more so to Dermisache's letters, which interfere with our expectations of the medium in several ways. Although they are labelled and recognisable as letters, they ultimately contain neither a decipherable linguistic message, nor are they dated or addressed to one or several recipients. They are transportable, but

10 Cf. Wende, Waltraud 'W.'. "Sehtexte—oder: Vom Körper der Sprache". *Über den Umgang mit der Schrift*, edited by Waltraud 'W.' Wende, Könighausen & Neumann, 2002, pp. 302–335, p. 330; Polaschegg, "Enigmatische Ästhetik", p. 177f.

11 Cf. Wende, "Sehtexte", p. 303, 315 and 321; and Schwenger, *Asemic*, p. 7. On reading vs. seeing from the perspective of literary studies cf. the recent volume Coch, Charlotte, Torsten Hahn and Nicolas Pethes, editors. *Lesen / Sehen: Literatur als wahrnehmbare Kommunikation*, transcript, 2023. On Dermisache's texts cf. Gache, "Reflections on Asemic Writing", p. 30.

12 Dermisache, Mirtha. "Artist's Statement". Gallery P420, September 2011, quoted in Schwenger, *Asemic*, p. 10.

13 Both quotations: Matthews-Schlinzig, Marie I., Jörg Schuster, Gesa Steinbrink and Jochen Strobel. "Vorwort". *Handbuch Brief*, edited by Marie I. Matthews-Schlinzig et al., pp. XI–XIV, p. XI: "Der Brief ist gleichermaßen Text, materiales Objekt und Ereignis/Handlung. Er ist Medium einer zeitversetzten, über eine räumliche Distanz hinweg erfolgenden und meist persönlichen schriftlichen Kommunikation." On the letter as model for communication cf. Rühl, "Der Pakt mit dem Adressaten", p. 110.

cannot be sent. When we consider the reflection of communication in Dermisache's *Cartas* in the historical context of when they were created – the military dictatorship in Argentina in the 1970s – they can be understood as a critical indication of the necessity of using code for even the most private exchanges.[14] The lack of addressee becomes a comment on the fact that under surveillance and the censorship of letters, the sender loses control entirely over who a letter is addressed to and who will read it. Writing asemic, illegible letters becomes the wordless expression of the inability to communicate freely. Belén Gache comments: "Asemic writing seems to mean that which words cannot convey." As a rebellion against established language, it is also directed against the hegemonic cultural, social and political system.[15]

However, it seems to me that the choice of the letter as a "stable framework" goes beyond this historical context. I would like to emphasise yet another feature of the medium of communication that is in focus here. A 'real' – in other words, private – handwritten letter on the one hand points to "social closeness despite distance", which is linked to the expectation of intimacy and authenticity.[16] On the other hand, because of its two main characteristics – the written form (as opposed to a conversation, which allows for questions to be asked) and the time delay (as opposed to the immediacy of oral communication)[17] – the letter always also opens up a space of ambiguity and thus for imagination.[18] Dermisache's letters tap into the potential of this particular aspect. By evoking intimate, authentic communication while withholding its content, the *Cartas* shift the central processes of epistolary communication *per se* into focus – namely: reflective observation, filling in gaps and interpretation.[19] They therefore invite us to

14 Cf. (with reference to Niklas Luhmann) Thiedeke, "Der Brief als individualmediale Kommunikationsform", p. 198f. On Dermisache's political engagement cf. Mezza, Cintia, Cecilia Iida and Ana Raviña. "Mirtha Dermisache, Life and Work 1940–2012". *Mirtha Dermisache*, edited by Agustín Pérez Rubio, pp. 255–289, p. 267.

15 Gache, "Reflections on Asemic Writing", quotation p. 18, cf. also pp. 25–29.

16 Cf. Höflich, Joachim R. "Kommunikationswissenschaft". *Handbuch Brief*, edited by Marie I. Matthews-Schlinzig et al., pp. 96–107, pp. 100–103, on handwritten letters: p. 105; Thiedeke, "Der Brief als individualmediale Kommunikationsform", direct quote p. 198: "Die individualmediale Form der Briefkommunikation lässt Erwartungen sozialer Nähe trotz Distanz zu."

17 Cf. Nickisch, Reinhard M. G. *Brief.* Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1991, p. 11f.

18 Cf. Vellusig, Robert. *Schriftliche Gespräche. Briefkultur im 18. Jahrhundert.* Böhlau, 2000, p. 136; Höflich, "Kommunikationswissenschaft", p. 98.

19 Cf. Thiedeke, "Der Brief als individualmediale Kommunikationsform", p. 197.

specifically reflect on the role of the recipient. For what is invoked with the letter as "frame" is ultimately the expectation of an answer.[20]

READINGWORK AND 'MÉTA-LECTURE'

In 1971, Roland Barthes described Dermisache's "illegible writing" as presenting "neither a specific message nor a contingent form of expression but, rather, the idea, the essence, of writing".[21] I would like to invert this way of looking at it – for in my view, illegible writing reveals at least just as much the essence of *reading*. Asemic writing emphasises a fundamental characteristic of writing and text, namely their potentiality, which is dependent on an actualisation by a reader. Without being read, as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, a text would only consist of "black marks on paper"; Roland Barthes grasped reading as a collaborative activity in the literal sense of the word: as "a form of work".[22] Dermisache herself described her graphisms as "'empty structure'" that is only "filled when the 'reader' comes along".[23]

However, the asemic 'text' produced by the graphisms arranged in a linear form is not merely an invitation to play freely with the production of meaning. If reading fails as an act of deciphering and receiving information, the materiality and mediality of what is being looked at, as well as reading itself as a psycho-physiological process, move to the forefront. According to Andrea Polaschegg, the "special promise of knowledge" contained within illegible pieces of writing is that, in view of the fact that they cannot be understood, they reveal the "specific interrelationship" between sensory perception and reading as a (failing) decoding process.[24] Looking at signs that resist our desire

20 On the letter as gift and the associated expectation of reciprocity cf. Strobel, Jochen. "Der Brief als Gabe". *Handbuch Brief*, edited by Marie I. Matthews-Schlinzig et al., pp. 254–268.

21 Letter from Roland Barthes, Paris, March 28, 1971, quoted in Mezza, Iida and Raviña, "Mirtha Dermisache", pp. 263f.

22 Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What is Literature?* Transl. Bernard Frechtman, Philosophical Library, 1949 (first published in French, 1948), p. 41; Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Transl. Richard Miller, Blackwell, 2002 (first published in French, 1970), p. 10.

23 Mirtha Dermisache's application for the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship 1971, quoted in Mezza, Iida and Raviña, "Mirtha Dermisache", p. 265. On reading asemic texts and their "invitation to play" (and play "at a high level, the level of art"), see also the last chapter in Schwenger, *Asemic*, pp. 137–150, quotation p. 149.

24 Polaschegg, "Enigmatische Ästhetik", p. 179: "Das besondere Erkenntnisversprechen des Phänomens unlesbarer Schriften für die Schrifttheorie liegt darin, dass an ihm eine spezifische Wechselbeziehung zwischen der Aisthesis der Schrift und der Dimension des (Nicht-)Verstehens beobachtbar wird, die zwar bei jedem Schriftgebrauch auf die eine oder andere Weise wirksam wird, sich aber gemeinhin der Analyse entzieht."

for legibility refers us back to the fundamental biographical experience of the state before the laboriously acquired ability to read.[25] Via our attempts to read, we reenact that which Dermisache described as the core of her artistic process: "to sit down to write, to unlearn".[26] When faced with her un-writing, it is we who are unlearning—unlearning how to read in the most productive way. Or, as the artist wrote about her work conversely: "Anyone can read it as well as anyone."[27] Mirtha Dermisache's letters have converted the knowledge of reading into their form—a form that is the challenge of observing oneself in the act of reading, a "Méta-lecture".[28]

To close, I would like to at least hint at one last twist that this line of argument implies. If we take the interruption of automatic processes of perception and the disruption of understanding to be central characteristics of art, then the illegible writing of the *Cartas* isn't just exposing the essence of reading and reflecting communication in general but also, more specifically, the nature of communication through art. Niklas Luhmann argues that, although the way in which art communicates does depend on language, it avoids "the routines involved

25 Polaschegg, "Enigmatische Ästhetik", p. 181.

26 Mirtha Dermisache quoted in Pomies, Julia. "Mirtha Dermisache. El mensaje es la accion", *Uno Mismo* 105 (1992), p. 49, translation quoted in Mezza, lida and Raviña, "Mirtha Dermisache", p. 259. In another interview, Dermisache describes her artistic process as a method of finding "ways of expressing oneself": "It wasn't easy to get rid of the terminology I had learned, to learn to unlearn what was learned as language." Mirtha Dermisache. "En el terreno de la Libertad". Interview with Sofia Zavala, November 2011. Audio archive housed in the AMD, quoted in Pérez Rubio, Agustín. "Methodology for Free Expression". *Mirtha Dermisache*, edited by Agustín Pérez Rubio, pp. 65–77, p. 66. Agustín Pérez Rubio stresses how important the idea and the process of unlearning was for Dermisache's work as a "search for free expression", including her pedagogical work, "understood as experiment in a reversal of learning: 'unlearning' certain ideas that hinder free creative expression" (p. 65). Only a "subsequent unlearning" of e.g. "conventional forms and structures of text", states Rubio, "could make way for free expression of forms and, perhaps, an 'other' language" (p. 72).

27 Interview statement in Rimmaudo, Annalisa and Giulia Lamoni. "Entrevista a Mirtha Dermisache". *Mirtha Dermisache. Publicaciones y dispositivos editoriales,* exhibition catalogue edited by the Pabellón de las Bellas Artes de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, 2011, hipermedula.org. English translation quoted in Durgin, Patrick. "Witness Mirtha Demirsache: Being Recognized by a Stranger". *Jacket2*, September 8, 2014, online: jacket2.org.

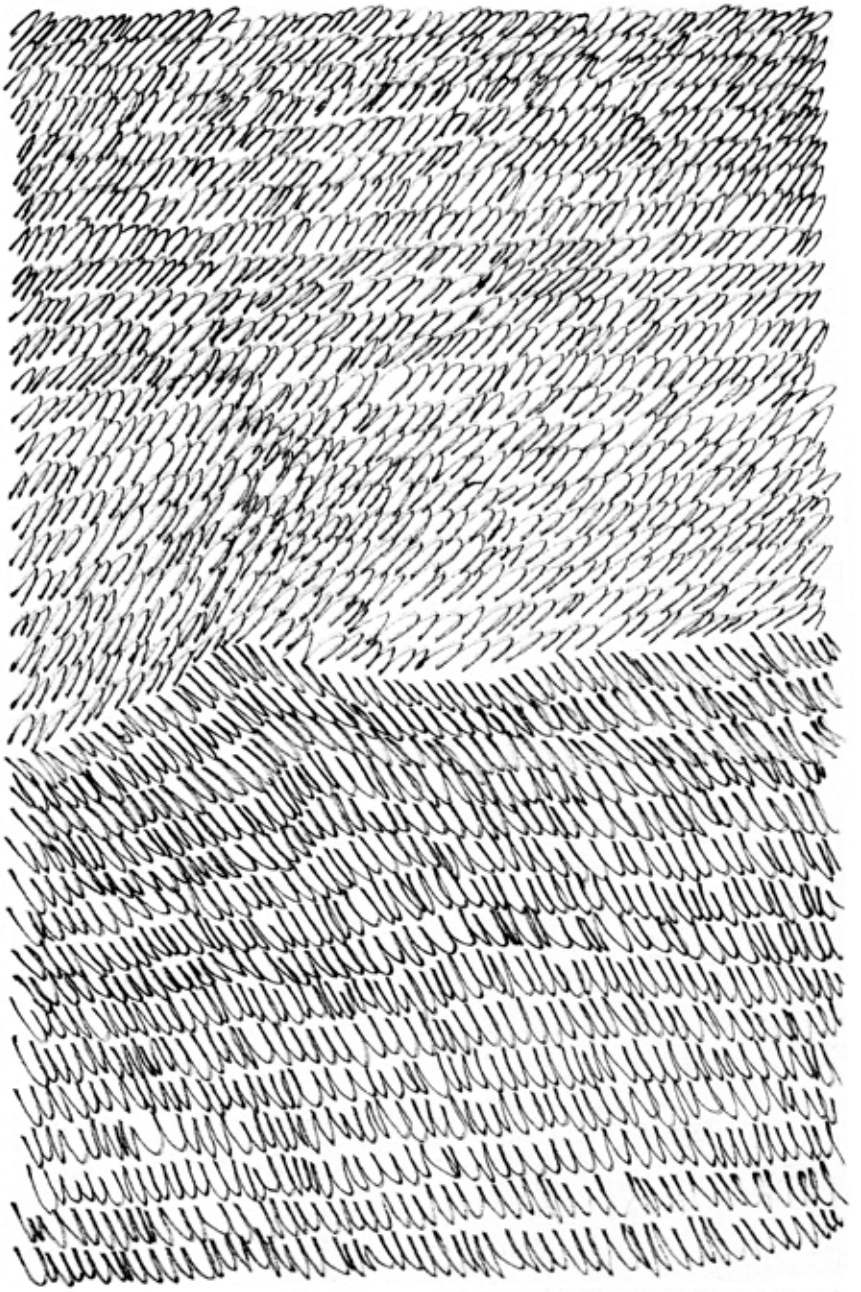
28 See Barthes, Roland. "Sur la lecture". *Le bruissement de la langue.* Éditions du Seuil, 1984, pp. 37–47, p. 37.

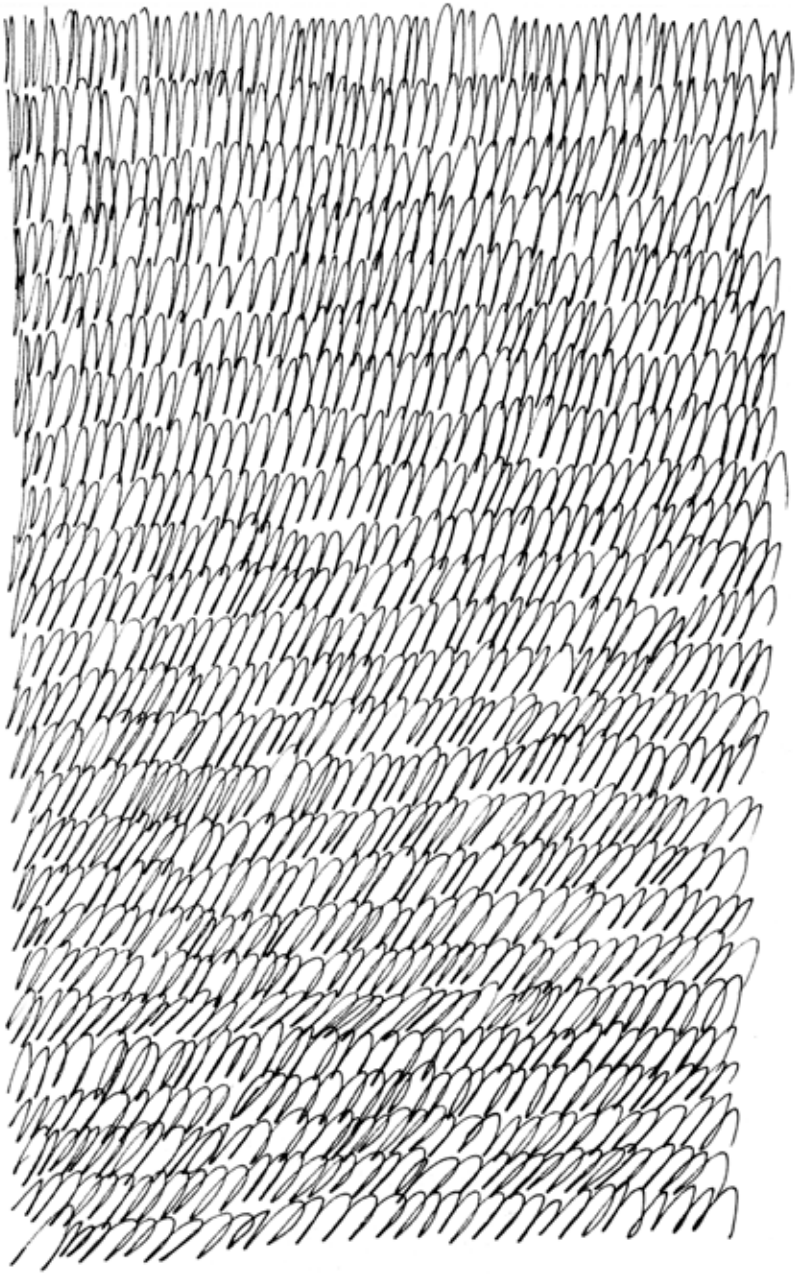
in language use."[29] It does this "as *a kind of 'writing'*", which "builds a bridge between perception and communication",[30] as Luhmann writes in a description that could apply equally well to Dermisache's work. Viewed in this way, art provokes the search for meaning and interpretation by frustrating our expectations. It challenges us – and this is precisely what Mirtha Dermisache's *Cartas* prompt us to do – to react to its specific "kind of 'writing'" with a specific kind of 'reading'. A reading that is unlearned and thereby reinvented. And which thus becomes visible as a practice that is sensory-receptive and self-reflexive, playful and experimental: as an *aesthetic* practice between receptivity and collaboration, tangibility and answering.

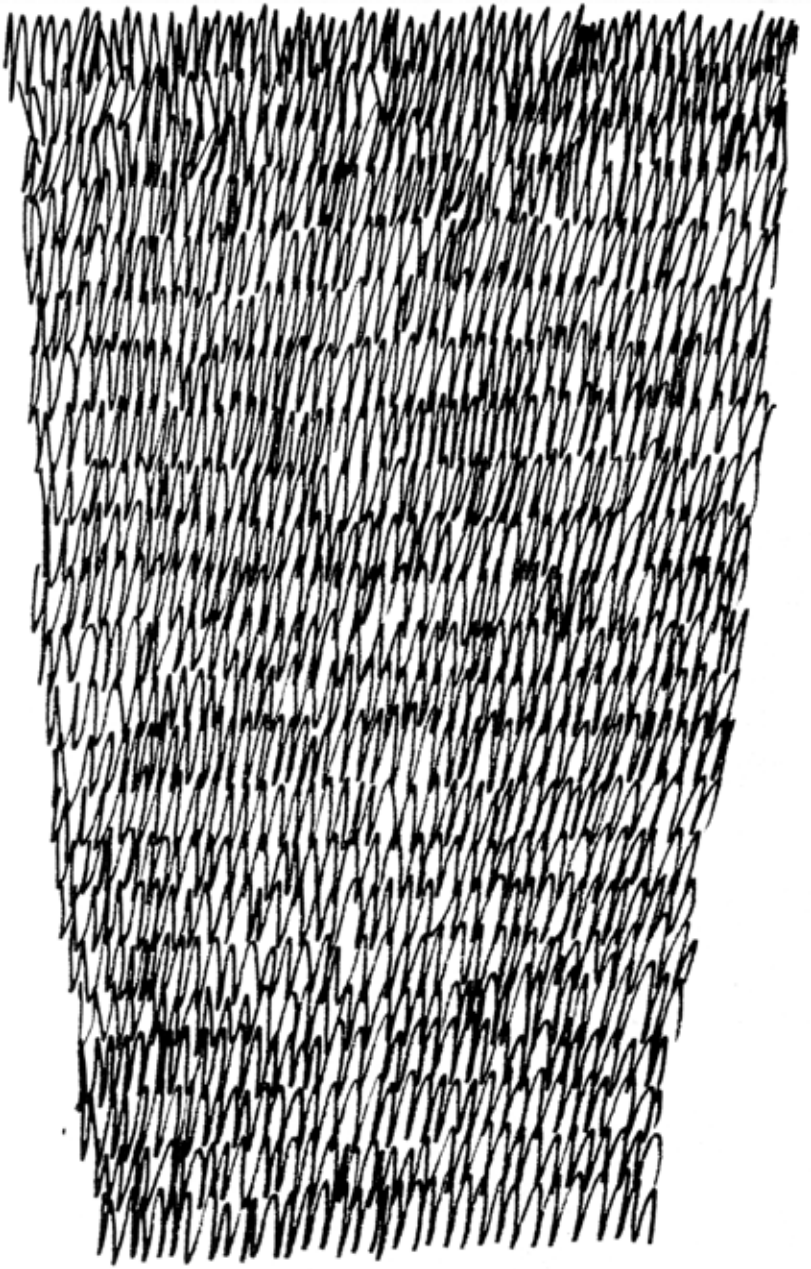
29 Luhmann, Niklas. *Art as a Social System*. Transl. Eva M. Knodt, Stanford University Press, 2000 (first published in German, 1997), p. 33. Luhmann writes: "The forms of art are understood as communications, but without language, without argumentation. […] Art permits a circumvention of language – of language as the form of structural coupling between consciousness and communication."

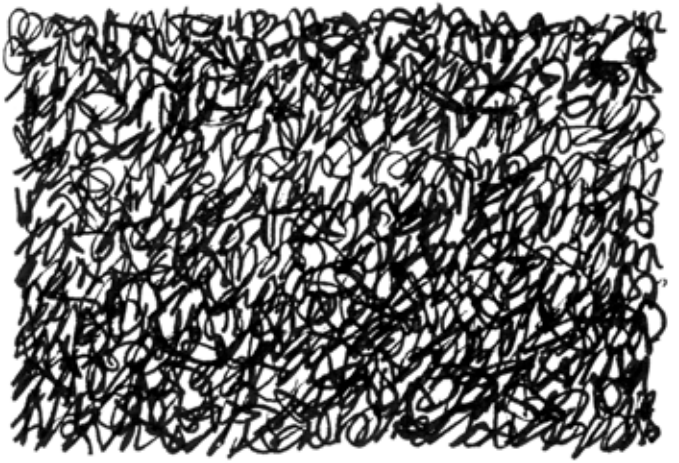
30 Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, p. 28f., my emphasis. On Luhmann's conception of textual art see Hahn, Thorsten. "Drucksache. Medium und Funktion der Literatur". *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 49, 2019, pp. 435–449, in particular pp. 444–446.

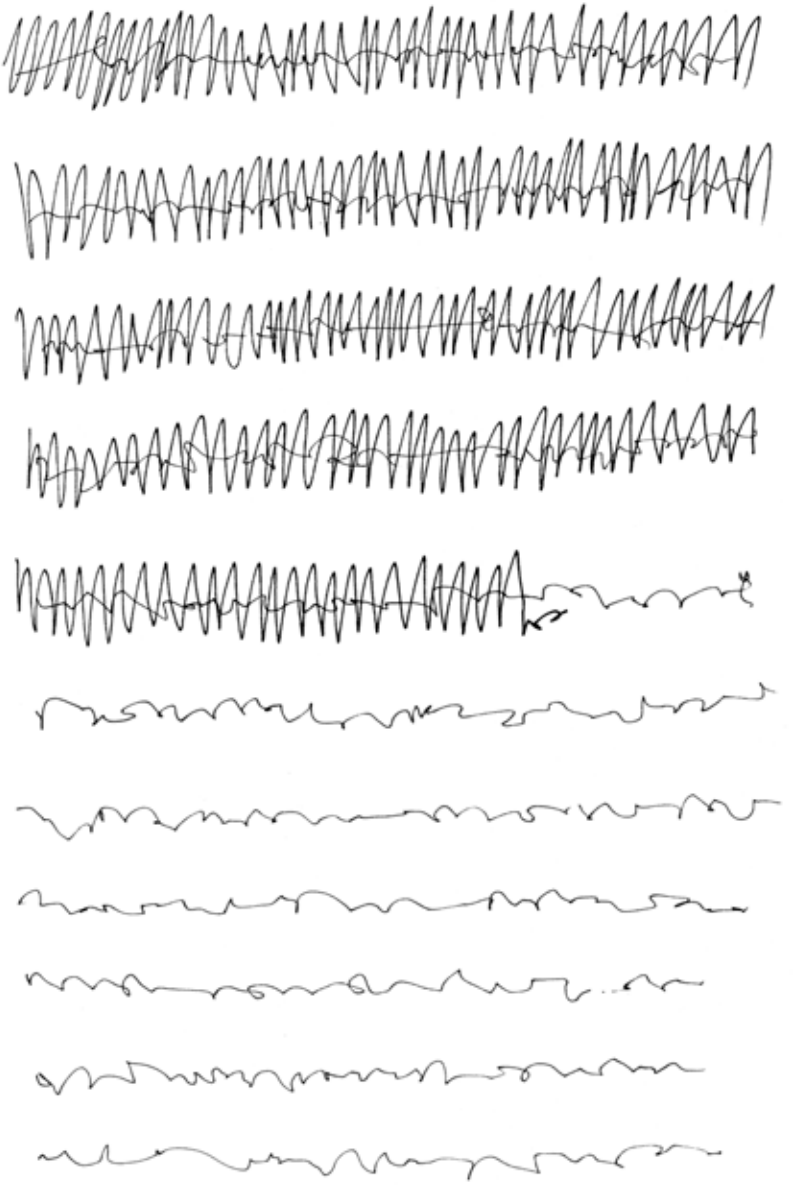
Sebastián Barrante
Letters to Mirtha III

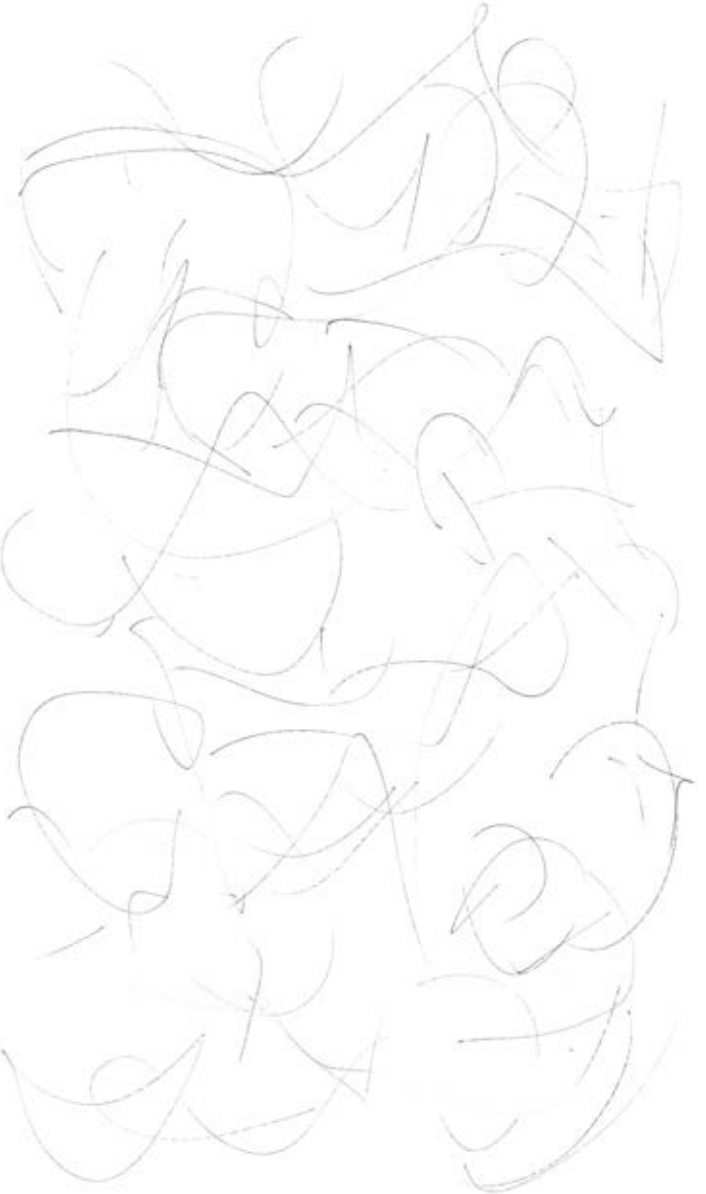


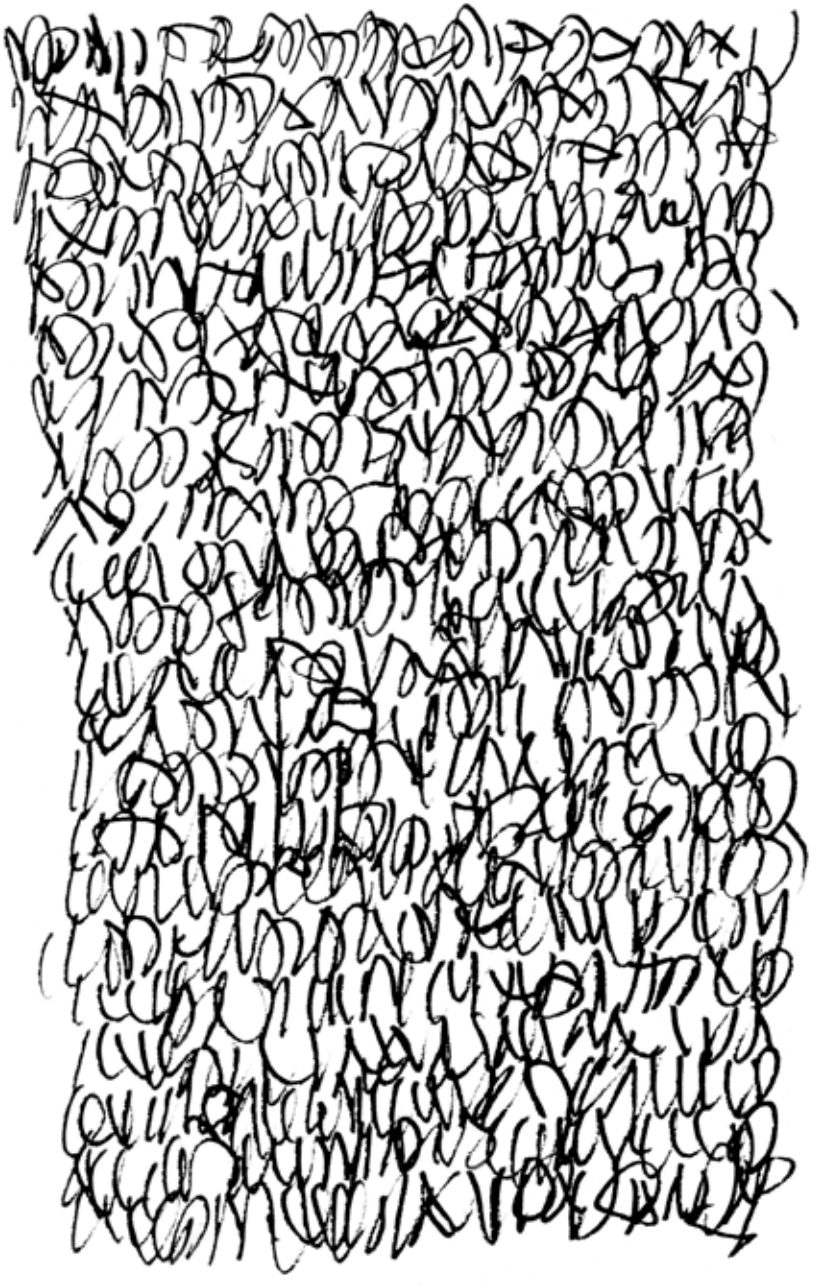


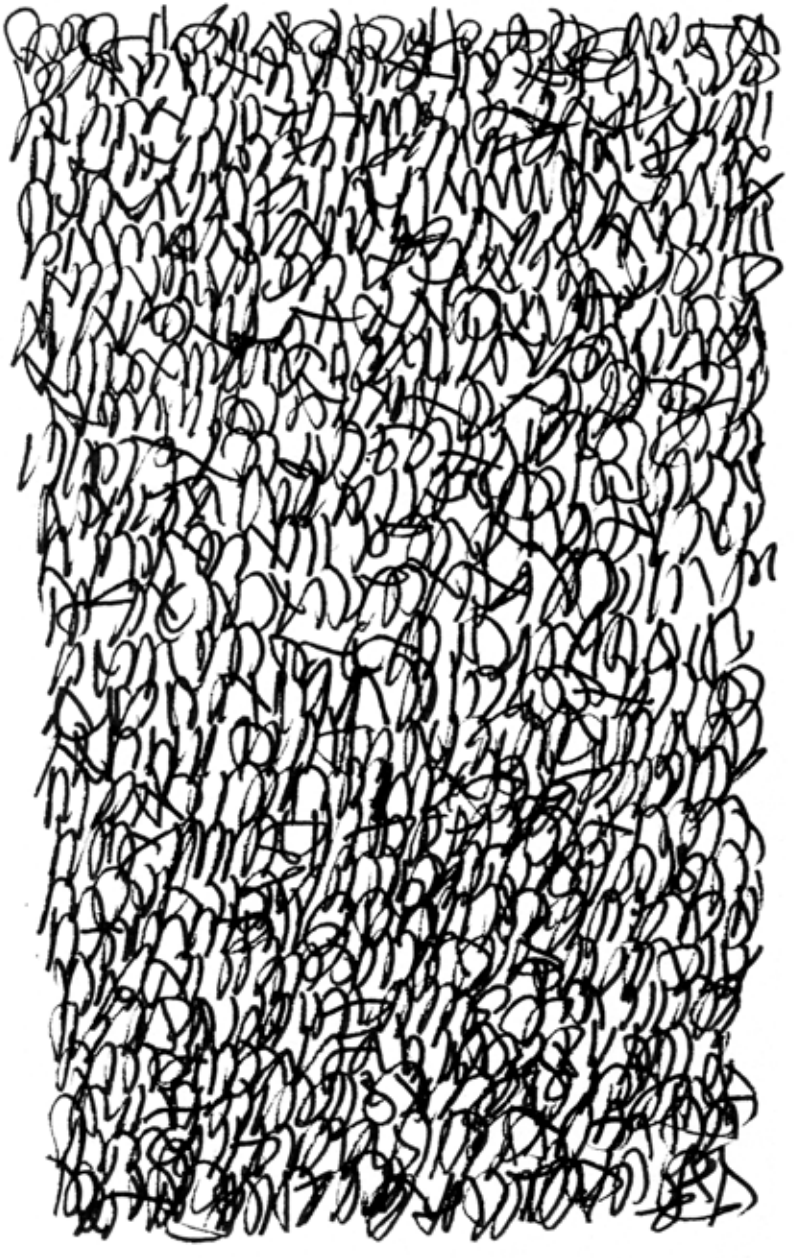


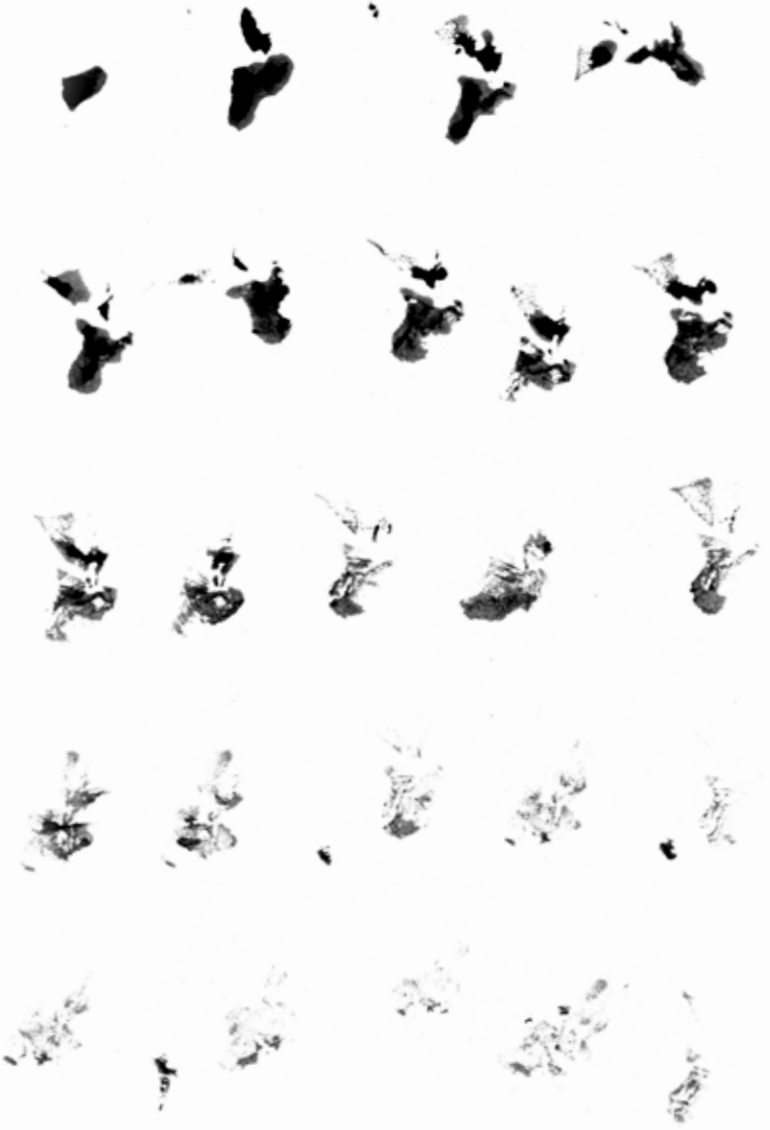


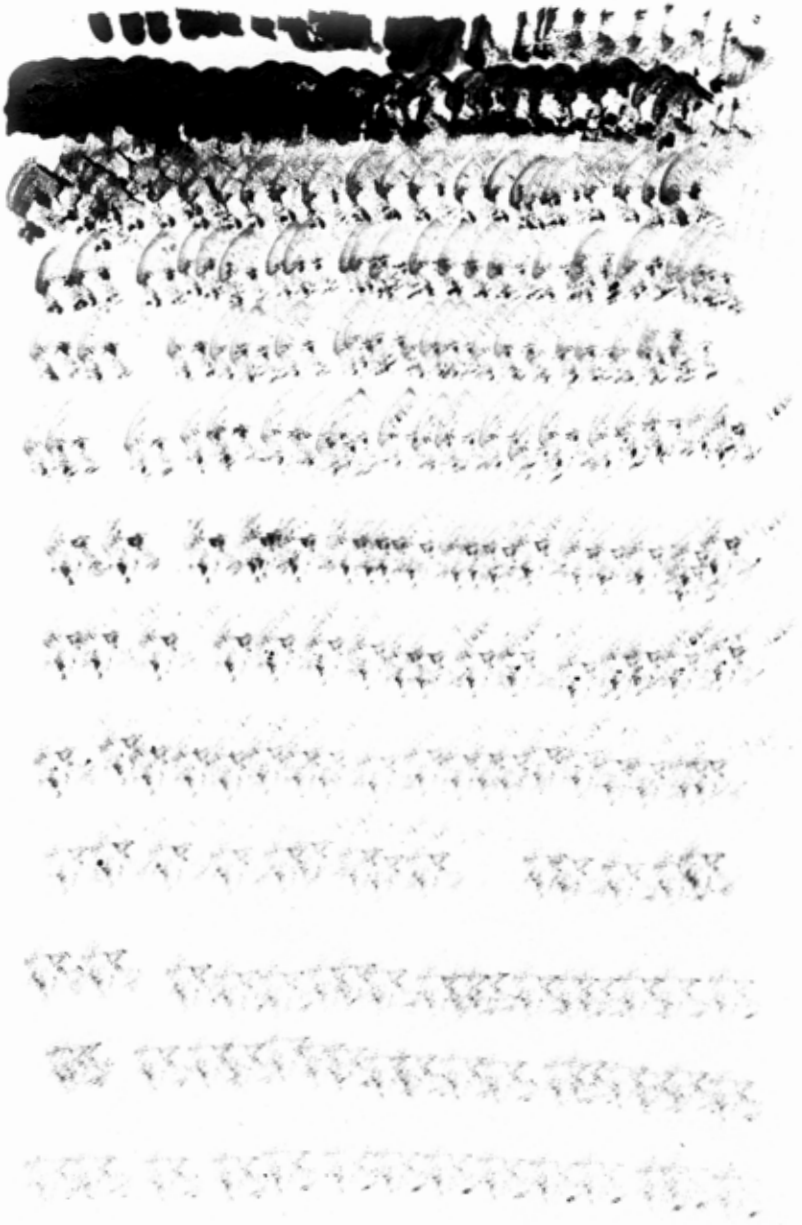












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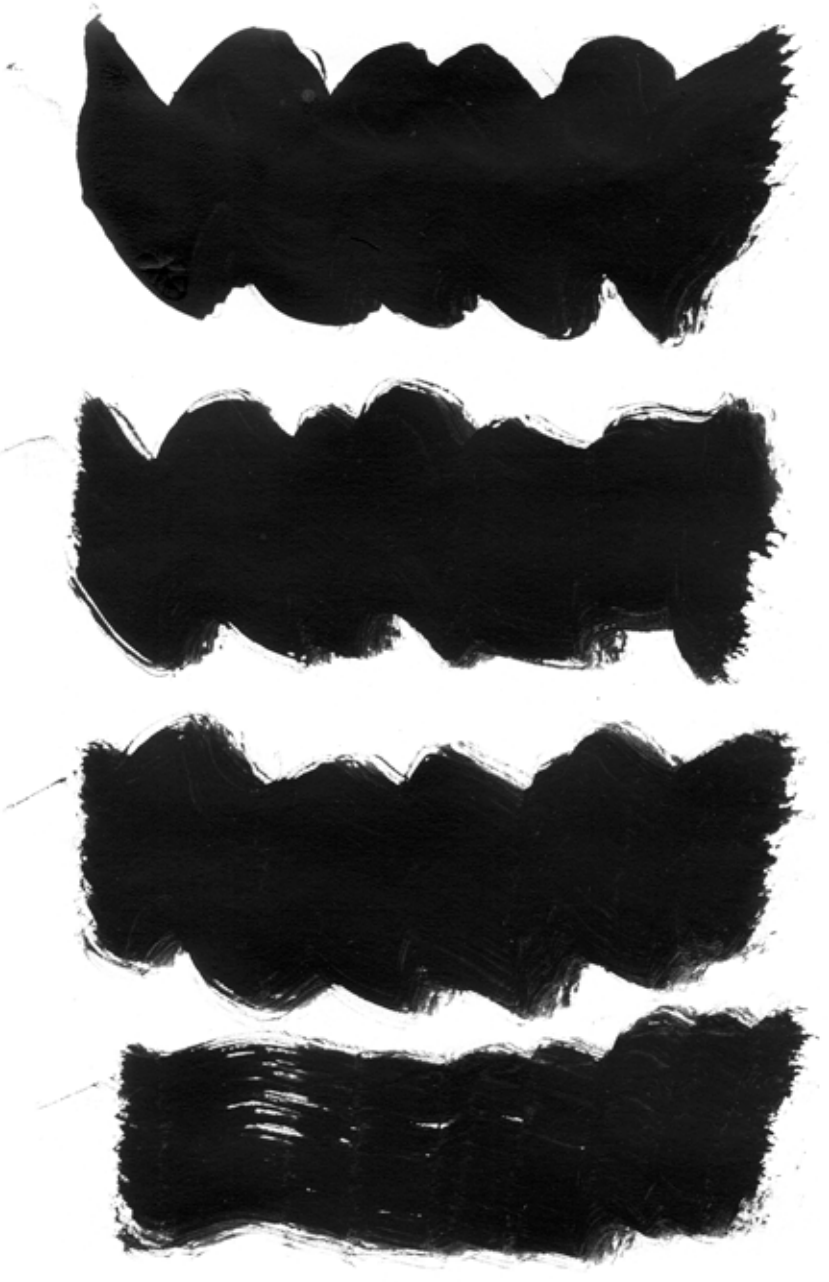

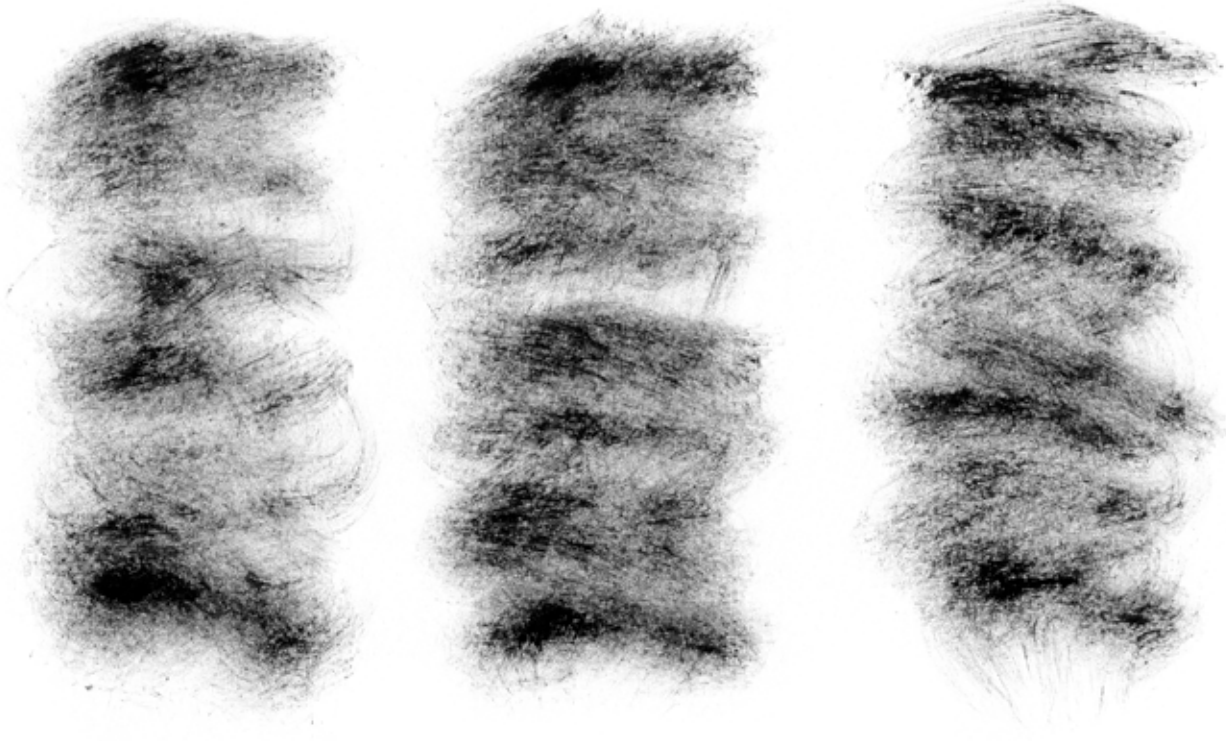

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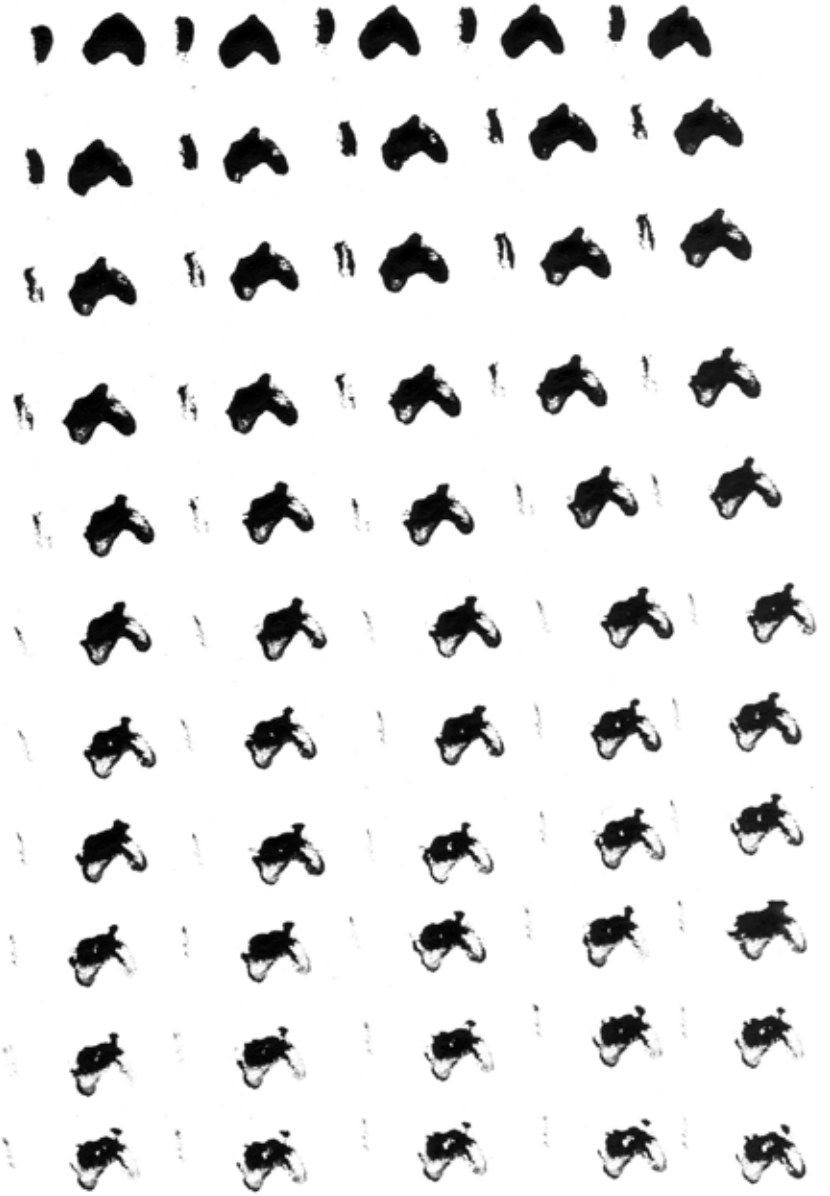

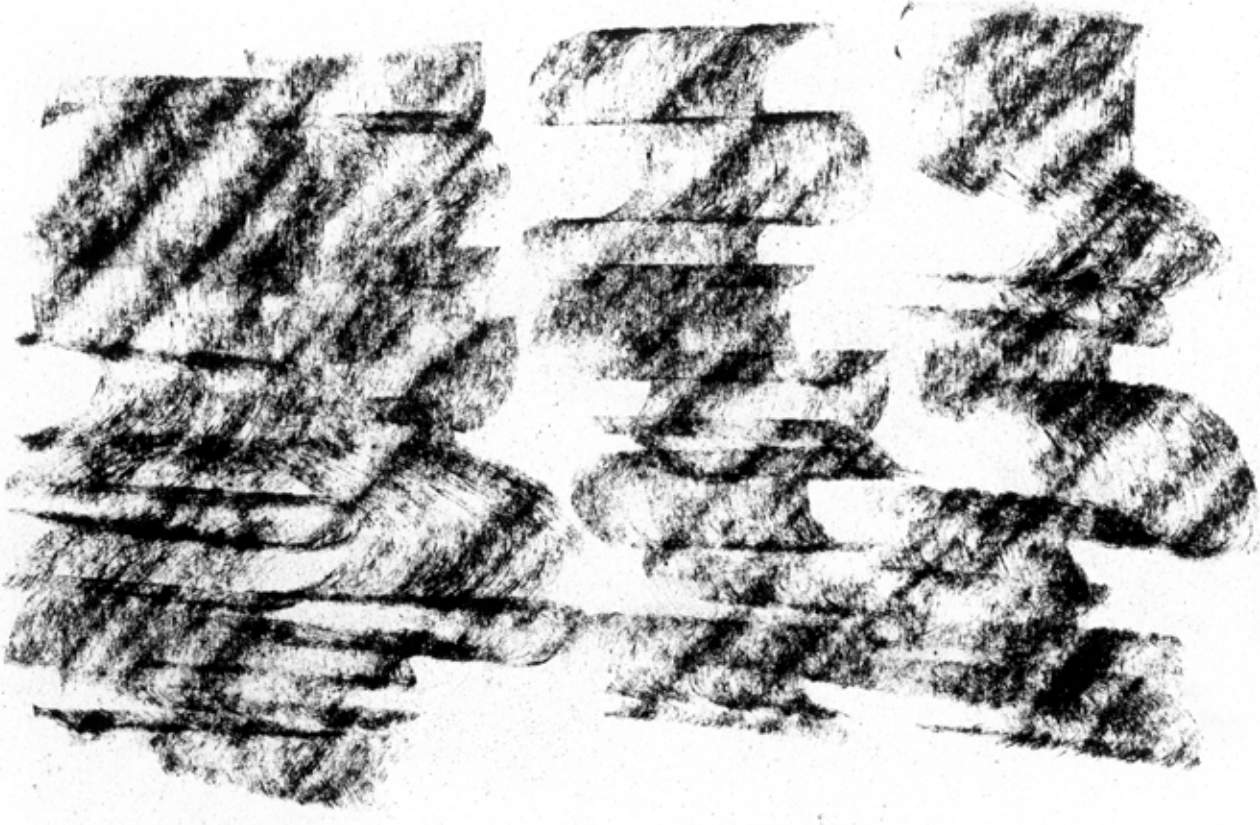

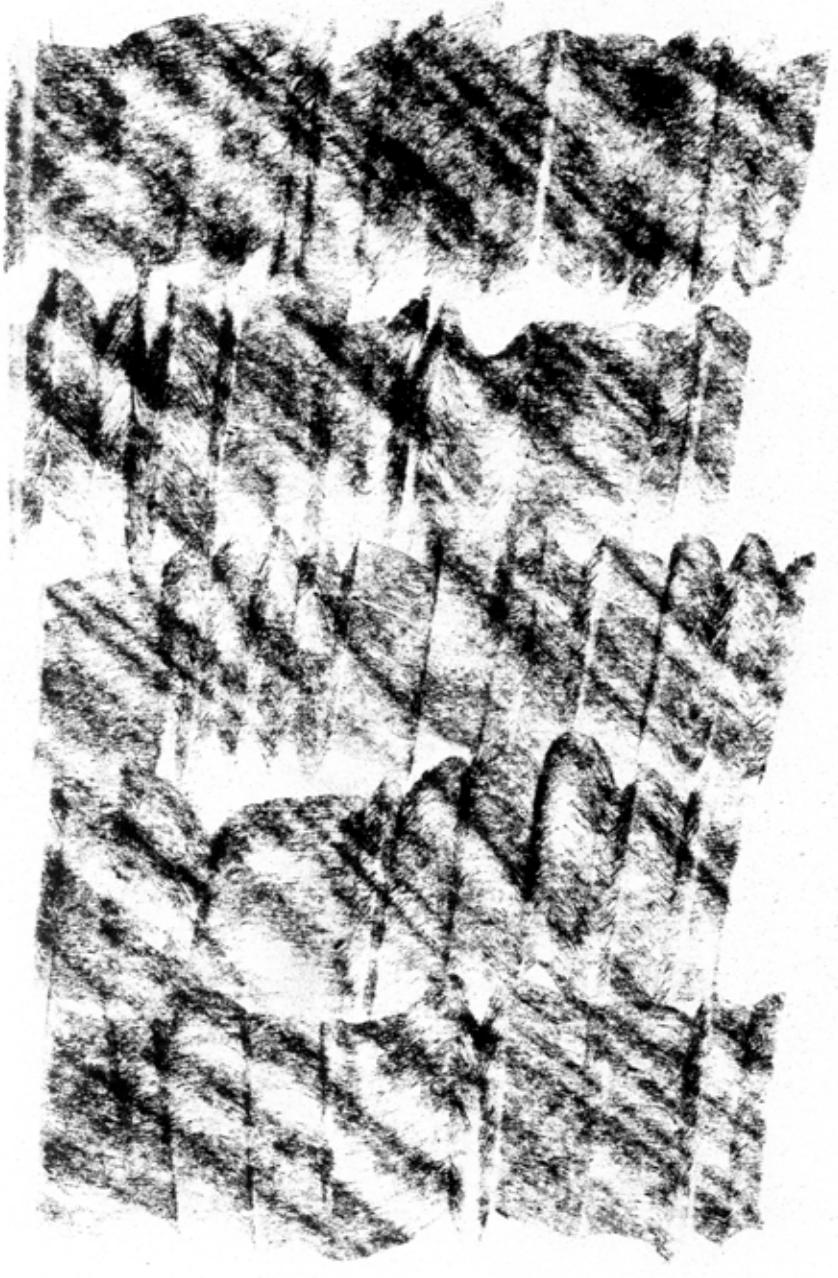

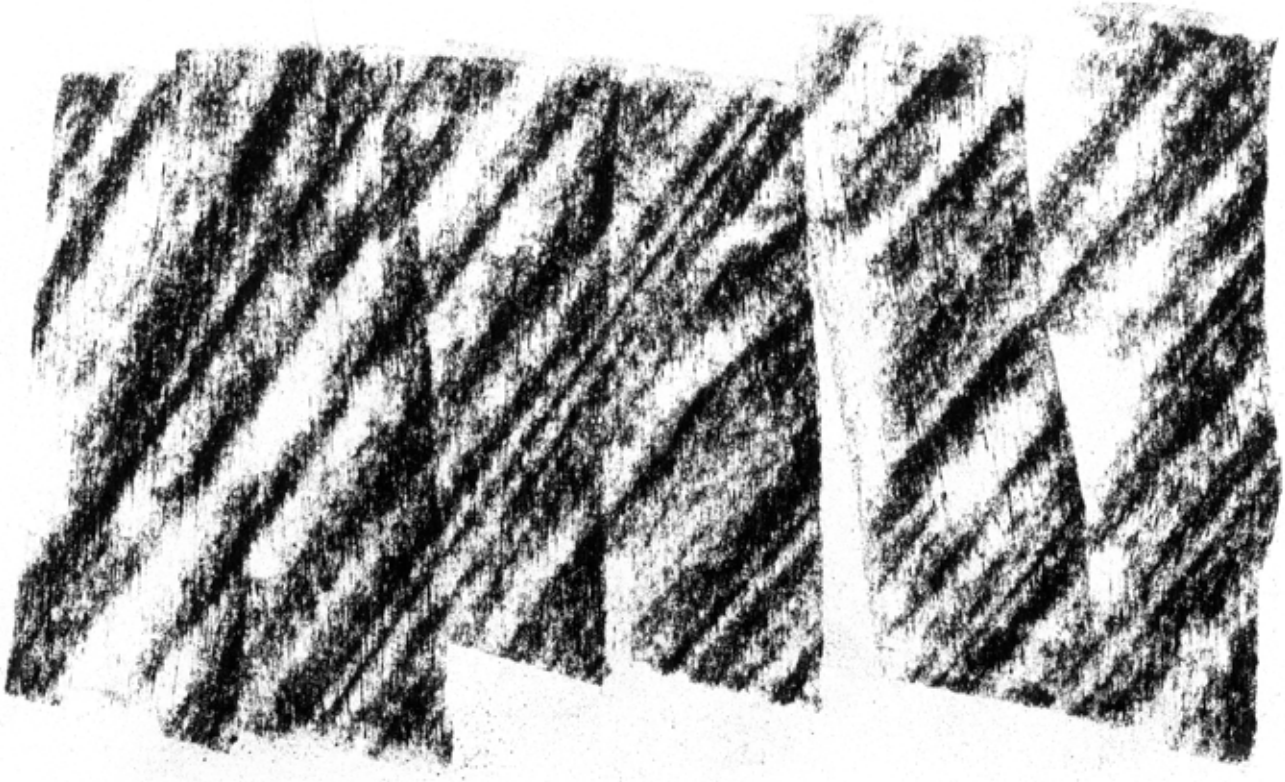

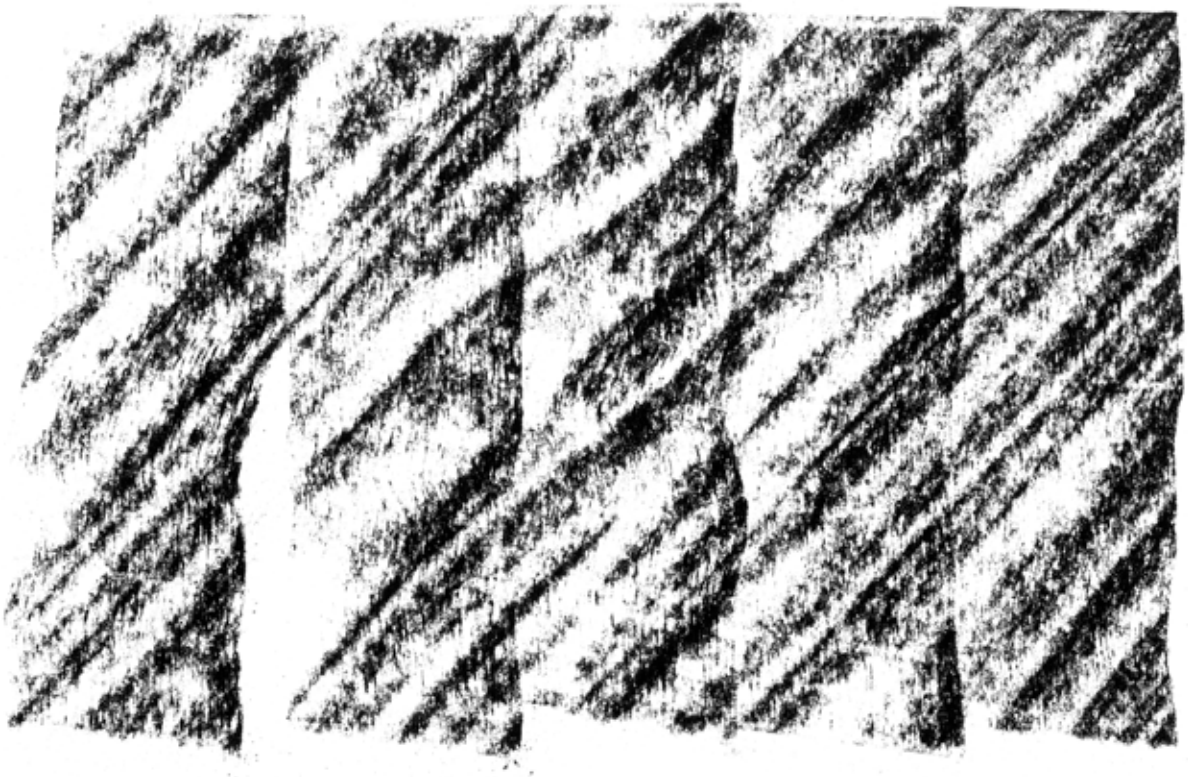

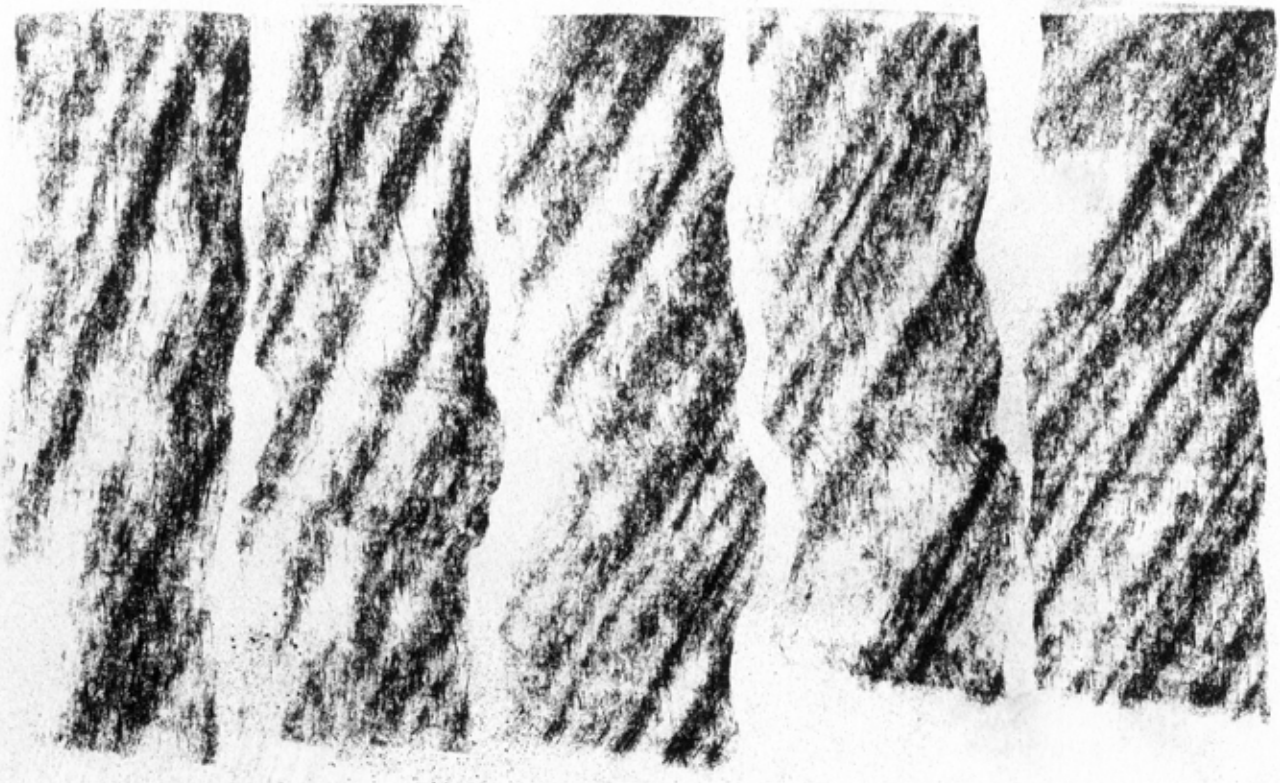

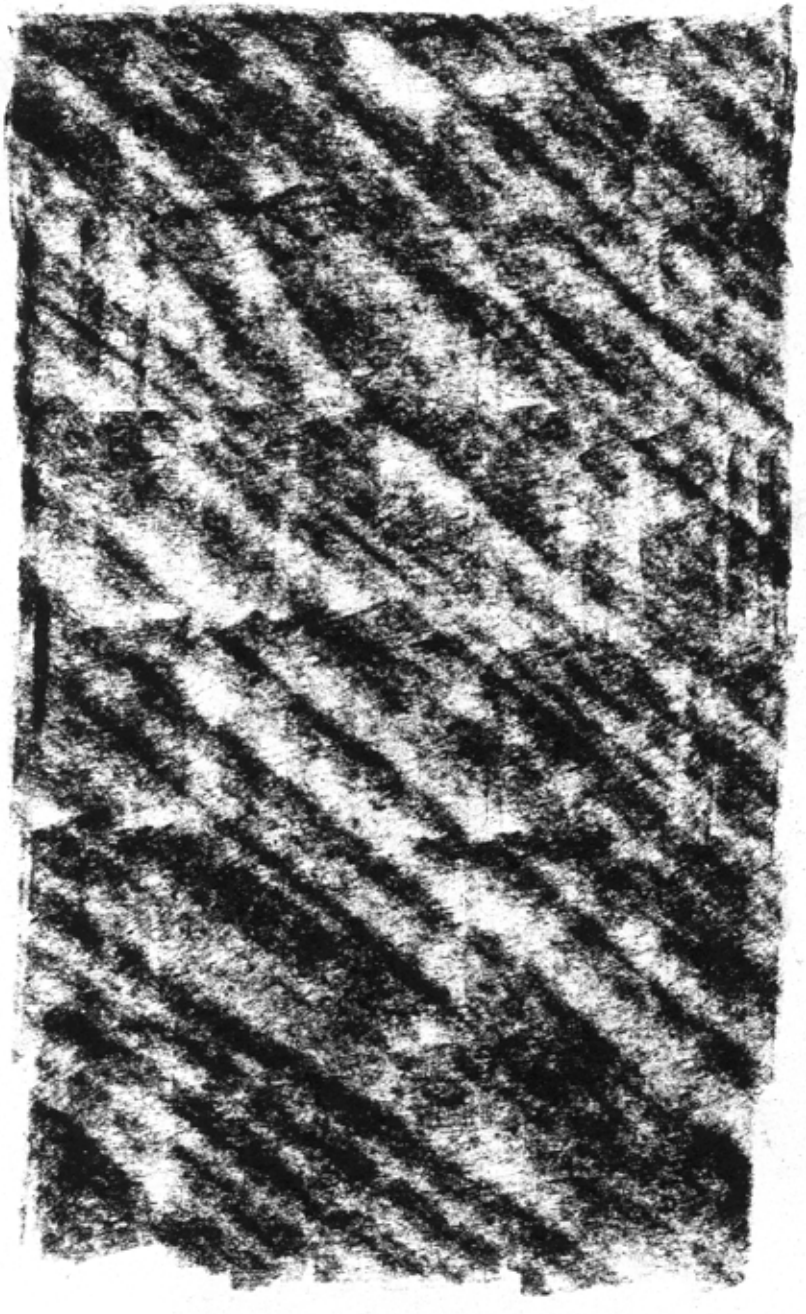

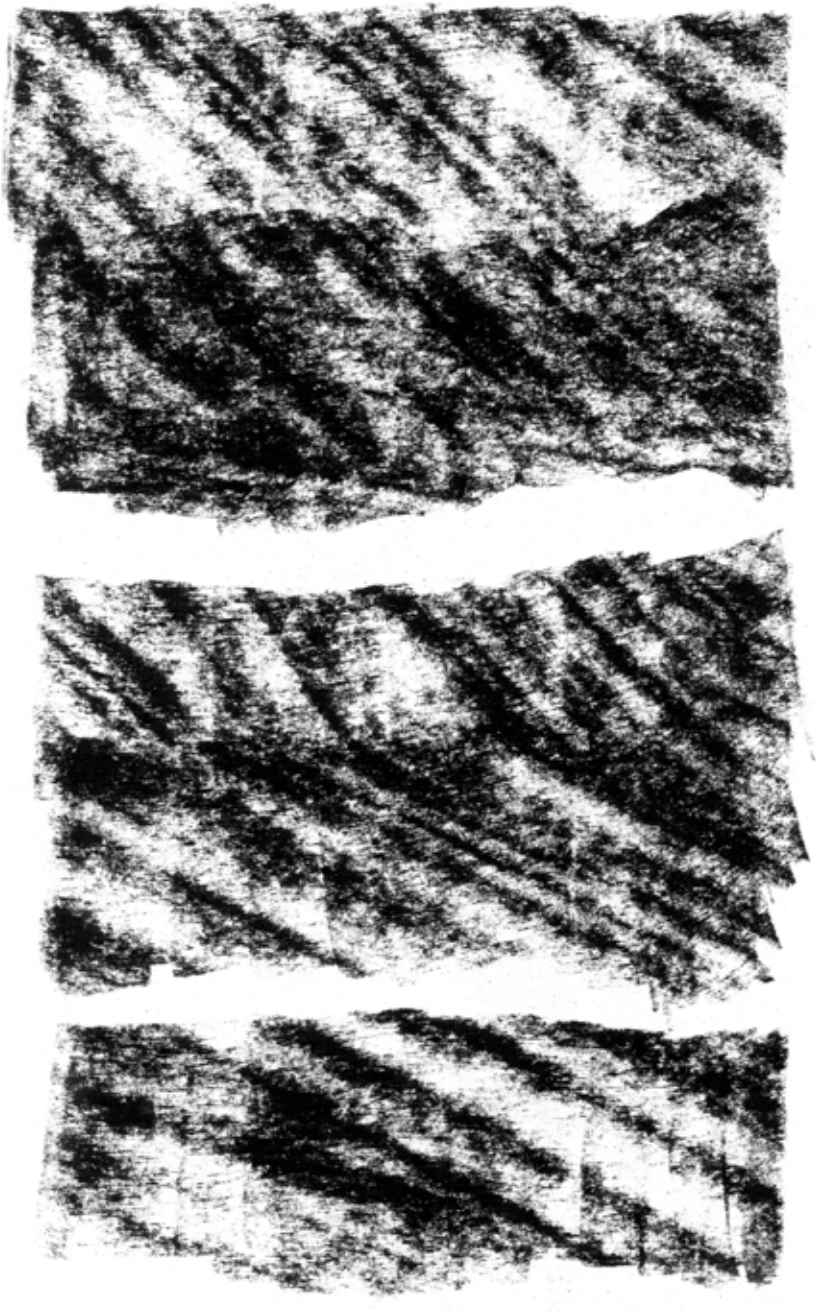

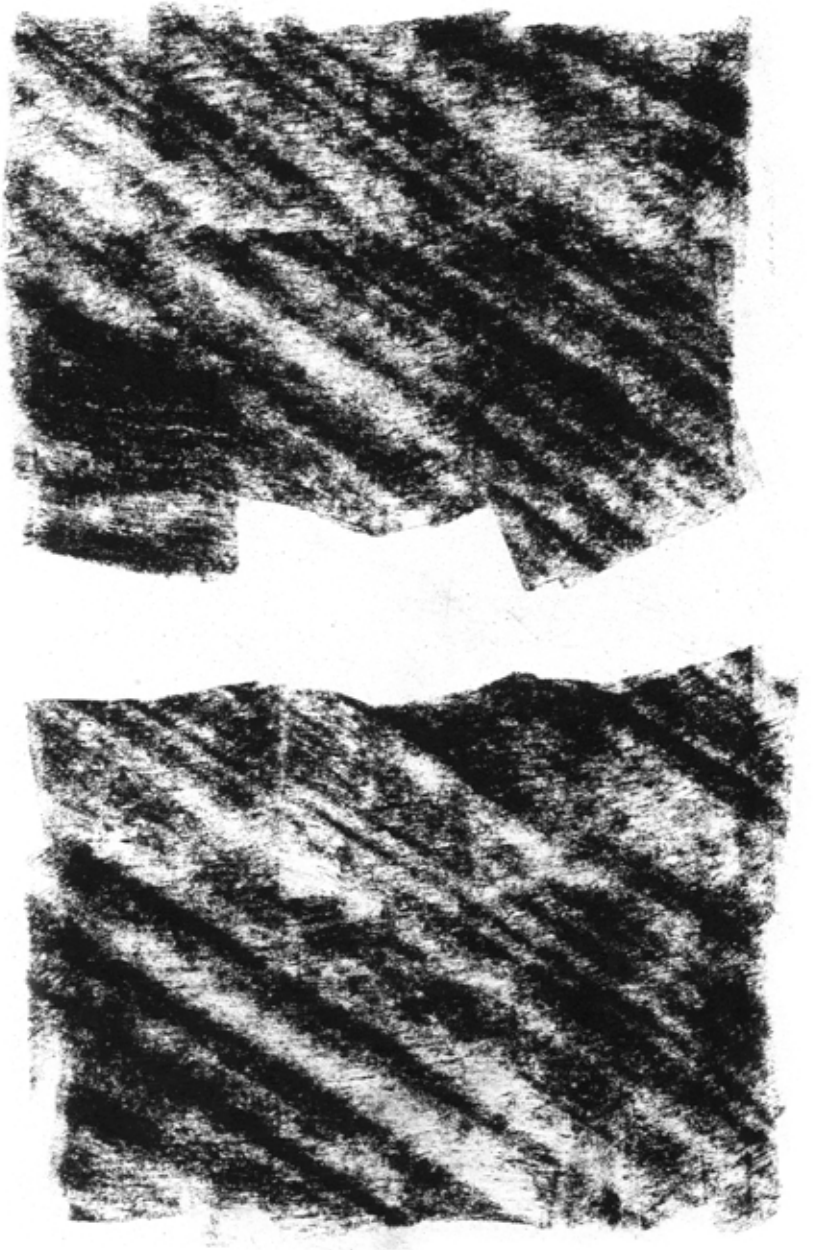

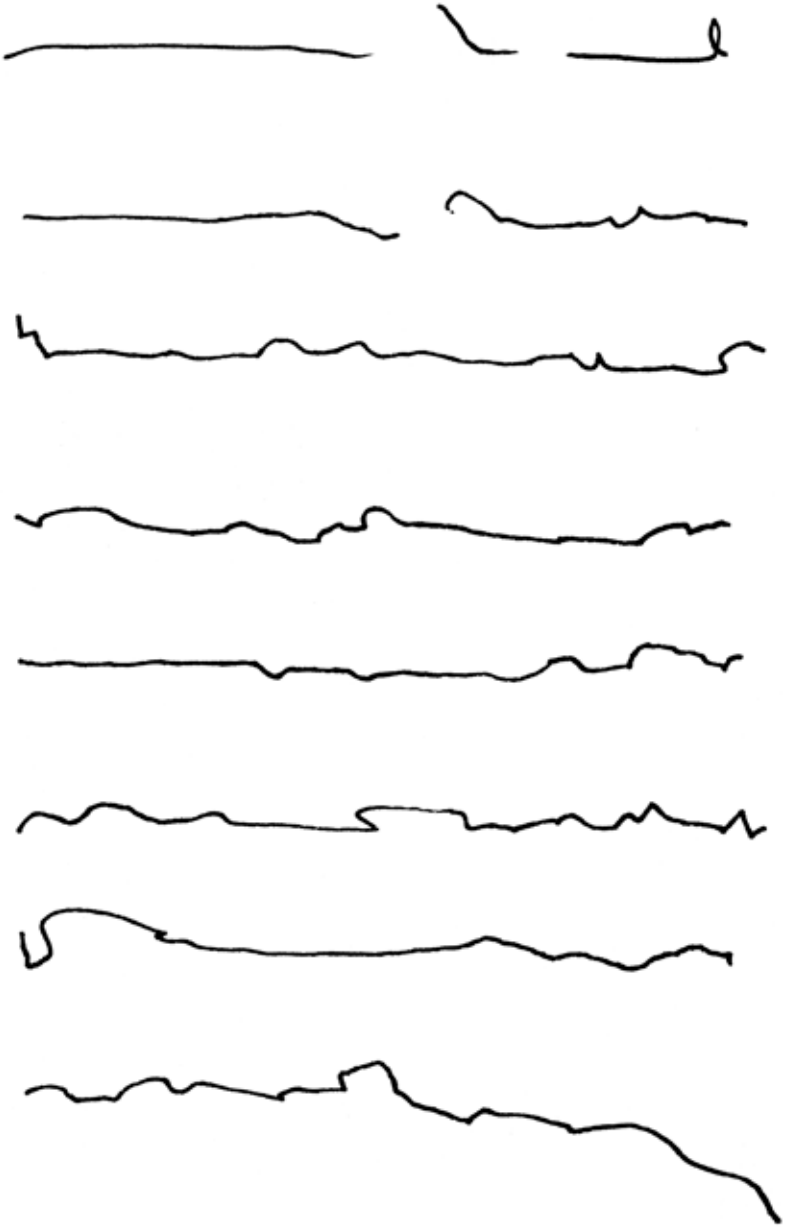

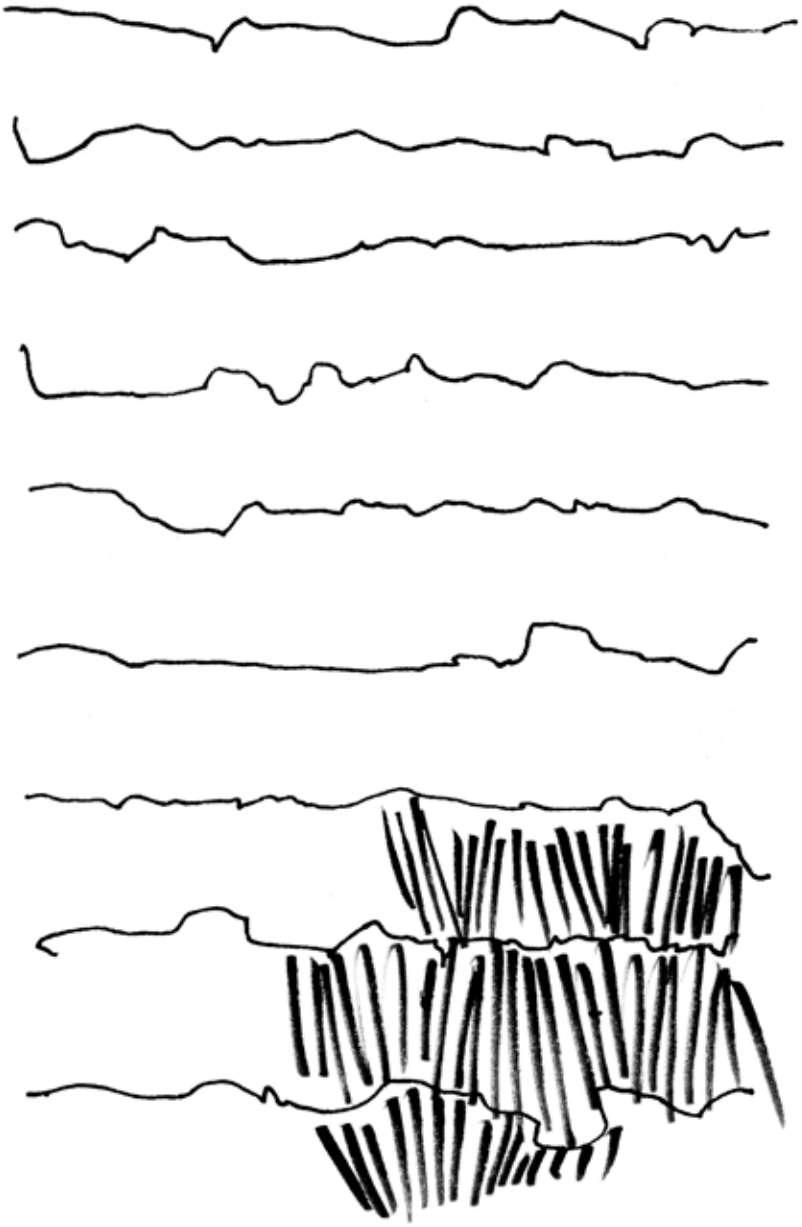

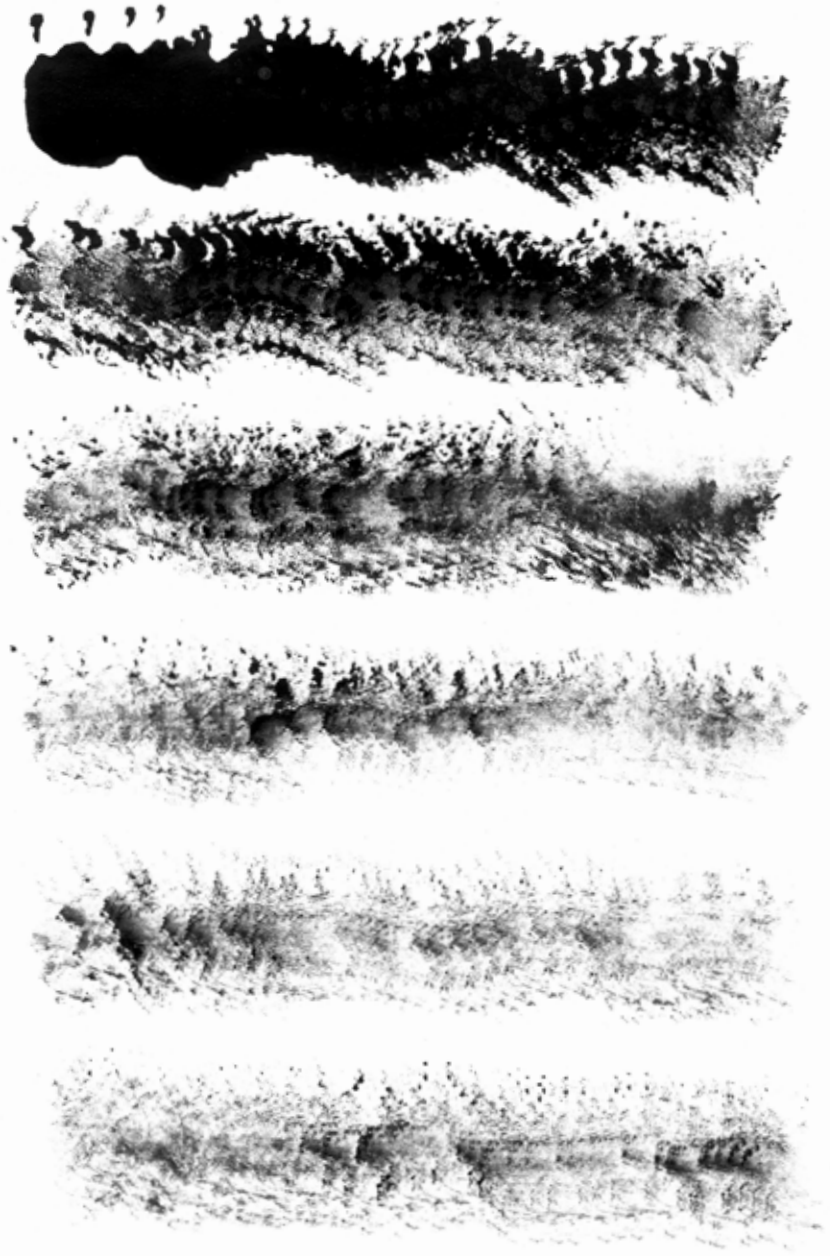

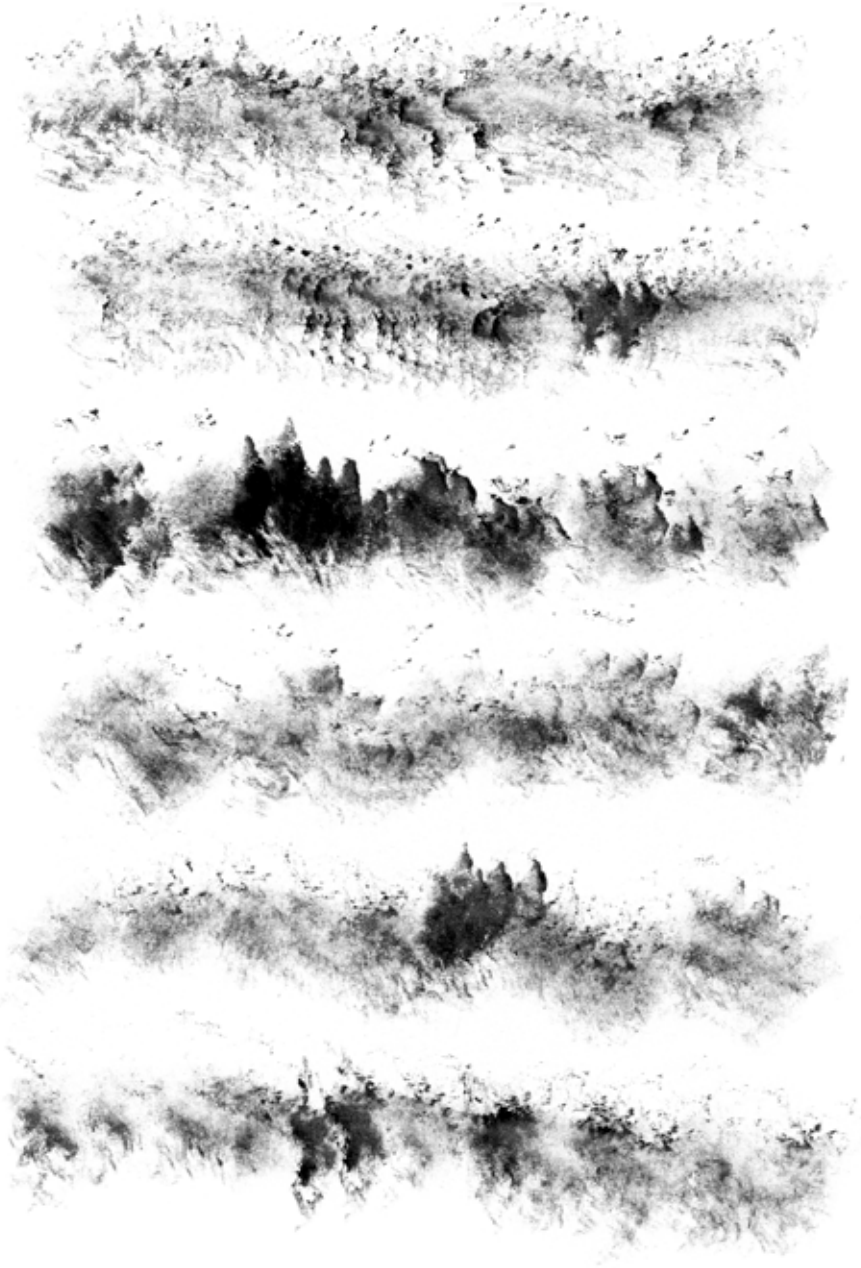

Editorial note

This publication grew out of a reading event that took place in Berlin in 2024 in conjunction with the exhibition *Mirtha Dermisache: To Be Read*.[1] Both were curated by the art historian Regine Ehleiter, the exhibition forming part of a two-year research project on the theme of writing as an artistic practice within the academic context of the Cluster of Excellence *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* at the Freie Universität Berlin. Applying a range of written and curatorial formats, this project explored literary writing practices by contemporary artists and the ways in which the domains of literature and the visual arts have intersected and interacted from the 1960s to the present. In order to trace the various outcomes of this phenomenon, the project examined artistic writing practices that question the conventional mediality and materiality of both literature and contemporary art, challenging the traditional definitions of both.

Produced in collaboration with the Legado Mirtha Dermisache as well as the Berlin exhibition venues A–Z and oxfordberlin, *Mirtha Dermisache: To Be Read* was the Argentinian conceptual artist Mirtha Dermisache's (1940–2012) first solo exhibition in Germany, where her work is still largely absent from art historical and literary discourses. The exhibition presented an overview of Dermisache's artists' publications, featuring her asemic writing. It was made possible by loans from Egidio Marzona's personal collection and the estate of Guy Schraenen, as well as by gifts from

1 The exhibition *Mirtha Dermisache: To Be Read* was on from 7 June to 11 August 2024 and took place at two venues concurrently: A–Z (Torstraße 93, 10119 Berlin) was the main site and oxfordberlin (Oxforder Straße 3–11, 13349 Berlin) the satellite venue.

Florent Fajole and the Legado Mirtha Dermisache to the library of the Freie Universität Berlin's Art Historical Institute, where they will remain publicly accessible. The exhibition was accompanied by a publication with the same title, a workshop on asemic writing, run by Paris-based artist-publisher antoine lefebvre editions, and an event in the collaborative series *Reading Artists' Books*, initiated by Regine Ehleiter and Tabea Nixdorff in memory of the artist and artists' book librarian Doro Boehme (1957–2020).

Beginning with the question of how to 'read' asemic—i.e. illegible—writing, the series of readings *Reading Artists' Books: Asemic Writing*, which was recorded and made available online, featured contributions by Paolo Dellapiana, Josefina Barcia, Barbara Bausch, Ivana Vollaro, Megumi Andrade Kobayashi, Silvina López Medin & Rebekah Smith, Antoine Lefebvre, Tabea Nixdorff & Monique Ulrich, Rosaire Appel, Konstantina Benaki and Oscar Salguero. Sebastián Barrante's online performance *Writing letters to Mirtha* accompanied the event for its entire duration and showed him continuously producing asemic 'letters' in various styles and techniques, all of which are documented here. They also formed the basis for a live sonic interpretation of Barrante's writing by Guillermo Montecinos, which concluded the event.

Mirtha Dermisache was born on 16 February 1940 in Lanus, 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.

Mirtha Dermisache's Estate (Legado Mirtha Dermisache) protects the memory and work of the artist; it strives towards making details of her life and her extensive oeuvre visible; it provides loans to institutions and assistance in curatorial and academic research.

www.mirthadermisache.com
contacto@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 Martin (UNSAM) in Buenos Aires. Here, all archival material related to her work is available to the public for consultation.

www.espigas.org.ar

Regine Ehleiter is a Berlin-based art historian and curator with a focus on exhibition history, artists' publications and conceptualism. She studied cultural studies, art history and journalism in Leipzig and London. Her dissertation *Ausstellen in Publikationen*, a transnational study of the exhibition-as-publication in the 1960s, was published by Edition Metzel in 2024. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Study *Access to Cultural Goods in Digital Change* at the University of Münster. Prior to working for *Temporal Communities*, she held teaching positions at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig and the University of Hildesheim.

Megumi Andrade Kobayashi is a scholar and curator of contemporary art and literature. Her research interests include writings in art, artists' publications and experimental literature. Her doctoral dissertation was recently published under the title *Otras escrituras. Gestos movimientos e inscripciones en el arte y la literatura contemporáneos* (Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2024). Currently, Andrade Kobayashi is a scholar and researcher of the Faculty of Arts at the Universidad Finis Terrae, where she is the director of the Laboratorio de investigación-creación de Publicaciones Artísticas (GPA). She is one of the founders of La Oficina de la Nada [The Office of Nothing], a research and curatorial group focusing on the links between literature, visual arts and music. In 2023, she published the short novel *Púa* (Ediciones Overol).

Sebastián Barrante is a Chilean artist. He graduated from the School of Arts of the University of Chile, specialising in artists' publications and exhibition curatorship. His work focuses on exploring themes related to intimacy, domestic fields and illegibility through media such as artists' books, performance and art installations. He is the co-founder of Naranja Publicaciones, a publishing house, artist collective and bookstore specialising in artists' books. His works are part of the Fundação Serralves (Porto, Portugal); the Bavarian State Library (Munich, Germany); the Cerrillos National Center for Contemporary Arts (Santiago, Chile) and the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles, USA), among others.

Barbara Bausch is a literary scholar. Her research interests include neo-avant-garde and contemporary literature, forms of literary engagement, and the theory and aesthetic practice of reading. Bausch has worked as an editor for fiction and non-fiction and has held positions and fellowships at the University of Sumy in Ukraine, the Institute for German and Dutch Philology at the Freie Universität Berlin and the DFG Centre for Advanced Studies *Imaginaria of Force* at the University of Hamburg. Her project at *Temporal Communities* investigates reading as an aesthetic practice both theoretically and by means of explorative collaborative formats.

Temporal Communities

The Cluster of Excellence 2020 *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* (EXC 2020) at Freie Universität Berlin fundamentally rethinks the concept of literature from a global perspective. We understand and study literature as a phenomenon that operates in and through time and creates its own temporalities. Literary practice, understood in a global sense, challenges traditional cultural and linguistic boundaries, making it necessary to transcend the Eurocentric notions of ‘nation’ and ‘epoch’ that have traditionally framed literary history. What matters for a concept of literature as a form of action that is always in exchange with other arts and cultural practices is the ability to create communities across time that transcend the idea of the literary as developed by Western modernity.

Temporal Communities brings together researchers from the fields of literary studies and comparative literature, art history and art theory, film studies, theatre studies and philosophy. The work of the cluster is characterised by a collaborative, exploratory practice that fosters exchange between the humanities and artistic perspectives.

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con • stel • la • tions 02
Reading Mirtha Dermisache

A publication by
EXC 2020 *Temporal Communities*

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02

“Reading artists’ publications, which are in themselves works of art, implies not only looking at a single page or element, but viewing them in total, as a sequence of pages in relation to others, and considering how textual elements — in this case, marks on paper that imitate text — are arranged on the page, and how pictorial and material aspects interact.”

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