

MoMA PRESENTS THE FIRST COMPREHENSIVE MUSEUM EXHIBITION TO EXPLORE THE WORK OF LEÓN FERRARI AND MIRA SCHENDEL

Dual Retrospective of Some 200 Works Focuses on Abstraction, Language-Based Works, and the Artists' Significant Contributions to Contemporary Art

Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel

April 5–June 15, 2009

The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art Gallery, sixth floor

NEW YORK, March 31, 2009—The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition ***Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel***

León Ferrari and Mira Schendel is the first major museum retrospective in the United States to survey the work of León Ferrari (Argentine, b. 1920) and Mira Schendel (Brazilian, b. Switzerland, 1919–1988), and to explore their significant contributions to contemporary art. Working separately over several decades in neighboring Latin American countries during the latter half of the twentieth century, each created an oeuvre of works of art fundamentally based in language. At a time when Western artists were incorporating letters, words, text, and language as a functional component of their art, Ferrari and Schendel distinctively addressed language as a major visual subject matter, considering the material body of language, its manifestation as a written word and voice, and its use as a metaphor for the human world. As contemporaries, though never collaborators, the two artists shared experiences of disillusion and exile that determined parallels and divergences in the art they produced.

Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel brings together some 200 works in a range of media, including ceramics, paintings, sculptures, installations, and drawings, from public and private collections in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, London, and the U.S., including that of The Museum of Modern Art. The majority of the works in the exhibition come from the Mira Schendel Estate (with thanks to the collaboration of Galeria Millan in São Paulo) and León Ferrari's personal collection, and many of these works are being shown in the United States for the first time.

Organized by Luis Pérez-Oramas, The Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art, with the assistance of Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães, Curatorial Assistant, The Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition is on view from April 5 through June 15, 2009, in The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art Gallery on the sixth floor.

"While the exhibition is intended to juxtapose the common themes shared in the work of these two artists, it constitutes a full retrospective of each artist's career," says Mr. Pérez-Oramas. "Ferrari and Schendel are visual artists who never abandon the word. They make it the center of the work—the word as a limitless substitute for the human voice. Ferrari and Schendel give us opaque texts as visual fields; wounded, fragmented, obsessive signs; abandoned, delirious, solitary letters. It is not language that shines through, but writing—whether abstract or textual,

alphabetic or architectural, deformed or infinitesimal, nominal or transitive—and, above all, its body: the graphic gesture."

Tangled Alphabets presents many groupings of works, and is organized loosely chronologically, presenting the evolution of the two artists' work from the late 1950s through the late 1980s for Schendel, and from the late 1950s through 2007 for Ferrari. The exhibition begins in the late 1950s with an examination of the artists' use of line, form, and texture, starting with early still-life paintings by Schendel and ceramic vessels by Ferrari. This is followed by a comprehensive look at the artists' use of words, letters, and phrases, as exemplified through a selection of their language-based works on paper from the 1960s and 1970s. Next, a dramatic display of their three-dimensional works from the 1960s and 1970s—Ferrari's steel sculptures and Schendel's paper sculptures and graphic objects—features many works that hang from the ceiling. Both artists made work of political and religious protest, examples of which are on view in a subsequent gallery, and range in date from the mid-1960s to the late 1990s in the case of Ferrari. The exhibition concludes with Schendel's last series of large paintings from the late 1980s, and Ferrari's most recent hanging sculptures in polyurethane from 2006 and 2007.

The early 1960s were crucial years in the development of the artists' work. Ferrari and Schendel started to derive work from language, making intricate works on paper. During this time in North America and Europe, the 1960s saw the emergence of Conceptual art. Although the work of Ferrari and Schendel is contemporary with the birth of Conceptualism, it is distinctively different. Since they address language as a material presence, a body of signs and traces, brushstrokes and gestures, far more than as a vehicle of concepts or ideas, they are more concerned with the visual appearance of language. In fact, the essence of their art lies in its execution, making each work an unrepeatable operation, which is the opposite of Conceptual art.

Highlighted in the first section of the exhibition are two key works from the 1960s. Ferrari's *Cuadro escrito (Written Drawing)* (1964), is a "written drawing" on which a handwritten text on the surface of the paper describes a nonexistent painting and what this painting would look like, while also producing an argument against religion, God, and the deification of painting. Schendel's *Untitled (Achilles) (Sem título [Achilles])* (1964) is a large oil painting depicting a doorway, over which an English sentence that references Achilles, taken from the introduction to a book of religious poems, has been written in stenciled capital letters.

The exhibition proceeds with works by Ferrari and Schendel that use symbols and patterns based in poetry rather than actual text. Both artists maintained friendships with significant poets—Haroldo de Campos in the case of Schendel; Rafael Alberti in the case of Ferrari. Ferrari's *Sin título (Sermón de la sangre) (Untitled [Sermon of the blood])* (1962), is based on a poem by Alberti and is comprised of two planes of lines that join in a complex labyrinth of black and blood-red linear gestures and crisscrosses. This work can be compared to Schendel's series of sculptural works begun in the 1960s, such as *Droguinha (Little nothing)* (1966) and *Objetos gráficos (Graphic Objects)* (mid-1960s), which hang from the ceiling of the galleries. The *Droguinhas* are

made of pieces of Japanese paper, twisted into ropes, which are then knotted and reknotted, thus symbolizing a chain that links embroidery with language and the frustration and confusion of a knot that cannot be untied. The *Objetos gráficos* emphasize Schendel's interest in graphic letters, signs and symbols, and address the notion of transparency as the works are placed in between plexi sheets that encourage the viewer to see them from both sides.

Further in the exhibition are dramatic works in which the artists expressed their ideas about politics, history, religion, faith, and the Catholic Church. Schendel's series of works on paper from 1975, *Homenagem a Deus-pai do Ocidente* (*Homage to God-father of the West*) examines the contradictions in the Catholic Church through floating words, symbols, hermetic paraphrases, and sentences taken from the Bible. Also included is Schendel's *Ondas paradas de probabilidade* (*Still waves of probability*) (1969), a monumental work comprising thousands of translucent nylon threads that extend from ceiling to floor besides a Biblical text from the Book of Kings that is printed on an acrylic sheet. It was first shown at the São Paulo Biennial in 1969, and was installed there again, in her honor, in 1994, and has only been shown once since then until its debut in this exhibition. Juxtaposing these works is Ferrari's *Juicio final* (*Last Judgment*) (1994), a large poster of Michelangelo's famous painting of the same title, the surface of which Ferrari covered with bird excrement, which acts as a form of writing expressing the artist's desire to question the concept of Hell and the Bible's writings about torture for sinners in the afterlife.

The exhibition concludes with the most recent work of each artist. In Schendel's final series of paintings, *Sarrafos* (*Splints*) (1987), large white monochromes with attached black bars appear as incomplete frames, mute gestures that might redeem the silence of painting. Ferrari's recent hanging sculptures, which are untitled and date from 2006 and 2007, are made from polyurethane and plastic, and include bones and other materials.

León Ferrari was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1920. His earliest works were done at the end of the 1950s, while he was working in Rome, Italy. He made sculptures in clay and plaster stylistically connected to the abstract tendencies of the period. Beginning in the 1960s, Ferrari conceived a personal style of abstract drawings in which gestural elements and writing intermix. Later, he abandoned avant-garde formalism to practice more political and confrontational forms of art-making. He played a key role in the Argentine vanguard during this period and participated in important artistic and political events such as Tucumán Arde, an avant-garde movement in Argentina in the late 1960s. Forced into political exile, Ferrari lived in São Paulo, Brazil, between 1976 and 1991, a time in which he reconsidered the techniques of his work and concentrated on forms closer to conceptual art. León Ferrari is still fully active in the contemporary Argentine art scene, and at 89, is today one of the most productive artists in Latin America.

Mira Schendel was born in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1919, and began her artistic training in Milan, Italy, in 1936. As a child, she was immersed in the most cultivated intellectual milieu in Italy, where her mother married Count Tommaso Gnoli, an aristocrat and intellectual in charge of

the famous Biblioteca Nazionale Braida. She studied art, philosophy, and theology, and spent her early youth in the Brera Palace, privately experiencing one of the most exquisite collections of art in the world. Schendel went to Sarajevo, Bosnia, in 1941, while fleeing Nazi persecution during World War II. In 1945, she moved to Rome, Italy, and later to Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1949, where she began to produce paintings and ceramic works while teaching and publishing poetry. Following an invitation to show at the first São Paulo Biennial in 1951, she moved to that city in 1953. A solitary artist, Mira Schendel was aware of the most important avant-garde chapters in her adopted country and exchanged with crucial intellectual figures of the XXth Century, from poets to philosophers and critics and fellow artists, becoming a central reference for the Brazilian cultural scene after 1965. Schendel died in Brazil in 1988.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is made possible by Agnes Gund, The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, and Estrellita B. Brodsky.

Generous support is provided by Nelly Arrieta de Blaquier, Beatriz and Andrés von Buch, The Bruce T. Halle Family Foundation, Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis, David Rockefeller, and Fundación Cisneros/Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros with additional funding from Clarissa Alcock Bronfman, Mr. and Mrs. Eduardo F. Costantini, Andrea and José Olympio da Veiga Pereira, Safra National Bank of New York, Alvaro Saleh Bendeck, Diego Costa Peuser, Mr. and Mrs. Antón Apostolatos, Leopoldo Rodés and Ainhoa Grandes, Mr. and Mrs. Guillermo Cisneros, Marieluise Hessel, Mr. Nicholas Griffin and Mrs. Adriana Cisneros de Griffin, Eva Luisa Griffin, and Tomás Orinoco Griffin, Mrs. Yvonne Dadoo de Lewis, Sharon Schultz Simpson, TEN Arquitectos/Enrique Norten, and Milú Vilela.

The accompanying publication has been prepared with the assistance and support of Charles Cosac and Michael Naify.

PUBLICATION:

The accompanying publication, *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets*, is a richly illustrated volume edited by Luis Pérez-Oramas. The catalogue presents new insights into the artists' groundbreaking work, and examines the connections and collisions of language, politics, and religion in the oeuvres of the two artists. In addition to over 200 color reproductions, the book features essays by Andrea Giunta, professor of Latin American art at The University of Texas; Rodrigo Naves, writer, historian, and professor of art history; an illustrated chronology by Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães, Curatorial Assistant; and an essay that discusses the curatorial premises by Mr. Pérez-Oramas. It is published by The Museum of Modern Art and Cosac Naify and is available at MoMA Stores and online at www.momastore.org. It is distributed to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P) in the United States and Canada, Thames + Hudson outside North America, and Cosac Naify in Brazil. Hardcover: 224 pages, 220 color illustrations. \$55.00.

PROGRAMS:

Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel

Tuesday, April 7, 6:30 p.m.

The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building, 4 West 54 Street
Theater 3 (The Celeste Bartos Theater), mezzanine

In this two-part program, speakers explore the work of artists León Ferrari and Mira Schendel, the subjects of MoMA's exhibition. Andrea Giunta, art historian and critic, and Luis Pérez-Oramas, MoMA's Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art, and organizer of the exhibition, engage in a conversation on León Ferrari's major contributions to the art of the XXth Century. Afterwards, scholars Paulo Herkenhoff, independent curator, Rio de Janeiro; and Guy Brett, writer and curator; address the work of Mira Schendel.

Tickets (\$10; members \$8; students, seniors, and staff of other museums \$5) can be purchased at the lobby information desk, at the film desk, or in the Education and Research Building lobby. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

Brown Bag Lunch Lectures

Monday, April 13, and Thursday, April 16, 12:30–1:15 p.m.

The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building, 4 West 54 Street
Classroom B, mezzanine

Two Brown Bag Lunch Lectures will focus on *Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel*. The lectures will be given by Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art. Attendees may bring their own lunches.

Tickets (\$5; members, students, seniors, and staff of other museums \$3) can be purchased at the lobby information desk, at the film desk, or in the Education and Research Building lobby. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

AUDIO GUIDE:

A MoMA Audio program highlights sixteen works in the exhibition. Eight of the works are discussed in Spanish by Luis Pérez-Oramas, the organizer of the exhibition, and also in Portuguese, while the other eight are discussed in English by Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães, Curatorial Assistant. The audio program is available at the Museum free of charge, courtesy of Bloomberg; and as a podcast on www.moma.org/audio and iTunes. MoMA Audio is a collaboration between The Museum of Modern Art and Acoustiguide, Inc.

WEB SITE:

The exhibition Web site, www.moma.org/tangledalphabets, features a concise group of works, some of which are discussed in the audio program, along with audio and texts explaining each of the significant juxtapositions of works. Visitors can zoom in on the works to explore the details. The site was designed and developed by Tender (<http://www.tendercreative.com/>). It will launch on April 5, 2009, in conjunction with the public opening of the exhibition.

TRAVEL:

The exhibition *Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel* will travel to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain, where it will be on view from November 24, 2009 through March 1, 2010; and to the Fundação Ibere Camargo, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where it will be on view from April 8, 2010 through July 11, 2010.

No. 15

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For downloadable high-resolution images, register at www.moma.org/press.

MoMA Monday Nights:

MoMA will remain open until 8:45 p.m. on selected Mondays, giving visitors extended hours to view special exhibitions and the museum's collection. The evenings will include entertainment and a cash bar. Regular admission applies. The museum will stay open from 10:30 to 8:45 on the following Mondays: April 6, May 4, and June 8

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

Hours:

Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m.

Closed Tuesday

Museum Admission:

\$20 adults; \$16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$12 full-time students with current I.D. Free for children 16 and under. Free for members.

Admission includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs.

Free admission during Target Free Friday Nights 4:00-8:00 p.m.

The public may call 212/708-9400 for detailed Museum information. Visit us on the Web at www.moma.org.