

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

**Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel, at MoMA through June 15, includes the above example of what Ms. Schendel called Graphic Objects.**

# Alternative Modernism Via South America

At least one work in "Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel" at the Museum of Modern Art should raise some hackles. It is "Last Judgment" by Mr. Ferrari, an Argentine artist born in 1920 who is still active. It consists of a large reproduction of Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" fresco in the Sistine Chapel that Mr. Ferrari left sitting beneath a cage of pigeons.

**ROBERTA  
SMITH**

**ART  
REVIEW**

The whitish substance dotting much of the image has a beautiful softness reminiscent of volcanic ash; damp, blossoming plaster; and loosely brushed oil paint. A mechanical reproduction of the best-known depiction of the world's end becomes an object that is either riddled with decay or luxuriantly hand-worked. Michelangelo may have populated his fresco with the minions of the Devil, but Death itself seems to be

seeping gently through the walls of Mr. Ferrari's version.

First made in 1985, "Last Judgment" neatly combines Process Art, appropriation art and political provocation. A violated ready-made (like Duchamp's mustachioed Mona Lisa), it hangs in the final gallery of the Modern's show a few feet from a polar opposite: "Still Waves of Probability (Old Testament, I Kings 19)" by Ms. Schendel (1919-1988), a Brazilian artist.

The sheer simplicity of "Still Waves" may also raise hackles. It consists of thousands of strands of nylon thread hanging to the floor from tiny jeweler's eye-hooks covering a 12-by-14-foot area in the gallery's 18-foot-high ceiling. In such quantity, the threads form a silvery, wafting, quasi-visible shaft that could almost be

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# From South America, Alternative Modernism

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light or rain. Hanging nearby, a sheet of clear plexiglass is printed with a quotation from I Kings 19 concerning the voice of God, which is not found in wind, earthquake or fire, but is simply "a still small voice." The religious subject matter is not as embedded as it is in the Ferrari piece, but "Still Waves," from 1969, is an early and rather monumental instance of Post-Minimalism.

"Tangled Alphabets" is the Modern's latest attempt to explore modernisms beyond the narrow Euro-American version that it did so much to lock in place. Organized by Luis Pérez-Oramas, the museum's curator of Latin American art, it is essential viewing for anyone interested in 20th-century art and often displays a taut aesthetic repartee. But it also sometimes feels half-hearted.

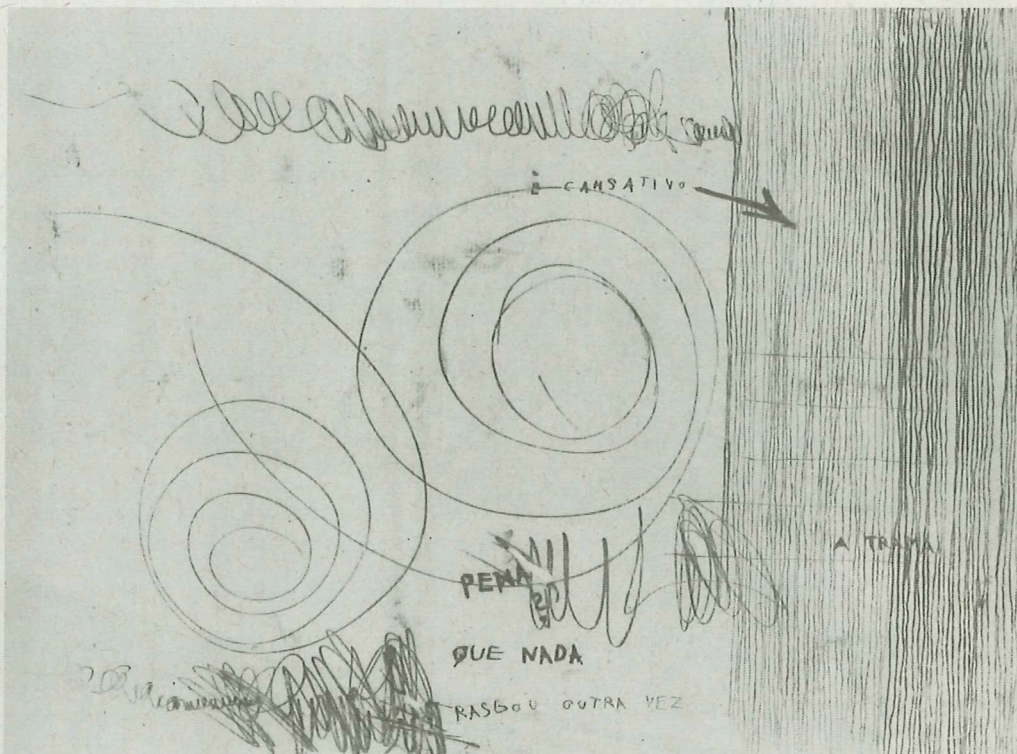
The news release lauds Ms. Schendel and Mr. Ferrari as "two of the most important South American artists of the 20th century." But the combined retrospectives suggest an unwillingness to commit. Wedging a double survey into galleries usually occupied by single ones doesn't help.

Still, "Tangled Alphabets" brings together more work by Ms. Schendel and Mr. Ferrari than has been seen in a North American museum. It opens a window on a complex regional artistic history similar to that of the United States in its assimilation of European models, embrace of both abstraction and popular culture and oscillation between purity and politics. Expect to find analogies here to Abstract Expressionism, Fluxus,

## Two very different artists, occasionally on common ground.

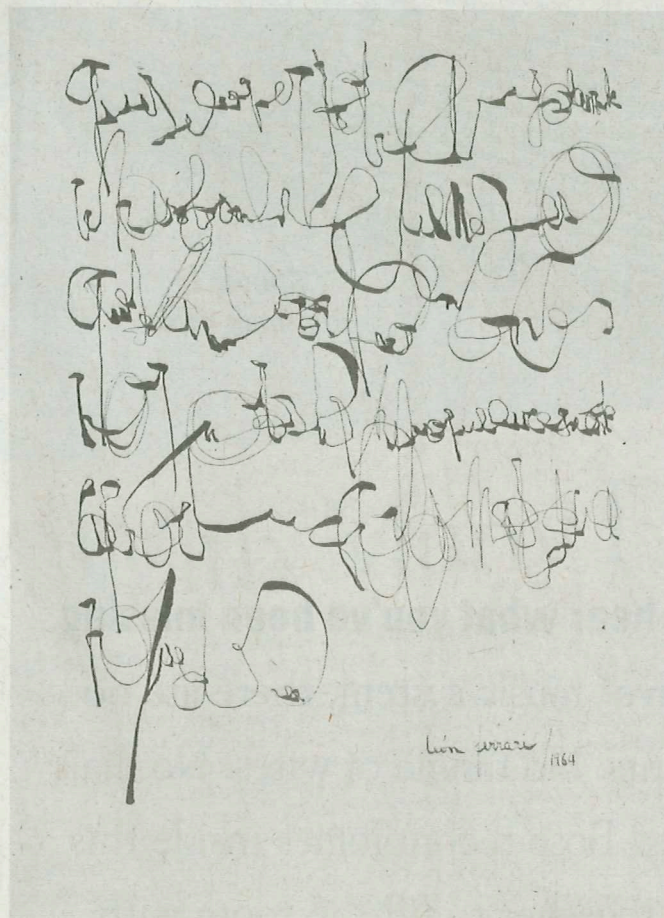
word art, Arte Povera, appropriation art and even Neo Geo.

Ms. Schendel and Mr. Ferrari knew each other only slightly and exhibited together only once in a large group show. They represent, at heart, very different sensibilities. Mr. Ferrari is extroverted, even grandiose, and peripatetic, hitting so many different notes over the course of his career that inevitably more than a few are off key. Ms. Schendel was more consistent, an introverted



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"A trama (A fabric net)," an oil transfer on Japanese paper by Mira Schendel from the 1960s.



An untitled ink-on-paper from 1964 by León Ferrari, an Argentine artist who came to drawing after working in sculpture.

### ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images from "Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel" at the Museum of Modern Art: [nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)

in which jubilant profusions of line suggest incoherent musical scores, flamboyant alphabets, manically pretentious script. A kind of studied Art Nouveau automatism prevails.

Sometimes the looping calligraphies heave like layers of sediment. Occasionally they are legible. Three works from 1963 titled "Letter to a General" signal the growing political consciousness that would inspire some of Mr. Ferrari's work for more than a decade. In 1976, as Argentina's military dictatorship tightened its grip, Mr. Ferrari and his family relocated to Brazil for 15 years; one son, Ariel, stayed behind and soon "disappeared."

One of Mr. Ferrari's most interesting political works is unfortunately represented in this exhibition only by a collage, although it appears twice in the catalog. It is the 1965 "Western Christian Civilization," a found-object assemblage and protest against the escalating Vietnam War. It consists of a nearly life-size figure of Jesus mounted, as on a crucifix, on the underside of a large, inverted

few are off key. Ms. Schendel was more consistent, an introverted purist, a focused student of Eastern mysticism and a Post-Minimalist before the fact.

They both emerged in the 1960s, when progressive ideas flourished in art and politics, albeit beneath the gathering clouds of military juntas. Their alignment is closest during these years, when both worked extensively with ink and paper, in vocabularies that mixed words, letters, illegible writing and line, as well as aspects of transparency and automatism. In the show's center gallery, it is sometimes hard to know who did what.

But they arrived at this common ground from different directions. Ms. Schendel, a Jew and onetime poet, survived World War II, emigrating in 1949 from Sarajevo to Brazil, where she began to paint. Living in São Paulo after 1953, she met a German bookseller named Knut Schendel who became the father of her

*"Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel" continues through June 15 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.*

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only child and then her husband. Her earliest works at the Modern are stiff, abstracted, Morandi-like still lifes from the mid-1950s.

Contact with the Brazilian Neo-Concrete artists is reflected in the quirky, textured, nearly monochromatic paintings she made in the early 1960s. But, striving for something less rational and more ephemeral, she found her true voice in a Zen-like visual poetry. It was created by pressing down — often with only her fingernail — on Japanese rice paper laid on glass laminate covered with ink and lightly sprinkled with talc.

The technique unleashed an immense range of seismographic marks, symbols, letters, word fragments and phrases that soon spread to the imposing two-sided works she called Graphic Objects. Here multiple sheets of rice paper dotted with regiments of little marks and letters, as well as big press type, are sandwiched between sheets of plexiglass. The disembodied, translucent patchworks and textures suggest different layers of sound caught on

scrim — black on white, red on white and white on white.

By 1964, Ms. Schendel was using her rice paper sculpturally, evolving forms that, concurrent with Eva Hesse's, achieved a resonant fusion of organic and geometric. Weaving and knotting twisted strands of it, she made odd, flexible forms that she called Little Nothings. These spheres and irregular nets evoke brains, vines, relaxed bodies and collapsed grids; they hover eerily between animate and inanimate.

Mr. Ferrari came to drawing from sculpture, his route first visible in ceramic vessels from around 1960, whose tapering curves evoke women's bodies, then in delicate wire sculptures that seem like 1950s period pieces but were made a decade later. Most of his efforts swing wildly between out of date and prescient, genuine and stagey.

His spidery ink drawings from the early 1960s lack the innate sense of scale that informs even Ms. Schendel's slightest works. Better are more carefully composed works, also from the 1960s,

the underside of a large, inverted model of an American bomber. Included in the 2007 Venice Biennale, it is polemical to say the least, but also remarkably ahead of its time.

This show encourages you to suspend many of your assumptions about postwar art in the Americas. But it also leaves other things up in the air. Concentrating on one artist or the other might have provided a fuller, messier account of either's achievement. Putting them together seems to have made for a larger tidiness by maintaining a certain Minimal/Post-Minimal orthodoxy. To shake things up really, the Modern may have to expand more than just its geographical purview.

