

# **The Words of Others: León Ferrari and Rhetoric in Times of War**

**Palabras ajenas:  
León Ferrari y la retórica  
en tiempos de guerra**

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**Falbo editor**



Cover of León Ferrari, *Palabras ajenas; Conversaciones de Dios con algunos hombres y de algunos hombres con algunos hombres y con Dios* (The words of others: Conversations between God and a few men and a few men with a few men and God), published by Falbo, Buenos Aires, 1967

# A Theater of the Present

José A. Sánchez

The Vietnam War (1955–75) is not so far away. From Buenos Aires, León Ferrari could hear the bombs and be affected by the torture. The pain has not disappeared—it remains active in millions of bodies, victims of other wars and more sophisticated modes of colonization. *Palabras ajenas* (The words of others, 1967) is not a historical drama; it is a drama of the present. And that present is ours.

There are places that are at the same time realities and myths—that is to say, sensible concretions of a tale: Guernica, Auschwitz, Kigali, Sarajevo, or Gaza. In the 1960s Vietnam was a reality and a metaphor in which imperialism became painfully visible. When he wrote his work, Ferrari could not imagine that the United States would be defeated or that the *nice* anticommunist dictatorship presided over by Juan Carlos Onganía (1966–70) would be relieved a few years later by the much bloodier military junta. Anticommunist imperialism had learned its lesson in Vietnam and acted much more effectively in Argentina and throughout Latin America, with the help of the local military.

& 21/11/ 66 C. Lodge: We are learning. (195)<sup>1</sup>

I was already here when León Ferrari wrote *Palabras ajenas*: my body existed, my heart beat, my lungs expanded, and my facial muscles articulated words, cries, and smiles. I could have been one of those children burned by napalm. But then I was far away indeed: I did not hear the bombs. Nor did I listen to the laments of the political prisoners of the Franco regime (1939–75), nor was I aware of the broken mourning of tens of thousands of Spaniards for their disappeared relatives, buried in mass graves, or the terror of those retaliated against and executed in the name of anticommunism and for the greater glory of the Catholic God—that God who is a father to his own and an executioner to all the others. I was one of his own, so it had been decided. And being one of his own meant keeping my eyes shut, my mouth quiet, and my hands still.

1. León Ferrari, *Palabras ajenas*, facsimile (Buenos Aires: Bibliografía de Voros, El Aleph, and Licopodio, 2008). Text references throughout are to this edition.

H 134 Hitler: None of us, without a doubt, is entirely normal. (182)

At home, they spoke very badly of Paul VI; at some point he was called a communist. I understood much later that my relatives merely repeated the messages dictated by the propaganda of the regime. Rome, which had unabashedly supported the coup d'état and had forgiven all the crimes committed by the fascist regime, changed its politics and moderated its doctrine with the arrival of John XXIII in 1958. Paul VI, who ascended to the papacy in 1963, was also critical of the regime but not to the point of giving up the economic privileges of the church in Spain. With Vatican patience, the pontiff waited for the death of the dictator. Spain was liberated from fascism but not from Catholicism, nor from the powerful families that continue to dominate the structures of our weak democracy, heir, like most of today's democracies, to those formal democracies that were invented precisely as a result of the lessons of the defeat in Vietnam, in the years when militarist imperialism became neoliberalism.

M 25/11/65 Reuters, etc.: Pope Paul VI has warned the 400 Latin American prelates attending the Vatican against the "dangerous forces" of atheism in South America. (44)

*Palabras ajenas* is a theater of the present because it confronts the power of the present. Power belongs to those who control the use of force (US president Lyndon B. Johnson), the dissemination of information (the media, although today this includes television and social networks), and the shaping of consciences (the pope and his cardinals, although today we would speak of subjectivities and we would have to include numerous aspects of the advertising and entertainment industries but also the design of work structures and relations). Finally there are figures who function as mythical referents, justifying the maintenance of this patriarchal power, both in Adolf Hitler's historical version and in the transcendent version of God. On the other side are the victims, subjugated, abused, silenced, attacked, reduced to a name or to data, sometimes images of bodies without identity. Faced with that power, León Ferrari organized a theater to talk to God.

BB 854 Ez. 21/9 God: A sword, a sword is sharpened, and also furbished: It is sharpened to make a sore slaughter; it is furbished that it may glitter. (113)

The German theater director Erwin Piscator used the term *Zeittheater* to refer to a theater that dispensed with intersubjective drama in order to speak directly of the reality of its time. Ferrari is close to Piscator in this general intention but also in many of the concrete procedures of representation: the use of newspaper



Performance of *Operativo: "Pacem in Terris,"* 1972, Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari. Arte y Acervo, Buenos Aires

fragments,<sup>2</sup> the dramaturgy of staging,<sup>3</sup> and the replacement of characters with voices, images, or disembodied information (something to which Bertolt Brecht also resorted at some point).<sup>4</sup> In "Bühne der Gegenwart und Zukunft" (Stage of the present and future, 1928), Piscator argues that theater cannot be merely a manifestation of its time but must also be an "engine and shaper" of the present, considering that this "present" is no longer "a metaphysical time" but "a product of the class struggle within each society."<sup>5</sup> The renunciation of neutrality led him to replace *Zeittheater* with *Tendenztheater*, a theater that goes beyond the present; to this end, the documents should serve not representation but learning.<sup>6</sup> The theater thus fulfills a pedagogical function.

T 8/10/65 Johnson: We in America have not always been good to artists and scholars. (31)

León Ferrari's work is undoubtedly a "play of tendency" as much as a "theater of the present." And because it does not refuse the integration of the poetic and the political, it takes sides with the peasants of Vietnam against the imperialist aggression and against the religion justifying the massacre. And it is also a "pedagogical" play, as long as pedagogy is not mistaken for indoctrination: just as the author leaves the historical characters to speak for themselves, he also lets the spectators associate and discover meaning for themselves, thanks to the clash of words produced through montage.<sup>7</sup> Ferrari's approach differs from that of Piscator in its scenographic treatment, because *Palabras ajenas* avoids the apparatus and trusts its effectiveness to words. In that search for sobriety, Ferrari is closer to the experiences of documentary theater made by Piscator himself in the 1960s, especially the staging of Peter Weiss's 1965 play *Die Ermittlung* (The Investigation).<sup>8</sup>

H 262 Hitler: I had intended to write a play. (31)

Like Ferrari, Weiss wrote his play assuming the role of witness of the present, in this case of the Auschwitz war crimes trial held in Frankfurt am Main between 1963 and 1965. *Die Ermittlung* takes the form of an oratorio in eleven cantos. (The writer Julio Cortázar, one of the earliest recipients of Ferrari's manuscript, called *Palabras ajenas* a "kind of tremendous oratorio.")<sup>9</sup> According to Weiss, *Die Ermittlung* is an actionless drama in which the conflict between the victims and the victimizers simply becomes manifest.<sup>10</sup> The duration of the piece (four and a half hours) should make it "unbearable"; neither Weiss nor Ferrari (his play is even longer and potentially endless) wanted their pieces to be spectacles.

2. Alfons Paquet, *Fahnen: Ein dramatischer Roman* (Munich: Drei Masken, 1923).

3. The staging of *Trotz alledem! Historische Revue* (1925). See Erwin Piscator, *El teatro político y otros materiales*, ed. Cesar de Vicente Hernando (Hondarribia, Spain: Hiru, 2001), 113.

4. Bertolt Brecht, *Der Ozeanflug: Radiolehrstück für Knaben und Mädchen*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann, vol. 2. Stücke, pt. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 565–85.

5. Piscator, "Bühne der Gegenwart und Zukunft: Das politische Theater," in *Zeittheater: Das politische Theater und weitere Schriften von 1915 bis 1966*, ed. Manfred Brauneck and Peter Stertz (Reinbeck bei Hamburg, Germany: Rowohlt, 1986), 249 (translation mine).

6. Piscator, *El teatro político*, 111.

7. León Ferrari to Leopoldo Maier, March 15, 1968, Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari. Arte y Acervo (see p. 218).

8. The play premiered on October 19, 1965, at the Theater der Freien Volksbühne in Berlin, with scenography by Hans-Ulrich Schmückle and a musical score by Luigi Nono.

9. Julio Cortázar to León Ferrari, July 2, 1967, © Sucesión Julio Cortázar, 2016 (see p. 194).

10. Peter Weiss, quoted in Ana Ruth Giustachini, "Circulación y reapropiación del teatro de Peter Weiss," in *De Bertolt Brecht a Ricardo Monti: Teatro en lengua alemana y teatro argentino (1900–1994)*, ed. Osvaldo Pellettieri (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1994), 97.



Respect for the victims and the dimensions of the violence that they intended to make present required a renunciation of the spectacular. Weiss wrote, "What I desire from the audience is that they can listen carefully and completely alert, not hypnotized, absolutely alive, answering all the questions of the play."<sup>11</sup>

CyO 240 NurembergTr: Who placed the rope / around the children's necks? (131)

A direct influence of *Die Ermittlung* on *Palabras ajenas* is unlikely. But Weiss began to be known in Argentina in those years because of the success of the 1965 staging of *Marat/Sade* (1963) in Paris, directed by Peter Brook. In June *Teatro XX* magazine published several pages of information and analysis. And in 1967 the magazine *Confirmado* included a report by Paul Gray on Weiss. *Die Ermittlung* premiered in Buenos Aires in Spanish that year and was staged by Pedro Asquini,<sup>12</sup> who would also be responsible for the Buenos Aires version of *Palabras ajenas*, produced in 1972 by Grupo T at the Teatro Larrañaga with the title *Operativo: "Pacem in Terris"* (Operation: "Pacem in Terris").<sup>13</sup>

CyO 240 NurembergTr: Did you hang only / one child at a time or several? (132)

Documentary theater is, according to Weiss, heir to the political theater of Piscator and Brecht, but it dispenses with dramatic material to work only with "authentic" material, from news reports and economic, political, or scientific analyses.<sup>14</sup> This material is produced by means of a "critical choice": the way in which the "reality clippings" are assembled gives rise to the "dramatic documentary quality." "The strength of documentary theater," says Weiss, lies in its ability to compose "a model of current events" from "fragments of reality": "by means of the editing technique [*Schnitttechnik*], it extracts significant units from the chaotic material of external reality."<sup>15</sup>

CyO 240 NurembergTr: How many children / did you hang from these hooks / on each occasion? (132)

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 99.

13. Pedro Asquini, *El teatro que hicimos* (Buenos Aires: Rescate, 1990), 126-27.

14. Peter Weiss, "Das Material und die Modelle: Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater," in *Stücke*, vol. 2, bk. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 598.

15. Ibid., 599, 602.

From a formal point of view, the parallels between documentary theater and the verbal collages of León Ferrari are beyond doubt. Weiss proposes four characteristics: (1) The use of news and news fragments, treated as antithetical material, and opposing individual and collective speakers; in its elocution, contrasts, repetitions, variations, irregularities, and dissonances are used. (2) Verbal elaboration of the facts through citations, simplifications,

summaries, and commentary. (3) Interruptions of the story. (4) Dissolution of the structure: "no such thing as a calculated rhythm, but raw material...the report from a theater of war." Like Piscator and Ferrari, Weiss saw no problem in being outside aesthetics: documentary theater is rather to be conceived as "part of public life," and its purpose is to criticize "concealment," "falsification of reality," and "lies."<sup>16</sup> It seeks not to satisfy the spectator but to intervene in the public sphere, to open a forum for discussion. Therefore documentary theater is "partial" because "objectivity" is, in these circumstances, "a concept that serves a power group to excuse its actions."<sup>17</sup>

PN 438 NurembergTr: Do you seek to assert before this Tribunal /  
that you, / the number two man in the Reich, / were not aware /  
of what was taking place / in the concentration camps? (132)

The staging of *Die Ermittlung* was described as antitheatrical by critics of the time. They also denounced the audacity of Weiss and Piscator for staging that extreme manifestation of violence and evil. Piscator defended himself by appealing to the *Denktheater* tradition, a theater that invites thought, not metaphysics but thought based on knowledge and analysis of reality.<sup>18</sup> The controversy surrounding *Die Ermittlung* was very similar to the one provoked by Ferrari's contribution to the national award of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella that year.<sup>19</sup> When in the following months Ferrari approached the composition of *Palabras ajenas*, he hardly cared if his work was considered art or theater as long as it fulfilled its communicative function.

T 14/5/65 Johnson: I am the most censored man in the world...

H 134 Hitler: Who can escape criticism? (185)

Although the parallels between Ferrari's theater of "clippings" and the documentary theater of Weiss are evident, his work seemed very strange in the Argentinean context. In the mid-1960s what was considered "political theater" remained the heir of independent theater, a movement that emerged with the founding of the Teatro del Pueblo in 1930 by Leónidas Barletta. It had evolved into a theater "for the middle classes,"<sup>20</sup> which critics labeled as "critical realism"<sup>21</sup> and "reflective realism."<sup>22</sup> In parallel, an "avant-garde" dramaturgy was developed, which includes the work of Griselda Gambaro and Eduardo Pavlovsky, and an experimental or "alternative" theater, of gestural character.<sup>23</sup> Finally it is possible to speak of a properly experimental scene, which happened in nontheatrical contexts and in which artists from other disciplines participated; regarding this scene, Alberto

16. Ibid., 804, 805.

17. Ibid., 800, 803.

18. Erwin Piscator, "Politisches Theater heute," *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), November 26, 1965, reprinted in Piscator, *Zeittheater*, 357.

19. León Ferrari, "La respuesta del artista," *Propósitos*, no. 106 (October 7, 1965); unpagged.

20. Lorena Verzero, *Teatro militante: Radicalización artística y política en los años 70* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2013), 96.

21. Luis Ordaz, *Historia del teatro argentino: Desde los orígenes a la actualidad* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Teatro, 1999), 391.

22. Oswaldo Pellettieri, *Una historia interrumpida: Teatro argentino moderno (1949-1976)* (Buenos Aires: Galema, 1997), 109.

23. John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del 60* (1985), 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Asunto and Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 2007), 57.



Greco's concept of Vivo-Dito (often translated as "the act of pointing," which suggests an art that points out lived experience rather than trying to represent it) and the happenings of Oscar Masotta, Marta Minujin, and Roberto Jacoby are worth mentioning. The Instituto Di Tella was the place of reference for the performing and action practices of visual artists, especially after 1965, when the architect and theater director Roberto Villanueva took over the direction of the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual, promoting a program of theater, happenings, and concerts. This included a production by Leopoldo Maler, who in 1968 directed the first staging of *Palabras ajenas*, in London.<sup>24</sup> Undoubtedly Ferrari's idea of theater, regarding the staging of his verbal collages, was very far from Villanueva's approach, which championed a type of gestural theater in which the word had a secondary role.

V 20/8/65 Visión: A tiger ate an American soldier.

H 45 Hitler: The earth continues to go round. What difference does it make if it's the man who kills the tiger or the tiger who kills the man! The stronger asserts his will: it's the law of nature... (49)

Ferrari was very interested in the show *Liberdade, liberdade* (Freedom, freedom, 1965), by the playwright Millôr Fernandes and the director Flávio Rangel, which premiered in Rio de Janeiro as a coproduction of the local Grupo Opinião and Teatro de Arena in São Paulo. It was a protest musical against the coup of 1964 perpetrated by the Brazilian military with support from US intelligence. It followed the model inaugurated the previous year by Augusto Boal with his show *Opinião* (Opinion). At first Boal had imagined staging a version of Kafka's *Trial* (1925) in which the defendants were people arbitrarily detained by the police. The difficulty of producing this theater-testimony led him to conceive a musical in which the dictatorship was criticized through songs.<sup>25</sup> *Liberdade, liberdade* kept that musical format, with a collage structure in which four actors who played fifty-seven characters interpreted a series of very diverse texts.

V 20/3/65 Westmoreland: Shoot all tigers...you find in the jungle....

HP 436 Hitler: It is the struggle of eternal selection, the selection of the strongest. (50)

24. María Fernanda Pinta, *Teatro expandido en el Di Tella: La escena experimental argentina en los años 60* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2013), 100.

25. Joan Abellán, *Boal conta Boal* (Barcelona: Institut del Teatre, 2001), 152.

26. Oscar Masotta, *Revolución en el arte: Pop-art, happenings y arte de los medios en la década del 60* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2004), 38.

The idea of "collage" was also present in the happenings and events that were common in many Latin American cities in those years. *Palabras ajenas* was written during a veritable fever of happenings in Buenos Aires. In a few months they had become popular to such a degree that some promoters had to lament the trivialization and the expiration of a very young phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> In



Program for Millôr Fernandes and Flávio Rangel's musical *Liberdade, liberdade, liberdade*, produced jointly by Grupo Opinião and Teatro de Arena, Rio de Janeiro, 1965, Millôr Fernandes Collection, São Paulo

the fall of 1966 Minujín presented *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* (Simultaneity in simultaneity), and shortly afterward a cycle called *Acerca del happening* (About happenings) was organized, consisting of a series of lectures and actions by different artists, Masotta, Jacoby, Oscar Bony, and Alicia Páez among them.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on texts by Susan Sontag, Jean-Jacques Lebel,<sup>28</sup> and others, in her lecture "El concepto de happening y las teorías," Páez proposed a series of descriptive features of happenings, some of which might serve to describe León Ferrari's work.<sup>29</sup> "Creative manipulation" occurs by placing the spectators in a tier before the actors, or even on the stage, altering or reversing the usual arrangement; Ferrari intended that the spectators would be in tension that way but also that they would look at themselves in a much stranger way than is usual in realistic theater. The "absence of argument" is evident: the anecdote is the pope's 1965 visit to New York and his speech at the United Nations, but the subject—imperialist violence as the heir of fascism and the necessary complicity of religion—is given not in the form of a plot but as a succession of contrasting and resonant words. Hence the importance of the "sound and expressive effect": although for Ferrari it was imperative that words be understood, sometimes they could also communicate by the effect of their own sonority or even their movement through space. Thus words, voices, and bodies would become a living sculpture, a replica of the volumes of wire built by Ferrari in the years before and after *Palabras ajenas*. In fact, one might think of this as an inverted version of what the artist called babelism<sup>30</sup>—inverted because in its first conception babelism was a mode of collective art, whereas *Palabras ajenas* appears more like an aggregation of voices that overlap without listening and without understanding.

Finally, the movement of words is consistent with a "circular temporality and repetition," which allows for the coincidence of the biblical God, the colonizers, the leaders of the Nazi Party, and the protagonists and witnesses of contemporary imperialism. The option for a cyclical structure constitutes a challenge to teleological temporality, which, according to the Christian worldview, proposes a temporal linearity according to which history and lives take place conforming to a transcendental end. The imagination of the Last Judgment obscures the experience of the present, and the torturing vision of Hell prevents that of earthly hells, those created by human beings through misery, repression, disappearances, and bombs.

& 311/66 USN&WReport: In South Vietnam, / planes equipped to spray chemicals / were killing rice crops in areas under Vietcong control.

27. Pinta, *Teatro expandido*, 189–92, 219.

28. Jean-Jacques Lebel visited Buenos Aires in March 1967 to deliver a lecture at the Instituto Di Tella following the publication of his book *El happening*, trans. Enrique Molina (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1967), originally published as *Le happening* (Paris: Denoël, 1966). See Pinta, *Teatro expandido*, 103.

29. Quoted in Pinta, *Teatro expandido*, 71. In a letter to Maler, Ferrari refers to Alicia Páez's article, which he considers "very interesting," and mentions that Maler himself appears in the article as "a predecessor of the happening." León Ferrari to Leopoldo Maler, January 23, 1968, Fundación Ferrari (see p. 204).

30. Andrea Giunta, "Cronología," in León Ferrari: *Retrospectiva; Obras, 1954–2004*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Recoleta, 2004), 111.



Performance of Peter Weiss's play *Die Ermittlung*, Berlin, 1965, Getty Images



Performance of Millôr Fernandes and Flávio Rangel's musical *Liberdade, liberdade*, produced jointly by Grupo Opinião and Teatro de Arena, Rio de Janeiro, 1965, Millôr Fernandes Collection, São Paulo

PN 420 Rosenberg: A great number of them died of hunger  
& 27112165 USN&WReport: Orders from Washington (121)

The hell of men is part of reality. And reality is León Ferrari's subject. Collage is a means of making reality enter the work.<sup>31</sup> Unlike artists such as Greco, Bony, or Jacoby,<sup>32</sup> Ferrari was interested not so much in the concretion of the real as in the complexity of reality. He was therefore closer to Cortázar and Jean-Luc Godard than to Vivo-Dito and happenings. Cortázar resorted to collage in *Hopscotch* (1963), explicitly in the chapters grouped in the third part ("From Diverse Sides"), but as a resource for effective narrative composition throughout the novel: "I include some of the small fragments in *Hopscotch* because what they say is perfect, you cannot say it better."<sup>33</sup> His recourse in chapter 34 to alternating lines of his own writing with lines from another author's novel is clearly echoed in the montage made by Ferrari, especially in the passages citing the pope's address to the United Nations. Giving voice to reality was also a way of taking to the extreme the will to dissolve individual authorship to approach a collective voice.<sup>34</sup>

[Several references] [God] cursed the fruit of thy womb.../  
[Johnson] yellow dwarf.../[Himmler] criminals.../[R. Russell]  
delinquents.../[Paul VI] atheists.../[God] unbelievers.../  
[Hitler] Bolsheviks.../[C. Lodge] Vietcong.../[Card. Cushing]  
communists.../[KKKlan] blacks.../[God] All will die by the  
sword.../[Christ] fire.../[Johnson] bombs.../[God] Smash them  
to pieces on the heads of all the people.../[Paul VI] Marxists.../  
[US Soldier] to hell with them.../[Christ] into eternal fire prepared  
for the devil.../[C. Lodge] guerrillas.../[Christ] Depart from me,  
you who are cursed/...[US Soldier] motherfuckers.../[La Nación]  
What is Hanoi doing?/[Le Monde] it does not answer...(231–32)

31. *Ibid.*, 132.

32. "Vivo-Dito art is the adventure of the real." Alberto Greco, "Vivo Dito" manifesto, July 24, 1962, quoted in Luis Camnitzer, *Didáctica de la liberación: Arte conceptualista latinoamericano* (Montevideo: Casa Editorial HUM, 2008), 223. Cf. Pinta, *Teatro expandido*, 147.

33. Quoted by Andrés Amorós in the introduction to Julio Cortázar, *Rayuela* (1963; Madrid: Cátedra, 1984), 51.

34. "The idea of collage—photo and text—seems fascinating to me. If I had the technical means of printing my own books, I think I would still do collage books." *Ibid.*

35. Leopoldo Maler to León Ferrari, January 16, 1968, Fundación Ferrari (see p. 202).

During preparations for *Palabras ajenas* in London, Maler wrote to León Ferrari about *Far from Vietnam* (1967), the collective film by Chris Marker, and highlighted Godard's contribution.<sup>35</sup> Faced with the impossibility of bringing Vietnam to Paris, Godard sought parallels between the Vietnamese resistance and that of the French workers and intellectuals: it was about, quoting Che Guevara, "creating your own Vietnam." The final sequences of the Godard fragment recall the pages of *Palabras ajenas* that Ferrari himself considered to be the most successful. They develop as a "continuous montage" through which a certain dissolution of the authorial voice is achieved, without, however, renouncing individual responsibility. The "achievement" results not from literary, intellectual work but from manual labor: "La vraie condition de

l'homme / C'est de penser avec ses mains."<sup>36</sup> One inevitably recalls the Brecht of the *Arbeitsjournal*, as evoked by Ruth Berlau, "with scissors and glue in hand," given to the task of "cutting and fabrication" that occupied him during the war years.<sup>37</sup> The poet clipped and pasted images. The artist, León Ferrari, cut and pasted words. In both there is the same concern: to respond to the evil of war, to the problem of the impossible representation of violence, to the search for the most effective way to translate the "cry" that the artist, as an intellectual, cannot abide, as he is responsible for communicating to provoke responses. Discussing Brechtian poetics, Georges Didi-Huberman writes that understanding things dialectically requires "disorganizing their order of appearance" to manifest "their differences, their mutual clashes, their confrontations, their conflicts."<sup>38</sup> He calls this mode of disorganization, practiced by Brecht in his plays and by Ferrari in his verbal and visual collages, to "dys-pose."<sup>39</sup>

L 29/12/66 Card. Cushing: Sometimes the use of force / can be love disguised as force. (25)

Although at some point Ferrari intended to rewrite *Palabras ajenas* as a play with only twenty characters,<sup>40</sup> he finally chose to entrust the effect of his text to pure "dys-position." Owing to the absence of characters, dramatic action occurs not as a result of the interaction between them but, as the artist Raúl Escari quickly saw, because of the "dialogue established between the different texts."<sup>41</sup> And if Brechtian drama demands a very clear staging that does not blur movement and dialectic relations, León Ferrari's text demands it even more so. The concept of staging is contradictory to the "dys-position" practiced in the text. There is nothing to rearrange—it is simply a matter of words being heard and, in their dialectical "disorganization," making a revelation, for something to change.

H 68 Hitler: The natives will have to be sifted out. (193)

In his review of *Operativo: "Pacem in Terris,"* Jacoby observed in Ferrari's antispectacular proposal a "way to de-aestheticize" theater into a communication medium or to propose an "over-politicized" aesthetic.<sup>42</sup> Like many other Argentinean artists and writers in those years, Ferrari had to accept the challenge of sacrificing the comfort of the discipline and autonomy; he thus approached the figure of the "revolutionary intellectual" who had replaced the "Sartrean intellectual" during the mid-1960s. Rodolfo Walsh, author of the famous 1959 chronicle *Operación masacre* (*Operation Massacre*), clearly incorporated the figure

36. "Le contrôle de l'univers," chap. 4, pt. 1, of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Neuilly-sur-Seine, France: Gaumont, 1998), quoted in Dominique Paini, *Le temps exposé: Le cinéma de la salle au musée* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2002), 95.

37. Ruth Berlau, cited in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position*, vol. 1 of *L'œil de l'histoire* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), 39.

38. *Ibid.*, 86.

39. *Ibid.*, 94.

40. León Ferrari to Leopoldo Maier, December 14, 1967, Fundación Ferrari (see p. 200).

41. Raúl Escari to León Ferrari, December 9, 1967, Fundación Ferrari (see p. 196).

42. Roberto Jacoby, "Fresco sobre la agresión neocolonialista: Intenso y poético experimento de comunicación política y estética," *La Opinión* (Buenos Aires), December 9, 1972 (see p. 279).



of the intellectual who, according to Ricardo Piglia, “from clear artistic positions, intervenes in concrete politics, and finally resolves the tension between aesthetics and politics by joining the revolutionary struggle.”<sup>43</sup> In the mid-1960s Walsh wrote two plays critical of the military class and a short text, titled “Juegos de guerra” (War games), in which he notes how “the enjoyment of war games has invaded Western capitals to become, almost, a society entertainment.”<sup>44</sup>

CO 18/6/65 Kahn: Nothing succeeds like success, and nothing defeats like defeat. (26)

In contrast to “war games,” in which destruction and death do not affect players, the “theater of war” does affect viewers, and it compels them to respond and, in a way, to try to become actors for its interruption. Like Brecht’s *Arbeitsjournal*,<sup>45</sup> *Palabras ajenas* is also “a war stage”: the place where the artist intimately lived his experience of war but also the stage on which the evil that creates war and that created by war become manifest. The dimensions of the play are not gratuitous; they are the result of the respect with which Ferrari wanted to place himself in relation to the victims and in relation to the resistance. His work with the thousands of clippings he used and the precision with which each of them is identified are also the marks of a formal war that the author lived, deeply affected by the real war.

N 11/7/65 AP: Towering mushroom-shaped clouds rose from the town as big bombs fell from the attacking planes.  
Napalm bombs sculpted brilliant sheets of flame over the jungle while aircraft cannon shells twinkled. (20)

Intimate theater responds to an external theater. War is a theater in the literal sense, used by the aggressor’s forces to distribute its propaganda by means of airplanes provided with loudspeakers (78) or by means of groups of anticommunist popular theater (79). It is a theater in the metaphorical sense, that spectacle of destruction caused by bombs, flares, shots, screams, and contortions of pain.<sup>46</sup> Finally, it is a dramatic theater, represented by leaders in their public appearances, when they remain faithful to the character that corresponds to them, and they seem at times implacable, at times conciliatory, at times exhibiting their hobbies or their feelings.

BM 9 Johnson: I am a free man, an American / a senator, and a Democrat, in that order. I am also a liberal, a conservative, /

43. Quoted in Verzero, *Teatro militante*, 118.

44. Rodolfo Walsh, “Juegos de guerra,” *Nueva política*, July 1965; available online via *La insignia*, [http://www.lainsignia.org/2004/marzo/cul\\_054.htm](http://www.lainsignia.org/2004/marzo/cul_054.htm).

45. Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal 1938 bis 1942* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 122.

46. See Bertolt Brecht, *Die Tage der Commune* (1956), in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5, pt. 5, *Stücke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 95.





León Ferrari, *Untitled* (Vatican interior and Jews in concentration camp), from the series *Relecturas de la Biblia* (Rereadings of the Bible), 1987, cut and pasted printed paper on printed paper, 10 $\frac{13}{16}$  x 9  $\frac{1}{4}$  in., Ferrari family collection, Buenos Aires

a Texan, a taxpayer / a rancher, an entrepreneur, / a consumer,  
a parent, a voter / and not as young as I used to be.(28)

León Ferrari emphasized this theatricality, without transforming the texts, to show the fiction of the wishes for peace expressed by Johnson and the commitment to it reiterated by Paul VI, in parallel to the kind image of God, the moral rectitude of Franco's or Hitler's benefactorial dreams. These fictions are unveiled through the montage of their words with other words, pronounced by themselves in other contexts or at other times (a procedure he would use a little later, during his participation in *Tucumán arde* [Tucumán is burning]).<sup>47</sup> To the perverse theater of war and political hypocrisy, Ferrari responded with a theater of "dys-posing." War games are transformed into word fights. Words attack those who pronounce them. The word, which was usurped by God to reincarnate in Christ, destroys all fiction, confronts imperial peace with the reality of war, confronts religion with the real torture of a hell occurring daily on earth while the pope celebrates the namby-pamby fiction of Christmas or the fictional suffering of Easter. Words destroy perverse fictions, those that produce death, and clear the symbolic space for creative fictions, those that produce life. And more words.

47. Andrea Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties*, trans. Peter Kahn (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 276.

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Miguel A. López

#### Adviser

Andrea Giunta

#### Assistant curator and researcher

Carmen Amengual

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