

Exhibition December 16, 2020 – April 12, 2021

Sabatini Building, Floor 4

The Kind Cruelty

León Ferrari, 100 Years



Santa María (Caravel, detail of *La justicia* / 1492-1992. *Quinto centenario de la Conquista* [Justice / 500th Anniversary of the Conquest]), 1992. Installation

La bondadosa crueldad (The Kind Cruelty), as an interpretive fiction and gateway to the complex weave of art, politics, and life that makes up the career of León Ferrari (Buenos Aires, 1920–2013), is also the title of a book of poems and collages that the artist published in 2000 (Argonauta, Buenos Aires) and dedicated to his son Ariel, who disappeared under the Argentine dictatorship. In that publication, Ferrari warned of a “cruelty so intimately blended with kindness that it hides it.” He also devoted a few lines to his written visual art, which he defined as an “ecological art” made only of words, the most renewable of resources, allowing the image to pass through the wall to the eyes of the viewer, thus firing their imagination. This technique, Ferrari said, “allows works to be made that no other technique would achieve, as it lets us attain and use the unattainable, what has already been or what has yet to arrive.” The work of León Ferrari offers its enigma and its disobedience as a way of firing the political imagination toward what is yet to come.

An engineer by profession, León Ferrari began practicing as a self-taught artist in the 1950s in Rome, where he made his first terracotta sculptures. From then on, his work developed in a process of continuous metamorphosis. He explored various materials, from the plaster and cement, wood and wire, in his sculptures, to the diverse pigments and inks in his drawings. He introduced conceptual strategies to his work by linking drawing with writing in his “written visual art,” and he experimented with thinking in images through the use of collage. After the military coup in Argentina, he lived in exile from 1976 to 1991 in São Paulo, Brazil. There he made his large-format sculptures, explored serialization by working with engravings, photocopies, and heliographies, and continued his confrontations with forms of political and religious power. His work as an artist is inseparable from his lifelong commitment to various political causes, especially in defense of human rights. His work was included in the 1999 exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* at the Queens Museum of Art in New York, and in *Heterotopías. Medio siglo sin lugar: 1918–1968* at the Museo Reina Sofía in 2000. These exhibitions can be considered milestones in the internationalization of his work, which reached a high point in 2007 when he was awarded the Golden Lion at the 52nd Venice Biennale.

León Ferrari’s multifaceted and challenging oeuvre resists a linear reading and traditional artistic categorizations.

His complex production can be seen as a pendulum moving between the decodification of violence and playful exploration at the limits of meaning. Despite its apparent heterogeneity, his work maintains an organicism and musicality within series that are repeated, reformulated, superimposed, and allowed to contaminate one another, touching on the social and political issues to which he was committed throughout his life. Rather than conceiving of art as a restricted practice aimed at an elite, from the outset Ferrari was dedicated to the idea of an “art of meanings” (the title of one of his 1968 essays, “Arte de los significados”) based on an aesthetic-political experimentation that would have the social significance necessary to engage a broad public. In fact, in the 1960s Ferrari was a key figure in the politicization of the avant-garde artists who broke away from the Instituto Di Tella, the emblematic institution that fostered experimentation in Argentine art during that decade. This rift began to open with the exhibition *Homenaje al Viet-Nam* (Homage to Vietnam, 1966) and reached its high point with *Tucumán arde* (Tucumán Burns, 1968). Ferrari was also a link between the political radicalization of Argentine art and the regional debates on art and revolution that took place in the early 1970s at the *Encuentro de artistas plásticos latinoamericanos* (Encounter of Latin American Visual Artists) group shows in Chile and Cuba, countries then experimenting with the construction of socialist societies on the American continent.

Ferrari reads the uses of the image in Western culture—from iconic figures of painting like Giotto, Fra Angelico, or Michelangelo, to contemporary photojournalism—as an aesthetic enchantment that leads people to forget its ethical narrative. He therefore creates an “archive of cruelty” in which he shows how the image has served power as a means of justifying the most vicious forms of torture and extermination, from the Catholic Inquisition and the Crusades to the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the Argentine dictatorship.

Through his visual and object montages and his literary collages, Ferrari experiments with forms to readjust the gaze, stir up emotions, and, at the same time, challenge the viewer to adopt a position. Moreover, his aesthetic-political investigations explore the communicative fault lines in language, blindness, error, illegible writings, or humor as ways to tense the literality of the word and the image, exploring other forms of beauty in order to extend the limits of the possible and the expressible.

The Kind Cruelty is a collective and polyphonic curatorial project that proposes a nonlinear journey through the work of León Ferrari. It features seven major themes that do not follow a chronological order, but intersect and resignify from one room to the next. In an attempt to dissolve the binary distinction between an abstract phase and a totally differentiated political phase, a distinction that in the past has led to aestheticized and distant readings of Ferrari’s work, this exhibition instead seeks to interpret his modes of action, intervention, and creation on the basis of the frictions and continuities between



Juicio final (Last Judgment), 1994. Printed paper (reproduction of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*) with fowl excrement

formal experimentation and *politicization* as two poles that are resignified at different moments of his career.

Justice and Judgments

León Ferrari examined the limits of earthly and divine justice in his controversial artworks with live animals: *La justicia* (Justice, 1991), in which a hen defecated on a scale; and *Jaula con aves* (Cage with Birds, 1985), an installation in which songbirds added “strokes” of excrement to a print of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*.

These are works that question art as tradition, as process, but also as result. When he started to produce his cages with birds, Ferrari prepared a protocol for the interaction between the human keepers and the fowls, a human-animal mechanism

with the potential to create unique works consisting of pictorial reproductions of the *Last Judgment* intervened with excrement. Ferrari said that the resulting images were kinetic, owing to the movement of the bird and its dung, but also progressive, because they grow and change over the time the cage is exhibited and functioning. The work demands that the viewers use several senses to appreciate and complete it. The production process of *Jaula con aves* speaks to us of the effects of time on living things, of their rhythms, but also of their transformation and their waste. Ferrari also plays with time by creating a device that does not require his own body to generate artworks, and can continue to produce images even when he is not physically present.

Ferrari used to say that Original Sin and the Last Judgment were the two judicial acts between which the West traces the line of history. His respectable paintings with excrement were a protest against divine justice, but also against the linear idea of time and the establishment of precisely the Last Judgment as the end of history.

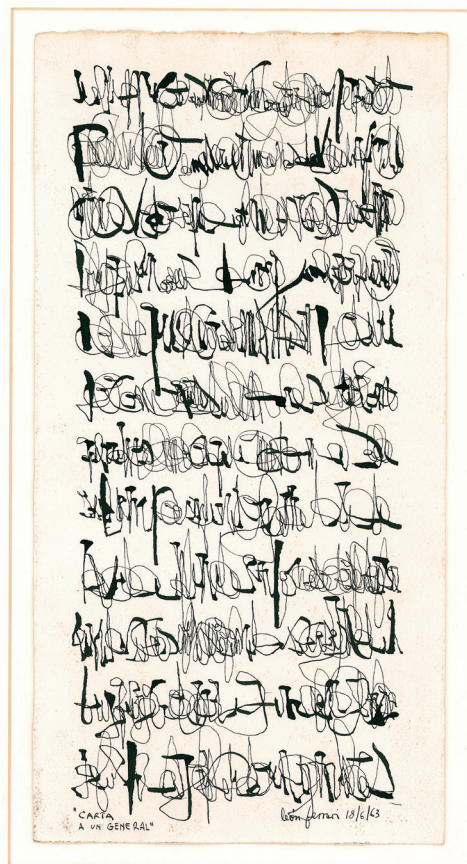
Ferrari Laboratory

In the late 1950s, Ferrari set up a laboratory of chemical compounds in his own home for the elaboration of metals, allowing him to establish a parallel time and space of experimentation for his artistic practice.

From the 1960s, his work oscillated between his hands and his mind, between matter and concept. He explored the spatiality of volume and the mimetization of drawing with writing. Ferrari used “deformed

writing” to unburden himself of his first secret political messages, as in *Carta a un general* (Letter to a General, 1963). With legible calligraphy he transcribed texts that became drawings, inviting viewers to reread them and also see them in a new way, as occurs with the eye that looks at us from his first work critical of religion, the handwritten *El árbol embarazador* (The Impregnating Tree, 1964).

He allowed writing to follow less analytical courses, exploring poetic language and the



Carta a un general (Letter to a General), 1963.
Ink on paper



La civilización occidental y cristiana (Western Christian Civilization), 1965. Assemblage

sensuality of the line. He explored different inks and pigments and the possibilities of color in his watercolors, on which the traces of his first collages appear, the beginning of a sustained practice of cutting out and reorganizing the words and images of others. The use he made of the letter and the word also ventured into processes of dematerialization of the artwork, as in the self-reflexive narrative of *Cuadro escrito* (Written Picture, 1964), his first conceptual work.

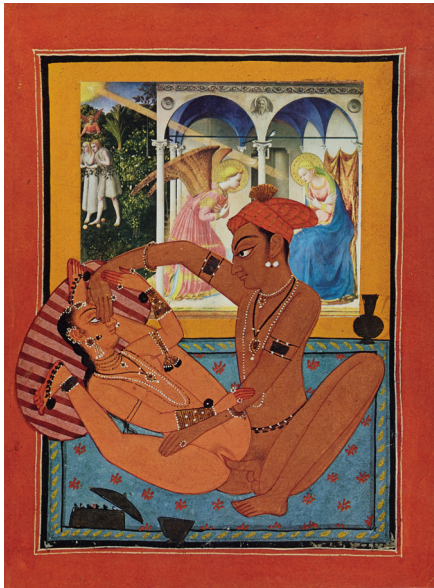
In this first phase of his production, Ferrari experiments with elements that weave through the matrix of his oeuvre like a bundle of threads that are successively unwoven and unknotted at different moments of his life. The potential for variation in his work is contained at this germinal moment,

reminding us that every time he takes a step forward, he takes something from his previous phase with him.

Religious Archaeology of Violence

Rereading as a methodology runs through León Ferrari's oeuvre. It is another name for his technique of collage and reassembly of meanings. Reading and rereading is also an archaeological exercise, a way of activating knowledge that does not emerge at first glance. Ferrari identifies the seed of war in the discourse of intolerance and punishment directed by the Judeo-Christian tradition at those who do not profess its faith. He rereads the Vietnam War from the standpoint of the religious justification for extermination of the other. From that archaeology of violence came *La civilización occidental y cristiana* (Western Christian Civilization, 1965), in which a crucified Christ appears on an American warplane, a work he installed at the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires. The institutional decision to withdraw the piece from the exhibition marked the beginning of a history of censorship that would follow his career. Ferrari sought to question a society whose apathy led it to naturalize these forms of violence.

In the series *Relecturas de la Biblia* (Rereadings of the Bible), a set of collages produced beginning in 1985, Ferrari introduces images of war, but also of sex, science, and pagan culture, to rewrite the iconography of the religious texts of the Old and New Testaments. Several pieces in this series, which contain photographs of nuclear bombs superimposed on angels of the Apocalypse, resound and



Untitled, 1986, from the series *Relecturas de la Biblia* (Rereadings of the Bible). Collage (Annunciation [Fra Angelico] + Eastern erotic image)



Untitled, 1986, from the series *Relecturas de la Biblia* (Rereadings of the Bible). Collage (German popular support for Hitler + Holy Ghost)



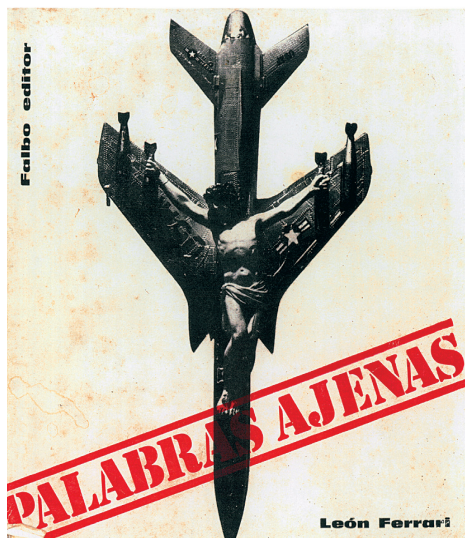
Untitled, 1986, from the series *Relecturas de la Biblia* (Rereadings of the Bible). Collage (Saint Augustine + Angel of the Annunciation + Eastern erotic image)

are reformulated in the material explosion of the polyurethane *Hongo nuclear* (Nuclear Mushroom, 2007), an image of the atomic bomb as the materialization of hell on Earth.

Words of Others

The book *Palabras ajenas* (Words of Others, 1967) is a literary collage in which León Ferrari puts into writing the process of montage begun with *La civilización occidental y cristiana*. Created in response to the daily news reports and photographs of torture during the Vietnam War, the artist felt that through the mediatization of the conflict, “for the first time the West coldly describes itself in action.”

The book fuses political and religious themes through a long imaginary dialogue between more than 160 characters. Without following a chronological order and always acknowledging the different sources cited, he lays bare the continuity of the rhetoric with which power makes itself manifest, and with which violence is defended in biblical texts, in Western imperialist policy, and in the media. Ferrari conceived of the work as a theatrical performance lasting many hours, thus questioning the idea of the show as a self-enclosed unit with a beginning and an end. Spectators would be able to go in and out at different times and remain as long as they wished. In 1968, the piece was staged in a one-hour English version directed by the artist and stage director Leopoldo Maler under the title *Listen Here Now: A News Concert for Four Voices and a Soft Drum*. In 1972, the theater director Pedro Asquini presented a second version at the Teatro Larrañaga in Buenos Aires



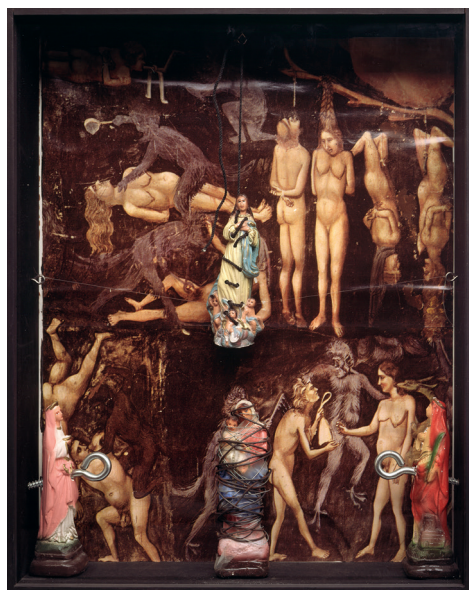
Cover of the book *Palabras ajenas* (Words of Others), Falbo editor, Buenos Aires, 1967

with the title *Operativo: “Pacem in Terris.”* With an approximate duration of five and a half hours, the public was allowed to wander in and out of the auditorium as Ferrari had envisaged.

The exhibition includes a sound installation based on the production of *Palabras ajenas* at the Museo Reina Sofía on April 14, 2018. This version by Ruth Estevez, José A. Sánchez, and Juan Ernesto Díaz was presented for the first time in 2017 at REDACT in Los Angeles, and afterwards at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá and the Museo Jumex in Mexico City.

Ideas for Infernos

In some of his visual and object collages, Ferrari denounces the Catholic Church’s discourse on hell as a form of illustration



Untitled, 2000, from the series *Ideas para infiernos* (Ideas for Infernos). Collage (intervened virgins + detail of Giotto's *Last Judgment*)



Untitled, 2005, from the series *Ideas para infiernos* (Ideas for Infernos). Intervened objects

and exaltation of torture and the punishment of those who are different. Here he uses household utensils, trinkets, and religious articles to show saints and clerics exposed to the tortures of hell. Ferrari thought that the infernos depicted throughout history aroused no reaction or condemnation, and he therefore made his own version in which humans were replaced by the figures of those who had supposedly created or disseminated hell: saints, virgins, and Christs. Thus among these objects are plaster saints inside a blender, or a virgin covered with plastic cockroaches and scorpions, making up an ironic series on divine justice. Ferrari sought to reveal the absurdity of a faith that wins over the faithful with threats. He suggested that the true hell was mental: living with the idea of eternal punishment as a form of introjecting fear. Ferrari's inferno objects provoked persistent reaction from different religious groups, whose protests culminated in the closure of the artist's retrospective at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires. The protests were spurred on by Jorge Bergoglio, today Pope Francis, who played a role in the judicial censorship of the exhibition.

Defying Impunity

From the second half of the 1960s, the climate of political and cultural revolution led him to explore what he called an "art of meanings," and to involve himself with a series of collective initiatives of artistic politicization that reached their high point with the experiment of *Tucumán arde* (1968). After this, he broke off his artistic work for ten years until the civil and military coup d'état



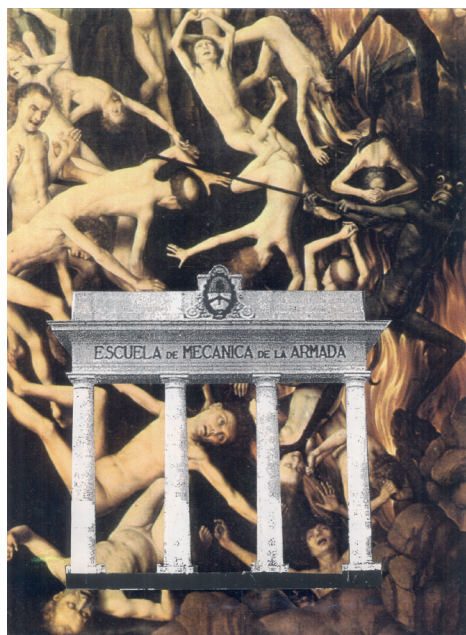
Nosotros no sabíamos (We Didn't Know), 1976. Collage

of 1976 in Argentina. The dictatorship introduced a time of disappearance and death that brought with it a breakdown in frameworks of meaning. At this time, Ferrari started to draw again, as though he needed to find a new language to link him to the inexpressible. He also returned to collage in his series *Nosotros no sabíamos* (We Didn't Know, 1976), news clippings from diverse Argentine newspapers explaining the disappearance of people, everyday traces of horror exhibited for all to see. Almost immediately, he went into exile in São Paulo with his family until 1991.

Ferrari worked on a time scale that was simultaneously synchronic and diachronic. He moved between the intensity of historical detail and the perspective offered by an extensive time frame. On his return from exile, he reinforced his commitment against the impunity of the crimes of state terrorism. In 1992 he produced *La justicia* (Justice), a work that connects such distant and dissimilar historical processes as the conquest of America and the dictatorship in order to show us the continuity of an illegitimate and cyclically reproduced violence. *La justicia* evokes an altarpiece decorated with hundreds of encrypted messages in objects that point to the role of religion in the violent appropriation of America. After it was first exhibited in Germany in 1992, the work went missing for more than ten years. Retrieved in 2004, it was exhibited once more, under the title *1492–1992. Quinto centenario de la Conquista*, in the retrospective held on the artist at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, where it was vandalized by a group of orthodox Catholics.

This is a work that bears the marks of its history and the nature of its materials, which degrade with time. After intensive research carried out by the Museo Reina Sofia and the Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo (FALFAA) in the artist's personal archive, it proved possible to complete the reconstruction of the work, respecting the materiality of each element, and thus install it in this exhibition exactly as Ferrari presented it in 1992.

While Ferrari's *Nosotros no sabíamos* extracted the traces of terror that managed to slip through the censorship of the press in the first months of the dictatorship, nearly



Untitled, 1995, from the series *Nunca más* (Never Again). Collage (Navy Mechanics School + detail of Memling's *Last Judgment*)

twenty years later, in 1995, he used the newspaper for his series *Nunca más* (Never Again), where he unburdens himself of his direct experience of the horror. This series of collages illustrates the reissue in installments of the report of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), which received wide circulation with the Argentine daily *Página 12*. Ferrari reclaims the press as a broad medium for visualizing the infernal dimension of state terrorism, rejecting impunity, and reasserting a commitment to human rights.

Ways of Doing / Immaterial Ferrari

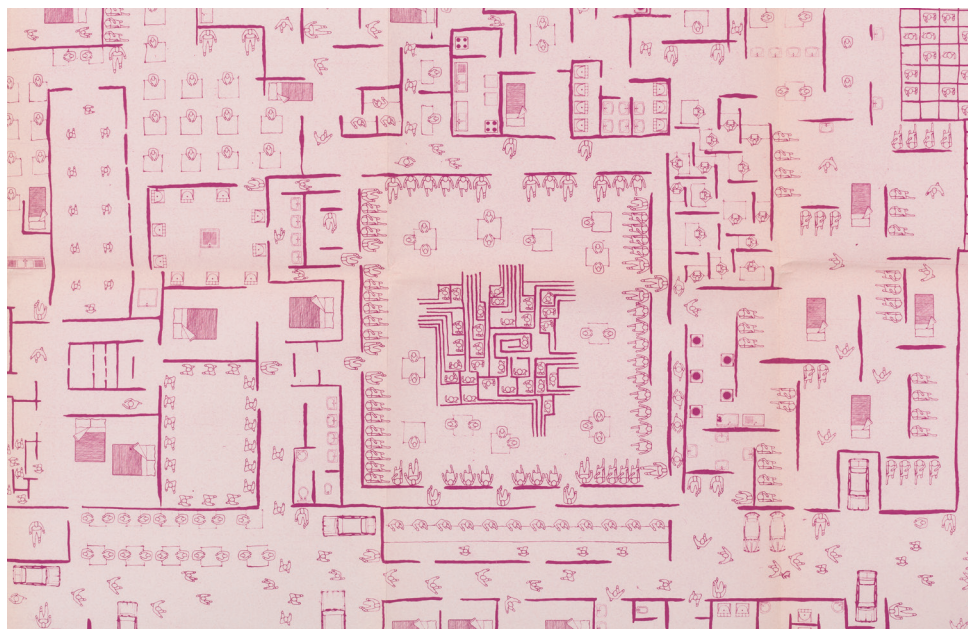
The exhibition ends with a non-chronological survey of León Ferrari's

biography. A constellation of his ways of doing, it uses previously unseen works and documents from his personal archive to present his career as a complex network of art, politics, and life.

Two episodes caused shifts and ruptures in Ferrari's life project. One was his trip to Italy in 1952, when his eldest daughter was stricken by tuberculous meningitis, and the other his exile in Brazil starting in 1976. Both occurred on the frontier between the public and the private, between intimate time and historic time, and they give us the keys to an understanding of what we call "Immaterial Ferrari."

The Italian trip of 1952 happened as a consequence of research undertaken to find a cure for his daughter's illness. The treatment began at a clinic in Florence, and allowed him to gather valuable information that he later presented to the Argentine Ministry of Health. During his stay in Italy, he produced his first artworks, came into contact with a circle of artists and intellectuals, and started to familiarize himself with the ideas of the political left. Italy was also the country of origin of his father's family. When asked about his first experiences of art and religion, Ferrari's response pointed to his father, Augusto Ferrari, an architect, painter, and photographer who also built and decorated churches in the Argentine provinces of Córdoba and Buenos Aires. As a voyage of artistic initiation, his journey to Italy also connected him with the creative audacity of his paternal lineage.

The second milestone in his biography is his exile in Brazil with his family beginning in 1976, and the later disappearance of his



Rua (Street), 2008, from the series *Heliografías* (Heliographs, detail). Heliographic copy

son Ariel in February 1977 at the hands of the repressive forces of the Argentine state. From São Paulo, Ferrari engaged in intense human rights activism. And for the first time he began to live exclusively off art, establishing ties with the São Paulo art scene. He returned to methodologies from the 1960s and, at the same time, experimented with serialization, sculptures converted into instruments, and his works with live birds. The exploration of each new technique allowed him to access new ideas and change his way of enunciating and affecting the reality of each period he found himself living through.

These two episodes show that Ferrari lived his life as he made his works. This room uses them as a basis for deploying

a lifetime's archive of actions, reflections, and strategies that show the intimate and affective engineering of his ways of doing both inside and outside the field of art. Ferrari investigated pigments, lines, and metals with the same virtuosity as he brought to his studies of pharmacology to find the proper administration of antibiotics to palliate his daughter's disease, or his gathering of precedents for the legal battle to find his son. The more bureaucratic face of his human rights activism or the plans of churches on which he worked with his father are metamorphosed in his collages, engravings, and heliographies. They are immaterial processes that leave a trace on his material work, and they expand the gaze over the political and ethical commitment that marked his life and oeuvre.

The project *The Kind Cruelty: León Ferrari, 100 Years* is the result of a long-term collaboration agreement between the Fundación Augusto y León Ferrari Arte y Acervo in Buenos Aires and three European museums—the Museo Reina Sofía, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and the Musée national d'Art moderne–Centre Pompidou in Paris—to carry out an in-depth study of the artist's oeuvre and preserve part of his heritage within an integral and expansive approach, permitting new readings of his work in dialogue with the European context while promoting relations between it and the activism of the present.

Each institution hosting the exhibition will safeguard a patrimonial collection donated by the Ferrari family that will include the full diversity of techniques, themes, and materials characterizing León Ferrari's long artistic career.

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