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## Short Fuse: Of virgins and in blenders and rats that sing

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# Of Virgins in Blenders and Rats that Sing

by Alberto Gomez and Dot Tuer

In December 2004, as the Pope lay dying and cardinals whispered in the cloisters of the Vatican, a retrospective for artist León Ferrari was taking place in another kind of cloister, La Recoleta, a convent converted into a cultural centre in downtown Buenos Aires. Ferrari, one of Argentina's most important political artists, has long used Christian iconography to critique the complicity of the Catholic Church in a history of genocide and intolerance ranging from the conquest of the Americas and the Inquisition to the Nazi Holocaust and Argentina's Dirty War. From his emblematic 1960 artwork "Western Civilization and Christianity," in which he placed a metre-high Christ on the wing of a model American fighter plane, to his more recent sculptures of crucifixes popping out of toasters, virgins in blenders and saints sizzling in frying pans, Ferrari's acid humour inverts divine punishment for heresy into the torture and hell of Christian imagery on earth. While his retrospective brought together a selection of works that ranged widely in style from abstraction to agit-prop and spanned fifty years of artistic practice from 1954–2004, Ferrari's repudiation of the institutional hierarchy of the Catholic Church for its violent exorcism of difference and its ideological collaboration in crimes against humanity made the exhibition highly popular and immediately controversial.

In the opening weeks of the exhibition, as large crowds lined up around the block to witness Ferrari's iconoclasm, right-wing Christian fundamentalists gathered, rosaries in hand, to pray for their souls. As spectators entered the main salon of the exhibition and were confronted by Ferrari's 1960 crucified Christ — as relevant now (perhaps more so) in the context of Bush's Holy War as it was when it was made during America's crusade against communism in Vietnam — the fundamentalists knelt and called for divine retribution. As viewers looked into a gilded cage where every few minutes the birds shit upon a reproduction of Michelangelo's "Last Judgement," the fundamentalists began to tremble with righteous indignation. Direct

action followed upon rage, with Catholic agitators vandalizing Ferrari's artworks within days of the retrospective's opening.

As the performative elements of protest escalated and debate in the mass media intensified, "concerned" citizens went to court to seek an injunction to have the exhibition closed. It was not only the desecration of the great propagandists of the Church such as Michelangelo or the diabolical recasting of Christian suffering that troubled Argentina's bishops and their followers. Equally disturbing was Ferrari's use of agit-prop collage to remind an Argentine public of the entanglement of religion, ideology and repression that struck at the heart of their own nation. In a series of works produced for the newspaper *Página 12* in the style of John Heartfield, photographs of Argentine Generals from the military dictatorship of the Dirty War (1976–83) were juxtaposed with Nazi symbols; and Christian imaginaries of the inferno with the material hell of clandestine concentration camps used to disappear 30,000 Argentineans. In another series of recent works, George Bush Junior had become the Grim Reaper. A photographic collage repeated his image in the orifices of a cadaver. Twirling globes were swarmed by dozens of plastic cockroaches, used by Ferrari as symbols of the ubiquity of American forces. A small architectural model of the White House was overrun by cockroaches and rats. In essence, Ferrari had recast Bush's imperialist regime as a purgatory of doom and destruction.

Perhaps it is no surprise in a country where a neo-liberal pact with the devil in the 1990s produced the first meltdown casualty of globalization in December 2001, and a bishop can publicly condemn the Minister of Health's campaign to legalize abortion by calling for him to be thrown in the river with a stone around his neck, that the Catholic right-wing was successful in its campaign to close the exhibition. According to the judge (Liberatore, ironically enough, was her name) who issued the injunction, Ferrari's retrospective "had wounded the religious feelings of the vast majority of the

city's inhabitants." It is also reassuring, and a sign of the shift in the political climate after the election of the left-leaning Kirchner as President in 2003, that the vast majority of Argentineans were more outraged by censorship than wounded by heretical images. City lawyers appealed the injunction, while Ferrari and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (who had first marched the streets during the military dictatorship asking for their disappeared children) led daily protests of artists and writers through the city to the steps of the Recoleta. In this instance, the legal wrangling and ideological confrontation between church and state ended with the re-opening of the Ferrari exhibition.

Less reassuring, and more unsettling, is the turn of events taking place on the global stage. With the Grand Inquisitor of right-wing Catholicism now ensconced as Pope, the vermin that invaded Ferrari's mock White House have reached the inner sanctum of Rome. Pope Benedict II (an erstwhile rat who sang for his supper) recently received the Bishop of Argentina, who had so inopportunistically called for the drowning death of the Minister of Health, with a warm embrace and urged him to continue the struggle for "the right to life." In the United States and beyond, fundamentalist evangelicalism is in ascendance. George Bush has won a second term at the White House on an imperial war platform, cockroaches and Abu Ghraib notwithstanding. In Iraq, the violence increases unabated, while in Afghanistan rumours over the desecration of the Koran in American political prisons sparked deadly riots. In this light, Ferrari's half-century commitment to denouncing the complicity of church and state in regimes of terror can only serve to remind us of the importance of struggling against intolerance and for the right to critique and to repudiate all forms of ideological violence.

**Leon Ferrari's work can be viewed at:**  
[www.leonferrari.com.ar](http://www.leonferrari.com.ar)  
[www.arteuna.com/RRF/a-Ferrai.htm](http://www.arteuna.com/RRF/a-Ferrai.htm)