Contributor: Lauren Richman

**Schendel, Mira**

Born: Zurich, Switzerland, 1919; Died: São Paulo, Brazil, 1988

Born Myrrha Dagmar Dub in Zurich, Switzerland, Mira Schendel was a visual artist based in São Paulo, Brazil working primarily in drawing, painting, sculpture, and poetry. Often considered marginal to popular vanguards active throughout 1960s Brazil, including ***Concretismos* (Concretism)** and ***Neoconcretismos* (Neoconcretism)**, many scholars consider Schendel’s marginalization to be self-initiated. The artist, a European émigré of the Second World War, surrounded herself with an intellectual network of similar characters. Her work often considers philosophical and religious frameworks, ranging from western religion to ancient eastern texts. Stimulating her intellectual exploration of faith and existence often through the visual component of language, Schendel’s work began featuring symbols and text in Portuguese, Italian, and German midway through her career. The artist’s work often disrupts the geometry of the plane and incorporates letters, phrases, and biblical excerpts. Schendel utilized materials both concurrent with artistic practice such as acrylic and tempera paints, but also Japanese rice paper and brick dust that when combined, created paradoxical relationships. Schendel developed a close relationship with art critic and theoretical physicist **Mário Schenberg**, both figures supporting spirited dialogue between São Paulo’s artistic and intellectual communities. Schendel’s painting and sculpture provided post-war Latin America with a new dialect in Modernism, fully engaged in contemplating universals such as existence, identity, and faith.

Schendel’s work has been the subject of various philosophical and existential interpretations, many by foremost scholars Sonia Salzstein, Rodrigo Naves, and Luis Perez-Oramas.

Although born of Jewish parents, Schendel was baptized and raised Catholic. She spent her adolescence in Milan, studying art at Via Fontanesi and then philosophy at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. Considered a non-Italian Jew under Mussolini’s anti-Semitic dictatorship, the artist fled persecution, settling briefly in Sarajevo. Here, Schendel met her first husband, Jossip Hargesheimer, thereby obtaining Croatian citizenship and permission to emigrate. In 1946, they returned to Rome where Schendel worked for the International Organization for Refugees. After three years of exile, Schendel and Hargesheimer immigrated to Porto Allegre, Brazil, but later separated. In 1953, Schendel settled in São Paulo where eventually she married Knut Schendel, a German émigré and owner of the well-known bookshop and intellectual hotspot, Canuto. Although the artist rarely discussed her experiences of the Second World War, Schendel’s private writings sometimes defend those displaced individuals who found refuge in Brazil, many of whom were her closest peers.

In 1950, Schendel began producing still life and abstract paintings exploring the relationships between colour, line, plane, and space. With careful attention to tone, texture, and surface, the thickly applied paint on canvas took on metaphysical qualities. Some of these were included in the **first Bienal de São Paulo in 1951**, exposing her to Brazil’s expanding contemporary art scene. Rather than participating in predominant artistic movements, Schendel surrounded herself with intellectuals like Schenberg, Concrete poet **Haroldo de Campos**, philosopher Vilém Flusser, and psychoanalyst Theon Spanudis, most of whom were fellow émigrés.

In the mid 1960s, Schendel’s production featured Japanese rice paper both in two and three-dimensional forms. She created hundreds of unique *Monotipias* (Monotypes), a series of individual sheets of rice paper displaying graphite lines, words, or symbols. She often used her own fingernails or other tools to scratch into the surface of the paper in order to make a direct transfer onto another sheet of rice paper. Also referencing the artist’s hand, the sculptural *Droguinhas* (Little Nothings) series displays graceful, yet compulsive tying and knotting of rice paper into singular hanging forms. By the end of the 1960s, language (Italian, German, Portuguese) dominated Schendel’s work, most notably *Objetos gráficos* (Graphic objects)—larger scale works with hanging sheets of rice paper housed in acrylic casing. In the 1970s, Schendel’s series *Toquinhos* (Little Things) transformed language into physical object in which she shaped pieces of acrylic to enclose cutouts of letters, numbers, or symbols on rice paper. Schendel returned to painting in the 1980s, highlighting gesture and line expanding into sculptural painting with the simple black-and-white constructions *Sarrafos* (Splints), the final series before her death. The artist’s work was featured in her first international, full-scale retrospective exhibition at London’s Tate Modern September 2013 through January 2014.

**References and further reading:**

Barson, T., and T. Palhares (eds.) (2013) ‘Mira Schendel’, London: Tate Publishing, (exh. cat.)

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Salzstein, S., G. Brett, [et al.] (1997) ‘No Vazio do Mundo. Mira Schendel’, São Paulo: Galeria de Arte do SESI, (exh.cat.)

Souza Dias, G. (2001) ‘Mira Schendel’, Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, (exh.cat.)

**List of Works**

1. 1. Mira Schendel, Sem título *(Fachada)* [Untitled *(Façade)*], 1960s, oil on jute, 91 x 91 cm, Luisa Malzoni Strina (X45885)
2. 2. Mira Schendel, Untitled from the series *Droguinhas (Little Nothings)*, c. 1964-66, Japanese rice paper, dimensions variable, approximately 90 x 70 cm, Scott Burton Fund, Museum of Modern Art, New York (68.2005)
3. 3. Mira Schendel, Untitled from series *Objeto gráfico (Graphic Objects)*, 1967, oil transfer on Japanese rice paper between transparent acrylic sheets, 100 x 100 x 1 cm, Mira Schendel Estate (X40065).
4. 4. Mira Schendel, *Ondas paradas de probabilidade (Still waves of probability)*, 1969, nylon thread and wall text on acrylic sheet, installation, variable dimensions, Collection Ada Schendel.
5. 5. Mira Schendel, *Sarrafo (Splint)*, 1986-87, tempera, acrylic paint, and gesso on wood panel, 90/97 x 188 x 52 cm, Mira Schendel Estate (X40092).