

Mira Schendel

1919–1988

by Ana Cândida de Avelar

1919

Myrrha Dagmar Dub is born on 7 June 1919, in Zurich, Switzerland to a family of Jewish origin. However, she is baptised at the Catholic Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Zurich.

1919–22

Mira lives in Zurich and Berlin until 1922, when her parents separate and divorce, she moves to Milan with her mother.

1930–6

Mira studies art in Milan.

From the age of four or five I drew furiously, if anyone gave me a gift, it had to be coloured pencils and graph paper. I drew figures... I always had a drawing pad and a black pencil with me. I sketched and people watched me draw furiously.

Mira Schendel, pintora: o espaço vazio me comove profundamente, interview with Jorge Guirte Filho, Interview Magazine (São Paulo), July 1981, pp.52–4.

1937

Mira's mother, Ada Saveria marries Count Tomaso Gnoli, a poet and director of the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense (Braidense National Library), Milan. The library is located in the same building as the School of Fine Arts and the Palazzo di Brera museum. Mira lives in an apartment in this building when not away at boarding school.

She begins her studies in philosophy at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart) in Milan.

1938

Mira is forced to discontinue her studies when a decree is issued by Mussolini stripping Jews of Italian citizenship and, among other measures, forbidding them from attending Italian universities.

Mira Schendel c.1950 mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo



c.1939–44

Escaping from Italy, Mira, who is now 'undocumented' joins a group of refugees bound for Yugoslavia. In Sarajevo, she meets a Catholic Croat of Austrian descent, Jossip Hargesheimer, whom she marries in April 1941. She receives a Yugoslav passport and papers.

1945–9

Mira and Jossip return to Italy when the war ends, they settle in Rome.

1949

Given the economic hardships in post-war Europe, Mira and Jossip decide to emigrate and begin applying to various countries in the Americas.

The Brazilian Immigration Bureau is the first to accept their application, so they set sail for Rio de Janeiro from Naples in July 1949, eventually settling in Porto Alegre.

Mira starts to paint and produce ceramics. She also begins life-drawing and sculpture classes at the Fine Arts School in Porto Alegre.

I started painting in Brazil. Life was very hard, there was no money for paints, but I used to buy cheap materials and paint like crazy. It was a matter of life or death for me.

Mira Schendel, pintora: o espaço vazio me comove profundamente, interview with Jorge Guirte Filho, Interview Magazine (São Paulo), July 1981, pp.52–4.

1950

On 6 January 1950, the newspaper *Correio do Povo* [*The People's Mail*] runs an article entitled 'The Drama of European Immigrants'. The story is so inaccurate that Mira writes an open letter defending immigrants to the newspaper, published the following day.

Her first solo exhibition of portraits, landscapes and still-lifes is held in October 1950 at the 'auditorium' of the same newspaper.

Little Nothing c.1965 Photo courtesy of Guy Brett, London



1951

After the positive reception of her first exhibition, Mira feels encouraged enough to submit work to the selection panel for the 1st São Paulo Modern Art Biennial. Her *Paisagem* [*Landscape*] is exhibited in the painting section.

1953

Mira separates from Jossip and moves to São Paulo alone. She begins to sign her works simply 'Mira'. This year she meets her future husband, Knut Schendel, a German émigré and owner of a well-known academic bookshop, Canuto.



Ely Buero, Mario Schenberg, Mira Schendel, unidentified man, mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo

1954–6

Schendel exhibits a group of abstract-geometric paintings known as *Geladeiras* [*Fridges*] and *Fachadas* [*Facades*] at a solo show at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo. She also participates in the 3rd Bienal de São Paulo. This period coincides with her burgeoning friendships with the physicist and art critic Mário Schenberg (1914–90); the psychoanalyst, poet, translator and art critic Theon Spanudis (1915–86); and the philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920–91).

1957–62

Ada Clara, the only child of Mira and Knut is born. The couple gets married in 1960. Between 1957 and 1962 Mira produces and exhibits very little, devoting her time to her daughter.

Mira Schendel's studio, 1960s, mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo



1962–4

Mira stages several exhibitions in São Paulo. In 1963 she presents paintings in dark, earthy tones with abstract divisions which the critics interpret as indicative of a transition in her work towards 'concretism'.

Beginning in 1964 and continuing until 1967, Schendel produces over 2,000 works on rice paper. The series becomes known as the *Monotipias*, (*Monotypes*).

The military stage a coup in Brazil in 1964.



Mira Schendel at home, 1960s, mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo

1965

Mira exhibits several of the *Monotipias* series at the 8th Bienal de São Paulo under the title *Canto dos jovens (a propósito de Stockhausen)* [*Song of the Youths, after Stockhausen*]. In this series, the artist draws on Stockhausen's musical piece to combine words and phrases written in different languages, this became a recurrent aspect of Schendel's works.

On Mira's relationship with language, which encompasses many works, the philosopher Vilém Flusser writes:

Mira's writings are not texts. They are not about anything, and so they cannot be read as representations. They are pre-texts. They are what texts are before they become texts (...)

FLUSSER, Vilém, "Indagações sobre a origem da língua", O Estado de São Paulo, Literary Supplement, São Paulo, April 28, 1967, p.1.

English critic Guy Brett visits the biennial and meets the artist. He and Paul Keeler, director of Signals, a gallery for experimental art in London, invite her to put on a solo exhibition at the space the following year.

Signals, London, c.1964–6, mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo



1966

Mira shows at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition catalogue features a poem by the Concrete poet Haroldo de Campos:

an art of voids
where the utmost redundancy begins to produce original information
an art of words and quasi-words
where the graphic form veils and unveils seals and unseals
sudden semantic values
an art of constellated alphabets
of bee-like letters swarming and solitary
all-pha-bbb-ees (...)
to enter the planetarium where her drawings
like starry patterns hang
and hear the silence as a bird of inwards
as a perch of almost
twittering its absolute haiku

Haroldo de Campos, text first published in the catalogue Mira Schendel, Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, May 1966



Mira Schendel exhibition at Signals, London, 1966, mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo

Mira travels to London for her exhibition at Signals. She presents sculptural works made of rice paper, *Droguinhas* [*Little nothings*] and *Trenzinho* [*Little Train*], as well as some *Monotipias*.

Photographer Clay Perry takes photographs of the artist with the *Droguinhas*.

Still Waves of Probability, 1969, installation view 1994, mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo



1966–7

Mira travels around Europe. She returns to Zurich and Milan, where she meets Umberto Eco. She also goes to Stuttgart where she meets Max Bense, professor of philosophy and theory of knowledge at the University of Stuttgart and his wife Elizabeth Walther, teaching at the same university.



Graphic Objects
34th Venice Biennale, 1968,
installation view Brazilian Pavilion
mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo

1968

Mira represents Brazil at the 34th Venice Biennale, alongside Lygia Clark, Farnese de Andrade and Anna Letycia Quadros. She shows *Objetos gráficos* [*Graphic Objects*].

She travels in Europe again. In Bern, she meets German philosopher Jean Gebser. She visits her friend Max Bense in Stuttgart, and then goes to Hamburg, Copenhagen, Oslo and travels to the North Cape (Nordkapp) in Norway.

1969

Mira takes part in the 10th Bienal de São Paulo. Held during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–85), this edition became subject to a boycott as many artists, from Brazil and elsewhere, refused to take part in protest against the repression practised by the military regime, which became more intense after 1968. Mira exhibits the installation *Ondas paradas de probabilidade – Antigo Testamento, Livros dos Reis I, 19* [*Still Waves of Probability – Old Testament, Book of Kings I, 19*]

Portrait of Mira Schendel 1960s, mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo



1970–4

In 1971 she produces over 200 *Cadernos* [*Notebooks*]. Between 1972 and 1974 she makes series of works known as *Toquinhos* [*Little Stubs*], collages on paper with transfer lettering and *Dalloscritos* [*Typed-writings*], in which she mixes typewritten letters, numbers and handwritten signs to form compositions. She also continues to use acrylic in the series of transparent sculptures entitled *Transformáveis* [*Transformables*], which she describes as a continuation of her linear drawings.

Max Bense was the only one who understood that... these things didn't function as objects, because all that mattered was the light and shadow, a continuation of some drawings of mine, those done on that ultra fine, transparent paper.

Mira Schendel (unpublished diary), quoted in Geraldo Souza Dias, Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade (São Paulo: Editora Cosac Naify, 2009), p. 258.

1975

Mira creates one of her most forceful series, *Homenagem ao Deus-Pai do Ocidente* [*Homage to God-Father of the West*], which consists of sixteen spray-painted drawings with transfer lettering spelling out passages from the Old Testament, particularly drawing from the Psalms.

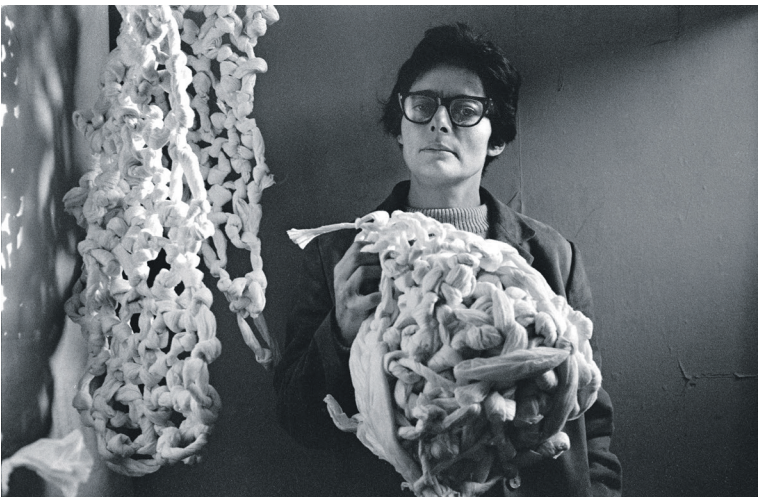
1978–82

She participates in the Venice Biennale of 1978, one of eighty-one women artists exhibited in *Materializzazione del Linguaggio: La Donna fra Linguaggio e Immagine* [*Materialisation of Language: Woman Between Language and Image*], curated by Italian sculptor, poet and performance artist Mirella Bentivoglio.

In 1978 Mira creates a series of landscape drawings; among these are the *Italiaia Landscapes*, named after a mountainous region in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

A year later she starts a series of temperas with gold leaf, which she continues until 1986. The first solo exhibition of this series occurs in 1982, at Galeria Paulo Figueiredo in São Paulo. For the first time in her career Mira achieves commercial success.

Clay Perry, Mira Schendel with Little Nothing, London, 1966, courtesy of Clay Perry, England and Co Gallery, London



1986–7

Between 1986 and 1987, she produces works that comprise her final complete series, the *Sarrafos* [*Battens*]. They consist of large wooden panels in white tempera and gesso, onto which are attached wooden battens painted in black tempera. Mira exhibits them in two shows which take place simultaneously at Galeria Paulo Figueiredo and Gabinete de Arte Raquel Arnaud in São Paulo.

This type of work started and ended with that exhibition. It was born of a moment of indecision, out of the disorder Brazil was plunged into in March that year, when it looked like we were living in some tropical Weimar. (...) These works are a response to the marasmus of that time.

Mira Schendel in Cesar Gobbi 'Mira Schendel, em dose dupla', Jornal da Tarde, São Paulo, August 5, 1987, quoted in Souza Dias, 2009, p.324.



Battens, Gabinete
Raquel Arnaud, São Paulo, 1987
mira schendel estate archive, São Paulo

1988

In June 1988, Mira is diagnosed with lung cancer during a trip to Germany. She returns to Brazil. On 24 July Schendel dies at the age of sixty-nine.

Brazilian curator and critic Paulo Herkenhoff remarks:

Mira took Brazilian art and transformed it into a philosophical matter. Through her notion of space, sign and material, she questioned the world like a philosopher.

P. Herkenhoff, quoted in 'Morre, aos 69 anos, a pintora Mira Schendel', Folha de São Paulo, July 25, 1988