EXHIBITION
MIRA SCHENDEL
01 MAR – 24 JUN 2014
Mira Schendel was born Myrrha Dagmar Dub in Zurich in 1919, to parents of Jewish heritage. She was brought up in Italy as a Catholic, studying philosophy at the Catholic University in Milan. During World War II, because of her Jewish roots, she was forced to leave university and stripped of her Italian nationality. Becoming a refugee, she travelled through Switzerland and Austria to what was then Yugoslavia. In 1949, she emigrated to Brazil, where she began her trajectory as an artist. She recalled: 'I started painting in Brazil. Life was very hard, I had no money to pay for paint, but I bought cheap paint and painted passionately. It was a matter of life and death.'

In Brazil in these early years, largely self-taught, she adopted new approaches to painting, learning from the example of artists such as Giorgio Morandi, Giorgio de Chirico and Paul Klee. From around 1953, when she moved to São Paulo, Mira Schendel began signing her works simply Mira.

**ROOM 1**

Schendel's early works are still lifes, interiors and asymmetrical architectonic compositions, which move the work towards abstraction. They present an account of being that focuses on the mundane details of our daily surroundings, our environment. For the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) whom Schendel had read, being meant the 'everydayness' of existence, not cut off from the world but within it. In this view, we establish our existence in a world of things — and things are what appear in Schendel's earliest works. The works in this room lead progressively towards an investigation of materiality, of painting itself as an object in the world — in one painting she even adds components in relief to the composition. In her early work, Schendel experimented with various modes of abstraction, both in painting and drawing. However, she felt ambivalent about the term abstract in relation to her work, commenting 'I don't know what to say of my painting, other than it is not “abstract”, though it is abstract, as I believe all art to be abstract.' For Schendel, abstract and figurative art were 'different, yes, but equally unreal.' A short time later however she talks of making new work that 'maybe abstract (or constructivist, or concrete: the terminology really doesn't matter).'

Economic considerations also continued to concern her as she looked to make a living from her work. She worked as a graphic designer producing book covers and illustrations, and also made a series of Christmas cards with abstract designs that were intended for commercial sale. However, with these cards for the first time she created serialised works in a set format and scale — something that would later define her working method. Working at home, rather than in a studio, she also made drawings called ‘Bordados’ [Embroideries] that are among her first works on rice paper, and in which she explores the issue of transparency. Only in 1960 did she become Mira Schendel when she married Knut Schendel, a German émigré and owner of an important bookshop that was a hub for São Paulo's intellectuals.

Schendel's paintings of the 1960s are characterised by a move towards geometry, revealing the influence of concrete painting. However, more evident are the thick, material surfaces and elemental forms in these works; Schendel remarked 'no matter how much I use geometric shapes, the sensory element of the brushstroke, the texture, is always there; for me this is very important. I would never make a completely sooth painting.'
Moreover, these works show that she was aware of the strength of informal painting in São Paulo, exemplified by her contemporary Tomie Ohtake (b. 1913), and also that she knew the work of Italian artists such as Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri — who had shown in early editions of the Bienal de São Paulo.

In her use of dark tones and archetypal forms, we can interpret Schendel's paintings as mystic or cosmic works concerned with the relationship between being and the void. Such paintings reinforce the fact that it is an investigation into the philosophy of being, or existence, that underpins much of her work.

Schendel's friend, and early advocate, the physicist and critic Mario Schenberg (1914-1990) wrote of her art at this time: ‘In 1963, we perceived a new phase of Mira's painting in which she used both oil and oil and tempera techniques to produce difficult, austere canvases of sound ontological meaning in which the rigour of construction and the constraint of colour and texture revealed to us the unchanging, rigid Parmenidian. Being in its identity. On one or another canvas, rigid and massive Being appeared threatened by a devouring Nothingness. (...) A growing feeling of void and spatiality permeated Mira’s painting.’

Alongside her work experimenting with the borders of abstraction, in the early 1960s Schendel continued to make figurative works. These include a number of works that appear as traditional still lives as well as others that are more cryptic. These works testify to the ongoing interest Schendel had in the formal exercise of the still life, experimenting in different styles and media. They were among her earliest experiments combining word and image.

Two paintings named O Retorno de Aquiles [The Return of Achilles], 1964, are among Schendel's most enigmatic works; they are also among the earliest where she employs a synthesis of text and symbol. Both refer to Homer's epic poem The Iliad, however the quotation incorporated into one of the compositions is taken from the Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1874) by the British theologian John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Newman's wider writing was a meditation on the nature of faith and certitude which aimed to demonstrate that it was possible to believe what could not be absolutely proven. Such themes relate to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) who also wrote about certainty. It is likely that Schendel discovered Newman through her reading of Wittgenstein. Both figures connect Schendel to Britain and her visit in 1966 when she sought out the Oxford scholar Cyril Barrett who had himself made a study of the relationship between Newman and Wittgenstein and their ideas on belief.

Schendel’s series of paintings made on paper in which she employed only black, white and red pigments have been named ‘Bombas’ [Bombs]. In them, ink and pastel are applied to wet paper, which causes the forms to become diffuse in a manner that, along with the restricted but bold palette, emulates the Oriental calligraphic painting. Mario Schenberg relates that Schendel’s work began to be influenced by ‘an Eastern world view, revealed to her through reproductions of the work of Chi Pai Shi, the grandmaster of contemporary Chinese painting.’

These are also works in which Schendel further explored the unification of words and visual images. In one of them the composition is dominated by the word ‘Sim’ (Yes). Spiral motifs recur throughout Schendel’s work. One such form dominates the painting Untitled (Todos) [All] from 1964.
These spiral forms were highly symbolic for Schendel and in one interpretation can be seen as Archimedean spirals which describe, in mathematical terms, a spiral recession in space. Such a recession implies movement and therefore also duration. So they are simultaneously an image and investigation of space and time.

ROOM 2

Schendel began her drawings or monotypes on semi-transparent rice paper in 1964. The drawings were made rapidly and in more or less two years she had made the majority of what amounted to over 2,000. This swift, yet rigorous and intense execution subsequently came to define her mode of production. Part of the ‘Monotypes’ are marked by Schendel’s use of language, often combining different languages in one work, including Portuguese, Italian, German and English; they were influenced by both concrete poetry and structural music. The ‘Monotypes’ embody Schendel’s exploration of concepts of being and nothingness, the void, and philosophical ideas drawn from phenomenology (the study of being and consciousness) – how we exist in the world (Umwelt or environment), with the world (Mitwelt or social world) and within ourselves (Eigenwelt or inner world).

In 1965-66, Schendel employed the same rice paper to create a series of soft sculptures named Droguinhas [Little Nothings]. Schendel said she aimed to create ‘something technically primary and easy. From a Western point of view these “sculptures” (this word without sense!) could be seen from the perspective of a phenomenology of being. From the Eastern point of view, well, they relate to zen.’ In 1968 Guy Brett commented that ‘Schendel’s Droguinhas do not describe any particular movement, but they are vital contributions to the language of movement because their fragility and energy indicate space as an active thing, a field of possibility.’

In 1966, Schendel was given an important solo exhibition at Signals, a gallery for experimental art in London. It was significant because of the interdisciplinary network of individuals that Signals forged, and the radical ways that they attempted to reframe the contemporary art of their time. This room emulates the installation of Schendel’s series of ‘Objetos Gráficos’ [Graphic Objects] presented in the Brazilian Pavilion at the 1968 Biennale di Venezia. These works were a development in Schendel’s delicate drawings on rice paper combined with clear acrylic, aiming in their form to create a sense of visual, temporal and spatial ‘transparency’. Schendel said: ‘While pursuing “transparency” as an issue I arrived at the object.’

With these works, Schendel also addressed ‘transparency’ as a philosophical concept. This idea is in line with the writings of the philosopher, poet and linguist Jean Gebser (1905-1973). Gebser aimed to describe the structure of human consciousness and used ‘transparency’ or ‘diaphaneity’ to refer to the human experience of time and to a form of the spiritual. He aimed ‘to render transparent everything latent “behind” and “before” in the world – to render transparent our own origin.’ For Gebser, rational thought and ideas of linear time and progress did not take into account what is latent to being.

The ‘Objetos Gráficos’ also explore language and corporeality. In the majority of these works, Schendel used letters as graphic elements either drawn or applied using transfer lettering. The works occupy the space of the spectator; they have neither a front nor a reverse and
can be read through their semi-transparency so that letters became reversed, or ‘anti-text’. In others however, there are notes by Schendel’s friend, the philosopher and linguist Max Bense (1910–1990), excerpts of poems by João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920–1999) and lines of Samba lyrics by Chico Buarque (b. 1944). Transparency, diaphaneity and de-materialisation dominate the works brought together in this room. The two Trenzinhos [Little Trains] illustrate the theme of diaphaneity as well as embodying the extreme fragility and delicacy of Schendel’s work. They are made from the same sheets of rice paper as the ‘Monotypes’ and the ‘Graphic Objects’. However, in this case the blank pages are left loose and simply threaded on a cotton string to be suspended across a room. One such work was displayed in Schendel’s solo exhibition at Signals, London in 1966. Untitled (Transformáveis) [Transformables] appear to be works designed to be manipulated by the viewer, so they might be considered ‘relational’ objects, because of their hinges which mean their position can be changed. But, Schendel’s approach to interaction was more circumscribed. Her comment that these small acrylic strips were perceived to be ‘do-it’, ‘play-it’, ‘touch-it’, ‘wreck-it’ type objects’ suggests that they were more to do with potential movement than actual interaction. Stressing this, Schendel would comment about them: ‘What really counted was the light and shade cast on the wall, as a continuation of some of my drawings – which were always made on those transparent, ultra fine papers.’ Schendel also made a series of objects called ‘Discos’ [Disks]; describing them she said: ‘Here there is the issue of transparency, of inside and outside (…) at the same time, in the same way that object and subject are the same; the concave and the convex together; in this way, one can feel the transparency theme.’

**ROOM 3**

The installation Variantes [Variants] (1977) is a unique work in Schendel’s production and one of a very small number of installations that she made during her career. It can be viewed as the culmination of her series of ‘Objetos Gráficos’, demonstrating how Schendel spatialised drawing, intending it to be seen from both sides and experienced as well as ‘read’. The work takes the form of a constellation or cloud, comprised of ninety-three small ‘graphic objects’ on mathematical themes. Ninety-two are executed in white on white, while a single one is white on black. Schendel had often used this device in which a focal point reverses the balance of black and white, for instance in her Droguinhas [Little Nothings] and can therefore be seen as a continuation of her interest in Eastern thought. Schendel commented that ‘asymmetry is one of the great lessons of the people from the East. I think it came from the East, this great asymmetry lesson; I think the West has always understood symmetry better. It is rare for a drawing of mine to be symmetrical. In general, intuitively, I run from symmetry.’ Variantes was never displayed in Schendel’s lifetime, but has come to light since her death as one of her most ambitious statements.

**ROOM 4**

The installation Ondas Paradas de Probabilidade [Still Waves of Probability] was made for the 10th Bienal de São Paulo in 1969. Held during the military dictatorship (1964–85), this edition of the Bienal was staged after the dictatorship launched a crackdown in 1968. It became known as the ‘Boycotted Bienal’
as many artists, from Brazil and elsewhere, refused to take part in protest against the regime. Controversially, Schendel accepted the invitation to participate which had come from Mario Schenberg. Her decision was perhaps based on the active acceptance of an opportunity to present an alternative way of being or resisting.

Schendel's installation of thin, almost-transparent fibres is accompanied by a text from the Old Testament, Book of Kings I, 19. The relationship of the text to the installation concerns manifestations of the invisible and the relation between knowledge, faith and certainty. The installation can also be seen as a 'field of possibility' as drawn from science and 'field theory.' Schendel explained that in this work 'the theme is predominantly the visibility of the invisible, that is, of things that are in action, but without our being able to see them, such as the laws of physics or spiritual processes.' Moreover, she said 'With the work for the Bienal, I am perhaps beginning a more silent phase (...). Listening (to silence also). Listening for liberation.' Through the work she sought to express the aim of humankind 'to be, faithfully, OF THIS world. And yet not be of this world. With all its love and joy and also the inevitable suffering, with devotion and without illusions.'

ROOM 5

The 1970s saw Schendel continue to investigate the themes of transparency and language, but also mathematics, communication, information and game theory. She embarked on a number of different series of drawings such as ‘Cálculos’ [Calculations], ‘Letras Circunscritas’ [Circumscribed Letters] and ‘Datiloscritos’ [Typed Writings], that use letters and numbers within their compositions. These explore logic as a method for testing the truth of a statement and also employ the language of binary numbers 0 and 1 as basic communicative components. She also created works that constitute an investigation of the 'work in movement', or 'open works' to be completed by the viewer or reader. Both the collages called 'Toquinhos' [Little Stubs] and the ‘Cadernos’ [Notebooks] relate to issues of language, time, variability and engage the viewer in decision-making. The ‘Cadernos’, mostly made in 1971, were not sketchbooks or artists' books but unconventional book-objects that were works in their own right. Schendel commented ‘the Notebooks conserve letters as an issue (...). Part of this series, titled Transparent Notebooks, also involves transparency (...) it addresses the same themes, i.e. time and space, that inspired the series Graphic Objects, Little Stubs, Disks, etc.’ The 1970s ushered in new modes of production for Schendel, notably her use of spray effects in her drawings. While this harks back to the diffuse effects she achieved in the 1960s with ink on wet paper, it also presented new freedoms. The suite Homenagem a Deus-Pai do Ocidente [Homage to God-Father of the West] (1975) consists of sixteen spray-painted drawings with transfer lettering that spells out fragments and passages from the Old Testament, particularly from the Psalms. Typically of Schendel, the series uses multiple languages – Portuguese, German, Italian and English. The series deals with themes of faith, Godly power and acceptance. Schendel struggled with the teachings of Catholicism that she had been brought up with throughout her life, contrasting them with her individual attitude towards the nature of existence that
was informed by extensive readings of Western philosophy and Eastern thought. However, for Schendel, there were no easy solutions. The church had been instrumental in helping her escape Fascism and also, through the Dominican order, presented a source of resistance to the dictatorship in Brazil, which led her to become familiar with Liberation theology – the deployment of theology against social injustice. The colourful ‘Mandalas’ – which indicate once again her interest in Eastern thought – employ mathematically precise geometric arrangements as a way to express spiritual values.

ROOM 6

During the 1980s, Schendel returned to painting, creating a series of tempera and gold leaf works. These have often been misinterpreted as expressions of decorative luxury – and because of this were vandalised at their first exhibition – or as being a reference to religious art. In fact, they are a formal expression of a balance between opacity and transparency – while the matt, tempera paint absorbs light, the gold is reflective and therefore ‘transparent’. The series of black and white works demonstrate Schendel’s use of extreme economy of form, colour and light. The balance of white and black, one dominant and the other having a subtler presence, recurs in a number of works in different media and scales. This play of opposites came from Schendel’s reading of philosophy and spiritual texts, specifically from the I Ching – the ancient Chinese Book of Changes which explores the dynamic balance of opposites or Yin and Yang.

The series titled ‘I Ching’ demonstrates how important Eastern thought, alongside Western philosophy, was for Schendel. The composition, which is divided into two hexagrams or series of six, can also be read as a mathematical progression – representing the theme of the inevitability and constancy of change as explored in the I Ching. Formally, the group of drawings are a series of colour-field abstractions where areas of contrasting colour are explored in different proportional relationships.

Schendel’s final, complete series were the ‘Sarrafos’ [Battens] (1987). The black, wooden bars that protrude from their surfaces address the limits between the body, the surface of the painting and the viewer’s space. In them, Schendel abandoned her usual delicacy to produce works that were deliberate and forceful. She explained how they were connected to the political situation of Brazil in the late 1980s, the first time she had made such an explicit link; saying they were ‘born of a moment of indecision, out of the disorder Brazil was plunged into (...) when it looked like we were living in some tropical Weimar. (...) Every everyone else, I was in need of direction, of some bearings. These works are a response to the marasmus of that time.’

The works of the series ‘Paisagens Chinesas’ [Chinese Landscapes] (1980s) share the use of a bold black line within a monochrome white ground, but also include chains of anthropomorphic letter A. These drawings emphasise the interrelatedness of Schendel’s practice, repeatedly returning to themes and motifs throughout her artistic career. While the ‘Sarrafos’ address the body, these drawings explore landscape and environment (or Umwelt) – also a repeated concern in Schendel’s work. Landscape is reduced in these works to its barest essential, a roughly horizontal line.

Another series in this room, the drawings known as ‘Paisagem Noturna de Itatiaia’ [Itatiaia Night Landscape]
(1978) take their title from a mountainous national park in Rio de Janeiro state. In these works, single A or groups of the letter populate the nocturnal landscapes like figures fleeing. This is one of the final series in which letters appear.

‘Mira Schendel’ is organised by Tate Modern, London and the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo in association with the Fundação de Serralves – Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto

Curators: Tanya Barson (Curator, Internacional Art, Tate Modern) and Taisa Palhares (Curator, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo)
Selected bibliography on Mira Schendel


ACTIVITIES RELATED TO THE EXHIBITION

GUIDED TOURS
01 MAR (Sat), 17h30, Museum Galleries
Guided tour by the exhibition curators, Taisa Palhares (Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil) and Tanya Barson (Tate Modern, UK)

08 MAR (Sat), 15h00, Museum Galleries
Guided tour for Amigos de Serralves by Paula Fernandes (curator of the Museum)

20 MAR (Thu), 18h30, Museum Galleries
Guided tour to the exhibition by poet José Tolentino de Mendonça

17 APR (Thu), 18h30, Museum Galleries
Guided tour to the exhibition by artist Leonor Antunes and launch of the book Leonor Antunes: villa, how to use

WORKSHOPS
05 APR (Sat), 15h00-18h00,
Education Room
‘Doors for Thoughts’ by Ana Vieira and Andreia Coutinho

05 MAR (Sat), 15h00-18h00,
Education Room
Guided tours by the Serralves Museum education staff

30 MAR (Sun), 12h00-13h00,
Museum Galleries by Cristina Alves

27 APR (Sun), 12h00-13h00,
Museum Galleries by Samuel Silva

11 MAY (Sun), 12h00-13h00, Museum Galleries by Joana Nascimento