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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

INTERRUPTING SILENCE: BRAZILIAN
MUSIC, CULTURE, AND POLITICS
IN THE OBJETOS GRÁFICOS OF MIRA
SCHENDEL

Júlia Sodré, Master of Arts
in Art History and Archeology
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The Swiss-Brazilian artist Mira Schendel is best known for the development of pre-textual languages, vocabularies of silence and emptiness, and attempts to speak of the unspeakable. The overall scholarly consensus is that Schendel was a singular and perhaps isolated artist who did not try to converse with her contemporaries or respond to specific events within the public sphere. While her series, *Objetos Gráficos* (Graphic Objects) (1967–68), can certainly be discussed within these terms, these works also demonstrate that Schendel's practice was neither predictable nor homogeneous. By analyzing and situating this series within its social, political, and artistic contexts, I position *Objetos Gráficos* as tangible evidence of Schendel's attention and response to external circumstances. Furthermore, I argue that Schendel's work around silence was deliberately employed to amplify its interruptions, thereby maximizing her limited but purposeful uses of legible text.

**INTERRUPTING SILENCE: BRAZILIAN MUSIC, CULTURE, AND POLITICS
IN THE *OBJETOS GRÁFICOS* OF MIRA SCHENDEL**

by

Júlia Sodré

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Introduction

Boycotted by Brazilian and international artists alike, the tenth São Paulo Biennial was marked by a void. Following a meeting at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in June 1969, the boycott was planned as a statement against the troublesome relationship between the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo (São Paulo Biennial Foundation) and the Brazilian government.¹ The meeting focused on a dossier of accounts from several Brazilian artists who were repressed and censored by the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985). Many of the most eminent figures in the national art scene, including Willys de Castro, Lygia Clark, Antonio Dias, Tomoshige Kusuno, and Hélio Oiticica, refused to participate in the Biennial. Even as the event's committee frantically searched for artists willing to participate in the Biennial and fill its rooms, most invitations continued to be denied.² Of the twenty-five artists initially selected to represent Brazil, Mira Schendel (1919–1988) was one of the eight who accepted the invitation.

Schendel's contribution took the form of a monumental installation titled *Ondas paradas de probabilidade—Antigo Testamento, Livro dos Reis, I, 19* (*Still Waves of Probability (Old Testament, 1 Kings 19)*) (1969) (Fig. 1). The work was made of thousands of thin nylon threads suspended from wooden and wire structures on the ceiling, their ends delicately touching the floor. Dependent on the variation of light and the viewer's movement across the space to be properly seen, *Ondas paradas de probabilidade* was one of Schendel's many attempts to make the invisible visible.³ The installation included a passage from the Old Testament, written in

¹ Caroline Saut Schoeder explains that the conflict between Brazilian artists and the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo was caused by the institution's financial relationship with the Brazilian government. During that period, the foundation relied not only on federal funding, but also on the structures provided by the Ministério das Relações Exteriores (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) for the transactions with other nations. The São Paulo Biennial was known as the "cultural canvas" of Brazil, and countless artists did not feel comfortable with how it appeared to place itself on the side of the dictatorial government at that particular time; Caroline Saut Schroeder, *Contra-Arquivo: os rastros do boicote à Bienal de São Paulo (1969)*, Florianópolis: Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, 2018, 43–44.

² Schroeder, *Contra-Arquivo: os rastros do boicote à Bienal de São Paulo (1969)*, 244.

³ Schendel's diary, quoted in Geraldo de Souza Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2009, 147.

black self-adhesive letters on a wall-mounted transparent acrylic sheet. The text recounts the aftermath of Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal and the subsequent death threat from Queen Jezebel. Fearful, Elijah fled to the wilderness, where he begged God to let him die. Rather than granting Elijah his wish, God asked him to go to Mount Horeb to find him there. Elijah attempted to find God amid the powerful, devastating forces of nature he encountered on the mountain: strong winds, an earthquake, and merciless fire. God was ultimately not found within any of them, appearing instead as a gentle whisper.⁴ This passage constructs an idea of God that rejects any association with violence and destruction, favoring an image of tenderness and care. By inserting this biblical narrative into her installation, Schendel invites her audience to grapple with its own definitions and expectations of power. Within its context, *Ondas paradadas de probabilidade* prompts the viewer to interrogate how they may have been conditioned to accept and normalize violence under the pretense of God and the greater good.

Schendel's decision not to boycott the Biennial defied her peers and provided her with the opportunity to fill the space with an undeniable sense of emptiness. The Venezuelan art historian Luis Pérez-Oramas describes Schendel's installation as theologically and politically radical, its juxtaposition of the "archaic voice of the Bible with modern transparency" going against the State and its opposers at once.⁵ Schendel's 1969 letter to the Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser reveals that rather than countering the artists who opted to boycott the Biennial, Schendel aimed to make a similar statement by taking a different approach. She explains that she shared her peers' opinions but still felt called to accept the invitation, implying that she saw the event as an

⁴ Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1 Kings 19.

⁵ Luis Pérez-Oramas, *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009, 26.

opportunity to shine a spotlight on what many attempted to keep hidden.⁶ In this letter, the artist adds that *Ondas paradas de probabilidade* does not aim to convey a single stable message, but a field of potential meanings in a manner similar to that of quantum phenomena, which can change significantly throughout observation.⁷ The nearly imperceptible nature of the nylon fibers calls the viewer to engage with the work corporeally, moving across space to find a position with greater visibility. However, the work never rewards such efforts, granting the audience no more than a hazy view of the room and those within it. Therefore, to observe *Ondas paradas de probabilidade* is to observe the emptiness it veils. Oscillating between visibility and invisibility, Schendel's installation made the void that the Biennial committee attempted to mask palpable and inescapable.

Although controversial, Schendel's presence in this Biennial supports a new reading of her life's work that reimagines its understanding in relation to its political context. While the boycott was successful in demonstrating the artists' discontent, Schendel was far from the only person who saw renunciation as an unpredictable decision that could lead to fruitless outcomes. The same concern can be identified in the journalist Niomar Moniz Sodré Bittencourt's fear that closing the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* could come across not as a political statement against the regime, but as an abdication of journalistic responsibilities.⁸ Is it possible that Schendel believed she had a responsibility to and with her audience, and that more could be said through

⁶ Schendel also wrote that she had nothing to gain nor lose financially as the work was not to be sold and the materials cost less than 10 Swiss francs. She believed that the piece triggered a longer period of silence as a tool for freedom; Mira Schendel in a letter addressed to Jean Gebser, 1969, in Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 149.

⁷ Mira Schendel in letter addressed to Jean Gebser, 1969, in Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 149.

⁸ This is not to imply that Bittencourt was the only activist within the newspaper staff. The *Correio da Manhã* was nearly, if not entirely, formed by journalists and other employees that openly opposed the regime. However, as a public figure and the founder of the newspaper, she became the face of its resistance. Also a board member in the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro), Bittencourt was arrested for months, and had her political rights revoked for ten years. Still, stepping down allowed the newspaper to avoid some of the negative attention brought by her presence.

her art than through its absence? Boycotting is a compelling and effective tool, but so too is the presence of the uncomfortable. With *Ondas paradas de probabilidade*, Schendel achieved both the emptiness that the boycotting artists sought and the awkward, confusing result of a visible invisibility that, in conjunction with a biblical text, challenges the audience's definitions of what constitutes legitimate and virtuous power.

In this thesis, I will discuss in depth how the oblique nature of Schendel's artworks has led scholars to undermine their politically-responsive nature, and how her upbringing and interests in fields such as philosophy and theology have contributed to the perception of Schendel as an immigrant detached from Brazilian art and culture.⁹ Offering an alternative interpretative lens, I argue that Schendel was far from isolated from Brazilian culture, society, and politics. After a brief overview of Schendel's biography and critical literature, I will review the series *Monotipias* (Monotypes) (1964–1967) and *Droguinhas* (Little Nothings) (1965–1968) in relation to the vocabulary that appears in the series, *Objetos Gráficos* (Graphic Objects) (1967-1969). Here, I argue that 1) Schendel's work was informed by Brazilian culture, dependent on but never limited to it; 2) Schendel was more responsive to the social and political spheres than previous scholarship has acknowledged; and 3) Schendel saw in art and music the possibility to tactfully communicate messages of resistance when doing so could be lethal, an idea that culminated in the *Objetos Gráficos*.

⁹ Here, and throughout this thesis, I utilize the term “political” in the broadest sense, following the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definition of the word as “relating to government, a government, or the conduct of government.”

Becoming Mira Schendel

Born Myrrha Dagmar Dub in 1919 in Zürich, Switzerland, Schendel was the daughter of Ada Saveria Büttner (b. Naples, 1896) and Karl Leo Dub (b. Varnsdorf, 1891). Schendel's mother was of German and Italian descent, and her father was Jewish and of Czech ancestry. In the early 1920s, her parents divorced, and Schendel was raised alongside her maternal family in northern Italy as a Catholic despite documents that attest her mother's plans to convert to Judaism following her marriage.¹⁰ The young Schendel often traveled to Bohemia to see her paternal family, which allowed her to stay in contact with German language and customs throughout the years, as well as with Jewish religion and culture.¹¹ In 1937, she began her studies at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, but she was forced to leave in 1938, when Italy declared her Jewish due to her ancestry, stripped her of her citizenship, and banned all Jewish people from pursuing higher education. Schendel moved across Eastern Europe throughout World War II, settling in Italy after the war with Josep Hargesheimer, whom she married in Zagreb in 1941. In the late 1940s, while Schendel worked in the Roman department of the International Refugee Organization, Hargesheimer expressed interest in emigrating. Letters of recommendation written on the couple's behalf note Venezuela, Canada, Argentina, and the United States as preferred destinations, but the Brazilian embassy was the first to accept the couple.¹² Ergo, in July of 1949, Schendel and her husband boarded the ship *Protea*, where she worked as a typist. They arrived in Rio de Janeiro a month later and soon moved to Porto Alegre, a large city in southern Brazil that was home to thousands of German immigrants.

¹⁰ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 28.

¹¹ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 29.

¹² Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 33.

A few months after her arrival, Schendel wrote to the newspaper *Correio do Povo* about the experiences of displaced Europeans and the precarious treatment they faced in their new city. She described hostility at the factories and dirty shelters, as well as the promiscuous activities taking place therein.¹³ Her open letter received such attention that, on the following day, the newspaper published the article “Aderimos a uma organização internacional de colocação de deslocados de guerra sem para isso contarmos com a mais rudimentar das condições” (“We joined an international organization for the relocation of war refugees without having even the most rudimentary resources to do so”).¹⁴ In the same edition, one of the newspaper’s editors wrote a hopeful open letter in response to Schendel, arguing that yesterday’s immigrant was the Brazilian of tomorrow, but lacking some nuance regarding the issues she had addressed.¹⁵ In turn, Schendel wrote a second letter explaining that early-twentieth-century immigrants struggled to understand the obstacles their counterparts faced. According to her, many believed that failing to achieve a better life was an individual matter rather than a result of the systems in place. Older immigrants had not lived through the recent crimes and genocide, Schendel explained, and therefore they could not measure how unprepared the country was to welcome and aid the new arrivals.¹⁶ Still emphasizing her gratitude and appreciation for Brazil and its people, she rightfully demanded better conditions and more concrete resources for herself and those like her.¹⁷ These two letters are perhaps the most public and straightforward examples of Schendel’s involvement with social issues, and they reveal much about Schendel’s character. She took upon

¹³ Mira Schendel, Carta Aberta de Mira He, *Correio do Povo*, Porto Alegre, January 7, 1950.

¹⁴ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 35.

¹⁵ The editor’s identity is not confirmed. Schendel addresses her second open letter to the editor, Francisco, but does not include his last name. At this time, *Correio do Povo* was directed by Breno Caldas, whose son was coincidentally named Francisco but only thirteen years old at the time.

¹⁶ Mira Schendel, Carta Aberta: “Imigrantes de Hoje, Brasileiros de Amanhã,” *Correio do Povo*, Porto Alegre, January 15, 1950.

¹⁷ Schendel, Carta Aberta “Imigrantes de Hoje, Brasileiros de Amanhã,” *Correio do Povo*, 1950.

herself the responsibility of addressing the issues many immigrants faced despite her own vulnerable position.

Before relocating to Brazil, Schendel aspired to be a poet. It was only in Porto Alegre that she began painting and working with ceramics, soon enrolling in the Escola de Belas Artes de Porto Alegre (Porto Alegre School of Fine Arts).¹⁸ In 1950, Schendel held her first solo exhibition in the auditorium of the *Correio do Povo*, and the audience's positive response motivated Schendel to submit her work for consideration for the first São Paulo Biennial, for which the oil painting *Paisagem* (c. 1950) was selected. Nevertheless, the artist was unhappy with the small art scene in Porto Alegre, wanting to move to Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, or Minas Gerais.¹⁹ Whilst she appreciated the bright side of her isolation—being away from art critics made it harder for external opinions to interfere in her work—Schendel craved a greater, more dynamic artistic community.²⁰

Between scholars and Schendel's close friends, there is an intriguing disagreement about whether she enjoyed or disliked living in isolation. The poet Haroldo de Campos, a friend, described the artist as fragile and misunderstood, a person who struggled to be among others.²¹ Despite considering Schendel a nongregarious individual, de Campos stated that the artist called him sporadically to discuss “the communicability of the work she was doing” and the sense of rejection she felt even late in her career.²² In contrast, Ely Jose Andreazza, a doctor and another friend of the artist, wrote that her desire for affection, understanding, honesty, truth, kindness, and humanitarianism indicated that she was “seeking in others an affirmation for [her] inner

¹⁸ Now known as the Instituto de Artes da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (Art Institute of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul).

¹⁹ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 40.

²⁰ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 40.

²¹ Sônia Salzstein, *Mira Schendel: no vazio do mundo*, exhibition catalogue, Galeria de Arte do SESI, São Paulo: Editora Marca d'Água, 1996, 227–9.

²² Salzstein, *Mira Schendel: no vazio do mundo*, 229–30.

condition.”²³ While it is fundamental to point out the contradictions that can be found when it comes to descriptions of Schendel’s nature, I believe both accounts can be true at once. Guy Brett, a curator with whom Schendel maintained personal and professional ties for most of her career, recounts that he always had the impression that she lived on very little and that her financial condition had a “strong bearing on the physical nature of her work.”²⁴ Therefore, it is necessary to ponder whether Schendel’s isolation was entirely a choice or a fruit of both internal and external circumstances.

In 1953, soon after divorcing Josep Hargesheimer, Schendel moved to São Paulo to take advantage of the better opportunities the city provided. Time and time again, excerpts from her journal—at least those that have been made public—demonstrate her persistent efforts to belong and to take advantage of everything her new city had to offer. In 1953, Schendel wrote in her diary, “Today marks four years since I arrived. It was a very sunny day like this one, but sad for me, because I didn't want to come. Now it's different, I like being here.”²⁵ Her enthusiasm manifests in her letters and diary entries, remarkably in Schendel’s long descriptions of her visits to galleries, libraries, and museums, including the Biblioteca Municipal, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), and the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM).²⁶ She also sought to connect with both the local art scene and the community of people who had recently moved from Porto Alegre, or, more broadly, from Rio Grande do Sul. As a result, Schendel began meeting notorious figures, including the actor Sérgio Britto and the sociologist Rudolf Lenhard. Also in 1953, Schendel became a graphic designer at the Editora Companhia Melhoramentos, where she

²³ E. J. Andreazza, op. Cit., Porto Alegre, October 24, 1951, quoted in Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 40.

²⁴ In the same conference, Brett stated that her series *Monotypes*, which she produced in the thousands, were only possible because she received a great quantity of Japanese paper as a gift; Guy Brett in “Mira Schendel Conference 2012 – Guy Brett – Respondent,” YouTube video, posted by UAL TrAIN Research Centre, (2012) 2020.

²⁵ Mira Schendel quoted in Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 48.

²⁶ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 47–8.

met her second husband, Knut Schendel. He ran a bookstore in São Paulo that imported much of the technical literature that propelled Brazilian modernization. In 1957, Schendel ceased making art to focus on raising her daughter, Ada, and returned to the art world five years later.

Prior to her maternity leave, the artist blended formal explorations with technical and medium-based experiments, resulting in geometric, abstract, and figurative configurations that gained or lost density depending on the material used to represent them. During the 1950s, Schendel's growing interest in playing with the contrast between transparency and opacity was already evident. In *Untitled* (1954) (fig. 2), Schendel presents a somber, slightly discomforting room with dark walls that create a claustrophobic impression, as if the room is closing in on the viewer. This sensation is exacerbated by Schendel's conservative approach to the dilution of her gouache and watercolor. Such reservations also permeate the strong, controlled delineations of the room and the objects within it.

It was only after her return to artmaking that Schendel began to extrapolate her investigations. If in the 1950s her works featured contained, static forms, in the 1960s, her work became more fluid, experimental, and welcoming of mishaps. In *Untitled* (1964) (fig. 3), Schendel stresses the delineations between jars, cans, and the surface upon which they sit. At the same time, the rest of the paper is covered in ink applied in thin, liquid layers that bleed into one another, creating a phantasmagoric atmosphere. Dark lines over light and/or translucent backgrounds became one of the most significant elements of Schendel's work and a defining characteristic of several of her series, including *Monotipias* (1964–1967) and *Sarrafos* (1987).

In 1964, Schendel further expanded her work through a wide range of media, techniques, and formal investigations. The turbulent year also interrupted her artistic practice, dividing her *oeuvre* into a “before” and an “after.” On March 31, 1964, the democratically elected Brazilian

president João Goulart was overthrown in a military rebellion that began in the state of Minas Gerais. By the next day, the military had taken over all major cities in the nation, successfully completing the coup d'état and establishing the Brazilian military dictatorship. Soon after these events, Schendel moved away from painting and began to explore the sensibilities of empty spaces in her artworks, which the art theorist Geraldo de Souza Dias argues to have been a direct result of the fall of democracy.²⁷ His argument becomes even more plausible when considering *Untitled* (1964) (fig. 4).²⁸ The work is characterized by strong black lines that map out a table, four *Ecoline* watercolors, a pipe, a *Gold Star* tobacco box, and an unidentifiable round container. At the bottom of the paper, Schendel informs the viewer that this scene depicts a work table of a Brazilian painter, perhaps her own. The colors of the work are determined by the paper's surface, limited areas of gray, mustard, and terracotta, and the yellowed newspaper cutting, whose headline reads "Reação tenta tomar o CNTI" ("Reaction tries to take the CNTI").²⁹ The news refers to the military attempt to take over the Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Indústria (National Confederation of Industrial Workers), which was part of a larger plan to end strikes and unions and to remove leftist individuals from all leadership positions. In this artwork—one of the earliest examples of Schendel's appropriation of politically charged sources—the artist depicts how the national atmosphere took over everyday life. By dating the work, omitting her signature, and writing "Mesa de Trabalho – Pintor Brasileiro" (Work Table – Brazilian Painter), Schendel generalizes the scene, dislocating it from the personal space of her

²⁷ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 64.

²⁸ Images and information about this artwork are not widely available online, with reverse image searches leading only to that taken by Ricardo Miyada, one of the curators of Mira Schendel's retrospective, *esperar que a letra se forme*, at the Instituto Tomie Ohtake in 2024. As of April 2026, reverse image searches only identify exact matches in press releases associated with this exhibit.

²⁹ The militaries were a self-declared "Reação," that is, a reaction group that was responding to the leftist ideology that had spread across the country. This term was used as a way to justify and legitimize the violent and repressive actions taken by the new regime.

home. By doing so, she suggests these concerns interfered with and reshaped artists' lives and careers, becoming fundamental generative forces in their works.

In Schendel's work, these events initiated a productive shift toward East Asian artistic elements and philosophy.³⁰ As explained by the art historian Majella Munro, Schendel's keen interest in Zen philosophy, repetitive mark-making, process over aesthetics, and the void resulted from her contact with Asian cultures and materials, as well as with the substantial Japanese diasporic community in São Paulo.³¹ While not the central point of this thesis, East Asian influences undeniably inform all series discussed hereafter, including the *Monotipias*, *Droguinhas*, and *Objetos Gráficos*. In the 1970s and 1980s, Schendel continued to elaborate on such ideas, especially in relation to Zen philosophy, notably in *Datiloescritos* (1974–1975), *Toquinhos* (1972–1974), *Mandalas* (c. 1970s), and *Sarrafos*, the latter her final series.³²

In the decades since Schendel's death, scholars have been unable to reach a consensus on which movement most closely aligns with her practice. For curators Galciani Neves and Paulo Miyada, Schendel's oeuvre cannot be interpreted only through biographical lenses; concomitantly, they resist strict associations with particular artistic movements.³³ Schendel's work was heavily influenced by concrete geometric art in the mid-twentieth century, a period when Concrete Art was highly regarded by Brazilian artists and intellectuals, while Art Informel was perceived as an attempt by imperialist countries to assert their influence. Schendel experimented with ideas from both movements, "uniting their threads in a personal synthesis,"

³⁰ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 65; Herkenhoff, *Mulheres do presente, a clareza entre sombras*, 239.

³¹ Majella Munro, "Zen as a Transnational Current in Post-War Art: The Case of Mira Schendel," *Tate Papers* no. 23 London: Tate Modern, 2015.

³² The *Toquinhos* series was first workshopped in 1968, but Schendel began a second wave of artworks under the same series four years later.

³³ Galciani Neves and Paulo Miyada in Instituto Tomie Ohtake, *Mira Schendel – esperar que a letra se forme*, exhibition catalogue, São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, October 2024, 2.

but substituting “the free gesture” with careful application of layers of paint in every composition.³⁴ Schendel’s work was initially associated with Brazilian Constructivism, but it was later seen as a product of the rupture seen within the movement and of the subsequent movement, Neoconcretism.³⁵ In a position later reinforced by Taisa Palhares, the curator Willy Kautz posited that if Concretism were represented by a collectivist, modernist, and historical referent, then Schendel applied similar theoretical frameworks but in a vocabulary distant from that of her contemporaries.³⁶ More recently, the curator and art critic Paulo Venancio Filho debated whether Schendel was a constructivist or expressionist, explaining that Schendel showed a constructive impulse and sought to synthesize reason in its highest form with refined technical methods.³⁷ In my view, which echoes some of what the Brazilian art critic Rodrigo Naves has written, Schendel ranks among the artists who served as catalysts for contemporary art.³⁸ This is not to say that Schendel was a contemporary artist, or that this categorization is the only way to understand her work within a particular timeline. Instead, I see Schendel’s work as a bridge and synthesizer of several artistic expressions and movements, past and present, European and Latin American, artistic and philosophical.

These connections have been widely discussed, but much of the scholarship on Schendel’s oeuvre fails to address the artist’s engagement with the political and cultural contexts in which she lived, thereby underestimating their sway over her work. The often-ignored relevance of the regime for her work becomes even more startling when we consider that

³⁴ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 55.

³⁵ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 23.

³⁶ Willy Kautz, *Mira Schendel: continuum amorfo*, exhibition catalogue. Monterrey: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, 2004, 10; Taisa Palhares, “Living in Between: Mira Schendel’s Poetics,” in *Mira Schendel*, edited by Tanya Barson and Taisa Palhares, translated by Oswaldo Corrêa da Costa, London: Tate Modern, 2013, 12.

³⁷ Paulo Venancio Filho, *Sinais/Signals: Mira Schendel*, exhibition catalogue, São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2018, 36.

³⁸ Rodrigo Naves, “Mira Schendel: el presente como utopía,” in *Mira Schendel: continuum amorfo*, 2004, 13

Schendel passed away only three years after the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship.³⁹ The most active decades of her career took place in the 1960s and the 1970s, decades marked by the issuance of the *Ato Institucional 5* (Institutional Act Number 5), commonly referred to as AI-5.⁴⁰ To assume that her work remained untouched by the violence and repression that defined this period is to overlook one of the main conditions of her art. The same kind of oversight has taken place in the analysis of the influence Brazilian cultural production has had on Schendel's practice. Naves, for example, has written extensively about Schendel, often distancing the artist from the country. The author goes so far as to state that Schendel had a kind of intellectual education and curiosity that was difficult to find among Brazilian artists, arguing that her interest in philosophy, psychology, and sociology followed her from Europe and that Brazil in the 1930s and 1940s could never have offered the proper environment to foster such interests.⁴¹ Naves disregards great Brazilian philosophers and intellectual artists such as Mário Ferreira dos Santos, Vicente Ferreira da Silva, Patrícia Rehder Galvão (known as Pagu), and Mário de Andrade, and he ignores several Brazilian artists who were avidly studying the same philosophers as Schendel. For example, her interest in Hermann Schmitz, Susanne Langer, and Merleau-Ponty was shared by some of the most important Brazilian figures of the twentieth century, including Lygia Clark,

³⁹ In many ways, Schendel's entire artistic career was touched by the aggravating political circumstances, considering that the issues that led to the coup d'état began years earlier. The country had been experiencing the effects of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution for years, but tensions began to rise in 1960, when Jânio Quadros was elected president, but unexpectedly resigned a year later. Vice-President João "Jango" Goulart was to be sworn in immediately, but he was on a diplomatic trip to China, which marked the start of years of accusations that he was secretly a communist.

⁴⁰ Promulgated by President Artur da Costa e Silva on December 13, 1968, and consisting of 12 articles, the AI-5 demolished all remaining laws that protected Brazilian freedom and democracy. The document bestowed upon the president the power to immediately close the National Congress and to control the Federal Supreme Court. From then on, Costa e Silva could suspend citizens' civil and political rights for up to ten years and criminalize any opposition to the government. These were the most brutal years of the dictatorship, now known as "anos de chumbo" (lead years). In 1969, Costa e Silva suffered a stroke, and President General Emílio Garrastazu Médici stepped in as his successor. Although contradictorily, Médici was responsible for the most violent and repressive years of the dictatorial regime and for the "economic miracle" in the early and mid-1970s. Such economic improvements in Brazil were directly related to oppressive labor rights initiatives, including the suppression of unions and lowered labor costs to attract foreign investments.

⁴¹ Naves, "Mira Schendel: el presente como utopía," 17.

Lygia Pape, and Hélio Oiticica.⁴² Hence, my thesis demonstrates how Brazilian culture and knowledge stimulated artists such as Schendel, fostering a fertile environment for technical and conceptual developments that have continued to expand through scholarship on her practice. The series *Monotipias* and *Droguinhas* will be analyzed in relation to one another, through the context in which they were born, and in their role as precursors to *Objetos Gráficos*.

Monotipias, Droguinhas, and the construction of Schendel's vocabulary

Developed somewhat in parallel, *Droguinhas* and *Monotipias* share many similarities with *Objetos Gráficos*. While the former possesses similar indirect yet significant potential as a political statement, the latter was fundamental to the artist's technical development. Given the inherent fragility of the paper she was working with, Schendel had to develop a specific technique since most traditional approaches would have ripped or otherwise damaged the material. The artist began by coating a sheet of glass with ink, followed by a layer of talc to act as a shield for the paper. Carefully, Schendel would lay the paper down and make marks by pressing a tool or her nails into it, which was always imprinted on both sides of the support. Also known as a painterly printmaking method, the monotype process allows greater spontaneity, making the artist's gesture more visible. Each monotype, singular and irreproducible, was created as part of a subgroup, which Schendel referred to as "families." The families of works, including *Lineares* (Linears) and *Escritas* (Writings), were often made in a burst of activity that followed the artist's long periods away from artmaking.⁴³ While Schendel had begun exploring the interplay between opacity and translucency in her paintings over the previous decade, it was

⁴² Paulo Herkenhoff, *Mulheres do presente, a clareza entre sombras*, São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2017, 239.

⁴³ Brett, "Mira Schendel Conference 2012 – Guy Brett – Respondent," 2012.

only through the transparency of Japanese paper that she found the opportunity to fully explore the possibilities of making the invisible visible. Her creative process became one of “transparentização” (making or turning something transparent), appropriating “transparency as a formal manifestation of the spiritual (epiphany)” and connecting it to Søren Kierkegaard’s paradoxical philosophy, where the binary thought of “either/or” is disturbed by the existence of “but also” and “through.”⁴⁴ According to Palhares, *Monotipias* led Schendel to understand that “the transparency problem” was a fundamental element of her poetics.⁴⁵ In *Untitled* (fig. 5), for example, Schendel emphasizes the paper’s translucence by making a brief incision that interrupts the light passing through the material. The artist’s singular interference documents her movement in time and space while also exacerbating the material void’s fertile creative potential rather than its absolute nothingness.

While the modesty of the *Lineares* family invites serenity and contemplation, some of the written monotypes exude chaos, uncertainty, and discomfort. Pérez-Oramas argues that “eschatological issues, the difficulties of faith, and the contradictions within the Catholic Church” permeate the *Monotipias* series.⁴⁶ To this, I add that the *Escritas* family is where Schendel’s concerns and ideas about religion are most radically present, taking shape as symbols, loose words, or paraphrases of religious texts. This is the case in *Canto aos jovens (a propósito de Stockhausen)* (Song of the Youths (regarding Stockhausen)), a collection of eight monotypes inspired by Karlheinz Stockhausen’s song, “Gesang der jünglinge,” known as the first masterpiece of electronic music.⁴⁷ Exhibited in 1965 at the 8th São Paulo Biennial, these

⁴⁴ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 145.

⁴⁵ Taisa Palhares, “Como Eu Me Divirto: As Monotipias de Mira Schendel,” *Perspectiva Filosófica*, vol. 49, n. 4, Recife: Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 2022, 90–93.

⁴⁶ Pérez-Oramas, *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets*, 26.

⁴⁷ Produced in 1955 and inspired by one of the stories in the Bible’s Book of Daniel, “Gesang der jünglinge” was born out of Stockhausen’s innovative idea of producing an electronic mass. The composer initially intended to hold

artworks featured words and phrases in several languages, including German, English, French, Italian, and Portuguese. In these languages, she repeatedly quoted and translated some of the words and sentences sung by a young boy: *alle*, *todos*, *tutti*, and *tous* (everyone); *etoiles* and *estrelas no céu* (stars and stars in the sky); *aller Regen und Tau* (all rain and dew); praise the lord, *bendizei o Senhor*, *benedite il Signor*, and *preiset den Herren*. On some monotypes, Schendel also wrote *então os 3 jovens cantaram* (then the three youths sang). Dias argues that Schendel found in this song a new kind of stimulus, one that enabled her to achieve an unprecedented unity between word, sound, and image in her work.⁴⁸ According to the author, the song's alternation between voices that articulate clear words and those that produce indistinguishable sounds creates several levels of verbal comprehension. Her hatchings and writing—sometimes entirely illegible—evoke Stockhausen's cacophony of voices, electronic pulse oscillations, and sine tones. These arrangements guided Schendel's exploration of space, and were reaffirmed through the thickness of lines, syllable breaks, and text legibility.⁴⁹

Still, these monotypes should not be read as mere representations of sounds. Across the eight works, Schendel's calligraphy and pressure on the paper vary significantly, suggesting a wide range of intentions and intensities. This spectrum has, at one of its extremes, a dainty, cursive writing that calls for close observation, an intimacy that leaves the viewer wondering whether this delicacy indicates peace of mind, vulnerability, fear, caution, or something else entirely. At the opposite extreme are Schendel's large, block letters and repetitive, abrasive hatchings that overpower the composition. While "Gesang der jünger" was born of Stockhausen's devotion to Catholicism, *Canto aos jovens (a propósito de Stockhausen)*

the service at the Cologne Cathedral, but had his idea rejected as his vision was not seen as appropriate for a religious space.

⁴⁸ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 185.

⁴⁹ Dias, *Mira Schendel: do espiritual à corporeidade*, 185.

materializes the internal turbulence of wavering faith through its contrasting ferocity and gentleness. Schendel's hand movements are undeniably present, at times forceful and frantic, and at others light and serene. Later, Schendel adopts a similar approach in *Objetos Gráficos*, where the rhythm and tempo of songs, as well as the artist's own relationship with their topics, can be seen and felt, even if not heard.

During the same period, Schendel developed *Droguinhas*. Named by her daughter, *Droguinhas*' title is literally translated to "little drugs," but the term is more commonly used as "little nothings," dismissing or demeaning the value of an object. The humorous acceptance of this title creates a stark contrast with the work itself. In Clay Perry's photographs *Mira Schendel and Droguinhas* (1966) (fig. 7), Schendel manipulates some of the series' sculptures, showcasing their malleability formed by webs of twisted, knotted, and braided Japanese rice paper. By assembling the sheets of paper in this manner, Schendel created rope-like structures that defy the paper's inherent fragility and that question the qualities traditionally associated with the material itself. The structural strength of each *Droguinha* allows it to be shaped into dense balls, hung from the ceiling, and to resist touch and movement. Such durability was a surprise to the artist herself, who initially produced these objects with the expectation that they would be ephemeral.⁵⁰

Droguinhas's unforeseen resilience becomes even more intriguing when considered in the context of Paulo Herkenhoff's arguments regarding their possible political undertones. Schendel, he argues, was among the many artists who immediately reacted to the political crisis that followed the coup d'état, and for him the *Droguinhas* materialized as part of Schendel's search for "a scathing transparency in a period of obscurantism."⁵¹ Herkenhoff calls attention to

⁵⁰ "Tangled Alphabets: Droguinhas (Little nothings) by Mira Schendel (Español)," YouTube video, posted by The Museum of Modern Art, 2009. Accessed February 27, 2026.

⁵¹ Herkenhoff, *Mulheres do presente, a clareza entre sombras*, 238.

the double meaning of the Portuguese word for knots, “nós,” deeming it “unthinkable that Schendel’s linguistic acumen would not have considered these senses.”⁵² While it can refer to the interlacing of a given material, “nós” also means “we” or “us.” Following this interpretation, Schendel’s knots are not irreversible, unsolvable problems, but a proposition for the audience to engage in constructing a collective strategy to untangle themselves from an undesired position.

Monotipias and *Droguinhas* show early stages of the ideas and techniques Schendel explored later in *Objetos Gráficos*. *Monotipias* is not only where Schendel’s unique technique was born, but also where the artist turned to the repetitive translation of musical lyrics and rhythms into written words and gestural movements. The connection between *Droguinhas* and *Objetos Gráficos* may seem comparatively frail, but their similarities expand beyond their possible meaning. Through her webs of knots, Schendel forces the paper out of its natural state, transforming the delicate material into one of resilience as if to protect it from external forces. The same is done in the *Objetos Gráficos*, where large acrylic sheets serve as shields that compensate for the paper’s brittleness. In the *Droguinhas* and *Objetos Gráficos*, the artworks are also suspended in space, see-through but not entirely transparent, turning the space and the people within it into ephemeral yet crucial components that shape the viewing experience.

Building on these arguments, I will now indicate how Schendel’s investigations of transparency in *Objetos Gráficos* turned this series into an invitation for an embodied, irreproducible, and collective viewing experience. In sequence, I will demonstrate how this series’ cultural and political references shared and continued the construction of collective strategies of resistance. My goal is not to overestimate the importance of politics within this

⁵² Herkenhoff, *Mulheres do presente, a clareza entre sombras*, 238.

series or Schendel's broader oeuvre, but to deconstruct the notion that she was isolated from either her peers or her country.

Transparency, language, and the void in *Objetos Gráficos*

Each *Objeto Gráfico* is singular, possessive of intransferable individuality. Yet, every object in this series belongs to a collective that shares a few key elements: letters or words on sheets of Japanese paper pressed between two acrylic sheets that measure one square meter and are meant to be suspended from the ceiling and distributed across space. This series, which has no confirmed number of artworks but includes at least sixteen objects, began with the same technique Schendel used in the *Monotipias* but later moved toward self-adhesive letter sets, likely influenced by the artist's experience designing dozens of book covers, including Strauss's *Psiquiatra no Mundo Moderno* and Lepp's *Higiene da Alma* (fig.8). While several *Objetos Gráficos* (fig. 9) are convoluted, almost completely covered in ink and devoid of comprehensible language, others show sparse, delicate, and/or legible writing. Before discovering the acrylic and while she struggled to overcome the incommunicability of the immediate moment, Schendel waited for the letters to assume their form on the paper, connecting one to another in a pre-discursive mode that could only succeed in a transparent material. Continuing her investigation into the "transparency problem," Schendel suspended these objects to allow the viewer to see them from every direction, disrupting the notion of front and back. Given the acrylic's transparency and the paper's translucency, Schendel believed it was possible for her to render both sides of the plane visible, converting the text into antitext and vice versa. This "circular reading" invites the viewer to move in the space, resulting in the transference of time

from the work to the viewer—that is, in the reactivation of time.⁵³ Although institutions such as the MoMA and Tate Modern have exhibited these works in a manner that did not allow a fulfilling circular reading, the transparency of each object elicits the response Schendel anticipated. As light crosses the surface of an *Objeto Gráfico*, it reveals the layered nature of the work, prompting the viewer to examine both sides in order to discover what was obscured by the transposition of texts.

Like Schendel, Pérez-Oramas, Brett, and Venancio Filho have considered the translucency of *Objetos Gráficos* in relation to space and to her study of language, time, and the void. If on one hand Pérez-Oramas defines the *Objetos Gráficos* as an exploration of “the thickness of language” and Brett distances it from the paradoxical concept of the void as empty and full at once, Venancio Filho states that the void’s ability to become activated by a nearly imperceptible, suspended presence is the literal condition of the *Objetos Gráficos*.⁵⁴ However, while Venancio Filho argues that the series demands a lack of gravity and a level of environmental purity found only in a laboratory to uncover its own clarity, I suggest otherwise.⁵⁵ Similar to Schendel’s *Monotipias*, which encompassed a wide variety of approaches and purposes, the *Objetos Gráficos* are heterogeneous and resist generalization. At times, Schendel constructs objects that indeed appear in a state of temporal and spatial suspension, as Venancio Filho notes. Yet in artworks such as *Objeto Gráfico* (fig. 10), the artist grounds the viewer and the object itself by including a “constellation of references [that] shows her connection to the cultural milieu of the time, in which the dichotomy of engaged art vs. aesthetic experimentation was being discussed, mostly through debates surrounding the new popular music and

⁵³ Schendel, *untitled text*, in Instituto Tomie Ohtake, *Mira Schendel – esperar que a letra se forme*, 5.

⁵⁴ Pérez-Oramas, *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets*, 13; Brett, “Mira Schendel Conference 2012 – Guy Brett – Respondent,” 2012; Paulo Venancio Filho, *Sinais/Signals: Mira Schendel*, exhibition catalogue, São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 2018, 37-38.

⁵⁵ Venancio Filho, *Sinais/Signals: Mira Schendel*, 37-38.

avant-garde literature.”⁵⁶ Additionally, this specific *Objeto Gráfico* materializes pause and silence by employing a method similar to that used by concrete poets: the blank space. Here, Schendel allows the two acrylic sheets to touch; no paper, ink, or letter sets impede their unity. As a result, the artwork's center gives the viewer a chance to see beyond the object. Unlike many other artworks in the series, which carry a sheer quality, this piece truly embodies transparency, ending the division between the environment and the work itself. Featuring the same texts on both sides in small font, the work invites two viewers to face each other and share a vulnerable, intimate collective experience. The activation of the artwork through the viewer's body was at the core of Neoconcretism, which defended that a work's meaning could only be ascribed through the encounter with the viewer. As such, this object reflects the grounded, collaborative essence that also pervades its own making process. Even if she initiated these works by herself, Schendel created the *Objetos Gráficos* as a joint effort, tying herself to other artists and intellectuals by valuing and propagating their ideas.

In this *Objeto Gráfico*, Schendel inserts several references, including quotations from various Brazilian popular songs and João Cabral de Melo Neto's 1950 poem *O Cão sem Plumas* (The Dog without Feathers). The poem depicts the poverty and social exclusion of the population living on the margins of the Capibaribe River in Pernambuco. Schendel draws from the fourth section, “Discurso do Capibaribe,” in which Cabral uses comparative metaphors to describe the river's presence in the collective memory. The river acquires “a slow and painful movement when it encounters the mangroves, standing still like enormous ripe fruit,” as well as “the energy of a living metaphor that floats between the real and the imaginary.”⁵⁷ Cabral expressed his

⁵⁶ Palhares, “Living in Between: Mira Schendel's Poetics,” 14.

⁵⁷ Maria de Fátima Gonçalves Lima, “Contemplação e Poesia em o Cão sem Plumas,” *LL Journal*, v. 7, 2012. Accessed on January 20, 2026. <https://lljournal.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2012-1-goncalves-texto/>

views through what scholars have named “poesia de menos” (poetry of less), a writing method that used irony and sarcasm as weapons against the selfishness of those in power. Instead of adopting a direct denunciatory tone, Cabral was committed to showing reality as it was, presuming that this would naturally lead to a narrative that exposed the social, political, and economic issues he aimed to represent.⁵⁸ Still, what makes the injection of this poem into this *Objeto Gráfico* intriguing has less to do with the poem itself and more with what happened to the poet in the years that followed its publication. A diplomat who lived in Spain, Portugal, Ecuador, Senegal, and several other countries, João Cabral de Melo Neto was reported by a coworker, Mário Calábria, as a suspected communist sympathizer in the early 1950s.⁵⁹ Consequently, he was temporarily dismissed from his diplomatic duties and faced two lawsuits. Despite being found innocent and allowed to return to Itamaraty in 1955, Cabral’s diplomatic career never fully recovered.

In this important *Objeto Gráfico*, Schendel not only combines works by writers, MPB artists, and a philosopher, but also inserts herself among them. In one section of the work, the artist rewrites what may have been a letter sent to a friend: “querido paulo, um whisky e um sambinha à sua saúde (...) ando metida neste trabalho chato, voce fazendo strip-tease e eu vestindo e adornando (enfeitando) chapas de acrilico” (dear paulo, a whiskey and a little samba for your health (...) I’ve been working on this annoying/boring piece, you doing strip-tease and

⁵⁸ Antonio Carlos Secchin, in Ramon Ramos, “Entrevista com Antonio Carlos Secchin: Para que possamos tomar outras lições na escolha das facas,” *Revista Pernambuco*, n. 167. Recife: Cepe Editora, 2020, 9.

⁵⁹ Calábria believed this to be true based on a letter written by Cabral to Ambassador Paulo Cotrim Rodrigues Pereira to invite him to write for a magazine of the British Labour Party. The Brazilian media turned these accusations into a spectacle, and in June 1952, the *Tribuna da Imprensa* published an article titled *Traidores no Itamaraty* (Traitors at Itamaraty). The publication claimed that João Cabral de Melo Neto was the leader of a communist group formed by several workers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had plans to share Brazilian military secrets with Russia; Fernanda Galve, “O navegar do poeta João Cabral no oceano das palavras proibidas (1952-64),” *Verinotio – Revista on-line de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas*, n. 21, 2016; Heloisa Murgel Starling, “Uma história soprada pelo vento no canavial: Um perfil das perseguições sofridas por João Cabral de Melo Neto,” *Revista Pernambuco*, n. 167, Recife: Cepe Editora, 2020, 14.

me decorating these acrylic sheets) (fig. 11). Schendel follows with few Buarque's songs, including "Tem mais samba" and "Madalena foi pro mar," which she briefly interrupts to introduce a line that not only does not appear in any songs but also in no other official publication: "e tem algo no ar além dos aviões da Panair" (and there is something in the air beyond the airplanes of Panair) (fig. 12). Decades earlier, Apparício Torelly used a similar sentence to refer to the political tension of the previous authoritarian regime, the Vargas Era, implying that an unclear yet powerful presence permeates the speaker's reality. Here, Schendel seems to update the line for her context, maintaining and reinforcing its political connotation by mentioning the airline Panair do Brasil. In 1965, without explanation, the military regime shut down the airline's operations. The act was long suspected of being related to the ongoing persecution of the airline's shareholders, Celso da Rocha Miranda and Mário Wallace Simonsen—a suspicion only recently confirmed by the Comissão Nacional da Verdade (National Truth Commission). Rather than canceling flights, the routes were granted to the airlines Varig and Cruzeiro do Sul, both of which had been made aware of the decision before Panair itself. Schendel reinforces this history by writing "e o cruzeiro do sul" and "cruzeirinhos," the diminutive of the country's coin at the time, *Cruzeiro*. Considering that Panair was no longer in operation by the time Schendel began working on this series, the inclusion of the company, particularly in this sentence, sets the tone for how the viewer may consider this work. Applying a mechanism similar to *Untitled*, in which she includes a newspaper headline in the depiction of a Brazilian artist's table, Schendel situates this *Objeto Gráfico* in a manner that makes it inseparable from its sociopolitical context.

Other sections of the work include other pieces of personal writings about how she came across her materials and methods, her desire to solve the issue of transparency and the idea of

front and back, as well as about what she hoped to achieve with this series. By situating herself and her art production alongside other voices and ideas, Schendel creates a web of knowledge that contextualizes this object and the series as a whole. Although not limited to, but certainly dominated by Brazilian references, various *Objetos Gráficos* include songs and poems from artists who were or had been persecuted for their political beliefs. Therefore, I must ask: is it truly plausible that these extensive and repetitive quotes—sometimes included as focal points, at others hidden in small handwriting among loose letters—were mere coincidences, not clues or unabridged statements of agreement with their author’s political viewpoint?

***Objetos Gráficos’* soundtrack: Sidney Miller, Chico Buarque, and Geraldo Vandré**

Among the references Schendel includes in *Objetos Gráficos*, the artist shows substantial attention to those of musical origin. In addition to *O Cão sem Plumas*, the present *Objeto Gráfico* (figs. 9–13) quotes Sidney Miller, Chico Buarque, Francis Hime, Vinícius de Moraes, and Toquinho. These musicians were associated with Música Popular Brasileira (Brazilian Popular Music), commonly known as MPB. The genre not only engaged directly with the issues surrounding the military dictatorship, but also transformed civil courage into a poetic-musical synthesis, building meaning for acts of resistance against the government.⁶⁰ Within this group of artists, Miller and Buarque composed more overtly political works than Hime, de Moraes, and Toquinho, but all five men resisted the regime through their music and were subsequently

⁶⁰ Marcos Napolitano, “MPB: A trilha sonora da abertura política (1975/1982).” *Estudos Avançados*, vol. 24, n. 69, 2010, 310, in Maria Aparecida Cezario, Kaliene Batista Ferreira. “Crítica política e social na ditadura militar brasileira: uma análise da música “Apesar de Você” de Chico Buarque (1967-1979).” *Revista Discente Ofícios de Clio*, vol. 8, n. 14. Pelotas: Universidade Federal de Pelotas, 2023, 158.

persecuted to varying degrees. At least four *Objeto Gráficos* cite some of their most politically charged compositions that became anthems of resistance against the dictatorial regime.

In order to fully comprehend the ramifications of Schendel's appropriation of these lyrics, remember that this series was produced at a time when even the most subtle of political statements could lead to grave consequences.⁶¹ Schendel could not have been unaware of the risk of associating herself with artists who were actively persecuted and censored by the dictatorship.⁶² This connection becomes even riskier with her inclusion of Miller's "A Estrada e o Violeiro" and Buarque's "Tem mais samba," two songs that reference the regime, although they were composed by artists who lived very distinct lives under this context. Despite sharing similar musical interests and political viewpoints, Chico Buarque and Sidney Miller had contrasting career trajectories.

By 1968, Miller had begun to gain notoriety through his participation in the *III Festival da Record* (1967) with the song "A Estrada e o Violeiro." According to the historian and musician Tiago Bosi Concagh, the lyrics explored the "dialectical relationship between the guitar player and the road, which reflected the relationship between man and historical becoming."⁶³ The song is marked by a slow, melancholic beginning that unfolds into a tempo so fast that the words are spoken almost too quickly for comprehension, mimicking life itself. The narrator tells his story as a warning, urging listeners to pay attention and prepare for what is ahead. While "A

⁶¹ The Comissão Nacional da Verdade estimates that the regime kidnapped and tortured over 20,000 people and murdered 434 people due to their political beliefs. Among the fatalities were Vladimir Herzog, a journalist and filmmaker that was affiliated with the Brazilian Communist Party, and the designer Zuzu Angel, who died in 1976 in a suspicious car crash understood as a political assassination that resulted from her ongoing public statements about the 1971 murder of her son and activist, Stuart Angel.

⁶² President Médici governed throughout the period known as 'recrudescimento' (recrudescence) (1969-74). Before the AI-5, music was already being censored, but after it, censorship became even more intense, and countless songs were forbidden from being played on the radio, at events and at the artists' concerts.

⁶³ Tiago Bosi Concagh, "Sidney Miller e a crise do Nacional-Popular (1966-1969)," XXVIII Simpósio Nacional de História: Anais Eletrônicos, Lugares dos Historiadores: Velhos e Novos Desafios, Florianópolis: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 2015, 7.

Estrada e o Violeiro” addresses life and death, and the loneliness that permeates both, the song is also an expression of hope. Incentivizing listeners to keep going despite the obstacles they will soon face, the voice reminds them that “Sua vista pouco alcança, mas a terra continua” (your sight reaches very little, but the land will continue), a promise that better days will inevitably come. Such better days never came to Miller, whose career imploded due to three main factors: the intensification of the dictatorship, the rearticulation and massification of the Brazilian phonographic market, and the resulting development of a counterculture. This counterculture functioned as an anti-establishment aesthetic project and as a critique made by and about both the right and the left, particularly about their respective conceptualizations of a national project.⁶⁴ Miller was the only MPB musician to write for the *Revista da Civilização Brasileira* (Magazine of Brazilian Civilization), which circulated ideas that opposed and resisted the dictatorship, further confirming his bravery and political stance.⁶⁵ Rumored to have committed suicide at the age of 35, Miller left many unanswered questions about himself as an individual, musician, and activist.

Buarque’s “Tem mais samba” is at once similar to and vastly different from “A Estrada e o Violeiro.” Despite its common associations with joyful celebrations, samba has always been, and remains, a form of resistance. Whether as a dance or a musical genre, samba owes its existence to the enslaved Africans who passed on their musical knowledge of African beats from one generation to the next. A mixture of African, Indigenous, and European styles, samba

⁶⁴ Concagh, “Sidney Miller e a crise do Nacional-Popular (1966-1969),” 1.

⁶⁵ In March 1965, the *Revista da Civilização Brasileira* first edition’s editorial explained that the Brazilian people were now facing a severe challenge, and needed to overcome the forces opposing the nation’s development. The basic principle of the magazine was to emphasize that, without liberty, it would be impossible to remove Brazil from the limbo in which it was found. Many of the members who contributed to the publications were associated with the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party), but they attempted to keep their affiliations discreet to avoid persecution and censorship. The magazine ceased its publications in 1968, as a result of the promulgation of the *Ato Institucional 5*.

became a recognizable rhythm associated with marginalized communities in Rio de Janeiro between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, soon spreading throughout the country despite backlash from the elites on account of its political content.⁶⁶ Within this context, the literary theorist Maria Lúcia de Barros Camargo argues that “Tem mais samba” is among the most significant works that followed the coup d’état in 1964.⁶⁷ Written as a commission for the musical producer Luiz Vergueiro, “Tem mais samba” signals the start of Buarque’s career. The lyrics are a rejoinder to the moment: “Tem mais samba no peito de quem chora / Tem mais samba no pranto de quem vê / Que o bom samba não tem lugar nem hora (...) Vem, que passa / Teu sofrer / Se todo mundo sambasse / Seria tão fácil viver” (There’s more samba in the heart of those who cry / There’s more samba in the tears of those who see / That good samba has no place or time (...) Come, let your suffering pass / If everyone danced samba / Life would be so easy). Throughout Buarque’s repertoire, samba is synonymous with love and happiness, expressing a loud, colorful kind of peace.⁶⁸ In “Tem mais samba,” Buarque offers the acts of making and dancing samba as a “fundamental activity for the betterment of humankind.”⁶⁹

In a related *Objeto Gráfico* (figs. 14 and 15), Schendel quotes “Tem mais Samba” yet again, which is then accompanied by Buarque’s full name and short excerpts from “Pedro Pedreiro.” Released in the same album as “Tem mais Samba,” titled *Chico Buarque de Hollanda*, “Pedro Pedreiro” speaks openly about the financial struggles faced by the Brazilian working class, who spend a lifetime waiting for better conditions that never come. Unlike the previous artwork, this *Objeto Gráfico* first appears as an illegible collection of loose letters. The letter A is

⁶⁶ Renan Dias Oliveira, “O samba como resistência cultural e luta política nos “anos de chumbo”,” XXIX Simpósio de História Nacional, Brasília: Universidade de Brasília, 2017, 2.

⁶⁷ Maria Lúcia de Barros Camargo, “Se todo mundo sambasse...” *Iberoamericana*, year XVI, n. 62. Madrid: 2016, 54.

⁶⁸ Adélia Bezerra de Meneses, *Desenho mágico: poesia e política em Chico Buarque*, São Paulo: Hucitec, 1982, 56, in Camargo, “Se todo mundo sambasse...” 57.

⁶⁹ Charles A. Perrone, *Letras e Letras da MPB*, Campinas: Booklink, 1988, 67.

the most repeated throughout the work, in both handwritten and adhesive letter sets. Schendel distributes these letters unevenly across the surface, creating areas of concentration and dispersion that accentuate the role of light in inviting the viewer to circulate the work. Through closer observation, Schendel's handwritten and typed lyrics become more noticeable, offering a potential path for interpretation that reinforces the connections between this series and MPB and inevitably positions the artist among those who explored samba as both an act of resistance and a fundamental element of Brazilian national identity.

Hélio Oiticica, for example, developed a series of wearable artworks titled *Parangolés*. Built in layers of canvases, gauze, nets, plastic, and paint, this series was first presented in 1965 at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. Pamphlets accompanied the work to introduce the “Bases Fundamentais para uma Definição do Parangolé” (Fundamental Bases for a Definition of the Parangolé).⁷⁰ These garments, activated by movement and dance, were inspired by Oiticica's experience at the samba school Mangueira, located in a favela of the same name. There, Oiticica learned to dance samba, which inspired him to bring the dance to museum spaces and the streets. Some *Parangolés* include embroidered political statements within the layers of material, such as “Incorpo a Revolta” (I Embodiment the Revolt) in *Parangolé P15, Capa 12, Incorpo a Revolta* (Parangolé P15, Cape 12, I Embodiment the Revolt) (1967) (fig. 16). Sharing Neoconcretism's core beliefs regarding the participatory work, *Parangolés* asks the viewer to realize, through the movement of both body and vestment, their agency over their bodies and destinies.

⁷⁰ The pamphlet characterized Oiticica's discovery, the *Parangolé*, as a fundamental turn in the theoretical position of his works regarding “color-structure in space, especially with regards to a new definition of what may be, in those same experiments, the “plastic object”, that is, the work.” Implicit in the architecture of favelas, Oiticica believed the concept of *Parangolés* could guide a return “to that mythical primordial structure of art.” For the artist, the elements brought by this kind of art could interfere and rearticulate the spectator's behaviour and positioning within participatory art.

In Brazil, there was a significant overlap between ideas and practices, with several individuals following two or more creative paths: Oiticica was an artist turned dancer, Maria Bonomi was both a printmaker and a theater set designer, the artist Lygia Pape was also a filmmaker and a poet, Rogério Duarte was a designer, actor, and musician, and so on. Not only did these artists' personal practices bleed into one another, but they also influenced other artists, contributing to a rich cultural milieu. The *Objetos Gráficos* mentioned thus far draw on a variety of sources, reflecting more than creating the connection between Brazilian literature, music, and the visual arts. In contrast, the following *Objeto Gráfico* (figs. 17 and 18) is entirely dedicated to a single composer: Geraldo Vandré. One side, which I will refer to as side A (fig. 17), features the songs “Cantiga Brava” and “Modinha,” while side B (fig. 18) is entirely dedicated to “Disparada.” In “Modinha,” Vandré primarily conveys romantic themes and therefore will not be a focus of this discussion. However, “Cantiga Brava” and “Disparada” carry significant political messages and warrant a brief analysis.

In the 1960s, the Brazilian music scene was characterized by a broad range of trends and styles—Bossa Nova, the pop-rock of the Jovem Guarda, and the experimental blend of styles known as *Tropicália*. The historian Marilu Santos Cardoso explains that Vandré was a figure of prominence within this context due to his simple verses and melodies that prioritized immediate communication rather than musical complexity.⁷¹ Although the impact of the dictatorship is evident throughout much of Vandré's musical catalogue, he never openly classified his work as protest music.⁷² According to Cardoso, Vandré did not suffer any direct government intervention

⁷¹ Marilu Santos Cardoso, “Música, política, repressão e resistência: Geraldo Vandré,” XXVIII Simpósio Nacional de História: Anais Eletrônicos. Lugares dos Historiadores: Velhos e Novos Desafios, Florianópolis: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 2015, 3–4.

⁷² Composed by Geraldo Vandré in 1968, “Pra Não Dizer Que Não Falei Das Flores” (So Not to Say I didn't Speak of the Flowers) became the hymn of the resistance against the military dictatorship. Forbidden from being played or mentioned for many years, the song addressed the hypocrisy of those who sang about flowers—a reference to Brazil's national anthem—while pointing their guns.

in the early years of the dictatorship, but his activities fell under surveillance in 1965, primarily at public performances, which were often organized by factory workers, students, and religious groups. Vandr 's support of these movements was documented by the Departamento de Ordem Pol tica e Social de S o Paulo, contributing to his classification as a leftist and active participant in social agitation. Ultimately, Vandr  left the country in exile after the promulgation of the AI-5, therefore ending his musical career in November 1968.⁷³

Some of Vandr 's best-known compositions, including “Cantiga Brava” and “Modinha,” were written for *A Hora e a vez de Augusto Matraga* (The Time and turn of Augusto Matraga) (1965), a movie by Roberto Santos. The film is based on and shares its title with Guimar es Rosa’s 1946 short story, written under the previous dictatorial regime, the Vargas Era (1930–1945). *A Hora e a vez de Augusto Matraga* tells the story of Nh  Augusto, a landowner from Minas Gerais who goes through a series of misfortunes, including spousal infidelity and an assassination attempt by a political adversary. Once saved by a couple of peasants, he decides to change his life to save his soul. The social historian Regina Mesquita states that *A Hora e a vez de Augusto Matraga* addresses the power relationships in Brazil and how the religious concept of the afterlife became a coping mechanism for living under intensive control and violence.⁷⁴ Despite being a secondary character, Nh  Quim was a considerable influence on the soundtrack. In the original story, he is a wise backwoodsman who represents popular knowledge, wisdom, and the virile notions associated with the “man on the road.” Mesquita argues that Vandr  uses Nh  Quim’s point of view to express his own ideas and beliefs, thereby suggesting that his music’s real intention is to communicate with the people.⁷⁵ In “Cantiga Brava,” for example,

⁷³ Cardoso, “M sica, pol tica, repress o e resist ncia: Geraldo Vandr ,” 10–13.

⁷⁴ Regina M. B. Mesquita, *Da Bossa   barricada? Engajamento pol tico e mercado na carreira de Geraldo Vandr  (1961-1968)*. Doctoral dissertation. S o Paulo: Universidade de S o Paulo, 2015, 95–96.

⁷⁵ Mesquita, *Da Bossa   barricada? Engajamento pol tico e mercado na carreira de Geraldo Vandr  (1961-1968)*, 100.

Vandré writes that the land in which his home resided was not swept with a broom, but rather with the “ponta de sabre / bala de metralhadora” (tip of a saber / machine gun bullet). If written in another time, the song could be interpreted as a criticism of the high rates of crime and violence in Brazil, but the imagery of the machine gun, within this context, is doubtless a reference to the dictatorial regime and the public battles against the Ação Popular group.⁷⁶ As the song ends, the narrator sings a statement of resistance, hope, and strength: “Muita luta já perdi / Muita esperança gastei / Até medo já senti / E não foi pouquinho não / Mas, fugir, nunca fugi / Nunca abandonei meu chão” (I've lost many battles / I've spent much hope / I've even felt fear / And not a little bit / But I never ran away / I never abandoned my land). The speaker in “Cantiga Brava” presents himself not as a victim but as a survivor determined not to cower in the face of oppression and fear, willing to fight for his land and rights.

Similar ideas inspire Vandré’s “Disparada,” another substantial example of the artist’s compulsion to report on the reality and consequences of the dictatorial regime.⁷⁷ The song, written from a cowboy’s point of view, starts by advising listeners to prepare their hearts for his unpleasant story of survival replete with mistakes, obstacles, lessons, unapologetic honesty, and encounters with death.⁷⁸ Vandré’s lexical choices build the image of a storyteller conscious of the

⁷⁶ Born at a time defined by the radicalization of Brazilian youth, the group *Ação Popular* (Popular Action) was a leftist organization that combined ideologies from socialism and Christian humanism. After the coup, the AP lost many of its members who had to leave the country in exile, and the group became a clandestine organization. From the mid 1960s to the 1970s, AP operated as a revolutionary insurrectionist group.

⁷⁷ “Disparada” was composed with the help of Théo de Barros and interpreted by Jair Rodrigues at the 1966 *II Festival da Música Popular Brasileira da TV Record*; Mesquita, *Da Bossa à barricada? Engajamento político e mercado na carreira de Geraldo Vandré (1961-1968)*, 47.

⁷⁸ Geraldo Vandré, “Disparada”, 1966. Translated lyrics: *I come from the backlands / And I may not please you / I learned to say no / To see death without crying / And death, destiny, everything / Death, destiny, everything / Was out of place / I live to fix it / I was once a steer in the cattle drive / But one day I mounted / Not for my own reason / Or for anyone with me / And who had any desire / But out of necessity / Of the owner of a cattle drive / Whose cowboy died / A cowboy for a long time / Firm lasso and strong arm / Many cattle, many people / I held on for life / I followed as in a dream / And the cowboy was a king / But the world kept turning / On the hooves of my horse / And in the dreams I was dreaming / The visions becoming clearer / The visions becoming clearer / Until one day I woke up / Then I couldn't go on / Valiant lieutenant / And owner of cattle and people / Because cattle you brand / You herd, you brand, you fatten and you kill / But with people it's different / If you don't agree / I can't apologize / I don't sing to deceive / I will grab my guitar / I'll leave you aside / I'll sing somewhere else / I was once a cattle in the herd*

government's authoritarianism and its equation of Brazilian citizens to animals farmed for human profit and consumption: "Então não pude seguir valente lugar-tenente / E dono de gado e gente, porque gado a gente marca / Tange, ferra, engorda e mata, mas com gente é diferente" (Then I couldn't go on / Valiant lieutenant / And owner of cattle and people / Because cattle you brand / You herd, you brand, you fatten and you kill / But with people it's different).⁷⁹ His voice is initially accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, the tone melancholic but full of certainty. As the song progresses, new voices sing along, a progression that coincides with an increasing tempo. In contrast with its lonely and somewhat hopeless start, the song ends with an excited group of voices that follows the guitar's powerful chords, reinforcing lyrics that symbolically emphasize the importance of solidarity and hope in the fight for social change.⁸⁰

While Schendel intercalates the lyrics of "Cantiga Brava" and "Modinha," blending the personal and social spheres on side A, side B features the lyrics of "Disparada" in cursive handwriting. Both sides of this object lack the contrasting areas of concentration and dispersion seen in *Objeto Gráfico* (fig. 14), having a partial rhythmic sense of uniformity instead, despite the song's different themes and cadences. The work's harmony is broken only twice on side B: once on the upper left corner, where the artist accentuates the word "NÃO" (NO), and again at the bottom center, reading "NÃO à MORTE" (NO to DEATH). Both instances belong to the verses "Aprendi a dizer não / Ver a morte sem chorar" (I learned to say no / to see death without crying). In the left upper section, Schendel's interruption is the most noticeable, serving as an eye-catching device that prompts the viewer to begin reading. Her desire to arrest the audience's

/ A cowboy, I was once a king / Not for myself nor for anyone / Who was with me / Who wanted or could / For anything of their own / For anything of their own / Want to go further than me / But the world kept turning / On the hooves of my horse / And since one day I rode / Now I'm a knight / Firm lasso and strong arm / In a kingdom that has no king.

⁷⁹ Maria Aparecida Rocha Gouvêa, "O Ethos do Compositor da Música Popular Brasileira no Contexto da Ditadura Militar: Uma Leitura Intertextual," *Anais do SILEL*, vol. 1, Uberlândia: EDUFU, 2009, 6.

⁸⁰ Perrone, *Letras e Letras da MPB*, 58.

attention is also present in the manner in which she applies varying degrees of pressure to the paper, giving some words a darker, thicker presence than others, emphasizing the lyrics that most directly refer to death or to the dehumanization of Brazilian citizens. While the juxtaposition of Vandr 's compositions in this object (figs. 17 and 18) requires the viewer's effort to read, it also characterizes one of Schendel's most legible works in *Objetos Gr ficos*. Unlike the rest of its series, this *Objeto Gr fico* is entirely made of handwritten, complete sentences, naturally indicating that the viewer should read, decode, and possibly recognize the text. Through its clarity, this *Objeto Gr fico* acts as the opposite of censorship, a renunciation of silence: Schendel not only disseminates Vandr 's ideas; she makes them her own, taking upon herself the responsibility of warning her viewers just as the cowboy warns his listeners.

Unlike the work just mentioned, another *Objeto Gr fico* (fig. 19) quotes "Cantiga Brava" and "Modinha" in a significantly distinct way. Here, Schendel repeats many of the single letters and symbols included in the rest of the series, but deprives the image of the same dynamic gestures that define some of the objects described thus far. At a distance, the work does not immediately reveal its textual character, the minuscule writing demanding higher levels of attention, effort, and proximity from the viewer. Even if these needs are met, the lyrics can easily remain unnoticed. The light that transpires through the work places greater emphasis on the layers of paper that compose the surface than on Schendel's printed interventions. By shrinking the lyrics in one object and amplifying them in another, Schendel automatically places these works in opposition: one *Objeto Gr fico* rejects silence and modesty; the other deceives the inattentive viewer into misunderstanding the work by hiding parts of itself. I find Schendel's diverging approaches surprisingly reminiscent of the different artists' responses to the tenth S o Paulo Biennial. The previous object made its statements inescapable, employing several

eye-catching devices to avoid going unnoticed, taking an extreme, direct path to convey its message. In contrast, the present work opts to communicate through subtle, nearly imperceptible visual elements, taking measures to protect itself while still sharing similar ideas with its intended audience.

Although the reason Schendel chose to quote these songs in such distinct ways may never be known, I argue that the inclusion of these lyrics must be considered a strong indication of Schendel's position regarding the political context in which *Objetos Gráficos* was born. The compositions highlighted here, "Cantiga Brava," "Disparada," "A Estrada e o Violeiro," "Tem mais Samba," and "Pedro Pedreiro," were part of a greater effort to counter the violence and censorship of the Brazilian military dictatorship, one that sought to create space for communication, solidarity, and resilience. More than songs, these anthems evoke the history of their origins, unable to shed the context in which they were born. Through metaphors, Miller, Buarque, and Vandr  showed art's potential as a powerful tool of resistance. Notably, their compositions did not gain notoriety years after their creation: they circulated widely during the dictatorial period, ingraining themselves into Brazilian collective memory. Schendel's *Objetos Gráficos* serve as material evidence that these songs echoed throughout Brazilian homes, businesses, and streets, becoming the soundtrack of Brazilian life and hope. Nonetheless, this series functions as more than mere representations or reiterations of these songs: it appropriates these lyrics to make interdependent statements of its own. At once, *Objetos Gráficos* situates Schendel within the artistic production of her time, asserts the relevance of political conditions in her works, and proclaims Brazilian culture as integral to her practice and life.

Conclusion

Schendel never spoke much about her life during the Second World War, neither in conversation nor in writing. There is also little existing documentation about how much she actually discussed the Brazilian military dictatorship. Nonetheless, one thing is certain: she shared many concerns with the artists, writers, and musicians of her time, even if she preferred to address them less explicitly. Whether her stance diverged from those of her peers due to her previous experience living under a highly repressive regime, we may never know, but to attribute the messages Schendel amplified through *Objetos Gráficos* to chance or naïvité is a gross undermining of her intellect and personal history of survival.

While *Objetos Gráficos* were the primary focus of my thesis, these works are only some among several other examples included here that indicate the artist's political nature. Here, I have provided extensive evidence to sustain a new understanding of Schendel's work and persona: her installation at the tenth São Paulo Biennial, her letters to *Correio do Povo* in 1950, her 1964 depiction of the Brazilian artist's table in *Untitled*, and the significance of the nós/knots in *Droguinhas*. I state that, alongside these examples, the *Objetos Gráficos* prompts an expansion of the scholarly narratives built around Schendel thus far, and functions as an undeniable testament to the artist's active engagement with Brazilian culture, society, and politics.

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