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Delicate Perception and Precarious Writing

*What concerns me is capturing the passage of immediate experience, in all its empirical force, into the symbol, with its memorability and relative immortality.*

— Mira Schendel[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Being an artist means inventing a language*

*to say the as yet unspoken.*

* Anna Maria Maiolino[[2]](#footnote-2)

My dissertation project, currently entitled *Delicate Perception and Precarious Writing* traces a small constellation of (mainly Latin American women) artists whose works open and re-theorize the question of writing during the period of 1960-1980. I explore how these artists’ experiments in “delicate” and precarious modes of reading–seeing emerge from and reconfigure what has traditionally been called the field of “aesthetic” experience and the political meaning of such experience. Two of the primary figures in this project are Brazilian artists Mira Schendel and Anna Maria Maiolino. The vast majority of collections and archives on Schendel and Maiolino are to be found in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and the detailed and tactile works of Schendel and Maiolino in particular beg to be seen, touched, and heard in-person.

With the help of the Tinker Summer Field Research grant, I had the privilege of seeing over 100 of Mira Schendel’s extraordinarily delicate and complex drawings and paintings in museums, galleries, and private collections in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, including the Museu de Arte do Rio, MAM Rio, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, Instituto de Arte Contemporânea (São Paulo), MAC São Paulo, and the Mira Schendel estate. During my visit to Mira Schendel’s estate, I was given access to scores of Schendel’s work from the 1960s and 1970s, with a particular focus upon works that work explicitly on the borders of written language and drawing. I was able to examine both the recto and verso sides of these thin sheets of paper, something that was impossible to see in most museums and other archives, where the delicate drawings are mounted and framed. Seeing and touching the *Monotipas* drawings allowed me to comprehend, in a way impossible before,the written mark as something far more akin to a stain that emerges from within the paper than an *application* inscribed upon a surface. I was also given access to several artists’ books that Schendel had made in the decade of the 1970s, whose very nature as objects that are meant to be handled makes them difficult to show in a public exhibition, but which offer rich meditations on the role of time in drawing. Some notebooks functioned as small experiments in the possibilities for lines and letters to interact and trade places, and many offered important reflections on the link between sight and shape which gave me many ideas for how to reframe and extend my project.

I was also able to see several key works by Anna Maria Maiolino at museums and galleries during my visit to Brazil. One of the most exciting aspects of my trip was a visit to Anna Maria Maiolino’s studio where I gained a richer comprehension of the context and scope of her work, as well as the different media she used for different projects.

I began to see nuances in the larger paradox governing much of Maiolino’s artistic projects, which she herself frames as “inventing a language” as a means to articulate that which is always on the other side of language. At the MAM Rio, I was able to see several large early works such as Maiolino’s early three-dimensional pieces “Glu, Glu,” and I was able to see works that span Maiolino’s five-decade career at institutions and galleries including MAR (Rio), MAC (São Paulo), and the archives of the Museu de Arte Brasileira (São Paulo), works that in various ways interrogated the boundaries of legibility and illegibility, and offered surprising commentary on the aesthetic possibilities activated by such a boundary.

There are two additional aspects of my trip to Brazil that were extremely useful and transformative. Several libraries and research centers provided access to extensive bibliographic materials and primary documents which were nearly impossible to find in the U.S. and which will be invaluable to the historical context to my project. The MASP library in São Paulo was a particularly critical resource in my research.

Perhaps most importantly, my visit put me in contact with Brazilian scholars, critics, and curators whose generosity was tremendously humbling. The remarkable attention and assistance I was offered, particularly in the form of extensive conversations, helped me to develop, extend, and reframe the intellectual questions at stake in my project.

1. Cited in Luiz Pérez Oramas León Ferrari, Mira Schendel, Andrea Giunta, and Rodrigo Naves. *León Ferrari and Mira Schendel: Tangled Alphabets*. New York, N.Y: Museum of Modern Art, 2009, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maiolino, Anna M. Anna Maria Maiolino: A Life Line = Vida Afora. New York, NY: Drawing Center, 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)