

Greta Schödl Street Poetry

28 January – 26 April 2025



Phileas THE AUSTRIAN OFFICE FOR
CONTEMPORARY ART

Greta Schödl: Street Poetry

We are honoured to present the first solo exhibition in Austria in more than 40 years of the work of artist Greta Schödl. Following her participation in the main exhibition of the 60th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia 2024, curated by Adriano Pedrosa and supported by Phileas, Schödl's work can now be seen in the country of her birth, where it has remained largely unknown until now. The exhibition traces her artistic development from the 1950s in Vienna through to the present day, and includes works on paper, found objects, photographs of historical performances, and several marble sculptures that were shown in Venice.



Installation view at the 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*, 2024. Photo by Marco Zorzanello

After studying in Vienna, Schödl moved to Bologna in 1959 and became an important figure within the Poesia Visiva ('Visual Poetry') movement. Writing has a central role in Schödl's art, overlaid on natural materials such as stone and handmade paper as well as found textiles and everyday objects such as ironing boards, dishcloths and bed linen. The emphasis is less on the content and meaning of the writing itself, and more on the visual appearance of the script and its rhythmic arrangement on the surface. Small golden marks, often placed within the empty spaces of vowels, create accents that highlight these patterns. Writing is liberated from its original function and instead develops an independence, revealing the interplay between language and image.

“Greta Schödl is a weaver of words... Her instrumental method is not the writing of the word, but the writing of the line composed of iterated words. Through her compulsive repetition, our attention goes to the linearity embodied by the ordered pattern of weaving.”

Mirella Bentivoglio, artist and poet, 1982

“Handwriting is an expression of the artist herself. It stimulates abstract thinking and creativity, and has both a psychological and emotional dimension. Unlike printing, handwriting leaves a personal trace of the writer. It is a unique and unmistakable experience, created with great precision and discipline in the mark itself. Writing by hand reveals who we are.”

Greta Schödl, 2018

Biography



Photo by Giovanni Bortolani

Greta Schödl (born in 1929 in Hollabrunn) studied Textile Art at the Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna, where she received the prestigious Academy Prize on completing her studies in 1953. Six years later, in 1959, she married the Italian designer Dino Gavina and moved with him to Bologna, where she has lived and worked ever since.

Her engagement with writing and language led her in the 1970s to become involved with the Poesia Visiva ('Visual Poetry') movement, centred around the artist and poet Mirella Bentivoglio. In 1977, she had her last institutional solo exhibition in Vienna at the Künstlerhaus. The following year, in 1978, Schödl participated in the exhibition *Materializzazione del linguaggio (Materialization of Language)* as part of the 38th Venice Biennale, invited by Bentivoglio. A few years later, in 1981, she also exhibited at the 16th Bienal de São Paulo, in Brazil.

In 2024, at the invitation of curator Adriano Pedrosa, she participated in the main exhibition of the 60th Venice Biennale.

Public events



Untitled, 2023. From: *Giro giro tondo salviamo il mondo*, Fondazione del Monte di Bologna e Ravenna, 2024

“Ring a Ring o' Roses”
A workshop for children

Saturday 15 February at 2pm
Opernring 17, 1010 Vienna

In this workshop, our youngest visitors (ages 6 to 10) will have the opportunity to explore the work of Greta Schödl with art educator Julia Haimburger. Inspired by Schödl's pieces, in which image and language merge, the children will be encouraged to tap into their own creativity and create their own art works.

Limited places available, please register at:
events@phileas.art



Untitled, c. 1975. Courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery

Public tours of the exhibition

Opernring 17, 1010 Wien

Throughout the exhibition, we will offer informal walk-throughs in the company of artists, authors, and curators. The dates will be announced in advance on our website and Instagram.

Phileas THE AUSTRIAN OFFICE FOR
CONTEMPORARY ART

Phileas - The Austrian Office for Contemporary Art supports artists, curators, galleries and institutions in Austria and works to strengthen their presence on the international landscape of contemporary art. Through long-term partnerships with museums, biennials and art institutions around the world, we enable the production and exhibition of new artworks and their donation to public collections.

Our exhibition space and office in Vienna provides a window into our international activities and a meeting place for public talks, screenings and performances. We publish an annual series of artist monographs and maintain an Artist Library of exhibition catalogues and portfolios available for research and consultation. We support the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale through a combination of fundraising, publishing and historical research, and were commissioners of the first Austrian Pavilion at the Gwangju Biennale, South Korea, in 2024. To complement these activities, we run an active Visitor Programme that invites international curators and critics to Austria throughout the year to visit artists' studios, galleries, museums and artist-run spaces.

Founded in 2014, Phileas - The Austrian Office for Contemporary Art is funded by the contributions of its private members and the Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport.

We are grateful for the support and commitment of:
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Cover: Greta Schödl, *Untitled*, 2020
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On the work of Greta Schödl

A series of new texts commissioned by Phileas as part of our Art Writing programme

Straßenpoesie

Simone Molinari

Presented alongside the tenth edition of Art Basel in 1980, *Straßenpoesie* ('Street Poetry') stands as the most ephemeral yet successful example of Greta Schödl's investigation of sculpture and performance in a public space.

The work consists of small, square pieces of white paper with a circular hole in the centre. On each, the artist has handwritten the series title, while her name and former address are neatly printed in one corner. In order to be activated, *Straßenpoesie* has to be tossed randomly on to the pavement; then, an unsuspecting passer-by must notice the oddly shaped paper and fix their gaze on it. The round shape of the hole mirrors the viewer's pupil, linking the work to the act of seeing, while at the same time functioning as a sort of magnifying glass. Through the act of framing, any small, insignificant detail it happens to land on is given a new dignity, magically transformed into something more than it originally was. A small crack in the pavement, a cigarette butt, a few blades of grass: by focusing on what usually slips the attention, the work effectively makes us slip, altering the rhythm of a walk and, with it, of thought.



Straßenpoesie ('Street Poetry'), 1980

This interference in the usual flow of the street, together with its relational nature, defines the political potential of *Straßenpoesie*. Having previously experimented with crowd interaction in *Tube* ('Tube', 1978) and *Bidone* ('Oil Drum', 1978), Schödl is well aware that public spaces are shaped by an interweaving of many forces, both visible and invisible (she almost got arrested for littering soon after throwing the poems on the pavements of Basel). By disrupting the passer-by's perception habits, Schödl shakes the given hierarchy of what, in our surroundings, is worth paying attention to. In this light, *Straßenpoesie* can be considered a delicate kind of monument, in the original etymology of the word, *monere*, 'to remind'. A democratic reminder of spatial awareness, the work celebrates the glimmer hidden in small things, as well as the potential of a political and poetic sensitivity that resides in every inhabitant of the street.

Scrittura

Bryony Dawson

What is it to cover an object's surface all over with its name? Obsession? Devotion? An act of dominance? Naming is a privileged act—it implies ownership or authority. It captures and organises; it sets things in their place. In the Book of Genesis, it is by naming all the animals that Adam becomes master of them. Greta Schödl's approach, however, seems less interested in the power dynamics of naming than in the subversive potential of repetition. On chunks of marble and granite, old sheets, ironing boards, mannequins and tea towels, Schödl's handwriting spells out the name of the object over and over until it forms a rhythmic, spidery, all-encompassing net, almost obscuring the very thing it describes. In each repetition, she adds a dot of gold leaf, often in the closed loop of an 'o', as if to pin the text in place. Across the lines and columns of this repeating script, the golden vowels form a drifting notation that evolves with the slight variations in Schödl's handwriting. The artist has described these drifts as "vibrations"—a seismic register of the shifts in her emotional state while working. It is not an accident that so many of Schödl's chosen objects evoke the feminised labour of housekeeping. As a woman carving out a space for herself in the male-dominated artistic circles of 1960s Bologna, Schödl was surely all too aware of how the word 'woman' would precede every aspect of her existence. In light of this, her text-covered objects align with a



Detail of *Marmo*, from the series *Scrittura*, 2020

feminist tendency in Poesia Visiva ('Visual Poetry') an experimental field that emerged in the late 1950s. By shifting focus from a text's meaning to its constituent elements such as individual graphemes or typographic design, Visual Poetry works to reveal linguistic structures as arbitrary and malleable, and to devise new systems for describing the world. Seen in this way, Schödl's repetitive, relentless naming is not a reinforcement of order but a quiet form of undoing—her golden dots not *pins*, then, but holes—through which something in language may escape.

Performance Art in Italy in 1970s

Tianyu Jiang

Female performance art during the 1970s embodied a distinct feminist intervention in public spaces. In Italy, from the late 1960s, narratives demanding female agency were no longer constrained and concealed within domestic spaces, but moved into the public eye through court cases such as Franca Viola's trial in 1966 (which marked the first time in Italy that a female victim of rape and sexual violence publicly refused a 'reparatory marriage'); feminist manifestos (notably art critic Carla Lonzi's *The Clitoridian Woman and the Vaginal Woman* from 1971); and feminist street protests. In this politically charged period, Greta Schödl's performance work in the late 1970s aligned with feminist ideals of visibility, accessibility and emancipation. Schödl achieved this goal not by taking a confrontational approach through bodily explorations, which were prevalent in feminist performance art of the time; instead, her work focuses on subtle introspection regarding the interplay between language, objecthood and identity. In *Tube* ('Tube', 1978) and *Bidone* ('Oil Drum', 1978), both performed in public in Bologna's Piazza Maggiore, Schödl inscribed words repetitively and continuously on to found objects, transforming them into evolving—not definitive—forms of poetry. Through Schödl's intuitive treatment of language as a visual material, an approach that liberates the word from any linguistic fixation, the tube or bin, imitating the mundanity of daily labour and

routines, acquired new meanings that were almost meditative and ritualistic. The action of carrying the inscribed object into the city square further signified the feminist reclamation of space. Schödl's minimalistic performance attracted—or even encouraged—interaction with the public, creating a reflective engagement with spectators in an everyday environment. Resonating with Anna Valeria Borsari's *Madonna* series (1977–80), which featured the imagery of the Virgin Mary created from seeds and grains in public squares to explore the impermanence of religious and cultural symbol, Schödl's performance likewise conceptually invited the public to pause and look into the often-neglected aspects of societal structure built upon male-coded languages and to witness the fluid, impermanent and unspeakable female experience.



Mannequin, 1978



Performance with *Tube*, 12 March 1978, Piazza Maggiore, Bologna. Photos by Nino Migliori

Household Objects

Punch Viratmalee

A piece of fabric, made of woven natural fibres, white with a red vertical stripe, when given a proper name and placed in a proper context, becomes a kitchen towel. A flat, elongated wooden plank, likewise, with the right name and in the right context, transforms into an ironing board. This practice of naming is how language works at its most basic level; it assigns objects to their place in the order of things, shaping our understanding of the world and our surroundings. It is in these objects, in their proximity to herself, that Greta Schödl found interest in the quotidian: kitchen towels, ironing boards, bed-sheets, tablecloths—by selecting these ordinary objects and transforming them through her practice. By writing the object's name on its surface again and again, she affirms its materiality, shifting the focus from the associated meaning of a name to the reality of its material, making the object disappear into itself; a casting of a spell to disenchant, a reversed christening. It is an act of simultaneous creation and erasure. Here, it is not only the choice of objects that reflects the artist's home life but also the language she writes in—the German of her native tongue, and Italian, the language of her adopted homeland. The constant, continuous, cursive hand flows across the worn surface of the object with a mediated intensity. The rhythm of these marks is further accentuated by arrays of gilded hollows in each vowel, evoking the gold of the Vienna Secession or the



Strofinaccio ('Dishcloth'), 2023

late Roman Empire. After all, Bologna is only an hour away from Ravenna and its magnificent sixth-century Justinian mosaic—a vision of transcendence brought down to earth, to the mundane. While the artist herself stated that she didn't intend these works to be a feminist statement, one can't help but wonder about the forces influencing our impression of these objects commonly used in our domestic lives, regardless of gender, and questioning their exclusive association with femininity.

Poesia Visiva

Jelena Jokić-Bornstein

Encountering Greta Schödl's art feels like discovering sacred relics from a long-lost civilisation. Each of her enigmatic *Scrittura* ('Scriptures') materialises a chant in the artist's unique visual language—found objects of rock, wood, paper and cloth are veiled with calligraphic repetition of their own name in Italian or German, rhythmically punctuated by gold leaf dots. Each exudes that Kubrickesque Black Monolith energy: nothing to add, nothing to take away, infinite interpretive possibilities.

It is no surprise then that her work is often contextualised within Poesia Visiva ('Visual Poetry')—an experimental movement that emerged in Italy in the 1950s and '60s to explore the visual aspects of language while challenging its conventions. Deeply political, the movement critiqued consumer culture and mass media, with a feminist strand flourishing under Mirella Bentivoglio. As curator of the seminal exhibition *Materialisation of Language* at the 1978 Venice Biennale, Bentivoglio emphasised women's role in reshaping linguistic and cultural narratives. Schödl's inclusion in this exhibition highlighted her feminist explorations—evident particularly in pieces created around this time, such as *Mannequin* or *Tube* (both 1978).

But to frame Schödl's work within any political movement is to take away from its timelessness and mysticism.



Contentitore di Parole ('Container of Words'), 2023. Photo by Thanassis Gatos. Courtesy of Gramma_Epsilon Gallery, Athens

The artist herself eludes labels: "When looking at my work, everyone should be free to see and experience the feelings that resonate within themselves." Her choice to cover the objects with their names resists interpretation—any other text would have turned the *Scrittura* into ephemeral political statements. Instead, they endure as embodied meditations on continuity – of nature, time, ritual, spirit...

There is solace in Schödl's "nothing is ever finished" philosophy. Her *Scrittura*—often created over the course of several years or even decades—quietly evoke the lost longings of modern civilisation: connection to nature, respect for time, and the permission to simply be.