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Dematerialization in the Argentine Context: Experiments in the Avant-garde in the 1960s

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Elize M. Mazadiego

Committee in charge:

Professor W. Norman Bryson, Co-Chair  
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2015

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2015



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of Figures .....	v
Acknowledgements .....	viii
Vita .....	x
Abstract of the Dissertation .....	xi
Introduction: In the Age of Discontinuity .....	1
Chapter 1: The Aesthetics of Negation .....	18
Chapter 2: Democratizing the Avant-Garde .....	86
Chapter 3: Rethinking the Happening .....	137
Conclusion: After 1968, we dematerialize .....	192
Bibliography .....	200

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Cornell Capa, <i>Pro-Peronist Rally</i> , 1955.....	7
Figure 2. Joaquín Torres-García, <i>Constructivist Composition</i> , 1943.....	23
Figure 3. Raúl Lozza, <i>Relieve no. 30</i> , 1945.....	27
Figure 4. Gyula Kosice, <i>Royi (Articulated Sculpture)</i> , 1944.....	28
Figure 5. Diyi Laañ, <i>Articulated Madi Painting</i> , 1946 .....	29
Figure 6. Lucio Fontana, <i>Spatial Concept</i> , 1950 .....	31
Figure 7. <i>Sucesos Argentinos</i> , Film still from “First Television Antenna Construction”, 1951 .....	35
Figure 8. Kenneth Kemble, <i>Tregua</i> , 1957.....	39
Figure 9. Jean Fautrier, <i>Tête d’otage</i> , 1945 .....	42
Figure 10. Kenneth Kemble, <i>Pequenas reglas de conducta</i> , 1958.....	46
Figure 11. Kenneth Kemble, <i>Untitled</i> , 1959 .....	47
Figure 12. Kenneth Kemble, <i>Paisaje Suburbano</i> , 1958.....	49
Figure 13. Exhibition Invitation for <i>Arte Destructivo</i> .....	50
Figure 14. Jorge Roiger, <i>Arte Destructivo</i> , 1961 .....	53
Figure 15. Marta Minujín, <i>Testimonio para una joven tumba</i> , 1960-1 .....	58
Figure 16. Marta Minujín, An example of her warped boxes, 1961-3 .....	60
Figure 17. Arman, <i>Poubelle (de Paul Wember)</i> , 1960 .....	61
Figure 18. Harry Shunk, Arman in Streets of Paris, 1960 .....	62
Figure 19. Harry Shunk, Pierre Restany firing at St. Phalle’s <i>Tirs</i> , 1961 .....	65
Figure 20. Niki de Saint Phalle, <i>Tir</i> , 1961 .....	65
Figure 21. Harry Shunk, Photo-documentation of <i>La Destrucción</i> , 1961.....	67

Figure 22. Photo from <i>Clarín</i> , Alberto Greco's <i>Monja Asesinada</i> , 1961.....	70
Figure 23. Alberto Greco, <i>Vivo-Dito (Paris, France)</i> , 1962.....	75
Figure 24. Alberto Greco, <i>Vivo-Dito (Piedralaves, Spain)</i> , 1963.....	80
Figure 25. Oscar Bony, Photo-documentation of Greco's <i>Mi Madrid Querido</i> , 1964 .....	82
Figure 26. Marta Minujín, <i>Revuélquese y viva!</i> , 1964 .....	89
Figure 27. Emilio Renart, <i>Integralismo Bio-cosmos n °3</i> , 1964 .....	89
Figure 28. Invitation to <i>Feria de la Ferias</i> , 1964.....	95
Figure 29. Olivetti Building.....	100
Figure 30. “Arte Vivo o arte de los vivos?”, <i>Atlántida</i> , August, 1965.....	108
Figure 31. “La Menesunda o el fin de los ismos”, <i>Leoplán</i> , June 16, 1965 .....	109
Figure 32. Marta Minujín, <i>El Batacazo</i> , 1965 .....	111
Figure 33. Allan Kaprow, <i>Calling</i> , 1965 .....	117
Figure 34. Claes Oldenburg, <i>Snapshots from the City</i> , 1960.....	118
Figure 35. Carlos Squirru, Edgardo Gimenez and Dalila Puzzovio, <i>Por que son tan geniales?</i> , 1965.....	121
Figure 36. Delia Cancela and Pablo Mesejean, <i>Love and Life</i> , 1965.....	127
Figure 37. Cover page of <i>Primera Plana</i> , August 23-29, 1966.....	132
Figure 38. George Segal, <i>Bus Driver</i> , 1962 .....	139
Figure 39. Brochure for <i>Acerca (de): “Happenings,”</i> 1966.....	152
Figure 40. Claes Oldenburg, <i>Autobodys</i> , 1963.....	160
Figure 41. Reproductions in Masotta's book <i>Happenings</i> , 1967 .....	162
Figure 42. Marta Minujín, <i>Simultaneidad y Simultaneidad</i> , 1966.....	179
Figure 43. “Happening para un Jabali Difunto,” <i>El Mundo</i> , August 22, 1966.....	182

Figure 44. “Happening” <i>El escarabajo de oro</i> no. 31-2, 1966 .....	184
Figure 45. Roberto Jacoby, <i>Mensaje en el Di Tella</i> , 1968 .....	193
Figure 46. Closure of Roberto Plate’s <i>El baño</i> , 1968 .....	195

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dematerialization in the Argentine Context: Experiments in the Avant-garde in the 1960s

by

Elize M. Mazadiego

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor W. Norman Bryson, Co-Chair  
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This study traces the development of happenings in Argentine art, through the work of Alberto Greco, Marta Minujín and Oscar Masotta, as both an artistic and socio-cultural imperative during the country's transformative 1960s. Their work presents a particular mode of dematerialization that experiments with gestures, events, experiences and mediations rather than conventional art forms and objects. Despite the artists' adoption of the term "happening" first coined by U.S. artist Allan Kaprow in 1958 and its relationship to the "internationalization" of Argentine art, the artists depart from



happenings' original tendencies. This dissertation examines the artists' innovative formal and theoretical formation in relation to local contexts and discourses, while also accounting for their various modes of translating and recontextualizing happenings and other international models.

While the works under discussion have received scholarly attention within a recent recuperation of postwar art in Latin America in the 1960s, they remain marginal to the development of Geometric and Informalist Abstraction and Conceptualism. Their position remains relatively obscure within the broader art historical narrative, in part as a function of its ambiguous status and ephemeral quality as artworks, but also stemming from a perceived frivolity. Traditionally, the works' more popular associations with levity and banality have overshadowed their critical potential. This dissertation addresses this disparity by critically examining and complicating the artists and their works' historical significance. I argue that these practices are a unique articulation of the artistic avant-garde in terms of rupture, social relevancy and political provocation that attempts to mediate the period's discontinuous process of modernization and progress following the overthrow of President Juan Perón. This study posits their artistic production, and more generally culture, as not merely reflective but productive, with a central concern stemming from an avant-garde strategy to shape people's perceptions and actions.

The dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from cultural studies, performance studies, philosophy, communication and media theory to address the intersection of postwar art with questions of modernization, notably mass society and culture, urban development, and new media technologies.

## **Introduction: In the Age of Discontinuity**

To begin speaking about the 1960s in Argentina would appear to be redundant considering the attention it has received by scholars in the various fields of art history, cultural studies, history, philosophy and literature and yet it is a period that continues to capture the interests of a new generation of researchers. In the specific area of art history this is evinced by a decade of publications dedicated to “reviving” Argentine art from the 60s, notably Andrea Giunta’s book *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties*, Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman’s publication *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde”* and Ines Katzenstein’s anthology of primary texts *Listen, Here, Now!: Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*. These examples must also be considered in relation to the numerous exhibitions and retrospectives that have contributed to a reconstruction of this period.<sup>1</sup> Many of these writers and curators have attempted to offer a more nuanced narrative to those previously written, while others present critical revisions to the canonical image of Latin American art, in what Mari Carmen Ramirez describes as moving “beyond the fantastic.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of U.S. scholars’ approach to studies in Argentine art and more broadly Latin American art, one is often in the position of translating a discourse that has been established in the region. My project is undeniably situated in all three positions. Also, stemming from this

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<sup>1</sup> Notable shows include: *Art of Contradictions: Pop, Realisms and Politics Brazil – Argentina 1960*. Curated by Rodrigo Alonso and Paulo Herkenhoff. Buenos Aires: PROA, 2012; *POP! La Consagración de la Primavera*. Curated by Maria José Herrera. Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2010; *Marta Minujín: Obras 1959-1989*. Curated by Victoria Noorthoorn. Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Mari Carmen Ramirez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic’: Framing Identity in US exhibitions of Latin American Art,” in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

scholarly foundation is my intention to weave together a notion of Argentine avant-garde art and a socio-political commitment, although in very specific terms. Yet I do this with a rather unlikely subject: the happening.

This dissertation is largely centered on the writings and works of three figures Alberto Greco, Marta Minujín and Oscar Masotta who represent the “happening-makers” in Argentina. With the exception of Greco, the artists subscribe to the term happening, first coined by Allan Kaprow in 1958 to refer to a hybrid form of collage performance. However the works imply a drift from the term’s original usage. Instead, the term defines “a blurred continuum of activity” – an emergent set of experimental art practices than a precise genre or movement.<sup>3</sup> What unites the artworks is an ephemeral character much aligned with Johanna Drucker’s notion of the “non-object”: artworks whose principle is a shift away from the object or final product.<sup>4</sup> Instead these works are activities, gestures, experiences, mediations and communication.<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest these works were definitively immaterial, but a premise of dematerialization underlies each of the artists’ aesthetic. At the same time I want to account for the artists’ various and distinct formulations.

While all of the studies I have mentioned so far acknowledge these artists and their works in Argentina’s history, they are given a cursory review, often relegated to a liminal position within the country’s development of an avant-garde art, international

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<sup>3</sup> Johanna Drucker, “Collaboration without Object(s) in the Early Happenings,” *Art Journal* 52, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Scholars have demonstrated the challenge in unifying this work under a single name or using a consistent language for this work, at times preferring to call these works actions or performances. See Deborah Cullen, ed., *Arte no es vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000*. (New York: Museo del Barrio. 2008).

project or more rigorous engagement with politics. On the one hand, this is partly reinforced by the liminality of the works as they occupy a space between established aesthetic mediums. On the other hand, this is a result of the challenge in consolidating a rapid succession of experiments in a narrow historical moment. A quick sample of art historical texts will illustrate this. Traditional narratives situate this history between Abstraction (Geometric and Informalist) and the politically oriented art practices of Tucumán Arde and Conceptual art. Art historian and critic Jorge Romero Brest first attempted to introduce these works within a historical framework in *Arte de la Argentina: Ultimas Décadas*, published in 1969. He historicizes Greco's Vivo-Dito as the "first happening," followed by Minujín, yet Masotta's happenings are not given any real consideration, suggesting that the scant public participation and media coverage made them inconsequential.<sup>6</sup> More recent narratives of these works tend to either emphasize their formal experimentation with artistic materials or their formal affinities with U.S. and European Pop art and happenings. For example Jorge Glusberg includes these works under the "cosmopolitan period" defined by a local artistic language working in parallel with international trends, whereas Jorge Lopez Anaya wants to call attention to the works' engagement with "el arte y la vida" (art and life) without much examination into what that means.<sup>7</sup> Recognition of these artworks for posing challenges to the limitations of art's formal conditions or dismantling the predominance of traditional mediums tends to place their value on the same axis as U.S. and European art trends, without much credit to these works innovative qualities. Furthermore, prevailing conceptions of happenings in

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<sup>6</sup> Jorge Romero Brest, *Arte en la Argentina: Ultimas Décadas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1969), 100.

<sup>7</sup> Jorge Glusberg, *Art in Argentina* (Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1986) and Jorge Lopez Anaya, *Ritos del Fin del Signo* (Buenos Aires: Eméce, 2003).

Argentina tend to privilege the youthful and celebratory character of these works, eclipsing their critical force.<sup>8</sup> One task of this dissertation is to reckon with these works both historically and formally in order to restore their criticality. I argue for exploring the unique character of the Argentine happening, grounded in a particular historical context that articulates an unconventional treatment of socio-political realities. As the dissertation will explain the basis for this treatment stems from a discourse that defines the avant-garde in terms of rupture, but also social relevancy and political provocation. How this is achieved however is through the various modes of the happening – whether that is meandering through a labyrinth of sensorial assaults or engaging in a communal space of absurd play or reading the newspaper to learn what you’ve read is false. In other words, the happening returns us to recurring tactics of the avant-garde whose imperative is to make an ideal form of communication, that either makes reality more transparent to the viewer or by shifting the viewer’s perception towards a critical awareness of their reality. For the artists in this dissertation, their various forms of the happening was that ideal model. The question is why? Why do these artists choose to engage the happening as a form of communicative exchange? And how do these issues respond to the specificities of the postwar and post-Perón era, and more specifically for my project, 1959-1966. The second task is to then to demonstrate how the happening is defined by two intersecting problems in Argentina: a fractured nation following Perón’s overthrow in conjunction with the process and conditions of modernization.

This argument responds to the historical gap that tends to overlook the

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<sup>8</sup> See Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

contributions these works made to the development of the more esteemed period of Conceptual art in Latin America. In Mari Carmen Ramirez' significant essay *Tactics for Thriving on Adversity* she claims that after the initial artistic revolution of the historical avant-garde movements, "conceptualism is the second major 20<sup>th</sup> century shift in the understanding and production of art."<sup>9</sup> Within this category are Latin America's contributions, yet she maintains a critical distinction between "western" tautological speculations and the periphery's ideological component. For Ramirez, the autonomous development of conceptual art in Latin America is measured by artists' recuperation of art's political purpose and antagonistic relationship to artistic conventions.<sup>10</sup> The art historical failure to account for happening's legacy in Argentina is not only a result of its ephemerality, but also attributed to the implicit socio-political dimensions that have yet to be fully addressed.<sup>11</sup>

### **An Exuberant Modernism, a deficient Modernization<sup>12</sup>**

Perón's ascendancy to political power began with his new position as director of the National Labor Office following the coup on June 4, 1943, turning it into a position as Secretary of Labor and Welfare. He then amassed popularity with labor unions, which led

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<sup>9</sup> Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980," in *Global Conceptualisms: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, ed. Luis Camnitzer, et al. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 53-68.

<sup>10</sup> This feature is what allows Ramirez to draw lines of continuity between historical and neo avant-garde art practices, while also making a distinction between "western" or "canonical" conceptual art and Latin America's "ideological conceptualism."

<sup>11</sup> This discussion is also in relationship to Alexander Alberro's genealogical trajectories that converge with Conceptualist Art. See Alexander Alberro. "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Nestor Garcia Canclini aptly described Latin America in terms of "an exuberant modernism with a deficient modernization." See Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Culture: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 65.

to his eventual occupation as war minister and vice president. By 1945 he was made President. Upon his election as President, Perón led his project to rapidly industrialize Argentina with a controlled mobilization of the country's working class, frequently referred to as the *descamisados* (the shirtless) or *las masas* (the masses). In combining capitalist growth with government relief programs and policies, Perón sought to improve Argentina's standard of living, especially for the working classes, in order to balance labor and capital and yield a unified nation.<sup>13</sup> His initiatives improved wages, housing conditions and social services. This radical restructuring entailed inverting long-standing social, political and economic hierarchies. Consequently, the population's elite was weakened by the once marginalized communities' socio-political gains. These shifts were increasingly made visible as Buenos Aires swelled with immigrants from the country's provinces, a phenomenon that was made visible during Perón's frequent mass demonstrations. A standard feature of Perón's presidency, both Juan and Evita Perón would give speeches to a mass body of largely the working class who gathered in the Plaza de Mayo annually on October 17<sup>th</sup> to commemorate Perón's presidency and May 1<sup>st</sup> for International Worker's Day (Figure 1).

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<sup>13</sup> The importance of a peacefully unified nation stemmed from an underlying panic that postwar economic instability could escalate into social unrest and civil war.



Figure 1. Cornell Capa, *Pro-Peronist Rally*, 1955

A look at the contemporary literature reveals the polarized climate, often in terms of the elite's feelings of discontent and anxiety associated with the changes. One such example is Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares' 1947 short story *La Fiesta del Monstruo* (The Monster's Party) that portrays the Perónist masses as a barbaric incursion on the city.<sup>14</sup> The story traces the journey of a Perónist supporter with his friends from

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<sup>14</sup> The manuscript was first circulated until its actual publication in 1955 in *Marcha*, a weekly periodical from Montevideo, Uruguay.



the town of Tolosa on the outskirts of Buenos Aires to the city's Plaza de Mayo to participate in the October 17th mass demonstration – an annual national holiday commemorating Perón's election in 1946. Along the way, the demonstrators pick up other supporters from various working-class provinces, chaotically disrupting the city's order with crude and destructive antics. Their behavior becomes increasingly violent as they approach the city center: first graffitiing walls, then dismantling a bus and setting it ablaze and finally stoning a man to death because he refused to salute a photo of the “monster” – Perón. This story illustrates the popular perception among Perón's opposition that the redefinition of Buenos Aires was more like an invasion of “uncultured masses.”<sup>15</sup> In addition, Perón's authoritarian tendencies to quiet his opposition, coupled with a radical nationalism further antagonized his critics.

As we see with the example of the mass demonstration, Perón used political rituals to mobilize popular support. The organized mass body was a main source of his legitimacy as he created an image of direct contact with people while also using the image to reinforce his power and influence towards his opponents. While these mechanisms were aimed at soliciting active political participation, another strategy was to achieve “passive consensus” in what Mariano Ben Plotkin calls the “Perónization” of various aspects of daily life and popular culture.<sup>16</sup> Essentially the government harnessed established mass cultural forms that first emerged in the 1920s and 30s with the development of the radio, cinema, and the popular press for their own political agenda.

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<sup>15</sup> Laura Podalsky, *Specular City: Transforming culture, consumption and space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana Es San Perón: A Cultural History of Peron's Argentina*, trans. Keith Zahniser (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 135.

More specifically, communicative strategies were employed with official advertising on the radio and printed media, while also shaping the contents of movies. Popular culture in particular was critical to Perón's success as he liberally borrowed cultural references easily identified by the working class, most notably tango lyrics or popular expressions in *lunfardo* – an idiom once associated with the working-classes. Scholars maintain that Perón's appropriation of discursive elements that circulated in mass culture – a form of “cultural popularism” – was essential to constructing a Perónist identity. As Matthew B. Karush argues “Populism in Argentina was not merely a byproduct of industrialization or a reflection of labor politics; it was also the outcome of a particular pattern of mass cultural development.”<sup>17</sup> Given this context, I position the collective body and popular consciousness of “the masses” as a central motif in the cultural imaginary after Perón's fall. Furthermore, I argue that Perón's treatment of culture is a model that a new generation of cultural producers and intellectuals will negotiate, in their interest to forge an alliance with the same audiences interpellated by Perón.

My dissertation begins with the last years of Perón before the coup that would overthrow him and into the *Revolución Libertadora* (Liberating Revolution). Argentina's road to modernization would take a different form under the new leaders whose declared objective was to rebuild a nation under a “democratic coexistence.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, modernization meant adjusting the economy by opening it up to foreign capital. Under President Frondizi, between 1958-1962, the economic plan *desarrollismo*

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew B. Karush, “Populism, Melodrama and the Market: The mass cultural origins of Peronism,” in *The new cultural history of Peronism: Power and Identity in Mid-Twentieth Century Argentina*, ed. Matthew B. Karush and Oscar Chamosa (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Luis Alberto Romero, *A history of Argentina in the Twentieth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 132.

(developmentalism) stressed deepening the country's partnership with multi-national investment and industrial promotion in the steel, automobile, energy, and oil industries.<sup>19</sup> This economic expansion was made visible by the material changes in the city. Despite a sense of growth and development, this was thwarted by the country's political instability. The series of short-lived presidencies were repeated attempts at democracy and economic modernization, yet consistent reminders of the country's inability to renew and regenerate. Underlying this period is a contradiction between a national and modern project that is deeply precarious, always on the verge of political collapse and yet committed and excited about change and progress. In Luis Alberto Romero's historical analysis of the period, he largely measures the country's social developments by the increased number of migrants to Buenos Aires, who were drawn to the city's urban attractions and job opportunities. What set this wave of migration apart was the way in which the migrants were integrated into the city. Romero states, the new contingents of the middle class transformed the original image of the masses: "the migration formed part of the social process of Argentina's era of expansion, of constant incorporation of new contingents of humanity into the benefits of progress, strengthened by the spread of mass communications."<sup>20</sup> The discrepancies of modernization that I have roughly sketched here functions as the socio-political backdrop for the story that I am telling.

Although this dissertation claims to speak about an Argentine art, the majority of the artists and events I examine are concentrated in the capital of Buenos Aires. This means that the artistic production that occurred in other major Argentine cities, such as

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

Cordoba, Rosario and San Miguel de Tucumán are not represented in this project.

Although Buenos Aires does not represent the diversity of Argentina, in the late 50s and into the 60s forty percent of the country's population resided in the capital. Furthermore, the city was the symbolic center of the country's modernization in addition to being the nucleus of the artistic avant-garde. Buenos Aires was the contested site during the passage from a Perónist past to a Post-Perón future, with its changed conditions reflective of the nation: utopian (promising and expanding) and a failure (fragmented and discontinuous). The city does not simply function as a stage to the artistic practices I explore in this dissertation, but acts as a main trope.

In Beatriz Sarlo's book *Las Batallas de las Ideas*, she writes "a central preoccupation [of this period] was the definition of key agents in the configuration of modern Argentina."<sup>21</sup> While this study argues for artist's importance in this configuration, I consider this in conjunction with the emergent intellectual field to draw potential points of intersection. This is exemplified in the figure of Oscar Masotta.<sup>22</sup> The works by Sarlo, Oscar Terán and Silvia Segal identify Masotta and the progressive

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<sup>21</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, *La Batalla de las ideas: 1943-1973* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1991), 89.

<sup>22</sup> Scholars' reflections focus on Masotta's literary criticism in the 1950s or his importation of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the late 1960s and 70s, leaving his texts on art and his artistic experiments in the shadows. Even in the field of art history scholars' historicization of 1960s Argentine art generally overlook his contributions or assign him a minor role. Only recently scholars have started to assert Masotta's importance. See Oscar Masotta, *Revolución en el Arte: pop art, happenings y arte de los medios en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2004); Ines Katzenstein, ed., *Listen, Here, Now!: Argentina Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004); Olivier Debroise, "Looking at the Sky in Buenos Aires," in *Getty Research Journal* 1, Thomas W. Gaehtgens and Katja Zelljadt, ed. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2009), 127-136; Daniel R. Quiles, "Between code and message: Argentine conceptual art, 1966-1976" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2010).

intellectual environment as a critical current in Argentina's modernization.<sup>23</sup> Terán and Sigal's narratives draw the limits of modernization with the 1966 coup that put General Oganía in power and the *Noche de los Bastones Largos* (Night of the Long Batons) directed at suppressing this particular community.<sup>24</sup> In Terán's terms, the "bloqueo tradicionalista" (traditionalist block) provoked the political radicalization of this sector and formation of Argentina's new left. Art historians such as Andrea Giunta and Ana Longoni note a similar shift in the artistic field in 1968 with the events: *Experiencias '68* and *Tucumán Arde*. As Longoni and Mariano Mestman write, Tucumán Arde was the "final, lucid attempt at crystallizing the "artistic" avant-garde and the "political" avant-garde as terms not subordinate to one another."<sup>25</sup> Rather than look at the definitive break from artistic institutions as the politicization of the artistic avant-garde I argue that artists were implicitly addressing the internal conflicts of their society and the narratives of modernity before these examples, while still asking questions about the conditions of art making in the 1960s.

Despite my intention to situate the happenings within a national experience of modernity, the inevitable question of Argentina's internationalism must be addressed. Andrea Giunta's seminal book dedicated to the topic maps out a network of institutions

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<sup>23</sup> See Silvia Segal, *Intelectuales y poder en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Punto Sur, 1991) and Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesentas: La formación de la nueva izquierda intelectual en la Argentina 1956-1966* (Buenos Aires: Punto Sur, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> On June 22, 1966 police burst into several departments of the University of Buenos Aires, notably philosophy, literature and the social sciences, violently hitting nearly 400 students and professors before detaining them. This event marks the end of the university's autonomy and the subsequent firing of professors, among the victims of the repression was Oscar Masotta who no longer held his position as a researcher in the Centro de Estudios Superiores de Arte, which he co-founded with architectu César Janello.

<sup>25</sup> Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, "After Pop, We Dematerialize: Oscar Masotta, Happenings and Media Art at the Beginnings of Conceptualism," in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now*, 169.

and artists that “internationalized” the art of this period, identifying the various permutations of the project and its meaning over the course of the late 1950s and into the 60s. She argues that internationalism was a strategy in which Argentina’s artistic field inscribed themselves within a broader art world, while also advancing the country’s cultural modernization. In the case of artists, she writes:

Given the new availability of options implied by the openness [following Perón] toward the international world and the liberty to establish and publicly confront its programs, artists began, almost compulsively, to import and translate the poetics of the postwar period.<sup>26</sup>

My dissertation directly responds and expands on this position by performing a closer reading of the artists Greco, Minujín and Masotta who were “notorious” for their adoption of external models. I wish to enrich the initial gloss that identifies a dialogue between these artists and French Nouveau Realism, U.S. Pop and happenings, but doesn’t interrogate their particular mode of translation. Additionally, I argue that their import was a strategy that goes beyond the appearance of cultural modernization defined by “openness to the international world.” Here, I take up Nestor Garcia Canclini’s call to explain the specific social processes that nourish their “adoptions.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, why were happenings particularly suited for an Argentine avant-garde art or relevant to the needs of an Argentine audience?

The internal debate within the field of Latin American art continues to negotiate the actual dialogue between the distinct geographic poles of the “center” and “periphery.” Often the issue revolves around assertions against Latin America’s belatedness or a loss

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<sup>26</sup> Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 85.

<sup>27</sup> Canclini, *Hybrid Strategies*, 50.

of authenticity. With the increasing amount of scholarly attention paid to global art histories, interested in tracing “geographies of art,” new methods have emerged aimed at decentering modernism.<sup>28</sup> Martin Puchner contends “one should not think of modernization as a single process or period that gave rise to one historically delimited form of radical modernism, but rather as different waves of modernization, each bringing with it new avant-gardes.”<sup>29</sup> The example of Partha Mitter’s work asks us to rethink analytic terms such as originality, influence and derivation in the construction of modern art history.<sup>30</sup> Curator of postwar Latin American art Mari Carmen Ramirez makes an attempt with a hermeneutic strategy of the “constellation.” This construct, as it is used in the exhibition *Inverted Utopias*, “randomly connects luminous points that have no intrinsic relationship to one another, yet whose primary function lies in their potential to orient travelers in the exploration of vast territories.”<sup>31</sup> Ramirez contends this model allows for a diachronic, yet non-chronological reading in order to “tell another story of Modernism.”<sup>32</sup>

The methods I employ attempt to transcend the discussion of derivation or originality in order to discuss the actual exchanges that occurred transnationally.

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<sup>28</sup> See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a geography of art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, manifestos and the avant-gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> Partha Mitter, “Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde from the Periphery,” *Art Bulletin* 90 no. 4 (Dec. 2008): 531-548. See also Kobena Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Mari Carmen Ramirez, “The Displacement of Utopias,” in *Versions and Inversions: Perspectives on Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, ed. Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramirez (New Haven: Yale Press, 2006), 127.

<sup>32</sup> In addition to Ramirez is Andrea Giunta, “Strategies of Modernity in Latin America,” in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism in Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: InIVA, 1995), 53-66.

Ultimately I situate Argentina's happenings within the international context of its period, examining what stems from these "cultural contact zones" and what sort of strategies of translation and recontextualization develop.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, I am interested in exploring how Argentina's approach to the happening opens up possible reconsiderations of Nouveau Realism, Pop and happenings. For example, can we conceive of Argentina's remote location as enabling a critical distance that allowed artists to explore the limits of the genre? The example of Masotta's *Sobre Happenings* certainly presents an interesting form of reading from the periphery that produces one of the earliest restagings of happenings.

A study of Masotta's work also renews the heated debate on the genesis of "dematerialization" in the 1960s. Oscar Masotta's lecture and essay *Déspues del Pop: Nosotros Desmaterializamos* (After Pop: We dematerialize) introduces the term in 1967 to describe *Arte de los Medios* (Media art) "social" materiality or the transmission of immaterial flows of mass media information and communication as artistic material, which anticipates U.S. critic and curator Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler's 1968 essay on Conceptual Art as "a process of dematerialization, or a de-emphasis on material aspects."<sup>34</sup> In 2001 the Argentine magazine *Ramona: Revista de Artes Visuales*, an art project by artist Roberto Jacoby, dedicated an issue to correcting the assumption that innovation takes place in the center and is disseminated to the periphery. Rather Jacoby argues for a re-evaluation of the cultural encounter and potential cross-fertilization that

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Six Years of Dematerialization of the art object form 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 5.



occurred during Lippard's trip to Argentina in 1968, suggesting that Lippard came in contact with, and potentially adopted Masotta's concept – a concept that was taken from Russian artist El Lissitzky's 1927 essay *The Future of the Book*.<sup>35</sup> The debate over the term's origin and influence, and its implications on the first Conceptual artworks is not an urgent question in this project. Rather “dematerialization” is fundamental to understanding a key feature of Argentina's avant-garde and interest in happenings. As my project will argue dematerialization is a generative process and ritual that obsolesces artistic models and artistic materials. The motif extends from a metamorphosis of communication that is provoked by changes in the mass media in 1960s Argentina – an element that defines Masotta's experience of modernization – yet aptly describes what El Lissitzky claims is “the mark of our epoch.” Although El Lissitzky was referring to 1926, Masotta recovers a fragment from his essay to illustrate the current tension between Argentina's modernization and progress that is contingent on a dissolution of the past.

## **Chapters**

The first chapter introduces the postwar avant-garde project in Argentina, tracing its original ambition and pivotal shift at the moment in which the President Juan Perón was overthrown in a coup d'état. It explores the incessant drive for innovation and experimentation, positioning the formation of new art forms: *Vivo-Dito* and happenings. The artists that emerge in the wake of Argentina's political transition are the same who open up a transnational network that fosters the country's internationalism. While this project is, in part, a more nuanced study of Argentina's dialogue with art capitals Paris

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<sup>35</sup> Roberto Jacoby, “Después de todo, nosotros desmaterializamos,” *Ramona* 9,10 (Dec. 2000-March 2001): 34-35.

and New York, this chapter takes this relationship as a basis to discuss the subsequent transport and translation of forms and ideas.

Chapter two explores the development of happenings as an historical necessity in Argentina and the resonances between this new artistic language and the avant-garde strategy to manifest the future. This period epitomizes the fervor associated with a post-Perón nation and anxieties about the instability of the transition. In this context, I argue for a reading of the genre as a form that uniquely represents the experience of modernity in Argentina and an arena to begin reshaping it. At the intersection of this ambition is the artists' negotiation between vanguard and popular culture.

The third chapter focuses on the intellectual activities of Oscar Masotta in the development and end of the happening that attempts to complete the avant-garde project. At the intersection of Masotta's interests in Structuralism, semiotics and the visual arts is a critique of current cultural production and a strategy for recuperating a more radical, socially-engaged practice that is relevant to their modern phenomena characterized by mass society, mass culture and communication. His critical position serves as subtext to his own, but brief artistic production and the group Arte de los Medios's Anti-happening. I argue that their process of negating the happening simultaneously entails the end point in Argentina's progressive dematerialization of art forms and entry into direct political action.

## Chapter 1: The Aesthetics of Negation

In 1967, at the height of Argentina's experiment in avant-garde art practices, critic and occasional artist Oscar Masotta reflected on the recurring problematic of defining the avant-garde in his lecture *Después del Pop: Nosotros Dematerializamos* (After Pop, We Dematerialize). He states,

The problem arises when one tries to define what the avant-garde consists of. Although it is not difficult, I will not attempt that definition here. More than offering definitions, my intention now is to give some account of events and complete the account with a few indications and some reflections. I will say that an avant-garde work must have at least these four properties...<sup>36</sup>

Among these four criteria is firstly the need for an artwork to understand itself within an art historical discourse and genealogy. Secondly, the avant-garde must alternately open up a new range of aesthetic possibilities and radically “negate something” in the way that the happenings seemingly cancel out painting or theatre.<sup>37</sup> More precisely, his third and last point argues that there exist latent qualities within painting and theatre that generate a negation of itself; thereby producing an intrinsic relationship between the negated genre and the new artistic language, yet one that effectively challenges the limits of traditional

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<sup>36</sup> Oscar Masotta, “Después del *Pop*: Nosotros Desmaterializamos,” in *Consciencia y Estructura* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia Editora, 2010), 281-2.

<sup>37</sup> Masotta cites Allan Kaprow's essay “Experimental Art,” originally published in *Art News* (March 1966) and Michael Kirby's “The New Theatre” in *TDR* (Winter 1965). Masotta's reading of both essays lends to his own concept of “negation” as deliberately effacing its artistic precedents. For example, the basis of Kaprow's essay is the distinction between modern avant-garde art and experimental art on the basis that the former is a developmental process whereas the latter truly broke from any historical frame of reference. Experimentalism is a complete “negation” (also described in terms of erasure, cancellation and renunciation) rather than a succession of past or current artistic practices.

genres.<sup>38</sup> On the basis of these criteria, the then-popular participatory events known as “happenings” would seem to constitute a manifestation of the avant-garde until presented with its antithesis known as the “Anti-happening” or more appropriately *Arte de los Medios* (Art of Mass Communications Media). Masotta’s argument is that this emerging artistic activity represents a version of Argentina’s avant-garde art as it inverts the structure of the happening to produce a new genre of work made of information. Masotta explains,

The “material” (“immaterial,” “invisible”) with which informational works of this type are made is none other than the processes, the results, the facts, and/or the phenomena of information set off by the mass information media.<sup>39</sup>

According to Masotta, media being radio, television, newspapers, and magazines operated as a catalyst by which the work’s material – its communication – is generated, and hence a type of dematerialization of the artwork.<sup>40</sup>

I foreground Masotta’s intervention because it demonstrates the coincidence of two broader preoccupations within Argentina’s artistic avant-garde: the need to define what is avant-garde art, and the fact that avant-garde art came to be defined in terms of both rupture from art’s past and dissolution of the material art object into immaterial forms of art.

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<sup>38</sup> Given this definition, Masotta finds only a handful of veritable artists of the avant-garde; among them are John Cage, Yves Klein, Allan Kaprow, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenburg, Roy Lichtenstein and Marcel Duchamp.

<sup>39</sup> Masotta, “Después del *Pop*,” 283.

<sup>40</sup> Masotta’s use of the term “dematerialization” extends from El Lissitzky’s essay *The Future of the Book* (1926) republished in *The New Left Review* 41 (1967): 39-44. Masotta opens his essay with a quote from Lissitzky who introduces dematerialization as an increasing characteristic of his period. More specifically Lissitzky makes reference to the encroaching effect new media technologies like the telephone and radio had on material forms of communication such as books and letters. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The question of what constitutes an Argentine avant-garde art reemerged in the wake of the country's reorientation towards change following the deposition of President Juan Domingo Perón in 1955. Of course the specifics of change vary across social, political and cultural fields, but together they shared a common orientation towards progressive change that set Argentina on an identifiably different course. Based on the popular discourse that circulated in contemporary newspapers and magazines during this transitional period, Perón's government was uniformly represented as dictatorial, provincial and populist that stifled growth on all fronts, especially in arts and culture.<sup>41</sup> One such example is the magazine *Sur* supported by writer and intellectual Victoria Ocampo. From the start of the magazine in 1931, the writers and editors imagined it as a bridge between Argentina and Europe.<sup>42</sup> However they felt their cultural connections became restricted under Perón. With the end of Perón, *Sur* published issue number 237 titled "*Por la reconstrucción nacional*" (For National Reconstruction). Much like the artists and intellectuals within the visual arts, the literary magazine reasserted free creative production and international engagement, which would subsequently generate a new and superior art in Argentina.<sup>43</sup>

These ideals took shape in a series of state initiatives that established art historian and critic Jorge Romero Brest as the new director of Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA), which led to exhibitions of local artists abroad and international artists in Argentina. The first example is in 1957 with the exhibition *Arte moderno en Brasil* at the

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<sup>41</sup> See Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*.

<sup>42</sup> *Sur* was modeled after the French literary magazine *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

<sup>43</sup> John King recognizes 'freedom and good literature' as key terms in *Sur*'s projection of a post-Peron Argentina. See John King, "Towards a Reading of the Argentine Literary Magazine *Sur*," *Latin American Research Review* 16 no. 2 (1981): 57-78. While the terms 'novelty youth and internationalism' are identified by Andrea Giunta in *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*.

revitalized MNBA. To follow was the plan to build the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (MAMbA) with the director Rafael Squirru and in 1958 the foundation of the private Instituto Torcuato Di Tella.<sup>44</sup>

These new conditions were just one effort within a larger system that set its sights toward a new generation of art within Argentina. The question of what was ‘new’ within art was rather ambiguous or yet undefined, leaving the term open for numerous interpretations.<sup>45</sup> This chapter explores the onset of questions and proposals that sought to determine Argentina’s paradigmatic shift towards a new art and vision of a modern future.

This narrative however begins with artists, working as early as 1944, who already expressed ambitions to bring forth an art practice relevant to their modern age. This chapter begins by introducing Concrete artists’ assertions coupled with their abstract forms at the end of Perón’s presidency as laying a foundation for an avant-garde in Argentina. The overthrow of Perón however created a context that catalyzed the artistic sector to develop work that was radically different. What ensued was a will to break from notions of the past and tradition, which abstraction quickly represented.

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<sup>44</sup> The Institute Di Tella was founded by Guido Di Tella on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his father’s death, Torcuato Di Tella, the founder of the successful manufacturing company Siam Di Tella. The Institute was initially started as a program in independent research within the arts and social sciences, but any actual programming didn’t begin until 1960 when the Institute organized itself in the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires and produced its first exhibit. See John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Asunto Impreso Ediciones, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Scholar Andrea Giunta’s *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentina Art in the Sixties* points to the range of projects produced by a network of artists, critics and institutions to internationalize Argentine art of this period. While the “new” was indeed synonymous with artistic models abroad, this chapter specifically addresses the transnational points of contact and exchange between artists and critics.

This rupture is first measured in an analysis of the term “arte nuevo,” which emerges as a contested construct, that from its start generates a rapid succession of genres in a perpetual search for artistic novelty. My argument here is that this permanent state of obsolescence becomes a definitive characteristic of Argentina’s avant-garde. This first chapter considers selected works of two specific artists, Marta Minujín and Alberto Greco, while seeking to explain the dissolution of painting and emergence of a dematerialized art form within a postwar internationalism.

### **Madí and Arte-Concreto Invención**

In the summer of 1944 a group of Argentine and Uruguayan artists published the first and only issue of the magazine *Arturo: Revista de Arte Abstracto* (Arturo: Magazine of Abstract Art).<sup>46</sup> Abstraction up until this publication was largely a remnant of Argentina’s first foray into an avant-garde practice, exemplified in the work of Emilio Pettoruti, Xul Solar, Juan del Prete, Pablo Curatella Manes and Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres Garcia.<sup>47</sup> Scholars largely attribute Joaquín Torres-Garcia with fomenting abstraction in Uruguay and Latin America after his return from Europe in 1934. More specifically, Torres-Garcia’s exposure to European modernist trends led to his formulation of the concept “Constructive Universalism,” which synthesized formal elements from Cubism, Neoplasticism and pre-Columbian imagery as a means to produce a “socially functional art” (Figure 2).<sup>48</sup> The dissemination of his ideology spread

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<sup>46</sup> Among the artists were Carmelo Ardén Quin, Rhod Rothfuss, Tomas Maldonado, Edgar Bailey, Gyula Kosice and Lidy Prati.

<sup>47</sup> In each case the artist returned to Argentina, except for Torres-Garcia who returned to Uruguay, after traveling to Europe where they became influenced by Italian Futurism, Cubism, Neoplasticism,

<sup>48</sup> Joaquín Torres-Garcia, *La Escuela del Sur* (Montevideo: 1955) in *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, ed. Dawn Ades (London: Yale University Press, 1989), 321-22.

throughout Latin America via his weekly radio lectures, the publication of *Circulo y Cuadrado* and the direct contact he had with a number of young artists in Latin America. Among them were his pupils, and eventual editors of journal *Arturo* Arden Quin and Rhod Rothfuss.<sup>49</sup> Torres-Garcia's legacy features prominently in *Arturo* as a new generation of abstract artists echo his principles on geometric art's universality and socially transformative function.<sup>50</sup>

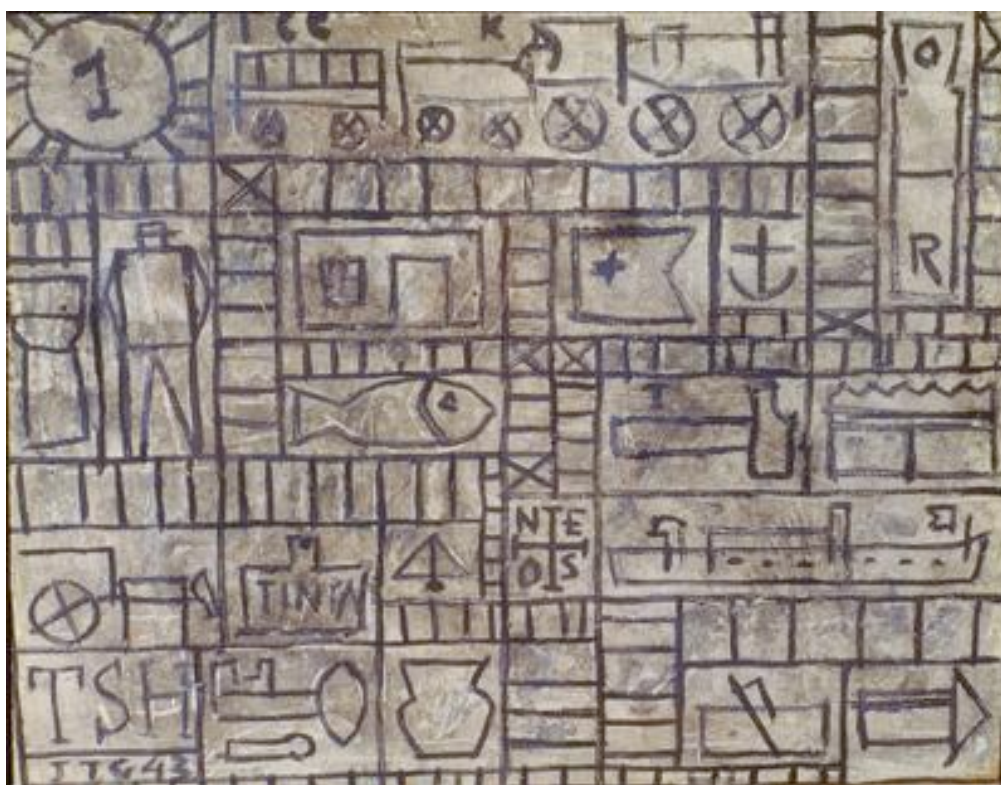


Figure 2. Joaquín Torres-Garcia, *Constructivist Composition*, 1943

<sup>49</sup> See Nelly Perrazo, *El Arte Concreto en la Argentina en la década del 40* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1983); Mari Carmen Ramirez, ed., *El Taller Torres-Garcia: The School of the South and its Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> An essay by Torres-Garcia was also featured in the journal. See Joaquín Torres-Garcia, "Con respecto a una futura creacion literaria," *Arturo: revista de artes abstractas* (Buenos Aires 1944): 23-4.



Unlike their predecessors, the creators of *Arturo* rejected any residual representation, expression or symbolism in a pursuit of “pure creation” and “invention.”<sup>51</sup> To emphasize this distinction, they identified their work as “concrete art,” a term first coined by Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg in 1930 and re-elaborated by Swiss artist Max Bill. In its original context van Doesburg defined concrete art as constructed from painting’s plastic elements – “planes and colours” – making no other reference than to itself.<sup>52</sup>

In *Arturo*’s collection of essays, poems and reproductions these terms loosely signified a purification of the image, void of any referents, and thus dependent on a completely inventive output. The journal included two definitions of “invention,” which further explains it as a process “to find or discover by means of ingenuity or meditation, or through sheer change, a new or unknown thing./To find, imagine, create, his/her work the poet or the artist.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, their strict negation of representation can be understood through their critique of Surrealism. According to the authors of *Arturo*,

[This] pure oneirism [Surrealism] will lead to ever greater idiocy, given that its sole source will be a constant systematic escapism, which, when analyzed, will become a closed intimacy, the fossilization of the personality.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ardén Quin, “Son las condiciones materiales de la sociedad, las que condicionan las superestructuras ideológicas,” *Arturo: revista de artes abstractas* (Buenos Aires 1944): 3-5.

<sup>52</sup> See “The Basis of Concrete Art,” in *Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 193.

<sup>53</sup> *Arturo: revista de artes abstractas* (Buenos Aires 1944): n.p. In contrast to this definition, scholar Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro argues that invention was an “absolute quality” rather than a method or process. See Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, “The Argentine avant-garde 1944-1950” (PhD Diss., University of Essex, 1996).

<sup>54</sup> “What *Arturo* stands for,” in *Art of Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, ed. Dawn Ades. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). 328-9.

Surrealism was perceived as a diversion from reality, whereas the artists' emphasis on the materiality of the painting and removal of references to nature was intended as a universal entry into an awareness of reality.

The latent contradictions found within the texts quickly manifested into the editorial teams' split across two groups: the Asociación de Arte Concreto-Invención and Grupo Madí. The former was led by Tomás Maldonado, Edgar Bailey, Lidy Prati and over a dozen new artists. Gyula Kosice, Rhod Rothfuss and Carmelo Ardén Quin formed the latter with a revolving network of writers, musicians, theatre performers and dancers.<sup>55</sup>

Both groups drafted manifestos outlining their differing postures. The *Manifiesto Invencionista* (Inventionist Manifesto), presented at their first exhibition at the Salón Peuser in March 1946, espoused the end of all representation in order to establish a new relationship to the visual object and by extension society.<sup>56</sup> A fundamental tenet to their philosophy was to counteract artifice as it perpetually obscured reality:

Representational art tends to muffle man's cognitive energy, distract him from his own power. The raw material of representational art has always been illusion  
 Illusion of space.  
 Illusion of expression.  
 Illusion of reality.  
 Illusion of movement.  
 A formidable mirage [...]

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<sup>55</sup> Rhod Rothfuss and Carmelo Arden Quin studied under Uruguayan Constructivist artist Joaquín Torres-García demonstrating the influences of the first wave of avant-garde artistic production in Latin America.

<sup>56</sup> The Salón Peuser was established in June 1944 as an extension of the owner Gilberto Knaak Peuser's existing space as bookstore and publishing company. See Talía Bermejo, "El Salón Peuser: Entre la Apuesta Comercial y El Afianzamiento de un Mercado Para el Arte en Buenos Aires," *Arte y Sociedad: Revista de Investigación* (September 2011), accessed February 10, 2013, <http://asri.eumed.net/0/tb.html>

[S]urround man with a direct relationship with things and not the fictions of things. To a precise aesthetic, a precise technique, the aesthetic function against “good taste...NEITHER SEARCH NOR FIND: INVENT.”<sup>57</sup>

The aims put forth by Arte Concreto-Invención were intended to have a social consequence, prompting their viewers to act against socio-political alienation and towards a new form of collectivity. This translated into the “coplanal arrangement” or “cut-out frame” which abandoned the traditional frame in an effort to integrate the artwork into its surrounding environment.<sup>58</sup> Raúl Lozza’s *Relieve no. 30*, composed of a free arrangement of painted geometric shapes connected by metal wire, integrates into the background wall, effectively eliminating the customary separation between the picture plane and its environment (Figure 3).

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<sup>57</sup> "La era artística de la ficción representativa toca a su fin," in *1ª Exposición de la Asociación Arte Concreto Invención*. (Buenos Aires: Salón Peuser, 1946).

<sup>58</sup> Rhod Rothfuss, "El marco: un problema de plástica actual," *Arturo: revista de artes abstractas* (Summer 1944): n.p.

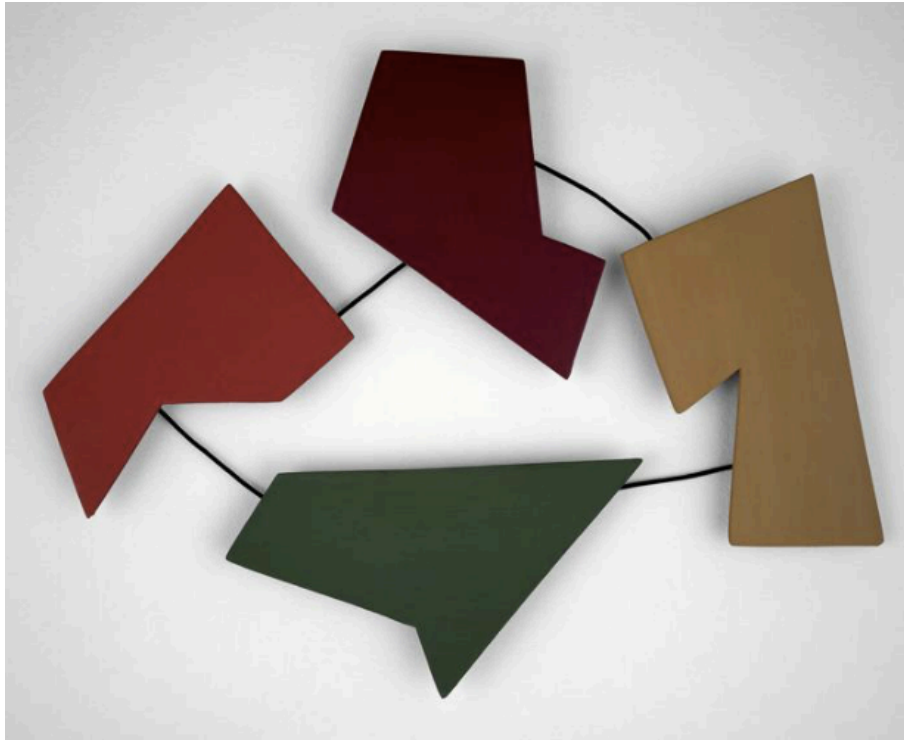


Figure 3. Raúl Lozza, *Relieve no. 30*, 1945

The *Manifiesto Madí* (Madí Manifesto) similarly coincided with their first exhibition, held at the Instituto Francés de Estudios Superiores in August 1946.<sup>59</sup> Signaling a break with past styles, they equally condemned figurative work, its relentless interference with reality, which impeded any potential for social transformation. In their own words, “[Madí] confirms man’s constant all-absorbing desire to invent and construct objects within absolute eternal human values, in his struggle to construct a new classless society...”<sup>60</sup> Unlike Arte Concreto-Invención, Madí emphatically eschewed static art forms for those that “contain presence, movable, dynamic arrangement.”<sup>61</sup> The mobility of structures across painting, sculpture, architecture and even theatre, seen in Gyula

<sup>59</sup> For further information on the groups see Perazzo, *El arte concreto en la Argentina*.

<sup>60</sup> “Madí Manifesto,” in Ades, *Art of Latin America: The Modern Era*, 330.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Kosice's *Royi* (*Articulated Sculpture*) and Diyi Laañ's *Articulated Madí Painting*, was another way to disrupt art's illusionistic quality (Figure 4 and 5). Movement yielded a new dimension of the object that was spatial, temporal and playfully interactive, bringing awareness to the present, concrete reality in which the work was situated.<sup>62</sup>



Figure 4. Gyula Kosice, *Royi* (*Articulated Sculpture*), 1944

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<sup>62</sup> Madi used the term “lúdica” to describe their work. See “MADÍ ha inventado el marco recortado e irregular,” Group manifesto and exhibition announcement (Bohemien Club, Galerías Pacífico, November 1946).

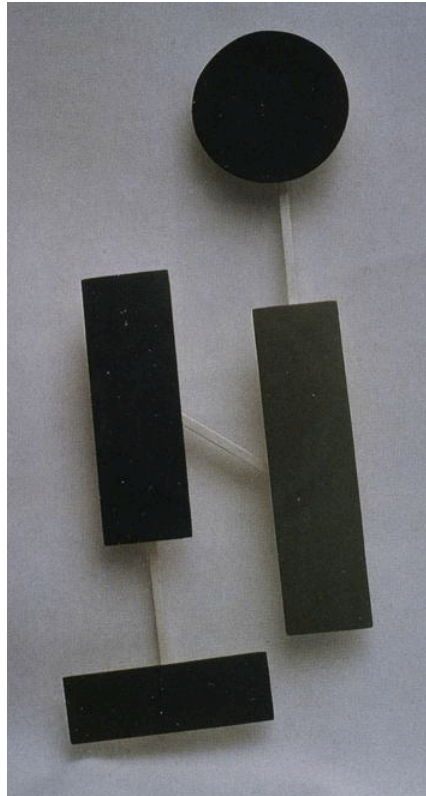


Figure 5. Diyi Laañ, *Articulated Madi Painting*, 1946

The development of Arte Concreto coincides with Lucio Fontana's *Manifiesto Blanco* (White Manifesto), co-authored in Argentina. The text, which advocated a new dynamic art made of spatial, changeable forms, points to the broad circulation of these ideas in Argentina.<sup>63</sup> Fontana, however, situates his text as a decisive response to the changing conditions brought on by postwar modernization, in what he described as an “era of mechanics:”

A change is demanded in the very essence and in the form. It is further demanded that painting, sculpture, poetry and music be superseded. An art is needed which is more coherent with exigencies of the new spirit.  
[...]

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<sup>63</sup> For more details on the Fontana and Argentina in this period see Dominique Liqueois, “Fontana, Argentina and Modernity,” in *Lucio Fontana* (Barcelona: Fundacio Caixa de Pensions, 1988).

Modern art finds itself now in a situation of transition that imposes a rupture with previous art, with the aim of opening the road to new conceptions. [...]

The ancient immobile images no longer satisfy the new man formed by the necessity of action and by the cohabitation with mechanics, which impose on him a constant dynamism.<sup>64</sup>

For Fontana the ensuing technological innovations required a new art, but the *Manifiesto Blanco* potentially orients us to the larger underlying issues at stake for many of these artists. These artists were in the midst of unprecedented change, most prominently Argentina's political reorganization coupled with postwar reconstruction abroad, both of which were gripped by a new wave of modernization.<sup>65</sup> In response, their artistic experiments sought to bear critically upon the issue of a new modern experience.

Scholar Martin Puchner's characterization of postwar modernity as a unique "temporality of breaks and new beginnings that nevertheless continue to be confronted with a past" captures essential aspects of the avant-garde's perpetual state of rupture and transition.<sup>66</sup> Despite their apparent differences, these manifestos come together to reveal a shared language and criterion of the postwar avant-garde. Articulating dissent, these texts agree that traditional art practices neglected to correspond to its present reality and thus required a radical break from conventions. In the example of Lucio Fontana, we see the literal destruction of painting as he physically punctures and cuts his canvases, while

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<sup>64</sup> See Lucio Fontana, "White Manifesto" in Ades, *Art of Latin America: The Modern Era*, 331-4. The manifesto was signed exclusively by his students at the Escuela Altamira, however Fontana is attributed as the author.

<sup>65</sup> Juan Domingo Perón as Secretary of Labor and Social Security had radically shifted labor policy in favor of unions and workers' rights, which ultimately led to his rising popularity and election as president in June 1946.

<sup>66</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of Revolution*, 7.

Madí and Arte Concreto-Invención challenged the integrity of the painting's original status as a two-dimensional pictorial representation (Figure 6).

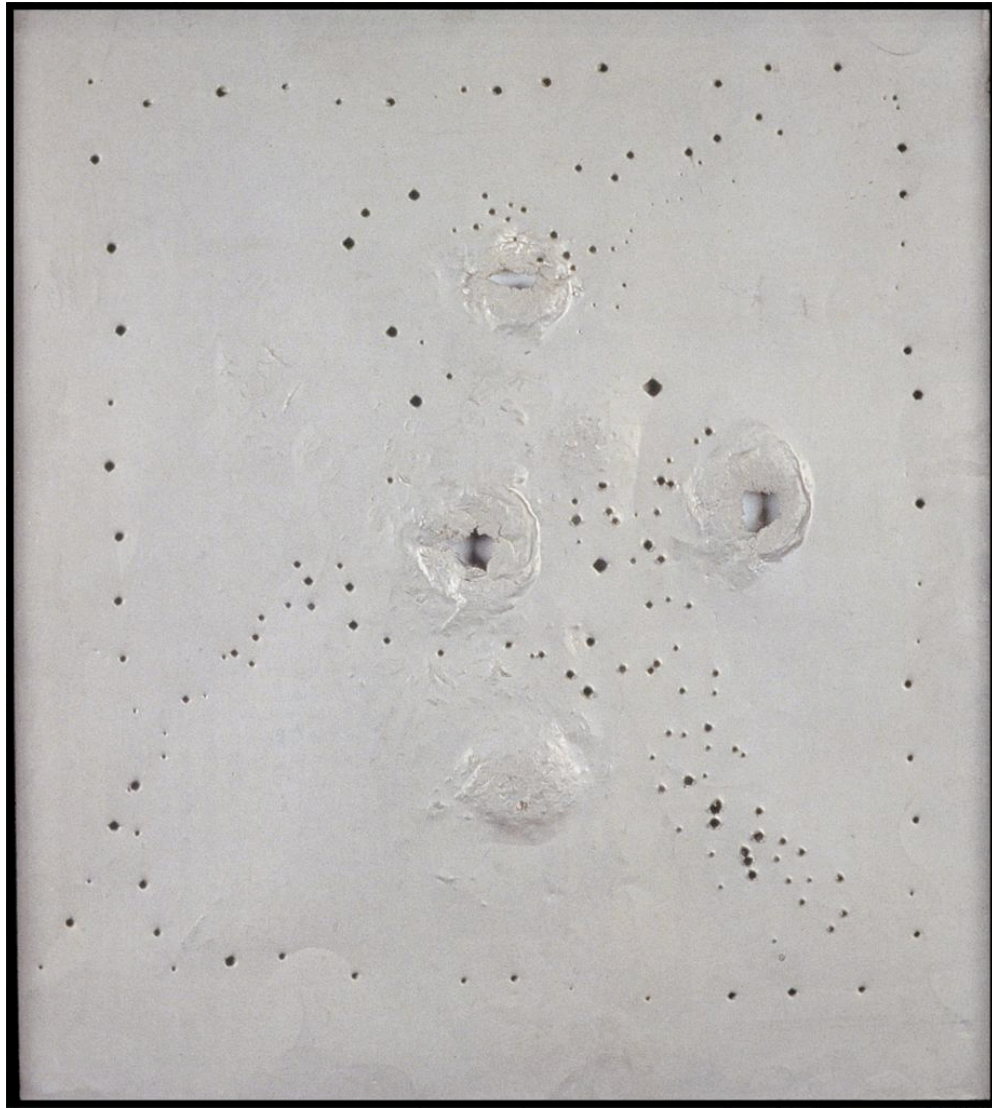


Figure 6. Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept*, 1950

Along with their synthesis of artistic disciplines, the artists' emphasis turned towards the material conditions of the object, movement and the surrounding environment, which again directed the viewer's attention towards their own concrete reality. Already a critical



component to the work of the Grupo Madí was a sense of the ludic, fostered through a basic mode of interaction and play between the viewer and artwork.<sup>67</sup> At stake were the artists' utopian ambitions to incite a profound transformation of society. The Asociación Arte-Concreto Invención, for example, clearly articulated their position as an oppositional force against a "decadent capitalist society" and "individualist absorption," with their primary aesthetic objective being a political one: "The creation of new objects of art that act and participate in the integral life of the people and that contribute to revolutionizing their existing condition..."<sup>68</sup>

As Puchner describes in his book *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, manifestos and the avant-gardes*, the "avant-garde manifesto," throughout its evolution, remained unequivocally tied to the socialist tradition, lending to its dual identity and function as an artistic and political document. Repeatedly the manifesto sought to "produce the arrival of the 'modern revolution'" as it alternately relinquished the past and ushered in the future.<sup>69</sup> In the long tradition of the manifesto in Argentina, Rafael Cippolini similarly recognizes the artists' rhetorical strategies as an instrument of destabilization and renewal:

Rather than establish a position, the manifesto seeks to establish an opposition. Often times to generate a scandal. Other times it generated a dogma. The former accelerated the chaos. The latter established an order.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> In the announcement of their 3<sup>rd</sup> exhibition, the grupo Madí claim to have created "plastica plural y lúdica," suggesting that the sense of play was located in the artworks' multiple possibilities and therefore the viewer's manipulation of the object.

<sup>68</sup> "MADÍ ha inventado el marco recortado e irregular," Group manifesto and exhibition announcement (Bohemien Club, Galerías Pacífico, November 1946).

<sup>69</sup> Puchner, *Poetry of Revolution*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Rafael Cippolini, *Manifestos Argentinos: Políticas de lo visual 1900-2000* (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editora, 2003), 17.

The significance of the specific manifestos discussed here is that they reveal a shared endeavor to destroy, which made way for a more positive program of new art that intended to be a more authentically real art. My argument here is that these texts construct a discourse, however vague and ambiguous, which echoes across the later transition into a post-Perón era, catalyzing subsequent experimental practices, repeatedly resurging while developing into different artistic expressions over the course of Argentina's post-Perón period.

### **Perón, Modernization and Abstraction**

The relationship between the Concrete artists and newly elected Perónist government wavered between antagonism and collaboration. The apparent hostility is exemplified in the vitriolic words voiced by Perón's Minister of Education Dr. Ivanissevich during the 1948 and 1949 National Salon. Referring to abstraction as a "morbid" and "perverse" art, Dr. Ivanissevich condemned it for its lack of classical beauty, typically found in Argentina's academic styles. The virtues of aesthetic beauty were an articulation of the nation's "doctrine of love, of perfection, of altruism," whereas abstraction was deemed a "moral aberration."<sup>71</sup> For this reason, he insisted that abstraction had no place in Argentina's cultural landscape, but both Madí and Arte-Concreto Invención were largely indifferent to Ivannissevich's negative assessment of their work. Indirectly, both artist groups tended to act in opposition to Perón as they collaborated with largely anti-Perónist entities including *Altamira: Escuela Libre de Artes Plasticas* (Altamira: Free School of Plastic Arts) and the *Teatro del Pueblo*

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<sup>71</sup> The article from *La Nación* (September 22, 1949) was reprinted in Gabriel Perez-Barreiro, "The Negation of all Melancholy," in *Argentina 1920-1994*, ed. David Elliott (The Museum of Modern Art: Oxford, 1994), 54.

(People's theater). Holding exhibitions there, these spaces were independently operated by artists and writers whose main objectives were to circumvent state jurisdiction and secure creative freedom.<sup>72</sup> More generally, the Concrete artists' attitudes towards Perón were elusive, at times vaguely criticizing Perón's government for their poor aesthetic choices, but never reaching a full indictment of the regime.<sup>73</sup>

However the polarizing effects largely generated by Ivanissevich faded by the 1950s, coinciding with his resignation. In 1952 at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, the government-organized exhibition *La Pintura y la Escultura Argentina de Este Siglo* (Argentine Painting and Sculpture from this Century) included Concrete artists. The comprehensive show sponsored by the General Offices for Culture and of the Ministry of Education situated abstraction at the end of a diverse history of Argentine art. Again in 1953 their work was selected as Argentina's representative works at the São Paulo Biennial, suggesting that both artists and government had reached a level of mutual acceptance.<sup>74</sup> The Perónist government in particular strategically modified its opinion of abstraction, giving credit to the style's modern and innovative tendencies.

In the fall of 1951 Argentina's first public television broadcast aired. In a version of *Sucesos Argentinos*, the country's cinema newsreel reported on the large-scale construction of the U.S. imported antenna on the Minister of Public Works' building.

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<sup>72</sup> The school was founded and organized by Gonzalo Losada, with the collaboration of art historian and critic Jorge Romero Brest, artist Lucio Fontana and Emilio Pettoruti.

<sup>73</sup> In the *Revista de Arte Concreto*, artists malign the Secretariat of Culture as "climbers of Christian guilt, who hate our art for being joyful, clear and constructive." While the *Arte Madi Universal* commented that "the last submission to the Venice Biennial has signified for Argentina a blatant negation of the new artistic values."

<sup>74</sup> Both art historians Maria Amalia Garcia and Andrea Giunta address these instances as evidence of increasing cooperation and appreciation. See Maria Amalia Garcia, *El arte abstracto: Intercambios culturales entre Argentina y Brasil* (Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2011) and Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*.

Shown suspended above Buenos Aires, the “tecnicos y obreros criollos” (criollo technicians and workers) collectively mounted the colossal structure as the accompanying narration spoke of a “new Argentina” (Figure 7).<sup>75</sup>



Figure 7. *Sucesos Argentinos*, Film still from “First Television Antenna Construction”, 1951

What emerges from the short film is a vision of Perón’s workers building a new, technologically advanced nation. To further emphasize this point, Perón’s administration marked the first public broadcast with televised coverage of the *Dia de la Lealtad* (Loyalty Day) ceremony.<sup>76</sup> On this occasion both Perón and his wife Evita delivered speeches to an impressive crowd at Plaza de Mayo in what cultural historian Mariano

<sup>75</sup> Radio director of state-run program Radio Belgrano Jaime Yankelovich imported the equipment from the United States. “Avanza la Television” *Sucesos Argentinos* 668, YouTube Video, 15:00, posted by TV Pública, Dec. 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7LIEBeim8I>

<sup>76</sup> Loyalty Day, annually commemorated October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1945 when unionized workers mobilized against the government’s imprisonment of Peron.

Ben Plotkin describes as an “annual ritual of communion between Perón and his people.”<sup>77</sup> The choice to inaugurate television’s arrival to Argentina with this event was again Perón staking claim to the country’s innovations as a symbol of their development.

In light of this context, concrete art’s relationship to the larger political apparatus reveals a growing tendency to prove Argentina’s participation in a global impetus towards progressive modernization. While industrialization and technological developments were part of this process, under Perón modernization also implied strict nationalism, state-directed capitalism and the mobilization of a working class. Under these conditions, the majority of Buenos Aires’ cultural field remained alienated and politically polarized by these chronic contradictions. Their position was assuaged by the coup d’état that ended Perón’s presidency on September 23, 1955. Known as the *Revolución Libertadora* (Liberatory Revolution), the newly installed military government and political transition was characterized as a liberatory act. What this entailed was a displacement of Perón’s legacy. Such examples of this include a government decree that prohibited any representations that featured Perón or Evita, going as far as covertly sequestering Evita’s embalmed body from the General Labor Confederation (CGT) office.<sup>78</sup> Various other expressions of this can be discussed in terms of the new liberalized economy and a process of democratization, but as Podalsky’s study reveals these political features were firmly aligned with a redefinition of Buenos Aires as a

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<sup>77</sup> Plotkin, *Mañana es San Peron*, 43.

<sup>78</sup> Following Evita Peron’s death in 1952, Peron intended Evita’s body to be displayed in a public monument when in 1955 the new authorities interrupted that plan by removing her body from its temporary location and burying it in a secret gravesite in Milan, Italy. The body was later recovered in 1971. See Podalsky, *Spectacular City*, 53.

“modern(izing) metropolis.”<sup>79</sup> Modernity, however, could no longer mean continuity with its immediate past and its perceived obscurity. In cultural terms, this meant undoing the closure on creative restraint, international isolation and socio-cultural belatedness towards a new, young generation that Brest claimed to “speak the free language of modernity.”<sup>80</sup>

As the art world regrouped in the post-Perón era, institutions, critics and artists organized a new, modern art for a new Argentina in terms of “novelty, youth and internationalism”.<sup>81</sup> Madí and Arte Concreto-Invención coincidentally dissolved in parallel with Perón’s government as the artists dispersed to pursue personal endeavors.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, existing practices were generally overlooked because they did not represent novel or youthful artistic trends, and its association with the recent past limited their appeal.

### **Arte Nuevo**

The term *Arte Nuevo* (New Art) clearly emerges from the transition away from Perón and all it represented at around 1955, but the actual production of an art that was inherently “new” comes with a break from the past into multiple parts and several directions. The ambiguous term was frequently employed throughout this period, often describing conflicting art practices that converged on a single point: opposition to traditional artistic styles, especially figurative art. Without any clear expression of what was new *Arte nuevo* simply implied artworks that were different and against current

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 58.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>82</sup> For example, Tomas Maldonado started teaching at Hochschule für Gestaltung in West Germany in 1954 and Gyula Kosice left for Paris in 1957 to promote Madi abroad which developed into Kinetic Art.

trends, generating a perennial quest for novelty. The significance of this term is in its capacity to describe the post-Perón period of the late 1950s and 60s as one that ultimately sought to distinguish itself as a new era and country, but could not reach a consensus on what would be representative of this change.

The most exemplary use of the term can be found in the formation of the Salón de Arte Nuevo in 1955. Arden Quin, co-founder of *Arturo* and the grupo Madí, organized the Salón with art critic Aldo Pellegrini and a year later coordinated a group of artists under the same name: *La Asociación de Arte Nuevo* (The Association of New Art). Reminiscent of Concrete art's principles, the group proposed to demystify the false claims propagated by figurative art through the dissemination of abstract art.<sup>83</sup> In the fourth edition of their annual exhibition, the Asociación produced a quasi-manifesto in support of non-figurative art as the new and latest artistic expression of form and reality, and thus representative of Argentina's exploration in *Arte nuevo*.<sup>84</sup> Considering Quin's involvement, it is no surprise that geometric abstraction dominated the field of non-figurative art, suggesting that Argentina's new art would be an evolution of Concrete art. But at the following year's exhibition a visible shift took place that reworked *Arte nuevo* in terms of precarious materiality and gestural expression.<sup>85</sup> Among the 35 artworks on exhibit Kenneth Kemble's collage *Tregua* was an untidy layering of oil paint, cut burlap and cloth on canvas (Figure 8). Its use of non-artistic materials coupled with a thick impasto of monochromatic colors echoed the stylistic tendencies of Art Informel,

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<sup>83</sup> Maria de los Angeles, *La Nostalgia de la Vanguardias en Argentina: La Aventura Concreta-MADI-Cinetica* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Klemm, 2000), 7.

<sup>84</sup> Sofía and Julián Althabe, "Presentación," in *4° Salón Arte Nuevo* (Buenos Aires: Galería Van Riel, 1958).

<sup>85</sup> The 5° Salón de Arte Nuevo took place at the Galería Van Riel.

Tachisme and Abstract Expressionism. Having recently returned to Buenos Aires from time spent in Europe and the United States, Kemble came in contact with the visceral work of Georges Mathieu, Wols, Willem de Koonig and Jackson Pollock, which evidently shaped his own artistic language.<sup>86</sup>



Figure 8. Kenneth Kemble, *Tregua*, 1957

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<sup>86</sup> According to Kemble's biography, the artist would have seen the exhibition *Véhérences confrontées*, curated by Michel Tapié, at Galerie Nina Dausset in Paris, March 1951. See López, *Ritos De Fin De Siglo*, 129-145.



Kemble's intervention in the Salón illustrates a passage that *Arte nuevo* took from the pure, clarity of geometric abstraction to Art Informel's crude, sullied canvases. In Aldo Pellegrini's forward to the exhibition catalog, the art critic similarly acknowledged the displacement of geometric abstraction, describing it as a turn from the "intellectual to the vital."<sup>87</sup> In a parallel exhibition at the Museo Municipal de Eduardo Sívori a group of eight artists inaugurated Informalism as a movement within the Buenos Aires art scene.<sup>88</sup> In art critic Hugo Parpagnoli's review of both exhibitions, Informalism is exemplified in Kenneth Kemble's collages' made with oxidized cans and pieces of wood, Alberto Greco's use of dirty plaster peeled from old walls or Olga Lopez's preference for carton, newspaper and wire.<sup>89</sup> Responding to Kemble's work, Parpagnoli interpreted his unconventional materials as an attempt to propose the aesthetic potential of trash. Accordingly, the art critic writes, "of course, these [works] should not be called paintings, but comfortably fit within a task...to discover new textures and expressively valorize any material anti-aesthetic."<sup>90</sup> Other critics perceived the predominantly mute brown and grayish colors mixed with non-artistic materials as an unfortunate turn towards a vulgar aesthetic. However given the current climate of artistic activity, these same works undeniably represented *Arte nuevo*'s need for novelty and experimentation.

In this way *Arte nuevo* leads the way into an *arte de la vanguardia* (avant-garde art) that by definition pushes the boundaries of the latest trend. As such *Arte nuevo* begins

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<sup>87</sup> Aldo Pellegrini, "[Al presentar la 6° exposición anual de ARTE NUEVO," in *Arte Nuevo 6° Salón anual* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Museo de Artes Plásticas Eduardo Sívori, 1960).

<sup>88</sup> Enrique Barilari, Alberto Greco, Kenneth Kemble, Olga Lopez, Mario Pucciarelli, Fernando Maza, Towas and Luis Wells present the exhibition *Movimiento Informalista*.

<sup>89</sup> Hugo Parpagnoli, "Arte nuevo y movimiento informalista," *La Prensa*, December 1, 1959.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

to operate as a term that needs to be fulfilled or realized, rather than a descriptive device or construct. Art historian Andrea Giunta similarly notes,

For Argentine institutions, the priority was to produce an artistic avant-garde and to become involved in the international scene and to do so they had to present an art that was different from what was already being offered as part of the repertoires of the main cultural centers – an art that was cutting edge [...] The project was not very well defined when the time came to deciding which images should present it. It meant offering all that could be considered new and, preferably, produced by young artists. The idea was that, out of all the forms that emerge from this climate of experimentation and adventure that had taken hold among artists of Buenos Aires, there was something key and original and different from what was being created in the traditional art centers.<sup>91</sup>

### **Informalismo**

L'art informel finds its origins in the somber aftermath of World War II and the Liberation of Paris in 1944. Shaken by the war's destructive force, European artists such as Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier and Wols produced intense works of dark monochrome palettes, expressive brushwork and *hautes pâtes*. Art critic Michel Tapié's 1952 book *Un Art Autre* bracketed these artists under the term "art of another kind", emphasizing its formless materiality and composition as a mode of emotional intensity and primordial impulse. These artists addressed the profound anxiety and malaise associated with an acute awareness of human existence's precariousness. In the example of *Otages* (Hostages), Fautrier loosely formed disembodied heads from dense layers of paper, chemicals and thick impasto in what art historian Serge Guilbaut describes as,

raw wounds, open for investigation in their beautiful display, but accompanied by an abstract type of repulsion, a nausea ever present

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<sup>91</sup> Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 13.

through association, through a process of painful contemporary connotations.<sup>92</sup>

Transcribed in the unformed, raw state of these works was the formation of the artist, individual self-awareness and the potential to reveal one's own reality, albeit a disturbing and unspeakable one (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Jean Fautrier, *Tête d'otage*, 1945

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<sup>92</sup> Serge Guilbaut. "Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick," in *Reconstructing Modernism in New York, Paris and Montreal: 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 58-9.

Another major component of their *art autre* was Dubuffet's championing of unrefined artistic production, a sort of anti-aesthetic based on his disavowal of painterly materials. In his application of mud, sand, asphalt and coal Dubuffet exalted the lowly matter of everyday existence to an artistic standard:

Mud, rubbish and dirt are man's companions all his life; shouldn't they be precious to him? And isn't one doing man a service to remind him of their beauty?<sup>93</sup>

From this context, several proposals expanded on Informalism's philosophical and technical elements generating their own nuanced languages.<sup>94</sup>

A number of formal affinities can be found as early as 1956 in Argentina with the work of Martha Peluffo and Josefina Robirosa. Although they did not explicitly identify themselves under Informalism their expressive artistic hand and incorporation of non-traditional materials signaled a turn within Abstraction. Similarly, the 1957 exhibition *Qué cosa es el coso* (What thing is the thing) featured a selection of paintings and collages produced with tar, flour and feathers.<sup>95</sup> Just two years later artists Enrique Balieri, Kenneth Kemble, Alberto Greco, Olga Lopez, Mario Puciarelli, Fernando Maza, Towas, Luis Alberto Wells and Estela Newberry establish Informalism as a movement in Argentina with the exhibition *Movimiento Informal* at the Museo Municipal de Eduardo Sívori and another show under the same name at the Galería Van Riel. Reviews of their second exhibition expressed an overall aversion towards the style, condemning its

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<sup>93</sup> Jean Dubuffet, "Rehabilitation de la boue," in *Aftermath: France 1945-1954: New Images of Man* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1982), 99-100.

<sup>94</sup> Aside from the different names that can describe variations of Informal art, such as Tachisme, Lyrical Abstraction, Gestural Abstraction and the North American Abstraction Expressionism. I am referring to the different regional developments that may have adopted the name such as in Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and Latin America.

<sup>95</sup> See Jorge Lopez Anaya, *Vanguardia Informalista Buenos Aires 1957-1965: Informalismo, Arte Destructivo, Arte Cosa*. (Buenos Aires: A. Sendros, 2003).

unintelligibility and excessive liberty with painterly techniques.<sup>96</sup> At stake for Parpagnoli was their relationship to the historical avant-garde. By situating their work as “documentation of incontrollable reactions” the critic points to the artists’ erratic gesture in relation to Surrealism’s automatism and Dada’s embrace of irrationality.<sup>97</sup> For critics Rafael Squirru and Jorge Romero Brest the same free, impulsive gesture was somehow a truthful account of experienced reality.<sup>98</sup> In anticipation of larger artistic developments to follow, Jorge Romero Brest reckoned Informalismo a “state of rebellion,” a “rupture of today’s man with that of yesterday, an essential change in a still uncertain present.”<sup>99</sup>

Within a climate of transformative change and experimentation, artists gathered under Informalismo as a point of departure from their current place within geometric abstraction. Given the impulse towards novelty fused with an international orientation, artists found in Informalism an aesthetic that took Argentine painting in new directions. For the critics who eagerly anticipated Argentina’s artistic renewal the abject dimension of Informalismo took painting too far into a gross display of materials and disregard for form. Yet, already by the Informalist exhibition at MNBA in 1960, Kemble critiqued the local movement’s “marked tendency towards prettiness.”<sup>100</sup> The works’ increasing lack of offensive force was an indication of an aestheticization of the trend, and thereby failed

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<sup>96</sup> See “Informalismo,” *Noticias gráficas*, July 23, 1959.

<sup>97</sup> Hugo Parpagnoli, “Pintura informal,” *La Prensa*, July 15, 1959.

<sup>98</sup> See Rafael Squirru, “Sobre el informalismo.” *Movimiento informalista* (Buenos Aires: Museo Municipal Eduardo Sívori, 1959), 5-12; Jorge Romero Brest, “Sobre el arte informal.” *del Arte: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine - t. v.*, July 1961, 9.

<sup>99</sup> Jorge Romero Brest, “Que es la pintura informal?” (1961). Archivo Jorge Romero Brest. Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte” Julio. E. Payró”, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires C3-S2-A.

<sup>100</sup> Kenneth Kemble, “Big Business Gets Interested in Art,” *Buenos Aires Herald*, October 3, 1960.

to maintain its place within the avant-garde.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, while the style was new within the context of Argentina it was unable to achieve its own local language. Kemble wrote,

We also seem to be working in a contemporary idiom for the first time [...] but we still have a long way to travel nevertheless [...] we still follow the latest trends much too faithfully [...] The next few years will tell whether we are capable of shrugging off these influences and creating an art of our own.<sup>102</sup>

Kemble's statement reveals the importance, and challenge of originality while remaining relevant to a modern discourse. Under these conditions, Informalismo never fully reached its potential to manifest an authentic avant-garde in relation to the West and within Argentina, and thus artists swiftly navigated towards newer expressions.

Historically, Giunta accounts for this early period as an experimental phase in the search for a representative style of *Arte nuevo* that largely generated transplants of European models.<sup>103</sup> While there is truth in her assessment, I would argue that Kemble's Informalist aesthetic was a means by which to enact a particular mode of the avant-garde, situated in notions of negation – a negation of painterly aesthetics, form, and technique. Furthermore, Kemble's adoption of Art Informel opened up new directions for the artist, producing models of what avant-garde art might look like.

### **Arte Destructivo**

*Pequeñas reglas de conducta* (*Small rules of conduct*) is an unkempt collage of stained fabrics, layered and stretched across a dark canvas, while Kemble's *Untitled* is

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Kenneth Kemble, "Does This Mean Local Art Is Catching Up?," *Buenos Aires Herald*, November 14, 1960.

<sup>103</sup> Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 85-9.

composed of dynamic gestural sweeps of black paint across a white canvas (Figure 10 and 11). Both works adhere to *art autre*'s unfinished appearance and lack of any formal control. On the one hand this apparent lack foregrounds the artwork's state of flux, giving primacy to the creative process. But as Kemble clarifies, the energetic stroke of the hand, "la tachadura" (a crossing out), was an evocation of erasure. He explains, "it is the crossing out that obscures all past pictorial traditions, renounced in order to begin again."<sup>104</sup> This specific gesture represents both an assault on the picture plane and by extension an attempt to destabilize the larger artistic tradition of painting, setting off a virtual dissolution of the genre in Argentina.



Figure 10. Kenneth Kemble, *Pequeñas reglas de conducta*, 1958

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<sup>104</sup> Kenneth Kemble quoted in Jorge Lopez Anaya, "El Informalismo: La Gran Ruptura" in *El Informalismo* (Buenos Aires: Liberaría Fausto, 1969), n.p.





Figure 11. Kenneth Kemble, *Untitled*, 1959

Kemble's preference for detritus can also be situated as a negation of the aesthetic or as the artist and his critics reaffirm as the *anti-aesthetic*. Evoking a term often associated with Dada, Kemble is concerned with problematizing the formal constraints placed on contemporary art practice.<sup>105</sup> In turning to "rejected materials" such as used burlap, blankets or oxidized cans Kemble inverts the hierarchy of artistic materials and aesthetic codes, opening up the possibility for new artistic modalities.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> The term *anti-aesthetic* here must be understood within the larger context of Dada's claims to *anti-art* and its disavowal for art as institution. Within this complex definition however is Duchamp's explicit use of the term which alludes to his radical opposition to formal conventions: "Art or anti-art ? was the question I asked when I returned to Munich in 1912 and decided to abandon pure painting or painting for its own sake. I thought of introducing elements alien to painting as the only way out of pictorial and chromatic dead end." Quoted in Hebert Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance: Art as Experiment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>106</sup> Kenneth Kemble, "Esta muestra tiene características de exposicion retrospectiva," in *Kemble: oleos y collages* (Buenos Aires: Galeria Lirolay, 1960).



Kemble's choice of materials however expressed other concerns, exemplified in his series *Paisaje Suburbano* (Suburban Landscapes) (Figure 12). These collages, made with rusty sheet metal and wood, made reference to the growth of shantytowns around urban centers as a poignant consequence of Argentina's modern "expansion."<sup>107</sup> Named *Villa Miserias* (loosely translated as Towns of Misery), these informal settlements expanded near railroads and highways under the *Revolución Libertadora* and Frondizi's modernization projects, contrasting sharply with the rising skyscrapers in the city's center.<sup>108</sup> In turning the viewer's eye towards Argentina's uneven socio-economic development, the trash used to construct these marginal sites can be interpreted as an indictment of Argentina's modernizing process.

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<sup>107</sup> This work is often compared to Antonio Berni's collages made of abandoned materials – wood, empty bottles, iron, cardboard boxes, metal sheets – as evidence of Buenos Aires' shantytowns *Villa Miserias*. See David Eliot, "Antonio Berni: arte, y politica en la vanguardia." In *Arte de Argentina: Argentina 1920-1994* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1994).

<sup>108</sup> The *Villa Miserias* appeared as early as the 1930s but swelled in size during and after World War II due to decreased agricultural production, increased industrialization, causing an influx of the country's rural population to urban cities: Buenos Aires and Cordoba. See Podalsky, *Specular City*.



Figure 12. Kenneth Kemble, *Paisaje Suburbano*, 1958

At the initiative of Kemble, artists Enrique Barilari, Jorge Lopez Anaya, Jorge Roiger, Antonio Segui, Silvia Torras and Luis Alberto Wells organized *Arte Destructivo* at Galeria Lirolay in 1961. Indicative of the exhibition's composition was the invitation's photograph of a devastated horse drawn carriage on the street of Buenos Aires (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Exhibition Invitation for *Arte Destructivo*

The image, photographed by participating artist Rogier, illustrated the premise of the show: the destroyed object. Among the works in the show were found, yet distinctively discarded objects, such as a battered umbrella, a disintegrating wicker chair, fragmented doll parts assembled together, a stained bathtub, a torn chair and partially melted wax heads. In addition to these works were other objects manipulated by the artist's own destructive gesture including their own Informal works.<sup>109</sup> Artists superimposed

<sup>109</sup> Additional works include a basket full of unspecified discarded objects, twisted sheet metal, a milk tank filled with heads, destroyed photographic portraits of the artists. Considering that the majority of these objects were taken from *La Quema*, the city's major dumpsite, and the streets of La Boca, these objects also serve to amass the throwaway material of urban society. This implied critique is largely overshadowed by the dominant discussion around the violent aspects of

fragments of music and text, including a lecture by critic Jorge Romero Brest, readings of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a theater script by Pablo Picasso, and music performances by the artists, as an aural component to the exhibition. The show emphasized the temporal quality of the works and exhibition as event with its closure resulting in the destruction of most works.

This collaboration was the first proposal for an exhibition in Buenos Aires without a single painting or sculpture. In their place was the object, found in a state of ruin or devastated at the hand of the artist's destructive gesture, directly challenging traditional artistic materials and mediums, as well as the permanent art object. According to Kemble, under the changed conditions of the post-Perón era artists acquired a "new freedom" to experiment. The show took experimentalism as a basis to enlarge the limits placed on artistic practice rather than achieve an aesthetic end. In his introduction to the show, Kemble writes,

[I]ts presentation might be imperfect and muddled, and above all too heterogeneous. But it will have precisely the value of its imperfection by leaving various paths open for future experiences. We wouldn't in any way wish to codify this effort nor establish an "ism" based on supposedly absolute premises, rather to simply explore one aspect of our being as old as man himself but never fully investigated in the field up until now.<sup>110</sup>

Their choice in the object was a foray into new formal territory and creative processes.

The centrality of destruction in this exhibition was conceived as a necessity of creation in

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destruction. See Andrea Giunta, "Destruccion-Creacion en la vanguardia argentina del sesenta. Arte y Politica. Mercados y violencia," *Razón y Revolución* 4 (Fall 1998): 1-21.

<sup>110</sup> Kemble, Kenneth, "Arte destructivo," in *Arte destructivo: Barilari, Kemble, López Anaya, Roiger, Seguí, Torrás, Wells* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1961).

what Aldo Pellegrini recognized as “the foundation for all future creation.”<sup>111</sup> In actual terms, the object found in its formless state lent to its new condition as an art object. This enthusiastic embrace of new, non-artistic material appears to extend from Kemble’s early *Informal* works, while entering into a stronger association with the object. On the one hand the object, found discarded and broken, implicitly commented on the obsolescence and transience of our everyday existence, which World War II put into high relief. But, Argentina was also in the midst of an excited, yet instable climate that generated certain hostilities. Such examples include an increasing military presence to maintain civic order, government repression against the far left opposition, and frequent student and worker protests. On the other hand, the object devastated by the artist enacts this very process of destruction, rendering the object an index of the artist’s violent gesture. In Kemble’s presentation of the exhibition, he turns to a long history of wars and the new atomic age, as proof of man’s intrinsic tendency to destroy. In this way, *Arte Destructivo* continues to show signs of existential anxiety once explored by *Informal* artists, while aligning their tradition of destruction with Dada and Neo-Dada artists.<sup>112</sup>

The number of artists who destroyed their early *Informal* works for the exhibition signal a critical juncture in the development and end of *Informalismo*. In a photograph taken of the exhibition a torn foghorn is next to an artwork in fragments

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<sup>111</sup> Aldo Pellegrini, “Fundamentos de una estética de la Destrucción,” in *Arte destructivo: Barilari, Kemble, López Anaya, Roiger, Seguí, Torrás, Wells* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1961).

<sup>112</sup> In Kristine Stiles’ extensive work on Gustav Metzger’s 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium *Arte Destructivo* features an early example of an international phenomenon. Much like Kemble and the artists associated with *Arte Destructivo*, the element of destruction in new art forms was an attempt to grapple with the real potential of virtual extinction. See Kristine Stiles, “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,” in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 227-329.

(Figure 14). Hanging on a wood frame remains a piece of canvas with a recognizable dark monochromatic surface, creating a synthesis of Informal painting and its anti model: Arte Destructivo.<sup>113</sup> Each artist in the exhibition once claimed to make Informalist artworks, but in defacing them they evoke Kemble's *tachadura*, a virtual erasure of the trend. In making Informalismo obsolete, artists create a potential space for a new artistic order.



Figure 14. Jorge Roiger, *Arte Destructivo*, 1961

Returning to Kemble's introduction, he does not deny the inevitable connections viewers make to Dada or Surrealism. Kemble attributes them as "immediate precursors."

Additionally, Informalism's techniques and Neo-Dadaism's *objet-trouvés* were

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<sup>113</sup> Andrea Giunta makes an interesting comparison between the violence portrayed in the exhibition of *Arte Destructivo* that can be understood as a critique of the institution, and the actualization of violence that artists directed against the institution. Her interrogation of this period and the practices that developed underscores the poetic framework in which *Arte Destructivo* operated. See Andrea Giunta, "Destruccion-Creacion," 1-21.

commensurate with *Arte Destructivo*'s "notable tendency toward destruction".<sup>114</sup> But what are the actual affinities that exist between these examples? While Kemble left it elusive, critics quickly reaffirmed the relationship through their shared formal tactics, evinced by the reappearance of the found object or readymade.<sup>115</sup>

The potential relationship *Arte Destructivo* may have had with Dada and Neo-Dada models can also be advanced through the prism of destruction as a constructive element for its time. Like Dada, the artists behind *Arte Destructivo* were concerned with opening up pathways for a transformation of current conceptions of art. While the complexity of Dada's activities is difficult to quickly summarize, Dada was invariably understood as nihilistic and destructive, with their attack directed against the institution of art and by extension a larger social apparatus. As scholar Dorothee Brill notes, Dada held the conviction that artistic expression was inextricably linked to the socio-cultural context in which it was situated.<sup>116</sup> One such example from the many Dadaist texts which illustrates this point is the *Dadaistisches Manifesto* (Collective Dada Manifesto) from 1918 that insists, "art in its execution and direction is dependent on the time in which it

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<sup>114</sup> Kemble, "Arte Destructivo."

<sup>115</sup> The term Neo-Dada served to compare works from the 1950s and 60s by North American and Western European artists to Dada. Peter Bürger's seminal work *Theory of the Avant-Garde* extends this reading into a comparison between the historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, in which he determines the latter as a mere repetition of the former. According to his argumentation, Dada subverted the institution, whereas Neo-dada reified it by rendering the Dada's transgressive acts into aesthetic ones. In Hal Foster's critical response to Bürger, he asks us to reconsider the neo-avant-garde as moment of comprehension and enactment of the avant-garde's original project.<sup>115</sup> In Dada's return, artists strategically recover its strategies as a means of negotiating their relationship to the institution. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>116</sup> Dorothee Brill, *Shock and the Senseless in Dada and Fluxus* (Hanover, N.H: Dartmouth College Press, 2010).



lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch.”<sup>117</sup> Dada’s general discontent with the war and modern society enabled their rhetoric, calling for a new society in which Dada was the “blastocyst of a new type of man.”<sup>118</sup> As Brill observes, Dada’s call for destruction intended to negate contemporary conditions without offering any constructive proposals to take its place. To demonstrate this, Brill cites central figure Tristan Tzara who stated, “the *tabula rasa* which we made into the guiding principle of our activity was of value only in so far as *something else* would succeed.”<sup>119</sup> Although Dada’s intended effects would leave a void, Tzara’s statement attests to destruction as a generative process.

In this way *Arte Destructivo* can be understood as repurposing the historical avant-garde strategy of destruction and its dialectical relationship with creation, yet extending its radicality across different lines. As I’ve already mentioned the principal purpose of destruction is to eradicate tired artistic models, which *Informalismo* immediately represented. In doing so, the collective of artists foreground the object, removing its previous associations with traditional painting and to some extent sculpture. Furthermore, this turn towards the object was a return to the transgressive value of the avant-garde. Yet the artists purposely avoided establishing it as an aesthetic end and thus sustaining their practice within a transitional, experimental gap.

### **Total Destruction**

Minujín’s arrival to Paris in late 1961 followed a decade of Latin Americans traveling to the city, first with Op and Kinetic artists Julio Le Parc, Martha Boto in the

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<sup>117</sup> “Collective Dada Manifesto,” in *Dada, the Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981), 242.

<sup>118</sup> Richard Hulsenbeck quoted in Brill, *Shock and the Senseless*, 62.

<sup>119</sup> Brill’s emphasis. Tristan Tzara quoted in Brill, *Shock and the Senseless*, 156.



1950s and later with Alberto Greco and the artists of Neo Figuración Luis Felipe Noe, Jorge de la Vega, Deira and Maccio. As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, France and more specifically Paris exerted its influence on the Argentine imaginary as the embodiment of modernity and the artistic avant-garde.<sup>120</sup> Their collective flight was in part a means to advance and internationalize their own artistic idiom that was deeply linked to this tradition.<sup>121</sup>

In the years following WWII France's reconstruction unfolded with an accelerated process of modernity, articulated in technological advancements, urban restructuring, industrialization and material consumption. This development, as Kristin Ross points out, was especially swift:

The speed with which French society was transformed after the war from a rural, empire-oriented, Catholic country into a fully industrialized, decolonized, and urban one meant that the things modernization needed – educated middle managers, for instance, or affordable automobiles and other “mature” consumer durables, or a set of social sciences that followed scientific, functionalist models or a workforce of ex-colonial laborers – burst onto a society that still cherished prewar outlooks with all of the force, excitement, disruption and horror of the genuinely new.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> The degree of influence France held over Latin America is outlined in Marcy E. Schwartz, *Writing Paris: Urban Topologies of Desire in Contemporary Latin America* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). However Argentina developed a particular admiration for France that inspired its urban architecture, literature in the example of Julio Cortázar and many others, to its struggle for independence from the Spanish. See Louis Furman Sas, “The Spirit of France in Argentina,” *The French Review* 15 no. 6 (May 1942): 468-477.

<sup>121</sup> This tradition was at first represented in both European and Latin American abstract movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which I argue shifts to include Dada. For a full overview of these developments in Concrete and Neo-Concrete art, Constructivism, Kinetic and Op art see Aracy A. Amaral, “Abstract Constructivist Trends in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia,” in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993): 86-99.

<sup>122</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 4.

In spite of France's postwar modernization Paris' status as the capital of modern art was quickly fading in the face of American art's ascendancy. Artistic activity was fractured across various movements that responded to contemporary socio-cultural changes, including Op and Kinetic art, modes of Abstract Expressionism (Art Informel, Lyrical Abstraction and Tachisme), Nouveau Realism and the Situationist International.<sup>123</sup>

In 1959 at the *Première Biennale de Paris: Manifestation Biennale et Internationale des Jeunes Artes* director Raymond Cogniat and organizers featured gestural painting as the preeminent artistic tendency with an overriding emphasis of works associated with Art Informel. Within this context, however, artists associated with the Nouveau Realistes Jean Tinguely, Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé ignited a controversy amongst the critics who read their *affiches lacérées* and *Méta-matic No. 17* as a direct challenge to abstract art and painting.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Among these competing movements was Op and Kinetic Art, developed in part by a group of Latin American artists active in Paris, including Argentineans Julio Le Parc and Martha Boto. In comparison to Informalism, Op and Kinetic artists was built on the legacy of Geometric Abstraction from both Western Europe and Latin America. Furthermore, new proposals broke from painting, working primarily with kinetic objects that invited the viewer's engagement.<sup>123</sup> Their industrial materials, such as plexiglass, aluminum, stainless steel, were a positive affirmation of certain modern and technological developments. The group Groupe de Recherche d'art Visuel (GRAV) was a collective formed in 1960 by Julio Le Parc and Horacio Garcia Rossi from Argentina; Francisco Sobrino from Spain, Francois Morellet, Joel Stein and Jean-Pierre Yvaral from France. Their first manifestos declared a stop to artistic "mystifications", which ultimately translated into a challenge to the artwork's traditional relationship with the viewer. This central principle, however, had larger implication to the authority of the artist, the passivity of the viewer and aesthetic values of an artwork. GRAV conceived of their work as one which required the audience's full engagement, which would increase their awareness to the work and by extension their place in the world. In doing so, these artists sought to empower the individual and reassert their agency. See Martha L. Sesin, "Playing their Game: France, Latin America and the Transformation of Geometric Abstraction in Postwar Paris," (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2008).

<sup>124</sup> See Kaira M. Cabañas, *The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme: Art and the Performative in Postwar France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Argentine artists' favorable perception of France however did not waver under these new conditions. Rather the allure remained in tact with a new generation of artists taking up residency there after the war. Minujín arrived to Paris with an invitation to participate in the Argentine delegation to the *Deuxième Biennale de Paris: Manifestation Biennale et Internationale des Jeunes Artes*. Interestingly, Argentina's delegation in the second edition was composed with artists mainly working in *Informalismo*, including Jorge Lopez Anaya, Romulo Maccio, Luis Felipe Noe, Martha Peluggo and Luis Wells. Minujín's contribution to the exhibition *Testimonio para una joven tumba* (Testimony for a young tomb) was an Informalist painting characterized by its large surface of diverse materials and monochromatic color (Figure 15).<sup>125</sup>



Figure 15. Marta Minujín, *Testimonio para una joven tumba*, 1960-1

<sup>125</sup> See Victoria Noorthoorn, ed. *Marta Minujín, Obras 1959-89* (Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2010).

Following the Biennale Minujín received a one-year study fellowship from the French government, allowing her to extend her stay. Alberto Greco, who already played a role as mentor to Minujín while in Buenos Aires, was the first contact she had upon arriving to Paris. According to Minujín, from then on she saw Greco daily and he would remain a crucial point of reference.<sup>126</sup> The new context in which Minujín found herself, coupled with her intense interchange with Greco, prompted the young artist to weigh her work between Informalism and emerging tendencies.

The exhibition *Pablo Curatella Manes et Trente Argentins de la Nouvelle Génération* (*Pablo Curatella Manes and 30 Argentines of the New Generation*), curated by Argentine sculptor Manes with his wife and art critic Germaine Derbecq, gathered the large number of Argentine artists working in Paris to showcase their activity at Galerie Crueze. Minujín presented *Le chien mort* (The dead dog), a spatial assemblage of warped cardboard boxes originally found in the streets of Paris (Figure 16). Although lightly painted and stacked together, Minujín left torn fragments of the boxes' commercial print still legible. In doing so, Minujín made reference to the material's origin as commodity-turned trash. The formal ambiguity of her work drew a level of bewilderment among Parisian critics who found these objects "difficult to classify" and at the "intersection between sculpture and painting."<sup>127</sup> The amorphous quality of *Le chien mort* testifies to the experimental mode Minujín was working within. Additionally, her quick passage from Informal painting to her found objects reflects the larger evolution occurring within France and Argentina's cultural field.

<sup>126</sup> Marta Minujín, interview by Victoria Noorthoorn in *Marta Minujín, Obras 1959-89*, 270.

<sup>127</sup> "Actualité de l'art Argentin," *Les Beaux-Arts à Paris* 966 (February 23, 1962).



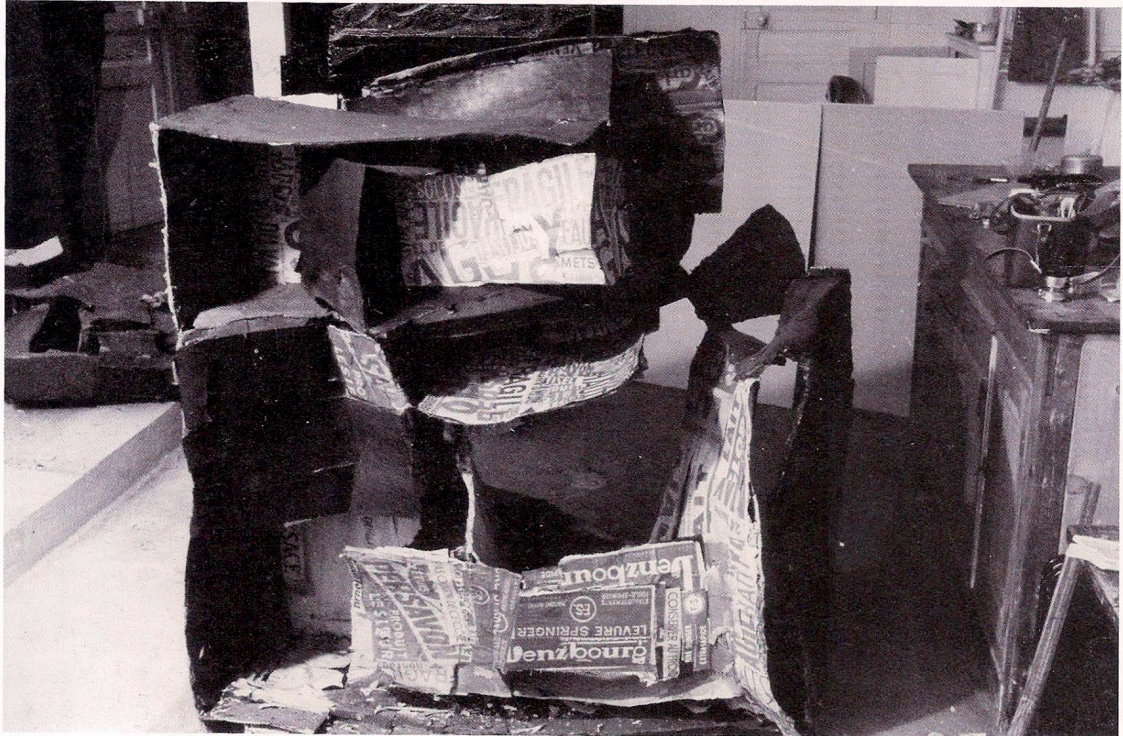


Figure 16. Marta Minujín, An example of her warped boxes, 1961-3

In spite of the connections that can be drawn between Minujín and *Arte Destructivo*'s focus on junk materials, the artist's boxes must also be understood in relationship to Nouveau Realism. More specifically, Arman's *Poubelles* (Trash bins) and *Accumulations* were made of debris the artist collected from everyday contexts and compressed into a glass box for display as an artwork. In *Poubelle (de Paul Wember)* Arman mixed torn pieces of paper with miscellaneous wrappers, bottles, balls of lint, a piece of a baguette and other unrecognizable items (Figure 17). A photograph taken of Arman in 1960 shows the artist collecting trash left out on an anonymous street in Paris, which he then used to fill the entire gallery space of Galerie Iris Clert in *Le Plein* (Fill-up) (Figure 18).



Figure 17. Arman, *Poubelle* (de Paul Wember), 1960





Figure 18. Harry Shunk, Arman in Streets of Paris, 1960

The art critic, Pierre Restany, who formed the Nouveau Realistes claimed these works as “parcel[s] of the extratemporalized real.”<sup>128</sup> Arman’s aesthetic was part of Restany’s larger project that declared art “the direct appropriation of the real”: “a real perceived in itself and not through the prism of conceptual or imaginative transcription.”<sup>129</sup> This “new realism” took shape in a signed declaration by artists including Arman, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely and

<sup>128</sup> Pierre Restany quoted in Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen, “La Virtrine/L’eponge: the Ecole de Nice and the “Hygiene of Vision,” in *New Realisms : 1957-1962 Object Strategies between Readymade and Spectacle*, ed. Julia Robinson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 68.

<sup>129</sup> Pierre Restany, “La realite depasse la fiction” in *Pierre Restany: Avec le Nouveau Realisme sur l’autre face de l’art* (Nimes: CNAP et Editions Jacqueline Chambon, 2000), 48.

Jacques Villeglé.<sup>130</sup> Despite the stylistic heterogeneity of the artists' work, Restany bracketed their activities under a shared "appropriation of reality."<sup>131</sup> In this sense, objects such as the discarded items from Parisian *poubelles* maintained their material and temporal traces. Artists then emphasized this indexical quality as France's external social realities, inserting it into the museum and gallery space, thereby eliciting an "irruption of the street within the museum."<sup>132</sup>

Within the contested arena of the French artistic scene, Minujín considered the Nouveau Realism as "the only thing new and really different in Paris" and unprecedented in Buenos Aires.<sup>133</sup> In her letter to MAMba Director Hugo Parpagnoli in 1962 Minujín relates the important artistic activities occurring in Paris, imparting a who's who of established and experimental galleries, exhibitions, critics and artists. Naming Rauschenberg to Restany, Minujín was clearly navigating the nexus of Paris' international network of avant-garde activity. From this vantage point, Minujín's encounter with Nouveau Realisme presented a way out of Informalism's stale condition both in France and Argentina:

According to Restany's explanation – the advent of a new brutal and realistic period, in which what has already been done, cannot be done any better. Quite exasperating, but I assure you that many, many young people are following this tendency and it deserves attention. They are real [...] Well, I am doing the same thing with my cardboard boxes, without any future. A material that may not exist tomorrow, which is to give no value to the future.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Within a year the group contracted and expanded as Hains, Kelein and Raysse left, while Cesar, Gerard Deschamps, Mimmo Rotella and Niki de Saint Phalle joined.

<sup>131</sup> Pierre Restany, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes: Un manifeste de la nouvelle peinture* (Paris, 1968).

<sup>132</sup> Jacques Villeglé quoted in Kaira M. Cabañas. *The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme*. 75.

<sup>133</sup> Marta Minujín to Hugo Parpagnoli, March 22, 1962. Parpagnoli Papers, Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires archive, Museo de Arte Moderno Buenos Aires.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*



Among the artists who drew her attention were Niki de Saint Phalle and her “white brutal objects” known as *Tirs* (Shooting Pieces).<sup>135</sup> A photograph taken on February 12, 1961 captures Pierre Restany firing a hand pistol at Saint Phalle’s assemblages (Figure 19). St. Phalle organized a collective shooting at the Impasse Ronsin, Paris, where she and others violently perforated her works with a gun, spilling colored paint that lay beneath the white surface of the work. The result was the destroyed assemblage covered in a colorful stream of vertical drips reminiscent of Pollock’s drip paintings (Figure 20). In Saint Phalle’s own reflection of the *Tirs* she commented,

I shot because I was fascinated watching the painting bleed and die [...] Ready. Aim. Fire. Red, yellow, blue – the painting is crying, the painting is dead. I have killed the painting. It is reborn.<sup>136</sup>

Echoing Restany’s declaration that “easel painting (like every other type of classical means of expression in the domain of painting or sculpture) has had its day,” St. Phalle performs the destruction of the artistic medium.<sup>137</sup> More specifically, both critic and artist aimed their assault at the supremacy of postwar abstract painting.

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<sup>135</sup> In 1961 Niki de Saint Phalle joined the already fractured Nouveau Realistes.

<sup>136</sup> Nikki de Saint Phalle quoted in Kristine Stiles, “Material Culture and Everyday Life,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 285.

<sup>137</sup> Pierre Restany, “Nouveaux Realistes,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 724-5.



Figure 19. Harry Shunk, Pierre Restany firing at St. Phalle's *Tirs*, 1961



Figure 20. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Tir*, 1961

Before her return to Buenos Aires Minujín held a final exhibition in her studio with artist Lourdes Castro and Alejandro Otero, where she presented her cardboard structures and a new series of found discarded mattresses. In the exhibition catalog Minujín announced that she would close the show with the destruction of her works. On June 6, 1963 Minujín proceeded to the Impasse Ronsin -- the empty lot and frequent stage for events by Nouveau Realistes.<sup>138</sup> There she placed her works for invitees to participate in a collective destruction of these works. Among those in attendance were Christo, Elie-Charles Flammand, Paul Gette and Jean-Jacques Lebel. They were each given the task to destroy her work using their own visual language. For example, Manolo Hernandez who worked in Abstract Expressionism poured paint on her work while Christo wrapped Minujín to one of her works. Following this sequence of events, Paul Gette, a performance artist, took an axe to her works. Minujín then proceeded to set free 500 birds and 100 rabbits before setting her works on fire with a torch. Existing photographs, taken by Harry Shunk, document Minujín with a group of individuals crowded around her reworked mattresses (Figure 21). The event unfolds with Minujín and others igniting her works on fire before they walk away from the residue.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> In addition to Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs* 1960, the Impasse Ronsin was the site of Arman's *Colère de Contrebasse* 1961. One of the first in his series of *Colères* (Tantrums), Arman violently smashed the bass into pieces against a wall. The artist preserved the action by fixing the fragments in the exact state of the destroyed object. See *Arman--selected Works, 1958-1974: An Exhibition Organized by the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California, September 15-October 29, 1974* (La Jolla, Calif.: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1974).

<sup>139</sup> Noorthorn, *Marta Minujín, Obras 1959-89*.



Figure 21. Harry Shunk, Photo-documentation of *La Destrucción*, 1961

Minujín's staging of a destruction of her work mirrors the formal structure found in St. Phalle's *Tirs*, which encompassed an open, creative and collaborative event intended to violate her works. In Minujín's words,

[The invited artists] were to come to the empty lot – Impasse Rosin – at 6 p.m. on Thursday, June 6, bringing with them tools they used for expressing themselves in their own work, and were to create upon my work (as symbolic destruction), they were to impose their images over mine, cover up, erase, modify my work. Create while destroying: burn out my identity.<sup>140</sup>

In this sense I argue *La Destrucción* is a transformative gesture, in which Minujín ceases her practice for a new one. Much in the same way Kemble employed the *tachadura* (crossing out) and *Arte Destructivo* as an evocation of erasure, Minujín orchestrated a collective destruction of works as a closure to her previous practice, initiating a new art and perhaps a new artistic identity.

Minujín, however, was now operating within the terms of a “happening;” an emerging practice first coined by American artist Allan Kaprow, that Jean-Jacques Lebel would pioneer in France.<sup>141</sup> Her turn towards the happening reveals the limitations she may have seen within Nouveau Realism's largely object-based practice. Both the object and its continual exhibition within the context of the gallery or museum space did not fit within her definition of “the real.” Rather than appropriate the real vis-à-vis the quotidian object, Minujín's approach implied a direct, physical manifestation of it. Minujín's work intersects with Lebel's libertarian spirit that defined the happening as a “free”

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<sup>140</sup> Marta Minujín, “Destruction of my works in the Impasse Ronsin Paris,” trans. Marguerite Feitlowitz, in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 59-60.

<sup>141</sup> Lebel developed his Happenings first in New York in 1961-2 before returning to France where he produced the Festival of Free Expression. See Mariellen R. Sanford, ed., *Happenings and Other Acts* (London: Routledge, 1995).

spatiotemporal event that provoked an “intensification of feeling, the play of instinct, a sense of festivity, social agitation.”<sup>142</sup> In Minujín’s own words, she claimed, “For me, art was a way of intensifying life, of impacting the viewer, shaking [him] up, removing [him] from inertia. [...] I wanted to live and make live.”<sup>143</sup> In formal terms, liberation was achieved through a shift from the raw material to an enlivened experience of real space and time.<sup>144</sup> Recalling *La Destrucción*, Minujín describes,

The birds flying off along with the rabbits running amidst the people, the mattresses letting off that burnt scent and charred paint [composed] a series of indisputably orgiastic images. The fireman’s sirens quickly made us leave the place, and so in a complete state of excitement my first happening came to a close.<sup>145</sup>

### **Realism and the Everyday**

In a letter to artist Alberto Greco, Ignacio Pirovano writes,

Your *Assassinated Nun* produces a terrible effect. A new series of horrors: they will figure among the raw testimonies of this era. A transitional epoch the like of which, perhaps, has never before been seen, from an old world to a completely new and different world, which we hope will be marvelous, we are living through the agony of its birth and in your painting you synthesize that very birth with your atrocious scream.

[...]

Now you move us to confront reality that makes us suffer. The face formed by anguish, desperation, rebellion, destruction is translated into the violence, insecurity, intolerance, unhappiness experienced by all conscious beings [...].<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Lebel quoted in Sandford, *Happenings and Other Acts*, 299.

<sup>143</sup> Minujín, “Destruction of my works,” 59.

<sup>144</sup> Liberation and notions of the “real” will have its own significance or meaning once Minujín would return to Buenos Aires. Liberation would take shape in terms of liberated desires, a present and possible future liberated by the cultural constraints previously imposed by Peron.

<sup>145</sup> Minujín, “Destruction of my works,” 59

<sup>146</sup> Ignacio Pirovano to Alberto Greco, Buenos Aires, October 12, 1961, Galería Pizarro archive, Fundación Espigas.



The then founding director the Museum of Decorative Art makes reference to Greco's *Monja Asesinada* (Assassinated Nun) – a frightfully soiled shirt nailed to a canvas -- exhibited in his solo show in Buenos Aires' gallery Pizzaro (Figure 22). The work was shown in conjunction with four black canvases that displayed a textured surface of painted drips and strokes in a complete denial of representation and form.<sup>147</sup>



Figure 22. Photo from *Clarín*, Alberto Greco's *Monja Asesinada*, 1961

<sup>147</sup> Dora de la Torre, "Alberto Greco, ¿pintor espectáculo?," *Mundo gráfico* 2, October 19, 1961.

At the center of Pirovano's encounter with Greco's gritty material is Informalism's brutal expressive force so inexplicably tied to postwar trauma, while expressing Argentina's collective anticipation for a promising future. In many ways Greco's tortured ethos perfectly embodied Informalism's existentialist artist in what Luis Felipe Noe remembers as the artist's magnetism towards "beauty in the terrible."<sup>148</sup> In part, Greco dramatized his marginal status in the art scene, asserting it as proof that he was indeed a true experimental artist, once proclaiming "Triumph and praise for consensus. Something I never had or will have. If one day I do, I will die of fear. I am an avant-garde artist."<sup>149</sup> The point of paralleling the artist to his work is to suggest that his work operated on Abstract Expressionism's subjective expression, in what Meyer Schapiro called "signs of the artist's active presence."<sup>150</sup> Again, returning to the exhibition *Las Monjas* Greco's seemingly impulsive gestures on his opaque paintings combined with his worn shirt as found object were the sources of Greco's presence, both physical and visceral. The artist conceived of this work as "vital painting" with these two elements as the living material of his work.<sup>151</sup>

It was in 1960, during a series of travels through the country's interior with an itinerant exhibition of contemporary Argentine art, that he came to this realization, writing that the everyday material that surrounds us was the "vibración de existencia"

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<sup>148</sup> Luis Felipe Noe, "Alberto Greco: Five Years After His Death," trans. Marguerite Feitlowitz, in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 45-55.

<sup>149</sup> "Alberto Greco to Lila Mora y Araujo" in Jorge Lopez Anaya, *Vanguardia Informalista*, 116.

<sup>150</sup> Here I am referring to the techniques of George Mathieu and Jackson Pollock. See Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries – Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 213-226.

<sup>151</sup> Jorge Lopez Anaya. *Vanguardia Informalista*. 41.



(vibration of existence).<sup>152</sup> That same year, on the occasion of the 1960 Salon de Arte Nuevo Informal artist Kemble participated from the perspective of the art critic, writing a review in the *Buenos Aires Herald*. The title, “Discloth framer finds a tree” makes reference to Alberto Greco’s unusual Informal work for the show.<sup>153</sup> Based on Kemble’s account, Greco managed to astound the exhibition organizers with a last minute presentation of a found charred tree trunk in place of his typical paintings. Apart from noting the sudden change and curious choice for an artwork, Kemble relates the spontaneous unfolding of the event:

The final touches were being done [to the exhibition] when to everyone’s dismay a loud commotion was heard taking place in front of the museum. Upon approaching a truck were 4 men laboring with a large tree trunk and above all the excited voice of Greco shouting ‘I’ve changed my mind, I shall exhibit a sculpture instead of painting.’<sup>154</sup>

This is only after Greco had spotted the derelict tree, located a truck, and convinced curious onlookers to help load the heavy object while deterring angry authorities. From this rather comical anecdote is the critical juncture between Greco’s *Informalismo* to *Arte Vivo*. Here, Greco stumbled upon an exemplary object in a rather raw state of ruin and decomposition that was no longer just his artistic material, but the artwork itself. Furthermore, the narrative behind the work described by Kemble registers the impulsive gesture, combining this action with his found object. This passage from his “vital paintings” leads us to his more explicit venture into the real with *Arte Vivo* [Live Art] and *Vivo-Dito*.

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>153</sup> Kenneth Kemble, "Discloth Framer Finds a Tree," *Buenos Aires Herald*, September 12, 1960.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*.

As early as 1954 Greco claimed to sign his name to walls, objects, streets and bathrooms in Paris, evoking comparisons to Duchamp's readymade.<sup>155</sup> Unlike Duchamp's everyday utilitarian objects turned art object, Greco designated the everyday matter (most often in the form of filth and degradation) artworks, preserving them in their original context. On the one hand, Greco was similarly interested in Duchamp's attempt to disrupt artistic conventions and aesthetic tastes.<sup>156</sup> On the other hand, his declaration of the ordinary object as art served to transparently align art directly to reality.

Upon returning to Paris in 1962 Greco would completely depart from Informalismo and paintings, demonstrated in *30 ratas de la nueva generación*, 1962 (30 rats for the new generation) for the exhibition *Pablo Curatella Manes et Trente Argentins de la Nouvelle Génération (Pablo Curatella Manes and 30 Argentines of the New Generation)*.<sup>157</sup> Greco presented a clear glass labyrinth containing 30 rats that he named after the 30 artists in the exhibition as his first example of *Arte Vivo*.<sup>158</sup> This first instance of Greco's new practice left many critics speechless, making little sense of his work in

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<sup>155</sup> Alberto Greco, "Gran Manifiesto Antimanifeisto Rollo Vivo-Dito," in *Alberto Greco: IVAM Centro Julio Gonzalez* (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio González, 1991), 308-309.

<sup>156</sup> Art historian Daniel Quiles offers a different perspective, calling Greco's Vivo-Ditos a "brilliant twist on the readymade" in making "non-art and art indistinguishable once the gallery context had been abandoned." See Daniel Quiles "Burnt out my potentiality : destruction and collectivity in Greco and Minujín," in *Beginning with a bang! : from confrontation to intimacy : an exhibition of Argentine contemporary artists, 1960-2007*, ed. Victoria Noorthoorn and Gabriela Rangel (New York: Americas Society, 2007), 69-80.

<sup>157</sup> "Actualite de l'art Argentin."

<sup>158</sup> As Giunta duly notes, Greco's *30 ratas de la nueva generacion* follows Spoerri's collaboration with rats in *Les Os de Szekely guljas, en collaboration avec les rats de la Galeries Schwartz* (1960) and Piero Manzoni's *Living Sculptures*, which are semi-nude models seated on a pedestal signed by the artist. But rather than use these examples to blunt Greco's originality my argument intends to situate his work within a rich context and its various artistic strategies not as a copy but as an exploration and potential translation of these devices that enables a particular construction of realism. Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 147.

relation to Paris' or Argentina's artistic panorama.<sup>159</sup> *Arte Vivo* at this nascent stage implied very little beyond his insistence for an artwork that was living. It however indicated that Greco was broadening his definition of the term "living" to mean animate. Within a month of this work, Greco produced his first exhibition of *Arte Vivo*. The remaining photo-documentation captures Greco kneeling down in an unspecified Parisian street holding the sign "*Premiere Exposition Arte Vivo de A. Greco*" (First exhibition Live Art by A. Greco) in one hand and circling around a man's feet in chalk in the other hand (Figure 23). The tall figure was in fact Argentine sculptor Alberto Heredia who appears unaware as he gazes into the camera with a bewildered stare, suggesting that it was a chance encounter.

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<sup>159</sup> Among the 30 artists in the exhibition were: Kosice, Le Parc, Martha Boto, Tomasello, Parmi, Noe, de la Vega and Minujín. While these artists represented Argentina's avant-garde tendencies, in relation to Greco, they seemed conservative and easily classifiable under painting and sculpture, with the exception of Minujín.



Figure 23. Alberto Greco, *Vivo-Dito* (Paris, France), 1962

In 1962 Greco wrote *Manifesto Dito del Arte Vivo*, declaring:

Live art is the adventure of the real. The artist will teach us to see not through a painting, but through the finger. He will teach us to see once again what happens on the street. Live art seeks the object, but leaves the “found object” in its place without transforming it or “improving” it by placing it in an art gallery. Live art is direct contemplation and communication.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Alberto Greco, *Manifesto Dito dell'Arte Vivo*, trans. Jane Brodie, in Noorthoorn, *Beginning with a Bang!*, 83.

The manifesto puts in relief the extent to which Greco was formulating a form of realism based on the direct appropriation of a found object. Instead of stripping the object from its original function by placing it in the neutral space of the gallery, Greco emphasizes the importance of leaving it within its original context in order to maintain its “real” and “authentic” function and meaning. The artistic gesture here, what Greco called *Vivo Dito* (loosely translated as Live Finger), is alternately the act of selecting an object and turning the viewer’s attention towards reality in its full and transparent display.<sup>161</sup>

As Hélène Lassalle contends “the relationship between artistic creation and representation is a constant in the twentieth century’s aesthetic debates,” with *realism* being a particular model that aimed to give a truthful, objective representation of reality.<sup>162</sup> In the late 1950s and early 60s diverse claims to realism were revived by a number of artists driven by the challenge to address a work’s relationship to the world’s changed, modern conditions. Within the Argentine context, both *Madí* and *Arte-Concreto Invención* are just two examples of artists’ repudiation of mimetic representation as a new mode of realism. In the debate between figuration and abstraction it was Tomás Maldonado, founder of *Arte-Concreto Invención* and mentor to Alberto Greco, that explicitly condemned art’s imitative quality as an illusion, arguing, “representative art is not realist, it can never be,” rather “concrete art is the only realist art.”<sup>163</sup> While artists in

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<sup>161</sup> According to Greco, the term “Vivo Dito” originated in Italy to mean “Vivo, de vivencia y ‘Dito, de dedo, accion de senalar y mostrar.’” See Greco, *Alberto Greco: IVAM Centre Julio González*, 59.

<sup>162</sup> Hélène Lassalle, “Art Criticism as Strategy: The Idiom of ‘New Realism’ from Fernand Lèger to the Pierre Restany Group,” in *Art Criticism Since 1900*, ed. Malcolm Gee (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 199-218.

<sup>163</sup> Greco worked in Maldonado’s studio. Tomás Maldonado, “Los artistas concretos, el ‘realismo’ y la realidad,” *Arte Concreto* (August 1946): 10.

Argentina were probing ways to reinvent realism for a new society at the time of Greco's departure, new appeals to realism were emerging in France upon his arrival.<sup>164</sup>

In Kaira M. Cabañas survey of France's cultural production in the late 1950s, the visual arts, film and literature were dynamically probing their relationship to the real.<sup>165</sup> The co-emergence of Nouvelle Vague and Nouveau Réalisme reveal a common dissatisfaction with traditional artistic forms, considering them outmoded and disconnected from contemporary reality. For the directors of Nouvelle Vague realism translated into the immediacy of Parisian streets through a new cinematic style that favored natural lighting, direct sound recording, improvised dialogue, jump cuts and elliptical narrative structures. Again in the example of Nouveau Realisme, Pierre Restany introduced the group as a "new perceptual approach of reality."<sup>166</sup> In the examples of Daniel Spoerri's *Tableaux-pièges*, Hain and Villeglé's *fiches lacérées* and Arman's *Accumulations*, these artists abandoned painting for experiments with mainly consumer objects in what Restany claimed was "the metaphoric exaltation of the object" that reflected "a socio-economical and cultural structure of the period."<sup>167</sup>

In 1962 the exhibition *Antagonismes 2: L'Objet* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris curator François Mathey assembled an international roster of artists, including Nouveau Realistes Arman, César and Klein, celebrating artists turn towards the

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<sup>164</sup> Realism has its own particular history in Argentina through the work of Antonio Berni. He employed the term Nuevo Realismo (New Realism) to mean an artistic practice focused on the everyday realities of the working classes. See Antonio Berni, "El nuevo realismo," *Forma* (August 1936): 14.

<sup>165</sup> Cabañas. *The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme*.

<sup>166</sup> Yves Klein, "Déclaration constitutive du Nouveau Realisme," in Cabañas, *The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme*, 1.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Pierre Restany in *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1985), 19.

object. Greco, who was not invited to participate in the exhibition, resolved to put himself on exhibition as a work of art during the opening. He wore a large sandwich board that read “Alberto Greco, artwork outside the catalogue” while passing out cards stating “Alberto Greco, objet d’art” (Alberto Greco, art object).<sup>168</sup> Various accounts add that Greco spontaneously took Yves Klein’s pen to sign two guests as *Vivo Ditos*.<sup>169</sup> His unsolicited intervention attempts to insert his *Vivo-Dito* within the framework of the exhibition on the object, making parallels between his work and that of his international counterparts. Furthermore, by inscribing himself into the exhibition while still emphasizing his “outsider” status, Greco wavers between situating his practice synchronically within the larger artistic milieu and retaining his marginality within it. This is best exemplified in his presentation of himself as the object. In doing so he distinguishes his material, what he would later call *objet vivant* (living object), as that which was beyond the framework of the exhibition.<sup>170</sup> In this way Greco’s body as medium of the real took realism to a new extreme.

By Greco’s subsequent text *Manifiesto Vivo Dito* (1963), his project continued to seek “direct and total contact with things, places and people” but began to seize the language, of contemporary realists:

Vivo Dito art is the adventure of the real, the urgent document, the direct and total contact with things, places, people, creating situations, creating the unexpected. It means showing and encountering the object in its own place. Totally in accord with cinema, reportage and literature as a living document. Reality without touchups or artistic transformation. Today I am more interested in anyone at all recounting

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<sup>168</sup> Jorge Lopez Anaya, *Vanguardia Informalista*, 42.

<sup>169</sup> See Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism and Politics*; Lopez Anaya, *Vanguardia Informalista*; Greco, *Alberto Greco: IVAM Centre Julio González*.

<sup>170</sup> Greco, “Gran Manifiesto Antimanifeisto,” 308-309.

his life on the street or in a streetcar than in any polished, technical account by a writer.<sup>171</sup>

This quote signals the attempt to move from a representation of the lived experience to the actual lived experience as a mode of representation. In the existing photo-documentation of Greco's subsequent *Vivo Ditos* the elderly, beggars, children, street vendors were the focus of his attention, the extent to which Greco unsuccessfully proposed to the Parisian gallery Iris Clert and Gallery "J" an exhibition of *clochards* (homeless) (Figure 24).<sup>172</sup> In an interview for the newspaper *Diario Arriba*, Greco defined his work as "alive" with a particular interest in "the vitals," explaining that "people are the only thing that is important!"<sup>173</sup> The notion of the real comes together in elements of unpolished and modest images of the street and its people. In comparison to the Nouveau Realistes who appropriated objects such as household trash, machine parts, industrial pigment, and advertising posters in complicity with the changes in a modern technological world, Greco largely eschewed this reality in his search for the "authentic" within an increasingly commodified society.

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<sup>171</sup> Alberto Greco, "Manifiesto Vivo Dito," trans. Maguerite Feitlowitz, in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now*, 38-41.

<sup>172</sup> Greco, *Alberto Greco: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez*, 270.

<sup>173</sup> Interview in *Alberto Greco: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez*, 317.





Figure 24. Alberto Greco, *Vivo-Dito (Piedralaves, Spain)*, 1963

Greco's *Vivo-Dito* took place on only one single occasion in Buenos Aires. In 1964, amidst an artistic community in a frantic search for a new artistic language, art critic and director of the Instituto Di Tella's new artistic space Centro de Artes Visuales (CAV), Jorge Romero Brest with the Galeria Bonino organized Greco's *Mi Madrid Querido* (My beloved Madrid). On the show's invitation Brest enthusiastically announced Greco's *Vivo-Dito* in terms of "¡Fermento! ¡Fermento! ¡Lo que necesitamos!"

(Commotion! Commotion! It is what we need!).”<sup>174</sup> Brest’s anticipation for a disruptive artwork, not yet seen in Argentina, was met with an unexpectedly large and curious crowd. On a warm summer’s evening in Buenos Aires approximately forty-four people in attendance crammed into the narrow gallery space at Galería Bonino. There they found two shoeshiners from the city’s streets sitting in front of blank canvases, while two masked individuals secured the arrival of Greco wearing a military coat and feathered tricorn hat. The military hymn *Marcha of San Lorenzo* played in the background as he flung flowers and pennants with an image of the Argentine pop singer Palito Ortega.<sup>175</sup> Greco read a text and then proceeded to outline the shoeshiners profile on the canvas. But due to the overcrowded space, the event migrated to the Plaza San Martín where Greco installed a large blank canvas, and then proceeded to write on it: *Homenaje a Buenos Aires – hay que esperar tres minutos – se las pico el bailarín* (A tribute to Buenos Aires – wait three minutes – the dancer suddenly flees).<sup>176</sup> Against the canvas, then-popular Spanish flamenco dancer Antonio Gades performed a short fandango to Esteban de Sanlúcar’s guitar. The event closed with Greco outlining the dancer’s silhouette on the canvas and his pronouncement: “*es lo que se senala con el dedo, lo que se muestra, lo que ocurre*” (this is what is pointed out with a finger, what is shown, what happens) (Figure 25).<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Cayetano Córdova Iturburu, "Pintura: En torno de una supuesta pintura espectáculo," *El Mundo*, December 20, 1964.

<sup>175</sup> La *Marcha de San Lorenzo* is a military hymn, frequently played on patriotic holidays and celebrations, which commemorates the independence of Argentina from Spanish colonial rule.

<sup>176</sup> Parts of Greco’s speech is an example of Argentina’s Lunfardo.

<sup>177</sup> *Primera Plana* 254 in Greco, *Alberto Greco: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez*, 327.



Figure 25. Oscar Bony, Photo-documentation of Greco's *Mi Madrid Querido*, 1964

Having accrued a reputation in Buenos Aires for his experimental Vivo-Ditos abroad, Greco returned home to an artistic community ripe for change. Both Brest and Bonino excitedly presented Greco and his latest work as a new artistic language defined

by its dematerialized form.<sup>178</sup> As the first expression of a “happening” in Buenos Aires, Brest predicted its emergence would provoke and agitate a largely staid artistic scene. Characterized by its conspicuous disorder, *Mi Madrid Querido* made critics recoil, sensing the attack on artistic tradition. *El Mundo* critic Caytaeno Córdova Iturburu dismissed it as a silly and futile spectacle that largely transgressed the contemplative aesthetic practices of serious, and genuine artists.<sup>179</sup>

Greco however uncharacteristically staged this Vivo-Dito in the artificial setting of a gallery, with an installation of canvases displaying his “living art” as a means of dressing his work with some semblance of traditional artistic practice and presentation. Interestingly, it was the unexpected circumstances of the show that forced Greco’s work back onto the street. *Mi Madrid Querido* was in part Greco’s introduction of a real and vital art to Buenos Aires. Once again a fully living work of art translated into the literal use of the human body as image. No longer speaking broadly about a “direct and total contact with things, place and people,” Greco confronted a *porteño* audience with a particular account of itself. On the one hand, Greco returned to the subject of society’s marginalized communities with the inclusion of the city’s street shoe-shiners, one whom was popularly known as Fernandez “*el feo que lustra lindo*” (the ugly one, who polishes beautifully).<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, Greco incorporated popular Spanish dancer Gades and guitarist Sanlúcar, instilling a performative quality to his Vivo-Dito. Adding to this dimension was Greco, dressed in military costume. Against the musical backdrop of *La*

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<sup>178</sup> “Aunque se destruya la imagen susantivo, puede ser que se salve el verbo.” Iturburu, “Pintura En torno de una supuesta pintura espectáculo”

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

*Marcha of San Lorenzo*, Greco embodied Argentina's heroic symbol of independence General José de San Martín. Both the march and memory of San Martín was embedded in the nation's popular consciousness. But as scholar Mariano Ben Plotkin points out, in 1950 Perón closely aligned himself to San Martín, correlating his own identity to that of a liberator and of equal historical significance.<sup>181</sup> In 1964, Greco's audience was likely very aware of the dual reference to San Martín and Perón. Greco's personification of San Martín operates as a similar tactic, identifying with a revolutionary and liberating spirit the General so popularly represented.

The significance of this tone can be tied to a convergence of influences. A year before *Mi Madrid Querido* military leaders overthrew Argentina's constitutionally-elected president Frondizi. The country's repeated *coups* reignited its general sense of instability. Echoing this sentiment, Greco had the impression Argentina was "on the brink of civil war at any moment, maybe within an hour or ten minutes."<sup>182</sup> Despite the country's crisis of political legitimacy, Buenos Aires' changing material conditions gave the appearance that of a rapidly modernizing country. With that was the illusion that Argentina had liberated itself from Perón's conservative constraints. Both Brest and Bonino were two figures especially invested in fostering the country's cultural modernization along these lines, with Greco's dynamic and wildly different *Vivo-Dito* as a catalyst. In part *Mi Madrid Querido*, and more specifically Greco's part as "liberator,"

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<sup>181</sup> Scholar Mariano Ben Plotkin describes Peron's manipulation of history, often presenting images and texts of Peron and San Martín together in school textbooks. See Plotkin, *Mañana Es San Perón*.

<sup>182</sup> Greco, *Alberto Greco: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez*, 328.

was a gesture towards manifesting Argentina's avant-garde as a rupture with modernism, and a belief in its liberating effects.<sup>183</sup>

This work sets the stage for a phase of artistic experimentation that attempts to imagine, and respond to a “new” Argentina. Moving beyond the initial transition after Perón and the postwar years, the emphasis on negation and destruction waned. In its place emerged efforts to build consensus and community across the socio-cultural divisions left by Perón. Guided by a vitalizing vision of society, artists deepened their commitment to making “live” art forms synonymous with “real everyday life.” The next chapter explores how this notion is articulated in the city, popular culture, playfulness, participation and communication. Greco's mixture of elements from Argentina's popular culture, such as *lunfardo*, the military march, fandango and Viamonte street shoeshiners anticipates the Pop visual language that would soon emerge.

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<sup>183</sup> In Daniel Quiles' reconstruction of *Mi Madrid Querido*, Greco apparently wrote “long live modern art” on his large blank canvas, which he then crossed it out. See Quiles “Burnt out my potentiality,” 75.

## Chapter 2: Democratizing the Avant-garde

In the first weeks of 1964 Galeria Lirolay in Buenos Aires filled its exhibition space with works reminiscent of the country's recent turn towards object-based art. Among the works on display were Delia Puzzovio's sculptural assemblage of discarded orthopedic casts mounted on a shoeshine box and Pablo Mesejean's large-scale Pepsi Cola bottle cap painted with the initials J.C. for Joan Crawford. While the gallery and its artists made no specific reference to an artistic movement or trend, the popular magazine *Primera Plana* highlighted the exhibition *Six Artists in Lirolay: Sexteto* for its apparent grouping of Argentina's proponents of Pop Art.<sup>184</sup>

The basis of such a characterization stemmed from an understanding of Pop Art as Popular Art, which the magazine associated with the artists' use of quotidian elements to construct "fantastical objects."<sup>185</sup> In the following issue, the artists were featured in a second article in which they responded to the categorization. Ruben Santantonín outright rejected the designation without much explanation, whereas Mesejean comfortably accepted the comparison as a happenstance of stylistic affinity with American Pop artists. Puzzovio described her work as "fresh," "ingenious" and "fun;" a set of adjectives that tangentially aligns her to U.S. and British Pop connotations.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> "Calendario: Arte; 'Pop Art'." *Primera Plana* 62, January 1964. *Primera Plana* was established in 1962 as a weekly magazine featuring cultural, political and economic current events. Much like the intentions of Buenos Aires' emergent art institutions, such as Di Tella, *Primera Plana* sought to participate in Argentina's modernization project by redefining the nation's socio-cultural landscape, which began with the magazine's popular content and accessibility to a mass consumer.

<sup>185</sup> Translated from "objetos fantásticos" the brief editorial note can be compared with *Primera Plana*'s earlier critiques of Informalist artists use of the everyday objects.

<sup>186</sup> "Arte: Ortopedia, humor y algunas obsesiones." *Primera Plana* 2, no. 3, January 21, 1964, 28.

Evident in *Primera Plana*'s presupposition of the artists' work as Pop is a dubious effort by critics to classify ambivalent art forms that were developing in Buenos Aires. For Santantonín, he was still working within his own notion of *Cosas* (Things) works made of precarious materials, notably discarded plaster, cloth, cardboard and wire. They were presented as tactile forms charged with "existential energy."<sup>187</sup> His contemporaries however could not define their artistic language in concrete terms, leaving their critics to regard it as Pop. While the artists' use of everyday objects is reminiscent of U.S. and British Pop art's object aesthetic culled from mass culture and consumption, their work more closely represents a composite of influences. From Nouveau Realism's surrealist juxtapositions and collage in the case of Puzzovio's casts to Neo-dada's assemblages of found and discarded objects in the work of Santantonín's *Cosas*, the exhibition reflects the artistic heterogeneity that restricted a unified stylistic narrative.

This chapter investigates the moment in which the search for a new artistic language settles comfortably in an Argentine Pop aesthetic. While it would seem that Pop's emergence in Argentina is fortuitously imposed on a group of artists ambivalent about their work, these artists agree that their art is beguiling, unabashedly frivolous and yet utterly banal, making it "popular." One of the purposes of this chapter is to define Argentine Pop, complicating the artists' emphasis on the "everyday" and the "popular." As Kristin Ross and Alice Kaplan write, "to advance a theory of everyday life is to elevate lived experience to the status of a critical concept – not merely in order to

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<sup>187</sup> Rubén Santantonín, "Porque nombro 'cosas' a estos objetos," in *Cosas* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1964).



describe lived experience, but in order to change it.”<sup>188</sup> The following discussion will argue that artists’ appeals to the ordinary and popular culture were alternately describing a changing reality in a post-Perón Argentina, but also actively creating new spaces and experiences by which they could imagine a different nation. This chapter will take a closer look at Marta Minujín’s work in order to address a shift from the quotidian object to more direct, physical experiences of the everyday in what I continue to address as a progressive dematerialization of art forms.

The topic of Pop resurfaced in Argentina in 1964 with the Premio Nacional Instituto Di Tella. Di Tella Institute’s Centro de Arte Visual (CAV) annually awarded an International and National Prize to an artist chosen by a three-person jury.<sup>189</sup> The jurors, American art critic Clement Greenberg, French art critic Pierre Restany, and Argentine critic and CAV Director Jorge Romero Brest, awarded Argentine artist Marta Minujín the National prize.<sup>190</sup> Her three-dimensional construction made of mattresses, titled *Revuélquese y viva!* (Wallow Around and Live!) (Figure 26) won the favor of Pierre Restany and Jorge Romero Brest, while the proponent of Abstract Expressionism Clement Greenberg voted for Emilio Renart’s biomorphic sculpture *Integralismo Biosmos n°3* (Figure 27).<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, “Introduction” in *Everyday Life: Yale French Studies* (New Haven, Conn. Yale University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>189</sup> Di Tella’s awards in 1960 and 1961 were only on the National level, until 1962 when Di Tella created an International award, which was juried by CAV’s director Jorge Romero Brest with a roster of international art historians, curators and critics. See King, *El Di Tella*.

<sup>190</sup> American abstract painter Kenneth Noland won in the International category.

<sup>191</sup> Romero Brest, Jorge, Clement Greenberg, and Pierre Restany. “En Buenos Aires, a los veintiocho días del mes de septiembre,” October 6, 1964, Archivos Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella de Buenos Aires.

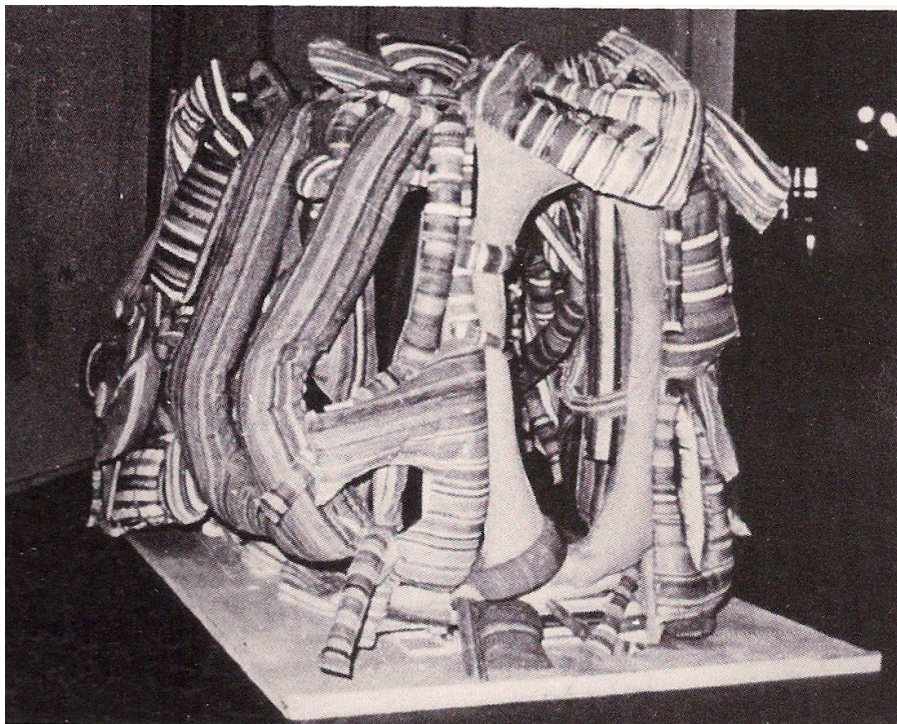


Figure 26. Marta Minujín, *Revuélquese y viva!*, 1964

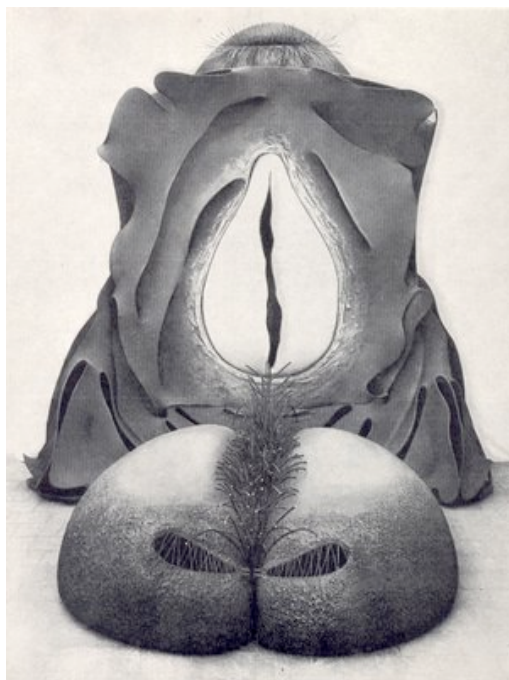


Figure 27. Emilio Renart, *Integralismo Bio-cosmos n °3*, 1964

In comparison to Minujín's application in assemblage, Renart's abstracted forms still worked within a traditional sculptural language. *Revuélquese y viva!* was composed of found mattresses, repainted in brightly colored stripes, and woven together in a disjointed spatial structure large enough for you to enter. The title, in the working class idiom of *Lunfardo*, invited its viewers to engage in a playful, physical interaction with the materials, while the vernacular meaning of the word *Revuélquese* implied a more sensuous indulgence.<sup>192</sup> *Lunfardo* had a history as a language spoken by *lunfardos* (thieves) and more generally associated with Buenos Aires' lower classes, but by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the language was appropriated by writers, tango musicians and theater producers interested in representing this demographic in their work.<sup>193</sup> By the 1920s the middle and upper social classes adopted *lunfardo* as a specifically Porteño (Buenos Aires) "street" language.<sup>194</sup> Despite *lunfardo's* integration into areas of elite culture and society, it maintains its status as a popular language. Minujín's use of the language, like Greco's use in *Mi Madrid Querido*, invokes a common practice within Buenos Aires' urban culture.

In formal terms, Minujín's recovered materials were a return to the discarded mattresses she destroyed in Paris. The work also represented the avant-garde tradition of assemblage and the neo avant-garde's recuperation of the art form, which was particularly prominent in Di Tella's International competition with Arman's *Accumulations* made of identical items pulled from the garbage and Jasper John's *Fool's*

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<sup>192</sup> The title has also been translated as *Roll around and live*.

<sup>193</sup> Most notably was the Boedo group of writers.

<sup>194</sup> See Donald Steven Castro, "Lunfardo: The Language of the Tango as a Source for Argentina Social History," *Proceedings* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 105-116.

*House* composed with everyday kitchen objects. Yet, these examples also maintained a certain boundary between object and viewer, which Minujín attempted to blur with her mattresses, thereby changing the paradigm of assemblage into a spatial structure that solicited the viewer's interaction and physical participation.<sup>195</sup>

While an effort to transform the viewer's role to an active participant was well under way in 1964 with New York happenings, *Revuélquese y viva!* shares a close affinity with the *Labyrinths* produced by the international collective Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV).<sup>196</sup> In Paris in 1963 the artists of GRAV wrote:

Our labyrinth is only a first experiment, deliberately aimed at eliminating the distance that exists between the viewer and the work of art.

The more this distance disappears, the more the interest in the object itself will disappear, and with it the importance of the personality of its creator. The same will be true of the entire superstructure around "creation" that is the reigning principle in the art world today.

We want to interest viewers, to lead them out of their inhibitions, to help them relax.

We want them to participate.

We want to place them in a situation that they activate and transform.

We want them to be aware of their participation.

We want them to move towards interacting with other viewers.

We want to develop in the viewer a strong capacity for perception and for action.<sup>197</sup>

The *Labyrinth* produced for the third Paris Biennial was composed of twenty different "environments" each constructed of moveable industrial materials. In François Morellet's *Répartition aléatoire de 40,000 carrés* (Random distribution of 40,000 tiles) small shimmering blue and red squares covered the space, distorting the visitor's sense of the

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<sup>195</sup> The evolution of the assemblage into an environment is attributed to American artist Allan Kaprow and his action collages.

<sup>196</sup> The group was co-founded by Argentine artist Julio Le Parc.

<sup>197</sup> Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel, "Assez de mystifications," (Paris, 1963).

space. Another room contained reflecting sheets of aluminum that obstructed the passage into the following space. These spaces tended to engross the visitor, demanding a different sort of engagement with the material forms than the traditional art object-viewer relationship. As their manifesto suggests this interaction would activate the viewer, shaking them from their generally passive role. Their belief was that this micro-shift in a common practice would have larger implications on the viewer's overall passivity in society.<sup>198</sup>

Similarly Minujín's mattresses solicits a form of participation rooted in a sensorial experience, describing her work as "both an art object and experience [...] I want to shorten the distance between a work of art and the viewer, in a compulsory way, through action and sensory stimulation."<sup>199</sup> Provided the title of the work and its garish color, the experience was purposely a provocation in sheer pleasure and enjoyment. A sensibility that echoes Puzzovio's interest in producing work that was both "fun" and "ingenious."

The levity that characterized the work emerging in Argentina reflected a distinction that Minujín would make repeatedly between an art from the past and the present. Recalling her statement from *La Destrucción*, "art was much more important to the human being than the immortal tradition framed at museums and galleries [...] art was a way of intensifying life."<sup>200</sup> Within this framework, "life" was wholly affirmative and celebratory.

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<sup>198</sup> The work of Marta Minujín and GRAV can also be understood in relationship to Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica's *Grand Nucleus*, 1960-63 and anticipates Jesús Rafael Soto's *Penetrables*, 1967. See Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Art from Latin America*.

<sup>199</sup> Grace Glueck, "From Safari to Sengal," *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 1966.

<sup>200</sup> Minujín. "Destruction of My Works," 59-61.

## Urban Folklore

Pierre Restany's endorsement of *Revuélquese y viva!* affirmed the importance of Minujín's work without explicitly defining her work as Nouveau Réaliste or Pop art.<sup>201</sup> Rather Restany recognized in Minujín artistic tendencies that coincided with his convictions and those of the Nouveaux Réalistes whom he supported. His statement in the Di Tella award's exhibition catalog reiterates his art of the real, affirming, "the artist has re-encountered their lucidity, transferring their action at the most direct, immediate and tangible level of the real [...] They "discovered" the 20<sup>th</sup> century nature: industry, advertising, urban."<sup>202</sup> This modern nature was then directly perceived through the "pure and simple appropriation, selection, accumulation, compression or rupture of objects." By placing this framework on the work of Minujín, her found mattresses would take on new meaning once in Buenos Aires. Suddenly, these objects in conjunction with a colloquial language and vibrant color palette possessed something akin to Argentina's "modern nature." Beyond the basis of her use of everyday materials, Minujín was similarly shaking up artistic conventions with a propensity towards provocation and spectacle.<sup>203</sup>

During Restany's visit to Buenos Aires, at the invitation of the Di Tella Institute, he also participated in the group exhibition *Feria de las Ferias* at the Galeria Lirolay. The single night event was structured like a quermés, or local market, with individual stands

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<sup>201</sup> Although Pierre Restany was specifically linked with the formation of the heterogeneous group Nouveau Réalisme, the critic's associations were often blurred across Neo-dada and Pop Art. See exhibitions *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York* at Galerie Rive Droite (Paris, 1961) and *The New Realists* at the Sidney Janis Gallery (New York, 1962).

<sup>202</sup> Pierre Restany, "¡El Arte, virtud moral, al fin!" in *Premio Nacional e Internacional Torcuato Di Tella 1964*, 12-13 (Buenos Aires: Centro de Arte del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1964).

<sup>203</sup> Already in 1964 Minujín was gaining considerable media attention in France and Argentina for *La Destrucción*. For more on the spectacular elements among the Nouveaux Réalistes see Julia Robinson, ed. *New Realisms: 1957-1962: Object Strategies between Readymade and Spectacle* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

that featured artists' work for sale (Figure 28).<sup>204</sup> According to Minujín, who was one of the organizers, the exhibition was a "modest attempt at a happening" that designed to "put art in reach of everyone."<sup>205</sup> Among the participating artists were Ernesto Deira, Alberto Greco, Antonio Segui and Pablo Suárez who sold their drawings, paintings, objects and sculptures at sizes and prices accessible to a mass consumer.<sup>206</sup> For example, some works were sold at 100 pesos per meter of canvas or per number of objects. In addition to the artists' works was a series of five short texts titled *5 Modèles de Préfaces-type* produced by Pierre Restany.<sup>207</sup> The exhibition turned market lasted several hours and ended with the artists burning their unsold works.

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<sup>204</sup> Kermés, also spelled quermés, is a popular fair with individual stands selling food, games or crafts.

<sup>205</sup> "Las hogueras del mundo moderno," *Primera Plana*, October 20, 1964.

<sup>206</sup> Invitation to *Feria de la Ferias* (Buenos Aires, 1964), Archive Galeria Lirolay, Accessed February 15, 2012

<sup>207</sup> Each text was conceived of as a preface to an artwork by an artist from different genres including: Abstract Expressionism, Neo-plasticism, Neo-geometry, Concrete art, Naïve art, Nouveau Réalisme, Neo-dada and Pop Art. Pierre Restany, *5 Modèles de Préfaces-type*, Marta Minujín Archive, Accessed February 20, 2012.





Figure 28. Invitation to *Feria de la Ferias*, 1964



The individual works in the exhibition represented the disparate styles and genres emerging in Argentina's art scene, while the exhibition represented another local expression of Pop. Restany explicitly referred to the event as the "FOIRE réalistiche-popisante" (realist-pop fair). Like the popular press, Restany identified a Pop idiom in Argentina's artistic production. By naming the activity as "réaliste-popisante" Restany determined a local set of experimental practices as an extension of a global phenomenon, thereby advancing Argentina's claim to be taken seriously in the international artistic arena and precipitating the movement's popularity in the country.<sup>208</sup> On the one hand, his gesture reflected the veritable exchange of influences occurring in Argentina and demonstrated the success of Argentina's internationalist project. The coupling of Nouveau Réalisme and Pop draws attention to the faint distinction between the co-emergent movements and more importantly how they were likely received and articulated in Argentina.<sup>209</sup> On the other hand, it imposed a classification that Argentine artists were still hesitant to affirm.

How exactly did *Feria de las Ferias* operate within the existing definitions of Pop or Nouveau Réalisme? The exhibition's organization as a store undoubtedly evokes Daniel Spoerri's grocery store exhibition and Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* from 1961.<sup>210</sup> Spoerri and Oldenburg's selling of commercial goods as art were critical comments on

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<sup>208</sup> On the topic of naming in Latin America see Marcelo Pacheco, "La Argentina: Una Mirada travestida. Emilio Pettoruti entre los espejos," in *Arte, Historia e Identidad en América Latina. Visiones Comparativas. XVIII Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte 3* (Mexico, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1994), 789-802.

<sup>209</sup> See Judith Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>210</sup> Daniel Spoerri's store held at the Koepcke Gallery in Copenhagen sold canned food stamped "Attention art work by Daniel Spoerri" for grocery store prices. Claes Oldenburg's store in New York sold replicas of food and other everyday goods in the range of twenty-five to eight hundred U.S. dollars.

the function of artwork as commodity. Additionally, the entirety of the artwork coalesced in the combination of installation, event and objects, with the meaning of the artwork resting on the visitors' participation in and experience of commercial exchange and consumption.

*Feria de las Ferias*, which followed the Di Tella awards, also intended to counteract the traditional structure of the art institution by creating an exhibition that implied wider accessibility to art by offering works at an affordable price. The artists' works within the exhibition were presented against the background of Walt Disney cartoons projected on the gallery walls and Beatles' music. Such an assembly of artworks and popular cultural references tended to obscure their difference. The works' new composition as mass cultural consumer object echoed Pop art's critique and complicity in the commodification of art. Additional elements of Pop are evident in the exhibition's carnivalesque atmosphere, such as the sensational colors, music and fair-like organization.<sup>211</sup> In fact, the general ethic of fun associated with this event and its main organizer Marta Minujín quickly became a main trope of Pop art in Argentina.

*Feria de las Ferias* as both installation and event epitomizes the growing interest artists took in creating experiences that hinged on the public's participation. The spatial art object presented in *Revuélquese y viva!* expands in scale with *Feria de las Ferias* to create an environment that simulates a fragment of local city life and culture in which participants perform the banal routine of shopping and buying at the market.

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<sup>211</sup> Lucy Lippard's introduction notes Pop's "carnival aspects" as its color and scale. See Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 10.

Restany outlined his impressions of Buenos Aires following his stay in a series of essays.<sup>212</sup> Scholars have duly noted his enthusiastic praise for the city and its artistic production in the frequently quoted article *Buenos Aires y el nuevo humanismo*.<sup>213</sup> Among his many assertions, Restany pronounced the city a modern metropolis and thus a veritable artistic center synonymous with Paris or New York. By situating it along the axis of the two contending international art centers, Restany restores Buenos Aires to the status of “Paris of the South.” According to the critic,

What I love about Buenos Aires is the breadth of its urban phenomena, the dimension of both its physical and psychological cosmopolitanism. [...] One in every three immigrants have traveled through Buenos Aires: there they have stayed or returned. The city is a living museum of the Argentine people. Every wave, every experience, every human adventure has left its trace, marking the features of every neighborhood, plaza and street corner.<sup>214</sup>

Restany’s focus on the city’s vitality was the basis for an “urban folklore” – an ambiguous term that seems to identify the specific character or essence of Argentina’s art in the city.<sup>215</sup> The term “urban folklore” also tends to concentrate Restany’s notion of the “real” to the specificities of a particular commercial, industrial and urban place. In this regard, artists such as Minujín were being celebrated for their engagement in a “poetic

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<sup>212</sup> Planète was reprinted in Spanish in Buenos Aires after Louis Pauwel’s visit to the city in 1964.

<sup>213</sup> See Rodrigo Alonso and Paulo Herkenhoff, ed., *Arte de contradicciones. Pop, realismos y política. Brasil – Argentina 1960* (Buenos Aires: PROA, 2012); Maria Jose Herrera, ed. *Pop! La consagración de la primavera* (Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2010); Mercedes-Trelles-Hernández, “The Contested Object: Pop Art in Latin American (1964-1974)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2002).

<sup>214</sup> Pierre Restany, “Buenos Aires y el nuevo humanismo,” *Planète* 5, (July 1965): 122.

<sup>215</sup> Pierre Restany, “Les happenings en Argentine: Buenos Ayres à la decouverte de son folklore urbain” (Paris, June 1965), mimeo, Fonds Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Accessed April 29, 2012.

recycling” of an urban reality in their local vernacular.<sup>216</sup> Moreover Restany identified an artistic language mixed with an intrinsically local character and international affinities, with Minujín once again being the leading example.

Minujín quickly adopted Restany’s term to define an emerging Pop aesthetic relevant to the shape and nature of the modern city: “all those who make objects make urban folklore, the only origin of Pop is massive industrialization, the overcrowding, the irrepressible invasion of the thing.”<sup>217</sup> Her reiteration of “urban folklore” exemplifies the way in which the idea came to represent Buenos Aires more specifically. Minujín’s description of “massive industrialization” and “overcrowding” can be compared to what Mariana Waisman noticed as “an eruption of Miesian-influenced metallic towers” in the city center and the increasing influx of immigrants from the provinces into the city.<sup>218</sup> Waisman’s observation makes reference to a series of tall linear skyscrapers inspired by the International Style that were erected throughout the downtown area in the early to mid-1960s. Prominent examples include the Italian Fiat and Olivetti company buildings, and French Peugeot’s sixty floor high-rise in 1962 (Figure 29).

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<sup>216</sup> Pierre Restany, *60/90 – Trente ans de Nouveau Réalisme* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1990), 76.

<sup>217</sup> “Gente en Primera Plana” *Primera Plana*, Nov. 10, 1964.

<sup>218</sup> Mariana Waisman, “Introducción” in *Architecture: Baudizzone, Erbin, Lestard, Varas* (Paris: Presse International, 1980), 9.



Figure 29. Olivetti Building

Financial institutions were also transforming the cityscape with new construction, notably architect Clorindo Testa and SERPA Studio's 1959-1966 Brutalist architectural building for the Banco de Londres, situated one block from the Plaza del Mayo. As Podalsky states, the skyscrapers signaled the important role of foreign investment and became symbols of progress and modernization in the post-Perón economy.<sup>219</sup> In addition to these urban developments was a proliferation of high-rise apartment clusters throughout the downtown neighborhoods of Barrio Norte and Palermo. While these buildings gave the appearance of modernization, Juan José Sebreli's 1964 book *Buenos Aires, Vida Cotidiana y Alienación* (Buenos Aires: Daily Life and Alienation) argues that

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<sup>219</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 178.

they were a response to the “massification” of the streets.<sup>220</sup> Both the buildings’ geographic location and architectural design created a protective spatial barrier between the wealthy, upper middle class inhabitants and the diverse, chaotic downtown street. A consequence of the physical changes in the built-environment was also a new relationship to the city, indicated in shifting socio-cultural practices.

Sebreli’s popular study on the contemporary and mundane aspects of porteño life makes a case for examining everyday practices in order to understand larger social structures and dynamics.<sup>221</sup> He situates himself within an international tradition of intellectuals who invoke the everyday, most notably Erving Goffman, Henri Lefebvre, Gilberto Freyre and Walter Benjamin. In his prologue to the book he imagines himself as a *flâneur* traversing Buenos Aires’ streets as a way of discovering other spaces and populations in his city, or “knowing” his environment more intimately. From the “popular class on Constitución” where he grew up to the train station where he encountered an “unknown underworld” of the socially marginalized, Buenos Aires was a “setting with infinite possibilities for drama and adventures, with its mysteries, its hidden corners and secrets to reveal.”<sup>222</sup>

His observations are mapped out according to the city’s class divisions and their corresponding regions, for example: the bourgeoisie in Barrio Norte, middle class in Flores, San Carlos, San Cristóbal, Balvanera, Concepción and Monserrat and the “lumpen” near Retiro. He details each group’s distinct customs and habits, such as modes

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<sup>220</sup> Juan José Sebreli, *Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana y alienación* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2011).

<sup>221</sup> His book was on Primera Plana’s best-seller list for twelve weeks and sold over 40,000 copies. Podalsky, *Specular City*, 172.

<sup>222</sup> Juan José Sebreli. *Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana y alienación*, n.p.

of diversion, dress, speech and sex. The study, as he claims, was the first sociological investigation of everyday life in Argentina. Echoing Lefebvre who argued everyday life's apparent banality revealed "something extraordinary in its very ordinariness," Sebreli's attention to the "everyday" was to "show the hidden significance behind the apparent insignificance of quotidian banalities and reveal human expression behind simple acts and gestures."<sup>223</sup> His turn to the everyday was not only an attempt to map out a transforming city, but also the reconfiguration of social practices. In other words, his book was an attempt to consolidate various symptomatic shifts underway in the 1960s. Among them was the issue of alienation typical of modern, urban life. Although Buenos Aires' was increasingly an anonymous and impersonal city, it was also a juncture where anything was possible.

Minujín and other artists' work can thus be seen as a similar exploration and attempt to register Buenos Aires' changing profile as a consequence of the country's political fluctuations and ensuing modernization project. The following work *La Menesunda* will highlight her endeavor to translate the materiality and form of her work into the experiential realm of everyday urban realities.

### **Strolling the city: La Menesunda**

In May 1965 Calle Florida, the popular downtown street, was noticeably crowded with a long line of visitors waiting nearly three hours to enter the Instituto Di Tella's Centro de Artes Visuales.<sup>224</sup> A large transparent window offered pedestrians and

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<sup>223</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), 37.

<sup>224</sup> The particular fragment of Calle Florida, between Charcas and Paraguay, was transformed at the start of the 1960s when architectural firm Bullrich and Testa renovated the empty offices and

excited patrons a preview of the main gallery teeming with lights, noise and incongruous objects in what was CAV's latest artistic presentation *La Menesunda*. Artists Marta Minujín and Ruben Santanonín, collaborated with Pablo Suárez, David Lamelas, Rodolfo Prayon, Floreal Amor and Leopoldo Maler to produce a labyrinth of sixteen interconnected installations. Once again the artists appropriated the local *Lunfardo* language with a title that roughly translates to "mixture" or "the mix." The disoriented and messy fusion of elements can be summed up in Jorge Glusberg's detailed description,

After traversing a transparent plastic shade and the silhouette of a man, the spectator-actor was faced with a tunnel of neon lights that ended in a pile of ten television sets that were permanently turned on, deafening the spectators. The following passage was a bedroom: a man and a woman slept and read on a bed. To continue, one entered into a tunnel full of neon lights and a thousand blinking lights, accompanied by street noises.

Then one descended a set of stairs with a sponge railing and a strong perfume invited the spectator to enter a gigantic head of a woman, totally covered in cosmetics. A make-up artist and a masseuse sat on a sofa; they were there to serve the public. Later on it was necessary to wait in line for a gyrating basket to deposit the spectator in The Swamp, a type of tunnel with soft walls and an elastic floor, which would sink under a person's weight.

A small door connected to a dark room that was impossible to remain in due to its strong odor of a dentist's office. Inside was a gigantic telephone with a missing number that was necessary to correctly guess in order to escape. Once outside, the public was met with a fridge full of carbon snow. The room's temperature, a few degrees below zero, obliged the viewer to open the door, but to escape to the next room you had to fight your way through forms of all shapes and colors that blocked the passage way.

An octagonal shaped mirror room received the spectator. Once inside, lights would turn off and the fans would turn on. A shower of fluorescent confetti would fall around the participant. The pungent

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installed mostly art galleries and the Di Tella Institutes' CAV, turning the area into an art center known as La Manzana Loca. See King, *El Di Tella*.



smell of fritters would make the viewer become aware, once more, of his-her urban location.<sup>225</sup>

In a barrage of multi-sensory experiences, *La Menesunda* yielded a frenetic assault on the viewer's senses.<sup>226</sup> Yet the distorted funhouse was deeply rooted in the physical realities of porteño life. As Minujín recalls,

Everyday Santatonin and I would walk down La Valle and Florida streets, and we would think about what abstract sensation we could convey in a limited space within the Insituto Di Tella...We came up with the whole project, the maze, at the table upstairs in Florida Garden café [for example], La Valle Street would be synthesized by a neon tunnel with the smell of fried food [...].

Now for the importance of *La Menesunda* [resided in] bringing people from the street into a sphere reserved for the elite, an institution like the Instituto that was, despite everything, conventional [...] and that's when I started with art involving mass participation; non-elitist art, art for everyone.<sup>227</sup>

From the artist's perspective *La Menesunda* conveyed a certain aura of the street through its brazen use of lights and sounds. Congested avenues were mirrored in the saturated corridors. However, urban life was not limited to the public sphere, the artists made reference to new domestic patterns and an accelerated consumer culture in the copious presence of television sets.<sup>228</sup> In addition, the insertion of a couple in bed hinted at the shifting attitude and acceptance of sex.<sup>229</sup> As a portrayal of the city, its lack of a central logic reveals a particular perception of Buenos Aires as chaotic, clamorous, and intensely

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<sup>225</sup> Jorge Glusberg, *Marta Minujín* (Buenos Aires: Gaglianone Establecimiento Grafico S.A., 1986), n.p.

<sup>226</sup> Flyer for *La Menesunda* (Buenos Aires, 1965) in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 107-9.

<sup>227</sup> Marta Minujín, interview by Victoria Noorthoorn, in Noorthoorn, *Marta Minujín*, 26.

<sup>228</sup> John King notes the sudden rise of consumer buying, in particularly televisions, with 200 televisions in 1952, 5,000 in 1953 and 800,000 in 1960. See King, *El Di Tella*, 45-46.

<sup>229</sup> See Valeria Manzano, "Sexualizing Youth: Morality Campaigns and Representations of Youth in Early 1960s Buenos Aires," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 4 (October 2005): 433-461.

energetic.<sup>230</sup> Such a characterization relates to the conflicting feelings of anxiety and celebration city inhabitants associated with Buenos Aires' metamorphosis. The work attempts to register the dislocating and disruptive experience of modern everyday life in Buenos Aires. While this dynamic emerged in Buenos Aires' under Perón in the 1950s, the erratic rhythms of urban life grew to new proportions in the 1960s, with an intensified sense of instability at the country's newly proposed trajectory.

Artists increasingly identified "the street" as a site to link art and ordinary life. The supposedly opposite realms of art (Di Tella Institute) and life (the street) converge in *La Menesunda*. This happens figuratively with semblances of Buenos Aires completely occupying CAV's gallery space. But as Minujín indicates, she believed there was something about *La Menesunda* that would attract "people from the street" into the Institute. In a sense this was achieved as an unprecedented number of visitors waited along Florida Street to experience the work. John King notes that *La Menesunda* broke all previous attendance records to Di Tella's exhibitions.<sup>231</sup> No longer was the institution a reserve for the elite, but rather it encompassed a more integrated vision of society. This development speaks to the fortuitous popularity of the exhibition, but also marks a shift

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<sup>230</sup> Natalia Milanesio's study dates Buenos Aires' change with the large migration of the rural class to the city under Peron. In very similar terms she describes the urban topography as a "chaotic, unpredictable and disorganized." See Natalia Milanesio, *Workers go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 129.

<sup>231</sup> John King notes a gradual increase in the number of visitors to Di Tella's CAV between 1963-7, suggesting that the center attracted a wider public than most art institutions. *La Menesunda*, however, broke previous records of visitors with an estimated number of visitors at 30,000. Its popularity was certainly emphasized, and perhaps even exaggerated with the fact that the exhibition could only allow 8 visitors enter at a time, thereby generating long lines. See King, *El Di Tella*, 100-3.

in Minujín's practice towards a more democratic ethos: an "art involving the masses," an "art for everyone."

In relationship to this artistic endeavor *La Menesunda* presented a new evolution of the object in that its "appropriation of the real" becomes more literal.<sup>232</sup> The non-art materials found in *La Menesunda* were used as themselves as much as they were used for representational ends. In this sense, this work oscillated between the ordinary and the extraordinary via its emphatic and animated materiality. Rather than a retreat from the chaotic streets, the viewer felt as though they were reintegrated into an amplified version of it. This was greatly achieved by the production of a large-scale environment, which creates an immersive and synesthetic experience. By shifting attention from the art object to the experience of it acting upon you, the artists of *La Menesunda* propose an art that is to be "lived" and not merely seen.

The blurred distinctions between art and life proposed in the artwork would prove to be a central problem to its reception as art. In response to the exhibition *El Cronista Comercial* bluntly asked the question "what does this creation have to do with art?"<sup>233</sup> The daily newspaper identified the exhibit with the emergence of an experiential art form with the potential to end a concept of art on traditional mediums. The newspaper understood the artwork's premise as situating aesthetic possibility outside of the museum, thereby "penetrating the life of the everyday."<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Ruben Santanonín's development of his practice also unfolds with *La Menesunda*, with a vision of a total art object that generated a multi-sensory experience. See Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 160.

<sup>233</sup> Fermin B. Fevre, "Problemas de La Menesunda," *El Cronista Comercial*, June 11, 1965.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

Another press source ran the headline “Buenos Aires flooded by a scandal that has a sufficient dose of innocence: Live art or art of the living?” (Figure 30).<sup>235</sup> The same article documented visitors’ assertions as “Buenos Aires has gone crazy” and “We have come to a museum. In a museum they exhibit works of art. What we have seen has to be – should be – art.” The magazine *Leoplán* printed “Exhibition? Spectacle?” and labeled the artists as desperate, sensational and exhibitionistic.<sup>236</sup> Accompanying photo documentation captured amused visitors moving throughout the difference situations (Figure 31).

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<sup>235</sup> "Buenos Aires inundado por un escandalo que tiene bastantes dosis de inocencia: ¿Arte vivo o arte de vivos?" *Atlántida*, August 1965.

<sup>236</sup> "La Menesunda o el fin de los ismos," *Leoplán*, June 16, 1965.

Buenos Aires inundado  
por un escándalo  
que tiene bastantes  
dosis de inocencia:  
¿mito o fraude?

# ¿ARTE VIVO O ARTE DE VIVOS?



Cueva de los cosméticos. Una azorada colegiala es esperada por la maquilladora. Una dice: "Que vengan bomberos y quemen todo".

Menesunda: el papel picado vuela por los aires, se mete en los ojos y el pelo, ahoga a las señoras y produce atroces espasmos.

Buenos Aires se ha enloquecido", clamó una señora en el hall del Museo Di Tella, en plena calle Florida, mientras nerviosa e incoherentemente mascullaba: "Tienen que venir los bomberos y prender fuego a todo esto". Mucha gente que había hecho hasta tres horas de interminable cola para ver *La Menesunda*, o más bien, para recorrer una especie de tren fantasma inundado de tóneles, escaleras, olor a creosota y cámaras heladas, opinaba igual que la señora vociferante. Otros emergían del "túnel" plenos de desconsuelo. O alegres y a los abrazos. Todos salían confundidos. Un pensamiento casi idéntico y simplísimo y obsesionaba: "Hemos venido a un museo. En un museo".

Figure 30. "Arte Vivo o arte de los vivos?", *Atlántida*, August, 1965





Figure 31. "La Menesunda o el fin de los ismos", *Leoplán*, June 16, 1965

Among the spirited commentary about the exhibition, the dominant sense of the work was one of confusion. Many critics called into question its artistic merit. At the same time the popular media appraised *La Menesunda*'s boisterous excitement as a modern spectacle. Indeed the exhibition's popularity, manifested in its press coverage, generated a specter of the artists as celebrities, obscuring their role as artists and the

original intentions of their work. Instead the event became assimilated into the surrounding media spectacle.

### **Imagining Community: a vital art**

The distinction between media spectacle and the emerging participatory art became increasingly unclear with subsequent works. *El Batacazo* (The long shot) featured at the 1965 edition of the Di Tella Awards and again a year later in New York at the Bianchini Gallery, was conceived of as a participatory environment made of disjointed vignettes. It was divided into four spaces, including one with neon outlines of soccer players' movements, another where participants would slide down to a naked doll in the likeness of Italian actress Virna Lisi, followed by a space with large-scale rubber dolls dressed as astronauts and a last section composed of glass walls encapsulating bees and rabbits (Figure 32). Once again Minujín received significant media attention for its experimental quality and resemblance to *La Menesunda*.



Figure 32. Marta Minujín, *El Batacazo*, 1965

In an interview featured in the newspaper *Confirmado*, Marta Minujín explains the work as:

a plastic event. Something I've made so that everyone can collaborate with me in its ongoing realization. Me, and the viewer, are on the same creative plane [...]

I insist that the artwork, as it is traditionally conceived, is a static construction. And today's man is extremely shocked by the surrounding commotion, at an intensity and speed of a jet [...] the easel painting cannot transmit nor register the changes that are happening minute by minute. A special dynamic is necessary to find, and that I encounter in my work.



*Reporter: So you call this work El Batacazo?*

Minujín: Of course, it pertains to a distinctive art, a vital art. And it doesn't reside in objects or mechanisms that I have realized, but in the instant the viewer lives [...]

*Reporter: A vital art is also a soccer game?*

Minujín: Precisely. Also, I want my works to live like a soccer game or a motor highway [...] I would like to place my works in the street, not in an exhibition space.<sup>237</sup>

In this interview Minujín makes several arguments that are important for our understanding of her overall work. First, Minujín identifies a paradigm shift in the culture and conventions of the modern Argentine, which necessitates an art that is synonymous with a fast-paced lifestyle. This new art for the new man described as “arte vital” is more attuned to the new urban realities. The reporter however makes an interesting correlation between Minujín’s “arte vital” and a soccer match, which the artist positively affirms.

Like the motor highway, the soccer game pertains to an arena outside of the exhibition space, meaning they are categorically defined as a non-artistic field. In very simple terms, they are “ordinary” or “everyday” experiences, which she defines as synonymous with her work. Unlike the motor highway, however, the soccer game is a collective experience characterized by its exuberant fans and energetic players. In 1964 Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre described soccer in the southern continent as a “Dionysian” spectacle, making reference to the fervor associated with the game.<sup>238</sup> This can be linked back to Minujín’s desire to make art of equal intensity. In Diana Taylor’s discussion of public spectacle in Argentina, she argues “public spectacle is a locus and

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<sup>237</sup> "Marta Minujín contra el caballete," *Confirmado*, November 7, 1965.

<sup>238</sup> Gilberto Freyre quoted in Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 112.

mechanism of communal identity through collective imaginings that constitute “nation.”<sup>239</sup> As Taylor explains, spectacle in Argentine history has repeatedly been a means of “imagining community.”<sup>240</sup> In the example of Perón’s populist spectacles, where masses of supporters regularly gathered at the Plaza de Mayo, the rally was the “visual arena” or stage where identity was collectively performed. It was the site where participants envisioned themselves as part of a unified body. Characteristic of the Perónist spectacle was a “pseudo-carnavalesque” festivity.<sup>241</sup> This sense of celebration and communal bond can be compared to the Argentine soccer game’s homogenization of a diverse fan base.<sup>242</sup> Therefore, Minujín’s comparison between her work and the soccer game not only aims to erase the distinction between her experiences and those attributed to “the everyday,” but also signals her desire to approximate the liberating effervescence and communal cohesion produced by the spectacle. In other words, her environments and happenings were the “visual arenas” where a new social and national identity is formed. Moreover, the lived experience or vitality that emerges from her work is tantamount to a fervent nature, through which an “imagined community” is possible.

As Laura Podalsky notes, immediately after Perón’s fall the city of Buenos Aires was a stage for spectacle as Perónists and his opponents used it as a tactic for consolidating socio-political alliances.<sup>243</sup> In the post-Perón period of the 1960s, with its many fissures across political, social and cultural arenas, new strategies were needed to build consensus. In the case of magazine *Primera Plana*, the street was a democratic site.

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, xi.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>243</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 29.

Scholar Laura Podalsky points to the recurrent column *La Ciudad: Diario de un ciudadano curioso*. In the series, an anonymous urbanite traversed the various parts of the city with an emphasis on physical and experiential zones of commonality. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the socio-political factions, the reporter “promoted a vision of urban community where people of diverse disposition unite over their shared fear of death or shared pleasure in song.”<sup>244</sup>

Within this larger context, Minujín’s work proposes a mechanism by which to develop a moment of horizontal identification and community spirit.<sup>245</sup> Returning to the example of *La Menesunda*, its redefinition of Di Tella’s space and its public unified the space between the “elitist” gallery space and the street, or more aptly collapsed their alienating structures.<sup>246</sup> What once seems to be a reinvention of art’s formal principles proves to be a more complex intervention in established socio-cultural relations. *La Menesunda* and *El Batacazo* sought to gather a divided public in a shared experience in amusement, pleasure and imagination, of which they were the main actors.<sup>247</sup>

### **Art merges into life: Mass media and pop culture**

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<sup>244</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 158.

<sup>245</sup> Antonio Berni’s *Juanita Laguna* is another example that critique’s industrial modernization in his comment on the city’s forgotten and marginalized communities in the Villa Miseria – Argentina’s shanty towns.

<sup>246</sup> The Instituto Di Tella solicited a study by the University of Buenos Aires’ Department of Sociology on the composition of public attendance at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. Their research confirmed that of the 15,000 visitors the majority came from high to middle class sectors of the society with a University education. See Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Vanguardias Artísticas y Cultura Popular, Transformaciones* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de American Latina S.A., 1973).

<sup>247</sup> The element of “participation,” “experience” and “fun” are notably contrary to Guy Debord’s concept of spectacle rooted in passivity and separation. See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983).

The critical response to *La Menesunda* and Di Tella's support of it was in part due to its artistic unconventionality, but how much were its arbiters also reacting to, what was to them, an unseemly display of apparent liberation from socio-cultural constraints? In the following years Di Tella would increasingly be considered a "liberated zone" for some, and thereby condemned for its perceived cultural freedom.<sup>248</sup> While the original premise of her work was not necessarily intended for the mass media, it was precisely Minujín's wholehearted embrace of spectacle that generated substantial media attention. As I've already suggested a consequence was the artists increasing notoriety, which quickly transformed Minujín and her work into an emblem of Argentine pop culture.

One October evening in 1964 the popular television entertainment program *La campana de Cristal* featured Marta Minujín as a guest. During her appearance the artist asked the seemingly unsuspecting host, "do you want me to make you a Happening?" Once he agreed Minujín proceeded to smear the studio camera with paint, pierce the canvas with her paintbrush and unleash a horse, hens and body builders onto the stage and live audience. The improvisational character was carefully staged for the live and TV. audience, playing into the public's idea of the happening and Minujín's work as an impetuous, unrestrained, hyperbolic art form. As part of the artifice or genuinely deceived, *Primera Plana* reported it as "one of the largest scandals ever on Argentine television."<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 142-4.

<sup>249</sup> "Happenings", *Primera Plana*, November 10, 1964.

In *Leyendo la noticias en el Rio de la Plata* (Reading the news on the Rio de la Plata) Minujín's proclaimed Happening involved walking along the river, reading a newspaper that she then wrapped herself in before entering the river. According to the artist, "it was as if the news was swallowing me up, sucking me in [...] The idea was how art dissolves in the news, in the mass media."<sup>250</sup> In contrast to the televised happening, the event was composed and performed for the vicinity of bystanders. According to Minujín, the work also evoked formal parallels to happenings, which similarly wrapped bodies. For instance, Allan Kaprow's wrapped bodies at Grand Central Station in *Calling* or Claes Oldenburg's mummy-like figures in *Snapshots from the City* (Figure 33 and 34). The point, however, was to comment on the mass media.

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<sup>250</sup> Marta Minujín, interview by Victoria Noorthoorn, in Noorthoorn, *Marta Minujín*, 25.



Figure 33. Allan Kaprow, *Calling*, 1965



Figure 34. Claes Oldenburg, *Snapshots from the City*, 1960

Together the happenings *La Campana de Cristal* and *Leyendo las noticias en el Río de la Plata* reveal Minujín's turn towards the mass media as another site in which to produce her work and rethink her artistic strategies. In her television performance Minujín plays on the more outrageous and shocking aspects of her practice to generate a mediated spectacle. With television's ascendancy as a popular and dominant medium in 1960s Argentina, it offered both a new aesthetic appeal and

a promise of mass audiences.<sup>251</sup> Therefore, in Minujín's persistent search for an art form rooted in public participatory experience, the street as the site for such possibilities was reimaged in television. Furthermore, the artist enhanced her access to the masses and extended her artwork into the everyday realm of people's living rooms, while severing the temporal immediacy and spatial dimension in her earlier work.

The artist's experiment with television as a new technique and language remains relevant to her emphasis on quotidian objects and life. In her exploitation of the visual medium, Minujín deepens her relationship with TV entertainment as a form of popular culture. In this regard, earlier associations made between her work and popular cultures are more closely aligned. Additionally, her initial mode of spectacle predicated on activity, production and shared creativity is lost to a submissive audience, thereby dulling the more radical aspects of her work.

The second happening, *Leyendo la noticias en el Rio de la Plata*, presented as her collapse into the mass media can be read in two ways. On the one hand Minujín affirms the gradual assimilation of her work into the mass media, underscoring the ways in which the press has transformed her work into media spectacle in addition to her own willing involvement in that integration. On the other hand she understands herself as being consumed by the media, to the extent that she becomes fully inscribed in popular journalism and other forms of mass media as a commodified image.

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<sup>251</sup> Television in Argentina arrives in 1951 as a state operated system, with its privatization in 1958 under Arturo Frondizi.



This work can be compared to the artwork *Por que son tan geniales?* (Why are they so great?). At the juncture of Viamonte and Calle Florida – the center of a popular pedestrian zone in the city center known as the Manzana Loca featuring art galleries, the University of Buenos Aires, bookshops and bars – stood a large billboard boldly stating *Por que son tan geniales?* (*Why are they so great?*) next to the self-portraits of artists Carlos Squirru, Edgardo Gimenez and Dalila Puzzovio. In addition to their imposing grins, the artists were each shown with their artwork. Squirru carries a blood transfusion bag in his hand, Puzzovio holds her discarded orthopedic casts and Gimenez is shown with his sculptural objects made of industrial materials (Figure 35). The artists installed the billboard for one month in 1965, free from any gallery representation. Furthermore, the billboard was hand painted by Meca publicity company, in the typical style of contemporary movie advertisements.



Figure 35. Carlos Squirru, Edgardo Gimenez and Dalila Puzzovio, *Por que son tan geniales?*, 1965

The artists were the same ones deemed the exponents of Argentine Pop Art in the 1964 exhibition *Six Artists in Lirolay: Sexteto* at Galeria Lirolay. In comparison to their work in that exhibition only a year ago, their billboard signals a transition in the development of Pop in Argentina. In the recurrent modality, that is Pop art's connection to the everyday urban environment, the artwork advances this notion by fully embedding the artwork into the public street in a complete negation of the gallery space. A clear motivation was to transcend the limitations of the

gallery and its narrow audience with a strategy to simulate channels of mass communication. Furthermore, in the photo-documentation of the billboard we are given a fragment of Buenos Aires dominated by commerce. The work, situated over a storefront, blends well into the panorama of advertisements for coffee and cigarettes. This new form of communication both pursues an expanded viewership, but also appears to be contending for their attention among myriad commercial forces.<sup>252</sup> The pronounced image nearly outshines the rest, yet in posing the question *Why are they so great?* the artists waver between an interrogation and assertion of their allure. In reference to Squirru, critic Samuel Paz described his artistic exploits in advertising as a rejection of sophisticated style and propagandistic devices, for a humorous display of everyday fantasy.<sup>253</sup> While Gimenez's confluence of painting and graphic design came together in lofty themes, similarly parodying high and low forms of art. Puzzovio, if we recall, was the advocate of art's basic pleasures and amusement. Collectively, their work registers in rather irreverent terms the impact of the ascending media culture on art, and an increasing cross-pollination of the two forms.

This new relationship between art and media defines a critical juncture in Pop art's development in Buenos Aires. Increasingly the continuum between Pop art and popular culture is reinforced in the new material of everyday (visual) experience. We are reminded here of Pop art's traditional relationship to popular culture first

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<sup>252</sup> "La generacion de Rita Pavone," *Primera Plana*, June 23, 1968.

<sup>253</sup> Paz doesn't clarify the term fantasy, but within an understanding of pop culture fantasy has consistently referred to as entertainment and escape found in fictional representations. See Samuel Paz, "No quiero, ni pretendo, que estas líneas expliquen los cuadros de Squirru," in *Carlos Squirru: pinturas* (Buenos Aires: Galería Bonino, 1963).

proposed by British art critic Lawrence Alloway. In his essay *The Arts and the Mass Media* he largely objects to American art critic Clement Greenberg's critique of kitsch, also described as "mass art," as the detritus of modernization. Alloway argues that this type of artistic production aptly registered the rapid changes brought on by modernization: "Popular art, as a whole, offers imagery and plots to control the changes in the world; everything in our culture that changes is the material of the popular arts."<sup>254</sup>

In Argentina, where the process of capitalism was nascent and uneven the meaning of the "popular" was as elusive as its counterpart Pop art.<sup>255</sup> In the artworks discussed thus far popular culture, and its various designations as mass and commercial culture, is consistently defined by its exposure to a greater audience or the "masses", yet specifically contained within an urban context.<sup>256</sup> The artists' conflicting relationship to the institution, as representative of hermetic culture, designates another motif of the popular. Such a binary, however, is complicated by the artists' collaboration with mainly private institutions: Galeria Lirolay and the Di

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<sup>254</sup> Lawrence Alloway, "The Arts and the Mass Media," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 715-17.

<sup>255</sup> A consideration of the multiple theoretical frameworks of Popular culture within Latin America produces various definitions that inadequately describe Argentina's specific context. For example, categories of Pop culture tend to range across three interconnected expressions of the authentically rural or folkloric subject who is endangered by modernization, the appropriation and simulation of advanced capitalist cultural models and those produced by oppressed sectors of society. See William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity : Popular Culture in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>256</sup> The masses in this sense can be compared to Peron's masses, named *Descamisados* (shirtless), whom were the rural, working class supporters. The juxtaposition illustrates the emergence of a new subject that is largely urban, middle-class with consumer power.

Tella Institute.<sup>257</sup> Other aspects that lend to a more nuanced category are the original uses of local colloquialisms and cultural icons. In its new formation, however, Pop art abounded in references that indicated the internationalism of the artistic avant-garde, and more noticeably commercial forces.<sup>258</sup>

### **A question of the masses**

As Chapter One explains the initial years after Perón's removal was largely about destroying any remains of its recent past as a starting point for a new future. Left in the aftermath of Perón's legacy, the ongoing transition stressed *desarrollo* (development) and *integración* (integration). Literary critic Jaime Rest stands out as one the first to assess the changing socio-cultural structures of the country during this period.<sup>259</sup>

Intellectuals like Rest were involved in diagnosing the country's condition and fate. In his essay *Cuatro Hipótesis de la Argentina* Rest outlines a nation in crisis stemming from a "bipolar structure" – a deep socio-economic and political schism.<sup>260</sup> His search for a post-Perón solution centered on answering a fundamental question: *qué hacer con las masas?*

(what to do with the masses?) The masses in this sense alternately makes reference to the

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<sup>257</sup> The continual relationship with these private institutions versus the Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM) or the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA) sheds light on these spaces' nebulous position as an institutional intermediary. It is precisely this role that allows these same spaces to "reorder the cultural market" in unprecedented ways. Cultural theorist Nestor Garcia Canclini notes, "The industrial bourgeoisie accompanies the productive modernization and the introduction of new habits in consumption that itself promotes with foundations and experimental centers destined to win for private initiative the leading role in the reordering of the cultural market." Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 59.

<sup>258</sup> This can be compared to the preceding period which actively sought to nationalize its commercial culture, rooted in national representations and attitudes

<sup>259</sup> Many considered Rest a precursor to the establishment of sociology and cultural studies in the country. See Jorge Rivera, *La Investigación en comunicación social en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Puntosur, 1987); Aníbal Ford, *Navegaciones: Comunicación, cultura y crisis* (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1994); Carlos Altamirano, *Peronismo y cultural de izquierda* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2001).

<sup>260</sup> Jaime Rest, "Cuatro hipótesis de la Argentina," in *Ensayos sobre cultura y literatura nacional* (Bahía Blanca: Universidad Nacional del Sur, 2010), n.p.

Perónist mass of supporters – the expanding rural immigrant body concentrated in the city, but also a majority population composed of the upwardly mobile working class and middle class. As Mariano Zarowsky explains, Perónism was a particular process that triggered Argentina's passage from a traditional to mass society.<sup>261</sup> Thus, for Rest the masses were key to gaining a new social consensus in a post-Perón Argentina.

In Gino Germani's first sociological studies in the country, his course of action implies integrating the majority into the nation's life. Germani's proposal was for an effective democracy with horizontal socio-political participation. In order to achieve this he calls for improved political liberties, economic and cultural distribution.<sup>262</sup> Culture, like politics, maintains a division between the elite and the masses. The problem is that the majority is consistently "excluded from the greatest values of culture," inhibiting the establishment of a democratic mass."<sup>263</sup> For Germani, a means of creating equal access to cultural production is through the pedagogical use of media technologies. Here he anticipates Minujín's position that similarly believes in the media as a way of bringing elite cultural forms to the masses.

Germani's position thus reframes Rest's original question: *que hacer con las masas?* as *que hacer con la cultura de masas?* (what do with mass culture)?<sup>264</sup> The anthology *Argentina 1930-1961*, published in 1961 by the editorial group behind the

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<sup>261</sup> Mariano Zarowsky, "Peronismo y cultura de masas en la Emergencia de los Estudios en Comunicación en la Argentina: Itinerario de Jaime Rest," *Revista Redes.com* 10 (2014): 192, Accessed January 5, 2015, <http://revista-redes.hospedagemdesites.ws/index.php/revista-redes/article/view/337/364>.

<sup>262</sup> Gino Germani, "La integración de las masas a la vida política y el totalitarismo," in *Germani: la renovación intelectual de la sociología*, ed. A. Blanco. Bernal (Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2006), 203-4.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

<sup>264</sup> Zarowsky, "Peronismo y cultura de masas," 192.

journal *Sur*, signals an increasing interest in the topic of mass culture in understanding national life. Although the publication explores a wide range of topics a large section is dedicated to essays on radio, television, film, sports and the press. Among them is José Enrique Miguens' publication that defines the masses as a socially heterogeneous group of individuals that are largely alienated from each other and suffer from a "passive receptivity."<sup>265</sup> Thinking in terms of mass media communication Miguens' structure situates "transmitters" on one end as the active producers of "stimulation and the passive "receivers" on the other end. His argument will have larger implications in the following chapter when the mass media becomes central to the debates on public consciousness and participation. Yet Miguens' essay reveals the way in which mass culture and mass media become sites for thinking about Rest's initial question.

This can be compared to the journal *Ruba (Revista de la Universidad)* that dedicated its 19<sup>th</sup> issue from 1965 to mass culture. The director of the journal Noel Sbarra presents the topic as one that corresponds to "an irruption of the masses in the cultural field."<sup>266</sup> In this edition is Rest's essay "*Situación del arte en la era tecnológica*" (Art's situation in the technological era). Rest largely echoes Germani's position that speaks of the mass media, such as radio, cinema, television, press, as tools to exercise "*acción pedagógica*" (pedagogical action) towards the masses:

a rational pedagogical action for the purpose of engaging the public of all ages and sectors in a vast and ambitious project with the ultimate aim to raise the cultural level of the community.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> José Enrique Miguens, "Un análisis del fenómeno," in *Argentina 1930-1960*, edited by Jorge A. Paíta. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1961. 329.

<sup>266</sup> Noel Sbarra, "De la Dirección" *Revista de la Universidad* 19, (Jan-Dec. 1965): 6

<sup>267</sup> Jaime Rest, "Situación del arte en la era tecnológica," in *Arte, literatura y cultura popular* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2006), 89.

While this brief aside into the formation of an intellectual discourse helps to frame the period in which Minujín and artists associated with Pop art are working in, I suggest that the question of the masses that underlies these essays is also imperative to the avant-garde's new interest in the city, popular culture, community, participation, mass audiences and mass media. In other words, at stake for Minujín and her developing practice was the problem of an elite culture and its relationship to the masses, but more importantly in making a gesture toward fostering social consensus and perhaps even imagining a post-Perón Argentina.

### **The blurring of Pop and Pop culture**



Figure 36. Delia Cancela and Pablo Mesejean, *Love and Life*, 1965



*Love and Life*, with the subtitle “exhibition in color,” by artists Delia Cancela and Pablo Mesejean, decorated Galeria Lirolay with brightly colored flowers that spelled the exhibition title. Flight attendants in plastic clothing welcomed the visitor with multi-colored eyeglasses framed with flowers. The central wall contained an animated painting of astronauts suspended in space (Figure 36). In their submission to the 1966 Di Tella Awards, Cancela and Mesejean produced *Retrato de Muchachos y Muchachas (Portrait of Men and Women)* – a painted triptych of emblematic pop cultural entertainers Sony and Cher, Antonie and Karine, Zou Zou and Benjamin amidst a field of flowers. In an accompanying text, Cancela and Mesejean mark the features that had come to be associated with Pop:

We love sunny days, plants, the Rolling Stones, white stockings, pink, silver, Sony and Cher, Rita Tushingam and Bob Dylan, St. Laurent and the young savage look, popular music, camp, sky blue and pink, stripped shirts, photographs taken of us, Alice and Wonderland, bronzed skin...the sea, dancing, magazines, movies...<sup>268</sup>

In this example, Pop art can be understood within Alloway’s original definition as the usage of pop art sources or the “heroes of mass media” in an art context.<sup>269</sup> The artists’ juxtaposition of U.S. and European fashion, music and film with whimsical objects and signs represents a particular lifestyle, mirrored in commercialized visions of leisurely enjoyment.<sup>270</sup> “Life” was no longer situated in the frantic streets of Buenos Aires, but was

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<sup>268</sup> Maria Jose Herrera, *Pop!*, 27.

<sup>269</sup> See Lawrence Alloway, “Pop Art Since 1949,” *The Listener* 67, no. 1761 (1962): 1085.

<sup>270</sup> Cancela later affirms this point stating, “una cultura, regida por la mezcla y la ingenuidad en un momento de cambios y modernización en el que la viveza criolla se develaba método insuficiente. Por eso, si el arte debía volver a ser parte de la vida, los íconos de la cultura de masas eran los signos/valores compartidos por la emergente sociedad de consumo... Las obras se inspiraron en la factura rápida y sumaria de los cartelones cinematográficos de la rutilante calle Lavalle, donde reinaban los ídolos que representaban. Así, los homenajes a las modelos (Kouka, Jeanne Shrimpton), cantantes pop (Sony & Cher, Bob Dylan) y a la cultura

based on a pastiche of imported images that masked the dynamic idiosyncrasies of porteño life. The aim, however, was the same: to evoke sensations of pleasure and liberated desires.<sup>271</sup> Returning to Minujín, her own explanation reiterates this point:

We define ourselves as “pop”...Popular, popular art, art that everyone in the world can understand, happy art, fun art, comic art. Not an art that is necessary to understand, an art that is necessary to like, that makes pop and you understand it. It has to be an art that communicates. I communicate very well with people from the country, they like very much what I do, I do things for television.<sup>272</sup>

While Minujín and proclaimed Pop artists’ persistent manufacture of diversion was often perceived as socially disengaged, this component was a prospect in mobilizing an art form for/of the masses and a strategy for art’s democratization.<sup>273</sup> Minujín positions “happy” and “fun art” as a basic element of experience that doesn’t require historical perspective or cultured knowledge to appreciate it. Therefore, it challenged the conventional consumption of culture that necessitated the privilege of an “aesthetic disposition” and thus erased a determinant of social differentiation.<sup>274</sup> Art is made

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juvenil internacional de la que se sentían partícipes, evidenció que el ideal de belleza ya estaba en otra parte. Como señaló Gianni Vattimo, en la posmodernidad el arte se disuelve en la “estetización de la vida”. See Maria José Herrera, “De los 60s al canon de Barbie: Sobre la artista Delia Cencela con motivo de su última muestra en Rosario antes de la irreparable pérdida de gran parte de su obra,” *Ramona* 13 (June 2001): 34.

<sup>271</sup> For a more theoretical exploration of these terms I turn to Baudrillard’s theory of consumption, which introduces notions of “happiness” and the “fun morality” within a consumer society as the “imperative to enjoy oneself, to exploit to one’s full potential for thrills, pleasures or gratification.” See the Jean Baudrillard, *Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Paris: Denöel, 1970), 49-98.

<sup>272</sup> King, *El Di Tella*, 362.

<sup>273</sup> Understood from Allan Kaprow’s perspective the Happenings’ own mode of play was the nucleus for participation and social enactment.

<sup>274</sup> This term, posed by cultural theorist Nestor Garcia Canclini, is: “To appreciate a work of modern art one has to know the history of the field in which the work was produced, have sufficient competence to distinguish, by its formal characteristics... This aesthetic disposition, which is acquired through belonging to a social class – that is, by possessing economic and education resources that are also scarce...” Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 16.

accessible both by its literal, although mediated, reach (as far as the Argentine provinces) and symbolic freedom from highbrow aesthetics.<sup>275</sup>

In Nestor Garcia Canclini's essay *Vanguardias Artísticas y Cultura Popular* (Artistic Vanguardies and Popular Culture) he discusses the "ludic dimension" in Argentine art, ultimately posing the question of its socio-political efficacy. Canclini recognizes the potential for play to disrupt codified social behaviors and relationships, but he questions to what degree can they truly transcend the temporal space in which play is performed, to transform socio-political conditions. Situating Alberto Greco within the category of play, Canclini attributes his form of contemplation and direct communication with elements of reality to subtly "alter" conventional social patterns and behaviors. The happening in particular radically questions traditional cultural structures, largely amending the roles of both artist and viewer. He assesses Argentina's "obra lúdica" (playful artwork) as provocative, but fundamentally short of integrating itself into, and reshaping socio-political reality. According to Canclini, the artists' failure was largely due to a critical misunderstanding of the social or mass media structures it intended to operate in.<sup>276</sup> To extend this argument further, the problematic that resulted from Pop's engagement in popular culture wasn't so much the easy appropriation, particular of a U.S. and European vernacular. The adoption of international icons reflects a complex flow of cultural production, which was incorporated into the daily life and tastes of Argentina as

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<sup>275</sup> Again Alloway makes this initial claim in his essay, stating "mass art is urban and democratic". Alloway, *The Arts and Mass Media*, 716.

<sup>276</sup> Successful examples include later works: Tucuman Arde and Grupo Octubre. See Canclini, "Vanguardias Artísticas y Cultura Popular," 253-280.

a symbol of the country's renewed openness and modernity.<sup>277</sup> Rather the issue is the way in which Pop succumbed to the industry's reappropriation and vulgarization.

In 1966 the Di Tella Institute's annual awards, juried by Lawrence Alloway and German art critic Otto Hahn, cemented Pop art as a genuine development in Argentina.<sup>278</sup> Unlike the 1964 edition, the once dubious category was no longer a central point of contention, but held a monopoly over the awards.<sup>279</sup> In addition to the large representation of local Pop artists in the competition, the first prize went to Susana Salgado's oversized, illuminated acrylic sunflowers and the second award to Delia Puzzovio's portrait of herself on large billboard. Alloway observed,

The artists of the young generation, that dominate the exhibition, have made a synthesis of two stylistic possibilities. Folkloric elements, persistent in Argentine art, have fused with international Pop forms and themes. The result is an exuberance of a local inheritance that has assimilated into a genuine international style.<sup>280</sup>

The same year *Primera Plana* dedicated an issue to "Pop" with a feature article titled *Pop? Una Nueva Manera de Vivir (Pop? A New Way to Live)*.<sup>281</sup> The popular magazine decorated their cover with a photograph of the representative Pop artists in Argentina: Carlos Squirru, Miguel A. Rondano, Delia Puzzovio, Edgardo Giménez, Pablo Mesejean, Delia Cancela, Juan C. Stoppani, Susana Salgado, Alfredo Rodríguez Arias (Figure 37).

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<sup>277</sup> In addition to culture, a general interest among the working- and middle-classes to consume U.S. products as a representation of one's own modernity is documented in Ernesto Goldar, *Buenos Aires: Vida Cotidiana en la década del 50s* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Plus Ultra, 1980).

<sup>278</sup> Hahn shared the same supportive sentiment for Pop Art that is illustrated in his essay. Otto Hahn, "Pop art et Happenings," *Temps Modernes* (January 1964): 1318-31.

<sup>279</sup> Of the fourteen participants six were working as Pop Artists: Delia Cancela and Pablo Mesejean, Juan Stoppani, Susana Salgado, Dalila Puzzovio and Alfredo Rodríguez Arias. *Premio Nacional Instituto Torcuato Di Tella 1966*. (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1966).

<sup>280</sup> Lawrence Alloway, "El único rasgo singular del Premio Di Tella 1966" (Buenos Aires, 1966) Archivos Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Accessed November 9, 2012.

<sup>281</sup> "Pop: ?Una nueva manera de vivir?," *Primera Plana* 191 (August 22-29, 1966).

The feature extended the definition of Pop into nearly every aspect of life from the television series Batman to fashion, film, postcards of Capri, parties called “happenings”, commercial posters that resemble comics, effectively collapsing different cultural modes and practices together.<sup>282</sup>

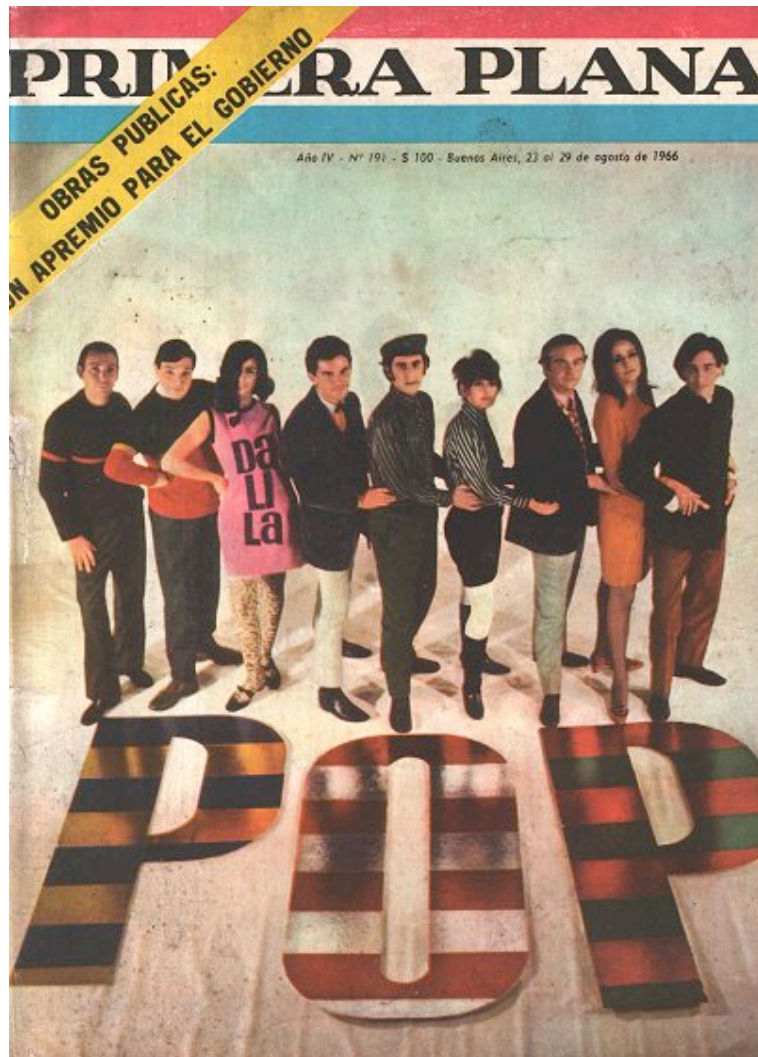


Figure 37. Cover page of *Primera Plana*, August 23-29, 1966

<sup>282</sup> Puzzovio confirms this point in a separate article when she said, “Everything is Pop” while Squirru agreed that Pop can be anything from the random act of breaking a rock to soccer to a nonsensical artist hanging from his feet as he paints a picture. “Discusión sobre arte pop ¿queda algo por hacer?” Unknown newspaper, (Buenos Aires, n.d.), Archive Fundación Espigas, Accessed November 20, 2012.

By this point Pop is ubiquitous, with it having achieved a legitimate place in Argentina's artistic field, a level of international recognition and more significantly a seamless integration into mass culture. Under its diluted identity Pop's proposed articulation of life, steeped in levity, was quickly conflated with happenings in what daily newspaper *La Razón* referred to as a "pop party."<sup>283</sup> From the perspective of the mass media, happenings were repeatedly described in terms of impromptu festive gatherings among Buenos Aires' renowned personalities and eccentrics, aptly described by the monthly magazine *Claudia* as, "The party [...] in that everyone participates with equal fun [...] what occurred here this evening is called a happening."<sup>284</sup> *Confirmado* offers further insight:

Not one week passes without two or three happenings in Buenos Aires: painters, ex-politicians, economists, dancers, young bohemians, psychoanalysts, diplomats, actresses, philosophers, industrialists, models, sociologists meet in the house of someone and they launch a spontaneous parade. They search for a new form of communication and some pretend to be creating a spectacle of artistic value.

Actually, anything can be called a happening and many people use the word as a noun to designate a situation or object that they cannot define with better precision.<sup>285</sup>

Such reinterpretations of the happening evoke *La Menesunda*'s superficial image as a vivacious collective experience similarly propagated by the press. Contrary to the image presented in the press that happenings were rampant at this time, intellectual and theorist Oscar Masotta observed that only a few were actually realized in Argentina, explaining it as "a strange phenomenon, that does not correspond to the works (that is, actual

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<sup>283</sup> "Una fiesta exclusiva," *La Razon*, October 7, 1966.

<sup>284</sup> Like *Primera Plana*, *Claudia* was established in 1957 as a publication for the new modern woman. "Fiestas de jugar: happenings," *Claudia*, October 1966.

<sup>285</sup> *Confirmado* was launched in 1965 with a style very similar to *Primera Plana*. "El Sindicato de happenings," *Confirmado*, September 1, 1966.

happenings that were produced) it would seem to have emerged from nothing.”<sup>286</sup> This discrepancy reveals a set of opposing definitions associated with the term and a certain triumph of media spectacle over reality.

As Masotta explains, the Happening became something “irrational, spontaneous, inconsequential, festive and a bit scandalous.” Furthermore, in Masotta’s book on happenings, Madela Ezcurra charges the press with fabricating an altogether different meaning, consequently obfuscating its artistic underpinnings.<sup>287</sup> Worse was the press’ refashioning of the happening as “a form of improvised entertainment for the high classes and in particular dedicated to the youth, especially the most audacious, the supporters of the new moral attitude”<sup>288</sup> From Ezcurra’s perspective, the genre was lost to an unwieldy interpretation of happenings that operated on a logic of spectacle. On the one hand Ezcurra decries the press’ co-optation and repackaging of the happening as a corrupting influence over its aesthetic value, as Pop, happenings and its mediated image yielded a new meaning embodied in principles of novelty, trends, and commodity fetishism. On the other hand her comment reveals how these modern sensibilities were localized in the everyday experiences of a privileged few. As opposed to the democratizing claims put forth by the first proponents of Pop, a paradoxical image emerged that was a modified egalitarianism specific to a new generation of young middle class cosmopolitans.

In Podalsky’s interrogation of *Primera Plana* the magazine and those that closely emulated its style, such as *Claudia* and *Confirmado*, solicited and fostered

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<sup>286</sup> Masotta, *Consciencia y Estructura*, 274.

<sup>287</sup> Just a year later Allan Kaprow, in his essay *Pinpointing Happenings*, similarly noted the muddled fate of Happenings’ as virtually meaning anything from Bobby Kennedy’s political campaign to discos to “life itself. Allan Kaprow, “Pinpointing Happenings,” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 84-89.

<sup>288</sup> Oscar Masotta, *Happenings* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1967), 194.

“trendy” readers as part of their effort to modernize the Argentine cultural field and by extension the urban population.<sup>289</sup> Clearly, the happening figured into a particular mode of appeal. In art’s discarding of its traditional characteristics, in a deliberate posturing as something culled from life, the happening drifted too far into everyday conventions.

While art history has often dismissed this period for its perceived frivolity Pop art was its own distinct cultural project, registering Buenos Aires’ dynamic transformations through the particularities of its material culture. The mundane art object was the instrument of an avant-garde experiment in both the dissolution of artistic tradition and the development of the happening. Together these forms facilitated the production of art’s spectacular experience of the everyday. As the works outlined in the chapter suggest, a notion of “the everyday” was a distinct conceptualization of socio-cultural structures, such as urban space and the public. Moreover, “the everyday” was a catalyst by which to forge a new consensus. At the nexus of art and culture was the proliferation of the mass media, which was also subject to artistic exploration and reflection, with the majority of examples demonstrating a complicit engagement. With a particular delight and immersion artists instigated their own inflated image, basking in media attention as a means to access a mass audience and further integrate their art into everyday circuits. In this way Pop played with the changes brought on by new media technologies, but hardly probed these same mechanisms. Rather Pop became implicated in a pop culture experience associated with youthful exuberance, experimentation, and spectacle, with artists as the new icons.

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<sup>289</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 170.



As I have already implied, critic Oscar Masotta enters into this climate with a decisive response that mitigates the swelling energy and recuperates happening's social endeavor. The next chapter will argue for his pivotal role in the development and demise of happenings in the evolution of the Argentine avant-garde. The questions and concerns dealt with in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, such as the continued emphasis of the "real," art's relationship to the masses and a dematerialization of forms will be viewed through a kaleidoscopic lens, characteristic of Masotta's intellectual diversity. While I continue to thread the influence of France and the U.S. through Argentina's artistic history, the following chapter argues for a way of thinking about this relationship in terms of translation.

### Chapter 3: Rethinking the Happening

In September 1965 the Di Tella Institute hosted two conferences titled *Arte Pop y Semántica* (Pop art and Semantics).<sup>290</sup> The leading organizer and speaker was Oscar Masotta, a relatively new figure in Buenos Aires' artistic scene. As the last chapter discussed, 1964 was a pivotal year that gave rise to a local expression of Pop art and happenings. The overwhelming presence of Pop locally and abroad forced art critics to turn their attention to the trend. In the case of Jorge Romero Brest, as Director of Di Tella's CAV, he lent his support of many so-called Pop artists vis-à-vis exhibitions and prizes.<sup>291</sup> However when it came to interpreting and contextualizing this work, Brest was often conflicted and confused.<sup>292</sup> Nevertheless, he attempted to explain the phenomenon, often in terms of its place within a teleological framework of modern art. Masotta arrived to Di Tella feeling equally compelled to discern the significance of Pop art and later happenings, but as Andrea Giunta explains, "Unlike Romero Brest, Masotta was not troubled by the artistic tradition of modernism."<sup>293</sup> Rather Masotta was enticed by art practices which were both critical and antagonistic towards its artistic predecessors, which Pop art represented in relationship to Abstract Expressionism. But as the title of his conference suggests Masotta was far more interested in situating Pop art as a critical departure from art's traditional mode of communication. More specifically, Pop artists, namely Andy Warhol, George Segal, Jim Dine and Roy Lichtenstein, problematize the

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<sup>290</sup> Masotta's lectures were later published in a book. See Oscar Masotta, *El "pop-art"* (Buenos Aires: Nuevos Esquemas, 1967).

<sup>291</sup> Jorge Romero Brest gave his own series of lectures on the topic at Di Tella in 1966.

<sup>292</sup> To understand Brest's writings more fully read Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism and Politics*.

<sup>293</sup> Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 181.

relationship between the image and the real object that the image makes reference to by revealing their semiotic structure:

Pop painters have revealed the point in which the plastic arts reproduce symbols and not things [...] 'Before' the work there doesn't exist a reality that is not already represented.<sup>294</sup>

Masotta's reading of their works highlights the importance of the image as a language whose meaning is derived from preexisting information or "codes." In the example of George Segal's 1962 *The Bus Driver* the plaster sculpture of an anonymous bus driver seated in a reconstructed platform of a real bus implies the system of "codes" that stand for something other than the physical identity of the driver (Figure 38). More broadly the bus driver or object signifies the social conventions associated with the individual, his job and place in society.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Masotta, *El "pop-art,"* 14

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

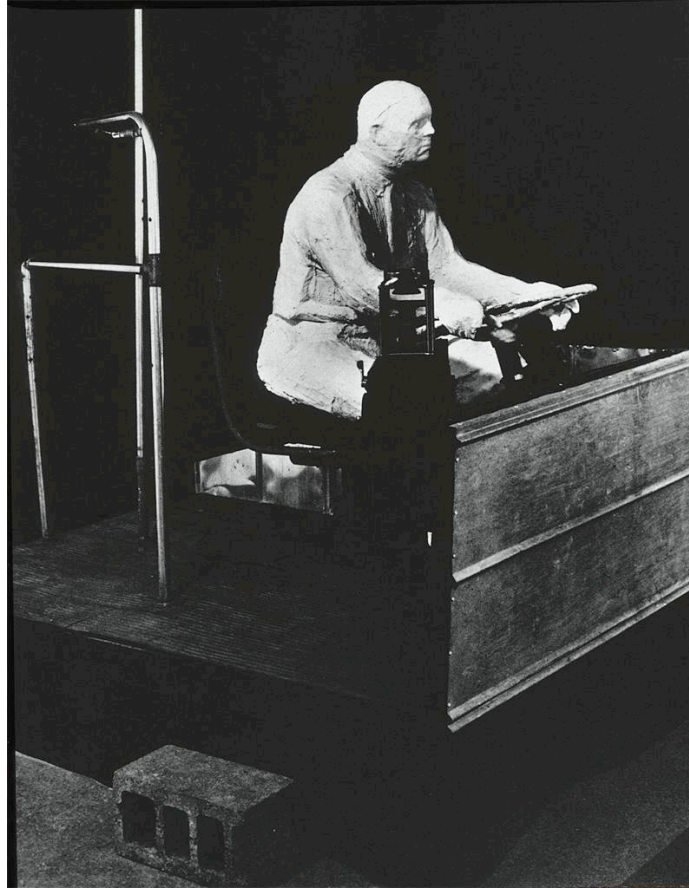


Figure 38. George Segal, *Bus Driver*, 1962

In Warhol's reproductions of Marilyn Monroe or Campbell's soup cans, Masotta understands them as "semantic" interrogations of mass-mediated images. He writes that Warhol "aims to convert his multiplications into a sign," which "make us feel the presence of the code," and thereby reveals a deeper structure of mass cultural processes.<sup>296</sup> The importance of this work is that it speaks directly to, and is a symptom of, a postwar reality characterized by a saturation of mass information and communication. By demystifying language, and more specifically the historically specific

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<sup>296</sup> Masotta's use of the terms "sign" and "code" derive from his eccentric background and vast reading of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, Roman Jakobson and Jean-Paul Sartre, influences which will be discussed further in this chapter. *Ibid*, 64.

language of mass media, Masotta saw the potential for Pop Art to generate a new socio-cultural consciousness:

Pop art is not a realism of object, nor a realism of its content. The only “reality” here is language, that is: those products of social action, those semantic circuits, those restrictions of norms and prohibitions that lie at the center of social life, that are called codes and they govern and determine individual life.<sup>297</sup>

This chapter charts Masotta’s brief, but significant intervention in the artistic field. As I begin to suggest he emerges in response to the excitement and attention around the illustrious purveyors of Pop and happenings, establishing an interpretative frame for these contemporary art practices, while also trying to reorient their trajectory. In contrast to the preceding chapters, this discussion turns to the central role of the critic in shaping the avant-garde in relation to Argentina’s process of modernization. In the case of Masotta, he is responsible for identifying Argentina’s formulation of the avant-garde in terms of “negation” and “dematerialization.” Rather than think of how these concepts forecast Argentina’s experiment with Conceptual forms of art, I argue that they describe an evolution towards the completion of an avant-garde project.

Beatriz Sarlo once suggested that Masotta was representative of a new type of “hybrid intellectual” in Argentina’s post-Perón period that synthesized philosophy with sociology, culture and politics in different and innovative ways.<sup>298</sup> This chapter looks at the deepening influence of these other disciplines on the visual arts. More specifically, I consider how the nuances of his intellectual formation, with an emphasis on Structuralism, informs art’s place within the modern world characterized by a mass

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<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>298</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, interview by John King in King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino*. 303.

society, mass culture and communication. On this basis I argue that Masotta is not unlike Greco and Minujín who invoke the everyday and reality, but with a theoretical sophistication insists on problematizing their transparency.

### **The engaged intellectual**

My brief introduction to Masotta's thinking on Pop opens up the discussion to his larger intellectual orientation and how that reshaped Buenos Aires' artistic field. Once again in contrasting Jorge Romero Brest with Masotta I wish to distinguish not only their divergent theses on Pop, but also emphasize Masotta's novelty; not only in terms of offering a new voice and perspective on the topic of Pop art, but also in his approach to the role of cultural critic and theorist. This position in part had something to do with the idiosyncratic nature of his professional identity and intellectual formation.

By 1965 Masotta had written very little on art, instead concentrating on literature. His study of Argentine novelist Roberto Arlt was published that year following a body of literary criticism featured in the journal *Contorno*.<sup>299</sup> Revealing a preoccupation with existential phenomenology, Masotta's essays largely expounded on the works of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Marx as a means of translating foreign thinkers to an Argentine readership. But Masotta also mined through these works, developing a language that he could apply in his interpretations of Argentine culture. His book *Sexo y Traición en Roberto Arlt* is just one example of how Masotta read Arlt through a prism of Sartre's *Saint-Genet: Actor and Martyr*.

The journal *Contorno*, established in 1952, was largely the stage for a new form of literary criticism, while forging an intellectual voice situated between Perónist

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<sup>299</sup> Oscar Masotta, *Sexo y Traición en Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Alvarez, 1965).

populism and Argentina's liberal elite. Its writers were among a young generation of the educated middle class who felt confused and frustrated by the current cultural and political landscape. On the one hand, they were disillusioned with Perón's leadership, the political instability following his removal and as a result a deeply polarized population. On the other hand, they were incensed with the influential cultural establishment that either fueled these divisions with their tendency to derogate Argentina's working class population, also known as Perón's masses, or disregarded them with their "escapist" literature.<sup>300</sup> For the writers of *Contorno* the journal *Sur* best embodied this tradition. Affiliated writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, were recognized as great literary figures, but condemned as writers "with no literature."<sup>301</sup> Despite Borges' genius, his esoteric worlds failed to be relevant to the specificities of their current everyday situation and thus narrowly served as entertainment for an elite readership.<sup>302</sup>

*Contorno's* objective was to transform the working class into a more active public, while also attempting to ally this group with a more unified middle-class. As historian of the journal William H. Ktra iterates "as middle-class intellectuals, [they] nurtured the ambition of achieving through political action and intellectual labor a significant transformation in Argentina's social and political landscape."<sup>303</sup> This moral attitude entailed a responsibility to write critically and with the specific function of being socially relevant and historically situated. Inherent in this ideology was their adoption of

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<sup>300</sup> Oscar Masotta, "Sur or Anti-Peronismo Colonista," in *Conciencia y estructura*, 129-151.

<sup>301</sup> Adolfo Prieto, *Borges y la nueva generación* (Buenos Aires: Letras Universitarias, 1954), 13.

<sup>302</sup> See also David Vinas, "La historia excluida: Ubicación de Martínez Estrada," *Contorno* 4 (1954): 16-21.

<sup>303</sup> William H. Ktra, *Contorno: Literary Engagement in Post-Peronist Argentina* (London: Associate University Press, 1988), 22.

Sartre's spirit of "engagement."<sup>304</sup> The writers of *Contorno* received the writings of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir in Spanish translations of the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, which Katra explains, spoke directly to their own anxieties and hopes during the last years of Perón and into the ensuing political instability.<sup>305</sup> However it was Sartre's concepts of "engaged" and "committed literature" that reaffirmed their intellectual labor as a form of socio-political action. Without interrogating the complexities of Sartre's philosophical positions, *Contorno* tended to embrace the general emphasis that language is a communicative instrument that could effectively shape a public's perceptions, and thus potentially transform or construct a new society.<sup>306</sup> Furthermore, it was the intellectual's imperative to instruct and guide the public towards this end. The journal's contributors then sought to embody and transmit this activist role in their essays.

In the example of Oscar Masotta's essay *Sur o El AntiPerónismo Colonialista* (*Sur or the Colonist Anti-Perónist*) he situates *Contorno* in opposition to the bourgeois tendencies of figures like Victoria Ocampo and her journal *Sur*.<sup>307</sup> The problem was their valorization of a so-called "universal literature," which alienated Argentine culture, and more specifically its masses.<sup>308</sup> In their imposition of an elitist literature, *Sur* failed to engage the historical reality of the "proletariat" and in doing so, subordinated their

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<sup>304</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Washington Sq. Press, 1966).

<sup>305</sup> Katra explores the comparisons between the intellectual fields in postwar France and Argentina, describing a shared sense of trauma, fear, political uncertainty, in addition to their more utopian beliefs. Katra, *Contorno: Literary Engagement*, 14-18.

<sup>306</sup> For more on this relationship see Beatriz Sarlo, "Los dos ojos de Contorno," *Revista Iberoamericana* 125 (1983): 797-807.

<sup>307</sup> Masotta, "Sur o el Antiperonismo Colonialista," 129-151.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 139.



voice.<sup>309</sup> Later in the essay Masotta explains, “we must help the proletariat free themselves of their current mindset and this freedom will only come with the on-going unmasking of bourgeois ideologies.”<sup>310</sup>

Taking a similar position, Juan Jose Sebreli wanted to make the distinction between “gratuitous” literature and examples that have a social function. As he explains, “[literature] cannot exist more than by and for another. No one can write for himself alone, a book is but one answer to the question of the public.”<sup>311</sup> Sebreli went on to say that literature serves the public by imparting an “authentic language” that demystified reality or what Leon Rotzitchner described as the novelist “tearing way the mirage of a reality.”<sup>312</sup>

The authors that *Contorno* championed seemingly revealed the true nature of their reality, which often equated to highlighting the uneven structures of society. In the journal’s second issue, which re-evaluated the work and status of author Roberto Arlt, the contributors celebrated Arlt’s “realistic” vision of 1920s Argentina through its marginal figures’ misery and alienation.<sup>313</sup> His own “imperfect” Spanish dialect that frequently used *lunfardo* gestured towards his working-class, immigrant background, and was partly

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<sup>309</sup> Some years later Ocampo rather explicitly stated “We know that the writer does not write for the proletariat, the oligarchy, or the bourgeoisie. The writer writes. The painter paints. And it all depends on what he does well or poorly.” Once again, Ocampo defers to a “universal literature” or apolitical aesthetic which is the focus of Masotta’s critique. Victoria Ocampo, “A los lectores de Sur,” *Sur* 268 (1961): 6.

<sup>310</sup> Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, 147.

<sup>311</sup> Juan Jose Sebreli, “El escritor y su publico,” *Revista centro* 3, no. 7 (1954): 27.

<sup>312</sup> Leon Rozitchner, “Comunicación y servidumbre: Mallea” *Contorno* 5/6 (1956): 30.

<sup>313</sup> David Vinas, “La mentira de Arlt,” *Contorno* 2 (1954): 2.

the cause for his own exclusion from Argentina's literary scene.<sup>314</sup> When many critics did not grant Arlt's writing a form of literature, *Contorno* endorsed it on the premise that he narrated his lived experience – a crude reality – in an “honest” language, that in turn challenged both the literary and social establishment.

The publication of Masotta's book on Arlt in 1965 coincided with his drift towards new inquiries into Lacanian psychoanalysis and contemporary aesthetics.<sup>315</sup> Although scholars have read this turn as Masotta's abandonment of Sartrean concepts, the questions around intellectual purpose and its methods that first propelled Masotta and his circle remained fundamental to his later explorations.<sup>316</sup> I consider Masotta's passage from literary criticism to art criticism and production as an extension of his original output.<sup>317</sup> That is, his formative experience with *Contorno* shaped his understanding of the intellectual and aesthetic act as inherently political or at least a form of social critique. In a way, the journal defined his production as a critical operation that engaged and unmasked their larger reality. At the basis of this undertaking was a break from an “elite”

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<sup>314</sup> For a detailed account of Arlt and his literary- context see Mariana Letourneur, “Roberto Arlt y el campo intelectual argentino de los años veinte y treinta.” *Dialogos Latinamericanos* 21 (Dec. 2013): 144-157.

<sup>315</sup> *Contorno* had long ended by 1965, with its last issue printed in 1959. The writers' vision was largely complicated by the challenges of turning their theoretical positions into actual political practice. Furthermore, they were re-negotiating their political positions in relation to the transition from Peron to Frondizi and the disappointment that was associated with both leaders' futilities. All went on to develop their intellectual practice in specialized fields, such as literature, sociology and psychonalysis, which represented other modes of engagement. See Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesentas* (Buenos Aires: Punto Sur, 1991).

<sup>316</sup> Masotta writes about his passage from Sartre to Lacan in his prologue to his book on Arlt. See Oscar Masotta “Roberto Arlt, yo mismo.” in Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, 224-243.

<sup>317</sup> Masotta's prologue for the first edition of his book *Conciencia y Estructura*, he wrote: “I have not evolved from Marxism to Pop Art nor by concentrating on works by pop artists am I betraying or denying yesterday's Marxism...My general points of view – the basic ones with respect to class struggle, the role of the proletariat in history, the need for revolution – are the same today as they were fifteen years ago. What has possibly changed is the way I understand the role of an intellectual in the historical process.” Masotta, *Conciencia y Estructura*, 30

establishment in order to forge a direct dialogue with a mass audience, with language and communication as the primary vehicles for advancing a new mass consciousness.

Returning to Masotta's discussion of American Pop art, he turns his attention to this practice for its social mobility. In Pop art, he recognized a new aesthetic form that makes visible the structural underpinnings of a social reality reified by the mass media. He encounters an object that informs the viewer not of a reality, but the mediation of signs that constructs such a reality. Masotta's task as a critic was to wholly engage this activity, mediating between the work and the public not only to conceptualize and translate this operation, but, as we will see, to develop entirely new and critical aesthetic models.

### **Re-Signifying the Happening**

In Masotta's reading of Argentina's Pop art, the trend was not comparable to its American counterparts. Marta Minujín's happening *El Batacazo* probed questions around the viewer's relationship to objects and their social milieu in what Masotta designated as a "fast-moving, utilitarian, readymade sensibility of the large cities," whereas Lichtenstein and Warhol accentuated the "pattern of meaning constituted in urban messages."<sup>318</sup> Recalling Chapter Two, an Argentine expression of Pop art was inextricably linked to the production of happenings, once again exemplified in Minujín's work. Moreover, the incursion of mass media into the artistic scene by 1965 led to the very identity of the happening being shaped as a product of mass culture, notoriously signifying its artistic and social meaning. At this juncture Masotta turns his analysis to the happening as a subject of a larger contemporary cultural phenomenon.

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<sup>318</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 107.

At the center of Masotta's critique are not the artists of happenings, who have produced only a handful of works of this genre in Argentina, but the mass media and the critics implicated in this structure. Masotta perceived a "lack of competent criticism to accompany avant-garde production, especially in the visual arts."<sup>319</sup> Among the veritable critics were Brest, Pellegrini and Derbecq, but their analyses were largely confined to specialized publications, namely exhibition catalogs and foreign magazines. On the "everyday level," meaning mass media circuits such as magazines *Primera Plana* and *Confirmado*, a critical understanding of art was deficient, tending to misinform the public and thus perpetuate their ignorance. Although the institutional framework of Di Tella would be the primary stage for Masotta's critical interventions, which in itself created a certain distance between him and an expanded audience, I argue that Masotta's foray into the artistic field was about recalibrating the current discourse on art so that it reflected a more critical and "accurate" engagement with the genre and society. As I have suggested, Masotta begins to correct this through his collaboration with the experimental exploits of Di Tella. Coincidentally director Jorge Romero Brest was one of the proponents of Masotta's investigations, giving him the space in which to present his explorations and produce a number of happenings. As a supplement to, and document of these activities Masotta published the book *Happenings* – a collection of essays by Masotta, artists working under the name of *Grupo Arte de los Medios* (Mass Media Art Group) and

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<sup>319</sup> Masotta, *Consciencia y Estructura*. 210.

sociologists Eliseo Verón, Alicia Páez and Madela Ezcurra.<sup>320</sup> Explicitly stated in Masotta's prologue to the book,

The happening appeared in Argentina beneath the sign of a strange destiny. One year ago Allan Kaprow referred to us as something like a country of happening-makers, whereas up to that date, express manifestations of the genre had barely existed in Argentina. The same occurred with the recent boom of the word "happening" in the press. A phenomenon of over-reporting in the mass media was inversely matched by very few effectively realized happenings.<sup>321</sup>

In the context of Argentina, the happening is largely a mythical construct precisely because very few artistic works were actually produced, but also because the supposed (re)presentations of so-called happenings in the press have been largely produced by mediated content in the form of image and text that does not correspond to artists' works. Thus, Masotta works towards countering the language or narratives that have generated and transmitted a particular belief about the happening, and by extension an artistic and social world. Returning to Madela Ezcurra's analysis of the mass media, she accuses it of debasing the happenings' aesthetic value. She writes, "[they] don't know if the happening is art or not, and if it is, it is trivial, an insignificant game."<sup>322</sup> Furthermore, "[they] don't analyze the phenomenon from an aesthetic perspective, instead they comment on its sociological signification and charge it with negative connotations."<sup>323</sup> As Chapter Two explains, Ezcurra takes issues with the portrayal of happenings as simply entertainment

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<sup>320</sup> Verón and Páez represent the first scholars to study and diffuse semiotics in Argentina. For more on these two figures and their relationship to Masotta see Mariano Zarowsky. "Oscar Masotta y Eliseo Verón: apuntes sobre una polémica olvidada en la emergencia de los estudios en comunicación en Argentina" (paper presented at the I Coloquio de Comunicación para la Transformación Social Escuela de Ciencias de la Información, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. August 30-31, 2012).

<sup>321</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 9.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid*, 194.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid*.

for and by Buenos Aires' elite class and an emergent generation of eccentric youths known for a new licentious moral attitude.

The first essay *El concepto de happening y las teorías* (The concept of the Happening and theories) written by Alicia Páez is a first attempt at shifting meaning, stating "Our proposition is to form a definition that dispels the ambiguity or provide some precision that limits it."<sup>324</sup> Páez organizes her article around three important features: a brief textual reconstruction of Kaprow's *A Spring Happening*, Jim Dine's *Car Crash*, Claes Oldenburg's *Autobodys* and the collective *Happening 24 hours*; a theoretical framework informed by Jean-Jacques Lebel's book *Le Happening*, Susan Sontag's essay *Happenings: An art of radical juxtaposition* and Michael Kirby's *Happenings* and a history constructed from a constellation of diverse U.S. and European-based antecedents, such as Dada and Surrealism, and figures like John Cage and Antonin Artaud.<sup>325</sup>

I first want to recognize Páez's essay as a contribution to Masotta's larger pedagogical exercise. Her narration of Happenings and exposition of theoretical texts, largely based on English and French publications, endeavored to translate this work for the Spanish-speaking reader, while also educating them on the major artistic themes and figures associated with the Happening. Additionally she seeks to return happenings to an artistic genre and practice, differentiating it from its frivolous associations. Based on her selection of authors and artists, Páez clearly positions the genre as an exclusively Euro-American development, but one which isn't entirely coherent.<sup>326</sup> The divergent

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<sup>324</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>325</sup> *24 Stunden* (24 Hours), held on June 5-6, 1965 at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, was a collection of Happenings by Joseph Beuys, Bazon Brock, Rolf Jahrling, Ute Klopheus, Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, Eckart Rahn, Tomas Schmit, and Wolf Vostell.

<sup>326</sup> Páez briefly mentions Gutai as a parallel practice to Happenings. Masotta, *Happenings*, 32.

perspectives of Sontag, Kirby, Lebel and Kaprow reflect a contested theoretical discourse, with a range of efforts to classify the Happening or attribute it to a specific artistic lineage.<sup>327</sup> From these debates however Páez enumerates formal characteristics, such as the creative manipulation of the public, the importance of the object and its relationship to the public, the absence of a logical structure or narrative, and a scripted use of language, that permits an alternative definition to happenings' popular idea. Furthermore, she recovers its critical force, particularly in relationship to current avant-garde experiments, by examining its historical and theoretical complexities. But, where do Argentina's happenings fit into this framework?

Perhaps the answer can be located in Masotta's dedication: "To Allan Kaprow and the memory of Alberto Greco."<sup>328</sup> His pairing of these two artists anchors the Happening, and its origins, in Argentina as much as abroad. As his prologue explains, the Happening also has a history in his country, stemming from a local genealogy that begins with *Informalismo* to the exhibition *Arte Destructivo*, Greco's *Vivo-Ditos* and Minujín's *La Menesunda*. These early models seem to run parallel to the history Páez outlines, as evidence of Argentina's own "radical assertion of the value of art in relation to life and the rejection of art in favor of life."<sup>329</sup> On the one hand, this juxtaposition stakes a place for Argentina's happenings within an international development, suggesting that the country was on its own path towards the latest art form. On the other hand, both the

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<sup>327</sup> For an overview of the discursive battles related to the Happening see the comprehensive anthology Sanford, *Happenings and Other Acts*.

<sup>328</sup> Alberto Greco committed suicide in 1965 in Spain.

<sup>329</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 14.

figures of Kaprow and Greco function as a springboard from which Masotta jumped into formulating his own happenings.

Masotta returned to Buenos Aires in April 1966 from a three-month stay in New York where he participated in ten happenings by various artists, including Allan Kaprow, Michael Kirby, Carolee Schneeman and La Monte Young. Following his first-hand experience of happenings, Masotta devised a “festival of happenings” to take place in Buenos Aires.<sup>330</sup> Despite the celebratory tone this name gives, Masotta mitigated this by framing the event within an institutional framework. As he recounts in his book, Masotta originally intended on having MAMBA present it with the collaboration of Buenos Aires’ more avant-garde galleries. The actual event took place over the course of five days in October and November 1966 at the Instituto DiTella with the title *Acerca (de): “Happenings” (Concerning: “Happenings”)*.<sup>331</sup> Masotta organized a cycle of two conferences in which Páez presented “El Concepto de Happening y las teorías” (The Concept of the Happening and theories) and Masotta gave a talk on “Los medios de información y la categoría de <discontinuo> en la estética moderna” (Information media and the category of <discontinuity> in modern aesthetics). Additionally the program contained three happenings: *Para Inducir el espíritu de imagen (To Induce the Spirit of*

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<sup>330</sup> Masotta received financial support from the Di Tella Institute which contributed to his trip to New York and “study” of the artistic milieu. See Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 183.

<sup>331</sup> Masotta plays with the dual meanings of the word “acerca” and “acerca de” which I have interpreted as a title which alternately describes the act of approaching or approximating the Happening, yet never fully becoming it and the act of speaking about or on the topic. There is also a distinction to be made between this title and the title of a Happening in the program: *Sobre Happenings*, which can be more closely translated as “About Happenings.”



*the Image*) by Oscar Masotta, *Señales (Signals)* by Mario Gandelsonas and *Sobre Happenings (About Happenings)* by a collective of artists.<sup>332</sup>

# Acerca (de): "Happenings"

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Los Centros de Artes Visuales y de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, comunican a Ud. la realización de un Ciclo de dos conferencias y tres happenings, presentado por Oscar Masotta.

**Martes 25 de octubre, 19 hs.**  
"El concepto de happening y las teorías", conferencia de Alicia Pérez.

**Miércoles 26 de octubre, 19 hs.**  
"Para inducir el espíritu de imagen", happening de Oscar Masotta.

**Jueves 27 de octubre, 23 hs.**  
"Señales", happening-ambientación de Mario Gandelsonas.

**Martes 8 de noviembre, 19 hs.**  
"Los medios de información y la categoría de «discontinuo» en la estética moderna", conferencia de Oscar Masotta.

**Miércoles 9 de noviembre, 19 hs.**  
"Sobre happenings", happening del equipo Roberto Jacobi, Eduardo Costa, Pablo Suárez, Oscar Bony y Miguel Ángel Telechea.

Las instrucciones para la asistencia a los happenings serán dadas el día 25 de octubre.  
Abono al ciclo completo: \$ 700.—. Sobrantes de abono: \$ 250, por sesión (conferencia o happenings). La asistencia a uno de los happenings será libre. Estudiantes: 25 % de descuento. Las entradas se limitarán a 200 personas por sesión. Se podrán reservar desde el día 20 de octubre.

Sala de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936, Tel. 31 4721, Buenos Aires.

Hay actualmente más de cuarenta hombres y mujeres "haciendo" algún tipo de Happening. Viven en Japón, Holanda, Checoslovaquia, Dinamarca, Francia, Argentina, Suecia, Alemania, España, Austria, Islandia, E.E.UU. Probablemente diez de ellos sean talentos de primera línea. Además existe, por lo menos, una docena de volúmenes acerca del tema o relacionados con él: el "Decollage N° 4" de Wolf Vostell, Köln, 1963, publicado por el autor; "An anthology" editada y publicada por Jackson Mac Low y La Monte Young, N.Y., 1953; "Water Jam" de George Brecht, Fluxus Publications, N.Y., 1963; "Fluxus 1", una antología editada por George Maciunas, también en publicaciones Fluxus, N.Y., 1964; Postface and Jefferson's Birthday, Something Else Press, N.Y., 1964; "Happenings" de Michael Kioby, E. P. Dutton, N.Y., 1964; "Grapefruit" de Yoko Ono, Wuntermaum Press, Long Island, N.Y., 1964; "Happenings, Fluxus, Popart, Nouveau Realisme" de Jorgen Backer y Wolf Vostell, Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburgo, 1965; 24 Stunden, Galerie Parnass de Wuppertal, Verlag Hansen y Hansen, Itzehoe Vosskate, 1955; "Primer of Happenings and Time Space Art" de Al Hansen y "Four suits", obras de Philip Cornen, Alison Knowles, Ben Patterson y Tomas Schmit, ambos publicados por Something Else Press; y el número del invierno de 1965 de la Tulane Drama Review, una publicación especial sobre Happenings editada por Michael Kirby, Tulane University, New Orleans; Jean-Jacques Lebel esta a punto de publicar su libro en París, y mi libro "Assemblage, Environments y Happenings", Harry N. Abrams, Inc., N.Y., aparecerá esta primavera. Además de esta creciente literatura, hay una bibliografía en aumento, de artículos serios. Estas publicaciones —y la cantidad de happenistas— contribuyen al mito de un arte casi desconocido...

**Allan Kaprow**  
(Art forum, marzo de 1966)

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El desarrollo y la producción artística de las dos últimas décadas, introduce, en la historia de la crítica, una nueva veta de reflexión, cuyo sentido y alcance toca a la vez las esferas de la estética, de la ideología y de la historia de la cultura. Se trata de la emergencia de una nueva conexión histórica, que desentroniza el pleito entre arte y técnica (maquinismo + trabajo) para traer a primer plano la relación del arte con los medios masivos de información.

Al "boom" de los medios de información (sin duda, el caso especial es la televisión) de los años posteriores a la segunda guerra mundial, sigue una transformación esencial, una rápida metamorfosis del "objeto figurativo". Pero ella no servirá únicamente para generar o definir estilos o tendencias nuevas, como sería el ejemplo, en el seno de las artes plásticas, del "arte pop", del "neo-dadaísmo" o del "empirismo radical" de Rauschenberg; estará simultáneamente en la base de la producción de áreas nuevas de actividad artística, híbridos de otros géneros o géneros nuevos, como el «happening», gracias al cual ahora es posible no solamente convertir en tema los productos de la información masiva (según la postura y la fórmula pop), sino recortar y ensanchar el campo de un "intermedia", una zona de actividad que se apoya en el híbrido de los géneros a condición de colocarse, paulatinamente y cada vez más, en el interior mismo de los medios de información. Pero para interrogar el "concepto" de «happening», será preciso desmontar los equívocos que la palabra recubre. Y si no nos equivocamos, ese desmontaje nos reconducirá, bajo una nueva luz, esta vez ejemplar, a esa misma zona de recubrimiento recíproco y de relación de los medios de información con el pensamiento y/o la actividad estética.

**Oscar Masotta**  
Investigador de dedicación exclusiva,  
Centro de Estudios Superiores de Arte,  
Universidad de Buenos Aires

Figure 39. Brochure for *Acerca (de): "Happenings,"* 1966

<sup>332</sup> The informal group of artists were Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Pablo Suárez, Oscar Bony and Miguel Ángel Telechea.

Turning to the accompanying brochure for the event, I would like to draw attention to the inclusion of two key texts that explain Masotta's critical intervention (Figure 39). A long quote by Allan Kaprow from an issue of *Art Forum* states "Currently there are more than 40 men and women "doing" some form of a Happening. They live in Japan, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France Argentina, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Austria, Iceland, the United States."<sup>333</sup> The quote continues to highlight the proliferation of literature on the topic, which along with the producers/artists "extend the myth of an art that is nearly unknown..."<sup>334</sup> This passage appears in conjunction with Masotta who stresses the "boom" of mass media information since the end of the Second World War that has led to a transformation of the "figurative object."<sup>335</sup> Given this context, Masotta explains, there is a need to interrogate the concept of the Happening, "disassembling" its misconceptions. Such an undertaking will redirect them towards a more enlightened understanding of the relationship between media information and contemporary aesthetic activity.

Masotta's citation of Kaprow narrows in on the artist's own recognition that the Happening has taken on a life of its own, expanding exponentially to incorporate a vast collection of literature and global network of "Happeners" that jointly propel a myth. Adding to these factors is the ascendancy of the mass media, which has only intensified this phenomenon. Masotta's reading of Roland Barthes semiological work is key to his understanding of myth here. In Barthes' examination of contemporary socio-cultural

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<sup>333</sup> For the full article see Allan Kaprow, "The Happenings are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 59-65.

<sup>334</sup> Brochure for *Acerca (de) Happenings* (Buenos Aires, 1966), Archive Insituto Torcuato Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Accessed December 3, 2012.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

phenomena, myth functions as the process by which constructed or contingent meanings (cultural codes) become naturalized universal truths.<sup>336</sup> Therefore, a consequence of the Happening's mediation – the circulation of texts and images of the Happening – is the potential for these media to appear as a natural emanation of the real event: “a factual system, whereas it is a semiological system.”<sup>337</sup>

*Acerca (de): “Happenings”* then is not only a battle over meaning, but a response to the mass media's mythological effect – Masotta's own act of decoding or demystification. In Barthes seminal text, *Mythologies*, myth is:

constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. [...] A conjuring trick has taken place; [myth] has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature.<sup>338</sup>

Therefore Masotta's mode of combating the myth is to historicize the Happening with an exegesis of authoritative texts and reproducing the works' material traces, such as summaries, scripts and photo-documentation. Masotta's other approach was to produce a single Happening composed of restaged works.<sup>339</sup> Titled *Sobre Happenings (About Happenings)* Masotta with Argentine artists Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Miguel Angel Telechea, Oscar Bony and Leopoldo Maler chose Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, two works by Claes Oldenburg and an untitled work by Michael Kirby that would demonstrate the range of styles in which a Happening could take form.<sup>340</sup> One could argue that Masotta presented these indexical traces as a revelation of truth against the trivial and rather inauthentic guise propagated by the media. The re-presentation of U.S.

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<sup>336</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1991).

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid*, 142.

<sup>339</sup> The actual event was postponed to a later date: December 6, 1966.

<sup>340</sup> The second work by Oldenburg is also unknown.

happenings also works towards reconstituting the genre and effectively restoring it to its historical and artistic context. Masotta envisioned *Sobre Happenings* in particular as a “commentary on the history of the Happening.”<sup>341</sup>

Masotta’s emphasis on history was indeed directed towards an audience that, he assumes, is largely unacquainted with happenings.<sup>342</sup> Even so, the narrative that he constructs is not a comprehensive account, nor a chronology. Rather these works are cases of the genre’s diversity. Based on Masotta’s account, Schneeman’s work demonstrated the “sensual current” within happenings, while Oldenburg’s *Autobodys* represented happenings’ more theatrical productions made of commodity cultural objects and Kirby’s work was a tendency that incorporated new media such as film and photography. But another key component to Masotta’s history-making is about relegating the Happening to the past.

In Kirby’s work, the original was an arrangement of film projectors and a recorder around an audience that sat in the center of the room. The Happening began with a 16mm projection displaying a recorded conversation between two people seated in the same room as the viewing audience, who planned the details of the unfolding Happening. Subsequent fragments of the film progressively narrowed in on the actual Happening, first by tracing a map to its location, than simulating the journey to the site, followed by recorded film of the audience members sitting in the space until the immediacy of the Happening and its recording are simultaneously projected for the audience, ultimately

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<sup>341</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 178.

<sup>342</sup> Recalling Chapter 2, the type of public that gravitated to Di Tella were frequently from Buenos Aires’ middle-class youth who likely participated in or knew about Minujín’s Happenings. So the issue here is the range of experience and knowledge of the Happenings and their origins outside of the Argentine context.

collapsing the live event and its mediation. Masotta restaged this work with elements of its making recorded at the nearby Bar Moderno and the journey moving through the downtown streets of Buenos Aires. Deviating from Kirby's format, the artists choose to quietly insert a dialogue that proclaimed the genre as dead.<sup>343</sup>

In Rebecca Schneider's discussion of the "reenactment" the restaging of a past event or artwork has a syncopated time "where *then* and *now* punctuate each other."<sup>344</sup> Diana Taylor talks about Peruvian collective theater group Yuyachkani's performances that repeat or reiterate in order to keep alive a memory. Contrary to current artists who argue that without reenacting their works, their art form would be dead, *Sobre Happenings*' was conceived specifically as an embodied relay of information that situated the Happening at a historical distance, in which both the participants and audience were re-visiting history with the artworks operating as artifacts.<sup>345</sup> In doing so, Masotta's re-enactment as a mediated form supersedes the happenings' most salient features: immediacy, presence and actuality. These works are reproductions of the past, as evidence that something *did* happen. The question is why would Masotta "deaden" the Happening at the height of its activity and so quickly after it appears in Argentina? In part Masotta is driven by Argentina's perpetual appeal to new art forms, manifested in some sort of rupture from a predecessor. In codifying the Happening, Masotta registers it as a

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<sup>343</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 181.

<sup>344</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>345</sup> Marina Abramović cited in Carol Kino, "A Rebel Form Gains Favor. Fights Erupt." *New York Times*, March 10, 2010. Diana Taylor also describes the "performativ repeat" with an example of Peruvian collective theater group Yuyachkani's performances that repeat or reiterate in order to keep alive a memory. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

tradition or convention that he will break from, thereby moving art forward in an articulation of the avant-garde and in anticipation of *Arte de los Medios* (Media Art).

### **Mediating the Happening: A question of translation**

Like Páez in their publication, Masotta and artists perform textual readings of works based on found texts: Oldenburg's script for *Autobodys* was taken from Michael Kirby's book *Happenings*, Schneeman's script and photo-documentation was found in an issue of *Some/thing* and Kirby's work was based on a recollection of Masotta's participation.<sup>346</sup> Páez prefaced her work as a "double mediation" to emphasize the experience of "knowing" the Happening via its published documentation and then a translation and interpretation of that material. Masotta, in speaking about *Sobre Happenings*, writes:

Our Happening would be a mediator, like a language of absent events, already non-existent, in the past. The events, the facts inside of our Happening, would not just be facts, they would be *signs* [...] we were excited, once again, by the idea of an artistic activity put into the "media" [...] information about events and not the events themselves.<sup>347</sup>

Their insistence on mediation, particularly as it relates to the Happening, displaces the phenomenological engagement or "direct communication" that works by Minujín and Greco once foregrounded. Although a key principle for Kaprow was the art form's immediacy and impermanence, Alex Potts argues mediation, in the form of language and more specifically Kaprow's writings, was critical to the entire enterprise of the

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<sup>346</sup> See Michael Kirby, *Happenings: An illustrated Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1966) and Carolee Schneeman, "Meat Joy," *Some/thing* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 31-45.

<sup>347</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 178.

Happening.<sup>348</sup> Its mediation enabled the event's physical immediacy to be "imagined" beyond its initial participants, lending to the work's "curiously paradoxical status as a phenomenon that is both unmediated and utterly mediated."<sup>349</sup> Given that Masotta's first experience of happenings, from abroad and Argentina, was entirely through its documentation, it is no surprise that he naturally approaches the art form in relation to mediation. Furthermore, it is this particular mode of reception that distinguishes mediation as central to the work's signifying process.

On one level, mediation is another crucial element in Masotta's attempt to direct attention to underlying structures of language and meaning. Quite explicitly, Masotta defines *Sobre Happenings* as a "language" in which the reconstruction of gestures, sounds, words, expressions and other acts were "signs," which presume to represent the original happening. In this sense, Masotta destabilizes the presence or immediacy of the event, by framing it as a trace of the original.

Interestingly Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, in line with Stanley Cavell, that modern art realized a level of immediacy precisely by revealing the conditions of its own mediation:

Modern art played a key role in convincing our culture of the reality of mediation. In many cases, modern painting was no longer about the world but about itself. Paradoxically, by eliminating "the real" or "the world" as a referent, modernism emphasized the reality of both the act

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<sup>348</sup> Alex Potts, "Writing the Happening: The Aesthetics of Non-Art," in *Allan Kaprow: Art as Life* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute Publications, 2008), 27-31. Amelia Jones has gone to great lengths to argue that body and performance art, despite their apparent immediacy, is also contingent on mediation of the body as representation. Like Potts, she similarly argues for the "mutual supplementarity" of performance and its documentation: "The body art event needs the photograph to confirm it having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological 'anchor' of its indexicality." See Amelia Jones, "Presence" in absence: Experience Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 11-18.

<sup>349</sup> Potts, "Writing the Happening," 27.

of painting and its product [...] Modern painting achieved immediacy not by denying its mediation but by acknowledging it.<sup>350</sup>

For Botler and Grusin, in the absence of representation, what is made “present” is the mediating agent, the medium. While Masotta is not working in the pure reflexive visual language of Abstraction, his objective is the same. The viewer is meant to perceive or “see” the act of mediation. This does not imply heightening our awareness of Happening’s traditional materials, such as Oldenburg’s cars or Schneeman’s bodies, rather we are to apprehend the framework in which they are being communicated, its communicative display.

On another level, the nature of mediation is a multi-layered process of transmission between the original Happening and its reconstruction where language begins with the original documentation that Masotta then translates and ultimately transforms into *Sobre Happenings*. We already saw in Masotta’s restaging of Michael Kirby’s Happening that the artists departed widely from the original, manipulating the taped dialogue in order to make a statement about the Happening’s imminent death.

Claes Oldenburg’s *Autobodys*, originally staged at the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics’ parking lot, commented on Los Angeles’ most ubiquitous object, the car, and the expansive urban sprawl that accommodated it (Figure 40). Masotta’s intention to “stick to the script” went awry when an excess number of people flooded the relatively smaller Buenos Aires parking lot to view the restaging. Masotta commented, “*Autobodys* then became something else,” as the cars struggled to

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<sup>350</sup> Jay David Botler and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 58.



circumvent the crowd of nearly five hundred bodies.<sup>351</sup> Apart from the spatial restrictions that Buenos Aires' compact city center posed to the re-making of *Autobodys*, essential ingredients of the work, such as a cement mixer could not be located in time to include in *Sobre Happenings*.<sup>352</sup>



Figure 40. Claes Oldenburg, *Autobodys*, 1963

Despite these distortions, the reconstruction of *Meat Joy* unfolded in large part according to the script and images Masotta had on hand. Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy* first took place in 1964 at the Festival de la Libre Expression at the American Center in Paris, France, and then in London at Dennison Hall and finally New York at the Judson

<sup>351</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 180.

<sup>352</sup> For Oldenburg's second work featured in *Sobre Happenings*, the untitled work went on without the key presence of a doctor. Based on the script, the doctor appears towards the end of the performance to inspect the participants' throats.

Church.<sup>353</sup> The structured script dictates discrete activities situated in a precise arrangement of space, objects and sounds:

Prologue: large table. Everyone arranges themselves and prepare for the event while the audience sits (Sound: Notes to Meat Joy and French lessons, 20 minutes)

The table is cleared. The men go on theater balconies. The women lay where the audience is. Small work light. Work sounds. Darkness.

(Sounds from the Rue de Seine assembled with rock n' roll begin).  
From the balconies the men throw plastic sheets [...]<sup>354</sup>

Perhaps the only apparent variation was during their reconstruction of Kirby's piece. In the 16 mm projection Masotta inserted footage from their rehearsal of *Meat Joy*, which substituted meat and fish for random objects. Kirby's piece ends with this excerpt. The audience then proceeded to the warehouse where they watched the participating artists perform the script, with its accurate use of meat and fish.

Images of the restaged work were published in Masotta's book. Interestingly the first image that appears is coupled with an image from Schneeman's New York iteration. The photograph shows a static audience of men and women who gaze at James Tenny directing a can of paint and brush at Carolee Schneeman doused in color (Figure 41). Below is a photograph from *Sobre Happenings* illustrating a half-dressed woman lying on the floor, covered in confetti as two male figures crouch nearby. The following page includes two additional photographs from *Sobre Happenings* that intensifies the visceral intermingling of bodies and materials. The last image, akin to Tenny and Schneeman's

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<sup>353</sup> Much of the photo-documentation that circulated was from Meat Joy's final iteration in New York. This was the case for the reproductions used in *Sobre Happenings*. A complete record of Meat Joy's documentation can be found in Carolee Schneeman, *More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings* (Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson & Co., 1997).

<sup>354</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 185. This transcript varies widely from Schneeman's more detailed script published in *More than Meat Joy*.

playful interaction, captures artist Roberto Plate similarly painting his female counterpart Gioia Fiorentino. Plate and Fiorentino tend to mimic the iconic image of a man gesturing, with a can of paint and brush towards the woman's body, treating her like a canvas. Effectively the grouping together of Schneeman's photo-documentation with *Sobre Happening* creates an almost seamless affinity, giving the illusion that they are all from a single event. Without the captions, a viewer could easily overlook the distinctions. This deception perhaps demonstrates the degree to which the reconstruction was performing the documentation in an attempt to remain faithful to the original work. But as the earlier accounts reveal there were also critical moments during *Sobre Happenings* in which deviations from the source material could not be avoided or was intentionally exercised.

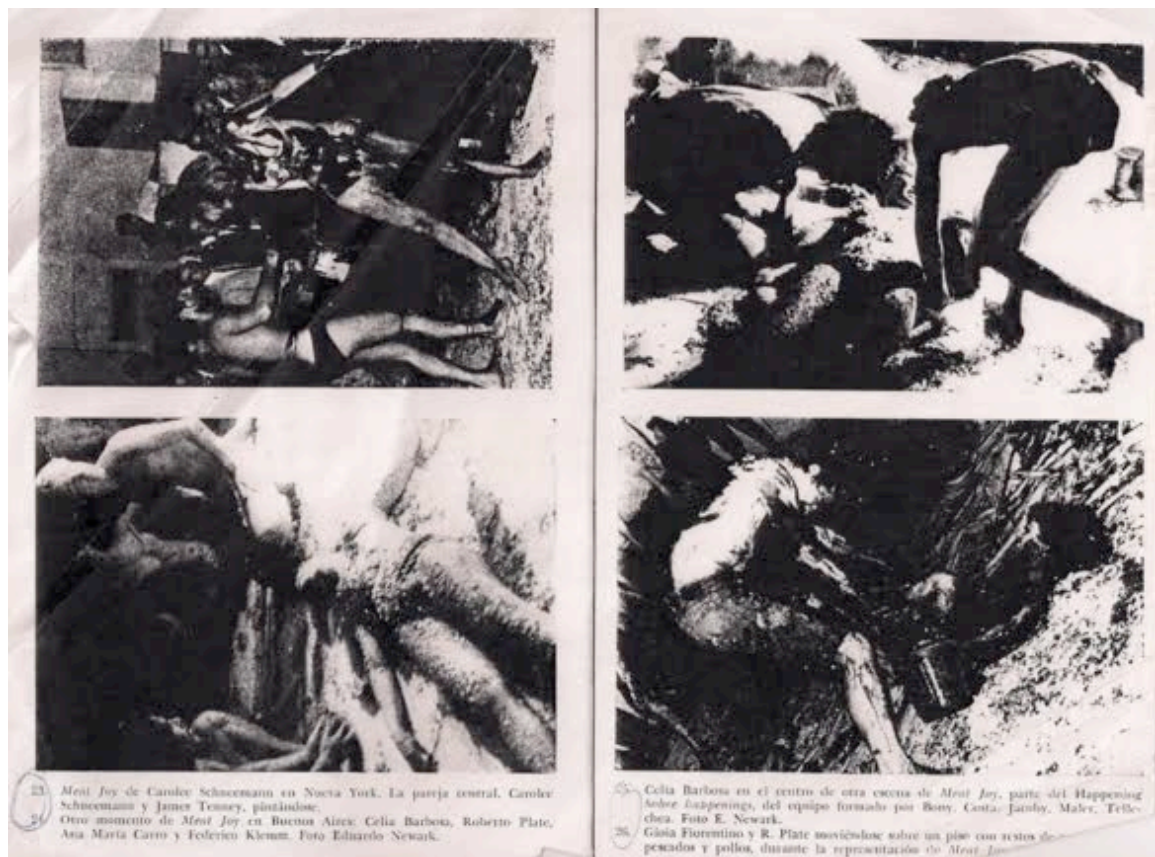


Figure 41. Reproductions in Masotta's book *Happenings*, 1967

I consider this dynamic process as one of translation. The concept of translation, first confined to the linguistic tradition but which now benefits from a more expanded notion of transfer, can be applied here to explain the complicated reproduction of source material into another cultural context.<sup>355</sup> In the case of *Sobre Happenings*, translation can be conceived as the formal and, potentially, semantic correspondences made between original and restaged works, but it is also what Ming Tiampo calls the “gap between translated terms” that generates “elements of invention” and “newness into the world.”<sup>356</sup> As Lawrence Venuti explains, translators are required to “dismantle, rearrange and displace the chain of signifiers that make up the source text,” subjecting the original work to a process of “decontextualization.”<sup>357</sup> Furthermore, the translator rewrites the source text to correspond to a new set of linguistic patterns, social conditions, cultural values and perhaps historical moments, initiating a second process of “recontextualization.”<sup>358</sup> The transformative dimension of translation, indicated by Tiampo and Venuti, signals the ways in which *Sobre Happenings* potentially transformed the original works, with its

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<sup>355</sup> One such example that is useful here is the concept “intermedial translation” to describe translating across media: “to work within discourses and practices of intertextuality, intersemiotics and interdisciplinarity, which can lead to movements across genres, media, bodies of knowledge and subject.” See Mieke Bal, “Editorial: Acts of Translation,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 5 (2007): 7.

<sup>356</sup> Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 53.

<sup>357</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “Ekphrasis, Translation, Critique,” *Art in Translation* 2, no. 2. (2010): 138.

<sup>358</sup> Walter Benjamin observes this process as one of deformation and ultimately destruction of the original. Sharing this sentiment was Jorge Luis Borges who believed translation inevitable transformed the original, but such a failure wasn’t detrimental. Rather Borges saw it as an opportunity to enhance the source text. See Walter Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” in *Selected Writings Vol. 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996) and Efrain Kristal, *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation* (Nashville, Tenn: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

constituent meanings lost to new ones relevant to its new context. This is perhaps most apparent in Masotta's reiteration of *Autobody's*.

As I explained Oldenburg's Happening registered Los Angeles' car culture. An important factor to this Happening was that the audience "participated" from the inside of their vehicles. Reminiscent of a drive-in movie theater, the audience drove into the empty lot and parked in a demarcated space where they would view the Happening. The final configuration of cars formed a large rectangular perimeter, creating an open central space or "stage" illuminated by the car's headlights where various actions took place. Cécile Whiting describes the effect of this work as "disrupting the logic of the parking lot grid" by effectively turning the space for parking cars into "a stage to be watched."<sup>359</sup>

As we know with *Sobre Happenings*, the excessive number of audience members, all on foot, invaded the "stage", occluding the intended reception of the work. Furthermore, a notion of car culture in Buenos Aires, at the time of *Sobre Happenings*, was only starting to emerge with increased car sales in the late 1950s. Even so, it wasn't articulated in quite the same way. Cars were a dividing marker of class between the Perónist masses who depended on public transport and the middle to upper classes who could afford a car's expensive price tag. As Laura Podalsky explains, in Buenos Aires a car meant you could "move around the city with great freedom" and "negotiate the urban terrain without having to encounter the working classes."<sup>360</sup>

Despite efforts to resemble Oldenburg's *Autobody's* we see the ways in which translation involved physical alterations or reinventions, and more significantly a

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<sup>359</sup> Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 177.

<sup>360</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 18.

displacement and transformation of meaning. This can similarly be applied to Schneeman's *Meat Joy* or Kirby's untitled *Happening*. Once in their new context meaning can be constituted in any number of ways: from Masotta's own artistic intention to produce a work of "information," to the influence of local socio-economic particulars of Argentine culture on the work, to the infinite interpretations of the viewers. Recalling Masotta, he defined these works as "signs." As signs he presumed they made reference to the original work, but as Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal's work articulate, artworks as signs have an "iterative" structure that "enter into a plurality of contexts":

[W]orks of art are constituted by different viewers in different ways at different times and places [...] Once launched into the world, the work of art is subject to all the vicissitudes of reception; as a work involving the sign, it encounters from the beginning the ineradicable fact of semiotic play.<sup>361</sup>

My argument is that Masotta oscillates between striving to translate U.S. happenings to an Argentine audience and engaging in a form of "semiotic play."<sup>362</sup> Years later one of the participating artists and a close colleague of Masotta, Roberto Jacoby, referred to *Sobre Happenings* "intertextual" character, suggesting that their citations, intentionally

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<sup>361</sup> Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (June 1991): 179.

<sup>362</sup> Masotta's role as a translator is also particular to his import of Lacanian psychoanalysis. His first lecture on Lacan, titled *Jacques Lacan y el consciente en los fundamentos de la filosofía*, was presented at the Escuela Pichón Rivière de Psicología Social. Lacan was relatively unknown to Argentina, partly due to the fact that Lacan's texts were only available through French journals, and thus not translated into Spanish. Within this context, Masotta gave an exposition of Lacanian concepts as a means of *introducing and translating* the French intellectual to an Argentine audience. While Philip Derbyshire argues that Masotta struggles with the betrayal his translation poses, I don't believe this anxiety is applicable to Masotta's translation of artworks. For more on this area of Masotta see Philip Derbyshire, "Who was Oscar Masotta? Psychoanalysis in Argentina," *Radical Philosophy* 158 (2009): 11-24.

dislocated from their origins, were instrumental to the construction of a new work.<sup>363</sup>

Here, Jacoby affirms the open structure of *Sobre Happenings* that he and Masotta were clearly experimenting with, stripping it of its socio-historical situation and integrating it into another.

### **A prototype of the Anti-Happening**

Approximately ten days before *Sobre Happenings* was scheduled to take place, on October 16, 1966, Masotta organized a Happening titled *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter). It began at Di Tella's CAV where approximately eighty people were divided and directed to board two groups of three buses. Unaware of what was to take place, the first group departed, heading to El Theatrón, and five minutes later the second group left Di Tella destined for the abandoned Juan Anchorena train station. At El Theatrón the group entered a compact, underground space occupied by photographers flashing their camera, TV news operators, a live music band energetically playing rock n' roll tunes, while a woman contorted her body in unison with a 16 mm projection of agitated bodies freeing themselves from bandages.<sup>364</sup> After twenty-five minutes the chaotic scene came to a halt and guests were instructed to board the bus, which left for Anchorena train station. At the train station was the second group who encountered nothing but the old abandoned station amidst a placid landscape. Their instructions were to literally pass time there, until a helicopter flew over the train platform revealing a pilot and the young actress Beatriz Matar. Following the helicopter's departure, the first group's bus arrived,

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<sup>363</sup> Roberto Jacoby quoted in Ana Longoni, "Oscar Masotta: Vanguardia y Revolución en los Sesenta," in Masotta, *Oscar Masotta: Revolución en el Arte*, 68

<sup>364</sup> The film was a citation of Claes Oldenburg's Happening, which Masotta does not have the title to. Olivier Debroise calls to mind *Injun*, but I also question the possibility that Masotta was working with *Snapshots of the City*. See Debroise, "Looking at the Sky," 127.



purposefully missing the helicopter. Nothing more was meant to happen, other than reunite the two groups and trust they would share accounts of their divergent experiences.<sup>365</sup>

The riotous scene found in the theater or the serene landscape interrupted by a hovering helicopter was not the Happening per se. Rather they were fragments of a totality, elements to a larger work that was not immediately accessible. In order to bridge the disjuncture, and thereby complete the work, each participant depended on the final exchange, in which the two groups communicated and informed each other of what happened.

Masotta once more establishes mediation as the locus of the work, explaining that the Happening “could not be direct nor “visual” but a verbal mediation, oral communication [...]”<sup>366</sup> The argument, similar to *Sobre Happenings*, is that mediation is formative to the construction of one’s experience, where knowledge of the Happening is derived from mediation and communication.

As Ana Longoni points out, *El helicoptero* was in part a counterpoint to the explicit sexuality in Jean Jacques Lebel’s happenings, who had recently performed a work at Di Tella. She writes, “If for Lebel, the priority of the Happening is to expand the perception of senses, the Argentinean privileges its potential as a mental process, with the

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<sup>365</sup> The many layers to this work, and possible meanings, have been dealt with by Olivier Debrouse whose study was unfortunately not fully realized, considers this work in the framework of the “Happening craze” and more specifically Minujín’s *Simultaneity in Simultaneity*. Karen Benezra also touches on the topic in her essay, looking at the work from the perspective of dematerialization. See Karen Benezra, “Media art in Argentina: Ideology and Critique “Después del Pop,” *Art Margins* 1, no. 2-3 (2012): 152-175.

<sup>366</sup> Masotta, “Después del Pop,” 286.



spectator as a reflexive interlocutor.”<sup>367</sup> Claire Bishop also highlights this tendency, comparing Masotta to the Brazilian’s invitation “to sense and to feel,” whereas he provoked his viewers to “think and analyze.”<sup>368</sup> These comparisons underscore the fundamental shift that Masotta’s experimentation makes to the genre of happenings, which de-emphasizes the sensory experience for semantic information. In Olivier Debrouse’s analysis, *El helicoptero*’s structure is a composite of an “old” and “new” Happening.<sup>369</sup> El Theatrón was the traditional Happening containing the “common Happening ingredients,” to the extent that the 16mm film projection directly quoted the white bandages and erratic body movements from Claes Oldenburg’s happenings.<sup>370</sup> Anchorena train station, where very little happened, was its binary opposite. The novelty of the work, signaling a “new” Happening or some hybrid form, was this mental and verbal collaboration of the participants. Participation is still at play, but it takes on a new form, reconfigured in information and communication. Furthermore, the visual, material and perceptual operation of the work is secondary to the accounts that weave the Happening together.

Masotta who read a Spanish translation of Umberto Eco’s *Opera aperta* (Open work) only vaguely refers to this text in his book *Happenings*.<sup>371</sup> In a later essay, *Después del Pop: Nosotros Desmaterializamos* (After Pop: We Dematerialize), Masotta uses the term “obra abierta” with little explanation, but which Ana Longoni interprets as a second

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<sup>367</sup> Ana Longoni, “Oscar Masotta: Vanguardia y Revolución,” 62.

<sup>368</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 106.

<sup>369</sup> Debrouse, “Looking at the Sky,” 127.

<sup>370</sup> Masotta doesn’t title the work.

<sup>371</sup> Masotta cites a Spanish translation of the book: Umberto Eco, *Obra Abierta* (Madrid: Seix Barral, 1965).

nod to Eco's work.<sup>372</sup> In both examples, Masotta never fully reveals the degree to which Eco shaped his own thinking and practice, yet *El Helicoptero* exhibits a tendency towards "openness": intentionally leaving the structure of the work ambiguous and contingent upon the receiver to complete the work in various ways, thus generating a multiplicity of outcomes, interpretations and meanings. Among Eco's examples, from Alexander Calder's sculptural mobiles to Karlheinz Stockhausen's aleatory musical compositions, these works:

reject the definitive, concluded message and multiply the formal possibilities of the distribution of their elements. They appeal to the initiative of the individual performer, and hence they offer themselves not as finite works which prescribes specific repetition along given structural coordinates but as "open" works, which are brought to their conclusion by the performer at the same time as he experiences them on an aesthetic plane.<sup>373</sup>

In *El Helicoptero* the precise execution of the two events at El Theatrón and Anchorena, down to exact timings, was important to the overall efficacy of the Happening. But what Masotta could not determine were the contents of the communication that would eventually be exchanged among the eighty participants. How would these two events be interpreted and reconstructed for the other? What information would be produced and disseminated about the work? For Masotta, who once admitted: "the reconstruction of events by means of language is always suspicious," calls attention to the way the act of communication potentially transforms the event it attempts to represent. Within the context of *El helicoptero* it would seem that the work is an exercise in its own transformation, its active shaping and reshaping by its participants. This

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<sup>372</sup> Longoni, "Oscar Masotta: Vanguardia y Revolución." 81.

<sup>373</sup> Umberto Eco, *Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancongni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3.

operation puts in evidence the fragmentary character of information and communication, which leads to the work's multiple and indeterminate meaning, but also its potential for manipulation, distortion or reification. This work functions as a metaphor, and critique, of mass media and the process through which events, in this case happenings, become transformed into information about the event.

### **The Mass Media “Boom”**

In the introduction to Eco's *Open Work* scholar David Robey reminds us that this text led to Eco's other intellectual inquiries with studies in mass culture, mass media and semiotics. Robey explains that Eco's entry into these topics extends from his initial impulse in *Opera aperta* to work towards a “clarification of the contemporary world.”<sup>374</sup> Eco's work was much like Barthes' critical reflection on the domain of socio-cultural life via mass media and culture:

analyzing the ideological implications of political, social and cultural products and events through a critical, rational and conscious reading of their meaning; laying bare the confusion, mystification and manipulation to which the contemporary public is subjected; inculcating in readers a constant attitude of healthy suspicion (*diffidenza*). Eco sees himself engaged in a form of permanent semiological guerrilla warfare against the mass media and political power, in the cause of an open minded, tolerant awareness of the complexities, ambiguities and nuances in life.<sup>375</sup>

Masotta's reading of both Barthes and Eco inflected his own critique of mass media's sophistication, but more importantly his work reflects a broader discursive formation abroad and in Argentina, where not only the various effects of modernization were coming under scrutiny, but the mass media was increasingly an area of inquiry. In

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<sup>374</sup> *Ibid*, XXIX.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid*, XXIX.

the case of Argentina, Masotta's work is symptomatic of incipient developments in the social sciences, with the first department of Sociology established in 1957 at the University of Buenos Aires. As Beatriz Sarlo explains, the formation of the discipline was a direct consequence of both Argentina's ongoing process of modernization and the changing social conditions initiated under Perón.<sup>376</sup> Gino Germani's 1962 study *Política y sociedad en una época de transición* (Politics and society in a period of transition) is exemplary of the field's primary interest in "the transformation of traditional culture to urban industrialized modern culture, and the emergence of mass society."<sup>377</sup> With figures like Jaime Rest the first reflections on mass media are closely tied to its impact on the masses. Once again, the problematic of "what to do with the masses?" is reformulated into questions around mass culture and media. Rest answer this questions affirmatively, referring to mass media's positive attribute as a "pedagogical instrument."<sup>378</sup> Gino Germani echoes this sentiment with his claim that within mass culture, media had the capacity to democratize, by effectively bringing high culture to the masses.<sup>379</sup> But it is Eliseo Verón, whose close association with Lévi-Strauss, opens up the field to structuralism and semiotics.<sup>380</sup> In the case of Verón the value of semiotics provided a

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<sup>376</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, "Estudio Preliminar," in *La Batalla de las Ideas*, 80.

<sup>377</sup> Gino Germani and Jorge Graciarena quoted in *La Batalla de las Ideas*, 82.

<sup>378</sup> Although Rest comes from a literary background he is often considered a precursor to the developments in Sociology. See Rest, "Situación del arte en la era tecnológica." Another relevant figure is José Miguens who, influenced by information theory and cybernetics, is interested in communication processes. See Jose Miguens, "Una análisis del fenómeno."

<sup>379</sup> For a discussion of the larger debates occurring at the time see Rivera, *La Investigación en comunicación social*.

<sup>380</sup> Between 1961-63 Eliseo Verón studied in France, with a fellowship from CONICET, where he worked closely with Claude Lévi-Strauss. Through his experience he became familiar with Roland Barthes' work, shifting his interest towards semiotics. Upon returning to Buenos Aires, Verón becomes professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Buenos Aires. Additionally he translated works by Lévi-Strauss, notably *Antropología Estructural* in 1961, and

conceptual framework to critically examine the social construction of meaning via the mass media. In contrast to Rest and Germani's optimism towards mass media's role in social development, Verón was disenchanted and highly suspicious of its ideological dimensions. Coinciding with these intellectual developments, were the actual changes occurring within the media environment that lent to its growing omnipresence and authority.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, in the case of television the 1960s marks a passage from its initial stage as a new technology with a restricted audience to a veritable form of mass media communication, eclipsing radio's dominance.<sup>381</sup> Just as pronounced were the changing features of print media in Argentina, with the number of newspapers and magazines growing exponentially between 1955 and 1966.<sup>382</sup> One such example is the appearance of the glossy weekly magazine *Primera Plana*. Its arrival in 1962 "revolutionized" the press industry by amending the scale and patterns of mass circulation, claiming "the ability to speak to and for an emergent majority of the populace."<sup>383</sup> Their new structure entailed printing more copies than any other magazine,

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begins collaborating with Oscar Masotta. Verón sustains his study at the intersection of semiotics and communication studies. According to Verón, semiotics in Argentina was born as "sociosemiotica" (social semiotics). Eliseo Verón, "Acerca de la producción social del conocimiento: El estructuralismo y la semiología en Argentina y Chile" in *Lenguajes* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1974), 96-125.

<sup>381</sup> Television sales grew exponentially from 5,000 sets to 100,000 between 1951 and 1955. See Mirta Varela, *La Televisión Criolla: Desde sus incios hasta la llegada del hombre ala Luna 1951-1969* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2005).

<sup>382</sup> See Anibal Ford, Jorge B. Rivera and Eduardo Romano, *Medios de Comunicación y Cultura Popular* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Legasa, 1985).

<sup>383</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 150.

and distributing more widely with the strategic placement of kiosks throughout Buenos Aires.<sup>384</sup>

Its impact is also measured by its different format, focus and style of reportage, modeled after U.S. publications *Time* and *Newsweek*. *Primera Plana* reconstituted the traditional Argentine journal with a new diverse range of national and international news to its reader. Beyond the current political and economic events, the magazine featured regular columns that were “snapshots of the modern.”<sup>385</sup> A main element was their cultural journalism that reviewed the visual arts, cinema and literature in the “*Calendario*” (Calendar). Another section titled “*Vida Moderna*” (Modern Life) sought to register the societal changes occurring in Buenos Aires, such as women’s transforming roles to promoting new fashion trends. In this sense, *Primera Plana* was working under the assumption that it was an arbiter of “*lo Argentino, con espíritu Argentino*” (what is Argentine, with an Argentine spirit), defined by new cultural traditions and urban sensibilities.<sup>386</sup> The weekly narrative of news, events and topics of interest was intended to refashion the image of Argentina as a vibrant and modern nation, while also guiding its public in the same direction. In addition to *Primera Plana*’s formation of new socio-cultural models and subjects, their articles claim to be the most accurate and immediate information on city life. Editor Abelardo Castillo described the magazine and its

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<sup>384</sup> The magazine’s actual reach was only to 250,000 readers of Buenos Aires 3 million inhabitants, but the general perception was that the magazine was far more influential. This can be gauged by the fact that in 1969 the military government shut down the publication on the basis of its “subversive” content, and more notably on the belief that this content had real sway over the general public.

<sup>385</sup> John King, “‘Ya nunca más seríamos lo que éramos’: Tomás Eloy Martínez and *Primera Plana* in the 1960s,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 31, no. 4 (2012): 431.

<sup>386</sup> “Carta al Lector,” *Primera Plana*, July 7, 1964.

journalists as “being fully participant in reality.”<sup>387</sup> By sending their journalists into the field or basing their stories on “scientific” sociological studies the magazine portrayed an appearance of truth.

Laura Podalsky ascertains that what was at stake for those at *Primera Plana* was influence over an expanded audience, from which they could formulate new subjectivities, a new public.<sup>388</sup>

The significance of the new cultural institutions [like *Primera Plana*] went beyond simply producing and transmitting new cultural values to wider sectors of the Buenos Aires populace. Much more important was their reshuffling of classic humanist notions governing the relations between appearance and reality, knowledge and being [...] <sup>389</sup>

The example of *Primera Plana* encapsulates the principal concerns Eliseo Verón expressed of the mass media, a magazine he declared as having an “enormous cultural impact.”<sup>390</sup> Verón maintained that the “power” of the mass media resided in its capacity to “create worlds” or “create the objects of which its speaks of.”<sup>391</sup> Verón however wasn’t so much concerned with the content of mass media that formed a particular vision of society. Rather he took issue with the internal conditions and operation that lends to mass media’s “façade of naturalness,” and thereby disguised the social construction of their contemporary reality.<sup>392</sup> If *Primera Plana* was engaged in crafting a new consensus, Verón’s task was to identify the discursive means that constituted it. Speaking specifically about the daily and weekly journals, like *Primera Plana*, Verón describes an

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<sup>387</sup> “Carta al Lector,” *Primera Plana*, October 26, 1965.

<sup>388</sup> Podalsky, *Specular City*, 165.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>390</sup> Eliseo Verón, Interview by John King, in King, *El Di Tella*, 417.

<sup>391</sup> Eliseo Verón, “Comunicacion de masas y produccion ideologia: acerca de la constitucion del discurso burgues en la prensa semanal,” in *Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología* 1 (1974): 9-42.

<sup>392</sup> Eliseo Verón, “Comunicación de Masas,” in Masotta, *Happenings*, 136.

“information superstructure.”<sup>393</sup> He sees these mediums as an organic part of the social fabric, transcending its original intention and modality to convey information, to become a determining element of their socio-historical formation.

His position becomes especially influential when in 1966 Verón’s intellectual trajectory intersects with Masotta, when both were affiliated with Di Tella.<sup>394</sup> Verón was a newly appointed professor at their Center for Sociological Studies, while Masotta was giving lectures, seminars and intermittently producing happenings. Although Di Tella is consistently remembered for its advancement of avant-garde artistic activity, Nestor Garcia Canclini reminds us that it was simultaneously at the forefront of the social sciences in Argentina.<sup>395</sup> Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman go on to suggest that their proximity precipitated a cross-pollination between these two fields, with Di Tella as the main point of intersection.<sup>396</sup> But ultimately their shared interests in mass media, communication and society provide a common meeting ground.

An actual dialogue can be traced in Masotta’s book *Happenings* and to some extent his later book *Conciencia y estructura*, dedicated to Verón, artists Roberto Jacoby

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<sup>393</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

<sup>394</sup> Between 1964 and 1966 Verón was Professor in the Department of Sociology and Oscar Masotta founded the Centro de Estudios Superiores de Arte (Center for Advanced Art Studies) at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) where he was a researcher and lecturer. The 1966 coup that established General Juan Carlos Onganía as president led to a purging of perceived leftist intellectuals and communist instigators from the University. Consequently, Masotta and Verón no longer continued to work at UBA, and developing their activities with Di Tella.

<sup>395</sup> Néstor García Canclini, “Cultural Studies from the 1980s to the 1990s: Antropological and Sociological Perspectives in Latin America,” in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Ana de Sarto, et al. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 329-345.

<sup>396</sup> Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, “Masotta, Jacoby, Verón: un arte de los medios de comunicación de masas,” *Causas y Azares* 3 (1995): 127-140.



and Julián Cairol.<sup>397</sup> For this discussion we will look primarily at the first example that interweaves the voices of both sociologists and artists together. Masotta's prologue explains that despite the spectrum of contributors, their approach to the topic of happenings is within a common "referential frame" and methodology influenced by Structuralism, anthropology, semiology and communications.<sup>398</sup> Despite the nuanced theoretical underpinnings of each branch, they were considered to be on the same axis. Mariano Zarowsky points to Verón's early work in particular, which moves fluidly across these theories, tending to unify them under a general science of society and communications.<sup>399</sup> Equipped with these new analytical tools, Masotta similarly links them together to narrow in on the mass media and the role of the artistic avant-garde in relation to it.

In Masotta's essay *Los medios de comunicación de masas y la categoría de <discontinuo> en la estética contemporánea* (Mass media communication and the category of <discontinuity> in contemporary aesthetics) he begins his discussion with a question: "what consists of our situation?"<sup>400</sup> His response turns to the visual arts and its interest in the mass media as a marker of a significant socio-historical shift. The correlation between art and mass media are once again gauged in the development of American and British Pop art and its import of images reified by the mass media.

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<sup>397</sup> Mariano Zarowsky points out that Verón's work was also reshaped by this collaboration, attributing his increasing focus on semiotics to Masotta. Masotta also participated in Verón's 1967 symposium at Di Tella: *Teorías de la comunicación y modelos lingüísticos en ciencias sociales*. See Mariano Zarowsky, "Oscar Masotta/Eliseo Verón: Un itinerario cruzado en la emergencia de los estudios en comunicación en Argentina," *La trama de la Comunicación* 17 (2013): 271-290.

<sup>398</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 9.

<sup>399</sup> Zarowsky, "Oscar Masotta/Eliseo Verón," 282.

<sup>400</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 51.

Happenings follow with their own vernacular of popular culture and mirroring of social reality, while also incorporating media technology into their works.<sup>401</sup> Together they present a “new image” that signals a “convergence of certain emerging social and cultural realities.”<sup>402</sup> But his primary concern is the extent to which these works enable us to *perceive* these realities.<sup>403</sup> Returning to his initial question, Masotta is not only asking what their current condition is, but rather how is the artistic avant-garde registering and responding to this change? In this regard, art acts as an agent that enables a new or shifting perception and awareness.

Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding media: The Extension of man*, which Masotta discusses in his essay, can clarify this issue further. McLuhan’s thesis on the importance of new media technologies’ transformation of society, often reduced to aphorisms such as the “global village” and the “medium is the message,” ascribes to it a sweeping impact, which is largely positive.<sup>404</sup> His many insights affirm the way in which media activates and reshapes our sensory perceptions, accelerates information flows and builds global connections that are more intimate. At the basis of his thinking was the media’s profound capacity to generate new structures of consciousness. For Masotta this “positive reality” that McLuhan envisions is a counterpoint to their enterprise.<sup>405</sup> Rather

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<sup>401</sup> Although Masotta gives a limited analysis of Argentina Happenings, Marta Minujín’s works from *La Menesunda* to *Simultaneidad y Simultaneidad* are relevant examples.

<sup>402</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 54.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>404</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>405</sup> This “positive reality” evokes parallels to Pierre Restany who also celebrated technological advances in terms of “la nature moderne.” While Masotta is explicitly thinking of McLuhan, I would argue that Restany’s influence on Minujín is still operative in her work, although she is also citing McLuhan. See Restany, “La réalité dépasse la fiction,” 48-50.

than embrace his technological determinism, Masotta in collaboration with Verón propose a tactic for engaging the media in a critical and potentially oppositional way.

Turning to Verón's contributions, a guiding principle in his two essays is a notion of an artwork, claiming its "validity" is based on the "extent to which its forms constitute a *transformation* of society and not a *reproduction* [of it]."<sup>406</sup> This definition is a point of departure into an analysis of Marta Minujín's *Simultaneidad y Simultaneidad* (Simultaneity and Simultaneity).

The multi-part happening *Simultaneidad y Simultaneidad* first occurred October 13<sup>th</sup> at Di Tella's audiovisual room where Minujín invited sixty guests, based on their affiliation with the media or celebrity status within it. The space was neatly arranged with sixty individual places equipped with a television set and portable radios for each guest to use (Figure 42). Over the course of three hours Minujín with a team of photographers and cameramen recorded the guests as they watched TV, listened to the radio or participated in interviews. Following the event, her guests were instructed to return the 24<sup>th</sup> at midnight. That evening the guests arrived to the same room, with the same arrangement intact. Each participant sat at their respective TV and radio sets where Minujín transmitted photographs, film and audio recordings gathered on the 13<sup>th</sup>. To the participants surprise they were presented with an uncanny encounter with their mediated self, followed by a ten-minute pre-recorded video of the happening *Invasión Instantánea* (Instantaneous Invasion).<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Verón's italics, Masotta, *Happenings*, 77.

<sup>407</sup> *Instantaneous Invasion* was also a multi-part work that involved interrupting the regular television and radio programming on Channel 13, Radio Libertad and Radio Excelsior with a ten-minute segment of film and audio footage of live Happenings by Allan Kaprow in the U.S. and Wolf Vostell in Germany. As we know Minujín's plan to coordinate a global network of



Figure 42. Marta Minujín, *Simultaneidad y Simultaneidad*, 1966

By reproducing the images and voices of the participants and transmitting it back to them through the mass media, Minujín creates a feedback loop that repeats the spectacle back onto its participant-spectator, while diffracting it across various media. Evoking McLuhan, Minujín orchestrates a multi-sensory media environment that aimed at extending the viewer's auditory and visual faculties, to the point of extending the very sense of themselves into the media.<sup>408</sup> As Rodrigo Alonso contends the absent narrative is

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communication using Telstar communications satellites, evoking McLuhan's "global village," failed, forcing Minujín to create a pre-recording of the segment that used fabricated images of Kaprow and Vostell's work based on written descriptions. From the perspective of the viewer at home watching on TV the transnational Happening was a seamless event that showcased the media's claims to immediacy and access. See Michael Kirby, "Marta Minujín's Simultaneity in Simultaneity," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 3 (1968): 148-152.

<sup>408</sup> "Most technology produces an amplification that is quite explicit in its separation of the senses. Radio is an extension of the aural, high-fidelity photography of the visual. But TV is above all, an extension of the sense of touch, which involves maximal interplay of all the senses." McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 333

evidence of Minujín's indifference to conveying information or content, instead the message was the medium.<sup>409</sup>

Beyond Minujín's intentions and the potential intervention it makes, Verón who was one of the participants, appears largely unaffected. His analysis largely centers on the structural inversion the work makes of mass media's customary communicational flow: "a-consumer-observing-television-in-their-home."<sup>410</sup> Over the course of the event, their traditional role, as observer of the media, is transposed when the media begins to observe them, and eventually they observe themselves. He concludes that while Minujín's *Happening* reconfigures the social ritual of consuming mass media, it is a closed-circuit system with any reflection on mass media consumption contained within an elite group of artists, journalists and celebrities. Consequently, Minujín repeats a problematic he associates with most happenings, both in their artistic and mass mediated representations. According to Verón, happenings as with most avant-garde artworks continue to be objects for "elite consumption" and moreover initiate a "process of 'eliticization' of mass cultural symbols."<sup>411</sup> *Simultaneity and Simultaneity* is just one example of how happenings fail in their critical task, in so much as their engagement with the mass media is largely superficial.<sup>412</sup>

### **De-mystifying mass media**

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<sup>409</sup> Rodrigo Alonso, "Tecnología para los Sentidos," in *Minuphone 1967-2010*, ed. Ana Longoni and Fernanda Carvajal (Buenos Aires: Espacio Fundación Telefónica, 2010), 66.

<sup>410</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 80.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>412</sup> Contrary to what Verón's analysis suggests an argument can be made that Minujín's *Simultaneity and Simultaneity* was designed to reflect a mirror back at the member of the media, making them aware of their significant role in the mass media, and the implications of its conventions. In their new position as observers/observed of their own media representations, they are forced to witness their "specularization" as the media tended to reinterpret them or "ghost" them.

In July 1966 artists Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari and Roberto Jacoby gathered under the name *Grupo Arte de los Medios* (Media art Group) to collectively write the manifesto *Un Arte de los Medios de Comunicación* (An Art of Communication Media), later published in Masotta's *Happenings*.<sup>413</sup> Roberto Jacoby, who later remembers the group as “Los Masottianos,” speaks of Masotta as an undeclared fourth member and vital mentor, whose theoretical enterprise profoundly influenced their artistic formation.<sup>414</sup> As I will explain in a later part of this section, the group is a key element in Masotta's collaborative and critical project on happenings and the artistic avant-garde.

Their manifesto follows the avant-garde tradition with its own provocation for a new artistic genre: “arte de los medios” (mass media art), which they planned to initiate with an artwork variously titled *Happening de la Participación Total* (Total Participation Happening), *Happening Para un Jabali Difunto* (Happening for a Dead Boar) and *Anti-happening*. Their polemic was aimed at “current art practices, primarily Pop Art,” which appropriated elements from the mass media, whereas they declared their intention to produce art within the media.

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<sup>413</sup> Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa and Raúl Escari, “Un Arte de los Medios de Comunicación,” in Masotta, *Happenings*, 121-122.

<sup>414</sup> Roberto Jacoby and Ana Longoni, *El Deseo Nace Del Derrumbe: Acciones, Conceptos, Escritos* (Barcelona: Ediciones de la Central, 2011), 35.





Figure 43. "Happening para un Jabali Difunto," *El Mundo*, August 22, 1966

On August 21, 1966 the daily newspaper *El Mundo* with a circulation of 300,000 published a double-page spread on a Happening produced by Jacoby, Escari and Costa, occurring on July 30<sup>th</sup> at the house of art gallerist Suana Muñoz Saénz Peña (Figure 43).<sup>415</sup> The title "Happening Para un Jabali Difunto," appearing in large bold letters, with

<sup>415</sup> Eduardo E. Eichelbaum, "Happening para un jabalí difunto," *El Mundo*, August 21, 1966.

five black and white photographs framing the text conveys an ebullient affair. Reading the images from left to right, the first photograph presents a riotous gathering led by theater actress and dancer Marilú Marini fully extended backwards towards the camera while a large crowd extend their arms upward. The second scene is of dancer Graciela Martinez among other jovial faces, all seeking a place within the camera frame. Pleasure is again conveyed in the photograph of artist Marta Minujín and film actress Egle Martin with their exuberant smiles. While the more reserved participants are writers Dalmiro Saénz and Manuel Mujica Láinez. In addition to those pictured, the text relates the presence of Oscar Masotta, psychoanalysis Pichon Rivera, sociologist Juan José Sebreli among many other recognizable figures from Buenos Aires' cultural and intellectual circle. Based on this composition, reporter Eduardo E. Eichelbaum ventured to call it an "artistic-sociological-psychoanalytic" experience.

The actual Happening, however, never took place. Rather, the event was pure invention. The artists later admitted to identifying Buenos Aires' top "mythical figures" from the media, especially those most often associated with so-called happenings, and soliciting their participation. Together with the artists, the participants fabricated their roles within the Happening, which was then staged for a camera. The overall documentation took shape in the form of a report authored by the artists and thirteen photographs by Ruben Santantonín. This information was then distributed to several journalists, with the anticipation that the fictitious Happening would be transmitted as real news to a mass readership. The large feature in *El Mundo* testifies to its success. Based on the artist's records subsequent articles appeared over several months in magazine *Gente*, *Para Ti*, *Confirmado*, *Primera Plana* and several others (Figure 44). On



October 30<sup>th</sup> *El Mundo* published the article *Comunicación de Masas* (Mass Communication) by Eliseo Verón that revealed the artificial nature of the story and its documentation.<sup>416</sup>



Figure 44. "Happening" *El escarabajo de oro* no. 31-2, 1966

His following analysis applauds the work as a timely intervention that ruptures the "information superstructure." For Verón, the artists' ability to transmit the fictitious

<sup>416</sup> Eliseo Verón, "Comunicación de Masas," in Masotta, *Happenings*, 133-8. See also Eliseo Verón, "La Obra," *Ramona: Revista de Artes Visuales* 9,10 (Dec. 2000-March 2001): 46-50.

Happening to the press, which was then circulated as an actual event to the public subverted the media's logic of transparency and immediacy. The artists more accurately reveal the media as a "language that creates its own objects," that is by illustrating "the facts" as a construction of language and ideology.<sup>417</sup> Moreover, the deceived reader is made conscious of the representational frame, the form of information or medium that typically erases the distinction between reality and its mediation. The artists then opened up the mass readership's perception to the "machine" through which they often perceive "reality."<sup>418</sup> The violation of both the media and its public stands in direct contrast to artists working with the mass media, such as Minujín who were ineffective in making a critical and productive "transformation of reality." Verón wrote,

I suspect that an art of the future post-industrial society will be similar to this experience [...] an art of objects [...] whose material will not be physical, but social, with its form constructed by the systemic transformation of communication structures.<sup>419</sup>

The *Anti-happening* actualizes Verón and Masotta's form of ideological critique, enacting a strategy of demystification that harks back to *Contorno*'s first attempts at "tearing away the mirage of reality."<sup>420</sup> Recalling Masotta's early association with the journal we are reminded of their collective endeavor, their Sartrean "commitment" that entailed a revelation of their historical situation and a critical response to it, especially in the interest of the larger socio-political orientation of the masses.<sup>421</sup> With the centrality of

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<sup>417</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 138.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, 136-137.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

<sup>420</sup> Leon Rozitchner, "Comunicación y servidumbre," 33.

<sup>421</sup> Again noting Sartre's influence, he wrote: "The committed writer knows that words are actions, he knows that to reveal is to change, and that one cannot reveal unless one has the project of changing." Jean-Paul Sartre quoted in Rhiannon Goldthrope, "Understanding the committed

mass communication in the 1960s as a dominant mode of organizing Argentine society, the media becomes the site of struggle for exercising “new ways of perceiving and behaving.”<sup>422</sup> Thus, Masotta’s original premise finds its evolution in happenings and Arte de los Medios’ first work, as the *Anti-happening* maneuvers its way into the public arena, reaching a mass audience to then inconspicuously destabilize what they have taken to be natural and true:

The fundamental content of our work is [...] a play between the reality of things and the unreality of information between the reality of information and the unreality of things; the materialization through the mass media, of imaginary events, an imaginary constructed on another imaginary; the game of constructing a mythical image and the task of seeking the support of the audience’s imagination, only to tear it all down and leave them simply with ‘the spectacle of their own deceived consciousness.’<sup>423</sup>

For the artists of the Grupo Arte de los Medios the experience of deception that emerges from the oscillation between truth and fiction is the key moment of discovery by which the public develops a critical knowledge, as consumers within a new media environment, but more broadly as new modern subjects.<sup>424</sup>

### **The Anti-Happening**

Recalling the early manifestos discussed in Chapter One, I would like to remind the reader of their common vision that articulated the post-war avant-garde art in terms of

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writer” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1992), 140-177.

<sup>422</sup> Roberto Jacoby, “Contra el Happening,” in Masotta, *Happenings*, 128.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>424</sup> Karen Benezra chooses to use the term “defamiliarization” to describe the work’s effect on the viewer. She takes her definition from Louis Althusser’s “symptomatic reading” and Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* or “V-effect.” These concepts share affinities with what I have so far discussed as “demystification” in that their aim is “denaturalize” ideology. In the case of the V-effect however “de-naturalization” is achieved by recasting what we have traditionally presupposed as natural in a strange and different light. Benezra, “Media art in Argentina,” 157.

innovative art experiments, that professed to transcend the limitations of established practices, which in turn corresponded to their changed conditions. One of my arguments was to suggest that their utopian ambition, along with the quest for novelty, was a driving force behind a perpetual obsolescence of art forms.

In 1967 Masotta's lecture *Después del Pop: Nosotros Desmaterializamos* (After Pop: We Dematerialize) echoes these early provocations, with his interpretation of avant-garde art as new aesthetic models, built on a radical "negation" of its artistic precursors. Daniel Quiles points to Masotta's citation of Sartre and El Lissitzky at the beginning of his essay to indicate a metabolic appropriation of past models as a means of developing a new avant-garde practice.<sup>425</sup> The first quote taken from Sartre's essay "Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology:"

'He devoured her with his eyes.' This sentence and so many other similar ones illustrate quite well the enthusiasm common to realism and idealism according to which knowing is eating.<sup>426</sup>

The second is an excerpt from El Lissitzky's essay "The Future of the Book":

Today the consumers are the whole world, the masses. The idea moving the masses today is called materialism, but dematerialization is the characteristic of the epoch. For example, correspondence grows, so the number of letters, the quantity of writing paper, the mass of material consumed expands, until relieved by the telephone. Again, the network and material of supply grow until they are relieved by the radio. Briefly: matter diminishes, the process of dematerialization increases each time. Sluggish masses of material are replaced by liberated energy.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Daniel Quiles, "My Reference is Prejudices: David Lamela's *Publication*," *Art Margins* 2, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 39.

<sup>426</sup> Quoted in Masotta, *Consciencia y Estructura*, 273.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid*, 273.

While Sartre describes a carnal devouring as a form of knowing, El Lissitzky expresses the evolution of dematerialized forms of media. Together these examples make reference to an act of assimilation, a process by which one thing disappears into another. For Quiles, Masotta's selection of these two texts supports the process by which Masotta, Jacoby, Escari and Costa arrive at the new genre *Arte de los Medios*. As I continue to demonstrate through this dissertation, this is a dominant paradigm of the Argentine avant-garde, which is articulated again in the passage from happenings to the Anti-happening. For Masotta, the question of what constituted an avant-garde art remained open, its project still yet unrealized, which *Arte de los Medios* then proposes to fulfill. The group's use of the manifesto certainly reminds the reader of their place within this tradition. Yet, while there is a level of continuity and development that I am tracing here, I also want to consider the ways in which *Arte de los Medios* is indeed critically negating their immediate predecessors, from Alberto Greco's *Vivo-Ditos* to Minujín's happenings. Before *Arte de los Medios*'s manifesto was Alberto Greco who in 1963 pronounced an "art of the real:"

Vivo Dito art is the adventure of the real, the urgent document, the direct and total contact with things, places, people [...] Reality without touchups or artistic transformation.<sup>428</sup>

By circling people and objects in their "found" contexts, Greco claimed to present them "just as they are," aiming to convey the present in a direct and unmediated fashion. In similar terms, Minujín declared her happenings as uninhibited "real" lived experiences and her material objects as undifferentiated from the city's modern environment they originated from. Under the influence of Restany and *Nouveau Realisme*'s "direct

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<sup>428</sup> Greco, "Manifiesto Vivo-Dito," 38.

appropriation of the real” – a realism “transparently align[ed] art with reality, realism with referent, to the extent that the referent itself becomes the art” – Greco and Minujín’s art similarly operate as simple presentations of a larger social reality.<sup>429</sup>

I argue that Masotta and Arte de los Medios’ question what is real, precisely by presenting an unreliable representation of reality, indirectly problematizing Greco and Minujín’s work. More specifically Arte de los Medios challenge their prevailing realist mode that tended to efface the way in which “reality” is constituted in their objects. Rather, they reject a notion of reality without intervention by holding our attention to the language of their works, which shapes or gives it meaning. Reminiscent of other realist models, the Anti-happening’s emphasis is on the productive character of their work, in favor of the process of making their work through the transmission and reception of the false Happening. Here, Karen Benezra’s mention of Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdugneffekt* or “V-effect” in relation to Arte de los Medios becomes insightful.<sup>430</sup> As Benezra notes, “defamiliarization” is a key element in Arte de los Medios’ work, aligning their work to Brecht’s theatrical techniques that gesture towards its own material production, thus making the operative medium visible.<sup>431</sup> The effect of “estrangement” sought to jolt the viewer out of their “perceptual numbness,” thereby producing a critical consciousness. For Jacoby, this is where the medium, or rather an awareness of it, becomes significant to their practice. He articulates,

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<sup>429</sup> Cabañas, *Myth of Nouveau Réalisme*, 18.

<sup>430</sup> Benezra, “Media art in Argentina,” 157.

<sup>431</sup> Estrangement has a much longer history that is also found in cinema and literature, often beginning with Viktor Shklovsky’s *Ostranenie* and takes new form in Nouvelle Vague’s cinécriture. See Lynn Higgins, *New Novel, New Wave New Politics: Fiction and the Representation of History in Postwar France* (Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

[T]he medium “sets the stage”; it induces minds and bodies to a certain precise perception of time and space. The decision to choose one medium and not another implies ideas about the material and social possibilities of establishing communication.<sup>432</sup>

While the Anti-happening was directed towards the mass media, the artists extend their critique to artistic mediums, which according to Jacoby are “being naturalized to the point that no one challenges their validity,” generating an “acritical conception of aesthetic mediums by which they are accepted just as they are presented to us.”<sup>433</sup>

However Arte de los Medios abandon prevailing artistic mediums altogether, proposing a dematerialized art object: “systems of communication.”<sup>434</sup> Masotta defines this “material” as “none other than the processes, the results, the facts, and/or the phenomena of information set off by the mass information media.”<sup>435</sup> Rather than appropriate the technological apparatuses of mass media, like Minujín, Masotta regarded the Anti-happening as the immaterial network and flow of communication through these devices. However, the dissolution of the art object in this example works against Greco and Minujín’s initial claims to immediacy. The immateriality of their work did not guarantee presence, but rather spoke to their new reality as one that is always mediated. In their manifesto, Arte de los Medios argued that the proliferation of mass media was changing direct, lived experience into a second-hand mental experience of simulations and representations:

In a mass civilization, people are not in direct contact with cultural events; rather they are informed about them via the media. For example a mass audience does not see an exhibition, attend a Happening, or go

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<sup>432</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 127.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>434</sup> Oscar Masotta, “Unedited Manuscripts,” *Ramona: Revista de Artes Visuales* 45 (Sept. 2004): 57.

<sup>435</sup> Masotta, “Después del Pop,” 283.

to a soccer game, but it does see footage of the event on the news. Actual artistic events are no longer important in terms of their diffusion, because they only reach a limited audience [...] it is of no interest to information consumers if an exhibition took place or not; all that matters is the image of the artistic event constructed by the media.<sup>436</sup>

The *Anti-happening* thus performs the systematic process that transforms the Happening into information about the Happening, essentially “dematerializing” the artistic genre. As Lissitzky envisioned a historical pattern where mediatized forms displace material ones, Arte de los Medios recognize a cultural system that must account for the mass media. Furthermore, Jacoby suggests elsewhere that the Happening was a “desperate search for a new means of aesthetic communication” largely built on the pretense of unmediated relations.<sup>437</sup> Their agenda offers a new model of communication that is in opposition to the “exclusivity” and “superficiality” of the Argentine Happening in a new appeal to the masses. Evoking parallels to Minujín’s televised Happening, Arte de los Medios were also after an expanded audience, but the key difference is their criticality and self-reflexivity.

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<sup>436</sup> Masotta, *Happenings*, 121.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid*, 130.



**Conclusion:**  
**After 1968, we dematerialize**

For the second annual edition of *Experiencias '68* (Experiences) organized by Jorge Romero Brest at Di Tella's CAV, artist Roberto Jacoby produced *Mensaje en el Di Tella* (Message in the Di Tella) – an installation including a telex machine that transmitted real-time news information from Agence France Press about the May '68 demonstrations in France, a photograph of an African American protester holding a sign against the Vietnam War and a manifesto by Jacoby composed of white letters on a large black board with his handwritten signature at the end (Figure 45):

This message is directed to the small group of creators, simulators, critics and promoters, that is to say, to those whose talent, intelligence, economic interest, prestige or stupidity commit them to what is called “avant-garde art.”

To those who come to the Di Tella for their regular “culture bath” to the general public.

The avant-garde is the intellectual movement that permanently repudiates art and permanently affirms history. In this trajectory of simultaneous affirmation and repudiation art and life have become so confused as to become inseparable. All of the phenomena of social life have been converted into aesthetic material: fashion, manufacturing and technology, the media of mass communication, etc.

“Aesthetic contemplation came to an end because aesthetics dissolved in social life.”

The work of art has also ended because life and the planet itself are becoming art. That is why everywhere there is a necessary, bloody and beautiful struggle for the creation of a new world. [...] <sup>438</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Roberto Jacoby, *Mensaje en el Di Tella*, trans. Marguerite Feitlowitz, in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 290.



Figure 45. Roberto Jacoby, *Mensaje en el Di Tella*, 1968

Jacoby, still working within *Arte de los Medios*, delivers a message of revolutionary change, arriving by a different medium from its various geographic locations. The work as a resounding protest aptly captures the global political tensions from that Spring in 1968. Despite the differences and distances between France, the U.S. and Argentina, Jacoby expresses an affinity with other movements by reading his own avant-garde message alongside political ones. By aligning his text to the actions occurring abroad,

Jacoby reminds us of the manifesto's performative speech, that is, its attempt to effect change.<sup>439</sup>

As his provocation explains, he directs his message specifically at an artistic audience – those from the field “committed to the avant-garde” and the exhibition's public there to view art. What he presents is not meant to be an aesthetic experience, but an instance of life defined in terms of political struggle. Furthermore, the ontological status of the mediums – the photograph and telex machine feed of real-time events – lends to the illusion of direct access to and communication of the protests' reality. But, as we know from Jacoby's participation in the Anti-happening, at the center of this work is an underlying critique of media's ideological dimensions that is discerned once the viewer looks beyond the content to identifying the medium that delivers and conditions it.

In a later reflection Jacoby described his work as “apocalyptic,” heralding “the end of art and society as we know it.”<sup>440</sup> This points to Jacoby's other intervention to dissolve art into life. On the one hand, Jacoby's notion of art and life is also a direct response to Jorge Romero Brest's curatorial framework of the exhibition. In a text Brest wrote for the exhibition he defines the “experiences” of these works based on their “rejection of [art's] symbolic form,” which he describes as the intermediary between art and life. In doing so, the works of art is not merely seen, but “intensely” lived, thus merging art more closely into life.<sup>441</sup> Jacoby tends to reject this position, advocating a complete erasure between the two poles. Instead, his text suggests that the avant-garde

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<sup>439</sup> I refer to J.L. Austin's theory of performative language to attribute language with force, whereby the utterance is equal to the performance of an action. See J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

<sup>440</sup> Jacoby, *El deseo nace del derrumbe*, 116.

<sup>441</sup> Jorge Romero Brest, *Experiencias 1968* (Buenos Aires, 1968) Archivos Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Accessed November 25, 2012.

has reached its end point where art is life and life is actual political engagement, represented in the multiple simultaneous revolutions unfolding at the moment that are creating “a new world.”

While Jacoby’s text announced art’s fateful future, it was violently realized when President General Onganía’s regime ordered police to terminate Roberto Plate’s work *El baño* (The bathroom). For the exhibition, Plate constructed a full-scale model of a public bathroom, complete with symbols on the door indicating gender, but upon entering the visitor encountered a vacant, non-functioning space. Without any invitation, the stream of visitors defaced the stalls with graffiti, including the decisive phrase “Onganía puto.”<sup>442</sup> The insult to the President was enough for police to censor the work by locking the doors to the bathroom shut (Figure 46).



Figure 46. Closure of Roberto Plate’s *El baño*, 1968

<sup>442</sup> Jacoby, *El deseo nace del derrumbe*, 116.

The event propelled the participating artists to respond, first with a statement that declared their opposition to the new “police state” in their country and its persecution of artists and intellectuals, in addition to labor and student movements.<sup>443</sup> As a sign of protest they removed their works from the exhibition and finally destroyed them in front of Di Tella, on the popular and busy Florida street.

Once again faced with a utopian vision contingent on destruction, the artists’ gesture recalls the consuming logic found in the early work of Kemble, Minujín and the artists of *Arte Destructivo* as a final rupture with art, represented in the works and the institution. The popular magazine *Primera Plana* described these acts as “a leap into the void” to describe a symbolic suicide.<sup>444</sup> The reference highlights the deep sense of closure and the uncertainty that came with it. Jacoby’s work and the events of *Experiencias ’68* signaled a drift towards art’s radicalization, where artist’s envisioned an art practice in terms of explicit political action. This effort offers a new proposal to Greco’s initial call for an ideal form of art’s relationship to reality, one that is “without touchups or artistic transformation.”<sup>445</sup> In this sense, it would seem that the developments I have traced in this dissertation would meet its end, exhausting the avant-garde and the conditions of its possibility, or reaching its completion at this critical juncture. Recalling Eco, he writes “[contemporary artistic production offers] a new way of seeing, feeling understanding and accepting the universe in which traditional relationships are being

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<sup>443</sup> “Declaración final de los participantes en las Experiencias 68,” trans. Marguerite Feitlowitz, in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 293.

<sup>444</sup> Jacoby, *El deseo nace del derrumbe*, 107.

<sup>445</sup> Greco, *Manifiesto Vivo Dito*, 38-41.

laboriously sketched out.”<sup>446</sup> In his opinion art’s socio-political effect isn’t explicit, rather it is a poetic exercise that produces new ways of seeing and knowing, that serves as a basis for change. This is the subtle, but crucial distinction between the works from the early to mid-60s and those that Jacoby and his contemporaries are proposing.

Not unlike the early 1960s, the transformation of the Argentine artistic field mirrored the political changes occurring in the country. Yet the initial alliance became increasingly contentious and contradictory as the open field of possibility started to close in. Oganía’s increasing repression of various sectors of Argentina’s intellectual and artistic communities dimmed any democratic prospective, prompting many to abandon the specificities of their practice, which seemed ineffective. Roberto Jacoby went on to collaborate on Tucumán Arde – an event that Luis Camnitzer claims “pushed the artistic project to the borderline of the political project.”<sup>447</sup> In August of 1968 several Argentine artists held The First National Conference on Avant-Garde Art in Buenos Aires. At the conference artists called upon their colleagues to consider producing artwork independently from institutions “established by the bourgeoisie,” and to integrate themselves into “the culture of subversion to accompany the working class on the road to revolution.”<sup>448</sup> This call led to a series of actions intended to collect and circulate information that brought attention to the impoverished state of the town Tucumán and countered and challenged the government’s account of Tucumán. The material was presented at an exhibition at the General Workers Confederation of the Argentines

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<sup>446</sup> Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962), 9.

<sup>447</sup> Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin America: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 61.

<sup>448</sup> Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics*, 272.

(CGTA) building, where an assemblage of visual media presented to the viewer information juxtaposed with political opinion, including films, photographs, posters, and graphics. The show lasted two weeks in Rosario and only two days in Buenos Aires. Following this work, Jacoby suspended his artistic production to deepen his work in sociology.

In 1968 Oscar Masotta published his book *Conciencia y Estructura* – a collection of essays that follow his intellectual itinerary. In September of that year he would give his last comment on the artistic situation in Argentina, claiming that Arte de los Medios was perhaps on the only existing art production capable of interweaving “revolutionary praxis” with “aesthetic praxis”: “[the artworks] would not be objects for the archives of bourgeoisie, but subjects for a post-revolutionary consciousness.”<sup>449</sup> Following this decisive statement, Masotta redirected his intellectual inquiries towards Lacanian psychoanalysis, with a series of lectures in 1969 on Lacan’s *Seminar on the Purloined Letter*, but by 1974 he left Buenos Aires for Spain due to the deteriorating political situation.

During *Experiencias '68* Minujín was in New York showing her work *Minuicode* – a telephone booth that inundated the user with various sensorial experiences. Upon her return to Buenos Aires she exhibited *Importación-Exportación* that recreated the experience of U.S. hippie culture in the space of Di Tella’s CAV before it closed completely in 1970. Both works mark a shift in Minujín’s emphasis on media to hippie culture and experiments in psychedelics. Although she sustained an interest in altering

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<sup>449</sup> Masotta, *Conciencia y Estructura*, 35.

viewers' perceptions she increasingly distanced herself from the socio-political realities in Buenos Aires.

In August 1969 the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) was established under the direction of Jorge Glusberg that claimed to support a “new unity of art, science and the social environment” that engage an art of process and systems.<sup>450</sup> The center was composed of artists, sociologists, mathematicians, art critics and architects. Art historical narratives recognize this space as the definitive turn towards Conceptual art in Argentina. The early experiments in happenings left a legacy that informed the practices involved with CAYC. In formal terms happenings' registration of dematerialization, perception, and communication, in addition to its dismantling of traditional structures for hybrid art forms opened up the creative field for Conceptual art to develop these modes in new and different ways. While CAYC and Argentina's conceptual art have a solid place in the narrative of postwar art, this project hopes to situate its predecessors in a critical and productive historical position.

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<sup>450</sup> Glusberg, *Art in Argentina*, 20.



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