BORN OF INFORMALISMO:
Marta Minujín and the Nascent Body of Performance

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"Easel painting is dead," Marta Minujín explained to Jacqueline Barnitz in a 1966 interview. "Today man can no longer be satisfied with a static painting hanging on a wall. Life is too dynamic. It moves with the intensity and speed of a jet, and a painting cannot possibly transmit or register the changes that take place minute by minute."[2] When Minujín gave this justification for her legendary multimedia environment *El Batacazo* (The Long Shot, 1965), she was speaking from experience. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, before rising to fame as a pioneer of happenings and environments in Argentina, she had sought to make painting "register changes." She had, in other words, labored to defeat its permanence and stubborn immobility—that is, its autonomy from the hic et nunc of life. This formative period of rigorous experimentation is, however, a largely ignored chapter of Minujín's artistic career, as it falls under the aegis of an irreverently inventive but widely disdained movement in Argentina: Informalismo.

Part of a broader international current of informalist art encompassing Europe, the United States, and even East Asia, Informalismo began taking hold of Buenos Aires in 1956.[3] Its proponents created highly textured, abstract paintings, which often veered into reliefs. They also embraced extra-artistic materials (rags, rusted cans, tar, etc.) evocative of the harsh realities of everyday life or, more broadly, of a postwar existentialist gloom. Through its messy, gestural markings, scatological textures, and somber colors, Informalismo connoted spontaneity, violence, ugliness, and irrationality—in sum, a complete break with the mathematically precise aesthetic of the previous decade's constructive vanguards (e.g., Arte Concreto Invención, Madí, and Perceptismo). Unlike geometric abstraction, which had aspired to be a new, universally intelligible language, Informalismo reveled in its unprecedented opacity and unorthodoxy, which nonplussed and scandalized many of Buenos Aires's art critics.

To examine in earnest this bête noire of Argentine art has since the early 1960s been considered a futile endeavor—one corrosive to the scholar's credibility. Consider this warning by Jorge Romero Brest, the influential doyen of Argentine art,[4] who carps in 1963, "It is not merely difficult to theorize informal art. For now it is impossible. . . . Whoever purports to *explain* this art will be defrauded, and whoever attempts to do so by basing themselves in logic is a fraudster."[5] By positing Informalismo as an art beyond language and critical thought, Brest was certainly channeling the zeitgeist of the postwar period, best distilled by Theodor Adorno's famous 1949 reflection that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[6] With the world still reeling from the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, much art falling under the rubric of "the informal" adopted an anti-Cartesian and sometimes nihilistic stance.[7]

Though Brest grokked this anti-humanism, it made him ill at ease. The vehemence and indiscriminate sweep of his preemptive condemnation of any interpretation of Informalismo should raise eyebrows. For, by affirming that Informalismo's point was "the elimination of explanation," Brest was simultaneously attempting to mask the limitations of his own critical powers before such an iconoclastic movement—limitations that sprung from his residual adherence to a humanist outlook, which ran afoul of Informalismo. He was not alone. The movement threw other critics into a similar interpretive impasse rife with cognitive dissonance, as the following pages will explore.[8] Nonetheless, an art historical silence and a whiff of chicanery have since plagued Informalismo, confirming the enduring impact of the fraught and equivocating reception to which Brest's words belonged.

Using Informalismo's discursive field as a point of entry, the present essay seeks to dispel the impression that Informalismo was an impoverished and impenetrable style—"the Cinderella of philosophy," as Brest once gibed.[9] Since the staggering breadth of Argentine informalist art precludes me from addressing this movement in its entirety, I will instead concentrate on a single body of work: Minujín's informalist paintings and sculptures. Though a slightly belated convert to Informalismo, Minujín used its lexicon of earthy colors, base

materials, and haptic impastos to create paintings that could evince the ravages of time and thereby convey her then burgeoning ethos that, "Nothing is static, life is constant change."[10] In this way, her informalist art acquired a radical contingency that activated viewers as bodily and historical subjects, opening the door to performance art while connecting Informalismo to local politics—a rarity for informalist art in Argentina and other parts of the world. The exhibition *Born of Informalismo: Marta Minujín and the Nascent Body of Performance* traces her trajectory from Informalismo into performative and participatory art forms—art, in other words, oriented toward an embodied, visceral experience more than an exclusively optical or cerebral one.

My focus on Minujín, moreover, functions as a twofold invitation: to bring renewed attention to the contributions of women artists within Informalismo and, relatedly, to encourage a more discerning view of a highly heterogeneous movement too often described through blanket statements that dismiss an entire crop of informalist artists, its daring innovators as much as its sophomoric imitators. Regarding the former proposition, it is worth noting that first-generation women *informalistas*, such as Noemí Di Benedetto, Olga López, Martha Peluffo, and Silvia Torras, regularly exhibited alongside their male peers, yet their contributions are seldom discussed. While narratives of Argentine art recognize that Informalismo's affront to "good taste" opened the door for avant-garde experimentation, such accounts invariably position male artists as the catalysts of change. Alberto Greco, Kenneth Kemble, and Oscar Masotta form, in that order, the typical syzygy of male protagonists ostensibly responsible for the evolution of Informalismo into performance, installation art, and happenings, respectively.[11]

By centering on Minujín's Informalismo, the present essay and its accompanying exhibition seek to rectify some of the blind spots produced by an overly neat teleology fixated on men. Though not a foundational figure of the movement like the aforementioned women artists, Minujín was arguably the only female Argentine artist to have seriously engaged with Informalismo *and* meaningfully entered the annals of art history both at home and abroad.[12] This study on Minujín—an internationally recognized and exceptionally peripatetic figure—sheds light on how Informalismo's transmutation into other art forms occurred not in an insular, Argentine context but through cross-pollinating contact with European and North American art. Due to its roots in French Art Informel and Art Brut as well as North American Abstract Expressionism, Informalismo was, to be sure, cosmopolitan from its inception.[13] Yet, in Minujín's hands, this internationally proliferating idiom became further entwined with foreign cultural production while becoming patently responsive to Argentina's sociopolitical reality, imbricating local and global phenomena.

Paintings Performing Their Death

In 1959, when Minujín was still a teenager, Informalismo reached its zenith through three informalist exhibitions organized by some of the city's leading institutions: the Galería Pizarro, the Galería Van Riel, and the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (MAMBA) in partnership with the Museo de Artes Plásticas Eduardo Sívori.[14] Over the following three years, Informalismo continued to appear at other esteemed venues such as the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA), while its practitioners (Mario Pucciarelli, Clorindo Testa, and Rómulo Macció) repeatedly won the prestigious National Prize of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella. Meanwhile, Minujín became close friends with the informalist painter Alberto Greco as well as a regular at the Bar Moderno, where artists and intellectuals discussed the latest artistic currents, including Informalismo. Intrigued, she attended artist Jorge López Anaya's workshops on Informalismo at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes Ernesto de la Cárcova. This exposure, combined with her closeness to Greco, led her to abandon her colorful abstract oil paintings in what she called a "metaphysical surrealist" vein for an informalist aesthetic.[15] "I was completely captivated by Greco," Minujín divulged decades later, "so much so that I got into Informalismo. . . . I was taken in and influenced."[16]

Dating from around 1959 to 1961, her first informalist paintings such as *Mancha* (Stain, 1960) are slates of opaque, muddied colors—mostly browns, grays, and sullied whites (Fig. 1). Like marks on a soiled shirt, their tonal variations are a function of the surface materials that either absorb or support Minujín's pigments. Color, in fact, always seems incidental to matter in these early works. In *Gran mancha* (Big Stain, ca. 1959), for example, warm beiges distinguish themselves as a fragile layer, chipping off the gray ground, while browns are inseparable from a viscous and coarsely applied coat of diluted oils (Fig. 2). The recurrence of "mancha," meaning stain, in Minujín's titles for her informalist paintings also emphasizes their imperfection and vulnerability to accidents.

Fig. 1. Marta Minujín, *Mancha* (Stain), 1960. Oil on canvas, 35⅝ × 43½ in. (90.5 x 110.5 cm). © Marta Minujín Archive. Photo: Arturo Sánchez

Fig. 2. Marta Minujín, *Gran mancha* (Big Stain), ca. 1959. Oil on canvas, 34 × 39½ in. (86.4 × 100.3 cm). © Marta Minujín Archive. Photo: Arturo Sánchez

Yet their vulnerability never teeters into daintiness. These works are crude, rough. Lacking the gestural expressivity typical of much Informalismo, Minujín's paintings evince a mute, obdurate planarity, underscoring rather than overriding the objecthood of painting. Their production process aligns them more with a world of dense, incontrovertible objects than with painting as a conduit to an illusory space or the inner, emotional realm of the artist. Made on the floor using a mixture of sand, carpenter's glue, hardboard, and chalk that, once set, was coated in thick layers of paint, Minujín's informalist paintings possess the impenetrable solidity of sidewalks and public walls—a far cry from the inviting, ideated window of traditional painting.

These works' resemblance to urban structures such as walls was deliberate.[17] Similarly to other Argentine artists of the early 1960s (Kenneth Kemble, Antonio Berni, Luis Felipe Noé, etc.), Minujín was inspired by Buenos Aires's cityscape. She recounts:

> [Greco and I] would be walking down the street, and he would say, "Check out that wonderful wall, I'll sign it." Greco's influence had to do, I believe, with the idea that you could find a wall and sign it. So I transferred the wall to the canvas stretcher.[18]

Her choice of words is unambiguous: Minujín sought not the transformation of urban reality into an image but the *transferal* of it, warts and all, to the space of the image. By linking this operation to Greco's early performative gestures rather than to his informalist paintings, she emphasized the directness or near indexicality of her paintings—in other words, her intention to connect with the concrete/ness of the city. Nonrepresentational yet mimetic, her informalist canvases add a new twist to Greco's signing of walls by operating as a sort of readymade abstraction, lifted from the built environment of Buenos Aires.

With the architectural golden age of Buenos Aires long over, the capital's aging urban structures were far from static or pristine. The city's surrounds were also increasingly composed of *villas miseria* (shantytowns), a term coined by Bernardo Verbitsky in 1957 as Informalismo proliferated.[19] Blemished by holes, cracks, veins, and raised patches, Minujín's informalist paintings evoke ceilings, walls, and floors in a state of decrepitude—architectural ruination not typically flaunted by "the Paris of Latin America."

The naturally occurring fissures running throughout her canvases such as *Untitled* (1961) point to their constitutive instability, resulting from their fusion of heterogeneous materials drying at different rates (Fig. 3). As with walls ravaged by leaky plumbing, the mildew-like stains, clustered around these diminutive crevasses, hint at the presence of humidity or of mysterious secretions, oozing throughout the strata of materials below. Rather than attack painting directly as, for instance, Greco had by leaving his canvases out in the rain to "enrich" their surfaces, Minujín produced a type of painting that attacked itself—a mutable painting whose surfaces seemed to be decomposing before our eyes. To put it otherwise, Minujín was developing a type of painting marked by temporality and a proclivity for the performative.

This performativity was inseparable from the body. If the flatbed picture plane is, as art historian Leo Steinberg theorized in 1972, a "receptor surface on which objects are scattered [and] data entered," then Minujín's paintings, although evoking the opaqueness of horizontal surfaces from the realm of culture, do not function as "receptors."[20] Rather they are emitters of telltale signs or symptoms, betraying internal, organic, and temporal processes: rot, infection, and, at best, banal aging. In short, these paintings produce the uncanny impression of having, like the viewer's body, a hidden interiority, whose secret churnings only partially transpire to the surface. One of the few works Minujín titled, *Movimiento interior* (Interior Movement, 1960), makes this aspect of the series explicit (Fig. 4). Placed at irregular angles in between horizontal layers of matter, some of this painting's brick-like forms appear to shift out of place, toppling one another or sliding into different strata, like active tectonic plates.

Minujín, moreover, staged her work's dilapidation as ineluctable. In *Untitled* (1961–62), for example, the artist's abortive attempts to mend the painting's surface are conspicuous (Fig. 5). Extra layers of paint patently cover some of its proliferating cracks. These layers were applied to the original surface in such a slapdash fashion that they underline more than conceal the flaws in the work. In addition, the colors of these corrective coats of paint approximate but never coincide with the shades of white or gray on which they are superimposed. Such a deliberate mismatch focuses the viewer's attention on the work's accelerated aging by highlighting the act of conservation already required at the moment of creation. In effect, Minujín's repairs

Fig. 3. Marta Minujín, *Untitled*, 1961. Sand, pigments, and carpenter's glue on hardboard, 59 × 70½ in. (150 × 179 cm). © Marta Minujín Archive. Photo: Pedro Roth

Fig. 4. Marta Minujín, *Movimiento interior* (Interior Movement), 1960. Sand, pigments, cardboard, chalk, and carpenter's glue on canvas, 23⅝ × 31½ in. (60 × 80 cm). © Marta Minujín Archive. Photo: Gustavo Barugel

Fig. 5. Marta Minujín, *Untitled*, 1961–62.
Sand, chalk, and carpenter's glue on hardboard,
39⅝ × 39⅝ in. (100.5 × 100.5 cm).

demote the expressive, autographic gesture (in vogue since Abstract Expressionism) to an impersonal and instrumentalized mark necessitated by the artist's intentionally faulty painting technique. Paint now functions as nothing more than a reparative glue or caulk. Minujín thus willfully downgrades oils, the most revered of traditional art materials.

Emphasizing the contingency of Minujín's informalist art is necessary, for the early, more favorable critical response to Informalismo interpreted the movement in transcendentalizing terms—an approach that flew in the face of informalist art's incorporation of detritus and other bits of unvarnished "reality." Consider, for instance, the positions taken by three influential critics in the 1961 issue of *Del Arte*, whose cover headline reads, "Informalismo Tipped in the Scales." The first respondent, Enrique Azcoaga, distinguishes a legitimate informalist art from a "dead," purely decorative one by highlighting the former's "expressive order" as "a road to elevation" or, more precisely, "a miraculous road . . . toward the superior."[21] By referencing Zen Buddhism and poetry, the second response by Rafael Squirru, director of MAMBA, similarly locates the merits of Informalismo in its humble materials, intuitive processes, and koan-like opacity, which transmit, in Squirru's own words, a "spiritual modality"—that is, access to a mystical "superior order" or "supra-conscious zone."[22] Jorge Romero Brest, the third commentator and then director of the MNBA, recognizes Informalismo's "crude realism" but also states that it "exists beyond what one sees, thinks, feels, or fabricates." He insists that *informalistas* would "be content making absolutely immaterial works of art," a desire for immateriality that, he believes, is at "the root of its spiritualism."[23]

Strikingly acrobatic in their argumentation, all three opinions frame informalist art as a secularized experience of the sacred, disavowing its baseness and extrapolating it from historical processes (including those of Argentina) and, more broadly, from time itself. Even the work of Greco—whose urinations on canvas secured his status as the most iconoclastic *informalista*—was recast through such lofty concepts. "[Greco] always identified degradation with sublimation, and signed his name to the water stains of public bathrooms," writes artist Luis Felipe Noé, concluding, "His delirium (his passion) was quotidian reality: there where reality burned up, where its guts exploded, horror and all that was sordid were *transformed within him into a dream of beauty, of goodness, or into an explosive laugh* [my emphasis]."[24]

To be fair, the critical attempt to elevate Informalismo's base materiality through universalizing notions of expressivity, transcendence, and beauty sprung, at times, from the rhetoric of certain informalist artists. A pioneer of Informalismo, Kemble, for example, described his collages made with refuse in the following way:

> In collage one can see that beauty and aesthetic emotion do not solely reside in what we are used to calling beautiful; . . . it demonstrates how beauty can be found in the most devalued materials . . . [these scorned materials] can contain a surprising expressive intensity. *But above all, and this is its true sense, [collage] ennobles and hierarchizes what is commonly unappreciated, amplifying our aesthetic experience and opening our eyes toward sensible worlds* [my emphasis].[25]

Kemble's transplantation of base materials to the hallowed space of the frame confirmed, in short, the redemptive power and viability of the pictorial medium. Painting was able to absorb and "ennoble" the rubbish embedded on its surface as "beauty and aesthetic emotion," categories that the artist sought to expand rather than totally subvert or discard. Viewing these pretentions with skepticism, critics such as Eduardo Baliari admonished, "if the painter of this epoch . . . wants to use his redeemed technique transcendentally, he will have to do so with a minimum of responsibility and know that one cannot play by turning to an unintelligible babbling."[26] Once again, the inscrutability of Informalismo—the way it strained critical paradigms, especially humanist ones—is used to defenestrate it. Others were more succinct. The poet Édouard Jaguer, for instance, wryly dismissed Informalismo as "a pious externalization of a new intellectual comfort."[27]

One particular critic, Ernesto Schóó, identified the contradictions subtending the general critical effort to disavow Informalismo's baseness and contingency. Citing and rebuffing Brest's and Squirru's arguments in *Del Arte*, Schóó observes, "by no means can man (nor the matter of our planet) escape time and space, nor the experience of the past."[28] No art, in his view, could truly deliver the viewer from the hard realities of the present. Furthermore, he reasoned, if Brest and others were correct in describing Informalismo as a "spiritualization of matter," then there could be nothing radical about this

movement, since such transcendence had long been the aim of traditional art, especially of a devotional nature.[29] In contradistinction to his peers, Schóó confronts rather than sublimates Informalismo's contingent materiality, yet he does not defend it:

> [T]o explore chaos is an admirable and necessary endeavor . . . ; to let ourselves be invaded by chaos, to transform ourselves into chaos, is to abdicate the human condition. . . . To transform painting into an emulation of the natural forces that decompose rocks and oxidize metal, or into the explosions that split atomic elements, is a senseless endeavor. . . . the informalist pictorial work runs the risk of being the mere illustration of a physical process.[30]

Here, Schóó's words betray what he holds in common with the critics he opposes: bourgeois anxieties over informalist painting as an agent of chaos capable of unmooring the subject from a position of rationality and control into an anguished, existentialist dérive. Informalismo could be such a threat as a result of its pronounced materiality and contingency—its repulsive yet seductive "excremental orgies," as Schóó puts it.[31] Neither Schóó nor the critics who posited Informalismo as a path to transcendence could countenance Informalismo's implication that the "human condition" could possibly amount to an inglorious, even meaningless, embodiment at the mercy of unforeseeable and uncontrollable vicissitudes.

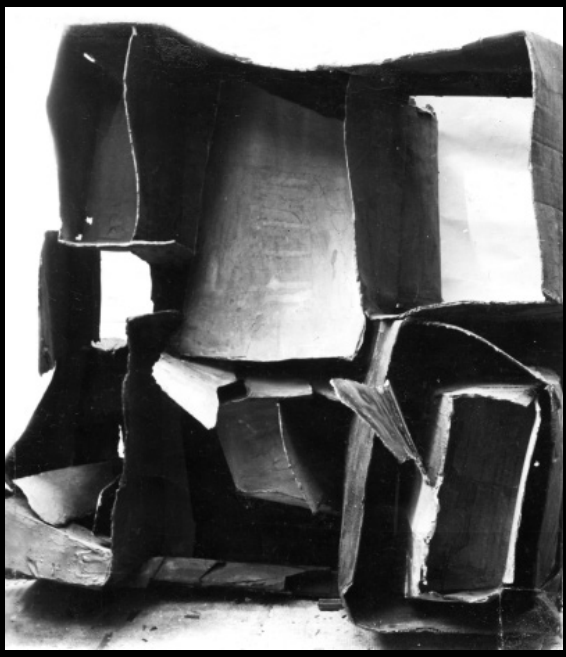
This notion was incompatible with the then widely held view of humankind as a reflection of God's image and the center of his divine order—a religious outlook already waning due to the extreme popularity of existentialism and its nihilist offshoots, especially among Argentina's culturati, who had steeped themselves in the recently translated writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.[32] Quoting Genesis 1:26 in a footnote, Schóó discloses the Judeo-Christian ideology informing his critical outlook: "I try to play fair and for this reason I clarify my personal position: I do not wholly commune with an absolute non-figuration. I always like to find in art the likeness of man (. . . 'in the image and semblance' . . .) or that in which man leaves his sign."[33] What was intolerable, in brief, was a nihilistic scatology's displacement of a humanist eschatology.

A work of art, however, does not need to employ figuration in order to operate as a "likeness of man." As the viewer's counterpoint, the work of art—even a fully abstract canvas—can slip into a relationship of equivalence or mutual definition with its viewing subject. In their decrepitude, Minujín's informalist paintings therefore invite viewers to consider their own state as unruly, vulnerable, and aging bodies—"an image and semblance" far from godlike. *Testimonio para una joven tumba* (Testimony for a Young Grave, 1960–61), a key work that Minujín had sent to the Second Paris Biennale in the fall of 1961, unveils the body within her body of work—that is, the tripartite analogy between the work of art, the aging cityscape, and the mortal flesh subtending her entire series of informalist paintings (Fig. 6). Through its title, *Testimonio* alludes to the then recent death of Minujín's older brother, who had succumbed to leukemia, a disease whose gradual devastation of the body from the inside out parallels the decline visible in Minujín's informalist works.[34] Much like a tombstone, the painting's hard surface both conceals and marks the horror of the body turned corpse. Not even youth can protect the body from the relentless march of chronic disease, of time itself. While critics such as Baliari recoiled at the "ugliness" of Informalismo, condemning it as "a putrefying cadaver belonging to a phase of painting to be definitively buried,"[35] *Testimonio* addresses directly this fear of death and disease, which had long fascinated Minujín, as evinced by her very first sketches repeatedly depicting the ill and infirm who visited her father's medical practice.[36] If US Abstract Expressionism—that older cousin of Informalismo—had centered on the lively actions of the heroic male body, Informalismo, as developed by Minujín, proffered its antithesis: ungendered flesh in a state of passive decomposition.

Only *Homenaje a Greco* (Homage to Greco, 1961) is more direct and particular than *Testimonio* in its titular reference to a human being (Fig. 7). The work is, of course, a tribute to Greco's enduring influence as an informalist artist and mentor to Minujín. Yet *Homenaje*'s brittle surface and muddied colors suggest something that also runs counter to everlasting artistic brilliance. "More than the 'painter' of my paintings, I consider myself 'painted' by my paintings," Greco had once riddled with regard to his informalist work.[37] *Homenaje*, though fully abstract and not a portrait, "paints" Greco; through its somber colors as well as its cracked and blotchy surface, it gestures to the precarity of his

Fig. 6. Marta Minujín, *Testimonio para una joven tumba* (Testimony for a Young Grave), 1960–61. Oil and assorted material on hardboard, 51⅛ × 63 in. (130 × 160 cm). © Marta Minujín Archive. Photo: Oscar Balducci

Fig. 7. Marta Minujín, *Homenaje a Greco* (Homage to Greco), 1961. Oil on canvas, 19¾ × 27½ in. (50 × 70 cm). © Marta Minujín Archive. Photo: Arturo Sánchez



Figs. 8 and 9. Marta Minujín, Untitled sculptures from the *Cartones* (Cardboards) series, 1961–62. Mixed media. © Marta Minujín Archive

existence as a wandering bohemian always on the verge of indigence and madness. *Homenaje* presents Greco as both enduring legend and vulnerable mortal. In fact, the mortality encoded in all of Minujín's informalist canvases became in this particular work an unsettling and unintended augur of Greco's eventual suicide in 1965.

Sculptures for an Ailing Democracy

In 1961 Minujín's informalist paintings began incorporating everyday objects, specifically the small cardboard boxes containing her oil paints. These materials possess a faint metonymic link to the domain of high art and are consequently not as lowly as the type of refuse encrusted on informalist works by other Argentine artists. It was not until her relocation to Paris in the winter of 1961 that Minujín began using true trash. From August 1961 to mid-1962, she employed large discarded cardboard boxes, culled from the streets of Paris, to make freestanding and large-scale sculptures, which she collectively called her *Cartones* (Cardboards) (Figs. 8 and 9).[38] Minujín took care to preserve and even amplify the abject and entropic quality of her torn, stained, and deformed cartons. Her boxes were, for instance, unevenly slathered in black pyroxilin shellac, an industrial paint most commonly used for cars and machine parts. Meant for sturdier supports, like metal, the pyroxylin shellac, once applied to cardboard, became immediately unstable and brittle, degenerating into a cracked and flaky surface. Once again, then, Minujín applied paint in a manner that enhanced the work's fragility and temporality.

She also stacked one box after another in a perfunctory manner that yielded asymmetrical structures as impermanent as their building blocks (Cover). With barely any syntax, the resulting rickety agglomerations were almost incapable of resisting the downward pull of gravity, becoming nearly indistinguishable from trash heaps or the makeshift shelters of people living on the streets from whom Minujín often purchased her boxes.[39] This link to houseless people loaded her informalist art's allusions to a fragile human condition with a poignant, even troubling, authenticity that aligned Minujín with other Latin American informalist artists drawing from the material culture of the poor (e.g., Venezuela's art collective El Techo de la Ballena). While living in Paris on and off between 1961 and 1963, Minujín stayed in various apartments without bathrooms, heating, or adequate space. Completely broke, she could not afford to buy oils, a situation that contributed to her use of cardboard. Her *Cartones* therefore signaled the artist's newfound penury, a condition that she shared, albeit to a lesser degree, with the French capital's houseless population.[40]

Given Minujín's exposure in Paris to Arman's *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* replete with found objects, it is tempting to link the two artists.[41] Yet, to Minujín, Arman's vitrines had "a very pretty effect" that she clearly skirted with her *Cartones*.[42] Made not of commodities but rather of the disposable packaging facilitating their circulation, the *Cartones* resisted the fate of Arman's works (already foreshadowed by their glossy vitrines)—that is, their transformation into art commodities to be sold and preserved. All lost or destroyed as a result of their inherent decrepitude, which caused them to be mistaken for trash, the *Cartones* never became part of what Minujín described as "a world so terrifyingly based in accumulation."[43] Though made of a far more vulnerable material than recycled car parts, her *Cartones* were closer to the *Compressions* of César, who supported her work by helping her search for gallery representation in Paris.

The missing or torn sides of the *Cartones*, moreover, turned emptiness itself into a key structural component (a feature of her first informalist reliefs, as well). The eye inevitably "fell through" their gaping holes, thereby boomeranging the viewer's attention back to the ordinary space of the room, its objects and people alike. The *Cartones* functioned more as frames for their surroundings, eroding the distinction between life and art—a blurring facilitated by the pedestrian nature of their materials. Minujín's informalist art once again paralleled the logic of Greco's performative work, specifically his contemporaneous *vivo-dito*, an act that framed a place, object, or person as art through the impromptu delineation of an ephemeral, chalk-drawn circle.

This focus on the "here and now," already latent in Minujín's early informalist paintings, soon opened her art to the political tribulations of her home country. Once back in Argentina in the fall of 1962, Minujín was presented with the opportunity to exhibit her latest sculptures on two separate occasions: MAMBA's group exhibition *El hombre antes del hombre: exposición de cosas* (Man Before Man: Exhibition of Things) at Galería Florida and her second solo exhibition, *Cartones, colchones y botas* (Cardboards, Mattresses, and Boots) at Galería Lirolay. The first show, which took place in September, amounted to a true gathering of the country's

leading informalists, ranging from Di Benedetto and Torras to López Anaya, Kemble, and Olga López. Squirru's vaporous essay in the exhibition catalogue does little to clarify what united all these artists. It does, however, reveal that the show was the direct consequence of a remark made by Minujín to Squirru. "Something must be done," she had said. "[T]his environment needs to be shaken up a bit or a lot before it swallows us all in its gray indifference, its defeatism. In short, we have to affirm life."[44] Deliberately and cautiously vague, Squirru's essay never contextualizes these words, opting instead to describe, in quasi-existentialist terms, an exceptionally bleak atmosphere in which "Argentine man is the most acute version of man in crisis."[45] Squirru writes:

> Death is installing itself in us due to our evasion of our own being. We are dying because we refuse to be what we should be; we refuse to be what we are, to see ourselves as we are. We Argentines are paralyzed by fear, fear of ourselves. This terror, this paralyzing complex is in great part our cowardice before our responsibility to take our past, to take on our past here and now. Argentina does not want to see its nakedness before the mirror.[46]

Though free of specific references to political events, Squirru's words point to a national predicament.

Indeed, following a coup earlier in 1962, José María Guido had assumed the presidency but had remained unable to consolidate his executive power due to acute internal tensions caused by the military's preponderance in the political sphere. The military soon split vertically into two major factions, the Azules and the Colorados, who could not agree on whether to allow the long-banned Peronist party back into Argentina's political theater. During the last week of *El hombre antes del hombre*, hostilities between the Colorados and the Azules approached full-on civil war.[47] Fighting broke out in cities all over the country, blood was spilled, and the Air Force bombed a Colorado camp in San Antonio de Padua. Additional eruptions of violence plagued the nation until April of 1963.[48]

In light of this context, Minujín's words to Squirru appear to be a call to action and to affirm life in all its complexity, as something imbued with death, too. "I was against the military on both sides," Minujín recalls decades later, "because they were, in reality, always against the people [*el pueblo*], that is, democracy."[49] She voiced her disapproval primarily through her work. Two months after the closure of *El hombre antes del hombre*, she presented at Galería Lirolay an entire group of sculptures (some free-standing, other wall-bound) combining military gear—boots, caps, ammunition pouches, gun holsters, and rifles—with her usual cardboard (Fig. 9). Noting the military paraphernalia, one critic writes, "a breath of tragedy, inevitably allusive of unfortunate realities of our country and time, flows from these works despite their rigorous non-figuration."[50] These unambiguous references to the military infighting were, moreover, supplemented by a variety of sardonic titles—*A las órdenes, mi general!* (At Your Orders, My General!), *Contando votos* (Vote Counting), *Cementerio para el ejército* (Cemetery for the Army), or *Todo correcto, capitán* (All Correct, Captain)—that pointed to the corruption, brutality, and factionalism of military personnel.

Aside from metonymically referring to the Azules-Colorados infighting, the military equipment of these pieces also functioned as a synecdoche for the soldiers embroiled in the conflict. Positioned at all sorts of inelegant angles, the military equipment was tangled or crushed into place. Such a disjunctive structure captured the destructive chaos of infighting, specifically the psychophysical condition of those caught in war. Minujín's assemblages aimed, in short, to be mimetic of traumatic shock—of its effects on both the mind and body—and, in this way, they articulated a completely jumbled and worn-down collective subjectivity.

Soldiers were, however, not the only ones affected by Argentina's fratricide, as suggested by the prominent presence of used mattresses in many of these sculptures (Fig. 10). As a basic and familiar commodity, needed and employed by all individuals, the used mattress was less a symbol for wounded soldiers than for all people—the universalized man evoked in the title of the show at Galería Florida. Scavenged from hospital dumpsters, the mattresses were encrusted with blood, feces, urine, and/or pus—stains that communicated human suffering. To the artist, mattresses had an intimate relationship to the body as well as to key events in a person's existence. "Human beings spend three fourths of their lives on mattresses. On mattresses, they are born, sleep, suffer, love," Minujín explained to the press at the time.[51] She valued these objects precisely because "they are a vital material and one that ages like us."[52] They were therefore

Fig. 10. Marta Minujín with one of her sculptures shown in *El hombre antes del hombre: exposición de cosas* (Man Before Man: Exhibition of Things), 1962.

metonymies for the mortal beings who used them. Mattresses, Minujín specified later in her life, are "the form of something dead that had been alive."[53]

In this respect, Minujín's sculptures shared much with the contemporaneous work of Arte Destructivo, another outgrowth of Informalismo. In November 1961 at Galería Lirolay, a group of informalist artists—Kemble, Luis Alberto Wells, López Anaya, and Torras, among others—had staged an exhibition of partially destroyed everyday objects. Already in Paris, Minujín did not see this show, yet the parallels were there. Some of Arte Destructivo's objects were damaged in ways reminiscent of a maimed human body. The exhibition's ripped armchair, which resembled a giant vulva, epitomized this effect. Reflecting on this show, López Anaya observes, "It would appear that the wounds of matter—a fundamental theme of the [Arte Destructivo] exhibition—resonated in one's consciousness as the wounds of the flesh, as though both lesions became so identified as to become indistinguishable."[54] Yet, in contradistinction to Minujín's work, Arte Destructivo's destructiveness had little to do with Argentina's political or economic circumstances. On the contrary, Arte Destructivo's manifesto emphasized the universality of destruction, linking it explicitly to the human psyche and to the global fear of nuclear warfare during the Cold War.[55]

More concerned with her work's immediate surroundings than with international affairs, Minujín heightened the ghastly anthropomorphism present in some of Arte Destructivo's sculptures while expunging any references to a Cold War–induced existential malaise. This effect was not lost on her public. One reviewer commented that Minujín's assemblages offered "a violent and pathetic spectacle that does not represent, describe, or symbolize a real being but rather acts upon us as a face disfigured by passions could."[56] The works—"bodies without a human silhouette"—were so gripping that the viewer, according to this last critic, was tempted to "dialogue with them."[57] Echoing this sentiment, the prominent Argentine art critic and poet Aldo Pellegrini observed that the mattresses were "tortured" materials with "a strong vitality."[58] To the French critic Élie-Charles Flamand, Minujín's mattresses were "symbols of suffering and death" that "reproduced [in the viewer] all of [their] affective 'charge,' which is intensive."[59] The dying body only intimated by Minujín's early informalist paintings had now come forth in full force, engaging viewers in a visceral and intimate way that was novel for Argentine art.

Initially attracted to the pronounced haptic quality of soft mattresses, viewers approached these familiar objects only to then be immediately repulsed by their unusual surfaces, covered in imperfect layers of paint and traces of bodily excretions, which perhaps still harbored enough bacteria to spread infection. Since these blemishes were easily confused with or concealed by paint marks, nothing prepared viewers for this unsettling discovery. In a curious perversion of museum etiquette, it was the distant and untouchable art object which now suddenly encroached on the viewer's space and not vice versa. By menacing the uncontaminated yet unprotected bodies of viewers with disease, pain, and even death, Minujín's sculptures came to life as vectors of contagion—a new type of "disagreeable object," to borrow artist Alberto Giacometti's surrealist term.[60] Minujín herself contracted, in her own words, a "terrible disease" from handling these old mattresses.[61]

In a poem penned for the catalogue of *Cartones, colchones y botas*, Squirru celebrates this hostile aspect of Minujín's work. "There is nothing casual about your boxes," he writes, "their recipients will pale before them, as you push [these boxes] toward them with brutality."[62] Simone Frigerio, another critic of the day, similarly remarks, "One cannot describe such a type of art: one receives a shock or turns around."[63] Likewise, historian José-Augusto França observed that these were actually "traps" and "objects of the most total incommodity" that checked or "repulse[d] our quotidian habits."[64] Noticing their underlying aggressiveness, Pellegrini warns that Minujín's sculptures "manifested a threat to the safety of the spectator."[65]

When photographed with her art, Minujín reinforced her sculptures' torturous rapport to the body by entering them and contorting herself so that her head and arms emerged from their cavities (Cover). These awkward poses likened the sculptures to objects associated with entrapment and pain—medieval pillories, torture tables, casts for broken limbs, etc.—explaining Pellegrini's view of them as lugubrious "apparatus-dwellings": things to be inhabited.[66] Minujín even titled one of these works *Les petits souliers me serrent* (The Small Shoes Squeeze Me).[67] Moreover, the artist's diary describes in vivid detail the difficulty she experienced in sharing her humble abode with her painted mattress sculptures once back in Paris later that

winter: "Cohabitating with painting is rough, especially because I do not know who will be transformed, I or it."[68]

The Death of Informalismo

Yet Minujín was not satisfied with the shock effect of her sculptures. For the opening of *Cartones, colchones y botas*, the artist supplemented her works with a disquieting performance—a happening avant la lettre, according to her.[69] She recruited eighty military draftees, who conducted different military marches and drills throughout the gallery's space. Although some perceived this as a brazen publicity stunt, Minujín's so-called proto-happening did not really provide the kind of entertainment capable of luring crowds. On the contrary, it violently shattered visitors' sense of safety. By turning the sculptures' allusions to the military into a reality, the marching soldiers served as an intimidating reminder of the turmoil raging in the streets. No longer content with transferring merely walls, Minujín was now relocating a national conflict to the realm of art, rupturing the latter's insularity.

Significantly, those in attendance could not immediately ascertain if the marching soldiers were a real military intervention or simply a new kind of art. Although not a parody, Minujín's reenactment of military marches paradoxically sapped the armed forces of their formidability. When the soldiers were revealed to be the mere puppets of the artist, the performance underscored precisely what made the military so terrifying and politically problematic at the time: its susceptibility to being controlled by anyone—even a nineteen-year-old—or, as was actually the case, by multiple, opposing leaders. The performance therefore did not inure gallery visitors to the trauma of military infighting by re-presenting a troubling scene occurring nationwide. Rather than offering the opportunity to master traumatic experience through habituating repetition, the performance exposed the military's alarming structural problems and political arbitrariness, thus producing its own second order of shock. Nothing could have been more troubling to the male-dominated art scene of Buenos Aires than, as Squirru wrote at the time, this "Joan of Arc" filled with the "bravery of a primordial female," seizing command of a menacing troop and disrupting the nearly sacrosanct autonomy and decorum of the art sphere.[70] Shockingly, Squirru was soon fired from his directorship at MAMBA as a result of his support for Minujín's show—a testament to the potent discomfort caused by the artist's first political performance.

Minujín's trajectory as an informalist artist therefore defies the widespread notion that Informalismo was an imported fad irresponsive to local, sociopolitical realities. López Anaya, one of the movement's leading artists and chief historians, describes Informalismo as a transhistorical phenomenon indifferent to geography:

> The expansion of informal tendencies was rapid and generalized. Diverse groups and independent artists in France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, the United States, and South America developed a penchant for painting that did not appear to have national limits and which only picked up a few characteristics proper to local traditions. In opposition to certain typically regionalist movements, Informalismo, with its marginalization of history and its anti-ideological technique, did not pose for itself any social or political problems.[71]

Minujín's informalist sculptures with military equipment went against the grain of most apolitical, informalist art.[72] Her "informalist performance" demanded not only the recognition of a collective sociopolitical trauma (one that it did not hesitate to exacerbate) but also insisted on recoding the exhibition space of art as another political battleground in which the actual conditions of public, sociopolitical experience could be examined. Even in the second half of the 1960s, newspapers would continue to refer to this moment in Minujín's career as "a protest exhibition" by a "rebel."[73]

Minujín's marching soldiers at Galería Lirolay are rarely acknowledged as one of Argentina's first full-fledged performances. Given that Greco had been graffitiing his name on found objects and public sites since traveling to Europe in 1954, most art historical accounts present his work as the origin of Argentine art based in action and the body.[74] Primarily conceptual in nature, Greco's quick and furtive signings did not, however, center the body, stimulate the senses, or elicit a durational experience to the degree that Minujín's Lirolay performance did. As an added complication, his mature articulation of "arte vivo," the *vivo-ditos*, were invented in Paris in 1962—the very same year as Minujín's Lirolay performance. He would not perform any *vivo-dito* in Argentina until 1964.[75] Consequently, other accounts have proposed Oscar Masotta's political actions in the second half of the 1950s—specifically, his distribution of images of Evita

Fig. 11. Harry Shunk and János Kender, *La destrucción* (The Destruction) by Marta Minujín, 1963. Photograph: Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2014.R.20)

Fig. 12. Harry Shunk and János Kender, *La destrucción* (The Destruction) by Marta Minujín, 1963. Photograph: Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2014.R.20)

and Juan Perón in an anti-Peronist bar—as the inception of Argentine performance, even though Masotta did not view himself as an artist at the time (nor did he consider his rebellious distribution of Peronist imagery to be art until decades later).[76] To reframe Masotta's dissemination of Peronist propaganda as performance art therefore risks conflating a faintly aestheticized political act with the politically engaged performances of the Argentine 1960s.

It is, of course, senseless to quibble over who might be the first performance artist of Argentina, especially as Greco's and Masotta's contributions to performance art are indubitable. Yet recognition of Minujín's robust and truly autochthonous performance at Lirolay helps complete a spotty history of Argentine performance art, one marked by nagging inconsistencies and lacunae left unaddressed by the privileging of male artists, such as Greco and Masotta.[77] Viewed as a groundbreaking instance of performance, Minujín's Lirolay piece not only sheds light on the political nature of subsequent Argentine performances but also initiates a trajectory for Argentine action art that differs from the North American one.

In the US the possibility of an art based in action surfaced with various responses to Abstract Expressionism, including the assemblages of Robert Rauschenberg and the environments of Allan Kaprow.[78] Via John Cage's ideas on chance as an anti-compositional device, Kaprow pushed his environments into settings for the partially aleatory performances known as happenings. "From the assemblage to the whole room or 'environment' is only one further step," Susan Sontag explains. "The final step, the Happening, simply puts people into the environment and sets it in motion."[79] In Argentina, by contrast, Minujín's informalist works were so dramatically open to temporal processes and a bodily rapport with viewers that the move to performance occurred without a transitional phase through environments.[80]

Shifts in contemporary art had accelerated this change. Reflecting on what she had seen in Paris, Minujín wrote in March of 1962:

> There are almost no informalists left. . . . They [artists and critics in Paris] are tired, bored of Informalismo. . . . The Object—I see that above all it is the moment of the object. There exists a necessity to get out of the canvas and place oneself in space, in all the possibilities of painting and sculpture. Perhaps because of this my things [the *Cartones*] were received so well in Paris. I arrived at a moment in which *one is starting to get out of painting to venture in a space that is more alive, more real* [my emphasis].[81]

The artists informing Minujín's perspective were, above all, the Nouveaux Réalistes, who were redeploying the Duchampian readymade through various sculptures and installations while supplementing this "object art" with spectacular "action-performances" easily digested by the media, especially by television. By the spring of 1963, the happenings of Jean-Jacques Lebel and his entourage would further compel Minujín to move "out of painting" and into something "more alive, more real."

The result of these crosscurrents was her first happening, *La destrucción* (The Destruction, 1963), in which Minujín burned all the informalist sculptures that she had created while in Paris (Fig. 11). I have already examined elsewhere the performative and destructive logic of this happening in relation to the French avant-garde—a reading that need not be repeated here.[82] Nonetheless, a few additional observations are worth making in light of this happening's treatment of its informalist pieces. As photographs of this event evince, the inherent vulnerability of Minujín's wobbly, informalist works—which she lined up against a wall like deserters before a firing squad—seemed to predispose them to such a public, violent end (Fig. 12). With much Argentine art up to that point, however, any destruction had largely been kept behind the scenes; the resulting work of art monopolized all visibility to the detriment of its destructive-creative process. This was the case of Greco's urine-loaded and rain-battered canvases, for example. Arte Destructivo, as well, had refrained from mutilating its found objects before the eyes of the public. Minujín's 1962 performance at Galería Lirolay had certainly startled viewers with the possibility of destruction and violence, suggested by the presence of armed soldiers, but had stopped short of any such attack on either the attending audience or the works on view.

The spectacle of destruction as a central component of Minujín's first happening could simply not have been imaginable without the precedents of Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs* (Shootings), performed at the same location as *La destrucción;* the *Colères* (Rages) of Arman; and the Fire Paintings of Yves Klein. Even though Minujín had taken care to diminish the presence

of the media during *La destrucción*, the spectacular nature of the happening's bonfire pointed to the sort of Nouveau Réaliste showmanship praised by Pierre Restany.

Yet the proximity of Nouveau Réalisme to Minujín both in terms of time and space risks eclipsing a slightly more distant yet important antecedent for her spectacular emphasis on a dangerous process. This antecedent is located within informalist art and of significance to the Nouveaux Réalistes as well. Indeed, in 1959 during the heyday of Informalismo, Galería Bonino, a key exhibitor of informalist art in Buenos Aires, had organized a solo exhibition of Georges Mathieu, who traveled to the capital for the show's opening. Aside from giving several talks at the Facultad de Derecho, Mathieu also publicly painted one of his lyrical informalist canvases at Escuella de Bellas Artes Manuel Belgrano.[83] Lasting no longer than twenty or so minutes, Mathieu's flamboyant performances courted a certain degree of destructive recklessness that sought to elicit a frisson from his viewers. In texts such as *Esquisse d'une embryologie des signes* from 1951, Mathieu theorizes that destruction is one of the six necessitated phases toward the renewal of pictorial language. Regarding his lyrical informalism specifically, the French artist writes:

> Revolt, Speed, Risk, these three words are also at the heart of Lyrical Abstraction today. Isn't this the same revolt against established rules, the same taste for risk in all its forms, the same passion for speed and violent intensity, the same scorn of the absence of originality and grandeur. . . ? . . . The canvas is whipped, jostled around, hacked open; the color spurts, bursts, pierces, flits around, rises, and crushes. The artisanal, the finite, the polished forms of the Greek ideals are all dead. . . . For the first time in history, painting has been able to become a spectacle, and you can witness its creation, just like you would a jam session.[84]

These words should sound familiar. Mathieu's view that speed was attacking conventional painting and reconfiguring it for an incipient spectacle economy were eventually echoed in Minujín's pronouncements that painting had died in a world moving at "the speed of a jet."

What distinguished *La destrucción* from the work of Mathieu and the Nouveaux Réalistes was Minujín's willingness to emphasize process to the point of sacrificing the work of art as a physical object with an unquestionable commercial value. This turn was a testament to the influence of Lebel's Marxist framing of the happening as "a putting into question of . . . industrial society."[85] "Our first objective is to transmute into poetry the languages that a society of exploitation has reduced to commerce and absurdity," Lebel concludes in his book *Le happening*.[86] Tellingly, Lebel opens this book by bemoaning the way that the media "have dragged [the happening] against its will into the whirlwind of Pop art," a movement he views as irredeemably commercial. To him, Pop was adulterating US happenings, transforming "the American artist" into "a public amuser ('an entertainer')."[87]

It is therefore with a certain measure of irony that Minujín—inspired by Lebel's belief that "everything always turns around two magnetic poles: Eros and Thanatos"—transitioned to Pop *as a result* of the informalist art that she destroyed in her first happening.[88] Indeed, while in Paris in 1963, Minujín began creating a series of soft sculptures with hand-painted stripes of fluorescent green, yellow, blue, pink, and red. Derived from a miniskirt that Minujín had glimpsed in a shop window, these eupeptic colors of commercial origin clearly adopted a Pop aesthetic. While these sculptures were collectively titled *Eróticos en Technicolor* (Erotica in Technicolor), Minujín also dubbed them her "colchones falsos" or "fake mattresses," since they did not incorporate discarded mattresses bearing the *real* stains of human suffering (Fig. 13). Rather, they were composed of new and homemade cushions suggestive of comfort and lovemaking. Minujín's titular opposition between real and fake, old and new, chthonic and erotic, clearly signaled her dialectical evolution, with Pop as the flipside of Informalismo and hence the necessary next step. Pop, she later explained, took her out of the "suicidal, depressed, and existentialist phase of [her] life, when everything was black and bleak."[89]

The saturnine, existentialist tenor of Informalismo was thus supplanted by the shallow ebullience of Pop, which imbued not only Minujín's next happenings and performances but her environments as well. Nevertheless, an informalist emphasis on somatic and sensorial experience would endure in Minujín's subsequent happenings, distinguishing them from the more cerebral, information-centric, and dematerialized art of Oscar Masotta and Arte de los Medios, which drew

heavily from semiotics and structuralism. By opening Informalismo to the contingencies of not just everyday life but specifically the body, Minujín arrived at a performative mode with an inherently political dimension that presaged the *engagé* performances of the later Argentine 1960s—a radicalization of informalist art seen nowhere else in the world, except perhaps another Latin American country, Venezuela.[90]

Fig. 13. Marta Minujín with her sculptures from *Eróticos en Technicolor* (Erotica in Technicolor) in her Paris studio, 1963. © Marta Minujín Archive

ENDNOTES

1 This essay is extracted from a chapter of my dissertation, "Populist Counter-Spectacles and the Inception of Mass Media Art in Argentina," which received the generous support of ISLAA. I would like to thank Olivia Casa for her thoughtful editorial guidance as well as the ever-brilliant Nicolás Guagnini, whose invaluable insights shaped both the contents and structure of this essay. I also owe much to Ariel Aisiks, who for years has steered me toward pertinent archival materials while acting as an illuminating interlocutor on Argentine art.

2 Jacqueline Barnitz, "A Latin Answer to Pop," *Arts Magazine*, June 1966, 38.

3 I opt for this particular year in light of several key informalist events: Alberto Greco's solo exhibition at the Galería Antígona; the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires's (MAMBA) exhibition *Pintura y escultura no-figurativa*, which presented the work of Martha Peluffo; the inclusion of Towas in a group show at the Galería Galatea; and the presentation of works by Kazuya Sakai and Martha Peluffo at the II Salón de la Asociación Arte Nuevo.

4 In 1963 Brest was reaching the apex of his powers. He had just left his post as director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes to become the new director of the innovative Center for Visual Arts at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella. Repurposing a 1961 text, Brest published this essay on Informalismo while serving as a juror for the 1963 Instituto Torcuato Di Tella Prize for International Painting.

5 Jorge Romero Brest, "El arte informal y el arte de hoy: un artículo muy remozado y reflexiones nuevas," in *Premio Internacional de Pintura Instituto Torcuato Di Tella* 1963 (Buenos Aires: Centro de Arte del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1963), 11. Digital Archive of International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Record ID 757816. My translation (all translations from Spanish and French are mine unless stated otherwise). As indicated by its subtitle, this article is a modified republication of Brest's 1961 article "Sobre el arte informal" in *Del Arte*. Emphasis in original.

6 Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society (1949)," in *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

7 In response to Jean Dubuffet's work, for instance, critic Henri Jeanson famously quipped, "After Dadaism, here is Cacaism," a remark that acknowledges Dada as a key precedent while making its irrational babble seem elevated, even cerebral, in relation to the offensively physical scatology of Art Informel. Dada had finally devolved to caca.

8 Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society."

9 Adorno.

10 "Latin Labyrinth," *Newsweek*, February 21, 1966, 90.

11 See, for instance, the chapter "Modernidad tardía" in López Anaya's book *Historia del arte argentino* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997). Antonio Berni and Luis Felipe Noé are two additional male artists typically mentioned in accounts that trace a divergent strain of Informalismo, one moving into neo-figuration.

12 Dalila Puzzovio is the only other female artist to have received any sustained acclaim after working through an informalist phase, though, as made clear by her absence from key informalist group shows, her engagement with Informalismo was less involved and sustained than Minujín's.

13 In the 1950s, works by Jackson Pollock, Jean Fautrier, Willem de Kooning, Alberto Burri, Georges Mathieu, and Antoni Tàpies were all exhibited in Buenos Aires.

14 Established in 1956 and directed by Rafael Squirru, MAMBA had no brick-and-mortar abode. Nicknamed the "Ghost Museum," it presented its exhibitions at different venues, including the Museo de Artes Plásticas Eduardo Sívori, which hosted the exhibition *Movimiento informalista*, organized by Squirru.

15 Marta Minujín, *Tres inviernos en París: diarios íntimos (1961-1964)* (Buenos Aires: Reservoir Books, 2018), 10.

16 Cited in Javier Villa, "Marta Minujín: A Biography," in *Marta Minujín: obras 1959-1989* (Buenos Aires: MALBA/Fundación Costantini, 2010), 269.

17 The architectural aspects of Minujín's informalist paintings persisted in her later informalist sculptures. As critic Simone Frigerio notes, "These 'structures' [Minujín's *Cartones*] are almost architectural constructions due to their monumental concept." Frigerio, "Marta Minvjín [*sic*]," *Aujourd'hui: art et architecture*, 1962, 26.

18 Frigerio, "Marta Minvjín," 27.

19 Buenos Aires experienced a surge in wealth and rapid urban growth from 1880 to 1930, resulting in the proliferation of Neoclassical, Art Deco, and Art Nouveau architectural styles, as well as an urban development plan inspired by Haussmann's transformation of Paris.

20 Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism (1972)," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 28.

21 Enrique Azcoaga, "Falso y posible informalismo," *Del Arte: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-t.v.*, July 1961, 8. ICAA digital archive, record ID: 741376.

22 Rafael Squirru, "Una auténtica actitud informalista," *Del Arte: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-t.v.*, July 1961, 9. ICAA digital archive, record ID: 741390.

23 Jorge Romero Brest, "Sobre el arte informal," *Del Arte: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-t.v.*, July 1961, 9. ICAA digital archive, record ID: 741399.

24 Luis Felipe Noé, "Alberto Greco: Five Years After His Death," in *Listen, Here, Now!: Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Inés Katzenstein (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 49.

25 Kenneth Kemble, *Kemble: óleos y collages* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1960), n.p.

26 Eduardo Baliari, "Informalismo," *Noticias Gráficas*, July 23, 1959, n.p.

27 Édouard Jaguer, "Polo Clandestino," *Boa*, May 1958, 29–30.

28 Ernesto Schóó, "Apuntes para un ensayo acerca del informalismo," *Arte y palabra: difusión y problemática de las artes plásticas*, September 1961, 14.

29 Schóó, "Apuntes para un ensayo," 11.

30 Schóó, 15.

31 Schóó, 16, footnote a.

32 The publishing house Losada and the literary journal *Sur* had translated and disseminated Sartre's key texts. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* was studied in particular throughout the 1950s, influencing the work of Argentine philosophers such as Rafael Virasoro and Miguel Ángel Virasoro. In the 1960s, Sartre's magazine *Les Temps Modernes* exerted significant influence on Argentina's young New Left intellectuals, especially those associated with *Contorno* magazine, which included, most notably, Oscar Masotta.

33 Schóó, "Apuntes para un ensayo," footnote c.

34 Minujín's brother succumbed in 1957. Written at that time, Minujín's earliest known text is a poem addressed to death. She writes, "You who fills your hands / With bodies so withered / That their souls fly/ In search of refuge / You, holder of the inert, / I want to meet you." Cited in Villa, *Marta Minujín: obras 1959-1989*, 268.

35 Baliari, "Informalismo," n.p.

36 Minujín, *Tres inviernos en París*, 9.

37 Cited in Jorge López Anaya, *Historia del arte argentino* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997), 233.

38 Bearing frames though freestanding, some of these were hybrids of painting and sculpture.

39 Minujín, *Tres inviernos en París*, 45, 46.

40 Minujín developed an interest in the poor very early on in her career. While still living with her parents in Buenos Aires, she often invited houseless people into her family home so she could sketch them. Minujín's later leftist awareness of poverty coincided with the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 through which a more progressive attitude toward the poor emerged, as best exemplified by the Latin American liberation theology and political praxis developed by Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez. I owe a debt of gratitude to Nicolás Guagnini for bringing this broader ideological context to my attention.

41 In a letter to Hugo Parpagnoli, Minujín mentions that she visited the Galerie Iris Clert and attended some of its vernissages. She describes the gallery as "most known for its extravagances," which included Arman's *Le Plein* of 1960. Minujín's letter to Hugo Parpagnoli, March 22, 1962. Archives of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Folder 31, p. 19.

42 Minujín's letter to Parpagnoli, p. 19.

43 Minujín's letter to Hugo Parpagnoli, May 7, 1963. Archives of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Folder 31, p. 17.

44 Rafael Squirru, "El hombre antes del hombre," in *El hombre antes del hombre: exposición de cosas* (Buenos Aires: Galería Florida; Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, 1962), n.p.

45 Squirru, "El hombre antes del hombre," n.p.

46 Squirru, n.p.

47 Villa, *Marta Minujín: obras 1959-1989*, 271.

48 More than thirty *planteos* (strikes) and uprisings against the government occurred from 1958 to 1962. For more on this history, see Deborah Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina: Between Coups and Consolidation* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

49 Interview with the artist, August 15, 2018.

50 Cayetano Córdova Iturburu, "La discutida muestra de Marta Minujín," ca. 1960, unknown publication. Marta Minujín Archives. Press Folder 1960.

51 Fanny Polimeni, "La muchacha del colchón," *Para Ti*, December 22, 1964, 22–23. Fundación Espigas—Marta Minujín Special Archives. Minujín Press Folder 7: 1964, item 10.

52 María Growel, "Marta Minujín," ca. 1960, unknown publication, 41. Marta Minujín Archives. Press Folder 1960.

53 Cited in Victoria Noorthoorn, "The Vertigo of Creation," in *Marta Minujín: obras 1959–1989*, 240.

54 Jorge López Anaya, *Historia del arte argentino* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997), 244.

55 See Kenneth Kemble's "Arte Destructivo," Aldo Pellegrini's "Fundamentos de una estética de la destrucción" and "Fundamentos psicológicos de un arte destructivo," in *Arte Destructivo: Barilari, Kemble, López Anaya, Roiger, Seguí, Torras, Wells* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1961).

56 H.A.P., "Bellas Artes: Marta Minujín," *La Nación*, November 12, 1962. Fundación Espigas—Marta Minujín Special Archives. Minujín Press Folder 5: 1962, item 5.

57 H.A.P., "Bellas Artes: Marta Minujín."

58 Aldo Pellegrini, "La trayectoria de Marta Minujín," in *Premio Nacional e Internacional Instituto Torcuato Di Tella* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1964), 32.

59 Élie-Charles Flamand, "Marta Minujín à choisi. . .," in *Marta Minujín, Lourdes Castro, Alejandro Otero* (Paris: 1963), n.p. Archives of Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires. Folder 31, item 16. Another copy also exists in ISLAA's archives.

60 Writing on assemblage and what he termed "Junk Culture," Lawrence Alloway observes, "Assemblages of such [junk] material come at the spectator as bits of life, bits of the environment . . . frequently presented in terms that dramatize spread, flow, extension, trespass. The junk is obtruded into our space with the aim of achieving maximum intimacy." Lawrence Alloway, "Junk Culture," *Architectural Design* 31 (March 1961): 122. Exploiting the artistic tendency to use familiar junk in a manner that secured intimacy and proximity, Minujín's junk assemblages drew people in only to ultimately produce the opposite effect: shock and revulsion.

61 Marta Minujín, *Vivências*, ed. Sabine Breitweiser (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2000), 230.

62 Rafael Squirru, "Marta Minujín," *Marta Minujín* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1962), n.p.

63 Simone Frigerio, "Actualité de l'art argentin," *Les Beaux-Arts à Paris*, February 23, 1962, n.p. In another article, Frigerio repeats the same idea: "one cannot avoid being hit by these painting-sculptures of Marta Minvjin [*sic*]." Frigerio, "Marta Minvjín," 26.

64 José-Augusto França, "Toute boîte a son mystère," in *Marta Minujín, Lourdes Castro, Alejandro Otero* (Paris: 1963), n.p.

65 Pellegrini, "La Trayectoría de Marta Minujín," 32.

66 Pellegrini, 32.

67 Simone Frigerio, "Marta Minvjín [*sic*]," *Aujourd'hui: art et architecture*, no. 36 (1962): 26.

68 Minujín, *Tres inviernos en París*, 74.

69 While discussing *A Three Country Happening* (1966) in an interview, Minujín insists, "I also invented the happening in 1961 before anyone else. Actually, I was in Paris when I heard about happenings, but I was already doing happenings in Argentina before that, though not in public as a happening." According to her, she began engaging in small happening-like actions (such as throwing paint over the balcony onto passersby) in Argentina. See Minujín, *Vivências*, 233.

70 Squirru, "Marta Minujín," n.p.

71 Jorge López Anaya, *Informalismo: la vanguardia informalista; Buenos Aires 1957-1965* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Alberto Sendrós, 2003), 14.

72 Minujín was not the only informalist whose work addressed sociopolitical realities. The work of Kenneth Kemble provides another important exception to López Anaya's statement. Works such as *Paisaje suburbano* (Suburban Landscape, 1961) and *El rey de los pordioseros* (The King of Beggars, 1960) pointed to the abysmal conditions of the villas miseria. Kemble later explained that, through these informalist works, he "wanted to show on calle Florida a reality that should concern us all." Kemble, "Kenneth Kemble: Collages, relieves y construcciones 1956-1961," in *Love Story: Silvia Torras y Kenneth Kemble 1956-1963* (Buenos Aires: Galería Van Riel, 1979).

73 "Minujín: Instalarse en los medios," *Confirmado*, December 29, 1966, p. 51. Fundación Espigas, Marta Minujín Special Archive. Minujín Press Folder 9: 1966, item 26.

74 Greco's signings became more ambitious over time, crystallizing into "Arte Vivo" or live art. In 1961, for example, Greco allegedly signed the entire city of Buenos Aires as a work of art.

75 Greco, in fact, wrote his first *vivo-dito* manifesto while in Italy in 1962. Performed on December 9, 1964, *Mi Madrid Querido* is Greco's first and last *vivo-dito* in Argentina.

76 Masotta performed these political acts in the company of two non-artists, the writers Juan José Sebreli and Carlos Correas of *Contorno* magazine. The exact date and location of this protest have not been determined by historians. See Ana Longoni, "Action Art in Argentina from 1960: The Body (Ex)posed," in *Arte [No Es] Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960–2000* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2008), 85.

77 To be clear, I am not insinuating that the consideration of Minujín's performative experiments perfectly completes narratives of Argentine performance art. The experimental work of artists such as Graciela Martínez and Marilú Marini, who came from the realm of dance, still beckons for analysis and inclusion in this history.

78 See William Kaizen, "Framed Space: Allan Kaprow and the Spread of Painting," *Grey Room* 13 (Fall 2003): 80–107. Robert Haywood also sheds light on Kaprow's first painterly environments for the Hansa Gallery in 1957. Robert E. Haywood, *Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg: Art, Happenings, and Cultural Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 20–21.

79 Susan Sontag, "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 269.

80 Though accompanied by sound effects, Arte Destructivo's 1961 exhibition of marred objects does not qualify as a participatory and immersive environment or installation of the sort that led to US happenings. All of Arte Destructivo's works were hung on the wall or placed on pedestals—displays that did not invite interaction and adhered to traditional exhibition formats.

81 Minujín's letter to Hugo Parpagnoli, March 22, 1962. Archives of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Folder 31, p. 23.

82 Michaëla de Lacaze Mohrmann, "Marta Minujín's Destructive Interventions," *ArtMargins* 9, no. 2 (June 2020): 61–84.

83 For more on this visit, see Nelly Perazzo, "Aportes para el estudio del informalismo en la Argentina," in *El Grupo Informalist Argentino* (Buenos Aires: Museo de Artes Plásticas Eduardo Sívori, 1978).

84 Georges Mathieu, "Épître à la jeunesse (1964)," in *L'abstraction prophétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

85 Jean-Jacques Lebel, *Le happening* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1966), 57.

86 Lebel, 76.

87 Lebel, 11. In footnote 1 on pp. 43–44, Lebel suggests that Allan Kaprow, "the author of happenings" in the US, has sold out. "It is better to earn one's butter than to change life, isn't that right?," Lebel asks rhetorically before flagging as suspect Kaprow's affiliation with a "University of the State of New York." Lebel tolerates Pop's cross-pollination with happenings only in the object-centric happenings of Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg. For more on this, see *Le happening*, 38.

88 Lebel, 28.

89 Minujín, *Vivências*, 231.

90 I am referring here to the contemporaneous experiments of El Techo de la Ballena, whose informalist work turned into a form of "terrorism in the arts," according to Ángel Rama, that targeted, among other things, Rómulo Betancourt's centrist government in Venezuela. For more on this, see Gabriela Rangel, "Imagen de Caracas: Art as Action," in *Contesting Modernity: Informalism in Venezuela*, 1955–1975, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

BIOGRAPHIES

A pivotal figure of late twentieth-century art, Argentine artist Marta Minujín (b. 1943) has produced boundary-breaking performances, paintings, sculptures, and installations over the course of her influential career. Since the late 1950s, she has addressed wide-ranging concerns from spectacle culture and the mass media to eroticism and nationalist iconography. An innovator of happenings, soft sculpture, environments, and technology-based art forms, she has at turns embraced informalist, Pop, and Conceptual strategies in formative works such as *La Menesunda* (1965), *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* (Simultaneity in Simultaneity, 1966), and *El Partenón de libros* (The Parthenon of Books, 1983). Among her numerous honors, she received the Premio Nacional Instituto Torcuato Di Tella Award in 1964 and a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1966. Minujín has had solo exhibitions at Howard Wise Gallery, New York (1967); the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC), Buenos Aires (1975); the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires (1999); Americas Society, New York (2010); the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville (2010); the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (2011); the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (2016); and the New Museum, New York (2019).

Michaëla de Lacaze Mohrmann is a Franco-Peruvian art historian and curator, broadly trained in modern and contemporary art and with an expertise in Latin American and Latinx art of the postwar period. She holds a BA in art history from Harvard University as well as a PhD in art history from Columbia University. Her research for her dissertation, "Populist Counter-Spectacles and the Inception of Mass Media Art in Argentina," which centers on the work of Marta Minujín, has been featured in articles for *ArtMargins*, *Artforum*, and *ICAA Documents of Latin American and Latino Art*, among other publications. Her writings have also appeared in several exhibition catalogues, including *New York: 1962–64* (Jewish Museum and Yale University Press, 2022) and *Wifredo Lam: The Imagination at Work* and *Prabhavathi Meppayil* (both Pace Gallery, 2022). De Lacaze Mohrmann completed curatorial fellowships at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the National Museum of Korea before working as Pace Gallery's associate curatorial director.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

PAINTINGS

Marta Minujín
Gran mancha (Big Stain), ca. 1959
Oil on canvas
34 × 39½ in. (86.4 × 100.3 cm)
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Marta Minujín
Mancha (Stain), 1960
Oil on canvas
35⅝ × 43½ in. (90.5 x 110.5 cm)
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Marta Minujín
Homenaje a Greco (Homage to Greco), 1961
Oil on canvas
19¾ × 27½ in. (50 × 70 cm)
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

DOCUMENTATION

Jorge Roiger
Photograph of Kenneth Kemble, Jorge López Anaya, Silvia Torras, and Luis Alberto Wells at *Arte Destructivo*, 1961 (printed 2014)
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Julieta Kemble

Harry Shunk and János Kender
Photograph of Niki de Saint Phalle's performance *Tirs* (Shootings), Paris, 1961
Exhibition print
Courtesy Getty Research Institute

Unidentified photographers
Photographs of untitled sculptures from Marta Minujín's *Cartones* (Cardboards) series, 1961–62
Exhibition prints
Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive

Unidentified photographer
Photograph of Marta Minujín with one of her sculptures shown in *El hombre antes del hombre: exposición de cosas* (Man Before Man: Exhibition of Things), 1962
Exhibition print
Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive

Harry Shunk and János Kender
Photographs of Marta Minujín's happening *La destrucción* (The Destruction), Paris, 1963
Exhibition prints
Courtesy Getty Research Institute

Unidentified photographer
Photograph of Marta Minujín with her sculptures from *Eróticos en Technicolor* (Erotica in Technicolor) in her Paris studio, 1963
Exhibition print
Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive

PUBLICATIONS

Marta Minujín (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1961)
Exhibition catalogue
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Kenneth Kemble, *Arte Destructivo: Barilari, Kemble, López Anaya, Roiger, Seguí, Torras, Wells* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1961)
Exhibition catalogue
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Enrique Azcoaga, "Falso y posible informalismo" (False and Possible Informalismo), *Del Arte: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-t.v.*, July 1961
Exhibition copy of article
Courtesy International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Jorge Romero Brest, "Sobre el Arte Informal" (About Informalist Art), *Del Arte: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-t.v.*, July 1961
Exhibition copy of article
Courtesy International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Jorge Romero Brest Archive

Rafael Squirru, "Una auténtica actitud informalista" (An Authentic Informalist Attitude), *Del Arte: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-t.v.*, July 1961
Exhibition copy of article
Courtesy International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Eloísa Squirru

Ernesto Schóó, "Apuntes para un ensayo acerca del informalismo" (Notes for an Essay on Informalismo), *Arte y palabra: difusión y problemática de las artes plásticas*, September 1961
Exhibition copy of article
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Rafael Squirru, "El hombre antes del hombre" (Man before Man), in *El hombre antes del hombre: exposición de cosas* (Buenos Aires: Galería Florida; Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, 1962)
Exhibition copy of essay
Courtesy International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Eloísa Squirru

Marta Minujín: Cartones, colchones y botas (Marta Minujín: Cardboards, Mattresses, and Boots) (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1962)
Exhibition catalogue
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Simone Frigerio, "Marta Minvjín [*sic*]," *Aujourd'hui: art et architecture*, 1962
Article
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Collage: Aizenberg, Battle Planas, Berni, Di Benedetto, García Uriburu, Kemble, López Anaya, Minujín, Renart, Reyna, Santantonín, Seguí, Wells (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1963)
Exhibition catalogue
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Marta Minujín and Alejandro Otero
La destrucción (The Destruction) (Paris: N.p., 1963)
Exhibition catalogue
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Julieta Kemble, ed., *Kenneth Kemble: The Great Breakthrough, 1956–1963* (Buenos Aires: Julieta Kemble, 2000)
Book
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
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Curated by Michaëla de Lacaze Mohrmann

Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)
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© Marta Minujín Archive

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