

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

In the late 1950s, an “informalist” aesthetic, which had proliferated around the globe since the 1940s, took hold of Buenos Aires. Locally known as Informalismo, this new, expressive style of painting was characterized by gestural brushstrokes, highly textured surfaces, and the incorporation of lowly, everyday objects. Around 1959, the Argentine artist Marta Minujín, who was at the start of her career, began experimenting with this visual idiom, soon translating it to sculpture. The resulting works offered a sustained meditation on the destruction of matter and, by extension, the vulnerability of the body, challenging established understandings of fine art and subjecthood, while opening the door to performance art in Argentina.

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

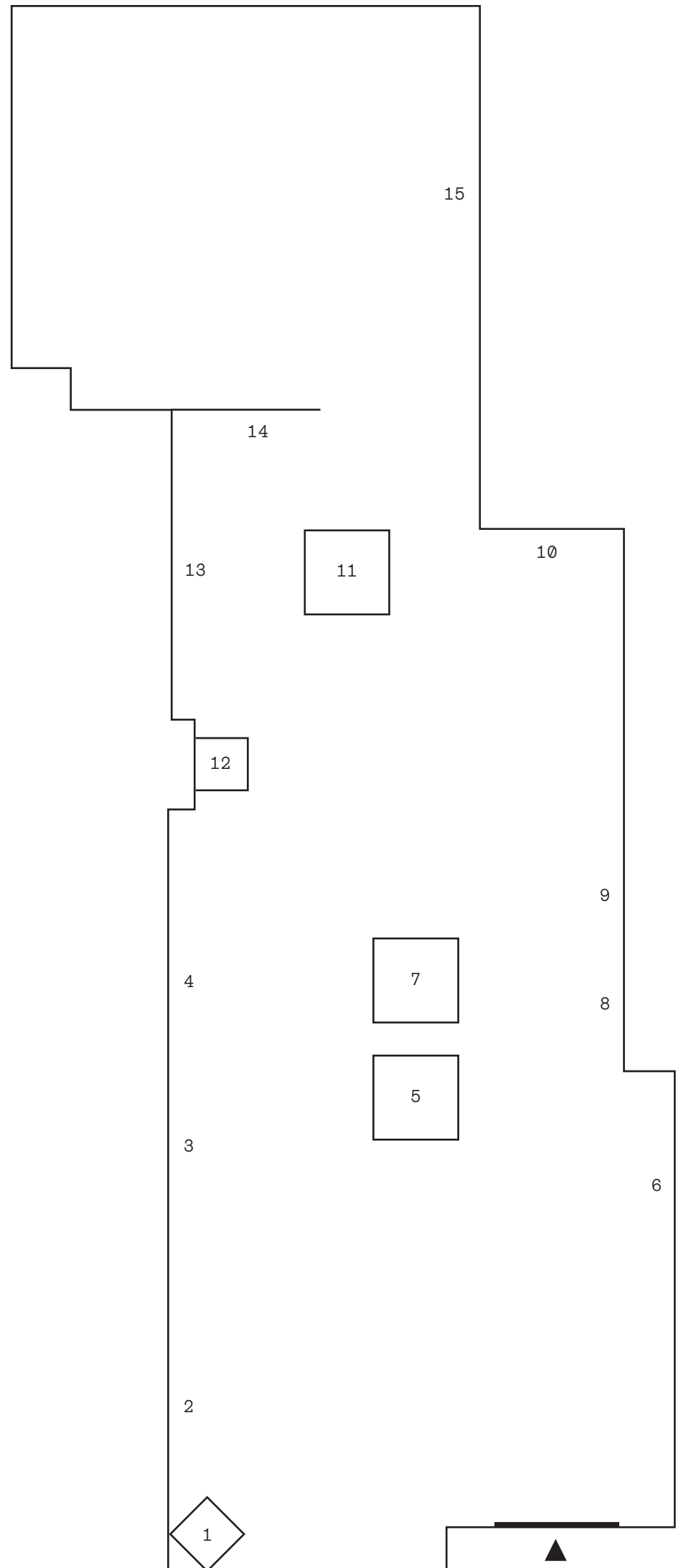
“Matter,” Minujín writes, “permits one to structure the surface [of paintings] until one reaches a space where modifications are possible, . . . where things day by day fragment themselves and disappear. We [informalists] find ourselves making a presence.” Part of a manifesto in the exhibition catalogue on view, these words constitute the artist’s only published statement on her informalist art. They reveal that in 1961 Minujín was already viewing the densely textured surfaces of her paintings as a stage on which a temporal process of disintegration could unfold. Significantly, to Minujín, this mutability and vulnerability turned her work into “a presence,” an entity with a bodily aura.

- 2 *Marta Minujín*
Homenaje a Greco (Homage to Greco), 1961
Oil on canvas
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)
- 3 *Marta Minujín*
Mancha (Stain), 1960
Oil on canvas
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)
- 4 *Marta Minujín*
Gran mancha (Big Stain), ca. 1959
Oil on canvas
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Speaking of the Argentine artist Alberto Greco, Minujín recounts, “We would be walking down the street, and he would say, ‘Check out that wonderful wall, I’ll sign it.’ Greco’s influence has 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.” Minujín’s early informalist paintings, shown here, evince a central inchoate form reminiscent of Jean Fautrier’s 1943–45 *Hostages* series. Over time, however, her works began reinterpreting Greco’s performative graffiti gestures, through which he christened urban structures as art. Her paintings increasingly drew from the patinas of public walls but not those of the beautiful edifices that had turned Buenos Aires into “the Paris of Latin America.” Rather, they conjure dilapidated buildings evocative of poverty and human suffering—the capital’s rapidly proliferating slums or *villas miseria*, a term coined in 1957, as Informalismo gained momentum.

- 5 VITRINE 1
- 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
Article
Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)

Exhibition Map



Most Argentine critics responding to Informalismo fell into two camps: detractors, such as Ernesto Schóó, who bemoaned its putrid materiality, and supporters, such as Jorge Romero Brest and Rafael Squirru, who attempted to sublimate this crudeness, recasting it as a new kind of beauty or a conduit to transcendence. Though opposed, both groups harbored a shared anxiety over what Schóó described as Informalismo’s “emulation of natural forces that decompose.” Resonating with the nihilism then in vogue, Informalismo’s decrepitude suggested a contingent and base embodiment that went against humanist and Judeo-Christian views of the subject as centered and rational—as a being “in the image and semblance” of God, to quote Schóó.

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

Minujín began incorporating the cardboard packaging of her oil paints into her paintings in 1961, contributing to the resurgence of collage in Argentina. When she relocated to Paris at the end of that year, she struggled to afford her basic needs and did not find adequate housing. No longer able to buy oil paints, she began creating reliefs and free-standing sculptures—titled *Cartones*—out of large, tattered cardboard boxes recovered from the trash or purchased from houseless people, who had used them as makeshift shelters and furniture. Eventually, she started using old, stained mattresses, culled from hospital dumpsters. Minujín valued these soft found objects because, as she observed, “human beings spend three fourths of their lives on mattresses.” To her, “they are a vital material and one that ages like us.”

7 VITRINE 2

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 Minujín [*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)

8 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

Following a coup in 1962, the Argentine military split into two opposing factions that fought until April 1963. During this time, Minujín began using military gear—such as gun holsters, caps, and boots—to create sculptures with sardonic titles such as *A las órdenes, mi general!* (At Your Orders, My General!) and *Cementerio para el ejército* (Cemetery for the Army). In September 1962, one of these works was presented in the group exhibition *El hombre antes del hombre: exposición de cosas* at the Galería Florida in Buenos Aires. Using cautiously vague, quasi-existentialist terms, Rafael Squirru, the director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, decries in the exhibition’s catalogue, shown here, “Death has installed itself” in Argentina. He explains that, in response to this bleak atmosphere, Minujín had urged, “Something must be done,” spurring him to organize the exhibition, which assembled works by informalists Olga López, Noemí Di Benedetto, Kenneth Kemble, and Jorge López Anaya, among others.

9 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

10 Unidentified photographer
Photograph of untitled sculpture from Marta Minujín’s *Cartones* (Cardboards) series, 1961–62
Exhibition print
Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive

In 1962 Galería Lirolay presented *Cartones, colchones y botas* (Cardboards, Mattresses, and Boots), Minujín’s second solo exhibition there, which featured sculptures made with military paraphernalia, including this work from the *Cartones* series. For its opening, Minujín staged her first performance: at her direction, eighty soldiers marched throughout the gallery, conducting military drills. Given the military infighting then unfolding in the streets, the troubling and unprecedented performance ruptured the insularity of the art sphere, causing an uproar. Rafael Squirru was fired from his post as director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires for supporting Minujín, whom he praised in the exhibition’s catalogue as a “Joan of Arc” with the “bravery of a primordial female.”

11 VITRINE 3

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

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

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

In November of 1961, the artist collective *Arte Destructivo*, formed by leading informalists Kenneth Kemble, Jorge López Anaya, Silvia Torras, and Luis Alberto Wells, staged an exhibition of partially destroyed everyday objects at Galería Lirolay. “It would appear,” López Anaya later wrote, “that the wounds of matter—a fundamental theme of the exhibition—resonated in one’s consciousness as the wounds of the flesh.” The analogy between inert matter and living flesh became most apparent in a sculpture of a ripped armchair that resembled a vulva. Though *Arte Destructivo* and Minujín’s contemporaneous informalist sculptures similarly evoked maimed bodies, Minujín, who was in Paris at the time, never saw this exhibition.

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

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

In her first happening, *La destrucción*, which took place in June 1963 at the Impasse Ronsin, a cul-de-sac in Paris, Minujín burned several works in an informalist vein. This spectacular act, captured in the photographs on view here, was in keeping with the destructive violence that characterized much of the Nouveaux Réalistes’ art—for example, the *Colères* (Rages) by Arman, Fire Paintings of Yves Klein, and *Tirs* (Shootings) by Niki de Saint Phalle, who shot her works at Impasse Ronsin just two years prior to Minujín’s happening. Unlike the Nouveaux Réalistes, however, Minujín pushed her destructive process to the point of sacrificing the work of art as a commodity. “No one could buy anything of mine,” Minujín explained. “My works were destined for the slaughterhouse.” *La destrucción* thus signaled her definitive turn away from the informalist art object.

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

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

While in Paris in 1963, Minujín began creating *Eróticos en Technicolor*, a series of soft sculptures with multicolored stripes, derived from a miniskirt she had glimpsed in a store window. Minujín dubbed these works her “colchones falsos” or “fake mattresses,” since, in contrast to her informalist sculptures, they did not incorporate discarded hospital mattresses, stained by ailing human bodies. Rather, they were composed of new homemade cushions suggestive of comfort and sexual pleasure. Minujín’s titular opposition between real and fake, old and new, Thanatos and Eros signaled her dialectical evolution, with her newfound Pop aesthetic as the flipside of Informalismo.