

# ¿Arte argentino? A conversation with Andrea Giunta

VON LENA GEUER · VERÖFFENTLICHT 23/05/2021 · AKTUALISIERT 23/05/2021

## Part 1/2: A conversation with the Art Historian Prof. Dr. Andrea Giunta

*Behind the term ‘arte argentino’ lies an exciting, stirring and at the same time conflict-ridden visual history. In the interview Andrea Giunta and Lena Geuer talk about the international discourse on Argentinian art under the scope of postcolonial theories, exploring both the problems and potentials that ‘arte argentino’ encompasses.*

### **Lena Geuer (LG): When has ‘Argentine art’ begun?**

**Andrea Giunta (AG):** When the state was built and the nation was founded, the idea of founding an ‘Argentine art’ was born. Such an idea did not officially exist until then. What is art? In fact, it is a construction in which certain objects function in a certain way. When you have no galleries, can art even exist? The introduction of the academy, the modernization process of the generation of the 1880s, the increasing number of exhibitions and the education of national history are all hints which lead to the assumption that ‘Argentine art’ begins at this point. In times of the 1960s avant-garde, artists were concerned with creating an “Argentine art”.

**LG: What is the link between the ‘tierra americana’ and the ‘Argentine Nation’? Jorge Romero Brest marks a difference in the art of Argentina with respect to other Latin American countries.**

AG: Romero Brest is thinking of the pre-Hispanic past of countries like Mexico or Peru. Mexico, unquestionably, has a very powerful post-revolutionary modern movement and a rich pre-Hispanic tradition. So, when he considers it from this perspective, he says that the pre-Hispanic cultures in Argentina and especially in the region of the Rio de la Plata do not have the forcefulness, articulation and sophistication in any field comparable to what they have in Mexico. That is the reason why Romero Brest complains about the absence of the past. It is like a *Leitmotiv*, a recurring formula, which also generates a contrary image, meaning that since we have no past, we have a future. This idea of a young society and a new nation is inherently linked to immigration. In the second half of the 19th century, Argentina was populated, above all, through immigration. Here, we do not find 120 indigenous languages as we can find them in Mexico.



*Image 1. Rubén Santantonín and Marta Minujín, La Menesunda, 1965, Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires. Marta Minujín Archive.*

**LG: Here I quote from your book: “This avant-garde was measured on the international scene, but it was thought of in national terms and, for many of the**

**artists, the national weighed in their decisions”. (Giunta 2001) What is ‘international’?**

AG: Today I would answer differently. In my latest book *¿Cuándo empieza el arte contemporáneo?* (2014) I propose another idea: no longer thinking about centers and peripheries like in that book (*Vanguard, Internationalism and Politics*, 2001). This thought unquestionably crosses the imagination of artists and what they feel for both Marta Minujín and Jorge Romero Brest. The clock has been set. There is no longer that peripheral relationship but simultaneity. Based on that representation and other aspects, I talk about the simultaneous avant-gardes and the simultaneity of the avant-gardes of the sixties. When I say that they wanted to make a ‘national avant-garde’, it means that they wanted to make an ‘Argentine avant-garde’. The avant-garde by definition is a notion that does not have a national inscription. Vanguard means ‘to be ahead’.

**LG: But the term avant-garde is linked to the idea of the state, of the military, isn’t it?**

AG: Well, if one looks at the military field. But I would say, almost by definition, that an avant-garde has nothing to do with the state. If you look at Peter Bürger’s definition (*Theorie der Avantgarde*, 1974), the avant-garde ought to be outside the institutions. There is an irreconcilable problem between the state and the avant-garde [which is a generalization that is not really true]. In Argentina the state definitely never managed to promote an avant-garde. The Di Tella Institute was a private foundation, with money coming from the Institute itself and other international foundations. The Argentine state did not contribute. The state promotes national awards, but the national awards did not represent the avant-garde. The artists never imagined that the state was the place of the avant-garde. But when artists say ‘Argentine’, they mean ‘an art with its own characteristics’, and also an art of quality and capable of succeeding in the world, of being recognized as a vanguard in the global context.

It is paradoxical because in truth, the avant-garde by definition is not national. It is inscribed within the model of European modernity, within the idea that artistic language evolves and advances. Therefore, the avant-garde is not simultaneously everywhere. It is somewhere and someone is carrying forward an anticipated idea. This is why the scheme promoted by American criticism works so well. When the



*Image 2. Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín, La Menesunda, 1965, Di Tella Institute, Buenos Aires, Marta Minujín Archive. Minujín in front of the head of the woman in which you can go inside.*

Germans entered Paris in World War II, the center of modern art falls into obscurity, and then the center of the avant-garde moves from Paris to New York, where it goes one step further. After the war, especially in the sixties, this scheme no longer works. Because art stops evolving. The idea of the revolution of styles ceases to have legitimacy. However, Argentines want to generate such an advanced art, so that the world recognizes that the avant-garde is existing in Argentina.

When one says 'Argentina', more than identity traits, what one is referring to is a space of power in the

geopolitics of world power. Just as the United States is recognized as a place that produces anticipatory art [like Germany or England], in Argentina they were looking for 'Argentine art' to occupy that place of visibility. For example, one can say that 'Brazilian art' has that place in Latin America, because it is everywhere and there is a lot of interest. Thanks to the Di Tella Institute, the Argentines achieved a space of visibility, in order to create the character of a 'center art'. That is why the international artists brought by the Di Tella Institute were very well chosen.

**LG: Because of the collection they had?**

AG: Yes, also because of the collection. But mainly because, for example, Robert Morris or Sol Lewitt were brought to Argentina in their heyday. They combined the international award with the national award, they were part of the international program of the *Museum of Modern Art* and brought their exhibitions here. The other way around, they brought an exhibition of 'Argentine art' to the *Walker Art Center* in Minneápolis. All these movements were a strategy to intervene in the articulation of the art world and create the conviction outside Argentina that 'Argentine art' is an advanced art.

**LG: In your book, you write: “‘La Menesunda’ ((*La Menesunda* was a multimedia installation created in 1965 in the Di Tella Institute by Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonin. The work was carried out in collaboration with the artists Pablo Suárez, Floreal Amor, David Lamelas, Rodolfo Prayón and Leopoldo Maler.)) (Image. 1-2) was, more precisely, a collection of badly combined trivialities, in which elements of urban iconography were mixed with playful and carefree situations. All this created a state of confusion [...] Romero Brest had to think of mechanisms that would explain this change.” (Giunta 2008: 170) How exactly did the mediation of this ‘new art’ take place?**

AG: I believe that there is an aesthetic conflict that I also elaborate in my book. Romero Brest is a modernist. Neo-Dadaism seems *kitsch* to him, for him it is nothing new.

**LG: The same thing that happened to Clement Greenberg.**

AG: Exactly, Romero Brest – without reading Greenberg – has the same mind as him. They think alike because they have the same presuppositions. Both are within the logic of modern art. The problem Romero Brest has is that he goes from being someone who gives classes and writes books to being the director of the Di Tella Institute whose mission is to generate the avant-garde of 'Argentine art'. That way, he is forced to understand the aesthetic change, otherwise he cannot run the Institute. His big problem is that he does not have the instruments to understand what is happening. Romero Brest comes from modernity, so he is used to existentialism as a philosophical system to understand change. But Heidegger is not useful to interpret Pop Art.

**LG: In *Arte visual pasado presente y futuro* (1981), Romero Brest continually quotes Heidegger.**



AG:  
If

*Image 3. Luis Felipe Noé and Jorge Romero Brest in the presentation of Noés book*

*“Antiéstética”(1965), Luis Felipe Noé Archive.*

one wants to talk about Pop and the fundamental elements introduced by that style, one is going to use other elements. Structuralism, mass culture and media theory serve as usual frameworks. You can use Heidegger’s theory, but it is not the pertinent framework to fully comprehend this movement.

**LG: Romero Brest had little objectivity, could one say so?**

AG: Argentine criticism has made no value out of objectivity. This objectivity is a value yet to come. If there is someone not objective, it is (by all means) Clement Greenberg. Today it is understood that criticism has to be objective, but in those years, it was and had to be subjective – it had to take a position. You cannot read Marta Traba without that scheme: she is the most subjective of all. One cannot judge Romero Brest by whether he was objective or not, since he does something that is remarkable. That is the problem when Romero Brest is wrongly compared to Oscar Masotta. They are two incomparable people.

**LG: So you do not agree with what Inés Katzenstein says in *Listen, here, now!* (2004), where she notes that they are two very different voices.**

AG: Romero Brest is not someone who wants to generate theory. Masotta, on the other hand, who comes from post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, has a theoretical framework. One has to read Romero Brest as someone who was building an apparatus of legitimization for 'Argentine art' and Masotta as someone who is formulating questions about aesthetic change. That is the difference between a theoretician and a mediator. Masotta does not form taste. On the other hand, Romero Brest does shape taste.

We must not forget that the Di Tella Institute pursued the formation of a new public as its main mission. So, Romero Brest plays the role of a mediator, he tries to explain the new Argentine art and gives lectures. He assumes a neglected task, but also a didactic one. That is why he hires Masotta to give lectures on Pop Art and writes him letters so that he can present himself at the Guggenheim. He was never an opponent: Masotta was just another creator who was supported by Romero Brest.

***The second part of the conversation with Prof. Dr. Andrea Giunta will be published on May 30th.***



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