

¿Arte argentino? A Conversation about (geo)political and aesthetic challenges

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Part 2/2: A Conversation with the Art Historian Prof. Dr. Andrea Giunta

Lena Geuer (LG): What is the interface between Minujín and Noé?

Andrea Giunta (AG): Minujín and Noé share the idea of making ‘Argentine art’ an avant-garde. Both are imbued with the idea of the avant-garde. In my book, I talk about their trip to Europe. Noé discovers the identity of the art of the Netherlands and then wonders what characterizes Argentine art.¹ By the way, I believe that the art that is made in Argentina cannot be made anywhere else. *La Menesunda* (1965) is a work anchored in the Porteño culture, in an area that existed at that time in Buenos Aires. Minujín and Santantonín cite a port culture: popular, grotesque, parodic, *kitsch*. All these elements are captured from a world that is about to disappear and which they compact with other urban elements, such as the neon of the street Corrientes. ((Giunta refers to the harbour district *puerto madero* and the *parque japonés* in Buenos Aires, which gave way to the Sheraton Hotel in the 1960s.)) They are looking for an iconography that has to do with mass culture and urban culture. It is a localized construction – like a ‘reference package’ – where Pop elements and influences of foreign languages come in. So, in that sense, they are trying to make an

'Argentine art'. That's why Noé investigates national history, and Marta Minujín flipped the Obelisk in Sao Paulo (*Obelisco acostado*, 1978) and Buenos Aires (*Obelisco de pan dulce*, 1979). They have this idea of making new, innovative, experimental, advanced art. It is that mixture of things that defines the idea of 'Argentine art'.

LG: I understand *La Menesunda* as a work that tries to change the position of the viewer. The visitor enters the work and becomes part of the it.



Image 4. Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín, La Menesunda, 1965, Di Tella Institute, Buenos Aires, Marta Minujín Archive. Visitors at the entrance of La Menesunda

AG: The spectator is immersed in the work is the result of a new philosophy, the concept of the open work; performances, ephemeral art, participation, experimenting with one's own body. The idea that the work is completed by the viewer is internationally widespread and is also represented in Argentina.

LG: I found the evolution of Minujín's work very interesting. First, she works with cardboard, gets inside her sculpture, then she enlarges it and uses soft materials, such as mattresses. She made *Chambre d'amour* (1963) (Abb. 5) in Paris and then Niki de St. Phalle produced her giant *Nana* in 1966, which also has an interior ambience.

AG: Well, another element that is occupying a place in society is the modern woman. The work stages a different corporeality that engages fully with the cultural horizon that traces the powerful irruption of the female body. From that perspective, yes, I believe that feminism can be both: an assumed and militant feminism as well as a reflection of art on the new status that women have in society. It is not only women fighting for their rights, but also women as objects of the industry. The light industries that diversify in relation to the emergence of this female subject and the female body is promoted to slim it, comb it, make it up or turn it into a subject of desire.

Psychoanalysis also plays an important role: women ask themselves who they are, how their experiences are constructed, what links them to other women, and so on.

Moreover, feminism implies an iconographic explosion. The female body, which has been captured in a male gaze in the history of art, emerges as a topic in the sixties. Women approached this aspect artistically. Minujín enters this discourse with *La chambre d'amour*. She takes on the task of representing the place of love, not by looking at the body of a naked woman reclining on a sofa, but from the inside. From that perspective, which is also marked by Marta Minujín, I think we have to consider from which point of view there is a feminine inscription. The text written by Fredric Jameson² about the Sixties needs to be rewritten taking into account this horizon of how women transformed images of representation of a patriarchal culture. This is part of the postmodern turn. Benjamin Buchloh said that he wrote history badly, because he did not include women. The crisis of the modernity in patriarchal discourses is closely linked to the emergence of women and feminism.

LG: I have a problem with the term 'vanguardia'. You say it is a term of war, although other expressions such as 'new art' were sought after and the idea of the avant-garde still exists. Bruno Latour claims that "We have never been modern" to point out the dualistic system of modernity. So it could be said that 'we have never been avant-garde'.

AG: I don't mind saying if we are or are not modern because I don't think any question is formulated from this point of view. For me, the problem is: why did they think it was necessary to have an avant-garde? What should it look like, from what place did they define the movement? In these matters, theory serves me to isolate the components of the concept 'avant-garde', which is never just one, but several. Peter Bürger helps me to think about the anti-institutional moment of the avant-garde, but that does not mean that it necessarily helps me to think about *La Menesunda*,

because it is a work supported by the institution in which Marta Minujín felt very comfortable. The friction occurs in 1968 when the artistic field has already become intensely politicized. It is a process that took place between 1965 and 1968 when the police entered the Di Tella Institute and the artists said – and here, there is another definition of avant-garde – “If we want to make avant-garde art, we cannot do it in the institutions, we have to do it in the streets”.



The

Image 5. Marta Minujín and Mark Brusse, Chambre d'Amour, 1964, Paris. Marta Minujín Archive.

Minujín, Brusse and others inside of the installation.

avant-garde is also experimenting with language, venturing into a terrain that no one has entered before. [...] For Bürger, everything that comes after World War II is not avant-garde, but non-creative repetitions. Here is another problem. I think that artists feel avant-garde because they make an art that nobody did before. That involves a political dimension as they are also transforming the parameters of taste. Making art for which there is no audience, art that cannot be collected, involves a certain politics. It is to combat the taste of the bourgeoisie and the prestigious, oligarchic

sectors. It is the introduction to popular culture. For example, Roberto Plate's bath is anti-institutional, because it brings a fragment of everyday life to the institution and leaves the work open for the public to appropriate it as they wish – and there, the institution says: “No!” However, it is not the Di Tella institute, but the police that intervenes.

The definition of the vanguard is very complex but, in simpler terms, it has to do with the idea of anticipating which comes from military terminology: those who are in the vanguard are the ones who advance on the battlefield and as they are few, they see more. They outline the strategy to advance on the enemy.

The vanguard seeks to eliminate the previous landscape. Both Minujín and Noé feel that they want to make an anticipatory art. Involved with the spirit of the times and the institutional context they have, they feel they want to make an art that triumphs in the world.

LG: What do you think about the parallel developments in the art of Argentina and Europe? Mercedes Casanegra, for example, says that the group of *Otra figuración* (Image 6) did not know the CoBRA group. Therefore, the Argentines did not copy the Europeans, as is often assumed, rather they were aesthetic phenomena, which appeared in parallel.

AG: There are [different] ways to see that issue. One has to do with the idea that Latin American art is peripheral to European art. [...] The conclusion that Latin American art would be a derivative art is wrong, because art is made in dialogue with other visual expressions. In the case of the aesthetics of the group *Otra figuración*, it can be said that CoBRA ‘stole’ from the children, as Picasso ‘stole’ his ideas from African art. In this way Picasso should be peripheral to African art. Artists are in dialogues. The terms ‘copy’ or ‘dependence’ disqualify Latin American art but not European art. [...]

Kenneth Kemble saw Alberto Burri. And Burri, in this case, is looking at the artistic landscape of that moment. But, while he works the burlap, Kemble opens the field of collage. And so Kemble creates a concept appropriated by Antonio Berni, who knows how to read the industrial belt of the Buenos Aires megalopolis very well. So, is one going to see Berni saying that he is peripheral to New Realism? No! He was in contact with New Realism, but he transformed it. Likewise, Noé transformed CoBRA based on new syntaxes. It is not only a question of topics because the language has also been transformed. This dynamic happens simultaneously. They are not defined works in



Image 6. Rómulo Macció, Ernesto Deira, Luis Felipe Noé, Jorge de la Vega, *Group Otra Figuración*, 1963, Buenos Aires, Photography: Sameer Macarius. Luis Felipe Noé Archive.

the sense of a national Argentinian art. Rather, they are works situated in an Argentine production context. *Juanito Laguna (aprende a leer)* (1961) was made here. The problem is how the colonial nations look from the center of cultural power towards other spaces: either they rescue them because they are exotic or they rescue them because they are similar.

LG: I quote again from your book: “No country in Latin America has had such a degree of institutionalization, which was supposed to promise an international recognition that was perceived as necessary. But contrary to all the promising predictions, Argentine art did not succeed in establishing itself on the international stage.”

One reads expressions such as “failure”; “those responsible are still being sought”; “bitter taste of defeat” (Giunta 2001: 299). I think that today we can see it from a different perspective. Not from the ‘failure’, but from the contacts that existed and from the materiality of the artistic works.

AG: One thing is what we can imagine and another thing is what the artists wanted. The failure is conclusive, that is to say, they did not manage to introduce Argentine art in the world. Buenos Aires was not recognized as a world art center. Juan Carlos Onganía's coup is one of these reasons, another one is the entry of censorship at the Di Tella Institute and the economic crisis of the company. The failure has to do with the change of the foreign cultural policy in the United States and, above all, in France. The French did a lot to achieve an exchange. Paris was full of Latin Americans and Argentines. According to the narratives of the 1960s in France, Latin Americans have no participation in French art. This can also be seen as a failure.

LG: But there are changes, aren't there?

Today they are discovering Julio Le Parc, finally. And the *Pompidou*² expanded the collection. There are twists and turns. The failure is directed to institutional recognition and not to artistic production. Of course they made good art. From that perspective it was a success because the Argentine artists managed to propose a new language, but they failed to achieve a market and to manage with galleries. But, from the perspective of international recognition, which was a big part of the institutional project of the sixties, they failed. However, the work still exists. And currently the work of many artists is being reviewed – and will hopefully be re-evaluated.

The original interview (November 2014) had been conducted by Lena Geuer in Buenos Aires in spanish.

Special thanks to Andrea Giunta for the interview!

1. Giunta refers to the statements Noé makes in *Antiestética* (1965). [\[↗\]](#)
2. Jameson, Fredric, "Periodizing the 60s." *Social Text*, no. 9/10 (1984): 178-209. [\[↗\]](#)
3. Giunta refers to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. [\[↗\]](#)



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