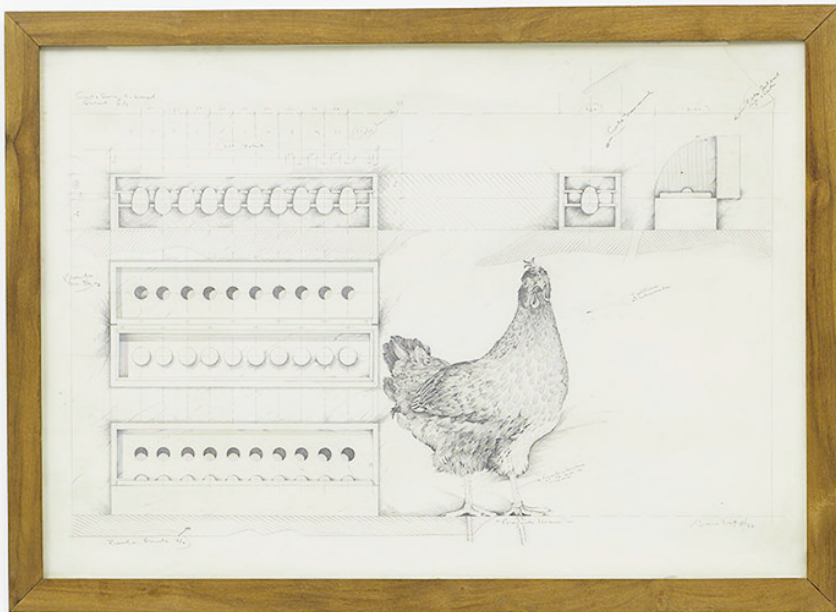




ICAA Documents Project Working Papers

The Publication Series for *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art*

Number 5 | December 2017



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The *ICAA Documents Project Working Papers* series brings together papers stemming from the Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art Project at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It also serves as the official vehicle to assemble and distribute related research by the Center's team of researchers, staff, and affiliates.

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Front cover (see also p. 7, fig. 3): Luis Fernando Benedit, *Proyecto huevos*, 1976–77, installation view.

Back cover (detail) and p. 18: Marta Minujín, *Movimiento Interior* [Internal Movement], 1960, sand, pigments, cardboard, pyroxilin shellac, chalk, and carpenter's glue on canvas, 60 x 80 cm, collection of Lilian and Mario Rodero, Buenos Aires.

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INTRODUCTION

Beatriz R. Olivetti

This fifth edition of the *ICAA Documents Project Working Papers* highlights two winning essays of the Peter C. Marzio Award for Outstanding Research in 20th-century Latin American and Latino Art: “Signs, Systems, Contexts: The Centro de Arte y Comunicación at the São Paulo Bienal, 1977,” by Julia Detchon, and “Remembering Marta Minujín’s Informalismo: Memory and Politics in the Art of Post-Peronist Argentina,” by Michaela de Lacaze. In keeping with support for Latin American and Latino art extended by the late director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Peter C. Marzio, the Award aims to recognize, reward, and enable new scholarship in the field. Chosen by a jury of distinguished scholars, these essays draw from the primary and critical resources available through the *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art* project’s digital archive.

Julia Detchon analyzes the development of a Latin American brand of conceptual art in Argentina during the second half of the 20th century in her essay. Drawn from her master’s thesis at the University of Texas, Austin—“Latin American Conceptualism and the Problem of Ideology: The Centro de Arte y Comunicación at the São Paulo Bienal, 1977,” which she successfully defended in 2016—Detchon’s analysis considers the construction of an international narrative of conceptualism in the region from the lens of CAYC’s publications and activities during the 1970s. The author explicates how CAYC’s founder Jorge Glusberg’s strategy of promoting international exchanges between the center and art scholars, critics, and artists followed a strict “theoretical framework of structuralism” (from which “systems art” originates). Ultimately, CAYC’s controversial participation in the XIV São Paulo Bienal in 1977 is evidence of Glusberg’s institutional use of politics to introduce CAYC and those related to “systems art” to broader international art networks.

Writing from Columbia University, New York, Michaela de Lacaze reconstructs and investigates the discursive field and reception of Informalismo in Argentina during the 1960s through a deep analysis of the artist Marta Minujín’s little-known early works. The author argues that Minujín’s special circumstances as a latecomer to this movement, paired with the artist’s rejection of transcendentalist values, allowed her to reference what the artist viewed as a flawed social memory in Argentinean society in her body of work. De Lacaze focuses her analysis on Minujín’s first Informalist paintings, completed between 1960 and 1961, which the author states differed greatly from other more expressive *arte informal* works as they “possessed the unmistakable density of concrete sidewalks and public walls—a dumb, obdurate solidity.” The fissures, holes, and blotches in Minujín’s works, argues De Lacaze, depict the precarious foundation in which walls and sidewalks are built in Argentinean urban settings. In this critical way, Minujín effectively reconnected this art movement with Argentina’s own historical context. Ultimately, De Lacaze argues that Minujín’s Informalist works were her own expression of the de-Peronization campaign of the years following the Revolución Libertadora of 1955.

The ICAA is delighted to feature both essays as part of the *Documents Project Working Papers* series and is proud to serve as a key platform for accessing the growing body of knowledge on the field of Latin American and Latino art. The Peter C. Marzio Award is generously underwritten by The Transart Foundation for Art and Anthropology, a private nonprofit organization based in Houston dedicated to the support of contemporary artists and scholars who integrate advanced and relevant social, anthropological, or cultural research in their work.

Opposite:
detail of fig. 1, p. 5.

...ciones. Durante los 4 años de gobierno del general Onganía (1966-70) pasaron por las manos de las guerrillas, el sistema se hizo más riguroso. Ya en setiembre de 1968, los guerrilleros peronistas capturados en Taco Ralo (Tucumán) fueron sometidos a largas sesiones de golpes y picana. Actualmente, todos los guerrilleros detenidos en la Argentina son torturados y el límite de sus fuerzas. La primera prueba fue ofrecida por las FAL, que secuestraron al imitativo paraguayo Waldemar Sánchez. Onganía se negó a negociar pero tuvo que mostrar públicamente a un guerrillero —Della Nave— quien fue exhibido por televisión en penoso estado. Las revisiones médicas comprobaron plenamente las torturas. Más recientemente, en mayo de 1971, el doctor Cornejo Yofré reivindicó a la Justicia en Córdoba; permitió que el médico forense revisara a cuatro guerrilleros de las FAR capturados en una acción donde murió un guerrillero.

El médico comprobó “trato inhumano y brutal después de ocho días de torturas insoportables”, y el juez ordenó procesar a los culpables. (Ver JERONIMO 37). Las revisiones revolucionarias, por su parte, han comenzado a responder a este género de denuncia. En noviembre de 1970, las FAL eliminaron con 14 disparos al segundo jefe de la División de Investigaciones Políticas, sub-comisario OSVALDO SANDOVAL, uno de los insubornables de las torturas que causaron la muerte de Alejandro Baldú, guerrillero muerto en la acción de torturas.

UN MUCHOS LOS RAPTOS QUE NO HAN TENIDO Aclaración

El 3 de agosto de 1962, Felipe Vallese, un obrero metalúrgico, tuvo la trágica virtud de registrar una serie ininterrumpida de secuestros y matriciones que culminaron trágicamente. Desde ese momento, a partir de esa fecha, ocho personas se fueron yendo ahora al matrimonio Maestre— despidieron, sin que hasta el momento se tenga noticia de ellas. En solo un caso, precisamente el de Felipe Vallese, quedó probada y sancionada legalmente la participación de la policía en su secuestro y asesinato posterior. En los restantes, el silencio se corrió sobre la suerte de los desaparecidos.

Felipe Vallese

En la fecha mencionada, un grupo de desconocidos de civil, secuestró a Felipe Vallese y lo llevó —eso se estableció posteriormente— a la casa número 1º de San Martín. Varios testigos, entre ellos un hermano del obrero, comprobaron que había sido torturado y lo denunciaron públicamente. En los meses y el joven metalúrgico no apareció. Por su parte, las autoridades policiales negaron haber estado en sus dependencias. El caso provocó diversas reacciones por parte de entidades públicas y sindicatos que reclamaron justicia en ese momento. El 13 de mayo de este año un juzgado de la ciudad condenó a más de 30 policías por haber participado en ese hecho. Como el cadáver no apareció, las condenas se dictaron por el delito de ocultación ilegítima de la libertad.

Alejandro Baldú

En el audaz asalto comando al vivac de Camarero del Mayo —hecho protagonizado por el FAL—, los guerrilleros denunciaron la detención de Alejandro Baldú y Carlos Della Nave. La policía afirmó que el segundo había sido detenido pero no admitió la captura de Baldú. Vinculado con este hecho, pocos días después se secuestró al cónsul paraguayo Waldemar Sánchez, pero poco después lo liberaron.

Secuestraron a Néstor Martins y Conrado Zenteno, el primero un gadillo. En un automóvil Fiat o Peugeot, con el número 118.621, que jamás apareció, ambos hombres fueron violentamente introducidos ante la asombrada mirada de los peatones. Las denuncias involucraron a la policía nuevamente en este caso. Los abogados hicieron un paro de 24 horas y afirmaron que en la misma esquina del secuestro se encontraba un agente policial que no intervino. Varios comunistas firmados por una autodenominada MANO ROJA se ofrecieron a conocer que ambos habían sido asesinados y pertenecer al FAL.

En realidad, el doctor Martins era un abogado que defendía a presos políticos y gremiales y que una oportunidad hizo condenar a varios policías por haberse comprobado que habían realizado apremios ilegales a detenidos políticos. Han transcurrido siete años y las posibilidades de hallarlos con vida se han desvanecido.

• Matrimonio Verd

En San Juan, hace apenas 17 días, el dentista Marcelo Abulnó Verd y su esposa Sara Palacios fueron secuestrados por varias personas vestidas de civil. Hasta el momento se desconocen las actividades del matrimonio, pero cuando se denunció el hecho y la policía allanó la vivienda, comprobó que ambos se dedicaban a fabricar explosivos y posiblemente pertenecían a alguna célula guerrillera. No se conoce hasta el momento quiénes fueron los raptos.

Más suerte tuvo el subjefe de la embajada de nuestro país, ingeniero Iouri Pivovarov, quien el 29 de marzo del año pasado fue secuestrado por varias personas. Sin embargo, el diplomático logró liberarse y fueron detenidos sus captores. El oficial subinspector de la Policía Federal y dos otros sujetos de los que se dijo eran estudiantes. Todos fueron condenados por la justicia a diversas penas sin revelarse mayores detalles del suceso.

EN LA ARGENTINA
TAMBIÉN SE REALIZAN
ACTOS CULTURALES

SIGNS, SYSTEMS, CONTEXTS:

THE CENTRO DE ARTE Y COMUNICACIÓN AT THE SÃO PAULO BIENAL, 1977

Julia Detchon

In 1977, a group of Argentinean artists affiliated with the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) in Buenos Aires won the Itamaraty Grand Prize at the XIV São Paulo Bienal—the first ever awarded to Latin American entrants. Their exhibition, titled *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales* (*Signs in Artificial Ecosystems*), contained fifteen works by ten artists using formal vocabularies that were, by this time, internationally recognized as the language of Conceptual art. From a distance, these works seem to share a common political stance on pressing issues of the time: the silencing of populations, the disciplining of bodies as they occupy (urban) environments, and unequal access to food and nutrition. But another reading of these objects might consider how they functioned, and how they transmitted meaning, as they circulated in a complex web of social and political contexts. Indeed, the reliance of these objects on contextual or discursive meaning (which is perhaps a constituent element defining Conceptual art more broadly) undermines the determinacy of their interpretation; the critical currency of CAYC’s exhibition and its presentation fluctuates across historical and institutional contexts. Interpretations have fluctuated such that the works in this exhibition, which now seem pointed in their critique of official culture, won in 1977 the official approval not only of the biennial’s organizers but also of Argentina’s dictator, Jorge Rafael Videla. Though they are commonly read for their content—or *what* they mean—their concern with structures of mass communication, the coding of messages, and the variable functions of an object as sign—or *how* they mean—reveals a more important political gesture. The critical nature of CAYC’s exhibition of Conceptual art at the 1977 São Paulo Bienal resides in this unstable semiotic field. Its found objects, propositions, and performances are political because they unfix the semiotics of power and authority.

CAYC and “Systems”

Jorge Glusberg, a critic and businessman, founded the Centro de Arte y Comunicación in 1969 as a space of interdisciplinary exchange that would establish intersections between current communication theories and avant-garde art practices. He invited critics, artists, and theorists from around the world—Guy Brett, Lucy Lippard, Abraham Moles, Joseph Kosuth, Gillo Dorfles, and Jerzy Grotowski were frequent interlocutors—to give seminars or workshops, curate exhibitions, and participate in juries. These exchanges fell under a prevailing theoretical framework of structuralism, with shared interests in distinctions between nature and culture, linguistic analogies, the use of plans and flow charts, the idea of a work as a “reduced model,” and the proposals of “systems art” as a visual metaphor for structuralism.¹

Glusberg wrote in an early exhibition catalogue, from 1972, “I believe that the current languages, created by man out of his necessity to communicate, have a common denominator that I have termed ‘systems.’ . . . Art as an idea, represented in this show, is as such a manifestation of a revolutionary opacity, opposed to the conscious misleading of ideologies, and represents a real Latin American set of problems.”² A concern with the power of communication systems to misrepresent the world—as authoritarian governments reformulated national identity according to ideological scripts—informed art practices that intentionally resisted centralized interpretation with “revolutionary opacity.” For Glusberg, “systems art” offered a common vocabulary for addressing this “Latin American set of problems”: histories of colonialism and a dialogic relationship with artistic traditions of Europe and the United States, issues of development and economic stability, and, most urgently, political violence. Communication and information theories offered expansive methodologies for addressing these issues by analyzing the production and conveyance of meaning. Systems provided a new form of “support for transmitting new axiologies,” as Mari Carmen Ramírez has written, allowing the artist to move away from authorship of a message and toward a more diffuse role as “encoder” or “organizer” of meaning.³ As a conceptual-curatorial model, systems allowed Glusberg to engage with local political concerns while diffusing some of the dangerous implications of institutional critique. By undermining the role of the artist and the primacy of his product, systems could also function as a tactic of “opacity” or evasion.

Somewhat ironically, as CAYC exhibited internationally throughout the decade, “systems art” evolved into a marketable category through which Glusberg could interpret and assimilate diverse aesthetic approaches to a “Latin American” set of problems. The hundreds of gacetillas, or bulletins, that he authored and mailed to art institutions around the world similarly worked toward systematizing a diverse constellation of aesthetic approaches.⁴ Systems made local problems legible to an international art world, offering up a radical investigation of the art object as a tactic of resistance to authoritarianism. CAYC thus functioned not only as a gallery but also as an institution with the explicit objective of inserting Argentinean and Latin American artists into circuits of local and international visibility; its politics ultimately increased its prestige abroad.

Biennial Politics

In this area, CAYC’s objectives aligned with those of the São Paulo Bienal. Founded by the Brazilian industrialist Francisco “Ciccillo” Matarazzo Sobrinho in 1951, the first Bienal Internacional de São Paulo consciously modeled itself on the Venice Biennale. Matarazzo had partnered with Nelson Rockefeller and the Museum of Modern Art in New York three years prior to found the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP), which sponsored the new biennial and shaped its emphasis on modern art. While Rockefeller’s principal role in founding MAM-SP links the institution inextricably to projects of American cultural expansion under the Good Neighbor Policy, modern art also emblemized Brazil’s incipient modernity and played an important role in visualizing its entrance into international economic partnerships. Both the museum and biennial were thus products of a period of correlation between American cultural involvement in the hemisphere and Brazilian internationalist aspirations, and have “always been intended to indicate Brazil’s competent modernism to an international clientele.”⁵ As biennial historian Isobel Whitelegg has noted, the Bienal’s prizes were sponsored by companies seeking to share “in a new regime of transnational development, ushering in an influential generation of industry-linked patrons whose philanthropic intentions could not be divorced from a vested interest in forming international economic partnerships.”⁶ Held after 1953 in the Oscar Niemeyer-designed Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion, the biennial was identical in format to Venice’s, with both national presentations and international exhibitions. The largest exhibition spaces were given to Brazil, the United States, France, and Italy, and early exhibitions tended to minimize Brazil’s relationship to other Latin American countries, which historically received little emphasis.

Though the biennial separated from MAM-SP in 1961, Matarazzo remained director of the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, its organizing body, until 1975. The separation entailed a shift from private museum patronage to public support in the form of city and state funding. Beginning in 1967, the effects of this shift in control became evident, when the new military government removed a work by the Brazilian artist Cybele Varela. During Emílio Garrastazu Médici’s military government, the Brazilian critic (and former biennial curator) Mário Pedrosa first called for an international boycott, and, Whitelogg writes, “by 1971 the boycott had successfully appropriated the exhibition’s international prestige, or, rather, participating in the Bienal, co-sponsored by Brazil’s right-wing military regime, had come to be seen as a dubious ambition for any politically engaged artist.”⁷ The boycotts continued through the 1970s, and managed to deflect much of the biennial’s coverage in the international press, though foreign artists continued to participate, and the biennial remained active.

CAYC had not participated during the boycott years under pressure from a group called Movement for Latin American Cultural Independence (MICLE), of which Luis Wells, Luis Camnitzer, Carla Stellweg, Liliana Porter, and Teodoro Maus were members. In 1971, an artists’ group called the Museo Latinoamericano worked with

MICLE to produce the self-published book *Contrabiennial*, which circulated as an alternative exhibition comprised of prints, letters, and evidence of political repression (fig. 2).⁸ In *Contrabiennial*, Gordon Matta-Clark published an open letter exhorting artists to withdraw their works from the Bienal, which “shamefully lent weight to that totalitarian government and its allies.”⁹ The letter also implicates Glusberg, in his role of inviting artists to participate through the CAYC exhibition *Arte de Sistemas*:

Of those who were invited by Jorge Glusberg to participate in the São Paulo Bienal, the majority have already expressed their intention to withdraw their work, maintaining the boycott of 1970 . . . the dubious way Glusberg handled this issue has seriously damaged the attractiveness of the show he has proposed in Buenos Aires. It has been suggested that instead of removing work from both exhibitions, the group is encouraged to exhibit at the same time in Argentina, making a firm collective statement against the situation in Brazil. My feeling is that Glusberg has the full intention of sending the works he receives to São Paulo, and that it is probably no easier to make political statements in Argentina than in Brazil.¹⁰

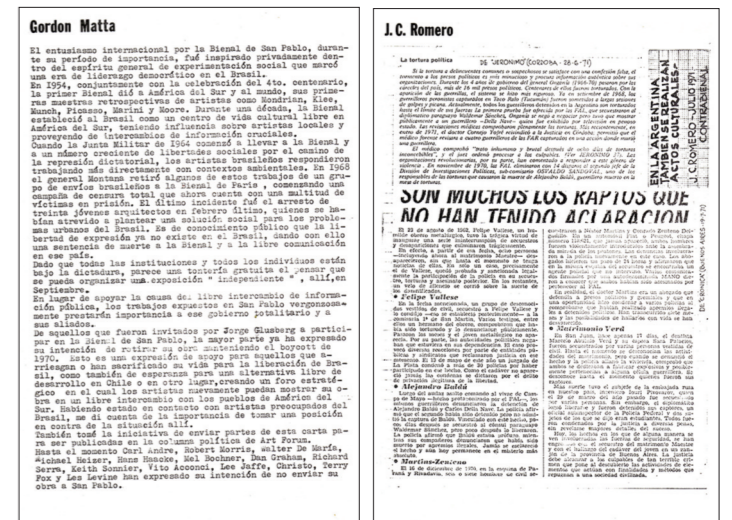
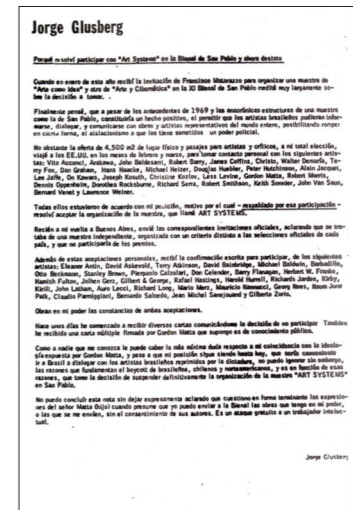


Figure 1 Excerpts from *Contrabiennial*, New York, by Luis Wells, Luis Camnitzer, Carla Stellweg, Liliana Porter, and Teodoro Maus, 1971. ICAA Record ID 766244, 7662181, and 766259.



The letter, dated May 19, 1971, prompted a reply from Glusberg, also published in *Contrabienal*, titled “Por qué resolví participar en *Art Systems* en la Bienal de San Pablo y ahora desisto” [“Why I Decided to Participate in *Art Systems* at the São Paulo Bienal and Now Will Not”]. In it, Glusberg explains his initial concerns about participating in the biennial and why, when Matarazzo invited him to exhibit *Arte como idea* and *Arte cibernético*, he later decided to participate.¹¹ Writing that he ultimately shared Matta-Clark’s position, and considering complaints from participating artists, Glusberg decided to withdraw the CAYC exhibitions from the biennial. Whatever his motivations, Glusberg surely recognized the expediency of boycotting in solidarity with international artists, and sat out the 1973 and 1975 biennials as well, despite a new section devoted to “Art and Communication” in 1973. “Taking part in the exhibition had been irreversibly cast as an ethical as well as a professional decision,” Whitelogg writes, but largely by American and European artists or Latin Americans living in exile. For Glusberg and for local artists, “the biennials of the 1970s presented a more complex choice, as each edition offered a chance not simply to gain prestige, but to continue to work critically and apart from the market.”¹²

The view that the São Paulo Bienal offered a space of exposure free of market forces is unconvincing given its historical interest in increasing Brazil’s visibility in international contexts. But the 1977 biennial may indeed have offered new opportunities for criticality, since it was the first edition produced under new leadership following the departure of Matarazzo, who did not allow curators to make substantial changes to display or documentation strategies. In 1977, under new curatorial leadership, the biennial’s organizers sought a stronger emphasis on Latin American (as distinct from Brazilian) art, and extended a special invitation to CAYC, who represented the most current Latin American practices, and could thus bring “Latin America” to Brazil. Under a new curatorial structure, CAYC would be allowed to show independently of the national presentations in a thematic section devoted to “Uncatalogued Art.”¹³ Though the Grupo CAYC’s entry in 1977 was, again, highly contentious, it was not because they participated, but because they won a Grand Prize—the first given to a Latin American entry in the Bienal’s twenty-seven-year history.

Signos en ecosistemas artificiales

For CAYC’s exhibition at the 1977 biennial, *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales* (*Signs in Artificial Ecosystems*), Glusberg made use of a systems framework, as he had in nearly all CAYC exhibitions, for unifying fifteen works by the ten artists of the Grupo CAYC (fig. 2). As the title suggests, the thematic linkages among works derived from their demonstration of the art object’s status as sign within the social space of a biennial. “Every artistic discourse is the product of a system of rhetorical transformations,” Glusberg wrote in an exhibition catalogue, and “every articulation of artistic space, as a system of signs, is constituted by the different rhetorical possibilities of the historical moment in which the artistic operators act and the media or instruments with which they act.”¹⁴ If the works seemed to have minimized some of their activist charge in pursuit of more formal or semiotic concerns, it may reveal more about the biennial as a site of meaning-making than about artistic shifts.



Figure 2 The Grupo CAYC (originally known as the Grupo de los Trece) in 1972; from left to right, standing: Juan Carlos Romero, Luis Pazos, Gregorio Dujovny, and Jorge González Mir; seated: Alberto Pellegrino, Alfredo Portillos, Jorge Glusberg, Jacques Bedel, Victor Grippo, Julio Teich, and Luis Benedit; not pictured: Vicente Marotta; reproduced in Graciela Sarti, “Grupo CAYC,” Blog of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, *Centro Virtual de Arte Argentino*, March 2013. http://cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/cayc/03_intro.php.

The issues addressed by *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales*—the silencing of populations, the disciplining of bodies, the roles of religion and the landscape in constructions of Latin American identity, tensions between ancient and modern forms of knowledge, the inequalities of South American economies and the ironic gaps in access to food and nutrition—read as so political in nature, and so salient to the time, that they seem to border on reportage. But, as Daniel Quiles has noted, a message is rarely so specific that there is no room to open it up. These thematic concerns could apply to a number of ongoing situations, or even to an overall condition.¹⁵ Though their classification as “ideological conceptualism” has narrowed the field of interpretation such that these objects are commonly read for their content (or *what they mean*), *how they mean* in fact reveals a more important political gesture. The critical nature of CAYC’s exhibition at the São Paulo Bienal, I believe, resides not in cleverly veiled metaphors that express the harsh realities of life under dictatorship, but in an unstable semiotic field of interpretation. The found objects, propositions, and performances that comprise *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales* elude the possibility of any one, official reading, decentralizing their analysis and pointing instead to the historical and cultural systems that locate them. This resistance to any singular or authoritative meaning can be read as a critique of the structures of power in a time of authoritarian governance of Latin America.¹⁶

Luis Benedit, who had built the participatory *Laberinto Invisible* for the CAYC exhibition *Arte de Sistemas* in 1971, continued exploring social behavior in natural and artificial environments. Benedit this time contributed *Laberinto para ratas blancas*, an artificial habitat in which, to reach their food, rats must traverse an acrylic maze and make a series of “unnatural efforts.” Like his artificial bee habitat, *Laberinto para ratas blancas* explored conditioned responses to stimuli and the environment. A landscape architect who exhibited in *arte povera* circles in Italy before helping found the Grupo CAYC,

Benedit frames his interests as purely semiotic. However, the Mexican axolotl in *Laberinto Invisible* and the white rats in *Laberinto para ratas blancas* gesture subtly to an interest in the relationship between national myths and citizen formation. Amid the neo-liberal restructuring of Argentina’s Proceso Nacional, the white rats in a “rat race” gesture not only toward human adaptation to and absorption in a code, like language, but also a new economic system that solicited foreign investment. As Glusberg wrote, “The end (perfect adaptation to the code) is the entropy of the system, because it has absorbed the participant into the correct run of the Labyrinth.”¹⁷ The rats, as participants, demonstrate metaphorically the processes of citizen formation under a new social order that promoted consumerism and the marketplace. Benedit’s use of white rats, or rats bred in a laboratory to optimize their adaptability to a system, may also suggest a biopolitics of access and mobility in this new social order, or perhaps the dictatorship’s intertwined capitalist fantasies of racial purity and consumer culture. Here Benedit conceives a scientific approach, per Althusser, to suggest the role of “ideological practices” in subject formation.

Proyecto Huevos, another work by Benedit, consisted of a wooden box containing turned wooden eggs inside small niches, with a stuffed hen positioned to face the artificial eggs (fig. 3). This tension between objects in artificial surroundings, and vice versa, speaks to a collapsing of signifier and referent. The grid, a system that manages the hen’s supply of eggs, imposes order on the natural world, turning the hen into a machine of food production. Agriculture and food production figure so centrally to Argentina’s national myths and self-fashioning that, following Benedit’s logic, food as a symbol takes precedence over food as necessity of life. Is it the real hen or the artificial eggs that function as signifiers in Argentina? To what do they refer?



Figure 3 Luis Fernando Benedit, *Proyecto huevos*, 1976–77, installation view, *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales*, reproduced in Graciela Sarti, “Grupo CAYC,” Blog of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, *Centro Virtual de Arte Argentino*, March 2013. http://cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/cayc/04_histo_05.php.

Jorge González Mir also blurred this distinction—with a more straightforward political metaphor—in his work *Factor interespecífico*, an installation of two-dimensional blackbirds perched inside white birdcages hung from the ceiling and scattered on the floor (fig. 4). Here, as in the other works, the realness or artificiality of the birds (referent) is of little consequence to their capacity for signification. Vicente Marotta’s *Más y mejores alimentos para el mundo*, an installation of piled sacks of wheat screenprinted with the text “Product of Argentina” or “For Export” (see fig. 4), again questions the important role of food production in Argentina. In the rarefied social space of the biennial, the slogans of commerce that advertise Argentina’s bounty from the surface of utilitarian wheat sacks take on an ironic tone, pointing instead to the country’s inability to feed its own population. The poverty implied by the gesture undermines the truth behind the refrain, “Argentina: breadbasket of the world.”



Figure 4 *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales*, installation view, São Paulo Bienal, 1977, reproduced in Graciela Sarti, “Grupo CAYC,” Blog of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, *Centro Virtual de Arte Argentino*, March 2013. http://cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/cayc/04_histo_05.php.

Leopoldo Maler, who trained in theater and dance and worked in television while living in London in the 1960s, joined with the Grupo CAYC to contribute *La Última Cena* (*The Last Supper*; fig. 5), an installation of a table with white cloth, set for thirteen on one side, as the scene is conventionally composed in painting. Above, thirty cattle and lamb carcasses made of lightweight white plastic hung from a rotating support. Barbed wire encircled the table on the ground, restricting the *mise-en-scène* to be viewed only from a distance. Having participated in the Happenings and *ambitaciones* of Di Tella in the 1960s, Maler became interested in the intersection of theater, dance, and art through a work he titled *Caperucita Rota* (1966). In it, he staged a play with slides, fourteen ballerinas, and a radio announcer in a makeshift Di Tella auditorium. He later collaborated with Marta Minujín on her famous installation *La Menesnuda*, and turned increasingly toward video, performance, and multimedia in the 1970s while living in Paris and New York. In *La Última Cena*, Maler’s intersectional interests are evident. An immersive environment that again conjures national myths and religion, Maler this time plays with the implications of participation. By inviting and then blocking entry, he teases apart the spectator’s dual roles of reading and participating in rituals of national identity. The hanging cattle make clear reference to the cornerstone of Argentina’s economy and culture, while the (sacrificial) lamb ties the hanging carcasses to the evacuated biblical event below. In an interview, Maler interpreted

the Last Supper as a celebratory moment of freedom—that is, a symbol of “freedom as a process and not an object.”¹⁸ The combined elements of celebration and death, order and sacrifice, freedom and threat, connote a complicated affective state of existence under military rule.



Figure 5 Leopoldo Maler, *La Ultima Cena*, 1977, installation view, *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales*, reproduced in Graciela Sarti, “Grupo CAyC,” blog of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, *Centro Virtual de Arte Argentino*, March 2013. http://cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/cayc/04_histo_05.php.

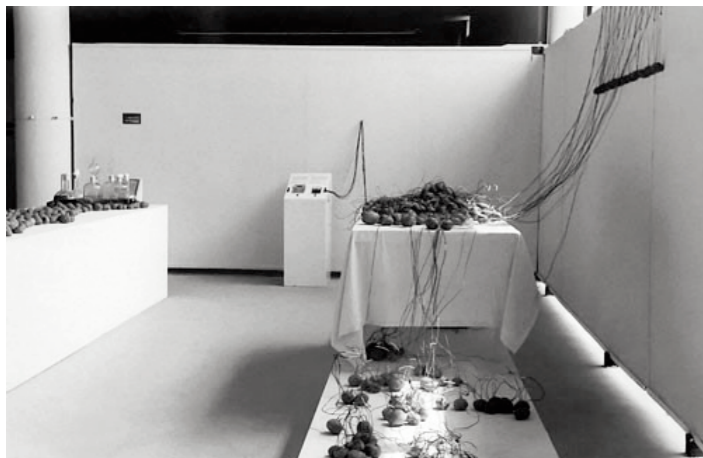


Figure 6 Victor Grippo, *Energía vegetal*, 1977, installation view, *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales*, reproduced in Graciela Sarti, “Grupo CAyC,” Blog of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, *Centro Virtual de Arte Argentino*, March 2013. http://cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/cayc/04_histo_05.php.

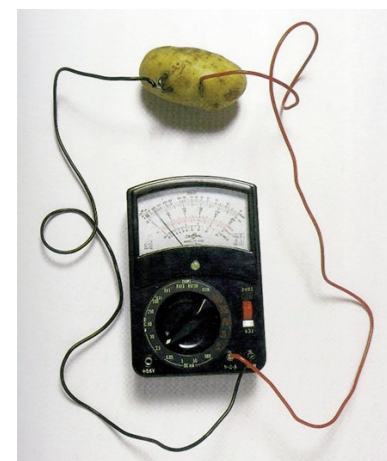


Figure 7 Victor Grippo, *Energía*, 1972, reproduced in Marcelo Eduardo Pacheco, ed., *Grippo: una retrospectiva, obras 1971–2001* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini: Malba-Colección Costantini, 2004).

Victor Grippo’s contribution, *Energía vegetal* (fig. 6), built on themes he had developed since showing *Analogía I* in *Arte de Sistemas*. In another incarnation of the work, *Energía* from 1972 (fig. 7), Grippo wired a potato to a voltmeter, which registers the energy stored inside it. The proposition, perhaps drawing on Grippo’s training as a chemist, cites a simple science project: a potato battery. As in *Analogía I*, the voltmeter makes its invisible electricity evident in the material space of the viewer, completing an analogy to human consciousness. The potato, circulating as an art object, takes on a minimal aesthetic as a small, irregular, organic shape, hooked up to spindly black and red wires that feed into a spare, functional voltmeter. A sturdy tuber, yanked from the ground, the potato looks almost delicate in this context, its pocked and bumpy skin prodded by wires. Such an odd juxtaposition might bring to mind the merging technologies of agriculture and industry at this time, and the primacy of agroindustry in Argentina’s economy. Grippo’s use of humble objects resonates with the attitudes of Minimalism and *arte povera*, though he stipulated to Guy Brett that his work involved a “small amount of material [and] a great amount of imagination: this is the real ‘poor means’: not the aesthetic Arte Povera!”¹⁹

Brett, a friend of Glusberg and Grippo and frequent interlocutor at CAYC, uncovered for an article remembering Grippo some notes he had taken over long conversations with the artist about his work. Some reveal the global events to which the work responded—Grippo had mentioned “a British military secret after the war: a biological battery, giving electricity from the movement of micro-organisms,” and “was especially excited by the struggle of the north Vietnamese, and their courageous and ingenious improvisations against the might of the American army. For example, ‘the use by the Vietnamese of a specially [sic] sensitive person to act as a radar in forward positions to tell of approaching planes.’”²⁰ But perhaps most illuminating was his “feeling that ‘here in Argentina, knowledge is untapped. Many pictographs [of indigenous origin] around Mendoza have never been studied. Thousands of items in the Museo de la Plata have not been studied.’”²¹ His interest in low-tech means seems to value the tactics of the disempowered or disenfranchised (Latin American) subject against the “ideological practices” or political and economic forces of neo-colonialism, Cold War geopolitics, neoliberalism, and the authoritarian nation-state.

Grippo once said, “what has to take place is a modification in the viewer’s form of reflection, since what I try to do is elevate the general tone of simple things not by making them abstract, but by altering hierarchies.”²² By recontextualizing a potato and altering its status within a hierarchy of social and material values, Grippo exposes what is already contained, invisibly, in an unremarkable object of everyday life. In an early essay on Grippo, Glusberg uncovered this power in the linguistic everyday by conjuring some of the Buenos Aires slang idioms featuring potatoes. “It can define an object of high quality, ‘este traje es una papa’—‘this suit is a potato’; or a job easily carried out, ‘qué papa hacer esos informes’—‘what a potato it is to do these reports’ (in English we would say ‘a piece of cake’); or an item of

journalistic news of importance that implies a revelation, ‘tengo la papa’—‘I have the potato’ (we would say ‘a hot potato’); a beautiful woman, ‘Fulana es una papa’—‘Fulana is a potato’ (we might say ‘a dish’), etc.”²³ One other interesting connection to language is the dual translation of *papa* as “potato” and “father,” perhaps supporting its spectral presence as a life-giving force of South American ontology or the equally important role of psychoanalysis in Argentina’s cultural arena. In English, however, “small” potatoes generally connote insignificance; indeed, there is no more fitting descriptor for a “dirt cheap” potato than “povera,” “pobre,” or “poor.”

It through this linguistic linkage that the potato becomes a metonym for the people who cultivate them, conflating the iconic agricultural contributions of South America with its people. To make just one more linguistic metaphor: a Spanish phrase refers to an unconscious or cumbersome body as a “sack of potatoes,” underscoring the (seemingly) inert or silenced quality of a personified potato and body under repressive political conditions. It is difficult, then, not to read the copper and zinc electrodes as reference to state use of electrical torture on political prisoners—practices that were at their peak in Argentina in 1977. Drawing on Grippo’s interest in alchemy, some critics have traced a parallel alchemical process by which he turns a “dirt cheap” potato into a status object, a repository of social value. But, as Daniel Quiles has pointed out, torture is also an alchemical process: the conversion of person into object, citizen into informant.²⁴ In spite of this disturbing affective valence, the potato resists an entirely tragic reading; it is so unassuming, so generous in its morphic possibilities, that it seems better suited to the realm of comedy²⁵ than tragedy: the energy stored inside the potato ultimately only works toward powering the voltmeter, which only registers its work. The tautology plays out formally, in the circular visual logic of wires that, in spite of their color-coded, specialized functions, begin and end in the potato. It is a sign system in operation, signifying the essence of the potato: potential energy.

At the São Paulo Bienal, Grippo’s installation *Energía vegetal* (see fig. 6) displayed potatoes piled messily atop a table that suggested a laboratory setting, wired together to amass a powerful current between them. Below, small piles of potatoes fed energy into the larger pile, which then fed wires that came together to power a single voltmeter, mounted in a vitrine against an adjoining wall. Though the tangles of wires do not seem to have been arranged in any aesthetic way, they do disappear behind the wall and reappear, as a single wire, to join up with the voltmeter nearby. Across from this arrangement, another table held an accumulation of potatoes without any attachments, along with specimens, test tubes, and flasks. In contrast to the pile of unwired potatoes on the facing table—an “analogy with science”—the small output of an individual potato multiplied as it connected with another in the pile, an “analogy with conscience[ousness].”²⁶

The analogy of an expansion of consciousness when one connects with others is, as in *Energía* and *Analogía I*, completed in the material space of the viewer, “when the potato’s latent energy becomes evident, and the fact that the group as a whole can generate a torrent of energy capable of incurring a transformation becomes unquestionable.”²⁷ The implications of such a simple proposal—the presumably substantial summation of the imperceptible natural energy of potatoes—are both political and poetic. The Argentinean critic Miguel Briante later wrote that the installation takes up “the energy inherent in matter to develop a metaphor for consciousness; in order to point out—in very few words—that the brain, that intelligence, is also energy, and that this energy can change the world, and that commitment and freedom are to be found in the acceptance of this energy.”²⁸ In this context, the silent potato, “in very few words,” posits a growing Latin American (revolutionary) consciousness or a hopeful course for silenced people living under the ideological practices of dictatorship.

If these political and poetic valences seem evident in retrospect, they were not as obvious, or not as interesting, to press coverage of the exhibition. Argentinean and Brazilian media, which covered CAYC’s presence at the biennial heavily, focused primarily on the patent absurdity of an art exhibition comprised of sacks of wheat, piles of potatoes, and hanging lamb carcasses. Prior to October 12, when the jury awarded *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales* the biennial’s Grand Prize, the exhibition—Grippo’s installation in particular—seemed to push the limits of what readers, if not biennial visitors, were willing to accept as art. What the Grand Prize revealed was the extent to which other artists participating in the biennial also questioned the ontological disruption posed by CAYC’s exhibition.

A Negotiated Position

The Brazilian newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* demonstrated this skepticism with a special section, “O Melhor da Bienal,” in its October 12, 1977, edition. The headline for an article reporting on the Grand Prize reads “Stones, Potatoes, Salami, Dirt, Wire Cages, Butts: The Grand Prize is the Argentines.”²⁹ Above, a banner of three images dominates the page with images of the quotidian materials that CAYC called art: a long table covered in potatoes (the unwired half of Grippo’s *Energía vegetal* installation), shot from below to exaggerate its length; a pile of rocks; an overhead shot of small pieces included in Alfredo Portillos’s ritual space. The image of Grippo’s long stretch of potatoes, which highlights its minimal formal qualities as it seems to poke fun at the work, reappeared on the cover of the biennial section in the Argentinean newsweekly *Somos* on October 21. Under the headline “The Argentines at the Vanguard,” a color installation view occupies two thirds of the page, this time in color, looking slightly down on the table but still exaggerating its length. Grippo stands at the far end of the table’s vanishing point, hardly more visible than the blurred biennial visitors looking at another CAYC work to his right. The text above him reads, “The Group of Thirteen won the

Grand Prize of the Bienal. Winnings of 12,500 dollars. Thirty-five countries and 210 artists participated. It is the first time that a non-European country has won such a high distinction. It was judged by an international jury. The prize ratifies the high level reached by Argentine art. Creativity was rewarded.”³⁰

The image again reappears in the Brazilian newsmagazine *Manchete* on October 29, under the large headline “Frans Krajcberg: The Protest of the Sculptor.” The image of Grippo is the same size as, and positioned directly above, an image of the Brazilian sculptor Franz Krajcberg removing his work from the biennial.³¹ The foil here is clear: Grippo, barely in focus at the far end of a table of potatoes, decentralizes his authorship of a work that relies on the meanings embedded in ordinary objects. Krajcberg, below, insists on his authorial and interpretive control over a product of his own making, removing it from a context that did not support his prescribed meanings. Such images also have the effect of making Grippo appear to be the only artist exhibiting in the section; other Grupo CAYC artists do not appear in images of their works, such as Vicente Marotta’s wheat sacks on the cover of *Gente y la Actualidad* in November. Indeed, Grippo was the only member of CAYC present to accept the award, though he did not speak for the group except to express a certain perplexity amid the uproarious response, saying only, “We were not expecting such a prize. We do not work for the sake of being awarded.”³²

According to Graciela Sarti, tensions surrounding the integrity of the jury built in the days leading up to the October 12 awards ceremony. *O Globo* reported complaints by the Polish-Brazilian sculptor Franz Krajcberg that two jurors, Marcia Tucker and Tomasso Trini, had made comments that Brazilian art could not be serious and that its entries were not “current.”³³ Ironically, the sole dissenting voice on the jury came from the Argentinean Silvia Ambrosini, who supported only Maler’s work but not the entire CAYC exhibition.³⁴ When the jury announced it would award the Itamaraty Grand Prize to CAYC, Krajcberg, despite having won one of the Premios Bienal, promptly set about dismantling his work in protest. The following day, the Argentinean newspaper *La Nación* reported:

The Brazilian artist Franz Krajcberg dismantled his work, threatening to burn it, while growling, “the decision is unfair to national artists.” According to him, the jury awarded the Argentines so as not to get involved by granting an award to the group Etsedron, from Bahía, “that shows the cruelties of Brazilian misery, all around the world.” The artist rejected his shared award of 20,000 cruzeiros (around 1,200 dollars), wishing the Brazilians to get it, but they refused his offer. The award granted to the Swiss Cherif Defraout, of about 500 dollars, came to a standstill when his manager disclosed his suspicions as regards the jury’s integrity. The event was filled with a sea of comments immediately after voting. . . one of them maintaining that “the whole of the modern trend in art denotes the presence of Communism” and that “the Argentine flag will not be hoisted in the Biennale’s red pavilion.”³⁵

Indeed, the press coverage of the event, particularly in Brazilian media such as *Manchete*, revived debates about the ethical-political implications of what should be considered art. Some more conservative critics echoed the objections to associating such art with “the Argentine flag.” The magazine *Eco de la semana*, skeptical of the atmosphere of “delirium” at the biennial, complained, “a sum of sausages, potatoes, sacks of wheat, rats and plastic lambs, in spite of all the international ribbons it harvests, does not amount to more than picturesque triviality, barely worth the momentary amusement of editors and readers of this magazine.”³⁶ The Brazilian editor Adolpho Bloch asked where in his company he could hang “as decoration potatoes, a hen and eggs, an ecumenical altar, birdcages, and I don’t know what other objects, bugs, and debris that won at the biennial.”³⁷ Such resistance exhumes the commercial and anti-communist origins of the biennial. Krajcberg’s initial response, however, was precisely the opposite. To him, the award was an act of censorship, politically motivated in its efforts to reward only Latin American artists that aligned themselves with power in a country with a “friendly regime.”³⁸

Given the seemingly critical tone of *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales*, Krajcberg’s interpretation of CAYC’s exhibition as politically expedient for biennial officials and the jury is puzzling. In a later interview, Jacques Bedel and Alfredo Portillos rejected the allegation, saying, “CAYC is not a group of wealthy people, but a group of professionals who work honestly and with effort. The proof is that three artists were unable to travel [to São Paulo] for lack of means. Shipping cost a lot of money and was funded personally by Glusberg, who is not a tycoon but a critic who cares about promoting Latin American art through his own efforts. This is due to the fact that the Argentine entry was not officially supported.”³⁹ In fact, there was an official Argentinean entry at the biennial, curated by Roberto Del Villano, which included work by Rafael Squirru, Bengt Oldenburg, and Carlos Roselot Laspiur. That CAYC’s exhibition attracted all of the attention indicates a nationalist excitement, evident in the triumphalist language of the *Somos* cover, about achieving recognition from international conferrers of cultural legitimation. Indeed, these magazines themselves took on the promotional tone of the *gacetillas*, further affirming CAYC’s place at “the high level reached by Argentine art.”

The nationalism that surfaces in Argentinean coverage of the event may help to explain CAYC’s presence at the São Paulo Bienal as a moment of official sanction. Photos document Glusberg touring the exhibition with the Governor of the state of São Paulo, Paulo Egydio Martins, under whose governance the journalist Vladimir Herzog was assassinated and student demonstrations at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo were violently repressed (fig. 8). And, contrary to Bedel’s portrait of Glusberg the passionate critic and patron of Argentinean art, Glusberg’s political connections made his participation—much less private financing—in the biennial incendiary among artists.⁴⁰ If the controversies that surrounded Glusberg’s management of CAYC smack of complicity with dictatorship, they also speak to the confusing negotiations and compromises those conditions required. How could officials in power interpret works that speak to

economic injustice, such as Marotta’s sacks of wheat, or the silencing of people, such as Grippo’s potatoes or González Mir’s caged birds, as anything but directly critical of their regimes?



Figure 8 Jorge Glusberg tours *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales* with Egydio Martins, Governor of the State of São Paulo, 1977, reproduced in Graciela Sarti, “Grupo CAYC,” Blog of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, Centro Virtual de Arte Argentino, March 2013. http://cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/cayc/04_histo_05.php.

Perhaps most telling is a congratulatory telegram from General Jorge Rafael Videla, then president of Argentina and an architect of the torture and “disappearances” of Argentinean citizens that were, in 1977, at their height. The telegram offers “most hearty congratulations” on the prize, which “reiterates once more Argentinean art’s high level and the rich variety of its diverse aesthetic proposals.”⁴¹ It may have been sent before news of the Grand Prize reached Argentina, and it certainly suggests that Videla never actually saw CAYC’s exhibition and its thinly veiled references to state terror, though its irony reveals the complexities of meaning as they unfold in different ideological contexts.⁴² An even more deeply ironic line from the telegram praises CAYC for its “search for new art forms of artistic expression consistent with the time in which we live.”⁴³ Indeed. If the *Signos en ecosistemas artificiales* exhibition was indicative of anything, it was the contingencies of context, the shifting structures of meaning according to “the time in which we live.”

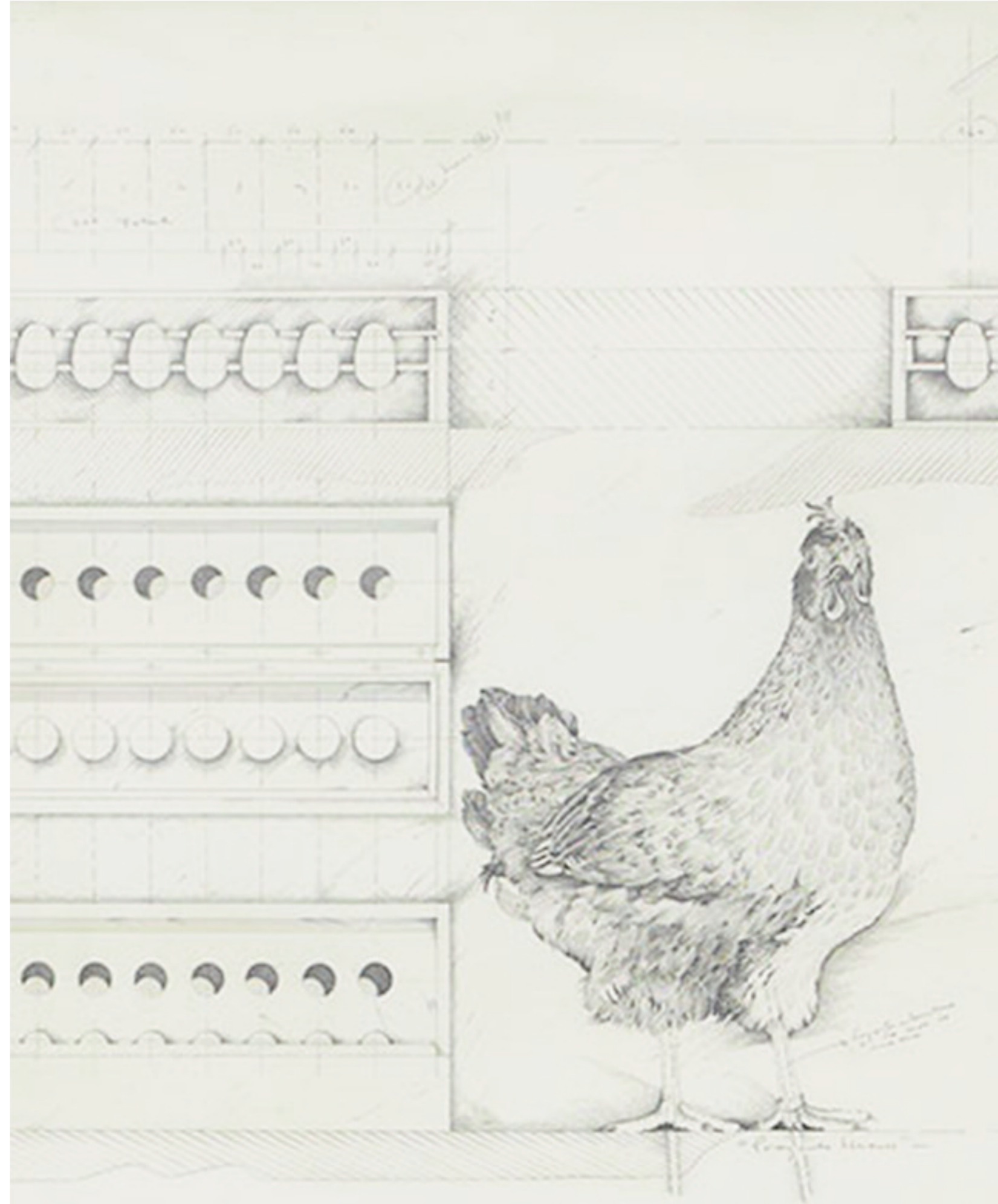
Videla’s telegram reveals the extent to which international art politics had affirmed CAYC’s role in a global social order; as a result, the content of its exhibitions had little to do with their meaning. It is not that CAYC’s curatorial frameworks evolved toward tamer politics in later exhibitions, but that its mode of semiotic critique came to signify relevance to international art circuits rather than a pointed indictment of repressive governance. CAYC’s official recognition confirmed that its works would *not* be read as political, but simply as objects of increased exchange value, as placeholders for bourgeois fantasies, and as symbols of Argentina’s currency in global art movements like Conceptualism. Here, in a reversal of the social meanings produced by the earlier exhibition *Arte e ideología: CAYC al aire libre* and its provocation of police intervention, the congratulatory embrace of the very object of CAYC’s criticism reveals a different operation of the art work: signification as social practice. The official responses CAYC elicited—threats from the police early on,⁴⁴ and later congratulations from the dictator—might be considered works of social practice and negotiation in themselves. Videla’s platitude that CAYC pioneered the “search for new art forms of

artistic expression consistent with the time in which we live” seems a perfect encapsulation of the gaps in interpretation that led to such responses.

Glusberg’s role in exploiting these shifting contexts should not be underestimated. The exhibition at the São Paulo Bienal is a useful case study in context because it illustrates the ways in which interpretation—of formal strategies in addition to the politics of exhibition and reception—changes the meanings produced by the objects themselves. Conceptualism’s reliance on appropriated objects, as discussed here, affirm Derrida’s claim that “every sign . . . can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion.”⁴⁵ It is not the intended message that makes Victor Grippo’s *Energía Vegetal* political (for example), but the open field of its interpretation. The Centro de Arte y Comunicación; Argentina in the 1970s; the São Paulo Bienal; Brazil in the 1970s; the realignment of art and state economies; recuperative efforts of activist-scholarship; these are just a few of the contexts that (over)determine the ways in which a group such as CAYC can be incorporated into canonical narratives of Conceptualism. CAYC’s exhibition at the São Paulo Bienal is both an event in time, allowing for analysis of formal strategies and the politics of reception, as well as a locus for contested meanings in “infinitely new contexts.” Critical objects such as these do not necessarily aim to denote a political reality but rather to expose the conditions of their signification: this is their political act.

NOTES

- 1 Jorge Glusberg, "Arte e ideología," in *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1972). Quoted in Fundación OSDE, *Arte de sistemas: el CAYC y el proyecto de un nuevo arte regional, 1969–1977* (Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2013), 64.
- 2 Fundación OSDE, *Arte de sistemas*, 64.
- 3 Mari Carmen Ramírez, in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea (New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Houston: the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004), 13.
- 4 See ICAA Record ID 748013 for a paradigmatic example of CAYC *gacetillas*.
- 5 Rachel Weiss, "Some Notes on the Agency of Exhibitions," *Visual Arts & Culture* 2 (2000), 122.
- 6 Isobel Whitelegg, "The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone (1969–1981)," *Afterall* 22 (Autumn/Winter 2009). See also Adele Nelson, "Monumental and Ephemeral: The Early São Paulo Bienais," in *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s–50s*, ed. Mary Kate O'Hare and Karen A. Bearor (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum; San Francisco; Pomegranate, 2010), 127–42, and Isobel Whitelegg, "Brazil, Latin America, the World," *Third Text* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 131–40.
- 7 Whitelegg, "The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone."
- 8 See ICAA Record ID 766001 and 766014 for further materials on *Contrabiennial* and Jorge Glusberg's relationship to the Bienal's organizing committee. See also Aimé Iglesias Lukin, "Contrabiennial: Redefining Latin American Art and Identity in 1970s New York," *ICAA Documents Project Working Papers* 4 (November 2016): 3–16.
- 9 Gordon Matta-Clark, "Gordon Matta," in *Contrabiennial* [New York] by Luis Wells, Luis Camnitzer, Carla Stellweg, Liliana Porter, and Teodoro Maus, [1971]. ICAA Record ID 766244. Translation mine.
- 10 Ibid. ICAA Record ID 766244. Translation mine.
- 11 Jorge Glusberg, "Jorge Glusberg: Por qué resolví participar en 'Art Systems' en la Bienal de San Pablo y ahora desisto," in *Contrabiennial* [New York] by Luis Wells, Luis Camnitzer, Carla Stellweg, Liliana Porter, and Teodoro Maus, [1971]. ICAA Record ID 766259.
- 12 Whitelegg, "The Bienal de São Paulo: Unseen/Undone."
- 13 *Catálogo—14ª Bienal de São Paulo*, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1981.
- 14 Jorge Glusberg, *The Group of Thirteen: XIV Biennial of São Paulo* (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1977), cited in Fundación OSDE, *Arte de sistemas*, 44. Translation mine.
- 15 Daniel Quiles, "Network of Art and Communication: CAYC as Model," Lecture at the Expanded Conceptualism Symposium, Tate Modern, London, March 19, 2011.
- 16 Though, as I argue elsewhere, this decentralization of interpretation also represents the political underpinnings of Conceptual art more broadly, including the "pure" or "analytical" strains associated with Europe and North America.
- 17 Jorge Glusberg, ed., "Luis Benedi, of the Group of Thirteen, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York," *Gacetilla* 181-A (December 28, 1972).
- 18 Interview with Graciela Sarti in Graciela Sarti, "Grupo CAYC," *Centro Virtual de Arte Argentino* (Centro Cultural Recoleta), March 2013. http://cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/cayc/04_histo_01.php.
- 19 Guy Brett, "Material and Consciousness: Grippo's Vision," *Third Text* 21, no. 4 (August 2007): 419.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Conversation between Victor Grippo and Hugo Petruschansky, cited in Marcelo Eduardo Pacheco, *Grippo: Una Retrospectiva, Obras 1971–2001* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini; Malba-Colección Costantini, 2004), 286.
- 23 Jorge Glusberg, *Victor Grippo*, 11. Cited in Brett, "Material and Consciousness."
- 24 Quiles, "Network of Art and Communication: CAYC as Model."
- 25 From pre-Hispanic motifs to Mr. Potato Head, representations of potatoes bearing human traits are cute; they capitalize on a comedic metonymy that distills our essence to our most important part: our head. Ana Longoni discusses pre-Hispanic clay representations of potatoes in her essay "Victor Grippo: His Poetry, His Utopia," in Pacheco, *Grippo*, 287.
- 26 Sarti, "Grupo CAYC."
- 27 Pacheco, *Grippo*, 286.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 "O Melhor Da Bienal: Pedras, Batatas, Salame, Terra, Arame, Gaiolas, Nadegas—O Gran Prêmio é Dos Argentinos," *Estado de São Paulo*, October 12, 1977.
- 30 "Los Argentinos, a La Vanguardia," *Somos*, October 21, 1977, Año 2, no. 57, Archivo Bedel. Translation mine.
- 31 Luiz Maciel Filho, "Frans Krajcberg: O Protesto Do Escultor" *Manchete*, October 29, 1977, Archivo Bedel. Translation mine.
- 32 "Escandalo en la Bienal de San Pablo," *La Razón* (Buenos Aires), October 13, 1977.
- 33 "Grupo argentino conquista o grande prêmio da bienal."
- 34 Sarti, "Grupo CAYC."
- 35 Pacheco, *Grippo*, 349.
- 36 "El delirio como una de las bellas artes," *Eco de la semana* (Buenos Aires), October 21, 1977, 49. Translation mine.
- 37 Filho, "Frans Krajcberg." Translation mine.
- 38 Fundación OSDE, *Arte de sistemas*, 82. ("Un país de régimen amigo.")
- 39 "A final, quem Krajcberg julga que é? Um Deus?" *Jornal da tarde* (São Paulo), October 13, 1977.
- 40 To address this issue in depth would be to veer outside the scope of this article. Several scholars have broached it, including Joost Smiers, who wrote that "during the dictatorship period [Glusberg] had excellent relations with the military government. His exhibitions abroad were officially promoted while, at the same time, many artists were being tortured, killed, or forced to leave the country as refugees. Néstor García Canclini remarks that Jorge Glusberg was "a master when it comes to feeling which way the wind is blowing politically"; see Joost Smiers, *Arts under Pressure: Promoting Cultural Diversity in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Palgrave, 2003). In another essay, Canclini added, "When the military government came to power in 1976, they officially promoted his exhibitions. Glusberg's company, Modulor, received a contract to install stadium lighting for the World Soccer Cup in Argentina in 1978"; see Jean Franco, George Yúdice, and Juan Flores, *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*, Cultural Politics 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). These connections are complicated, however, and speak both to Glusberg's deft navigation of a complex political terrain and his ability to carve out space for criticality within it. Mariana Marchesi touches on these complications, which she describes in a note to an essay as the "interesting and delicate issue . . . of the relationship between the businessman and the Argentine military government." If it's possible to make such a connection, she argues, it would have to be after 1977; the total disinterest of the Argentine government in the Biennial, symbolized by its refusal to lend the official flag of the consulate, is evidence of CAYC's lack of official status. Her explanation for CAYC's participation and award in the biennial revolves around "the new approaches to regionalism emerging in those years"; see Fundación OSDE, *Arte de sistemas: El CAYC y el proyecto de un nuevo arte regional, 1969–1977* (Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2013).
- 41 Daniel Quiles, "Arte de Sistemas," *Artforum International*, November 2013.
- 42 Quoted in "Los Argentinos, a La Vanguardia."
- 43 Sarti, "Grupo CAYC." This part of the note was reproduced in "Los argentinos, a la vanguardia."
- 44 For interesting coverage of this event, which I discuss in my thesis, "Latin American Conceptualism and the Problem of Ideology: The Centro de Arte y Comunicación at the São Paulo Bienal, 1977" (master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2016), see also ICAA Record ID 747956, 747531, 747542, 761185, and 761988.
- 45 Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context (1971)," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 320.



Opposite:
detail of the front cover;
see also fig. 3, p. 7.

REMEMBERING MARTA MINUJÍN'S INFORMALISMO: MEMORY AND POLITICS IN THE ART OF POST-PERONIST ARGENTINA

Michaela de Lacaze

“It will be said that it is pure utopia and this is true. Isn't human production always utopian, even when it seems most practical? Arte Informal is notoriously so.”

—Jorge Romero Brest, “On Informal Art,” *Del Arte*, July 1961¹

“Those [Informalists] who elevate matter in function of its contents and offer us the miraculous road of an informal order that is sufficiently expressive, these are the ones who through this artistic road...paint on all things; or what is the same: these are the ones who invite us to nourish ourselves from the mystery, the contents, of a category with which we soar towards the superior.”

—Enrique Azcoaga, “False and Probable Informalism,” *Del Arte*, July 1961²

“Could we . . . claim that the attitude of the ‘Informalist’ artists escapes the conditionings [of thought] because their occupation transcends the categories of thought itself? That their aesthetic attitude places them outside of space and time, in a strange ‘unifying communion’ with a superior order in which all contradictions and disturbances of the intellect find harmony?”

—Rafael Squirru, “An Authentic Informalist Attitude,” *Del Arte*, July 1961³

In 1961, the publication *Del Arte* devoted its July issue to *Arte Informal* or *Informalismo*, an art movement that had become a noticeable presence in the Buenos Aires art scene since 1959 (figs. 1–3). Two years later, it continued to baffle the Argentinean public, who did not hesitate to disparage it. Primarily inspired from the *Art Informel* and *Tachisme* of Spanish, Italian, and French artists, such as Antoni Tàpies, Alberto Burri, and Jean Dubuffet, Informalismo embraced extra-artistic materials to create abstract, nongeometric paintings (often bordering on reliefs) with opaque, highly textured, and usually earth-toned surfaces, whose facture conveyed the gestural force and spontaneity that was often a part of their making. Through its forms, materials, and methods of production, the movement positioned itself as a rejection of the rational and controlled geometric abstraction produced by the constructivist vanguard of the forties—*Arte Concreto*, *Inventión*, *Madí*, and *Perceptismo*, for instance.

As suggested by *Del Arte*'s cover headline, “Informalismo Tipped in the Scales,” the featured jury, comprised of three of Argentina's most distinguished art critics, had the task of defining and judging the main characteristics and artistic merits of the movement. The panel represented some of the few advocates of Informalismo, whose indifference to the rules of “good painting” had incensed the majority of Buenos Aires's conservative art world.⁴ Although the magazine hoped to stage a clash of opinions, the respondents possessed, besides their overall support of Informalismo, a commonality, which was obfuscated by their different theoretical approaches.

In his essay “False and Improbable Informalism,” the Spanish poet and critic Enrique Azcoaga (the least well-known and most skeptical of the three intellectuals) focused on distinguishing a legitimate Informalist art from a “dead,” purely decorative one by stressing that only the former had the ability to deliver “a road to elevation” through an “expressive order” (fig. 1).⁵ The director of the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires, Rafael Squirru, approached the subject differently by establishing parallels between Informalismo, on the one hand, and Buddhism and Zen Poetry, on the other (fig. 2).⁶ He located the merits of Informalismo in its ability to transmit a spiritual attitude through its humble materials, inner poetry, and overall opacity.⁷ To Squirru, Informalismo granted its viewers access to a “superior order” or “supra-conscious zone” beyond time and space where all conflicts could be harmoniously resolved.⁸ Azcoaga's and Squirru's views of “good art” as a conduit to transcendence were echoed in Jorge Romero Brest's portrayal of Informalismo as a fundamentally “utopian” art, practiced by “cultivators of truth” (fig. 3).⁹



Figure 1 Enrique Azcoaga, “Falso y Probable Informalismo,” *Del Arte*: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-tv., July 1961, 8. ICAA Record ID 741376.

Figure 2 Rafael Squirru, “Una Auténtica Actitud Informalista,” *Del Arte*: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-tv., July 1961, 9. ICAA Record ID 741390.

Figure 3 Jorge Romero Brest, “Sobre el Arte Informal,” *Del Arte*: plástica, literatura, teatro, música, cine-tv., July 1961, 9. ICAA Record ID 741399.

Because Brest was, at the time, the director of the National Museum of Fine Arts—an institution that had reopened in 1956 and quickly become the country's premier arbiter of the arts—his analysis of Informalismo, albeit abstruse, carried more weight than the observations of the other two critics. Organized as a series of numbered notes, which never quite coalesced into an argument, Brest's tentative response highlighted the most salient attributes of the movement—mainly, the “crude realism” resulting from Informalismo's rejection of traditional art materials and its total negation of long held artistic values, such as permanence and high quality.¹⁰

But instead of delving into the anti-humanistic implications of Informalismo, Brest claimed that negation “always introduce[d] a corresponding affirmation” and proceeded to neutralize Informalismo's negativity by turning to phenomenology and vaguely Sartrean philosophical notions, such as experience, imagination, and existence.¹¹ For instance, Brest recognized that Informalist artists embraced materials considered exogenous to art only to then insist that this group would in truth “be content making absolutely immaterial works of art”—a desire for immateriality, which was at the “root of its spiritualism,” according to the critic.¹² Brest also similarly reversed his point regarding Informalismo's tendency to embrace real time and materials by maintaining that the movement simultaneously “aspire[d] to be anterior to experience,” that is, outside of history.¹³ Overall, Informalismo was “not a school nor a tendency but rather a way of conceptualizing existence.”¹⁴ And yet “to be Informal” also required being “true” to what surpassed experience and existence—a dubiously enigmatic realm, which “exist[ed] beyond what one sees, thinks, feels, or fabricates,” Brest conjectured.¹⁵ Given these incongruous remarks, it is perhaps unsurprising that Brest went so far as to propose “virginal art” as an alternate name for a movement whose canvases flaunted a heterogeneous mix of base materials hardly evocative of virginal purity or innocence.¹⁶

Brest's odd linking of Informalist art to spirituality, utopia, and even sacrosanct virginity betrays precisely what unites all three critics: a view of the work of art as a secularized experience of the sacred. The pages of *Del Arte* therefore give us a glimpse into the way that the discursive field constituting Informalismo's reception extrapolated artistic subjectivity from its immediate institutional context in order to reimagine it as transhistorical. But the general critical attempt to sublimate Informalismo's lowness through notions of expressivity, vitality, spirituality, beauty, and timelessness, among others, sprung, in fact, from the very language used by many prominent *informalistas*—a language and attitude that led the poet and critic Édouard Jaguer to dismiss Informalismo as a “pious externalization of a new intellectual comfort”¹⁷ as early as 1958. Jaguer was not alone in his scorn. In his disparaging review of the Galería Van Riel's 1959 exhibition on Informalismo, Argentinean critic Eduardo Baliari, admonished artists that “if the painter of this epoch . . . wants to use his redeemed technique transcendently, he will have to do so with the minimum of responsibility to know that one cannot play by returning to an unintelligible babbling . . . aiming to affirm blind adaptation, facilitated by the disorder into which painting has been driven” (fig. 4).¹⁸

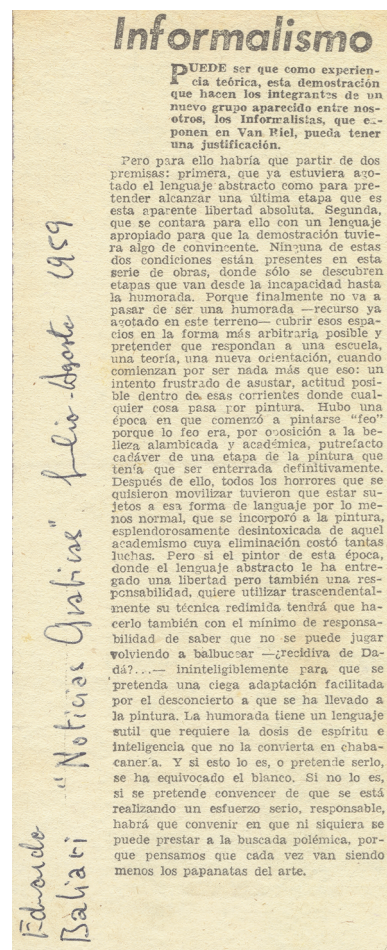


Figure 4 Eduardo Baliari, "Informalismo," *Noticias gráficas* (Buenos Aires: July 23, 1959). ICAA Record ID 825848.

sense, the Argentinean understanding of Informalismo was quite germane to the Art Informel of French artist Jean Dubuffet, whose style and ideas had been introduced to Argentina by artist Alberto Greco during the 1950s.²⁰ Dubuffet's *matèrisme*, after all, had sought to rehabilitate painting in the postwar period by discovering order and form in matter with a pronounced excremental quality.²¹

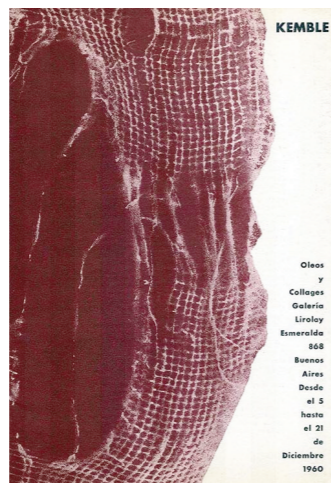


Figure 5 Kenneth Kemble, *Kemble: oleos y collages* (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1960). ICAA Record ID 741334.

Greco, a star informalista and allegedly the first Informalist painter of Argentina, was just as responsible as Kemble for the reception of Informalismo in transcendental terms. Greco's artistic strategy consisted of always desecrating the art object through a vicious act of violence that was meant to emphasize "the death of painting" but which ultimately yielded yet another painterly image to be aesthetically appreciated. For his red and black series begun in 1959, Greco covered his canvases in tar and urine and then left them out in the rain and wind. Nevertheless, the resulting works, like his monochromatic *Pinturas Negras* of a year later, possessed striking surfaces that transmuted piss and tar into a cohesive, all-over abstract design, whose self-referentiality, opticality, and freezing of temporal processes conformed, albeit unwittingly, to a Greenbergian theorization of modernist painting. Greco himself underscored the sublimating aspect of his work. Rain, he explained, had "loaded [the canvases] with force," while his urine had caused "organic reactions of matter, which enriched in an aleatory manner the surface" of his paintings.²²

In a text written five years after Greco's death, the artist and critic Luis Felipe Noé, who had also been a close friend and collaborator of Greco's, stressed the elevating power of the deceased artist's oeuvre:

[Greco] always identified degradation with sublimation, and signed his name to the water stains on the walls of public bathrooms ... 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.²³

In short, Greco's artworks always confirmed the resiliency of painting and redirected attention back to the artist as the agent of a violent yet creative process.²⁴ Even when he later performed the *Vivo-Ditos*²⁵ (briefly referenced above by Noé), Greco, by signing and,

more importantly, framing his targeted subjects, once again maintained the hierarchizing power of art, even if in a schematic way.²⁶ And so did many more informalistas, such as Jorge López Anaya, Luis Wells, Mario Pucciarelli, Olga López, and Clorindo Testa, whose works sought to break free from the constraints of "good taste" and elitist refinement while paradoxically embracing traditional bourgeois notions of painterly expressivity and autonomy.

This was the artistic milieu that Marta Minujín (born 1941) entered in 1959, turning eighteen the very same year that Informalismo made its indelible mark on Buenos Aires thanks to three Informalist exhibitions at some of the city's most recognized venues: the Galería Pizzaro, the Galería Van Riel, and the Museo Municipal de Artes Plásticas Eduardo E. Sivori (supported by the recently established Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires).²⁷ That year, the young Minujín began frequenting artists and intellectuals at the Bar Moderno, a true hotspot for discussing the latest artistic currents, including Informalismo. Intrigued, Minujín attended artist and critic Jorge López Anaya's workshops on Informalismo at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes Ernesto de la Cárcova.²⁸ Her friendship with the magnetic Greco, whose work had been included in all three 1959 Informalist shows, further pushed the precocious yet impressionable Minujín to abandon her colorful abstract oil paintings reminiscent of Orphism for an Informalist aesthetic (see fig. 12). "I was completely captivated by [Greco]," Minujín confessed, "so much so that I got into Informalismo ... I was taken in and influenced."²⁹

Minujín's first Informalist paintings, dating from 1960–61, were slates of muted colors—mostly, muddy browns, opaque greys, and sullied whites—that hardly seemed to be the result of the carefully thought out compositional choices so evident in the artist's previous works (figs. 6–11). Like stains on a dirty shirt, these paintings' tonal variations were a function of the surface materials that either absorbed or supported Minujín's pigments. Made from sand, carpenter's glue, hardboard, and chalk, as well as thick coats of paint, these paintings possessed the unmistakable density of concrete sidewalks and public walls—a dumb, obdurate solidity, which perfectly complemented their monotone, inexpressive hues. They consequently lacked the gestural expressivity typical of most *arte informal* of the period. At the same time, the hard and compact planarity of these weighty paintings caused their flatness to underscore, rather than override (as hoped for by Greenberg), the objecthood of painting.

Similarly to the artworks of many other Argentinean avant-garde artists (e.g. Kemble, Antonio Berni, Noé, Greco), the cityscape was indubitably a source of inspiration for the series. Minujín once recounted, "[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. I was still working with the canvas stretcher."³⁰

Yet Minujín's interpretation of Greco's gesture was not as clear-cut or naive as this anecdote might at first suggest. Minujín's choice of words is quite telling; her works executed not the transformation of

reality into an image but the *transferal* of it, warts and all, to the space of the image. The devalued materials that Minujín brought into the frame could not be aestheticized nor sublimated, because they engendered a process of decomposition that undermined the integrity of the artwork and automatically precluded transcendence. In short, rather than attack painting only to produce paradoxically yet another painting, as Greco did, Minujín produced a painting that attacked itself.

Of course, Minujín was a fledgling artist, who, at twenty years old in 1961, was still searching for her own "proper image," as she herself intimated at the time.³¹ Consequently, the process by which she distinguished her work from her peers was in no way straightforward. Yet the precocious artist was aware of the movement's problematic rhetoric. The pamphlet she penned for her first solo exhibition at the Galería Lirolay in May 1961 was a poetic and cryptic text that had the assertive tone of a manifesto. Its opening sentence was palpably defensive, delineating the prerogative of informalistas rather than introducing or describing the art on display. "To rebel against the conditioned and written," Minujín announced, "implies that one be able to make mistakes, to contradict oneself, and to reassure oneself that any path is valid in the measure that it expresses us."³² The curious phrasing of this preemptive defense of Informalismo betrayed Minujín's anxiety over the movement she had recently espoused. To Minujín, Informalismo's claims to self-expression were inextricably tied to a need for self-reassurance; the informalistas could not legitimize their break from long-held artistic conventions without resorting to the comforting and even cliché pretext of expressivity and artistic freedom. In the same breath, Minujín also tacitly and tellingly equated the movement's recourse to expression with both error and self-contradiction.

Evidently, Minujín considered herself a part of Informalismo and was not impervious to the rhetoric of the movement, as attested by the rest of the bombastic pamphlet. In fact, her defense of the artist's right to error and self-contradiction was just as much about Informalismo as it was about her own conflicted position within this movement. Yet her self-awareness and unease was already enough to distinguish Minujín from her older peers. And her art set the artist further apart from them.

Pocked by holes, cracks, blotches, and raised patches, Minujín's Informalist paintings were barely distinguishable from the decrepit ceilings, walls, and floors found in old buildings plagued by leaky plumbing (figs. 6, 9, and 11). As this association suggests, the damage visible on Minujín's hard surfaces seemed to be caused by faulty structures or noxious activities internal to them. Much like the fault lines created by moving tectonic plates, the fissures running throughout Minujín's paintings appeared to be produced by an unstable foundation, by an imperceptible shifting between the paintings' abutting plaques of different materials. The mildew-like stains clustered around these diminutive crevasses (figs. 6, 9, 11) hinted at the presence of humidity or of mysterious secretions oozing throughout the strata of materials below.

Kenneth Kemble, one of the leading artists of Informalismo, provided perhaps the most illustrative case. He described his Informalist collage-paintings in his personal notes, written in 1959 but published in 1960, in the following way (fig. 5):

And it is a work of art if it communicates an emotion of the aesthetic order...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 and how ... [these scorned materials] can contain a surprising expressive intensity. *But above all, and this is its true sense, [collage] ennoble and hierarchizes what is commonly unappreciated, amplifying our aesthetic experience and opening our eyes towards sensible worlds.*¹⁹ [emphasis mine]

As made clear in this passage, devalued materials were not employed in Kemble's brand of Informalismo to subvert the status of art. On the contrary, the transplantation of low materials into the hallowed space of the frame confirmed the redemptive power and viability of the pictorial medium, since the latter was always able to absorb and "ennoble" the rubbish embedded on its surface by distilling, whether through its compositional order, expressive gesturality, or self-reflexive language, "beauty and aesthetic emotion" from it. In this



Figure 6 Marta Minujín, *Untitled*, 1961, pyroxylin shellac, sand, pigments, and carpenter's glue on hardboard, 150 x 179 cm, collection of the artist.

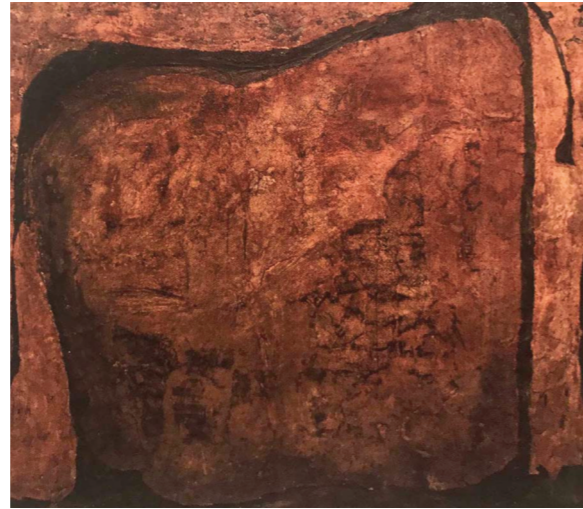


Figure 7 Marta Minujín, *Untitled*, 1961–62, sand, pyroxylin shellac, chalk, and carpenter's glue on hardboard, 126 x 150 cm, collection of the artist.



Figure 8 Marta Minujín, *Mancha* [Stain], 1960, oil and carpenter's glue on canvas, 90 x 110 cm, collection of Miguel Fuks, Buenos Aires.



Figure 9 Marta Minujín, *Testimonio para una joven tumba* [Testimony for a Young Tomb], 1960–61, oil and assorted materials on hardboard, 130 x 160 cm, collection of the Museum of Modern Art of Buenos Aires.

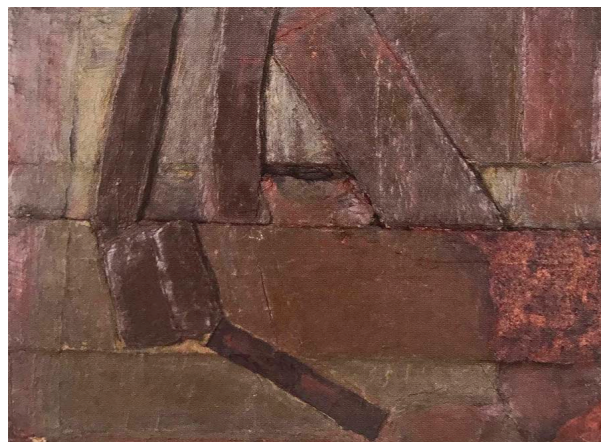


Figure 10 Marta Minujín, *Movimiento Interior* [Internal Movement], 1960, sand, pigments, cardboard, pyroxilin shellac, chalk, and carpenter's glue on canvas, 60 x 80 cm, collection of Lilian and Mario Rodero, Buenos Aires.



Figure 11 Marta Minujín, *Untitled*, 1961–62, sand, pyroxylin shellac, chalk, and carpenter's glue on hardboard, 100.5 x 100 cm, collection of the artist.



Figure 12 Marta Minujín, *Música acuática de Haendel* [Handel's Aquatic Music], 1960, oil on canvas, 135 x 162 cm, collection of the artist.

If the “flatbed picture plane” was, as Leo Steinberg theorized it in 1972, a “receptor surface on which objects are scattered [and] data entered,” then Minujín’s paintings, although evoking the opaqueness and solidity of horizontal surfaces from the realm of culture, did not function as “receptors.”³³ Rather, they were emitters of telltale signs or symptoms, betraying internal, organic, and temporal processes: rot, infection, and, at best, banal aging. In short, these paintings produced the uncanny impression of having a hidden interiority, whose secret churning only partially transpired to the surface. One of Minujín’s few titled works *Movimiento Interior* [Internal Movement] (1960) made this aspect of the series explicit (see fig. 10).

Minujín, furthermore, staged these paintings’ dilapidation as ineluctable. In *Untitled* (1961–62), for instance, the artist’s abortive attempts to mend the painting’s surface became conspicuous. Extra layers of paint blatantly covered some of the painting’s proliferating cracks. These layers were applied to the original surface in such a slapdash fashion that they underlined more than concealed the flaws in the work. In addition, the colors of these corrective coats of paint approximated but never coincided with the shades of white or grey on which they were superimposed. This deliberate mismatch focused the viewer’s attention on the work’s accelerated aging by literally highlighting the act of conservation already required at the moment of creation. In effect, these repairs demoted the autographic gesture as well as the expressive manipulation of materials—so lauded by Argentinean critics and Informalist artists alike—to an impersonal and instrumentalized mark, necessitated by the artist’s deliberately faulty painting technique.³⁴ Paint now functioned as nothing more than a reparative glue or caulk. Minujín’s adoption of unstable base materials ultimately led to the degradation of oils, the most revered of traditional art materials—a true reversal of Kemble’s logic. In Minujín’s Informalismo, painting could not redeem the low elements

that it incorporated into its space. On the contrary, the pictorial medium was itself corrupted by them.

Minujín’s eschewal of informalista notions of expressivity and transcendence was perhaps most evident in the painting *Testimonio para una joven tumba* [Testimony for a Young Tomb] (1960–61) (see fig. 9), a key work in Minujín’s series of Informalist paintings as evidenced by the artist’s decision to send it to Paris for the Deuxième Biennale de Paris: Manifestation Biennale et Internationale des Jeunes Artistes in the fall of 1961. Even though the title of this work alluded to the recent tragic death of Minujín’s brother, the painting refrained from communicating the pathos that one might expect from a grieving artist and, hence, willfully failed to distinguish itself from Minujín’s other Informalist canvases.³⁵ *Testimony for a Young Tomb* was, in effect, as silent as a grave. And as with a grave, the painting’s hard surface both concealed and marked the horror of the body turned corpse. Indeed, the work’s direct reference to mortality revealed the analogy between the work of art and the human body that ran throughout the whole of Minujín’s Informalist art. In fact, it was her paintings’ anthropomorphic impermanence—their performance of mortality—that effectively barred any sort of transcendental reading. The work of art was simply too firmly anchored in the *hic et nunc* to allow the viewer’s mind to escape the mundane into the beyond of a superior order, as wished for by Squirru.

Significantly, Minujín’s text for the Galería Lirolay linked the transience of her materials not just to the body but also to memory:

[the material] makes it possible to structure the surface until reaching a possible space of modifications that once superimposed onto traditional space-time, is able to belong to memory, where things day by day fragment themselves and disappear.³⁶

To Minujín, low and unstable materials enabled her to create a surface that was, first, compatible with the space-time of the everyday and, second, a “space of modifications” or of disintegration structurally analogous to memory. This reflection clarified that, for Minujín, memory is not an abstract, autonomous domain existing separately from the body of the subject but rather a contingent physical fact, embedded in the body (the fallible brain), and hence susceptible to the ravages of time; it is, in brief, material and conditioned by externalities.

Minujín’s correspondence between painting and mind should therefore not be misapprehended as a revival of antiquated notions of painting that equated pictorial space with the interiority of the subject only to better exclude the body and transcend the material realm. Clearly, a painting like *Untitled* (1961) (see fig. 6) did not present the mnemonic field as a stable and cohesive psychological, private space, peppered by personal markers of uniquely felt emotions and experiences. The psyche of the bourgeois subject was not featured here as it had been in, for instance, the painted dreamscapes of Surrealism or its postwar outgrowths, like Abstract Expressionism.

If the mind had long been metaphorically described as a hard surface that bears mnemonic inscription—think of Aristotle’s *tabula rasa* or Sigmund Freud’s *wunderblock*—then Minujín’s Informalist series, as a conceit for an embodied memory, adopted this image of the mind as a slab only to chip away at it quite literally. Riddled with cracks, fractured by deep fissures, and left partially bare by crumbling paint, *Untitled*, much like the rest of Minujín’s Informalist works, presented the tablet of the mind as dysfunctional and irreparably damaged by its trajectory through time.

But aside from these flaws and signs of aging, Minujín’s tablet of the mind was patently barren, composed of nothing more than swaths of dull browns and beiges, offering little distraction to the eye. The memory figured by Minujín’s Informalist paintings was diametrically opposed to the kind of mind analogized by the Combine paintings made by Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s. As argued by Steinberg, Rauschenberg’s picture plane spoke to “the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city.”³⁷ It “stood for the mind itself,” Steinberg elaborated, as a “dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue—the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.”³⁸ Anything “reachable-thinkable” would adhere to it.³⁹ Rosalind Krauss further nuanced Steinberg’s observations and described Rauschenberg’s paintings as follows:

The field of memory itself is changed from something that is internal to something that is external; from something that is private to something that is collective insofar as it arises from the shared communality of culture. This is not culture with a capital C but rather a profusion of facts, some exalted but most banal, each of which leaves its imprint as it burrows into and forms experience.⁴⁰

That is to say, Rauschenberg’s Combine paintings articulated the communal, even popular, nature of memory.

As “transferals” of urban structures, whether public walls or streets, Minujín’s Informalist paintings similarly portrayed memory as something springing from the collectively constructed cultural realm. Yet the “data,” to use Steinberg’s term, so conspicuously collected on the surface of Rauschenberg’s paintings was noticeably absent from Minujín’s Informalist works. Although Argentina had not developed a consumer culture as pervasive as that of the United States, the country had still witnessed the gradual commercialization of everyday life during World War II and the postwar period, a process that only intensified throughout the 1960s.⁴¹ There was therefore no shortage of commonplace symbols and material facts to extract from the bustling commercial world of one of Latin America’s largest cities. Kenneth Kemble’s Informalist series *Paisajes Urbanos* [Urban Landscapes] illustrated this fact plainly. So did Antonio Berni’s *Juanito Laguna* and *Ramona Montiel* narrative series of collaged paintings.

Consumerism, however, was not the only phenomenon that came to mark Argentina in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This period was more profoundly defined by the repressive eradication of Peronismo that immediately followed the self-denominated Revolución

Libertadora, the 1955 military coup responsible for sending authoritarian President Juan Domingo Perón into exile.⁴² Under the leadership of General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, which lasted from 1955 to 1958, the new, aggressively anti-Peronist military government sought to erase Peronismo from both the political scene and historical record by dismantling all Peronist institutions (e.g., the Fundación Eva Perón and the Instituto Argentino de Promoción del Intercambio)⁴³ and recasting the Peronist era, through the new language of Cold War politics, as an aberrant “totalitarian regime,” whose socio-economic successes were the result of fascist coercion, systematic deception, and mass indoctrination.⁴⁴ Passed soon after the coup, Decree 4161 outlawed all discussions of Perón’s “second tyranny”⁴⁵ and banned any mention of Perón or Evita in the media as well as any display of partisan symbols.⁴⁶ The term “de-Peronization” was coined to describe this virulent campaign, which did not shy away from using violence to repress⁴⁷ any sort of resistance from the public.⁴⁸ Most importantly, the Peronist party, to which the majority of voters, especially the working class, belonged, was disbanded and barred from all future “free” elections.⁴⁹

Constantly monitored by the military, which had retained the power to intervene in the political sphere, the subsequent weak presidency of Dr. Arturo Frondizi from 1958 to 1962 did nothing to change the new status quo. This was the case even though Frondizi had won the elections through the support of Peronist voters, who had been directed by Perón (still in exile) to vote for Frondizi after the two leaders had formed a secret pact for the latter to end the proscription of Peronismo once in office. Frondizi ultimately never fulfilled his promise and repeatedly disavowed any such pact even though Perón publicized its existence by producing signed papers of the secret agreement in 1959.⁵⁰ Like the military government preceding it, Frondizi’s presidency was marked by a denial of historical facts and negation of Peronismo that had become typical during the years following the Revolución Libertadora.

Given that the period alternated between what historians describe as a manipulative historical “reeducation of the masses” and an “absolute negation of the past,”⁵¹ it is unsurprising that Minujín’s paintings refused to be “abundant with concrete references,”⁵² like Rauschenberg’s paintings, and instead illustrated the silence of censorship and, more crucially, a breakdown in collective memory through their dilapidation and blankness. Like the mind of someone suffering from Alzheimer’s, Minujín’s pictorial field as memory was devoid of content precisely because ten years of Peronist history (as well as the Peronist party itself) were being wiped away.

The inability of Minujín’s Informalist works to register cultural information is all the more comprehensible considering that Argentina’s cultural sphere was making this collective disavowal even more totalizing. As carefully chronicled by art historian Andrea Giunta, the Buenos Aires art world saw the end of Peronismo’s isolation, crude populism, and retrograde censorship as its golden opportunity to reorient itself toward the international community and to quickly update itself through new styles and art forms, collectively designated by critics as *arte nuevo* or “new art.”⁵³ At the same time, tastemakers and critics falsely reasoned that only new and young artists could make *arte nuevo*. This fetishizing of youth and novelty

was, of course, accompanied by a disregard for the old.⁵⁴ Artists and artworks from the immediate past, despite their criticism of Peronismo, were dismissed as extraneous, if not antithetical, to the new sociopolitical and artistic context of a born-again nation with no history.

The feverish pursuit of new art forms, furthermore, pushed artists to “almost compulsively . . . import and translate the poetics of the postwar period,” specifically the latest European artistic developments that conveniently had no historical connection to Argentina’s recent political experience.⁵⁵ In his key book on the Informalist vanguard, López Anaya reflects on the supra-national and ahistorical character of Informalismo:

Diverse groups and independent artists in France, Germany, . . . the United States, and South America developed an inclination for a type of painting that seemed to disallow national limits and which picked up only a few characteristics proper to local traditions. In opposition to certain movements that were typically regionalist, Informalismo, with its marginalization of history and its anti-ideological technique, did not pose social or political problems.⁵⁶

Through Informalismo, artists hastily searched for “the key to whatever could be considered ‘new,’”⁵⁷ for a visual vocabulary that could properly represent, not the sociopolitical reality of the country, but its aspirations and idealized image as a renewed nation liberated from “dictatorship” and in tune with international artistic trends.

The rhetoric supplementing Informalismo therefore had to deny the immediacy inherent in Informalist *matèrisme* through a deployment of idealist terms, because this recasting of the Art Informel style as timeless and autonomous allowed the movement to further disconnect itself from traumatic and unresolved historical events that tarnished the image of Argentina’s political and cultural renaissance. Informalismo, in short, was itself implicated in the dialectic of spectacular rebirth and historical denial that was the founding condition of post-Peronist Argentina.

By alluding to a crumbling collective memory through the visual vocabulary of the art movement abetting this process of amnesia, Minujín’s Informalist paintings reframed Informalismo as embroiled in the historical processes it sought to exceed. These paintings pointed to the inherent contradiction between the material immediacy of Informalismo, on the one hand, and its ahistorical rhetoric and affirmative position, on the other. The artist’s reinterpretation of the Art Informel imported from Europe fulfilled the urgent function of connecting this style to the local Argentinean history it was otherwise displacing. The criticality and timeliness of Minujín’s art cannot be underestimated, for, as so many Argentinean intellectuals were beginning to recognize at the start of the 1960s, the historical unearthing and reconsideration of Peronism was a critical first step in the rehabilitation of the Left in the country.⁵⁸

NOTES

- Jorge Romero Brest, “Sobre el Arte Informal,” *Del Arte: plastic, literature, teatro, musica, cine-t.v.*, July 1961, 9. Brest published a second version of this text as “Informal Art and the Art of Today: A Very Updated Article and New Reflections” for the catalogue of the 1963 National and International Prizes of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella. This text was then translated by Gabriel Perez-Barreiro for *Listen, Here, Now!: Argentine Art of the 1960s, Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Ines Katzenstein (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004). I am, however, using my own translation of the original 1961 text, made available through the digital archive of the International Center of the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. ICAA Record ID 741399.
- Enrique Azcoaga, “Falso y Probable Informalismo,” *Del Arte: plastic, literature, teatro, musica, cine-t.v.*, July 1961, 8. ICAA Record ID 741376. My translation.
- Rafael Squirru, “Una Autentica Actitude Informalista,” *Del Arte: plastic, literature, teatro, musica, cine-t.v.*, July 1961, 9. ICAA Record ID 741390. My translation.
- The Informalistas, for instance, abandoned the concept of beauty as well as traditional tools such as paintbrushes in favor of spoons, fingers, and sticks, among other things.
- Azcoaga, “Falso y Probable Informalismo,” 8.
- Squirru’s recourse to Zen Buddhism was most likely inspired from the writings of tachiste painter Georges Mathieu, who had outlined four principles for painting based in Zen thought. Significantly, Mathieu had visited Buenos Aires in 1959 and exhibited at the Galeria Bonino. During his visit, Mathieu had gotten in touch with the Informalist Argentinean artists, who had exhibited at Galeria Pizarro that same year. Kenneth Kemble’s series of Informalist black and white paintings inspired from Japanese calligraphy most likely further encouraged Squirru to theorize the movement through Zen thought.
- Squirru, “Una Autentica Actitude Informalista,” 9.
- Ibid.
- Brest, “Sobre el Arte Informal,” 9.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid. Almost immediately, Brest dismisses “virginal art” as an “inappropriate” name for the movement. Nevertheless, in the seventh note of his article, he proposes a similar notion by describing Informalismo as a practice of “aesthetic nudism,” that is, as a pure art form unsoiled by the past and unconstrained by artistic norms. Virginal art is a term that also reappears in Brest’s second and unpublished 1961 essay, “What is Informal Painting?”
- Edouard Jaguer, “Polo Clandestino,” *Boa*, n.1 (May 1958): 29-30.
- Eduardo Baliai, “Informalismo,” *Noticias Gráficas* (Buenos Aires: July 23, 1959). ICAA Record ID: 825848.
- Kenneth Kemble, *Kemble: Oleos y Collages* (Buenos Aires: Galeria Lirolay, 1960). ICAA Record 741334. My translation and emphasis.
- Greco had traveled to Paris in 1954 and returned to Latin America soon after with the intention of creating an Art Informel movement both in Brazil and Argentina. The important critic and poet Aldo Pellegrini had also published an article on Dubuffet, “Jean Dubuffet o la poética de lo desagradable” as early as 1953, in which he praised Dubuffet’s spontaneous working of materials. Finally, Juan Eduardo Cirlot’s book *El Arte Otro* (1957), which provided additional descriptions of Dubuffet’s work, was widely circulated in Buenos Aires at the time.
- In an aside in her essay “Robert Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” Rosalind Krauss observes quite correctly that in Dubuffet’s *texturologies* collage elements “were used in such a way as to suspend their materiality between their own identity as objects and a transformation into sheer pictorial design or tone.” See Rosalind Krauss, “Robert Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden Joseph (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 50.
- Jorge Lopez Anaya, *Informalismo: la vanguardia informalista, Buenos Aires 1957–1965* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Alberto Sendros, 2003), 41. My emphasis and translation.

- 23 Luis Felipe Noe, "Alberto Greco: Five Years After His Death," in *Listen, Here, Now!: Argentine Art of the 1960s, Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Ines Katzenstein (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 49.
- 24 Greco's decision to call many of his performances *Vivo-Ditos* or "living fingers" served to signal the primacy of the artist as the agent doing the selecting of everyday objects as art. As argued by Longoni, "the artist attributes to him or herself the capacity to point out that there is art in life, and that he or she is the only authorized person to make that presence known." See Longoni, "Action Art in Argentina from 1960: The Body (Ex)posed," in *Arte [No Es] Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960–2000*. Ed. Claudia Calirman and Elvis Fuentes (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2008), n11.
- 25 The *Vivo-Ditos* were officially created from 1962 onwards, but Greco had been experimenting with this type of action since 1954. Most of the *Vivo-Ditos* consisted in the encircling and signing of people, situations, or places with a piece of chalk.
- 26 Art historians consistently argue that Greco's *Vivo-Ditos* fused art with life by taking art into the streets. They consequently, represented a critique and destabilization of the art institution. "Greco announced the end of museum and gallery art in his *Vivo-Dito* creations," writes Marcelo Pacheco, for instance; see Marcelo Pacheco, "From the Modern to the Contemporary: Shifts in Argentine Art, 1956–1965," in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 21. Curator Gabriela Rangel also argues that the *Vivo-Dito* "may be one of the most original responses to Marcel Duchamp's readymade as well as an extreme action outside the conventional frame of the institution of art, intended to destroy the notion of the artwork as something accomplished by judgment or functionality"; see Gabriela Rangel, "Alberto Greco: Signing the Transient," *Review: Literature and Arts of Americas* 40:2, 298–300. Similarly, Ana Longoni sees the *Vivo-Ditos* as the "counterpoint" of the Duchampian ready-made because they "do not entail removing the signaled object . . . from their contexts (the street, daily life) in order to place them in an art museum. . . . Instead, they are left where they are"; see Ana Longoni, "Drifts of the Avant-Garde Scene" in *Beginning with a Bang!: From Confrontation to Intimacy* (New York: Americas Society, 2007), 64. Daniel Quiles, too, concurs: "The *Vivo-Dito* introduced a brilliant twist on the readymade—that non-art and art would be indistinguishable once the gallery context had been abandoned"; see Daniel Quiles, "Burn Out my Potentiality: Destruction and Collectivity in Greco and Minujín" in *Beginning with A Bang*, 71. However, Longoni, Rangel, and Quiles all refrain from following through with the implications of their comparison to Duchamp—mainly, that as a reversal of the readymade, the *Vivo-Dito* extended the art institution, no matter how briefly, into the non-artistic space of the streets (as opposed to bringing the non-artistic, everyday object into the space of art, as Duchamp did). Greco did not void painting, art or the art institution but simply relocated their shared key signifiers—the frame and the signature—into the everyday, thereby re-contextualizing the mundane as art. Eventually, Greco's *Vivo-Ditos* evolved into other art actions that consisted in tracing the silhouette of ordinary (usually lower class) people onto the canvas before which they stood. This alternate, sister gesture literalized what was only implicit in the *Vivo-Ditos*: art's still potent ability to absorb and neutralize the everyday and extra-artistic subjects as nothing more than pure form. Furthermore, Greco's photographs of the *Vivo-Ditos* preserved these actions as artistic images and thus corrected their ephemerality, while granting them a commodifiable exhibition value. Despite Greco's claims to the contrary, the *Vivo-Dito*'s expansion of the frame of art into everyday life represented a colonization that strengthened or, at least, reasserted the reach and power of the art institution and the art market, leaving these far from undermined or abandoned. This paradoxical aspect of Greco's work is symptomatic of what Giunta describes as the Argentinean avant-garde's conflicted relationship to the institution of art; see Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 126. Artists, she argues, felt the need to go beyond bourgeois tastes and traditional art's conventions and yet were dependent on the institutions most emblematic of these tastes and conventions.
- 27 Minujín's year of birth remains uncertain. Some sources state that she was born in 1941, while others pinpoint her birth to 1943. The artist has herself contributed to this confusion by making contradictory statements regarding her age. As a teenager, Minujín often added a few years to her age in order to have access to sites and grants reserved for adults. As she got older, Minujín did the opposite, perhaps because Argentina's art world strongly associated youth with the figure of the avant-garde artist.
- 28 Minujín's first Informalist paintings seemed to borrow the particular somber color palette of López Anaya's work as well as their material solidity.
- 29 Cited in Javier Villa, "Marta Minujín: A Biography," in *Marta Minujín: Obras 1959–1989* (Buenos Aires: MALBA Fundacion Costantini, 2010), 269.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 270.
- 31 Marta Minujín, *Marta Minujín* (Buenos Aires: Galeria Lirrolay, 1961). Reprinted in *Marta Minujín: Obras 1959–1989*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: MALBA Fundacion Costantini, 2010), 203. My translation.
- 32 *Ibid.* My emphasis and translation.
- 33 Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism (1972)," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden Joseph (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 28.
- 34 Minujín's rejection of the locally championed expressive brushstroke can also be read in a larger, more global context as a repudiation of the inimitable Abstract Expressionist dribble of paint that had triumphed in New York and garnered international recognition during the postwar period.
- 35 Her older brother had succumbed to cancer, a disease whose gradual destruction of the body from the inside out parallels the decline visible in Minujín's Informalist works. The artist, however, never explicitly linked her brother's death to her art.
- 36 Minujín, "Marta Minujín: A Biography," 203. My translation.
- 37 Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 34.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 40 Krauss, 52.
- 41 For more on this, see Eduardo Elena, *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).
- 42 Deborah Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina: Between Coups and Consolidation* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 27–36.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 30. See also Elena, *Dignifying Argentina*, 247–49. Even the embalmed body of Evita, which had been publicly enshrined, mysteriously disappeared.
- 44 Elena, *Dignifying Argentina*, 247.
- 45 This phrase implied that Peron was the twentieth century's version of the infamous Argentinean tyrant Juan Manuel de Rosas, who ruled from 1835 to 1852.
- 46 Elena, 247.
- 47 A failed, pro-Peronist uprising in 1956, for example, left scores dead and thousands imprisoned and was arguably one of Argentina's most violent uprisings in decades.
- 48 Elena Scirica, "Proscriccion, modernizacion capitalista, y crisis, Argentina (1955–1966)," in *Historia Argentina Contemporanea: Pasados presents de la politica, la economia, y el conflicto social* (Buenos Aires: Dialektik, 2008), 218–24. My translation.
- 49 Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, 28. This prohibition was not withdrawn until the 1973 elections.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 51 Scirica, "Proscriccion, modernizacion capitalista, y crisis," 219. My translation.
- 52 Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 32.
- 53 Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 56–64, 85. For a brief, yet informative, account of this period see Pacheco, "From the Modern to the Contemporary," 16–25.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 56 Lopez Anaya, *Informalismo*, 14.
- 57 Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*, 87.
- 58 For more on the Argentinean intelligentsia's rereading of Peronism in an attempt to change the politics of the left in Argentina, see Beatriz Sarlo, "Intellectuals: Scission or Mimesis?" in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 250–61.

Opposite:
detail of fig. 6, p. 18.



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Michaela de Lacaze earned a BA in the history of art and architecture at Harvard College and is a PhD candidate in modern and contemporary art at Columbia University. Her research has focused on new media art, happenings, performance art, Informalismo, and installation art in Latin America, especially in the context of Argentina and Brazil. While living in Seoul, South Korea in 2014–16, she became a fellow at the National Museum of Korea and developed an interest in East Asian art and Korean contemporary art, publishing essays on Ahn Kyuchul, Cody Choi, Korean ceramics, and the Dansaekhwa School. Her dissertation, currently in progress, centers on Marta Minujín, using her art as a lens through which to reconstruct the early history of Argentina's avant-garde experiments with performance, new media, and different forms of participation during the first half of the 1960s. Since 2015, Michaela has worked under the leadership of curator DaeHyung Lee as the editor-in-chief of Hyundai Motor's Art Initiative. In addition, she is one of the curatorial assistants for the 2017 Korean Pavilion of the 57th Venice Biennale as well as the editor of the Korean Pavilion's catalogue.

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