One of the earliest Argentine works in Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980, León Ferrari’s Quisiera hacer una estatua (I Would Like to Make a Statue) (c. 1964), anticipates a common impulse among Buenos Aires–based artists in the latter half of the 1960s: to convert a given medium into information transmitted by another. In calligraphic writing that fills the upper fourth of a sheet of paper, Ferrari describes a sculpture he would like to make, a plaster cast of Lyndon B. Johnson with various “torture artifacts” hidden “under the President’s skin...teeth spasms caresses tanks cemeteries chapels broken roads lindens thistles projectiles....” This imaginary sculpture would capture Johnson in the act of “signing papers,” a possible reference to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 10, 1964, which first authorized American military force in Vietnam. As with its fellow examples in Ferrari’s Manuscritos series (1964–65), the individual words in Quisiera hacer una estatua are legible, rendered in a loping cursive across irregular lines. This produces an ongoing delay, as the viewer must effectively translate drawing into writing to read the artist’s words.²

Quisiera hacer una estatua speaks to the challenges of balancing imperatives of political content and formal experimentation in 1960s Argentina. Right-wing military juntas overthrew the two democratically elected presidents, on March 29, 1962, and June 28, 1966, respectively, the latter with the vocal support of the country’s mass media. Artists in the orbit of the theorist Oscar Masotta and the Centro de Artes Visuales at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella responded by politicizing media—both artistic media and the mass media more generally. As members of this milieu began to move to North Atlantic centers at the end of the decade, their explorations were disseminated into an emerging global field of conceptual practices.² To attend to the specific connections and trajectories of the Argentine artists in Transmissions is to diverge somewhat from the exhibition’s staging of parallels or echoes between the ex-peripheries on opposite sides of the Cold War in favor of repeated strategies that can be traced across intimate networks that gradually expanded in reach and influence.

Enveloping Simultaneities: Discontinuity as Structure
At the center of this experimentation was the autodidact Oscar Masotta, who led reading groups on French structuralism and Marshall McLuhan’s media theory with a group of younger artists that included Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, Roberto Jacoby, and Marta Minujín. Conducted in Masotta’s apartment after the university crackdown immediately following the June 1966 coup, these sessions would lead to the production of a short-lived movement: arte de los medios de comunicación (media art). This approach was exemplified by Costa, Escari, and Jacoby’s 1966 Happening para un jabalí difunto (Happening for a Dead Boar), a fictional Happening—one that never really happened—consisting only of its reportage in newspapers and magazines. “What is important,” the artists wrote, is “not what is said; rather the medium itself becomes the subject.”³ For Masotta, this stripped the Happening to its essence: a report about a missed art event, disseminated through the mass media. In his July 21, 1967, lecture “Después del Pop: Nosotros desmaterializamos,” Masotta theorized the media art experiments of the previous year by identifying the mass media as both content and channel for “dematerialized” artworks (prior to the publication of Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler’s
“Dematerialization of Art” essay). “I can affirm,” he recalls, “that there was something within the happening that allowed us to glimpse the possibility of its own negation, and for that reason the avant-garde is built today upon a new type—a new genre—of works.”

Beyond its status as an intervention within existing artistic trends in Buenos Aires, however, it is essential that media art first appeared in the aftermath of the right-wing military coup of June 29, 1966—one welcomed by many of the country’s newspapers and magazines. In this context, media awareness was a political act.

Later that year, Marta Minujín staged an ambitious media work with the Di Tella’s support: Simultaneidad en simultaneidad (Simultaneity in Simultaneity). It consisted of two works in one, only one of which, Simultaneidad envolvente (Enveloping Simultaneity) was executed as planned. Minujín selected 60 representatives of the mass media (entertainers, musicians, programming executives, and several artists and theorists) and gathered them in the Di Tella. Each was placed before a television and a radio, where they were filmed, photographed, and recorded giving “their opinion of the event and the ‘media’ in general.” Eleven days later, the participants returned to the Di Tella to watch and listen to their recorded selves. This demonstration had the effect of mediating individuals who were normally part of the information that the mass media directed at its viewers. Minujín staged or documented this presumed experience of self-reflexivity that the viewer experiences from outside the circuit—as it were, from a mediated distance—to “help them,” in Masotta’s account of the project, “to become conscious of this fact, of this environmental power of the media.”

The following year, 1967, Masotta’s 1965 lectures on Pop art and an edited volume about media art, cannily titled Happenings, were published. (After 1968, he would cease to write about art, devoting the rest of his career to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.) One term that persists in Masotta’s lexicon, from his interest in Pop through to media art, is “discontinuity”—the breaking up of the work of art through various means so as to refuse its reception as a “Gestalt” whole—which he first identified in Warholian seriality. Discontinuity’s popularity in early Argentine conceptualism is evident in the number of works that employ tripartite structures, such as stages or levels, at which the work is experienced, examples of which are currently on view in Transmissions. For 60 metros cuadrados y su información (60 Square Meters and Their Information) (1967), Oscar Bony laid 60 square meters of chain-link fence on the floor of the gallery and had its “information”—film footage of the fence—projected on a nearby wall. Bony writes of “three times” corresponding to “three levels of perception,” anticipating the sequence by which viewers would first notice they were walking on the fence, then look up and see the footage, and then “mentally relate” the image and its referent. At first glance, this seems quite different from Bony’s La Familia Obrera (The Working Class Family) of one year later: a working-class man, his wife, and their child, placed on a pedestal for the duration of an exhibition opening. A recording of ambient sounds from their home was broadcast in the gallery to accompany their physical presence. On the wall there was a text indicating that the artist had agreed to pay the family the wage the father would have received had he been working. This work was shown at the short-lived Experiencias ’68 exhibition at the Di Tella, which ended when the artists destroyed their works and cast them into the street after one project in the show was censored. A closer look at a contact sheet of documentary photographs of La Familia Obrera raises an interesting question. The “family” in some of the images is missing the child and clearly consists of a different man and woman than the one pictured in the framed, canonical image of the work. This suggests that the artist may have hired multiple “families” to stand in for this mediated emblem of authenticity, and recalls Happening para un jabali difunto’s supplanting of the event with the photograph.

A discontinuous, tripartite structure also characterizes David Lamelas’s Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: Visual Image, Text and Audio, which appeared at the Venice Biennale from June 15 to October 15, 1968. An office was installed in the gallery, visible behind glass in a sort of minimalist box, with a live attendant at a desk reading news related to the Vietnam War in different languages as it came off the ANSA news wire via an Olivetti teletype machine (viewers could listen to her via plastic earpieces just outside). An audio recording produced from the initial reading of the news was available to viewers when the live attendant was not.

Figure 2. Oscar Bony. La Familia Obrera (The Working Class Family). 1968. Gelatin silver print. Latin American and Caribbean Fund. © 2015 Oscar Bony. Courtesy of Carola Bony
For MoMA’s reinstallation of the work, the Museum has included two photographs on the desk as well, corresponding to the “visual” level in the title. The original title was to have been Information Complex on a Subject Selected from the Three Levels of the Image (Visual, Writing, Sound), but Lamelas altered it to explicitly mention the war, to be an “office” instead of a “complex,” and to leave the object of the “three levels” ambiguous—it is unclear whether the “office” or the “Vietnam War” is parsed on three. MoMA’s re-creation of the work’s giant white container, which cannot be seen in the original photographs of the Venice installation, makes clear the degree to which Office of Information presented the mass media as a tableau, radically demarcated from the viewer. Where in 60 metros cuadrados y su información Bony provided a tactile experience of walking across the fence (feeling it underfoot as one scrutinized its mediation into film) the viewer of Office of Information touches only the medium itself—an information delivery system—to one’s ear. There is no manifesto or commentary on the incoming data other than the materiality of its presentation, accumulation, and recording. Lamelas reduced Vietnam, the political flashpoint that nearly shut down the Biennale with protests that year, to mere information, running through the system.

This unflinching focus on media supports his claim that his work does “not address intellectual or sociological problems.”

Office of Information makes for a striking contrast with Tucumán Arde (Tucumán is Burning), an emblematic work of 1960s political art that took place in Rosario, Argentina, in November of that same year. The project was initially conceived in the wake of Experiencias ‘68 by a group that included Ferrari and Jacoby, in addition to many Rosario-based artists such as Graciela Carnevale, Eduardo Favario, and Juan Pablo Renzi. Their goal was to abandon the art institution as a requisite platform and more directly integrate art with politics. Working with journalists and labor activists, the Tucumán Arde collaborators designed what they called a circuito sobreinformacional (overinformational circuit), in which a political position would be relentlessly reiterated. In
a union headquarters, the group installed a multimedia “exhibition-condemnation” with a surfeit of evidence as to the destructive consequences of the dictatorship’s economic policies and repression. This project privileged message over self-reflective considerations of media, even as the organizers adapted Masotta’s strategies: concocting a fictional biennial for publicity and unfolding the project in discontinuous stages. *Tucumán Arde* marks a major transition in the Argentine art of this period. Feeling they had reached a limit, many of the participating artists subsequently entered other disciplines—activism, sociology, design—leaving a void filled by artists and institutions operating in an increasingly transnational field.

*Tucumán Arde* presently exists as an archive maintained by Graciela Carnevale, one of the original collaborators. The materials are freely loaned out to exhibitions and online databases to maintain awareness of this increasingly canonical project, which might call attention to MoMA’s acquisition and exhibition of Bony, Lamelas, and Minujín’s works from this period in *Transmissions*. *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* is exhibited as an archive, with the original Di Tella event shown in photographs, seating plans, and notes, while the interactive 60 metros cuadrados and *Office of Information* have been meticulously re-created with period devices (down to an original, if non-functioning, Olivetti telex receiver for the Office). As a result, the essential component of materiality in Bony and Lamelas—tactile and participatory in the former, tantalizingly sealed off in the latter—remains quite palpable, while Minujín’s massive undertaking appears as something we have missed, only recoverable in fragments. One could surely conceive of *Simultaneidad envolvente* being updated for MoMA in 2015, with contemporary players in the New York mass media brought to the Museum on two separate occasions. Likewise, the *Office* has at times been reinstalled with a functioning news feed about ongoing military conflicts such as the last Iraq War, rather than having its information frozen at Vietnam circa 1968. This is all to say that there may yet be options for how these media artworks are exhibited in the future. To “update” them, informationally speaking, would treat them as scripts or scenarios rather than precious archival documents or rigid blueprints for sculptures or participatory installations.

**Friends’ Names: The Transnational Sphere**

At the end of March 1968, Eduardo Costa, one of the original media artists, moved permanently to New York, where he began collaborating closely with a group of artists and writers including Vito Acconci, Scott
Burton, John Perreault, and Hannah Weiner, who were expanding the fields of poetry and writing into other media.\textsuperscript{19} His Names of Friends: Poem for the Deaf-Mute (1969) extends one thread of media art that Costa pursued with Roberto Jacoby in Buenos Aires prior to his departure: audio recordings of what the artists called “oral literature” that attended to the differences between written and spoken language. “Thus,” they wrote, “all the richness of oral language would be recovered for literature (tones of voice, the age and gender of the person speaking, perhaps his social class).”\textsuperscript{20} A silent 8mm film, Names of Friends frames the bottom half of Costa’s face as he recites the names of new colleagues in New York, privileging a sort of visual, non-auditory material—lip-reading—instead of written or spoken language. The work echoes his critique, during his early years in New York, of both authorship and originality amid the collaboration and sharing of ideas that typified conceptualist circles. In an event titled Anti-Expressionism at Hunter College on May 5, 1969, a series of performers, each announcing him- or herself as Costa, recited the artist’s biography. In this same year, he proposed “a piece that is essentially the same as a piece made by any of the first conceptual artists, dated two years earlier than the original and signed by somebody else.”\textsuperscript{21}

In the late 1960s, New York served as a cosmopolitan center that brought international artists into contact, as embodied by Kynaston McShine’s Information show at MoMA in 1970, an international survey of Conceptual artists that included Minujín and Lamelas in its program of screenings. Information featured Alejandro Puente’s Todo vale. Colores primarios y secundarios llevados al blanco (Everything goes. Primary and secondary colors brought up to white) (1968–70), which studied the lightening of primary and secondary colors in different painterly mediums: pigments, liquids, canvases, and diagrams. Here painting was anything but; the artist turned upon it as yet one more system to be broken into parts and comprehended as a now quasi-scientific structure. Information shared artists—Luis Camnitzer, Grupo Frontera (Inès Gross, Mercedes Estevez, Adolfo Brunowsky), and Liliana Porter—with Experiencias ‘69, which took place between September 5 and 14, 1969, and was one of the final exhibitions at the Di Tella prior to its closure.\textsuperscript{22} A forgotten iteration of the contemporary art showcase, Experiencias ‘69 intermingled artists who continued working in Argentina post-1968 with transnational practitioners such as Lea Lublin. As Isabel Plante has reported, while based in Paris after 1964, Lublin traveled back to Latin America several times, producing participatory environments in Argentina and Chile that continued to interrogate systems of communication. Projects such as Fluvio subtunal, a series of participatory “zones” installed in a subterranean tunnel linking the Argentine cities of Santa Fe and Paraná, reprised Minujín’s early sen-sorial environments, such as La menesunda (1965) (with Rubén Santantonín).\textsuperscript{23} Lublin’s Dedans le musée (Pénétration d’images) (Inside the Museum [Penetration of Images]) (1971–95), speaks to her drier institutional interventions of this period. Reproductions of canonical paintings are projected onto penetrable plastic curtains dividing exhibition galleries, reorienting both their physical and ideological positions in the museum.

The Argentine-born Porter and German-Uruguayan Camnitzer worked closely as members of the New York Graphic Workshop, which, in a fascinating transposition of New Left discourse into the field of art, aimed to elevate the print from its status as a traditionally subordinated medium, while also participating in the burgeoning networks of mail art.\textsuperscript{24} Their work of the late 1960s recalls Buenos Aires conceptualism’s mediation of artistic mediums, as in Porter’s prints in which lines are produced by indexical images of folded or crumpled paper. Camnitzer favors a wry sense of humor in invoking the history of representation, as in Horizon (1968), in which the word “HORIZON” is positioned on and vivisected by the central horizontal axis on a blank piece of paper. These contemplative studies of language, materials, and representation are certainly as subtle and thoughtful as their counterparts in Buenos Aires, but something is sacrificed that was central to Bony, Lamelas, Minujín, and others in the orbit of Masotta and the Di Tella circa 1966–67: the mass media,
intended to amplify and maximize audiences rather than imprint the artist’s solitary thinking in the studio setting. The possibilities of mail art served to pry open that closed circuit, however, by sending works of art through semi-private networks of likeminded artists, as in *Diagonal Cero* and *Hexágono ’71*, the innovative publications of Edgardo Antonio Vigo, who remained based in the smaller Argentine city of La Plata throughout the era. As Zanna Gilbert has amply demonstrated, “translocal” networks of mail art would keep Latin American artists in contact throughout the turbulent 1970s, with its panoply of repressive regimes with both left- and right-wing ideologies across Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Similar questions of scope would attend the experiments of Jorge Glusberg’s Centro de Arte y Comunicación, which supplanted the Di Tella as the major platform for contemporary art in 1970s Buenos Aires. Dubbing his artists’ approach *arte de sistemas*, or systems art, Glusberg reprised the emphasis on communication that defined his predecessors, while extending CAYC’s reach into a global field of conceptualism and mail art that would unite artists across Latin America in traveling group shows, while extending networks to Yugoslavia and the Soviet Bloc. In *Transmissions*, his name appears on the Polish artist Ewa Partum’s *Autobiography*, demonstrating the Center’s remarkable reach. The Chilean artist Juan Downey’s epochal *Video Trans Americas* project (1973–76), for which the artist juxtaposed 14 examples of video footage from travels in various countries within the Americas atop an outline map of the region, realized a vision of the artwork as peripatetic network via video that accords with Glusberg’s internationalism and interest in new media. For Downey, working as an expatriate in New York, the medium itself, and by extension its possible appearances as information transmitted by other media, was no longer the focus of attention. Instead, the social—literally, examples of different societies within the same hemisphere—took center stage as both object and potential agent of transmission.

Daniel Quiles is an Assistant Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he teaches courses on the theory and history of postwar art of the Americas. His research has appeared in academic journals such as Art Journal and ARTMargins, and he is currently writing a book manuscript titled *Ghost Messages: Oscar Masotta and Argentine Conceptualism*. He is also an art critic who has written for Artforum, Art in America, and DIS Magazine, among other publications.

—

Organized by Stuart Comer, Chief Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art; Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography; and Christian Rattemeyer, The Harvey S. Shipley Miller Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints; with Giampaolo Bianconi and Martha Joseph, Curatorial Assistants, Department of Media and Performance Art.


Support for the exhibition is provided by the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund.

Special thanks to Jill and Peter Kraus.
For more examples of the Manuscritos series, as well as Cuadro escrito, his best-known ink drawing from this period, see Andrea Giunta, ed., Leon Ferrari: Retrospectiva. Obras 1954–2004, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Recoleta, 2004), 120-123 & 287-295

My focus in the first half of this essay thus dovetails with the “Oscar Masotta and the Art of Media” section in MoMA’s book of primary texts from the Argentine avant-garde. See Inés Katzenstein, ed., Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 154-255.

Listen, Here, Now!, 225

Ibid, 213

The other half of Simultaneidad en simultaneidad was to have been an Argentine installment of the 3 Country Happening, a collaboration with Allan Kaprow and Wolf Vostell, who were planning to execute simultaneous happenings in New York and Berlin, respectively. In the end, however, the satellite television equipment that Minujín had hoped to use to synchronize these events and broadcast them in Buenos Aires did not function. She resorted to showing documentary footage of the other artists’ works. Minujín’s component, Invasión instantánea (Instantaneous invasion), was to have transmitted the footage of the other artists’ happenings as well as close-ups of the artist’s face directly into the homes (hence this idea of “invasion”) of 120 people via radio, television, telephone, and telegraph.

“Marta Minujín, en la línea de McLuhan, piensa que los medios de información ‘ambientan’ a las audiencias, y que en su propio trabajo y mediante el uso simultáneo de medios de información diferentes—radio, televisión, telegramas—ella no haría sino ‘señalar’ a las audiencias, es decir, ayudarlas a tomar conciencia de ese hecho, de ese poder ambientacional de los medios.” My translation. The verb “ambientar” does not have a proper equivalent in English—it is a verb made from the word for “background” or “environment,” so as a verb it literally means to posit oneself as an environment for another. This seems to correspond to McLuhan’s notion that new media “massage” their users in such a way that the user is unaware of the mediation.


Ibid, 180. Herrera notes that Bony himself later claimed that his payment was double the normal wage, but a number of critical sources from the period claim that it was equivalent.

This observation is credited to Niko Vicario, who gave an excellent presentation on La Familia Obrera at the 2012 LASA conference in San Francisco. The contact sheet can be seen in the second edition of John King, El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta (Buenos Aires: Asunto Impreso Ediciones, 2007).

Office of Information recalls Jacoby’s Mensaje en el Di Tella, included in the same Experiencias ’68 exhibition as La Familia Obrera a month earlier in Buenos Aires. Both works used telex machines to introduce incoming news feed—political realities mediated and transformed into information—into the space of the exhibition.


The artist claims that the original featured photographs arranged in different ways from day to day, although they are not visible in the existing documentation of the Venice installation.

The biennial that year was met with student protests, artist boycotts, and threats of occupied pavilions. A large police presence remained on hand to assure that the event would open “at all costs.” The majority of the Italian artists ultimately did not participate. Chiara di Stefano, “The 1968 Biennale. Boycotting the Exhibition: An Account of Three Extraordinary Days,” in Clarissa Ricci, ed., Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale (Milan: Et al., 2010), 130-133


See Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde: Vanguardia artística y política en el ’68 argentino (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Ciervo por Asalto, 2000)


Eduardo Costa and Roberto Jacoby, “First Hearing of Works Created with Oral Language,” in Listen, Here, Now!, 253


