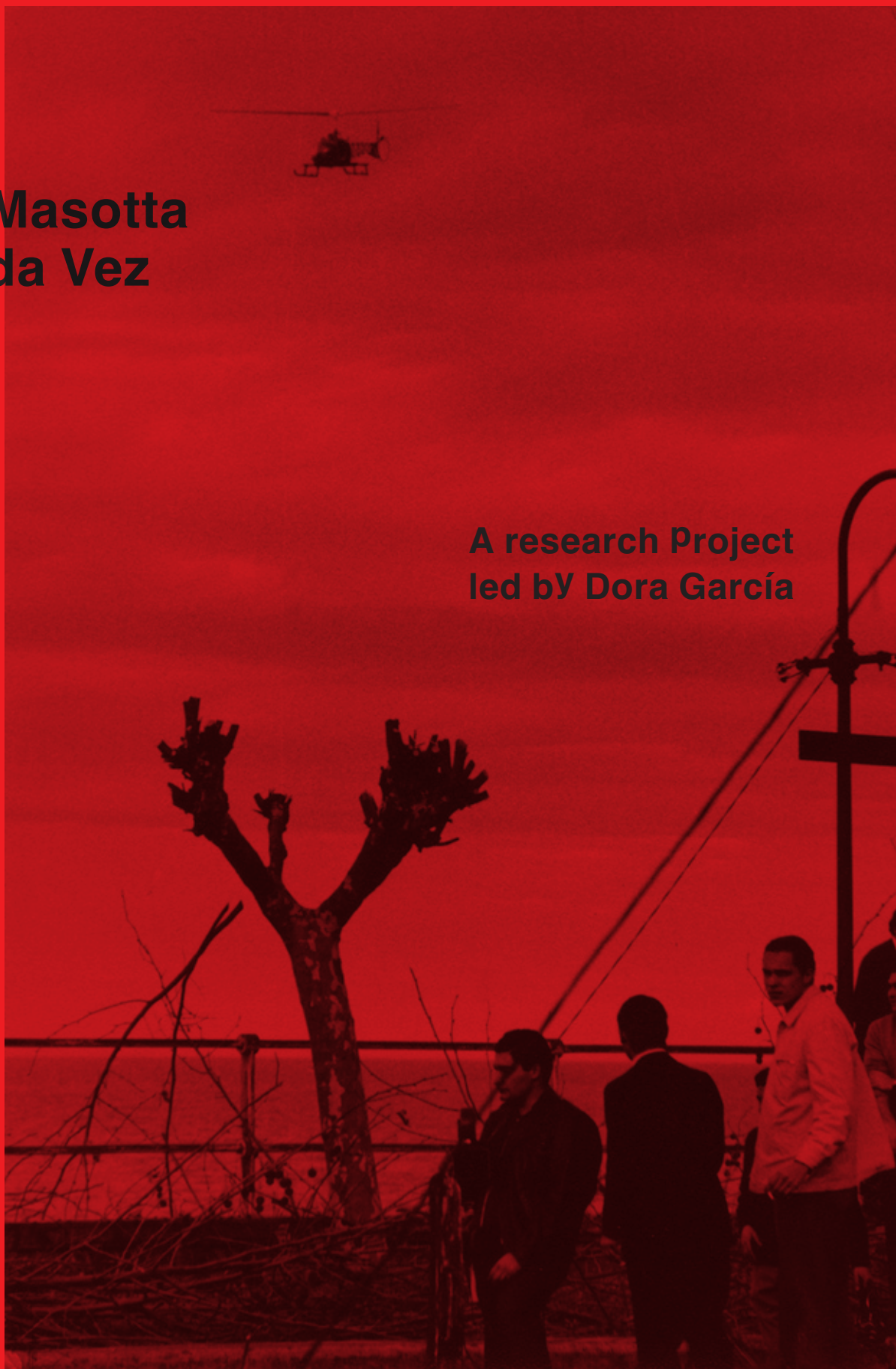


Oscar Masotta Segunda Vez

A research Project
led by Dora García



Cahier No. 1

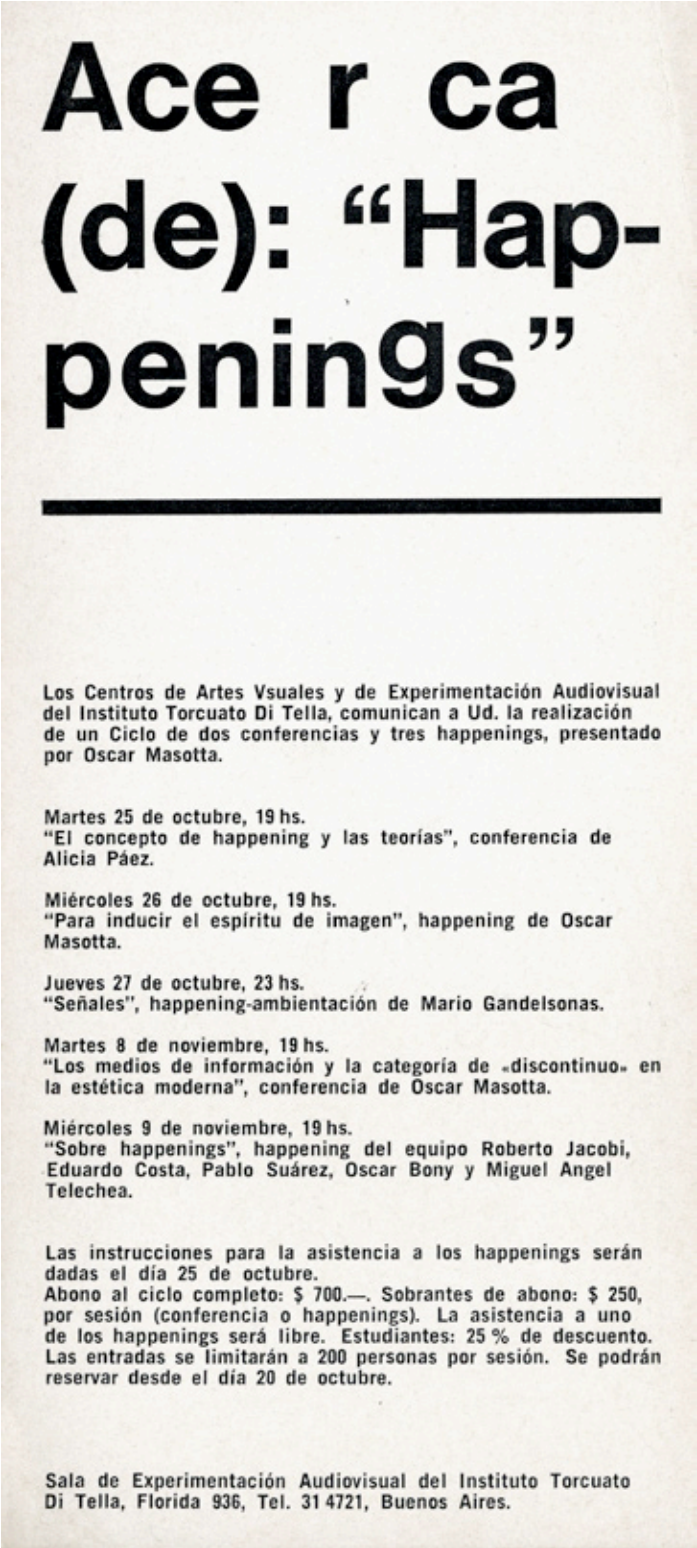
Oscar Masotta
Segunda Vez

Cahier No. 1

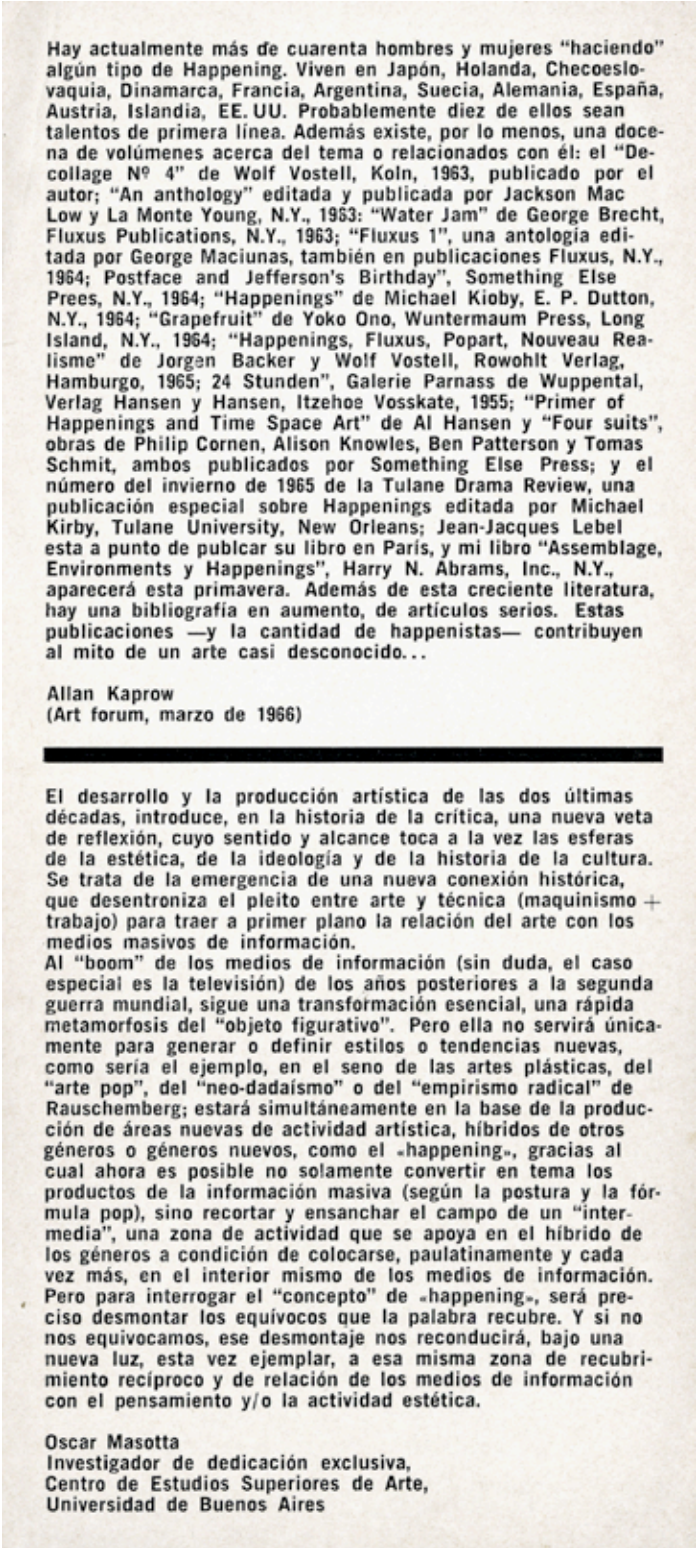
A research Project
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Original flyer for the cycle of happenings and lectures *Acerca de “Happenings”* (About “Happenings”), 1966. Source: Archivos Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina



Introduction: How Masotta Was Repeated

Dora García

To tell the truth, I don’t exactly remember when was the first time I heard Masotta’s name. And so I have decided that the name first came to me during a conversation I had with the much-admired Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia, whom I met, after much anticipation, for a public conversation at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, in March 2014. Piglia mentioned Masotta in passing, as someone he thought might interest me since, like me, he was interested in performance, psychoanalysis, and politics.

A curious thing happened during that public conversation. As a token of admiration, I read to Piglia a passage from his novel *Artificial Respiration*, and he could not recognize his own writing. When I finished, he said something like: “Not bad what you just read. Did you write it?” The audience, overjoyed, clapped. Here’s the passage I read:

“Those letters? They are not addressed to me. I am not sure, sometimes, whether I perhaps am not dictating them myself. Nevertheless,” he said, “there they are, on that table, don’t you see them?” That bundle of letters—did I see them?—on the table. “Don’t touch them,” he said. “There is someone who intercepts the messages that reach me. An expert,” he said, “a man named Arocena. Francisco José Arocena. He reads letters. Just like me. He reads letters that are not addressed to him. Like me, he tries to decipher them. He tries,” he said, “like me to decipher the secret message of history.”¹

A few months later, when I learnt that Masotta had died in Barcelona, not far from my house, when I read some of his texts and saw that, yes, Piglia was right, he was the perfect intersection between performance, politics and psychoanalysis; and yes, when I learned that he treated performance (happening) as an act of transgression, and dematerialization as the thing to be done after Pop; then, yes, I thought I had intercepted something. A letter that was not meant for me but had nevertheless come my way, a *found object*, in the technical sense: I had not looked for it, but I did find it.

What followed from there was the usual process of study—meticulous, thorough—until we, for by this point it was not just me but a team that was working on this, were able to fill in an application for a grant, which we got and allowed us to make a film, gather texts for a book, create a website, translate some of Masotta’s texts ... All to bring

to the forefront Masotta’s work, which was totally unknown to us until a couple of years ago, and which we just happened to stumble upon, but which completely swept us off our feet ...

I had decided from early on that an important part of the research work would go to filming three happenings Masotta had organized in October 1966. At that time, we had no documentation of them, no clear photographs, no films. There was only Masotta’s after the fact but very thorough and detailed description of the happenings, or anti-happenings, all of which took place in October 1966. He describes and discusses *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter), *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen* (To Induce the Spirit of the Image), and *El mensaje fantasma* (The Ghost Message) in “After Pop, We Dematerialize” and in “I Committed a Happening,” both published in 1967. Those descriptions would allow us to script the happenings and make them happen again. The idea was to get as close as possible to the original way of preparing, coordinating, and performing, and that means that we would make a documentary of the repetition of those happenings without rehearsing them, without the possibility of playing for the camera, without the possibility of redoing anything that might not seem right. And that is what we did.

In September 2015, we repeated *El helicóptero* as one of the opening events for Tabakalera, a new art center in San Sebastian, Spain.² There was a real audience of about eighty to a hundred people, an actress, a helicopter pilot, stewards and stewardesses to lead the audience, a drum player, a theater, an open landscape. It happened.

Later on, when Cloe Masotta, Oscar Masotta’s daughter, found some original pictures of the happenings in Buenos Aires, it was uncanny to see how closely they resembled the images taken in San Sebastian almost fifty years later.

In June 2016, and with the support, advice and help of the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, we repeated one of Masotta’s most controversial happenings, *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen*. It consisted of confronting a contemporary art audience with a group of twenty “old” *lumpen* proletarians who were played by actors and who stood—under a violent white light and the shrill sound of an electronic soundtrack—facing the audience for one hour. It happened—even if the electronic soundtrack was rather pleasant: composed for the occasion by artist Jan Mech, it was actually re-invented, taking into account the time (1966) of the original electronic composition, because we have no notion of how the original one sounded. And even if the white light, due to technical limitations at Torcuato Di Tella, was far from violent. Still, it happened. And, to our surprise, it produced a pretty negative response from the audience: some thought it was too violent, others that it was not violent enough, and some thought we were profiteers who came from “the Metropoli” to suck dry Masotta’s memory like vampires—even though, for decades, no one had done much about Masotta³ or, and especially, about his artistic work. Ultimately, though, the big question was: why repeat Masotta?

In French, the word *répétition* means *rehearsal* as well. Allan Kaprow, when he introduced the format that would be known as happenings—something that happens, a “new art form involving ordinary people, ordinary time, and everyday spaces”⁴—warned us about the impossibility of *repeating* a happening. Kaprow’s main problem with repetition is that it

immediately smacked of “art,” in the sense that repetition “improved” a performance, and for him a happening/performance was, precisely, an action that could not be repeated or perfected. He says: “Perform the happening once only. Repeating it makes it stale, reminds you of theater and does the same thing as rehearsing: it forces you to think that there is something to improve on. Sometimes it’d be nearly impossible to repeat anyway—imagine trying to get copies of your old love letters, in order to see the rain wash off those tender thoughts. Why bother?” Kaprow equates happening with reality. It is not fiction, and as such, cannot be repeated: reality does not repeat itself.

But if we had to repeat it, how *identical to the original* can, or should, that repetition be? If the repeated action is staged in a theater, which is a representational, protected environment, what are the possibilities for changes, for unforeseen elements to change the performance? And if the action is not staged in a theater but happens instead in a public or semi-public space, what are the possibilities for identity and change in that case? We are tempted here to go pre-Socratic and say with Heraclitus: “No man can step into the same river twice.”

How about scripted actions? How about repetition in relation to a protocol or a score? Could we still speak of original and repetition then? We could say that all performances of a musical score are equally original iterations of that piece, and no performance is more “real” or “authentic” than another one: *the piece only exists when it is performed, there is no original that is repeated*. A score is written thinking of endless activation, of endless repetitions that never quite fully coincide with each other.

What about a text as a score? That is what we dealt with here: Oscar Masotta’s description of a situation, *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen*, in “I Committed a Happening.”

A situation, according to Guy Debord, is something that can be repeated and yet is also unique. “What is a constructed situation?” Agamben asks, and proceeds to answer it as follows: “A definition contained in the first issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* states that this is a moment in life, concretely and deliberately constructed through the collective organization of a unified milieu and through a play of events.”⁵ Agamben disconnects the idea of “constructed situation” from the dialectic between art and life that governed avant-garde movements of the twentieth-century, thus detaching “constructed situation” from the realm of “art,” that is, of “aestheticism.” He keeps using the two terms of the dialectic, art and life, construction and life, a dialectic that is also at play in the expression, “constructed situation,” which combines two opposites: “construction” and “situation,” life and art, fiction and reality. Debord’s concept of *situation*, as described by Agamben, hints paradoxically to the concept of happening by Kaprow: *something that can be repeated and yet is also unique*.

Following Agamben’s discussion of Guy Debord, repetition is not the return of the identical, since it is not “the same as such that returns”; what returns is “the *possibility* of what was.” Repetition “restores the possibility of what was, renders it possible anew.” Memory, Agamben suggests, is what restores possibility to the past:⁶ by making repetition possible, by allowing the perception of something present as past, and, inversely, the perception of the past as present: *déjà vu* and *haunting*.

Similarly paradoxical are Kierkegaard’s reflections in *Repetition* (1843), whose title in Danish, *Gjentagelsen*,

literally means “the taking back.” In Kierkegaard, repetition relates to movement. Repetition (taking back, movement) and recollection (*anamnesis*, the recollection of past lives, memory, standstill) are the same movement, but in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas real repetition is recollected forward. Memory moves backward and repetition moves forward, the *past* of recollection and the *now* of repetition. Repetition is a paradoxical term: “that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but precisely this, the fact that it has been, makes repetition something new.”⁷ This means that the privileged *now* has always already *been* (past), and what has *been* could always *become* (future). Repetition is a *nonconcept* of “a strange instantaneous nature, it is this something patched between movement and standstill and that, following logic, does not exist in any given time.”⁸

Coming down to simpler language: a text as score. When we re-constitute a situation (call it repetition, re-enactment, activating, replaying, or, simply, performing), what kinds of tools do we use? Most probably, a written protocol, like a score or a script, which precedes (perhaps) the situation and guides it, or a description that is subsequent to the situation it describes. Sometimes, it is hard to tell what is what when it comes to this “historical input”; famously, the most accurate and complete description of Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* is the work of someone who never saw the performance.

However, we could say that this written information is the spine of the repetition, the part that (perhaps?) stays identical, and upon which we might practice an exegesis, an interpretation, an adaptation. This written information may be what Kierkegaard means by memory (standstill, recollection), which he distinguishes from repetition (action, forward movement).

And the act of interpreting this written information is already a “placing in the present,” a “today,” since we are interpreting now. This interpretation will inevitably be different from one we might have made five years ago and from that of others fifty years ago. But we are not repeating yet; we are just reading.

As Borges used to say: if you tell me how people will read in the future, I will tell you what kind of literature will exist in the future.⁹ This is obvious, of course: by the act of reading (interpreting, understanding) we make present, and therefore we definitely modify that piece of memory that is the score, the protocol, or the description.

One could say, pushing it, that the act of interpretation/reading places the situation-to-be-repeated in a no-time, an achronic moment, almost a mythical time. Where each act of interpretation/reading/adaptation makes everything present again, where death does not exist ...

Except: this *reading projected towards a repetition* does not happen in a vacuum. Next to the written protocol (memory), and to interpretation (placing in the present time, we and now), we have the actual action of repetition, the action repeated (forward movement, according to Kierkegaard). And the action repeated happens within a historical and social frame, where author, participants, audience or captive audience, belong. This historical and social frame has something to do with class, economics, education, the current political state of things, language, place, and generally speaking, context. How much of this do we let enter into our repetition? Can we even control that?

And how does all this—past (memory), no-time-eternal-present (reading), future (repetition)—affect the “original” piece, how does it modify the source? And is this good for “the source”?

One would guess it is good. As artists, we dream that our books will be read, our theater pieces and choreographies performed, our music played: *we want to affect the future*. And we want our work to be *transformed by the future*, that is to say, we want it to remain present. There is no greater compliment than what Fritz Senn said of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*: “we are still trying to be *Finnegans Wake*’s contemporaries.” Maybe we are still trying to be Masotta’s contemporaries.

To read Freud. In his 1914 text “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,” Freud argues that repeating happens instead of remembering. The purpose of the repetition is to make the traumatic event that we refuse to remember happen again and again, so that it exists in a protracted present.

Repeating is a form of making present, of making something happen again.

So repetition is a form of catharsis—this is well-known, of course. And also of atonement. Or of repair. How many thousands of years are behind this idea? A wrong happened and must be set straight. We re-play it on our mind, a moviola with which to repair the wrong. Here we have haunted houses, ghosts, penitents, punishments, penalties, penances. Poetic justice too: the justice that did not happen in history can at last happen now, in fiction. Fiction can happen as a place of atonement for reality. Yes, fiction as a sort of heaven for the hell of reality.

This is at the heart of the famous *esprit d’escalier*. This French expression, commonly used in English as well to describe the experience of thinking of a good or witty comeback only when it’s too late, pinpoints the desperate desire to replay the situation so as to make it possible for us to deliver the witty, crushing, comeback we have just thought of. And, of course, to punch back the one who deserved to be punched, to take back the awful remark that broke a

relationship, to say a proper farewell to someone we know now we will never meet again. Repetition, playback, repair wrongs, pay debts, give what’s due.

This is all true, but the concept of psychoanalysis we are going through refers, rather, to a form of the return of the repressed. Yes, this wonderful concept. The more a memory is repressed, making its recall impossible, the more aggressively it finds its way out by means of the compulsive repetition of an action. In this case as well, repeating is a form of making present, of making something happen again. The greater the resistance to remember, the more violent the compulsion to *act out*, so that repetition replaces memory. *Segunda Vez*. Second Time Around. Déjà vu. In monotheistic religions, the Second Coming (*Parousia*) is the sign for the end of times. The prophecy of the Second Coming is as well a *cancellation of chronology*. Each moment is the moment of the Messiah’s arrival: it has happened already, it has been prophesized, it is caught in an eternal loop of happening again.

Nietzsche puts it this way in 1881: “And in every one of these cycles of human life there will be one hour where, for the first time one man, and then many, will perceive the mighty thought of the eternal recurrence of all things: and for mankind this is always the hour of Noon.”

But since, according to what we said when discussing psychoanalysis, the ritual acting out of the myth (or the repetitive acting out of the forgotten memory) implies a reactualization of that primordial traumatic event, then it follows that the actor, the one who acts, is magically projected *in illo tempore*: he or she becomes contemporary with the myth/the forgotten memory. It is not a return to the past but, rather, a projection into a moment of a strange instantaneous nature, patched between movement and standstill and that, following logic, does not exist in any given time.¹⁰

A suspension of time: that is how Masotta was repeated. This repetition—as we shall see in a future publication—comes from a desire to restore a memory that has been (a little) forgotten: Southern Conceptualisms¹¹ in exile on the eve of a political catastrophe (Argentina 1976–1982).

- Notes
- 1

Ricardo Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*, trans. Daniel Balderston (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 44.
- 2

In the framework of the exhibition *Moving Image Contours: Points for a Surrounding Movement*, curated by Soledad Gutiérrez and Anna Manubens.
- 3

With the very notable exception of the excellent research work carried out by Ana Longoni.
- 4

Allan Kaprow, “How to Make a Happening,” available at <http://www.primaryinformation.org/product/allan-kaprow/>
- 5

Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 78.
- 6

Giorgio Agamben, “Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2002), p. 315–16.
- 7

Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, in *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M. G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 19.
- 8

Arne Melberg suggests that repetition is a “nonconcept,” since it exists only in what Constantine Constantius (i.e., Kierkegaard) describes as a state of “nonbeing,” and that makes the link to the passage from Plato’s *Parmenides* just cited. See Arne Melberg, “Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term,” in *Diacritics* 20/3 (Autumn 1990): 75.
- 9

I would like to thank Nora Joung for pointing out the relevance of Jorge Luis Borges’ short story, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” to this project. And I feel that the following passage is especially pertinent, in several senses, to the repetition of the happening *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen*, and so deserves to be cited at length: “It is a revelation to compare the *Don Quixote* of Pierre Menard with that of Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote the following (Part I, Chapter IX): ‘... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.’ This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the ‘ingenius layman’ Miguel de Cervantes, is mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes: ‘... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.’ History, the *mother* of truth!—the idea is staggering. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as a *delving into* reality but as the *very fount* of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is not ‘what happened’; it is what we *believe* happened. The final phrases—*exemplar and adviser to the present*, and *the future’s counselor*—are brazenly pragmatic.” See Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Viking Press, 1998), p. 94.

- 10

“Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique—the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution. That technique, requiring infinite patience and concentration, encourages us to read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Aeneid*, to read Mme. Henri Bachelier’s *Le jardin du Centaure* as though it were written by Mme. Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the calmest book with adventure. Attributing the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce—is that not sufficient renovation of those faint spiritual admonitions?” Borges, “Pierre Menard,” p. 95.
- 11

The network Southern Conceptualisms is an international platform for collective production, reflection, and setting in common of a political position. It was founded in late 2007 by a group of researchers concerned with the need for a political intervention into those processes that have sought to neutralize the critical potential of a set of conceptual practices that had taken place in Latin America in the 1970s. See more at: <https://redcsur.net>

Original flyer for the happening *El helicóptero*, 1966. Source: Archivos Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

EL HELICOPTERO

happening
de Oscar Masotta
Coordinación General: Juan Risuleo
Cita: 14 hs. en el
Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936
Partida: 14,30 hs. desde el
Instituto Torcuato Di Tella

Lugar:	Estación Anchorena	Lugar:	Theatron
Mujer del helicóptero:	Beatriz Matar	Bailarina “en vivo”:	Nacha Guevara
Piloto del helicóptero:	Luis Losada	Batería:	Louis Moholo
Acomodado-ras:	Irene Maulnes Virginia Simova Lila Bonis	Guitarras:	Miguel Angel Telechea Pedro López de Tejada
Conductores:	Manuel Arias Roberto Richetti José Copasti	Acomodado-ras:	Liliana Fernández Blanco Carola Leyton Patricia López de Tejada
Fotógrafo previsto:	Juan Lepes	Conductores:	Luis Morando José Balotti Salvador Arias
		Hombre del proyector:	Osvaldo Vacca
		Fotógrafo previsto:	Carmen Miranda
		Cámara cine-matográfica:	Oscar Bony
		Vestuario de las acomoda-doras:	María del Carmen Spingola
		Realización de vestuario:	María del Carmen Spingola Laura Linares

Auspiciado por el Centro de Artes Visuales y el Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella

EL HELICOPTERO

happening
de Oscar Masotta
Octubre de 1966
por Dora García
12 de septiembre de 2015
Coordinación General: Ander Sistiaga
y Víctor Iriarte
Cita: sábado, 12 de septiembre, 13.30 hs. en
Tabakalera, Duque de Mandas 32,
20012 Donostia-San Sebastián
Salida: 14 hs. desde Tabakalera

Lugar:	Itziar	Lugar:	Teatro Modelo Zarautz
Mujer del helicóptero:	Itsaso Arana	Bailarina “en vivo”:	Josune Azurmendi
Coordinadores:	Leire Egaña Mikel Villaescusa	Coordinadores:	Gerard Ortin Klamer Alana Hernández
Cámara 1:	Vincent Pinckaerts	Batería:	Alejandro López Allende
Cámara 2:	Raquel Rodríguez	Cámara 3:	Jesús María Palacios
Sonido 1:	Bruno Schweisguth	Cámara 4:	Iratí Gorostidi
		Cámara 5:	Mikel Zatarain
		Sonido 2:	Iñigo Azkue Etxabe

Auspiciado por el centro de cultura contemporánea Tabakalera San Sebastián dentro de la exposición “Contornos de lo audiovisual. Puntos para un movimiento que rodea.”

Flyer for the repetition of Oscar Masotta’s happening *El helicóptero*, repeated by Dora García in San Sebastian, 2015, as part of the exhibition *Moving Image Contours: Points for a Surrounding Movement*, at the Tabakalera, San Sebastian. Curated by Soledad Gutiérrez and Anna Manubens.



Rereading Masotta

Nora Joun9

I recently reread Jorge Luis Borges short story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote.” The text is styled as an appreciation for a French symbolist poet who set out to become the author of Cervantes’ novel: Menard “did not want to compose *another Quixote*, which is surely easy enough—he wanted to compose *the Quixote*. Nor, surely, need one have to say that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intentions of *copy-ing* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.”¹

Menard’s “*visible*” oeuvre is listed in the first part of the text, and consists of an output dominated by paraphrases, translations, negotiations, a transposition into Alexandrines of Valéry’s *Cimitière marin*, interpretations, and pastiches. The Frenchman’s “*subterranean*” work, on the other hand, was the undertaking of the task of authoring *Don Quixote*. By the end of his life, Menard had succeeded in writing two chapters of the Quixote as well of parts of a third. Menard’s initial method, which he eventually rejected as “too easy,” had been to learn “Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget European history from 1602–1918—*be* Miguel de Cervantes” (p. 91). Eventually, he settled instead on another course: to arrive at the Quixote being Pierre Menard, accepting the psychological and intellectual strain that that entailed. The narrator proposes at the very end of the text that Menard has enriched the art of reading by means of the new technique that consists of “deliberate anachronism” and “fallacious attribution” (p. 95). This technique, the narrator claims, encourages us, for example, to read the *Odyssey* as if it came after the *Aeneid* and to attribute the *Imitatio Christi* to Joyce or Céline.

Pierre Menard is often viewed as a text that points to the role of the reader in the production of meaning. Beatriz Sarlo writes in her reading of Borges that meaning “is constructed in a frontier space where reading and interpretation confront the text and its (always ambiguous) relationship to any claim to literal meaning and objectivity.”² A reading by fallacious attribution confuses the lines between reading and authoring. For Sarlo, “the process of enunciation modifies any statement.” She elaborates: “this principle destroys and at the same time guarantees originality as a paradoxical value which is related to ‘enunciation’: it comes from the activity of writing and reading, not tied to words but to words in a context.” As a result, the productivity of reading becomes a demonstration of “the impossibility of repetition.”³

This is where Borges’ short story became an interesting, albeit confusing, lens with which to look at Dora García’s repetition of Oscar Masotta’s 1966 happening

Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen (To Induce the Spirit of the Image) at MUAC-UNAM in Mexico City, in March 2017 (It had been previously repeated at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires in June 2016). Borges’ perplexing theorization of the nature of reading and authorship is of course something quite different from a happening. If repetition is impossible with a text, then it must be doubly impossible with happenings. Even taking into account the contingency of a text’s subjective reader, the very nature of a happening dictates that it depends in part on chance, or luck. Everything is dependent on the success of the logistics: moving people from here to there, communication, the memorization of monologues or scores, the testing of lights, sound, props.

For the audience, if they can rightfully be called that, a confusion concerning their role was the first thing instilled upon entering the space where the happening took place. The punctual witnessed Michelangelo Miccolis (as Oscar Masotta) calling out names from a list and handing out envelopes of money to the actors hired to be the lumpen proletariat that the audience had gathered to see. Backstage transactions are usually there because audiences need not be bothered with or involved in them: they pay for the aesthetic experience, not to see actors getting paid for their labor. Likewise, audiences don’t usually overhear the instructions given to the actors. But this wasn’t theater, as Miccolis/Masotta underlined.

Miccolis/Masotta then turned his attention to us, the non-actors/audience, and after welcoming us told us about the origin of the piece: apparently, a piece by La Monte Young he’d seen in New York City. “I do not hesitate to confess the origin,” he said. But, surely, Allan Kaprow’s name would seem to come more readily to mind in this context? A confession that is simultaneously a smoke screen, or even a fallacious attribution of sorts, obscuring what we might have assumed to have been the main influence of the happening. Miccolis/Masotta continued to reassure the audiences of their safety, inadvertently, or not so inadvertently, implying that the *grupo lumpen* represented a potential danger (something the rich surrounded by the poor admit to thinking each time they lock their car doors at a red light), and further implied by their position onstage: standing in line under interrogatory light, they look like they are at a police line-up. Miccolis/Masotta assured us, though, that the situation was under control and, pointing out the twelve fire extinguishers ready to hand, that he’d even thought of the possible eventuality of a fire. If the audience was in any doubt as to whether or not these were actually functional, Miccolis/Masotta emptied one of them in an absurd demonstration, like a schoolboy’s illustration of Chekov’s gun.

“Then” the happening “began.” The actors huddled onstage. Was the audience still an audience? I’ve rarely, if ever, felt a gaze more commanding than those coming from the actors panning over or fixating on the audience, and rarely have I felt more scrutinized. The most relaxed parts of the audience sat down on the floor of the room, as if preparing to watch a movie. Others scrutinized one another, as if looking for clues, or as if wondering whether the others saw what they were seeing, if they reacted the same way, if they were read the same things into what they saw.

I was familiar with the “score,” Masotta’s after-the-fact description of the original happening. But the description of a happening is not a happening. And familiarity with the “score” did not prepare me for the affect stirred in me

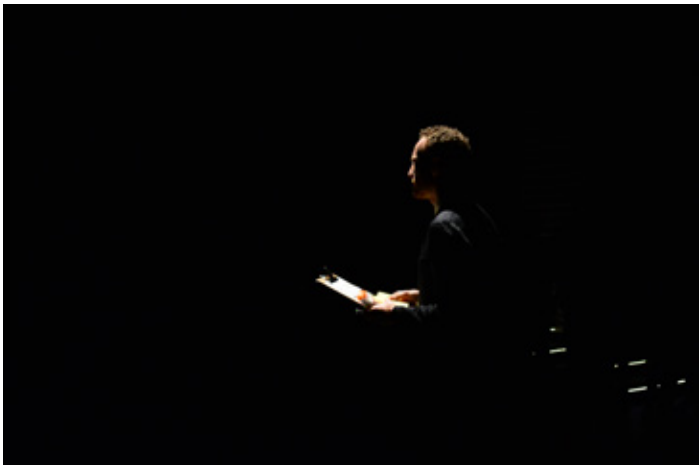
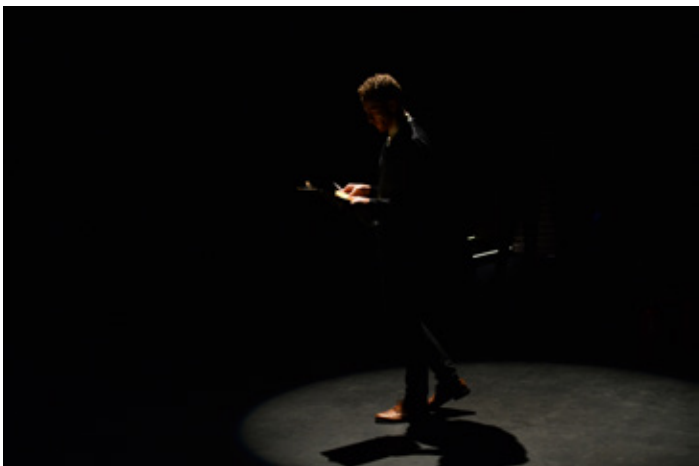
during the hour I spent watching the lumpen watching us. To see the happening, to experience it, we had to repeat it, make it happen again. Would that be reading or authoring?

Was it even a repetition? One audience member, who had been a friend of Masotta’s and who experienced *Para inducir* in ’66 pointed out that, in contrast to this March day at MUAC-UNAM, no chairs or water had been offered to the performers during the original happening. In other words, the 2017 *Para inducir* was Masotta *light*. I’m in no position to disagree. However, fifty years have passed since the first *Para inducir* took place, and the deliberate anachronism enhances the fact that the lumpen are *still* lumpen and art audiences are *still* largely from an entirely different stratum than the people they’re looking at. Grievous economic differences have not vanished, and exoticization, or indeed vilification, of otherness, be it cultural, economical or national, is very much alive. The happening didn’t seem dated. Not in its rhetoric, not in its “look,” and certainly not in content.

We could have imagined, looking at *Para inducir* and looking around us, that it would resonate just as powerfully in 2017. But we wouldn’t have known just how curiously contemporary the happening could be, or how insistently it would address our time, if we hadn’t endeavored to make it happen again, to repeat it, to construct a possibility of seeing it. And to do that, we had to author it.

Notes

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Viking Press, 1998), p. 91. All other references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 32.
- 3 Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 33.



Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen, a happening by Oscar Masotta (1966), repeated by Dora García in March 2017, as part of the exhibition *Oscar Masotta: Theory as Action*, at MUAC-UNAM, México DF. Photos: Periscopio, MUAC-UNAM. © Dora García.

Remembering for Others

Victoria Durnak

My son turned one in February 2017. I love being a mother, but one thing terrifies me: that I am responsible for keeping the memories of these early years, as research shows that mostly we don’t remember anything from before our third year.

So I keep a diary. I make a memory book, documenting important events in my son’s life. Cold facts such as the headlines on the day he was born, the price of butter, flour, and gas. But also things that are up for interpretation, like his temperament, favorite objects, foods. Other things I just rely on my memory for, even though I am often confronted with my own fictional tendencies.

For a long time, I thought that my mother, my father, my sister, and my sister-in-law had all been to therapy without disclosing the reason to me. I planned to write a book where I figured out, through conversations, what they didn’t want to share with me, and why. I approached them, one by one, and found out that my mother and sister-in-law were the only ones who had visited a therapist. For a moment I had mistaken Norway for Argentina (or New York?).

In 2013, a piece on CNN announced that being in therapy is the norm in Argentina. The country has the highest per capita concentration of psychotherapists, many of them psychoanalysts, in the world. When Vivi Rathbon moved from the United States to Argentina after graduating from college into a tough job market she got herself an analyst as well. “It was really awkward at first [...] It’s very Woody Allen. You’re laying there, the analyst just says, ‘OK, talk.’ ‘Talk about what?’ ‘Anything.’”¹

“The therapist” is an archetypical character in popular culture. It is an impartial someone, often with glasses and a woolen sweater, who can rummage our minds and help us make sense of ourselves. It is a person who can get to know us and carry around our memories—like an external hard drive with analytical powers.

Today we also trust our gadgets to remember for us. There are smartphone apps to remind you to buy milk, keep track of passwords, birthdays, and so on. Some apps even play the role of “surrogate therapists.” Live OCD Free, for example, is a tool for people with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Let’s say you cannot leave the house without locking the door multiple times. Now you can exit your front door, open the app, and a countdown timer appears. If you keep yourself from locking the door multiple times, you receive a reward; if you can’t, you press the “Just gave in” button. Either way, you generate charts for yourself, and for your actual therapist—if you have one—to evaluate.

Having a small child can feel like locking the door multiple times, out of necessity rather than compulsion. Endless repetition is healthy for my son’s brain. He eats

at approximately the same intervals. He sleeps at approximately the same intervals. We play with the same things. We build a tower, tear it down, build a tower, tear it down. *Are you thirsty? Should we go outside?* There are so many things for him to learn. I repeat, and when he understands he laughs out loud.

In “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” Freud discuss screen memories, a recollection from early childhood that may be false and that masks another deeply emotional memory, like childhood sexual trauma. I don’t think that false memories have to come out of repression, but it is intriguing to consider how our imagination adds to our memory, especially in art.

In Oscar Masotta’s *El helicóptero*, two groups mingle after experiencing two kinds of happenings: one group has been to a small theater, the other group has seen a helicopter fly by with a famous actress sitting next to the pilot. The artwork is partly produced in the conversation among the attendants about what they saw, or what they remember.

While staying at my in-laws’ in the days before my son’s first birthday, I came across Per-Oskar Leu’s essay about his mother, “Kari Mette Leu.” While I read, my father-in-law was listening to old tunes and cover versions of them on YouTube. When you start thinking about remembering and repetition, you see it everywhere. Anyway, in the essay Leu presents objects that belonged to his mother, who passed away when he was six and a half years old. These objects are now artworks. And here it is the son—and his art—that function as the memory of the mother. He writes: “Being a keen gatherer of memories as well as things, I was disturbed to hear the nuts and bolts of recollection explained on a popular-science radio show. Apparently, when retrieving an event from the vault of the mind, the brain doesn’t recall so much as reimagine, tainting the memory with a range of ingredients in the process: fragments of other occurrences, newly uncovered details, current thoughts, figments of the imagination.”²

Throughout 2016, I lived in Norway’s seventh largest city, Skien. I got a stipend to stay in the family home of playwright Henrik Ibsen. In January 2017, I exhibited drawings of every person I could remember from my stay. Drawing them felt like spring cleaning. Still, even though I ended up with eighty-eight portraits, there were a lot of people I forgot. I had not fallen off my horse, like Ireneo Funes in Jorge Luis Borges’ story “Funes the Memorious,” whose fall is suggested as the explanation for why he could suddenly remember absolutely everything.

Forgetting a little bit is irritating, forgetting a lot is frustrating, and forgetting everything is ... I don’t know. Sad, but somehow neutral? My grandmother has Alzheimer’s disease. She has been through stages of anger and confusion, but now that the disease has wiped her whole memory clean, she just sits, silent and passive, no longer expressing anything when we come to visit.

My grandmother being ill with this mysterious disease might play a role in my anxiety about remembering for my son. Especially since I am—due to the lack of sleep, I hope—extremely forgetful these days. I forget where I put things, what I am about to say; I even forget simple words. A friend who has a son two weeks younger than mine feels the same, and confided in me that sometimes she struggles to keep in contact with herself. Who are we when we are unable to remember?

Even though it might seem like forgetting is a drift towards the threshold of non-being, there is also another

side to it, according to science journalist Anil Ananthaswamy. In “The Unmaking of Your Story,” one of the essays in his *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, he points out that Alzheimer’s disease “challenges those who argue that the self is best understood as constituted of and by narratives—and that there is nothing else besides these narratives.”³

Without memory, says Ananthaswamy, we are still bodies that are subjected to experience—an accurate description of my son and my grandmother, the only difference being that one of them is about to start a cycle of narratives, the other one has lost hers forever.

Someone in between those two states is Alice, a linguistic professor played by Julianne Moore in the 2014 film *Still Alice*. The resourceful mother finds herself diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and we follow her as she builds systems to keep the disease at bay for as long as possible. Throughout the movie we are confronted with the fact that there is only so much we can do to control our vulnerable recollection. “So live in the moment, I tell myself. It’s really all I can do. Live in the moment,” Alice says.

The way I see it, both art and life are built on three principles: before, now, and after. Planning, executing, and documenting. If Alice is a spokesperson for the “before” and the “now,” Canadian artist Leanne Shapton literally illustrates the “after” in *Was She Pretty*, where she draws portraits of her friend’s ex-boyfriends and -girlfriends. Small texts emphasize how we categorize and remember our past lovers, the impossible standards we set for each other, often after our relationships have ended. We are then left only with our memories, sometimes manifested in objects, as Per-Oskar Leu’s essay also shows.

“When Eugénie moved in with Stuart, she came across a woman’s winter coat in his closet. She asked him how long it had been there, and he said about a year. She asked him whose it was, and he said it belonged to his ex-girlfriend and he was just keeping it in case she wanted it back.”⁴

Shapton and Leu both remind me that the stories are there even though some of the people involved might be missing. This takes away some of the pressure, for me at least. It is also comforting to think that even though my son is currently a body (with strong opinions!) subject to experience, he will gradually take over the narrative, no matter how much of it is a product of our imaginations.

Notes	
1	http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/28/health/argentina-psychology-therapists/
2	https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/kari-mette-leu
3	Anil Ananthaswamy, <i>The Man Who Wasn’t There: Tales from the Edge of the Self</i> (London: Dutton, 2015), p. 37.
4	Leanne Shapton, <i>Was She Pretty?</i> (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), p. 135.





Filmstills, *La Eterna*, by Dora García, 2017, 45 min.

Where Are We Going, and Why? (Shooting Notes)

Andrea Valdés

“Maybe tomorrow, when we’ll be impatiently thinking about the day after tomorrow, we’ll know. We go to the Colón Theater, to the Opera, the to Palacio de los Deportes, to the Olimpia Londonense, to Covent Garden, to the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, we see Boca play River, we learn from the seals at the zoo. We’ll have fun, kill time or let it kill us with an orange pip, we shuffle in our seats, we pay to be subjected to unjust aggression, to have a premeditated desire to laugh, cry, jump, eat some Laponian food or chocolate with almonds, yawn, stay frozen in place, or exalted, but, most importantly, we don’t miss the date. Out of curiosity, our friends the Greeks, and the Romans too, and all the generations that have preceded us, would go to see what was happening at such and such a place or in such and such a time, that is to say, a spectacle organized, by one or many people, who confessed publicly so as to be judged under various avatars. But what one is only half-conscious of are the spectacles that are not organized, the ones that exist on their own and are part of daily life, living cells that nourish the organized spectacles and that oblige us to be spectators and actors at one and the same time.

Society has invented a lot of disturbing things, but these are in their own way useful and they fulfill their ‘social’ function: it invented those big boxes called theaters, within which things happen. It gives you pause to think that, sometimes, we leave an organized spectacle and, later, on the street, we come upon a manifestation of orangutans that excites us a lot more than the theatrical function: the spectacle has taken place outside, and not inside, a box. (...) When we hear an actor read lines he has learned by heart for the umpteenth time, we think—and this does not require a prodigious imagination—that there is a false note in there somewhere, and so we end up not listening to the text but to how the actor declaims it, or we attend to how he moves. What is more, the text isn’t his, but a writer’s. The logical thing, then, would be for the writer to play it on the stage, either solo or accompanied by the rest of the cast, which in their turn try to express the ideas of someone else. The world of interpreters/performers is a fading a testament to another era.”¹

These lines were written over forty years ago, and their author now asks me if she put on too much make-up. Her name is Graciela Martínez and I invite her to sit down while the others around us change between vast numbers of plastic chairs.

It’s nine in the morning in Buenos Aires. It’s a Thursday and I’m on the second floor of a luminous building with dirty windows. The first time I came I had a hard time finding the entrance to the building. I walked in front of it twice before realizing that I had to walk through a shop to reach the lobby. One of the façades faces a train station. The other faces a vacant lot where there are many vegetable plots, an improvised garage, and an abandoned train car. The building isn’t very old, but it looks a bit as if it’s abandoned. Maybe it was the scene of a mass eviction, though there are still signs of activity inside: handwritten signs and doors secured, incongruously, using bike locks, plaques indicating someone’s office. On the—generous—stairwell there are people going up and coming down. I don’t know any of them.

When Dora García invited me to take some notes about her latest project, I accepted immediately, since I knew that it turned around Oscar Masotta, a figure who had by then already caught my interest, but I’ll explain that later. It’s still early and in the building on Lacroze Street the ashtrays are on the verge of overflowing with butts. Maybe that’s what conjures up for me a second ghost, Julio Cortázar’s, who was himself an inveterate smoker, like Masotta. One of Cortázar’s short stories is being filmed today. From what I know from an earlier conversation, what links the short story to the rest of the project is the notion of repetition and its echoes in literature and psychoanalysis.

Dora García is not an artist of intermediate ambitions. So as not to lose myself, I always associate her with keywords, like the tabs that appear on the website of a project that allows multiple entry points and possible deviations. That always happens with her. There are videos, images, and texts that refer to a specific universe. Kaprow, Agamben, Debord ... Here, documentation is treated in the exact same way as any other element. We see that in the leaflet with which she invites us to attend the reproduction of *Para inducir al espíritu de la imagen* (To Induce the Spirit of the Image), a happening by Masotta that Dora has integrated into this new work, which for its part is divided into five parts and is also called *Segunda Vez* (Second Time Around), like the short story that brought me to this strange building.

The shoot today is a run through, though it is possible that, during the editing phase, material from today’s shoot will end up in the final cut. The actors don’t seem bothered by that. “The thing is all these people come from the *under*, not from TV. They’re used to dealing with any situation,” Lila (Lisenberg), a line producer, tells me. I run into her on the first floor, where the shooting is to take place, after having chatted a bit with Graciela.

On a corner, right by some elevators that are not exactly trustworthy, a table with coffee and pastries has been set up and it is attracting more and more people. Some forty minutes have passed. I don’t see Dora or her team: two cameramen and a soundman. Where could they be? It turns out that their cab crashed into another one when it was on the way to pick them up, so they will be a while still. But no one here seems in a hurry, and no one waits to be introduced. Each does it after his or her fashion immediately upon entering.

“It’s not so cold today.”
“There’s coffee, coffee ...”
“And lots of smoke.”
“Wow, I’m beat.”
“But we just started. Do you want a napkin?”
“No. And put your apron on or they’ll bitch us out.”
“Apron?”
“The gown.”

I hear a lot of yawns. Now and then some footsteps.

“I got these earrings last week. I like them because they are light. Back in the day, when jewels were all made of bronze, that was a pain. But these are light as a feather.”

Greetings. Someone puts an end to them.

“Why are the cookies just thrown all over like that?”
“They’ve been like that for two years.”
“Don’t you see that there are mice here. There are mice ... Imagine the party!”

Someone whistles.

“We’ve suffered a lot from hunger in Argentina ... it’s good that our union always demands catering.”
“And to think I became an actress so I wouldn’t have to wake up early. I don’t get it.”

The cast is quite mixed. There are about twenty actors of varying ages. Most of them already know each other. What I understood is that they do their own wardrobe, provided they respect a couple of (no doubt) quite vague instructions—as happens in the original story, where a number of people are summoned by letter to an office where a group of functionaries urges them to carry out a transaction.

“Did you get the notice?”
“Yes.”
“Me too. But it doesn’t explain anything. There are a lot of people in there ...”
“It’s the second time I come.”
“The second?”
“And you?”
“First.”
“Me too. How did it go?”
“Fine. They ask your name, address ...”
“Then why did you come a second time?”
“I was told to come back.”
“That man has a strange look.”
“Strange face too. He’s a weird guy.”
“They don’t ask anything about your family?”
“Yes. Studies, occupation ...”
“And do you have to bring a photo?”
“Nobody asked me for one, no.”
“But when was the first time?”
“Three days ago.”
“Three days ... Well, at least it looks like things go quickly in there.”
“It depends. With some it takes five minutes, with others twenty.”

For being set in another era, the characterization is pretty discreet. What’s more, when the time comes, Dora is actually the first to “ignore” it by deciding to start the filming with the arrival of the propmen. Until that day, those boys had never acted before. They had just been walking around the set, hanging up curtains and fixing things while some of the microphones were being hooked up. She liked their presence: one was obese, the other thin, with delicate eyelashes and wearing an Obey winter hat, the clothing line of the street artist who immortalized Obama’s face. Dora didn’t ask him to take it off, nor did she yell “Action!” when it was time.

Instead, she just said this: “We’ll record everything at once. It’s a long take with three cameras. That means that, even if there is a main camera, all three are recording nonstop. Which isn’t to say that you have to be acting all the time. The idea is to try to record all of you, everything you improvise inside, and outside, the character. There isn’t a dominant dialogue. I didn’t think it was imperative to read Cortázar’s story, since everything is very ambiguous in the story anyway. It’s not really clear what’s happening.”

“What is clear,” she continued, “is that there are three groups of people and a hierarchy between them, though it isn’t explicit—it’s in the gestures, in how the characters move. It’s in the spaces too. In the waiting room, the front offices and the office located all the way in the back, where the final questioning happens. You glimpse the movement through the doors ... Rocco is the only one who has an idea of what the place is like, since it’s the second time he’s been summoned. So the point is to do what you’d do if you were really in that situation, and that’s basically what we all do every day.”

Little by little smoke had contaminated the atmosphere and, as the actors improvised around a map, an office stamp ... the dialogues started to become singular and distinct. In the room at the back, the interrogation room, the cameraman started turning very slowly around himself. And Rita, the protagonist, followed.

“You smoke?”
“Sometimes.”
“Do you want a smoke?”
“Ok.”
“What do you do?”
“I’m a student.”
“What are you studying?”
“Literature.”
“What sorts of books do you like?”
“Right now I’m reading Argentinean literature. I really like intimate diaries.”
“How come? You like to meddle in people’s lives?”
“I like the recording of intimacy.”
“Are you nervous?”
“No.”
“Do you like to spy?”
“I like to read.”
“And when you were little, did you go to the office?”
“The office?”
“The principal’s, in high school, for bad behavior.”
“Yes, once.”
“Why?”
“Because I spoke too much in class.”

“Why?”
“I had things to say but the teacher couldn’t stand me so she sent me to the office.”
“And the office, was it like this one, or smaller?”
“It was smaller, just a room.”
“I see ...”
“Do you have any concerns about us?”
“Do I have any questions, you mean?”
“Concerns are not questions. Otherwise I would have asked if you had any questions. Doubts ... do you have any doubts?”
“No.”
“No doubts. Of all of us, who’s the boss?”
“The boss ... the boss ... it’s you.”
“And tell me, are you always formal when you address your elders?”
“Not really, no ...”
“Did you come alone?”
“...”
“Well done. And did you speak to anyone?”
“Yes, at the reception.”
“When you addressed your teachers in school, were you always formal then?”
“Sometimes, yes.”
“And how did they react?”
“Just fine. If I was formal to them it’s because they had made it clear that that’s how they wanted it.”
“So you weren’t trying to seduce them with formalities to get something in return.”
“Our exchanges were normal.”
“Normal? Like this conversation, or more normal?”
“I don’t know.”

I had to cover my mouth to suppress a laugh—we laughed regularly at the improvised dialogues. As we eat, I mention to Rita (Pauls) that it must be odd to be born with the vocation for acting, but she downplays it and Dora, in her way, echoes her: “People are still debating what good acting is; I think it was Robert Mitchum who used to say that he had two acting styles: with and without a horse.” Andrea (Garrote), for her part, bemoans the fact that there are so few fictions about the good. “Most plots are paranoid. Why aren’t there fictions with different structures?” I don’t know what to tell her. Now I think that maybe the blame falls to Roberto Arlt, the subject of an important text by Oscar Masotta, though it was not through Arlt that I found my way to Masotta.

2

Fate had it so that, just at that moment, I was involved in not one but two Masotta operations: the one led by Dora García as she repeated his actions, documented them, and put them in dialogue with the work of other authors, as was happening that day; and the one that provides the title for a 1991 book by Carlos Correas, *La operación Masotta*. That text is the autopsy of a friendship and its era, but it is also the intellectual biography of a figure whose memory helps the author come to terms with himself. Correas is very hard on Masotta, and I recognize in his pages two fascinating subjects whose lives were forever changed and split by what they read.

With this in mind, I go the next day to see the filming of *Para inducir al espíritu de la imagen*, which is being shot at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, where Masotta had organized his happening, though back then it was at a different location. I hear a buzz and before me I recognize many of the actors from the day before. But today they’re standing in line clothed in rags and looking tired. For today, they’ve been asked to dress like bums, like people down on their luck. One moves around slowly, another counts his money and a third moves his lips, as if he were mentally reciting something. They are the focus of attention of an uncomfortable action: they had been paid, in public, to stand on a platform in total silence for one hour, subjected to the continuous glare of light reflectors and to a sharp, shrill sound—all so that we, the public, could look at them.

If Carlos Correas had closed Masotta off for me with his writing, I find that Dora García recuperates him for me with this action. And the figure I find here is different. Indeed, as we talk about what her actions mean, she tells us that a happening does not depend so much on manipulating the public as on “creating the condition for something to happen again.” It’s a lovely idea, which in its turn takes me back an idea in Cortázar, who also flirted with the happening and even tried to define it: “it is, at the very least, a hole in the present.”

The irony is that, in his story, there is no hole. Where did Carlos leave from? I’m back at the building. It’s the second day of shooting and the protagonist scrutinizes the interrogation room with her gaze while the camera keeps rolling. The questions continue.

“How long did it take you to get here?”
“Fifteen minutes, maybe less.”
“Fifteen? Or less?”
“I couldn’t say. I rode a bike.”
“Do you live far?”
“In Villa Crespo.”
“And do you like the cigarette?”
“I haven’t finished it yet.”

I hear all this on the headphones, since I’m now tucked away behind a partition, in the first room, the waiting room, where a mere few minutes earlier Nathalie had answered her phone and started speaking in Swedish, an odd occurrence in a story where strange details are not in short supply, like this woman with dirty hands or the poster no one understands or the assorted background objects: a whisk, a motorcycle, a plaster bunny ... Junk that you’d never expect to see in an office. Not in 1973, not today. In the story, this strangeness is described and even justified in passing: “Her sister had said that they were setting up offices all over the place because the ministry buildings were becoming too small,” says the narrator, who is embodied in a “we” that is never quite identified. Actually, this narrator mentions almost everything in passing—the summons, the questions, ... it’s like a dialogue that started already a while ago and that no one wants to take charge of—at least not openly, or entirely. It’s too monstrous.

A month later I went back to that building. I walked up to the first floor and knocked on the door. A man with bad teeth opened the door. I explained that not long ago I had been here, in that space, as part of a film shoot. The space was less cluttered, and cleaner, than the last time, but the tables were still there, as was the red clothes hanger and the poster that had been splashed with coffee to make it look like it was old and stained with cigarette smoke.

DO NOT ENTER
Staff only

The man told me then that the building belonged to the Administración de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias (ADIF), but that the government had granted its total use to a cooperative. For the last ten years, it has been the headquarters of Mutual Sentimiento, an association founded in 1999 by former political prisoners and exiles, to mitigate not so much the abuses of the state, but the effects of its abandonment. Inside there is a community radio station and a space for workshops; on the paved area outside, where I saw an abandoned train car, there is a storehouse for locally produced vegetables. But the greatest accomplishment is on the third floor: a pharmacy that sells only generic drugs. Now and then the place is rented for film shoots.

After our chat I ask him if I can have a look at the place, but there is no trace of Rocco. Or of Rita and Raúl, who in the film wonder why they had been summoned. All but one leave the way they had come. I keep going. In the back room, the interrogation room, I do feel a presence.

“Don’t be scared,” the man with broken teeth tells me when he opens the door. In front of me now I see a dog that barks at me then licks my hand, as if he remembered me.

“I’m sorry, I have to get going, I’m already late for an appointment at seven,” I tell the man.

“Federico will be here in a couple of days. If you come back he can explain everything you, and better too. He has all the data.”

Notes

- 1 Graciela Martínez, *Primera Plana*, 2 April 1968.



Filmstills, *Segunda vez*, by Dora García, 2017, ca. 0:45 min.



Sobre happenings (Meat Joy) (1967) Oscar Masotta, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires. Source: Archivos Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Three Works of Explicit Import

Inés Katzenstein

1

Defining a position, towards the world and oneself, has been one of the more permanent, and coarse, obsessions of Argentinian art. As Luis Felipe Noé puts it, the issue has hung like “the sword of Democles over the head of every artist in this part of the world”.¹ Referring to the regional dimension in Latin-American art, Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera writes: “Latin America has not cured itself of its identity neurosis.”² There are multiple alternatives to this self-definition, but the most extreme of them, simply by virtue of the polemic they generate, are the ones that succeed in putting the item on the agenda time and again: either an openness to the world through a relationship of fluid dialogue with the “outside,” or a celebration of specificity in search for our own authentic language.

In our globalized contemporaneity, these positions not only persist, but are pushed to extremes, regardless of how hackneyed they sound. In either case, we need to examine the political dimensions of those positions. The dominant logic today is based on the open circulation of information (a reticular logic of immediacy capable of dissolving the abysses that yesterday kept the borders of national cultures in place and clearly defined), and this means that the play of forces between the two arguments has changed radically. What I would like to suggest is that, perhaps, the most progressive voices today are not necessarily those that defend an internationalist argument and the existence of a global *zeitgeist*. On this issue, Suely Rolnik writes: “it was clear by then that, in order to respond to industrial capitalism (with its disciplinary society and its identitarian logic), it was necessary to oppose a fluid, flexible, and hybrid logic that had been appropriated from the 1960s and 70s. It has now become a mistake to take the latter as a value in itself—since it came to constitute the dominant logic of neoliberalism and its society of control.”³ We know that, even if the dynamics of cultural exchanges have intensified and diversified exponentially, the circuits of exchange remain strongly conditioned by power structures that determine the valuation of certain languages and the exclusion of others, and also that these power structures imply, more importantly, differing levels of access to the resources needed to produce and maintain the vital cultural practice of artists, and to develop powerful and sustainable institutional structures. We know as well that, in the last decades, the dominance of a transnational imaginary has actualized certain emphases—nationalist, localist, protectionist—that function as a counterweight against the conception promoted by globalization of a generic, con-

sumerist, and de-territorialized culture. Against this background, the integration of art and context, production and dwelling, advanced by these arguments has acquired a new relevance.

Despite the changes brought about over the past twenty years thanks to internet access, the free circulation of capital, the lower price of travel, and the intensification of migrations, the relation Argentinean artists entertain to external referents (which they influence through lectures, images, and ideas), remains, as a general rule, beset by guilt. Except for those periods when one’s training and formation as an artist or intellectual was explicitly based on learning to handle and appropriate from a foreign culture, the importance of external referents has tended to disappear from the discourse of the artist, as if they had become taboo. Nothing is considered lower than the art based on the acritical mimesis of foreign models, something the Argentinean artist Kenneth Kemble defined in 1968 as the “dictatorship of the tardy fad”:⁴ the artist who imports, traffics, or repeats continues to be regarded as synonymous with inauthenticity, speculation, and mediocrity.

We have not had our Oswald de Andrade in Argentina. And although we did have Borges—who makes the case for the right of Argentineans to the entire Western tradition in his famous essay, “The Argentinean Writer and the Tradition”—his ideas don’t seem to have had an impact on the guilt I just mentioned, perhaps because, in contrast to Andrade, Borges assumes a position that pretends to dissolve the political drama implicit in the problem of nationality and influence by defining it as nothing more than a mistake.

That said, what I would like to do here is present three works by Argentinean artists based on the sacrilegious practice of working by repeating foreign model. These are three works that, at the outset, present themselves as politically incorrect: Oscar Masotta’s cover of multiple Happenings; Marta Minujín’s explicit cultural import; and a simulated international filiation by Leopoldo Estol and Diego Bianchi. By analyzing the temporalities implicit to each of these cases, we shall be able to distinguish between procedures that are based on the acritical enthrallment for the other, and those that use repetition as a procedure that, paradoxically, enables both self-definition and critical resistance.⁵

We are at the heart of the happening boom in Buenos Aires, in 1967. Jean François Lebel had recently visited Buenos Aires and talked about the topic at the Instituto Di Tella. Marta Minujín had already produced a few happenings, like the ambitious *Simultaneidad en Simultaneidad* (Simultaneity in Simultaneity), which consisted not only of sixty TV monitors projecting back to the public its own image, but also of simultaneous live actions from an Allan Kaprow happening in New York and another from Wolf Vostell in Berlin, both of which had been scheduled to coincide with Minujín’s. Also, a group of artists with links to theory had organized a false happening to provoke repercussion in the press and thus give entity to the work as a new “art of communication media” capable both of showing the obsolescence of the ritualism inherent to the *acción happenista*, and of signaling a new and uninhibited definition of the artist as a media operator of his or her own image. In the midst of this boom we find Oscar Masotta, a fundamental figure of the 1960s in Argentina: a brilliant theoretician, a pioneer of the concept of the “dematerialization” of art in the 60s, and, later, a key figure in the introduction of Lacanianism to the

Spanish-speaking world, Argentina and Spain in particular. What was Oscar Masotta doing at the Instituto Di Tella?

After writing a book about Roberto Arlt and publishing an essay about Pop Art, Masotta, who had a marginal relation to the university institution, befriended some of the younger, and more intellectually-inclined, artists then working at the Instituto Di Tella. He became their interlocutor as well as an influential and heterodox art critic.

To put it in the briefest of terms: Masotta theorized about, and against, happenings (he distrusted the role of the auratic and the ritual presence of bodies in them), and he proposed instead a more contemporary way of working, one that consists of using communication media itself as the object, and material, of the work. But to artistically improve the happening (*improve* is Masotta’s word), it had to be installed, deployed, in the local scene through the concrete existence of the happening as a material of study.

“The more information we gathered,” Masotta writes, “the stronger grew the impression that the possibilities—and ideas—had been exhausted. The idea *not* to do an original Happening, then, and instead collect various Happenings that had already happened into one Happening suddenly seemed more important to us.” Masotta wanted to put himself “beyond” or “after” the happening as a historically closed genre. “We would be didactic,” he says.⁶ The didactic part consisted of the production of a cycle that would include two conferences, a happening by Masotta himself, another by the architect Mario Gandelsonas, and the montage of a series of successive Happenings entitled *About Happenings*. This is the work I want to present here as the first case of “import” (importación).

Since what interested Masotta were the circuits of communication (more on a semiotic than a geopolitical key), he decided to work using the information about the genre that he had at hand: the script for Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy*, which had been published in the magazine *Some/Thing*, in New York; the description of a happening by Claes Oldenburg, whose title Masotta did not know, but which he had read about in *Art News*; an account, published in Michael Kirby’s *Happenings*, of Oldenburg’s *Autobodys*; and, lastly, a description of a happening by Kirby, title also unknown, but which Masotta had seen during a trip to New York. As is well known, this sort of relation to works—mediated by photos and accounts published in languages one has no command of (Masotta didn’t speak or read English)—is one of the most decisive sources influencing and shaping Argentinean, and indeed Latin American, art. That is why Ricardo Piglia talks about Argentinean culture as a “second hand” culture:⁷ But if, in general, the relation to these sources is experienced as an embarrassing scene, and consequently hidden, in this case the literal repetition of works known only through spurious sources constitutes itself publicly, and for the first time, as a type of art—an art of media—that manifests the historical overcoming of the arts based on the immediacy of contacts. While “the Happening is an art of the *immediate*,” the art of “mass media” is an “art of *mediations*, given that mass communication implies spatial distance between those who receive and the things themselves, the objects, situations, or events to which the information refers.”⁸

With a group of artists,⁹ Masotta decided to combine all the happenings he read about and assemble them into a single Happening—a sort of anticipation of postmodern pastiche or, as Masotta himself defines it, as a “colony of

Happenings and a history of the Happening.”¹⁰ The succession of Happenings took place at the Institute Di Tella to an audience of two hundred people while a voice over the loudspeaker could be heard saying “that it didn’t believe much in Happenings, that the genre was dead or out of date.” Masotta explains that they were excited “by the idea of an artistic activity put onto the ‘media’ and not onto things, information about events and not the events themselves.”¹¹ The repetition, based on the information, is the work.

2

Marta Minujín’s *Importación-Exportación. Lo más en onda* (Import-Export: What’s Really Hip) is the height of treachery in what concerns the traffic of information from the center to the periphery: the aim of the project is a cultural actualization and the establishment of a fad (in the case, hippism) hailing from the US. The *export* phase of the work never took place. The text that presents the work says: “Information obliges us to adopt actions, ideas, and fads in total disregard to their nationality. The economic factor (country of origin) does not confer nationality onto the product. Importing is an interpretation of the materiality of information.”¹²

With funds she received from the Instituto Di Tella, Marta Minujín brought back from the US all the hippie paraphernalia she could find. In a first room, the public came across a pair of glasses that distorted reality into surprising specters; on the floor were painted fluorescent flowers and arabesques that shone under a black light. There was smoke, colored lights, strange smells, psychedelic music, and Hare Krishna chants. In a second room there were strobe lights, as well as projections of homemade slides and of short films by Gerard Malanga, Ira Schneider, and Yud Yakult. Lastly, Minujín set up a stand, operated by underage kids who had been recruited via an ad in the paper, that sold hippie products.

In a classic trade operation between North and South, mobilized by the artist as the agent who imports and updates, Minujín wanted to bring to Buenos Aires all the elements that constituted the psychedelic experience she had discovered in the US. It isn’t as if there were no hippies in Buenos Aires before 1967, but it’s certainly true that there weren’t many. The setting was supposed to influence young people, to promote, simultaneously, an altered vision and peaceful, laid back ambiance in order to mobilize the *porteño*, who had to get with “what’s hip”.

As I see it, the most radical aspect of this work is the substitution of the artistic object for the presence, in the artistic space, of a social group. And even if the rhetoric of the piece was more semiotic than relational, what the work proposed was a sociological art that presented youth culture as a new, vital paradigm and as a consumer niche. We should recall that this work took place in a context in which there was an enormous interest in the social transformations that were taking place as a result of the emergence of a mass society: new ways of dressing, new ways of behaving, new habits. The intention, in this sense, was to make the relation between the public and the imported information (in this instance, the young and hippism) the work. As Roberto Jacoby, a colleague of Minujín’s in Argentina, wrote that same year: “art and life have become so confused as to become inseparable. All of the phenomena of social life have been converted into aesthetic material:



Importación/Exportación (1968), Marta Minujín, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires. Reproduced with the permission of Marta Minujín Estudio.

fashion, manufacturing, and technology, the media of mass communication, etc. Aesthetic contemplation came to an end because the aesthetic got dissolved in social life.”¹³

Insofar as *Importación-Exportación* sets as its objective a cultural actualization, it adds a new level of political complexity to the social and relational question. The text that follows the work’s title (“Information obliges us to adopt actions, ideas, and fads in total disregard to their nationality”) announces that national borders had been eclipsed as designators of the origin of “products.” It does so, one imagines, simply to distance the act of importing from the geopolitical map and thus to dismiss, at the outset, any suspicion of cultural imperialism. What is posited, then, is a proto-globalization scheme in which nationality does not matter. All that said, I think the failure of the *export* phase of the work is a clear demonstration of the fact that what the work announces is false.

The work’s temporal scheme is evident, and the mimetic intention complete. Importing corrects under-development. As in the classic modernizing narrative, the future arrives from the North.

3

Lastly, I want to discuss is *La Escuelita Thomas Hirschhorn* (The Thomas Hirschhorn School House), a work co-authored by Diego Bianchi and Leopoldo Estol that took place at the Belleza y Felicidad Gallery in Buenos Aires in 2005. A first and essential piece of information necessary to analyze this piece is to mention that it was conceived as a direct response to reviews that had tacitly suggested that these two artists were copying, in their work, the precarious and excessive aesthetic and the expansive installations of the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, who had come to be known in Buenos Aires as a result of a large installation (*Critical Laboratory*) at the Malba Museum. Faced with this accusation, Bianchi and Estol decided to exaggerate the influence and make a work in which Hirschhorn would be used both as the style and as the explicit titular figure. *La Escuelita Thomas Hirschhorn*, consequently, brings the ghost in question into the open and places it before everyone. As in the tributes to philosophers and writers that permeate Hirschhorn’s work,¹⁴ Bianchi and Estol use the Swiss artist as a sort of DNA for the work: Hirschhorn is present not just in the title and poster, but also in the very character of the installation, where his presence can be identified in the themes (over-information, hyper-connectivity) and in the formal strategies (excess, precarious constructions that rely on wrapping tape and aluminum foil, spatial expansion).

Prior to this, Estol and Bianchi had been making installations using materials deriving from the dysfunctional urban situations that had emerged in Buenos Aires in the wake of the crisis at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. In this sense, the installation at Belleza y Felicidad was just as much the result of an act of outrageous juvenile cannibalism as a deepening of their field research.

For *La Escuelita*, Estol and Bianchi subdivided the gallery into a series of very tiny but interconnected spaces designed for a variety of real uses: cavern, classroom, drugstore, cybercafé, mini-disco floor, library, gazebo, patio. Parties and classes were organized in the cavernous spaces they produced.¹⁵ The use of a relatively small space

for multiple, and in some senses irreconcilable, ends was a direct reference to the multi-functional spaces that were popping up then, like the convenience store-cum cybercafé-cum-bar. The emphasis on parties, for its part, underlined a particular moment in the city: because of an accident at a disco that had left almost two hundred people dead, Buenos Aires saw the emergence of hundreds of places to go out dancing, with parties going underground.¹⁶

For Diego Bianchi, the idea was to use “Hirschhorn as franchising.”¹⁷ For Leopoldo Estol, it was a project “with an ambiguous authorship, and the local public is very reticent about that. The public here is always paranoid, always worried that it is being taken for a ride: the classic commentary is, ‘they’re just copying that from foreign magazines.’”¹⁸

But the most interesting thing about *La Escuelita* is that, in it, Thomas Hirshhorn functioned as a toolbox with which to radicalize the observations that the artists were putting forward about their own context: Argentina in the wake of the crisis, consumed as it was by issues of provisionality, precarity, and compensation. Hirschhorn could declare, in Paris: “I love the power of forms made in urgency and necessity”; and he could as well include in each of his shows posters that said: *Quality, no! Energy, yes!*.¹⁹ But it was in Buenos Aires that these premises found their most fertile context.

Identification becomes an occasion to learn from Hirschhorn, who is constituted into the fictional father of the duo of artists because of his capacity to dissolve the tension between a political art and an art anchored in the formal, a division that exacted a heavy price from Argentinean art, which is those years was transitioning from the eminently aestheticist paradigm that governed art in the 1990s to the militant art of new artistic collectives that were working in relation to the crisis.

In this sense, *La Escuelita* is, like *About Happenings*, a pedagogical work (a work-school) that uses the model to underscore a preexisting local situation and to redirect attention from the outside to the inside.

4

The differences among these works are essentially manifest in the different models of temporality implicit to each: Minujín aspires to a classic movement of *actualization*; in Masotta, the aim is to provoke a gesture of *anticipation* with regards to the model, achieved through a copy that establishes a new genre that “improves” the model; Bianchi-Estol, for their part, create a situation of *synchronicity* with the model.

But we see that, in these three cases, the explicit, scandalous mimesis of a foreign referent is a strategy to create a polemic with the local scene through a questioning of two ideas: the notion of a heroic origin and a passive repercussion, and the idea of *ex nihilo* invention. They are all, to borrow Hal Foster’s expression, anti-foundational works that invoke the original/copy convention only to shatter it. They are brazen examples of what Gerardo Mosquera defines as “the paradoxical anti-colonial resistance that Latin-American culture expresses through its inclination to copy.”²⁰ And they lay bare, publicly, the scene that tends to remain hidden: repetition as the radical demonstration of the connection between scenes. They are Argentinean examples of an anthropophagic approximation, of an “opening to the Other, the elsewhere, and the beyond.”²¹



Escuelita Tomas Hirschhorn (2005), installation photo at Belleza y Felicidad, Buenos Aires. Reproduced with the permission of Leo Estol and Diego Bianchi.

Notes

- 1 Luis Felipe Noé, “El arte en América Latina necesita pasaporte?” (1988), in *Noescritos sobre eso que se llama arte (1996–2006)* (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editora, 2007), p. 281.
- 2 Gerardo Mosquera, “Contra el arte latinoamericano”, available here: http://servidor.esteticas.unam.mx/edartedal/PDF/Oaxaca/complets/mosquera_oaxaca.pdf
- 3 Suely Rolnik, “Avoiding False Problems: Politics of the Fluid, Hybrid, and Flexible,” trans. Rodrigo Nunes. Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/25/67892/avoiding-false-problems-politics-of-the-fluid-hybrid-and-flexible/>
- 4 Kenneth Kemble, “Ideas para un examen de conciencia sobre el proceso creativo en nuestras artes plásticas,” in *Escritos*, Kenneth Kemble, ed. Justo Pastor Mellado (Buenos Aires: JK, 2012), p. X.
- 5 We should perhaps make clear that this term, import, alludes to an artistic system organized according to national schemes in which the circulation of information crosses concrete borders. The rupture of this system would have us think about the obsolescence of a term that, nevertheless, survives in the language of artists, either as a result of inertia or of a situation of reaction.
- 6 Oscar Masotta and Eduardo Costa, “On Happenings, Happening: Reflections and Accounts” (1967), in *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Inés Katzenstein (New York: MoMA, 2004), p. 201 & 202, respectively.
- 7 Ricardo Piglia, “Notas sobre *Facundo*,” in *Punta de Vista* 3, no. 8 (March-June), 1980.
- 8 Oscar Masotta, “Prologue to *Happenings*” (1967), in *Listen, Here, Now!*, p. 181.
- 9 The artists who participated are Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Miguel Angel Telechea, Oscar Bony, and Leopoldo Maler.
- 10 Masotta and Costa, “On Happenings, Happening,” p. 202.
- 11 Masotta and Costa, “On Happenings, Happening,” p. 205 & 202, respectively.
- 12 Brochure of the exhibition at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1968. Archive of the ITDT, Library of the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella.
- 13 Roberto Jacoby, “Message in the Di Tella,” in *Listen, Here, Now!*, p. 290.
- 14 Thomas Hirschhorn once said: “I want to work as a fan,” and also, “I want to connect my brain to this Foucault battery.” See “Thomas Hirschhorn: Philosophical Battery,” available at: <https://www.papercoffin.com/writing/articles/hirschhorn.html>
- 15 The classes on offer were: “Marxism,” with Roberto Jacoby; “Improvisation,” with Fernanda Laguna; “Damage Reduction,” with Andrés Schteingart; “Photography,” with Miguel Mitlag; and “Work Clinic,” with Eduardo Navarro.
- 16 These came to be known as “post-Cromagnon” spaces. República de Cromagnon was the name of the disco where the tragedy that left 194 people dead and thousands injured happened late in 2004.
- 17 Diego Bianchi, in an email to the author, 2010.
- 18 Leopoldo Estol, in an email to the author, 2010.
- 19 For both, see “Thomas Hirschhorn: Philosophical Battery.”
- 20 Mosquera, “Contra el arte latinoamericano.”
- 21 Manuela Carneiro da Costa and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, cited in Rolnik, “Avoiding False Problems.”

I Committed a HaPpening (1967)

Oscar Masotta

When, in the December 16th edition of the newspaper *La Razón*, I read Professor Klimovsky’s condemnation of intellectuals who “concoct” Happenings, I felt directly and personally implicated. If I am not mistaken, the number of persons in Buenos Aires who fulfill such conditions can be counted on half the fingers of one hand. And since Klimovsky recommended “abstaining” from Happenings and “investing” the powers of the “imagination in lessening this tremendous plague” (he means “hunger”), I have to admit, seriously, that I felt ill at ease, even a bit miserable. So I said, “I committed a Happening,” in order to quell this feeling.

But I was quickly able to regain my tranquility. The choice, “either Happenings or left-wing politics,” was false. At the same time, is Professor Klimovsky a man of the left?¹ It was enough to recall another either/or—of the same kind—that Klimovsky proposed in his prologue to a book by Thomas Moro Simpson,² where one reads: “We are much given to existentialism, phenomenology, Thomism, Hegelianism, and dialectical materialism; by contrast, analytic philosophy is almost absent from the curricula of our philosophy schools... The causes of this state of affairs are diverse, reflecting the unusual preponderance in these latitudes of... certain religious or political traditions.” Finally, one must reply in the negative: No, Professor Klimovsky is not on the left. First, because of the explicit tendency to assimilate the political to the religious, as we read in the preceding paragraph. Second, because in the context, when Klimovsky says “political,” he directly denotes “dialectical materialism,” i.e., this philosophy of Marxism. Third, because these two lines of assimilation seek only to persuade one of the truth of the false, right-wing choice: “either Marxism, or analytic philosophy.” And fourth, because it was anecdotally, i.e., historically, false that there existed, at the moment when Klimovsky wrote this prologue, any preponderance in the teaching of the “Marxist tendency” in Argentine lecture halls.

I said that the two choices are of the same kind: in both, one of the opposing terms does not belong to the same level of facts as the other. Analytical philosophy (the philosophy of science + modern logic + the analytic study of the problem of meaning) does not include any assertion about the development of history, about the origin of value in labor, about the social determination of labor, or finally about the social process of production or about the necessity of revolution that can be read in this process. It could then additionally be said that insofar as Marxism includes proposals concerning the origin, value, and scope of

ideas, for example, it includes analytic philosophy, while the reverse is impossible. Marxism can certainly integrate the results of the analytic study of propositions and strengthen its methodology with the contributions of the logic and philosophy of science; while, on the contrary, if analytic philosophy claimed to include Marxism, it would simply dissolve eighty percent of the assertions of Marxism, which, being proposals about society as a whole and about the totality of the historical process, are effectively *synthetic*, if not dogmatic.³ We then see that there exist two perspectives from which to look upon the relation between Marxism and the philosophy of science. If one does so from the viewpoint of Marxism, there is no exclusive choice, but a relation of inclusion and complementarity. If, on the other hand, we look from the viewpoint of the philosophy of science, the terms become contradictory and the choice is exclusive.

The same holds for the choice between the Happening and the concern with hunger (excuse me for this combination of words). Given that the Happening is nothing other than a manifestation of the artistic genre, the surest and easiest way of answering, using words in their proper meaning, is to say that by extension this choice would also include musicians, painters, and poets. Must one then look in Klimovsky’s words for indications of his totalitarian vocation? I do not think so. Professor Klimovsky is surely a liberal spirit, of whom, I am sure, one could say the same as Sartre once said of Bertrand Russell some years ago: that in truth, for him, intellectuals and science are *all that exist*. But what must have certainly occurred is much simpler: Professor Klimovsky was caught off guard by the phenomenon of the increasing use of the word “Happening” that Madela Ezcurra has discussed. This mistake—whether intentional or not—is in itself revealing.

The growing connotation of the word “Happening” in the mass media originates in certain presuppositions conveyed by these messages that, when not analyzed, tend to determine their contents. In truth, these presuppositions are nothing other than “ideas of communication,” as Jacoby writes; that is, ideas concerning society as a whole, which include, fundamentally, decisions with respect to the “place” in society to which each sphere of activity should belong. Now, it is certain that no journalist, whatever his level of information, can ignore the fact that, at its very basis, the word is associated with artistic activity: thus a certain apparently positive ambivalence in the degree to which what the word means is taken seriously or jokingly. This is because the idea of Art with a capital “A” carries a lot of weight for these journalists. What comes to pass—and the whole matter is not much more complicated than this—is that through its conservative groups, society establishes the connection between this “place” (a receptacle of hierarchical ideas, of judgments concerning the relative value of the results of every kind of activity) and each sphere of social activity by fixing on the “materials” of each particular activity. Thus, the prestige of the artist’s activity should be systematically linked with certain properties of the material he uses. It is in this way that, historically, the idea arises that bronze or marble are “noble materials.” During the time of Informal Art, and also before then, we have seen painters react against this idea: but the results were not particularly negative.

And yet, the quarrel with respect to the nobility of the material is completely outdated today, and for that very reason it is possible that it has attained a certain degree

of vulgarization. Works made with “ignoble” materials are accepted on the condition, I would say, of leaving the very idea of material in place; that is, the idea that the work of art is recognized by *its* material support. To say it in another way: there is still a humanism of the human, since the idea of material is felt to be the “other” of the human (and it is granted transcendence for this reason). There is a fundamental opposition: human subjectivity on one side, sensible matter on the other. If one carried the analysis further one might see that, as in Lévi-Strauss’ description of the myth, this binary is correlated with another: outside-inside. Now, in traditional art (and particularly in painting, sculpture, and theater), what is outside of what is outside, man, can only have contact with sensible matter because he *is* a body. And, on the contrary, sensible matter can only convey an aesthetic image on the condition of not encompassing the condition of its existence, i.e., the human body. This could be the reason why, as Lévi-Strauss says, there is a problem of dimensions in the very constitution of the work of art: in some way it is always a *miniature* of what it represents.⁴ But what then shall we think of the Happening? As it tends to neutralize these oppositions and homogenize people and things, the Happening begins by making the very notion of “material” more improbable, more difficult; as art, then, it is an activity whose social “place” is difficult to establish, and perhaps Kaprow is right to proclaim that the Happening is the only truly “experimental” art.

From January to March of 1966, and while in quite close contact with *happenistas* such as Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Al Hansen, Carolee Schneeman, and the German Wolf Vostell, I was able to be present at some ten Happenings in New York. Two impressed me particularly. Both had this in common: they included the physical presence of the artist and the “public” did not exceed, in either of them, more than two hundred persons. But they were totally different. It could be said (I do not like this choice) that one was made for the senses, while the other spoke to the understanding. The work of Michael Kirby was, effectively, “intelligent.”⁵ Kirby had called the audience together on March 4, on Remsen Street, in a middle-class neighborhood of Brooklyn. When we arrived at the place we discovered that it was a religious school, St. Francis College. In New York it is quite common for Happenings to take place in schools, or even in churches. The most superficial reason, perhaps, is to be found in the fact that American Happenings are relatively nonsexual, unlike the French ones.⁶ Those that I have seen, in general, induced the idea of ceremony: they were serious, if it can be said that way. But this is an insufficient explanation because Carolee Schneeman held the presentation of her *Meat Joy*, which was rather audacious from the sexual point of view, in the church on Washington Square, surrounded by the buildings of New York University.

In the center of the room, where the action was to unfold, was a space where film projectors had been set up, along with three or four different types of slide projectors and recorders. The audience was supposed to sit in chairs arranged into three groups surrounding the middle space. Kirby soon arrived, followed by a group of five or six technicians. There were other people in the center of the space. When the lights went out the projection of a 16mm film began: seated around a table were two people talking (one of them a priest). The audience quickly understood that the conversation concerned the physical characteristics of the very place they were in. The priest and the other

person were planning the Happening that was unfolding: they were talking about the capacity of the space, the lights, the quantity of “performers” they would need, the price of the tickets, and whether there would be any remaining profit once the expenses had been paid. The lights were then turned back on. And when they went off the next time, a projector showed, once again on a wall, a map of the area of Brooklyn where the school was located; the shadow of a pencil flitted across the map, tracing the path from a nearby square to the school itself. The lights went on and off again: then the same itinerary that had been traced by the pencil was traversed by an automobile, presumably Kirby’s. The camera filmed the streets from behind the windows of the vehicle, until arriving at the building of the school. The lights then came on again, and on one side of the space, seated at the same table, and clothed in the same way, the priest and his friend repeated the conversation of the film. The lights went on and off again, and in the moments of darkness, a slide projector alternately showed one of them and then the other. Then Kirby entered the scene live and joined the conversation, and afterwards the lights went off again and in the film one could see the same scene repeated, Kirby entering and sitting down to talk the other two. Afterwards the priest appeared in the film in full face, speaking to and looking at the live public. When the lights went on Kirby answered him from below, from the table. These operations grew more complex as they followed in succession: they combined, for example, with photographs of places in the space itself, which were projected onto those same places. The photo of a corner of a large wooden door projected onto the door. What happened was that the account of the programming of the Happening came increasingly closer to the time of the Happening that was unfolding until, finally, the audience, which had been photographed a few minutes before this with Polaroid cameras, could see itself, photographed, on the walls between the three groups of seated persons surrounding the action. When the lights went on, Kirby’s presence in the middle of the room made it seem as though the actions had reached an end. And yet something was happening. The technicians seemed to be having some kind of difficulty with the equipment, maybe it was a matter of cables. Finally Kirby explained that what was happening was that the noise and voices of the persons in the audience had been recorded, that the idea was that the audience should listen to its own words inside the space in the same way as it had seen itself photographed, but problems had arisen and the Happening could be considered over. The audience answered the final words with sustained applause. We then left our seats, and slowly we began to go out. Hardly had we begun to do so when we heard the treacherous clamor of our own applause—which Kirby had carefully recorded—accompanying our steps.⁷

The author of the other Happening was La Monte Young. At the time I was not very familiar with the American “scene,” and so I paid attention to the opinions of everyone else. Young: a disciple of Cage, Zen, close to the “cool” painters, into the drug scene. The Happening (or musical work?) was held at the house of Larry Poons, an excellent painter promoted by Castelli. I don’t remember the exact address; it was downtown, on the West Side, in a “loft,” one of those enormous shed-flats that you can find in New York for two hundred dollars a month, and which after painting them totally white are lived in by some painters and simply used as a studio by others. It was on the third floor, and

one had to go up by broad stairways that led to shed-apartments like the final one, but totally empty. Only in certain corners, set discreetly on certain walls, one could distinguish canvases: these must have been pictures by Larry Poons. After climbing the last staircase, one was assaulted by and enveloped in a continuous, deafening noise, composed of a colorful mix of electronic sounds, to which were added indecipherable but equally constant noises. Something, I don't know what, something Oriental, was burning somewhere, and a ceremonious, ritual perfume filled the atmosphere of the space. The lights were turned out; only the front wall was illuminated by a blue or reddish light, and I don't remember if the lights changed (perhaps they did, switching from red to green to violet). Beneath the light, and almost against the wall, facing the room and facing the audience, which was seated and arranged throughout the space, there were five people also sitting on the ground, one of them a woman, in yoga position, dressed in what was certainly Oriental clothing, and each of them holding a microphone. One of them played a violin, while, seen from my position, not much more than five yards distant, the four others remained as though paralyzed, with the microphones almost glued to their open mouths. The very high-pitched and totally homogeneous sound had at first kept me from seeing the cause of these open mouths, which was that the four, stopping only to breathe, were adding a continuous guttural sound to the sum of the electronic sounds. The violinist slowly moved the bow up and down, to draw a single sound from the strings, also continuous. Before them, between these five and the public, could be seen the naked spectacle of a tape recorder playing a tape loop and the cables of an amplifier device. There was in this timeless spectacle a deliberate mix—a bit banal for my taste—of Orientalism and electronics. Someone, pointing to the first of the five, told me that it was La Monte Young himself, and that he was “high.”⁸ I'm sure he was; and the others as well. The event had begun at nine at night and was programmed to last until two in the morning. Among the audience were one or two people who exhibited something like a possessed state, in a rigid meditation position.

In all this there was something that escaped me, or that wasn't to my taste. I don't like Zen, or rather, even while it gives rise in me to a certain intellectual curiosity, since in it there are certainly valuable intuitions about language, it disgusts me as a social phenomenon in the West, and even more as a manifestation within a society so dramatically capitalist as the American one. But I knew neither the practice of Zen, nor the complete theory; and additionally, in this sum of deafening sounds, in this exasperating electronic endlessness, in this mix of high-pitched noise and sound that penetrated one's bones and pummeled one's temples, there was something that probably had very little to do with Zen. Since I had entered the room the physiological condition of my body had changed. The homogenization of the auditory time, through the presence of this sound at such a high volume, had practically split one of my senses away from all the others. I felt isolated, as though nailed to the floor, the auditory reality now went “inside” my body, and didn't simply pass through my ears. It was as though I were obliged to compensate with my eyes for the loss in the capacity to discriminate sounds. My eyes opened wider and wider. And all they found in front of them, enveloped in the quietude of their bodies and in the light, seated, were the five performers. How long would this last? I was not

resolved to pursue the experience to the end; I didn't believe in it. After no more than twenty minutes I left.

Two or three days afterwards I began changing my opinion. When you took away the connotations of Zen, Orientalism, etc., there were at least two profound intentions in the Happening by La Monte Young. One of them, that of splitting a single sense away from the others, the near destruction, through the homogenization of a perceptual level, of the capacity to discriminate on that level, brought us to the experience of a difficult restructuring of the total perceptual field. Simultaneously, the exhibition of the performers in their quietude, beneath the bath of colored light, transformed the entire situation into something very similar to the effects of LSD. The situation was therefore something like an “analogue” of the perceptual changes produced by hallucinogens. But the interesting thing, in my opinion, was that this “analogue,” this “similitude” of the hallucinatory condition, did not end up turning into one. The rarefaction of the perception of time was not sufficient to transform it into an actual hallucination because it had too much real weight to become unreal: the hallucination could not go beyond the state of induction. This is the idea that I took to “commit” my Happening five months later in Buenos Aires. But there was another idea in the work of La Monte Young: through the exasperation caused by a *continuum*, the incessant sound at high volume, the work transformed itself into an open commentary, naked and express, of the continuous as continuous, and thereby induced a certain rise in consciousness with respect to its opposite. Or, it could also be said that La Monte Young pushed us to undertake a rather pure experience by allowing us to glimpse the degree to which certain continuities and discontinuities lie at the basis of our experience of our relationship with things.

When I returned to Buenos Aires in April of '66, I had already resolved to do a Happening myself: I had one in mind. And its title, *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen* (To Induce the Spirit of Image), was an express commentary on what I had learned from La Monte Young. On disordered sheets of paper, and on the edges of my habitual (“intellectual”) work, I noted both the general framework of his actions and their details. From La Monte Young I retained, unaltered, the idea of “putting on” a continuous sound, the product of a sum of electronic sounds, at an exceedingly high volume, for two hours (three hours less than he). As to the arrangement of the performers and the audience, it would be the same: the performers in front of the room, lighted, and the audience facing the performers, in the shadows, occupying all the rest of the space. Thus the audience would be obliged to see and indeed to look at the performers bathed in light, for the duration and under the high volume of the electronic sound. I, however, would not have five performers, but thirty or forty; and they would not be sitting in a yoga position, but seated motionless in a motley array, on a platform. I then thought that I would recruit them among the downtrodden proletariat: shoeshine boys or beggars, handicapped people, a psychotic from the hospice, an impressive-looking beggar woman who frequently walks down Florida Street and whom one also meets in the subway of Corrientes, with shabby clothes of good cut, varicose veins but skin toasted by the sun; this woman was the perfect image of a person of a certain economic status who had suffered a rapid and disastrous fall. Finally, I thought that at the right moment I would have some money to pay these people, whom I had to find somehow by going

out into the street to choose them or search for them. For the rest, the details that accompanied this central situation were not so numerous. I would start off the Happening by talking to the public, telling them the origin of the Happening, that it was inspired by La Monte Young, and that in this sense I had no qualms about confessing the origin. I would also tell them what was going to happen next: the continuous sound, the light illuminating the motley-colored downtrodden-looking group on the platform. And I would also tell them that in a sense it was as though the overall situation had been carefully designed by myself, and that in this sense there was an intellectual control over each one of its parts. That the people of the audience could proceed according to their own will: they could remain seated on the floor, or they could stand. And if they wanted to leave at any moment they could, only they would have to follow a rule to do so. I would distribute little flags among them, and if anyone wanted to leave they had to raise a flag: then I would have this person accompanied to the exit (later I revised the detail of the little flags; they softened the situation, and my idea was that the Happening had to be spare, naked, hard). I would go on talking about the idea of control, about the fact that almost everything had been foreseen. I would repeat the word control to the point of associating it with the idea of a guarantee. That the public would have guarantees, even physical guarantees, that nothing could happen. Nothing, except one thing: a fire in the room. But a fire could happen in any other room, in any other theater. And, in any event, precautions had been taken, and for this reason I had equipped myself with a quantity of fire extinguishers (which I would have with me at this time and would show to the audience). Finally, to give more guarantees, to reinforce the image of the fact that everything or almost everything had been foreseen, and even designed or controlled, I myself would discharge a fire extinguisher immediately. And I would do it for two additional motives. On the one hand, because not many people have ever seen a fire extinguisher in action—except those who have been in a fire—and therefore there exists some doubt as to whether, in the case of a fire, the fire extinguishers that we see hanging from the walls will work or not. And, on the other, for the aesthetic side of the question, because the discharging of a fire extinguisher is a spectacle of a certain beauty. And it was important for me to exploit this beauty.

Once the fire extinguisher had been discharged, the electronic sound would begin, the lights illuminating the sector of the platform with my performers would go on, and the situation would then be created. For two hours. Later I changed the duration, reducing it to one hour. I think that was a mistake, which reveals, in a way, certain idealist prejudices that surely weighed on me: in reality, I was more interested in the *signification* of the situation than in its *facticity*, its hard concreteness. (Think of the difference with La Monte Young, who brought this concreteness to the very physical and physiological limits of the body.)

In April, I gathered a group of people, plastic artists for the most part, to plan a festival of Happenings: Oscar Palacio, Leopoldo Maler, David Lamelas, Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Mario Gandelsonas. I invited them to make a successive set of Happenings, in a relatively limited space of time. They accepted; we then agreed that various art galleries—Bonino, Lirolay, Guernica, etc.—would each have to take the responsibility of presenting an artist. The group of Happenings would in its turn be presented and presided

over by the Museo de Arte Moderno of the City of Buenos Aires. We spoke with Hugo Parpagnoli, the director of the Museum, and with the gallerists: everyone agreed. By acting in this way—i.e., by planning our Happenings within an official framework: the presence of the museum—I intended to work according to what may be called pedagogical ends. I was attracted by the idea of definitively introducing a new aesthetic genre among us. For this, our Happenings had to fulfill only one condition: they must not be very French, that is, not very sexual. I was thinking of accomplishing purely aesthetic ends, and I imagined myself a bit like the director of the Museum of Stockholm, who had opened himself up, from within an official institution, to all manner of avant-garde manifestations. But Buenos Aires is not a Swedish city. At the moment during which we planned the two-week festival there came the coup d'état that brought Juan Carlos Onganía to power, and there was an outburst of puritanism and police persecution. Scared, we abandoned the project: what is more, it was a bit embarrassing, amid the gravity of the political situation, to be creating Happenings... In this respect—embroiled in a sentiment of mute rage—I now think exactly the contrary. And I am also beginning to think the contrary about those “pedagogical” ends: about the idea of introducing the dissolving and negative force of a new artistic genre through the positive image of official institutions.

It was only recently, in November, at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (ITDT), that I would effectively succeed in carrying out my Happening. The imminence of the date had made me think about my own “image”: about the idea that others had of me and about the idea I had about this idea. Something would change: from a critic or an essayist or a university researcher, I would become a *happenista*. It would not be bad—I thought—if the hybridization of images at least had the result of disquieting or disorienting someone.

In the meantime, the central situation of the planned Happening had undergone a modification. Instead of people of a downtrodden condition, it would use actors. But you will see, this was not too great a compromise, nor a tribute to artificiality in detriment to reality. It came about because of a performance that Leopoldo Maler presented at the ITDT. In it he used three older women who had caught my attention: at one moment they came onto the stage to represent a radio or television quiz show. The women each had to sing a song in order to get the prize. I remembered the aspect of the women, grotesque in their high heels, holding their purses in their hands, in a rather ingenuous position. These persons very clearly denoted a social origin: lower middle class. It was exactly what I needed: a group of around twenty persons indicating the same class level, men and women. Maler then gave me the telephone number of a woman who could engage this number of persons. It was somebody who had something like an agency for placing extras. I called her, she listened to me very courteously, and we agreed that there would be twenty persons. She asked me to explain what kind of persons I needed, what physical aspect. I summed it up: older persons, looking badly off, poorly dressed. She said she understood. I would have to pay each person four hundred pesos.

As for the fire extinguishers, I had no difficulty obtaining them. I put myself in contact with an industry that made them, and spoke with the sales manager. Very courteously, he accepted my request. He would lend me twelve fire extinguishers for one day. He also gave me instructions

about different kinds of fire extinguishers to cover the possibility of various dangers. I would use one that produces a dense white smoke. When I tried it out, before the Happening, I also realized that it produced a quite deafening noise. I would use it as a bridge between my words and the electronic sound. At five in the afternoon on October 26, the first of the twenty hired persons began to arrive. By six all twenty had arrived. Men and women aged between forty-five to sixty years old (there was only one younger person, a man of thirty to thirty-five). These people came to “work” for four hundred pesos; it was temporary work, and even supposing—though it was impossible—that they obtained something similar every day, they would not succeed in pulling in more than twelve thousand pesos a month. I had already understood that the normal job of almost all of them was to be hawkers of cheap jewelry, leather goods, and “variety articles” in those shops that are always on the verge of closing and that you find along Corrientes Street, or in some areas of Rivadavia or Cabildo. I imagined that with this work they must earn even less than I was going to pay them. I was not wrong.

I gathered them together and explained what they were to do. I told them that instead of four hundred I would pay them six hundred pesos: from that point on they gave me their full attention. I felt a bit cynical: but neither did I wish to have too many illusions. I wasn’t going to demonize myself for this social act of manipulation that happens every day in real society. I then explained to them that what we were going to do was not exactly theater. That they had nothing to do other than to remain still for an hour, motionless, shoulders against the wall of the room; and that the “play” would not be carried out in the normal theater, but in a large storage room that I had expressly prepared. I also told them that there would be something uncomfortable for them: during this hour there would be a very high-pitched sound, at very high volume, and very deafening. And they had to put up with it, there was no alternative. And I asked whether they accepted.

One of the older ones seemed to pull back, but they all consulted each other with their eyes and, finally, with mutual solidarity, they answered yes. As I began to feel vaguely guilty, I considered offering them cotton plugs that they could put in their ears. I did so, and they accepted, and I sent someone off to look for the cotton. A quite friendly climate had already sprung up between us. They asked me about the costumes (each of the old people held a sack or a suitcase in hand). I told them that they should dress as poor people, but they shouldn’t use make-up. They didn’t all obey me completely; the only way not to totally be objects, not to be totally passive, I thought, was for them to do something related to the profession of the actor.

Soon it came time for the Happening to begin. Everything was ready: the tape loop (which I had prepared in the ITDT’s experimental music lab), the fire extinguishers. I had also prepared a little armchair, on which I would remain with my back to the public, to say the opening words. I then went down with everyone to the storage room, and explained to them how they were to stand against the back wall. I had also prepared the lights. All that remained was to pay the extras: for this I began to distribute cards, signed by myself, with each one’s name, which they would subsequently be able to cash with the secretary of the Audiovisual Department of the Institute. The old folks surrounded me, almost assaulting me, and I must have looked like a movie

actor distributing autographs. I saw that the first persons had arrived: two of them seemed to be happy. I continued with the cards; when I turned my head again, the room was full of people. Something had begun, and I felt as though something had slipped loose without my consent, a mechanism had gone into motion. I hurried, arranged the old folks in the planned position, and ordered the lights turned off. Then I asked the people who had arrived not to come forward and just to sit down on the floor. The sense of expectation was high, and they obeyed.

Then I began to speak. I told them, from the chair, and with my back turned, approximately what I had planned. But before that I also told them what was happening when they entered the room, that I was paying the old folks. That they had asked me for four hundred and that I had given them six. That I had paid the old people to let themselves be seen, and that the audience, the others, those who were facing the old folks, more than two hundred people, had each paid two hundred pesos to look at them. That in all this there was a circle, not such a strange one, through which the money moved, and that I was the mediator. Then I discharged the fire extinguisher, and afterward the sound came on and rapidly attained the chosen volume. When the spotlight that illuminated me went out, I myself went to up to the spotlights that were to illuminate the old people and I turned them on. Against the white wall, their spirit shamed and flattened out by the white light, next to each other in a line, the old people were rigid, ready to let themselves be looked at for an hour. The electronic sound lent greater immobility to the scene. I looked toward the audience: they too, in stillness, looked at the old people.

When my Leftist friends (I speak without irony: I am referring to people with clear heads, at least on certain points) asked me, troubled, about the meaning of the Happening, I answered them using a phrase that I repeated using exactly the same order of words each time I was asked the same question. My Happening, I now repeat, was nothing other than “an act of social sadism made explicit.”

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Notes

- 1 That he is not, in truth, would not prove much. The same prejudices with respect to this word–“Happening”–can be found in a Marxist intellectual or party militant. Nor is it a matter of trying to disarm the adversary’s arguments by drawing attention to what he is *not*. I introduce the question of the left here for expository reasons, to set things up more rapidly.
- 2 Thomas Moro Simpson, *Formas lógicas, realidad y significación* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1964).
- 3 Dogmatic in the positive sense of the word. This is what Sartre sees at the outset of his “critical” investigation of “dialectical reason.” But, in the reverse, one must certainly take care not to make Marxism into a romantic philosophy of totality and synthesis. The category of totality, its indiscriminate use, has more to do with a specifically spiritualist philosophy than with the strict discipline demanded by the Marxist idea of “science.”
- 4 See the opening chapters of Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 5 Using Roland Barthes’ words, I call intelligence “the aesthetic contemplation of the intelligible.”
- 6 Jean-Jacques Lebel is not the only case in France. But whatever the value of his Happenings, one does have to recognize the positive side of his violence, his passion for getting involved. In April of 1966 I was able to attend a Happening by Lebel in Paris, where practically–and sexually–everything happened: a naked woman masturbating, an act of coitus in the middle of the space. The following day the police shut down the event.
- 7 Kirby’s work left quite an impression on Marta Minujín, and it should be considered as the basis of her inspiration for the Happening with the sixty television sets.
- 8 In the language of the “addict,” it means being strongly affected by the drug.



Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen, a happening by Oscar Masotta (1966), repeated by Dora García in June 2016 at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires. Photos: Bruno Dubner. © Dora García.



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SeGunda Vez is a film and research Project centered around the figure of Oscar Masotta (Buenos Aires, 1930, Barcelona, 1979), an author, PsYchoanalYst, and haPPe-nista. SeGunda Vez uses the figure and work of Masotta to exPlore the intersecti-
ons between Performance, PsYchoanalYsis, and Politics, PaYinG sPecial attention to narrative strateGies such as rePeTition and metafiction.

**“One Year aGo, Allan KaProw referred to us as a countrY of ‘haPPenistas,’ even thouGh, uP to that date, exPress ma-nifestations of the 9enre had barelY existed in ArGentina.”
– Oscar Masotta**

