

Segunda Vez: How Masotta Was Repeated



A research Project
led by Dora García

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This and following pages: Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*, 1967.
Happening at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, El Theatrón, and
Anchorena, Buenos Aires. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of
Cloe Masotta.











“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 muterage—I now think exactly the opposite.”

—Oscar Masotta,
“I Committed a Happening”

Dear reader,

The first time I heard Oscar Masotta’s name was during a public conversation with Argentinean author Ricardo Piglia at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires, in March 2014. Piglia mentioned Masotta almost in passing, as someone whose interest in performance, psychoanalysis, and politics might intersect with my interests.

A few months later, when I learnt that Masotta had died in Barcelona, not far from my house, and when I read some of his texts I 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. Piglia’s *Artificial Respiration* is a novel organized around letters that are continuously intercepted by readers other than their addressees. And that is what that almost off-hand remark became: a message that was not meant for me, but that had nevertheless come my way. A *found object*, in the technical sense: without looking for it, I had found 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, were ready to apply for a grant. It was thanks to that grant that we were able to make a film, *Segunda Vez*, to gather texts for this book, to create a website, and to translate some of Masotta’s texts. We are particularly happy to be able to offer a translation of Masotta’s early, and seminal, study of the Argentinean author Roberto Arlt, *Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt*, in its entirety. Our hope was to bring Masotta’s work to the forefront and to widen the readership of this figure, who had been totally unknown to us until a mere couple of years ago, but who immediately, and completely, swept us off our feet.

You are now holding in your hands one of the products of this quest; the other is the film *Segunda Vez*, which is being released simultaneously. Together, the book and the film are the final result of those four years of research and of the imagination and enthusiasm that all the people involved—too many to name here—brought to this project. Certainly this is not the end, but it is an important, and cherished, beacon for us. We hope, dear reader, that you enjoy it.

Dora García



Dora García, *Segunda Vez* (still), 2018. 92'

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Distant Star
(excerpt, 1996)

by Roberto Bolaño

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by Dora García



Giotto, *Raising of Lazarus*, 1305-06.
Fresco, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy.

The second “meeting” happened some months later during that same year, 1973. On a cool spring night I was walking out of a bookshop at 2700 Santa Fé Street. Just as I stepped out, a long black car pulled to a stop by the curb, right in front of me. I froze—the brutal Ezeiza massacre was still fresh in the air. Sindicalists, political leaders, militants, ex-militants, and “ideological suspects” were being assassinated or executed on an almost daily basis. On September 6, the ERP had mounted an assault on the Sanidad Military Post in order to take rifles. They failed, were wounded and detained—but not before killing the commander of the military forces; on September 26, José Ignacio Rucci had been summarily assassinated. Playing dead as I stood might perhaps help me. I saw that there were five people in the car. The back door closest to me opened and one of the passengers stepped out, leaving the door open behind him. This person, a little fellow dressed in dark tones, walked past me and into the bookstore. I looked into the back seat, and there, deep in the middle seat, also dressed in dark hues and wearing a necktie, was Masotta. There was someone else to his left, and two people in the front seats, all dressed in black or similar. Masotta and I looked at each other: we started sizing each other up, but we exchanged no greetings, gave no sign of recognition. I stood and the sizing up continued, since I was not going to leave until there was some sign of approach, or until Masotta had disappeared. And yet, I wasn’t sure that Masotta had recognized me: a sort of fog seemed to float before his eyes and his very pale face—more of a dull grimace or an effigy of boredom. At last, a sort of slow and cumulative sadness seemed to flash across that face and give it expressivity. Sadness for himself? For me? For both of us? I’ll never know, and I don’t care. The little fellow who had gone into the bookstore returned and got back into the car. The door closed and the car left, taking Masotta and his four companions, or guards.¹

With these words, Carlos Correas recalls the last time he saw Masotta. Correas and Masotta met at university and were close friends for years, though eventually they became estranged, partly as a result of Masotta’s widening intellectual interests and pursuits, notably contemporary art and psychoanalysis. 1973, when the “meeting” happened, was one of the darkest years in Argentina’s history, the year of the Ezeiza massacre and of the formation of the far-right death squads known as the Triple A. If Correas decided to “play dead,” it is because he recognized what had quickly become a typical situation: a car pulling to a stop in front of you could mean the end. But, to his surprise, he discovered that one of the people in the car was his old friend, a man Correas had once even been in love with.

Masotta’s family insists that professional ambition is what prompted him to leave Buenos Aires in 1974: he wanted to pursue his career as a Lacanian reader, translator, and teacher. But some of his friends also insist that he had been “squeezed” (*apretado*) by the Triple A, and had left out of fear of further prosecution. It is possible, then, that what Correas describes is that moment. That might explain the absence of expressivity in Masotta’s “pale” and “dull” face; the fact that he doesn’t recognize, or pretends not to recognize, his old friend; the sadness that flashes across his face. Correas himself is unsure: are the people Masotta is with his “companions,” or his “guards”? In the end, Correas decides he does not care. The car leaves.

However one reads the scene, the fact is that Masotta is both a formidable intellectual and a wonderful protagonist in the political thriller that Correas’ episode describes. Violence, or the image of violence, is a fundamental ingredient of the artistic production of those years. Indeed, artistic production in general, and Happenings in particular, had something of the criminal about them, as Masotta himself suggests:

All of this created a certain semblance between the Happening and some mafia operations, like a bank holdup, for example. With a goal in mind—getting hold of the money—one must trace a strategy of schedules and timetables: one must know what time the employee with the key to the safe arrives; one must find a way to distract

a cop, in other words, to create a “gap” in the cop’s constant vigilance; one must orchestrate the coincidence of this “gap” with the hour when the bank has the fewest number of clients.²

The analogy between the Happening and the mafia, Masotta tells us, was first suggested by Allan Kaprow, who writes, in the text that must have been in Masotta’s mind:

But the importance given to purposive action also suggest the Happening’s affinities with practices marginal to the fine arts, such as parades, carnivals, games, expeditions, guided tours, orgies, religious ceremonies, and such secular rituals as the elaborate operations of the mafia.³

Purposive action, carefully coordinated and planned: very few Happenings in the history of the genre could have been harder to coordinate and synchronize than Masotta’s *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter), which took place in Buenos Aires on July 16, 1967. One possible exception is *Calling*, an almost contemporary two-day Happening by Kaprow that took place in New York and South Brunswick on August 21 and 22, 1965.

Calling was, perhaps, even closer to a mafia operation, both in its cruelty and iconography, than *El helicóptero*. Participants fell into two groups: victims and perpetrators. Throughout the first half, and day, of *Calling*, Kaprow’s “victims” were abducted several times: wrapped in silver foil and white laundry bags, they were relocated to landmarks around New York City by car and eventually abandoned at the information booth at Grand Central Station. When they managed to liberate themselves from their silver and white shrouds, these “human packages” had to call a predetermined phone number: someone would answer but immediately hang up, without saying a word (haven’t we seen this in a thousand mafia films?). The following day, the victims became the perpetrators: it was the perpetrators turn to be stripped naked by their former victims and abandoned in the woods, hanging upside down from trees (again, haven’t we seen this in a thousand mafia films?).



Peter Moore, performance view of Allan Kaprow's *Calling*. South Brunswick, New Jersey, August 21, 1965. © Barbara Moore, licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.



Kaprow's description of the situation in the score for *Calling* couldn't be more forensic:

In the woods, the persons call out names and hear hidden answers. Here and there, they come upon people dangling upside down from ropes. They rip the people's clothes off and go away. The naked figures call to each other in the woods for a long time until they are tired. Silence.⁴

Kaprow's Happenings effect the transition that turns the audience from beholders to participants, and it is the audience/participants who are compelled to adopt the role of victim or of perpetrator.⁵

Kaprow's two-part Happening, *A Service for the Dead* (March and August 1962) has the audience being led to a cave-like space, the foyer of the Maidman Playhouse in New York, and this first part of the Happening ends with a woman, supine and naked, being covered by a white sheet. The same audience, in the second part of the Happening in August, is taken outdoors, to the Atlantic shore of Long Island, to a neighborhood famous for being home to many psychiatrists: a symbolic passage from land to sea, from reason to the unconscious. The open Atlantic shoreline stands in dramatic contrast to the theatre's claustrophobic and crowded basement. We hear echoes of *El helicóptero*, where part of the audience is taken to a basement theater, and another to the abandoned train station of an upscale suburb overlooking the water.

While the audience in the second part of *A Service for the Dead* was particularly active, carrying all sorts of props, *Calling* was the first Kaprow Happening to have no audience at all, since each and every member of the "audience" had a role to play, and Kaprow indicates that communication is the main subject of *Calling*. That said, it is clear that the form of communication in question is not a neutral exchange between two equal partners, but an irreversible, unilateral, and one-directional demonstration of power. There was no audience: the *happeners* were performing, for themselves and for one another. The representation of violence directed against the spectators in previous Happenings is now directed, instead, at the performers' bodies. The passive performers (victims) were entirely at the mercy of

Peter Moore, performance view of Allan Kaprow's *Calling*. South Brunswick, New Jersey, August 22, 1965. © Barbara Moore, licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

their active counterparts (perpetrators), who slashed and tore the clothes of the “victims” and left them helplessly dangling upside down, naked. The relation here is one of trust and dependence, with clear sadomasochistic associations.

Discussing *El helicóptero*, Masotta describes an image that might owe something to Kaprow:

On one of the walls was projected an eight-minute film that accentuated the expressionist image: a figure, completely bound in bandages, twisted and turned violently in an effort to free itself from the ties that bound it (it was a replica, a “citation,” of a film by Claes Oldenburg). Louis Moholo accompanied the figure’s movements with his drum kit. A live figure—similar to the one in the film—cleared a path through the audience, enveloped in darkness, to reach the wall upon which the film was being projected, and once there it started to mirror the contortions of the figure in the film.⁶

Masotta does not tell us which Oldenburg film he is talking about, but it is hard to understand why he doesn’t mention *Calling*, since that is the most obvious reference. Structural similarities between different Happenings aside, Masotta wanted to highlight the reference to ritual and darkness that was characteristic of Jean-Jacques Lebel’s Happenings. Among other things, *El helicóptero* is a critique of what Masotta calls Lebel’s “shit aesthetics.”⁷

The association between the shrouded body and a corpse was likewise the central idea of a seminal piece by Artur Barrio, *Trouxas Ensanguentadas* (Bloody Bundles), produced in 1969-70. During that period, Brazil, like Argentina, was under siege from the state terrorism of a military dictatorship. *Trouxas Ensanguentadas* happened in three different contexts: the first time was at the MAM (the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, 1969), and there the bundles consisted of newspapers, aluminum foam, cement, meat, and blood, all bundled together with white cloth. It didn’t take long for the police to show up, and a mere forty-three hours after being inaugurated, the work had been removed. The second time, Barrio scattered his “bloody



Artur Barrio, *Situação T/T 1*, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 1970.
Part of *Trouxas Ensanguentadas*. Photo: César Carneiro.

bundles” through the streets of Rio de Janeiro. The third time was at the Municipal Park in Belo Horizonte, in 1970, as part of the demonstration *Do Corpo à Terra* (From Body to Earth). There, the bundles attracted a huge audience—as well as the fire brigade and, finally and inevitably, the police, who confiscated the work. This time, however, the whole procedure was secretly recorded and shown in the exhibition *Information* at MoMA. The curator of that show, Kynaston McShine, says apropos of Barrio’s work: “If you are an artist in Brazil, you know at least one friend who is being tortured; if you are one in Argentina, you probably have had a neighbor who has been in jail for having long hair or for not being ‘dressed’ properly; and if you are living in the United States, you may fear that you will be shot at, either in the universities, in your bed, or more formally in Indochina. It may seem too inappropriate, if not absurd, to get up in the morning, walk into a room and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas. What can you as a young artist do that seems relevant and meaningful?”⁸

There was of course a world of difference between undertaking these types of action in the US, a democracy, and in Argentina and Brazil, both of which were dictatorships at the time. Lucy Lippard refers to this difference in an interview with curator Nina Möntmann:

I’ve often pondered why artists in more volatile or totalitarian societies (Chile in 1973, or Central America around 1980, are among the chilling examples) were perceived by their rightwing governments as real threats, whereas we who were analyzing activism, making art by “desecrating” American flags, or yelling and wheatpasting on the streets of New York with similar politics were just nuisances to the US government, a dispiriting sign of art’s direct ineffectiveness.⁹

Ana Longoni suggests that when the collectively authored counter-information piece, *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán is Burning), was closed down by the police on November 25, 1968, within hours of opening at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, it was as if a garden of forking paths had opened up for Argentinean artists and, more broadly, for intellectuals and thinkers of all stripes. The dilemma

was this: either go into exile, or renounce artistic (or intellectual) practice altogether.¹⁰ Some chose the latter route; Masotta, in due course, was to choose the former.

* * *

Roberto Bolaño spent his childhood in Chile and Mexico. In 1973, when he was twenty years old, he returned to Chile to support Salvador Allende’s government. After Pinochet’s putsch, Bolaño claims he was arrested and held in custody for a little over a week, and that he returned to Mexico following his release. In 1977, he moved to Spain, to a town not far from Barcelona.

In 1996, Bolaño published *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, a completely fictional encyclopedia of rightwing writers in the American continent. It’s a collection of ultra-right fascists and Nazis, with all the load of horror, class hate, caciquism, irrationality, racism, and brutality. The last of the characters portrayed, Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, will become the protagonist of Bolaño’s next novel, *Distant Star*, also published in 1996. The same episode is described in both books, though what they emphasize and focus on differs. Bolaño says that the episode was narrated to him by his alter ego, Arturo Belano, and it is quite thrilling to compare some of the events described in one and the other.

In the Carlos Ramírez Hoffman section of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, we read:

At that stage he was calling himself Emilio Stevens and writing poems of which Cherniakovski did not disapprove, although the stars of the workshop were the twins Maria and Magdalena Venegas, seventeen or perhaps eighteen-year-old poets from Nacimiento (...). He was at the height of his fame. He was called upon to undertake something grand in the capital, something spectacular to show *that the new regime was interested in avant-garde art*. Ramírez Hoffman was only too pleased to oblige. (...) That was where he wrote the first line: Death is Friendship. (...) Death is Chile. (...) Death is responsibility. (...) Death is love and Death is growth. (...)

Death is communion. (...) Death is cleansing. (...) Death is my heart. And then: Take my heart. (...) Our change, our advantage. (...) Death is resurrection. (...) They understood the pilot's will and knew that although they couldn't make head or tail of it, they were witnessing an event of great significance for *the art of the future*. (...) ... he called for silence and said (these are his actual words, according to Zabaleta) that it was time to plunge into *the art of the future*. He opened the bedroom door and began to let the guests in one by one. One at a time, gentlemen: *the art of Chile is not for the herd*. (...) According to some rumors, he was expelled from the air force (...). He changed his name. He was associated with various ephemeral literary magazines, to which he contributed proposals for happenings that never happened, unless (and it hardly bears thinking about) he organized them in secret.¹¹

In *Distant Star*, Ramírez Hoffman goes by two names: Alberto Ruiz-Tagle is the young poet who reappears as Carlos Wieder (Wieder means “again” in German), the fascist hero, aviator, and artist. We read:

But let us return to the beginning, to Carlos Wieder and the year of grace 1974. At that time Wieder was at the height of his fame. After his triumphant journey to Antarctica and aerial displays over numerous Chilean cities, he was called upon to undertake something grand in the capital, something spectacular to show *the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not at odds, quite the contrary*. (...) He said that after writing in the sky it would be appropriate—as well as charmingly paradoxical—to circumscribe the epilogue to his aerial poem within the bounds of the poet's den. As to the nature of the photos (...) he would only say that it was visual poetry—*experimental, quintessential, art for art's sake*—and

that everyone would find it amusing. (...) Wieder's plane emerged far from the airstrip, over an outlying suburb of Santiago. There he wrote the first line: Death is friendship. (...) Death is Chile. (...) Death is responsibility. (...) Death is love and Death is growth. (...) Death is communion. (...) Death is cleansing. (...) Death is my heart. Then: Take my heart. And then his name: Carlos Wieder. (...) Death is resurrection. (...) ... and they knew that although they couldn't make head or tail of it, they were witnessing a unique event, of *great significance for the art of the future*. (...) Finally, on the stroke of midnight, he climbed onto a chair in the living room, called for silence and said (these are his actual words according to Muñoz Cano) that it was time to plunge into *the art of the future*. (...) There is, of course, no truth to the story that there were colored lights or drum beats coming from a cassette player hidden under the bed. (...) Muñoz Cano claims to have recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most of them were women. The background hardly varied from one photo to another, so it seemed they had all been taken in the same place. The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures, although Muñoz Cano could not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken. (...) A photo of a young blonde woman who seemed to be dissolving into the air. A photo of a severed finger, thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement.¹²

In both novels, there's a character (at once a poet, a fascist hero, and a visual artist) who organizes an exhibition of photographs that he bills as “the art of the future” and “avant-garde art,” and who is suspected of having organized some Happenings, which either didn't take place, or took place in secret. He is also a murderer, a torturer, an agent of terror, and an accomplice of the new regime's

desire to show interest in avant-garde art. The sky as palimpsest for poetry, the “poet’s den”—his own room, dark and confined—as the “paradoxical epilogue”¹³ to the aerial poem. We hear, again, echoes of *El helicóptero*, where a part of the Happening consists of the helicopter flying over the abandoned train station. What is chilling about these two almost identical scenes—written by a leftist Latin American author who was, evidently, well informed about the last tendencies of the Latin American avant-gardes before they were silenced by dictatorships—is the way it couples state terror and avant-garde art.

There is a line of thought that imagines artists and poets as prophets, as beings endowed with special subjectivities that allow them to foretell the catastrophes to come. Ricardo Piglia mentions Kafka’s prophetic qualities in the novel *Artificial Respiration*: “The word *Ungeziefer*,” meaning insect or vermin, “which the Nazis would use to designate prisoners in the concentration camps, is the same word that Kafka uses to describe what Gregor Samsa has turned into one morning.”¹⁴

Similarly, Joyce famously predicted the atom bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in *Finnegans Wake*:

He’d left his stickup in his hand to show them none ill feeling. Whatthough for all appentices it had a *mushroom* on it. While he faced them front to back, Then paraseuls round, quite taken attack, sclaiming, Howe cools Eavybrolly!

—Good marrams, sagd he, freshwatties and boasterdes all, as he put into bierhiven, *nogey-sokey* first, cabootle segund, jilling to windwards, as he made straks for that oerasound the snarsty weg for Publin, so was his horenpipe lug in the lee off their mouths organs, with his tilt too taut for his tammy all a slaunter and his wigger on a wagger with its tag tucked.¹⁵

Masotta likewise toyed with the archetype of the sinister self-fulfilling prophecy with his anti-Happening or mass media work *El mensaje fantasma* (The Ghost Message, 1967). A poster that read, “This poster will be broadcast on TV Channel 11 on July 20,” was pasted to the walls of the city center in Buenos Aires.

And on the appointed date the poster was broadcast. It’s hard to imagine a more literal articulation of the proverbial “writing on the wall.”

There was an undeniably prophetic quality to it, as there was to his two Happenings, *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen* (To Induce the Spirit of the Image, 1966), and *El helicóptero*. It wasn’t long after the latter that the Argentinean government started throwing dissidents—and what counted as dissidence could be as trivial as owning a red book—out of airplanes. And it wasn’t long after *El mensaje fantasma* that the Triple A took to the media, and Triple A groups, sent by the government’s Press Secretary, occupied channels 9 and 11, and later channels 7 and 13 as well, and used these channels to announce the names of future victims and to justify abductions and assassinations already carried out.

Carlos Correas had reason to “play dead” as the black car pulled to a stop in front of him, unexpectedly giving him a last, melancholy glimpse of his erstwhile friend.



This and following pages: Dora García,
Segunda Vez (stills), 2018. 92'

3

An Intellectual Passion

by Jorge Jinkis



With some modesty—inevitably, as if betrayal could not but be the tragic horizon of words that advance, unguarded, towards the risk of being wrong—I repeat, in a low voice, these words by Maurice Blanchot:

“We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement. Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode, yet into which all of the simplicity of life enters, passes by way of the recognition of the strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them, not to make of them a topic of conversations (or essays), but the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation. Here discretion lies not in the simple refusal to put forward confidences (how vulgar this would be, even to think of it), but it is the interval, the pure interval that, from me to this other who is a friend, measures all that is between us, the interruption of being that never authorizes me to use him, or my knowledge of him (were it to praise him), and that, far from preventing all communication, brings us together in the difference and sometimes this silence of speech.”¹

Far from a declaration of impotence, the gesture that doesn't reduce the unknown to the known, that doesn't subjugate the limits imposed by the enigma of friendship, but instead preserves its mystery, renders us responsible for our relation to a singularity composed of pure differences. It is lucid, as Blanchot says, to accompany one's friend's strangeness, to resist feigning dialogue, not just with the lost interlocutor, but also with that part of our presence that we lost with him. With time, though not only with time, when pain is displaced from its pathetic labor, one can celebrate the unmitigated happiness of having had him as a friend.

Honoring that fortune doesn't keep us from reading, but reading establishes another form of distance, one that obliges us to situate the difficulty of the obstacles facing us when the existence of words is articulated to the time of history. A *differential and historical* reading: that was one of the names of Masotta's project.

1.

"Everything here is difference," Masotta announces in his first psychoanalytic book, and continues: "a book written in the Spanish of Río de la Plata that shares almost no words with other books written on the same topic in the same Spanish, a text that repeats and transforms the text of a European author and that does not fail to warn the reader that perhaps it betrays when it repeats and that, when it transforms, it is only out of its desire to repeat."²

Masotta had already found this crossroads between repetition, difference, and betrayal earlier. In the presentation of his book about Roberto Arlt, *Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt*, a book that, he says ironically, "anyone who'd read Sartre could have written," Masotta situates himself as a reader.³ Writing originates in reading and, once again, Masotta warns that the reference to a European author inscribes him in a discussion with other readings that treat an Argentinian subject in the language of the Río de la Plata.

With this insufficiency and this impossibility, the point was to construct an improbable reality that existed, perhaps, in the form of a problem, one that had to be solved in and through writing. Masotta invents for himself a procedure; he puts in play a usurpation that denounces itself; he surrenders to the aesthetic intuition of his subjective implication; and he sets off to rescue an Argentinian theme: spurious language, rootedness and rootlessness, the contradictory demands that a social class exacts from a body, the humiliations of the individual who decides for an absolute leap into evil. And he finds a name for that knot: "Myself."

Resounding in the antipodes is that ghost who nests in the soul of the poet and who replies to Peer Gynt's question with this arresting announcement: "My name is Myself." That is not an identification, but the voice of a failed identification. Masotta yielded his name to the impossibility of naming that failure.

That is why he thanks Cesare Pavese for having deprived the right of the monopoly it had had till then on the idea of destiny.⁴ And Michel Leiris, who thinks that to write is to put oneself in danger, that one writes because of books, not because of life. But what is the border between life and books in a writing that presents itself both as an attack on the border police *and* as a revindication of limits?

The reference to madness is paradigmatic. The sixties fell into something of a romantic idealization of madness, seeing it as an experience, a journey to find a way out. But, in contrast to the mystical empiricism of the English,⁵ Masotta argues that madness is the intersection between structure and consciousness, that it offers a singular recourse with which to extract oneself from class culture: "It is the exact opposite of incoherence. It is, rather, the putting into practice of the highest demands of logic and reason."⁶ That word, logic, doesn't deny history; instead, it erupts in history to say that it is not a question of periods and periodizations, but a position of rupture.

2.

Masotta's intellectual trajectory over three decades obliges us to leave blank the improbable places of synthesis. Philosophy, phenomenology, and Marxism; literary criticism, the political essay, literature, aesthetics, and artistic experimentation (Pop Art, the Happening, media art, comic books); the structure of communication and semiology, structuralism, psychoanalysis, its practice and its teaching—and, in all these areas, *theoretical action*. There's a dispersion into a heterogeneity that can frustrate those attached to regimented professional discourses, but that is not in conflict with a convergent orientation. Each time an irreducible experience is at work it reveals, in its complexity, a common problematic: a knot and an overdetermination, the tension between the critical nerve of avant-garde theoretical currents and their intrusion into the more or less local reorganizations of the intellectual field.

I have cited from a book about Lacan published in 1970, and from a talk about literature given in the late 1960s. Both problematize, in different ways, the language spoken by Argentinians. But we have to go as far back as 1954 to show that

this is an insistent theme. In September of that year Masotta published “Denuncias sin testigo” (Denunciations without Witness) in the third issue of the magazine *Contorno*. Masotta’s text is a diatribe against a text by Vocos Lescano published in the Madrid-based magazine *Ínsula*. In it, Masotta argues in favor of the *voseo* as *the mode*, as the differential accent, of Argentinian speech, and against any form of grammatical moralism in literature. In doing so, however, Masotta is not defending a regionalist particularity: he’s attacking the conservative trait of the “naïf who thinks that the use of ‘tu’ imparts *tone* and cultural standing.”

There is no doubt that Masotta knew the reminiscence value that affects any trend. But it’s not a question of *revival*; Masotta, deploying a rhetoric that is not lacking in provocation, and relying each time on the *inaugural reach of the present tense*, directs himself towards “those who recognize in the vertigo of some trends the profound truth of the period that seems to be opening up before us, a real moment of intellectual reorganization.” No to the politics of trends; trends at the service of a politics that calls into question everything that has been acquired.

3.

Let us state our conviction. Oscar Masotta had meant—and maybe it’s important to create the occasion to rectify the perfection of this past—an alternative, a rejection of the historical luck that, in our city, reduced the figure of the intellectual to that of an ideologue, of someone overflowing with arguments about a practice that he’s ignorant about, the servant of an expert meta-language that provides the theoretical rationalization of a practice. Masotta’s singularity resides in the fact that he actually meddled in the practices that mattered to him, and he did so while circumventing the institutions that legislate academic borders and delineate each profession. If art still means “know how,” Masotta was an artist who learned the difficulties of practicing what he spoke about. The term “intervention” might designate his praxis, but that requires some clarifications.

One tends to reserve the use of “meddle,” meaning to mix (here a designator of impurity), or of “interfere” (which is bothersome), to designate an intervention into areas other than

one’s own (a question of property), or into areas that one has not been invited to (universities distribute these invitations as they’re instructed to). To meddle, then, is to introduce oneself while affirming—in an *unforeseen* and unauthorized way that doesn’t necessarily make it untimely—that one’s intervention means the following: “this issue concerns me too.” And to do so without anyone’s permission.

The intellectual proceeds this way by choice: he or she is a meddler, sometimes an intruder. We might think—without overstatement, we believe—that this sort of intervention in a practice, this decision to speak “from within” it, combined with the emphasis placed on the action itself, are indexes of the political relevance of a practice. But this sort of intervention has become rarefied. The intellectual who decides to speak “from within” a practice, one that has by then become his, can only get there “from outside.” And this contrast then lays the ground for the strengthening of an imaginary, *outsider* position for the one who has not been invited.

Respect could leave him to the elements; to cross the threshold in search of shelter would be to exclude oneself from the protection one has found. Between legality and legitimacy, the temptation is romantic. That said, he wasn’t a lover of the elements. Might not this scene, which seems to destine the hero to the bad manners of rebellion, not be identical to itself? Without the protection of cynicism, would it not be possible, perhaps, to spoil the imposture without the horror of practicing it? It became possible to find a way out of this anecdote and to transform it into a theoretical enterprise because Oscar Masotta was not Roberto Arlt.

4.

The critical essay doesn’t place itself in the judge’s bench: it partakes, plays the game. It assumes the necessary insufficiency and rejects the classic option between dogmatism and eclecticism; it bets on writing, exploration, and conflict, sometimes against the technical propensities of academics; it always runs the risk of lacking the perfection of that which doesn’t fail. The essay, which abandons the comfort of sticking to rigid methodological norms,

puts itself at risk by entrusting its search to what the style does in the act of writing itself.

A stylistic trait of Masotta's is to present this risk as an inconclusive and failed attempt. We might mention here the "Six Frustrated Attempts to Write about Arlt,"⁸ and we could also mention his choice for the title, *Ensayos lacanianos* (Lacanian Essays, 1976), for which there are no antecedents in the history of psychoanalysis. We should by no means confuse this with modesty: the method depends on successive rectifications, on retroversions and folds, on pushing forward towards a provisional conclusion that wears down the sluggishness of prejudice and gives itself the time to pursue the resistances of the discourse. "We should correct ourselves even more" is a sentence that Masotta repeats to himself to gain momentum and to propel himself to revise the arduous relationship that words maintain with concepts. "Ever since the Prologue to *The Hunting of the Snark*," Masotta writes, "words have been suitcases." They are full of other words, and ideas don't lack a body. That is why nothing in a text is aleatory.

It's rare for Masotta to introduce a notion without opening the historical register which that notion discusses and on which it depends. Consequently, the discourse always unfolds through discussion, as if it were touched by the careful sense that the word is sustained by the differences among words.

5.

The word "discussion." Not every controversy is a battlefield, even if the action always inscribes itself in a field with competing forces. It becomes almost inevitable that a heterodox position, a position of rupture, should include a moment of negativity, the threshold for *something other* as the support for one's own movement. We'll limit ourselves to citing only three cases.

a) In 1966, a Uruguayan weekly published a polemic about structuralism and Marxism between Eliseo Verón and Juan José Sebreli, and Masotta intervened in it with an extemporaneous title: "Anotaciones para un psiconálisis de

Sebreli" (Notes for a Psychoanalysis of Sebreli). The illegitimacy of the terms used by the latter (a humanist Marxism in the mold of Henri Lefebvre) takes on the function of a pretext that allows Masotta to convert them into an object of reflection, while also indicating the risk that Verón runs of avoiding the problem of the relation between theoretical praxis and political positions. But rather than confining himself to the limits that the terms establish for the discussion, Masotta explodes them.

b) Similarly, the polemic with Verón offers him the occasion to render explicit, in the work of that semiologist, the supposed silences of an empirical ontology of sexuality, and to find therein a discrepancy that constitutes an unbridgeable difference with psychoanalysis. The ironic title is also a topological game: "Reflexiones transemióticas sobre un bosquejo de proyecto de semiótica translingüística" (Trans-semiotic Reflections about a Sketch for a Translinguistic Semiotic Project).⁹

c) Then a talk entitled "To Read Freud,"¹⁰ which includes a critique of Rodrigué, who was president of the International Psychoanalytic Association in Buenos Aires. Following Rodrigué's erratic reply, which was published, together with Masotta's text, in the *Revista Argentina de Psicología*, Masotta wrote "Anotaciones para un psicoanálisis de Rodrigué" (Notes for a Psychoanalysis of Rodrigué), a rebuttal that does not hold back on satire: "Without foregoing the opportunity to construct the scene for a parody, our intentions here are not elegant but didactic: our goal is to continue to suggest ways to read Freud and Lacan that allow us to understand the thorny question: psychoanalysis." It's about continuing the undertaking, and it is clear that the action circles back to, and affects, the subject of the action. The

idea of parodying psychoanalysis for didactic ends was not entirely new; it was in fact being done for the second time, on the heels of Freud's *Laienanalyse*.¹¹ Whether translated as lay, secular or profane, what it really means is: without clergy.

Even if the text discusses doctrinal positions about symbolism, it is important to note that it renders explicit the structure of what it understands by polemic by highlighting the pertinence of the word "psychoanalysis" in the title. Masotta doesn't affirm the "scientific falsehood" of the position of his interlocutor, but contents himself with reconstructing the other's theory, in which the Freudian slip presents itself as a mistake. It's about speaking the truth of the mistake. In contrast to the automatism of "applied psychoanalysis," Masotta commits himself to his practice by using everything that might be pertinent in and about psychological knowledge.

Whoever reads these controversies will see that polemical exuberance, a certain violence of manners, and the mentioning of proper names are not enough to obscure the fact that, every time, what is essential to Masotta is to pursue his own reflection. Well beyond the circumstantial interlocutor, he constructs a discourse that is *dissident* to the context and aimed at undermining the authority of the institution. It might be worth our while to recall that "to discuss" comes from *discutere*, which literally means to shake or dash something till it shatters. In other words: to attend to things in such a way as to distinguish them. When we discuss, we may or may not contradict our interlocutor's argument, but we are certainly shaking or dashing something with our interlocutor.¹²

6.

It is possible that the insistence on the multiplicity of references he had recourse to and on the diversity of practices he meddled in could lead us to overlook the fact that some of his interests were invariable. There were ruptures, but also continuities.

In 1966, Masotta presented one of his *Happenings* at the Instituto Di Tella as a history of the *Happening*; the idea, as he puts it, was "to produce for the audience a situation similar to that experienced by archeologists and psychoanalysts."¹³ Let's

say that psychoanalysts and archeologists are invoked in their quality as absent from what has taken place, as readers of the rubble and vestiges left behind by old or ancient constructions. The point, then, is to create the conditions that generate the possibility of a narrative produced by the traces and remains of what has happened.¹⁴ History is not the past, but the narrative of the past pressured by the questions of the present. In every field, Masotta always paid attention to the transmission.

Isn't a concern for the audience one of the defining traits of *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter)? An absent subject is constituted by the return of the narrative he or she receives of a situation that includes him or her; Masotta creates an experience in which the audience is divided, precisely so that no one would be in the position to appropriate it in its totality.

Masotta's concern on this front is so explicit that he goes so far as to suppose an answer from Lacan: "his difficulty is his audience." One might think that the difficulty requires some medium to interpret the thousand masks worn by the demands of one market or another. It's a biased truth. In 1969, Masotta says that Freud knows that "the truth of his theory depends on its capacity to persuade his audience."

But the audience is not a contemplative public, and the point is to put it on a stage or, better said, to let it know that it is onstage: "A text is a rhetorical site wherein the truth of the ideas advanced is not extrinsic to the discourse's capacity to persuade. It should be clear that we're not talking here about convincing the reader, but rather about introducing the reader—who is there, in any case—into the discourse as the structuring *site* for the articulation of thought."

The figure of the reader names a site, still empty, towards which the discourse is directed. Introducing the reader is the door Masotta uses to enter, and in a sense he never strays too far from that door. The supposed air of common sense emanating from some of his texts is due less to the supposedly introductory level of his audience (a pretext for repression) than to the decision to face the themes by questioning the foundations of the experience and the principles that guide it.

But there is something more. By arranging, in hierarchical order, the place, the occasion, and the determinations the audience undergoes, and by explicitly naming the material

conditions of the emission of the discourse, Masotta not only accepts them as constitutive of the utterance (which indeed they are), but he introduces into the utterance, explicitly, the operation that allows for a return to the utterance. The *critical* vein of Masotta's discourse is precisely there, in this inclusion of what makes the said possible.

7.

Masotta says: "Before psychoanalysts, the people closest to me were painters (in the current sense of the term), architects, semiologists. I got into psychoanalysis through the roof, but I soon found myself climbing the walls down to the ground floor: the thing is, I had students."¹⁵ No psychoanalytic lineage, but no filiations either.

Maybe he always got in through the roof—if that indicates the heterodoxy of his entries. He saw three hundred students a week. The number is vertiginous and can derail us. He wasn't a professor who taught what had to be known; he was a teacher attentive to the cracks in what he said. He taught even what he didn't know, he taught while thinking, deeply, out loud.

But, in contrast to liberalism, in which a pragmatic conscience accords with the truth, Masotta was convinced that "truth doesn't emerge from the competence of opinions." He was a theoretician dedicated to *poiesis*, he believed in "theory as action." He made, and he made others make (write, translate, publish, create magazines, found institutions, invent professorships). Comfort was never a threat. It was an action in plain sight, far from closed off spaces and ritualized practices.

The conviction that intellectual praxis entails the commitment to turn oneself into the agent of the practice in question had consequences. Masotta distinguished psychoanalysis from the professional engagements of its institutionalization, and through that exercise he discovered his vocation while revising his own relationship to knowledge. We could add to that the political discussion of ideological actualizations; the trust he put in reading and its difficulties; the task of establishing the conditions that made reading possible; the hierarchy granted to argumentation in his tense relations with the truth; the decision,

as an interpretation of malaise, to push ahead with a theoretical project that appropriates the analytical experience as a whole: teaching, publications, the founding of a school, then another, then another. Masotta undertook all this with a precipitation that ensured him a leadership role and made it possible to distinguish psychoanalysis from psychoanalysts. Precipitation means not waiting; it means venturing into the breach, getting ahead of the event, which depends on that haste for its own realization. The vocation for the polemic, the comic stage he built for its unfolding, the humor of associations, the ferocity of the questions, the absence of any complicity with the surrounding environment, the interpretation of the complicities at the root of conformity: all of these inflect Masotta's discourse with the accent of truth.

8.

The first Lacanian Congress in Argentina was held in April, 1969, and it was a gathering of friends. For the second Lacanian Congress, held in October that same year, Masotta offered this quite specific justification: "we use the name *congress* to identify with Freud, with a time when psychoanalysis was not institutional. This designation is not without its humor for us. And—just imagine!—we go so far as to say that we identify with Freud in order to convert Lacan into our Fliess. We are Freud expecting everything from Fliess."

The first issue of the *Cuadernos Sigmund Freud*, which gathers the talks delivered during this second congress, appeared in May, 1971. Prior to that, between July and August of 1970, Masotta held a seminar at the Instituto Di Tella that was eventually published under the title *Introducción a la lectura de Jacques Lacan*, a book that proved decisive to the propagation of psychoanalysis in Argentina. At the same time, Masotta also launched the collection *Los casos de Sigmund Freud* (Sigmund Freud's Cases). Masotta also introduced the translation of two Lacan seminars, *The Formations of the Unconscious* and *Desire and Its Interpretation*, and he advocated for the translation and publication of other authors from the Freudian School in Paris.

In 1970, Eliseo Verón organized the first symposium about semiology in Argentina, and he invited the Grupo

Lacanianos de Buenos Aires to hold a panel about psychoanalysis.¹⁶ But the members of the Asociación Psiconalítica Argentina (or APA) loudly refused to participate in the symposium, pleading that they were unfamiliar with Lacan's work. In that same period, Dr. A. Duarte opened up the doors of his department at the Hospital Neuropsiquiátrico Borda to the Grupo Lacaniano de Buenos Aires, and the members of the Grupo, Masotta included, visited the hospital almost daily. However, the invitation was immediately withdrawn when a group of young architects, friends of the Grupo, offered to change the architecture of the hospital, rendering the psychiatric space of madness unrecognizable and making the life of patients more bearable.

In 1972, Masotta convened a work group (with Jorge Fukelman, Alberto Marchilli, and others) named El Lugar (The Place, a day hospital). In this place, overcoming the limits that psychosis imposes on theory would not have to result in the impotence of its practitioners. Also in 1972, at Masotta's invitation, Maud and Octave Mannoni, ambassadors of the anti-psychiatry movement, travelled to Buenos Aires. Two years later, Masotta founded the Freudian School of Buenos Aires, and most of his students joined.

That same year he taught in London, at the Arbours Association and at the Henderson Hospital, in Surrey. He moved to Barcelona and founded the Biblioteca Freudiana of Barcelona, and he promoted as well the founding of the Biblioteca Galega for Freudian studies. In 1977 and 1978, he organized seminars in psychoanalysis at the Miró Foundation. He wrote the introduction to Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, and he translated, with Gimeno-Grendi, *Radiophonie* and *Television*. One could go on and on.

9.

Once, so as not to get distracted by an authorial dispute, Freud appealed to a rhetorical device that presents originality as the "reanimation of something forgotten," which is to say, as a product of repression. That is no doubt excessive. Appealing to the same strategy, Freud would also sometimes search for a historical antecedent as a source of authority. Consequently, Freud

often claims that his findings are being introduced to history "for the second time." Anyone familiar with the temporality of trauma and the theory of repression knows that, in psychoanalysis, the second time is in fact the first.

Perhaps Masotta's appeal to parody is an instance of an analogous strategy. There is no word that doesn't evoke other words, and no text that doesn't refer to other texts. But that doesn't surrender the power to signify to metonymic slippage. Anti-establishment since Bakhtin, parody, when it has recourse to the simulacrum, to imitation, to irony, when it is not exhausted by its satiric intent, establishes a distance with the model and institutes, through repetition, a meaningful difference (it betrays when it repeats, and transforms out of the desire to repeat).

When parody doubles in on itself and declares itself as parody it indicates an awareness, not just of dissimilarity, but of inadequacy, a lack that affirms a disparity and takes control of that difference. Masotta writes: "over time, we realized that, in the intervening years, we had learned to make ourselves heard (...), that parody and comedy had in the end traced the path of an experience that was ours, and was original." But, as a bulwark against the risk of pedantry, he adds: "One must be careful with history: one always ends up finding meaning in the direction of events, one always sees oneself evolving." But history is made up of breaks, cuts, ruptures; it is a succession of discontinuities, and the prestige that Masotta might have won in the social and public sphere never stopped him from advancing by returning, time and again, not to the beginning, but to the truth of the starting point.

10.

Oscar Masotta was born in Buenos Aires in 1930, the year of the civic-military coup that deposed president Hipólito Yrigoyen and that has become known in Argentinian history as the "infamous decade." He belonged to a generation marked by the coup that sent Juan Perón into exile in 1955. He was not a Peronist, but rather called himself an anti-anti-Peronist. In 1966, another coup brought down another president, and the military government imposed repression and censorship until 1970. He decided to leave Argentina in 1974, during the cruel prolegomena to what

would be a second infamous decade, a murderous regime that devastated the country through state terrorism.

In this context of political upheavals and institutional precarity, of reorganization and dissolution, of the convergence of vicissitudes, of the shedding of blood, and, here and there, of the sporadic isolation of a fragile protection, Masotta, on the eve of exile and with no optimism, wrote: “Luckily, under the shadow of the historical anecdote, there will run, as a filthy ghost, the water of legitimate foundations.”¹⁷ Luckily, yes, but it wasn’t just a question of luck. It was the current of water, profoundly demystifying and disalienating, that today—when culture goes to great pains to produce sadness—has the value of an ethics of resistance.



Dora García, *Segunda Vez* (stills), 2018. 92'

4

**To Read Freud
(1969)**

by Oscar Masotta

“The sYmbol is the succulent strawberrY that the PsYchoPath omniPotentlY Generates in his internal world, whereas the envied and assailed heart becomes the vilified and worthless object.”

—E. RodriGué, *El contexto del Proceso analítico*

It is Althusser—whose reading of Marx is inflected by his reading of Lacan—who suggests the task: to read Freud.¹ But every possible or probable reading of Freud should go through the Procrustean bed of the history and development of psychoanalysis. For historical reasons, it is difficult to distinguish Freud’s work from the contemporary development of this conjectural science: there are hardly ten years between the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and the Salzburg Congress. From then on and until his death, Freud will not only see himself as freed from the loneliness of that characterized the years following the waning of his friendship with Fliess—the time of his neurosis, his panics, and his auto-analysis—he will also see his own production as a writer become surrounded by the production of Ferenczi, Abraham, Stekel, Rank. How to decide, then, about that which in other cases poses less doubt, that is, the texts and the order of a reading?² What is the value and scope of the theory articulated in those texts? Let us recall the position that Stekel formulated early on: even if Freud speaks to a giant, the dwarves on his shoulders saw farther than he did. So much recognition hid a lot of scorn. And, of all that Freud himself produced, apparently no more than bits and pieces of the last part of his work would remain today: a poorly conceptualized theory of personality, a model of the psychic as conflict, the skeleton of a dynamic conception of illness and cure.³

In this way, history has been able to see two histories of psychoanalysis take shape: one of them, abundantly written, has been scarcely thought; the other one, for its part, is *inscribed* in the psychoanalytic establishment (the Argentinean Psychoanalytic Society is a good example). This inscription in fact nothing more than that of the unconscious signifier, the mnemonic trace that memory did not forget because it had never been conscious: Freud’s repression. If the histories are read, everything

on the surface remains in order: psychoanalysis begins after the mid-1920s. What did Freud say? If *Inhibition, Symptoms, and Anxiety* is read, it is simply to verify that, together with abandoning the first theory of anxiety (mechanic separation of affection and representation), and together with an anxiety now conceived as a failure of the functions of the Ego, Freud maintains the notion of an “a posteriori,”⁴ the idea of a temporality that splits repression into two times. This split constitutes repression as such. A model, in sum, that had already started to be outlined inside the most archaic neurological fictions of “the Project.”⁵

In Freud’s time—when his neurosis was inseparable from his desire for knowledge about neurosis,⁶ and when Freud finally drew out his theory from his neurosis and thus eluded his neurosis by the construction of a theory—psychoanalysis was far from being an institution. “Psychoanalysis today” (to use a phrase once celebrated by a book) seems doomed to begin at the end. In the best case, it is essentially about the transmission of a technique; in the worst, about formalizing a theory whose foundations and scopes nobody questions anymore. It is simply not necessary: if it exists in the head of our “giants of the armchair,” it is because Power underpins Knowledge. On the other hand, a theory, if it has consensus, turns out to be economic—a couple of paragraphs is enough to spell it out. But I am not appealing to metaphors: I am so convinced that what we repress is Freud himself that the only way to read some of the books written by Argentinian psychoanalysts is to pay close attention to lacunae and to look at them upside-down, like those textiles that can only be understood if looked at from the wrong side.

Note, for example, the vestiges of Freudian discourse in the manifest discourse of one of today’s psychoanalysts, E. Rodrigué, who writes:

I regard this silence as an artifice of the technique of dream interpretation that Freud used at the beginning of the century. The method of fragmenting dreams into arbitrary chains and of asking, sometimes even pressing, the patient to associate with each item, produces an alteration in the dream’s natural plot, where the symbols are related to its text in meaningful ways.”⁷

But can we not perceive here, as in the case of the repressed and the symptom, a certain massive appropriation—by antithesis—of a piece of Rodrigué’s discourse by the rigor and the power of Freud’s theory? Let us see what the paragraph says: a) that it is not possible to isolate a sign from its context; b) that impossibility is due to the fact that meaning depends on a “natural plot” (this unfortunate expression undoubtedly means that what should be analyzed is what is visible, the image of the dream, for example, and not the words);⁸ c) that the meaning is only readable within the actual and global context of the sign, or symbol. But do we not recognize here the theses of a phenomenology of totality (allied—and this is no less significant—to the perennially pragmatist vocation of the texts of this author), one that emphasizes the molar by a blind rejection of the fragmentary, of what is “molecular” in the “parts”? This anxiety, after all, has already been sufficiently demolished by contemporary linguistics. How could there be meaning—both outside and inside psychoanalysis—if the sign did not carry in itself not only its own principle of fragmentation, of isolation from the text and, indeed, from every text (its inherence to the code and its poetic potential),⁹ but also its own principle of internal division (the Saussurean bar, which splits the signifier from signified, is neither a discovery of that linguist nor a privilege of the schizophrenic)? How could an “item” be inherent to its context without a signifier, that is, without that materiality of an absolute, and a priori, exteriority that defines the materiality of language? In sum, how could this be without the possibility for *any* word (moneme or phrase) to be taken “à la lettre,” as Lacan says, that is, taken letter for letter or decomposed to the extreme in its “letters”? Without them being easily convertible into their anagrams? Without the ability of the molecular products, thus deconstructed, not just to form new fusions, new links, new chains (by their similarities, formal or sonorous, as well as by their differences), but also, and simultaneously, to open and close the flow of meaning and signification? What is Rodrigué’s answer? First and foremost, that answer depends on the amputation of the Freudian theory of the sign, that is to say, on reducing the latter to the “problems of symbolism.” Rodrigué discusses Jones so as not to have to read Freud, while introducing, against the archi-Freud, the (secondary?) benefits of Susan Langer’s discovery (!); to this he adds the names (no more than that) of the concepts of

Peirce's tripartite scheme. From then on, a certain genetic, Jakobsonian, hierarchized, and (why not?) sufficiently moralizing vision of symbols is guaranteed—if you use “pseudosymbols,” it must be because you have that almost incurable disease. As for the first word pronounced by the autistic child, Rodrigué says that the child “does not stumble upon the use of the symbol, but only discovers how to designate an internal object.”¹⁰

Things happen differently in Freud, they are less certain, more serious, less simple. Rodrigué acknowledges a difference between *necessity* and ... something else; in Freud, though, something else has a precise name: *desire*. And if the dream is to be regarded as the Royal Path, it is because it leads to the subjacent desire—always evasive, always difficult to fix or to define (though never absent)—that teaches that “I” is an illusion and defines the subject by its *position* (by its location, it should be said) in a discourse that is at once both truer *and* more deceitful and misleading: the unconscious. It is clear and obvious that little Anna Freud's dream cannot be reduced to Ferenczi's example of the goose that dreams about corn or the pig that dreams about acorns; impossible, at any rate, to ignore the fact, the difference, that little Anna's dream is articulated aloud while she is asleep: “Anna F(r)eud, st'awberry, wild st'awberry, om'lette, pap.”¹¹ In the case of the animal—if it can be said, properly speaking, that this creature dreams—there is an “elective unity of the satisfaction of the necessity. In Anna's dream—and this is what gives it an exemplary value for Freud—the signifier is present.”¹² How? In the repetition of a phonic group, in the scansion that the repetition introduces, in the effect produced by the rhetorical ordering and by the internal and autonomous hierarchization of words and phrases, in the atomization of the meaning of the phrase, and in the restitution of the meaning introduced by the same repetition (the “common denominator” says Lacan).

But let us see the example of the “signal” issued by Rodrigué's autistic child: the word in question is “/m/(a)/m/(a)”¹³ (bars and parentheses are mine). Does the presence here, difficult to separate from the meaning of the word, of a double alliteration, vocalic and consonantal, not make this example homologize with the one of little Anna's dream? What is meant, then, by the indicative ballast that will not allow the word to “elevate” itself to a symbolic function? Nothing, maybe, or simply the concealment of

the presence of the signifier in every word. The problem is that the use of a symbol is not what constitutes its *efficacy*; by and large, when the child or the adult uses the symbol, everything is already settled. The use of the symbol has to be attributed to resistance, assuming any space is conceded to it at all in the analytic situation, but it can never set itself as the final, or initial, perspective in an account of the symbolic order. When Rualito says, “mama,” does he resist? If the referent of the word is nothing other than an “internal object,” would it not be then that the word in Rualito's mouth would seem least like a red light? The question is further complicated, first, by the fact that it deals with the *infans*,¹⁴ who hardly resembles a bee or an ant, since the “ecological niche” of the *infans* is doubly articulated.¹⁵ As for the rest, the child's entrance into the symbolic is operated all at once, and not because the subject grasps at once and suddenly the complete repertory of terms, rules, and uses of the language. What happens is that from then on those rules and those uses (first and foremost the uses codified by the language) *subject the subject*, to use a Lacanian formula. The difference between Freud's example and Rodrigué's is that, whereas little Anna *produces*, with the existing words in the language code, the paranomasias and scansions that reflect her desire (“realized” *in*, and only *through*, that linguistic articulation), Rodrigué's child, conversely, finds available in the language code a signifying unit determined and already provided of a similar rhetorical articulation. In other words: what varies from one to the other is the placement of the subject of the discourse (and a word, it is known, can be inserted in a complete discourse) in relation to the language code (it is not excessive to recall: natural) and to the words, whether uttered or not, hallucinated or actually heard. And still in other words: what varies, concomitantly, is the structure of the relation: utterance-enunciation (*énoncé-énonciation*).¹⁶ If Rodrigué can so comfortably talk about index, icon, and symbol, it is because he is fascinated by the results of the unconscious elaboration; because he treats these results as a *behavior* and analyzes them as such; and because, stretching the field of psychoanalytic inquiry, he constantly confuses utterance and enunciation. It is significant that when he has to define Peirce's terms, he can do it without passing through any reflection at all on the notion of “interpretant,” without which, incidentally, the former terms become absolutely vacuous. Nor is there any reference to

the case, foreseen by Peirce, of a symbol whose interpretant is not a feeling, action, affection, or activity, but another symbol—a point that overlaps considerably with Freud and psychoanalysis.

The behaviorism of signification at work here replaces the psychoanalytic analysis of the signifier, and centers its attention instead on the *modes* in which the symbol is used, thus obscuring, perhaps, Freud's true discovery. "Is the symbol a double of the object or does it conjure it?" It is clear: Rodrigué always has—as does desire, according to Sartre—the carrot dangling before his eyes. In Sartre, however, the carrot advances with the donkey. But in Rodrigué, the donkey moves while the carrot, which is made of bronze, remains still (the "total object"). Does the patient respond with a behavior capable of discriminating between the carrot and the movement, between one and the other? We can see to what extent Rodrigué acts like those anthropologists who waste their time discovering, for the umpteenth time, the structure of magic in populations they call primitive, without understanding that the structure was a feature of the category and not of the studied object. And we can see as well, by the same token, how this whole ideological baggage—often condemned, and not without reason—filters into psychoanalytic practice and analysis today.

This defenestration of the meaning that language, the word, the signifier, and symbols had for Freud is accompanied by an absolute disinterest in the study of the languages *in* Freud. Once in a while there is a return to the critique of the economic model, and then it is pointed out that there is an energeticist metaphor in Freud. With the word metaphor, Freud's blindness is recalled, or we are told that a metaphor should not be taken seriously, but treated as a fiction. But, without fiction, is it possible to talk, about the construction, whether of a scientific theory, or of any language whatsoever?

There is in Freud a neurologic metaphor, which he eventually abandoned, and an economic metaphor, which he always stuck to. The same is true for the spatial and topical metaphors. And there is also a linguistic metaphor, a military struggle metaphor, and a metaphor of speculation and investment, of business operations and trade; and writing metaphor, which he likewise never disowned: comparisons with pictograms and ideograms, hieroglyphs, the idea of trace and inscription. In short:

a geology of language where the system of concepts—always open but never incoherent—is constructed as inseparable from the different languages and their *registers*, and maybe none of them can ever be set aside without destroying the structure of the whole doctrine.

But was the science that Freud conceived also an anthropology? We know what the word anthropology means in a question like that. Are we allowed to read in Freud the description of a rise towards hominization, the idea of a humanity that rediscovers itself through the biological and constitutes itself through different "integrations"? It's a captious question, one whose uselessness allows our answer to be both yes and no. But the answer should be no. Here, nature, society, and culture are neither moments of a dialectical overcoming nor reading levels. They are the vanished factors of a group of facts of the same type, the very ones that make psychoanalysis a science. Because there is no "man," either for or in psychoanalysis: there is the "*subject*"—or, as Althusser reminds us, "*survivors*." The only way to accept this truth is to devote ourselves to the operations that Freud once bequeathed us and to clear a path, through a deconstruction of the Freudian myth, to the construction of the facts of Freud's theory.

We will then discover that the truth of a subject without man intertwines with the object of psychoanalysis: that lunar scenery made of sounds heard, of glimpsed images and phantasmagoric scenes, of inscriptions and markings, of the translations of those markings, of traces and clues, of paths that are now and then crossed by a meaning that is, simultaneously, signification and energy. In sum, that archaeological and geological rebus that contains the secret of that "redundant fish of the unconscious which men call mute because it speaks even while they sleep."¹⁷

Translated by Zilkia Janer, with substantial corrections and emendations for this edition by Emiliano Battista. Reprinted with permission from the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, University of Michigan.



1976, Cordoba, Argentina: preparations for the burning of books deemed "subversive" by the military. Photo: Gustavo Farias.



1972, Trelew, Argentina: 16 political prisoners are executed by firing squad at the Almirante Zar Naval Base. Photo: E. Pereira.



August 8, 1976: the streets of Buenos Aires under total military control. Photo: A. Medaglia.



May 30, 1982: police officers arrest hundreds of demonstrators. Photo: E. Rosito.

by Inés Katzenstein

Source (for all images): Archivo General de
la Nación, República Argentina, Departamento
Documentos Fotográficos.

**“All Political history constructs its scene,
its exhibition theater.”**

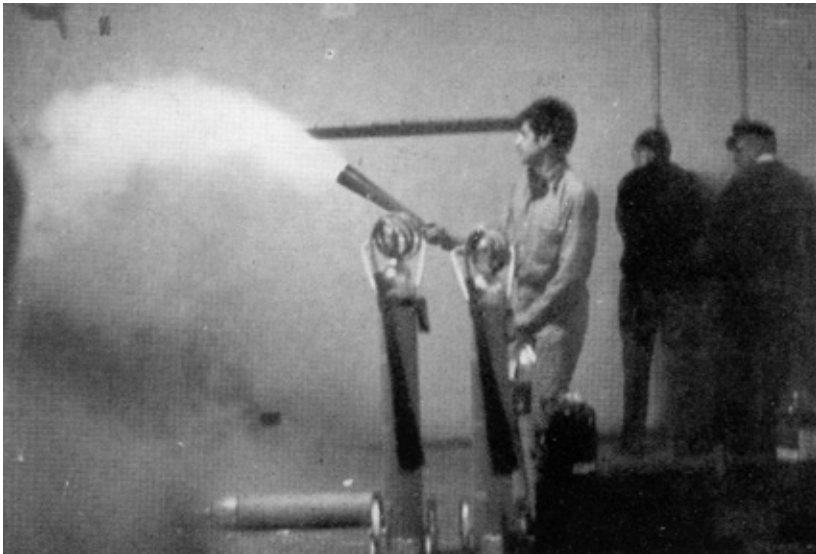
**—Georges Didi-Huberman,
*Peuples exposés, Peuples figurants***

**“Everything comes to us from others,
humiliation even more so.”**

**—Oscar Masotta,
*Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt***

To Induce the Spirit of the Image, one of the three Happenings Oscar Masotta made between 1966 and 1967, exposes—for a whole hour, under a glaring white light and piercing sounds—a group of elderly film extras, all shabbily dressed, to the gaze of the middle-class audience of the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires. That Happening was without a doubt the most sensationalist of the three he conceived and realized during his brief but intense foray into the visual arts. And yet, despite its spectacular ambition and structural simplicity, it remains for me the most mysterious and inscrutable. In the analysis that follows, I rely primarily on the two photos documenting the Happening, and on Masotta’s “I Committed a Happening,” in which he retraces the history of the work, and in which he defends himself from the accusations leveled at him by “well-intentioned” leftwing intellectuals of the time.

That text offers a detailed account of the Happening, but when Masotta comes around to analyzing his “deep intentions,” as he might have put it, he deflects our attention instead. He tells us that the idea for the Happening, particularly its insistence on a continuous piercing sound, was inspired by a La Monte Young Happening that he had seen in New York whose goal, according to Masotta, was to restructure “the total perceptual field” by dissociating visual from audio stimuli.¹ He goes on from there to examine, and take apart, the accusations he received for having dedicated himself to a genre as banal as the



Oscar Masotta, *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen*, 1966. Happening at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Cloe Masotta.

Happening. But it is only at the very end of the text, in the concluding sentence where Masotta describes his Happening as an “act of social sadism made explicit,” that he brings us close, in a flash, to the political heart of the matter.

What I would like to suggest is that Masotta’s description and analysis overlooks three vectors that I think are fundamental to the interpretation of that work, and I want to use those vectors here to try overcome the inscrutable character of that piece. The first is that, in his text, Masotta omits the most important Argentinean antecedents informing the “content” of his action: one is the writer Roberto Arlt, and the other the visual artist Alberto Greco. The second vector of my analysis is that Masotta doesn’t dig deeply into the relation between the proposed action and politics: this relation is announced, as a defense, at the start of the text, and mentioned, as a slogan, at the end. At no point, however, does Masotta elaborate on it. The third vector is the interdisciplinarity that Masotta was working with in that Happening. In this sense, I’ll argue that *To Induce...* was, both for Masotta’s own trajectory and for cultural history in general, an exceptional moment of experimental translation, from literature and politics to psychoanalysis. And if Manuel Hernández is correct when he says that, “whether or not he realized it, Oscar Masotta did not refrain from operating as an artist in his entry into psychoanalysis,”² I will argue that he did not refrain from operating as a therapist in his forays into art.

Greco and Humanism

We’re at the height of the Happening boom in Buenos Aires. Jean-François Lebel had recently been to the city, to the Instituto Di Tella, where he waxed polemical about the subject. Marta Minujín had done some Happenings of her own, including the ambitious *Simultaneidad en Simultaneidad* (Simultaneity in Simultaneity), which consisted of sixty television monitors that projected the image of the public back to the public, and of a failed attempt at live simultaneous action and connectivity with Allan Kaprow in the US and Volf Vostell in Germany. A group of artists with links to theory, headed by Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, and Roberto Jacoby, had mounted a fake or anti-Happening that “replaced

its reality with the report of that reality.”³ Their stated aim was to provoke repercussions in the press, as these would give the work the status of a new “art of communication media” capable of showing the obsolescence of the ritualism inherent to the “classical” Happening, and of showing as well the actuality of an art that exists less as an object of contemplation and experience than as a discursive system of advertising and the press.

At the center of this “boom” we find Oscar Masotta. But if his stated plan was to “overcome” the Happening, artistically speaking, by defying the arrogance of an imported genre that he saw as already outdated, he still had to install the Happening in the local scene so as to make it, through that concrete existence, an object of discussion.⁴ “We would be didactic,” Masotta writes.⁵ And his original didacticism consisted in putting together a cycle of conferences and of repeated and original Happenings called *Acerca de Happenings* (About Happenings); *To Induce...* was one of the original Happenings.

What is curious about this piece is that, rather than experimenting with communication media and with the new dematerialized art that he advocates in his talks and texts, Masotta took the opposite direction: he aligned himself with another current flowing through Argentinean art in those years, one that favored a more vitalistic and corporeal art. This current operated in relation to the human presence, and specifically in relation to what Georges Didi-Huberman, in his analysis of the auratic phenomenon in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, calls the “double gaze”: a condition of the auratic, which stems from the religious realm, that resides in the fact that the work, or object, returns the spectator’s gaze. I am referring, quite specifically, to the current that Alberto Greco inaugurated in 1963 with his *Vivo Ditos*. Greco had started to do these, we might call them bio-readymades, in Europe, and they consisted in signaling certain situations, notably those of poor people: the artist would stop people in the middle of the street, draw a circle in chalk around them, and then sign the work with grandiloquent irony.

Seen from the perspective that Greco gives us—it is worth noting that *Happenings*, a book that Masotta coedited, is dedicated to Greco—we can say that *To induce...* is concerned not so much with communication media as with immediacy. But, more specifically, Masotta’s relation to Greco has to do with the



Alberto Greco, *Encarnación Heredia, mujer sufriendo*, Madrid, 1963. Archivo Fotográfico Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

kind of people that both men choose to display. Greco's obsession had always been to put vagrants on display: a famous photo shows a poor man, for example, another an elderly and humble woman, both surprised by Greco in the street. In other, related works, an elderly shoe shiner, a "suffering old woman," and an old seller of matchboxes pass through a different sort of process: not a chance encounter on the street, but a sort of slide into the space of painting. These figures appear photographed standing in front of a blank canvas. The artist draws, inscribes their silhouettes on the canvas, leaving the white silhouette of their bodies delineated against a background daubed black. In these pictorial and socio-performative works, Greco offers a spectacle of the passivity and submission of old bodies before the action of the artist, who appears like a maniacal clown. Between provocation and exaltation, sadism and candor, Greco invents a mode for approximating social reality that Masotta will make his own not long thereafter.

In these poor and sad figures, in their physical presence before the art public, Greco finds a condition of authenticity that he wants to preserve. He writes: "Do you realize that we've been around these people and frequented these places our whole lives, but that we've not seen or appreciated them?"⁶ The *Vivo Ditos*, as a result, are a sort of rescue operation that, almost immediately, mutates into cruelty.

In a project that never got off the ground, Greco wanted to go even further. He writes: "Two years ago I went to the Iris Clert Gallery and suggested showing people, but the gallerist told me that she 'couldn't sell that.' So the following day I went to Gallery J and said that I wanted to show vagrants, that I wanted to stuff the gallery full of vagrants and lock the door. The audience would look through the windows, and the vagrants inside could do whatever they wanted: eat, shit, fuck, fight, etc. And that gallery's reply was: 'That's impossible. There's a Salvation Army just across the street, and we'd all be arrested.'" ⁷ For this projected but never realized piece, Greco was not satisfied just with the one-on-one encounter on the street, but tried instead to imagine what the confrontation with "the group" might be like.

Masotta's action was an attempt at something similar, though he wanted his version ("spare, naked, hard") to be a controlled situation in which "almost everything had been

foreseen."⁸ We shall see, however, not only that Masotta's relation to his "object" is more tortuous than Greco's, but that his intentions are less straightforward and more controversial. What I'll try to show here is that, with *To Induce...*, Masotta produced a situation that is unique to the genre: a static sadomasochistic scene, a skeletal frame that stands as an attempt at elaborating politics through a few formal strands of the psychoanalytical scene (an intertwining that Masotta eventually abandoned after the Happening). That is why, for me, this work, which combines performance, psychoanalysis, and politics, represents a unique vertex in Masotta's intellectual and political life.

We should briefly revisit the action and the atmosphere of *To Induce...* Masotta hired around thirty people—chosen precisely for being "older persons, looking badly off, poorly dressed"—and exhibited them in one of the rooms of the Instituto Di Tella: aligned atop a platform, they were exposed to the gaze of the audience for an hour. Masotta himself, personifying a sort of stage director or a histrionic torturer, tells the audience that he has hired these men and women, and that he is paying them better fees than they would normally have gotten as extras, that nothing dangerous is going to happen but that, just to be on the safe side, he has equipped the room with several fire extinguishers. And, standing between the public and the actors, he empties one of the fire extinguishers, arguing that discharging "a fire extinguisher is a spectacle of a certain beauty."⁹ Following this initial violence, Masotta bathes the group of wage earners with a white light that dazzles them, and he subjects them, and the audience, to continuous electronic noise for the duration of the Happening.

It seems quite clear that, at its most basic argumentative level (the theatricalization of a sociological violence), the Happening draws its inspiration from Greco's actions, which Masotta knew well. At the level of its "sensationalism," however, of its desire to provoke sensations of shame and guilt, the work draws from the ideas—and above all from the feelings—of class, oppression, and freedom that Masotta had been exploring and developing for years, in a context marked by the proscription of Peronism, through his reading of the work of Roberto Arlt.

The Argentinean Horror

It was in this period of transition—when Masotta's formation in literary criticism, his political interests and dilemmas, his forays into semiotics and art and, eventually, into psychoanalysis, all coalesced into a heterodox theoretical whole—that the genre of the Happening appeared to him as an unusual space of intellectual and political action. A truly experimental space. In the case we are analyzing now, Masotta appears to use the Happening like an empty shell that grants him an unexpected freedom to try to exorcize something of the Argentinean political drama, and that allows him to conduct, in the most encrypted way possible, what we here propose to think as his subterranean curative vocation. I speak in these terms, drama and cure, because *To Induce...* presents itself as the staging, simultaneously, of a tense and irrevocable sociological fissure, and of a therapeutic ceremony.

Before unpacking this suggestion, we need to say something about the political and social violence of the wider context: the proscription of Peronism that Argentina had been living through since 1955; the discussions, urgent at the time, about the political role of intellectuals; and the coup d'état led by General Onganía in June 1966. At the same time, however, this political violence seemed to exceed the conjuncture itself; indeed, it seems to have been encrusted onto the old and tired bodies that Masotta exhibits, as well as onto the split structure—the seen bodies on one side, and the seeing bodies on the other.

In addition, *To Induce...* seems directly bound to some stories about the life and character of Masotta himself that we find, for example, in the ruthless testimony of Carlos Correas, who became close friends with Masotta at university, and who says that, for Masotta, hatred “was an attitude and a project.” He writes: “We were the children and grandchildren of resentful immigrants who had been deprived of social value and political prospects, but had retained enough ambition for respectability to succeed in being ‘employees’ of the middle class. [...] Patience, fraternity, and the working class struggle weren't ours; nor was the violence or the terrible substratum of the underprivileged (*lumpenaje*).” He goes on: “That's where we were at twenty-three or twenty-four: Sebrelí was a primary school teacher; Oscar, supported by his father, was a mid-level employee; and I was working

as an administrator at the Club Atlético River Plate. This, too, was an Argentinian horror.”¹⁰ Masotta acted from the resentment of this middle-class without options. And it was through the lens of this same resentment that, years earlier, he read and understood Roberto Arlt, the author of *The Seven Madmen* and *The Mad Toy*. Masotta's monograph about Arlt, *Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt*, is essential reading if we hope to shed light on *To Induce...*

In his book, Masotta defines Arlt's characters, all of them humiliated by economic inequalities and cruelties, as “monsters of sincerity.”¹¹ According to Masotta, Arlt sought out “human relations stripped of hypocrisy,” relations that manifest themselves in characters with a taste for inflicting suffering on beings “inferior” to themselves.¹² In Arlt's anguished characters, class hatred is made explicit in the passage from silence to the exteriorization of contempt towards and repulsion from those below.

Masotta's interest in the expression of social humiliation that Arlt put at the heart of his writing was rooted both in his observations of Argentinean society, which was economically and ideologically fractured by all manner of race and class divisions, and in his own social condition. In a letter to Carlos Correas, Masotta curses his class for its “shameful unhappiness,” and he recognizes that “our era, our time, lived vertiginously on the basis of hatreds, of misunderstandings, of stinging, needs more executioners, more snitches, by the day.”¹³

“Executioners,” “snitches”: that is what Masotta is looking for when he conceives a scene in which the middle- and upper-middle-class public at the Instituto Di Tella must train its gaze on the pitiful over-exposition of these old and impoverished men and women. In this sense, it's a situation organized in such a way as to make the pleasure and the shame of the bourgeois audience (supposedly anti-Peronist) vibrate intermittently, to make them swing electrically—and I say electrically because the material of the Happening, through sound and light, is pure amplification. The humiliation, then, is specular, and the word “induction” would take place both in the volcaic space of the scopic relation and in the tortured and hysterical conscience of the public.

Here we have a key with which to understand the structural sensationalism of *To Induce...* Masotta, who admits at the start of his text to be “ill at ease,”¹⁴ wants to provoke a shock at the level of class-consciousness, but also, and more specifically,

at the level of the bodies, which he subjects to an unwanted exhibition and to a sustained sensory bewilderment. Neither words, nor fraternity, nor pity, nor movement: the goal here is to arrive at a *photographic* suspension of hatred. The silence, the total paralysis on the stage, would be the Argentinean horror exposed by the Happening: a hatred that, since 1955, in the context of the proscription of Peronism that followed the self-titled *Revolución Libertadora*, had only deepened.¹⁵

On the other hand, both the social dichotomies that had defined Argentina as a divided country—from Sarmiento's dictum, "civilization or barbarism," to the so-called "blot" (*grieta*) of today—and the racist tendency to revile the popular classes with pejorative adjectives like "negro," "little black heads," and, even, "animal waste," were very much alive. This gaze that discriminates on the basis of looks and appearance is what Masotta embodies in this casting work, which harks back to the anti-popular characterization of the old as a "ragged and alien mass," to borrow Martínez Estrada's description of the Peronist people.

And yet this mass, in *To Induce...*, is not a threat. It is composed, as I mentioned, of unarmed and defenseless people exposed as a subjected group. But who exactly operates the "social sadism made explicit"? Who are the executioners here? Is it Masotta, in his role as director/torturer? Or is it the bourgeois audience capable, perhaps, of enjoying this observation of the people? The violence would be produced both in Masotta's sadistic rhetoric and gestures (hyperbolic, farcical), and in the sadistic, and tormented, conscience of the public.¹⁶ Masotta is ruthless: he wants to explode the conventions that dissimulate class hatred in order to compose a *true* image of Argentinean society, one that overexposes the sociological distances in a situation of unavoidable tension.

It would seem, then, that Masotta has decided to embrace violence as the way into a true image of Argentinean society. This desire is reminiscent of the humanism that Georges Didi-Huberman discusses in *Peuples exposés, peuples figurant*, where he proposes an alternative "humanism" to the "benevolent philanthropy that ratifies taboos," a humanism "in its harshest sense: an obstinate questioning of our relation—constitutive, natural, and cultural—to the violence of the world."¹⁷ It is, likewise, a humanism related to the ideas developed by Antonin Artaud in

his first manifesto, where he writes: "Without an element of cruelty at the foundation of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In this state of degeneracy, in which we live, it is through the skin that metaphysics will be made to reenter our minds."¹⁸ Understood in the terms I've just laid out, and taking into account Masotta's cultural context, this harsh and corporeal humanism would be truer than much of the political art that, in those years, represented the popular in a way that bordered on the eulogistic: truer than the angelism of the painter Antonio Berni and his character, the village kid Juanito Laguna, and truer as well than the idealizing heroism that we find in the works of Ricardo Carpani, with his muscular workers, all deeply committed to the struggle for emancipation and work.

In the atomized model of society staged by the Happening, a model that disabuses us of the idea that there can be any exit, be it political or charitable, it is money, in the end, that appears as the force that molds the scene of representation of the people. The money that Masotta uses to hire the extras, the money that he discusses, exhibits, and counts at the start of the Happening. Money functions as the sole organizing principle, as the only thing that manages to induce the spirit of the image of the Argentinean people. In *To Induce...*, Masotta returns to the pre-Peronism idea of a dehumanized and silent society, the society depicted by Arlt, in which the composition that organizes money appears as a symptom. Let us recall here the view of the middle-class that Masotta spells out when he writes about Arlt: "The middle class lacks *self-consciousness* and has, at best, only an uneasy *sense of itself*: the middle class individual hides his self from himself, he doesn't know how to confess to himself that his class is already the rotten fruit that has fallen off the social tree. His position in the cycle of production hides from him the fact that he is closer to the proletariat than to the owning classes. But although he hides what he actually is from himself, he still has a *sense of self*, he is still consumed by the certainty, experienced in concealment, that the inner emptiness of what he does not have *appears* as hidden. And his consciousness is troubled by the constant threat that everything he tries so hard to conceal might burst out into the light at any moment."¹⁹

This emptiness speaks of a society that demands some form of *treatment*.

Neither Action nor Word: A HYPnotic Setting

The design of the scene, produced thanks to money, is everything. The light and sound are a citation of the sensory vector of the work by La Monte Young, in which, Masotta says, “one was assaulted by and enveloped in a continuous noise” that produced a change in the body’s physiological condition: the “splitting” of one of the senses away from the others resulted in a “difficult restructuring of the total perceptual field.”²⁰ But there is also a police-medical vector in the image of the extras crowded together on the platform. The bodies are illuminated as if they were the bodies of the “criminal multitudes,” whether being observed by the police or being photographed before the firing squad. Both of these references would have been fresh in Masotta’s mind during those years, when arrests and political violence were daily events. That is what I call the photographic design of the scene.

Here, however, I want to suggest that we must also see the meticulous way in which Masotta constructs his scene as a sort of encrypted psychoanalytical *setting*, in the sense that Winnicott gives to that term, that is, “the sum of all the details of management that are more or less accepted by psychoanalysts.” I say encrypted because, although Masotta had been deeply involved with psychoanalytic theory by then, and although he focuses his attention on the *management* details—even going so far as to list them off, *viva voce*, to the audience at the start of the Happening (light, sound, duration, fire extinguishers)—he seems in his text to be unaware, or unwilling to recognize, that his piece is a curative ceremony, the staging of a *setting*.

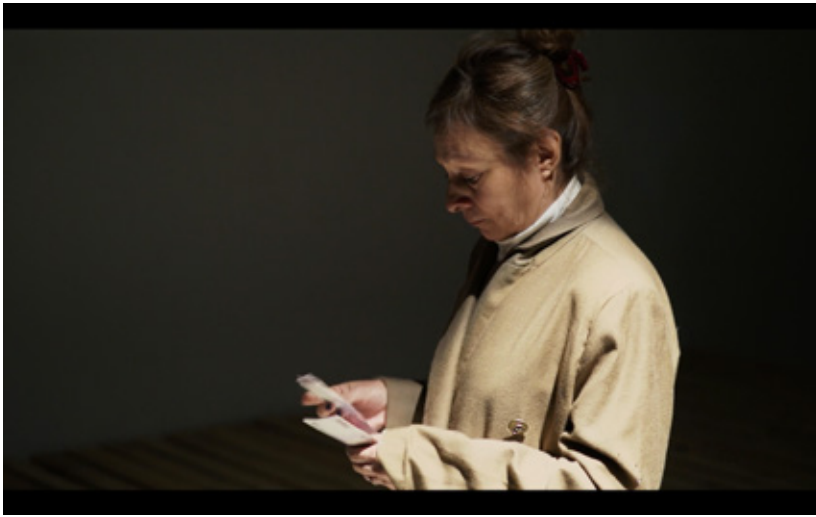
But what does the setting remind us of? If we connect the trance atmosphere produced by the constant presence of light and sound to the “induction” announced in the work’s title, it becomes clear that the central reference of the work, through the Orientalism Masotta had detected in La Monte Young, is to the hypnotic practices that gave birth to psychoanalysis in the first place. (We may recall here that, prior to the invention of psychoanalysis, Freud not only spent a decade using hypnotic techniques on his patients, but that he was also an avid student of the various schools and methods of hypnosis.) We can then imagine that Masotta was fully aware of the curative

potential of hypnotic rituals of induction, and that he appropriated them for the Happening.

My point here is that, by staging a setting that brings with it the memory of the magical origin of psychoanalysis, Masotta was trying out a sort of therapy. To back up my suggestion, I would go so far as to say that, when Masotta decided to publicly sacrifice himself in the role of torturer, he was embodying one of the central positions of the psychoanalyst: the deliberate abstention of pity and compassion. In the piece, of course, he did it by exalting his condition as a cursed character. But let us recall here that, according to Jacques-Alain Miller, everyone who wants to become an analyst “seems to have an elective relation to *apartheid*, either because they have suffered it themselves, or because their filiation is marked by a certain *apartheid*. [...] What we find in each of them is a pronounced sense of exception: the only one, the favorite, the dishonored, the excluded, the extraordinary, either in its version as exalted, or as pariah.”²¹

When Ana Longoni examines Masotta’s relation to Marxism, she points out that Masotta wanted to “create for himself a valid position, though without having to carry its legitimating banners or habits. And, to that end, he forced theory, betrayed orthodoxy, vindicated its bastard child: that’s Masotta’s parable before Marxism.”²² By inventing a form of analysis in the most idiosyncratic way possible, *To Induce...* stages the same parable in relation to psychoanalysis. Aware of the political failure of an engaged and leftist aesthetics, Masotta borrowed the format of the Happening, under the pretext of artistic pedagogy, in order to elaborate, tragically, the political drama in Argentina as if it were a clinical case.

In the realm of the sensible, which is to say, the realm of aesthetics, Masotta decided to elaborate the political traumas of his era while also trying out, in the provocative dimension of the spectacle, the cold procedures of clinical analysis. For that reason, and although it presents an impossible community, a divided counter-society, at once silenced and guilt-ridden, this work is not a manifestation of a definite disenchantment on Masotta’s part, or even of a pure cynicism. It is, perhaps, an example of a “pained cynicism”²³ that rebels against itself in an exceptional and encrypted attempt at an experimental political cure.



This and following pages: Dora García,
Segunda Vez (stills), 2018. 92'



6

**I Committed a
HaPPening (1967)**

by Oscar Masotta

When, in the December 16 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 leftwing 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, rightwing 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

Acerca (de): "Happenings"

Los Centros de Artes Visuales y de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, comunican a Ud. la realización de un Ciclo de dos conferencias y tres happenings, presentado por Oscar Masotta.

Martes 25 de octubre, 19 hs.

"El concepto de happening y las teorías", conferencia de Alicia Páez.

Miércoles 26 de octubre, 19 hs.

"Para inducir el espíritu de imagen", happening de Oscar Masotta.

Jueves 27 de octubre, 23 hs.

"Señales", happening-ambientación de Mario Gandelsonas.

Martes 8 de noviembre, 19 hs.

"Los medios de información y la categoría de «discontinuo» en la estética moderna", conferencia de Oscar Masotta.

Miércoles 9 de noviembre, 19 hs.

"Sobre happenings", happening del equipo Roberto Jacobi, Eduardo Costa, Pablo Suárez, Oscar Bony y Miguel Ángel Telechea.

Las instrucciones para la asistencia a los happenings serán dadas el día 25 de octubre.

Abono al ciclo completo: \$ 700.—. Sobrantes de abono: \$ 250, por sesión (conferencia o happenings). La asistencia a uno de los happenings será libre. Estudiantes: 25 % de descuento. Las entradas se limitarán a 200 personas por sesión. Se podrán reservar desde el día 20 de octubre.

Sala de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936, Tel. 31 4721, Buenos Aires.

Hay actualmente más de cuarenta hombres y mujeres "haciendo" algún tipo de Happening. Viven en Japón, Holanda, Checoslovaquia, Dinamarca, Francia, Argentina, Suecia, Alemania, España, Austria, Islandia, E.E. UU. Probablemente diez de ellos sean talentos de primera línea. Además existe, por lo menos, una docena de volúmenes acerca del tema o relacionados con él: el "De-collage Nº 4" de Wolf Vostell, Köln, 1963, publicado por el autor; "An anthology" editada y publicada por Jackson Mac Low y La Monte Young, N.Y., 1963; "Water Jam" de George Brecht, Fluxus Publications, N.Y., 1963; "Fluxus 1", una antología editada por George Maciunas, también en publicaciones Fluxus, N.Y., 1964; Postface and Jefferson's Birthday", Something Else Press, N.Y., 1964; "Happenings" de Michael Kioby, E. P. Dutton, N.Y., 1964; "Grapefruit" de Yoko Ono, Wuntermum Press, Long Island, N.Y., 1964; "Happenings, Fluxus, Popart, Nouveau Realisme" de Jorgan Backer y Wolf Vostell, Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburgo, 1965; 24 Stunden", Galerie Parnass de Wuppertal, Verlag Hansen y Hansen, Itzehoe Vosskate, 1965; "Primer of Happenings and Time Space Art" de Al Hansen y "Four suits", obras de Philip Cornen, Alison Knowles, Ben Patterson y Tomas Schmit, ambos publicados por Something Else Press; y el número del invierno de 1965 de la Tulane Drama Review, una publicación especial sobre Happenings editada por Michael Kirby, Tulane University, New Orleans; Jean-Jacques Lebel esta a punto de publicar su libro en París, y mi libro "Assemblage, Environments y Happenings", Harry N. Abrams, Inc., N.Y., aparecerá esta primavera. Además de esta creciente literatura, hay una bibliografía en aumento, de artículos serios. Estas publicaciones —y la cantidad de happenistas— contribuyen al mito de un arte casi desconocido...

Allan Kaprow

(Art forum, marzo de 1965)

El desarrollo y la producción artística de las dos últimas décadas, introduce, en la historia de la crítica, una nueva veta de reflexión, cuyo sentido y alcance toca a la vez las esferas de la estética, de la ideología y de la historia de la cultura. Se trata de la emergencia de una nueva conexión histórica, que desentroniza el pleito entre arte y técnica (maquinismo + trabajo) para traer a primer plano la relación del arte con los medios masivos de información.

Al "boom" de los medios de información (sin duda, el caso especial es la televisión) de los años posteriores a la segunda guerra mundial, sigue una transformación esencial, una rápida metamorfosis del "objeto figurativo". Pero ella no servirá únicamente para generar o definir estilos o tendencias nuevas, como sería el ejemplo, en el seno de las artes plásticas, del "arte pop", del "neo-dadaísmo" o del "empirismo radical" de Rauschenberg; estará simultáneamente en la base de la producción de áreas nuevas de actividad artística, híbridos de otros géneros o géneros nuevos, como el «happening», gracias al cual ahora es posible no solamente convertir en tema los productos de la información masiva (según la postura y la fórmula pop), sino recortar y ensanchar el campo de un "inter-media", una zona de actividad que se apoya en el híbrido de los géneros a condición de colocarse, paulatinamente y cada vez más, en el interior mismo de los medios de información. Pero para interrogar el "concepto" de «happening», será preciso desmontar los equívocos que la palabra recubre. Y si no nos equivocamos, ese desmontaje nos reconducirá, bajo una nueva luz, esta vez ejemplar, a esa misma zona de recubrimiento recíproco y de relación de los medios de información con el pensamiento y/o la actividad estética.

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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.

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 Castellì. 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.

by Ana Longoni

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.”

This translation by Brian Holmes, slightly amended for this edition, was initially commissioned for *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s*, edited by Inés Katzenstein and Andrea Giunta, and published in 2004 as part of The Museum of Modern Art's Primary Documents series. Reprinted by permission.

“Somethin9 would chan9e: from a critic or an essaYist or a universitY researcher, I would become a *haPPenista*. It would not be bad—I thou9ht—if the hYbridization of ima9es at least had the result of disturbin9 or disorientin9 someone.”

—Oscar Masotta, “I Committed a HaPPenin9”

“I am verY scared. I’m an AVANT-GARDE Painter. (Oh! Yes, sorrY, I almost for9ot.) I was unanimously rejected bY the Di Tella (Ha, ha, ha!). (Ai! Ai!).”

**—Alberto Greco,
in a letter to Lila Mora Y Araujo, 1960**

In this text, I would like to explore the proximities and connections in the trajectories of two crucial and unclassifiable figures of the Argentinean avant-garde in the 1960s. The relationship between Alberto Greco and Oscar Masotta is specular—the fruit of coincidences and overlaps, of the unstable places in which they operate, and, most importantly, of the deviant and disruptive way in which they occupy those spaces. Both were key players in that radical epic, driving forces behind the most daring actions and ideas put forward then, and both occupied a marginal, liminal, or displaced position with respect to the art institution. Following their early deaths, they suffered decades of silence and neglect, only to reemerge with undeniable force in the accounts being produced today about that period.

What I want to highlight, by indicating their parallel and overlapping paths, is that what they produced with their interventions are heterotopias, a notion that Michel Foucault coined to act as a counterpoint to utopia (an impossible, non-existent place). Heterotopias constitute real counter-spaces that “suspend, neutralize, or reverse”¹ instituted places, that

My discussions with Fernando Davis and the members of the group “Arte, Cultura y Política en la Argentina Reciente” nourished many of the ideas developed here. I would also like to thank Dora García for her generous and precious feedback and encouragement.

contradict those places by altering the network of relations that obtain between them. Foucault called “heterotopias of deviation” those that operate against the grain of the disciplinary logics of the spatialization of power. It’s not just a question of other spaces, but also of the undisciplined or altered use of normed places.

I would also like to highlight, through a sequence of practices that begin with Greco and includes Masotta, among others, a salient trait of the Argentinean avant-garde in the 1960s, namely the commitment to inscribing artistic production in the circuit of mass media and street advertising, of interpellating a public that is at once anonymous and indeterminate.

The Mirror

Masotta and Greco were both born in the same city, Buenos Aires, a year apart: the first in 1930, the second in 1931. In other words, they were born at the very beginning of the so-called “Infamous Decade,” which marked the first of the successive military coups that make up the long and violent saga that punctuated Argentinean history until 1983, and in which both men lived out their (intense) lives.

Both come from Buenos Aires’ middle class, and their conditions overlap in more ways than one: Greco and Masotta are self-taught, drifters, pariahs, even lumpen; both share an overarching concern for survival on the margins of the “productive system,” and for the process of their becoming-intellectual or becoming-artist. Economic hardship as a correlate of the absence of formal employment is a common denominator in their letters, writings, and testimonies.

Masotta, reluctantly supported by his father, lived with his parents for as long as he could. When he finally moved out, he had to rely on friends to put him up and, during an intense crisis brought about by his father’s death, he even lived for a few days at a construction site. Towards the end of Perón’s second term as president, in 1955, Masotta was working as a replacement teacher, although not for long. When Peronist groups attacked and burned churches in June of that year, Masotta assigned his ten-year old students the following essay question: “God or Perón?” That was the first and last time that Masotta, who never

completed his Philosophy degree at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, held a formal academic post.

Greco, for his part, fled Argentina, where he felt asphyxiated, misunderstood, and rejected, and he made ends meet as best he could, amidst precarity and errancy, in Spain, France, Italy, Brazil, and the US. Thanks to a scholarship, he went to Europe for the first time in 1954, his suitcase full of Andean artifacts that he sold in order to survive. He also hawked his drawings in Parisian cafes, offered his services as a seer or fortune-teller, managed now and then to live on the favors of a patron, and, occasionally, he prostituted himself as well. The position of kept man, of the person who lives from loans or gifts, puts both Masotta and Greco in a counterproductive logic that they pit against the idea of utility while claiming for themselves the right to inactivity and informality.

Both fashioned their poses, their public personas, by cultivating a slovenly dandyism, an elegance out of sync with the norm. What Alan Pauls says about the elusive and marginal relation of the dandy to institutions can be applied as well to the space—de-centered, disturbing, and unclassifiable—occupied by Greco and Masotta: “The dandy is not a professional, he doesn’t have a job, and he doesn’t rely on any institution. He’s marginal (...). His strength stems from the fact that he occupies a border, a margin, within an already existent space.”²

While Masotta presented himself as an intellectual who intervened in a variety of fields (literary criticism, art, the comic strip, psychoanalysis, politics), even though he lacked academic credentials, Greco archly declared himself to be an “AVANT-GARDE artist,” even though he had no prizes to his name and no recognition to speak of in the art scene. Strategies for (self) invention from a desiring, and defying, border.

Greco and Masotta share a condition of errancy, manifest in the incessant trips of the first, and in the forays into schools of thought, modes of intervention, and roles of the second. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin explores the politics of the vagabond through the figures of the *flâneur*, the sandwich man, and the prostitute, figures that resonate powerfully in Greco and Masotta’s heterotopic displacements. Displacements of desiring, (un)desirable bodies. Disturbing and uncomfortable. Excessive.

Greco’s trips—which have been described in such terms as “desiring errancy,” “nomadic travels,” “queer *derive*,”³ and

“nomadic errancy”⁴—originate in the discomfort or rejection that he felt in his home country, to which he would on occasion return. In 1950, with the artist Marta Gavensky, he travelled across the Andean high plateaus. In 1954, with a scholarship from the French Government, he travelled to Paris, where he stayed till 1956, to continue studying painting; during his stay he travelled to Italy and Austria in 1955, and to Arles and London in 1956, the year he returned to Buenos Aires. A year later he went to Rio de Janeiro, and to São Paulo in 1958, and from there, some time later, he returned to Buenos Aires, where he stayed until 1961. That year he returned to Paris, where he lived through 1962, when he moved to Rome, with trips to Genoa and Venice en route. In 1963 he moved to Madrid, and he spent some months in Piedraavales. That same year he travelled to Lisbon, Galicia, and Paris. In 1964 he returned to Madrid, travelled to the Canary Islands, to Buenos Aires and, at the end of the year, to New York. In May, 1965, he returned to Spain, travelling to Ibiza, Madrid, and Barcelona, where he committed suicide in October. An interminable succession of ideas and circles, of detours going nowhere.

Masotta, for his part, didn’t leave Argentina until 1966, when he travelled to New York and Europe. That means that, in 1965, when he developed his luminous theses about Pop Art, he was working with a second-hand and nebulous knowledge, based mostly on reproductions in magazines or slides he managed to borrow, of the works he analyzes. He published *EI “pop-art”* in 1967, and in it he wonders if the first-hand knowledge of works and artists that he had gained since 1965 didn’t require him to modify his earlier “fantasies” and reconsider the ideas he had woven together based on his indirect references. Masotta concludes that his observations still held water, albeit with one exception: his (first) reading of Pop Art, he says, overlooks “the correlation between the visual arts and the modern expansion of information media.”⁵ This pending reflection is what became the organizing principle, not only of the collection *Happenings*, which Masotta coedited, but also of the first works of mass media art in Argentina. Masotta, under threat from paramilitary groups and harassed by the atmosphere of political persecution and violence, went into exile in December, 1974, settling first in London, and eventually in Barcelona. He never returned to Argentina.

It should be clear that, in speaking about Greco’s and Masotta’s errant condition, what matters most to me is not

so much their geographic displacements, but the mobility of their changing and uncertain roles. Greco and Masotta tried multiple paths, launching themselves into activities that cannot be framed or pigeonholed into one discipline or specialty.

Greco painted, though there is writing in a number of his paintings—and the reverse is true as well: a number of his writings contain collages, drawings, and graphisms. Many of his writings are also a sort of visual machine—or, to borrow a Masottian category, “drawn literature”—from the early poem cycle *Fiesta* to the novels *Besos Brujos* and *Hombres de mi vida* to the *Gran manifiesto-rollo arte Vivo-Dito*, a 200-meter long roll manifesto-anti-manifesto written in the form of a collage, with interventions by a number of inhabitants from Piedraavales. The roll is an extensive *cadavre exquis* that serves to signal everyone in Piedraavales as *vivo-dito*.

The *Vivo-Dito* consisted in signaling—with a gesture of the finger or a chalk circle—a person on the street or an everyday situation that Greco had decided to sign as his artwork. It can be read, heterotopically, as kindred, but also as different, to the readymade. Greco, like Duchamp, doesn’t produce: he finds, and claims as art, a fragment of the everyday (people, the street). But, and the difference is not minor, he doesn’t wrench what he finds from its place in order to send it, as anti-art, into the museum. His (anti)artistic gesture is to leave the *vivo-dito* where he found it, thus condemning it to be radically ephemeral, to disappear an instant later.

Masotta is likewise obliged to improvise, and likewise accused of having only a partial and unconsolidated handle on the authors he discusses and the questions he addresses. According to Carlos Correas, the “apparent knowledge” exhibited by his erstwhile friend about the work of no less than Sartre was in fact an “effective ignorance.”⁶ Masotta, for his part, inverts that argument when he suggests that “a certain cultural poverty, a poverty of training” can in fact function as “the motor that not only drove me to plan the book [*Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt*] but that allowed me to write it.”⁷

To invent one’s future requires the construction of one’s own image as well, whether as a pose or as an imposture. To present oneself as a work of art (the artist as art, life as art) complicates the separation between art and life. On the subject



Alberto Greco, *Vivo-Dito*, Madrid, 1963.
 Archivo Fotográfico Museo Nacional
 Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

of dandyism, Pauls asks: “To leave behind no other work than one’s life, to practice no other art than the art of living: isn’t that the identifying mark of the dandy’s program?”⁸

Greco defined himself as a “living artwork,” and he proposed situations in which his presence—his gaze, his body, his action, his signature—was the detonator. This is true not only of the *Vivo Ditos*, but extends also to Greco’s incorporation of living characters onto the canvas, and to the “Tachisme conference” that he planned while in Brazil (it’s unknown whether it ever took place). What matters in Greco is not the result, but the live action itself; the poet Horacio Pilar writes that “Greco had a theatrical idea of art,” that it is as if, “through the artwork,” Greco “was offering himself as the sacrificial body.”⁹ A joyful sacrifice, in any case.

Masotta constructed his pose carefully: the tie slightly askew, the shirt collar never quite intact. Film and literature both supplied him with models and gestures, as Guillermo Saccomanno observes:

A cocky Oscar who imitates James Dean and Marlon Brando, who copies their look, and who alighted for good, when he discovered Belmondo in *Breathless*, on a desired, and desirable, image: something slightly off about the way he wears his jacket, a cigarette always on his lips, a smile that oscillates “between grief and nothingness.”¹⁰

In a queer reading that invokes the figures of the gay *flâneur*, the “lumpen dandy,” and “sexual errancy,” Fernando Davis locates the possible inaugural scene of Argentinean art in Greco’s practice of besmearing signing the obscene drawings that he would see on the walls of public bathrooms in Paris in 1954 with the vulgar tag “*Greco puto*” (Faggot Greco).¹¹ This “blind” episode, since all that has come down to us is Greco’s own testimony, insists on reinventing itself as a visible and imaginable image. Years later, two Argentinean artists, Alberto Passolini and Juan Reos, almost simultaneously produced a series of works based on that episode, works that fictionalize the absence and transform the inexistence—of work, archive, or registry—into a creative drive.¹²

We can think of the occupation of these public bathrooms in Paris, their transformation into “*teteras*” (slang in



Juan Reos, *Greco Puto*, 2017. Etching, 24 x 34 cm. Part of the series *ANTES, un mundo sin reliquias*.

Argentina for places for furtive sexual encounters), as a heterotopia of deviation. The inscription, “*Greco puto*,” can be read as an ad or offer for his services as a prostitute—Greco himself mentions plying that trade—and also as their conversion into artistic action (years later, Greco himself located in these tags his first *Vivo Ditos*). Heterotopic borders to rethink the relation between art and prostitution.¹³

As Davis points out, there is in this act of public presentation and sexual offer, written in a foreign language in a marginal spot of the City of Lights, “a queer displacement of language through which the Argentinean tag, defiantly and uncomfortably, turned the double marking of the body, as gay and foreign,” into a “dislocatory *derive* of the migrant artist.”¹⁴

Perhaps the exercise of expanding the “queer hypothesis” to Masotta could shed light on his proximity (seductive, solidary) to feminism and homosexuality. In an attempt to reconcile feminist theory and psychoanalysis, Masotta argues that “Freudian theory, far from being anti-feminist, offers an adequate starting point from which to posit feminism as a necessity and a question.” Distancing himself from the naturalization of heterosexual binarism, he suggests that “masculinity and femininity are not, for Freud, properties at the starting point of the subject’s development, but endpoints, final destinations of that development.”¹⁵

In the 1950s, Masotta was a part of a trio with Juan José Sebreli and Carlos Correas. Both Sebreli and Correas were out as homosexuals, and both were seduced by their friend, about whom, years later, they would write a number of texts permeated with love and spite. This is a strong indication of how distant Masotta himself was from the hegemonic homophobia of those days. But there is something more at work here, an openness to a non-heteronormed desire. Correas recalls: “Oscar, who was frankly attractive, knew how to take advantage of the homosexuals around him without losing his virile chastity.”¹⁶

In 1959, the magazine *Centro*, published a short story by Carlos Correas entitled “La narración de la historia,” about a student and a petty thief who make out on the street.¹⁷ Reprisals came in hard and fast. Correas and Lafforgue were both charged with obscenity in a much-publicized trial, and the issue of the magazine containing the story was confiscated and taken off the shelves. Amidst the unanimous homophobia of the critics

(from the conservative daily *La Nación* to the publications run by the Communist Party), Masotta fiercely defended his friend, including with blows.

Roberto Jacoby underscores that, for Masotta, “being a homosexual was a virtue he had been unable to reach in spite of his efforts. He would introduce you to someone by saying: ‘He’s a very intelligent guy, a homosexual.’”¹⁸ In this respect, according to Saccomanno, both Sebreli and Correas coincide in pointing out that the very elegant suit that Masotta wore to his father’s funeral (...) had been obtained through the promise of sexual favors to a *colimba* colleague, favors that Masotta didn’t honor. At the very most, his homosexual experience extended to getting a blowjob from a fag once.¹⁹

During his years in exile in Barcelona, the doctor and psychoanalyst Marcelo Ramírez Puig and his partner, the artist Daniel Melgarejo, were among Masotta’s closest friends. Equally crucial was his intellectual affinity with the writer Alberto Cardín, who was the force behind the magazine *Diwan* as well as an LGBT activist.

Both Greco and Masotta fought against the insistent hostility of the local scene (intellectual, artistic), which reacted with irritation to their provocations, and was taken aback by their polemical irreverence. More than once, Greco and Masotta have been (and continue to be) accused and discredited as being farces, charlatans, seducers, frauds—in sum, of being *chantas*, as they say in Argentina. I’ll mention one example, among many, that attests to the persistence of this irritation towards them. The Brazilian art critic Aracy Amaral was surprised to learn about the first (and, to this day, the only) retrospective of Greco’s work at the IVAM (in Valencia, Spain): the show, she argues, can seem “to confer upon his production an inexistent aesthetic importance,” for Greco, she says, three decades after having met him in São Paulo, “was less an artist than a spectacle.”²⁰

Their early deaths coincide in the same distant city, and give us a last and disconsolate specular image: their absences highlight, among other things, the dissolution of one of the most singular and abysmal scenes of our history—and I’m not speaking only about art history.

Greco committed suicide by overdosing on pills in Barcelona in 1965. He arranged the whole scene to coincide

with the arrival of his unrequited love, who was on his way: Greco left the street door slightly ajar, and he died as he was writing the word, “End,” on the palm of his hand. He was, we might say, postulating his own voluntary death as his last work.

Masotta also flirted with suicide during a period of his life that he called his “season in hell,” in reference to the psychic illness brought about by the desolation that his father’s death caused in him in 1960. Correas relates, dispassionately, one of his suicide attempts: “Madness fulfilled its purifying function; and a triple simultaneous suicide (barbiturates, rope around the neck and suspended from the ceiling, cut wrists) in 1960 was averted by a secret lack of commitment.”²¹ Jorge Lafforgue, who was one of his closest friends at the time, recalls that his “suicide attempts always gave me the sense of not being definitive (...), that there was something ridiculous about them. I don’t know if any of them actually had an unambiguous intention—I suppose one must have, if nothing else because of their insistence.”²²

These experiences with suicide and madness can be thought as heteropias insofar as they are liminal and self-destructive acts that fold and unfold in dangerous exercises in freedom and autonomy (leave reason, forsake life).

A HYPOTHESIS

There was not much in the way of direct contact between Greco and Masotta, given Greco’s suicide in 1965, and the fact that his interventions in Buenos Aires in the years prior to that were sporadic (but thunderous). Still, Masotta referred to him in the tribute organized at the Galería Pizarro two months after his death, and discussed him—briefly and incisively—in the two books he wrote about (and from within) the avant-garde: *El “pop-art”* and *Happenings* (which he coedited and contributed to).

In *El “pop-art,”* Masotta analyzes Jim Dine’s series of tools and household equipment, like a sink and a hammer. Dine places the object on the canvas and surrounds it with black, thus displacing it from its use-function, so that the object is devoured “by its own image.” Masotta sees in Dine’s practice a reflection about the absence of the imaged subject, since “the object’s concrete being (...) depends on its use-context.” And he links

Dine's procedure to Rauschenberg's combine paintings and to Greco's *Vivo-Ditos*:

"Sign people," as Greco used to say. What could that mean? If there is no individual outside the context in which he exists, and if that context is in any way modified (for instance, by isolating an individual with a chalk-drawn circle), isn't it the very idea of individuality that finds itself modified or disturbed?²³

Besides the *Vivo-Ditos*, Greco had also used a procedure that is still closer to Dine's, in which he used subjects rather than objects. Greco called them "incorporations of living characters to the canvas," and they consisted of public situations in which a person (some recognizable, like the Flamenco dancer Antonio Gades, others unknown, like the itinerant merchant Encarnación Heredia) would place him or herself against the white canvas, and Greco would fill in the rest of the canvas in black paint. When the person stepped away from the canvas, you'd see the empty spot that had previously been occupied by his or her body.

In the "Prologue" to *Happenings*, Masotta again refers to Greco, arguing there that he was a foundational landmark in the short history of the Happening in Argentina, and characterizing his poetics as the "radical assertion of the value of art in relation to life and the rejection of art in favor of life, added to an attentive anxiety with respect to the most recent phases of art history."²⁴ From these traces, which he links to the very definition of the avant-garde, Masotta suggests a genealogy of the Happening that passes through the *Vivo-Ditos*, the "incorporations of living characters to the canvas," and, most importantly, through the campaigns for self-promotion that Greco launched on the streets of Buenos Aires. Immediately upon returning to the city, or just prior to leaving, Greco would go around tagging walls or printing posters—of the same type and quality as those still used today to announce recitals or neighborhood dances—whose only text were such slogans as: "Greco, America's greatest informalist painter," or "Alberto Greco, how great you are!" He pasted these onto the walls of the city center, thus installing his presence in the very city where he felt both misunderstood and scorned.



Alberto Greco, *¡Alberto Greco qué grande sós!*, Buenos Aires, 1961. Poster campaign. Photo: Sameer Makarius.



Edgardo Giménez, Dalila Puzzovio, Carlos Squirru, *¿Por qué son tan geniales?*, 1965. Billboard placed at the intersection of Florida and Viamonte streets, Buenos Aires. Courtesy of Dalila Puzzovio.

Masotta underscores the persistence of this same procedure in Italy: “In 1963, he plastered the walls and monuments of Rome with another phrase: ‘Greco, how great you are!’”²⁵ As in the public bathrooms in Paris, here we have again the estrangement of a colloquial expression, typical of Argentina, inscribed in a foreign context. Following his scandalous appearance at the Venice Biennale, Greco travelled to Rome, committed to making his presence there known:

[Greco] undertakes a systematic and spectacular graffiti campaign, using thick colored markers, across the entire historic center: Villa Gabuino and environs, Piazza di Spagna, the Forum, ... And the tag is, with minor variations, always the same: “PAINTING IS DEAD. HAIL VIVO-DITO ART, GRECO” (...). He continued to be perfectly unknown, but his name became very popular nonetheless.²⁶

When Greco inscribed his street campaigns for self-promotion in the circuit of mass media, he was trying to interpellate not only those he knew, but the anonymous public: Greco was less interested in the popular “subject” as a reference than as an interlocutor.

In these gestures by Greco, Masotta locates the beginnings of a series within the Argentinean avant-garde that will continue in that same vein in the well-known poster that Edgardo Giménez, Dalila Puzzovio, and Charly Squirru placed on the centrally-located corner of Viamonte and Florida. These three artists hired a painter for ad campaigns to make a portrait of them in which they are surrounded by psychedelic objects and framed by the question: “Why are they so brilliant?” Another poster, in which the artists appear as rock stars, continued this campaign with the question: “But, really, why are they so brilliant?”

The following year, also in Buenos Aires, Eduardo Costa, Roberto Jacoby, and Raúl Escari formed the group Arte de los Medios. Inspired by their fertile exchange of ideas with Masotta, these three artists conceived a new artistic genre, one that would run counter to the Happening fad and whose only materiality would be its circulation in mass media. Their first project, entitled *Anti-Happening* (1966), consisted in the mediatic

invention of a Happening: what they did was to send to “the press a written and photographic report about a Happening that did not occur.” The operation required a triple “creation”: the “writing of a false report”; the “transmission of this report through the media” (sixteen newspapers and magazines published it); the spectator, who constructs (in light of “the data received and based on the meaning the data acquires for him”) “the dimensions of a nonexistent reality that he believes to be true.” The work, they argue, privileges “the moment of transmission” over the moment of “creation.”²⁷ As with Greco’s anti-manifesto manifesto, these media artists appropriated the concept of the Happening to challenge it and to produce an antagonistic event, an *anti-Happening*.

Their experiment presupposes an acute awareness of the capacity of mass media to construct events, and this of course is something already at work in the self-promotion campaigns launched by Greco and, later, by Giménez, Puzzovio, and Squirru. In 1967, Masotta himself conceived a work of media art, entitled “The Ghost Message,” which likewise made use of pasting a poster on the street.²⁸ Masotta not only recognized, in this new genre, the condition of novelty in relation to earlier artistic movements (“media art today is avant-garde because it can produce entirely new objects”), he also thought that the new media art was “open to receiving revolutionary political content.”²⁹

This genealogy of artistic experimentation in the mass media circuits continued with the vertiginous radicalization of Argentinean avant-garde politics and aesthetics that we have called the “1968 Itinerary.” Its culminating point was the collective project *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán is Burning), which aimed to construct a *counter-informational* event that would refute the official version that the dictatorship had promulgated of the crisis which had devastated Argentina’s northern province. One of the stages of this collective project was, as it happens, an unsigned ad campaign that included a poster—similar in its materiality to Greco’s posters, as well as to Masotta’s “The Ghost Message”—that featured only a single word, “Tucumán,” and this single word drew the attention of anonymous passersby to the red-hot focus to the country’s economic, social, and political crisis. Also part of the campaign were graffiti and stickers that read: “Tucumán Arde.” These, like the other actions mentioned, were not clear about their condition as part of an artistic intervention.



Tucumán Arde, poster, first phase of the collective project.
Rosario, Argentina, 1968. Archivo Graciela Carnevale.
Courtesy of Graciela Carnevale.



Oscar Masotta, *El mensaje fantasma*, 1967. Anti-Happening
consisting of a poster campaign and a television broadcast.
Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Cloe Masotta.

Tucumán Arde is not an exceptional and isolated event, but a direct heir to the Arte de los Medios group and to the theoretical concepts that Masotta and others had introduced into the Argentinean avant-garde in the 1960s. Key notions—such as dematerialization (which Masotta takes from El Lissitzky in 1967), discontinuity (found in Roland Barthes and his reading of Michel Butor), mythologies (again in Barthes), environment (a notion that they derived from Marshall McLuhan and the idea that the medium is the message, and not from the art practices that would soon be given that name), and dishabituación (which Ricardo Carreira introduces to designate the effect of discomfort provoked by avant-garde art)—constitute a platform that was, and remains, productive to thinking the *derive* of this radical artistic movement, from Greco's *Vivo-Ditos* to the vertiginous political radicalization of 1968.

The interruption of *Tucumán Arde* with the closing, in 1968, of the show in Buenos Aires due to pressure from the dictatorship precipitated the dissolution of avant-garde groups in Rosario and Buenos Aires, and the generalized decision by artists to abandon art. Some, threatened by the growing violence, opted to leave Argentina; others, instigated by the political mandate, which seemed at the time the only way to make sense of that burning historical conjunction, joined militant groups. Before that explosion, the vertiginous 1968 itinerary was an extreme attempt to connect the artistic and the political avant-garde (or the avant-garde and the vanguard, as Susan Buck-Morss suggests in her discussion of the Soviet avant-garde). *Tucumán Arde* can be read as a collective wager on the ability to produce a singular political event out of the powerful tools and specific knowledges that the artistic avant-garde had conceived.

These proposals threaten to overflow the art field and, in that, they are at the other end of Anglo-Saxon Pop Art, which appropriated industrial symbols and icons in order to transform them into artistic materialities or references. It is in that threat, however, that we touch one of the distinctive traits of the Argentinean avant-garde in the 1960s: the experimentation with circuits of mass communication, with its appeal to the language, support, circuits, and environments of mass publicity and communication.



Oscar Masotta, *El mensaje fantasma*, 1967. Anti-Happening consisting of a poster campaign and a television broadcast. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Cloe Masotta.

8

After Pop, We Dematerialize (1967)

by Oscar Masotta

“‘He devoured her with his eYes.’ This sentence and manY si9ns Point to the illusion common to both realism and idealism: to know is to eat.”

– Jean-Paul Sartre, “IntentionalitY: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenolo9Y”

“The idea movin9 the masses todaY is called materialism, but dematerialization is the definin9 characteristic of the ePoch. For examPle: corresPondence 9rows, so the number of letters, the QuantitY of writin9 PaPer, the mass of material consumed exPand, until relieved bY the telePhone. AGain, the network and material of suppliy 9row until theY are relieved bY the radio. Matter diminishes, we dematerialize, sluggish masses of matter are rePlaced bY liberated ener9Y.”

– El LissitzkY, “The Future of the Book”

1. The Word “HaPPenin9” in the Mass Media

We are not a country of *happenistas*, despite the fact that one of the genre’s founders, Allan Kaprow, referred to Argentines as such a year ago (I don’t remember exactly where: *Art News*, *Artforum*?). At that time relatively few Happenings had been made in Argentina. Nor were many made afterward: quantitatively speaking, 1966 was not all that fruitful. To be exact, only two Happenings took place among us last year. We must not neglect to add the following to that number: two “works” of uncertain classification, but whose authors refuse to call Happenings; one, whose classification is less uncertain, that was conceived as a literary work and that could undoubtedly be called a Happening;

and the work of an American artist, Bob Whitman, a film entitled *Prune Flat* that Marta Minujín brought to Buenos Aires. The film was part of a “work” in which the bodies of three women live on stage served as the screen onto which the film of the bodies of the women was projected.¹

Still, even if the Happenings actually made were very few, the word “Happening” spread through the dailies and magazines of Buenos Aires over the course of 1966, from magazines of a certain level of “style” and/or “seriousness,” such as *Primera Plana* and *Confirmado*, to pretty lowbrow (sensationalist and with little written information) publications like *Así*. From dailies such as *La Nación* and *La Prensa* to *La Razón* and *El Mundo*, and from political articles to humor columns, the word invaded the comic strip and finally reached the billboard. It was a strange phenomenon that, since it didn’t correspond to the facts (that is, to the Happenings effectively carried out), appeared to spring from nothing. Nor does it make sense to try to understand it by thinking of the dates, since by the time that a few Happenings were actually taking place at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, the phenomenon of the quantitative growth of the word was already quite advanced.

How to explain the phenomenon? There is a sort of explanation that has not appeared in print but is heard around and is, to my mind, rather abominable for two reasons. Firstly, because it is complicit with what the word means within the mass media *boom* (something irrational and spontaneous, trivial and festive, slightly scandalous). Secondly, because of the ideological charge of an explanation that consists in affirming that Argentine “reality” (I also loathe this sort of use of the word “reality”) is not very serious, and hence the explosion of the word in the press is in some way a positive phenomenon because it somehow represents a becoming aware of our lack of seriousness. Just imagine: the vicissitudes of political power, the circular succession of economic teams. And what of the ridiculous seizing of the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands) by an ex-actress and a few young extremists? I would say the answer is nothing. Especially if the point is to make comparisons: Argentina’s domestic and foreign politics are no less serious and more scandalous, nor more serious and less scandalous (perhaps less scandalous) than those of any other Western nation. On the other hand, it would be difficult for Argentines to give ourselves the politics we want. The iron limits

of an internal and external economic and social structure determine and decide for us, and without our input, a “reality” that is only ours because it is alien.

In any case, I believe that the explosion of the word can perhaps be explained, or at least understood, via a certain hypothesis that, although no doubt incomplete with regard to the facts it deals with, is at least sensible.

Firstly, in no case do I remember having read the word without it referring in some way to the real facts, that is: that “Happenings” are products of a certain type of avant-garde artistic activity. This reference to artistic activity, however vague, indicates a certain relationship, the presence of a certain meaningful distance: it condemns the distance or void that exists between the products of mass information and avant-garde artistic activity.

On one hand, the void signifies the unresolved situation in contemporary culture between the elite and the masses. The slightest consideration, however, reveals a real shortcoming in Argentina: above all, the absence of competent criticism to accompany avant-garde production, especially in the visual arts. I’m referring, concretely, to the lack of written material. The only ones in Buenos Aires who have the information to talk about the most contemporary production (Jorge Romero Brest, Aldo Pellegrini, Germaine Derbeq, Hugo Parpagnoli, Samuel Paz) rarely write for publications other than catalogues, and when they do write for specialized magazines, they are magazines that are not published in Spanish. In one of last year’s issues of *Art and Artists*, a British magazine edited by Mario Amaya, I remember reading an editorial that discussed the difficulty of distinguishing these days between a journalist and an art critic: the high level of everyday criticism makes the distinction difficult. In this regard, alas, Argentina is not England, or the United States, or France. On the contrary, in addition to the lack of specialized criticism in Argentina, the everyday criticism is ill-informed and adverse. *Primera Plana* and *Confirmado* are no exceptions. The critic here rarely commits himself. He is more interested in displaying information he does not have or has obtained hastily than simply in using the information he does have to aid in the comprehension of the work.

But these reflections do not explain the explosion of the word, which surely would not have occurred without a certain anxiety—let’s call it that—or a certain predisposition on

the part of the mass audience. An interesting phenomenon, as I see it, and a positive one, in that it points to the fact that, whatever the distance between an aesthetic production intended for an elite audience and a broad audience, that distance is never absolute and there are always some points of contact or some sort of rupture of the distance. Now, it is important to understand also that the spread of the word (and all the mistakes regarding its meaning) is not due to the “ignorance” of the mass audience, since, among other things, journalists, and not the receptors of mass messages, are the ones who compose the messages. That is to say, a certain kind of intellectual laborer who bears the pressure of tensions akin to those borne by his audience, and bears as well the theoretical tensions of the intellectual world and of the environment of artistic production that surrounds him.

We must think, then, about this specific situation. I would say that, in Buenos Aires, one of the coordinates points to the activity of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, and is indissociable from the crave that this activity could not but provoke in groups that are originally or naturally removed from it. Whatever the value or the judgments passed on the works promoted by the Visual and Audiovisual Arts departments at the Instituto, there is no doubt that they contrast with a certain milieu, the bulk of whose artistic production was created inside the traditional canon. There is no “underground” in Buenos Aires, and in a world in which the artistic production is not very big, the “institutionalized underground” of the Instituto could not but exert pressure on that milieu.

But what is happening in the rest of the “field,” in the majority of the cases? Let us reflect briefly on what is happening in Argentine film. The best films produced among us (works by David José Kohon, Fernando Birri, and Lautaro Murúa) did not go, technically speaking, beyond certain more or less Neorealist aesthetic strategies. And beyond the searches of Manuel Antín with regard to time and the thematic investigations of Rodolfo Kuhn, there has been no progress among us towards a Nouvelle Vague cinema, for example, or towards any major avant-garde propositions. Once the city had been explored as a theme, and once a certain testimonial description had been achieved (*Alias Gardelito* and *Tres veces Ana* constitute the best examples),² young directors generally filmed rather little. The situation can be explained in large part by the economic difficulties linked to

production and the uncertain loan policy enforced by the Instituto Cinematográfico Argentino. But looked at the other way, it would be difficult to say that young directors do not film much solely because of money and financing difficulties. I believe that the current impasse in Argentine cinema expresses, at this level, an aesthetic impasse. To give the matter yet another twist, it is not that young people have nothing to say but that perhaps they are beginning to have a sharp consciousness that tells them that the issue turns, not what is said, or even perhaps on the way in which it is said, but on the characteristics of the “medium” at hand to say it with.

To put it another way, at this moment in the process of contemporary art, at a time marked not only by the appearance of new “genres” of expression, like the Happening, but also by the fact that the very idea of “genre” as a limit has come to seem precarious or perishable (theater mixes its techniques with those of film, dance blends with painting, film shows the strong influence of the comic strip), it becomes increasingly impossible to remain indifferent to this small proposition of all avant-garde work or exhibitions (and difficult, likewise, not to take seriously the very idea of avant-garde). The problems of contemporary art reside less in the search for new content than in research of the “media” for the transmission of that content. “Media” here means generally what it means in advertising jargon: the information media (television, film, magazines, and newspapers). And if there is talk now of not concerning oneself with content, it does not mean that avant-garde art is moving toward a new purism or a worse formalism. What is occurring today in the best pieces is that the contents are being fused to the media used to convey them. This concern—demonstrated explicitly for the first time by Pop artists—is inseparable from a true sociological concern, that of a new way of returning to “content.”

No filmmaker today could trick himself into thinking that, even if he tried—faithful still to the Neorealist spirit—he could comment on or “show” the social “reality” of a city. He would be too late, because it has already been remarked on again and again by the dailies, newspapers, radio-phonics “works,” television, photo-novels, and advertising. The contemporary artist cannot help but become aware of the appearance of these mass phenomena that in some way throw his own work off kilter. And

we already know the tactics contemporary artists have used, and are still using, to respond.

One response has been to propose images that, like Lichtenstein's, are not "of reality," but images of images. Another has been a radical reflection on the material characteristics of the aesthetic "medium" that is being worked with. Today, the proposals of an outdated criticism that never tired of issuing pronouncements like "this is painting but that isn't," "this is theater and not film," "this is sculpture and that is not," are being confronted with the idea of making works with materials and techniques taken from different genres, the idea of an area of aesthetic activity where it is possible to mix both strategies and "media." In short, the idea of the work of art as "hybrid."

In summary, the explosion of the word "Happening" in the mass media information of Buenos Aires may perhaps be due to reasons that still have to do with issues like aesthetics and the history of the works. They are the result of a certain degree of complication among these types of factors: 1) the lack of serious criticism on an everyday level; 2) the lack of a specialized criticism in specialized publications that could have an influence on everyday criticism; 3) a certain positive restlessness, on behalf of mass audiences, that is only satisfied by an indifferent criticism 4) the need—without the slightest doubt—for the groups producing art to find new aesthetic formulas and problems; 5) the way in which these needs, combined with the existence of an avant-garde production on the level of the visual arts, are projected on individual journalists, that is, those responsible for the explosion of the word.

It is not surprising that the direct, personified, concrete emitters of mass messages effectively constitute the terminal point in a series of chain reactions whose mechanism operates similarly to what psychologists describe as ambivalence: the negative and positive evaluation of the same object. This might be the reason behind that atmosphere, tinged with a slightly spicy air, associated with the idea of sex and parties that has often accompanied the word Happening when, beginning last year, it started to appear in print in the dailies and magazines of Buenos Aires.

2. The Avant-Garde and Works of Mass Information

A cycle of lectures and Happenings of mine at the Instituto Di Tella in October and November of 1966³ links my name to the word Happening. Despite the spread of the word in the mass media, I should add that I am not a *happenista*—in the same way that I am not a musician, or a painter, or a sculptor, or an actor, or a theater director: I have not devoted, nor do I plan to devote, the bulk of my activity or my future to any of those activities. I want to add, moreover, that I do not believe in Happenings. Now, I think I should explain what I am saying when I say that I do not believe in Happenings, but it is difficult. Sometimes the time or place for explaining everything isn't there. I will say in any case that I do not believe in Happenings just as I do not believe in painting and theater. And I can discern in the reader a slightly sarcastic and amused fury that will cause him to exclaim: here we have "an avant-gardiste"! Very well, I will not contradict that. I believe that in art, today, there's no alternative other than to be of the avant-garde.

The problem arises when one tries to define the avant-garde. Although it is not difficult, I will not attempt that definition here. More than offering definitions, my intention now is to give some account of *events* and complete that account with a few indications and some reflections. I will say that an avant-garde work must have at least these four properties:

a) that there be recognizable in it a certain susceptibility and a completed information about what is happening at the art-historical level, that is to say, about what is happening in art with regards to what has been done before, and to what one imagines *should* happen afterward. In this way, the avant-garde consists in a postulation that states that the work of art exists within a historical sequence of works, and that that sequence is governed by an *internal necessity*. A passage from Henry Geldzahler expresses this characteristic succinctly: "This is instant art history, art history made so aware of itself that it leaps to get ahead of art"⁴;

b) that it not only open up a new range of aesthetic possibilities (that is—as is commonly said—that it be an “open work”), but that it simultaneously, and radically, negate something. For example: the Happening with regard to painting,⁵ or the Happening with respect to traditional theater;⁶

c) that this relationship of negation (with regard to what the work negates of that which has preceded it) not be whimsical, but that it reveal something fundamental about the very core of what is negated. In this way, the passage through or overcoming of theater or painting by the Happening would be a “logical extension”⁷ of something already latent in theater or painting, and that demanded to be made manifest;

d) (this point may be the hardest to understand and accept immediately; let us say it is the most polemical) that the work, with its radical negativity, call into question the very limits of the great traditional artistic genres (painting, sculpture, music, etc.). For example: the Happening with regard to those traditional genres themselves. According to this characteristic—as I understand it—Picasso never would have belonged to the avant-garde since the “plastic arts” of the twentieth century would have had only one outburst (the only one that effectively stretched the boundaries of the genre): the Dadaism of the second decade of the century (and its “revival” during the mid-1950s with Pop Art and French Neo-realism, which is, historically, when Happenings appeared). In this view, the avant-garde of the century is made up of just a few names: Satie and Cage, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Duchamp and Schwitters, Yves Klein, Allan Kaprow. And one would have to add the name of one Surrealist, René Magritte.

One might reach a hurried conclusion on the basis of these considerations: that today only the Happening, this hybrid of genres, is avant-garde. But that is not my conclusion. On the contrary, my position is that there was something within the Happening that allowed us to glimpse the possibility of its own negation, and for that reason the avant-garde today is built upon a new type—a new genre—of works. We could call these works “anti-Happenings,” but there is a problem in that designation: it makes a completely new aesthetic manifestation depend upon a genre, like the Happening, that is no longer new. To get to the point, this new genre of artistic activity, which appeared in Buenos Aires in 1966, already has a name: “Art of Mass Communications Media.”⁸ I can attest that it fulfills the basic requirements for describing a field of artistic activity; in other words, that it effectively constitutes an artistic genre. This is confirmed, on the one hand, by its capacity to produce “objects” for aesthetic contemplation and, on the other hand, by the fact that it concretely delimits the “material” with which it is possible to construct a particular and precise kind of work. Just as the “material” of music is a certain sonorous material or the continuum of auditory stimuli, and just as bronze, wood, marble, glass, and new synthetic materials constitute the “material” with which and upon which it is possible to make sculptures, so too the “works of communication” define their own area of “materiality.” The “material” (“immaterial,” “invisible”) with which informational works of this type are made is none other than the processes, the results, the facts, and/or the phenomena of information set off by the mass information media (examples of “media” include: radio, television, dailies, newspapers, magazines, posters “panels,” the comic strip, etc.).⁹

3. A New CYcle

It was in this spirit and with these ideas in mind that I developed a new cycle, also to be carried out at the Instituto Di Tella, which would comprise (did comprise) a Happening, the title of which was *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter), a communicational work (or “anti-Happening”), the title of which was *El mensaje fantasma* (The Ghost Message), and an explanatory lecture that I called “Nosotros desmaterializamos” (“We Dematerialize”). The purpose

is easy to discern: to juxtapose a communicational work and a Happening so as to allow for an understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the operations, and of the “materials,” that constitute them. The cycle proposed at the same time an “anti-optical,” anti-visual aesthetic: the idea of constituting “objects,” though with the goal of speaking, not to the eyes, but to the mind. The title of the communicational piece commented on the tension of the search for immaterial materials, for anti-things, if you will. As for the title of the lecture—in which I tried to explain, in a less orderly manner, what I am trying to explain now—I took it from the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky, from an article of his perspicaciously¹⁰ exhumed in a recent issue of the *New Left Review*, the journal of the independent English Left. Of all El Lissitzky’s nervous and lucid paragraphs, one in particular fascinated me. It can be read in the epigraph to this essay.

4. *El helicóPtero*

El helicóptero would serve me, a posteriori, as a reference with which to define, through differentiation, what a communicational work is. But I had already understood as well, while planning it, that it could be useful to pit *El helicóptero* to the Happening by the French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel that we had seen here in Buenos Aires that same year, as well as to the ideas that he defends in his book, which was recently translated into Spanish.¹¹ In a country where, as far as Happenings are concerned, deeds are scarce and information abundant, it wasn’t pointless to polemicize at the level of the deeds themselves. The image of the Happening that emerged from Lebel’s work, and from his book, was that of a generalized irrationality. Lebel espouses what we could call a quasi-psychedelic ideology that accords pride of place to a set of myths: life, spontaneity, sensory and perceptual participation, liberation from the unconscious, and certainly also the current myth that contemporary consciousness is “bombarded” by information. And Lebel thinks that what contemporary men fear above all is the naked expression of instincts. He would perhaps not be half-wrong if ours was a Victorian society. As I see it, what men of contemporary societies fear, and try to hide, is not the irrationality of the instinct but the rationality of the structure. Besides, all

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 Mujer del helicóptero: Beatriz Matar Piloto del helicóptero: Luis Losada Acomodadoras: Irene Maulnes Virginia Simova Lila Bonis Conductores: Manuel Arias Roberto Richetti José Copasti Fotógrafo previsto: Juan Lepes	Lugar: Theatron Bailarina “en vivo”: Nacha Guevara Batería: Louis Moholo Guitarras: Miguel Ángel Telechea Pedro López de Tejada Acomodadoras: Liliana Fernández Blanco Carola Leyton Patricia López de Tejada Conductores: Luis Morando José Balotti Salvador Arias Hombre del proyector: Osvaldo Vacca Fotógrafo previsto: Carmen Miranda Cámara cinematográfica: Oscar Bony Vestuario de las acomodadoras: María del Carmen Spingola Realización de vestuario: María del Carmen Spingola Laura Linares
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Auspiciado por el Centro de Artes Visuales y el Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella

Original flyer for the Happening *El helicóptero*, 1967. Source: Archivos Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Lebel does in his Happenings is to arrange, in sealed-off premises (the theater of the Instituto, with its cube shape, chairs, and stage at the front, in sum, the traditional architectonic box of the traditional theater), a cluttered, disorderly, and simultaneous group of messages (slides, films, live performers, his own talk), to produce a sought-for result: a dark and expressionist image. We could describe Lebel's Happening as follows: a "collage," neo-naturalist and expressionist. But this iconoclast, who favors a shit aesthetic¹² and who thinks simultaneity as disorder, does not for all that abandon the traditional coordinates of the traditional theater. This destroyer of traditional art is nourished by the foundation of that art: the closed, post-Renaissance space. It is indeed true that you need a cube to make us believe that the world is a mess! In sum, without rejecting Lebel's belligerent attitude—or the conceited air, orgiastic and dark, that surrounds his Happenings and his person—it is still worthwhile recalling to what extent violent attitudes are not enough to justify the contradictions and meanderings of certain aesthetic propositions.

It was enough to bring the audience out of the premises of the Instituto to change the aesthetics. *El helicóptero* turned on its head the idea of simultaneity as disorder: by proposing two situations, simultaneous in time but separated spatially, it showed simultaneity as constitutive of the foundations of communication and language. The image of two or more events taking place simultaneously only conjure up an aesthetic of disorder and "bombardment" if these events take place in the same space. In *El helicóptero*, there were four explicit intentions:

1) that no member of the audience would be able to directly appropriate the totality of the situation (in the Happening, none of the members of the audience could "see" the totality of the events);¹³

2) that clock-time is a function of geographic and spatial distance (*El helicóptero* was nothing if not a "drawing of timetables," the planning of a set of departure and arrival times that had to be rigorously obeyed);

3) the simple idea that geography does not signify the same thing, and that the control of time is different depending on whether the space is covered on a wagon, a car, or a plane (the presence of the helicopter, by the same token, connoted the 1930s);

4) to produce and allow a certain, and precise, type of appropriation of the global situation: it could be neither direct nor visual, but had to be mediated by verbal language, by oral communication, face-to-face. Allow me to explain.

The audience was invited to arrive at the Instituto Di Tella at 2pm on July 16—the cycle had been announced through *gacetillas* (newsclips), through a poster on the windows of the Instituto itself, and through the newsletter that the Instituto sends to its members and to the people involved in the Visual and Audiovisual Arts departments. At the appointed hour, around eighty people¹⁴ had bought their tickets and were in the hall of the Instituto. Six minibuses were waiting outside. In the hall, mixed in with the public, six ushers were giving instructions: the public, the ushers explained, had to gather around the first three buses, or the last three, depending on whether the final number on their entrance ticket was odd or even. The public was likewise told that, henceforward, the schedule would be obeyed rigorously and that the buses would leave from the door of the Instituto at 2:40pm and at 2:45pm. At 2:30pm exactly everyone had to start filing into the buses.

The buses had different destinations. Three of them were headed to the the Theatrón, a theater situated inside the Galería Americana, on the intersection of Avenida Santa Fé and Pueyrredón.¹⁵ The other three were headed instead to the Anchorena station, a train station of the (now abandoned) *línea del bajo*, in the Martínez area.¹⁶ Once all the buses were on their way, the ushers gave more instructions, which differed depending on where the buses were headed. The ushers on the buses going to the Theatrón stressed the importance of a strict adherence to the schedule: everyone would be dropped off at the entrance to the Galería, and at 3:25pm exactly the buses would depart again, direction Anchorena. The audience was also told that the

departure time of the buses would only be revealed to them once everyone was down below—the Theatrón is a cellar theater—and that everyone would have to collaborate in the effort to vacate the premises and reach the buses waiting for them on the sidewalk of Avenida Santa Fé as quickly as possible. Those going to Anchorena, for their part, were told that, once there, all they had to do was to be on the lookout for two things: 1) the arrival of the helicopter (it would be carrying the actress Beatriz Matar), which would do numerous “fly-overs” between 4 and 4:05pm; 2) the arrival of the part of the audience that had gone to the Theatrón, but was due to join them in Anchorena. In conceiving the schedule, I had arranged things so that those who went first to the Theatrón would only arrive in Anchorena immediately after, or a bit after,¹⁷ the helicopter fly-overs. That was all. The forty people coming from the Theatrón would not see the helicopter; they’d “be late.” But this “being late” was planned, and that gave the sequence of events its “exceptional” character. In daily life, one is late, either against one’s will, or by accident. Here, instead, being late was a necessity of the planned structure. There were, consequently, two chronological times: the time of the deceived group (which had been told to hurry for “nothing”), and the reverse of that time (the time of *my* consciousness, which “knew”). All of this created a certain resemblance between the Happening and some mafia operations, like a bank holdup, for example. With a goal in mind—getting hold of the money—one must trace a strategy of schedules and timetables: one must know what time the employee with the key to the safe arrives; one must find a way to distract a cop, in other words, to create a “gap” in the cop’s constant vigilance; one must orchestrate the coincidence of this “gap” with the hour when the bank has the fewest number of clients.¹⁸

El helicóptero, for its part, also answered a strategic end: to deny half the audience direct view of the helicopter, so that it would be available only through the oral narrative of those who had seen it. In this way, the Happening ended with the constitution of a situation of oral communication: the two sectors of the audience, in a way that was “direct,” “face-to-face,” “reciprocal,” and “in the same space,”¹⁹ communicated to each other what the other had not seen. That was all.

5. At the Theatrón and at Anchorena: the “Images”

The Theatrón holds no more than a hundred and forty people, and is located on the Galería’s lower-level. My plans were for the events there to be confused, disorganized. The audience walked into a completely unlit and dark theater; it was up to each of them to decide whether to stand or sit. Waiting for them in the darkness were Louis Moholo with his drum set and a projectionist with a 16mm projector. There were also two musicians, Telechea and López Tejada, who welcomed the public with the song “Yeh-yeh.” The photographers and the flashes; the Telenoche TV crew; the cables and the spots; the disordered public in the theater; the shouts of the ushers and of Juan Risuleo;²⁰ my own shouts telling the photographers to make sure that the light from the spots didn’t illuminate the space for too long: there is in all of this certain replica of Lebel’s aesthetic—a set of simultaneous and juxtaposed messages and tensions, the tortured and tortuous properties of the image that lovers of Expressionism find so appealing. On one of the walls was projected an eight-minute film that accentuated the expressionist image: a figure, completely bound in bandages, twisted and turned violently in an effort to free itself from the ties that bound it (it was a replica, a “citation,” of a film by Claes Oldenburg). Louis Moholo accompanied the figure’s movements with his drum kit. A live figure—similar to the one in the film—cleared a path through the audience, enveloped in darkness, to reach the wall upon which the film was being projected, and once there she started to mirror the contortions of the figure in the film.

What the public “saw,” and the expressionist style of the situation, were the result of what I had planned. But it is not amiss for me to point out here that none of this was much to the point, since I didn’t “believe” in that Expressionism. All I’m trying to say, quite simply, is that the events at the Theatrón were not the *entire* Happening: from the point of view of the *totality*, what happened at the Theatrón was nothing more than a “differential” with regards to Anchorena.

In Anchorena, the image was open and calm, a bit nostalgic and, to put it briefly, touched with some characteristics specific to Romanticism. This old and abandoned *British* station: the iron rail of the platform that faces the river like a

balcony invited one to contemplate the “landscape” on that winter Sunday afternoon; the grey river caressing the slightly damp wood and the iron of the rails covered by the overgrown grass. The cold, the separation of the bodies, the open space: everything invited reflection, contemplation, recollection. An atmosphere—it seemed even to me when I reached Anchorena—reminiscent, in part at least, of a short story by Borges, or by Beatriz Guido, or, maybe, by Eduardo Mallea ...

But wasn't the contrast clear? The opposition between Anchorena and the Theatrón was the same as that between a peaceful past and an anxious present, or between an open space and a space framed by four walls. And, maybe, it was akin as well to the opposition between Romanticism and Expressionism, and to the way that the open space of the sky (which takes on meaning due to the expected arrival of the helicopter) is the opposite of a closed, underground space (where nothing is expected since everything arrives before anything can be expected).

Another opposition (or, it could be better to say, paraphrasing linguists: another pairing of opposites): in Anchorena, Beatriz Matar literally “flew over” the audience waiting down below; in the Theatrón, conversely, the members of the audience found themselves in a confined space in which the distance between bodies was improbable, unusual. The public, open space of Anchorena was the polar opposite of the equally public, but promiscuous and more bodily awkward, space of the Theatrón. The idea of promiscuity and corporeal proximity links up to the idea of sex, and that was commented on in the first minute of the film projected on the wall: a slow travelling shot inside a bathroom ends with a close-up of a detail of a toilet. This close-up was at the same time clearly a pairing with the helicopter: this opposition defined the basic coordinates of the Happening. Tension upwards, towards the sky, in one; tension downwards, towards the lower-level and the toilet, in the other.

Another pairing: if the Theatrón is situated in the “North” (speaking here from the standpoint of its socio-economic “brand” as an upscale area), the Galería itself and the corner of Pueyrredón and Santa Fé (bars, shops) are transit areas—commercial, but “popular,” two characteristics that evidently “neutralize” its “brand” status.²¹ Anchorena, conversely, preserves its brand

status: situated on the “*cordón verde*” (green belt) of the “*Zona Norte*,” a residential area north of the city, it clearly denotes its upper-middle class status. It could thus be said that, within this relation, only Anchorena was situated *in the north*, while the Theatrón was instead situation *south of that north*. This relativization of geographic spaces allowed Anchorena to have an *absolute definition* of its geographic position, whereas the Theatrón was allowed only a *relative definition*. During the Happening, the very words “Anchorena” and “Theatrón”—and this due to the characteristics specific to those two places—composed a connotative field constituted as follows: Theatrón : Anchorena :: neutral status : high status :: no-North : North :: relative : absolute.

But what does all this mean? Primarily, that every “punctual” commentary, that is, that each and every image or object in *El helicóptero* would be wrong. The expressionist images of the Theatrón could not be judged or understood on their own: they had to be thought in relation to the images at Anchorena, which they were *not*. *Presences*—that is, the perceptible and visible objects present—only gained sense (like the phonemes of a linguistic message) within a code and, consequently, in relation to *absences* (for example: the *meaning* of what was Happening at the Theatrón was in Anchorena, and vice-versa). In short, to understand it was necessary to *substitute*.²²

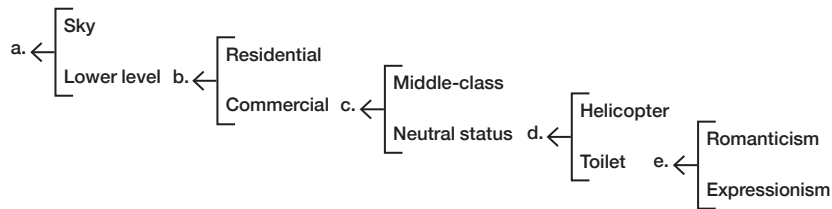
Let us return to our pairs, or binaries. On the one hand, it could be said that they don't have the same logical consistency, and that they don't all belong to the same level. On the other hand, simply to accept that the objects and images were nothing more than “fragments” and “differentials,” and that they thereby sketched an ample group of relations, doesn't gain us much. An organized group of relations, regardless of how “strong” the structure that groups them may be, cannot account for itself, nor can it immediately account for the *meaning* of a message. My point is that it is only after one has glimpsed the *code* that it becomes possible to describe the *message*. Knowing a code, however, is not the same as deciphering a message. Put differently: what was the signification of *El helicóptero*? What did it *signify*, as a message?

Let us answer the first question. To do so, that is to say, to introduce a certain order into the disorder, it might prove useful to apply a rule suggested by Lévi-Strauss when it is

a question of making sense of a myth through an analysis of its structure: “to isolate and compare the *various levels* on which the myth evolves: geographic, economic, sociological, cosmological—each one of these levels, together with the symbolism proper to it, being seen as a transformation of an underlying logical structure common to all of them.”²³

The levels of analysis in our case would be these:

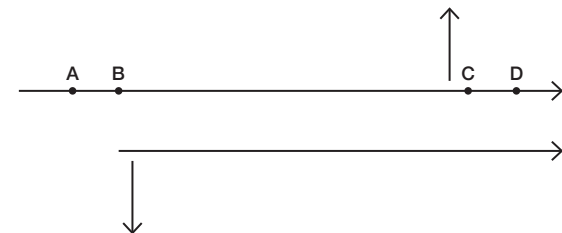
- a) cosmological
- b) economic
- c) socio-economic
- d) historical (the level of technical development)
- e) cultural (styles or aesthetics)



It is obvious that the logical consistency of the pairs is not the same. But it is thanks to that, and not in spite of it, that the Happening *signifies*, that it *expresses* a meaning. Allow me to explain. If we compare the pair of opposites—sky/lower level and helicopter/toilet—we notice that the first pair is stronger. It is quite clear that *sky* and *lower level* are opposites, in the same way as top and bottom are opposites: the members of the pair are each the polar opposite of the other. The same cannot be immediately said of helicopter/toilet, except for the fact that the pair also contains *top* and *bottom* as its foundation. But why a helicopter and not two-engine aircraft? And assume I had chosen a two-engine aircraft, why should I have chosen that and not a jet?²⁴

Well, the questions just raised are fundamental, because they convert the helicopter into a “differential”: they define it by what it is not. By the same token, the helicopter provided a way for me to “think” the sky: given the differences between the three types of aircrafts (in terms of how fast, and how high, they can go), we could say that the helicopter belongs to the “low heavens,”²⁵ while jet propulsion airplanes belong to the “high heavens.” And since there are, in turn, differences between jet propulsion and propeller planes, we could say, even more specifically, that the helicopter is a machine that belongs to the “first low heavens.” In other words, the helicopter “divided” the sky and, in so doing, it acted retroactively on our first cosmological level, if I can put it that way.

Simultaneously, as an autogiro, the helicopter constitutes one pole of another opposition: at the other end of that pole are those airplanes that are not autogiros. But doesn’t this other opposition bring to the fore yet another characteristic of the “first low heavens”? It does, namely the fact that, to reach it, and to come down from it, there’s no need for runways or airports. Similarly, Santa Fé and Pueyrredón, or Anchorena, or indeed any place whatever, are all suitable places to navigate by helicopter, something which we can express as follows: *the helicopter rendered Santa Fé and Pueyrredón homologous with Anchorena, that is to say, it neutralized the status relation. Here we see, again, how a (historico-technological) level acts retroactively on another level (the socio-economic).*²⁶



“A” represents the moment, before the departure of the minibuses, in the hall of the Instituto Di Tella: it was in that situation that the audience was constituted into a group. “B” indicates the moment when the buses leave and, hence, the beginning of a time when the audience is split in two. “C” indicates the arrival of the helicopter (at 4pm, seen only by half the audience). “D” indicates the arrival of the Theatrón audience at Anchorena. “E” indicates the end of the Happening (the audience was told to return to the buses, and these took everyone back to the Di Tella). The graph above shows that the start and the end of the Happening (segments “AB” and “DE”) are not symmetrical, even though they are similar, since in them the group was not split. These segments, consequently, are opposites of the time when the group was split (segment “BD”). However, “AB” and “CD” differ and are opposed, since in the former the group lacked a common experience, while in the latter it did have some sort of common experience. What was common about that experience was entirely verbal. This final situation of “verbal communication” was a function of two different “real” experiences. Could we not say then—even if it would be slightly pedantic, maybe even banal—that *El helicóptero* was like a “primitive tale,” or like a myth?²⁷ And that its myth was none other than the myth of the origin and functions of verbal language? The *origin*: to relate to the other what the other could not see so that he may tell us what we, in turn, could not see. The *functions*: to constitute, through the reciprocity of the narratives, the history of the group, that is, its unifying memory, and consequently the group itself as a social unit. We could say, then, that the “theme” of *El helicóptero* is the origin and the functions of oral communication. But what was its meaning, its signification? I understand that there are at least as many readings of it as the levels of analysis that we established to organize the oppositions. Considering the theme as the empty scheme, and superimposing upon it the schemes that correspond to the cosmological, economic, socio-economic, historical, and cultural levels, we could generate a variety of interpretations, all of which would be, to my eyes, valid. In “the symbolism proper to it,” each level would allow for the symbolism proper to each of the other levels to “resonate” within it. In this way, one could generate, from a cosmological perspective, the following propositions: *By splitting the audience, the Happening established a certain direction (before and after*

the destination points) between the part of the audience that had been at the lower level of the Galería and the sector that had been referred, or turned, towards the sky.

It will be said that the scheme is, for all that, still fairly empty. But don’t the significations, symbols, and oppositions “resonate” in the words used? Think about it: in the word “sky,” the helicopter as sign of the “first middle heaven”; in the expression, “destination points,” the difference between the Theatrón (without “brand” status) and Anchorena (with “brand” status). In this way, and from a socio-economic perspective, one could generate still more propositions, charged with resonances that are not (or are less) empty, but full of moral and/or ideological connotations.

El helicóptero was both a commentary on, and a beginning of, the very group that constituted its audience. This commentary (a bit sarcastic, a bit mocking) obliged the group to trace a directional scheme similar, or analogous (“iconographic”), to the tensions over status that defines the individuals of the class. The directional scheme (from the Theatrón to Anchorena, and not the other way around) showed the group in the process of being unified and finally reaching its unity, in a trajectory that went from bottom to top, from the “toilet” to the helicopter ... The helicopter, a machine of the “first middle heavens,” as an autogiro, filled a certain function as a symbol for the neutralization of the reality of status: according to this function, the *Zona Norte*—defined by its status as residential—symbolically lost its status. In this way, one can foresee, and it must be said, that at the end of the Happening the group regained the unity of its history and its unity as a group through certain contents, communicated orally, that are in some way contiguous with a system (ideological) of contradictory propositions.

These explanatory reflections are, in any case, incomplete. What does the opposition, *Romanticism-Expressionism*, mean, for example?²⁸ On the other hand, how much weight should we give to the socio-economic reading? As for the interpretation offered above: is it anything more than a mere interpretation of entirely relative value given that it manifests quite openly *my* own ideology? I myself think that it is something more. I am not saying that the entire meaning of the Happening can be reduced to the socio-economic reading; what I am saying is that if the entire meaning of the Happening is to be seized by one or another interpretation, that interpretation

cannot ignore the socio-economic level, it cannot ignore the symbolism it releases, or the meaning that emanates from it.

I am perfectly aware of the fact that a Happening cannot be reduced to an oral or written interpretation: to think with words is not the same thing as to think with “things.” That said, a certain verbalization is always possible and always adequate, since the “things” of the concrete social universe cannot but manifest the *differences*—of form, function, name, utility—between them. Like words, each object (an airplane, a table, a knife, a pipe) outlines its signifying universe: on the one hand it *denotes* its utility and, on the other, it *connotes* its status: its hierarchical signification, its value, its “image.”²⁹ In this way, the object—no matter how seemingly or insignificant—cannot but carry within itself this potential to signify, which reveals the precise rupture between culture and economy that defines contemporary societies. From this perspective—the perspective of the Social Sciences and also of the modern Communication Sciences³⁰—global societies cannot be studied without passing through the various *systems of connotations* found at the bases of social life and myths. Conversely, within this enterprise, Happenings were not only possible, but necessary. These aesthetic objects, produced *for and by* small audiences, and which in each case propose a specific circumscription of the global society, are veritable principles of intelligibility: they section off a concrete portion of social life so as to allow us to explore and understand it. The operations that circumscribe and outline are what make Happenings real aesthetic “objects.” Happenings are yet another testimony to the fact that, if the social universe is intelligible (if it is something more than a senseless disorder), it is because “things” and people form between them a tightly-knit web of relations. It was this last point that I felt was important to suggest here.

6. *El mensaje fantasma*

My intention, however, was not only to make a Happening, but to point out the difference between two genres of works, to exemplify the difference between the Happening and “media art.” I wanted to point out at the same time that the idea of making works of the latter type was already present in Happenings and that the passage emerged as a “logical extension.”

El helicóptero showed the vocation that Happenings have towards communication, given that its design (watches, spaces) led to a final situation that required an oral account. One could say that *El helicóptero* was a communicational work, but a work of oral, not mass, communication. In general, the very field of the Happening, because it requires the concrete presence of the people in the audience, coincides with the field of perception, that is to say, with the field of stimuli open to the senses. Whatever the function assigned to the audience,³¹ the presence or immediate belonging to the place where the events take place is required. In this way, Happenings have emerged as prolongations of so-called “environments,” in which the aim is to envelop the subjects in the audience in direct media and sensory stimuli (smells, colors, etc.).³²

And while there is a difference between an environment and a Happening, since in the latter the audience can be moved from one place to another, the fact is that both types of works require the quantitative *determination* of the audience. One could not conceive a Happening, for instance, in which no audience was called to “participate” in it: in the final analysis, one cannot imagine a Happening without “spectators.” But it is possible to conceive and realize other types of work with that condition (without spectators, that is). The proof is that, unlike Happenings and theater works, they can “begin” without the need to gather an audience.

El mensaje fantasma (The Ghost Message) was a good example. The 16th and 17th of July I had posters put up in a central area of Buenos Aires (from 25 de Mayo to Carlos Pellegrini and from Charcas to Lavalle) bearing the following message: “*This Poster Will Be Broadcast on TV Channel 11 on July 20.*”

For July 20, I had purchased (through an advertising agency) two ten-second spots on Channel 11, and when they aired the channel’s announcer said: “*This medium announces the appearance of a poster the text of which we are now broadcasting.*” A sign appeared simultaneously on the screen on which one could read, in another typeface, the very words printed on the poster: “*This Poster Will Be Broadcast on TV Channel 11 on July 20.*”

Although I would not like to act as the critic of my own work here, I can nevertheless highlight these characteristics:

a. that the media with which the work was carried out (and this was clearly in line with Pop propositions) was the same as that used in advertising;

b. that the audience for the work was clearly *undefined*, in the sense that, within a mass audience, the actual audience could be anywhere between a handful and a lot of people;³³

c. its similarity to certain advertising “works” (with the beginning of an unknown campaign); and its difference from advertising (since there were no future steps, the work revealed its “purposiveness without a purpose”);

d. that its stated purpose was to invert the usual relationship between the communications media and the communicated content: here, and in a reciprocal and circular way, each medium revealed the presence of the other and its own presence, revealed by the other.

9

Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt (1957/1965)

by Oscar Masotta

The translation of sections 1, 2, 3, and 6 are by Brian Holmes, and first appeared in *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s*, edited by Inés Katzenstein and Andrea Giunta, and published in 2004 as part of The Museum of Modern Art's Primary Documents series. Reprinted by permission. The translation of sections 4 and 5 are by Emiliano Battista, who also introduced some changes and corrections to the translation of the other sections.

Oscar Masotta once called himself an “anti-anti-Peronist,” and for the longest time it seemed to me that the only way to understand this self-definition was through an examination of the wide and conflicting set of political ideologies that attached to Peronism over the years. The extreme left, the extreme right, and everything in between have alternated in claiming Peronism as their own. Not so long ago, in a country that had been terrorized by a Peronist police state, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner could still be successively buoyed to the presidency of Argentina by tapping into the more progressive and socialist strands of Peronism. It seemed to follow, then, that any attempt to understand Masotta’s formula would require mapping out the spectrum of Peronism, and the specific stances Masotta took in the face of the various guises of Peronism he witnessed in the course of his brief life. I am sure such an effort would yield interesting results, but I’ve also come to think that Masotta used “anti-anti-Peronism” as shorthand for the quarrels that he waged with the anti-Peronist left. It was a way to foreground in a memorable formula his frustrations with the left—not because Masotta was a man of the right ready to defend the state violence and terrorism conducted under the banner of Peronism, but because he had no patience for what he saw as the pious, obsequious, unimaginative, and stilted leftwing politics of many of his contemporaries. For Masotta, their anti-Peronism was at best misguided and at worst dull, in the double sense: it was both boring and ineffective. We find an inverted mirror image of the predicament that Masotta’s formula highlights in the predicament of some conservative intellectuals today. Since the election of Donald Trump and the rise of extreme right parties in Europe, a number of thinkers on the right have stopped taking aim at the left and directed their attacks instead at conservatives who have embraced those developments. Feeling personally implicated by that embrace, these thinkers have concentrated at least a part of their energies to loosening its grip by appealing to a version of conservatism that is not defined by protective nationalism, crass populism, xenophobia, and all the rest of it. Masotta, for his part, called himself an “anti-anti-Peronist” because some of the battles that he fought most vigorously, because he felt directly implicated in them, were with the left. And he waged these battles in the name of a different idea of what leftwing politics is, or could be.

Masotta's *Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt* is an ideal place to see this polemic with the left being played out. An early text now finally available in English, *Sex and Betrayal* examines the work of Argentinean author Roberto Arlt, who died in 1942, leaving behind four novels (including *The Mad Toy* and *The Seven Madmen*), a few plays, and scores of newspapers pieces. Forgotten by the literary world for a while, Arlt's work was starting to be reevaluated in the 1950s, and Masotta casts *Sex and Betrayal* as an attempt to save Arlt from the clutches of his leftwing readers, whose half-measures and pusillanimity he saw as ways to "ignore" Arlt rather than to revive him. In this, *Sex and Betrayal* is not only exemplary of the polemic at the heart of Masotta's "anti-anti-Peronism," it is also the site for a doubling of that polemic, since in the years that followed the writing of *Sex and Betrayal*, Masotta came to question his approach, though not his allegiance, to Marx and to leftwing politics. In the span of a few years, Masotta's polemic with Arlt's leftwing readers became a polemic internal to his own thought and work. In the pages that follow, I want to look at this polemic, focusing on the way it informs Masotta's understanding of the politics of literature in particular, and of art in general.

Masotta wrote *Sex and Betrayal* in the 1950s, but it was only published in 1965, by which time his intellectual interests and influences had shifted. Still, rather than return to the manuscript and reshape it in light of his more recent insights, he published the text as he had written it, limiting himself to writing an essay, "Roberto Arlt: Myself," that comments on the early work and describes the changes and evolution in his thinking. The place we give to *Sex and Betrayal* in Masotta's oeuvre depends to a large extent on the way we read "Roberto Arlt: Myself," and my opinion is that Masotta in 1965 stands by the argument of his earlier effort. What he repudiates, or at least distances himself from, is the theoretical apparatus through which he had articulated that argument. *Sex and Betrayal* is dominated by the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, so much so, in fact, that he says, with tongue-in-cheek, that "anyone who'd read Sartre could have written that book."¹ By the time the book was published, Masotta's commitment to Sartre and, more broadly, to phenomenology, had waned; he had discovered "Lévi-Strauss, structural linguistics, and Jacques Lacan," and under their influence he had come to

the conclusion that "Marxism is absolutely not a philosophy of consciousness." Marxism had been buried by phenomenology, with its focus on consciousness and intentionality, and by 1965 Masotta felt that it had to be "rediscovered ... in the modern doctrines of languages, structures, and the unconscious." "Consciousness or structure?," Masotta asks, and answers that we must "opt for structure"—though he still feels that "it is important not to disregard consciousness."² It is interesting to note here that 1965 saw the publication of the first version of Louis Althusser's *Reading "Capital,"* itself an attempt to develop a "symptomatic" reading of Marx that would rescue Marxism from phenomenology by attending to the silences and lacunae in the text. I mention this because, as we shall see, the transition from Sartre to Lacan, or from consciousness to structure, remains governed in Masotta by a "symptomatic" dialectic between the visible and the invisible, by an emphasis on the movements through which latent or unconscious elements are revealed.

The reevaluation of Arlt in the 1950s was dominated by the question of the politics of his work. Arlt's novels, short stories, and plays depict the miseries of those at the lower levels of the social ladder and the hypocrisy-inducing "hysteria" of the middle class. The heart of this hypocrisy is the ever-present fear that the secret the middle class wants so desperately to keep hidden will be revealed. That secret is that middle class *is* the lumpen proletariat, and Arlt's novels, through what Masotta calls a "delirium of identification," reveals that secret by making it the repressed source of middle class humiliation: to be from the middle class is to be humiliated.³ While this—Masotta calls it the "social content" of Arlt's work—was certainly appealing to Arlt's leftwing readers, their attempts to claim Arlt as a comrade and fellow-traveller were complicated by a number of factors, chief among them being the fact that the "social content" is never accompanied by what his leftwing readers would have expected to be its "political content." Arlt represents the people and the masses as miserable and humiliated, but never as the noble subject of the class struggle. He shows no interest in depicting smaller, localized victories that could stand as symbols of the greater and more glorious victory to come. On the contrary, he patiently and inexorably leads his characters to the "certainty of defeat so as to fully reject the uncertainty of the possibility of victory."⁴

Arlt's characters are miserable and humiliated, but their misery and humiliation are not pathways towards "class-consciousness." Most of the characters are actually entirely lacking in class-consciousness, and the few who are not fare no better in transforming their class-consciousness into a "political task," that is, into the organization to fight against the oppression of class divisions. Arlt's leftwing readers could not but be embarrassed (Masotta's word) by the fact that his characters suffer the miseries of their class position (hence the validity of the social content), but don't embody their "social class" or the struggle that is supposedly immanent to that class (hence the absent political content). Indeed, they put all their energies into detaching themselves from their class position, because what matters to them is their individuality and the individuality, autonomy, and singularity of their own destiny. They could not care less about the destiny of the class, or about revolution. The few who do, like the Astrologer in *The Seven Madmen*, seem to care about it for wrong, or at best ambivalent, reasons.⁵ Arlt's "wretched individualities," as Masotta calls them, uniformly refuse to replace an "individual moral system with a collective one."⁶

From the perspective of the leftwing reader, none of this bodes well, since few things are as anathema to the left as the (reactinary) valuing of the individual over the collective, or the class. But it gets worse. Arlt's characters are searching for autonomy, for a way to coincide with their singular and autonomous destinies. They are moved by the desire to be fully coherent with a moral system of their own creation, and their efforts are simultaneously rewarded and frustrated in a moment of evil, of betrayal, in a moment that is not just indifferent to the solidarity among the oppressed, but that decidedly negates the very possibility of such solidarity. The communities of wretched, silent, and humiliated beings that Arlt describes are communities in which "community is impossible."⁷ Far from being noble, the moment of success—which, as just indicated, is also a moment of failure—is the moment when the character becomes the snitch, the informer, the betrayer, the henchman who executes those who are already executed, those whom society has already condemned, like the Crip and the Crosseyed Girl. Masotta calls this Arlt's "inverse anarchism," an anarchism whose "bomb" is not aimed at a head of state, at the police, or at the upper classes, but at the proletariat itself, "which is to say, in Arlt, at the humiliated."⁸

Arlt, like Jean Genet, is an example of a figure whose subject seems on the face of it to be tailor-made for the left, but whose treatment of that subject flies in the face of any and every leftist ideal or goal. This puts Arlt's leftwing readers in an awkward situation: they do not want to write Arlt off altogether, but in their attempts to salvage *something* from him for the left, they resort to a variety of questionable strategies and compromises. They soften the insistence on the individual and his destiny; they focus on the "social content" while turning a blind eye to the absent, or antithetical, "political content"; they read the essays—where, "thank God, Arlt's Marxist convictions are clear"—and not the fiction; they "excuse" Arlt for the political shortcomings of his vision, etc. Meant as attempts to revive Arlt, these readings only bury him further, because they systematically ignore the "tension" that forms the heart of all his work as a novelist: "there would be no novels by Arlt without the tension that revolves around this man's individual fate."⁹

None of this bodes well for the leftwing reader or, indeed, for Masotta himself. In many respects, Masotta's situation is even more complicated, since he has no interest in compromising with Arlt, in getting what he can either by minimizing, ignoring, or excusing all those things that are an embarrassment from the point of view of the traditional left that Masotta is attacking. He doesn't want to repeat the "mistake" that "explains why no communist has ever written insightfully about Arlt."¹⁰ On the contrary, he insists that we must accept Arlt on his terms, and that doing so is in fact the only way to "recuperate the political content of Arlt's novels in its *entirety*" for the left.¹¹ The key to understanding how Masotta plans to pull this off appears at the end of the introduction to *Sex and Betrayal*, where he writes: "Marx said that, for him, men are nothing more than the 'product' of the economic conditions under which they live. But he also adds that men, of course, surpass those conditions 'by a lot.' It's a difficult sentence, in which man is described simultaneously as absolutely free and as absolutely determined. What if Arlt's work could be interpreted as an accurate, and precise, *commentary* on these words by Marx? What if, in Arlt, the apparent absence of a coherent political perspective turns out to be the instrument with which to make sense of this fusion between freedom and determinism?"¹²

This shift, away from a simplistic opposition between “social” and “political” content, and towards a dialectic between freedom and determination, sets the stage for Masotta to approach Arlt, Marx, and leftwing politics through the Sartrean dialectic between being-in-itself (or facticity) and being-for-itself (consciousness, transcendence, freedom), and through the ontology that underwrites that dialectic. I shall return to this, but let me say first that I was drawn to this polemic because it seemed to me that, for Masotta’s project to succeed, he would need to do two things at once: to present a different and more nuanced view of what counts as leftwing politics, and to do so through the articulation of a less hackneyed understanding of the politics of literature than the one he found in the work of his interlocutors. On the horizon of Masotta’s text is the question of what it means to say that politics is immanent to a work of art. Masotta clearly has no patience for those who think that the politics of an artwork depends on the extent to which its content reflects the goals and aspirations of the people and their struggle. Indeed, the shortcomings he sees in Arlt’s leftwing readers invariably have to do with their attempts to make him fit that mold, however awkwardly. Masotta’s challenge to that approach to the politics of art bears a link, tenuous but present, to the work of Jacques Rancière, since, in a fundamental sense, Rancière’s aesthetic theory is directed precisely at creating the space that allows him to call into question the idea that the politics of art is rooted in certain figures or themes. According to Rancière, there are no criteria of adequation between a figure (say, the worker) or a subject matter (say, the oppression of the proletariat) and a mode of representation or, if you will, a “politics.” There is no reason why the masses are inherently the bearers of leftwing politics, and the individual—man— inherently rightwing and bourgeois; no reason why the masses should be the “good” subject of history (“it is the masses that make history,” Mao says), and “man” the “bad” subject of history (the owner who holds power, or the worker who, detached from the movement or the party, cannot but be mystified by bourgeois ideology). Something of this is at play in Masotta’s conviction that Arlt’s “wretched” and “outstanding” individualities can be entirely recuperated for the left, provided we can stop thinking of the left and of the politics of art in the narrow terms that Masotta, and Rancière, challenge in their work.

The polemic with Arlt’s leftwing readers, in sum, seemed to offer an interesting point from which to explore what we might call Masotta’s aesthetic theory. That turned out not to be the case, since one does not find an aesthetic theory in *Sex and Betrayal*. There is of course a formulation of what criticism should or could be, of the sorts of things to be attentive to when reading the work of an author, but no aesthetic theory, no systematic account of the structure of aesthetic experience and of how to describe the politics of that experience. This is not a criticism, and I would venture to guess, given Masotta’s trajectory, that we will not find a fully-developed aesthetic theory anywhere else in his work. What we find instead is something that Masotta felt and thought deeply about, namely a theory of the subject, first as consciousness and, later, as structure. Hence the suggestion that all of Arlt may be a commentary on the idea that man, or the subject, is absolutely determined, and absolutely free. Masotta, with Marx and Sartre, takes this to be our fundamental ontological feature: the self or subject is a combination of non-conscious facticity and consciousness. Arlt’s humiliated characters feel “ontologically degraded,” and the goal of their individual search is “ontological”: as they see it, the only way to escape ontological degradation is to transcend it, and the only way to do that is to cease to embody the class (or the determination of the given), so as to embody an absolute, and absolutely free, will. Unfortunately for them, Sartre is not a Cartesian dualist who thinks that mind or consciousness can free itself entirely from matter. The moment of consciousness is not liberation from facticity, but the realization of the mutual constitution of self and world, of the fact that we are both free *and* determined, subject *and* object.

Not coincidentally, this ontology mirrors and sustains what Masotta calls Arlt’s “metaphysical realism.” Against the idea that life, politics, economics, and art are each distinct realms of experience, Masotta argues that what we find in Arlt is a holism in which these realms are interconnected and mutually dependent. Those leftwing readers who disregard Arlt’s metaphysics as politically irrelevant fail to see the imbrication that he forges between the social and the metaphysical in his novels. “Metaphysical realism” is the name Masotta gives to that imbrication, and the point of *Sex and Betrayal* is to explore its structure through the dialectic between freedom and determination. And that dialectic argues

that the moment of freedom, the moment when the character coincides with a destiny and a moral code of his own creation, is likewise the moment when he coincides with the destiny and the moral code he has been given. Arlt's metaphysics, in other words, is not a flight from the social, but the path through which to understand the social. Ditto with the ontology: in the attempt to detach themselves from the class, Arlt's characters end up coinciding with, and thus revealing, its secret, "putrid" core.

This puts us in a position to understand how Masotta describes the politics of Arlt's work, and of art in general. To say that Arlt's characters perform the dialectic between freedom and determination is interesting, but hardly much to go on, not least because the merits of this as a reading of Marx may be questionable given its insistence on what Althusser calls the early, humanist Marx, the Marx of the theory of alienation that was superseded by the mature Marx of *Capital*. It's possible that Masotta's thought moved in the same direction as Althusser's; we can assume that it did, and that part of the point of "Roberto Arlt: Myself" was to signal that shift. This being the case, what does Masotta want to retain from *Sex and Betrayal* in 1965? In "Roberto Arlt: Myself," he says that the key point he wanted to make in his book is that betrayal is the "privileged form of conduct" of the middle class.¹³ This doesn't mean that betrayal is rampant in the middle class, but rather that, insofar as logic demands coherence from our conduct, betrayal is the only form of conduct that allows the middle class to be coherent with itself, the only way the middle class can be coherent with the "morality of the social."¹⁴ The fact that betrayal is rare is no reason to define it as the outlier, the exception, the singularity that, precisely because of its singularity, cannot be incorporated into the moral code but must be considered, always, as its *other*. According to Masotta, both in the 1950s and in 1965, betrayal is the secret heart of the "morality of the social," and that is why he describes every middle class person as a "would-be snitch," a "would-be informer."¹⁵ The character who betrays doesn't escape the morality of the social, but embodies, and thus reveals, the tendency to mendacity and betrayal at the center of that morality. Even if Masotta moved away from Sartre and from the dialectic between freedom and determination, he held on to what he claims that dialectic reveals in Arlt: that betrayal is the heart of bourgeois, middle-class morality.

The interest in betrayal is not random, but grounded in two things: one is that Arlt's first novel, *The Mad Toy*, ends with the protagonist betraying his friend the Crip, so that the discussion is motivated in part to make sense of this act. The other is that betrayal is a form or manifestation of evil, and evil, Masotta says, desires to be: betrayal is one form in which evil acquires being. We all know, as Masotta and Arlt also knew, that betrayal is only one of many forms of evil, and Masotta reads *The Mad Toy* as a progression of evil acts: in the first, Astier is still a kid with a knack for inventing gadgets, and he builds a little "cannon" that, he realizes, can be used to kill someone; the second finds Astier, by now in his teens, trying, and failing, to set fire to the bookstore where he works; his third act of evil consists in flicking a lit cigarette onto a bum asleep on a doorway, setting the rags covering him aflame; and the fourth is the betrayal of his friend the Crip. It's easy to see that these evil acts are not all alike, but in what way is there a progression here? And a progression towards what? Towards an act of evil purified of social content, towards a purely metaphysical evil, an act of evil that could not be justified as the inevitable and unfortunate means to a worthy end. In sum, an act of evil that no longer has "the familiar scent of the good."¹⁶

The joy Astier feels when he builds the little cannon capable of bringing death into the world must be read against the background of a miserable childhood: a little oasis of joy in a desert of privation. The attempted arson, because it refers to a "world of bosses," is "tarnished" by the "solidarity among the oppressed" that attaches to it, and "every act informed by solidarity participates of the good." The lit cigarette brings us closer to the goal because it is so utterly gratuitous, though it, too, is "tarnished" by the social: Astier, angry at shop owners "comfortably asleep on their beds," inverts the direction of his anger and strikes the homeless bum instead. That brings us, finally, to the betrayal of the Crip, which Masotta calls "a gratuitous and almost pure evil."¹⁷ Why "almost pure"? At one level the answer is simple: what Astier's friend experiences as a gratuitous and pure act of evil is also, from the point of view of the social, a good. One should snitch on thieves. But this simple answer is grounded on a more complicated, metaphysical/ontological argument. We all understand, of course, that evil is the opposite of the good: empirical situations may, and do, present overlaps, extenuating

circumstances, and so forth. Still, even in the face of these we assume that we can distinguish good from evil, and we insist that for the good to be good it must always be free of and independent from evil. Evil must always remain other to the good; there can be no contamination in the *definition* of the good, nor can the good have evil as part of its composition. We must assume, as Masotta puts it, “that ‘decency’ and evil are mutually exclusive.” And yet, “the only thing Arlt wants to tell us” is that this is not so. Far from being mutually exclusive, evil resides at the very heart of the good. More than that, even: evil “is the condition of possibility of the good: the punishment of the thief is not the good in itself, since it presupposes the act of snitching and thus entails evil as well. Evil lives at the heart of the good, like a green fly on the whitest and purest milk.”¹⁸ The act of transcendence through evil, through a metaphysical evil devoid of social content, fails because it is ontologically impossible to achieve: there is no pure evil or, for that matter, pure good, just as there is no pure consciousness, only the combination, the mutual dependence, of consciousness and facticity. And so it is that, in their failure to find autonomy and escape the class, or the social, through evil, Arlt’s characters end up revealing an “abject mechanism.” They end up occupying “the position of henchman which that mechanism pretends to leave empty.”¹⁹ They occupy, they embody, and in so doing reveal, the supposedly empty place of evil at the heart of the “morality of the social.” In so doing, these “wretched beings attest to a putrid society by transforming themselves into perfect mirrors of putrefaction.”²⁰

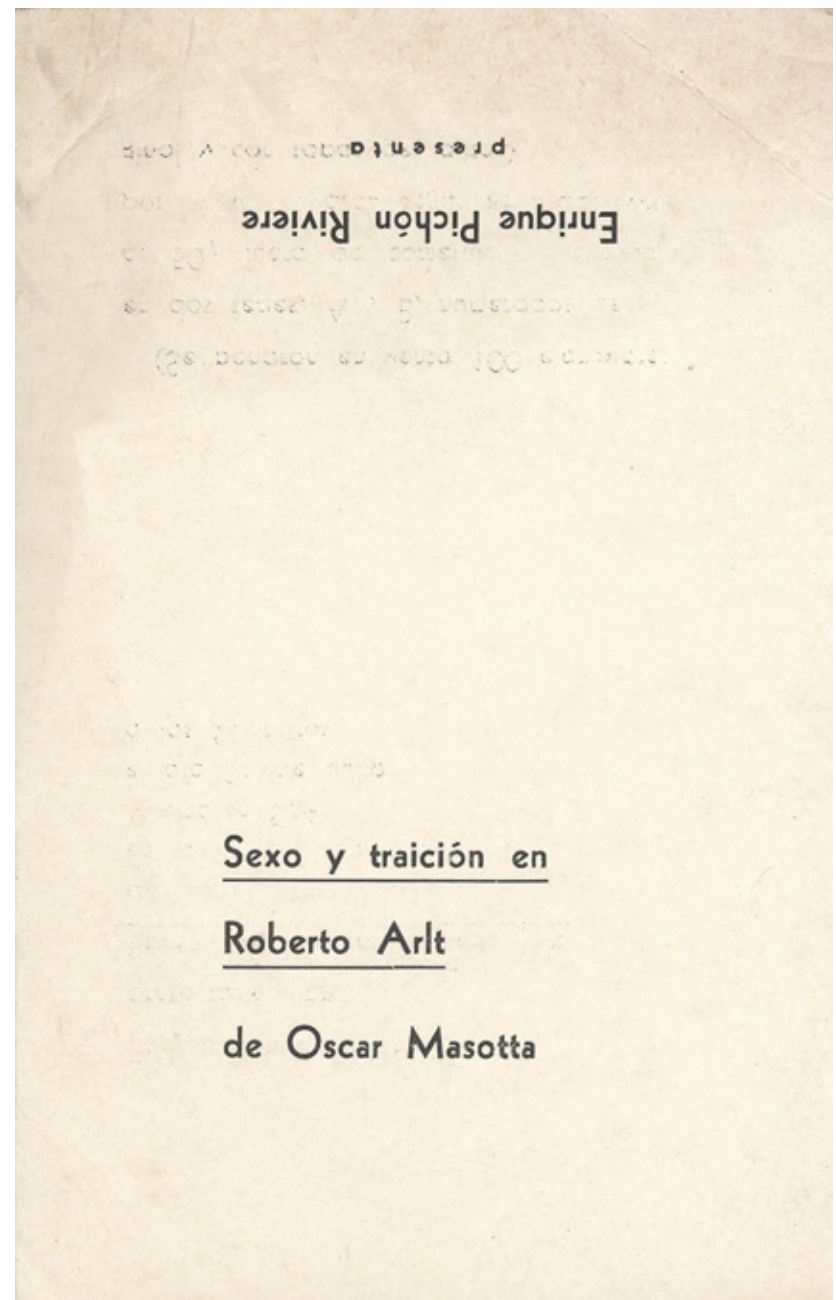
That is the answer Masotta gives us in *Sex and Betrayal* to the question of the politics of Arlt’s work: Arlt’s novels show the putrefaction of the middle class and of the morality of the social. Through the dialectic that reveals evil as the condition of possibility of the good, the “delirium of identification” reveals the repressed source of middle class hypocrisy and humiliation. Through evil, “society reveals itself for it is,” and this revelation, which shows that the supposedly empty place of evil at the heart of the abject mechanism is not empty at all, breaks the spell of “mystification”: Arlt’s work can be recuperated for the left in its *entirety* because it demystifies. Although Masotta moved away from Sartre and the emphasis on consciousness, I would like to close by showing that his understanding of the politics of art

remained the same in later years. To that end, I want to turn briefly to Masotta’s “I Committed a Happening,” which he wrote after “Roberto Arlt: Myself,” and in which he describes the conception and production of his first Happening: *To Induce the Spirit of the Image*.

Much like *Sex and Betrayal*, the text opens with Masotta giving voice to the discomfort and confusion he felt when confronted by Gregorio Klimovsky’s accusation that “intellectuals” had better things to do than to “concoct” Happenings. Given the political situation (this is 1966), Klimovsky thinks that these intellectuals should be doing something less frivolous and more consequential, like applying their “imagination to lessening this tremendous plague [hunger].”²¹ It’s an old accusation, and Masotta, although he admits to feeling a little rattled by it initially, quickly comes to think that the option Klimovsky puts on the table, “either Happenings or leftwing politics,” is “false.”²² Masotta’s Happening was to be part of a two-week festival that he had a hand in conceiving and organizing at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires. But the coup that brought General Onganía to power and, with him, “an outburst of puritanism and political persecution,” led to a halt in the planning, and the festival was postponed. That halt, according to Masotta, had two causes: one was fear, and the other embarrassment, an embarrassment caused by an argument identical to Klimovsky’s. Masotta writes: “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 opposite.”²³

It is clear that what Masotta encounters in the figure of Klimovsky is another version of the narrow view of the left and of leftwing politics that he had argued against in *Sex and Betrayal*. Early on in “I Committed a Happening,” Masotta’s strategy is to question Klimovsky’s leftwing credentials, to wonder whether Klimovsky is really, as he claims to be, a man of the left. As a strategy, this is only half-effective, as Masotta himself indicates: it may discredit Klimovsky, but it does not address the question of the left itself, and the fact that Marxist intellectuals have themselves formulated arguments against Happenings that align with those proposed by Klimovsky. And Masotta comes around to that at the end of the text, where he tells us that

even his friends on the left, people whose credentials were not in question, were nevertheless “troubled” by the Happening, and puzzled too: time and again, they asked him to explain what it meant. And Masotta had a reply that he repeated verbatim every time the question came up: “My Happening,” he would say, “was nothing other than ‘an act of social sadism made explicit.’”²⁴ But why should this prove that the initial option — “either Happenings or leftwing politics” — is “false”? The answer, it seems to me, has to be found in the discussion of Arlt, particularly in Masotta’s suggestion that Arlt’s characters reveal, by occupying, the space of evil that the mechanism of the social pretends to leave empty. In other words, the Happening — and, by extension, other forms of artistic expression — can reveal, can render explicit, a dimension of the social, namely its sadism (or evil), that would, in the absence of the Happening, remain implicit, latent, unseen, unoccupied. With its performance of sadism, Masotta’s Happening renders explicit the “social sadism,” of everyday, middle-class life. And, of course, this “proof” of the speciousness of the initial option depends on a wider point, namely that leftwing politics cannot be reduced to the alleviation of hunger or to the the clichés of so-called “political” art. Whatever else Masotta’s “anti-anti-Peronism” may have been, it was also this attempt to argue that the politics of art depends less on reflecting the struggle than on its ability render visible the mechanisms by which the social thwarts the challenges to its moral code. Certainly the question, “consciousness or structure?,” produced profound changes in Masotta’s thought. But, on this front at least, the position he formulated early on held steady.



Original invitation to the launch of *Sex and Betrayal* in Roberto Arlt, in Buenos Aires, 1965.
Courtesy of Cloe Masotta.

To Dispute the Existence of Man: Genet and Lacan on Art and Revolution

by Aaron Schuster

Enrique Pichón Riviere

presenta el libro

Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt

de Oscar Masotta

en la librería Galatea

Viamonte 564

el día 15 de Julio

a las 20 horas.

(Se pondrán en venta 100 ejemplares
en dos series, A y B, numerados del 1
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por Jorge Alvarez según la tirada ori-
ginal y con tapas del autor).

1. Art and Revolution

“What role can literature and art play in the revolution, in the battle for the liberation of man?” This is the last question Jean Genet responds to in his article “The Palestinians,” published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in 1973.¹ In his answer, which constitutes the most sustained meditation on art and politics in his writings, we can discern three separate issues being addressed: What is the relationship between artistic and political revolutions? What role can art play in political revolutions? And, is there an inherent politics of art? Let us consider these in turn.

In light of Genet’s political activism, he was a fellow traveler of the Black Panthers and the PLO, and his politically incendiary theater—which, even though it no longer inspires the same violent reactions, I would argue is more pertinent now than when it was originally staged in the 1950s and 60s—it might be surprising to see that he is quite critical of the political potential of art and the role of artists in revolutionary struggles. Reflecting on whether art and the revolution can be allies, Genet skeptically writes, “how can arrows that fly in different directions be tied together?”² Art goes one way, the revolution another. As evidence for this, he cites the example of the USSR: “To bring about the revolution of October ’17 was magnificent. To bring about a pictorial revolution, as Cézanne did on his own, was also something very fine. But the men of ’17 seized political power and since 1924 they have forbidden exhibitions of Cézanne or painters who have understood his lesson.”³ Genet is less impressed with the flourishing of avant-gardes in the early Bolshevik period than with the Stalinist reaction and its conformist aesthetics. “Revolutions in art are liberties too great for political revolutionaries,” he concludes. The political revolution is not up to the challenge of art. On the other hand, when art addresses politics directly, it tends to misfire in spite of its intentions. Genet mentions in this regard Francisco Goya’s series of prints *Horrors of War* (*Los desastres de la Guerra*). “Take, for example, Goya’s *Horrors of War*, a collection of pictures in which Goya condemns the Napoleonic wars. Anyone who has the opportunity of seeing the whole series is enchanted by the beauty of this work of art. We are so absorbed by the lightness and vitality of Goya’s line that the beauty of the spectacle makes us forget to condemn the war it represents. What is the state of

someone who looks at this work? I can describe my own feeling as follows: a state of inward passivity which persists in an unending search for beauty without the passivity ending. This is its point of no return; if it goes beyond it, it will be faced with dazzlement and, at the extreme point, death.”⁴ This is quite a remarkable description of aesthetic experience; even a trenchant critic of the aestheticization of political conflict and war like Susan Sontag sees in Goya’s series “a turning point in the history of moral feelings and of sorrow.” “War is not a spectacle” in these images; rather, “with Goya, a new standard for responsiveness to suffering enters art.”⁵ Genet does not share in this responsiveness. For him, the beauty of Goya’s pictures makes him forget the horror of what they depict, but this aestheticism itself takes on a macabre twist: the beautification of injury and death leads to a contemplation of beauty unto death. At its far limit, art engenders a fatal passivity. This might be seen as an extreme articulation of the Stendhal syndrome, but it also expresses one of Genet’s great obsessions, if not *the* obsession that cuts across the different phases of his career: the intimate connection between art and death.

Political revolutions are concerned with “information” and “practical orders,” and for this reason are not interested in artistic invention—indeed, they are largely opposed to it. Art, on the other hand, needs and demands a freedom that is “too great” for political revolutionaries. Between artistic revolutions and political revolutions there would seem to be a mismatch, a missing link, a lack of relation; *il n’y a pas de rapport révolutionnaire*, as Lacan might have said. There is no common measure, no inherent kinship between the revolutions of art and politics. They go their own ways, like arrows shot in different directions. Their paths may align, but this is more the result of good fortune than a natural solidarity of purpose. Indeed, if there is an intrinsic relation between them it is a disjunctive and adversarial one. Art and politics are related to one another through a series of formal oppositions: passivity versus activity, the individual versus the collective, the useless versus the practical. Whereas art is a solitary enterprise, leading to contemplation and the cultivation of an inward freedom, politics is necessarily an active and collective affair. However, Genet does not leave things at the level of these static oppositions but goes on to describe a more complex way in which the relation between art and politics may be thought,

where the two are neither simply opposed nor united but bound together in and through their very non-relation. This has to do with the nature of artistic freedom. Genet defines art in a radical way: contrary to its sympathetic defenders, who ascribe to art all kinds of positive and progressive qualities, it is impossible to say what art is “good” for, or what values it promotes. On the contrary, for Genet art is useless, it is good for nothing, but this nihilism must be understood in a very specific sense: what makes art “valuable” is precisely its refusal to be inserted into any given system of valuation or scheme of justification. It defies any external determination of its goal or purpose, but neither can it comfortably settle into its supposed autonomy (art for art’s sake). Art is fundamentally insurrectional and destructive, challenging “all values and all authority” and calling into question any existing order or established state of things. “It disputes even the existence of man,” Genet writes.⁶ This is a freedom too great for the revolution, and yet, at the same time, it is essential for it. In its uselessness and rebelliousness, in its refusal to serve anything, even the revolution, art is useful for the revolution. The last line of the article reads: “The artist is weak, and it is the duty of the revolution to protect him even in the sphere of the mistakes he makes—but at the same time he is one of the most powerful weapons of revolution.”⁷ One might wonder, who is protecting whom?⁸ Is it art, in its weakness and lack of social power, that needs to be protected by the revolution within its own separate sphere, giving it the freedom to create and experiment (to take risks, to fail, to make mistakes, etc.); or is it the revolution that needs art as one of its most “powerful weapons,” as something which, in its uncompromising revolt, in its radical disputation of man’s existence, is crucial in the “battle for the liberation of man”? Indeed, who is this “man” to be liberated? Who is the subject of emancipation? In order to understand this better we should turn to Genet’s theater, where he dramatizes this fraught relationship between art and politics, but whose political character Genet also carefully qualified.

The main problem Genet outlines in “The Palestinians” is the tendency to aesthetic conservatism among revolutionary movements, for which art typically serves as a vehicle for self-glorification. While political inventiveness and radicalism can go together with artistic inventiveness and radicalism, for Genet it is far more likely that revolutionary movements will favor already

established and recognizable artistic forms, and use these for boosting themselves. “Political revolutions and artistic revolutions are not always mutually exclusive, but it must be admitted the one of the things that all revolutions desire is to be glorified by the academism that should be destroyed.”⁹ Revolutions, just like the old orders they oppose, want to glorify themselves, and to do so they draw on the most orthodox aesthetic means. This is a crucial weakness, and one of the reasons why, as Lacan liked to point out, revolution is an ambiguous term: it can signify upheaval and decisive break but also turning around in circles, a return to the start.¹⁰ With respect to the situation of the Palestinians, Genet remarks that in making strategic use of readymade bourgeois forms of artistic expression, the movement risks buying into the whole of bourgeois ideology, thus leaving class issues fundamentally untouched. “The Palestinian revolution is right to make use of bourgeois—and so virtually completed—artistic forms. But at the same time this is a danger for the revolution, for it tempts it to exploit the same themes, the same images, the same clichés, and thus the same lies as those which support the bourgeoisie.”¹¹ We find a similar concern echoed in a passage from *Prisoner of Love*, Genet’s last novel, born of his time spent among Palestinian refugees and the fighters of the PLO. The image of the revolution threatens to replace the reality of the struggle: “The revolution’s in danger of becoming unreal through rhetoric, images on screens, and metaphor and hyperbole in everyday speech. Our battles are in danger of turning into poses—they look heroic, but in fact they’re performed.”¹²

2. Authority and Enjoyment: *The Balcony*

This risk, or even inevitability, of the aestheticization of politics, was most clearly spelled out in the “Avertissement” that Genet appended to his play *The Balcony*.

A few poets, these days, go in for a very curious operation: they sing the praises of the People, of Liberty, of the Revolution, etc., which, when sung, are rocketed up into an abstract sky and then stuck there, discomfited and deflated, to figure in deformed constellations. Disembodied, they become

untouchable. How can we approach them, love them, live them, if they are dispatched so magnificently away? When written—sometimes sumptuously—they become the constituent signs of a poem, and as poetry is nostalgia and the song destroys its pre-text, our poets destroy what they want to bring to life.¹³

A few words about *The Balcony*. Although written in the 1956, against the backdrop of the Algerian War for Independence and, more distantly, the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War (Genet’s explicit historical reference),¹⁴ it is an extraordinarily contemporary play, dealing with the failure of the revolution, the obscenity of police power, and the fateful chiasmus between images of power and the power of images. Well before Agamben’s researches, Genet characterized politics as driven by the production of glory. Viewed in the light of last American presidential election, *The Balcony* is essentially the story of a grotesque reality show whose buffoonish actors, exploiting the right moment, commandeer the actual State.

The play takes place almost entirely inside a fancy brothel called “The Grand Balcony,” otherwise known as a house of illusions (*maison d’illusions* is a name for a brothel in French). Its patrons come to indulge their perverse fantasies in elaborately staged scenarios, mainly involving authority figures. In the opening scenes we see clients impersonating a Bishop, a Judge, and a General (there is also a masochistic scenario involving a beggar—more on him later). This is played for maximum artificiality, with ridiculously oversized costumes and florid speeches: the bishop berates a prostitute-sinner over whether she really committed the sins she confessed to, then coyly feigns shock at her outrageous behavior; a bare-breasted thief makes the judge lick her boots before admitting to her crime; the general rides his stallion-whore through corpse-strewn fields, repeatedly prompting her to describe the sights of battle. Breaking up this burlesque meta-theater of power is the occasional rattle of machine gun fire, which alerts us to a political crisis: while play-acting masters in the bordello, a revolution is going on outside. This is a cause of concern for the clients and the brothel’s hostess, Madame Irma, who is counting on her ex-lover Georges, the Chief of Police, to come and save the day by putting down the rebels. The Chief of Police, meanwhile, seems concerned with only one thing: whether anyone has come to the brothel to play him. He is informed by Irma that, sadly, no:

despite the great variety of fantasies catered to in *The Balcony* no one wants to be the Chief of Police, he does not figure in the “pink handbook” of the brothel’s greatest hits (or as he puts it, the “nomenclature”). The revolution advances, the State appears on the verge of collapse. Roger the plumber is a leader of one of the cadres, and his girlfriend Chantal, one of Irma’s former prostitutes, is celebrated as an inspiring symbol (or really, sex symbol) of the revolution. The Queen’s Envoy arrives at the brothel, and soon after the Royal Palace is detonated in a thunderous explosion, to which he coolly remarks: “A royal palace is forever blowing up. In fact, that’s exactly what it is: a continuous explosion.”¹⁵ We might translate this to mean: order is not simply the opposite of chaos but a kind of managed chaos; once one understands this, the disorder created by the revolution appears not so much a threat to the status quo as an opportunity for this explosive order to reinvent itself and extend its domination. And that is precisely what happens. In its moment of dire crisis the Envoy conceives a cunning plan to save the State: the brothel patrons will present themselves as real figureheads to the public, they will actually become the authorities that they were merely pretending to be for libidinal kicks. The “Bishop,” “Judge,” and “General,” along with Irma in the role of the Queen and the Chief of Police as Hero, parade themselves before the public on the balcony of *The Balcony*. This works: the appearance of order is saved, and the tide of fighting turns in their favor. At this moment, Chantal is also shot and killed. Later, in the most comical episode of the play, the Chief of Police—upset that still no one has come to play him—proposes an emblem for himself: a rubber phallus of exactly his stature, decked out in the national colors. A defeated Roger at last shows up at the brothel asking to impersonate the Chief of Police, who is thrilled to finally become immortalized in a Symbol. At the end of his performance Roger takes out a knife and castrates himself; momentarily surprised, the Chief of Police feels for his balls and triumphantly announces that he is still “intact.” He then departs into his tomb—the scene takes place in a newly constructed “mausoleum studio”—for a reported “two thousand years.” After complaining about the cost of all these extravagances (especially the upkeep for the mausoleum), Irma breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly, telling them that the festivities will start again tomorrow and now they should all go home where life is even falsier than in her studios.

While there is much here to be discussed, I will focus on what I take to be the play’s central theme: how power grips its subjects. *The Balcony* is a comedy that not only takes power as its theme, but shows the inherent comedy of power. It exposes authority as something that is essentially faked, impersonated, performed, play-acted, and how this performance procures a libidinal bonus, a surplus enjoyment. As a theater-within-the-theater, the brothel both stages the libidinal attachment to power and reveals this attachment as revolving around “one’s own private theater of power,” i.e. fantasy. With remarkable theoretical rigor, *The Balcony* spells out a phenomenology of this enjoyment, which, following the different scenes, may be described according to four related features.

First, it is *detachable*. The Chief of Police: “I’ll make my image detach itself from me. I’ll make it penetrate into your studios, force its way in, reflect and multiply itself. Irma, my function weighs me down. Here, it will appear to me in the blazing light of pleasure and death.”¹⁶ The Bishop: “The majesty, the dignity, that light up my person, do not emanate from the attributions of my function. — No more, good heavens! than from my personal merits. — The majesty, the dignity that light me up come from a more mysterious brilliance: the fact that the bishop precedes me.”¹⁷ Authority is something that is separated from the person and precedes him or her. Moreover, the symbolic status should also be seen as detached from the “function” these roles serve, the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them. To enjoy the majesty, the dignity, the splendor of the office in its virginal purity, unsullied by the *person* holding it and the *function* it is meant to fulfill — this is the service that the whorehouse provides.

Second, it is *immobile*. The Envoy speaks of “a quest of immobility,”¹⁸ and the Bishop declares: “A solemn stiffness! Final immobility.”¹⁹ Immobility is opposed to motion or action; to use Sartre’s terminology, it is on the side of being rather than doing.²⁰ Enjoyment is essentially contemplative. This is demonstrated *a contrario* when the brothel patrons, after assuming for real the roles they were merely playing, complain that their pleasure is not heightened but spoiled: “We’re going to live in the light [...] We — magistrate, soldier, prelate — we’re going to act in such a way as to impoverish our ornaments unceasingly! We’re going to render them useful!”²¹ The Chief of Police, on the other hand,

is “in motion” and “loaded with actions,” and so he cannot enjoy; at least, not until he is finally transformed into an Image by which he can contemplate himself.²² The Bishop, Judge, and General are on an opposite trajectory to the Chief of Police throughout the play: while the former are hollow images that end up becoming real agents of power, the latter starts off as a dull, uninspiring practitioner of state violence only to be transformed into a glamorous “dead” symbol. (To refer again to Trump: the same disappointment was noted by observers on the face of Donald Trump during his inauguration, as if assuming the duties of the presidency disturbed his “immobile” enjoyment of play-acting the role).

Third, it is *solitary*. The Bishop: “I wish to be bishop in solitude, for appearance alone.”²³ The General: “I want to be a general in solitude. Not even for myself, but for my image, and my image for its image, and so on.”²⁴ Enjoyment isolates the individual in a private bubble of fantasy, where the image of power can be beheld as if in an endless hall of mirrors. One should add that this expandable tiny beacon is not simply the opposite of reality but its secret condition—it provides a kind of subtle glow or backlighting, an extra glamour, as opposed to the bright light in which ornaments and costumes and everything else is made “useful.”

And fourth, this enjoyment is *fatal*. In Carmen’s words, “The scenarios are all reducible to a major theme, [...] Death.”²⁵ This is underscored by the construction of the mausoleum studio, which is presented as a kind of master studio, the studio of studios, the one that contains and sums up the rest. Death as the absolute master—why? Not because the brothel patrons are suicidal or have a death wish, but just the opposite: they desire to transcend their frail, mortal condition and taste immortality. Death is the name for eternity, which is achievable only by sacrificing oneself to and serving the (detachable, immobile, solitary) Symbol.

CARMEN: You want to merge your life with one long funeral, sir.

THE CHIEF OF POLICE (*aggressively*): Is life anything else?²⁶

In this sense, the ultimate role would be to play a corpse, which is precisely what Arthur (another of Irma’s employees) is paid to do, except he gets killed first. Arthur is supposed to impersonate a corpse for the Minister of the Interior, who himself gets assassinated before making it to the brothel. Arthur thus ends up playing a real corpse for a dead Symbol—which would perhaps be the best definition of Genet’s thanato-erotic theater.

Now, of these four aspects, let us dwell further on the solitary character of enjoyment. Upon reflection this might appear somewhat puzzling: is it not the case that the clients’ pleasure is mediated by and dependent on the participation of others, that it entails a whole intersubjective scenario? One is never “alone” in fantasy; for all its self-centeredness, narcissism entails a complex choreography of social relations and identifications. Genet clearly delights in portraying the perversity of the logic of recognition whereby the master turns out to be slave of the slave; for example, the Judge who, crawling on all fours, begs the thief to steal, for without this crime he would promptly vanish in a puff of dialectical smoke. “My being a judge is an emanation of your being a thief. You need only refuse—but you’d better not!—need only to refuse to be who you are—what you are, therefore who you are—for me to cease to be... to vanish, evaporated [...] But you won’t refuse, will you? You won’t refuse to be a thief? That would be wicked. It would be criminal.”²⁷ From the invention of the “who you are” of the soul to the complicity of law and transgression, somehow all of *Discipline and Punish* is contained here.

But there is another way to understand solitude. If the brothel-goers insist on their solitude, it is to highlight that their narcissistic gratification is not so much about them (funny as this sounds) as something that is greater than themselves and that transcends their persons: the Image. Their attitude is one of worship and adoration. The “enjoyment of the image” should be understood in both the subjective and objective senses of the genitive, but especially the latter. It is not only that images of power serve as the means for the client’s enjoyment, but, in a more profound way, the image itself is the locus of enjoyment. To put this more strongly: it is not *I* who enjoys, but *it*—the image—that enjoys in and through me. “I want to be a general in solitude. Not even for myself, but for my image, and my image for its image, and so on.” Solitude entails self-loss and depersonalization. Instead of

images being at the service of the clients' pleasure, it is the persons who serve as the support for the detached reign of images, infinitely reflected in the mirror of power: this is the secret truth of sovereignty that the brothel reveals. This is also why, for Genet, the brothel has the same solemnity and grandeur as a church. In *Querelle*, the bordello La Ferie is described as a holy place: "Every evening he went long stretches out of his way to pass by the vicinity of La Ferie—which to him truly seemed like a chapel."²⁸ (The Grand Balcony and La Ferie were loosely modeled on the infamous Madame Petite's in Barcelona, which Genet visited in the 1930s).²⁹ In his notes on "How to Play *The Balcony*," Genet writes that "the play should not be performed as if it was a satire on this or that. It is—and must therefore be performed as—the glorification of the Image and the Reflection."³⁰ This is key: it is all too easy to interpret *The Balcony* as a satire of authority figures, but this misses the more disturbing and subversive comedy. One of the running jokes in the play is that joking is not permitted in the brothel. Irma: "I don't allow any joking. A giggle, or even a smile, spoils everything. A smile means doubt. The clients want sober ceremonies."³¹ Or as Carmen rebukes Arthur: "Mr. Arthur, you're wearing an outfit that doesn't allow you to joke. The pimp has a grin, never a smile."³² *The Balcony* is a comedy without jokes. For all its clownishness and outlandishness, the brothel is a solemn space, a holy place, a temple of *jouissance*—and this gravity makes it all the more comical.³³ In Genet's diagnosis, contemporary ideology, as the production of glory, combines religious devotion with total farce.

This depersonalization is radicalized in *The Screens*, with its autonomous floating costume-parts: Saïd's empty upright trousers, or Sir Harold's flying leather glove.

HABIB: You going already, Sir Harold?

THE GLOVE (with SIR HAROLD's voice): Not entirely. My glove'll guard you!

A wonderful pigskin glove flies in, directed by a mechanism behind the screen. It remains in the air, as if suspended, in the center of the stage.

SAÏD (who had bent down): Was there any need for you to tell him all that?

HABIB (putting a finger to his lips, then pointing to the glove): Sh!³⁴

The floating glove without a colonist is a pure emblem of power and authority, an insignia liberated from its bearer—an image in solitude. Likewise, when Leila wants to express her adoration of her husband Saïd, it is to his freestanding pants that she addresses herself (as Carmen already put it in *The Balcony*, "Without the thighs it contained, a pair of pants on a chair is beautiful").³⁵ The brothel-bishop's claim that "the bishop precedes me" is here taken in a surrealistically literal manner; it is as if his miter and bonnet and all the "handsome ornaments, copes, laces"³⁶ should levitate in space. The ultimate such detached floating symbol is, of course, the Chief of Police's man-sized national phallus costume: Chief Dickhead as the phallus of State. This same emblem also reappears in *The Screens*, where, appropriately enough from a psychoanalytic viewpoint and thanks to the peculiarities of French grammar, it is now transformed into that paradigmatic object of fantasy, the female phallus: "War's a riproaring orgy. Triumphant awakening! [...] You're the mighty phallus of France who dreams she's fucking!"³⁷

Is this closure within the "house of illusions" the end point of Genet's thought? As much as the revolution seems to threaten the reign of images (Irma: "It looks to me as if the aim of the rebellion weren't to capture the Royal Palace, but to sack my studios"³⁸), it is soon revealed to be "a game," in the words of the Chief of Police, one whose leader, Roger, failed because he "didn't know how to handle his role."³⁹ It is as if the revolution were but another of the brothel's studios. The defeat of the revolution is dramatized by the fate of Chantal: she abandons the brothel and her former métier in order to join the cause, only to be prostituted by the different cadres as a glamorous icon that "embodies the Revolution."⁴⁰ "In order to fight against an image Chantal has frozen into an image."⁴¹ And her frozen image is finally re-appropriated by the very State she rebelled against (and which murdered her): "Chantal Victorious" emblazoned on its new flag.⁴²

Is there, then, a way of interrupting this production of glory, of breaking its hypnotic spell? The play's conclusion is grim. Roger fails twice: first as a revolutionary leader, and then again in defeat, when he comes to The Balcony to ritually impersonate his acknowledged master, the Chief of Police. Far from destroying the image, his desperate act of castration appears only

to ratify its mystique. As the Chief of Police victoriously declares: "Though my image be castrated in every brothel in the world, I remain intact. Intact, gentlemen."⁴³

3. A Celebration of Nothing

Let us now return to the text of "The Palestinians." In keeping with the idea that there is no intrinsic relation between art and politics, Genet remarks that art is politically indeterminate, "it belongs to both the left and the right," and this makes it difficult to enlist in the revolutionary struggle. He then writes:

But we can go further than this. In my view, artistic work is of two kinds, and in defining the two kinds in accordance with their functions there must be no question of preference. On the one hand there is the work which serves the revolution; this is constructive in the sense that it destroys bourgeois values. Then there is another kind of artistic work, essentially violent and inflammatory, in the sense that it refuses to submit to any value or to any authority. It disputes even the existence of man. This was the kind I meant when I said that artistic work cannot serve the revolution, and I insist that it rejects all values and all authority.⁴⁴

This is the crucial distinction, and it should be understood as internal to the left. There is one kind of art that, in combatting established prejudices and bourgeois values, serves the cause of the revolution. This is progressive art, leftist in content, activist in spirit, with a constructive purpose; e.g., to stimulate critical reflection on the historical conditions, to dismantle the commodity form, to assist in imagining new forms of community and human relations. But there is a second kind of art that is not useful in this way. It does not serve the revolution, not because it is ideologically reactionary or devoted to a self-serving aesthetic, but because it does not serve anything at all. It is negative, destructive, abyssal: pure revolt. "When I say that artistic work is inflammatory I mean that in the long run it upsets all established order."⁴⁵ This kind of art is refractory to both the old regime and the new. It serves no master, it has no project or goal, it upholds no values (even seemingly progressive ones), it accepts no pre-given limits—as Genet says, it goes so far as to "dispute even the existence of man." But this extreme insurrection is essentially an

inward one. "Artistic work, which is the product of the struggle of the artist in isolation, tends to contemplation, which, in the long run, may turn into the destruction of all values, bourgeois or otherwise, and their replacement by something else that will more and more come to resemble what we call freedom."⁴⁶ According to Genet, art is on the side of contemplation, not action, and certainly not collective action, and thus it is the natural adversary of revolution. Nevertheless, if it is "the duty of the revolution to encourage its adversaries: works of art,"⁴⁷ it is because the absolute freedom that art demands is not unrelated to the revolutionary struggle for emancipation, and even touches on its most neuralgic point: its relation to power. There is a paradox in the relationship between art and politics. "An art that is entirely at the service of the revolution is in danger of becoming entirely at the service of the political power of the revolution."⁴⁸ Politically engaged art risks betraying the revolution precisely by supporting and glorifying its power. Art that does not serve the revolution, on the other hand, may serve it all the more faithfully through its very refusal to serve: its rejection of "all values and all authority" stands as a stubborn and unyielding call for the revolution to subtract itself from the political power that it deploys.

Genet claims to be offering a neutral taxonomy, with "no question of preference." Each kind of art, the politically engaged and the radically destructive, has its own validity. However, the general definition that he gives a little further on in the text is clearly in line with the second type, and confirms its centrality to his thought. "Finally, the definition of a work of art could be the following: an object that is really of no use."⁴⁹ How can we better understand this uselessness? Toward the end of *The Screens*, the Mother implores her son Saïd: "Don't let yourself be conned by either the old girl or the soldiers. Don't serve either of them, don't serve any purpose whatever."⁵⁰ *Don't serve*: in the character of Saïd we can see Genet's dramatization of the uselessness of the artwork, in its uncompromising imperative for freedom. He is a figure of pure revolt, the most extreme character in all of Genet's theater. Like *The Balcony*, *The Screens* takes place against the backdrop of revolution; this time, however, the revolution succeeds. Set amidst the Algerian War of Independence (though this is nowhere explicitly stated, and the colonists hail from England and the Netherlands, with legionnaires provided by France), the

main story concerns Saïd, an impoverished man on the fringes of village life, who can only afford to take as his wife Leila, the ugliest woman in the land. Saïd and Leila are an abject couple, and together with his mother they form a veritable family of “nettles.” Leila is so hideous that she wears a black hood, with three holes for eyes and mouth; Saïd is taunted about his spouse by fellow workers on Mr. Harold’s colonial plantation. He steals; she also turns to thieving; they both end up in prison. Saïd complains, Job-like, about his misfortune. All of this is encouraged by the Mother, who aids and abets her son’s degradation; she is joined in this by Leila, who adores Saïd, and debases herself further and further in order to assist her husband’s ruination.⁵¹ He later plucks out one of her eyes; she revels in how perfectly horrible she’s become. He is a pauper, an outcast, a thief, a prisoner, and, finally, a traitor to the revolution (although even his treason is poor: “As regards betrayal [...] you didn’t achieve much”⁵²). In the last scene of the play, after the revolution has succeeded in toppling the colonial regime, there takes place another, more intimate battle, a fight over Saïd’s soul. The Arab soldiers promise to forgive his crime if he joins their new order. But the old lady Ommu, seeing in him the incarnation of pure evil, wants to turn him into a song, forever calling the people to violence and insurrection. This he vehemently resists: “That’s not me, Saïd! On neither the wind of the harps nor the quivering of a calf.”⁵³ He tries to run, but is shot and killed by one of the soldiers. Unlike the other casualties of war, however, he does not descend into the realm of the dead.

Saïd’s fate is opposed to that of Chantal. In a classically tragic manner, she meets the very destiny that she flees: escaping from the brothel to join the rebels, she is first prostituted by her comrades as a (sex) symbol of revolt, and then, after she’s killed, her image is re-appropriated by the State to become its new standard. In death Chantal is returned to the spectacular machinery of Irma’s bordello. Saïd escapes this glorification; he refuses to be used or to serve any cause, disappearing into a void more radical than death. Genet called the play a “celebration of nothing.” “People say that plays are generally supposed to have a meaning: not this one. It’s a celebration whose elements are disparate, it is the celebration of nothing.”⁵⁴ *The Screens* is a deliberately overloaded spectacle, including 96 characters in 17 scenes and a stage broken up by the titular “screens” that

highlight the artificiality of the performance. It speaks of degradation and betrayal, the relation between life and death, judgment, racism, colonialism, poverty, sexuality, love, war, and revolution. But among all these elements, it is Saïd who is the embodiment of nothing, the eclipse of all meaning.

4. PsYchoanalYsis and Politics

There is a powerful connection to psychoanalysis in Genet’s description of a violent and inflammatory art, an art of no use and that serves nothing—could not the same be said of the paradoxical anti-therapy that is psychoanalysis? Jacques Lacan was one of the first serious readers of *The Balcony*, and he immediately saw its profundity. Commenting on it in the March 5, 1958 session of his fifth seminar, *The Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan deems the play to be a great comedy in the Aristophanic tradition, with important lessons about fantasy, enjoyment, and the phallus as symbol of symbols (he will come back in later seminars to Genet’s perspicacious description of the role of the fake detail in fantasy).⁵⁵

Lacan typically turns to artworks when it comes to articulating a theoretical innovation or turning point in his work: “The Purloined Letter” and the autonomy of symbolic structure; *Hamlet* and the *objet a*; *Antigone* and the ethics of desire; Paul Claudel’s *Coûfontaine* trilogy and the historicity of the Oedipus complex; *The Ambassadors* and the gaze as object of the scopic drive; *Las Meninas* and the structure of fantasy; *Lol V. Stein* and the object of love; *Finnegans Wake* and the new conception of the symptom as “sinthome,” knotting together the three orders of the imaginary, symbolic, and real.

In the case of *The Balcony*, what is at stake is the notion of *jouissance* (enjoyment). This concept, which will increasingly take up Lacan’s attention to the point where he will claim that “jouissance is the substance of everything we speak about in psychoanalysis,”⁵⁶ is introduced for the first time in a rigorous manner in this session of Seminar V, where it is defined as the “other pole” to desire. “We will briefly return to what forms, as such, desire’s deviation or alienation in signifiers, and we will ask what it means, from this perspective, that the human subject

is able to take possession of the very conditions imposed upon him in his world, as if these conditions were made for him, and that he manages to be satisfied with them.”⁵⁷ After alienation in the symbolic order, where “man’s desire is the desire of the Other,” enjoyment entails a kind of return-to-self, an appropriation of the alienated conditions of desire as if they were one’s own. Through enjoyment I possess my dispossession, or at least I get off on it. My desire may not be mine, but nevertheless I can find some satisfaction there, in the chain of signifiers that reigns over my (lost, divided) existence—this jolt of excitement from out of loss and estrangement is what the concept of *jouissance* designates.⁵⁸

Lacanian psychoanalysis can profit not only from Genet’s nuanced theatrical depiction of *jouissance* but also from his portrayal of how the spell of this enjoyment might be broken, with all the caveats and ambivalences contained in his analysis of the relationship between art and politics. Closely paraphrasing Genet’s theses on art, we could say the following. It must be admitted that psychoanalysis belongs to both the left and the right; there are schools that emphasize social adaptation, normative models of psychosexual development, and the autonomy of the ego; other strands are more critical, challenging traditional understandings of the human being and its supposed ends. This checkered history makes it difficult to use in the political struggle. But we can go further: there are two fundamental kinds of psychoanalysis. On the one hand, there is the psychoanalysis that serves the revolution; this is constructive in the sense that it criticizes bourgeois values and attacks social conformism; it identifies the social-historical kernel of mental illness, showing how the patient’s sickness cannot be treated outside a critique of the conflicts constitutive of capitalist civilization. But there is another kind of psychoanalysis that is essentially violent and inflammatory, in the sense that it refuses to submit to any value and any authority. This psychoanalysis cannot serve the revolution. Its rejection of normativity goes so far as to “dispute even the existence of man.”

Saïd is for Genet what Sygne de Coûfontaine is for Lacan: a character who goes the furthest in becoming pure waste, the zero-point of subjectivity and life.⁵⁹ Genet’s outcast-hero is arguably even more radical in this regard: whereas Sygne is reduced to a disfiguring tic that signals the total desolation of her destiny, the ultimate sign of Saïd’s refusal is nothing but his

non-reappearance, the fact that after his death he will not be recycled into the land of the dead but will remain a pure absence serving nothing. The wager of psychoanalysis is that by making this explosive nothingness part of its practice, by mobilizing the lack in the Other, the void around which the analysand articulates and repeats his or her most fundamental fantasy, it can produce salutary side-effects: the possibility of invention outside the ways the Other has determined the pathways and dramas of the subject’s desire.

In one of his interviews, Genet characterizes the political dimension of his theater as follows: “All my plays, from *The Maids* to *The Screens*, are after all, in a certain way—at least I’d like to think so—they are after all somewhat political, in the sense that they address politics obliquely. They are not politically neutral. I was drawn to plots that were not political but that took place within a purely revolutionary movement.”⁶⁰ Genet’s dramas are set in a political context, but they themselves are not political, or at least not directly. *The Maids* deals with the problem of social domination by recounting an intimate drama of a mistress and her two chambermaids; *The Balcony* is set in a brothel, with the revolution going on outside; *The Blacks* is a clown show meant to lure the white audience, while a political action (the trial and execution of a traitor) occurs offstage; *The Screens* takes place amidst the anti-colonial revolution, yet it focuses on the story of a poor village thief and his ugly wife. What if we took this indirection not simply as an accident of the plays’ constructions, or the expression of some narrative preference, but as saying something essential about the relationship between art and politics? For Genet, art is decentered in relation to politics, and this decentering is staged within his theater. Art is not politically neutral, but neither is it fully engaged in or absorbed by the revolutionary cause. It produces its effects not through direct prescription but obliquely, as side-effects, by detonating a certain situation from within. Genet’s theater constitutes an extended meditation on the problem of how to separate oneself from power, or how to exorcise the attachment to the master within oneself. More work would need to be done to examine the different ways that Genet dramatizes this, the various traps and impasses and strategies for escape that he deploys (in my mind, *The Maids* and *The Blacks* form one couple, *The Balcony* and *The Screens* another).

Where and when will the void arise, who will incarnate the refuse of a given order? In the “Avertissement” of *The Balcony*, Genet describes the artist’s role as provocateur: “It is not the function of the artist or the poet to find a practical solution to the problems of evil. They must resign themselves to being accursed. They may thereby lose their soul, if they have one; that doesn’t matter. But the work must be an active explosion, an act to which the public reacts—as it wishes, as it can. If the ‘good’ is to appear in a work of art it does so through the divine aid of the powers of song, whose strength alone is enough to magnify the evil that has been exposed.”⁶¹ This description of the artist’s function strongly resonates with the position of the Lacanian analyst, from having no practical solution (equivocal interpretation) and magnifying evil (treating the symptom as the index of subjective truth), to having to resign oneself to being lost or accursed (not being able to fall back on anything—training, knowledge, qualifications, life wisdom, or a well-adjusted ego—other than one’s own “wound”).⁶² In this passage Genet appears more sanguine about the “powers of song” than he is in *The Screens*. *The Screens* ends on an ambiguous note. Kadidja has just told us that Saïd and Leila will not reappear, but the very last line of the play goes to the Mother: “Then where is he? In a song?”⁶³ Is *The Screens* not the song of himself that Saïd feared, his shittiness embalmed? Genet does something else: he stages the difference between an art in the service of the revolution and another that, as “active explosion,” attests to a searing hole in the real.

12

Second Time Round (1977)

by Julio Cortázar



This and following pages: Dora García,
Segunda Vez (stills), 2018. 92'





Dora García: Lazarus

- 1 Carlos Correias, *La operación Masotta: cuando la muerte también fracasa* (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 1991), p. 178. The ERP is the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, or People's Revolutionary Army.
- 2 See Oscar Masotta, "After Pop, We Dematerialize," p. 158.
- 3 Allan Kaprow, "Happenings are Dead: Long Live the Happening!," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 64.
- 4 Allan Kaprow, "Calling," in *Tulane Drama Review* 10:2 (Winter, 1965), pp. 203–04.
- 5 Susan Sontag writes: "Perhaps the most striking feature of the Happening is its treatment (this is the only word for it) of the audience. The event seems designed to tease and abuse the audience. The performers may sprinkle water on the audience, or fling pennies or sneeze-producing detergent powder at it. Someone may be making near-deafening noises on an oil drum, or waving an acetylene torch in the direction of the spectators. Several radios may be playing simultaneously; the audience may be made to stand uncomfortably in a crowded room, or fight for space to stand on boards laid in a few inches of water. There is no attempt to cater to the audience's desire to see everything. In fact, this is often deliberately frustrated, by performing some of the events in semi-darkness or by having events going on in different rooms simultaneously. In Allan Kaprow's *A Spring Happening*, presented in March 1961 at the Reuben Gallery, the spectators were confined inside a long box-like structure resembling a cattle car; peep-holes had been bored in the wooden walls of this enclosure through which the spectators could strain to see the events taking place outside; when the Happening was over, the walls collapsed and the spectators were driven out by someone operating a power lawnmower. (...) The people in the Happenings are often made to look like objects, by enclosing them in burlap sacks, elaborate paper wrappings, shrouds and masks. (...) Much of the action, violent and otherwise, of Happenings involves this use of the person as a material object. There is a great deal of violent using of the physical persons of the performers by the person himself (jumping, falling) and by each other (lifting, chasing throwing, pushing, hitting, wrestling); and sometimes a slower, more sensuous use of the person (caressing, menacing, gazing) by others or by the person himself." See "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London and New York: Picador, 1990 [1966]), pp. 265–67.
- 6 Masotta, "After Pop, We Dematerialize," p. 157.
- 7 "Besides, all Lebel does in his Happenings is to arrange, in sealed-off premises (the theater of the Instituto, with its cube shape, chairs, and stage at the front, in sum, the traditional architectonic box of the traditional theater), a cluttered, disorderly, and simultaneous group of messages (slides, films, live performers, his own talk), to produce a sought-for result: a dark and expressionist image. We could describe Lebel's Happening as follows: a 'collage,' neo-naturalist and expressionist. But this iconoclast, who favors a shit aesthetic and who thinks simultaneity as disorder, does not for all that abandon the traditional coordinates of the traditional theater." Masotta, "After Pop, We Dematerialize," pp. 152–54.
- 8 Kynaston McShine, *Information*, ex. catalogue (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), p. 138.
- 9 Nina Möntmann is currently at work on gathering and producing material for a projected anthology on the question of dematerialization in art. This still unpublished interview was conducted as part of that project.
- 10 See Ana Longoni, "Greco and Masotta: Heterotopic Trajectories," p. 139.
- 11 Roberto Bolaño, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, trans. Chris Andrews (London: Picador, 2010), pp. 197–214 (italics mine).
- 12 Roberto Bolaño, *Distant Star*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2004), pp. 77–89 (italics mine).

- 13 Bolaño, *Distant Star*, p. 78.
- 14 Ricardo Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*, trans. Daniel Balderston (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 206.
- 15 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1976 [1939]), p. 315 (italics mine).

Jorge Jinkis: An Intellectual Passion

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 291.
- 2 Oscar Masotta, *Introducción a la lectura de Jacques Lacan* (Introduction to the Reading of Jacques Lacan) (Buenos Aires: Ed. Corregidor, 1974), pp. 9–10.
- 3 Oscar Masotta, “Robert Arlt: Myself,” in *Oscar Masotta: Theory as Action* (Mexico, D.F.: MUAC, 2017), p. 172.
- 4 Masotta, “Roberto Arlt: Myself,” p. 181; for Michel Leiris, see p. 184.
- 5 In 1970, David Cooper (who had spearheaded the anti-psychiatry movement with R. D. Laing, who in his turn had founded the therapeutic community at Kingsley Hall) visited Masotta and his Grupo Lacaniano de Buenos Aires. At the time, the winds of May ’68, the Vietnam War, and the political movements of the so-called Third World were all still blowing.
- 6 Masotta, “Roberto Arlt: Myself,” p. 173.
- 7 Argentinians use the second person plural, vos, also for the second person singular, tu. A defense of voseo is a defense of this practice. — Ed.
- 8 Pages 238–43 of this volume.
- 9 Published in *Cuadernos Sigmund Freud* no. 1 (1974).
- 10 Pages 67–73 of this volume. — Ed.
- 11 The reference is to Freud’s *The Question of Lay Analysis*, or *Die Frage der Laienanalyse*. — Ed.
- 12 One among innumerable examples: the celebrated epistemologist Gregorio Klimovsky once wrote a spirited ideological critique against the frivolity of the intellectual who “concocts” Happenings. In his reply, Masotta didn’t get bogged down in a personal argument, but rather invited Klimovsky to give us a logic class. He discussed ideas. (For the discussion with Klimovsky, see “I Committed a Happening,” pp. 105–120. — Ed.)

- 13 Eduardo Costa and Oscar Masotta, “On Happenings, Happening: Reflections and Accounts,” in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-garde*, ed. Inés Katzenstein (New York: MoMA, 2004), p. 204–05.
- 14 In 1966, Masotta joined the group Arte de los medios de comunicación, or Art of Communication Media, formed by Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, and Raúl Escari. And his interest in media never flagged. On July 20, 1969, Masotta gathered of all us to see—we thought—the moon landing. But the real event was not the moon landing itself, but its worldwide, televised transmission. We had some fun times.
- 15 Oscar Masotta, “Comentarios para L’École Freudienne de Paris sobre la fundación de la Escuela Freudiana de Buenos Aires,” in *Ensayos lacanianos* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1976). On this topic, see Ana Longoni’s lucid study, “Oscar Masotta: Vanguardia y revolución en los sesenta,” where she retraces Masotta’s intellectual itinerary and his major references. The text is indispensable reading for anyone who wants to understand Masotta’s historical importance in art and aesthetic theory. It appeared as the introduction to Oscar Masotta, *Revolución en el arte: Pop-art, happenings y arte de los medios en la década del sesenta*, ed. Ana Longoni (Barcelona: Edhasa, 2004).
- 16 The Grupo was composed by Masotta, López Guerrero, Hugo Levin, and myself. Carlos Sastre joined us for the panel discussion.
- 17 Oscar Masotta, *Ensayos Lacanianos*, p. 195.

Oscar Masotta: To Read Freud

- 1 Lacan’s work, which undertakes a precise interpretation and a (hard) reading of Freud’s texts, grants them their true dimension. That may facilitate the project, but it doesn’t resolve the task.
- 2 The problem is how to decide what the development of his work means. Should we read *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Psychopathology*, and *Wit* from a perspective in which the “linguistic” preoccupation is to be understood as surpassed by the

- arrival of the “structural” (?) theory of instances? What is the order of implication that marks the relationship between the second topology, the last theory of instincts, the theory of qualities, and the doctrine of dreams? As we see it, Freud himself indicated in his “Scheme” of 1938 the order and ranking of the reasons that unite the history of the concepts and their relevance to the System. We shall return to this elsewhere.
- 3 For a fleeting but no less disheartening vision of Freud, see P.J. Van der Leeuw, “Sobre el desarrollo de la teoría freudiana.” A meaningful example to the extent that it appears in the twenty-fifth anniversary special issue of *Revista de Psicoanálisis* (July–December, 1968).
- 4 Psychoanalytic theory had to wait for Lacan to recuperate the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardness), without which it is impossible to understand the Freudian theory of repression.
- 5 See Moustafa Safouan, “De la structure en psychoanalyse,” in *Qu’est-ce que c’est le structuralisme*, ed. François Wahl (Paris: Seuil, 1973).
- 6 See Serge Leclair’s remarks about of the dreams of Irma’s injection and the botany monograph, in *Psychanalyser* (Paris: Seuil, 1968).
- 7 E. Rodríguez, *El contexto del proceso analítico* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1966), p. 82.
- 8 Exactly the opposite of what Freud postulated.
- 9 A poetic materiality, it should be said, to emphasize the Lacanian notions of the effect of the metaphor and of the word. We use the word “poetic” in the strict sense that it has in Jakobson’s model: a relationship between the function of selection and the combination by which the equivalences that constitute the former are projected on the contiguity axis that constitutes the latter. See Roman Jakobson *Essays de linguistique générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 220. As an example of Jakobson’s definition and of its concrete applicability to the structural analysis in poetry, see Samuel R. Levin, *Linguistic Structures in Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964). See also Lacan’s “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious.”
- 10 Rodríguez, *El contexto*, p. 47.

- 11 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 40.
- 12 Jacques Lacan, *Desire and Its Interpretation*, Seminar VI, trans. Cormac Gallagher, lesson from December 3, 1958, p. 46. Available at: <http://www.lacaninireland.com>. (Lacan’s wording is considerably different, but the point is the same. — Ed.)
- 13 See Roman Jakobson, “Why Papa and Mama,” in *Studies in Child Language and Aphasia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 21–30.
- 14 According to Lacan, in *Desire and Its Interpretation*, the *infans* is the child who does not speak yet.
- 15 I am referring, simply, to the two articulations in André Martinet.
- 16 See Roman Jakobson, “Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb,” in *Selected Writings: Word and Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 130–147.
- 17 Louis Althusser, “Freud and Lacan,” in *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, ed. Olivier Corpet and François Matheron (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 16.

Inés Katzenstein: The Happening as Political Exorcism

- 1 Masotta, “I Committed a Happening,” p. 114.
- 2 Manuel Hernandez, “Masotta’s Dilemma,” in *Oscar Masotta: Theory as Action* (Mexico City: MUAC, 2017), p. 233.
- 3 Eduardo Costa and Roberto Jacoby, “Creation of the First Work,” in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-garde*, ed. Inés Katzenstein (New York: MoMA, 2004), p. 225.
- 4 The fact that Masotta avoids any and every local reference in his text about *To Induce...* stands out even more given the emphasis he places on “overcoming” a genre that hails from the hegemonic centers of art.
- 5 Eduardo Costa and Oscar Masotta, “On Happenings, Happening: Reflections and Accounts,” in *Listen Here Now!*, p. 202.
- 6 Cited in Francisco Rivas, “Alberto Greco: La novela de su vida y el sentido de su

- muerte," in *Alberto Greco* (Valencia: IVAM, 1992), p. 292.
- 7 Cited in Francisco Rivas, "Alberto Greco," p. 290.
- 8 Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," p. 115.
- 9 Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," page 116.
- 10 Carlos Correas, *La operación Masotta. Cuando la muerte también fracasa* (Buenos Aires: Interzona, 2007), p. 23 & 28, respectively.
- 11 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 174
- 12 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 195 & 233, respectively. In the first instance, he is citing Raúl Larra, and in the second he is paraphrasing Erdosain in *The Flamethrowers*: "The truth is I entertained myself by making other poor beings suffer anguish whose only real sin was being inferior to me."
- 13 Cited in Correas, *La operación Masotta*, p. 198. Correas adds there: "Our disorientation was extreme until Perón's fall, in September of 1955. Then I understood. We had not 'succumbed to the fascination' exerted by Sartre: Sartre was only a weapon with which to vanquish our inner enemies and to combat the horror that we inspired in ourselves, and the Argentinean horror at large. No, most certainly, the horror of Argentina under Peronism. Even better: of anti-Peronist Argentina, which is where we lived, thanks to our social condition."
- 14 Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," p. 105.
- 15 Even the most fervent anti-Peronists, like the essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, allowed that Peronism had the historical force of *exhibiting* the Argentinean people for the first time. See Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *¿Qué es esto? Catilinaria* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lautaro, 1956).
- 16 From this perspective, we can say that the photos that document the Happening were poorly taken, or, at least, that there's one missing to complete the documentation. The photos should not have been exclusively of the poor, aligned like recluses or inert victims, but should also have captured the physical confrontation between this group, as the object of the gaze, and the gazing public. The interplay between them is inevitably unequal, but also inevitably specular.
- 17 Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants* (Paris: Minuit, 2012), p. 52–3.
- 18 Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 251.
- 19 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 217.
- 20 Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," p. 114.
- 21 Jacques-Alain Miller, "Los fundamentos neuróticos del deseo del analista," <http://www.freudiana.com/articulos.php?idarticulo=264>.
- 22 Longoni, "Oscar Masotta: vanguardia y revolución," p. 34. See Jorge Jinkis, "An Intellectual Passion," endnote 15, for bibliographic information.
- 23 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 207.
- Oscar Masotta:
I Committed a Happening**
- 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," this means being strongly affected by the drug.
- Ana Longoni:
Heterotopic Trajectories**
- 1 Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 178.
- 2 Alan Pauls, "Dandismo: la actitud como una obra de arte," in *La Nación*, supplement ADN, Buenos Aires, November 5, 2013.
- 3 Fernando Davis, "Tráficos y torsiones queer/cuir en el arte: cuerpos, contraescrituras," in *Errata* no. 12 (Bogotá, January–June, 2014), p. 24.
- 4 María Amalia García, "A sus anchas en su piel de hombre," in *¡Alberto Greco, qué grande sos!* (Buenos Aires: MAMBA, 2016), p. 46.
- 5 Oscar Masotta, *El "pop-art"* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Columba, 1967), p. 11.
- 6 Carlos Correas, *La operación Masotta. Cuando la muerte también fracasa* (Buenos Aires: Interzona, 2007 [1991]), pp. 67–9.
- 7 Oscar Masotta, "Roberto Arlt: Myself," in *Oscar Masotta: Theory as Action* (Mexico City: MUAC, 2017), p. 172.
- 8 Pauls, "Dandismo: la actitud como una obra de arte."
- 9 Horacio Pilar, "Alberto Greco en Brasil (recuerdos de Horacio Pilar)," in *Alberto Greco* (Valencia: IVAM, 1992), p. 192.
- 10 Guillermo Saccomanno, "6 intentos de escribir sobre Oscar Masotta," in *Página 12, Radar*, Buenos Aires, January 10, 2010.
- 11 Davis, "Tráficos y torsiones queer/cuir," pp. 22–44. The expressions "lumpen dandy" and "sexual errancy" come from Diogo Trerotola and Néstor Perlongher, respectively.
- 12 In 2016, Alberto Passolini, as part of the series *Grafitis realizados en los baños públicos de París durante encuentros sexuales*, made a number of drawings in ink and watercolors for the book *¡Alberto Greco, qué grande sos!* Juan Reos, in the series *ANTES, un mundo sin reliquias* (2017), offers a different image of the same episode, entitled *Greco puto*.
- 13 It would be interesting, in this context, to examine the relation between Greco's and other heterotopic practices (Carlos Ginzburg and Liliana Maresca come immediately to mind) that explore the relationship between prostitution and Argentinean art.
- 14 Davis, "Tráficos y torsiones queer/cuir," p. 22.
- 15 Oscar Masotta, *Lecciones de introducción al psicoanálisis* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2006 [1977]), p. 30.
- 16 Correas, *La operación Masotta*, p. 11.
- 17 *Centro* was published by the students of the Humanities Faculty of the Universidad de Buenos Aires; Jorge Lafforgue was the editor-in-chief, and Masotta an assistant editor.
- 18 Roberto Jacoby, cited in Rosangela Rodrigues de Andrade, *Puzzle(s) Masotta* (Rosario: Homo Sapiens, 1997), p. 120.
- 19 Saccomanno, "6 intentos." *Colimba* is a popular term in Argentina for compulsory military service.
- 20 Aracy Amaral, "Nos anos 50: Alberto Greco em São Paulo" (1991), in *Textos do Trópico de Capricórnio*, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2006), p. 204.
- 21 Carlos Correas, *La operación Masotta*, p. 61.
- 22 Jorge Lafforgue, "Oscar (Masotta)," in *Cartografía personal. Escritos y escritores de América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2005), p. 378.
- 23 Masotta, *El "pop-art"*, pp. 99–100 (for all passages).
- 24 Oscar Masotta, "Prologue" to *Happenings*, in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-garde*, ed. Inés Katzenstein (New York: MoMA, 2004), p. 183.
- 25 Masotta, "Prologue" to *Happenings*, in *Listen Here Now!*, p. 184.

- 26 Francisco Rivas, "Alberto Greco. La novela de su vida y el sentido de su muerte," in *Alberto Greco*, p. 208.
- 27 Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, "An Art of Communications Media (manifiesto)," in *Listen Here Now!*, p. 224 (for all passages).
- 28 For more on "El mensaje fantasma," see "After Pop, We Dematerialize," pp. 164–66.
- 29 Oscar Masotta, "Advertencia," in *Conciencia y estructura* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1968), p. 16.

**Oscar Masotta:
After Pop, We Dematerialize**

- 1 Detailed information about Happenings and works carried out in 1966 can be found in Oscar Masotta et al., *Happenings* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Álvarez, 1967).
- 2 Both from 1961, by Lautaro Morúa and David José Kohon, respectively. – Ed.
- 3 The cycle comprised two lectures and two Happenings. Alicia Páez gave one of the lectures, and I performed one of the Happenings, while the other Happening was planned and coordinated by a team made up of Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Oscar Bony, Miguel Ángel Telechea, Pablo Suárez, and Leopoldo Maler.
- 4 Henry Geldzahler, participant in the "Symposium on Pop Art," organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Published in *Arts* (April 1963), p. 37.
- 5 See Allan Kaprow, "Experimental Art," *Art News* (March 1962), p. 62.
- 6 See Michael Kirby, "The New Theater," *Tulane Drama Review* 10:2 (Winter 1965), p. 15.
- 7 See the "definition" of the term "Happening" in *Words*: "the term 'Happening' refers to an art form related to the theater, in that it is performed in a given time and space. Its structure and content are a logical extension of 'Environment.'" *Words*, exhibition catalogue, Smolin Gallery, 1962.
- 8 The creator of the genre is, without a doubt, Roberto Jacoby (see Oscar Masotta et al., *Happenings*), and that in its purest form. This genre of works, to my mind, contains within it nothing less than everything one can expect from that which

is greatest, most profound, and most revelatory in the art of the coming years and of the present. Marta Minujín's work with sixty television sets, at the Instituto Di Tella last year, remained hybridized with the idea of "environment-making," even though the work went beyond it.

9 I distinguish thus between the "aesthetic object," the "media" in which the work is made, and its "material." In order to define precisely the field of works of mass communication, one must not confuse the "media" with the "material" of the work. This distinction brings with it a certain obscurity, but its meaning can be considerably clarified if one thinks of advertising. The "material" with which any campaign works is constituted by the consciousness of the subjects that the campaign is targeted at: the "material" is then, for example, the so-called "phenomena of persuasion," or, rather, the "effects." So the "media" is the instrument for reaching those subjects: "posters," television, stills. Now, between a work of advertising and a work of mass communication there are, nevertheless, differences with regard to the "aesthetic object." A commercial can be "beautiful," and those with modern tastes and sensibilities will easily recognize that. But the "object" of the mass work also has a lot to do with that beauty. What is perceived has more to do with certain effects of intelligibility, which are achieved through certain "transformations" of the usual structures of mass communication. The example of *El mensaje fantasma* (The Ghost Message), to which we shall turn shortly, may serve to clarify these difficulties.

10 Perspicaciously because El Lissitzky's ten pages anticipate by more than thirty years the "thesis" of Marshall McLuhan.

11 Jean-Jacques Lebel, *Le Happening* (Paris: Denoël, 1966).

12 I'm not judging, just describing.

13 In Happenings, the idea that the audience would not witness what is "happening" is already old, classic even. In a Happening by Thomas Schmidt, in Wuppertal (Germany), the actions took place when the public could not see them. Schmidt was in a room surrounded by buckets of water and other objects, and whenever someone entered the room, the *happenista* would take a rest. That was his way of indicating

- that the actions would not be resumed until the observer had left.
- 14 From an economic standpoint, the cycle only yielded deficits. The cycle's total cost (the rental of the helicopter, the costs of shooting an eight-minute film, a twenty-second spot on Canal 11, etc.) exceeded 150,000 pesos. The ticket sales (and the tickets were expensive, 600 pesos each) didn't cover even a third of the costs. But, from the point of view of the Happening itself, eighty people was a sufficient number. The maximum we had foreseen was 200 people. Happenings don't require large audiences.
- 15 The Galería—a sort of shopping mall, not an art gallery—is still there. – Ed.
- 16 Martínez is its own municipality, and is located in the northern part of the greater Buenos Aires region. The *línea* (or *tren*) *del bajo* refers to the projected, but eventually abandoned, line between the stations Borges and Delta.— Ed.
- 17 The only danger, in fact, regarding the timetable was that the buses coming from the Theatrón would arrive before the helicopter. But the drivers had been instructed not arrive, under any circumstances, before 4:10pm. The helicopter pilot, for his part, had been instructed to stop the fly-overs at exactly 4:05pm, thus ensuring that the helicopter would have completely disappeared from the sky before the arrival of the Theatrón group. But there was one glitch: the travel time between the Instituto and Anchorena had been calculated to be fifty minutes. That was the wrong estimation for a Sunday afternoon! And so the buses coming from the Instituto arrived a mere two minutes before the helicopter, which, for its part, appeared in the sky at 4pm on the dot.
- 18 The analogy between the structure of the Happening and those of the mafia is Kaprow's. (See Dora García, "Lazarus," pp. 29–30.— Ed.)
- 19 These four properties distinguish verbal communication from other forms of communication. See F. Chaig Johnson and George R. Klare, "General Models of Communication Research: A Survey of the Developments of a Decade," *Journal of Communication* 11:1 (1961), pp. 13–26. See also Gerhard Maletzke, *Psychologie der Massen kommunikation: Theorie und*

- Systematik* (Hamburg: Hans Bredow Institute, 1963).
- 20 Juan Risuleo was the coordinator of the cycle.
- 21 In linguistics, "neutralization" designates an opposition, pertinent at the level of the code, that loses its relevance in some positions within the message. What results from that loss is called the "archiphoneme." Barthes says, very nicely, that the archiphoneme expresses the pressure of the syntagm on the system. For our example, we could say, analogically, that the neutralization of the "brand" *status* expresses the pressure of the real distribution of socio-economic areas and of the exchange phenomena on the nomenclature that designates these same areas.
- 22 The "substitution test" is the basic operation of structural linguistics. It consists of substituting a phonic segment within a signifier by another, existing phonic segment in the same language so that the final phonic result evokes a different signification.
- 23 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Story of Asdiwal," in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Edmund Leach (London and New York: Routledge, 2004 [1967]), p. 1.
- 24 It will be said: because that would have been an economic absurdity. Who can rent a jet? But this very impossibility is itself a "differential" and, as such, it *signifies*. Hence the certain air of economic precarity that has always accompanied Happenings and that, as I see it, is not that far removed from questions that we would call aesthetic.
- 25 These designations are by Lévi-Strauss, who speaks—in his analysis of myths, for example—of the "high," or "atmospheric" heavens, which are indicated in the myth through the presence of different types of birds, for instance, or of natural phenomena.
- 26 To speak about how one level acts, "retroactively," on another is, in fact, nothing more than a metaphor. What we have are the relations between the levels. But since our analysis is incomplete, the metaphor allows us to indicate the methodological level we are using and to suggest what is the intended result. For similar reasons, we shall speak about "resonances" below.

- 27 Not forgetting, however, that there are radical differences between the Happening and the myth. That poses a problem for the analytical model—directly inspired by Lévi-Strauss—we have used here. Indeed, while the myth is a story narrated through the mediation of an already constituted language (that of the community that it is about), the Happening does not consist of a verbal narrative, but finds itself rather more on the side of “things” than of the word: it is situated “before” words. The myth is thus an enjambed language, while the Happening, a sublanguage, is that which enjambes the primary language and that, at the same time, is enjambed by the “work” that that language performs on things.
- 28 I’m referring to the romantic “space,” which presupposes an observer capable of constituting the landscape, the totality of a situation, as a spectacle. The space of the battles of Victor Hugo.
- 29 I say “image” here in the same way as in advertising one speaks of “brand image” or “imagen de fábrica” (trademark).
- 30 With regards to Communication Sciences, see Gerhard Maletzke, *Psychologie der Massen kommunikation: Theorie und Systematik*.
- 31 With respect to the function of audiences in Happenings, see Alicia Páez, “El happening y las teorías,” in Masotta et al., *Happenings*.
- 32 “The term ‘environment’ refers to an art form that fills an entire room (or outdoor space), surrounding the visitor and consisting of any materials whatsoever, including lights, sounds, and colors.” Allan Kaprow, in *Words*, exhibition catalogue, Smolin Gallery, 1962.
- 33 There is actually a tautology here, since leaving the audience undefined is the defining characteristic of the term “mass” in “mass communication.”

**Oscar Masotta:
Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt**

- 1 A “cross to the jaw.” See Roberto Arlt, *The Seven Madmen*, trans. Nick Caistor (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2015), p. 136: “He tried to clasp his stomach with his hands, but Bromberg’s arm arched forward

again, and a right cross to the jaw rattled Barsut’s teeth.” All further references to *The Seven Madmen* are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text. —Ed.

2 Silvio Astier, Remo Augusto Erdosain, and Estanislao Balder are, respectively, the protagonists of the three novels just mentioned. —Ed.

3 We shall not try to account for Arlt’s tendency to abandon the novel for the theater, though we can at least acknowledge it. A discussion of that tendency would have to elaborate and spell out a coherent theory of the relation between those two genres. We can nevertheless venture a conjecture: if Arlt felt pushed to abandon the novel, it may well be due to the fact that there is very little of the novelistic about the characters he created—they are real “characters,” in the classical sense of the term: petrified destinies, still-lives. With the exception of *The Mad Toy*, Arlt never shows us a character leading his life, other than when that life is already formed. That explains why his readers always feel a rupture of novelistic time. Readers learn nothing more about Erdosain across the chapters of *The Seven Madmen* than they already knew at the start of the book. The situations are not moments in time crossed by the life of the character, moments in which the character is transformed and changes his life; they are *scenes*, set pieces in which the character remains identical to itself. The only things that change are the sets themselves and the “chorus” around him. Readers are consequently obliged to visually imagine these *scenes* and to *contemplate* the finished life of a character who does not change. Hence the fact that Arlt might have felt the need to transplant these still-lives to a medium better suited to them: the theatrical stage. This transplant transforms readers into what they *already were* as readers of the novels. Needless to say, all of that would have to be looked at and explored more closely, and so it is preferable for our purposes—without forgetting his theatrical works and the evolution of aesthetic forms that Arlt adopts in them—to limit our references exclusively to the novels and short stories as we try to understand the relation between author, character, reader, and spectator, and the tightly-knit web of implications therein.

- 4 Francis Jeanson, *Sartre par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), p. 35, for both passages.
- 5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Respectful Prostitute*, trans. Lionel Abel, in *No Exit and Three other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 254; for the discussion about shooting “white folks,” see pp. 271–72.
- 6 Roberto Arlt, “Las fieras,” in *Dos Relatos: El Jorobadito, Las fieras* (Barcelona: Red Ediciones, 2018), p. 33. All further references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
- 7 The insertions in brackets are Masotta’s, who is paraphrasing the list more than really citing it. —Ed.
- 8 Héctor Murena, probably a reference to his analysis of Arlt’s work in *El pecado original de América* (1954). Masotta discusses Murena again in the Appendix. —Ed.
- 9 Juan José Sebreli, “Inocencia y culpabilidad de Arlt,” in *Sur* no. 223 (July and August, 1953).
- 10 A character in *The Seven Madmen*. —Ed.
- 11 Luis Juan Guerrero, *Revelación y acogimiento de la obra de arte* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1956).
- 12 Masotta cites this as a passage from Jean Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers*, but I’ve been unable to locate it in any of the editions (French, English) I’ve consulted. —Ed.
- 13 The Crip is the character Astier betrays in *The Mad Toy*; he is lame—like the Cripple Hipólita in *The Seven Madmen*—and a Spanish immigrant. —Ed.
- 14 Raúl Larra, *Roberto Arlt, el torturado* (Buenos Aires: Futuro, 1950), p. 133.
- 15 Larra, *Roberto Arlt, el torturado*, p. 134.
- 16 Larra, *Roberto Arlt, el torturado*, p. 129.
- 17 Roberto Arlt, *The Mad Toy*, trans. James Womack (London: Hesperus Press, 2013 [1926]), p. 153. All further citations of *The Mad Toy* are from this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
- 18 See Arlt, *The Mad Toy*, p. 8. —Ed.
- 19 Masotta contrasts “anarquismo al derecho” and “anarquismo al revés”: to wear something *al derecho* is to wear it correctly, right side out; and, naturally, *al revés* is the opposite of that. Compare what he says here to what he says about the glove on p. 181. —Ed.
- 20 Which does not mean, it should be clear, that Larra’s book, with all its common sense, isn’t superior to the illegible and retrograde prose of J. C. Ghiano’s articles on Arlt.

- 21 I am thinking here of the best scene in David Viñas’ *Un Dios cotidiano*, though it must be said that the protagonist of that book, Father Ferré, is diametrically opposed to Astier and Arlt. Moreover, if we are to be precise, it must also be said that only Astier betrays the reader, whereas in Viñas’ book, it is the author who betrays the protagonist by making him commit an act that he, the character, had thought himself incapable of. As I have tried to show elsewhere, Viñas’ characters are touched by a strong passivity.
- 22 The expression is *destapa cloacas*, and Masotta is perhaps alluding to the moment in *Los lanzallamas* when Barsut tells Ergueta: “Usted es uno de esos tipos con quien uno destapa su cloaca.” Larry Riley was kind enough to share with me his recently completed translation of *Los lanzallamas*, which is due to appear in English as *The Flamethrowers*. Riley renders the passage just cited as follows: “You’re one of those types who one can show all his garbage to.” All further references to *The Flamethrowers* are to Riley’s manuscript, hence the absence of page numbers. —Ed.
- 23 Sartre explores this dialectic in detail in his book on Jean Genet, *Saint Genet*. Here, I am using only the most general conclusions that Sartre proposes, and verifies time and again, in that book.
- 24 I’m referring to George Bataille’s *Literature and Evil*, where Bataille—not without some obscurities and never straying too far from a tragicomic and aestheticizing tone—argues that evil is the essence of poetry.
- 25 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012 [1952]), p. 181.
- 26 Roberto Arlt, *El amor brujo* (Buenos Aires: Futuro, 1930), p. 78. All further references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
- 27 I do not agree with Lukács when he says, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, that the pathological structure of a novelistic character is an identifying trait of “decadent” literature. Lukács’ thesis assumes the normality of the character, and, to do that, it presupposes that there is a difference in kind between the pathological and the normal. But that is

entirely false, since the effort to understand the pathological depends on the structure of a mind that must, in some way, know what it is that it is trying to understand. Arit's characters are perfect psychopaths and/or psychotics: that is precisely what the "seven madmen" are. The symptoms are fairly clear: self-absorption, the impossibility of engaging in normal relationships with others, dreams of destruction, perseverance, sudden shifts in the flow of thoughts ("he thought telegraphically," etc.), dependency complex, negative self-judgment, and so on. Were we to add that these characters feel empty inside, we could also diagnose them—as has been done with Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre's *Nausea*—as schizophrenics. And if we think about their inclination to dramatize humiliation, or about the (alleged and metaphysical) "pain" that they insist consumes them, we could also diagnose them as hysterics. One thing, and the other as well: schizophrenics and hysterics, empty men and comedians. And yet, Arit's work has nothing whatsoever to do with decadence: what he does is "paint," in his own way, the real relation among men within a society. It will be said, coincidentally, that this "painting" is what interests Arit, and that his work can be praised, supposedly, because it gives us local color (an obsession of certain critics if ever there was one). That, incidentally, is basically what Lukács does when he feels compelled to justify Kafka's genius. He discards everything in Kafka, other than the depiction, sometimes minute and microscopic, of daily customs. But in so doing Lukács forgets that there is no pure description of social reality, no description of social reality that is independent from and external to the structure of the character. It is because of this, and not in spite of this, that Kafka's characters are the way they are and that a certain (real) society is revealed from and through their perspective. The same is true of the "sick" characters in Arit: they are sick because society has literally sickened them, and their sickness is a *privileged perspective* opened onto that society. Outside of that perspective, there can be neither "local color," nor an accurate portrait or living "painting" of the social.

28 The scene is from Arit's *The Flamethrowers*. — Ed.

29 We need to be careful about how we understand *sincerity* here. What I am referring to is a specific aspect of the characters' behavior, the fact that Astier and Erdosain allow their class extraction and social condition out into open. That said, these very same characters are also entirely insincere. As I've already noted, they are too identical to themselves to really be what they say they are. My own opinion is that this fusion of sincerity and comedy is what accounts for the greatness of Arit's man. These characters become comedians, and absolutely so, as a way to attest to what society has imprinted on them, and there is nothing comic about the latter. There is also, running parallel to this, what is called the "sincerity of the author." Whenever that rears its head, we need to be even more careful. The tradition of literary criticism in our country is terrible. And Arit's work, which has been discussed in some forty short essays that pretend between them to give a global view of that oeuvre, has been a privileged victim of that tradition. But Arit is simply an exemplary case. With the exception of the note that Juan José Sebreli published in *Sur*, and of the handful of texts published in an issue of *Contorno* dedicated to Arit, the tendency in Argentina has been to turn him into a monster of sincerity and authenticity. We need to undertake a purifying mission against that critical tendency, and that means starting at the beginning. We should recall—as Maurice Blanchot's profound reflections in *The Work of Fire* have shown—that the act of writing is constitutively, and fundamentally, insincere. All that is best about a work of fiction doesn't have to do with its sincerity (otherwise, it would not be fiction), but with the attitude that the author assumes towards the sincerity that is originally veiled from him. Such is the thesis that Noé Jitrik lays out in his work about Quiroga (*Horacio Quiroga, una obra de experiencia y riesgo* [Buenos Aires: ECA, 1959]), and that work remains, on this front at least, a rare exception in our critical literature. It will be said that there are works that pay no attention to the social experience they're commenting on, and others that, conversely, deepen

and reveal that experience. Let's agree to call the former insincere and the latter sincere, and to put Roberto Arit between them. Fair enough, and I myself am trying to describe the meaning of his work as a whole as it appears to the innocent reader, though without failing, for all that, to refer that meaning to the social structures that his work helps us understand. But a really critical work needs to go beyond that. I devote my energies to describing—because this has not been done with Arit till now—the "signifying structures" of the work. What I mean is that I devote my energies to describing what the work, after its own fashion, says. A subsequent work should go beyond the analysis of the novels and aspire, instead, to offer an existential and historical psychoanalysis of the man, Arit, and not, as I am doing here, of Arit's man. This psychoanalysis would investigate the dialectical intertwining of the work with the life of the author, and the relation between the "authenticity" of the characters, the constitutive insincerity of any author, and the supposed sincerity of the man himself (i.e., Arit). This would allow us to see the social myths that Arit's work and life reveal and denounce, and those that they affirm and uphold.

30 Claude Lanzmann, "L'Homme de gauche," in *Les Temps modernes* no. 112 (1955).

31 Roberto Arit, "El Jorobadito," in *Dos Relatos: El Jorobadito, Las fieras*, p. 23. All further references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.

32 The difference between imagination and perception is Sartre's, who elaborates extensively on it the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The "perceptive attitude" refers to *ongoing totalizations*, to totalizations in the process of realizing themselves as such; the "imaginative attitude," for its part, refers to closed totalities. In this way, Sartre differentiates between *totality* and *totalization*. The imaginary object (the object of a common act of the imagination, works of fiction, and the static object in general) is constructed from the perceived world and extracts its materials from that world. Whether deliberately or otherwise, it names the circuit of men and tools that makes up the historical world, but it does so by closing the circuit, by pushing the historical into the eternal. The

perceived object is likewise "seen" within this selfsame circuit, but what we grasp through it is the historical in the process of historicizing itself, that is to say, immersed in time and subject to the transformations that time imposes on the circuit.

33 See *The Mad Toy*, p. 71. — Ed.

34 See *The Seven Madmen*, p. 255. — Ed.

35 On this topic, see Bertrand Russell's *Marriage and Morals*. It is nevertheless the case that Judeo-Christian thought, at least at its origin and across the best minds to have emerged from that tradition, yields an ethics of embodiment—consider Hegel, for example. More than the influence of Christian thought, however, we should speak directly, and with greater rigor, about Catholicism. That said, it is true that there is no difference at the level of the genesis of social norms and customs.

36 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992 [1943]), p. 557. (Masotta adapts the sentence slightly; Sartre is citing Rougemont, who, speaking about Don Juan, says: "He was not capable of having." — Ed.)

37 The reference is to Hipólito Yrigoyen, who was President of Argentina from 1916 to 1922, and again from 1928 to 1930, when he was deposed by a military coup. Marcelo T. de Alvear was President of Argentina between 1922 and 1928. — Ed.

38 Sartre, *Saint Genet*, p. 51.

39 By "we," I mean each of us who is paid an unknown salary in an envelop in exchange for some service.

40 See *El amor brujo*, p. 64. Arit actually says "criados de cuello duro," or "stiff-necked servants." — Ed.

41 It is true that there are moments when the tertiary worker or sector, already unionized, can take to the streets to fight for this or that material cause, and thus give proof of the great value it can have to the struggle by joining its force to that of the proletariat. This is precisely what happened quite recently here in Argentina with bank workers. But, without casting a contrary judgment on this behavior, it is still valid, and politically useful, to inquire as to its motivations. And to do that we need to attend to the relations between the tertiary sector—as a social group working

- with and for a specific ideology—and other social groups.
- 42 Sebreli has suggested how important the role of the father in Arit's novels is to a psychoanalysis of Roberto Arit. It is significant that *The Mad Toy* is entirely silent about Astier's father. In the other novels, the characters trace their humiliation back to the authoritarian and punitive figure of the father. According to this reading, there is, at the origin of Arit's work, a problem of authority: the humiliation of the boy, inflicted by a father who rejects him and who forces him to live with a negative self-perception. To our eyes, however, if we want to understand this work, and if we want to attempt a real psychoanalysis of its author, then we must strive to recover, from a childhood subjected to humiliation by an authoritarian father, the child's awareness of the social humiliation that weighs on the father who humiliates him.
- 43 A magazine. Originally launched and edited by Pedro Orgambide, Raúl Larra, and David Viñas, it ran from November 1961 to July 1966.—Ed.
- 44 The *sics* are Masotta's. I was unable to locate the Ocampo text that Masotta is referring to, but clearly what Ocampo detests is "shit" (*mierda* in Spanish).—Ed.
- 45 Nira Etchenique, *Roberto Arit* (Buenos Aires: La Mandragora, 1962), p. 23.
- Emiliano Battista:**
Oscar Masotta and the Left
- 1 Oscar Masotta, "Roberto Arit: Myself," in *Theory as Action* (Mexico, D.F.: MUAC, 2017), p. 172.
- 2 Masotta, "Roberto Arit: Myself," pp. 182–83, for all passages.
- 3 Oscar Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arit*, p. 234ff.
- 4 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 174.
- 5 See Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 188–89.
- 6 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 170.
- 7 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 188.
- 8 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 182–83; see also p. 198.
- 9 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 170.
- 10 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 198.
- 11 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 171 (emphasis mine).
- 12 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 175.
- 13 Masotta, "Roberto Arit: Myself," p. 173.
- 14 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 207.
- 15 Masotta, "Roberto Arit: Myself," p. 173.
- 16 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 199.
- 17 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 208; see pp. 197–98 for previous passages.
- 18 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 203.
- 19 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 203.
- 20 Masotta, *Sex and Betrayal*, p. 208.
- 21 Oscar Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," p. 105.
- 22 Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," p. 105.
- 23 Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," p. 117.
- 24 Masotta, "I Committed a Happening," p. 120.
- Aaron Schuster:**
To Dispute the Existence of Man
- 1 Jean Genet, "The Palestinians," trans. Meric Dobson, *Journal of Palestine Studies* vol. 3 no. 1 (Autumn, 1973). The original French text has been lost, so the English translation effectively serves as the original.
- 2 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 32.
- 3 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 31.
- 4 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 32.
- 5 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), pp. 45, 44.
- 6 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 32.
- 7 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 34.
- 8 In a totally different register, the same question is at stake in Kafka's short story "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," which also deals with the relationship between art and politics, and the function of the artist in the community.
- 9 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 31.
- 10 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII 1969–1970 The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), p. 55.
- 11 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 33.
- 12 Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 317.
- 13 Jean Genet, "Avertissement," *The Balcony*, trans. Barbara Wright and Terry Hands (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. xiv.
- 14 "My point of departure was situated in Spain, Franco's Spain, and the revolutionary who castrates himself was all those Republicans when they had admitted their defeat. And then my play continued to grow in its own direction and Spain in another." Interview with Michel Breilman, "J'ai été victime d'une tentative d'assassinat," *Arts* no. 617 (May 1957). Translated and quoted in Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 414.
- 15 Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove, 1966), p. 65.
- 16 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 48.
- 17 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 12.
- 18 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 61.
- 19 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 13.
- 20 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. George Braziller (New York: Signet, 1963), pp. 61–62.
- 21 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 80.
- 22 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 84.
- 23 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 12.
- 24 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 27.
- 25 Genet, *The Balcony*, pp. 87–88.
- 26 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 49.
- 27 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 19.
- 28 Jean Genet, *Querelle*, trans. Anselm Hollo (New York: Grove, 1974), p. 230.
- 29 See Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography*, p. 103.
- 30 Genet, "How to Perform *The Balcony*," in *The Balcony*, p. xiii. Genet excoriates an early London production for precisely this reason: "In London the director's sole aim was to abuse the English royal family, the Queen in particular, and to turn the scene between the General and his horse into a satire on war" (xi). The problem with satire was identified long ago by the arch-satirist Jonathan Swift: "Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own." Genet counteracts this in three ways: Irma implicates the spectators directly, at the end of the play, in the universe of the brothel; he specifies that the production not be tailored to the local context but remain somewhat abstract and suggestive; and he insists on the devout, religious character of the proceedings, so that the laughter of satire (making fun of this person or that) does not laugh away the more distressing comic object: the production of glory.
- 31 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 30.
- 32 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 43.
- 33 On the brothel as a holy space, see also Matthew Sharpe, "Between Genet's Bordello and Holy Communion: Lacan on Comedy in *Seminar V*," *S: Journal of the Jan van Eyck Circle of Lacanian Ideology Critique*, vols. 6–7 (2014), p. 73.
- 34 Jean Genet, *The Screens*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), pp. 29–30.
- 35 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 49.
- 36 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 7.
- 37 Genet, *The Screens*, p. 72.
- 38 Genet, *The Balcony*, pp. 31–32.
- 39 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 50, 94.
- 40 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 57.
- 41 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 57.
- 42 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 82.
- 43 Genet, *The Balcony*, p. 94.
- 44 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 32.
- 45 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 32.
- 46 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 32.
- 47 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 32.
- 48 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 34.
- 49 Genet, "The Palestinians," p. 33.
- 50 Genet, *The Screens*, p. 174.
- 51 In one of the most beautiful speeches in *The Screens*, Leila says to Said: "But I want—it's my ugliness, earned hour by hour, that speaks, or what speaks?—I want you to stop looking backward. I want you to lead me without flinching to the land of shadow and of the monster. I want you to plunge into irrevocable grief. I want you—it's my ugliness, earned minute by minute, that speaks—to be without hope. I want you to choose evil and always evil. I want you to know only hatred and never love. I want you—it's my ugliness, earned second by second, that speaks—to refuse the brilliance of darkness, the softness of flint, and the honey of thistles" (97).
- 52 Genet, *The Screens*, p. 166.
- 53 Genet, *The Screens*, p. 170.
- 54 Jean Genet, "Letters to Roger Blin," in *Reflections on the Theatre and Other Writings*, trans. Richard Seaver (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 14.
- 55 See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VIII 1961–1962 Transference*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), p. 392.

- 56 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI. D'un Autre à l'autre 1968–69*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 45.
- 57 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book V 1957–58 Formations of the Unconscious*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 236.
- 58 It is important to underline this point: the original meaning of *jouissance* in Lacan's work is an affective supplement to the subject's alienation in the symbolic order. The body is not missing in Lacanian theory, but it is framed from the perspective of the subject's lack-of-being. This is not the understanding of *jouissance* that prevails in most Lacanian circles today, which is more Deleuzian (or Deleuzoguattarian) in making of enjoyment a bodily charge or force that is subsequently submitted to symbolization. A reconstruction of this concept in Lacan should start from his reading of *The Balcony*.
- 59 For Lacan's reading of Claudel's Coüfontaine trilogy, see *Seminar VIII*, pp. 265–325. Lacan also theorizes this zero-point of subjectivity in terms of the Sadean "second death," which I examine in my *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2016), pp. 39–42.
- 60 Jean Genet, "Interview with Rüdiger Wischenbart and Layla Shahid Barrada," in *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, ed. Albert Dichy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 246.
- 61 Genet, "Avertissement," p. xiv.
- 62 Lorenzo Chiesa already pointed out the link between Genet's artist and the Lacanian analyst in "The First Gram of Jouissance: Lacan on Genet's *The Balcony*," in *The Comparatist* vol. 39 (October 2015), p. 19.
- 63 Genet, *The Screens*, p. 176.

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Emiliano Battista is a bookmaker. He has worked with Daan van Golden, Aglaia Konrad, Mitja Tušek and other artists. A translator, usually of French philosophy and theory; most recently, he edited and translated *Dissenting Words*, a book of interviews with Jacques Rancière. He is currently at work on a book about the place and function of the book in the world of contemporary art.

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Jorge Jinkis is a practicing psychoanalyst based in Buenos Aires, and was a friend of Oscar Masotta. He was involved in the creation of a number of publications: *Cuadernos Sigmund Freud*, *Cuadernos de psicoanálisis*, *Sitio*, and *Diatribas*, and *Conjetural*, of which he is, along with Luis Gusmán, editor-in-chief. His books include *Lo que el psicoanálisis nos enseña* (1983), *La acción analítica*, and *Indagaciones* (2010).

Inés Katzenstein was recently named Director of the Research Institute for the Study of Art from Latin America at MoMA. Prior to that, she had been the Director of the Art Department of Universidad Di Tella. She has curated numerous exhibitions and written extensively on Latin American art, particularly on the Argentinean avant-gardes of the 1960s. Her publications include *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the Sixties: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (2004).

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This and following pages: Dora García,
Segunda Vez (stills), 2018. 92'









Segunda Vez:
How Masotta Was Repeated

Published by Oslo National Academy of the Arts and Torpedo Press, 2018. Distributed by Torpedo.

Concept: Dora García
Editing and translation*: Emiliano Battista
Proofreading: Boris Belay, Anna Susanna Woof
Design: Aslak Gurholt (Yokoland) and Alejandro V. Rojas
Typeset in Helvetica Neue and Masotica
Printed in Norway by Nilz & Otto Grafisk AS
Edition of 500 copies
ISBN: 978-82-93104-20-9
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Julio Cortázar's "Second Time Around" is translated by Clive Griffin and reprinted by permission of the translator and John R. King, editor of the volume in which the translation first appeared: *New Penguin Parallel Texts: Short Stories in Spanish/Cuentos en español* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999).

Oscar Masotta's "I Committed a Happening" and "After Pop, We Dematerialize" (sections 1, 2, 3, and 6) are translated by Brian Holmes and reprinted by permission of MoMA. They appeared originally in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-garde*, ed. Inés Katzenstein (New York: MoMA, 2004).

Oscar Masotta's "To Read Freud" is translated by Zilkia Janer and reprinted by permission of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, University of Michigan. It appeared originally in *Dispositio* vol. 18, no. 45 (1993).

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Image, back cover: Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*, 1967. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Cloe Masotta.

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This book is published with the generous support of The Norwegian Artistic Research Program and the Oslo National Academy of the Arts.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who, in ways both large and small, had a hand in bringing this book, and the two Cahiers that preceded it, into being. We are specially grateful to Victoria Durnak, Nora Joung, Olga Martí, and Siren M. A. Tjøtta, for their commitment and contributions to this project; to Jesús Alcaide, Ricardo Piglia, Germán García, Nora Catelli, Montserrat Rodríguez Garzo, Norberto Ferrer, Diego Peller, and Carlos Masotta, for sharing their knowledge of Oscar Masotta; to Marta Dansie and MoMA; to Larry Riley, for sharing the manuscript of his translation of Roberto Arlt's *The Flamethrowers*; to Lila Lisenberg, Agustín Pérez Rubio, and Javier Gómez, for making Buenos Aires such a hospitable place; to Vanessa Ohlraun, for encouraging the project; and to Cloe Masotta, for everything.

SeGunda Vez is an art research Project centered on the figure of Oscar Masotta (Buenos Aires, 1930, Barcelona, 1979), an author of ground-breaking texts about the HaPPeninG, art, and dematerialization, a Pioneer of Lacanian PsYchoanalysis in the SPanish-sPeakinG world, and a haPPenista. The Project has Yielded a full-length and four medium-length films bY Dora García, two Cahiers documenting the research, and this book. *SeGunda Vez: How Masotta Was RePeated* offers a selection of Masotta's writings, including his early studY of ArGentinean author Roberto Arlt, as well as texts that contextualize Masotta's thought and broaden the reach of his reflections on the intersections between Performance and PsYchoanalysis, art and Politics.



Oslo National AcademY of the Arts
TorPedo Press

ISBN 978-82-93104-20-9

