

**Intimate Space and the Public Sphere:
Margarita Paksa in Argentina's Military Dictatorship**

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THESIS

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For Asher

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the work of artist Margarita Paksa (1933-2020) during Argentina's military dictatorship. Unlike other Argentinian artists who left the country and enjoyed commercial success or security in the postwar art world, Paksa never left Buenos Aires. While living under the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1966 to 1983, Paksa responded critically and creatively to political oppression through an ever-evolving sequence of mediating frameworks. In the context of a dictatorship, where the public sphere becomes more and more theatricalized amid arbitrary measures of control and repression, the private space of intimacy takes on a different and essential role. Addressing the differences between private and public, exteriority and interiority, proximity and distance, Paksa expands the notion and boundary of intimacy. Paksa's work allows us to theorize the subversive potential of critical art forms only apparently produced to serve an intimate, embodied aesthetic. While censorship, violence, and disappearance were commonplace in Argentina, Paksa effectively claimed the public sphere on behalf of herself and other artists, developing *alternative* and *oppositional* ways of encountering art institutions as well as the military regime. Even though Paksa was among the first conceptual artists in Latin America, she has been widely ignored in the international art world. My dissertation corrects the oversight by writing Paksa's history in terms of the theoretical, critical, and historical frameworks that situate her work at the center of its time and place both in Argentina and internationally.

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INTRODUCTION

“My memory is stamped with 30 years of violence... Not only that I cannot leave it aside, but that I have it stamped as if it was a cattle brand (*marca de ganado*). This time democracy won’t be short.”

—Margarita Paksa.¹

This dissertation explores Margarita Paksa’s forms of cultural resistance and the ways that she managed to convey the gravity of her times despite the mounting prohibitions used to silence her and the Argentinean society. During Argentina’s military dictatorship that lasted 17 years (1966-1983), Paksa’s work meant to circulate political expression while eluding censorship. And as a conceptual artist herself, she was afraid that conceptual art in Argentina could become too explicit, definitive, and didactic in its particular socio-political context. For Paksa, an art without a “direct message” leaves more room for the spectator to interpret, which was more in line with her politics—freeing the viewer (and citizen) of constraints and interpretations. The different projects presented in this dissertation give expression to Paksa’s internal conflict with an art of ideas, an art of communication, and what it can do.

I argue that Paksa’s work is truly experimental, and that she understood her experimental art as action, operating as an actual intervention in the world. As a result, in the repressive context of Argentina’s dictatorship of the 1960s-1980s, Paksa’s works acquire a new political potential, and their effectiveness lies in their reclaiming of private and intimate space as a radical experience. Paksa’s practice during the 1960s and 1970s, a practice that no one else has attempted to examine, demonstrates her artistic courage and determination. This dissertation will lead to the first lengthy research in English of this important artist by way of Paksa’s response to the changing political climate of Argentina.

¹ Margarita Paksa in conversation with artist Juan Carlos Romero, Centro Cultural General San Martín, Buenos Aires, October 7, 1986. Museum of Modern Art Archive, Buenos Aires.

When making art under persecution, it ceases to be a means of direct communication and takes on the burden and fascination of coded signals placed for an audience who would understand the messages intended for them.² Despite the still-prevalent belief that the dictatorship perpetrated a “cultural genocide,” as writer Julio Cortazar once called it, acts of resistance—or, to put it more plainly—stabs at life that would not be lived in total isolation, are at the center of a history of political repression. The Argentinian dictatorship left at least 30,000 dead, University professors were being fired. Intellectuals, artists, and most of all, leftist militants, were fleeing the country and being killed in its name. But despite it all, cultural life persevered.

Paksa belonged to a generation that came of age in the early 1960s following years of repressive dictatorships and explosive cultural and political activity in Buenos Aires, and during the rise of armed political struggle, especially within leftist political groups. Paksa came to believe that artistic and cultural activities were crucial instruments for the enduring revolutionary state they had been trying to form before the coup took place in 1966.

The many prohibitions of the time (censorship and self-censorship) forced Paksa to depend on cryptic communicational coding not merely out of stylistic preference but out of a need to push the limits of regulated speech and historical remembrance. The cultural production of Argentina’s last military dictatorship begins at a point of pressure, where visual culture of the highest order meets politics at the point of a gun. The question then is, what was still possible, and what was actually accomplished despite conditions of unthinkable prohibition, fear, and violence?

When it became impossible to speak openly about events that occurred every day—kidnappings, torture, rumors of torture and clandestine jails, eruptions of violence next door or

² See Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

down the street—Argentinean artists and intellectuals sought ways to speak about and understand the events surrounding them. This led Paksa to experiment with new and different materials that combined the mechanic and the handmade. New technologies allowed her to constantly question her practice (and art in general) in order to advance it. For Paksa, to resist meant to survive creatively and intellectually by whatever means possible. Her use of transparent acrylic, for instance, in sculptures like *Relaxing Egg* (1967) (figs. 1, 2) and the MAC furniture examined in detail in Chapter One, enabled her to experiment with new materials that were just appearing in the industrial design scene of Buenos Aires while continuing to think about the body and physical contact. They required the involvement of the hand—through the invitation to the audience to touch the *Relaxing Egg* or to sit in the *Relaxing Chair* (fig. 6).

As different as Paksa's works might seem, they all position conceived space and tensions with lived space, or the daily environment in Paksa's minimalist sculptures, such as *Relaxing Egg* or performative installations such as *Comunicaciones* (1968) (figs. 18-20), analyzed in Chapter Two. The typographic works studied in Chapter Three, such as the map series *Diagramas de batallas* position the operation of laying out space as not only organizing *a posteriori* knowledge, but also as a conceptual exercise linked to the mapmaker's vision. Map making is thus covertly dependent on the artist's hand and intention.

Paksa's works represent, in part, a life under dictatorship, captured in what is said as much as in what remains unsaid. These negative spaces—silences—also speak in Paksa's work. As such, I will argue that Paksa offers art history and practicing artists alike a viable and translatable model for creativity under distress that is especially relevant today. Paksa's work allows us to theorize the subversive potential of critical art forms only apparently produced to serve a private or intimate, embodied aesthetic. Censorship, violence, and human disappearance were commonplace in Argentina. Nevertheless, Paksa effectively claimed a variety of spheres on

behalf of herself and other artists, developing alternative and oppositional ways of encountering art institutions as well as the military regime.

Remarkably, Paksa's work has rarely been shown in the United States or internationally. However, in 2012, Paksa was recognized with a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires. There are several historiographic reasons for Paksa not being better known outside of Argentina. Most importantly, the literature on 1960s Argentine art has primarily focused on art institutions. For example, Andrea Giunta, Ana Longoni, Mariano Mestman, and John King have delineated the crucial roles that public and private institutions played in the development of art in Argentina in the 1960s.³ What these important forebearers gain in establishing the institutional history, however, they lose in the analysis of individual artists, systems of interrelated artworks, and uniquely Argentinian practices. With newly accessible archives and publications, it is now possible to study individual artists' writings and artworks that significantly contribute to our understanding of the community of artists and their relationships to each other.

Paksa has been named in passing and in footnotes in most publications about Argentinian art written by the authors named above and more. I believe that part of the "invisibility" of a deep analysis of her work is due to a misconception that women's role as mothers or their priority to protect their children under a dictatorship precludes them from being relevant and committed artists. As mentioned, in contrast to other artists who left to exile, Paksa never left Argentina; she had to balance her artistic practice and political commitments with protecting her

³ See Andrea Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del di Tella a "Tucumán Arde": Vanguardia artística y política en el '68 argentino* [From di Tella to "Tucumán Arde": Artistic and political vanguard in the Argentine '68], (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Cielo por Asalto, 2000); John King, *Arte en Argentina: Argentina 1920–1994* [Art in Argentina: Argentina 1920–1994], ed. David Elliot (Oxford: Museum of Art, 1994).

family. During the military dictatorship, Paksa was concerned with not risking her life or that of her two young children, while maintaining an art practice.

Like many other women artists, Paksa's career was interrupted by several factors—among them maternity and caretaking, and in this particular case of Paksa, a military dictatorship that lasted 17 years. This means that between the ages of thirty-three and fifty—during Paksa's years of personal maturity—she worked in interrelated contexts of creative expression, artistic censorship, and political oppression. She chose to continue making art while living under the dictatorship and relentlessly searching for new ways and new mediums to express herself. “I'd like to make it clear,” she said, “that throughout my career, I have never cared for what kind of style it is, whether figurative or not, but have always focused on my objective.” My dissertation precisely focuses on Paksa's objective and desires informed foremost by her sociopolitical context and not by a particular aesthetic choice. How can art become different using new materials and technologies? And therefore, how can the world change? “How do I keep saying something, saying what I can. I don't want to remain silent,” she told me when I met her in her Buenos Aires apartment in the summer of 2017.

Art history tends to focus on the “career” of the artist, a clearly patriarchal way of understanding an artist's practice. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the power of the art object and studies Paksa's work. In the catalog of the exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, curators Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta write that the exhibition “grew out of our shared conviction that the vast body of work produced by Latin American women and Latina artists has been marginalized and

hidden by dominant, canonical, and patriarchal art history.”⁴ *Radical Women* asserts that women artists have been disregarded from art historical discourses, in part for the lack of cohesion or stability in their practice, or the lack of financial support for their practice. Paksa’s eclectic collection of works is hard to pinpoint at first glance, but with time and dedication I could trace connections between her experimental works and different use of materials.

Since my first research trip to Buenos Aires in the summer of 2017, I was not only able to access Paksa’s personal archive in her own home, but I was also able to develop an intellectual connection with her and her son, Sergio Paksa. Sergio Paksa has assisted with long-distance access to materials and with scanning and responding to questions both in-depth and quickly via WhatsApp. Paksa suffered from Alzheimer’s disease and had been in decline when I visited her home. Her memory was selective—she did not remember much of recent events; I would need to introduce myself every time I went to visit her. However, she was able to speak quite eloquently about her work and the political environment of the 1960s and 1970s in Buenos Aires. “I had to leave a lot behind. I had to leave basically everything,” Paksa told me, referencing the time during the mid-1970s in Argentina when Paksa retreated from the art world. She continued, “art is made of both production and reception and if we were not able to share our work in public then it was like losing everything.”⁵ The works highlighted in the following chapters are

4 Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, “Introduction” in *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, (New York: Prestel Press, 2017), 17. Also relevant here is the dissertation in progress of PhD Candidate at University of Texas Julia Detchon titled *Work-Around: Lea Lublin, Marie Orensanz, Mirtha Dermisache, and Margarita Paksa* focusing on four artists all featured in *Radical Women*. Paksa has gained more recognition since being included in the survey exhibition *Radical Women* with six of her works: the sculpture *Silencio II* (Silence II) (1967/2010), four works on paper including *Toma del batallón 601* (The capture of battalion 601), from the series *Diagramas de batallas* (Battle diagrams) (1975) and her video *Tiempo de descuento. Cuenta regresiva. La hora 0*. (Discount time. Countdown. Zero hour) (1978). After *Radical Women* and after her death on July 5, 2020, the Museum of Metropolitan Art in New York acquired two works on paper by Paksa, as well as the Museum of Fine Art Houston. The New York non profit Instituto of Latin American Art (ISLAA) is planning a four-person exhibition including Paksa’s works on paper with the intention to display them in 2022. I am also in conversation with ISLAA considering traveling that exhibition to Chicago.

⁵ Author interviews Margarita Paksa in August 2016, Buenos Aires.

enmeshed in the experiences of dictatorship, violence, censorship, and repression, but also in the emergence of a new sensibility.

In Chapter One, “Participation,” I focus on the work *Relaxing Egg* from 1967 and on the artist’s interest in active audience engagement. *Relaxing Egg* is a series of 500 hand-held, egg-shaped plastic objects (figs. 1, 2) that were meant to be circulated widely in people’s familiar spaces, such as one’s home, office, or one’s pocket, as if to both solidify and blur the distinction between public and private life. Their simple form is in direct dialogue with the Minimalists in New York, whose work she knew, but whose sense of the boundary between public and private experience was necessarily different. Carried in pockets, this work partook of a blended private-public domain that implicitly exemplifies an alternative to the state-controlled public sphere of the military dictatorship in Argentina.

Chapter Two, “Communication” extends this logic in terms of what could or could not be said or enacted in Argentina at the time, and reflects on Paksa’s efforts to address the events of 1968 from a local perspective. This chapter focuses on one piece in particular titled *Comunicaciones* (1968) (figs. 18-20) that consisted of a performance by Paksa herself and her husband in which they left imprints of their bodies on a sandbox. The audience was faced with the imprints and a record player that played the sounds of a couple having sex over headphones. Concerning Paksa’s local situations, any reference to sex or sexuality was carefully monitored and censored by the military government that fostered Christian morals. *Comunicaciones* indexed the gap between the physical presence of a speaker and what is heard in speech acts generally.

Chapter Three, “Resistant Messages,” studies Paksa’s “typographic drawings” from 1966-1978, which explored the sinister procedures of the dictatorship and political brutality via visual poetry, with a particular intention to produce coded messages. In the 1970s, many artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario opted for abandoning art and completely dedicating themselves to

social work, activism, graphic design, or advertising. But Paksa never abandoned art; rather, she distanced herself from the art world's militancy, which was distancing itself from Paksa's convictions. She continued working, isolated, at her home studio—without anyone seeing the work produced—focused on developing the typographic works and drawings examined in this third chapter.

These many forms of gap-making, intentional obfuscation of meaning, and exploration of the political potential of a blended public/private sphere all come together in the Conclusion, “Tiempo de Descuento” (Discount Time), which focuses on Paksa's video *Tiempo de descuento. Cuenta regresiva. La hora 0* (*Discount Time: The Countdown: Hour 0*) (1978), regarded as the first known video art piece made in Argentina.⁶ For this artwork made during the most violent years of the military dictatorship in Argentina, Paksa shot 45 minutes of footage of a man running around an apartment, which she then edited down to a 12-minute video of the moments when the runner entered and left the room. To put it bluntly, the work is all a gap in a political context where panoptic control was (literally) the law of the land. The work can be interpreted as a marker of the significance of what could not be seen in the public realm, as a negative imprint of the time edited out of the official piece.

Throughout Paksa's continued experimentation which began in the 1960s and concluded upon her decline with Alzheimer's in about 2015, Paksa embodied the ideal of the transmedia artist-inventor. Resisting a firm adherence to any specific medium or style, she tirelessly pursued a political-poetic image-making system that would be coded or cryptic not merely out of preference but out of a need to bypass the censors and survive as a person and artist. A deep study of Paksa's study is long overdue: a truly exceptional conceptual artist who challenged established forms of communication and information diffusion during the most difficult times in

⁶ Princeton University PhD Candidate is working on his dissertation that investigates the emergence of video as an artistic medium during the 1970s among a diverse group of artists and institutions in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay.

Argentina's history. The path traced in this dissertation evidence the construction of a rigorous poetic practice that served as a platform from which the artist launched an array of conceptual, material, and political experiments that never integrated into an easily recognizable individual style.

CHAPTER I: *Participation*

Margarita Paksa studied sculpture at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes Ernesto de la Cárcova in Buenos Aires, graduating in 1955. This was a time of conflict, when the so called “Revolución Libertadora” took place, a transitional military dictatorship, brought about by a coup d’état which overthrew the president Juan Domingo Perón and lasted between 16 and 23 September 1955. The society was divided between Peronists and anti-Peronists, and there was a process of political and cultural as well as economic reformulation. During her student years, Paksa took an oppositional position, manifested in rebellious attitudes towards the current regime that would foster her passionate ideals. In the late 1950s, Paksa gave private classes for children and would eventually teach sculpture at the Facultad de Bellas Artes de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata (UNLP) until the early 2000s. After working for almost a decade in ceramics, in 1963 Paksa began exhibiting expressionist sculptures made of marble, iron and found objects. The scale of these works grew, and in 1965 she presented her first environment, *Calórico* (Caloric), a room filled with objects made of polyester and vinyl tubes.

In the mid-sixties, Paksa frequented the Bar Moderno, then located in Maipú 918, a meeting point of artists of Paksa’s generation linked to the Instituto Di Tella and the first Argentine rock musicians. It was a time of cultural effervescence where most of the action would happen in the Buenos Aires area called “Manzana loca” where the Bar Moderno and the Di Tella were placed. From 1965 onward, Paksa would participate in numerous group exhibitions and befriend the art critic Oscar Masotta who was critical to her growth as an artist, for he introduced her to philosophy, linguistics, and communication theory.

“We have an obligation to think about humanity and contribute to a happier world,” Paksa declared in 1968. There is a “difference between what is healthy to tolerate on a daily

basis and what is not.”⁷ This obligation expressed itself in Paksa’s political activism in the 1960s and early 1970s during the military dictatorship in Argentina, as with several of her works, among them her 1967 conceptual project *Relaxing Egg*—a series of egg-shaped objects made out of transparent acrylic in different colors. *Relaxing Egg* was not only recognized in the Argentinean art world as a provocative conceptual work, but it also became a desirable object in popular culture.

Each egg, either deep red, vivid green, cobalt blue, or clear,⁸ was about 6 cm long and was meant to be displayed inside a bottomless transparent acrylic cylinder (figs. 1, 2).



Figure 1. Margarita Paksa, *Relaxing Egg*, 1967. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.



⁷ From a handwritten note in Margarita Paksa’s archive, Buenos Aires, 1968.

⁸ Paksa explained to me in an interview in August 2017 that these specific colors were chosen from a limited variety of available acrylic sheets.

Figure 2. Margarita Paksa, *Relaxing Egg*, 1967. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

Paksa produced 350 eggs for the first edition in 1967 and, due to high demand, the following year made a second edition of 150. These eggs were meant to be given away, sold, and circulated so that they would become part of everyday life. In 1967, Paksa explained that the “*relaxing egg*” is “an object that brings together a number of gestures. On a personal level, I always kept screws and other forms that somehow soothed me or belonged to me, that’s how these relaxing eggs were born, to have in my hand, to entertain oneself, to play and to forget. . . Here, we’re not trying to make a serious, formal or unbreakable work of art. We don’t care if it persists in time, we care that it gets to blend with a daily experience.”⁹ This statement by Paksa marks two interrelated goals behind *Relaxing Egg*: one, to blur art and life, and second, to generate relaxation.

In a later interview with curator Laura Buccellato, Paksa reflected on *Relaxing Egg* and explained that “At that time, our conversations between artists were aimed at deeply criticizing the buyer or sole owner of the work. We fought against that. How? Doing multiple or ephemeral works. For us it was a matter of taking out the value of the unique work of art, to go completely against that.”¹⁰ Paksa’s works cannot exist apart from the social environment in which they operated. Artist Jorge Caterbetti argues that “the works of the artist [Paksa] surpass the psychoanalytic, going beyond the merely sociological to reinstall themselves in the revindication of life itself.”¹¹

⁹ “El swinging San Telmo,” *La Nación: Columnas de la juventud* (Buenos Aires), November 20, 1967, 26.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, 78. Interview with Laura Buccellato in 2010.

¹¹ Jorge Caterbetti and Laura Buccellato, “Diálogos sobre arte y política,” in *Política y arte conceptual* (Buenos Aires, 2011), in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, 131.

In the 1960s and 1970s, in North America as well as in Europe, most ambitious artists were focused on expanding the boundaries between the various arts and questioning the very concept of what constitutes art. Even though artists in Argentina were also concerned with these questions, that historical period was conflict-ridden; the dictatorship in Argentina became increasingly oppressive toward the end of the 1960s, and countless people went into exile or forcibly “disappeared” starting in the early 1970s.¹² It is important to note that Argentina had two dictatorships during the 1960s and 1970s: there was a coup in June 28, 1966 that put general Juan Carlos Onganía in power and then another in March 24, 1976 that named Jorge Rafael Videla as its new leader. Government repression included the dissolution of student organizations, invasion of churches, military inquests into universities, censorship, and more. Within this climate, artists responded with work in which the political dimension is neither rhetorical nor explicit. Out of context, Paksa’s *Relaxing Egg* can be read as a mere object of consumption, a small and colorful object can be perceived as *just* that. However, the dialogue she established with politics, as well as the facts of everyday life, was intended to provoke the spectators’ critical distance from the reality in which they lived. This critical distance was provoked and stimulated by what Paksa refers to as “relaxation.”

“To relax” can be interpreted as either first a form of escapism, “to deprive one of energy, zeal, or strength of purpose,” or a state of balance, “to attain equilibrium following the influence of stress.”¹³ Paksa did not want people to withdraw from reality but rather the opposite: she wanted “to think about humanity.” *Relaxing Egg* provided a way for people to connect with themselves; by engaging the senses and touching the polished plastic egg, one would achieve a sense of calm or equilibrium, and more importantly, achieve a critical sensibility. By exercising a

¹² For thousands of Argentinean families, the word “desaparecidos” (disappeared) became a symbol of a long harrowing nightmare. Under the military rule, thousands of people, most of them dissidents and innocent civilians unconnected to the so called “left-wing terrorism,” were arrested and then vanished without a trace.

¹³ Merriam Webster, s.v. “relax,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relax>.

critical sensibility, one may attempt to uncover or expose the ambiguities, misrepresentations, distortions, and even falsehoods in particular social phenomena.

Paksa strived to erase the boundaries between so-called high and low culture, between the artist as an “active” producer and the viewer as a “passive” consumer, and, most importantly, between art and life. Knowing that the *Relaxing Egg* could be treated as both a consumerist object (or a “gadget,” as she calls it) as well as a conceptual artwork, she decided to accompany each egg with a card that described its very unique function:

Description: This is an ovoid. Its diameter is larger than 62 mm and its diameter smaller than 45 mm. Its weight is 100 gr. It is made out of plastic. Transparent, red, blue, green, etc. Its container is a cylinder. Its diameter is 70 mm and height is 100 mm. You place it on top of the ovoid, enclosing it, restricting its movement on a table or desk.

Function: To channel a tactile and visual form that captures the whole range of gestures that accompany each person, at moments when he or she is sitting at the table, thinking, solving, elucidating. Its shiny and polished surface allows the constant rotation in the hand, granting a gradual physical discharge that brings “relaxation.” Its ovoid shape creates a tactile situation that would never happen through a different oval or spherical object. It is meant to be used with the right hand—a fit, exercised, and sensitive hand.¹⁴

The reason for this rather detailed description of a simple function was that Paksa wanted “to represent what happens when someone buys a gadget and has to read a long informative text in order to find out what the object can be used for.” The object “contains a subtle irony easily perceived by consumers. The multiple [referring to the eggs] is also a critical and satirical conceptual work about the beginnings of this tendency when it would always contain a written text.”¹⁵ In a 1997 interview with the newspaper *La Capital*, Paksa commented that she “worked with a sort of irony in the conceptual art framework that a piece usually had to have a text. I

¹⁴ Margarita Paksa and Marcelo Pacheco, *Proyectos: sobre el discurso de mi* (1997; repr., Buenos Aires: Fundación Espigas, 2003), 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

thought that was a cliché, and in 1967 I was making fun of this by describing carefully in detail the relaxing egg.”¹⁶

The use of instructions was a major strategy used by conceptual artists. One can trace these strategies back to Marcel Duchamp who in 1919 sent instructions from Argentina for his sister Suzanne and Jean Crotti to make his gift for their April marriage.¹⁷ Fluxus artists were also employing irony, at the same time positioning themselves outside of the museum and the art market. Their *Fluxkits* from the 1960s were objects assembled in cases no larger than a briefcase comprising works by several Fluxus artists and sold through Fluxshops and mail-order centers. These objects “were, in fact, portable performance scores that prompted a variety of actions, from rope-jumping and match-lighting to poem-composing and organ-playing.”¹⁸ Their efforts to sell these at low prices and distribute them at unconventional sites such as the street, shops, and concert halls, demonstrate that we can read the *Fluxkit* as a hack of consumer capitalism.

Another example of the strategy of instruction, Yoko Ono has made several “instruction pieces” which she describes as “paintings to be constructed in your head;”¹⁹ her artist book *Grapefruit* from 1964 included instructions that an individual may, or may not, wish to enact.²⁰

¹⁶ Fernando Farina, “Arte con sentido,” *La Capital* (Rosario), March 16, 1997. Quoted in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 77.

¹⁷ In 1949, Duchamp asked Henri-Pierre Roch to make a second *50cc Air de Paris* after Walter Arensberg's original had been broken; he directed Roch to return to the Paris pharmacy that Duchamp had visited in 1919 and have the druggist empty and re-seal the same kind of glass ampule as was used originally. Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 212, 374.

¹⁸ Natasha Lushetich, “Ludus Populi: The Practice of Nonsense,” *Theatre Journal* 63 no. 1 (2011): 23. *Fluxkits* first announced in 1964 in the Fluxus newspaper *Fluxus cc fiVe ThReE*.

¹⁹ Jason Persse, “From a Whisper to a Scream: Following Yoko Ono’s Instructions,” *Inside/Out*, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, July 14, 2010, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/07/14/from-a-whisper-to-a-scream-following-yoko-onos-instructions/.

²⁰ One of Yoko Ono’s instructional pieces reads: “Get a telephone that only echoes back your voice. Call every day and talk about many things.” Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions + Drawings* (1964; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). There are many more artists employing the “instructional” strategy. Sol LeWitt is known for his instructions for detailed line drawings to be made directly on the wall surface.

At the same time that artists were exploring this new territory, in Buenos Aires, there were efforts to make artworks available for sale at alternative spaces other than commercial galleries.

Works at Risk

In November of 1967, Paksa presented *Relaxing Egg* at the exhibition *Obras en riesgo* (*Works at Risk*) (fig. 3) at a store called La Flor de San Telmo: Tienda de Exclusividades (The Flower of San Telmo: Store of Exclusivities) in the neighborhood of San Telmo, south of Buenos Aires' city center.²¹

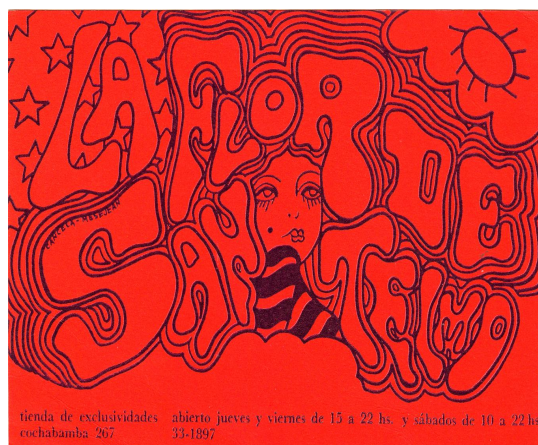


Figure 3. *Obras en riesgo* (*Works at Risk*), La Flor de San Telmo, exhibition brochure, 1967. Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires.

The store was owned by the architect Osvaldo Giesso, who commissioned a number of artists to create serial works to be sold as holiday gifts. According to Giesso, the idea was that “anyone

²¹ The specific address was 267 Cochabamba Street, Buenos Aires. San Telmo is one of Buenos Aires' oldest neighborhoods with colonial buildings. Cafes, tango parlors and antique shops line the cobblestone streets, which nowadays are often filled with craft artists and dancers. In the 1960s, the neighborhood was the hub for antique shops and artists' studios.

could take home a work of art.”²² The exhibition brochure clarified that visitors would be able to find “exclusivities to use and give away with risk.”²³ The use of the word “risk” (*riesgo* in Spanish) seems a curious choice. What was at risk? The artists? Their objects? The store’s space? Emilio Renart, one of the artists in the exhibition, explained to a journalist that “what is important is to create a new environment, shared, of human contact, because some galleries for certain avant-garde artists are insufficient. Here, experimentation is crucial.”²⁴

Throughout the decades, artists have faced dilemmas regarding the economy surrounding their work, and challenges in finding the right context to showcase their artworks. *Obras en riesgo* in San Telmo offered a “new environment” for artists in Argentina as well as an opportunity to sell works at reasonable prices without the intermediary of others. Other similar projects include Claes Oldenburg’s weekend shop on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which in the early 1960s offered things from lingerie to blueberry pies, all made out of plaster and chicken wire.²⁵ Filled with his own pop sculptures, Oldenburg’s store was situated among other variety stores and was presented as a street-side experiment. Around that same time, Fluxus artist George Maciunas opened the so-called Flux-Hall located on Canal Street in Manhattan. The space hosted various Fluxus performances and operated as a retail shop where they sold Fluxus

²² *Obras en riesgo (Works at Risk)*, Buenos Aires, 1967, Brochure for the exhibition, Margarita Paksa archive, Buenos Aires, at the artist’s house, San Martín 522, 3rd floor, Apt. 8, hereafter “Paksa archive.” All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “El swinging San Telmo,” *La Nación: Columnas de la juventud* (Buenos Aires), Nov. 20, 1967. Renart (1925–1991) was an Argentine painter, sculptor, and teacher aligned with *informalismo*. Informalism or Art Informel was a pictorial movement that included all the abstract and gestural tendencies that developed in France and the rest of Europe during World War II, parallel to North American Abstract Expressionism.

²⁵ Jonathon Keats, “Pop Artist Claes Oldenburg’s Legendary Lower East Side Store Comes to MoMA (But You’ll Have to Buy Your Chicken wire Lingerie Elsewhere),” *Forbes*, June 11, 2013. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2013/06/11/pop-artist-claes-oldenburgs-legendary-lower-east-side-store-comes-to-moma-but-youll-have-to-buy-your-chickenwire-lingerie-elsewhere/#1f4f35959739>.

artists' pieces.²⁶ Another example would be Andy Warhol, who did not disguise his interest in business and commerce, and who also, in addition to selling his artwork, pursued his own media industry in the form of a factory.²⁷

The endeavors by artists in Latin America, however, took place in a very different political and economic context. During the 1960s, most countries in Latin America were undergoing a process of rapid industrialization, which was key to their entry into modernity.²⁸ Along with Brazil and Mexico, Argentina saw its domestic market rapidly internationalized as the country was restored into an emerging transnational economy. Because of its right-ist agenda, in Argentina, “the built environment changed more according to the initiative of private groups than the state, and lighted modern designs (like skyscrapers) were favored over heavy neo-imperial ones.”²⁹ In addition to the transformation of the cityscape, consumer culture was the most characteristic sign of the social dynamic in 1960s Argentina.³⁰ Consumption took on a new meaning, becoming a means of signaling the country's modernity.³¹ During this capitalist

²⁶ The Flux-kits were available at the shop. The Flux-Hall had a satellite location in Germany. See Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). In 1916, the Russian Vladimir Tatlin organized an exhibition titled *The Store* including works by Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko. The press criticized the exhibition saying it indeed resembled a store and an old junk shop. See Bruce Althshuler, “The Zero Form” in *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 95.

²⁷ Warhol developed a commercial magazine, film production, a television show, and more.

²⁸ Latin American modernity is a complex concept but among economic understandings, it means “the very problematic condition of social formation in a (semi)peripheral region within the constitution of the capitalist world-system.” See Felipe Ziotti Narita, “The quest for modernity in Latin American critical theory,” in *Critical Theory Research Network*, November 18, 2016. <https://criticaltheoryresearchnetwork.com/2016/11/18/quest-modernity-latin-american-critical-theory/>.

²⁹ Laura Podalsky, “Urban Formations and Critical Scaffolding,” in *Spectacular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955–1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 12.

³⁰ See Adolfo Prieto, “Los años sesenta,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 125 (1983), 889.

³¹ Ernesto Goldar, *Buenos Aires: Vida Cotidiana en la década del 50* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Plus Ultra, 1980), 16. As Podalsky argues, “the increased consumption of items for the home cultivated a new domesticity away from the public streets. At the same time, consumerism also encouraged the reformulation of public spaces.” See Podalsky, “Urban Formations and Critical Scaffolding,” in *Specular City*, 17. Stores started to pop up in the downtown area and in wealthy neighborhoods in the north of the city (not San Telmo).

expansion, there were also negative cycles of high inflation and greater inequality of income distribution.³²

If we define “risk” as “someone or something that creates or suggests a hazard,”³³ then *Obras en riesgo* might have been referring to the current situation in Buenos Aires. It might have been referring to the state prohibition on certain cultural products (books, films, theatrical performances) and censorship that involved assassinations, exile, and the cessation of human rights. But also, it might have been referring to the political economy with rising inequality and an explosion of Argentina’s foreign debt. *Obras en riesgo* opened only a year after Juan Carlos Onganía took power. In 1966, Onganía ended the existing democratic regime with a coup supported by myriad factions within the country; the consensus included broad sectors of businesspeople and moderates. The primary exceptions were the Radical, Communist, and Social parties, even though some leftists supported the coup.³⁴ It was a tumultuous and disorderly period of dictatorship. The country was polarized by confrontations between Peronists and anti-Peronists, with “fierce state violence, censorship, and repression, the systematic dissolution of public life, and the closure and strict control of educational and cultural institutions.”³⁵ Upon

³² William C. Smith, “Cycles of Crisis and Transformation” in *Authoritarianism and The Crisis of The Argentine Political Economy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 32-35. In 2001, Argentina saw yet another economic crisis. On December 20th, after a popular revolt, the government was overthrown and replaced by a provisional one. In the meantime, people’s savings in banks were locked by the “Corralito” so they couldn’t be withdrawn, and the Argentinean peso was devalued by 400%. Countless people lost everything they had and fell into poverty, as the middle class was struggling to survive. With the aim of sharing resources and finding a way to collaborate and survive between artists, conceptual artist Roberto Jacoby founded “Proyecto V(enus) (PV). PV served as a nexus for an artistic trade economy, where visual artists, writers, musicians, journalists, and artists’ friends offered their artworks and services (graphic design, yoga classes or haircuts). PV had its own currency, the Venus, used for trading.

³³ Merriam Webster, s.v. “risk,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/risk>.

³⁴ Some leftists viewed Arturo Umberto Illia’s regime cynically as an ineffective farce of bourgeois democracy. Illia was president of Argentina from October 12, 1963, to June 28, 1966, and a member of the centrist Radical Civic Union. See Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, trans. James P. Brennan (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002). Onganía would remain president until 1970, but the dictatorship continued under the leadership of Isabel Perón (Juan Domingo Peron’s third wife) until 1983.

³⁵ Eve Kalyva, “The Rhetoric of Disobedience: Art and Power in Latin America,” *Latin American Research Review* 51, no. 2 (2016): 47.

taking power, Onganía closed Congress, deposed the Provincial Governors, and banned and bankrupted the political parties by confiscating their properties and assets. In May 1967, he promulgated a defense law against Communism whose aim was to counteract “ideological infiltration, economic pressure from abroad and subversive action.”³⁶

Despite this political context, the works in the exhibition *Obras en riesgo* were anything but dispirited or grim. The brochure listed things that could be found in the store: “dresses, shirts, lamps, mirrors, tapestries, jewelry, psychedelic posters, and many more objects designed by avant-garde visual artists.” Although designed by artists, the objects appeared to be commercial in nature, but experimental and presented with irony and humor. Along with Margarita Paksa, the featured artists included Pablo Mesejean, Delia Cancela, Vicente Marotta, Rodolfo Azaro, Antonio Berni, Emilio Renart, Oscar Bony, Rogelio Polesello, Enio Iomi, Héctor Lacarra, and Miguel Angel Vidal.

A lively article in *La Nación* described the objects on sale: “The poofs designed by Eduardo Carballa (two plastic cushions, one inside the other, with an aluminum base), psychedelic posters, the clothes and hangers of Mesejean-Cancela, the fantasies in acrylic by Lasarte, the rings of Heredia, the tapestries of Iutta Walosheck, and the biggest hit: the relaxing eggs of Margarita Paksa.”³⁷ Reading between the lines, we can infer that the objects occupied that nebulous space between fine art and decorative art, conceptual art and design, and functional and nonfunctional objects. The same journalist noted of the works on display: “If you don’t dare to wear them you can at least say you own a ‘conceptual’ art object.”³⁸ As I will demonstrate,

³⁶ From *Primera Plana* (May 12, 1967), quoted in David Rock, *Authoritarian Argentina: The Nationalist Movement, Its History, and Its Impact* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 203.

³⁷ *La Nación* (May 11, 1967), Museo de Arte Moderno, Archives, Buenos Aires.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

these functional objects to be worn or used were actually challenging works, with politically resistant undertones.

A 1967 article titled “El Swinging San Telmo” in *La Nación* described Paksa’s *Relaxing Egg* as having multiple functions, among them decoration, because “they come in different colors that deform images beautifully.” It suggested to put the eggs on people’s work desks “and to touch them lovingly while you speak with the lady in shift, or when you smoke a cigarette thinking about the next due date, or when your wife calls you to tell you that your youngest son has measles. It’s very easy. You just touch them and automatically your problems are channeled.”³⁹

In a humoristic manner, the *La Nación* article suggests that the *Relaxing Egg* is a decorative object that is beautiful to look at and also serves the function to relax and “solve problems.” One can easily mistakenly interpret Paksa’s work as a reduction of art to a decorative amenity, or understand her instructions for relaxation as a form of escapism. Similar criticism has been pronounced towards the art of Henri Matisse, especially when referring to his highly disputed passage. In 1908, Matisse published “Notes of a Painter” in which he expressed his abiding philosophy concerning the relationship between art and life: “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.”⁴⁰ This often-quoted sentence tends to give the impression that Matisse desired merely entertainment and that his ideals were somewhat superficial. Instead,

³⁹ “El swinging San Telmo,” *La Nación: Columnas de la juventud* (Buenos Aires), November 20, 1967, 26. One of the first things I noticed about Paksa when I met her in August 2017 was that she constantly held, squeezed, and rotated a small piece of paper in her right hand. She did this during the three-hour visit that day, as well as on my second and third visits.

⁴⁰ Henri Matisse, “Notes d’un Peintre,” *La Grande Revue*, Paris, December 25, 1908; as translated by Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 42.

Jack Flam writes that Matisse “is not advocating an art of superficial decoration or entertainment, but stating his belief in art as a medium for the elevation of the spirit above and beyond, yet rooted in the experience of, everyday life.”⁴¹ Matisse’s comparison of his art with a “good armchair” was mentioned with the intention to bring art closer to an everyday experience. This resonates with Paksa’s intentions.

Relaxing Chair

With two children and a threatening political and economic situation, Paksa and her husband, the painter Osmar Cairola, managed to keep working by exploring new industrial materials to design furniture. Early in 1968, they started selling their furniture at their store MAC (Muebles Acrílicos Contemporáneos, or Contemporary Acrylic Furniture).⁴² They operated MAC until 1980, and in 1982 they separated. Their MAC acrylic furniture, which kept them economically afloat in a difficult time, was recognized and awarded in the mid-1970s by Argentina’s Industrial Design Research Center and the National Institute of Industrial Technology.

Their furniture was well received for its novelty value, but also its material and aesthetics, and the impact in the press was immediate. In an article in *La Nación*, the couple was described as groundbreaking—the first in Argentina to work with plastic for furniture fabrication

⁴¹ Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art*, (University of California Press, 1995), 35. Flam goes on to say that it is very likely that when Matisse wrote this passage, “he had in mind his new patron, the Russian businessman Sergei Shchukin, whose recent life had been filled with tragedy and who sought consolation by what he called ‘living in’ the pictured he acquired from Matisse.” Ibid, 35.

⁴² The store operated through Galeria del Este, store 17, Maipú Street 971. Paksa met Cairola in 1955 when studying at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes Ernesto de Cárcova. They got married in 1958. Conversation with Paksa’s son Osmar Cairola on August 20, 2017.

(fig. 4). The article describes it as “a line of unconventional furniture, new, with unique satisfactions.”⁴³



Figure 4. “Seamos no convencionales” (“Let’s be unconventional”), *La Nación*, August 30, 1970. Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires.

⁴³ Felisa Pinto, “Seamos no convencionales” [Let’s Be Unconventional], *La Nación*, August 30, 1970, 25. Trying to survive the hardship of the economic crisis in Argentina at that time, Paksa and Cairola developed this business, which was very well received by the press and customers. “The magic of the translucent furniture” reads one of the headlines of a newspaper article found in Paksa’s personal archive. This clipping, like many others in the archive, doesn’t include the name of the publication or the date, but it is likely from 1968–70.

A black-and-white photograph shows Paksa sitting on one of her designed colorless transparent tables. Even though she is dressed in a pencil skirt, a floral blouse, and a large metal necklace, she looks relaxed, barefoot and looking past the camera (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Margarita Paksa at MAC, Buenos Aires, circa 1968. Margarita Paksa archive, Buenos Aires.

A sign behind her reads “MAC muebles acrílicos,” and next to it we see a display of translucent chairs and shelves. Next to Paksa, on top of the table, are two large eggs—seemingly twice the size of the earlier objects of *Relaxing Egg*. Since the photograph is black and white, we cannot tell if the eggs are any particular color.⁴⁴ Paksa’s hand hovers above them as if the picture caught the moment just before she was going to touch one, perhaps to prevent it from rolling over the edge. The image also establishes the positive (egg) and negative (hand)—the forming of the pair.

⁴⁴ We know the table is colorless from other contemporaneous images, but this is the only known photograph of the large version of the eggs. Note that the table has a built-in magazine rack.

Even though these eggs are much larger than the ones from the *Relaxing Egg*, they can still be held in one's hand and transmit a sensuous experience. It is intriguing to observe them in a store that is otherwise entirely devoted to objects with an overtly practical function for the home or office: chairs, tables, shelves. The eggs are the only "natural" form. Furthermore, they are consistent with Paksa's intention to take the art object out of the museum and place it directly in life.

Like the eggs, the furniture was intended for "comfort and relaxation" in private spaces.⁴⁵ In a note about the couple's famous 1968 *Sillón sedante* (Sedative Armchair), also referred to in other places as *Relaxing Chair* (fig. 6), a colorless, transparent chair made out of one long bent piece of acrylic, Paksa wrote:

The idea of the *Sillón sedante* is a wake-up call regarding the need for introspection, and a healthy balance between inside and outside. Loneliness and isolation no longer exist, and indeed they may not be necessary, since it is said that people are social animals. But studies have been conducted to determine the level of noise tolerable to a person. While today in the electronic era we manage to make everything silent such that Buenos Aires's mayor can fix the potholes with his drill, you know that everything takes time and we run the risk of producing ever more neurotic generations. There are decibels of difference between what is healthy to tolerate on a daily basis and what is not, apart from all the problems that already exist. We have an obligation to think about humanity and contribute to a happier world.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Felisa Pinto, "Seamos no convencionales," 25.

⁴⁶ 1968 note, Paksa archive.

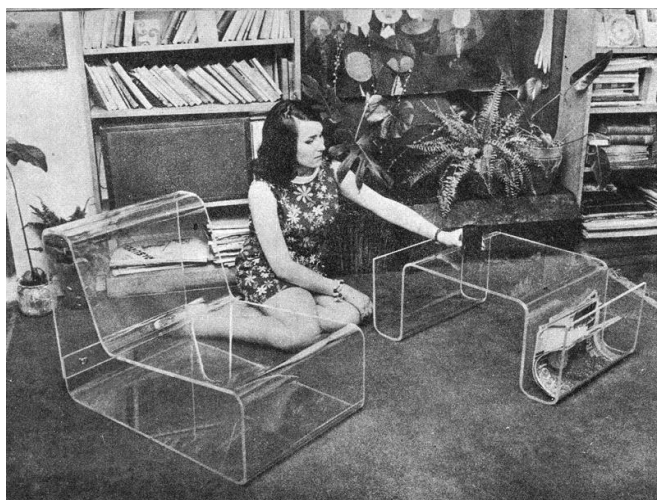


Figure 6. “Sillón Sedante” (“Relaxing Chair” or “Sedative Armchair”), MAC, 1968. Margarita Paksa Archive, Buenos Aires.

Here, Paksa expresses a strong commitment to relaxation as a moral obligation. She does not explicitly link the need for it to the violence and censorship happening at the time in Argentina—a move probably intended to protect herself and her family.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it clarifies that she approached furniture design as an artistic project⁴⁸; art and design were not separate, but were rather intertwined. Furthermore, the connection she makes between “relaxation” and creating a “healthy balance between inside and outside” is worth unpacking—outside being by nature a noisy, chaotic, unhealthy place, and inside potentially a more familiar and intimate environment, with opportunities for enjoyment and leisure. When writing about *Relaxing Egg*, Paksa almost used the same words: “This realization of *Relaxing Egg* signals and puts a touch of attention on the need to think more about people. It points to the results of

⁴⁷ When I interviewed her son Sergio Cairola in August 2017, he said that Paksa was concerned about putting her family at risk, even though she had strong political views.

⁴⁸ After the closure of the Instituto Di Tella, in the early 1970s, Jorge Romero Brest, together with his wife and designer Edgardo Giménez, opened the cultural commercial company *Fuera de Caja: Centro de arte para consumer* (Outside the Box: Center for Consumer Art). This company was dedicated to the design of everyday objects such as cups and tablecloths. For Brest, his boutique was a way to connect aesthetic objects with the needs of society, a consumerist society. See José Emilio Burucúa, “Los último años 60 y sus proyecciones” in *Arte, sociedad y política: Nueva Historia Argentina, Volume 2* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1999), 30.

alienation [or nervous tension].”⁴⁹ If we go back to the definition of “relaxation” named above, we can certainly say that Paksa’s instructions to relax were not about avoiding or evading tension but rather about restoring equilibrium.⁵⁰

In a 1967 note on both *Relaxing Egg* and *Relaxing Chair*, Paksa wrote:

The idea for *Relaxing Egg* is that it is the first manifestation of an avant-garde art acting directly on the means of commercialization and industrialization. . . We should avoid the distances that exist between art and everyday activities. This work focuses on pointing to the real dissemination methods. It aims to point out and lead to a greater introspection. Even though I share the point of view of sociologists and psychoanalysts that to the problem that causes tension we should not apply aspirin but solve it, the dilemma [in this work] focuses mainly on the industrial development of the world. . . . We have to contribute to the creation of a new consciousness, where the results of the tension are not wars but the trip to the stars that we are awaiting. In this world there will undoubtedly be new objects that will not be variations on the ones we know but new creations for other needs. Such is the case of my project of a true *Relaxing Chair*—not only a more comfortable line but rather the guarantee of greater rest in less time with the possibilities of greater introspection.⁵¹

Both *Relaxing Egg* and *Relaxing Chair* promote relaxation, which can also be perceived as an act of control over one’s desires. These works implicate the users’ patterns of behavior and enable control over them. They implore engagement from the viewer, asking them to arrive at a moral judgment through relaxation. They address what Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman call, in another context, “the moral responsibility of society in relation to the distress of the world.”⁵²

⁴⁹ 1968 note, Paksa archive.

⁵⁰ Just like the eggs, the furniture was produced in multiple pieces, and in series, thereby questioning the traditional idea of the unique, auratic object so valued in the art and furniture market. I will later expand that this was an exception for Bauhaus, for instance. Additionally, making each object or furniture more affordable and therefore easier to incorporate them into everyday life. Cairola and Paksa worked the plastic into modules that were conveniently stackable and easy to disassemble.

⁵¹ 1967 notes, Paksa archive. The *Relaxing Chair* and *Sillón Sedante* (Sedative Armchair) seem to be referring to the same or similar piece of furniture. The notes about the *Relaxing Chair* are dated 1967 and the *Sedative Armchair* are dated 1968. Both are transparent acrylic chairs and Paksa refers to them in terms of relaxation or sedation.

⁵² Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 284.

The transparency of acrylic was a novelty, as was the unlimited number of colors in which it could be produced, and it offered an idea of drawing form in air. Paksa's eggs, as well as her furniture, were factory produced. One can trace many precedents and parallels of artists exploring the connections between art and design using industrial materials. Take, for example, the experimental products of the Bauhaus, such as the Wassily Chair designed by Marcel Breuer or Wilhelm Wagenfeld's lamp; Marcel Duchamp's readymades; minimalist furniture by Donald Judd; and consumer culture-oriented works of Pop art by Claes Oldenburg and Richard Artschwager.⁵³

About the transparency of the MAC furniture, Paksa commented: "The acrylic allows me to work with transparent forms that cannot be replaced by other materials. This quality of transparency, even in those of colors, leads to a sort of 'dematerialization' of the elements. With the acrylic I can create new furniture for the home without visually occupying the space."⁵⁴ *Relaxing Egg* was Paksa's first experiment involving transparent acrylic. Nothing about this material choice was mere coincidence—rather, it was a conscious decision on her part because it would allow the eggs to circulate more freely in society (although acrylic was novel for many of these applications, it was far cheaper than metal or wood and could be mass-produced) and to occupy space in a seemingly ephemeral way. The idea of something that *visually* does not

⁵³ Both Judd and Paksa began working with furniture design in 1968. Paksa's furniture practice ended after a decade, while Judd continued with great success, with a new phase in the 1980s as he began to commission professional wood and metal furniture makers and sought quality craftsmanship abroad. Nina Murayama writes that even though "Judd's industrial-looking art and design objects would seem to represent a counter to the tactile warmth of sculptures and functional objects by Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) and Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), all three artists were profoundly engaged with issues inherent in design and with the articulation of space." Nina Murayama, "Furniture and Artwork as Paradoxical Counterparts in the Work of Donald Judd," *Design Issues* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 47. Paksa also always paid close attention to her works' relation to the exhibition space. Like Andrea Zittel and Jorge Pardo, she explored the participation of audiences and the involvement of viewers, users, and consumers, including herself.

⁵⁴ Paksa, "Transparencia," unpublished article, in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, 101.

occupy space resonates with the conceptual art vocabularies of the time having to do with dematerialization.

Lucy Lippard was among the first writers to recognize the phenomenon in a 1968 essay co-authored with John Chandler titled “The Dematerialization of Art.”⁵⁵ Kris Cohen recently summarized their ideas: “Conceptualism arrived on the scene to undo the objecthood of objects, to undo, thereby, the way that objecthood supported, as ground, an expressive practice of self that could be inscribed upon that ground. Art thereby becomes language, concept, idea, all things that, under the work of the ‘de-’, would cease to provide ground for expressive practices.”⁵⁶ Despite apparent similarities, however, to “undo objecthood” in the context of the dictatorship in Argentina points to other concerns not necessarily the center of focus for North American artists. Conceptual art in Argentina and the dematerialization of the art object came to fruition during the dictatorship as a way to resist authority and find other possible ways to communicate, not necessarily ceasing to “provide ground for expressive practices,” but quite the opposite, by exchanging expression for introspection.

Daniel R. Quiles notes that the cultural critic, pedagogue, and occasional artist Oscar Masotta labeled in 1967 the conceptual practices in Argentina *desmaterialización* (dematerialization), involving “an abandonment of the art object on the one hand, but also the tendency to break down, to dismantle and decompose systems, that is evident in so many of the

⁵⁵ Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* 12, no. 2 (1968): 31–36.

⁵⁶ Kris Cohen, “The Painter of Dematerialization,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 2 (2016): 254. See also Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972: A Cross-Reference Book of Information on Some Esthetic Boundaries* (New York: Praeger, 1973). In this book, Lippard mentions several Argentinian artists, among them “the Rosario group”: Lia Masonnave, Graciela Carnevale, Norberto Puzzolo, and Oscar Bony. Lippard visited Buenos Aires and Rosario in 1968.

works he and the artist close to him produced.”⁵⁷ His *desmaterialización* was closely tied to technological changes and media obsolescence. Masotta’s ideas of dematerialization were first presented as a lecture at the Instituto Di Tella on July 21, 1967, titled “Después del Pop: nosotros desmaterializamos” (After Pop: We Dematerialize), which preceded Lippard’s essay.⁵⁸ Masotta was alluding to El Lissitzky’s essay *The Future of the Book* published in 1926, in which the author argues that, in an increasingly materialistic world, dematerialization (for instance through radio) was paradoxically evolving into a prevalent social phenomenon.⁵⁹ In the sixties, the trend toward dematerialization in the United States had a different foundation than the one in Argentina. For Lippard, dematerialization was a sort of “anti-materialism” while for Masotta, artists were downgrading the material vehicle but without any particular intention of having it eliminated.⁶⁰

The occasion for Masotta’s text and lecture was *Happening para un jabalí difunto* (Happening for a Dead Boar, 1966) by Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, and Raúl Escari. The happening never actually took place in real life, but had been advertised in newspapers and magazine reports as a real event. Sometimes accurately referred to as an “anti-happening,” it was a sociological experiment with political undertones. A commentary on the manipulation of the media and information by the military government, Masotta thought this project was the perfect

⁵⁷ Daniel R. Quiles, “Between Code and Message: Argentine Conceptual Art, 1966–1976” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2010), 202. See Oscar Masotta, “Después del Pop: Nosotros desmaterializamos,” in *Conciencia y estructura* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1968), 218–44. See also more recent publications Karen Benezra, *Dematerialization: Art and Design in Latin America* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020) and Elize Mazadiego, *Dematerialization and the Social Materiality of Art: Experimental Forms in Argentina, 1955-1968* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2021).

⁵⁸ Masotta’s lecture was published as “Después del Pop: nosotros desmaterializamos,” in Oscar Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Álvarez, 1969). Lippard visited Argentina in 1968, but does not credit Masotta for the term “dematerialization” which became the focus of her 1973 publication *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966-1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

⁵⁹ El Lissitzky, “The Future of the Book,” in *New Left Review* 1, no. 41 (January-February 1967), 39-44, first published in 1926.

⁶⁰ See Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 31.

answer to object-oriented trends in the art scene of Argentina. A prominent theoretician at the time, Masotta's ideas were highly influential on the art then produced.

Minimalism and Estructuras Primarias

The first time that Paksa referred to dematerialization regarding her own work was in 1967, when she showed *Diagonal y Corrientes* (*Diagonal and Currents*, 1967) (fig. 7) at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires for the Ver y Estimar (To Look and to Estimate) award.⁶¹

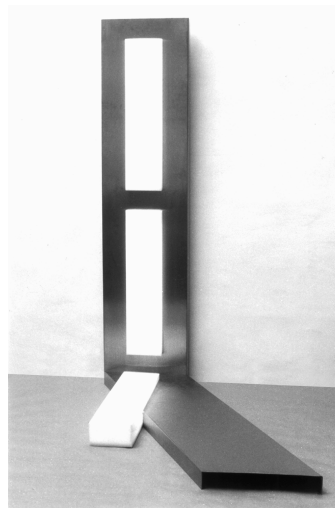


Figure 7. Margarita Paksa, *Diagonal y Corrientes* (*Diagonal and Currents*), 1967. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

⁶¹ *Ver y estimar* began as a magazine created by Jorge Romero Brest. In 1954, the Asociación Ver y Estimar was founded, from which the Ver y Estimar prize (Buenos Aires, 1960–68) emerged years later. The 1963 edition of the Ver y Estimar award was held at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, where Romero Brest was then director.

Diagonal y Corrientes is a wall and floor work 62 feet high, 46 feet deep, and 36 feet wide, made out of rolled steel, white acrylic, and fluorescent tubes. The title is an allusion to a crossroads in downtown Buenos Aires, Avenida Corrientes, which translates to “Avenue of Currents,” and the work itself is representative of the street.⁶² Even though the work looks like a minimalist sculpture—made out of industrial materials and light—it represents the Buenos Aires street, the modernization of the city with the pavement markings made out of fluorescent light.

The project *Diagonal Cero* (1962-69) by Argentine artist Eduardo Antonio Vigo has a number of similarities not only with Paksa’s *Diagonal y Corrientes* but also with *Relaxing Egg*. *Diagonal Cero* was a trimestral journal and call for participation left in public spaces where common people might discover it. *Diagonal Cero* took the form of a folio: each sheath, decorated with images created by different artists, contained articles, reviews, theoretical texts, poetry, woodblock prints and drawings on commercial, hand-made, or semi-transparent orange paper, producing a range of tactile sensations for readers. Just like *Relaxing Egg*, the focus was put on the objects’ materiality and the tactile experience of them. Also interestingly, in the magazine’s first editorial text, Vigo and his collaborators state: “We are contradictory. Contradiction [is] equivalent to expressive liberty. We are at the DIAGONAL ZERO of the contemporary, we are in an identifiable city and we are at the beginning.”⁶³ Founded in Buenos Aires, a city of diagonals in which streets are laid out in a diagonal grid leading to the principal city square, Diagonal 0 does not exist. The title of Vigo’s journal thus implies a clean slate, a starting from scratch, a minimalism of some sort, where creativity reigns and everything is possible.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *Diagonal Cero*, N. 1, 1962. [Estamos en la DIAGONAL CERO, en el centro de la cuestión, observando a nuestros observadores, atrayendo y dejándonos atraer. Estamos en la DIAGONAL CERO, que no es estar ni ser centro. Somos contradictorios. Contradicción equivalente a libertad expresiva. Estamos en la DIAGONAL CERO de lo contemporáneo, estamos en una ciudad identificable y en un comienzo.]

In her notes about *Diagonal y Corrientes* she also describes the piece as *reductiva* (reductive).⁶⁴ However, “reductive” and “dematerialization” are not synonyms, which leads me to think that Paksa was using these words to describe different aspects of her work. If by reductive Paksa means changing one form to another, then that is exactly what she is doing with *Diagonal y Corrientes*: there is the actual street in Buenos Aires, and then the “reduction” happens with Paksa’s sculpture of that actual street. In Paksa’s writings, “dematerialization” refers to her use of light which, in her eyes, was moving away from the material.

Paksa utilized light in other minimalist works, such as her series *Identidad en dos situaciones* (Identity in Two Situations, 1967–2000), where two similar forms made out of transparent and white acrylic are placed next to each other, but only the white form is illuminated from within by a fluorescent tube. The two forms are similar but opposites at the same time. The illuminated one shines onto the transparent one, divided by a piece of glass that separates and unifies them simultaneously: two identical forms, two different situations.

Paksa viewed transparency and light as canceling out all gesture of expression or emotion to arrive at the most essential conceptual form, and valued the material of acrylic for its ability to achieve the effect. One may ask if relaxation is an emotion? Perhaps Paksa did not think so. She compared *Diagonal y Corrientes*’s strategy of “dematerializing” with other projects. She lists:

Diagonal and Corrientes: opposition of reflecting matter, light and reflection.

500 Watts, 4, 635 Kc, 4.5 C: opposition and dematerialization; light and sound.

Relaxing Egg: opposition of transparent form and function.

Silencio: opposition of volume, transparency and reflection.

Compression: opposition between symmetry and asymmetry, both (being) transparent.⁶⁵

500 Watts, 4, 635 Kc, 4.5 C was first exhibited in 1967 at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella and re-produced at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, for Paksa’s retrospective there in

⁶⁴ Margarita Paksa and Marcelo Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 104.

⁶⁵ Margarita Paksa, “Carried Out Project: Diagonal y Corrientes,” in *Proyectos: sobre el discurso de mi*, 104. My highlights in the titles.

2004. It is an installation in a dark space where a 500 watt pulsing light projector sends a beam in a longitudinal direction. The beam is altered when intercepted by two acrylic boxes. Photoelectric cells along a walkway are activated when people walk on it, also producing sounds. The same year as *Relaxing Egg*, Paksa created *Silencio I (Silence I)* (1967) (fig. 15) which at first appears to be an abstract, minimalist cube made from transparent acrylic. However, this mute cube, made during the first year of Onganía's dictatorship, was not empty: it contained silence as material, referencing the authoritarian suppression of dissidence. This work was a multiple, and consisted of three cubes: one approximately 20 cm to a side, one approximately 25 cm to a side, and one 30 cm to a side. *Compression* (1967) is a multiple of six light-blue cubes made of acrylic, each with a water balloon inside, seeking to compare a hard and geometric exterior with an asymmetrical, soft interior.

Interestingly, the works listed above were all made in the year 1967 and are Paksa's most minimalist-like pieces. That same year, the new minister of economy Adalberto Krieger Vasena began his administration with a devaluation of 40 percent, a wage freeze, the suspension of collective labor agreements, and allowed the participation of private companies in the oil business. Another important event that year was the visit of the United States' Vice President Richard Nixon, who praised Onganía and denied he could be a dictator. Furthermore, Argentina and the world were shocked by the news of the arrest and subsequent execution of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. These events were all influential in the cultural scene in Argentina.

In Argentina, the minimalist mode of sculpture, which was taken up by many artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario, was not described as "minimalist" as in the North American context, but rather referred to as *estructuras primarias* (primary structures), after the 1966 *Primary Structures* show at the Jewish Museum in New York. In 1967 Jorge Glusberg curated a group show of twenty-one artists at the Sociedad Hebraica in Buenos Aires titled *Estructuras*

Primarias II.⁶⁶ In the catalogue, he referred to the works in terms of “communication,” “structural psychology,” and “participation”: the works “are not placed before the public, but around it; the public is made to participate.”⁶⁷

This exhibition was part of “The Week of Avant-Garde Art,” also known as the “Semana de los americanos” (Week of the Americans), an internationally publicized series of exhibitions that occurred September 25 through 30, 1967, in which galleries and museums invited “our foreign friends” to visit and explore “the avant-garde of Buenos Aires.”⁶⁸ The art historian Andrea Giunta has written extensively about the internationalization of Argentinean art in the 1960s: “The Cold War was a war of words, images, and symbolic actions, and rhetorical discourse was one of the most valued weapons—discourse intentionally designed to produce specific effects on specific audiences.” Giunta continues by explaining the concept of “internationalism” in this context, implying that it was not an exchange but rather “the victory of one aesthetic model over another, and this model was fundamentally expressed in terms of abstract art, understood as the quintessential adversary of socialist and fascist ‘realisms.’”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ In addition to Paksa, the other artists were César Ambrosini, Rodolfo Azaro, Miguel A. Bengochea, Oscar Bony, Aldo Bortolotti, Graciela Carnevale, José Luis Carballa, Noemí Escandel, Eduardo Favario, María Mercedes Estévez, Carlos Gatti, David Lamelas, Lía Maisonnave, Gabriel Messil, Oscar Palacio, Norberto Puzzolo, Juan Pablo Renzi, Osvaldo Romberg, Antonio Trotta, and Fernández Bonina. Brochure of exhibition *Estructuras Primarias II*, Archives of the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires. About the curatorial decisions of this exhibition, *the magazine Primera Plana* wrote: “Glusberg concentrated on a very striking selection, in spite of the scarce novelty of the majority of the submissions; between the pieces in the group show, without a doubt, these are remarkable because of the complexity of significations that they unleash, or by inventiveness: the *Sombra Proyectada sobre el piso y pared* [Shadow Projected on the Floor and Wall] by a Rosario artist Eduardo Favario, the pompous *Grados de libertad en un espacio real* [Degrees of Freedom in a Real Space] by Juan Pablo Renzi (also from Rosario), or the *Desconexión de imagen*, by Margarita Paksa, already presented at the last and resounding Braque Prize.” “Plástica Consagración de la vanguardia,” *Primera Plana* (Buenos Aires), October, 3, 1967, 60.

⁶⁷ Jorge Glusberg, *Estructuras Primarias II*, (Buenos Aires: Sociedad Hebraica, 1967), 16.

⁶⁸ Andrea Giunta quoting Romero Brest’s *Semana de Arte Avanzado en la Argentina* in “Strategies of Internationalization,” in *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 230. Among the visitors were Stanton Catlin, director of the Gallery of Art for the Center for Inter-American Relations, New York City, and Lois Bingham, director of the International Art Program, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

⁶⁹ Andrea Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics*, 233. See also Martin J. Medhurst, “Rhetoric and Cold War: A Strategic Approach,” in *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, And Ideology* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

Estructuras Primarias II

Giunta notes that *Estructuras Primarias II* was the most extreme example of Buenos Aires art institutions' eagerness to demonstrate connections to North American art. However, despite the ambition to internationalize the local scene at the official level, "the work of many of the participating artists was widely varied in terms of their conceptual and formal orientations. The exhibition presented elements of spatial and formal conceptualization that deviated from self-referentiality to introduce, as a conceptual reflection on the artistic act, connotations that soon led to proposals linking art with politics."⁷⁰ Paksa participated in *Estructuras Primarias II* with two works: *Identidad en dos situaciones* (1967), discussed above, and *Desconexión de imagen* (Image Disconnection, 1967). Both are designed in an architectural manner engaging the surrounding space and seeking to generate visual effects such as confusion and disorientation accentuating the effects of lights in objects and the exhibition space. For example, the work of Rosario artist, Juan Pablo Renzi, *Grados de libertad de un espacio real* (Degrees of Freedom of a Real Space, 1967) (fig. 8), presented at *Estructuras Primarias II*, articulated the lines of a vertical rectangle that framed an empty portion of the gallery space. Quiles observes that "from signaling immaterial sections of gallery space through sculpture, Renzi was importing space, whether air or liquid, from other locations, expanding its reach within the parameters of serial display to absurdist effect."⁷¹ Additionally, Renzi's title, "Degrees of Freedom of a Real Space," pointed to the lack of "real space" for liberty or freedom, giving his minimalist sculpture a clear

⁷⁰ Ibid., 232.

⁷¹ Daniel R. Quiles, "Between Code and Message," 155.

political message.⁷² The signaling of the absent tightens the senses and drives a dialectical game between the visual configuration and the logical proposition that expresses the idea.

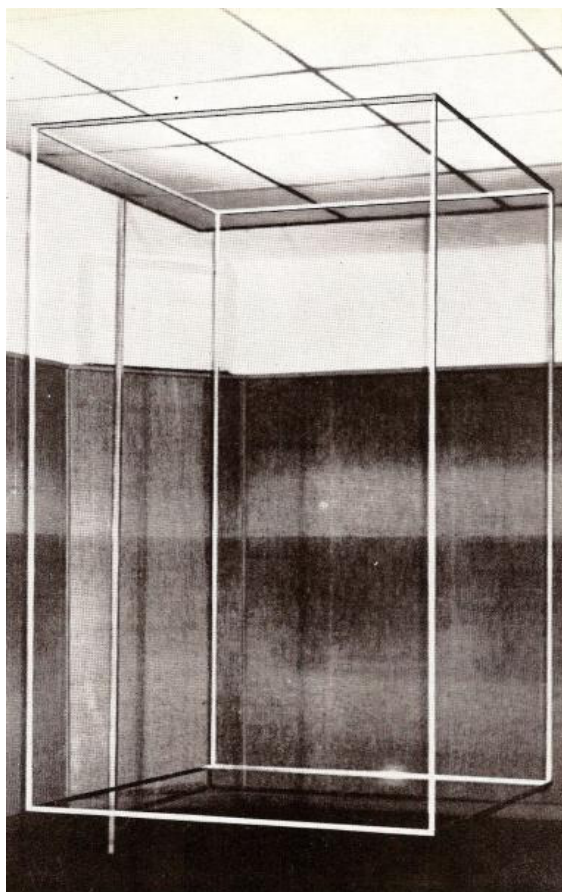


Figure 8. Juan Pablo Renzi, *Grados de libertad de un espacio real* (Degrees of freedom of a real space) (1967) presented at *Primary Structures II*. Courtesy of the artist.

The Instituto di Tella, founded in 1958 by the Argentine businessman Guido di Tella, was the main hub for support and promotion of artists making *estructuras primarias* and “advanced

⁷² The year 1967 was also the moment in which the Rosario group consolidated itself, encouraged not only by its strong internal dynamics, but also by the encouragement provided by the Buenos Aires critics and curators Jorge Romero Brest and Jorge Glusberg. Like Renzi, other avant-garde artists from Rosario faced competition on two fronts, struggling against the international art scene as well as that of Buenos Aires. At the same time, they perceived the need to consider local tradition.

art.” It was designed as a multidisciplinary cultural center that would facilitate a wide range of intellectual production, including economics, music, theater, and the visual arts. It opened in a new location in 1963 at Avenida Florida, near Plaza San Martín, a busy pedestrian intersection in the upscale Retiro district, poised to attract larger audiences (fig. 9).



Figure 9. Instituto di Tella located at 936 Florida Street (Buenos Aires). Source: *Primera Plana*, February 1968.

That same year, Jorge Romero Brest was appointed director of the di Tella's *Centro de Arte Visuales* (Center of Visual Arts) and ran it until its closure by the Onganía regime in 1970.⁷³

Idea Correspondiente (*Corresponding Idea*, 1967) was presented at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in the 1967 exhibition *Más allá de la geometría; extensión del lenguaje artístico-visual en nuestros días* (Beyond Geometry: An Extension of Visual-Artistic Language in Our Time). In that work, Paksa placed four irregular prisms made out of white fiberglass in a manner that highlighted the luminosity of the occupied space. Two were on the ceiling and two

⁷³ Jorge Romero Brest was the editor of the journal *Ver y Estimar* from 1948 to 1955, and director of the Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires from 1955 to 1963. Daniel R. Quiles, “Between Code and Message,” 16.

on the floor, forming a system instead of presenting an individual work with precise delimitations. This work marked an important moment for Paksa, now recognized as one of the core artists of di Tella, one of the most respected art institutions in Argentina at that time. Her works with light invited viewers to walk around them and experience how the space and the object constantly changed as one moved.

Romero Brest wanted to propel the Argentinian avant-garde to international recognition. As Giunta writes, “This meant an art that did not merely belatedly transfer styles that originated in international art centers, but that was generated at the same time or even in advance of those centers.”⁷⁴ The notion of Buenos Aires as a modern metropolis appealed to Brest and many others who wanted to cast off the recent Peronist past and were nostalgic for what they saw as Argentina’s glory days at the beginning of the century, when Buenos Aires was commonly seen as the Paris of South America. Romero Brest advocated for “*arte nuevo* (new art) by young artists that included abstract art, op art, happenings, integration between art and architecture, and more.”⁷⁵ The exhibition *Más allá de la geometría* (Beyond Geometry), one of the first shows he curated at the di Tella, exemplified his goal to promote Argentine “advanced art”—specifically art that moved beyond geometry into space.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Andrea Giunta, “Rewriting Modernism: Jorge Romero Brest and the Legitimation of Argentine Art,” in *Listen, Here, Now!*, 79.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷⁶ In the exhibition brochure, he debated the different terms that could define the work in the show. He refers to the 1965 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York *The Responsive Eye* and objects that deal with “experimental psychology and optics” is not the appropriate title or term to understand that type of art. He also explains why other terms are not appropriate, from “geometric abstraction” to “Op art,” “systemic painting,” or “kinetic art.” He resists the term “minimalist,” but in the conclusion of his essay he writes that “in the last decade, complex forms have appeared because they refer to mixed or simple contents by referring to a single class of content, arriving to the ‘minimum’ of art, complicating existential suggestions by the presence of bright and contrasting colors, or essential monochromes, when not of hollow or barely insinuated figures that follow a quasi-invisible geometry.” Jorge Romero Brest, “*Más allá de la geometría: Extensión del lenguaje artístico-visual en nuestros días*,” exh. brochure, Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, April 20–May 14, 1967. William C. Seitz, “Press release” for *The responsive eye*, exh. Cat, Museum of Modern Art of New York, February 23–April 25, 1965. https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326375.pdf.

In 1967 Romero Brest decided to rename the well-known di Tella prizes as *Experiencias Visuales* (Visual Experiences).⁷⁷ As he explained, with “experiences” the viewer could come into contact with the blend of life and art. The object would disappear, but not the art.⁷⁸ “It is one thing to have experience of *realities*, as in the past, artworks were the fruit of experience, and quite another to have an experience of *the real*, as we do now that artworks are, in themselves, irrefutably *experiences*.”⁷⁹ Andrea Giunta states that “artists no longer projected their experiences in an image, but rather presented them in a pure state.”⁸⁰ According to Brest, the known forms of art might disappear but not the creative experience that can be projected and expanded to those who encountered it. For Brest, the experiences belong to the phenomenological approach.⁸¹

In 1967, North American artist Robert Morris won the International Torcuato di Tella prize, reflecting this more comprehensive respect for minimalist sculpture in the country. The work he presented was *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, a series of sixteen cubes, each measuring 914 mm to a side. This work, like many other minimalist sculptures, controlled or traced the viewer’s body or trajectory. There was a trend among Argentine artists in the mid-1960s, as noted by Jacqueline Barnitz, “toward creating environments that invited active participation.”⁸² According to Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, these new types of avant-gardes were interested in the

⁷⁷ A new set of art prizes had emerged in Argentina after the Revolución Libertadora, among them Romero Brest’s Very y Estimar Honor Prize (1960–68), the di Tella’s national and international prizes (1960–66), the Braque Prize (1963–ongoing), and the Biennial Americana de Arte (1962, 1964, and 1966).

⁷⁸ Jorge Romero Brest, “‘Awareness of Image’ and ‘Awareness of Imagination’ in the Process of Argentine Art,” in *Listen, Here, Now!*, ed. Andrea Giunta (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2004), 110–16.

⁷⁹ Jorge Romero Brest, “Informal Art and the Art of Today: A Very Updated Article and New Reflections,” in *Listen, Here, Now!*, 100. See also Jorge Romero Brest, *Arte en la Argentina: Últimas décadas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1969).

⁸⁰ Andrea Giunta, “Jorge Romero Brest: Rewriting Modernism,” in *Listen, Here, Now!*, 87.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Jacqueline Barnitz, “New Figuration, Pop, and Assemblage in the 1960s and 1970s,” in *Latin American Artists in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Waldo Rasmussen (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 126.

“dematerialization of the artistic experience.”⁸³ The word “experience” may have been drawn from Brest’s prior interest in phenomenology, while setting up a dichotomy between a previous, more traditionally contemplative art and one closer to Umberto Eco’s “open work” that is completed by the viewer.⁸⁴

In *Proyectos sobre el discurso de mi* (Projects about my discourse), published in 1997, Paksa referred to her architectural works as “environments” and wrote about the use of light in her 1967 projects as “opposed to the tradition of sculpture.”⁸⁵ In a way, she was thinking like the North American minimalists who stayed away from traditional art materials and embraced industrial materials and industrial fabrication to avoid the impression of personal or subjective expression. Take, for example, when in 1963 Dan Flavin began to work with his signature fluorescent tubes, and by 1968 he had developed his sculptures into room-size environments of light. Lippard was not too enthusiastic about these, criticizing the colorful works that “cross the borderline into decoration and become simply too beautiful.”⁸⁶ Lippard appreciated simple color schemes in sculpture; she admired Flavin’s *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Robert Rosenblum)* (1963) and *daylight and cool white (to Sol Lewitt)* (1964).⁸⁷

⁸³ Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, “Itinerarios de la vanguardia plástica argentina de los ’60,” in *La cultura Argentina de fin de siglo: ensayos sobre la dimensión cultural*, ed. Mario Margulis and Marcelo Urresti (Buenos Aires: Oficina de Publicaciones del CBC/Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1997), 604.

⁸⁴ See Andrea Giunta and Laura Maledetti Costa, eds., *Arte de posguerra: Jorge Romero Brest y la revista Ver y Estimar* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2005); Andrea Giunta, “Rewriting Modernism: Jorge Romero Brest and the Legitimation of Argentine Art” in *Listen, Here, Now!*, 76–92; Jorge Roberto Brest, *Arte en la Argentina: últimas décadas*. The Eco reference is to Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), which was about the making of art with a multiplicity of meanings and the participation of the audience/reader.

⁸⁵ Margarita Paksa and Marcelo Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 104.

⁸⁶ Lucy Lippard quoted in James Meyer, “Enter Flavin: Eleven Artists,” in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 99.

⁸⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, “Dan Flavin, Kaymar Gallery,” *Artforum* 2, no. 11 (May 1964): 52–54. Since Lippard’s dissatisfaction over Flavin’s work was primarily formal, I cannot help thinking she would have liked Paksa’s *Identidad en dos situaciones* over, for instance, Flavin’s *Alternative Pink and Gold* (1967–68). John McCracken, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and other Light and Space artists from California were experimenting with similar ideas at this time.

As Lippard observes, Flavin sculptures “cross the borderline into decoration” as do some of Paksa’s works. However, whereas Flavin’s works are rapidly perceived, Paksa’s are more both sensorially generous and slower. Flavin wanted his work to produce “rapid comprehensions—get in and out situations.”⁸⁸ In fact, these instructions to view the work rapidly actually suggest that the longer one looks at the work, the more difficult it is to perceive. Phenomenology, and particularly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, offered the minimalist artists a language for theorizing the relationship of the spectator with sculpture, an experience that made the body and what it perceives inextricable. The time of phenomenology is “not a real process, not an actual succession that I am content to record,” time is “in *my* relation to things.”⁸⁹ As Robert Smithson observed of Flavin’s work, “Ultimately, there is nothing to see.”⁹⁰

These words recall what Nicolás Guagnini writes about Argentinean artist David Lamelas’ work that was also included in *Más allá de la geometría*: “In Lamelas’ *Situation of Time*, there is really nothing to see, nothing to protect, no metaphors, no spectacle, and nothing to be identified with or to identify. . . . There are no universal pictures or a program to tune into in *Situation of Time*—there is only a *ruin* of the universal.”⁹¹ Lamelas’s work consists of seventeen televisions on pedestals of equal height running along three walls of a darkened

⁸⁸ Dan Flavin, “some other comments . . . more pages from a spleenish journal,” *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967): 23.

⁸⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, repr., London: Routledge, 1989), 412.

⁹⁰ Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” in *Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 13.

⁹¹ Nicolás Guagnini, “A Situation of Time: Despite Geometry, Beyond the Universal,” in *A Principality of Its Own: 40 Years of Visual Arts at the Americas Society*, exh. cat., ed. José Falconi and Gabriela Rangel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 193.

gallery. The TVs are on but receive no signal.⁹² The lack of content or message in the work points to Lamelas' critical position on the universal ambitions of Minimalism, its repetition and seriality, as well as art institutions such as the di Tella in Buenos Aires that were attempting to position themselves in the international context of contemporary sculpture.⁹³ Lamelas' was one of the few conceptual pieces in the exhibition.

For the same exhibition, Paksa presented *Idea Correspondiente*, four prismatic forms that provoked a destabilizing optical effect by dislocating and slightly redirecting the planes of vision. This work was less conceptual in nature compared to the one described above by Lamelas. However, much like Lamelas' work from this moment, a particular perceptive effect of sculpture in a gallery space—the light cast onto architectural features—is doubly signaled, in this case with the four prismatic forms. Of the work, Paksa wrote, “The inclination of the upper plane of each of the prismatic units allowed the spatial relationship between the top and bottom shapes. The public could look from outside and/or go through the work.”⁹⁴ Paksa's phenomenological approach resonates with Brest's comments at the time about the “experiential” works. One must recall as well that with this work, Paksa exhibited for the first time at the Di Tella.

I would like to go back now to *Relaxing Egg*. Even though it is an object-based piece, I would argue that its essence is not in the object but in its hand-heldness and the individual eggs' dispersal and circulation among people.⁹⁵ Brest's decision to use the term *experiencias* to better

⁹² Nam June Paik did something similar in his first solo exhibition in 1963, *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television*, at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal Germany. “Paik altered the sets to distort their reception of broadcast transmissions and scattered them about the room, on their sides and upside down.” See “The Worlds of Nam June Paik,” Guggenheim website, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/the-worlds-of-nam-june-paik-2>

⁹³ See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Sign and Structure in the Work of David Lamelas,” in *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 319.

⁹⁴ Margarita Paksa and Marcelo Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 34.

⁹⁵ Andy Warhol called his studio a “factory,” a word usually associated with industrial manufacture. Between 1964–1968, more than five hundred works of art were completed, including silk screens, photographs, work on film, and more. See Elizabeth Currid, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art, And Music Drive New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

refer to the work by young artists in Argentina accurately applies to Paksa. Although not exclusively, the di Tella mainly supported artists making happenings or *ambientaciones* (environments). Laura Podalsky explains happenings in Argentina as “orchestrated artistic events . . . blend[ing] the conventions of visual art with those of theater in such a way that ‘spectators’ frequently became active participants in the production of the artwork.”⁹⁶ The effectiveness of Paksa’s *Relaxing Egg* is dependent on people buying the small object, holding it in their hand, and keeping it in their pockets, their homes, or their offices. And the artist’s focus on participation was a common thread throughout her career. Starting with her early sculpture *Caños en movimiento* (*Pipes in Movement*, 1964), described later, her proposals consistently encouraged physical viewer participation.

Participation

A vital touchstone for Paksa’s work at this moment was the Argentinian artist Rubén Santantonín, who in 1961 inaugurated his idea of the *arte cosa* (art thing), a conceptual framework for participatory art.⁹⁷ His series of innovative forms were titled *Cosas* (*Things*) (fig. 10) and were made of cardboard, rags, wire, wood, plaster, and other materials—abandoning the supremacy of painting and sculpture. He wrote: “No more ‘lines’ or ‘volumes.’ I want the ‘thing’ to include *directions, volitions, ‘contacts,’ links, bulkiness, squeezing*. I have banished the old exhausted canons from my soul.”⁹⁸ He made two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms. The

⁹⁶ Laura Podalsky, “Interlude: The di Tella and the Manzana Loca,” *Spectacular City*, 139. Podalsky’s definition of a happening differs from how Allan Kaprow would define it, as events that make it difficult to distinguish the artistic activity from daily life. In his opinion, the themes, materials, and actions of Happenings should not be derived from the arts; they should take place a variety of spaces and changing locales, and audiences should be eliminated entirely. See Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments & Happenings* (New York: Abrams, 1966), 151-208.

⁹⁷ Rubén Santantonín was influential for many artists of his generation in Buenos Aires. See Marcelo Pacheco, “From the Modern to the Contemporary: Shifts in Argentine Art, 1956-1965,” *Listen, Here, Now!*, 22-23. In an interview with Paksa in August 2017, she named Santantonín as a friend and colleague who she learned a lot from.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Marcelo Pacheco, “From the Modern to the Contemporary: Shifts in Argentine Art, 1956-1965,” *Listen, Here, Now!*, 22.

latter were forms suspended from the ceiling that allowed people to wander through them, sense their roughness, the drips of color, the material intensity that was bound, squeezed, and perforated. His things did not resemble anything in particular but were characterized by the intensive use of material.



Figure 10. Rubén Santantonín, *Cosa (Thing)*, 1963. Courtesy of the artist.

While in North America, artists like Claes Oldenburg were making objects that took irony, kitsch and mockery in directions of mass culture, Santantonín's work took a rather existential orientation. For him, "things" were giving form to the "existential devotion" constituting "art today."⁹⁹ Santantonín's "things" were inspired by Jean Paul Satre's existentialism, who was being discussed by intellectuals and artists in Buenos Aires bars, such as the Moderno.¹⁰⁰ In a personal diary, he wrote "Culture grows slim on history. It thrives on the

⁹⁹ Ruben Santantonín quoted in Andrea Giunta's "The Avant-Garde as a Problem," *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics*, 129.

¹⁰⁰ See Andrea Giunta, "The Avant-Garde as a Problem," in *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics*, 129-130.

present. I want to immerse myself madly in that existential whole that for me is the present. I want to feel that I existed part of my time. NOT ANOTHER... I want to bleed existence.”¹⁰¹

Santantonín’s writings about his “things”—both the reliefs he created from cardboard as well as the forms he suspended from the ceiling with wires or strings—were also referring to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty proposed redefining everything in terms of perception and phenomenological description, and Santantonín observed that his “things” were meant to be “predominantly sensorial,” offering a great diversity of sensations, that cause people “to no longer observe things,” but rather “to feel themselves immersed in them.”¹⁰²

Santantonín’s principal interest was the viewer and their relation to what he called the “thing”: “The intent, to the extent possible, is that man no longer CONTEMPLATES things but he immerses himself in them with his pleasure, with his distress, with his imagination. That he does not feel transcended but rather affected, complicated, commingled.”¹⁰³ Comparatively, while Santantonín was paying attention to the “distress” lived in society, Paksa was committed to “relaxation.” Santantonín summarized his art program in eight lines, which included: “Against artistic conservation,” “In favor of the vital instant,” “In favor of surprise over the unusual.” In 1966, finding himself isolated from the art milieu in Buenos Aires, he decided to destroy all of his works by setting them on fire.

Like Paksa’s “eggs,” Santantonín’s “things” were primarily tactile forms, with the viewer experience being the focal point of the work. The *arte cosa* was a new form of expression and communication that questioned “the traditional circuits of art’s distribution, and second, the

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 130.

¹⁰² Ibid. 130. Also see Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-22.

¹⁰³ Rubén Santantonín, “Why I Call These Objects ‘THINGS,’” trans. Mark Schafer, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 36–37. The original Spanish text is “Por qué nombro ‘Cosas’ a estop objetos,” in *Cosas*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1964).

transformation of the artwork into an organism that the viewer can traverse.”¹⁰⁴ Santantonín recognized a rigidity in the relationship between art and audience, and in 1962 began experimenting with participatory works of art. His unfulfilled project *Arte cosa rodante* (Rolling Art Thing) was to consist of a large red structure mounted on a trailer pulled by a Jeep that would travel from town to town. At each stop, people would be invited to enter and participate in multidisciplinary activities and sensory experiences.

In late 1964, Paksa and Santantonín were part of the group exhibition *Objetos 64* at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires, along with twenty-four other artists.¹⁰⁵ Paksa presented her first participatory work, the aforementioned *Caños en movimiento* (fig. 11), a rectangular structure made out of wood with attached, manipulable bent pipes made out of iron and painted silver.

¹⁰⁴ Marcelo Pacheco, “From the Modern to the Contemporary: Shifts in Argentine Art, 1956-1965,” *Listen, Here, Now!*, 22.

¹⁰⁵ The other artists included Roberto Aizenberg, Antonio Berni, Delia Cancela, León Ferrari, Edgardo Giménez, Marta Minujín, Dalila Pizzovio, Emilio Renart, Rafael Squirru, Juan Carlos Stoppani, Pablo Suárez, and Luis Wells. Exhibition brochure, Museo de Arte Moderno archive.

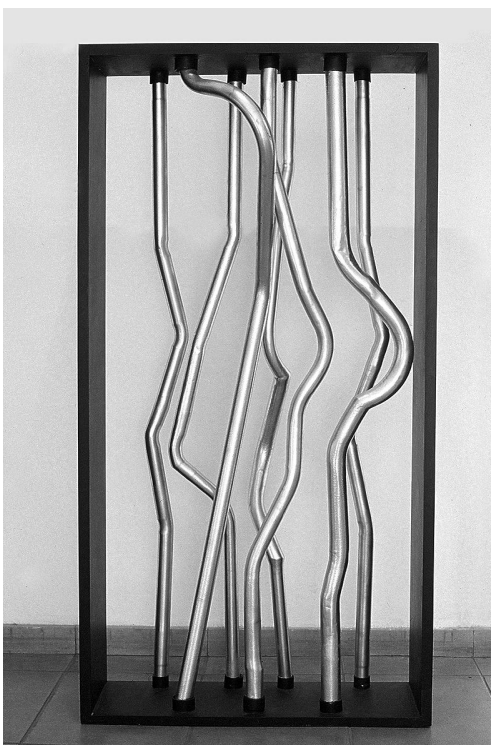


Figure 11. Margarita Paksa, *Caños en movimiento* (*Pipes in motion*), 1964. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

The work was meant to be “in motion,” meaning that the spectator was to touch the work and move the pipes. In the context of an oppressed society, Paksa’s work enabled viewers to become users or participants, manipulators of the sculpture. Through play, it affected a sense of social connectivity. Exhibition curator of *Objetos 64*, Hugo Parpagnoli, wrote in the brochure:

Neither paintings nor sculptures, neither Dada nor Pop (in spite of the lamentations of the critics), these objects, either logical or arbitrary; some sad, others hilarious; exaltation of the sinister, the corny, or the cruel; objective spectacles or subjective arousals, they all have in common the three-dimensional and the hallmark of an explosive attitude. The artists in the exhibition, even though they are concerned with the changes in form and presentation, therefore the title “Objects,” had an “attitude” present in their works pointing to their political concerns. . . . [The artists] are capable of feeling better than us, the humidity, the moth, the politicians, the failures and the great prizes of the place where they live in.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Edgardo Antonio Vigo also takes on the viewers' active role in his series *Relativuzgirs* created in 1957-58, where he associated dada's spirit with concrete art.¹⁰⁷ These are a series of monochromatic sheets of coarse paper with hand-punched perforations. Through the holes, fragments of the world can be glimpsed; layers of paper planes are shuffled and the composition reconfigured. *Relativuzgirs* invited audiences to take on the role of artist by putting the work back together. Even though the works are reminiscent of geometric abstraction, Vigo did not refer to them as such but rather as "clandestine" manuals for making the most progressive art of the present in one's own living room.¹⁰⁸

Another vital project to consider in the context of participatory art in Argentina is *La Menesunda* (1965) (fig. 12), a collaboration involving Ruben Santantonín, Marta Minujín, and several other artists at the di Tella.

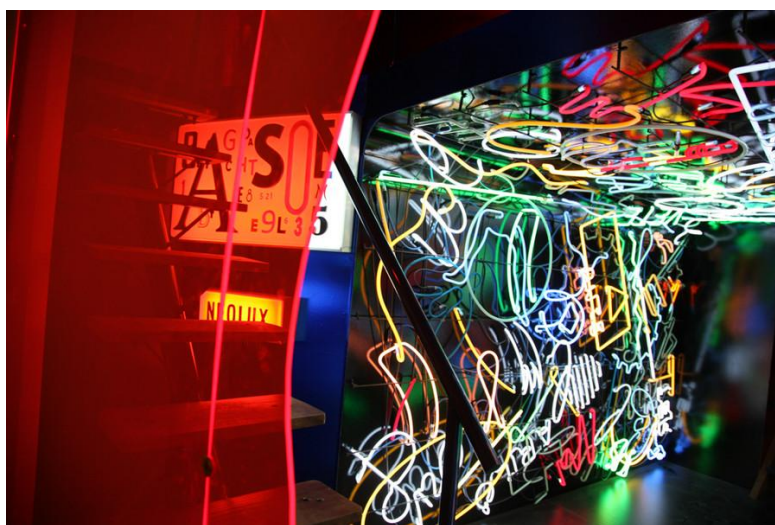


Figure 12. Ruben Santantonín and Marta Minujín, *La Menesunda*, 1965. Instituto Torcuato di Tella. Courtesy of the artist and Henrique Faria, New York.

¹⁰⁷ According to the artist, "relativuzgir" "is a marriage between relativity, Einstein's philosophical mathematical base, electricity as an active element, and the property of rotation, that is to say the escape from the REPRESENTATION of movement to movement itself." Cited in María José Herrera, in *Edgardo Antonio Vigo* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Telefónica, 2004), 14. See Zanna Gilbert, "Marginal Media and Manual Multiples: Edgardo Antonio Vigo's Conceptual-Artisanal Aesthetic" in *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

¹⁰⁸ Vanessa Katherine Davidson, "Paulo Bruscky and Edgardo Antonio Vigo: Pioneers in Alternative Communication Networks, Conceptualism, and Performance (1960s-1980s)," (PhD diss., New York Institute of Fine Arts, 2011), 111.

The title is a slang word that suggests disorder or a situation of confusion.¹⁰⁹ Visitors lined up to enter a labyrinthine structure by a narrow neon-lit passageway and walked through eleven different multisensorial environments, including spaces with particular smells and sounds, a closed-circuit television showing the viewers going through the spaces, a room with a naked couple in a bed, a passage with a glass capsule in which confetti rained down, and much more. *La Menesunda* was neither a happening nor a show nor a spectacle; it was an experience and a provocation. In Minujín's words, "It was a journey through situations that sought to surprise and sensitize the viewer to be a participant."¹¹⁰

Minujín was one of the first artists in Argentina to be recognized for her happenings. She became the face of participatory art in the country and turned attention to the status of the viewer, crafting increasingly complex and spectacular enclosures to engage the senses in the country's new art institutions. Oscar Masotta wrote in the edited 1967 volume *Happenings*, which he dedicated to Allan Kaprow and Alberto Greco, that "a year ago Allan Kaprow referred to us as a country of *happenistas*, even though up until now, manifestations of the genre had hardly appeared." Despite this, Masotta felt that 1966 had been a significant year for happenings in Argentina.¹¹¹ Masotta's publication assembled several articles and documents devoted to juxtaposing two different happenings: on the one hand was the "old" concept of the Happening and its theories and specific realizations in Buenos Aires, and on the other, the presentation of a

¹⁰⁹ This recalls the name that Hélio Oiticica gave to his *Parangolé* (1964–79) series, also a slang word (that one in Portuguese) referring to a precarious situation, a place or moment of confusion.

¹¹⁰ Marta Minujín, "La Menesunda según Marta Minujín," ["La Menesunda according to Marta Minujín"], Buenos Aires Ciudad, March 2016, <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/museoartemoderno/la-menesunda-segun-marta-minujin>. *La Menesunda* was re-installed most recently at the New Museum, New York, in 2019 as *La Menesunda Reloaded*.

¹¹¹ Oscar Masotta, "Prólogo," in *Happenings*, ed. Oscar Masotta (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Álvarez, 1967), 9. The volume contains texts by the critic Alicia Paez and the sociologist Eliseo Verón, commentaries by artists including Roberto Jacoby and Eduardo Costa, and an extended prologue by Masotta, which attempted to account for the proliferation of the term "happening" in the Argentine avant-garde.

new genre of Anti-Happening: the emerging experiences produced by the Arte de los medios de comunicación de masas (Art of the mass media) group.¹¹² Ana Longoni explains that “this group (consisting of the artists Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, and Raúl Escari) sought to go one step further towards the dematerialization of art, finding its sole reality in mass media circuits and dissolving it into social life.”¹¹³

It might seem odd to compare Paksa’s *Relaxing Egg* with happenings as they manifested in Argentina, but not only were they both pivotal parts of the art scene in Buenos Aires at the time, but they operated in very similar ways. Paksa’s project challenged established forms of communication and information diffusion. *Relaxing Egg* was a new proposal, a new manifestation, of an avant-garde art placement drawing upon the means of the market and industrialization. When planning the project, the artist wrote that the goal was “to take art out of the exhibition halls and instead place it directly in life. There is the intention to provoke a gesture, to include it within the habitual ones, to address one or more senses at the same time.”¹¹⁴ The eggs, like other of her projects, “tend to renew forms of communication, not accepting the established ones but creating the possibility of communication between individuals through other means.”¹¹⁵ When the 350 eggs were dispersed throughout the city, each egg owner would presumably follow Paksa’s instructions. Everyone that owned a *Relaxing Egg* was connected and having parallel experiences—in an imaginary way and as a communitarian experience.

¹¹² In 1966, Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, and Raúl Escari formed the group Grupo de Arte de los Medios de Comunicación de Masas (Art of the Mass Media). They used mass media as their medium (or art form) in order to question its role and power in society. As Masotta explained, their informational art was made of “none other than the processes, the results, the facts, and/or the phenomena of information set off by the mass information media.” See Oscar Masotta, “After Pop, We Dematerialize (Excerpts)” in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 214.

¹¹³ Ana Longoni, “Oscar Masotta,” *Documenta 14*, April 2017. <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/16214/oscar-masotta>

¹¹⁴ 1967 note, Paksa archive.

¹¹⁵ 1968 note, Paksa archive.

Allan Kaprow also shifted the specialized zone of art toward the particular places and occasions of everyday life. For him, the contents of everyday life, such as eating strawberries, a letter from a friend, sweating, shaking hands, a scratch, a sight, are more than merely the subject matter of art. Rather, they are the meaning of life.¹¹⁶ Inspired and influenced by John Dewey, Kaprow defined art as a “participatory experience.” A meaningful experience for Kaprow was the one extended into the unpredictable and experimental contexts of social and psychological interaction.

Kaprow wrote extensively about participation and performance: “Intentionally performing everyday life is bound to create some curious kinds of awareness (...) Focusing on what is habitual and trying to put a line around what is continuous can be a bit like rubbing your stomach and tapping your head, then reversing. Without either an audience or formally designated stage or clearing, the performer becomes simultaneously agent and watcher.”¹¹⁷ Kaprow was differentiating audience participation in a theater setting from a participation performance relating to everyday routines. Even though touching a “*relaxing egg*” is not necessarily part of an “everyday routine,” it becomes one—it is a personal and private activity. Taking place in one’s homes, offices, or pockets, the act of touching the *Relaxing Egg*, was prescribed in some way by the artist. Relaxation is something we can all understand, even if we don’t necessarily consciously experience it. “The feelings produced under these conditions are not simply emotions; and the knowledge acquired is not simply casual information,” in Kaprow’s words. That something in between emotions and information might be what Paksa was trying to achieve with “relaxation”: consciousness and criticality. It is different to watch an actor eat

¹¹⁶ Jeff Kelley, “Introduction” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xii-xiii.

¹¹⁷ Allan Kaprow, “Participation Performance,” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 187-188.

strawberries on stage than actually eating them at home in a conscious way. In Kaprow's terms, one could say that the person owning *Relaxing Egg* is not only a participant but also a *performer*.

Any consideration of participatory art in Argentina must refer to the Group de Recherche d'art Visuel (GRAV), founded in Paris in 1960. GRAV's members included several international kinetic and Op art practitioners, and their foremost theorist was the Argentinean Julio Le Parc, who studied with Lucio Fontana in Buenos Aires during the 1940s. In a manifesto from 1967, GRAV wrote:

Through provocation, through the modification of the conditions of environment, by visual aggression, by a direct appeal to active participation, by playing a game, or by creating an unexpected situation, to exert a direct influence on the public's behaviors and to replace the work of art of the theatrical performance with a situation in evolution inviting the spectator's participation.¹¹⁸

The emphasis was on multisensorial environments and kinetic sculpture as a means to affect the viewer's perception. In 1963, GRAV presented *Labyrinth* for the third Paris Biennial, comprised of twenty environmental experiences, from wall reliefs to light and mobile installations. It was accompanied by a short manifesto, reading in part:

If there is a social preoccupation in today's art, then it must take into account this very social reality: the viewer.
To the best of our abilities we want to free the viewer from his apathetic dependence that makes him passively accept, not only what one imposes on him as art, but a whole system of life. . . .
We want to interest the viewer, to reduce his inhibitions, *to relax him*.
We want to make him *participate*.
We want to place him in a situation that he triggers and transforms.
We want him to be conscious of his participation.¹¹⁹

This manifesto echoes some of Paksa's ideas behind *Relaxing Egg*, given that one of GRAV's goals was "to relax" the viewer through participation. As Claire Bishop rightly remarked, "The

¹¹⁸ Claire Bishop, "Je Participe, tu participe, il participe," in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 88.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 89, my emphasis in the first instance, "to relax him."

experiences produced by GRAV's installations are primarily individual rather than social, and today we would more correctly describe them as interactive rather than participatory."¹²⁰ One could claim something similar for Paksa's eggs; they were meant to be experienced individually in a private space.

In considering participatory art in Argentina, it is also pertinent to recall Alberto Heredia's *Cajas de Camembert* (*Boxes of Camembert*, 1963) (fig. 13), fifteen sealed jars that the viewer was supposed to open to activate the piece. They were built with great meticulousness and involved small dolls, dentures, and prostheses. The cheese boxes served as a starting point for several more sculptures involving waste materials. The work was, to a large extent, a criticism of consumerism, an expression of social irony.



Figure 13. Alberto Heredia, *Cajas de Camembert*, 1963. Courtesy of the artist.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 89.

The art critic Aldo Pellegrini wrote that when opening Heredia's boxes, "The public becomes the active collaborator, discovering for himself the spectacle hidden by the artist."¹²¹ In other words, each opening meant a rebirth of that work of art. Pellegrini also wrote that artists at the time manifested an inclination to reconsider and ascribe value to objects from everyday life, as had the Dadaists and Surrealists. He explained that for new artists, the displacement of the function of the object, apart from its current use, emphasizes its relation with the surrounding world, accentuating in the object the lasting imprint of those who created it.

Heredia's boxes resemble *Bólides* ("fireballs") by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, as both use readymades as their structure. Early in his career, Oiticica had turned away from art that was isolated from the world in a frame or on a pedestal. In 1963, he made his first *Bólides*, suggesting the dynamism and impact he was after. His boxes in *Bólides*, for instance, were wooden constructions with moveable planes, and often held organic materials for viewers to handle. He called them "Transobjects" because they transformed found objects into art, divorcing them from their daily use. He saw the boxes of *Bólides* as social manifestations embodying an ethical position because they were integrated into the world, not apart from it. Paksa also saw the *Relaxing Egg* as a social manifestation, spreading "relaxation" to the outside world. Yet Paksa's objects were from the get-go "new"—industrially made and with an advertised purpose (relaxation). With Heredia and Oiticica's boxes, the work was not completed or seen in its entirety until the viewer interacted with it. Paksa's eggs were about liberating the viewer and impacting their consciousness. Paksa aimed for viewers to enter into a space of transformation where categories of individual and social, conscious and unconscious, active and passive, would assuage repressed tension.

¹²¹ Aldo Pellegrini, "Los Camembert de Heredia," in *Las cajas de Camembert*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Galería Lirolay, 1963).

Paksa undoubtedly drew from international manifestations of minimalism and participatory art in creating *Relaxing Egg*, but the most vital connections are with Brazilian neo-concrete art, specifically with Lygia Clark's series of *Bichos* and Hélio Oiticica's *Bólides*. The *Bichos* were simple structures made from metal plates joined by hinges that formed a spine, as Clark describes it, allowing it to be articulated.¹²² Clark highlighted that the work was presented as a living, active organism, which the spectator could interact with completely.

As Brazilian poet and theorist Ferreira Gullar asserted in his 1959 "Neo Concreto Manifesto" and "Theory of the Non Object," the neo-concretists aimed to "synthesize both sensory and mental experiences."¹²³ Participants were asked to *use* rather than contemplate the works, which "exist only as potential, waiting for a human gesture to realize [them]."¹²⁴

This is an apt description of Paksa's *Relaxing Egg*, which was made just a few years later. Just as with Clark's *Bichos* and Oiticica's *Bólides*, Paksa's *Relaxing Eggs* are dependent on viewer's involvement to transform them into sensorial works to be handled with the body. These works invite viewers to interact with objects far away from the museum. Participants are invited to turn works over in their hands as well as their minds. The main difference between them is that Clark and Oiticica created objects that could be flexible and altered by each participant, allowing for countless variations, while Paksa's eggs were predetermined and invariable.

Claire Bishop characterizes participatory art in Argentina in the 1960s as "taking reality and its inhabitants as a material, and the desire to politicize those who encountered this work.

However, the artists did not abandon an attachment to the value of artistic experience—each

¹²² Cornelia Butler and Luis Pérez Oramas, *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment Of Art, 1948-1988* (New York: Museum of Modern Art: 2014), 160.

¹²³ Ferreira Gullar, "Teoria do Não Objeto," in *Jornal do Brasil (Sunday supplement)*, November 21, 1960. Reproduced in *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte, 1950-62*, Aracy A. Amaral, ed. (Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo: MEC-FUNARTE, 1977), 90-94.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

practitioner felt him/herself to be working politically, but within art.” Bishop claims that the participatory actions produced in Argentina stand in sharp contrast to the experiments produced in Brazil during the same period. “If the master narrative of Brazilian art was (and to a large extent remains) the sensuous, then Argentinian work is more cerebral and self-reflective; its performances are less visually oriented and more willing to tarry with nihilistic consequences of producing coercive situations.”¹²⁵ At this point, it should be clear that Argentinian artists like Paksa, Santantonín, Vigo, and Minujín, among others, were working with the sensuous in their work, rather than with the purely “cerebral and self-reflexive” as Bishop claims. Bishop argues that in Argentina and France in 1968, “participation became a means to deal with anxieties about realities, representation, and political oppositionality. . . . The Argentinians more characteristically approached participation through experiments in social division.”¹²⁶ Here is another generalization by Bishop when in fact there is less homogeneity in Argentina than this suggests. Her historicizing approach of participatory art is assumed to open debates around the social in art, but her generalizations and methodological contradictions betray the complexity of some of the examples in her project.

Even though *Relaxing Egg* is conceptual in nature and included instructions, the main focus was on the senses: touching the egg will calm the mind. The relationship between mind and body is explicit in Paksa’s handheld sculpture: looking and thinking are not enough. Paksa investigated the role of the viewer and his/her participation throughout her practice during the

¹²⁵ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 105.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 104. Some of the examples of Argentinean art that Bishop offers are: Alberto Greco’s *Vivo-Ditos* (Living Finger, 1962-64) that involved the artist encircling passers-by with chalk and signing them as ‘living sculptures; Oscar Bony’s *La Familia Obrera* (The Worker’s Family, 1968) was a performance with a working-class family—a man, woman and child—sitting on a platform eight hours a day. The family was paid to sit on the plinth during the exhibition open hours. Marta Minujín’s *Suceso Plástico* (25 July, 1965), a happening in Montevideo, Uruguay held in a working class neighborhood and involved the participants being herded into a soccer stadium, to the accompaniment of Bach’s ‘Mass in B Minor’ and encircled by motorbikes blaring sirens.

dictatorship, with particular focus on the 1960s. However, her interest in participation changed shortly after the dictatorship ended in the late 1980s.

Repetition and *Arte de Sistemas*

Although “systems art” moved art toward the interdisciplinary and informational, the question that seems pertinent here is whether systems demand a turn outward or inward. According to the media scholar Mitchell Whitelaw, a systems approach “demands a turn outwards [that] raises questions about the intervention of art in the world of agency [that] threatens to spill out into everyday life, beyond culturally sanctioned and government funded forms, and so to evaporate completely, or rather to become imperceptible.”¹²⁷ However, I would argue that systems move inward as well.

The openness of systems is apparent, but they also have a self-protective mechanism, a sense of retreat and defensiveness, an armoring of the subject, and a desire for a safe place. Paksa’s system was meant to be both external and internal. On the one hand, the outward system operated in the city when the five hundred eggs were subsequently circulated by visitors to the exhibition, the majority of them inhabitants of Buenos Aires. On the other hand, the eggs were part of an inward system that came with precise instructions regarding their use as objects for relaxation in the office or at home—in an intimate, personal space.

In 1967, after her show at La Flor de San Telmo, Paksa sent some of the remaining “relaxing eggs” to friends and colleagues abroad such as Lawrence Alloway, Leo Castelli, and Sol LeWitt, who responded with appreciative thank-you letters. For instance, Alloway wrote, “My wife and I love your relaxing-egg. It is beautiful and playful. It is so kind of you to think of us. As a tactile

¹²⁷ Mitchell Whitelaw, “1968/1998: Rethinking a Systems Aesthetic,” *ANAT Newsletter* 33, May 1998, <http://diss.anat.org.au/mwhitelaw.html>.

object and as a visual datum the egg is equally successful. Note: My wife is left-handed, so she holds it with that hand ('dexterous, proctored, sensitive'). So many people are coming to the US from Buenos Aires that we hope you may follow your egg boom. It would be fine to see you again. Again thank you." (fig. 14)¹²⁸

330 West 20 St
New York 100 11
3 March 1968

Dear Margarita Paksa
My wife and I love your relaxing-egg.
It is beautiful and playful. It is so
kind of you to think of us. As ~~a~~ a
tactile object ~~of touch~~ and as a visual datum
the egg is equally successful. NOTE:
my wife is left-handed, so she holds it
with that hand ('dexterous, proctored, sensitive').
So many people are coming to the US
from Buenos Aires that we hope you
may follow your egg boom. It would
be fine to see you again.
Again thank you. Very sincerely
Lawrence Alloway

Figure 14. Thank you letter from Lawrence Alloway to Margarita Paksa, March 3, 1968. Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires.

Paksa's commitment to seriality and mass production in *Relaxing Egg* does not suggest that she aligned with a kind of conservatism or docility often related to mass consumerism.

¹²⁸ Letter from Lawrence Alloway to Margarita Paksa, March 3, 1968, Paksa archive. The two first met in 1966 when he was part of the jury for the 1966 Premio Internacional Instituto Torcuato di Tella [Instituto Torcuato di Tella International Prize]; the other jurors were Otto Hahn and Jorge Romero Brest. They awarded first prize to Susana Salgado, second prize to Dalila Puzzuvio, and unanimously recommended that a special prize be awarded to David Lamelas for the quality of his work. Paksa was very much aware of the artistic development in the Northern hemisphere even though she hardly left Argentina—she believed that politically, it was important to stay. Thanks to Romero Brest who would travel often and share his knowledge with the di Tella artists, it enabled her ability to read English, and thanks to international visits of critics and artists to Buenos Aires, Paksa was well-connected to happenings in the art world internationally.

Rather, it suggests an acceptance of patience as a virtue—a recognition of, and faith in, the cyclical nature of life as a bulwark against ubiquitous repression. It is important to note that there is no documentation of the five hundred plastic eggs that Paksa produced for this project. The only known, extant images that exist show two, three, or eight eggs at a time, not giving much sense of the multiplicity and repetition involved in their making. In fact, only three eggs—red, green, and blue—remain in Paksa’s personal collection. We can *imagine* the five hundred eggs, of course, but this mental image is not of an installation in a room, on a pedestal or in a vitrine. Rather, we likely imagine their existence in a fragmented way—dispersed all around Buenos Aires in people’s pockets, homes, and offices. In contrast, Warhol had an impulsion toward seriality, toward repetition and variation that was intentionally visible. There are numerous images and documentation of the reproductions happening in Warhol’s factory, as well as the installations of silkscreen works.

Worth mentioning is Piero Manzoni’s *Uovo con impronta* (*Egg with Thumbprint*, 1960), a series of 150 hard-boiled eggs that the artist signed with his thumbprint and set on a bed of cotton wool in a small wooden box. Soon after, in a performance in Milan titled *Consumazione dell’ arte dinamica del public divorare l’arte* (*The Consumption of Dynamic Art by the Art-Devouring Public*), Manzoni distributed the eggs to the audience to eat. He explained, “I gave my art to the public to eat . . . and they swallowed these artifacts consecrated by the ‘personality’ of the artist: direct communion: the exhibition was consumed by the spectators in one hour and ten minutes.”¹²⁹ By giving the consecrated eggs directly to the public to eat, at which point the artwork was eliminated, Manzoni aimed to break down the distance between the artist and the public, refusing a position of superiority. At the same time, he embarked on a critical attack on art institutions, which he perceived as being at the service of the art market.

¹²⁹ Manzoni, letter to Shozo Yamazaki, July 22, 1960, quoted in Anna Constantine, “Piero Manzoni in Context 1933–1963,” in *Germano Celant, Piero Manzoni*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1998), 270–71.

I invoke this example here because it had in common with Paksa's hundreds of eggs that were distributed to the general public—not prestigious collectors or institutions, but contrarily friends, visitors, inhabitants of the city, everyday consumers. In a contemporaneous note, she explained that her work *needed* to be part of a different way of *difusión* (dissemination or framework). Using manifesto-like language, Paksa wrote: "Creation has to be life. Closely linked to everyday activities."¹³⁰ As with the eggs to be eaten, Paksa asked her audience to treat the work as an everyday commodity, something to purchase for a little money. Whereas Manzoni enacted a criticism of consumer society, Paksa used its systems of circulation and consumption to incorporate her work into everyday lives.

In *Your Everyday Art World* (2013) Lane Relyea explains that "it was the one-two punch of minimalist objects and conceptual and process art, their prioritizing of the artwork's exteriority, including not just the actual space it shares with viewers but the legal and administrative structures of exhibition as well as forms of art distribution and publicity, that definitively undermined the barriers that had kept art within an idealist and contemplative universe all too separate from the world of the here and now."¹³¹ Relyea's description of minimalist objects as about the "exteriority" of the artwork should be broadened. Paksa's *Relaxing Egg*—a hand-held minimalist object—is about both the exteriority or the "moving outwards," linking them to a sales context, the mail, plastic manufacture, but also about a development and awakening of an interiority.

For many global artists of the 1960s, including Paksa, engaging the realm outside of art institutions became a central part of their practice. In the 1960s and 1970s, the use of new technologies—early computers, video art, cybernetics—by artists became a way to transform traditional object-based artistic practices into new, systems-based ones. As the American critic,

¹³⁰ 1967 note, Paksa archive.

¹³¹ Lane Relyea, "Welcome to Yourspace," in *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 26.

Jack Burnham, put it in 1968: “We are now in transition from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented culture*. . . . The cultural obsession with the art object” is being supplanted by an awareness of systems and the functional relationships between art objects. “These new systems prompt us not to look at the skin of objects, but at those meaningful relations within and between their visible boundaries.”¹³² Patrick Jagoda explains that “networks” (another word for systems) in the 1960s, “was central to countercultural movements such as New Communicalism as well as to the New Left’s broader adoption of news media, especially televisual networks, as a key aspect of its strategic planning in anti-Vietnam protests.”¹³³

It cannot be pure coincidence that these ideas emerged during the Vietnam War, the worldwide protests of 1968, and the dictatorships in South America. With intensity, artists were questioning their own practices: How does art serve society? How to blur the boundaries between elite art, popular art, and art of the masses? Artists, whether they were working with technology or not, were engaged in a post-representational, post-object practice concerned with provoking an awareness of the real as an extensive, relational, dynamic network of processes. In other words, “systems” referred to art that was concerned not only with itself, but with social and political issues. The art object (or at least the term “art object”) was coming to be perceived as insufficient to the production of art, its context, and discourse. The distinction between the individual, the institution, and the status of the artwork became blurry, the hope being that the “system” would draw boundaries within a more complex field.

In Argentina, systems art was first associated with conceptual art developed in an international context. And if systems were to draw new boundaries within a complex field, then the Argentine businessman, author, and curator Jorge Glusberg played a significant role in

¹³² Jack Burnham, “System Esthetics,” *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1967): 31.

¹³³ Patrick Jagoda, “Introduction,” in *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 13.

making it happen who will begin to use the term *arte de sistemas* ca. 1970.¹³⁴ He institutionalized *arte de sistemas* by being the first to articulate a communication network among Argentine artists and critics and their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America, and also by presenting this “new” art from Argentina globally, to consolidate and legitimize this regional art with international tendencies. In 1966, the Argentine chemist and artist Víctor Grippo wrote a short text titled “Sistema” outlining the circuit of artistic production, where there is a recontextualization of fragments or portions of daily life. He used the metaphor of the transmitter (the artist with his or her surrounding); the channel (“the artwork as a fulfillment from everyday objects that by modifying certain variables create another meaning”); and the receiver (the audience, the one that gives his or her support to the artwork as a “valid recipient”).¹³⁵ With her *Relaxing Egg*, Paksa applied an operation of communicative systems partially removed from the scope of art. Her strategy was to approach social systems of mass consumption, dispersing the eggs into everyday life and into the urban space.¹³⁶ Paksa offered a new form of engagement that was not alienated from the world, but was instead a part of it.

Clement Greenberg wrote that in the 1960s, the borderline between art and non-art had to be explored in the three-dimensional, “where sculpture was, and where everything material that

¹³⁴ When the di Tella closed in 1970, it left a cultural vacuum that the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) in Buenos Aires emerged to fill, under the leadership of Jorge Glusberg, who remained the director of the institution until his death in 2012. It presented itself as an interdisciplinary space favoring not only the arts, but also science and social studies. In July 1971, the exhibition *Arte de sistemas* opened at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires, organized by Glusberg and CAYC, featuring works by Vito Acconci, Luis F. Benedit, Mel Bochner, Christian Boltanski, Don Celender, Dan Graham, Victor Grippo, Hans Haacke, Allan Kaprow, On Kawara, Dusan Kilmes, Joseph Kosuth, David Lamelas, and many more. The inclusion of many American artists demonstrated that *arte de sistemas* looked outward for international recognition as much as it addressed any local politics and concerns.

¹³⁵ Victor Grippo, “Investigación sobre el proceso de la creación” [“Investigation about the process of creation”], in *Grippo: Una retrospectiva. Obras 1971–2001* [*Grippo: A retrospective. Works 1971–2001*], exh. cat., ed. Marcelo Pacheco, (Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2004).

¹³⁶ I will go back to talking about systems in Paksa’s *Comunicaciones* (*Communications*, 1968) in Chapter 3.

was non art also was.”¹³⁷ Minimalism in North America, with its simplicity of surface, contour, and commitment to the series and the interval, was very much recognized as art, and it was intended to be so. Greenberg states that “minimal art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough anything else. Its idea remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered.”¹³⁸ Michael Fried declared in “Art and Objecthood” that what is at stake “is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects: and what decides their identity as painting is their conforming to the demand that they hold as shapes. Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects.”¹³⁹

Given the hybridity of the minimalist aesthetic of *Relaxing Egg*, Paksa was much closer to the competing artistic tendency of Environments and Happenings (whose most articulate spokesperson was Allan Kaprow) than to Minimalism. As mentioned, Paksa was concerned with blurring art and life; she wasn’t interested in the binary distinctions between sculpture and object, between the fine and commercial arts, between art and life. *Relaxing Egg* was an art project connected with a broad consumer audience, aspiring to bring about critical consciousness in viewers—even potentially acting as a political tool.

Paksa chose to create a solid *egg* shape, an idealized form from nature, rather than geometric form such as an oval or circular form. As she writes in the card that accompanies the object: “Its ovoid shape creates a tactile situation that would never happen through a different oval or spherical object.”¹⁴⁰ Not only did the title of the work point to an “egg,” something we

¹³⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Recentness of Sculpture,” in *The Collected Writings and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 252. Greenberg was writing about the North American Minimalism and their break with painting.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹³⁹ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Minimal Art: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 124.

¹⁴⁰ Margarita Paksa and Marcelo Pacheco, *Proyectos: sobre el discurso de mi* (1997; repr., Buenos Aires: Fundación Espigas, 2003), 66.

find in the outside world, but moreover, the actual object represented something we might encounter on a daily basis—in the market, in a farm, or one’s kitchen.¹⁴¹ Similarly, her sculpture *Diagonal y Corrientes* looked like a minimalist sculpture with its industrial materials and geometric shape, but it was in fact representing a specific street in Buenos Aires, Avenida Corrientes. Even though Paksa was not using ready-made objects, Kaprow’s proclamation in his early essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” resonates with Paksa’s choices: “Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists.”¹⁴²

One may ask why she chose the egg shape for this particular stress-relieving toy? In the context of Argentina’s dictatorship, *the egg may* point to a loss of fecundity. The military was rounding up not only guerrilla groups, but anyone believed to be a left-wing subversive. By 1983, the repression through illegal arrests, tortures, killings, and forced disappearances reached an estimated thirty thousand people. Some were young pregnant women; sometimes their babies were killed or (estimated five hundred babies) were given to couples deemed sympathetic to the regime so that they would not be raised as communists, but rather as “proper Catholics.” “At the time we didn’t know they were killing our kids,” said Estela de Carlotto. “I was like all the other mothers: naive. We were expecting the return of our children.” De Carlotto is referring to her disappeared daughter, Laura, who was killed in August 1978 by her captors, and whose body

¹⁴¹ Paksa’s eggs remind Constantin Brancusi’s series titled *Newborn* (ca. 1915-1920), some made out of white marble or bronze. With its evocation of an egg or a head, *Newborn* is a metaphor for birth as well as a portrayal of an infant’s head. Brancusi’s fascination in finding the “essence” of a thing or finding the moment of origin also reveals his aspirations toward originality.

¹⁴² Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7-9.

was returned to the family. Her mother later found out that her daughter had been pregnant and gave birth to a son before she was murdered.¹⁴³

In the face of this, consider how, for millennia and across the world, the egg has been a powerful symbol representing the potential of life. In ancient times it was a symbol of the universe, of creation, and in some cultures, luck, wealth, and health. In the Jewish tradition it symbolizes promise, and in Christianity it is a metaphor for resurrection, immortality, and the trinity. Argentina, for much of its modern history with colonial origins, has been a Christian country, predominantly Roman Catholic.

There are numerous examples of artists working with eggs and allusions to eggs during the dictatorships in Latin America. Among them, the Brazilian artist Lygia Pape created *O ovo* (*The Egg*, 1967) which consisted of three cubes made of wooden boards, each side covered with a layer of blue, red, or white plastic film. The participant in the installation would enter the structure through the open bottom panel of the cube and push out the film/skin in order to simulate the act of being born.¹⁴⁴ The Brazilian artist Anna Maria Maiolino's video *+=-* (1976) documents a performance where two men sling eggs across a table at each other. We assume that the rules of the game are such that the man who catches the most eggs before they fall off the

¹⁴³ "How the children of Argentina's 'disappeared' are being reunited with their birth families," *PBS News Hour*, October 19, 2015. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/children-argentinas-disappeared-reunited-birth-families#transcript>. *La history oficial* (The Official Story) is a well-recognized movie about a high school history teacher (Norma Aleandro) who has a comfortable life with her husband, a businessman with ties to the military, and their adopted daughter. She begins to wonder about the identity of the girl's birth parents, suspecting that her daughter may be the child of people abducted or killed by the government's brutal crackdown on leftist groups.

¹⁴⁴ The artist herself performed with the cubes, and observed of the experience: "You are trapped inside, covered by a sort of membrane; when you push on it with your hand, the membrane starts to give and suddenly tears, and so you are born: you stick your head out of the hole and roll on out." Quoted in Luis Otávio Pimentel and Mário Pedrosa, *Lygia Pape* (Rio de Janeiro: FUNARTE / Instituto Nacional de Artes Plásticas, 1983), 46. *O ovo* formulates an allegory not only of birth but also of the sex act. That allegory, though, lies more in the performative nature of the work than in its structure (the "eggs," after all, are in the shape of a cube). They involve the performance of a liberating physical act in which we also ruminate on the pains and pleasures of the flesh. *O ovo* could also be conceived as a metaphor for political, familial, or social liberation, perhaps a change in the understanding of women's roles. *O ovo* are structures to be ruptured by the subject to move from interior to exterior, from one's own body toward the audience, which stands in for the larger collective, or society. It involves an act of "opening outward."

table becomes the winner. +=- nods to the fragility of human life and its ability to be made trivial in the hands of men.¹⁴⁵

Relaxing Egg's small scale fused the space of aesthetic experience with the pocket of one's clothing, effectively penetrating the subject's space and performing an alternative form of attachment for the spectator. In a country where public space was highly regulated, intimate space had different aesthetic possibilities. The eggs blurred the distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects; they are body fragments that the artist is offering to the world of the viewer.

Relaxing Egg's small scale is fairly different from some of the North American large-scale Minimalist sculptures, often engaging floor, ceiling, and walls. In the catalog, Eleanor Green wrote:

The kind of scale that acts as content is not simply a matter of size and proportion, it is a function of the way the forms appear to expand and continue beyond their physical limitations, acting aggressively on the space around them, and compressing it. The intrusion of these forms into the surrounding space and their interaction with the architecture force the viewer to consider the environment in which they are placed in the context of the structure.¹⁴⁶

Rather than “acting aggressively on the space,” the *Relaxing Egg* was meant to soothe, to alleviate tension, and rather than being intrusive in the surrounding space, it was something to hold and take with yourself. Paksa wasn't so interested in the problem of architectural enclosure (space) or the relationship of minimal sculpture to the limitations of negative space—floor,

¹⁴⁵ This is indicated in the equation that is the title of the work—despite producing all things equal, the results are negative. Maiolino's +=- was produced in the midst of the Brazilian military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985, associated with repression, violence, and many people fleeing into exile, but also rapid economic growth based on state ownership of key sectors. Maiolino's work is clearly at odds with the Neo-concrete conception of the artwork as a catalyst for the subject's openness to the world, where her works' interiorities tend to reject the surface. As opposed to the fragility of Maiolino's “real” eggs, Paksa proposed an alternative that was strong, compact, durable. It's as if Paksa wanted to save art from the collapsing situation of Argentina, and made the eggs unbreakable as to protect themselves (art in general) and the people keeping them. See Bryan Barcena, “Hunger Is a Virtue,” in *Anna Maria Maiolino*, 150–57.

¹⁴⁶ Eleanor Green, “Introduction,” in *Scale as Content: Ronald Bladen, Barnett Newman, Tony Smith*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1967).

walls, ceiling. For instance, Paksa's work *Silencio I* (*Silence I*, 1967) (fig. 15), named previously, was made the same year as *Relaxing Egg* and was also a multiple of three sculptures of different sizes. The cube, even though it appeared to be purely geometric at first glance, had a small metallic plaque that read "Silencio" (Silence). The cubes were not empty but contained hidden, repressed words and emotions at a time of political repression and censorship.



Figure 15. Margarita Paksa, *Silencio* (*Silence*), 1967. Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires.

This work stands in contrast with one of Hans Haacke's earliest works *Condensation Cube* (1965) that consisted of a transparent acrylic cube containing water. Because of the temperature difference between the inside and outside, the water condensed and constantly changed in random forms. While Paksa's cube spoke to the restraints and control of the military government in Argentina, Haacke's cube emphasized the condition of art as a living organism which reacts in a flexible manner to its surroundings.

In my own interviews with Paksa, I asked her about the difference between the *Relaxing Egg* and the *Silencio* series, and without hesitation, she said that the *Relaxing Egg* was a minimalist work, and that afterward she moved toward a more conceptual work. With *Silencio* "there is more content and I'm working it in another way; I'm not interested in minimalism so

much, but what I'm getting with that."¹⁴⁷ *Relaxing Egg* has a more subtle political message than *Silencio*. However, they all share the idea of an encoded message: a need for intimacy, a sense of privacy. Even though the eggs exist in multiples and were meant to be distributed throughout Buenos Aires, the relaxing eggs are meant to be experienced individually. In the series of five hundred, there is a tension between an inward drive and the will to formulate collective proposals. However, the eggs were never experienced as a whole. There is no documentation nor information about who has them or how they felt about them. There is no actual sense of collectivity but rather a secluded experience, an underground happening. The small handheld sculptures point to the individual experience of the work rather than an opening up to a collective participation. They are secret sculptures. *Relaxing Egg* has an amorphous existence, recognized as both material and secretive.

Writing in 1967 about the North American Minimalists and hidden aggressions embedded within their use of silence, Susan Sontag stated,

The exemplary modern artist's choice of silence isn't often carried to this point of final simplification, so that he becomes literally silent. More typically, he continues speaking, but in a manner that his audience can't hear. Most valuable art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence (or unintelligibility or invisibility or inaudibility); a dismantling of the artist's competence, his responsible sense of vocation—and therefore as an aggression against them.¹⁴⁸

"The notions of silence, emptiness, reduction," Sontag states, "sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc.—specifically, either for having a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or for confronting the art work in a more conscious, conceptual way."¹⁴⁹ John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), for instance, is a musical score in three movements that instructs the performers not to

¹⁴⁷ Interview with the author, August 18, 2017.

¹⁴⁸ Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1969), 4-5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

play their instruments during the entire duration of the piece. 4'33" is commonly known as the silent piece, where the performer sits at the piano and marks off the time in three movements, all the while making no sound. Cage's desire was that even though sound is not forthcoming, listening can still go on if one's attention is shifted to the surrounding sounds.

Paksa's silence was not the same silence as the one performed by Cage or the Minimalists. Paksa's works' secretiveness are in fact a way to survive, to be able to continue to make art in a violent and censored context of dictatorship. Paksa's work with different materials, technologies, and strategies, are all leading towards a main goal: the survival of the artist. Referring to the military dictatorship in Argentina, Marguerite Feitlowitz writes that "the terrorist state created two worlds—one public and one clandestine, each with its own encoded discourse."¹⁵⁰ A widely spread message by the military was that they aimed to recover *el ser nacional*, which translates as "the collective national essence, soul, or consciousness."¹⁵¹ Even though this might sound like a preference for collectivism and multitudes, the military abhorred both individualists as self reliance *and* the (leftist) masses. For both Juan Perón and the juntas, "individualism" was far removed from any sort of heroism. Here is Perón as early as 1949: "Individualism is amoral. It leads to subversion, to egoism, to the evolution of the lower forms of the species."¹⁵² Later on, the military would use these same ideas to censor both individuals and masses. Emilio E. Massera, an Argentine naval military officer, proclaimed that "some must speak and some must be still, so we can listen to the voices of the just and the silence of the sinners."¹⁵³ Perhaps the latter is what was in Paksa's box. Institutions in Argentina like the di

¹⁵⁰ Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵² Ibid., 37. I will expand on the "juntas" in Chapter 1.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 39. Massera was a leading participant in the Argentine coup of 1976. Here he was addressing the National Academy of Law and Social Science in 1970. From "Derecho al mar" (The Right to the Sea) in Emilio E. Massera, *El Camino a la Democracia* (Caracas: El Cid Editor, 1979), 38.

Tella remained a refuge for artists' experiments only as long as the political statements remained coded.¹⁵⁴ Paksa was *trying* to find any possible way to keep making challenging art under Onganía's dictatorship that censored, often violently, artists and their artworks.

Art and Everyday Life

After the fall of Juan Domingo Perón in 1955, the boiling political situation in Argentina was an ideal breeding ground for the appearance of political publications. The primary ones were *Primera Plana*, *Confirmado*, *Siete Días*, *Redacción*, and *Panorama*.¹⁵⁵ For about a year in 1968, every week, Paksa's *Relaxing Egg* was centrally featured in the comic strip *Sir Jonás, el ejecutivo* by cartoonist Landrú (Juan Carlos Columbres), published in *Primera Plana*.¹⁵⁶ The comic told the story of Sir Jonás, a manager who turned to the *Relaxing Egg* every time he got nervous. One May 1968 strip read: "In order to calm down, Sir Jonás took the relaxing egg and started to turn it vertiginously between his fingers. . . Sir Jonás moved it quickly in his right

¹⁵⁴ See Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del di Tella a "Tucumán Arde": Vanguardia artística y política en el '68 argentino [From di Tella to "Tucumán Arde": Artistic and political vanguard in the Argentine '68]*, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Cielo por Asalto, 2000).

¹⁵⁵ In 1965, Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman sold *Primer Plana* and dedicated himself to another publication called *Confirmado*. The magazine continued with the information and narrative style of *Primera Plana*, and was clearly on the side of the military, attaching the democratic government. There is not much information about *Siete Días* except that it was trying to be like "Life" magazine. *Panorama* also came out in 1965 as a monthly publication and in 1968 became weekly. *Panorama's* slogan was "the magazine of our times," and offered articles on international themes, about television, and dealt with depth some themes that the newspapers dealt with more superficially. See Carlos Ulanovsky, *Paren las Rotativas: Diarios, Revistas y Periodistas 1920-1969 [Stop the Rotary: Newspapers, Magazines and Journalists 1920-1969]*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2005) and Daniel Scarfò, "Esplendor y ocaso de la editorial Abril" ["Splendor and occasion of the April publishing house"], *Clarín*, November 8, 2016. https://www.clarin.com/rn/ideas/Esplendor-ocaso-editorial-Abril_0_HyXtkvOwQl.html.

¹⁵⁶ During the 1960s, especially between 1965 and 1967, the Argentine art critic, psychoanalyst, and essayist, Oscar Masotta, focused his writings on experimental artistic productions (Pop art, happenings, media art) and objects of mass culture, in particular the comic strip. In 1968 he organized the first International Biennial of the Comic Strip at the di Tella, considered "the most successful expression of the era of the encounter between art and mass culture." His interest in comics was innovative for its reconsideration of a product of "low" mass culture as a privileged object for analysis and interpretation using emerging theoretical paradigms. The Argentine literary and cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo says, "It was the emergence of a new sensibility, since the intellectuals of the 1950s tended to place themselves only in relation to the 'high' art." John King, interview by Beatriz Sarlo, "El di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta" [El di Tella and Argentine cultural development in the sixties] (Buenos Aires: Gaglianone, 1985): 421.

hand.”¹⁵⁷ The imagery shows the parody of the comic strip as Sir Jonás is sitting at his work desk with what looks like a bottle of wine, smoking a cigar and holding a *Relaxing Egg* in his left hand (fig. 16).



Figure 16. "Sir Jonas, el ejecutivo," *Primera Plana*, Buenos Aires, May 21 1968. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

¹⁵⁷ "Sir Jonás, el ejecutivo," ["Sir Jonás, the executive"], *Primera Plana* (Buenos Aires), May 21, 1968, 282.

The Onganía military had taken certain economic strategies, promoting the decrease of salaries and a demand for higher productivity of employees.¹⁵⁸ As a manager, Sir Jonás, drinking wine, smoking and playing with the *Relaxing Egg*, was not necessarily following the norms of productivity that the military was ordaining.

Another similar story appeared in a July 1968 issue of *Panorama*; Miguel Brascó wrote a short fictional story about a businessman that included a *Relaxing Egg* in the plot. A secretary notices that her boss is stressed out and brings him a relaxing egg as a gift. “Grabbing the eggs immediately, he became relaxed.”¹⁵⁹

Primera Plana was a widely read weekly magazine, with a circulation of approximately one hundred thousand, but its reach was limited to less than five percent of the capital’s population.¹⁶⁰ It was aimed at upper-class readers and contained advertisements and articles on high-end products and cultural events.¹⁶¹ It was published uninterruptedly from November 13, 1962, until August 4, 1969, when the Onganía dictatorship prohibited its circulation. When it reappeared a year later, it openly supported Onganía’s military intervention. For instance, journalist Mariano Grondona wrote: “That the terms ‘dictatorship’ and . . . ‘dictator’ are used as

¹⁵⁸ Lucas Daniel Iramain, “La Política Laboral de la Última Dictadura Cívico-Militar,” *Anuario IEHS* 29 & 30 (2014-2015): 71-96.

¹⁵⁹ Miguel Brascó, “Temas Ejecutivológicos” [“Executive topics”], *Panorama*, (Buenos Aires), July 1968. Newspaper clipping in Paksa’s archive.

¹⁶⁰ Laura Podalsky, “Circulating Desires,” in *Spectacular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955–1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 159.

¹⁶¹ Argentina at this time experienced an explosion of critical writing, supported by an expansion of magazine culture, most prominently with *Primera Plana*, which began as a middlebrow magazine and quickly became a dominant voice. *Ibid.*, 148–75.

synonyms for tyranny and tyrants is a serious error of historical perspective.”¹⁶² The same author wrote in another issue: “The army has to take sides on what happens in the country because it is an essential and indispensable part of our history.”¹⁶³ Even though several writers in the magazine supported the military intervention, the magazine was shut down several times. In 1971, Juan Perón acquired the magazine when he was in exile in Spain and ran it from there, finally ceasing its publication in 1973.

The magazine had a column called “Vida Moderna” (Modern Life) that reported on contemporary practices, for example, the increasing use of babysitters, fashionable restaurants, and innovative products (gifts for clients, men’s suits, wedding gowns, speedboats, etcetera).¹⁶⁴ It is not too surprising, then, that Paksa’s *Relaxing Egg* got so much visibility in this magazine, reporting as it was on the latest trends available to the model consumer-citizen. Even though the appearance of the eggs in *Primera Plana* was part of Paksa’s goals—to incorporate the work of art into everyday life, and become part of the popular culture—in 1968, with the turn of the magazine’s politics in support of the dictatorship, she felt betrayed and angry. When the cover of one 1969 issue read “Argentina: The Death of Painting,” and had an image of a wooden easel covered in white flowers and purple ribbons, Paksa had the urge to react.¹⁶⁵ Paksa sent a letter to the editors where she claimed that “art is not dead.... It has changed, and it has to respond to the new social realities.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Mariano Grondona, *Primera Plana*, May 3, 1966. Newspaper clipping in the Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires.

¹⁶³ Mariano Grondona, *Primera Plana*, June 7, 1966. Quoted in Ernesto Jauretche, *No Dejes Que Te la Cuenten: Violencia y Política en los 70* [Don’t Let Them Tell You: Violence and Politics in the 70s], (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Del Pensamiento Nacional, 1997), 118.

¹⁶⁴ Laura Podalsky, “Circulating Desires,” in *Spectacular City*, 162.

¹⁶⁵ *Primera Plana*, N. 333, May 19, 1969.

¹⁶⁶ Reprinted in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 104.

In *Relaxing Egg*, the viewer experience is the focal point of the work, providing a way for people to connect with reality and themselves. By engaging the senses and touching the polished plastic egg, one would achieve a critical sensibility, and as argued in this chapter, Paksa's commitment to relaxation was not about avoiding or evading tension but rather about restoring equilibrium and connecting with oneself. Acting as a political tool, the small scale of the eggs allowed Paksa to blur the distinction between art and life, and allowed for the eggs to exist under such political circumstances, hidden from the public eye, in order to survive as an artist.

CHAPTER II: Communication

In Argentina, 1968 marked the moment when the gallery site began to feel like a prison, holding artists and their work back from any contact with the outside world. The Instituto Di Tella—the main art center in Argentina at the time—responded to this situation, hosting *ambientaciones* (environments) and happenings. These forced the viewer-participants to arrive at their own highly specific understanding of the experience, reworking the traditional conceptualization of the museum or gallery so that, rather than a space of passive contemplation, the Di Tella became a site of festive and even interactive encounters. Interestingly, since its opening in 1958, the Di Tella was the target of criticism by both right- and left-wing groups.

“The government saw the Di Tella as a ‘corrupting influence’ and made some efforts to curtail its growing cultural influence,” explains Prof. Laura Podalsky. As for critics on the left, such as the Communist Party, they denounced the Institute’s a-politicism and financial ties to foreign charitable organizations. The harshest critique of the left was that the Di Tella “reproduced older patterns of neocolonial domination under the guise of artistic innovation.”¹⁶⁷ In addition, the Di Tella was accused of celebrating foreign cultural values while ignoring the misery around it.¹⁶⁸

Despite these critiques, the Di Tella undoubtedly provoked intense and productive relationships while simultaneously clashing with artists. It provided resources for experimentation and helped foster encounters between avant-garde artists, create interdisciplinary work, and contact new audiences for art. Some artists would identify themselves as belonging to the Institute (“del Di Tella”), while others described their affiliation as limited to

¹⁶⁷ Laura Podalsky, “The Di Tella and the Manzana Loca,” in *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955–1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 144.

¹⁶⁸ See John King, “Desarrollo artístico y cultural: Argentina, 1956-1976,” [“Artistic and cultural development: Argentina, 1956-1976”] in *Arte en Argentina: Argentina 1920–1994* [Art in Argentina: Argentina 1920-1994], ed. David Elliot (Oxford: Museum of Art, 1994), 72.

occasional invitations through which they took advantage of the resources it offered.¹⁶⁹ Throughout 1968, a significant number of artists broke with art institutions with which they had been affiliated.

A series of artworks and protest actions in 1968 by Margarita Paksa and other artists from Buenos Aires and Rosario challenged art institutions and their representatives, as well as the political climate of dictatorship. Many artists not only took art to the streets in the form of social or political actions, but they also introduced modes of political speech, and interrupted official events by reciting their own texts or attempting to present the class struggle through art. As Quiles characterizes the art scene in Argentina in “Between Code and Message: Argentine Conceptual Art, 1966–1976,” some artists saw the country’s political situation as necessitating clear messages in art, while others questioned the very possibility of articulating any message that is direct and explicit.¹⁷⁰ In the projects analyzed in this chapter, we see how Paksa falls into the latter category—questioning the new forms of art that aimed to convey a single and unambiguous political message.

Mesa Redonda (1967)

Starting in late 1967, Paksa became less interested in minimalist forms and “primary structures” and instead turned to speech and communication as points of departure for her work. In October 1967, Paksa proposed a project to Jorge Romero Brest at the Di Tella, titled *Mesa Redonda—Esto es un juicio (Round Table—This Is a Trial)*. *Mesa Redonda*, which ultimately went

¹⁶⁹ Paksa participated in only three exhibitions at the Di Tella: *Más allá de la geometría*, *Experiencias '67*, and *Experiencias '68*. She did not consider herself as belonging to the Di Tella, but she did recognize the access to new opportunities and technologies that the center gave her at the time: “The Institute promoted an environment of creative freedom and supported an investigative art.” Interview with Margarita Paksa in Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, eds., *Del di Tella a Tucumán Arde: Vanguardia artística y política en el '68 argentino* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Cielo por Asalto, 2000), 371.

¹⁷⁰ Daniel R. Quiles, “Between Code and Message: Argentine Conceptual Art, 1966–1976” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2010), 136.

unrealized, was envisioned as a round table or panel discussion with invited artists Oscar Bony, David Lamelas, and Oscar Palacios. Paksa described round tables as acts that “take place while following pre-conceived CODES, rules of behavior and proceedings previously established.”¹⁷¹ As for *Mesa Redonda*, she continues, “this project is built on the foundation of assuming there isn’t much novelty in the way the receiver gets a concept.”¹⁷²

Paksa conceived of an artists’ panel as an artwork in itself and as bearing as little relation as possible to the quality of spontaneity. The prepared questions for the panelists were sent by mail along with the invitation to the participants. Every person’s acting role would be far removed from the individual’s own subjectivity and would comprise a response to generic circumstances. “The audience will be seated in a lower level than the artists. This serves to set off the condition of art: a preferential stage, a superior one, as if it had an aura. The artists may be armed with tools and elements typical of their work—a painting, brushes, a palette, a camera, etc.” A spotlight would highlight the artist, and his or her response would be broadcasted via an audio recording. Initially, each question would coincide with its answer, but as the event transpired, the questions and answers would not correspond to each other. For example, a question to a woman might be answered by a man, or a question to a particular artist might be answered by a musical sound. The audience would have to connect the different questions and answers in their minds through memory, making it evident that they were attending a round table that had previously occurred and had been scrambled.

In the proposal for *Mesa Redonda*, Paksa writes, “The spectator is not allowed to remain passive, he must carry out an activity.”¹⁷³ This was not the first time that Paksa articulated the

¹⁷¹ Margarita Paksa and Marcelo Pacheco, *Proyectos: Sobre el discurso de mi* (1997; repr., Buenos Aires: Fundación Espigas, 2003), 107.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 108.

importance of having an active audience or spectator. Chapter 1 focused on the essential role that the audience played in *Relaxing Egg* as both active participants and consumers. Though, for *Relaxing Egg*, the works were meant to exist and be interacted with in intimate or private spaces such as one's home, office, or pocket. For *Mesa Redonda*—a public event—Paksa's setting is a “public space.” However, one can argue that an art institution is semi-public with a limited type of audience. Paksa explains that “the essential objective [of *Mesa Redonda*] is to set out the presence of the communication codes and leave aside all those possibilities generally termed ‘spontaneity.’ The public is the only one that can feign to believe in spontaneity since it will always be attending a representation, even if unwillingly.”¹⁷⁴ The recordings played for answers act as authoritative forms of information with no place for change, improvisation, or emotions to arise. The authoritarian aspect of the round table relates to the dictatorial regime of Juan Carlos Onganía, who had assumed the Presidency in Argentina just a year earlier in 1966.

Mesa Redonda was a clear rejoinder to the many round tables organized at the time in conjunction with exhibitions at the Di Tella. Paksa sought to expose the predictability of the art world and the premeditated, assigned roles that each person generally performs. Invited artists to the Di Tella were generally expected to discuss motivations behind their work, for example, and not encouraged to discuss or say certain things.¹⁷⁵ Such events often included Jorge Romero Brest as the organizer, curator, and moderator. When Paksa proposed this project to Romero Brest, he rejected it without hesitation.¹⁷⁶ Had Paksa's work been realized, she would have succeeded in exposing the audience to the mechanical formula and power relations inherent in

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹⁷⁵ In both exhibitions *Experiencias Visuales '67* and *Experiencias '68* at the Instituto Di Tella there were roundtables such as the one described. Information available at the Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires. Additionally, Paksa explained in an interview with the author that roundtables with artists at the Di Tella were predetermined beforehand and felt forced and artificial. Interview with Author, Buenos Aires, Argentina, August 2016.

¹⁷⁶ *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 66.

the round-table format. She hoped that the round table would no longer serve as an effective conduit of information concerning certain exhibitions, artists, or artworks.

However, in Paksa's notes for the project, she expresses ambivalence toward this new type of art she was proposing. She writes:

If our work fit into a synthesis of concepts; if we voluntarily remove from our own works the expressive stroke or emotional touch that (no doubt) excited our predecessors, if we expressed ourselves through an IDEA rather than on the decision to confuse the spectator, it would be unfortunate if the logical correlative was that we intended an act of DIRECT communication.¹⁷⁷

At a time when many ambitious artists were moving away from practices such as abstraction or primary structures or Minimalism, with more open-ended content, Paksa seems troubled by the idea that what would replace these previous styles would be art with a "direct" message. In other words, she was afraid that conceptual art in Argentina would become too explicit, definitive, and didactic.

The term "conceptualism" as defined by Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer is relevant here. He explains that "'conceptualism' (as a separate term from 'conceptual art') challenges not only aesthetics but also the attitude towards the role of art—the ways of producing it and its intended impact."¹⁷⁸ This means that two ruptures have to be discussed, not just one. Of these ruptures, one is *formal* and the other *institutional*, and each has different historical significance."¹⁷⁹ If by historical, we mean the political relations that drive changes in the structures that shape (and often constrain) everyday life, then *form* and *institution* seem quite connected for Paksa, which is why she is troubled about the apparently "direct" form promoting an imbalanced power relation. Paksa's concern about her work having a direct or didactic

¹⁷⁷ Paksa, in Paksa and Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 43–44. Translated by Quiles, "Between Code and Message," 172–73.

¹⁷⁸ For a complication on Luis Camnitzer's definition of "conceptualism" see Miguel A. López, "How Do We Know What Latin American Conceptualism Looks Like?," *Afterall* 23 (2010): 5–21.

¹⁷⁹ Luis Camnitzer, "Salpicón and Compota," in *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University Of Texas Press, 2007), 15.

message has to do with an effort to seriously and responsibly change the relationship between art and its audience. The scrambling of the questions and answers in *Mesa Redonda* was a way of making the message of this piece less “direct.” The viewer would have had a different experience from other conceptual works being germinated at the time, such as *Tucumán Arde*, where the message was intentionally more didactic and informational.

In his 1957 lecture “The Creative Act,” Marcel Duchamp identified two aspects of the creation of art: the artist and the spectator. “The artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius: he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Artist History,” he explained.¹⁸⁰ “[...] The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act,” Duchamp added. In trying to find the right approach to conceptual art, Paksa was juggling art and its interrelation with the social and political reality. For Paksa, an art without a “direct message” leaves more room for the spectator to “decipher and interpret,” which was more in line with her politics, freeing the viewer (and citizen) of set constraints and interpretations that reify dominant culture. In light of her skepticism toward conceptual art, her project *Comunicaciones* (1968) gives expression to Paksa’s internal conflict with an art of ideas, an art of communication, and what it can do.

***Comunicaciones* (1968)**

Mesa Redonda set the stage for Paksa’s projects at the Di Tella that examined different modes of communication. The work, *Comunicaciones* (Communications), was created for the controversial and iconic group exhibition *Experiencias ’68* at the Di Tella (May 8–23, 1968).

¹⁸⁰ Marcel Duchamp, “Creative Act,” *Convention of the American Federation of Arts*, Houston, Texas, April 1957, repr., *Aspen* no. 5+6, Fall-Winter 1967, Roaring Fork Press, New York City, New York.

Comunicaciones consisted of various physical and mediated elements placed in relation to one another, organized as four different parts or “sequences,” as Paksa calls them.¹⁸¹ Paksa explains that “these sequences distinguish different types of messages and the relationship between the transmitter, the code used, and the receiver in a dematerialized whole.”¹⁸²

The first sequence was a small white room or *ambiente* (environment) with dihedral angles, constructed in the apartment of architect Osvaldo Giesso who had also organized *Obras en Riesgo* at the San Telmo Store, the same place where Paksa presented *Relaxing Egg*, in 1967. Because of its dimensions (of about 3 ft high and 6 ft long), the room only offered the possibility of sitting or lying down. It was meant to be used “for relaxing, introspection, sleeping, or love.”¹⁸³ The room of curved angles was enveloping “like an uterus,” as Paksa explained.¹⁸⁴ There is no documentation of this room, which seems purposeful since it creates a space that exists only as distant and remote -- the room stayed in Giesso’s apartment and only existed as a concept for the space supplied. It was not to be accessed but only imagined.

The reference to the room enclosing the viewer and being “like a uterus” relates to her first installation, *Calórico (Caloric)* (1965) (fig. 17), in which she filled a gallery with bright red polyester and vinyl, along with tubes, balls, and fun-house mirrors set in a circular arrangement.

¹⁸¹ *Comunicaciones* was restaged at Fundación Proa in Buenos Aires in 2005 for that year’s re-creation of *Experiencias* ’68.

¹⁸² Paksa, “Proyecto Realizado: Comunicaciones,” in Paksa and Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 74.

¹⁸³ Translation by Eileen Brockbank from Spanish to English in Ines Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 245.

¹⁸⁴ Author’s interview with Margarita Paksa, Buenos Aires, Argentina, August 2017.



Figure 17. Margarita Paksa, *Calórico* (*Caloric*), 1965, Acrylic and Mirrors. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

These mutually reflecting transparencies made many visitors feel as if they were inside a machine or someone's body. *Calórico* evoked the "internal," provoking a sense of claustrophobia—the idea was to create the experience of being inside a dystopian domestic fun-house, reflective of the unstable times. The *ambiente* at Giesso's studio presented conceptually in *Comunicaciones* was different to *Calórico* in that it was removed from the audience's direct experience and only existed as an idea. Similarly, however, both *Calórico* and *Comunicaciones*' first sequence invoke a space that is confined, limited, and even oppressive.

Titled *Santuario del Sueño* (*Sleep Sanctuary*), the second sequence of *Comunicaciones* comprised one side of a 33-rpm record; identified by a blue spiral on the face of the record, it played a spoken description of the room in Giesso's studio and a text with the same description. A transcription of the text is on the following pages. For Paksa, this description has a hypnotic quality, one that is "obsessive and circular."¹⁸⁵ The third sequence was the second side of that

¹⁸⁵ Paksa, in Paksa and Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 74.

record, decorated with a disc-shaped pattern of wavy red lines and titled *Candente (Red Hot)* (fig. 18).

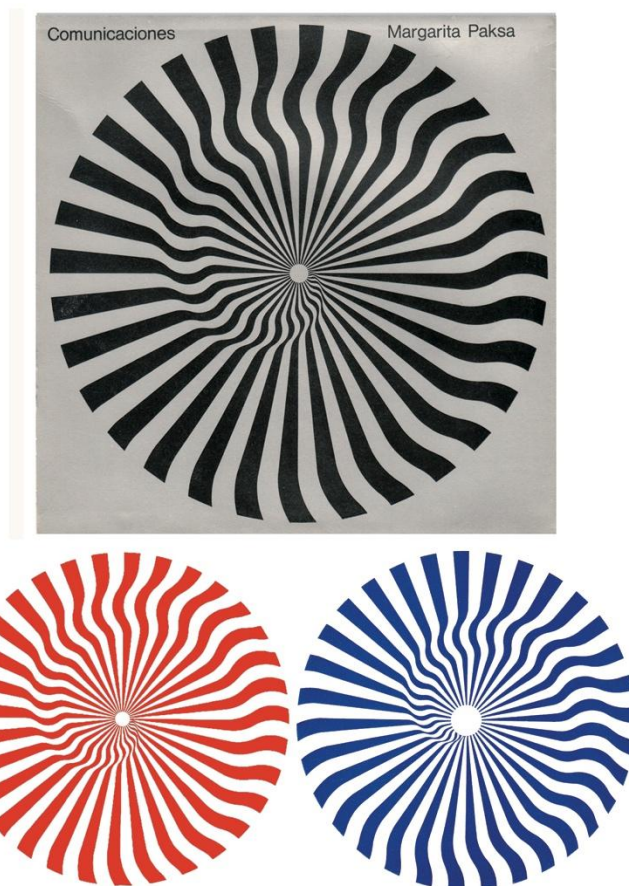


Figure 18. Margarita Paksa, *Comunicaciones (Communications)* (Sequence 2 and 3, record covers), 1968. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

It consisted of a recording of two people—Paksa and her husband, Osmar Cairola—engaging in intercourse. According to Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman “both sides [of the record] tended to nullify or balance each other out.”¹⁸⁶ Nullification and balance are rather opposing kinds of actions, and I believe Paksa’s goal was to create balance by creating experiences that were calming and others that were exciting.

¹⁸⁶ Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 110.

The fourth and final sequence (fig. 19) was located in the gallery space, in this case the Di Tella. It consisted of an 8 by 4-meter (26 by 13-foot) rectangle filled with sand, in front of which two record players on a pedestal would play sequences 2 and 3 on headphones.



Figure 19. Margarita Paksa, *Comunicaciones (Communications)* (Sequence 4), Performance Paksa and Osmar Cairola, Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 8, 1968. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

The audience was encouraged to sit down on a low table that supported the two Wisco turntables, and listen to the records while facing the sand. On the sand surface, Paksa and her husband made imprints of their bodies. This action occurred on the opening night and was meant to be repeated weekly. Paksa writes, “when we started the exhibition, this action was photographed, documented. The purpose of the photo was to freeze the event, which would be reproduced in the mass media, such as it was in *Primera Plana* No. 282.”¹⁸⁷ The *Primera Plana* photo (fig. 20) shows Paksa wearing black pants and a long-sleeve shirt, lying down on the sand,

¹⁸⁷ Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 246.

facing up. Cairola, her then-husband, is standing next to her, wearing shorts and no shirt. He is stepping forward, approaching Paksa, about to lay down next to her. The photographs are zoomed in to the two performers, leaving outside the frame the rest of the installation and the presumed audience watching them. Paksa and Cairola's faces are obscured, highlighting the two bodies against the white sand.

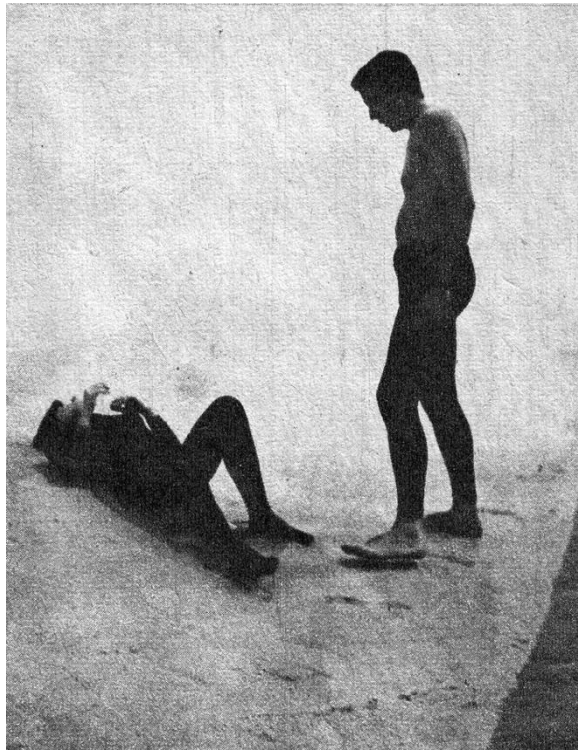


Figure 20. Margarita Paksa, *Comunicaciones (Communications)* (Sequence 4), Performance Paksa and Osmar Cairola, Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 8, 1968. Photo from *Primera Plana* N. 282. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

This photo became an iconic image representing the types of works that Argentinian artists were developing in 1968—it represented a non-traditional art form with characteristics of dematerialization and ephemerality.

The audience was invited to listen to the records with headphones so that the sound would be available only individually, creating a more private and closed setting in the public exhibition hall (fig. 21).

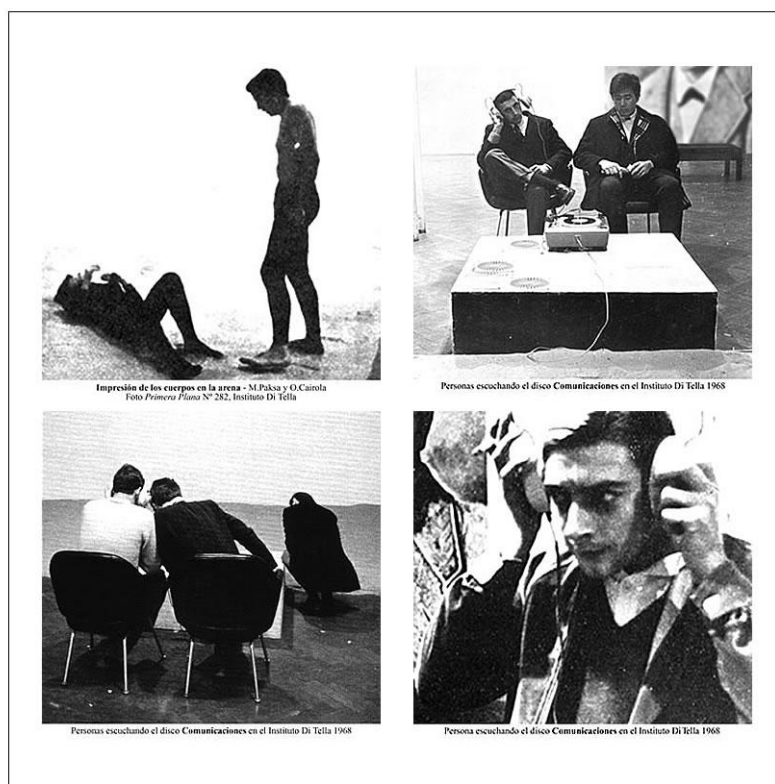


Figure. 21. Margarita Paksa, *Comunicaciones* (*Communications*), Opening night at the Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 8, 1968. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

As Paksa explains, “the purpose was to offer a personal and intimate hearing.”¹⁸⁸ “Intimate” could refer to the erotic aspect of the work’s third sequence, yet this was not the first time that Paksa explored intimacy and interiority. As in *Relaxing Egg*, *Comunicaciones* created a space that points to relaxation and introspection. The audience was invited to have a more intimate experience while listening to the sounds of the records and looking at the imprinted bodies in the

¹⁸⁸ Paksa, in Paksa and Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 76.

sand.¹⁸⁹ This was an installation that demanded the participation of the visitor. However, it was crucial for Paksa that this participation would take place almost invisibly, internally, in the mind of the individual audience member. No one else would know if the audience member is actually “participating,” only the person in the headset knows their own degree of participation and communication.

The art critic Alberto Cousté praised the work in the weekly magazine *Primera Plana*, writing, “Margarita Paksa’s work (a 33 RPM record called *Comunicaciones*, followed by a sandpit where she will weekly stamp her body print) is undoubtedly the culmination of the show *Experiencias ’68* and perhaps one of the richest works in meaning produced by the avant-garde of Buenos Aires.”¹⁹⁰ (fig. 22)

¹⁸⁹ In her essay “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies,” Kristin Stiles writes about Romanian artist Lia Perjovschi’s project *Test of Sleep* from 1988 which occurred during one of the most violent times of the autocratic totalitarianism of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, who were assassinated on December 25, 1989.” Perjovschi’s project consists of covering her body with white paint with which she inscribes illegible symbols, a visual language that she then animates with silent gestures. This performance was enacted privately in her home with her husband as the only witness/audience. Stiles argues that silence is the foundation of trauma and the cause of the loss of identity. “Silence was maintained efficiently by the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, which enforced Nicolae Ceaușescu’s crushing control [...] Fear and secrecy resulted in the effective supervision of all aspects of Romanian life.” Like Romanian silences, Argentinean silences should also be understood in the context of silences that result from terror and censorship. Paksa’s *Comunicaciones* and her insistence on intimacy and privacy in her projects in general relate to Stiles’ analysis of trauma and its silent expression. Kristin Stiles, “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies” in *Concerning Consequences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 54-55.

¹⁹⁰ Alberto Cousté, *Primera Plana*, no. 282, May 21, 1968. Quoted and translated in Paksa and Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 120. Translated by the author. I talk more about *Primera Plana* in Chapter 1. It was a weekly glossy political, cultural, and current affairs magazine published in Buenos Aires between 1962 and 1973.



Figure 22. Alberto Cousté, “Di Tella: La Sangre llega al río” in *Primera Plana* No. 282, May 21, 1968. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

With that strong statement, Cousté then explains that “the real contribution goes beyond its totalizing function (space and movement, the static and the dynamic, fullness and emptiness, the virtuality of the image on the record and its ephemeral value in the sand). It rather resides in the shivering encounter, long absent from the visual arts; the discovery of poetry, that secret method of knowledge.”¹⁹¹ Cousté is right on point when he emphasizes that what is special about *Comunicaciones* (and Paksa’s work as a whole) is its silent, mysterious, secretive character. Paksa’s installation had elements of surprise, especially encountering the recording of the couple engaging in sexual intercourse, forcing the viewer to listen to something that was not revealed beforehand. Whereas many of the works in *Experiencias* ’68 featured an explicit approach, Paksa’s *Comunicaciones* is more poetic, requiring a process of discovery and a more prolonged experience.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

As part of the project, Paksa created a chart titled “Comunicaciones—Esquema de Trabajo” (“Communications—Work Scheme”) (fig. 23), where she mapped out the points of interaction between the viewers and the different elements in the work. She divided the chart into four points: *emisor* (sender), *código* (code), *estímulo* (stimulus), and *receptor* (receiver or viewer).¹⁹²

EMISOR	CODIGO	ESTIMULO	RECEPTOR
1. El ambiente construido en el Estudio Giesse	arquitectural	táctil visual	La posibilidad de ser usado para reflex, introspección, sueño o amor. (Mensaje ambiguo)
2. La descripción observativa del ambiente. Tema azul del disco: "Santuario del Sueño"	disco cassette	auditivo	El espectador/oyente, es introducido en 7' en blanco, la nada, el vacío. (Mensaje ambiguo)
3. La respiración humana Tema rojo del disco: "Candente"	disco cassette	auditivo	El espectador/oyente, es propuesto a moverse energicamente los sentidos. (Mensaje univoco)
4. Performance en el Inst. Di Tella. La artista y su pareja imprimen sus cuerpos en la arena, se escuchó el disco por auriculares.	acción corporal	visual auditivo	La reconstrucción de las secuencias en el imaginario del espectador/oyente. (Mensaje ambiguo)

Figure 23. Margarita Paksa, “Comunicaciones—Esquema de Trabajo” (“Communications—Work Scheme”), *Comunicaciones*, 1968.

The senders were listed as the environment at Giesse’s studio, the description of that environment on the record, the human breathing on the record, and the performance at the Di Tella in which Paksa and her partner imprinted their bodies on sand. The codes were the mediums chosen to communicate with the senders, and they are “architectural,” “record,” and “body action.” The resulting stimuli were the “tactile visual,” “auditory,” and “visual auditory,” which were transmitted to the receiver or viewer. In the last column, about the receiver/viewer, Paksa specified the possibilities of reception by the spectator. As she writes, the message for all the sequences would be ambiguous, except for the message for the side of the record with moaning sounds, which would have an unambiguous message.

¹⁹² Paksa and Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 78.

It is unknown whether the chart was available for visitors to see or if it was made only for Paksa's own use, but it most certainly exists as a record of Paksa's work scheme and theoretical paradigms. Even though *Comunicaciones* is a multipart, complex system of transmission, Paksa made an effort to create a definite structure. In some ways, it resembles a scientific formula, meticulously planned, with each sequence having a particular beginning and end, even when the message is "ambiguous." In *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect and the Antihumanist Turn* (2013), Eve Meltzer defines strategies (like the ones by North American artists Adrian Piper, Sol LeWitt, and Mel Bochner) as falling under the sign of "information." She could add Paksa to the list, writing that "their rhetorics resisted the conventional ideology of visibility, conceptualist strategies are often considered resolutely anti-visual."¹⁹³ I would not go as far as to say Paksa's *Comunicaciones* was "anti-visual," but she was certainly playing with the idea of visual ambivalence, the auditory and the sensory.

Meltzer approaches Conceptualism and Structuralism as one and interconnected cultural forms. In fact, Meltzer approaches conceptualism from all sides, "these include systems and structures, language and 'information,' and the scientific and seemingly disaffected mode of rendering the visual field and, more generally, of managing experience."¹⁹⁴ Paksa employed terms by Structuralists such as Roman Jakobson, who was being read by artists and intellectuals in Argentina who followed art critic, semiotician, and psychoanalyst Oscar Masotta's seminars and writings.¹⁹⁵ Artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario did not necessarily call their work "conceptual" but rather *arte de los medios* (Mass-Mediatric Art). They appropriated structuralist, semiotic, and communicational theories as focal points for their conceptual projects. In the

¹⁹³ Eve Meltzer, "Antepartum" in *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹⁵ Other linguists being read and claimed by Masotta were Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Claude Shannon, and Warren Weaver. See Quiles, "Between Code and Message."

1960s, Masotta gave numerous lectures on Pop art, happenings, and *arte de los medios* (media art). They were collected in his volumes *El "Pop Art"* (1967) and *Happenings* (1967). In these writings, Masotta indicates that signs are capable of generating more than one possible interpretation, and that “the signified of a sign depends solely on context.”¹⁹⁶ The categories in Paksa’s chart that break down the various points of interaction between the viewer and the different elements in *Comunicaciones*—sender, code, stimulus, and receiver or viewer—correspond to those that Masotta identifies in *El "Pop Art"* when citing Jakobson’s essay “Linguistique et poétique.”¹⁹⁷ Masotta’s five conditioning factors of a message are listed as: emitter, receiver, contact, context, and message itself. Important to note is that Masotta omitted the category of “code,” which is so central in Jakobson’s essay and that corresponds to context. But Paksa restores this category in her chart, noting the criticality of the “code” as an essential category for her work. If we understand “code” as “a system of symbols (such as letters or numbers) used to represent assigned and often secret meanings,” this supports Paksa’s desire to create art that does not have a “direct message.”¹⁹⁸

As for the first and second sequences—the architectural environment and the recording with the description of the space—they both have ambiguous (or better yet) conflicting messages. Paksa writes in her book *Proyectos sobre el discurso de mi* that the space at Giesso’s studio offered “the possibility of being used for relaxation, introspection, sleep, or love.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Oscar Masotta, “Happenings,” in *Revolución en el Arte: Pop-art, happenings y arte de los medios en la década del sesenta*, ed. Ana Longoni (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2004), 143–44.

¹⁹⁷ Roman Jakobson, “Linguistique et poétique,” in *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), 209–20. Masotta was also drawing his ideas from Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, among others. I will also refer to the media theorist Marshall McLuhan when referring to the work of Marta Minujín’s *Simultaneidad* and its connections with McLuhan’s theories. Other relevant theorists are Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver’s 1950s linear model of communication and 1960s David Berlo’s theory “Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver Model of Communication.”

¹⁹⁸ Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/code>, s.v. “code.”

¹⁹⁹ Margarita Paksa and Marcelo Pacheco, *Proyectos: Sobre el discurso de mi* (1997; repr., Buenos Aires: Fundación Espigas, 2003), 74.

However, the descriptive text of the room that accompanies the recordings diffuses any sense of relaxation. The descriptive text of the room reads as follows:

Santuario del Sueño (Sleep Sanctuary)

There are four walls, floor and ceiling
 four walls, floor and ceiling
 we are coming into a room with
 four walls, floor and ceiling
 the wall on the right is like the floor
 the wall on the left is like the floor
 the wall in front is like the floor
 the wall at the back is like the floor
 the ceiling is like the floor
 the ceiling is like the walls
 the floor is like the walls
 the angles are curved
 visual infinite
 a shining point
 only a shining point
 the eyes are fixed on the shining point
 the eyes are fixed, visual infinite
 the eyes are fixed on the shining point
 the eyelids
 the eyelids weigh, weigh
 the eyelids weigh, weigh
 now we are coming into an enormous balloon
 an enormous white balloon
 an enormous transparent white balloon
 not four walls floor and ceiling
 only an enormous balloon
 we descend into a hole
 a very deep hole
 far away, farther and farther away
 only a shining point remains far up
 far away, farther and farther away
 four walls floor and ceiling
 four walls floor and ceiling.²⁰⁰

We understand from Paksa's text that her intentions were to describe an architectural room devoid of people. The repetition created a new kind of silence. This void is different from the

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 120.

one of Minimalism, and more specifically, the “silence” produced by John Cage.²⁰¹ While Cage’s silence is performed in an “open space” where outside and unanticipated noises are part of the work, Paksa’s “silence” is controlled and contained in this sequence. There is no invitation to outside sounds that do not pertain to the artist’s work. Even though Paksa considers the recording of the room description “ambiguous,” the work is calculated and meticulous. It should be noted that the changing description of the room may disorient the viewer, disrupting the idea of a fixed space and creating a sense of relaxation only periodically. Even though Paksa said the work was about relaxation, it seems she expected the viewer to be alert and to engage with the work in order to picture the space.

The reception of the recording of the couple having intercourse is “proposed to the spectator/listener to energetically mobilize his/her senses.” Paksa adds in this section that the message is “unambiguous” rather than “ambiguous,” as it is in the other parts.²⁰² This sequence produced a specific effect and unique causality. Even though Paksa might have referred to this sequence as unambiguous, as in sounds universally understood as such by anyone listening to the record, thus making the message less ambiguous and more direct, sexual pleasure sounds can be performed disingenuously where only the performers would know.

As for the last sequence—the performance of body imprints in sand at the Di Tella—the viewer is offered a “reconstruction of sequences in the imagination of the audience member/listener.” Paksa also specified this sequence as having an “ambiguous message.” The insistence on having an ambiguous and unambiguous message reflects Paksa’s earlier concern

²⁰¹ In Chapter 2, I also refer to Cage’s *4’33”* (1952), a musical score in three movements that instructs the performers not to play their instruments during the entire duration of the piece. In *4’33”*—commonly known as the “silent piece”—the performer sits at the piano and marks off the time in three movements, all the while making no sound. Cage’s concept was that even though sound is not forthcoming, listening can still transpire if one’s attention is shifted to the surrounding sounds.

²⁰² The title of the work, *Communications*, can be defined as “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior,” and one may add that in the plural form, *communications* is “a technique for expressing ideas effectively (as in speech).”

about conceptual art becoming too direct and too didactic. Both formal and intellectual structures come together in *Comunicaciones* through a kind of deliberate conceptual execution and measurement of the real and the imaginary. The four different sequences of the work are drawn into a poetic relation in the viewer's mind and play off each other, creating visual and conceptual rhymes and rhythms.

Writing about art in Argentina and Brazil in the 1960s, Paulo Herkenhoff notes that “the political intentionality demanded communication strategies and construction of the relationships between signifier and meaning in the public sphere and the circulation of art. The objective was to maintain the forcefulness and readability of the message, but also to establish a mode of communication that would guarantee the survival of the artists themselves against the repressive apparatus of the state.”²⁰³ Paksa's categorizing of each sequence per “single” or “ambiguous” message seems to correlate with Herkenhoff's observation of artists seeking both to communicate a direct or forceful message and also to survive as an artist during the dictatorship. To survive as an artist was for Paksa to hold onto the complex language of form and has in some ways been in conflict with conceptualism and the political urgencies of the moment.

Additionally, *Comunicaciones* stresses researching the participant's behavior using sensory effects. In other words, even though *Comunicaciones* was a conceptual work, Paksa was interested in focusing on the viewers' senses, feelings, and sensitivities. Speaking of the audience, Giunta describes: “In 1965, the Buenos Aires public was aware that to approach ‘art’ it was no longer enough to merely observe a painting hanging on a wall. It was now necessary to wander through neon tubes, to stare at a couple lying together in bed, and to have makeup applied to one's face in an exhibition hall.”²⁰⁴ Giunta's “new” art references might be pointing to

²⁰³ Paulo Herkenhoff, “Introducción,” in *Pop, realismos y Política: Brasil—Argentina, 1960's*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 2012), 22.

²⁰⁴ Andrea Giunta, “Decentering of the Modernist Paradigm,” in *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 165.

works displayed at the Di Tella, specifically *La Menesunda* (1965) (fig. 24), which I briefly referred to in Chapter 1.



Figure 24. Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín, *La Menesunda*, 1965, Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires. Museo de Arte Moderno archive, Buenos Aires. Courtesy of the artist and Henrique Faria, New York.

La Menesunda was a labyrinthine structure composed of eleven different multisensorial environments, including spaces with particular smells and sounds, neon signs, a closed-circuit television showing the viewers going through the spaces, a room with a naked couple in bed, a passage with a glass capsule in which confetti rained down, and much more. Many perceived works like *La Menesunda* had transformed art into scandal and spectacle of the audience's own participation, paving the way for other projects at the Di Tella to provoke both confusion and controversy.

The audience at the Di Tella was varied—running the gamut from members of the public who strolled down fashionable Florida Street to office workers, artists, and intellectuals. The

Institute was breaking down barriers, “and whoever went there could see and feel things that were prohibited everywhere else,” states Giunta.²⁰⁵ *La Menesunda* had such a great public impact that it left art critics and administrators like Romero Brest speechless and confused. Attempting to make sense of the novel trend in which art was no longer an object for contemplation but rather an event to be lived, Romero Brest gave a lengthy lecture in June 1964 titled “Arte 1965: Del objeto a la ambientación” (“Art 1965: From the Object to the Environment”), in which he proclaimed his decision “to suspend judgement.”²⁰⁶ Expanding on this concept, he explains that “the new situation revealed that art was no longer made to last, and that the abstract and idealist foundation had given way to the notion of the ‘experience.’ The idea of ‘representation’ was replaced by ‘presentation;’ man had ceased to live in eternity and had plunged into the temporary.”²⁰⁷ The temporary “presentation” to which Giunta and Romero Brest are referring is the “new” focus in Argentinean art on everyday life. As Paksa commented on *Relaxing Egg*, “Here, we’re not trying to make a serious, formal or unbreakable work of art. We don’t care if it persists in time, we care that it gets to blend with a daily experience.”²⁰⁸

For *Comunicaciones*, Paksa thought in similar terms. Even though it was composed of multiple parts, the last sequence—the performance and installation at the Di Tella—was the only public manifestation of the project. The imprints of the couple’s bodies on the sand were meant to be erased every day, giving the work an ephemeral quality. Someone encountering the work one day would find slight variations of it on another day. The differences in the sand each day

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 169.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 169. See Jorge Romero Brest, “Arte 1965: Del objeto a la ambientación” [“Art 1965: From the object to environment”], June 11, 1965, mimeograph, Caja 1, Sobre 6, Jorge Romero Brest Archives, University of Buenos Aires.

²⁰⁸ “El Swinging San Telmo,” *La Nación: Columnas de la juventud* (Buenos Aires), November 20, 1967, 26.

were caused by the artist and her partner, not the audience. This is an important quality of the work, one that embodies Paksa's hermetic and calculated approach.

Quiles argues that Paksa's *Comunicaciones* is "an analytical revision of Minujín and Santantonín's *La Menesunda* of three years earlier and the genre of the sensorial environment in general."²⁰⁹ While *La Menesunda* was a less structured installation where visitors were directed mainly by the architecture of the space, the experiences themselves were fairly open-ended. In contrast, *Comunicaciones*'s "elements were closed circuits sending information to a receiver who cannot respond to or alter this content."²¹⁰ Speaking of *El Batacazo* (*The Long Shot*) (1965)—a similar piece to *La Menesunda*—Minujín explains to a reporter: "It is a visual event. Something that I have done so everyone can collaborate with me on its permanent realization. Viewers are on the same plane of creation with me. There is no dichotomy between us, but rather a unity, dynamic, ever-changing, hallucinatory, infinite."²¹¹ While the viewer of *La Menesunda* could encounter a couple in bed in real-time, the viewer of *Comunicaciones* was removed from the original event of sexual activity, a moment that was solely experienced after the fact and via recordings. The sex and voices were fixed—Paksa chose to only share the sounds and not any visuals of the sex act, so that sounds were enough "communication" for the audience to receive the desired message. Quiles adds that "it is not the experience of the viewer that is privileged, nor his or her ability to make sense of the work, but the fact of transmission itself. Every experience of sounds, touch, or movement is premeditated, calibrated in advance for its

²⁰⁹ Quiles, "Between Code and Message," 152.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Marta Minujín, "Marta Minujín against the Easel," in Patrick Frank, ed., *Manifestos and Polemics in Latin American Modern Art* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 189. Original interview was published in *Confirmado*, October 7, 1965, 64. *El Batacazo* (*The Long Shot*) is an environment that included figures simulating weightless space travel, caged flies and rabbits, and neon figures of soccer players and astronauts. In the interview she explains, "The work does not reside in the objects and mechanisms that I have put in place, but rather in the moment that the viewer lives while inside it. The work's unfolding is in that awareness, not in the forms, which we might relegate to the status of accessories." Ibid., 190.

effects.”²¹² In this sense, *Comunicaciones* remains closer to traditional art in which the form is at the forefront because the artist has something specific to communicate.

In 1965, Carolee Schneemann created *Fuses*, a video work that presents an interesting comparison with *Comunicaciones*. Schneemann documents herself and her husband at the time, James Tenney, engaging in intercourse in various locations within the couple’s home, observed by their cat, Kitch. In the film, Schneemann’s body becomes an instrument by which the artist, operating the camera, invites reflection upon the politics surrounding female sexuality. This stands in contrast to Paksa’s oeuvre, which was less concerned with female sexuality per se and more with intimacy and confidentiality in general. Here, we understand “intimacy” to be something of a personal or private nature. Although intimacy is often connected to sexuality, as it is, in part, in *Comunicaciones*, Paksa explored intimacy in a broader sense. Addressing the differences between private and public, exteriority and interiority, proximity and distance, Paksa expands the notion and boundary of intimacy. Schneemann’s editing and manipulation of the film serves to augment the expressive qualities of the material recorded. This strategy contrasts with Paksa’s, in which the sharing of the intimate act is more distanced, calculated, and measured. As Quiles writes, the “indexical trace of the intimate act evidences a desire to filter corporeal experience through structural analysis.”²¹³

The reference of the original sexual using the sound of it in *Comunicaciones* anticipates Vito Acconci’s 1972 performance *Seedbed*. At the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo, New York City, visitors encountered an empty space except for a low wood ramp. When the work was activated, twice a week, hidden below the ramp and out of sight, Acconci masturbated and narrated his

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Quiles, “Between Code and Message,” 150.

fantasies about the visitors aloud; his voice projected through speakers into the gallery.²¹⁴ Both Paksa and Acconci were interested in the interplay between the psychological and the social, expressed in the overlapping boundaries of interior and exterior. However, for Acconci, it was important to be physically in the space highlighting the importance of reciprocal interaction with the viewer. Paksa, on the other hand, opts for a representation of a finished act, creating physical distance between the original sexual act and the audience by offering a fixed sound piece as an intermediary. Works like *La Menesunda* cause boundaries to blur and make communication too ambiguous, while *Comunicaciones* tries to prevent that, distancing itself so that a relationship of communication can occur. We could say that this is what it means to “survive as an artist.”

Even though the participatory approaches of *Relaxing Egg* and *Comunicaciones* are different, both pieces take into account the viewer as an intrinsic and indispensable component of the work's system. In *Relaxing Egg*, Paksa not only made the handheld minimalist objects available for circulation, but attached to them a card describing their specific function. Both works are premeditated and infused with expectations that the viewer will experience the art object or environment in a certain way.

In a 1967 note, Paksa included reflections on *Relaxing Egg* and *Relaxing Chair*, an allusion to *Comunicaciones*, the work that would be displayed a few months later at the Di Tella.

Paksa writes:

There are other projects that now cannot be communicated but tend to renew forms of communication, not accepting those already established but creating the possibility of communication between men through other means. Coming from the boom of ‘in-communication’ (word already saturated), man in the future should learn to manage himself better as a source of activity and energy

²¹⁴ In 1972, Acconci conceived three performances in three different exhibition spaces at the Sonnabend Gallery. He wrote: “In Room A (*Seedbed*), I’m under the floor, I’m part of the architecture of the room, whereas in Room C (*Transference Zone*), I’m inside a point, a booth, in the corner, whereas in Room B (*Supply Room*), I’m there only so that I won’t be there, only so that I can be taken away, only so that I can be kidnapped.” Rachel Taylor, “Seedbed,” *Tate*, December, 2008, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/acconci-seedbed-t13176>.

(as long as monopolies allow it) . . . There is the intention to provoke a gesture, included within the usual ones, and address one or more senses at a time.²¹⁵

To provoke, in the context of *Relaxing Egg*, for instance, was to trigger a gesture in the viewer, a communication that addressed multiple senses. Communication through other means has been Paksa's ongoing concern. However, the quote above seems to be referring particularly to *Comunicaciones*; it is the first time that the concept of "communication" (and in-communication) appears so clearly in her notes about an artwork.

Paksa's language resonates with cybernetic theory. She most likely learned about it through Masotta, who had employed cybernetic terms from the linguist side of cybernetic theory, especially from the English anthropologist, linguist, and semiotician Gregory Bateson.²¹⁶ In August 1969 (a year after Paksa finished *Comunicaciones*), the exhibition *Arte y Cibernética* (*Art and Cybernetics*) opened at the Centro de Estudios de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC)—the new art space that would become the main art institution after the closure of the Instituto Di Tella.²¹⁷ CAYC's curator Jorge Glusberg used cybernetic terminology to describe what the artists were doing with the goal of linking them to a larger international trend where artists were utilizing computers, video, and scientific gadgets in their work. Some international examples are in New York, the group E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) founded by Robert Rauschenberg and Billy Kluver; in London, the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition at the ICA; and the influence of Jack Burnham and other cybernetic theorists on North American artists such as Dan Graham and Hans Haacke.

²¹⁵ Paksa, note, 1968, found in Margarita Paksa archive, Buenos Aires.

²¹⁶ See Quiles, "Between Code and Message," 216.

²¹⁷ The artists included in the CAYC show *Arte y Cibernética* were Luis Benedit, Antonio Berni, Ernesto Deira, Osvaldo Romberg, among others. The show traveled extensively throughout Argentina and Uruguay. See *Arte y Cibernética*, exh. cat. (Montevideo: Comisión Nacional de Artes Plásticas, 1970), and Jorge Glusberg, *Arte y Cibernética*, exh. cat. Galería Bonino (Buenos Aires: CEAC, 1969), and *Arte y Cibernética*, exh. cat. Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Juan B. Castagnino (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1970).

Even though throughout her career Paksa often explored and employed new materials and technologies, in *Comunicaciones* she does not actually include technological apparatuses besides two record players, most likely because she did not have access to them. Her earlier installation *500 Watts, 4, 635 Kc, 4.5 C*, that was first exhibited in 1967 at the Di Tella and reproduced at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, for Paksa's retrospective there in 2004, was composed of a dark space where a 500 watt pulsing light projector sent a beam in a longitudinal direction. The beam was altered when intercepted by two acrylic boxes. Photoelectric cells along a walkway were activated when people walked on it, also producing sounds.²¹⁸ According to Paksa, the goal of the work was to transform the invisible to visible, to find the audible in the inaudible, in a technological environment.²¹⁹

Paksa presented this installation in the group exhibition "Experiencias Visuales 1967" at the Di Tella (preceding the exhibition "Experiencias 68" where she showed *Comunicaciones*). The art critic Alberto Cousté notes that many of the artworks in "Experiencias Visuales 1967" seemed to be influenced by Marshal McLuhan and new technologies. He writes in an article titled "The Sons of McLuhan" that "the nearly scientific air that all the experiences at the Instituto Di Tella apparently ooze, seems to be something guided by the obsessions of the technological prophet Marshall McLuhan. Just like our ever-growing technologies have created a whole series of new environments, men have come to understand the arts as anti-environments or counter-environments that provide us with the means to perceive the environment itself."²²⁰ Through the use of light and sound, Paksa's *500 Watts* points to the audience, inserting "the

²¹⁸ For the production of the work, Paksa collaborated with Fernando von Reichenbach, an artist and engineer that directed the Laboratorio Electrónico del Instituto Di Tella (The Electronics Lab at the Instituto Di Tella).

²¹⁹ *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 70.

²²⁰ Alberto Cousté, "Los hijos de McLuhan" ["McLuhan's Sons"], *Primera Plana* no. 246, September 12, 1967. Museo de Arte Moderno archive, Buenos Aires. See Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967) and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964).

spectator as a stimulating element, an active participant meant to fulfill a task, play a set role.”²²¹ She plays no physical role, other than to “signal” to audiences and make them conscious of the environment and the power of the media.

An earlier artwork by Minujín titled *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* (*Simultaneity in Simultaneity*) is worth bringing up as a precursor of *500 Watts*. It shows a clear interest in the effects of mass media and social interactions on individual creativity and institutional critique of this artist’s generation. In 1966, Minujín collaborated with Allan Kaprow in New York and Wolf Vostell in Berlin in the international project titled *Three Country Happening* where each artist proposed a happening at the same time and date in their own respective countries. *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* took place at the Di Tella in two steps. The first part consisted of an event simultaneously transmitted by radio, TV, telephone, and telegraph where 120 preselected people, who had been photographed, filmed, and recorded in their homes were “invaded” by media for ten minutes. For the second part, Minujín invited sixty guests to the Di Tella from the cultural and journalistic world, who were photographed and filmed while they sat down in front of a TV set with a transistor radio. When they exited the event, each guest was asked to give their opinion of the event and of the media in general. Eleven days later, the same sixty people came back to the Di Tella and watched themselves reflected on the screens of their TV sets and in slides, which were projected at the sides, while they listened to their own voices transmitted over the radio.

Minujín’s work includes the viewer more directly, while Paksa’s projects (such as *500 Watts*) is more contained and premeditated with little alterations made by the viewer. There is an openness in her works for audience participation, but with control and limitations. Paksa’s work exists between having both an ambiguous and direct message which shows her conflicting relationship with the mechanisms through which meanings are conveyed to audiences.

²²¹ Paksa in Paksa and Pacheco, *Proyectos*, 106.

Experiencias '68

For the exhibition *Experiencias '68*, Romero Brest invited thirteen artists who had in common, in his words, “the destructive spirit of the traditional artistic work. We invite the viewers to connect image and concept. And to verify that, despite the differences between these experiences and what has traditionally been called a work of art, the relationship [between the projects] persists.”²²² Even though Paksa was not alone in her interest in transmitting a message and her emphasis on communication, this sentence by Brest doesn’t seem to apply to Paksa; on the one hand, to “connect image and concept” sounds somewhat like the idea of a “direct message” that Paksa was trying to avoid. On the other hand, Paksa who instead of having a “destructive spirit” was closer to what Herkenhoff points out about art “surviving.” Additionally, as explained in Chapter 1, Romero Brest advocated for “advanced art” in place of “the traditional artistic work.” Artworks of this time not only move beyond the traditional art genres, they also defy traditional categorization under “new” groupings: *happenings* and environments.

A 1968 article in *Primera Plana* describes *Experiencias '68* as “an agonistic trance; a card game that abhors aesthetics, at the risk of spending the rest of the time in a no man’s land that the visual arts would not claim, and that even the spectacle—happenings included—could not recognize as theirs.”²²³ *Primera Plana*’s critic seems to be arguing with Brest’s concept and

²²² Jorge Romero Brest, *Experiencias '68*, exh. brochure, Museo de Arte Moderno archive, Buenos Aires, in Patricia Rizzo, *Instituto Di Tella: Experiencias '68* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 1998), 51–52. Artists invited were Rodolfo Azaro, Oscar Bony, Delia Cancela, Jorge Carballa, Roberto Jacoby, David Lamelas, Pablo Mesejean, Margarita Parkas, Roberto Plate, Alfredo Rodríguez Arias, Juan Stoppani, Pablo Suárez, and Antonio Trotta. Brest’s reference to the destructive spirit of the artists in 1968 remind what Blake Stimson writes in the edited volume *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*: “Institutional critique, as it will be understood here, was a child of 1968, but a child with a deep-rooted soul often at odds with the spirit of its time. If there was one trait that characterized that spirit above all others, it was its suspicion of institutions as such, casting itself variously against Jim Crow, the military-industrial complex, patriarchy, the Man, and a host of other such perceived and actual hegemons.” Blake Stimson, “What Was Institutional Critique?” in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, Stimson and Alexander Alberro, eds. (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2009), 20.

²²³ *Primera Plana*, no. 282, May 21, 1968. Quoted in Longoni and Mestman, *Del di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 151.

values. But Paksa's practice did not "abhor aesthetics;" on the contrary, Paksa was both engaged with the risks and worried about them. She was both aligned and separate from the trends around her. For Paksa, it was not so much about winding up in a "no man's land" without a category to hang over her work, but instead about nuanced communication using multiple senses rather than oversimplified, direct, dictatorial, black/white conceptual frameworks and messages.

"Experiences" became a central term in his understanding of contemporary art and how he characterized new Argentinean art productions for local and international audiences. "It is one thing to have experience of realities, as in the past, artworks were the fruit of experience, and quite another to have an experience of the real, as we do now that artworks are, in themselves, irrefutably experiences."²²⁴ Paksa's *Comunicaciones* requires a mediating form or translation of what she means to the viewer. It was not about only having an experience which is all about immediacy. Paksa wanted to communicate by other means, as mentioned above, which is actually quite different from transmitting a message.

In *Experiencias '68*, artists experimented with works that were "live" and performative—these are different from "experiences" which do not necessarily involve an "event" or act in the presence of an audience. Paksa's *Comunicaciones* is both an installation and performance as she intended to enact the performance with her husband every day for the duration of the exhibition. To some extent, *Comunicaciones* is an "open work" because she leaves arrangements of some constituents of a work to the public and to chance. An "open work" is a concept by Umberto Eco who explains that an "open work" is when the work is open in its interpretation: "Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every

²²⁴ Jorge Romero Brest, "Informal Art and the Art of Today: A Very Updated Article and New Reflections," in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 100. See also Jorge Romero Brest, *Arte en la Argentina: Últimas décadas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1969).

reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.”²²⁵ In an interview in 2010, Paksa looks back at *Comunicaciones* and explains the piece in similar terms:

I wanted to do a work that existed in the imagination of the spectator, that was not an object, something palpable, but rather a totally virtual work, or as (Pierre) Restany says—*dematerialized*. So, I did a totally open work. On the one hand, the environment that I made in Giesso’s studio; on the other, the two sides of the disc; later, the place returned to the Di Tella Institute, and I made the impression of the bodies in the sand. They were, in short, four sequences where the visual and the auditory were at play. What was my model? I said to myself, if I can go to the movies, see a movie and remember it for a lifetime without needing to see it again, this same thing I want to happen with those who will see my work.²²⁶

The ephemerality of the imprinted bodies on the sand comprises a desperate gesture in order to fulfill the artist’s intention to dematerialize the work of art. The artist, Jorge Caterbetti, explains that “the traces in the sand are signs of existence . . . The artist, when writing with her body on the sand, generates meaning, gives meaning to an action that is installed forever. Hence the effectiveness of the performativity: precisely, to claim non-perpetuity endows the work with an echo impossible to silence.”²²⁷ The ephemerality of *Comunicaciones* made it possible for Paksa to create such a subversive work during the military dictatorship. She recalls that Romero Brest had to convince the police not to suppress the work, which, although not pornographic, was erotic, which is why they wanted to censor it in the first place.

The imprinting of the bodies on the sand provides a precedent for Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas* series (begun in 1973), in which she carved and shaped her figure into the earth or in water. In contrast to the motivations behind Paksa’s piece, Mendieta’s *Siluetas* serves as a transition from the artist’s homeland to her new home; as Mendieta explains, “it is a way of

²²⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962, repr. 1989), 4.

²²⁶ Paksa interviewed by Laura Buccellato, July 2010. Quoted in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 84. Pierre Restany was a French art critic and philosopher who spent time in Buenos Aires and wrote about 1960s art in Argentina.

²²⁷ Jorge Caterbetti, “Diálogos sobre arte y política” [“Dialogues about art and politics”], *Política y arte conceptual*, 2011, in Margarita Paksa archive (Buenos Aires, 2011).

reclaiming my roots and becoming one with nature.”²²⁸ These bodily residues were made from various materials, including flowers, tree branches, moss, gunpowder, and fire. Like *Siluetas*, *Comunicaciones* lives on only in the form of the artist’s documents, films, and photographs. Both Paksa and Mendieta wanted the trace of the silhouette, through its absence, to exude the presence of the bodies lying on the ground, a feminine position at once vulnerable and basic.

Paksa’s work occupied an important place in Argentinean art criticism at the time. In his 1969 volume *Arte en la Argentina: Últimas décadas* (*Art in Argentina: The Past Decades*), Brest described *Comunicaciones* as follows: “Margarita Paksa’s experience was of a different order ... she made an investigation ‘with space and open time,’ as she said, at the same time that she created a mass-produced work with albums. Nobody escaped the intense poetry that such a new experience produced.”²²⁹ For Argentinean curator and art critic Jorge Glusberg, Paksa’s piece stood out from the rest of the works on view at *Experiencias ’68*: “Several square meters of sand distributed in front of a semicircular background reproduce a solitary landscape (beach, desert). On the sand, traces of two bodies; a sufficiently suggestive sound background introduces the public to the experience of relaxation and love . . . Only Paksa and (Roberto) Jacoby try to break through the boundary that seems to start to open, barely open, to all the possible paths of the plastic arts.”²³⁰

Jacoby’s contribution to the show was *Mensaje en el Di Tella* (*Message in the Di Tella*, 1968) (fig. 25), a work consisting of three parts: a poster-manifesto proclaiming the union of art and life, a teleprinter connected to the *France-Presse* news agency that typed out real-time news about the events of May 1968, and a photograph of a black man in the United States marching against racism and the Vietnam War.

²²⁸ Ana Mendieta quoted in Gloria Moure, *Ana Mendieta* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, S.A., 1996), 108.

²²⁹ Romero Brest, *Arte en la Argentina*, 97.

²³⁰ Jorge Glusberg, “Artes plásticas,” *Análisis* (Buenos Aires), no. 376, (May 27, 1968): 47-48.



Figure 25. Roberto Jacoby, *Mensaje en el Di Tella* (*Message in the Di Tella*), Installation at the Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 1968, restaged at the Museo Reina Sofia, 2011.

In this work, Jacoby suggests that art has reached its limits, and therefore the consequent need for art to extend into life, a principle that the set of “experiences” exhibited at the Di Tella were proving to be true. The poster reads: “The future of art is not connected to the creation of works, but to the definition of new concepts of life, with the artist as propagandist for these concepts.” The poster and the image of the radical activists both have ambiguous messages; they do not mention politics explicitly, but point to the outside world, or the world outside the art institution, foreseeing that the end of gallery-based artworks is approaching.

Also embodying this concept was Oscar Bony’s *La Familia obrera* (*The Working-Class Family*, 1968) (fig. 26), an installation or a living sculpture composed of the titular working-class family (a father, mother, and son) paid to sit on a plinth in the gallery for eight hours a day while recorded sounds of their home life played in the background.



Figure 26. Oscar Bony, *La Familia Obrera* (The Working Class Family), Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 1968. Courtesy of the artist.

Bony paid the family twice the salary that the father earned as a die-caster. The piece was harshly criticized by the press and the public alike as “unethical” and an attack on family and work values.²³¹ Bony produced *La Familia obrera* in the face of devastating economic policies, rising fiscal inequality, and a decrease in working-class salaries in Argentina.

Even though Paksa’s work does not explicitly refer to a singular political issue like Bony’s, she subtly points to the action of distributing (or communicating) messages to a specific audience. While other contributions to the exhibition were more concerned with examining the difficulty of representation as a tool for political advocacy, *Comunicaciones* attempted to materialize the endless possibilities that arise in the transmission of a message. Her work questions the efficacy or even the possibility of direct speech to frame the subject. As she points

²³¹ Ibid.

out in the chart accompanying the piece, certain “sequences” had ambiguous messages while others had a more concrete, singular one.

During the dictatorship, the mass media was another front for persecutions and censorship. To be sure, television and radio had various ideologies, but both media were pressured by the regime. The government had blacklists of music, programs, and novels, along with actors. Mediums, as well as artists and art institutions, had to find their ways, find their language to keep producing and *communicating* without being caught by the censorship apparatus. Paksa’s poetic strategies exemplify this situation; *Comunicaciones* recalls the theatricality performed by the military dictatorship and its effects on the public. Afraid of saying something that should not be said, citizens would censor themselves. Thinking twice before speaking or doing for fear of “What do I have the right to say? Where is the limit?” creates a certain mentality of policing oneself.

Public space was controlled to varying degrees by the state, and one’s “performance” as a citizen was closely monitored. Laura Podalsky in *Specular City* writes that in Argentina,

State censorship inculcates self-censorship as individuals and private institutions try to anticipate and avoid government intervention. The boundary between externally and internally imposed restrictions is not always clear. Considered in broader terms as a restriction on articulatory power, censorship can refer to general structural conditions like literacy and poverty that prevents some citizens from gaining access to cultural goods and information. Rather than being limited to particular state policies and actions, censorship might also include the way that certain economically empowered groups can/do “speak” while others in more unstable economic conditions cannot/do not. In this light, censorship does not merely refer to the realm of ideas; it also relates to material issues. Censorship regulates the circulation of ideas *and* their material manifestations.²³²

Yet, to some extent, Argentinean artists were not as concerned with self-censorship as much as communicating a message about the present situation. On May 22, 1968, the work *El Baño* (*The Bathroom*) by Roberto Plate (fig. 27), exhibited at *Experiencias '68*, was censored by the

²³² Podalsky, “Consuming Sex in the City,” in *Specular City*, 199. See also Andrés Avellaneda, *Censura, autoritarismo y cultura: Argentina, 1960–1983* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1986).

Onganía police. Plate's work simulated a real bathroom, like those in public places featuring the silhouettes of ladies and gentlemen at their doors, but inside, the absence of toilets confused visitors, forcing them to redefine their sexual situation.



Figure 27. Roberto Plate's *El Baño* (*The Bathroom*) at the moment of its closure by the military police. Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 22, 1968. *Primera Plana*, May 28, 1968. Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires.

On the white walls of those bathrooms, viewers wrote, among other things, insults against the Onganía regime. The artist's hope was that the audience would perceive the work as a safeguard for their privacy, so much so that it would "produce an emotional discharge."²³³ Daniel Quiles explains that Plate "had crafted a work so open that its viewers were actively responsible for its

²³³ Roberto Plate, proposal for *Experiencias '68*. Quoted in Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 113. Plate was probably aware of the earlier interventions by Argentinean artist Alberto Greco's in bathrooms in Paris. In 1954, Greco wrote phrases such as "GRECO PUTO" translating to English as "male prostitute" in a vulgar way or "fag." The inscriptions in the bathrooms that Greco visited were places of encounter and sexual exchange among men. Greco's inscription "GRECO PUTO" can be interpreted as an appropriation or inversion of the homophobic graffiti. See Francisco Rivas, "Alberto Greco. La novela de su vida y el sentido de su muerte," in *Alberto Greco* (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio González, 1992).

censorship.”²³⁴ Soon after the opening of the exhibition, the police placed a chain around *El Baño*, prohibiting visitors from entering. The police alleged that *El Baño* influenced public morality and placed guards before the work. The censorship unleashed the inevitable storm between the artists and the Di Tella.²³⁵

Even though the state’s approach to censorship from 1966 to 1973 was often arbitrary and inconsistent, it tended to focus on two primary goals. In speeches by state officials, decrees, and laws, the government emphasized its anticommunist position and took proactive measures to foster Christian morals. These objectives were largely fulfilled by efforts to control the educational system and the mass media.²³⁶ Never able to predict how the government might react to a given statement or action, Argentines were more likely to censor themselves than to engage in any activity that would lead to official sanction. Self-censorship increased, as the line between external and internal censorship was porous from the start. However, self-censorship was not the case with the artists in *Experiencias '68*.

Protest, Speech, and Walkouts

On May 23, the day following the censorship of Plate’s work, the artists represented in *Experiencias '68* threw their works onto Florida Street and destroyed them in protest. The Di Tella—located in what was called the *manzana loca*, the “crazy blocks” encompassing nearby art galleries, book shops, and university buildings—did not support the artists’ protest and thus this gesture signified a break with the gallery. This event cut through the heavy pedestrian traffic,

²³⁴ Quiles, “Between Code and Message,” 160.

²³⁵ Romero Brest, Di Tella’s director, responded to the censorship of Plate’s *El Baño* with a text supporting the artists in the exhibition. An excerpt of this text explains the common characteristics he sees in the works in the exhibition: “it is about another attitude, which goes beyond the mere contemplation of painted or sculpted images: it is about altering the viewer about what he has in sight and what he may not repair, so that he intensifies his contemplation until he lives the same experience with the greatest intensity, becoming aware of his position in the world.” Jorge Romero Brest, May 23, 1968. Text reprinted in Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 116.

²³⁶ Podalsky, *Specular City*, 199–202.

with the consequent police intervention and the arrest of some of the participating artists.²³⁷ (fig. 28)

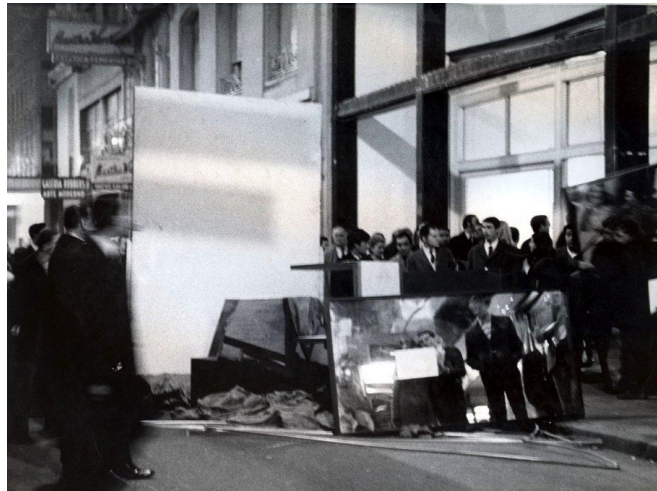


Figure 28A



Figure 28B

²³⁷ Even though the majority of artists were in agreement with this act, it is known that not all artists in the exhibition destroyed their works. Antonio Trotta, whose signature is included in the letter sent to the Di Tella, declared years later that he was not present during the event and that other artists destroyed his work without his consent. Antonio Trotta quoted in *La Nación*, May 21, 1998, 29. Quoted in Mestman and Longoni, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 119.



Figure 28C



Figure 28D

Figure 28. *Experiencias '68* (Experiences 68), Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 23, 1968. Destruction of the artworks outside the Di Tella, Florida Street. Courtesy of Roberto Jacoby. archivosenuso.org

Together with other intellectuals, the artists wrote a statement, which I transcribe here:

Buenos Aires, May 23, 1968

Actions by the police and the judiciary have closed down one of the works on view in the *Experiencias 68* exhibition at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella. This is the third time in less than a year that the police have supplanted the weapons of criticism with the criticism of weapons, taking upon themselves a role they shouldn't have: that of carrying out aesthetic censorship.

From what we have seen, this is not only about imposing their own point of view on fashion and taste, with absurd haircuts and arbitrary arrests of artists and young people in

general; they are trying to do the same thing with the work of these artists.

But artists and intellectuals have not been the principal targets of persecution: the repression is also directed against the labor and student movements; once this has been accomplished, they believe they will have silenced all free consciousness in our country. Argentine artists resolutely oppose the establishment of a police state in our country.

THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE EXHIBITION *EXPERIENCIAS 68* WITHDRAW OUR WORKS AS A SIGN OF PROTEST.

ALFREDO RODRIGUEZ ARIAS / PABLO SUAREZ / ROBERTO PLATE /
ROBERTO JACOBY / JUAN STOPPANI / JORGE CARBALLA / OSCAR BONY /
DAVID LAMELAS (in absentia) / ANTONIO TROTTA (in absentia) / RODOLFO
AZARO / PABLO MESEJEAN / DELIA CANCELA / MARGARITA PAKSA.²³⁸

Although focused on a strong questioning of the censorship at the Di Tella, this document also incorporated a wider denunciation of the political repression instituted by the government toward other sectors of Argentinean society. The artists' protests against the censorship and against the compliance of art institutions were characterized as "salto al vacío" (jump into the void) in an article in *Primera Plana* that covered the event.²³⁹ Paksa agrees: "*Experiencias '68* was anything but festive; we exposed ourselves and our works, there was a lot of pain in this scheme."²⁴⁰ (fig. 29)

²³⁸ Translated by Marguerite Feitlowitz. See "Art Under the Paradigm of Politics," in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 291–94. There is an additional long list of names of other artists and intellectuals in support of this letter: "Declaración final de los participantes en las Experiencias '68." Archivo Fundación Espigas, Buenos Aires.

²³⁹ *Primera Plana*, no. 282, May 21, 1968, 70. Museo de Arte Moderno archive, Buenos Aires.

²⁴⁰ Author's interview with Margarita Paksa, Buenos Aires, Argentina, August 2017.



Figure 29. Margarita Paksa and Roberto Jacoby interviewed by the local TV. *Experiencias '68* (Experiences 68), Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, May 23, 1968. Courtesy of Roberto Jacoby. archivosenuso.org

This episode suggests the definitive break of a large segment of Buenos Aires artists with one of the main modernizing institutional actors that had housed them. The encounter therefore signifies two forms of dissolution or destruction of art. On the one hand, destruction was manifested by the authoritarian state through censorship, judicial persecution, and police repression. On the other, it was embodied by the artists' act of destroying their works and tossing the remnants onto the street in response to the Onganía regime. Having perceived that they could not prevent their production—even the most critical—from being absorbed and neutralized by art institutions, the artists committed an act of violence against the materiality of their own works.²⁴¹

It is important to note that not every artist gave up on art at this time. Some turned to the production of “revolutionary art” as we will see with *Tucumán Arde*, while others emigrated to

²⁴¹ See Longoni and Mestman, *Del di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 120. The artists' decision to destroy their work resonates with Kristine Stiles's term “destruction art.” She explains that “artists present the ‘imaginary of extinction’ localized in the body, the object which is offered both as a destructible material and/or agent of that destruction . . . But destruction art is not only about the presentation of the conditions of destruction. It is also one of the means by which a world consciousness is being formed that may contribute to the construction of an ‘altered sense of self’ which is necessary to insure human survival.” Not a utopian project but rather a pragmatic one, “destructive art” seems to be an appropriate term to connect to the developments transpiring in Argentina in 1968. Kristine Stiles, “Survival Ethos and Destructive Art,” *Discourse* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 76.

Europe in search of working conditions less hostile than those in Argentina. Still, other artists, such as Paksa, are a bit harder to classify.

A month before the opening of *Experiencias '68*, as part of the inauguration of the exhibition and prize *Ver y Estimar* (*See and Estimate*), Eduardo Ruano, one of the artists invited to participate in this exhibition, along with the artists Roberto Jacoby, Juan Pablo Renzi, and Pablo Suárez, entered the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires screaming, “Yankees out of Vietnam!” The group approached Ruano’s piece in the exhibition that consisted of a large poster of John F. Kennedy displayed behind glass with literature regarding his assassination. On the floor was a brick with arrows pointing at it. Ruano destroyed the glass with the brick and scratched Kennedy’s image. The museum called the Oganía police, and Ruano was prohibited from entering any cultural institution in Buenos Aires from that moment on. This episode is important to note because it marks the beginning of a series of events in 1968 in which Argentinian artists adopted a political-artistic modality.

Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman explain that at this time, the passage from “object-art” to “action art,” marked by happenings and environments, took a new direction whereby artists left aside the representation of political violence, and instead began to perform (artistic) acts of (political) violence. The incident at the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art launched what Longoni and Mestman call “Itinerario del ’68” (Itinerary of ’68), which encapsulates the period when numerous political-artistic actions were mounted in a collective manner, in particular the series of exhibitions, protests, and discussions leading up to *Tucumán Arde*.²⁴² Quiles describes this development as “a logical progression from an inability to articulate political speech in the gallery context to the imperative to exert such speech within the political

²⁴² See Longoni and Mestman, *Del di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 95–99.

sphere itself.”²⁴³ Eve Kalyva adds that Tucumán Arde “initiated a series of exchanges, critical reflections, and committed action that contributed to the wider movement toward social change and democracy.”²⁴⁴

Collective Actions

In June 1968, another revolt occurred, of which Paksa was the main leader. It was unleashed when the invitation to participate in the 1968 Braque Prize, an annual award organized by the French embassy, was sent out to artists with an additional sheet that modified the regulations. In the sheet, invited artists were instructed to describe their works and “point out the possible existence of photos, legends or texts that would be part of the work.”²⁴⁵ In that same document, the organizers of the prize stated that they reserved the right to “make the changes they deem necessary” to the works of art. In a way, the organizers tried to forestall the anti-institutional stance adopted by the avant-garde artists. The first to repudiate this gesture of censorship was Paksa, who on June 18 sent a letter to the organizers, in which, along with renouncing her participation in the award competition, she also affirmed the artist’s right to regulate his or her work. “There can be no change under any circumstances, by any institution, or jury, in the work of personal artistic creation.” She continues, “The political, professional, and cultural life of our country shows clearly that all intromission is harmful. This intrusion always seeks to silence, destroy, and dissolve the opinions of the most lucid, trying to create confusion, rather than order.”²⁴⁶ (fig. 30)

²⁴³ Quiles, “Between Code and Message,” 170. See also Longoni and Mestman, *Del di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 254–66.

²⁴⁴ Eve Kalyva, “The Rhetoric of Disobedience: Art and Power in Latin America,” *Latin American Research Review* 51, no. 2 (2016): 54.

²⁴⁵ Premio Braque committee, 1968 invitation, Margarita Paksa archive, Buenos Aires.

²⁴⁶ Letter from Margarita Paksa to the Premio Braque committee, June 18, 1968. Margarita Paksa archive, Buenos Aires. My translation.

Castelar, 18 de junio de 1968

Señor
Consejero Cultural y de
Cooperación Técnica de la
Embajada de Francia
Robert Ferrand

Estimado Señor:

He recibido la carta con fecha 4 de junio de 1968, en la cual se me comunica que he sido seleccionada para participar en el Premio George Braque 1968, que tendrá lugar en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Le comunico que no participaré. Considero que he presentado dispositivos y que mis trabajos y actuación pública son bien conocidos. No acepto por lo tanto, el hecho de tener que sujetarme a las condiciones por usted presentadas, por carta de esa misma fecha.

He leído varias veces esas indicaciones, y si bien puedo entender la necesidad de ordenar la entrega de trabajos sujetos a montaje, simplemente por razones de eficiencia, veo que nada tiene que ver con ello "señalar la posible existencia de fotos, leyendas o escritos que integren la obra y reservarse el derecho de efectuar los cambios que juzgare necesarios".

No puede haber cambios bajo ningún concepto, por parte de ninguna institución, ni jurado, sobre la obra de creación personal artística. Además, siendo un Premio por invitación, considero que el jurado, tiene plenos poderes para seleccionar a quien le convenga. Es allí donde comienzan y terminan sus derechos, para dejar lugar al derecho de los demás, al libre juego de su pensamiento, que el artista ejerce bajo su propia responsabilidad.

Es la crítica, la opinión pública en general, a través de sus vehículos naturales, la que hará el posterior juicio.

No voy a entrar en discusiones sobre la libertad y la censura. La vida política, social y cultural de nuestro país, demuestra ya bien claramente que toda intromisión es nefasta.

Que esa intromisión, siempre pretende acallar, destruir y disolver las opiniones de los más lúcidos, tratando de sembrar la confusión, antes que el orden.

Que la autoridad se destruya a sí misma, al ejercer un acto, que en su aparente fuerza, es una demostración de temor.

Lo saluda
M. Paksa
Margarita Paksa

Figure 30. Margarita Paksa's letter to the Braque Prize organizers, June 18, 1968. Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires.

Following Paksa's letter, other artists, such as Roberto Plate and collectives like the Artistas de Vanguardia de Rosario (Avant-garde Artists of Rosario), decided not to apply for the prize, instead distributing flyers with a manifesto titled "Siempre es tiempo de no ser cómplices" ("We Must Always Resist the Lures of Complicity.")²⁴⁷ The artists unsuccessfully attempted to boycott the prize. However, during the award ceremony, held at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes on July 16 and attended by, among others, the French ambassador, the museum's director Samuel Oliver, and other Argentinean officials, a group of artists interrupted the proceedings,

²⁴⁷ See Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 294-295. The artists that signed the manifesto were Osvaldo Mateo Boglione, Fernandez Bonina, Aldo Bortolotti, Graciela Carnevale, Rodolfo Elizalde, Noemi Escandell, Eduardo Favario, Emilio Ghilioni, Martha Greiner, Jose M. Lavarello, Lia Maisonnave, Ruben Naranjo, Norberto Puzzolo, Juan Pablo Renzi, and Jaime Ripa.

denouncing censorship and “cultural colonialism.” According to various journalistic sources, the first one to interrupt the ceremony was Paksa, who shouted over Oliver.²⁴⁸ For some twenty minutes, fliers, rotten eggs, and stink bombs were thrown at officials as well as some of the exhibited works. Some journalists indicated that firecrackers were also tossed. The incident ended with the intervention of the police, the closing of the museum’s doors, and the arrest of about twelve people, among them ten artists, including Paksa.²⁴⁹ (fig. 31)



Figure 31. Premio Braque (Braque Prize), July 16, 1968, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Artists taken by the police Margarita Paksa, Pablo Suárez, Roberto Jacoby, Ricardo Carreira, and Eduardo Favario. Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires.

²⁴⁸ Brazil witnessed parallel events of confrontation between artists and art institutions. In *Opinião 65*, Hélio Oiticica fruitlessly tried to enter the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro with the *passistas* of the Samba School of Mangueira outfitted in his *parangolés*—capas, flags, banners and tents made from different materials that were designed to be worn while dancing to the rhythm of samba. The performers were refused by the museum’s officials. In 1969, artists staged a boycott of the São Paulo Biennial against the military dictatorship.

²⁴⁹ Other artists who were arrested included Ricardo Carreira, Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Ruano, Pablo Suárez, and Eduardo Favario (from Rosario).

Alberto Cousté wrote in *Primera Plana* that the artists were in disagreement with “fascist influences and for not allowing authentic artists to participate freely in competitions like the Braque Prize.”²⁵⁰ Various articles appeared about this incident, since it ended with the detention of Paksa and artists Pablo Suarez, Roberto Jacoby, Ricardo Carreira, and Eduardo Favario (an artist from Rosario). While in prison, the men in the group were forced to cut their hair, but thanks to a request by the French ambassador (the organizer of the Braque Prize), the authorities released the artists a few hours later.²⁵¹

The magazine *Gente* wrote: “[The museum director] Samuel Oliver was only able to say two words. Then the piercing voice of the sculptor Margarita Paksa interrupted him. It was the voice of the dissident artists, of those who had withdrawn their works, from the prize competition.”²⁵² Artists in Rosario (a northern city in the province of Tucumán), specifically the Grupo de Rosario, an avant-garde that formed in that city in 1966, supported their colleagues in Buenos Aires by penning a manifesto titled “Siempre es tiempo de no ser cómplices” (We Must Always Resist the Lures of Complicity).²⁵³ An excerpt of the manifesto reads:

The attempt at aesthetic and ideological censorship perpetrated by the representatives in Argentina of the government of France through the requirements for the 1968 Braque Prize, an action that coincides with the climate of police repression that reigns in our country and with the repudiated repression by the French government of the uprising of its own people, has created a situation in which it is possible for artists to arrive at the requisite consciousness for modifying the rules of the game and for subverting the established order. This is why we consider definitively terminated any relationship on our part with those who flaunt the “power” to judge the artistic value of any product (whatever form it may take) made within the geographic and institutional limits proposed by the bourgeoisie.²⁵⁴

The manifesto was presented publicly in Rosario in June 1968 with a blackout that interrupted a speech by the critic and director of Buenos Aires’s Instituto Torcuato di Tella (ITDT), Jorge

²⁵⁰ Alberto Cousté, “Plástica,” *Primera Plana* (Buenos Aires), July 23, 1968, 84. Paksa archive.

²⁵¹ Some sources say that the artists were held for 15 days and others say they were only in prison for a few hours.

²⁵² “La noche de los premios y las piñas” [“The Night of Prizes and Punches”], *Gente* (Buenos Aires), July 25, 1968. Quoted in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 91.

²⁵³ Grupo de Rosario or also called Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia was a group of artists from Rosario that existed from 1966 to 1968. They often worked together to work on manifesto statements against the art bureaucracy of the city. They were later part of *Tucumán Arde*.

²⁵⁴ Juan Pablo Renzi et.al., “We Must Always Resist the Lures of Complicity,” in *Listen, Here, Now*, 294-295.

Romero Brest.²⁵⁵ The artists cut the light so Brest would stop talking and then spoke their manifesto aloud in the dark. Brest was visiting Rosario for a gathering called “Amigos del Arte” (Friends of Art) organized by the Municipality of Rosario. The following day, the artist returned to Romero Brest the funds that the ITDT had awarded them to carry out the Ciclo de Arte Experimental (Experimental Art Series).²⁵⁶

The attack against the Braque Prize should also be seen as opposition to the French embassy and government; the artists were aware of the student and worker revolts against the government of Charles de Gaulle in France, and expressly manifested solidarity with the repressed demonstrators. In addition, the event marked the collaboration between artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario that would culminate in the planning and realization of *Tucumán Arde*.

Las Fuentes Rojas and *Tucumán Arde*: A New End and a Beginning

Later in 1968, these artists’ revolutionary spirit was demonstrated in what was known as *La Acción de las fuentes rojas* (*The Action of the Red Fountains*) (fig. 32) in the early morning of October 8, on the first anniversary of the execution of Ernesto Che Guevara by the U.S.-backed Bolivian army. A group of artists, including Paksa, Beatriz Balvé, León Ferrari, Roberto Jacoby, Juan Pablo Renzi, and Pablo Suárez, sought to dye the waters of the main fountains of Buenos Aires the color red, in allusion to Che Guevara’s death.²⁵⁷ The group organized itself into pairs

²⁵⁵ More on this incident in chapter 3.

²⁵⁶ “Interruptions: Braque Prize and Assault on a Lecture by Romero Brest,” in *Listen, Here, Now*, 294.

²⁵⁷ This action is similar to the experiences that Argentinean artist Nicolás García Urriburu created the same year at the Venice Biennale (and in other European cities), where he dyed the waters of the Venetian canals and fountains the color green, as an ecological protest. However, while the green waters speak to a preservation of life, the red fountains allude to the committing of a crime. Most recently, on Saturday, January 18, 2020, organizers of protests that commemorated the fifth year anniversary of the death of AMIA lawyer Alberto Nisman, dyed two fountains at the Plaza de Mayo of red color. For images, see link: https://www.clarin.com/politica/tineron-rojo-agua-fuentes-plaza-mayo-homenajes-nisman_0_xzxSEqMv.html.

(woman and man), simulating romantic couples. Each couple carried red aniline dye to be thrown into the assigned fountain.²⁵⁸ However, as the artists were not aware that the fountains did not circulate the water in a closed system, the color was diluted immediately.

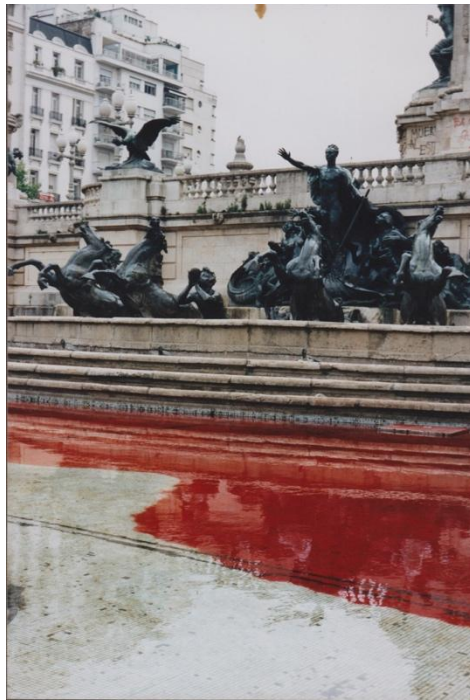


Figure 32. Beatriz Balvé, León Ferrari, Roberto Jacoby, Margarita Paksa, Juan Pablo Renzi, and Pablo Suárez, *La Acción de las Fuentes Rojas (The Action of the Red Fountains)* or *Homenaje al Che Guevara (Homage to Che Guevara)*, October 8, 1968. Margarita Paksa Archive, Buenos Aires.

A day later, Paksa decided to try a different tack. She and her husband, Osmar Cairola, used their car to make a hole in the ground. They scattered white and light blue paint along some Buenos Aires thoroughfares, creating the stripes of the Argentinean national flag. The plan was to do a second round with the car to scatter red paint on top of the flags, but this second effort was unsuccessful as well since the fresh paint stuck to the wheels of passing cars, leaving almost

²⁵⁸ The fountains were located in the plazas Lavalle, del Congreso, and de Mayo.

no white and blue paint behind. The participants in the October 8 and 9 actions regarded them as failures since they had no impact on the mass media. Despite their incompleteness and lack of success, Paksa referred to the actions as “guerrilla acts.”²⁵⁹ Their absence from the media explains why the two events are basically unknown and ignored by art history.

Around this time, amid the Onganía dictatorship, the risks assumed by artists were increasing, as artists were now outside the protection of cultural institutions. In the aftermath of *La Acción de las fuentes rojas*, Che Guevara’s symbolic power prompted the censors to shutter several exhibitions that included his image or persona in one way or another.²⁶⁰ The Cuban Revolution played an important role in Argentinean artists’ ideologies at the time—it served as both an ideal and emblem of the left that developed as a resistance to political and economic authoritarianism. Innumerable portraits of Guevara were produced at this time in Argentina and Brazil. The images were executed in a pop art style with saturated colors and flat paint; and, they were in dialogue and tension with the carefree glamour of the Marilyn Monroe portraits by Andy Warhol.²⁶¹

A few months prior to the fountain actions, Paksa had hosted one of the early organizational meetings for *Tucumán Arde*, attended by artists from Buenos Aires and Rosario. Artists discussed their visions of the work that they would produce together. The name *Tucumán Arde* was suggested at this preparatory meeting in reference to René Clément’s 1966 film *Paris brûle-t-il?*, released in Spanish-speaking countries as *Arde Paris? (Is Paris Burning?)*.²⁶² Paksa

²⁵⁹ Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 155.

²⁶⁰ That same month, the Onganía police closed the group exhibition *Homenaje a Latinoamérica* (Homage to South America), which, like *La Acción de las fuentes rojas*, was held on the one-year anniversary of Che Guevara’s death.

²⁶¹ An example of a Che Guevara portrait in a Pop Art style is the Argentinean Alfredo Plank’s *Homenaje a Latinoamérica* (Homage to Latin America), 1967.

²⁶² Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva, 94.

proposed turning the question into an affirmation—*Tucumán is Burning*; therefore, the name *Tucumán Arde* (*Tucumán Burns*).

The year 1968 saw intense conflicts among artists, institutions, and the national government. Even though the deadliest time in the Argentinean dictatorship would not begin until 1976, many sources date the beginning of state terrorism—extreme censorship, violence, and repression—to late 1968. That year artists from Rosario and Buenos Aires (including Paksa), together with intellectuals and workers, condemned the Argentine government, which they accused of leading Tucumán people into poverty and starvation. The government had closed down sugar mills and farms in Tucumán, leading to widespread poverty and starvation. “Artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario were engaged in a quiet debate that is evident in different artworks and actions,” Quiles explains, “some saw the country’s political situation as necessitating clear messages from art, while others questioned the very possibility of articulating any message free of the play of the signifier.”²⁶³ Quiles argues that *Tucumán Arde* (*Tucumán is Burning*) was an attempt to reconcile these two discrepancies.

Tucumán Arde was first exhibited in Rosario’s union headquarters and then in Buenos Aires’s union headquarters, the latter closed by the police a few hours after the opening. After this event in Buenos Aires, most of the artists involved ceased producing art altogether; others clandestinely continued as they could. This was a highly important—arguably the most important—project in Argentinean art history.

Even though Paksa, Carreira, Ruano, and Suárez, among others, participated in the initial planning of *Tucumán Arde*, they later stepped away from the project and did not sign the work as authors. This was the result of various factors—personal, artistic, and political. The affiliation of *Tucumán Arde* with the political grouping FATRAC (Frente Antiimperialista de Trabajadores de la Cultura; Anti-imperialist Front of Workers of Culture) gave rise to political tensions within the

²⁶³ Quiles, “Between Code and Message,” 136.

original group. Paksa recalls that she was there “to defend [her] position against the censorship and didn’t want to hand [herself] over to a political group that [she] had nothing to do with or wanted to.”²⁶⁴ The intense process of aesthetic and political radicalization provoked several artists to distance themselves from the project. Another factor, as Longoni and Mestman suggest, is that the participating Buenos Aires artists were generally more inclined to retain elements of aesthetic reflection in the project, while artists from Rosario favored a more direct, propagandistic approach.²⁶⁵

After *Tucumán Arde*, both the artists that actively participated in the endeavor and those who did not, decided to abandon art altogether, left the country and emigrated to Europe or the United States, or continued to create work that was not as aesthetically and politically radical.²⁶⁶ Between 1969 and 1976, Paksa was not included in any public exhibition but instead continued to collaborate with her husband in the furniture store MAC and to work privately in her studio, alongside her social activism.²⁶⁷

As her last project for the year, on December 27 and 28, 1968, Paksa organized the *Cultura 1968* (*Culture 1968*) meetings at the SAAP (Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos; Argentine Society of Visual Artists) (fig. 33).²⁶⁸ These meetings served to reflect, balance, and

²⁶⁴ Interview with Paksa in Longoni and Mestman, *Del di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 374.

²⁶⁵ See Longoni and Mestman, *Del di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 150–69.

²⁶⁶ Those who left the country or planned to leave included Delia Cancela, David Lamelas, Pablo Mesejean, Roberto Plate, Alfredo Rodríguez Arias, Juan Stoppani, and Antonio Trotta. They emigrated to Paris, London, Milan, or New York. Others, like Oscar Bony, abandoned art, while Rodolfo Azaro and Jorge Carballa adapted their work in order to continue to show at art institutions. See *ibid.*, 184–85.

²⁶⁷ See Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 for more.

²⁶⁸ Margarita Paksa, “Texto del Informe de Margarita Paksa a Cultura 1968.” In *Documents of Latin American and Latino Art*, International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/761355#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1114%2C-46%2C4806%2C3666>

close a stormy year. As Paksa explains, “these were meant to create a space to discuss a political art to be carried out collectively and with interdisciplinary actions.”²⁶⁹

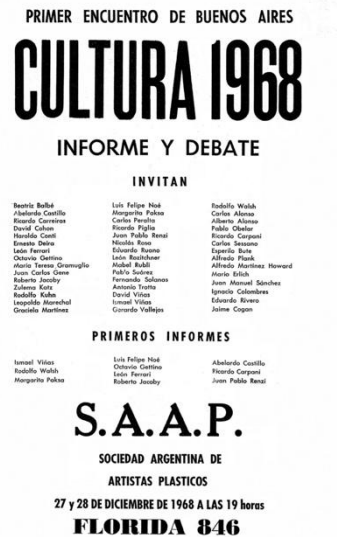


Figure 33. *Cultura 1968* (*Culture 1968*) at the SAAP (Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos) (Argentine Society of Visual Artists) organized by Margarita Paksa, December 1968. Invitation. Margarita Paksa Archive, Buenos Aires.

Paksa recalls that between fifty and two hundred people attended the meetings. In “Más allá de las disidencias” (“Beyond the Dissidences”), a speech Paksa read during the initial meeting of the series, she stated, “The success of any future joint action, such as the interaction between groups, will depend to a large extent on the fact that individual proposals become collective. It is possible that the proposal of coincidences will more easily emerge from finding the common

²⁶⁹ Author’s interview with the artist, August 2017.

enemy in the national culture; it is possible that the tactics to be used to fight against the enemy, will be the reason for our dissidence.”²⁷⁰

With these meetings, Paksa sought to promote conversations concerning the relationship between art (or culture) and daily life. In her speech she proposes overcoming the separation between people in the arts and the rest of society: “Culture, as well as life and the right to learn and teach, belongs to all of us . . . The process will be slow, but nation and art will be united.”²⁷¹ In the role of organizer, Paksa aimed to develop a context where artists working with different aesthetics, ideologies, and approaches to art would come together, at least for discussions. Concluding her opening speech, she said:

We already have some examples . . . *Ver y Estimar*, *Experiencias 68*, *Premio Braque*, *Tucumán Arde*, and many more, are offered as experiences where art and life were united, as creative actions toward positive situations, as a reward, we have received police persecution, censorship, and jail for our acts. The artist creates a process of appropriation of life . . . Will it be possible to consider a new objective as an aesthetic proposal? To restore life to life itself? Life was embodied in the painting, and then it was hung on a wall; we removed the frame, and it was transformed into an object, then it moved into the room’s space (installation); then it occupied the building (environment), and finally, when it seemed too confined, went to the street.²⁷²

Paksa’s desire to intervene collectively in everyday life, even on a micropolitical level, attempted to activate that “experimental exercise of freedom” that the Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa so often discussed. Despite Paksa’s efforts and the support of some of her colleagues, these meetings ceased in February 1969. Paksa’s goal was to create an ongoing dialogue regarding the next steps for art and to try to answer her (rhetorical) question: Would it be possible to create a

²⁷⁰ Margarita Paksa, “Más allá de las disidencias” [“Beyond the Dissidences”], presentation, December 17, 1968, *Cultura 1968*, Buenos Aires, SAAP (Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos), 846 Florida Street. Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires. My translation. Paksa’s words resemble the thoughts and words written in the Third Cinema manifesto *Hacia un tercer cine* (Toward a Third Cinema) written by , written in the late 1960s by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. Third Cinema or Third World Cinema is an aesthetic and political cinematic movement mainly in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. See Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, *Hacia un tercer cine* (Toward a Third Cinema), *Tricontinental Journal* (1969).

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

new mode of art, where life is restored to life itself? Along with her friends Oscar Bony, Roberto Jacoby, and Pablo Suárez, among others, Paksa abandoned art (at least publicly) for a period. She affirms that she made this decision, in part, as she realized that her actions could not change reality and that her “thoughts were mere utopias.”²⁷³

Paksa remembers that her biggest disappointment was “not being able to affect even more artists with our thoughts . . . after the Braque Prize incident, *Tucumán Arde*, and the circumstances, I said to myself: ‘I’m leaving.’”²⁷⁴ Artist Oscar Bony also recalls that, “together with Paksa, Plate, and Suárez, we made a decision that, in my opinion, greatly exceeded the importance of our works, and that is probably unique in the world: we denied our professional careers. It was a drastic reaction to the acts of censorship that were happening and a radicalization of the idea that we had regarding the role that art should play in society.”²⁷⁵

In the binary art and life, one could say that life won out over art. From that point on, art did not hold the same interest for Paksa, who made a strategic withdrawal. “It was a historic time in art; inside oneself, art died. We criticized it so much that we were not able to work with it in the same parameters.”²⁷⁶ This led Paksa to engage in social activism for the next couple of years. She volunteered from 1970 to 1974 in a *villa miseria* at La Matanza, a type of shantytown or slum found mostly around the largest urban settlements in Argentina, close to her home in Castelar. There, Paksa taught drawing and painting classes to children.

Institutional Critique

²⁷³ Laura Buccellato, interview with Margarita Paksa, July 2010. In *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, 103.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁷⁵ Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 211.

²⁷⁶ Fernando Farina, “Margarita Paksa: entrevista,” [Margarita Paksa: interview], *La Capital* (Rosario), March 16, 1997: 11.

The anti-institutional stance adopted by several avant-garde artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario was not characterized as “institutional critique” by art historians writing on Argentinian art at the time nor by the artists themselves. The book *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, includes three examples of Argentinian artists’ writings in the volume together with other examples predominantly by North American artists.²⁷⁷ Alberro writes, “The parallel increasingly made in the late 1960s between the managers of the institution of art and those who have assumed responsibility for continuing the established cultural order prompted artists to scrutinize and gradually challenge the roles of museum directors, curators, trustees, and the like.”²⁷⁸ The art institution began to be perceived as a place of “cultural confinement” and thus something to attack aesthetically, politically, and theoretically.

Comparing Marcel Broodthaers’s critique of museums—which used the “institution’s internal contradictions to criticize it in its own terms”—to the work of Argentinian artists at the time, Alberro proposes designating the latter a “prescriptive critique of the museum as institution.”²⁷⁹ Continuing, Alberro explains that artists’ modes of criticism in Buenos Aires, Rosario, Paris, and Warsaw “stood outside the objects they criticized, asserting norms against facts—offering judgements from a particular point of view (or criteriological positions). The criticism took various forms, including boycotting exhibitions, organizing public meetings and sit-ins, disseminating pamphlets, producing false identification cards to enable free entry into museums, and performing actions and other demonstrations that sought to radically transform the

²⁷⁷ The projects included in this volume are Graciela Carnevale’s *Project for the Experimental Art Series*, Eduardo Favario’s *Project for the Experimental Art Series*, and Osvaldo Mateo Boglione and others’s *We Must Always Resist the Lures of Complicity* (all 1968). See Alberro and Stimson, *Institutional Critique*, 72–81.

²⁷⁸ Alberro, “Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique,” in *ibid.*, 4–5.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

dominant art institutions.”²⁸⁰ Artists in Argentina, however, did not seek to transform institutions with their actions. Rather, they demonstrated strong opposition to the institutional framework but with no intention to ameliorate that framework. They realized that the institutions were confining them and they had to be liberated from them—taking art to the streets.

My position resonates with the one of Slovenian curator, museum director, and scholar Zdenka Badovinac, who in her book *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* writes that “the western model of institutional critique may be less than useful in the countries without deeply rooted institutions to criticize.”²⁸¹ Badovinac aims to prove that the progression of Modern Art has never been universal, but rather that artists working in the “margins” of the West, be it in Eastern Europe or in Latin America, are working with local histories as well as with the processes of contemporary globalization, are of the most significance today.

Even though there are interesting similarities between North American artists working within the realm of institutional critique and Argentinian artists’ actions, as seen in this chapter, it is important to recall the differences in their practices. Argentinian artists were living under a dictatorship that had strong ties to art institutions, and experienced censorship of their artworks and ideas—a context that pushed the artists to not only question art institutions, but to oppose them and end relations with them.

The main figures of institutional critique of the 1960s and 1970s were Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke. These artists’ works question, among other things, the neutrality of the institutional frame and the autonomy of art through interventions in museums and galleries. What is essential to observe is that their works were

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Zdenka Badovinac, *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-socialist Europe* (New York, New York): Independent Curators International, 2019, 125.

inseparable from the institutional context; the artists needed the institution to make their point. They also depended on their spectators to complete the work: “We ask you to become intelligent!” Buren, with his BMPT colleagues, urged his viewers in 1967.²⁸² Kirsi Peltomäki explains that “instead of being directed toward discrete art objects or performing subjects, spectators were expected to account for the entire *institutional context* within which they found themselves viewing art—visiting a museum or gallery, or encountering artworks in the public space.”²⁸³ By becoming aware of the specific connections between art institutions and the broader social context, the viewer was now an integral part of the picture.

Paksa made proposals about different kinds of communication and multi-level modes of reception, while what her contemporaries stood for (or were trying to mobilize) was “too utopian” and led to failure, prompting many artists to abandon art in favor of political militancy. The transformations that occurred toward the mid-sixties—after the military dictatorship took power—allows us to distinguish two types of artistic approaches that at first were interwoven, but later ended up separating from each other: those in favor for a “direct” message and those in favor for more complex forms of communication that involve sensuous ways. Paksa understood early on that if she wanted to show her work in public life, it should not dissolve into overdetermined binary oppositions. Both Paksa and her peers, by 1969, came to feel that this mode of making art with a direct message did not meet the challenges of the increasingly urgent political situation in Argentina. They could no longer afford to “survive as artists,” they just had to survive at all.

²⁸² BMPT quoted in Jeffrey Deitch, “Daniel Buren: Painting Degree Zero,” *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 2 (October 1976): 88. BMPT stood for (Daniel) Buren, (Olivier) Mossed, (Michel) Parmentier, and (Niele) Toroni.

²⁸³ Kirsi Peltomäki, “Affect and Spectatorial Agency: Viewing Institutional Critique in the 1970s,” *Art Journal* 66, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 39.

CHAPTER III: Resistant Message

Margarita Paksa dedicated the typographic work *Me cortaron las manos* (*They cut off my hands*, 1973) (fig. 34) to the Chilean musician, poet, and political activist Víctor Jara, who was tortured during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet—his hands were cut off to disable his guitar playing, and he was mocked by his torturers, who forced him to play the guitar with dismembered hands before killing him.



me e c
or taro
n..la as
manos

Figure 34. Margarita Paksa, *Me Cortaron las Manos*, (They cut off my hands), 1973, Letraset and black ink on paper, 17 × 17 cm (6.7 x 6.7 in.) from the series *Obras Tipográficas*. Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA) Collection, New York.

Jara's torture is just one example of the extreme cruelty and violence of the junta that came to power in Chile on September 11, 1973, summarily ending the Popular Unity Government of Salvador Allende. Paksa was well aware of the military dictatorships overpowering neighboring countries such as Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil, and sympathized with Jara in particular, who was

an early victim of the coup because he had aligned himself with Chile's working and peasant populations, singing songs about the hardships of lower-class life.²⁸⁴

Written as a coded message, Paksa's *Me cortaron las manos* is a small work on paper made using Letraset, a letter-transfer system in which preprinted letters on a transparent sheet are "struck" onto another substrate via rubbing—not drawn but imprinted. Paksa's choice to work with Letraset is not arbitrary, as she explained: "I didn't want to draw the letters by hand, because if I was against traditional painting and sculpture, I was also against traditional drawing movements. I wanted to emphasize technique, mechanics, to remove myself from any trace of humanity."²⁸⁵ There is a level of gestural removal in this technique that makes it not as closely physical or subjective as drawing. But to use Letraset, one must also be skilled and careful; rubbing the letters too softly will fail to detach them fully from the Letraset sheet. This is to say that even though the words in the work are not hand drawn, they bear evidence of the artist's hand, of the smudges and residues left during the process of their application.

Me cortaron las manos points to the difficulty of "doing" without hands, the absence of participation and action (or activism) of the artist. The fragmented words call for an active viewer who can make the connections between the words. The size of this work is also important in relation to this idea of engagement and its relationship to the viewer. It is relatively small, measuring 17 x 17 cm (6 3/4 x 6 3/4 in.), about the size of a hand. Paksa was quite deliberate, then, about the size of the work in relation to its content; it effectively replaces Jara's cut-off limbs by giving them another presence, like ghost limbs. The piece was made using an energetic

²⁸⁴ Between 1971 and 1973 the Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum in Santiago received more than four hundred multidisciplinary works from Latin American artists, including one by Paksa. She sent a typographic piece and participated in an exhibition in Santiago in 1972 in support of the social and political project that was developing in Chile during the Allende government. It is unknown what specific work she sent to the Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum, but Paksa's son, who manages her archive, considers it was a typographic work made in 1972, the year she sent the artwork to Chile. Author in interview with Sergio Paksa over the phone, July 12, 2020.

²⁸⁵ Margarita Paksa and Laura Buccellato, "A Conversation with Margarita Paksa and Her Time," in *Margarita Paksa* (Neuquén, Argentina: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2010), 81.

technique at a small scale, but the reading of it is rather onerous. The breaks in the words recreate violence recalling the dismembering and mutilation of bodies. Letters that are discontinuous metaphorize the atrocity of the act, which is repeated in the language of the body.

The shape, size, and placement of the letters on the page contribute to a message in which destruction and construction are inseparable. In the case of Paksa, as in that of so many others who have suffered personally or vicariously, the destructive actions of violence, either in their own flesh or in someone else's, they responded by creating and building to counteract the damage, as a way to counteract destruction.²⁸⁶ Paksa's choice to write about the mutilation of Jara's hands in particular connect to her fears of not being able to continue as an artist or to make art freely. Paksa understood that not being able to create is like losing one's humanity; *manos* (hands) is a word that for a Spanish speaker has a poetic resonance with *humano* (human). In the word "humano" in Spanish there is also included the word "man" in English, a transit between languages, which confirms a pre-Babel vision, in which the possibility of crossing languages is also a crossing between different forms of creation, such as those that cross the work of art that, being visual, does not avoid being verbal, and crosses the borders of creation. The connection between *humano* and *man* is a translinguistic movement that can also be applied to the trans-aesthetic movement, between different languages and different artistic forms, leads to forms of universalization that humans manifest, the humanity of the creation.

This interjection legitimizes the fusion of mediated imagination that distinguishes less and less the different experiences between visuality from the experience of verballity. For Paksa, the relation between the formal, visual aspects of typography and the production of meaning was central to the work. Paksa practiced a visual poetics that sought to leave intact the material of the

²⁸⁶ One could think of the kintsugi philosophy, the centuries-old Japanese art of fixing broken pottery. Rather than rejoin ceramic pieces with a camouflaged adhesive, the Kintsugi technique employs a special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. See Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018).

hand gesture, through which the signifier emerges. Her text works follow directly from her installations of the preceding years. Far from isolated, formal experiments, they are only apparently unrelated to her three-dimensional projects. Rather we should regard the works on paper as continuing her focus on the materiality of the object in relation to space, as well as on active audience engagement, all while carrying an intentionally resistant message.

Me cortaron las manos is part of Paksa's series *Obras tipográficas* (*Typographic Works*), made from the late 1960s to the 2000s, all of which explored the sinister procedures and political brutality of the dictatorship via visual poetry. They called out the killings and violence by their names and simultaneously reflected on their maker's complex role as an artist. Paksa's typographic works are far from simple objects—they are memorable and can imprint themselves upon one's mind. The series attends to language's materiality as well as disengages itself from prescriptive proclamations.

Paksa regarded herself as a poet as well as a visual artist; in a 2010 interview, she told curator Laura Buccellato, "I am an artist with a long trajectory. I write poems, short stories, and I write about almost all my works. So I could also be called a poet."²⁸⁷ Paksa's experiments with the materiality of writing clearly connect to Concrete poetry. This global movement, which began in the 1950s in Europe and South America, was united by a variety of interests. Rather than a poem in the conventional sense, a Concrete poem is akin to a diagram or drawing, a pattern on the page that symbolizes a relationship between objects, concepts, and occasionally structures of sound. Paksa had several commonalities with Concrete poets, especially her type of subtlety and the creation of visual poems from reduced language (sometimes a single word), which she then manipulated, permutated, and transformed.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Laura Buccellato, interview with Margarita Paksa, July 2010, in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva* (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 106.

²⁸⁸ For an overview of Concrete poetry see Mary Ellen Solt, ed., *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

writing, Paksa's various typographic works are more calculated, machine-like, and closer to graphic design.

Like Ferrari, working at the limits between writing and painting in the Argentine context, there is also the work of artist Mirtha Dermisache (1940–2012) that was coined as “illegible writings” by French theorist Roland Barthes, who in 1971 wrote her a letter showing great interest in her work and stressed her ability to achieve the “essence of writing.”²⁹⁰ Dermisache's enigmatic scripts are empty of meaning and fall into a tradition of Asemic writing—writing without semantic content—that dates to the Tang dynasty.²⁹¹ She saw in the formal structure of newspapers, comic strips, and letters a chance to expand her expressive field and explore new possibilities for her calligraphic lines. Her *Diario No 1 Año 1* (Diary No. 1 Year 1) from 1972, for example, is part of her series *Diarios* (Newspapers), a copy of the daily newspaper with information translated into nonsensical script.

Paksa's *Me cortaron las manos*, like many of Ferrari's and Dermisache's calligraphic works, is concerned with not only the linguistic meaning but also their relationship to the space/page and the object. All elements are engaged in a dialectical tension that alternates between, or reconciles, perception and reading. Paksa would have also been familiar with Brazilian Concrete poetry, Concretismo, a movement founded by the poets Haroldo de Campos, his brother Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari and promoted internationally via the

²⁹⁰ Mirtha Dermisache had contacted Barthes through Argentine filmmaker Hugo Santiago, director of the now-legendary film *Invasión* (1969), who had taken one of her books to Paris. Letter from Roland Barthes to Mirtha Dermisache, March 28, 1971, in Mirtha Dermisache, *Porque ¡yo escribo!* [*Mirta Dermisache: because I write!*], ed. Agustín Pérez Rubio, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Malba and Fundación Espigas, 2017), 263.

²⁹¹ The Tang dynasty, or Tang Empire, was an imperial dynasty of China that ruled from 618 to 907, with an interregnum between 690 and 705.

magazine *Noigandres*, which was launched in São Paulo in 1952.²⁹² Their Concrete poems were typically printed, not handwritten. One of their manifestos reads: “With the concrete poem occurs the phenomenon of metacommunication: coincidence and simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal communication; only—it must be noted—it deals with a communication of forms, of a structure-content, not with the usual message communication.”²⁹³ Words of Concrete poetry are dismantled and modified so that we can see what they are made of and how—their origins, meanings, references. Some interesting *Topoemas* by the Mexican Octavio Paz “show and say” poems in space; they make words and letters exist in the *topos*, the visual space.²⁹⁴ For Paksa, visibility and readability work together and at different levels.

Take, for example, a Concrete poem written in 1957 by Pignatari, *Beba Coca Cola* (*Drink Coca-Cola*, 1957) (fig. 36).²⁹⁵

²⁹² Although *Noigandres* was only published between 1952 and 1962, artists continued developing abstract poetics in following decades. Notably, Augusto de Campos experimented with several forms of multimedia composition and display, including the early use of computers. During the mid-1960s Brazilian Concrete poets began collaborating with Tropicalia musicians such as Caetano Veloso and Tom Zé, and the sonic dimension of Concretism became clearer.

²⁹³ Augusto de Campos, *Teoria da Poesia Concreta, Textos Críticos e Manifestos 1950–1960 [Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry]*. Translated by Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Decio Pignatari. São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1965. Reprint 1958.

²⁹⁴ “Topos” according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, means “‘literary theme,’ 1948, from Greek *topos*, literally ‘place, region, space,’ also ‘subject of a speech,’ a word of uncertain origin.” <https://www.etymonline.com/word/topos>.

²⁹⁵ Written in 1957, Pignatari’s poem was set to music and recorded and performed in 1966 by Gilberto Mendes as “Motet Em Ré menor – Beba Coca-Cola. Enjoy!”



Figure 36. Décio Pignatari, *Beba Coca Cola*, 1957. From *Poesia concreta in Brasile*, 1991. 45-13. Courtesy of the Estate of Décio Pignatari.

Pignatari used Coke's trademark red and white and a midcentury typeface to create an anti-advertisement. The English translation of the poem reads as follows:

drink	coca cola
drool	glue
drink	coca(ine)
drool	glue shard
shard	
glue	
	cesspool

Pignatari's poem references Coca-Cola and the brand's economic imperialism, which reached Brazil in the 1950s.²⁹⁶ The poem insinuates a globalizing culture thanks to a subversive brand of wordplay in which repetition and recombination express meaning while deconstructing it. The word "coca," in South American countries, refers to a number of shrubs, but especially to coca tea. Pharmaceutically, the dried leaves of the coca yield cocaine. By simply exchanging the position of the vowels in "coca," the poet gets "caco" (shard). With this simple method, he is

²⁹⁶ Concrete poetry has affinities with such later North American Pop artists as Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenberg, and James Rosenquist, all of whom also riffed on Coca-Cola drinks and branding.

able to bring into the poem the question of what one would find in the future if the shards we leave are fragments of Coca-Cola bottles. The final word of the poem, “cloaca” (cesspool) also takes its letters from “coca cola.”

While Pignatari reproduced about a 100 silkscreen copies of this particular work, each of Paksa’s typographic drawings is handmade and unique. Here I want to put special emphasis to Letraset as craft, and point out the historical and gendered division between craft or handmade (often associated with women’s labor), and fine art. Gender inequality is not an exception for the world of concrete poetry. In the anthology *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979*, co-editors Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre write that women’s role in international neo-avant garde groups were “rarely established with precision. In fact, it is regularly underrated. Their work is not always credited, and it has rarely garnered the visibility and recognition that their male collaborators’ work received.”²⁹⁷

Women in Concrete Poetry gathers 50 artists, poets, performance artists, writers, and activists who do not necessarily identify as concrete poets due to the label being too narrow. Even though Paksa is not included in this volume, the new framework offered in this book is particularly relevant. Paksa did not consider herself a concrete poet but her experiments with typography are relevant to the experiments of the other 50 women artists included in the above-mentioned book, who worked on the periphery of the main concrete poetry circles. The co-editors Balgiu and de la Torre redefine the term “concrete poetry” as a term in flux, centered in the materiality of text, and placing thematic emphasis on the subjectivity of language.

In a review of the book, writer and artist Theadora Walsh explains that,

in the 60s and 70s, letraset, mimeographs, and portable duplication techniques became commonplace technologies. For the first time, artists, poets, and designers were able to easily produce typographical texts. Letraset’s rub-down Instant lettering, for example, allowed typefaces to be

²⁹⁷ Mónica de la Torre and Alex Balgiu, “Introduction” in *Women in Concrete Poetry 1959-1979* (Brooklyn, Primary Information, 2020), 13-14.

manipulated by hand. Visual styles which had always implied professionalism or authority could be torn up, done cheap, and repurposed. Type took on a new materiality.²⁹⁸

I add to Walsh's observation that Paksa's choice to use Letraset was also a way to bypass the censors. With Letraset, she could remain detached from the work, at least to some extent, and not be traced by handwriting analysis called "graphology"—the analysis of the physical characteristics and patterns of handwriting to identify the writer.

Paksa's Letraset visual poem *Me cortaron las manos* takes the form of handwritten words. It is a sort of drawing to be seen while reading. Reading and observation, like writing and drawing, are unified under the same gesture. Distant from the canonical tradition of Conceptual art that takes the impersonal forms of Joseph Kosuth as a reference, these writings have the mark of subjectivity. It is an important distinction, especially when speaking of the 1960s, when artists in Argentina (and other Latin American countries) were producing publications with precarious techniques but always emphasizing quantity more than quality in order to decentralize art production. Artists like Edgardo Antonio Vigo in Argentina published magazines like *Diagonal Cero* (Diagonal Zero, 1962–68) and *Héxagono* (Hexagon, 1971), which were important vehicles for the dissemination of the new Latin American poetry.²⁹⁹

Paksa's earlier typographic explorations, which might be described as anti-advertisements or anti-posters, include her 1969 series *El centinela abrirá fuego* (*The Sentinel Will Fire*). There are four versions of this work—numbered *I*, *II*, *III*, and *IV*—all made with

²⁹⁸ Theadora Walsh, "Endless Constellations: On "Women in Concrete Poetry 1959–1979" in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 21, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/endless-constellations-on-women-in-concrete-poetry-1959-1979/>.

²⁹⁹ In Chile, for example, Guillermo Deisler published Ediciones Mimbre, a compendium of graphic art and visual poetry by the Latin American avant-garde. Deisler was imprisoned in 1973 during Pinochet's government but with the help of a friend was able to leave jail and go into exile in France, where he continued to publish, now under the name of UNI/vers, until his death in 1995. See Cristina Freire, "Apuntes sobre el arte subterráneo en Latinoamérica en los años 1960–1970" ["Notes on Underground Art in Latin America in the 1960–1970s"] in *Sistemas, Acciones y Procesos: 1965–1975* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 2011), 42–48.

black and red ink and a typewriter. To create some of the text in *El centinela abrirá fuego I* (fig. 37), Paksa used a typewriter which reads: “El centinela abrirá / FUEGO / en rojo” (The sentinel will FIRE in red), and “Otra vez metiéndote en política?” (Getting yourself into politics again?). She hand-drew the much larger word “FUEGO” which is centered, bolded, and in all-caps, giving the work the sense of a mass-produced poster.

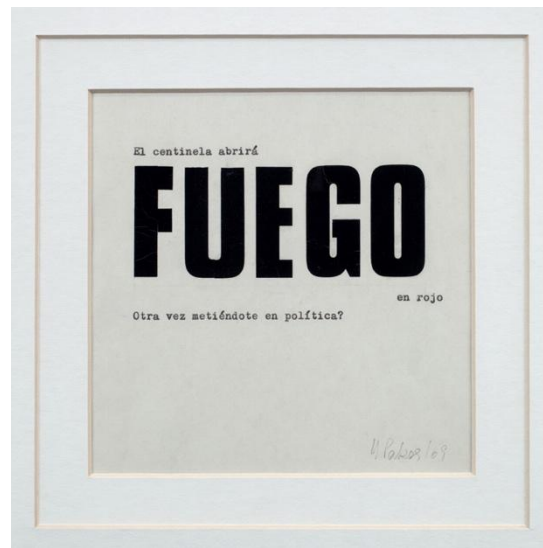


Figure 37. Margarita Paksa, *El Centinela abrirá fuego I* (*The sentinel will fire I*), 1969. Black, ink on paper and typewriter, 14.5 × 14.5 cm. (5.7 x 5.7 in.), Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA) Collection, New York.

The thick, oversize letters seem to have been written with physical force. The central word, “FIRE,” is verbal and visual at the same time. “The sentinel will FIRE” is a warning of upcoming danger, an order someone gave to the sentinel—“ready, set, fire!”—which turns someone into a murderer for following these rules.³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ As mentioned in previous chapters, Paksa was the one who came up with the name Tucumán Arde. One could safely say that the idea of fire or burning was of specific concern to Paksa as a way to understand or feel the political situation in Argentina.

It is estimated that Argentina's military government killed up to 30,000 people during the dictatorship. Families who lost their children during these times made claims similar to what follows:

At four in the morning on the 17th of April, a group of heavily-armed men, identifying themselves only as members of the security services, demanded entry to our home. When we let them in, they searched the house at gunpoint and then ordered my eighteen-year-old-daughter, Maria Vargas Guevara, to come with them for questioning. I asked to accompany her but they said that was not possible. Where were they taking her? I asked. They said to Police Station Number 9 and, not to worry, they would bring her back within twenty-four hours.

In great fear but with hope, my husband and I waited those twenty-four hours. Maria did not return. We went to Police Station number 9 where they denied any knowledge of Maria. Then we went from station to station all over the city and everywhere they denied all knowledge of her whereabouts, denied any knowledge of her arrest. We hired a lawyer and he brought a writ of habeas corpus before the First District Court. The Government responded that it could not identify Maria because according to their records she had never been detained. The judge dismissed our application. Meanwhile we went to every military headquarters in the city, where we received the same answer, that she was unknown to them. We went to our priest and asked him to make inquiries. He learned nothing. Please help us. She may still be alive.³⁰¹

Making the 1969 series *El centinela abrirá fuego* in this political context was not a small undertaking by Paksa, in fact it was an enormous risk. When Paksa writes in her work "The sentinel will FIRE" she is warning us that the sentinel will FIRE any minute. In *How to Do Things with Words* (1955/1962) the British philosopher of language J. L. Austin introduces the idea of "speech act theory," arguing that instead of focusing on semantics and what words mean, we should focus on pragmatics and what people mean.³⁰² In other words, we should focus on the various things that people do, the acts they perform when they speak. Austin concludes that

³⁰¹ Tom Farer, "I Cried for you, Argentina," *Human Rights Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (November 2016): 854-855.

³⁰² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1962).

every statement (with a few limited exceptions) is really an *act*, so in this case, Paksa is *doing* something, an action.

Rather than remaining just a word, “FIRE” becomes an image, an imperative sign, provoking an action rather than a verbal response. The order is pronounced only to provoke an execution; it expresses the violence of those who command and the silence of those who must limit themselves to carrying it out. As a conceptual art piece, the work plays with two possibilities—the evidence of the image and the plurality of meanings of the word. Paksa used the space of the page to highlight the word “FIRE” using capitalization and different word sizes to emphasize the ambiguity of the didactic and political message.

In the 1960s art scene in Argentina, it was no longer enough to maintain one’s political awareness as a parallel to the work of art. Art had begun to move away from *aesthetics* as if running away from an enemy, and took up *ethics* as its model and aims. Several groups of artists from diverse ideologies, even ones otherwise antagonistic in their views, found themselves unified by their suspicion toward aesthetic points of view, favoring instead more directly propagandistic approaches.

Paksa’s involvement with *Tucumán Arde*, and then subsequent disengagement from the movement, was in part because it was becoming too narrowly ideological, and was moving away from experimental materiality and aesthetics. These interests prevailed for her entire career, pointing specifically to Paksa’s insatiable search for a suitable political aesthetic. Her goal was to not be limited by one single way of making or viewing art. In her own words: “No, not for me; the jail of proposing ideological paths in art, declamatory of truth that later logically will be contradicted by others—no more surrealist manifestos, neither concrete, nor constructivist.”³⁰³

Other artists that left *Tucumán Arde* in addition to Paksa were Pablo Suárez, Roberto Plate, and

³⁰³ Margarita Paksa, “Arte y Utopía en la Argentina” (presentation, III Congreso Nacional de Semiotica “Los Discursos de la Utopía,” November 1988). Archives of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires.

Oscar Bony. Bony even remembered this decision as being collective: “it was a drastic reaction to the censorship events that had been taking place and a radicalization of the idea that we had then about the role that art should occupy in society.”³⁰⁴ In other words, the role of art in Argentinean society in these times was one that should bypass the censors maintaining a relationship with experimental material. In the late 1960s, Paksa was involved with *Tucumán Arde* at the movement’s beginning stages. Soon, however, she became disappointed by its rejection of material concerns. It was under these circumstances that she turned to typography and drawing.

When she writes “Getting yourself into politics again?” in *El centinela abrirá fuego*, it is both interrogative and an ironic phrase—a kind of reproach and acknowledgement. Questioning her role as an artist involved with politics, it’s as if she inscribes this image in the history of violence, the history of resistance, and the history of herself. In the 1970s, many artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario opted for abandoning art and dedicating themselves to social work, activism, graphic design, or advertising. But Paksa never abandoned art; rather, she distanced herself from the art world’s militancy which was becoming overtly political and which was distancing itself from Paksa’s own convictions. Until the late 1970s, she continued working, isolated, at her home studio—without anyone seeing her work. She focused on developing the typographic works and drawings examined in this chapter. She was also very involved with the Peronist group “Unidad Básica” in La Tablada, Buenos Aires, where she coordinated various activities such as murals and theater plays in shanty towns of the area.³⁰⁵ For several years, León Ferrari, for example, stopped working in art, and between 1970 and 1976 he was active in the Buenos Aires Forum for

³⁰⁴ Oscar Bony, *La Nación*, “Via Libre”, May 21 1998, 27, quoted in Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde,”* 254-255.

³⁰⁵ Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde,”* 254-266.

Human Rights and in the Movement Against Repression and Torture.³⁰⁶ After the last coup in 1976, he went into exile in Brazil where he took up his artistic production. Pablo Suárez was a close friend of Paksa and collaborated in early 1969 with the graphic design establishment called “Fabrill Financiera,” designing and producing graphic materials such as posters and comics. Soon after, Suárez retreated to the countryside and isolated himself from the art world and most of his friends.

With the series *El centinela abrirá fuego* she began to realize more clearly the collapse of ideological content. In fact, these works refer to her own work as a self-critique, as if they were the work of another, or as if they were a reference of her own and others at the same time. This subjective overlapping initiates a transition to a space where the exteriority of her perception and the intimacy of her reflection became commingled. In *El centinela abrirá el fuego III* (fig. 38), Paksa makes the poster self-referential by adding with a typewriter at the top the following sentence: “Un gran cartel decía” (A large poster said), followed by “El Centinela abrirá FUEGO. El ciego trastabilló un momento . . .” (The sentinel will fire. The blind man stumbled for a moment . . .). In this version, the word “FUEGO” is encased in a red rectangle, highlighting it even more insistently.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 254.

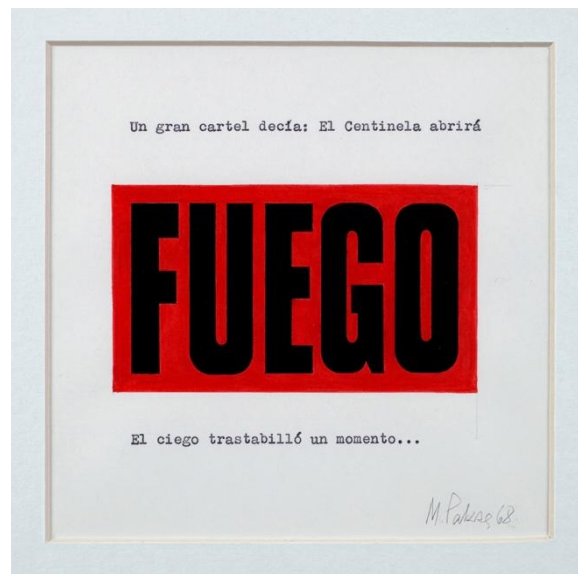


Figure 38. Margarita Paksa, *El Centinela abrirá fuego III* (*The sentinel will fire III*), 1969. Black, ink on paper and typewriter, 14.5 × 14.5 cm. (5.7 x 5.7 in.), Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA) Collection, New York.

Paksa's aesthetic choices here go back to the basics of typography. Early printing, from medieval manuscripts to Chinese calligraphy and beyond, was often done in black and red, with red mostly used as an accent color. And from an aesthetic viewpoint, red works very well as a highlight color with both white (paper) and black (text). Constructivist posters are another relevant example where the use of simple geometry and flat colors—predominately red, black, and white—were used to promote workers' campaigns such as the famous poster by Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova *Books!* (1924) that advocated for workers' education.³⁰⁷

In the 1980s, American conceptual artist Barbara Kruger would become known for her typical use of black-and-white photographs, overlaid with declarative captions, stated in white-on-red. Like the Constructivists, Kruger's work was designed for a general audience and public consumption. In *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)* (1989), as in most of her works, the colors red, white and black are instrumental in drawing focus. The color red in particular does

³⁰⁷ For more information on Constructivist material culture see Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: from Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

not only command a viewer's attention, but also helps instigate a reaction. Take, for example, traffic signs: Stop signs are red; Caution signs are yellow; Construction signs are orange. If a sign is directly commanding you to do (or not to do) something, it is most likely red. For instance, "Stop," "Yield," and "Do Not Enter" signs are all red, with the most crucial information on the road communicated through the use of either entirely red signs or white signs with red text.

While the first two versions of Paksa's *El centinela abrirá fuego* do not necessarily explicitly reference the work's own poster aesthetics, the third and fourth have an evident self-referentiality. Paksa forces us to consider our reaction to the work by suggesting that our compulsion to call the work a "poster" reveals our own predisposition to confuse the image with the thing it represents. In other words, much like René Magritte in *The Treachery of Images* (1926), Paksa is pointing to our tendency to see a word as an unambiguous sign of a thing. As examined in Chapter 2 with the earlier work *Comunicaciones* (1968), Paksa wanted to avoid didactic art that conveys direct messages. Instead, *El centinela abrirá fuego III* is paradoxical. Its format again recalls advertising with its large imperative text surrounded by fine print, but unlike advertisements, that evoke recognition without much hesitation, Paksa's work requires the viewer to stop and consider: *Is it a poster, or does it look like a poster?* Is it telling us about some other, different poster? In fact, this work must indeed be pointing to another poster, "un gran cartel" (a large poster), given that the work at hand is rather small. The viewer becomes a reader, doubling her vision or dividing it in a reflective act by which she sees and reads at the same time. *El centinela abrirá fuego*'s self-referentiality is part of what makes the work "private" and resistant, or designed for a trusted limited public, as opposed to the Constructivists and Barbara Kruger who intended the work to be for the masses.

Political graffiti and posters were a central medium for the artists involved with *Tucumán Arde*, designed for informal or accidental audiences. In order to counter the State's deliberate

concealment of information of the poverty situation of northeast Tucuman province, artists opted for what they called “a circuito sobreinformacional” (overinformational circuit). Their poster campaign consisted of “sticking posters on billboards and walls in the center and neighborhoods of the cities of Rosario and Santa Fe with one single word: TUCUMÁN. The photos show, for example, factory doors, walls, billboards, wallpapered with that simple poster, sharing the street space with posters of commercial products.”³⁰⁸ Even though Paksa did not stay with *Tucumán Arde*, it is clear that her works continue implementing advertising language and using non-conventional broadcasting channels within the artistic community.

Maps of Resistance

Between 1970 and 1976, Paksa developed the series *Diagramas de batallas* (*Battle Diagrams*), singular cartography in which she introduced written messages, while simultaneously pointing out geographical sites of repression. Paksa made each of these diagrams corresponding to real events—guerrilla confrontations and civil unrest that took place in different locations such as La Plata, Córdoba, and Buenos Aires Province in Argentina.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde,”* 196.

³⁰⁹ For example, in La Plata these events happened between 1972 and 1973, in Rosario they were during 1975, in Tucumán the confrontations were in early 1975 until mid-1976. Paksa’s works correlate to some of these events and I will expand on these series later in this chapter.

The series *Diagramas de batallas* refers back to Paksa's earlier works from 1966-1968, *Situaciones fuera de foco* (*Out of Focus Situations*) (fig. 39), made using Letraset, where she alluded to the political situation of neighboring country Uruguay.³¹⁰



Figure 39. Margarita Paksa, *Justicia, una situación fuera de foco* (Justice, an out of focus situation), from the series *Situación fuera de foco* (*Out of Focus Situation*), 1968, Letraset and ink on paper, 17 x 17 cm (6.7 x 6.7 in.), Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA) Collection, New York.

The Uruguayan dictatorship—which is known to be not the most bloody but the most totalitarian of all Latin American dictatorships—quietly started the process toward authoritarianism in the early 1960s and officially lasted 12 years, from 1973 to 1985.³¹¹ *Situaciones fuera de foco*

³¹⁰ In 1966, a large number of Argentine artists with a wide range of ideological orientations came together for the exhibition *Homenaje al Viet-Nam* (Homage to Vietnam) at Galería Van Riel in Buenos Aires. Paksa contributed two works from this series: “Uruguay, una situación fuera de foco I–IV” (Uruguay, an Out-of-Focus Situation I–IV, 1966) and “Uruguay, una situación fuera de foco Tupamaros” (Uruguay, an Out-of-Focus Situation Tupamaros, 1966). This was the first of many group shows organized in the second half of the 1960s on a range of political issues. Another political show was *Malvenido Mister Rockefeller* (Unwelcome Mister Rockefeller) at the Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos, Buenos Aires, organized in June 1969 to condemn Nelson Rockefeller’s visit to Argentina as the representative of Richard Nixon. Paksa participated in this exhibition as well. See more in Margarita Paksa: *Retrospectiva*, 42–45.

³¹¹ Paul C. Sondrol, “1984 Revisited? A Re-Examination of Uruguay’s Military Dictatorship,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 11, no. 2 (1992): 187–203.

include a black and white typographic game where Paksa dislocates the word “Uruguay” as a metaphor for social disarticulation. A country that, like Argentina, was being the subject of violations of human rights, use of torture, and the unexplained disappearances of many Uruguayans. In other works in this series, Paksa includes the colors yellow, red, and blue, as well as a five-pointed star in the background. These colors are inspired by the Tupamaros flag, a left-wing urban guerrilla group in Uruguay, which has horizontal triband blue-white-blue with a red diagonal with a five-pointed yellow star in the middle.³¹² Words are stamped with stencil over the star with phrases such as “Vencer o Morir” (“win or die”) in all-caps black or “Tupamaros” in all-caps red.

Paksa’s references to Uruguay were a way for her to critique Peronism. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, groups working toward socialist revolution proliferated in Latin America, among them the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional–Tupamaros, founded in Uruguay in 1961, and the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP, People’s Revolutionary Army) in Argentina, launched in 1969. Because of their operative’s inventiveness in devising political actions (the historic prison break by leftist rebels in Uruguay, for instance), these movements have come to be considered forms of political conceptualism. Artist Luis Camnitzer famously wrote about this in *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (2007), claiming that the Uruguayan Tupamaro guerrilla movement staged creative and spectacular events that blurred the border between politics and art, and had an aesthetic valence beyond military performances: “The Tupamaros exemplify politics coming as close as possible to the art side of the line. In 1968, the Argentinean group *Tucumán Arde* (Tucuman Is Burning) is an example of art coming as close as possible to the political side of the line.”³¹³

³¹² The Tupamaros flag is based on the Artigas’ flag which is one of the three official flags of Uruguay. It pays homage to José Gervasio Artigas (1764-1850), the national hero of Uruguay.

³¹³ Luis Camnitzer, “The Tupamaros,” in *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 44.

In *Situaciones fuera de foco*, black and white words such as “Uruguay,” “Justicia,” and “Freedom” appear as if seen through the crosshairs of a rifle’s scope. The connection between weapon and camera is almost inevitable; in English, if one considers that “to shoot” can describe the action carried out with either. Images are fired like bullets thanks to the sight of the rifle or the objective of the camera—a lethal coincidence between names and techniques. Creation and death are reconciled not by the same instruments but by the same voice: “to shoot.” The American artist Gordon Parks, known for his photojournalism, repeatedly compared his camera to a weapon: “you have a 45mm automatic pistol on your lap, and I have a 35mm camera on my lap, and my weapon is just as powerful as yours.”³¹⁴

Although in most of Paksa’s *Situaciones fuera de foco*, the highlighted words are inscribed in a circle, as if viewed through a rifle sight or camera lens, in others, the word appears as if escaping the limits of that dreadful circle. Are we in fact looking through a weapon? Could it perhaps be a camera? Older SLR cameras used “split image focusing” that looked precisely like Paksa’s crosshairs. Or is it a magnifying glass that distorts the writings presented? How does a word react when it is interceded by an optical device, which transforms it into a target? Paksa empties the words in the target—“Justice” or “Freedom”—from their original meanings and instead places them in situations of helplessness or weakness against the imminence of the final shot.³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Gordon Parks quoted in Belle Hutton, “The Camera Could be a Weapon”: Gordon Parks on the Power of Photography” in *AnOther*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/12638/gordon-parks-quotes-of-note-exhibition-alison-jacques-gallery-life-magazine>.

³¹⁵ Paksa’s *Situaciones fuera de foco* where words like “Justice” are threatened and seen through the lens of a weapon, relate to the panopticism of totalitarian regimes, where actions for justice and freedom turn activists into targets of surveillance and removal. In 1975, Michel Foucault defined panopticism in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* as “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. To achieve this, it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so.” Michel Foucault, “Panopticism” in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books 1995), 201.

The person looking through the camera or the gun scope presumably has their finger on a trigger/shutter release. If it's a gun, the viewer is an assassin. If it's a shutter release, the viewer is a documentarian. Regardless, both are observers but on behalf of different people. Especially with the series *Situaciones fuera de foco*, Paksa is thinking about "observers" of her work rather than "spectators." Art critic Jonathan Crary distinguishes these two terms in the *Techniques of the Observer* where the term "observer" emphasizes the individual's role in complying with certain codes of seeing, whereas "spectator" is more commonly used to emphasize the passivity of "looking" on as the passive recipient of the mass spectacle.³¹⁶

Paksa characterized the works in this series as situations "out of focus," blurred, confused, indeterminate. Even though the most obvious interpretation could be that some letters in a given word are more out of focus than others given the crosshairs in the composition, the reference could also be to *foquismo* or "foco theory," a strategy for revolution associated with the Argentinean Marxist Ernesto "Che" Guevara and developed by the French intellectual and government official Régis Debray.³¹⁷ According to this theory, it is not necessary to wait until conditions are right to begin a revolution. Particularly in oppressed Third World countries, a dedicated group of revolutionaries can begin very small-scale semi-guerrilla warfare at any time, which will supposedly serve as a focus (in Spanish, *foco*) and inspiration for the rapid growth of more general guerrilla warfare.

Even though she calls the works "out of focus," namely, outside of the focus (guerrilla) group, Paksa's works are not abandoning politics, but rather, she is making a modest gesture toward change. Clearly, the *foco theory* could not apply since the language of revolution had been practiced and then perverted by the Peronists. By being "out of focus," Paksa's piece

³¹⁶ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990), 5.

³¹⁷ Matt D. Childs, "An Historical Critique of the Emergence and Evolution of Ernesto Che Guevara's Foco Theory," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 593–624.

performs a potent form of aesthetic, semiotic, and political delay that responds both to the risk of that moment, but also to the necessity of action in the future.

While the works in the *Situaciones fuera de foco* series are graphically relatively simple, the *Diagramas de batallas* are more complex, including maps with specific locations and situations of the state of siege at that moment, adding layers of sociopolitical specificity. “Justice” did not look the same nor mean the same thing in 1968 as it did in 1974. *Justicia, toma de La Calera* (Justice, Occupation of La Calera) (fig. 40) from the 1974 series *Diagramas de batallas* is strikingly more detailed and intricate than the 1968 piece also titled “Justice”.

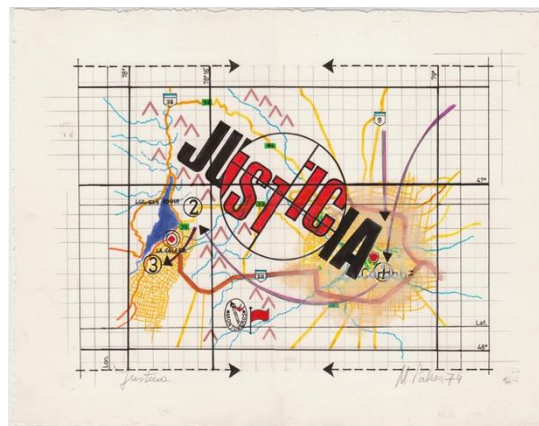


Figure 40. Margarita Paksa, *Justicia, toma de La Calera* (Justice, take of La Calera), from the series *Diagramas de batallas* (Battle diagrams), 1974, Ink on paper, 27.5 x 36.5 cm. (10.8 x 14.3 in.), Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires.

If there was any question whether the crosshairs in the earlier series were from a weapon, now there is more certainty that we are in fact viewing from a gun’s point of view. The map pinpoints the specific places where the leftist urban guerrilla group Montoneros was engaged in conflict in La Calera, a town in the district of Córdoba in northern Argentina. On July 1, 1970, the Montoneros took over the police station of La Calera, a bank was robbed, the telephone

exchange was seized and its equipment disabled, and lastly a box was left in the corner of the bank—an alleged explosive that actually contained a recording of a Peronist march.

If we understand cartography as “the art and science of graphically representing a geographical area, usually a flat surface such as a map or chart. It may involve the superimposition of political, cultural or other non-geographical divisions onto the representation of a geographical area,” then *Justicia, toma de La Calera*, like other works in this series, adopts communicative systems from cartography in addition to those from the scope of art.³¹⁸ The agency of the author of traditional maps “is sidelined or even erased entirely, and in the absence of a clearly marked point of view the map assumes a more general tone: it appears as the universal point of view.”³¹⁹ Even when the agency of the author is obscured, maps are always political—they have been made to assert the legibility and dominance of empires (Roman and European), but also made to mark changes in technology such as the demarcations of gas stations. Treasure maps, for instance, are documents of illegal wealth transfer. Unlike maps generated for strategic government intents or guerrilla purposes, Paksa’s mapping operations offer advanced *alternative* forms of signaling local violence to the world.³²⁰

Take for example the map that French theorist Guy Debord made in 1957 titled *The Naked City*, in which Debord remade the city of Paris according to which areas he found compelling. Based on a standard map of the city, *Plan de Paris a vol d’oiseau* (1956), Debord cut small segments of the city, not by neighborhood or any other official delimitation, but rather by what he found relevant. Debord’s map was made in response to Baron Haussmann and his

³¹⁸ Britannica, s.v. “cartography,” <https://www.britannica.com/science/cartography>.

³¹⁹ D. Pinder, “Subverting cartography: the situationists and maps of the city,” *Environment and Planning A* 28 (1996): 407.

³²⁰ “Debord cut the Plan into nineteen chunks, thereby banishing any trace of an urban grid. Then he connected the map chunks of streets and buildings with swirling red arrows that represent the psychogeographical explorations or *dérives* undertaken in Paris in the early 1950s.” Elin Diamond, “Reactivating the City: A Situationist-Inspired Map of New York,” *Theatre Journal* 70 (2018): E-16. The Situationists collectively developed a theory of “psychogeography” and “psychogeographical mapping” as a means of exploring and trying to change the city.

massive urban renewal program of new boulevards, parks and public works in Paris commonly referred to as “Haussmann’s renovation of Paris” that took place between 1853 and 1870. In “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” Debord writes that “from any standpoint other than that of facilitating police control, Haussmann’s Paris is a city built by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”³²¹ Haussmann specifically designed the city for the emerging and powerful merchant class. The old slums were bulldozed and the working classes were moved to the suburbs.

In *The Naked City*, Debord rearranged a tourist map of Paris by slicing sections and connecting them randomly with red arrows intending to alert the walker to “laws and effects” that amount to social control. Debord’s new itineraries represent human trajectories determined by chance, and what the Situationists and Lettrists referred to as *dérive*, or in this case, more appropriately referred to by “psychogeography.” Debord defined “psychogeography” in 1955 as the “study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individual.”³²² Art critic Lori Waxman adds about this term in *Keep Walking Intently*, saying that “the Lettrists saw the street as an adult playground, but they also saw it as a place for observing the effect of the city on its inhabitants. They dubbed this type of investigation ‘psychogeography.’”³²³

However, while Debord and the Situationists deconstruct conventional cartographic maps (both literally and figuratively) in order to focus on place as a criticism of space/urban systems, and conventional maps convey a certain abstract kind of truth about the urban environment, Paksa’s maps are different. They not only represent a specific place and a specific event, but they

³²¹ Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique” (1955), in Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 24.

³²² Ibid., 8.

³²³ Lori Waxman, “Drifting toward a Situationist Revolution” in *Keep Walking Intently: The Ambulatory Art of the Surrealists, the Situationists International, and Fluxus* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 139.

also represent the artist's stance regarding this event. In Paksa's point of view, as her work reads, the attack by the Montoneros at La Calera was searching for "justice."³²⁴ In other words, with her maps, Paksa attempts to counter "official" cartographic schemes and representations of space and instead uses maps and discourses of cartography tactically and transgressively for political ends. Paksa's map exposes a checkerboard design that dates back to colonial times, when Spain imposed the grid layout over the city of Buenos Aires.³²⁵

In the early 1970s, for example, Argentine artist Horacio Zabala produced a series of maps of Latin America that he modified by obscuring parts of the region with monochromatic rectangles of black, blue, or red paint. In *Revisar/Censurar* (1974) (fig. 41), Zabala rubber-stamped the words "revisar" (inspect) and "censurar" (censor) with increasing density on a series of readymade South American maps, culminating in the total obscuring of the territory with a black monochromatic rectangle, an unambiguous allusion to censorship and repression. Zabala modified the map of South America to bring attention to a continent suffering from abuses of power and stifling of citizens. Both Paksa and Zabala are critiquing urban forms that directly link

³²⁴ Just a year before La Calera events, there was a turning point in Argentina's political history: a civil uprising in the city of Córdoba at the end of May 1969, known as the Cordobazo. The uprising saw students and workers rise up against the military dictatorship of General Juan Carlos Onganía with a series of strikes and urban riots. Onganía had suspended the right to strike, frozen workers' wages, and decreed a 40 percent devaluation of the Argentinean peso, among other changes. Furthermore, he was attempting to impose corporatism in Argentina and was using Córdoba as an experimental site for these policies. "The cordobazo proved the beginning of the end for Onganía. Having first dismissed his entire cabinet, Onganía then spent a year failing around helplessly, until finally in early June 1970, he fell to another coup led by his army commander, General Alejandro Lanusee." David Rock, "Authoritarians, Populists, and Revolutionaries," in *Authoritarian Argentina: The Nationalist Movement, Its History and Its Impact* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 209.

³²⁵ Buenos Aires' grid pattern has its origin in the late 1500s when the Spanish conquistador Juan de Garay created the first organized layout of the city. The squares were chosen as simple unities and every Spanish conquistador was appointed an area as large as one square of the city (or half a square).

to colonialism more generally. Like Paksa, Zabala approached cartography through its relation to power and politics, where territory can be marked as exploitable, or commercialized.³²⁶

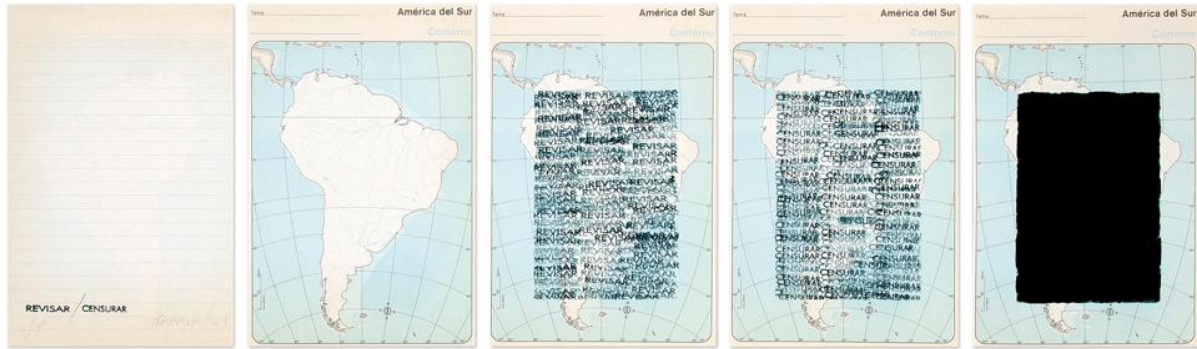


Figure 41. Horacio Zabala, *Revisar/Censurar*, 1974, Ink and pencil on printed maps, 14 1/4 × 39 1/8 in. Daros Latinamerica Collection, Zurich.

Interpreting Paksa's 1974 *Justicia, toma de La Calera* one must also consider that just a year earlier, a crucial event transpired in the history of the military dictatorship in Argentina. The Ezeiza Massacre took place on June 20, 1973, near Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires, when Juan Perón returned to Argentina after eighteen years in exile. From Perón's platform, camouflaged snipers from the right wing of Peronism—members of the Triple A, a clandestine army financed by Peron's minister of social welfare, José López Rega—opened fire on the crowd of three and a half million people who had gathered at the airport.³²⁷ The left-wing

³²⁶ The art historian Elena Shtromberg points out in her book *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s* (2016) that "while the scholarship on mapping and its historical impact in the New World is well-charted terrain, there is still a dearth of studies on the mapping impulse in the work of artists, despite its ubiquity in artistic practice throughout the twentieth century, particularly in Latin America." Elena Shtromberg, *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 129. Shtromberg mentions Joaquín Torres García's *Inverted Map of South America* (1943), the most widely known and cited example in this vein. For an expanded discussion on Torres García's work see Jennifer Jolly, "Reordering Our World," in *Mapping Latin America: A Cartography Reader*, ed. Jordana Dym and Karl Offen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 198–211.

³²⁷ David Rock, "Perón and After," in *Authoritarian Argentina*, 158.

Peronist Youth and the Montoneros were targeted and trapped. It is said that there were thirteen deaths and 365 injured in the massacre, but there was no official investigation, so the numbers were likely higher.

By this time, Perón had very different followers and supporters from both the left and right wings. The main question for these groups sought who Perón would give his blessing to—who was the real Perón? He had encouraged from the outset the widest ideological spectrum of actors. Historian David Rock writes:

During the early years, Perón's regime continued to wear what the U.S. State Department had called its "defensive camouflage" and manifested relatively few traces of its authoritarian origins. Buoyed by a rapidly expanding economy, Perón could reward his supporters and ignore most of his enemies. He now flaunted his credentials as a popular democrat and sought to strengthen his support by "becoming closer to all those who have thought differently from us. . . . All forces can be used in our movement. . . . It is our breadth that will enable us to triumph."³²⁸

At first, the ideological polarization was manageable in an international context. However, after World War II, given Argentina's now much closer relationship with the United States, political unrest began to mount, and Perón abandoned what he called "the generic methods of democracy" to start a dictatorship.³²⁹ The Peronists became more polarized and pitted against one another.

As a leftist Peronist, Paksa herself was actively involved with the Montoneros from 1970 to 1974 while teaching art in the shantytown (*villa miseria*) at La Matanza, outside Buenos Aires. But, she soon became disillusioned with the violence that was promoted from both the Peronists' right and left wings and disengaged from the Montoneros. In 2010 she recalled: "They killed each other! Fuck everyone! What I most hated about Peronism is that ability to kill each other physically."³³⁰ Paksa's *Diagramas de batallas* focus on the resistance from the guerilla

³²⁸ David Rock, "Perón and After," in *Authoritarian Argentina*, 158.

³²⁹ *Ibid.* 161.

³³⁰ Buccellato, interview with Paksa, July 2010, in Margarita Paksa: *Retrospectiva*, 106.

groups who opposed and attacked the military. These battle diagrams are interpretations of actual battles organized by the left-wing guerrilla groups with Paksa acting like a war artist. A war artist is generally commissioned through an official scheme to record the events of a war. In the case of Paksa, she was self-motivated to document her experience of war in the form of an illustrative record or a depiction of how war shapes lives. Many works by war artists serve as documents of a time, telling a history that would otherwise be lost. The forcefulness of Paksa's individual titles leaves no room for misinterpretation: *Buscamos Armas 1 (La Comida) (We Look for Weapons 1 [Food]*, 1970), *Buscamos Armas 2 (Violencia) (We Look For Weapons 2 [Violence]*, 1970), *Tucumán, el Vietnam Argentino 3 (Libres or Muertos) (Tucumán, the Argentinean Vietnam [Free or Dead]*, 1973), for instance.

In *Toma del batallón 601 (The Capture of Battalion 601*, 1975) (fig. 42), the action in question is the ERP's capture of an arsenal on December 23, 1975, in Monte Chingolo, a town in the south of the greater Buenos Aires metropolitan area. The 601st Arsenal Battalion was the largest in the country, and the operation entailed blocking bridges and traffic as well as fierce combat between ERP snipers and the police. The many helicopters and explosions led one witness to compare the scene to Vietnam.³³¹ The clash lasted seven hours and ended with ninety ERP deaths and six to ten casualties among the security forces. By mapping such operations in diagrams, Paksa's series serve as documents of the conflict that would soon lead to Argentina's 1976 coup d'état and the Dirty War (the name used by the military dictatorship of 1976–83).³³²

³³¹ Eduardo Tagliaferro, "Los prisioneros del ataque a Monte Chingolo," Página 12, accessed on March 4, 2021 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/1999/99-12/99-12-26/pag13.htm>.

³³² For example, even though the events at La Calera were very significant, especially for the local people, there are no visible records of them. The places where the attacks took place no longer exist—the police station is in ruins, the telegraph center was converted into a butcher shop, and the bank is now a Chinese grocery store.



Figure 42. Margarita Paksa, *Toma del batallón 601* (The capture of battalion 601), from the series *Diagramas de batallas* (Battle diagrams), 1975, Ink on paper, 28.5 x 38 cm. (11.2 x 15 in.), Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires.

Secret Writings

Between 1970 and 1976, Paksa did not exhibit work in Argentina. She had a few international exhibitions in Paris, Santiago de Chile, and São Paulo, but mainly focused on working in her studio and teaching art in shantytowns. Paksa as well as other teaching artists knew of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who visited Argentina in 1973 in the midst of the dictatorship happening in both Brazil and Argentina.³³³ He had recently published the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) which greatly influenced educators all across South America struggling under conditions of mass illiteracy and poverty, similar to those of Freire's context in Brazil.³³⁴ In a later book, *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992) Freire recounts his visit to Argentina and recalls his meetings with the rectors of all the national universities, the trainings for the Ministry of Education, a meeting with educators in a peripheral area of Buenos Aires, and a “night out” with

³³³ Darío G. Martínez, “Cuando Freire visitó la Argentina” in *maíz*, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.revistamaiz.com.ar/2019/11/cuando-freire-visito-la-argentina.html>.

³³⁴ Paulo Freire, et al. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 50th anniversary edition (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

political activists.³³⁵ But Freire also recounts that in these meetings, there were police and military officers undercover asking provocative questions. Their presence reveals the organs of repression and the power to infiltrate and monitor convenings about education. Educators who participated in these meetings were persecuted, tortured and disappeared at the hand of the military. There were dedicated task forces that collected educational materials to clandestinely destroy them, and not surprisingly, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was a book forbidden during this time.³³⁶

Under this climate of repression, in November 1976, Paksa returned to the Buenos Aires' art world with an exhibition at Escuela Modelo de Castelar titled *Exposición de Artistas Plásticos (Plastic Artists Exhibition)*, where she presented her series of figurative works *La Comida (Food)* (fig. 43). Kidnapping, torture, and mass murder were rapidly escalating in Argentina, and *La Comida* alludes to that carnage, which was both physical and intellectual. Paksa's naturalistic drawings of cooked pigs are shown as if presented at a tavern—displayed on a tray on top of lettuce and tomatoes, or stuffed with grapes and garlic-tomato skewers. Some of the pigs laying down in these big platters had their mouths stitched, representing censorship. They resonate most viscerally in their obsessive attention to detail, thereby reflecting the cruel reality of the current political environment.

³³⁵ Darío G. Martínez, “Cuando Freire visitó la Argentina” in *maíz*, accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.revistamaiz.com.ar/2019/11/cuando-freire-visito-la-argentina.html> See also Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

³³⁶ Darío G. Martínez, “Cuando Freire visitó la Argentina” in *maíz*, accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.revistamaiz.com.ar/2019/11/cuando-freire-visito-la-argentina.html>.



Figure 43. Margarita Paksa, *Sin título* (Untitled), from the series *La Comida* (Food), 1976, pencil on paper, 19.6 x 27.5 in. Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

“I came back at the worst time,” recalls Paksa. “However, I did not choose an anodyne path. I did works about food: very perfectionistic pictures of gagged animals. Placed in the room, *La Comida* turned into death.”³³⁷ Paksa did not take a subtle approach— once installed in the gallery space, the cooked pigs on trays stuffed with fruit immediately became a metaphor for death. However, Argentine curator Jorge Glusberg interpreted this series in a completely different way, not necessarily related to the dictatorship murders. He wrote in 1985:

The works that Margarita Paksa disseminated in 1976 [...] are a faithful reflection of this problem of the status of women as an object and reveal a direct allegation for women’s demands. In this sense, animals are at the same time something that, once prepared and cooked, generate disgust: the natural reluctance to feel in the face of the testimony of a cannibalistic society, where women are destined to occupy a passive place. Consequently, these detailed drawings are metaphors for cruelty and are linked to the magical-mythical rites of cannibalism...³³⁸

Glusberg was referring to the idea of cannibalism or “anthropophagy” from the manifesto of Brazilian Oswald de Andrade from 1928 that later inspired artists and musicians in Brazil in the

³³⁷ Laura Buccellato, interview with Margarita Paksa, July 2010, in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva* (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 117.

³³⁸ Jorge Glusberg, *Del Pop Art a la nueva imagen* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985), 367- 376.

1960s.³³⁹ Even though de Andrade was referring to Brazilian culture specifically, the cultural tradition of cannibalism is a concept that is also applied to all of Latin America, in its need for identity and in its attempts to shed European or American self-centeredness. Glusberg appropriates this concept of cannibalism to interpret Paksa's figurative work *La Comida* as a way to speak about women's objectification.³⁴⁰ Glusberg's interpretation and leaving aside the dictatorship as the primary explanation of the work was most likely purposeful as a way to protect himself and Paksa even though the dictatorship had recently ended.

"In fact," Paksa recalls later on, "I wanted to represent *La Comida* precisely at the end of 1976, at the height of the dictatorship, where there were real massacres [...] I felt that people were food, digested; It was the phagocytosing by the military of all the rest of the people."³⁴¹ Originally she wanted to use people enclosed in large acrylic boxes, "locked up or tied up, gagged," but she thought it would be "too direct and cruel."³⁴² The catalogue of the exhibition where this series was first shown said clearly that "the only message Paksa was giving was that of death."³⁴³ Writer Nicolás Rosa, reflects on this series:

It is natural that having worked on an "idea" prior to its pictorial realization, this "idea" refers to its contiguous theoretical context: Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes. However, it could be affirmed that Margarita Paksa's works do not proceed, nor do they rely on the codified organization of mediating functions (raw/cooked, nature/culture). [...]

³³⁹ Oswald de Andrade, "Cannibalist Manifesto" in *Latin American Literary Review*, trans. Leslie Bary, Pittsburgh: Dept. of Modern Languages, Carnegie-Mellon University. 19 (1991): 38–47.

³⁴⁰ Paksa had a later series called *Her, The Food* (1977) that was more specifically referring to women's objectification, so perhaps Glusberg confused the series *La Comida* with this later one after having conversations with Paksa.

³⁴¹ Laura Buccellato, interview with Margarita Paksa, July 2010, in *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva* (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno, 2012), 120.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ Nicolás Rosa, "Sobre la exposición *La comida o el Paradigma de la muerte*. Reflexión simbólica sobre el objeto de consume" ["About the exhibition *Food or the Paradigm of Death*. Symbolic reflection on the object of consumption"] in *Margarita Paksa expone dibujos serie La Comida* [*Margarita Paksa shows drawings from the series Food*], Buenos Aires, Galería Balmaceda, 1976. Museo de Arte Moderno Archive, Buenos Aires.

Pigs, chickens or rabbits: subjected to the rite of “roasting,” of “cooking,” they do not participate in the circuit of ritual consumption but rather are inserted in the closed sphere of violence: flagrant and necessary contradiction of nature violated to become an edible product: a macabre consumer object, then.³⁴⁴

Eating is an old hyper culturalized habit, a trace of persistent biological dependencies that loosely masks the crudest forms of desire, the vain attempt at material manipulation of a category not classifiable in any code: death.

Paksa’s *La Comida* is above all a political satire along the lines of the satirical novel *Animal Farm* (1945) by English writer George Orwell, which is traditionally viewed as a satire on dictatorships in general, and the Bolshevik Revolution in particular.³⁴⁵ The book tells the story of a group of farm animals who rise up against their human farmer in order to have a more democratic environment. However, their uprising ends up in a situation worse than before, with an authoritarian leader, a pig named Napoleon. “The animals are not only representative of certain historical figures in the Russian Revolution, but are also archetypical of tyrants, bigots and sycophants in all dictatorial regimes down the ages,” writes Prof. Harry Sewall.³⁴⁶

With the coup, several Argentine artists in addition to Paksa, returned to figuration such as Antonio Berni, Antonio Segui, and Juan Pablo Renzi, “through which the horrors of the dictatorship were referenced through neoexpressionist grotesquerie,” argues Quiles.³⁴⁷ In the

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ George Orwell, *Animal Farm*: 75th Anniversary Edition (Kolkata: Signet Press, 2004).

³⁴⁶ Harry Sewall, “George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: A metonym for a dictatorship,” *Literator* 23, no. 3 (Nov. 2002): 82.

³⁴⁷ Quiles, ““Between Code and Message,” 258. For more on figurative painting in 1970s Argentina see Andrea Giunta, “Pintura en los ’70: inventario y realidad,” in *Arte y Poder: Jornadas de Teoría e Historia de las Artes 5* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1993). It is pertinent to bring up here the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), a modern realist movement of the 1920s that emerged in Germany in the aftermath of World War I, as the formation of the nation’s first democracy, the Weimer Republic, was taking place. New Objectivity artists offered close observations of the human condition, emphasizing the ugly and grotesque as an intentional affront to comfortable bourgeois society. See Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015).

important essay by art historian Andrea Giunta titled “Pintura en los ’70: inventario y realidad” (“Painting in the 1970s: inventory and reality”), she writes that when artists in Argentina adopted figurative images in the 1970s—a movement also referred to as “Nueva Figuración” (New Figuration)—it was received with surprise.³⁴⁸ Figuration, and painting in general, were questioned and confronted in Argentina with what had constituted the dominant panorama in the previous decades: the emergence of geometry in the 1940s and its developments in the following decade, the informalist proposals at the end of the 1950s, the experimentations with the media, the use of new and novel materials, and the desire to reunite art and life in the 1960s.³⁴⁹ Additionally, politics and corporate culture had appropriated modernism, so it is not surprising that artists returned to figuration in this particular context of the 1970s.

While art critics qualified the figurative tendency as backwards, Giunta proposed a different reading, especially to those works made between 1976 and 1980s, years ruled by violence and repression. She writes: “In short, it is about reestablishing the symbolic links between a set of apparently inconsequential and distant images and the imaginary that consciously or unconsciously was generated around a violent reality. It is about investigating the possible relationships between the state violence of the 1976 military coup and the visual discourse.”³⁵⁰ Art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh states that representational work is retrograde in the European context of the 1920s and 1930s. In his 1981 essay “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” Buchloh emphasizes that there is a close connection between repression and representation—that

³⁴⁸ See Andrea Giunta, “Pintura en los ’70: inventario y realidad,” in *Arte y Poder: Jornadas de Teoría e Historia de las Artes* No. 5 (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, University of Buenos Aires, 1993).

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 218. My translation.

growing political oppression and a “regression” to modes of figurative representation in art are closely tied. In his own words:

How is it that we are nearly forced to believe that the return to traditional modes of representation in painting around 1915, two years after the Readymade and the Black Square, was a shift of great historical or aesthetic import? And how did this shift come to be understood as an autonomous achievement of the masters, who were in fact the servants of an audience craving for the restoration of the visual codes of recognizability, for the reinstatement of figuration?³⁵¹

We cannot understand Paksa’s figurative painting from Buchloh’s perspective.

Buchloh was writing about a particular time and space—the 1920s and 1930s in Europe—and he was an advocate for the 1960s avant-garde project, but Paksa’s work in Argentina in the 1970s was happening in a completely different context. As persuasive as Buchloh’s essay on figurative painting has been, it is important to differentiate the figurative paintings in Argentina from ones in Europe or North America—the ones in Argentina cannot be understood without acknowledging how linked they are to trauma. Murder and disappearances were happening right in front of Argentine artists’ eyes—they could not look the other way. We should see these figurative paintings as confrontations with a repressive reality. “Returning to painting,” writes Giunta, “also implies the possibility of resisting the oppressive power from the symbolic power of the image.”³⁵²

In *Information*, one of the most important early exhibitions of Conceptual art, which took place at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, curator Kynaston McShine intended to gather artworks from around the world that focused on the production, transmission, and circulation of information. A number of Argentine artists were included in the show. Paksa was not, but she

³⁵¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” *October* 16 (1981): 39.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 224.

was very much part of the international practice that McShine was spotlighting. He explained his intentions in the opening pages of the exhibition catalogue:

If you are an artist in Brazil, you know of 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?³⁵³

The fear that Americans might have felt in the United States in the 1970s was distant from the one that artists in Brazil or Argentina might have felt under a military dictatorship. While it is true that protests could turn violent and dangerous, in the U.S. people were not disappearing or tortured. Additionally, most of the Latin American artists that participated in the *Information* show were living outside of their native countries while Paksa remained in Argentina.

It was during the 1970s that the political urgency to evade censors gave rise to the use of covert text by Latin American artists. Furthermore, their employment of text as art’s material content connected their projects to other international manifestations of Conceptual art. Paksa and Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles, for instance, embedded in their work similar sociopolitical agendas. Meireles participated in *Information* with the work *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project* (1970) (fig. 44), composed of Coke bottles screen printed in white with the message “Yankees Go Home!” in English, below it “MARCA REG. DE FANTASIA” (FANTASY TRADEMARK), and below that, the title of his project. He then signed the work with his initials and the date. The idea was that the bottles would be reinserted into circulation by refilling them with Coca-Cola, which as a dark background would make the white lettering of the message easier to read. Bottle refilling, as opposed to melting down for recycling, was common at the time. Censorship in Brazil during the dictatorship required that any written text get a

³⁵³ Kynaston L. McShine, “Essay,” in *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 139.

clearance from the federal police in Brazil. “Given the susceptibility of established modes of communication to censorship,” explains art historian Elena Shtromberg, “Meireles’ *Insertions* deliberately provided a space for a dissenting voice, if not a subversive ideological agenda, via an alternative medium, or circuit.”³⁵⁴



Figure 44. Cildo Meireles, *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project*, 1970. Silkscreen on Coca-Cola bottles. Courtesy of the artist.

Art historian Liz Kotz argues in her book *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (2007) that the first notable instance of artistic appropriation of language was John Cage’s 1952 composition *4'33"*.³⁵⁵ Out of this “beginning,” Kotz asserts, came an emphasis on language as a way to document or record an *event*, and language took on a more instrumental and performative role rather than a material one. Take for example Joseph Kosuth’s early conceptual artwork *One and Three Chairs* (1965), which is considered a performance of an idea.

³⁵⁴ Elena Shtromberg, *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 33.

³⁵⁵ See Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

Paksa worked on the series *Escrituras secretas* right after the coup in 1976, and it was an act of artistic courage and determination.³⁵⁶ At first glance, these wall sculptures seem to be purely geometric serial abstractions; but, a closer, more careful look reveals secret coded messages, requiring a visual commitment from the viewer to recognize the hidden message, a kind of complicity or tacit pact, always uncertain, eventual, proposed between the artist and the observer. One of the works in this series is *Es tarde* (*It's Late*, 1976) (fig. 45), made the same year as the coup, positions metallic wheels painted in bright red and blue on an aluminum plate, and its aesthetic of serial minimalism appeals to an ambiguous game. As one looks for the hidden text, the message reveals itself and reads: it's late.

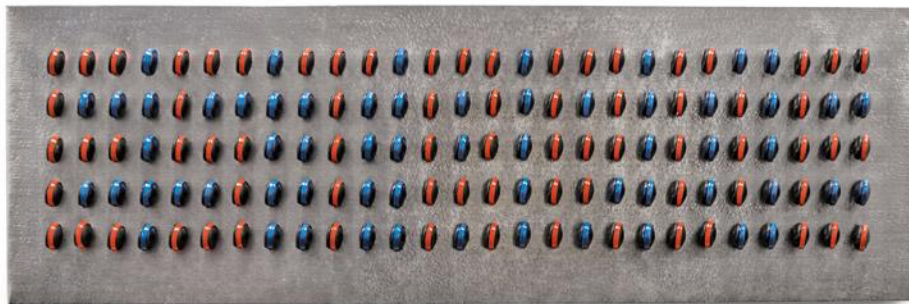


Figure 45. Margarita Paksa, *Es Tarde*, from the series *Escrituras Secretas*, 1976. Aluminum and wheels, 16 x 58 x 2 in. Courtesy of MALBA, Buenos Aires.

While Meireles' *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* is an “event-related” series—it depends on the circulation and distribution of the Coca-Cola bottles to have meaning—Paksa's *Escrituras secretas* are less focused on the performance or the capacity of language to record but

³⁵⁶ There are no notes or sketches of these works in Paksa's archives. I suspect this was a precaution on her part, taking seriously the idea of the work and its secrecy.

rather treat language as simultaneously material and conceptual. Furthermore, Paksa was interested in keeping language hidden, both protecting and enriching it.

The coup of March 24, 1976, by the Argentine military came after two and a half years of political chaos under Isabel Perón, widow of populist president Juan Perón. Two days after the coup, the junta announced that army commander General Jorge R. Videla had been designated president of the nation. The object of the junta was to join a “global confrontation” against Communism—in other words, to resist and reject anyone whose ideas were contrary to Western and Christian civilization.³⁵⁷ David Rock describes it: “The military regime of 1976 appointed Nationalists to the supreme court and to positions in the ministries of education and justice, the Central Bank, and numerous faculties in the universities. Meanwhile, the church provided another avenue for the Nationalists to influence and support the regime.”³⁵⁸ Videla and the junta announced in their first speech that “the enemy has no flag nor uniform . . . nor even a face. Only he knows that he is the enemy.”³⁵⁹ One was expected to denounce any individual whose appearance, actions, or presence were “inappropriate”—the people were asked to divide the civilized from the uncivilized, the patriot from the traitor.

No (1976) (fig. 46), from the series *Escrituras secretas*, is made of metal round knobs painted red and blue, attached to an aluminum plate.

³⁵⁷ See Rock, “Authoritarians, Populists, and Revolutionaries,” 225.

³⁵⁸ Rock, “Authoritarians, Populists, and Revolutionaries,” 227.

³⁵⁹ David Rock, *Argentina 1516–1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 365.

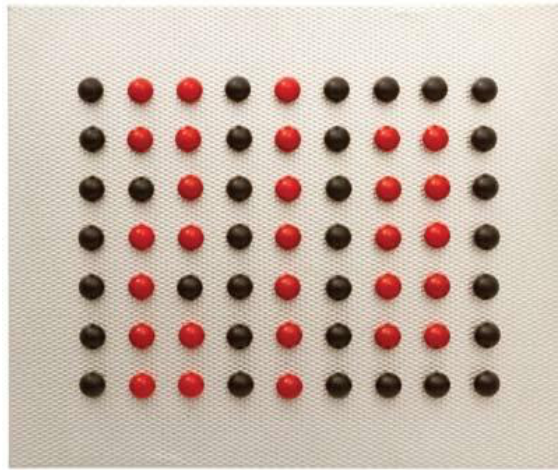


Figure 46. Margarita Paksa, *No*, from the series *Escrituras Secretas*, 1976-2000. Aluminum and metallic knobs, 13 x 16 x 2 in. Courtesy of Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

As in *Es tarde*, the secret message is the title. About this work, Paksa commented:

I do not want to make a billboard sign; if that was the case I would have made something to be read from 10 meters away. On the contrary, I wrote it so that it was very hard to read, because it is very intimate, it is there so you can read it inside, so that you internalize it, to be read by the spectator and the maker. I am not screaming; I am telling it to myself: say “no” to this because it’s oppression, say “no” to this because it’s a dictatorship, say “no” to so many things.³⁶⁰

In the same interview, Paksa explained that in another work she included the word “yes” in English because The Beatles say “yes,” while in Argentinean society one must say “no” to many things. In her words: “We had to say ‘no’ to political, social, and intimate things. That is why I chose to work with coded messages.”³⁶¹

Paksa might have been familiar with Yoko Ono’s 1966 conceptual piece *Ceiling Painting/Yes Painting* consisting of a ladder leading up to a canvas hung on the ceiling, with a magnifying glass hanging down on the end of a chain. Looking through the magnifying glass like

³⁶⁰ Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva, 117.

³⁶¹ Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva, 117.

a spy, one was able to read a word written in small letters: “Yes.”³⁶² However, the coded message of *Escrituras secretas* was not only a semiotic problem but also a political one.

The only way for Paksa to transmit her message was to make it barely perceptible. Given the personal risks of dissent under an authoritarian and dictatorial regime, she opted for secrecy, which is a form of silence, or rather *resistance*, in the two senses of the verb—to oppose and fight as much as to continue resisting, opposing and fighting, despite the risks. This was a time when everyone in Argentina was called to battle: “Citizens, assume your obligations as Reserve Soldiers. Your information is always useful. Bring it to us,” declared General Jorge Rafael Videla in 1975.³⁶³ Paksa was doing the opposite by coding her messages. The text “It’s Late” is concealed, and gives a sense of Paksa’s own subjective feelings, her irritation, subtly inserted in the rigidity of a formalist aesthetic. Her anguish is about it being “too late” to make art that would make a difference, especially during the Dirty War, a time when her family and colleagues were being targeted and disappearing. Paksa was obsessed with the meaning of art at the same time that she was trying to capture the experience of life under dictatorship and push back, with caution, against its oppressive constraints.

Conceptual art in Argentina and the dematerialization of the art object came to fruition during the dictatorship as a way to resist authority and find other possible ways to communicate, not necessarily ceasing to provide ground for expressive practices, but quite the opposite, by exchanging expression for introspection. In other words, this introspection is not one that is meant to be for a single, monadic person. Paksa’s works are in fact made for communities linked by survival and shared trauma.

³⁶² It is said that Ono and John Lennon met at the preview night of her solo show *Unfinished Paintings and Objects* at the Indica Gallery in London where *Ceiling Painting/Yes Painting* was exhibited. Ono’s positive message was representative of a journey towards hope, and celebrated by Lennon and the Beatles as a mantra.

³⁶³ Videla made this declaration in Montevideo at the Eleventh Conference of Latin American Armies, and it was quoted in *Clarín*, Argentina’s largest daily newspaper, on October 24, 1975. Quoted in Marguerite Feitlowitz, “Introduction,” in *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

In her 1977 work *Para Macedonio* (*For Macedonio*) (fig. 47), she wrote backward, with Letraset, in a column, on a notebook sheet. Paksa dedicated this work to the Argentine anarchist writer and philosopher Macedonio Fernández (1874–1952), who was a mentor to Jorge Luis Borges and other avant-garde Argentine writers, and served as an inspiration throughout her career. To read the words in this work requires a mirror, alluding to various methods used to keep knowledge hidden, perhaps most famously Leonardo da Vinci, who wrote many of his personal notes in this manner. My translation of *Para Macedonio* reads as follows (with the caveat that some words, like “ideobras” and “belarte,” are invented): “for / macedonio / fernández / these / idea-works / trying / for / them / to be / beautiful-art”.³⁶⁴

EXERCICIO 21	16
para	1
macedonio	2
fernández	3
estas	4
ideobras	5
tratando	6
de	7
que	8
sean	9
belarte	10
	11
	12

Figure 47. Margarita Paksa, *Para Macedonio* (*For Macedonio*) from *Obras Tipográficas* series, 1977. Letraset and black ink on paper, 8 x 11 in. Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires.

³⁶⁴ Particularly important to highlight about Macedonio’s philosophy was that he fought against the intellectualization of his work. For example, in his avant-garde experimental novel *The Museum of Eterna’s Novel*, published posthumously in 1967, the characters are in crisis because they know they are only characters and not real people, and that the novel will end once the reader stops reading. They suffer because they know they are ephemeral and depend on the reader to continue living. The characters’ self-consciousness, as well as the self-consciousness of the novel itself (it has more than fifty prologues), makes it seem as if it is looking for a meaning to its existence beyond its vulnerable and contradictory fictional presence. I believe Macedonio’s work resembles Paksa’s active reflective habit, and her consistent questioning of her role as an artist and search for new materials and strategies. Macedonio Fernández, *The Museum of Eterna’s Novel: The First Good Novel* (1967; repr., Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2010). Paksa likely read this novel in the late 1960s or late 1970s, around the time of its first publication, even though Macedonio started writing it in the 1920s.

In 1979 Paksa transferred her typographic interests into neon sculptures. Her sense of frustration related to art's tardiness is evident in *Es tarde, vuela* (*It's Late, Fly*, 1979) (fig. 48), which is made of red, green, and purple neon mounted on a black acrylic plate. I cannot help but notice that Paksa includes the word “vuela” (fly) which at the time referenced the “vuelo de la muerte” or “death flights”— a form of extrajudicial killing practices by the military between 1974 to 1983 in which opponents of Argentina’s military regime were thrown from planes into the freezing waters of the South Atlantic in an attempt to hide the murders.³⁶⁵



Figure 48. Margarita Paksa, *Es tarde, vuela* (*It's Late, Fly*), 1979, neon and black acrylic, 12 x 31 x 4 in. Courtesy of Margarita Paksa Archives, Buenos Aires.

One of her better-known neon works is *El arte ha muerto, viva el arte* (*Art Is Dead, Long Live Art*, 1979) in which she contradictorily suggests that art is both dead and alive. Death in art often refers to a substantial transformation that makes it last through a change. In the case of the

³⁶⁵ See Ceraudo Giancarlo, et.al., *Destino Final: Argentina's death flights during the Dirty War* (Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing, 2017).

neon sculptures, the text is not coded, nor is it difficult to read, as it is in the *Escrituras secretas*, but the sculptures are partially masked by the flashy material of neon, a medium employed for advertising and shopfront signs through the 1960s, when artists like Joseph Kosuth and Dan Flavin began to experiment with it, turning a material associated with the urban kitsch of commercial signage into a powerful medium of fine art. And in Argentina, artist Marta Minujin was also known to have used neon in the famous installation *La Menesunda* (1965) at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella.³⁶⁶

Most interesting regarding Paksa's neon work is the experimentation with a new material that combines the machinic and the handmade. Manufacturing neon signs is as much a craft as it is a mechanical process. Most often, neon works are unique and need to be made according to the confines of the available space. Manufacturing neon signs is largely a manual process. It consists of bending the tubing and attaching the electrodes, removing any impurities from within the tubing, then evacuating the air and adding the gas.

New technologies allowed Paksa to constantly question her practice (and art in general) in order to advance it: "I'd like to make it clear that throughout my career, I have never cared for what kind of style it is, whether figurative or not, but have always focused on my objective."³⁶⁷ Paksa's objective or artistic purpose was informed foremost by her sociopolitical context and not by a particular aesthetic choice. How can art become different using new materials and technologies?

From Paksa's early typographic works *El centinela abrirá fuego* (1969), to her series *Diagramas de batallas* (1970-1976) in which she draws complex maps with specific locations and situations of the state of siege at that moment, to the work *Me cortaron las manos* (1973)

³⁶⁶ See Chapter I for more information on *La Menesunda*.

³⁶⁷ Margarita Paksa and Laura Buccellato, "A Conversation with Margarita Paksa and her Time," in *Margarita Paksa*, exh. cat. (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Neuquén, 2010), 81.

dedicated to Victor Jara, to *Escrituras secretas* (1976), Paksa's typographic works in general had a particular intention to produce resistant messages. Written in encoded ways, Paksa's works call for an active observer who can make the connections between the words and the world. The murderous junta that ruled Argentina from 1966 to 1983 restricted the written word because they feared its expressive power, but Paksa was courageous and skillful to continue making art despite censorship and life-threatening conditions. As in Paksa's earlier works like *Relaxing Egg*, the viewer in Paksa's typographic works is also the participant. We, the viewer become a reader doubling our vision or dividing it in a reflecting act by which we see and read at the same time.

EPILOGUE: Tiempo de Descuento

Paksa's first video piece, which is widely regarded as the first known video artwork made in Argentina, was *Tiempo de descuento. Cuenta regresiva. La hora 0* (*Discount Time: The Countdown: Hour 0*, 1978) (fig. 49), and is about what is seen and not seen, the veiled and the unveiled, and the differences between private and public space.³⁶⁸ For this work, Paksa shot forty-five minutes of footage of a man running around an apartment, which she then edited down to a twelve-minute video of the moments when the runner entered and left a particular room. The edit poses a reflection on time and human becoming, as occurring within gaps of activity.



Figure 49. Margarita Paksa, *Tiempo de descuento. Cuenta regresiva. La hora 0*. (Discount time. Countdown. Zero hour), 1978, Video performance, UMATIC/Betamax, color, sound 12 min., Courtesy of Walden Gallery.

³⁶⁸ Paksa made several more videos in the 1990s, notably *El Descanso de Loreta* (Loreta's Rest, 1992), *Metamorphosis* (1993), and *Es Tarde* (It's Late, 1994).

The work can be superficially interpreted as a benign meditation on a life defined by its actions (which would pose no problem to the censors), but it can also be interpreted as specifically about the significance of what is not allowed to be seen in the public realm, as a negative imprint of the minutes that were edited out. The twelve-minute color video is, in my estimation, a direct continuation of Paksa's previous typographic works, this time with different materiality: an actor dressed in black enters a small, defined stage on the floor to *represent* the man who runs, not to *be* that man. While the actor runs, always seen in the same place, a digital clock at the bottom of the frame marks the viewer's perceived time, not the runner's time. In other words, the clock marks 17:25, 17:26, 17:27, even as the runner's actions are clearly discontinuous.

Paksa showed this video for the first time in late 1978 at *Argentine Art Encounter*, organized by the Argentine Association of Art Critics at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires. Here, with enthusiasm for new technologies, Paksa presented the first known video artwork ever made in Argentina as a single-channel projection. Early portable video equipment was not easily accessible then, and Paksa recalled that the curator of Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC), Jorge Glusberg, had called her one day and said that he'd received a Sony Portapak video recording on loan and wanted her to try it out.³⁶⁹ Thanks to this serendipitous loan, Paksa suddenly had access to an expensive recording and editing machine that would otherwise be extremely difficult to procure—at the time, such items were exclusively owned by television networks.

"Delayed access to the video apparatus in Latin America," wrote Glenn Phillips and Elena Shtromberg, co-curators of the 2017 exhibition *Video Art in Latin America* at LAXART in

³⁶⁹ "They just lent me a video machine and I would like you to come and try it." That's how Paksa recalled Glusberg's words. *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, 142.

Los Angeles, “deferred its widespread use within artistic spheres until the late 1970s and 1980s. It then became an important medium for the expression of dissent during an era dominated by military regime governments. Given the close relationship between those regimes and the media conglomerates controlling television broadcasting, the portable video camera represented a decentralized media outlet for voicing opposition to State violence.”³⁷⁰ In an interview with curator Laura Buccellato, Paksa recounts how *Tiempo de descuento* came about:

I called Malena Marechal, who had a theater group; I asked her if she had an actor to lend me, so she connected me with Juan, an actor whose last name I don’t remember. We met at the Villa Luro station and I asked him to bring a black outfit. We went in front of Modulor, where the famous machine was, which was actually an editing machine as well. There were two engineers who recorded the image with the camera and then the machine automatically did the editing. It was simultaneous recording and editing. I drew a space with white contact on the floor and told Juan to walk slowly wearing his black outfit, when he was in the middle of the drawn space, he started running. I asked the engineers to take the shot from the middle of the body up, so that the race he was doing, which was getting faster and faster, would appear as running wildly in a space. I didn’t want it to look like we were in that specific room. When he was done running he paused at the marked space on the floor and continued running. He ran for 45 minutes without stopping.³⁷¹

Paksa shot *Tiempo de descuento* with two fixed cameras so as to create an illusion of displacement: the runner is at times in a specific room with white walls and wooden floors, and at other times, he is in a completely abstracted space, enclosed by an ovoid colored shape. One of them pointed at the runner-actor, and the second focused on an acrylic disc that Paksa had hung on a wall. Here again we see Paksa’s interest in combining the machinic and the handmade, now with video, allowing her to use a new technology to test new grounds and “advance” her art practice. The editing component of the video machine overlapped both images, enclosing the man’s figure in the disc, so that at times he appeared outside of the enclosed space, and at others

³⁷⁰ Glenn Phillips and Elena Shtromberg, “Introduction,” in *Video Art in Latin America* (Los Angeles: LAXART, 2017), <http://momentumworldwide.org/wp-content/uploads/VALA-Video-Art-Latin-America-Catalogue.pdf>.

³⁷¹ Interview with curator Laura Buccellato, *Margarita Paksa: Retrospectiva*, 142. Modulor was a lighting fixtures company.

he seemed trapped. Notes found in Paksa's archive indicate that "I asked the engineer to take a shot of the whole body when Juan was entering and exiting the demarcated space; later he will only shoot the half body in order to forget that place and suggest a spatial displacement."³⁷² The actor is first seen in a small room with white walls, and wooden floors demarcated with a white square. At the bottom of the frame we see the date and time: "11-15-78 17:25" and we hear a monotonous machine-like soundtrack that intensifies as time passes. The figure turns colors, from purple to green, to blue, to green, to red, to black and white, and then back again to repeat colors. Then the space demarcated by the ovoid disc turns different colors and the figure remains black and white.³⁷³

Tiempo de descuento manifests Paksa's interest in capturing or emphasizing time through repetitions. It is not surprising, then, that Paksa used her opportunity to work with video—a time-based medium—to challenge the viewer's sense of space, time, and form. Artist Bruce Nauman belongs to a generation of North American artists who experimented with video focusing on "presentness": "Modernist conventions of time based on progress, chronology, linearity, permanence, and incessant dismissal of the present broke down and opened a gap, where new modes of attention to the here-and-now began to emerge."³⁷⁴ The awareness of the "now" and the need to pay attention to the immediate environment is best experienced in John Cage's 1952

³⁷² "Notes for *Tiempo de Descuento*," n.d., Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires.

³⁷³ The ovoid shape appeared in Paksa's earlier work *Relaxing Eggs* (1967)—a series of egg-shaped objects made out of transparent acrylic in different colors: deep red, vivid green, cobalt blue, and clear. Paksa produced 350 eggs for the first edition in 1967 and, due to high demand, the following year made a second edition of 150. These eggs were meant to be given away, sold, and circulated so that they would become part of everyday life. Touching a *Relaxing Egg* was a personal and private activity—they were meant to be experienced individually in a private space like one's home or office (or pocket). Out of context, Paksa's *Relaxing Egg* can be read as a mere object of consumption, a small and colorful object can be perceived as *just* that. However, the dialogue she established with politics as well as the facts of everyday life was intended to provoke the spectators' critical distance from the reality in which they lived. This critical distance was provoked and stimulated by what Paksa refers to as "relaxation."

³⁷⁴ Nevena Ivanova, "Nauman and Graham's Politics of Presencing: Boredom Exposing Inauthenticity of 1960s-70s Time Consciousness," *Journal of Film and Video* 71 no. 1 (Spring 2019): 36.

composition 4'33" who with his "silent piece," listening can still transpire if one's attention is shifted to the surrounding sounds.

However, with early video work, such as Nauman's, the problem of presentness is raised on a new level. Nauman's 1967-69 studio performances such as *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square* (1968), a minimal performance in which Nauman experiments with repetitive movements around his studio in relation to the floor and the walls, is a particularly relevant comparison to Paksa's *Tiempo de Descuento*.³⁷⁵ Like Paksa's, Nauman's video involved repetitive patterns of movement around an enclosed room. But in Nauman's case, he pointed the camera to himself at his studio, as a truly self-referential work—in his words: "My conclusion was that I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever it was I was doing in the studio must be art."³⁷⁶ Typical of early experimentations with video art, Nauman was concerned with the exposure of "mundane everydayness as central subject of art without any attached signification or drama to soften its dullness."³⁷⁷ In stark contrast, Paksa's enclosed space in *Tiempo de Descuento* is depicted in the context of Argentina's dictatorship. The runner in *Tiempo de Descuento* runs in and out of the room as a way to reveal and conceal, expose and obscure. Additionally, Paksa's work looked the way it looked because it *had* to be in order to endure dangerous times.

The title of Paksa's video conceals meaning and symbolism. Even though she never explicitly said so, several aspects of *Tiempo de descuento* clearly refer to soccer. The title is a term used in soccer, sometimes translated in English as "injured time" or "stoppage time," referring to durations when players are injured and a corresponding duration must be added to

³⁷⁵ For more information on Nauman's video *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square* (1968), see https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/bruce-nauman-walking-in-an-exaggerated-manner-around-the-perimeter-of-a-square-1967-68/.

³⁷⁶ Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words: Writings and Interviews*, ed. J. Kraynak (MIT Press, 2005), 194.

³⁷⁷ Ivanova, "Nauman and Graham's Politics of Presencing," 49.

the total time of the game. Once the forty-five minutes of each half of a soccer game are completed, the referee determines the extra time or “discount time,” depending on the breaks that have been taken, to compensate for the lost minutes. Recall that Paksa recorded footage for forty-five minutes, the duration of half a soccer game. And, last but not least, Paksa filmed a man running in activewear and edited down the run to twelve minutes, the length of a possible “discount time.”

The second part of the title, *Cuenta regresiva. La hora 0*, besides referring to a countdown—something enacted in anticipation of a great event, such as the turn of a century or the launch of a space rocket—has very specific connotations in Argentina. “La hora cero,” the zero hour, was at that time not only midnight, but also curfew, namely the time after which the military demanded civilians to be at home, or otherwise risk questioning and/or arrest.³⁷⁸ Similar to the “discount time,” before which a soccer player must work hard and as fast as possible to obtain the best results in the game, civilians felt pressure in the hours and minutes before curfew to hurry and do what they could.³⁷⁹

Soccer has been vitally important in the lives of millions of Argentines, and it provides an interesting critical lens to analyze and understand many social phenomena in the country. During the 1970s, in the different soccer clubs, people of different political and ideological backgrounds worked together for the glory of their beloved club. Families of victims frequently found themselves side by side with perpetrators. Military members of the club, key people of the dictatorship, were cheering together during the ninety minutes of the game as if nothing untoward was happening elsewhere. Soccer in Argentina during the dictatorship was a sort of

³⁷⁸ Thank you to my father, Daniel Behar, who pointed this out.

³⁷⁹ Most of the kidnappings and murders indeed occurred after midnight. The “Ledesma blackout” of 1976, for example, consisted of a series of power cuts through the Libertador General San Martín power plant in the Jujuy province, intentionally caused by the ruling civic-military dictatorship. It took place between July 20 and 27, always after midnight, and the military kidnapped some four hundred students, political and social activists, trade unionists, and protesters.

microcosm of what was going on in society as a whole. In the book *Clubes de fútbol en tiempo de dictadura* (*Soccer Clubs during the Dictatorship*), Raanan Rein et al. analyze each club, stating that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, military and Communists were not as separate, as binary, as one might think.³⁸⁰ One example is Club Atlanta, where some of the fans who had disappeared family members tried to pass their names to a general who frequented the games because his son played on the team, hoping to get clues to their relatives' whereabouts.³⁸¹ It seems that there were indeed a few cases where, thanks to connections through Club Atlanta, prisoners were liberated.

The same year that Paksa made *Tiempo de descuento*, 1978, was also the year of the FIFA World Cup, a quadrennial international soccer tournament, which that year was held in Argentina and won by Argentina, who defeated the Netherlands three to one in the final, after the discount time (fig. 50). It cannot be a coincidence that Paksa chose to title her video art with a soccer reference and that the content of the video is a man running, engaging in physical activity like soccer players do, because the point of the work was a coded cloaked criticism of the government's actions as intertwined with soccer: namely, two years earlier, there had been a coup in Argentina, and it was known that the military government used and abused this tournament for its own benefit. The day of the coup, March 24, 1976, the military broadcast a game between Argentina and Poland to distract the citizens.³⁸² Rein, one of the authors of *Clubes de fútbol en tiempo de dictadura*, explained in a recent interview that:

³⁸⁰ Raanan Rein, Mariano Gruschetsky, and Rodrigo Daskal, eds., *Clubes de fútbol en tiempos de dictadura* [*Soccer clubs in times of dictatorship*], (Buenos Aires: UNSAM, 2018).

³⁸¹ Raanan Rein, "Buscando un refugio de 'normalidad.' El Club Atlético Atlanta, su crecimiento institucional y protagonismo barrial," [Looking for a refuge of 'normality.' The Atlanta Athletic Club, its institutional growth and neighborhood leadership], in *Clubes de fútbol en tiempos de dictadura*, [*Football clubs in times of dictatorship*] 203–20.

³⁸² See Rodrigo Tamagni, "Interview with Raanan Rein," *InfoBae*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.infobae.com/deportes-2/2018/05/16/los-clubes-de-futbol-durante-la-dictadura-en-argentina-bajo-la-optica-de-raanan-rein-convivian-victimas-y-victimarios-codo-a-codo/>.

In the case of the World Cup, the military understood from the get go that they had a unique opportunity to show the whole world, but also Argentine society, that they had a modernizing project, a vision of society, which is a vision of a healthy, free, disciplined society, with certain values of order, family, religion. . . . They did a good job with the World Cup and in many countries the issue of human rights violations was not discussed so much.³⁸³

Rein adds that many international players and fans returned to their home countries praising the “new Argentina” governed by the military, as they had not seen any acts of violence or disorder while in the country. On the other hand, the Dutch soccer player Johnny Rep, who played against Argentina in the final, later told a journalist that his “team was afraid to win.”³⁸⁴ Argentina’s first FIFA triumph was therefore controversial and historically overshadowed because it was won under a brutal dictatorship, which at that very moment was hiding murders, disappearances, and torture while military generals promoted soccer players (such as Mario Alberto Kempes) as national heroes (fig. 50).



Figure 50. Argentine soccer player Mario Kempes, on the right, celebrates after scoring a goal in the FIFA World Cup, at the River Plate Stadium in Buenos Aires, June 25 1978. Courtesy of Associated Press.

³⁸³ Tamagni, “Interview with Raanan Rein.”

³⁸⁴ Ezequiel Fernández Moeres, “Argentina 78, el fútbol como coartada de la dictadura,” *New York Times América Latina*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2018/06/12/espanol/america-latina/argentina-78-mundial-rusia-fifa.html>



Figure 51. Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla congratulates player Osvaldo Ardiles, on the right, and to the captain of the team Daniel Passarella, on the left, celebrating the 1978 World Cup, after the final between Argentina and Holland in Buenos Aires. Courtesy of Associated Press.

Such as with *Escrituras secretas*—Paksa’s wall sculptures seem to be purely geometric serial abstractions, but a closer examination reveals secret coded messages—*Tiempo de Descuento* requires a visual commitment from the viewer to recognize the hidden message. Continuing making art under persecution, ceases to be a means of direct communication and takes on the burden and fascination of coded signals placed for an audience who would understand the messages intended for them. Not explicitly, Paksa’s 1978 work on soccer, *Tiempo de descuento*, acknowledged it as, at that time, a corrupted sport. Soccer offered Paksa a way to talk about complex issues elemental to the Argentine society. The most popular sport in the country is the reflection of a society where no separation exists between soccer and politics. “While people screamed the goals,” said Estela de Carlotto, the president of the Grandmother of the Plaza de Mayo, “the cries of the tortured and the murdered were extinguished.”³⁸⁵

When I recently asked Paksa’s son, Sergio Paksa, about his mother’s relationship with soccer, he responded, “Marga [as many called her] was from River [an Argentine soccer team],

³⁸⁵ Estela de Carlotto in documentary *Mundial '78: Historia Paralela [World Cup 78': Parallel History]*, directed by Gonzalo Bonadeo, Diego Guebel, and Mario Pergolini (Ayer Nomás Producciones and Cuatro Cabezas, 2003), color digital film. According to this documentary there were 50 deaths during the World Cup of 1978, among them nine pregnant women.

but it was just a minimal sympathy. Soccer did not really exist for her, she did not care. In the World Cups we were all very hooked with the games and she would watch with us so as to not clash.”³⁸⁶ Sergio went on to assert that *Tiempo de descuento* could not possibly relate to soccer since his mother was not at all interested in sports: “She was not even interested in Tango or mate [a traditional South American drink],” implying that she cared little about anything typically Argentinean. But I maintain that Paksa was intentionally, covertly addressing the corruption of soccer and its entanglement with the military government through buried symbolism.

For example, a few years later, Paksa began a series using prie-dieus (prayer stools), of which one work was titled *Viejos-nuevos mitos* (*Old-New Myths*, 1980) and consisted of a marbled prie-dieu with a panel at the top bearing a soccer ball and neon, exposing the neon’s ignition mechanism and cables as part of the work. The work has a strong parody sense, since for many soccer fans, the sport induces a quasi-religious feeling with which they build their own liturgies. According to Paksa’s son, *Viejos-nuevos mitos* was a criticism of the soccer player Armando Maradona, who was for many Argentine soccer fans a godlike figure. This claim by Paksa’s son seems contradictory to his statement about *Tiempo de descuento* claiming any connection to soccer because Paksa wasn’t interested.

Anti-poem

Paksa was internationally recognized when *Tiempo de descuento* was included in the 1981 exhibition *Video from Latin America* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She was the only Argentine artist in this important show of twenty-one Latin American artists. That year, Paksa installed a different version of *Tiempo de descuento* at the entrance hall of the Recoleta Cultural Center in Buenos Aires, in which she invited the original actor in the video to perform

³⁸⁶ Author interview with Sergio Paksa by phone, August 22, 2020.

once again, this time live. As seen in figure 52, during the opening of the show, the actor ran next to a television where *Tiempo de descuento* was showing, then after a few minutes went running around the whole center while distributing four hundred copies of a poem—or “antipoema” as Paksa called it—to the visitors.



Figure 52. Margarita Paksa, *Tiempo de descuento. Cuenta regresiva. La hora 0*. (Discount time. Countdown. Zero hour), 1978, Archival image of video performance, UMATIC/Betamax, color, sound, 12 min., Courtesy of Walden Gallery.

Paksa’s desire to call this work “anti-poem” comes from her admiration of Nicanor Parra, the famous Chilean poet who described himself as an “anti-poet” due to his distaste for standard poetic formalities and function.³⁸⁷ Paksa’s anti-poem is a collage of sorts regarding definitions of time, a concept that had manifested in Paksa’s previous typographic works such as the aforementioned “secret writing” *Es tarde* (1976) and the neon *Es tarde, vuela* (1979). The text of Paksa’s anti-poem that accompanied the new 1981 version of *Tiempo de descuento* is in different

³⁸⁷ She would have become familiar with Nicanor Parra’s work during Salvador Allende’s government in Chile, which Paksa followed closely as seen at the beginning of this chapter.

colors—black, red, blue, purple—and arranged in columns along the right and left of the page (fig. 53).

"TIEMPO DE DESCUENTO, CUENTA REGRESIVA, LA HORA 0"

La ley de su continuidad
es el sentimiento de lo mismo
de lo idéntico, el que sirve de base a la memoria
el tránsito de lo homogéneo a lo diferente
la forma de toda actividad, a su vez
una forma sucesiva
una sucesión perpleja
la forma sucesiva de los cambios que se producen en todo ser
cuando el apetito de lo porvenir, es el verdadero revelador
hacia lo que no es,
pero pudo ser y será
y por lo tanto abraza,
la continuidad de la multiplicidad sucesiva y
la característica de su sucesión exclusiva
dejando en la conciencia, los residuos
de la sucesión en la conciencia
y la conciencia de su propia sucesión;
una sucesión perpleja
no se debe negar
una sucesión perpleja
es la percepción de la diferencia pero en supuesto de homogeneidad
mas, el vértigo de impresiones diferentes
nos hace ignorar, no sólo racional

sino experimentalmente
su correlatividad y recíprocamente concierne a la movilidad, el cambio
y se imponen a la condición humana;

una sucesión perpleja
fórmula abstracta de todo cambio
vale, por la cualidad e intensidad de los mismos
el nuestro, dentro del que rige las experiencias y
con impulsos a su reforma y mejora
ordenado y constante, nos domina idéntica ilusión
y siempre, siempre olvidando que la vida
que la vida demanda y, enamorada de lo que fue

LA MEMORIA
de lo que fue, se dejó y no fue
fluye en un aire tenue de fantasmas puramente imaginarios.
En ambos casos nos domina la misma ilusión
una sucesión perpleja
en la persecución de un imposible,
encaminados tras fantasmas sin realidad

en un vacío de movimiento.
La ley de su continuidad
es el sentimiento de lo mismo, de lo idéntico

Margarita Paksa
anti-poema que acompaña al video del mismo nombre, 1978

Figure 53. Margarita Paksa, *Tiempo de Descuento, Cuenta Regresiva, La Hora 0*, 1978. Text that accompanies the video of the same title. Margarita Paksa archives, Buenos Aires.

Following is my translation:

The law of its continuity
is the feeling of the same
of the identical, the one that serves as the basis of memory
the transition from the homogeneous to the different
the form of all activity, in turn
a successive way
a puzzled succession
the successive form of the changes that take place in every being
When the appetite for the future is the true revealer
toward what is not,
but it could be and will be
and therefore embraces,

the continuity of successive multiplicity and
 the characteristic of its exclusive succession
 leaving in consciousness, the residues
 of succession in consciousness
 and the awareness of his own succession;
 a puzzled succession
 should not be denied
 a puzzled succession
 is the perception of the difference but assuming homogeneity
 more, the vertigo of different impressions
 makes us ignore, not just rational
 but experimentally
 their correlation and reciprocally arrange mobility, change
 and they are imposed on the human condition;
 a puzzled succession
 abstract formula of all change
 okay, for the quality and intensity of them
 ours, within which governs experiences and
 with impulses to its reform and improvement
 orderly and constant, the same illusion dominates us
 and always, always forgetting that life
 that life demands and, in love with what was
 THE MEMORY
 of what was, was left and was not
 it flows in a thin air of purely imaginary ghosts.
 In both cases the same illusion dominates us
 a puzzled succession
 in pursuit of an impossible,
 headed after ghosts without reality
 in a void of movement.
 The law of its continuity
 is the feeling of the same, of the identical.

Time is framed, in both the poem and the video, as a propulsion toward repetition—"puzzled succession"—and the identical. In other words, memory never leaves us, but keeps coming back to us: "that life demands and, in love with what was / THE MEMORY / of what was, was left and was not / it flows in a thin air of purely imaginary ghosts." In *Tiempo de descuento*, access to a sense of time comes from the rhythmic repetition of the runner who, even though he is moving in space and time (he is indeed running), reappears always in the same demarcated spot, over and over again. As mentioned, Paksa recorded with two cameras so as to create an illusion of displacement: the runner is at times in a specific room with white walls and wooden floors, and

at other times in a completely abstracted space, enclosed by an ovoid colored shape. The transitions from one space to another are so quick that these different spatial realms become one.

As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, Paksa continued making artworks despite the violent military dictatorship in Argentina. Concerned with her surroundings and conflicted about how to reconcile aesthetics and politics in her practice, Paksa developed her own language, one of coded messages and secrecy. Throughout her career, she was afraid that conceptual art in Argentina could become too explicit, definitive, and didactic. Writing about art in Argentina and Brazil in the 1960s, curator and critic Paulo Herkenhoff notes that “the political intentionality demanded communication strategies and construction of the relationships between signifier and meaning in the public sphere and the circulation of art. The objective was to maintain the forcefulness and readability of the message, but also to establish a mode of communication that would guarantee the survival of the artists themselves against the repressive apparatus of the state.”³⁸⁸ To say that Paksa was audacious and risky at an unimaginable time of trauma, loss, and violence, is not enough.

It is significant that Paksa’s work during the 1970s—the most violent time of Argentina’s dictatorship—concentrated on a number of issues, above all, the production of *coded* messages—concealing and revealing, covering and confessing. Her typographic series and video work depended on obliqueness, since their main interrogation originates in a self-aware, and also self-censored subject, incessantly calling into question the narrow ideological nature of overtly political art. Paksa’s methodology centers on her insatiable search for the suitable political aesthetic. Her works respond with skepticism to the extroversions and theatricality of the dictatorial government, paradoxically hostile to any operation perceived as “inappropriate” in the public dimension. Secrecy, in Paksa, has to do with the experience of time; everything in her

³⁸⁸ Paulo Herkenhoff, “Introducción,” in *Pop, realismos y Política: Brasil—Argentina, 1960’s*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Fundación Proa, 2012), 22.

works evoke a slower tempo, slowly unraveling itself, in order to offer a gathering place of personal (and artistic) growth.

As mentioned earlier, for Paksa, to resist meant to survive creatively and intellectually by whatever means possible. There is an aesthetic, sensorial, conceptual, and political certainty about all the artistic manifestations that Paksa created. She was not fond of repeating herself, nor was she involved with formulas for success. The exploration of the creative act was always the prominent and vital inquiry of her work.

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Whitelaw, Mitchell. “1968/1998: Rethinking a Systems Aesthetic.” *ANAT Newsletter* 33, May 1998. <http://diss.anat.org.au/mwhitelaw.html>.

About the Author

Ionit Behar is an art historian and curator. She is the Assistant Curator at DePaul Art Museum (DPAM) and the curator as part of the team BeharXSchaman for the Terminal 5 Expansion public art project at O'Hare International Airport. She has worked as the Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at Spertus Institute, a Research Assistant for the exhibition "Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium" at the Art Institute of Chicago, and a Graduate Curatorial Assistant at Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago. Her writing has appeared in exhibition catalogues and art journals such *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, *The Chicago Reader*, *THE SEEN*, and *The Exhibitionist*.

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. Candidate, Art History, University of Illinois Chicago, IL (2013-2021)

Committee: Hannah B Higgins (Advisor), Elise Archias, Daniel Quiles, and Megan Sullivan

Areas of Expertise: Modern and Contemporary Art, Latin American and American Art, Post-War Painting and Sculpture, Socially and Politically Engaged Art, Transnationalism, Theories of Space and Place, Minimalist Art, Exhibition History, Museum and Curatorial Studies.

M.A., Art History, Theory and Criticism, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (May 2013)

Thesis Title: *Michael Asher's Displacements in Chicago, 1979 and 2005*

Committee: David Getsy (Advisor), David Raskin, and Julian Myers-Szupinska

B.A., Multidisciplinary Program in the Arts, Tel Aviv University, Israel (September 2010)

Magna cum laude

Diploma, Arts Administration, Bank Boston Foundation, Montevideo, Uruguay (December 2006)

LANGUAGES

Spanish: Native language

English, Hebrew and French: Fluent

Portuguese and Italian: Intermediate conversational ability

AWARDS

2021 – Edman-Waltz Scholarship, University of Illinois at Chicago

2020 – Institute for the Humanities Resident Graduate Scholar Award, University of Illinois at Chicago

2019 – Spring 2019 Ross Edman Fellowship, University of Illinois at Chicago

2018 – Graham Foundation's 2018 Grantee with Fieldwork Collaborative Projects

2018 – Chancellor's Research Graduate Award, University of Illinois at Chicago

2017 – Art History Research Travel Grant, University of Illinois at Chicago

2017 – Provost Graduate Award, University of Illinois at Chicago

2012 – Jimmy Jones Internship Award, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

2011 – Merit Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

CURATORIAL & ARTS MANAGEMENT

DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL (August 2020-present)

Assistant Curator

Co-Curator - *LatinXAmerican* (January 7-August 15, 2021)

Curator - *Claudia Peña Salinas: Quetzalli* (February 19-August 15, 2021)

Assistant Curator - *Stockyard Institute* (September 2021–February 2022)

Assistant Curator - *Remaking the Exceptional: Tea, Torture, & Reperations | Chicago to Guantánamo* (March 2022–August 2022)

Curator – *Solo(s)*: Krista Franklin (September 2022–January 2023)

Curator – *Ode to Hope: María Berrío, Joiri Minaya, Rosana Paulino, and Kelly Sinnapah Mary* (September 2022–January 2023)

Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL (September 2022–February 2023)

Guest Curator

Nelly Agassi Solo Exhibition

O'Hare International Airport, Chicago, IL (June 2021-present)

Curator

Del Otro Lado – curated and organized commissions of 17 Chicago artists at O'Hare's new international arrival corridor. Artists: Nelly Agassi, Assaf Evron, Krista Franklin, Wills Glasspiegel and Footwork, Jenny Kendler, Mayumi Lake, Yvette Mayorga, Cecil McDonald Jr, Faheem Majeed, Huong Ngo, Chris Pappan, Ebony G. Patterson Cheryl Pope, Edra Soto, Leonard Suryajaya, Selina Trepp, Bernard Williams.

SUBTE | Centro de Exposiciones, Montevideo, Uruguay (July-September 2021)

Curator

Fuera de tiempo. Online project "Monte-Video" - artists Luciana Damiani, Luisho Díaz, Florencia Martinez Aysa, Teresa Puppo, Anaclara Talento.

Material Gallery, Chicago, IL (February-March 2020)

Guest Curator

Off Hours: A solo show by Karen Dana

Fieldwork Collaborative Projects NFP, Chicago, IL (2016–present)

Director of Curatorial Affairs

Direct Message – exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Oct 2019–Jan 2020)

Park District – web based project, supported by the Graham Foundation Grant (September 2019)

Public Park – short documentary on Humboldt Park and Hurricane Maria, supported by the Chicago Architecture Biennial (2018)

More Strange Than True – exhibition (September 17–November 11, 2016)

Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, Chicago, IL (2016–2018)

Curator of Collections and Exhibitions

Todros Geller: Strange Worlds (September 6, 2018–February 17, 2019) – awarded Terra Foundation grant

Inquiry 01: Jewish Artists Fellowship, co-director with Ruslana Litzchier (May 23, 2018–August 1 2 2018)

Ellen Rothenberg: ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant (February 1, 2018–April 22, 2018)

Ben Shahn: If Not Now, When? (April 9–August 27, 2017)

Chicago Artists Coalition, Chicago, IL (July–December 2017)

Guest Curator

Preview 7: The Whole is Always Smaller Than Its Parts (December 1–21, 2017)

A group exhibition featuring BOLT Artist Residents from 2017-2018

Art Institute of Chicago (August 1, 2016–August 1, 2017)

Research and Exhibition Assistant

Tomma Abts (Fall 2018)

Andrew Lord: Unslumbrous Night (October 26, 2017–April 15, 2018)

Peter Fischli David Weiss: Snowman (April 27, 2017–October 15, 2017)

Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium (February 18–May 7, 2017)

Gallery 400, Chicago, IL (August 2013–May 2016)

Curatorial Graduate Assistant

Our Duty to Fight: Black Lives Matter Chicago (April 29–June 11, 2016)

Few Were Happy with Their Condition (January 15–March 12, 2016)

Making Chances (September 11–December 12, 2015)

After Today (May 8–August 8, 2015)

Visibility Machines: Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen (January 16–March 14, 2015)

Here, There, Everywhere, Co-curator with Lorelei Stewart and Pinar Uner Yilmaz
(October 31–December 13, 2014)

Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety... (My Barbarian) (September 5–October 18, 2014)

The Franklin, Chicago, IL

Guest Curator

My Feet Have Lost Memory of Softness, Curator (October 22–November 23, 2016)

Terrain Exhibitions, Oak Park, IL

Guest Curator

Hinged Space, co-curator with Sharmyn Cruz-Rivera (March 13–April 6, 2016)

Julius Caesar, Chicago, IL

Guest curator

Twin Rooms. Artists: Nelly Agassi, Assaf Evron, Michelle Grabner, Sherwin Ovid and Bailey Romaine, Co-curator with Pinar Uner Yilmaz (November 15–December 15, 2015)

Mañana Será Así, Online Exhibition with Uruguayan Artists, Curator (February 2015–present)

Instituto Cervantes, Chicago, IL

Eloisa Ibarra: The Seed of Babel, Curator (July 2014–September, 2014)

Sullivan Galleries, Chicago, IL

Curatorial Assistant

Faculty Projects Exhibition (September–December 2013)

Post-Baccalaureate Studio Exhibition, Curator (March–July 2013)

SET OFF: AIADO, Design and Fashion Thesis Exhibition (March–July 2013)

MFA Show 2012, Curatorial Fellow with grupa ok (January – May 2012)

School of the Art Institute, Chicago, IL

In Praise of Simple Forms: Assaf Evron and Naama Arad. Co-curator with Sharmyn Cruz Rivera (November 2012)

Julius Caesar

Chicago Is My Kind of Town: Ramón Miranda Beltrán, Co-curator with grupa ok (October 7–28, 2012)

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL

Curatorial Intern, Awarded *Jimmy Jones Fellowship* (May 2012–August 2013)

Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, IL

20 Neighborhoods, Curatorial Intern (May–August 2012)

No Longer Empty, New York City, NY

Curatorial Intern (September 2010–March 2011)

Immigrant Student Artists' Exhibition, Jerusalem, Israel

Curatorial Assistant (April–May 2010)

Haifa Museum of Art, Haifa, Israel

Curatorial Intern (September–December, 2009)

TEACHING

DePaul University, Guest Lecturer for “Cities and Racial Formation” (February 23, 2021)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Lecturer, Survey of Latin American Art (Spring 2020)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Guest Lecturer for “Research in Contemporary Practices,” on Curatorial Practice (November 24, 2020)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Lecturer, Survey of Modern and Contemporary Art (Fall 2019)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Guest Lecturer for “Art and Anthropology,” lecture on Tucumán Arde and Conceptual Art in Argentina (April 22, 2019)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Guest Lecturer for “Art and Change at the West Side,” lecture on Socially Engaged Art Practice (March 28, 2019)

Art Institute of Chicago, Adjunct Lecturer, Tours of the museum collection and special exhibitions (September 2017–present)

University of Illinois Chicago, Guest Lecturer for “Intro to Exhibition and Museum Studies,” lecture on personal curatorial projects (September 11, 2018)

University of Illinois Chicago, Guest Lecturer for “Intro to Exhibition and Museum Studies,” lecture on Hélio Oiticica’s retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago (March 8, 2018)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Guest Lecturer for “Encounters between Art and Anthropology,” lecture on Tucumán Arde (February 15, 2018)

University of Illinois Chicago, Guest Lecturer for “Intro to Exhibition and Museum Studies,” lecture on Hélio Oiticica’s retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago (September 21, 2017)

Art Institute of Chicago, Student Ambassadors Training, “Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium” (February 4, 2017)

University of Illinois Chicago, Teaching Assistant, “World History of Art and the Built Environment I and II” (August 2016–May 2017)

Gallery 400, Public exhibition tours to high school, undergraduate and graduate students (August 2013-May 2016)

University of Illinois Chicago, Guest Lecturer, "Museums in Motion," Graduate Seminar (Fall 2016)

University of Illinois Chicago, Guest Lecturer, "Latin American Art," Undergraduate Survey Class (Spring 2014)

School of the Art Institute, Teaching Assistant for classes "World Cultures and Civilizations" (Fall 2011 and Spring 2012) and "History of Abstract Art: History, Theory, and Practice" (Spring 2013)

ESSAYS & PUBLICATIONS

Fwd: Museums, "The Mess of the Canon: Book review of Zdenka Badovinac's *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe*," Summer 2021 (forthcoming)

BRIDGE, "Principles, Protest, Power" June 2021 (forthcoming)

VIS, Book review of Zdenka Badovinac's *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe*, December 2020.

FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism, "Encouraging Encounters: Dignicraft in conversation with Ionit Behar," March 2020.

The Seen, "Interview: Sara Ramo," September 2019.

Chicago Reader, "Photographer Laura Aguilar invited viewers to take a long, hard look at all her imperfections," May 23, 2019.

The Exhibitionist, "Radical Women: Making Room," November 25, 2017.

The Seen, "Interview Amalia Pica," September 2017.

VIS, "The world that reveals that it is a world: On The Art of Mono-ha and New Materialism," June 2017.

The Seen, "Interview: Luis Camnitzer," September 2016

Art Slant, "Beyond Beauty: Beatriz Santiago Muñoz On How to Truly Perceive a Place," March 15, 2016

Chicago Reader, "Tony Tasset's Artists Monument brightens up Grant Park," February 17, 2016

Chicago Reader, "The New Art Institute," January 6, 2016

Chicago Reader, "Park your car, tune into B.B. King, turn South Sacramento into a public art project," August 13, 2015

Chicago Reader, "No, there's not construction outside the MCA—those are sculptures by Alexandre da Cunha," July 17, 2015

Art Slant, "Highlights and Surprises: A First Look at EXPO Chicago 2015," September 18, 2015

Art Slant, "Jenny Kendler Translates Confessions into Birdsong," July 13, 2015

Art Slant, "Arte de Sistemas: Conceptual Art and Politics in Argentina," June 8, 2015

The Exhibitionist, "Six x Six," May 2015

Art Slant, "Artist Profile: Andrew Norman Wilson Therapizes the Corporate World," April 14, 2015

Art Slant, "The Making of Violence: Doris Salcedo at the MCA Chicago," February 25, 2015

Art Slant, "Streams of Life: An Interview with Angelica Maria Zorrilla," February 24, 2015

Art Slant, "10 Latin American Art Exhibitions to See in 2015," January 6, 2015

Art Slant, "Longing for Flight: Sarah Charlesworth's Stills," October 10, 2014

Art Slant, "The Middle as a Means to an End: The Chicago Effect at the Hyde Park Art Center," September 5, 2014

La Pupila, Uruguay, "Isa Genzken: esculturas en Movimiento," September 6, 2014

La Pupila, “El legado de Louise Bourgeois, Lucian Freud, Richard Hamilton y Cy Twombly,” November 2011
Semanario Voces, Uruguay, “Llamando a la memoria,” August 11, 2011
La República, Uruguay, “El hundimiento del Guggenheim,” May 9, 2011
La República, “Collage de Materiales descartables: Las esculturas sociales de Thomas Hirschhorn,” April 11, 2011
La República, “Luis Camnitzer en el Museo del Barrio,” April 25, 2011
La República, “Una cadena de asociaciones: Bordes de Oscar Larroca,” March 7, 2011
La Pupila, “Sobre la vida y las formas de José Pedro Costigliolo,” April 2011
La República, “Efectos Místicos: Instalación de Peter Greenaway en Nueva York,” January 24, 2011
La República, “Inventar y Construir: Carmelo Arden Quin,” January 17, 2011
Comité Central Israelita, Uruguay, “La Existencia Inmaterial del Arte – Anish Kapoor,” November 23, 2010

Exhibition Essays

Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, “Time: And Indocile Matter,” exhibition essay for *what flies but never lands?*, June 2021
Galeria Labyrinth, Poland, exhibition essay for Nelly Agassi’s exhibition *7-13*, June 2018.
Chicago Artists Coalition, exhibition essay for Jean Alexander Frater, June 2018.
Spertus Institute, “Interview: Ellen Rothenberg,” *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant* publication, February 2018.
Chicago Artists Coalition, *Preview 7: The Whole is Always Smaller Than Its Parts*, exhibition essay, November 2017.
Fieldwork Collaborative Projects, Pulaski Park’s Field House, *More Strange Than True*, exhibition essay, September, 2016.
Julius Caesar, Chicago, IL, “Twin Rooms,” 2015
The Mission Projects, Chicago, IL, “The Triumph of Landscape: Mariana Sissia,” 2015
Espacio de Arte Contemporáneo, Montevideo, Uruguay, “Intercambios: Sobre Javier Abreu y El Empleado del Mes,” 2015
Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Las Palmas, Spain, “Entrevista a Ramón Miranda Beltrán,” 2015
Julius Caesar, Chicago, IL, “My Kind of Town: Ramón Miranda Beltrán,” 2012
School of the Art Institute, Chicago, IL, “A Museum Without Frames” and “Tricks of the Eye” in *Group-Work* for MFA Show 2012. Ed. Julian Myers and Joanna Szupinska, 2012
Museo Nacional Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile, “Raimundo Rubio Huidobro,” 2010

PRESENTATIONS

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *Mapping the Field*, Art History Lecture (November 3, 2019)
Association for Latin American Art Triennial: “The World Turned Upside Down,” Chicago, IL, *Handheld Minimalist Objects: Margarita Paksa’s Relaxing Egg, 1967* (March 7–9, 2019)
School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sullivan Galleries, Presentation with art collective Dignicraft in conjunction with exhibition *Talking to Action: Art, Pedagogy, and Activism in the Americas* (November 4, 2018)
Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago, IL, *Speaking Truth to Power*, panel discussion (October 24, 2018)

University of Illinois at Chicago, Art History Colloquium, *Handheld Minimalist Objects: Margarita Paksa's Relaxing Egg, 1967* (September 21, 2018)

Art Institute of Chicago, Presentation to Adjuncts - *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* (February 21, 2017)

Spertus Institute of Jewish Learning and Leadership, Chicago, Introduction and Q&A for short films *Hannah Cohen's Holy Communion* and *Torah Treasures and Curious Trash* (February 19, 2017)

The Inclusive Museum Conference, Los Angeles, *Short-term Contracts: On Michael Asher's Institutional Critique and Contemporary Artists' Critique of Institutions* (August 4, 2014)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Art History Graduate Thesis Symposium, *The Value in Context: Michael Asher's Displacements in Chicago, 1979 and 2005* (May 2, 2013)

Binghamton University, New York, *Michael Asher and the Displacements of a Work in Movement*,

Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference (April 27, 2013)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *A Metonymic Linkage of Metaphors. Michael Asher's Displacement at the Kunsthalle Bern, 1992* (December 13, 2012)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *A Void: Emptiness Made and Displayed* (May 9, 2012)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *Now and Then: The Sublime and Phenomenology. Gordon Matta-Clark and Phenomenology of Space* (December 19, 2011)

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

DePaul Art Museum, Public Programs in conjunction with *LatinXAmerican* exhibition (January–August 2021)

Spertus Institute, Public Programs in conjunction with exhibitions (September 2016–September 2018)

University of Illinois Chicago, *Mutual Interpretations*, Student Lectures Series (August 2014–August 2015)

Gallery 400, Philip von Zweck's *Temporary Allegiance* (August, 2013–August 2014)

Gallery 400, *Voices Lectures* (August, 2013–August 2014)

Gallery 400, Public Programs for exhibitions *The Program*, *It's the Political Economy*, *Stupid*, *Ghost Nature* (August 2013–August 2014)

Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois, Interim Manager of Performances and Lectures (July–August 2013)

RESEARCH AND ARCHIVAL EXPERIENCE

Spertus Institute, Curator of Collections (September 2016–September 2018)

Art Institute of Chicago, Research Assistant (August 2016–present)

Gallery 400, Archives Assistant (August, 2013–August 2014)

School of the Art Institute, Research for Faculty: Nora Taylor, David Raskin and Daniel Quiles (August 2012–May 2013)

Tel Aviv Museum, Israel, *Critical Mass: Contemporary Art From India* (August 2011–December 2011)

Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel, Digital Collection Intern (March–August 2010)

OTHER WORK

DePaul University Center for Latino Research, Advisory Board Member (November 2020–present)

City of Chicago, Chicago Aviation Curatorial Advisory Board (October 2020–present)

FLORA ars + natura, *Beca Roberts*, Jury Member, Bogotá, Colombia (November 2018)

Art Institute of Chicago, *Membership and Development intern* (August–December 2012)

School of the Art Institute, Chicago, Art History Student Committee (August 2012–May 2013)

School of the Art Institute, Student Union Galleries, Gallery Assistant (September, 2011–September, 2012)

French Embassy, Montevideo, Uruguay, *Paul Cezanne Art Prize*, Jury Member (November 2011)

Latin American Cultural Week, New York City, NY, Grant Writer (September 2011–December 2011)

Pinta Art Fair, New York City, NY, *Exhibitor and Visitor Support Internship* (November 2010)

ADDITIONAL SKILLS

Microsoft Office: Word, Excel and PowerPoint

CITI, collections data base

MIMSY, collections data base

CatalogIT, collection data base

Social Media Management

Adobe InDesign

Photoshop

QuickBooks