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View of Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín's The Rotating Basket, from *La Menesunda*, 1965. Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive.

THIS SUMMER, New York was introduced to one of the most renowned avant-garde works of the Argentine ’60s: *La Menesunda*. The New Museum’s exhibition “Menesunda

Reloaded" reconstructed all the outlandish elements of this labyrinthine circuit, from its confetti blitzes and spinning cage to its incandescent tunnel of neon lights. Originally created in 1965 by Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín, the environment marked a watershed moment in Argentine art; its kitsch aesthetic, technological components, and participatory nature shattered notions of art established by local art academies and recent avant-gardes alike. Equally unprecedented was the work's popularity. Throngs of people of all backgrounds and ages flocked to *La Menesunda*, quickly becoming central to its mythos. Captivating the media, these motley crowds formed long queues that extended out into the streets—an unusual sight that gave the area surrounding the exhibitor, the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, the nickname "the crazy block." The work's closed-circuit TVs and infinity room continually reflected images of the visitors back to them, further fascinating the public with the spectacle of their own participation. At the same time, the installation also confirmed the Janus-faced nature of such mass gatherings. When *La Menesunda* closed after a two-week run, around 3,700 turned-away visitors reportedly formed an angry mob whose banging fists nearly shattered the windows of the work's prestigious venue. This shocking scene contrasted dramatically with that of *La Menesunda*'s inaugural night, during which a decorous and elegant elite—the glitterati typical of art-world openings in Buenos Aires at the time—had gingerly filed through the environment, as seen in Leopoldo Maler's documentary on view at the New Museum.

A similar dynamic reemerged during the New Museum's vernissage for "Menesunda Reloaded," which opened alongside two other concomitant exhibitions this June. While the partygoers patiently waited to explore the legendary installation, disgruntled art workers rallied outside, demanding a living wage, vital work benefits, and the swift resumption of negotiations between the museum and its new union, which had joined UAW Local 2110 in January following weeks of tension and a relentless anti-union campaign from the institution's management. In between honks of solidarity blasted by passing bus drivers and firefighters, demonstrators cited the reneged egalitarian ideals of Marcia Tucker, the museum's late founder, and explained the larger stakes of their struggle: If only the independently wealthy can afford to work for exploitative wages or take unpaid internships, how can the art world adequately serve a broad public or represent the many artists whose art exposes inequities of power?

View of Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín's *La Menesunda*, 1965.

Meanwhile, the institutional rhetoric surrounding "Menesunda Reloaded" courted a different kind of populism. The underlying calculus of a museum's attempt to compete with new forms of entertainment can be glimpsed in the show's brief curatorial statement. Celebrating *La Menesunda*'s undeniable Instagrammability, it affirms that "Minujín anticipated the contemporary obsession with participatory spaces, the lure of new pop-up museums, and the quest for an intensity of experience that defines social media today." This narrow focus on the work's proven popularity and predictable mediatization overdetermines other aspects of the show. Consider, for instance, the exhibition's title, "Menesunda Reloaded," which, in its echo of *The Matrix Reloaded*, crassly likens the re-creation to the lackluster second installment of a Hollywood franchise. As a brand-focused, profit-maximizing approach to film production, the franchise model has stifled

the creativity and criticality of films in order to generate formulaic products with a guaranteed, highly lucrative mass appeal. Does the New Museum view its rebooting of *La Menesunda*—the third iteration of the work—in such a light?

When the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (MAMBA) meticulously re-created *La Menesunda* in 2015, the show was called "La Menesunda according to Marta Minujín"—a title that underscored the temporal distance and interpretative maneuvers determining the project's restoration. Its accompanying publication delved into the painstaking process of exhuming the work, emphasizing the constructed and never fully recoverable nature of history. No such nuanced consideration of the past is detectable in "Menesunda Reloaded." In fact, the show's catalogue counseled against attempting any "precise reconstruction" of the work, arguing that "a fastidious attention to detail was not the point of the original installation." But even if scrupulous accuracy was "alien to Minujín and Santantonín's practice," should that also be the case for curators and art historians? It is perhaps this fast and loose attitude toward historical facts that led to the catalogue's most risible gaffes, such as its naming of a nonexistent "Miguel Otero"—in lieu of the nonpareil Venezuelan geometric abstractionist Alejandro Otero—as Minujín's collaborator for *The Destruction*, 1963, her first happening.* A similar nonchalance suffuses the installation of *La Menesunda*. In order to make room for the work, the curators have constricted the rest of the exhibition space, denuding it of supplementary materials that might have shed light on the environment's original reception or its re-creation process. Appearing near the exit, the footage by Maler feels tacked on, an apparent afterthought with almost no contextual framing.

View of Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín's The Icebox, from *La Menesunda*, 1965. Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive.

For Minujín and Santantonín, the experience of discombobulation *La Menesunda* engendered was closely linked to the rapidly changing urban landscape and social fabric of 1960s Buenos Aires. Curators Massimiliano Gioni and Helga Christoffersen, however, refrain from exploring this important context in order to privilege—to an anachronistic degree—the work's affinity with contemporary cultural phenomena, such as social media–oriented pop-up experiences like the Museum of Ice Cream. According to this presentist framing, *La Menesunda* is less a tool for understanding or contesting historical reality than a testament to "Minujín's prescient vision": that is to say, a harbinger of today's ineluctable, hyper-spectacular, and capitalist status quo.

Yet neither the general public nor the Argentine critics who shaped the reception of *La Menesunda* in 1965 perceived it as the augur of a neoliberal attention economy smoothly running on the mediatized participation of easily mesmerized and obedient consumers. On the contrary, critics immediately cast the work as a dangerous catalyst for the mobilization of a public that would cease to be productive or governable. In other words, aside from defying established conventions of high art, *La Menesunda* also disrupted the social stratification of an increasingly consumerist Buenos Aires reshaped by the advances of international capital. A sort of Trojan horse, it infiltrated the rarefied space of the Di Tella with the ludic atmosphere and rowdy crowds of popular fairs, amusement parks, and sports stadiums—sites to which *La Menesunda* was frequently compared in the press.

Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín, The Octogonal Mirror Room, from *La Menesunda*, 1965. Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive.

This remixing of high and popular culture, it should be stressed, differs from the leveling of taste produced by present-day attractions designed to go viral. Today's neopopulist experiences lack the sociopolitical irritancy that *La Menesunda* possessed under the still-hegemonic cultural conservatism of 1960s Argentina. As suggested by its title's use of *lunfardo* (the argot of proletarian Buenos Aires), *La Menesunda* addressed the multitudes historically deemed too uncouth for art. Meaning "confusing chaos" or "mayhem," it immediately announced its challenge to the tacit behavioral rules and traditional class dynamics structuring artistic and public spaces. Though the Di Tella did not survey the demographics of its numerous visitors, newspapers reported on the installation's special impact on working-class people. "*La Menesunda* amply fulfilled a link between art and *el pueblo*, incorporating itself in the life of the man of the streets," wrote one journalist. "[M]any times I heard on a suburban train how a man, going or coming from work, suspended his reading of the latest crime to, at the slightest pretext, 'tell the story of the *La Menesunda*' to his fellow traveler."

The destabilizing cultural politics of *La Menesunda* vexed the upper echelons of Argentine society, which had no desire to relive the working-class incursions of the Peronist years. Revealingly, the work's most hostile reviewers adopted a strident ideological stance against its ostensible leftist populism. In a packed lecture, titled "About 'La Menesunda,'" the critic Eduardo González Lanuza, for instance, equated *La Menesunda*'s creators and all young pop artists to those working on the communist side of the Iron Curtain. Writing his satirical review entirely in *lunfardo*, another detractor adopted the presumed perspective of a working-class hoodlum. *La Menesunda* so riles this imaginary figure that he threatens to gather his cronies and outdo the havoc of the piece with his own *menesunda*. Reducing the common man to a caricature of anarchy, the writer betrays bourgeois anxieties regarding the work's agitation of a proletarian mob. Later in 1965, when protesting students occupied a building belonging to the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires, newspapers did not hesitate to decry their holdout as "a replica of *La Menesunda*," baptizing it "*La Menesunda II*." The political potency of *La Menesunda* therefore always resided in its potential replication, not in the art world, but within the social field.

View of Marta Minujín and Rubén Santantonín's The Bedroom, from *La Menesunda*, 1965.
Courtesy Marta Minujín Archive.

While Minujín later envisioned outgrowths of *La Menesunda*, such as an unrealized made-for-TV version of the work, *La Telesunda*, its exact re-creation in a museum is antithetical to the logic of her 1960s oeuvre. Like many artists of her generation, Minujín repeatedly staked out a position against the museum as a repository of ostensibly timeless, precious objects for elite delectation, stating as early as 1963: "I felt and declared that art was much more important for human beings than the eternity to which only the most cultured have access: art kept in museums and galleries." In regard to another 1965 environment, *El Batacazo*, Minujín stressed that "it is necessary that the work be destroyed," since art "does not reside in the objects or mechanisms that I realized." She had, in fact, embraced

an aesthetic of destruction since creating her early informalist sculptures made from detritus between 1961 and 1963—works that she subsequently burned in *The Destruction*. The eventual dismantling of her environments was crucial; only in their absence could a mnemonic process unfold, thereby turning the audience into true participant-cocreators. "[M]emory, transformed by what lives in it, is more important than the event in and of itself. In this lies the participation of the spectator," Minujín told the Argentine press in 1965. She held the same view regarding her short-lived happenings. "Not able to return to the object, [memory] adds new elements," she said. "This is why it is important that the work destroy itself, in this way one avoids the disillusionment that a posterior confrontation could signify." For the artist, the power of *La Menesunda* resided in having "the great majority of spectators finalize their experience by conceiving of their own *La Menesunda* or by adding [imagined] details," as one critic explained at the time.

In its protean afterlife within the minds of all sorts of people, *La Menesunda* could function as a galvanizing symbol for the razing of class hierarchies, in the present and in the future. It is precisely this kind of equality that today continues to be the horizon for collectivizing workers in and outside the art world. The current decontextualization and instrumentalization of *La Menesunda*'s mass appeal, therefore, betrays the work's spirit—a spirit perhaps far too dangerous for the New Museum to conjure at such a fraught moment in its history.

**The Museum of Modern Art's 2004 anthology,* Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde, *also incorrectly names "Miguel Otero" as Minujín's collaborator.*

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