

Visual Arts

The surreal art of Marta Minujín and Mika Rottenberg

The Argentine artists exhibit their power to unnerve in two shows at New York's New Museum



A room from the installation 'Menesunda Reloaded' in the New Museum, New York, by Marta Minujín (2019) © Darío Lasagni

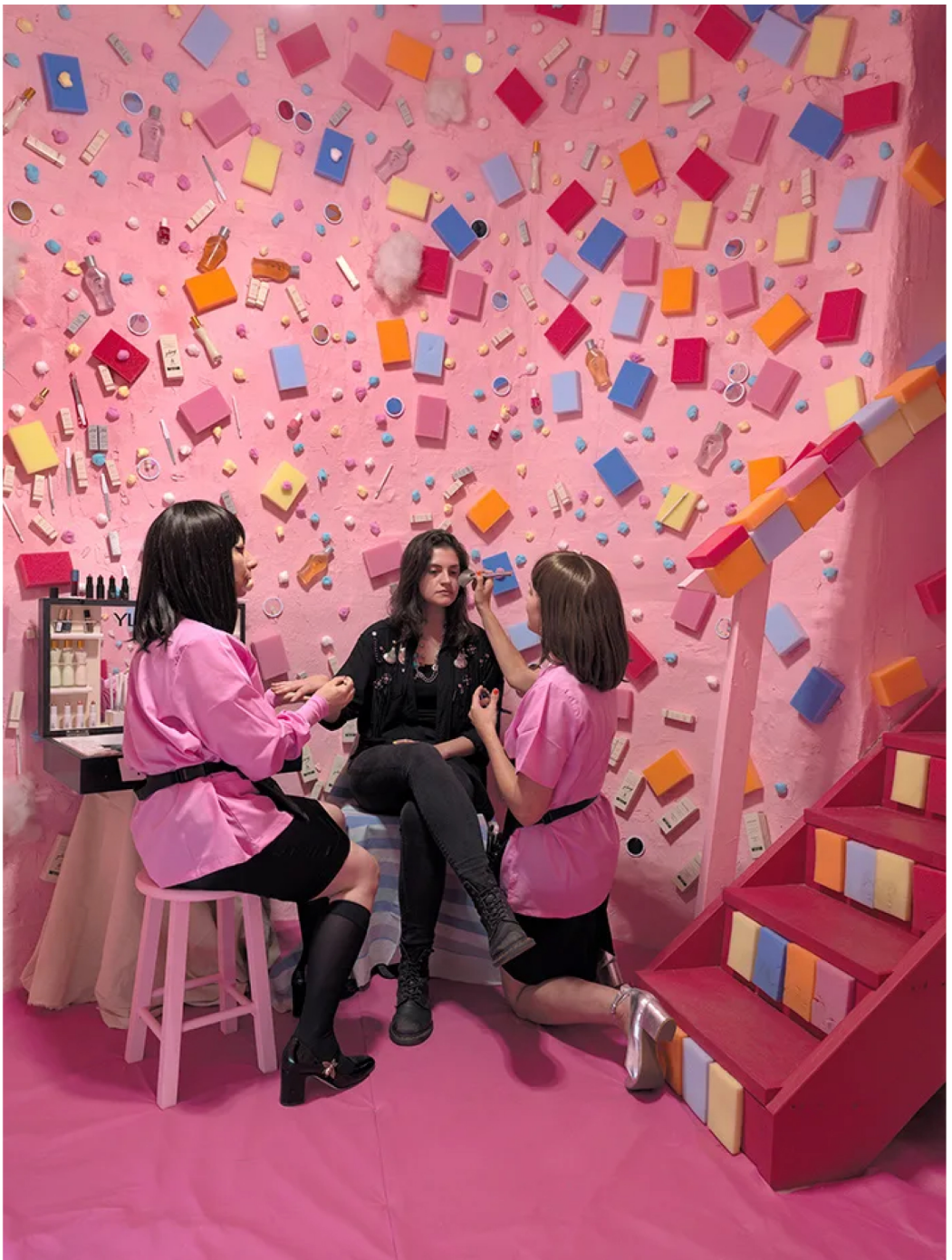
Ariella Budick 9 HOURS AGO

New York's New Museum is in a Buenos Aires state of mind. A pair of seemingly unconnected shows on different floors honours two Argentine artists a generation apart; the resulting resonance amplifies a pop-surrealist sensibility that survived several eras and immense political change. Marta Minujín, born in 1943, and Mika Rottenberg, born in 1976, dip into similar wells of inspiration, wallowing in day-to-day bodily functions, organic grotesquerie and fantastic juxtapositions. Their proximity at the New Museum opens up the continuities between them, offering a satisfyingly comic immersion in the absurd.

Minujín's installation "Menesunda Reloaded" reprises "La Menesunda" (Argentine slang for a confusing situation), a legendary walk-in work that took Buenos Aires by storm in 1965. For 15 days, students, professionals, workers and abuelas lined up around the block for eight hours at a time to take part in an unprecedented artistic sensation. They filed, one by one, through 16 rooms, and emerged with the feeling of having experienced something fresh and excitingly outlandish. Minujín and her collaborator, Rubén Santantonín, supplied a trippy total environment, a happening on an epic scale. Nobody had seen anything like it.

It must have been shocking at the time, this avant-garde fun house with a mean wit that left visitors feeling alternately bewildered, freaked out, exhilarated and daring. A year after it opened, the Catholic military dictator Juan Carlos Onganía took over the country, and the brief window for optimism shut. Kissing in public was banned; the thought of the citizenry trooping through a weirdly lascivious mise-en-scène was out of the question.

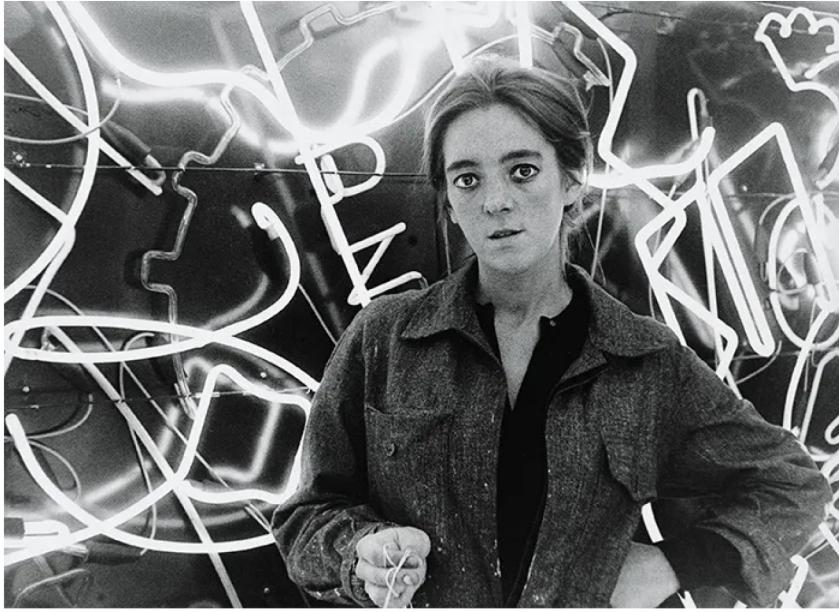
Now that "La Menesunda", faithfully reconstructed by Buenos Aires' Museo de Arte Moderno, is finally making its US debut, the grooviness feels a bit quaint but the 1960s Surrealism still unnerves. You enter a neon-lit space, one at a time, and climb a stairway to an array of outmoded TVs where . . . wait, that's you on the black-and-white screen, apparently under surveillance. Next comes a bedroom, where a déshabillé couple lounge in bed, looking fetchingly bored. You move along, down another set of stairs, and into a pink-painted salon. A young woman offers to draw a lipstick heart on your hand.



A room from the installation 'Menesunda Reloaded' in the New Museum, New York, by Marta Minujin (2019) © Dario Lasagni

From there things get weirder. You elbow your way through an “intestine room” decked out in pink plastic sausages, then traipse on a soft and lumpy floor through a hallway lined with slightly icky sponges. Led into a black chamber, you are informed that in order to exit, you’ll have to guess the correct combination and punch it into an oversized keypad on the wall. Even knowing you’re not actually trapped, you jab frantically at the buttons before realising that the door will open with a gentle shove. Suddenly you find yourself in a mirrored octagonal space with a glass box at its centre. Climbing in brings the room alive: the lights go down, a wind blows and confetti swirls around you like fluorescent snow.

In its original form, “La Menesunda” was meant as a kind of hallucinatory scale model of Buenos Aires, with its bright lights, blaring screens, dark streets and labyrinthine menace. It celebrated the street, the moment, and urbanity itself. You’re not meant to process the experience intellectually, but to give in to the disorientation. “I just wanted people to live in art. And a way of doing that is to go inside, laugh, see something new and react to it,” the artist tells curator Massimiliano Gioni in the catalogue essay. It’s like a warped Alice in Wonderland amusement park ride.



Marta Minujín installing 'The Neon Tunnel, from the original 'La Menesunda' in Buenos Aires in 1965 © Centro de Artes Visuales Archive, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella

Minujín was aiming for a be-here-now physical hyperawareness, but the experience stays with you long after you walk out through the last door. A trace of bodily ooze lingers on the skin — the insistent nudge of those pink plastic organs against your body; the squishiness of the sponge as you slip and grab for something; the creamy stain of lipstick on your hand. It's hard to avoid the sense that you have voluntarily submitted to an impersonal assault.

People filed through 16 rooms and emerged with the feeling of experiencing something outlandish

Discomfort is at the heart of Mika Rottenberg's work too. Though she grew up in Israel and now lives in New York, Rottenberg shares with Minujín a sensuously unsettling aesthetic — what you might call a gross-out compulsion, like an eight-year-old boy's fascination with snot.

She is obviously beguiled by the body's involuntary response to irritation. In "Sneeze" we see an assortment of men in dark suits, each alone at a desk in a bare cell, as if waiting to be interrogated. Each man's Cyrano-scaled prosthetic nose twitches and reddens, his head tilts back, and his bare feet with painted toenails curl squeakily against the floor. When the sneeze finally comes, it's a doozy, expelling a raw steak, a lightbulb or a startled bunny. The sequence is both nightmarish and funny, a fantasy that men with colds might give birth to the wrong species through their inflamed schnozzes. "There are many layers of our existence which are not controlled by our thinking mind," Rottenberg has written. "A laugh or a sneeze addresses these other parts of your body that don't need your mind to tell them how to behave. . . I like to think about art as an irritant to the stability of ideas or to culture."



A still from the video 'NoNoseKnows', (2015) by Mika Rottenberg © Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Rottenberg sails close to a political agenda here — certainly the authorities in Minujín's day would have taken umbrage at her notion of disrupting stability — but she seems more interested in getting under the viewer's skin for its own sake than in telling anyone what to think. She trots out a

lot of visual and acoustic tricks: the crunch of splintering lightbulbs; the buzz of throat singers from Tuva; a headless ponytail that flips insolently by itself; drops of water that fall from the ceiling on to a pair of hot pans, sizzle and vanish into wisps of steam. A disquietingly realistic finger pokes out of the wall and twirls slowly, its ultra-long fingernail inscribing runes in the air as if to signal . . . something.



'Finger' (2018) by Mika Rottenberg © Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

In the end, Rottenberg and Minujín both invoke Surrealism's power to knock the viewer off balance, without holding out an explanatory hand. The only options are to enjoy it or flee.

Mika Rottenberg, to September 15; Marta Minujín, to September 29, newmuseum.org

Follow [@FTLifeArts](https://twitter.com/FTLifeArts) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first. Listen and subscribe to Everything Else, the FT culture podcast, at ft.com/everything-else or on [Apple Podcasts](#)