

Crossed Paths between France and Argentina

Berenice Gustavino

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/17158>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.17158

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2015

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Berenice Gustavino, « *Crossed Paths between France and Argentina* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 44 | Printemps/Eté 2015, Online since 01 June 2016, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/17158> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.17158

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Crossed Paths between France and Argentina

Berenice Gustavino

Translation : Simon Pleasance

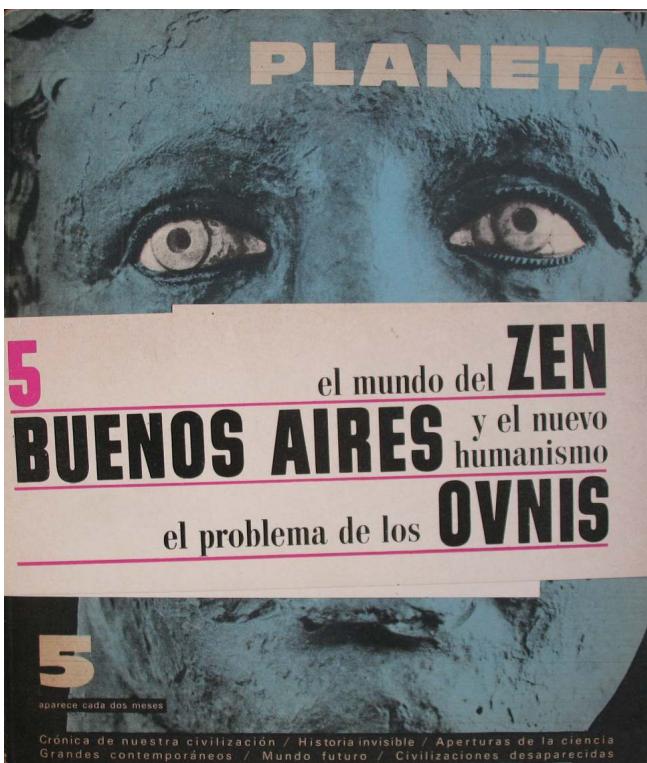


« Colchones : "Revolúquese y viva" : Nueva fórmula de arte », *Todo*, 1st october 1964
 (Clement Greenberg, Jorge Romero Brest and Pierre Restany at the Premio Di Tella)

¹ The art critic Pierre Restany's travels describe a trajectory that can be followed in the articles he published internationally, in his correspondence, and also in the original documents held in archives in France and abroad. Pierre Restany first arrived in Buenos Aires in 1964, where he established professional and friendly relations with two central

figures in the local art scene: the critic Jorge Romero Brest and the artist Marta Minujín. The first was an author and lecturer, and an acclaimed cultural mediator. At that time he was running the Visual Arts Centre at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (ITDT). His projects and writings dealt with the modernization of the artistic milieu. Marta Minujín, for her part, was a young artist who, after forays into informal painting and a stay in Paris, embraced the Pop aesthetic and the object-related practices which were close to the Happening.

- 2 Pierre Restany was invited by Jorge Romero Brest to take part in a major event in the cultural life of Buenos Aires: the ITDT's national prize. Both men supported Marta Minujín in that contest, and helped her to walk away with the prize after presenting her structures made of multicoloured mattresses. That encounter marked the start of shared projects and long-lasting exchanges, to which the respective art circles, French and *porteño*—belonging to the city of Buenos Aires—reacted in differing ways, either by echoing them, or ignoring them.



Cover of *Planeta*, no.5, May-June 1965 [Argentinian edition of the review *Planète* including an environment about Pierre Restany: "Buenos Aires y el nuevo humanismo", p. 118-129]. Collection Berenice Gustavino

- 3 Pierre Restany's first articles about the art of Buenos Aires, written after his visits there, were published in Argentina, Italy and Sweden, but aroused absolutely no interest in France. In Argentina, their publication was confined to the pages of *Planeta*—the local version of the French review which Pierre Restany regularly contributed to. Their attempted publication in *Primera Plana*, based in Buenos Aires, also foundered. With aims not reaching beyond the stage of intentions, many of the projects devised by the critic and the Argentinians were curbed before being realized. There were letters showing exchanges discussing an exhibition of Argentinian art planned in Paris, publications of books by Pierre Restany in Buenos Aires, and the translation of Jorge Romero Brest's writings, with their publication imagined together with his French colleague's, in both

Europe and Argentina. One or two texts thus remained unpublished in the archives of each member of the Brest/Minujín/Restany threesome. They represent interesting avenues for researchers. The documents are especially helpful for reconstructing the personal and affective bonds between the protagonists. But after more comprehensive scrutiny, questions arise about the scope and the effects of the encounter on the development of their artistic and critical work. Pierre Restany's enthusiasm for the ITDT's activities and Marta's oeuvre failed to touch France; while, in Argentina, his submissions—the eye of the “cultural traveller”—are still quoted to this day to broach the art of the 1960s.

- 4 The critic was interested in the work of the young painters and producers of objects whom he called *pop-lunfardos*, combining the Anglo-Saxon term with a word hailing from Buenos Aires slang. In his letters and articles, Marta Minujín was described as the group's leading light. She became “the hope of Buenos Aires, La Pasionaria of living art, the Louise Michel and the Rosa Luxembourg of the *lunfarda Renaissance*, the Joan of Arc of Buenos Aires Restanysta”.¹ Prefaces produced on contact with the Argentinian art scene showed differing facets of the critic's style. In two diverse chords, these writings are still little known about in art critical Archives and in Marta Minujín's private archives.
- 5 In Buenos Aires, Pierre Restany took part in *La Feria de las ferias* [The Fair of Fairs]. That collective and fleeting event, held in the Lirolay gallery, paid tribute to the jury of the salon that had just taken place. Coordinated by Marta Minujín, the event was akin to a bazaar at which several artists presented their work to the public. The organizers were keen to “put art within everyone's reach” and let the visitors choose the features of the works; they also left them free to decide about the size and style of the pieces before buying them at affordable prices. While Marilú Marini offered “erotic dances at 20 pesos”,² the size of Marta Minujín's mattresses could be altered to suit the purchaser's preference. Complying with this production logic, Pierre Restany wrote “5 Models of standard prefaces devoted to Marta Minujín, and especially prepared for the realistic and pop-oriented FAIR at the Lirolay gallery, Buenos Ayres, 7 October 1964”.³ Involved were five short essays, designed to be marketed and used by potential buyers. Each one introduced the imaginary work of an Expressionist, abstract, neo-plastic, concrete, naive, New Realist, neo-Dada, or pop artist. In them we can identify the key expressions of the critical jargon, quite usual for the day in commentaries about those styles and movements. Although playful and self-mocking, several passages in the prefaces almost identically re-create the critic's “serious” writing style.



Polimeni, Fanny. « La Muchacha del colchon », in *Para Tí*, 22 december 1964 © Archives Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella

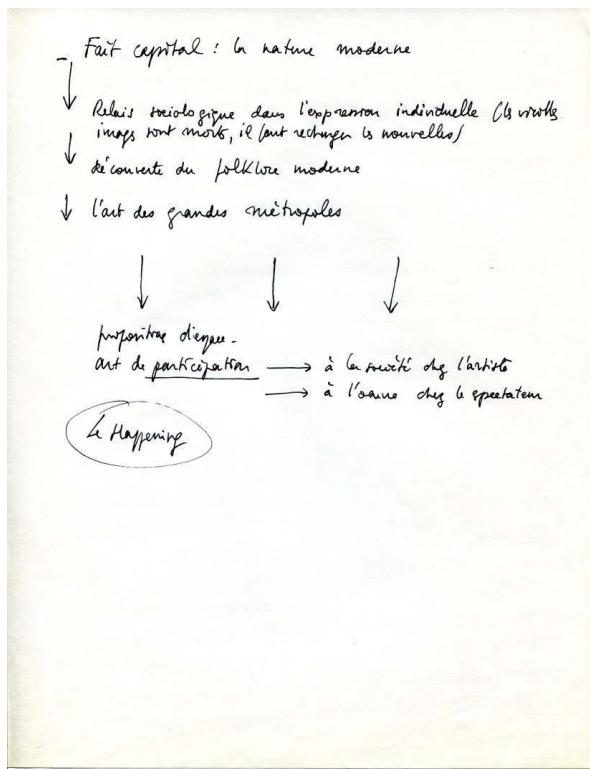
- 6 The parody-like aspect of the experience clearly emerged in the short “instructions for use” accompanying each preface. In the case of the essay about Abstract Expressionism, we read that it is “intentionally short and affirmative” and that it “may be used sentence by sentence divided into autonomous fragments: each quotation may be post-dated or pre-dated depending on the needs and development of the artist”. The essay about a naive painter—who could be “real or fake, but preferably female, who only started painting after the menopause”—, “may also be used for many figurative painters, old and new alike”, to use Pierre Restany’s own words. The essay about a New Realist can, in its turn, be swiftly recycled for a neo-Dada artist: if the name of the artist is of Anglo-Saxon origin, the title would have to be altered; and if the artist was of neither European nor Anglo-Saxon origin, it would suffice to add the lines written for the Pop artists. The prefaces were pieces written in series, in which the force of the “authorship” of the writer was left up in the air, and the final decision about their use was left to the appraisal of the public. In this way, just like artists who get around the rules defining the work of art as a unique and signed piece, Pierre Restany appropriated the traits of the critic’s work by exposing his output to manipulation, and highlighting the purely pragmatic aspects of his own praxis. Using self-mockery, he turned a process intended to involve intellectual and literary skills into a cheap and commonplace “fair” product.



Front and back of a manuscript postcard from Marta Minujín to Pierre Restany, undated, PREST.XSAML.11/4 - Archives de la critique d'art © Marta Minujín

- ⁷ In the following year, the critic became involved in another proposal put forward by Marta Minujín. Early in 1965, the artist asked him to write an introductory essay about *La Menesunda*, an event that she was preparing with, among others, Raúl Santantonín and Pablo Suárez at the ITDT.⁴ Involved here was a labyrinthine circuit offering the public

different ambiances and a host of stimuli—lights, smells, temperatures, sounds, and textures—as well as “vital” situations which would do away with people’s passiveness and get them to react.⁵ Pierre Restany wrote “Be realistic: learn how to conjugate life in the future!”,⁶ An essay for the catalogue of the exhibition which Jorge Romero Brest was already preparing to make a contribution to. *La Menesunda* was presented as an exemplary *porteño* case illustrating the interpretative outlook of the critic. Pierre Restany, who was acquainted with the piece through the artist’s description of it, broached it by relying on his pivotal notions: the “New Humanism”, the “Second Renaissance”, and the “realist orientation” which dominated the current development of things and introduced a “sociological stage into individual expression”. To *La Menesunda* he applied the principle of the “synthesis of artistic information” put forward to explain the North American Happening. This latter emerged from that northern land and even almost exclusively from New York, the critic explained to his European readership in 1963, passing a very negative judgment about the prospect of its development out of that context.⁷ On the other hand, *La Menesunda* was nothing less than a manifestation of the local Argentinian territory and “a local contribution to a shared work”. Instead of broadening the 1963 definition, in order to include that Argentinean work in it, it was a matter of diverting the definition towards an accepted “new realist” sense. In that way, the antecedents of *La Menesunda* referred not to the research of the North Americans, but to that undertaken by Arman, Alain Jacquet and Gianni Bertini. Pierre Restany tried to include the artistic research of the Argentineans within an apparently “international”, but “interested” overview, where the axis passed through France and not through the United States.



Handwritten note from Pierre Restany for the text « Soyez réalistes : apprenez à conjuguer la vie au futur ! », mai 1965, PREST.XSAML24/36 - Archives de la critique d'art

⁸ The exhibition organizers acknowledged receipt of the preface,⁸ but the catalogue was never published. The reasons for its cancellation have not come down to us—the French

critic's essay is not held in Buenos Aires and its existence was not hitherto known about. Despite that, Pierre Restany had no hesitation in subsequently introducing himself as the "preface writer" of *La Menesunda*,⁹ an exhibition which attracted a large public and a keen interest on the part of the *porteño* press.

- ⁹ Those successful essays, published or otherwise, questioned the tangible effects of the critic's activity with regard to the career of the Argentinian artist Marta Minujín. In 1963 this latter stayed on Rue Delambre in Paris where she started to sew and hand paint the mattresses which became the typical motif of her work. Of different sizes and volumes, they were put together and then affixed to the wall, hung from the ceiling or assembled on wood and metal structures. *Colchoncito* [Small Mattress] was part of that research and, in 2010, was the first piece by the artist to find its way into a public art collection in France.¹⁰
- ¹⁰ Such a work conceived in Paris by an artist belonging to the South American diaspora which lived in the capital in the early 1960s, nevertheless took half a century to be legitimized by one of the most important art institutions in Europe, with an itinerary which seemed to leave out the figure of Pierre Restany and become removed from his powerful influence. In Argentina, on the other hand, and in spite of the limited distribution of his writings, the critic's ideas about the "Argentinian painters", the *Pop-lunfardos* and the "urban folklore" of Buenos Aires are still being associated with the artistic avant-garde of the 1960s. In 2010, for example, a large retrospective show of Marta Minujín's work was organized at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA). In the catalogue, an essay by the curator Victoria Noorthoorn developed the themes of the show and opened with a lengthy quotation in French taken from Pierre Restany's "Buenos Ayres et le nouvel humanisme".¹¹ Victoria Noorthoorn singled out three key concepts from the critic's ideas about the city of Buenos Aires, which enabled her to approach Marta Minujín's oeuvre and character: the ability to constantly re-define herself, the possibility of imagining herself on a world scale, and the need to be constantly asserting the freedom of the body and the mind. Pierre Restany is still the "famous French critic", the stout champion of Marta Minujín's work and author of the first noteworthy words about her oeuvre. What is still invisible in France takes on, in Argentina, the breadth of a ground-breaking way of looking at the work of an artist who is very much part of the narrative of the art history of the 1960s, whose active presence in the local art scene has been recently revived.

NOTES

1. Restany, Pierre. Letter to Marta Minujín, 12 April 1965, Pierre Restany collection, Archives de la critique d'art, PREST.XSAML 11/12
2. "Las hogueras del mundo modern" (not signed), *Primera Plana*, n°102, 20 October 1964, p. 36

3. Two typewritten pages, the third being lost. There is also a Spanish translation. Dossiers of the "Projets 1960-1970 "La feria de las ferias"" , Marta Minujín archives
4. **Minujín, Marta.** Letter to Pierre Restany, undated. Pierre Restany collection, PREST.XSAML 11/65 to 69, p. 5
5. In *lunfardo* slang, *menesunda* means drug, as well as big mess, shambles, din.
6. Unpublished text written in Paris in May 1965. Typescript, Pierre Restany collection, PREST.XSAML 24/40 to 42
7. Restany, Pierre. "Une tentative américaine de synthèse de l'information artistique : les happenings", *Domus*, n°405, August 1963, p. 35-42
8. Jorge Romero Brest thanked Pierre Restany and declared that the preface was magnificent. Letter to P. Restany, 1 June 1965, Pierre Restany collection, PREST.XSAML 11/70.
9. Restany, Pierre. "Les happenings en Argentine : Buenos Ayres à la découverte de son folklore urbain". Typescript. Paris, July 1965, Pierre Restany collection, PREST.XSAML 13/54 to 58. Article published with the title "Happenings i Argentina" in *Konstrevy*, 1965, n°4-5, p. 160-165
10. *Colchoncito*, 1963, oil on striped cotton mattress hand painted with fluorescent colours. 75 x 42 x 27 cm. Inscriptions on the canvas: "Paris 1963 Marta Minujín" Donation of a work to the artist Michel Haberland in 1980, Paris. Mattress elements, painted and sewn. Inventory number: AM 2010-293. The work was shown at the Pinta Fair in London in 2010 and was added to the museum collection by means of a purchase in which Erica Roberts and the "Pinta Museum Acquisition Program" played a part. It was then part of a special hanging of *elles@centrepompidou : artistes femmes dans les collections du Musée national d'art moderne* (Centre Pompidou).
11. Noorthoorn, Victoria. "El vértigo de la creación", *inMarta Minujín: Obras 1959-1989*, Buenos Aires : Fundación Eduardo Costantini, 2012, p. 11-39