

Cahier No. 2

Oscar Masotta Segunda Vez



**A research Project
led by Dora García**

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Buenos Aires Is Not a Swedish City

Dora García

“We had the experience but missed the meaning, And approach to the meaning restores the experience.” – T.S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages”

Ricardo Piglia uses these lines from T. S. Eliot as the epigram to his novel *Artificial Respiration*, published in 1981. I start my introduction to the first Cahier of this series of publications about and around the work of Oscar Masotta by relating the story of the first time I met Ricardo Piglia, in Buenos Aires, in 2014. It was as part of a public discussion, in the course of which I read a passage from *Artificial Respiration*, and Piglia didn’t immediately recognize that the passage I was reading was from his book. Piglia constructs his novel around the idea—obviously a metaphor for the act of reading itself—of letters being intercepted by someone other than the addressee. That idea has been important for this project all along: what are we, after all, if not clandestine readers, snoopers, into the correspondence between Masotta and his time? And it is central to this Cahier, which presents newly-found letters that Masotta wrote to his mother in Buenos Aires from his voluntary exile in Barcelona in the last years of his life. Masotta’s daughter Cloe, who has been a collaborator in this project more or less from the start, found them only last year and she suggested that we could use them, an idea that we immediately agreed to, not just because of the insight they give into Masotta as a father, husband, and son, but also because of the plastic possibilities they offer for this Cahier.

The discovery of these letters gives us a fresh and unique glimpse into the private temperament of an intensely curious and intellectually voracious character. There is nothing in them about his intellectual production (other than passing allusions to the fact that he needs to write, or to his students, or to possible professional invitations), about his readings, his lectures, or about other intellectuals he was in contact with, or had recently met. Instead, through these letters to his mother, we read about his relationship to the family he had to leave behind, his enthusiasm with his newborn daughter, his observations into the new city, Barcelona, that became his home, his description of the two apartments he lived in (and the gift for descriptive writing, as anyone who has tried it knows, is by no means a given), and, finally, about the first signs of the disease that would cost him his life. They give us a privileged look into Masotta’s *humanitas*.

As I write this text, I am also finishing the last of four short films I’ve made in dialogue with Masotta’s work and that, in their own way, explore—and I hope continue—his

legacy. Entitled *La Eterna*, the film closes with these words by the Paris-based Argentinian philosopher Gabriel Catren (we’re leaving the English unedited):

Gabriel Catren: Masotta is someone that, in a certain sense, he is an intellectual from Argentina, and I don’t know if you know this theory in biology where they say that the individual, that the ontogenesis recapitulates the phylogenesis. (...) The idea that the development of a single individual recapitulates all the stages of development of the species. So when you’re a child you’re a sort of amphibious, and when you grow up you’re traversing all the stages of the species, is it clear?

Adva Zakai: Yes, yes.

Gabriel Catren: So in a sense Masotta is someone who, in his ontogenesis, in his development as a person, recapitulates many of the different stages of the European intelligentsia during the last century. He started with phenomenology, then he passed to existentialism, afterwards to Marxism (well, not afterwards, they were all entangled), after that he was a structuralist, and afterwards he was interested in psychoanalysis. So a single individual traversed, recapitulated, all these stages of thinking in Europe in the last century.

That is, indeed, what makes Masotta so interesting: he is a man who recapitulates—a man whose work embodies and traverses—the seminal currents and tensions of intellectual and political debate in Europe during his century. That said, Masotta was Argentinean through and through, and in his writings he always insists, with bitter lucidity, on where he is speaking from. In “I Committed a Happening,” for example, he writes:

I was thinking of accomplishing purely aesthetic ends, and I imagined myself a bit like the director of the Museum in Stockholm, who had opened himself up, from within an official institution, to all manner of avant-garde manifestations. But Buenos Aires is not a Swedish city. At the moment during which we planned the two-week festival there came the coup d’état that brought Juan Carlos Onganía to power, and there was an outburst of puritanism and police persecution. Scared, we abandoned the project: what is more, it was a bit embarrassing, amid the gravity of the political situation, to be creating Happenings.... In this respect—embroiled in a sentiment of mute rage—I now think exactly the contrary. And I am also beginning to think the contrary about those “pedagogical” ends: about the idea of introducing the dissolving and negative forces of a new artistic genre through the positive image of official institutions.¹

Masotta opens “After Pop, We Dematerialize” by commenting on the “explosion” of the word “happening” in Buenos Aires in the mid-1960s. He wants to explore this somewhat strange phenomenon—strange because the ubiquity of the word in print was disconnected from the reality of the art scene itself in Buenos Aires at the time, where Masotta counts exactly six happenings between 1965 and 1966. One explanation that catches his attention, and which he

considers “abominable,” is that the “explosion” of the word “happening” in the press is, in some ways, “a positive phenomenon,” because “it somehow represents a becoming aware of our lack of seriousness.” And Masotta comments:

Just imagine: the vicissitudes of political power, the circular succession of economic teams. And what of the ridiculous seizing of the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands) by an ex-actress and a few young extremists? I would say the answer is nothing. Especially if the point is to make comparisons: Argentina’s domestic and foreign politics are no less serious and more scandalous, nor more serious and less scandalous (perhaps less scandalous) than those of any other Western nation. On the other hand, it would be difficult for Argentines to give ourselves the politics we want. The iron limits of an internal and external economic and social structure determine and decide for us, and without our input, a “reality” that is only ours because it is alien.²

Masotta was keenly aware of the circumstances (we could say: the miseries) of the Argentinian intellectual. He defined the political attitude of his younger years with the formula: anti-anti-Peronism. A complex position, difficult to understand for those not versed in the shifts and turns of Argentinian politics from the 1950s to the 1970s: an opposition to those who oppose Peronism that is at the same time not an endorsement of Peronism. In Masotta’s later years, lived mostly in exile, this was replaced by a sense of hopelessness about the political situation in Argentina. The Ezeiza massacre of June 20, 1973, put an end to the hope that a decent political regime could be established there, and triggered the massive exile of intellectuals to Europe, and to Spain in particular, because of the common language. Masotta was one of many to escape, first to London, then to Barcelona.

The years of dematerialization go from 1966, when Masotta “committed” his happenings, to 1972, the year of the Trelew Massacre (when sixteen political prisoners were executed by Argentina’s military government), and of the approval of Law 19,797, which forbade the dissemination of any information concerning guerrilla organizations in Argentina. Like Lucy Lippard (see *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*), Masotta saw dematerialization (the abandonment of the materiality of the object in favor of its conceptuality) as a consequence of the politization of art. The idea, in broad strokes, is that the liberalization of the art object from materiality meant both its democratization and the displacement of the dialectic, content/form, towards another dialectic: information/medium.

Masotta opens “After Pop, We Dematerialize” with two passages, one from Sartre, and a brilliant one from El Lissitzky’s short text “The Future of the Book,” where we read: “Matter diminishes, we dematerialize, sluggish masses of matter are replaced by liberated energy.” And in his text Masotta works out the fundamental idea of dematerialization as a political strategy:

Just as the “material” of music is a certain sonorous material or the continuum of auditory stimuli, and just as bronze, wood, marble, glass, and new synthetic materials constitute the “material” with which and upon which it is possible to make sculptures, so too “works of communication” define their own area of “materiality.” The “*material*” (“*immaterial*,” “*invisible*”)

*with which informational works of this type are made is none other than the processes, the results, the facts, and/or the phenomena of information set off by the mass information media (examples of “media” include: radio, television, dailies, newspapers, magazines, posters “panels,” the comic strip, etc.).*³

Information is the new material of dematerialized art. We could marvel at the prophetic qualities of this paragraph, both in its anticipation of the immediate future (the *Tucumán Arde* project in 1968, for example),⁴ and in the long term (today, information is the ultimate currency, the supreme power). But we must not fail to appreciate what such a claim meant for an Argentinian intellectual. In a recent interview with Nina Möntmann, Lucy Lippard says:

I’ve often pondered why artists in more volatile or totalitarian societies (Chile in 1973, or Central America around 1980, are among the chilling examples) were perceived by their rightwing governments as real threats, whereas we who were analyzing activism, making art by “desecrating” American flags, or yelling and wheatpasting on the streets of New York with similar politics were just nuisances to the US government, a dispiriting sign of art’s direct ineffectiveness.⁵

Indeed, the practice of dematerializing art (and the relation of that practice to art’s politization) in the South American context between 1966 and 1972 could be fatal, literally. It wasn’t necessary to be an artist whose work was explicitly political in content to enter the area of danger. One didn’t have to be a pamphleteer to draw the attention of government forces. A case in point are the repercussions that befell the members of a psychoanalytical group in Argentina that was half-jokingly called Lacano Americanos: many of its members participated in Masotta’s *happenistas* adventures, and most either preceded or followed him into exile. For Masotta, to be a politically-aware author could not be dissociated from being, radically, an avant-gardist. And avant-gardism in the time of dematerialization, Masotta argues, “fuses” content and form/medium, and in so doing it deactivates the traditional, conventional opposition between these two terms. Masotta writes:

And if there is talk now of not concerning oneself with content, it does not mean that avant-garde art is moving toward a new purism or a worse formalism. What is occurring today in the best pieces is that the contents are being fused to the media used to convey them. This concern—demonstrated explicitly for the first time by Pop artists—is inseparable from a true sociological concern, that of a new way of returning to “content.”⁶

In the same text, Masotta explains that he is not interested in “defining” the avant-garde, but rather in pinpointing some of its properties. He offers four of them, the first of which reads:

that there be recognizable in it a certain susceptibility and a completed information about what is happening at the art-historical level, that is to say, about what is happening in art with regards to what has been done before, and to what one imagines *should* happen afterward. In this way, the avant-garde consists in a postu-

lation that states that the work of art exists within a historical sequence of works, and that that sequence is governed by an *internal necessity*. A passage from Henry Geldzahler expresses this characteristic succinctly: “This is instant art history, art history made so aware of itself that it leaps to get ahead of art.”⁷

With Masotta, the eternal dialectics between art and politics, form and content, autonomous and heteronomous art, reaches a new level of complexity, one that we are still heavily debating today.

This series of publications will be completed by a book, which will include the first English translation of Masotta’s seminal monograph on the work of Roberto Arlt, *Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt*. There is a certain parallelism between Masotta’s admiration for, and clear identification with, Roberto Arlt, and the relation between Sartre and Jean Genet; indeed, many have suggested that *Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt* is Masotta’s *Saint Genet*. Masotta sees Arlt as an author whose work engages—candidly, realistically—with the marginal and dispossessed classes of Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires, in Masotta’s dry observation, is certainly not a Swedish city, and the social and political context of Buenos Aires is unique: colonialism, racial politics, misery, classism, totalitarianism, state violence, *periferia*. The political notion of class was notoriously absent from the conceptual art practiced by artists in the North. Class, however, is one of the elements that characterizes, sometimes in a tragic manner, both the practice and the discourse of conceptual art in the South, where the notion of conceptual art was indissociable from politics, and the latter, in turn, was often associated with class, class consciousness, gender, and race (it bears mentioning here that, in the South, conceptual art was less dominated by white men than in the North). If Kaprow, a conceptualist from the North, cast a long shadow on Masotta’s happening *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter), Arlt, a thoroughly *porteño* author, cast a long shadow in the happening *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen* (To Induce the Spirit of the Image), where class-consciousness, and class-resentment, are central.

And yet—in ways that mirror the reproaches leveled at Masotta, which he describes in “I Committed a Happening,” and which are so perfectly telegraphed by the choice for “committed” in the title—the orthodox left accused Arlt of not being sufficiently class-conscious, of accentuating, even of glorifying, the individual quality of the moral and economic misery of his characters, none of whom find, or even seek, redemption in the collective, and all of whom are indifferent to class solidarity and to the class struggle. Masotta agrees that all of this is true, but disagrees with the idea that this robs Arlt’s work of political or revolutionary force. Arlt does offer “aestheticism, anarchism, and bad faith,” but that is not irreconcilable with politics. Masotta insists, instead, that politics in art works differently, and must be conceived differently, than politics in the “political” sphere. He writes:

I think something similar happens with Arlt as with Chaplin’s films, which manage, with their strictly anarchist view of the world, to exert a positive political influence on the individual. And not because aesthetics and politics follow different paths, but because, in the literary work, politics changes its laws for the laws internal to the work, and also because, if one is to speak about politics when speaking about literature,

one must, so to say, put in parenthesis all one knows about politics in order to allow the work to speak for itself. Every literary work has to be understood through the description of this limit point, in which its internal structure rubs shoulders with the reader, in which, on the other side of the printed work, the work exists for the reader; it has to be understood through a description of that which, situating ourselves on the side of the one who reads, we could call the experience of an aesthetic structure. That would allow us to see how the left could recuperate in its entirety the political content of Arlt’s novels.⁸

Masotta chose as the title for the book that gathered his writings between the 1950s and the late 1960s *Conciencia y estructura* (Consciousness and Structure). Speaking about the artistic object, I suggested that in Masotta we see a displacement of the dialectic, content/form, towards another, more significant and contemporary, dialectic, information/medium. And we can now, when speaking of the author and the reader, sense yet another displacement, from politics/aesthetics, to consciousness / structure. I would like to conclude, then, with a passage from Arlt:

He knew he was a thief. But the category he was labeled with did not interest him. Besides, the word “thief” had little resonance with what he felt inside. There, he was aware of a different feeling, of a kind of circular silence that pierced his skull like a steel rod, leaving him deaf to anything but his own wretched despair.⁹

Notes

- 1 The full text of “I Committed a Happening” is available on the website of this project: <http://segundavezsegundavez.com/>. It appears as well in the first Cahier of this series of publications, *Oscar Masotta: Segunda Vez, Cahier No. 1* (Oslo: Torpedo Press, 2017), p. 32–7; for this passage, see p. 35.
- 2 See p. 9 of this Cahier.
- 3 See p. 11 of this Cahier.
- 4 *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán Burns) was a collectively conceived and multidisciplinary work and exhibition (today we would say, “a project”) that took place in November, 1968, at the headquarters, in Rosario and Buenos Aires, of the Comunidad General de Trabajadores de los Argentinos (one of Argentina’s largest unions). Conceived and mounted by intellectuals and artists from both cities and different disciplines, *Tucumán Arde* sought to create a cultural phenomenon with political characteristics that exceeded the conventional artistic channels, and language, of the avant-garde. The aim was to reach a wide audience using publicity and propaganda strategies (posters, placards, newspaper montages, statistical graphs, etc).
- 5 Nina Möntmann is currently at work on gathering and producing material for a projected anthology on the question of dematerialization in art. This still unpublished interview was conducted as part of that project.
- 6 See p. 10 of this Cahier.
- 7 See p. 11 of this Cahier.
- 8 Oscar Masotta, *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (Sex and Betrayal in Roberto Arlt) (Buenos Aires: J. Alvarez, 1965), p. 5–6.
- 9 Roberto Arlt, *The Seven Madmen*, trans. Nick Caistor (New York: New York Review of Books, 2015), p. 5

EL HELICOPTERO

happening
de Oscar Masotta
Coordinación General: Juan Risuleo
Cita: 14 hs. en el
Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936
Partida: 14,30 hs. desde el
Instituto Torcuato Di Tella

<p>Lugar: Estación Anchorena</p> <p>Mujer del helicóptero: Beatriz Matar</p> <p>Piloto del helicóptero: Luis Losada</p> <p>Acomodadoras: Irene Maulnes Virginia Simova Lila Bonis</p> <p>Conductores: Manuel Arias Roberto Richetti José Copasti</p> <p>Fotógrafo previsto: Juan Lepes</p>	<p>Lugar: Theatron</p> <p>Bailarina "en vivo": Nacha Guevara</p> <p>Batería: Louis Moholo</p> <p>Guitarras: Miguel Angel Telechea Pedro López de Tejada</p> <p>Acomodadoras: Liliana Fernández Blanco Carola Leyton Patricia López de Tejada</p> <p>Conductores: Luis Morando José Balotti Salvador Arias</p> <p>Hombre del proyector: Osvaldo Vacca</p> <p>Fotógrafo previsto: Carmen Miranda</p> <p>Cámara cinematográfica: Oscar Bony</p> <p>Vestuario de las acomodadoras: María del Carmen Spingola</p> <p>Realización de vestuario: María del Carmen Spingola Laura Linares</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Auspiciado por el Centro de Artes Visuales y el Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella</p>
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Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*, 1966.
Photographer unknown, © Cloe Masotta.

After Pop, We Dematerialize (1967)

Oscar Masotta

“‘He devoured her with his eyes.’ This sentence and many signs point to the illusion common to both realism and idealism: to know is to eat.”

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

“The idea moving the masses today is called materialism, but dematerialization is the defining characteristic of the epoch. For example: correspondence grows, so the number of letters, the quantity of writing paper, the mass of material consumed expand, until relieved by the telephone. Again, the network and material of supply grow until they are relieved by the radio. Matter diminishes, we dematerialize, sluggish masses of matter are replaced by liberated energy.”

– El Lissitzky, “The Future of the Book”

1. The Word “HaPPening” in the Mass Media

We are not a country of *happenistas*, despite the fact that one of the genre’s founders, Allan Kaprow, referred to Argentines as such a year ago (I don’t remember exactly where: *Art News*, *Artforum*?). At that time relatively few happenings had been made in Argentina. Nor were many made afterward: quantitatively speaking, 1966 was not all that fruitful. To be exact, only two happenings took place among us last year. We must not neglect to add the following to that number: two “works” of uncertain classification, but whose authors refuse to call happenings; one, whose classification is less uncertain, that was conceived as a literary work and that could undoubtedly be called a happening; and the work of an American artist, Bob Whitman, a film entitled *Prune Flat* that Marta Minujín brought to Buenos Aires. The film was part of a “work” in which the bodies of three women live on stage served as the screen onto which the film of the bodies of the women was projected.¹

Still, even if the happenings actually made were very few, the word “happening” spread through the dailies and magazines of Buenos Aires over the course of 1966, from magazines of a certain level of “style” and/or “seriousness,” such as *Primera Plana* and *Confirmado*, to pretty lowbrow (sensationalist and with little written information) publications like *Así*. From dailies such as *La Nación* and *La Prensa* to *La Razón* and *El Mundo*, and from political articles to humor columns, the word invaded the comic strip and finally reached the billboard. It was a strange phenomenon

that, since it didn’t correspond to the facts (that is, to the happenings effectively carried out), appeared to spring from nothing. Nor does it make sense to try to understand it by thinking of the dates, since by the time that a few happenings were actually taking place at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, the phenomenon of the quantitative growth of the word was already quite advanced.

How to explain the phenomenon? There is a sort of explanation that has not appeared in print but is heard around and is, to my mind, rather abominable for two reasons. Firstly, because it is complicit with what the word means within the mass media *boom* (something irrational and spontaneous, trivial and festive, slightly scandalous). Secondly, because of the ideological charge of an explanation that consists in affirming that Argentine “reality” (I also loathe this sort of use of the word “reality”) is not very serious, and hence the explosion of the word in the press is in some way a positive phenomenon because it somehow represents a becoming aware of our lack of seriousness. Just imagine: the vicissitudes of political power, the circular succession of economic teams. And what of the ridiculous seizing of the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands) by an ex-actress and a few young extremists? I would say the answer is nothing. Especially if the point is to make comparisons: Argentina’s domestic and foreign politics are no less serious and more scandalous, nor more serious and less scandalous (perhaps less scandalous) than those of any other Western nation. On the other hand, it would be difficult for Argentines to give ourselves the politics we want. The iron limits of an internal and external economic and social structure determine and decide for us, and without our input, a “reality” that is only ours because it is alien.

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

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

On one hand, the void signifies the unresolved situation in contemporary culture between the elite and the masses. The slightest consideration, however, reveals a real shortcoming in Argentina: above all, the absence of competent criticism to accompany avant-garde production, especially in the visual arts. I’m referring, concretely, to the lack of written material. The only ones in Buenos Aires who have the information to talk about the most contemporary production (Jorge Romero Brest, Aldo Pellegrini, Germaine Derbeq, Hugo Parpagnoli, Samuel Paz) rarely write for publications other than catalogues, and when they do write for specialized magazines, they are magazines that are not published in Spanish. In one of last year’s issues of *Art and Artists*, a British magazine edited by Mario Amaya, I remember reading an editorial that discussed the difficulty of distinguishing these days between a journalist and an art critic: the high level of everyday criticism makes the distinction difficult. In this regard, alas, Argentina is not England, or the United States, or France. On the contrary, in addition to the lack of specialized criticism in Argentina,

the everyday criticism is ill-informed and adverse. *Primera Plana* and *Confirmado* are no exceptions. The critic here rarely commits himself. He is more interested in displaying information he does not have or has obtained hastily than simply in using the information he does have to aid in the comprehension of the work.

But these reflections do not explain the explosion of the word, which surely would not have occurred without a certain anxiety—let’s call it that—or a certain predisposition on the part of the mass audience. An interesting phenomenon, as I see it, and a positive one, in that it points to the fact that, whatever the distance between an aesthetic production intended for an elite audience and a broad audience, that distance is never absolute and there are always some points of contact or some sort of rupture of the distance. Now, it is important to understand also that the spread of the word (and all the mistakes regarding its meaning) is not due to the “ignorance” of the mass audience, since, among other things, journalists, and not the receptors of mass messages, are the ones who compose the messages. That is to say, a certain kind of intellectual laborer who bears the pressure of tensions akin to those borne by his audience, and bears as well the theoretical tensions of the intellectual world and of the environment of artistic production that surrounds him.

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

But what is happening in the rest of the “field,” in the majority of the cases? Let us reflect briefly on what is happening in Argentine film. The best films produced among us (works by David José Kohon, Fernando Birri, and Lautaro Murúa) did not go, technically speaking, beyond certain more or less Neorealist aesthetic strategies. And beyond the searches of Manuel Antín with regard to time and the thematic investigations of Rodolfo Kuhn, there has been no progress among us towards a Nouvelle Vague cinema, for example, or towards any major avant-garde propositions. Once the city had been explored as a theme, and once a certain testimonial description had been achieved (*Alias Gardelito* and *Tres veces Ana* constitute the best examples),² young directors generally filmed rather little. The situation can be explained in large part by the economic difficulties linked to production and the uncertain loan policy enforced by the Instituto Cinematográfico Argentino. But looked at the other way, it would be difficult to say that young directors do not film much solely because of money and financing difficulties. I believe that the current impasse in Argentine cinema expresses, at this level, an aesthetic impasse. To give the matter yet another twist, it is not that young people have nothing to say but that perhaps they are beginning to have a sharp consciousness that tells them that the issue turns, not what is said, or even perhaps on

the way in which it is said, but on the characteristics of the “medium” at hand to say it with.

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

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

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

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

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

2. The Avant-Garde and Works of Mass Information

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

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

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

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

c) that this relationship of negation (with regard to what the work negates of that which has preceded it) not be whimsical, but that it reveal something fun-

damental about the very core of what is negated. In this way, the passage through or overcoming of theater or painting by the happening would be a “logical extension”⁷ of something already latent in theater or painting, and that demanded to be made manifest;

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

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

3. A New Cycle

It was in this spirit and with these ideas in mind that I developed a new cycle, also to be carried out at the Instituto Di Tella, which would comprise (did comprise) a happening, the title of which was *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter), a communicational work (or “anti-happening”), the title of which was *El mensaje fantasma* (The Ghost Message), and an explanatory lecture that I called “Nosotros desmaterializamos” (“We Dematerialize”). The purpose is easy to discern: to juxtapose a communicational work and a happening so as to allow for an understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the operations, and of the “materials,” that constitute them. The cycle proposed at the same time an “anti-optical,” anti-visual aesthetic: the idea of constituting “objects,” though with the goal of speaking, not to the eyes, but to the mind. The title of the communicational piece commented on the tension of the search for immaterial materials, for anti-things, if you will. As for the title of the lecture—in which I tried to explain, in a less orderly manner, what I am trying to explain now—I took it from the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky, from an article of his perspicaciously¹⁰ exhumed in a recent issue of the *New Left Review*, the journal of the independent English Left. Of all El Lissitzky’s nervous and lucid paragraphs, one in particular fascinated me. It can be read in the epigraph to this essay.

4. El helicóptero

El helicóptero would serve me, a posteriori, as a reference with which to define, through differentiation, what a communicational work is. But I had already understood as well, while planning it, that it could be useful to pit *El helicóptero* to the happening by the French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel that we had seen here in Buenos Aires that same year, as well as to the ideas that he defends in his book, which was recently translated into Spanish.¹¹ In a country where, as far as happenings are concerned, deeds are scarce and information abundant, it wasn’t pointless to polemicize at the level of the deeds themselves. The image of the happening that emerged from Lebel’s work, and from his book, was that of a generalized irrationality. Lebel espouses what we could call a quasi-psychedelic ideology that accords pride of place to a set of myths: life, spontaneity, sensory and perceptual participation, liberation from the unconscious, and certainly also the current myth that contemporary consciousness is “bombarded” by information. And Lebel thinks that what contemporary men fear above all is the naked expression of instincts. He would perhaps not be half-wrong if ours was a Victorian society. As I see it, what men of contemporary societies fear, and try to hide, is not the irrationality of the instinct but the rationality of the structure. Besides, all Lebel does in his happenings is to arrange, in sealed-off premises (the theater of the Instituto, with its cube shape, chairs, and stage at the front, in sum, the traditional architectonic box of the traditional theater), a cluttered, disorderly, and simultaneous group of messages (slides, films, live performers, his own talk), to produce a sought-for result: a dark and expressionist image. We could describe Lebel’s happening as follows: a “collage,” neo-naturalist and expressionist. But this iconoclast, who favors a shit aesthetic¹² and who thinks simultaneity as disorder, does not for all that abandon the traditional coordinates

of the traditional theater. This destroyer of traditional art is nourished by the foundation of that art: the closed, post-Renaissance space. It is indeed true that you need a cube to make us believe that the world is a mess! In sum, without rejecting Lebel’s belligerent attitude—or the conceited air, orgiastic and dark, that surrounds his happenings and his person—it is still worthwhile recalling to what extent violent attitudes are not enough to justify the contradictions and meanderings of certain aesthetic propositions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The buses had different destinations. Three of them were headed to the the Theatrón, a theater situated inside the Galería Americana, on the intersection of Avenida Santa Fé and Pueyrredón.¹⁵ The other three were headed instead



Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*, 1966.
Photographer unknown, © Cloe Masotta.

to the Anchorena station, a train station of the (now abandoned) *línea del bajo*, in the Martínez area.¹⁶ Once all the buses were on their way, the ushers gave more instructions, which differed depending on where the buses were headed. The ushers on the buses going to the Theatrón stressed the importance of a strict adherence to the schedule: everyone would be dropped off at the entrance to the Galería, and at 3:25pm exactly the buses would depart again, direction Anchorena. The audience was also told that the departure time of the buses would only be revealed to them once everyone was down below—the Theatrón is a cellar theater—and that everyone would have to collaborate in the effort to vacate the premises and reach the buses waiting for them on the sidewalk of Avenida Santa Fé as quickly as possible. Those going to Anchorena, for their part, were told that, once there, all they had to do was to be on the lookout for two things: 1) the arrival of the helicopter (it would be carrying the actress Beatriz Matar), which would do numerous “fly-overs” between 4 and 4:05pm; 2) the arrival of the part of the audience that had gone to the Theatrón, but was due to join them in Anchorena. In conceiving the schedule, I had arranged things so that those who went first to the Theatrón would only arrive in Anchorena immediately after, or a bit after,¹⁷ the helicopter fly-overs. That was all. The forty people coming from the Theatrón would not see the helicopter; they’d “be late.” But this “being late” was planned, and that gave the sequence of events its “exceptional” character. In daily life, one is late, either against one’s will, or by accident. Here, instead, being late was a necessity of the planned structure. There were, consequently, two chronological times: the time of the deceived group (which had been told to hurry for “nothing”), and the reverse of that time (the time of *my* consciousness, which “knew”). All of this created a certain resemblance between the happening and some mafia operations, like a bank holdup, for example. With a goal in mind—getting hold of the money—one must trace a strategy of schedules and timetables: one must know what time the employee with the key to the safe arrives; one must find a way to distract a cop, in other words, to create a “gap” in the cop’s constant vigilance; one must orchestrate the coincidence of this “gap” with the hour when the bank has the fewest number of clients.¹⁸

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

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

The Theatrón holds no more than a hundred and forty people, and is located on the Galería’s lower-level. My plans were for the events there to be confused, disorganized. The audience walked into a completely unlit and dark theater; it was up to each of them to decide whether to stand or sit. Waiting for them in the darkness were Louis Moholo with his drum set and a projectionist with a 16mm projector. There were also two musicians, Telechea and López

Tejada, who welcomed the public with the song “Yeh-yeh.” The photographers and the flashes; the Telenoche TV crew; the cables and the spots; the disordered public in the theater; the shouts of the ushers and of Juan Risuleo;²⁰ my own shouts telling the photographers to make sure that the light from the spots didn’t illuminate the space for too long: there is in all of this certain replica of Lebel’s aesthetic—a set of simultaneous and juxtaposed messages and tensions, the tortured and tortuous properties of the image that lovers of Expressionism find so appealing. On one of the walls was projected an eight-minute film that accentuated the expressionist image: a figure, completely bound in bandages, twisted and turned violently in an effort to free itself from the ties that bound it (it was a replica, a “citation,” of a film by Claes Oldenburg). Louis Moholo accompanied the figure’s movements with his drum kit. A live figure—similar to the one in the film—cleared a path through the audience, enveloped in darkness, to reach the wall upon which the film was being projected, and once there she started to mirror the contortions of the figure in the film.

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

In Anchorena, the image was open and calm, a bit nostalgic and, to put it briefly, touched with some characteristics specific to Romanticism. This old and abandoned *British* station: the iron rail of the platform that faces the river like a balcony invited one to contemplate the “landscape” on that winter Sunday afternoon; the grey river caressing the slightly damp wood and the iron of the rails covered by the overgrown grass. The cold, the separation of the bodies, the open space: everything invited reflection, contemplation, recollection. An atmosphere—it seemed even to me when I reached Anchorena—reminiscent, in part at least, of a short story by Borges, or by Beatriz Guido, or, maybe, by Eduardo Mallea ...

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

Another opposition (or, it could be better to say, paraphrasing linguists: another pairing of opposites): in Anchorena, Beatriz Matar literally “flew over” the audience waiting down below; in the Theatrón, conversely, the members of the audience found themselves in a confined space in which the distance between bodies was improbable, unusual. The public, open space of Anchorena was the polar opposite of the equally public, but promiscuous and more bodily awkward, space of the Theatrón. The idea of promiscuity and corporeal proximity links up to the idea of sex, and that was commented on in the first minute of



the film projected on the wall: a slow travelling shot inside a bathroom ends with a close-up of a detail of a toilet. This close-up was at the same time clearly a pairing with the helicopter: this opposition defined the basic coordinates of the happening. Tension upwards, towards the sky, in one; tension downwards, towards the lower-level and the toilet, in the other.

Another pairing: if the Theatrón is situated in the “North” (speaking here from the standpoint of its socio-economic “brand” as an upscale area), the Galería itself and the corner of Pueyrredón and Santa Fé (bars, shops) are transit areas—commercial, but “popular,” two characteristics that evidently “neutralize” its “brand” status.²¹ Anchorena, conversely, preserves its brand status: situated on the “*cordón verde*” (green belt) of the “*Zona Norte*,” a residential area north of the city, it clearly denotes its upper-middle class status. It could thus be said that, within this relation, only Anchorena was situated *in the north*, while the Theatrón was instead situation *south of that north*. This relativization of geographic spaces allowed Anchorena to have an *absolute definition* of its geographic position, whereas the Theatrón was allowed only a *relative definition*. During the happening, the very words “Anchorena” and “Theatrón”—and this due to the characteristics specific to those two places—composed a connotative field constituted as follows: Theatrón : Anchorena :: neutral status : high status :: no-North : North :: relative : absolute.

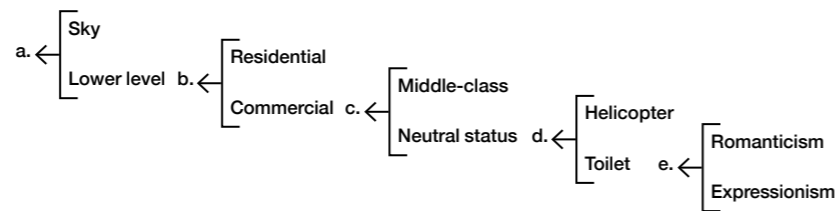
But what does all this mean? Primarily, that every “punctual” commentary, that is, that each and every image or object in *El helicóptero* would be wrong. The expressionist images of the Theatrón could not be judged or understood on their own: they had to be thought in relation to the images at Anchorena,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

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

Let us answer the first question. To do so, that is to say, to introduce a certain order into the disorder, it might prove useful to apply a rule suggested by Lévi-Strauss when it is a question of making sense of a myth through an analysis of its structure: “to isolate and compare the *various levels* on which the myth evolves: geographic, economic, sociological, cosmological—each one of these levels, together with the symbolism proper to it, being seen as a transformation of an underlying logical structure common to all of them.”²³

The levels of analysis in our case would be these:

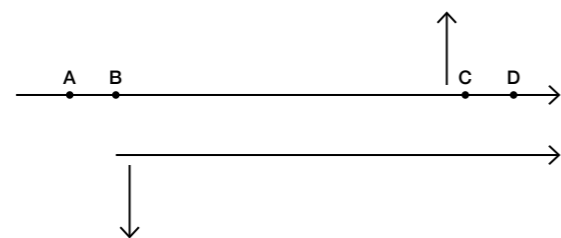
- a) cosmological
- b) economic
- c) socio-economic
- d) historical (the level of technical development)
- e) cultural (styles or aesthetics)



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

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

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



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

By splitting the audience, the happening established a certain direction (before and after the destination points) between the part of the audience that had been at the lower level of the Galería and the sector that had been referred, or turned, towards the sky.

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

El helicóptero was both a commentary on, and a beginning of, the very group that constituted its audience. This commentary (a bit sarcastic, a bit mocking) obliged the group to trace a directional scheme similar, or analogous

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

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

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

6. El mensaje fantasma

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

- 1 Detailed information about happenings and works carried out in 1966 can be found in Oscar Masotta et al., *Happenings* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Álvarez, 1967).
- 2 Both from 1961, by Lautaro Morúa and David José Kohon, respectively. – Ed.
- 3 The cycle comprised two lectures and two happenings. Alicia Páez gave one of the lectures, and I performed one of the happenings, while the other happening was planned and coordinated by a team made up of Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Oscar Bony, Miguel Ángel Telechea, Pablo Suárez, and Leopoldo Maler.
- 4 Henry Geldzahler, participant in the “Symposium on Pop Art,” organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Published in *Arts* (April 1963), p. 37.
- 5 See Allan Kaprow, “Experimental Art,” *Art News* (March 1962), p. 62.
- 6 See Michael Kirby, “The New Theater,” *Tulane Drama Review* 10:2 (Winter 1965), p. 15.
- 7 See the “definition” of the term “happening” in *Words*: “the term ‘Happening’ refers to an art form related to the theater, in that it is performed in a given time and space. Its structure and content are a logical extension of ‘Environment.’” *Words*, exhibition catalogue, Smolin Gallery, 1962.
- 8 The creator of the genre is, without a doubt, Roberto Jacoby (see Oscar Masotta et al., *Happenings*), and that in its purest form. This genre of works, to my mind, contains within it nothing less than everything one can expect from that which is greatest, most profound, and most revelatory in the art of the coming years and of the present. Marta Minujín’s work with sixty television sets, at the Instituto Di Tella last year, remained hybridized with the idea of “environment-making,” even though the work went beyond it.
- 9 I distinguish thus between the “aesthetic object,” the “media” in which the work is made, and its “material.” In order to define precisely the field of works of mass communication, one must not confuse the “media” with the “material” of the work. This distinction brings with it a certain obscurity, but its meaning can be considerably clarified if one thinks of advertising. The “material” with which any campaign works is constituted by the consciousness of the subjects that the campaign is targeted at: the “material” is then, for example, the so-called “phenomena of persuasion,” or, rather, the “effects.” So the “media” is the instrument for reaching those subjects: “posters,” television, stills. Now, between a work of advertising and a work of mass communication there are, nevertheless, differences with regard to the “aesthetic object.” A commercial can be “beautiful,” and those with modern tastes and sensibilities will easily recognize that. But the “object” of the mass work also has a lot to do with that beauty. What is perceived has more to do with certain effects of intelligibility, which are achieved through certain “transformations” of the usual structures of mass communication. The example of *El mensaje fantasma* (The Ghost Message), to which we shall turn shortly, may serve to clarify these difficulties.
- 10 Perspicaciously because El Lissitzky’s ten pages anticipate by more than thirty years the “thesis” of Marshall McLuhan.
- 11 Jean-Jacques Lebel, *Le Happening* (Paris: Denoël, 1966).

- 12 I’m not judging, just describing.
- 13 In happenings, idea that the audience would not witness what is “happening” is already old, classic even. In a happening by Thomas Schmidt, in Wuppertal (Germany), the actions took place when the public could not see them. Schmidt was in a room surrounded by buckets of water and other objects, and whenever someone entered the room, the *happenista* would take a rest. That was his way of indicating that the actions would not be resumed until the observer had left.
- 14 From an economic standpoint, the cycle only yielded deficits. The cycle’s total cost (the rental of the helicopter, the costs of shooting an eight-minute film, a twenty-second spot on Canal 11, etc.) exceeded 150,000 pesos. The ticket sales (and the tickets were expensive, 600 pesos each) didn’t cover even a third of the costs. But, from the point of view of the happening itself, eighty people was a sufficient number. The maximum we had foreseen was 200 people. Happenings don’t require large audiences.
- 15 The Galería—a sort of shopping mall, not an art gallery—is still there. – Ed.
- 16 Martínez is its own municipality, and is located in the northern part of the greater Buenos Aires region. The *línea*, or *tren, del bajo* refers to the projected, but eventually abandoned, line between Borges and Delta.— Ed.
- 17 The only danger, in fact, regarding the timetable was that the buses coming from the Theatrón would arrive before the helicopter. But the drivers had been instructed not arrive, under any circumstances, before 4:10pm. The helicopter pilot, for his part, had been instructed to stop the fly-overs at exactly 4:05pm, thus ensuring that the helicopter would have completely disappeared from the sky before the arrival of the Theatrón group. But there was one glitch: the travel time between the Instituto and Anchorena had been calculated to be fifty minutes. That was the wrong estimation for a Sunday afternoon! And so the buses coming from the Instituto arrived a mere two minutes before the helicopter, which, for its part, appeared in the sky at 4pm on the dot.
- 18 The analogy between the structure of the happening and those of the mafia is Kaprow’s.
- 19 These four properties distinguish verbal communication from other forms of communication. See F. Chaig Johnson and George R. Klare, “General Models of Communication Research: A Survey of the Developments of a Decade,” *Journal of Communication* 11:1 (1961), pp. 13–26. See also Gerhard Maletzke, *Psychologie der Massen kommunikation: Theorie und Systematik* (Psychology of Mass Communication: Theory and Systematics) (Hamburg: Hans Bredow Institute, 1963).
- 20 Juan Risuleo was the coordinator of the cycle.
- 21 In linguistics, “neutralization” designates an opposition, pertinent at the level of the code, that loses its relevance in some positions within the message. What results from that loss is called the “archiphoneme.” Barthes says, very nicely, that the archiphoneme expresses the pressure of the syntagm on the system. For our example, we could say, analogically, that the neutralization of the “brand” *status* expresses the pressure of the real distribution of socio-economic areas, and of the exchange phenomena on the nomenclature that designates these same areas.

- 22 The “substitution test” is the basic operation of structural linguistics. It consists of substituting a phonic segment within a signifier by another, existing phonic segment in the same language so that the final phonic result evokes a different signification.
- 23 Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Story of Asdiwal,” in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Edmund Leach (London and New York: Routledge, 2004 [1967]), p. 1.
- 24 It will be said: because that would have been an economic absurdity. Who can rent a jet? But this very impossibility is itself a “differential” and, as such, it *signifies*. Hence the certain air of economic precarity that has always accompanied happenings and that, as I see it, is not that far removed from questions that we would call aesthetic.
- 25 These designations are by Lévi-Strauss, who speaks—in his analysis of myths, for example—of the “high,” or “atmospheric” heavens, which are indicated in the myth through the presence of different types of birds, for instance, or of natural phenomena.
- 26 To speak about how one level acts, “retroactively,” on another is, in fact, nothing more than a metaphor. What there is are the relations between the levels. But since our analysis is not complete, the metaphor allows us to indicate the methodological level we are using and to suggest what is the intended result. For similar reasons, we shall speak about “resonances” below.
- 27 Not forgetting, however, that there are radical differences between the happening and the myth, and that poses a problem for the analytical model—directly inspired by Lévi-Strauss—we have used here. Indeed, while the myth is a story narrated through the mediation of an already constituted language (that of the community that it is about), the happening does not consist of a verbal narrative, but finds itself rather more on the side of “things” than of the word: it is situated “before” words. The myth is thus an enjambed language, while the happening is a sublanguage, that which enjambes the primary language and that, at the same time, is enjambed by the “work” that that language performs on things.
- 28 I’m referring to the romantic “space,” which presupposes an observer capable of constituting the landscape, the totality of a situation, as a spectacle. The space of the battles of Victor Hugo.
- 29 I say “image” here in the same way as in advertising one speaks of “brand image” or “*imagen de fábrica*” (trademark).
- 30 With regards to Communication Sciences, see Gerhard Maletzke, *Psychologie der Massen kommunikation: Theorie und Systematik*.
- 31 With respect to the function of audiences in happenings, see Alicia Páez, “El happening y las teorías” (“Happenings and Theories”), in Masotta et al., *Happenings*.
- 32 “The term ‘environment’ refers to an art form that fills an entire room (or outdoor space), surrounding the visitor and consisting of any materials whatsoever, including lights, sounds and colors.” Allan Kaprow, in *Words*, exhibition catalogue, Smolin Gallery, 1962.
- 33 There is actually a tautology here, since leaving the audience undefined is the defining characteristic of the term “mass” in “mass communication.”

We'll Have to Find a Way of Meeting Each Other Soon

Cloe Masotta

"I'm certain, besides, that the only way of capturing the sense that defines his destiny is to alter the chronology."

– Ricardo Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*

It was sometime between 2014 and 2017, while conducting a series of interviews for the exhibition *Oscar Masotta: Theory as Action*, curated by Ana Longoni and recently inaugurated at the MUAC, in Mexico City, that I met Dora García. She was at the time already fully immersed in the project *Segunda Vez*, which consisted, among other things, of repetitions of the happenings that my father had made in Argentina in the 1960s.

Ana and Dora both invited me to participate in their respective projects and, on my side, I contributed somewhat to fostering a fertile relationship between the two them. Their invitation to join their respective research projects and the works that would come out of them offered an opportunity to settle an outstanding debt with my autobiographical narrative, and became part of an intellectual investigation and an artistic project. Indeed, more than one: it was during this same period that, through Andrés Di Tella, the members of Un Faulduo contacted me about a project that straddles comic books, the fanzine, and performance: *La Historieta en el (Faulduo) Mundo Moderno*.¹

Now this text is also destined to become part of that body of work, animated and given life by researchers whose interests, concerns, and intellectual passion revolved, also, around my father's life and work.

While talking to my friend Frederic Montornés—who, in this chain link of causalities, is also quite close to Dora—he suggested to me that the psychic medium might be the figure with which to understand all these people: Ana Longoni, Dora García, the members of Un Faulduo, as well as all the men and women I interviewed, with the inestimable collaboration of Andrés Duque, another dear fellow traveller in this personal journey. Through them, I've been able to get to know my father, Oscar Masotta.

In "How Masotta Was Repeated," Dora's introduction to the first Cahier of this series of publications, she cites Ricardo Piglia's *Artificial Respiration*. Piglia's novel, as is the case with many other fictions in Argentinean literature, begins with an absence, invoked in the opening pages by

the photograph of the narrator's uncle, who has disappeared. And it is with this absence figure that the narrator undertakes an epistolary exchange that unfolds like a mystery novel. There is always an enigma, invoked already at the outset of the book by the old photograph. And, as in a criminal investigation, the protagonist becomes entangled in the life of a series of characters in the course of the novel.

On the affective side, my father's voice has become audible to me through a series of letters and photographs that turned up only very recently. It is as if, through this process, all of us who have grown close to my father in different ways had invoked him.

I travelled to Argentina in August, 2016, after spending seventeen years without setting foot in Buenos Aires, and I went to my father's childhood home, where his sister Nelly and my cousin Gustavo still live today. And there, after so many years, we chanced upon a box full of letters that my father, from his exile in Europe, had written to his mother, my grandmother Teresa. Somewhat later, in early 2017, my mother, Susana Lijtmaer, discovered a series of photographs of the happening *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter) at her house. In this emotive network of exchanges, those photographs have also become part of *Segunda Vez*.

"Letter writing," Ricardo Piglia writes in *Artificial Respiration*, "is a truly anachronistic genre, a sort of tardy inheritance from the eighteenth century; those who lived at that time believed in the pure truth of the written word. And we? Times have changed; words are lost with ever greater ease; you can see them float on the waters of history, sink, come up again, mixed in by current with the water hyacinths. We'll have to find a way of meeting each other soon."²

Until the appearance of these letters, my father's voice had always been something distant to me. And, despite the sharpness of the photos I've been shown ever since I was a kid, his image was blurry. Memory in *flou*. Where does my story begin? Certainly before I was born, when my parent first met. Or, also, some years later. In the exile that, thanks to these letters, I've been able to date precisely for the first time.

The dates remain nevertheless punctuated by a suture that started with the interviews I conducted for Ana Longoni's exhibition, continued with the writing of a text for the MUAC catalogue, and keeps going with this text, in which the autobiographical emerges in dialogue with my father's letters.

Through these letters, I've imagined my father, after a long transatlantic voyage, discovering Barcelona on his way to London, his first destination in Europe. I have also been able to caress my mother's stomach, six months pregnant, when my father gave me a boy's name. In these letters I see myself as a toddler, crazy about my father, imitating his gestures. The first traces of my story are woven in his writing. Birth and farewell. Presence and absence, as in the photograph at the beginning of Piglia's *Artificial Respiration*. So much that was experienced, and forgotten, during my first years of life, is now being repeated as I read the letters exchanged between my father and grandmother! Everything is there. From his exile to the yearning for the country he left behind; from the beginning of his new life in Europe to my mother's pregnancy; from the letter announcing my birth—dated 1976 though I was born in 1977—to my first words and steps to the last letter, written a few months before his death, on September 13, 1979.

Notes

- ¹ *The Comic Strip in the (Faulduo) Modern World*. Faulduo is an "art collective exploring and experimenting around comics." See www.unfaulduo.com.
- ² Ricardo Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*, trans. Daniel Balderston (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 30.



T/n EUGENIO C.

Barcelona, 24 diciembre 74 -

Querida mamá:

Te escribo todavía con papel del barco, pero ya estoy en Barcelona desde hace 4 días - Vivo en un Hotel muy confortable en el barrio gótico, un barrio muy antiguo junto a la Catedral, también de estilo gótico y construida en el siglo XIV - Este barrio es un hermoso empedrado de callecitas. La ciudad, construida junto al Mediterráneo y entre dos montes, el Tibidabo y el Montjuich, es apasionante. Me quedaré aquí, tal vez, unos días más - Estoy tratando de entrevistar a gente por razones de mi trabajo. Pero para antes de mi cumpleaños estaré ya en Londres. Escríbeme allí.

Te pido dos favores.

El primero: que averigües bien por la Mimi en el Banco si me puedes mandar ~~los~~ 100 dolares o lo que fuera, como ayuda familiar a Londres. Si es posible, me haces el envío (se entiende con los dolares al precio oficial). Pero espera que yo haya llegado a Londres. El dinero para hacer el giro se lo pido por teléfono al padre de Susana. Y en tal caso, le decís también a él que le haga otro giro a Susana. Averigua bien en el Banco si esto es posible.

El segundo: que llames a Luz Freyre, la persona que vive en mi departamento,

Letters

Oscar Masotta

Barcelona, December 24, 1974

Dear mom,

I'm still writing you on the boat stationary, even though I got to Barcelona four days ago. I'm staying at a very comfortable hotel in the Gothic neighborhood, a very old neighborhood by the cathedral, also Gothic and built in the fourteenth century. It's a lovely neighborhood, a maze of little streets. The city, built on the Mediterranean, between two mountains, Tibidabo and Montjuic, is fascinating. I'll be staying here a few more days. I'm trying to interview people for my work. But I'll be in London before my birthday.¹ Write me there.

I have two favors to ask you.

First: please see Mimi at the bank and find out if you can send \$100, or something anyway, as family help to me in London. If it is possible, please do send (of course, with dollars exchanged at the official price). But wait till I'm in London. You can ask Susana's father to cover the transfer fees. And you might as well ask him to transfer some money himself to Susana. Find out at the bank if this is possible.

Second: call Luz Freyre, the person who's now living in my apartment, and ask her if everything is ok at home. And tell her to make the second deposit by January 10, since I need the money. Be nice.

Also, tell me if Nicolás was reimbursed for the ticket money and if he has deposited it already.

A big hug to all, and greetings to that shameless nephew of mine. Write me.

Kisses,

Oscar

Barcelona, October 28, 1976

Dear "Mother,"

I received your last letter, the one where you tell me that you're worried about me, because I haven't sent news, etc. You must have had news of me by now, since I sent you to an Argentinean doctor who had passed through so that he could send you greetings from me, tell you that I'm fine, that I already have an apartment in Barcelona, etc.

I just haven't had the time before now to sit down at the typewriter and write you. It's only been a month and eight days since we got to Barcelona, and I've had to take care of everything: look for an apartment, rent it, buy furniture, furnish it from top to bottom, etc. It takes time and work (and money). And I had to do all that without neglecting my students, and their number keeps growing. I have a lot of work in Barcelona, and that's why I decided to move here. I'll be commuting to London from here, instead of what I was doing before.²

The apartment we rented is really beautiful. It's on the eighth floor, with enormous French windows and a balcony that's sixteen meters long and two meters wide. Marvelous. In the morning, a blinding light licks the wood floors and the white walls. Right now I'm sitting facing a French window all in glass: not that far off, over the buildings, you can see one of the mountains of Barcelona; from the balcony in the back you can see the other. We have a fireplace, and we've already used it. I have an enormous, wood-paneled office. Beautiful.

Moreover, Susana is in her sixth month, and the swelling of her stomach leads me to suspect that I will, indeed, be a father. Susana and I are fighting less, and she is happy. At first she complained about Barcelona, since she likes London better. But she's starting to like it here. We went out to dinner yesterday and I ingested some incredible grilled "*gambas*." *Gambas*, as you know, are enormous shrimps. So enormous, in fact, that a French lady seated at the table next to ours inquired of the waiter (here, they say "*camarero*," not "*mozo*"), in astonishment, if they were grilled whales and told him that she wasn't aware that one ate whales that way. Incredible. On our way back from the restaurant, I was still hungry, and we bought a Serrano ham that's now hanging in our kitchen. If things go on this way I doubt it will last more than a day or two. Wine in Spain is super cheap: for the price of a liter of wine in London I can get eight here. Same with cigarettes: I'm now smoking dark tobacco cigarettes that cost eleven pesetas, which is to say, a fourth of the price I'd pay for a pack of blonds in London.

Call Pipo and give him my new address (it's noted below). He's coming at the end of the year. And I want to ask you to get a few things for Pipo to bring when he comes to see us. As soon as I'm done paying off the debts I incurred setting up this place, I'll send you some dollars. It'll be soon. I just have to find someone to take them to you. But there are some Chaco Indian masks, called "chanel" masks, that I'd like you to buy for Pipo to bring. And send me some Jockey Club cigarettes, the new long kind. And start getting ready, for as soon as I have a few extra pesos you can make your second visit to Europe, this time to meet your second grandson.³ Think up some names you like and let me know. I like Tomás. Isn't it nice? But who knows, maybe it'll be a granddaughter. What would you call her?

Well, "mother" (don't ever sign another letter that way, it's too pathetic), I send you a hug. Without commenting too much on it, start preparing for another little trip. And a hug from me to the Zambelli family. What's become of Zambelli "junior"?

My address in Barcelona:
Oscar Masotta
Aribau 212, 8th, 3rd
Barcelona, Spain
Telephone: 217-9440

Kisses,
Oscar

Barna, February 14, 1976⁴

Dear mom,

I want to let you know that, since around quarter to eleven in the morning yesterday, the number of women in the family has gone up by one. We've had a baby girl named Chloe (or Clohe, I don't remember where to put the h),⁵ and this baby girl was born weighing 3,685 kilos and measuring fifty-one centimeters (tall for a girl).

Well, everything went well and Susana proved to be in possession of amazing health. She delivered at a clinic called Deseux,⁶ which, as is fitting, is one of the best in Barcelona. Everything went really well. She called her parents and asked them to call and share the news with you. So you must know already.

Well. Get ready then for the trip. You could come around mid-September. What do you think about coming by boat? I think you'd like it and you'd be able to bring me some things from there, I'll tell you what exactly. For example the bookshelves with drawers that I had bought before leaving; they were expensive there and are even more expensive here. You have to find out how many cubic meters you can bring with your ticket. I also have some books and records that I'd like you to bring.

I haven't decided yet whether to buy your ticket here and send it to you, or to buy it there. But do look into the following things:

- a) departure dates for the ships of the company "C"
- b) ticket prices
- c) how many cubic meters you can bring
- d) how much we have to pay for excess luggage

Look into those things and write me soon. I received the clothes you sent, thank you for everything.

I'm happy. I want to see you in Europe again. This time you'll be in Barcelona, which you're already quite familiar with.⁷ But we'll also take a few trips. I know Spain quite well, but have never been to Italy. Maybe we'll take a little trip. We'll see.

A hug to everyone and a kiss for you,

Oscar

Oscar Masotta
Aribau 212, 8th, 3rd
Barcelona (11), Spain

Barcelona 2 de abril de 1978

Querida mamá:

Recibí tu carta y como sospechaba tu viaje de vuelta se realizó sin novedad y con nostalgias. ¿No es Barcelona una linda ciudad? ¿Pero no es Cloe un encanto? Cada día está más linda y cada día inventa cosas nuevas, lo imita todo. Ahora sí que ya está casi por caminar, largarse sola. Todavía tiene un poco de miedo, pero recorre la casa agarrada a las paredes o a lo que puede. Se mira largamente en el espejo, hace muecas con la boca. Ya dice algunas cosas. Me llama a mí con un: "Caaaar". Dice también "Bau-bau". Ha dividido el mundo entre dos nombres, el mío y ese "Bau-bau". Siempre sonriente, come bien, duerme bien, está bien. Es una suerte del cielo haber tenido esta nena tan linda. Vos no me dejás mentir sobre lo linda que es, y ya se lo habrás contado a todos, así lo espero.

Nos hemos mudado. Me hubiera encantado que conociera el departamento nuevo. Un poco caro, pero es una maravilla, más lindo que el otro, mucho más. Está construido por el mejor arquitecto de Barcelona (y en Barcelona hay la mejor escuela de arquitectura de España). El barrio mucho más bacán: una calle silenciosa de esas que te llevaba a pasear con el coche. Es el mejor departamentó que tuve en mi vida. La parte interior de la cocina y el lugar para estar es increíble. Está dividido separado por vidrios, la cocina y el lugar para comer. La cocina solo es el doble de grande de la del otro departamento. La casa de departamentos tiene en el fondo, además, una pileta de natación. Desde dentro de muy poco comenzaré a nadar un rato cada mañana temprano. El departamento es tan lindo, y con la piscina, que me parece que este año me quedo aquí y no voy a veranear a ningún lado. Al ~~fin~~ ^{menudo} (yo, ya que Susy quiere ir a Grecia este año (aquí ir a Grecia, vos sabés, es como allí ir a Vicente López).

.Bueno. Basta de contar grandezas. No he comprado el otro departamento, pero estoy contento de no haberlo hecho. Con la plata en el Banco me siento más tranquilo. Tenemos ganas con Susana de comprar una casa en Londres. Veremos.

No he ido a Canarias. Estaba cansado, muy cansado con todo el asunto de la decisión sobre el departamento y la mudanza. Ya hace dos semanas que nos mudamos. Un trabajo de loco, arreglar de nuevo las bibliotecas, los libros, todo. Pero iré a Canarias en abril o mayo: a Canarias, Granada y Málaga. De Granada y Málaga quieren que viaje periódicamente. No se si lo haré. Como vos sabés, nací cansado. Es demasiado. Pero algo haré. Veremos. También me salió una invitación para viajar a Bahia, en Brasil, para agosto. No se que haré al final. Los viajes en avión me siguen aterrorizando, y a Brasil hay nueve horas de vuelo. Pero tengo ganas de ir a Estados Unidos. Mi amigo Will (el norteamericano de Londres, ¿te acordás?), que está viviendo en Massachusetts, me ha invitado. Pero no sé, tengo que escribir un libro este verano, y con la pileta de natación en casa, están dadas las condiciones pa-

Barcelona, April 2, 1978

Dear mom,

I got your letter and, as I suspected, your return trip was uneventful, though nostalgic. Isn't Barcelona a beautiful city? And isn't Cloe charming? She grows more beautiful by the day, and every day she invents something new-she imitates everything. Now she is actually almost ready to walk, to light out on her own. She's a bit afraid still, but she roams the house, using the wall, or whatever she can, for support. She looks at herself in the mirror for long spells, contorting her mouth. She can already say a few words. She calls me "Caaar." She also says "Bau-bau." She's divided the world into two names, mine and this "Bau-bau." Always smiling, she eats well, sleeps well, and is well. It's a gift from heaven to have had such a lovely girl. You won't let me lie about how beautiful she is, and no doubt you've already told everyone about her. Or so I hope, at least.

We've moved. I would have loved for you to see the new apartment. A bit expensive, but marvelous, more beautiful than the other one, much more. It's by one of Barcelona's best architects (and the best architecture school in Spain is here in Barcelona). The neighborhood is more relaxed: a quiet street like the ones I would take you to see on our drives. It's the best apartment I've had in my life. The inside part of the kitchen and the living room are incredible. The kitchen and the dining room are split, separated by a glass partition. The kitchen is only double the size of the one in the other apartment. And there is a swimming pool in the building, in the back. Soon, I want to start going for a swim early every morning. The apartment is so beautiful, and with the pool I'm thinking about staying here for the summer this year instead of going somewhere. At least I will stay, since Susana wants to go to Greece this year (as you know, to go to Greece from here is like going from Buenos Aires to Vicente López).

Well. Enough with the boasting. I didn't buy the other apartment, and I'm happy about that. I feel more at ease with the money in the bank. Susana and I are keen to buy a place in London. We'll see.

I didn't go to the Canary Islands. I was tired, very tired, what with having the make a decision about the apartment and the move. We moved in two weeks ago. A crazy amount of work: setting up the bookshelves again, the books, everything. But I'll go to the Canary Islands in April or May: to Gran Canaria, Granada and Malaga. They want me to go regularly to Granada and Malaga. I don't know if I'll do it. I was born tired, as you know. It's too much. But I'll do something. We'll see. I also got an invitation to go to Bahia, in Brazil, in August.

I don't know what I'll do in the end. Flying still terrifies me, and it's a nine-hour flight to Brazil. But I do want to go to the US. My friend Will (the American in London, remember?) is living in Massachusetts, and he invited me. But I don't know. I have to write a book this summer, and with a swimming pool at home, the conditions for staying put right here seem set. I'd love to have my family come visit me.

Kisses to your secretary, the lady from across the street. Kisses to all. And a big hug from Cloe to everyone. And you, start getting ready for your next trip-you know that a part of my budget is set aside for your tickets. I think it should be possible for you to come back at the end of the year. You can tell me.

A hug from your son,
Oscar

my new address:
Juan Sebastián Bach 7bis, 4th, "A"
Barcelona (6)
Telephone: 321-1570

ps.: You didn't tell me if Pipo liked his umbrella.
Give him my new address.

Barcelona, July 8, 1978

Dear mom,

Thank you for the phone call. It was wonderful to hear your voices, and, indeed, Nelly sounds like she is doing well. Cloe is doing well, growing up at an astonishing speed. I'm afraid that what I described to Nelly in my letter is already outdated. Now she picks up the phone and starts saying "Hello, Hello, Hello." She climbs onto everything. Walks down the stairs on her own. Etc. She kisses her dolls, puts them to bed. Incredible.

Next week we're going to Galicia on vacation. We're all going. We're also taking Elena, a girl who does the household work and also takes care of Cloe. I hope we'll have good weather, given that Galicia is as rainy as England. But we'll eat the best oysters in the world and we'll drink Ribeiro, a white wine that I must have mentioned to you already. We'll be back in Barcelona in August; that's really the heart of summer, and we'll spend it at home (the pool helps), with sporadic escapes to the Costa Brava. But I'm always busy with work, not teaching classes, but with texts to write.

And how are all of you? It's also been a while since you've written me. When are you coming? How is Gustavo doing? Tell him to write me.

We haven't taken any photos since you left. Last week I bought three photo albums and looked through all of the photos again as I was putting them in the albums. We'll take a bunch in Galicia. I'll send many your way. I'll send one of Cloe wearing my glasses. She takes them off me and puts them on.

Kisses to all. Write me soon. When you want to call me, be sure you call collect: all you have to do is tell the operator. That way you can talk to me whenever you want.

More kisses, and a grown-up and serious hello from Cloe to everyone,

Oscar

*I have two phone numbers:
321-1570 and 239-6462*

Barcelona, March 23, 1979

Dear mom,

I just got your letter, which made me very happy. You always complain but, anyway, there is something about you that's always been helpful to me. I see that my friends have told you about my aponia. That's why I haven't written you lately. I was quite worried for a while. One of my vocal chords is paralyzed. The cause for it could have been very ugly, the worst in fact, and that scared me a lot. In the end, though, the tests didn't turn up anything malign. It's a pretty rare case, and the origin of it may have been too much smoking. The good news, then, is that there is nothing malign, but the bad news is that the vocal chord is still paralyzed. I'm slowly and gradually regaining the volume of my voice, with the healthy vocal chord compensating for the paralyzed one, and with time I'll have almost the same voice as before. Recovery takes time, though. Still, I'm already doing a bit better. I can already talk on the phone, for example. I also have to do recovery exercises, and for that I work with a speech therapist every day. In places that are not too loud people can hear me perfectly, and I can already speak with Cloe pretty well.

In sum, a stroke of bad luck, but not altogether bad. And it may even come in handy, since I don't smoke or drink anymore, etc. Meanwhile, Cloe keeps growing. She's more beautiful, more serious, more intelligent every day. She says everything and speaks all the time. When it first started she'd imitate me, say her throat ached, and ask for aspirins. It's incredible, since she's barely two years old. She understands everything. She wants me to tell her stories. She has an Argentinean accent, though suddenly she says "Ven Papito," instead of "Vení." Also, she says she's Catalanian: "I'm a little Catalanian girl," she says. She doesn't fully understand what that means, but she says it all the same. Anyway, if I start telling you about Cloe I'm liable to bore you.

Cloe is now a little over two years and a month. She's not tall, but petite rather. Her face and head are round, but something in her features tends to lengthen, and her expression resembles mine. Everyone comments on it. But she is beautiful, graceful, sociable. She likes people. She already knows Freud and Lacan. She says: "There's the book by Mr. Freud." She's going to be intelligent.

Well, when are you coming to visit your granddaughter? Cloe already knows you from the photographs. Tell Nelly that I'll write her soon.

For Easter Week we're all going south, to Malaga, Granada, and Seville. I'll send you photos from Granada, which is a marvelous place. I'm including a photo of Cloe here, without telling her mom (Susana wants all the photos of Cloe for herself).

I'm very eager to see you. Your little one,

Oscar

Notes by Cloe Masotta

- 1 Oscar Masotta was born on January 8, 1930.
- 2 According to my mother, Susana Lijtmaer, my parents had decided to move to London because my father loved the city. In London, he enrolled in classes to perfect his English, he was contacted by a few people interested in his work, and he set up a psychoanalysis study group (possibly two even). He was also invited to give talks here and there. It was in London that he translated Jacques Lacan's *Radiophonie and Télévision*, which appeared in Spanish as *Psicoanálisis: radiofonía y televisión* (Anagrama, 1977). He settled in Barcelona in 1976, with the idea that he would continue his activities in London, but that never happened.
- 3 My grandmother's first grandson is my cousin Gustavo, son of my aunt Nelly.
- 4 The date is incorrect, since I was born on February 13, 1977.
- 5 In the end, there was no "h," since when my parents went to register my birth at the city hall in Barcelona, the registrar would not allow them to register a "foreign name," so they settled for Cloe without "h" as less "foreign."
- 6 He means the clinic Santiago Dexeus; in his letters, as the heading for this one suggests, my father was not overly meticulous about dates or spelling.
- 7 My grandmother visited my parents in London for about twenty days, though, as my mother tells me, she didn't get around too much on her own, mostly because she didn't speak English.
- 8 He is referring to J. A. Coderch who, with Manuel Valls, designed the residential building, constructed between 1957 and 1960, on the street Johan Sebastián Bach 7bis. My parents moved there in 1978.

Oscar Masotta

JUAN SEBASTIAN BACH, 7 BIS, 4.º A
BARCELONA-21
ESPAÑA
TEL. 321 15 70

Barcelona 8 de julio de 1978

Querida mamá:

Gracias por la llamada telefónica. Me gusto mucho oírlos, y la Nelly me parece que en efecto anda bien. La Cloe está muy bien, creciendo a una velocidad espantosa. La descripción que le hago a la Nelly en la carta, me temo, ya no sirve. Ahora agarra el teléfono y se pone a decir "Hola, Hola, Hola". Se trepa a todos lados. Baja escalones sola. Etc. Le da besos a las muñecas, las pone a dormir. Increíble.

La semana que viene nos vamos de vacaciones a Galicia. Vamos todos. Llevamos también a Elena, una chica que hace los trabajos de la casa y cuida a Cloe. Espero que nos toque buen tiempo, ya que la zona gallega es tan lluviosa como Inglaterra. Pero comeremos las mejores ostras del mundo, beberemos el Ribeiro, un vino fresco del que ya te habré hablado. Para agosto estaremos de vuelta en Barcelona; es el mes verdaderamente de verano, y lo pasaremos en casa (la piscina ayuda), con escapadas esporádicas a la Costa Brava. Pero yo tengo siempre que trabajar: no en clases, pero tengo que escribir cosas.

¿Cómo están todos? Vos también hace tiempo que no me escribís. ¿Para qué fecha vas a venir? ¿Cómo anda el Gustavo? Decíle que me escriba.

Desde que te fuiste no volvimos a sacar fotografías. La semana pasada compré tres álbumes y las puse todas y las volví a mirar. Son muy lindas fotos. Ahora en Galicia vamos a sacar un montón. Te voy a mandar muchas. Te voy a mandar una de Cloe con mis anteojos puestos. Me los quita y se los pone.

Besos a todos, escribime pronto. Cuando quieras hablarme por teléfono, pedí que sea yo aquí en España quien le pague, lo decís a la telefonista, y ya está. Y me hablás cuando se te de la gana.

Besos otra vez, y un adulto y serio saludo de Cloe para todos,

Oscar 

Tengo dos teléfonos : 321-1570
239-6462

Oscar Masotta

48/8001

JUAN SEBASTIAN BACH, 7 BIS, 4.º A
BARCELONA-21
ESPAÑA
TEL. 321 15 70

Barcelona 23 marzo 1979
Querida mamá:

321 / 1570
Acabo de recibir tu carta, que me alegró mucho. Siempre te quejás, pero de cualquier modo hay siempre en vos algo que a mí me ha servido mucho. Veo que mis amigos te han contado de mi afonía. Eso fue la causa de que no te escribiera durante el último tiempo. Pasé un tiempo muy preocupado. Tengo una cuerda vocal paralizada. La causa podría haber sido muy fea, la peor, y me asusté mucho. Pero finalmente los análisis no dieron nada malo. Es un caso bastante raro y al origen puede haber sido el exceso de tabaco y también el alcohol. Tuve que dejar de beber y de fumar. Lo bueno fue entonces que no tenía nada maligno, pero lo malo es que la cuerda vocal sigue paralizada. Solo bastante lentamente voy recuperando el volumen de la voz, la cuerda vocal sana va compensando a la paralizada, y con el tiempo volveré a tener casi la misma voz que antes. La recuperación completa lleva tiempo. Pero en este momento no estoy ya tan mal. Por ejemplo, ya puedo hablar por teléfono. Además tengo que hacer ejercicios de recuperación para lo cual trabajo diariamente con una fonoiatra. En ambientes no muy ruidosos se me escucha perfectamente, y ya puedo hablar muy bien con Cloe.

En resumen, un golpe de mala suerte, pero no del todo mala. E incluso me puede servir, ya que no fumo, casi no bebo, etc. Mientras tanto la Cloe sigue creciendo. Cada día más linda, más seria, más inteligente. Habla todo, continuamente. Al principio me imitaba, decía que le dolía la garganta y pedía aspirinas. Increíble, apenas tiene más de dos años. Lo entiende todo. Quiere que le cuente cuentos. Tiene un acen-

to argentino, pero de pronto te dice: "Ven, papito", en cambio de "Vení". Además ella dice que es una catalana. "Yo soy una catalanita", dice. No sabe del todo lo que quiere decir, pero lo dice. Bueno, si comienzo a hablarte de Cloe puedo aburrirte.

Ahora Cloe tiene poco más de dos años y un mes. No es alta, más vale pequeñita. La cara y la cabeza, redonda, pero algo en el rostro tiende a alargarse, y la expresión se parece a mí. Todos lo dicen. Pero es linda, graciosa, sociable. Le gusta la gente. Ya conoce a Freud y a Lacan. Dice: "Ahí está el libro del señor Freud". Va a ser inteligente.

Bueno, ¿y vos cuándo vas a venir a visitar a tu nieta? Cloe ya te conoce por las fotos. Decíle a la Nelly que pronto le escribiré.

Para semana santa nos vamos todos para el sur: Málaga, Granada, Sevilla. Te voy a mandar fotos desde Granada, que es una maravilla. Aquí te mando una foto de Cloe, sin que la madre se entere (Susana quiere todas las fotos de Cloe para ella).

Tengo muchas ganas de verte,

tu hijo

Oscar 

Oscar Masotta: Segunda Vez
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“But Buenos Aires is not a Swedish city. At the moment during which we planned the two-week festival there came the coup d’état that brought Juan Carlos Onganía to power, and there was an outburst of Puritanism and Police Persecution. Scared, we abandoned the Project: what is more, it was a bit embarrassing, amid the gravity of the Political situation, to be creating Happenings... In this respect – embroiled in a sentiment of mute rage – I now think exactly the contrary.”

– Oscar Masotta

Segunda Vez is a film and research Project centered around the figure of Oscar Masotta (Buenos Aires, 1930, Barcelona, 1979), an author, Psychoanalyst, and Happenista. Segunda Vez uses the figure and work of Masotta to explore the intersections between Performance, Psychoanalysis, and Politics, paying special attention to narrative strategies such as repetition and metafiction.