

HENRIQUE FARIA | BUENOS AIRES

# Marta Minujín: Frozen Sex

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*Untitled*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas. 129 x 129 cm

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## Marta Minujín: Frozen Sex

1.

Washington D.C., 1973: Marta Minujín shut herself up in her studio and worked for six months on the painting series *Frozen Sex*. But lest we imagine this situation as a withdrawal isolating her from the world, let's keep in mind that, on the contrary, before taking up her brushes, the artist embarked on an ethnographic survey of pleasure: checked out porno cinemas, cabarets, sex shops, and parties in which sexual liberation was setting the pace for modern life. In this city, as well as in New York and San Francisco, where she also spent time in her twenties, desire and consumerism bred a sort of citizenry of the lower depths later cut short by political conservatism and the AIDS crisis. The '70s were also a key time for the feminism that made headway through the sovereignty of the woman's body — early in 1973 abortion was legalized in the United States — and that managed to erupt into the male narrative of the history of art. A good snapshot from this advance party is the piece *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* (1972) by Mary Beth Edelson, in which Jesus Christ and his apostles are replaced by 69 heretics, among them Minujín.<sup>1</sup>



Marta Minujín in her Washington D.C., 1973. Digital photograph from vintage negative

Pop art typically treats emblematic images coldly, images which are in the shopping cart, images which overshadow either by their beauty or their off-puttingness, and

<sup>1</sup> On Minujín's career with regard to feminism, I recommend reading Georgina Gluzman, "Reflexiones en torno a la muestra retrospectiva de Marta Minujín en el Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires" [Reflections on MM's MALBA retrospective], in María José Herrera (editor), *Exposiciones de arte argentino y latinoamericano. El rol de los museos y los espacios culturales en la interpretación y la difusión del arte* [Argentine and Latin American Art Shows: The Role of Museums and Cultural Spaces in Interpreting and Circulating Art], Buenos Aires, Arte x Arte, 2013, pp.401-416.

which exhibit the signs of the media or of the counterculture. These images are neither narrative nor contestatory, they are the real set into the work in their version as simulacrum. The conceptual exercise pop offers is that of embodying brutal sincerity at the same time as the superficial turns charming. The sex organs painted by the artist, depicted in full scale, occupying the entire canvas, intensify this operation, though they bear no mimetic relation to the original. While the size is exaggerated, the flat forms and schematic volumes in their various pinkish flesh tones spare us the details that a pornographic close-up would give us within ten minutes. Painting, as a performative gesture that slides and gradually covers the surface, lends a differential temperature to these representations, including the possibility of their melting before our eyes.



MARTA MINUJÍN. *Sin título*, 1974. Serigrafía. 60 x 60 cm. Edición de 30

## 2.

Buenos Aires, November 1973: Minujín exhibited *Ocho óleos de la serie erótica* [Eight Oils in the Erotic Series] in the gallery Arte Nuevo. Three hours after the show opened,

the police arrived and the exhibition was shut down. A first point to bear in mind for understanding this situation is that Minujín is a woman, and in these cases the degree of censorship is always other, to the point of verging on scandal. I mention this because the radical nature of her career must be thought about from a vantage point that lets us note the challenge a woman artist faces in her medium, all the more if we're dealing with the history of geniuses.



*Untitled*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas. 127 x 127 cm

A second point is the shrinkage that the local art world suffered once repressive legislation was put into place. Nonetheless, compared with other more permeable scenes in the visual culture of libertinage — from sexual activism to the Teatro Maipo —, the very entrance of some of these images into the visual arts was a cause for controversy and reserved attitudes on the part of criticism. Both the pop works, associated with an imaginary femininity, and the works that challenged the stability of the representable through their proximity to the obscene, were relegated to a

euphemism: frivolity. This is the word that cultured punishers on both the left and the right came up with in order to condemn access to the unshowable.<sup>2</sup>

**3.**

Washington D.C., May 1974: Minujín showed her paintings again in the Hard Art Gallery, only now with the title *Frozen Erotisme*. At the opening the artist unleashed considerable camp [sic: English in original -- tr.] energy: she had two body builders painted pink, had a romantic bolero playing in the background, served pink champagne and doled out pink pills, and both she and guests of hers wore pink attire. The variation in title was due to the artist's interest in sensory experience between the work and the viewer, a concern we find also in her mattresses *Eróticos en technicolor* [Technicolor Erotics], in which she sets up a relation with audiovisual flow. Unlike Georges Bataille, who thought of eroticism as excessive jouissance transgressing boundaries in an embarrassing disarray of bodies, Minujín captured and framed private parts, adding an exhibition value to them. Sex served up on a platter, between the compulsion of the series and apparitions of the night, and sexual politics as a constantly disputed terrain, are the symptoms that lit up this era. The critic Julián Cairol had a similar impression at the time when he realized that the paintings recall advertising for frozen food: "Through this process, the artist reveals the empirical instrument on which eroticism has been built, and she represents it as so many anonymous objects of consumption. Sex no longer belongs to the individual, but to the culture."<sup>3</sup>

Francisco Lemus

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<sup>2</sup> See Raúl Escari, "El pensamiento del Di Tella consideraba viejo el tema del sexo," ["At the Di Tella Institute they considered the theme of sex old hat"], *Actos en palabras*, Buenos Aires, Mansalva, 2007, pp. 59-62.

<sup>3</sup> Julián Cairol, "Marta Minujín: Frozen Erotisme," in *Frozen Erotisme* (exhibition catalog), Washington D.C., Hard Art, May 20 to June 5, 1974.

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*Untitled*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas. 153 x 126 cm

**Marta Minujín** staged her first happening, entitled *La destrucción*, in 1963. In 1966 she mounted “Simultaneidad en simultaneidad” [One Simultaneity within Another], as part of the *Three Countries Happening* she shared with Allan Kaprow (New York) and Wolf Vostell (Berlin).

Some of her ephemeral works, massively attended, include *El Partenón de libros* [Parthenon of Books] (1983), *Carlos Gardel de fuego* [Carlos Gardel Ablaze] (1981), *La Torre de Babel con libros de todo el mundo* [The Tower of Babel Made of Books from Around the World] (2011). In turn, she made trans-psychedelic paintings, technicolor mattresses, and performances. Her works are found in both Argentine and international collections, among them: the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Guggenheim Museum (New York), Tate Modern (London), the Art Museum of the Americas (Washington D.C.), the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid), Olympic Park (Seoul), Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (Buenos Aires), Malba-Fundación Costantini (Buenos Aires), as well as in major private collections. Over the last decades she has had numerous solo exhibitions and retrospectives; outstanding among them, *Marta Minujín. Obras 1959-1989* (Malba, 2010) and *La Menesunda por Marta Minujín* [MM's "Mayhem"] (Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aire, 2015-2016). She has taken part in group shows at the Guggenheim Museum (New York), Place du Palais Royal (Paris), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), and Fundación PROA (Buenos Aires), among other prestigious art institutions. In 2016 she was awarded the Premio Velázquez a las Artes Plásticas (Madrid). In 2017, at Documenta 14, in Kassel, she presented the work *Pago de la deuda griega con olivas a Angela Merkel* [Payment of Greece's Debt in Olives to Angela Merkel] (Athens) and *El Partenón de libros prohibidos* [Parthenon of Banned Books]. In early 2018 she was awarded the Americas Society Cultural Achievement Award in New York. She currently lives and works in Buenos Aires.