

rial characteristics that lie at the basis of certain changes of the signified; whereas redundancy measures a continuum, the bridge that runs from the code to the message, where the very possibility of communicating a meaning is generated. It could be said, along the lines of the information theorists, that redundancy is an operation whose end is the constitution of the signified—that it is an operation in service and “care” of the transmission of the message, whereas metaphor contributes to the meaning as already constituted, as a support and springboard for the production of other signifieds or for the enrichment of the meaning, and this without “caring” about the possibility of obscuring the message. But this difference of levels, if maintained, would act to hide the rivalry between the two functions, and additionally would tend to exacerbate the distinction between information and communication: redundancy then belonging to the order of the quantitative measurements of information, and metaphor to the qualitative order of meaning, to the “contents” of communication.

Finally, to return to these pages, it would have to be said that in any case they will remain incomplete. For how to speak of Pop without reflecting on the correlation between the visual arts and the modern extension of the means of information?

—Written August 15, 1967, Buenos Aires. Originally published as “Prólogo,” in Oscar Masotta, *El “pop art”* (Buenos Aires: Columba, 1967). Translated by Brian Holmes.

## The Argentine Image-Makers

By Oscar Masotta

My contact with the Argentine image-makers was at once encouraging and unsettling. To the plurality of signifieds that I had experienced in the proposals of the American Pop artists was added the plurality of the Argentines' proposals. [Rubén] Santantonín tastefully showed me his portfolio and gave me ideas about its development; for my own judgment he offered some pages of writing where he reflected on the meaning of his work. I understand that Santantonín (whose art has little to do with Pop) is more concerned with a still undeveloped theory of the “thing,” more so than of the “object” (to use the vulgar term). But where does the difference lie? I would say that what attracts and fascinates Santantonín is the pure *facticity of indifference* in the “thing,” and that in this sense he pays little attention to the significations of social reality. A kind of phenomenological reductionism, which I do not mean to criticize, and which could be further explored and brought to its ultimate consequences. But this quest, I believe, would require careful reflection on the materials with which he works. The same could be said of Emilio Renart. When conversing with Renart one finds oneself obliged to talk about what he calls, in his personal code, the “spirit” of his monsters, or their “image” (I use the quotation marks to show that the word belongs to Renart's personal lexicon, his “idiolect,” as a linguist would say). But Renart makes very little reference to the muffled stridency of the significations tangled in the very materials with which he carries out the quest for his images, and it could be said that he takes the material for granted. Yet these hasty observations do not convey what I was able to sense through direct contact with Renart and his works, which is what [Pierre] Restany spoke of, the existence of a veritable folklore of Buenos Aires. What shall we understand by folklore? What is the relation between Renart's monsters and the “folklore” of Buenos Aires? Is there any?

When I visited Renart's studio on the roof terrace of the single-story house where he lives in the Floresta neighborhood, which is my home neighborhood, on Camarones just a few yards from Nazca Avenue, I couldn't help thinking of the relation between Renart's monsters, his social origin, the originality of his concepts, and the nationality of his work. A difficult relation, rarely framed in these terms by the critics. Upon direct contact with the work and with the man, Renart, everything seemed at once clear and obscure to me. But at the same time, and thanks perhaps to this clarity and obscurity, I thought of the possibility of a certain self-integration, in which perhaps my preoccupation with artistic questions, a preoccupation of the elite—in the positive sense of the word, but nonetheless, of the elite—could become coherent in my book on an Argentine writer, Roberto Arlt. Like Renart and myself, Arlt had an intimate experience of the same geography, the same folklore (that is, the same atmosphere, the same native coloration), the same social origin. And although Renart has no intention of grasping meaning in the realm of social reality—as in Pop art—still I thought there was a certain subsoil that did not appear in his works, but was associated with that atmosphere of mute sarcasm characteristic of his themes, with that acidic deposit accompanying his decision to work on icons of organic forms and related to the materials, somehow “ignoble” and artificial, with which he constructs those icons.

My contact with [Juan] Stoppani and with the quality of his dolls aroused a rare sense of surprise. Surprise, additionally, when confronted with the kind of idea he had of his production, and of his role as an artist. Stoppani told me that he would like to produce simple and punctual reactions of “taste” in people, that he made his dolls to the sole end that they should be pleasing. Think of how suggestive a deep reflection on the idea of taste and on a body of work and an attitude that poses taste as its object and finality could be for a mature criticism, and for an aesthetic in search of its principles. The splendor without mystery and the shine of the gilt paper on in these dolls, plus a sense of falsehood and a precise control of artifice, held out a seductive trap for consciousness, which made me think of Martial Raysse's works,<sup>1</sup> and of a certain idea of beauty, a conception of beauty where it is the result of the clarity of motives plus the control of artifice. All that had surely to do with the “taste” of which Stoppani spoke.

Carlos Squirru's works helped me to understand certain Pop techniques. Even though they have little to do with Lichtenstein or Wesselmann<sup>2</sup>—to name two very different cases—they make manifest an attitude that lies at the basis of the modern critique of the image. The use of “vulgar” materials and broad, “low” manners of signifying, made of “low blows” as I would say, helped me to think of a group of techniques among which it would not be useless to begin to distinguish. These “low” mechanisms of conveying a message deliberately repeat the characteristic forms of mass communication. And they do so, in this case, with an intention that is not exhausted in mere parody and irony, although it always remains inseparable from them. In this way a necessary connection is asserted between effective communication and the low discursive tenor of the communications medium. I am thinking of a silhouette cut out of wood and painted black, the silhouette of a head that Squirru presented to me in his studio, similar to the two lateral silhouettes that he just presented for the Di Tella National Prize. Upon it, in colored lines similar to the cheap plates of anatomy books, he had painted

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Luis Alberto Wells. *Denotación espacial [Spatial Denotation]*, 1965. Wood, lights, and enamel, 13'11/2" x 22'11 5/8" x 9' 10 1/8" (4 x 7 x 3 m). Courtesy the artist



a liver. "Like when someone's drunk and their liver goes to their head," commented Squirru, with insecure humor, pointing to the figure. But do you understand? First: the visual image here was nothing more than the literal commentary of a preexisting phrase (*subírsele a uno el hígado a la cabeza* ["his liver goes to his head"]), and the whole—the phrase plus the visual image—produced a joke as its result.<sup>3</sup> Second: all of this pointed to a complementary relationship between visual image and verbal language. This relation *constitutes* the visual as incomplete, i.e., it constitutes the visual, in a stubbornly and perversely deliberate way, as something contrary to what one expects from any work of art: that it be sufficient unto itself, that on the level of its means it should constitute itself as a closed universe of signification.

And here we touch on a key point, which will no doubt continue to perturb the critics: the question of the independence of the visual image as image. Contemporary artists tend to display a specific and precise contamination of the content of images: either they appear to be aberrantly related to real objects (Rauschenberg's "combines") or they appear compromised by the interjection of verbal and/or written language. Thus an indignant critic has written the following about [Michelangelo] Pistoletto's<sup>4</sup> exhibitions:

Surfaces of polished metal where you situate yourself alongside figures painted in gray, preferably seen from the back, so that even the most hermetic viewer cannot ignore their radical distance. Such is the excellent support that Pistoletto's works offer to the literature, a support which, it must be said, his commentators take advantage of with incomparable felicity. And before this avowed insufficiency of literature, we need nothing more than a plastic work able to assert its independence by specific means, irreducible in principle to any verbalism, creating an emotion of a primarily visual order. Which is certainly not the case here.

When a critic reacts in this way, one has to wonder what kind of wound he has received, where he has been "hit." And in this case, it is not difficult to guess (the critic himself tells us): what has been wounded is *the conception of the specificity and independence of the visual as visual*.

But let us return to the Argentines. [Luis Alberto] Wells's geometricism separates him from the image-makers. The same holds for Maza. Wells's "spatial structures" are, in a sense, only the constitution and transformation into volume of that familiar informal material with which he worked in his early period. But to the extent that he geometricizes the volume and conceives the work as a counterpoint between color and volume (his stripes of homogeneous color painted "over" the wood), Wells moves rather far away from the Informal experience. On the other hand, he lets us glimpse that insofar as he feels the volume to be a "thing," he refuses—and he stands by this refusal with a good deal of talent—to conceive the "thing" as the "comedy of *being-there*" (to use the fine expression of Nicolás Callas). There is neither comedy, nor irony, nor parody in Wells's colored volumes, in his quasi-functional, quasi-architectonic "sculpture-paintings." There is a counterpoint between Wells and Squirru, the dialectic of the "serious" and the mocking (I place "serious" between quotation marks, and do not depreciate mockery). One of the questions that arises in our minds, and upsets them, is that of the work's material destiny, the question of its insertion into the con-



Marta Minujín. *Revuélquese y viva!* [*Wallow Around and Live!*] 1964. Reconstruction. Private collection, Buenos Aires

text of the functions and institutions of real society. The image-makers reject any functional possibility or integration from the very moment that they begin working with fragile and artificial materials; as for Wells, I am told that he denies the existence of any degree of architectonic functionality in his work, beyond a certain limit at least. But what sets this limit, if not Wells's own consciousness?

These questions of consciousness become more interesting in reference to Marta Minujín. The theoretical foundations, so to speak, that accompany Minujín's works are well known: a vision of the social process as a phenomenon of continuous change, on the one hand, and on the other a conception of the work's relation to the viewer as immediate, *participative* contact, as *situation*, with a cathartic value that is supposed to replace the isolated and aestheticizing presence of the traditional plastic object. By conceiving the work as mortal—with its value consisting precisely in this, since it puts the very limit of the concept of the artwork to the test—this vision of art considers the social system, on the contrary, as indestructible. Here I am referring to what goes on in Marta Minujín's head. For Minujín everything changes, everything becomes and transforms, constantly and quickly. But thereby, one suspects, nothing changes for her, nor can the development of the societies themselves be substantially modified. Here there is a Comtean positivism of which Minujín remains unaware; it is of a piece with her neutral and euphoric vision of the society in which she lives, and has its roots in the ideologies of Dadaism and Futurism. In the mind of Minujín, in the conscious motives she gives herself for working, there is a strange mix of absolute negativism and total acceptance of the effective structures of real society. But I do not pretend to ignore the originality of Minujín's works; and when one comes to know the person, one simultaneously comes to know what definitively wavers within her and what definitively justifies her taste for the spectacular. One



then understands that this taste is explained by her convictions and by her manner of taking part in history and in the most contemporary artistic problems from the inside, as it were.

### Notes

1. Martial Raysse was born in 1936. His career has been meteoric. His first financial support came from the Divan Gallery in California. He divides his time between Nice, Los Angeles, and New York. In 1962 he signed the manifesto of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* group led by Restany.
2. Tom Wesselmann was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1931. After graduating in art, he traveled to New York in 1956, and held a show with Jim Dine that same year at the Judson Gallery.
3. The joke, as a contaminating effect of the visual by the verbal and vice-versa, has abounded in contemporary art since Magritte and the Dadaists.
4. Michelangelo Pistoletto was born in Biella, Italy, in 1933. His first exhibition was in 1960, in the Galatea Gallery in Torino, where he lives and works. Pistoletto paints figures on metal backgrounds which function as mirrors. The quality of the mirrors bring the painted figure and the reflected image of the spectator to approximately the same level.

—Originally published as "Los imageros argentinos," in Oscar Masotta, *El "pop art"* (Buenos Aires: Columba, 1967). Translated by Brian Holmes.

## Prologue to *Happenings*

By Oscar Masotta

The Happening appeared in Argentina beneath the sign of a strange destiny. One year ago Allan Kaprow referred to us as something like a country of Happening-makers, whereas up to that date, express manifestations of the genre had barely existed in Argentina. The same occurred with the recent boom of the word "Happening" in the press. A phenomenon of over-reporting in the mass media was inversely matched by very few effectively realized Happenings. Nonetheless, from the viewpoint of the facts—that is, considering both the Happenings that were carried out, and a certain maturity in terms of the reflection on the products of avant-garde art—it may be that 1966 was indeed a fruitful year for us.

The essays that comprise the present volume are relatively coherent with respect to one another. On the one hand, the authors coincide in their theme, even if in a rather unusual way. And on the other, they all make use of, in greater or lesser measure, the same referential frame, the same methodology: Structuralism and structural anthropology, semiology, communications. It is true that with the exception of the article by Eliseo Verón, the informed reader will not find any complete structural or semiological analysis of the Happening. But, nonetheless, structural analysis and semiology do not cease to be the common referential frame, the "axis" (even if a rather distant one) toward which the reflection tends. It is then possible for the reader to go through the different essays that make up the volume in the same way as one reads a unified work, like the chapters of a book by a single author. From essay to essay the thinking is not contradictory, but complementary. And even if unresolved points remain, or if a certain ambiguity floats around the solution of certain problems, still the authors coincide in their way of formulating these difficulties.

Thus the reader can go through the book in different ways. If he comes to the volume with the aim of informing himself about what a Happening is and what the word signifies, he should probably first read the work of Alicia Pérez, complemented by the