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Art

Marta Minujín's Radical, Immersive Art Presaged the Instagram Era

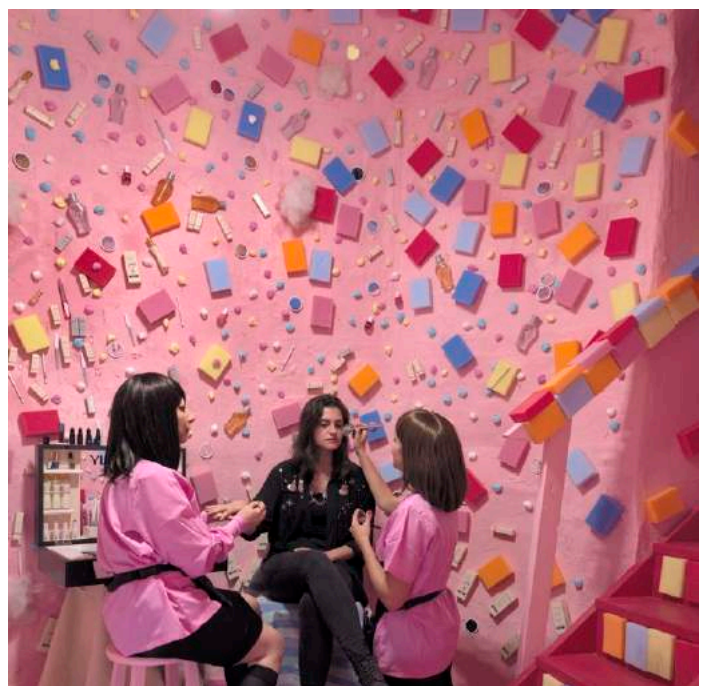
Alina Cohen jul 2, 2019 12:53pm   



Portrait of Marta Minujín in *La Menesunda*. Courtesy of the New Museum.

You could say that Marta Minujín invented immersive art. Sure, Yayoi Kusama introduced her first “Infinity Room” the same year that Minujín debuted her 11-chamber artwork, *La Menesunda* (*Mayhem*) (1965), at the Center of Visual Arts of the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires. And in the late 1950s and early 1960s, artists such as Allan Kaprow and Robert Whitman had already organized site-specific “happenings” that turned their performance environments into integral components of their pieces. But *La Menesunda* elevated conceptual art to wacky new heights.

Minujín’s labyrinthine installation led viewers into a bubblegum pink room where actresses applied makeup to visitors; into a faux bedroom where a man and a woman lounge in bed; into a bright white space that resembles the inside of a refrigerator; and into a chamber scented with creosote, a dark brown oil used in dentistry. Now, New York’s New Museum is restaging the groundbreaking artwork in “Menesunda Reloaded”—for a generation used to documenting everything on their iPhones.





Marta Minujin *La Menesunda - archive-*,
1965
Museo de Arte Moderno
de Buenos Aires



Installation view of “Marta Minujín: Menesunda Reloaded,” 2019 at the New Museum. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of the New Museum.

In 2019, many visitors’ first impressions of *La Menesunda* won’t be through the exhibition itself, but through Instagram. Their impulse, once inside, will be to whip out their camera phones to take pictures and videos. The piece is ideal social media fodder: colorful, zany, and bold.

In the decades since immersive art debuted, both brands and artists have latched onto the medium, hoping their spectacular installations gain popularity online. Santa Fe–based immersive art experience company Meow Wolf, for example, has integrated the refrigerator motif into their own sprawling installation, updating Minujín on a larger, commercial scale. In this way, Minujín’s work feels particularly prescient.

These days, it’s fashionable to lament our addiction to our phones and our obsession with mediating art-viewing experiences by taking pictures. That’s not the artist’s perspective, though. What matters most, Minujín says, is that the viewer can experience the work alone.





Installation view of *Menesunda* at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, 2015. Photo by Gabriel Rossi/LatinContent via Getty Images.

“What hurts is the shoes and the people,” Minujín explained when we met recently. She’s concerned about people tracking in dirt or refusing to experience the art solo. “Some people say, ‘no, I have a friend; I don’t want to go alone; I am claustrophobic; I want to be with my husband,’” Minujín mimicked. “It’s much better to allow at least one minute to be alone.”

Surprisingly, she considers phones a positive addition to the installation. Taking pictures gives viewers another opportunity to participate in the artist’s vision. Curator Massimiliano Gioni noted that he and co-curator Helga Christoffersen were particularly interested in how *La Menesunda* has “long anticipated ideas about participation and alienation through the media, which now seem common currency.”

Born in 1943 in Buenos Aires, Minujín established herself as a bold, independent artist as a teenager. At 16 years old, she secretly married economist Juan Carlos Gómez Sabaini. She falsified records to indicate that she was 18, so the state would grant her a marriage license. “I was always breaking rules in my own life,” Minujín said. The couple are still together today, yet Minujín’s primary motive was hardly romantic or traditional. The legal union allowed her to travel internationally on her own. Minujín embarked to Paris, where she integrated into the burgeoning art scene. She had no running water or heat, just the desire for a creative career.



Marta Minujín *All the Lovely People*, 2010
Praxis Prints

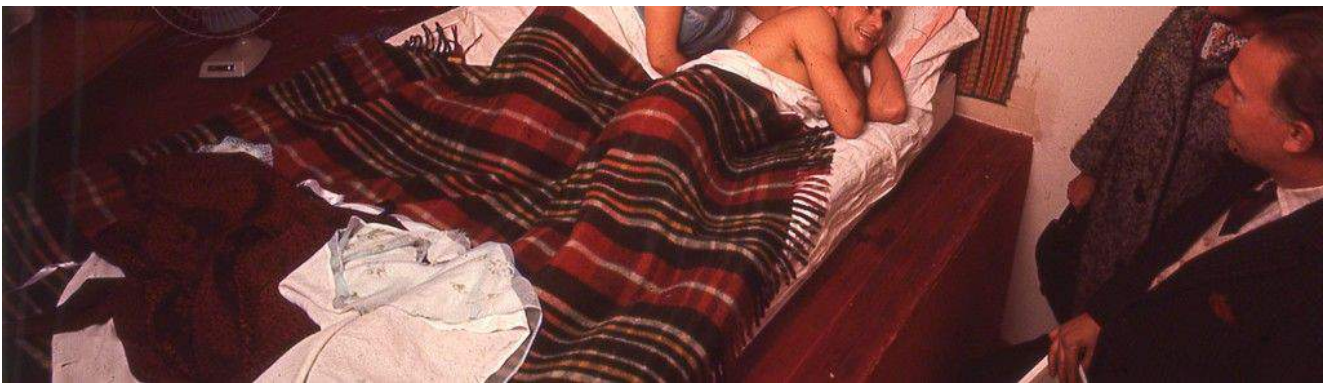
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Throughout the early 1960s, Minujín began working with discarded hospital mattresses while running her studio out of a space that artists Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely lent to her. “Fifty percent of your life you spend in mattresses,” the artist explained. “You sleep in mattresses.” Minujín’s practice became increasingly ambitious. In 1963, she created *La chambre d’amour* (*The Love Room*), an installation made from multi-colored mattresses that she made herself, which viewers entered through a door shaped like a vagina. Once inside, they were welcome to participate by having sex.

From there, Minujín’s radical vision grew. Instead of creating one room, she decided to make 11. She began collaborating with fellow artist Rubén Santantonín on *La Menesunda*, to debut back in her hometown. The pair wanted to make work that would require participants, not spectators.

Minujín’s ideas about sex and gender persisted. One room featuring a couple reading and talking in bed was particularly risqué in the largely Catholic country of Argentina back in the 1960s. Minujín cast strangers to play the couple. Yet after the two-week show, according to the artist, they fell in love and eventually got married.





Marta Minujin *La Menesunda - archive-*, 1965
Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires

The room featuring makeup artists derived from Minujín’s critique of sexist restrictions against women’s work. “To be a housewife was terrible,” Minujín said. Before they were allowed to hold jobs, she continued, women spent their time buying makeup and clothes.

Another groundbreaking element of the installation was a closed-circuit camera, which allowed visitors to look at a television screen broadcasting their own images. In 1965, the concept was novel and exciting; today, it elicits ideas about mass surveillance. “Her idea was that media would free us all, now they seem to entrap us,” said Gioni. “For better or for worse, the *Menesunda* is the perfect incarnation of this dilemma.”

La Menesunda opened in Buenos Aires in 1965 to immediate acclaim. Crowds flooded the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella with eager visitors. The next year, Minujín won a Guggenheim fellowship for her efforts.





Installation view of *The Octagonal Mirror Room*, from *La Menesunda* at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, 2015. Photo by Agustina Vizcarra. Courtesy Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires.

She moved to New York, where she quickly embraced a colorful existence. She lived at the Chelsea Hotel, partied at Max's Kansas City, and befriended artists from Andy Warhol to Carolee Schneemann. She embraced a psychedelic lifestyle, taking acid everyday and leaving her galleries in favor of the hippie existence. By 1969, she recalled becoming “completely disconnected from reality.”

Minujín moved back to Argentina, then to Washington D.C. Through all this, she continued making art. Looking back on the wildness of the late 1960s, she said, “it was fantastic.” Creativity exploded. She made her own clothes. She met Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

Since the 1960s, Minujín developed a proposal for a sculpture resembling a reclining Statue of Liberty covered in hamburgers (1979); created a replica of the Parthenon using 100,000 banned books (1983); organized performances with Andy Warhol that involved trading ears of corn to elicit ideas about international debt (1985); and participated in documenta 14 (2017) with an iteration of *The Parthenon of Books*. The political nature of Minujín's work is often encased in serious fun.



Marta Minujin *El Partenón de Libros*, 1983
Herlitzka + Faria

Reflecting on her life, Minujín expressed no regrets. Early determination, independence, and self-acceptance allowed her to

thrive and generate exciting new artwork on three different continents. No wonder, then, that she wants viewers to walk through *La Menesunda* alone.

The purpose of the environment, she explained, is “to make a person feel very much themselves. To show their personalities through those events. Finding themselves.” Each time visitors re-enter, she added, it’s like experiencing “a different life.”

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