A dialogue on Marta Minujin's happening: Leyendo las noticias (Reading the news)

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Recommended Citation
Pease, Silvia Márquez, "A dialogue on Marta Minujin's happening: Leyendo las noticias (Reading the news)" (2022). Department of Art and Art History. 2.
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Leyendo las noticias (Reading the news)

Marta Minujín “made waves in the 1960s for her conceptual art and her “happenings”, which thrust her onto the world stage at a time when Buenos Aires was considered on par with New York in terms of the art world. At 73, she … was a contributor to last year’s Documenta art fair and festival in Germany with her world-renowned Parthenon of Books”¹ (O’Higgins, Culture trip 2018).

Marta Minujín’s Leyendo las noticias is a happening that combines feminine subjectivity with the socio-political, creating a dialogue around notions of trace, the feminine, text, meaning, and impermanence. Specifically, how these notions affect the women living in an unstable and pluralistic world. It depicts a woman as a ‘participatory woman’ talking about women, in a conflicted patriarchal society. I would argue that the popular Marta Minujín’s Leyendo las noticias, represents a ‘slippage,’ for women (Cixoux 1976) amid a repressive culture, and a historical context of a Dirty War, violence, and fear. Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Helene Cixous, Jane Bennett, and Julia Kristeva are brought in dialogue, with the selected happening, in an intertwined analysis of: the reading of Freud and meaning of text in relation to the psyche (Derrida 2003), women talking about women’s issues (Cixoux 1976), the impermanence and the
notion of the *severed head* (Kristeva 2012), the concept of the *thing-power* and the *decentering* of the human experience (Bennett 2010) and the concepts of *Da-sein* as a product of time, place and culture, and the necessity of choice (Heidegger 2010).

**Making waves**

The first concept that is very clear in *Leyendo las Noticias* (Figure 1) is Cixoux’s feminist view that women should talk and be represented by women. As perfectly described by the *Culture Trip* reporter O’Higgins, Marta Minujín, “makes waves.”² Women should write their history towards their liberation, Cixoux explains. Definitely, women “will bring about a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis: hers is not simply a class struggle. The new history is coming; it’s not a dream, though it does extend beyond men’s imagination, and for good reason” (882). Cixoux’s belief in women “as a militant,” and as “an integral part of all liberations” (882), writes that the new “woman is obviously not that woman Nietzsche dreamed of who gives only in order to receive.”³ She is the one “borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence” (885). This violent incandescence creates the force that will propel change. The past of muted and silent past is part of the past. Now, women have the right to “smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (Cixoux p.888).

Considering that happenings represent a “fluid line between life and art” and this line, “should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct as possible” (Kaprow p. 260), Minujín’s *Leyendo las Noticias*, brings to the fore what Cixoux remarks as when a “personal history blends together, with the history of all women, as well as national and world history” (882). This aspect is evidenced in the work of Minujín, the happening and her performance is “an act that will also be marked by women’s seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which
has always been based on her suppression” (Cixoux p. 880). Minujín is “the taker and the initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process” (Cixoux 880).

*Leyendo las Noticias*, illustrates the political and economic crisis in Argentina that was covered by the media; it was *sedimented*, without the possibility of unveiling the truth. Minujín through her happening, illustrates the shift and mutation; and “derives pleasure from this process of alterability” (Cixoux p. 888).

**Un-sedimentation is a slippage.**

In the happening *Leyendo las noticias*, Minujín wraps her entire body, in several layers of newspaper and lays on the ground by the Río de la Plata, near Buenos Aires Argentina. Positioned in a very comprised and uncomfortable position, she is reading sections of a newspaper, before gradually entering the water. As she enters the river, Minujín, lets the newsprint – and its writings – gradually disintegrate around her.

For Derrida, while reading of Freud, the “meta- physical concepts and phrases” are “condensed and sedimented” (Derrida p. 248). This notion of *sedimentation* of messages and information is clearly depicted in *Leyendo Noticias* during the act of going in the water. Minujín enters the water, and the newspaper slowly disintegrates. Disintegration relates to the notion of lack of *sedimentation*. Thus, when the newspaper disintegrates by being in contact with the water, the content and the pressing news are non-existent. The news become non-important, non-existent, impermanent. Meaning is not permanent, is not *sedimented*. I argue that contrary to Jung ‘sedimented archetypes,’ and Derrida’s “condensed and sedimented” (248), *Leyendo las noticias* presents the notion of un-sedimentation. *Un-sedimentation* is a slippage, a shift, a movement, a new way of thinking, rather than, a patriarchal ‘sedimentation’ of meaning. *Un-sedimentation* is a complex an interesting notion because not only talks about women; but rather,
talks about the “infinite richness of their individual constitutions” (Cixoux p. 876). Or rather, what Cixoux remarks as the “process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another” (882), moving beyond the sedimented state of being. These aspects of the slippage—in relation to identity—have not yet been sufficiently analyzed, and women have suffered from this prejudice for a long time. Un-sedimentation, reorientation, and restructuring with respect to identity can vindicate women from this sedimented state. Moving them into a space where feminine alliances are created, dialogue of equality and plurality.

Heidegger identified this turn and weakening of subjectivity while living the present, as “the moment of vision” (Augenblick) where authentic Da-sein appears (78). He goes further to say that we have a necessity of balance and the urge to react for Da-sein to reveal itself. The power to turn is exemplified in Leyendo las Noticias, by the ritual of cleansing which takes place when Minujín’s body—covered in newspaper—goes in the river. The furious current of the Río de la Plata causes the newspaper to disintegrate, to move, to be taken away by the current. It evolves and it becomes something else. This is Heidegger’s turn, detour, deferral. The much needed turn that Minujín’s physical performance depicts. She walks into the river—dressed in a comic newspaper custom, made of tragic news about the political turmoil in Argentina. I interpret this happening as not only an impermanent act of paper disintegration; but rather, what Heidegger remarks as a detachment, turn, of present, past and future traumas. A liberation, a ‘detour’ that becomes visibly and imminent, specially, in 1966 when the military coup that came into power in Argentina tightened.
Newspaper Body consumed by the media.

What is a newspaper? A newspaper is a popular item that represents a society, that brings the current news, that informs. The newspaper is considered mass-media which transmits the current information in respects to the socio-politico-cultural state of people. Minujín uses the newspaper (media) to cover her body creating a spectacle. A spectacle that depicts Minujín’s body being constricted, inhibited, restricted, and her head covered with a comic newspaper hood. The hood has the knowledge that she receives while reading, she seems constricted, until she liberates herself entering the water. On one hand, Minujín is engaging with the media, or what McLuhan calls the media is the “extension of ourselves, also depend upon us for their interplay and their evolution” (49). And, on the other hand, she is resisting to the mass media in general. Specially, what she considers an existing media’s threat to transform women pop artists into a commodity among other comments. Minujín’s narrative is acknowledging the limiting and constricting effects of mass media in a rather violent and intimate act.

There is an inherent tension between the physical experience (body consumed by the newspaper) and the information of the mass-media. Minujín responds to the climate of unstable governments and dictatorships, commenting on the Argentinean media and the violent displacement of women. During the Leyendo las noticias, Minujín destroys the newspaper body and the hood by going into the water, almost as an act of violence, what Kristeva defines as a ‘violent gesture’ indicating “the before and after” when “we must be prepared to experience the figure, severed and whole, in its severing and its dance: to inhabit it, rigid and fleeting, violent and happy, blood and spirit, horror and promise” (Kristeva 65-66). The notion of the severed head, the head in the platter, of Kristeva is clearly illustrated by Minujín, when she brings to the
fore a representation of the newspaper hood as being decapitated, a violent of disintegration that alters the way we are seeing the body figure.

This violence of decapitation ends with the source of knowledge, that in a moment, it becomes non-existent. The knowledge that does not exist anymore, relates to the connection between the text (in the newspaper) and our psyches, that Derrida questions, “if the psyche is indeed a kind of text, but: what is a text, and what must the psyche be if it can be represented by a text? (Derrida 250). Although it can be interpreted in several ways, it is clear for Derrida that ‘the text’ is linked to ‘the psyche’ and the act of having the physical content “represented by a text whose essence is irreducibly graphic” will “eventually invade the entire psyche” (Derrida 250). Minujin’s newspaper walking custom can be compared to Derrida’s “structure of the psychical apparatus (250). Just like the one he describes in the “Note on the Mystic Writing Pad” (250), it has a protective layer and the potential to disappear without a trace. Derrida ‘s reflection on the analogy of the wax and the protective layer balances the decapitated head notion introduced by Kristeva and the violent act of destruction.

Minujin’s newspaper body has a life of its own; and thing-power. For Bennett, the notion of the thing-power is “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). The thing-power creates a juxtaposition between the object and the subject; both, what Bennet remarks as a “shared materiality.” which finds “balance” – between the animate and the inanimate, between the drama and subtle—, and then, it “is elevated” (13). Minujin’s bodily movements exemplify Bennett’s challenge to abandon our human-centric worldview. As such, the newspaper body (a newspaper woman) becomes a temporal vibrant thing, which articulated movements are animated. This newspaper thing has thing-power regardless of human interaction. Indeed, there are certain qualities (powers) of the newspaper
(thing) that continue with “the-process-of,” without relying on human intervention. Bennet’s concept of the thing-power promoting responsible ethical human engagement links with Heidegger’s reflection on Da-sein and the necessity of choice.

Concluding, the dialogue between Cixous, Derrida, Bennett, Heidegger and Kristeva among other ideas, presented here, offer intriguing insights and could be further investigated. The interesting overlapping concepts within this ‘happening’: Leyendo Las Noticias by Marta Minujín, invite to another dialogue at the intersections of ethics, aesthetics, morality, politics, humans and things. I believe this is one of many opportunities to restructure ideas to find valid, global, poetic, imaginative and pluralistic points of view.
Fig. 1. Marta Minujín *Leyendo las noticias*, happening, 1965.
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Courtesy Di Tella Library, Buenos Aires
Cited Works


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Notes


5 In reference to the Argentine women’s being transformed into a commodity, Art historian Hal Foster has argued that “while ‘there were female artists involved in Pop (for example, Pauline Boty, Vija Celmins, Niki de Saint Phalle, Rosalyn Drexler, Lee Lozano)’, they ‘could not act as its principle subjects in large part because they were conscripted as its primary objects, even its primary fetishes’” See Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter and Ruscha*, Princeton 2012, p.14–15. See Kalliopi Minioudaki and Sid Sachs, *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968*, exhibition catalogue, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery of the University of the Arts, Philadelphia 2010; see also Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture*, Cambridge 1997.