

Phantasmal Theatricalities: The Spectre of the Public in the Work of Oscar Masotta and Dora García*

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

This article analyses the situation as an aesthetic category and a way of creating a public environment, relating it with the levels of representation and action. It examines the theatricality of the situation; that is, its specific representation mechanisms and the modes of relationship it poses. This approach is specified, at a historical level, through two different contexts: the reception of the happening in Argentina in the 1960s, promoted by Oscar Masotta, and the revival of the latter's work, by Dora García, through the project *Segunda vez* (2014-2018).

Keywords: situation, criticism of participation, public, performance art, Oscar Masotta, Dora García

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I can see dead people.

Dora García (Springer, 2011: 17)

Preliminary Meditations: The Spectres of Academia

The academic re-reads the summary of the revisions of his article that he has received in an email from the journal asking him to consider the comments and assess the possibility of making the corresponding changes. The reviewers do not agree on their judgments, although both consider that the writing, title, abstract, keywords and references are correct. The problem, according to one of them, is in the exposition, the analyses, the connection with the dossier to which the volume is dedicated and the conclusions. The assessment does not seem very encouraging.

Nevertheless, he thanks the anonymous reviewers for the opportunity for this dialogue, a unique occasion to put into practice the spectral dimension of the public, which is his working hypothesis for the article in question. On the other hand, he recalls the Latin maxim that Marguerite Yourcenar (2016: 283) borrowed from the scientists and thinkers who lived under the constant threat of the stake during the time of the counter-reformation, *non cogitat qui non experitur*. Experimenting involves risk. The risk of thinking, doing and making mistakes, understanding by *thinking* to confront what is still unknown, the exploration of *other* territories. Experiments do not always go well, as those scientists of other times knew.

In this premise of relationship with the unknown lie the less obvious and directed relational modes. These are the modes the author proposes as a necessary plane for the construction of a public space that is uncertain and yet to be created. With this, he responds to the invitation of the symposium that, coincidentally, he himself helped design and that, in the words of Roberto Fratini, sought to analyse, assess and map “the resonance of an expanded concept of interaction — and of an expanded idea of relational

aesthetics — in different areas of current theatre-performative praxis.” The academic wonders if academia could be considered as one more exponent of this expanded sense of the theatre-performative praxis. He also wonders if the form and condition of the works, on the one hand, and the ways of studying them and forming a relationship with them, on the other, should not in some way correspond to each other, affect each other, and contaminate each other.

As a guide on this journey through the expanded scope of the relational-performative, he studies the idea of the *situation*, understood as a unique spatial-temporal position, an aesthetic and critical category that he develops with respect to other better known ones such as representation or performance art. Thus, the academic proposes to add the criticism of the situation to the criticism of representation, which was followed by the performative turn. What has most prevailed of the latter are the suspicions about the discourse of participation, which under its inclusive and democratic guise has become quite misleading. The author recalls the project that he devoted to this topic a few years earlier in collaboration with a large group of artists and academics, whose results also appeared in different monographic publications (Cornago, 2016-2017).

However, now he does not want to overlook his dialogue with those anonymous interlocutors who will be any reader of this text. In the case of text reviewers, they also become central characters in the architecture of academia and its legitimisation mechanisms as a public space. Anyone who is part of this institution has played this role with more or less success, thinks the academic. After reading his article once more, he decides that the best way, perhaps also the riskiest, to respond to the reviewers’ comments is to distance himself from his own character within this academic dramaturgy and apply a complete 180 degree turnaround to the structure of his work and the treatment of its units: he places the case study at the beginning, which had been at the end (the scene of waiting) and closes it with the image of the group of people sitting around a table, invoking the spirit of the public. This scene is linked to the explanation of the theatricality of the situation, which was previously found at the beginning, and will now be the conclusion.

The academic trusts that this reorganisation will help address the points made by the reviewer, although at the same time he suspects that it will not convince him either. At least, he tells himself, he will have tried to take a step in this dance of academic actors who cannot reveal themselves or enter into open discussion. That would violate the principle of objectivity that, according to the institution, is guaranteed behind the anonymity of these agents. Are we to believe that the virtue of academia, like that of justice, is in being blindfolded?

In any case, the author consoles himself, this will serve to clarify, and clarify to himself, the function of the works within his study, not only as an object of analysis but as a place and point of view from which the analysis itself is constructed. This obviously modifies the position of the work in the face of academic criticism. The subject (researcher) - object (research) relationship, which has traditionally served to arrange the position of art within academia,

giving it a vicarious position as an object of theory, is reconsidered within an open and horizontal framework of relationships. The work is recovered as a narrative of an event, hence the narrative or expository tone that the reviewer rightly denounces, in the absence of a more critical perspective. The photo that is recovered from the work becomes part of a montage of ideas, images, artistic settings and theoretical positions. The idea of the situation, the public as a space for unlearning and experience, the criticism of action, the anti-happenings of the Argentinean artist and theorist Oscar Masotta, or their revival by the Spanish artist Dora García, are the pieces in this game of juxtapositions. The critical operation consists of the relationship between the different pieces. Based on these elements, a space for thought, questions and ideas is constructed as if they were images from a fresco. Its objective is not the pieces that form part of it but the object of study of the article and of the symposium itself. In other words, the forms of relationship through artistic devices, concretised in this case in a type of device that, like the writing of the article, gives rise to a situation of indeterminacy.

Following the guidelines of the concept of the situation, this exercise in situated criticism does not close in on itself. Hence another of the flaws detected by the reviewer: the dispersed nature of the conclusions. This is not a conclusive criticism that ends up establishing the limits of a certain territory but rather seeks to open spaces for movement, questioning and thought. It is up to the reader to take control of this last step, which involves the exercise of a criticism whose objective has more to do with sustaining, insisting and sharing some questions about the place of the public and what is public than with responding to them. This, ultimately, must come from practice, beginning with the practice of academic writing itself.

To close these meditations, the academic is left thinking about how not just the sense of the relationships between subject and object, theory and practice, academia and art, and works and environment have been transformed, but the modes of these networks of relationships. At the same time, he also considers how these transformations do not just affect the ways of studying theatre but the world in general, since they respond to a vision in which there are no fixed limits and nothing is completely separate from anything, nor occupies a fixed position. (Here it occurs to him that Giordano Bruno was burned for defending these types of ideas.) He admits that this does not exclude the need for methods, rules, definitions, categories and models, but always in a transitory and contingent way.

This is what he calls *failed criticism*. Failed, not for not knowing how to live up to history, since this is a condition of life, but as a way of giving an account, taking charge and facing this state of overcoming and overflowing with everything that surrounds us. The audience, which is all of us in the end, the ultimate object of this study and one understands of the symposium, is invited here, through this series of theatrical images, to nevertheless take a position in terms of this *situation* that is always, by definition, a situation of knowledge and ignorance; in short, learning and experimentation.

The first photo of this journey features a group of people outdoors, on the side of a mountain. They are waiting for something to happen that they

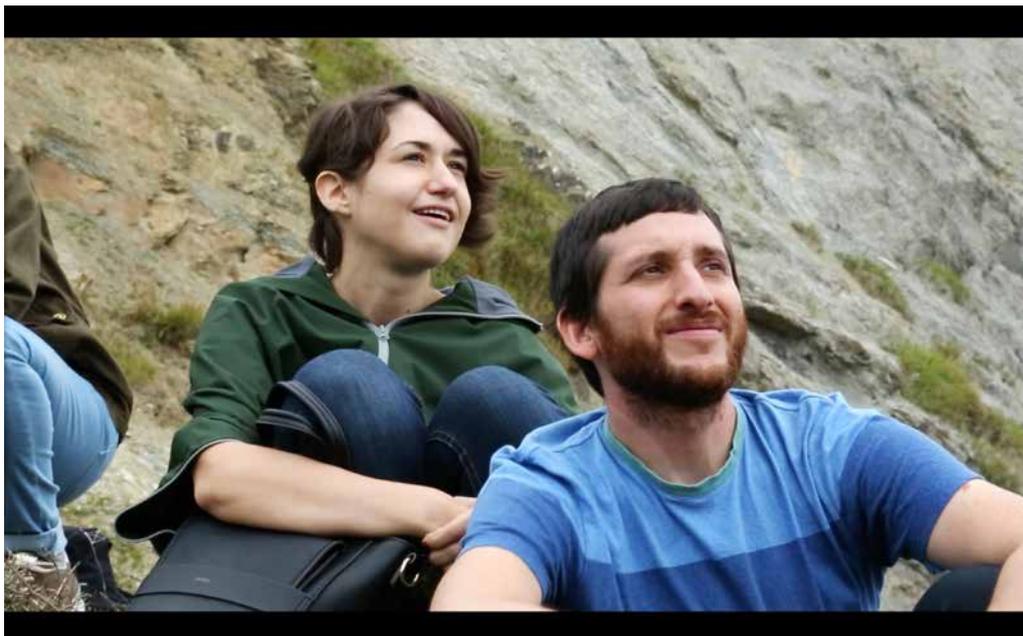
already know is going to happen because they are witnessing the repetition of a work that has already happened. They have also been advised that the scene will be filmed. The difference, in this case, between waiting and pretending to wait is subtle. The audience is part of this group, which is not only made up of spectators. There is also the artist who initiates the action, Dora García; her team; the managers and technicians of the Tabakalera cultural centre in San Sebastian, where the scene is taking place on Saturday 12 September 2015, between 2 pm and 5 pm; as well as the other passers-by and onlookers who, coincidentally, happen by at that moment. Everyone is waiting for something. Although not everyone has the same knowledge of what is going to happen, everyone can access basic information about the event in which they are participating. It is a repetition of Oscar Masotta's work in Buenos Aires in 1966 and that he himself defined in the face of the happening trend, which became the currency of artistic modernity at that time, as an anti-happening. The piece, which we will talk about later, is entitled *El helicóptero*; now what is of interest is simply this moment of waiting. But waiting for what?

This moment of waiting is also a moment of theatre by definition, since everyone is aware that they are once again doing something that has already been done in the past by another group of people. The assumed awareness of the collective fact of repetition returns to the dramaturgy of this situation the theatrical character in its most basic sense, the sense of repetition, of going back to doing what *others* did before. Repetition also conceals the possibility not only of difference but of accident, that something does not turn out as it should; that something fails, that something is not the same as the first time.

It is clear, taking into account the disparity of the contexts between Buenos Aires in the 1960s and San Sebastian more than half a century later, that nothing will be the same. However, at the same time, everything is set to be the same. In that difference lies the possibility of the accident but also of history as a possibility of change. Repeating becomes a way of coming together to remember what we did not experience but could have, the possibility of a common past turned into a desired present.

Due to the way the action is proposed — a characteristic feature of García's work — everything is meticulously prepared to follow a basic script, but at the same time open to interference from the environment. In theatrical terms, what ends up happening moves away from what is planned to happen. Endless small events, attitudes, gestures and glances sneak into the central action. This, in fact, ends up functioning as a layer of registration on the landscape of unnoticed events, which take place before, during and after a disperse and off-centred action, turned into a moment of waiting. The result, filtered by the camera and subsequent editing, can be seen through the final film.

On a ritual level, in which theatre inevitably participates — like, to a different extent, any public setting — moments of waiting are also moments of invocation of something to come. The theatrical image of a group of people waiting, or seemingly waiting, is traversed by a forward gaze: it refers to something already past, which is about to happen again. The invocation of a



Dora García, *El helicóptero*, 2016. <<https://augusteorts.be/catalogue/92/el-helicoptero>>

past which, as Derrida (1993: 19 ff.; ed. 1995) says in *The Spectres of Marx*, is also an invocation of a future and a form of the present.

Ana Longoni (2004; ed. 2017b: 8) uses the image of a spectre that returns “decades after silence and effacement,” multiplying “its ability to provoke and connect distant scenes.” Its objective is to explain the revival of Oscar Masotta’s artistic work in the last two decades, who until then was known mainly for his translations and studies on Lacan.

This image also responds to the play of presences and absences, shadows and reflections, unfolded by Dora García — a visual artist with a strong theoretical and performative influence —, based on the works of Masotta. *Segunda vez* is the title of this multiform project developed between 2014 and 2018, also called by her and her collaborators the “spirit of Masotta”, as if the whole piece were an expanded séance. An idea that ties in with Arendt’s image — which we will examine later — of the public as a table that unites and separates us, and which we have to believe in and depend on, even if we do not see it.

García’s project does not have a merely documentary aim. History repeats itself but with the intention that something happens for the first time, although that first time always ends up being the second. Or, as the subtitle of the project book says, published on the occasion of the Museo Reina Sofía’s retrospective on the artist in 2018, that the second time is always the first. This double nature of repetition and accident, rather than action, is linked to the mixed nature of the situation in terms of its degree of determination and indeterminacy. What is determined by this invocation will now be Masotta’s own work, which is taken literally from the past; the indeterminate, the void in which this repetition is sustained, in the sense that it is not a question of showing anything other than the very fact of repetition. To do again what was done half a century ago, so that a difference arises that is a symptom

of the present: “I believe that what is not there, but whose absence is denounced by all the elements present, is a presence much more powerful (we could say, *the presence of absence*) than any object placed in a given situation” (García, 2005: 41).

Segunda vez, like García’s other great projects, gave rise to an extensive work programme on art, politics and psychoanalysis, a crossover that was synthesised in the figures of metafiction and repetition. The lectures given at the two organised seminars are available on the project website, along with various publications and texts. These materials dialogued with the central axis of the product, formed by the film composed of four sequences and an epilogue. Two correspond respectively to the repetition of *El helicóptero*, of which the situation of waiting forms part, and the repetition of *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen*, Masotta’s other anti-happening. The others are based on the story by Julio Cortázar *Segunda vez*, which gives the project its title, and on the *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*, by Macedonio Fernández. The latter served to contextualise the figure of Masotta and the artistic and political context of the time. An epilogue was added to these four parts, *El mensaje fantasma*, using the same advertising procedure through street signs that had previously been used by the Grupo de Arte de los Medios, of which Masotta was part and which we will discuss below.

The recordings were made in different places and contexts, but both the repetitions and the medium-length films based on works of fiction were made without rehearsals; that is, they were improvised with some basic guidelines and the suggested materials. The fact that they were not previously rehearsed contributes to placing all the work on a threshold of indefiniteness, of *not knowing* and insecurity, where the limits between the pretended and the real are diluted, raising a question about the nature of what is perceived as reality. Fiction texts were reinvented from conversations, encounters, talks or explanations more or less improvised by people from different fields. This is the case of *La Eterna*, which explores psychoanalysis, politics and art in relation to the figure and time of Masotta. In Cortázar’s story, it is a conversation repeated twice: the first as a chance meeting in a waiting room between two young people, which ends up becoming a scene of seduction; and, the second, already inside the room, between a young man and an agent of the state police apparatus.

In the final short film, two people leave another abandoned in the forest, wrapped in a white sheet and completely tied up. This referred to the action projected and imitated at the same time live by a performer at Theatrón, where *El helicóptero*’s parallel event took place. With this closure, another axis of the project was emphasised along with repetition: the denunciation of a void left by that and those who are not there, and who finally justify the repetition: “The origin of this repetition is a desire to recover a memory that has been (slightly) forgotten, the conceptualisms of the south, in exile, on the eve of a political catastrophe (Argentina, 1976-1982)” (García, 2018: 148).

When presented as repetitions, performance art events or simple conversations in order to be recorded, these scenes approach a kind of strange filmed theatre in which silences and dead moments slip through. As in

Masotta's works, a distance is taken from the effect of immediacy of the physical action, to focus on the immediacy of the situation, until it is suspended between the present of the recording and the mirage of that present.

In the repetitions, everything that is crossed is integrated into this theatre in slow motion, which also happened in Masotta's works, although now the type of story, mediated by the camera, has changed substantially. If, at that time, it was being constructed and deconstructed with respect to the trend of the happening, in García's case the spectre of a previous event is invoked; but not to observe it as the remains of history but to use it as a tool, to open a parenthesis in the usual modes that organise political and symbolic theatricality, and the modes of production of the artistic medium. If, in the first case, the audience still had some option of distancing themselves from what they observed, the remains of the happening, in the second, audience and actors, artists and non-artists, past and present, are confused in a common ground where the possibility of distance, criticism and action already falls entirely on the situation whose porous limits threaten to encompass everything.

Undertaking an impossible exercise in historical involution, we would say that the second photo of this journey is a replica of its repetition half a century later. In this new photo, another disperse group of people appears in an outdoor landscape, waiting for something to happen. The difference, in addition to the black and white of the photos that have reached us, is that they no longer know what they are waiting for. History has gone backwards and the awareness of being part of the repetition of a previously fixed script is not yet so clear. Instead, there is a feeling of attending an original event, which is occurring for the first time, a fundamental aspect of the artistic discourse that was emerging around the happening at the time and will be resumed shortly after by performance art. However, even then, Masotta, who had just returned from a study scholarship in the United States to learn about new languages, was aware of the pitfalls of the first time and the discourse of originality intrinsic to the story of artistic/economic modernity. The distance established with the work itself and the invitation that it offers the audience to place themselves at the same distance of doubt about what is happening are at the root of his criticism of the happening and of this type of creation procedure from a situated perspective, which would later be given names such as contextual or site-specific art.

The happening was received in Buenos Aires with the eagerness with which everything new is consumed, making it a fashionable term ascribed to a series of traits that made it easily recognisable despite its ambition to escape labels. The book published by Masotta entitled *Happening*, followed by a question mark, expresses, at the same time, this commitment to the new genre and the doubts and distances. A forward movement that, in turn, describes a diagonal movement, to leave the space of artistic practices in a more open position. In fact, it was calling for other forms of involvement whose development, two years later, would be interventions such as *Tucumán Arde*, with a more direct political reach.

The revival of Oscar Masotta's artistic production must be understood as part of a broader current of interest in spaces that are more difficult to identify, or hybrid practices, which had remained on the margins of the dominant historiography. The Red de Conceptualismos del Sur was created for this purpose. Ana Longoni's edition of Masotta's texts in 2004, *Revolución en el arte*, which includes the historical volume *Happening?*, was a key piece in this process. To this edition we must add the exhibition *Oscar Masotta. La teoría como acción*, in 2017, for which the aforementioned compilation was reissued. Masotta's artistic activity, concentrated in a few years, is well documented and studied. The reason for bringing it into this discussion about the public modes of art and the relational devices is not because of the happening itself but because of the operation of displacement. It is used to open other less directed modes of participation, such as those that would be unfolded in *Tucumán Arde*, and which are the ones that the academic was interested in contributing to this dossier.

Both Masotta and some of his contemporaries — such as Roberto Jacoby, Raúl Escari and Eduardo Costa, who for a few months would form the Grupo de Arte de los Medios de Comunicación (Costa; Escari; Jacoby, 1966) — considered the happening as an already exhausted language, despite its still short history. However, they discovered other types of possibilities, relating to the phantasmal potential of the media and bringing to light the media theatre that orchestrated it: that complex public sphere that surrounds us and in which we are participating even before becoming aware of it. The option, then like now, was not to create a more participatory art but to open spaces of suspension and propose environments from which to take a position in the face of the very fact of participation and regimes of the public.

Initially, Masotta proposed to the Centro de Artes of the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires — a meeting place, at the time, of the most restless artists — an exceptional happening entitled *Sobre happening(s)*. This would consist of a selection of pieces made anew, in whole or in part, by a team of local artists, based on the existing documentation. The selection included Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*; *Un happening* and *Autobody* by Claus Oldenburg; and an untitled happening by Michael Kirby.

Masotta and his contemporaries must have been aware of that confrontation with a history of turning the happening into a museum piece; and of the contradictory nature of making original happenings known, overturning the basic principles of a genre that sought to reaffirm itself in the experience of the moment and, therefore, the impossibility of its repetition. This kind of mini-exhibition of happenings would turn them into a sort of representation of actions that were born in opposition to the idea of simulacrum, betraying the effect of reality and the poetics of the immediacy characteristic of performance art.

With the theatricalisation of performance art, in the case of both Masotta and García, there was a displacement of the focus. That left the audience trapped in a representational device that transformed them into just another actor. The audience not only attend some happenings but at the same time become accomplices in this staging operation. Thus, they are given a

distance of reflection between what they are seeing and the present in which they find themselves.

Thus began a prolonged, dispersed and uncertain time, which is the time of the situation of which the public is a part. They not only participate as witnesses to physical experiences, but are invited to take a position in the face of this effect of authenticity, making visible the artistic institution, the economy of history based on the production of the new and the role they are playing within it. The myth of action, immediate, real and physical, is thus suspended over a kind of void. This void supported the theatrical machinery necessary, as Barthes explained in those same years, to create a new language: “In fact, to found a new language *through and through*, a fourth operation is required: *theatricalization*. What is theatricalization? It is not designing a setting for representation, but unlimiting the language” (Barthes, 1989: 6).

At a time when terms such as *re-enactment* or delegated performance were not yet known, but anticipating those politics of spectatorship (Bishop, 2012: 219 ff.) that were to come, these happenings become living documents exhibited in a museum. Or, using Lacanian terminology — a terrain Masotta was already familiar with — signifiers of works that had already occurred. This places the audience, as explained by Costa and Masotta (2004: 13; ed. 2017), in the position of the archaeologist or the psychoanalyst; that is, faced not with original works but with the remains of something that already happened.

The objective was to unleash the limits of languages, as Barthes says, to direct the gaze not only to those works but to what was in between them and the context of their reception in Buenos Aires. It was about becoming aware of a present situation and moment, unfolding an intermediate plane that would interrupt the inertias produced by trends. Under this theatrical gaze, happenings became an empty instrument, a kind of outer shell to sustain a situation: “Our happenings would be a mediator, like a language, of absent events, now inexistent, past” (Costa; Masotta, 2004; ed. 2017: 164). The aim, they continued, was for the work to be incorporated and circulated through other circuits and times, overflowing the limits of the material object-work: “Again, we were excited by the idea of an artistic activity put in the *media* and not in things, in the information about the events and not in the events” (Costa; Masotta, 2004; ed. 2017: 164).

The open distance between original and copy, which is the distance on which theatricality is built, broadens the field of the gaze. It includes the medium/device that produces the copy; that is, the space itself where the event is occurring, which is also a non-event. The focus of the medium creates that emptying effect on which to found a new language, still unidentified. A language that is open to the outside, which does not close in on itself.

However, General Juan Carlos Onganía’s coup d’état caused this exhibition to be delayed until the end of 1966. In its place, Masotta proposed a seminar that would serve as a preparation — *Acerca (de): Happenings* — in July of the same year. Here, following the established roadmap, he does not present a happening but a media work, *El mensaje fantasma*, an almost didactic illustration of the territory they were exploring.

Both in this work and in *El happening de la participación total* — already carried out by the Grupo de Arte de los Medios de Comunicación, also in 1966 — the dissemination of the piece in the media constitutes the central part of the work. The first case, *El mensaje fantasma*, also revived in *Segunda vez*, is constructed from an advertising poster placed on the street, which announces the day and time when a television station is going to screen the same message from the poster: “This poster will be screened by TV Canal 11 on 20 July”. Previously, Masotta had already reserved two 10-second spots on the aforementioned station, in which the following message would be heard: “This medium announces the appearance of a poster whose text is the one we screen,” accompanied by an image with the text of the poster on a plaque, but in another typeface. The event is the placing of the poster in the street, but this is not finished until it is announced on television. Eventually, the event comes down to being named.

El happening de la participación total anticipated, in the title, the programmatic attempt to end the happening by pushing its possibilities to the limit. The task involved the dissemination of the work itself as if it had taken place, a plan that is finally revealed through the media, which unveils the plot. Again, it is when it is named in the media that the event happens, which is to do something whose only reality is to have been publicly announced.

It was a few months later when Masotta presented his first happening, which he himself would define as anti-happening or meta-happening. Also didactically, in order to provoke discussion, he created a structure that allowed him to play with these two possibilities: immediacy and what he called “discontinuity” in one of the presentations at the July seminar (Masotta, 2004; ed. 2017a). *El helicóptero*, from which we have extracted our scenes of waiting, was *originally* done on 18 October 1966. It consisted of two parts that happened at different points and in parallel. The audience, previously divided into groups, were taken by buses from the Instituto Di Tella: some were heading to a fringe theatre venue located in the basement of a building in the centre of Buenos Aires, Theatrón, and others to the north of Buenos Aires, a residential area along the Río de la Plata waterfront where the old abandoned Anchorena train station is located.

The first group would stay for just under half an hour in an immersive experience, developed in a dark environment, with live rock music. A toilet is screened, in which a character is seen trying to free herself from some bandages, and an actress imitating the gestures of removing the bandages from her body. There are also provocative actions with sexual content; traits that the audience of the time had no difficulty in identifying with the stereotypes of a certain type of happening whose best known exponent was Jean-Jacques Lebel.

Citing this type of happening must be understood as a reaction to the work that the French artist had shown shortly before in Buenos Aires. This had enjoyed enormous repercussions in the media. Masotta (2004, ed. 2017b) responded a week later, in a lecture, distancing himself from that aesthetic, which he qualified as irrational, with liberating pretensions and based on a series of cultural stereotypes. And, finally, at a formal level, due to the



Oscar Masotta, *El helicóptero*, 1967. © Cloe Masotta and Susana Lijtmaer

distribution of space and the use of the stage, it ended up becoming another type of theatre, which he sought to reject. Again, as was anticipated in the previous section, it is the feeling that the action does not arrive, that it failed, which creates the situation.

For their part, the other group, in front of that old train station, next to the north waterfront, facing the Río de la Plata, had little else to do than relax, enjoy the scenery and let time pass. Finally, after almost an hour, the helicopter announced in the title of the work appeared, from which a well-known television actress greeted the group. Five minutes later, the buses arrived with the other group, and they met up again to be taken back to the Instituto Di Tella.

In an analysis of the work a few months later, Masotta (2017b) explained his structuralist approach based on a text by Levi-Strauss. Debroise (2017) takes up this approach to present it as a deconstruction of the happening. In this way, he put it in dialogue with the anthropological perspective that Lebel uses to defend this type of work as a ritual of liberation. Through this structural approach, the meaning of the work would be articulated through a formal system of oppositions between the types of locations and actions of each of the parts: enclosed-outdoors, city-rural environment, downwards-upwards, noise-silence.

Of the two scenarios, it is the second, due to the absence of action, that responds to the format of the situation, and it is also this that Masotta presents as a new type of anti-happening. Becoming aware of a situation implies taking a distance to confront what is happening, but also what is not happening, but could happen. This situation of temporary suspension is projected to another level when it intersects with the one that was taking place at the same time in the other place. Finally, the work is not any of these situations separately, but a third thing, the result of the impossibility of achieving a

reading that gives meaning to everything. The absence of a single story is the accident caused by the situation, constructed at a sensitive level as a moment of dispersion and openness, exchange and circulation.

In *El helicóptero*, as in the media works reviewed, an impression of absence is produced, also fundamental in García's work, in which different types of actors and media are involved. The objective is not to turn this void into an aesthetic object of contemplation but into a sensitive stimulus, to wonder about the possible modes of representation, construction and manipulation of reality; one of whose examples, at that time, was the construction of the happening itself as a story of an artistic modernity promoted by the media.

To escape from the media you have to insist on it even more. This is the message of the media arts. The solution does not mean avoiding it by trying to overcome distances, but by assuming the mediated — but not media — condition of reality and of ourselves as part of it. The theatricality of the situation, which we will see in the next section, refers to this expanded perspective with which it is a matter of reacting to the questions: what is happening, what we are arguing.

The current insistence on practical action can be explained by its function to give these intermediate spaces greater substance. *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen*, Masotta's second and last happening, seems a direct reference to this operation of making the medium more substantial. In this case, the medium is the image, through an exhibitional practice that sends it off in unforeseen directions. Also held at the Instituto Di Tella, at the end of that same year, 1966, it consisted of the exhibition of about twenty people with the appearance of indigents.

The work began with the artist himself addressing the audience. He sat on a sofa, turning his back to them, to explain the situation: he clarified that the work was going to last an hour and that they could leave the room at any time. He explained to them that he had paid the people in front of them, even more than what they initially asked for, although he did not reveal that they were actually movie extras. He also insisted that the normal security conditions in the room were in place, so they should not be worried about accidents. To stress this, some fire extinguishers had been grouped in public view, and he himself emptied the contents of one of them to demonstrate that they worked. Next, the tableau formed by the people arranged in a line facing the audience frontally was lit with an intense light, whose stridency was accentuated by means of loud electronic music.

It is worth highlighting the figure of the substitute, the false representatives, the fakers, as Masotta was nicknamed, according to Luis Ignacio García (2018); or the double, that the anthropologist Isaac Joseph (1984; trans. 2002) defines as the inhabitant of the public space. This element is the actor by definition, also of the (public) situation, a medium in which no one fully believes, even though everyone needs it. False representatives create a sense of emptying that makes the moment stand on its own. The substitute is a non-legitimised actor, he is someone or something that is performing a function that does not correspond to him, he is only a *re-medium* or *re-mediator* for an accidental moment.

When things are no longer supported by their legitimate representatives, reality falters. The problem is that there are no longer legitimate representatives. The originals lose credibility. Under the gaze of that phantasmal and diffuse third eye that is history, the institution or the public medium, we all play a delegated role. The difference with the baroque allegory of the *theatrum mundi* is that now that eye is not the eye of God but the spectre of our own public condition: it is us looking at ourselves.

The public can be defined in opposition to the private or as what is shared. To explain this second meaning, Hannah Arendt (1958: 59 ff.; ed. 2005) uses the image of a group of people sitting around a table, which at a given moment disappears, as if it were a magical effect in a *séance*. Those attending are sitting around an empty centre looking at each other but without that central object that marked the distances at which they should stand. The public, says Arendt, is that imaginary table that we must be constantly defining. And we not only have to create it but we also have to believe in it. The public, like this *séance*, has a spectral dimension, which with the media revolution, the intangible economy and the digital world has become more apparent.

Despite its inclusive ideology, or precisely because of it, the quality of a public space is measured not only by what it includes but above all by its forms of exclusion. They are the excluded and what is left outside that challenge a public space, bringing to light its limits, its theatricality and its forms of production.

The working hypothesis — the academic believes — developed throughout this article is that relational modes acquire greater substance when they promote dialogue, not only with the most visible agents and the most obvious actors, but with those other uncertain or phantasmal presences that are part of ourselves, and not only with them but from them. It is the subject that participates who also assumes his condition, both as a subject in fact and as a subject based on his qualities and forms of presence that are more fragile, less evident or easy to identify.

This spectral condition becomes a political element when it is related to the forms of expropriation of basic human capacities such as the word, the body or space, devoured by the media, politics and speculation, as Agamben has studied (1996; ed. 2001), when analysing the reason for politics through what escapes politics. According to Santos (2011), through the forms of production of absences caused by discourses about science, the economy, progress or race and gender. One of the contributions of art is in celebrating these unlearned modes of construction of the public, unforeseen ways of doing and making ourselves public; in short, converting what is public into an uncertain and pending moment.

The table of the public Arendt refers to can be history, memory, institution, academia, science, art, education, ethics, gender politics, or simply the need to believe in a level of organisation that could be any of the above or a mixture of all of them. This game board symbolises the set of discourses, agents and factors that we have internalised and that determine our behaviours in public, a set of factors that is always greater than what we can identify and control.



Ignacio Tejedor López, *Experimento Philips*, 2017. Hacernos un mundo. Jornadas investigación y creación. Madrid, Teatro Pradillo.

This table also has a strong aesthetic quality in terms of sensitive production. That explains why, by definition, it is also one of the territories of the arts. Art is the medium to activate the powers of the absent, a way of opening gaps and displacing already predetermined relational schemes. Historically, theatre has been the place to explore the ways of organising ourselves as a society. It is not by chance that this area is also a space inhabited from its mythical origins by spectres and phantoms. Today this ability to rethink the modes of the public, implicit in the performative, runs through the entire artistic and cultural panorama.

Masotta's operation involves an exercise in repetition, comparable to what Dora García would carry out half a century later with the artist's works. Although the background horizons on which this operation is drawn are different, the mechanisms of theatricality to make people feel the possibility of what is not, but could be, are comparable. The feeling of being part of a situation that exceeds the knowledge we have of it is common to these works and, in general, to all of García's work.

On the website of the Tabakalera cultural centre, a clarification appears concerning the repetition of *El helicóptero*, that "the well-being of the participants and the safety regulations will be respected at all times." It is, in addition to a nod to Masotta, a storm warning for these spaces of fictions and realities, of substitutes and mediators, in which no one controls everything or knows exactly what is happening. The regimes of exchange between a public space and what remains outside, which can turn it into a porous and changing environment or a rigidly delimited space, are what mark the quality of that space as public and, where appropriate, as a public space of the artistic device that generates it.

Waiting for the helicopter expresses the diffuse temporality of a situation in which the elements that are easier to identify and, therefore, initially more certain (such as the arrival of the helicopter or the actors who act as indigents in *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen*), are mixed with more indefinite, disperse and even confused times, causing an effect of estrangement and suspension. The result is a void, nothing happening, in which, nevertheless, something is felt to be happening, even without knowing exactly what. What is finally being recorded is not Masotta's work or fictional stories but the fact itself of repetition, with the aim of causing a shift in time, modes and identities, from which unexpected forms of participation of our public condition emerge.

The situation and the situated define a work perspective that gained prominence in the humanities throughout the second half of the 20th century. Its interest lies in putting the object of study in relation to both a precise and open context: precise, because it is located in a specific space and time but confronted with the indeterminacy generated by the heterogeneity of circumstances; hence the situation that, as the Royal Spanish Academy dictionary says, includes the "set of factors and circumstances that affect someone or something in a moment" (RAE, 2018). The diversity of these factors, in which biological and environmental circumstances must be included, means that the subject can never have all of them completely under his control, although pretending that control is part of the social game.

The imaginary of the situation is based on the awareness that its agents have to form part of a shared moment. This gives it a theatrical dimension, despite not being constructed in the face of an external gaze. The agents themselves act as actors and audiences of their own situation. This substantially varies the mechanisms of theatricality with respect to the performance staged, against an external gaze, or the action as a form of interruption of that staging.

Something makes us look around, inviting us to become aware of where we are. It is often a feeling of overflow, lack of knowledge of the environment and uncertainty. An unforeseen event puts us on guard: what is happening, where am I? This gaze gives the work a relationship of exteriority, confronting it with an uncertain level of circumstances that overwhelms us. It is a poorly defined idea but its power lies in that indeterminacy. Under the umbrella of the situation, not only the audience becomes visible but also the rest of the elements with capacity for agency, the most obvious but also the least certain.

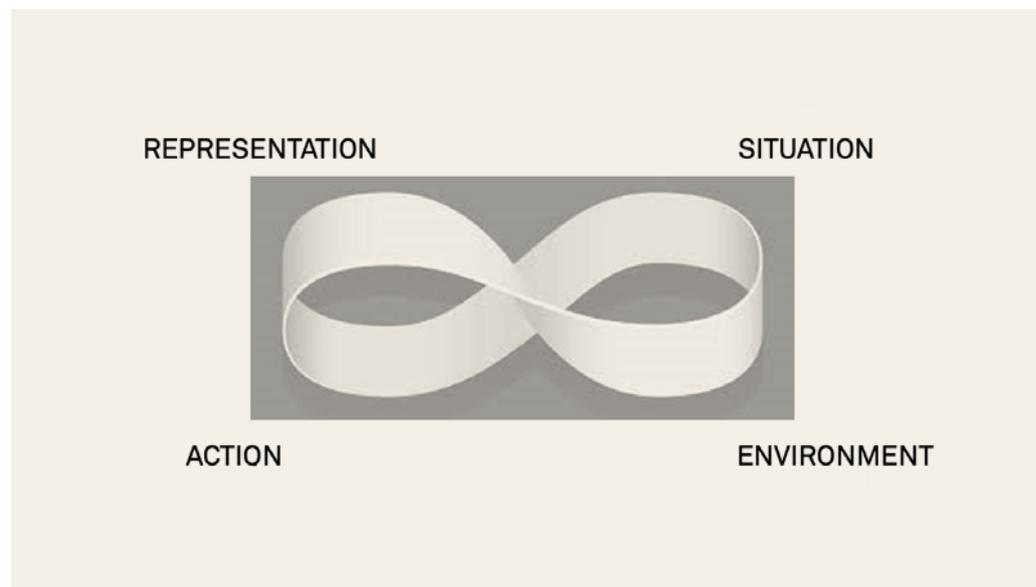
The external gaze on which the edifice of theatricality is built is a third eye, a third instance of character, sustained by the shared consciousness of the public, the consciousness of being seated at that shared table to which Arendt referred. That gaze gives a self-reflective power to the situation, also characteristic of any theatricality mechanism.

This makes it possible to maintain distance faced with this third eye without ceasing to be exposed to it. The outside and the inside stop drawing external and fixed limits. Thus, a moving terrain is created within which distances, complicities, approaches and divergences are armed and disarmed.

There are no longer fixed distances. The space is organised and disorganised according to the movement of the actors, who can potentially be everyone and everything. What has been and what can be, what is present and what only exists as a form of absence, enter into a relationship that questions the stability of the public as an instituted space. That third eye becomes one more circumstance of a representation of which a single or finished story cannot be made, because the situation also includes whoever observes or relates it.

As a form of action, the situation is no longer what the artist does but what he makes happen, an expanded time of imprecise limits that is beyond his control. The sense of the situation depends on the circumstances and variables that concur. History is suspended and, in its place, the situation unfolds like a sensitive plane that mobilises a collective, uncertain and polluting intelligence.

There is the temptation to establish a historical sequence within the narrative of modernity, in which the representation would come first, then the action and finally the situation. It would be consistent with the linear mode of representation of the story, even with the action as a way of interrupting it, but not with the multilinear and suspended perspective of the situation, which does not admit a single story but a more fluid dynamic of relationships. We can express it as follows:



This loop, inspired by Claramonte's (2016) modal aesthetic, in turn links with Morton's (2016; trans. 2019) *dark ecology*. He presents it as the figure that best suits the complexity of this paradox, which consists of confronting us with a multicontextual environment, on a non-human scale in many of its layers, with human instruments. It is the complexity of this fourth node that projects the flow of representation-action-situation senses towards a horizon that surpasses us, understanding the environment in all its diversity of scales from proximity contexts to temporal and material levels such as geological time or the organic time of living systems. The environment is not a single medium but the media in plural and the circumstances that go

through the situation and give it, in terms of its forms of representation, a phantasmal dimension.

If the happening, performance art and action art emerge as a rupture of representation, the situation emerges as a suspended time-space. From there it is feasible to rethink the ways of taking charge of history, representation and the possibilities of action. The fact that the action did not work as expected, being trapped as another form of (anti) representation, is the accident that gives rise to the situation, as would happen in the case of Masotta and other artists, and their treatment of the happening. The situation is not, therefore, the result of an action with a specific beginning and end, but of an accident, an unforeseen event or failure that forces us to stop and look around.

An uncertain negotiation unfolds within the situation between these four levels. The representation-action system of oppositions, linear time of representation versus specific time of action, gives way to a reflective temporality. From this, the question about history and representation can be recovered as an opportunity of what did not happen but could have happened.

History is recovered in potential time, not only from what matters but from what apparently does not matter or becomes less visible, from its silences, absences and lost experiences. As a story to be made, history becomes a power in the present tense. This also points to the present as a possibility of updating the past, from unexpected places and modes. The situation turns the present into an opportunity not for one but infinite stories, depending on the agents and circumstances that affect it.

Final Meditations

The academic wonders if this analysis of the theatricality of the situation, compared to the most common models of theatricality of representation or anti-theatricality of action could serve as a conclusion to the journey presented. Perhaps he intuits that the following considerations do not conform to the academic model of conclusions of a work proposal. In fact, this requires more a practice, a way of doing that is also a way of writing and placing oneself in an environment, rather than a theoretical answer.

Like that invisible table of the common, the situation, the academic believes, hides a secret in which everything and everyone is collaborating, and about which no one has the complete story. It has a conspiratorial side that invites us to seek alliances and to move a little blindly. It is like a game board, a space of loss, but also of desire and risk, of knowledge and ignorance, which demands a certain life strategy. The situation does not end in a single point of view, nor does it remain stable but is the result of conflicting perspectives and positions, which means that it cannot be reduced to a single narrative; the very possibility of the narrative and the different ways of sustaining the representation also depend on that living moment of changing experiences.

Perceiving and thinking in terms of the situation makes us consider each moment as an uncertain landscape of moving elements, of people, things and emotions that are present, but also of others that are absent and that somehow become present.

The question of what is participatory is no longer posed in a single work-audience, active-passive, fiction-reality direction, but rather opens up to different modes and levels. As an artistic activity, the writing/reading of this text and the space in which we find ourselves participates in its public condition and sense of belonging, always uncertain, to an imaginary real community. The focus of the discourse of participation in the figure of the audience leaves equally important agents in the shadow to determine the economy of the public, starting with those who have been excluded from the inclusive ideal of political discourse.

The work-audience, text-reader, academic-non-academic, we-you duality unravels when entering a larger terrain in which, before the audience arrives — or you read this text —, there is already a plane of consistencies and a previous fabric. Although at the moment of its opening, an activity acquires a unique concretion, which is especially evident in the case of the theatre, the consciousness and the politics of the public are not reduced to that moment of staging in a mode of participation, but begin to be defined earlier and continue to transform once the work is finished.

The notion of active spaces should not be understood as spaces that need the participation of the audience to be activated, as if a space were something dead that is activated from the outside. Before the audience arrive, something is already happening. If we give it time to emerge with all its complexity of layers and circumstances, space is revealed as an unstable network of intersections and tensions between past and present, doing and not doing, fiction and reality, of which the public takes part as one more player in a match that has always already begun. The degree of knowledge and ignorance of the territory that is being explored, together with the gaps on which it is built and the displacement effect that it produces, operate as parameters to determine the quality, public and political rather than participatory in a broad sense, of a specific activity.

We are part of a secret history riddled with absences. In fact, it is not one story but many. An uncertain configuration within an infinite network of possibilities shifting between fiction and reality, research and creation, past and present, theory and practice. This being-with, says Derrida (1995) at the beginning of his essay, is the place of ghosts. Science and ghosts seem to belong to opposite worlds. Perhaps academia, thinks the scholar, has trouble admitting the participation of these unlikely entities, even in the case of sciences of a practice as phantasmal as theatre. Perhaps this is the cause of autism that these and other institutions often demonstrate. Although, on the other hand, he knows that the institution is also himself, that he has been part of it for many years. This encourages him to continue insisting on one of the basic questions of his study, not as a closing discussion but as a pause in this montage of scenes of waiting and invocation, of situations and opportunities to rethink and place ourselves before the condition of the public, also in the world of academia:

What happens between two, and between all the “two’s” one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost. So it would be

necessary to learn spirits. Even and especially if this, the spectral, is not. Even and especially if this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, *is never present as such*. The time of the “learning to live,” a time without tutelary present, would amount to this [...]; to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them. No *being-with* the other, no *socius* without this that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with spectres would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations. (Derrida, 1994: xvii-xviii; ed. 1995)



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