

## The Jewish Museum

### *Marta Minujín: Arte! Arte! Arte!*

#### English Audio Guide

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## 100. Introduction

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Welcome to *Marta Minujín: Arte! Arte! Arte!*, the first U.S. survey exhibition of this iconic Argentinian artist. I'm Darsie Alexander, Senior Deputy Director and Susan & Elihu Rose Chief Curator at the Jewish Museum.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** And I'm Rebecca Shaykin, Associate Curator here at the Museum and co-curator on this exhibition.

We are excited to present the work of this innovative artist, whose multifaceted career has spanned six decades and three continents. From her earliest experiments with cardboard and sand, to the development of her signature fluorescent mattress sculptures and psychedelic strip paintings, Minujín is recognized as an incredibly bold and visionary object-maker. But she is equally fluent in ephemeral arts. As an early instigator of happenings, builder of destabilizing environments, and creator of large-scale monuments – all intended to be here and gone in a flash – she is as much attuned to the experience of art as she is to the work itself. For this installation, we worked closely with the artist to select works we felt would provide the best overview of her career, while capturing the rebellious spirit, playfulness, and wit she brings to each new project.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Minujín's story began in 1943 in Buenos Aires, where she was born to a Jewish family on her father's side. Her grandfather, a clothier, descended from a Russian-Jewish family that immigrated to Argentina in the 1890s. Minujín was interested in art from a very young age, and that curiosity led to a strong artistic personality by the time she was in her early twenties. She found and was nurtured by an active community of like-minded avant-garde artists in Buenos Aires. Over the years, she became interested in the potential of art to 'intensify experience,' as she put it. Sometimes this played out in performance works that would create fun, chaotic encounters for participants; other times she would use technology as a kind of feedback loop, where visitors would see themselves anew through photography or video.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Minujín loves to travel and has done so throughout her life. She is particularly fond of New York and made many friends here, including Andy Warhol, Carolee Schneemann, and Sam Hunter, who was director at the Jewish Museum from 1965 to 1968. Her work became more politically minded after she returned to Argentina in the mid-1970s.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Minujín is now in her 80s and she continues to make vital, relevant works for all generations. A social media celebrity with upwards of 250 thousand followers, she is a captivating presence in her signature platinum-blond hair, reflective sunglasses, and colorful jumpsuits, shouting "Arte! Arte! Arte!" to a worldwide audience, ever conscious of the power of creativity to change how we see, interpret, and interact with reality.

**101. Marta Minujín, *Colchón (Mattress)*, 1964, restored in 1985**

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** This is an early work by Marta Minujín. It's one of her iconic mattress sculptures from the early 1960s.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Curator Rebecca Shaykin.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** It's a series of pillow-like forms that have been cobbled together to create this kind of squishy body-like sculpture, you'll note there are several, kind of, limbs dangling down from it. Some of them may look like arms or legs, even have a kind of phallic symbolism to them.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Minujín was living in Paris on a scholarship at the time, so she couldn't afford to spend money on art supplies. So, she improvised. Here's artist Marta Minujín.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** I had no money while I was in Paris, so I would wait until hospitals got rid of the mattresses used by the sick, or when someone died, and I would take them to my workshop and disinfect them.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** In her studio, Minujín worked these mattresses into soft sculptures with various shapes. Curator Darsie Alexander.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** There were a lot of artists, particularly people think of Claes Oldenburg and other artists that were dealing with this so-called phenomenon of soft sculpture. Marta was interested in this material for a very different reason. That is, again, going back to the humanness of the material itself.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** People recognize what mattresses are for. Mattresses can be used for making love, for dying, for being born, for sleeping. Fifty percent of our life is spent on mattresses.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** These are all the realities of the human condition that leave their imprint on this material called the mattress.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Eventually, Minujín started experimenting with bright, colorful patterns as she embraced the pop culture that was taking shape around the world in the early 1960s.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** I was trying to convey a world that was colorful, carefree, fun. And this part of the bed, these fluorescent mattresses also created a kind of restorative reverie, in that everything looked pretty, in shades of turquoise, in this and that... As if you'd fall asleep and dream about beautiful things, and that was a boost of energy for the day.

**102. Marta Minujín, *Sin título (Untitled)*, 1961–62**

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** This piece is a very humble-looking piece.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Curator Darsie Alexander.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** It's brown, it's made out of cardboard. It's collaged together. As you look around the landscape of the exhibition. There are a lot of brightly colored works. Large-scale works. She is not there yet. This is Marta at a very early stage of her career, she's hanging out with an artist named Alberto Greco, who was a legendary, Argentinian artist, older than she was, really infused the landscape of Buenos Aires with an incredible sense of experimentation.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** This piece is an example of Informalism, an art movement that was sweeping across Argentina in the 1960s.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** And part of what Informalism in Argentina was about it was a kind of abstraction, but an abstraction based again, on very humble materials on everyday artifacts. The works were often quite dark. They were sometimes made of heavy materials. So, Marta often used cement and concrete and thick impasto, dark palette, and cardboard, which is ultimately a very expendable, cheap, destructible material.

So, she's playing with this tension between the object as a kind of painting surface and also as a sculptural surface.

She's starting to experiment with this material that can be manipulated, scaled up, and then can eventually be used as a kind of prop or interactive container for the physical body.

**103. Marta Minujín, Panel depicting rugby players, created for *El Batacazo (The Long Shot)*, 1965–66, remade in 2010**

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** This installation is a fragment of what had been a much, much larger piece called *The Long Shot*, which was originally produced at Di Tella in Buenos Aires, and then came to New York to be featured at the Paul Bianchini Gallery in 1966.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Curator Darsie Alexander.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** The neon seems to show two figures, kind of grappling for the ball; it's a kind of a stop-action motion, neon. Here in New York, we think of Times Square, we think of advertising. We think of the commercial sector. And here you have this artist that is playing with these associations.

And she's kind of done it in this freeze-frame way. You get the sense looking at this piece that these figures are in motion, they're passing a ball. One is kicking, one is grabbing... And she loved this idea of competition, she loved spectacle, but she also loved the theme of bodies being pushed to their max.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Minujín is drawn to moments that intensify people's senses and experiences and she recreates those moments in her art.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Often in Marta's early work in particular, the idea of creating complicated, sometimes awkwardly funny, sometimes destabilizing, sometimes just blatantly chaotic experiences for participants was very much a part of what she was allowing herself to do, really giving over the power of the experience to the participants while orchestrating an experience that could be very bizarre, sometimes confrontational, often chaotic, again to sort of intensify, to draw out extreme feelings, extreme emotions.

The other reason that this piece was so important is that it was imported to New York. It was only really on view for a very short period of time. It closed after a few days, but it did attract the New York art world. So, she was really starting to make a name for herself not just in Buenos Aires, but here in New York.

**104. Marta Minujín with Andy Warhol, *El pago de la deuda externa argentina con maíz, "el oro latinoamericano"* (Paying Off the Argentine Foreign Debt with Corn, "the Latin American Gold"), 1985**

**DARISE ALEXANDER:** This performance work by Marta Minujín with Andy Warhol is captured in this series of photographs. Curator Rebecca Shaykin.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** The work consisted of the two artists sitting back-to-back, in chairs on a pile of corn.

They went through the process of Marta scooping up a handful of corn and ceremoniously handing it to Andy Warhol as if it were payment for her country's debt.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** Argentina's always been burdened with foreign debt. But then I started thinking, "this country's fed the entire world by now," because during World War II, Argentine ships would sail out laden with seeds and corn for people to make bread and everything. So many ships sailed out, in fact, that their lives were extended by what they received from Argentina. So, for me, the dollar debt had already been settled.

I wanted to be done with the subject and figured I'd pay Andy Warhol. He was a friend of mine. So, I paid off Argentina's foreign debt to him in Latin American gold—corn. That was the idea behind this piece. Now, many issues still remain around the dollar, but it's as though I've paid off this debt. For me, it's settled. Even for Argentina it's settled—it has been for many years now.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** One of the things I love about this work is the way that both of their very iconic kind of artist personas are on display here. You know, Andy Warhol was very famous for his kind of, blasé stare and silver mop of hair.

And Marta very similarly had cultivated a very specific look and image of herself as an artist. Here she is dressed head to toe in black, with her signature sunglasses and her platinum blonde bangs, in some ways actually very similar to Andy Warhol's look.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** This work is operating on a lot of different levels. Warhol's so deadpan and Marta's kind of got a sly smile and she's turning and looking at him and handing him this corn and he looks a little perplexed. But then when you start to drill into it a little more, she's dealing with a very real condition which is a lot of economic instability that had a huge impact on artists.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Although the two artists had come up in the same generation, Warhol benefitted from North American wealth and the robust art market in New York City. He'd been selling his work since the 1960s, while Minujín didn't sell any work until 1980.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** In fact, Warhol, as they were coming off of this project, he said, "Marta, you're so talented, you could be a millionaire". And she said, "Yeah, I could be, but I live in Argentina".

**105. Marta Minujín, *Congelación a lo largo (Autorretrato de espaldas) (Long-Term Freeze [Self-Portrait with Back Turned])*, 1975, from the series *Frozen Sex*, 1973–75**

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** This painting is a self-portrait of her lying down reclining, and you see her from the back. It's a nude self-portrait, and it is the culminating image of a series that she did in the early 1970s called *Frozen Sex*.

This is a body of work that she produced when she was living in a suburb of Washington, DC, possibly some of the most provocative art she's made over the course of her career. *Frozen Sex* is a series of extremely bold, very graphic depictions of genitalia and sex acts. It's also been highly abstracted. They're quite beautiful to look at. She uses a very restricted palette of pinks and reds and purples that she has said are also influenced by her experience of taking psychedelic drugs.

This series of work has a very different feel from anything else that she's done, but the fascination with the body and with sex, is readily apparent in her work right from the beginning.

I think what's important about this work, is just how incredibly groundbreaking it was for a woman, especially in this time, to be making work like this.

The series started in 1973, and this is around the time that many feminist artists working in the United States, were really beginning to push the boundaries of what was considered acceptable for women artists to create.

Marta's paintings from this series were shown in Washington, DC when they were made. And she conceived of a kind of performance for the opening event. She asked everybody who attended the event to dress in pink and they were served pink champagne, there was a strip tease that was performed for the audience there and Marta herself showed up in a silver jumpsuit looking incredibly space-age and futuristic. So, there was almost this feeling of the eroticism of the paintings coming off the walls and being present in this space with them.

She says the people who attended were really scandalized, but she loved that. She just, lived for that, you know, kind of shaking people out of their typical routines and upending social mores and, codes.

**106. Marta Minujín, *El Partenón de libros (The Parthenon of Books)*, Buenos Aires, 1983**

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** The Parthenon of Books was a massive replica of the original Parthenon in Greece, a real symbol of democracy that she recreated with tubular structures and then covered in thousands and thousands of books that had been banned under the military dictatorship.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** In 1983, Argentina's dictatorship fell, marking the end of a horrific period in the country's history. Here's artist Marta Minujín.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** It was the most atrocious dictatorship in Argentina's history: 30,000 people were killed, tortured, kidnapped—all sorts of things. Films were censored, books were banned—even first or second grade reading books. The Little Prince, for instance, was banned.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** When the military group that had taken control of Argentina by force was finally overthrown, Minujín was determined to create a monumental artwork—a revolutionary work—that would not only symbolize the movement of the country to free itself and enter a new period of democracy but would help facilitate that process.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** It was a miracle because I started to build this on the busiest street in Buenos Aires, almost without permission. Then people began donating books to me, and all the publishers who kept their books under wraps also gave them to me, or else they could be killed for having them. I managed to collect 30,000 books, which people volunteered to hang up. They came to the city and put it all together, simply out of a love for life.

About five days later, they came back to take away all the books that had been banned.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** To be able to create a work that would speak to the wrongs of the political moment, that is so generous and giving, was a real cause for people to come together in celebration.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** In 2017, Minujín recreated *Parthenon of Books*, this time in Kassel, Germany. She built it on a site called Friedrichsplatz, where in 1933 the Nazi party had burned thousands of banned books, largely by Jewish authors. Once again, Minujín's *Parthenon* helped bring about a sense of collective healing. This time, she brought together books that had been banned throughout history, all over the world, calling attention to the dangers of fascism. By putting these titles back into circulation, Minujín gave a new generation an appreciation for access to knowledge without fear of persecution.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** Art protects you and saves you. Art saves you from everything.

**107. Marta Minujín, *Frac-asado (Loser / Burnt Suit)*, 1975**

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Now, when you look at this work, it is really unlike any of the other pieces that you've seen in the exhibition so far. It's this bedraggled, torn, slightly ugly tuxedo in shreds hanging off a hanger mounted on a base that looks like it's filled with coal. And I think in a way that's how she described the feeling that she got when she came back to Argentina after having been away so long.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Minujín returned to Buenos Aires from the United States in the mid-1970s. In 1976, a brutal military dictatorship took over Argentina's government.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** When Marta came back, she was very depressed by what she saw. Things were not good. She felt that people were very fragmented. The economy was very unstable.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** The dictatorship was hostile toward artists and others. Minujín sought a humorous response to them and to the social fragmentation she saw around her.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** And so, she develops this idea of the *Academy of Failure*, and she actually creates a work of which this object, this burnt suit, was a part. She wanted to take this notion of failure and kind of turn it inside out.

Because failure in and of itself, it's not an end. She saw it as something that could be kind of a beginning, that in a state of failure, you are in a state of vulnerability. And that vulnerability can lead to a kind of openness about the future.

And so, she took this symbol, 'frac-asado' it means both kind of burned suit, but it's also another way of phrasing the state of being unsuccessful. So, she's, through this object and all of the works and the performances and installations that she had around it in the so-called *Academy of Failure*, she really started to investigate again the possibilities of where failure could lead.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** During this period, Minujín created artworks that were interrogating the power structures that had been erected.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** And she invited audiences and participants to think of themselves in a language of failure. Not to be shamed around it, but here are the different ways in which one can identify failure. And how are those ways interpreted and how can they reshape our own individual trajectories?

**108. Marta Minujín, *Pandemia (Pandemic)*, 2020-21**

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** This one's dark. All my works have always been multicolored, but I did this one in black and white because it was an awful time.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Minujín started creating *Pandemia* at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** This piece is made of fabric strips painted gray, black, and white, and glued together one by one. There are 27,900 strips in total. We spent nine months in lockdown. I used to sneak in here because the police could arrest you for being outside. I had people painting the fabric, which was then cut into strips and glued onto the canvas. I would spend five or six hours a day, like I do now, gluing one strip in place, then another, and then another. I enjoyed it, I find it relaxing.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** The popular understanding of Marta is again, this like outward facing celebrity, and she is, she is, she is. But even though she has this really big, big, big, big, big personality she likes to work quietly and alone. When you look at one of these canvases, just remember it probably took her thousands of hours to make this piece. And probably she did most of it by herself listening to the radio.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Minujín transcribed phrases she heard onto the back of this work, capturing the pandemic as it spread across the globe. Again, she turned to art for both refuge and response.

**MARTA MINUJÍN:** Art takes you to an entirely different world. I believe art goes beyond everything, it's a higher universe that protects you. So, as I was making it, the piece morphed into a work of magic.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** Minujín's process of creating work about the pandemic as it was unfolding infused the pieces with the unusual tenor of the time. Curator Rebecca Shaykin.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** With these collaged and accumulated strips, the surfaces of them can look a little bit like television static or pixelated images. So, looking at a piece like this, like it's an image that's trying to register or a screen that's stuck between the stations to me, really, really calls to mind that kind of liminality of the early pandemic.

109. **Marta Minujín, *Soliloquio de emociones encontradas (Soliloquy of Mixed Emotions)*, 2011**

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** This is a monumental canvas.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** Curator Darsie Alexander.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** It is an all-over painting filled with thousands of little strips of paintings that have been cut up and layered onto this canvas. So, she's dealing with much the same visual vocabulary as those very early striped mattresses where she starts to paint them very fluorescent colors in the mid-1960s.

But here the effect is this jostling cacophony of fields of color, of black and red and bright, luminous green kind of jostling across the surface of the material.

**REBECCA SHAYKIN:** They really vibrate in front of your eyes and, and make you really look all over. They certainly have a connection both to her interest in kind of psychedelia and the effects of hallucinogens on one's vision.

But also, just in their sheer size and scale, there's a kind of immersive quality to them too. So, there is almost an experiential aspect to this work as well, even though it is more or less just a painting on the wall.

**DARSIE ALEXANDER:** The work is an extension of her presence and her energy. If you were to put Marta in front of this giant canvas with all of these undulating colors and this, chaotic vibe, they'd be the same. That is her.

She's got some great pictures of herself and her father walking around in pin-striped suits in the '70s, in Buenos Aires. She makes these amazing jumpsuits that are part of her wardrobe that actually look remarkably like this canvas. Like this is her brand and it's the brand that goes through the work and through what she wears. And yet it's in discourse with art.

Her brand is her art. And her art is who she is, and there's no separation.