

Inés Katzenstein lecture (28:04)

00:03 Thank you so much, Tomás. As a student of the plastic arts and coming from mixed media, the history of art of the era of the 60s has given me exhibitions such as *Imagen de Caracas*, the biggest multimedia show of the time, which brought together artists of many different tendencies and created debates through the beginnings of the 70s, creating paths toward a new space in the art world. Now we turn to Argentina and it gives me great pleasure to introduce

00:30 - curator Inés Katzenstein. **(00:45) IK:** Hello to all.

01:00 - I was invited to speak about Jorge Romero Brest, the director of the Instituto Di Tella in Argentina in the 1970s, because in 2009 I founded and have since directed a small art school that operates within Universidad Di Tella; this is to say I have been at the front of what should come to be the first resurrection of this celebrated institute. But here I won't speak of how we think and work today with this legacy, that is as important symbolically as it is metaphorically

01:30 - for us. I instead will speak about that time, about Jorge Romero Brest, who was the engine, from Di Tella, driving one of the most intense episodes of the history of art of that decade, and about how he, whose training was with the acutely intellectual modernists, was in dialog during the 70s with the drastic mutations and conflicts that arose and that he encouraged with a

02:00 - will to question that is so unusual in the current art establishment, and with a lucidity for reading the future of art that had only been read as audacity, and that today I'd like to read as anticipation. Jorge Romero Brest was a central operator in Argentine art since the 40s, when he began writing art criticism, until the start of the 70s, when we find him proclaiming aloud

02:30 - that art exhibitions are obsolete. In the interim, the trajectory of Romero Brest was intense and successful. He had a brilliant career as a juror of great international prizes. He directed the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Argentina from 1955 to 1963 and was professor of some of the fundamental figures of the thinking and management of postwar Latin American art, such as Martha Traba, Damián Bayón and, essential for Venezuela,

03:00 - Clara Diamant de Sujo, who throughout her life declared herself indebted to the teaching and contacts she received from Romero, above all her contact with Lucio Fontana, through whom she led the Du Champ exhibition in Caracas. Committed to promoting what he called the vital character of culture against the professorial culture, he was an extremely dynamic character, not only for the educational, editorial and expositive projects he initiated,

03:30 - but because he always wanted to be connected with what was new, and this decision led him to transit dramatic changes of position, or what he called, in reference to the eyes, cataract operations that allowed him to see and tune himself to the new forms of art. For a partly Venezuelan example, from the questioning nature of Romero Brest, I brought to read to you a few excerpts from a letter he wrote in 1959

04:00 - about the celebrated (but never built) building by Oscar Niemeyer for the Museo de Arte Moderno de Caracas. The letter is addressed to Inocente Palacios, a collector and president of the Colinas de Bello Monte housing development, and it says, I quote: "This building, which is projected to be the Museo de Arte Moderno de Caracas, could be sensational, I don't deny it, as much for its technical daring as for the civil courage that

04:30 - building it implies. The problem I find often in the best South American architects, particularly the Brazilians, Mexicans and Venezuelans, comes precisely from this investment in value, as if they built more for their own personal recognition than to attend to the communities' needs." Then he says: "In summary, dear friend, more than encouraging you to think about the project of the building, I'd like you and your friends to think about the character that the museum should have.

05:00 - About what local and national needs it needs to fill, about what kind of cultural dissemination. Because the building's form cannot be but the result of this idea that you yourselves have proposed. The word *museum* defines very little. What's important is why a museum is created, and as it is a museum of modern art to be created in our time, it seems to me there is an obligation to review previous ideas.

05:30 - Will this be a museum just for conservation, like those of the past century? Or is it advisable that its character be more that of a club than a museum? Wouldn't it have to be an animated place where you go a hundred times a year, not just to look at the works but also to exchange opinions and have discussions? In my judgment, for example, a great hall where you can smoke and have coffee or drinks is essential, because in that way the museum can transform itself into a place of gathering, into a true living center of local creation."

06:00 - end quote. The text, as we see, makes manifest the complexity of Romero's ideology. In what concerns architecture, it is tied to functionalist, anti-expressive and anti-symbolic principles; in what concerns the conception of a museum, it is open to the uncertainties of the new, anticipating even positions on the use and meaning of cultural spaces that have only recently, thirty years later, gained strength publicly with the discursive turn in contemporary art.

06:30 - today we will concentrate on the labor of Romero Brest during the decade of the 60s, because that is when he became director of the Centro de Artes Visuales of the Instituto Di Tella, the interdisciplinary center that in its few years of existence would transform into what was called the most influential and polemic institutionalized

underground in postwar Argentine art history, and where artists such as León Ferrari, David Lamelas,

07:00 - Roberto Jacoby and Marta Minujín, among others, made their first works. And because the 60s were also the period during which the ideas of modern art that Romero Brest had constructed through thirty years of lectures, of exhibits and classes suffered a dramatic reevaluation. The Di Tella Institute had centers for visual arts and theater and an experimental music school for students from all of

07:30 – Latin America, and from the beginning of the decade it served as the undeniable heart of the Argentine art scene. From there, where he directed the visual art center, Romero Brest made one of his main objectives to position Argentine art in a relationship to international art that was more attuned and had fewer complexes. For this purpose he selected jurists for the Premios Internacionales Di Tella from critics of the stature of Pierre Restany,

08:00 - Clement Greenberg, Willem Sandberg and Giulio Carlo Argan, who helped him to show in Buenos Aires foundational works by extremely young artists like Lygia Clark, Robert Rauschenberg, Takis, Jasper Jones, James Rosenquist, Morris and Sol Lewitt, among others, and to promote shows of Argentine art in the United States, such as *Beyond Geometry* and *New Art from Argentina*. All this would earn him strong criticism from points of view less aligned with internationalism,

08:30 - for example, from Marta Traba. In general terms, Romero Brest balanced his administration combining retrospectives of renowned artists with projects whose formats and procedures were new, and even scandalous, for example the projects of Marta Minujín, who while at Di Tella made some of her most overwhelming installations and happenings.

09:00 - Despite the permanent attacks from the conservative press and the dilemmas that Romero Brest himself felt with respect to the value of new art, which at times he did not entirely comprehend, his support was sustained for the works that were beginning a process of mutation and dematerialization. And this support led him to effect changes to his initial plans for the Institute, to the extent that, as we'll see, he proposed removing the exhibit halls completely. I'll tell you how this process came about.

09:30 - The Instituto Di Tella had established two annual prizes: the international prize, for which he convened the stellar jurors I mentioned, and a national prize. After five editions of this national prize, in 1967, pressured by artists who felt that the "prize" format concentrated the totality of its resources for a winner who was ultimately debatable, and by his own consciousness that the most challenging works of the moment

10:00 - demanded new forms of production and of conceptualization, Romero Brest decided to divide the entire budget of the prize among a selection of 12 participants, with no winner, and rebaptize the national prizes as “Experiencias,” (experiences) a term that, in those psychedelic times, began to have fundamental importance. We could look at, for example, the title of Jimmy Hendrix’s 1968 album *Experience*. As we’ll see in examples,

10:30 - the precision of this curatorial transformation—from prize to scheme for commissioned works—raised the production resources for each of the invited artists, stimulated the production of works conceived in relation to the specific space, and even more fundamentally, dismantled the idea that a work of art had to be a closed, portable object with defined conceptual borders and an impact that prioritized aesthetics. We’ll see

11:00 - some of the pieces from the 1967 Experiencias Visuales that in some form was one of the first exhibitions of conceptualism on Argentina. Let’s see, this is the exhibit plan; *Situación de Tiempo* by David Lamelas, with 17 Siam Di Tella-brand televisions

11:30 - broadcasting static; *Las Estrellas Negras* by pop artist Edgardo Giménez; an analysis and image of the exhibit hall of Ricardo Carreira; a work of the signals of fashion by the duo Cancela-Mesejean and an installation film *Sesenta*

12:00 - *metros cuadrados y su información* by Oscar Bony. This is how Romero thought of the new manifestations that participated in the Experiencias; it is, he said, as if they wanted to bring art closer to life—the greatest desire of artists of all the ages—overcoming the intermediary of symbolic forms; they are not static artworks, closed and definitive, but projects of dynamic creation to be

12:30 - contemplated. With the situation presented as such, he wrote, artistic creation becomes freer and points more directly to the freedom of those who live it. After this first edition, assuming now that visibility was no longer a central element of this new art, Romero led Experiencia 68 and Experiencia 69 with no visuals. These exhibitions were

13:00 - conceived to give space to that which was beginning to be produced by the most experimental artists, something that had not yet taken form or received a clear category but that Romero believed would approach an uncertain and exciting threshold for art, perhaps its end, yes, but an end that he seemed to understand less as a moment of going mute than as a transformation into something unexpected, probably contrary to all that he had preached but that as such was part of an irreversible process,

13:30 - worth passing through and analyzing. In a dramatic and perhaps paradoxical way, the case of Experiencia 68 is important not only for its curatorial structure but for the fact that this show is transformed into the stage for a series of sudden appearances that, as I will explain, marked an unprecedented fissure between artists and institution. The political situation was tense. In 1966

14:00 - in Argentina a military dictator of ultra-Catholic ideology had assumed power and put into practice a regimen of persecution against all behaviors considered deviant, including cutting short the hippies long hair, raiding motels, and culminating in a violent attack against the autonomy of the university that is known as the Noche de los Bastones Largos on July 29, 1966, when the police used force to dislodge five departments of the University of

14:30 - Buenos Aires for their opposition to the military government's decision to intervene in the universities and annul their systems of government. This event initiated the emigration of hundreds of scientists and academics. In 1968, with the death of Che Guevara, the climate of discontent had sharpened and the atmosphere of political mobilization had deepened. There is a work, or better said, a gesture, that calls Experiencia

15:00 – 68, even before its opening, as a conflictive exhibition. One of the invited artists, Pablo Suárez, decided not to produce his original project and instead wrote to Romero Brest a letter explaining his motives for the change in direction: to give the letter itself value as a work of art and distribute it to the public at the entrance of the show. In the letter, Pablo Suárez signals: "I believe that the political and social situation

15:30 - of the country of origin is changing. Up to now I could argue the action developed by the Instituto, accept it or judge it. But today what I don't accept is that the Institute that represents cultural centralization, institutionalization, the impossibility of valuing things in the moment that they influence the medium, because the institution only wants to allow entry to already prestigious projects, which it utilizes when they have lost currency or are unarguable given the grade of professionalism

16:00 - of those that produce them; that is to say, it utilizes them without any risk at all. These four walls enclose the secret to transforming all that is within them into art, and art is not dangerous, those who want to be understood in some way, say it to the streets." The show opens, then, in a strange climate. To give a general impression of the kind of works presented at Experiencia 68,

16:30 - we could say that it opened two large groups. Those works that used languages that at the moment were called primary structures, like the works of Antonio Trota and David Lamelas, and those of a more experiential nature, that is to say, that implicated an kind of relational or connective action on the part of the spectator, like the works of Roberto Jacoby and Oscar Bony, among others.

17:00 - Of this last group, there are some who, in a significant way, echo the dissident attitude of Pablo Suárez, as for example *Mensaje en el Di Tella*, a work by Jacoby that included a Telex connected to the France Press agency that printed in real time the

explosive news items arriving from France in May, and a flyer or text titled "Mensaje en el Di Tella" that said the following: "Vanguard

17:30 - is the movement of thought that permanently denies art and permanently affirms history. All the phenomena of social life have become aesthetic material: fashion, industry and technology, mass media communications, etc." And it proclaimed: "Artistic contemplation is over because the aesthetic has dissolved into social life." Let's hang on to that last phrase by Jacoby

18:00 - as it provides something key just a little ahead in this presentation. The other work that displaced the focus of attention from aesthetic situations, in this case placing it on sociological research, was the polemic and today celebrated *Familia obrera* by Oscar Bony, that presented a proletariat father with his wife and son, exhibited in the middle of the hall, sitting on a pedestal next to recorded sound of the daily activities of the family's home. In this

18:30 - work, Bony puts on stage two pillars of Western and Christian society: work and family, monumentalizing them and simultaneously submitting them to the humiliation of the gaze of the other. But curiously, the work that really lit the flame of scandal was not Bony's with its sociological violence, nor the utopic-messianic ideas of Jacoby, nor the institutional attacks of the letter by

19:00 - Suárez, but a work that in the beginning had been proposed as an innocent exercise of architecture and semiotics. This is *El baño* by Roberto Platé, a blank, empty compartmentalized space, as if it contained two rows of bathrooms for the public to access. The walls of the work, in their vacant state, were written on by the public, who graffitied them as if they were a public bathroom, including sexual drawings and

19:30 - attacks on the government, which drew an inspection one week after the opening, resulting in a juridical closure. Eight days after the closure of Platé's work, the other participants in the Experiencias, in solidarity with the artist and in protest of the installing of the moralist police state, took their works out into the street and, at the door of the Instituto Di Tella, they destroyed them.

20:00 - Far from being intimidated, Romero Brest came out to announce, with near euphoria, that "were it not for these Experiencias, few would have comprehended the crossroads at which these artists find themselves, still making works, these objects with which the world has been represented for millennia and that now lack epistemological justification. I do not risk much by prophesying that the blow delivered by this Experiences to standard artistic creation

20:30 - is a mortal one." He was referring to a process that had been occurring and that tended to dematerialize an autonomous work of art but that now also manifestly impugned the institution of the museum. He quickly understood that the fluid and

reciprocally legitimizing relationship between artists and institutions that had accompanied them was now definitively broken. In spite of the

21:00 - outcome of Experiencia 68, one year later Romero pushed forward what would be the last edition of the Experiencias, with a few very good works like *Las Sombras Falsas* by Liliana Porter, the contemporary colonial art poster and work of postal art by Luis Camnitzer, or the closed-circuit experiences by Grupo Frontera, but it had an air of the ending of a cycle.

21:30 - Romero said, the experiences of 1969 were lacking, that the “wonderboys” had disappeared. The artistic-political crisis that I’ve just told you about coincided with a major financial crisis at the Instituto, given that the factory on whose profits it operated was in bankruptcy. The Di Tella family asked the directors of the three centers to reduce expenses,

22:00 - and this petition produced a radical proposal from Romero Brest, which, as we’ll see, without considering the consequences, opened a path for the definitive closing of the space. Romero wrote this: “a conservative attitude would lead to maintaining the galleries open on Calle Florida, there could always be exhibitions of paintings, sculptures, objects of some interest. But still, I must note that on one hand, this interest is relative, as the

22:30 - creative vein in the field of representation and exhibition has worn out.” Facing what he sees as the expressive weakness of exhibition, Romero discards the idea of continuing with the Experiencias, even though they were the most interesting manifestation for their destructive effects. For him, works of art propelled by experimentation and debilitated by public questioning were destined to disappear and, as a consequence, exhibit halls

23:00 - would cease to be the ideal space for the functioning of art. Going back to the image of the museum as a space for conversation he drew for Inocente Palacios when writing her about the Museo de Caracas, ten years later he stated: “the only thing left is dialog with young people.” During 1969, Romero sketched out various proposals to replace the Centro de Artes Visuales. First, he proposed to transform it into a television studio

23:30 - directed by artists. Then, he proposed to transform it into what he called a center for art for consumption, really, a store. His third and last project, before he would definitely close the centers, proposed a total integration of languages, from theater to music to visual arts and communication media. The cultural and political climate grew more and more complicated and between the police persecution

24:00 - and the ethical questioning of the artists themselves of the meaning of continuing to produce art works or contribute to a revolutionary process that felt increasingly urgent. At the end of the decade, some of the most outstanding artists from the Di Tella scene

emigrated to different cities in Europe or provisionally abandoned their artistic practices. In this history, Experiencia 68 was the most unusual battle, the most difficult-to-cure fracture between

24:30 - experimentation and institution. To finish, during the Di Tella years, Romero Brest had donated his personal library to the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, to make room in his house for the radical pop decoration of the artist Edgardo Giménez, who he had also left to stay in his weekend home, a kind of porto-postmodern pop fantasy

25:00 - in the suburbs of the city. The Di Tella closed its doors at the beginning of 1970 and that same year cierra Romero, together with Edgardo Giménez, independently opened what had been the second of the proposals he made to the authorities of the Instituto: Fuera de Caja, a store that produced and sold art for to be consumed, designed by artists. Romero wrote:

25:30 - "In May of 68, I proposed to Guido Di Tella the need to made the Institute a kind of business. It was evident that artists from all over the world evolved into the making of objects for consumption. Now that this center, Fuera de Caja, is a reality that art for consumption exists, they are afraid we'll throw out paintings." The design store

26:00 - was an effort to bring together all the art that comes near designed objectuality, mundane and usable, and to repatriate certain artists who had worked outside of Argentina, but essentially it proposed a fictional scenario, in Romero's words, the future aesthetic. When, in 1969, Romero Brest proclaimed that artistic things become industrial and the industrial artistic, he was predicting

26:30 a world that today, 40 years later, seems completely familiar to us, a world that Gilles Lipovetsky describes as artistic capitalism, a world as fascinating as terrifying in which there is less art and more market, because the art appears associated and mixed with the logic of what's commercial, what's useful and what's entertaining. With Fuera de Caja, Romero turned his back on political art,

27:00 - attacked the autonomy of works and anticipated, with Edgardo Giménez, the current age of design and hyperconsumerism. With Fuera de Caja, it was as if Romero Brest had interpreted that phrase by Roberto Jacoby, you remember, "Artistic contemplation is over because the aesthetic has dissolved into social life" in the most sophisticated manner, but also the most critical and capitalist. I don't need to stay that the

27:30 venture was a round commercial failure, and worse, it was only read *a posteriori* as a post-Bauhaus delirium, belated and classist, rather than as a new polemic initiative of anticipation from Romero Brest, who was devoted to what art and history were becoming. Many thanks.