



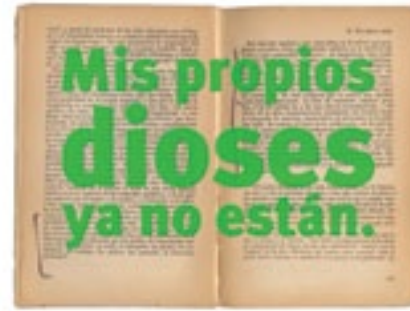
Roberto Jacoby's 1968: *el culo te abrocho*
by Juli Carson

*For the signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness, being by nature a symbol only of an absence. Which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be or not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be and not be where it is, wherever it goes.*¹ – Jacques Lacan

On the subject of global Conceptualism, two primal scenes come to mind between which a "purloined letter" under the signature of "Dematerialism" circulates. It's a letter that now returns – as if by chance – under the signature of Roberto Jacoby.

In 1967, the Argentine critic Oscar Masotta, a close friend of Jacoby's, delivered a lecture at the Instituto di Tella in Buenos Aires: "After Pop We Dematerialize." He opened by citing the Soviet avant-gardist El Lissitzky: "The idea that moves the masses today is materialism: however, it is dematerialization that characterizes the times." Lissitzky's argument boiled down to the idea that "as correspondence grows, so the number of letters, the quantity of writing paper, the mass of material of supply grow until they are relieved by the radio. Matter diminishes, we dematerialize, sluggish masses of matter are replaced by liberated energy."² The dilemma for revolutionaries in the 20s had been how to make books after the advent of radio. That is, how could the revolution harness the liberated energy *within* the material of a given message – be it radio or printed matter? Returning to this quandary some 40 years later, Masotta argued "...if there is talk [today] of concerning oneself with content, it does not mean that avant-garde art is moving toward a new purism or worse formalism. What is occurring today in the best pieces is that the contents are being fused to the media used to convey them."³ And if the medium was now the message, as Marshall McLuhan famously argued, it was up to artists of the 60s to chip away at the mythological nature of this message in the context of mass media.

In 1968, an article by the American critic Lucy Lippard appeared in the British magazine *Studio International*: "The Dematerialization of Art." For her, "Dematerialism" evoked the idea of "art as idea," wherein "matter is denied, as sensation has been converted into concept!" This conversion required a turn away from Greenberg's Modernist painting – "art for art's sake" – and a move toward a "rational-esthetic"



and later a "post-esthetic." However, Lippard added the following caveat: "Dematerialized art is post-esthetic only in its increasingly non-visual emphases. The esthetic of principle is still esthetic, as implied by frequent statements by mathematicians and scientists about the *beauty* of an equation, formula or solution."⁴ To Lippard's chagrin, the heart of Greenbergianism – essence, beauty, harmony and order – was clearly still beating. Lippard may have tossed out Greenberg's notion of "medium specificity," but the essentialist nature of his project remained *in its place*. Lippard was speaking for a branch of American artists for whom Dematerialism had less to do with the signifier, or the *material unit* of an artwork. Rather, like Greenberg, they were focused on the signified, the artwork's non-visual aesthetic *concept* that transcends its material base. And yet, as early as 1966, Jacoby was thinking about how a signified event or artwork might be experienced *through* its representational signifier as an event itself.

Masotta's lecture and Lippard's article act out our two primal scenes. Now, Jacoby enters to provide some historical context.

In "An Art of Communications Media," written with Eduardo Costa and Raúl Escari, Jacoby addressed the concept of a "new media art" against Allan Kaprow's more purist notion of the Happening. Kaprow was interested in how people might interact with each other – in real time and space – when following a given script of events. *Two persons must meet at a train departing at 5:47 pm*, for instance. His idea was to break down the barrier between performers and audience and, by extension, art and life. Since Happenings were to constitute an original authentic encounter, Kaprow was clear: *Happenings should be performed only once.*⁵ Jacoby, however, refuted such unmediated encounters. As he put it, "...a mass audience does not see an exhibition, attend a Happening, or go to a soccer game, but it does see footage of the event in the news."⁶ For Jacoby, Kaprow's insistence on privileging the direct experience of events was outmoded. "It is of no interest to information consumers if an exhibition took place or not," Jacoby argued, "all that matters is the image of the artistic event *constructed* by the media."⁷ This notion of a *mediated* presence constituting a direct experience in and of itself defined a series of "anti-Happenings" Jacoby produced (in collaboration with Costa and Escari) from 1966-1968.

Jacoby followed through with this idea – that an original event or Happening might be discarded altogether in place of its



representation – in pieces such as *Total Participation Happening* (1966). First, the group produced thirteen photographs of fictitious "happenings" staged in various locations throughout Buenos Aires. "The report and photos were [then] sent to various journalists in hopes they would believe they were real and would treat them as if they were any other news item," Jacoby recalls. "On August 21, the first article written based on our false report appeared in the daily newspaper *El Mundo* (circulation 300,000)"⁸ As such, the "reality" of Jacoby's "Happenings" did not exist *outside* their representation. Rather, they existed both in *and* out of their place, having *happened* for the viewing public (as well as the participants) as a "secondary" representation *after the fact*. Moreover, once the photographs were published in the mass media, the depicted events violated Kaprow's mandate of happening only once. Instead, Jacoby's anti-Happenings happened over and over and over again in a multiplicity of places, while offering "a play between the reality of things and the unreality of things; the materialization, through the mass media, of imaginary events, an imaginarium constructed on another imaginarium; the game of constructing a mythical image and the job of seeking support of the audience's imagination, only to tear it all down and leave them simply with *the spectacle of their own deceived conscience.*"⁹

And so, in Argentina in 1966, a call for *critical aesthetics* was made. Who will answer this call today? The answer to this question revolves around the complex issue of receivership.

In his 1955 seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Jacques Lacan declared that *a letter always arrives at its destination*. In saying this, Lacan wasn't claiming that a letter always arrives at the address typed on its envelope. Rather, his implication is that the letter's rightful addressee is *by definition* the person who receives it. This idea relates to Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, whereby a subject (of sexuality, gender, nation, etc.) becomes ideologically defined the moment s/he answers a "hail" or call from the Other (be it a love object, parent or politician). This call and response happens every time I (unconsciously) recognize a hail and know it is *I who has been hailed*. If a hail always reaches its rightful destination, that's

Left: Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, *Total Participation Happening*, 1966
Center, Right, Cover: Roberto Jacoby, 1968: *el culo te abrocho*, (detail), inkjet print, 2008

because someone is always there – as if by chance – to receive it. Likewise, in the case of the purloined letter, the receiver is merely the *holder* of the letter, not the “rightful” *possessor* of it in any pre-scripted way. It might be easier to think of a purloined letter as an anonymous message placed in a bottle and cast out to sea. When it lands and a subject recognizes it and picks it up – s/he has answered its call. The artist is one such subject. But which call does s/he answer? And which call, in turn, does s/he cast back out? In contemporary practice, these questions boil down to: Which artists take up *which* Conceptualism today?

Enter Jacoby's *1968: el culo te abrocho*. The title, a silly childhood rhyme – literally “I will nail your ass” – hints that Jacoby's contemporary return to the 60s isn't going to be nostalgic or didactic. Rather, Jacoby picks up where he left off.

A mediation of a mediation, *1968: el culo te abrocho* consists of digital photographs of archival documents that defined Jacoby's diverse practice in 1968 in and around the Instituto di Tella. Ana Longoni describes the archive as consisting of “manifestos, collective declarations and proclamations asking to abandon the institutional spaces of art and condemning the censorship of the dictatorship [of the 1966 military coup]; pictures of actions in which one can see how artists tear apart and destroy their own works of art as a protest measure; press records of the police detention of Jacoby and others during the protest incidents in the Premio Braque; the cover or pages of *Conciencia y Estructura*, a crucial book written by the intellectual and developer of the avant-garde, Oscar Masotta, that proves the crossing of paradigms like structuralism and critical Marxism.”¹⁰ By re-photographing these documents, Jacoby returns to the “event” of 1968 – a type of global Happening – as a representation, both then and now, that he irreverently “nails in the ass.” But in Spanish *el culo te abrocho* is ambiguous, meaning both “I will nail your ass” and “I get nailed in the ass.” Metaphorically, in-as-much as we “nail” the events of 1968, we are simultaneously “nailed” by its mythological, libidinal representation in the present. In Jacoby's hands, “1968” becomes a paradox: a letter from the past, returned to its senders in the present. This question of historical temporality relates to what Derrida calls *archive fever*.

The archivist's collection is defined by the paradoxical desire to repeat or return to a prior state – along the logic of a death drive – and the desire to preserve or maintain something – along the logic of the life drive. At its core is the fear of losing the memory of something, and *yet*, in an effort to return to this prior state, one must necessarily efface it with a contemporary representation. It is *precisely* in the space between these two instances – the tension between the Thanatos of returning to origins of the “initial” practice and the Eros of continuing that project's legacy – that the archival impulse is staged. Archivists traditionally mask this space (of desire) under the scientific cover of historical preservation – *Just the facts, ma'am*. But, in fact, desire *itself* is at once the archive's secret that dare not speak its name *and* its driving force. Indeed, it is the scientific model of the archive – where the subjectivity of the artist-as-archivist is completely repressed – that defined an entire branch of Conceptualism in the northern hemisphere. Bernd and Hilla Becher's industrial photographs and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* project are prime examples. Jacoby's archive enacts the “other” Conceptualism, one informed by psychoanalysis – exemplified

by Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* – where auto-reflexivity is played out in the artwork's material/content as *well as* through its maker. According to Jacoby, this type of practice sets up a “formation of networks where the medium, the transmitter and receiver are configured in the same process.”¹¹

This heterogeneous reflexivity is generated through the brightly colored poetic texts that Jacoby superimposes on the historical documents, which make up *1968: el culo te abrocho*. In so doing, they release a libidinal impulse usually repressed in archives. Several of Jacoby's texts are fragments of lyrics he wrote for the 80s New Wave band Virus. Over a reproduction of Oscar Masotta's *Consciousness and Structure*, for instance, we read: *Pagan icons undress in my reveries*. He originally wrote the lyrics, he says, because they “brought him happiness.” Alternately, several other images contain faux Gnostic texts. Over an erotic portrait of an unknown nude from 1968 we read: *Don't be scared to be a whimsy God that spills inside me and keeps me alive*. Over yet another document – a poster of Che Guevara that Jacoby designed for *Sobre* magazine – we read an epigram by G. Lichtenberg, S. XVIII: *Speak so I may see you*. As Masotta argued in his Instituto di Tella lecture, the content here has been fused to the media conveying it. Jacoby's two typographies – the original documents and the contemporary texts – signify a series of oppositions: the factual and the fictional, the scientific and the poetic, the political and the libidinal, the historic and the contemporary. But here these oppositions are collapsed onto each other – inseparably laminated like two sides of a single sheet of paper. From the perspective of critical aesthetics, any attempt at untangling this knot would only serve to re-instate the “perception of our deceived consciousness” as a mythological world of experience *versus* representation. If, on the other hand, we allow these categories to remain in flux, as Jacoby does in *1968: el culo te abrocho*, then the Argentine Dematerialist letter will have reached its destination once again.

1 Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” in John P. Muller, ed., *The Purloined Poe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1988), p. 39.

2 El Lissitzky, “The Future of the Book,” *New Left Review*, (February, 1967), p. 40.

3 Oscar Masotta, “After Pop We Dematerialize,” in Ines Katzenstein, ed., *Listen Here Now!* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), p. 208.

4 Lucy Lippard, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Studio International*, p. 31

5 Allan Kaprow, “Assemblages, Environments and Happenings,” (1959), in Charles Wood, ed., *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1995), p. 708.

6 Roberto Jacoby, et. al., “An Art of Communications Media (manifesto),” (July 1966), in *Listen Here Now!* p. 223.

7 *ibid*

8 Roberto Jacoby and Eduardo Costa, “Creation of the First Work,” (1967), in *Listen Here Now!*, p. 228.

9 Roberto Jacoby, “Against the Happening,” in *Listen Here Now!*, p. 229.

10 Ana Longoni, “The Inciter,” unpublished manuscript.

11 Verónica Castro, “Interview with Roberto Jacoby,” on *portal.educ.ar*, (April 27, 2005).

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