Media, Art, and Politics in the Work of Roberto Jacoby

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Roberto Jacoby trained as a sociologist at the University of Buenos Aires in the early 1960s, and this background has had a significant impact on his art and writings. He is part of what has come to be referred to as the Di Tella Generation, artists who in the ’60s exhibited within the context of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires. The central theorists were the philosopher and literary critic Oscar Masotta and the sociologist Eliseo Verón, both of whom began to combine structuralism and semiology with Marxism in the early to mid-1960s. Jacoby, too, was a vital member of this group, and to this day his art, research, and writings continue to explore the boundaries of the art institution. Almost all of his projects have been collaborative, and their very status as “art” is troubled by their pervasive ephemerality, context specificity, and topicality.

One of Jacoby’s first exhibited artworks, To Live Here (Vivir aquí) (1965), consisted of a displacement of his home studio into the Galería Guernica in Buenos Aires, where he carried out his daily routine in public, thereby conflating the sites of creation and display. The following year, Scale Model of an Artwork (Maqueta de una obra) (1965), a model for an untitled structure of polystyrene spheres and plastic human figures, was included in Made of Plastic (Plásticos con plásticos), a group show at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires. The model was accompanied by a mimeographed text indicating that the artwork was located in the mental construction of the spectators contemplating the small preliminary design on display. This early interest in mobilizing language and media in the production of art culminated in an expansive range of experiments with information circuits, systems, and channels of communication.

Jacoby’s first brush with theories of the sign and strategies of demystification, articulated in the early writings of Roland Barthes and introduced into the Argentine context by Masotta’s criticism of the mid-’60s, complicated his earlier reception of texts by Marshall McLuhan such as The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962) and

1. Masotta was also the first to introduce Lacanian psychoanalysis to the Spanish-speaking world in the late 1960s and ’70s. For a thorough overview of this aspect of his work, see Germán L. García, Oscar Masotta: Los ecos de un nombre (Barcelona: Atuel-Eolia, 1981). For an excellent assessment of Masotta’s and Verón’s contributions to the Argentinian intellectual milieu, see Beatriz Sarlo, La batalla de las ideas (1943–1973) (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2001), pp. 94–99.
*Understanding Media* (1964), which set out to analyze the profound impact of communication technology on the human subject (and on social organization more generally). These explorations led Jacoby to collaborate with two other Argentines with similar interests: visual artist Eduardo Costa and writer Raúl Escari. In July 1966, the three penned “An art of communications media (manifesto)” (Un arte de los medios de comunicación [manifiesto]), which called for the production of artworks within the prevailing circuits of mass media and communication. The artists, who worked collectively as Media Art (Arte de los Medios), saw enormous potential in this practice, not least in its ability to enable artists on the margins of the established art world to participate in its domain. Yet, more than an attempt to expand the realm of the aesthetic and to disseminate art to an unprecedentedly large audience, the demystification of the infrastructure of the mass communication media had a political promise for Media Art: the actualization of an unmediated community in which the governing measure is directly incorporated into the living attitudes of its members.

The first work produced by Jacoby and his Media Art colleagues was *Happening for a Dead Boar (Happening para un jabali difunto)* (1966). This event,
which also came to be known as the Anti-Happening, appropriated information-media circuits to publicize a false action. The fictional Happening existed only in the press release and in staged photographs distributed by the artists to local newspapers. Accordingly, the artwork’s realization was determined through its transmission. The primary goal of this gambit was to construct a Happening within existing circuits of media. In the process, it enlarged the field of spectatorship as it fused with the media that would disseminate it. But the Anti-Happening also served to emphasize the pivotal role played by the apparatus of mediation between subjects and objects, as well as the considerable extent to which the news media is susceptible to being shaped by misinformation. More than a simple demonstration that the mass media misleads and distorts, the Anti-Happening exposed the extent to which the media creates the reality that it claims to represent, and, by extension, the subjects addressed by that reality. Subjective experience, from this perspective, is largely a given whose conditions of possibility must be searched for elsewhere—in the historical norms, or in discourse. What will be considered necessary, and what the art of Jacoby and his colleagues will contribute, is the development of an understanding of the peculiar sort of subject that both shapes and is shaped by the structures it employs. At the core of artworks whose reality is solely based on media circuits is a recognition of the notion that structures (including not only circuits and systems but also tools, operations, protocols, and/or procedures) precede the subject and dominate and manufacture subjectivity. All structures, all symbolic orders, all techniques, are seen to work in this way: Humans, originally, dumbly, so to speak, perform a variety of practical deeds or rituals, and through those performances, and with all their rules and prohibitions, become subjects who in getting a sense of those deeds get a sense of their lives, of who and how they are.

Media Art disbanded in 1967. But before the artists went their separate ways they produced a number of projects that variously mobilized channels of information and publicity, employed communication technology such as closed-circuit television, and expanded the notion of literary work by transmitting oral language and everyday colloquial events through magnetic-tape-recording formats and other gadgets. Following on this logic, in 1967 Jacoby realized Automatic Circuit (Circuito automático), which engaged an electronic answering device that delivered a message whenever someone dialed the telephone number (of the Di Tella Institute) that appeared on adhesive notices the artist affixed in several key districts of Buenos Aires. The machine’s prerecorded message announced: “You have closed the communication circuit that began when you read the announcement.

3. Jacoby became increasingly involved in the artistic and political radicalization of the time in Argentina. Costa relocated in 1967 to New York City, where he continued his art practice, collaborating with Vito Acconci, Scott Burton, and others. Escari moved to Paris in 1967 on a scholarship to study at L’École pratique des hautes études with Roland Barthes.
This circuit does not transmit information, it merely refers to itself.” As such, *Automatic Circuit* functioned as a purely self-reflexive course of information that encompassed a large stretch of public space and included human subjects and electronic machines in its loop.

Jacoby’s left-wing political commitments have long been clear. One of his first exhibited artworks was an untitled fiberglass sculpture of war victims from an early 1966 series based on images culled from newspapers. The object was featured in *Homage to Vietnam* (*Homenaje al Vietnam*), an important group show held at the Galería Van Riel in Buenos Aires in 1966. This level of engagement continued into the late 1960s, though Jacoby integrated it with his exploration of media. A case in point is his *Message in the Di Tella* (*Mensaje en el Di Tella*) (1968), included in the exhibition *Experiencias 68* that opened at the Di Tella Institute in early May of that tumultuous year. This piece, which he claimed was the result of conversations with fellow artists León Ferrari and Pablo Suárez, featured three “ideological components”: a short text by Jacoby that professed the new confluence of art and social life, a Teletype device that spat out a newsreel stream of live media information (from the international news agency Agence France-Presse) about the dramatic events taking place that month in Paris and in cities around the world, and a black-and-white photograph of an African-American man advocating for civil rights in the United States by carrying a placard with the declaration *I AM A MAN*.
A few months later, Jacoby began to work with a group of like-minded activists to lay the foundations for the collective, artistic-political production of *Tucumán Is Burning* (*Tucumán arde*) (1968). This media art event consolidated a coalition of artists, social scientists, and trade unionists, and was held in November 1968 at the headquarters of the General Confederation of Argentine workers’ Union in the cities of Rosario and Buenos Aires. The large group put on display an enormous array of field research that directly confronted state propaganda that sought to obscure the humanitarian crisis produced by the government’s decision to shut down the sugar refineries in the northern province of Tucumán. The show featured photographs, newspaper articles, and a broad set of statistics depicting, reporting on, and analyzing the effects of the closure of the sugar
mills that were the lifeblood of the largely agrarian population. Several reports on the relation between business and political interests were also included, and recorded testimonies from local farmers and factory laborers were played over loudspeakers. The goal was to mobilize information against the government’s official line about the closure of the refineries; expose the oppression, exploitation, and extreme poverty in Tucumán; and lay the foundation for a new aesthetic that mobilized various media towards social transformation. The exhibition was exceptionally well received in Rosario, but was forced to close soon after its opening in Buenos Aires later that same month because of strong pressure from the military government.

Cultural activity was increasingly subjected to stringent control in the volatile years of the Argentine dictatorship, which began in June 1966 with the military coup that brought Juan Carlos Onganía to power and, with the exception of a brief period of fragile democracy between 1973 and 1976, continued until 1983. This led Jacoby to return to his studies and research in the field of sociology, where he concentrated on an investigation of the authoritarian logic that persecuted ideologies deemed corrosive of established social hierarchies. During these years, Jacoby was one of the authors of Street War, Class War (Lucha de calles, lucha de clases) (1973), which features information about the growing political violence directly related to government policies in the province of Córdoba, and he initiated the research project Storming Heaven (El asalto al cielo) (1975–85), which studied the underpinnings of the labor unrest and workers’ strikes that transpired in the context of the dictatorship.4

As the autocratic military regime became increasingly violent in the late 1970s and early ’80s, with tens of thousands of people murdered or made to “disappear,” Jacoby began to develop what he referred to as a “strategy of joy” (estrategia de la alegría). This “strategy” posited the facilitation of joyousness as a way to offset the pervasive sense of terror that swept the country in these years, and it indirectly led Jacoby in 1979 to commence working with the legendary glam-rock group Virus. Jacoby’s highly ironic, cathartic, and critical song lyrics set to visceral, danceable rock music heightened “the possibility of exercising movements of the body driven by desire or play—personal forms of liberty—in order to accrue social force and, above all, unfetter the terrorized bodies of the young, the principal victims of state terrorism.”5 This form of dissent broke with the dominant convention of solemn protest in Argentina. The songs were mobilized as a tool to get a mostly young fan base to communicate with each other and to prevail over the paralysis precipitated by the pervasive brutality of the ruling regime. As Jacoby insinuates in


“Surfaces of Pleasure” (“Superficies de placer”), one of the songs he wrote for Virus, the pleasure of actually coming together with others around a collective experience occasions a loss of inhibition and the development of a tremendous potency that is in itself a highly transgressive and political act. For much of Virus’s history, however, this was a politics that responded to emergency conditions—a politics that sought to preserve the integrity of the human subject in the face of its attempted annihilation by state violence, and then later in the 1980s by the scourge of the AIDS crisis. Typical of the gender play of glam rock, the musicians of Virus (all male) often appeared onstage in androgynous outfits, scandalizing not only the supporters of the right-wing dictatorship but much of the traditional Left in Argentina as well. The band project continued until 1988, when the lead singer, Federico Moura, died of AIDS.

Life within the context of the terror brought on by military rule fundamentally altered the nature of Jacoby’s art. By the time he began to participate more actively again in the art world in the 1980s, he had largely relinquished his critique of the mass media and other mechanistic techniques of domination. His new artistic experiments did not privilege the structure of circulation or systems over the subject. Instead, his projects sought to create situations and generate events conducive to forms of social bonding that deviated from accepted norms. These included nightclub events, such as the “Body Art” festival (1988), where nearly one hundred people took part in a contest of fifteen-second performances at the Palladium discotheque, as well as projects such as Snowball (Bola de nieve, 1998–), which created and made publicly accessible a large online database featuring the work and biographies of Argentine artists.

The success of Snowball prompted Jacoby to develop what the art historian Ana Longoni describes as “micro-societies” that fluctuate between the individual and the collective both...
inside and outside the art realm. A case in point is *Venus Project* (*Proyecto Venus*, 2001–6), produced in response to the profound economic and political crisis that culminated in Argentina’s default on its debt to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2001. Jacoby used the stipend of a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship to launch *Venus Project*. This fledgling experimental community of more than five hundred individual members sought to facilitate and realize new forms of social relations. As a self-governed social organization, *Venus Project* brought together workers of all kinds who were willing to trade goods and services with each other. In essence, *Venus Project* functioned as a barter system, complete with its own currency, initiated during a time when bank withdrawals, let alone cashing paychecks, were nearly impossible.

One of Jacoby’s most powerful recent works is *Darkroom* (2001). The piece took the form of an initial performance at the gallery Belleza y Felicidad in Buenos Aires in 2002. There, one spectator at a time was permitted to descend into a dark basement with an infrared night-vision video camera to witness and record the alternately savage, absurd, and bawdy actions of a group of thirteen performers dressed in white plastic suits and bulbous masks. The actors were blinded by the darkness. Since they could not see each other there was no sense of choreography between them. Instead, they groped their way through the pitch-black space among a strange arrangement of everyday objects. Occasionally, one person would bump into the next and engage in

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7. My discussion of *Darkroom* is indebted to a conversation with Nicolás Guagnini in New York City on October 9, 2014. See also Nicolás Guagnini, “1000 Words: Roberto Jacoby,” *Artforum* 49, no. 7 (March 2011), pp. 249–50.
various acts, sometimes violent, sometimes sexual, often inexplicable. The experience, from the perspective of the spectator, was at once disturbing, empowering, and erotic. The raunchy dimension of the piece related to the dark rooms located in several Buenos Aires nightclubs during these years where patrons could enter and participate in purely tactile encounters with strangers. The connotations of the dark underside of the years of the dictatorship were not lost on anyone, with everything aboveground appearing normal and unproblematic while a haunting world of violence and terror existed just beneath the surface. Yet in this case the spectators were active insofar as, camera in hand, they were the ones who controlled the apparatus of recording and reproduction. The video recordings were later played back on monitors installed in dark, one-person screening booths in subsequent exhibitions of *Darkroom*.

In December 2006, Jacoby, together with a small cohort, organized “Technologies of Friendship” (“Tecnologías de la amistad”), a series of large dinners that continued his practice of creating situations in which artists on the margins of the established art world could come together to discuss possible collaborations. A full account of the events was published in the Buenos Aires–based journal *Ramona*. An art magazine without images, conceptualized and launched by Jacoby in 2000, *Ramona* circulated in print for ten years and continues to be disseminated electronically. “Technologies of Friendship” culminated in the production of the video project *Chastity (La castidad, 2007–08)*, which Jacoby made in collaboration with the artist and sociologist Syd Krochmalny. *Chastity* is also an exploration of social relations. It takes as its starting point an agreement made between the two artists to live and work together for one year while engaging in a platonic
relationship. The exhibited video consists of an intimate discussion between two actors who play Jacoby and Krochmalny. The dialogue identifies chastity as a countercurrent to the structural sexualization of all human affairs, needs, and desires in contemporary capitalist culture. It also suggests that structures, like regimes of power, can only function through repetition and ritualized performances and that therefore, in the possibility of swerving or *queering* the mimetic performance, there is a space for emancipation and transformation available to the subject, not to mention an entirely new range of aesthetic possibilities.

Jacoby exhibited *The Soul Never Thinks Without Images (El alma nunca piensa sin imagen)*, 2010 at the twenty-ninth São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. The organizers of that year’s Biennial announced that its focus was going to be the relations between art and politics. The expectation was that artists would develop works that expanded on the type of melancholic, symbolic, testimonial opposition to the status quo that characterizes much contemporary art. Indeed, the exhibition’s agenda led the curators to feature a large amount of documentation of *Tucumán Is Burning* in the Biennial. But when Jacoby responded to the exhibition’s theme by bringing together around thirty Argentine artists, scholars, writers, musicians, and social scientists to constitute an “Argentine Brigade” (a reference to the International Brigades that fought in the Spanish Civil War) in support of Dilma Rousseff, the presidential candidate of the ruling socialist Workers’ Party, the Biennial Foundation objected to the exhibition on the grounds that it violated Brazilian law. The curators in turn covered over key components of the work without the

artist’s consent the day after the opening. The irony was only heightened by the fact that, according to Jacoby, the curators had fully approved the work several months before the opening. Once again, then, one of Jacoby’s art projects generated a considerable scandal and was censored by the ruling order and its minions. Yet the differences between The Soul Never Thinks Without Images and earlier projects such as Tucumán Is Burning that also ran into troubles with the authorities are highly indicative of the conditions of art practice in South America today. In the case of Tucumán Is Burning, for instance, the artwork was developed as an act of subversive dissent in opposition to the ruling regime. By contrast, The Soul Never Thinks Without Images was in fact made in support of the government (the Workers’ Party had been in power for eight years leading into this plebiscite, and would go on to win several subsequent national elections). Jacoby’s contribution to the Biennial thus brought attention to the reality that, as a result of the large-scale democratic movements that have reshaped most of South America in the 2000s, today there are very few organized political fronts in this part of the world to the left of the governments in power. In response to the suppression of his work, Jacoby released a statement contending that the actions of the Biennial Foundation made plainly evident the bankruptcy of the art system in most of Latin America today, where, as he put it, “there is more experimentation, creativity, and ultimately hope in the realm of organized politics, spanning from institutions to social movements, than there is in the contemporary art system.”