

The second “meeting” happened some months later during that same year, 1973. On a cool spring night I was walking out of a bookshop at 2700 Santa Fé Street. Just as I stepped out, a long black car pulled to a stop by the curb, right in front of me. I froze—the brutal Ezeiza massacre was still fresh in the air. Sindicalists, political leaders, militants, ex-militants, and “ideological suspects” were being assassinated or executed on an almost daily basis. On September 6, the ERP had mounted an assault on the Sanidad Military Post in order to take rifles. They failed, were wounded and detained—but not before killing the commander of the military forces; on September 26, José Ignacio Rucci had been summarily assassinated. Playing dead as I stood might perhaps help me. I saw that there were five people in the car. The back door closest to me opened and one of the passengers stepped out, leaving the door open behind him. This person, a little fellow dressed in dark tones, walked past me and into the bookstore. I looked into the back seat, and there, deep in the middle seat, also dressed in dark hues and wearing a necktie, was Masotta. There was someone else to his left, and two people in the front seats, all dressed in black or similar. Masotta and I looked at each other: we started sizing each other up, but we exchanged no greetings, gave no sign of recognition. I stood and the sizing up continued, since I was not going to leave until there was some sign of approach, or until Masotta had disappeared. And yet, I wasn’t sure that Masotta had recognized me: a sort of fog seemed to float before his eyes and his very pale face—more of a dull grimace or an effigy of boredom. At last, a sort of slow and cumulative sadness seemed to flash across that face and give it expressivity. Sadness for himself? For me? For both of us? I’ll never know, and I don’t care. The little fellow who had gone into the bookstore returned and got back into the car. The door closed and the car left, taking Masotta and his four companions, or guards.<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Carlos Correas recalls the last time he saw Masotta. Correas and Masotta met at university and were close friends for years, though eventually they became estranged, partly as a result of Masotta’s widening intellectual interests and pursuits, notably contemporary art and psychoanalysis. 1973, when the “meeting” happened, was one of the darkest years in Argentina’s history, the year of the Ezeiza massacre and of the formation of the far-right death squads known as the Triple A. If Correas decided to “play dead,” it is because he recognized what had quickly become a typical situation: a car pulling to a stop in front of you could mean the end. But, to his surprise, he discovered that one of the people in the car was his old friend, a man Correas had once even been in love with.

Masotta’s family insists that professional ambition is what prompted him to leave Buenos Aires in 1974: he wanted to pursue his career as a Lacanian reader, translator, and teacher. But some of his friends also insist that he had been “squeezed” (*apretado*) by the Triple A, and had left out of fear of further prosecution. It is possible, then, that what Correas describes is that moment. That might explain the absence of expressivity in Masotta’s “pale” and “dull” face; the fact that he doesn’t recognize, or pretends not to recognize, his old friend; the sadness that flashes across his face. Correas himself is unsure: are the people Masotta is with his “companions,” or his “guards”? In the end, Correas decides he does not care. The car leaves.

However one reads the scene, the fact is that Masotta is both a formidable intellectual and a wonderful protagonist in the political thriller that Correas’ episode describes. Violence, or the image of violence, is a fundamental ingredient of the artistic production of those years. Indeed, artistic production in general, and Happenings in particular, had something of the criminal about them, as Masotta himself suggests:

All of this created a certain semblance between the Happening and some mafia operations, like a bank holdup, for example. With a goal in mind—getting hold of the money—one must trace a strategy of schedules and timetables: one must know what time the employee with the key to the safe arrives; one must find a way to distract

a cop, in other words, to create a “gap” in the cop’s constant vigilance; one must orchestrate the coincidence of this “gap” with the hour when the bank has the fewest number of clients.<sup>2</sup>

The analogy between the Happening and the mafia, Masotta tells us, was first suggested by Allan Kaprow, who writes, in the text that must have been in Masotta’s mind:

But the importance given to purposive action also suggest the Happening’s affinities with practices marginal to the fine arts, such as parades, carnivals, games, expeditions, guided tours, orgies, religious ceremonies, and such secular rituals as the elaborate operations of the mafia.<sup>3</sup>

Purposive action, carefully coordinated and planned: very few Happenings in the history of the genre could have been harder to coordinate and synchronize than Masotta’s *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter), which took place in Buenos Aires on July 16, 1967. One possible exception is *Calling*, an almost contemporary two-day Happening by Kaprow that took place in New York and South Brunswick on August 21 and 22, 1965.

*Calling* was, perhaps, even closer to a mafia operation, both in its cruelty and iconography, than *El helicóptero*. Participants fell into two groups: victims and perpetrators. Throughout the first half, and day, of *Calling*, Kaprow’s “victims” were abducted several times: wrapped in silver foil and white laundry bags, they were relocated to landmarks around New York City by car and eventually abandoned at the information booth at Grand Central Station. When they managed to liberate themselves from their silver and white shrouds, these “human packages” had to call a predetermined phone number: someone would answer but immediately hang up, without saying a word (haven’t we seen this in a thousand mafia films?). The following day, the victims became the perpetrators: it was the perpetrators turn to be stripped naked by their former victims and abandoned in the woods, hanging upside down from trees (again, haven’t we seen this in a thousand mafia films?).



Peter Moore, performance view of Allan Kaprow’s *Calling*. South Brunswick, New Jersey, August 21, 1965. © Barbara Moore, licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.