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RULE AND DEVIATION

The art of Ana Jotta

By Diedrich Diederichsen



Ana Jotta, *A Poderosa (The Mighty Woman)*, 2006, paint on polystyrene foam and polyurethane, 75 7/8 × 75 7/8 × 11 3/4".

SOMEONE ASKS WHAT the opposite of a
document looks like, show them an artwork by Ana Jotta.



Wael Shawky, *Drama 1882*, 2024, 4K video, color, sound, 45 minutes.

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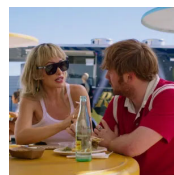
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You might say that the opposite of a monument is a document—that is, an artifact or piece of evidence. But a monument must be fabricated, and so documentary objects, too, don't simply occur: They must be found or at least recognized as such. Recognizing an object as a document—whether it be a trading card; a photograph of a musician, one of its edges torn; a box of laundry detergent from a children's play store; or two movable letters from a pegboard information system—is the central anti-monumental act: People make such identifications all the time without thinking much about it, and others even try to systematize such recognitions, turning that habit into a discipline that builds archives. Yet the spontaneous awareness of the possible document or the possibility of a document is a kind of artistic expertise, and few people are capable of honing it as an active knowledge, a skill—without becoming an institution. The true art is knowing how to surreptitiously plant things among the found objects that document the individual who collects all this, and document her not as a collector but as a producer, a producer of what are now sometimes also miniature monuments after all—like Jotta's *A Poderosa*, 2006, a giant hand painted on polyurethane, borrowed from Philip Guston's *The Line*, 1978, that emerges from clouds to point to the ground.

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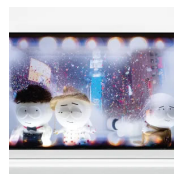
Jotta collects, arranges, displays, and manipulates disparate things. Her ways of engaging with the objects, images, geometric furniture drawings, mathematical and nonmathematical embroideries, shreds of text spelled in printed or found letters, and other ephemera are likewise diverse: She imitates, reproduces, quotes, varies, invents, and manipulates. There's much that's dainty and twee, but there's

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also much that's clunky, surprising, incongruous, and spot-on. Jotta also does not rely on some neutral system to show things, a self-effacing display or institutional interior. She instead uses glass cases in public settings, old screens for Super 8 home theaters, books, and sundry other media that could never feign disinterest. And the mood is far from uniform; it ranges from excessive to demure, disciplined to prankish.

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Ana Jotta, *J*, ca. 2015, handsaw, found broken plastic, 12 5/8 × 4".

The old problem for the modernist poet was how to render the disarray of the world as the individual encounters it (sequentially, throughout a lifetime) without becoming a pack rat or hoarder, compulsively absorbing and accumulating *every* impression, but also, conversely, without simply resorting to a system that decides for you what's relevant or not. How many possible ways are there to love objects without falling victim to that love, without letting it die in the entropy of universal equivalence?

Poetry's traditional answer is language. Language is both rule and deviation, *langue* and *parole*, but the rule retains a vestigial presence in every deviation. Poetry's gambit, which is to relax the rules or introduce new ones, operates in relation to a linguistic reality in which orthodoxies emerge time and again, reflecting the need to regulate living speech such that those who stick to the rules fail to notice that they're speaking, that they're applying the rules of speech. This tension between speech, and the

speaker's unthinking submission to systems of order, and a poetry that, while likewise reliant on rules, assaults, exaggerates, exploits, and perpetually exhibits those rules, is the central concern of a modern lyric poetry that, unlike its classical predecessors, aspired to do more than merely expand the grammar by adding new rules.



Ana Jotta, *Rua Ana Jotta (Ana Jotta Street)*, 1981, engraved stone. Installation view, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, 2005. Photo: Laura C.C.

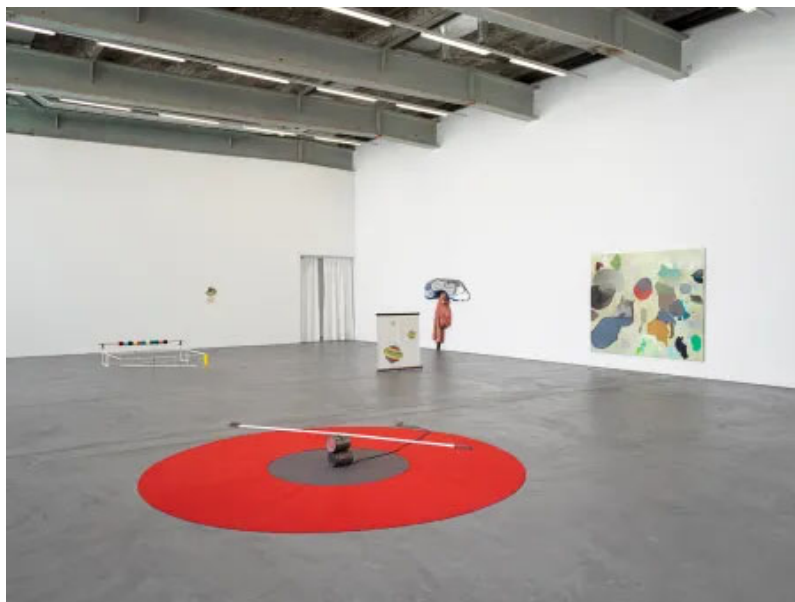
Now imagine the same problem for a visual poetry, a poetry that, just like Walt Whitman or Andy Warhol, wants to name, celebrate, eulogize essentially everything—only it can't rely on "the system" as an existing antagonist or friend. It will need by turns to simulate a system, use and assault that simulated system, or turn its attention to the objectively system-like elements in the world of the visual and attack institutions, architectures, the market and fairs, the white cube. Then again, all this has been going on for a long time, and often in very tediously systematic fashion. Jotta does it too, but not in the form of a crusade; she sticks to the mode of an inspired absent-mindedness that limits itself to enacting, with great focus, in a specific special small object, what nonetheless miraculously looks to the beholder, when all is said and done, like a method, like something she always does. Even though the individual decisions bear at most a family resemblance to each other.

Jotta's approach is akin to those of other broadly speaking poetic minds, like Marcel Broodthaers, who needed to supply or feign the system that, by the same token, they then disavowed or parodied.

Jotta, who was born in 1946, attended art school in the mid-1960s and wrote, acted, and worked as a stage and set designer in the '70s before turning to art professionally in the '80s. She appeared in one of the first Portuguese movies about the country's colonial past, João Botelho's *Um adeus português* (A Portuguese Goodbye, 1985). Already, Jotta understood visual art as other protagonists, theorists, and practitioners have only realized much more recently, as an art that has swallowed up formats like the moving image and opera: as a meta-art. Since World War II and the so-called neo-avant-gardes, the poets of pictures tried at once to create a systematic structure to work against and insinuate latent systems—and here Jotta's approach is akin to those of other broadly speaking poetic minds, like Marcel Broodthaers, who needed to supply or feign the system that, by the same token, they then disavowed or parodied.

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View of “Ana Jotta: *Composição*” (Composition), 2024, Kunsthalle Zürich.
 Foreground: *Madame De*, 2007. Photo: Cedric Mussano.

Anthony Huberman, who is, with Miguel Wandschneider, the world’s leading connoisseur of Jotta’s oeuvre and curator of her upcoming exhibition at Wiels in Brussels, has argued that the concept of “appropriation” is an ill fit for her work because it implies a meta-approach to art, whereas Jotta’s practice is more intuitive. I would call that “intuitive” element “poetic,” which has the advantage of naming the peculiar humorous equivocation that informs not only Jotta’s approach to artmaking but her attitude in her engagement with (actual or imaginary) systems and para- or quasi-languages with which one can make poems—and which at once subvert this proclivity to become instruments, tools, that you can neutrally use to make or produce something. Still, I would agree with Huberman that “appropriation” (with its roots in the recycling of mass-produced images by the artists of the Pictures generation and its bad reputation today) isn’t quite right, in no small part because Jotta manages the feat of making fabricated elements of her work and found pieces look more alike than different.

There is nothing that more directly and more unmistakably yields a signature style and distinctive voice than skirting method. The “absence of a recognizable style” (as a wall text accompanying her current show at Kunsthalle Zürich puts it) that is often said to define Jotta’s work is in the end clearly a stylistic feature. Such an approach stipulates that you can’t follow something with something similar—and you can tell: It’s not dogmatic, as

in serial music, but “poetic,” yet still effective. Jotta doesn’t hide behind the rule of no-rules. The style of sidestepping style isn’t a modernist or conceptual exercise. Rather, it signals a boredom with repetition, with the well-trodden path, primarily for vital and affective reasons.



View of “Ana Jotta: pɔːtʃuːgiːz ˈhæɪn.di.krɑːft,” 2016, Établissement d’en face, Brussels.

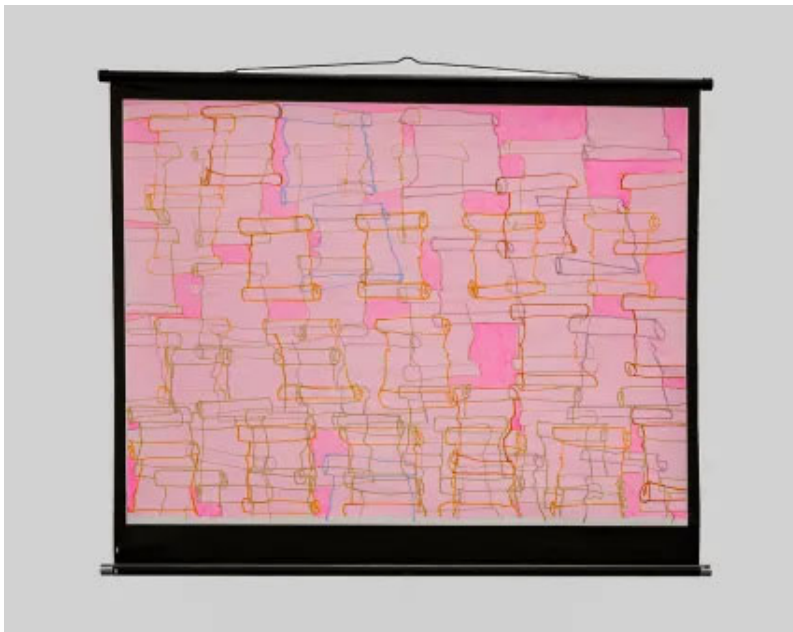
There, perhaps, you have that intuitive element, but its purpose is to solve a logical problem: How can I avoid repeating myself without becoming completely entropic? By following inclinations of my own person that aren’t explicitly known to me or calculated (steering clear of ones that are obvious and make sense to the shrink)? Her last name is homonymous to *jota*, the Portuguese word for the letter *J*, and so she collects everything whose shape resembles it. *Madame De*, 2007, now on view in Zurich in an exhibition organized by Wandschneider, consists of a large red circle, with a stack of two tin cans at the center, atop which rotates a rod appended with walking-cane crook handles reminiscent of a *J*. A self-portrait?



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Not coincidentally, Jotta's first retrospective, mounted at Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, in 2005 after nearly a quarter-century of work, was titled "*Rua Ana Jotta*"; the eponymous work shows a street sign bearing her name. Street signs are a staple of barroom walls or in private party dens or "imaginative" teenagers' bedrooms, typically taken down by the finder themselves because the street has a funny name or commemorates a prominent figure the collector reveres. It's easy to imagine the authorities in London struggling to keep up with the fans who remove the signs along Abbey Road. Jotta's piece feigns that her walls, when densely hung with objects, which God knows they aren't always, can also be read as those of a quaintly original room. In fact, she made the sign herself, and the rooms in her Lisbon home, which one can admire in several on-camera interviews and magazine profiles, are much subtler in design. More to the point, *Rua Ana Jotta* designates the path she has taken while also suggesting that her sensibility encompasses the entire street, which she paces out and, as it were, harvests.





Ana Jotta, *Untitled #8*, 2023, acrylic on projector screen, 51 1/8 × 47 1/4".

But Jotta not only avoids repetition, she also works in series (so as to stop repetitively not-repeating her singularities?). The idea that a painting, when it ages and the colors fade, is a kind of film (a moving image) underlies Tony Conrad's "Yellow Movies," 1972–73, a series that also features the conventional aspect ratios for cinematic projection. But there is a second reason Jotta has painted on dozens of those screens people used to use at home to show narrow-gauge amateur footage from their last vacations: They combine the predefined quality of an industrial standard with the poetic aura of the obsolete and antiquated. So what she has here is a display for two-dimensional works that is also emphatically non-neutral. Signature Jotta: The moment you think that she's illustrating some thinker's theory—in this case Derrida's idea of the frame usurping the content of the picture—you realize, with a laugh, that she's not so much illustrating as parodying it.

You might surmise that someone who's game for any medium and any form of presentation would've seized on the fashion for moving images in the art world as a challenge, the more so given that her background is in film and theater. But she's not especially fond of the gravitas and rigidity of artists who've chained themselves to something. Although she's unafraid of material excess—witness her walls densely covered with taped and mounted objects, drawings, collages, posters (as at *Le Miroir d'en face*, Brussels, in 2016)—it seems that

the self-imposed constraint of an external apparatus with its own logic doesn't do much for her. The videos disappear from her oeuvre, while the "footnotes" pile up; *footnotes* is her name also for the small slips of paper and documents she has collected: another tribute to the irregular frame of the world through which we are led by Ana Jotta Street.

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"Ana Jotta: Composição" (Composition), organized by Miguel Wandschneider, is on view at Kunsthalle Zürich through September 8. "Ana Jotta: On peut . . . On peut encore . . ." (We Can . . . We Can Still . . .), organized by Anthony Huberman and Miguel Wandschneider, is on view at Wiels, Brussels, September 6, 2024–January 5, 2025.

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