

Art

unlimited

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W H A T D O W E N E E D
I S T H E R E
T O W E E P
O V E R P A R T S
O F L I F E ?
T H E W H O L E
O F I T ? A L L
F O R Y E A R S

ALFREDO JAAR

On the occasion of his exhibition in Berlin, A. S. Bruckstein Çoruh wrote an essay about the artist's practice

A LABORATORY IN A UFO

Selin Çiftci reviewed Yağız Özgen's first exhibition *Astronomy Picture Of the Day* in New York

SAY IT OUT LOUD

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NEW HORIZONS ON THE BIENNIAL QUESTION

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Alfredo Jaar

The Temptation to Exist: *What Need is There to Weep?*

Essay: A.S. Bruckstein Çoruh / House of Taswir

Berlin, June 12, 2023

Dear Alfredo Jaar,

My name is Almut Sh. Bruckstein, also known as House of Taswir.

It is a joy and honor for me to imagine an interview and/or essay for Istanbul's magazine Art Unlimited on the occasion of your upcoming exhibition *The Temptation to Exist* at Galerie Thomas Schulte in Berlin.

Art Unlimited's context is courageous and unbroken in spirit. The magazine is a platform for critical thought, contemporary art, and theory. We will have a lot of freedom to present, frame, and feature *The Temptation to Exist*.

As I understood you will be arriving in Berlin this coming weekend; I would be grateful and excited to meet you at any time during the week you may suggest.

One option would be the classical interview format. But since there are so many interesting overlaps—some of them possibly yet unexplored—between your work, the works of the artists you have gathered, and the epistemic architectures I have developed mainly in conversation with critical theorists and artists from the so-called Middle East over the last twenty years, we could also consider doing it a bit differently.

We could meet in the gallery next week for about an hour and a half and speak freely, starting with indefinite beginnings and without a set of predefined questions. I would then create a literary form(at) combining visuals, snippets of our conversation, and theoretical reflection in ways inspired by the architecture of the exhibition itself.

Of course there are various gravities in the orbit of which we could begin the conversation. One of them could be "architecture" itself: architecture(s) related to a critique of representation, to diasporic ways of thinking, and to ancient texts, which in their overflowing margins (all life is in the margin) explore the cracks, fissures, holes in "what's written."

When I think of it now, it is possible that this kind of epistemic architecture is even at work in *The Temptation to Exist*, with all those works punctuating, interweaving (interviewing) the text: WHAT NEED IS THERE TO WEEP OVER PARTS OF LIFE? THE WHOLE OF IT CALLS FOR TEARS.

This would be one way to enter. Naturally there are a million others. What do you think—would you like to suggest a time next week? Looking forward to hearing your thoughts.

Warmly,

Almút

New York, June 12, 2023

Dear Almút,

Thank you very much for your beautiful invitation. I will be honored.

I think that Thursday midday might be best, hopefully we should be almost ready by then. Please let me know if it works for you.

Best regards,

a

Berlin, June 13, 2023

Dear Alfredo,

Thank you for your kind and swift reply.

Thursday midday—12 pm—in the gallery sounds great. I can't wait to see you there.

Warmly, Almút

Diary toward an exhibition opening

Berlin, June 13, 2023

The Temptation to Exist

Yesterday I plunged into E. M. Cioran's *The Temptation to Exist*, a collection of essays published in an English translation in 1968. It is the thirty-five year-old Susan Sontag who introduces this Romanian thinker (1911–1995) to English-speaking readers: "Cioran... with his oddly lyrical chains of ideas, his merciless irony, his gracefully delivered allusions... his universe of discourse is preoccupied with the themes of ... impasse, suffering, mortality... His fierce, tensely argued speculations sum up brilliantly the decaying urgencies of 'Western' thought, but offer no relief from them beyond the considerable satisfaction of trying to understand. Relief, of course, is scarcely Cioran's intention. His aim is diagnosis."

E. M. Cioran. Susan Sontag. Alfredo Jaar. Summoning the "decaying urgencies of 'Western' thought offering no relief beyond trying to understand." What is the temptation so intimately tied to human existence that the artist Alfredo Jaar, together with E. M. Cioran, calls this exhibition "the temptation to exist"?

"We last only as long as our fictions," Cioran suggests in the last paragraph of *The Temptation to Exist*, an essay on death and dying, and the last of the essays collected in the book. Human existence is inextricably tied to fictions, and fictions have a Janus face: just as any fantasy of progress, they may be fabricated to avert the gaze from desolation, death, and disaster. Seen in this light, even hope becomes a matter of betrayal. Or just the other way around: fiction may prove the only way to touch, transform, create reality.

The Temptation to Exist:

an essay on the immanence of death (Cioran). *The Temptation to Exist*: an introduction on how to stand in the ruins of thought, history, and man (Susan Sontag). *The Temptation to Exist*: a Berlin exhibition opening at Thomas Schulte on June 23, 2023, featuring seven works by Alfredo Jaar accompanied by more than forty works by nearly fifty artist friends.¹ Susan Sontag wrote in 1968:

"More and more, the shrewdest thinkers and artists are precocious archaeologists of these ruins-in-the-making, indignant or stoical diagnosticians of defeat in an era of permanent apocalypse. The time of collective visions may well be over: by now both the brightest and the gloomiest, the most foolish and the wisest, have been set down. But the need for individual spiritual counsel has never seemed more acute. *Sauve qui peut.*"

At the Abyss

In the evening I go to a poetry reading at St. Matthäus, a reading and performance of Georges Didi-Huberman's letters to Gerhard Richter, *Images in Spite of All*. The context is the exhibition *At the Abyss of Images*, showing sixteen large-scale paintings by Michael Müller that comment on and undo Gerhard Richter's 2014 Birkenau Cycle. In his letters to Richter, Didi-Huberman, the rigorous French thinker and art theorist, interrogates the (impossible) conditions under which images of horror, violence, occupation, genocide, and bloodshed must (not) be shown. He wrote the letters between 2014 and 2016 after visiting Richter's Cologne studio. There, pinned

to the artist's studio walls, Didi-Huberman saw the four black-and-white photographs from Auschwitz-Birkenau that were the subject of Didi-Huberman's own monograph *Images In Spite of All* (2012): photographs witnessing what happened inside the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. Shot by forced Jewish laborers at Auschwitz-Birkenau, taken in haste and under the threat of death, these photos were smuggled out of the extermination camps, most probably by a man named Alberto Errera. Errera was a member of the *Sonderkommando* perversely set up by the Nazis to torture Jewish laborers with the various tasks connected to the machinery of death. After the war, these four photographs found their way into a museum in Dresden and were publicly shown: the only existing visual testimonies of the Nazi death acts at Auschwitz-Birkenau's gas chambers and crematorium. When Didi-Huberman came to visit, Richter had placed four large, untouched white canvases *vis-à-vis* on the opposite wall, lying in wait for an act of representation that never got quite concrete. Provoked by Didi-Huberman's book, Richter first painted photorealist copies of those photographs, then decided to paint them over, those testimonies fading into opaque abstraction under thick layers of paint.²

How do we do it then? I felt I had stepped into a scene of unending substitutions. Not only Auschwitz but also Rwanda. Not only Alberto Errera but also Gutete Emerita.³ Those outrageous acts of violence, hatred, torture, and death are perpetrated in an abysmal swirl of repetitions. The whole of it... The whole of it, Seneca is right, calls for tears. Not only Ukraine, but also Yemen, South Sudan, Myanmar, Afghan-

istan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, which has been occupied for more than seventy years, where killing of Palestinians becomes a daily routine, and Europe whose borders become a mass grave for people in need drowning to the tens of thousands before the eyes of the world.



² One work by Gerhard Richter is included in Alfredo Jaar's selection of artists for *The Temptation to Exist*. It is a photograph from 2000, measuring 87.6 by 49.5 centimeters, based on a large 1965 almost photorealist oil painting by Richter, *Onkel Rudi* (Uncle Rudi), depicting an anonymized, archetypal soldier of the German *Wehrmacht*. Both works are based on a photo from a personal family album, showing Richter's uncle, Rudolf Schönfelder, who served in Hitler's *Wehrmacht*. Only Richter's deliberate choice of title makes the story concrete.

³ See below for more information.

¹ The exhibition *The Temptation to Exist* was first shown in a different constellation at Galerie Lelong & Co. in New York, May 13 to June 25, 2022.

(Left) Alfredo Jaar, *1 + 1 + 1*, 1987 (detail), Lightboxes with sepia transparencies, gilded frames, mirrors, 101,6 x 101,6 x 12,7 cm, Copyright Alfredo Jaar. Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, The Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles, and the artist, New York.

(Right) Alfredo Jaar, *What Need Is There to Weep over Parts of Life? The Whole of It Calls for Tears*, 2018, Neon, 324 x 410 cm, Copyright Alfredo Jaar. Courtesy Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, and the artist, New York, Photo: GRAYSC 2023

Berlin, June 14, 2023

Say Their Names!

I keep listening to the conversation between Alfredo Jaar and Carlos Basualdo at the opening of *The Temptation to Exist* at Galerie Lelong & Co. in New York, Saturday, May 14, 2022.⁴ Jaar's work *06.01.2020 18.39* (2022)—an artistic testimony to the Black Lives Matter protests in Washington, DC, on June 1, 2020, in solidarity with George Floyd, the unarmed Black man in Minneapolis murdered by a local police officer in an abhorrent public scene—was concurrently on view at the Whitney Biennial. Not only Alberto Errera, but also Gutete Emerita, and also George Floyd. Not only Alberto Errera, but also Gutete Emerita, and also George Floyd, and also Razan Al-Najjar, the Palestinian nurse killed by IDF forces June 1, 2018, at the Gaza border. Not only Alberto Errera, but also Gutete Emerita, and also George Floyd, and also Razan Al-Najjar, and also Mahsa Amini, the twenty-two-year old Iranian woman killed by the “morality police” of the Islamic Republic Iran for not covering her hair correctly. This is the terrifying logic of “the whole of it”: a list of names so long, too long to remember, let alone to mourn, extend one's sorrows to family and friends, speak and write about, all those lives cut short. “Say their names!” we hear. An impossible imperative arises. We must say their names. But the artist is right: empathy and mourning become a matter of power relations and national alliances. Morality a matter of narcissism and self-righteousness. Refrain from the unbearable self-righteousness of morality, Simone Weil suggests in *Gravity and Grace*.⁵ There seems no way to translate the gravity of moral action into the beauty and generosity grace. Refrain, refrain. Humility demands an ego emptied out. How do we do it then? How does the artist do it?

What Need Is There to Weep?

“WHAT NEED IS THERE TO WEEP” Seneca says, and the red neon letters in Alfredo Jaar's installation may offer a twist in the matter. The words are arranged two by two: WHAT NEED—yes, there is a need—IS THERE—alas a specific need—TO WEEP—OVER PARTS—yes! over parts—OF LIFE?—implies a reading in reverse, from the end to the beginning: EVEN IF the whole of it calls for tears, there is a need to weep over parts of life. An impossible imperative cracks an otherwise mere nihilistic reading of this passage. Weeping is not futile, but it is necessary. “What need is there”: there is a need to weep over parts of life, again and again. For more than four decades

Jaar has repeatedly created riveting installations that address the specific deadlocks of this imperative. By use of unforgettable images and carefully crafted texts, with minimalist means, and in fierce opposition to authoritarian repression, the artist explores the impact (media) images have on the general public, rigorously engaging the moral complexities and responsibilities that come with their use, including his own.⁶ The questions that arise are perennial and touch upon the deadlocks of representation. How (not) to expose human suffering to the public gaze? How not to remain silent? How (not) to speak? How then to show *Images in Spite of All?*

even scratched to death
a simple rectangle
of thirty-five
millimeters
saves the honor
of all of the real.
- J.-L. Godard⁷

When in the presence of the face of another, there is an abysmal threshold to cross. Artists, filmmakers, poets, writers, critics know: the biblical imperative “You shall not make for yourself any graven image” literally pertains to nothing as much as to the human face. Why? Because we read: “In the image of God, [He] created man.” The medieval rabbis explain: just as we do not know the face of God, so we ought not to contain/delimit/arrest/define/expose the face of the other. The Hebrew *be'tselem elohim*⁸ is an allusion to “in the shadow of...” Speak shadows, says Paul Celan, give it the shadow... give it shadow enough...

see how things all come alive—
by death! Alive!
Speak true who speaks shadow.⁹

- Paul Celan



⁶ See Lilly Wei, Alfredo Jaar, *studio international* (New York), June 6, 2022.

⁷ Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1998), seen in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All* (Munich: W. Fink, 2007), [2].

⁸ “In the image of God” [Gen. 1:27].

⁹ Paul Celan's poem *Speak You Too*, in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 76–77.

⁴ Carlos Basualdo is the curator of contemporary art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

Berlin, June 15, 2023

Give it the Shadow

How, then, does the artist Alfredo Jaar "give shadow enough"?¹⁰ How does he answer the indifference of the general public? How does he confront the compassion fatigue created by the infinite stream of media and social media images? How does he steer clear of voyeurism?¹¹

I realized that I couldn't use [those images].
It didn't make sense to use them;
people did not react to those kinds of images.
Why would they react now?
I was starting to think that there must be another way
to talk about violence without recurring to violence. . . .
- Alfredo Jaar¹²

Allow me to summon before my mind's eye works by Alfredo Jaar I have seen that "give shadow" to memory, traces, and faces in pain. How do they give shadow? They radicalize the threshold, withhold and blur the image, produce blindness, evoke the imagination by narration, substitute letters for images, mirror or invert the gaze. The installation *Real Pictures* (1995–2007), for example, shown at the Berlinische Galerie in 2012, confronted visitors with several black plinths, a kind of archive, a graveyard reminiscent of Berlin's memorial for the Shoah.¹³ Each plinth bears a paragraph describing a particular scene witnessed by the artist during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. All images are withdrawn from view, locked up in the plinth's drawers, thousands of them, images that the artist took during his trip to Kigali three weeks after the Rwandan genocide, during which nearly a million people were killed in less than one hundred days.¹⁴ One of the inscriptions reads:

Ntarama Church, Nyanata, Rwanda
40 kilometers south of Kigali
Monday, August 29, 1994

This photograph shows Benjamin Musisi, 50, crouched low in the doorway of the church amongst scattered bodies spilling out into the daylight. Four hundred Tutsi men, women and children, who had come here seeking refuge, were slaughtered during Sunday mass. Benjamin looks directly into the camera, as if recording what the camera saw. He asked to be photographed amongst the dead. He wanted to prove to his friends in Kampala, Uganda, that the atrocities were real and that he had seen the aftermath.¹⁵

"Benjamin looks directly into the camera, as if recording what the camera saw." *Real Pictures* not only withholds the image, substitutes letters for images, but also inverts the gaze, barring our vision, expose us to the gaze of the other. The subject switches fronts, *l'écrit* is now voiced by the other. An interrogation takes place, and the visitor is summoned to give testimony, work by work. The *Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996): to give testimony of what happened to Gutete Emerita, thirty years old, surviving her husband, Tio Kahinamurwa, forty, and her two sons, Mubozza, ten, and Matirigari, seven, slaughtered by a Hutu death squad at Sunday mass in Ntarama Church in Rwanda. Jaar tells their story in images/ lightboxes, paragraph by paragraph. Her gaze, in the last one, is the only image.¹⁶ *The Silence of Nduwayezu* (1997): to give testimony what happened to Nduwayezu in Rwanda, the young boy who had witnessed the killings of his parents and remained silent.¹⁷ One million slides of Nduwayezu's eyes pile up on a massive lightbox, with magnifying loupes strategically positioned. The artist pulls the visitor into an ethnographic act; visitors use loupes to take a close look. Precisely this act splits the subject. A double shooting takes place: the minute we look, Nduwayezu's gaze hits back, summons, calls us to stand up. That's the moment we put the device down. To forget or not to forget, to ignore or not to ignore. That is the question.

10 All of Alfredo Jaar's work touches upon this question. Among them is *Shadows* (2014), a mixed-media installation that retells the story of two Nicaraguan women who had lost their parents using photographs by Rosa Wasing.

11 See Kathy Sherman, *The Rwanda Project: Chibanu born, New York Based Conceptual Artist Alfredo Jaar's Latest work at the Getty*, MOCOA, Daily Maverick, April 6, 2021.

12 Quote related to *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita at Sammlungs Zentrum*.

13 *Alfredo Jaar—The Way to the Archives of Resistance*, Berlinische Galerie, June 15–September 17, 2012. This piece is part of the huge work *The Rwanda Project* (1994–2010).

14 See also the museum website of MOCOA in Vancouver concerning the acquisition of Alfredo Jaar's *Real Pictures*, 1995–2007.

15 See Jaar's website, <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1996/the-eyes-of-gutete-emerita/>.

16 See Jaar's website, <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1997/the-silence-of-nduwayezu/>.

17 Alfredo Jaar, *The Silence of Nduwayezu* (1997), part of *The Rwanda Project* (1994–2010).

Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996, Two Quad Vision lightboxes with 4 color transparencies, 67 x 128 x 16 cm, Copyright Alfredo Jaar, Courtesy Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, and the artist, New York.

Berlin, June 16, 2023

Ilya Kabakov R.I.P.

I start the day by reading an obituary for the Soviet conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov, who passed away on May 27, published by the artist Anton Vidokle on e-flux. Vidokle describes the "artistic shock" that Kabakov's work created. "Each narrative contained a conceptual snap that would go off like a small explosion in your mind." Yes, Each work contains a conceptual snap that goes off like an explosion. That's it; Jaar's work withholds and radicalizes the threshold of the image, probes the nervous system, produces shock and surprise when the image is released. Alfredo Jaar's *Sound of Silence* (2006) is such a work.¹⁸ The shock of its last image, released in an explosion of sound, still reverberates in my body. It's the sound of the camera's click.

Lament of the Images and members of the blind

On September 18, 2019, Alfredo Jaar showed his work *Lament of the Images* in the old synagogue in Stommeln.¹⁹ This small synagogue, located not far from Cologne, had escaped destruction in the November 1938 pogroms because the Jewish community of Cologne had sold the synagogue to a German farmer in 1937, who used it as an animal shed, which protected it from the Nazi pogroms. Stommeln Synagogue has been turned into a space for contemporary art since 1991 for in-situ commissioned works by many international artists.²⁰ For his *Lament of the Images* Jaar invents a mobile apparatus, in which two light tables, one standing, one hanging face down, more closer and closer to one another until they almost touch. Cyclical moments of touch rhythmically darken the room. A shadow falls, and when the two lights are about to touch, there is a moment of blindness.²¹ *Chiaroscuro* in the synagogue: darkness for monsters to arise, blindness for the memories of the dead.²²

In 1990 Jacques Derrida curated an exhibition at the Louvre called *Memories of the Blind: Self-Portraits and Other Ruins*, accompanied by a monograph with the same title.²³ Derrida views the artist as a blind man; blindness, dimmed light, tears, veils, body shrouds are the appetitive conditions for creating, drawing, and making an image. The blind become "archives of visibility."²⁴ In Derrida's dreams, he sees his forefathers as blind Jewish old men. Jews? Derrida turns the blindfolded synagogue into an insignia of seeing. Foolish and blind, she (the synagogue) insists to see the world through the letter, the body of the letter, the flesh of the letter, the wound of the letter, the letter of wounds. Letter people. In the world of contemporary art, that blindfolded dame is no longer the synagogue. It is artists, thinkers, filmmakers, activists who develop an aesthetic of resistance, who expose the violence of images unveiled, and return justice to the blind.

An alyrical heteronym separates the drawn object [face] from the [photographic] trace.
- Jacques Derrida²⁵



19 After Stommeln Synagogue (2019), this work (2002) was shown at Thomas Schulte Center Space from November 14 to December 23, 2020.

20 Participating artists included Juan Krawffordt (1991), Richard Serra (1992), Georg Baselitz (1993), Micha Kubell (1994), Eduardo Chillida (1995), Gregor Schneider (2016), Anthony Cragg (2015), Wald Rad (1970–2016), Franz Edvard Walker (2016), and Alfredo Jaar (2019). Rebecca Horn (1991), Lawrence Weiner (2002), Rosemarie Trockel (2002), Sol LeWitt (2005), Maurizio Cattelan (2008) were all solo artists at Synagogue Stommeln. Cf. *One Site—One Space—One Work: 30 Years of Art Projects in the Stommeln Synagogue*, ed. Angelika Schallberg (Münch: Hatje, 2021).

21 Ibid., 216. See also Alfredo Jaar's greeting for the New Year opening, in which he describes an eye surgery (ibid., 227).

22 Reference to Alfredo Jaar's several versions of *Chiaroscuro's* *reflexion* (2012/2014) displaying *Prologue* or Spanish translations of a line from Primo Levi books by Italian theorist, political thinker, and freedom fighter Antonio Gramsci: *O rullo munda et invertebat—non dicitur a seculo. Non dicitur, non dicitur a seculo. The old world is dying, the new world is slow to appear. And in this chiaroscuro the monster arise!* For the politico-poetic translation history of the Gramsci quote, see Mela Mironova and Caqun Page's *Iterary/poetic*, *Dedication* online.

23 *Mémoires d'aveugle* (Unpermitted or amnes routes, exhibition of the Musée de Louvre curated by Jacques Derrida, October 26, 1990–January 21, 1991. Published in English as Jacques Derrida, *Memories of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Michael B. Nass and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., slightly modified by the author.

18 See <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/2006/the-sound-of-silence-2/>.

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11 See Kathy Berman, *The Rwanda Project: Chilean-born, New York-Based Conceptual Artist Alfredo Jaar's Latest work at the Zeitz MOCAA*, *Daily Maverick*, April 6, 2021

12 Quote related to *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* at Sammlung Zimmermann

13 *Alfredo Jaar—The Way It Is: An Aesthetics of Resistance*, Berlinische Galerie, June 15–September 17, 2012. This piece is part of the huge work *The Rwanda Project* (1994–2010)

14 See also the museum website of MCBA in Lausanne announcing its acquisition of Alfredo Jaar's *Real Pictures, 1995–2007*.

15 See Jaar's website, <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1995/the-rwanda-project/real-pictures/>.

16 See Jaar's website, <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1996/the-rwanda-project/the-eyes-of-gutete-emerita/>.

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Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996, Two Quad Vision lightboxes with 4 color transparencies, 67 × 128 × 16 cm, Copyright Alfredo Jaar. Courtesy Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, and the artist, New York

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Lament of the Images and memoirs of the blind

On September 18, 2019, Alfredo Jaar showed his work *Lament of the Images* in the old synagogue in Stommeln.¹⁹ This small synagogue, located not far from Cologne, had escaped destruction in the November 1938 pogroms because the Jewish community of Cologne had sold the synagogue to a German farmer in 1937, who used it as an animal shed, which protected it from the Nazi pogroms. Stommeln Synagogue has been turned into a space for contemporary art since 1991 for in-situ commissioned works by many international artists.²⁰ For his *Lament of the Images* Jaar invents a mobile apparatus, in which two light tables, one standing, one hanging face down, move closer and closer to one another until they almost touch. Cyclical moments of touch rhythmically darken the room. A shadow falls, and when the two lights are about to

touch, there is a moment of blindness.²¹ *Chiaroscuro* in the synagogue: darkness for monsters to arise, blindness for the memoirs of the dead.²²

In 1990 Jacques Derrida curated an exhibition at the Louvre called *Memoirs of the Blind: Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, accompanied by a monograph with the same title.²³ Derrida views the artist as a blind man; blindness, dimmed light, tears, veils, body shrouds are the aporetic conditions for creating, drawing, and making an image. The blind become “archivists of visibility.”²⁴ In Derrida’s dreams, he sees his forefathers as blind Jewish old men. Jews? Derrida turns the blindfolded synagogue into an insignia of seeing. Foolish and blind, she (the synagogue) insists to see the world through the letter, the body of the letter, the flesh of the letter, the wound of the letter, the letter of wounds. Letter people. In the world of contemporary art, that blindfolded dame is no longer the synagogue. It is artists, thinkers, filmmakers, activists who develop an aesthetic of resistance, who expose the violence of images unveiled, and return justice to the blind.

An abysmal heterogeneity
separates the drawn object [face]
from the [photographic] trace.
- Jacques Derrida²⁵



19 *After Stommeln Synagogue* (2019), this work (2002) was shown at Thomas Schulte Corner Space from November 14 to December 23, 2020.

20 Participating artists included Jannis Kounellis (1991), Richard Serra (1992), Georg Baselitz (1993), Mischa Kuball (1994), Eduardo Chillida (1995), Gregor Schneider (2014), Anthony Cragg (2015), Walid Raad/SITU Studio (2016), Franz Erhard Walther (2018), and Alfredo Jaar (2019). Rebecca Horn (1998), Lawrence Weiner (2002), Rosemarie Trockel (2003), Sol LeWitt (2005), Maurizio Cattelan (2008) were all solo artists at Synagogue Stommeln. Cf. *One Site—One Space—One Work: 30 Years of Art Projects in the Stommeln Synagogue*, ed. Angelika Schallenberg (Munich: Hirmer, 2023).

21 *Ibid.*, 326. See also Alfredo Jaar’s greeting for the New York opening, in which he describes an eye injury; *ibid.*, 327.

22 Reference to Alfredo Jaar’s several versions of *Chiaroscuro/O velho mundo/Il vecchio mondo* (2021/2021/2016) displaying Portuguese or Spanish translations of a line from Prison Note books by Italian theorist, political thinker, and freedom fighter Antonio Gramsci: *O velho mundo está morrendo—o novo demora a nascer. Nesse claro-escuro, surgem as monstros.* “The old world is dying, the new world is slow to appear. And in this chiaroscuro the monsters arise.” For the politico-poetic translation history of this Gramsci quote, see Melo Minotaur and CapCat Ragú’s literary/poetic Delicatessen online.

23 *Mémoires d’aveugle: L’autoportrait et autres ruines*, exhibition at the Musée du Louvre curated by Jacques Derrida, October 26, 1990–January 21, 1991. Published in English as *Jacques Derrida, Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Michael B. Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, slightly modified by the author.

June 19, 2023

The color red and the *Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*

There is a command *noli me tangere!* when it comes to the face of other. The wound of the other radicalizes this demand. In 2009 Lebanese artist, filmmaker, and writer Jalal Toufic published a large essay entitled *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*.²⁶ Toufic coins this phrase *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* in reference to an “immaterial” withdrawal of tradition. He claims that such a withdrawal is caused by a specific type of persecution, war, genocide, colonial occupation, or other acts of violence that not only destroy people, buildings, and the infrastructure of a community during the times of the disaster, but also have an irreparable impact on the tradition itself. These are, for Toufic, effects of an immaterial withdrawal, a lack or absence witnessed especially by those who are sensitive to the withdrawal, even in the midst of the material abundance of repair, usually because they themselves have been affected by the disaster. It is the writers, artists, filmmakers who, after a surpassing disaster, can no longer find their way into the newly sculpted terrain, even if books, libraries, institutions, and other remnants of it have been restored and remain materially available. One of the traditions that have immaterially withdrawn after a surpassing disaster, according to Walid Raad, an artist who has worked closely with Jalal Toufic ever since the publication of the essay in 2009, is the color red.²⁷

And Yet.

When entering Alfredo Jaar’s *The Temptation to Exist*, we are immersed in a dim-deep red emanating from WHAT NEED IS THERE TO WEEP, reminiscent of a darkroom’s safe light. How does the artist do it? How does he resurrect the color red which—thus we think—due to extensive bloodshed must have withdrawn past a surpassing disaster? Jaar uses this color in an early work, *September 11, 1973* (1974), in which the artist arrests all weekend dates after September 11, 1973 as “11” in red²⁸, as if to say: after 9/11 of that year, time forever changed.²⁹ “The color red is the color of rage, the color of warning, of danger.”³⁰ But there exists a connection to a work of Alfredo Jaar we must not overlook. A material connection. We look at the poem by Russian poet Anna Akhmatova published in 1930 in St. Petersburg which reads:

So much to do today:
kill memory,
kill pain,
turn heart into a stone,
and yet
prepare to live again
-Anna Akhmatova

Alfredo Jaar dedicates an entire work to Akhmatova’s poem. In his version of the poem, a lettered neon installation called *And Yet* (2019), the color red resists its withdrawal. The color red resists the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster because it finds itself glued to the words AND YET.

Berlin, June 20, 2023

Power, Joy, Humor, Resistance

I get lost in following the work and life of Anna Akhmatova. And I collect my thoughts for the meeting with Alfredo Jaar on Thursday at Thomas Schulte that I am really looking forward to. How does the artist convene his loosely associated faculty of forty-eight artists, living and no longer living? And how does he turn rage and mourning into *Power, Joy, Humor, Resistance*?³¹

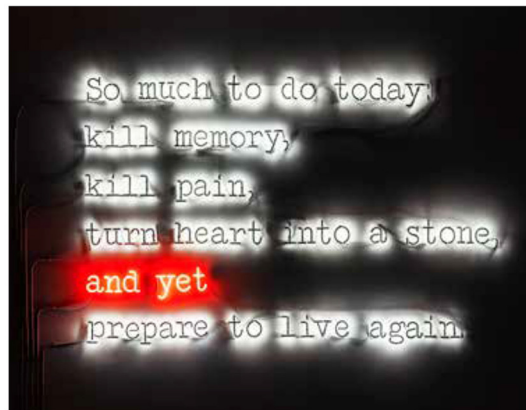
An afterthought from the Kalam School

The medieval thinkers of the Kalam schools take a detour through theology to give us their take on the matter. They all ask the same question: since we must not ascribe any essential attributes to God (nor anyone else), how do we know the ways of creation and how to act in the world? The key to this question, they say, are attributes of action, attributes of relation. To the Kalam masters, critical thinkers before their time,

sentences like “God is good” or “God is just” are blasphemous, “and yet!”, goodness and justice, love and graciousness indicate (divine) ways of human interaction. The Istanbul art scene is full of deeply creative ways of doing things, of creating solidarity and loyalty, exuberance and joy “Despite It All.” “Love and Action is the Answer” is a hashtag among members of one of the most inspiring communities in Istanbul. I am convinced there is massive energy and power when communities in the vicinity of *The Temptation to Exist* unite. Alfredo Jaar has created such a community, a community where the living and the dead unite, a community imaginary and real, inspiring and exuberant, a community for a future that is now. Forty-nine artists and sixty-three works unite and relate to one another in a space measuring twenty square meters, a tiny imploding universe. If there is a black hole in which things worked in reverse,

tears turned into dance, swords into plowshares, patriarchy into female power, then it must look like this one. Alfredo Jaar has built his own *Kleine Mnemosyne*,³² where artists, thinkers, critics, activists unite and are dancing on “down to the government.”³³ Rebecca Horn’s mobile installation *Love and Hate: Knuggle Dome for James Joyce* (2004) teaches us the secret, both contemporary and ancient, widely visible to all.

How do sharp knives kiss? she asks. And how do we?



26 Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009); free download on <https://jalaltoufic.com>

27 A.S. Bruckstein Çoruh, *Red Ink: Utopia/Dystopia*, in *House of Taswir: Doing and Un-Doing Things; Notes on Epistemic Architecture(s)* (Munich: W. Fink, 2014), 180. See also the entire chapter “Red Ink,” 153–91.

28 September 11, 1973, was the day of the military coup (supported by the CIA and Western powers) that brought down the Allende government and put Agostino Pinochet into power. For the work *September 11, 1973* and its variants see the website of the Hofselt Gallery in San Francisco, <https://hofseltgallery.com/exhibitions/105/works/artworks-9046-alfredo-jaar-september-11-1973-1974-2011/>.

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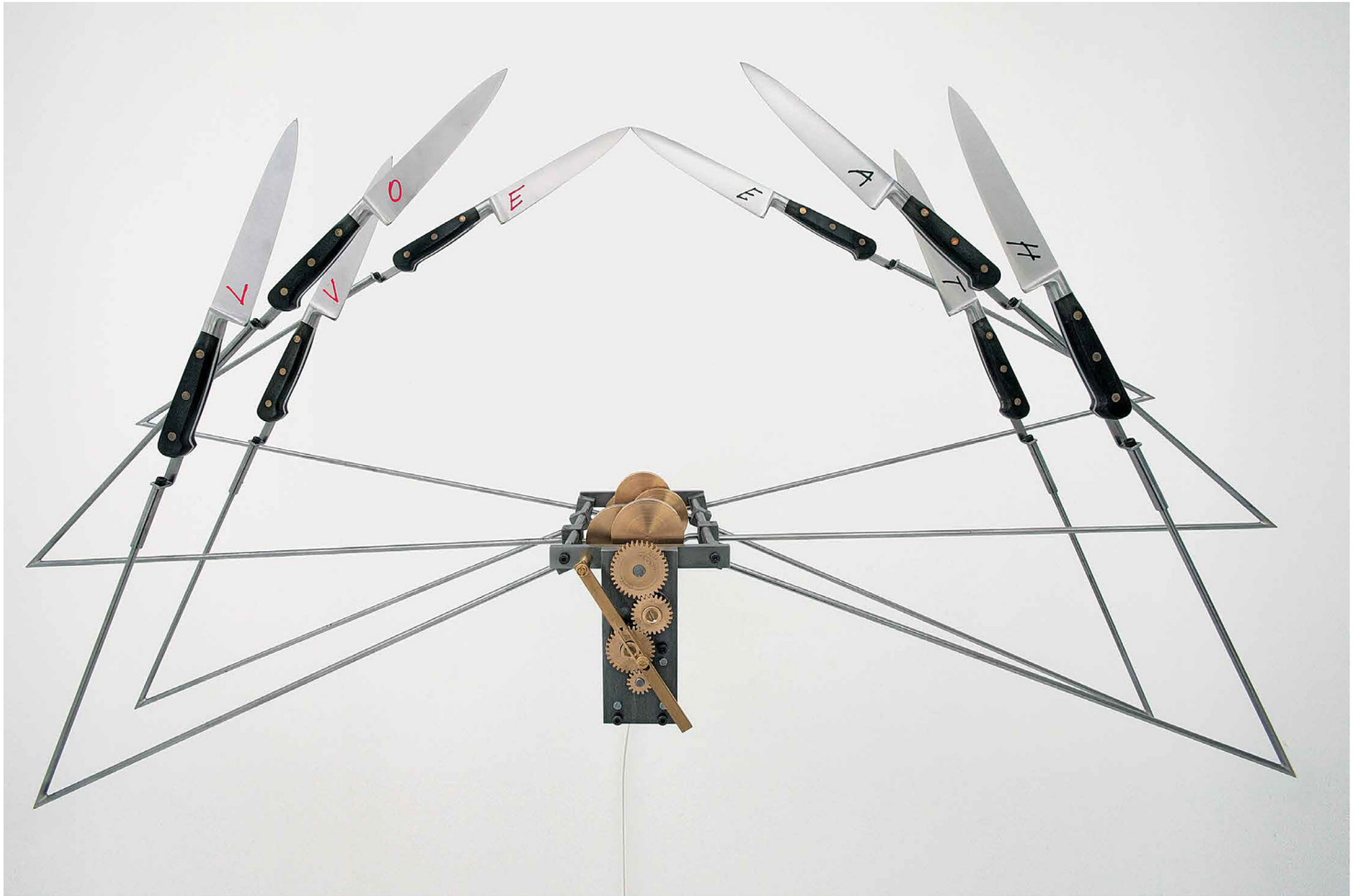
30 Alfredo Jaar in conversation with Carlos Basualdo at Galerie Lelong & Co. in New York (see note 1).

31 Work by Monica Bonvicini (2021), shown by Alfredo Jaar in *The Temptation to Exist*, Thomas Schulte Berlin.

32 Reference to the small art and think space *Meine Kleine Mnemosyne* (My Little Mnemosyne) at the House of Taswir. In a space measuring twenty square meters, it shows a subjective and exuberant configuration of more than fifty artists, mainly from the Middle East, who all dedicate their life and work to resisting disappearances, violence, and loss. See www.taswir.org. It was inspired by Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Project* in Hamburg in the 1920s. Warburg’s Atlas had sixty-three image plates. Cf. Aby Warburg, *Der Bildatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003).

33 Jenny Holzer, *Survival: Dance on Down to the Government...* (1984), text on cast aluminum plaque. This work was included in Jaar’s *The Temptation to Exist*.

even scratched to death
a simple rectangle of thirty-five
millimeters
saves the honor
of all of the real
-J.L. Godard





(Previous page) Rebecca Horn, Love and Hate, Knuggle Dome for James Joyce, 2004, Knives, metal construction, motor, 60 × 110 × 40 cm, Copyright Rebecca Horn. Courtesy of Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, and the artist, Bad König, Odenwald, Photo: GRAYSC 2023

(Up) Grada Kilomba, Untitled Poem (One Sorrow, One Revolution), 2022, Charcoaled piece, engraved poem, hand-painted with gold leaf, 24 × 24 × 86 cm, Copyright Grada Kilomba. Courtesy of Galerie Thomas Schulte and the artist, Berlin, Photo: GRAYSC 2023

ALFREDO JAAR

THE TEMPTATION TO EXIST

24 JUNE TO 12 AUGUST

OPENING TONIGHT
7 TO 9 PM

BAS JAN ADER
ROSA BARBA
LETIZIA BATTAGLIA
DAWOUD BEY
MONICA BONVICINI
FRÉDÉRIC BRULY BOUABRÉ
STANLEY BROUWN
GIOVANNA CALVENZI
ANGELA DE LA CRUZ
HANNE DARBOVEN
GINO DE DOMINICIS
JUAN DOWNEY
AYŞE ERKMEN
THEO ESHETU
VALIE EXPORT
HAMISH FULTON
HANS HAACKE
MONA HATOUM
JENNY HOLZER
REBECCA HORN
ALFREDO JAAR
ANN VERONICA JANSSENS
JOAN JONAS
BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN
ON KAWARA
SEYDOU KEÏTA

GRADA KILOMBA
COSIMA ZU KNYPHAUSEN
JOSEPH KOSUTH
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MISCHA KUBALL
PIERO MANZONI
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DAYANITA SINGH
NANCY SPERO
ROSEMARIE TROCKEL
REIJIRO WADA
LAWRENCE WEINER
FRANCESCA WOODMAN

Invitation to the Opening of Alfredo Jaar,
The Temptation to Exist at Gallery Thomas Schulte, June 2023

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