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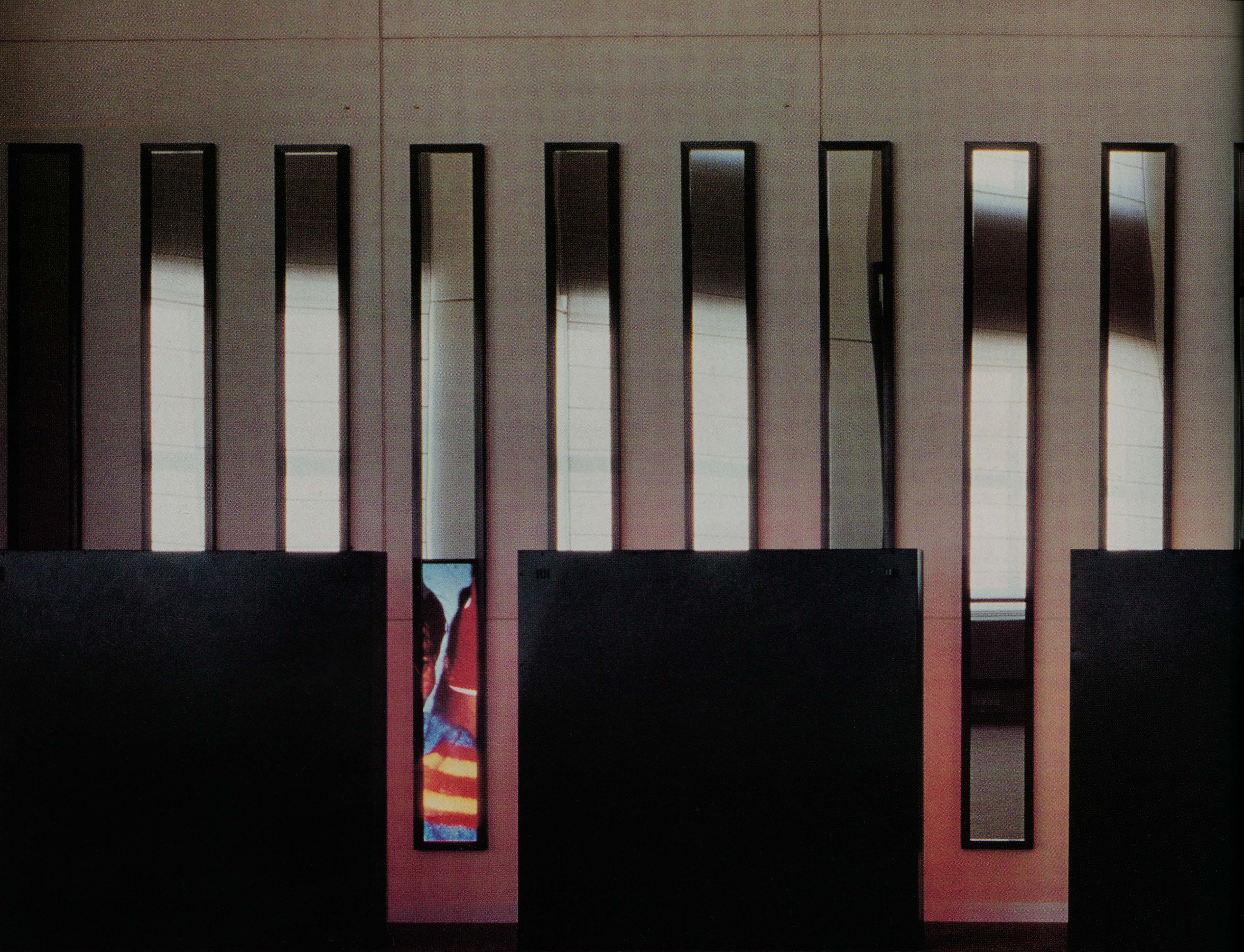


Alfredo Jaar, *Paysage* (Landscape), 1989, light boxes with color transparencies and mirrors, ca. 100″ × 23′4″ × 72″ overall. Permanent installation in the General Meeting Room of the Foundation L'Arche de la Fraternité, Paris.

ALFREDO JAAR

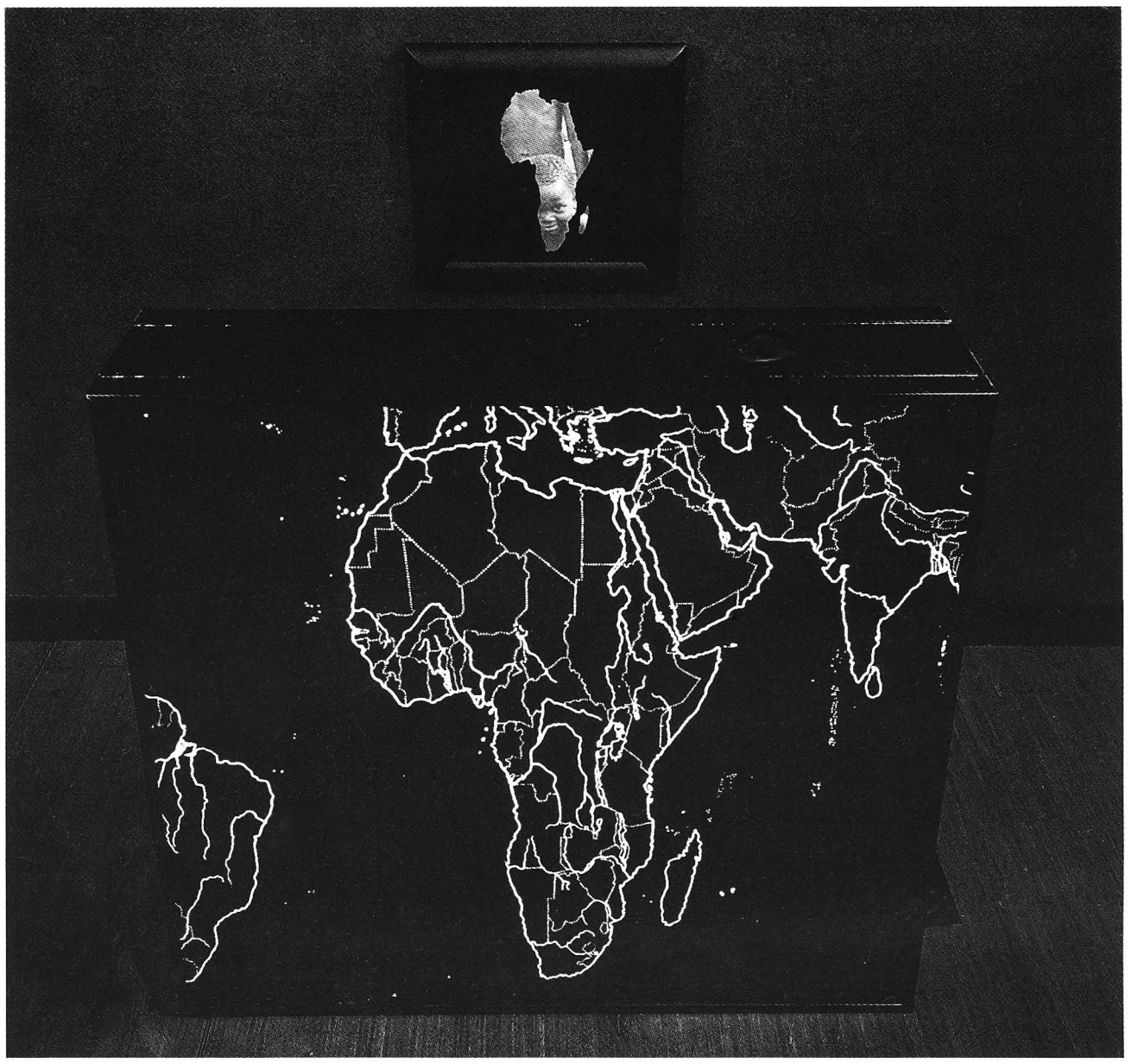
THE BODY MAPS

THE OTHER

Patricia C. Phillips

I do not believe that history obeys a system, nor that its so-called laws permit deducing future or even present forms of society; but rather that to become conscious of the relativity (hence of the arbitrariness) of any feature of our culture is already to shift it a little.

Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*



Alfredo Jaar, *La Géographie ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* (Geography = war; detail), 1989, light boxes with color transparencies and mirrors, installation in "*Magiciens de la terre*" exhibition, Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, 1989. Opposite: **Alfredo Jaar, *The Fire Next Time* (detail), 1989,** light boxes with black and white transparencies, 50″ × 50′ × 25′ overall, installation in the Grand Lobby of the Brooklyn Museum. Collection of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

On the floor are two world maps. The one to the right is a conventional projection of the world; I remember that I got this particular map as a centerfold in a *National Geographic* magazine. To its left is another global map conceived by German geographer Arno Peters in 1974. Although Peters' map neither adds nor deletes countries or continents, it presents a radical re-presentation of the world's sphere flattened to a two-dimensional surface. The conventions of cartography established by Gerardus Mercator over 400 years ago faithfully follow a grid of longitudinal and latitudinal lines. According to his projections, landmasses further away from the equator seem larger than statistics might indicate, and third-world countries, generally close to the equator, seem far smaller. Peters' schema restores a proportional equality to each country and continent. Peters claims that all landmasses have been placed at their exact geographic correlates. They are precisely proportioned and shaped, and represent their actual area. Every country and continent is presented in its true location and at its correct size. Both maps are products of the science of cartography; both are based on calculation, measurement, and the rules of representation. Yet such is the divergence between them that, suddenly, the graphic "truth" I learned as a child, and whose imprint I can still visualize in my mind's eye, appears problematic and highly questionable. What Peters has accomplished with his new view of the world is to throw into doubt objective standards of measurement. Peters' map dispels the traditional Eurocentric bias of mapmaking. Doing this, it suggests the ideological subtext of all forms of measurement.

It was Alfredo Jaar who first showed me Arno Peters' map, well before he began to use this provocative image in his own installations. Cartography is both an intellectual and a personal passion for him. Jaar is an inveterate traveler—the graphic representation of the world and his experience of it have shaped his philosophy. He is cosmopolitan and simultaneously feels that he belongs nowhere. Born in 1956 in Santiago, Chile, Jaar moved with his family to Fort-de-France, Martinique, when he was seven. Ten years later he returned to Santiago, where he received a degree in architecture at the University of Chile. This degree was amended by extensive studies in film. As an artist living in Chile, Jaar addressed both local and global political issues in projects that involved landscape, the streets, and occasionally the art galleries. In 1982, he moved to New York; it may not feel like home, but it is where he most often resides.

Jaar's work in the early and mid '80s used photographs, light boxes, and mirrors to create difficult, self-conscious encounters for the viewer. Images were often placed near the ceiling or just off the floor. Sometimes they could not be apprehended directly but only in reflection or from awkward, deliberately uncomfortable positions. The photographs were radically cropped into excruciating close-ups; bodies,seen from the waist down, seemed to be incomplete—or dismembered. Like Peters' map, Jaar's observation of people in often degrading situations showed that the photographic image and the limitations of the chosen framing device were also a form of measurement, a subjective way of representing the world to eyes saturated with the products of the "objective" profession of photojournalism. For Jaar is profoundly aware that the human body, perhaps even more than the world map, is under constant surveillance, subject to measurement, analysis, and classification.

In *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould explores the insidious ways that society and its institutions have studied and classified the human form in order to legitimate oppressive ideas—and political agendas. The shoddy, now disputed strategies of craniometry and phrenology were based on the 19th century's absolute faith in empiricism. One Samuel George Morton, for example, a Philadelphia-based physician, achieved great acclaim for his exhaustive studies of the volume of the human brain. At the time of his death, in 1851, he had amassed over 1,000 human skulls.[1] Morton's "scientific" procedures were employed to prove his preconceived thesis that races and ethnic groups could be empirically and irrefutably ranked. The accrued data satisfied white society's proposition that black men and women were inferior to whites. The objectivity of scientific method was used to substantiate the absolute subjectivity of prejudice and bias.

Gould is interested in, among other things, the social context of science. His research has illuminated the ways that scientific (that is, "objective") data have been adjusted to support socioscientific predispositions. It is no surprise to discover, but important to remember, that research is neither a neutral nor a pure pursuit; the analysis of the human body and the strategies of cartography have been guided by ideological intentions. The human body—like an area of the world—is both the symbol and the vessel

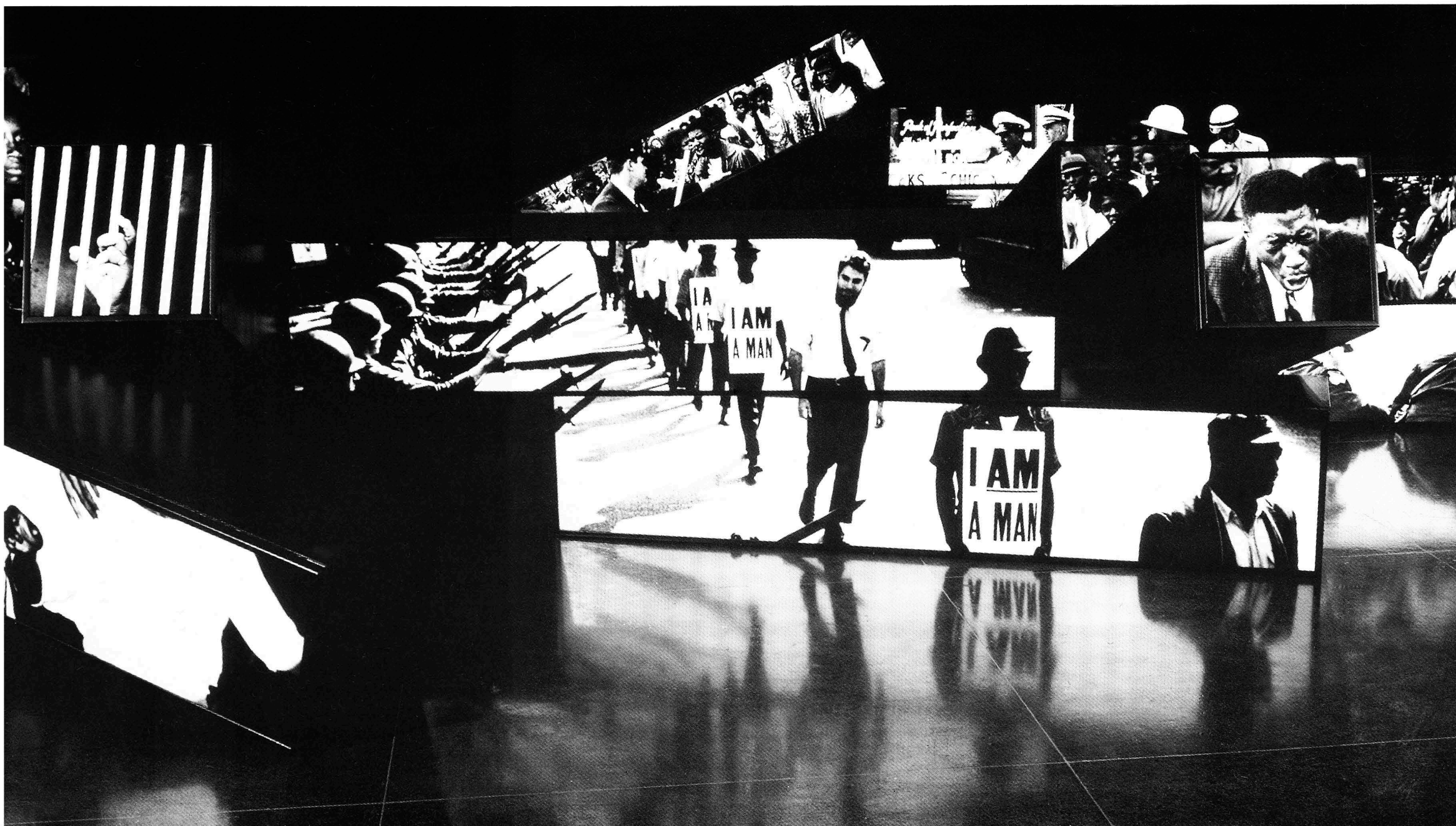
of social progress; the study and documentation of both are, therefore, always inflammatory affairs. Mercator's 1569 projection was both a practical and philosophical delineation of the world – from the European colonizers' point of view. Samuel George Morton's anatomical mapping was an exercise in social navigation – and social control. Their "truth" need not be ours.

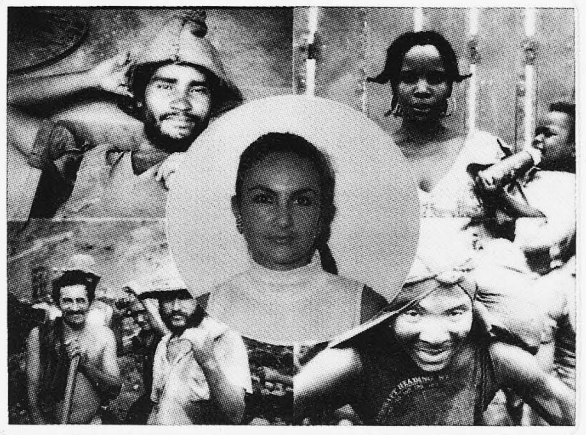
Jaar is preoccupied by the dilemma of the "other" – the perception and measurement of the dominated by the dominant. His work is, in fact, a cartography of the human body as a site of preconception, as the subject of manipulation. Its geography includes the human face and body as well as the constraining spaces and edges of institutions, a space that allows him to examine the philosophical dilemma of the other – in society and self – and to explore how this concept has aided progress at the expense of a sound intellectual, moral understanding of ethnicity. Jaar's position is informed by his own circumstances as a current resident/participant in a ruling culture who has lived much of his life in third-world cities. He resides both inside and outside – as an observer of the other and as one himself.

Mapping and measurement establish one's place in the world – being "here" rather than "there." In *The Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov[2] takes the reader through the convoluted narrative of discovery of the American continent by white, European explorers in order to examine the relationship of self to other, as well as various typologies of otherness. Is it, he asks, possible to acquire a full understanding of the self without determining who is not? Does not an ideation of self require the reflective foil of those who are perceived as radically different? Clearly, these are questions of psychological import as well as institutional identification. The potency of the concept of the other has been a strong stimulant to progress in dominant cultures at the expense of underdevelopment and selective deprivation in those dominated. For the other is condemned to the margins of perception and acceptance; and the wider the margin between oneself and the other the better. Here the marginality of the other is both a circumstance of survival on the edge – on the outer borders – as well as the broad bunker of space that physically segregates. The other is the opposition; whether perceived as inferior or equal, the other is profoundly, irreconcilably different.

Jaar's work addresses with aggressive intelligence views of the world that propagate this perverse dialectical condition. The conventions of seeing become both metaphors for and operations of the mechanisms of thinking, in order to illuminate the bankruptcy of power predicated on oppression. To accomplish this without sentimentality, without participation in another form of exploitation, is an almost impossible task. Jaar's work marks and inhabits its own edges; the corruptibility of his position as artist/observer/critic is an irony that the artist explicitly engages.

In 1989 Jaar completed four major projects including his first permanent installation in Paris. They all employ photographic transparencies of human faces and figures in light boxes which are either free-standing or embedded in the wall. Some images the artist has found in the files of United Press International and other photographic archives and some are by Jaar, taken during the course





Altered Polaroid picture taken of visitor to **Alfredo Jaar's *The Booth*, 1989,** installation in "The Photography of Invention" exhibition, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., 1989. Opposite: **Alfredo Jaar, *La Géographie ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* (detail), 1989.**

of his peripatetic trips to Brazil, Nigeria, and other parts of the world. Whether the images have the urgent, formulaic qualities of news photos or the more personal, direct gaze of Jaar's own eye, they all possess a grainy tangibility. The cropping and composition of images, their irregular relation to the rectangular edges of the light box, and the regularity of the architectural context are significant formal components through which Jaar seeks to effect—and subvert—how we feel, think, and see.

Early in 1989, Jaar was commissioned to do a permanent project in a monstrous post-and-lintel building in La Défense, on the edge of Paris. The so-called Arche de la Fraternité is a place where scholars, researchers, and students study international relations, situations of oppression, and the dream of global peace. The institutional setting for Jaar's piece, which is entitled *Paysage* (Landscape), was the top-floor offices of the International Foundation for Human Rights, in a shockingly banal lounge where visiting dignitaries meet for formal receptions. On one wall of the triangular-shaped room, Jaar installed a long line of tall, thin mirrors in narrow, black frames. There are small spaces between the mirrors, but they operate formally like the pickets of a fence or the bars of a jail cell. Placed several feet back from and facing the reflective wall of mirrors is a line of five rectangular black light boxes. Each holds a color transparency of a black or brown face from an imperiled area of the world. The faces are simultaneously fierce, frightened, dignified, unique—and unknown. Nameless, they stand as symbols of the "promiscuous idea of a Third World."[3] In one, a small grimacing child partially hides his face from the intrusive, scary camera lens.

Jaar has created a volatile corridor of space between the mirrors mounted on the wall and the perfect procession of light boxes. It does not encourage entry; rather, most viewers move along behind the boxes. They cannot get into a position to see the transparencies straight on, but can only apprehend the images as reflected in the parallel line of mirrors. The angle of perception, and the movement of each viewer's body through the room, create a strange pas de deux with the cropped, distorted images encountered in the mirrors' white glare. No face can be seen in its entirety; the slender mirrors crop, edit, shatter them into unassimilable fragments. The small expanses of white wall offer only blank moments and the regular rhythm of interrupted, frustrated vision. When *Paysage* is approached from an acute angle, the mirrors reflect slices of the transparencies as well as truncated panoramas of the surrounding room, whose sole wall of windows looks out on the panorama of Paris. The impoverished, pained reality of the faces in the photographs is conjoined, not without irony, with the reality of a wealthy institution whose purpose it is to study the oppressive circumstances of others. The calculated architectonics of Jaar's installation—like the presumed veracity of all standards of measurement—address the questionable authority of the institution; the selected visages make concrete the statistical, abstract analyses of research and unemotional scholarship.

Paysage offers another measure of man, woman, and child. The precision of the formal elements suggests a sure system of calibration. The absolute order of the setting promises a level of control and certainty—the clean context of empiricism. But the seeming certitude of the installation—the architectural module as visual yardstick—proves an arbitrary, unreliable method of measurement. Such regularity can produce no logical or meaningful data. Instead, it creates this gyrating, maniacal compass whose rotating, restless arrow cannot find magnetic north. All is changing and nothing is stationary except the expressionless face of the pocket instrument—the faces in the photographs. Like Peters' projection, this is mapmaking without fidelity to the axis, to four directions. All is distortion, but it is not necessarily wrong. The discomfiting perceptual experience causes a productive mistrust of vision based on unquestioned traditions, on narrow definitions. The other becomes less easy to dismiss.

If *Paysage* uses the order of the installation to challenge the potentially corrupt or malignant use of measurement, *The Fire Next Time*, inspired by James Baldwin's 1963 novel, used disorder to explore the nature of racial violence in the United States, and to comment on the horrendous distances still remaining between "us" and "them." Installed last summer in the space of the Brooklyn Museum's grand lobby, *The Fire Next Time* was composed of a series of long, coffin-shaped light boxes scattered on the floor against a vast wall that Jaar had painted a deep blue-black. These light boxes held back-lit black and white transparencies of violent confrontations between black citizens and white law-enforcement personel, which Jaar had obtained from UPI and Bettmann Newsphotos.

Jaar's presentation of these episodes from the history of the civil-rights movement was calculated for emotional impact: a man in a line of march, wearing a placard that says, "I AM A MAN," is bisected at the neck; a drama of running feet is completed in a series of images stacked one atop the other. In every case, the position of the viewer was crucial to the apprehension of the parts and the whole. Walking through the field of boxes, the viewer was forced to look down to see. Every small pivot framed a new collage of images. Here, the system of modules—no matter how meticulously proportioned—frustrated conclusiveness or closure. How could one get one's bearings, or measure the magnitude of the events depicted, when the formal elements positively militated against it? Distance, objectivity, became an impossibility. What was safely "past" remained uncomfortably, almost physically, "present."

Jaar sought other ways to discomfit his audience in another installation, entitled *The Booth*, which made manifest the unavoidable nature of complicity. Sited in the National Museum of American Art, in Washington, D.C., last summer, the project was largely informed and inspired by the National Portrait Gallery, which is adjacent to it. For this work, the artist built a large black cube, on three sides of which he placed enormous photo transparencies of individuals he had encountered during his travels to non-Western cultures. The large, backlit portraits glowed, the estranged, strained, but eager faces confronting the stranger's camera—and now the viewer. The fourth wall of the cube was cut in half vertically to create an open doorway. A photo reverse of Peters' map marked the entrance into a pure white interior. It was both a welcome mat and a warning.

Once inside, viewers could press against one wall in order to have their photographs taken by a technician operating a Polaroid camera, an experience not unlike having your picture taken in a photo booth at Woolworth's. After a moment's wait, the viewer was presented with the photograph. But it was a manipulated image. The familiar face of self was encircled by a halo of faces like the ones pictured on the outside of the booth. This surrounding filagree was the human evidence of suffering, of struggle, of the insidious perpetuation of the other in order to confirm the centrality of the self. Making the viewer complicit in the process of distancing, Jaar enacted a startling betrayal of individual security and complacency.

Peters' world map is a bold challenge to the conventions of Western cartography, but the novelty of its delineations is even more conspicuous when seen as white outline on black surface. As used by Jaar in *The Booth*, the agitated lines of coastal edges and national boundaries suggest that Peters' method of measuring the world is very much about reconceptualizing the world in a jarring new way. There is a graphic sense of evenness,

balance, interdependence, and the vulnerability of propinquity. Countries are elongated—they seem closer, with all that that implies. The places of the other seem more substantial and not nearly so far away.

Jaar has also used this provocative image to lead viewers into a maze. Last May in Paris, as part of the exhibition "*Magiciens de la terre*" (Magicians of the earth) at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle of La Villette, he built *La Géographie ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* (Geography = war, in Jaar's translation). Here, viewers entered a black labyrinth of space. The dark entrance was marked by a photographic negative of the Peters world map. The circuitous route within took people through a sequence of spaces and images that document—through Jaar's measured gaze—the dumping of toxic materials in Koko, a small Nigerian village near Lagos. For Jaar, such disposals of noxious PCBs, solid industrial and pharmaceutical residues, asbestos fiber, and oxalic acid are just "the 'modern' version of the slave trade,"[4] and, like it, lucrative for the countries and individuals involved; even some of the victims—adults and children suffering from inflamed eyes, running sores, and cancer—have found the acceptance of the world's garbage a risk worth taking for the money received. But the debacle goes beyond the plight of the individual: the barrels and containers of lethal stuff deteriorate or tear, and the contents have infected the land and water table with spreading thoroughness.

Without resorting to the shock tactics of photojournalism, Jaar quietly led the viewer into a final visual confrontation with a large-scale image of people picking through a dump of refuse and dangerous chemicals. On the other side of this interior chamber was a free-standing light box holding a photo negative of Peters' revision of the African continent. Its reflection shone across the space onto the chest of the young man looming in the foreground of the photograph, reading as the outline of a distorted heart, a fortuitous visual conjunction that the artist himself did not plan.

Ecumenism requires vigilance; seeing requires a vision. Jaar's work helps us to chart and measure a course; his work places the viewer in a situation where the systems of substantiation fall under intensive review. He does not allow us to forget that, as Todorov writes, "at the same time that it was tending to obliterate the strangeness of the external other, Western civilization found an interior other."[5] Without the sentimentality of personalization, Jaar discovers the dimensions and location of ideology in the lines, colors, surfaces, and proportions of the human body. His measured methods—like the Peters map—sabotage an idea of otherness founded on distortion. He places the other firmly in the world—and in ourselves. □

Patricia C. Phillips writes regularly for *Artforum*.

1. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1981, p. 51.
2. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, New York: Harper & Row, 1987.
3. Shiva Naipaul, "The Illusion of the Third World," in *Harper's*, September 1985, p. 15.
4. Alfredo Jaar, quoted in *Magiciens de la terre*, exhibition catalogue, Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989, p. 155. Translation from the French.
5. Todorov, p. 248.