

ARTS & MEDIA

Studies on Happiness bring history to the fore

New exhibit by Chile's Alfredo Jaar at Parque de la Memoria focuses on dictatorship

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FOR THE HERALD

After four years of research, Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar shows a new temporary — and hopefully soon-to-be permanent — site-specific memorial at Parque de la Memoria: *Punto Ciego* (*Blind Spot*). This new model of memorial is accompanied by the most complete overview of the artist's works, made during and about the dictatorship in Chile.

The new memorial is built within the space of the museum. It is dark and only in the corner we see a screen radiating a soft light. It is connected to a camera outside somewhere. As in real time, the light alters — but the corner remains unchanged. It is a cell corner. A cell where loved ones may have been locked in, never to return. A corner of light which draws the careful eye of the many people who are still searching for their disappeared relatives. Still hoping.

"After four years of research, what I found striking in Argentina was that the process of dealing with the past is still so alive," Alfredo Jaar said. "In Chile, they have turned the page a long time ago. And the dictatorship started at about the same time. Here, the perpetrators are put on trial. People are still looking for their children and grandchildren..." The artist continues by mentioning the park's wall with names: "There is room for 30,000 names. There are only 8,500 now. So, they are waiting for 21,500 more names to be declared."

Punto Ciego can be considered a space of waiting, apart from mourning. "I wanted to articulate this eternal, impossible waiting that exists in Argentine society, exemplified by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and by so many other people." This waiting is what fascinated and horrified the artist the most.

Jaar is a globally well-known and distinguished architect, filmmaker and artist, who has exhibited not less than four times at the Venice Biennale, always leaving a big impression, as well as at the Biennale of Sao Paulo and the Documenta in Kassel, Germany. The MOMA, Tate, Centre Pompidou and Reina Sofia all have works by Jaar in their collections. In 2012, a



A glimpse into Alfredo Jaar's exhibition at the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires.



An image from Alfredo Jaar's Studies on Happiness project.

large retrospective of his works was put on in Berlin. He showed *Studies on Happiness* there, after a curator from Switzerland had found these works in his archive five years prior.

The series of works Jaar called *Studies on Happiness*, which also give the title of the exhibit at Parque de la Memoria, are documents of experiments he did when he was still living in Chile. Born in 1956, he was young at the time of the dictatorship. "And I had not been trained as an artist," he adds. So even though, now, look-

ing back, he may find some of the works somewhat naïve, especially in comparison to his current line of work, he does see their value.

"It was a time of censorship. What's worse is that there was self-censorship. We were afraid, and you did not know how far you could go as an artist. You didn't want to disappear, to end up in jail. So you had to create your own mental red line. A line you cannot cross because it may be dangerous."

And in this complicated game of

self-censorship, Jaar thought that working on happiness would be considered so naïve, so simple, that he would not be touched. So he went to the streets and gave people a mint. The passer-by could either participate by voting yes or no to the question: "are you happy," or eat the mint. "I did that with a sense of humour," he smiles.

But the project went further. Jaar made portraits of happy and unhappy people in studios, art spaces, museums. He'd ask them about their happiness. They talked about it too — not about the dictatorship specifically, but "you could read between the lines. It made people speak in very poetic terms."

So people voted and spoke out — about things they were not allowed to do at the time. Following this project, Jaar received a scholarship to continue working in New York. He did not hesitate: in 1982 he left the country, and his last work in Chile, also included in the exhibit, is a divide he made of little Chilean flags in a landscape, showing the division in society — half of the population being against and half for Pinochet.

In New York, at first Jaar continued working on the situation in Chile. But he realized quickly that there was no interest in his homeland. Was he an-

gry or disappointed by that? No. It was just the way it was. Besides, he wanted to grow as an artist. And he was in another context, so he moved on. But not quite. One of his everlasting sources of fascination — as can be distilled from the show — is the person of Henry Kissinger. As the US Secretary of State at the time of Pinochet's dictatorship, Kissinger was fully aware and informed about what was happening in Chile, but he did not care. Jaar shows an extract of a conversation he had with the president, which demonstrates his derogatory view of the country.

Jaar became obsessed with Kissinger. On view is also Kissinger's biography, in which a photo with the Chilean leader was omitted. Jaar searched the archives and added the purposely left-out photo. He shows Kissinger for who he was and wants to share that image with victims of all the crimes that were left unaccounted for — crimes for which the artist and many others believe Kissinger should be tried.

In 2002, together with a Human Rights organization in Germany, Jaar bought up ad space in newspapers when Kissinger was visiting the country, and placed ads saying "Arrest Kissinger" in all the languages of the countries where crimes had been committed.

"Isn't it futile? I have been asked. Yes, maybe, but don't forget the emotions of the victims. I want them to know there are other models possible than the one where people like that can live in impunity. There are other models of seeing. And that's what I want to show: that's what art can do."

Blind Spot, specifically made for the park, is also about not seeing. "Just like in Chile, there were also a lot of people here who saw but didn't act — a blindness in history." *Blind Spot*, the cell with a corner of light, is not only a place of mourning or waiting, it is a shared space. It becomes a place of solidarity once entered.

WHEN AND WHERE

Until March 1 at Parque de la Memoria. The museum is open from Monday to Friday from 10am to 5pm, weekends and holidays from 12pm to 7pm. Free admission.

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