

Uncomfortable Truths

An encounter with Alfredo Jaar

Here is an artist who doesn't welcome interference during his working process. Alfredo Jaar values context and needs to understand where his work will go before he can know what to place there. To him, it is of great import that the work communicates with the specific audience that will see it. Given the self-referential milieu he found in New York in the early 1980s he decided that it would be appropriate to make work that related to other parts of the world, to connect the city with the rest of the planet. And that is what he has proceeded to do.

LYLE REXER

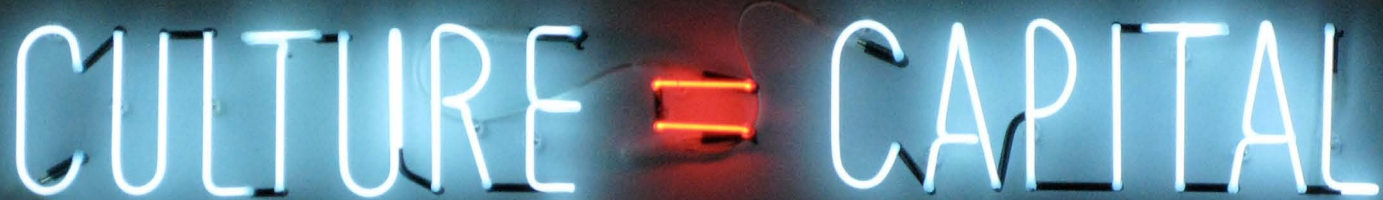
In the world of art, it is Alfredo Jaar's task to remind audiences of the things they would rather forget. He has built an international career by making challenging works that deal with such subjects as the Rwandan genocide, the exploitation of gold miners in Brazil, and the dumping of toxic waste in Nigeria. Chilean born, he has won numerous international awards, including a MacArthur 'genius' fellowship. Most recently he was chosen to represent Chile in the 55th Venice Biennale (2013). Jaar travels constantly for lectures and to do research for his art installations. DAMN° caught up with him at his Chelsea studio in New York during a brief hiatus.

DAMN°: You've recently been selected as Chile's representative to the Venice Biennale. Tell us about that.
Alfredo Jaar: I generally don't speak about work in progress because it is likely to change before it is finished, so anything I could possibly say would be premature. Every reaction affects me and I don't want it to interfere with the process I follow in my

work. I just came back from Rome, where I met with architects and fabricators, and the piece has already gone through a major change. I can tell you, however, that I intend to create a piece that is a critical reflection on the biennale as an institutional format for exhibiting art. That's all I'll say for now.

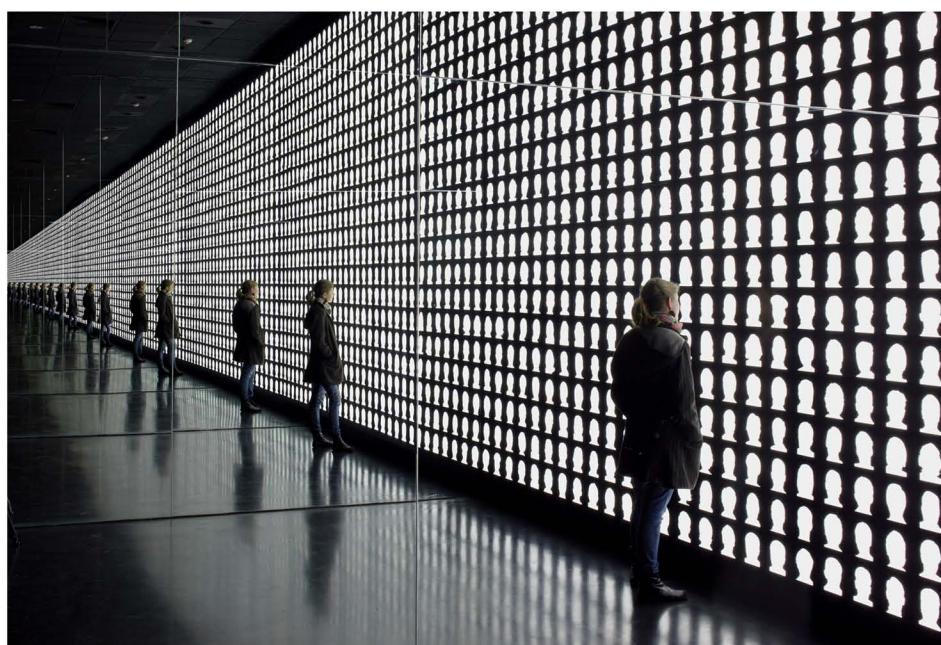
DAMN°: You mention your working process. From what I have read, you are very methodical. Can you tell us more about how you work?

AJ: I am an architect making art. I never studied art, so I am extremely free regarding art-making because no one ever told me what to do. I approach it as an architect would, and for an architect, context is key. I will not create anything before understanding the context. I cannot act in the world if I do not understand the world, so my process is really about understanding the context in which my work will take place. That understanding is based on research, visits, and interviews with key players. Only when I feel I have accumulated a critical mass of informa-



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THE GEOMETRY OF
CONSCIENCE, 2010

tion can I act. I do not take a display space, a gallery or a museum, as a physical space only. For me, it is a political space, a historical space, a cultural space. I am amazed at artists who create stuff in their studios and send it around the world.

DAMN°: Are you critical of that? Envious?

AJ: I am just an observer of it, and I simply don't understand how it functions. The problem is, you wind up confronting the site anyway, because in order to communicate, a work has to be seen, and where it is seen is critical. You are dealing with a specific audience and you have to make sure you are communicating with that audience.

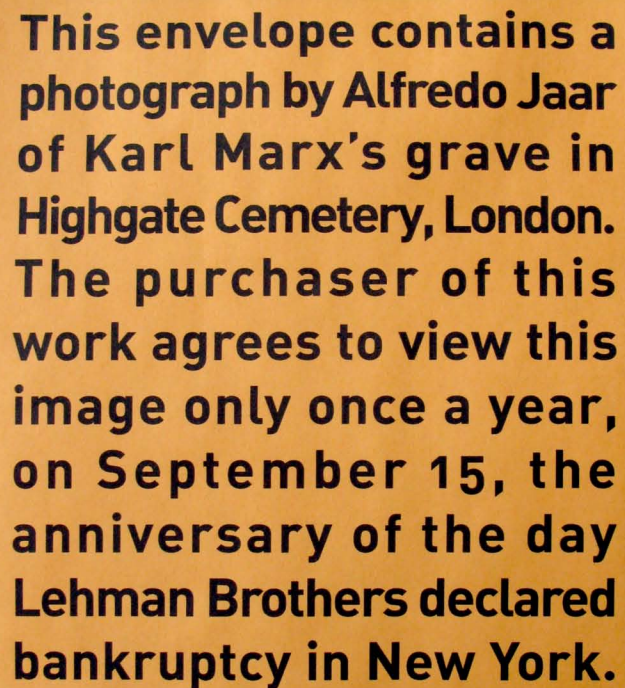
DAMN°: You were just in North Africa, in Algeria. Can you tell us much about that, although it's preliminary?

AJ: I went there on the invitation of a friend of mine, Zineb Sedira, an Algerian artist based in London, and she wants to help the Algerian art scene, which is isolated and limited. The political structure is not very supportive of culture in general. In wanting to end the isolation of artists there, she asked me to direct a seminar with young artists. She expects me to have a look around, and hopes I will keep the relationship going, and that that perhaps I will develop a project or return to teach in a more formal way. My public interventions are a third of my practice, and this is the way most of them start, with an exploratory visit. I don't go with any preconceived notions of what I will do or find. I try to understand whatever is happening in front of me, and it's always a fascinating discovery.

DAMN°: Is there something consistent about which places eventually yield a project?

AJ: No. Every place is unique. I accepted the invitation to Algeria because for a long time I have been following what is going on in north Mali, and Algeria is on the frontier with Mali. There is a crisis there. Groups are fighting for the independence of the North, some of which are Islamist, some of which are apparently affiliated with al Qaeda. My original interest came from collecting contemporary African music, and I am a big fan of Tinariwen, which is a group of Tuareg musicians. For a number of years I have also followed Ali Farka Toure. I've wanted to do a film about him because he was not only an extraordinary musician, he was also a political activist. He was the mayor of Timbuktu. In order to bring together the people of this disintegrating region, he sang not only in the colonial French language but in all the different languages spoken in the north. This is the model of the intellectual artist that I admire. But he passed away before I could start my project about him.

DAMN°: Before our interview, I sat down to draw a map of all the places you had been in the course of



This envelope contains a photograph by Alfredo Jaar of Karl Marx's grave in Highgate Cemetery, London. The purchaser of this work agrees to view this image only once a year, on September 15, the anniversary of the day Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy in New York.

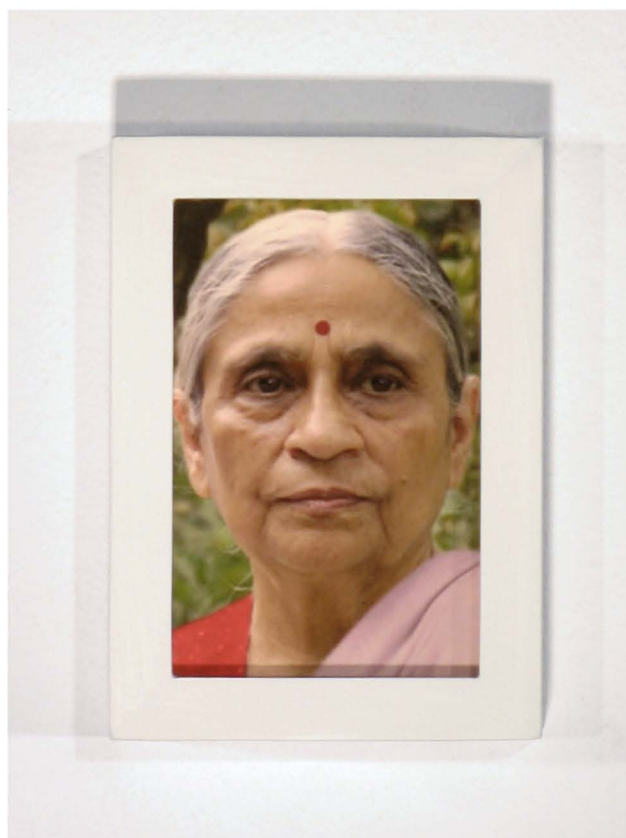
12/21 *Jaar 09*

your work. It was a large map with a lot of dots. Did you make a conscious commitment to be global?

AJ: When I first moved to New York in 1982, I was delighted and happy to be here; there was so much interest in culture and there were so many institutions. After all, I was coming from a military dictatorship. But I quickly discovered that New York was also very provincial. An international exhibition meant mostly American artists and a few Germans. And if you looked at the nature of the work, you felt it was very self-referential. So I spent a few years trying to understand what I could do in order to be active within that scene, and I decided I would bring the world to New York. I am a news junkie, and I happened to read about conditions in the gold mines in Brazil, about 100,000 men working with their own hands and without machinery. I thought: New York, Wall Street, gold – perhaps I can create a connection. I had applied for a Guggenheim fellowship, and even though I was completely unknown at the time, miracle of miracles, I got one. So I went there, and gathered incredible material – photos, video, interviews. Then, I rented the entire Spring Street subway station and on the billboards placed the harrowing images I had taken in the gold mines. In-between the images were panels listing the price

SEPTEMBER 15, 2009





of gold on world markets. The people who would see these on the subway were the people going to Wall Street, where they deal with gold in a very abstract way, so I was giving this abstraction a human dimension. That work put me on the map. I was invited to the Venice Biennale, which was the first time an artist from Latin America had been asked to participate, and soon after that, to Documenta, also the first time a Latin American artist had been invited.

DAMN^o: It all sounds very Cartesian, your approach - passionate but logical. Do you sometimes feel a tension between the desire to make something visually arresting, even inviting, and the urgency to communicate the content of the work? Is there a contradiction in using art to change people's minds?

AJ: Whenever I am asked this sort of question, I always quote Jean-Luc Godard, who said that it may be true that you have to choose between ethics and aesthetics, but whichever one you choose, you will always wind up running into the other one at the end of the road - because the definition of the human condition is in the *mise-en-scène* itself. I believe there is no way to take an aesthetic decision without also taking an ethical one; and there is no way to represent any ethical position without also taking an aesthetic position. In order to articulate an ethical idea you must produce an object or some kind of communication, and it will have a physical form, which will have an aesthetic dimension. I use design and architecture to facilitate the 'reading' of this artifact.

DAMN^o: An artist taking this position runs the risk of being criticised, on the one hand for being too aesthetic in dealing with political matters and, on the other, too didactic in dealing with aesthetic choices.

AJ: This is a central dilemma. The most difficult thing for an artist who works as I do is to create that balance between poetry and information. I am trying to inform you but I am also trying to move you, to illuminate you, to touch you. With some projects I have failed miserably, in my opinion. With some, I feel I have achieved that balance.

DAMN^o: Can you name one?

AJ: The Skoghall Konsthalle project in Sweden (2002). In that town, the owners of a paper mill had built almost everything, but one thing was missing, a place for culture and art. So I decided to create one, with funding from the paper company. We built it and inaugurated it with works by young local artists, focusing on paper, and 24 hours later, we burnt it down. The entire community came, they saw the work, they saw a new building in their landscape, and then I took it away. The strongest aesthetic dimension was that spectacular fire, the performative aspect, as people understood this was going to disappear. A year later they invited me back, as an architect, to design a permanent kunsthalle. Mission accomplished.

DAMN^o: Let's step back for a moment. Your studio is in Chelsea, arguably the centre of the global art market. Yet, when visiting galleries here, we see

THREE WOMEN, 2010 (1/2)

THE SKOGHALL KONSTHALL, 2000
(facing page)



very little that would qualify as committed or political art, certainly not the kind of work you do.

AJ: It is important to understand that the art world is really a network of interlocking systems. There is not one art world. Some systems ignore each other, others touch each other, still others interact. I have a circuit of maybe fifteen galleries in Chelsea that I visit, whose programmes I respect, and the others I simply ignore. The public sees the art world almost exclusively through the lens of the art market, and the media concentrate on that particular system within the network. All the young artists I meet worldwide, who are struggling to make sense of this world we live in, are completely outside of the art market. So it's very important to realise –

DAMN°: - that there is a world outside the art market?

AJ: Absolutely. That it is a plural world. You know, with all the demands that are put on kids by society today, it is extraordinary that there are still people out there who make the decision, at the age of 17, 18, 19, "I want to be an artist. I don't want to be a banker or a lawyer or an engineer.

DAMN°: Is that how you made your decision?

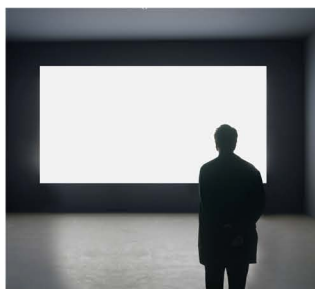
AJ: I, too, wanted to understand the world, and to change it. But it has not been easy. I've been in New York for 30 years. For the first 10 or 15 years, people did not understand what I was doing. I was attacked a lot for being too political, for them. In an interview very early on, I said "how do I make art out of information most people would rather ignore?" I didn't have an answer. But that has been my goal. It took me a while to reach the balance I spoke of earlier. I think, I hope, I am getting better at this, even though I still fail. And also, slowly, there are more people out there, more institutions and collectors who are interested in this kind of work, because I am no longer one of the few working in that spirit. We are coming to realise that in times of crisis we need artists and intellectuals to help make sense of what is happening around us.◀

Biennale Bénin. Inventing the World: The Artist as Citizen, Bénin, until 12 January 2013, www.biennalebenin.org

Bilderbedarf, Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Germany, until 17 February 2013, www.kunsthalle-baden-baden.de

Alfredo Jaar: The Sound of Silence, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, 19 January – 24 February 2013, www.nederlandsfotomuseum.nl

This Will Have Been: Art, Love, & Politics, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 09 February – 03 June 2012, www.mcachicago.org



LAMENT OF THE IMAGES, 2002