



# LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Alfredo Jaar

## Alfredo Jaar and the Happiness of Chile by Caille Millner

### Alfredo Jaar wants to know: "Are you happy?"

December 8th, 2013

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SEE THE MAN.

He's standing next to a newsstand on a busy street in Santiago de Chile, talking to people as they rush by. At first you try to avoid looking at him, worried that he might be a beggar or something worse. For years it's been too dangerous to talk to strangers. You never know who they might talk to next.

Yet as you walk by you notice that he is standing in front of a large white chart and it catches your attention. The chart is gridded with black squares and studded with small white pins that represent percentages. Above the grids are precise numbers and you can't help but pause; it is a surprise to see something so careful and scientific in the middle of a busy, trash-strewn street in Santiago, above all next to a newsstand plastered with so many ugly tabloid pictures.

It reminds you of the public surveys you took when you were studying sociology at the university, before the junta took over, back when students could still work on anything they wanted. The man looks like a student, too, with his shaggy hair and his blue jeans. You hesitate, overcome by memory. Then the man asks you a question. "¿Es usted feliz?"

*Are you happy.*

Frightened, you look at him. Does he know who you are? Will he report you to someone? But as you look at his face — it is an intense, open face — his eyes begin to seize up, and you know that he too is afraid.

You glance back at his chart. For the first time you notice that it's decorated with a small graphic of a colorful rainbow. The rainbow has been cautiously measured and rigidly drawn, and for some reason the sight of it breaks your heart — to think that this poor student has to demonstrate his innocence in this way. That he has to be afraid to ask even the most simple, childish questions. But of course you know why he should be afraid, and so you turn to him and say what he already knows must be a lie.

"Si."

Chile was not a happy country in June 1980, when the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar began taking public surveys for his *Studies on Happiness* project. Once South America's most stable democracy, for nearly seven years the country had been in the grips of a military dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet. It would be another full decade before Pinochet was peacefully ushered out of power.

In June 1980, life in Chile meant evening curfews at 8 p.m. It meant the "disappearances" of those who were suspected of speaking against the government, disappearances for which Pinochet's government would never produce either bodies or explanations. Political parties were banned. Discussing politics or even social concerns was impossible. Trusting anyone was dangerous. Beneath a façade of order and stability, Chile was a grim country gripped by fear and violence.



Into this nation with such a withered public life stepped Alfredo Jaar. Though he was born in Santiago de Chile, he had not grown up there. Jaar lived with his family on the Caribbean island of Martinique from the age of 5 until the age of 16. While they were away, Chileans had elected a Socialist president, Salvador Allende. Jaar's father believed in Allende's socialist directives and, against the advice of all of their relatives, moved his family back to Chile just a year before the military coup.

"Obviously my background didn't prepare me for what I was about to experience," said Jaar, who now lives in New York, in an interview. "I was coming from a very happy island. My family had come back to Chile in a pretty positive state of mind about the future of the country. So perhaps all of that made me more sensitive."

Jaar was 23 years old when he conceptualized *Studies on Happiness*. He had no background in traditional art. He had studied architecture but stopped short of earning his degree, demoralized by the ugliness of the buildings that were being constructed in Santiago. He tried to switch to filmmaking, but Pinochet had just decided to shut down the country's only film school. There was a certain alienation to his existence in Chile, especially since, as he said, he was still "operating on a limited understanding of the [country's] situation."

Jaar's fragmented history became a strength in *Studies on Happiness*. It's an improvised collection of public surveys, video interviews, textual fragments, photographs, and billboard "public interventions." Even his bewilderment about his home country became valuable, since he saw no reason why he couldn't find a way to work honestly without incurring the wrath of the government.

Most Chilean artists who better understood what they were facing had already emigrated, or withdrawn into narrow expressions of apolitical beauty and abstract form. If, as the philosopher Roberto Unger has written, "we often seem to be (such) helpless puppets of the institutional and imaginative worlds we inhabit," then Jaar's shallow roots in Chile may have given him the freedom to imagine something else.

"One of the elements of living under a military dictatorship may be censorship, but what's even worse is self-censorship," Jaar said.

The paradox, of course, was that he couldn't explicitly express what that looked or felt like.

He hit on the idea of doing a project to "study happiness" after reading French philosopher Henri Bergson's 1900 collection of essays, *Laughter*. The Bergson essays reminded him that things which appear silly on the surface are often deadly serious. "[L]aughter indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life," Bergson wrote. Comedy, meanwhile, offers a way to "mesmerize [...] the mind of the spectator."

In the social life of Chile, the idea of "happiness" was, indeed, comedy. It was a common cliché employed mainly for Chile's consumer culture, which Pinochet encouraged as an alternative to the potential danger of a public one. It was jingles on the radio, smiling faces on the television screen. It was fluff for advertisers, not a concept on which citizens were allowed to meditate.

"The question of happiness surfaces in daily lies; in advice from women's magazines, in advertising; in the fabrication of 'the tyranny of the offered object,' which consciously manipulates the unconscious mechanisms of desire," wrote the Chilean critic Adriana Valdés in a 1981 text about *Studies on Happiness*, reprinted in the project's 1999 English edition from the Actar publishing house.

Jaar thought about Bergson. He thought about the artist Hans Haacke and his 1970 "poll" of visitors to New York's Museum of Modern Art — the first conceptual art exhibit at a US museum. He thought about his frustrated film studies and he thought about poems. Like every Chilean who loves Pablo Neruda, the nation's most famous (socialist) poet, Jaar knew that poems contain infinite possibilities for subversion within an innocuous context.



"It had to be something almost stupid," he said. "Almost naïve."

Then, he took a risk. "I gambled on two things," he said. "The first gamble was that I could accurately judge the limit of what I could do, because I meant to walk right up to that limit. The second gamble I took was that other people in Chile would understand that I was acting in a very veiled way. I gambled that other people would understand my performance."

*Studies on Happiness* had seven phases. It began with the public surveys and moved into interviews with self-identified happy and unhappy people. Jaar used their texts, photos, and video interviews to offer "public presentation[s] of happy and unhappy people," along with discussions about happiness.

He also did the first of the remarkable "public interventions" on which he has built his career, erecting photos and billboards around Santiago that blared, "¿ES USTED FELIZ?" Jaar's emphatic question, surrounded by trashy ads for beer and ginger ale, has an immediate, confrontational power in photos. It lunges out of the landscape to seize your existential attention.



*Above and Below: Alfredo Jaar  
Studies on Happiness, 1981  
Santiago de Chile, public intervention  
Courtesy the artist, New York*





Jaar videotaped Chileans and played back their interviews in public. He asked them about what they wanted and why. He offered them the chance to gather together and to speak to each other.

The inherent danger of all of these activities should have been immediately apparent to Pinochet's government, but many of the visuals that Jaar employed were, indeed, almost stupid: smiling faces, stencilled rainbows. The façade of naïvety worked on every level: politically, conceptually, and aesthetically. Most importantly, it worked to create a small feeling of openness and freedom among the people who participated in all of its phases.

"It was very unusual to be filmed by a stranger in Chile at that time," Jaar said. At that time it was very unusual to be filmed in Chile at all. Part of that was because of the simple matter of access — most Chilean households got their first televisions in the 1970s, after the government relaxed import restrictions on electronics. (It was part of the same consumer culture development that Pinochet was encouraging for all of the country's public life.)

But allowing a stranger to record you is also an act of intimacy and trust — a potentially radical action in the conditions of a dictatorship. It was a risk to be seen, to insist on the fact of one's existence.

People were disappearing. Jaar was recording.

"We were creating a very small space of existence for people," he said. "And I could see it in people's reactions when I showed them their interviews on the monitors. They could see themselves. They could see others. They felt complicity, and I could feel it in the way they congratulated me. They all knew to speak between the lines."

Everyone in Chile was performing, too.

See the propaganda.

On October 5, 1988, the people of Chile will vote in a presidential plebiscite to determine whether or not Pinochet continues to rule the country. A majority vote of "Si" grants him another eight years in office. A majority vote of "No" forces him to call free elections by the end of 1989, according to rules that he has written.

Or so you've been told. For now, as you sit in front of your television set, yawning against the boredom of the evening curfew, it's impossible to believe that Pinochet will ever step aside. Nothing you've seen in the streets or on the television set leads you to believe that he's going anywhere. His supporters, in uniform, have knocked on your door so many times that you've stopped answering it. Sure, some rag-tag volunteers from the "No" side have shown up, too, and you've politely listened to them. You believe in their cause. You're even wondering if there's a way to vote "No" without anyone seeing you.

But the "Command for the No" represents 16 nominally banned political parties, all of which are struggling to get organized. Pinochet can't stomp out the plebiscite the way he has so many other threats — the rest of the world is watching this time. Even US president Ronald Reagan is sending a group to observe the vote. He has to at least pretend that voting is a legitimate activity.

But it won't be. How could it be? Pinochet controls all of the television stations. They run his maudlin, chest-thumping ads over and over again. His people will announce the results of the vote. He's given the opposition just 15 minutes on television, late at night, to make their case. That's why you're still up now. But how many people in Chile have given up and gone to sleep?



You're dozing when it comes on, so it takes you a moment to realize what it is. It's happy and for some reason this surprises you. There are people dancing and singing the word "No." Behind them, the sunshine is bright. Everyone looks pleasant and well-fed. You blink many times to be sure that you're watching the right ad. Then you see it, and it's so astonishing that you jump up from your chair.

It's a big graphic of a colorful rainbow. It has the same careful measurement and rigid form as the rainbow you saw on the street in Santiago all of those years ago. The moment floods back.

You never forgot that you had told the man you were happy when you weren't. It was a small lie of self-protection, one of the endless ones that you've made in the years since, but for some reason it felt like a larger betrayal.

Only when you see the rainbow in the "No" ad do you realize just how much of a betrayal it was.

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*Studies on Happiness* was Alfredo Jaar's first artistic work. Within it are all of the themes that he would develop in his later pieces — the critique of media images, the insistence on the critical importance of public space, the incisive and understated political messages, the slyness with which he makes spectators into participants and conspirators.

*Happiness* also launched Jaar's international art career. The piece was shown in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Argentina and won its creator a major fellowship to work in New York. He left Chile in 1982.

It was an auspicious time for an artist like Jaar to make his début. The American art circuit was moving towards a post-modernist critique of images, seen in the work of artists like Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger. The same qualities that made Jaar's work possible in Chile — improvisation, ambiguity, an emphasis on conceptual significance — were the same ones that were in fashion at that moment in the New York art world.

But considering the Chilean context in which it was made — and what came next — *Happiness* is far more than the piece that launched a brilliant career. In 1979, Jaar understood that ordinary Chileans needed to have the experience of being seen. He understood that they needed to be confronted with the gap between what was and what could be. Finally, he understood that in order to face these emotions, what they needed was lightness, not fear.

In 1988, all that Jaar had anticipated came to pass. The "Command for the No" did indeed use the same rainbow motif in its television ads and signage. But they used much more. They developed a joyful, poppy advertising campaign that envisioned a bright future for Chile — one that was full of happiness. Combined with a serious voter registration drive, international support for "clean" elections, and an incredibly disciplined political strategy, the Command for the No won the plebiscite.

Pinochet stepped down from the presidency in 1990. Chile became the rare country to achieve a peaceful transition to democracy after years of dictatorship. Part of the reason for the country's transformation was an image campaign that appealed to naïvety, to hope, and to happiness.

Of all people, Pinochet failed to grasp this. During the plebiscite campaign, he failed to strike the right note with his advertisements, images, and messages. He ran footage of the food lines that had been part of the Allende years. He threatened a return to communism and disorder. He showed images of mothers and children screaming, terrified of the red menace.

He had not seen Jaar's Chile.

Jaar had no contact with the organizers of the "No" campaign. "I do not take credit for anything," he said. "I was amazed that they were using the same motif ten years later. I took it as a fabulous, marvelous affirmation that this was the right way to go. An incredible coincidence — but not my action."



Or was it? After all, an artist deeply steeped in ideas such as Jaar knows that it's important to question the concept of coincidence.

"When a mental state is depicted to us with the object of making it dramatic, or even merely inducing us to take it seriously, it gradually crystallises into *actions* which provide the real measure of its greatness," wrote Bergson in "Laughter."

This year was the 40th anniversary of the military coup that left Chile's elected president, Salvador Allende, dead and brought General Pinochet to power. On the day of the coup — September 11, 1973 — bombs and gunshots rained down on the presidential palace, el Palacio de La Moneda, from 11:24 a.m. until 12:45 p.m. Images of the smoking, dessicated palace haunted the memories of Chileans for decades afterwards.

On September 11, 2013, at the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende in Santiago de Chile, a broadcast began at 11:24 a.m. and ran until 12:45 p.m. It began with the 1973 image of the palace under assault. Thirty seconds later it faded into a calm, simple shot of the Palacio de La Moneda today. The palace façade has the gleaming whiteness of recent restoration. A Chilean flag waves at full mast from the roof. Crowds of spectators mill silently below.



"I wanted to create a new memory," Jaar said. "I wanted to clean this image up. To give people a new way to think about it. Because images become deeply embedded in us. They stay with us. And that one has had a long history."

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