

Collecting

Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar is a tired man, perpetually jetlagged, but speaks with the animated intensity of an itinerant preacher. Sipping tea in his Chelsea studio, which looks more like the habitat of a middle manager than of a creative soul, he tries to explain why making art involves logging so many miles.

"I became an artist because I do not understand the world," Jaar says. "Everything I know, I understand through making art."

His goal is to jolt complacent minds into caring about issues that they studiously ignore. His process is a constant cycle of researching, digesting, repackaging and disseminating the information he absorbs – about the Rwandan genocide, a gold mine in Brazil or the death of Osama bin Laden. Rather than hole up in a paint-splattered workspace, Jaar journeys from museums to impoverished hell-holes, then on to universities and lecture halls on an assortment of continents, before cycling back to his adopted home in New York.

This month, his equally globe-trotting work alights at Art Basel Miami Beach, where it will sit somewhat uneasily along more obviously saleable products. One piece consists of a black box emblazoned with a motto in white type: "Other People Think" – the final three words in a long speech written and delivered by a 15-year-old John Cage in 1927. Another is a neon sign quoting from Japanese author and Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe: "Teach us to Outgrow Our Madness."

Jaar seems resigned to the idea that there might be a market for these enigmatic works – though he's not especially happy about it. "When I started 30 years ago, I possessed a kind of utopian idealism, and I thought you could be an outsider and beat the system. Today I'm convinced that there is no outside the system. We all participate, one way or another." That's his grudging way of saying that if collectors want to buy his art, it's OK with him.

Jaar was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1956, but spent much of his childhood on the island of Martinique. His father, a socialist black sheep in a mostly rightwing clan, moved his family back to Chile in 1972, after the country had elected Marxist Salvador Allende to the presidency. The elder Jaar's political contentment was short-lived. Augusto Pinochet took power in a military coup in 1973, and Alfredo came of age in an atmosphere of stifling repression. In 1982, he fled to New York, where he found the art scene "exciting but provincial". An "international" exhibition was one that included a German or two. Latin America was artistically invisible. That narrowness gave Jaar his first mission: to introduce SoHo to the rest of the planet.

A current affairs junkie since his teens, Jaar foraged for ideas in newspapers and, in 1985, he came across a tiny item about a gold mine in Brazil that had attracted 100,000 miners. "They had abandoned their families," Jaar marvels. "They were entrepreneurs. They were not being exploited by anyone. But they had created this hell-like hole in the ground, where they searched for gold."

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Dantesque delights

No subject is too disturbing to figure in Alfredo Jaar's politically ambitious, ambiguously beautiful installations. *Ariella Budick* met him in New York

mine and returned with a set of Dantesque yet beguiling photographs: lines of muscular, mud-caked men heaving sacks filled with rock on their shoulders. But Jaar was less concerned with the scenes' lyricism than with the surreal link between that teeming gash on a South American hillside and the decorous abstractions of the global commodities trade. He installed the photos in a SoHo subway station, juxtaposing them with posters showing gold prices in different markets.

The way Jaar presents his photographs matters more to him than the pictures themselves. "In our society of consumption and spectacle, where everything becomes decontextualised, images need help," he says.

Inevitably, though, a seductive image wriggles free of its context. In 2004, when the "Gold" photos, minus the original installation, made an appearance in Miami, a Florida newspaper printed one with the caption: "Hot-legged gold miners (like the ones in this photo by Alfredo Jaar) are among the eye-candy you'll see at Art Basel." Studying that clipping now, Jaar shakes his head, unsure whether to laugh or despair. "Gold" is about labour, voluntary enslavement, capital and the relationship between economics and sweat. It is not about sexy legs.

In 1994, one world event grabbed Jaar by the throat and refused to let go: the genocide in Rwanda. He grabbed his cameras and a notebook

Alfredo Jaar's '1+1' (1987) Below: the artist with his light installation piece 'Other People Think' (2012)

Art Institute of Chicago, Daniel Traub

and joined the photojournalists heading for Rwanda even as refugees were streaming out. That trip generated a six-year project in which he struggled to find a way to sustain the experience of shock yet manage his emotions at the same time. "Rage is not a good mechanism to make intelligent decisions or good art," he says.

Jaar was rattled by what he suddenly felt were the limits of imagery. He saw journalists' eloquently horrific photographs printed alongside perfume ads, trivialising their subject and failing to rouse the world. A picture, he began to feel, isn't worth much without 1,000 words explaining what it means – and once you have a text, perhaps the image just becomes

a distraction. He tried exhibiting captions without photographs, and light boxes bearing just the obsessively repeated word "Rwanda" in stark block capitals. He took one close-up that haunted him: the eyes of a woman who had watched a massacre take place. Fascinated by the layers of observation – the viewer sees the photographer bear witness to another eyewitness's trauma, while she stares back – Jaar turned the picture into thousands of identical slides and tossed them on a huge table, in much the same way that he found corpses piled in the fields.

Jaar has lived in the US for many more years than he spent in Chile, and a recent surge in the Latin American art market has largely passed him by. But he remains loyal to his leftist roots and the diet of political outrage on which he was raised nourishes him even now. His work is vehement, though never shrill, hectoring or didactic. Growing up under a military dictatorship has made him wary of propaganda, and he mistrusts art's (and especially photography's) ability to persuade uncritical eyes.

"We are taught how to read and write, but we are not taught how to see properly," he says. "Images are not innocent. We are bombarded by thousands of them, each one trying to sell us something, to convince us of a certain conception of the world."

One way he resists the tyranny of media is by devoting only a third of

his time to the complex of galleries, museums and collectors. The rest he spends teaching or conducting what he calls "public interventions" – like "Dear Marcus", a suite of epistolary billboards he planted across a remote Finnish archipelago.

Eclectic techniques and uncompromising subject matter make Jaar's urgent installations a rarefied taste for collectors. This fact isn't lost on Mary Sabbatino, vice-president of Galerie Lelong, which represents him. "He's surprised when I tell him that people don't want to see work about dying in Rwanda in their living room," she laughs. "Last year we showed a piece that referred to the killing of Osama bin Laden. It got a great reaction – everyone knew what it meant. We didn't sell it, though."

Fortunately for Jaar and his gallery, his more politically ambitious installations do appeal to museums and a loose-knit group whom Sabbatino describes as "interested in art that deals with the human condition" – collectors who are not put off by references to misery and massacres. Then there's the irony that, almost in spite of himself, Jaar regularly produces images that have an ambiguous, allusive beauty. That Florida newspaper caption-writer was not alone in being smitten by the picture of the gold miners' marmoreal legs: the edition of three sold out in days.

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