








## “Artists are Thinkers”: Alfredo Jaar on Creating New Ways to Look at the World

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Courtesy the artist and Galerie Kamel Mennour

Alfredo Jaar facing his work, *Lament of the Images*, 2002.

by Coline Milliard

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**Alfredo Jaar** is a professional observer, an unremitting globetrotter who has, for almost three decades, spliced into his work first-hand accounts and in-depth analysis of the way information is distributed and consumed. The Chilean artist — who will represent his country at the next **Venice Biennale** — has tackled some of the world’s thorniest issues head on. His celebrated “Rwanda Project” (1994-2000) is a harrowing take on the genocide and its patchy coverage in the Western press. Other pieces have looked at gold mining in Brazil, immigration in Finland, and the homeless in Montreal.

Always seeking to engage different audiences, Jaar has also made around sixty public interventions — including the 2010 meditative garden “Park of Laments” at **100 Acres: The Virginia B. Fairbanks Art and Nature Park** in Indianapolis — and is a keen educator. The artist talked to **ARTINFO UK** about site-specificity, thinking-versus-making, and his plans for his first stay in Algiers as part of **aria**’s pilot residency program.

**You've dealt with conflicts and complex social and political situations in countries as varied as Canada, Finland, Rwanda, Angola, Brazil and the USA. How do you keep your eyes fresh and stay open to the particulars of a given place?**

I spend an enormous amount of time researching. This research takes place in-situ as nothing compares to the real life experience of a place. Sometimes I feel like a frustrated journalist. Most of my projects, and their corresponding research phases, last between two and six years and involve many trips to the area, numerous contacts with local players, and interviews, workshops, and seminars. I read the local press, I watch television, I do whatever locals do. I do not act before reaching a certain critical mass of information. The objective is to discover what I call the essence of a place. Only at that moment I start formulating ideas. As an architect, I have always believed that I need to understand the world before acting in the world. Context is everything. I consider each place unique and each one requires a unique response to its uniqueness.

**In a recent interview published in FLUOR, you said: “The artist creates models for thinking the world.” Could you expand on this?**



I strongly believe that artists are thinkers, as opposed to object makers. My working process is 99% thinking, and 1% making. That thinking process is at the core of what I do. And this process is always triggered by a specific site or issue. In my career I have been incapable of creating a single work of art out of nothing. That is why I am not a studio artist: I define myself as a project artist. I try to propose, with my projects, a creative model that responds to the particulars of a given situation. That model can then be projected into the world. I believe that this is what artists do: with each project we propose a new conception of the world; and that new conception is a new way of looking at the world. That is why I believe that we create models of thinking the world.

**One third of your time is dedicated to your work for museums and galleries — the “art world” — one third to public interventions, and the rest to directing workshops and seminars, teaching and lecturing. How important is it for you to maintain this balance?**

That balance is vital and I cannot conceive my life, professional or personal, any other way. The so-called “art world” is a very insular place and I regularly need to get out and confront myself with the “real world.” That is what I do in my public interventions. They help me understand the world. And my teaching is where I share my experience with the younger generations, from whom I learn enormously. This system allows me to reach a much more diverse and larger audience and it helps me to continuously improve my artistic language, as I see art as communication; communication requires a language; and language requires a vocabulary. As my audience is always shifting, I need to keep inventing new languages for my new audiences. As I never studied art, it is a fascinating process to ascertain what communicates, how and with whom. I never forget that communication does not mean to send out a message; it means to receive an answer. If there is no answer, there is no communication. I always remind my students of this fundamental point.

**How has your training as an architect and filmmaker impacted the way you make art?**

Everything I know about art I learned by being an architect. Studying architecture had a full impact in my career. In fact I consider myself an architect making art. I use the methodology of the architect to research and create. When I confront myself with a given space, I do not see it simply as a physical space, but as a social space, a cultural space, and a political space. And that is what architects do. But film is also very important. I discovered early on the similarities and parallels between architecture and film, and they have fed my creative process. Architecture is not only about space, it is also about bodies moving in that space, it is about scale, it is about light, it is about movement, and all this is also film. I combine the two disciplines with a great sense of freedom. I feel that they define who I am as an artist.

**You are about to spend a week in Algiers as part of aria’s pilot program. What do you expect from your experience in the city and what do you hope to achieve with the residency?**

My friend **Zineb Sedira** has set up a great program to stimulate the cultural scene in Algeria and has invited me to spend a week there. This will be my first visit to Algeria and North Africa. Unlike the rest of Africa to which I have dedicated an enormous amount of work, I am not at all familiar with this area of the world. But I have been following with utmost interest the development of the crisis in North Mali and I am curious to see if Algeria will intervene, as is the wish of the United States. **Hillary Clinton** was there a couple of weeks ago. I am a great admirer of **Tinariwen**, an extraordinary group of Tuareg nomad musicians who have been struggling for self-determination for North Mali with their music.

But this trip is just my first exploration of Algiers. We have scheduled encounters with young artists and journalists and I am offering a lecture at the **École des Beaux Arts**. I will visit cultural institutions and I hope to listen to Algerian music. And I will get lost in the Kasbah. Normally on these first trips I only try to get a basic sense of the place in order to decide if I may or may not work on a long-term project. In that sense the first moments of discovery are very important as they may content the seeds of a long-term engagement.

*Alfredo Jaar is the third artist to take part in the one-year pilot program **aria** (artist residency in Algiers) set up by artist Zineb Sedira. **aria** will be officially launched in London on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012.*

*On the same day at 6:30 p.m., Jaar will be discussing how he generates debate through public interventions during an event at **Amnesty International UK** presented by **Iniva** in association with **aria**. For more information, [click here](#).*