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## *"I will not act before understanding. Context is everything.": The Work of Alfredo Jaar* by Elena Shtromberg

One of Latin America's great contemporary artists delves into how we get to know the world around us.

December 8th, 2013

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THIS TEXT WAS MEANT to relay an interview, one where I, an art historian of contemporary Latin American art, was going to ask Alfredo Jaar, one of the most recognized names in the contemporary art world, provocative questions about his artistic process. I hatched my plan in response to the news of Alfredo Jaar's artist talk on November 20, 2013, at the University of Utah, where I am a faculty member. My strategy was to assist the lecture and ask Jaar a series of questions over breakfast the next day, a task for which I prepared by reading through countless previous interviews, seeking out those questions that have not been asked. The problem, however, with interviewing famous living artists, particularly during the height of their career, is that they have been asked the same questions countless times and the answers, whether intentionally or not, come readymade. Given Jaar's recent work for the Chilean Pavilion at the 55th International La Biennale di Venezia (Venice Biennial) and a consistently active career spanning decades, interviews with Jaar abound in all manner of publications.

I desisted from the interview format, choosing instead to relay the details of his artist talk, a condensed performance, but one as carefully composed as his works of art. The artist talk has become a genre in and of itself; its proliferation alongside the steady rise of global art fairs and biennials has been responsible for turning artists into international celebrities. I do not mean to suggest that artists are accomplices in or have intentionally facilitated such a turn of events, but simply to highlight it as a reigning phenomenon from which artists rarely escape. And yet, despite the proliferation of artist talks, the genre remains stubbornly conventional, limited to a chronological narration of the sequence of the artist's best-known works, communicating what is often easily available on artist websites. As an art historian of contemporary art, I have seen many artist talks but few have dazzled. If I highlight Alfredo Jaar in this text it is because his talk elevates the genre to new heights. But first a disclosure: Jaar is one of the artists responsible for why I chose to study contemporary art from Latin America. I divulge this because my deep respect for and admiration of his work will no doubt taint my vision of his performance.

I want to begin by saying that Jaar is an artist who looks deeply, in a sustained and critical way, into how knowledge is constructed, delving into the mechanisms of how we get to know and relate to the world around us. Consider, for example, his work with maps, one of the formative structures shaping our worldview, in *A Logo for America* (1987), and later in the work that first influenced my vision of the world, *Geography=War*, an installation from 1990. In the former, Jaar projected the silhouette of a map of the United States onto a lightboard in New York City's Times Square with the text "THIS IS NOT AMERICA" to remind us that the term "America" refers not

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Alfredo Jaar

only to the familiar contour that is identifiable as the United States but rather to the hemispheric mass comprised by North, South and Central America, more correctly designated by the plural *Las Americas* in Spanish. In his 1990 project, Jaar deployed maps once again, by including lightboxes with silhouettes of geographic sites culled from the Peters Map, a cartographic depiction of the world that more accurately portrays the scale of continental landmasses. The Peters Map is an adjustment to the widely used Mercator Map (in circulation since 1569) that has fixed our concept of the world by compressing Africa and South America, and strategically centering and enlarging Europe and North America. First introduced in 1974, the contours of the Peters Map at first glance appear distorted, despite the fact that it is considered the most geographically precise representation of the continents with regard to their size. With these works, Jaar reminds us that maps are not solely documents charting territories, but also ones shaping our vision of history, and more importantly the cartographic coordinates of globalization and power.

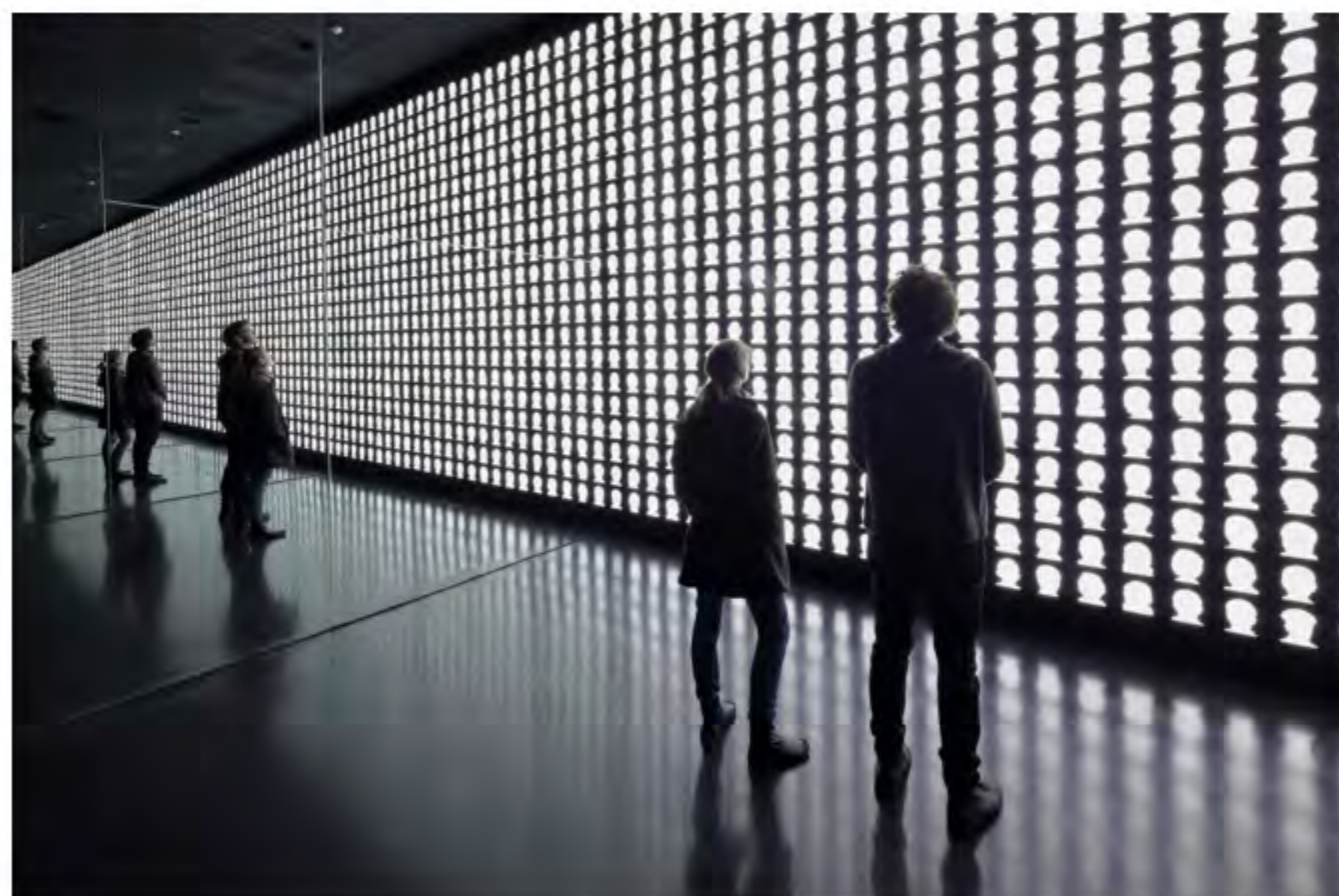


*Above: Alfredo Jaar, Venezia, Venezia, 2013  
Photography Agostino Osio Courtesy Goodman Gallery,  
Johannesburg/Cape Town, Galerie Lelong, New York, kamel mennour, Paris,  
Galería Patricia Ready, Santiago, Galleria Lia Rumma, Milano/Napoli,  
Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin and the artist, New York*

*Below: Alfredo Jaar, A Logo for America, 1987  
Computer animation for Spectacolor sign, Times Square, New York, 10:24 looped  
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York and the artist, New York*



*Below: Alfredo Jaar, The Geometry of Conscience, 2010  
Santiago de Chile, Museo de la memoria y de los derechos humanos, monument  
Courtesy the artist, New York*



If Jaar's artistic practice is anchored by a repeated layering of representational systems, texts, cartography, images, newspapers, etc., then his aesthetic forms change in response to specific contexts and world events. It is clear that the circumstances of particular sites drive his artistic process; in fact he began his presentation by stating: "I will not act before understanding. Context is everything." Context, in lieu of chronology, also drove the format of his presentation. He began by showing an image from 9/11, the World Trade towers going up in flames in 2001, an event that needs little introduction. This was followed by another 9/11 image, that of the Palacio de La Moneda, in Santiago de Chile, going up in flames after the infamous coup d'état Augusto Pinochet led on 9/11 of 1973, which lasted 17 years. The similarity was visually striking and corrects the often mistaken perception that 9/11 and its resulting trauma are tied solely and semantically to the United States. Jaar declared that he was attempting to create new memories. He did so by introducing a recent work, which took place on 9/11/2013 on the 40th anniversary of the coup, lasting exactly an hour, 11:45 a.m. – 12:45 p.m., the half hour before and after the coup. For this work he filmed the Palacio capturing the same commanding, panoramic angle of the inflamed building, an image that has become iconic of the dreaded military takeover, but replacing it with the Palace as it stands today, reconstructed and back to normal, even calm, at least on that occasion.

While Jaar has mostly escaped the moniker "Chilean artist," having come to prominence with works made all over the world, and notably in Africa, it appears that after decades of absence he is moving back into Chilean territory, having recently won the prestigious Chilean Premio Nacional de Artes Plásticas (the National Award for Visual Arts) in September, 2013, shortly after representing Chile at the Venice Biennial of the same year. It is not surprising that Jaar began the talk by contextualizing it in a country that is not only his place of origin but one that has captured the world's attention with recently held elections (November 18, 2013) and yearlong student protests. Facing a group of University students, the artist highlighted how most recently a 25-year-old Chilean student, Camila Vallejo, a young woman that has led the massive student street protests, along with three other student protesters, were now voted into congress (a fact one encounters immediately upon entering the artist's website, [alfredojaar.net](http://alfredojaar.net)), motivating those students who believe in a cause to pursue it. The event also begs the realization of how unlikely this would be in our own congress, ostensibly one of the world's most democratic.

Adhering to the Chilean context Jaar next described a striking work from 2010, his memorial to those disappeared, tortured and killed during the Dictatorship, entitled *La Geometría de la Conciencia* (The Geometry of Conscience), located at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, inaugurated that same year by former President Michelle Bachelet. The museum itself is an architectural gem that a Brazilian team of architects conceptualized (Mario Figueroa, Lucas Fehr and Carlos Dias). Jaar's work, which brilliantly unites geometry and conscience, is strategically placed underneath the area designated the "Plaza of Memory." To view the work, the spectator must descend into the darkness, literally and metaphorically. Viewers are let in 10 at a time and directed into a small space with a guard at the entrance, where they are asked to be silent in the darkness for three minutes. Once their vision adjusts, the viewers are faced with countless, geometrically aligned silhouettes from floor to ceiling — there are 500 in total — which are then illuminated. Though all the forms appear identical, the silhouetted profiles, Jaar informs us, were each modeled on one of the thousands of photos found in missing persons reports, carefully carved out to reference a specific life. To remind his present audience of the identities of the victims, Jaar presents this work by not only discussing its forms but also reading aloud the names of the casualties the silhouettes represent. Upon exiting the memorial, the viewer once again encounters the light of day, a performance in and of itself of descending into the depths, if only for a few minutes, before emerging to safety.

It is clear that Jaar's artistic practice is motivated by questions surrounding human rights; he transitioned seamlessly from the victims foregrounded by the memorial to another sector of the population that he identifies as victims: the immigrants. He presented on the plight of the gypsies in France, who even with proper immigration documents suffer prejudice and fear of deportation. His *Du voyage, des gens*, is a 3-minute video featuring a gypsy woman seated on the ground, playing an ancient instrument resembling a violin. The camera focuses on the woman and it is only towards the end of the short video that the camera pans out, allowing the viewer to capture the scene surrounding her and her location; she is sitting in front of, the Centre Pompidou. Through Jaar's work, the woman and the world famous museum become a part of the same cultural infrastructure of Paris that is sought out by tourists but endangered by right wing conservative immigration policies. What would Parisian life look like without such a cultural complex? Jaar presented several other works attending to the question of immigration, one he has reflected on in a variety of places.



Above: Alfredo Jaar, *Du Voyage, Des Gens*, 2011

Video 3 min looped Courtesy kamel mennour, Paris and the artist, New York

*Below: Alfredo Jaar, One Million Finnish Passports, 1995  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki Courtesy the artist, New York*



*Below: Alfredo Jaar, The Cloud, 2000  
Valle del Matador, Tijuana, US-Mexican border,  
public intervention Courtesy the artist, New York*



In *One Million Finnish Passports* (1995) installed in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Jaar responded to Finland's immigration policy, one of the most inflexible in Europe, particularly in comparison with that of neighboring Nordic countries. For the installation, he managed to print a million passports after promising authorities he would immediately burn them after the exhibit. The documents were presented to viewers in neatly arranged piles on the floor, a sea of blue documents that could only be viewed behind a thick glass wall with bars, reminiscent of a prison. Geometry and conscience were at play as the viewer took in the massive quantities of passports, each brimming with the possibility of a new life left unled. Jaar recounted that he was particularly touched when one museum visitor, in solidarity with those lives, ran home after seeing the work to

retrieve his own passport, and in a moment of security distraction threw his into the pile. The final project Jaar discussed in this vein was *La Nube/The Cloud* (2000), an event/performance that took place at the San Diego/Tijuana border at the Valle Del Matador (Valley of Death), an ominous but telling site. Incongruously, this work involved balloons and music, items associated with festivity, though there is little to celebrate in this context. Jaar placed a cellist on the US side of the border and the balloons, 3,000 of them — in homage to the number of victims of border crossing — on the Mexican side. Contradictions abounded as it became clear that balloons and music are free from any notion of borders and can travel where people cannot. Jaar noted that when he proposed the project, there were objections based on the environmental damage the balloons would cause both to the birds and as waste. He responded to the objection by using biodegradable balloons that disintegrated. The performance was held on October 14, 2000, and lasted 45 minutes; as poetry and a list of the names of border crossers was read, the cello played and a moment of silence was held in honor of the victims observed. Despite the different circumstances surrounding each of his works focusing on society's victims, it is easy to identify certain constants in Jaar's work, the commemoration of social injustice chief among them.

The ephemerality of balloons and music led Jaar to discuss another ephemeral project, one that he created in 2000 for Skoghall, a small paper mill town in Sweden, using a decidedly more aggressive material, fire. For Skoghall, Jaar proposed a contemporary art gallery that he called the *Skoghall Konsthall*. The entire gallery was constructed with paper produced by the town's mill and presented the town with the first cultural institution it had known. For the gallery's first exhibit, Jaar invited young artists who worked with paper from neighboring cities and the opening drew quite a large crowd. Sadly, only 24 hours after opening night, Jaar destroyed the museum, a fact he documented in a series of photos that show the structure brazenly lit up as it is engulfed in flames. The act of creation and destruction was meant to provoke Skoghall's residents, showing them what having such an institution could have been and prompting them to instigate a more permanent construction.[1]

As an instigator of such cultural activity, Jaar has been invited by a number of different cities to produce site-specific works. In this vein, the next project he discussed was *Requiem for Leipzig* (2005). Addressing it as a "failed" project, Jaar explained that he had been asked to conceive of a work that would shed light on the impoverished state of culture in Leipzig, a former East German city, known in music domains as the place where Johann Sebastian Bach was cantor. Choosing an abandoned church, once a symbol of beauty and elegance, Jaar concentrated his efforts on a grand chandelier inside the church. He played with notions surrounding light and dark (binaries that are constant throughout his work), lowering the chandelier and illuminating the space and then reversing the action by returning it to the ceiling as the light dimmed and went out. Each descent of the chandelier was punctuated by Bach's music, which faded as the light went out. For Jaar, the work was meant to prompt active discussion among the viewers in the church about failures of the State to support culture in their society, but instead the audience was silent, immersed in the spectacle, an outcome Jaar found disappointing. This leads to the question of how the success or failure of each artwork is measured. The artist claims that when he begins a project he identifies a very specific program or objective that he is trying to accomplish with his work (in the case of Leipzig a lively discussion among audience members) and he judges the end result based on how well he met his objective, regardless of the work's reception by critics, audience members, curators, etc.



*Above: Alfredo Jaar, Requiem for Leipzig, 2005  
Leipzig, public intervention Courtesy the artist, New York*

*Below: Alfredo Jaar, Lights in the City, 1999  
Bonsecours Market, Montréal Courtesy the artist, New York*







*Below: Alfredo Jaar, Skoghall Konsthall, 2000 Skoghall, public intervention Courtesy the artist, New York*





Jaar often employs light and dark to communicate a form of social distress. In the case of Leipzig this was the abandonment of the city's decaying cultural infrastructure. In the next work he presented, Jaar took us to Montreal, describing *Lights in the City* (1999), where lights were used to signal the city's problem with homelessness. For this project Jaar installed large quantities of red lights in the Cupola of the Marché Bonsecours, an important monument in the historic city center of Montreal. He later placed devices in three homeless shelters located near the Cupola and urged homeless people entering to press a button on the device that was rigged to detonate a red light in the Cupola. Resembling a building ablaze, a scene Jaar was no stranger to, the red light signaled a threatening situation, something gone awry that required immediate attention, making it impossible to ignore the problem of homelessness by wiring it, literally, into the city's most renowned landmark.

An hour and a half into the lecture and Jaar had still not addressed some of his most well known works, in particular the Rwanda project. When I later asked why not, Jaar replied that he decides on the narrative of the presentation of the work based on where he is. Jaar responded to the University of Utah by leading the audience on a global journey, lacking a fixed chronology or geography, linked instead through cohesive thematic and material explorations. Returning to the question of artistic process, Jaar announced, "My work is 99% thinking and 1% making," and he often tells his students to, "Stop making stuff."

It is clear that Jaar's artistic and aesthetic mission is to use his work to nudge viewers into a more heightened perception about the physical and conceptual space they inhabit, a mission he folds into his presentation as much as the work itself.

□

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[1] Later in the presentation Jaar revealed that he has since been contacted by Skoghall officials to create such a permanent structure.