



Dreaming new worlds

Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar discusses art, utopia, and cultural transformation with Julian McKinnon on the cusp of a visit to our shores.

For the past 35 years, Alfredo Jaar has called New York City home. In May he will visit New Zealand for the first time. Jaar is exhibiting in Auckland Art Gallery's *Space to Dream: Recent Art from South America*, and will deliver the keynote speech of their public programme. Simultaneously Trish Clark Gallery is exhibiting *The Politics of Images*, providing an overview of Jaar's career.

The Chilean artist has an international exhibition history that the word 'extensive' would blush at its inadequacy to describe. He's had numerous exhibitions across Asia, Africa, Europe, North and South America in a career spanning three decades. Jaar has exhibited at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, the Whitechapel Gallery, London, Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Istanbul Biennial amongst many other locations. He represented Chile at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and is a MacArthur Foundation Fellow.

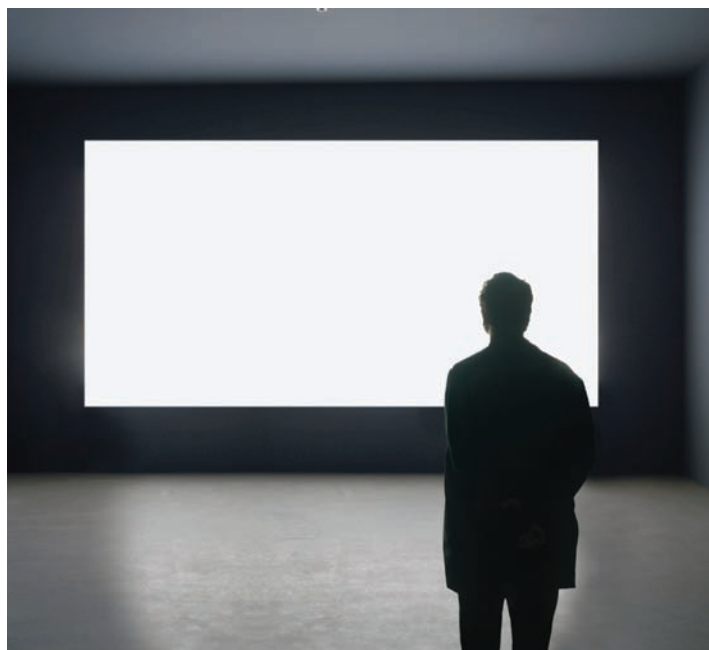
On a crisp March morning I spoke to Jaar in New York via Skype. Although he works principally in installation he has strong tendencies toward architecture and film. On the relationship between these disciplines in his work, his response was intriguing: "I'm a frustrated architect, I'm a frustrated filmmaker, and I'm an artist. Everything I do is informed by film and architecture. I look at the world through the eyes of an architect. Then sometimes I make work that is closer to film. I read more about film and architecture and pay much more attention to what is going on in those fields than what's happening in the world of art.

"Most people limit themselves to their own discipline, and I think that's a big mistake. You lose so much of the world," he said.

Jaar's desire to engage with the world and to see culture bring about social dialogue is integral to his motivation as an artist. His acclaimed 2004 work *Infinite Cell* is a notable

case in point. The work consisted of a prison cell constructed of iron bars, painted wood, and mirrors. The mirrors, fitted internally, created the illusion of cell space extending to obscurity. The work paid homage to Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, with Jaar describing it as a metaphorical representation of the cell Gramsci was imprisoned in by Mussolini's fascist government. He also stated that he was brought to *Infinite Cell* by the comment made by artist and writer Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'culture is a prison'. Pasolini observed the elitist nature of much cultural discussion, and stated a need for art to engage a broad audience.

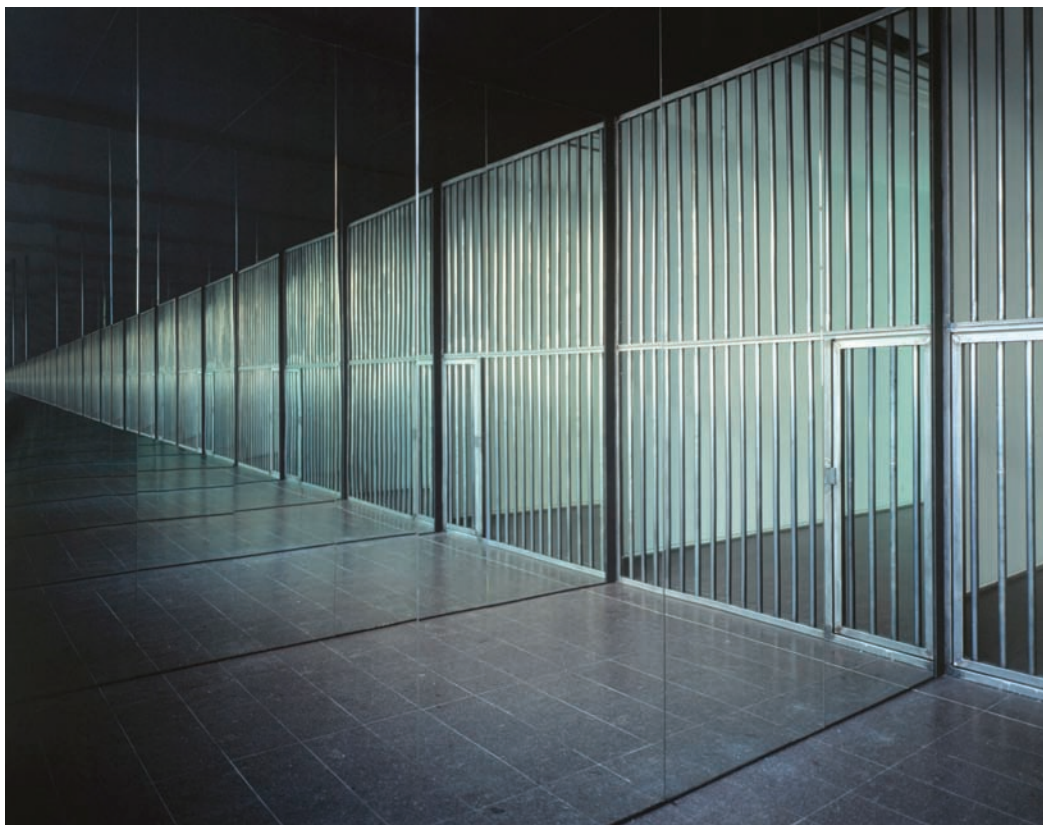
Infinite Cell invokes Gramsci and Pasolini indirectly, its comment on cultural hegemony and class politics resting gently behind immediate appearance. This is not uncommon in Jaar's modes of expression. "We are a response to all of the stimuli that we receive. I became an artist during the Pinochet regime, and I'm sure it has stayed with me and influenced the way I work in general. My work was never banging you on your head. It was more subtle, more poetic – because it was a matter of survival. We couldn't express ourselves openly. We couldn't express our resistance to the dictatorship because we would be 'disappeared', or killed, or imprisoned. So we had to learn to speak between the lines. I've kept that strategy alive, and I use it to differing

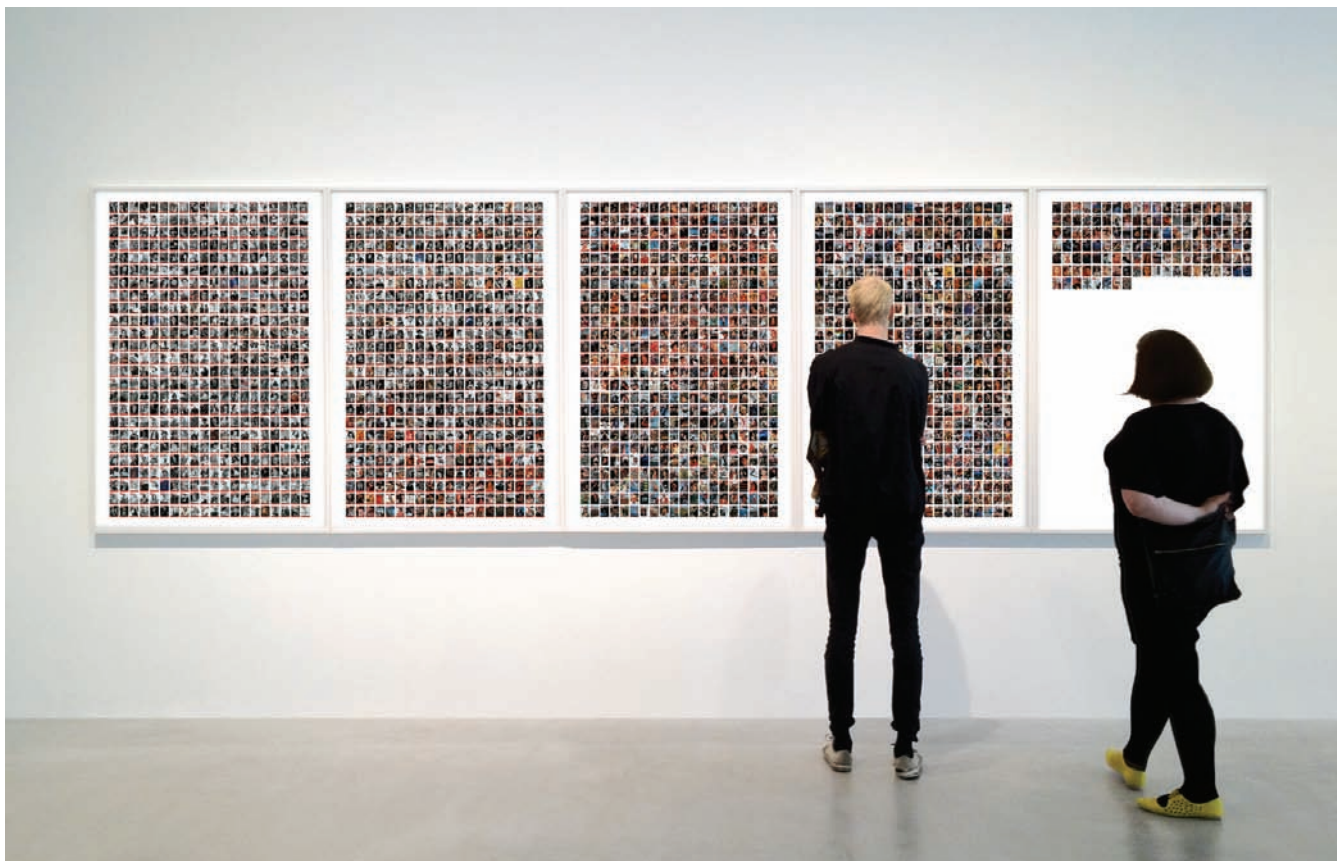


Alfredo Jarr, 2002, in front of *Lament of the Images*, Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany. Courtesy of the artist, New York

Opposite page: Alfredo Jarr, *Venezia, Venezia*, 2013, metal pool, 1:60 resin model of Giardini, hydraulic system, wood structure, metal. Photo: Agostino Osio. Courtesy of the artist

Below: Alfredo Jaar, *Infinite Cell*, 2004, iron gate, iron bars, mirrors. Overall dimensions variable. Courtesy of Galleria Lia Rumma, Milan/Naples, and the artist





degrees – sometimes in a more overt way and sometimes subtly. But it is one of my main strategies as an artist.”

Jaar believes art and culture have a role in bringing about social change. “There is a dilemma I face as an artist. The art world is a very little world, where I speak to you and you speak to me and it doesn’t go any further. I believe in the capacity of culture to effect change. But a single artist can’t do that. You create works, and these works happen in a landscape. If you are very lonely in that landscape then the affect is quite limited. But culture at large can create a different reality. The best example I can give is that in 1964 Irving Wallace wrote a book called *The Man*. It was very successful. A film was made in 1972 and the film was also very successful. So other novels and films were made that followed the same ideas, the same plot. Then musicians started singing, rappers started making music with the subject of this novel. Then a TV series was broadcast on public television, and then another series, and another film, and another novel. For 50 years, culture presented the possibility of a black president. Then it became real when Obama was elected. If you knew the level of racism that exists in the United States you would ask yourself ‘how is it possible that the United States has a black president?’ It became possible because culture prepared the way.”

The notion of culture ushering in new possibilities was at the forefront of Jaar’s work *Venezia, Venezia*, exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2013. The work was a 1:60 scale model of Venice’s Giardini that would periodically submerge into a pool of water. “I was interested in making a comment on the obsolescence of the Venice model. We have the Giardini, where only 28 countries are represented in these grandiose pavilions and 160 countries are left out. Even

though every country is free to build a pavilion outside of the Giardini, or rent a space in the Arsenale, I felt that the official position is that only 28 countries matter. What does that say to African artists, that there isn’t a single African country in the Giardini? What does the art world communicate with that structure? I think it’s obsolete. It has to be changed. It has to become more democratic. My project sank the Giardini. It was erased. I created a *tabula rasa*, a new structure inviting people to project different possibilities. So you would see the water, then the Giardini would rise up like a ghost from history, and then disappear again. It was a utopian project. Hopefully it planted a seed so that someday someone will create a new model for an international exhibition of contemporary art,” he said.

Motifs of utopia are recurrent in Jaar’s work. In a world where *realpolitik* and economic doctrine frequently enable armaments traders and despots, whilst perpetuating environmental degradation, a language of utopia is a necessary source of reprieve. “If utopia was not possible I would not be an artist. I like to speculate or dream of a better world, and utopia is such a necessary tool for that. That’s why I’m an artist. The world of art and culture is the last remaining space of freedom in a way. Besides the market, besides all the extraordinary influences on the art world from every source, it’s still a space of utopia, it’s still a space where we are free to create better worlds.”

Discussion soon shifted back to culture’s capacity for progress. “We live in a very different global art world than when I started in 1982. At the time an international exhibition meant a few Americans and a few Germans. It was unthinkable to imagine an artist from Latin America, or from Asia, or from Africa appearing on the international

Right: Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo for America*, 1987–2014, public intervention. Digital animation commissioned by The Public Art Fund for Spectacolor sign, Times Square, New York, April 1987. Courtesy of Times Square Alliance, New York, and the artist

Opposite: Alfredo Jaar, *Searching for Africa in Life*, 1996, Five C-prints mounted on plexiglass, 152.4 x 101.6cm each. Courtesy of kamel mennour Paris, galerie Lelong New York, Galerie Thomas Schulte Berlin, and the artist

art scene on the same level as artists from the US or Europe. I've seen the evolution in the last 30 years, and today artists from all these areas have much more visibility. We are still not on a level of perfect equality, but a lot of progress has been made."

Drawing attention to ingrained political assumptions of a prevailing culture is something Jaar engages with in many of his works, though is particularly evident in *A Logo for America* (1987). "I arrived in New York in 1982 and I immediately noticed that in daily language in this country they use the word 'America' to refer only to the United States, and not to the entire continent. Language is not innocent. Language contains a conception of the world. The United States dominates the entire continent politically, financially, and culturally. So every time they said "welcome to America" or "God bless America", I felt that Chile and the rest of the American continent was being erased. It's like the French saying "France is Europe, the rest is irrelevant". I was shocked by that, and so I created a piece in order to contest it. More than a million people saw it in Times Square in 1987. Of course nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. You could say it was a utopian dream to make that word revert to its original meaning. But, still I wanted to show a model of thinking that says 'you're not correct. This is not America, this is the United States.' America is a continent."

In a 2004 interview in relation to *Infinite Cell*, Jaar posed a series of rhetorical questions "How do we make art in the world, the way it is now? How do we make art today? What do we want to say as producers of culture?" I asked him if he still considered those questions relevant to his present work. "I'm still looking for answers. That's why I'm an artist. Those questions linger and they affect the way I look at the world and the way I think about art. I think they should be part of our daily thought process in our discipline as cultural producers. I am an artist because I don't have perfect answers to those questions. Being an artist is my way of searching for them."

Alfredo Jaar is exhibiting in Auckland Art Gallery's Space to Dream: Recent Art from South America to 18 September and at Trish Clark Gallery, Alfredo Jaar: The Politics of Images to 10 June, 2016.

