

## TURIN

## Alfredo Jaar

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The squawking sound of a clarinet playing in the background was like a madman's cry: obsessive, desperate, angry, lacerating. The footsteps of visitors, sinking unsteadily into an expanse of broken glass, created a harsh, broken, crunching noise. This was the grating sound of "*Abbiamo amato tanto la rivoluzione*" (We Loved It So Much, the Revolution), an exhibition that Alfredo Jaar dedicated to radical utopia. The title, borrowed from that of a 1986 book by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, appeared on the wall, written in red and white neon, illuminating the fragments of glass (150 tons of it, ground and ready for recycling) that covered the floor of the exhibition space. The phrase reminded us to wonder what has become of the thirst for change, the collective participation in political and cultural action, the utopian charge that characterized the 1960s and '70s.

As a young man in Chile, Jaar, at the age of seventeen, experienced Augusto Pinochet's bloody military coup of September 11, 1973, which overthrew the Socialist government of Salvador Allende. For eight years he lived under Pinochet's repressive regime; only his work as an artist allowed him brief bursts of freedom. The video in which Jaar plays the clarinet badly, *Opus 1981, Andante Desperato*, 1981, conveys the desperation of a voice that cannot form words but can only emit strident



Alfredo Jaar, *Abbiamo amato tanto la rivoluzione* (We Loved It So Much, the Revolution), 2013, glass, neon, dimensions variable.

sounds in order to let its owner's agony be heard. The films of Pier Paolo Pasolini and the writings of Antonio Gramsci would sustain him through those years, instilling in him a model of the militant intellectual, fully engaged in his society and time. The company of artists and intellectuals who have inspired Jaar and served as points of reference in his life has ranged from Hans Haacke to Alighiero Boetti, from Nancy Spero to Yoko Ono, from Gabriel García Márquez to Giuseppe Ungaretti. In this exhibition, curated by Claudia Gioia, Jaar established a dialogue with them in a small side room densely packed with both their works and his, a multivoiced chorus reflecting on the history and artistic practices of the times: politics and poetry, performance and photography, neon works and video gathered on four image-filled walls. On the rear wall, the light box *Gesamtkunstwerk*, 1988, explicated the sense of this intense dialogue: The works that Jaar picked for the show were mostly political. From Spero's *Torture in Chile*, 1975, to Gerhard Richter's *Mao*, 1968, as well as VALIE EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1969, and Fabio Mauri's *Disegno schermo fine* (Endless Screen), 1962, the works conveyed their shared commitment to politics and to issues of intellectual freedom.

In a second side room, dark and filled with water, Jaar borrowed a red-and-white neon piece by Mario Merz, *Sciopero generale azione politica relativa proclamata relativamente all'arte* (National Strike

Associated Political Action Proclaimed Relative to Art), 1970, but turned it upside down so that the text was reflected in the water, as if to say that today, that call for engagement cannot be communicated other than as an echo, entrusting the power of the word to the fragile framework of the reflection. And yet Jaar does not allow himself to slip into nostalgia. Reflecting on the past and present with an awareness of how much has changed, his extended elegy to the years of militancy is also a call to revive that critical dimension, that revolutionary potential of culture that Gramsci theorized.

With the formidable metaphor of the glass detritus, Jaar asked us to confront the shards of a past in which political commitment was an almost inevitable condition—the never-repudiated past with which he continues to contend, reflecting on what little remains today of that ideological fervor, but also reaffirming art's capacity to indicate paths of freedom of action and thought: an amputated history, a possible future.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.