ALFREDO JAAR
THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

EXHIBITION GUIDE
YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK
Generally we are taught how to read, but we are not taught how to look.

ALFREDO JAAR
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It is impossible to convey the real-life situation of someone else. Everything we do as artists, dealing with the reality of the world, is out of focus.

ALFREDO JAAR
INTRODUCTION
CLARE LILLEY

It is difficult | to get the news from poems | yet men die miserably
every day | for lack | of what is found there

William Carlos Williams Asphodel, That Greeny Flower 1955

As a pioneering practitioner of socially critical art, for almost forty
years Alfredo Jaar has asked difficult questions of himself and of
society, about art and culture, and about our often-stated claims
of care and responsibility. Frequently choosing subjects that are
not in the mainstream or which the media manipulates, he focuses
on political oppression, humanitarian concern, and human and civil
rights abuse. He gives voice and face to those who are marginalised
or otherwise muted by circumstance.

Born in Santiago, Chile in 1956, Jaar was raised in Martinique and
aged sixteen returned to his birthplace, where from 1973 he lived
under the military dictatorship of General Pinochet until he moved
to New York in 1982. As well as condoning torture and murder, the
Pinochet regime forbade public speaking, meetings and any direct
action. Whilst studying both architecture and filmmaking, and driven
to respond to his environment, Jaar chose to pursue an expanded
conceptual art practice. This enabled him to explore and comment
on his environment with comparative unrestraint: “The world of art
and the world of culture is the last remaining space of freedom...
I am free to speculate, I am free to dream a better world, and I can
only do that in the art world”.

For his seven-part Studies on Happiness (1979–81) Jaar approached
thousands of strangers in Santiago to ask, “Are you happy?”,
presenting his findings in public places and so undermining the
dictatorship’s denial of its citizens’ right to vote and to freedom of
speech. Astutely framed as an artwork, the studies evaded official condemnation and in 1982 won Jaar a scholarship to New York, where he initially went to work for the architectural company SITE and soon established a highly respected international career as an artist.

Describing himself as “an architect making art”, Jaar constructs spaces and intricate light systems to navigate the ambiguities of what is represented and misrepresented in photographic and other media. Questioning the objectivity and truth of media images, Jaar’s extremely precise work explores issues such as voyeurism, compassion-fatigue, and deliberate manipulation of images for political and other ends. Frequently using appropriated media images and film, his challenge is “how to make art out of information most of us would rather ignore”. His achievement lies in this ability but also in his capacity to make art that we, as viewers, want to see, despite its difficult or harsh nature.

My first encounter with Jaar’s work was at the 2002 Documenta11 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, and I was struck absolutely by the power and compassion of his installation, Lament of the Images (2002). In this work Jaar had carefully entwined two narratives around cultural blindness towards the use and ownership of images with an account of Nelson Mandela’s forced labour of breaking limestone on Robben Island where the harsh reflection of sunshine on the white stone damaged his retinas. After reading three texts, the viewer walks into a room filled with a searing, bright light that embodies the metaphorical and literal blindness of which they tell. Jaar describes Lament of the Images as being “a metaphor for the blindness in our society... I believe that we have lost the ability to see and be moved by images. Nothing moves us any more, nothing has any meaning. My work is a kind of poetic meditation about the power of images”. The poetic content of Jaar’s work, his distillation of the meaning of complex subjects and his deft but rigorous touch, makes it extremely compelling. Despite its tough subject matter, Jaar’s modus operandi is to limit the emotion of photographic material, but through repetition or powerful light to make work that is insistent, work that edges into our consciousness and comprehension: “There’s this huge gap between reality and its possible representations. And that gap is impossible to close. So as artists, we must try different strategies for representation... [A] process of identification is fundamental to create empathy, to create solidarity, to create intellectual involvement”.

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This exhibition engages with crucial global topics; through the use of light, architecture and photography, three seminal installations in the galleries explore the power of images, the ongoing plight of refugees, and grief. They are complex, powerful installations that take us on a journey through the Underground Gallery. Two text works in neon and one presented as a take-away poster make use of words borrowed from writers; they announce the artist’s beliefs and I CAN’T GO ON. I’LL GO ON (2016) speaks of fortitude in the face of adversity. Outdoors and seen through the huge windows of the gallery, is an important new work made especially for Yorkshire Sculpture Park. As with many of Jaar’s installations, it has gestated for some years, becoming an aspiration that the artist could not be certain would be realised. The Garden of Good and Evil (2017) is a grove of 101 evergreen trees and nine steel cells that reference the often-unlawful detention and covert questioning of individuals at ‘black sites’ around the world. Giving its title to the whole exhibition, this growing installation conjures notions of the biblical Garden of Eden as well as the important Northern-Renaissance triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights (c.1490-1510), in which Hieronymus Bosch ponders humanity and notions of creation, false paradise and corruption. Jaar’s garden is enchanting but with ominous overtones, resolute on being seen and experienced through the shadow it casts within the building. From within the grove and the steel structures, visitors can reflect on the meaning of freedom. After the exhibition closes, as a lasting legacy for future generations, the trees will be replanted and nurtured in the historic estate.

Aside from the important content of the project, this exhibition is a fusion of a leading international artist’s work with one of Britain’s most beautiful and unique museums and it continues a strand of YSP’s programming around global issues that has included Shirin Neshat, Ai Weiwei and Amar Kanwar. To have Alfredo contribute to YSP’s fortieth anniversary programme, and to our beautiful landscape, is a privilege and we extend our gratitude to his studio, to those who have supported the project, and most especially to Alfredo Jaar.
I love the particles of sky that slip through the skylight – a metre of light where horses race.

One Square Metre of Prison
MAHMOUD DARWISH
THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL 2017

The premier of a major new work for YSP sees the installation of 101 trees along the 50-metre length of the Underground Gallery open-air concourse. Concealed within the grove of trees are steel cells which reference ‘black sites’, the secret detention facilities around the world operated by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The cells are obscured from view, in the same way the ‘black sites’ and the torturous activity happening is hidden from public view. Some of the known sites include Guantanamo Bay in Cuba; Salt Pit, also known as Cobalt and Code Black in Afghanistan; the hidden prison Bright Light in Romania, and others located in Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Thailand, Kenya and Egypt.

The cells hidden amongst the trees all have a one-metre square base inspired by the poem, One Square Metre of Prison (1986), by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. Darwish had been imprisoned many times following the Israeli occupation of his country in 1948 and spent much of his life in exile. Visitors are invited to walk in amongst the trees to discover the hidden structures.

YSP worked closely with the artist to select species that are already present in the 18th century designed landscape. The evergreen trees chosen are Black Pine, Scots Pine, Green Yew, Variegated Holly, Green Holly, White Pine and Western Red Cedar.

Generously donated by the artist and a/political, The Garden of Good and Evil will become a permanent part of the YSP collection.
I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.

The Unnameable
SAMUEL BECKETT
I CAN’T GO ON. I’LL GO ON 2016

This neon work uses a phrase from The Unnameable (1954) by Samuel Beckett, which according to Jaar is a perfect metaphor for the times in which we are living. “A time of absolute chaos and confusion, where the collapse of ideologies and traditional politics is amplified by a dazzling array of technological developments; an era of alternative realities, otherwise known as the post-truth moment.” The last eight words of the novel, extracted by the artist to make this piece, present us with the only possible escape: to first acknowledge our despair, and then move forward.

BE AFRAID OF THE ENORMITY OF THE POSSIBLE 2015

This work quotes E. M. Cioran, one of Jaar’s favourite authors. It is from one of his most celebrated books entitled On the Heights of Despair (1934).

Cioran’s overwhelming pessimism resonates with some of the horrific events witnessed by the artist throughout his life: from the military coup in Chile (1973) and its subsequent 17 year-long brutal dictatorship, to the Rwandan genocide (1994) where one million people were killed in less than a hundred days in the face of the international community’s indifference. In light of these despairing events, the artist perceives Cioran’s almost passionate pessimism as an act of resistance and a necessity for counterbalance and survival.
I CAN'T GO ON
I'LL GO ON
BE AFRAID OF
THE ENORMITY OF
THE POSSIBLE
I think that artists are thinkers, they’re intellectuals, and art is about thinking. For me, art is about 99% thinking and 1% making. So I spend most of my time thinking.

ALFREDO JAAR
YOU DO NOT TAKE A PHOTOGRAPH. YOU MAKE IT. 2013

This poster work appropriates a quote that has been attributed to the well-known American photographer Ansel Adams. Jaar uses the phrase to encourage reflection on “the most basic but overlooked fact of photography: that images are not innocent”. The artist deeply believes that every photograph ever made contains a conception of the world. This work is a call for a greater conscious awareness of this fact.

Visitors are invited to take away a copy of the poster.
YOU DO NOT TAKE A PHOTOGRAPH. YOU MAKE IT.
I wanted to build a theatre devoted to one single image because images are of crucial importance. Today children are taught how to read, but nobody teaches them how to see and that is something that has always amazed me.

ALFREDO JAAR
THE SOUND OF SILENCE 2006

Jaar uses carefully devised complex light systems to amplify, isolate and bring into focus the subjects of his installations. In The Sound of Silence, an intense wall of LED light strips illuminates the viewer to near-blindness before they enter the much darker constructed space.

Inside, the soundless film projection tells the story of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter and the fallout of his controversial photograph taken during the Sudan famine in 1993. The image shows an emaciated child with a vulture ominously looking on, and was first published in The New York Times, where Jaar saw it. The photograph, though lauded, also received an onslaught of criticism. In 1994 Carter was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, shortly after which he committed suicide.

Jaar wrote the narrative based on news reports and Carter’s writings, concisely telling the story in just eight minutes, and he let the work stay dormant for ten years while waiting for the technology required to realise his vision would become available. This work brings to the fore the question of journalistic responsibility and shines light onto humanity and our collective failings.

Carter was part of the ‘Bang-Bang Club’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s in South Africa, a group of photographers who captured images in the midst of fighting and unrest during the latter years of apartheid.

“It is too easy to blame Carter for being the vulture, where in fact we are the vultures, the vulture is us. We are the ones who are guilty of such criminal, barbaric indifference.”
I wrote down her name: Nguyen Thi Thuy. I could not get her age, or her story. I suspect she was born at Pillar Point, as do some 30 children a month. She continued to follow. Later, I offered her my hand and she accepted it. From that moment, she never let go of my hand. Until I left the camp.

Of the 1378 photographs I took in Hong Kong, the images of Nguyen are the ones that have remained in my memory. Forever.

ALFREDO JAAR
“Our society is blind. We have lost our ability to be affected by images.”

In 1991 Jaar visited a Vietnamese refugee camp in Hong Kong where he met and interviewed people incarcerated in ‘refugee detention centres’, as well as officials and members of the Hong Kong Government.

Hundreds of thousands of people had travelled to Hong Kong since the mid-1970s. Searching for a better life and quickly nicknamed ‘boat-people’, they were fleeing a post-war Vietnam crushed by poverty, the U.S. trade embargo and ethnic persecution. The Government of Hong Kong, still under British rule at the time, struggled for decades to handle the crisis, resulting in a rapid growth of camps such as the one Jaar visited.

It was at Pillar Point Refugee Centre that the artist met Nguyen, a little girl who voluntarily accompanied him as he explored the camp. At one point she agreed to be photographed by Jaar. The resulting images represent and condense his experience there as well as the thousands of people who had fled their homes; an individual representing the many. Jaar articulates the importance of the individual through many of his installations, rather than focusing on the mass of victims of the devastation and oppression he has witnessed.
The capacity of our humanity resides in our ability to read an image and identify with another human being. Only in that capacity of focusing... is where the process of empathy and identification can occur.

ALFREDO JAAR
Jaar’s exploration into the power of documentary images continues in Shadows, a story told through only seven photographs taken by Dutch photojournalist Koen Wessing as he recorded the revolt against the Somoza military dictatorship in Nicaragua.

At its centre is an image, taken in Esteli, Nicaragua in 1978, showing two women in the throes of grief on learning of their father’s murder. Shot by the National Guardsman, he had been left by the side of the road. The anguish of the daughters’ suffering is amplified by Jaar’s use of powerful light, and the image, described by him as one of the “strongest expressions of grief”, fades into a bright silhouette, skillfully orchestrated to linger as a shadow in the mind of the viewer.

Shadows is the second work of a trilogy of installations that focus on a single extraordinary image. It follows The Sound of Silence, the first work in the trilogy, in its strategy of contextualising an image through a complex installation; but differs from it in its choice of narrating through images rather than text.

This installation is inspired by Chili September 1973, a photo-based book by Wessing, which wordlessly tells the story of the beginning of the Chilean military dictatorship that lasted 17 years. In Shadows, Jaar similarly chooses to tell significant narratives through a sequence of poignant photographs without using a single word.
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ALFREDO JAAR
THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

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pg 22-23 The Sound of Silence installation view; pg 26-27 A Hundred Times Nguyen (detail); pg 30-31 Shadows (detail)

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