

HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS

Alfredo Jaar on the Capacity of Culture

In a conversation we had in Cape Town, I attempted to better understand Jaar's deep belief in art's capacity to effect change amid political disorder.

Khanya Mashabela 1 minutes ago



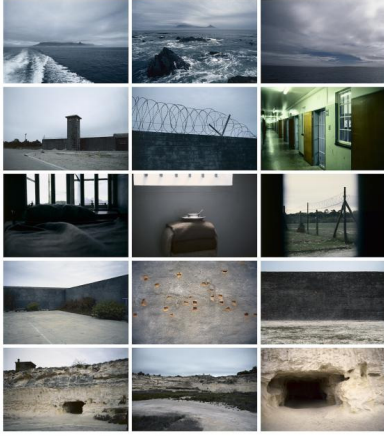
Alfredo Jaar, Culture=Capital, 2011, Neon

CAPE TOWN — Late last year, the artist Alfredo Jaar displayed a series of photographs and piercing neon works addressing the shared trauma and healing of Robben Island's political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, after Apartheid. It was in the midst of this exhibition, titled *Men Who Cannot Cry*, at Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, that I sat down with him to

reflect on his four decades' worth of work. Jaar — who consistently deals with violence and oppression within the global context in his work — wants to oppose the 'if it bleeds it leads' mentality of photojournalism by creating pieces that are subtle and ambiguous, but which cut to what he perceives as the heart of the matter. Even so, he admitted to me a fear of misrepresenting issues in the ways that journalism often does, a fear which he counters with empathy and exhaustive research.

I attempted to better understand Jaar's belief that art, and culture at wide, can pierce the current political disorder which, for many in both the Global South and in the West, appears incurable. In the face of the complexity and scale of social injustice worldwide, Jaar advocates for the political power of culture and straightforward communication.

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Alfredo Jaar, "The Sound of Silence" (2010)
 (image courtesy Goodman Gallery, Peter Blum Gallery, Galerie Lelong & Co., and the Artist)

Khanya Mashabela: *I know that you've been asked before about whether your work is political, and your response has been that all art is political. But what do you think is the political power of art, and the potential effects of the political messages expressed in art on its audience?*

Alfredo Jaar: I believe that culture can effect change, that is undoubtedly true. In the mid-60s there was an author who wrote a novel called *The Man* [Irving Wallace, 1964] and it was so successful that they decided to make a film based on the book.

The film was also very successful, so they did a series, and then another book. Musicians and rappers started making music about *The Man*. This novel was very creative, very unique, and the story of the novel is that through a series of curious incidents, the president had died and the vice-president had died, and through succession a Black man became president. It was the first time in culture that there was the image of a Black president in the United States. Subsequent generations of people in the United States were born in a culture that showed them a Black president. It was a part of the landscape ...

KM: *Part of the possibilities.*

AJ: ... and then Obama was elected. I believe that Obama was elected because 'the Black president' was created by the world of culture. I really believe that. Because that is the only way to explain the election of Obama in such a racist society. Now what you see during the Trump regime is the racism coming up to the surface. It is an extremely racist society; how is it possible that Obama was elected? That is the capacity of culture, to create a model of looking and thinking about the world that can enter a society and that shows us what is possible. Then it becomes normal, and then things begin to happen.

Right now, we are going through very dark times. The president of the country where I live is a fascist. You look at Europe, half the countries have fascist parties, getting 10, 20, 30 percent of the vote. In Latin America, Brazil just elected a fascist president. In Asia, there are two or three fascist presidents. It is a disaster. Within that landscape, I think that the last remaining spaces of freedom are the spaces of art and culture. The museums, the galleries, the universities, the art journals ...

KM: *How has that idea of art as a zone of freedom been complicated for you by the increased involvement of economic interests? I'm thinking of the work you made, "Culture = Capital."*

AJ: I did that work almost contradictorily. On the one hand, I wanted to celebrate the fact that for me culture is the true capital, that it is not about money or financial interests, but about ideas. For me, culture is the true capital of societies. When you go to a country, you admire their intellectuals, their ideas, their work. That's what I retain from the countries I visit.



Alfredo Jaar, "Men Who Cannot Cry (A)" (2018) (image courtesy Goodman Gallery and the Artist)

KM: *Culture has more lasting power.*

AJ: Exactly. I believe that culture is the capital of societies, and that governments should invest much more in culture. But a new phenomenon has taken place in the last 20 years in the world of art; we have been invaded by investors, and they look at art as a commodity. There is a danger that the so-called 'art market' — which is not the same as the art world, they are two

different systems and they feed each other, but they are separate — will transform the art world. When I hear talk about the art market, I insist that yes, there are people that are buying artworks just to resell them and make money, but that is not the art world. The art world is millions of young artists who, against the odds and against the wishes of their families, their parents, and the system, have decided not to be engineers, doctors, lawyers, or bankers.

KM: *Do you ever worry about the influence of the art market on the art world? Do you worry that it is influencing the reason that people become artists?*

AJ: I am afraid that is starting to affect it greatly. Some artists are coming into our world for the wrong reasons. But they will find out very quickly that there are some selling works for millions of dollars but those are the 0.000001% of the art world. The real art world is not that. It is young artists around the world trying to make sense of this world.

KM: *I want to better understand your views on art's capacity for change. There is your work, "Tonight Poetry Will Not Serve." Is there a point for you where art cannot fully address trauma?*



Alfredo Jaar, "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve"
(2013), seven archival pigment prints

AJ: That poem [written by Adrienne Rich, 2011] touched me because when you say, "Tonight, no poetry will serve," it says *tonight* no poetry will serve, but it is also suggesting that *other* nights, poetry can serve. I believe in the power of poetry, the power of art, to serve as a counterbalance to the darkness that surrounds us in the world. But sometimes you feel that there is no way out. I go through very depressing moods and I feel ... "What am I doing? Is it really making a difference? Is it worth it?" You have doubts. I am always full of doubts.

That piece was a way to recognize that, to be honest and say that sometimes art might help you and sometimes it might not, because reality around us is too powerful and sometimes art cannot affect it.

KM: *What are your considerations when you adapt poetry to visual art?*

AJ: I could say that most of my works are haikus in the sense that I am interested in the economy of means, how you can create an explosion of meanings with so little. I believe in the power of the single idea. Many artists make the mistake of trying to say 30 things at the same time. The communication of two human beings who do not know each other is already very complicated. I don't know you. You don't know me. How do we communicate? I believe haikus allow us to communicate things in a simpler way. That doesn't mean simplistic — the words can have complexity and depth. I am always looking for poems that can, in one line, throw you a hundred miles from here. It's extraordinary when they do that.

[Alfredo Jaar: Men Who Cannot Cry was on display at the Goodman Gallery \(176 Sir Lowry Rd, Woodstock, Cape Town\) in December 2018.](#)

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