



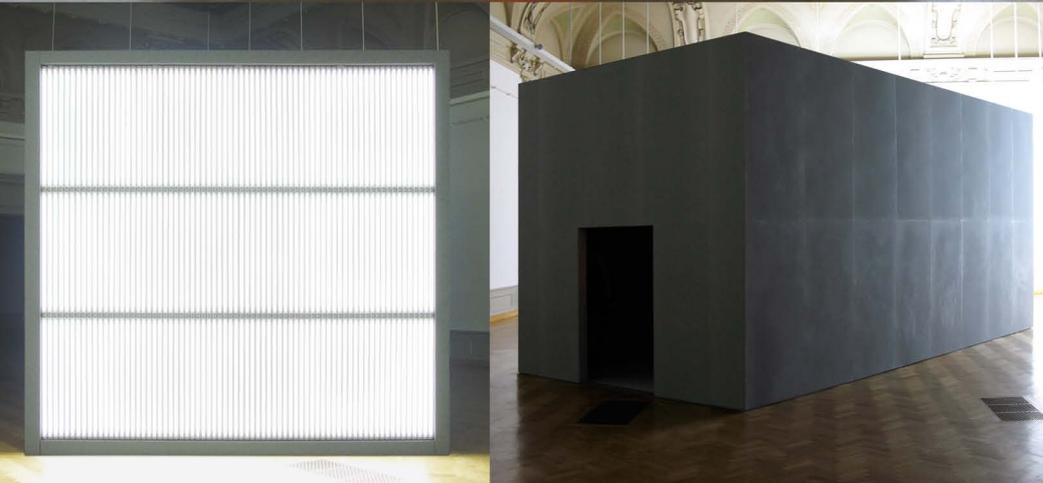
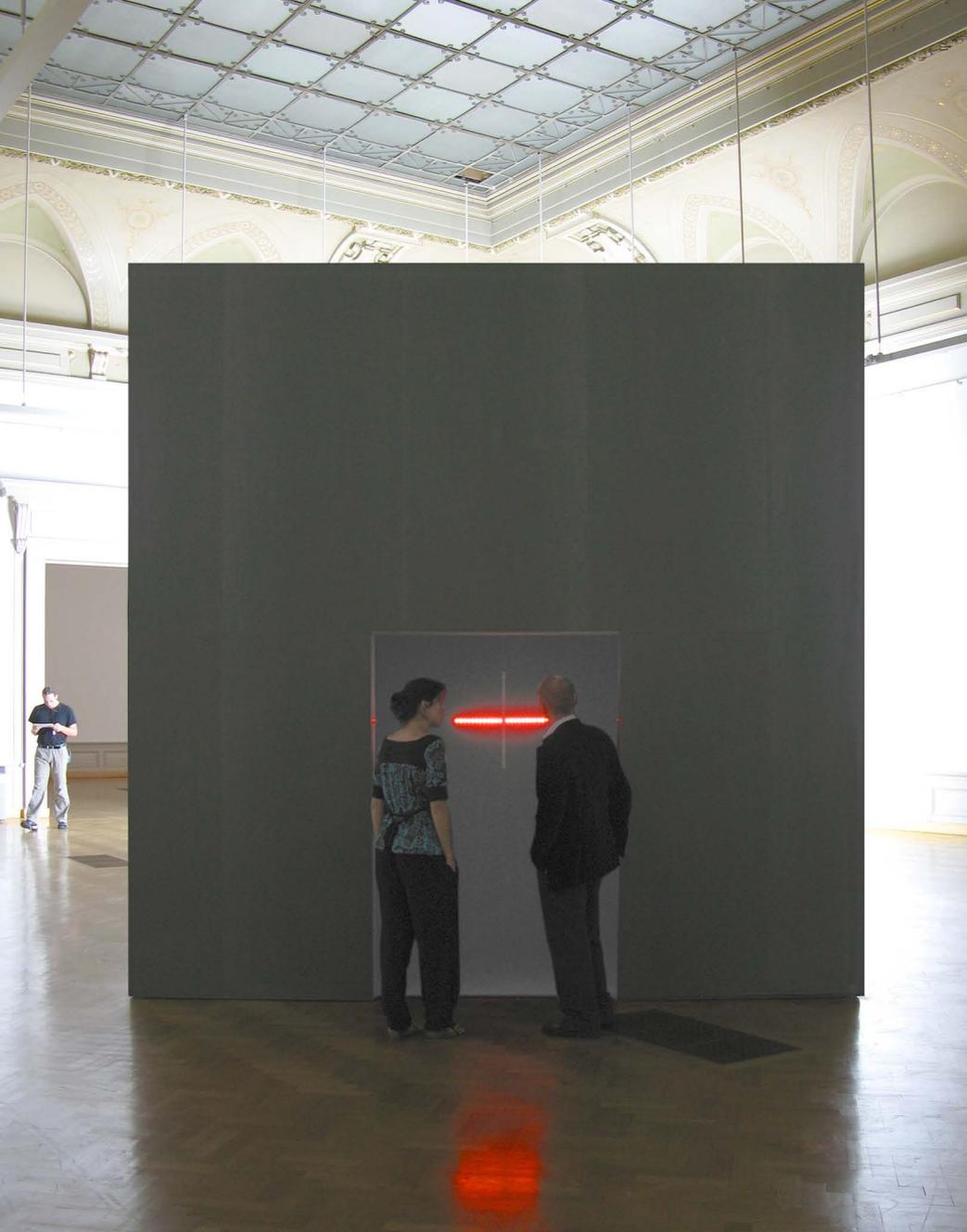
Subtle Power



Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom, 2005.
Zinc platform, 25 zinc containers, 9 compact axial fans, air conditioning system, irrigation system, lighting system, 100 flowers, earth, and video projection, installation view and detail.

Alfredo Jaar's Recent Installations and Permanent Public Interventions

BY ANNE BARCLAY MORGAN



Top and above: *The Sound of Silence*, 2006. Wood, aluminum, fluorescent lights, strobe lights, and video projection (software design by Ravi Rajan), 3 views of installation in Lausanne.

Alfredo Jaar's body of work continues to be widely discussed in terms of the theory and politics of images. He often critiques the use and ownership of well-known photographs and raises topics largely ignored by the media. His work has received critical acclaim for its efficacy in giving a voice to the powerless, the marginalized, and the persecuted. For example, a series of images and installations focusing on the Rwandan genocide (1994–2000) examines how an entire continent, Africa, can go largely ignored by Western media and political and economic elites.

Much less, however, has been written about Jaar's work in terms of sculpture and installation. Undoubtedly influenced by his architecture studies in his native Chile, Jaar uses space to create striking works that convey both passion and conviction. His installations are conceived and constructed with exacting precision, so that the viewer's experience, too, is considered with great care. His recent works, in particular, embody a remarkable depth of sensitivity in their subject matter. While the ideas addressed by his installations are robust, tough, and multi-layered, viewers are treated with a certain tenderness.

Jaar's aesthetic is best described as Minimalist, architectural, and sleek. Simple lines and shapes emphasize conceptual concerns, directing viewer perceptions and movements through the space. While the observer looks at the artwork, the works gaze back at and into the observer. There are no distractions, no detours. The materials, the images, even the texts express a poetic quality that adds to the power of the work. The proportions are both elegant and forceful, the means and the materials simple and understated, enhancing access to the underlying ideas.

Jaar's primary construction material is metal. For instance, in *The Sound of Silence* (2006), aluminum panels enclose a giant, rectangular space where viewers sit to watch a short film-essay. At Galerie Lelong's 2009 showing of this work, viewers first confronted a blinding wall of fluorescent tubes. After walking along either side, into ever-expanding shadow, visitors waited at an opening directly opposite the illuminated wall for a horizontal red light to extinguish and a vertical green light to signal. They



Infinite Cell, 2004. Iron bars, painted wood, and mirrors, 370 x 450 x 260 cm.

then entered a darkened space, walking around a partition to find a simple bench. The eight-minute-long silent film presents a largely text-based narrative summarizing the troubled life of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, leading up to a startling flash from two sets of photographer's lights placed on tripods on either side of the projection and aimed at the audience, followed by a brief viewing of Carter's unforgettable image of a vulture and a starving girl in Sudan. This chilling photograph was published in the *New York Times* on March 26, 1993 and won the Pulitzer Prize, but it also created an uproar with profound consequences for Carter, who committed suicide soon thereafter. The narrative ends on a distressing note, tracing the reproduction rights to this historic image and the unknown fate of the girl. The proportions of the viewing space, the placement of the bench in relation to the screen, and the brilliant flashes of light lend a sense of intimacy and confrontation to the film's themes. This large-scale installation amounts to a theater built

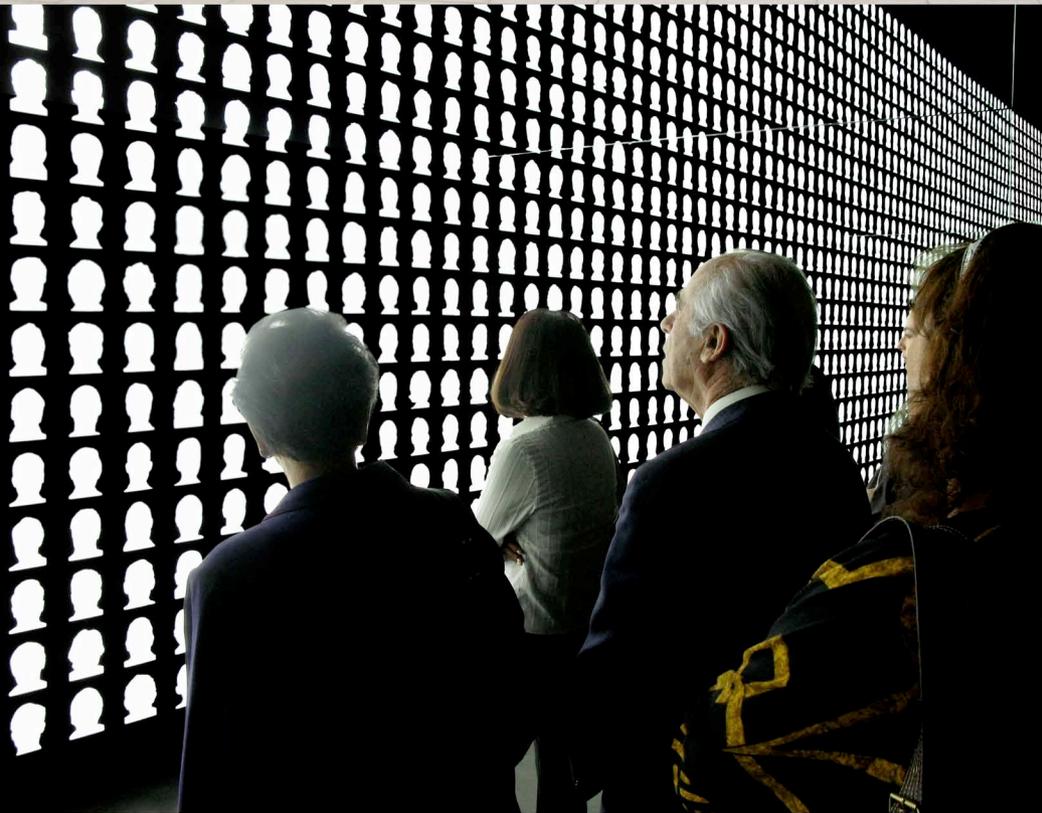
to analyze and discuss one image and its power.

Light is the principle medium in Jaar's work—from the almost blinding luminosity of a wall of fluorescent tubes to the light within and behind a wall-hung image or text, to the glow of light tables, as well as projected images. To bring to light social and political injustices, secretive manipulations, media sensationalism, political avoidance, and social ignorance, his work also deals with light as a metaphor for the pursuit of morality and ethics in individuals, groups, and society as a whole.

Jaar uses light tables most directly in *Lament of the Images (version 2)* (2002). In this installation, one light table hangs upside down over another with very little separation, creating a band of light only one centimeter wide that projects a line along the surrounding walls. Every six minutes, the top table rises, pauses for one second, and then drops down again. Although *Lament of the Images* incorporates a tool traditionally used to analyze images, there are no images on view, only

light. Rather than analyze an image, the installation briefly illuminates the viewers themselves. Here, Jaar argues eloquently for focusing on reality—the viewers—rather than representations of reality, since images are nothing more than constructions, mere interpretations.

By walking, lingering, and (in some cases) sitting, viewers create narratives from the parts of Jaar's installations. All of the components contribute to this story, not just the projected images or texts: the viewer's trajectory through and experience of the space is equally important. *Lament of the Images (version 1)*, shown at Documenta in 2002 and then at Galerie Lelong, provides a particularly effective example. Three backlit texts in white on a black background greet the viewer. The first references Nelson Mandela's imprisonment and the blinding sunlight he was subjected to during forced mining of highly reflective limestone. The second focuses on Bill Gates's ownership of important, and nearly inaccessible, historical photographs and on digital reproduction rights to works of art. The third



Top and detail: *La Geometria de la Conciencia*, 2010. Two views of memorial at the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile.

text focuses on the purchase by the U.S. Department of Defense of all relevant satellite images prior to the first U.S. air strikes in Afghanistan. After walking through a long, narrow, and very dark corridor, the viewer then comes face to face with a wall of blinding white light. Three different sto-

ries about images lead to a confrontation with total blindness, total light, and nothing to see.

Two recent installations incorporate different materials and explore other ideas in a tribute to the Italian philosopher, politician, and political theorist Antonio Gramsci,

who died in 1937. In *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom* (2005) at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Rome, Jaar included flowering plants, a first for his indoor installations. The viewer entered the space through metal doors, as if walking into a giant refrigerator. Placed in 25 zinc cubes filled with earth and set into a zinc-covered wooden platform, 100 flowering plants were given perfect nutritional support and light conditions, while simultaneously being subjected to violent wind from a row of nine industrial fans and intense air-conditioning. Such was the force of the wind and the cold that they could not survive, and they were regularly replaced for the duration of the exhibition. On the far wall, a live video feed of Gramsci's grave suggested that he was watching the spectacle. The title references Mao's use of a phrase from an ancient Chinese poem in his campaign to enlist the support of Chinese intellectuals for the Cultural Revolution. The eventual response of those intellectuals resulted in their imprisonment, torture, and death. Jaar's installation pays homage to threatened and oppressed intellectuals around the world—in spite of harsh conditions and death, their ideas, or seeds, live on.

A second Gramsci-related work showed exceptional mastery of space. *Infinite Cell* (2004), at the Galleria Lia Rumma in Milan, consisted of a cell built inside the gallery, which the viewer entered through a tall, narrow door of iron bars proportioned to feel physically small (like Gramsci). Once inside, one experienced the sensation of being held captive in a seemingly endless cell, an illusion conjured by precisely placed mirrors and a window behind a grid of bars, referencing Gramsci's long imprisonment.

Every aspect of Jaar's installations—the spatial configurations, the lack or overabundance of light, the use of zinc and aluminum to create surrounding and reflective surfaces, the placement of text or its absence, the use of white letters on black, the careful selection of just a few images or none at all—adds to their subtle yet very real power to shift awareness, to bring to light that which was hidden from view.

With over 50 ephemeral “public interventions” and temporary public art projects to date, Jaar has recently begun to create



Park of the Laments, 2010. Two views of site-specific work at the Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park, Indianapolis Museum of Art.

permanent public works. The first of these, commissioned by then-President Michelle Bachelet of Chile and completed at the beginning of 2010, is *La Geometria de la Conciencia (The Geometry of Conscience)*, a memorial to the victims of the Pinochet regime at the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago. In Jaar's profoundly moving and unforgettable memorial, a wide, glass-enclosed staircase leads down from the museum's entrance plaza to a subterranean space facing a concrete facade punctuated by glass doors. (An elevator is also available.) The glass doors open into an antechamber lit by daylight from the spacious stairwell. A museum guide standing behind a cast-concrete podium placed near another closed door welcomes visitors and explains the viewing procedure. When the door opens, visitors may enter the final space for three minutes. The door closes behind them, and for 60 seconds, the chamber is filled with total darkness. The light level then gradually increases over a period of 90 seconds, bringing into view a series of blindingly white silhouettes along the back wall. Laser-cut into black metal

and placed in front of opaque glass, the silhouettes are backlit by a bank of computer-controlled LEDs. By placing mirrors on both walls perpendicular to the wall of silhouettes, as in *Infinite Cell*, Jaar creates a seemingly infinite number of heads. Suddenly, the light disappears, returning visitors to total darkness, but the brilliant silhouettes remain a vivid after-effect in each person's visual field and memory. Then, after 30 seconds, the door leading back to the antechamber opens.

Jaar's concept for this memorial is unique. He alternates a row of silhouette-portraits of Pinochet's victims with a row of silhouettes made from the heads of people living in Santiago today. With this strategy, he suggests that the dead should not be singled out in a separate category but included with the living in a collective narrative. The deceased are not the only victims; their survivors and descendants carry the pain and repercussions of that horrific regime into the present day.

Jaar has also installed a new work at the Indianapolis Museum of Art's new Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park. *Park of the*

Laments serves as a refuge where visitors can sit on minimal wooden benches and contemplate global atrocities. Viewers descend through a long, dark underground tunnel, then ascend a set of stairs to arrive at the benches, arranged around a sort of open amphitheater. A natural fence, made of greenery and topped by views of the sky, enhances the meditative nature of this central space. Here, Jaar goes beyond *Lament of the Images (version 1)* by emphasizing the trajectory of descent and ascent through the darkness of global injustice, violence, and slaughter to find a place of mourning, rest, release, and perhaps some sort of inner peace.

Jaar's first permanent public works suggest a new direction and the potential to reach larger audiences. In each of his installations and public interventions, he invites viewers to consider challenging subject matter by creating spaces of profound beauty and meaning in which to linger and ponder.

Anne Barclay Morgan is a writer living in Gainesville, Florida.