

## Art in America

**A Post-Pavilion Biennale?: An Interview with Alfredo Jaar**

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**by Faye Hirsch**



Alfredo Jaar, *Venezia, Venezia*, 2013, installation. Photo Italo Rondinella.

The Chilean pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale opens with a large lightbox bearing the image of the Italian artist Lucio Fontana stepping gingerly through the ruins of his Milan studio after World War II. An image both devastating and hopeful, it ushers the visitor into Alfredo Jaar's ambitious installation *Venezia, Venezia*, replete with such contradictions. Behind the lightbox is a hushed, darkened space occupied by a gigantic stepped platform, atop which is a steel cube filled with murky water. Every three minutes, a grayish model of the Biennale's Giardini, with their characteristic national pavilions, rises dripping from the surface like some sea monster, emerging for 30 seconds then returning into the opacity of the pool. The apparatus is both impressive and unsettling.

Jaar met with *A.i.A.* a few days before the public opening of the Biennale and talked about the meaning of these seemingly incongruous elements.

**FAYE HIRSCH** What was your idea for *Venezia, Venezia*? It seems like quite an elaborate apparatus for you.

**ALFREDO JAAR** It's the biggest project I've ever undertaken, in time, cost and human resources. There was a huge team of collaborators. So this is the idea. When you come into the space, you see this image—a suspended lightbox, measuring 8 by 8 feet, quite large. It's an image of Lucio Fontana arriving at his Milan studio, which had been bombed in the

Second World War. Fontana was born in Argentina, then lived in Italy for a while, but had gone back to Argentina during the war. This is a key image for me as an introduction to the work, because for me it is a key moment in the history of culture in the world. Italy was on its knees. It had lost the war; it was morally destroyed. The country had allied with the Germans, there were Fascists, and of course it was physically destroyed. And an extraordinary group of intellectuals—artists, writers and filmmakers—in less than 20 years, created a cultural revolution that changed the course of history. In 1943, Visconti releases his film *Obsession*—this was during the war! In 1945, the year the war ended, Rossellini releases *Rome Open City*, with a script by Fellini. And in 1948, De Sica releases *The Bicycle Thief*. This is just a sample of what filmmakers were doing at the time. Then a couple of years later, we had extraordinary writings—books and poems, by Giuseppe Ungaretti, Cesare Pavese and Alberto Moravia, who wrote *The Conformist* in 1951. Then Pasolini, Fellini, Bertolucci, and so on, and Arte Povera. All of them changed the image of Italy in the world. So this image of the artist, standing in the wreckage . . .

**HIRSCH** Looking quite energetic, actually . . .

**JAAR** Yes. [Laughs] He's pretty well dressed! It's an amazing picture. For me it stands as an image of resistance, of what art and culture can do in a society. It's an homage to all these artists in the figure of one of them, Fontana. Then you have to cross a bridge, which physically takes up the whole width of the pavilion. But I am less interested in the physical act of crossing the bridge than the mental act of crossing it. It's suggesting, "Let's go somewhere else. We have to go to the other side." On the bridge itself, you find this enormous tank that is filled with water.

**HIRSCH** It looks very much like a Minimalist sculpture when you first walk in.

**JAAR** It's filled with water from the *laguna*—at least it looks that way.

**HIRSCH** It's quite murky.

**JAAR** Yes. Though it's clean water—we used some pigments, and added chemicals so it wouldn't form algae or living organisms. But we wanted to match the color of the *laguna*. Every three minutes, a perfect replica of the Giardini, all 28 national pavilions, emerges from the water. It's a model in 1:60 scale, made of gray resin. For this we had to have a survey done of the Giardini by a group of local architects. We drew up the plans and gave them to a model-maker in Rome. It took a year, and seven people, to build this model.

**HIRSCH** So there wasn't an already existing model of the Giardini? I'm sort of surprised.

**JAAR** Nor did the Biennale have any plans of the Giardini. These pavilions are like embassies; they are owned by their respective countries. During the course of the Biennale, this emerging and submerging will happen 24,860 times. For me, that is 24,860 opportunities to rethink the model of the Biennale. This is one of two meanings of the work. The first is actually that you have just seen this image of destruction, and your first impression is of a *rinascimento*, a rebirth. What I'm trying to suggest here is that culture resists. Every time the model goes up and down it says, "Resist, resist, resist."

**HIRSCH** That's a coincidence, given that Ali Kazma's work, in the Turkish pavilion, right next door, is about resistance of all kinds . . . his installation is called *Resistance*.

**JAAR** I haven't seen it yet. I have been a prisoner here for three days. Anyway—it's about the spirit of resistance of artists in postwar Italy, as well as the resistance of artists in

contemporary society. That is one level. You can destroy cities, you can kill people, but you cannot kill ideas. The second level is a kind of self-critique, since we have the capacity to be critical about ourselves and our practices. It's a poetic invitation to rethink the Biennale model. I think it's outdated, with just 28 national pavilions, while there are 160 nations looking for spaces in the Arsenale or in the labyrinth of the city.

The architecture of the Giardini communicates. When an African artist comes to the Giardini, he doesn't find a single pavilion representing an African country, apart from Egypt, which is North African. What does this say about the relationship of the Giardini to the rest of the world? Even when one of the countries is supposedly generous and invites an artist from another country, it is still the host country inviting them into their "home." When the model is submerged, and you have this *laguna*, which is most of the time, I'm hoping it becomes like a blank canvas—a screen onto which the spectators can project their dreams, their imaginations, their inventions.

**HIRSCH** And their fears? It's kind of scary-looking water.

**JAAR** Yes—well, obviously, there is this ecological reading that can be made. But if I had the intention of speaking about climate change, of *acqua alta*, you would have seen the water come *up*, which does not happen here. Here it's the architecture coming up. I'm really suggesting it as a ghost from history. We have invented a utopia from which the Biennale has disappeared. It emerges just to remind you what it once was. It's all gray, like other monuments in Venice. It gives you the opportunity to ask, "What can be done? What can culture do?"

**HIRSCH** The Giardini presents a little snapshot of the world at the end of colonialism. I realize it's an outmoded model, but it's also a remnant of what was. Do you feel that there should be something done in the Giardini?

**JAAR** There are many strategies, and there have been many discussions of this issue. For example, in 1965, there was a proposal to raze all the buildings and erect a contemporary structure that would be generous and open, and that would house exhibitions by artists from around the world. This is just a wild guess, but in 15, 20 or 30 years, I think there will be no more national pavilions. It's going to be like São Paulo, or Havana, or Liverpool, in which the system of national pavilions does not exist; it will be abolished.

**HIRSCH** And replaced by what?

**JAAR** I think that—and again, this is pure speculation—they will invite a curator to do the exhibition, and that the curator will use the pavilions simply as architecture. Their history, their origin, will fade from existence. They will be used as spaces, designed by architects from around the world.

**HIRSCH** I see. And you consider that to be a happy outcome?

**JAAR** I don't know. I cannot say. But that's my speculation—a way of carrying on without destroying everything that is there.

**HIRSCH** So right now it's the hegemony of nations—and then it will be the hegemony of the curator?

**JAAR** But imagine they invite a Palestinian artist and say, "All right, use the Israeli pavilion."

**HIRSCH** But the decision is being made by a curator.

**JAAR** By a curator, yes. That's what curators do. They are free. And artists are free—remember that.

**HIRSCH** Artists are free, but they are not free from curators.

**JAAR** [laughs]

**HIRSCH** I'm sorry—I have very strong opinions about this.

**JAAR** That's okay—but it depends, it depends. For me, the world of art and culture is the last remaining space of freedom. I can do anything I want.

**HIRSCH** I'm afraid if they pick a single curator to do it, it will remove the choice even further from any local jurisdiction. Right now the national structures have a certain autonomy.

**JAAR** But that's exactly what I'm questioning. The extreme mobility of artists today makes things completely different. We are not in the 19th century. Artists are born in one place, study in another place, they work in a third place, and their work deals with subjects in yet another place. I was born in Chile, I was educated in French Martinique, I've been living in New York for 32 years, which is the greater part of my life, and I'm doing a piece about Venice and the system of the Biennale. Where is Chile? And why do I have to speak about Chile? I was born in Chile—that's a fact, and I have done works about Chile—in the '70s, for example, during the dictatorship. But I am not forced to do works only about where I'm coming from. I would like to do art about the landscape in which I am inserted, for example. Because I work with issues of site specificity, I am addressing issues of this space.

**HIRSCH** But most of the artists in the national pavilions do not talk about their origins or their nations.

**JAAR** We are across the way from Argentina, and the artist is talking about Eva Perón. The Lebanese artist is talking about tensions between Lebanon and Israel. You go to Turkey and he's probably doing something about Turkey.

**HIRSCH** He's not.

**JAAR** Well, some artists do and some do not. A lot of artists carry their nationality quite publicly, some subtly, and with others, it's completely gone. These are generalities. I do not like to speak in generalities. What I'm saying is the world of artists is a world of freedom, and we should let artists be free. And I don't have the responsibility to represent a country.

**HIRSCH** I understand. Now, haven't the pavilions in the Giardini become a particular thing—like the Accademia, like the Scuola di San Rocco? Something that's historical?

**JAAR** I know, I know. But they still communicate a certain *order* of things.

**HIRSCH** Absolutely. But shouldn't we remember that the order was once the case? And be reminded?

**JAAR** Yes, but you cannot keep excluding people from an old order that doesn't make any

sense any more. One hundred and sixty countries? You cannot do that. And you have huge countries with huge pavilions and small countries with small pavilions. I know it's history, but for me, artists create models for thinking the world. And the world is in a particular state right now. Economies are collapsing, Europe is becoming a fortress, the gap between rich and poor is increasing. Perhaps we cannot change things from within the art world, but every effort should be made not to replicate those imbalances. What the Giardini does is replicate the imbalances of the real world. What I am suggesting is to change that model. If we change that model, it becomes a model that can be used for other things in the real world.

**HIRSCH** These visitors seem to so enjoy the rise and fall of the Giardini. That must give you some pleasure.

**JAAR** Well, it's a magical piece.

**HIRSCH** The shimmering of the light on the ceiling is so lovely.

**JAAR** And there's a third element, very subtle, that no one sees. I don't talk much about it—it's almost private, a secret. When you stand here, and look at the lightbox from behind, you will see that there's a cut.

**HIRSCH** Yes! Just a chink of light.

**JAAR** And this is Fontana's cut. Fontana, in the 1940s, puncturing the canvas—he became known for his cuts. So here, we have a very subtle cut that almost no one sees. It allows very little light. For me, it's the equivalent of the small light that existed in 1946, at the end of the war. And then the Italian artists, among them Fontana, illuminated world culture.

*Venezia, Venezia, Alredo Jaar's contribution to the Chilean Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, was curated by Madeleine Grynsztejn. The commissioner is the Chilean National Council of Culture and the Arts. It is located in the Arsenale.*