

LEARNING MIND
EXPERIENCE INTO ART

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Alfredo Jaar, born in Santiago, Chile, is an artist, architect, and filmmaker who has lived and worked in New York since 1982. His work has been shown extensively around the world—at the Venice, São Paulo, Johannesburg, Sydney, Istanbul, and Gwangju biennials, as well as *documenta* in Kassel. He has created more than forty public interventions around the world. His 2006 film *Muxima* focuses on Angola. Jaar received a Guggenheim fellowship in 1986 and a MacArthur fellowship in 2000.

IT IS DIFFICULT

Every time I start writing an essay or a speech, I am reminded of Paul Valéry's words, "Optimists write badly," to which Maurice Blanchot replied, "But pessimists do not write."¹ So, badly, but with optimism, I address your future of art making.

I have been making art for thirty years and, to tell you the truth, I still find it difficult. Very difficult. Why? Perhaps because, as Chinua Achebe brilliantly articulates it, "Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him."² What order of reality was I given?

If I had to revisit the last fifty years of contemporary history to analyze the order of reality that I was given and select from my timeline the events that marked my life, and that of my generation, I would perhaps start with May 1968. I was only twelve then, but very aware that the generation preceding mine was revolting in the streets of not only Paris, but also Mexico City, New York, Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome, Buenos Aires, Warsaw, and Prague. They loved it so much: the revolution. I joined them, but only in spirit, of course, as I was twelve years old. Honestly, as events have unfolded since then, one more tragic than the other, one more revolting than the other, one more unjust than the other, I sometimes look outside my window and search for signs of a new revolution.

I was in Santiago, Chile, on Tuesday, September 11, 1973, when the Chilean military overthrew President Salvador Allende, who died during the coup. General Augusto Pinochet, sponsored by the CIA, seized total power and established a brutal military dictatorship. How can I forget the vision of tanks and infantry troops surrounding the palace of La Moneda? Hawker Hunter fighter jets bombing the president's quarters? President Allende, besieged in the palace, refusing to surrender and addressing the nation for a last time in an unforgettable farewell speech minutes before dying? Thousands of *desaparecidos*, a million exiles? How do I change that order of reality?

1. Paul Valéry, *Cahiers/Notebooks*, trans. Norma Rinsler, Paul Ryan, and Brian Stimpson (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 113.

2. Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).



I was in Ntarama, forty kilometers south of Kigali, Rwanda, on August 29, 1994, in the aftermath of a genocide, the third of our century, that claimed one million lives—one million lives—in the face of the criminal, barbaric indifference of the so-called world community. How can I forget the vision of five hundred corpses on the ground, rotting under the African sun? How do I change that order of reality?

I was in the Pillar Point Refugee Center in Hong Kong the morning of a day in September 1991, surrounded by approximately 150 children, all born in this refugee camp. Some 30 children are born every month in these camps occupied by more than 80,000 so-called boat people from Vietnam. These children were born there, live there, and have never seen the outside world. How do I change that order of reality?

But my past is not important. What is the future for artists now, the order of reality that they must change now, that is all around us? These are dark times; these are difficult times. A few words are enough to convey the times we live in: names of places like Darfur, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Guantánamo, North Korea. Names of people like Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, the leader of a peaceful, nonviolent struggle against a repressive, criminal military junta in Burma, a regime that holds more than 1,100 political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi and other key civil society leaders. More than one million Burmese have fled to neighboring countries. Names of people like Zackie Achmat, South

Africa's foremost AIDS activist, leader of Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the country's leading AIDS activist group. In South Africa every day approximately 600 people die of AIDS-related illnesses while an additional 1,500 to 1,600 are infected with the HIV virus. The numbers for the entire African continent are staggering. Nelson Mandela said: "AIDS is one of the greatest threats humankind has faced: Let us not equivocate, a tragedy of unprecedented proportions is unfolding in Africa, one in two, that is half of our young people, will die of AIDS."³

These are dark times; these are difficult times in which American culture has rapidly shifted toward what Susan Sontag termed an "increasing acceptance of brutality."⁴ These are dark times; these are difficult times in which our society, as Adrienne Rich said, "is still trying to grapple with the hectic power of capitalism and technology, the displacement of the social will into the accumulation of money and things."⁵ Accumulation of money and things: is this the society we want? A society of the spectacle and consumption where every sign around us asks us to consume, consume, consume? Accumulation of money and things: is this the world you want? As a Norwegian philosopher once wrote: "We have everything, but that's all we have."⁶

How do we make art when the world is in such a state? How do we make art out of information that most of us would rather ignore? How do we make art in the midst of so much pain and suffering surrounding us—as John Berger put it, amidst "the pain of living in the present world"?⁷

Art is the home of these questions. We make art because we have to. The extraordinary Russian poet Anna Akhmatova wrote:

*So much to do today:
kill memory, kill pain,
turn heart into a stone,
and yet prepare to live again.*⁸

We make art because we have to. Art is the place where we go to so that, as Christian Wiman said, "We might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy them."⁹ Art is the place that offers us the last remaining space of freedom.

That freedom is precious. Young artists need to take it. Use it to dream. Use it to fly. That freedom lies in a system that you will create. As William Blake said, "I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's."¹⁰ Artists need to create their own system, invent their own world, and always connect. Connect with another human being. Create bridges because art is connection, art is communica-

3. Nelson Mandela, closing address, Thirteenth International AIDS Conference, Durban, South Africa, July 14, 2000.

4. Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times*, May 23, 2004.

5. Adrienne Rich, "Credo of a Passionate Skeptic," *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, March 11, 2001.

6. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "We have everything, but that's all we have: Outsourcing the Welfare State," in *Art of Welfare: Verksted 7*, ed. Paul Brewer, Marta Kuzma, and Peter Osborne (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art, 2006).

7. John Berger, "Written in the Night: The Pain of Living in the Present World," *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2003.

8. Anna Akhmatova, "The Sentence," in *Poems of Akhmatova*, trans. Stanley Kunitz and Max Howard (London: Harvill Press, 1998), 109. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.

9. Christian Wiman, *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 120.

10. William Blake, "Jerusalem," in *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 629.

11. Emile M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, trans. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 105.

12. E. M. Cioran, quoted in "E. M. Cioran: To Infinity and Beyond," *Spike Magazine*. <http://www.spikemagazine.com/1197cior.php>.

13. From "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." By William Carlos Williams, from *The Collected Poems: Volume II, 1939–1962*, copyright © 1944 by William Carlos Williams. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

tion. And never forget that communication does not mean to send a message. To send a message is not communication. Communication occurs only when you get an answer. An answer means you are communicating. An answer means you are connecting. I would argue that art is that answer. That answer is precious, and it is worth all the effort in the world. So young artists need to provoke these answers, search for them, where they are or around the world.

I am an optimist who writes badly, and pessimists do not write, they say. But it is not entirely true. My favorite pessimist writes incredibly well, and I need to share him with you. His name is Emile Cioran. This is my preferred quote from him:

I am lured by faraway distances, the immense void I project upon the world. A feeling of emptiness grows in me; it infiltrates my body like a light and impalpable fluid. In its progress, like a dilation into infinity, I perceive the mysterious presence of the most contradictory feelings ever to inhabit a human soul. I am simultaneously happy and unhappy, exalted and depressed, overcome by both pleasure and despair in the most contradictory harmonies. I am so cheerful and yet so sad that my tears reflect at once both heaven and earth. If only for the joy of my sadness, I wish there were no death on this earth.¹¹

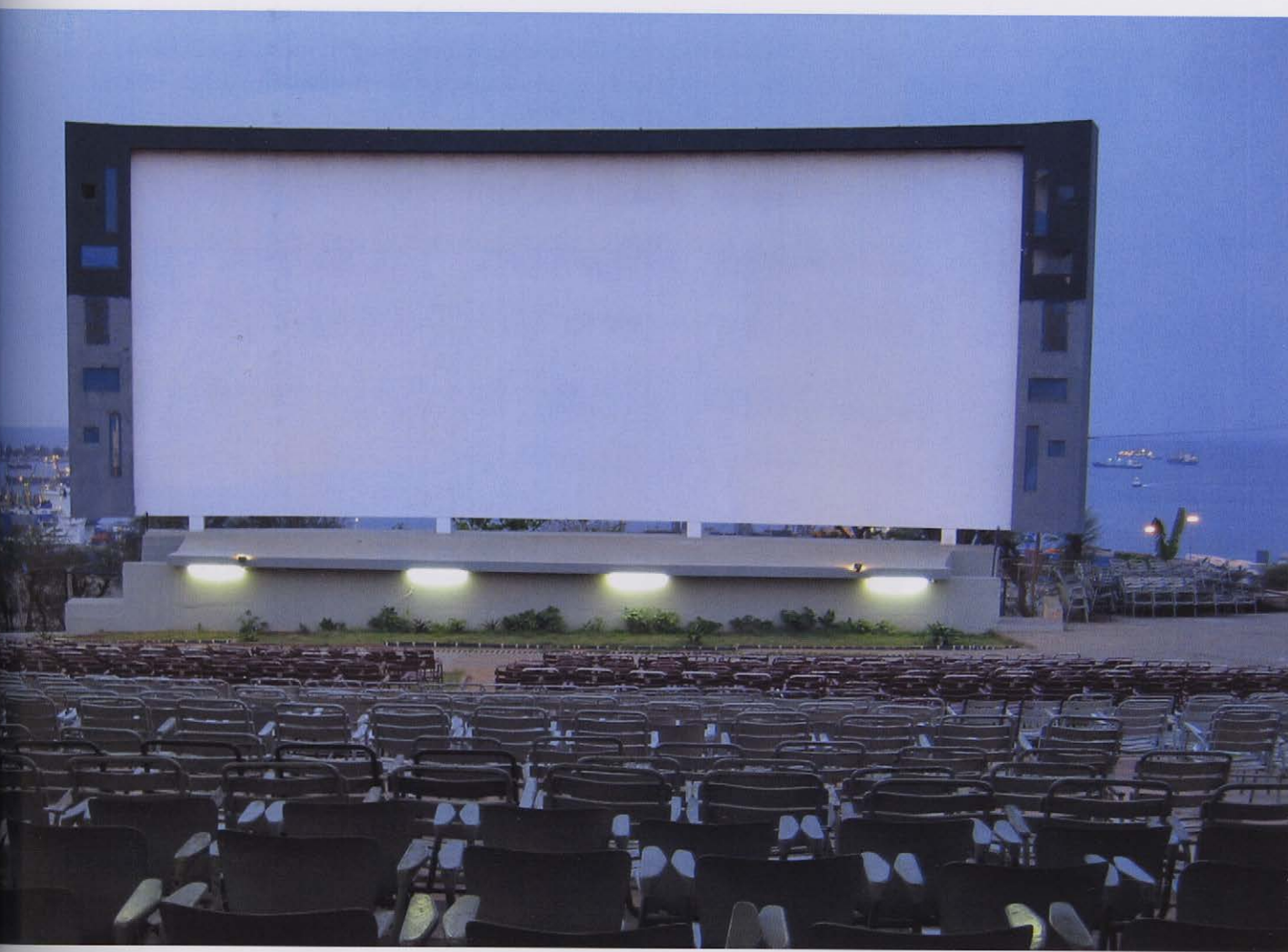
Cioran is the writer of solitude and pain, of sleeplessness and lyricism, bicycling between heaven and hell. "Melancholy redeems this universe, and yet it is melancholy that separates us from it," he also wrote.¹²

Are we condemned to melancholy? The answer is no. Art is a reason to believe. I believe, thanks to Cioran and many artists and intellectuals whose work has been not only an important source of inspiration and knowledge but also much more than that—an essential part of my life. These intellectuals have charted the world's moral landscape with imagination and courage, with a thirst for justice, and a quest to change our world.

Art is a reason to believe. William Carlos Williams gave me a reason to believe when he wrote:

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.¹³*





There. Where is that place called “there” in this magnificent poem? This “there” has to be created by each generation of artists and intellectuals. That is the extraordinary task and privilege. They will create that there. They will create that place with poetic imagination, with social justice, and above all, with creativity.

How far the new fascism expands will depend on how committed they are to defeating it with culture, with cultural artifacts, with cultural productions, with cultural writings, with cultural strategies, with cultural programs. When I think about our minuscule, insular, and impotent art world, I think of Antonio Gramsci in his cell, writing his extraordinary notes from prison. But I ask myself: who is writing the prison notes today?



14. Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China and Other Pieces*, trans. Edwin and Willa Muir (London: Martin Secker, 1933), 283.

I am not advocating for the art world to correct the dire imbalances of the real world, but I would like to suggest that every effort should be made not to replicate so perfectly those imbalances. “You can hold back from the suffering of the world, you have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature,” Franz Kafka said, “but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering that you could have avoided.”¹⁴

I am arguing for the inextricability of ethical and aesthetic values. As Jean-Luc Godard said: “It might be true that we have to choose between ethics or aesthetics, but it is also true that, whichever one we choose, we will always find the other one

at the end of the road.”¹⁵ Artists are now ready to take this road. It is the road of the dreamers. You are not alone. You are ready to create a different order of reality for all of us. It is the road of the dreamers. I wish you a fantastic journey into this road, in these dark times.

When asked if art could bring peace in a world of wars and conflicts, the great poet Robert Lowell answered: “Art does not make peace. That is not its business. Art is peace.”¹⁶

Art is peace. To end, please allow me to paraphrase, badly, but with optimism, Mahatma Gandhi:

*First, they will ignore you.
Then, they will laugh at you.
Then, they will fight you.
Then, you will win.*¹⁷

15. Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 147.

16. Robert Lowell, in 1977, in J.D. McClatchy, *Twenty Questions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 51.

17. Mahatma Gandhi, quoted on <http://www.thinkexist.com>.