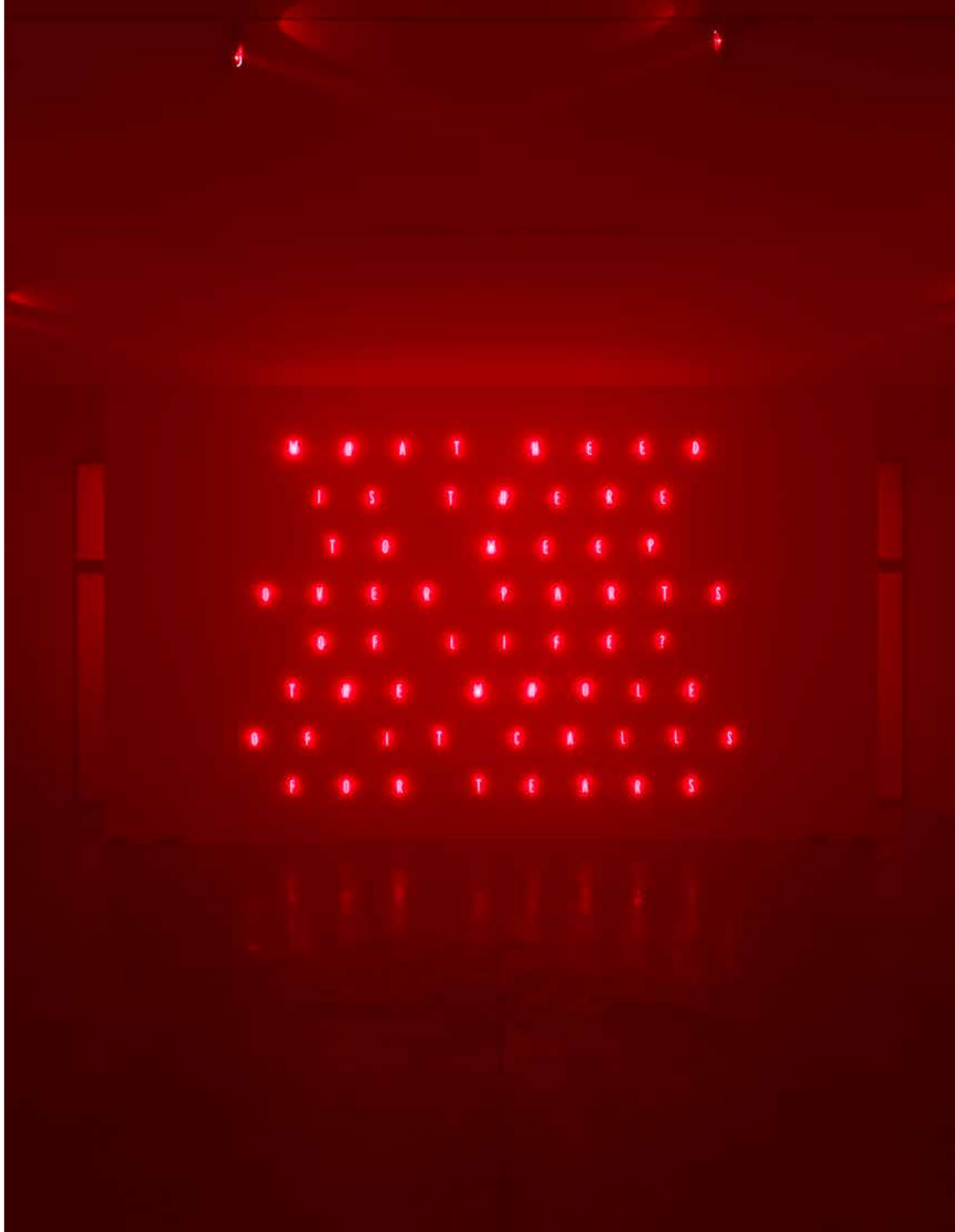
When the Light Goes Dark

Alfredo Jaar

“I want to touch you, I want to move you, I want to illuminate you, both with the beauty of the world but also with the information contained.” Elizabeth Fullerton meets Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar to discuss his deeply affecting work, which creates resounding moments of clarity and poetry in response to devastating world politics and events.



COURTESY GALLERIA LIA RUMMA, MILANO/NAPLES AND THE ARTIST, NEW YORK

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What Need Is There to Weep Over Parts of Life? The Whole of It Calls for Tears (detail), 2018
Neon
476 × 600 cm

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Alfredo Jaar photographed in his studio by Jee Eun Esther Jang
On the wall, *Magician*, 1979

On 21 September, International Peace Day, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) will unveil *The Garden of Good and Evil*, a major new installation by Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar, comprising nine steel cells embedded deep within its landscaped parkland. Intended as a metaphor for the CIA's secret black sites used to torture and detain "terror" suspects around the world, the cells are the "evil" part of the title. Some are completely enclosed, others barred, some are tall enough to stand in while others barely have room to sit. Measuring one square metre at the base, the cells were inspired by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's 1986 "One Square Metre of Prison", which celebrates the resilience of the human spirit and contains the line, "My freedom is not to be what they want, but to enlarge my prison cell, and carry on my song of the door."

For visitors strolling through YSP's 500-acre grounds, the rural idyll will be disrupted by the discovery of these sinister metal cages hidden among the foliage, calling to mind the many atrocities committed out of public view by state forces in the name of security. "You have this rather lyrical journey through the landscape and then you come across these things which you probably start to read as minimalist sculptures, and then it dawns on you," says Clare Lilley, director of programme at YSP. "One of them is sited in the lake itself. And you just get the most horrible, dreadful feeling of somebody being underwater in a cell."

I encountered New York-based Jaar, an architect by training, at YSP's opening of his 2017/18 solo show, also titled *The Garden of Good and Evil*, which presented the first iteration of the cells within a grid-shaped grove of 101 evergreen trees planted in wooden cubes. I was struck by the apparent contradiction between the understated passion of the work and its cold, clean, minimalist form. Over the course of subsequent phone conversations, Jaar explained, "When I started studying architecture, I was fascinated by the development of minimalism, but I couldn't help asking myself, 'How is it possible that in the most turbulent decade of my generation—the decade of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, of the Vietnam War, of student revolts around the world—the art world was embracing the minimalist forms that were completely devoid of what was happening?' I thought at the time that eventually I would like to revisit minimalism and bring back the missing content. The commission proposal from YSP gave me a chance to experiment with this.

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Jaar has gained a reputation for creating powerful, unflinching works across installation, film, photography and performance that expose human-rights injustices and extreme abuses of power from Rwanda to Nicaragua. Last year he won the Hiroshima Art Prize, which is awarded every three years to an artist who champions human rights in their work, adding to a string of accolades including the MacArthur "genius grant" (2000) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1985).

Jaar lived in Chile during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet until 1982, an experience that he says gave him an ethical direction. In that climate of oppression and fear, artists and intellectuals were forced to invent a new language of resistance that spoke between the lines and through poetic silences.

As a child, Jaar suffered from extreme shyness. His father consulted a psychiatrist for advice and instead of prescribing pills and endless expensive therapy, he suggested they buy Jaar a box of magic tricks. It was a stroke of genius. "Slowly I overcame my shyness by being a magician, without even realizing it," he tells me. He began practising magic when he was around seven and continued for some ten years; its influence explains the elements of mystery and surprise in his work and the care he takes with his mise en scènes. "It's in me," he admits. "I don't think I will ever stop being a magician."

Magic and poetry are utilized to dramatic effect in two of his best-known works, *The Sound of Silence* (2006) and *Shadows* (2014), which were shown at YSP and have toured widely. Part of an ongoing trilogy concerned with the politics of image-making, each is centred on a single, devastating photograph and exploits the elemental tools of architecture—light, darkness and space. The first is a silent eight-minute film installation set within an austere, darkened cube that is approached via a wall of bright vertical LED strips. Inside, a sparse text onscreen tells the life story of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1993 photograph of an emaciated Sudanese toddler being greedily eyed by a nearby vulture. Carter committed suicide shortly after. Six minutes in, the photograph flashes up in a burst of light and is gone. "You're struck by the surprise of the flashlight that blinds you momentarily and converts you into the subject. That weakened position is when I allow you to see that terrible image for just a fraction of a second," says Jaar. Keenly aware of the pitfalls of voyeurism, he handles the depiction of

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human suffering with rare sensitivity in his works.

The visceral impact is even stronger in *Shadows*, which is based on a sequence of seven photos taken by the Dutch photojournalist Koen Wessing in 1978, recording the moment when two daughters learn their father has been killed by the US-trained National Guard in Nicaragua. The visitor is led past six photographs displayed together into a separate room, where an enlarged version of the climactic central photo shows the women distraught with grief. The figures steadily fade into a blinding white silhouette made up of one million watts. "This is a way for me to almost assault you and to imprint that image in your brain. When the light goes dark at the end of the sequence […] you will leave the space with that image in you. Light can be a very, very powerful thing," says Jaar.

The artist is still searching for the right image and display mechanism for the final work in the trilogy. Ideally, he would like it to focus on Asia, but Jaar's process is much too precise and rigorous to be rushed. Reading the news is fundamental to his practice, since his work is derived from reality. His daily morning ritual involves combing through a list of thirty-six diverse news media and six news agencies from around the world. "That's how I discover situations or events that interest me and I follow them, sometimes for weeks, months or years," he says. "At one point in that process suddenly an image or event will make some kind of click in my head and I will feel the need to go further and develop a project around it. It doesn't happen very often, but it happens enough to keep me working." Journalism, poetry, philosophy. These are the touchstones of Jaar's practice and feel both old-fashioned and essential, given the prevalence of fake news and social media today. "I always try to strike a balance between information and poetry," Jaar says. "I want to touch you, I want to move you, I want to illuminate you, both with the beauty of the world but also with the information contained."

Jaar's compassion for humanity has taken him all over the world—to Rwanda in the throes of the genocide, to a Vietnamese refugee camp in Hong Kong, and recently to South Africa's Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years by the apartheid regime. His 2018/19 show *Men Who Cannot Cry* at Goodman Gallery in Cape Town was titled in reference to the former prisoners of the island, who apparently lost the ability to cry due to years of forced labour in a limestone quarry—they were denied the protection of sunglasses. Returning with former inmates five years after their release, Mandela had picked up a stone and placed it on the ground by the roadside. The simple gesture was repeated by the others, eventually forming a cairn known as an isivivana. "I was very touched by it," says Jaar, who made a series of neon works and photographs around the small monument, impressed by its fragility. "I thought it's a perfect metaphor for the South African process of reconciliation."

In the current fraught political climate, Jaar's uncompromising approach feels particularly urgent. His earlier works have assumed fresh meaning. For example, his neon billboard bearing the words "This Is Not America" over an outline of the US map was first displayed in 1987 in Times Square. Last December it was installed on a boat and paraded along the shore for the duration of Art Basel Miami. Jaar originally conceived the piece in reaction to the arrogant US practice of designating the country "America", which effectively erases the rest of the continent. Since then Obama's government has expelled immigrants and Trump has detained children in cages on the Mexican border. The work has come to express a struggle around identity. "It has been fascinating to see the work change reading. I've completely lost control, it has a life of its own."

This deeply thoughtful artist has never been one to make frivolous work. But his practice seems to have taken an even bleaker turn of late. For his show *Lament of the Images* at his Milan gallery Lia Rumma late last year, he created a blood-red neon wall installation borrowing Seneca's melancholy words: "What need is there to weep over parts of life. The whole of life calls for tears." With typical economy, Jaar presented the neon letters spaced out from each other with their cables cascading down like tears. "It was a lament," he tells me. "It was the most public expression of my feeling these days in the face of what's happening around us. I'm going through quite a pessimistic phase."

After thirty-seven years living in the US, Jaar feels extremely conflicted about remaining in his adopted homeland. Would he consider moving back to Chile? "It's one of many thoughts. I wanted to see how the Trump presidency would develop and it's much worse than anything I expected," he says. And yet, he sums up his position in the words of Italian Communist Party founder Antonio Gramsci: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." Amid the oppression, fake news, nationalism and intolerance, the arts, in Jaar's view, remain a last bastion of freedom. "This is where we are free to dream of a better world and to communicate models of a better world to our audience. That is why the world of culture is important."

Previous pages
The Garden of Good and Evil, 2017/2018
10 stainless-steel cells
Overall dimensions variable

Opposite page
Shadows, 2014
Mixed-media installation
Overall dimensions variable
Original photograph by Koen Wessing (1942-2011). Estelí, Nicaragua, September 1978

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