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Oral history interview with Alfredo Jaar, 2020 July 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alfredo Jaar on July 29, 2020. The interview took place at Jaar's studio in New York City, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Alfredo Jaar at his studio in New York City on July 29, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Could you tell me a little bit about how these past few months have been for you during the pandemic and the large shifts we've seen in America?

ALFREDO JAAR: Well, uh, that's like a three-hour answer. [Laughs.] Uh, It has been horrific to watch this country collapse into this unbelievable chaos. Uh, this health crisis has become a triple crisis. It's also a crisis of the financial crisis. And then it's also a crisis of democracy. We can see that in the streets of this country. So it's a tribal crisis. And, uh, this is in a flow. It's happening right now. It's alive. So it's very difficult to rather distance and, and actually speak with, with certainty about this. So everything I can say is just a spontaneous, uh, reaction to your questions. But obviously, in a few months, in a few years from now, I may look at them and think, Oh, how stupid was I? But—or, oh, how are smart was I? I don't know. Because it's happening right now. So we're in the middle of it. But the ineptitude of the administration has been criminal, absolutely criminal. That's the only way to describe it. And, I mean, I don't need to remind you that if you look at the numbers, this country represents barely four percent of the world population, and we are 25 percent of the cases. And the same with the deaths. It's just horrific, and it's unfair. And it's very, very sad.

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Now, um, in terms of myself, it has been very difficult. I've been away from the studio for 16 weeks. The building was closed. The studio was closed. And I've been back for the last two weeks. And we are slowly starting to to restart in a way where we started. Every single exhibition I had that's been postponed for next year, or even for 1922—or in 2022 or in 2023. So I find myself with a lot of space in front of me with really nothing in my schedule. This is an unprecedented situation. In the last 30 years, I've had dozens of exhibitions every year of all kinds. And I was traveling all around the world to investigate and to prepare exhibitions, to give conferences, to teach, et cetera, et cetera. All this is gone completely. So the first—the next few months look pretty tough so far.

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Uh, so during this time when I was confined at home, I, uh, I rediscovered silence. And I rediscovered slowness. And I rediscovered solitude. And that has been good. I read an enormous amount of stuff. I watched an incredible amount of movies. And I listened to an extraordinary amount of music. This I had not done for the last forever. I have never done it—like this before. So this has been good. This has been like a break in my—in the frenzy of my life. I was very stressed. As I said, traveling around the world. I was traveling 200 days per year. I was having an average of 30 exhibitions per year and a dozen lectures per year. So it was a train that never stopped, and suddenly it stopped. And this has been completely new as an experience.

So besides my frustration and the economic pain for me and for my assistants, uh, it has been, as I said, a rediscovery of silence and solitude. And that has been good. And I'm asking myself a lot of questions that I ignored. I mean, what am I doing? What—where am I going? What are really—how can we act in the world the way it is? So even though my work has always been reactive to the context, because I'm an architect, for me context is everything, I find myself, uh, thinking again and again and deeper and deeper, how do I react to this? As I said, health crisis. Financial crisis. We have millions of unemployed. I mean, I live in SoHo. Half of SoHo is still barricaded, and it was destroyed. The city has changed. And the world has radically changed. So

we are all asking ourselves, Where do we go from here? So it's a moment of doubt. I've managed to create two works, two small videos, two modest videos. One, approximately five minutes. The other one, 15 minutes. And they are exercise. Exercise that respond to this moment. I can send them to you after we finish this conversation.

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BEN GILLESPIE: So I wanted to come back to the silence and the slowness and the solitude that you're describing. And since you're an architect and an artist very interested in the politics of photography, I was wondering about how your sense of the idea of witnessing or sharing has shifted with that solitude, with that slowness now that we're living, um, in such a way that we're reliant upon photography even more than we were in the past, um, and our public spaces are radically transformed for us.

ALFREDO JAAR: Well, because my work—is the sound okay?

BEN GILLESPIE: Yes.

ALFREDO JAAR: Okay. Because my work respond to the context, all my investigations have always been about witnessing, witnessing in the most deep and the most responsible way to try to understand the context before acting. My motto has always been the same. I will not act in the world before understanding the world. And so, this witnessing is part of what—who I am, what I do all the time. I've never done a single project in my life that is the pure product of my imagination. Every single project, we act to a certain reality, either of my immediate environment, or the context in which I'm invited to act.

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The difference now is that this witnessing has happened online, through the internet. And this is completely flawed. I'm very uncomfortable with this kind of witnessing. You really never know exactly what's happening unless you are there, physically there. So that's why I've traveled so much, approximately, as I said, 200 days a year, for the last 30 years. I've flown more than 7 million miles. Because it's important to go there to see with your own eyes, to be in situ, to talk to people, to talk to the key actors of the context in which you're acting or trying to act. And this kind of witnessing, I cannot do it now. I've been witnessing through my computer. I've participated in some of the marches in New York City. Not too many, because I'm 64. So I'm in—I'm in the high-risk category. So I couldn't resist going to a few. I filmed a few. I photographed a few. But I didn't go to as many as I wanted because of my health. I wanted to make sure I'm fine. And it's frustrating. It's frustrating. It's very difficult to, uh, to react only based on what I see on TV and on the internet. Because, as you know, I'm distrustful. I do not trust what I see—these publications. Some of them can be trustworthy; others are not. Others are very manipulative. That's why I read so many different media sources from around the world. I spend two hours every morning looking at the news from at least 37 sources in different languages because I need to understand what's happening. And by looking at these different sources from different ideological frameworks, I can understand better. It's not perfect. It's not as if I'm there, but at least it gives me different perspectives. And that is better than just having a single perspective. So I'm, I'm still a witness but a frustrated witness and a limited witness.

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BEN GILLESPIE: So being in New York throughout this period, and, um, you know, really being in New York, not traveling like you're used to, um, has that—have you been reflecting on your past installations in New York, and just everything that's happening on the ground in terms of Black Lives Matter and the—you know, the stress we're really feeling about institutional trust and how to manage not only the triple crisis, um, that's in front of us. So has your idea of home evolved during this period?

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ALFREDO JAAR: I mean, yes and no. No, because these crises have always existed. The inequity that exists in the health system of this country is just criminal, as simple as that. And corona has just revealed that, made it more visible. But this inequity has always existed. And that's why most of the victims are African Americans or Latinos, or minorities. So it's a tragedy. It's a criminal fact. The financial inequity has always existed. And this democratic crisis started the day this country elected the actual occupant of the White House.

And now as you know what—what's happening in Portland or, or, or Seattle, et cetera, et cetera, it's really fascism. And I don't use this word lightly. I know—I recognize fascism when I see it. As you know, I was born in Chile, and I lived in Chile during the Pinochet regime. And so when I see fascism, I recognize it immediately. And what's happening in this country right now is fascism. There is no other word for it. So, uh, this fascism, in a way, is not new in a sense that this country has always exercised fascism, but not locally, not domestically. It has done it in Chile, and it has done it in more than 50 countries around the world. And I was victim of that fascism in Chile, courtesy of Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Nixon. So fascism is not new. What's new, it is now—it is being perpetrated in this country domestically and that I had never seen it.

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Racism is not new. When I moved to New York in 1982, I was shocked at the level of racism. I had an image of the United States as being a fair country. And uh, I thought Martin Luther King had made a difference. I thought the civil rights movement had made a difference. And when I arrived in New York, I was shocked to discover the level of racism. And I did a lot of works about racism in this country. I created works in the '80s and in the '90s, works like *The Fire Next Time* that I did for the Brooklyn Museum, but now it is at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. The title, of course, quotes James Baldwin. Then I did a series of works called *Searching for Africa in Life*, about *Life Magazine*, about the death of Martin Luther King, et cetera, et cetera. So racism for me has always been the criminal feature of life in this country, and I never accepted it. Now after 40 years living here, you're numb by it, and you just take it as part of the normal.

So when these things—these protests started again after the death of George Floyd, I thought, "Finally." I mean, this should have been going on for 40 years in the streets of this country. Why now? And I've been asking myself, "Why now?" What's—what—this is interesting. Why now? I've been waiting 40 years for this reaction. And, and what touched me the most when I went out was how diverse was the crowd. I had never seen that before. I think I felt that African Americans have always been experiencing an enormous solitude in this racist society. One of my work is called—it's about—Martin Luther King's funeral represented in *Life Magazine* is about that. It's a photograph by Gordon Parks in the—in *Life Magazine*. It's a double page, and it's an extraordinary photograph of the funeral. And 99.9 percent of the population attending Martin Luther King funeral is Black. There are a dozen of White people. That tells you the level of solitude in this fight.

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So when I went out, and I saw so many White kids and Asians and Latinos together with African American, I thought, "This is different. This is different." Now, I'm not convinced this would bring about change, unfortunately. I have to see it to believe it. But as I said, it's difficult to talk about something that is actually happening now, that is in the flow. We are in the middle of a crisis in motion. And there are elections coming up. So it's really risky to talk about something that is moving in front of us. But I am more hopeful than before. I think that the election of an, of an African woman as vice president would be an extraordinary event and would correct all the defaults of the Obama administration. Because Obama, we all cried, we all believed he was going to change the world and this country, and he didn't do. I felt he was very weak. He was very weak. And so I hope that now with a woman, with an African woman as a vice president, if it happens, and it's still not sure that this will happen, that will be an extraordinary hopeful sign.

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BEN GILLESPIE: You often describe yourself as a utopian and an idealist. Um, but there's a real element of dealing with reality as it is in your work. And something that's come to mind to me over the past few months in light of, you know, the grim portrait of things as they are is your work *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On* and, um, a message that's—that doesn't feel ostentatiously hopeful but is perhaps defiantly resilient. Um, and just to wrap up, um, could you tell me a little bit more about the quality of your hope as we go forward and—in this perhaps never-ending crises?

ALFREDO JAAR: As you know, that work is based on the last words of a book by Beckett called *The Unnamable*. So it is like this, *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On*, and so I've done a project with that statement, which I identified with very much.

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But the one I really identify with is the—is the original, which is really a statement by Gramsci—

Antonio Gramsci. He is the founder of the Communist Party in Italy. And in the '30s, he was in the cell—in prison. He actually died in his cell, imprisoned by Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy at that time. And he wrote an extraordinary book called—writings from—from prison—prison—notes from prison. And somewhere in that book, he talks about his state of mind. And at one moment, he says this brilliant statement. He said something like, "I am pessimistic with my intellect, but I am optimistic with my will." So we come to balance the pessimism of his intellect with the optimism of his will. And I always have identified with that sentiment. So intellectually, I am pessimistic—totally pessimistic.

But in order to survive, in order to resist, you have to be optimistic with your will. You have to keep going. So, when I discovered that Beckett's sentence, I was fascinated. I felt this was almost like the English version of that statement by Gramsci, but without the poetry and all the specificities of Gramsci's ideas. It was much more pragmatic in the English way, as the English language is much more pragmatic than the Latin or Spanish or French or Italian. So, while Gramsci said, "I'm pessimistic with my intellect and optimistic with my will," Beckett says, "I can't go on, I'll go on." And so, I have used it because it still works. But it doesn't have all the nuances of the Italian version in my view. And so this is how I feel. I keep going. I'll keep working. I'm doing my third little video about the current moment. Um, these are just exercises. But intellectually, I'm still quite pessimistic.

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BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. Well, with that I'm very grateful for your resolve and for speaking with us today.

ALFREDO JAAR: It's a pleasure.

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