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# Q&A: Alfredo Jaar, SCAD speaker and global gadfly, on “recuperating the power of images”

February 17, 2014

TEXT SIZE

By FAITH MCCLURE

The Savannah College of Art & Design welcomes internationally renowned Chilean artist, filmmaker and architect **Alfredo Jaar** this month as the 2014 SCAD deFINE ART honoree and keynote speaker.

The MacArthur- and Guggenheim-award recipient’s numerous installations and large-scale public interventions are ethically motivated, illuminating the multiple faces of political imbalance, military conflict and human rights violations. Jaar has made work addressing the 1994 Rwandan holocaust, the Mexico-US border conflict and the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, as well as the 1978 Nicaraguan Revolution, which is the subject of his upcoming installation *Shadows*. Its world premiere is at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah on February 18.



**Jaar will speak at SCAD Atlanta** on February 20. ArtsATL spoke with him while he was in Savannah installing his exhibition.

**ArtsATL:** *I wanted to start off with a question about your earlier life in Chile. You moved away when you were young to the island of Martinique in the Caribbean, and then later moved back to Chile as a teenager. You were about 17 when the military coup brought Augusto Pinochet to power. To be at a coming-of-age time in your life, and during such a pivotal moment in your country’s history, must have left a powerful impression on you.*

**Alfredo Jaar:** Yes, I lived on an island for many years, and it was a beautiful life. Very innocent. We moved from the world in a way. Going back to Chile in the Allende government and witnessing the military coup was to be suddenly finding yourself in a tornado. You’re swept away by events after this very quiet and peaceful life. And I’m sure that going through that must have affected me in many more ways than I’m capable of thinking of.

It is also true that, because I became an artist during that dark period of my country’s history, I learned to speak between the lines. I learned how to create works that would suggest, instead of being too obvious or direct, because we were under censorship and we were afraid. If there’s anything worse than censorship it’s self-censorship, because you just don’t know what are the limits of the things you can do or say. You had to create a new language in a way, a language that would communicate with people and say the things you wanted to say in a climate of oppression, and at the same time, it shouldn’t be readable to the authorities. That’s the challenge I had when I started . . . I think that I probably learned an enormous amount of things from that period, and I’m sure the lessons learned I’m applying to every single project.

**ArtsATL:** *I can’t imagine the fear that would come with making subversive work under such an oppressive regime.*

**Jaar:** Yeah, we were all fearful, but we still did it because it was a way to breathe. We were suffocated by the dictatorship, and in fact, when I left, I had reached a point of suffocation where I could no longer breathe [at all] anymore. I was looking for breathing spaces. Every single work created a little breathing space.

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Jaar built *The Sounds of Silence* on this photo taken in Sudan by Kevin Carter.

**ArtsATL:** *It seems now that legibility is of supreme importance in your work, which is an interesting contrast to the covertness required of you under the Pinochet regime. In art school, it's often taught that a good work of art shouldn't necessarily answer all of its own questions. That's sometimes true, but I've always thought the best artists employ the most direct and succinct metaphors that not only are clear but also have multiple layers. Could you talk a little bit about your editing process?*

**Jaar:** Yes, for me, I strongly believe in the power of a single idea. And editing is key because we are communicating with an unknown person. We are communicating with an audience. To communicate to one unknown person is very difficult. So imagine communicating with masses of people through objects, through things. That gives you an idea of the challenges that artists face when they're making art.

Basically, I discovered very early on that it was important for me to have a program, and within my program as an artist I have an objective, and my objective is to communicate something very precise and specific to that audience in that moment and in that context and regarding a very specific issue. I've always followed that *modus operandi*. I believe that art is communication . . . and communication only exists when there is an answer. I'm desperately trying to communicate with the audience. I want to tell them something, but I want to make sure they get it.

But as you said, that doesn't mean to go down to the lowest common denominator. It means to use the technologies available to us in order to communicate clearly, but that doesn't eliminate or exclude a certain amount of poetry in the work, a certain amount of beauty, and so many other things that you can use as an artist.



Jaar addresses the civil right movement in *The Fire Next Time*, which is in the High Museum's collection.

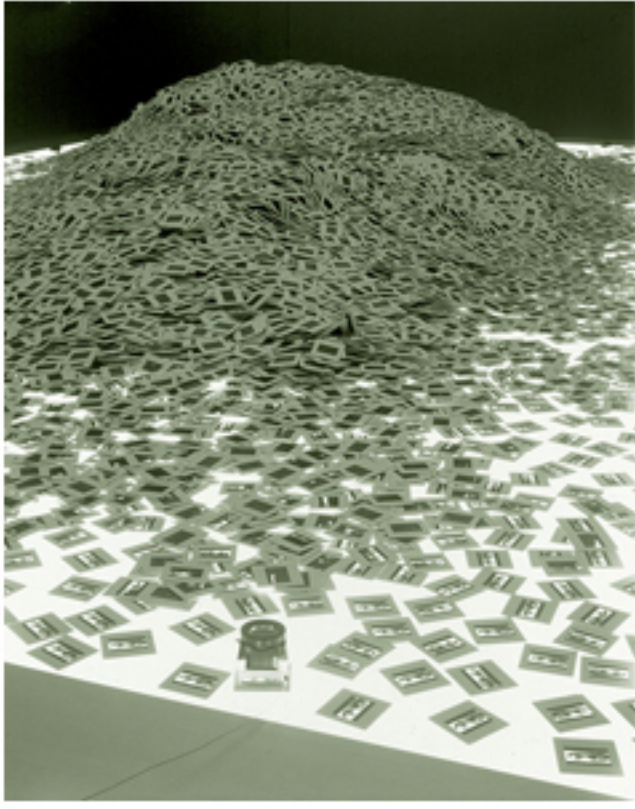
**ArtsATL:** *You don't want to sterilize information to the point that you're conveying it without feeling.*

**Jaar:** Yes, as an artist you have to walk this very fine line between didacticism and poetry. Basically, if you fall onto one side, to the didactic side, it becomes, as you say, totally sterilized. It's pure communication, but without any feelings or beauty. If you fall on the other side, it's almost too beautiful, too sweet, and the content might escape people because they're just impressed by the beauty of it. It's very difficult to find this middle road, to combine those two things in the most perfect way, where the work manages to communicate, manages to inform, manages to make you think, but at the same time touches you, moves you and illuminates you, and gives you joy, gives you pleasure. That's what the ideal work of art has to do, and it's very, very difficult, and of course, most works of art fail to do that, but when they do it's a very magical moment.

**ArtsATL:** *So much of teaching, too, is about clear communication. How do you negotiate this balance in the classroom with your students, both in your teaching process and with student work?*

**Jaar:** What I normally do with the students is I ask them to stop making things. The school has a tendency to ask them for production of objects. I would rather place the emphasis of education on the thinking capacity of the students. I really believe that artists are intellectuals. We are thinking people. The process of art is the process of thinking. So for me, art is 99 percent thinking and only 1 percent making. What we do should be the result of a very long and thorough and deep-thinking process.





An installation detail from Jaar's six-year *Rwanda Project*.

**ArtsATL:** *I know you've spent years conducting research before beginning making work.*

**Jaar:** Yes, because I believe — and this is probably coming from the fact that I'm an architect and I never studied art — but for me, in order to act in the world, I need to understand the world. It's very important for me to understand. I'm not afraid to say I do not understand. You know, I look at a certain context, I look at the world around me and certain things I do not understand. And so, I need to understand before acting. How could I dare — how could anyone dare? — say something about an issue without fully understanding it and knowing what has been said before, and understanding all the grays, and all the pros and cons, etc.? It's just a matter of being responsible and being serious about something.

So, that's what I do. Only when I've reached a critical moment where I feel I understand, where I can say "Yes, I know what's going on here," then I can act. That's what I try to explain to my students. Stop making things and let's decide what we're going to talk about, how are we going to work through this issue, but first, do we understand this issue?

**ArtsATL:** *So much of your role as an artist is simply offering an awareness of the things going on in world. But you can't really control what people do with the information you give them. Even for those who consider themselves ethically conscious people, what do you think stands in the gap between those who become aware of social injustices and do nothing, and those who become aware and are moved to take action?*

**Jaar:** It's a beautiful question. I think it's two things. It's awareness and empathy. And between awareness and empathy there is a huge gap. And not everyone can jump from one to the other. What's in between these two things is life itself. Basically, if our education, if our parents, if our background, if our life experience have taught us how to be aware of the context in which we live, then we live in a certain level of awareness, which is the first key step, of course.

But then, there are a lot of people who are aware, but who create a psychological barrier between this awareness and the next step that would move you to . . . express your empathy and actually try to change things. And that barrier is, of course, life itself. We live very complicated lives. For most people it's very difficult to get by with your own personal problems, and problems [in other parts of the world] seem huge and impossible to tackle, and most of the time they're happening very far from where you are.

But then, if you manage to go through, and you realize that to be a human being means being able to express your humanity in acts toward strangers, in acts toward others, you know, to help make this a better world for yourself and for others, then you start doing little things. You start helping NGOs, you become a member of a few of them, and you give them a monthly fee . . . and then you start reading more about certain issues, certain publications that tell you more about the world, because you want to know what's happening in the world, what's happening in Burma, in Nicaragua, in Brazil, etc. You want to know because you're curious. This is our planet. This is where we live, and then you can start doing little things. There are millions of ways to do this. Yes, life gets in the way, but if you understand that empathy is a part of being alive, then it's easy.

**ArtsATL:** *I think a lot about Ai Weiwei's creative process when I think about your work. Someone asked him once if he thought himself an artist, and he responded he sees himself as more of a chess player. A lot of his work isn't necessarily creating something new. It's really just illuminating or reframing what already exists, re-presenting inequalities around him as "art" so that they're somehow more visible. I think of your Newsweek and Life magazine projects where you let the headlines speak for themselves. Can you talk about this?*

**Jaar:** It's true. Because people lose their capacity to see, because they're numbed . . . by what's going on around them. They can't see the context . . . they're unaware. These works you mention are incredibly simple. You don't do anything. You take them from one context and place them in another context. This displacement really creates magic, because suddenly people see them in a different light. And so basically you're shining light on something that already exists, that is already out there, but for some reason no one has seen, and by just moving it . . . to the context of art, the context of culture, then these issues become visible.



Alfredo Jaar: *Shadows*, 2014. Commissioned by the Savannah College of Art and Design with support from the Ford Foundation. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York. (Photo by John McKinnon, courtesy of SCAD)



**ArtsATL:** *A photographer making work about the Holocaust once said to me, “It’s not that they killed six million people. It’s that they killed one person, over and over again, six million times.” I thought that was such a simple, subtle difference of language, a simple rephrasing and rearranging of words, through which it’s suddenly possible to penetrate it differently. The abstract becomes personal.*

**Jaar:** Absolutely, I agree with you. I think that this speaks of the power of words and why I like poetry so much. I’m a great poetry reader. And I like poets. I like the way they juggle words and do magic with words. I like Japanese poetry because you can make very, very short poems and they can have an explosion of meaning. I’m always looking for the economy of means in the language to be able to express certain things. Poetry has always been an important source of inspiration.

**ArtsATL:** *Your exhibition in Savannah follows your very successful work The Sound of Silence, about the well-known photograph taken by photojournalist Kevin Carter in Sudan. This new work, Shadows, is the second of a trilogy addressing the 1978 revolution in Nicaragua, specifically an image taken by the late [Koen Wessing](#).*

**Jaar:** I’m very excited and very nervous because it’s the world premiere. These works [in the trilogy] want to focus on single, extraordinary images. *The Sound of Silence* was a way to articulate a story around an image, it was a theater built for a single image. Here, we have another theater, a very different one, physically and so on, built for a single image.

I don’t know how it’s going to be received. The expectations are very high. *The Sound of Silence* has been show 25 times around the world. It’s my most popular work, in 16 different countries, six different languages, so it’s a bit tough for me. But this image is quite amazing, and I’m creating a mise-en-scène, re-creating this image in a very special way, to try to recuperate the power of images. We’re all bombarded by thousands of images, and they have become meaningless in our culture. With the phone now, everyone who has a phone can take a picture, billions of pictures are being taken everyday, as if degrading the meaning of a photograph because it is so much part of who we are today.

It’s a way for me to insist that images are not innocent. Images can present a certain perception of the world. An image is full of information. So basically, I’m rescuing an image from our recent history, inviting people to look at it.