

To understand Alfredo Jaar's work, one must be as scrupulous in considering it as the artist is in constructing it. Take, for instance, the installation *Bonjour Sécurité* (1993). Five square light-boxes, of the sort used in advertising, rest in a row on the floor, close to the wall, providing the only light in the exhibition space. The luminous transparencies on the front faces of the boxes depict, in cinema-like succession, an expanse of brilliant blue water broken by a progressively longer wake, as the initial viewpoint recedes. Behind the boxes, a row of small low-hung framed mirrors

reflects fragments of the boxes' back sides, which bear illuminated images of Haitian refugees whose Florida-bound boat was detained by the United States Coast Guard in June 1992. The deliberately

84. *Bonjour Sécurité* (1993).
Five double-sided light-boxes with colour
transparencies, 25 framed mirrors



85. *Geography = War* (1990). Six double-sided light-boxes with colour transparencies, six framed mirrors. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau, New York

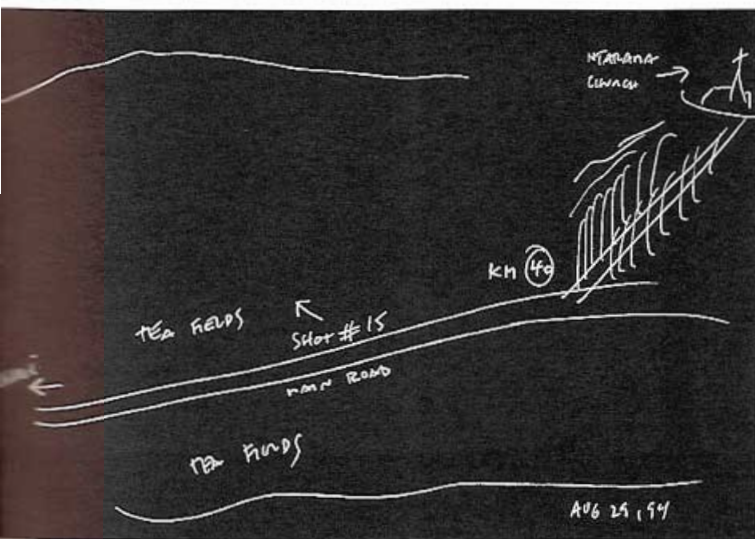


difficult viewing arrangement reveals itself to be symbolic of the relationships between the images it contains. The reverse images, glimpsed only with effort, and persistently shifting as the viewer moves around, are physically distanced and visually fragmented, underlining both the subjects' peripheral positions and the aloofness of the framing devices that mediate their images. The only stability is found in the stark authority of the physical elements and in the immaculate images "up front," which themselves record a retreat.

Other installation structures effect similar critiques of power relations, always via a formal elegance that is held in tension with the journalistic images. The fragmented, sometimes mazelike structure of the *Geography = War* installations (dating from 1989 to 1991) is akin to the structures of deception that permitted a huge load of

toxic waste from Italy to be dumped in the village of Koko, Nigeria. The casket-sized light-boxes of *The Fire Next Time* (1989), bearing archival images from the 1960s U.S. civil rights movement, are arranged as bricks in a sort of ruined wall. In Jaar's first major installation, *Gold in the Morning* (1986), five light-boxes paired with gilded metal boxes hugged the corners of the room, articulating the architectural space of the gallery. This was the first time he had used the strategy of placing elements on the periphery in order to point out the very marginality of the subjects depicted and thereby to create an affirmative representation – in this case, of workers toiling in the chasm of Brazil's Serra Pelada (naked hill) goldmine. In a more recent installation, *One Million Finnish Passports* (1995), a forbiddingly austere, undifferentiated mass of passports (useless replicas, to be exact) is barricaded behind an officious glass wall, in reference to the highly restrictive immigration policy Finland has

86. Source photograph and drawing for August 29, 1994 (1997). Booklet published by Art Metropole, Toronto



maintained during a period that has seen a million refugees accepted into other Nordic countries.

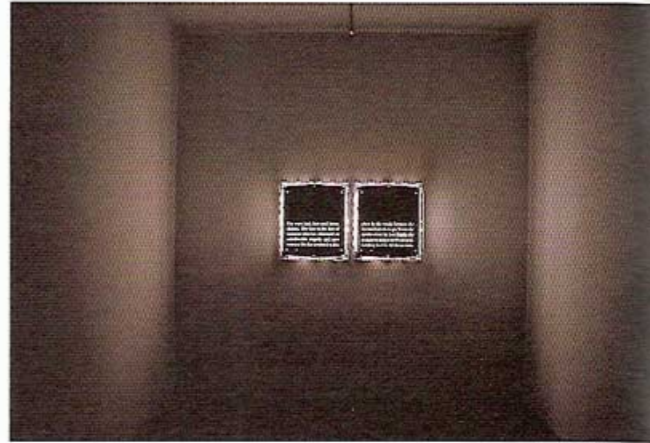
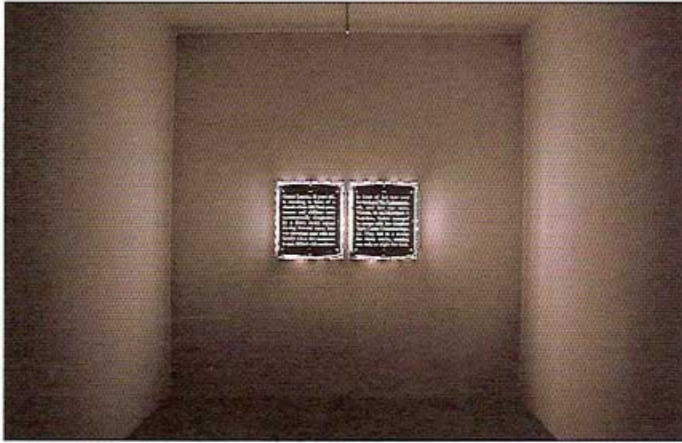
The care with which Jaar builds up installations such as these is tied to the treacherousness of the ground he treads. For years he has been preoccupied with representing various global issues – migration, the effects of racism, the exploitation of human and natural resources – focusing in particular on the people marginalized by dominant social and economic trends. In representing these subjects through typically commercialized forms such as light-boxes and billboards, he seeks a difficult balance: to present marginalized stories without trading on their subjects' suffering, and to tackle the authority of the formal and social structures within which the work is developed, while acknowledging his own somewhat privileged viewpoint. The question of who should be able to represent

particular peoples' conditions is a complex one: to assume a global viewpoint is to open oneself to accusations of imperialist thinking, while to presume that only those living in a specific situation are able to represent it is to risk essentializing and to deny the very real inequities of access to the means of representation. In Jaar's view, global pressures are both eroding and exacerbating these problems. The Koko incident is a case in point:

"The boundaries between *here* and *there* have been disappearing little by little. When I read that we were dumping our garbage *there* – in Africa, in this instance – it was the ultimate proof that there were no more boundaries between *here* and *there*. At the same time, the boundaries between *there* and *here* are stronger than ever."¹

Because these boundaries still exist, it is necessary to acknowledge the relations of power involved in constructing an image of *another*. Jaar responds by problematizing the acts of representing, viewing, and consuming through several means: images distanced by reflection in water or mirrors; deliberately unorthodox placement of objects; awkward viewpoints; complex architectural arrangements; compositions that emphasize "missing" information via blank backgrounds.

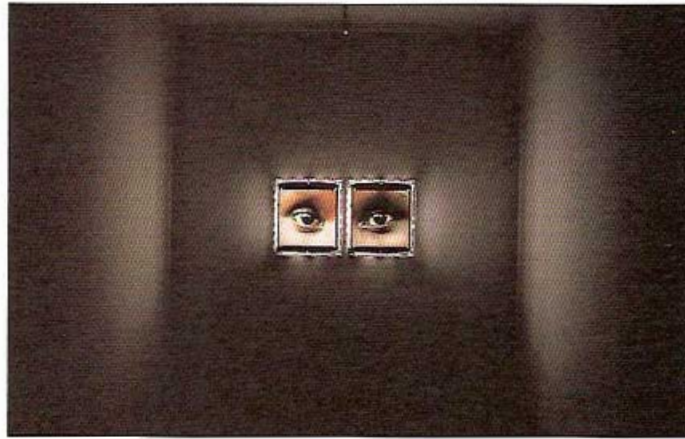
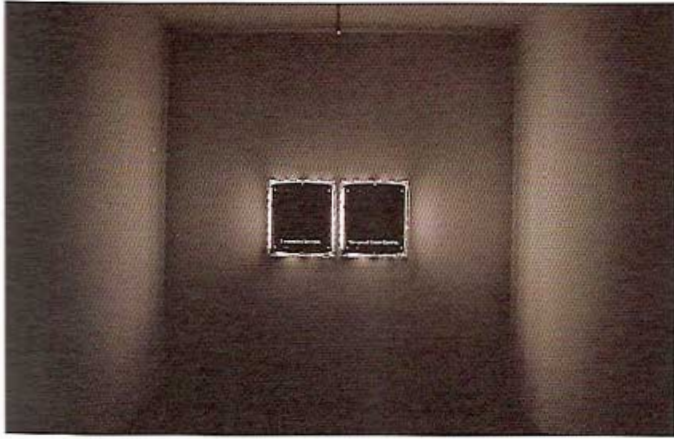
87. *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (light-box version, 1996).
Two Quadvision light-boxes with sequence of
six b/w text transparencies and two colour transparencies



"Jaar attempts, through means of physical obstruction, to dislocate the viewer and thereby to alter the relationship between viewer and viewed or – crucially, in Jaar's case – between self and 'other' in which the perception of 'otherness' dialectically confirms the centrality of the self."²

While the problematics of representing others have often led Jaar to render particular images *difficult*, in other cases he focuses on that which is *unrepresentable* – suppressed or absent. Several works entitled *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* present nothing but the eyes of a traumatized Tutsi woman Jaar spent time with in Rwanda in 1994. A small booklet, *August 29, 1994* (1997), alternates schematic plans of the area

near a mass grave in Rwanda with unremarkable photographs of the mapped site. While the images are ordinary, the gap one feels between the acts of violence and the possibilities of description is startling. In other work, Jaar's concern for outlining structures of marginalization locks onto details that may seem peripheral to the story. During a visit to a Hong Kong detention camp for Vietnamese refugees, he took a few photographs of a child, who would not speak but clung to him. His book *A hundred times Nguyen* (1994) simply repeats four subtly different portraits of the



girl, affirming the existence of a story untold. A statement by Jaar about working with cultures other than one's own hints at a strategy of measured impropriety that is pertinent to both debates about representation and the choice of insisting on a global perspective despite its attendant difficulties.

"We live in an imperfect world and all of us are guilty of many things. But we are also victims because we arrive in a situation we haven't created. The only thing to do in such a situation ... is to 'choose mistakes'.... From within the system, I have to learn how

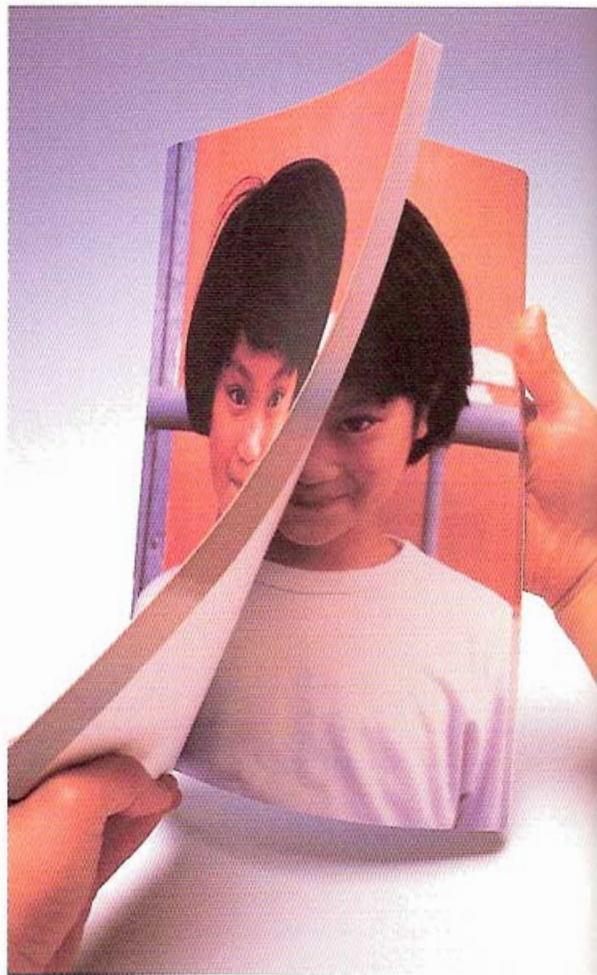
to say what I want to say and do what I want to do. There will be mistakes but I will choose them; I am a guilty victim choosing mistakes."³

Elsewhere, Jaar has chosen a deliberately equivocal structure, deflecting the "mistake" into something like a question. A 1989 brochure intended for distribution in Montreal's Mirabel airport – but rapidly confiscated – bore the phrase "*Welcome to Canada*" in English, French, Spanish, and German, unfolding to reveal a transposed Canadian flag, with the maple leaf moved from the centre to make room for a picture of smiling Nigerian children. The significance of this ambivalent gesture of juxtaposition rested ultimately in the expectations and reactions of the audience encountering it in a site of cultural definition.

Notes

1. Alfredo Jaar statement, based on interview by Lilly Wei, for "The Peripatetic Artist: 14 Statements," *Art in America* (July 1989), p. 155.
2. David Green, "Political Positions: Alfredo Jaar at the Whitechapel," *Creative Camera*, no. 315 (Apr-May 1992), p. 49.
3. Jaar in "The Peripatetic Artist," op. cit., p. 155.

88. ¿Es Usted Feliz? (1980). Billboard



89. *A hundred times Nguyen* (1994).
Artist's book published by Fotografiska
Museet and Moderna Museet,
Stockholm

In textual works Jaar is freer to be at once more polemical and more lyrical, though not necessarily more emotional, than in the image-based work. A 1997 billboard simply featured one line by poet William Carlos Williams: "It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably for lack of what is found there." Its quiet call to attention echoes a conceptual project realized in 1980, while still in his native Santiago. There, stark billboards posing the mundane question "¿ES USTED FELIZ?" (Are you happy?) struck to the heart

of everyday conviction in the context of Pinochet's military regime, the environment Jaar would leave behind in 1982. Yet even these projects are inconclusive. In the end, what is most consistent in Jaar's work – whether a formalized viewing situation or a loaded question – is an equivocation that turns the burden of responsibility upon the viewer. G.K.