



# The RESPONSIBILITY of *Privilege*

## A Conversation with **Alfredo Jaar**

by Anne Barclay Morgan

Artist, architect, and filmmaker Alfredo Jaar lives and works in New York. His installations and individual artworks have been shown around the world. He has participated in the Venice, São Paulo, Johannesburg, Sydney, Istanbul, and Kwangju Biennials, as well as Documenta. In 2000 he was the only visual artist to receive the prestigious MacArthur "genius award" fellowship. He holds the Winton Chair in Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

Jaar has had major solo exhibitions at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Whitechapel Gallery in London, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Recent public projects have been located in Montreal; Skoghall, Sweden; Tijuana-San Diego; and Fukuroi, Japan. He has recently been working on a new project, *Lament of the Images*. The first installment was unveiled at Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany, in the summer of 2002.

**Anne Barclay Morgan:** *Four years ago you made your last works about the genocide in Rwanda. What made you finish that project?*

**Alfredo Jaar:** I completed the task that I had given myself, which was to explore the issues of genocide and indifference and express as much as I could about them and to circulate the work as widely as possible. *The Rwanda Project* has traveled around the world and has been seen by thousands of people. There are two major publications. Furthermore, I had exhausted

my own capacity to deal with the subject, having completed nearly 30 works in six years. I felt the need to move on. But, of course, this is a luxury that most Rwandans will not be able to afford: How can you go on living after witnessing a genocide? But the truth is that I have not felt capable of moving on to another project of such magnitude and intensity. I wasn't psychologically prepared for another such project or even able to go somewhere else and start a similar project. So for the last three years, I have been doing site-specific projects around the world, which are much more short-term exercises. You get into a very specific situation and you intervene.

**The Skoghall Konsthall, 2000. Public Project in Skoghall, Sweden. Burning of the temporary structure and exhibition.**

**ABM:** *Have you been doing permanent works or temporary public projects?*

**AJ:** Both. Some have been permanent, as in Barcelona and Fukuroi, Japan. Others have been temporary: in the U.S./Mexico borderland; Montreal; Skoghall, Sweden; and Matsudai, Japan. In general, I prefer to do ephemeral public projects, which give you opportunities to take risks and experiment. I can try things that I have never done before, like the performance in Tijuana, where I organized a large-scale event with music, images, and poetry. I don't want to repeat myself. I prefer to try things I haven't done before.

I have always resisted permanent works because I don't feel capable of speaking to the subsequent generations who will find works in their midst created by someone from a previous generation, a previous time, a previous context. So in all of my public projects I have requested the right to create a permanent structure with a flexible content, to create a situation in which certain elements can change over time, according to the situation. Something always remains, but that is not what is most important. The piece allows for flexible change, as in the project in Barcelona, where easels are anchored in the ground and are therefore fixed. But every single day when you walk by that square, the work is different. One day you might find nothing, on another day you might find only poetry, or very loud political manifestos, or the sweetest little drawings by children. The square becomes a place of continuous change and exchange, in the sense that people can leave their projects for someone else to take home. I haven't done more permanent pieces because institutions are generally reluctant to let me create a space that could change over time. They want to do something and move on. My public projects demand continuous attention.

In Barcelona, the project was made possible because a school adjacent to the

square agreed to sponsor it and supply paper in the reception area. Anyone who wants to use the piece goes to that office and gets sheets of pre-cut paper to place on the easels. The school accepted my demands, and that is why the work exists.

**ABM:** *In your permanent projects in Japan, how did you integrate change?*

**AJ:** In Japan, a local curator would be in charge of each *Bunka No Hako* (Japanese for "culture box"). These structures are not museums, but "boxes of culture." I curated the first show in collaboration with a local curator, but after this they will be on their own. I structured the piece in such a way that they have to change the works every three months, with every season. They just have to find the right work for the right context and the right time.

**ABM:** *Is it stipulated that only contemporary art can be shown, or can historical works also be included?*

**AJ:** No, the curators will be free to choose. We started by showing contemporary art in one wing of the culture box and historical art in the other. They might continue that logic, or they might change it. The idea is that they respect the logic of the place with a single work of art on each side and no more, because in this case, the work of art is just a pretext to come, not to look only at art, but to look at the landscape and find a place of silence, of meditation, of reading. When we were building the first culture box, I made a selection of five different haikus by an extraordinary female Japanese poet, Chiyo-Ni.

A local calligrapher spent an entire day writing these haikus directly on the walls. We documented

Two views of *Playground*, 1999. Public project in Sant Boi, Barcelona, Spain.





all this on video. It is a very beautiful spectacle to see him writing. When I visited the space early the following day, it was not yet open to the public. The culture box was empty, with just the poetry on the walls. I started crying because it was overwhelming. It was a beautiful small space filled with poetry. I thought that we do not need any more art. These structures should just remain as houses of poetry. What if we put them in the landscape and people go in just to read poetry? The poetry would stimulate thinking. People would sit on the bench and look at the landscape and that would be more than enough. I felt that the space was overwhelmingly filled with meaning, with only these few words. But I was forced to change my mind because we had already engaged in discussions with the artist whose work would open the culture box. It would have been very painful for him. We had to include the artwork in the end, and by then I was really happy with it. But I kept thinking about those houses of poetry.

If I find the right context one day, I will build these poetry houses, because I think that today we need to be offered these kinds of possibilities. These places will slow you down, and that is the whole point. People rush around in their lives. They don't have time to think; they don't have a place that conveys a sense of "welcome," a place to do nothing. That would be very revolutionary—a place of nothing. All of my projects are exercises from which I learn something, and I apply what I have learned to the next exercise. From this exercise, I learned that sometimes you don't even need art, you need "nothingness."

This reminds me of John Cage, one of the artists I most admire. Cage was looking for silence. He found a lab where he thought he could experience total silence. He went in, and they closed the door behind him. He was hoping to find 100 percent silence, nothingness. To his big surprise, he started listening to his heart. He was shocked. He discovered that there was

no total silence. It does not exist. It is always about yourself. The house of poetry will be a future project if the context is right, a place where there is nothing. It will become a place about looking at the landscape, a place where you can go and be with yourself, to read or meditate.

**ABM:** *When you moved to New York in 1982, you first worked as an architect. With the creation of the culture boxes, you returned to architecture.*

**AJ:** What has been happening in the field of architecture over the last 10 years is more interesting, I am afraid, than what has been happening in the art world. Because I am an architect, I have followed the architecture scene quite closely. Quite a few times the thought has even crossed my mind that I should drop everything in the art world and just go back to architecture. Until now I haven't had the courage to do that. But finally, I found a way to create buildings as an artist. The Japanese project and the Swedish project deal directly with architecture. It is my way to send signals to my former life and to connect with that fantastic field.

**ABM:** *Your Swedish project (2000) must have been very satisfying for you; it is ephemeral, with all the components of architecture.*

**AJ:** Yes. The Swedish project was a very good synthesis. I was invited by the city of Skoghall to create a public project. Fifty years ago the largest paper mill in the world built this town for their workers, complete with habitat, a church, a school, a hospital. They built everything, a real "company town." Today it has grown substantially, but its economy is still dependent



Two views of *Bunka No Hako (Culture Box)*, 2000. Public Project in Niigata, Japan.

on the paper mill. On my second visit, I discovered that they were missing one thing, a place for culture. Instead of using city funds to create a public art project, I talked to the paper mill about funding my project, since it made sense for them to fund the first place for culture in the city. They accepted. I designed the first Konsthall in Skoghall, and we built it out of paper. We invited some 15 young artists from around Sweden to create works focusing on paper. The entire community came to the opening. And exactly 24 hours after the opening, we burned it.

**ABM:** *Was the art inside?*

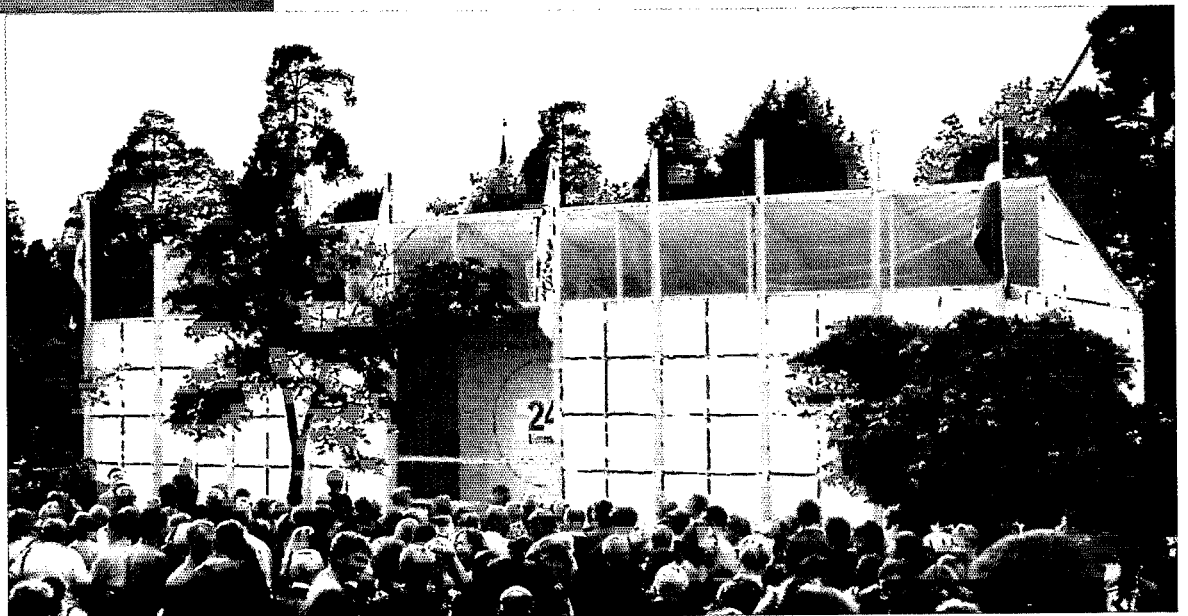
**AJ:** Yes. The artists were aware that this would be the building's fate. Most of them incorporated the idea into their work. Why did I burn it? First of all, I've always wanted to burn a museum. This was my big chance and I did it. But more seriously, as an artist from New York I did not want to impose an institution on this town. The idea was to offer the community a glimpse of what contemporary art can be and do, and once they had it, to take it away. The project suggested

**Interior and exterior views of *The Skoghall Konsthall*, 2000. Project in Skoghall, Sweden, before burning.**

to the community that if they have the political will and go to the paper mill and to the mayor, they can create a permanent cultural space of their own.

Midway through the construction, a popular movement was born, asking me not to burn it. They realized that a cultural space was missing, and since I was building it, we should keep it. I was thrilled by their reaction, which was exactly what I was hoping to trigger. But my response was, "I hope this is the seed of a movement that will create a new, real museum. But we have to burn this one because this is an important, fundamental aspect of my project." They insisted, "No, let's save the foundations, the basic structure, and we will replace the paper with real walls." My reply was that it would be less expensive to create a new structure. This one was made in order to be destroyed; with the first rain it would collapse. I had worked closely with the fire department in order to design the structure so that it would collapse inward.

Then a second movement was born. They saw the need for a new playground in the city and wanted to save the wood from the project for it. This one was a tougher issue for me. My reply was, "I am surprised that I had to come all the way from New York for you to discover that you need a new playground in Skoghall. I am happy that my project is provoking this initiative from you. Please go to the paper mill and ask for more wood. They will give it to you." I was a little worried because I knew I was going to burn wood that could be used for something else. Even though no one ever remarked that the paper mill destroys trees worth a dozen potential playgrounds every day, I was still hurting inside. But I thought that the spectacle of the burning museum would stay in their minds until they saw a real museum built in their community. During the discussion, something marvelous





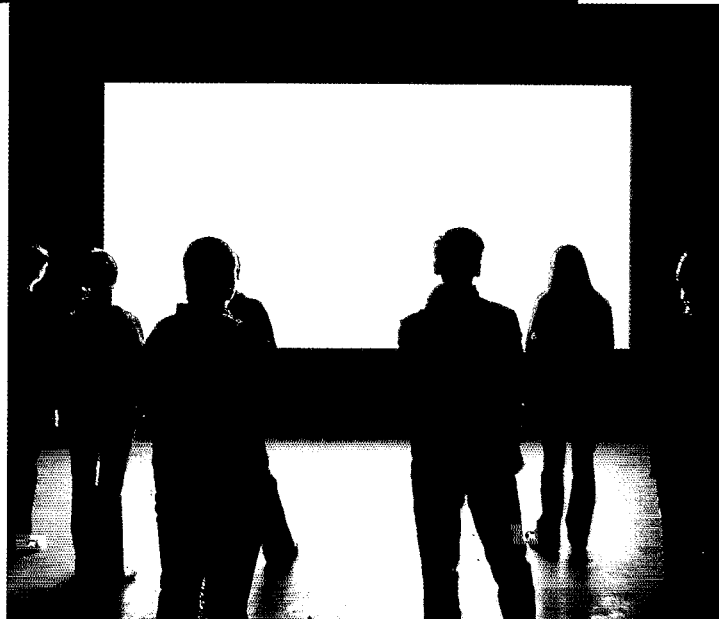
happened. I said, "Listen, it is very important conceptually that I complete my project. It has to burn. But I would be happy to design a playground for you at no charge. But it is very important that we burn the structure. Please let me burn it." Exactly one year after completing that project, I received a call from Skoghall, asking whether I remembered my promise. They were ready. So I went back, and the city offered me a major site right in the middle of downtown, 11 meters by 40 meters. I am designing a permanent playground for free.

**ABM:** *So your conscience is clear.*

**AJ:** Yes, and I am very happy because I love to work with kids. I have designed a forest where children will be able to climb from tree to tree on elevated bridges. I've never done anything like this, but why not? As I said, I want to do things I have never done before.

**ABM:** *You have incorporated sound in some of your works.*

**AJ:** Yes, the first time I used sound was in a 1980 performance based on a photograph by Susan Meiselas. I also have a permanent installation in the Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art that incorporates music. Music is also part of a performance I did about Rwanda. And recently, I used it in a performance piece on the U.S./Mexico border. After I returned from Rwanda, I realized that sound was the most powerful and simplest tool for self-healing. There was nothing else that offered me the healing that sound could. I listened to a lot of music and cried continuously. That is why I used sound in the performance about Rwanda, where I offered the audience a place of healing and mourning through sound. Music has always been a fundamental aspect of my life. Nietzsche said, "Without music, life would be a mistake," and I really believe that. I hope to continue to use music when I think it makes sense.



**ABM:** *Your work communicates so much through the way you place text, images, and objects in a space, for example, by putting text at eye-level in just one line on a black wall. Space becomes a language in your work, just as much as text or image.*

**AJ:** As an architect I have always been aware of the language of space. I have always done installations where I am not just showing images, words, or objects, but an entire space is speaking. The language of the installation is the language of the space, which the installation articulates.

**ABM:** *In Barcelona, at the Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, the space for your exhibition about Rwanda was a 12th-century cloister. A sense of history was present*

**Two views of Lament of the Images, 2002. Three Plexiglas plates and light wall, text panels: 23 x 20 in. each; light wall: 6 x 12 ft.**



**Two views of *The Cloud*, October 14, 2000. Public project at Valle del Matador on the Tijuana-San Diego border.**

*even though you were dealing with a contemporary political situation.*

**AJ:** I was lucky to be offered that space. It was already very meaningful. It was just a matter of letting the space speak, of creating the right kind of atmosphere for the work. It was important to have a sense of complicity with the space and not to disturb it.

**ABM:** *You make videos to document your work. What about making a work that is purely film?*

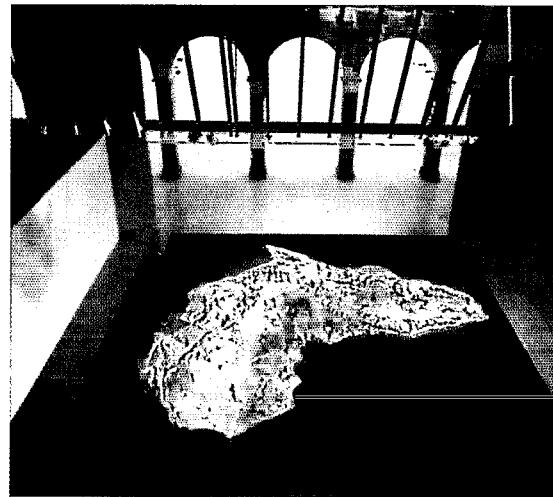
**AJ:** I started producing documentaries of my recent works in order to preserve them as lived experiences. In the case of the performances, it is the obvious way to do it. These documentaries are my way to go back to film, to experiment with it, experiment with the editing in my studio, which allows me to slowly understand new technologies, slowly experiment with the language of film. Hopefully, I will find the means to go beyond documentaries and do another kind of film. I am a frustrated filmmaker. I hope to do more film, some time in the near future.

**ABM:** *Are you content with the title "artist"?*

**AJ:** I think I am content. I am a frustrated journalist. I am a frustrated filmmaker. I am a frustrated architect. I have all these frustrations, but I think the word "artist" is the one that embraces all of them. An artist can do film, architecture, journalism, anything. "Artist" is the most open and generous word.

**ABM:** *In Lament of the Images for Documenta 11, you transformed a large, rectangular room.*

**AJ:** That piece is very simple. As you enter the room, you find three illuminated texts on a wall. They were created by placing windows inside a wall, inset with panels laser-cut with text and flush with the wall. Everything is painted gray. You don't see the panels



or windows, you just see a wall. Light from behind the panels shines through the words. These are texts of light. After you read these texts, you enter a 22-foot-long dark corridor. At the end there is a strong light. When you reach the second space, you are blinded by a screen of light, only light, a huge (10 by 20 feet) source of light. There are no images.

**ABM:** *What is your intent with that work?*

**AJ:** This piece is a philosophical essay on the crisis of representation today. It is a poetic meditation on what is seen and what is not seen. It is a search for light in the darkness. It is a lament of the images.

**ABM:** *How did you find the political situations that you reference in the three texts?*

**AJ:** When I was in Cape Town a few years ago, I visited the island and prison where Mandela was kept. One of the guards, a former prisoner, took me to a lime quarry where Mandela and other political prisoners were forced to work for years digging lime. The apartheid regime used the lime just to turn the roads white. But obviously they were trying to destroy him physically and mentally. The lime blinded him and hurt his lungs, but he survived. A few months later I read a story about Bill Gates, who owns a few photo agencies and one of the most important photography archives in the world. The article described how he planned to bury his millions of images in a lime quarry. I jumped; I made the connection. Mandela working half of his life in prison in a lime quarry, going blind, and then a billionaire buys all these images that represent the history of humankind and buries them in a lime quarry. The third text focuses on the tragedy in Afghanistan, which started in response to the tragedy in New York. Before the bombing, the U.S. government bought all the satellite rights to images of Afghanistan and neighboring countries. So I started connecting these three events.

**ABM:** *In some recent projects you shifted your attention away from exposing injustice to coming up with solutions, or healing, or closure. Your performance *The Cloud* on October 14, 2000 in Tijuana was a sort of memorial service for immigrants who died trying to cross the border. For the families of those who died, the performance offered a resolution.*

**AJ:** Yes, I agree. It is the result of my frustration with representation. Artists represent things, but at a certain

point we should go beyond representation. We should create spaces of interaction, meaningful dialogue. In *The*

*Cloud*, I wanted to create a space of mourning, a space that would go against the grain of local events, where death had become banal, where people die every day simply trying to cross the border. It is not even reported in the news because it happens too often. The performance was an opening, offering a space of silence, of meditation: a space where the victims' relatives were able to come together and perhaps connect with each other. I don't think it is a solution, just a much needed moment. Artists have the privilege of being able to create these moments, and we should use them.

**ABM:** *Speaking of privilege, how do you view the artist's responsibility?*

**AJ:** Every day I come to the studio and I think. I just meditate and think and analyze situations. This is an incredibly privileged position. I make my own schedule. I select the context, the framework, the focus, the objectives. Duchamp said that art is about freedom. I feel so free; I have an amazing amount of freedom. But I have always thought that with that privilege comes a certain responsibility. Because society has given us the time and the means to think, to speculate, to ask questions, to propose solutions, to try things, to experiment, our responsibility is that we give back to society. How do we give back? By engaging the audience in important issues of our time, communicating, offering a space of discussion, dialogue, and interaction. It is really about offering audiences something that no one else in society can offer them, not the media or the entertainment worlds, not their professional lives. That is what is unique about what we can do. It is very difficult to accomplish this, but we can take people to places they have never been. I don't mean physically, but mentally. We can ask hard questions, we can suggest difficult answers. All that is part of our privilege.

*Anne Barclay Morgan is a writer living in Florida.*

**Left:** *Signs of Life*, 2000. Public projection of the names of 10 places where the Rwandan genocide occurred. Work shown at the Hotel de Ville, Lyons, France. **Right:** *Emergencia*, 1998. Metal pool, water, fiberglass maquette, and hydraulic system, pool: 36 x 288 x 278 in. Maquette submerged every 12 minutes.



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