

MATRIX/BERKELEY 122

Alfredo Jaar

University Art Museum

early February - mid March

1989

Waiting, 1988



Alfredo Jaar's installations are overtly political expressions achieved within the terms of a highly personal aesthetic sensibility. Confronting gross inequities in the distribution of wealth and power, Jaar--a native Chilean who has lived in the United States since 1982--focuses his art on the disenfranchised peoples of Mexico and of Central and South America. He draws particular attention to the connections and discomfiting contrasts between the lives of these "Third World" peoples and our own "First World" condition. Clearly, such distinctions of privilege cannot be made solely on geographic bases, and Jaar's stark images speak as much of the poor and homeless who live among us as they do of those beyond our territorial border. His work is never strident, being constantly tempered by an attention to formal elements such as light, scale, composition, and architecture. The elegant beauty of Jaar's installations stands both in contrast to as well as in sympathy with his alienated subjects.

The individual works in the MATRIX installation, Waiting, are drawn from two series, Out of Balance and Coyote!, in order to link the theme of general social imbalance with a topic particularly relevant to California: our dependence on the agricultural labor provided by illegal aliens coming largely from Mexico and Central America. Here, Brazilian gold miners and Mexican coyotes--the men and women who ferry immigrants on their backs across the Rio Grande--are depicted in large-scale photographic transparencies mounted in sculptural light boxes which

the artist has arranged in the darkened gallery.

Jaar's shadowy installation in which the works are hung either above or below the usual exhibition sightline emphasizes his subjects' social displacement. In the three horizontal transparencies, Jaar's portraits of young workers are pushed to the extreme margins, appearing as if caught in a view of pure, undifferentiated space. Indeed, the simplicity of Jaar's sculptural forms and the absence of imagery in much of the compositions suggest an ironic reference to the abstract ideals of the Modernist tradition. Rather than pointing towards transcendence, however, Jaar's unoccupied spaces are politicized sites into which we are invited to project a corresponding image of our own relatively comfortable existence. In these spacious compositions the artist provides a symbolic ground for the future imagination and responsibility necessary to redress the current socio-economic imbalances.

A single vertical light box depicting an older coyote contrasts with the three horizontal pieces. The man's body--shown from behind to expose the strained muscles of his back--fills most of the frame, completing the picture and excluding the viewer from active dialogue with the image. Whereas the horizontal pieces suggest a potential for engagement, this work, leaning like an afterthought against the gallery wall, offers little hope. For the older generation, the artist seems to be saying, it is already too late for change.

The visual clarity of Jaar's illuminated photographs seems to invite direct access to the depicted figures. By presenting images of impoverishment in finely designed and crafted light boxes reminiscent of an upscale advertising display, however, the artist reminds us of the inevitable distance imposed by our own social vantage point. In the installation, Waiting, Jaar asks us to consider how the possibilities for social change depend on our capacity to comprehend the lives of those excluded from our own privileged society.

Alfredo Jaar was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1956 and, in 1982, moved to New York City where he continues to live and work. He received a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985.

Lawrence Rinder

Works in MATRIX (all works courtesy the artist and Diane Brown Gallery, unless otherwise indicated):

1. Untitled (Out of Balance "A"), 1988, light box with color transparency, 18"h x 96"w x 7"d.
2. Untitled (Out of Balance "B"), 1988, light box with color transparency, 18"h x 96"w x 7"d.
3. Untitled (Coyote "A"), 1988, light box with color transparency, 18"h x 96"w x 7"d. Collection Emily Fisher Landau, New York.
4. Waiting (Coyote "E"), 1988, light box with color transparency, 72"h x 48"w x 7"d.

Selected installations:

Venice Biennale, Italy, Gold in the Morning '86 (catalog); Spring Street Subway Station, NYC, Rushes '86; Grey Art Gallery, New York University, NYC, A Frame of Mind '87; Spectacolor Sign, Times Square, NYC, A Logo for America '87; Sao Paulo International Biennial, Brazil, Learning to Play '87; Documenta 8, Kassel, W. Germany, 1 + 1 + 1 '87 (catalog).

Selected group exhibitions:

The New Museum for Contemporary Art, NYC, Art and Ideology '84; Alternative Museum, NYC, Disinformation '85; Bess Cutler Gallery, NYC, When Attitudes Become Form '86; Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University, NYC, Perverted by Language '87; Everhart Museum, PA, Art and the Dialectic Process '87; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Committed to Print '88.

Selected bibliography:

Magnani, Gregorio.  
"Aperto '86," Flash Art, Nov. '86.

Princenthal, Nancy.  
"Fragments and Frames," Art in America, May '87.

Phillips, Patricia C.  
"Alfredo Jaar," Artforum, Mar. '87.

Lippard, Lucy R.  
"Tunneling to Artistic Enlightenment," In These Times, Apr. 8-14 '87.

Levin, Kim. "Maura Sheehan and Alfredo Jaar," The Village Voice, Feb. 11-17 '87.

Heartney, Eleanor.  
"Maura Sheehan/Alfredo Jaar," The New Art Examiner, June '87.

Cameron, Dan.  
"Documenta 8, Kassel," Flash Art International, Oct. '87.

Kimmelman, Michael.  
"Cries and Whispers," The New York Times, Mar. 25 '87.

Bonetti, David. "Candid Cameras: Immigration, Fabrication, Appropriation," The Boston Phoenix, Mar. 25 '88.

Sans, Jerome. "Alfredo Jaar, Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris," Flash Art, Summer '88.

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