

TWILIGHT MEMORY: THE CHILEAN CHAPTER OF ALFREDO JAAR

Alfredo Jaar, The Dark Side of the Moon. September 14, 2023 – March 17, 2024
Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile.

by Adrián Gouet Hiriart

Even among the most geographically and chronologically distant cultures one might wish to explore, it is possible to find that the moon, as a figure imprinted early in the course of human memory, is always associated with representations that somehow allude to the idea of change: its periodic phases, its ever-shifting appearance, as well as the gravitational forces that, in the ebb and flow of the tides, shape and reshape the edges of the earth and of our own experience within it. From this ancient matrix, all manner of expansions have unfolded toward a myriad of references to motherhood and secrecy, night and water, sensuality, imagination, and even madness, or lunacy — a word that derives from the Latin *luna* ("moon").

It is said that this is the symbolic itinerary followed by the creative evolution of the English rock band Pink Floyd when, in 1973, they released their acclaimed album *The Dark Side of the Moon* — a trajectory the band itself was living out amid the turbulent tides of the international success that was consolidating them at the time, though marked in no small part by the shadow left by the madness of one of its founders, guitarist Syd Barrett, who had been expelled from the group years earlier. The album has often been read as a source of hidden keys to decoding the traumas and ecstasies of that group's history, even though it can also be heard as one long interior monologue, sustained by the continuous, uninterrupted musical flow between its nine songs, as if they were phases shifting gradually but relentlessly toward new emotional and sonic dimensions.

Curiously, however, and despite the direct allusion to the London band, it is not this long chain of associations around the idea of change that gives rise to the exhibition the renowned artist Alfredo Jaar presented at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago, Chile, under the title *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Upon entering the museum's Matta room, the nearly two hundred pieces installed in the exhibition convey quite the opposite: the total absence of movement, the rigorous and immovable arrangement of what seems a strictly informational space, filled with data and documents mounted according to their date of production. For this is an exhibition that surveys the early years of Jaar's artistic production — years marked by the democratic and institutional rupture that, from that same year, 1973, onward, would make Chile a place where time simply stopped passing.

With works the great majority of which had never before been exhibited, Jaar's show is situated within the commemorations that the Museo de Bellas Artes, alongside many other cultural institutions in Chile, organized to mark the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état of September 11, 1973. It is significant, then, that the exhibition opens with the *Calendarios* series, which Jaar began developing shortly after the coup and continued until 1982, the year he left Chile to settle permanently in the United States. In a direct allusion — though one set apart from the almost contemplative tone we might find in On Kawara's *Date Paintings* — Jaar's operation consists of producing, but above all intervening upon, various everyday calendars of those years, to point out how, in his own words, "every day after September 11, 1973, became the 11th, in this nightmare that had just begun and whose duration no one knew." Despite the ironic undertone this intervention often carried — where the ominous date was made to coexist with bucolic landscapes or Coca-Cola slogans — Jaar's gesture signals Chile's tragedy without illustrating it, revealing the impossibility of escaping a traumatic and cacophonous time, akin to the powerlessness of Sisyphus dragging the rock of his punishment up the mountain again and again — in the same way we also find it in the lyrics of "Breathe," from the Pink Floyd album that lends the show its name:

Run, rabbit, run
Dig that hole, forget the Sun
And when at last the work is done
Don't sit down, it's time to dig another one

It is no surprise, then, that the exhibition is laden with works in which Jaar attempts to show the impossibility of making explicit the terrors that surround him, drawing on what the show's curator, Pablo Chiuminatto, describes in the exhibition catalog as a series of "oblique strategies" — strategies that would serve as the prelude to the peculiar way in which Jaar would go on to inscribe his practice within the context of so-called political art. As happens with *Imposibilidad* (1979), *Pablo, Pablo, Pablo* (1974), or *Missing* (1982), the exhibition gradually reveals the conditions of what was known in Chile at the time as the "cultural blackout," impressing upon today's visitors — aware as they are of the horrors that followed — a simple question: what is to be done? How is one to act in the face of a reality that is immovable in its crudeness, unrepresentable in its dramatic permanence? The force of these questions stems not only from the drama that the repression and abuses of that era posed for the country, but also from their continuing relevance today, borne out by the temporal confinement we are made to witness daily — the endless civil wars in Africa, the conflict in the Middle East, or even the recent COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the fact that this exhibition focuses on Jaar's early works, most of them previously unseen, allows us to view retrospectively the germ of those oblique strategies from which his later, internationally acclaimed works would spring — works such as *A Logo for America* (1987) or *The Rwanda Project* (1994–2000). Forged in the crucible of the blackout and political persecution, this germ is what, since antiquity, has been called *recusatio*: the literary trope whereby the poet begins their address by claiming to have no words to describe what they see, only to then adopt a kind of stylistic alter ego through

which to shed light on what cannot be named. How, then, is one to reconcile the atrocious evidence of what is seen with the expressive impotence to comprehend it? How can artworks be the place where collective history intersects with personal misfortune, the local vicissitudes of a marginal country with the great geopolitical movements, the clean and detached design of hundreds of photographs, drawings, and documents with the most harrowing horrors they represent — the bright side with the dark side of the moon?

Two groups of works in this exhibition make visible the extent to which Alfredo Jaar has confronted these questions in his work. Both do so by revealing dimensions in which *recusatio* ceases to be a mere rhetorical device and begins to take on a more emotionally charged tone — a properly human resonance through which these works exceed the merely explanatory function of the circumstances that gave rise to them. On the one hand, there is the *Anónimos* series (1980), in which the artist gathers press photographs and reframes them around certain details, particularly certain faces or marginal gestures within the context of the broader scene. Here Jaar shows his affinity with the practices of the ready-made and media appropriation present in many of his works, but the act of reframing he carries out here also entails a reframing of our own perception of these images, in which we begin to recognize, in those mute or bewildered gazes, our own bewilderment, our own silences. And in this, the exhibition's installation has been key, in terms of the placement and scale these faces occupy within the room.

For its part, and in keeping with that anonymous character, the *Estudios sobre la Felicidad* [Studies on Happiness] (1980–1983) mark the inaugural moment of Alfredo Jaar's work in its most direct engagement with public space. The artist's extensive digression across all manner of informational diagrams, figures, and data begins, once again, with a simple, even naïve question — though no less pressing for that: are you happy?

In commemorating what is probably the most inconsolable event in Chile's history, Alfredo Jaar's exhibition at the MNBA in Santiago offers a multitude of clues as to how art allows us to reckon with the darkest side of human cruelty. Beyond local circumstances, the Chilean chapter in this global artist's body of work constitutes not only a prefiguration of the works that would later make him famous. It is also the site where historical and personal memory is exercised as an action doubly directed toward both past and future. Even amid the greatest disquiet, Jaar's work pushes us to seek what to do, how to act, to turn toward the action that mobilizes and transforms:

"We live by action — by acting on desire. Those of us who don't know how to want — whether geniuses or beggars — are related by impotence (...) To act — that is true wisdom. I will be what I want to be, but I have to want whatever it is."
