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Art Worlds into Real Worlds: A Conversation with Alfredo Jaar¹

Federica Martini

Federica Martini: In 1989, much critical debate was arisen around the *Magiciens de la Terre*. What was your experience as an artist participating in this show?

Alfredo Jaar: I received a letter from the curators inviting me. I assumed they had seen my work at the Venice Biennale in 1986 and in documenta the following year. They invited me to create a new work. At that time, I had just begun to investigate the dumping of European toxic waste in Africa, so I proposed that this could be my starting point; they accepted. They funded my first trip to the continent – a research trip to Nigeria. I had been interested in Africa for some time – focusing on the issue of media representation of Africa in the USA in particular – but I had never been able to afford a trip to the African continent. I had already started this methodology of traveling to a place, investigating a specific issue and then making work based on my research. For the Venice Biennale in 1986 I had visited the Brazilian Eastern Amazon and transformed my reportage about gold mining into an installation. I had decided to develop these kinds of international investigations as a response to the provincialism I perceived in New York, where I had been living since 1982.

Because I came from Chile people expected me to make work about Chile and I have always fought against that. I wanted to be free to focus on anything I wanted, just as North American and European artists do. I remember being afraid that the title of the exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, was too exotic, that works would be read the wrong way. But when I saw the list of invited artists and realized that artists I greatly respected were going to participate, like Hans Haacke, On Kawara, Alighiero Boetti and Giovanni Anselmo for example, then I felt it was safe to take part myself.

During the installation period Richard Long was working just across from my space in La Villette. I ran into Hans Haacke whom I had already met in New York. I knew well some of the South American artists such as Jose Bedia and Cildo Meireles. Cildo was someone that I admired and considered very important, but he did not exist in the European contemporary art world of 1989. He had participated in the Information exhibition at the

Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970 but I believe *Magiciens* was one of his first shows outside our continent. Also close to my space was Huang Yong Ping and his washing machines, but there was no occasion to meet him. I met other artists only when I needed to borrow some tools. I was disappointed by the lack of social opportunities during the installation – it was very chaotic and there was no time. I certainly didn't have time to enjoy Paris – I didn't even see the second part of the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou! There were some incredibly smart juxtapositions at La Villette, for instance between works by Richard Long and Esther Mahlangu. Facing it, the obvious question was to ask yourself why do we see some practices as exotic, primitive, or craft and other work, which is comparably made, as conceptual?

I was puzzled by the negativity of the critical reception of the show. It was frustrating that critics attacked the exhibition almost automatically, sometimes without even having seen the show, and focusing exclusively on the obvious neo-colonial perspective; too few bothered to ask artists from former colonies what the show meant for them. I think critics were suspicious because the show was taking place in Paris, given France's very problematic colonial history – I am certain that if exactly the same show had taken place in New York at that time the reception would have been very different. *Magiciens de la Terre* was without doubts an exhibition for its time; I really think it changed our small, pathetic, provincial art world. Finally, the fraud had been exposed. Before, an international exhibition meant ten Americans and a couple of Germans. In 1989 there was a huge amount of resistance to artists from other countries and cultures; basically, the doors were closed. After *Magiciens de la Terre* there could be no turning back; it was the first crack in the Western bunker of art.

Magiciens de la Terre started an irreversible process and it was the beginning of a very long and complex journey that will never end. The status quo today is definitely much better than in 1989, but the road ahead is still very long and difficult, as real change will happen only when structural transformations are made in the dominant institutions and media.

FM: Before 2013, when you presented *Venezia, Venezia* in the Chilean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, your interventions within perennial exhibitions were contextualised in ‘stateless’ situations, such as *documenta* 2002 and, in Venice, *Aperto* 1986, the African Pavilion (2007) or the Fear Pavilion (2009). It is obvious that the Venice Biennial national pavilion system belongs to another century and should be changed.

AJ: Why hasn’t it changed? Because the art world is a perfect reflection of the geopolitical reality of our times, as simple as that. The increased focus on Chinese artists, for example, is nothing more and nothing less than the acknowledgement that China has become the second economy of the planet and that the art market axis is shifting towards Asia. The same explanation is valid for Indian artists. These are not new artists working on the scene, they simply were invisible until the economy of their respective countries became impossible to ignore.

As I wrote a few years ago, I am not advocating for the “art world” to correct the dire imbalances of the “real world,” but I would like to suggest that every effort should be made not to replicate so perfectly those imbalances.

We should perhaps all declare ourselves stateless. That would certainly trigger a major change in the system. In a way we are all stateless. There isn’t a single country in the world with which I identify myself ideologically, artistically, culturally or intellectually. I do identify with certain individual minds, intellectuals who have enlightened me with their thinking, but not with a country.

I have encountered so many people that previously thought I was African, or Italian, or Brazilian, or Angolan. When I returned from witnessing the Rwandan genocide, I went to the Rwandan embassy and requested a Rwandan passport in symbolic solidarity with their suffering. They refused, of course. But today I am designing the Memorial for the victims of the genocide in Kigali. Concerned by the fact I am white and non-African, I demanded the unequivocal support of the most important survivors organizations for my design before proceeding. People do not expect an artist born in Chile to be concerned by what happens in any other country. I find it shockingly normal. This is what makes me human. I identify with a little country called the Kalakuta Republic. It was created by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, one of the most extraordinary musicians of our time. I visited him at the Shrine in Lagos, Nigeria where he performed three nights per week.

In the last concert I attended, he told us in the audience: “You Africans, listen to me as Africans. And you, non-Africans, listen to me with an open mind!”

I A first version of this conversation was published in Federica Martini, Vittoria Martini, *Just Another Exhibition: Stories and Politics of Biennials*, Milan: Postmediabooks, 2011. The text was updated in April 2020.

Alfredo Jaar is an artist, architect, and filmmaker who lives and works in New York. His work has been shown extensively around the world. He has participated in the Biennales of Venice (1986, 2007, 2009, 2013), Sao Paulo (1987, 1989, 2010, 2020) as well as *Documenta* in Kassel (1987, 2002).

Important individual exhibitions include *The New Museum of Contemporary Art*, New York (1992); *Whitechapel*, London (1992); *Moderna Museet*, Stockholm (1994); *The Museum of Contemporary Art*, Chicago (1995); and *The Museum of Contemporary Art*, Rome (2005).

Major recent surveys of his work have taken place at *Musée des Beaux Arts*, Lausanne (2007); *Hangar Bicocca*, Milan (2008); *Alte Nationalgalerie*, *Berlinische Galerie* and *Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst e.V.*, Berlin (2012); *Rencontres d’Arles* (2013); *KIASMA*, Helsinki (2014) and *Yorkshire Sculpture Park*, UK (2017).

The artist has realized more than seventy public interventions around the world and over sixty monographic publications have been published about his work. He became a Guggenheim Fellow in 1985 and a MacArthur Fellow in 2000. He received the Hiroshima Art Prize in 2018 and the Hasselblad Award in 2020.

Federica Martini, PhD, is a contemporary art historian and curator. Since 2018 she is Head of the Visual Arts Department at the EDHEA School of Arts. Previously, she was Head of the MAPS Master of Arts in Public Spheres, and a member of the curatorial departments of the *Castello di Rivoli*, *Musée Jenisch Vevey* and *MCBA/Lausanne*. Publications include: *Pour Elle: Marguerite Burnat-Provins* (2018); *My PhD is my art practice. Notes on the Art PhD in Switzerland* (2017, with P. Gisler); *Tourists Like Us: Critical Tourism and Contemporary Art* (with V. Mickelkevicius, 2013); *Pavilions/Art in Architecture* (with R. Ireland, 2013); *Just Another Exhibition: Stories and Politics of Biennials* (with V. Martini, 2011).