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**Art Beyond Aesthetics. Alfredo Jaar,  
The Commitment Rediscovered**

The first time I saw Alfredo Jaar's work was in 1987, at the Venice Biennale. I was struck by the way he had taken the traditional format of the Biennale and turned it into a space for political and social commentary. His work was not just about art, but about the world. It was a commitment to the truth, and a commitment to the future.

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When I met Alfredo Jaar in February-March 2005, we were both quite pessimistic about the state of intellectuals in society and what seemed to be their political destiny. Everything considered, I think that something can still be done, more through the work of Jaar than mine though. [...] Jaar is a kind of 'active pessimist', a pessimist who produces. The definition of pessimist is my own, as his view of the world and its immediate future does not seem to me excessively optimistic; nevertheless, his 'pessimism' gave me the impression of one not exclusively contemplative and apocalyptic. [...] Jaar works conscious of the fact that the art world is contained by a logic defined by the exigencies of the market, and does so with a dignity which prevents his work from becoming propaganda for the system in which – positively or negatively – he moves. I am always a little embarrassed when I consider my social function (and also that of the artist); as an exponent – to use Marxist terms – of 'superstructures', I am out of place in my society. This discomfort, however, is not particularly dramatic. We are a community of people within a world whose limits and defects, due to a particular mental lucidity and social perspective, we are able to see and have to learn to tolerate. When did all of this commence? When did the discomfort of the artist (and also for the philosopher) in society begin? It began when the artist found himself confronted by a public who did not actually know that much. No artist of the nineteenth century – apart from portraitists – worked for commission. The artist had to wake up with an idea of what he was going to present to the world, to the 'public'. [...] We are all in relatively marginal positions, that puts us in the situation of having to ask ourselves if there is something that does not function, and why: the concept of political commitment is now linked to the figures of the artist and philosopher; it was not always the case: at least up until the Romantic era. The figure of the intellectual, to which we, sociologically speaking, belong, was formed in the nineteenth century when there was a kind of dilation of the horizons of the market in which these figures presented themselves. [...]

In contemporary society, the category of people that are comfortable in this system – from an economic point of view – has grown, although they are also aware of what they have compromised. Jaar works fighting. For example, if you ask him for what and against what he is struggling, he will show you his work: the photographs and the projects that he did for Rwanda; the pile of Finnish passports exhibited in Finland; his various installations that are never easily collocated. We are in a condition that calls us – although it does not oblige us – to be politically conscious of where we are. I entitled this article: *Art Beyond Aesthetics* because I consider myself no longer as a philosopher, a student of aesthetics that studies what the aesthetic experience is like according to modern aesthetic philosophy. Modern philosophy and aesthetics began with Kant; from when they were both understood as descriptions of the possibility of certain common experiences. Having discovered the variety of conditions for these experiences, the norms were also discovered, including the mechanisms of various kinds of human experience and their limitations. In this set up, aesthetic activity according to Kant was a free play of cognitive faculties not applied to the knowing of determined phenomenon and the production of determined effects; it is a way to put into action cognitive faculties in 'emptiness': the beauty of this was to develop a way of understanding things not immediately directed to the production of 'goods' and universals. Kant called aesthetic judgement 'reflecting judgement', or 'reflexive', because it regarded the state of the subject and not of the object. Aesthetics, from Kant to Heidegger (that is, until the end of the twentieth century and thus no longer our own) was a justification and a theorization of a kind of activity that enriched, but in many respects gratuitously. For Kierkegaard, the aesthete is Don Giovanni, someone who does not commit himself to life in concrete ways, but who always lives for the moment, enjoying the presence of something which is, however, ephemeral. Between the eighteenth/nineteenth and twentieth centuries, aesthetics was principally this: which also signified that artists

were often bizarre types, without defined vocations. There is a whole tradition on this connection between genius and madness of artists. In the twentieth century, this a priori condition of marginality, generally accepted, theorized and nurtured suffered a crisis; the civilization in which these *personages* were able to live was itself under attack. The 'Blue Knight' is of 1913, but a year later the First World War began: the artistic *avant garde* of the beginning of the century felt the apocalyptic climate. It was not by chance that *The Sunset of the West* was published by Sprengler in 1918 and at the same time Picasso became interested in African masks, or that Kandinsky turned to shapes that no longer represented human bodies and faces. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an air of 'the end of culture' was established across Europe: Kierkegaard found new publics, existentialism, negative theology, Karl Barth: a whole atmosphere which effected the condition of artists and intellectuals alike, both the most sensitive points of a 'civilization and its discontents' (to cite Freud). At the beginning of the century, artists began to refuse to be experts in décor; there is a revolution in art against aesthetic philosophy, as demonstrated by Benedetto Croce and in aesthetic neo-Kantianism. Jaar's poetics – like that of many of today's artists – is inspired by the *avant garde's* idea that art is not only an element in what Hegel described as the 'Sunday's of life'; a concept which he criticized, sustaining that every day should be a Sunday, an idea taken up by Marxist theorists at the beginning of the century. For example, Walter Benjamin reflected on the new conditions in which art in the twentieth century found itself. Works of art today are confronted by the instruments of reproduction, [...] and this brought to Benjamin's mind the idea that art had long been subject to a kind of cultural attention that treated it as an amulet. [...] The fact that art could then be reproduced signified for Benjamin that we had to invent a new approach to art, different from the traditional one which considered the value of art sacred, linked to both superstition, to certain religious ideas and to the fetish that was

money: in other words, the economic value of the work. Benjamin sustained the necessity to rebel against this and had in his mind a problem which, in my view, is felt by all artists and one which, above all, reflects on the work itself.

Philosophy has ceased to concern itself with what happens in the soul of the spectator when he declares that a work of art is beautiful; it has stopped considering the aesthetic experience as a human one: both political and sociological. Today, art and the market are so confused that the critic is also the dealer. In the pre-Benjamin traditional aesthetics, the most important thing was a work's context and connections. Dilthey, for example, stated that aesthetic and historical experiences were more or less similar because they both allow us to live out in our imaginations possibilities that we didn't have in our reality. According to this conception, art and history are in contact with other worlds. Adorno, at the end of a long career as a theorizer of aesthetics wrote – citing Baudelaire – that art is une 'promesse de bonheur': above all, the work represented something else: this is typical of Dilthey. The fact that the work of art opens up different, alternative realities is also sustained by Heidegger, for whom it 'opens the world': not because it documents the existence of past worlds, but because, in a certain way it announces a change in our way of seeing the universe. [...] The use of language of great poets is not only an exercise in vocabulary; these special languages attach themselves to everyday usage and become norms. Nietzsche said that we would not liberate ourselves of God as long as we did not liberate ourselves of grammar, which is like saying that a grammar and a syntax provide a world vision that conditions our experience. It was in this sense that, for Heidegger, art (poetry) inaugurated a world and modified and marked the use of a language or of a historical language in which experiences were formed. On the other hand, if you want to interpret Heidegger's idea in a less pompous way, it could also be said that art opens up a world because the meeting with a work of art, if it is that, modifies our coordinates and changes our

existence. To change and open worlds means that one is dealing with a real experience: the experience of truth is a true experience. A work of art, for a Heideggerian philosopher (which I am) is this: the meeting with a vision of the world which is not inside the world, but one which readjusts the general coordinates.

These days, one can speak of 'opening worlds' also in our lives and in our worlds; art opens a world when it is committed in the world, above all. Brecht had this thought: even if he did not use the terms of Heidegger, when he spoke of the non-Aristotelean theatre. At the end of an Aristotelean theatre piece there is catharsis: the purification of the passions that the work has provoked in us. This is based on the idea that there is a rational order in the world and that there is no need for change. However, the theatre of Brecht wanted to provoke rage, and a desire to change in the spectator. In a certain sense Jaar works in the same way, producing in the spectator a kind of a knowledge that one supposes he or she never had. Why is it more effective to create a work like Jaar's on Rwanda than circulate informative leaflets? Is that which we are called to in Jaar's work purely political? Is trying to change the world through art realistic? It is, or at least it appears to be, until it is confronted by the political. More of the world is modified by a work of art than by the speeches of politicians.

We live in a world dominated by *loisir*: by pleasure, entertainment and communication, in which goods are treated less as objects and more signifying cultural signs. In our daily lives, we consume more and more goods of which we have no primary need. These possessions are always more abstract, although it has to be said that the world of mass communications in which we are immersed and each of us in part responsible also has a way out. There is an impulse of auto-liberation inside the same system of communication, and this also regards art. One can work through art, because in art there is an element of liberty that is traditionally absent in political structures. There is more freedom in artistic communication. Jaar and his work reaches many more people

than newspapers committed to the left, for instance; in the work of art there is both the denouncing of the liberty that is lacking and its announcement in a kind of future freedom. This announcement was recognised by Adorno, whilst Benjamin wanted to recognise it. Such an announcement happened when the *avant garde* of the early twentieth century when it positioned itself against the market, and happens when Jaar composes a work out of elements that can only be enjoyed as a whole. To think of one's own work as a significant contribution means thinking of it as a public responsibility, a confrontation with other genres and not only with the group interested in the thing for itself. It is in this that I see Jaar's political commitment, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of presentation and of working itself.

I would like to summarize the main points of my discussion. Firstly, the *avant garde* of the early twentieth century placed themselves against a certain kind of aesthetic discourse, one in which art was considered as being separate to life. Secondly, the most advanced aesthetics of the twentieth century joined together art and truth in many ways: as political propaganda (Brecht), or as 'cleaning up' of our daily lives (Bauhaus, design), or as the announcing of alternative worlds (Adorno's *promesse de bonheur* and Heidegger's 'opening of a world'). Thirdly, these various modes are the aesthetics of the twentieth century: the aesthetics that investigates the significance of art in our world, etc. Theoretically, we cannot but be bound to these. Finally, Jaar promotes an interventionalist conception of art which is perhaps the most mature and interesting development of that readjustment of relations between art and truth that twentieth century philosophy sought to explain.

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