

## The Language of Transformation: A Conversation between Alfredo Jaar and Eva Diaz

*The Crude and the Rare* exhibition included Alfredo Jaar's 1985 work *Introduction to a Distant World*, depicting the labor conditions of a vast open-pit gold mine in the Amazonian jungle. The nine-minute video documents a landscape teeming with thousands of mud-encrusted workers, and captures the men snaking up slippery slopes bearing loads of gangue to be sluiced for tiny flecks of ore. The workers' near-naked bodies, burdened by heavy sacks precariously roped to their heads, convey the hell of mule-like toil in a land ravaged by the removal of natural resources. Between these horrific images, the film intersperses statistics about the fluctuating price of gold in various international stock exchanges. The viewer is alerted to a damning secondary, though invisible extraction: from these men's labor, surplus value is converted into capital for wealthy speculators.

Now that *The Crude and the Rare* project is being expanded into a book, I thought Alfredo and I could begin our discussion with *Introduction to a Distant World* and how it can help us reflect on struggles for environmental justice and the production of space today.

**Eva:** I recently heard the geographer Neil Smith speak about the expansion of the "rights of nature" movement beyond Ecuador, where it originated. In particular, the U.N. General Assembly is currently debating implementing new international standards that nature has a right "to exist, flourish, and persist in its cycles of evolution," based on the language of the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008. Of course in the success of its "Water Wars" of the early 2000s Ecuador was a bellwether nation in proving that marginalized populations could fight against the privatization of natural resources and abuses of the local environment by corporate interests. However, Smith made a persuasive case against using the rhetoric of rights of nature outside the Amazonian case, arguing that giving rights to nature may essentialize "the natural" to justify the vulnerability of certain populations to infant mortality, subsistence living, disease, and other conditions of poverty. On the other hand, we know that the untrammelled exploitation of precious and other natural resources must stop in order for human life on earth to continue without technological life support, so to speak.

It seems to me that your work foregrounds the precariousness of human life, in contrast to the overvaluation of inert objects, as a topic of active political contestation globally. And certainly in your work is an argument that art has a stake in representing those struggles. This often takes the shape of a juxtaposition of two distinct sites—



Detail of *Rushes*, 1986, Spring Street Subway station, NYC

for example, in *Introduction to a Distant World*, the site of gold mining and sites of commodities trading internationally (and in a different iteration of the project, those two sites brought into a third, the NYC subway). I'm sure your training as an architect has something to do with this interest in spatial incongruities.

**Alfredo:** To introduce spatial incongruities in public space has been a strategy of my practice for the last 30 years, but I must clarify that the so-called public space isn't really public anymore as it is today controlled by corporations or governments. In fact, what we used to call public space is disappearing quickly. At the time, I wanted these spatial incongruities to become cracks on the façade of normalcy that surrounds us, cracks in the system. I have always considered myself an architect making art, and as an architect that works outside the realm of architecture, I have had to create a system for my practice, following Blake who suggested that we "must create a system or be enslaved by another man's (system)." My subway project, titled *Rushes*, was a more public version of *Introduction to a Distant World*: I wanted to occupy an underground site, the subway, and as you probably remember, in those times (1986) the subway was not the sanitized site we experience today, the underground was a site of danger. I rented the entire available advertising space in one specific station, Spring Street, that became for two months a spatial incongruity in the subway network, a system that articulated an obvious but invisible correlation between commodities trading and the precariousness of nature and human life. Wall Street traders witnessed this spectacle on their way to work.



**Eva:** The issue you raise about how art relates to control of public space is crucial, it seems to me. In contrast to your work, much art that calls itself public is essentially innocuous: ornamental, large-scale sculpture or decorative muralism that neutralizes or avoids social differences and divisions constitutive of “the public.” When you introduce dissonance into those Wall Street traders’ morning commutes, it reclaims such a space as public, underscoring that the primary feature of democratic public spaces is that they are always subject to diverse, contentious interpretations about their use (as opposed to private or autocratic spaces, where unilateral control can be exercised). But not only that, this dissonance seems to galvanize your audiences to think empathetically, if not critically, about their roles in larger geo-political struggles. Does that friction—the rub of spatial incongruity—then produce a politicized public? This reminds me as well of your Skoghall Konsthall from 2000 in which the planned destruction of a temporary art structure you erected in a small mill town—a “company town”—in Sweden galvanized a community to think about their relationship not just to the local paper mill that donated the materials, but to a wider notion of contemporary art and the place of culture in both a local and international economy.

**Alfredo:** *To produce a “politicized public” is always an essential component objective of my program in every single project, but I almost never succeed. The strategy consists of aiming high but I always end up settling for less, unfortunately. We demand so much from our practice, and that is very important, but we must also recognize that most everything we do goes against the grain. My Skoghall project is one of the few cases where my objective was accomplished beyond my wildest expectations, but it is an exception that proves the rule I am afraid. Here the task was enormous: how do you articulate the lack of a cultural space to a community that never cared about*

*having one? My solution was absurd to the highest degree: let us build one and destroy it 24 hours later, in the most dramatic way, by fire. The logic was: perhaps now you visualize what it means not having such kind of space? It worked beautifully as the community selected the ephemeral structure as their most important building in a national survey realized just one year after the event. And seven years later they invited me back to design, as an architect this time (no fire, please, they said) a permanent Kunsthalle for the city.*

**Eva:** The Skoghall project converges three physical and discursive sites I’ve heard you discuss as the main ones of your practice: 1) the gallery or museum, 2) projects undertaken in public areas, and 3) public speaking and pedagogy. *The Marx Lounge* you initiated in Liverpool in 2010 also seems to constellate these three elements in a politically tendentious manner. I wonder if you could speak about this; I’ve always found, especially when teaching art students, that envisioning art practice as you do provides a new horizon beyond the impasse of today’s market-driven art culture, where “the public” is often reduced to a specific client.

**Alfredo:** *You are right, as soon as I discovered the insularity of the so-called “art world” I felt the need to get out and reach a larger audience. I accomplished this through my public interventions in communities and places far removed from the art network, and through teaching: there, I engage students in a dialogue where I try to share my experience with them.*

*The Marx Lounge that I created for the Liverpool Biennial was a happy constellation of those three worlds. I occupied an abandoned storefront in the center of the city and transformed it in a reading room. I offered some 500 books (in three copies each) from and about Marx and more recent political thinkers like David Harvey, Stuart*

*Hall, Chantal Mouffe and Judith Butler. I wanted to present on a single large table all the progressive knowledge that exists today. One terrible consequence of the financial crisis in the UK has been the new fees policy regarding universities. My intention was to give away these books after the exhibition to underfunded libraries and a group of professors and students that were trying to create a new free University in Liverpool. The unemployment levels in Liverpool were dramatic and I also wanted to attract that group of readers. And we did. So we had a rare instance of intellectuals seated next to students seated next to unemployed people using the library. We had furnished it with IKEA sofas and painted the entire space red. I feel more "complete" as a professional and also as a human being speaking to these three groups. In the Marx Lounge we managed to get them together in the same space. We must expand our audience, it is a matter of responsibility.*

**Eva:** The protests against the Tory government last fall, precipitated by the steep hikes in university fees you mention, and further violent protests in the past week triggered by deep cuts in social services and patterns of police brutality in cities like Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, as well as Tottenham, Croydon and other near London environs, indicate that this responsibility to progressive dialogue is ever more pressing. This from the *New York Times* today (August 9, 2011): "Tim Godwin, acting commissioner of Scotland Yard, appealed to people to help identify the rioters. He conceded, obliquely, that the unrest was at least partly rooted in social deprivation, saying there were 'conversations to be had' about grievances in London's most deprived neighborhoods, but said that could come only after the unrest had ended." [A quick sidebar to the reader: Godwin is "acting" commissioner of the Metropolitan Police because his predecessor Sir Paul Stephenson resigned after revelations of Scotland Yard's collusion with Rupert Murdoch's right-wing tabloids in the ongoing telephone hacking scandal.] The deferral of "conversations to be had" about the causes of, and solutions to, social deprivation is too common, and is often politically desirable to those seeking to prevent progressive social change and the equitable redistribution of resources. In your work you have returned to left figures like Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, as have theorists like David Harvey and Chantal Mouffe that you invited to speak in *The Marx Lounge*. It's not an easy road, but the success of *The Marx Lounge* in Liverpool and as a touring project demonstrates that in spite of attempts to define art as a market commodity, art venues are in fact some of the few sites in which these conversations are happening. Curators invite you; students, artists, academics, and the wider public attend. You are making art into a public dialogue, creating spaces of reflection that can possibly channel desires for social change. In a way, the Lounge functions much like a school, by employing a model of progressive, liberal arts education that has too often been proclaimed moribund:

that education is a site of both personal growth and social transformation. But it certainly puts a lot of pressure on art to compensate for the cutbacks in funding the arms and instruments of civil society. Can art successfully take on that responsibility of teaching, of political transformation?

**Alfredo:** *I agree with your observation that the venues of art and culture are where these conversations are happening. It is surprising as these places are for the most part market-driven. In spite of that, it is there that artists and intellectuals have been able to create spaces of resistance, what David Harvey would call "spaces of hope." This has been possible because some of these institutions are not monolithic but plural, and people like you or me may sometimes find a space within them. They are perhaps, together with universities, the last remaining spaces of freedom. And it is there that we, as cultural producers, create models of thinking. Models of thinking the world. The Marx Lounge is one. The Skoghall Konsthall is another. Each one of these models aspires to transformation, cultural, political, and social, this is their raison d'être. These transformations are not forced upon the audience but are the result of a staged conversation, an "infinite conversation" as Blanchot would describe it. But this is accomplished only when there is communication between the cultural producers and the audience. And communication is not simply sending out a message, there is communication only when there is an answer. No answer, no communication. We must make an effort to communicate better with our audience. It is the lack of communication that perhaps explains the insularity of the "art world," once we recognize this and decide to work outside the white cube, we have no choice but to invent new strategies of communication, a new language. A new language of transformation.*

*Eva Diaz is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art at Pratt Institute. She is currently preparing the manuscript for her book on Black Mountain College called Chance and Design, which focuses on rival methodologies of experimentation practiced by three key Black Mountain teachers in the late 1940s and early 1950s: Josef Albers, John Cage, and Buckminster Fuller. Her writing has appeared in magazines and journals such as The Art Bulletin, Artforum, Art in America, Cabinet, Frieze and Grey Room.*

*Alfredo Jaar is an artist, architect, and filmmaker who lives and works in New York. He is a Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellow. His work has been shown extensively around the world, including the Bienales of Venice and São Paulo as well as Documenta in Kassel. He has created more than sixty public interventions around the world. He is currently developing a public memorial project to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Gernika in Spain in 2012.*