

Artmaking and the Sinthome

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Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar has been quoted as saying, “My dilemma as an artist is how to make art out of information that most of us would rather ignore” (cited in Staniszewski, 1988, p.117). Over the past two decades, Jaar has consistently dealt with unsettling real-life events of catastrophic proportions, e.g. gold mines in the Amazon in Brazil; a Vietnam refugee detention center in Hong Kong; a toxic dumping site in Nigeria; and genocide, war, and famine in Rwanda. Not only does Jaar struggle with presenting disturbing subjects most of us would rather ignore, but he also contends with the difficulties of conveying the realities of such situations. In the following, I examine Jaar’s efforts as framed by Lacan’s evolving perspective of the symptom, from the 1950’s to later teachings, which re-conceive the symptom as *sinthome*. The sinthome, in contrast to the symptom as a coded, ciphered message bearer, represents a senseless signifying formation of *jouissance*, but one Lacan argues is essential to meaning.

Lament of the Images, first exhibited at *Documenta 11*, 2002, signals Jaar’s continuing concern with the inadequacy of the image to represent contemporary experience. After witnessing the catastrophic events in Rwanda, the massacre of over a million Tutsi men, women and children, Jaar experienced a crisis of the image in his own practice. Jaar’s difficulty with images has to do with the capture of the gaze by the cultural bombardment of images, most of which, Jaar deplores, ask us to consume. Jaar laments, “How does an image of pain survive in the sea of consumption?” (cited in Sollins, 2007, p. 36). Although acknowledging the dilemma has no satisfactory resolution, Jaar has continued inventing various representational strategies to combat the impotency of the image. One extreme strategy has been the withdrawal of the image altogether, a practice that shaped Jaar’s work for almost a decade.



Figure 1. Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images*, 2002.

Written text often assumes a significant position in Jaar's work. In *Lament of the Images*, viewers first encounter three illuminated texts with white lettering on a black surface. Viewers who pause to read the three texts, discover a common theme of invisibility. For example, the first text describes the inability of Nelson Mandela to cry on the day of his release from prison on Robben Island, his eyes having been damaged by the relentless glare of the sun on the white limestone quarries in the mine where he worked alongside other prisoners. The second text relates how 17 million photographic images, purchased by Bill Gates from the Bettman and United Press International Archives, were buried in a limestone mine, among them a photograph of Mandela while in prison. The third text tells of the United States Defense Department purchasing the rights to all the satellite imagery of the war in Afghanistan.

Drawn down the dim hallway housing the three texts, viewers enter another darkened room to encounter a brilliant screen of white light. As art critic Sandra Accatino moved through the semi-dark corridor to emerge into the dazzling light emanating from the illuminated screen, she recounted experiencing feelings of insecurity and expectancy. Accatino (2006a) characterized the installation as “an embodied metaphor for absence, inadequacy, and denial, for the frailty and increasing worthlessness of images, their gradual loss of meaning, the impossibility of using them to present the reality they stand for—and our own ability to see” (pp. 209-210). Accatino’s metaphors might be viewed as Slavoj Žižek (1989) characterizes metaphorical efforts to articulate the wreck of the *Titanic*. That is, Žižek asserts that such metaphorical endeavors are attempts to escape the terrifying impact of the Thing, the Lacanian Real (p. 71). By providing a meaning, the Thing is domesticated, reduced to its Symbolic status. As such, artworks become symptoms, coded and ciphered messages that can be dissolved through interpretation.

Lacan, however, recognized the persistence of the symptom and that what has been foreclosed by the Symbolic will always return in the Real. Thus, in his later theorizing, Lacan re-conceptualized the symptom as *sinthome*, a signifying formation of *jouissance* and bearer of enjoyment that cannot be vanquished by the Symbolic. As well known, enjoyment is an inaccurate way to translate Lacan’s use of the French term, *jouissance*, which can be more aptly translated as a type of pleasure incorporating pain and even a certain satisfaction derived from suffering. *Jouissance* can be closely associated with anxiety and, in his theorizing, Lacan increasingly articulated anxiety with the concept of the Real, arguing that the cause of anxiety is the possibility of living out the drives to actually obtain the *objet a* and *jouissance*.

In *Lament of the Images*, the void of the illuminated screen, bereft of the image-screen that can protect from an encounter with the Real, exposes viewers to the gaze of the Other. Caught in the scopic field, not knowing what the Other desires, viewers may experience unsettling feelings of vulnerability. Perhaps anxiety is what Jaar aims toward. Jaar remarks about his artistic practice, “If I stick to the raw information, it’s not interesting as art, I want to be able to move you, challenge you, touch you. I want to be able to irritate you, provoke you; that’s a political task” (cited in Accatino, 2006b, p. 83).

If the symptom is part Symbolic and part Real, *Lament of the Images* addresses the Symbolic through prohibition and imposition of the Law. The three texts situated at the beginning of the installation introduce the prohibition of visibility, which the intensely illuminated, but empty screen physically and metaphorically extends. Jaar's approach, framed with strong prohibitions regarding visibility and the scopic field, signals the antagonism that exists between drives and prohibitions. Adrian Johnston (2005) recognizes that both sides of the drive, jouissance and prohibition, can produce anxiety. Johnston, however, distinguishes between a low-level discontent induced by prohibition and an intense anxiety fostered by unreserved removal of the Law. For Johnston, the complete abolishment of the Law immediately transforms jouissance into a disgusting anxiety-laden experience. Johnston argues a strong case for the Law and the Father as essential to the existence of the subject. He remarks that although the subject's enjoyment is obstructed, the drives require interference from an outside authority, without which the existence of the subject is in jeopardy.

The incessant image glut projected onto contemporary culture by the media impels the audience closer and closer toward an abolishment of the Law, steadily removing prohibitions regarding what can and cannot be seen. Jaar, however, unexpectedly reverses the process in unreservedly imposing the Law to create a void. Is this void sufficiently anxiety-inducing to exceed the Symbolic? Žižek (1989) speaks of images that go beyond knowledge and metaphor, described as "visible fragments of a kind of coagulated remnant of the liquid flux of jouissance" (p. 71). He demonstrates this phenomenon with the powerful fascination exerted by images of the *Titanic*, ones that exceed attempts, from the left and the right, to capture them through metaphorical explanation. Žižek's (1989) reference to the *Titanic* photographs as "visible fragments of a kind of coagulated remnant of the liquid flux of *jouissance*" witness to a concrete presence of the Real (p.71). Artistic practice can strive toward the Real with elements that resist symbolization, extend beyond knowledge to fill the void of the Symbolic, not with further symbolic meanings, but meaningless enjoyment. Lacan's own interest in the writings of James Joyce during the time of his development of the sinthome attest to materialization of the Real through a reconstruction of the Symbolic. Does Jaar's literal materialization of the void, in *The Lament of the Images*, reach this intensity or does it remain as low-level discontent?



Figure 2. Alfredo Jaar, *The Skoghall Konsthall*, 2000.

Another of Jaar's works, the *Skoghall Konsthall Public Project* (2000), more potently, demonstrates the void as a materialization of the Real. In the Konsthall project, Jaar rivetingly concluded the work by burning down the specially constructed exhibition hall along with the artworks of a number of young Swedish artists. For the project, produced in the Swedish town of Skoghall, site of the world's largest paper mill, Jaar constructed a small exhibition building entirely of wood and paper from the mill. Twenty-four hours following the public inauguration by the mayor and public officials, Jaar immolated the exhibition building in a fiery demolition. The impetus for this drastic action derived from Jaar's recognition of the dearth of cultural life in the company-dominated town. In a statement, written prior to the construction of the exhibition hall, Jaar clearly articulated his plans for construction and deconstruction. He concluded his statement,

it is my hope that the extremely short life of the Skoghall Konsthall will make visible the void in which we would live if there was no art. And this realization will perhaps lead the city of Skoghall into the creation of a much-needed permanent space for contemporary creation and projection (Jaar, 2000, ¶16).

Jaar's strategy for making the void visible in the Swedish town was symbolically filling the void, and then senselessly resurrecting it again. Jaar's actions, capable of producing considerable anxiety, left only the gaze to look back at the Skoghall officials and citizens, posing the question, what does the Other desire?

Defying signification, the Real of the *Skoghall Project* could not be absorbed by the signifying chain. The liquidation of the exhibition hall and artworks symptomatically pointed toward that which had been repressed, the lack in the Other. The Law was transgressed. The experience belongs to the register of the Real and *jouissance*. Jaar registered the Real in a formidable manner, an action shaped by inexplicable absurdity, characteristic of the *sinthome* rather than the symptom. In an interesting footnote, five years following the *Konsthall* project, the Skoghall authorities contacted Jaar to design a definitive art space for the city in 2012.

The *sinthome* seems a productive conceptual framework for thinking through contemporary artistic practice. Israeli-French feminist theorist and artist Bracha Ettinger defends constructing artworks as *sinthomes* rather than symptoms. Ettinger (2002) proposes that the artwork produced as *sinthome* operates on "a level equivalent to events erupting in the Real," (p. 96). She states,

And so we may say that the work of art, any work of art fabricated as *sinthome*, is in a way crazy; it is produced at the level of *jouissance* and is meant to create *jouissance* and to make sense of what is left of it (an object a, a *plus-de-jouir*) (p. 96).

Importantly, Ettinger argues that the *sinthome* does not correspond to a lack defined by the phallic mechanism of castration, but is indifferent to it (p. 96).

Ettinger's distinction between the creation of the artwork as a symptom and as a *sinthome* suggests two very different ways of addressing the relationship between the Real and the Symbolic. As symptom, the artist seeks to reveal castration and the lack that exists in the Symbolic while, as *sinthome*, the Symbolic is subverted, not through resistance, but through indifference. Ettinger argues that artistic practice as symptom makes sense in and through the Symbolic and, while creative, does not qualify as art because it is already in a culturally accepted signifying process, already in the language of the Other. She contends, "If the symbolic Other already contains all

the clues required to decipher the message contained in the work-as-symptom, this work has no potential to transform the Symbolic” (Ettinger, 2002, p. 96).

Žižek’s (2001) reading of Hitchcock’s creative process as driven by sinthomes or visual motifs that haunted his imagination offers further insights into the notion of the artwork as sinthome (p. 200). According to Žižek, Hitchcock constructed narratives as a pre-text for his use of sinthomes already possessed of a certain libidinal investment or drive energy. These visual motifs provide Hitchcock’s films with substantial density and account for their becoming the object of our desire. Significantly, Žižek recognizes Hitchcock’s visual sinthomes as paradoxically supporting interpretation while also resisting interpretation, thus inscribing Hitchcock’s films with a specific visual enjoyment, a surplus that comes forth in its details, a sudden leap from the official content of the films. Roland Barthes’ recognition of the punctum in the photographic image manifests a similar phenomenon. Lacan theorized the sinthome as a fourth ring of the Borromean knot of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary that signified a personalized way for cohering as a subject and organizing enjoyment of the unconscious. Hitchcock’s visual sinthomes and Joyce’s idiosyncratic writing style evidence this particularity and uniqueness.

Alfredo Jaar’s desire to challenge the stranglehold media images exert over catastrophic human events, prompts us to ask if the void has emerged in his practice as a visual sinthome and, if so, does it answer this challenge? Most importantly, Jaar’s recognition of the need to subvert media control of the image should suggest a direction and challenge for art educators. As Jaar admits, there is no ready-made formula that will allow artists to circumvent the clichés and stereotypes that infuse images in contemporary culture. Artists and art educators must seek artistic strategies that will perform this function and, like Jaar, be willing to court failure that spurs continued trial and effort. The direction of the Lacanian Real and the sinthome Lacan theorizes as that which cannot be vanquished by the Symbolic and Žižek characterizes as images that go beyond knowledge and metaphor holds promise, but it represents a need for rethinking artmaking pedagogy.

In rethinking art education pedagogy, I submit Symbolic representation will continue to hold import for artmaking but will not negate a need to also recognize meaning that exceeds this perspective, meaning that can’t be explained Symbolically.

Jaar's intertwining of the Symbolic and the Real through a multidimensional artistic practice, including the creation of artworks with text, image, and bodily experience attests to the approach I recommend. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag acknowledges the need for this complexity. She observes, "Harrowing photographs do not lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us" (p. 89).

So Jaar says, "How do I work? With information and emotion, information and culture, information and spectacle (cited in Accatino et.al., 2006, p. 83)." This is the lesson students might take from Jaar, the need for a multi-dimensional practice, subtly interweaving the Symbolic—information and culture, with that which falls outside the Symbolic—emotion and spectacle. Such an approach may allow the work to invoke the Lacanian Real as well as philosopher Gilles Deleuze's (2003) notion of sensation as that which acts directly on the nervous system.

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Figure 1. Alfredo Jaar, Lament of the Images, 2002, 3 Plexiglas plates with inscriptions, light wall, mixed media. Text panels: each 23 x 20 inches (58.4 x 50.8 cm). Light wall: 6 x 12 feet (182.9 x 365.8 cm). Text composed by David Levi-Strauss, Installation view at Documenta 11, Kassel. © Alfredo Jaar, Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

Figure 2. Alfredo Jaar, The Skoghall Konsthall, 2000, Skoghall, Sweden. © Alfredo Jaar, Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

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