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The unpresentable and the aesthetics of the sublime in the Art of Alfredo Jaar

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The modern versus the postmodern discussion in the philosophical, aesthetics and political theories has brought to our attention significant terms and notions associated with the nature of legitimacy, consensus, form, presentation and emancipatory power in art. Jurgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard are two of the most significant and compelling theorists on this debate. This article addresses the postmodern thought of 'presenting the unpresentable' by incorporating the writings of Jean-François Lyotard, "What is postmodernism," and "Introduction to the postmodern condition," and Jurgen Habermas' article "Modernity, An Incomplete Project."

Habermas' discourse is fundamentally in defense of Modernity and the existence of, what he defines as a 'postmodern condition,' that denies the unity of life experiences in art. Therefore, I argue that in Postmodernism, as per Lyotard's writings, art "…caters to the impossibility for an attainable wholeness or sense of presence" (1131). And yet, this state of 'unattainable wholeness', does not deny to postmodern art the role of the experience that can carry emancipatory power. Yet, it may not be a 'unity of experience' as per Habermas, but still constitute a space of experience and presentations of the unpresentable that is predicated by difference. I propose that Lyotard's theory of the presentation of the unpresentable, which sees presentation of artworks oriented towards formless art language games and communication, are

divergent works of art that are concerned with a formless aesthetics of the Lyotards' 'true sublime.' To substantiate this theoretical analysis of the 'presentation of the unpresentable' in art, I show the works of Alfredo Jaar: "33 women," 2019; and "What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears," 2018.

First, to bring light to this argument, I draw attention to Lyotard and Habermas. Lyotard proposes that modernism is in constant dialectical relationship with postmodernism, in contrast to Habermas' point of view, who believes that modernity is an unfinished project. Certainly, Habermas believes in a 'postmodern condition' that is interfering with "the uncompleted project of Modernity, that of the Enlightment"(Lyotard 1132). Habermas describes the notion of a shared 'life world' in the arts, "…against which emancipatory claims can be measured" (1124). And, he means "…the arts and the experiences that they provide …[must] bridge the gap between cognitive, ethical, and political discourses, thus opening the way to a unity of experience"(Lyotard 1132). At the other end of the spectrum, Lyotard, a critic of Western metaphysics, is very suspicious of this 'unity of experience,' defined by Habermas. And, he articulates the relationship between modernism and postmodernism to be "…precisely the loss of a shared space which brings a passage of "heterogeneous language games– those of cognition, of ethics, and politics–without, which he defines as, a 'consensus of a taste,' leading to the nostalgia of a shared space or "unattained wholeness" (Lyotard 1124, 32). Lyotard clearly criticizes Habermas, declaring the decline of what Habermas describes as the 'noble professions' which belonged to the "totality of life" experiences and proposing change in the presentation of art.

What does the notion of the 'presentation of the unpresentable' mean? Lyotard suggests that the issue of the presentation of the unpresentable is the core of the constitution of the postmodernism. He describes two tendencies between the relationship of the modern and the

postmodern epochs, first the artworks "…that cater in whatever fashion to the nostalgia for an unattainable wholeness of sense of presence." Second, Lyotard describes the onset of postmodern art when he writes: "…the ingenious forms of postmodern art, as being the representation of the unpresentable" (Lyotard 1134).This statement can be read as Lyotards' declaration of the beginning of postmodern art, a process of presentation of the unpresentable and the aesthetics of the sublime.

Lyotard engages in the process of presentation of the unpresentable by describing the true sublime sentiment, "…which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept" (1136). The artist's work presentation ".. is not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to …the work" (Lyotard 1137). This notion of the 'presentation of the unpresented' in art presentation, activates the differences and does not "…supply reality but … invent[s] allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (Lyotard 1137).

The notion of the unpresentable circulates in the work of Alfredo Jarr, titled "33 women" (Figure 1). The artist is invoking the unpresentable, demonstrating that there is a 'conceivable' that is not presentable. He is breaking the rules of traditional composition and materials while applying "…new rules that will not be known until the work was finished" (Lyotard 1136). Even though these presentations vary in form, function, mode, and style; they have a different unity of experience. Alfredo Jaar's '33women' does not depict the image of the genocide and the displacement of refugees. Rather, he opposes the issues by foregrounding the work of thirty-three extraordinary women (Figure 2).

Jaar's postmodern presentation invokes the painful unpresentable, it depicts the portraits of these leading feminine figures, who have remained invisible from public view. He makes them visible by placing a spotlight on each one of the printed portraits (Figure 3). For us looking at these portraits is an opportunity to learn about the lives of these unrepresented women such as Kalpona Akter, a labor activist fighting for safer workspaces who was child sweatshop laborer, as well as Razan Zaitouneh, a human rights lawyer and journalist who defends victims of atrocities committed by the Syrian government. Jaar's project pays homage to their efforts because despite their outstanding civic service as exemplary leaders in their respective fields, including human rights, sexual violence, and other causes, they remain unrecognized. In this installation, Jaar depicts them as women heroes presenting what he considers presentable, pointing to a subtle dialogical political critique on feminine issues.

Alfredo Jaar's site specific installation titled "What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears " is a space of reflection on human suffering and the uncertainty of our times (Figure 4). Alfredo Jaar appropriates the phrase title from the letter of consolation written around by the stoic philosopher Lucius Seneca to his friend Marcia after the death of her son (Figure 5). In the actual letter Seneca asks her in a morally forceful language to resist the irrational impulse of sorrow. The installation consists of the emblematic poetic language depicted with fluorescent red lights glowing in the fog, contrasting with the large empty gallery space (Figure 6). The gallery does not have any other objects, but the light becomes a tangible material that elicits feelings of compassion. It invites to a reflection on humanitarian emergencies (figure 7).

In conclusion, Habermas' approach to the definition of postmodernism as a 'postmodern condition' that denies the unity of life experiences in art is problematic and philosophically inconsistent. While there are some inconsistencies on Lyotard's postmodern discourse, however, I coincide with his notion of postmodern art as presenting an 'unattainable wholeness' or sense of presence, yet, it may not be "a unity of experience" as previously conceived; but, it constitutes a space of experience and affections communicates difference, which in turn, facilitates the expression of essence and emancipatory power.

Even though Lyotard's conception of postmodernism, raises some interesting questions and ideas, such as the one mentioned on this essay, further analysis on some of his concepts might contribute to advance his aesthetic and political discourse beyond the postmodern boundaries.

While the presentation of the unrepresented is not the only venue to describe the postmodern movement, it does, as Lyotard suggests, gives the artist a unique advantage of freedom of expression through which she or he can depict a traumatic story, from a space of meta language and freedom of expression, "inventing allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented."

(Lyotard 1137)

Works Cited

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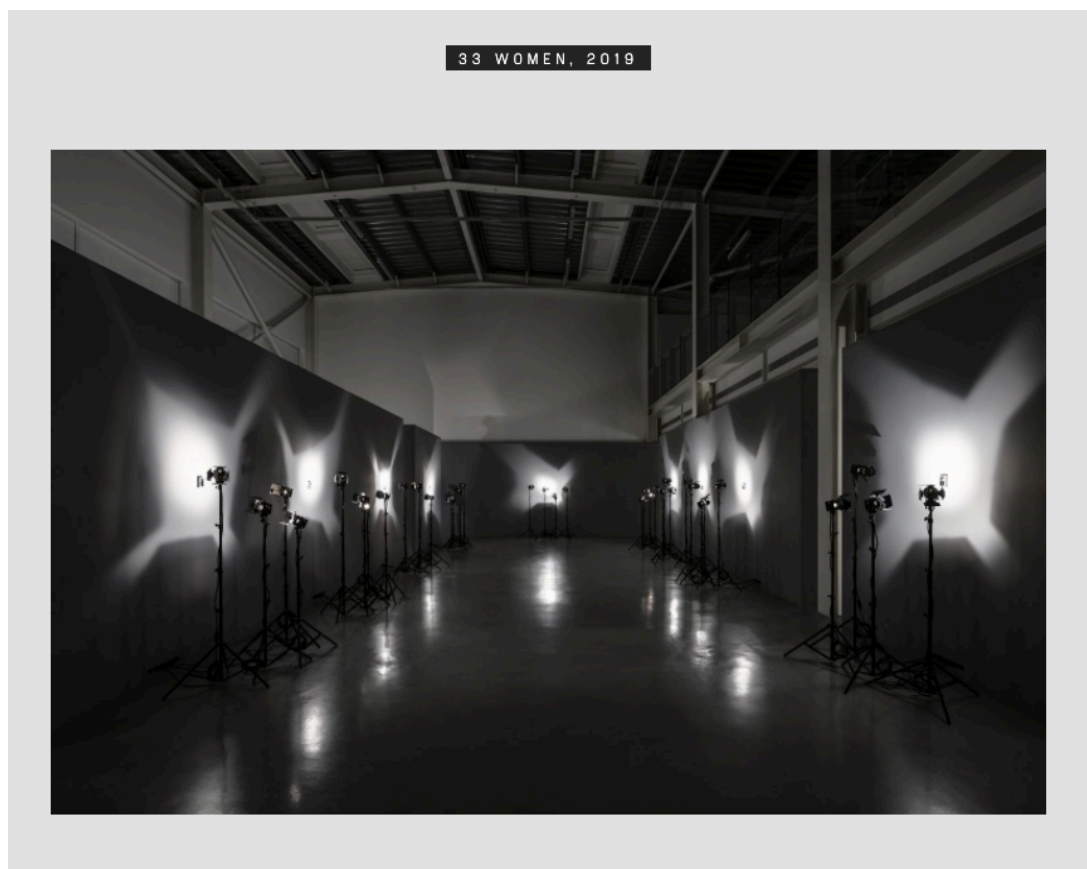
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33 WOMEN, 2019

Figure 1. Alfredo Jaar, *33 Women*, 2014–2019
33 framed pigment prints, 198 light projectors, 198 tripods, dimensions variable, Installation, photo courtesy of the artist

Figure 2. Alfredo Jaar, *33 Women*, 2014–2019
33 framed pigment prints, 198 light projectors, 198 tripods, dimensions variable, Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 14: 'Leaving the Echo Chamber', Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation, Courtesy of the artist
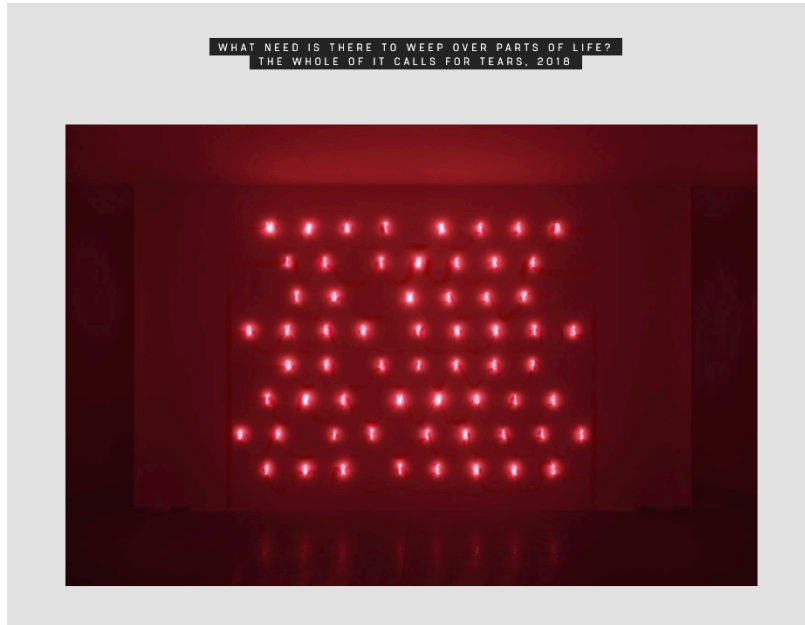

Figure 3. Alfredo Jaar, *33 Women*, 2014–2019
33 framed pigment prints, 198 light projectors, 198 tripods, dimensions variable, Installation

view: Sharjah Biennial 14: 'Leaving the Echo Chamber', Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation, Courtesy of the artist

Figure 4. Alfredo Jaar, "What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears," 2018, neon, 19' 8 1⁄4" × 15' 6 5⁄8". Photo courtesy of the artist.
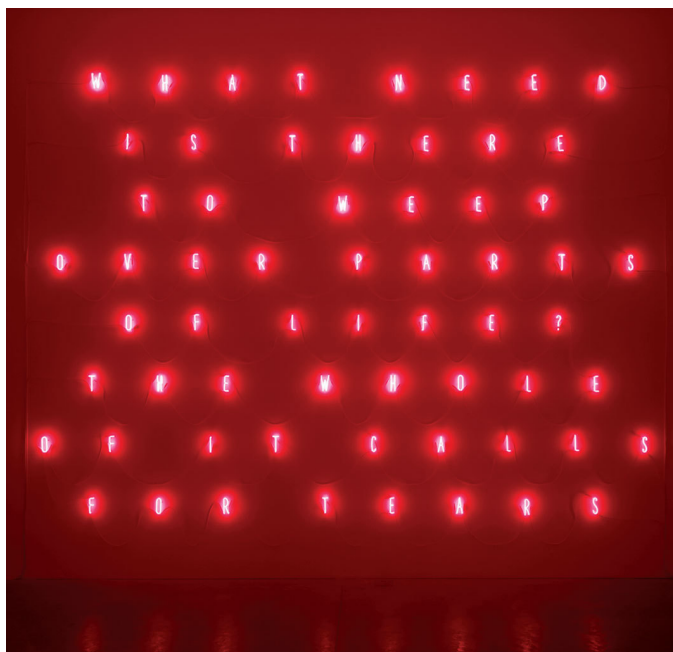
Figure 5. Alfredo Jaar, "What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears," 2018, neon, 19' 8 1⁄4" × 15' 6 5⁄8". Photo courtesy of the artist
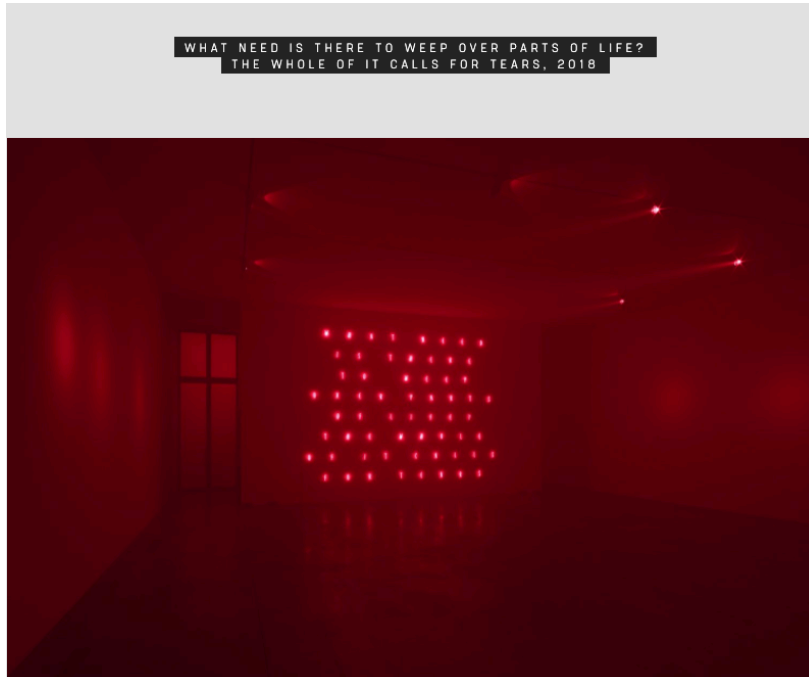

Figure 6. Alfredo Jaar, "What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears," 2018, gallery view. Photo courtesy of the artist.
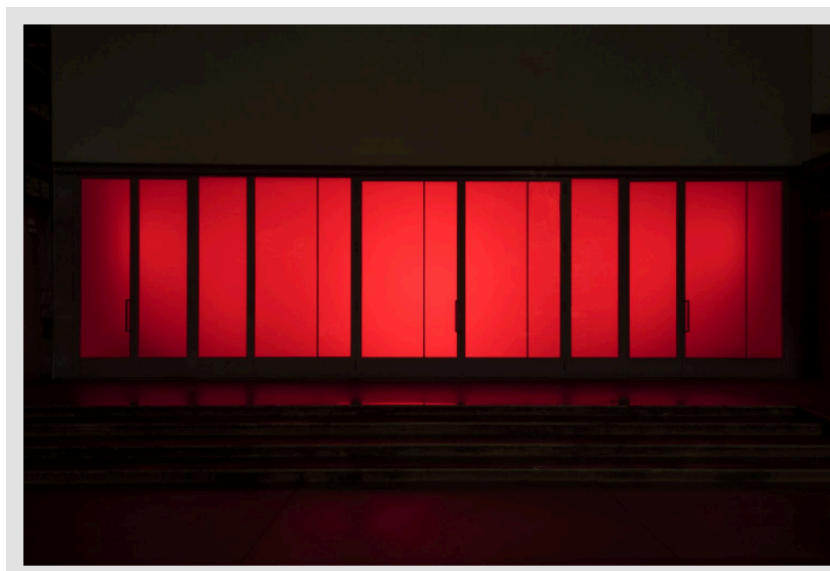

Figure 7. Alfredo Jaar, "What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears," 2018, street view. Photo courtesy of the artist.