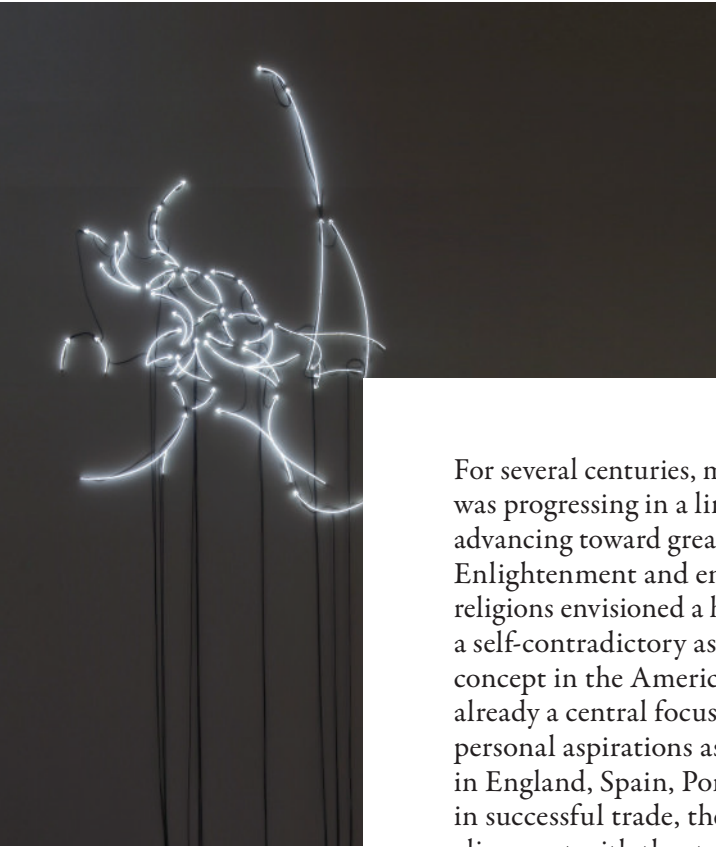




# Is the Art Market Becoming Political?



Alfredo Jaar: (*Kindness of (Strangers)*), 2015  
Ed. 3, Neon and framed print, 290 × 209 cm.  
Segment of a work that represents the flow of refugees from the South to the North.

For several centuries, many parts of the Western world believed that our civilization was progressing in a linear fashion; that it was not just changing but gradually advancing toward greater perfection, guided by a telos associated with the ideas of Enlightenment and emancipation. Not just Christianity but also other world religions envisioned a happy ending in a “heaven on earth,” which initially was not a self-contradictory assumption. The pursuit of happiness was enshrined as a concept in the American Constitution in 1776, thereby linking economic profit, already a central focus in capitalist societies of that time, with the individual’s personal aspirations as a universal driving force. In the United States, as well as in England, Spain, Portugal, and other European countries that were engaged in successful trade, there was a belief in societal progress that was certainly in alignment with the state but increasingly disengaged from the church and religion. This progress has been viewed critically since the early 1970s, though the objections were hesitant at first. Understandably, we do not want regression, uncertainty, let alone a decline. **In the visual arts, the promise of progress could be pursued by joining a “Salon,” then a “Secession,” and since the early 20th century, an avant-garde movement. Artistic sensibility was consistently strong then, so isms and styles succeeded one another as if driven by the telos of progress. Yves Klein was one of the artists who assumed the role of a culminating figure.** Speaking on his own behalf, he advocated the dematerialization of art. When Yuri Gagarin, the first Soviet cosmonaut, reported from space in 1961 that the Earth had a lovely blue color, Klein felt vindicated. Allegedly, he had signed the sky as his own work in 1946. In 1960, he patented the ultramarine pigment as “International Klein Blue.” Museum director and art historian Paul Wember wrote in his 1969 monograph on Klein, “Blue is the spirit of God,” in order to situate Klein’s gloriously blue paintings as the logical conclusion of Western painting since Giotto. Franz Meyer, long-time director of the Public Art Collection Basel, who admired Wember for his visionary courage, was also intent on applying a teleological perspective to history. In his view, Richard Serra was the most important sculptor; consequently Eduardo Chillida, whom he ranked second, did not merit consideration. In the case of painting, Frank Stella was, in his view, number one; hence Ellsworth Kelly, the supposed number two, could not be considered for acquisitions.

Many experts regarded art history, despite its contradictions, as a strictly linear affair. They thought of progress in dogmatic terms. Harald Szeemann, who wanted to be the foremost exhibition organizer until his death in 2007, often boasted about who was fit to stand next to him at the forefront. Due to this mode of thinking, the choice of the roof of an underground parking lot in front of the *Theater Basel* as a pedestal for Richard Serra's work "Intersection" was praised as a site location. All the while, the artist had not even seen the place before. Today, we not only wonder when the dogma of progress began to crumble. More and more, we are seeking alternatives to linear thinking and hoping for a balance. One wants to participate in the by now long-established era of 'Diversity,' if only out of curiosity. As is well known, the Subprime Crisis due to risky mortgage loans in 2008 did not hurt the art markets. **The globalization crisis caused by the Covid pandemic of 2020 contributed to their dematerialization. Art can be digitally consumed as never before. In museums, for example at the *Kunsthaus Zürich*, the term "polyphony" is now used to promote visits to the collection. There should be many voices, many standpoints, many participants, but no longer a finale, no other telos than that of openness.** It is to be hoped that a person concerned with happiness in a changing world encounters the work of Alfredo Jaar. His book "Studies of Happiness," published in 2023, chronicles a survey Jaar conducted already in 1979–81 in Santiago de Chile of all places, during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. As a Chilean architect and filmmaker who grew up in Martinique — "I was coming from a very happy island" — he asked passersby if they were happy. At that time, there were no political parties in Chile and no discussions of politics or social concerns. Instead, torture and curfews prevailed. People disappeared without anyone knowing the reasons for their arrest or anything about their whereabouts. Under these circumstances, the question to passersby whether they were happy seemed disturbing. Jaar, however, consulted with participants in the selection of photos, sound, and film recordings. This effort gave rise to his first artistic work. It shows that everyone was well aware that people could speak between the lines. That they used the façade of naïvety, just as the world of comedy and double entendres provides relief in ongoing dictatorships and terrible wars. The old imperial idea of progress, which was possible for centuries, is a thing of the past in contemporary art. There are and have been too many backrooms and too many historical accidents that were no accidents. The art market, too, is now suddenly taking notice.

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