

A Sea of Grievs Is Not a Proscenium: On the Rwanda Projects of Alfredo Jaar

David Levi Strauss

They fired at the hospital from outside and threw grenades over the walls into the courtyard. The patients did not understand what was happening. They started to wander around, singing, with their hands in the air.

– A worker at Rwanda's main psychiatric hospital, describing the beginning of a massacre carried out by Hutu militiamen in April 1994, one of the first in the Rwandan genocide

We are forever pursued by our actions. Their ordering, their circumstances, and their motivation may perfectly well come to be profoundly modified a posteriori. This is merely one of the snares that history and its various influences sets for us. But can we escape becoming dizzy? And who can affirm that vertigo does not haunt the whole of existence?

– Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of griefs is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear.

– Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*

Rwanda, Rwanda, Rwanda. The name now calls forth a flood of images: corpses clogging the Kagera River, bloated and bleached white, collected like driftwood at the base of a falls; dismembered bodies scattered in a churchyard, under a glowing white statue of Christ the Savior, lifting his arms in benediction; and the gray squalor of the refugee camps, with emaciated children turning their huge eyes to the cameras. These were the images that appeared in newspapers around the world as the genocide occurred in Rwanda.

The images were put there to illustrate news stories, but in the end they acted independently. The truth is, no one read the news stories. If they had read them, they would have demanded that something be done to stop the killing. They didn't read them. But they did look at the images. Why didn't they respond to these images with outrage, and demand political action?

It is partly because the politics of images, the way they are organized, has changed, and this has acted to erode their power and effectiveness. Filmmakers have been pointing to this erosion for years. So have the best photographers. But there has always been something about "real pictures" of real violence that undercuts their political effect, and separates them from experience.

In his short essay "Shock-Photos," Roland Barthes addressed this lack of effect. "It is not enough for the photographer to signify the horrible for us to experience it," he wrote. These images, intended to convey horror, fail to do so "because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgement: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing—except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence. . . ." Such images do not compel us to action, but to acceptance. The action has already been taken, and we are not implicated. Our complicity is concealed, intact. "The perfect legibility of the scene, its formulation dispenses us from receiving the image in all its scandal; reduced to the state of pure language, the photograph does not disorganize us."¹ We are not disorganized because news images operate within a perfectly organized rhetoric of consumption, the pure language of the spectatorship under which we now live. Images of suffering and misery elsewhere in the world are used as reminders of what we are free from. They operate in the greater image environment of consumption to offset images of contentment, to provide the necessary contrast. Their use value, and their effect, is palliative. This effect is far-reaching, and one of the histories thus buried was that of Rwanda.

The story of what happened in Rwanda in 1994 is one of massive criminality and complicity. It is the story of a state-sponsored genocide that took years to plan and direct, but only 100 days to carry out, as the rest of the world looked on. It constitutes the third genocide of this century, following that of the Armenians by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and 1916, and that of the Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War.

Faced with growing opposition within Rwanda, and increasing pressures from without to share power, the single-party government of President Juvénal Habyarimana was showing signs of increasing instability in 1990. "Hutu Power" extremists within the Habyarimana government began to incite the Hutu majority population of Rwanda to attack the minority Tutsis, saying that they were the source of all the troubles. Radio Mille Collines ("A Thousand Hills") constantly spewed propaganda calling on the Hutus to "finish the work begun in 1959" (when the Hutus massacred 100,000 Tutsis and drove thousands of others into exile), and leaving nothing to the imagination concerning the nature of this "work." "The grave is only half full," they said. "Who will help us fill it?" In order for the genocide to be successful this time, they instructed, "The children must also be killed." The children they failed to eliminate in 1959 had now grown into the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Uganda. Commandment number eight of the "Hutu Ten Commandments" printed in the government newspaper read: "The Hutus should stop having mercy on the Tutsis."

A Hutu Power politician named Dr. Léon Mugesera gave a speech in December 1992 in which he appealed to his fellow Hutus: "We the people are obliged to take responsibility ourselves and wipe out this scum. No matter what you do, do not let them get away." To the Tutsis, he

said (echoing old racial myths about the ethnic origins of the Tutsis): "I am telling you that your home is in Ethiopia and we will send you back through the Nyabarongo River as a shortcut."² In the slaughter to come, the Nyabarongo and other rivers were choked with the corpses of slain Tutsis.

The authors of the Rwanda genocide are well known, and most of them are still at large in Zaire, Kenya, or in the West. Dr. Mugesera took refuge in Canada, and as of last Fall could be found advising his graduate students at Laval University in Quebec City. Habyarimana's brother-in-law, Protais Zigiranyirazo, a founding member of the death squad Zero Network and an original shareholder in Radio Mille Collines, was given sanctuary in France.³

Since it is often difficult to tell Hutu from Tutsi by sight, death lists had been prepared using the identity cards first issued during the colonialist period, listing the ethnicity of each bearer. Hutu youths were formed into militias, called the Interahamwe ("those who fight together"), and were armed. When Habyarimana's plane was shot down on April 6, 1994, the Hutu leadership blamed the Tutsi-led RPF for his death (it has since been alleged that the President's plane was actually shot down by the Hutu extremists themselves, perhaps with the assistance of French soldiers⁴), and unleashed the Interahamwe to begin slaughtering Tutsis. Using the identity lists, the militiamen began to pull Tutsis from their homes and stop them at roadblocks, and government officials in the provinces lured Tutsis into churches and community centers, where they were stabbed, clubbed, and hacked to death. One survivor of the Ntarama slaughter, a child of 12 named Mutaganzwa, said, "They told us we were inyenzi (cockroaches), and then they began to kill us."⁵ Tutsi women were raped, tortured, and mutilated before being killed. Many Hutus who refused to participate in the carnage were executed along with the Tutsis. Within three months, a million people were dead, out of a total population of 8 million. An equivalent death toll per capita in the U.S. would be 25 million. The scale and speed of this genocide was unprecedented.

It was important to kill everyone. If someone survived, they could tell the story of what had happened, and name names. It was especially important to kill all the children. If any of them were spared, they could go on telling the story for a long time, and they would never forget. And it was important to make it look as if all of the Hutus left alive participated in the killing, so that none of them could later point the finger at someone else.

The genocide in Rwanda required extensive planning, organization, and single-minded execution. It also required the complicity of the world outside of Rwanda. Given the speed with which the genocide was conducted— 1 million people in 100 days; 10,000 murders per day— any response from outside would have saved thousands of lives. Two weeks into the slaughter, the Canadian commander of the U.N. forces in

Rwanda said he could end the genocide with five to eight thousand troops. Most military leaders now agree that the genocide could have been stopped in two or three days with a few thousand properly armed troops (since the Hutu militias did not have heavy artillery, and were cowards⁶). But when the U.N. began to mobilize an interdictory force to stop the killing, the U.S. and Belgium pressured the U.N. to instead reduce the number of their troops in Rwanda, from 2500 to 270 men, who were then left in Kigali with no recourse but to stand around and watch it happen. And in May 1994, a U.N. plan to send 5000 African troops into Rwanda also collapsed because the U.S. opposed it. When it was finally authorized, the mobilization was held up for months while the U.S. dickered with the U.N. over the rental fee on U.S. armored personnel carriers needed for the intervention to proceed.⁷

The French government, which had supported and armed the Rwandan government troops, finally sent their troops in only after the genocide was over, and the invading RPF troops were driving the Hutu government army and militias out of Rwanda. The million massacred Tutsis were replaced nearly one-to-one by returning refugees. But the French ended up protecting and providing official sanctuary for the fleeing Hutus.

When the killers fled, they led 2 million of their fellow Hutus out in a mass exodus. Fifty thousand of them died of disease, hunger, and lack of water. At that time, the international community, moved by pictures of refugees on the run, swung into action, providing massive humanitarian aid to the Hutus who had fled to Zaire. The refugee camps in Zaire were controlled by the political and military leaders of the genocide. Under international "humanitarian" protection, and with the support of Mobutu of Zaire, the Interahamwe began to regroup.

The Scandal of Silence

Some will object that the world did not know what was happening until it was too late. The record refutes that. Reading through the New York Times coverage of the genocide in Rwanda, it is clear that all of the above facts were known before and as the genocide happened. It's all there, in dated black and white. The world's inaction was not due to ignorance of the facts, but to a prejudice against them. On April 15, 1994, Elaine Sciolino reported in the Times that "Although it has not been exactly articulated this way, no member of the United Nations with an army strong enough to make a difference is willing to risk the lives of its troops for a failed central African nation-state with a centuries-old history of tribal warfare. . ."⁸

This characterization of the genocide as "centuries-old. . . tribal warfare" or "an atavistic replaying of ancient hatreds"⁹ would be repeated throughout the killing. But what happened in Rwanda in 1994 was not war, but state-sponsored genocide against civilians. To call it "tribal warfare" defames the dead and gives succor to the

guilty. American historian Alison Des Forges has written that far from being "part of the 'failed state' syndrome that appears to plague some parts of Africa, Rwanda was too successful as a state."¹⁰ It was a state that, with the help of foreign powers, eliminated nearly all potential opposition within the country. Only the returning Tutsi refugees and the RPF prevented it from fully profiting from the genocide.

Also on April 14, 1994, Bob Dole, then Republican leader in the U.S. Senate, replied to a question about Rwanda on the TV show Face the Nation in this way: "I don't think we have any national interest here. I hope we don't get involved there. I don't think we will. The Americans are out. As far as I'm concerned in Rwanda, that ought to be the end of it."¹¹ But that wasn't the end of it. The next day, hundreds of unarmed men, women, and children were slaughtered at the Catholic church in Nyamata. Two days later, the massacre at Nyarabuye commenced. Philip Gourevitch later wrote: "The killers killed all day at Nyarabuye, and at night they cut the Achilles tendons of survivors and went off to eat behind the church, roasting whole stolen cows in big fires, and then in the morning, still drunk on banana beer after a night of sleep beneath the cries of their victims, they went back and killed again, for three days or four days or five days. They worked like that."¹² When government officials organized the massacres of Tutsis in 1990, they told Hutus that it was part of their communal work obligation (umuganda) to kill their neighbors.

Bob Dole is a war hero, who fought against Hitler's genocide of the Jews. How was it that he could so easily turn his back on the genocide in Rwanda?

One month later, on May 17, the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, said, "The delay and lack of leadership shown by the United States Government in confronting genocide in Rwanda is appalling."¹³ And U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali called the United States' lack of response to genocide "a scandal."

In London, the Guardian columnist Simon Hoggart offered this chilling explanation for Britain's lack of response: "Rwandans are thousands of miles away. Nobody you know has ever been on holiday to Rwanda. And Rwandans don't look like us."¹⁴

In June, when the 100-day pogrom in Rwanda was nearly complete, President Clinton instructed U.S. government spokesmen to avoid using the word "genocide" to describe what had happened in Rwanda, so as to avoid U.S. responsibilities under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Under this agreement, the U.S. and all other signatories pledged to respond to genocide wherever it occurred, so that "never again" would the horror perpetrated by the Nazis be allowed to happen. What happened in Rwanda was precisely what the United Nations was formed to prevent.

When the French government suddenly decided to support armed intervention in Rwanda, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé pontificated, "It is no longer time to deplore the massacres with our arms folded, but to take action. The urgent need for international intervention should lead us to show both imagination and courage."¹⁵

The RPF leaders in Rwanda discouraged the French intervention, pointing out that "They would be intervening to protect the torturers." In the years leading up to the genocide, the French government had backed the Rwandan government against the RPF, and had armed the men who organized the militia gangs. Under the French, the Rwandan army grew from 5000 men to 30,000. "Whatever happens, we will do it," vowed French President Mitterand in June 1994; "every hour counts."¹⁶ In his 1996 essay on "Understanding the Rwandan Massacre," Ugandan writer Mahmood Mamdani noted that "So public was France's role in the training of armed militias that would become the storm-troopers of the genocide— particularly the Interahamwe —that when I got to Kigali it was common to hear the French President called Mitterahamwe."¹⁷

What the French political leaders knew full well came as a surprise to their soldiers on the ground. On July 1, one of them said "This is not what we were led to believe. We were told that Tutsi were killing Hutu, and now this."¹⁸ And on July 2, another said "We were manipulated. We thought the Hutu were the good guys and the victims."¹⁹

As the new government of Rwanda under the RPF was trying to rebuild, the World was feeding and protecting the killers, who were regrouping in Zaire, and strengthening themselves for war.

The Culture of Impunity

On July 24 in Hot Springs, Arkansas, President Clinton was pressed by reporters to explain his lack of response to Rwanda. "We're doing the best we can," the President said, "but we're going to do more. If you look at the record, I think it would very difficult to point the finger at anyone."²⁰

But it is not difficult. The truth is that the U.S., through the U.N., could have intervened in April 1994 and saved hundreds of thousands of Rwandan lives, with limited risk to U.S. troops. There was a right and a wrong in Rwanda, just as surely as there was in Nazi Germany. To conceal this fact behind loose talk of "tribal warfare" and "an uncontrollable spasm of lawlessness and terror" was obscene.

As late as December 21, 1997, James C. McKinley, Jr. wrote this in an opinion piece in the New York Times under the title "Searching in Vain for Rwanda's Moral High Ground" and a huge image of the

Associated Press photograph of bodies at the falls on the Kagera River:

*For Westerners, whose concept of genocide has been shaped by the moral clarity of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, the situation in Central Africa is baffling and frustrating. Today's killers often appear to be tomorrow's victims, and vice versa. 'It's not a story of good guys and bad guys,' said Filip Reyntjens, a history professor in Antwerp, Belgium, whose specialty is Rwanda. 'It's a story of bad guys. Period.'*²¹

Bad guy Africans, specifically. Just bad, crazy Africans doing what crazy Africans do. The media representation of Africans in the West has often supported this logic, as Fergal Keane wrote in his book *Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey*:

*In our world of instant televised horror, it can become easy to see a black body in almost abstract terms, as part of the huge smudge of eternally miserable blackness that has loomed in and out of the public mind through the decades: Biafra in the sixties; Uganda in the seventies; Ethiopia in the eighties; and now Rwanda in the nineties.*²²

This image of black Africa made the Western powers reluctant to see what happened in Rwanda as what it was: genocide, a crime against humanity. As Hannah Arendt wrote, "If genocide is an actual possibility of the future then no people on earth. . . can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence without the help and protection of international law." And David J. Sheffer, the current U.S. Ambassador at Large for War Crimes Issues, has said "The most challenging test for the rule of law in our generation is the genocide of 1994 that consumed Rwanda."²³ The message from 1994 was that the rule of law does not apply to Rwandans.

The conspiracy of silence, subterfuge, and complicity that surrounded that genocide was the conspiracy of us. It is not only the people of Rwanda who were complicitous in this crime against humanity, but we who, in our freedom, comfort, and security, sat by our screens and watched it happen.

The Rwanda Projects

All art is meaningless to those for whom life itself is merely a spectacle.

— John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time*

You cannot penetrate events with reportage.

— Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*

In August 1994, Alfredo Jaar went to Rwanda to see with his own eyes what had happened there. Accompanied by his friend and assistant Carlos Vásquez, he flew from Paris to Kampala and, after spending two days in Uganda, proceeded overland to Kigali, Rwanda.

The capital city of Kigali, the epicenter of the genocide, was completely devastated. There was no power, no water, no services, and little food. The Hutu militias had fled to the Zairean border. The RPF, formed mostly of Tutsi refugees returning from Uganda, was in control. The Tutsi dead far outnumbered the living in Kigali, and the few survivors all bore the mark of the miraculous.

With assistance from the U.N., Jaar and Vásquez began to meet people and to hear their stories. One day, Jaar came upon an inoperative post office and bought up the last of their postcards. The cards, which had been produced at some point by the Rwandan Office of Tourism (and sponsored by the Belgian airline Sabena), all had the same slogan emblazoned across the top: "Rwanda – Découvrez 1000 merveilles, au pays de 1000 collines" (Rwanda – Discover 1000 marvels in the land of 1000 hills). On the reverse they carried tourist pictures of the wildlife in Akagera National Park— impalas, zebras, eagles, and lions —and beautiful mountain vistas of Kibuye and Gisenyi or the serene skies over Lake Kivu. One postcard showed dancers in full regalia, with long white headdresses and beads.

Jaar began to collect the names of the survivors he met in Kigali and write them on the postcards in this way;

JYAMIYA MUHAWENIMAWA
IS STILL ALIVE!

EMMANUEL RUCOGOZA
IS STILL ALIVE!

CARITAS NAMAZURU
IS STILL ALIVE!

Then he addressed the postcards to his friends and colleagues in other parts of the world. Twenty-five to thirty people received over 200 postcards. Since there was no postal service left in Rwanda, he mailed the cards from Uganda on his way out.

This action, which came to be called Signs of Life, was Jaar's first from Rwanda. It was simple and direct and at the same time layered with meaning. Rwanda's tourist slogan recalls the more virulent propaganda of Radio Mille Collines, the lush landscapes recall Simon Hoggart's assurance that "Nobody you know has ever been on holiday to Rwanda," and the wildlife shots point to the fact that many in the West know more about the plight of Rwanda's fauna (especially Dian Fossey's gorillas in the mist) than about the slaughter of its human inhabitants. The simple statement that "So-and-so is still alive" recalls the time when the appearance of one's name on the genocidaire's lists meant instant death. It reverses the effect of naming.

As often happens in Jaar's work, there is also an art historical reference, in this case to On Kawara's early conceptualist postcard series from 1969 and 1970. Kawara's Confirmation consists of a telegram mailed to Sol LeWitt in February 1970 which read "I AM STILL ALIVE." A previous series of telegrams carried the messages: "I am not going to commit suicide— Don't worry," "I am not going to commit suicide— Worry," and "I am going to sleep— Forget it."²⁴

In Signs of Life, Jaar appropriates a landmark in conceptual art and reinvigorates it, bringing it back to life out of the dead letter file almost thirty years later. He also pointedly moves the originally self-involved work out into the world, in an act of engaged conceptualism.

Jaar and Vásquez hooked up with a Swiss journalist and a Japanese reporter and travelled around Rwanda, continuing to document what they found. They went to refugee camps outside of Kigali and on the Zaire-Rwanda border, and on Monday, August 29, 1994, they went to Ntarama Church, 40 kilometers south of Kigali, where 400 Tutsi men, women, and children who had sought refuge in the church were systematically slaughtered during Sunday Mass. Outside the church, they met a woman named Gutete Emerita, whose husband and two sons had been hacked to death with machetes before her eyes.

Jaar took photographs wherever he went in Rwanda, and they numbered over 3000 by the the end of the trip. There were times when the camera acted as a welcome buffer, an intermediary between himself and the all too unmediated things he was looking at. At other times, it seemed superfluous and altogether inadequate, reminding him only of "the futility of a gaze that arrives too late." In a later interview, Jaar reflected back on this time:

For me, what was important was to record everything I saw around me, and to do this as methodically as possible. In these circumstances a 'good photograph' is a picture that comes as close as possible to reality. But the camera never manages to record what your eyes see, or what you feel at the moment. The camera always creates a new reality. I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable. This is why it was so important for me to speak with people, to record their words, their ideas, their feelings. I discovered that the truth of the tragedy was in the feelings, words, and ideas of those people, and not in the pictures.²⁵

When Jaar returned to New York, he found that he could not look at the photographs he had taken in Rwanda. It would be almost two years before he found a way to bring them into his work.

In November of 1994 Jaar was invited to participate in a public art project in Malmö, Sweden. He was given the use of forty light-boxes all around the city in which to display any image he wished. But he did not wish to display an image, yet. The truth is, he could not.

Instead, he filled the light-boxes with Rwanda; that is, with the name "Rwanda," repeated over and over, filling up the frame. These posters, scattered around the streets and squares of Malmö, reduced the rhetoric of advertising to a cry of grief. But they also served notice on a complacent public: "You— in your tidy parks, on your bicycles, walking your dogs —look at this name, listen to this name, at least hear it, now: Rwanda, Rwanda, Rwanda. . ."

The posters were a raw gesture, produced out of frustration and anger. If all of the images of slaughter and piled corpses, and all of the reportage did so little, perhaps a simple sign, in the form of an insistent cry, would get their attention.

Real Pictures was first exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago in January 1995. Out of the thousands of photographs he had made in Rwanda, Jaar carefully selected sixty images, to show the different aspects of the genocide: the massacres, the refugee camps, the destruction of cities. He then "buried" each of these images in a black linen box. On the top of each box, he had silkscreened in white a written description of the image inside. These boxes were stacked and arranged into "monuments" of various sizes and shapes. The completed work consists of 550 direct positive color photographs in 550 black linen boxes.

The sixty images were all taken in late August 1994, in Nyagazambu Camp and Ntarama Church in Rwanda, and the Kashusha and Katale refugee camps and Ruzizi 2 bridge in Zaire. The text that replaces them both describes and inscribes them:

Caritas Namazur, 88 years old, fled her home in Kibilira, Rwanda and walked 306 kilometers to reach this camp. Her white hair disappears against the pale sky. Because of the early morning temperatures, she is covered in a blue shawl with a geometric print. Her white blouse cuts across her neck, adorned with a string of amber beads. Her gaze is resigned, weary, and carries the weight of her survival.

Caritas is a Hutu caught between the actions of her own people and the fear of retribution from those who have been victimized. In her life, she has witnessed how many Tutsis had to seek exile in other countries. At this late age, in a dramatic reversal, she too has become a refugee.

The texts for the images from Ntarama Church are the most harrowing:

Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of the church. Dressed in modest, worn clothing, her hair is hidden in a faded pink cotton kerchief. She was attending mass in the church when the massacre began. Killed with machetes in front of her eyes were her husband Tito Kahinamura (40), and her two sons Muhoza (10) and Matirigari (7). Somehow, she managed to escape with her daughter Marie-Louise Unumararunga (12), and hid in a swamp for 3 weeks, only coming out at night for food. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, rotting in the African sun.

Jaar has described Real Pictures as a "cemetery of images," and the effect is certainly funereal. The silence of the gallery is deafening. One wanders among these dark monuments as if through a graveyard, reading epitaphs. But in this case, the inscriptions are in memory of images, and of the power that images once had in us. Reading them, we imagine images as if in memory: "real pictures."

The epigraph to Real Pictures comes from the Catalan poet Vicenç Altaió: "Images have an advanced religion; they bury history."²⁶ In Real Pictures, the tables are turned— images are buried in order that history might again be made visible and legible. In this way, it is a work of heresy. It is also heretical in its refusal of visual representation, in saying no to the image. Sylvère Lotringer has commented that "In Kantian terms, Alfredo Jaar's installation is a 'non-presentation.' It is meant to bear witness to the impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable. . . This is what Jaar's black boxes are about: they are the negative of the pictures; a tomb for the media. . . simultaneously blocking out the media, presenting a mental image and putting the victims to rest."²⁷ And there is a way in which the images become more horrific, and more effective, in their absence. Holland Cotter noted in his review in the the New York Times that the method of Real Pictures "is in the spirit of classical tragedy, where violence takes place out of sight, and is reported only in words."²⁸

In addition to resembling a graveyard, Real Pictures also looks like an archives. Stored in this way, archivally, these images accumulate a charge, so that the monuments begin to operate like batteries: image batteries.

One referent of Real Pictures is certainly Maya Lin's Vietnam War memorial, in its elegant simplicity and strength (and its visual restraint), but the monuments of Real Pictures also allude to Minimalist sculptures like those of Donald Judd and Tony Smith. Jaar's repositioning of the formal and the contextual in this work is related to Hans Haacke's, in his U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983. If Real Pictures accuses Minimalism, or formalist purism in general, of anything, it is (as Leo Steinberg wrote of Isolation Box) "of being hermetic— the blind deaf-mute icons of a reductive aestheticism." Again, as in Signs of Life, the alienation of art for art's sake, and the separation between aesthetics and ethics, is denied.

The Slide + Sound Piece came about in March 1995, when Jaar was asked to give a slide lecture on Rwanda during the exhibition of Real Pictures in Chicago. What kind of slide lecture does one produce to accompany a photography show in which no photographs appear?

The Slide + Sound Piece begins in silence, with words projected onto a screen. The words are hand lettered, white on black, like the epitaphs on the boxes. There is a dedication "For Caritas," referring to Caritas Namazura, the 88-year-old woman who fled her home in Rwanda during the genocide and walked 306 kilometers to the refugee camp in

Zaire where Jaar met her. Her name is also a noun. In Latin it originally meant "high price" and later came to mean "affection, love, esteem." The dedication is followed with a quote from the African writer Chinua Achebe:

Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him.

and one from the New York Times, dated April 15, 1994:

The disintegration of Rwanda into chaos and anarchy has evoked expressions of horror and sympathy from the international community. . .

and a firm pledge to stay away.

And then begins a chronology of the genocide as reported in the world's press, juxtaposed with the world's responses and the accompanying body count: April 15, 1994/ 100,000 Deaths. . . May 20, 1994/ 600,000 Deaths. . . June 20, 1994/ 1,000,000 Deaths. As the terrible litany is projected onto the screen, the sound of the projector takes on the character of a dirge.

August 1, 1994:

Time magazine dedicates its second cover to the tragedy. "This is the beginning of the final days. This is the Apocalypse," reads the cover, quoting a resident of Goma, Zaire.

The cover of Newsweek read "Hell on Earth."

And then a different music begins, a song from the Ugandan musician Geoffrey Oryema. As he sings, we read from the screen:

Uganda is a former British colony

The colonial language spoken there is English

The official language is English too

Although most people speak Luganda or Swahili

At least 300,000 Tutsis were living in Uganda by the end of 1993

It was from Uganda that the Tutsis launched their last and successful attack that gave them the power

Tutsis came back home speaking English

Some observers believe that France supported and armed the Hutus because they spoke French

French is the colonial language in Rwanda, a former Belgian colony

In Rwanda, the official languages are Kinyarwanda and French

But the national language is Kinyarwanda

Kinyarwanda is the medium of school instruction at primary level, and French at secondary level

But only 8% of the population reaches secondary level

Then comes the chorus:

*Life is like an onion
You peel off each layer
and sometimes you weep*

The epilogue is from the Romanian philosopher E. M. Cioran, echoing Achebe. When Cioran died a few months after the Slide + Sound Piece was first presented, Jaar produced a print of Cioran's text as an homage:

I am lured by faraway distances, the immense void I project upon the world. A feeling of emptiness grows in me; it infiltrates my body like a light and impalpable fluid. In its progress, like a dilation into infinity, I perceive the mysterious presence of the most contradictory feelings ever to inhabit a human soul. I am simultaneously happy and unhappy, exalted and depressed, overcome by both pleasure and despair in the most contradictory harmonies. I am so cheerful and yet so sad that my tears reflect at once both heaven and earth. If only for the joy of my sadness, I wish there were no death on this earth. Cioran 1911-1995.

The Slide + Sound Piece is a potent materialization of "the immense void [we] project upon the world." It shifts the terrible facts of the Rwanda genocide from the realm of "objective" reportage to that of tragedy (or song), "where violence takes place out of sight, and is reported only in words."

Politics is concerned with our grievances, art and poetry with our griefs. In the Slide + Sound Piece through the skillful orchestration of projected text and the sound of a human voice (and again by the pointed absence of images), Jaar opens up a place for the grief that must come if we are to remain human.

It had been almost two years since Alfredo Jaar had returned from Rwanda, and he had not yet shown any of the images he made there. Let There Be Light, first presented at the Printemps de Cahors in France in June 1995, let out the first image. The installation in a converted cloister consisted of a row of ten light-boxes and a separate specially made light-box. Each of the ten smaller light-boxes displayed a different place name: Kigali, Cyangugu, Amahoro, Rukara, Shanghi, Mibirizi, Cyahinda, Kibungo, Butare, and Gikongoro. To most viewers, these names meant nothing, even though a total of one million people had been killed in these places in three months time in 1994.

The names were made of light. When viewers stood before them to read, their faces were illuminated by the names and then reflected back to them in the shiny black surfaces of the boxes. In this way the names were inscribed on the faces of those who read them. Hagase la luz.

Reading these names today, one recalls another such list: Chelmo, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz. . . In Claude Lanzmann's extraordinary film Shoah, he evokes the horrors that occurred in those places through words and images, often by showing the faces of the survivors and of the perpetrators and collaborators. The epigraph to that film (like the title Let There Be Light) comes from the Bible, from the book of Isaiah. It is from a passage stating that the privileges of the people of God are open to all, even to those who think themselves excluded by race or disability: "I will give them an everlasting name."

The second part of Let There Be Light is a light-box fitted with a mechanism that allows four different images to appear on the same surface in sequence, one after another at selected intervals. We see two boys standing with their backs to us. They are looking across an open area to where a crowd has gathered. The boy on the right has his left arm around his friend. In the next shot we have moved closer and a bit to the left, so we can now glimpse the boys' eyelashes. In the third shot, closer still, the boy on the right has intensified his embrace. His fingers are laced together around his friend's shoulder, and his head is now pressed against that of his friend. In the final frame, the boy on the left turns and rests his forehead on his friend's cheek.

The sequence is timed to draw us into the action of this tender embrace. We cannot see what the boys are looking at, but given the context we imagine it is something terrible. We are not shown this, but only their reaction to it. And their reaction is to draw closer together, for comfort and in solidarity.

As we watch the sequence repeated again and again, and are drawn into the boys' embrace over and over, we begin to feel ashamed by our distance from the boys. Their response to what they are seeing is to reach out to one another, in human sympathy. Our response to what we saw happening on our screens and on our front pages in Rwanda was to turn away.

The second image from Rwanda to appear in Jaar's constructions was The Eyes of Gutete Emerita, first shown at the City Gallery of Contemporary Art in Raleigh, North Carolina in June 1996. Two of the "quadvision" light-boxes were placed side by side, almost touching. As in the composition with the two boys (and in the Slide + Sound Piece before it), the sequencing and timing of the changing words and images in this piece are what determines its effect. The method is cinematic even if the form is not.

At the beginning of the sequence, a block of text appears, white on black, in each of the two light-boxes. There are ten lines of text in each box, and they remain there for 45 seconds:

Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of a church where 400 Tutsi men, women and children were systematically slaughtered by a Hutu death squad during Sunday mass. She was attending mass with her family when the massacre began. Killed with machetes in front of her eyes were her husband Tito Kahinamura, 40, and her two sons, Muhoza, 10, and Matirigari, 7. Somehow, Gutete managed to escape with her daughter Marie Louise Unumararunga, 12. They hid in a swamp for three weeks, coming out only at night for food.

This text dissolves and more text appears, five lines on each panel, this time for the duration of 30 seconds:

Her eyes look lost and incredulous. Her face is the face of someone who has witnessed an unbelievable tragedy and now wears it. She has returned to this place in the woods because she has nowhere else to go. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, rotting in the African sun.

This text, too, disappears, and is replaced by two more lines:

I remember her eyes. The eyes of Gutete Emerita.

These last two lines reverberate for 15 seconds. Then, suddenly, an image flashes into view. It is Gutete's eyes, very close up, filling the two frames, one in each frame. Before one has time to think, they are gone, leaving a potent afterimage.

The first time I saw this piece, I became physically ill at the sight of Gutete Emerita's eyes. I felt dizzy and almost retched. I don't know why this happened, but it did. Perhaps the flash of the image caused a flash of recognition that resulted in vertigo: a surplus of information in too small a period of time. Or maybe it had to do with the way the time of reading slows down over the course of the three movements, and then the visual shock of the eyes blasts in. The truth is that I feel ill now, remembering it.

The Eyes of Gutete Emerita is nothing less than a concentrated attempt to recover the power of the image. By carefully balancing the information carried in the text with the visual information in the image, Jaar propels the relation into crisis. The precision of the altered relation in The Eyes of Gutete Emerita goes to the heart of the "the social function of subjectivity" that John Berger described in Another Way of Telling:

The way photography is used today both derives from and confirms the suppression of the social function of subjectivity. Photographs, it is said, tell the truth. From this simplification, which reduces the truth to the instantaneous, it follows that what a photograph tells about a door or a

*volcano belongs to the same order of truth as what it tells about a man weeping or a woman's body. If no theoretical distinction has been made between the photograph as scientific evidence and the photograph as a means of communication, this has been not so much an oversight as a proposal.*²⁹

This proposal, which underlies every use of images in the regime of spectatorship, has as its goal the erasure of such distinctions. By insisting on the distinctions, and recalibrating the balance between "evidence" and "communication," Jaar short-circuits the exchange, to get to "the point where an image can make sense again." He has said of this piece, "In that fraction of a second, I want the spectator to see the massacre through the eyes of Gutete Emerita. I think that this is the only way to see the massacre now, since we failed to see it in the actual images of the Rwandan genocide."³⁰

At about the same time in 1996, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* took another form, this one more architectural than cinematic. It was first presented at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra in February 1996.

The first thing we see as we approach the work is a black wall with a thin line of text embedded in it at about eye level. It is the same text that appeared in the light-boxes: "Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of a church. . ." We read the illuminated text as we move along the wall. "I remember her eyes. The eyes of Gutete Emerita." When we come to the end of the wall, we turn the corner and are confronted by a fantastic sight: a huge (16 x 16 foot) light table, on which is piled a mountain of 35mm slides. A million of them, in fact. A million slides for a million deaths. As we approach this apparition, we see that there are loupes arranged around the edges of the table. We pick one up, take a slide from the mountain, and hold it up to our eye. It is the eyes of Gutete Emerita. We pick up another slide— more Gutete eyes. Another and another, all eyes.

The artist has said that it is this moment, when our eye comes that close to the eyes of Gutete, that is the moment he has been waiting for. In that moment, the distance imposed by media representations of Rwanda is collapsed. Eschewing the so-called "objectivity" of the news media, Jaar here breaks through to another objectivity, both in the optical sense of the lens that is closest to the object, and in the root sense of "something thrown before the mind." As in the light-box version, the effect is almost neurological. Eye to eye, we are involved. The many in the one. If the world turned a blind eye to the killings in Rwanda, Gutete Emerita did not. Her eyes saw it clearly. Looking into her eyes, perhaps we too will see it. It is a risky, some will say foolhardy attempt, but it works.

The *Eyes of Gutete Emerita* piece was realized in one more version, a printed edition published in conjunction with Jaar's exhibition at the City Gallery of Contemporary Art in Raleigh in June 1996. A black portfolio box unfolds in quarters to reveal a stack of

seven cards, on which is printed the same text that appears in the other versions. This time, when we read the final words, "The eyes of Gutete Emerita," we turn the card over and pick up the final one, on which is affixed a strip of reflective mylar, a mirror. Raising the card to read, we see our own eyes reflected, and again the distance is collapsed.

The light table version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* was reconstructed in April of 1997 at the Galeria Oliva Arauna in Madrid, and in May 1997 at the Franck + Schulte Gallery in Berlin, with a different text on the wall, telling the story of a different survivor:

Over a five-month period in 1994, more than one million Rwandans, mostly members of the Tutsi minority, were systematically slaughtered while the international community closed its eyes to genocide. The killings were largely carried out by Hutu militias who had been armed and trained by the Rwandan military. As a consequence of this genocide, millions of Hutus and Tutsis fled to Zaire, Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda. Many still remain in refugee camps, fearing renewed violence upon their return home.

Like adults, children were systematically targeted and killed. The militias wanted to make sure they did not repeat the mistake of 1959 when they had not killed the children. Those children went into exile and formed a resistance.

It is impossible to estimate the number of children killed during the massacres. Some children were slaughtered with their parents. Others witnessed their parents and brothers and sisters being murdered. Many who survived the killings lost their will to live and died.

On Thursday morning, August 25, 1994, I entered the Rubavu Refugee Camp near Gysenyi in Rwanda as school was about to begin. As I approached the make-shift school, children gathered around me. I smiled at them and some smiled back. Three children, Nduwayezu, Dusabe and Umotoni, were seated on the steps in front of the school door. Nduwayezu, 5, the oldest of the three, was the only one that looked directly at my camera. Like the other 36 children in the camp, he lost both parents. When Nduwayezu arrived at Rubavu, he remained silent for four weeks. Four weeks of silence.

I remember his eyes. And I will never forget his silence. The silence of Nduwayezu.

Rwanda is now filled with orphans like Nduwayezu, and many of them (UNICEF estimates 85,000) are now the heads of their families, taking care of younger children without the aid of parents or other adults. Fergal Keane spoke with a woman named Rose Kayitesi, who fought with the RPF and is now caring for these orphans. "We are trying to teach them to trust the world again," she said. "But it is very, very difficult."³¹

The eyes of Gutete Emerita and the silence of Nduwayezu are offered as signs of the genocide, in the hope that they might make its significance perceptible to us.

The exhibition of The Silence of Nduwayezu at the Franck + Schulte Gallery in Berlin also included a piece called Field, Road, Cloud. It consists of three large framed photographs, each paired with a small reproduction of a sketch indicating their location.

The first large photograph pictures a lush green field of tea, stretching out to the horizon. In the far distance to the left stands a white building with a broad brown roof. The sketch next to the photograph indicates that it was taken on the main road from Kigali on August 29, 1994. We recall that the main export crops of Rwanda are tea and coffee, and that the farm land is rich and productive.

The next photograph is especially gorgeous. A rough dirt road is bathed in late afternoon or early morning golden sunlight. The trees lining the road cast striated shadows across it. In the top center of the image appears a torso-shaped patch of sky. Glancing at the sketch next to the image, we read that this is the road to Ntarama Church.

In the last photograph in the series, one cottony white cloud is framed by a deep blue sky. The cloud has begun to break up, letting off a few fine wisps. In the last sketch, the "lonely cloud" appears directly above the pointed steeple and cross of Ntarama Church. In front of the church are drawn some squiggly lines and under them the legend, "BODIES, 500?"

This is the church where Gutete Emerita saw her family killed.

Three images on the way to a killing site: fecundity, felicitous light, and freedom of movement. I remember once travelling on a train from East to West Germany before the Wall came down, and looking out the window at a row of trees, and wondering whether this was an East German or a West German row of trees.

The Rwandans have insisted on leaving some of the killing sites, like Ntarama Church, as they are, with dead bodies all around, so that people can see with their own eyes what happened. But the truth is, human bodies do not make good monuments. They decompose quickly and disappear. There will have to be other ways to show the world what happened.

In the Centre d'Art Santa Monica, all of the above works are installed in the cloisters surrounding the central quadrangle. In the quadrangle is a black pool, and at regular intervals the continent of Africa rises up out of it like a leviathan. It is a leviathan that the First World has always beheld with a mixture of awe, greed, and revulsion. The nations of the North have plundered Africa's resources and enslaved its people. And they have projected onto it images of the Dark Continent and the Heart of Darkness. But the day will soon come when its Emergency can no longer be misrepresented.

At the center of the installation of Alfredo Jaar's Rwanda works in the Centro Cultural Koldo Mitxelena in San Sebastian appears a different projection. The first thing that viewers encounter is a film-text in the central court, flanked on both sides by meditation areas. The projected text is by E.M. Cioran, the same text that appeared in the Slide + Sound Piece. But here it appears in Basque and in Spanish, alternatively. At selected intervals, the text decomposes into its constituent letters, and then is reformed.

As it cycles through this process, we recall Michelangelo Antonioni's invocation of "the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see, or perhaps, not until the decomposition of every image, of every reality."³²

Images Have an Advanced Religion

The question of evil, like the question of ugliness, refers primarily to the anaesthetized heart, the heart that has no reaction to what it faces.

– James Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart*

The most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes. In other words, what you show people, day in and day out, is political. . . . And the most politically indoctrinating thing you can do to a human being is to show him, every day, that there can be no change.

– Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing*

We know that under the revealed image there is another one which is more faithful to reality, and under this one there is yet another, and again another under this last one, down to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see. Or perhaps, not until the decomposition of every image, of every reality.

– Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*

Alfredo Jaar's Rwanda works attempt to throw light on an occluded history and to act as an indictment of the world's silence and inaction in the face of the genocide in Rwanda. Is this something that art can or should attempt to do? The world's great history paintings have been doing it for at least the last three and a half centuries. In a recent essay on On Kawara's work, the artist Jeff Wall points out that the great history paintings, from Velázquez' *Surrender at Breda* (1634-35) to Manet's *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* (ca. 1867), to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), are "rhetorical, ideological, conforming, or dissenting poetic expressions, subjective 'readings' of the same sources other people were reading at the time. This kind of painting was thrown into crisis by photography— or, more specifically, by photojournalism." Jaar works back into this crisis, transforming photojournalism through aesthetic means, by reworking the *mise en scène*. Like the history paintings of the past, these works operate in time— one must know their historical context in order to fully

appreciate them. But they work aesthetically, not as propaganda. Jaar refuses to make a choice between politics or ethics and aesthetics, believing, with Godard, that "whichever one you choose, you will always find the other one at the end of the road."

The Rwanda works also address a crisis in the image, and in our relation to images, that Paul Virilio recently called "a sort of pathology of immediate perception that owes everything, or very nearly everything, to the recent proliferation of photo-cinematographic and video-infographic seeing machines; machines that by mediatizing ordinary everyday representations end up destroying their credibility." As we increasingly become subject to images, the subject of any image becomes less and less available to us. Must we turn away from images entirely in order to begin again?

It was Stalin who said "A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic," recognizing that tragedy (or song) and statistics are two entirely different classes of information. Statistics (the science of the state) is designed to suppress or preclude action, to encourage passivity and stasis. We live in a time when information, in the form of words and images, is being transmitted in vast quantities and at increasingly high speeds, and this mass and velocity determine its effects. Human beings cannot act on information transmitted in this way, but only attempt to retrieve, sort, and process it.

In order to counter statistical thinking, one must focus on individuals. Not a million deaths, but one death. Not thousands of refugees in camps, but one survivor at a time, with a name and an image. Jaar severely limits the number and speed of his images, in order to have a different effect. A single image, of one woman's eyes, is given the time required to do another kind of work.

It is not possible to make an image of genocide. But it is possible to make images of individuals, and to put words and images and sounds together to say something in relation to genocide. Without turning a sea of griefs into a proscenium, one can still effect the *mise en scène*.

There are of course those who say that such events as genocide should not be represented at all, that any representation is bound to falsify and trivialize it. Even art should keep its distance. But these are people for whom art itself has become false and trivial.

The terrible truth about photographs is that they can only ever show us what happened, never what is happening or will happen. They are always about something that is gone, and so are in league with death.

In Jaar's Rwanda works, we see the artist's tremendous frustration with this, with "the futility of a gaze that arrives too

late." In the first of these works, he turns away from the image in disgust. The image is only used to carry the message on its back: CARITAS NAMAZURU IS STILL ALIVE! Then he abandons the image entirely, and pares the message down even further, to only the name, Rwanda, repeated over and over. Then he buries the images, in sepulchral cubes that stand like a rebuke to representation itself.

It is only in the later works that Jaar finds a way to begin again, to recover the image from the obscurity into which it has been cast. The first resuscitated image is of a simple human gesture, an embrace between children. In a way, it is the same image that W. Eugene Smith made of two children holding hands and walking away. It was the first image Smith made after having abandoned photography to the War, and he made it "to refute two years of negation." In focusing on the eyes of Gutete Emerita, Jaar returns to the most basic human encounter, eye to eye, and begins again.

The Rwanda works finally return to the one thing that photographs can do well; they can fix an image in memory, so that it is not forgotten. Though it is not enough in relation to the one million dead in Rwanda, it is something.

¹ Roland Barthes, "Shock-Photos," in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), pp. 71-72.

² Andrew Jay Cohen, "On the Trail of Genocide," *The New York Times*, September 7, 1994.

³ Fergal Keane, *Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey* (New York: Viking, 1995), p. 119.

⁴ Raymond Bonner, "Behind Rwanda's Disaster: A Plot by Extremist Hutu?" *The International Herald Tribune*, November 14, 1994.

⁵ Donatella Lorch, "Children's Drawings Tell Horror of Rwanda in Colors of Crayons," *The New York Times*, September 16, 1994.

⁶ The commander of a French marine unit, Lieut. Col. Erik de Stabenrath, said of the militias, "They were very courageous when they were killing people who could not defend themselves." Raymond Bonner, "With French Exit Near, Rwandans Fear the Day," *The New York Times*, August 9, 1994.

⁷ Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. to Supply 60 Vehicles for U.N. Troops in Rwanda," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1994.

⁸ Elaine Sciolino, "For West, Rwanda Is Not Worth the Political Candle," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1994.

⁹ John Darnton, "Africa Tries Democracy, Finding Hope and Peril," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1994.

¹⁰ Philip Gourevitch, "Letter from Rwanda: After the Genocide," *The New Yorker*, December 18, 1995, p. 87.

¹¹ Elaine Sciolino, "For West, Rwanda Is Not Worth the Political Candle," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1994.

-
- ¹² Philip Gourevitch, "Among the Dead," *Doubletake*, Winter 1998, p. 85.
- ¹³ Paul Lewis, "U.N. Backs Troops for Rwanda But Terms Bar Any Action Soon," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1994.
- ¹⁴ Stephen Kinzer, "European Leaders Reluctant to Send Troops to Rwanda," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1994.
- ¹⁵ Alan Riding, "France Seeks Partners for Rwandan Venture," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1994.
- ¹⁶ "Who Will Save Rwanda?" *The Economist*, June 25, 1994.
- ¹⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, "Understanding the Rwandan Massacre," *New Left Review*, 216, 1996, p. 28.
- ¹⁸ Raymond Bonner, "Grisly Discovery in Rwanda Leads French to Widen Role," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1994.
- ¹⁹ Raymond Bonner, "As French Aid the Tutsi, Backlash Grows," *The New York Times*, July 2, 1994.
- ²⁰ Richard D. Lyons, "Airlift Shifts Into High Gear To Supply Refugee Camps," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1994.
- ²¹ James C. McKinley, Jr., "Searching in Vain for Rwanda's Moral High Ground," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1997.
- ²² Fergal Keane, *Season of Blood*, p. 29-30.
- ²³ Steven Lee Myers, "Making Sure War Crimes Aren't Forgotten," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1997.
- ²⁴ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 180.
- ²⁵ Rubén Gallo, "Representation of Violence, Violence of Representation," *Trans 3/4*, p. 57.
- ²⁶ Vincenc Altaió, "Europe or the Difficulty of History," essay in *Europa* exhibition catalog, IFA, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart, 1994.
- ²⁷ Rubén Gallo, "Representation of Violence, Violence of Representation," *Trans 3/4*, p. 66.
- ²⁸ Holland Cotter, "Alfredo Jaar," *The New York Times*, May 12, 1995.
- ²⁹ John Berger with Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 100.
- ³⁰ Rubén Gallo, *Trans*, p. 61.
- ³¹ Fergal Keane, *Season of Blood*, p. 68-69.
- ³² Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings & Interviews on Cinema* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), p. 63.