Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images*, 2002, three illuminated texts, light screen, text by David Levi Strauss, dimensions variable, installation view, *Documenta11*, Kassel, Germany, 2002 (artwork published under fair use; photograph provided by Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, and the artist, published under fair use)

Swagato Chakravorty

Unwatchable: Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images* (2002), and the Ends of Representation

Kassel, Germany, 2002. Wandering across the expanse of *Documenta* 11, you walk into a heavily darkened room on the second floor of the Fridericianum, the sound of your footsteps absorbed into deep gray carpeting. A rectilinear labyrinth, made of dark gray fabricated panels that stretch vertically to touch the ceiling, lies ahead. As you enter and make your way through this labyrinth, the narrow pathway takes sharp turns, leading you first left, then right, then left again. Turning each corner brings you ever closer to a lambent white glow that lies somewhere ahead, gradually intensifying, filling the spaces of your passage. Rounding the final corner, you step out into what would otherwise be a dark chamber—the camera obscura of old—were it not for a massive screen mounted in the center of the wall on the far side. It is this screen that is ablaze in white light, leaving you and your fellow spectators to stand or shuffle around awkwardly, blinking, abruptly exposed in its harsh radiance. Squinting at the screen as your eyes adjust to its luminous intensity, you are able to determine there is nothing else to be seen on the screen: there are no narrative or other visual attractions forthcoming. You decide to move on—*Documenta* 11 includes more than six hundred hours of moving-image media, after all—and make your way back through the walled maze. As you move through the entryway to leave the installation, your still-dazzled eyes almost miss three brief, dimly backlit texts, the words incised into Plexiglass plates, mounted in a series along the wall.

Alfredo Jaar's *Lament of the Images* (2002), commissioned for and first exhibited at *Documenta* 11, draws upon the Chilean-born, New York–based artist's long-standing interests at the crossroads of photography, the cinematic, and the architectural to search for a spectatorial ethics in the face of contemporary image flows and forms of spectatorship.[1] Jaar's installation considers the possibilities for what Abigail Solomon-Godeau has termed an "ethics of representation" capable of resisting a critical enervation born of an excessive visuality.[2] It does so within a particular historical conjuncture, one in which there is apparently no end to the surfeit of images constituting the mediascape that is our lived environment, yet authority over images and their technologies of production is increasingly concentrated in the hands of private corporations and government entities.[3] My claim here is that *Lament of the Images* in particular, and in a broader sense Jaar's artistic practice since the mid-1990s, anticipates and negotiates what media theorists Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen have recently identified as a contemporary crisis of "unwatchable" imagery.[4] The unwatchable image or media object, as Baer and his coauthors define it, resists vision and visibility in several ways and on multiple fronts: shocking the viewer's senses, being excessive in ways that overwhelm vision itself, being literally hard to access as a consequence of censorship, and so on. The crisis of unwatchable imagery emerges as an acutely contemporary phenomenon due to "the accumulation of horrific, seemingly unimaginable developments" at the juncture of geopolitics and globalized capitalism and their entanglement with "a massive shift in our media environment."[5]

1. The title of the artwork comes from a poem by Nigerian author Ben Okri, in which the burning of ritual masks and icons causes them to lose their power. See Okri, "Lament of the Images," in *An African Elegy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), 9–13.
2. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Lament of the Images: Alfredo Jaar and the Ethics of Representation," *Aperture*, no. 181 (Winter 2005): 36–47.
3. I use the term "mediascape" in the sense originally defined by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
4. Nicholas Baer et al., *Unwatchable* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).
5. Ibid., 4.

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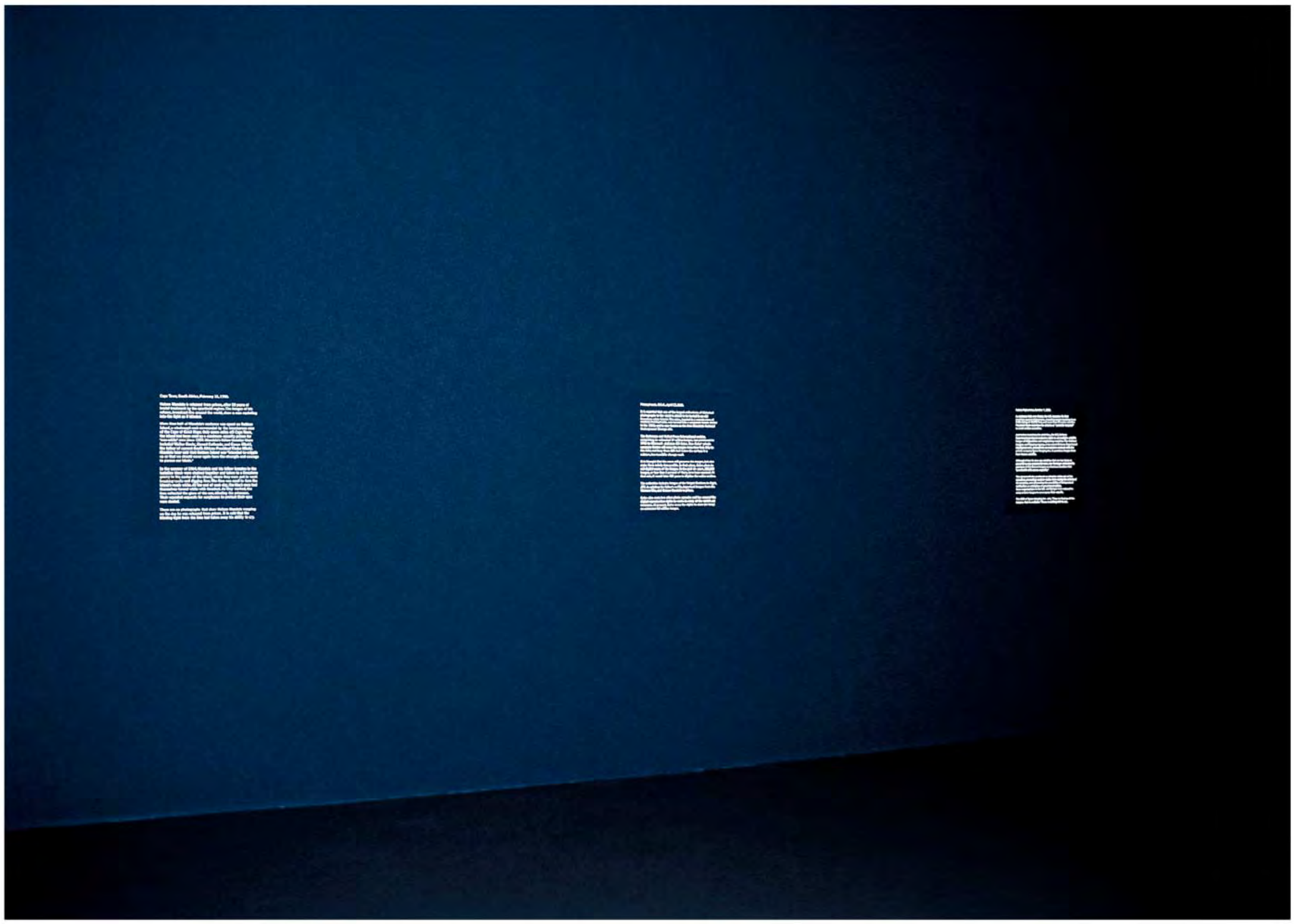


Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images*, 2002, three illuminated texts, light screen, text by David Levi Strauss, dimensions variable, installation view, *Documenta11*, Kassel, Germany, 2002 (artwork published under fair use; photograph provided by Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, and the artist, published under fair use)

I argue that the concept of the unwatchable affords us critical insight into Jaar's artistic practice. Beginning with a close study of *Lament of the Images*, I situate its central concerns within broader contexts of (un)watchable imagery and the (un)representability of racialized trauma, both of which Jaar has repeatedly taken up in his practice since the mid-1990s. *Lament of the Images*, by asking us to consider the possibilities of maintaining—or even forging anew—ethical spectatorship under conditions of unprecedented image saturation, thus draws together several lines of inquiry Jaar had been developing for over a decade.

Lament of the Images (2002)

Intuitively, one wants to consider *Lament of the Images* a "cinematic" installation.[6] At around the same time that filmmakers, critics, and scholars of cinema expressed anxieties over the apparent death of cinema and its uncertain afterlives, the moving image migrated into the spaces of contemporary art.[7] By the early 2000s, it was no longer surprising to find screen assemblages of varying dimensions and configurations in the art gallery or at an exhibition of contemporary art. In fact, *Documenta* 11 itself, as several contemporaneous reviews noted, played a crucial role in advancing arguments for, and consolidating, the place of the moving image within contemporary art. In this context, *Lament of the Images*, especially noting the year it was completed, appears at first glance to be a variation on the classic projective assemblage: a dark room with a brightly lit screen and ample space for spectators, though with no auditorium-style seating. It requires some time spent within this space to recognize the superficiality of such a frame of reference. Whereas there are any number of precedents for modernist explorations of the materiality of cinema and the conditions of spectatorship, Jaar's installation does not disclose such inclinations. While Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962–64) brilliantly played on materiality and the contingency of the photogram by allowing the light of a projector lamp to shine through a bare filmstrip, *Lament of the Images* does not attempt any comparable materialist disassembly. And while *The Paradise Institute* (Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, 2001) re-creates within the white space of the art gallery the social conventions and material assemblage of the film theater in order to productively juxtapose different conditions of spectatorship, *Lament of the Images* is not nearly as invested in exploring the histories of cinema.

At the same time, although *Lament of the Images* clearly engages contemporary problems of representation and spectatorship that are themselves entangled with "crisis globalization" (to use T. J. Demos's apt term), it is markedly different in its refusal of documentary images—indeed, the artwork actively empties out the image altogether.[8] Where artists such as Yto Barrada, Emily Jacir, Rabih Mroué, and many others have creatively reworked the formal parameters of the documentary image to negotiate closely related problems of contemporaneity (in Terry Smith's sense),[9] Jaar asks a more elementary question: under contemporary conditions of image circulation and saturation, is *any* documentary image adequate to the artist's task today?[10]

The "screen" on the wall that confronts us is not a fabric or digital display screen but a flat, backlit light wall approximately 6 feet tall and 12 feet across. The wide-screen dimensions of this light wall inescapably recall a century of cine-

6. A *New York Times* critic did just that when she wrote of "a rectangle of searing white light the size of a movie screen" in her review of Jaar's installation at *Documenta11*. See Nancy Princenthal, "Art/Architecture: A Language of Light Amid Darkness," October 20, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/20/arts/art-architecture-a-language-of-light-amid-darkness.html.

7. The bibliography on cinema and the museum is by now extensive. Some prominent titles include Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013); Raymond Bellour, *La querelle des dispositifs: Cinéma, installations, expositions* (Paris: P.O.L., 2012); Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009); Tanya Leighton, ed., *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008); Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Tamara Trodd, ed., *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011).

8. T. J. Demos defines crisis globalization as "an era of growing economic inequality, one facing the increasing influx of migrants and refugees into the North as they seek decent standards of living and escape from repressive regimes, widespread poverty, and zones of conflict." Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), xiii.

9. Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 703.

10. For a wide-ranging survey of documentary tendencies in global contemporary art, see Demos, *The Migrant Image*.

matic attractions that saw the dimensions of the movie screen expand in length, height, and even in the round as the cinema pursued ideals of immersive spectatorship.[11] Yet the unrelenting, unchanging intensity of the white radiance emanating from this light wall/screen soon undoes our anticipation of a cinematic experience. The deep history of screens, traced in recent work by film historians and media theorists, indicates that their function as a surface or material support for images is relatively recent.[12] Such associations do not emerge until the late eighteenth century, with the rise of immersive multimedia attractions like Robertson's Phantasmagoria and magic-lantern slide shows. Prior to these precinematic visual practices, screens were understood in more architectural and spatial terms—as material objects that *screened* by offering shelter, *screened* from an unwanted gaze, or even *screened* space, by partitioning it.[13] A suitably translucent, or transparent, screen could thus be a physical barrier of sorts that partitioned spaces of visibility, modulating the visual field and resulting in differing levels of visibility. The screen in this more physical sense is as much something that organizes space as it is an object through or upon which to gaze. Yet if we approach the light wall/screen hoping to be able to see something on or beyond its surface, we find instead that *Lament of the Images* contests both senses of the screen. This bright light wall, installed as a screen within a darkened room that plausibly recreates the most typical experience of being inside a cinematic screening, neither offers images up to the viewer nor allows the spectatorial gaze to pass through. In this installation—which seems precisely conceived to evoke the way in which one passes from the world into the dreamlike semidarkness of the space of the movie screening before confronting a stream of images on a large screen—there are no images to be seen at all. Such strategies of displacing the image from the visual field, wholly or in part, form a thread that runs through Jaar's artistic career since the mid-1990s.

Alfredo Jaar originally trained as an architect in Chile, while also studying film. He did not move to New York, where he currently lives and works, until 1982. In interviews, Jaar has acknowledged the enduring influence of his early interdisciplinary studies on his artistic practice.[14] In particular, he has noted that it is the spatial configuration of the typical cinematic assemblage, with a singular object (the screen) holding our attention while a larger viewing environment engages multiple senses, that intrigues him: "there is one focal point of attention that attracts all the senses."[15] He has also acknowledged the flaneur-like spectatorship of moving-image art that has now become a commonplace, as the moving-image loop-installation format has gained widespread adoption across exhibition contexts in museums and galleries, and that has motivated several of his installation designs. As Jaar avers, "I can't force people to see, but I can provide conditions for people to slow down so that the work can engage them in a dialogue."[16] The labyrinthine architecture of *Lament of the Images*, which compels a winding walk to and from the light wall/screen, is one instance of the way in which Jaar's work pragmatically slows down the unfolding duration of the spectatorial encounter. Of equal importance to the operation of spectatorial displacement that is at the heart of *Lament of the Images*, however, are those three wall texts that many spectators nearly missed both at *Documenta* 11 and in the work's subsequent installations.

The three wall texts, which are crucial to the experience of *Lament of the Images* and to producing the dialectical relations by which the work figures an incipient

11. Ariel Rogers, *Cinematic Appeals: The Experience of New Movie Technologies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
12. See Erkki Huhtamo, "Elements of Screenology: Toward an Archaeology of the Screen," *ICONICS: International Studies of the Modern Image* (Tokyo) 7 (2004): 31–82; and Craig Buckley, Rüdiger Campe, and Francesco Casetti, eds., *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).
13. Wu Hung, "The Painted Screen," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 37–39.
14. Patricia C. Phillips, "The Aesthetics of Witnessing: A Conversation with Alfredo Jaar," *Art Journal* 64, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 11.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 12.

crisis of the "unwatchable," span the years 1990 through 2001 and were composed, at Jaar's request, by the poet and critic David Levi Strauss.[17] Displacing the locus of information in *Lament of the Images* from the domain of the (photographic/cinematic) image to that of the archive, each text begins by documenting a precise location and date and proceeds to briefly describe a certain rupture within post-1989 visual culture. The first begins in "Cape Town, South Africa, February 11, 1990." The text provides an account of how Nelson Mandela, South Africa's anti-apartheid revolutionary leader and future president (1994–99), was released on that date after having been imprisoned for twenty-seven years by the apartheid regime. The text quite precisely describes a scene, images of which are nowhere visible within the space of the installation: "The images of his release, broadcast live around the world, show a man squinting into the light as if blinded."[18] Reading the text, we learn that Mandela spent eighteen years of his sentence on Robben Island off the Cape of Good Hope, seven miles from Cape Town. This island, with a long history of confining political prisoners under different colonial administrations, had since 1959 been used by the apartheid South African government as a maximum-security prison for Black prisoners. Mandela shared his time there with fellow anti-apartheid leaders Ahmed Khathrada, Govan Mbeki, and Walter Sisulu. From the summer of 1964 onward, Mandela and others in Robben Island's isolation block were put in chains and sent to dig lime and break rocks at a limestone quarry. The text concludes thus:

> At the end of each day, the black men had themselves turned white with limedust. As they worked, the lime reflected the glare of the sun, blinding the prisoners. Their repeated requests for sunglasses to protect their eyes were denied. There are no photographs that show Nelson Mandela weeping on the day he was released from prison. It is said that the blinding light from the lime had taken away his ability to cry.

Moving to the second text, datelined "Pennsylvania, April 15, 2001," we learn that "the Bettmann and United Press International (UPI) archives, comprising an estimated 17 million images, was purchased in 1995 by Microsoft chairman Bill Gates." Corbis Images, founded by Gates in 1989, would henceforth own these archives, which were to be buried underground in a storage vault. Although this may initially seem an act of cultural preservation, Strauss's text clarifies that over the preceding six years "225,000 images, or less than 2% of them, have been scanned. At that rate, it would take 453 years to digitize the entire archive." The vast wealth of visual documentation contained within the Bettmann and UPI image archives, including photographs of Wilbur and Orville Wright, the Vietnam War, and other major events in world history would, instead of remaining available to the public, simply disappear from visibility and thus from cultural memory. The text concludes by noting the following facts without offering any opinion: "Gates also owns two other photo agencies and has secured the digital reproduction rights to works in many of the world's art museums. At present, Gates owns the rights to show (or bury) an estimated 65 million images."[19] What implications there may be are left to the reader to deduce.

The third text, beginning "Kabul, Afghanistan, October 7, 2001," marks the first air strikes initiated by the US government against Afghanistan in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Although these moves of political aggression had at

17. Ibid., 20. Jaar cites his imprecise grasp of the English language as one reason for this collaboration.
18. Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images*, 2002, with text by David Levi Strauss.
19. Ibid.

the time widely, if on trumped-up premises, been justified by the United States and its allies across news media, Strauss's text informs us that the US Department of Defense had, ahead of the air strikes, "purchased exclusive rights to all available satellite images of Afghanistan and neighboring countries."[20] The text identifies the National Imagery and Mapping Agency—a unit of the Department of Defense—and a privately held corporation named Space Imaging, Inc., as having jointly purchased all imagery from the Ikonos satellite, despite the government already owning numerous spy satellites with far greater resolving powers. The text concludes by describing how this agreement

> produced an effective white-out of the operation, preventing Western media from seeing the effects of the bombing, and eliminating the possibility of independent verification or refutation of government claims. News organizations in the US and Europe were reduced to using archive images to accompany their reports. The CEO of Space Imaging, Inc., said, "They are buying all the imagery that is available." There is nothing left to see.

Jaar's use of archival material in *Lament of the Images* differs from how it is often used in the work of artists who call into question, through parafictional practices, the constructed nature of archives and other institutions that organize and legitimate the production of knowledge (I am thinking, for example, of Walid Raad/the Atlas Group and others associated with the Beirut School of contemporary art).[21] Rather, Jaar juxtaposes the archival texts—brief but vivid descriptions of events—with scenes of visual negation corresponding to those events. What *Lament of the Images* traces across its three wall texts is an emergent crisis of vision and visuality related directly to those conditions identified, perhaps most influentially by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as constituting our present conjuncture.[22] The violence of the state, once embodied in the global administrations of European imperialism and colonial power, is today translated via the operations (frequently but not exclusively relating to the imperial ambitions of American "exceptionalism") of globalized capital into a new empire of sovereign power. And indeed, as Hardt and Negri put it, this sovereignty is one consequence of the ways in which "the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another."[23] These entanglements are what produce conditions of impoverishment and privation within visual culture. *Lament of the Images* identifies a growing paradox: at a time when images are produced faster and circulate more widely than ever before, the images that we produce are increasingly subsumed to the private domain.

The spare, architectural assemblage of *Lament of the Images* and the spectator's navigation of it make for a dialectical encounter that acknowledges the antinomies of inhabiting an increasingly visible, perhaps even too visible, contemporaneity that is at the same time producing the infrastructural and geopolitical conditions for a critical lacuna. Or as Jaar has put it in more concrete terms: "There has never been so much access to information and images. Our landscape is saturated by images. But at the same time, we never have had so much control of images by private corporations and governments."[24] As spectators, we cannot obtain the full measure of the narratives told by the texts in *Lament of the Images* precisely because these texts refer to images that are absent from the visual field. Equally, the light wall/screen denies (in)sight on its own terms, its brilliant white

20. Ibid.
21. For an overview of Corbis Images' buyout of the Bettmann and UPI archives, see Sarah Boxer, "A Century's Photo History Destined for Life in a Mine," *New York Times*, April 15, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/15/us/a-century-s-photo-history-destined-for-life-in-a-mine.html. See also Steven Livingston and W. Lucas Robinson, "Mapping Fears: The Use of Commercial High-Resolution Satellite Imagery in International Affairs," *Astropolitics: The International Journal of Space Politics and Policy* 1, no. 2 (2003): 3–25. On parafictionality, see Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 51–84.
22. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
23. Ibid., xiii.
24. Phillips, "Aesthetics of Witnessing," 20.

light threatening a physical loss of visual clarity in addition to the obdurate blankness of the screen's surface.

Within the terms of this work, neither text nor (non)image suffices on its own—each informs the other. The spectator's aesthetic experience of the light wall/screen's excessive radiance is refracted and transformed by the critical context provided by the textual components. Light itself, so foundational both to the production of images as well as to the human sense of sight, comes to signify an absence that is also inseparable from an excess.[25] Indeed, discussing *Lament of the Images*, Solomon-Godeau has written that it "returns us . . . to the metaphorics of vision and blindness, sight and insight, to what is obscured (censored imagery), controlled (ownership of the image), to the limits of both visuality and image. The excess of light, like the excess of images in our postmodern world, may well occlude the light of knowledge, the insight of knowledge."[26] Solomon-Godeau's series of oppositional terms ultimately describes relations between what can and cannot be seen or watched. The concept of the "unwatchable," as it has recently been developed by media theorists Baer, Hennefeld, Horak, and Iversen, further clarifies these relational antinomies.

Unwatchable

The unwatchable is not only a concept "that has gained currency in recent years, but that has also remained latent across the history of aesthetics."[27] An image or media object may be considered unwatchable in different ways and in more than one sense. The spectator may deem it "disturbing, revolting, poor, tedious," or perhaps it is "literally inaccessible" owing to reasons of censorship or other circulatory restrictions.[28] The formalization of the unwatchable as both an aesthetic concept and a critical term in media theory today has to do with the rapid and comprehensive ways in which digital media culture—from social media in its many variations to the familiar push notifications on the smartphones almost all of us carry nowadays— regulates the everyday rhythms of our lives. Consequently, we experience "new levels of exposure to violent phenomena, which are documented first-hand and immediately circulated in intimate, uncensored detail."[29] The *unwatchable* image is therefore born of, and itself bears, a sense of excess. In response, we may well avert our gaze from the endless stream of images of catastrophe, calling it unwatchable.[30]

At the same time, much of this imagery of catastrophe may also be unwatchable in a more literal sense: here I am alluding to what artist and theorist Hito Steyerl defined in 2009 as a "poor" image, a product of digital technologies of image making.[31] The poor image is characterized as much by its low resolution, and the material impoverishments that attend the conditions of its production in the first place, as by its circulatory capacities. Formal and material imperfections are precisely what, for Steyerl, grant the poor image its radical potential, enabling it to become "a copy in motion" that is rapidly "uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited," ultimately entering and speeding along alternative, unofficial, and informal networks of circulation.[32]

Advances in image-compression technologies, algorithmic image processing, and the resolving powers of smartphone cameras have called into question at least the "low-resolution" elements of Steyerl's description of the poor image.

25. On the relations between vision and its excesses in the twentieth-century context, especially in relation to light, see Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
26. Solomon-Godeau, "Lament of the Images," 42.
27. Baer et al., *Unwatchable*, 3.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 4.
30. On the politics of refusing the gaze, see Irit Rogoff, "Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture" in Gavin Butt, ed., *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 117–34; and Frances Guerin, ed., *On Not Looking: The Paradox of Contemporary Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018).
31. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (New York: Sternberg, 2013), 32–45. The essay was originally published online in e-*flux* 10 (November 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.
32. Ibid.

However, it is crucial to bear in mind that formal characteristics are only part of the picture. As she notes, it is possible to recalibrate a hierarchy of images based on criteria of "velocity, intensity, and spread."[33] Those of us who regularly use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram will recognize in these three words a succinct description of viral media. Consider the often hard-to-watch video imagery of police brutality against protesters peacefully assembled across the United States that unfolded over the summer of 2020. Although some of these videos recall the low-fi aesthetics (poorly framed, heavily pixelated, nearly abstract) associated with what Steyerl subsequently called "documentary abstraction," most of them are not actually all that unclear or unfocused.[34] It is, rather, by means of their virality and their ability to construct—on the fly as it were—oppositional publics and national (and, as the protests continued, international) alliances against the apparatus of the carceral state that these constitute "poor" images: literally, images of the disenfranchised and the downtrodden. And these poor images are unwatchable not primarily because of the materiality of the imagery itself, but because of the violent excesses they show us.

The treatment of the "unwatchable" by Baer, Hennefeld, Horak, and Iversen largely remains within a Rancièrian regime of aesthetics and the horizon of ethical spectatorship it makes available to us.[35] Media theorist Alexander Galloway offers another critical perspective on that which eludes representation. Arguing that debates over violence, trauma, and its (un)representability tend to "exhibit a form of blindness toward the mode of production, sublimating a political worry . . . into an observation about art," Galloway suggests that "the point of unrepresentability is the point of power," which for him no longer resides within the image at all. Rather, "the point of power today resides in networks, computers, algorithms, information, and data."[36] Galloway's point, which shifts emphasis to the infrastructures of contemporary image production, circulation, and spectatorship, is not unrelated to the discourses of unrepresentability that are of concern to Baer and his coauthors. As the contemporary image—and operations pertaining to its production, circulation, reproducibility, storage, and retrieval—is increasingly displaced to the domain of the digital or the virtual, a gap opens up between what is *representable* and what is (publicly) *accessible*. A related point (echoed by Jaar himself), implicit in the connection Galloway makes between questions of power in/of the image and the question of infrastructures that generate and sustain image flows, is that it is private corporations and government organizations, exerting varying levels of control over these infrastructural elements, that increasingly determine the thresholds of contemporary representation and representability. (It is against this last that Steyerl positioned the illicit, fugitive character of the poor image as a potential counteracting force.)[37]

Alfredo Jaar's work has historically traversed these intersecting spaces of inquiry, taking up questions of image making, representation, representability, and flows of power—specifically in relation to the possibilities for a spectatorial ethics. Especially following a transformative visit to Rwanda in 1994, shortly after the massacres ended, he has been concerned with what Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), named the "white gaze," and how it mediates the processes whereby racialized violence is rendered spectacular by aesthetic means. Questions of regarding, or refusing, images of violence find a rich history in the enduring afterlives of transatlantic slavery and colonial violence, and our efforts

33. Ibid., 41.
34. Hito Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty," *A Prior* 15 (2007), 300–308.
35. For Jacques Rancière, "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time." Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 13. Within his tripartite division of the sensible, the aesthetic regime is one of secularization, in which any subject is available to any medium in art. Spectatorship, in this context, is the act of taking a position, of acknowledging representation with the appropriate response: it is, in short, the formulation of an ethical response to what is shown. See also Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2007); and Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2009).
36. Alexander Galloway, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," *Theory, Culture and Society* 28, no. 7–8 (December 2011): 95.
37. In *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), Steyerl satirizes the instructional film mode to survey five ways to merge real, physical space and time with technologies of virtual imagery in order to become invisible (ostensibly, to modes of electronic surveillance and social-media-detection algorithms). The video draws on ideas she outlined earlier in "In Defense of the Poor Image" and other essays.

to critically reckon with them. Thus Saidiya V. Hartman, writing in her groundbreaking book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, tells us pointedly that "rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned."[38] Visual and documentary representation of racial trauma, in particular, introduces scenes of ethical uncertainty that draw together the catastrophically unwatchable and the absolutely unrepresentable.

Representation after Rwanda

Jaar's artistic practice took a decisive turn following his travels in Rwanda in August 1994. That year, decades of tensions (whose origins stretch back to Belgium's colonial occupation of what was then called Ruanda-Urundi but that extended beyond its end in 1962) between Rwanda's Hutu and Tutsi populations exploded when Hutu militias escalated violence into outright genocide. The United Nations Security Council, infamously, withdrew the majority of its peacekeeping forces, and major Western powers failed to intervene in any significant way. Between April 7 and July 15, 1994, approximately one million Rwandans, mostly Tutsi, were murdered.[39] To date Jaar has produced twenty-two installation-based works drawing upon on his experiences in Rwanda. Just six of these actually involve any photographic images, despite the artist having taken approximately three thousand photographs in Rwanda. None of the six works attempts to represent or illustrate the unwatchable, unrepresentable atrocities, traces of which Jaar encountered in his travels. This emergent refusal of documentary representation in Jaar's post-Rwanda work is partly what leads Solomon-Godeau to argue that what is at stake in work by "artists who address the catastrophic in its myriad incarnations and who desire their work to bear witness within the institutional spaces of art (and sometimes outside them)" is "the *ethics* of representation."[40] As though driven away from the image itself, and in search of forms of spectatorship that do not spectacularize catastrophe, Jaar has turned toward a "politics of images" that inheres in a displacement of the image from the field of representation, often by incorporating textual material as a means of deferral.[41] In fact, he has described the post-Rwanda works as "exercises in representation," identifying *Lament of the Images* in particular as "a modest philosophical essay on our relationship to images today."[42]

The artworks resulting from Jaar's travels in Rwanda came to constitute a series titled *Let There Be Light: The Rwanda Projects, 1994–2000*. Almost all of the works were centered on strategies of representational displacements, and all, to a greater or lesser extent, relied on textual means by which the visual could be deferred. *Rwanda, Rwanda* (1994), for example, was the second in the "Rwanda Projects" series, commissioned by the city of Malmö, Sweden, as a public artwork. It comprised fifty light boxes installed throughout the city. The boxes were marked simply with the word "Rwanda" stamped eight times, stacked vertically. Solomon-Godeau sees the work as "an accusatory reminder of the failure of civilized Europe to intervene," which, by its jarring presence amid the sanitized streets of what is Sweden's third-largest city as well as one of its most industrially developed, "reminded passersby of the catastrophe elsewhere."[43] However, to the

38. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.
39. For standard accounts, see Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis, 1959–1994: History of a Genocide* (London: C. Hurst, 1998); and André Guichaoua, *From War to Genocide: Criminal Politics in Rwanda, 1990–1994* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017). See also Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (London: Zed, 2000).
40. Solomon-Godeau, "Lament of the Images," 39 (emphasis in original).
41. Kathleen MacQueen, "A Landscape of Tragedy: New Debates in Alfredo Jaar's 'Politics of Images,'" *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 42, no. 2 (September/October 2014): 8.
42. Phillips, "Aesthetics of Witnessing," 20.
43. Solomon-Godeau, "Lament of the Images," 39.

Alfredo Jaar, *Rwanda, Rwanda*, 1994, photolithograph, image 62¼ x 43¾ in. (158 x 111 cm), sheet 68⅞ x 46⅝ in. (175 x 118.5 cm), installation view, Malmö, Sweden (artwork published under fair use; photograph provided by the artist, published under fair use)

extent that *Rwanda, Rwanda* displaces vernacular notions of center and periphery even as its referent is itself displaced from the local to the global, it collapses geopolitical distance precisely by giving material form to what Okwui Enwezor, in his essay introducing *Documenta* 11, described as "the terrible nearness of distant places."[44] In its play of disappearance and reappearance and its juxtaposition of a civilized "here" with a supposedly barbaric "elsewhere," *Rwanda, Rwanda* as a public project causes a catastrophe that unfolded "elsewhere"—from which the West conveniently withdrew itself by disavowing responsibility despite having played a crucial originary role—to reappear as a condemnatory referent in the heart of Europe.[45] Created the very year of the genocide, it remains perhaps Jaar's most pointed *J'accuse*.

Jaar's experiments with strategies of representational displacements continued with *Real Pictures* (1995), in which he enclosed 372 cibachrome prints chronicling his Rwanda experience within black linen archival boxes, one photograph per box. Silkscreened text on the top of each sealed box briefly describes the photograph concealed within. For a 2020–21 exhibition at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, the boxes were installed in neat geometric stacks spaced throughout a grid within a darkened room.[46] Each stack was precisely spotlit from above, a halo of light spilling around it on the floor. The overall effect evoked cenotaphs or grave markers as much as Minimalist sculptures and the modernist grid. The artwork's title, a formal description that doubles as a flatly declarative statement, acknowledges the status of the work as visual documentation—*pictures*—while underscoring its evidentiary basis in the *real*. Yet it is this very indexicality, the singularity of the photographic image that produces the

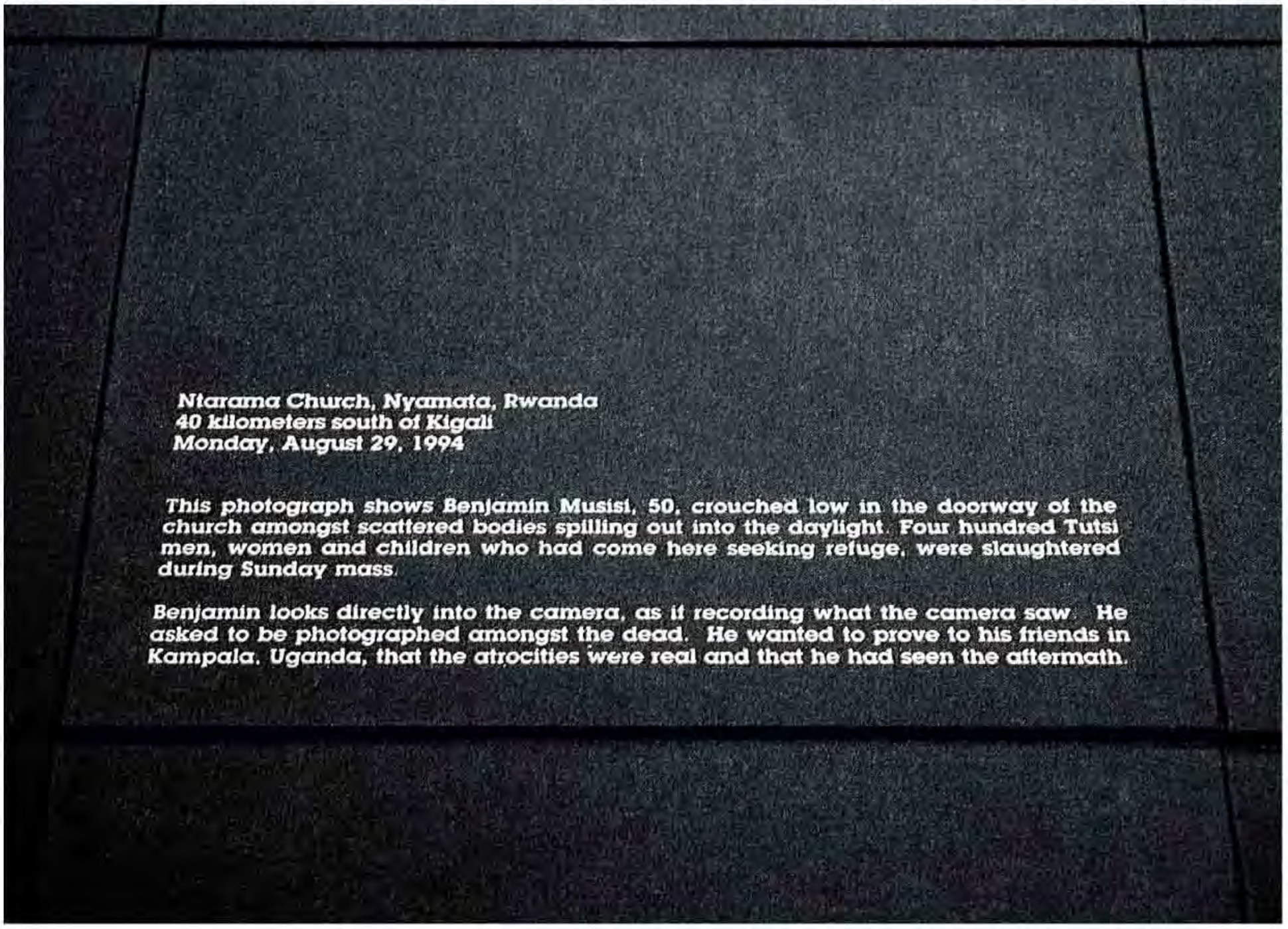
44. Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box," *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition; Catalogue* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 65.
45. In the early stages of the unfolding genocide, photojournalism and news reporting in the West primarily cast events as a consequence of tribal aggressions, neglecting its origins within the complexities of Belgium's colonial administration. See Debra Bricker Balken, "Lament of the Images," in *Alfredo Jaar: Lament of the Images* (Cambridge, MA: List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), 23.
46. *Alfredo Jaar: The Rwanda Project*, November 19, 2020–May 23, 2021, Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town; organized by Koyo Kouoh and Storm Janse van Rensburg.

Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures*, 1995. color photographs in black linen archival boxes, silk-screen print, dimensions variable, installation view, *Alfredo Jaar: The Rwanda Project*, Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town, November 19, 2020–January 15, 2022 (artwork published under fair use; photograph provided by Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town, and the artist, published under fair use)

Barthesian "that-has-been," that is ultimately not made available to the spectator. The traces of violence that these real pictures document are displaced from the field of representation and visuality: they are unwatchable. By refusing the closure of a representation that can only re-present the very trauma it documents, *Real Pictures* becomes an open signifier, at once acutely specific in its historical context yet skeptical of the capacities of photographic and photojournalistic representation in a broader sense. These *Real Pictures* are withheld from our gaze, and implicit in this withholding is the rejection of a politics that turns on the hope of pricking the spectator's conscience.

Jaar's interdisciplinary commitments to architecture and cinema assert themselves more forcefully in *The Sound of Silence*, which the artist commenced in 1995 but could not complete until 2006 when technological advances made it possible to do so. The work was first exhibited at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne and has since been exhibited in more than eighteen countries. *The Sound of Silence* retains Jaar's skepticism regarding the limits of photographic representation, particularly in racial contexts, as well as the pitfalls of spectacularized trauma. In addition, it is a key work in Jaar's oeuvre for its acknowledgment of a crisis born of an excess in contemporary image flows as well as for the formal means by which it negotiates that crisis.

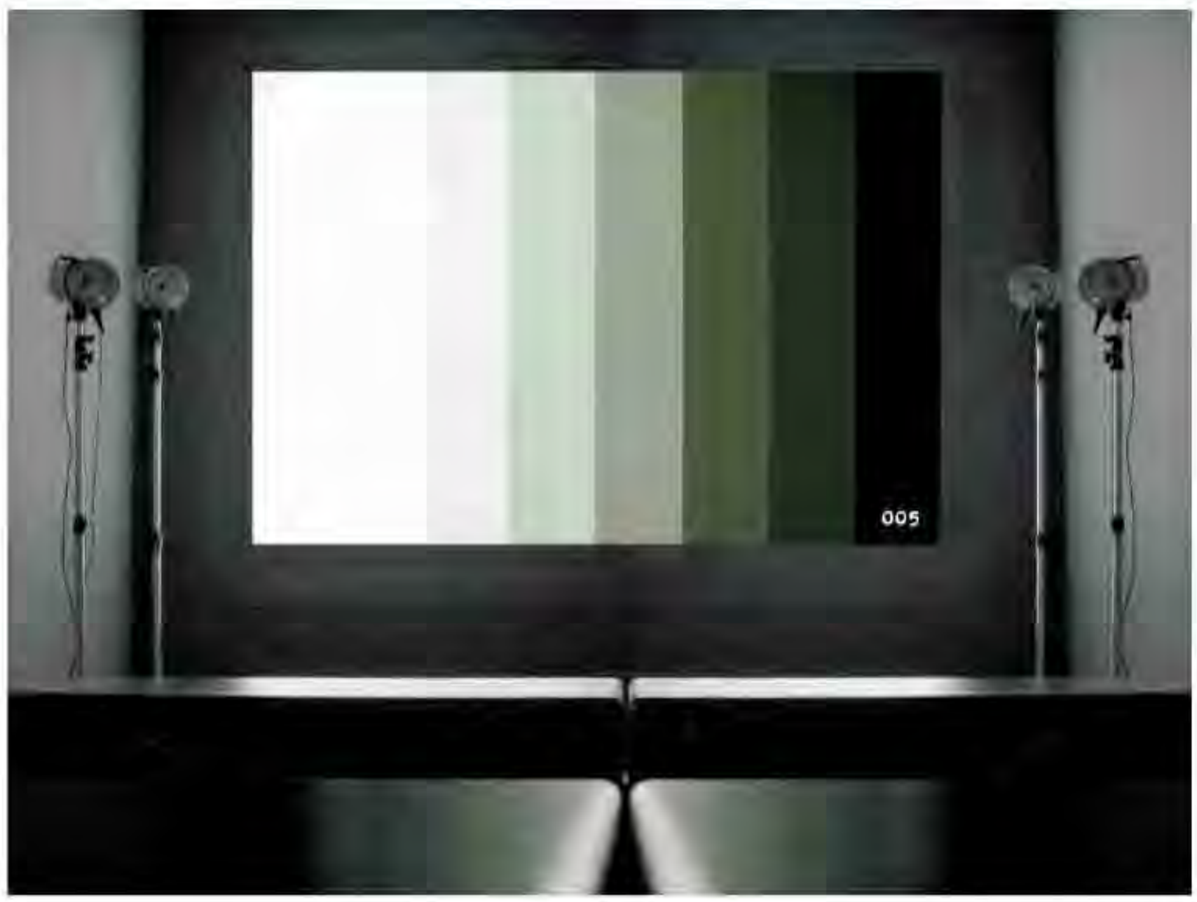
The Sound of Silence is a video installation based on the work of the white South African photojournalist Kevin Carter (1960–1994). Born and raised in a middle-class, whites-only neighborhood in Johannesburg, Carter began covering South



Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures*, 1995, detail of archival box and silkscreen print (artwork published under fair use; photograph provided by Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town, and the artist, published under fair use)

Africa's anti-apartheid struggles in the early eighties. In 1993 he and fellow photojournalist João Silva traveled to Sudan to document the famines and rebellions then underway. At some point, when their United Nations airplane stopped to distribute food among famine survivors, Carter noticed a small, malnourished Sudanese child on the ground some distance from the United Nations food center. A vulture lurked nearby, observing the child. Struck by this juxtaposition, Carter shot a few photographs and chased the vulture away, leaving the child to continue onward. On March 26, 1993, the *New York Times* printed one of these photographs, syndicating it worldwide. It caused an immediate and international outcry, leading to innumerable public inquiries. The child's identity remained unknown for years, as did his fate. The intensity of public criticism, condemning the photograph as exemplifying the racist spectacularization of suffering, left its mark on Carter. His photograph won him the Pulitzer Prize in April 1994. But three months later, on July 27, Carter took his own life.

The Sound of Silence is installed within a large container, the inside of which is designed to re-create the typical "black box" theatrical space now so commonly found in moving-image exhibits within gallery or museum spaces. Strips of bright white lighting run down the exterior of one side of the box. On the other side, red and green strips of lighting mark the visitor entrance. The installation admits approximately a dozen visitors at a time, and timed entry ensures that they are able to watch the eight-minute work without interruption. In this respect, *The Sound of Silence* thoroughly replicates the temporal structures of the



Alfredo Jaar, *The Sound of Silence*, 1995–2006, wood structure, aluminum, fluorescent tubes, LED lights, flashlights, tripods, video projection (8 min. loop), dimensions variable (artwork published under fair use; photograph provided by Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the artist, published under fair use)

Alfredo Jaar, *The Sound of Silence*, 1995–2006, wood structure, aluminum, fluorescent tubes, LED lights, flashlights, tripods, video projection (8 min. loop), dimensions variable (artwork published under fair use; photograph provided by Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the artist, published under fair use)

cinematic experience. On a large projection screen inside the darkened interior, single lines of text—formatted to resemble lines of poetry—appear line by line on the screen, pulsing slowly. They introduce and narrate not just the life and work of the photographer,

> kevin
> kevin carter

but also contextualize his fateful photograph of the Sudanese child and the vulture, and the public reception to its publication:

> the man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame
> of her suffering
> might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene
> wrote one critic

There is a sense of suspended or perhaps deferred time that accrues as the video plays on. We learn that Carter had, with care and often at great personal risk, documented apartheid injustice in South Africa and more widely. His photographic work had served to focus the attention of Western powers onto the ruination their decades of colonial administration had left behind throughout Africa; his images in a real sense catalyzed acts of acknowledgment from the symbolic to the real. And this is arguably why *The Sound of Silence* is at pains to impress upon the spectator these contextual details, holding in abeyance the image itself. Through the linear temporal structure of its lines of text, which appear one after the another, serially, the image at the heart of *The Sound of Silence* is deferred until a cru-

cial moment at the very end when a stunning burst of white light, emitted from powerful strobes mounted on stands (almost invisible in the darkened space), dazzles viewers. After nearly eight minutes of silence, the loud popping sound—as of a photographic flashbulb—that accompanies this light is nearly deafening. And it is only now, in the immediate aftermath of this sensory assault while our sight is still dazzled, that Carter's infamous photograph flashes up for an instant on the screen before fading to black.

The Sound of Silence thus relies on textual deferral and Jaar's cinematic sensibilities—strategies he foregrounds even more clearly in *Lament of the Images*—in order to slow down the time of representation itself and, by consequence, the spectatorial encounter. Carter's photograph attained a kind of literal overexposure through its worldwide media circulation in 1993. It has since become an inescapable part of the iconography surrounding the Rwandan genocide; indeed, through the late nineties it became shorthand around the world for vernacular media narratives of African poverty. When I was a teenager in Calcutta, seeing Carter's photograph broadcast on local news shaped my own early impressions of global economic inequities. Today it would accumulate hundreds of thousands of likes and retweets, going viral on social media within a few minutes. *The Sound of Silence* benefits from the eleven years that elapsed between 1995, when Jaar conceived the work, and 2006, when advanced technology made it possible for him to realize it. This *décalage*, which by sheer contingency is woven into the artwork's form, makes possible a renewed spectatorship, a renewed relation to Carter's image. *The Sound of Silence* also marks a turn in Jaar's critical interests, as it takes up the question of how the sheer excessiveness of contemporary image flows—which not only were crucial to the afterlives of Carter's photograph but also in a real sense affected Carter's own life—increasingly mediates broader questions of representation and representability.

"A Sense of the Visual"

Alfredo Jaar made *Lament of the Images* for *Documenta* 11 in 2002—that is, between 1995, when he conceived of *The Sound of Silence*, and 2006, when he completed it. The concerns that animate *The Sound of Silence*, which are as much about the visual and documentary mediation of violence (in particular, the ways in which race and difference in geopolitical power structure both the conditions of representation as well as the horizons of representability) as about the antinomies of an excessive visuality—what Akira Mizuta Lippit calls "avisuality"—are accentuated in *Lament of the Images*. For Lippit, avisuality is "not a form of invisibility, in the sense of an absent or negated visibility: not as the antithesis of the visible but as a specific mode of impossible, unimaginable visuality . . . it determines an experience of seeing, a sense of the visual, without ever offering an image."[47] Specifically, in *Lament of the Images*, Jaar has definitively turned from, without leaving entirely behind, one sense of the unwatchable—that which is too horrific and makes us avert our gaze—to another: that which is so excessively visible as to negate vision itself. The work marks an even more radical departure from his earlier work in that images, which were previously merely displaced from the visual field (sealed away in *Real Pictures*) or positioned at the limits of vision (fleetingly given to spectators in *The Sound of Silence*), are no longer present at all.

47. Lippit, *Atomic Light*, 32.

In the context of Jaar's post-Rwanda work, *Lament of the Images* extends his investigations into the possibilities of ethical representation and spectatorship, particularly in relation to race and to questions such as those raised by Susan Sontag and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay concerning art's capacities for mediating trauma and catastrophe.[48] Jaar's introduction of a greater level of abstraction here, inviting us to read the work not merely as addressing the representation of individual or communal trauma but as addressing the ends of representation as such, is informed by his earlier attempts to negotiate critical spectatorship in the face of an extreme profusion of images. The introduction of a screen-like object resembling the screens of different orientations that now serve as our environmental surround, but which, in contrast to *The Sound of Silence*, does not operate as we expect such screens to, is likewise suggestive of an enlargement of Jaar's focus from the still image to the flow of images—still and moving—in which we are now perennially awash. Indeed, the "screen" in *Lament of the Images* actively resists our gaze: its brilliant radiance hurts the eye. Finally, the abstraction that formally organizes *Lament of the Images*, by addressing the question of representation as such, also addresses the question of who or what makes images available for spectatorship and, subsequently, circulation.

Lament of the Images draws into its orbit the histories of colonial violence and their afterlives within a pernicious entanglement of globalized capital and state power as these play out within contemporary visual culture. What is new, suggests Jaar, is an encroaching privatization of the field of the visible and the visual itself, which, if allowed to proceed unchecked, might end in there being, as one of the wall texts in the work notes, "nothing left to see." Following Jaar's transformative experience in Rwanda after the genocide, the artist's attempts to creatively respond to both "the dimension of the tragedy and [his] incapacity to communicate this"[49] appear to have led him toward the conclusion that to simply show more and perhaps increasingly extreme photographic and visual documentation of the catastrophe "would not make a difference."[50] Whether still or moving image, it is not that more needs to be shown but rather that we may want to reconsider the conditions of the visible and the invisible, the watchable and the unwatchable, the representable and what defies representation. With *Lament of the Images*, one of several artworks produced by Jaar in the wake of the Rwandan genocide, the artist presciently negotiated conditions of representation and visuality that critics now consider as constituting the unwatchable, addressing on multiple fronts the ways in which the infrastructures of contemporaneity make themselves hard to see, and their visible images harder to watch.

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48. See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone, 2008).
49. Phillips, "Aesthetics of Witnessing," 18.
50. Balken, "Lament of the Images," 24.