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Alfredo Jaar: Between Seeing and Believing

By Faith McClure on June 12, 2014



Alfredo Jaar, *Shadows* (installation view), 2014, at the SCAD Museum of Art.

In his book chronicling the 1994 Rwandan genocide, journalist [Philip Gourevitch](#), while standing amid dozens of dead civilians at a church in Nyarubuye, the site where 1,500 Rwandans had been massacred, tries to make sense of what his mind cannot fathom: "This is what fascinates me most in existence: the peculiar necessity of imagining what is, in fact, real."

Imagination shouldn't be limited to crayon-clasping preschoolers or eccentric arty types. It's much more democratic than that, and carries with it much nobler ambitions.

Chilean-born artist [Alfredo Jaar](#) stands eagerly in this gap between seeing and believing. His work has confronted the world's most lamentable political traumas—oppressive dictatorships in South America, the cruel aftermath of colonization in Africa, the holocaust in Rwanda, extreme poverty, military corruption, and labor exploitation, among a litany of others.

His recent exhibition *Shadows*, a multimedia photographic installation on view at the [Savannah College of Art and Design Museum](#) through June 29, is dedicated to the question of photojournalism and its ability—or inability—to make real the imperceptible terrain of another's private suffering.

The second in a trilogy of installations, *Shadows* follows Jaar's most acclaimed work, *The Sound of Silence* (2006), a narrative eulogy to South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, who documented the 1993 famine in Sudan before eventually taking his own life. Utilizing a similar format—a theater dedicated to a single photograph—*Shadows* honors late Dutch photographer Koen Wessing who captured in disturbing detail the oppressive political landscape in Nicaragua at the height of the Sandinista insurrection.

Like much of his work, *Shadows* extends a fertile dialectic between what Jaar exacts in his mind and what he intuits from his gut. Hidden in the folds of his signature austerity are glimmers of the transcendent, capturing a felt sense of the eternal despite such a stern aesthetic.

Entering the black box of the artist's installation is a bit like entering a theater of the mind. If empathy begins in the imagination, then Jaar has quite literally constructed a theater—a *mise-en-scène*—in which to project his epiphanies, and Wessing's. Conjuring a deep sense of interiority, the installation is best witnessed in uninterrupted solitude.

Projected upon the rear wall of the theater, a single startling photograph emerges within a two-minute video loop. Taken by Koen Wessing in Estelí, Nicaragua, in 1978, one year before the revolution that overthrew a demoralizing 43-year military dictatorship, the image shows two young campesino women, their bodies flailing in anguish. The corpse of their father, assassinated by the Somoza's National Guard, has been brought to them.



Within a minute or so, the bucolic landscape behind them gradually fades to black, and the images of the two women, increasing in luminosity, become saturated with light. The emanation eventually becomes blinding, and reads as a third presence in the room, both warm and alarming, interrogating yet divine. The impulse is to stare and keep staring, despite the pain of looking.

When the room is enveloped in complete darkness, the viewer is pushed from objective witness to transcendent participant. Colorful afterimages of the two campesino women appear en masse, seemingly liberated from the photograph. They permeate the darkness like ghostly apparitions, transforming the theater into a tomblike installation. Like the death of Lazarus, the feeling is grievous but redemptive. Within seconds, the two-minute loop begins again.

Jaar's choice to highlight a single emotional narrative conveys a harder truth about Nicaragua's fraught political history than would an encyclopedic chronology of the country's corrupt leadership. Supported by U.S. funding, the Somoza dynasty, ruling from 1936-1979, maintained absolute political power and owned much of the country's wealth. Its National Guard, considered above the law and able to murder at will, asserted violence to control resistance, also ambushing Augusto Sandino, leader of the opposition.

Six additional lustrous backlit photographs from Wessing's film reel line the installation's entry and exit corridors. They flesh out a fuller emotional narrative: the father's body sprawled out on the grass, the two women collapsed in various states on their homestead, their limbs writhing as if in physical rejection of death.

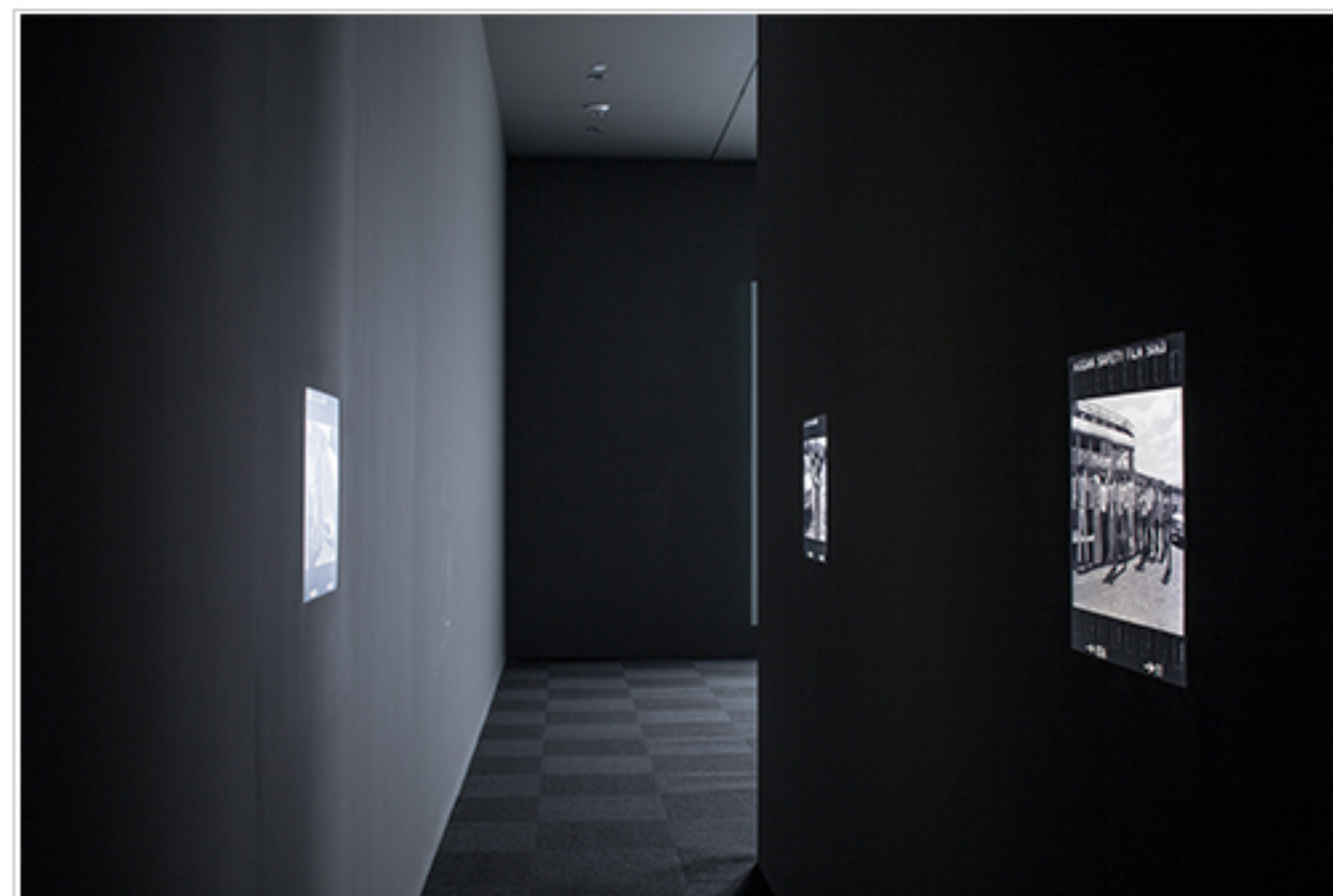
A departure from the didactic narration of *The Sound of Silence*, *Shadows* instead is an abstract upheaval, bypassing the analytical mind and unearthing something deeper. Its immediacy speaks to a level of trauma beyond language, calling to mind what literary theorist Elaine Scarry defines as the inexpressibility of pain—that it not only resists language but “actively destroys it, bringing about ... the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”

But Jaar's choice to forego his verbal predilections (though there's still a short explanatory text available at the door) is as strategic as it is symbolic. The gesture pays homage to Wessing, who viewed language as an impossible deterrent from the potency of images. Wessing's 16-page *Chile, September 1973*, a powerful image-only publication of the violent military coup that resulted in Chile's 17-year dictatorship, was motivation for this reciprocal act. From this vantage point, *Shadows* exists within a web of individual and collective narratives: Wessing's, Jaar's, the campesino sisters, their father, and the collective cultural narrative of Nicaragua.

Jaar's 1982 *Faces*, shown concurrently, reiterates the parallel. Compiled from newspaper clippings around the 1973 coup in Chile (that Jaar experienced firsthand as a teenager), the work hones the private emotional realities of opposition members by enlarging their fear-stricken faces.

The unrelenting question is, of course, what can a photograph actually accomplish? Venture into the labyrinth of photography criticism and the ethics of representation, especially regarding war photography, and you'll uncover a broad spectrum of polemics—from hopeful romantics who believe photography can change the world to academic skeptics who deconstruct photographs to near oblivion, seeming to miss the point altogether.

Early photojournalists regarded their work as interventionist, expecting images of disparity and injustice to thrust viewers into action—not an unrealistic expectation given its novelty. But photography has since become the great egalitarian medium. The ubiquity of the camera, “the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood,” according to Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, has made photographers of us all. The Internet, our new consciousness, bequeaths its visual maelstrom, anesthetizing our emotional cognition along the way.



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In her book *The Cruel Radiance*, which refutes the idea that photographs of trauma and political violence are aggressive, voyeuristic, or exploitative, author Susie Linfield argues instead that learning to read such photographs are necessary in connecting to our modern history: “Photojournalists are responsible for the ethics of showing, but we are responsible for the ethics of seeing.” She continues, “This requires transforming our relationship to photographs from one of passivity and complaint to one of creativity and collaboration ... ”

Jarr’s *Shadows* creates this space for engagement. Prioritizing the social and reverential over the individual and merely intellectual, *Shadows* reminds the viewer that photographs are not mere surface-dwelling species, decontextualized and severed from the roots of real experience. Instead, they exist within a conversation, within multiple overlapping narratives. They’re deeply relational, acutely personal, and embedded within vast cultural and political ecologies. In fact, it is their very incompleteness, their inability to tell an entire story, that presents them as the perfect opportunity for curiosity and education.

Like great literature, interactive installations like Jaar’s *Shadows* have the potential to nourish and expand our moral imagination by allowing us to enter the viewpoint of another from within. If it’s true that the audience completes a work or art, *Shadows* is completed by the empathic potential it cultivates in the imagination of its viewers.

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