

Cruelty of the Image Alfredo Jaar: The Politics of the Image, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland

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The exhibition at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland, is a unique opportunity to explore and encounter some of Alfredo Jaar's earlier as well as more recent inquiries into the politics of the image. The importance and relevance of Alfredo Jaar's work is indexed in the catalogue of the exhibition which features essays by Georges Didi-Huberman, Jacques Rancière and Griselda Pollock. Alfredo Jaar has extensively investigated the power-relations which affect, govern and structure images, in particular their perception and reception by the viewer/witness/consumer in the age of globalization. The art of Alfredo Jaar exposes and frames the mechanics of power of the image thus performing a critique of the nature of seeing by revealing and exposing the underlying operations of montage and editing which sustain our perception of the world and its global events, that is the reality presented by the media and the world of so-called 'information'. 'Information' is as much about information as it is about disinformation because images are selected, edited, presented and promoted while others are ignored or denied on a basis which ultimately obeys the master narrative of a political agenda.

This disjunction between reality and information is exposed in Jaar's 1994 *Untitled (Newsweek)* which displays all the *Newsweek* covers that appeared during the unfolding of the Rwandan genocide. Every cover is accompanied by the historical facts pertaining to the genocide and its monstrous body count which every week adds up another hundred thousand additional unreported and anonymous victims. The reality of genocide is absent from the *Newsweek* covers which focus instead on in comparison trivial Americana such as the deaths of Kurt Cobain, Jackie Kennedy, the trial of OJ Simpson and the high-tech 'gender gap'. It is only in August 1994 that the first *Newsweek* cover dedicated to the Rwandan

genocide appears, when the genocide has literally been consummated in abject indifference.



The Sound of Silence, 2006
© Alfredo Jaar
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

In the age of global information, the viewer is a consumer of images and Jaar challenges us as viewers/consumers by confronting us and even, in the case of *The Sound of Silence* (2006), by trapping us into the political fabric of the image. *The Sound of Silence* (2006), the most recent and most powerful work displayed in the Lausanne exhibition. *The Sound of Silence* contextualizes the infamous Pulitzer-Prize winning Kevin Carter photograph first published in the *New York Times* in 1993 of a child starving on its way to a feeding centre in the Sudan under the hungry gaze of a vulture. *The Sound of Silence* sets up the space of the image in a large cube. One of the external sides of the cubic structure is illuminated by a series of blinding white neon lights which violently contrast with the dark interior of the cube. It takes eight minutes in the small *camera obscura* to understand and experience the multiple and interwoven tragedies of the Kevin Carter photograph. The story of Kevin Carter unfolds in writing and silence on the screen. The biographical narrative of the South-African freelance photographer is a narrative of failure, soul-searching and trauma which enables the viewer to identify and empathize

with Carter who sadly committed suicide in 1994, aged 33. Kevin Carter's narrative culminates in the traumatic encounter with the starving little girl in the Sudanese bush, encounter captured in the photograph. The cruel subtext lies in the fact that Carter waited twenty minutes, watching the little girl crawl in desperation in the hope that the vulture would spread its wings - which it does not - in order to get a better photograph. The text is only interrupted once by four violent and blinding flashes turned against the viewer. The violent breach of the scopical field reverses the position of the voyeur/viewer, now violated by the flash and victimized like the Sudanese child. Carter's picture then appears furtively on the screen and the narrative ends with the destiny of the image and suicide of the photographer. The image has only appeared for a fraction of a second – the actual time it took for the image to be recorded – but the frame of its cruel history will haunt the viewer throughout the rest of the visit.

The image in Jaar is thus a site of trauma, especially when it comes to his explorations of Africa. Some of Jaar's most powerful and haunted works are those that have dealt with the Rwandan genocide. In 1994, a few weeks after the end of the genocide, Jaar leaves for Rwanda where he takes some 3000 pictures. *Real Pictures* (1995) is an installation where Jaar's Rwandan pictures are not visible but buried in black boxes. Every box bears the factual description and narrative of the photograph and the visitor is overloaded with the narratives of genocide which contrast with the minimalist aesthetic arrangement of the scene. The image, buried in its box/tomb, is transformed into a 'document' where the image is suppressed and the narrative exposed, like in *Sound of Silence*. One of the narratives reads as follows:

Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of the church. Dressed in modest, worn clothing, her hair is hidden in 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 Unamararunga (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.



Real Pictures, 1995
© Alfredo Jaar
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

The boxes are piled onto each other, monumental mass graves of various sizes and heights but also archive, and the darkened room of the Palais de Rumine is transformed into a mausoleum and non-place of memory where Jaar's Rwandan experience rests. *Real Pictures* is an obsessive monument dedicated to a traumatic encounter between an artist/witness and the people of Rwanda, present and dead. *Real Pictures* is a site of mourning, not only of the victims of the Rwandan genocide captured in the images, directly or indirectly, but also the artist's 'own private Rwanda'. Alfredo Jaar resurrects, objectifies and engages with the archive of his traumatic memories. In *Real Pictures*, the traumatic memory is both acknowledged and mourned, quietly resting within the non-place of the Rwandan archive.

The most haunting of his works on Rwanda is probably *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996). In *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, the viewer is not confronted directly with the atrocities of the genocide but is faced with the eyes of Gutete Emerita, the gaze of a survivor whose narrative has been mentioned above. The traumatic nature of this missed encounter is indexed by the hundreds of serialized slides of her eyes, heaped up on a white neon screen. The material of the Real – this gaze of which the event

is absent - like the buried images of *Real Pictures* is here again sculpted into a mass grave or funerary heap in a gesture which both revives and buries the post-traumatic gaze of Gutete Emerita. The powerful and haunting nature of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* lies in the gaze of this missed encounter not only between the photographer and its subject but between the West and Rwanda. What Alfredo Jaar manages to conjure within the space of the museum is the very experience of our failed engagement not only with certain images but with the very political processes that make those realities possible. We have failed Rwanda and we are failing Africa, most notably Darfur. Global events are not foreign, nor exterior to us; on the contrary, as Jaar has relentlessly demonstrated, we are very much part of their fabric.

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