

## Visual art

# The image under interrogation

Alfredo Jaar's two exhibitions give a wide overview of the artist's thinking and work over several decades

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In conversation with Malian filmmaker and scholar Manthia Diawara, Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar refers to his multidisciplinary approach as the "Pasolini model", a reference to the late Italian filmmaker, writer and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, about whom Jaar has also made a film, *The Ashes of Pasolini*.

In it, Pasolini speaks of his move from literature to filmmaking as a protest not only against the Italian language, and therefore against nationality, but also as an outcry against an increasingly consumerist society that had "emptied out the diverse ways of being human".

In another part of the tribute, which consists of various conjoined interviews and excerpts from Pasolini's films, Pasolini states that his hatred of his country's petit bourgeois was so great that his novels contained characters largely from the working class.

The similarities between the two artists' approaches are obvious. Jaar, who was born in Santiago in Chile,

grew up under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship.

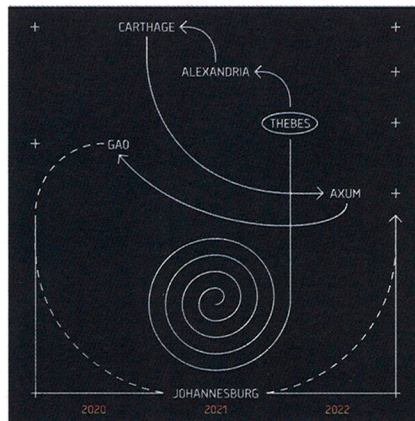
Jaar's work, from public interventions to films and photographs, has sought to question the skewed power dynamics governing global societies, dynamics often held in check by mass media and their manipulation of imagery.

In South Africa for a week, Jaar is presenting a collection of his seminal works in two Johannesburg galleries, the Goodman Gallery and the Wits Arts Museum.

At the Goodman (until March 23) is a compilation of several important works under the title *Amilcar, Frantz, Patrice and Others*.

At Wits is a standalone installation titled *The Sound of Silence* (until April 10), a 428m<sup>3</sup> "theatre" in honour of Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize-winning image of a starving Sudanese child crouched in the foreground of a patchy field while a vulture looks on from the background.

The rectangular box structure, encased in metal sheeting, stands diagonally on a floor. At the back of the structure is fluorescent light-



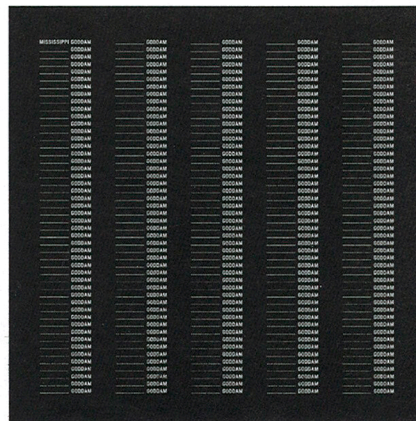
**Out of the darkness: Alfredo Jaar's *Johannesburg* and *This Is What Happened, Miss Simone***

ing in rows. Light is a recurring motif in Jaar's work, sparking conversation about the act of engaging with images.

To enter *The Sound of Silence*, viewers has to wait for a green neon light signal before negotiating their way into the viewing theatre, which has a bench and a projection screen. On each side of the screen are two strobe

lights, whose use the viewer becomes aware of as the eight-minute video progresses.

It narrates Carter's life matter-of-factly, mostly in single or double lines of text. The context of the photograph, the ensuing controversy and its aftermath (the Pulitzer Prize and Carter's suicide) are explained, and as the narration winds down the lights



as one begins to grapple with it, the image fades away.

"When this image was published in 1993 in the *New York Times*, I was blown away," says Jaar, a quietly declamatory artist. "I thought it was the most extraordinary image created about hunger in the world. That bird was us as human beings because there is enough food to feed the planet, and the way we have dealt with hunger in the world is totally unacceptable."

Jaar began working on a version of the installation in 1996, using a slide projector. Unhappy with the results, he left it alone for about a decade, resuming it only after meeting Ravi Rajan, "a technological genius" who designed the software for the project.

Between witnessing Carter's image for the first time and the first successful completion of the project, Jaar went to Rwanda to document the aftermath of the genocide that took an estimated million lives in about 100 days. It was an experience, Jaar says, that led to a distrust for images.

"When I created this work, I wanted to believe that images were still important, that they still had an effect. When I saw that image I thought it could convey a reality without you having to have been there. That image gave me back my faith in

photography, in a way, and I wanted to share that with the audience."

Jaar's work on Rwanda, which he has pursued in various forms since 1994, finds expression at the Goodman Gallery in at least two works selected from his oeuvre, particularly in the untitled, and now iconic, dissection of 17 *Newsweek* covers from April to August 1994.

From the targeted April 6 shooting above Kigali of the plane carrying the Rwandan and Burundian presidents, until July, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front established full control of the country, not a single *Newsweek* edition mentioned Rwanda on its cover. The first mention appears on August 14 1994, when the genocide has morphed into a refugee crisis.

"We didn't want to talk about genocide, we want to talk about refugees," Jaar has said in a public lecture available online.

It is a profound work that supports Jaar's wider theories about the genocide: that not only was the West (particularly the United States and France) complicit in the conflict but also active. Work produced from subsequent visits to Kigali shows how the impact of conflict lingers despite the passage of time.

A three-minute video of still photo-





**At Wits: *The Sound of Silence*, 2006 (courtesy the artist and the Goodman Gallery).** Photo: Ricardo Marcus K

graphs titled *Kigali* (taken in the city in 2008) captures a seated couple locked in a side-by-side embrace in what is apparently a public park. The movement is shot at a diagonal angle, from the rear, so that only their backs and the landscaping of the park are visible.

But, as one studies the couple's embrace, the woman's slightly lopsided posture suggests simmering grief rather than affection. The park and a congealed mound of rocks are in the passage of three minutes revealed to be a monument. "There I am forc-

ing the viewer to commit to looking at the image," says Jaar.

*Amilcar, Frantz, Patrice and the Others* offers a sample of Jaar's work spanning decades. He has expressed his disdain for the insular art world and his desire to escape the "white cube". It is fitting, then, that the only new works by the artist in this package are the ones with "a certain [measure of a] public life", because of their positioning in the gallery's street-facing windows.

Here we find large neon-light installations bearing the name of black consciousness and Pan-Africanist icons such as Amilcar Cabral, Fela Kuti, Frantz Fanon and Patrice Lumumba.

The use of neon lighting as a trope for capitalist consumption is clear, and this intervention does not scale the heights of *This Is Not America*, Jaar's recurring Times Square installation, and perhaps doesn't try to. On the other hand, if one was in search of commodified black bodies, then Rosebank is the place.

Another noteworthy piece is *The Man*, which springs from Irving Wallace's book of the same name and

which looks at how a sociocultural wellspring brought to life the idea of a black US president.

"It was the first time that the idea of a black president came up in a work of fiction," says Jaar. "So in 1972 a film was made with James Earl Jones as the president and after that there have been many books, TV series, songs, raps, so it became a part of culture for 50 years."

Asked about doing a critique of President Barack Obama, Jaar says he would run the risk of falling into the "enemy" trap.

In fact, one glaring critique of his work could be that *The Sound of Silence*, 2005, a video of a steaming tea cup in Nelson Mandela's Robben Island cell, suggests a tender spot for Mandela, which could do with further research to unravel the prevailing narrative of the former president.

The moment of the saintly Mandela has passed and we can only imagine what kind of work Jaar would produce from an extended foray into this subject. But, ultimately, Jaar's works find their strength in their open-endedness.