

Get inside to think outside of this box

'Sound of Silence' contextualises Kevin Carter's harrowing Sudan image, writes **Tymon Smith**

WHAT'S in the box? That's the question everyone was asking at the Wits Art Museum on Tuesday night.

Those who'd come out of the box were not very forthcoming, creating more expectation in the minds of those waiting to get inside the box.

The box in question takes up the main exhibition space of the museum. It's made of steel and a bank of fluorescent lights on one side blinds you momentarily as you move to the entrance. There you have to wait until the security guard, watching a light that turns from red to green, tells you it's time to enter.

A day later and Alfredo Jaar, the artist who created the box for his installation *The Sound of Silence*, is walking through the Goodman Gallery as preparations are made for the opening of his show there. Amilcar, Frantz, Patrice and the Others has no boxes in it.

Of Tuesday's *Sound of Silence* opening, Jaar says that although the installation has shown 26 times in countries around the world since 2006, its arrival in Johannesburg is a "homecoming".

"It's never been more contextualised than here."

What's in the box? Well, to describe it in too much detail would be to spoil it, so let's say that *The Sound of Silence* is an



CEREBRAL: Artist Alfredo Jaar draws attention to injustice

Picture: MADELENE CRONJÉ

eight-minute video installation about one of the most famous images of the 20th century and the man who made it, South African photojournalist Kevin Carter. It's the Pulitzer Prize-winning shot of a girl crawling

towards a feeding station in Sudan while a vulture lurks behind her. After its publication on March 26 1993 in the *New York Times*, indignant readers and opinion pieces demanded to know what Carter had done for the girl after clicking his shutter. Just over a year later Carter, 33, committed suicide.

Jaar's piece, which he wrote in 1995 but only found the technical capability to produce a decade later, reflects not only on Carter's troubled life and sensitivity to the horrors of his profession but also on the society that produces the need for photojournalists.

"People don't really understand what these guys do. They leave their families and they go to these places ... and they confront the horrors of the world. They do it because they want to show their peers and the citizens of the world what the world is and the things we have to do to resolve it, and they suffer for it," says Jaar.

His intention is to shed a more compassionate light on the image and its creator.

"For me it's the most extraordinary picture about hunger in the world and we are the culture — the Western world."

The box, with its strict control and foreboding monolithic presence, makes it difficult to escape the work and was created by Jaar in response to the fick-



THE HORROR: Photographer Kevin Carter committed suicide just over a year after taking this Pulitzer Prize-winning shot

Picture: KEVIN CARTER/SYGMA/CORBIS

leness of the art world, where “the average attention span is three seconds”.

“You spend two years of your life working on a work and people come by for three seconds and they get bored and they’re on their phones and they move on. This is a piece that’s very serious. It’s a lament and it has the structure of a Greek chorus. It’s poetic and I want you to treat it respectfully. Hopefully you won’t leave before it’s finished and so I can share with you a story that I’ve built along a certain sequence.”

Born in Chile in 1956, Jaar lived on the island of Martinique between the ages of five and 16. The experience shaped his world view and his relationship

to Africa. He attended the Lycée Schoelcher, Frantz Fanon’s alma mater, and during his time in Martinique the mayor was Aimé Césaire, the writer and theorist whose ideas helped shape post-colonial African identity and politics.

When it was time for him to leave the island, Jaar recalls: “I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to kill myself. I thought I was black at that moment. It had been a psychological operation in order to live there and be fine and my life was there.”

After living for 10 years back in Chile under the Pinochet regime, Jaar fled to New York, where he has lived for 36 years.

Recognised as one of the foremost contemporary artists of

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his era, Jaar often deals with the representation of Africa in Western media and highlights social injustice in his work.

In the windows of the Goodman Gallery, neon lights welcome viewers to Kalakuta Republic and memorialise its creator, Fela Kuti, the Nigerian musician and activist who Jaar met in the ’80s in Lagos.

“Fela was a conceptual artist. He created his own country in protest against the Nigerian dictatorship and I thought that was absolutely brilliant.”

Other works highlight the Rwandan genocide and the US media’s failure to cover it until it was too late.

Jaar’s work may appear straightforward, but when he

teaches students he tells them that he believes “art is 99% thinking and 1% making”. There is a careful consideration of the relationship between his works and the broader, deeper meanings they examine.

“To me the art world and the world of culture is the last remaining space of freedom,” says Jaar, who has projects lined up around the globe this year.

And if you need any evidence of Jaar’s belief, do yourself a favour and go and find out what’s in the box.

● *The Sound of Silence is at the Wits Art Museum until April 10 and Amilcar, Frantz, Patrice and the Others is at the Goodman Gallery in Joburg until March 23.*