

ALFREDO JAAR

LAMENT OF THE IMAGES

DEBRA BRICKER BALKEN





SIGNS OF LIFE, 1994

Two hundred postcards.

Alfredo Jaar's first project devoted to Rwanda was actually produced on-site. Composed of two hundred scenic postcards of the Rwandan landscape that Jaar mailed to friends from neighboring Uganda, these pre-existing images are informed, like all of his work, with a *double-entendre* that elliptically references both the genocide as well as an artistic prototype. Rather than directly declaring his own safety in the chaos that still existed after the massacre, each postcard notes the name of a survivor whom he encountered and interviewed while travelling within the country. For example, "VENANT KAREKEZ IS STILL ALIVE!" appears on the reverse of one image, the phrasing of which echos a similar project by On Kawara, a Conceptual artist, who some twenty years earlier engaged the postcard as a device to transmit statements that pertained to his own psychological state. By reversing the solipsistic or self-referential content of On Kawara's work, Jaar's *Signs of Life* becomes a politically charged work, filled with allusions to Rwanda's pogrom.



RWANDA, RWANDA, 1994

Offset print, 68½ x 46½ in. Edition of 100.

One of Jaar's first projects when he returned from Rwanda was to create a public piece for the city of Malmo, Sweden. Drawing on one of the most commonly used fonts, Futura Bold, Jaar repeated the word Rwanda eight times in a size as large as the confines of his paper would permit. This poster, which was sited in various locations throughout the city, was intended to subvert the strategies of advertising by focusing exclusively on a text, here of a word that conveyed little meaning in the West. Seen by Jaar as a "kind of cry," the repetitive structure of this project, combined with its de-emphasis on design becomes metaphoric of the indifference of the international community to the third largest genocide in the twentieth century.

The United Nations Security Council reaches a final agreement to send an international force to Rwanda. One million people have been killed and 2 million have fled the country. Another 2 million are displaced within Rwanda.



UNTITLED (NEWSWEEK), 1994

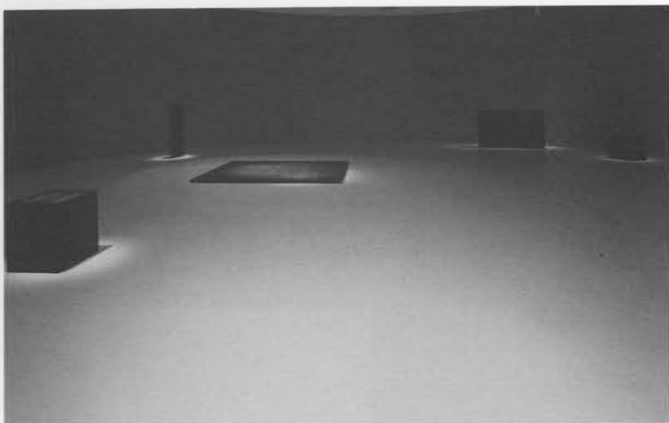
Untitled (Newsweek) exists in three formats: as a work that consists of seventeen covers from the publication spanning April 6 through August 1, 1994, the approximate dates of the genocide in Rwanda; as a project woven into Jaar's book *Let There Be Light*; and as a performance. These covers from *Newsweek*, unwittingly allude to the media's failure to cover a major international event. With no artistic intervention, Jaar reveals the late twentieth century's primary preoccupation with celebrity and its denial of tragedy and atrocity. That *Newsweek* featured the massacre in Rwanda two weeks after it had ended, when the chaos of the refugee camps had escalated, underscores the disinterest and values of the world community.



IMAGES HAVE AN ADVANCED RELIGION. THEY BURY HISTORY, 1995

Exhibition brochure, 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 in. Two cibachrome prints.
39 x 84 in. overall.

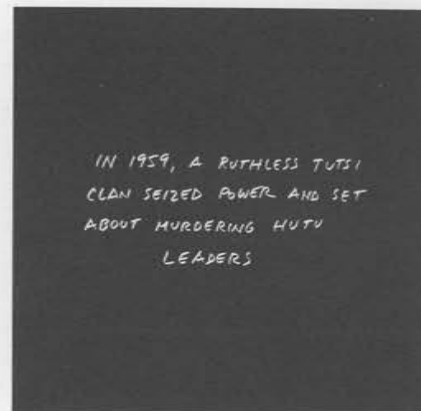
Conceived both as an exhibition brochure and as an artistic project to accompany the installation of *Real Pictures* at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, this work takes the form of a four-page pamphlet, three pages of which contain a fold-out or narrative spread of two photographs. These images mask an incident off-camera that most photojournalists covering the Rwandan tragedy would probably disclose. Instead, Jaar devotes the cover of this booklet to a picture of three young boys caught in an embrace, a gesture that he has referred to as a moment of "solidarity, humanity, and love"; while the interior photograph is of an anti-climactic shot of a crowd within a refugee camp. Jaar's strategy, again, is to occlude the violence of genocide while engaging the viewer's imagination as an active aesthetic and (hopefully) political ingredient.



REAL PICTURES, 1995

372 linen photographic boxes with text stacked in eight differing geometric shapes and 372 cibachrome prints; size of each stack of boxes varies overall; dimensions of installation vary.

Comprised of eight differing geometric shapes of stacked archival black boxes, *Real Pictures* is a funerary piece, a memorial to the victims who perished in the massacre in Rwanda in 1994. The first large-scale installation that Jaar created on the subject, each box conceals a photograph of some aspect of the genocide. A factual description of each picture appears on the top of each container. By veiling the imagery of violence that was widely disseminated by the mass media, Jaar inverts the role of photography while empowering the text as a purveyor of information. Within this dramatically lit installation, these boxes read like tombs, a poetic and evocative metaphor both for the failure of international intervention and for the state of photography.



SLIDE + SOUND PIECE, 1995

Two slide projectors, programmer, sound system. Carousel 1: 66 slides; carousel 2: 55 slides; sound: Geoffrey Oryema from *Beat the Border*, published by Real World, 1993.

Like *Real Pictures*, *Slide+Sound Piece*, focuses exclusively on text, but here music is added as an accompaniment. A narrative history of both the events and circumstances that led to the massacre of 1,000,000 people in Rwanda from April 13 through July 19, 1994, the work attempts to trace through facts something of the oppressed nature of the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. While the press in the early stages of the genocide had cast this tragedy as tribal warfare, Jaar reveals through his texts, the colonial origins of the massacre. With the stirring voice of Geoffrey Oryema interspersed within this performance, Jaar aims to elicit empathic response through the suppression of imagery.

I am lured by faraway distances, the immense void I project upon the world. A feeling of emptiness grows in me; it infiltrates my body like a light and impalpable fluid. In its progress, like a dilation into infinity, I perceive the mysterious presence of the most contradictory feelings ever to inhabit a human soul. I am simultaneously happy and unhappy, exalted and depressed, overcome by both pleasure and despair in the most contradictory harmonies. I am so cheerful and yet so sad that my tears reflect at once both heaven and earth. If only for the joy of my sadness, I wish there were no death on this earth.-----

IN MEMORIAM, 1995

Two color silkscreen, 26³/₄ x 38¹/₂ in. Edition of 50.

Composed of a text by Cioran (1911–95), one of Jaar's favorite writers, this poetic recasting of a potent passage from *On the Heights of Despair* stands in as an elegy for the Rwandan pogrom. Again, without the aid of pictorial devices, this silkscreen utilizes text to convey a complex emotional state. A mirror of Jaar's own conflicting experiences in Rwanda, of encountering "humanity" alongside of violence, the work encapsulates the dual or multiple feelings that frequently accompany the witnessing of death. The last line here, "If only for the joy of my sadness, I wish there were no death on this earth," summarizes the profundity of Jaar's ongoing reaction to the genocide.



LET THERE BE LIGHT, 1996

Ten light boxes with black and white text, 14 x 20 x 3 in. each; one quad vision light box with four color transparencies, 26 x 23 x 6 in.; overall dimensions: 66 x 460 in. Edition of three.

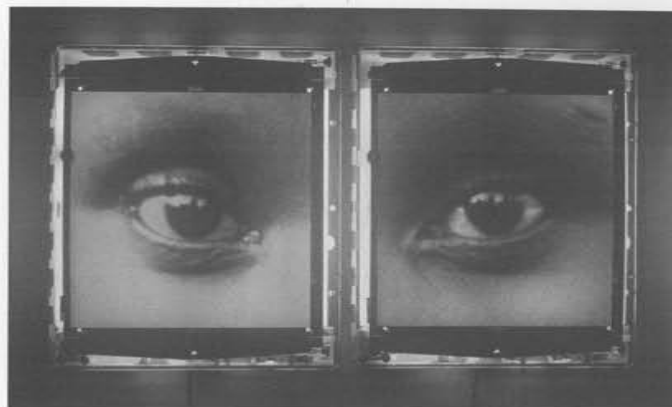
Drawing on a detail from the cover photograph used in *Images have an advanced religion; they bury history*, this installation combines the image of two embracing boys and the names of ten Rwandan cities in which the largest massacres took place. Words such as Kigali, Mibirizi, and Butare are illuminated in this darkened installation, providing along with the quad vision box, the only source of light in this theatrical space. As the two children fold into each other's arms in a sequence of four changing photographs, Jaar reminds us that the names of these towns remain silent, unknown to the world, despite the atrocity that now marks their history. This invisibility, Jaar suggests, is the outgrowth of a prevailing world view that Africa is a secondary subject or continent, overshadowed by the dominant needs and interests of developed countries.



EMBRACE, 1996

Quad vision box with four transparencies, 26 x 23 x 6 in. Time cycle, 4 x 15 seconds.

This work highlights the quad vision light box that is the visual component of *Let There Be Light*. On its own, this work focuses exclusively on the touching four-part sequence of two young boys who are witness to some unspecified event that appears off-camera. As the narrative moves from frame to frame, their embrace becomes symbolic of what Jaar refers to as the "humanity, solidarity and love that we as a world community did not provide to the citizens of Rwanda."



THE EYES OF GUTETE EMERITA, 1996

(Quad vision version) Two quad vision light boxes with six black and white and two color transparencies; each box: 26 x 23 x 6 in; time cycle: 45', 30', 15' and 1/5 seconds; overall dimensions: 26 x 48 x 6 in.

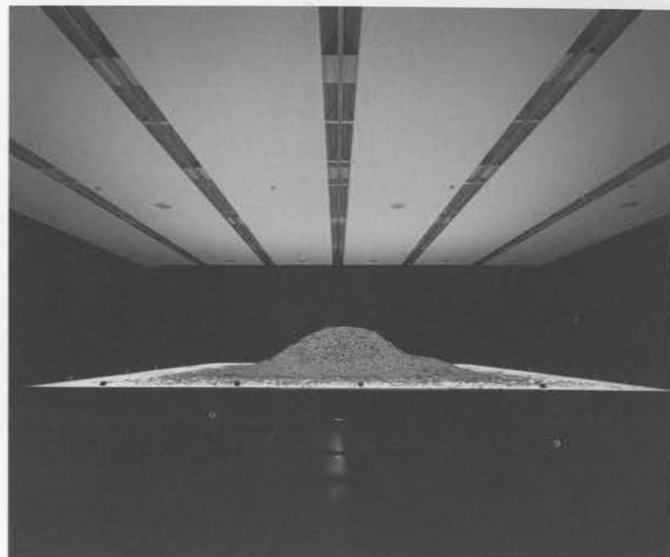
The quad vision box has enabled Jaar to realize the early cinematic implications of his work. Here, a text is spread over two boxes that evolves in three moving frames that recounts the story of Gutete Emerita, a woman who witnessed the slaughter of her son and husband and who somehow managed to escape with her daughter. As the details of this event or text unfold, Jaar primes the viewer for some denouement or expected photograph. Instead of a prolonged image, however, the eyes of Gutete flash on the screen in a 1/5 second shot, imprinting our minds with a haunting image. Because Jaar feels that photography can no longer induce emotional reaction given the omnipresence of imagery generated by the mass media, he pursues alternative strategies such as the quad vision box (a mechanism ironically developed by the advertising industry) to attempt a more lasting impression.



THE EYES OF GUTETE EMERITA, 1996

(Artist book version) Cloth, paper, and mirror, 8 x 8 in.
Edition of 500.

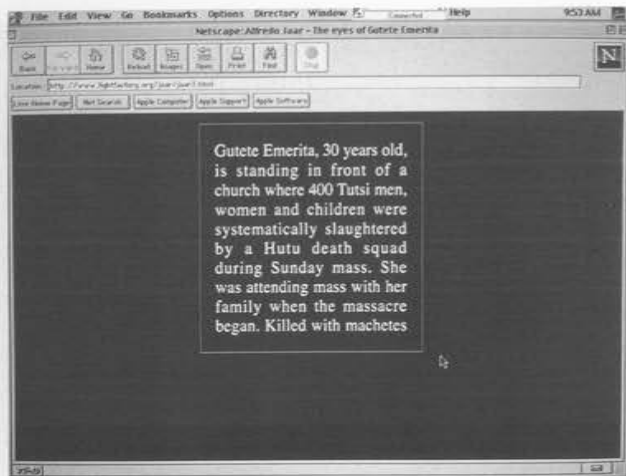
This project, which was published on the occasion of an exhibition of *Real Pictures* at the City Gallery of Contemporary Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, incorporates the same text as the quad vision version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*. But instead of the $\frac{1}{5}$ second shot that follows after the story, Jaar has drawn on a thin strip of foil, a mirror that captures our eyes rather than that of the survivor. The conceit here is a disturbing one—that we as a world community are ultimately responsible for the Rwandan tragedy.



THE EYES OF GUTETE EMERITA, 1996

(Light table version) light table, slides, slide magnifiers, light box with b/w transparency; light table; 36 x 216 x 144 in.;
light box: 6 x 258 x 4 in.; overall space dimensions: 15 x 40 x 28 ft.

The third version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* consists of a large installation, here with the same text that appears both in the quad vision box and artist's book. Configured as a thin fifteen-foot long band of narrative that is set in a wall, the description works as a filmic device to move the viewer along a dark hallway to a door. Beyond this corridor lies a huge light table with a mound of one million slides of a singular image of Gutete's eyes. A metaphor for the vast number of Rwandans who perished in the genocide in 1994, this piece also works to engage an audience through use of the magnifiers or loupes that appear along the edge of the table. As Jaar has stated, "Her eyes mirror our eyes. Her eyes are full of the content that we rejected."



THE EYES OF GUTETE EMERITA, 1997

(Internet version) <http://www.lightfactory.org/jaar/jaar.html>

Like the quad vision box, the internet version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* operates much like cinema. While the viewer is still required to advance each frame of text here, when the eyes of Gutete are revealed at the end of the story, they remain on the screen but for a split second. Jaar's strategy to "make an image unforgettable," circumvents the now conventional approaches of photojournalism. In lieu of violence and cruelty, he offers a more poetic image, one that by resistance to mainstream photographic tactics is capable, at least, of some possibility of holding the viewer.



THE SILENCE OF NDUWAYEZU, 1997

Light table, slides, slide magnifiers, light box with b/w transparency
 light table: 36 x 200 x 120 in.; light box: 12 x 18 x 5 in.;
 overall space dimensions: 15 x 40 x 28 ft.

The Silence of Nduwayezu reverses the format of the light table version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*. Unlike the textual prelude that accompanies the staging of the later work, the viewer is introduced here first to the large light table and subsequently to a narrative label within a light box that appears on the wall. This installation draws, as the text discloses, on the experience of a young orphaned boy whom Jaar encountered in one of the refugee camps. His silence, or refusal to speak for a four-week period, not only caught Jaar's attention but became emblematic of the world community's inability to explain or to account for the widespread brutality. The light table here functions similarly to illuminate a mass of one million slides, all of Nduwayezu's eyes.



FIELD, ROAD, CLOUD, 1997

Three color cibachrome prints, three b/w cibachrome prints colors; prints: 40 x 60 in.; b/w prints 6 x 9 in.; overall dimensions: 40 x 275 in. Edition of five.

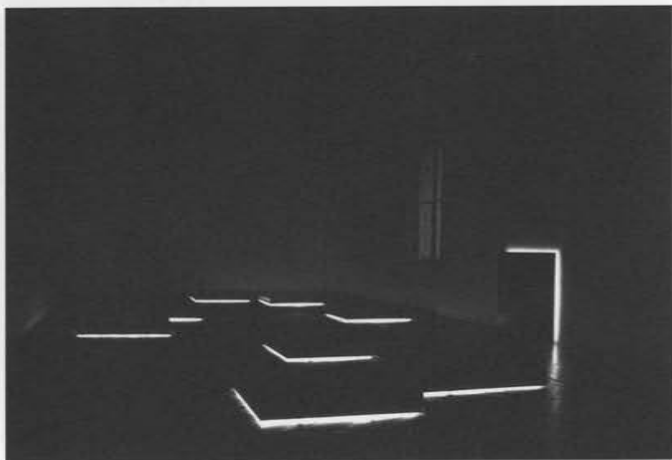
The three sumptuous images of fragments of a landscape that partially make up this work are meant as a foil, another of Jaar's ongoing ploys to seduce the viewer. Ostensibly pictures of an unravished field, road and cloud formation, small sketches that accompany each of these cibachrome prints alter whatever beauty is initially associated with each image. The information in these drawings reveals that these sites, especially that below the sky, are marked by the genocide. For the description that is linked to this picture states that beneath this seemingly luminous image lies a mound of 500 bodies. As in all of Jaar's projects devoted to Rwanda, *Field, Road, Cloud* points to the ways in which imagery can be recast by information, a potent reminder of the shaded photographs that appear in the press.



AUGUST 29, 1994, 1997

Artist book, 8 x 5 in. Edition of 1000.

Commissioned by Art Metropole, Toronto and published by Little Cockroach Press, this work exists as the artist book version of *Field, Road, Cloud*. The intimate format of this work, along with the sense of motion and filmic timing that is conveyed as each page is turned, adds another take on Jaar's ongoing investigation into the way in which information changes the way in which we view images.



UNSEEN, 1997

Nine light boxes, 40 x 40 in. each, overall installation dimensions vary.

This installation of nine square black light boxes, devoid of text and imagery, expands on the funerary content of *Real Pictures*. With eight of these square forms disposed on the floor and one against a wall, these geometric planes provide the only source of light in an otherwise dark interior. As undifferentiated, austere shapes that are pervaded with light, they become symbols of the suppressed silence of the dead. Like most of Jaar's work that comprises his Rwanda series, *Unseen* utilizes light for spiritual effect, an allusion to the ineffable loss and tragedy of genocide.



THE GIFT, 1998

Paper: 10 x 10 x 10 cm. Edition of fifteen thousand.

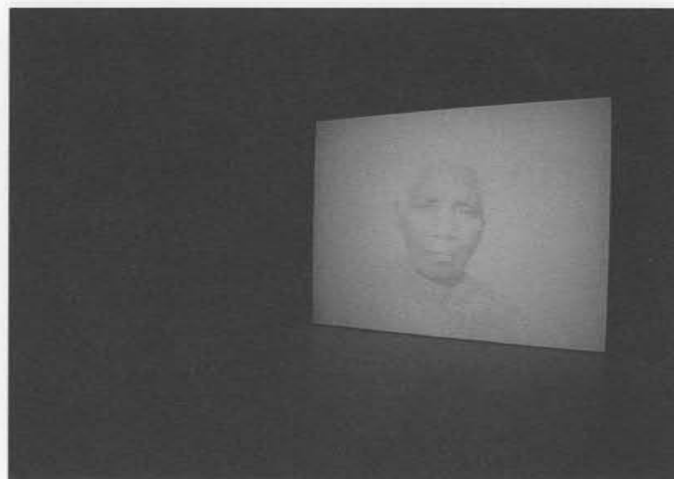
A public performance enacted over a ten-day-long period in Stockholm, *The Gift* is both a tribute to and fund-raiser for Doctors Without Borders, a non governmental organization that assisted in the care of manifold victims of the Rwandan genocide. A basic red paper cube that becomes transformed as it is unfolded and refolded into a money box and art work, Jaar and his assistants distributed 15,000 of these works at a dozen sites throughout the city. As the cube is opened and eventually closed, the sequence of images of embracing boys in *Let There Be Light* is revealed; on the top of the box is the bank account number of Doctors Without Borders. While the yield of donations has yet to be determined, Jaar hopes that the presence of the cube alone in each participant's home will generate an understanding that the only individuals who came to the aid of the Rwandan people were those not implicated in politics.



EMERGENCY, 1998

Metal pool, water, fiberglass maquette, hydraulic system pool;
pool: 36 x 288 x 278 in.; maquette: 12 x 258 x 236 in;
emergency frequency: 1 minute every 12 minutes.

Produced for a recent exhibition of thirteen of Jaar's Rwanda projects at the Centre d'Art Santa Monica in Barcelona, *Emergency* consists of a map of Africa set within a pool of a water that gradually surfaces over a twelve-minute period. With Spain situated in southern Europe in close geographic proximity to Africa, Jaar contends the country "could have been the bridge between the two worlds...but has not because of its racism." This simultaneously emerging and receding image becomes yet another pointed metaphor for Jaar to assert the way in which Africa has been treated both by developed nations and by the mass media. "I wanted to put Africa back on the map," Jaar has said of this work, a reference to its diminished status as a continent.



EPILOGUE, 1998

35mm silent color film; 3 mins.

In *Epilogue*, a gradually emerging and fading image appears of an eighty-eight-year-old woman named Caritas Namazuru who Jaar encountered in flight from her home in Kibilira to a refugee camp in Nyagazambu, Rwanda. Like the anecdotal nature of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* and *The Silence of Nduwayezu*, this visual narrative is of an elderly woman who walked three hundred and six kilometres to seek safety. But without a textual accompaniment, Jaar relies primarily on the sadness and intensity of this survivor's gaze to convey her plight, a fitting image or end-point to his projects on Rwanda.



MEDITATION SPACE (TEA), 1998

Rwandan tea, four cotton cushions; cushions: 6 x 80 x 80 in.;
each overall space: 30 x 24 ft.

The last two installations that Jaar has produced for his Rwanda series include two meditation spaces, each with large-scale texts by Cioran in reverse black and white that appeared in *In Memoriam*. Combined with the scent of tea and coffee from Rwanda (the primary crops grown in the country) that are distilled in these spaces, these two areas are yet another, albeit more contemplative, means to engage the viewer in considering the events that unfolded in Rwanda in 1994.



MEDITATION SPACE (COFFEE), 1998

Rwandan coffee, four cotton cushions; cushions: 6 x 80 x 80 in.;
each overall space: 30 x 24 ft.