

A SEA OF GRIEFS IS NOT A PROSCENIUM

The Rwanda Projects of Alfredo Jaar

They fired at the hospital from outside and threw grenades over the walls into the courtyard. The patients did not understand what was happening. They started to wander around, singing, with their hands in the air.

—A worker at Rwanda's main psychiatric hospital, describing the beginning of a massacre carried out by Hutu militiamen in April 1994, one of the first in the Rwandan genocide

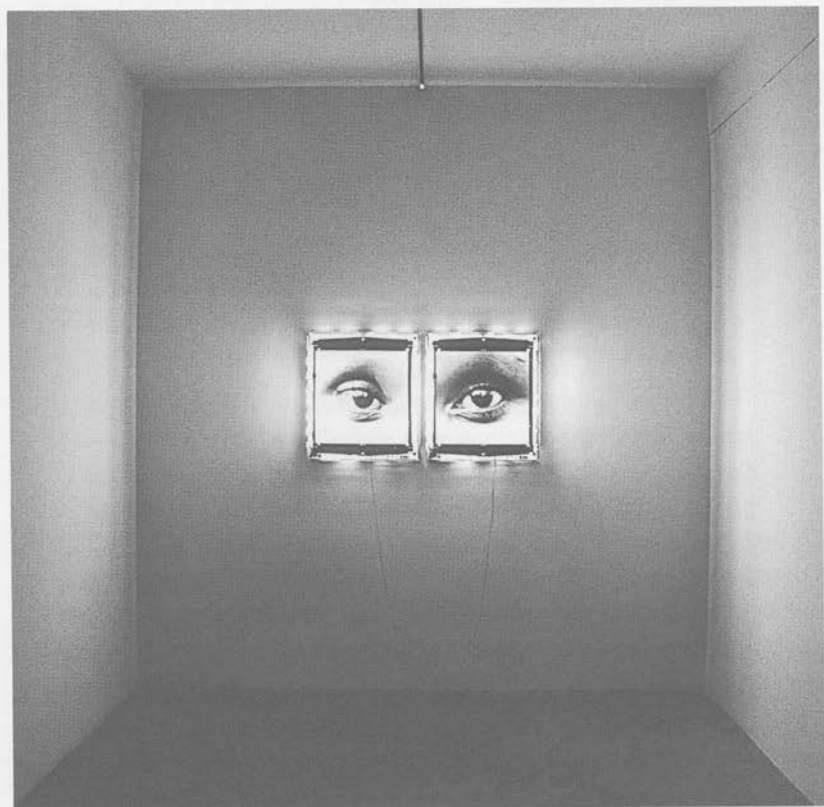
We are forever pursued by our actions. Their ordering, their circumstances, and their motivation may perfectly well come to be profoundly modified a posteriori. This is merely one of the snares that history and its various influences sets for us. But can we escape becoming dizzy? And who can affirm that vertigo does not haunt the whole of existence?

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of griefs is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear.

—Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*

Rwanda. Rwanda. Rwanda: the name now calls forth a flood of images—corpses clogging the Kagera River, bloated and bleached white, collected like driftwood at the base of a falls; dismembered bodies scattered in a churchyard, under a glowing white statue of Christ the Savior, lifting his arms in benediction; and the gray squalor of the refugee camps, with emaciated children turning their huge



Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996

eyes to the cameras. These were the images that appeared in newspapers around the world in 1994 as the genocide occurred in Rwanda.

The images were put there to illustrate news stories, but in the end they acted independently. The truth is, no one read the news stories. If they had read them, they would have demanded that something be done to stop the killing. They did, however, look at the images. Why didn't people respond to these images with outrage, and demand political action?

It is partly because the politics of images, the way they are organized, has changed, and this has acted to erode their effectiveness, and their power to elicit action. Filmmakers have been pointing to this erosion for years. So have the best photographers. But there has always been something about "real pictures" of real violence that undercuts their political effect, and separates them from experience.

In his short essay "Shock-Photos," Roland Barthes addressed this lack of effect. "It is not enough for the photographer to *signify* the horrible for us to experience it," he wrote. These images, intended to convey horror, fail to do so "because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgement: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing—except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence. . . ." Such images do not compel us to action, but to acceptance. The action has already been taken, and we are not implicated. Our complicity is concealed, intact. "The perfect legibility of the scene, its formulation, dispenses us from receiving the image in all its scandal; reduced to the state of pure language, the photograph does not disorganize us."¹ We are not disorganized because news images operate within a perfectly organized rhetoric of consumption, the pure language of the spectatorship under which we now live. Images of suffering and misery elsewhere in the world are used as reminders of what we are free from. They operate in the greater image environment of consumption to offset images of contentment, to provide the necessary contrast. Their use value, and their effect, is

palliative. This effect is far-reaching, and one of the histories thus buried was that of Rwanda.

The story of what happened in Rwanda in 1994 is one of massive criminality and complicity. It is the story of a state-sponsored genocide that took years to plan and direct, but only a hundred days to carry out, as the rest of the world looked on. It constitutes the third genocide of this century, following that of the Armenians by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and 1916, and that of the Jews by the Nazis during World War II.

Faced with growing opposition within Rwanda, and increasing pressures from without to share power, the single-party government of President Juvénal Habyarimana was showing signs of increasing instability in 1990. "Hutu Power" extremists within the Habyarimana government began to incite the Hutu majority population of Rwanda to attack the minority Tutsis, saying that they were the source of all the troubles. Radio Mille Collines ("A thousand hills") constantly spewed propaganda calling on the Hutus to "finish the work begun in 1959" (when the Hutus massacred a hundred thousand Tutsis and drove thousands of others into exile), and leaving nothing to the imagination concerning the nature of this "work." "The grave is only half full," they said. "Who will help us fill it?" In order for the genocide to be successful this time, they instructed, "The children must also be killed." The children they failed to eliminate in 1959 had now grown into the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Uganda. Commandment number eight of the "Hutu Ten Commandments" printed in the government newspaper read: "The Hutus should stop having mercy on the Tutsis."

A Hutu Power politician named Dr. Léon Mugesera gave a speech in December 1992 in which he appealed to his fellow Hutus: "We the people are obliged to take responsibility ourselves and wipe out this scum. No matter what you do, do not let them get away." To the Tutsis, he said (echoing old racial myths about the ethnic origins of the Tutsis): "I am telling you that your home is in Ethiopia and we will send you back through the Nyabarongo River as a short-

cut."² In the slaughter to come, the Nyabarongo and other rivers were choked with the corpses of slain Tutsis.

The authors of the Rwanda genocide are well known, and most of them are still at large in Congo, Kenya, or in the West. Dr. Mugesera took refuge in Canada, and as of the fall of 1997 could be found advising his graduate students at Laval University in Quebec City. Habyarimana's brother-in-law, Protais Zigiranyirazo, a founding member of the death squad Zero Network and an original shareholder in Radio Mille Collines, was given sanctuary in France.³

Since it is often difficult to tell Hutu from Tutsi by sight, death lists had been prepared using identity cards that were first issued during the colonialist period, listing the ethnicity of each bearer. Hutu youths were formed into militias, called the Interahamwe ("Those who fight together"), and were armed. When Habyarimana's plane was shot down on April 6, 1994, the Hutu leadership blamed the Tutsi-led RPF for his death (it has since been alleged that the president's plane was actually shot down by the Hutu extremists themselves, perhaps with the assistance of French soldiers⁴), and unleashed the Interahamwe to begin slaughtering Tutsis. Using the identity lists, the militiamen began to pull Tutsis from their homes and stop them at roadblocks, and government officials in the provinces lured Tutsis into churches and community centers, where they were stabbed, clubbed, and hacked to death. One survivor of the Ntarama slaughter, a child of twelve named Mutaganzwa, said: "They told us we were *inyenzi* (cockroaches), and then they began to kill us."⁵ Tutsi women were raped, tortured, and mutilated before being killed. Many Hutus who refused to participate in the carnage were executed along with the Tutsis. Within three months, a million people were dead, out of a total population of eight million. An equivalent death toll per capita in the United States would be twenty-five million. The scale and speed of this genocide was unprecedented.

It was important to kill everyone. If someone survived, they could tell the story of what had happened, and name names. It was especially important to kill all the children. If any of them were spared, they could go on telling the story for a long time, and they

would never forget. And it was important to make it look as if all of the Hutus left alive participated in the killing, so that none of them could later point the finger at someone else.

The genocide in Rwanda required extensive planning, organization, and single-minded execution. It also required the complicity of the world outside of Rwanda. Given the speed with which the genocide was conducted—one million people in a hundred days, or ten thousand murders per day—any response from outside would have saved thousands of lives. Two weeks into the slaughter, the Canadian commander of the U.N. forces in Rwanda said he could end the genocide with five to eight thousand troops. Most military leaders now agree that the genocide could have been stopped in two or three days with a few thousand properly armed troops (since the Hutu militias did not have heavy artillery, and were cowards⁶). But when the United Nations began to mobilize an interdictory force to stop the killing, the United States and Belgium pressured the U.N. instead to *reduce* the number of their troops in Rwanda, from 2,500 to 270 men, who were then left in Kigali with no recourse but to stand around and watch it happen. And in May 1994, a U.N. plan to send five thousand African troops into Rwanda also collapsed because the United States opposed it. When it was finally authorized, the mobilization was held up for months while the U.S. dickered with the U.N. over the rental fee on U.S. armored personnel-carriers needed for the intervention to proceed.⁷

The French government, which had supported and armed the Rwandan government troops, finally sent their troops in only after the genocide was over, and the invading RPF troops were driving the Hutu government army and militias out of Rwanda. The million massacred Tutsis were replaced nearly one-to-one by returning refugees. But the French ended up protecting and providing official sanctuary for the fleeing Hutus.

When the killers fled, they led two million of their fellow Hutus out in a mass exodus. Fifty thousand of them died of disease, hunger, and lack of water. At that time, the international community, moved by pictures of refugees on the run, swung into action, providing mas-

sive humanitarian aid to the Hutus who had fled to Zaire. The refugee camps in Zaire were controlled by the political and military leaders of the genocide. Under international "humanitarian" protection, and with the support of Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, the Interahamwe began to regroup.

THE SCANDAL OF SILENCE

Some will object that the world did not know what was happening until it was too late. The record refutes that. Reading through the *New York Times* coverage of the genocide in Rwanda, it is clear that all of the above facts were known before and as the genocide happened. It's all there, in dated black and white. The world's inaction was not due to ignorance of the facts, but to a prejudice against them. On April 15, 1994, Elaine Sciolino reported in the *Times* that "Although it has not been exactly articulated this way, no member of the United Nations with an army strong enough to make a difference is willing to risk the lives of its troops for a failed central African nation-state with a centuries-old history of tribal warfare."⁸

This characterization of the genocide as "centuries-old . . . tribal warfare," or "an atavistic replaying of ancient hatreds,"⁹ would be repeated throughout the killing. But what happened in Rwanda in 1994 was not war, but state-sponsored genocide against civilians. To call it "tribal warfare" defames the dead and exempts the guilty. American historian Alison Des Forges has written that, far from being "part of the 'failed state' syndrome that appears to plague some parts of Africa, Rwanda was too successful as a state."¹⁰ It was a state that, with the help of foreign powers, eliminated nearly all potential opposition within the country. Only the returning Tutsi refugees and the RPF prevented it from fully profiting from the genocide.

Also on April 14, 1994, Bob Dole, then Republican leader in the U.S. Senate, replied to a question about Rwanda on television's *Face the Nation* in this way: "I don't think we have any national interest here. I hope we don't get involved there. I don't think we will. The Americans are out. As far as I'm concerned in Rwanda, that ought to be the end of it."¹¹ But that wasn't the end of it. The next day, hun-

dreds of unarmed men, women, and children were slaughtered at the Catholic church in Nyamata. Two days later, the massacre at Nyarabuye began. Philip Gourevitch later wrote: "The killers killed all day at Nyarabuye, and at night they cut the Achilles tendons of survivors and went off to eat behind the church, roasting whole stolen cows in big fires, and then in the morning, still drunk on banana beer after a night of sleep beneath the cries of their victims, they went back and killed again, for three days or four days or five days. They worked like that."¹² When government officials organized the massacres of Tutsis in 1990, they told Hutus that it was part of their communal work obligation (*umuganda*) to kill their neighbors.

Bob Dole is a war hero, who fought against Hitler's genocide of the Jews. How could he turn his back on the genocide in Rwanda?

One month later, on May 17, the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, was reported as saying: "The delay and lack of leadership shown by the United States Government in confronting genocide in Rwanda is appalling."¹³ And U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali called the United States' lack of response to genocide "a scandal."

In London, *Guardian* columnist Simon Hoggart offered this chilling explanation for Britain's lack of response: "Rwandans are thousands of miles away. Nobody you know has ever been on holiday to Rwanda. And Rwandans don't look like us."¹⁴

In June, when the hundred-day pogrom in Rwanda was nearly complete, President Bill Clinton instructed U.S. government spokesmen to avoid using the word "genocide" to describe what had happened there, so as to avoid U.S. implication and responsibilities under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Under this agreement, the United States and all other signatories pledged to respond to genocide wherever it occurred, so that "never again" would the horror perpetrated by the Nazis be allowed to happen. What happened in Rwanda was precisely what the United Nations was formed to prevent.

When the French government suddenly decided to support armed intervention in Rwanda, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé

pontificated: "It is no longer time to deplore the massacres with our arms folded, but to take action. The urgent need for international intervention should lead us to show both imagination and courage."¹⁵

The RPF leaders in Rwanda discouraged the French intervention, pointing out that "they would be intervening to protect the torturers." In the years leading up to the genocide, the French government had backed the Rwandan government against the RPF, and had armed the men who organized the militia gangs. Under the French, the Rwandan army grew from five thousand men to thirty thousand. "Whatever happens, we will do it," vowed French President François Mitterand in June 1994; "every hour counts."¹⁶ In his 1996 essay on "Understanding the Rwandan Massacre," Ugandan writer Mahmood Mamdani noted that "so public was France's role in the training of armed militias that would become the storm-troopers of the genocide—particularly the Interahamwe—that when I got to Kigali it was common to hear the French President called *Mitterahamwe*."¹⁷

What the French political leaders knew full well came as a surprise to their soldiers on the ground. On July 1, 1994, one of them said: "This is not what we were led to believe. We were told that Tutsi were killing Hutu, and now this."¹⁸ And on July 2, another said: "We were manipulated. We thought the Hutu were the good guys and the victims."¹⁹

As the new government of Rwanda under the RPF was trying to rebuild, the world was feeding and protecting the killers, who were regrouping in Zaire, and strengthening themselves for war.

THE CULTURE OF IMPUNITY

On July 24 in Hot Springs, Arkansas, President Clinton was pressed by reporters to explain his lack of response to Rwanda. "We're doing the best we can," the president said, "but we're going to do more. If you look at the record, I think it would very difficult to point the finger at anyone."²⁰

But it is not difficult. The truth is that the United States, through the United Nations, could have intervened in April 1994 and saved

hundreds of thousands of Rwandan lives, with limited risk to U.S. troops. There was a right and a wrong in Rwanda, just as surely as there was in Nazi Germany. To conceal this fact behind loose talk of "tribal warfare" and "an uncontrollable spasm of lawlessness and terror" was obscene.

As late as December 21, 1997, James C. McKinley, Jr. wrote this in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* under the title "Searching in Vain for Rwanda's Moral High Ground" and a huge image of the Associated Press photograph of bodies at the falls on the Kagera River:

For Westerners, whose concept of genocide has been shaped by the moral clarity of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, the situation in Central Africa is baffling and frustrating. Today's killers often appear to be tomorrow's victims, and vice versa.

*"It's not a story of good guys and bad guys," said Filip Reyntjens, a history professor in Antwerp, Belgium, whose specialty is Rwanda. "It's a story of bad guys. Period."*²¹

Bad-guy Africans, specifically. Just bad, crazy Africans doing what crazy Africans do. The media representation of Africans in the West has often supported this logic, as Fergal Keane wrote in his book *Season of Blood*:

*In our world of instant televised horror it can become easy to see a black body in almost abstract terms, as part of the huge smudge of eternally miserable blackness that has loomed in and out of the public mind through the decades: Biafra in the sixties; Uganda in the seventies; Ethiopia in the eighties; and now Rwanda in the nineties.*²²

This image of black Africa made the Western powers reluctant to see what happened in Rwanda for what it was: genocide, a crime against humanity. As Hannah Arendt wrote: "If genocide is an actual possibility of the future, then no people on earth . . . can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence without the help and the protection of international law."²³ And David J. Sheffer, the current

U.S. Ambassador at Large for War Crimes Issues, has said: "The most challenging test for the rule of law in our generation is the genocide of 1994 that consumed Rwanda."²⁴ The message from 1994 was that the rule of law does not apply to Rwandans.

The conspiracy of silence, subterfuge, and complicity that surrounded that genocide was the conspiracy of *us*. It is not only the people of Rwanda who were complicit in this crime against humanity, but we who, in our freedom, comfort, and security, sat by our screens and watched it happen.

ALFREDO JAAR'S RWANDA PROJECTS

All art is meaningless to those for whom life itself is merely a spectacle.

—John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time*

You cannot penetrate events with reportage.

—Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*

In August 1994, Alfredo Jaar went to Rwanda to see with his own eyes what had happened there. Accompanied by his friend and assistant Carlos Vásquez, he flew from Paris to Kampala and, after spending two days in Uganda, proceeded overland to Kigali, Rwanda.

The capital city of Kigali, the epicenter of the genocide, was completely devastated. There was no power, no water, and little food. The Hutu militias had fled to the Zairean border. The RPF, formed mostly of Tutsi refugees returning from Uganda, was now in control. The Tutsi dead far outnumbered the living in Kigali, and the few survivors all bore the mark of the miraculous.

With assistance from the United Nations, Jaar and Vásquez began to meet people and to hear their stories. One day, Jaar came upon an inoperative post office and bought up the last of their postcards. The cards, which had been produced at some point by the Rwandan Office of Tourism (and sponsored by the Belgian airline Sabena), all had the same slogan emblazoned across the top: "Rwanda—Découvrez 1,000 merveilles, au pays de 1,000 collines" (Rwanda—Discover 1,000 marvels in the land of 1,000 hills). On

the verso they carried tourist pictures of the wildlife in Akagera National Park—impalas, zebras, eagles, and lions—and beautiful mountain vistas of Kibuye and Gisenyi or the serene skies over Lake Kivu. One postcard showed dancers in full regalia, with long white headdresses and beads.

Jaar began to collect the names of the survivors he met in Kigali and write them on the postcards in this way;

JYAMIYA MUHAWENIMAWA
IS STILL ALIVE!

EMMANUEL RUCOGOZA
IS STILL ALIVE!

CARITAS NAMAZURU
IS STILL ALIVE!

Then he addressed the postcards to his friends and colleagues in other parts of the world. Twenty-five to thirty people received more than two hundred postcards altogether. Since there was no postal service left in Rwanda, he mailed the cards from Uganda on his way out of the country.

This action, which came to be called *Signs of Life*, was Jaar's first from Rwanda. It was simple and direct and at the same time layered with meaning. Rwanda's tourist slogan recalls the more virulent propaganda of Radio Mille Collines, the lush landscapes recall Simon Hoggart's assurance that "Nobody you know has ever been on holiday to Rwanda," and the wildlife shots point to the fact that many in the West know more about the plight of Rwanda's fauna (especially Dian Fossey's gorillas in the mist) than about the slaughter of its human inhabitants. The simple statement that a named person "is still alive" recalls the time when the appearance of one's name on the *genocidaire's* lists meant instant death. It reverses the effect of naming.

As is often the case in Jaar's work, there is also an art historical reference, in this instance to On Kawara's early conceptualist post-

card series from 1969 and 1970. Kawara's *Confirmation* consists of a telegram mailed to Sol LeWitt in February 1970, which read: "I AM STILL ALIVE." A previous series of telegrams carried the messages: "I am not going to commit suicide—Don't worry," "I am not going to commit suicide—Worry," and "I am going to sleep—Forget it."²⁵

In *Signs of Life*, Jaar appropriates a landmark in conceptual art and reinvigorates it, bringing it back to life out of the dead-letter file almost thirty years later. He also pointedly moves the originally self-involved work out into the world, in an act of *engaged* conceptualism.

Jaar and Vásquez joined up with a Swiss journalist and a Japanese reporter and traveled around Rwanda, continuing to document what they found. They went to refugee camps outside of Kigali and on the Zaire-Rwanda border, and on August 29, 1994, they went to Ntarama Church, forty kilometers south of Kigali, where four hundred Tutsi men, women, and children who had sought refuge in the church had been systematically slaughtered during Sunday Mass four months earlier. Outside the church, they met a woman named Gutete Emerita, whose husband and two sons had been hacked to death with machetes before her eyes.

Jaar took photographs wherever he went in Rwanda, and they numbered more than three thousand by the end of the trip. There were times, Jaar said, when the camera acted as a welcome buffer, an *intermediary* between himself and the all too unmediated things he was looking at. At other times, it seemed superfluous and altogether inadequate, reminding him only of "the futility of a gaze that arrives too late." In a later interview, Jaar reflected back on this time:

For me, what was important was to record everything I saw around me, and to do this as methodically as possible. In these circumstances a "good photograph" is a picture that comes as close as possible to reality. But the camera never manages to record what your eyes see, or what you feel at the moment. The camera always creates a new

*reality. I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable. This is why it was so important for me to speak with people, to record their words, their ideas, their feelings. I discovered that the truth of the tragedy was in the feelings, words, and ideas of those people, and not in the pictures.*²⁶

When Jaar returned to New York, he found that he could not look at the photographs he had taken in Rwanda. It would be almost two years before he found a way to actually show the images.

In November of 1994 Jaar was invited to participate in a public art project in Malmö, Sweden. He was given the use of forty light-boxes all around the city in which to display any image he wished. But he did not wish to display an image, yet. The truth is, he *could* not. Instead, he filled the light-boxes with *Rwanda*; that is, with the name Rwanda, repeated over and over, filling up the frame. These posters, scattered around the streets and squares of Malmö, reduced the rhetoric of advertising to a cry of grief. But they also served notice to a complacent public: "You—in your tidy parks, on your bicycles, walking your dogs—look at this name, listen to this name, at least hear it, now: *Rwanda, Rwanda, Rwanda. . .*"

The posters were a raw gesture, produced out of frustration and anger. If all of the images of slaughter and piled corpses, and all of the reportage did so little, perhaps a simple sign, in the form of an insistent cry, would get their attention.

Real Pictures was first exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago in January 1995. Out of the thousands of photographs he had made in Rwanda, Jaar carefully selected sixty images, to show the different aspects of the genocide: the massacres, the refugee camps, the destruction of cities. He then "buried" each of these images in a black linen box. On the top of each box, he had silk-screened in white a written description of the image inside. These boxes were stacked and arranged into "monuments" of var-

ious sizes and shapes. The completed work consists of 550 direct positive color photographs in 550 black linen boxes.

The sixty images were all taken in late August 1994, in Nyagazambu Camp and Ntarama Church in Rwanda, and the Kashusha and Katale refugee camps and Ruzizi 2 bridge in Zaire. The text that replaces them (written in collaboration with the artist and writer Susan Otto) both describes and inscribes them:

Caritas Namazur, 88 years old, fled her home in Kibilira, Rwanda and walked 306 kilometers to reach this camp. Her white hair disappears against the pale sky. Because of the early morning temperatures, she is covered in a blue shawl with a geometric print. Her white blouse cuts across her neck, adorned with a string of amber beads. Her gaze is resigned, weary, and carries the weight of her survival.

Caritas is a Hutu caught between the actions of her own people and the fear of retribution from those who have been victimized. In her life, she has witnessed how many Tutsis had to seek exile in other countries. At this late age, in a dramatic reversal, she too has become a refugee.

Jaar has described *Real Pictures* as a “cemetery of images,” and the effect is certainly funereal. The silence of the gallery is deafening. One wanders among these dark monuments as if through a graveyard, reading epitaphs. But in this case, the inscriptions are in memory of *images*, and of the power that images once had in us. Reading them, we imagine images as if in memory: “real pictures.”

The epigraph to *Real Pictures* comes from the Catalan poet Vincenç Altaió: “Images have an advanced religion; they bury history.”²⁷ In *Real Pictures*, the tables are turned—images are buried in order that history might again be made visible and legible. It is heretical in its refusal of visual representation, in saying no to the image. Sylvère Lotringer has commented that “In Kantian terms, Alfredo Jaar’s installation is a ‘non-presentation.’ It is meant to bear witness to the impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable. . . . This is what

Jaar's black boxes are about: they are the negative of the pictures; a tomb for the media. . . . simultaneously blocking out the media, presenting a mental image and putting the victims to rest."²⁸ And there is a way in which the images become more horrific, and more effective, in their absence. Holland Cotter noted in his review in the *New York Times* that the method of *Real Pictures* "is in the spirit of classical tragedy, where violence takes place out of sight, and is reported only in words."²⁹

In addition to resembling a graveyard, *Real Pictures* also looks like an archive. Stored in this way, archivally, these images accumulate a charge, so that the monuments begin to operate like batteries: image batteries.

One referent of *Real Pictures* is certainly Maya Lin's Vietnam War memorial, in its elegant simplicity and strength (and its visual restraint), but the monuments of *Real Pictures* also allude to Minimalist sculptures such as those by Donald Judd and Tony Smith. Jaar's repositioning of the formal and the contextual in this work is related to Hans Haacke's, in his *U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983*. If *Real Pictures* accuses Minimalism, or formalist purism in general, of anything, it is (as Leo Steinberg wrote of *Isolation Box*) "of being hermetic—the blind deaf-mute icons of a reductive aestheticism." Again, as in *Signs of Life*, the alienation of art for art's sake, and the separation between aesthetics and ethics, is denied.

It had been almost two years since Alfredo Jaar had returned from Rwanda, and he had not yet *shown* any of the images he made there. *Let There Be Light*, first presented at the Printemps de Cahors in France in June 1995, let out the first image. The installation in a converted cloister consisted of a row of ten standard light-boxes and a separate, specially made light-box. Each of the ten smaller light-boxes displayed a different place name: Kigali, Cyangugu, Amahoro, Rukara, Shanghi, Mibirizi, Cyahinda, Kibungo, Butare, and Gikongoro. To most viewers, these names meant nothing, even though a total of one million people had been killed in these places in three months' time in 1994.

The names were made of light. When viewers stood before them to read, their faces were illuminated by the names and then reflected back to them in the shiny black surfaces of the boxes. In this way the names were inscribed on the faces of those who read them.

Reading these names today, one recalls another such list: Chelmo, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz. . . . In Claude Lanzmann's extraordinary film *Shoah*, he evokes the horrors that occurred in those places through words and images, often by showing the faces of the survivors and of the perpetrators and collaborators. The epigraph to that film (like the title *Let There Be Light*) comes from the Bible, from the book of Isaiah. It is from a passage stating that the privileges of the people of God are open to all, even to those who think themselves excluded by race or disability: "I will give them an everlasting name."

The second part of *Let There Be Light* is a light-box fitted with a mechanism that allows four different images to appear on the same surface in sequence, one after another at selected intervals. We see two boys standing with their backs to us. They are looking across an open area to where a crowd has gathered. The boy on the right has his left arm around his friend. In the next shot we have moved closer and a bit to the left, so we can now glimpse the boys' eyelashes. In the third shot, closer still, the boy on the right has intensified his embrace. His fingers are laced together around his friend's shoulder, and his head is now pressed against that of his friend. In the final frame, the boy on the left turns and rests his forehead on his friend's cheek.

The sequence is timed to draw us into the action of this tender embrace. We cannot see what the boys are looking at, but given the context we imagine it is something terrible. We are not shown this, but only their reaction to it. And their reaction is to draw closer together, for comfort and in solidarity.

As we watch the sequence repeated again and again, and are drawn into the boys' embrace over and over, we begin to feel ashamed by our distance from the boys. Their response to what they are seeing is to reach out to one another, in human sympathy. Our response

to what we saw happening on our screens and on our front pages in Rwanda was to turn away.

The second image from Rwanda to appear in Jaar's constructions was *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, first shown at the City Gallery of Contemporary Art in Raleigh, North Carolina in June 1996. Two of the "quadvision" light-boxes were placed side by side, almost touching. As in the composition with the two boys, the sequencing and timing of the changing words and images in this piece are what determines its effect. The method is cinematic even if the form is not.

At the beginning of the sequence, a block of text appears, white on black, in each of the two light-boxes. There are ten lines of text in each box, and they remain there for forty-five seconds:

Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of a church where 400 Tutsi men, women and children were systematically slaughtered by a Hutu death squad during Sunday mass. She was attending mass with her family 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, Gutete managed to escape with her daughter Marie Louise Unumararunga, 12. They hid in a swamp for three weeks, coming out only at night for food.

This text dissolves and more text appears, five lines on each panel, this time for the duration of thirty seconds:

Her eyes look lost and incredulous. Her face is the face of someone who has witnessed an unbelievable tragedy and now wears it. She has returned to this place in the woods because she has nowhere else to go. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, rotting in the African sun.

This text, too, disappears, and is replaced by two more lines:

I remember her eyes.

The eyes of Gutete Emerita.

These last two lines reverberate for fifteen seconds. Then, suddenly, an image flashes into view. It is Gutete's eyes, very close up, filling the two frames, one in each frame. Before one has time to think, they are gone, leaving a potent afterimage.

The first time I saw this piece, I became physically ill at the sight of Gutete Emerita's eyes. I felt dizzy and almost retched. I don't know why this happened, but it did. Perhaps the flash of the image caused a flash of recognition that resulted in vertigo: a surplus of information in too small a period of time. Or maybe it had to do with the way the time of reading slows down over the course of the three movements, and then the visual shock of the eyes blasts in. The truth is that I feel ill now, remembering it.

The Eyes of Gutete Emerita is nothing less than a concentrated attempt to recover the power of the image. By carefully balancing the information carried in the text with the visual information in the image, Jaar propels the relation into crisis. The precision of the altered relation in *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* goes to the heart of the "the social function of subjectivity" that John Berger describes in *Another Way of Telling*:

The way photography is used today both derives from and confirms the suppression of the social function of subjectivity. Photographs, it is said, tell the truth. From this simplification, which reduces the truth to the instantaneous, it follows that what a photograph tells about a door or a volcano belongs to the same order of truth as what it tells about a man weeping or a woman's body.

*If no theoretical distinction has been made between the photograph as scientific evidence and the photograph as a means of communication, this has been not so much an oversight as a proposal.*³⁰

This proposal, which underlies every use of images in the regime of spectatorship, has as its goal the erasure of such distinctions. By insisting on the distinctions, and recalibrating the balance between "evidence" and "communication," Jaar short-circuits the exchange, to get to "the point where an image can make *sense* again." He has said

of this piece: "In that fraction of a second, I want the spectator to see the massacre through the eyes of Gutete Emerita. I think that this is the only way to see the massacre now, since we failed to see it in the actual images of the Rwandan genocide."³¹

At about the same time in 1996 *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* took another form, this one more architectural than cinematic. It was first presented at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra in February 1996.

The first thing we see as we approach the work is a black wall with a thin line of text embedded in it at about eye level. It is the same text that appeared in the light-boxes: "Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of a church. . . ." We read the illuminated text as we move along the wall. "I remember her eyes. The eyes of Gutete Emerita." When we come to the end of the wall, we turn the corner and are confronted by a fantastic sight: a huge (16-by-16-foot) light-table, on which is piled a mountain of 35mm slides. One million of them, in fact. A million slides for a million deaths. As we approach this apparition, we see that there are loupes arranged around the edges of the table. We pick one up, take a slide from the mountain, and hold it up to our eye. It is the eyes of Gutete Emerita. We pick up another slide—more Gutete eyes. Another and another, all eyes.

The artist has said that it is this moment, when our eye comes that close to the eyes of Gutete, which is the moment he has been waiting for. In that moment, the distance imposed by media representations of Rwanda is collapsed. Eschewing the so-called "objectivity" of the news media, Jaar here breaks through to another objectivity, both in the optical sense of the lens that is *closest to the object*, and in the root sense of "something thrown before the mind." As in the light-box version, the effect is almost neurological. Eye-to-eye, we are involved. If the world turned a blind eye to the killings in Rwanda, Gutete Emerita did not. Her eyes saw it clearly. Looking into her eyes, perhaps we too will see it. It is a risky, some will say foolhardy attempt, but it works.

The light-table version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* was reconstructed in April of 1997 at the Galeria Oliva Arauna in Madrid, and in May 1997 at the Franck + Schulte Gallery in Berlin, with a different text on the wall, telling the story of a different survivor:

Over a five-month period in 1994, more than one million Rwandans, mostly members of the Tutsi minority, were systematically slaughtered while the international community closed its eyes to genocide. The killings were largely carried out by Hutu militias who had been armed and trained by the Rwandan military. As a consequence of this genocide, millions of Hutus and Tutsis fled to Zaire, Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda. Many still remain in refugee camps, fearing renewed violence upon their return home.

Like adults, children were systematically targeted and killed. The militias wanted to make sure they did not repeat the mistake of 1959 when they had not killed the children. Those children went into exile and formed a resistance.

It is impossible to estimate the number of children killed during the massacres. Some children were slaughtered with their parents. Others witnessed their parents and brothers and sisters being murdered. Many who survived the killings lost their will to live and died.

On Thursday morning, August 25, 1994, I entered the Rubavu Refugee Camp near Gysenyi in Rwanda as school was about to begin. As I approached the make-shift school, children gathered around me. I smiled at them and some smiled back. Three children, Nduwayezu, Dusabe and Umotoni, were seated on the steps in front of the school door. Nduwayezu, 5, the oldest of the three, was the only one that looked directly at my camera. Like the other 36 children in the camp, he lost both parents. When Nduwayezu arrived at Rubavu, he remained silent for four weeks. Four weeks of silence.

I remember his eyes. And I will never forget his silence. The silence of Nduwayezu.

Rwanda is now filled with orphans like Nduwayezu, and many of them (UNICEF estimates some eighty-five thousand) are now the heads of their families, taking care of younger children without the aid of parents or other adults. Fergal Keane spoke with a woman named Rose Kayitesi, who fought with the RPF and is now caring for these orphans. "We are trying to teach them to trust the world again," she said. "But it is very, very difficult."³²

The *eyes* of Gutete Emerita and the *silence* of Nduwayezu are offered as signs of the genocide, in the hope that they might make its significance perceptible to us.

The exhibition of *The Silence of Nduwayezu* at the Franck + Schulte Gallery in Berlin also included a piece called *Field, Road, Cloud*. It consists of three large framed photographs, each paired with a small reproduction of a sketch indicating the location shown.

The first large photograph pictures a lush green field of tea, stretching out to the horizon. In the far distance to the left stands a white building with a broad brown roof. The sketch next to the photograph indicates that it was taken on the main road from Kigali on August 29, 1994. We recall that the main export crops of Rwanda are tea and coffee, and that the farmland is rich and productive.

The next photograph is especially gorgeous. A rough dirt road is bathed in late afternoon or early morning golden sunlight. The trees lining the road cast striated shadows across it. In the top center of the image appears a torso-shaped patch of sky. Glancing at the sketch next to the image, we read that this is the road to Ntarama Church.

In the last photograph in the series, one cottony white cloud is framed by a deep blue sky. The cloud has begun to break up, letting off a few fine wisps. In the last sketch, the lonely cloud appears directly above the pointed steeple and cross of Ntarama Church. In front of the church are drawn some squiggly lines and under them the legend "BODIES, 500?"

This is the church where Gutete Emerita saw her family killed.

Three images on the way to a killing site: fecundity, felicitous light, and freedom of movement. I remember once traveling on a

train from East to West Germany before the Berlin Wall came down, and looking out the window at a row of trees, and wondering whether this was an East German or a West German row of trees.

The Rwandans have insisted on leaving some of the killing sites, like Ntarama Church, as they are, with the remains of bodies all around, so that people can see with their own eyes what happened. But the truth is, human bodies do not make good monuments. They decompose quickly and disappear. There will have to be other ways to show the world what happened.

IMAGES HAVE AN ADVANCED RELIGION

The question of evil, like the question of ugliness, refers primarily to the anaesthetized heart, the heart that has no reaction to what it faces.

—James Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart*

The most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes. In other words, what you show people, day in and day out, is political. . . . And the most politically indoctrinating thing you can do to a human being is to show him, every day, that there can be no change.

—Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing*

We know that under the revealed image there is another one which is more faithful to reality, and under this one there is yet another, and again another under this last one, down to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see. Or perhaps, not until the decomposition of every image, of every reality.

—Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*

Jaar's Rwanda works constitute an attempt to throw light on an occluded history and to act as an indictment of the world's silence and inaction in the face of the genocide in Rwanda. Are these things that art can or should try to do? The world's great history paintings have been doing this for at least the last three and a half centuries. In a recent essay on On Kawara's work, artist Jeff Wall points out

that the great history paintings, from Velázquez's *Surrender at Breda* (1634–35) to Manet's *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* (ca. 1867), to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), are "rhetorical, ideological, conforming, or dissenting poetic expressions, subjective 'readings' of the same sources other people were reading at the time. This kind of painting was thrown into crisis by photography—or, more specifically, by photojournalism." Jaar works back into this crisis, transforming photojournalism through aesthetic means, by reworking the *mise-en-scène*. Like the history paintings of the past, these works operate in time—one must know their historical context in order to fully appreciate them. But they work aesthetically, not as propaganda. Jaar refuses to make a choice between politics or ethics and aesthetics, believing, with Godard, that "whichever one you choose, you will always find the other one at the end of the road."

The Rwanda works also address a crisis in the image, and in our relation to images, that Paul Virilio has called "a sort of pathology of immediate perception that owes everything, or very nearly everything, to the recent proliferation of photo-cinematographic and video-infographic seeing machines; machines that by mediatizing ordinary everyday representations end up destroying their credibility." As we become increasingly subject to images, the subject of any image becomes less and less available to us. Must we turn away from images entirely in order to begin again?

It was Stalin who said: "A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic," recognizing that tragedy and statistics are two entirely different classes of information. Statistics (the science of the state) is designed to suppress or preclude action, to encourage passivity and stasis. We live in a time when information, in the form of words and images, is being transmitted in vast quantities and at increasingly high speeds, and this mass and velocity determine its effects. Human beings cannot act on information transmitted in this way, but only attempt to retrieve, sort, and process it.

In order to counter statistical thinking, one must focus on individuals. Not a million deaths, but one death. Not thousands of refugees

in camps, but one survivor at a time, with a name and an image. Jaar severely limits the number and speed of his images, in order to have a different effect. A single image, of one woman's eyes, is given the time required to do another kind of work.

It is not possible to make an image of genocide. But it is possible to make images of individuals, and to put words and images and sounds together to say something in relation to genocide. Without turning a sea of griefs into a proscenium, one can still effect the *mise-en-scène*.

There are of course those who say that such events as genocide should not be represented at all, that any representation is bound to falsify and trivialize it. Even art should keep its distance. But these are people for whom art itself has become false and trivial.

One terrible truth about photographs is that they can only ever show us *what happened*, never what is happening or will happen. They are always about something that is *gone*, and so are in league with death.

In Jaar's Rwanda works, we see the artist's tremendous frustration with this, with "the futility of a gaze that arrives too late." In the first of these works, he turns away from the image in disgust. The image is only used to carry the message on its back: CARITAS NAMAZURU IS STILL ALIVE! Then he abandons the image entirely, and pares the message down even further, to only the name, *Rwanda*, repeated again and again. Then he *buries* the images, in sepulchral cubes that stand like a rebuke to representation itself.

It is only in the later works that Jaar finds a way to begin again, to recover the image from the obscurity into which it has been cast. The first resuscitated image is of a simple human gesture, an embrace between children. In a way, it is the same image that W. Eugene Smith made of two children holding hands and walking away. It was the first image Smith made after having abandoned photography to the war, and he made it "to refute two years of negation." In focusing on the eyes of Gutete Emerita, Jaar returns to the most basic human encounter, eye to eye, and begins again.

The Rwanda works finally return to the one thing that photographs can do well; they can fix an image in memory, so that it is not forgotten. Though it is not enough in relation to the one million dead in Rwanda, it is something.

1998

NOTES

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