ULRICH PROJECT SERIES:
ALFREDO JAAR
WE WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT WE DIDN'T KNOW
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ALFREDO JAAR

War. Famine. Genocide. Poverty. Political corruption. Chilean-born, New York-based architect, photographer and filmmaker Alfredo Jaar bears artistic witness to these ongoing tragedies throughout the world. One recognizes his installations by their intellectual complexity and stirring, eloquent beauty—beauty that acts as a foil to elicit a deeper engagement with troubling topics and moral considerations. Each of these projects grows out of dedicated in situ research and significant interaction with the people whose plight becomes the artist’s subject. Traversing the globe, Jaar has addressed such problems as human exploitation in Brazil’s Serra Pelada gold mine, toxic pollution in Koko, Nigeria and homelessness in Montreal, Canada. The artist is best known, however, for The Rwanda Project, 1994–2000, a series of artworks that critiqued the world’s indifference to genocide in Africa.

THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

The Rwandan genocide began on April 6, 1994, but the groundwork for this state-sponsored killing spree was laid long before. The country’s citizens comprise two very similar ethnic groups—a Hutu majority and a Tutsi minority. In the years preceding the genocide, extremists within the Hutu-led government waged a propaganda campaign, inciting animosity toward the Tutsi by blaming them for the country’s economic and social problems and describing all Tutsis as allies of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), an exile rebel group. In addition to this psychological conditioning, the Hutu leaders began training and arming common citizens in militia groups known as the interhamwe (those who fight together), thus preparing tactically for conflict as well.

On April 6, 1994, Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana’s plane was shot down. The Hutu leadership blamed the RPF and used the incident as just cause to let loose the interhamwe to massacre. (Subsequent study suggests Habyarimana’s own government actually downed the plane in order to begin the genocide.) In a mere one hundred days, working with rudimentary arms, ordinary Hutus slaughtered an estimated one million of their Tutsi neighbors. This terror was preventable. However, those foreign nations with the power to intervene did not take action. On April 21, just two weeks after the killings began, Rwandan-based United Nations Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire declared that with a mere five thousand well-equipped soldiers he could stop the genocide. Instead of sending additional forces, the UN Security Council ordered the retreat of ninety percent of Dallaire’s troops.¹

¹Fig. 1 Rwanda, Rwanda, 1994. Offset print, 68 ¼ x 46 ¼ in. Public installation in Malmö, Sweden. Image courtesy of the artist.
The full web of reasons for this disengagement is complex. However, analyses by historians and political scientists have since come to the common conclusion that—without vested economic, strategic or material interests in the small African country—Western superpowers, the United States chief among them, simply did not want to be involved. As the slaughtering progressed, these countries’ governments purposely refused to call the killing a full-fledged genocide; to do so would have bound them legally and morally to intervene. Instead they would admit only that “acts of genocide” were occurring in the country. Although humanitarian aid organizations protested, the vast majority of Western citizens did nothing to encourage their elected officials to act differently.

ARTISTIC RESPONSE

Horrified both by what he was able to read of the genocide and how little coverage the Western press provided, Alfredo Jaar flew to Rwanda shortly after the killings ceased to better understand for himself. Once in the devastated country, he met with survivors, heard their stories, and took more than three thousand photographs. The experience fueled twenty-two different projects in which the artist struggled to adequately represent the devastation he witnessed. He explains, “Each [one] was a new exercise, a new strategy and a new failure . . . Basically, this serial structure of exercises was forced by the Rwandan tragedy and my incapacity to represent it in a way that made sense.”

This wrestling with representation, specifically with the question of photographic efficacy, is a defining feature of the artworks that *The Rwanda Project* comprises. As a body of work it asks: Surrounded daily with media images that inure us to violence, can we find in photographs genuine understandings or provocative calls to action? Jaar’s frequent suppression of images suggests his doubt. For example, in 1994, the artist filled forty light boxes throughout the city of Malmö, Sweden, not with the photographs he took in Rwanda, but with the African country’s name printed over and over in a simple, adamant call for attention (fig. 1). In 1996, Jaar presented one of his photographs, a portrait of survivor Gutete Emerita, cropped to reveal only her eyes and further restricted by being shown for only one fifth of a second on a pair of light boxes after a narrative text describes how she witnessed her son and husband’s murders (fig. 2). And, in the artist’s most well-known installation on the topic, *Real Pictures* (1995), he presented 372 of his Rwanda images each entombed in black archival boxes; rather than see these photographs, viewers read descriptions of their content printed on the top of each box.

![Fig. 2 The Eyes of Gutete Emerita, 1996. 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. Image courtesy of the artist.](image)
ANNOUNCEMENT, TESTIMONY AND MEMORIAL

In addition to demonstrating Jaar’s deliberate reticence with images, these three projects are exemplary of the ways in which The Rwanda Project, as a whole, uses multiple modes of address to speak about the genocide. The varieties of address can be thought of in three categories: announcement, testimony and memorial. The first of the projects described above offers a straightforward announcement—calling for attention by declaring “Rwanda. Rwanda. Rwanda.” The second uses the story of a specific individual and forces the viewer to, literally, look into the eyes of this woman whose personal story is offered as testimony. The third uses a funerary trope, burying the pictures, in a statement of memorial.

We Wish to Inform You That We Didn’t Know (2010), Jaar’s most recent Rwanda project, departs from these earlier works by relying heavily on images—nearly twenty-five minutes worth of them—but continues the trajectory of the previous projects by weaving announcement, testimony and memorial—as three distinct types of statements—into a single narrative.

We Wish to Inform You That We Didn’t Know (detail), 2010. Three-channel video installation and audio. Image courtesy of the artist.
ANNOUNCEMENTS
One watches the three-channel video on a trio of LCD screens lining one wall of a darkened square room. On the center screen, an opening text written by the artist sets the tone for the assemblage of audio and imagery that follows:


When these words fade away, a male voice speaking over radio static in Kinyarwanda fills the space and a translation of the speaker’s 1994 broadcast appears on the center screen. He explains, “a little something is planned for Kigali” and ends his announcement with a lilting, gleeful exclamation of “ah-hoo!”

The screens darken again and give way to a 1998 British news segment on President Clinton’s trip to Rwanda for a memorial wreath-laying ceremony. The on-location correspondent explains that anger toward Americans has caused the wreath-laying ceremony to be canceled in order to protect the president. Over a quick succession of footage—Rwandan orphanages, memorial sites, army troops and individual families—the reporter’s voice explains that, four years after the genocide, conflict in Rwanda continues. Although the Americans wanted the wreath-laying to be a “dramatic gesture . . . survivors of the genocide . . . believe the world stood by while their loved ones were butchered and they’re quick to take offense.”

The following segment begins with the literal rolling out of the red carpet as President and Mrs. Clinton are seen disembarking Air Force One and greeting Rwandan President Paul Kagame and other dignitaries. The footage then cuts to the American president’s address. Standing before a cluster of Rwandan and American flags, he formally acknowledges the failure of the global community to stop the genocide. To explain this failure, he says:

It may seem strange to you . . . but all over the world there were people like me sitting in offices day after day after day who did not fully appreciate the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror.

As he completes this statement, the screen freezes and the audio stops. The footage of this last sentence, “It may seem strange . . . ,” repeats on the center screen and again freezes. Again on the left screen, the sequence runs once more and then holds still. The president’s voice now absent, for a moment the viewer must contemplate this triplicate image of an apologetic leader—hands grasping either side of the podium’s top edge, head bowed, lips pursed—in silence.
TESTIMONIES
The close of this segment—in which Clinton shifts from giving a third-person report to a first-person account, “people like me”—marks the video’s transition from detached announcements to personal testimonies. Footage of Clinton’s speech is followed by audio and text translation of another Rwandan broadcast from 1994. Here, again, the speaker makes an announcement in the third person, “Where are they/Accomplices of the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front)/There are none left.” He then shifts to the first person, “Sing with me. Come rejoice with me, my friends. Accomplices of the RPF have been exterminated.”

Following this audio clip, the video shifts to its lengthiest segment, in which three Rwandan survivors testify to the brutality of the genocide. They speak candidly and in detail about the phenomenon of the death pits into which the Hutu killers would throw hundreds of Tutsi and then toss grenades after them, an efficient form of mass murder. Two of the survivors describe being in these pits; the third describes pulling dead bodies out. Their horrific accounts are followed by that of former Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, Stephen Lewis. A member of the international Rwandan investigatory panel, Lewis states: “I think Clinton knew exactly what was going on in Rwanda.”

MEMORIALS
Jaar closes the video with a sequence of his recent photographs of memorials in Rwanda. Set to the emotional strains of a male vocalist and piano, the photographs depict the Kigali Memorial Center in the country’s capital city and Ntarama, a church complex where nearly 5,000 Tutsis were killed. The first set of images presents installations at the center, including a wall engraved with names of victims, rows of snapshots clipped to wire lines, suspended installations of victims’ blood-stained clothes and shelves of skulls. The second set of images captures the grenade-damaged buildings at Ntarama, the piles of victims clothes that fill the buildings’ empty rooms and a hauntingly vacant chapel. Jaar presents these stunning images kaleidoscopically across the three screens, often placing the same image at the left and right in reverse or repeating the same image in triplicate. In this way, the images function musically, as phrases to be arranged and repeated to emotional effect.

CRITIQUE AND CATHARSIS
The emotional sequence of images and music is followed by the video’s title, a single line of white text that appears letter by letter across the darkened, silent screens: WE WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT WE DIDN’T KNOW. The line recalls the title of journalist Philip Gourevitch’s 1998 award-winning book We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda. That book took its title from a letter written on April 15, 1994, by a group of pastors who, with thousands of other Tutsis, sought sanctuary from the Hutu militia in a church hospital. Their plea to local community leaders for intervention went unanswered. The next day they were massacred.
Jaar describes the video’s title as “a clear and conscious take on Gourevitch’s title, but I am of course turning it around and making a comment on the cynical attitude of the West.” That comment—a harsh critique of those nations that could have stopped the genocide, but did not, and a specific incrimination of President Clinton—is more pointed in this artwork than in any of the artist’s previous projects about Rwanda. The force of that condemnation necessitated the video’s two distinct parts, which Jaar refers to as the “argument” and the “release.” Comprising the announcements and testimonies, the argument presents the terrible discrepancy between the US President’s claim of ignorance and the reality of the advance warnings for and terrible scope of the genocide. Weaving together the eloquent memorial images and emotional music, the release offers a poetic catharsis, a freeing of the emotions one encounters when presented with such atrocity.

And yet, the video then closes with its title: WE WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT WE DIDN’T KNOW. That short sentence reverberates at length. It rings with sarcasm, as a critique of a past failure—we referring to those Western leaders who claimed ignorance as an excuse for their inaction. However, if one reads we in a broader sense—inclusive not just of figures of political power, but also one’s self and other common Western citizens—this closing statement is also a call to action, a directive to responsibly inform ourselves about the current state of our world and to speak out with empathy against pain and injustice wherever they are encountered.

— Emily Stamey, curator of modern and contemporary art

1Philip Gourevitch, We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda (New York: Picador, 1998), 150.
3Alfredo Jaar, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2011.
4Ibid.
RESOURCES

More about Alfredo Jaar
www.alfredojaar.net
www.pbs.org/art21/artists/jaar

More about Rwanda and calls to action
www.survivors-fund.org.uk
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil
www.onemillionbones.org

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1845 Fairmount Street
Wichita, KS 67260-0046
316-978-3664
www.ulrich.wichita.edu
ulrich@wichita.edu

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