

# A Landscape of Tragedy: New Debates in Alfredo Jaar's "Politics of Images"

By Kathleen MacQueen

The mark of a wound, very close to death, in any case to blindness. Scar or trauma, it is a question of everything that is signified in the loss of sight—and especially of what bears witness to it.

—Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

A little-known work by the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar—*Faces*, from 1982—was exhibited for the first time during the artist's Berlin retrospective in 2012 and again this year to accompany the premiere of *Shadows* at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) Museum of Art.<sup>2</sup> In *Faces*, Jaar pairs newspaper clippings with a single face, extracted from the crowd and enlarged, to “rescue it”—he claims—from anonymity and oblivion.<sup>3</sup> This concept of rescue—a kind of reframing of the content within a new context—also applies to what the artist intends as a trilogy of works, each dedicated to a single image. The first was *The Sound of Silence* (2006) in which the artist *rescued* a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph from controversy and reclaimed its significance as a “signal of distress.”<sup>4</sup>

As a lamentation, Jaar evokes a minor chord in this work, acutely sensitive to photography's binding relationship to death. Minor in its sparse precision of aesthetic means, the rhythm of sequencing, and the tonality of his plea to consider carefully one's position within a heated debate, *The Sound of Silence* is one of Jaar's major accomplishments. Exhibited twenty-five times in eighteen countries, in terms of widespread viewership it is undoubtedly his most successful work to date. He now continues his trilogy with a second work entitled *Shadows* (2014), eulogizing Dutch photojournalist Koen Wessing (1942–2011), who covered the struggles for democracy in Latin America throughout the 1970s and '80s during the rise of repressive dictatorships. This

essay proposes to consider these two works in light of ongoing debates on the representation of suffering.

kevin

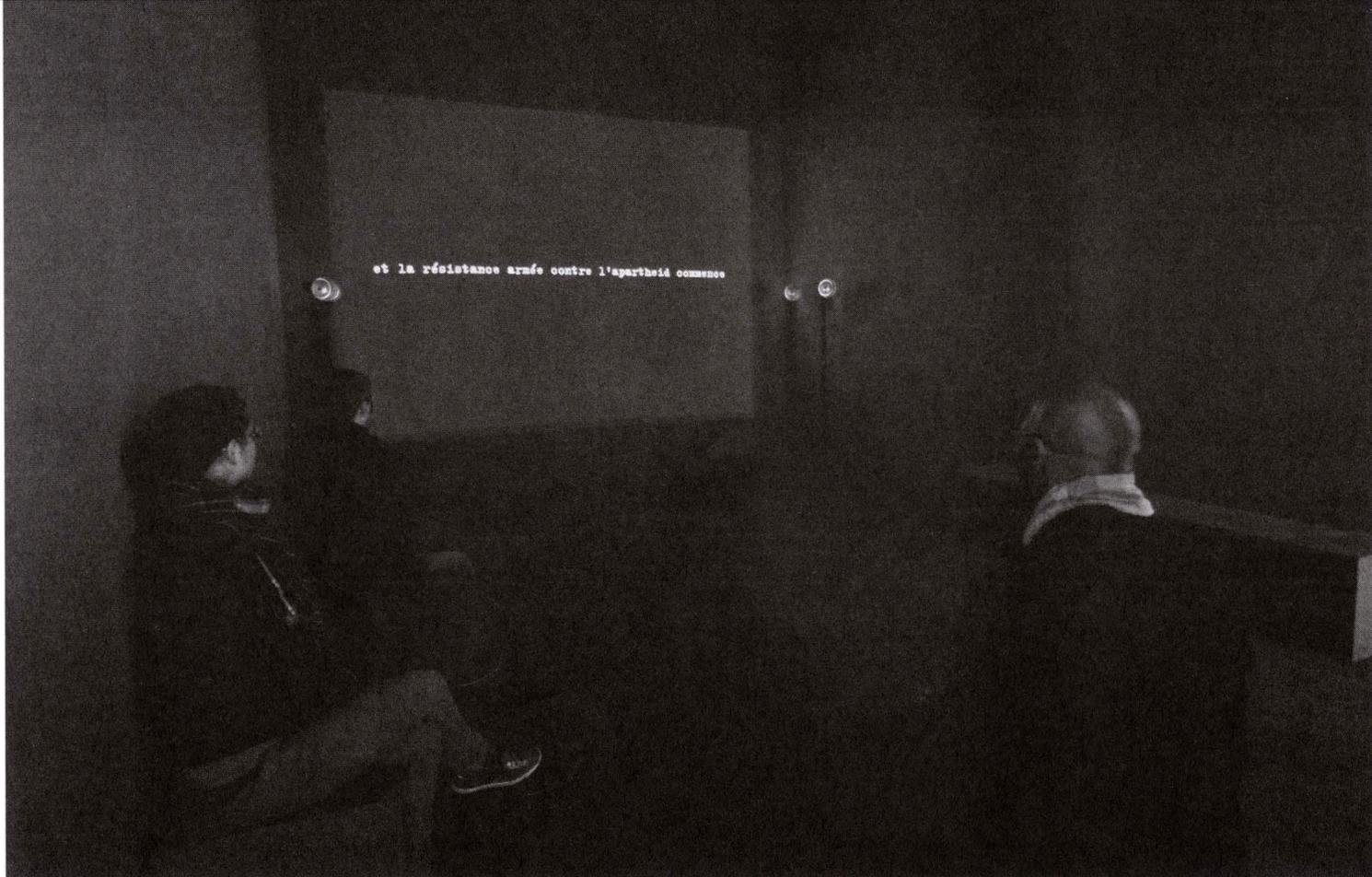
kevin

kevin carter<sup>5</sup>

*The Sound of Silence* is a video projection as prose poem, sparsely outlining the controversial career of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter (1960–94). Having started out documenting the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, Carter later covered rebel movements and famine disaster throughout the continent. His eye was no stranger to catastrophe. In early 1993, he travelled to the Sudan along with South African photojournalist João Silva to document the guerrilla fighting. According to Silva, their UN transport plane stopped to distribute food to famine victims, and Carter stayed near the plane to photograph the children temporarily abandoned by mothers who set them down to collect rations. A small child—emaciated and weak—struggled to crawl to the food distribution center. A vulture landed nearby. Carter positioned himself for a meaningful composition, hoping the vulture would spread its wings. It did not. After some minutes, Carter took a few images, then chased the vulture away. The child continued his struggle and the photographer smoked a cigarette before his plane took off for the next crisis center.<sup>6</sup>

The *New York Times* purchased and published the fateful image of the child and bird on March 26, 1993. Immediately the newspaper received a deluge of mail asking the fate of what was then believed to be a little girl. Inquiries were made, but the child's whereabouts were unknown. The *Times*'s response to readers prompted an outcry of rebuke against a photojournalist who was seemingly more intent on getting a good image than in saving the life of a child. The media audience saw only a small portion of what the photographer had witnessed—a single frame, an isolated microcosm within a more significant macro-event—and it is difficult to determine whether it was the condemnation he received for “preying on” his subject or the visual catalog of human suffering haunting his mind's eye that stripped him of the will to continue. Carter committed suicide on July 27, 1994, shortly after being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography, which included the image that had drawn so much criticism.

Jaar knew of Carter and was determined to make a work about the image, but he waited until the moment was auspicious. More than a decade later, *The Sound of Silence* premiered at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland. Alongside Jaar's *Rwanda Project* (1994–2000) and *Lament of the Images* (2002), it serves as a monumental composition within an oeuvre that has consistently grappled with the fundamental dilemmas of photography, including the relation of representation to the real, and our accountability for the complex and often contradictory messages images impart. Jaar describes his work as a “politics of images” through which he charts the consequences of the extreme dichotomy of both the profusion and dearth of images, whether through the ease of digital production and dissemination or the censorship of information and



Installation view of *The Sound of Silence* (2006) by Alfredo Jaar; software design by Ravi Rajan

sequestering of historical image archives. Paramount to this debate is the extremely fraught complexity of what Susan Sontag termed “regarding the pain of others”<sup>7</sup> and the relationship between victims, survivors, and chroniclers of catastrophic events.

In *The Sound of Silence*, Jaar presents the audience with a theater—a container box with bold stripes of bright lights vertically aligned on one side and, on another, an entrance with alternately a red horizontal and a green vertical light, signaling admission of a dozen or so viewers at a time. In this way, viewers have the opportunity to attend the entire eight-minute sequence, from beginning to end, uninterrupted. Inside, the text flows silently, one line at a time, an image-flash of typed phrases in the rhythm of a recited (an excited) poem. The text is the sort one finds on Wikipedia, but pared down to the essential: its language is sparse and poignant. It tells the story of that one fateful image in text, while withholding the image itself. At one point I hear my inner voice condemn, “How could he?” But when I read: “I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings . . .” my heart cries, “Oh my god, no!” There is a jolt—a *coup de foudre*—not of love but of death, a life flashed as in death before my inner eye as we learn of Carter’s suicide. In subsequent screenings I realized that Jaar’s audience held the same passionate but varied responses as the readers who wrote to the *New York Times* more than a decade previously. A friend left a message on my cell phone that was difficult to

interpret for the weeping that accompanied her response to what she termed “all the evil in the world.” A man walked out after a screening shaking his head at my decision to watch the recitation a second time. “You’ve got courage!” he remarked. A well-dressed woman sitting beside me was indignant at the callous disregard of the photographer. Afterward, I asked if she preferred that these stories not be told.

Since Sontag published *On Photography* in 1977, making widely available the essays she had previously published in the *New York Review of Books*, an enormous debate has ensued, bolstered by various poststructuralist theories on subjectivity and the ethics of representation. While eventually the responsibility born by media publishers and audience has been added to the mix, initially it was image producers—rather than the distributors or receivers—who were held responsible for the interpretation and impact of their work. Jaar himself has been criticized for profiting from other people’s suffering; presumably artistic reputations are impacted in inverse proportion to the suffering of their subjects.<sup>8</sup> What these critics fail to notice are the risks photojournalists take and the resources artists often devote to their projects. Any recognition or remuneration they receive goes back into their work. What audiences often fail to consider are the means used to inform—possibly inconsiderate but also potentially protective of their subjects. The act of observation, according to Jacques Derrida,

“associates scopic attention with respect, with deference, with the attention of a gaze or look that also knows how to look after, with the contemplative gathering of a memory that conserves or keeps in reserve”<sup>9</sup>—this, at least, is the ideal.

Sontag’s 2003 publication, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, strove to add complexity to the messages, both explicit and implicit, in her previous writings on photography. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Ground of the Image*—published in English in 2005—examined what links “the image to violence and violence to the image.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Judith Butler published *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003) and *Precarious Life* (2004), which consider our ethical responsibility to others in relation to violence. In this cultural and intellectual climate, Jaar’s *The Sound of Silence* complicated the kind of moral righteousness that placed photography at the dock.

“the man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame  
of her suffering  
might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene,”  
wrote one critic<sup>11</sup>

. . . clearly unaware of Carter’s career. Carter had photographed murders and survived murder attempts; he had photographed prisons and survived imprisonment; he sacrificed his own mental health in order to witness injustice firsthand so that we could be informed safely at a distance; he became famous but certainly not rich; and, finally, he could no longer survive the trauma of what he had recorded through his lens—the distance the lens creates insufficiently protective, the psyche’s archive less successfully edited than an archive of film—so he ended his life because of his connection to, not his complicity with, horror.

Jaar has always recognized in himself a will to inform, the necessity to take an active stance in the struggle for social justice. He also understands the seduction of the spectacle and the perverse pleasure taken in viewing the suffering of others. He has frequently chosen to deny us the gratification of our own prurient interests by relying on text and judiciously limiting his use of images, but he has never denied the legitimacy of observation, compassion, and understanding that images are capable of provoking. He considers his work as creating models for seeing the world.<sup>12</sup> Seeing is a step toward knowledge and knowledge another step toward action. For Jaar, it is not the image that warrants condemnation but the willingness to ignore the connection of our own standard of living to the poverty and disadvantage that persist worldwide. This is the blind spot that disconnects seeing from knowing. It is for Derrida “[t]he mark of a wound, very close to death, in any case to blindness.”

Jaar is not a moralizer. He is a raconteur. He tells us the story of one image and the man, Carter, who created an icon of an event. He tells us how this controversial image of human suffering was made. He provides the opportunity to condemn the photographer, then gives the words to foster forgiveness, and, finally, in a mark of abrupt timing, he throws his lightning bolt: after a blinding strobe flash directed at the viewers, as if we were the subjects of a photographic moment, complete with the popping sound of a flash that jolts like a gunshot, the image appears for a second, breaking

up the text and jarring our consciousness, while our pupils are still adjusting to the blinding light.

This shock compels recognition of the famine crisis and the role of the messenger in relation to it. It is the job of a photographer to tell a story in pictures—to chronicle an event. The photographer is not an aid worker: the training is specific, the purpose is clear, and crossing the line can create interference. Consider the French aid workers jailed in Chad in 2007, the American sociologist who adopted a former child soldier but could not manage the outward manifestation of his trauma, or Ed Bradley of *60 Minutes* when he stopped speaking to the camera and entered the water to help struggling boat refugees to shore, which was subsequently condemned as self-promotion. Humanitarian work is politically delicate, physically demanding, legally dense, and functionally precise. There are consequences when one doesn’t stick with what one is trained to do. There are consequences when one does.

kevin  
kevin carter

It is assumed photographers are callous cads, tabloid paparazzi rather than “good Samaritans.” We value the willingness of those who risk their lives for others but fail to notice how many journalists lose their lives simply by doing their job. Perhaps it is easier to blame others than to question ourselves. Perhaps it is simpler to condemn the individual for a solitary act than recognize and lay claim to our governmental and systemic economic failures, which set the stage for atrocity. Or perhaps Carter fell victim to his own solitary act of *l’instant décisif* (the decisive moment expressed by Henri Cartier-Bresson), which tends to isolate an occurrence from a much broader picture. Standard journalistic practice (in text, film, or still photography) favors a way of seeing that isolates the individual—whom we might care about—from the context of hundreds, if not thousands, or hundreds of thousands, of victims. It is a known psychological deficiency that numbers produce psychic numbing; we respond to the individual, not the many.<sup>13</sup>

Carter carefully framed his image to contrast the vulture and the child, creating a play of fatalistic binaries—which might include predator/prey, strength/frailty, opportunism/need, and blessed/forsaken—that ultimately trapped the photographer himself. By eliminating the thousands of famine victims that surrounded the scene, he asked us through his image to care about one and, by extension, many. But, ultimately, we only care about that one and condemn the photographer for failing to save that one, rather than questioning ourselves for failing to be concerned with the rest. Our message to Carter was that the human response of one-to-one is of more crucial concern than a global response to many. We could not see the mother and assumed he should have become one.

*The Sound of Silence* was conceived and written in 1995, motivated by the shock of Carter’s suicide, but Jaar could only realize the project when the technical capability of computer timing became available—hence its actualization in 2006. Perhaps it also needed



Installation view of *Shadows* (2014) by Alfredo Jaar at SCAD Museum of Art; courtesy SCAD; photograph by John McKinnon

that passage of time to be heard. After decades of dialectical war on the efficacy of images to influence opinion, it was time for a truce on the battleground of representation long enough to consider whether the message itself deserves greater attention than the messenger who delivers it. *The Sound of Silence* condensed succinctly the “calling” that is photojournalism, whose messenger is far too often held accountable for the failings of our own social and political disregard. The messenger is condemned so that we can sideline the problem.

The illumination of a body that falters and twists upon *theinvisibleofbody*. A Negative that complicates, makes evident, and frees the bodies' illuminated-darkness, fostering a camouflaging of freedom's *unfreedom* and unfreedom's *freedom*; the darkness of illumination and illuminations' *Darkness*.

—Sigrid Hackenberg y Almansa<sup>14</sup>

The focal point of *Shadows*—Jaar's second installation in this trilogy sequence—is an image of two young women, shocked by the death of their father, a *campesino* shot execution-style in the temple by Somoza's National Guardsmen and left by the side of the road. It was taken by Wessing near Esteli, Nicaragua, in September 1978, while covering the Nicaraguan revolution. Drawing on Wessing's photo-essay

methodology, Jaar fashions an immersive experience different from that of *The Sound of Silence*, whose blinding flash punctuates a didactic narrative text. *Shadows* tells its story only through pictures.

Visitors follow a corridor lined with three approximately 10 x 14-inch backlit images, which begin the story; then, in a wider, open space, there are figures projected nearly life-size on the wall: two women wail in ecstatic grief, their bodies upright but limp, collapsing into arabesque curves evocative of a lamentation by Giotto. The background fades to black, focusing on the women alone who, after ten seconds, fade to white while a complex system of LED lights takes over from within the screen, until the double silhouette becomes so intensely bright it is painful. Then darkness. The afterimages of the silhouettes cause viewers to inadvertently perceive the shadows of the women dancing throughout the space, even merging with their own shadows, which totter along with the women, a feeling of disequilibrium taking over. As visitors exit, three final backlit images complete the story, grounding perception once again with information.

The afterimage effect of the women's silhouettes is imprinted on the mind's eye; there is—and will remain for a long time—a visual memory of this dance of death. While *The Sound of Silence* is haunted by the body's absence—the child, emaciated from hunger and no longer visibly human, the caring mother gone, the photographer perceived as heartless—*Shadows* is about the body and the body's

lingering presence as a photographic memory. It is also about history, ethics, and time, which are, for Sigrid Hackenberg y Almansa, the critical questions of philosophy in propinquity to the body/*bodies* that are *of the human* and of nature. In *Total History, Anti-History, and the Face that is Other* (2013) Hackenberg y Almansa speaks of “time that is no longer of history, or the other, the faltering maddening spiral that is the human.”<sup>15</sup> And to read her treatise on Hegel’s total history and Levinas’s anti-history, one is compelled to enter this spiral, give in to a language that destabilizes and resists capture, and trust in a poetics of intimacy that reinscribes—no, reincorporates—the body, annihilating the mind/body split of classic philosophy as a reinterpretation of modern thought contiguous to the physical conditions of our lives.

Let me reiterate: *The Sound of Silence* relies on words, the telling of a story; it is didactic, Cartesian, calculated. The image is offered to view only after a blinding flash and then for the briefest of moments . . . as if we do not deserve it, as if it had already vanished from sight and could no longer be seen—“universal and singular and would thus have to be called the *unbeseen*, as one speaks of the unbeknownst.”<sup>16</sup> As if it had become the ghost of an image, a ghost image—latent but barely perceptible—a problem in transmission. The child no longer human, the mother missing—it is an image of the inhuman, humanity’s absence that is itself distress . . . revealed to us through *bedazzlement*—a blinding, which is also stressful—its own form of violence. According to Derrida, writing in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993), “This inflicted violence is always at the origin of the mythic narrative or of the revelation that opens one’s eyes and makes one go from the sensible light or the *lumen naturale* to the intelligible or supernatural light.”<sup>17</sup>

Blindness, blind spots of perception or comprehension, the violence of blinding, the body, and female bodies . . . What is the iconography of the female body if not of love and grief (or, at its extreme, lust and hysteria)? And the iconography of the male body, if not of life and power, or its defeat in castration and death? Derrida writes:

In drawing those who weep, and especially women (for if there are many great blind men, why so many weeping women?), one is perhaps seeking to unveil the eyes. To say them without showing them seeing. To recall. To pronounce that which, in the eyes, and thus in the drawing of men, in no way regards sight, has nothing to do with it.<sup>18</sup>

Derrida has noted that aside from the allegory of Justice, the blind in biblical and mythical tales are men, yet women are the ones who weep. Women and children are front-page victims: the representation of loss, which deflects our attention from the corpse. Even in the iconic image of the Kent State shootings on Monday, May 4, 1970, it is the gesture of the wailing woman kneeling beside the body of the slain student that attracts our attention—the lived, felt experience, rather than the life lost. Jaar, too, selects an image of women to highlight what he understands as the power of images: to influence our worldview, and in turn, our response as global (not just local) citizens.

Two of Wessing’s images from Nicaragua, in 1979, are featured prominently in Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981). One is of two nuns intersecting paths with two soldiers, while a third soldier stands immobile on the street corner. The other is of a woman who carries a sheet in the gesture of a deposition in order to shroud a corpse lying on the street, already shrouded by another. These images prompted Barthes to distinguish between *studium* and *punctum*: images that inform and images that wound.<sup>19</sup> Jaar’s selection of two women collapsing in grief is of a more dramatic tenor. But Barthes’s *punctum* is often a small detail within an image, which triggers personal memory rather than collective consciousness. Barthes’s is an intimate reflection on the viewing experience, while Jaar’s is universal and iconic. His nostalgic view harks back to what he considers a “golden age” of photojournalism before the internet “when images were much more important than [they are] today.”<sup>20</sup> It was a time when photojournalists often worked independently and were not embedded with the army, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Defense, as they have been in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> But photographers thirty and forty years ago also had fewer media outlets.

The onslaught of images of violence in an internet technological age—whether in the context of news, social media, or fictional narrative—becomes increasingly relentless, streaming across screens in homes, movie theaters, airports, waiting rooms, offices, and urban centers through televisions, media billboards, personal computers, and handheld devices. Both production and dissemination are instantaneous. Thomas Hirschhorn littered images of violence throughout his installation for the 2011 Venice Biennale, *Crystal of Resistance*, where the viewer came across them inadvertently by surprise but then, once cognizant, could not help but see them everywhere, becoming inundated and overwhelmed. In *Touching Reality* (2012) Hirschhorn films the close-up of a hand whose index finger sweeps across a digital tablet, scrolling through a seemingly limitless archive of corpses, violently torn asunder by conflict, terrorism, and war. These images are known as “poor images”—without provenance, taken by whomever, on cellphones or cheap cameras to make a record and to post on the internet for purposes of identification, documentation, or propaganda in moods of rage, despair, or detached analysis. They are considered by some as “war porn”—the scopophilic indulgence in catastrophe—but Hirschhorn sees them as facts-on-the-ground: the reality of relentless massacres carried out in the name of ideological struggle. These are images whose unsophisticated technique offers up little or no ideological framing and, for this reason are, for Hirschhorn, less shaped by the interests of the state and, therefore, more significant than media reportage.

Following from *Precarious Life*, in which she affirms “that specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living,” Butler published *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009) to draw attention to the problem of “the frames through which we apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured”—the frames that are “politically saturated.”<sup>22</sup> She contends:



Installation view of *The Enclave* (2012–2013) by Richard Mosse; courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery; photograph © Tom Powel Imaging, Inc.

Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality. This means that the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version. And so, when the frame jettisons certain versions of war, it is busily making a rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resources for resistance.<sup>23</sup>

We viewers are too hypersensitive, decries Hirschhorn in his manifesto “Why Is It Important—Today—to Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Beings?”<sup>24</sup> For Hirschhorn, it is precisely because these images from the *rubbish heap* are not beautiful and not icons, but are taken by just anyone and no one in particular, that we have a responsibility to look. It is because they are mutilated bodies, which do not miraculously come to life as characters in video games or actors on the screen, that we must look. These images are ubiquitous, and yet invisible, because they are censored or we turn away and so, according to Hirschhorn, it is important to make an about-face to look at them. But do they bring us closer to what Butler terms the

“precarity”<sup>25</sup> of life, and our accountability for lives that are so distant from us?

Butler warns that “that same uncontrolled circulability can work to scatter the effects of war, undermine our ability to focus on its costs, and even naturalize the effects of war as a presupposed background of everyday life. . . . The destruction of our ability to focus is yet another form of collateral damage.”<sup>26</sup> The irony of Barthes’s understanding of the photograph as a reproducible copy of an irreproducible event is that events of conflict and suffering are in fact reproduced globally, year after year. How do we keep these events from enduring the complacency of redundancy? Hirschhorn’s emphasis on excess is antithetical to Jaar’s iconicity, which seeks to dignify his human subjects—victims of atrocity—by relying on a universalizing signification of suffering as a Western visual tradition depicting martyrdom and grief. As Wessing would have done in a photo-essay, Jaar sequences the images in a linear narrative, yet his frame is not the intimacy of a pamphlet, magazine, or book but, instead, an immersive theatrical experience.

Barthes and Jaar chose different images—in the first case, reflecting incongruity, and in the second, epic lyricism—and I would choose yet another: an image unforgiving in its ordinariness. The



Installation view of *Crystal of Resistance* (2011) by Thomas Hirschhorn at the Swiss Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2011; © Thomas Hirschhorn; courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; photograph by Romain Lopez

third image in Jaar's sequence shows the two women having just seen the disfigured body of their father; they each face the center of the picture plane; one covers head with hands, the other her eyes as she leans for support against a car parked on the grass. Though the women are on different picture planes, their elbows visually touch as protective shields, their faces hidden, and their eyes averted from the horror of a wound that opens their father's face like a third eye. "Death threatens sometimes by the specular crossing of gazes . . . the eye that must not be seen, or the eye open like a wound," asserts Derrida in relation to myths in which death is averted through "the

ruse of an oblique or indirect gaze."<sup>27</sup> The women cannot bear witness to their singular tragic event—the loss overwhelming, a veil over memory, a blinding trauma whose afterimage will linger as irreconcilable torment. They enforce their isolation— anonymity even—as if suffering were theirs alone.

The fourth and central image, then, is of a dance of veils—sight crazed with grief. Jaar uses the power of the women's physicality along with the intensity of the light to move his audience from blindness to insight. From an event, which happened years ago—the photographer (and perhaps the women as well) now dead—Jaar transfers this virtual dance of death so that we might step into it and recognize it as our own. Barthes "wanted to explore [photography] not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think."<sup>28</sup> For Jaar, this is akin to creating a model of looking at the world. But what can we take from this revelatory experience? The installation acts as eulogy to the act of interference: the journalist documenting the "facts on the ground" so that s/he can spread the word. Speaking of the kind of journalism that commits itself to in-depth reportage, Jaar claims, "When victims see these photojournalists, at least they know that someone cares enough to be there. I always saw them as a sign of solidarity in the landscape of tragedy."<sup>29</sup>

Throughout his oeuvre, Jaar has honored his influences—leftist political and cultural figures—most notably Antonio Gramsci and Pier Paolo Pasolini, but also including Fernando Pessoa, Nelson Mandela, Salvador Allende, Edouard Glissant, Agostinho Neto, Chinua Achebe, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and Fela Kuti, along with Carter and Wessing. And there are more in this assembly of men, "differential distributions" of honor.<sup>30</sup> In *The Politics of Friendship* (2005), Derrida halts his discussion on Nietzsche and Heidegger sharply by asking: "How much of a chance would a feminine friend have on this stage? And a feminine friend of hers, among themselves?"<sup>31</sup> His longstanding friendship with the photojournalist Susan Meiselas notwithstanding, Jaar's *homages* are to men. Women are the shadow figures in *Muxima* (2005), *The Ashes of Pasolini* (2009), and *Shadows*. They are the lamentation, the refrain, and the passage toward understanding. They are representative figures—representations whose personhood shifts to the symbolic realm. Their *bodies*, along with their agency, fade from sight.<sup>32</sup>

For Hirschhorn, the male body is missing—the vulgarity of war's inhumanity, the illegitimacy of massacres of any count. And the child? Men, women, and children (a band of youth no older than twenty or twenty-two) are all soldiers—conscripted as both victims and perpetrators—in Richard Mosse's *The Enclave*, which premiered to much acclaim at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Although the affective impact is considerable, Mosse's work has been criticized for the aestheticization of his subjects. His six-channel film centering on the guerrilla conflict waged in the Eastern Congo uses discontinued infrared film stock whose color balance shifts the bright green of the jungle to an intense fuchsia pink, replacing documentary realism with cinematic spectacle. The dramatic reversal of coloration begs the question: what latitude do we accord the frames of art? The criticism against such aesthetic means is similar to debates that flowed through

nineteenth-century French salons pitting beauty against ugliness in literature, prompted by Victor Hugo's introduction of the lower classes onto the stage of the Théâtre-Français. Mosse has brought to attention a subject largely ignored in the realm of art, through *the ruse of an oblique or indirect gaze*. Less troubling than the seductive power of the color is its deflection of the viewer's attention away from the work's other stylistic mannerisms: the prominent soundtrack, establishing moods of acute apprehension broken by an occasional melancholic pastoreale; the roaming Steadicam, which occasionally pans a scene but more frequently pushes through, its movement evocative of an aggressive human presence, its smoothness robotic (the camera intrudes but never engages); and finally the absence of exchange between the subjects of the film and the filmmakers, leaving viewers as voyeurs. Without interchange or information, we witness as strangers, the events' details occluded from us.<sup>33</sup>

What do we ask of art? Can we expect it to act with what Butler refers to as a "transitive function"—that is, "making us susceptible to ethical responsiveness"?<sup>34</sup> Can artworks frame their subjects in ways that break biases established by social norms? Can they open an alternative and, hopefully, critical perspective on the conditions of life impacted by the uneven power relations of economics and war today? By *instrumentalizing certain versions of reality*, is one seeking to veil or unveil the eyes? What, then, does this vision tell us of history, ethics, and time? Where is the body situated in time, and when does its presence acquire the validation of personhood—a life worth grieving? These questions prompt further investigation; consider them an opening. In a footnote in *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida speaks of a letter written by the Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, in which he "imagines a duel between two so-called 'Blind' philosophers—[George] Berkeley and [Étienne Bonnet de] Condillac. In spite of everything that opposes them, they have idealism in common." Diderot finally asks in the letter, "Would you not be curious to see a trial of strength between two enemies whose weapons are so much alike?"<sup>35</sup>

For all of Hirschhorn's anger and indignation, does raw realism decrease distance between the viewer and the subject any more than Mosse's aestheticization increases it? Can Jaar's iconicity recuperate in affective impact what it forfeits in historical specificity? In what ways and to what effectiveness do these works *signal distress*? I do not wish to equalize either criticism or acclaim for these three artists, whose works bear little resemblance aside from their focus on sites of violent conflict, but only to suggest a degree of idealism inherent in each. These questions introduce the possibility for a reciprocal consideration of means. Nancy is quite clear:

There is no "message" without there first being—or, more subtly, without there also being in the message itself—an address to a capacity or an aptitude for listening. It's not an exhortation (of the kind: "Pay attention! Listen to me!") It is a warning: if you do not understand, do not look for the reason in an obscurity of the text but only within yourself, in the obscurity of your heart.<sup>36</sup>

For Jaar's part, *Shadows* presents "A Negative that complicates, makes evident, and frees the bodies' illuminated darkness . . ."<sup>37</sup> It offers a politics of images that opens onto history as a rescue mission for the present, in which blindness is both the reason for and potential to escape from ignorance. And, yet, this blindness *has nothing to do with sight* . . . it is instead an address to our *capacity for listening* that seeks to illuminate the archive of our consciousness as evidence of the contiguous conditions of our lives.

**KATHLEEN MACQUEEN, PhD, was a photojournalist in the 1980s before re-shaping her career as an artist, theorist, and independent scholar. She is the author of *Tactical Response: Art in an Age of Terror* (2014).**

NOTES 1. Jacques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, ed. Gerhard Richter, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 29. 2. Alfredo Jaar's *Shadows*—a commission of the SCAD Museum of Art—was on view at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia, February 18–June 29, 2014. 3. The artist gave a walk-through of his exhibition on February 19, 2014. 4. As the 2014 deFINE ART honoree, Jaar gave the keynote address at SCAD on February 20, 2014, in which he spoke of "signals of distress," noting the wide range of social and political responses to economic inequity, lack of political representation, and the accumulation and manipulation of information. 5. An excerpt from Jaar's *The Sound of Silence* (2006). 6. Accounts vary, but this is the version João Silva told Japanese journalist Akio Fujiwara, who published it in his book *The Boy Who Became a Postcard* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2005). 7. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). 8. One such example was a question addressed to the artist at the Graduate Center, City College of New York, December 9, 2005. The proceedings are available online at [www.photographyandatrocity.leeds.ac.uk/pa\\_07/pa\\_07.htm](http://www.photographyandatrocity.leeds.ac.uk/pa_07/pa_07.htm). See also my discussion in *Tactical Response: Art in an Age of Terror* (New York: Agon Press, 2014), 19–22. 9. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 60. 10. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 15. 11. An excerpt from Jaar's *The Sound of Silence* (2006). 12. See, for example, "Models of Thinking: Alfredo Jaar interview by Kathy Battista," *Art Monthly* (December/January 2010–11), 342–5. See also Kathleen MacQueen, "Alfredo Jaar," *BOMB Daily*, April 30, 2014, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000084/alfredo-jarr>. 13. See, for example, Paul Slovic's research on human response mechanisms to mass murder and genocide discussed in his paper, "If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act: Psychic Numbing and Genocide," *Judgment and Decision Making*, no. 2 (April 2007): 79–95. 14. Sigrid Hackenberg y Almansa, *Total History, Anti-History, and the Face that is Other* (New York and Dresden: Atropos Press, 2013), 37 [emphasis in original]. 15. *Ibid.*, 121 [emphasis in original]. 16. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 45. Note that Kevin Carter's image is owned by the Megan Patricia Carter Trust and managed by Corbis Images (owned by Bill Gates), the largest photo agency in the world, which controls the use and distribution of close to one hundred million photographs. 17. *Ibid.*, 92. *Lumen naturale* refers to Immanuel Kant's practical reason. 18. *Ibid.*, 127. 19. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981). 20. MacQueen, "Alfredo Jaar." 21. See, for example, Judith Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag," in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York and London: Verso, 2009), 63–100. 22. *Ibid.*, 1. 23. *Ibid.*, xiii. 24. Thomas Hirschhorn's "Why Is It Important—Today—To Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?" was posted on the IMA, Brisbane site concurrent with the artist's 2013 exhibition, *Touching Reality*. See <http://ima.8phase.com/pages/exhibits/touching-reality284.php>. 25. Butler distinguishes between "precariousness" as an existential condition of life and "precarity" as a social and political condition of the circumstances in which we live. See *Frames of War*, 3. 26. *Ibid.*, xiv. 27. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 87. 28. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21. 29. MacQueen, "Alfredo Jaar." 30. The term is Butler's from *Frames of War*, 32. 31. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 57. 32. An exception to this would be a lesser-known work from 2010 entitled *Three Women*, which features the activists Aung San Suu Kyi, Graça Machel, and Ela Bhatt. 33. The film stock's coloration has a tendency to obscure details; for example, most individuals I spoke with understood the scene in the dense brush to be a violent battle, while I saw it as a training exercise—the bodies not corpses but soldiers playing their role as the enemy; had real ammunition been used, the bodies would have been mutilated and the filming more chaotic. 34. Butler, 77. 35. Denis Diderot, qtd. in Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 101–2/footnote 79. 36. Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Dead*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault, Sarah Clift, and Michael Naas (Fordham University Press: 2008), 9. 37. Hackenberg y Almansa, *Total History*, 37 [emphasis in original].



LIKE US!

**AFTERIMAGE:  
THE JOURNAL OF  
MEDIA ARTS AND  
CULTURAL CRITICISM**