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ALFREDO JAAR *Shadows*

by Ann McCoy

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To explore the profound impact of *Shadows*, one must begin with Alfredo Jaar, the architect. Jaar's site-specific spaces at Lelong have no equivalency in contemporary architecture. Like Louis Kahn, whose architectural designs drew upon archeological structures, Jaar's spaces are timeless without utilizing any obvious historical quotation. We enter through a tall narrow passage reminiscent of those found in Old Kingdom Egyptian mortuary temples. The height and blackness of the passage dwarfs the viewer. Although rationally we know the gallery has a level floor, one feels weighted down by the darkness, as though the floor descends. Through Jaar's architectural spaces, we begin a journey into psychic interiority, into the unconscious. The first passage ends at a faintly lit wall, with a bend. During the low light cycle, the viewer feels as if they have entered the central room through a magic membrane. This womb-like chamber's intimate human proportion is scaled to accommodate a private, internalized ritual. The third passage ushers the viewer out, providing a rest from the action. This is a realm of suffering, violence, death, and reflection rarely visited in today's art world. Alfredo Jaar has produced a work of astonishing dimensionality.

In a video on the lobby wall, Dutch photojournalist Koen Wessing describes photographing the September 1978 insurrection of the Sandinistas in Esteli, Nicaragua. For *Shadows*, Jaar has taken the photographs from Wessing's contact sheets rather than using his own photographs the way he did in his Rwanda project (1994 – 98). Wessing is known for *Chile, September 1973*, a wordless book of photographs documenting the coup in Chile. *Shadows* is the second part in a trilogy of works in which single photographs form a leitmotif, the first being *The Sound of Silence* (2006) which used the late Kevin Carter's 1993 photograph of a starving child with a vulture as its touchstone. Both Jaar and Wessing have stowed away photographs they have taken for a period of time because the contents were too distressing. In an era when many argue that photographs have lost their impact, Roland Barthes's



argument about “shock photos” rings hollow in Jaar’s case. No such erosion of images occurs here. Rather, their impact is reinforced by Jaar’s architectural spaces and use of projection, leaving the viewer overwhelmed.

Today we are inundated with images of violence in places like Iraq and Gaza, images that fuse with these from Nicaragua. *Shadows* slips down the timeline to become part of another world of “Once upon a Time.” In the video, Wessing says it best: “This is a Greek tragedy.” The viewer moves back and forth between

recent history and antiquity. Wessing’s scene of mourning daughters with their arms raised over their heads in grief can also be found on a monumental Attic Greek krater attributed to the Hirshfeld Workshop from 750 B.C., located at the entrance to the Greco-Roman hall at the Metropolitan Museum. This is an old story, daughters with arms raised mourning a fallen father.

Entering the first passage, the row of small photographs functions like the “stations of the cross,” describing a sequence of suffering. The first shows an arrest scene with men lined up against a bus. But it is the second photograph that takes the viewer into a place of eternal darkness: an assassinated Sandinista father lies with his skull blown open. His body has been dumped by the road, like the corpse of Antigone’s brother Polyneices, doomed to non-burial beyond the city walls. In this act, we witness a contemporary lack of dignity, historically given even to the bodies of enemies. This man is an Ajax, who will finally be transported by his fellows to his home to be laid out. A child looks on, his innocence lost forever.

In the central room, the image of his grieving daughters with arms raised has been described by Jaar as “the strongest expression of grief” he has ever seen. Most viewers would agree. William Kentridge and Nalini Malani have both spoken about the primacy of shadows, arguing that shadows, like a Rorschach test, force the viewer to enter the image and complete it in their imagination. Jaar accomplishes this in a different way; the mural-sized image of the grieving daughters morphs into an isolated white-hot silhouette. After a moment of blinding light, we are left with a seared afterimage, both on our retina and our unconscious. This gesture of mourning moves out of Plato’s cave into the bright light and returns again to the depths. The viewer falls into the darkness of the second passage as a reprieve.

This final passage contains images of the murdered man laid out at home, with a cloth covering his head wounds. In repose, his dignity has been restored. There is something very touching about the domestic simplicity of this scene. In another photograph, his grieving daughters rest on the lawn. This final image allows the viewer to gather up their reserves to face the world outside. For this reviewer, the images entered that night’s dreams and the daughters became sisters. In a world often lacking in intimacy, these images entered the most intimate place possible. Jaar has restored the valuable currency of reflection and compassion to a tired and jaded art world. This is one of the most stunning exhibitions of the season.



Alfredo Jaar, *Shadows* (2014). Lightboxes with black and white transparencies, 12 x 13" (detail). Original photographs by Koen Wessing (1942-2011): *EstelÌ*, Nicaragua, September 1978. © Koen Wessing / Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam.



Alfredo Jaar, *Shadows* (2014). Installation with LED lights, aluminum, video projection, 116 x 174". Original photograph by Koen Wessing (1942-2011): *EstelÌ*, Nicaragua, September 1978. The collection and copyright of Koen Wessing is administered by the Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam.

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