Partial view of Alfredo Jaar's installation *The Sound of Silence*, 2006, fluorescent lights, video projection and mixed mediums, 14 by 15 by 30 feet overall; at Lelong.

ALFREDO JAAR
LELONG

Alfredo Jaar wrote the script on which *The Sound of Silence* is based in 1995, and then waited more than a decade before he figured out what to do with it. (Completed in 2006, the project varies slightly from one venue to the next; this was its first appearance in New York.) He says the delay was a matter of waiting for the right technology, but it is as readily explained in emotional terms. Delivered as a series of terse, projected text frames in Courier font (the kind associated with typewriters), the story concerns Kevin Carter, a photojournalist from South Africa who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for a picture he took in Sudan during a period of war and famine. It shows an emaciated little girl doubled over on the ground; looming behind her, a conspicuously robust vulture waits patiently. Three months after he won the Pulitzer, Carter committed suicide. [Also see Xu Zhen review this issue.]

The presentation of these and other scarcely less gut-grabbing facts about Carter and his subjects takes 8 minutes. All but one pass in silence. The only source of light in the box-shaped, metal-walled room that houses the projection is the words themselves. Vaguely penal, this room presents its rear exterior wall to viewers first, a wall that is covered with a battery of ferociously bright white fluorescent tubes. On the other side of the structure is an entry guarded by a cross-shaped sign—one axis red, the other green, lit in alternation. Coming into the story in the middle is not encouraged.

And for good reason. Though this review is a spoiler, no written summary can really diminish the blistering impact of the projection's climax. After an account of the circumstances in which the famous photo was taken and of its outcome—which included enraged letters to the editors of the many newspapers in which it appeared, asking why Carter hadn't helped the girl instead of recording her misery—a blinding flash of light fills the room, accompanied by a muffled explosion. Following this flash, experienced as a snapshot with the pun fully intended, we see the image in question, very briefly. It is, in every sense, stunning. Then the text resumes.

Compunctions about displaying photographs of atrocities, and a determination to engage viewers viscerally and if possible actively, are the competing impulses that together have shaped a great deal of Jaar's work. The agonizing choices faced by witnesses with cameras—sensationalize and inure; withhold and enable potentially lethal neglect—are forcefully articulated in the projects he undertook following his documentation, in thousands of photographs that he mostly declined to exhibit, of the aftermath of mass killings in Rwanda in 1994. Nowhere, perhaps, are those choices given greater dramatic force than in *The Sound of Silence*.

Two other works were on view in this exhibition: the small framed white-on-black print of the word "Why" (2009) and a five-panel assembly of 2,126 postage-stamp-size photoreproductions of *Life* magazine covers, ironically titled *Searching for Africa in Life* (1996); the search is mostly in vain. Hung together, they address political injustice with careful dispassion. It is the inescapably personal meaning of *The Sound of Silence* that makes its impact so much closer to universal.

—*Nancy Princenthal*