

■ Alfredo Jaar

South London Gallery London February 6 to April 6

For some time now the New York-based Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar has been making probing work on the power of photographic images – particularly those in the news – to inform and misinform, to focus and divert attention, to prick and salve consciences. Now, some 15 years after his show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, British gallery-goers can reacquaint themselves with his work. It was about time.

The pieces on display at the South London Gallery are impelled by his longstanding preoccupation with Africa and its representation in the news media, but they vary widely in tone, from the blunt to the elegiac. On the walls are a few prints that reproduce magazine covers, arranging them in neat grids and highlighting, with brutal economy, the skewed and episodic character of mainstream news reporting on African affairs. In *Searching for Africa in LIFE*, 2007, we see the features of statesmen and celebrities beaming from many hundreds of *LIFE* covers but struggle to find a single image of Africa. *From TIME to TIME*, 2006, consists of nine covers, eight of which reproduce a rote manoeuvre of colonial thought in considering Africa under the rubric of nature, the cover stories revolving around wild animals and natural disasters, while the ninth carries the caption ‘Somalia; The US to the Rescue’, a line that perfectly captures the mix of naivety and hubris that prompted the ultimately disastrous interventions of 1992-95.

In *Muxima*, 2005, a 36-minute video, Jaar strikes a completely different note, painting a lyrical but clear-eyed picture of modern Angola. In a series of ‘cantos’, the camera scans the still water and luxuriant banks of a broad river, it catches a large group of children as they lark around on a beach, it follows an intravenous drip down to the hand of a hospital patient, it records the silky gestures of a sapper as he locates and detonates a landmine. The film is held together by a musical thread: each canto is accompanied by a different rendition of the song, written in 1956 by the musician and anti-colonial militant Liceu Vieira Dias, that gives the work its title. The result is a hypnotic film that touches on the struggle against colonialism and the civil war that raged later as Angola became a peripheral theatre of the Cold War, setting the lives of contemporary Angolans against a richly drawn historical backdrop while also conveying, in the lushness of the imagery and score, the artist’s intense fondness for the country.

In the show’s pivotal work, *The Sound of Silence*, 2006, Jaar has created a piece that is more complex than the prints and more abrasive than the film. In an aluminium-clad structure that can be entered, so the gallery attendant will tell you, only when the lights at the entrance turn from red to green, the viewer finds four flash lights on tripods flanking a screen on which is projected, slowly, phrase by phrase, the story of the South African photojournalist Kevin Carter. We learn that Carter rebelled against apartheid while serving as a soldier, later turning to photojournalism to document its



Alfredo Jaar
The Sound of Silence 2006

effects; and that, when in Sudan in 1993 to cover the war-induced famine, he took a picture of a starving girl stalked by a vulture. The photo was published in *The New York Times* and won him the Pulitzer Prize but also brought fierce criticism, many readers reproaching him for not immediately attending to the girl. Not long afterwards he committed suicide. At this point in the story, the four flash lights emit a sudden blaze and Carter’s iconic photo appears briefly before the dazed viewer. Then the narrative comes to a bitter close as Jaar explains that the photographic rights are managed by Corbis, a large Bill Gates-owned corporation, while the girl’s fate is unknown.

What is striking about this work is the forcefulness of Jaar’s address to the gallery-goer, whose movements are constrained and whose viewing habits are put under stress. The viewer is held back at the entrance before being interpellated by the flash of light, which binds together the taking of the picture and the photographer’s suicide while extending their implications to embrace the audience. The flash executes an imaginary reversal; it makes as if to invite the girl and vulture to contemplate the gallery-goer, and in the process it raises questions about the act of looking – about what motivates it, about its psychological and proto-political effects. And it raises those questions not in abstract, generalised terms but urgently and immediately, by turning the viewer’s gaze back on itself with a jolt. This is not an accusatory work but a fiercely quizzical one by an artist who, for all his reservations, passionately believes in the need to look, and to go on looking, at the conditions in which other people live. ■

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