



The Sound of Silence, 2006, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Photo: Andy Stagg. Courtesy the artist

ALFREDO JAAR: THE POLITICS OF THE IMAGE

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Alfredo Jaar has long been a restless investigator of the politics of images, especially in the power relations between developed Western countries and the so-called Third World. For this exhibition he presents an ensemble of six pieces relating to Africa, a subject of choice for the artist for some 25 years. *The Sound of Silence* (2006) is an iron-clad projection room, the screen of which spells out a short biography of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter. The white typewriter lettering narrates Carter's tumultuous life, and the crucial moment in his career when he travelled to Sudan and photographed a child crawling towards a feeding centre under a vulture's threatening eyes. Behind this famous shot is a cruel story: Carter waited 20 minutes hoping that the bird would spread its wings and give a more spectacular image. The photo was bought by *The New York Times* and won Carter the Pulitzer Prize, but it caused massive outrage – why didn't the photographer help? – and he gassed himself a few months later. As the mention of his suicide appears on the projection, an explosion of blinding flashbulbs interrupts the narrative and turns the viewer, for a second, into another helpless subject of a photographic act.

In *Searching for Africa in Life* (2007) Jaar displays miniature reproductions of *Life* magazine covers published from the 1930s to the 90s. Strangely, or embarrassingly, Africa is mentioned less than five times, and almost always in relation to animal documentaries or other exotica. This work belongs to a series of Jaar's pieces highlighting what he calls the international community's 'criminal indifference' to the continent. It resonates with one of Jaar's older pieces, *Untitled (Newsweek)* (1994),

in which the artist puts in parallel the unfolding of the Rwandan genocide with *Newsweek's* covers for those dates: 'More than 30,000 bodies down the Kagera river / Men, Women and Computers'. By the time the magazine finally devoted a headline to Rwanda, in August 1994, more than one million people had been killed. *Untitled (Newsweek)* belongs to *The Rwanda Project* (1994–2000), perhaps the greatest of Jaar's achievements to date. Composed of 21 individual works, it is a memorial to the victims of the genocide, a personal resolution of the artist's harrowing experience in Rwanda immediately following the genocide and a questioning of Western responsibility.

Despite a whole career committed to denouncing injustices throughout the world – gold miners in Brazil, boat-people refugee camps in Hong Kong, the homeless in Montreal – Jaar is highly aware of the limitations of art as a mode of action. 'I am a little sceptical about the responsibility of the art world to these issues', he said in 2002, 'but it offers a space that is not available anywhere else. We should use every available space.' And Jaar's tone is not only one of anger. His first film, *Muxima* (2005), also on show here, is based on ten different versions of an Angolan folk song, and unravels like a message of hope, a reassertion that even in one of the most difficult areas of the world, beauty and joy still have their say. *Coline Milliard*