

# Strategies of Visibility

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"The eye is the most autonomous of our organs. It is so because the objects of its attention are inevitably situated on the outside. Except in a mirror, the eye never sees itself. It is the last to shut down when the body is falling asleep. It stays open when the body is stricken with paralysis or dead. The eye keeps registering reality even when there is no apparent reason for doing this, and under all circumstances. The question is: Why? And the answer is: Because the environment is hostile."

Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*

In the room housing *Lament of the Images*, three texts glow upon the wall. Apart from the fairly small lettering composing each of the three luminous rectangles, the whole room is in semi-obscurity. So the words that illuminate us as we read them also dazzle.

The first text describes the twofold blinding of Nelson Mandela: dazzled by the daylight in the photograph of his release, and blinded by the glare of the sun on limestone in the mine where he served part of his sentence. The following text tells how millions of photographic images purchased by a Bill Gates company were buried in a limestone mine. Among the photographs mentioned in the text is one of Mandela in prison. From the last text we learn how the United States Defense Department purchased the rights to all satellite imagery of the war in Afghanistan. "There is," it concludes, "nothing left to see."

Still dazzled by this last text, the viewer's eyes are then drawn down a dim corridor from which a faint glow emerges. Going down it, you suddenly find yourself in another room, standing before a screen of brilliant white light that blinds you for a few seconds. The feelings of insecurity and ex-

pectancy that overtake you in the semi-darkness of the corridor, and the momentary blindness when you emerge into the light, thus become an embodied metaphor for absence, inadequacy and denial, for the frailty and increasing worthlessness of images, their gradual loss of meaning, the impossibility of using them to present the reality they stand for—and our own inability to see.

*Lament of the Images* is thus a condensation of much of the thinking that has been present in Alfredo Jaar's projects for the past twenty years and more. At the same time, it may announce the appearance in his work of new visual metaphors, which, drawn from the welter of reality into the enclosed, protected space of art, may succeed in imbuing that same reality with new meaning.

The use of light and darkness, the scenographic employment of space and occlusion, the hermetic ambiguity of the images: these are what constitute the visual strategy of the works that make up the project on the Rwandan genocide, a project which Jaar undertook between 1994 and 2000.

Thus, for example, in *Untitled*, an installation shown in 1997, the lightboxes which Jaar had hitherto used for showing his images are scattered, turned against the floor and the wall.

The only thing that shines in the room are dim chinks of light. Everything else, once again, is blind and mute in the darkness.

*Untitled*, like *Lament of the Images*, can be understood as a corollary of *Real Pictures* (1995), one of the first works Jaar produced from the experience of Rwanda and the photographs he took there. Shown in different versions on more than fifteen occasions, *Real Pictures* comprises a total of 550 photographic positives reproducing a selection of sixty images from the refugee camps, the places where the mas-

sacres were carried out, and the ruined cities. In *Real Pictures*, each of the images was placed in a black linen photographic box whose lid was printed with a white silk-screened description of the image it contained, giving the date, the names of the people and places depicted, and the circumstances in which the photograph was taken. The boxes were then stacked up or scattered around the floor, with only the description showing. In the silence of the gallery and the museum, wrote David Levi Strauss, the visitor "wanders among these dark monuments as if through a graveyard, reading epitaphs."<sup>1</sup>

By replacing the spectacle of tragedy—the brutal, overwhelming images published by the press—with personal, private, everyday stories and testimonies, the shrouded photographs of *Real Pictures* are turned back into a "means of remembrance," a monumentum that gives victims and survivors their individuality back and ensures that they remain in our memory as real, authentic pictures.

For this reason, both *Real Pictures* and *Lament of the Images* can also be seen as remnants, relics or ruins of the shifting relationship we now have with the photographic image. This is partly because of the way the pictures have been supplanted by their descriptions, but mainly because of the particular emphasis laid on the texts composing these, on the expectations the photographic images might arouse, on the reliance we might place on them as evidence and testimony and, at the same time, on their frail, fleeting, artificial and constructed character. This characteristic, which is the organizing force behind *Lament of the Images*, is touched upon for the first time in the text in *Real Pictures* that describes the photograph of Benjamin Musisi, the driver who accompanied Jaar on much of his journey through Rwanda.

Ntarama church, Nyamata, Rwanda, 40 kilometers south of Kigali,  
Monday, August 29, 1994.

This photograph shows Benjamin Musisi, 50, crouched low in the doorway of the church amongst scattered bodies spilling out into the daylight. 400 Tutsi men, women, and children who had come here seeking refuge were slaughtered during the Sunday mass.

Benjamin looks directly into the camera, as if recording what the camera saw. He asked to be photographed amongst the dead. He wanted to prove to his friends in Kampala, Uganda that the atrocities were real and that he had seen the aftermath.

The value that Benjamin Musisi ascribes to the photographic record as incontrovertible evidence, as truth, the illusion of an exact correspondence between what one sees and the pictures that come out of the camera, are given a counterpoint in the concealment of the photographs in *Real Pictures*, the total loss of visual information, that makes it still more urgent to return to personal experience when constructing an image of the tragedy. In the empty, noiseless spaces of the gallery, the museum, memory, the absence of the photographs challenges the viewer to trust, as though in an act of faith, the written word.

In *Lament of the Images*, Jaar deepens the evocativeness of these restrained descriptions of missing images by inducing the viewer to identify and engage with them. Reading the three texts that make up the work, the visitor discovers and reconstructs relationships of meaning that are simultaneously peripheral and essential, between situations as different as Mandela's imprisonment and subsequent release, the acquisition of photographs by Bill Gates, and the invisibility of the pictures of the Kabul bombardment.

There is a subtle interplay of repetition and prolongation, so that words and actions which would be trivial in other contexts become vitally important here: they shimmer in

our memory as the words do in our eyes. It is limestone that blinds Mandela on Robben Island, and it is limestone in a mine in western Pennsylvania that encloses millions of images which might never be seen again. While in Cape Town the excess of light dazzles Mandela on the day of his release, Afghanistan is in darkness when the flash of the bombs marks the beginning of the U.S. occupation. The image of a prison island is extended to other forbidden, impregnable places: a remote mine 220 feet deep, a top secret Defense Department intelligence unit. Just as millions of photographs have been protected and preserved in a bomb shelter in the United States (including pictures of the Vietnam war), millions of people were exposed to that country's bombs and missiles during the Afghanistan war. The whiteness of the stone that protects and conceals Bill Gates's photographic archives, the lime dust that has turned black men white in their prison by the end of the day, and the operation carried out by the United States over Kabul, with its "carefully targeted" air strikes and its effective media white-out—the effect is that this color, this word, come to stand for concealment, violence and usurpation. And we too, finally, standing before the screen, squint against the white glare, blinded like Mandela, seeing nothing, because there is no image left for us to see here either.

In *Lament of the Images*, the fine web of relationships between each of the texts, and between what the viewer reads and then experiences, engages and compels our intelligence but also, subtly, our sensibility: we seem to find in the upheavals of history, in its events, an unexpected coherence that challenges us to involve and identify ourselves. In the exhibition space, the narrative structure which sustains and connects these accounts takes the form of a journey

that is physical as well as mental, forcing us as viewers to relinquish our static state and use our own movements to comprehend and construct the intelligibility of the story and the meaning of the work we are seeing. In earlier works, too, such as *Out of Balance* (1989) and *Untitled (water)* (1990), the use of marginal areas in the exhibition venues, the alteration of architectural plans, the fragmentation, alteration and inversion of images, and the use of mirrors and reflecting surfaces all, in their different ways, served to intensify the momentary presence of the spectator, who was forced to acknowledge that the different images constructed from the various possible points of view were always incomplete, fragmentary, inadequate, elusive.

Mirrors, which appear in a number of works including *Untitled (water)* and *Infinite Cell* (2004), and light, which forms part of such works as *Out of Balance* and *Lament of the Images*, are resources whose conventional use is to improve the clarity and visibility of objects, but which Jaar employs for the opposite purpose, to conceal, to obstruct, or to baffle the onlooker. In *Untitled (water)*, the mirror surfaces do not reflect the images in their entirety but rather our partial, uncertain perception of those who appear in them—Vietnamese immigrants or, in other similar works, Mexican or Haitian immigrants, miners in the north-eastern Amazon, abandoned children, refugees, corpses—or reproduce only emptiness and absence, as in *Infinite Cell*. Light, again, which isolates the figures of the gold prospectors in *Out of Balance*, cancels out and erases the landscape they have made for themselves in the shifting, uncertain setting of Serra Pelada. Thus, too, the only thing revealed by the light cast from the screen in *Lament of the Images* is the suppression and concealment of every record.

The mirrors, which reflect back not an image but rather the impossibility of reconstituting the image in its entirety, and the light, whose effect here is not to illuminate but to dazzle and conceal, may therefore signify not the appearance of people and events, but the risk of a still more complete disappearance. Or it may be that the viewer, confronted with these works like a dazzled, blinded witness to a vision, is required to construct and create a narrative that involves a relative non-visibility, a story that moves like an intuition about what the import of all this may be. In either case, by highlighting the omissions, the inaccuracies and neglect, the unbridgeable gap between what is there to be seen and what is ultimately visible, Jaar's works shock the viewer's anesthetized outlook, engaging us with everything that, in this process, enters and leaves our field of vision.

The contraposition between zones of darkness and light, the use of water or mirrors on the floor or walls, also create a feeling of instability that influences the way we traverse the exhibition space, compelling us to adjust our senses, making our movements slow and cautious. Just as the subjects of Jaar's works have suffered harm and neglect, the artworks make the viewer vulnerable and, in doing so, restore time to the events, people and things depicted—the time they need to be seen. Perhaps the original scene can never be reconstructed, people and events may always appear veiled, divided, deferred, hidden, but the mental picture that we as viewers are challenged to create out of our own experience can transform the works, and the happenings and individuals they contain, into definitive and lasting events in our memory.

The few images that Jaar does use in his works, such as the child's eyes in *The Silence of Nduwayezu* (1997),



the gnarled or childish hands and faces, or the intimate, private gestures of love, compassion or helplessness that appear in other projects, or again the different versions of a popular song that compose *Muxima* (2005), or the smell of coffee and tea that permeates the two installations forming *Meditation Space* (1998),<sup>2</sup> or the voices, sounds and pieces of music used in other works, are probably there to preserve and shield, in the midst of annihilation, sickness and poverty, a few tiny but significant manifestations of humanity; some scraps of dignity that move us and, as happened with the texts in *Real Pictures* and *Lament of the Images*, make us want to imitate what we see and to recognize ourselves in the peering eye, the seeking hand, the smiling girl, the waiting men, the woman with her back to us in a roadway.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in Jaar's works, art, which aspires to universality, brings others' pain, innocence, hopes and frustrations nearer to us for a moment, mingles them with our lives in the safety of the gallery or museum.

It may be worth noting here that *Lament of the Images* was shown for the first time at the eleventh Kassel Documenta, one of the most important of all artistic events and an enormous draw for artists, artworks and the public. In this epicenter of image overload, *Lament of the Images* was also a way of questioning the usefulness of these modern art bazaars and the works displayed there. Outwardly imitating and evoking a minimalist aesthetic, *Lament of the Images*, like *Real Pictures* before it, dislocates the stark self-absorption of minimalism by employing a strategy that reconciles and equates aesthetics with ethics. In other works, such as *Blow-up* (1993), paraphrasing Antonioni in the film of the same name, Jaar had reflected on the meaning of contemporary art and its powerlessness and frustration before the

complexity of the real, and on the ephemeral and artificial character of images. Using two adjoining spaces as he was to do in *Lament of the Images*, in the first, faintly red-lit room of *Blow-up* Jaar installed a photographic laboratory with light tables, an enlarger and trays containing pictures whose development had been halted in mid-process. Approaching in the expectation of finding Antonioni's spare images on the clean, transparent surfaces of the laboratory, the viewer was instead confronted with a sequence of shots of a legless beggar in Bogotá falling over and then turning an agonized face to the camera. The next room was black and lined with mirrors at either end, creating the illusion of a boundless space rather like that produced inside *Infinite Cell*. The room was equipped like a photographic studio with a tripod and camera and two light umbrellas that barely provided illumination. Then, in an effect reminiscent of the screen in *Lament of the Images*, viewers were suddenly blinded by the glare of a stroboscopic light, as though a momentary loss of sight offered an escape from the infinite, fragile and deceptive interplay of reflections and representations. In Jaar's work, the images and references to films by Bergman, Antonioni, Godard and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, the use of cinematographic resources and hybrid supports in the mounting of works, a cross between seductive advertising and stripped-down minimalism, are intended, I believe, for an "in" public that is, perhaps for that very reason, somewhat elusive. The allusions and quotations may be like traps set for the eye which, seeking beauty, is confronted instead with the images and events that have been purged from History. In the early nineteenth century, in one of his engravings in the *Disasters of War* series, Francisco de Goya

made a rather similar use of the sublime image of the Belvedere Torso—part of a damaged first century B.C. sculpture which Winckelmann had described, at the height of the neoclassical period, as “one of the last perfect works Greek art produced before it lost its freedom”—to represent a man’s mutilated and impaled corpse: whereas the Belvedere Torso was usually celebrated for using inert material to represent life in all its vigor, Goya transfigured it into a lump of dead flesh.

In an essay about his fascination with the beauty of a city, Joseph Brodsky wrote that the eye sought safety because the environment was always hostile. This explained, he said, the eye’s “appetite for beauty,” indeed the very existence of beauty: beauty is safe, beauty is comforting.<sup>4</sup> It is true that the limpid beauty attained by Jaar’s works is, in this sense, a consolation for pain, iniquity and death, but it is also and primarily a bait, because it is a beauty that, like the Sirens’ song, tempts us to discard our survival instinct, luring us on to where tragedy lies in wait. With this achievement, Jaar places the eye, the main tool of the aesthetic faculty, at the service of ethics—perhaps because the eye identifies not with the body it belongs to, but with the object of its contemplation.

<sup>1</sup> David Levi Strauss, "A Sea of Grieffs is Not a Proscenium: The Rwanda Projects of Alfredo Jaar," in *Let There Be Light*, Barcelona, Actar, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The two installations making up *Meditation Space* were created for an anthology exhibition of the Rwanda project at the Koldo Mitxelena cultural center in San Sebastián (Spain) in the fall of 1998. Whereas the other works occupied dark areas in the basements of the building, the works in *Meditation Space* were placed in two wells on to which the other rooms gave out. Each work consisted of four large black cushions placed on the floor in front of a panel several meters long. At the bottom right-hand corner of each panel was an electric air-freshener from which wafted the smell of one of Rwanda's main export products, tea and coffee. Sitting or lying on the cushions, visitors could read on the panels a phrase from E.M. Cioran's essay "Degradation through Work" (which can be found in *On the Heights of Despair*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, trans. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston) written in black on a white background in a Basque translation in the case of *Meditation Space* (Coffee) and in white on a black background, in Spanish, in the case of *Meditation Space* (Tea). In the text, Cioran speaks of the contradictory feelings—sorrow, joy—that the facts of life inspire in us. "I am simultaneously happy and unhappy, exalted and depressed, overcome by both pleasure and despair in the most contradictory harmonies. I am so cheerful and yet so sad that my tears reflect at once both heaven and earth. If only for the joy of my sadness, I wish there were no death on this earth," the text ended. Matching the attitude expressed by the text, the natural light, the convivial space created by the cushions and the pleasant, familiar smells of the coffee and tea provided viewers with a counterpoint, almost an alternative, to the death, destruction and injustice presented in the exhibition's other works.

<sup>3</sup> By showing images suffused with ordinariness, Alfredo Jaar's works are employing an old rhetorical strategy. In the early fourteenth century, Giotto sought to reach the viewers of his paintings as directly and immediately as he could by employing conventional gestures from the liturgy and the law courts, thus borrowing a body language which quickly identified the feelings expressed. Praising his painting a century later, Leon Battista Alberti wrote that the models for representing emotions were to be found in nature, in front of our eyes. "The story will move the spirits of the viewers," he wrote in book II of *De pictura*, "when the men depicted there express their emotions clearly. And since nature has determined that there can be no greater attraction than that of like things for one another, we weep with those who weep, laugh with those who laugh and suffer with those who suffer. But these movements of the spirit are made known by the movements of the body." Pliny had said much the same thing fifteen centuries before.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993.