SEEING WITNESS

Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony

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4. A Cemetery of Images
Photography and Witness in the Work of Gilles Peress and Alfredo Jaar

Thirteen months after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, journalist Philip Gourevitch visited the church at Nyarubuye where some one hundred Tutsis had sought refuge, only to be hacked to death by Hutus. This church had become a rotting memorial; the Tutsis did not bury their dead at Nyarubuye or at many other such sites, but left them untouched as a testament to the atrocities that had taken place there. When Gourevitch gazed upon these putrefying corpses, he remarked, "The dead looked like *pictures* of the dead."[1] Because the bodies seemed unreal in spite of his knowledge of the slaughter and his belief in the accounts he had already heard and read, he explains, the genocide was "still strangely unimaginable. I mean one still had to imagine it."[2]

These statements, tinged with incomprehension, bring us squarely to the entangled questions that I seek to ponder in this chapter, for what Gourevitch describes is the troublesome role of photographs in acts of witness. That role begins with the process whereby an eyewitness, because he does not recognize and cannot comprehend the horror at which he is looking, is forced to try to imagine it, that is, by definition to "form a mental image of something not present to the senses."[3] But he must engage in imagining *even as* the material facts of atrocity are present to him, *even as* he is in fact seeing them. To be a witness, then, means simultaneously to see and to imagine, but from Gourevitch's description we learn that imagining is not a free and boundless form of creative work but rather is disciplined by the rules and habits of photographs, their discursive formation. These rules involve the habits not only of depiction and of viewing depictions but also of imagining oneself relative to what is depicted. In addition to having to imagine the atrocity, then, Gourevitch must also struggle to imagine his own witnessing of it, to see himself seeing.[4] In one passage, he explains that he was escorted on his visit to Nyarubuye by Sergeant Francis of the Rwandese Patriotic Army. About Sergeant Francis, Gourevitch writes, "His English had the punctilious clip of military drill, and after he told me what I was looking at I looked instead at my feet. The rusty head of a hatchet lay beside them in the dirt."[5] In the presence of this Tutsi officer, Gourevitch is made to imagine himself seeing; when he cannot, he looks away.

The private conflict he endured that day—a conflict about the unburied dead and their burial in remembered photographs, a conflict about how one imagines one's own witnessing—is one version of a larger problem that lay at the center of a public debate in postgenocide Rwanda. The terms of that debate are sketched in a conversation Gourevitch had with Alexandre Castanias, a monitor for the U.N. Human Rights mission and an eyewitness to a similar massacre at the Kibeho church in Gikongoro:

> The talk about Kibeho had started when Alexandre asked me if I had been to the church at Nyarubuye, to see the memorial there of the unburied dead from the genocide. I hadn't yet, and although when I did go I didn't regret it, I gave Alexandre what I thought—and still think—was a good argument against such places. I said that I was resistant to the very idea of leaving bodies like that, forever in their state of violation—on display as monuments to the crime against them, and to the armies that had stopped the killing, as much as to the lives they had lost. Such places contradicted the spirit of the popular Rwandan T-shirt: "Genocide. Bury the dead, not the truth." I thought that was a good slogan, and I doubted the necessity of seeing the victims in order fully to confront the crime. The aesthetic assault of the macabre creates excitement and emotion, but does the spectacle really serve our understanding of the wrong? Judging from my own response to cruel images and to what I had seen in the hospital ward of Kibeho wounded, I wondered whether people aren't wired to resist assimilating too much horror. Even as we look at atrocity, we find ways to regard it as unreal. And the more we look, the more we become inured to—not informed by—what we are seeing. I said these things, and Alexandre said, "I totally disagree. I experienced Kibeho as a movie. It *was* unreal. Only afterward, looking at my photographs—then it became real."[6]

Here Gourevitch and Castanias take up opposing positions in an ongoing debate about the discursive habits of documentary photographs, their perversely spectacular nature on one hand and their intense realism on the other.[7] Gourevitch adds his voice to what has already been said about the patterns of "cruel images," the role played by photojournalism in ideology formation, its share in the commodification of human tragedy, its dependence on spectacle, its function as an instrument for policing knowledge, and its "aesthetic assault" or pornographic mise-en-scène. Castanias lends his voice to what has also been said about the urgent necessity of such images, about the crucial role played by photojournalism in democracy, its capacity to testify to uncomfortable or impermissible truths, its "reality," and its necessary function as historical witness. What is perhaps less discussed but potentially more productive, especially with regard to Rwanda, is the question of the photograph's role in either contributing to or undermining our capacity to imagine our own witnessing.

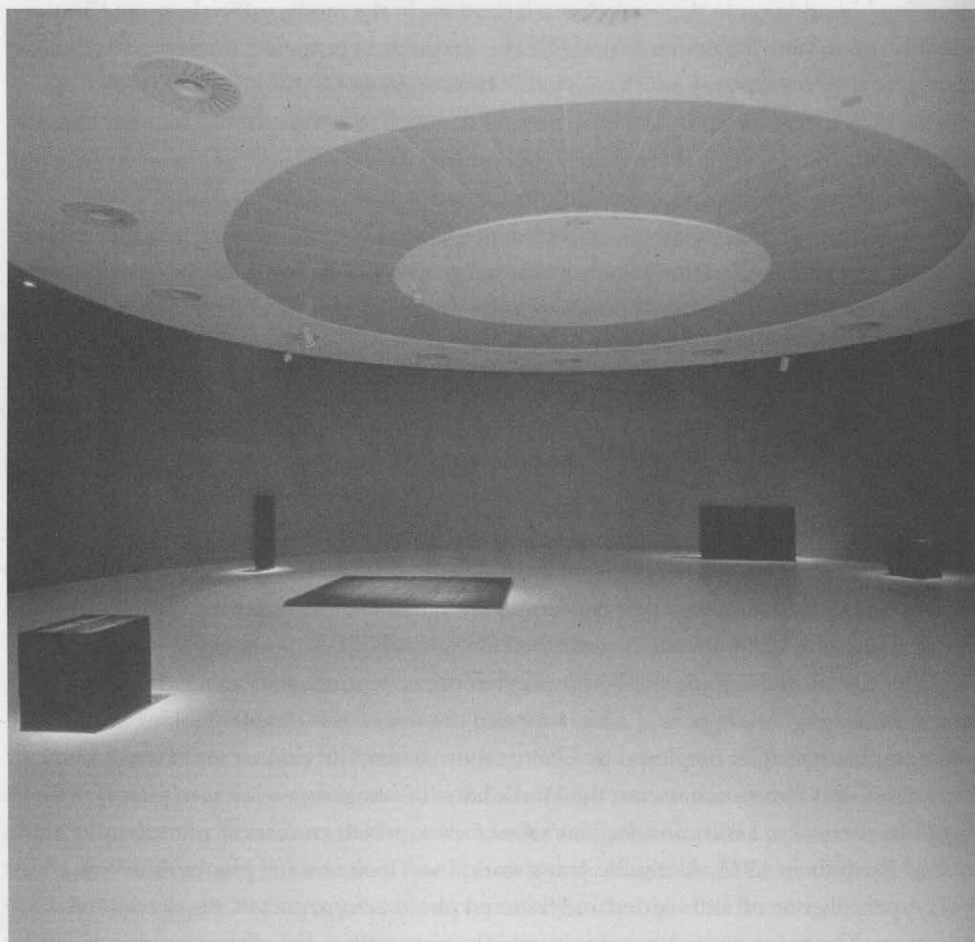
I am interested particularly in how the West imagined itself as witness to the Rwandan genocide. A great deal has been written about the West's misperception and mischaracterization of these events: the United States, Belgium, Great Britain, and France

looked at the killings that began on April 6, 1994, and described them as acts of "ancient tribal conflict," as a "civil war" between the Hutu government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front, and as "the struggle of two rival ethnic groups." All these claims were grossly inaccurate. The so-called ancient conflict was a by-product of European colonization and the European's favoring of the lighter-skinned Tutsis, whom they considered more suitable for leadership. Thus, white Europeans appointed Tutsis to positions of privilege within Rwanda, despite their minority status. This, in turn, caused nearly a century of resentment by the majority Hutu. Moreover, it was not in any way a civil war, which would suggest that the conflict involved two armed sides locked in mutual combat. Instead it was largely a massacre of innocent and unarmed people, a despicable act of ethnic cleansing.[8] In addition to these mischaracterizations in the media, officials in the Clinton administration were forbidden to describe the atrocities as genocide; they could say only that "acts of genocide may have occurred."[9] It was only in October 1994 that the Commission of Experts, set up by the U.N. Security Council to investigate the killings, officially described the slaughter of more than eight hundred thousand Tutsis as genocide, invoking, for the first time since its inception, the Genocide Convention of 1948. Western politicians, foreign policy analysts, governments, United Nations officials, and journalists acted as false witnesses to the tragedy in Rwanda, misrepresenting what they saw there. That shameful action was made possible by the particular way in which the West imagined itself (and continues to imagine itself) as witness to human conflict. Because of its wealth, its technologies of surveillance, its ubiquitous media, its free press, its Christian heritage, and its military power, when the West imagines its own witnessing, it conceives of that witnessing in terms that are both photographic and godlike: as itself unseen, as omniscient, disembodied, and disinterested. Colin Powell's presentation of U.S. surveillance photos from Iraq at the United Nations in 2003 is only one recent example. The West sees, according to this mythology, impartially and from a distance, the way a camera sees. And yet, the one thing a camera cannot see is itself. In the blindness of that technology of witness, a world of cruelty and failed foreign policy lies.

The task of questioning the West's ponderous conception of its own witnessing is enormous; its urgency is great. I'd like to spend the rest of this chapter looking at the photographic strategies employed by Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar and French photojournalist Gilles Peress to question the West's habit of imagining witness in photographic terms. In particular, I will consider Jaar's *Real Pictures,* which consists of photographs he took of Rwanda in 1994. Alongside Jaar's work, I will look at some photos that Peress took, especially one of a discarded and battered photo album, part of the detritus of the massacres. The purpose of this comparison is to contemplate how these gestures of self-conscious burial complicate our habits of picturing and therefore imagining witness.

For four years Alfredo Jaar worked on The Rwanda Project, in which he sought to represent the genocide, or, more accurately, to represent its unrepresentability. His project is ultimately a meditation on the nature and limits of the journalistic or documentary

photograph. He has said of this project, "The camera never manages to record what your eyes see, or what you feel at that moment. The camera always creates a new reality. I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable."[10] Jaar was and is outraged by the world's complete indifference to the carnage in Rwanda, where nearly a million people were killed in a little over three months. That indifference came in spite of newspaper reports and gruesome photographs, such as the disturbingly graphic images taken by photojournalists, including Gilles Peress. In response to the camera's simultaneous ubiquity and inefficacy, Jaar has tried to



Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures,* 1995. Archival boxes, black linen, silk-screened text, Cibachrome prints, variable dimensions. Photograph courtesy of Alfredo Jaar.

develop strategies to place photographic knowledge at the center of his inquiry: he has veiled images or shown them disappearing; he has reduplicated some images hundreds of times, even a million times; he has blown them up and backlit them in photo boxes or miniaturized them in slides that must be looked at through a loupe.

Significantly, as part of his Rwanda Project, Jaar's installation called *Real Pictures* was composed of his Rwandan photographs, which he "buried" in black linen storage boxes and stacked in piles. There are eight different configurations of these boxes, each containing from 18 to 120 identical photographs from different sites that Jaar visited in Rwanda and Zaire. The top of each box is silk-screened with a text in white letters that describes the duplicated image encased within it. Most interpreters of *Real Pictures* see it as funereal, as an elegy to the image and to the power it has lost to a world of simulation and spectacle. Critic David Hartt, for example, writes, "Jaar is aware that to merely show us images of the carnage and destruction is exploitive, and worse, a pointless mimicry of the news media."[11] Jaar thus withholds these images from the media "stream." David Levi-Strauss, in his discussion of the project, similarly critiques the media, saying, "The way the politics of images are organized has changed, and this has acted to erode their power and effectiveness. There has always been something about 'real pictures' of real violence that undercuts their political effect, and separates them from experience."[12] He goes on to conclude that Jaar's work "transform[s] photojournalism through aesthetic means, by reworking the mise en scène."[13] Analyses such as those of Hartt and Levi-Strauss suggest that the value of *Real Pictures* lies in its ability to disrupt the habits of the pictures that dominate our capacity to imagine horror. Certainly that is Jaar's own stated goal, made clear by his inscription of the following statement by the Catalan poet Vincenç Altaió at the entrance to *Real Pictures:* "Images have an advanced religion; they bury history."[14]

In addition to the prevailing view that the project is a "tomb for the media," however, I would argue that it has another important effect, which is that it undermines our capacity to imagine our own witness in photographic terms.[15] The connection between the two, our habits of depicting trauma and our habits of picturing ourselves as witnesses to trauma, is expressed by John Taylor in his book on photojournalism. "The faithfulness of the photograph as trace, index or evidence," he writes, "though compromised by its use, puts onlookers in the privileged position of standing in the place of the actual, earlier eyewitness. This combination of realism and distance from the objects in view allows watchers to indulge in voyeurism. It also fixes viewers in an act of looking and seeing which, according to Jameson, is not only rapt but also mindless."[16] Westerners looking at media images of the Rwandan genocide become the voyeurs that Taylor describes. We become viewers who can neither see nor imagine seeing our own viewing; we engage in a looking-from-a-distance that is unaware of itself, that is mindless. Not only was the documenting gaze of the international press corps a central part of the Rwandans' experience of this tragedy, but also that gaze was one defined by its incapacity to see itself. The story

"A Prayer for the Living," written by Nigerian writer Ben Okri about the joint U.S.–U.N. intervention in Somalia in 1993, describes how events there were made to conform to the discursive habits of photographs. But the story can also be seen, more generally, to give voice to Africa's contemporary experiences of the Western media:

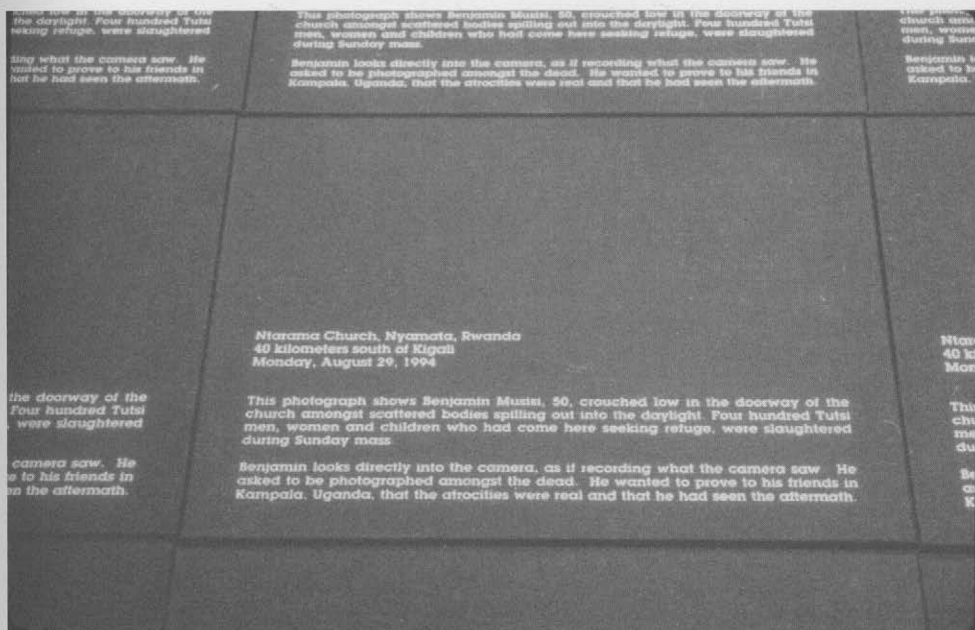
> I suppose this is what the white ones cannot understand when they come with their TV cameras and their aid. They expect to see us weeping. Instead they see us staring at them, without begging, and with a bulging placidity in our eyes. Maybe they are secretly horrified that we are not afraid of dying in this way. . . . I sang silently even when a good-hearted white man came into the school building with a television camera and, weeping, recorded the roomful of the dead for the world. . . . I opened my eyes for the last time. I saw the cameras on us all.[17]

Okri explains that the white ones cannot understand what they were sent to witness, because, first of all, it does not conform to preexisting pictures of weeping and starving Africans, and, second, their cameras and their eyes engage in tasks that are blind to their own witness, recording and weeping, respectively.

That Jaar is responding to that problem is evident where he describes the work of documentary photography, emphasizing the important role that incidental details have in the process of witnessing. He explains: "A parallel emerges between these minor elements [in the photograph] and the spectator: both the spectator and the minor details assume the precarious position of witnesses. This strategy offers a commentary on our incapacity to see, on the futility of the gaze that arrives too late."[18] Here the artist likens the spectator to the inanimate objects that find their way into the photographic frame, objects that testify to the photograph's reality but in themselves cannot see. His concern with the possibility of seeing our own seeing is further demonstrated in the texts that are printed on the black boxes in which he buried his Rwandan photographs. For example, the description of the photograph of Ntarama Church reads:

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

In this ekphrasis, it is Musisi's eyes that record what the camera saw. His eyes are devices for seeing the fact that the camera sees. They bear witness to the eyes of the photographer, to the eyes of the West. And the photograph in turn sees that Musisi has seen; it testifies to his witnessing. In reading this text rather than seeing the image it describes, we



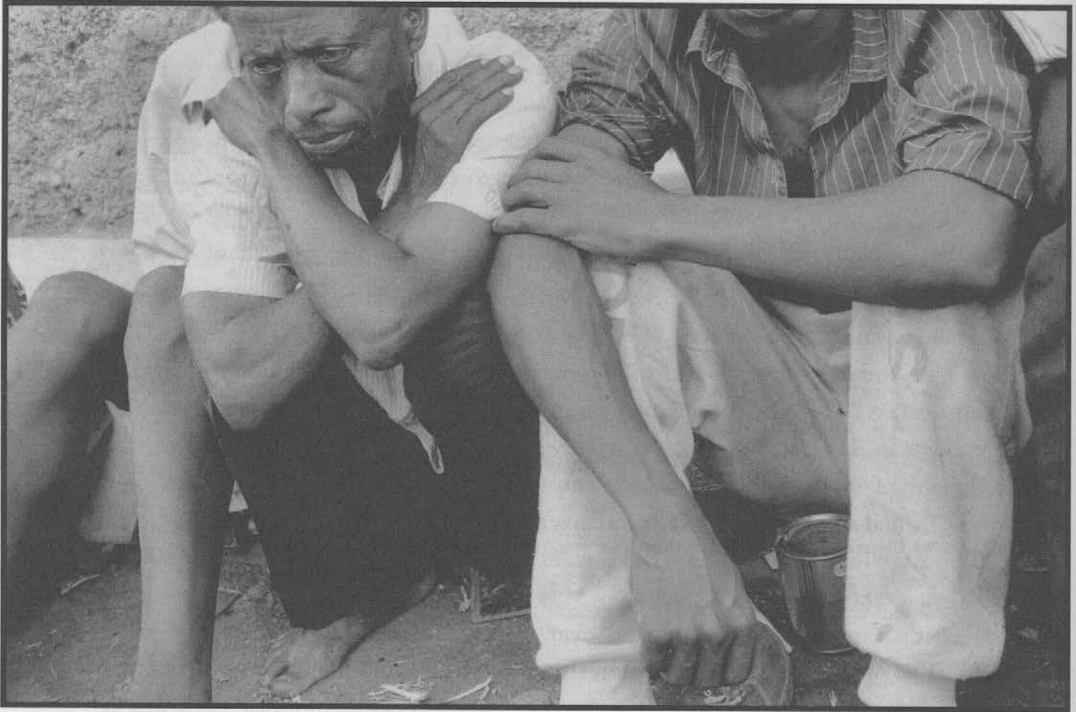
Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures* (detail), 1995. Archival boxes, black linen, silk-screened text, Cibachrome prints, variable dimensions. Photograph courtesy of Alfredo Jaar.

are put in the position of having to imagine, that task so central to witnessing. In Jaar's work the ritual burying of the photograph acts to blind us, and in our blindness we imagine ourselves as witnesses.

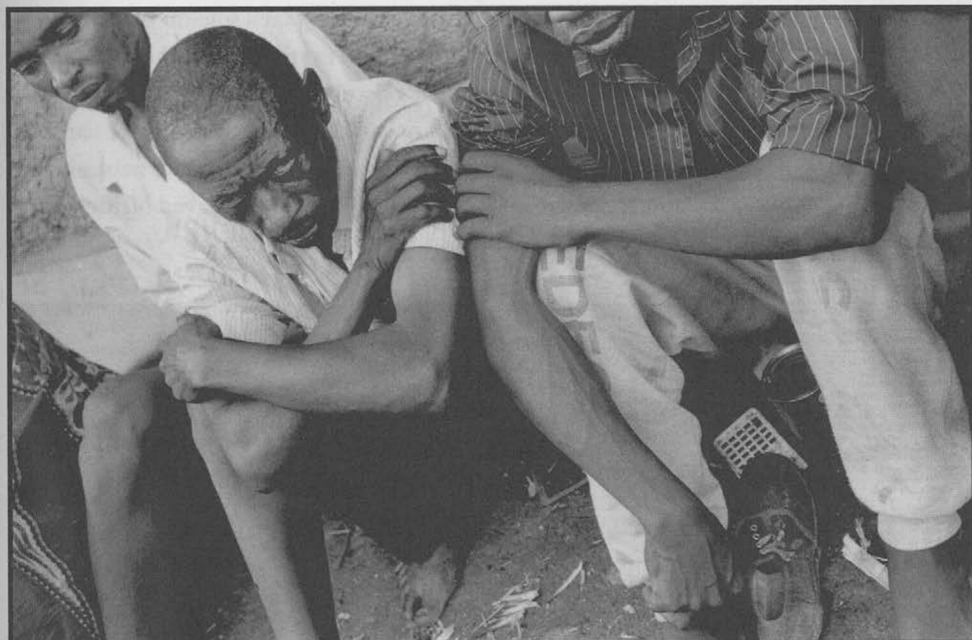
Gilles Peress's burial is of a somewhat different sort, but it has similar effects. Peress, a Magnum photographer who has worked in Northern Ireland, Turkey, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Iran, has produced a photo book about the Rwandan genocide called *The Silence*. The book, which reproduces his black-and-white photographs without commentary, is divided into sections called "The Sin" (which includes images of Tutsis killed in or displaced by the genocide in Rukara, Nyamata, Nyarubuye, and Mayangi), "Purgatory" (which includes images of Hutus living in refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania), and "The Judgement" (which shows Hutus dying of hunger and disease in the refugee camp at Goma). These sections are framed by two images of the same man. The first is preceded by the following text: "Rwanda. Kabuga, 27 May 1994. 16h:15. A prisoner, a killer is presented to us, it is a moment of confusion, of fear, of prepared stories. He has a moment to himself." The photograph shows the man seated on the ground looking away from the camera, which frames him from above. The second image, appearing at the end of the book, is preceded by this text: "Rwanda. Kabuga. 27 May 1994. 16h:18. As I look at him he looks at me." This photograph, nearly identical to the first, shows the same man in the same pose from the same camera angle, only this time, the man's eyes are rolled upward

at the photographer. Thus, the religious narrative constructed in the book's pages of sin, purgatory, and judgment, is bracketed by the question of looking.[19] In the first image we voyeuristically look at this killer, who is "presented to us" just as he was to the photojournalists sent there to document the story of the crisis. In the second, at the end of this book of horrifying images, we see him seeing, we imagine our own witnessing, and we are judged through his eyes.

Peress has remarked that his experiences of witnessing indescribable violence have caused in him an "urgency to look at reality. As it is. And more." It is an urgency, he says, "to peel off layers from my eyes, to see."[20] There is one image in *The Silence,* bracketed between its twin images of witnessing, where layers of seeing are peeled away, where seeing is both buried and unearthed. The camera, trained at the ground, produces a sensation of vertigo, a feeling of falling. The object it spies there is an old photo album, its acetate pages torn, splayed out, and peeled away, its remaining photographs stained by water and covered in dirt. Peress's camera records the memorializing function of the photograph, its placement in albums, its implicit narratives (both personal and national) of family and home. It recognizes itself in the photographic frame; it sees itself seeing.



Gilles Peress, *The Silence,* 1994. "Rwanda. Kabuga, 27 May 1994, 16h:15." Photograph courtesy of Magnum Photos.



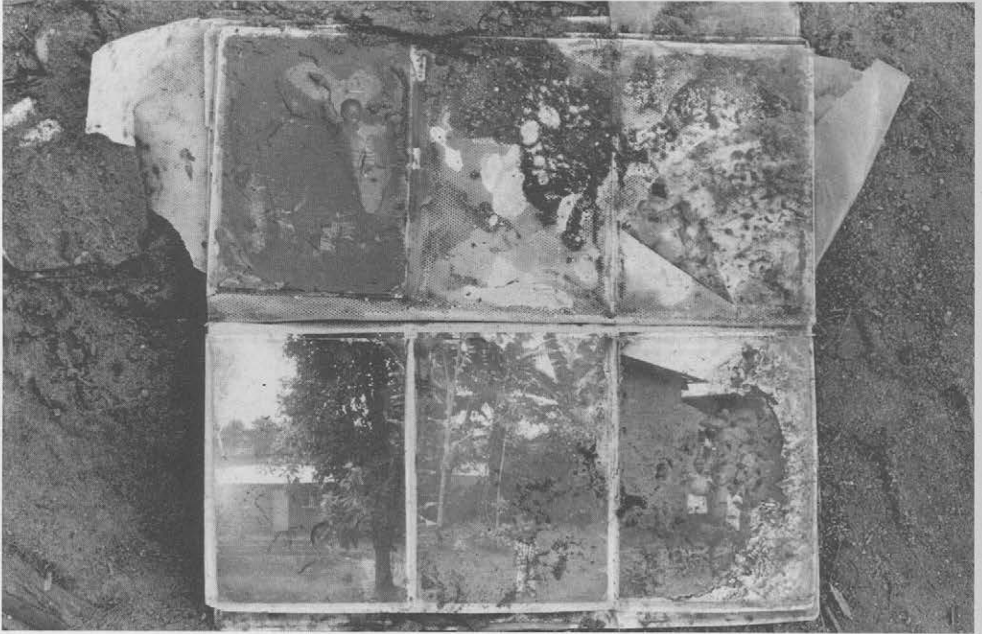
Gilles Peress, *The Silence,* 1994. "Rwanda. Kabuga, 27 May 1994, 16h:18." Photograph courtesy of Magnum Photos.

The image is a mirror in which we witness the photographic model on which we have based our witnessing.

One can make out four of the photographs in the album's six sleeves. The image on the upper left shows a dimly lit interior where stands a smiling boy in a striped shirt. The image on the lower left shows a small house dominated by the large tree in its front yard. Next to that is a scene from what looks like the same yard, where a little boy stands smiling at the camera. And finally, on the lower right, is another image of two boys in white shorts standing in front of a house. What is perhaps most startling about these images, particularly in the context of Peress's disturbingly funereal book, is their depiction of people who are living, young boys who pose comfortably, who are playing, smiling. These are images of life as it was lived before the genocide, when normal experience was still a possibility. But even they are framed by death. The self-reflexive nature of this image—a photograph of photographs—is made more profound by the barely discernable presence, in the black dust, of a small hand print that, like the photograph itself, bears an indexical relation to the absent (and presumably dead) body to which it refers.

In this sense, the album, like the many dead bodies Peress recorded, seems to lie somewhere between memory and oblivion, between burial and exhumation. The album itself was left there, out in the sun with the decomposing bodies, as a memorial to the lost innocence of these children, to the hand that imprinted itself in this dust. But the

photograph of the album is something different. Like Alfredo Jaar's solemn black boxes, it has the effect of strategically shoveling under, burying, and putting to rest the technologies of witness that, through the camera's gaze, routinely obscure the presence and responsibility of witness itself. Looking at the photograph, we wonder how it was that we came to imagine ourselves as witnesses in these terms, how we used the dispassionate neutrality of the camera as a model for how to look at genocide, how the West conceived of itself as an omniscient god who sees but is not responsible for human slaughter.



Gilles Peress, *The Silence,* 1994. Photograph courtesy of Magnum Photos.