THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE APRIL 2009

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Alfredo Jaar

WITH DORE ASHTON, PHONG BUI, & DAVID LEVI STRAUSS

On the occasion of the artist's current exhibition *The Sound of Silence,* which will be on view at Galerie Lelong until May 2nd, Alfredo Jaar paid a visit to the *Rail's* Headquarters to discuss some aspects of his life and work with Publisher Phong Bui, Consulting Editors Dore Ashton and David Levi Strauss, and a group of graduate students in the Art Criticism & Writing program at the School of Visual Arts.

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Phong Bui: What strikes me the most about "The Sound of Silence" is that, based on the available news report and the photographer's own writing, you were able to construct your own text that was concise and effective. In exactly eight minutes, not only do we get the entire story of Kevin Carter and his eventual suicide, we're also reminded of the greater political struggle and human tragedy, which has been more or less the central focus of your preoccupation as an artist ever since you did your first project, "Studies on Happiness" in 1979. Could you tell us how it came about since there were a few years between when you first learned of the subject and when the piece was made?

Alfredo Jaar: When I first saw the photograph by Kevin Carter published along with the article, "Sudan is Described as Trying to Placate the West," on March 26, 1993, in *The New York Times*, I was struck and taken by its problematic power immediately. My first impulse was to cut it out and save it in my archives. Then, a year later, came the news that Carter had received the Pulitzer Prize, which, only a few months later, led to his suicide. And that was when I felt strongly that I had to do something about this event. It took me roughly a year to write the piece, and so I wrote it in 1995, and knew exactly what I wanted to do with it, but there was no technical way of doing it at the time—computers had yet to become available. I first thought of it being like a performance, or a play. Then I thought about doing it with a slide projector, as I had done once for a similar piece for the Rwanda Project called "Slide and Sound Piece," but it became too complicated, so I abandoned the whole project and let it stay dormant for exactly ten years. Then, in 2005, I met Ravi Rajan, who is a technological genius, and during one of our conversations I told him about the technological difficulties I had with the piece, and he said he could design a new program that would control the text, the projector, the green and red lights, as well as the flashlights, and that it could be easily converted into one operable installation. It also coincided with my being invited to participate in FotoFest in Houston, for which I was offered funding. As I wrote it in 95, there are things in the text which are not true today. For example, Corbis, owned by Bill Gates, was the largest photo agency in the world then; now that title belongs to Getty Images. And at the time I wrote that it held more than 100 million images, which I realized later was an exaggeration, but that number became real later on, when Gates acquired quite a few more photo archives. But now Getty Images is way beyond that number. However, I thought it was important to leave the facts as they were at that moment. At any rate, the piece has been incredibly well received. We have shown it six times already, and we just did an Italian version last year. This year we're doing a Chinese, a French, and a Russian version, because language is such an important component to the piece.

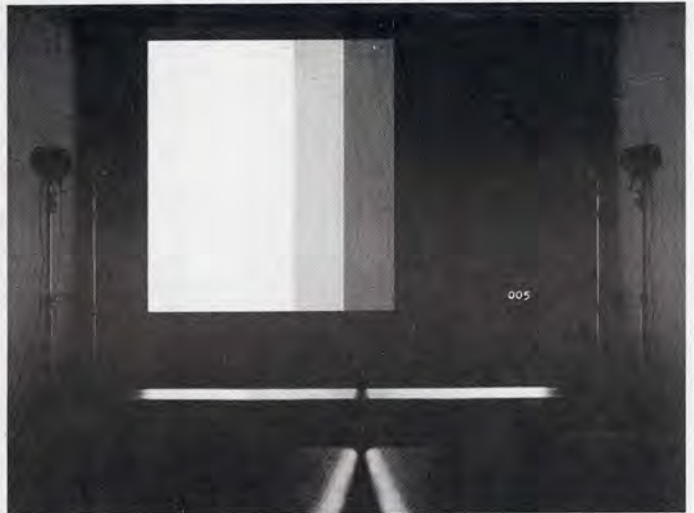
Dore Ashton: I always have found in your work an ethical component, or critique of human behavior. I remember in Andrzej Wajda's *Love at Twenty*, which begins with a photographer who witnesses a little boy who falls into the bear pit at the zoo, he hesitates for a minute. Instead of saving the little boy he takes the photograph; similarly, the ethic of the eyewitness photographer is engaged in your piece. Could you tell us what you think about that predicament?

Jaar: Well, it is a very complex question, and it is really at the heart of the piece. As we all know, the objective and mission of the photojournalist is to show us the reality of the world. And in order to capture that reality, they go to dangerous and tragic places at the expense of their lives. I see them as the conscience of our humanity; they represent for me what is left of our humanity. And I think of them in these situations as signs of solidarity, first of all, because they are there. They truly understand that they are there to show these realities that the rest of us would rather ignore. I have great admiration for what they do. In fact I am a friend of quite a few of them. I would say that most photojournalists clearly understand their limitations, which doesn't mean that they don't intervene. But it is also dangerous when they do, simply because when they take a position in the middle of any of those situations, they will most likely get shot at, and there will be no witnessing possible. So you can imagine, they have to be able to balance between bringing the images home, and their natural humanist impulses. And believe me, when they witness these tragedies and do not intervene directly, they inevitably have to deal with that physical and mental justification. But for them, to document these realities is their way of intervening. I can assure you that the rate of suicides among photojournalists is one of the highest in the world.

Ashton: I read that there were 300 photojournalists killed in the last five to six years, while many are still missing.

Jaar: Exactly. They are there trying to do work that very few people are willing to do. They are trying to balance between these two impulses, and they suffer from it. Most people do not experience this, and I am not a photojournalist, but after my Rwanda experience when I was there among other photojournalists witnessing the genocide, I wanted to kill myself. I was ashamed of being a human being; I had to seek psychiatric counsel in order to cope with this situation. And this was just one experience. Imagine that now these people live with it constantly. They go from one conflict, one tragedy, to another. This is a very, very complex issue. I do not have an answer myself, and I am not sure any of us do.

Bui: I remember seeing the documentary made by Dan Krauss, *The Death of Kevin Carter*, at Cinema Village in 2006, which dealt with details of Carter's own anguish as well as his own humanity. The reason why that photo was heavily criticized by Western audiences, as most of us agree, is largely because they saw all of Africa encapsulated within that small frame. And the conflict arose due to, on one hand, that lack of understanding of the context in which the photo was



Alfredo Jaar, *The Sound of Silence*, (2006). Installation with wood, aluminum, fluorescent lights, strobe lights and video projection. Duration of projection: 8 minutes. Software design by Ravi Rajan. Installation view at Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts Lausanne, Switzerland, (2007) Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong.

taken, and on the other hand, the benefit of its message. Don't you also think that it was an iconic image, like those we've seen during the Vietnam War? I'm thinking of Nick Ut's horrific photo of the young naked Vietnamese girl (Pham Thi Kim Phúc) running from the napalm attack on the road near Trang Bang in 1972 with her extended arms.

Ashton: Like John Filo's 1970 Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of Mary Ann Vecchio, whose arms extended toward her dead friend, also reminded us of the Pietà!

Jaar: Exactly. First of all, I think Carter's photo is one of the most extraordinary images I've ever seen as a human being and as an artist. And I totally agree with you that the reason why it became so controversial is because it is too easy to blame Carter for being the vulture, where in fact we are the vultures, the vulture is us. We are the ones who are guilty of such criminal, barbaric indifference. And the vulture didn't need to open its wings to make that point.

Bui: Which he waited for.

Jaar: Yes, for twenty minutes. The truth is I've never seen an image translate so much and so well the guilt of what is called Western civilization. I am always reminded of Gandhi when he was asked, "What do you think about Western civilization?" to which he answered, "It would be a good idea." [*Laughter.*] Again, that image, for me, encapsulates that guilt and criminal indifference, because it really reveals our real relationship with the African continent, which is continued indifference. If you just look at the AIDS issue, for example, nearly 75% of the AIDS population are African, and less than 100,000 of them are getting treatment per year. It is unbelievable. And criminal.

David Levi Strauss: So much of photojournalism has to do with getting into position. That's what photojournalists do; they spend a lot of time getting into position. Once they're in position, they need to have everything working and be *on*: to react, to get what they're there to get. And in this particular installation, you put the viewer in that position, in relation to the Kevin Carter image. I noticed people coming into that space, and instead of sitting on either edge of the bench, they sat in the middle, as if they were getting into position to have an experience. I think the whole design and structure of the installation emphasized that position.

Jaar: Right. That's why some people think that when the two lights on both ends of the screen flash, they're designed to shock them, and there's some truth to that, but my intention is that I am putting light on you, and you are being looked at, you are being photographed. I am making a kind of transfer of looking into while being looked at.

Ashton: André Breton talked about the mirrors of inconstancy, without the silver wall, for which all those startling images of human catastrophe are perhaps no more than images. I often feel that your work has a similar transparency; when people are confronted with the work, they'll see what they see.

Jaar: Everything is part of the visual apparatus. Nothing is hidden. The tempo or rhythm, which is one second faster than the normal comfortable reading pace, helped to create the subtle tension that still makes the viewer somewhat uncomfortable. They have to follow quite closely and fairly fast in order to read what's happening on the screen.

Ashton: It helps when the narrative is beautifully written. You're a pretty good short story writer.

Jaar: Well, I am quite insecure about my language. So I have a lot of friends looking at my stories and correcting me when I need it. In fact Levi is one of those friends correcting me [*laughs.*]

Ashton: What do you think about the fact that there is always resistance to a photojournalist, to such an extent that, not long ago, they tried to say that that famous [Robert] Capa photograph, "The Falling Soldier," taken during the Spanish Civil War, was staged?

Jaar: This mise-en-scène, that staging that some people do, is problematic. But now, most of them have a very clear vision of what they want to communicate, and sometimes they take this license to affect the final result. And, of course, there is a limit to what all of us should do. For example, if I want to convey x feeling in one image to my audience who is thousands of miles away, drowning in a sea of consumption from newspapers, magazines, the Internet, etc, etc, and I feel that by moving this object one inch to the left, I will achieve my objective, I think that is what they are thinking about. It is not gratuitous. It is not just because it is a beautiful composition. It is more about how I am here, risking my life to photograph this reality, knowing that it will never convey even an inch of that reality. I am just making a representation of it. But while making a representation of that reality, I am creating a new reality. Every photograph is about making decisions. It is therefore a creative act, always. That is why some photojournalists think that, in making these kinds of minor interventions, it will help them to convey what they are trying to convey. But, of course, sometimes it can be read as a manipulation, as insensitive to the realities that they are experiencing.

Alfredo Jaar, "A Logo for America" (1987). Courtesy of the artist.

Alfredo Jaar, "Rwanda Rwanda" (1994). Courtesy of the artist.

Levi Strauss: That's what happened with the *Los Angeles Times* photographer Brian Walski, who digitally altered an image of a British soldier and a group of Iraqi civilians with Photoshop, which cost him his job. In any case, with Carter's iconic image, what viewers project onto it is their sense of feeling betrayed, not just by Carter, who took the photograph which they object to, but by the entire apparatus. The apparatus has conspired to reveal their (our) true position of complicity.

Bui: Yet they're compelled by what they see because it amplifies their safety.

Jaar: You can look at all of these pictures and realize that there is always some kind of set-up, either way. I mean, if we are a little cynical, what is the difference between a photographer who is there on his own, trying to document an event and moves something to convey better a certain reality, and the photographer who accepts being embedded with troops that will take him and show him exactly what they want to show him, only designated places which reveal only what is important according to their own agendas. Which one is the bigger set-up? I am giving you an extreme example, but the truth is that set-up is a reality.

Ashton: You know when I worked at the *Times* when they wanted to punish somebody they'd put them on the picture desk [*laughter.*]

Jaar: Wow, what a punishment [*laughter.*]

Bui: Do you think growing up in Chile—I know you were born in 1956 and from the age of five to fifteen, lived on Martinique—during its sustained struggle for socialism colored your worldview from an early age?

Jaar: In 1972 when the Allende government had already been in place for two years, my father, who believed in socialism, announced from Martinique that we were coming back, as opposed to most of my relatives who were conservatives, they all said that—"we're trying to get out of here and you want to come back?" [*Laughter*] So, we came back when I was sixteen years old and I was thrown into a tsunami of politics—a country divided in half and there was nothing that you could do without being labeled a mummy (a label they used for people on the right) or a commie. It was a very intense and quick learning experience about politics. I was in Chile during the military coup, which happened in the following year, and experienced the first nine years of the Pinochet regime before I left for New York in 1982. Of course, Chile was one of the first places I started to learn how to speak in between the lines, to evoke, instead of speaking directly. It was a strategy, but it was also a matter of survival. There was no other way to speak.

Ashton: They used songs a lot, or poems, to substitute what they couldn't express verbally.

Jaar: Absolutely. Otherwise you would get killed, you would disappear. But, honestly, all of my other experiences informed me equally: my education, my travels, my parents. We are a sum of all the stimuli we receive.

Bui: And when you came to New York in 1982, while working at SITE (an architectural firm) to make ends meet, you did your first piece "Mary Boone."

Jaar: Which was one of my most subversive public intervention projects. It was at the time when Mary Boone was one of the most famous dealers in the New York art world. She was so adept at displaying herself in all the magazines, which made her even more famous than the artists she represented. What I did was I took an ad from *Artforum* and I replaced the name of the artist with her name so it said Mary Boone exhibiting at Mary Boone [*laughter.*] I also made posters and put them around SoHo. The first comment I got was, "Surely you will get a show at Mary Boone soon!" [*Laughter.*] In any case, coming to the *Rail* office, I was thinking about when I first met Dore in 1985, and that she wrote one of the first essays about my work on the occasion of my being invited to the Venice Biennale in 1986.

Bui: That's twenty-four years ago. Yikes! How did you meet Dore?

Jaar: I knew about her because of her strong interest in Latin American culture and politics, so I wrote to her, and eventually we met and became friends.

Bui: You were trained as an architect, and you still think, when you make your work, of it as solving a problem.

Jaar: Right. I never studied art, so I approach my work like an architect does. I study a place not only in physical but also in social, political, as well as cultural terms. My whole concept of searching for the essence of a place or a space or an issue really comes from architecture. I still consider myself an architect making art.

Bui: The same can be said with film and theatre, which you also had studied.

Jaar: Absolutely. All of those things combined do explain, I think, how and why I do what I do in my work.

Levi Strauss: Can you tell us about the façade of the structure, which is fully lit by vertical rows of bright, white fluorescents?

Ashton: Some of my students interpreted that as bars of a jail cell which I thought was pretty good.

Jaar: That's a nice interpretation; I never thought of it in such a way. What I wanted was first to blind the viewer as soon as they entered the space. I gave myself a conceptual program: I will blind you inside even more. Then when they sit and start watching the film as the text emerges in and fades away almost as if it pulses with life, as if it lives and dies, they hopefully would notice that the light which the text is illuminated from is going out to the world, trying to illuminate the world. It is a kind of reverse camera lucida where instead of letting light in, it throws light out.

Ashton: And you've chosen an old font, as if it were typed on an old typewriter?

Jaar: Well, when I was writing this piece I was writing a story that reads like a poem. I tried all kinds of fonts and nothing worked, so I ended up with this one, which is an electronic font but it simulated a typewriter. For me, that font was an attempt to give it a human dimension. Since I am not the press, I am not an official voice, it is my modest way to tell the viewer a little story which I want to share with them. I wanted to build this entire space devoted to one single image because images are important. Today children are still taught how to read, but nobody teaches them how to see and that is something that always amazes me.

Ashton: There was a period where they taught children how to look, at the very least; I don't know if you can teach anyone how to see. Now of course, they are always bombarded with these terribly confusing images every second of the day, so what and how can they see?

Jaar: And these images are not innocent. Every single one of them that we see has been created by a committee of experts, and has been tested to make sure they communicate exactly what they want before sending them out to the world.

Ashton: Did you get many reactions on

your "A Logo for America," which you did in Times Square in 1987?

Jaar: That project was a lost cause. [*Laughter.*] The most frustrating reaction was when NPR sent a journalist around interviewing people while they were watching it on the screen in Times Square. Some of them said live on national radio, "This is illegal. How could they let him do this?" It is so embedded in their education that the U.S. is America, whereas the rest of the continent is erased. I think it is important to remember language, again, is an expression of reality, and language will change only when the reality changes. In this case the geopolitical reality is that this country dominates the entire hemisphere. If that doesn't change, then language will never change. However, you should be happy to know that "A Logo for America" is my most reproduced work. It is used in a dozen textbooks to teach young students about globalization.

Ashton: That's good news!

Bui: That's what [Antonio] Gramsci was trying to make the distinction between the direct domination of political society and the indirect domination of civil society, which brings to mind, when did your fascination or involvement with Gramsci begin?

Jaar: It started in Chile, when I was growing up. Gramsci was very important for the Chilean resistance. And then, after my invitation to the Venice Bienniale in 1986, I started going to Italy quite often; consequently, I began to read his writings again. And while I was there, I rediscovered [Pier Paolo] Pasolini, whom I had been fascinated with during my film studies and so these two Italian intellectuals have been a great influence on my work. If I can make a short explanation why I admire Gramsci, it is the belief, even from prison, that culture can affect change, which is really an extraordinary thought and I strongly believe in it.

Ashton: How do you define culture?

Jaar: Well, for example I believe that it was culture that made possible that Barack Obama became the president of the United States. Through many novels, films, works of art, and cultural actions, which were created by artists and intellectuals, in the world of culture, who essentially made that vision possible. That is what I learned from Gramsci. Pasolini, on the other hand, was the most complete artist/intellectual ever. Not only was he a filmmaker, a poet, a writer, a columnist in a newspaper, but he also was a critic and a theorist. He was really so much of his time in every level, and he did it so effectively and with such commitment. The poet Giuseppe Ungaretti whose extraordinary capacity for an economy of means also had a tremendous impact on how I think about my work. That is why I have created six important projects in Italy in the last five years and they are all dedicated to these intellectuals. I am working in their shadows.

Bui: Can you talk about how "Searching for Africa in LIFE" came about?

Jaar: Well, I've been obsessed with the media ever since I was a kid.

Bui: Which you learned from your father, who couldn't go one day without reading the newspaper for at least two to three hours in the morning!

Jaar: That's absolutely true. What I've done for a long time is compile materials from various media, what I call press works, coverage of certain issues. "Searching for Africa in LIFE," in fact, shows *LIFE Magazine's* lack of coverage of the African continent from 1936 to 1996, and when they do cover it, which is five or six times, it's mostly animals. This is the most influential magazine in terms of making photography accessible to the rest of the world.

Levi Strauss: It certainly set up a lot of tropes that continue to this day in press images—I mean images that become iconic still have to look like those that appeared in *LIFE*.

Jaar: Exactly, and, most importantly, it gave most people in the U.S. and the rest of the world an image of the world. So, two or three generations were educated by school, by their parents, and by the media and the media was mostly *Life Magazine*. I created this piece in '96, but it had never been shown till last year, and in this current show, I felt that it paired well with *The Sound of Silence*.

Bui: Africa seems to be a special place for you. It's not just a place full of human conflicts and tragedies. I know you love the music and have collected various sounds that came from different countries, so there are other cultural aspects that don't get expressed overtly in your work.

Jaar: It was in Martinique where my strong links with Africa began. Even though it was a difficult beginning. I arrived at the age of six and I was the only white kid with red hair in my class, so I was a very strange character. I was the subject of jokes at first, but slowly, after a while, everyone adopted me and I became a local, somewhat. I really identified myself with that place, which gradually linked into the greater culture of Africa. Of course, later in life, when I discovered the tragedies and how they were represented in the so-called Western media, I decided to dedicate 60 to 70 percent of my work to Africa-related projects. I went to school at the Lycee Schoelcher where the intellectual elite of Martinique came from: Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Edouard Glissant. At the time, Cesaire was also the Mayor of Fort de France, the capital!

Ashton: Your Rwanda project, which was such a hugely incommensurate event very much like what I'm just reading now in Claude Lanzmann's autobiography where he talks about when he did the epic *SHOAH* (1985), how hostile the reactions were from the audience, partly because they didn't want to deal with what he was trying to bring to their attention. I'm curious, how did you deal with yours?

Jaar: I don't know if I ever really dealt with it, and that's why the project went on for six years, which was the longest project that I ever created, largely because I wasn't satisfied with the answers I was finding. I simply didn't have the right language to say what I felt when I witnessed the genocide. Normally I would say barbaric, indifferent, but these are just two words that do not begin to convey what I want to convey about what we did as a world community. Levi thought of this as criminal indifference.

Levi Strauss: This is something that you really showed me, by encouraging me to go back and read the story of Rwanda as it was printed daily in the *New York Times*. And it was all there in black and white, from the beginning. It wasn't a surprise. It wasn't as if people didn't know what was going to happen. All you had to do was read the newspaper. That's terrifying.

Jaar: It's the Security Council who did it, really. They were told that if they just gave the okay, it could be stopped immediately. But, unfortunately, it would never happen because of two factors: one, sadly, there is no oil in Rwanda, so why bother, and two; I think racism is still with us.

Una Minnagh: It's one thing to take photographs on site like those of the photojournalists, but when you transport that experience into a gallery space, which essentially has to be orchestrated, aestheticized, or manipulated in order to draw the attention of the viewers to the screen, how do you balance between the content of what you want to communicate and the way it is made?

Jaar: There is no way to represent anything without aestheticization. In other words, there is no representation without aestheticization.

Miriam Atkin: I interpret the piece as a sort of series of deaths that occur on many different levels. There's the suicide of Carter, the deaths of the victims of the Sudanese famine, and there is the termination of the images as the potential provocation of change once it was appropriated by the media industry; then, finally, the negation of object, once it is displaced by the image. Let's say, if *The Sound of Silence* is a eulogy for these many losses, does it attempt to re-establish a living relationship with the dead or to create the stage for a productive discourse around these irretrievable losses?

Jaar: It was Roland Barthes who said that every photograph is about death. One way or another, it's always about death. I think that the one I lament the most is our own death as human beings. What I mean is that I am afraid we have lost most of our humanity, we are already dead, or almost, as human beings. **BR**

Alfredo Jaar, detail of "Searching for Africa in LIFE" (1996). 5 C-prints mounted on Plexiglas. Each panel: 60 × 40 inches (152.4 × 101.6 cm) Courtesy of the artist.