

Text by Michele Faguet
Written for the exhibition
Alfredo Jaar: 50 Years Later
March, 2023

Alfredo Jaar's extraordinarily prolific and diverse output over the past five decades has consistently grappled with the question of how art should respond to the human suffering that is product of political injustice and economic disparity. Interrogating the nature of photography specifically—the construction and dissemination of photographs in our media-saturated culture, as well as our response to them—his work asserts the transformative power of art precisely by acknowledging its limitations and blind spots.

Among Jaar's most significant works is *The Rwanda Project*, 1994–2010, which resulted from his experience traveling there in August 1994 to bear witness to a genocide largely facilitated by the international community's indifference and failure to intervene. Emulating the denunciatory practice of photojournalists, whom the artist has described as the "conscience of our humanity," he set out to methodically record the devastation of a tragedy ignored by mainstream media outlets, but soon realized that the experiences of the survivors he met could never be adequately represented by pictures. In fact, when Jaar finally exhibited some of the photographs he'd taken, with *Real Pictures*, 1995, the project's second iteration, they would be hidden from view in black boxes, silkscreened with descriptions of what was buried inside and arranged in a funereal constellation within a dimly lit gallery space. Similarly, the light and film installation *The Sound of Silence*, 2006, narrates the harrowed life of Kevin Carter, who committed suicide shortly after receiving a Pulitzer Prize for the photograph he shot in Sudan of a starving child and a vulture hovering nearby, without showing any of the images that haunted Carter during his brief but celebrated career. The historian Carolyn J. Dean has noted that it is by now common to assume an inverse relationship between increased exposure to images of suffering and their capacity to elicit an appropriate emotional response, resulting in what scholars of trauma studies have termed "empathy fatigue." How, then, can the suffering of others be confronted and denounced without normalizing it through overrepresentation or, worse, replicating the violence already endured by transforming this pain into a perversely titillating object of consumption?

"Images are not innocent," Jaar has repeatedly warned. Echoing the words of Ansel Adams and the engaged conceptualism of artists like On Kawara and Félix González-Torres, *You Do Not Take a Photograph. You Make It.*, 2013, reproduces this simple phrase in white text against a black panel on the wall, along with a serial version of the work—a stack of

posters on the ground that viewers are invited to take home with them. The message is clear: images are constructed and are never an objective or transparent record of reality, even those captured by the lens of a camera (a point increasingly obvious now ten years later, in our post-analogue landscape of digital alteration). We are also meant to consider how images are deployed—what is shown and what is omitted—and how this shapes our perception of past and present. To this end, much of Jaar's work engages with how current events are narrated through images by the media. *Untitled (Newsweek)*, 1994, shows the weekly covers of the popular magazine between April and August of that year: interspersed among headline features like the trial of O.J. Simpson or the polemic against Generation X, the deaths of public figures like Kurt Cobain, Richard Nixon, and Jacqueline Onassis are commemorated, but not until one million Rwandans lost their lives with another four million displaced did one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century make the cover. The more recent *Mea Culpa*, 2022, departs from a cover of *The Economist* that depicts a stream of blood seeping through the colors of the Ukrainian flag, with additional covers featuring the flags of Yemen, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and Syria, among others, in order to add to the Global North's limited repertoire of humanitarian crises worth paying attention to.

Jaar's paradoxical strategy of providing visibility to events and voices suppressed or neglected by the mainstream media in an often oblique and evocative manner can be traced back to the very first works he produced as a young architecture and film student in his native Chile, which are the subject of the current exhibition. Having spent most of his childhood and adolescence in Martinique, Jaar returned shortly before the 1973 military coup that violently ended the utopian experiment of Salvador Allende, Latin America's first democratically elected socialist president. *September 11, 1973, 1974/2017*, a calendar that repeats the number 11 from that fateful day on (a date that, of course, acquired an additional significance in 2001), alludes to the dictatorship's extreme repression and erasure of everything that came before it, imposing a static temporality marked by forced consensus. *Self-Portrait*, 1977, shows the anguished expressions of the young artist struggling to make sense of an interrupted collective history, of which he had not yet fully formed part as the child of émigrés, returning home to witness the implosion of a country he scarcely knew. The project that would perhaps later prove most seminal to the development of Jaar's uniquely poetic form of politically engaged practice is *Estudios sobre la Felicidad (Studies on Happiness)*, 1979–81, based on a series of polls conducted by the artist on the heavily militarized streets of Santiago that posed the seemingly innocent question, "¿Es usted feliz?" (Are you happy?). With the methodological precision of a neutral investigator, Jaar interviewed members of a population that had been brutally silenced, providing the opportunity to vote, to express an opinion, to speak between the lines—a radical gesture that escaped detection precisely thanks to its nuanced simplicity. He captured his respondents on photographs and video, the latter a relatively new medium embraced, paradoxically, by both those he filmed, longing to emerge from the shadows of censorship, and an authoritarian regime that saw the use of new media as consistent with its neoliberal revolution. Today, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the Chilean tragedy, these documents provide a stunning portrait—both melancholic and utopic—of its immediate aftermath.

After participating in a juried exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes with this work, for which he was awarded a grant to study in New York City, Jaar emigrated for the second time. This time it would be permanent. But Chile continued to preoccupy him, especially given the vantage point of distance and the free circulation of information; here, the crimes of the dictatorship were not whispered in private but were a matter of public record. As was the involvement of the Nixon administration—an open secret since the mid-1970s revelation that he had ordered the CIA “to make the [Chilean] economy scream.” Instrumental to the toppling of the Allende presidency was Henry Kissinger, a figure Jaar denounced without fear of censure in numerous works, for example, *Searching for K*, 1984, a series of collaged photographs and captions taken from Kissinger’s memoirs, picturing him with various world leaders. A final image shows him enthusiastically greeting General Augusto Pinochet; evidence of his complicity, it is singled out from the others, precisely because it was excluded from the official biographies. More than two decades later, Jaar revisited this subject with *Nothing of Very Great Consequence*, 2008, a lightbox featuring a transcript released in 2004 of a telephone conversation between Kissinger and Nixon on September 16, 1973 and titled after the words callously uttered by Kissinger in reference to the tragic events unfolding in Chile, coordinated and facilitated by the US government. Similarly addressing US interventionism in Latin America, *Cien Años de Soledad [No Realmente]*, 1985, cites the celebrated novel by the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, but is also vaguely reminiscent of the Colombian conceptual artist Antonio Caro’s iconic work *Colombia Coca-Cola*, 1976. The message, that we are never really alone, hints at a broadening of the perspective of the young artist, rooted in the particularities of his birth country’s trauma, to confront the global, geopolitical dimension of the human tragedies that inextricably bind us all together, demanding our indignation and action.