

## After-Images: Trauma, History and Connection in the Photography of Alfredo Jaar

### Pos-imágenes: trauma, historia y conexión en la fotografía de Alfredo Jaar

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#### Abstract

In 1994, Alfredo Jaar, a Chilean photographer and installation artist based in New York, went to Rwanda to collect first-hand testimonies of the genocide that was then taking place there. His presence constituted not merely an observation of events taking place, but also a profound personal involvement with the people and places that he encountered. The result, upon his return from Rwanda, was the Rwanda Project 1994-2000, an installation that sought to reverse objectifying tendencies in photojournalism through an intensely personal and subjective meditation on violence, loss and trauma.

This paper seeks to explore the notion of the after-image. By this, I mean the power of certain images to follow us and impose upon us, as viewers, an agency and a historical imperative that is theirs. I shall do so by tracing this attempt by Jaar to counter what is often referred to as 'victim photography' and to offer, instead, the space of the photograph as one of historical reconstruction and connection. In this sense, Jaar's work sheds light upon the otherwise largely neglected context of Rwanda and works against the silence and invisibility of those who survived the genocide that took place there. In its attempt to mediate memory, Jaar's work crosses temporal and spatial boundaries. Thus, if photography is most obviously about loss and the death of the moment, then in Jaar's work, we also encounter a reversal of the same, whereby the subjects of his images transpose to viewers reverberations of their silenced histories.

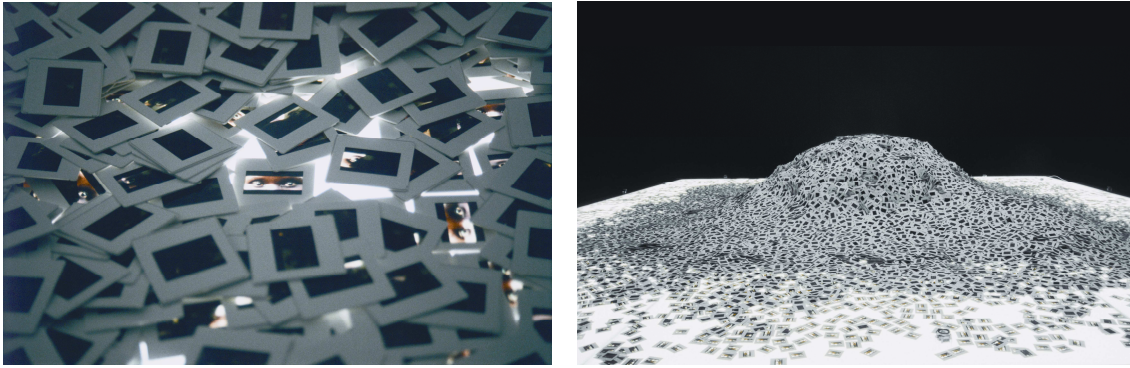
**Keywords:** photography, trauma, memory, silence, afterimage

#### Resumen

En 1994, Alfredo Jaar, fotógrafo y artista de instalaciones chileno, afincado en Nueva York, viajó a Ruanda para recopilar testimonios personales del genocidio que entonces ocurría allí. Su presencia suponía no sólo una observación de los acontecimientos, sino también una profunda participación personal, llegando a involucrarse con los pueblos y lugares que llegó a conocer. Al regresar de Ruanda, el resultado fue el Proyecto Ruanda 1994-2000, una instalación artística que procuraba invertir las tendencias objetivizantes del fotoperiodismo mediante una reflexión intensamente personal y subjetiva sobre la violencia, la muerte y el trauma.

Este artículo intenta explorar el concepto de la posimagen. Con este término, me refiero al poder de ciertas imágenes de seguirnos e imponernos, como espectadores, una agencia y un imperativo histórico que les son propios. Aquí trazaré el intento por parte de Jaar de contrarrestar lo que a menudo se conoce como "fotografía de víctimas" y de ofrecer, en cambio, el espacio de la fotografía para la reconstrucción y la conexión históricas. En este sentido, la obra de Jaar arroja luz sobre el contexto altamente obviado de Ruanda y lucha contra el silencio y la invisibilidad de los que sobrevivieron el genocidio que ocurrió allí. En su tentativa de mediar la memoria, la obra de Jaar atraviesa fronteras espaciales y temporales. Así, si lo más evidente es que la fotografía tiene que ver con la pérdida y la muerte del momento, entonces en la obra de Jaar encontramos una inversión de esto, por lo cual los sujetos de sus imágenes transponen las reverberaciones de sus historias silenciadas a los espectadores.

**Palabras clave:** fotografía, trauma, memoria, silencio, pos-imagen



Inherent in the notion of culture and questions of testimony is the concept of memory. This becomes all the more poignant when considered in the light of the fact that culture is often marked by struggle, especially in contexts of historical oblivion or political disempowerment. If in recent years questions of cultural memory and historical recuperation have become fields of considerable academic focus, then to a large extent this is due to the fracture of memory in the face of conflict, whereby testimony breaks down. Trauma by definition indicates not just the lived conflictive event, but also the subsequent failure of narrative, and hence testimony. In the black hole of oblivion that ensues, human suffering, questions of justice and historical regard become subsumed and disappear. The discipline of cultural memory has gained momentum from a concern with the Holocaust and its recurrent presentation of this problematic of memory in the face of trauma. Curiously, while the post-memory of the Holocaust continues to command academic focus, other genocides and traumas that have occurred or are occurring in our times all too often remain relegated to academic oblivion. No doubt it is precisely in these arenas of silence that photography in its function as a trace of memory can intervene.

In his *Memory, History and Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur<sup>1</sup> examines the vicissitudes of memory, whereby certain events overtake others in the collective consciousness. Ricoeur traces the links between collective remembering and the forging of historical narrative, showing both to be selective. Equally, he marks the reciprocity between remembering and forgetting, pointing thus to the subcutaneous existence of lost memories, or memories that have fallen short of representation. Historical 'knowledge' thus is limited and selective in its inclusion of facts, dependent upon those memories that have gained entry into narrative. At the same time, certain memories are so focused upon that they gain significance that accrues over time. Thus, as a trope of what must not be forgotten and yet falls ever short of adequate articulation, the Holocaust remains today at the forefront of Western collective awareness and hence historical narrative: indeed, so great is its importance that it not only underlines the memory of those absent millions who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis, but also acts as a key foundational narrative for the modern nation-state of Israel. Ironically, its importance in the collective memory and in the narrative of the nation thus turns it into a key subtext

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. By Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 2004, Chicago, London, University of Chicago Press.

that is aligned to on-going Zionist action in Palestine. Thus it is that while the vast majority of conflicts and deaths around the world recede into oblivion, the memory of certain others can grow over time and mutate, acquiring new signification and political reach. Recent trends in trauma studies reveal attempts to move beyond the largely Eurocentric confines of the discipline's origins, linked as it is to Freudian psychoanalysis and a largely Western focus centering on the Holocaust, made more intense since the events of 9/11. Few studies of trauma tend to focus on Gaza or Baghdad, whilst many do on New York in the twenty-first century, and attempts to understand, represent and politicise the question of trauma remain, with few exceptions, a prerogative of the global hegemony.

To think back to those conflicts and silences that have marked our recent decades and that are in danger of receding into silence, one has only to move slightly beyond the geo-political contours of the West. They are too numerous to list. Think, for example, of the genocide of Armenians at the hands of Turks, never as yet acknowledged by Western powers, of the USSR under Stalin, of the atrocities of Vietnam, of the deaths which occurred during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, of conflict in Sierra Leone, of the on-going 'war on terror' with its countless concomitant civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, to name but a few. Think too of the *desaparecidos* of Latin America, the disappeared, who are neither known to be dead nor alive and who can thus neither be mourned nor embraced, whose names hover in the anguished grey zone between life and death. In trying to give voice to the disappeared, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo struggle to etch the names of their disappeared loved ones over a looming collective oblivion. Their voices are small and the forgetting is large.

This article will focus on an artwork entitled "The Eyes of Gutete Emerita", by the photographer and installation artist Alfredo Jaar. My aim is to analyse the ways in which Jaar focuses specifically on trauma in the Rwandan context as a site of silence or forgetting and unearths within this silence the potential to mobilise politicised responses via his artwork. Through this visual representation that centres upon intensely traumatic events and experiences, Jaar taps into the often-ignored unvoiced historical potential in sites of trauma. His artwork intervenes in this silence: it explores the extent to which historical understanding and connection can emerge and be forged from the non-rational and sentient ways in which audiences respond to such representations. Thus, Jaar calls upon an ethics of vision, whereby that pre-discursive moment of encounter with alterity or the *other* via still photography becomes the ground from which to build collective remembering amongst those who did not necessarily live through or witness trauma. In so doing, the photograph becomes the frame within which historical narratives can germinate and collective oblivion can be countered. If the forging of such memory is important, it is so because it aims to challenge, if not override, the larger political context of forgetting that epitomised the global negligence of Rwanda's tragedy. The commitment to representation and memory is thus both an ethical and a political act.

Born in Chile, Jaar lives and works in New York. Jaar left his native Chile at the age of twenty-five, seeking respite in New York from the horrors of Pinochet's dictatorship. An architect by training, he managed to elude political scrutiny whilst in Chile, despite showing artwork that exposed the violations of human rights by the prevailing regime. Jaar posits his work against the overriding oblivion that blankets suffering and loss in contexts that are politically charged and weighted with injustice. While he does not call himself a photo-documentarian –his work bears too obvious an artistic inflection for that and calls instead upon the viewers' ability to make tacit connections– nevertheless, Jaar says his artwork is always "project-based", linked to

real-life events and focused on building connections or on communicating the lived realities of marginalized events to viewers who are primarily located in the West. As projects focusing on such contexts, Jaar's artwork has a marked social and political dimension. It aims to correct historical gaps by riding the uneven border between global hegemonies and their peripheries. It is the result of a deep engagement between the artist and his chosen contexts and is thus the hybrid result of this prolonged encounter between an artistic drive and a socio-political context. If Jaar is not strictly speaking a documentarian, his work has often followed parallel paths to those of other Latin American photographers working in the field of social documentary, in particular aestheticised photo-documentary, most especially those of the Brazilians Sebastião Salgado and Miguel Rio Branco, like whom he has, for instance, photographed the gold miners of the Serra Pelada. Jaar's work centres on military conflicts, political corruption, and imbalances of power between industrialized and developing nations. Subjects addressed in his work include the genocide in Rwanda, gold mining in Brazil, toxic pollution in Nigeria, and issues related to the border between Mexico and the United States. I shall argue in this paper that Jaar's work offers us poignant counter-documentaries to mainstream news images, offering both prolonged meditation on conflict in the crevices and margins of global networks of power and, very importantly, personal testimonies of the latter. In particular, my focus is on his efforts to negotiate the delicate area that lies between the failure of representation in terms of deliberate repression from collective memory and the articulation not of the memory *per se*, but of this absence of historical acknowledgement. In this, he foregrounds the power of visual art to call upon the silent, to frame the invisible and to thus forge a frame for what should have been seen. By this, I mean that Jaar calls upon the notion of turning a blind eye, whereby the *absence* of what should have been seen and acknowledged is noted and comes into sight.

Perhaps one of the more glaring failures of the collective memory of our times relates to the mass killings that took place in Rwanda in 1994-5. Few realize that the massacres of Rwanda constitute the third genocide of the twentieth century, the first being the rarely recalled one of Armenians by Turks belonging to the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and 1916 and the second the slaughter of Jews by Nazis during the Second World War. If Africa has always remained Europe's marginal "other", then few historical events confirm this invisibility as forcefully as the international neglect that occurred both during and after this genocide. Intellectual history as predicated in the West too often forgets to take Africa into account –no doubt, this neglect takes some of its cue from colonial attitudes and others from Hegel's stated disregard for Africa as Other.<sup>2</sup> Writing on his country, Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, a writer and intellectual from Equatorial Guinea, states "The real international disinterest in the affairs of Equatorial Guinea is the cause of mistaken conceptions about her true situation".<sup>3</sup>

The same holds true for Rwanda. What occurred in Rwanda was a state-sponsored genocide that was many years in the planning but carried out in no more than a hundred days. As "Hutu Power" extremists incited Hutus across the country to attack the minority Tutsis in a bid to eradicate them, the West turned its back on the bloodshed that was taking place. The ensuing Civil War was savage and intense. During this time, the United Nations withdrew its forces, as the corpses of slain Tutsis, attempting to flee from the country, choked the Nyabarongo and other rivers. Within a space of three

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<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Jibree. New York: Dover, 1956, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, "Cuando tu tierra te expulsa", unpublished lecture, 2008. My translation from Spanish to English.

months, over a million people had died out of an overall national population of eight million. The Hutus targeted Tutsi children in particular, as the aim was above all to wipe out the future of Tutsis and to ensure that the historical memory of this genocide would be forever eradicated. To quote the Indian sociologist Ashis Nandy, “The massive carnages at Rwanda and Bosnia have taught the students of genocide that the most venomous, brutal killings and atrocities take place when the two communities involved are not distant strangers, but close to each other culturally and socially, and when their lives intersect at many points. When nearness sours or explodes it releases strange, fearsome demons”.<sup>4</sup> Whilst many agree that intervention from the United Nations may well have stopped the massacres, the latter withdrew the majority of its peacekeeping forces from the country following pressure from the United States and Belgium, a former colonial power in Rwanda. Of the 2500 United Nations soldiers who had been in Rwanda, only 270 remained. If the world turned a blind eye, it was not because they did not know. Reports were indeed in the press. However, as Elaine Sciolino of the *New York Times* stated, “no member of the United Nations with an army strong enough to make a difference is willing to risk the lives of its troops for a failed central African nation-state with a centuries-old history of tribal warfare”.<sup>5</sup> Closer to home, Simon Hoggart of the *Guardian*, stated that “Rwandans are thousands of miles away. Nobody you know has ever been on holiday in Rwanda. And Rwandans don’t look like us.”<sup>6</sup> The limited Western intervention that did take place was misleading in its intentions: misinformed by their governments that Tutsis were killing Hutus, French soldiers were dispatched to aid the latter to the further detriment of the Tutsi minority. As Kofi Annan, the previous Secretary-General of the United Nations later acknowledged during a visit to Kigali, “We must and we do acknowledge that the world failed Rwanda at that time of evil. The international community and the United Nations could not muster the political will to confront it”.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there was much that the United Nations could have done but did not do. Annan’s acknowledgement has done little to place the genocide of Rwanda in the spotlight. While it was somewhat highlighted in the media in 2004, a decade after it occurred, few in the West today have clear details of what took place, quite unlike the Holocaust of 1939-45.

It is against this backdrop of collective neglect and forgetting that Jaar works. His Rwanda Project spans the years 1994 to 2000 and is the result of a visit made to Rwanda in August 1994. His decision to go to Rwanda to see the situation there for himself was taken as a result of the lack of concern that was prevalent in the United States. When he arrived in Kigali, there was neither water nor power available and very little food. Jaar’s first artistic act, later called “Signs of Life”, was to send postcards out of the country with the names of survivors he met: *EMMANUEL RICOGOZA IS STILL ALIVE! CARITAS NAMAZURU IS STILL ALIVE!* Ironically, the postcards all bore images of Rwanda as an idyllic holiday location, bursting with flora and fauna. In the course of his travels around the country, Jaar began to collect stories of survival and to take photographs. A key aspect of his work is the combination of text and image. To quote the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, “photographs by themselves cannot do very much... But when you place them next to words, they become so

<sup>4</sup> Ashis Nandy, “Obituary of a Culture”, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/513/513%20ashis%20nandy.htm>, accessed 8/5/2008

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Sciolino, “For West, Rwanda Is Not Worth the Political Candle”, *New York Times*, April 15, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A00E3DA1F38F936A15756C0A96258260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>, consulted on 5-5-2008.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Press Release, SG/SM/6552, 6 May 1998.

powerful.”<sup>8</sup> The effect of Jaar’s work lies in the interplay between image and text. Of the twenty-one photographic installations that form Jaar’s Rwanda Project, perhaps the best known is the one entitled “The Eyes of Gutete Emerita”. Gutete Emerita witnessed before her own eyes her husband and two sons being hacked to death with machetes as the family attended mass. Jaar met Emerita when she returned to the scene of the massacre to find the bodies of her family.<sup>9</sup>

It is after we have registered the horrors that this woman has witnessed, told to us in Jaar’s words, that her eyes fall on us. Jaar’s work is at once an indictment on the cruelty of what happened in Rwanda and an indictment on the indifference that we, the largely Western viewers and erstwhile uncaring onlookers of Rwanda’s tragedy, showed at the time. When we look into them, as Jaar induces us to, we almost see ourselves reflected in the very eyes that had witnessed horror and where the very perpetrators of the murders were once reflected. It was as if by witnessing the death of her family, Gutete Emerita had become an eyewitness for the whole of Rwanda. In turn, she also became the eyes of a nation that turned to question those who had betrayed her in her time of need.

To look closely at this image of Gutete’s eyes is to realize that Jaar presents them to us in the guise of an image that is still within the frame of the negative, film that has yet to be processed. Gutete’s eyes remain locked in the box, within the confines of the anteroom of the camera, still repressed from the light of the world and yet filled with the raw colour of pain, a metaphor for her history that has been barred from articulation. In this sense, this is not an image of Gutete’s eyes, but in fact an image of the absence that ensues from our refusal to look at her or to dwell on her trauma. What is more, Gutete’s eyes become, for us, *the* sole reference points for the trauma she experienced; at the same time, her gaze upon us is the very antithesis of the absence of willing witnesses to Rwanda’s horrors. In this sense, Gutete’s eyes become a vehicle of trauma, insistently attempting to relay its haunting to those who refused to look or acknowledge. As Barthes says in the opening passage of *Camera Lucida*, “I am looking at the eyes that looked at the emperor”.<sup>10</sup> Barthes thus underlines the fact that photographs bring with them a paradoxical sense of proximity and distance. They act as windows that link us to what lies around and beyond the subject of the image. In considering the links between art and trauma, it is important to take note of this distance, for art, as Mieke Bal reminds us, is inevitably belated in its response to the traumatic event.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the traumatic event can never be reproduced by art. The photograph is thus unable to represent trauma—for trauma must be seen as the rupture of coherence and rationality that eludes and defies all representational structures and systems, be these linguistic or visual. To quote Cathy Caruth, “(trauma) is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the artwork itself is the result of the aftershocks of

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<sup>8</sup> Sebastião Salgado, personal interview, London, September 10<sup>th</sup> 2007

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.alfredojaar.net> (last accessed 26-2-2010)

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1982, New York, Hill and Wang, p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Mieke Bal, “The Pain of Images”, in Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne (eds.), *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 93-115.

<sup>12</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, p. 4

trauma, and as such, cannot be seen to engender it in any way. This image of Gutete's eyes is only that —i.e., an image, a re-presentation of eyes that bear the imprint of trauma. By looking into Gutete's eyes, we do not see her. We see only an abstraction of her suffering distilled in her eyes made clear to us by the (con)text. At the same time, the image makes us acutely aware of the impossibility of us ever really knowing her pain or making it ours. When we look into her eyes, we of the global hegemony, we are also looking into the abyss of our collective neglect.

What then, one may well ask, is the point of Jaar's work? To what extent and to what ends can art draw upon trauma to construct a politics for the unvoiced? In what way can an art installation, or even twenty-one art installations mitigate the losses of a conflict as great as Rwanda's? How can resolution be reached via images and text produced in the aftermath of conflict? Speaking in visual terms, this resolution or clarity that is sought is not one of trauma itself, but of absence, silence and repression. Of tacit consent to violence.

In order to understand Jaar's work, we need to seek a conceptual framework within which a nexus between art and experience can be established. In this context, Jill Bennett reminds us that

trauma-related art is best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the "secret" of personal experience. To understand its transactive nature, we need to examine how affect is produced within and through a work, and how it may be experienced by an audience coming to the work.<sup>13</sup>

Crucial here, when exploring the transactive nature of trauma-related art, is the idea of aesthetics, understood as a field that negotiates the sentient with the logical or rational. If such artwork has historical and political value, then this derives from the way in which affective responses to artwork can be translated into conceptual engagement. What is more, in considering the affective or sentient, we need to distinguish it from the sentimental. Jaar's work, in my view, does not seek to arouse sympathy; nor does it seek to foster a sense of identification between us, as viewers, and Gutete, as subject. Indeed, the very fact of her gaze upon us underlines the separation between her and us for without this space of difference, the artwork cannot function. Nor does the photographic installation portend to be anything more than a form of diffusing an account of events. However, it does so, in contrast to dominant media, not by profiling large-scale events in neutral language —one thinks here of commonly heard phrases such as "collateral damage" or, in the context of Rwanda, "a million dead"— three words claiming to encompass a million different lives. Instead, Jaar's work diffuses information by deliberately targeting the sentient in viewers. It hones in on the tragedy of a single person and transforms that individual's trauma into one that represents the trauma of an entire people. Furthermore, the point of Jaar's photographic installation is, in fact, to jar the viewer.

Numerous viewers have mentioned the physicality of their responses to Gutete's eyes. David Levi Strauss, for instance, talks of how he felt physically ill and nauseous when he encountered the installation. He states "I felt dizzy and almost retched. I don't know why this happened, but it did."<sup>14</sup> This response to the artwork via the body is extremely important and must be taken note of. It is not an abstract response to an abstract image, but rather a bodily or material response to an abstract image. This

<sup>13</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathetic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, 2005, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, 2003, New York, Aperture Foundation, p. 97

materiality of response, the retching that Levi Strauss felt or the nausea that swept over him, is the stirring of historical and political potential. For politics to be real, and by this I mean experienced, as opposed to thought about or talked about, it needs to be less an ideology encountered conceptually than a lived experience that attacks the neutrality of the viewer and forces a response that is involuntary and non-rational. The artwork that is political affects the viewer despite himself, and not thanks to his preconceptions. Indeed, it is the materiality of bodily or sentient response that then engenders a specific line of thinking. Furthermore, if the viewer is shaken by the artwork, this is not because she or he somehow feels the subject's trauma. In this sense, artwork does not transmit trauma, as such, or convey it, for trauma, by definition, remains elusive to representation and relay. Rather, artworks, such as "The Eyes of Gutete Emerita", must be seen as primarily performative. They incite a kind of embodied perception in the viewer, not through the "telling of..." but through a sensory assault that shakes the viewer out of her or his complicity. For artworks that speak from trauma can only be thought of in terms of a temporal tension, that of the past traumatic context that produced the work and the relative peace and quiet of the present. In this sense, the artwork does not relay the traumatic experience, but it does convey a mini-shock of trauma generated by this temporal collision. This mini-shock can also be viewed as a mild after-shock, staged with care but material in effect. If it affects the body, then it also affects the mind. It does not convey information or 'teach' us anything as such, but it propels us into a mode of uncertainty. Momentarily, but in a very sentient way, the equilibrium of our lives has been upset. We wonder why. As David Levi Strauss states of his response to Jaar's work, "I don't know why this happened".

It is curious to note in this context that trauma is a borderline experience. For the victims of trauma always encounter it in the violence of contact with the world outside, and yet its impact is most acutely felt internally. So too do the temporal contrasts of such artwork present borderlines between what is known and understood and the bewildering silence of what has not been articulated and what transgresses the logic of human understanding. What emerges upon a contemplation of the idea of trauma is the question "Why?" This borderline is the space of uncertainty from which critical enquiry can emerge. With trauma related artworks such as this, the viewer first feels the force, not of the experience of trauma itself, but of its million subsequent reverberations that course through the body and force a questioning to explode within the viewer, led thus to conceptualize and interrogate the experience. And in this interrogation lie the stirrings of an ethically and politically necessary articulation of repressed history. These are the after-images that scatter through space, so that personal history is propelled into the wider collective realm across the uneven and unfair divisions of global power: the images or memories both spoken and visualized of Auschwitz, Vietnam, Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and so many more that repeat in the anterooms of our collective imagination.... Images that bring disquiet.

Cultural representations inevitably lag behind the event. As we dwell here on the idea of testimony in the context of post conflict cultures, we face a conundrum whereby culture is by definition a field of representation, contestation and struggle, but also, it would seem, inevitably delayed and even removed in its ability to narrate or make sense of conflicts. At the same time, the notion of post conflict cultures posits the spectral force of past conflicts onto culture in the here and now, somehow complicating temporal experience by drawing the past out and scattering it in the realm of the present. Thus the "post..." indicates not merely that which is posterior, but rather the ricocheting tremor of past moments and events in the present. It indicates the incessant return of shadows and traces that infiltrate memory and identity, all the more forcefully when



repressed. It underlines the persistence of sight, even when turning a blind eye. Few cultural media capture this contradiction as well as photography: in always lagging behind the event or the moment, in their interjections into the here and now across space and time, photographs are spectral in their play of absence and presence. For this very reason, they draw into the present shards of memory seized, as Walter Benjamin has so famously stated, “in the flash of the moment before it dies”. Thus, photographs are the result of crises, tokens of death and loss that force us to come face to face with our own existential pathos. In this sense, the image is always an after-image, a shadowy trace of that which was or might have been, uncertain and ambiguous, always short of articulation, but also stubborn and persistent. Unfinished and lingering, it is also always uncertain, unresolved, in the interrogative. Despite the brief text that accompanies the image, “The Eyes of Gutete Emerita” do not provide us with historical understanding of Rwanda’s tragedy. Instead, what this artwork does is to carve a space within the frame from which a questioning of our silence and our absence may begin.