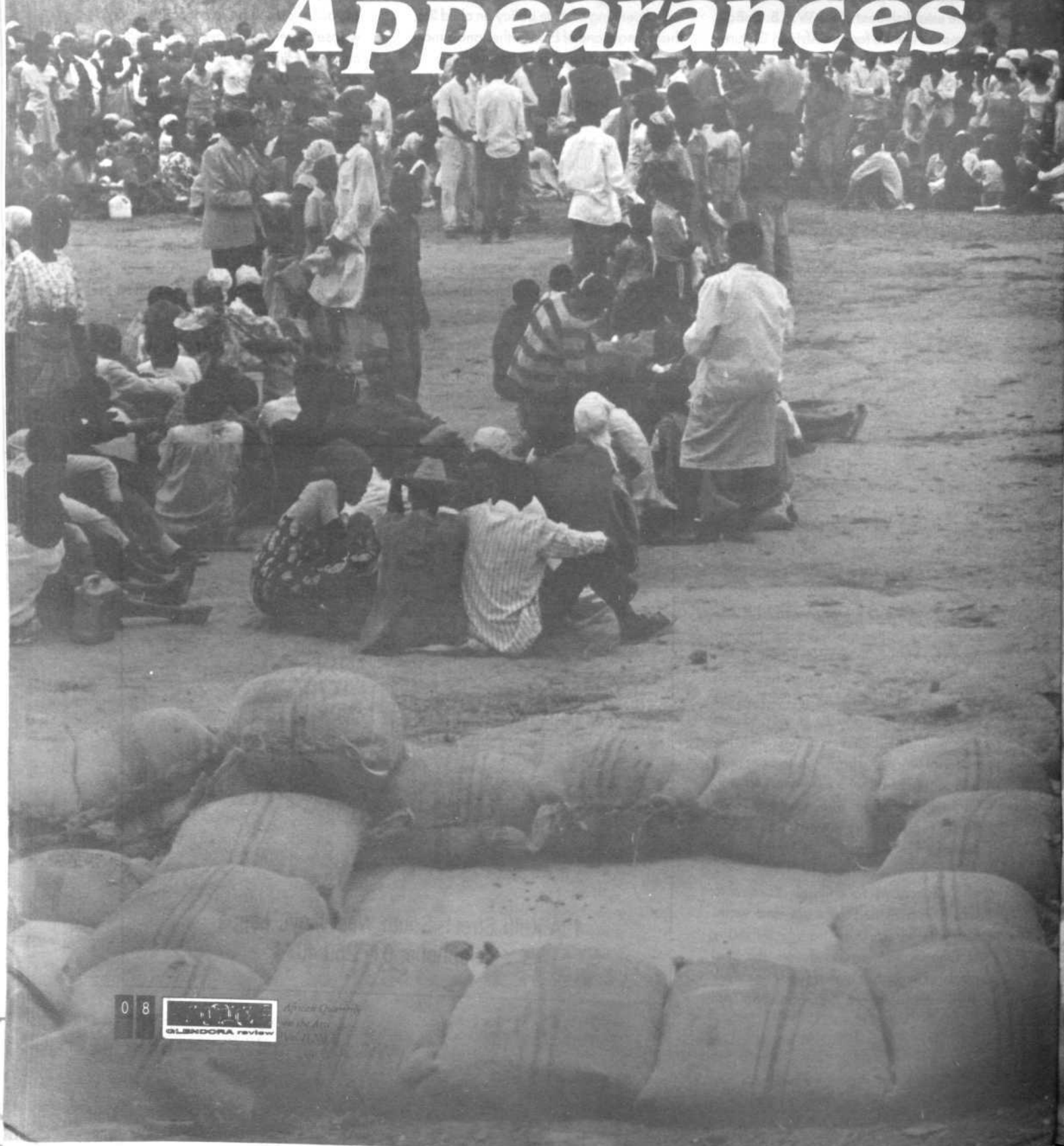


# ALFRED

## *Appearances*



# DO J A A R

*are against us*

**A**

Rick Pirro

**J A A R'S** studio holds thousands of photographs he had taken since leaving Chile over a decade ago for New York City, yet Jaar does not consider himself to be a photographer. Even the inclusion of Jaar's work in numerous photography exhibitions in museums throughout the U.S. and Europe has not convinced the artist of his specialisation. In the face of such evidence, one might regard Jaar's reluctance to own up to his profession as a kind of aesthetic conceit, a reaction to the historic, and somewhat continuing, denigration of photography within the pantheon of 'high' art. Yet Jaar's reasons for resisting the label of photographers seem to reflect more substantial concerns. In some ways, Jaar's practice approaches journalism, which, supported by the assumptions and privileges afforded photography, could easily be misread as a documentary project.

Conversely, Jaar's work would seem to support filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha's contention that, 'there is no such thing as documentary.' While typically concerned with specific geopolitical conditions, Jaar's photographs make no claim to offer the truth of a matter. Relying on conceptual strategies that implicate place and position in the production of meaning, Jaar's

work underscores the inevitable signifiatory gap between photographs and their subjects. This is not to say, though, that Jaar subscribes to a notion of reality or history as an unending procession of simulacra, if anything, Jaar's challenge to photography's representational authority serves to foreground material relations and lived experience.

Jaar is keenly aware of the ways in which information, particularly in the guise of the photographic, is circulated through global media networks and the ways that information is offered up for daily consumption. In an advanced market economy where images are perhaps the most significant commodities, exposure is likened to knowledge and consumption is promoted as engagement. In response to

past decades, Jaar's work has largely focused on a set of interrelated issues: population displacement and immigration, the exploitation of labour, and environmental degradation. A number of his projects have dealt with political, social and environmental crisis on the African continent.

In 1989, Jaar read a short article in the New York Times about the illegal dumping of toxic waste from Europe in the port town of Koko, in southwest Nigeria. With a suspicion that the few facts reported in the newspaper did little but downplay the actual situation and its global implications, Jaar travelled to Koko. Later, with the information he gathered through interviews and the thousands of

photographs he took over a two week period, Jaar produced a number of installations, collectively titled *Geography = War*.

For *Geography = War*, Jaar exhibited his photographs from Koko as large, glossy

be viewed. The mirrors offered only fragments of the obscured photographs, fragments which changed as viewing positions shifted. The mirrors also reflected fragments of the viewer's own body as he or she moved about the installation, thereby implicating the viewer in the crisis and its reconstruction as a photographic narrative.

The ethnic violence between the Hutu and Tutsi, and the world's unwillingness to take serious action to help end the genocide in Rwanda, provided the rationale for Jaar's return to Africa in the summer of 1994. On that trip, Jaar visited towns and refugee camps in Rwanda, Uganda, and Zaire, collecting words and images related to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of, mostly Tutsi, people. Yet the project which resulted from that investigation would not follow Jaar's usual conception strategy. There were no glossy transparencies of dead bodies, no reflected images of displaced people. Jaar noted doubts about photography's ability to communicate the enormity of the tragedy and, conversely, its potential to simply contribute to the specialisation of violence. It is a predicament stemming from what Paul Virilio has called a 'crisis of references (ethical, aesthetic), an incapacity to take stock of events in an environment where appearances are against us.'<sup>1</sup> In the end, Jaar did choose to use the photographs of the Rwanda genocide, but not show them.

Jaar incorporated some of the photographs in an installation, titled '*Real Pictures*', in which the image remained hidden in archival storage boxes. Each box was silkscreened with a short description of the single photograph inside it. The boxes were stacked and arranged in various configurations, acting as funerary markers for what Jaar called 'a cemetery of images.' Without access to the photographs, viewers were left to picture each image through language.

At first consideration, Jaar's reliance on words in the absence of photographs might seem to rest on a naive notion that language is somehow closer to the truth, or less susceptible to ideological manipulation, than images. Yet Jaar rescued *Real Pictures* from nostalgia by

**The boxes were stacked and arranged in various configurations, acting as funerary markers for what Jaar called 'a cemetery of images'**



this situation, Jaar brings together the visual codes and materials of documentary and promotion

(which are already conflated to a certain extent) to undermine the very operations of those systems. Through carefully staged installations, Jaar's photographic work encourages a more complex exchange between viewer and image.

As relations to information increasingly structure a whole range of social and political interactions, Jaar's work attempts to demonstrate how these relations enable some at the expense of others. In his investigation, Jaar is particularly concerned with the ways in which developing nations are pictured in industrial (or post-industrial) economies and how such representations support nations of First and Third Worlds and their attendant power inequities. Jaar understands that the ideological divide separating First and Third Worlds has real, measurable consequences. Over the

transparencies illuminated in lightboxes, situated in darkened spaces, the lightboxes presented Jaar's images in sequences that insinuated a cinematic visual language. The lightboxes also held transparencies on their backsides, which were visible as reflections in a set of small, framed mirrors mounted behind. To see the second images, which typically offered a counterpoint to their more ambiguous partners, viewers had to bring their bodies to an almost uncomfortable proximity to the lightboxes. In one series of lightboxes the facing transparencies graphically traced the path of the freighters that carried the toxic waste from Italy to Nigeria, while mirrors reflected images of stacked barrels containing PCBs and other dangerous compounds and children rummaging through the dump site in Koko. There was, however, no single vantage point from which all of the images could

using words in such a way as to undermine any claim they might have to an absolute correspondence with reality. While the texts offered descriptions of the basic elements of each hidden image, some also included less necessary, or newsworthy, observations. Jaar's attention to rather curious aesthetic details, like the geometric pattern on the shawl of a woman who walked 300 kilometres to a refugee camp, and his embellished prose style, offered evidence of a highly personal testimony.

With his current work, Jaar again turns his critical attention to Nigeria. The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in November provides the impetus of *Shelter* (*Please Close Your Eyes*), a project made up of a series of six lightboxes in an outdoor bus shelter in Seattle. Like *Real Pictures*, *Shelter* continues Jaar's exploration of narrative description in the place of photographic documentation.

*Shelter* is concerned with the absence of significant Third World figures from the popular imagination and political consciousness of the U.S. public. The work addresses this condition of invisibility with references to three Nigerians. Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chinua Achebe and Fela Anikulapo Kuti. There are clearly marked spaces for an image of each man on separate transparencies, even photo credits for Jaar, yet *Shelter* provides no pictures. Instead, captions accompany missing photographs.

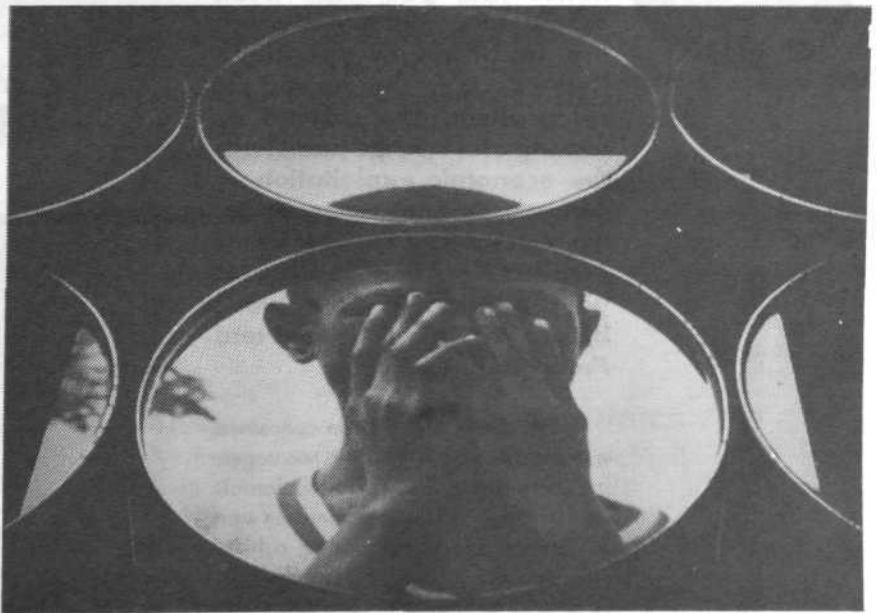
In the first caption we read that Saro-Wiwa is pictured speaking at a rally in Ogoniland. The text goes on to note Saro-Wiwa's environmental and human rights work and the circumstances of his execution. An accompanying transparency presents an excerpt from his prison writings, in which Saro-Wiwa declares, 'The most important thing for me is that I have used my talents as a writer to enable the Ogoni people to confront their tormentors.'

The second caption accompanies a missing portrait of Achebe and provides information regarding Achebe's success as a writer and his work as representative for Biafra. Achebe's profile, like the others, serves to underscore the political efficacy of words, both written and spoken. With *Shelter*, Jaar reasserts the continuing power of words in cultures (and publics) overcome by images.

The last caption describes Fela performing at a nightclub in Lagos. We are told that Fela uses his songs to attack the corruption and human rights abuses of Nigeria's military regime. The final transparency of *Shelter* offers a translation of Fela's adopted name, noting that Kuti means 'Death cannot be caused by human entity.' With that phrase, Jaar brings our attention back to Saro-Wiwa and his execution. The sentiment expressed, though, may seem a bit trite given the events of the morning of November 10th. Saro-Wiwa is dead, his execution orchestrated by Sani Abacha and carried out by the general's troops. Yet by

world's greatest artists.' While these opinions may very well be accurate, they are opinions nevertheless, offering a clear opposition to the dry disembodied objectivity.

*Shelter* demonstrated two concurrent, yet potentially contradictory, impulses in Jaar's practice. While Jaar understands the political significance of representing the struggle of developing nations as a question of the unequal power distribution between First and Third Worlds, he is at the same time wary of reinscribing fetishistic economies of image display and consumption with his



**An installation on the Koko dump site, from the exhibition 'Geography=War'. Double-spread picture is that of a Rwandan refugee camp.**

smuggling his writings out of prison shortly before his death, Saro-Wiwa himself insured that his words would have a political life beyond his death.

As with the silkscreened texts in *Real Pictures*, the captions for Jaar's ghost images in *Shelter* also serve to deny journalistic detachment. Jaar moves from briefly describing the missing photographs and providing some basic biological information to making statements about these men that reflect his own biases and investments. Jaar states (as fact) that Achebe is 'one of the most provocative and original voices in contemporary literature' and that Kuti is 'one of the

photographs. Jaar's continuing negotiation of these concerns seems to have left him increasingly pessimistic about the efficacy of critical images in a media economy largely structured by over-determined technologies and over-saturated markets. It is a practical pessimism, though one grounded in a recognition of the capacity of a spectacular culture to serve up even the most sophisticated critique as an image for consumption. Yet I suspect Jaar's move away from photography is only a temporary retreat, a way to buy time and clear a space for self-reflection and new strategizing. **GR**