

## RUBÉN GALLO

I am very interested in the relationship between your work and your experience. In discussions on art and literature there has been a very long period - beginning with the structuralist discourse of the 1960s - in which any notion of experience was automatically disqualified: there were constant assurances made that texts and works of art had absolutely nothing to do with the life of the author, that they were independent structures governed exclusively by internal rules and considerations.

In recent years, various important critics - most notably Julia Kristeva - have abandoned this structuralist position in order to investigate the relation between the work of art and the author's experience.

I would like to ask you various questions about your experiences in Rwanda to arrive at a more complete understanding of Real Pictures. Tell me a bit about your itinerary during the twelve days you were in the region. Did you arrive there with a program of what you wanted to see and photograph, or did this happen in a more spontaneous manner? How did you live? How did you travel?

### ALFREDO JAAR

All of my projects have more or less the same plan. I find out about a situation, I inform myself as much as possible through the press, and lastly, I travel. In the case of Rwanda, I went first to Paris, where I spent three days trying to get more information, because the view from Europe, and particularly from France, was different from what I could find in the U.S. Then I had to travel to Kampala, in Uganda, because air travel to Rwanda and Kigali, that nation's capital, had been interrupted. I traveled with my friend and assistant Carlos Vásquez. We spent two days in Uganda trying to get more information, and we were successful, since Uganda is much closer to Rwanda than the United States or Europe.

After three days of research in France and two days of research in Kampala, we were finally ready to go to Rwanda. We set off from Kampala towards southern Uganda, and arrived at the border on the following day. We were stopped there by the Rwandan army: I explained to them that we were photographers - I have press credentials that accredit me as a photographer - we signed some papers, and they let us through.

We went immediately to Kigali, the capital. It was a frightening trip, because the highways were deserted. We spent hours without seeing a soul. The people, of course, had fled. We arrived at Kigali, a city in a state of siege, which had been completely destroyed and left without electricity or running water.

We immediately sought out the UN headquarters to get up-to-date information on the situation. Almost all of the hotels had been abandoned and the UN was using several of them as bases of operations. We settled down in a hotel that was partially reserved for the press and members of non-governmental organizations.

We attended the UN press conference every morning to hear the news on the changing situation. Sometimes the UN also offered the press a guided tour on official trucks of the refugee camps or battle sites. My assistant and I accepted the UN's invitation on several occasions, but most of the time we got together with other journalists, and went our own way. I would say that while we were in Rwanda we went on officially scheduled UN trips on three or four occasions, and the rest of the time we spent on our own. And of the time we spent on our own, we spent about half completely alone, and the other half accompanied by two friends, a Swiss journalist and a Japanese reporter.

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I want to ask you how you went about the process of photographing the scenes of massacre. What did you do when you found a spot you wanted to photograph? How would you position yourself? What sort of communication did you establish with the people of the place?

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On a typical day, we drove to a refugee camp and parked outside. Once inside, we walked among the people, we approached them and spoke to them in English, in French, or in their own language through an interpreter. We immediately identified ourselves as journalists and photographers. Our no-frills look - our cameras were ridiculous compared to those of the other photojournalists, who have foot-long zooms - helped us to establish human contact with the people of the place. We spent entire days in the refugee camps: We were very visible during the first hours, but people got used to us and we became almost invisible. Only at that point did we begin to take photographs. The idea was to spend as much time as possible with people before taking pictures, so that we established some closeness - we wanted to be as close as possible - to them. We spent a lot of time talking, chatting with people in order to get as much information as possible about their tragedy. As a rule, we put our cameras in our bags when we first got to a place, and did not take them out until we had been there for two or three hours and had spoken to people.

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Fadi Mitri, a photographer who covered the massacres in Lebanon, once said in an interview that a photojournalist could not let his feelings interfere with his work. Mitri stated that, as a photographer, he had to concentrate exclusively on the technique of photography - the frame, focus, the composition of a good photograph - and not on the violence and pain before him.

How did this tension affect you when you were in the refugee camps? Did you allow your feelings to be involved in the photographic process?

## ALFREDO JAAR

Our reactions were radically different from those of Fadi Mitri. We were not able to escape our emotions. In fact, we were often not able to take pictures, and had to limit ourselves to looking, talking with people, and trying to understand the situation. There were many times when we let our feelings control the situation, but we couldn't help it, nor did we want to.

Since the images we were taking were for personal and artistic use - they were not for publication - we did not have the same concerns that journalists generally have. We were not worried about whether the image might be commercial or not. There was a lot of emotion and tension in our work. Without thinking about it, we sought out respites from the desperation that surrounded us. We would photograph really horrific scenes, and five minutes later, spontaneously, we found ourselves taking a picture of the sky, a tree, or a plant, anecdotic details that would allow us to breathe a bit. Later, I tried to incorporate these details into the work, in order to show that the context is real, that it is possible to see beyond a pile of bodies on the ground. These are small mechanisms of defense and survival. Sometimes we spoke among ourselves, we tried speaking to people, tried not to look too long on those incredibly crude scenes.

## RUBÉN GALLO

In terms of technique, what difference was there between the "spontaneous" photographs you took of the sky or the trees, and the pictures of massacres and violent scenes?

## ALFREDO JAAR

For me, what was important was to record everything I saw around me, and to do this as methodically as possible. In these circumstances a "good photograph" is a picture that comes as close as possible to reality. But 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. This is why it was so important for me to speak with people, to record their words, their ideas, their feelings. I discovered that the truth of the tragedy was in the feelings, words, and ideas of those people, and not in the pictures. There is a way of expressing this disjunction in photography. It consists in highlighting certain elements within the scene, which do not represent the essence of the scene. These elements become simple witnesses to the suffering. A parallel emerges between these minor elements 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 a gaze that arrives too late.

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Fadi Mitri also speaks of the demands of the market. He tells us that there is a market for photographs of war, of massacres, of violence. And that this market has its own rules, which result in some photographs selling more than others. For example, again according to Mitri, photographs that are too bloody - images of corpses that have been mutilated or are covered by wounds - do not sell. In order to sell, a war photograph has to aestheticize the violence it represents. And these conventions reach such a point that Mitri speaks of "formulas" which photojournalists follow. The most commercial photographs, he tells us, are those that encapsulate a small anecdote or story, such as a father running with a baby in his arms in front of a landscape of ruin and destruction.

What I want to ask you is, what perspective did you gain while in Rwanda on the operations of this market? What new insights did you discover in being around other more commercial photographers?

## ALFREDO JAAR

One cannot generalize about photojournalists. There are all sorts of photojournalists. The problem is two-pronged. First of all, they always maintain a certain distance because they work in a hurry. They have to get their pictures out as fast as possible to send them to the photo agencies that distribute them. The second problem is that the majority of these reporters need a lot of security. Often, they tour these areas with guards in tow, and they ask for special protection from the UN while they work. For these two reasons, there is often a great distance between them and the people they photograph. They also use these foot-long zooms that allow them to photograph images which appear to be taken from very close up, but in fact are taken from far away. Our equipment, and also our solitude in the field, compelled us to be really in the middle of everything.

The problem is not in the photojournalists, but in the distribution of their images. As an artist, I had the luxury of returning home with my images and spending the next six months studying them, in order to finally present them in the context of my installations. They, on the other hand, take their pictures and immediately have to send them to the central agencies, which in turn distribute them to the media.

The initial editing of these photographs is done by an editor at a photographic agency. The editor discards a large number of the photographs he receives after having made a selection of the most commercial ones. Then, the editors of the different media -

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In the final presentation of the piece you did not show the photographs that you took in Rwanda. How did you arrive at this decision?

On various occasions you have quoted Vincenç Altaio's phrase, "images have an advanced religion: they bury history." Could you elaborate on the negative effects you associate with images?

## ALFREDO JAAR

I have always felt that we suffer from a bombardment of images through the media, a bombardment that has completely anesthetized us. We are given a sense of being present and living the information we are provided with, but once the television is switched off, or we put away the newspaper or magazine, we are left with an inescapable sense of absence and distance.

My logic was the following: If the media and their images fill us with an illusion of presence, which later leaves us with a sense of absence, why not try the opposite? That is, offer an absence that could perhaps provoke a presence. This was the first step. The second step was to avoid showing these images because they would distract us from what was truly important: namely, that we let a million people die without doing anything. I want to remind you that the UN, fifteen days after the massacre began, could have sent five thousand men and immediately stopped the violence, according to statements made by the Canadian general who was in charge of the UN troops in Rwanda. But the Security Council decided that the troops that were already in Rwanda should abandon the place. This was a catastrophe that could have been averted. Therefore, one of my ideas was to create a situation of absence in order to generate a presence. I also thought: People were already shown a great quantity of images, but they did not see anything. No one saw anything because no one did anything. Then I thought, this time I won't show the images so that people can "see" them better. What we have here is an absolutely radical and utopian logic, a study, an experiment in representation.

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Even though the photographs were never actually shown in Real Pictures, you made a very careful selection of the images: out of the 3,000 or so pictures that you took in Rwanda, you only used about 60. Could you talk about the process of selecting these images?

## ALFREDO JAAR

Today there are about 15 Real Pictures monuments that contain a maximum of 60 photographs. I selected those 60 photos because I wanted to "show" the different aspects of the war in Rwanda: the massacres, the refugee camps, the destruction of cities. I wanted to cover the complete spectrum. I spent hours and hours looking at those images and carefully selecting the material for my installation. At that time I was not aware of the process: I selected those images with great care, looking for the best pictures. I considered the elements in each photograph as carefully - the composition, framing, the information and expressions it contained - as if the photos were going to be exhibited. On our return from Rwanda, my assistant and I lived through a very painful process that lasted several months. I decided not to look at the images for some time, to recover from the impact that they had on me. And while I thought about how to work with these images, I was struck by the idea of not showing them at all. This decision was taken after my return, as I was preparing the materials.

## RUBÉN GALLO

I would like to contextualize your decision to conceal the photographs that you took in Rwanda. There is a sort of "distrust of the image" which we had seen previously in your work. I think that this phenomenon, which I call a "distrust of the image," has culminated in Real Pictures and in 1,000,000 Finnish Passports, another installation in which the image has disappeared.

## ALFREDO JAAR

I now find myself at a sort of dead end. I am going through a very fascinating moment of reflection. I am at a cul-de-sac not only because I have discarded the image, but also because I have worked on the subject of a genocide that left one million people dead, so any subject after that seems trivial. In 1996 I created a new work about Rwanda. It is called The Eyes Of Gutete Emerita. This is the name of a woman we met there. It consists of two light boxes with changing images. Each light box presents a series of changing photographs.

In The Eyes Of Gutete Emerita there are two light boxes mounted on the wall, one next to the other. At the beginning of the sequence, both boxes present a text that fills up the boxes completely, and lasts for one minute. The second image is another text that also lasts a minute. The third image also contains a text and also lasts a minute. These texts describe the massacre from the point of view - through the eyes of - Gutete Emerita, a woman who survived. Finally, when we