

Alfredo Jaar
The Eyes of Gutete Emerita

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART | DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

Alfredo Jaar and Goya's Legacy: A Work about Rwanda's Genocide Enters the Hood's Collection

As Spectator I was interested in Photography only for sentimental reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida:
Reflections on Photography*

The artist Alfredo Jaar was born in 1956 in Santiago, Chile, a country that suffered through civil war and military dictatorship during the years of his adolescence and early adulthood. He was seventeen years old when the elected government was overthrown, replaced by the repressive military rule of Augusto Pinochet. In 1982, he moved to New York City, where he has lived ever since. Jaar frequently addresses political issues in his work and often focuses on the dignity of the powerless. In 1994, he visited Rwanda not long after the genocide and embarked on a decade-long artistic journey, creating works that were born of his experience there. The Hood Museum of Art has recently acquired a pivotal work from this series, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996). Roland Barthes's quotation (above) serves as an appropriate epigraph to the following discussion about this photo-based work, as Jaar's Rwandan work as a whole arises from a cataclysmic experience too deep for words and beyond the range of what images can convey. The image itself is a wound,

and the artist's creation of the work becomes part of an attempt at comprehension. Because of the artist's deep commitment to drawing attention to what happened in Rwanda in 1994, *Eyes* and its companion pieces are some of the most important works of art about war in violence in the last thirty years. It was selected for the cover of *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* by David Levi Strauss (*Aperture*, 2003) and was the culminating work for a recent exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art entitled *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*.

War has been a constant presence from one generation to another and one era to another, on each continent, in all parts of the world. Artists have often been witnesses to these conflicts. The Italian painter Parmigianino lived through the sack of Rome in 1527 but did not depict what he saw what patron would commission a record of the city's rape? Victors most often glorified war in frescos, paintings, and sculpture, while the defeated rarely sought to record their downfall. In the more discreet and less bombastic medium of prints, however, artists sometimes chose to describe war's effects. Jacques Callot saw the havoc caused by the Thirty Years War the pillaging and plundering in the French duchy of Lorraine and recorded it in his etchings titled *The Miseries of War* (1632; below). This series is one of the first artistic works to render the horrors visited upon civilian populations. Callot probably chose etching as the medium for this work because multiple impressions of the prints could circulate widely among collectors and therefore



Jacques Callot, French, 1592—1635, *The Pillage of a Farm* (*Le Pillage d'une ferme*), plate 5, 1633, etching. Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.983.30.1



Francisco Goya, Spanish, 1746—1828, *One cannot look*, ca. 1810—20, etching and aquatint. Gift of Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935; PR.991.50.1.26

influence perceptions of the conflict; by nature etching is a democratic process, less expensive to produce and buy and distributable in large editions. One hundred fifty years later, the Spanish artist Francisco Goya witnessed Napoleon's invasion of his country in 1808 and shortly after began a series of etchings, *The Disasters of War* (ca. 1810—20), about the executions, sieges, burials, and rapes he either witnessed or heard about from others. Influenced undoubtedly by Callot's series, Goya's images are less removed, the figures larger and the setting or location less important than in the earlier artist's work. With an unflinching eye, Goya focuses on the terrible suffering of human beings during times of armed conflict and occupation.

Goya's etchings in the *Disasters* are laid out in a numbered sequence and given titles that often refer to the one that comes before or after. In the second etching in the series, he shows French mercenaries killing Spanish partisans, while the third shows the reverse, Spanish defenders killing French soldiers. The title on the second, *With or without reason*, is followed by the title of the third, *The same*. By choosing such images and accompanying words, Goya comments on the brutality and violence of acts of war, regardless of who does the killing.

Another *Disasters* etching showing the execution of civilians is titled *One cannot look* (above). The senseless toll of violence on all subjected to it particularly the cost to humans who see acts of barbarity is a theme woven throughout the eighty prints in *Disasters*, perhaps the first visual artistic work that deliberately questions war's destruction of human life.

Not surprisingly, the series was not published or disseminated during Goya's lifetime. The prints, such as those in the Hood Museum of Art's collection, were eventually published in 1863 by the Royal Academy in Madrid. Goya's images in turn influenced a new generation of artists when they appeared. Manet's stunning image of a dead figure in front of a barricade in *Civil War* (below), a print about the brutal suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, draws both on Goya's legacy of picturing the dead or defeated and on the relatively new medium of photography, which with its long exposure times was only suited to showing the still forms of dead bodies. As Jacqueline Baas has pointed out, the dead soldier who is at the center of Manet's composition is holding a white handkerchief, showing that he had been shot while trying to surrender. The striped trousers of a civilian combatant mark the partially visible legs of a body lying next to him.

Without question Goya's *Disasters* also prefigures the photographic images of wartime conflict. Images showing the torture and mutilation of bodies one of which is illustrated on the next page are nonetheless rare in the published photographic record. Only when the war criminals themselves document these acts are they recorded; witness the tremendous impact of the recent images of inmates being tortured at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Photojournalists more frequently capture on film (or, these days, digitally) the physical aftermath: corpses lying on the ground, refugee camps, and injured civilians and soldiers. Goya's painful depictions of actual terror and torture, though common enough in literature,



Edouard Manet, French, 1832-1883, *Civil War*, 1871, lithograph. Purchased through the Julia L. Whittier Fund; PR. 1951.110



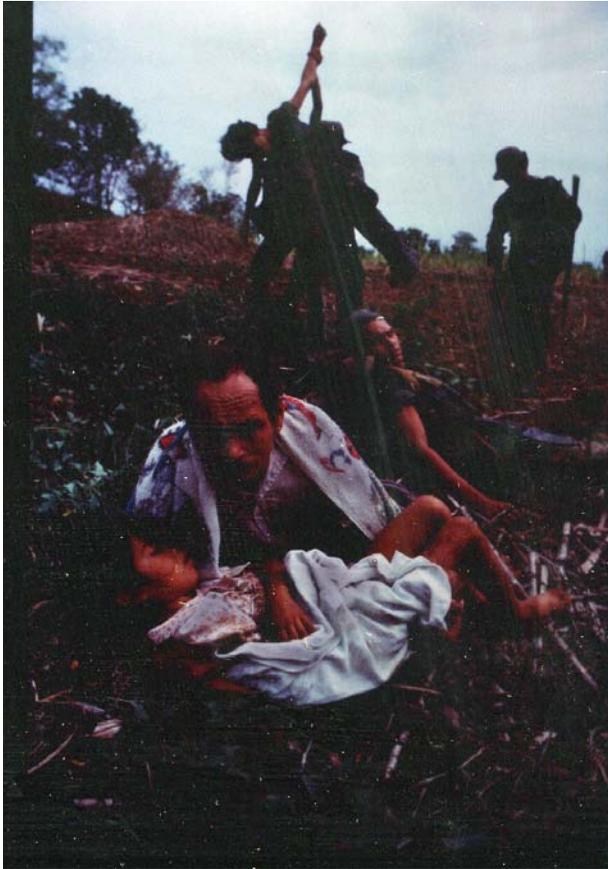
Francisco Goya, Spanish, 1746—1828, *What else is there to do?*, ca. 1810—20, etching and aquatint. Gift of Adolph Weil Jr., Class of 1935; PR.991.50.1.33

are also rarely found in Western art. Exceptions are paintings and sculptures of Christ's suffering (for instance, the wracked crucified body of Grewald's Isenheim altarpiece) or visions of hell intended to inspire sinners to improve their behavior. In these religious scenes, such images have a particular purpose for instance, to visually demonstrate what Christ chose to undergo in order to redeem the human race. In contrast, Goya's images emphasize the irrationality and randomness of violence in wartime. He turns art's purpose toward revealing what the imagination balks at seeing and comprehending. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes: With Goya a new standard for responsiveness to suffering enters art . . . The account of war's cruelties is fashioned as an assault on the sensibility of the viewer. Few artists have matched his fury and unrelenting vision.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, photographers became the main visual chroniclers of war. As Sontag notes, the photographer takes the photograph, and with its ontological status as a recorder of what is real, the photographic image of war becomes freighted with a responsibility that it cannot possibly support to convince those who see it of its truth above and beyond its partial and monocular vision of a moment of time. Sontag also notes that it is not necessary for the photographer to write next to his image as Goya does under one print: I saw this. The very nature of the photograph gives it a power of

persuasion that is at once more immediate and more fragmentary. One photographer who intends his work to persuade others to renounce war's devastation is photojournalist James Nachtwey, whose camera has focused on the most painful images of war and its effects (see next page). Nachtwey seems to get as close as Goya in his depictions of events and risks his life frequently to do so. Because of the specificity of the photographic medium, and his tendency to show suffering at its most intense, Nachtwey has been criticized for displaying his work in museum exhibitions and for making beautiful pictures of suffering. But the most beautiful images are sometimes the most compelling, so any accomplished photographer of such subjects is caught in this conundrum. By putting the most vulnerable on display, often as nameless victims, photographers are thought to be complicit in rendering them powerless, offering them up to be consumed like any other product in an image-hungry culture.

The photojournalist, as one who documents, operates on a different plane than the artist. The artist interprets what he or she has witnessed, reforming it into a mediated experience of the world. The Hood's new acquisition *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* by Alfredo Jaar, although it uses photographs, continues in the artistic tradition started by Goya. Jaar is a witness, but he does not take on the responsibility of conveying the impact of his experience through direct images. He focuses instead on one woman's suffering in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. When Jaar visited Rwanda in August after the genocide of April and May, he traveled to Kigali, where the violence was centered. On August 29 he went to the Ntarama Church, forty miles south of this city, where four hundred Tutsi men, women, and children had gathered to escape the killing and instead had been brutally slaughtered. Jaar and his interpreter met a woman named Gutete Emerita there who told them about seeing her husband and sons murdered during the massacre and then escaping with her daughter. In creating *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, Jaar made the decision not to show the results of the carnage, the bodies that still lay rotting at the site; instead, he describes it in text. Then he shows the eyes of the woman, whose expression he cannot forget. It is an attempt to fix and convey the horror of systematic violence by



James Nachtwey, American, born 1948, *San Miguel Province, El Salvador*, 1984, color photograph. Gift of Hugh Freund, Class of 1967; PH.2004.75.4

focusing on one survivor. He purposefully names the people in his work—they are not anonymous victims. In the piece, he shows the eyes for only a fraction of a second, denying the viewer the pleasure of prolonged contact with her intense gaze. The fleeting appearance of her eyes, after several screens of text that describe her experience, mirrors the elusive quality of memory as well as the quick but lasting impact of a violent act, the extinguishing of a life through the sharp movement of a machete or knife.

By concentrating on the survivor as witness, Jaar is echoing Goya's theme of *seeing* as a troubling and devastating legacy for both artist and subject. Jaar has said that after he exited the church he took a picture of a cloud in the sky. When he found this image on his camera, he did not remember taking it. He believes he was so overwhelmed by what he had just seen that he must have unconsciously aimed the camera at an aspect of nature that was free of the turmoil of

the church grounds. This picture, along with others taken on the way to the church of an abandoned agricultural field and the wood-lined path that leads up to it, was used by Jaar for another work, *Field, Road, Cloud* (1997), that displays these benign images next to each other on a wall. Jaar placed diagrams next to them that note their locations in relation to the church and the bodies that remained there. Jaar's work often leads us to question not only the photographic image's capability to convey the reality of an experience but also the efficacy of words over photographic images (and vice versa). He underscores the way in which word and image interact to create meaning outside of the constraints of their different expressive languages.

The impact of Jaar's visit to Rwanda was deep and powerful. He worked for almost ten years on projects related to the genocide, and *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* became one of this body of work's signature pieces. Just as Goya used the medium of prints to disseminate his message, Jaar turned to public art projects such as *RWANDA, RWANDA* in Malmö, Sweden, and *The Gift* in Stockholm to communicate about this genocide and the lack of action to prevent deaths on the part of Western governments. He has also created an internet version of *Eyes*. The impulse is the same as Goya's: by revealing the effects, he hopes to make others aware of the costs. Goya perhaps had no illusions about the ability of his *Disasters* to prevent other similar events, but Jaar goes beyond just capturing what happened in order to make a political statement about its unacceptability. His public interventions speak to an activism that goes beyond the image.

As works like *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* attest, Goya's legacy is still more than relevant in a world racked by hate and violence. He revealed the power of images to convey a dark and persistent part of human experience, the great cruelty of the state, and of individuals, in times of war. Alfredo Jaar, working with other strategies and in new artistic modalities, eloquently continues this noble calling.

Katherine Hart
Associate Director
Barbara C. & Harvey P. Hood 1918
Curator of Academic Programming

[Further Reading]

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. *Fatal Consequences: Callot, Goya, and the Horrors of War*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1990.

Jaar, Alfredo. *The Fire This Time: Public Interventions, 1979–2005*. Milan: Charta, 2005.

. *It Is Difficult: Ten Years*. Barcelona: Actar, 1998.

. *Let There Be Light: The Rwanda Project, 1994–1998*. Exhibition catalogue. Barcelona: Actar, 1998.

Levi Strauss, David. *Between the Eyes: Essays of Photography and Politics*. New York: Aperture Foundation, 2003.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003.

[Caption]

Alfredo Jaar, Chilean, born 1956 (has lived in New York City since 1982), *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996, two Quadvision lightboxes with six black-and-white text transparencies and two color transparencies, edition: 5/6. Pictured: Cycle 4 of 4. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund, the Contemporary Art Fund, the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund, and the Anonymous #144 Fund; 2006.17

[Artist Bio]

Jaar, an artist, architect, and filmmaker, was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985 and was chosen to be a MacArthur Fellow in 2000. His solo exhibitions include those at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, the Modern Museet in Stockholm, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

[Publ. Info]

This brochure was published to accompany the exhibition of Alfredo Jaar's *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* at the Hood Museum of Art, July 8–September 3, 2006.

© 2006 Trustees of Dartmouth College.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Nils Nadeau

Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS

Printed by Queen City Printers Inc.

HOOD

MUSEUM OF ART

Dartmouth College

Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

(603) 646-2808

www.hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu