

Alfredo Jaar, The Structure of Images, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

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Alfredo Jaar

The Structure of Images

No other contemporary artist has elevated the discourses of medium-criticality to an artistic status like Alfredo Jaar. Only a few have managed to get under the skin of representation with such sharp awareness and politically charged agency. This is Jaar's greatest conceptual skill. Despite the sophisticated intellectual approach, his work is never burdened by its critical heft; the message is never smothered by the artist's painfully acute critical awareness.

No other invention has changed the world like photography. The act of representing through the photographic lens is never a passive gesture of documentation. Of course, we are fully aware of photography's world-forming power. Its indexical relationship with the world endows the medium with the uncanny ability to fabricate our lived experience in real-time. But simultaneously present tense and token of memory, the photographic image relentlessly points at our inability to fully grasp the moment. In the first half of the nineteenth century, we invented a mechanical eye able to compensate for the shortcomings of our biological one. We invented an eye capable of conceptualizing what the brain cannot immediately see. *The Structure of Images*, currently on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MAC), is a beautiful, fully-formed visual essay about this very power of photography, its unparalleled ability to reveal, conceal, and record.

Opening the small exhibition is the triptych *Life Magazine, April 19, 1968* (1995)—a piece that summons the solemnity of church altarpieces. The realism of the left panel progressively gives way to the transcendence of diagrammatic representations featured in the right panel. The iconic image of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral (originally published by *Life Magazine* in April 1968) that we see in the left panel is read through a racial lens of the central panel that only foregrounds Black individuals. Despite their

pronounced aesthetic differences, these two images share a structural assonance—a cohesive sense of density and entropy. The third image visually extracts the few white individuals present in the original photograph. This image features the least amount of diagrammatic information, and yet it speaks the loudest about racism and social segregation in the history of the United States.

Nearby, inside a darkened room, three small black-and-white photographic images from the *A Hundred Women* series (2014–ongoing) are surrounded by spotlights on stands. These are the portraits of Shada Nasser, Nawal El Saadawi, and Camila Vallejo: three remarkable female activists who have been sidelined by the Western media. In the dark environment, the spotlights are blinding. Depending on the viewer's point of view, the glare can obscure the photographs. And as one attempts to gain a better vantage point, it is the spotlights that obstruct the view; the legs of the light stands also keep us at a distance. Only sporadically, the faces of these women become fully visible. This play of visibilities and invisibilities reflects the structural conditions under which knowledge of the world we live in is produced by the media. It questions modes of representation and consumption as well as our moral and ethical societal values—our obsession with celebrities who are famous for being famous.

Shada Nasser is a human rights and defense lawyer who has saved the lives of numerous Yemeni women unjustly charged with crimes they did not commit. Nawal El Saadawi was an activist for women's rights in the Arab world. A prolific author, El Saadawi founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) and openly fought female genital mutilation in Egypt. Between 2011 and 2012, Camila Vallejo, today a communist party politician, led a series of student protests that brought the Chilean education system to its knees by revealing layers of intolerable corruption.

Alfredo Jaar

Life Magazine, April 19, 1968, 1995.

A Hundred Women (Nawal El Saadawi), 2014, installation views, 2021.

Photos : courtesy of the artist & Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago



These are only some of the women that Jaar has literally cast light on through this ambitious and ongoing project. These women have single-handedly challenged regimes of oppression and have devoted their lives to making a positive change for others. Jaar's installation implicitly questions their invisibility on the international scene, thus evidencing the cultural superficiality that draws our attention and defines our interests. Shouldn't these women occupy our minds more than the Kardashians? Captivated by self-obsessed celebrities, we don't seem to care about those truly heroic individuals of our time who fight for social justice. Jaar asks us to momentarily contemplate the possibility of a different popular culture in which those who make a real difference to the lives of others are in the spotlight.

The last work in the exhibition, simply titled *R* (1990), presents a reflection on how the media represent refugees. In this work, Jaar returns to the lightbox—an emblematic object he has incorporated in past works as a metaphorical tool for enabling visibility and thus defining knowledge. This lightbox houses the image of an anonymous Ethiopian woman photographed in a Sudanese refugee camp. The image was acquired by the author from a photo agency. Nothing is known about this woman. The six round mirrors that face the viewer and reflect her image merge viewer and refugee into one fragmented hierarchical representation in which the refugee is cast as inferior to the museum visitor.

The Structure of Images is unsettling in its simplicity and critical acumen. The exhibition embodies and performs the relational modalities that lead us to interpret photographic imagery as truth. It positions the politics of the image in our contemporary world as a central ethical question about the very nature of truth. And it invites us, the viewers, never to stop questioning the imagery that surrounds us in a world that is defined by photographs more

than ever before—those we see and those we don't, those we only understand decades after they were taken and those we might never fully grasp.

Giovanni Aloï

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

August 28, 2021—January 9, 2022