

Real Pictures (1995). *Dimly lit, like a cathedral, the exhibition space houses a series of dark monuments that evoke the familiar shapes of minimalist sculpture: A large, flat square laid across the floor mimics the contours of a Carl André piece; in an adjacent room, a voluminous cube recreates the monolithic qualities of Richard Serra's objects; in a corner, a pyramidal shape recalls certain works by Robert Morris. But these structures are not made of iron or steel; they are assembled out of hundreds of black archival boxes, massed as if they were bricks. Each box contains a single photograph and a brief text, embossed on the exterior, describing the inaccessible image. "In the photograph," reads one of the texts, "there are too many bodies to count. They are in a particularly grotesque moment of decomposition, where the flesh is still visible, but it is bloated, discolored, and rotting."*

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On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying Juvénal Habyarimana, the Rwandan president, was shot down near Kigali. The African nation immediately plunged into one of the most cruel civil wars of our century: in less than two months, over a million Rwandans were killed; two million were forced into exile; another two million were displaced within Rwanda. Puzzled by the international community's refusal to acknowledge the magnitude of the genocide, Alfredo Jaar visited the Rwandan refugee camps in the summer of 1994. At first, he turned to photography as the most effective medium for telling the world about the tragedy; over the course of a few weeks, he took over three thousand photographs of the most horrific scenes of death and mass destruction.

Very soon, however, photography

## ALFREDO JAAR PHOTOGRAPHY DETHRONED

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RUBÉN GALLO

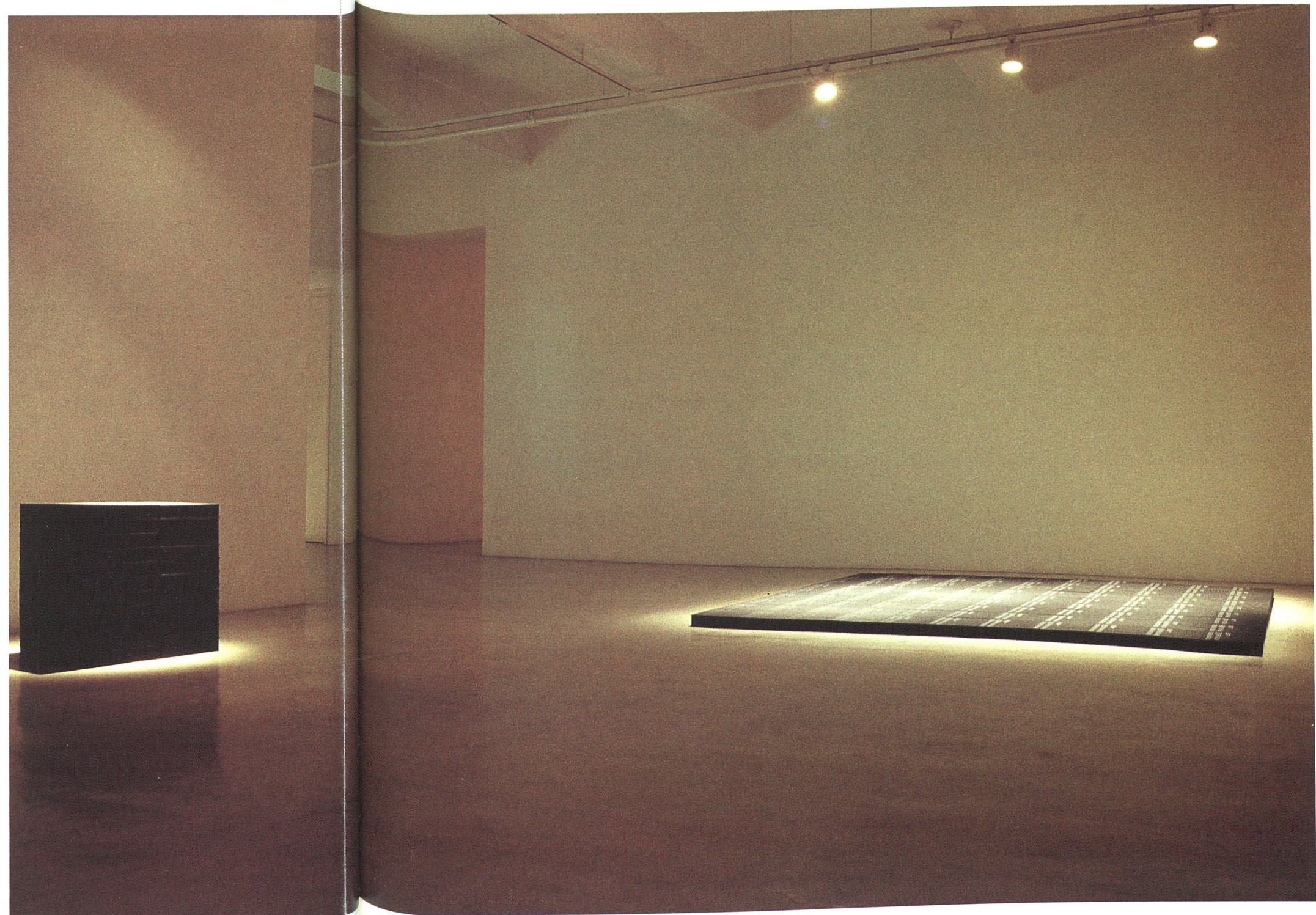
proved to be an entirely inadequate medium for conveying the plight of Rwanda. The proliferation of images in our spectacular society has somehow neutralized the photograph's capacity to transmit *affect*. Searching for a more effective medium for representing the Rwandan events, Jaar eventually arrived at the solution proposed by *Real Pictures*: burying the photographs inside somber, tomb-like monuments that mimic the appearance of minimalist structures. Paradoxically, the photographs of Rwanda would be present in the final installation, but they would remain invisible, inaccessible to viewers.

Initially, this strategy might seem strange: how did the artist arrive at the unlikely marriage between photography and minimalism, two practices with such distinct and apparently irreconcilable histories? Why is minimalist sculpture presented as a more effective medium than photography for conveying the urgency of the Rwandan genocide? In the pages that follow, I would like to suggest that in achieving a synthesis of photography and minimalist techniques, *Real Pictures* not only engages with some of the most important debates of the twentieth century about the politics of

representation, but also offers an unprecedented solution to the ethical imperative of conveying the magnitude of historical events.

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It is significant that Alfredo Jaar first turned to photography as a medium to represent the urgency of the Rwandan



PHOTOS: Alfredo Jaar. *Real Pictures*, 1995. Photo: Archival Boxes. Black Linen, Silk-screened text, Cibachrome Prints. Variable dimensions. Courtesy Gallery Lelong, New York.

genocide. Since its invention over a century ago, critics have seen photography as the most effective vehicle for representing reality. In "A Short History of Photography" (1931), Walter Benjamin celebrates the new technology's

ability to capture details of reality – he refers to these as "the optical unconscious" – that are usually invisible to the naked eye. Through processes like slow motion and enlargement, photography allows us to see and

understand more of the world around us. "It is through photography," Benjamin concludes, "that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis." [1]



Closer to our time, Roland Barthes took this assertion even further, concluding that for most people, photography does not only represent the world: it *is* the world. “A photograph is always invisible,” Barthes writes. “it is not *it* that we see” [2] – “a photograph is literally an emanation of the referent.” [3] Photography is not only the most effective medium for representing the visual elements of reality, but it is also the most potent vehicle for transmitting emotions and *affects*. Barthes tells us that his favorite photographs are those that most successfully transmit the affective intensity which he calls *punctum*. These photographs contain an element that pierces the viewer, producing a powerful – and painful – experience in him. “A photograph’s *punctum*,” he writes, “is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” [4] Looking at these photos, Barthes is literally *attacked* by the emotions that they produce – he is pierced, pricked, bruised by the image.

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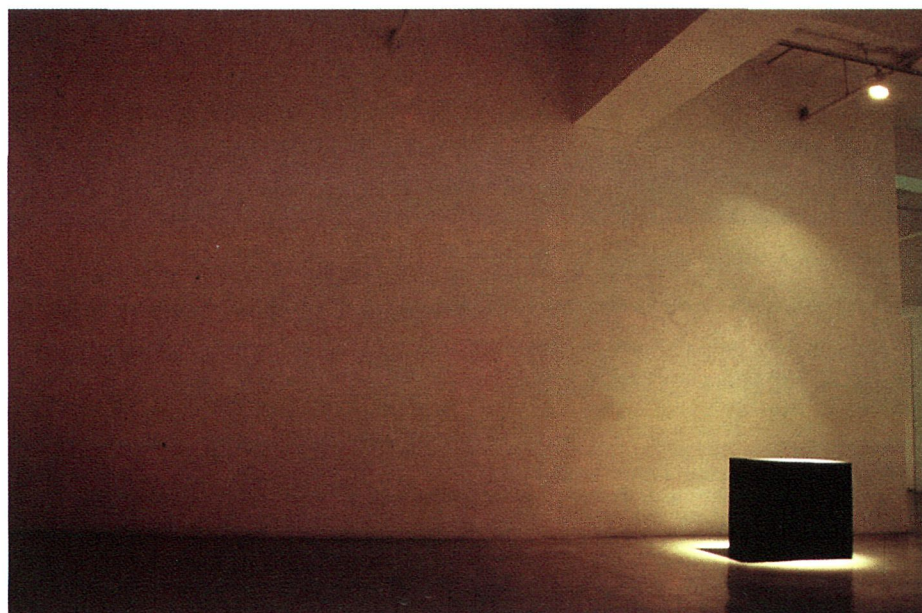
Given the photographic image’s powers to capture the most minute details

of reality, and to produce powerful emotions in the viewer, one would then be tempted to conclude that photography is the most effective medium to represent traumatic events, such as the Rwandan genocide. A photograph, it seems, could produce an elaborate visual representation of the massacre which would also unleash in the viewer the violent affective charge associated with the *punctum*.

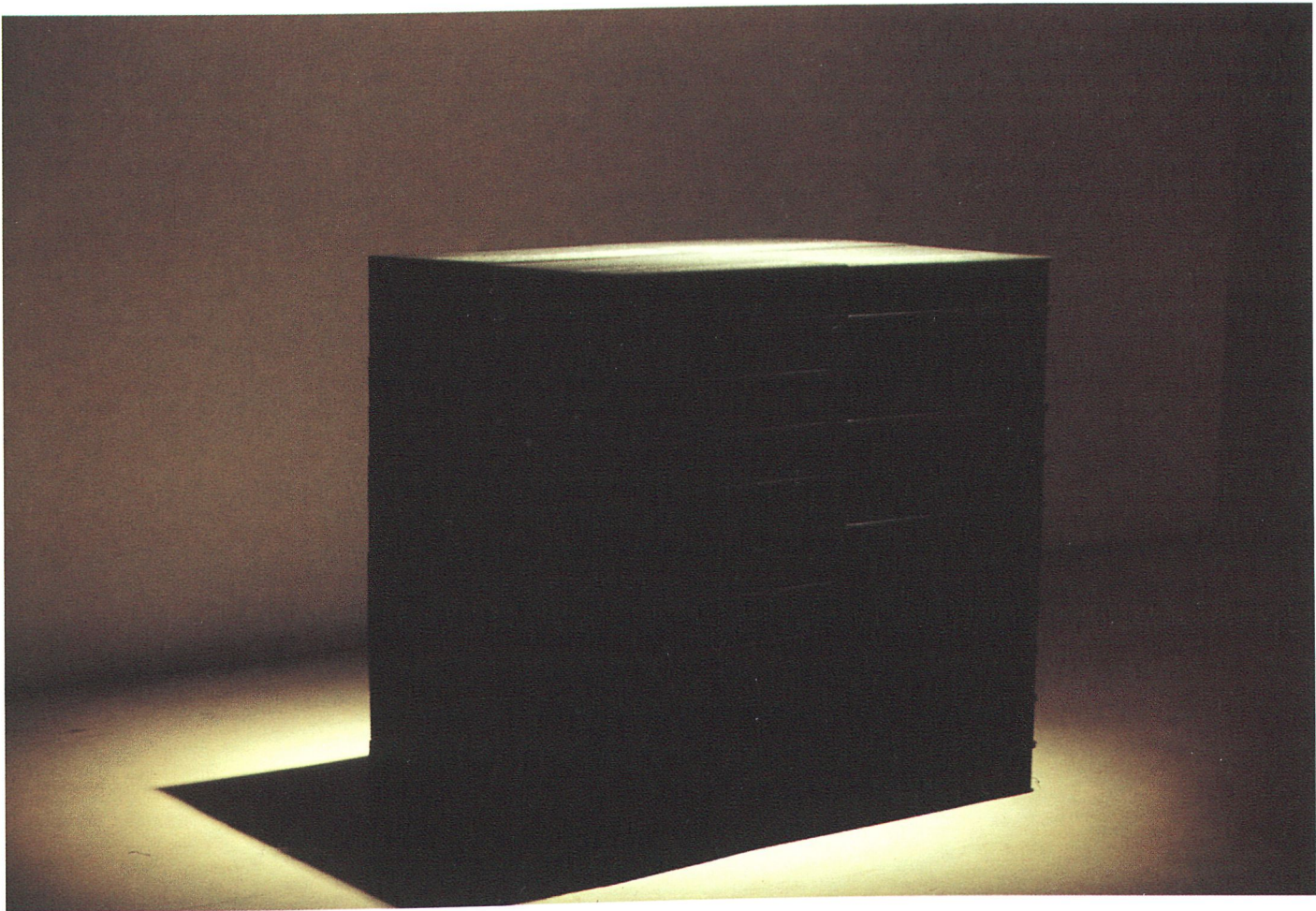
Even Barthes, however, acknowledges that photography does not always achieve this noble representational ideal. The *punctum*, Barthes concedes, is a highly subjective experience, one which depends less on the photograph’s actual traits than on the associations and memories produced in the viewer’s mind. Often a photograph that unleashes powerful emotions in one viewer has absolutely no effect on a different person. Following this logic, Barthes tells his readers that he will not show his most prized image – a photograph of his mother as a little girl at the Jardin d’Hivier – because the complex affective charge that pierces him – a sublime synthesis of filial love and melancholy – will be inevitably lost in other viewers.

Not only is a photograph’s affective charge highly subjective and incommunicable, but the experience of the *punctum* is becoming increasingly difficult in our society. “Society,” Barthes writes, “is concerned with taming the Photograph, with tempering the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it . . .” [5] And how is this madness, this intensity inherent to photography tamed by the modern world? The proliferation of images in television, newspapers, magazines, billboards and other forms of mass media have abused photographic reproduction to the point where the experience of the *punctum* is almost impossible. Photographs are no longer contemplated or experienced, but merely *consumed*: “What characterizes the so-called advanced societies,” concludes Barthes, “is that they consume images [...] something we translate in ordinary consciousness by the avowal of an impression of nauseated boredom, as if the universalized image were producing a world that is without difference (indifferent).” [6]

Ironically, the tendency towards the taming of the photograph that Barthes denounced in 1980 had already been acknowledged by Siegfried Kracauer in the 1920s. Less optimistic than Walter Benjamin, Kracauer did not see photography as a medium whose focus on detail could reveal an “optical unconscious” invisible to the naked eye, but merely as a technique based on the accumulation of useless detail. Photography, he argued, follows the exact same logic as the positivist scholars who believed that history could be written by gathering as much “raw” information as possible about a subject or a period. For







Kracauer, photography was the latest invention of a capitalist system that worshipped thoughtless accumulation – of capital, of data, of images. “From the perspective of memory,” he wrote, “photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage.” [7]

At the root of Kracauer’s critique was a firm conviction that the abundance of visual detail contained in photographs fostered a type of intellectual laziness. When looking at an image, he claimed, we have no need to exercise our intellect, since we are presented with an accumulation of visual information that leaves nothing to our imagination. We are helplessly plunged into a passivity that distracts us from the “awareness” and “consciousness” required for an engaged, active existence in the world. “Never before,” wrote Kracauer, “has an age

been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resemble them in a photographic sense [...] The assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits. [...] Never before has a period known so little about itself. [...] In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding.” [8]

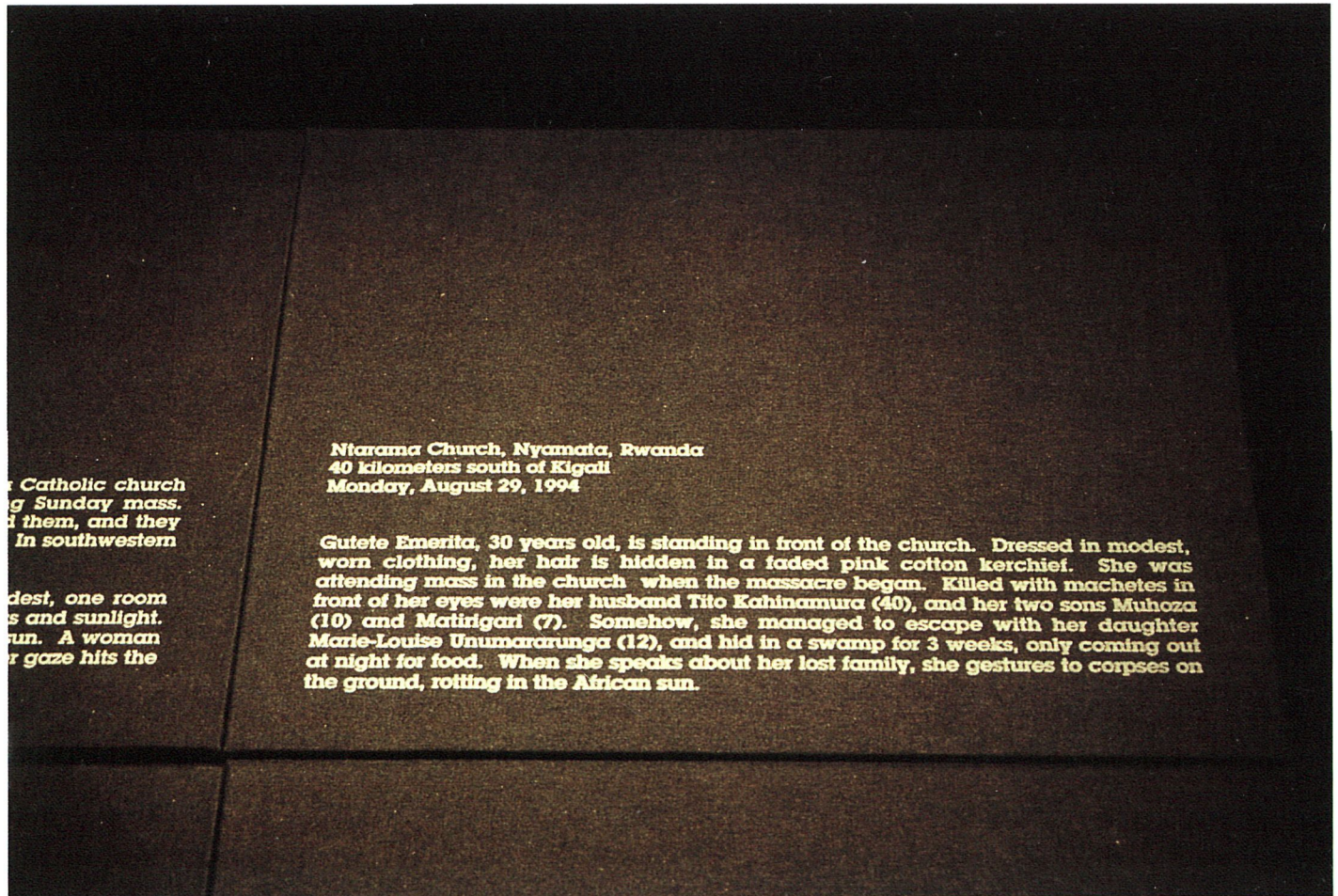
In Kracauer’s view, photography is not an effective medium to communicate the importance of an event – like the Rwandan genocide – because it can never penetrate the surface. A photograph is simply an accumulation of superficial details, of appearances that cannot increase our understanding of the event

since they reveal nothing about historical or cultural context. Because of its superficial nature, photography can only be disrespectful towards its subject matter: “The blizzard of photos,” Kracauer concludes, “betrays an indifference toward what the things mean.” [9]

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In the end, Barthes and Kracauer arrive at similar conclusions: the photographic image cannot be trusted as an effective medium to represent significant events. Barthes refuses to show his readers the photograph of his mother at the Jardin d’Hivier: he claims that the image would lack a *punctum* for his readers, since they never knew his mother. Kracauer would blame the photographic medium itself and argue that an image can never adequately represent a person because it is lifeless,





unrefined accumulation of detail – “In a photograph,” he wrote, “a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow.” [10]

Kracauer’s and Barthes’ ideas shed light on the refusal of the photographic image staged by *Real Pictures*. This installation hides the photographs for the same reason that Barthes withholds his most prized portrait from his readers: for viewers unacquainted with the magnitude of the genocide, photos of corpses and razed villages would merely be read as empty accumulations of detail. Like the thousands of other images of disaster seen every day in newspapers and television, they would leave the viewer cold, indifferent. They would communicate no *punctum*, they would not pierce the viewer with the horror of death. “I have always felt,” writes Jaar, “that we suffer

from a bombardment of images produced by 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 the newspaper put away, we are left with an inescapable sense of absence and distance.” [11] “Images,” Jaar has said, quoting Catalan writer Vincenç Altaió, “have an advanced religion: they bury history.”

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But how are significant events to be represented? If photography proves to be an inadequate medium, there must surely be other techniques that can produce an effective representation of the Rwandan massacre. In his essay, Kracauer had pointed to one alternative: the main disadvantage of photography, he

concluded, was its literalness, its excessive representation of detail that led to a type of intellectual passivity. If, on the other hand, there could be a form of representation that showed less minutia and left more to the viewer’s imagination, it would prove to be a more effective medium. Distancing himself from photography’s representational *literalism*, Kracauer argued for a type of *abstraction*: “As consciousness becomes more and more aware of itself,” he wrote, “the meaning of the image becomes increasingly abstract and immaterial.” Abstract concepts serve to awaken “consciousness.” [12] When faced with an abstraction, Kracauer concludes, the human mind is led to an exercise its intellectual powers – it is forced to interpret, to discern and to criticize.

Despite Kracauer’s passionate

argument, it is difficult to imagine how artistic abstraction could serve to *represent* a historical event. By definition, abstract art – especially Modernist painting, as theorized by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried – is structured by the strictest prohibition against referentiality, against indexing anything – history, politics, even other cultural forms – that lies outside the artwork itself. If we were to follow Kracauer's argument, and abandon the crude literalness of photography in favor of a more enlightening abstraction, where would this choice take us?

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Following Kracauer's logic, *Real Pictures* abandons the literalness of the photographic image in favor of a peculiar type of abstraction: the "look" of minimalist sculpture. Why minimalism?, we might ask. Does not minimalist sculpture seem even less adequate than photography when faced with the challenge of representing the weight of the Rwandan events? After all, minimalist abstraction is of the same order as that of modernist painting: despite readings that naïvely attempt to invest this movement with a radical political engagement which it always lacked, [13] it is sufficiently evident that minimalism merely perpetuated the modernist prohibition against referentiality. As radical as Serra's cubes and Judd's "specific objects" claimed to be, they remained – like modernist painting – aloof to the historical events that marked the 1960s.

Why, then, would *Real Pictures* mimic the look of minimalist abstraction? Despite its refusal to engage with historical events, minimalism achieved a crucial artistic breakthrough which even

Kracauer would have applauded: its use of monumental shapes and industrial materials shifted the emphasis of aesthetic experience from the object to the viewer. The works of Donald Judd, Richard Serra, or Carl André cannot be contemplated passively, like the literal photographic image despised by Kracauer. Minimalist structures aggressively confront the viewer and force him to include his own body – as he walks over, around, or under them – in the aesthetic experience. Minimalist abstraction jolts the viewer out of his passivity, forcing him to not only to deploy his intellect, but also to mobilize his body around the sculptures.

In "Notes on Sculpture," (1966) Robert Morris explains how minimalism brings about this active spatial engagement with the object. Morris claims that when we look at external objects, our perception always takes the human scale as a point of reference. "It is obvious, yet important," he writes, "to take note of the fact that things smaller than ourselves are seen differently from things larger." In general, small objects are not very interesting; our physical superiority immediately moves us to dominate them, and we merely perceive them in a mode that Morris defines as closed, intimate, and *spaceless*. Small objects are "spaceless" because we merely assimilate them – by holding them in our hand, or towering above them – into the space occupied by our body. "Space," Morris concludes, "does not exist for intimate objects." [14]

In contrast, the perception of objects whose size approaches or surpasses that of the human figure is a complex operation which Morris associates with *publicness*: "The quality of publicness,"

Morris explains, "is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself." Upon approaching a large object, we must negotiate between our space and the object's space. As we move around the object, the relationship between the two spaces changes: up close we find ourselves enclosed by its space, while from far away our own bodily space appears to dominate the object. Above all, this public quality ensures that there will be a constant engagement between the viewer and the object, a constant negotiation of bodily space. "It is just this distance between object and subject," Morris concludes, "that creates a more extended situation, for physical participation becomes necessary." [15]

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*Real Pictures* thus posits the crucial achievement of minimalism – the mobilization of the viewer and his perceptual and bodily engagement with the object [16] – as an antidote to the intellectual lethargy that both Kracauer and Barthes associated with the proliferation of images in our societies. The monuments of *Real Pictures* demand that the viewer become an active participant in the work: he must traverse the gallery, walk around the somber structures, feel overwhelmed by the dark aura cast by these shapes. As when entering a cathedral or a memorial, visitors are filled by a certain awe that alters their demeanor: everyone remains silent, hands clasped together, walking slowly around the monuments. As in ritual actions, there can be no spectators, only participants in this collective act of experiencing the work.

In addition to mobilizing the viewer and securing his engagement, *Real*



*Pictures* fulfills Kracauer's call by replacing the *literal* photographic image with an *abstract* one: buried inside the archival box, the photograph can never be seen. In its place, we find a text that not only describes the image, but reveals crucial elements that cannot be represented by the photograph. Consider the following example:

*Kashusha Refugee Camp*

*30 kilometers south of Bukavu, Zaire*

*Zaire - Rwanda Border*

*Saturday, August 27, 1994*

*Caritas Namazuru, 88 years old, fled her home in Kibilira, Rwanda, and walked 306 kilometers to reach this camp. Her white hair disappears against the pale sky. Because of the early morning temperatures, she is covered in a blue shawl with geometric print. Her white blouse cuts across her neck, adorned with a string of amber beads. Her gaze is resigned, weary, and carries the weight of her survival.*

*Caritas is a Hutu caught between the actions of her own people and the fear of retribution from those who have been victimized. In her life, she has witnessed how many Tutsis had to seek exile in other countries. At this late age, in a dramatic reversal, she too has become a refugee.*

The text conveys numerous details which could never be captured by the literalness of the photographic process: the date and location where it was shot, the identity of Caritas Namazuru, the photographed subject, and above all the historical context – the displacement brought about by the civil war – that makes the image significant. Like the minimalist structure that contains it, the text demands from the viewer an intense engagement and mobilization, though

this time though a mental – and not bodily – process. The viewer must traverse the text, assembling the multiple details it provides in order to arrive at a mental image of the invisible scene.

So far we have seen how *Real Pictures* surpasses the limitations of photography through its use of minimalist strategies and abstract images. In a brilliant move, however, *Real Pictures* also transcends the shortcomings of minimalism by incorporating photographic elements into the monuments. Minimalism, as we had seen, perpetuated the modernist prohibition against referentiality, and thus remained divorced from history. *Real Pictures* proposes a superb formal solution by which minimalist structures are forced to bear the weight of history. Each monument literally incorporates the historical referent – the photograph – into its form. Through this process, the minimalist structure becomes a functioning archive, a repository of factual information about the Rwandan genocide. This strategy by which a purely formal device is forced to become an index of historical events recalls On Kawara's transformation of monochrome painting into a historical document (especially the three quasi-monochromatic canvases titled *One Thing 1965 Viet-Nam*, 1965).

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*Real Pictures* is thus the result of a quest for a medium that could adequately represent the enormity of the Rwandan massacre, for an artistic form that could transmit the affective intensity of the event without falling prey to the sensationalism that characterizes the consumption of images in our society. Its magnificent synthesis of photographic

and minimalist strategies transcends the shortcomings of these two artistic forms by integrating the active engagement of the viewer produced by minimalism with the historical referentiality that characterizes photography. The monuments of *Real Pictures* commemorate not only the Rwandan genocide, but also the dethronement of the visual image and the triumph of abstraction over literalness. Stripped of its spectacular functions and relegated to the archival box, the photograph becomes a document at the service of history.

- [1] Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One Way Street* (London:NLB, 1978), p. 243.
- [2] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981), p. 6.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- [7] Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 51.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- [11] Alfredo Jaar, "The Limits of Representation," *Trans* 1/2, no. 3/4 (1997), p. 59.
- [12] Kracauer, p. 60.
- [13] See, for example, the extremely defensive and paranoid reading of minimalism as a politically subversive artistic movement presented by Hal Foster in "The Cruelty of Minimalism," *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
- [14] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 230-231.
- [15] *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.
- [16] This engagement has often been related to the phenomenology of perception. Rosalind Krauss claims that in the complex relation between viewer and minimalist structure, "even the distance and the viewpoint are not added to the object, but inhere in the object's meaning, like the sounds that infuse our language with an always already given ground of sense." "Richard Serra, A Translation," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernists Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 262.