

FEATURES ■ ESSAY

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## Grave and Buried: Alfredo Jaar and Nicaragua's Ignored History

by Noah Dillon

**Alfredo Jaar: Shadows at Galerie Lelong**

February 14 to March 28, 2015

528 West 26th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 315 0470



Alfredo Jaar, *Shadows*, 2014 (detail). Lightbox with black and white transparency, 12 x 13 inches. Original photograph by Koen

Wessing (1942-2011): Estelí, Nicaragua, September 1978. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Lelong, New York.

You need to know this: some parts of the Cold War are remembered, others are not. One particularly brutal episode that has been mostly forgotten is the Nicaraguan Civil War, which spanned about 30 years. During the 1980s, the US government funneled weapons and money into the hands of the Contras, an array of right wing paramilitary organizations opposing the leftist Sandinistas, who had deposed the American-installed Somoza dictatorship in 1979. The support provided to the Contras by the Reagan administration briefly blew up into a fiasco in 1986, when it was revealed that US Marine Corps Lt. Oliver North had been funding such groups via proceeds of illegal arms sales to Iran, laundering of federal money, and by protecting (or possibly aiding) the Contras' manufacture and distribution of cocaine. The Contras systematically attacked civilians and aid workers, and used torture, assassination, terrorism, and rape to suppress leftist insurrection. The same tactics were, at that time, being taught to rightist soldiers from several Latin American countries at the US-based and government-funded School of the Americas (now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). The civil war was horrific, resulting in the deaths of up to 50,000 people, including a lot of civilians. But that conflict is largely eclipsed by other more optimistic events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany, the ejection of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the Polish Solidarity movement, and Glasnost and Perestroika.



Alfredo Jaar, *Shadows*, 2014. Installation with LED lights,

aluminum, video projection and six lightboxes with black and white

Alfredo Jaar's exhibition, "Shadows," now at Galerie Lelong, includes four photographs from the early stages of that war, taken in 1978 by documentarian Koen Wessing (1942-2011). The show is introduced by a short video interview with Wessing, who describes the incident shown in his pictures, which are shown as 12-by-13-inch lightboxes with black-and-white transparencies. A *campesino* was executed by the Somoza regime, his body dumped by a rural road. Wessing doesn't spare any of the violence: the man's head wound is plainly visible in several pictures, as his neighbors collect his body. The first image one encounters is of soldiers inspecting a bus at a checkpoint, giving some sense of the violent intimidation used on the populace, which had seen inequality skyrocket and their lives abused and threatened.

The primary focus of the exhibition is the overwhelming grief shown by two young women for their father, the slain *campesino*. After being told of the murder, they arrive at the scene crying, clutching their heads and covering their mouths at the roadside. The lightboxes are hung in a small, darkened corridor, given several feet of space so that their impact is

transparencies; Lightboxes: 12 x 13 inches each; Projection: 116 x 174 inches; Overall dimensions variable. Original photographs by Koen Wessing (1942-2011): Estelí, Nicaragua, September 1978. The collection and copyright of Koen Wessing is administered by the Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam. Images: Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Lelong, New York.

acute and dramatic, unfolding the narrative slowly in discrete pictures. Turning a corner in the hallway, a large room opens with an enormous installation: a photo of the daughters wailing, projected onto the wall, which is covered with an aluminum panel cut around their bodies. Slowly, the rest of the scene fades into blackness, leaving the two girls, torqued by anguish, in empty space. Then, the girls themselves fade into bright white light, backlit LEDs shining in the metal panel's cutout. They become sharp, blazing white silhouettes in the darkness. And when the light suddenly ceases for a few moments, their afterimage is seared into the retinas until the cycle begins again.

Other photographs in the suite depict the young women at home, crying over the laid-out body of their father, his fatal injury wrapped and his corpse set on a cot. They fold themselves over to weep on the patio, while others stand, stone-faced. They mourn on the grass in front, collapsed.



Alfredo Jaar, *Shadows*, 2014. Installation with LED lights, aluminum, video projection and six lightboxes with black and white transparencies; Lightboxes: 12 x 13 inches each; Projection: 116 x 174 inches; Overall dimensions variable. Original photographs by Koen Wessing (1942-2011): Estelí, Nicaragua, September 1978. The collection and copyright of Koen Wessing is administered by the Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam. Images: Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Lelong, New York.

Jaar's previous work has used similar image sets to light otherwise undiscussed tragedies, and to navigate what is seen and what is not, whether by suppression or by forgetting horror. Jaar has employed documentary photographs of the Rwandan Genocide and, in a 2009 collaboration with critic and poet David Levi Strauss, substituted black boxes for photos of atrocities in the Iraq and Afghan wars that had been withheld from the public by the US government. Instead, Jaar and Strauss described what the images show, including a caption under each picture. Wessing has presented his own images with little or no commentary, intending that they speak for themselves.



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