

SEARCHING FOR AFRICA IN LIFE

ALFREDO JAAR

ALFREDO JAAR (b. 1956)

Searching for Africa in LIFE, 1996/2014

Color transparency (Duratrans), Plexiglas, LED lightboxes

Permanent site-specific installation

Commissioned by The New School Art Collection Advisory Group

Searching for Africa in LIFE compiles all 2,128 covers of *LIFE* magazine published between 1936 and 1996. For the United States, *LIFE* was the first and most influential all-photographic news magazine. With over thirteen million weekly readers at its peak, its mission was to provide the country with a window into the world. When *LIFE*'s publisher, Henry Luce, launched the publication, his stated purpose was "To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events..." However, the scarcity of covers featuring African subjects throughout the magazine's sixty-year circulation provides an opportunity to reevaluate this claim. *Searching for Africa in LIFE* reflects historical American attitudes about culture and race—attitudes that continue to reverberate today.

—Alfredo Jaar

Alfredo Jaar conceived this work in 1996, completing a unique lightbox version in 2014 upon an invitation from The New School to house it permanently in the University Center's Arnhold Forum Library. Jaar draws on the archive—a collection of *LIFE* magazine covers—to offer an exploration of the politics of representation in mainstream media and to interrogate our own assumptions about culture and ethnicity. More precisely, Jaar points to the formation and distribution of knowledge around these issues. What emerges in *Searching for Africa in LIFE* is "a failure to inform, a failure to represent." The diversity and complexities of a rich culture, in this case, the continent and peoples of Africa, are largely ignored and reduced to a handful of patronizing, aestheticized images.

Searching for Africa in LIFE questions the currency of media constructions by calling attention to the power of material collections to reposition our gaze and to bring to light readings, and mis-readings, of our histories.

About the artist:

Alfredo Jaar (b. 1956, Santiago, Chile) is an artist, architect and filmmaker who lives and works in New York City. Jaar's multidisciplinary artistic practice explores the unequal power relations and sociopolitical divisions that result from globalization, including desensitization to images and the limitations of representation. With an expansive commitment to art in diverse and distinctive cultural, political, and public contexts, his work has been commissioned, exhibited, and installed throughout the world.

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