

Life of the Subject

by
Ashley Zhang

Ashley Zhang is the recipient of the 2023 Vera List New School Art Collection Writing Award, which is bestowed on New School students for the best essays inspired by works in the university's art collection. The New School Art Collection's 2014 commission of Alfredo Jaar's *Searching for Africa in LIFE* is permanently installed in the seventh-floor reading room in the University Center's Arnhold Forum Library.

What does it mean to really live?—A presumptuous question with a plethora of possibilities. It can be observed underneath a microscope, explained as a series of biological functions that contribute to growth, reproduction, development, expansion. Or perhaps it could be understood in relation to an artistic stroke; life suggests the ability to endure, to celebrate, to placate, to feel, the need to express; life can even be akin to a forensic investigation, the evidence of blood and body. Yet, above and within all, life carries with it a desire to be remembered. Just as the innate need for reproduction, the demand for expression, the stain of blood, and the remnant of bodies imply, there is a requisite for lingering that seems to pervade through all definitions of life: the desire to leave a mark, to remember and be remembered.

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Image: Alfredo Jaar, *Searching for Africa in LIFE*, 1996/2014. Duratrans color transparency and LED lightboxes. Courtesy The New School Art Collection.

Photography then seems to become an inevitable function of life. It is an act of preservation, of attempting immortality. Yet, as connotated by Susan Sontag, photographing becomes a sort of “memento mori,” a reminder that everything must die.¹ Both paradoxically and fittingly, the desire to capture an object through the camera reflects the human impulse to create a legacy, to simply be reminded of mortality once again. The creator of *LIFE Magazine*, Henry Luce, launched the publication with a similar mission and sentiment. In his statement during the magazine's launch in 1936, he proclaimed his desire “to see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events,” and most importantly, “to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed.”²

Photography's power to instruct comes with the power to preserve certain legacies through the dispersion of images. *Searching for Africa in LIFE* (2014) by Alfredo Jaar represents this duality, effectively illustrating the expression, “history is written by the victors.” *LIFE* showcased its desire to see “the world” in its original mission statement, but has ironically delivered the opposite. Its wide range of covers, only two of which feature images of Africa in its sixty-year run, reflects not only ignorance, but a malevolent erasure, robbing Africa of its potential legacy through the image—of life at its core.

To acknowledge this effect is to acknowledge the repercussions of the lack of representation through the image. Be it intentional or not, a lie of omission does not indicate the truth nor does it indicate innocence. The decision to exclude African stories and images shows not only disregard for African people and Black subjects, but a deeper, more insidious indifference to the legacy and life of the group as a whole, a complete rejection of the humanity of the continent.

If photographs are “a mediation between the living and the dead,”³ as bell hooks writes, the absence of visuals of African life can be seen as a rupture between the continent's past and present. At the same time, given the vast colonial history of photographing subjects on the continent and proliferating their images without their consent represents a different kind of erasure, one that strips away the agency and personhood of the camera's addressee. But in eliminating their image altogether, as exhibited in Jaar's installation, the refusal of visual representation suggests not only a Machiavellian indifference, but an attempt at cultural extinction. If denying the imaging of a subject is equivalent to denying the life of the subject, Jaar also asks if misrepresentation can also be a denial of agency.

What is often ignored as an effect of visual erasure is the denial of humanity, the denial of legacy, and henceforth the denial of Black life. *Searching for Africa in LIFE* is a lesson of the power of visual culture, and the consequences of the misuse of its capability. If photography is a death of sorts, as Sontag notes, “a soft murder,”⁴ to image also suggests the ability to live. To be photographed is to be alive.

¹ Susan Sontag, “In Plato's Cave,” On Photography (New York: Delta Books, 1973): 11.

² Quoted in Aida Amoako, “Life magazine: The photos that defined the US,” BBC, March 11, 2020. www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200311-life-magazine-the-photos-that-defined-the-us.

³ bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995): 63. ⁴ Sontag, 10.

