

# Picturing That Which Has Not Been Imaged: The Photograph Upended in Owanto's "La Jeune Fille à la Fleur" Series

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## **The Problem of Photography: Gender, Trauma and Mimetic Representation**

Photography is intimately connected to memory and violence. Despite perceptions of the photograph as a reflection of reality, it is mediated and can easily, through framing and authorial intentionality, slip into the fictional or instrumental. As Karina Eileraas argues, the image is not just a product of mechanical reproduction, “but also of a dynamic field of aesthetic and social relations and contestations” (Eileraas, “Reframing the Colonial Gaze: Photography, Ownership, and Feminist Resistance,”

2003, 810). This paper addresses the necessarily wary, yet poignant representational strategy accomplished by French and Gabonese lens-based artist Owanto (b.1953, France) in her *La Jeune Fille à la Fleur* series (2015). It argues that Owanto re-presents colonial photography in order to raise awareness of the trauma of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) while also recognizing its inherent incomprehensibility. It queries previous accounts of activist art with a specific focus on lens-based installation art by diasporic women artists of African descent through an analysis of Owanto's artwork and its negotiation of photographic and trauma theory.

Numerous scholars have debated the slippery, problematic and violent nature of the medium. (See Gonzalez, "Morphologies: Race as a Visual Technology," 2003 and Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 1986) Simultaneously evidentiary and subjective, intimate and violating, de-subjectifying and heroizing – the photograph is a paradox. Photographers from the 1970s until the present day, such as Hannah Wilke, Zanele Muholi and Yael Bartana, have chosen to reinterpret the medium to address this very paradox through their artwork. While Wilke empowers her body by unveiling it in precarious positions to the camera, Muholi focuses on marginalized subjects and Bartana invents politically para-fictional landscapes. These three women use the medium to challenge its historically painful legacies through distinct artistic strategies. Deploying photography to subvert its

very history and essence continues to be a successful strategy within feminist, diasporic and activist art. This can be seen in Carrie Mae Weems' (b. 1953, Portland, OR) 1995-1996 series *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I Cried*, in which she appropriates and edits nineteenth century photographs of enslaved African Americans with provocative captions and tonalities.

Following in this lineage, and yet taking it a step further, Owanto utilizes photographic portraiture as source material to address the effects of FGM. Her mother was Gabonese and she spent time with her maternal side in Libreville as a child. In 2009 she represented Gabon at the 53rd Venice Biennale, however, she was born in Paris. (Owanto, "The Forgotten Drawer," 2018). In *La Jeune Fille à la Fleur* she re-appropriates colonial photographs from a family photo album of women engaged in ceremony and revealing their circumcisions. The artist also affixes a hand-crafted sculptural element to the photographic image, filling the void of the wounded genitalia with a flower. Despite the fact that Owanto must be wary of re-violating her subjects due to the nature of the photographic image, she mobilizes the medium precisely because, and in spite of, its invasive exposure.

As literary scholar Marianne Hirsch writes, "reading and [remaking] can be seen as forms of feminist resistance" (Hirsch: 1997, 215). Through her rupture of photographic representations of the black female body with sculptural components, she reproduces the "punctum",

or the details within the image which reach out from their photographic sources and prick, wound or bruise their audience's subjectivity. (See Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1981). In revealing her affected subject position in relation to the photographs she mobilizes, Owanto rejects the notion of the photograph as an objective document. She does, however, activate the tension between the real referent of the violence and trauma of FGM preserved within the image, and therefore its testimonial effect, and her subjective meditations on the practice. In this way her work is liminal between the personal and the political, merging the inherent theatricality, or intentionality, of both art and activism.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines FGM as, "procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons". (Nnamuchi 2012. 91) The WHO also estimates that between 100 and 140 million women have undergone the procedure globally. (Nnamuchi: 2012, 91) On her website, Owanto writes, "Often done in discreet initiation ceremonies around the world, FGM/C is an age-old ritual that has been used to signify the important transition from childhood to womanhood by curbing sexual desire" (2018). There are many women who live with FGM, scholars and activists who argue against European or American intervention against FGM. FGM is an endlessly nuanced postcolonial and diasporic issue at the core of which is

a larger questioning about the evolution of tradition, culture and morality and who gets to dictate their practice. As the following pages are focused on Owanto's perspective on FGM, information about the practice will only be provided when it concerns the works of art under consideration. Readers looking for more information should consult Obioma Nnaemeka's *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourse* (2005) and Saida Hodžić's *The Twilight of Cutting: African Activism After NGOs* (2017).

In order to picture the reality of FGM, Owanto explicitly depicts the female body laid bare. In this way, she participates in feminist interventions within art history to represent and de-objectify the vagina. With a few exceptions such as the Venus of Willendorf and other similar figurines, vaginal iconography in art history is rare. Most representations of the female body throughout history either do not explicitly represent female genitalia or feature women covering that region of the body to imbue their figures with a sense of sexual intrigue. In all of this imagery, the exterior of the female body is objectified for the purposes of sexual desire while female genitalia is deemed too obscene to be directly depicted. (Nead 1992, 65) The vagina was a taboo subject for centuries and despite a few instances of male artists representing female genitalia, usually for sexually instrumental purposes such as Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (1856), it was not valued as a representational form by female artists until the 1970s.

In the 1970s the “our bodies ourselves” movement inspired a reclamation by women artists who began to draw on the forms of female genitalia to create work (Nead 1992, 65). This was a political statement by artists such as Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke to gain visibility for the vulva where it was traditionally denied. This type of women’s body art such as Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) or Wilke’s *Sweet Sixteen* (1977), “reveals the interior, the terrifying secret that is hidden within this idealized exterior” in Lynda Nead’s words (Nead 1992, 66). Owanto’s choice to conceal the vulva cannot be easily condemned as anti-feminist. In fact, many female artists in the 1970s rejected vulvic representation because they felt it reduced women to a biological form. They claimed that these representations participated in the perception of the woman’s role as biologically determined, something the women’s movement was attempting to refute. Owanto’s desire to protect the genitalia of the women pictured in her photographic sources can also be defined as a feminist gesture, particularly since they are colonial nudes.

Questioning the efficacy of making and re-making representations of the vagina inherently considers the gaze at play. While the vaginal interior was aesthetically mystified by the male gaze for centuries due to its “vulgarity”, in the twenty-first century it has been demystified, though certainly still de-subjectified, through the lens of the pornographic gaze. The persistent and pervasive pornographic gaze objectifies representations of the

vagina for sexual gratification. (See Fokt, “Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography,” 2015 and McKee, “The Objectification of Women in Mainstream Pornographic Videos in Australia,” 2005). In the West, FGM has been framed through the lens of the medical gaze which initiates a different kind of desubjectification in that the doctor separates the patient’s body from her identity and subjective psychology (See Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 1975). Owanto chooses to protect the visualization of her subject’s interior wounds to combat and negotiate the various gazes at play. In so doing she participates within a lineage of artists claiming political autonomy for the female body from the honorific, caring angle of the female gaze, to address and picture this specific form of gender-based violence and discrimination. In covering her subject’s genitalia, Owanto is also protecting its fetishization as an aesthetically erotic form.

It is essential to highlight that most of the artists in the 1970s thinking about vulvic representation were white women artists. Women of color were alienated from the “women’s movement” because white feminists put an emphasis on gender rather than race and class. As Winifred Breines writes, because of their “white, middle-class privilege, the account goes, most early feminists, even those who were radical, socialist, and dissenters from the status quo, created a feminism in which black women...were unwelcome and uncomfortable” (Breines 2007, 18). That said, there were black female artists

working at the time such as Betye Saar and Senga Nengudi whose artwork addressed gender-based oppression through the lens of race, if without direct representation of the vulva. In the wake of their initial efforts, artists in the twenty-first century such as Zanele Muholi and Mickalene Thomas have begun to take agency by more directly visualizing the black female body laid bare.

Thomas most explicitly responds to Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* through her work *Origin of the Universe 1* (2012). As a black, queer artist Thomas re-envisioned Courbet's scene by depicting a black woman's genitalia from the same vantage point, drastically shifting the gaze. Muholi has also photographed many black women nude and in particular focuses on members of the LGBTQ community in South Africa due to their marginalized position in society. Both Thomas and Muholi have taken major steps to expand the visual strategies surrounding feminist depictions of black women despite the complex history of representations of the black female nude. Between 1810 and 1815, Saartjie (or Sarah) Baartman from the Cape of Good Hope toured Britain and Paris where her body was both sexualized and racialized and described as "monstrously swollen" and "repulsive." (Wright, "The Face of Saartjie Baartman: Rowlandson, Race, and the 'Hottentot Venus,'" 116-117). From the colonial nudes circulated as fetishized objects to Baartman's story, one can understand why black artists concerned with feminist issues might have avoided depicting the black

female body nude. Weems points to this history quite explicitly in “& A Photographic Subject”. She covers the original image, picturing an African American woman with her breasts bare, with a red veil of color and inserts the phrase “& A Photographic Subject” over her body to convey how this woman was sexualized, typified and de-subjectified by the photograph in her time. While she leaves the woman’s body bare, she does so not to re-violate her but rather to highlight the violence of the original image-maker. Thomas, Muholi and Weems all demonstrate the power and necessity of visualizing the black female body nude in particular contexts. As FGM is explicitly concerned with the perception and visualization of women’s bodies, Owanto must negotiate how and why to represent its raw physical reality, particularly as it has never been aesthetically rendered before.

### **Owanto: Filling the Void**

When Owanto first discovered small celluloid photographs of young women engaging in coming of age ceremonies and undergoing FGM in a family photo album, she quickly returned the images to a drawer and shut them away. The album was among her father’s belongings and she presumes the images were taken by a western photographer in the mid twentieth century in what was then termed *Afrique Equatoriale Française*, the collective French colonial territories in central Africa between 1910 and 1959. As she describes it, “My

first reaction was to quickly put them back in... something I call 'the forgotten drawer' – as I didn't want to be upset, and I didn't want to process the pain I saw in those photographs" (Owanto, "The Forgotten Drawer," 2018). Unable to truly forget the details in the colonial photographs which to her indexed trauma and pain, the artist returned to the drawer just days later. Rather than repress that which upset her within the images, Owanto decided to confront it directly through an artistic project.

She began by digitally enlarging the images to up to ten feet tall. Subsequently she printed them on aluminum panels to, as she describes it, "create a kind of a contemporary feel, because FGM/C is a very contemporary subject" (Owanto, "The Forgotten Drawer," 2018). More than just contemporary, aluminum as a material is cold and hard. It can evoke the texture of the medical examination room or the sharp nature of industrial architecture. Fierce and commanding, in their printing on aluminum and through their exaggerated scale, these images have morphed beyond the soft, malleable and weathered paper photograph in a family photo album. In this way they cannot be handled, overpowered or flipped past with amnesiac abandon. Once enlarged on aluminum, she created a hole in either the site of the wound or in the actual faces of the women pictured. While two of the six images within the series feature young women in ceremony displaying their genitalia, the

other four images depict women engaged in the celebration that precede the actual cutting. Owanto defines this distinction as the contrast between “the joy and the pain. The before and the after” (Owanto, email dated January 29, 2019 to Emily Shoyer). Following the creation of the hole, the artist crafts a flower by hand from corn and glue, petal by petal and places the flower in the hole to fill the void. She chose the flower due to its poetic associations with a young woman’s sexual innocence or virginity and envisions it playing a healing role as a vehicle for concealment like a shield or mask. In the artist’s words, the flower transforms her subjects “from victims to heroines” in that their genitalia or identities do not become the primary focus – they can take on a persona beyond their trauma (Owanto, “The Forgotten Drawer,” 2018).

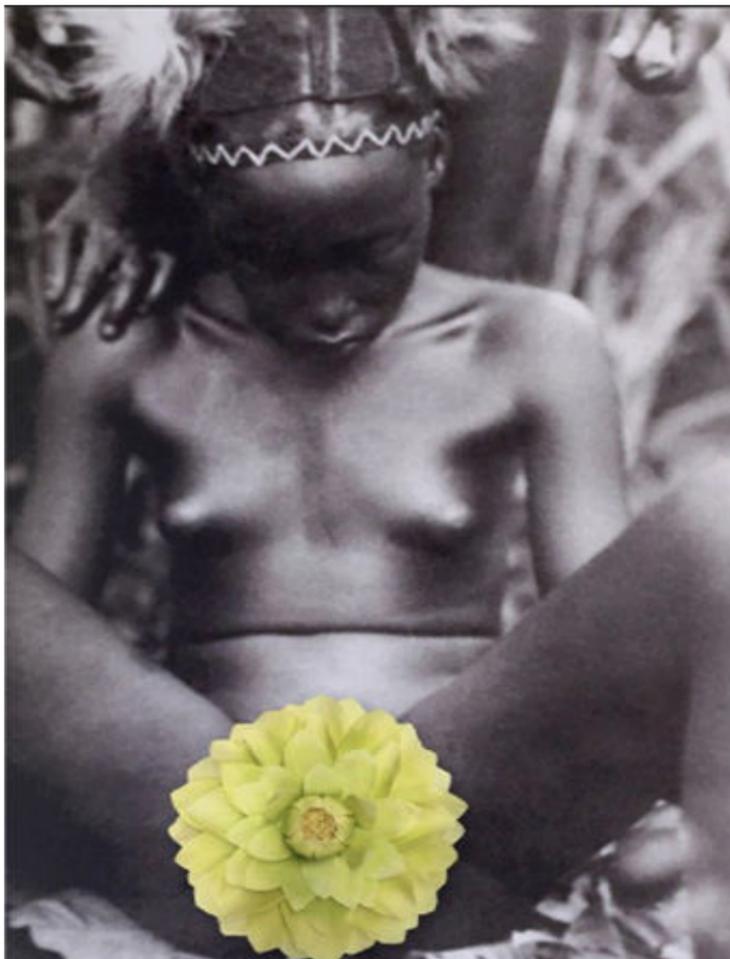


Figure 1. Owanto, Flowers II from *La Jeune Fille à La Fleur*, 2017. Cold porcelain flower on aluminum UV print, 200 x 288 cm. Permanent Collection of the Zeitz MOCAA. Image courtesy of the artist.

Owanto began the series *La Jeune Fille à La Fleur* in 2015. In early 2019, she displayed the works in two major exhibitions titled “One Thousand Voices” at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) in Cape Town, the largest major museum for contemporary African art in the continent, and later at the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Marrakech (“Owanto: One Thousand Voices,” *Contemporary And*, 2019). The first work in the series, *Flowers II*, is one of the more explicit as the central female figure is entirely nude with her legs splayed open (fig. 1). She gazes down intently towards her genitalia wherein Owanto has placed a bright greenish-yellow flower. Transferring it to a large-scale format, and giving it depth through its printing on aluminum, enables the viewer to find a number of striking details within the image. The central female figure, who cannot be older than twelve or thirteen, takes up the majority of the composition. On closer inspection, a slightly weathered hand reaches from beyond the frame and rests on the young girl’s shoulder pressing ever so slightly into her skin, as if holding her in place. The gesture could be comforting but it also might be constraining. Though this may not have been the photographer’s intention, they have captured a key element of female genital mutilation/cutting rituals. Most often FGM is performed by traditional practitioners who are older women (Simpson, Robinson, Creighton, and Hodes: 2012, 38). Usually, the practice is requested by the girl’s mother, grandmother or other elder female rel-

atives and they hold her down as the ritual is performed. The hand in Owanto's piece recalls this painful aspect of the practice as it haunts from beyond the image.

If the hand in *Flowers II* indexes this traumatic aspect of FGM, *Flowers III* invokes it more directly. *Flowers III* features a young girl with her legs spread open similar to the young girl in *Flowers II* (fig. 2). Behind her, an older woman clasps the younger girl's knees aiding her in pushing her legs open. She gazes at the young girl, while the young girl looks at her genitalia. Owanto fills the location of the mutilated vulva with a large pink flower, and creates a greenish haze around the image, so that the young girl's body is the central focus. This reveals another component of the artist's process: Owanto adds what she identifies as digital veils of color to mediate the harshness of the image. In creating these, the artist enables the viewers to maintain their gaze despite the difficulty of doing so and reveals the image as mediated by her, in place of a mere mimetic representation of violence or suffering. Certainly, the images testify to the fact that these unnamed women underwent a painful experience. The images do not however represent that pain or trauma entirely. This is precisely because the subjective extremity of the trauma and pain of FGM cannot be represented. A photograph can never capture or truly evoke the physical pain of FGM or the psychological impact it may have had on these women after-the-fact. Their lives and their subjective pain cannot ever be

known, the colonial archive precludes their autonomous voices, and this unspeakability is performed in Owanto's installations.

Literary and psychoanalytic theorist Cathy Caruth explains that "the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 1996, 3). Since trauma is defined as an event involving such an extreme amount of stimuli that it is too powerful to be cognitively engaged with, the victim of trauma lives it after-the-fact in the mind (La Planche and Pontalis 1993). A number of problems arises due to this experiencing of trauma after-the-fact in the mind. Caruth explains that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 1996, 4). Through the haziness of Owanto's images, she recalls this unknowable, unpresentable nature of trauma.

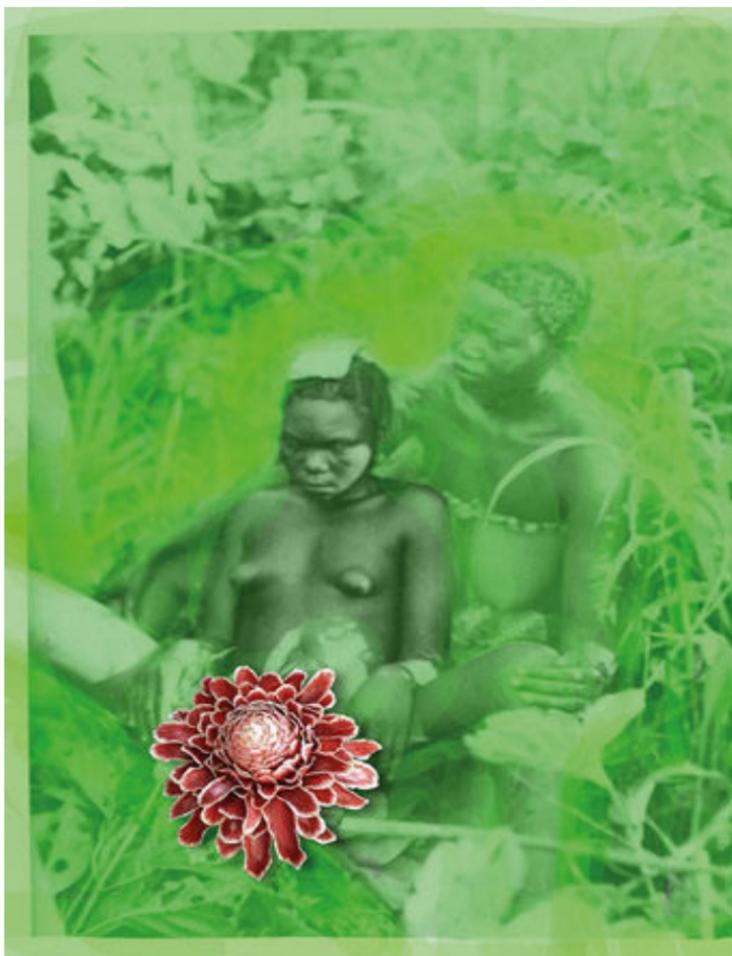


Figure 2. Owanto, Flowers III from *La Jeune Fille à La Fleur*, 2017. Cold porcelain flower on aluminum UV print, 89 x 125 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

The other works in the series such as *Flowers IV* and *Flowers VI* feature images taken during the celebration that would have occurred prior to the ritual itself. Therefore, they do not feature the more graphic image of a young girl with her legs wide open. In *Flowers IV*, twelve women stand in a line in the same garments, presumably engaging in a ritual. Owanto has covered almost all of their visible faces except for two. *Flowers VI* portrays a young woman standing in the center of an image in ritualistic garb. (fig. 3) Owanto has obscured most of the image with a yellow veil and covered the young woman's face with a yellow flower. Despite the artist's association of these images with the trauma of FGM, the violence of these images lies most meaningfully in that their original source remains the colonial gaze. The Western photographer who took this image would have been intruding on a private, traditional moment and they have captured these women through the lens of a fetishizing colonial morality. Through Owanto's re-publishing of these images she addresses and reframes not just the violence and pain of FGM, but also the oversexualizing, exploitative colonial gaze. In covering the faces and therefore identities of each woman in the images of "celebration" and the exposed genitalia in "ceremony", she protects their subjectivities and, through the flower, attempts to imbue them with a sense of the agency deprived through both FGM and colonial exploitation. In this way she also reinvents the register of significance existent in the symbol of the flower, exceeding innocence in order to project agency.

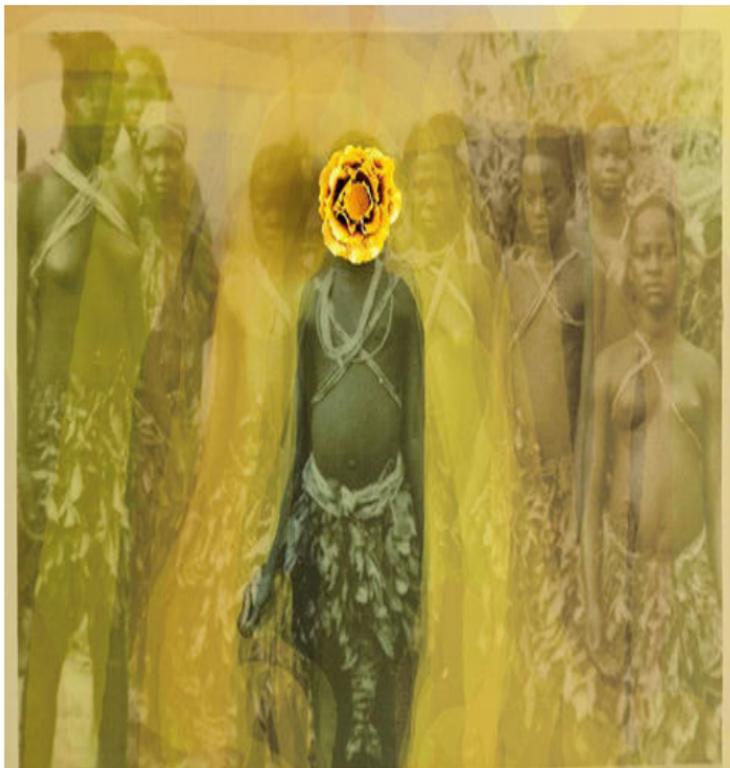


Figure 3. Owanto, Flowers VI from *La Jeune Fille à La Fleur*, 2017. Cold porcelain flower on aluminum UV print, 125 x 89 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

### **Addressing the Nature of the Photographic Image**

In its existence at the intersection of aesthetic and social relations, photography has been connected to violence

since its invention in the nineteenth century. The very colonial photographs that Owanto discovered in her family's album were so violent to her that she tried to repress them entirely. Many types of photographs of colonies in Africa were circulated widely and spread problematic and inaccurate narratives about colonial subjects. In this context, photography was a means to document, grid and demean certain "types." (Geary 2008, 143). The perception of the photograph as a factual, scientific document led to dangerous misperceptions of colonial and other alienated subjects (Sekula 1986). This is partially due to the fact that despite European consumers' perception of the photograph as a scientific document, the image turned the individuals it represented into objects filtered through the colonial gaze. Owanto appropriates a specific type of ethnographic colonial nude, those featuring nude African women engaged in either traditional or newly reformed Europeanized activities. These were constructed, as Christraud Geary writes, "through the lenses of both African and foreign photographers" (Geary 2008, 147-8). The images depicting African women in exoticized activities turn these women into objects to be digested and consumed, and therefore strange and demeaning in their representation to a European audience.

Put simply, as Prita Meier writes, "Of course, all photographs are in a sense reductive, turning people, their bodies, and their experiences into static representations"

(Meier 2019, 48). This transformation of people into static representations is a type of de-subjectification. The individuals within the photograph become aestheticized, able to be perceived and consumed as forms rather than humans. If the very aesthetic of the photograph is connected to violence through its de-subjectification of the imaged subject, it is also connected to violence through its status as an emanation of something past, or as Roland Barthes describes it, “that-has-been.” (Smith 2013, 102). This is because anything “that-has-been” has been lost. The photograph captures an expired moment and often subjects who have expired or eventually will expire themselves.

Countless scholars have reframed and mobilized Barthes’ theories on photography. This is because Barthes was really the first to write about the way photographs are entangled with trauma, affect and emotion. In his final book, published in the 1980 volume *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes looked at images and described the unexpected ways in which they made him feel something. In the introduction to their edited volume *Feeling Photography*, Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu claim that the focus on feeling is a queer exercise in contrast to straightforward theories of photography, such as those espoused by Charles Baudelaire who saw the photograph as a machine of representational exactitude, or Walter Benjamin who favored the photograph’s reproducibility, centered on “thinking.” (Elkins 2013,

10-12). They argue that finding feeling in photography enables us to look at marginalized subjects as they are often “conspicuously absent” from thinking-focused writing about photography. Barthes identifies *punctum* as the emotive, affective quality of the photograph in *Camera Lucida*. It is *punctum* which enables Owanto to picture, in Brown and Phu’s words, “all that gets left out of photography’s unfolding story” (Brown and Phu 2014, 5).

Barthes argues that there are two types of viewing of photographs. For him, *studium* is a studied, distanced viewing of a photographic image; it is liking rather than loving. The *studium* occurs when the viewer recognizes what the photographer intended them to encounter and understands that intention. The *studium* is a culturally prescribed knowledge, one that is shaped by prior training. In contrast, *punctum* is a viewer's extremely personal response to certain details in an image. For Barthes it is “this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me” (Fried 2005, 542). *Punctum* is sudden and violent, it “pricks,” “wounds” or “bruises” the viewer’s subjectivity without warning. Shawn Michelle Smith has emphasized how *punctum* is a prick, a cut or as she writes, a “penetrating hole made visible by the camera” (Smith 2013, 34). In its very nature, *punctum* is connected to physical trauma.

The bodied, affective intentionality of *punctum* helps us locate feeling in images. Part of the power of the

image in eliciting punctum lies in the comparative frame it invokes in terms of tense, it testifies to a moment that is past while also manifesting its subject within the time and space of the viewer (Smith 2013, 108). In this way, the referent still maintains a powerful presence despite the medium's historical tendency towards its de-subjectification. While punctum is about the viewing subject, its experience occurs due to the image's referent. The referent's affective potential propels it into the viewer's present, wounding them and in so doing, maintaining a position of power. Smith has been interested in the ways in which artists have forecast their own feelings, or experiences of punctum, within their practice of photography. In that punctum is a bodied experience of wounding, it is profoundly meaningful that Owanto experienced it in relation to FGM's traumatized photographic archive.

### **The Operation of Punctum**

In order to comprehend how Owanto foregrounds punctum, we must consider the moment in which she first interacted with the photographic sources of her final works. Something occurred during Owanto's perusal of a family photo album to cause her to shut the album and attempt to repress the details within its imagery. These details wounded her enough for her to want to forget them. While we do not know precisely what these details were, the artist has articulated a distinction between what these photographs captured "on the

surface” and the side she saw which was “mostly pain” (Owanto, “The Forgotten Drawer,” 2018). In this way she defines the difference between what is shown versus what she sees. In other words, she projects Barthes’ theorized distinction between *studium* and *punctum*. It is her experience of *punctum*, due to the affecting violence and pain involved on multiple levels in the original celluloid images, which moved the artist to manipulate them and in so doing rupture their very status as photographs. Through an aesthetic analysis of her sculptural interventions, we can begin to comprehend the details which might have pricked her.

Her first intervention into the photographic composition was to digitally enlarge the images. When one looks at small images in a photo album, each image becomes but one of many nostalgic objects amidst a collection that is owned and therefore easily mastered or shut away. Once converted to such a large scale, these images overwhelm their viewer and take on the status of singular objects. In rejecting the original scale of the imagery, Owanto denies the violent imposition of the colonial gaze which aims to overpower, own and belittle the subjects of these images. At the same time, she must be wary of the voyeurism possible in transferring these colonial nudes to a large-scale format. In an attempt to avoid such voyeurism, in *Flowers II* and *III* the artist eliminates the visual of the mutilated genitalia through the hole she crafts. In Smith’s terms, *punctum* is itself a

penetrating hole. By creating her own penetrating hole within the image, Owanto has aesthetically acted out her experience of punctum in the precise site of the composition which elicited it. These voids index the affective quality that the picture of the wounded vulva had for the artist. To Owanto, this visual was a violation, a wounding experience. Rather than leaving the void empty, and therefore leaving the pain and trauma abruptly indexed, she needed to heal the pain.

In crafting and placing a flower within the void, the artist references the clichéd notion of “deflowering” as a way of depriving a woman of virginity. Here she appropriates the term in order to imply that FGM is a way of depriving young women of control over their own genitalia. The sculptural flower therefore becomes a gesture of her healing and returning that which was taken from the young women represented. In this way she is both showing us how the image punctured her subjectivity and operating through an aesthetics of care. The flower is her reaching out, gesturing to create an interpersonal relationship with the subject of the photograph. This gesture relocates the young woman from a de-subjectified static representation and brings her into an active and affective present dialogue.

Owanto rejects the documentary nature of photography by sculpting her subjective experiences of punctum onto the image’s surface, while still indexing a past

traumatic event. Interestingly, uncontextualized details within Owanto's works are still evident. For example, in *Flowers VI*, the yellowish haze has not entirely eliminated the potential affect of the young women depicted to the right of the central figure. The intensity of the gaze of the young woman to the farthest on the right reaches out from the yellow haze, retaining its power to hold the viewer's attention. In *Flowers III*, the older woman to the right of the young woman beneath the green haze is still visible and her role in the ceremony, or another visual detail, could still prick or wound a viewer. It is true that a viewer might respond subjectively to these specific details in the images.

Michael Fried writes, "The punctum, we might say, is seen by Barthes but not because it has been shown to him by the photographer" (Fried 2005, 546). Fried argues that punctum cannot be prescribed by the photographer because it is by nature spontaneous, personal and unique to the individual. By his logic, punctum is not, and can never be, the viewing experience desired or intended by the maker. Punctum is antitheatrical in nature, a function of being situated in the photograph rather than art. Art objects such as paintings and sculpture generally consider the beholder in a different way than the photograph. The photograph can include details which the photographer did not intend to be there, and as a result can produce unintended effects. In contrast, art objects such as those produced by Owanto are entirely constructed, each facet of the composition is intentional

and produced to create specific relations with the beholder. Certainly, the power of punctum lies in its unpredictability, and yet Owanto has aesthetically demonstrated how its very unpredictability can be mobilized to create work for intentional outcomes, in her case to produce an activist viewer.

### **In Conclusion: The Intersection of the Personal and the Political Gaze**

Activist art inherently considers the beholder in that it is concerned with educating, raising awareness and inspiring social transformation in a collective rather than a singular individual. Therefore, despite her personal experience of punctum, Owanto cannot recreate that experience for her viewers solely by presenting them with the original photographic sources. She could never know that the exact effect she desires would be accomplished because punctum is unknowable in advance. This is precisely why she mobilizes a personal punctum in order to create an art object that in its activist intentions inherently considers the beholder and is therefore the performance of a desired effect. Most remarkably, she has transformed a subjective experience into something public and transmissible. This is a departure from previous accounts on activist art.

In her 1984 essay “Activating Activist Art”, Lucy Lippard writes, “photography is a major component of social-change culture.” (Lippard 1984, 11). In the essay,

she goes on to argue that the absence of a photographic practice in Ireland contributed to the absence of activist art overall in the country. This is because photography manifests a “truth-effect” or an evidentiary quality which activist artists must capitalize on to argue for the reality and importance of their cause. Owanto obscures that “truth-effect” of the photograph. In her aesthetic, one of subjective experience and care, she is mobilizing both the testimonial quality of the photographic image and the performativity of the art object to inspire a desired viewing experience. Precisely due to the paradoxical status of the photographic image, she is able to appropriate it, activating aspects of its nature such as a personal elicitation of punctum and its testimony to a past event, while also subverting its inherent violence and voyeurism through sculpture to transmit her punctum and affect the public.

If as many feminist scholars have asserted, “the personal is political”, Owanto has explicitly aesthetically asserted that connection in utilizing what Barthes identifies as the most personal theoretical operation in photography, the punctum, to educate the public about FGM and attempt to eradicate the practice (Smith 2013, 98). She is concerned with more than just inspiring feelings of empathy or compassion. Her works ask for the active participation of the viewer who must do the work of discerning its affective intentionality. Ariella Azoulay argues that there are more politically expedient feelings

than compassion or sympathy. She theorizes that a photograph's goal must be to activate a "civic gaze", one which looks from a public space of interrelationality. (Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 2008) She writes, "When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted upon others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation" (Azoulay 2008, 14).

Owanto however, offers her viewers a unique opportunity for an aesthetic appreciation which lends itself to a civic gaze. In parsing the aesthetic facets of each piece in the series, each viewer discerns the details about the original photographic sources which affected and wounded the artist. The concealment of the genitalia with a flower in *Flowers II* reveals Owanto's disturbance in response to the visualization of the wound. An appreciation of these aesthetic differentiations leads to an understanding of the humanity and pain invoked by this practice, and the ways in which we are all implicated in it. This is the space of the civic gaze.

In considering her perspective against FGM, it is important to situate the site from which Owanto speaks. It is difficult to do this since her maternal side is Gabonese, and her paternal side is French and therefore she cannot be located through fixed notions of ethnic, national

or geographic identity. *La Jeune Fille à la Fleur* has been displayed in Europe and Africa. Despite Owant's status as an artist of the African diaspora, she is still speaking largely from the West. Many gender studies scholars are highly critical of anti-FGM campaigns from the West, even by women of color or African descent. In Signe Arnfred's introduction to *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*, she articulates the dangers of falling into "dark continent discourse" in which all traditional practices, such as FGM, on the continent are conceived as "savage" or "backwards." (Arnfred 2005, 10-11). Practices like FGM can be used as a foil to revalorize Western morality. Moreover, as Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi assert, portraying African women as victims legitimizes Western efforts to come to their rescue. (Arnfred: 2005, 12). In this way certain activists working against FGM from the West can be interpreted as re-working a colonial/missionary trope. Obioma Nnaemeka asks, why are Western feminists becoming interested in the issue without ever having had a conversation with a circumcised woman? (Nnaemeka 2005, 4).

Owanto is not circumcised. That being said she has certainly had many conversations with circumcised women. As an extension of the Fleurs series, the artist collected stories and voice recordings of women around the globe via Whatsapp sharing their personal experiences with FGM. These recordings resulted in a sound installation titled *One Thousand Voice* (2018) which was displayed

alongside the *La Jeune Fille à la Fleur* works at the Zeitz MoCAA and MACAAL. Owanto describes her intentions for the piece to aid in giving voice to “the girls who continue to have no say over their own bodies, and calls upon communities to adopt an alternative celebration, an alternative rite of passage devoid of cutting” (Berger 2018). She does not ask communities to cease practicing a meaningful ritual, but rather hopes that they can conceive of alternative options so as to both protect their cultural heritage and women’s autonomy.

*One Thousand Voices* provides the historical images with a more powerful contemporary, personal presence in the form of traumatic memory. Owanto was compelled to supplement her lens-based works with the written or aural word as still images are inherently static. Trauma despite its inability to be entirely experienced, and therefore entirely testified to, requires a telling for it to be worked through. As Ernst Van Alphen describes, testimony is favored in the context of trauma because it is associated with objective representation (Van Alphen 1997, 24). Since her artwork is imbued with her subjective stake, including the aural and written testimony, it connects the project with the personal reality of each woman’s lived FGM experience. As Owanto writes, “I have always been interested in linking the past with the present in order to build the future” (Owanto, email dated January 29, 2019 to Emily Shoyer). Rather than demonizing the traditional practice because it is beyond a

Western zone of comprehension, Owanto has specific goals in sight. She is also concerned with empowering women through her representations, rather than typifying them as object, solely victimized bodies.

The fact that Owanto chose to manipulate the photographic medium into wary lens-based representations is meaningful. Other artists have attempted to address FGM. Many of these projects such as Alice Walker's 1993 book *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* and the documentary of the same title are intended as solely educational and therefore are presented as objective projects. Walker's project has faced particularly strong criticism from post-colonial gender studies scholars precisely because of its moralizing nature. The very wariness of Owanto's visualization of FGM is essential in that it is more nuanced and therefore more ethical. It is essential to note that artist Aida Silvestri (b. 1978, Eritrea) has also accomplished a nuanced representation of FGM as a survivor herself working in contemporary photography. A longer version of this paper considers both her project *Unsterile Clinic* (2016) and *La Jeune Fille a La Fleur* in tandem, however this shorter presentation focuses solely on Owanto's work to highlight its connection to colonial imagery.

To ethically represent an issue like FGM, which is a post-colonial and feminist conversation that predominantly affects women of color, Owanto had to be care-

ful. Through her intentional, nuanced mobilization of the photographic image, she retains the socially transformative nature of the medium, while also preventing the works from de-subjectifying the subject of FGM or the black female body. In transforming her photographic sources into mixed-media art objects, she also capitalizes on a necessary theatricality. She has upended the subjectivity of punctum and turned it into a transmissible activist aesthetics of care, strategically accomplishing a feminist resistance in the form of activist art and giving FGM a powerful and essential visual presence, one that it has never had before. The notion of a completely appropriate visualization of this endlessly complex issue is futile. Considering *La Jeune Fille a La Fleur* demonstrates that an awareness of this futility should not hold artists back, for the alternative is to lose the representation, and reflexive critique of FGM entirely.

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