

'One Thousand Voices' by Owanto

Through her Flower Series, Owanto brings to light the complex and contested issues surrounding Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C). 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.

When I first came across these old tiny 'celluloid' photographs amongst my late father's belongings, I was greatly shocked. They depicted an FGM/C ceremony, which, I assume may have taken place during the 1940s in what was then known as Afrique Equatoriale Française. I put them back quickly where I thought they belonged, in a forgotten place that I called 'le tiroir de l'oubli' (the forgotten drawer). This was three years ago. What I had seen then was now engraved in my memory, where it would stay vividly. I was haunted by the violations created by both the cutting and the voyeuristic colonial camera lens that captured these young women. After I began a search on Google, I had an even greater shock. These faded old photographs from the 40s had brought me to discover how 'actual' they were as they showcased the crude reality of our time.

More than 200 million girls and women alive today have been cut in 30 countries where FGM/C is concentrated, of which 44 million are under 15 years old. More than three million girls are at risk for FGM/C annually.

I felt I had to retrieve these documents 'du tiroir de l'oubli'. I understood that these photographs carried a symbolic and ambivalent meaning. They depicted a ceremony, a celebration. They also carried pain. I wanted to bring the past into the present. I wanted to transform these old celluloid photographs into digital media documents, and to keep a record of human behavior. It would shape the future. I understood that these images taken by a Westerner during the colonial era, perceived as voyeurism could be elevated to the rank of art and activism, and used as a force for good if it were taken in the right direction.

In Flower Series, Owanto retrieves archival photographs of an intimate, private and contested custom, and enlarge them to 2x3 meters high. The artist disrupts the violation in the image by removing the sections deemed most private. She covers the void with delicate cold porcelain flowers. The physical act of removing the flower, the "deflowering", momentarily exposes the viewer to the truth. The flower is a symbolic cover-up that masks the identity of these young girls — an identity that was taken away from them — and hides this very loss. The original image is transformed to enable the young women in the old image to embody a different narrative. Flower Series is a deep reflection on the rights of women over their own bodies.

'Flowers' was first exhibited at Le Conseil National in Monaco to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March 2016, and later at the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair at Somerset House in London. 'Flowers' has been acquired by the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA) that will open in September 2017.



Flowers, 2015-2016, Cold porcelain flower on aluminum UV print

As an expansion of the Flower Series, Owanto created One Thousand Voices.

One Thousand Voices is a sound installation which amplifies an ensemble of voices collected from around the world. It is a collection of audio testimonies from female genital mutilation survivors. Using various languages, some speaking anonymously, some testifying openly, this project mixes sounds and stories of survival and strength derived from cutting.

The voices will overlap and loop for several hours in varying volumes from several megaphones. The piece will have a similar structure to that of a symphony orchestra, with multiple distinct sections or movements. Each voice will be projected from its very own megaphone. As in Flower Series, the vinyl 'crackling' undertone in One Thousand Voices is coupled with the digitally recorded voices, and mixes analogue and digital sound, bringing the past into the present. The installation is best exhibited in public spaces, where passers-by are forced to witness snippets of various stories from around the world. What is usually spoken about in hushed tones in private spaces will be presented loudly and openly in order to encourage open dialogue around the complexities of FGM/C. It can also be installed in a large empty hall, where audiences can become immersed in the recounting sounds.

The mélange of voices, accents and languages derive from over twenty countries and their diasporas to tackle the very taboos that often leave others silent. The collective voice of FGM/C survivors speaks for the girls who continue to have no say over their own bodies, and calls upon communities to adopt an alternative celebration, an alternative right of passage devoid of

cutting. Indeed, it calls for a new humanity. This installation highlights gender inequality and the politics surrounding a woman's body.

Recording guidelines

We are looking for individuals who are willing to share their stories and the circumstances of their experiences. We propose that individuals record their stories on a smartphone and send them to us via WhatsApp at +1 917-891-3575 or via email at owantostudio@gmail.com.

Please note that the guidelines can be adapted to the comfort of each individual.

Audio length: 1-5 minutes

- Name
- Religion
- Age
- Country of origin

Story & testimony [guiding questions]

- What happened?
- When did it happen? How did it happen?
- How did you feel? How do you feel now? What were the consequences?
- Message of empowerment and/or message to end FGM

Owanto Bio

Owanto is a multicultural artist from Gabon where she spent her formative years. She eventually moved to Europe to study Philosophy and Languages at the Institut Catholique de Paris in Madrid. The artist uses a multidisciplinary approach in her creative process and works across a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, photography, video and installation. Owanto lives and works today between Africa, Europe and the USA.

Owanto had the honour of representing the Republic of Gabon at the 53rd International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2009, with a solo show in Gabon's first National Pavilion. She was the first artist to represent a Sub-Saharan African country. "The Lighthouse of Memory", Go-Nogé-Mènè poses questions such as "Where are we going?" Her work focuses on memory. Today the artist is actively engaged with social issues hoping to bring awareness and positive change to the world through the medium of art.

Owanto is currently working on the 'Flowers' project, which aims to raise awareness about FGM/C around the globe and promote womanhood. In addition to producing new large-scale works, Owanto is collaborating with survivors to create an audio art piece that weaves together these women's powerful voices.

The artist continues to exhibit internationally today. Her works can be found in private and public collections around the world.

Katya Lucia Berger Bio

Katya Berger is a multimedia journalist of British, French and Gabonese origin. She holds a BA in French and English literature from King's College London and an MS in journalism from the Columbia Graduated School of Journalism.

She wrote her thesis on the vast discrepancies in pricing between HIV/AIDS treatment in developing countries and the United States. Her first short documentary focuses on cyborgs and the growing number of people who are implanting technology into their bodies to enhance their senses.

Katya has worked as a producer for "Quotidien" (TF1) covering the US presidential election, and has covered crime and immigration for other French TV channels such as "Sept à Huit" and "France 24". She is particularly interested in women's issues and has produced video content for UN Women.

Her work on 'One Thousand Voices' has allowed her to further explore gender inequality and gender based violence, and to bring an end to harmful traditions such as FGM/C. It is an honour for her to collaborate with Owanto, her mother, and to produce an audio art piece — where journalism meets art — that will contribute to the empowerment of women worldwide.

OWANTO: www.owanto.com

Katya: www.katyaluciaberger.com

Flowers: <http://owanto.com/projects/flowers/>