

SOME THING WE AFRI CANS GOT

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QUARTERLY
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owanto one thousand voices

interview
ANA WELTER

contemporary
art

Owanto exhibits *One Thousand Voices* in a solo show at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) (February 6th, 2019, International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation — May 30th, 2019) and in the group exhibition “Material Insanity” at the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) (February 23rd, 2019 — September 22nd, 2019), a decade after representing the Republic of Gabon in a solo show at the Venice Biennale.

Ana Welter: Owanto, this year marks a decade since you represented your country with a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale (2009). What was at stake then and how has your work evolved?

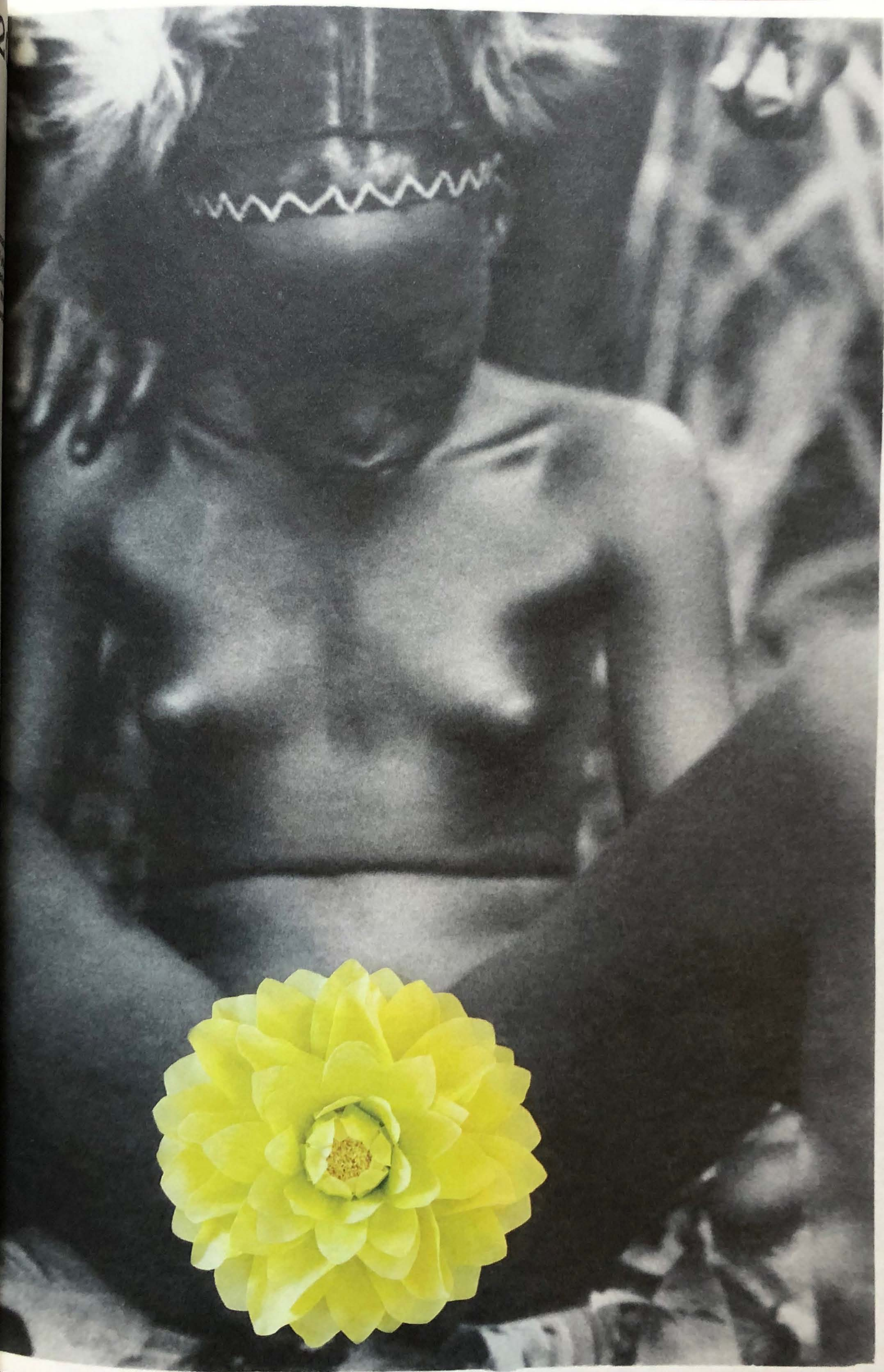
Owanto: The Venice Biennale was a first for the Republic of Gabon. I was the first artist from a Sub Saharan country to have a solo show at the prestigious biennale in *Participation National*. The exhibition, entitled *The Lighthouse of Memory: Go Nogé Mènè (Making the Future)*, evoked my personal history as an African woman raised by African women. They were the pillars of my life and played a central role as I had lost my father when I was 11. The world was unstable politically and economically in 2009, as it is now, and I sought to construct a more committed world for my children by creating a bridge between the past and the future.

The Flowers Project follows these same themes. My concern about the state of the world demands individual and collective responsibility to shape a better world for girls and women. Activism has taken the lead. In Africa, more than three million girls have been estimated to be at risk of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) annually, the majority of girls being under the age of fifteen. More than 200 million women and girls alive today have been cut in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the diaspora. While my personal narrative and my concern for the global state of women and children played a central role in my work then, so did the omnipresent question *Where Are We Going?* Ten years later, I have grown as a mother, woman and artist. With *One Thousand Voices* (part two of *The Flowers Project*), I take these respective themes to the height of activism, linking my origins with the world beyond.

How did the *Flowers Project* come about?

Owanto: Five years ago, I discovered old photographs of a female initiation ceremony in a family album I had inherited, and felt compelled to act. Although these photographs were taken in Africa, probably during the 1940s, this was a global phenomenon that was still very present in today's society. I believed that these photographs had fallen into my hands for a reason, and I understood that I could use the past to formulate an artwork that would awaken consciousness and shape

Owanto
Flowers II, from *La Jeune Fille a la Fleur*, 2017
Cold porcelain flower on aluminum UV print, 200 x 288cm.
Courtesy of the artist
& Voice Gallery



the future. *The Flowers Series* (part one of *The Flowers Project*) was born and the iconic photograph *La Jeune Fille à la Fleur* became part of the permanent collection at Zeitz MOCAA. Soon after, I began to develop "One Thousand Voices" in collaboration with Katya, my daughter, a journalist and documentary producer.

Katya, how did this mother-daughter, artist-journalist collaboration come about?

Katia Berger: Owanto and I discussed the idea of collaborating on a documentary-contemporary art project about Female Genital Mutilation in the summer of 2016, after I had completed my masters degree at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism in New York. I reached out to Sahiyo, an NGO based in Washington DC, asking if they could introduce us to survivors interested in sharing their stories publicly. That's when we met Alifya, an FGM survivor and mother of 2 girls from the Indian Dawoodi Bohra community, at her home in New York. She was welcoming and generous and encouraged us to pursue the project.

About a year later, after I had worked on numerous projects as a documentary producer and produced videos for UN Women's online campaign, it was time for me to join Owanto Studio in a more professional capacity and to create a meaningful partnership with my mother. I reached out to NGOs and activists around the world, taking phone calls, meeting and interviewing journalists, activists and survivors, collecting information, country statistics, and testimonies. The research was vital for the creation of *One Thousand Voices* and helped us navigate the world of activism and to understand the politics behind the action, an aspect neither Owanto nor I were familiar with nor anticipated.

Why did you decide to create a sound installation as opposed to a documentary?

Katia Berger: We wanted to create a socially engaged, contemporary artwork which would raise awareness about an issue that is dear to us as women, as women of African descent, and as human beings; an issue which had not been discussed in the cultural-artistic landscape before, at least not in this capacity, and an issue that carries massive, massive consequences for the future of young girls and women.

We wanted to create a work which would move people, haunt them even, so they would take a stand. The voices of the women testifying in *One Thousand Voices* tell the collective, universal story of the more than two hundred million women and girls affected by the practice, the majority of whom have been silenced. They carry the heavy load and history of violence that has been perpetuated on women and girls for centuries. For us, it was inspiring to listen to how these extraordinary women had turned their pain into positive forces for change in the hope of a safer and more opportunistic world for their daughters. We wanted you to see just how brave and bold and powerful these women stand today. This, we dreamed, would incite change in each of you.

Searching through the 300+ transcripts of testimonies we have received via WhatsApp over the course of 2 years has been a huge learning experience, and a source of inspiration, compassion, and creativity. Producing the sound installation, weaving voices in different languages, connecting the stories and turning sounds into a symphony, has been hard at times, emotionally and artistically. But the thought of Owanto and me creating archives out of these testimonies is what gives us the power to continue to uncover and expose the truth. It gives us, and the world, the tools to understand what is at stake by listening to real-life voices of women and young girls who have endured genital mutilation/cutting and to learn from societal mistakes.

What kind of impact, Katya, do you think a project like this will have?

Katia Berger: Our dear friend, Hoda Ali, activist, educator, nurse, and survivor eloquently says in *One Thousand Voices*: "If you save one child, you save a whole generation."

Our mother-daughter/artist-journalist collaboration is precious. For it is through this precious partnership, that of a mother and a daughter and the support of their male allies, that we will find the courage to stand united and say "no more". This is where the cycle ends, when a girl is given the right to own and to protect her body in its full integrity; when a girl is given the right to go to school and to have an education; when a girl is given the right to marry the person of her dreams and to enjoy it; and when a woman is given the ability, through the sacred gift of an

education, to save her own daughter from the "cut" because she knows the difference between right and wrong.

On February 6th 2019, *One Thousand Voices* will also be heard at Museo Madre Napoli in Italy, and an extract of the piece will also be heard at conferences in France, Belgium, Portugal and Sweden. The project is ongoing and this is just the beginning. We are still collecting testimonies and we will continue producing the piece until we reach a symbolic 1000+ voices. We invite survivors to share their voices at owantostudio@gmail.com. We hope that the project will find its place in museums and cultural spaces but also in schools around the world.

What is the connection between the *Flowers Series* and *One Thousand Voices*?

Owanto: I decided to create a bridge from the visual images to the sound images, from the past to the present, and from Africa to the world. It was important to weave the past with the present, the analogue with the digital, the artistic with the journalistic. The exhibition at Zeitz MOCAA illustrates that it is not a story of "something" happening in some far-away village in Africa, it is happening everywhere, in cities and homes across the world, daily.

The *Flowers Series* uses photography and sculpture to highlight an age-old ritual that often signifies the transition from girlhood to womanhood, and to reflect on the rights of women over their own bodies. The blooming flower poetically plays a healing role and metaphorically changes the narrative. *One Thousand Voices* amplifies the collective voice of survivors to report on the magnitude of the practice and to literally change the narrative, breaking the silence.

Owanto, your exhibition at MACAAL will present a third series from the *Flowers Project* entitled "*Pardonne-moi*". What is it about?

Owanto: "*Material Insanity*" is a group exhibition which "invites the critical analysis of past and present societies by accentuating the practice of contemporary artists as well as exploring the act of rematerialization as an art of combat". *Pardonne-moi* fitted perfectly into *Material Insanity* as it represented the materialization of "One Thousand Voices" and was another step in raising awareness, as cutters abandoned the

knife and adopted the needle to weave the words of liberation voiced by the heroines.

I had attended the Dakar Biennale in 2018 where I met Magatte Sy Gaye, the director of the Senegalese Committee Against Traditional Practices. She brought me to meet survivors, activists, religious leaders, and reformed cutters in the outskirts of the city. I asked her if she would organize a collaboration with reformed cutters from the Kolda region in South Senegal.

The women produced 500 pieces over the course of 3 months. They embraced a new skill, gained a new source of income, and with this new skill a new opportunity arose to allow them to abandon the knife for the needle. There is the notion of healing on the one hand and the notion of pardon or atonement on the other. Women are making amends.

The neon piece entitled *What happened, happened, happened, happened* hangs within the immersive installation at MACAAL and brings to light the voice of a survivor. The enlightened words offer a way out from shadow and darkness, a departure from the patriarchal regime perpetuated by matriarchal societies.

The use of a new medium, material and embroidery, needle instead of knife, is explored, as well as the relationship between the spoken word, the written word, and the enlightened word. The yellow thread symbolises transformation and the yellow neon signifies enlightenment. In this exceptional act of solidarity all women are united.

Why is this PROJECT important for the future of girls and women?

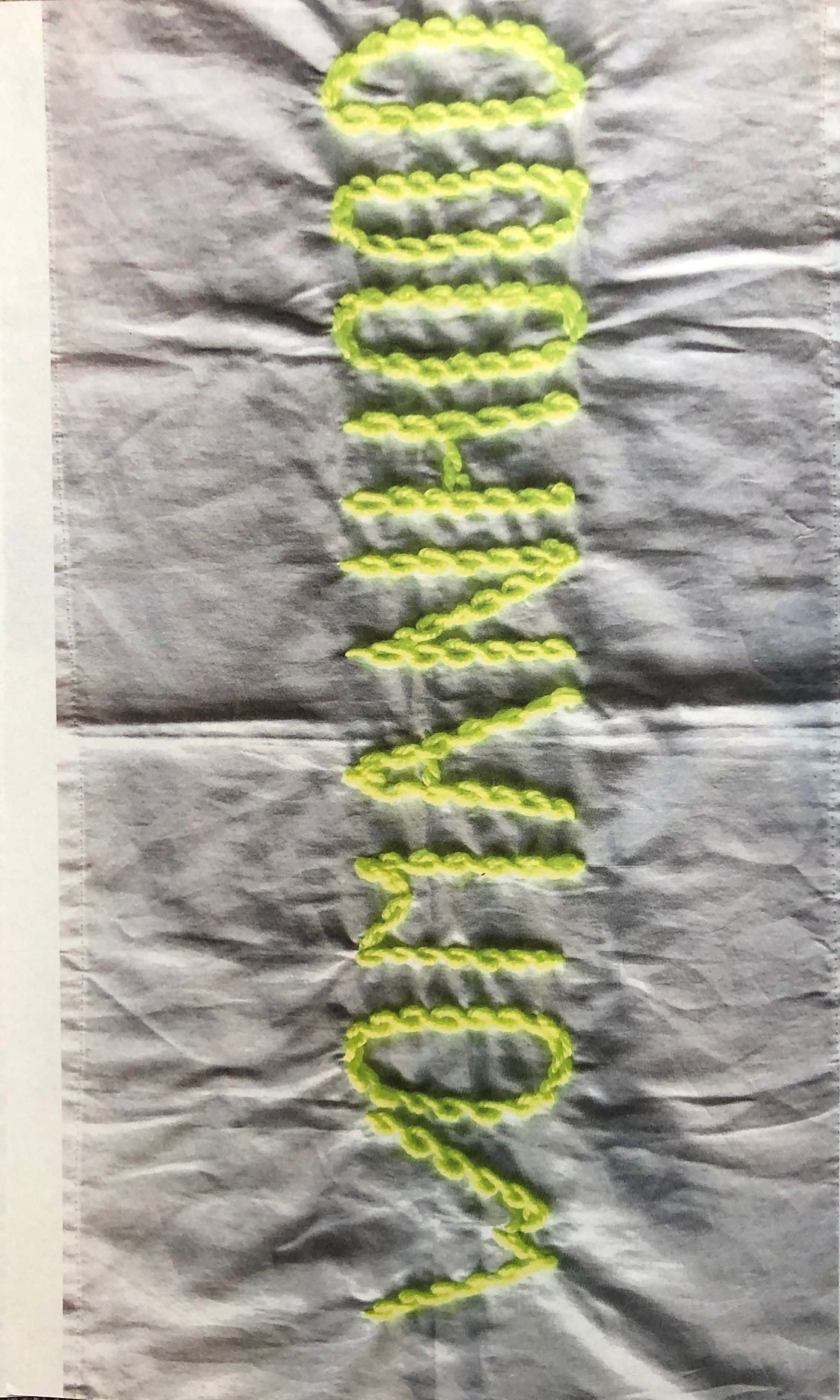
Katia Berger: In most cases, FGM leads to early child marriage and deprives girls of an education. A recent study shows that rates in East Africa among girls aged 14 and under have dropped significantly — from 71% in 1995 to 8% in 2016 — over the past twenty years, as a result of awareness campaigns directed at mothers. Huge progress has been made, but the study does not take into account women and girls above the age of 14 nor does it consider the variance in cultural practice from country to country. Demographic trends suggest that the rates will continue to increase each year. Currently, 3 million girls and women

are at risk yearly. By 2030, this could reach 4.6 million. More than ever, we need to remain mobilised and accelerate efforts to reach the goal of ZERO girls cut by 2030. We must end FGM in this generation.

Elizabeth Katamboi is a youth leader at Africa Schools Kenya (ASK), a non-profit providing education in the Kajiado South County of Kenya. The Maasai people commonly encourage boys to get an education, but not girls. Traditionally, all girls are cut and do not pursue an education after 8th grade, if they are lucky, and are married off to older men with multiple wives. However, Elizabeth's community decided to put an end to Female Genital Mutilation and to adopt an "Alternative Rite of Passage" ceremony devoid of cutting. The harmful ritual has been replaced with health and human rights education. Elizabeth is the first of any generation from her village to get an education. Her sponsors through ASK are both educators, and they helped Elizabeth not only graduate from high school, but also finish college in 2018. Elizabeth now has her degree in social services and medicine, and is hired by ASK to work on a two-year pilot program starting this February. The Kenyan Ministry of Health has agreed to hire Elizabeth when she finishes her two-years with ASK. She now has the opportunity to play a different role in society and the world at large. She will be travelling outside of Kenya for the very first time to join us on a panel on February 6th at Zeitz MOCAA to share her experiences with the world.

Owanto: This courageous move forward towards collective transformation is made possible with the support of centres of knowledge such as Zeitz MOCAA and MACAAL. Museo Madre Napoli is supporting the project on International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM with a 24 hour display. Other prestigious institutions have expressed interest and will follow as we want to bring *One Thousand Voices* to the 5 continents where FGM/C is prevalent. In time, more educators, scholars, artists, curators, journalists, politicians, collectors and other key players will continue to add their weight to the cause.

Ana Welter



Owanto
Voices and Womanhood, from Pardonne moi, 2018
Embroidery on cotton fabric 37 x 60 cm
Courtesy of the artist

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