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Repairing Representational Wounds: Artistic and Curatorial Approaches to Transition After War

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the wounds inflicted by the representation of the war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda. The paper presents Kanyo, Love and Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind, artistic works within the exhibition When We Return, as a staging ground to interrogate symbolic repair. Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind is an artwork-as-archive of items that were used by the inhabitants of settlement camps during the war between the LRA and the GoU but that were left behind once the camps were disbanded. The objects are a materiality of humanitarian aid; the artwork presents these objects of assistance as cultural artefacts. Kanyo, Love is an artwork about the aftermath of war through an exploration of the courtship gifts received by former wives of the LRA. The work critiques the silencing of affect in the frozen-in-time narrative of forced marriage and abduction that are superimposed onto the women. Curating the work as a knowledge register adds artistic and curatorial knowledge to existing research, reporting and archives on the war. It inserts artwork in the voids within the heritagisation of Uganda's conflict past.

KEYWORDS

Social practice art; curation; representation; Uganda; memory; archive; war; symbolic repair

Introduction

Artists often use their work to challenge the ways in which past conflicts are seen and therefore understood. Artists in and from Africa are increasingly taking on the project of revising histories that were narrated by colonisers. For example, Kudzanai Chiurai's practice remixes archives to create a new visual language that, among many provocations, critiques the colonial gaze on African bodies (Chiurai 2018). Syowia Kyambi uses her own body to perform speculative fictions that challenge both colonial and post-colonial subjectivities (Blackmore 2020). Kadder Attia has been acclaimed for his work that often juxtaposes the colonial harms inflicted on African peoples through assemblages of repair. These works form a part of visual strategies to remake the past (Akpang 2020).

Arts need not act simply as a form of recognition of historical violence; rather, art can offer new insights into social processes. Curation can also be a form of caring for difficult

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pasts through in-depth consultation and collaboration. This paper contends that artworks and the curation of them in war-affected areas of Uganda have a potential to address certain harms that have been committed through problematic representation that occurred during decades of civil war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU). We pay attention to the ways that news media and humanitarian agencies have portrayed the conflict and therefore a visual consciousness about people most affected in the northern region of Uganda. These types of communication outlets mimicked colonial forms of visual capture that, according to Azoulay (2019), enact symbolic violence on those who are represented, by virtue of making, collecting and proliferating archives of suffering. In contrast to external representations, the twenty-year ordeal had many everyday, seemingly ordinary moments that were not captured in news media coverage, humanitarian reporting and NGO activities (Titeca 2019). For those living in internally displaced persons camps (IDP camps), these moments included the existence of confined forced displacement and aid assistance. For women who were abducted and forced into marriage with commanders, these moments included both their youth and coming of age. And while these experiences are multi-layered and full of traumatic events, the realities do not need to be reduced to a general narrative of vulnerable others. In our view, such visual repertoires, connected to discursive troupes of stereotyped African wars and aid assistance, are in need of reevaluation now that the war has ended.

It is through emotive engagement with sensorial artworks that reframing of wars can aim towards a form of what Mani (2011) calls "cultural justice" (547). According to Mani, the cultural approach to justice is necessary because it allows for solidarity and understanding as a reparative mechanism to address the divisive realities of violent conflict. In Uganda, this approach is useful for understanding the ways in which representation, especially of women as "ideal victims," can exist even in the context of care. In this way, care is understood twofold: first, within the duties of humanitarians, and second, within the ethical responsibilities of socially-engaged artists or curators. These strands converge in the visual representations of the conflict between the LRA and GoU from 1989 to the present (although the LRA no longer operate on Ugandan soil). We respond to Mani and others who have made a call to care by arguing that there are representational wounds that require symbolic treatments.

In this study, we—as artist and curator—explore the inadequacies of care in humanitarian and media representations of people during the war in northern Uganda, resulting in a kind of symbolic harm done. Beyond this critique, we offer new avenues to reflect on violent pasts through Okwenje's artworks (*Kanyo, Love; Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind; Can Agura*) and Blackmore's curatorial practice of the group exhibition *When We Return: Art, Exile and the Remaking of Home* (2019), informed by the processual dialogue *The Grammar of Images* (2018) that both featured Okwenje's art. This study contrasts the artistic works and public exhibitions that were mounted in the aftermath of the war, with the media and humanitarian documentation from the time of the war. While news reports used framings of suffering Ugandans to call for an end to the war or for better support for humanitarian action, the artwork reflectively asks questions about the duty of care, more than a decade after the war has ended.

Our contribution offers two key insights. First, it posits that representation during conflict has lasting impacts. This recognition highlights that the practice of depicting

“vulnerable others” did not dissipate with the 1980s critiques of humanitarian communication. Second, we insist that artwork can be important for exploring difficult histories and potential futures, fostering a contextually relevant duty of care. Together these perspectives provide insights into a region and art history that has rarely been addressed in work relating to post-war representation in Uganda.

Aesthetic approaches: navigating creative propositions

We employ the reflexivity and visual anthropology as methodological tools. This involves ethnographic insights gained through and around social-practice art. Rutten, Dienderen, and Soetaert (2013) explain that a sensorial analysis of how artwork impacts a social situation can be done “by anthropologists who are collaborating with artists, by artists who are creating projects generating anthropological insights, and by art projects that are produced as outcomes of ethnographic research” (461). The outcome can be classified as a “visual intervention” (Pink 2007) synthesised through an academic reflection. Together both visual and ethnographic methods advance work on transition and truth-seeking, from a post-colonial lens (Enwezor 2002; Hartman 2019). Our interest in survivor-centered truth-seeking and representation stems not from a judicial or rational utilisation of fact but from an ongoing need to further interrogate what Hall described as a crisis of cultural representation (1997) and its attendant subjects (Mbembe and Roitman 1995).

We recognise the trouble with engaging war histories and crafting an alternative that is inherent in any engagement with difficult knowledge. According to Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson “Thinking about curation [is] not only as selection, design, and interpretation, but as care-taking—as a kind of intimate, intersubjective, interrelational obligation” (2011, 4). Taking into account the duty of care, there are ethical questions that arise in terms of whose memories are being interpreted? How can atrocity be represented in a dignified way? Does the work of presenting the past in the present contribute to the justice aims of those who contribute to the exhibition? Vorster (2019) describes how a single artwork, Judith Mason’s *The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent* (1998), can be imbued with layers of care and complication. In one part of the triptych the artist creates a dress out of plastic to dignify the Phila Ndwandwe who was kept naked before her murder by security police. It is said that she made a pair of panties out of a plastic bag and this is the basis for the dress, however, that is imbued with inaccuracies, destabilising its role in truth-telling as part of the South African Constitutional Court’s art collection. As the curator, Vorster was challenged to adequately care for the object while also caring for the narrative that the object represented, acknowledging that sometimes these things were in contradiction. Through the process of curation, she is able to participate in the negotiation of narrative that is part of cultural justice work.

The authors of this paper recognise that, in art making and curation, we are continually evaluating the form and meaning in depicting war stories. We do so by creating a triangulated call-and-response between artist, curator and survivors. Such call-and-response is similar to the method used by Ntombela (2019) but extended to include survivors and research collaborators of the region who have also experienced the war. As curator and artist, we have built our practices around memorialising parts of Uganda’s history.

We position our memory work as a contribution to unveiling hidden histories and making historical silences audible. Our collaboration is rooted in a three-year research project called *The Politics of Return* (2016–2019), but extends much deeper: into Okwenje's own biography of displacement as a Ugandan who lived in exile in Kenya with her family during the dictatorial presidency of Idi Amin. This experience has featured in Okwenje's artworks and Blackmore's decade-long work curating in war-affected parts of Uganda. Our task in this project was to conduct research from an aesthetic point of view and to synthesise other academic insights into creative ways of interpreting difficult pasts.

Okwenje based her investigation for this project on cycles of displacement experienced by Ugandan and South Sudanese women living in Uganda, employing journalistic and investigative methods to interrogate political, social and cultural contexts. She transforms the materials of her investigation—research papers, interview transcripts, annotations, photography, news articles and archives—into artistic outputs. The result is a series of interconnected mixed-media artworks that explore the aftermath of the war in northern Uganda. Two of these works are discussed in this contribution: *Gang Kikome and Other things We Left Behind*, a set of object portraits from internal displacement camps, and *Kanyo, Love*, a multimedia set of works in collaboration with thirty-six women (The Women).¹

The Women self-identify as Acholi people. The area that the war occurred is known as the Acholi Sub-Region that spans across eight districts in the north of Uganda. Acholi people are connected by their shared language, social norms and customs. Acholi culture has also been analysed by scholars who critique the incongruence between culture and international justice norms (Allen 2006), sometimes advocating for traditional forms of reconciliation (Baines 2010). While this grouping of Acholi is not monolithic, it provides a social-cultural framework to reveal a contrast in forms of representation. The assumptions on language and cultural references in the artworks draw upon this framework.

In 2019, Okwenje (a Ugandan from the eastern and central regions) travelled to the northern areas of Acholi and constructed a research site/studio to meet with The Women to discuss their experiences of courtship in the aftermath of war. Okwenje was introduced to The Women by an Acholi researcher working on the *Politics of Return* research project who was already known to some of The Women. At the initial meeting with The Women, 10 were present, and as the research progressed and the days passed, more and more women joined by volunteering to come to the research site, wanting to share their stories and objects of love. The Women, still experiencing stigma and discrimination, had formed an unofficial support group based on their common experiences of forced marriages to LRA combatants.

Blackmore (a Euro-American) curated an artist residency in collaboration with 32° East that worked with three artists and sixteen academic researchers. Together they develop a series of four exhibition iterations and six dialogues including a focused 2018 installation and discussion on representation (as part of the biennale festival KLA ART) that featured Okwenje's work alongside six other artists and representatives from victims associations

¹The Women currently live in Gulu town or its surrounding areas. Following is a list of their names. We chose to use their English names to maintain relative anonymity: Agnes, Agnes, Alice, Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatrice, Christine, Doreen, Evelyn, Florence, Florence, Florence, Florence, Grace, Grace, Irene, Jackie, Jennifer, Ketty, Kevin, Kevin, Laker, Lily, Lucy, Margaret, Maurine, Milly, Nighty, Olimpia, Oliver, Sarah, Scovia, Susan, Susan, Teddy and Vicky.

and social justice NGOs. These exhibitions constitute a negotiation of representation around issues such as: the everyday experiences of South Sudanese women in exile in Uganda, understanding how to represent war in dignified ways, presenting research through art for academic audiences, and displaying war histories in regions where the wars occurred. This methodology yields insights through the dialogical process of care by deciding what to show, asking whose voice is present and making space for audiences' feedback while the artwork is in process.

With this in mind, we have tried to keep an open dialogue both with the organisations that house the objects of displacement—the Uganda Museum, the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre, and the Pabbo Memorial—and with the thirty-six women who are featured in *Kanyo, Love*. Key participants in the artwork and research were invited to preview the exhibition before it opened in Gulu in July 2019 (Figure 1). We used this time to explain our creative process and give the opportunity for refusal if people did not want their images shown. In the context of Uganda's war histories, social art practice and exhibitions of contemporary art are rare, requiring a bespoke form of care that requires constant ethical and methodological re-evaluation. Starting from this context specificity the artworks can have many more iterations and audiences, further exploring issues of representation and repair.

Context of the war

From the late 1980s, a group of rebels called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) were active in northern Uganda, later spreading to southern Sudan and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo; at the time of writing in July 2021, they are based in the Central African Republic. The LRA have been characterised by their treatment of civilians as targets, although initially their motivation was to destabilise the GoU as retaliation for marginalisation and extrajudicial killings. In addition, they demanded participation in political structures dominated by the National Resistance Army/Movement party, which took power during a coup in 1986 and have maintained a singular hold on power as central government responsible for counterinsurgency against the LRA. The Government of Uganda (GoU) used a series of military and structural violence tactics to combat the



Figure 1. The Women previewing the exhibition with Okwenje.

killings, abductions, rapes and mutilations committed by the LRA. The conflict within Uganda spanned more than two decades, displaced millions and incurred the loss of tens of thousands of lives. This brief description of the conflict offers a sense of the scale; while we acknowledge this glossing of the situation oversimplifies more complex conditions, it is important to outline the context of the war before our analysis can progress.

Gendered aspects pervade both how the violence was committed and how the war was depicted. For example, during the war the LRA abducted thousands of people, mostly children and women. Some estimates say that between 1996 and 2006 the LRA abducted anywhere from 54,000 and 75,000 people, with 25,000 to 38,000 of them being children (Phuong, Vinck and Stove 2008). Women who were abducted, moreover, sometimes as girls, were forced into marriage to combatants. Many LRA commanders had multiple wives, and were known to practice closed-polygamy. GUSCO reported that over 10,000 young women and girls returned from the war, many pregnant or bearing young children (Allen et al. 2020). In addition, sexual violence has so characterised the experiences of abducted and displaced women that “forced marriage” has been included on the list of charges for former LRA commander Dominic Ongwen at the International Criminal Court.

Internal displacement, however, impacted nearly everyone in the population. Life in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps was one of the most defining experiences of the war between the LRA and GoU. After a series of failed military campaigns seeking to oust the LRA and rebel units across northern Uganda, the GoU mandated in 1996 that people be shifted into “protected villages.” Thousands of people were given little notice and even less support as they were forced into semi-urban trading centres. These locations were determined based on their access to roads where army patrols could reach them. Large international aid assistance programmes entered the conflict zone several years after the camps were initially set up, because the numbers of internally displaced persons camps increased with ongoing violence and threats of abduction. At one point it is estimated that nearly 90% of the region was displaced, and being supported by international humanitarian agencies. However, the camps became a form of structural violence through forced displacement (Branch 2008). Domestic and international media outlets depended on government and aid workers both to allow access for coverage and as informants to narrate the dynamics of the violence (Dolan 2009).

Representational wounds

Throughout the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, media outlets circulated reports on the numbers of lives lost, the mythical nature of the brutality and the scale of displacement. Appeals for, and representation of, vulnerable beneficiaries were at the core of a series of campaigns led by humanitarian actors and news media. Work done in this way creates a bio-political discourse of “bare life” that classifies humans in an ahistorical category of those dependent on external maintenance of basic needs for survival (Agamben 1998). In terms of humanitarian communication, Kennedy argues that “when victims are stripped of context and reduced to the most basic of rights, to pure animal emotions, they become personless—they lose their human dignity”

(2009, 3). An analysis of visual representation and the accompanying text within humanitarian and news media discourses of the war shows how this “bare life” spectacle of suffering was created.

Shocking headlines, images of maimed faces and inhumane, even violent treatment of children all worked to portray the stereotypical African war. One *Independent* article read, “Child soldiers, sex slaves, and cannibalism at gunpoint: the horrors of Uganda’s north” (Judah 2004). ReliefWeb wrote that, “‘refugees [are] packed into squalid camps where often only drink and sex can blot out hunger and despair’, aid workers say” (Waillis 2005). A review of Ugandan and Euro-American media outlets showed scores of unidentified youth holding AK47 rifles, noted only for their status as abductees or child soldiers.² Girls were represented primarily by their classification as rape victims or as “bush-wives” to rebel forces. The other dominant set of imagery presented was of people whom rebels had disfigured. Hundreds of photographs circulated in newspapers, magazines, blogs and film of men and women who had their lips, noses or limbs dismembered. These examples demonstrate that agencies and journalists regularly used children as the preferred victim while speaking for the victims through statistics and social vulnerabilities (Von Engelhardt and Jansz 2014).

These references—of which there are hundreds—and their associated visuals become speech acts that created a distorted truth. Speech acts, according to Bredekamp (2018) can conjure images and direct how people think, feel or act through the emotive power of speech. The images thus evoke a gaze of suffering developed through colonial forms of representing savage violence and helpless children. This mode of narrating war frames both victims and perpetrators within colonial depictions of the suffering African (Werbner 1998; Finnström 2010). A lack of care or agency is apparent in the depictions, so profound are the discourses that few self-represented experiences of the war are present in public domains. All together, it is these image acts and the subsequent silencing of complex histories through stabilised narratives that we call “representational wounds.” Such wounds are created in the time of war but can fester for many years thereafter.

These strategies of representation have been challenged by empirical data that suggests a more complex and nuanced era of violence. This is not to discredit the actuality of the events, but to show how easily they lend themselves to symbolic violence through incomplete representation (Giroux 2000). The 2010 volume *The Lord’s Resistance Army: Myths and Reality*, for example, provides a sound counter-narrative into whose “truths” have been told and why they are relevant (Vlassenroot and Alen 2010). Finnström’s work on media in this war context shows the editorial decisions at outlets such as Reuters produced information that “mirrors years of repeated (media) truths on Kony and his rebels” (2010, 74). Importantly, the backlash against the viral aid campaign video *Kony2012* both from within Uganda and the diaspora spurred a recognition of voices and alternative perspectives. However, these critiques rarely engaged the visual representation issues at hand.

²Newspapers and online sources with reports from 1989–2004 such as *New Vision*, *Monitor*, *Red Pepper* (Uganda and mostly within the Refugee Law Project Archive collection) and *New York Times*, *CNN*, *Newsweek*, *BBC News*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *US National Public Radio*, *Smithsonian Magazine*.

The creation of an alternative media outlet in the post-war environment illustrates a new space for representation unhindered by government or external filters. An opinion piece in the *Acholi Times* put it clearly: “The current narrative continues to breed anger and frustration from victims who cannot make meaning from their experience nor find justice” (Alier 2015). Authors in the *Acholi Times* seek to counterbalance problematic narratives through journalistic sections designed to celebrate cultural heroes and traditions. This reframing directly uses culture and self-determined truths to seek historical redress, in turn developing a type of solidarity through narrative that leads to the cultural justice defined by Mani (2011).

The mediatisation of war reinforces problematic narratives, here rooted in stereotyped representations of African others (Wainaina 2005). Images and narratives support an ongoing culture of stigmatising returnees that further drives a wedge between those who experienced the war in displacement camps and those who experienced the war in “the bush” (Macdonald and Kerali 2019). The incompleteness or inaccuracy that comes from this process cannot, therefore, be used as indexical images recruited when constituting memories. As the artworks below show, lived experiences themselves challenge faulty narratives advanced by state, news and humanitarian actors. Yet the pain from harm inflicted by representational violence is unable to heal because of the lasting impact it has on the imaginative potential for remembrance.

There are several reasons why these forms of representation have endured. First, the LRA is still active, rendering the discourse around the LRA atrocities still valuable for military and humanitarian campaigns in neighbouring DRC and Central African Republic. Second, the post-war reconstruction efforts in northern Uganda continue to be led by externally-funded aid organisations. These organisations rely on certain formulas of representation—inherited from humanitarian communications—to access the funding for their work. Such formulas reproduce the language of vulnerable others by positioning the vantage point from the “outsider looking in”, a positioning that Cole has summarised as part of “the white-saviour industrial complex” (2012). The amount of visibility around LRA violence justified the humanitarian emergency (Nibbe 2011), creating certain gaps and silences regarding the quotidian aspects of life during and after the war.

Artistic interventions

Artists and documentary photographers have responded to the war between the LRA and GoU, at different times and in a variety of forms. In the immediate aftermath, as people returned from combat, art therapy became a popular tool. There have also been several documentary photography efforts that have sought to nuance and individualise the war story through portrait photography. Theatre, too, has featured in the growing support for massacre commemorations as well as through a small number of national and international productions. A brief description of these works and how they relate to the social milieu of transition, helps to position Okwenje and Blackmore’s 2019 work.

Many “artistic” interpretations of this war follow the pattern of the humanitarian and media reports above. In 2014, Christian Aid and *The Guardian* newspaper teamed up to

produce a series of images by photojournalists entitled *In Kony's Shadow*. The first image is of a partially blind and disfigured man with the caption "Oryem Kenneth, 42. Oryem was abducted by the LRA for two days in 2003. They cut off his lips and ears with a knife and his fingers with an axe." A dozen portraits of disfigured victims were displayed in London's Oxo Tower with short captions and little context into the political background of the conflict. The aim of the work was to raise money for the charity whilst showing the enduring suffering of beneficiaries. Similarly, other foreign photographers have created aestheticised portraits that perpetuate this reductionist gaze onto bodies: for example, photographer Heather McClintock's series *The Innocent: Casualties of the Civil War in Northern Uganda* appears in a glossy coffee-table style book (2010) featuring dozens of prints of mutilated women and scarred babies. This book, and others, are widely available via global outlets as well as in bookshops across Uganda. Alternative forms of representation must contend with this commercialisation of images and proliferation as accepted content.

Within Uganda, professional artists have created a few socially engaged projects in which survivors are agents of their own representation. For example, painter and woodcut printmaker Fred Mutebi utilised a workshop and dialogue format to create a "talking mural" in 2010. The youth art project and artwork were called *The Road to Reconciliation*. The nine-panel mural depicts a prolonged state of dependent uncertainty with a symbolic World Food Programme truck driving down a road made with the colours of the national flag (Kiwere 2009). In 2009, David Kigozi was commissioned by the Dutch Embassy to make the *Pillar of Peace* showing the developmental aspiration of children surrendering weapon and taking up books. Playwright Deborah Asimwe Kawe, too, has been acclaimed for her play *Forgotten World* that re-enacts scenes from the war. This visceral and sometimes shocking script has been shared and performed globally, becoming part of the shadow of empire representation (Edmondson 2018).

Documentary photographers have also attempted to reframe the past and depict the everyday experiences of war. German photographer Anne Ackerman has been making portraits of people in northern Uganda that attempt a "more dignified" narration of post-war life. Scholar and former journalist Kristof Titeca undertook a multi-year project to depict "rebel lives" from the images that rebels had taken themselves during the war (2019). Both of these modes of representation form a more collaborative representational domain but still rely on a realist interpretation.

In the sections that follow, we describe the artistic and curatorial decisions to break out of and reframe the problematic representations that have been produced during the war. In so doing we aim to participate in "aesthetic justice" that does not use didactic interpretation to dictate counter-narratives but employs artworks as mechanisms to remake the past from incomplete histories (Gielen et al. 2015). As such, it is not an all-encompassing answer; rather, the work opens a file in the problematic historical archive.

Investigating the aftermath

In this section, we discuss Okwenje's artworks that were installed in Gulu, Uganda in 2019. Set at the TAKS community centre, *When We Return: Art Exile and the Remaking of Home*

was a group show including eight artists covering narratives from across the region. Within the show, the specific artworks *Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind* and *Kanyo, Love* created an interactive proposition whereby the viewer could navigate between Okwenje's different series. They are a coupling of aesthetics and temporal remixing of the past, creating a visual shift away from the misrepresentations described above. The multi-sensory components of the work (sound, photography, interactive installation) as well as the reflective way of implicating oneself created an artistic rejection of representational wounds. Furthermore, displaying the artwork in the epicentre of the war invited audiences to engage with content they already intimately knew.

Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind is a growing photographic-collection of material remains from the humanitarian-assisted era of encampment. The title derives from the phrase *gang kikome*, which is the Acholi term for ancestral home: *gang* meaning home, and *kikome* meaning of the soil and lineage. The artwork takes as its subject a series of material artefacts that came from the rations of displacement camps but that were left behind when the camps were disbanded. Seemingly innocuous and quotidian, the objects were deeply personal artefacts with biographies and provenance not captured in the public collections, but instead known by the owners who had kept them in their personal possession. As a collection, the artwork uses remains as a provocateur to ask about what is remembered, what is forgotten and what is included in the historical record.

Okwenje made portraits of the objects, removing the background that could reference a context or the provenance. This decision circumnavigated the aesthetic codes of documentary and images of suffering that were used to speak about this war and that have been traditionally used to represent tragedy. Removing a contextual environment from the images creates the possibility of seeing something different from what is presented in the photographs (Cramerotti 2009)— removing the landscape and backdrops, for example, that have come to characterise “bush wars.”

Employing codes of studio portraiture introduces aesthetic pleasure for contemplation. Can we view the remains of war as beautiful? This question creates a tension between the ways in which consuming representations of tragedy and their aftermath become normalised. The assumption is that aestheticisation numbs the audience to the realities being documented, because documentary and beauty are often considered separately. In other geographies, photographer Sebastião Salgado, whose work on enduring difficult social realities is highly aestheticised, has received this same critique (Sischy 1991). Yet when we account for the representational wounds proposed in the realist documentary images of the LRA versus GoU war, we find limited nuance in the ways in which this conflict has been portrayed. Repetitive classification develops stereotypes that depict “the other” in such a way that constitutes an “exercise of symbolic violence” (Hall 1997, 259). The result is a directional gaze that obstructs the potential for one to see themselves or their own history.

Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind is a testament to nuance in representation. For example, the work can be seen as a characterisation of poverty at the same time as a revelation of the relationships between an object's owners and humanitarian assistance. The USAID-branded oil can and the World Food Programme-stamped grain sack are globally recognised, even iconic materials associated with humanitarian aid.

However, for the recipients of this aid, the products themselves can come to signify a cultural object and a temporal experience. Furthermore, each image in *Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind* includes the hand or fingers of the person that physically supported the backdrop during the production of the photograph. The decision to leave the hand in the frame is a technique of reflexive documentary that Okwenje employs in an effort to break the “fourth wall.” Showing the production of the image (the fourth wall) creates an awareness in the audience that implicates them in the spectacle of the image.

Additionally, the size of the objects in each photograph is amplified, creating a fictionalised element that belies the documentary value of photography. The increased size augments the details on the object, making the image readable. Ironically, the fictionalisation of the work and the elimination of a visual background for context reveals a factual biography of the object. These details are easily visible when installed, because each photograph is over a metre in height and is stretched over metal frames with end points that go into the ground—turning the work ultimately into sculptural objects. The sculptures are installed in a staggered formation, reminiscent of a cemetery, whose markers rise up from the ground (Figure 2).

We now turn to a series of the images to see how these biographies are realised. Several of these objects are here reframed in a new light. The associated descriptions come from Okwenje’s interviews and Blackmore’s research on “humanitarian remains” (2020) (Figures 3–5).

The speech act of saying *jereken labade peke* does not exist without the aesthetic object and the human body. As such, the Blue Jerrican creates an “image act” that provides a visual terrain to relate to the children born of war (Bredekamp 2007). The mutuality of the word and the object are imbued with meaning that is both colloquial and everyday (to collect water), yet extraordinary and tied to the war (to carry the child from the bush). For those who speak Acholi and understand the aftermath of the war, this is an intimate way of knowing represented by the artist. Conversely, as an outsider, one is offered an insight into lived realities of war and return through the objects and their linguistic associations.



Figure 2. Installation view of *Gang Kikome and Other things We Left Behind* at TAKS Centre, Gulu (2019).

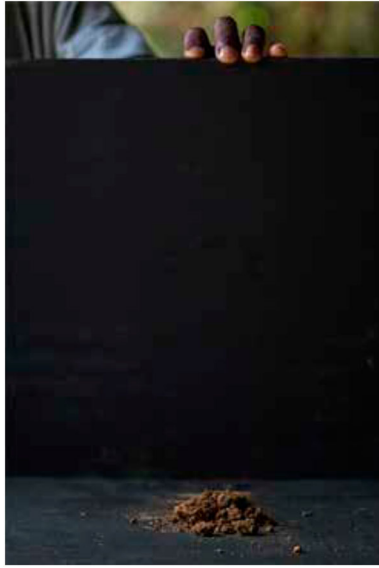


Figure 3. *Soil.* The most pertinent to the title *Gang Kikome* is the small mound of soil in one image, which represents those who were buried in the camps and the cultural mode of burial within the homestead. The camps were operational for over twenty years, where many people experienced the full spectrum of life, from birth to death. In most camps, burial sites were not designated, and the inhabitants had to improvise within the already cramped space. When the camps were disbanded, many of the dead were left behind. Being born in a camp and leaving the dead behind implicates the camp as *gang* and *gang kikome*.



Figure 4. *USAID Oil Can.* Signifying the materiality of humanitarian aid and its disposable aesthetic, over time these objects of aid were reused and became cultural artefacts. In some cases, they were repurposed (hammered into metal doors, made into instruments or reused for food storage). Although the shape and function of the object changes, the logos of the development agency remain visible, lending another layer of meaning to the reading of the material remains of camp.



Figure 5. *Blue Jerrican.* The assumption on considering the blue jerrican is that it started off as a receptacle for liquids, possibly as a storage container or transport vessel. However, the intervention of a large hole adds to the biography of the container, altering its trajectory and utility—as does the fact that that it is tied with string, possibly recognisable as a child’s toy that would be dragged in the dirt transporting objects inside it. However, its true provenance is not known, lending a multiplicity of meanings. One possible meaning is that in Acholi, this type of plastic object is called *jereken labade peke*, which means a jerrican (watering container) without a handle. However, a jerrican without a handle is also an idiom used to describe a child born to a rebel fighter and a “bush wife.” Unlike the jerrican with the handle, it is much harder to carry; without a handle, the jerrican is somewhat incomplete.

Intimacies of return

The objects and presentation in *Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind* imply an open and public discourse, and form an investigation into histories silenced in plain sight, revealed through objects. However, *Kanyo, Love* is a much more intimate series of artwork. The series investigates the interior lives of return, seeking understandings of the ways former rebel-wives find love and experience courtship after war. This ongoing work is about post-conflict reintegration examined through individual portraits, an archive of courtship gifts, and testimonies of post-war love relationships of The Women, incorporated with media clippings reporting on the war. As a collection, the work is distinctly different from the portrait-based photo-journalistic photography seen in other engagements with war-affected peoples of the region.

The title takes inspiration from the term *kanyo*, which in Acholi language means “to endure, to be resilient.” Interviews with The Women and other sources have identified the difficult conditions of forced marriage, but also how the experience impacted post-war intimacies (Kiconco and Nthakomwa 2018; Porter 2020). It is important to note that many of the forced marriages ended with the war for a variety of reasons: because the men did not survive the war, because they were imprisoned and are awaiting trial, or

in some instances, because the couples mutually decided to go their separate ways. Still, some couples did decide to remain together in civilian life.

Most of the women who participated in the project returned from the bush with the children that they bore during their forced marriage, with the responsibility for parenting and providing being left to them. Generally, the Anglophone concept of “love” involves, to the Acholi, respect, partnership and planning for a shared life. It is understood as a phenomenon that unites families and clans and ensures the perpetuation of lineages (Porter 2019). Yet, there are deep social ruptures that happen when love is not achieved and social fabric is broken (p'Bitek 1964). By including *Love* in the title of the work, Okwenje acknowledges the complicated interpretation of the meaning of love both in the subjective reading of the word by the subjects of the work as well as the audience. Placing “Love” after *Kanyo*, Okwenje implies a hardship that is to be endured in the experience of love and in attaining new forms of post-war love.

In rebuilding Acholi society after the war, there was an expectation that traditional courtships and relationships and their attendant rituals and practices would resume. In Acholi custom, partnerships uniting a man and a woman and their families and clans are generally preceded by a period of courtship. During the courtship, gifts that symbolise a promise of commitment are exchanged between the man and the woman. Porter (2020) describes how *nyom* (the public culmination of courtship and marriage) works to define a sense of home, often emplacing marriage as a signification of home (4). Understanding home through marriage is logical considering the Acholi custom is for women to move to their husbands *gang*, and that they are only able to inherit land from men.

The majority of the courtship gifts offered to The Women after the war were utilitarian. They included objects such as a piece of cloth, a coin purse, a handbag, or a mobile phone, to name a few. The functional nature of these gifts implies the nature of the partnership promised. The intention of the gift of a mobile phone is to facilitate everyday ease of life, communication and movement which reflects the expectation of the partnership. The courtship gifts are also indications of a return to normalcy after the dislocation of war. Even in its practicality and illustrative of the subjective reading of “love”, there is affect in the gesture of the gift and attached to the object itself, as evidenced in the interviews conducted with The Women. When Doreen was asked what the object meant to her, she replied:

Well, when I hold the phone I always think about the days of our courtship. And of course, when I cover myself like this [wraps the textile around her shoulders] I feel like I am getting affection from my husband and it gives me happiness. That is the best. To remember who he is.³

When capturing the courtship gifts, it was important to Okwenje that the objects were photographed without any environmental markers to indicate their context. Using a back-drop referenced the notion of normalcy and created visual uniformity, while simultaneously levelling the objects' hierarchy of value. Visually, the mobile phone was afforded the same value as a single fork or *kitenge* (wax print fabric). This was a deliberate effort to encourage the audience to bring their assumptions to the reading of the objects, asking what does a mobile phone, a fork, a *kitenge* mean to you? Furthermore, styling of

³Personal Interview with Okwenje, May 2019.



Figure 6. Display of courtship objects photographed as Polaroids, TAKS Centre, Gulu (2019).

the images as Polaroid pictures, a medium globally renowned for its casual, impromptu affect, sought to communicate the informality and sense of urgency and immediacy (Figure 6).

The annotation on each Polaroid-style image is the name of the recipient of the object, invoking a nomenclature that suggests a cataloguing or archiving of the object. In this way, the photograph is designed as an object to be inserted into a speculative archive. Okwenje elevates and makes visible that which is intangible by presenting these courtship gifts in the form of an archive (Foster 2004). However, the supposition of an archive is that for something to be included, there is something else that must have been excluded (Derrida 1996). Presenting the courtship gifts as an archive alongside media clippings and interviews, then, expands the archive's power from an agent of wounding to a complicated treatment that is both tangible and intangible.

The archive of the gifts, along with the testimonies, reveals the varied realities of the women's experiences of love and commitment in extraordinary circumstances. Jennifer explained: "I started knowing love when I was a bit young. I was only thirteen years old, but I knew that I would marry him. When I left the bush I heard that he was still alive and so I went back to him."⁴ In some instances, the courtship gifts represented a return to normalcy, a promise or expectation of a shared life and hope for the perpetuation of their lineage—aspirations that are intangible contributions to social repair and cohesion in the aftermath of war. For others, the courtship led to fulfilling relationships defined by commitment, love and support, while many others experienced courtship shaped by continuing vulnerabilities from the war—leaving them exposed to a host of social issues such as wife inheritance, land grabbing, HIV infection and witchcraft, to name a few. And yet some women remained nostalgic for the relationships that they had in the bush and have preserved the gifts that they received from their combat-husbands during their forced marriages. For example, Lilly recalled her relationship with LRA leader Joseph Kony:

⁴Personal Interview with Okwenje, May 2019.

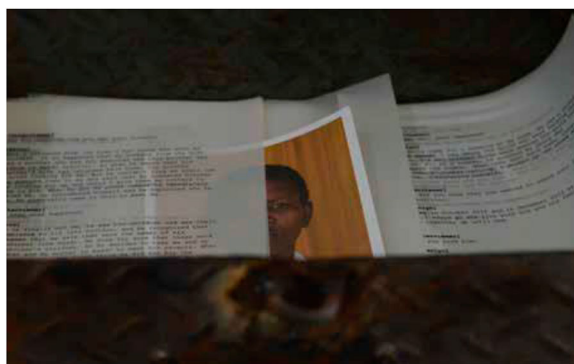


Figure 7. Display of portraits and testimonial extracts, TAKS Centre, Gulu (2019).

[Interviewer]: Tell me about your husband from the bush, did he give you anything?

[Lilly]: I wanted to bring a soap that my husband gave me. I have kept it up until now because it has a sweet smell. But unfortunately it is not with me where I am staying, I gave it to my mother to keep for me.⁵

But the archive of courtship gifts does not exist in isolation, thus the series *Kanyo, Love* is not just about the objects. As discussed above, the series includes portraits of The Women and their testimonies, an audio soundscape, text-based works and media reports on the war (Figure 7). Metal cases keep the Polaroids of the courtship objects alongside the testimonies and reproduced news clippings. In this way, The Women's stories are depictions of the war and symbolic images of return (the courtship objects) paired as an intentional juxtaposition.

The symbolic displays of metal travelling cases signals movement and safe-keeping. Moreover, the legacies of misrepresentation are coupled with portraits, testimonies and the notion of love that is absent in the characterisation of formerly-abducted women as rape victims or bush wives. We realise that with millions of people impacted by the reality of the war, there is no total or didactic way to tell the story. Thus, a series of fragments constitutes a symbolic gesture, eliciting a moment of inquiry for the visitor.

Curatorial interventions

We displayed *Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind* and *Kanyo, Love* in conversation with other artworks by Okwenje and seven further artists in a group show. The location for the exhibition was a community centre gallery in Gulu, the region's largest town and the epicentre of aid during the war. The space was vast, providing multiple rooms to showcase the artwork, as well as a garden where *Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind* was installed. Our team of docents, who were also researchers from the region working on issues of returned women and children, were able to be in constant dialogue with the organisers, researchers and artists to ensure a meaningful interpretation of the artwork.

Blackmore, the exhibition's curator, built on her decade long practice in Uganda to create aesthetically-driven dialogical spaces. Informed by thinking about site-specific

⁵Personal Interview with Okwenje, May 2019.

modes of displaying difficult knowledge in public space, as well as the academic foundation for the project, the exhibition opened with a two-day conference that brought together sixty-eight scholars and practitioners from around the northern region of Uganda, South Sudan and DRC. The academic, artistic and public dialogue considered the transitional realities at play in this post-war context, whereby most adults retain first-hand memories of what happened to them. We observed that visitors recognised the objects of displacement seeking interest in the stories of The Women.

The exhibition *Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind* enabled an illustrative dynamic between two generations of Acholi, those who knew life before the war and those who grew up in the IDP camps. Two men in particular sparked our attention as they debated the usefulness of displaying the objects as artworks. An elderly man, who was nostalgic for pre-war life and had experienced the contrast in the squalor of camp life, was disturbed that the objects were reified and presented as artworks. He expressed that they represented a difficult part of Acholi history that should not be memorialised in this way.⁶ The younger man, however, was born in the camps and grew up in them and did not have a lived knowledge of pre-war Acholi life. He articulated a nostalgia towards childhood memories of play in the camps, refashioning the objects into toys. He spent some time with the artworks, recounting memories that the objects evoked.

This example not only illustrates the convergence of humanitarian aid and cultural artefacts described above, but also the tension inherent in artistic work on memory. Imagery offering alternatives to media and aid portraiture can elicit mixed reactions based on survivor experiences. We grant that the example of these two men shows that this approach is not an absolute treatment of representational wounds. Images may always be triggering for some people. However, that we were able to engage this debate marked this exhibition as impactful on those grounds alone. Furthermore, the affect that objects elucidate speaks to the everyday experiences of war, rather than the sensationalised versions shown in media and humanitarian communication dominated by realist portraits of bodily violence or people's suffering.

Other considerations emerged as well. Showing the artwork in the regions where the subjects of the representational wounds reside creates a kind of "relational vulnerability" (Finnström 2020, 45) that we accepted as artist and curator. Taking on Finnström's concept, we are situated as knowledge brokers, making this scholarly contribution a reflexive analysis. Recognition of this positioning is rarely seen in work that seeks to distance scholarship from social phenomena, however, we offer new presentations for understanding transition in "public space" (Ramírez-Barat 2014) through our attempt to develop alternative representational strategies. That level of care rarely arises when artwork is made elsewhere or when portraits of suffering are extracted from contexts in the Global South to be shown in institutions in Europe and North America. By directly engaging the people represented in these artworks, and mounting its first installation in their home region, we were able to assuage the discomfort and problematics associated with displaying oversimplified experiences and with presenting them to outsider audiences. To our surprise, but we believe partly because of our method, our status as outsiders rarely met with refusal.

⁶In discussion with the authors, 26 July 2019.

Many of The Women involved in *Kanyo, Love* requested more engagement from the artist, even asking for their husbands to come to the exhibition or for the work to be made into new forms such as books or radio talk shows. The TAKS Centre, moreover, asked for the exhibition to become permanent. Now *Gang Kikome and Other Things We Left Behind* has been donated to them. So too have other artworks become permanent fixtures across the region, encouraging a continued dialogue in spaces unmediated by the curatorial. This positive feedback does not mean that the process is complete or that its inclusion was total, yet it created a starting point to better approach conceptually-driven and socially-engaged art exhibitions in Uganda.

Conclusions

Curatorial work marking moments of transition is a meaningful companion to the aesthetic journalist. Together, we ask questions that seek a more just way of understanding without fixity or didactic intentions. This article has outlined a challenging context for artistic and curatorial work in the aftermath of war. Given the legacies of media and humanitarian assistance, reframing the past requires ongoing engagements. We conclude that there is something unique found in this moment of collaboration: without overstating our reach or impact, it is possible that we have made inroads in two ways. First, we have advanced the work on this war and efforts by adding artistic and curatorial knowledge to existing academic research and humanitarian archives. Second, we have provided a potential means to introduce artwork into the voids that make up Uganda's historical reflections on its conflict past.

Unlike certain mediated versions of history, Okwenje's artwork does not engage the biopolitical tenets of "bare life". The aesthetic of portraiture given to discarded objects does not take the camps as an assumed reality, but instead points to the materiality of life as evidence of its history. *Kanyo, Love* does not reduce its participants into headlines or categories of beneficiaries, as has been the legacy of representing displaced persons in a way that dehistoricises or universalises them (Rajaram 2002; Malkki 1996). Rather the artwork provides archival layers for The Women to express themselves, their struggles and their ideas of love. Here lies no self-identification as a "bush wife" or abductee. Instead, there is a past, a present and a future that disrupts the frozen time of the war archive.

As a work of collaboration, we are conscious to avoid reproducing representational wounds. As such, we refused to join the continued violence that archives inflict by virtue of their circulation (Macías 2016). Our contribution to the memorial and archival space of northern Uganda may not be as linear as others have been—however, this is the trick of aesthetic justice, whereby Van Tomme asserts that "... aesthetics can, and perhaps should, one might argue, be messy and decidedly un-aesthetic when concerned with the representation of ongoing struggles for justice" (2015, 116). Indeed, the unfinished business found in this seeking of representational justice is exactly what keeps us inquiring.

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