Reproducing Traces of Trauma: Towards Transformation Through Contemporary Art

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Content Warning

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Abstract

In the spring of 1863, a man known by the name of Peter escaped from a plantation in Louisiana and found safety among Union soldiers encamped at Baton Rouge in the United States of America. Before being able to enlist in the military, he underwent an extensive medical examination which revealed that his back was heavily mutilated and filled with horrific scars. The photograph taken – later often referred to as 'The Scourged Back' – became proof of slavery's brutality and was used by the abolitionists in their campaign to end slavery. The picture was reproduced many times and rapidly spread across the country. More than 160 years later, the image of Peter still provides a powerful imprint of the horrors of slavery and has formed the blueprint of a string of recently produced contemporary art works. This short essay centers three pivotal works by Victor Sonna, Arthur Jafa and Fabiola Jean-Louis that deal with this subject matter and discusses their potential in dealing with and transforming historical trauma.

Disclaimer: The reproduction of violent images – as is done in this essay through the discussed (art) works – raises several ethical questions. While violent images can serve as catalysts in bearing witness to traumatic events, mobilizing and effectuating change, they must always be handled with utmost care. These images carry a significant weight, and repeated exposure and insensitive handling could potentially lead to (re)traumatization, desensitization or turn suffering into spectacle. In this essay, the images – in each case contextualized – are intended to carefully re-read history and empower action without perpetuating harm.

Introduction

During one of my visits to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in the autumn of 2021, I was unsuspectedly confronted with an intriguing artwork that was positioned as a barrier between the austere, white museum walls. The installation, which, upon closer inspection, appeared to be constructed of bits and pieces of old monkey bars, held a total of fifty-two almost see-through images made of white-coated silkscreen mesh fabric (figure 1). Taking an even closer look, I was drawn towards one particular picture which seemed vaguely familiar. A rather gruesome image of a seated man with visibly painful looking scars covering his whole back (figure 2). Nevertheless, this man seemed strong, with his left hand positioned firmly on

Figure 1. *Installation view of Wall of Reconciliation* by Victor Sonna. 2020. Images on silkscreen mesh fabric and wood, dimensions variable. Photography: Ronald Smits. Courtesy: the artist. The installation was part of the solo exhibition *1525*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 18 July 2020 - 9 January 2022.

Figure 2. *Detail of Wall of Reconciliation* by Victor Sonna. 2020. Image on silkscreen mesh fabric, wooden frame. Photography: Ronald Smits. Courtesy: the artist.

Figure 3. *Installation view of Wall of Reconciliation* by Victor Sonna. 2020. Images on silkscreen mesh fabric and wood, dimensions variable. *Refresh Amsterdam #2: War & Conflict*, Amsterdam Museum, temporary location Hermitage Amsterdam, 7 October 2023 - 24 February 2024.

his left hip and his face also looking in that direction; his eye catching my eye. 'Where have I seen this man before? What do we know about him?' I thought to myself, but couldn't find answers in the wall text or the accompanying catalogue (Esche et al. 2020).[1] Fast forward to two years later, when I visited the Amsterdam Museum to see the exhibition *Refresh Amsterdam #2: War & Conflict*. I encountered the same artwork and again, I was struck by this specific image that was part of the installation (figure 3). Here, too, the exhibition text didn't present any details about the person depicted.[2] It seemed time to find out more about this portrait that resonated so strongly in my memory.

The Scourged Back: 1863

The wonders of the web's image algorithms quickly led me to the photograph of 'The Scourged Back' (figure 4),[3] an iconic portrait of a man known by the name of Peter (formerly referred to as Gordon). The story goes that during the spring of 1863, Peter escaped from a plantation in Louisiana or Mississippi and found safety among Union soldiers encamped at Baton Rouge (Masur 2020, 77; Silkenat 2014, 179). This event happened during the American Civil War (1861-1865) when the Union was reconstructed and finally freed from slavery, after a long battle between the divided North and South (Masur 2020, 40-46). Subsequently enlisting in the military – which was only possible after the Lincoln administration signed the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863 – Peter underwent an extensive medical examination as part of this enlistment (Collins 1985, 43-44). His back was heavily mutilated and filled with horrific scars. The photographs taken of his back – of which at least three versions are known – became proof of slavery's brutality and were used by the abolitionists in their efforts to end slavery (Lange 2020, 61-62). A journalist for Henry Ward Beecher's famous *Independent* (1863) wrote:[4]

Figure 4. *The Scourged Back*, attributed to McPherson & Oliver, April 1863, albumen silver print from glass negative. International Center of Photography. Purchase, with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2003 (183.2003).

Figure 5. Unknown, "A Typical Negro", *Harper's Weekly*, July 4th, 1863. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

"The black man with the scarred back is the type of the slave system, and of the society that sustains it. It typifies the pride of race and the contempt of labor. This card-photograph should be multiplied by the hundred thousand, and scattered over the states. It tells the story in a way even Mrs. [Harriet Beecher] Stowe cannot approach: because it tells the story to the eye. If seeing is believing - and it is in the immense majority of cases - seeing this card would be equivalent to believing things of the slave states which Northern men and women would move heaven and earth to abolish!"
('The Scourged Back', 4).

And this is exactly what happened: his portrait was reproduced many times and spread across the country soon after.[5] One of Peter's images was copied by engravers for publication in *Harper's Weekly* and is probably the most well-known reproduced example. There, the image was given the caption 'Gordon, under medical inspection' and was flanked by two other smaller images – that are far less known today – one showing him in rags and the other depicting him in uniform, presenting the readers of the magazine with a success story of the runaway slave: a clear, linear and therefore also reductive narrative starting with captivity, moving towards emancipation and finally achieving freedom in the form of an American Union soldier (figure 5).

The Scourged Back: now

Now, more than 160 years later, this image of Peter – and other photographs of enslavement, emancipation and freedom taken from the 1850s onwards – still provides a powerful imprint of the horrors of slavery and is stored in various registers of our collective memory in various parts of the world. This specific representation, firmly rooted in history, presents us with a multifaceted ever-changing narrative filled with meanings and legacies (Willis 2021, 35). Not only through the reproduction of the original, but first and foremost through the reproduction of the image *through* other images. In this essay, I will analyze three contemporary interpretations of 'The Scourged Back' and discuss the particular ways in which they carry the potential and might even contribute to transforming the traces of trauma, and argue for their relevance as mediators between past and present narratives.

Trauma and suffering in contemporary art

Griselda Pollock, a feminist art historian and cultural theorist, has extensively explored the theme of trauma in art. Her work intersects with psychoanalytic theory, feminism and memory studies, offering a profound understanding of how trauma is worked through and processed in visual culture. Pollock convincingly argues that trauma itself – given its intangible nature – cannot be represented (Pollock 2013, 4 & 20). When looking at works of art that are informed by trauma, we are therefore not dealing with the phenomenon itself, but with its *after-affects*: that what is left behind, the painful residuals of the actual event. They signify spaces in flux that are held or carried by *after-images*: the artworks themselves (Pollock 2013, 27). Despite trauma's irrepresentability, it is in effect something that can be "*approached, moved and trans*form*ed*" (Pollock 2013, 4). The author invites

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us to step away from the dominant discourse of cure and healing that is tied to trauma studies and instead focus on being confronted with 'wounding' without directly seeking resolution (Pollock 2013, 4).

Diametrically opposed to this idea of wounding, is the concept of 'fugitivity', a term popularized by cultural theorist and poet Fred Moten. In his work, Moten aims to go beyond traditional categories of analysis rooted in Western philosophy that fail to consider the black experience, developing new forms of aesthetic inquiry that place the conditions of being black at its core. Similar to Pollock, Moten is highly critical of the discourse on trauma. His critique specifically focuses on blackness as always already damaged and thought of in terms of victimhood. Instead, Moten seeks to understand how black cultural practices embody forms that exceed trauma, even while they might remain marked by it (Moten 2003; Harney & Moten 2013). Fugitivity, then, suggests a mode of being that resists capture, categorization, and commodification, even when born out of the conditions of profound historical trauma (Harney & Moten 2013, 22-43). Moten is particularly interested in practices that move beyond trauma as mere suffering. They can then represent acts of survival, resistance, and the creation of alternative modes of being and knowing.

The works of Victor Sonna, Arthur Jafa and Fabiola Jean-Louis – each incorporating the image of 'The Scourged Back'– shed new light on the aforementioned concepts of wounding and fugitivity and underscore the importance of art and reproduction in engaging with, critiquing, processing and moving beyond the immensely complex legacies of (historical) traumas, in this case slavery.

Wall of Reconciliation

The artwork described in the introduction concerns Victor Sonna's *Wall of Reconciliation* (2020). When approaching the wall – which can be placed in different angles according to the space in which it is presented – the viewer is confronted with multiple (historical) images, that each bear witness to brutality. Sonna presents us with an asynchronous narrative, for instance by pairing the imprint of an etching from the 17th century with a photographic image from two centuries later. Some feel vaguely familiar, while others have a strong resonance in our collective memory. Some are iconic, others are maybe less well-known, of course all depending on who is looking. The materiality of the work, using the silkscreen mesh fabric which is normally used to produce a series of screenprints, underscores the infinite reproducibility and vastness (in time and geographical space) of the traumatic events depicted (Esche 2020, 116).

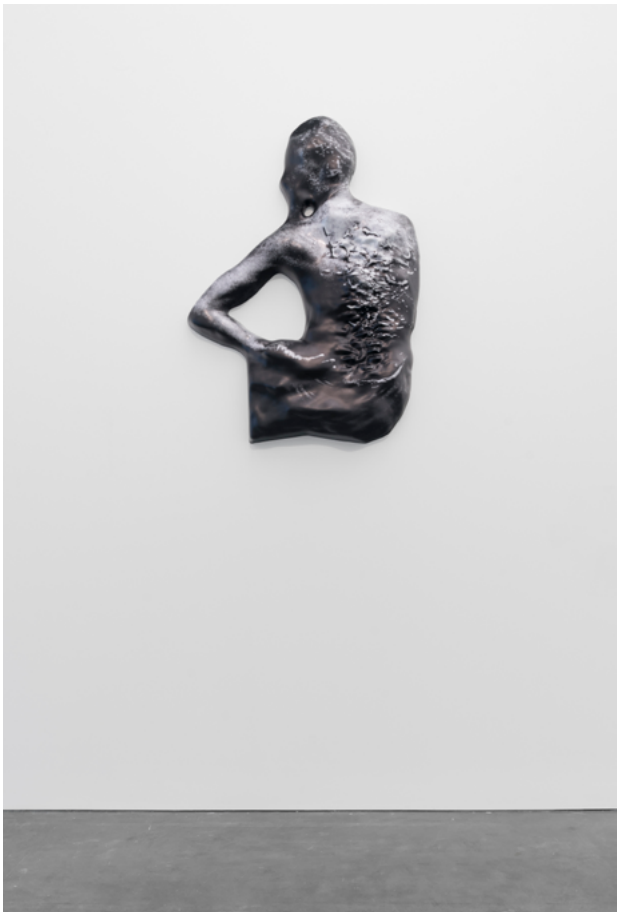

Figure 6. *Ex-Slave Gordon* by Arthur Jafa. 2017. Vacuum-formed plastic, 144.8 × 111.8 × 22.9 cm. Courtesy the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Gift of R.H. Defares.

Most importantly, Sonna's work invites us to make a connection through a physical experience by becoming part of the installation: the images remain abstract without contrast and need a fellow viewer, forming a dark backdrop, on the other side of the wall to become clear. This active experience of the artwork – blurring the boundaries between object and subject and actually establishing a relationship between both – ties in closely with a phenomenon described by Pollock as 'wit(h)nessing', a term coined by the feminist theorist of affect and painter Bracha Ettinger (Pollock 2013, 12-13; Ettinger 2004, 69). The concept goes beyond the traditional notion of witnessing, which implies a detached observation of events. 'Wit(h)nessing', on the contrary, involves an emotional and ethical connection between the witness and the person or the event being witnessed, acknowledging the interconnectedness of human experiences, especially those marked by trauma (Ettinger 2004, 69-94).

By juxtaposing both viewers and inviting them to look at the same image, Sonna stresses our complicity and collective responsibility in the

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making of history. Our history should be looked at headfirst – as something we need to come to terms with, hence also the term 'reconciliation' in the title – after which we can decide how to shape our future together.[6] The artwork strongly advocates for the existence of a multitude of perspectives in the shaping of that future. As argued by Sonna in conversation with head of collections Steven ten Thije: "*If you already know what the other person is supposed to think, there's no room left for dialogue*" (Esche 2020, 232).

Ex-Slave Gordon

While Sonna's *Wall of Reconciliation* offers a critique of the horrors that took place during slavery – by putting emphasis on and confronting us with the reproducibility of the image and placing it within a new constellation – Arthur Jafa's wall-sculpture *Ex-Slave Gordon* (2017) (figure 6) aims to critique those same horrors by focusing on the identity of the sitter instead (the title already giving a clear indication).

The work was part of the American tour of the groundbreaking traveling exhibition *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (2021-2024), which was originally organized in tandem by the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) and the Instituto Tomie Ohtake in Brazil (2018).[7] For the American rendering of the exhibition, Jafa's sculpture was contextualized within the theme 'Enslavements and Emancipations' and shown next to a framed original of 'The Scourged Back'[8] and a large photograph 'Untitled', from the series *Memory Black Maria* (1995) by the Brazilian artist Eustáquio Neves (Lucas 2022). Neves restaged the image of 'The Scourged Back' by writing the word 'Zumbi' over the sitter's back, a direct reference to the enigmatic leader of Quilombo dos Palmares, Brazil's largest community of fugitives from slavery (Pedrosa et al. 2021, 84). Neves seeks to re-signify Peter's scar tissue by reappropriating the image of suffering and focusing on a narrative that celebrates successful resistance. In Jafa's sculpture, we can also see a clear focus on the re-signifying of the wounds. Here, they are not erased, but magnified. In the object text next to the work, we read the following:

> *"The translation of the photographic image into a three-dimensional figure further attests to the subject's humanity; and the larger-than-life scale and palpable raised wounds make him virtually and viscerally present" (Pedrosa et al. 2021).*

Interestingly, nothing is said about the materiality, albeit this clearly being an important element in the reading of the work. The sculpture is not

made of a classic material such as bronze or marble, but consists of vacuum-formed plastic. By using this highly unconventional material, Jafa creates an immense tension between the iconic image and figure behind it, the object and subject. It's almost as if the historical figure is trying to break out of the plastic, to unveil new truths after being muted for so long, reclaiming his individuality in the present.

Madame Beauvoir's Painting

Another recently produced work adding to the collection of works based on the image of 'The Scourged Back', is Fabiola Jean-Louis' *Madame Beauvoir's*

Figure 7. *Madame Beauvoir's Painting* by Fabiola Jean-Louis from the series *Rewriting History*. 2017. Print, 131,1 x 101,2 cm. Collection Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam, coll. nr. 7243-1. © Fabiola Jean-Louis.

Painting (figure 7). The work is currently part of *Our Colonial Inheritance*, the semi-permanent collection display of the Wereldmuseum in Amsterdam. The exhibition focuses on Dutch colonial history in Suriname, Curaçao and Indonesia, but does not limit itself to these countries.

The photograph is part of Jean-Louis' larger series *Rewriting History* in which 17th, 18th and 19th century culture is critiqued and reappropriated. In this particular image, the artist creates a *mise-en-abyme*, suggesting a recurring sequence of events. We see a painted version of the image of Peter seated on his chair, his scars highlighted with splashes of red and white paint and the profile of his face obscured by an all-seeing eye, a symbol of the awareness of a higher being. Seated in front of Peter is a woman – Madame Beauvoir – in a richly decorated dress, the back of which mimics the back of Peter. This time however, the scarring becomes something that embellishes the rich, gold material. The 'wounds' are flanked by two butterflies, a symbol of metamorphosis.

The symbolism applied in this work suggests artists, and that what they produce, carry with them a healing potential and a power to transform history (Benedicty-Kokken 2024, 223). This potential is strengthened by the choice of material for the dress, which is fully made of delicate paper (Jean-Louis 2024). By using the same material on which history is commonly written and reproduced – newspapers and magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* – allows for a reinterpretation of narratives and imagining otherwise, without erasing that same history.

Conclusion

In this essay, three artworks have been analyzed with a specific focus on their dealing with traces of trauma. Each of them serves as a valuable mediator between past and present and does so in distinct ways: Sonna's in emphasizing collectivity, Jafa's in expressing individuality, and Jean-Louis' by using *mise-en-abyme* as a visual trope. Their artworks underscore the importance of reproduction in engaging with, critiquing and processing the immensely complex legacies of (historical) traumas, in this case slavery. They move beyond trauma, not only by showing the wounds but by turning these into powerful acts of survival and resistance. Looking back at our histories – not only through text, but also through images – can be an essential part in moving forward.

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Endnotes

1 In the wall text, a general remark was made that highlighted we are looking at historical representations of slavery, but no individual details were mentioned. Similarly, in the catalogue, no references are made that point out any details about the images.

2 Similar to the former presentation at the Van Abbemuseum, the exhibition text presented a sense of collectivity and connectivity between the images by referring to 'historical pictures of slavery', not mentioning any details about what or who we are looking at.

3 In some instances, this image is referred to in literature and popular culture as 'Whipped Peter' or 'A Map of Slavery'. The captions each express different viewpoints, the first placing emphasis on the identity of the sitter and the pain he must have endured, the second underlining slavery's centrality to the history of the United States and a form of collectively felt pain. See also Masur (2020, 77-79).

4 Henry Ward Beecher was an avid advocate of the abolition of slavery, together with his sister Harriet Beecher Stowe. She received worldwide recognition with her novel Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), which helped fuel the abolitionist cause.

5 The impact these images might have had in influencing popular opinion – not only in the United States, but also in Britain – is mentioned by Kathleen Collins (1985, 43-45). For an analysis of the subtle differences between the images, see Silkenat (2014, 171-172).

6 It is telling that the exhibition catalogue *Victor Sonna, 152* opens with a black page, with a singular anonymous quote in white capital letters, saying: '*Iets moet eerst afbrokkelen voor het opnieuw kan worden opgebouwd*' [translation: '*Something has to crumble first before it can be built anew*']. Similarly, a large quote was placed in the exhibition space of *Refresh Amsterdam #2: War & Conflict*, saying: '*Verzoening kan alleen plaatsvinden als je de werkelijkheid onder ogen komt'* [translation: *'Reconciliation can only happen when you face reality'*].

7 The exhibition was presented in four museums in the United States: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (October 2021-January 2022); National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (April-July 2022); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (December 2022-April 2023) and Dallas Museum of Art (October 2023-January 2024).

8 Here, the third known image of Peter was presented, which also formed the basis for the printed engraving in the article in *Harper's Weekly*.