

A great disgrace of this ongoing moment is the supremacist logic that keeps asserting a readership of Black Life™ as a condition—one to be sanitized, cured, corrected—rather than enveloped in the embrace of a radical ecstatic possibility of Ordinary Black Being™.

It is here where it feels most important to start, combing through the carefully crafted archive that Frida Orupabo has chronicled on her Instagram over eight years of use under the moniker avatar @nemiepeba. Orupabo takes on a complicated role in shaping and stewarding the living stream of Black consciousness that is her online profile: she is savior, caretaker, curator, archivist, witness, analyst, producer, collector, and weaver—and that’s just the beginning. Reaching back to 2013, Orupabo’s nascent scroll shows more color than her later posts, more images of the artist self-documenting or documented by others, as well as filters that frame and awkwardly timestamp the pictures we see. These pictures are windows into a different self, into other chapters of Orupabo’s digital being and becoming, running alongside her meteoric ascendancy to new creative heights away from the screen. These early posts—events of note for the artist that remain distanced from the extractive consumption of the viewer—stand in gentle contrast to the grayscale of images and filmic snippets that come later. Moving from past to present and from present to past we travel through and along these lines, as we witness Orupabo coming into a visual language mostly devoid of color, now a known trademark of her ways of seeing.

To the standards of the algorithmic pattern of platforms like Instagram, the early images themselves are remarkably unpopular: early posts have a smattering of likes, establishing an unusual quietude within the forum they perform for, which heralds memes and magnifies the hyper-visible cyber presence of Black/femme/body/celebrity. It feels like an exercise of Orupabo’s memory, a refusal of, as one caption reads, “Forgetfulness/see/Memory” that, in its density, voraciously takes on a desire to capture and tenderly hold the things she shows that we see right along with her, those gauzy moments we share that risk slipping away from us all with time.<sup>2</sup> The digital traces Orupabo makes, and those who witness them, speak: @anamibia—the handle of artist-in-avatar and cinematographer Arthur Jafa—engages with many of her posts, sustaining a conversation with Orupabo through the intimacy of a digital touch. The ways in which a “like” is a form of mark-making shows how these two artists have long been in dialogue and exchange. The material transmitted in this distributed broadcast between the two takes on different visual and sonic frequencies as the years layer on top of one another. In the early days, we see snippets of the artist’s Black Life™ in its Black Everydayness™: the cooking of plantains framed by the stripes of a crisp

1 July 11, 2015. 55 likes.

2 July 10, 2013. 1 like.

black-and-white shirt;<sup>3</sup> curls of waxy deep purple scribbles that appear to be crayon in choreography across a sheet of paper, a carefully manicured finger making a casual appearance stage left;<sup>4</sup> a photo taken from above showing a miniature yellow keyboard on the brink of melody, a smiling player with lips painted pink looking down at a blue dress and bare knees.<sup>5</sup> These are the traces and documents of the artist's hand, the ways in which she shares parts of herself in full exposure, honest notes that sharply ring out and reverberate, one after the other, in symphony and siren song.

The nonlinearity of Orupabo's posts in a linear Instagram feed is a digital dawn and dawdling that won't stop buffering, an abstracted fissure that expands for our time-travel, pulling us forward and backward at once. This impossibility is made remarkable in its spatiotemporal luminescence, the artist highlighting and drawing from the darkness disparate cultural and social citations to live as neighbors in this newly networked and lit-up architecture the internet. We begin to see things move and reanimate as we tap and shuffle through, and even listen to the images speak as Orupabo permits them: there is Black English rapper and producer Roots Manuva serenading us in his 2001 music video for his song "Witness (1 Hope)"<sup>6</sup> (lyrics: "Taskmaster burst the bionic zit-splitter / Breakneck speed we drown ten pints of bitter..."); further along, the assassination of Japanese politician Inejirō Asanuma on national TV by "17 year-old Otoya Yamaguchi, 1960" in a silent and eternal loop;<sup>7</sup> still later, a slice of the 1975 film *Gray Gardens*, a "documentary by Albert & David Maysles" (close captioned: "[Eddie humming]");<sup>8</sup> and then, via YouTube, "Eartha Kitt on love and compromise" (liked by @j\_\_\_\_\_g\_\_\_\_\_, artist and filmmaker Ja'Tovia Gary) wherein the singer, when asked, "Can anyone live with Eartha Kitt?" responds, "That's not for me to decide, that's for someone who decides to live with me to decide, not for me."<sup>9</sup> A document of a document, a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy, Orupabo makes material what filmmaker, artist, and writer Hito Steyerl calls "the poor image," each post "a lure, a decoy, an index [...] a reminder of its former visual self."<sup>10</sup>

In a glossy era of Facetuned figures and environs that have been color-corrected, artificially enhanced, ultra-white-balanced, and scrubbed clean of flaws or pixelation—rendering our reality a pale disappointment when held up against the vivacity of the genuine fakes we use to re/construct our lives—Orupabo's feed engages the blurry, broken, and over-exposed as a deliberate eye and editorial choice. To best understand whether what we see through the eyes of the artist is true to its original source, we have to search for it. Orupabo does little to help us along in the hunt; the occasional text that sparingly accompanies her posts rarely provides clues to advance our digging. The artist challenges us in our journey to discovery by rendering the legibility of each citation abstract, a recognition that all wayward images are not intended to be made didactic, controlled, legible, contained. As we scroll, we google, two actions done

3 July 2, 2013. 3 likes.

4 July 14, 2013. 3 likes.

5 July 16, 2013. 14 likes.

6 July 29, 2013. 6 likes.

7 August 1, 2013. 2 likes.

8 August 12, 2013. 5 likes.

9 August 23, 2013. 6 likes.

10 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal* no. 10 (November 2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

side by side, slipping between screens and search boxes. In her findings Orupabo leads us to psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's 1977 book *The Restoration of the Self*;<sup>11</sup> writer William Burroughs's contestation of Scientology, *Ali's Smile*, first published in 1971;<sup>12</sup> a section of Sylvia Plath's 1962 poem "Elm," written about her husband Ted Hughes's infidelity and dedicated to poet Ruth Fainlight: "I am terrified by this dark thing That sleeps in me; / All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity."<sup>13</sup> We also stumble across things that we cannot be sure the artist saw herself, or if the posts are reversions of a sight, a "rememory"<sup>14</sup> being re/cast, re/staged, and re/played out in a new frame: a filled crystal glass next to its empty twin;<sup>15</sup> a figure in a patterned red shirt splayed out across a rococo patterned fabric (caption reads: "Avo tapete," Google translate, "Portuguese detected": "grandfather rug");<sup>16</sup> a still from writer and director Ousmane Sembène's 1966 film *Black Girl*, showing a young Black girl recline on white sheets with her hair tightly wound in rollers, the subtitle reading, "Get up, lazy-bones!"<sup>17</sup>

Through her insistent chronicling Orupabo holds space not only for the poor image, but for the lost image, the missing image, the longing image, the dispossessed image, the migrating image. Encrypted images of bodies travel in diaspora away from themselves into the oceanic depths of a salty internet, whose algorithms are designed to recognize and categorize a kind of image that these do not conform to, rendering Orupabo's imagery-mimicry relatively invisible and therefore skirting the fame of hyper-visible circulation. The success of the artist's posts is a strikingly decentralized objective: each image becomes a ghost copy that floats somewhere beyond capture and the Fordist engine of "relatable content." The currency of Orupabo's archive is a glitch within the economy of a social media platform that constantly pushes artists to be influencers and monetize their followings. Orupabo is creating images that are failures to the structure of the internet as it is presently programmed, but great successes to giving us a window into new representations of Black Life™. The artist creates a wandering counterpublic, each of us as we follow along transforming into a digital boulevardier on Orupabo's information superhighway. This is a radical act, an authentic expression of what Black feminist theorist and writer Tina M. Campt calls "Black countergravity"—"def[ying] the physics of anti-blackness that has historically exerted a negating force aimed at expunging Black life" and making carceral the ungoverned loiter and unsanctioned wander of Black thought.<sup>18</sup>

Orupabo also shows us the complex viscosity of the digital as a gooey site, format, and material. What becomes surprising over and over again are the ways in which we are faced with so much *unknowing* and *unlearning* in our scroll of Orupabo's culture-mapping. Tasked with taking on the labor of working toward a better understanding, the frustration that comes with not being able to immediately place what we've seen shifts our expectations around knowledge as it is produced and

11 August 20, 2013. 3 likes.

12 August 27, 2013. 3 likes.

13 August 27, 2013. 2 likes.

14 To call on a term from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

15 October 11, 2013. 3 likes.

16 October 22, 2013. 5 likes.

17 December 10, 2013. 3 likes.

18 Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 21.

mediated online. The artist in her labor online challenges our assumption that we've "seen it all" or—for the things that we have not yet seen—that we might be entitled to know them fully right off the bat, without ever having to work our way toward and into them. The fragmentation of Black Life™, bound up within the constant tele/vision of Black social death and Black physical death, vastly limits the ways in which Blackness is represented in proxy and, by extension, circulated. As Black femmes, our fame drastically transforms on- and offline when we are made finite, rendered in the past tense when pushed to the precarious and extinguishing condition of extinction. Orupabo really exposes the bias of historical visibility as tied to the celebrity of Blackness and, too, Black femmehood, an ultimate systems error, a rejection of the death-drive that the digital compounds so easily. She seizes the privilege to re-code and move beyond an established algorithmic architecture created to elevate necropolitical models of an Afro-pessimistic Blackness and carceral Black Thought™, showing a different side of what it means to be Black and growing up, growing older on the internet, a lifespan that counteracts the fate of our eternal ending, one that we survive to duly discredit. Orupabo's Blackness and her archival wandering as chronicled online defies the trap of entertainment, offering a digital presence that acts as a loving scrapbook and collective digital attic, self-aware and Tumblr-like in its associative endlessness and woven generosity of stored intersections across thought, theory, pedagogy, and praxis. This is an arc of life that, in the profundity of its ordinariness, celebrates the possibility of seizing our right to think and live in fully realized and claimed emancipation and sovereignty. This possibility is a concept made to seem impossible only via the incessant re/broadcast of Black suffering as a driving model to viral excellence. Through her diaristic breaking and recreating of image-making on the screen, Orupabo completes and complicates her creative work offline. The artist shows us that to live and re/negotiate the gorgeousness of existing as an Ordinary Black Being™ requires the constant exercise of assemblage, an opportunity to build and liberate new bodies and new modes of consciousness through a process of cutting, slicing, stitching, combining.