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Digital Africa

DIGITAL ART AND INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY

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DOM: 9.9€ - BEL/LUX: 9.9€ - CH: 14FS - CAN 14.99$ca - D: 10.50E - N CAL/S: 1250cfp - POL/S: 1450cfp

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DIGITAL AFRICA

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Defko Yaw Rek Workshop,
Kër Thiossane, Dakar.

The *Digital Africa* project was designed to support practitioners and activists, encourage the sharing of experiences and knowledge, and contribute to establishing a network among artists, innovators, festivals, institutions ...

Through this publication, as well as a series of events and exhibitions, coupled with workshops and lectures, *Digital Africa* invites you to discover this immediate history, to (re)think the continent's original relationship with innovation and, with your feedback, to question the Western consumerist approach to technology.

Marseille: Digital exhibition Africa
(May 14th-July 5th)
What do a regional war in Congo, the old story of plundered African resources and our new tech toys have in common? How do African artists appropriate digital tools to rethink the idea of border, the poetry of electrical flows, Sufi principles or urban background noise in Nigeria?
Artists and innovators: Ammar Bouras, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Franck Indjendjet Gondjout, Jean Katambayi Mukendi, Marcus Neustetter et Stephen Hobbs, Emeka Ogboh et Haythem Zakaria.

Bastide Saint-Joseph
Town Hall of the 13th and 14th arrondissement - 72 Rue Paul Coxe, 13014 Marseille. < http://planetemergences.org >
Co-production MCD, Planète Émergences
and Marseille-Provence 2013
Art consultants: Karen Dermineur (Dakar/Paris)
and Tegan Bristow (Johannesburg).

Dakar: « Tandem Dakar-Paris » event (June 12th to 15th)
Launch party for MCD # 71 "Digital Africa"
Bionic Orchestra, immersive entertainment at La Biscuiterie.
< http://www.tandem-dakarparis.com >
In partnership with Kër Thiossane (Dakar).

Marseille
Publication Launch party at Pavillon M (June 19th).

Paris
Publication Launch party at the Gaîté Lyrique (June 27th).

Coming in 2014 event in Johannesburg
exhibition in Ile-de-France.

Publishing Partners
Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie
(International Organisation of La Francophonie)
Institut Français (French Institute)

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Digital Africa

is available as a free PDF eBook!

In French and English, from September 15th, 2013.

www.digitalmcd.com

mcd digital culture magazine
PLANÈTE ÉMERGENCES
ORGANISATION INTERNATIONALE DE la francophonie
INSTITUT FRANÇAIS
DAKAR PARIS TANDEM 2013
fondationBlachère
KLUZ l'fabrique culturelle et numérique

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Digital Africa

In 1984, in a book titled *Un regard noir**, Makossa *alias* Blaise N'Djehoya humorously described *the French as seen by the Africans*. Today we invite you to explore digital art in Africa from a different point of view on new media: Africans as seen by Africans. What if innovation, so fawned over in the West, were to be (re)discovered on the African continent? Reappropriating, repurposing, inventions, new applications…

African contemporary art linked to new media remains little known and underrepresented on an international scale. This publication offers a basic topography, from Maghreb to South Africa, spotlighting the actors of African digital art. With its extraordinary but non-exhaustive panorama, this issue reflects the diversity and richness of artistic expression related to the specific cultural, economic and social contexts of the African continent.

All the trends are represented: multimedia installations, machine-artworks, digital photography, video art, *live* audiovisuals, Net art, sound art, poetry readings, typography projects, animated graphics, video games, participative processes, interactive installations, recycling art, coding art, design, geolocation art, "viral street culture", open experiments… The organizations that produce and/or distribute these works are also featured: festivals, resource platforms, websites, blogs, collectives invested in open software and *Open Source,* fablabs, innovation networks…

In 2009, Musiques & Cultures Digitales initiated the *Digital Africa* project with Karen Dermineur, guest editor for this issue, in order to offer a new perspective on new media by revealing African creators who use them and reappropriate them, who simply make art with contemporary tools.

We would like to thank the authors and artists who contributed to this issue: Tegan Bristow of South Africa for her precious help on English-speaking Africa; the International Organisation of La Francophonie, dedicated to promoting cultural and linguistic diversity (especially in Africa), whose support allows us to distribute this publication for free in French and English in digital formats (pdf and e-book); and Institut français, whose editorial insert reports on the Digital Africa series of discussions around digital industries and innovation in Africa, launched in 2012.

This Magazine des Cultures Digitales devoted to *Digital Africa* is a starting point, an invitation to continue this exploration of African digital art. Feel free to join these networks and especially to contact these artists, exhibition curators, festival directors and cultural institutions, laboratories… to produce and distribute them internationally.

Anne-Cécile Worms

* Blaise N'Djehoya and Massaër Diallo, *Un regard noir, Les Français vus par les Africains*, 1984, éditions Autrement.

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BY-NC-ND

Reflection

Theory and practice

DIGITAL ART AND INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY IN AFRICA

BY-NC-ND

NEGOTIATING A GLOBAL CULTURE

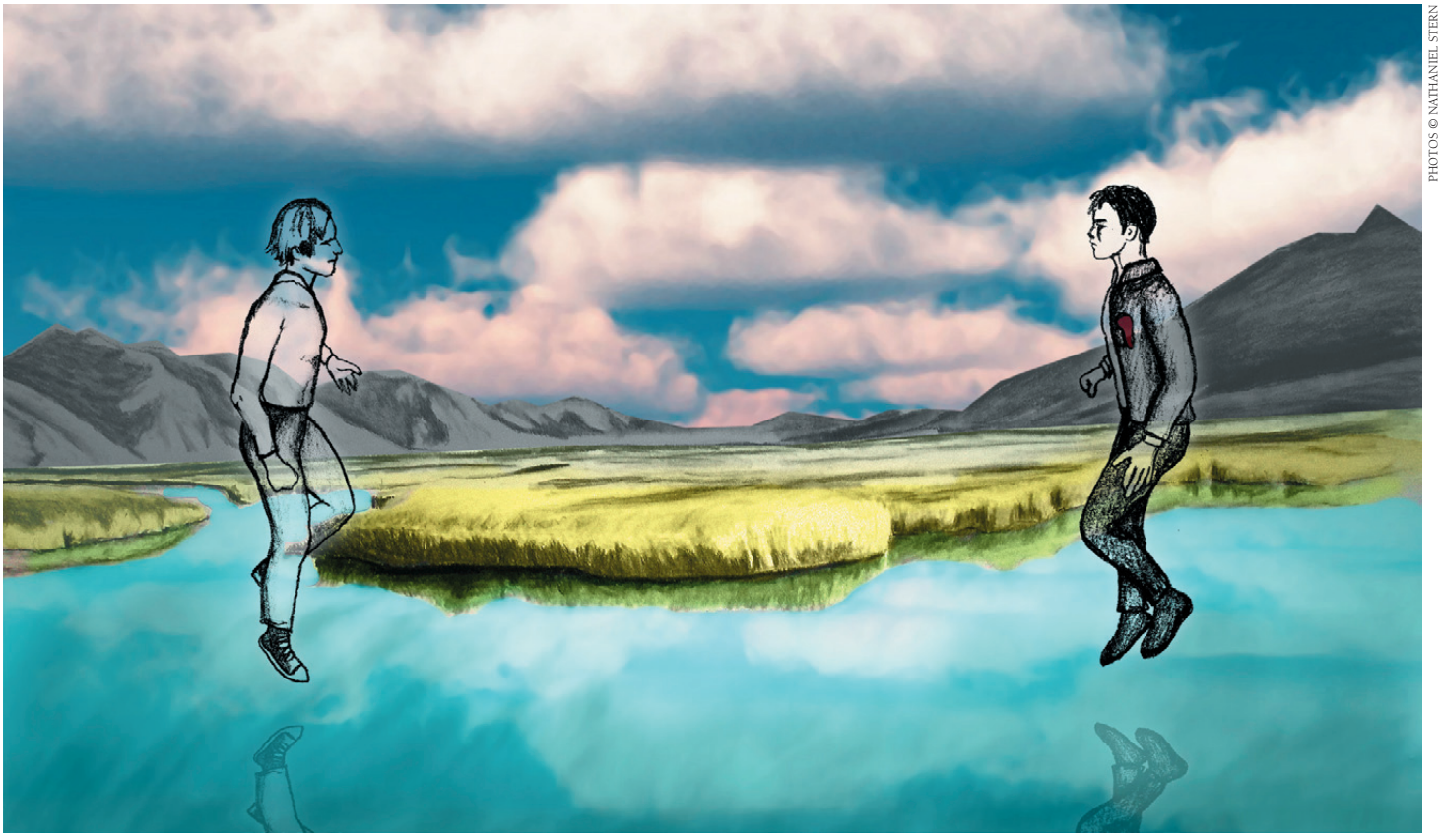
in South African digital art

This paper aligns the Altermodern, a critical cultural theory developed by Nicolas Bourriaud, with specific South African digital artists and establishes a framework for current South African digital art. Specifically, it discusses the roles of Nathaniel Stern and Marcus Neustetter[1] as artists and of Tegan Bristow[2] as a curator/researcher. This paper presents (*or* suggests) an alternative critical platform for future practice for the medium in South Africa and in so doing to contribute to and extend the conversation which has begun in this field.

The Altermodern is an all-encompassing, global artistic theory that accommodates and allows for multiple cultures to co-exist equally. Bourriaud's theory of the Altermodern, which is explored in Bourriaud's main text, *The Radicant* (2010), is based on his observations of the global dynamic and contemporary artistic practice, as located in a world which is perceived as being "de-centred" and dominated by globalisation. Bourriaud's theory is a departure point for artists to move away from postmodernism and postcolonialism. The Altermodern rejects the multicultural models which postmodernism and postcolonialism stood for in favour of a new modernism which allows cultures to be translated equally and regarded as the "other". Bourriaud states that *it is a matter of replacing the question of origin with destination* (pg 40). Through co-operation and discussion, Bourriaud proposes a level of understanding of and translation among cultures.

Altermodern practioners are able to traverse cultures in time and space. They navigate different cultures using translation which enables them to understand and use different signs. Bourriaud describes the movement of the *Radicant* artist as one who is able to develop multiple roots along his journey, the origin of which is no longer regarded as the focal point. Rather, the focal point is the destination. Overall, Bourriaud perceives this 'de-centred' world as allowing for an artist's practice to thrive in a new direction.

The advent of globalisation is the starting point for Bourriaud's theoretical development. He sees it as bringing about, influencing and enabling a very specific change in artistic production, and ways of thinking and of navigating the cultural landscape. For Bourriaud,



PHOTOS © NATHANIEL STERN

Given Time.
Nathaniel Stern.
Ross & Felix,
in *Second Life*.

globalisation has had the same effect on our current context as industrialisation had on modernism. This development is nourished by the intricate telecommunication network that has developed alongside globalisation as a result of capitalism. The ability to commune in several languages and cultures is a dynamic enabled by the Altermodern, namely, the ability to translate and navigate more than one culture.

Given its inherent nature and the way in which it is accessed, the digital medium is closely linked to globalisation and is not necessarily restricted to a specific culture, region or country. The most fundamental aspect of digital art is its interactivity, which is both a physical and a psychological interaction, contrary to contemporary perceptions. According to Christiane Paul, the interactive nature of the medium offers a *distinct form of aesthetics* (*Digital Art*, pg 67) which results in dynamic narratives and journeys, and artworks, which align with Bourriaud's theory. The Altermodern provides a framework for this medium and allows it to develop its own discourse within contemporary culture.

The field of South African digital art is much smaller, contained and exclusive than digital art internationally. The medium has exclusive tendencies, both for those practising and for those viewing, who are able to understand and appreciate the work since a certain level of technical/digital knowledge is required. The need for this knowledge is acknowledged by both Neustetter and Bristow and is often viewed as being problematic for both practitioners.

Neustetter, Stern and Bristow all have a certain mobility which is presented in both their work and practice. Stern was originally based in the United States and moved to Johannesburg in 2001 where he extended his existing knowledge of digital art and began to contribute and develop the discourse surrounding South African digital art. Despite having moved back to the United States, his two locales help Stern to establish a dialogue around the discourse and the medium. Similarly, Neustetter's multicultural connections and extensive international travel on behalf of his practice contribute to the discourse he has created around his work.

Bristow, also based primarily in South Africa, has taught in Japan and is currently travelling extensively through Africa conducting research in relation to her PhD studies. Bristow is affected by both her own movement and the traversing of different cultures and that of ›

Given Time.
Nathaniel Stern.
Interactive
installation.

PHOTO © TEGAN BRISTOW

Joburg Art Fair 2009. Internet Art in the Global South.

PHOTO © CHRISTO DOHERTY

Joburg Art Fair 2009. Mazwi Vezi & Dean Kupe (Wits University).

the artists she curates, while the artists are affected only by their own mobility. These digital practitioners move beyond just an engagement with the digital as a medium, towards what it signifies in relation to the global. This mobility and the traversing of cultures and geographies reflect the global inhabiting which Bourriaud describes.

In Stern's work *Given Time* (2010), he uses the online social networking environment Second Life as a platform and framework for his artwork. In *Second Life*, he positions two avatars who are lovers who *hover in mid-air, almost completely still, gazing into one another's interface* (Stern). The work is exhibited as two large video projections of the avatars on opposite walls, each from the perspective of the other. They then become characters, actors. The viewer is able to enter this space between the lovers, yet the exchange between the avatars is eternal and undisturbed by the viewer who in turn becomes a voyeur of their exchange. The virtual world in which he participates through the avatars is dependent on him. A dialogue is established between the two avatars which is entirely displaced from the physical realm.

Neustetter's engagement with connections is evident in his work *relation IV* (from the exhibition *In Motion*) (2010). This work is a digital print based on performances done with light sensitive software. Software developed by Bristow enables Neustetter to produce a digital light drawing of the performances. Computer vision is used to track light and draw a line from the brightest light to the next brightest, creating a "light drawing". Neustetter realised he was "drawing the space... around things" and that the light source could "connect" and that, ultimately, he was *capturing time and space by looking at the negative space around* objects or movement (Interview). It is as though the line forms connections and a journey is translated and displaced through the software.

Bristow's curation method is a product of her research. This is evident with the online exhibition *Internet Art in the Global South* (2009), which she curated for the *Joburg Art Fair* in 2009. This exhibition[3], which is still accessible, consists of a framing website to provide context for the viewing and links to various internet artworks from the Global South, mainly South America, India, Korea and South Africa. Bristow used the *Upgrade International Network* (a global network of digital arts organisers and artists) as a platform to invite artists to submit artworks, which were selected based on thematic similarities. This networking and method of curating illustrates how the medium allows for a global dialogue to be established. It is one of the first noteworthy collections of Internet art in the Global South and addresses the medium which is often embedded in issues surrounding *marginalisation and first world advances* (Bristow, *Rephrasing Protocol: Internet Art in the Global South*). A collection such as this enables a necessary criticality of the medium from a specific perspective for both the artists and the viewers.

Despite the project being exhibited at a contemporary art event, the internet proved a difficult medium of engagement for the viewing public. This sentiment is echoed in the general gallery system and commercial nature of the South Africa contemporary art scene. Past the *Joburg Art Fair*, the online exhibition has proved to be an interesting resource and reflection of the medium in the Global South. The nature of the medium allows for networks to be formed as the internet is intrinsically based on hyperlinks and hypertext forming connections and transferring information. Bristow endeavours do this on a much broader scale here.

Both artists engage with the formation of narrative through information, and connections are formed between the artworks which transport the viewer on a journey over a specific space and time. Their perception of their global position as "global citizens" (Neustetter, Interview) allows for a specific engagement with concepts such as mapping, displacement, networks, translation and narratives. The same can be said for Bristow's curation and research of the medium.

Bourriaud's theory is not just an indication of artistic practice, but an indication of a global dynamic. It proposes how this new modernity and globalisation might be dealt with by artists. In her article *Deriving Knowledge* (2009), Sarah Smizz observes that *displacement becomes a methodology and view point as opposed to a style* (Smizz). The Altermodern does not necessarily define a specific aesthetic style or "trend" but rather a way of thinking and perception which becomes an aesthetic. This aesthetic is present in the works of both Neustetter, Stern and Bristow's curation method and approach to the medium. Smizz adds that the Al-

termodern allows for new media artists, as many can relate to the *hyper linking/ hypertext as a thought process*, to connect to dynamic narratives and translation, and to definite re-occurring themes in the practitioners work.

While this theory is in many respects accurate and offers insight, it does seem a little romanticised. Bourriaud's theory cannot necessarily be described as "wrong", however there are two problematic areas of the Altermodern. The first is that the theory is all encompassing and the second is that Bourriaud writes the theory from the "centre" about a "de-centred" global dynamic. The all-encompassing, all-inclusive aspects of Bourriaud's theory cause the Altermodern to be somewhat unrealistic. Bourriaud writes a broad theory from the "centre" about a global dynamic which he perceives as existing in a "de-centred" world. Not everyone is able to live in this "de-centred" world which Bourriaud describes; not everyone is able to live the mobile lifestyle that results in the Altermodern and some people are forced to migrate and travel across continents. This mobility is very different to the one Bourriaud describes and from the mobility of the practitioners described.

Perhaps the Altermodern is not applicable or relevant to as many people as Bourriaud perceives. It is necessary when engaging with this theory to consider the problematic aspects of the Altermodern and to perhaps refine its critical adaption when using it as a framework. It does however offer a critical framework for digital art and specifically for practitioners in South Africa, with its multicultural and multilingual society. The digital medium offers artists an alternative means of exploring different cultures, both geographically and historically. The artists discussed here engage with themes which a global dynamic and culture enable. Bourriaud's theory illustrates this and allows for movement within this dynamic and beyond. ■

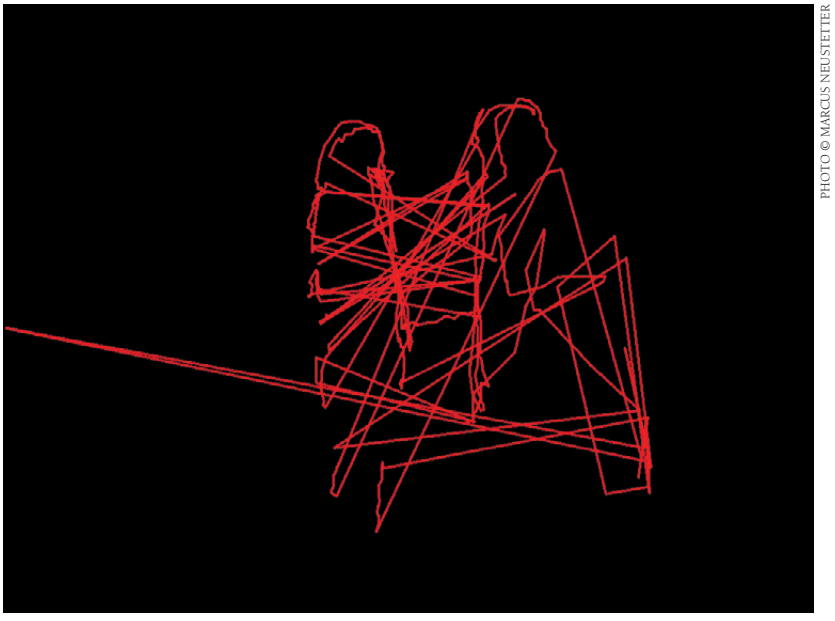


PHOTO © MARCUS NEUSTETTER

Relation IV (detail). Marcus Neustetter. *In Motion* exhibition (2010).

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(1) *Cf.* page on Marcus Neustetter, and his paper, in this publication.
(2) *Cf.* page on Tegan Bristow, and his paper, in this publication.
(3) Infos: www.digitalarts.wits.ac.za/jafnetart/
(4) *Cf.* page on Whitaker in this publication.

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