INTERVIEW WITH TEGAN BRISTOW

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Online
Interviewer: Carly Whitaker
Interviewee: Tegan Bristow

Carly Whitaker: Hi Tegan, thank you very much for joining me and agreeing to be interviewed as part of my research. It's nice to have you here and chat about my topic and your experiences in curating digital art. So, thank you. Could you just set the tone and start up start us off, could you maybe reflect on your professional background, what led you to your interest in digital art, and maybe your initial encounters?

Tegan Bristow: Okay, cool. So where is my background? So, I'm at the Wits University and I've been here for many years, almost 15 years now, but I was interested in digital arts prior to that and that's why I did my masters in it. That led me to Wits. I was interested in it mostly just because there are computers in the world, and we interact with them a lot.

And I was also studying art at the time, and I was very interested about that kind of the intersection of technology and culture and how people were making a creative practice in that way and actually over a network, like how, that makes me sound really old, but in the beginning of my university career and 1st and 2nd year, the internet was really just beginning to take form when we were using the internet quite a lot and I was in a very remote University of Rhodes in Grahamstown and the kind of connectedness was really exciting for me in different ways and I was quite fascinated by the prospects of that.

And then I think I just really fell in love of coding, which led me even further into making work. But yeah, here I am and I'm at Wits and I also founded and directed a festival called Fak'ugesi Festival for many years, which aimed at promoting and developing the digital arts sector, I suppose, or even recognition within the continent and that was up until 2021. Yeah. So, there we go.

CW: Good. Yes, nice and succinct, awesome, thank you. And then just for the sake of any people listening, could you maybe just expand on our working relationship over the past couple of years.

TB: Sure. So, I know you from being a student, so I taught you when you were in third year, from what I remember and you did a course with me on internet art and it was very exciting and very cool. And I don't think I was even teaching your group how to code then. I think we were just kind of using Web 2.0, stuff Facebook and different things to make....

CW: I think we did do... I mean we did code, we did HTML and CSS but there was maybe a little bit of JavaScript.

TB: And that was fun and then you came and did the MA with us as well, didn't you?

CW: Yes.

TB: I can't remember that because it was so long-ago, making space for other things

CW: Yeah, long ago, that file has fallen away.

TB: You came and did your MA with us as well and clearly you fell in love with this subject matter as well, which is really exciting, and it's been exciting to see you develop your career and your continued passion for the space. So, that is how I know you.

CW: Thanks. Yeah, I think something I've tried to grapple with over the past couple of years is how I would describe myself or my role and I don't know if you have felt the same way at any point or do still feel that, but if so, how do you describe your role, what are the descriptors that you add or to explain to people what it is that you do and has this sort of changed and shifted over the years, depending on your contexts?

TB: Yeah, I think definitely it has changed a lot and it changed a lot on people's perception, which is change and grow. And I think people know what digital art is more or have a better perception of it. I mean, I think in the beginning it was such a strange concept to people that you might want to do things like link technology and culture or even think about that. So, we used to use the term arts and digital a lot and I think now I shift, and I use the term culture and technology more because it is so expansive. It's not just, and maybe also because my practice might have changed, I'm doing less making and more organizing and more writing and thinking about the space and curating.

Yeah, so my role has definitely shifted, and I think the language that I use also changes there. But yeah, I mean I've used the words artist, I've used the words digital artist, I've used the words curator, I've used the word organizer. Yeah, and I think one of the issues is that, especially in South Africa and maybe the continent, is that it's such a space that is so unfilled, not because there's people who are not doing it, but it's just not well supported.

So, people like you and I [who] are taking on multiple roles because, you know, if we did want to have an exhibition, we'd probably have to be the person who made it happen because there were no exhibitions or were no festivals that looked at the practice. So, it's about being the kind of personality that's going to pick it up and do something with it. So it's also about filling multiple roles at the same time and not having the luxury, unfortunately, of just doing one.

CW: Yeah. Yeah, I can definitely identify with that as well. Yeah. And then in terms of terminology of digital art, so over the years, the way in which we describe it, you even said you've shifted from digital art or art and digital to culture and technology. So, how do you kind of elaborate, you explained a little bit about it now, but maybe just expand on how you position yourself within the existing categories and terminology, whether it's digital art, new media, net art or contemporary or any of the post-arts that exist, do you feel that also shifts and changes, depending on the context or your role or even your audience?

TB: Yeah. I don't think I've ever called myself an internet artist actually because I didn't really ever practice that much within that space. So, while I delved in it, it wasn't a main space for me, I suppose I called myself a digital artist for a long time. But then there was often sort of growth of especially digital design, digital graphic design on the continent meant that people often reading that as designer digital artist, which some people do refer to themselves like that.

And so, then I kind of brought an interactive digital art, knowing that making that distinction between making things that you can interact with and click and do things with just a static format. Yeah, I think, you know, digital art has different meanings for different people. I think once, you know, when you look at it from the lens of an animator, they call themselves digital

artist, but they're animators, they're not making critical interrogative practices at all. They are just making cool stories, sometimes. Same goes with gaming, you're not necessarily making a game that's going to critique society or capitalism or something that. So, that kind of interrogative aspect, you know, is different.

So, I suppose it just depends. So, then I think I started throwing words in like critical interrogative, those kinds of words so that it would be more staying within the art practice rather than in the kind of entertainment practice. So, making that deviation, but I think now, yeah, it just depends who you're talking to. So, we use the word that makes sense to the audience that you're currently engaging, because some people understand that digital art to be critical practice within the digital framework and others think it's animation, so it depends on who you're talking to, really. Yeah.

CW: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, I agree. I think sometimes, you know, you can't just say artist because then they assume certain things and then so many assumptions happen with so many different descriptors that you use.

As a curator, you've worked with a bunch of different digital mediums and in different contexts. What do you think the digital mediums specifically affords or requires of a curator in that context? Whether it's skills, methodologies, strategies or even positionings.

TB: Yeah, it's very interesting. Right? So, I mean it's even really hard to find curators who are working in the digital space. If you look into the world, there are very few people, I think I know three or four people that functionally act as digital art or art and technology curators within a frame of practice.

And I think you know, of the people that I know, I think a kind of broad understanding of the histories of that space is really significant, so knowing the context in which that work is being made. So, it's not like something comes along and you're thinking it's brand new, meanwhile it's actually been done a lot of times. So, understanding the histories and contexts and complexities of what has happened and where it can potentially go is really important.

I think that question of criticality is significant. And I think as a curator, you always ask different kinds of questions of different spaces, or you have a particular agenda. So, I think it's important that that agenda, for whatever curatorial work you're doing, is well aligned to what it is that you're doing. So, for instance, with The Festival, the agenda was very much a development agenda.

So, as much as I tried, it was really hard to do, really deeply fascinating critical practice work because the audience just wasn't that audience at all, and it was also about kind of bringing new people into the space. So, it was kind of generalizing and opening it more and making it available rather than asking really pertinent questions, which I think can happen in the European context much easier.

Do you know what I mean? There's a history of critical practice. You know, you can have questions around very particular questions on AI that look at the critique of capitalism for instance, that's not something that you can be here, because they're so far away from the critique of capitalism in an art practice that's being accessed by many people.

So, rather you're looking at more generalized questions and I think relating them to the context in which you're working. So for me, you know, all the way through from the work that I did with

Goodman Gallery and Post African Futures, it was very much about saying: what are the conversations happening on the continent now amongst artists and in their regional and local critique of the space.

So, what does technology mean for them versus you know, you're going to do a bio art piece in Johannesburg when your biggest issues are just basic access to power and the question of access to power has everything to do with systems and failures and other things, you know what I mean? So, that's what the artists are talking about.

Not, you know whether you can make bio plastics because they freaking can, because it's really not a priority. So, I think that's really important, the context in which you're working, the agenda in which you trying to engage as a curator and how that then meets serving the audience. And I think, I don't know if it's just me, but there's always an educational aspect, I suppose, to curating. There's always an informant, there's an informative and conversational thing.

So, when you educate to inform and you converse around topics and things and I think that's what you need to be doing. So, you need to find ways to be able to do that, especially here where you can't just present something at people and they will magically be like oh..

So, there is about kind of engaging that, but I think the space is grown and there's opportunities for different kinds of practice now.

I think one of the other things, well for me anyway, I get asked a lot to look at new stuff. This is a notion that because I'm in the technology space, I just magically know about NLP. So, then I'll be spending some time learning up what is national language processing and how does that affect work that we do? So, now for instance, doing a project with Google and AI and NLP and you having to work with, because often you're working with artists who may never have encountered that before, but their practices very much around language. So, how do you work with them to bridge them into the questions of natural language processing and AIs, based on their practice, which might be more a sci-fi orientated or around, you know, other ways of thinking about language, there's definitely a bridge.

So, you're often almost a mediator in that way, between a form of technology and ideas that artists might be working with. So yeah, I think technological ability, the ability to bypass certain ways of thinking about technology and making that easier, I think it's really important, especially within the digital art space. And then I think, you know when you're looking at installation, you kind of need to know what your scope is. So, you know, this is very contextual. So, doing a digital installation with ZKM where the resources are that much better, you would probably work with your artists to really build out the framework of how they present and work with them. But if you are in Johannesburg, with smaller budget and access to resources, you're going to try and find a different way to do that work. Yeah. So, I think there's a lot of technical grappling as well that happens. And yeah.

CW: And then what do you think South Africa specifically demands or requires of a curator or even a digital artist practicing here?

TB: I don't think South Africa demands anything. I think South Africans are mostly oblivious, but then, and also the scene here. But I think you mean what are the .....

CW: Yeah, what it affords, yeah. What does it allow for?

TB: Yeah. I think there's definitely a lot of opportunity, it's a huge wide open space and I think there's a lot of interest, especially in the international community on people who are practicing in digital from the continent. I think it's just really rare. So, the opportunities are enormous. But I think one of the issues there is that if you're talking about a kind of European American audience with African work, is that you're, the same thing I was saying before, there's certain subject matter that are dealt with and considered like genre and normal within some context, which have no relevance at all in South Africa.

So, there might be a South African artist, digital artist, who's dealing with something that where a kind of digital art curator from Europe looks at it, doesn't understand how it fits into their work, their genre, because it's not doing what digital art does in Europe or America is doing different things. And I think that's a big challenge for African artists because it doesn't always align and I think there's also a thing of quality, so because the artists don't get support at all, you know, the time spent the technological support that the quality of work often isn't at the level of expectations, just because of access to resources, software, hardware, time.

So, it's very difficult to survive. So, you're not building a complex robotic system as an artist in South Africa because you a) don't have the time or the access to that knowledge base or the stuff. So, I think that's really difficult, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it's, I think one of the things that I've been working really hard and it doesn't necessarily mean that the work in South Africa is not important and interesting and I think that drawing that line is really important, a) for your artists and for the international audiences.

So, a lot of work that I do has been about negotiating that and saying this is significant for these reasons. So, you spend a lot of time writing and positioning stuff, saying this is significant here for this reason, because of this and this work is excellent because it does this or it's valid and it's interesting.

I mean I think there's still no market really for digital arts on the continent. I don't think people really know how to buy it or engage it or do it, it's expensive and it has different kinds of ways of buying it. So, I mean, yeah.

It’s a complicated space. Yeah. I mean, I think there's one video art collector in the country and that's just video art.

CW: Yeah. And I'm sure you can only have so many, do you know what I mean? Well, maybe not, who knows

But I suppose this comes back to two of my next questions in terms of who the audience is. And then, I don't know if you can speak a little bit too that in terms of, I think it differs depending on your context that you're working in, but who would your audience be? And then funding of artists and of curatorial projects within this space and how artists are meant to manage, having these roles, and taking these rolls on as well.

TB: So, the audience in South Africa?

CW: Yeah. Yeah. Who would they be for you in the context you've described?

TB: I think there's a lot more. So, the audience is quite young, I'd say. So, we're not looking at a mature audience at all. Not looking at an old fine art audience who don't really understand the space at all, or don't really understand its value. So, you're really looking at people who are

engaging in digital practice on a daily basis and find it interesting and relevant to their lives in that way.

So, I think when you're looking at a target audience, you're looking at quite a young target audience. I think that audience has grown in the last few years. So I've had the privilege of seeing it grow, which is really exciting, and I mean it's terrible that it's taken 10 years, but you are, so for instance, there's a gaming culture, but they aren't necessarily just looking at gaming, they're also looking at critical digital art, you know, they're interested in slightly off the wall alternative things, which generally falls more in the art space. You've got younger art audiences who are more comfortable with digital, essentially.

So, you've got people who are digital who are interested in that, you've got younger art audiences who are more comfortable with digital and wanting to engage that. And I think it's a long way off, I don't think there's a heavy standing audience just yet. But again, it's a kind of slow edging and I think a focus on the young audience would really help, because that audience then will mature with you and then also other audiences will come in.

I think there's a lot of regional and international interest in local work, especially in particular kinds of topics, I think there's a lot of, obviously in the last few years, a look to the south from the north, so you're also looking at those audiences and what they're finding interesting and significant, which is also changing. I think there's a lot more awareness of difference following Covid, to be frank, because a lot of people went online for that and I think we're suddenly kind of be like oh, Brazil exists, there are people there!

So, there is that notion that people are thinking outside of their box a little bit more because they're spending more time online and yeah, I think there's a lot of work around particular kinds of topics. So, in the funding frame, kind of funny that I get, you know, I do a lot of developmental work, if you looking at developing certain kinds of topics or certain kinds of ideas or bringing things into the public domain, there's funding for that. Obviously, all the funding is still largely international, so Swiss Pro Helvetia, Goethe good. So, it's very much still supported by the international cultural organizations. But I think there's because of the 4IR, and from what I know of the kind of pressure on government at the moment to respond to digital questions. The National Arts Council is slowly beginning to acknowledge digital work and I think the NFVF, the National Film and Video Foundation, has for actually much longer, but more because with gaming VR and animation because being an extension of the film industry, so not so much straight up arts practice. Yeah.

CW: And then, just to get a sense of your practice, how would you describe your practice as a curator and do you often have a specific intention for the type of project that you work on?

TB: Gosh I do. I mean, I'm thinking back, the last two years I've just felt I've just been doing grant admin. So, I don't know if you could call grant administration a practice. I don't think you can, but yeah.

CW: It's definitely a skill.

TB: Yeah, definitely, I think that, as I was saying before this, there's a kind of I think Fak'ugesi, and some of the other things, there's always been an agenda for me and one of those agendas are about kind of opening up the position on the intersection of culture and technology.

So, what are the, a) how do you get people behind it through their own language? So, there's acknowledgment of oh yeah, this is okay, versus technologies, their cultures there. So, for me, it's been a lot of kind of making those two worlds meet or talking about how those two worlds meet with a local audience.

That's been a primary objective for me and then I think, from an international perspective, I've always, I think the value and the difference of African work has always been a significant question, positioning it in a uniqueness rather than less, but just differently positioned.

CW: Yeah. And then do you have a typical process that you follow? I know The Festival is a unique curatorial project. So, in that sense, or just in other projects that you work on, have worked on in the past?

TB: Like a conceptual process?

CW: Yeah.

TB: Yeah. I always start with the question, I suppose in a way, what is the thing that needs to be interrogated the most? What are the questions that need to come out? So, if I look at the Festival as a focus, there's this you know, there's AfroTech, right? So, it is very much about the kind of youth engagement with technology and holding technology in your hands and what you can do with it.

I think some of the other things, it also just depends on what's happening in the country at the moment. So, The Festival, because it was always quite cross-national and regional, it was always about trying to hold some of that stuff. So, for instance, Afro source-code thing was very much about the kind of vernacular algorithms, stuff which is a very personal passion of mind.

So, trying to find the relationships between mathematical thinking, philosophies of technology and building them into known cultural practices on the continent and finding that link. Then I suppose the other stuff is, again one of the kinds of agendas, I think ownership, for me, was one of the big things that I've been doing now.

So, I've been less curatorial work and a lot of development work. So, how do you get people to get their work to market for instance and how does that happen? What is the infrastructure that supports it? It's all well and good supporting artists endlessly, but if there's no gallery to support the artists, what's the point? So, it's really about looking at that, how are African artists, digital artists, in all their capacities, able to monetize and think about the value, their value in different ways. Yeah. So, it depends on if there's an agenda. Yeah.

CW: Okay. And then, you know, so once you've got that idea of the direction that you want to go in, how do you decide which artists that you want to work with and how they align with that, or don't?

TB: I suppose it often it means that are they practicing within that frame. So, do they have a critical practice or creative practice that speaks to some of that stuff? I mean often it's very; it goes both ways. So, there will be acknowledgement of artists who are out there and knowing while I'm developing the theme simultaneously that they can be part of that in different kinds of ways.

I mean, it also depends on what program we're running because you can also do open calls and ask people to respond to that and they'll put forward work, and that for me is most successful. I

think artists are working across diverse spaces all the time. So, an open call is actually quite nice because then they'll be, oh yeah, this resonates with what I'm doing, and I'll shift it slightly this way. I think there's also for me, there's been a development thing, so it's often about, also through open calls, but in our agenda with the festival is about supporting young artists.

So, looking for people who are just beginning to engage their practice, they might not have an established practice yet. And how do we bring them in for residency or a showcase or something that helps them, gives them some support and a little bit of a boost. Yeah.

CW: Yeah. And then once the project or, I'm referring to it as a project quite loosely here, but how do you approach documenting or engaging with it once it is complete, in a way.

TB: Yeah, I think documentation is really, really vital and important. I find small video documentaries are really helpful. I mean, that can live in The Festival, we always did that, just as a kind of sum-up of the core themes, but then we also output a kind of partner report. So, this is what happened, this is the subject that was spoken about, this is the theme, which we make then publicly available so that people can access them.

I suppose that I also write quite a lot, so I do a fair amount of academic publishing around the different stuff that I do. Yeah, I make a little websites, document it, I mean I think now with The Festival it is quite nice, Google Arts and Culture will build an archive of that stuff, so we've got trillions and trillions of Google hard drive space of photographs that we've taken. So, we always take photographs, always shoot videos, always keep everything, all this stuff.

So, now we're building quite a nice archive of that for Google Arts and Culture, which is a nice kind of public space for that kind of stuff. Yeah, because that stuff costs money, if you're going to make it public, you have to then serve it and pay for website hosting and do all of that stuff and often it's quite short-lived. So, if you want to build out an archive, you have to plan for that. Yeah.

CW: Definitely. And then, you know, you said you haven't really practiced that much as an artist recently, but that's how you started I think and entered into this space. How do you feel that has influenced your curatorial work?

TB: Yeah, I think, yeah, it's weird. I suppose quite a lot. I mean I'm a person and I feed through myself, I can't separate myself out from who I am, but I mean, in a way it's everything. I think I'm a curator by mistake, I'm not an intentional curator.

CW: The sheer will to survive.

TB: The sheer will just to see things manifest in the world. And so I mean, I think with my PhD research is when I really started curating the most, so with the Goodman Gallery I'm actually putting together a PhD show, which is actually a research response. I'm asking a lot of artists to respond to a very particular question and then building an expression around that, and that was very exciting.

And that has kind of gone on in my practice. So, with The Festival, it's there's a question and then we manifest that question and look for responses or positions around that. So, I suppose in a lot of ways, the research and the art making are more closely linked. Do you see what I mean? So, for instance, with vernacular algorithms, I'm kind of an artist but I'm a researcher in that I'm not making so the coded work.

I mean it's informative because I know what the extent is. So often, when I'm mentoring a young artist, I'll be like, you can do more. I know this because I have done more. You know what I mean? You don't have to stop here; you can go much further with this. So, I think knowing what's possible from a kind of making perspective is helpful. Yeah.

CW: Yeah. You touched earlier on how, you know, with COVID, we have been online a whole lot more and are aware of a whole lot more different contexts and maybe have exposure to them. But how do you think the COVID-19 and the different lockdowns has had an impact on your practice as a curator?

TB: Yeah, I mean, we went online quite a lot and we also, I mean in 2020 we ran an online bootcamp for curators, because we just, you know, it's not so much with being online, but running The Festival, I think you can be a curator and then you can be a festival director and the festival director actually relies on curators. Right?

So, you rely on people to say: bring me and organize for me people doing different kinds of stuff and it doesn't exist on the continent. There's just very few people working in that space and doing that kind of work. I mean, I think with The Festival there's a very specific kind of practice. I mean, it wasn't so much what you're doing, which is the internet art, it was animation or other kinds of VR/AR critical practices.

But I couldn't just be like, hey, so-and-so in Ghana, give me your best artist, I just can't do that. So, we ran an online program in 2020. That was a kind of boot camp for curators. And it was really successful and really interesting, because a lot of the curators are also practitioners, but then they're sort of acting as curators.

But then they were curators who didn't even think of themselves, people who didn't even think of themselves as curators, who very successfully became curators, you know what I mean? Who were actually just theatre managers. You know what I mean, and they suddenly created these amazing collections of online work, and that opened up worlds for them, like ... and then we also did a project with Pop Art where we made collaborative work.

So, the Virtual Blackout project, which is a project by linking theatre practitioners with digital artists online and virtual amount of time and having them make stuff in that space, was really dynamic and really interesting. And all those people benefited so much, they had never actually done that before. So, I think we were forced to make things really quickly in a very dispersed way, you could literally have people on the other side of the world and engaging.

And then the other thing that was interesting that happened is that for The Festival we got a whole new audience that we never, we had but we didn't know that we had, so people were watching from the outside, like oh, this is really interesting, but were never able to attend. So, they could never be there in person. And the minute we went online, we had a huge audience that was always there but never attend essentially.

So, then we just realized that the value of keeping things online continuously, actually going forward, you know, it's a kind of resourcing thing, you're either doing something online or you weren't. So, it's about trying to find that middle ground where people can attend and interact with each other in different ways. Yeah.

CW: What are some of the mechanisms or ways of working or operating or curating that you picked up during this time that you feel you will still continue to implement?

TB: I think that connecting of really diverse people, even now, I mean we're working with a Nigerian artist in New York, who's working with the Nigerian linguists and then a game designer in Johannesburg, you know, and then they kind of work together to develop proposals. So, the opportunity is there, you know what I mean? And I think just keeping that digital thread all the way through so you can actually co-curate in ways that we haven't been able to co-curate before. We never, had an opportunity, it was always there I suppose, but we just never acted on it because it's always about trying to be in the space and with people around you, like these new audiences.

And then I suppose making diverse audience interactions, keeping that quite online and offline, so you're not only just ever doing one, you're doing multiple, which is a lot more work but..

CW: Yeah, a lot more work. Yeah.

I mean that digital thread that you've just described speaks a lot to a network way of working and network thinking. How do you feel, how much does this impact the way you work? Having these networks, having these correspondence with people and different networks and different conversations as well. Do you think it shifts and changes as well?

TB: I think for us it's really given us a lot more visibility. I think also the opportunity that other people are willing to do that as well. There's really a lot more opportunity for local artists and local people like me to be running international programs from bad Wi-Fi at Wits, do you know what I mean, that's...

CW: Your picture is crystal clear!

TB: You know, so I think that there's a lot more visibility and a lot more opportunity and I think there's a kind of recognition, and maybe even a confidence, of local practice. I think there's always this notion that we're on the other south, the most southern point of the world and connecting with anyone was always like they had to have money, or just work really hard. So, if you're going to Europe to do a project or you know, people came here and then you spend all your time trying to get them not to be mugged.

But I think the yeah, there's a lot more confidence to be like, yeah, I can do this, I'm equally skilled as other people as well. So, that visibility has helped with that as well, I think. Visibility in practice, there's also visibility in our ability to be able to function and do and engage internationally that I don't think we've had before.

CW: Yeah, that's interesting. And do you feel like within these networks, as they shift and change there's reciprocity? Like the way in which the network is developing is reciprocated back?

TB: Yeah. You know, one thing I've learned about life and general practice is things take time and I think if we keep at it and keep that focus and confidence and attention. It will, yeah, it does.

CW: Can you think of an example where that reciprocity is quite visible for you? Maybe within your own practice? Not necessarily, maybe within Fak'ugesi or either from Fak'ugesi.

TB: Well, I mean this is also why I think it's time, because I think in the back of my mind, I was thinking of something. So, for instance, Ars Electronica, right? You know, the big arts festival. For years they have been calling me and being like hey, can you please send these

recommendations for artists from Africa, blah, blah blah? And then I do, and then none of them are selected, and then they asked me again. And then I do and then none of them are selected, and then I do and then none are selected.

And then they asked me again and I said: No, I'm not tipping you any more artists because you never select them. And it's because you don't understand them, you don't understand what they're doing. So, you can't consider them, it's impossible for you. So no, until you functionally change your mind, I'm not helping you anymore – I'm done. And they we're like, oh, and I'm like, yeah, oh!

And I think in a way, it's about that as well. That's why I'm saying, it's like a confidence thing to say actually, the reciprocity is also about drawing and having boundaries and saying: you want to work with us, but do you know what it means to work with us? And I did the same with The Festival, like with all my funding for The Festival's international and there was a point where I was like, I don't want a French artist, I don't want to bring your lousy French artists to come and sit here and be patronizing with my artists. I'm not freaking interested, I want to support this money with your money, with your French money, support this amount of South African artists and your French artist can come and maybe do a workshop, but that's it. I'm not just paying for a French artist.

So, it's also about saying, you know it's also the relationship stuff is about being quite boundaried and stuff and I think that's needed, and I think that you can't have reciprocity without that, you can't just expect people to naturally just kind of flow into your process there on the other side of the world. They're unlikely to think through what it is that they're doing. Some people will potentially, more than others, but then, so you also have to guide people in how to work with you and what your needs are. Otherwise, because they don't always know, you know, and you've also got to be okay with that, being like oh well.

But sometimes they don't listen. I mean there was a time when we worked with some developers from Germany and they wanted to do something and we were like, no, we have two mechatronic engineers who are joining this project, we don't need to come and teach anyone about Arduino, it's really okay. And they were like no, no, no, we did this before in some other remote location, we know what we're doing and we were like, yeah, but we just told you we've got two mechatronic engineers who are working on the project and you don't need to come and teach us how to work on Arduino. And then they came and then they had Arduino and people were like, who are these guys? And they were like, oh, so, you guys know what you're doing? And we're like yes, we said so. Why were you not listening?

So, I think that's also you know, being trying, that's really important to make sure that the reciprocity is real, because I think that's one of the other things that what you might have interaction, but is it the kind of interaction that's beneficial or is going to shift anything? Yeah.

CW: And I suppose in your case specifically, with Fak'ugesi the reciprocity and the funding, requirements can often be kind of related in a way, you know, in terms of what is required for the funding, so that you know what you're explaining is a nuanced balance between the two in a way.

TB: Yeah, exactly, and I think methods are working and how you interact, I mean, that's something that I'm really having an issue with at the moment with one of my projects, where there's very little consideration for the needs of the artists here, you know what I mean? Time, access, there's just an assumption that it's the same as Europe and that everybody has their

professional artists, you can just chill because you've got huge support, and you've got access to electricity, and so it's also about you kind of have to teach people to be like no, you need to act faster and you need to be more clear otherwise you're just wasting everybody's time. Yeah.

CW: Definitely.

TB: That's probably not the, the answer that you wanted, but for me that's what that is. Yeah.

CW: Yeah. No, no, I think yeah, it expands on it in a different way that often isn't something that a lot of curators have to consider in a way, because not a lot of them receive the significant funding that Fak'ugesi has had to, in a way, you know. So, I think in that context, it's really interesting.

I was originally going to ask you this next question in relation to Fak'ugesi, but I feel like you've spoken a lot about it, because I know your level of involvement with it. I can understand a lot of the way in which you're answering some of these questions, is rooted in your experience with Fak'ugesi, but you touched on Post-African Futures, the exhibition you did in your PhD, a little bit earlier, at Goodman. So, you might have to think going back a couple of years to this. But could you maybe share some of your experiences for how you came about it, why you initiated it?

You've spoken briefly about how location influences the decisions that you make and what it was like then for that specific exhibition and how that impacted your network and the way in which the network impacted it as well.

TB: Yeah, it was interesting. So, I mean Post-African Futures, the reason I started, it was very, it was built on the PhD, right? So, the PhD was kind of responding to cultures of technology in Africa. And I suppose it's also that thing of what is African digital art versus what is other digital arts?

So, you know, if I was going to write a Textbook, so that's what the premise was, very basically. If I was going to write a Textbook for culture and technology or Digital art in Africa, what would that read like, you know what I mean? And if you go and look at other ones, you'll see that there's a trajectory.

There's a trajectory of practice that goes with the Industrial Revolution, modernity... Do you know what I mean? There's a flow of how things happened there. And one of the things that was really clear is that the people that I was working with, students and things, were not working with technology in the same way that students working with technology in Europe, because that a) access was different; b) the cultural associations and histories with those technologies were completely different. So that, I suppose, was the premise, I was actually writing that down and saying actually this is what it is.

So, there's a kind of regionality about that, and also, I mean it became very political, very fast. And it also looked a lot at philosophies of technology, you know, because the Western European technology format is highly material, capitalistic.

So, within a material format, when you think about technology. So, then I started exploring like in Africa, where this technology sits and how does it work? And you know, there's phases, there's pre-colonial, there's colonial and post-colonial. In pre-colonial, there was a technology culture, technology culture existed, but it didn't fall within the same philosophical framework as the material.

So, it was more egalitarian than material, right? So, there's a kind of saying: if technology would to, if modernism and capitalist material engagements of technology had never happened, what would the history of technology for Africa look? And it's fundamentally different, but also what it does is it changes the philosophical perception of how we should be interacting with technology, what we should be doing with it and why.

So, that was my main premise. So, I think I've done some early research and I sort of started writing this premise and I'd been interviewing a lot of people about it because I felt people practicing in a cultural way with technology in Africa, were able to answer that question as well, and it shouldn't just come from me. And I think at the time, and I think I've kind of outgrown that now, but I think at the time I was very concerned that I was a white South African talking about the continent, you know what I mean, in an informed way, and I didn't feel I had the kind of right to do that for whatever reason.

And even though, and I think I kind of got over that, I felt I needed to consult. And because there were no books, there were no resources, history of art in Africa, to then refer to, I kind of felt these artists were my resource. So, how they were culturally engaging in thinking and philosophizing about their relationship with technology, would be born on their history and experience of it, because we are in the world. So, it's pretty philosophical. So, then I interviewed a lot of people and then following the interviews, I sent them a premise. I said this is my premise and I'm calling the premise Post-African Futures. And you know, the other thing was that everybody was like, oh, Afro-Futurism! And I was like, no, it's not this.

And then I looked a lot of Afro-Futurism, and I was like yeah, definitely not this, we're not talking about Afro-Futurism because Afro-Futurism does very particular things, which I don't think is what I'm talking about here. So, I suppose Post-African Futurism is a kind of naive word for trying to make that distinction. So, then I sent everybody the premise and I had them respond to it, so it was almost an invitation. It said I'd like to invite you to exhibit with me, here is my premise, I'd like you to respond. And then everybody made, I was very lucky to work with the Goodman Gallery, because they paid for everything. So, I worked with the Goodman Gallery to basically say these are the artists I'd like to work with, they had some artists in their stable that they'd been working. So, Nolan Dennis, Kapwani Kiwanga, who else, some of the people. And then I brought over my own list. So, we worked with them and they wanted to work with artists that were commercially viable, but we did, you know, work with some younger artists who work with Tabita [Rezaire], at the time she was really new to the space. And then we sent out invitations, we asked people to respond and they kind of developed, worked or had worked or wanted to make new work, depending on what it was, so there was like lots and lots of interaction and discussion and then we made the work.

And then also did a performance because I think in Kenya, so one of the things that we found, because we wanted to make it as Pan-African as possible, it was really hard because they just weren't that many artists working in digital at the time. So, in Kenya, I've done a lot of research in Kenya and a lot of the work is narrative orientated, so science fiction writing and music. So, we kind of worked with people that. So, we worked with writers, and we worked with Blinky Bill and then, what are they called?

And the brother moves on. So there was like, we went and built almost a concert section that talked to that narrative, that stuff in the music scene, rather than just the thing. Yeah, so, like I said, it was very led by research but also led by a response. So, it was an invitational response, basically. Yeah.

CW: Interesting. Yeah, I think the way in which your network evolves and as you know, from your research is also quite interesting in a way as well. So, this question is more about understanding how Floating Reverie, for example, and the different people I'm interviewing and the different projects they've been involved in that I'm working on, how that has had an impact on network.

So, you participated in Floating Reverie in 2014, if you can believe that? It's so long ago, in the first year that it started. Can you speak a bit about your experience, if you can remember back during your residency and maybe the impact that that had at the time on your practice and your network?

TB: I think I remember being so busy at that time, but it was actually, it was like a forced break to make work. You know what I mean? I just wasn't making work anymore. So, it was a kind of, for me, it was like a dedicated time to make work, like I had to force myself to do that. It was on my task list because it was also like that very contained time, so it is quite hard. It was also like because I collaborated with João Orecchia and it was just fun for us to collaborate. That's about it though. I mean I don't feel, I didn't really connect with anyone else in Floating Reverie after that, or yeah.

CW: I think what's interesting for me is that your time during the residency, you started doing the generative coding and yeah, you did collaborate with João, but it's nice to see that coming through and maybe your later practice as well in the algorithmic work that you've been working on and the theme with Fak'ugesi as well. And then, I know João was within your network already at the time, but that sort of that came up again a couple of times, which I think is really interesting. And Floating Reverie also was on The Festival for their catalogue. So, I think, you know, and I think within Fak'ugesi and even Post African Futures, and this is the network, are there a lot of overlapping links and connections, like different nodes between the different artists and the different participants as well?

TB: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think people are brought together by the notion that they practice digitally, you know what I mean? There's a lot of kind of coloured intersection and shared interests, like painters hang out with other painters and kind of, you know, check each other's techniques out or you know, just philosophise is by the smell of turpentine. You know what I mean? That's kind of what digital artists also do, there's a sort of skills exchange, there's a kind of, you know, you're in the same tribe essentially. And I think that there's something that I think that yeah, the nature of work is that there's a kind of flow of practice and interaction. Yeah.

CW: And shared experience I think, especially in such a niche, sort of small context, that we sort of tend to operate in. But those are all the questions I have for you Tegan, thank you very much for your time and being so generous with your information and your experiences within the different contexts. Do you have any questions for me that you want to ask?

TB: No, not really. I just wanted to say that we've just moved Ellipsis to a new thing. It's looking pretty good. I'm going to share the link with you now quickly. It's on a password at the moment, actually it's normal thing, but at the password is editors. I'm just, we'll probably take that off today. So, if you're looking for your work, it's there, it's just changed. Yeah.

CW: Okay.

TB: Yeah, so the normal ellipsis.org.za, still works. But I often think of the work that I do in ellipses is being slightly from a digital arts, but it's different and it's more research orientated, but it's still pretty nice and interesting, in different ways. And of course, you had your piece there and Natalie in the same year, so yeah.

CW: Yeah. Good.

TB: Okay. Alright then. Bye. Thanks

CW: Thanks so much Tegan.