



ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES AND AESTHETICS IN SOUTH AFRICAN DIGITAL ART: ESTABLISHING A DIGITAL ART PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA FRAMED THROUGH THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT | A small group of academics and artists have critically engaged with a digital arts practice in South Africa. It is a growing practice, developing and orienting voices and discourse for many artists, curators and spaces of practice. This article explores this digital arts practice through an engagement with the medium and post-Internet/contra-Internet, historically contextualising the field that has emerged in contemporary artistic practice over the past ten years in South Africa. To add more context specific platforms and spaces (traditional/formal, nontraditional/informal, and a combination thereof) and key exhibitions such as *Refiguring Space, Post-Digital 2019/2020 special edition*, and artists CUSS Group and NTU will be discussed to provide insight into the emerging digital arts practice in South Africa.

KEYWORDS | Decolonial, Digital Art, South Africa, Post-Internet Art

Introduction

Digital art, internet art, and post-Internet art are heavily influenced by the digital medium, and have made their way, sometimes contentiously, into contemporary art and even popular culture with the rise and increase of digital technologies. In South Africa, there are a small group of academics and artists who have critically engaged with this practice in a contemporary South African context. The practice is growing and developing, providing artists and curators in South Africa with a voice and unique discourse. Some initial questions prompted this article, and my broader research: In what ways does post-Internet art in South Africa exist? What are the social, economic and cultural factors that are leading artists to shape this terrain? Does it enable new narratives to occur? How has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced digital artistic practice?

This article doesn't answer these questions conclusively, but it does provide some response to these provocations.

I start with a definition of digital art and post-Internet art, one applicable outside a Western framework. Then I present a historical overview and reflection on the contemporary digital art practice that has emerged in South Africa over the past ten years – looking at artists, curators, platforms, and spaces. “Traditional/formal” and “nontraditional/informal” platforms and spaces, which both support and enable this practice to exist, will be addressed. I position this digital art practice not exclusively in a global context, but alongside or in relation to one, and then also review the impact or influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on artists’ practice in this context. CUSS Group and NTU’s practice, and the group exhibitions Refiguring Space and Post-Digital 2019/2020 Special Edition add more insight to this context as practices that propose new aesthetics, create narratives, and foreground unique critical voices.

This initial article was first written in 2020 and 2021 at the start of my PhD research titled “Networked Curatorial Practice: Reorienting and Creating Spaces for Digital Artists

in South Africa" (2024). As a result, there may be subsequent insights and perspectives on the type of work described here, the context, and the different spaces that have progressed or shifted since then. I intend to publish an updated version of this text once my research has been finalised. Through my research, it has become clearer to me how much more research into this practice is required and necessary. This paper is not all-encompassing but seeks to unpack a part of the practice as I saw it then.

Digital Art (Post-Internet) – A critical, Contra Perspective

In recent years, the digital medium and networked technologies have become more readily accessible and, as a result, more acceptable and utilized as a creative medium. The digital space has encroached on the contemporary arts as a tool, medium and subject. This practice is often conceptually framed by and directly engages with the internet. Yet, not all digital art does so, and not all contemporary art is framed as such. Both can exist in the frame of post-Internet art.

Christiane Paul claims that "digital technology has now reached such a stage of development that it offers entirely new possibilities for the creation and experience of art."¹ According to Paul, the term *digital art* describes a broad range of "artistic works and practices [and] does not describe one unified set of aesthetics" but rather reflects a "language of aesthetics."² The emergence of this language parallels a nascent community of aesthetic practice in South Africa. Paul highlights the difference between digital technology as a "tool" and as a "medium." Digital technology acts as a "tool for the creation of traditional art objects" such as photography, film, or sculpture and as the medium "being produced, stored, and presented exclusively in the digital format and making use of its interactive and participatory features."³

Internet art is artwork produced, stored and presented exclusively and entirely online. Post-Internet art, by contrast, does not always exist online but rather pushes "the boundaries between the immaterial and material art object."⁴ As a descriptive term, post-Internet implies a particular way of thinking about the Internet. From the initial use of the term, there was a tendency to describe fashionable, trendy or "cool" art as "post-internet"—understood as an art form or aesthetic seen online. Its acceptance seemed to ease into popular culture far more smoothly than internet art, or perhaps that was the result of it emerging from internet art rather than being an underground or sub-movement. This type of art and its associated practice "exists around, because of, and through the Internet."⁵ The term was initially used by Marisa Olson in 2006/2008 to describe "art after the internet."⁶ The term itself is problematic, extensively

vague and reductionist. The prefix does not refer to a specific starting point, as Artie Vierkant explains, but rather a cultural shift towards the "introduction of privately-run commercial internet service providers and the availability of personal computers."⁷ The term does not imply that the internet is over, but rather refers to work which is "informed by the phenomenon of the Internet" and that "any cultural production which has been influenced by a network ideology falls under the rubric of Post-Internet."⁸ Michael Connor describes Olson's "after" as "connected to a historical shift" that referred to a "delineation within the artist's practice which could be experienced in everyday time, not historical time: 'I surfed, and then I created art.'"⁹ Despite the global reach of the internet, an explicitly Western discourse and practice is often generated about the internet and post-Internet art. I am interested in how the post-Internet occurs outside of this milieu.

When an all-encompassing global perspective is assumed, it is usually written from a uniquely Western one. There seems to be little room in this monolithic presentation for unique, geographical nuances to be addressed or documented. The history of South Africa has indeed determined unique conditions of post-Internet engagement. The definition of post-Internet needs to be challenged and reviewed in light of the complexity and diversity being articulated in postcolonial worlds.

Zach Blas critiques post-Internet terminology, claiming that the prefix is insufficient and that it reflects "an inability to account for the present in its specificity and singularity."¹⁰ Blas acknowledges that the biased portrayal of post-Internet practice generalises a "moderate collection of hip, young, 'digital native' artists and art institutions mostly in the West."¹¹ This homogenisation ignores the diversity and nuanced specificity that occurs in post-Internet practice. This term *post-Internet* now feels futile and extremely reductionist. Blas presents the term *contra-Internet* as an alternative to post-Internet suggesting that the "artistic militances and political subversion of the internet are not post-internet aesthetics but rather *contra-internet aesthetics*."¹² Blas further suggests that insofar as the term *contra-Internet* aesthetics "could strive to bring the internet to ruins, it does so to create positive alternatives."¹³ The examples discussed will present how this is occurring in South Africa.

The Digital in Contemporary South Africa

At this point, it is worth mentioning my positionality and background in South Africa: I am a white woman based in Johannesburg, South Africa. I earned a master's degree (MA) in Digital Interactive Media in 2012 and have established

myself as a curator, lecturer, researcher and artist in the field. As an artist, my practice is influenced by (and reflective of) digital media, particularly the Internet. As a curator and researcher, my practice and roles are primarily dedicated to creating space(s) for digital artists, and generating a robust critical discourse around the field in South Africa.

My MA research thesis, titled “South African Digital Art Practice: An exploration of the Altermodern” (2012), sought to contextualise a South African practice in a global discourse, and identify patterns and trends that mirrored global events. In *Floating Reverie 5 Years 2014–2019*, Tegan Bristow states that this contextualisation in 2012 “was no easy feat; not only were digital artists in South Africa thin on the ground, but framing their practice in the expected methods of referenceable academic theory was even harder.”¹⁴ This is no longer the case: emerging artists have more access to digital technologies and as a result, a greater number of artists are now engaging with them. Bristow further notes “that it was the focus on process that held the work, and the artists that made it, in a relationship to South African practice. . .within the African urbanism of Johannesburg.”¹⁵

In 2014, I founded a digital residency programme called *Floating Reverie*. *Floating Reverie* consists of two components: an online digital residency programme called //2Weeks and a corresponding annual *Post-Digital* instance. *Floating Reverie* started as a result of a perceived lack of platforms or spaces and opportunities for artists to engage with contemporary new media and digital culture in South Africa and Africa more broadly. The //2Weeks residency happens once a month for two weeks. An artist is invited to respond to the brief and “check in” on a selected online platform of their choice such as Instagram or Tumblr. This happens daily for two weeks, establishing a network in each iteration. The *Post-Digital* instance acts as an extension of the residency. It occurs at the end of the annual residency period where artists are invited back to participate and re-engage with the residency in a physical exhibition. *Floating Reverie* has evolved, grown, and subtly changed alongside the internet and associated networked practices, as it deliberately enables artists to “make work and explore the digital medium, and to encourage conversations around contemporary issues.”¹⁶ As I have noted elsewhere:

Each residency, and artist, brings a new dynamic to the process and each has added insight to the framework. The residency has naturally shifted towards a process- oriented, research residency as opposed to a conventional residency focussed on the art object or an exhibition. The artistic process is often removed from the final showing of a work. It can be treated as mystical, as being for the artist's eyes alone. It is not often that the audience or viewer is involved, or necessary, in the process. The //2Weeks residency breaks with these conventions, enabling the artist to reveal their process.¹⁷

Floating Reverie has informed much of my own research and practice. In 2012, I sought to position my research “beyond previous artistic discussions associated with postcolonial discourse,”¹⁸ suggesting that a new framework was necessary. This was a context which was reflective of the time, but nearly a decade later, perhaps a decolonial, post-Internet or contra-Internet context is more fitting.

South Africa, as both an historical and contemporary context, requires a nuanced understanding of the socioeconomic, technological and geopolitical environment that informs my research and practice. In 1994, the first democratic elections were held in South Africa, leading to the end of legislated racism and the oppressive apartheid government that had controlled and monitored all aspects of society, culture, and the country’s economy for close to five decades. The apartheid regime had determined who had the right to own land, who could access education and the language in which people were taught. It forbade marriage between people of different state-determined racial designations, among many other disturbing violations of basic human rights. As a system, apartheid facilitated the development, economic prosperity, and cultural freedoms of privileged white South Africans at the expense of other BIPOC South Africans.

The effects of apartheid are still visible in our sociocultural structures, economic infrastructure, healthcare and, significantly, in the unequal access to technology and education that continues as a legacy of disenfranchisement, especially for youth, in South Africa. This unfair and disproportionate access to education, technology, information and healthcare is all a reflection of these ongoing effects. The legacy of these disparities has been profoundly highlighted and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and through the varying levels of national lockdown, which were first implemented in late March 2020. I will expand on how these have manifested further on.

The end of apartheid led to the lifting of global sanctions that had been leveraged against the racist regime, resulting in an influx of trade and international investment over the next decade. This coincided with, yet is unconnected to, the start of the internet. This increase in access to digital technology was not, and still is not, distributed equally, as legacies of apartheid continue to haunt South Africa. The digital divide is prevalent in our society today and of deep concern, despite the use of mobile technologies increasing every year.¹⁹ This trend is also problematic, as the cost of data is extremely expensive in South Africa. According to The Inclusive Internet Index, South Africa’s “availability [of the internet] is its weakest area, where network quality and electricity access leave much to be desired,” resulting in a ranking of twenty-sixth out of one hundred countries.²⁰ Another recent study of “unlimited residential internet plans” put South Africa at the top, with 1Mbps costing \$0.87 compared to the same

speed in Brazil costing \$0.24.²¹ In 2016, 63 percent of South Africans were on a prepaid phone contract and 70 percent of South Africans accessed the internet from their mobile device. This has led to the campaign "Data Must Fall," which "focused on [reducing] exorbitant data costs."²²

This turbulent context is not too dissimilar to the development of internet art in Soviet Russia or Eastern Europe, where artists such as Olia Lialina and Vuk osi realized the internet's potential for activism and protest. Mihaljinac and Mevorah describe the change in the role of the internet for artists in Serbia in relation to democracy:

In the beginning, the use of the internet in Serbia signified the battle against totalitarianism, the fight for democracy, as well as openness that Serbia lacked during UN sanctions. After becoming a democratic state and actively participating in networked society, many Serbian artists gave up on both promises of democratic system and the Internet as a democratic media source/platform and are trying to find new ways of building a democratic society.²³

This change in attitude and loss of hope reflects a relatable caution around the role of the internet, or technology's ability to impact the new democratic society in South Africa meaningfully. In their article, "Between the Archive and the Real: Contemporary Digital Art and South Africa" (2015), Christopher Williams-Wynn and Samantha McCulloch, with reference to the digital divide, state that digital art practices "born of African contexts risk being doubly marginalised, excluded from the hegemonic holdings of the contemporary art archive and spurned by commercial interests. . .[and that] the prospects for visibility remain subdued."²⁴ The digital medium is not without its complexities and requires in-depth consideration, even more so now.

South Africa has a diverse and often untold history of computing and technology. Delinda Collier references Ron Eglash's research on African fractals and the racism in "analog/digital distinctions,"²⁵ who has argued that "digital technology is actually built on a design that is indigenous to Africa and has had a separate but related logical and material development."²⁶ This is worth considering when looking at inclusive or diverse contexts for computing and technology. Lizelle Bisschoff states that "Africa's exposure to technology has developed differently than in other parts of the world; most African citizens are introduced to the Internet through mobile/smartphones, while they might never own a desktop computer, in the West, this exposure has worked in the opposite direction."²⁷ I believe "exposure to" to be the wrong term here, and would suggest replacing it with "use of." This is owing to the fact that Africa wasn't exposed to technology as a separate entity, rather its proliferation developed and emerged within and in addition to daily life, as a result of globalisation and networked technology. South Africans who

were born post-1994, are known colloquially as "born-frees," and are the first generation to have grown up with the internet and mobile phones, which have since become interchangeable. The internet allows for information access and connection, which is still an exclusive commodity for many South Africans and artists practising here.

A Contemporary Context in South Africa

Over the past ten or so years, there have been several platforms and spaces (traditional/formal, nontraditional/informal and a combination thereof) that have contributed to the development of digital art in South Africa.²⁸ Traditional institutional support comes in the form of galleries and formal educational institutes, while nontraditional/informal support can be seen in the form of festivals, residency programmes and artist-run spaces. These various types of spaces, and the ebbs and flow of sustainability around them, start to form an ecosystem for artists and curators to tap into and out of. The boundaries between the traditional/formal and nontraditional/informal platforms have begun to overlap and merge in recent years, depending on the needs of the field and the agents or actors in them.

The galleries in the contemporary art scene in South Africa that have included digital art in their programming have supported positioning digital creative practice as part of a central discourse for artists, critics and theorists. It has also helped expose and educate a largely conservative audience that is far more familiar with commercial artworks and mediums. In 2012, I identified that there was a need to "educate artists technically, and also the public so that they understand the work" and appreciate and engage with it. I further pointed out that "galleries also require education to equip them to exhibit and store the artworks."²⁹ This is not a problem unique to our South African context, as Christiane Paul identifies in her book *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (2009).³⁰ The commercial needs of galleries and the saleability of digital art are also something to consider. The nature of our historical context does mean that the group of digital artists and key players is a "relatively small and exclusive" group and the public's exposure to digital art is limited. Although this was indeed the case in 2012, the number of digital artists has increased dramatically since then as a result of education and exposure to the medium. Nonetheless, Bristow has observed that South Africa "does not have support for digital art in most of its gallery structures" and that "new media is considered a somewhat experimental format and an uncomfortable purchase item."³¹

Goodman Gallery and Stevenson, both with spaces in Johannesburg and Cape Town, have made a significant effort to include a digital artistic practice in their programming



Figure 1: *A Crescendo of Ecstasy*, by Mary Sibande. 2018, TMRW Gallery: <https://tmrw.art/a-crescendo-of-ecstasy>.

over the past few years. Goodman Gallery has hosted solo and group exhibitions exploring digital art. Most notable for Goodman Gallery, are the group show *Post African Futures* (2015) curated by Tegan Bristow, and *Exotic Trade* (2017) the solo exhibition by Tabita Rezaire. Stevenson's exhibitions include solo exhibitions by the artist Dineo Seshee Bopape, *the eclipse will not be visible to the naked eye* (2010), *lešobana!! lešobana! lešobana!! (le bulegile); lešobana! lešobana! lešobana!! (go phunyegile)* (2011), and *Kgoro Ya Go Tšwa: Even if You Fall From a Circle* (2013). Stevenson also presented Bogosi Sekhukhuni's solo exhibition *Simunye Summit 2010* (2017) and CUSS Group's exhibition *New Horizon* (2016).

TMRW is a unique project/space for artistic exploration and technology production, presentation, and R&D. It was based in Johannesburg from 2018–2022, but has subsequently paused its programming. During that time, it had a physical space where curators and creative technologists were able to “work with established artists to explore the possibilities, limits and unique capabilities of the digital world for the visual arts.”³² I was Curatorial Director at TMRW (the space) from 2020–2022. TMRW (the project) was started in early 2018 under the curatorial direction of Ann Roberts and Brooklyn J Pakathi. The first exhibition at TMRW was a collaborative effort, of production and conceptualisation, between TMRW

and Mary Sibande, called *A Crescendo of Ecstasy* (2018), which saw an existing artwork by Sibande, *The Purple Shall Govern* (2014), transformed with virtual reality and 3D printing to create an “immersive and dramatic artwork,” as seen in Figure 1.³³

TMRW has worked with The Centre for The Less Good Idea on *The Invisible Exhibition* (2018) and *The Invisible Exhibition II* (2019), for several seasons assisting with production and conceptualisation of various components. The Centre for the Less Good Idea, founded by William Kentridge in 2016 and based in Maboneng, Johannesburg, is a project space for artists, cultivating cross-disciplinary projects, with several of these projects including technology and digital arts in their scope. The Centre is structured around workshop-based ‘seasons’ where curators are invited and, in turn, invite various practitioners, to collaborate and workshop their ‘less good ideas’ into productions, experiences or installations for public viewing. The Centre and TMRW invited several contemporary artists for *The Invisible Exhibitions*, working outside of the digital space to explore and experiment with the digital technology Tilt Brush, a 3D drawing application on Oculus. Through the use of this tool, the artists were able to create “augmented and virtual reality sculptural drawings” that were then transformed into augmented reality (AR) artworks.³⁴ The production brought a “unique interactive

journey into performance and contemporary arts" through a series of VR and AR experiences, as seen in Figure 2. TMRW's unique focus and collaborative approach to curatorial projects allowed artists to produce work beyond the scope of their skills and to be exposed to the potential that new technologies and mediums afford. In season 2 of 2017, The Centre saw the inclusion and exploration of a variety of technologies in *The Invisible Exhibition*, and interactive technology in the performance *Jacaranda Time* by Tegan Bristow and Cameron Harris, and *Splash* by Tegan Bristow, Janus Fouché, and Lulu Mlangeni.

Two smaller galleries that have also contributed to cultivating an experimental practice for artists and curators working with digital technologies worth mentioning are Kalashnikov Gallery and No End Contemporary Art Space in Johannesburg, both artist-run spaces. Both galleries have hosted *Post-Digital* instances by *Floating Reverie*. Kalashnikov hosted a dedicated experimental work space, The Wreck Room (2015–2019), where I showcased *Bae Magick* (2017) (Figure 3), and where Fak'ugesi Festival presented their residency exhibitions in 2014 and 2015.³⁵

It is at both these smaller galleries where more flexibility occurs and less established and nontraditional/informal support for emerging artists and explorative practices exists. These galleries are interested in providing such support but often have limited resources and equipment, which curators or artists are often responsible for sourcing.

There does seem to have been a peak around 2016 to 2018, when galleries were more open to including digital art exhibitions as part of their programming. I am unsure whether this is due to their programming strategy or the artist's interests and practice, or rather if it is completely

coincidental (apart from TMRW, whose focus is deliberately on digital art in South Africa and the Global South). The galleries mentioned above are established and have facilitated a digital art practice for both artists and the public. However, for it to be sustainable, the commitment to the medium needs to be long-term. This is an area which requires further research and a deeper analysis.

Galleries, together with universities, play a role in education about digital art and related practices. It is as much about equipping audiences and galleries through exposure to the medium as it is about educating and equipping artists or curators for the field. Educating artists and curators is the task of academic institutions, which falls into the traditional/formal support structure. There are several South African universities that warrant mentioning regarding their formal education programmes around the visual arts. The University of Witwatersrand's Wits School of Art's (WSOA) Digital Arts Division, in Johannesburg, offered an MA in Digital Interactive Media through coursework until 2019, and currently still offers a few undergraduate courses focusing on internet art and data visualisation, which were hugely formative for my practice and career. These are now framed as part of the heavy game-design focus, and are not offered to the rest of the WSOA students, such as the Fine Arts majors. Several other South African universities have also included the digital medium as part of their curriculum in visual arts. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in Durban, and the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town (UCT) offer undergraduate courses in New Media. Yet, nowhere seems to focus on the digital art medium specifically. Exploring pedagogical collaborations within universities, Doherty and Bristow present an intimate picture of the complex nature of establishing a department focused on the Digital Arts. They note the "profoundly

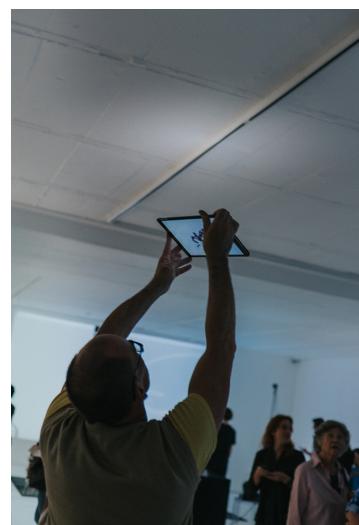


Figure 2: *The Invisible Exhibition II* [left] *The Invisible Exhibition I* [right], by The Centre for the Less Good Idea and TMRW Gallery: <https://tmrw.art/the-invisible-exhibition-ii>, <https://tmrw.art/invisible-exhibition>



Figure 3: *Bae Magick* – installation by Carly Whitaker, 2017, Kalshnikov Gallery. Image taken by Anthea Pokroy.

trans-disciplinary implications of [teaching and studying] digital technology from a creative arts perspective" within a university and educational institutional context.³⁶

The digital medium presents an entirely new space for artists and curators, as opposed to traditional or conventional galleries or exhibition spaces, which can often be limiting and restrictive in their structure, agenda and commercial requirements. Nontraditional/informal support exists in the form of festivals, residency programmes and artist-run spaces. Recent events, festivals, residencies and spaces in the contemporary South African art scene over the last few years have emphasised and deliberately placed digital and technological practices at the centre of many discussions.

Events such as the Fak'ugesi Festival (2014–ongoing), the annual ISEA (International Symposium on Electronic Art) Symposium, and The Centre for the Less Good Idea (2016–ongoing) are some primary examples of how scale and scope can allow for digital arts practice to emerge and be cultivated. Fak'ugesi's 2019 theme was aptly named "TAP YOUR SOURCE CODE!," and 2020's theme was "Upload Download Your Heritage," which existed entirely online because of the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁷ The festival's program is diverse and responsive to the current needs of the

digital arts community, and consists of a range of content, including an artist residency program, conference, music events, and skills workshops. The festival endeavours to establish an inclusive practice around technology. ISEA2018 occurred in Durban, South Africa, in 2018—the first time on the African subcontinent. Under the theme of "Intersections," many intellectuals, creatives, makers, and thinkers came together in Durban and were able to explore not only what was happening in South Africa in the field of digital arts but also to showcase their own works.³⁸ ISEA2018 was curated, managed and produced by Marcus Neustetter through the Trinity Session. It is also worth noting that Neustetter was a key artist in my MA research, and his early practice was heavily focused on experimenting with digital art.

These events, while seemingly small, all contribute to building a practice and discourse, and increasing the visibility of the digital arts within both the public and practitioners' space. There appears to have been a peak of activity in South Africa around 2016 to 2018, when galleries were more open to including digital art exhibitions as part of their programming. I am unsure whether this was due to their own programming strategies or due to the artists' own interests and practices, or rather, if it is completely circumstantial (apart from TMRW, whose focus was intentionally on digital art in South Africa and the Global South/Majority World).³⁹

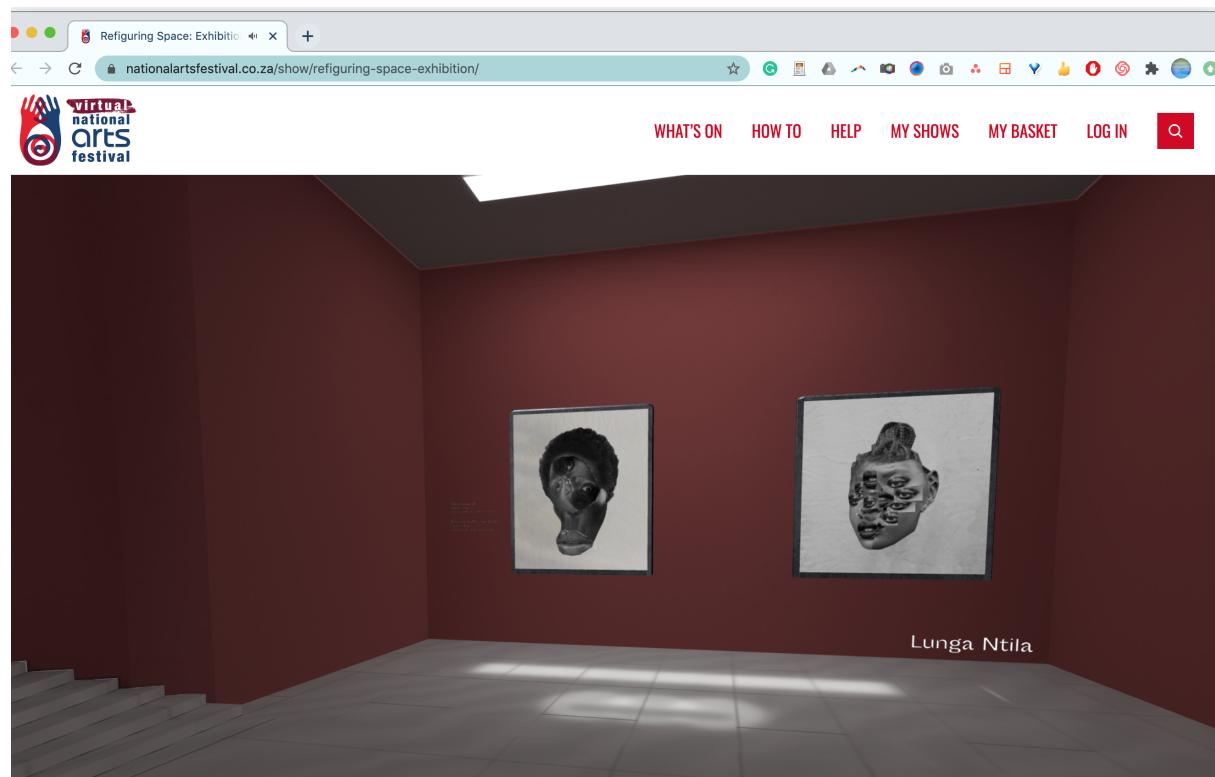
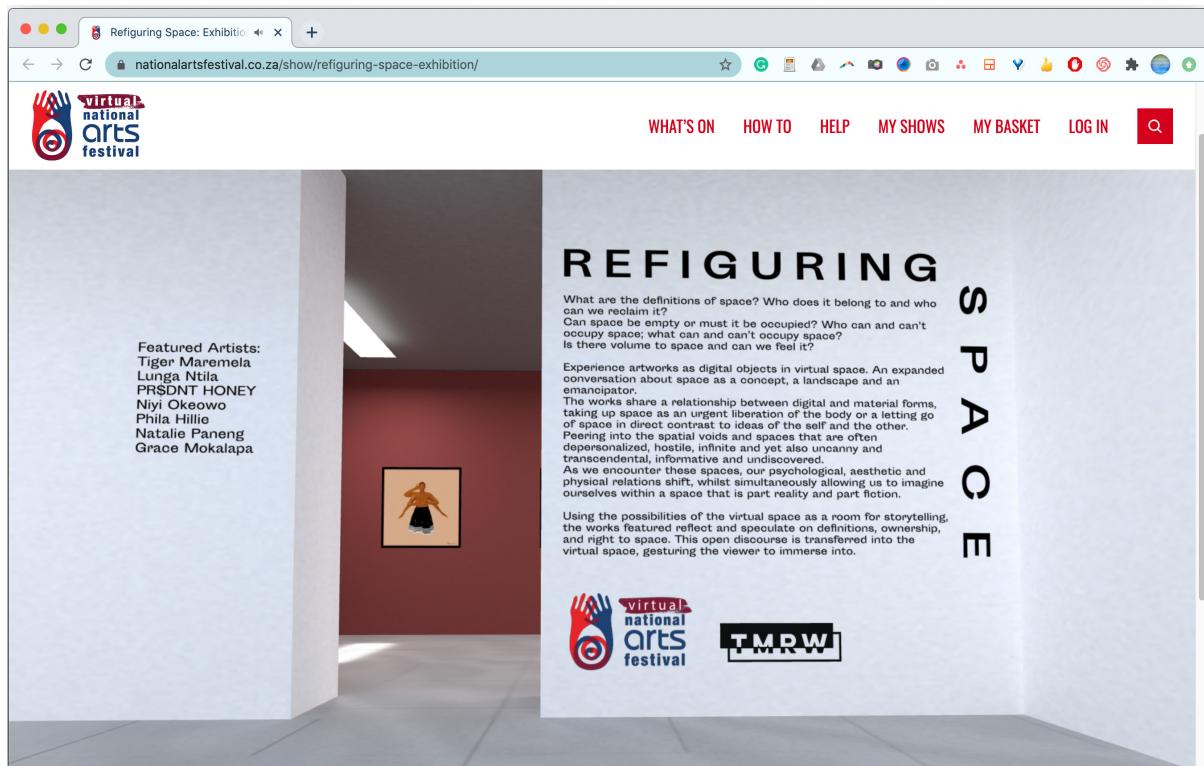


Figure 4: *Refiguring Space*, curated by Brooklyn J. Pakathi. June-July 2020, TMRW Gallery. Screenshots taken by the author in July 2020.

Impact of Covid-19 on South African Digital Arts Practice

In 2020, owing to COVID-19 and a country-wide shutdown, galleries and institutions turned to the internet to provide artists with more visibility, connection, and presence. This has enabled many institutions and organisations, not just in South Africa, to be more accessible to the public. In this case, the internet is being used as a tool and becomes the platform for access, as opposed to the platform being the medium. This tendency echoes the different roles the digital can play as a tool or medium. This was visible quite early on as galleries and art spaces implemented new strategies. This was also visible in the Centre for the Less Good Idea's Season 7, which launched an online programme consisting of live performances that were streamed or prerecorded in the space and aired online. The Goodman Gallery's group exhibition curated by Amy Watson, aptly titled *How to Disappear*, opened just before our nationwide shutdown on March 14, 2020, and consisted of a range of artworks, not necessarily digital or post-Internet artworks. The exhibition's fortuitous timing engaged with "pervasive modes and technologies of surveillance in the making of contemporary society."

The gallery chose to document the exhibition virtually, enabling digital access and held a panel discussion titled "Surveillance in a Time of Crisis Over" on Facebook Live.⁴⁰ These "new" strategies of reaching audiences using digital documentation or virtual tours and generating more accessible discourse through online panel discussions continued to escalate throughout the pandemic as lockdown restrictions ebbed and flowed across the globe. These strategies allowed physical institutions, often limited by their physical constructs of location, to continue and extend their discussions with a broader audience in such so-called unprecedented times.

It is worth further considering the impact of Covid-19 and the national lockdown, including the social and cultural consequences that determine how artists, galleries and museums position themselves. How can the digital space be used as a medium, not just a tool to increase access and encourage further discourse? TMRW's online exhibition *Refiguring Space*, curated by Brooklyn J. Pakathi, was presented as part of the National Arts Festival, hosted online from June to July 2020. *Refiguring Space* presented a range of artworks in a 3D or VR environment, which aimed to "share a relationship between digital and material forms, taking up space as an urgent liberation of the body, or a letting go of space in direct contrast to ideas of the self and the other."⁴¹ The show presented only young BIPOC artists and used the medium to deliberately create a "virtual space as a room for storytelling" and featured works that considered and speculated on "definitions, ownership, and right to space" to reflect on sociocultural dynamics and tensions in our

contemporary context. The digital exhibition mimicked a physical gallery to showcase the exhibition and present the artworks, and with VR capabilities, allowed the viewer to navigate through digital rooms where various content and mediums were presented, as seen in Figure 4.⁴²

Floating Reverie is a nontraditional/informal platform for artists to explore and create using the digital medium. The *Post-Digital 2019/2020 special edition* was hosted by TWRW, which presented work from the *//2Weeks special edition* of 2020 and *//2Weeks* residency artists from 2019. The *special edition* took place at the end of April, deliberately coinciding with the initial first extension of the national lockdown level 5 in South Africa. It was an open invitation to all previous residency artists and an opportunity for them to reimagine their past residency on a new or similar platform. This *Post-Digital* presented creative practice emerging from two pivotal moments in our contemporary context – before and during the pandemic (see Figure 5). The artists who participated in *//2Weeks* during 2019, were engaging with their practice from before the pandemic, reflecting and reimagining it in the heart of the pandemic, in 2021. Additionally, the artists who participated in the *//2Weeks special edition* in 2020, were similarly engaging with their practice from the very beginning of the pandemic, and reflecting and reimagining it in the heart of the pandemic, in 2021. The *Post-Digital* presents a physical exhibition (see Figure 5) and an online component consisting of curatorial notes and reflections from the artists using the tool Art Curator Grid (Figure 6).⁴³

This review of different traditional/formal, nontraditional/informal platforms and spaces presents insight into how they have contributed to the development, progression, education and understanding of digital art in South Africa. Additionally, the context of the pandemic has brought more concerns and new ways of working to light.

Networked Speculation: An Aesthetic and Narrative

There is an obvious tendency in contemporary art to engage with the digital medium and internet-oriented practices. Some South African artists and collectives who deserve to be mentioned include: Aluta Null, Bogosi Sekhukuni, Brooklyn J. Pakathi, Carly Whitaker (myself), CUSS Group, Daniel Rautenbach, Dineo Seshee Bopape, ISSI_ISSA, Ketu Meso, Marcus Neustetter, Miranda Moss, Natalie Paneng, Nathan Gates, Nolan Oswald Dennis, Nkensani Mari, NTU, Tabita Rezaire, Tegan Bristow, Tiger Maremela, Xopher Wallace, among others. These artists—some more established and experienced than others—present new ways of curating and creating, referencing and engaging with networked practices and the digital medium. These artists' practice is rooted in

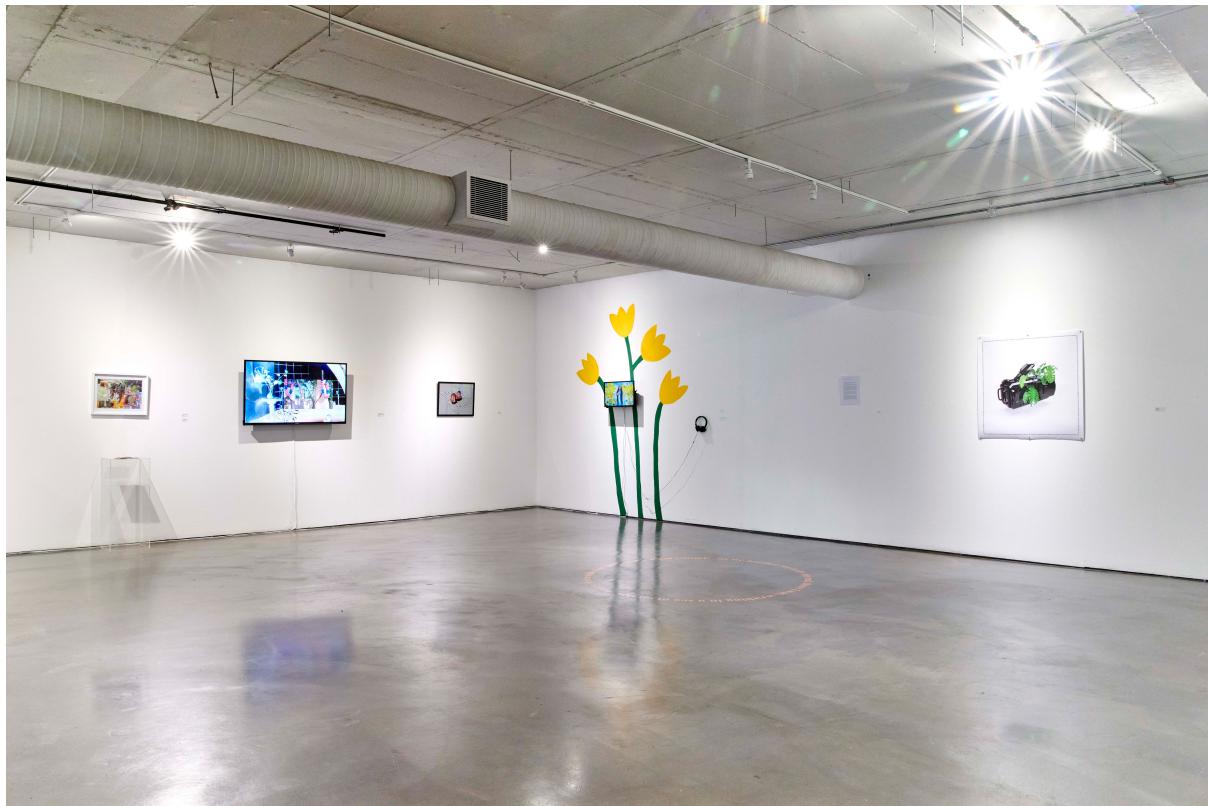


Figure 5: Post-Digital 2019/2020 special edition – installation view, curated by Carly Whitaker. February-March 2021, TMRW Gallery: Image taken by Anthea Pokroy.

a direct engagement with the medium, working with it both as an immaterial and material form. New narratives and new ways of experiencing the artwork emerge from this practice, speculating our way forward.

Many artists acknowledge that the internet is not necessarily a place or space that is perceived as democratic, inclusive and empathetic to all, as Tabita Rezaire points out in her article “Afro Cyber Resistance: South African Internet Art” (2014), arguing that “the web repeats and [reinforces] the old systems of exploitation.”⁴⁴ It is necessary for many South African artists to be critical of digital technology which, in our location, is inextricably linked to the artists’ background and historical context of the country we were born into. Rezaire describes this medium as a “fantasized global online culture” that is “still mainly a one-way flow, from [the West] to the rest of the world.”⁴⁵ This draws into question the type of information we receive, and where it comes from.

NTU is a South African collective founded in 2015 by Nolan Oswald Dennis, Tabita Rezaire, and Bogosi Sekhukhuni, who are concerned with “technologies of epistemic liberation and cultures of scientific enquiry”⁴⁶ and aim to provide “decolonial therapies for the digital age.”⁴⁷ Their work *NERVOUSCONDITIONER.LIFE.001* was produced for the group exhibition *Post African Futures* (2015) (Figure 7). The

installation is an “independent online network, created to explore the possibilities of a safe and independent space on the Internet: free of discrimination, speech control and surveillance.”⁴⁸ NTU created a secure web server which hosts a localised chat room similar to *The Thing* (1991–1998), which challenged institutional ways of operating and communicating by providing alternative avenues.⁴⁹ NTU takes this a step further, stating that the work was created “as a safe space for people of colour to discuss, share, and organize, without the presence of white-supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative oppressions that seem to govern the public forums of the Internet.”⁵⁰ Bristow, the curator of the exhibition *Post African Futures*, states that the installation is “a direct comment on the Internet as a highly bigoted and racialised space, and how young Africans do not feel safe or adequately represented on it.”⁵¹

This establishment of a secure and safe place is not unimaginable, and the development of a contained network, both digitally and physically, seems initially like a viable solution. This installation consisted of cubicles reminiscent of internet cafes strewn across Johannesburg. The artist collective presents a solution to this problem that they have identified and experienced themselves, critiquing current network setups, online algorithms and online behaviour. The space that NTU creates and allows to be accessed within the gallery exhibition critiques the current mechanics of the

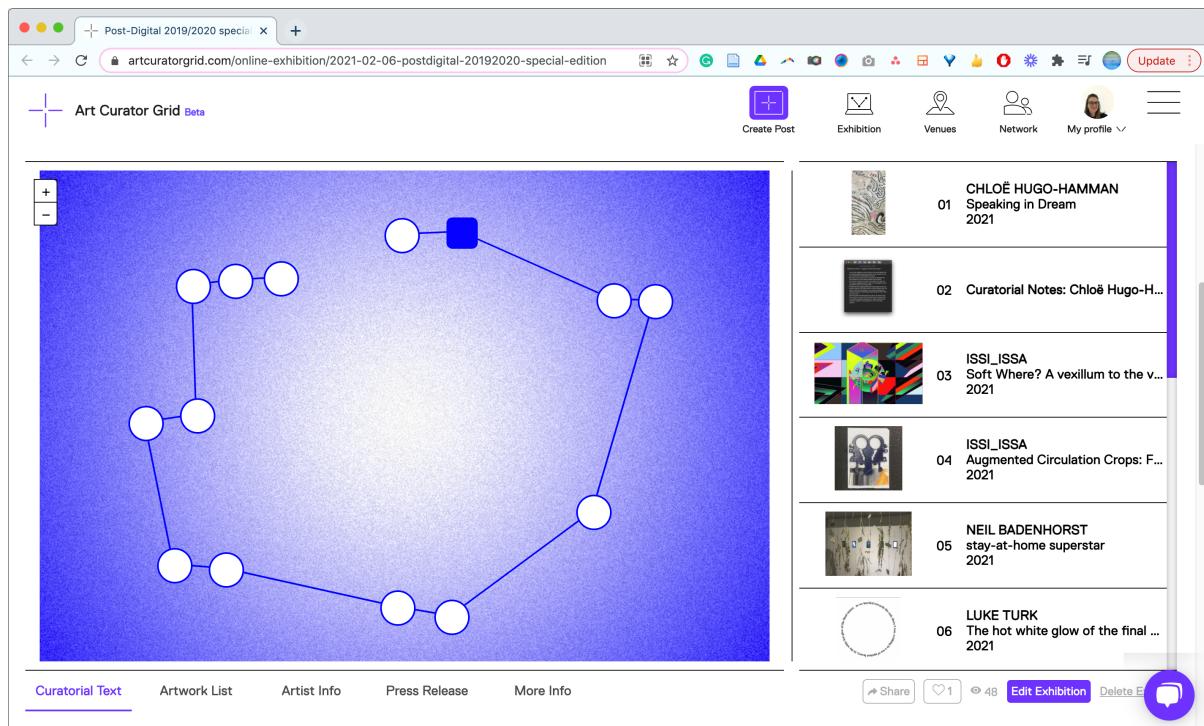


Figure 6: Post-Digital 2019/2020 special edition – online component, curated by Carly Whitaker. February–March 2021, TMRW Gallery. Screenshot taken by the author in February 2021.

internet. NTU creates a safe space and attempts to decolonise a digital space *within* another colonised space: the gallery. The cubicle, the server and the network become objects in a narrative and a speculative present that is created for a specific experience critiquing the politics of being online.

These artists create spaces which present and represent an aesthetic through an image that operates within the real. The editors of *Speculating Aesthetics* state that new modes of “aesthetically-mediated practices” emerge that bring about changes in the way we “produce, disseminate and consume [the] experience” of artworks or the image.⁵² This can be seen in CUSS Group’s installation at the Berlin Biennale in 2016.⁵³ CUSS Group, in collaboration with ANGEL-HO, FAKA, Megan Mace, and NTU presented the *Nguni Arts International, 2016* and the *Triomf Factory Shop*. CUSS Group was formed in 2011 and was one of the first art collectives to focus on digital technologies in South Africa, permeating a range of spaces, from car trunks (boots) in Zimbabwe to video parties in Johannesburg and MoMA in Poland.

Their installation for the Biennale takes an ironic stand against perceptions of contemporary African art, and responds to “commercial, cultural, and technological superhybridity in contemporary South Africa and beyond.”⁵⁴ The *Triomf Factory Shop* sells a variety of products in the front of the shop, such as fragrances and beer, as seen in Figures 8 and 9. The shop acts as a “virtual ‘front’ for a back room” that is closed to the public. It becomes a “site of production

for a live program of performances... streamed from behind closed doors into the storefront.”⁵⁵ In an article on *Bubblegum Club*, a ghostwriter describes the installation as a “simulacra in iridescent disk-spin; it’s a swarm of diffused meaning, a passage of intensities and forces, turning the thing in on itself, manipulating the implications of the platform by hiding things in plain-sight.”⁵⁶ The description goes on poetically, offering a glimpse into the motivations behind the work and the selected artists’ contributions:

But you’ll probably be in-and-out in three seconds, waving your terms. At biennales, people stand in front of things just to say that they did. Cash ‘n carry, but can you smell the contraband? ... You’ll probably take the cabinet for closed, miss the catalogue and the infinity curve, the repurposing of what remains after the bulldozers came and left. There’s history in the artifice and implications in that name; who’s *triomf*? Do some digging.⁵⁷

This text and the questions that it poses are of particular relevance given their cultural context. There is history in their installation, in their actions, and their “ruse.” Sophiatown was an area in Johannesburg in the 1930s, a cultural hub for artists, jazz musicians, singers, dancers and political thinkers, which held space for creative expression and speaking out against the oppressive apartheid government. The majority of the inhabitants were Black South Africans, and in 1954, all the area’s inhabitants were forcefully removed, and the area demolished and rezoned for white

South Africans under the name *Triomf*, meaning *triumph* in Afrikaans. However, the area wasn't very prosperous and subsequently became poverty-stricken. The name was changed back to Sophiatown in 2006, and post-1994, the suburb is again far more representative of the country's demographic. However, the energy and cultural production which once originated from the area was removed – erased – from its location intentionally. CUSS Group speculate about what the location means now, and going forward into the future. Presenting this at a Biennale also presents a certain comment on the role of artists as cultural producers, and the politics surrounding them and their specific geographic, racial and cultural perspectives.

This challenges Michael Connors's sentiment that "artistic and critical discourse has shifted from 'Internet culture' as a discrete entity to the reconfiguration of all culture by the Internet, or by internet-enabled neoliberal capitalism."⁵⁸ CUSS Group, both in their conceptual development and their approach to the Biennale installation, address this, and more. They look at this 'neoliberal capitalism' from an alternative perspective, which raises questions about whose culture, whose images and whose art are represented, where and by whom. CUSS Group takes matters into their own hands. *Triomf Factory Shop* is an ironic material representation of

networked culture in physical form, an attempt to decolonise existing ways of practice, and a protest against existing spaces of exclusion. They raise the following questions:

Who gets to produce and export the images? This is surreptitious transfer; re-appropriated appropriation, co-option in a bad paint job and the resurrection of dead content. The TV's running clandestine overproduction in a façade of daily routine. Excess in the understocked and the flickering light of uneven acknowledgements. Your 'modernisms' were misplaced at the start. Necromedia, narcomedia, publicity, packaging... are you live Tweeting?⁵⁹

Conclusion

There is a specificity to how the post-Internet is located in South Africa that calls into question the politics of the post-Internet aesthetic that circulates as a homogenous, global phenomenon. Within the context of contemporary South Africa digital arts practice, the internet acts as a framework, and new narratives and aesthetics emerge; this is directly linked to the country's history and its residents' degree of inclusion or access to technology. These politics

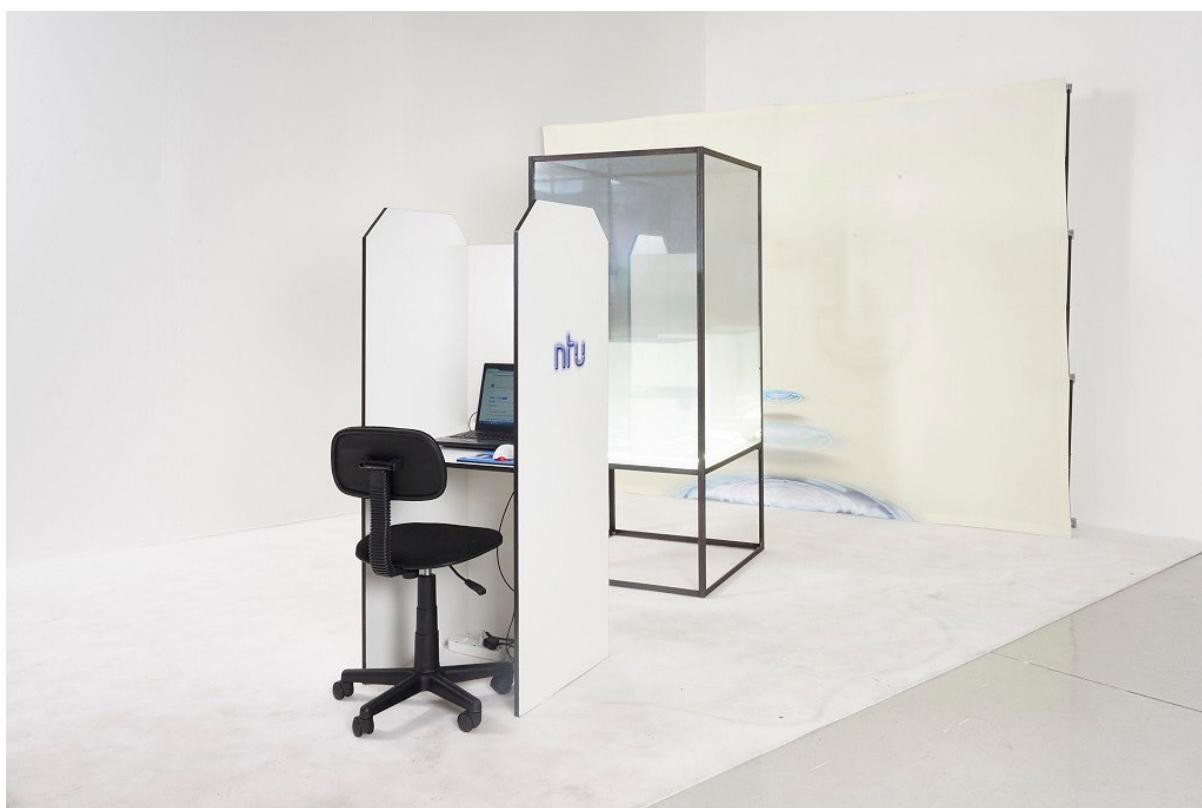


Figure 7: *NERVOUSCONDITIONER.LIFE.001*, by NTU. 2015, Goodman Gallery. <http://www.goodman-gallery.com/exhibitions/560>



Figure 8: Triomf Factory Shop, by CUSS GROUP. 2016, Berlin Biennale. <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/participants/cuss-group-2/>



Figure 9: Triomf Factory Shop – installation view of Nguni Arts International 2016, by CUSS GROUP. 2016, Berlin Biennale. <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/participants/cuss-group-2/>. photo: Timo Ohler

emerge in the aesthetics of the artworks by CUSS Group and NTU and from the exhibitions *Refiguring Space* and *Post-Digital 2019/2020 Special Edition*. These practices reveal a deliberate engagement with notions of control online, and the commodification of information, image generation, and cultural

anxieties around the networks that we all exist within. These artists and exhibitions simultaneously speculate about the future, as the present is so uncertain; for this reason, it demands critique, partially through the presentation of new narratives—of a decolonial positioning—and via the site of digital possibility.

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- 5 Whitaker, “//2Weeks 2014,” 35.
- 6 Marisa Olson, “POSTINTERNET: Art After the Internet,” *Foam Magazine* 29 (Winter 2011): 59–63.
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- 11 Blas, “Contra-Internet Aesthetics,” 88.
- 12 Blas, “Contra-Internet Aesthetics,” 89.
- 13 Blas, “Contra-Internet Aesthetics,” 89.
- 14 Tegan Bristow, “In Five Years,” in *Floating Reverie 5 Years 2014–2019*, eds. Carly Whitaker and Nicola Kritzinger (Cape Town: Floating Reverie, 2019), 26.
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- 16 Carly Whitaker and Nicola Kritzinger, eds., *Floating Reverie 5 Years 2014–2019* (Cape Town: Floating Reverie, 2019), 11.
- 17 Whitaker and Kritzinger, *Floating Reverie*, 11.
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- 27 Lizelle Bisschoff, “The Future Is Digital: An Introduction to African Digital Arts,” *Critical African Studies* 9, no. 3 (September 2017): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1376506>.
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- 29 Whitaker, “South African Digital Art Practice,” 61.
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- 31 Bristow, “In Five Years,” 29.
- 32 Tymon Smith, “Immersive Intelligence: Mary Sibande’s ‘A Crescendo Of Ecstasy,’” ArtThrob, June 22, 2018, <https://artthrob.co.za/2018/06/22/immersive-intelligence-mary-sibande-s-a-crescendo-of-ecstasy>.
- 33 Smith, “Immersive Intelligence.”
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