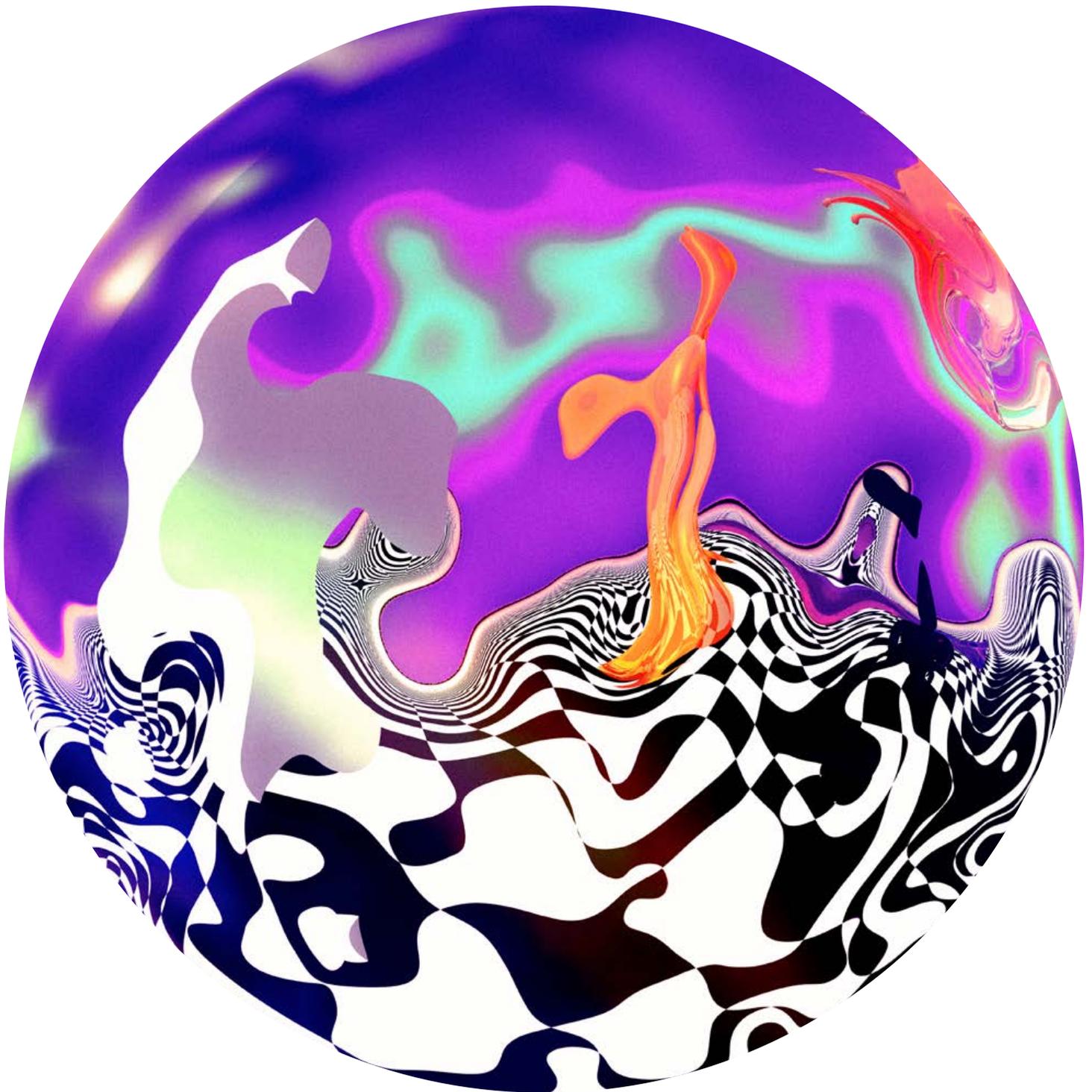


# C&

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## CONSCIOUS CODES, ANYONE?

AN ART MAGAZINE • 2020 • PRINT EDITION NO. 11

## EDITORIAL

**“With evidence of coded beaded patterns, communicative frequencies with non-human agencies, and connections to ancient practices, new media can embody new forms of consciousness and expressions of ‘otherness’ that have come to define digital art.”**

Enos Nyamor

Contemporary And (C&) was deliberately founded as an online magazine with the desire for it to be accessible beyond physical distribution boundaries. Free content for readers from Accra to Rio de Janeiro to New York. Accessibility is the bottom line. Connecting people and visualizing their artistic production is what C& has been and is constantly doing. Digital space is the main tool of the global network that creates the content of C&. Digital connections have become even more urgent during recent weeks, in which a pandemic has had and is still having a worldwide impact.

This first C& print edition of 2020 focuses on digital arts and their potential for connecting to the past and inventing the future.

Enos Nyamor asks how much digital art production in Africa is stereotyped. Artists Natalie Paneng and David Alabo speak more specifically in interviews about their practices. Creative producers Ingrid LaFleur and Daniel Kimotho give insights on cryptocurrency and its ability to increase economic activity and output from African perspectives. Nelly Y. Pinkrah discusses how histories of race, Blackness, and (media) technology have always been intimately intertwined. Finally, Awour Onyango focuses on the Kenyan art scene which is countering the erasure of Kenyans from Nairobi's tech boom through digital and VR work.

Do enjoy this utterly analogue version of C&!  
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# 50

## YEARS

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- |  |   |  |   |  |  |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|
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Robert Irwin, Blocky (2008), Art Basel in Basel, 2015 (Top); Art 05 in Basel, 1974, by Kurt Wysz (Bottom)

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## CONTENTS

6 – 9

### EMBODYING FORMS OF KNOWING AND BEING

Enos Nyamor looks at digital arts from Africa and their potential for connecting to the past and inventing the future

10 – 13

### REMAKING MONEY

Two experts explain cryptocurrency's use, social significance, and implementation in Africa

14 – 19

### HELLO NICE

In conversation with Natalie Paneng, the South African artist building a bridge between Instagram and the art world

20 – 23

### THE DIGITAL HAS BEEN AROUND FOR A WHILE

Nelly Y. Pinkrah reimagines the digital, from the automaton as a proxy for a Black subject to West African weaving as code

24 – 27

### BLACK MIRRORS AND AFRO-SURREALISM

In conversation with David Alabo, the Moroccan Ghanaian artist creating speculative digital African landscapes

28 – 31

### SILICON SAVANNA

How Kenyan artists highlight their subjectivities through virtual reality

# EMBODYING FORMS

# OF KNOWING

Our author **ENOS NYAMOR** looks at digital arts from Africa and their potential for connecting to the past and inventing the future.



“It is possible that the convergence of vernacular and traditional knowledge can contribute to ways of rethinking technology.”



# AND BEING

both images Isaac Kariuki, *Weaponize the Internet*, 2017.  
© Courtesy Isaac Kariuki

It is more than two years now since the release, in early 2018, of Ryan Coogler's Hollywood blockbuster film *Black Panther*, and the spell it cast still lingers. Nearly every conversation on the reinvention of African consciousness begins and ends with the fictional Wakanda, sparking ideas of an Afro-Renaissance. But, at the same time, it is almost an incongruous concept. The magical realism of an advanced and mythological African society, one that is hidden from the glare of the civilized world and which merges technology and ritual, is inherently experimental.

The novelty of this encounter, of the fantasy of a technologically sophisticated world imbued with nonhuman agency, has supported the universal concept of digital arts from Africa. And the mention of this form of expression must be contained in the same breath as the equally appealing notions of Afro-Futurism and, of late, Afro-Metropolis.

When the ZKM (Karlsruhe)—in collaboration with Dakar's Ker Thiosanne and Johannesburg's Fak'ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival—organized a series of digital art exhibitions in 2018 and early 2019, under the umbrella title *Digital Imaginaries*, it was evident that the premise was constructed on the hypothesis that Africa is the latest entrant into the global digital sphere. While this idea represents a sense of altruism, it suggests that Africa—here representing a collection of all nationalities on the continent—has not undergone all the stages of industrialization. And so it is categorically a leap from the dark ages straight into what may be the fourth industrial revolution.

Even then, this “hyphenation” of digital arts and Africa is problematic. Why, for example, are there no special categories for digital arts from Asia, Europe, or the Americas? In his essay “Intense Proximity: Concerning the Disappearance of Distance,” which appeared as part of the documentation for the 2012 La Triennale, Okwui Enwezor observed that the world is increasingly interconnected and defined by a convergence that produces new relationships of proximity. At any rate, the digital sphere is borderless and brings into perspective the multiplication of social structures across urban centers in every corner of the globe.

There are many approaches to digital arts from Africa, but the most dominant tendency is to reflect on the ecological impact of obsolete components. Africa has become a dumping ground for used and faulty technological gadgets and machines. During the sixth edition of the Afropixel Festival, held from February to May 2018 in Dakar, Senegal, the focus was on mining old gadgets and repurposing them to assert local agency. Although creating value in found objects is commendable, it also highlights the challenge of digital arts from Africa. Upcycling is dependent per se on manufactured and discarded items, without suggesting a fresh way of producing original components. Again, this thrusts digital arts from Africa into a cycle of dependency rather than of innovation.

As the gap between form and content widens, and because of the obvious disjunction between audiences and productions, digital arts from Africa is likely to also be hurled into liminality. Video art, including virtual reality, has become a pillar of digital arts from Africa and merely domesticates the capacity of digital platforms to nourish the imagination and forms of expression. There is also a noticeable tendency toward site-specific digital arts from Africa, but to transfer them from their original spaces to new locations is to distort their meanings. For example, a selection of works from workshops in Dakar was showcased at the ZKM in Karlsruhe. These works, mainly composed of found and upcycled gadgets, were likely

to be irrelevant in such a context, where they can simply become sculptures made of discarded components and not necessarily extensions of the imagination.

But it is the notion of Afro-Futurism that is often the core of digital art from Africa. The sudden surge in visions of a post-human dimension of Africa is significant. Yet these digital humanist sensibilities are often fashioned in accordance with, or as a reflection of, fantasies in the Global North. If Afro-Futurism exists, then Euro-Futurism must also be defined. Some artists have become critical in their work of the fog of Afro-Futurism. In the video installation *We Need Prayers: This One Went to the Market* (2018), the Nairobi-based Nest Collective satirically rebukes Afro-Futurism as largely market-based, fashioned for a Western audience, and disconnected from the realities of Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora.

What is required, perhaps, is a new metaphor for digital arts from Africa. It is possible that the convergence of vernacular and traditional knowledge can contribute to ways of rethinking technology. Indeed, perceptions of technical vernacular knowledge and coded traditions were part of “Premonitions,” the second phase of the Digital Imaginaries festival held at the Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg in 2018. Beyond approaches to ecological sustainability and computational functionality, the focus is on the precedence of both human and nonhuman others. Collaborations between artists, cultural producers, and scientists have been instrumental in developing algorithms for traditional practices. Working in a new artistic project, Russel Hlongwane, Alex Coelho, Tegan Bristow, and João Roxo have been exploring how to bring vernacular knowledge into contemporary digital practice. One result has been the use of a software that transforms beaded patterns into code. Moreover, tapping data from the South African Human Genome Program, Joni Brenner and Marigold, a Zimbabwean beadwork cooperative, interpreted and visualized genetic population data into a necklace.

Although narratives around digital art from Africa can barely escape the traps of classification, as well as the desire to correspond to Western ideals, reducing Africa to a new entrant is regressive. People of African descent have been active in the process of developing digital technologies, but their efforts may have been obliterated by institutional violence. Now, with evidence of coded bead patterns, communicative frequencies with nonhuman agencies, and connections to ancient practices, new media can embody the new forms of consciousness and expressions of “otherness” that have come to define digital art from Africa. ■

—  
ENOS NYAMOR is an art-writer from Nairobi, a former student of the C& workshop in Nairobi, a former Akademie Schloss Solitude fellow, and an MFA art-writing candidate at the School of Visual Arts, NYC. He lives and works in New York City.



**“People of African descent have been active in the process of developing digital technologies, but their efforts may have been obliterated by institutional violence.”**



above The Nest Collective, *We Need Prayers: This One Went To Market*, 2018.

© Courtesy The Nest Arts Company

below François Knoetze, *Core Dump*, Dakar featuring Bamba Diagne. Film still: Anton Scholtz, 2018.

© Courtesy François Knoetze. Film still: Anton Stoltz

# REMAKING MONEY



What's all the excitement surrounding the alternative currency about? To demystify cryptocurrency, **C&** spoke with two experts. **INGRID LAFLEUR**, artist and founder of think tank The Afrofuture Strategies Institute, and **DANIEL KIMOTHO**, of cryptocurrency blockchain provider EOS Nairobi, explain its use, social significance, and implementation in Africa.

**“The best part of cryptocurrency is that it makes a person take a closer look at how our current economic system operates, and extracts from and dehumanizes Black people.”**

So, what exactly is cryptocurrency? Cryptocurrency works similarly to traditional money in that it can be exchanged online in token form for goods and services. Many companies and even individuals have issued their own currencies which can be traded for whatever another company or person provides. Cryptocurrency is created using computer code and is worth what the market believes it's worth at its time of trading. And blockchain is the decentralized technology used to track and record transactions across many computers. The blockchain is maintained by middlemen called miners. They ensure the transactions are honest and keep the trading route secure and open.

Anyone who is looking to diversify their assets or process monetary transactions outside of more traditional means can use blockchain, which tends to be a very secure process. It's much more difficult to hack cryptocurrency than local or national banks. No matter how big and secure, the largest banking firms in the world are still subject to breaches from time to time. Cryptocurrency allows us to buy goods and services like any other form of currency, but the method of transaction is almost completely digital. There is no reserve amount in a safe—the amount you send is the amount that exists. So cryptocurrency is quickly becoming a creative way to stay ahead of financial data loss.

**TASH MOORE** What drew you to activism and entrepreneurship in the context of cryptocurrency?

**INGRID LAFLEUR** Cryptocurrency has always fascinated me, but I sharpened my focus when I began to look at ways to address the poverty issue in Detroit. Because cryptocurrencies introduce a new economic system that has the ability to reflect the values of the community, they can be a great tool to use in fighting against economic injustices.

**DANIEL KIMOTHO** My [professional] network got curious about the various types of money, especially cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin, that exist alongside central bank money with its traditional notes and coins, bank money (b-money) issued as debt instruments [such as credit-card payments] by banks, electronic money (e-money) such as [Vodafone's phone-based transfer and financing service] M-Pesa, and investment money (i-money) that is backed by assets or commodities such as gold.

We [...] went a step further to understand the environment in which crypto networks operate. The world of open source had started leveraging cryptocurrencies as an incentive system to get the platform and applications built and services delivered to the network. We implemented entrepreneurship in this relatively new environment.

**TM** How do you incorporate cryptocurrency into your everyday life?

**IL** I can't say that it is really present in my everyday life. I wish I had more opportunities to use my crypto. Because of the current global recession, I have begun paying more attention to the market.

**DK** At present, it is still very complex to move between the different forms of money. For example, moving from bitcoin to M-Pesa requires several platforms and steps. That means that active daily interaction with cryptocurrencies is done by individuals who are trading between the different assets. Or those who are offering services to open-source networks involved in governance, network operation, or management and platform development.

As more opportunities emerge from the growth and innovations of open-source crypto network communities and corporate enterprises, more ways to interact with cryptocurrencies will emerge.

**TM** How can cryptocurrency benefit Africans and the Diaspora?

**IL** I think the best part of cryptocurrency is that it makes a person take a closer look at how our current economic system operates, and how it extracts from and dehumanizes Black people. A system that has enabled Black bodies to be bought and sold, treated as assets to be traded, leveraged, and used for collateral. The economy has extracted time, energy, and talent from Black bodies to benefit white power structures for a long time. And I do think a certain level of economic justice can be attained through the creation and usage of cryptocurrency within a cooperative economic model.

More directly, there are coins like Guap, a cryptocurrency created by Tavonia Evans, a technology specialist [and cryptocurrency evangelist] from the US. The usage of Guap encourages spending at Black-owned businesses. And I believe it is important to support crypto projects coming out of Africa and the African Diaspora.

**TM** I've seen Ms. Evans featured in Crunchbase, a business platform, and on Blavity, a tech community for Black creativity. Her currency is meant to encourage and facilitate transactions outside of traditional banking, which has been historically hostile to Black businesses both in the US and internationally. Is that correct?

**IL** Yes, as well as supporting Black businesses.

**DK** Cryptocurrencies allow for capital flows in Africa both from within the continent and from other parts of the world. Firms and individuals can choose to produce their goods and services in Africa. Open-source crypto networks have incentivized the advocacy of their technologies in Africa as well as the development of those technologies and service delivery by leveraging cryptocurrencies.

Since cryptocurrencies are programmable forms of money, people from the continent of Africa and the Diaspora can leverage them to connect with one another, to bridge the trust needed to trade and transact.

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## C&

Contemporary And (C&) is an art magazine and a dynamic space for issues and information on contemporary art from Africa and its Global Diaspora. C& publishes weekly features, columns, reviews, and interviews in English and French on contemporaryand.com. C& América Latina (C& AL) focuses on the connections between Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa (amlatina.contemporaryand.com). Texts on this platform are published in Portuguese, Spanish, and English. The C& print issues are published twice a year.

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**CONCEPT**  
Julia Grosse  
Yvette Mutumba

**EDITORIAL TEAM**  
Julia Grosse  
Yvette Mutumba  
Will Furtado  
Theresa Sigmund  
Olivia Buschey  
Elisabeth Wellershaus  
Mearg Negusse

**AUTHORS**  
Christa Dee  
Russel Hlongwane  
Tash Moore  
Enos Nyamor  
Awour Onyango  
Nelly Y.Pinkrah

**BOARD MEMBERS**  
Bisi Silva († 2019)  
Christine Eyene  
David Adjaye OBE  
N'Goné Fall  
Thelma Golden  
Thomas Lax  
Yinka Shonibare MBE  
Suzana Sousa

**COPY EDITING**  
Jenifer Evans  
Simon Cowper

**GRAPHIC DESIGN**  
Britta Rogozinski,  
SHIFT Design, London

**PRINTING**  
BVZ Berliner Zeitungsdruck  
GmbH, Berlin

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**FRONT COVER**  
David Alabo, *Dream Bubble*, 2019. Digital Art Print. Courtesy the artist

**BACK COVER**  
David Alabo, *Introspection*, 2019. Digital Art Print. Courtesy the artist

**“Because cryptocurrencies introduce a new economic system that has the ability to reflect the values of the community, they can be a great tool to use in fighting against economic injustices.”**

**TM** Cryptocurrency can overcome boundaries created by nationalism, overt tribalism, or sheer distance, introducing to one another communities and partners whose shared interest is trading.

**DK** The reduction of trust barriers enables people to invest more, trade more, and thereby to increase the economic activity and output among Africans and people of African descent [outside of or alongside Western infrastructure].

**TM** Where do you see cryptocurrency in the future?

**IL** I think a shift is happening. We will see more usage and acceptance of cryptocurrencies, especially in the US, but with Africa leading the way. I wouldn't be surprised if Rwanda took the lead within Africa.

**TM** Cryptocurrencies are gaining popularity and recognition, and Africa is slated to lead innovation as well as population growth in the twenty-first century, so it follows that Africa would become an epicenter for online currency trading as traditional exchanges reach their physical limits.

**DK** I see increasing adoption, as the digital-native generation interacts with the concepts of blockchain, cryptocurrency, and bitcoin. They will slowly grow into an acceptable

form of money alongside central bank currencies, b-money, e-money, and i-money. This will become obvious when governments start accepting cryptocurrencies as a form of payment for levies.

**TM** What are some of the weaknesses that could be addressed?

**IL** In order for cryptocurrencies to be widely used, we need to have lots of educational classes and workshops available. Unfortunately, there are a bunch of scams that are deterring participation. It is very important to keep people fully informed so that they can participate responsibly.

**DK** There are technical challenges around building up the capacity to handle a consistently large number of transactions happening at the same time. There are also social challenges that could be addressed with the right education and communication, by explaining exactly what the technologies are, what they can be used for, how to use them, and why they are important. There is a lot of investment that is going into this pioneering work, as can be seen by the growing number of cryptocurrency wallet users since 2016.

**TM** In other words, the people who are building and using the exchanges now—the pioneers. What are the strengths of cryptocurrency?

**IL** Two of the biggest strengths are the ability to choose which economic system you want to participate in and the encrypted peer-to-peer capabilities.

**DK** The data stored within the blockchain is highly secure and the records are immutable, which has allowed the technology to prove itself over the years since bitcoin has been in existence. This has increasingly given investors confidence to hold cryptocurrencies in their portfolios.

I am also grateful that the technologies exist in a permissionless open platform that

anyone can participate in. This has been of great benefit to me and my team from Africa because we have been able to interact with the rest of the world on a brand-new technology at the same time.

And finally: novelty. New ideas have the advantage of gaining support from some of the world's smartest minds who are looking to change how the world works. Cryptocurrencies have attracted large numbers of talented individuals from all around the globe, with some of them receiving support from venture funds and other capital sources to build new technologies that could change the face of the financial world.

**TM** In closing, cryptocurrency, like any form of currency, has pluses and minuses. When cryptocurrency is made into a physical coin for instance, it falls prey to many of the pitfalls of traditional currency, including making an impact environmentally depending on the materials used:

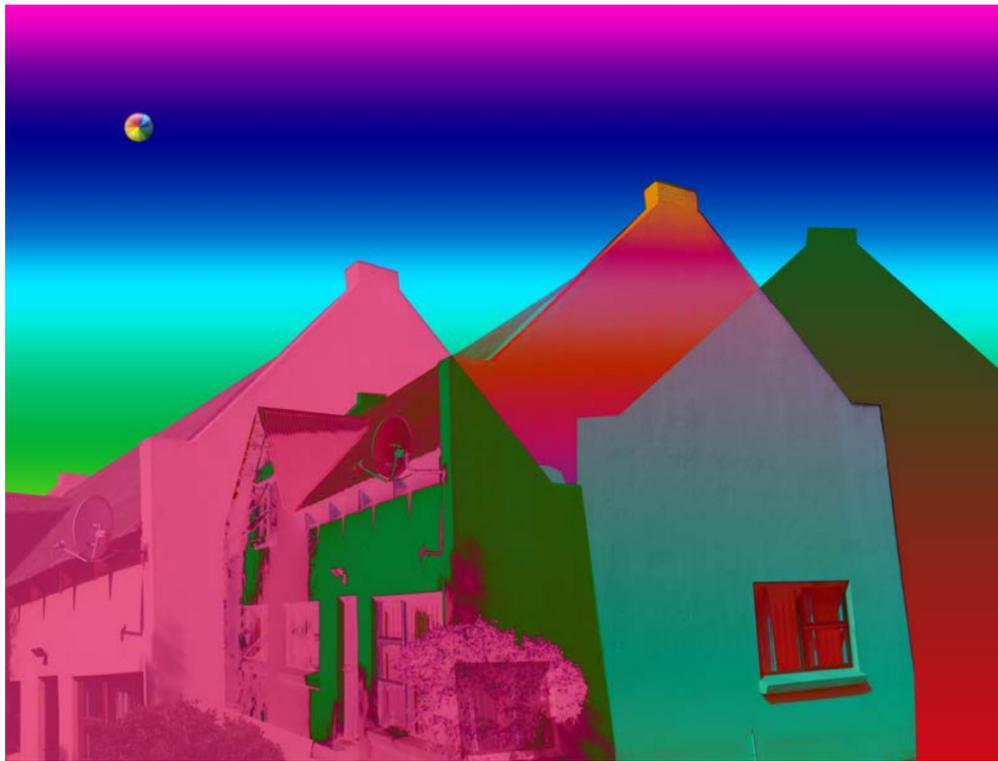
“According to the Bitcoin Energy Consumption Index, Bitcoin mining consumed approximately 51 trillion terawatts of electricity per year as of February 2018. That figure has risen steadily and inexorably over time, irrespective of day-to-day market movements, prompting policymakers to take a closer look at Bitcoin's carbon footprint.”—Brian Martucci, Money Crashers

Because a new predetermined amount of bitcoin is minted whenever miners complete a new blockchain, there will continue to be a demand for nonrenewable sourcing. ■

—  
**TASH MOORE** is a bicoastal Detroit booster, social entrepreneur, and activist who is deeply passionate about promoting diversity & inclusion. She was a coordinator of the 2018 C& Critical Writing Workshop in Detroit.



# HELLO



South African design artist **NATALIE PANENG** entered the digital art world through her vlog Hello Nice. Since then, she has built a bridge between Instagram and the art world by successfully linking multiple audiences. Her playful creations draw on digital identities, on imagined worlds, and on the everyday influence of the internet. Our writer **CHRISTA DEE** spoke to Paneng about her creative process and the digital art landscape in South Africa.

Natalie Paneng, *Hey MTV Welcome To My Crib*, Episode 3, 2019. Courtesy the artist

# NICE

Natalie Paneng, *A Nice Research Booth and Vaporwave Response Computer*, 2019. Courtesy the artist



**“A lot of online platforms are also changing—algorithms and stuff have created certain limitations. But for now, I think things are more possible online.”**

**CONTEMPORARY AND (C&)** Your work explores identity and how we engage with the digital through the use of personas or characters. How has this practice developed over time?

**NATALIE PANENG** I’ve built and added new devices and found ways to explore more refined and experimental techniques. There has also been a shift toward simulating more imagined worlds and reflecting on my experience online. My work is still super playful, but more abstract—I’ve moved away from the didactic structure that was often present in *Hello Nice* (2016-19).

**C&** Your recent still and video works include visual signifiers and aesthetic references from your earlier work but push further into collage, visual mind mapping, lo-fi video textures, and trippy distortions.

**NP** I enjoy playing with layering and multiplying images of myself to kind of amplify my existence. Through distortions and textures, I try to simulate elements of my imagined world and bring them to life. I still take a lot of references from Vaporwave and lo-fi aesthetics, but I’ve found a way to apply them so that they fit in with the curation of my world and its signifiers. There is always an element of trippiness and glitch references in my work as it aims to break perceptions of reality—it aims to feel like a crazy moment in which fantasy coexists with a weird news reporter, giving you insight for thirty seconds.

**C&** You often describe yourself as a multidisciplinary artist, not as a digital one. What do these identifications mean to you?

**NP** Being a multidisciplinary artist has always been about using more than one medium and multiple skill sets to create work. And even within my digital work, the mode of presentation might be analogue. So I don’t call myself just one thing.

**C&** Is the process of teaching yourself an important aspect of your practice?

**NP** A lot of my digital skills are self-taught and through that navigation I have developed a style which I feel is pretty distinct. In the process of teaching myself techniques, I have developed an aesthetic that I call amateur, but I have learnt that it is also my very particular way of navigating these programs. I have a certain amount of control when creating like this.

**C&** You share your work, explore visual and sonic concepts, and map out your thoughts on Instagram, involving followers in the creative process. This blurs the line between “finished” works and thought processes.

**NP** I see the internet and the social platforms I share my work on as digital playgrounds. Through online sharing I continue a dialogue I started years ago and build more of my abstract world and its characters. I’m also often sharing new skills and questions and reminding the internet that I still exist.

**C&** In 2019, you were part of the Fak’ugesi Residency, during which you created a research booth focused on digital forms. For other exhibitions recently, you have printed out your digital work. How does your work translate from the digital to the print format?

**NP** I try to find a healthy balance between my presentation modes. I want to present work that is tangible. Translating my digital work into print has allowed me this opportunity. And in the research booth, I presented digital work that required viewers to engage. I am trying to find ways to make digital art accessible within and beyond the screen.

**C&** How do you think the South African creative space frames digital art and the possibilities available for artists such as yourself?

**NP** I wish there was more visibility for digital artists. I don’t think I have found that community just yet, which sucks. But I know I need to keep contributing until I find it. So far, the internet has offered me a platform and endless access. Yet a lot of online platforms are also changing—algorithms and stuff have created certain limitations. But for now, I think things are more possible online.

**C&** What are the opportunities and challenges for young digital artists in South Africa?

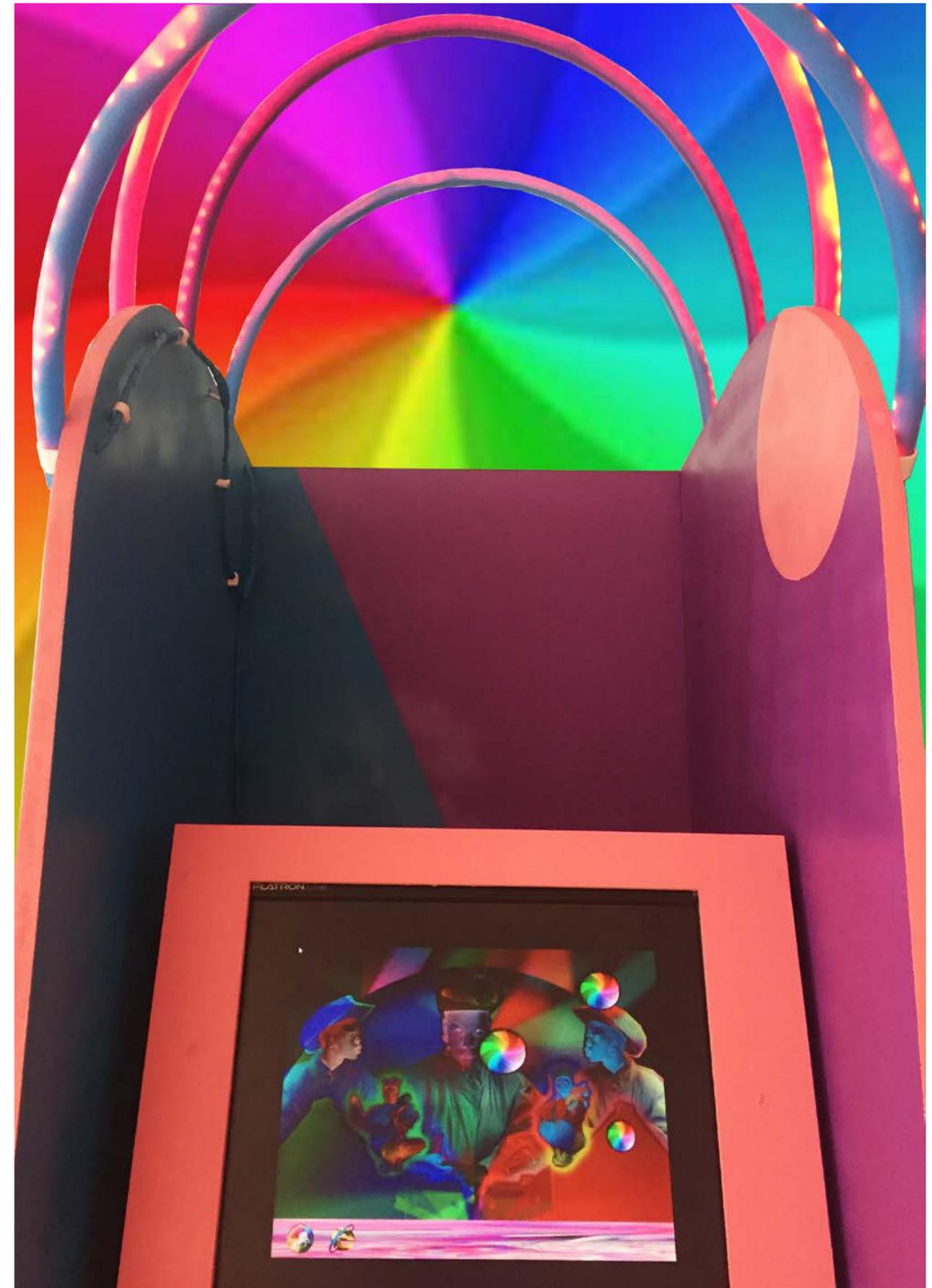
**NP** I think the main opportunity is being able to offer alternative perspectives and show younger artists that creating digitally is possible. I hope that more opportunities will arise, so that young artists need to compromise less, and that more platforms will protect them as well as connect them. Because digital art isn’t as tangible as other art, entering other art spheres can be difficult. Digital artists are often made to compromise when it comes to presenting their work in commercial art spaces.

**C&** What are you working on now, and how do you see your career evolving over the next year?

**NP** My focus has shifted toward experimental video art. I am creating more video work and pushing my technical boundaries as far as I can. I’m hoping to explore this in different formats, maybe even by creating a short film or two. I am really enjoying world building, playing around with existing in the abstract, and presenting those worlds in multiple formats. Getting more technically skilled and learning will also be a focus. I think this is the time to reinforce my foundations as a digital artist. ■

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*CHRISTA DEE is a Digital Visual Anthropologist and writer. Her previous anthropological research has focused on Instagram and its uses for rethinking Johannesburg imaginaries and mapping practices. Her recent master’s research unpacks the remediation of African knowledge and technology as form through digital art shared on the internet.*

opposite Natalie Paneng, *A Nice Research Booth and Vaporwave Response Computer*, 2019.  
Courtesy the artist



# THE DIGITAL HAS BEEN AROUND FOR A WHILE



Odete Semedo in the film *Quantum Creole*, Filipa César, 2020. Courtesy the artist

The history of technology is inseparable from the history of Africans. From the automaton as a proxy for a Black subject to West African weaving as code, **NELLY Y. PINKRAH** writes about reimagining the digital.

“Power only lies in Relation, and this power is that of, and belongs to, all” (Édouard Glissant, translated by Sam Coombes in *Édouard Glissant: A Poetics of Resistance*). How we relate—to each other, to any thing, living, dead, material or not, any structure or system, the world—is determined by media and technology. They constitute the reality in which experiences become possible, and so they shape our understanding of the world. They are never innocent. The history of ideas around media and technology has always been intimately intertwined with thinking about race and colonialism, that is, racial thinking. New media scholar Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has elaborated on this extensively. In her 2006 book *Freedom and Control*, for example, she shows how racialization was central to the development of the internet. Her 2012 essay *Race AND/ as technology* considers race as technology, reflecting on racial technologies such as segregation. Termed homophily, she explains, segregation became the underlying principle of network sciences. The simple assumption that the “same people”—“same” here is based on problematic identity categories such as race—want to be together, and thus only interact with each other, has created the infamous echo chambers we are now trapped in, individually and

collectively. This has an immense impact on how we are connected and pushes us into online relationships which in turn dictate the information we can consume. Louis Chude-Sokei, another scholar, has created an incredible testament to the overlapping imaginaries and relations of and between Blackness and technology. In *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (2016), drawing from literature, including science fiction, and the sonic, he shows how the automaton has always been the projection of the other, and in the US this other was certainly the Black slave. There is much more material to cite on the point I'm making: if we ask how racism as a system of knowledge and media technology organizes life and social structures, the answer depends on pushing the boundaries of what counts as technology in the first place, and, subsequently, finding the lineages and linkages between media, technology, and race.

In Western popular perception, Blackness is still often considered to be in stark conflict with technological advancement, innovation (which is associated with the future, or futurity, as positivity), and progress. The reasons for this are complex, manifold, and historically traceable. One umbrella term has come to be used for a lot of creation from the African continent that touches, however slightly, upon technoculture and science fiction. But Afro-Futurism has its very own history. Alongside that, we must keep in mind the diversity of contexts:

the political history of each African country's social, economic, and governance structures, which affect relationships to media and technology, as well as how media and technology are embedded in each respective society. Any aesthetic, any piece or project, emerging from this fragmented field that is the digital—whether it uses digital technology to create an artwork decoupled from the digital (in so far as that's possible) or to critically examine the digital by using that technology—should be considered precisely through this unique set of relations and relationalities, the bound-together things that shape existence in the contemporary world.

The digital has been around for a while. Computing happened well before computers, and digital systems existed before machines were able to use digital language—code. The term stems from the Latin word *digitus*, simply meaning finger or toe. When something can be divided into discrete countable units, it is digital. The keys of a piano are a digital system, as are our hands (see Florian Cramer's 2014 essay "What Is 'Post-Digital'?"). What is colloquially referred to when the digital is mentioned today is either the internet (as a system of computer networks) or an electronic machine able to compute zeros and ones. What the etymology also tells us is that it doesn't make much sense to strictly divide reality into digital and analogue. A lot of devices are hybrids, and the analogue can be as computational as the digital can be non-computational. Besides, digital technology has become so all-encompassing that it has literally transformed every aspect of life on earth (although for many this statement still seems to be an exaggeration). Media possess performative qualities, an absence in presence, or an immaterial materiality (media philosopher Sybille Krämer has written extensively about this). This is why they are prone to becoming ubiquitous without us being aware of them all the time. Just as we wouldn't be able to communicate properly if we were thinking about the grammar and syntax of language

constantly, we now interact with interfaces—flawlessly designed screens—that hide the unthinkable amounts of infrastructure and labor needed to create them or to run the internet. Not to mention the algorithmic systems of surveillance and capture we are exposed to. In public, at borders, airports, and through applications on our devices, we don't even notice how algorithms decide what we are offered and see to buy or read, where we are allowed to go or enter, when we are profiled, and what credit we'll receive. Media and technology are never neutral—they mirror society and tend to hide and become opaque.

The newest work by Portuguese filmmaker Filipa Cesar, *Quantum Creole*, reflects the history of digital code by illuminating specific and seemingly unexpected relationalities. This documentary offers a whole spectrum of modes of seeing, hearing, thinking, imagining, and mapping out a different world by way of creolization—a concept widely associated with Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant. The description of the film reads: "While the Punch-card technology, designed for the textile loom, was fundamental for the development of the computer, the binary code is closer to the ancient act of weaving than to that of writing. *Quantum Creole* is an experimental documentary film of collective research into creolization, addressing its historical, ontological and cultural forces. Referring to the minimum physical entity in any interaction—quantum—the film utilizes different imaging forms to read the subversive potential of weaving as Creole code. West African Creole people wove coded messages of social and political resistance into textiles, countering the colonists' languages and technologies. As the new face of colonization manifests itself as a digital image, upgrading terra nullius in the form of an ultra-liberal free trade zone in the Bissagos Islands, it also marks the continuation of the violence that erupted several centuries ago with the

**“Textile creation is an elaborate technology, often looked down upon as ‘only’ women’s work, a kind of craft. Its resistant qualities had to be unearthed exactly like the history of women in computing.”**

creation of slave-trading posts in the place then known as the Rivers of Guinea and Cape Verde.”

Textile creation is an elaborate technology that has been feminized as a craft and thus identified as a poor technology. Its technological qualities and the part it played in articulating political resistance needed to be unearthed, like the history of women in computing (see, for example, Sadie Plant's 2008 book *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*). In *Quantum Creole*, Guinean writer and literary theorist Odete Semedo talks about “cloths as bearers of speech. They simply speak.” If truth be told, it is an elusive task trying to translate this image of the beginnings of a media-technological planetary transformation, this binary weaving system that was the loom, into the massive operation that this formalized set of rules has become today. What does the digital say? The cultural logic of the binary that is enforced and materialized through the digital increasingly becomes contested ground, a site to be broken up. For decades, this theoretical work has been done by the so-called disciplines of minorities: feminist theory, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. They have questioned the Enlightenment way of constructing everything as binary oppositions—nature/culture, human/machine, Black/white, master/slave (the latter terminology is used in informatics and software engineering, by the way), and more. But here I specifically speak of the practice, the actual work of programming. It is possible to code differently, to build networks other than those that are currently authoritative, networks with “structures that privilege difference and inclusion” (see the 2019 essay *Homophily: The Urban History of an Algorithm*, by Chun, Laura Kurgan, Dare Brawley, Brian House, and Jia Zhang), but it will be a question of power. I'd say, the more people learn how to code and use digital tools the better—power to the people.

And just as Cesar refers to the quantum, so too do other approaches invested in

reimagining the conditions and possibilities of life on earth. (This also has to do with an urge to approach and contest the concept of Western linear time, but that would be another article. See for example Michelle M. Wright's 2015 book *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, conceptualizing Blackness as a “when and where” rather than a “what.”) The literary and artistic collective Black Quantum Futurism, for example, explores and merges quantum mechanical interpretations of specific concepts like spacetime with Afro-centric knowledge and understandings of it to argue against their Western counterparts. And in 2018, I read a quote by Barry Esson, a member of the activist-curatorial collective Arika, about Fred Moten's book trilogy titled *consent not to be a single being*, a phrase taken from Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990). Esson says:

“Enlightenment or Western ideas of ethics were always influenced strongly by classical physics, so 400 years of European history tells us that we are individuals acting on each other through laws of force. But particle physics has moved beyond that and says there are no fixed objects, that objects are entangled, that they can be non-locatable, that it's better to think of individual occurrences as statistically probable emergences out of some kind of field.”

I'm curious to radically think about and experience such a field. It calls for a re-conceptualization of relations—between the living, the technical, the environment and the world, the material, and all of their intersections. It involves the reinvention and recollection of and resistance to the world we live in right now. ■

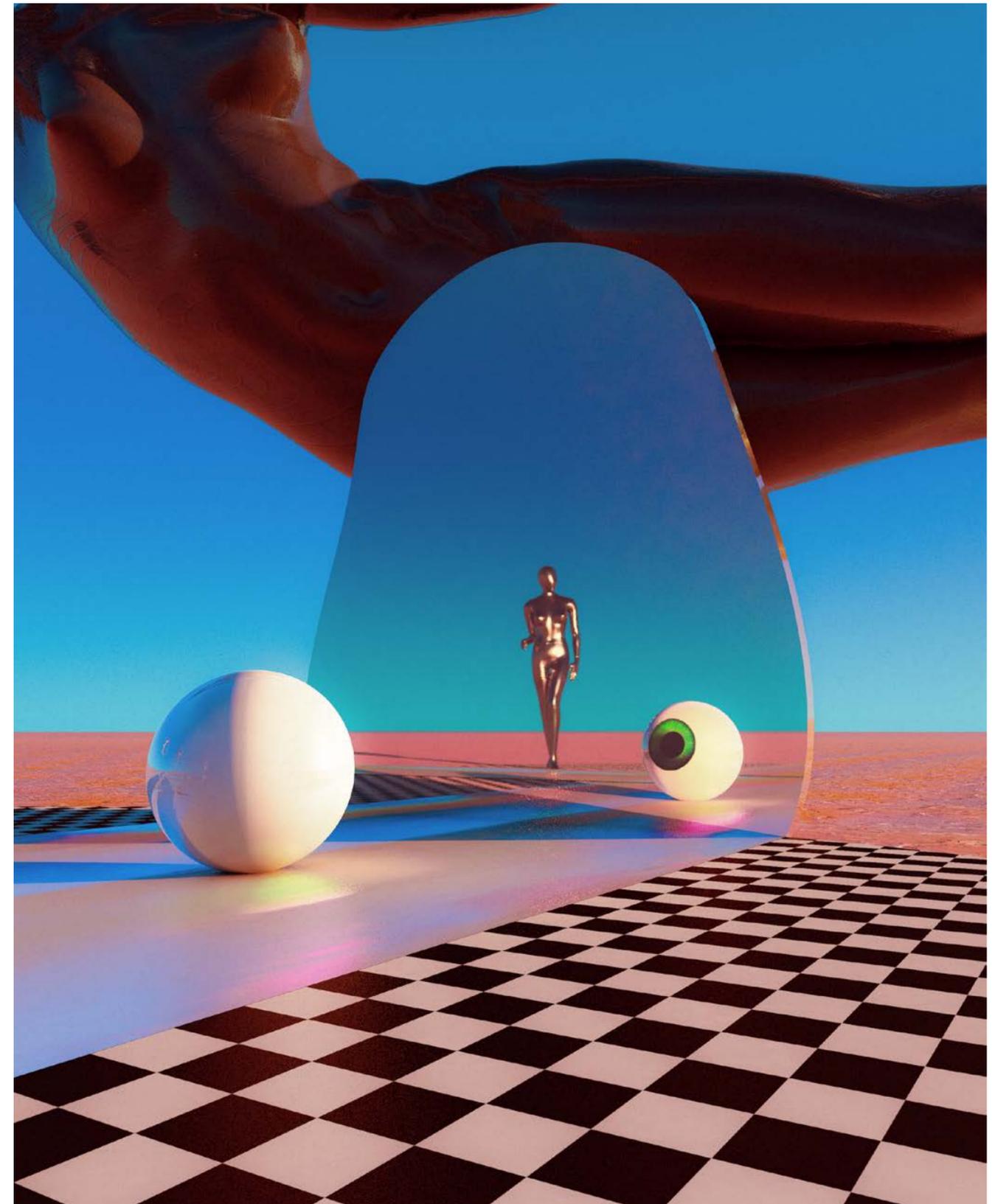
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NELLY Y. PINKRAH is a political activist and cultural and media theorist currently pursuing her PhD on Édouard Glissant and cybernetics in the research training group “Cultures of Critique” at Leuphana University.



# BLACK MIRRORS AND AFRO-SURREALISM

Afro-Surrealism is the approach **DAVID ALABO** uses to visually articulate digital African landscapes that are speculative, familiar, and fantastical. Based in Accra, the artist has a unique Moroccan Ghanaian identity and forged his creative personality in Italy, Ghana, and the United States. Alabo's strange and eerie images are fashioned by software, with all its possibilities for productive manipulation.

opposite David Alabo, *Lust*, Digital Art Print, 2019. Courtesy the artist



**“Afro-Surrealism focuses on augmentation, on overcoming the many struggles that define our history and assuming the agency of our narrative.”**



David Alabo, *Sablier*, 2019. Digital Art Print. Courtesy the artist

**“‘Afro-Futurism’ gained popularity as a means to describe a movement and way of thinking established long before the term’s inception. Exploring identity within the context of alienation and displacement in order to envision alternative realities is a natural part of the Black experience.”**

Fragments of Accra, such as the skull, often feature in Alabo’s work—“a statement that is both metaphorical and political about trader women who balance their livelihoods upon their craniums.” His images of an undulating Sahara express loneliness, alluding to states of isolation and alienation associated with mental illness, which the artist thinks needs urgent attention among African peoples. His other concerns include the gendered identities of his subjects, which he obfuscates by creating isolated androgynous figures negotiating vast deserts.

The sum of his work is a kaleidoscopic rendering of Africanity through juxtapositions of African tropes and imaginaries, with a chromatic, shiny quality, that he describes as “reflective points,” in both metaphorical and literal terms. In this interview, Russel Hlongwane speaks to the artist about black mirrors, the tradition of surrealism in Africa, and the possibilities of digital art.

**CONTEMPORARY AND (C&)** Let’s talk Afro-Surrealism, within which I include the traditions of folklore and the literature of Ben Okri and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o. What is your version of surrealist history in Africa, and how have these authors informed the visual manifestation of your practice?

**DAVID ALABO** Surrealism is the perfect genre to describe the complicated and abstract experience of Blackness. It allows an artist to express unfiltered thoughts and emotions in the work, the same way writers do with language. Afro-Surrealism focuses on augmentation, on overcoming the many struggles that define our history and assuming the agency of our narrative. It calls on us to ask what freedom for Black people will look like in the future. Futurism and Surrealism are similar in that they both rely heavily on the speculative—endless possibilities that continue to change, with time as the main influence.

**C&** Where or how do you situate your work within the Afro-Surrealist lineage, given that it is screen based?

**DA** My work is as informed by the past as it is by the present. We live in a world that is dominated by “black mirrors” or screens. Art has transcended the physical realm into the virtual and so have the artists and media that accompany it. We show our works on virtual platforms, so why not make art the same way?

**C&** Do you believe in problematizing the term “Afro-Futurism(s),” as some critics argue for, owing to its history and reductive aesthetic matrix?

**DA** “Afro-Futurism” gained popularity as a means to describe a movement and way of thinking established long before the term’s inception. Exploring identity within the context of alienation and displacement in order to envision alternative realities is a natural part of the Black experience.

Creating and questioning the status quo is just as important as the meaning behind the art. It’s empowering to have that freedom of expression. Our imagination is informed by the past and is inseparable from our visions of the future. Afro-Futurism is more than an aesthetic trend—it’s a beacon of hope and an escape from the harsh realities of the now.

**C&** I am interested in your collaborations with commercial entities like fashion brand Daily Paper and media company Quartz. How does this work exist alongside your Afro-Surrealist practice?

**DA** When you work to create new worlds with people who share your vision, there is a freedom and trust that allows you to explore concepts without hesitation. Daily Paper is dedicated to promoting African culture by honoring the past and its influence on creating a vision of the future. The company pushes the boundaries and challenges perceptions of Africa in the fashion world, which is what I aim to achieve in the art

world too. It just makes sense that we work together and inspire each other.

**C&** What possibilities does digital art present?

**DA** The way we absorb and appreciate art is evolving as fast as the tools and technology we use to create as digital artists. That, together with the impact of years of social media and advertising, means we are almost hardwired to look out for media that are engaging and fluid with motion. Digital art merges seamlessly with the exciting world of augmented reality to add a new way of interacting with art and our perception of reality. We are on a continuous search for new tools to express ideas that are as unique as they are. ■

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RUSSEL HLONGWANE is a cultural producer and creative industries consultant based in Durban. His work obsesses over tensions in *Heritage/Modernity and Culture/Tradition as they apply to Black life*. His said practice includes cultural research, creative production, design, and curatorship.



# SILICON SAVANNA

To counter the erasure of Kenyans from Nairobi's tech boom, the country's artists are stepping up to highlight their subjectivities through virtual reality, writes **AWOUR ONYANGO**.



above Jim Chuchu, *Invocation: The Severance of Ties*, film still, 2015. Courtesy the artist  
below The Nest, *Let This Be a Warning*, 2017. Courtesy The Nest Arts Company



The Nest, *Let This Be a Warning*, 2017. Courtesy The Nest Arts Company

In February 2019, British wildlife photographer Will Burrard-Lucas broke the internet with photos of a black panther (melanistic leopard) in Laikipia—it was touted as the first photographic sighting of its kind on African soil in a hundred years. Perhaps unexpectedly, Kenyans quickly mobilized to dispel this settler-colonial fantasy of sighting and shooting by spreading local photos of the same black panther online, highlighting how flying in from Europe and being helped by locals to take photos of a black panther and taking all the credit wasn't laudable. What was also being challenged was Kenya's image as a vast untouched savanna without people but replete with acacia trees and beautiful wild animals, codified in settler fantasies such as the Hollywood movies *I Dreamed of Africa* and *The Lion King*, and in acacia-tree-at-sunset book covers for all African literature, occasionally featuring a lone Maasai warrior as a dot on the landscape, noble, spear in hand, watching over it. The unpeopled savanna with its precious wildlife and infinite possibilities met the silicon savanna with its opinions, hashtags, fast internet, and technology.

Created through the violent displacement of natives into "reserves" and concentration camps during colonization and then codified through nature parks, reserves, and conservation areas armed with private militias to keep the natives out in the postcolony, the vast unpeopled savanna remains a running motif in the visual semiotics of Kenya. It transcends landscape to create an ideology of a mythic safari land in which a British photographer can take "the first" photograph of a black panther in nearly a century. That the photographer was British only served to highlight the violent colonial ideology of US writer Ernest Hemingway's unoccupied savanna and Danish author Karen Blixen's savanna, where the natives were at best props or silhouettes in the background. The tension

between the colonial fantasy, its underlying violence, the tech-savvy natives of the postcolony, and the dehumanization of the savanna can be traced back to two colonial policies. One is the downgrading of local understandings of art into crafts, curios, and taboos, which influenced which productions were viewed favorably, as in the case of Maa beadwork (in which the Maasai collaborated with the British)—as opposed to Kamba beadwork (which required design consultation from seers and witch doctors). The other is the displacement of natives by settler-colonial and later state apparatuses that pitted them against the wild animals they often cohabited with and sought to put those animals' lives above theirs. This led to the image of the vast unpeopled savanna as a vessel for settler-colonial fantasies like that of US singer Taylor Swift, whose *Wildest Dreams* video reproduces the clichés of Africa.

When this language was repurposed in the mid-2010s to reintroduce Nairobi to the world as "Silicon Savanna," a tech metropolis—"Silicon Valley but on the continent"—the imminent danger was a repeat of that displacement. But if the natives were erased from the settler-colonial savanna, they refuse to go unheard in the silicon one. There has been a push to place Kenyans back in Kenya, as full beings with voices, diverse aesthetics, opinions, and agencies. The colonial idea of art as paintings is also being challenged using the various technologies of the Silicon Savanna, from Basil Ngode's project of mapping digital graffiti on Nairobi buildings (2016), to Melisa Alella's *Leso Stories* (ongoing), to Jim Chuchu's video *Invocations* (2015), to the Nest's *Let This Be a Warning* (2017).

Alella's *Leso Stories* repurposes animation and virtual reality to immerse the viewer in a household in the savanna, a "traditional" homestead where the rich oral, design, performance, and architectural traditions of Kenya's diverse ethnicities are reimaged.



The Nest, *Let This Be a Warning*, 2017.  
Courtesy The Nest Arts Company

Armed with archival reference photographs, Alella modeled characters decked out in lesos, a local cotton fabric whose design is an art form in its own right, hats made from hippo-tooth elements, and beaded bracelets, accessorizing the landscape with assets lifted from lost cultural design traditions, all reimagined as if the colonial displacement had never happened. The human is placed back in the savanna, returned to the imperfect utopia of Kenya's landscapes, in tune with the wildlife that has inspired so many stories and performing and living art. Virtual reality can be perfect for the kind of engagement our oral traditions needed, the call and response as well as the atmosphere.

The Nest's *Let This Be a Warning*, a 360° virtual reality film, also immerses the viewer in the vast unpeopled landscape of the wild savanna of settler-colonial fantasies where everything is possible for those allowed to dream of Africa. Instead of a black panther, an armed Kenyan approaches the viewer, futuristic weapon at the ready, a grand departure from the smiling, meek, and helpful native informant, no *Jambo Bwana* song or *Hakuna Matata*, hostile, present, and markedly uncooperative, unlike the noble Maa warrior of the colonial fantasy. This native isn't here to protect and guide you but to protect the land, the people, and the narrative from you. No displacement will happen here, and as you are surrounded by the unwelcoming party and ferried to another location, you are confronted with the reasons for your unwelcomeness. You are warned not to return and expelled from the land by an armed community ready to defend its own and speak for itself, a community that has reimagined what has been lost and made peace with what is left. The freedom and agency to set terms of engagement with the outside world depicted in *Let This Be a Warning* was evident in 2019 when Kenyans demanded the dismissal of a *New York Times* editor for publishing a picture of dead bodies to illustrate a report on an attack in Nairobi. The Nest's confrontational work questions the invisibility of the East Africans who collaborated with Beyoncé on *The Lion King: The Gift* soundtrack album and the lack of Kenyans playing significant roles in a GQ photoshoot with Kenyan athlete Eliud Kipchoge in March 2020.

In Jim Chuchu's *Invocations: A Severance of Ties*, the silhouette of an initiate, the native informant, is brought to the foreground, separated from its function of reassurance and guidance, upended from its passive stance, placed in the center, facing the camera and not away from it. This silhouette, semiotically linked to the noble Maasai warrior, is given life, agency, opinions—it moves within the space, tries on a mask, reaches for a reimagined past. In place of the guttural chants of the Maa warrior is the determined repeated invocation "I am not your son," as text declaring "This

is not your name" and "I am not your blood" flickers across the screen. The figure battles with foreign definition, obligation, and duty, morphing into its own self-identity. This confrontation with the defining other is complete by the second part of the video, *Invocations: Release*, where the figure dispels all the conditioning in a cloud of smoke, breaking free of the bonds. Chuchu, who is interested in reshaping Blackness, making space for "a Blackness not afraid to dream, a Blackness not afraid to exist in another world," creates a conversation between precolonial cultural rituals considered pagan, banned and made taboo by colonial interests in Christianity and "civilization," and the current interests of the technopolis, geared more toward establishing itself globally in health, finance, and charity, placing the Kenyan struggling for self-definition within these erasing interests. Like Alella, Chuchu argues in favor of reinstating the performance of rituals the British deemed devilish and unchristian as artworks and placing an identity often denied, erased, or quieted down by the savanna right in the middle of that conversation. A reimagination of what was erased ("This is not your name"), a separation of the individual from the creator of the narrative ("I am not your blood"), and a determined rejection of all that is not in service of the good of the individual. All this echoes the push by Kenyan artists to imagine their own definition of art, how to engage with it, and how to place their voices firmly and clearly in the Kenyan narrative. No longer content with their position as passive silhouettes in the savanna, be it the settler-colonial fantasy or the silicon technopolis, Kenyan artists are repurposing the tools and imagery of their erasure to center themselves and their diverse narratives, histories, practices, and reimaginings, no longer asking for a seat at the table but imagining a table of their own. ■

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AWUOR ONYANGO is a writer and visual artist who lives in the pagan citadel of Nairobi in neocolonial Kenya. She explores ways of storytelling in the East African tradition of lived art. Her writing leans toward the Afro-surreal, Afro-SciFi, and Afro-speculative and has been published in various magazines. In 2017, she was longlisted for the Caine Prize.



**“When this language of the savanna is then repurposed to reintroduce Nairobi to the world as the Silicon Savanna, a tech metropolis—‘Silicon Valley but on the continent’—the imminent danger is a repeat of the displacement of locals within the narrative.”**

Melisa Achoko Allela, VR Film Still *Leso Immersive Stories*. Courtesy the artist



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