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The Future is Digital: An introduction to African digital arts

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The role of technology in Africa and the impact of the so-called digital revolution has been much-hailed and well-documented in areas such as commerce, communication, agriculture, media and political activism. While these utilitarian purposes of digital technology have been widely explored, one area that has received less scholarly attention (except perhaps in the case of Nollywood, see below) is the artistic applications of digital technology, the role it has played in the development of creative practices in Africa. Digital culture, as a ubiquitous feature of modern life, allows us to connect to geographical locations, cultures, histories and people that have previously been much less accessible. The new information age and the global connectivity it has brought has forced us to reassess what we thought we knew about Africa, presenting alternative and much more diverse stories and representations of this large and diverse continent. African artists are utilizing this digital space to create, recreate and disseminate new images of Africa in inventive and socio-culturally conscious ways. This special issue of *Critical African Studies* focuses on the proliferation of African digital arts (defined below) in the 21st century.

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. A utopian and techno-optimistic view of technology emphasizes the positive role that more accessible and affordable technologies can play on the African continent in terms of democratization, empowerment and communication. Africa has certainly embraced new technologies, as is prevalent in rising statistics of mobile, smartphone and Internet usage in many parts of the continent, particularly the urban centres. The accelerated process of technological progress that Africa has undergone over the past decade or so is providing multiple possibilities for innovation, including new forms of citizenship and activism (as could be observed, for example, by the use of social networking during the Arab Spring uprisings from 2010). Africa has also in some cases been at the forefront of new technological developments, with Africa-specific technologies such as mobile phone banking (with East Africa's M-Pesa being a case in point), and the use of mobile Internet technologies in agriculture to access market prices, soil censors and weather forecasts. Kenya has been central in the development of many of these technologies, with the conglomeration of tech entrepreneurs in the country leading to the epithet "Silicon Savannah". Africa's tech entrepreneurs are harnessing new ways of understanding user experience and user interface hardware, software and design. This optimism should perhaps be tempered with a more sober view of the impact of new technologies and ICT in Africa, recognizing that technological advancement is still inaccessible in large areas of the continent, and that economic and political failures prevent many Africans from accessing its potential benefits.

Nonetheless, the digital revolution has had a major impact also on the African creative industries, not only in terms production, but importantly, also on the exhibition and dissemination of

art. Digital technology has, for instance, been the driving force behind the development of Africa's first economically self-sustainable popular film industries through the video-film phenomenon spearheaded by Ghana and Nigeria's Nollywood. This model of popular low-budget filmmaking, enabled by affordable digital cameras and desktop editing software, has now been replicated all over the continent. Whereas Nollywood films were initially primarily distributed on DVD and VCD (video compact disc), improved broadband and Internet streaming technology means that these films can now be downloaded or watched on multiple VOD (video-on-demand) platforms online, in Africa and internationally. This is similarly true of many other audio-visual, graphic and literary African art forms and creative output, with digital technology thus having played a crucial role in the proliferation of content creation and providing wider access to African art.

As mentioned above, however, it is important to consider aspects of accessibility. The key to the depth and scope of digital arts in Africa clearly lies in the access to and efficiency of technological infrastructure on the continent, in particular the Internet. The democratizing potential of digital technology should not be overestimated on a continent that are still on the wrong side of the digital divide. Statistics show that in 2014 around 70 million people on the African continent were in possession of a mobile phone (of a total population of 1.2 billion) of which about 60% were smartphones ("DFM 2014 Spotlights African Co-production and Distribution" 2014). Recent research from TeleGeography – an international telecommunications research firm – shows that while Internet in many parts of Africa is still slower than in the west, and limited by a lower penetration rate when compared to the rest of the world, bandwidth capacity is growing faster than anywhere else in the world (Tshabalala 2015). Undersea broadband cables, like the Sea Cable System (Seacom), the Eastern Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy) and the West Africa Cable System (WACS) have helped multiply Africa's access to international bandwidth by 20-fold in just five years. Telecommunication companies in Africa have been working on broadband wireless access technologies in order to make Internet available to the population at large. This fast-improving Internet infrastructure is attracting investor demand. Wireless speeds have improved and their cost is becoming more affordable, at least for the 300 million Africans classified as middle class. There has been a heavy focus on smartphone access on the continent, as the optimal and most effective way of accessing digital technology. Between 2014 and 2015 smartphone usage in Africa almost doubled, as in 2015 it was reported that there were at least 130 million smartphones on the continent, a number that is forecast to reach 350 million by 2017, and 500 million by 2020 ("New Start-ups Target Continent's 300m-strong Middle Class" 2015). Access to 'small screen' digital information and communication technologies are rapidly increasing in Africa, including through mobile phones, tablets and laptops, while Internet access is constantly improving. These technological developments are keenly reflected in the proliferation of digital arts in Africa.

What is digital art? It is, simply put, artistic work or practice that uses digital technologies as an essential part of the creative and/or presentation, dissemination and exhibition process. It is impossible to define as a single phenomenon, but instead includes changing and fluid sets of artistic techniques, technologies and concepts (Hope and Ryan 2014, 3). Christiane Paul (2015, 7-8) likewise defines the term as an umbrella for a broad range of artistic works and practices that cannot be described by a single set of aesthetics or methods. Beryl Graham (2007, 93) simply defines digital art as "art made with, and for, digital media including the internet, digital imaging, or computer-controlled installations". Since the 1970s, various terms have been used to describe these digital practices, including computer art and multimedia art, and digital art itself is often placed under the larger umbrella term of new media art. We know that the impact of digital technology has transformed more traditional creative practices such as painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and music, while new forms, such as net art, digital installation art and virtual reality have become recognized and accepted artistic practices. While the techniques of digital art are used extensively by mainstream media in advertising and by filmmakers to produce visual effects, digital art is also increasingly used in less mainstream and commercially orientated ways, to produce new media art less concerned with economic factors and more with experimentation and creative expression. Some examples of this type

of digital art are mentioned below. Digital art includes a wide range of artistic production, including audio-visual production, animation, interactive projects, websites, filmmaking, and graphic art and design.

It has been argued that digital technologies facilitate a new kind of relationship between place and space: through their capacity to transgress borders and subvert territories, these technologies are implicated in a complex interplay of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Treffry-Goatley 2011). These two concepts, as argued by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (published in English in 1977), exist simultaneously, with mediatization – omnipresent in everyday contemporary cultural experiences – working as a preferential source of deterritorialization through experiences such as migration, tourism and economic transformations. The 'virtual spaces' accessible through digital technology would seem to lead to decidedly deterritorialized cultural experiences, by expanding cultural horizons through digital global media. Such globalized access to information, and of interest here, to art, transforms the relationship between our physical locations and our cultural activities, experiences and identities, thus leading to a seemingly paradoxical process of reterritorialization. I would argue that the process of reterritorialization, following the initial deterritorialization that occurs because of the disappearance of the relation between culture and its social and geographic territories, becomes particularly significant in the context of postcolonial Africa. The creative output described in the articles in this special issue is in many ways profoundly local, speaking to the very specific socio-cultural and –historical experiences and contexts of the geographical locations the art was produced in. At the same time however, the processes of digital creation and transformation, and the mediums of dissemination and reception, open this art up to truly global, transnational encounters; 'glocalisation' at work. The geographic decentralization and displacement occurring through growing African diasporas outside of the continent emphasizes the importance of virtual spaces and connections even further – indeed, a digital diaspora. We could further trace an affinity between deterritorialization, reterritorialization and decolonization. While the Americanization of worldwide cultures and the pervasive influence of American mass media have been denounced as some of the less desirable aspects of globalization, the 'glocalisation' of culture that becomes possible through the use of digital technologies has given us unprecedented access to voices, stories, ideas and views from cultures other than our own, thus resisting cultural hegemony and homogenization. As Callus and Potter assert in their article, referencing Fatoki (2005), digitization has the potential to make Africans producers and exporters of indigenous information, rather than merely passive consumers of imported knowledge. Digital art has enabled African cultures to affirm their creative identities in a global space.

Digital technologies have further broken down the boundaries between artist and audience, and often promote a form of interactivity. Mobile phones, for example, can now be used to simultaneously produce and consume audio-visual content (so-called 'prosumption'), with the Internet making it possible for alternative media productions of all kinds to gain greater visibility. This, then, gives rise to a digital democracy of sorts, with not only creative and socio-cultural implications but also clear socio-political significance. This view exemplifies the perspective that digital technologies can democratize the arts – an ethos of democratization that includes the belief that every person has the right to engage in the arts (Hope and Ryan 2014, 13). Thus, the democratization of art increases public access and involvement in artworks through, for example, the development of new platforms for interactive art outside of gallery or museum spaces. This, at least, has been the process in the western world; in Africa, the distinction between gallery-sanctioned 'high' art and 'lower' forms of popular art, folk art and crafts has always been less clear cut, often artificially enforced by western art markets and patrons. Thus, the shift to digitally produced art in Africa is not so much a transformation of more established and conventional art forms than completely new and innovative ways of cultural and creative expression. We have to retain an understanding of the polycentrism of digital arts, that the dynamics between "the global and the local, the centre and the periphery, the north and the south, are as vital to consider as the broad-scale impacts of globalisation and the traditional geographical centres of economic and cultural power" (Hope and Ryan 2014, 17).

Guided by these notions of polycentrism and multiplicity, digital arts, in the context of this special issue, is deliberately understood in a broad context. When the initial call for papers was released, it listed art forms including, but not limited to: animation, visual arts, filmmaking, game design, photography, illustration, advertising, graphic design, installation art, video films and video art, political cartooning, graphic novels and digital comics, and digital poetry and storytelling. The call for papers resulted in a rich collection of articles that includes a theoretical consideration of the links between digital media, development discourse and political creativity, gallery exhibitions of digitally produced art, video games, comics and online literary platforms. As one of the first of its kind, this collection of articles is intended to provide an entry point into, and serve as inspiration for, further critical consideration and scholarly research into the development, meanings and methods of digital arts in Africa.

The website African Digital Art (africandigitalart.com) has recognized the increasing importance of digital technologies in artistic practice and serves as a virtual space to collate, document and explore the proliferation of new media art on and from the continent. Founded by Kenyan digital artist Jepchumba, this website has indeed been the inspiration behind the idea of this special issue. It has become a platform for innovation and inspiration, highlighting new talent as well as successful designers and artists, with 'Pushing Digital Boundaries' as its tagline. The site sets out to discover new design solutions, artistic expressions and creative talent while striving to foster the emerging and growing technology driven creative community in Africa. Jepchumba maintains that digital technology is transforming the way the world looks at Africa, and that the myopia of the past has been widened through access to technology. Examples of art and creative practice from across the continent are showcased on the site in categories that include contemporary art, print design, film, animation, conceptual art, digital platforms, graphic design, gaming, fashion, interactive art, music, photography and typography. So, while it is clear that examples of digital art and the application of digital technologies in African creative practices abound, scholarly research is still catching up and it here that I hope this special issue will make a useful intervention.

Some of the innovative examples of digital arts include African digital collage, a growing art form that utilizes technology to produce a range of artworks that incorporate digital video, animation, photography, animated gifs and digital photo manipulation. Looking to the past – often-misrepresented, subjugated and suppressed through histories of slavery and colonization – African digital collagists use ethnographic images of Africa to recreate and reinterpret visual representations from the pre- and postcolonial eras. Creating alternative narratives of the past, websites such as the Nigerian Nostalgia Project (nigerianostalgia.tumblr.com) have become a popular online resource for collagists to find historical materials including photographs, videos, sound clips and graphic art. This connection with the past that is enabled by decisively forward-looking and at times even futuristic technologies, is significant. As virtual spaces and environments free us from the limitations and fixity of geographic location, so digital technology could also be utilized the disrupt the linearity of time, refusing to see the past, present and future of postcolonial Africa as clearly demarcated points.

In the area of literature, Badilisha Poetry (badilishapoetry.com) is the largest online archive of African poetry and literature. Digital platforms powered through mobile technology inspired the creators of the site to develop an archive with over 400 African poets from 31 countries who share their work in over 14 different languages. Africa Cartoons (africacartoons.com) is another comprehensive digital platform that acts as an educational encyclopaedia of African political cartooning and cartoonists. Ichyulu (ichyulu.com) is a Kenyan online concept store that collaborates with fashion entrepreneurs from across the continent to feature selected work from African designers and serve as an alternative distribution channel. Awesome Tapes from Africa (www.awesometapes.com) is an archive of rare African music cassette tapes that have been digitized. These are just a few examples of the multiple digital platforms that are showcasing African arts.

Many individual digital artists are emerging from all over the African continent, and in the diaspora. Keyezua (keyezuavision.tumblr.com) is an Angolan-born digital artist who explores the

African renaissance as a contemporary storyteller. Her work investigates a cross-section of topics such as African culture, sex and religion. She experiments with a wide range of mediums and one of her recent projects, called Stone Orgasms, addresses female genital mutilation and the female body. Kenyan-born Wangechi Mutu (wangechimutu.com) is one of the most important contemporary African artists, whose work has achieved much global acclaim. She employs a variety of mediums including video, installation and sculpture and her work often centralizes the female body and confronts the viewer with organic elements intertwined with abstract patterns to create surreal figures. Williams Chechet (www.instagram.com/williamschechet) is a Nigerian digital artist and graphic designer exploring through his art how Africans across the globe understand and experience their own histories and cultures. Inspired by pop art, the psychedelic colours and digitally manipulated futuristic photographs of his project, We Are the North, comprises of a series of art works inspired by portraits of Northern Nigerian. Udegbunam Tochukwu Bernard Johnbosco (osengwa.com/portfolio-item/tbj) is another Nigerian, Lagos-based, graphic artist and illustrator. His creations often utilize intricate lines, patterns and designs found in ankara fabric – colourful wax-print fabrics featuring African patterns and motifs. He works in mixed media and draws inspiration from realism as well as Afro-futurism and symbolism. What should be clear from this handful of examples, is that creative self-expression is crucial for these digital artists, and that they aim to explore, challenge and revise notions of individual and collective African identity.

This special issue commences with a theoretical deliberation on digital media, development and political creativity by Joshua McNamara, in which the author warns against simplistically equating digital technological innovation and application with progress, and against linking social and economic development and digital technology in an uncritically linear way. The concept of digital political creativity is scrutinized, in an urban East African context, with case studies including UN-Habitat's (United Nations Human Settlements Programme) *Block by Block*, a novel programme in which the video game Minecraft is used as a community participation tool in the design of urban public spaces, as well as *Ushahidi*, an online crowdmap created by Kenyans to document the election violence of 2007 through texting reports of violence from their mobile phones or supplying information via email ("ushahidi" meaning witness in Swahili). McNamara points out the limitations of these projects in their political implications, but also how they could at times be applied in unexpectedly creative ways.

Tegan Bristow's article is an exploration of research around the Post African Futures exhibition, held at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2015. The exhibition attempted to challenge the understanding of contemporary digital and communications technologies in relation to contemporary African cultures. African Digital Art's Jepchumba took part in this project through the creation of a podcast series in which she interviewed artists on art, culture and technology. Bristow's article commences with an extensive and important historical outline of scholarship around African positions and philosophies of technology, revealing both the paucity of theoretical engagement in this area as well as the development of new approaches. The article highlights some of the most compelling examples of digital art that featured in the Post African Futures exhibition, tracing links between the spiritual and digital, the past and the future, in which the digital becomes an imagined metaphysical conduit.

Paula Callus and Cher Potter's article studies the rise of digital technologies and related new media in a Kenyan context, using as context the emergence of a growing local video games industry and a new generation of Kenyan video game developers, players and promoters. Through extensive interviews conducted with industry experts and independent artists working in the video games industry in Kenya, the paper explores the design strategies employed by young producers of creative digital content for games. Case studies include Leti Arts, Avandu, Afrikana Digital, Black Division Games, Gaming for Kenya (G4K) and NAICCON (Nairobi Comic Convention), and their findings suggest that these developers and promoters prioritize creating and advocating local content that includes visual and narrative game environments referencing histories and folklore specific to their East African cultural context. Tessa Pijnaker and Rachel Spronk's contribution likewise focuses on video games, but in this instance the mobile app *Africa's Legends*, developed by the Kenyan/Ghanaian company Leti

Arts (also discussed in Callus and Potter's article) in 2012. The app features a game and comics of eight African superheroes based on African folklore, mythology and history, and thus their research affirms the prevalence and importance of localized creative content also posited by Callus and Potter. Their article explores the intersection of digital technologies and social and economic class, a framework which reminds us of the importance of considering the accessibility of technology as mentioned above.

The political potential of digital arts and the transnational geopolitical imagination of Somalians living in the country as well as in the diaspora is probed in Peter Chonka's article on Amin Amir, the most popular and prolific political cartoonist in Somalia. Amir's work, under the name Amin Arts, is disseminated digitally and in print across the Somali territories on a daily basis. The article explores the recurring themes and discourses of Amir's cartoons, including corruption, political violence, 'clan-ism', and ongoing external interference in Somalia and argues that the artist collapses conventional distinctions between diasporic production and local consumption (linked to the deterritorialization/reterritorialization argument I pose above). Chonka argues that this process facilitates the reproduction of particular tropes of shared cultural, ethnic, nationalist or religious identity across multiple political boundaries.

Finally, Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed's article examines the rise of online platforms for publishing and consuming literature from Africa, adding further case studies to the examples of digital platforms mentioned above, such as 3Bute, Okadabooks and Brittle Paper. The author found through her research that these platforms connect readers to new writing from the continent – writing that more reflects their own lived realities – in innovative ways. Importantly, digital technologies have enabled the production of literature in multiple languages simultaneously for readers in various African countries. This reiterates the interplay between the specific/local and the multiple/global that has been a recurring analytical and theoretical thread throughout this introduction to digital arts in Africa.

African digital arts are proliferating in original and cutting-edge directions, presenting ingenious and imaginative ways to express complex and changing African identities. While this selection of articles presents a mere snapshot of the innovative and fruitful theoretical and analytical approaches to studying digital arts in Africa, it is intended to open up multiple possibilities for future research to fill the gaps and contribute new ideas.

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