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## **Title**

Future Lab Africa: Critical Engagements with African Culture and Technology

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## **Abstract**

This short paper acts to contextualise and explain the development and purpose of the *Future Lab Africa*. A project developed by Digital Artists Jepchumba and Tegan Bristow. *Future Lab Africa* acts to feature conversations with Digital Artists and Creative Technologists working critically and creatively in the field of technology and digital art in Africa and its regions.

## **Introduction**

Before we explain in more detail what *Future Lab Africa* is and what it does; we would like to start with a small discussion that positions digital arts and creative practice with technology in Africa and its regions. This positioning is not in aid of positioning digital arts practice in the arts, as we think this is something that has already been done, both by ourselves and others in the last couple of years. Rather we aim to identify the location of new technologies against culture in Africa and its regions. For the purposes of clarity however, a quick positioning within the arts would describe digital art and creative practice with technology, when viewed from a medium orientated perspective, as falling into the category of new media art. Meaning art produced with new media, which would include: video, the internet, software and the construction of electronic and interactive systems. In effect digital art is specialisation of new media art that focuses specifically on digital media. Outside of a medium specific orientation, like all art practice, digital art is made for very different reasons: from illustrative work; to storytelling and meaning making via animations or interactive engagements; the development of software and applications for social and playful use; all the way through to exploring critical engagements at the intersection of culture, art and technology. At it is at this last juncture that *Future Lab Africa* begins its interrogation.

*Future Lab Africa* as a project engages the practice of artists and creative technologists who look critically at new and communications technologies in line with

contemporary African cultures. It addresses creative and cultural practices that essentially interrogate a globalised information economy. For us, as practitioners and enablers, this is a very important point of engagement and poses a number of questions. Firstly, the ICT (internet and communications technology) industry has boomed over the last five years, making communications technologies ever present, even a domesticated technology. We ask therefore, how aware we are of the cultural implications of these technologies? Secondly we ask, how the cultural implications of these technologies are being addressed and by whom? The ICT industry is largely commerce driven and any research being performed around it is mostly concerned with access, reach and the development of new markets. (Murphy & Carmody, Ekeanyanwu, Childs). Where socio-economic and socio-cultural research is being done, it is largely through poorly formed appropriation and development theory. Additionally very little of this is written from the perspectives of African cultures and contemporary African urbanism (Sey, Ling). Thirdly, we understand ICT's as a system of knowledge transfer and these systems, as they stand, are largely Euro-American. How then do we interrogate these systems from the perspective of African knowledge systems? (Omoka, Pfaffenberger). Lastly, and not least, we are concerned with how critical and creative practice from Africa, is addressed and contained abroad. All too often terms like 'AfroFuturism' are used too broadly, lumping all African practice into a notional engagement that is given very little contextualisation. Euro-American curators then use terms like 'Africa Now', as they battle to contain a deeper or more nuanced understanding of critical and creative practice from different regions on the continent. This as we know is unfortunately the consequence of the long use of 'Africa' as a beautifully fictitious term, a term used to contain its continued invention (Mudimbe).

In the same light ICT research has a tendency to bundle usage patterns into a similar fictitious 'African' forms. A tendency to generalise and not interrogate the implications of regional socio-cultural, political and economic situations when ICT is addressed. Just as there are unique cultures on the continent, there are unique cultures of technology that show how individual nations and groups critically engage or creatively use new technologies. Another of our tasks therefore is it to address these unique African cultures of technology.

Technology as a construct has been largely theorised from the West, and there is an unfortunate paucity of historical positions on technology from the continent. This is largely due the fact that the histories of Western modernism and colonialism are one history (Mignolo), and that the continent has been stripped of a great deal of its knowledge over this time.

From the perspective of Western philosophies of technology there are two ways to understand technology, both of which have their roots in Christian metaphysics, and evolve from seeing technology as a domination of the natural world. These are technological determinism and technological somnambulism. On these Bryan Pfaffenberger in “Fetished Objects and Humanised Nature: Towards an Anthropology of Technology” states:

What is so striking about both naive views of technology, the view that emphasises disembodied ways of making and doing (technological somnambulism) and the other that asserts technology’s autonomy (technological determinism), is that they both gravely understate or disguise the social relations of technology. (241).

Pfaffenberger proposes to “illuminate the unreliability of the culturally-supplied Western notion of technology” (237) and propose that technology should be viewed as a ‘sociotechnical’ system, that is interactive with social relations, politics, economics and more specifically ideology (8). Pfaffenberger’s paper has been very helpful to a great number of cultural anthropologists when looking at non-Western societies, like those in Africa, where technologies were not historically the product of material culture but rather a total social phenomenon. Historical technologies are thereby seen as part of larger cultural engagements. This assist in finding philosophies of technology that may evolve from mathematical and algorithmic thinking in spiritual rites and rituals; the organization and architecture of homes and villages as the product of socio-cultural evolutions; metal work as a ritualised knowledge system, and so on. So while there is some research being done to interrogate historical positions on technology from the continent ( Eglash, Collier, Bangura & Setati), it is equally important for us speak about and formalise contemporary positions. Contemporary and culturally investigative positions do however grow from local knowledge systems. And it is for this reason, particularly around communications technologies, that an assertion of independence and decolonial methodologies is found in light of neo-liberalism.

Digital art and cultural practices that interrogate the intersection of culture and technology are not only important in reflecting contemporaneity, but equally important in shifting the direction of engagement. What this potentially allows is the development of systems of knowledge within internet and communications technologies that are more reflective of African ideologies and less about developing Africa as a market.

## Beginnings and Contributions

*Future Lab Africa* evolved from sharing experiences and thinking from our own individual practices. This subsequently led to the identification of similar concerns and the development of a natural collaboration. We first met in 2009 when we were invited by the Goethe Institute to form part of an African delegation of digital artists to the ISEA (International Society of Electronic Arts) Festival in Germany. Of course as a delegation we were a little bit of an anomaly, as the understanding in Europe at the time was that there was very little digital art on the continent. In addition to this any development was generally positioned in a largely patronising 'development' perspective and very little focus was given to critical engagement.

At ISEA in 2009 Jepchumba was there to speak about her work on the platform and network *African Digital Art*. African Digital Art is an online platform that archives digital practices across the continent and the diaspora. Since its inception *African Digital Art* has showcased over a 1000 projects and artists who have utilized a form of digital or new media art in their artist production. *African Digital Art* extended its online presence by supporting projects and initiatives that support and foster growth in the exploration of digital and new media as a transformative medium. In presenting individual works, cultures of technology and design solutions throughout Africa. In 2009, at the ISEA conference little was known about emerging digital art practices within Africa and Jepchumba's presentation highlighted a general overview of trends and practices in Africa.

Bristow at the same conference, spoke to her practice as a interactive digital artist and developer, as well as her work on the MA programme at the Digital Arts Division of the Wits School of the Arts. In this programme, candidates from various fields, from computer science to fine art join to learn how to develop interactive engagements. Unfortunately very little of this concerned an interrogation of South African and other African perspectives on technology and culture. Bristow therefore began research and numerous projects to address these concerns. Most recently in the development of her PhD, which addresses decolonising aesthetic methodologies in digital art and creative technology engagements in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria.

In the process of her PhD Bristow curated an exhibition in 2015 titled *Post African Futures*, held at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. It was from this exhibition, after years of conversations between Bristow and Jepchumba that *Future*

*Lab Africa* began. Bristow invited Jepchumba to participate in the exhibition and she responded with a proposal for *Future Lab Africa*.

As enablers and developers in the field, both of us are concerned with sharing details around not only what artists are making, but how these artists make their work in their various contexts. This is in addition to the subjects they focus on and what inspires them to do so. The start of *Future Lab Africa* was a proposal from Jepchumba to interview all the artist on the exhibition. Running concurrently with the exhibition we launched the *Future Lab* Podcast. The purpose of the podcast was to document representations of digital art practices in Africa through the viewpoint of the artists themselves, thereby giving a more accurate and personalised view of processes and practices.

*Future Lab* is experimental in nature, a form of digital storytelling that involves not only interviews, but also edited episodes mixed with music, and digital sound. *Future Lab Africa* grew from this initial podcast series and later in October 2015 we produced a series interviewing artists that participated in the *Fak'ugesi Digital Africa Residency*, and it is from this base that *Future Lab* will continue to grow.

### **Future Lab Africa Series**

Thus far we have two *Future Lab Africa* podcast series from 2015. The first, as mentioned, focuses on artists who participated in *Post African Futures* exhibition and the second focuses on artist who participated as creative technologists in the 2015 *Fak'ugesi Digital Africa Residency* in the 2015 Fak'ugesi Festival. Up to this point the decision to focus on distinct exhibitions has allowed us to contain conversations with artists in relation to different themes and ways of working.

*Post African Futures* series for instance, dealt very specifically with the artist's response to Bristow's research around African cultures of technology and critical aesthetic practices. All the artists, from across the continent, were interviewed to speak to their particular conceptual and development process and in reflection of the work they produced for *Post African Futures*. What this did, was allow for a comparison of very diverse practices within a single frame, a frame that is dealt with very differently by each artist.

The second series with artists in the 2015 *Fak'ugesi Digital Africa Residency*, is very different and yet still speaks to the concerns of art, culture and technology. The 2015 Fak'ugesi residency invited resident artists to explore and create public

engagement in response to the theme: “Futurist Visions of Johannesburg: uncovering place and space, physical and virtual responses to ‘now’ for socio-cultural technologies of the future.” In the podcast series there is a focus on this theme as well as the experiences of the artists on a festival residency; a very different mode of working from that of normal studio practice. A festival residency forces individuals to work in reflection of each other's practices, in a new environment and in a very short period of time. In this case the residency additionally focused on the development of work through public engagement, with particular focus on Johannesburg as a city. The podcast therefore allowed for a reflection of the residency experience; an interrogation of Johannesburg from different perspectives, and most importantly the different approaches to working with the public in the construction of artwork and culturally informed technologies.

Each series therefore allows for very different but comparable experiences. These we believe act to educate other practitioners around the beauty, criticality and concerns of working in the field. The other advantage of working with a podcast series, is that there is no limit to how each series can be styled and the number of episodes is dependant on the number of artists who participated. This means that each artist on a given project can voice the concerns of their own contexts and practices.

### **The Future of Future Lab Africa**

At the end of 2015, beginning of 2016 *Future Lab Africa* was invited to join Creative Disturbances, collection hosted by the Leonardo Initiatives (MIT) of the ArtSciLab at the University of Texas, Dallas (<http://creativedisturbance.org>). This has given us a small boost into the new year to upgrade our hosting, buy new podcasting software and make a new series.

Moving forward into 2016 we will continue to raise funds for the project and with this put out a call to festival and projects to be featured as series. We would very much like this to include projects outside of Johannesburg and South Africa, as the last two projects have been based in Johannesburg and are affiliated with our own practices. Our vision for *Future Lab Africa* is that it becomes a research platform from which we can feature this rapidly growing and shifting field from the perspective of creatives across the continent.

We have also begun exploring *Future Lab Africa* as a platform from which to run workshops that address participatory engagements between artists in the field. In

many ways the podcasts have started a process of constructive and radical sharing, that we hope like to see manifest in new ways.

*Future Lab Africa* can be accessed with details of each series from [www.futurelab.org](http://www.futurelab.org) and listened to on Sound Cloud ([soundcloud.com/futurelabafrika](https://soundcloud.com/futurelabafrika)) and subscribed to on iTunes ([itunes.apple.com/za/podcast/future-lab-africa/](https://itunes.apple.com/za/podcast/future-lab-africa/)).

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## **Author Bios**

**Tegan Bristow** is a South African artist and developer of interactive digital installations. In addition, Bristow is lecturer and head of the Interactive Digital Media at the Digital Arts Division of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Bristow is currently completing her PhD on Technology Art and Culture Practices in Africa. Bristow most recently curated the Post African Futures exhibition with the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, in extension of this research. As an artist Bristow has exhibited widely. “Meaning Motion” at Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa acted as a recent retrospective to her interactive art developments.

**Jepchumba** is an African Digital Artist and digital enthusiast who works hard to combine her two passions: Digital Media and Africa. Originally from Kenya, she has lived around the world developing her interest in philosophy, art and technology. An African digital artist, Jepchumba loves experimenting with motion, sound and various digital effects and techniques and has an extensive background in digital art, web design and development, audio/visual production and social media strategies.