



@Joburg

A dispatch on the arts, technologies and cultures in the metropolitan community served by the Johannesburg airport.

by Nathaniel Stern

“I know exactly what to call it,” I said to Cobi van Tonder in a late-night, drunken brainstorming session for a new art collaboration—a romantic outdoor installation involving water and motion sensors

—at some bar in Centurion (the New Jersey—circa 1985—of Johannesburg).

“The Sea,” I said.

“Perfect,” she declared, and more drinking commenced.

Three years later, not only have we not found the budget to produce our doomed project, but Cobi has been overseas for more than a year, commissioned to make stunning work for ISEA and other residencies, even while remaining mostly unknown in her home country. There is undoubtedly some recognition and (much less) support for South African techno-art, but it mostly happens in this way—Out of Africa, so to speak.

GLOBAL AND LOCAL

There is a huge disconnect between the international and local “scenes” of Johannesburg’s art and technology elite. New York-based Joshua Goldberg, the first digital artist-in-residence at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), once called Johannesburg “Moon-Base Alpha,” implying our vast city of 19 million people was relatively isolated from “mainland” international art contexts. Marcus Neustetter <onair.co.za/mn>, the head of UNESCO’s DigiArts Africa and an underappreciated artist in his own right, is continually invited to panels and lectures overseas, and van Tonder, a former UNESCO award-winner, is making a name for herself as an interactive

composer in Europe and the Americas <www.otoplasma.com>. Such relationships, however, in which First World outreach programs swoop in to make an African superstar or two, can hardly represent all our city, country or continent’s diverse work.

There are, rather, many local pockets of production. These come from design communities and arts departments, DIY performance artists and hackers, high-concept professionals and open-source gurus—and many combinations thereof.

Critical discussions within South Africa’s art scene tend to waver between wonderfully (sometimes overly) complimentary engagements and all-out complaint sessions full of blame. Somewhere between the two, and with a twist of “Screw it; I’m just gonna make it happen,” one will find small communities of utterly exhausted and mostly penniless artists doing amazingly interesting and beautiful art/tech interventions. These are our future-makers.

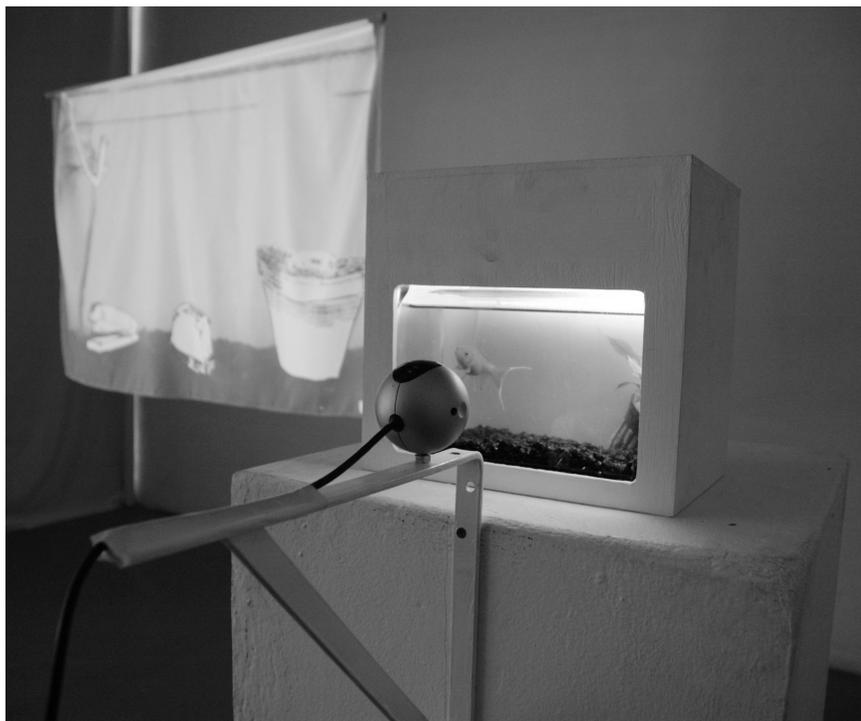
PROGRAMS, BLOGS AND COMMUNITIES

Christo Doherty, the head of Digital Arts at Wits, holds regular Digital Soirees, public presentations by local or visiting creatives and scholars. Once a month, I help “upgrade” these to The Upgrade! Johannesburg <atjoburg.net/upgrade>, where we plug our artists into a local node of a global network. These upgrades have helped lead to visits by such luminaries as Hans “übermorgen” Bernhard and Turbulence.org, as well as to facilitate our now historic Unyazi Electronic Music Festival <www.newmusicsa.org.za/unyazi2005.html>.

Doherty’s department, founded as a Master’s program in the Wits School of Arts and growing into more, is housed in the “Digital Convent,” a former nunnery. Its part-time lecturers, including myself, have gone on to give workshops at a half-dozen other South African institutions. The students, who annually exhibit performative installations at downtown sites, are regularly featured on our collaborative blog, Art & Technology, Johannesburg <atjoburg.net>.

Art blogs in general have caught on in the last year. Most use the medium to write about more traditional work (such as Sue Williamson’s pre-blog diary and site-at-large, <artthrob.co.za>), but there are a few who push the boundaries. Aryan Kaganof, known for his cell-phone-film and networked performances, has his overflowing Kagablog <www.kaganof.com/kagablog>, consist-

(© Nicky Nagy. Photo © Christo Doherty)



ing of local “great art daily.” Such net presence has helped wake up the global community to some of our homegrown stylings: Turbulence.org gave its first South African net.art commission last year, and Art Interactive (Boston) will exhibit an all-South African show in 2007.

Programs, sites and communities such as the above also facilitate cross-fertilization. Kaganof’s blog began after a spat of guest blogging on my own site; Mark Edwards, a long-established contemporary artist and former student at Wits Digital Arts, is head of the University of Johannesburg’s multimedia department, and is overseeing its transition into more interactive work; Abrie Fourie, a local photographer, has been dabbling in net.art, and rising photographic star Mikhael Subotzky is beginning to do the same; Nokuthula Mazibuko has produced a site of short stories for free distribution <www.thulacreative.co.za>; and William Kentridge—South Africa’s most well-known contemporary artist—has produced beautiful, Guggenheim-commissioned miniature mechatronic plays.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND COMPETITIONS

However, in a city where even video artists struggle to fund much-needed equipment, it is up to DIYs with guts to make things happen. For example, Simon Gush’s Parking Gallery <parking-gallery.net> is a mobile gallery currently squatting in a parking garage in downtown Jozi. A 24-year-old artist and “laborer” (as he refers to his work as a professional exhibition hanger), Gush borrows whatever he can from government-funded spaces such as the Johannesburg Art Museum. His shows, sometimes up for only one night, feature young contemporary artists, mostly from SAartsEmerging.org, a community blog he co-founded.

On the larger scale, there are massive gaps in institutional support. There are some governmental and/or foreign grants, but most go to NGOs and research-based programs; those that are for the arts (generally from the European Union) are often funneled to established collectives or institutions rather than individuals making experimental work. The National Arts Council, an exception to this rule, has never, to the best of my knowledge, granted funds for new media art. There are several corporate-sponsored competitions, but only the now-defunct Brett Kebble Art Awards (BKAA)—founded by the public rela-

tions firm of a controversial, supposedly Mafia-connected mining mogul who was mysteriously murdered last year—accepted proposal-driven installations and offered equipment to artists that needed it. Other competitions are looking more and more toward conceptual and media art for young innovators, but cannot give the necessary support; this year’s Absa Bank L’Atelier—where five of ten finalists were technology-based and lent their own equipment for the length of the exhibition—was a bit of a coup for the privileged artists included.

Still, the American Consulate donated an eMac to the Johannesburg Art Museum last year, which subsequently purchased its first South African interactive installation, the BKAA-winning *step inside* (a work of my own). The museum has since been purchasing complex video pieces and plans to look at more interactive art in the future. Director Clive Kellner believes it is part of the museum’s job to learn how to archive such work and hopes other institutional and corporate collections will follow suit.

OPEN SOURCE AND CREATIVE COMMONS

Marc Shuttleworth, the multimillionaire software guru turned astronaut turned Open Source activist, has been pushing his Ubuntu OS and Freedom Toasters both locally and globally, but it is Heather Ford, the executive director of iCommons, a global community offshoot of the Creative Commons (CC) movement, who has spearheaded open content and re-mixing culture in South Africa. She has promoted CC to the point where most digital artists consider it as a possible license for any new work and she brought more than half a dozen South African creators to the recent iCommons iSummit in Brazil. There is a plan for a Joburg CC exhibition in the works, and GordArt, a small gallery in one of Joburg’s trendiest neighborhoods, will hold its first CC Salon well before this article goes to print.

ELEPHANTS . . .

The elephant in the room, of course, is race. How can it be ignored just 10 years after apartheid? As in any country, this is obviously a complex issue that deserves dissertation-length debate. Affirmative action and black empowerment are priorities in education and at large, but while local black artists such as Thando Mama, Churchill Madikida and Donna Kukama are beginning to make names



(Photo © Christo Doherty)

for themselves in video—with occasional forays into the more experimental—the majority of interactive artists still look like me: white. This is due to various factors, including but not limited to expense, exposure and skilled experts of color being quickly snapped up by commercial businesses rather than staying in the arts. I believe this will change over the next decade of democracy in South Africa.

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The downsides of working in new media in South Africa, which range from a lack of understanding and funding to an inability to collect or archive, are not much different from problems of the First World during the 1960s and 1970s. We are granted the same kind of enablement brought by such constraints, but mostly devoid of tech fetishist baggage or rapid mainstream appropriation. Johannesburg’s odd First World/Third World split gives it enough distance from the global community to leapfrog over some of its issues and produce its own provocative mixes of art and technology. From electro-gumboots <otoplasma.com/gumboots> to scanner performances <compressionism.net>, there is a “hate-your-tools, break it ’cuz it’s interesting” scene here that the rest of the world should really be paying more attention to. . . . Watch. This. Space.

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- Phillippe Bootz, "Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms," in "New Media Poetry and Poetics" Special Issue, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 14, No. 5/6 (2006).
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