FASHIONABLE ADDICTION:
The Impact of Digital Identity through the Cult of the Body (an African Perspective, with particular reference to the Democratic Republic of Congo)

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A MINOR DISSERTATION PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ART

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
2015
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All photography credits for my body of work: Ashley Walters and Carlos Marzia
To my parents, Pierre and Henriette.
Acknowledgements

Above all, I wish to thank God Almighty for His grace, and the opportunities He has provided along the way to my completion of this MFA degree.

I am deeply grateful to the Directors during my time at the school, Professor Stephen Inggs and Associate Professor Fritha Langerman, for your positive attitude, and especially to Professor Pippa Skotnes and the late Professor Colin Richards for your vision and support, which gave me the courage to take on the challenge of this project.

I owe so much to my supervisors, Professor Jane Alexander and Associate Professor Johann van der Schijff, for your unfailing kindness, patience, vision, technical guidance and enthusiasm throughout the last two years. Without you this project would not be what it is presently. It has been a pleasure working with you, and I could never thank you enough.

My gratitude also goes to the academic staff for your support and criticism, especially Associate Professor Virginia MacKenny, Doctor Barbara Martinez-Ruiz, Associate Professor Berni Searle, Doctor Rael Salley, Doctor Nomusa Makhubu, Svea Josephy, Jean Brundrit, Natasha Norman and Annemi Conradie. Your advice has given my work, both theory and practice, new life. In addition, members of the administrative and support staff were enormously helpful, including Afiefah Rajap, Sharon Werthen, Moeneeb Dalwai, Charles van Rooyen, Stanley Amon and Shannon Brand. Thank you too to Solvej Vorster at the Hiddingh Hall Library for your valuable assistance.

I am thankful for my Masters colleagues' kindness and sense of humour; it was such a pleasure sharing the experience of the Venice Biennale with you. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Suzanne Duncan and Sepideh Mehraban for your considerable effort in responding to my two seminars, which gave me more material to research; and Francois Knoetze, who shared my first-year studio and became like a brother to me. I also thank Florian Schiller, Laurentius Fullard and the rest of the team at Ecycle Electronic Recycling in Paarl for your services, as well as all my friends and family for your consistent encouragement. And a special thank you to Patrick Bongoy for your great assistance and support.

This document would not be a success without the contribution of people who generously gave their valuable time and talent. I wish to thank my proofreader, Matthew Cannon, for helping me to find the best way to say what I wanted to say, Carlos Marzia for designing the book, and Ashley Walters for photography and video editing.

I could never end this without thanking my funders, including the Jules Kramer Scholarships and the CCA Fellowship, and expressing how grateful I am to Doctor Siona O’Connell for facilitating the latter.
## Contents

1 Introduction 7

2 Theoretical, Historical and Socio-Political Context 9
2.1 Fashion in the Congos 14
2.2 The Influence of La SAPE in the Contemporary DRC 16
2.2.1 The Politics of Reinvention 19
2.3 Culture and Power: Mobutu Sese Seko – The Cult of Personality 22
2.5 The Influence of African Fractals in Modern Computing 25
2.5.1 Modern Computing and Luba Aesthetics 27

3 Contemporary Practice 30
3.1 Identity and Diaspora: The Influence of Place 30
3.2 (My) Bodies in Space: Symbolism, Gender and Race 36
3.2.1 Artistic Approach 36
3.3 Digital Identity and Art 41
3.3.1 Self-Determination in the Realm of Digital Aesthetics 41

4 Method and Process 42
4.1 Collecting Materials 42
4.2 Reconstructing Beauty from the Obsolete 42

5 Conclusion 46

6 Catalogue 47
6.1 Video Performance and Photography 47
6.2 Web Jacket 48
6.3 Techno Dandy: A Suit of Disagreement 54
6.4 Digital Bags 61
6.5 Fractals 62
6.6 Untitled 1 and 2 63
6.7 Techno Addict 64
6.8 Googling my Dreams 65
6.9 Techno Trash Bin 66
6.10 Narcisurfing Netizenship 68
6.11 E-Munkishi 70

7 End Notes 71

8 References 77

9 List of Illustrations 82
1 Introduction

My MFA project consists of sculptural installations, videos and images that, together with the written text, comment on the impact of information technology on society. In both the written and practical components, I refer to my own experience and developments in fashion and access to information technology (IT) in my home country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), with a focus on Kinshasa. I also explore aspects of the consumerist nature of IT in Africa more broadly and how this generates trends relating to ‘FOMO’, an internet slang acronym for the Fear Of Missing Out.

My primary reason for connecting African fashion with contemporary computer technology is because both concern Western products being utilised in Africa in the context of self-determination.

The African continent is a source of mining wealth, for example coltan (short for columbite-tantalite), a mineral widely used in technology. The DRC is one of the major coltan-producing countries, and yet it is technologically underdeveloped or limited itself because of an oppressive capitalist system (Pole Institute – blood minerals [PI], 2010: 8-9), (PI, 2010). However, some of these minerals return to Africa in the form of products and create new consumers, desires and services in emerging contemporary technology contexts.

In the process of upgrading to higher levels of technology, the developed world often uses Africa as a dumping zone for electronic waste (e-waste), with no regard for the environmental and human impact. For example, the UN environment programme’s 2012 and 2013 report under the Waste for Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) legislation showed that thirty percent of the allegedly second-hand products imported to Ghana were useless (African WEEE Report by the UN Environment Programme [AWRUNEP], 2012). Pieter Hugo’s photographs in the book Permanent Error (2011) provide strong visual evidence of this [Figures 1 and 2].

Figures 1 and 2: Peter Hugo, Yakubu Al Hasan (left) and Al Hasan Abukari (right), Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana (2009). From the series Permanent Error. Digital C-Prints.
Although I'm aware of the debate around issues of representation and ‘afro pessimism’ generated by Hugo’s images, my motivation in using them is that they provide sufficient documentation of the realities of disposing of electronic waste and the impact on people and the environment pertaining to those particulars zones of Africa.

I draw an analogy between the consumption of IT and African fashion, and specifically with my own country’s culture of dressing-up, which has developed into a kind of doctrine (the ‘cult of the cloth’) and an expression of resistance. The analogy is linked to the desire to stay up to date with IT, which can lead to addiction. I also consider it useful to compare the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of African customs of hairdressing, the wearing of hats and jewellery, and even body modification as a social identification with today’s society, within which ‘personal media’ are additional accessories for urban status.

My reference and use of computer parts critique the way that contemporary technology has become an extension of our personal style, as in the fashion sense described above: a virtual identification which could also suggest a tendency towards an alienation of the body (because of the virtual social interaction and virtual identity) from its immediate environment that has manifested in our current psychological landscape. Consequently, I suggest the consumption of contemporary media in urban spaces opens up the notion of virtual anthropology or virtual cultural anthropology, related to the electronic personality or e-personality.

As a Congolese of Luba origin, I look at the importance of numeracy and symbolism in African culture in general, and in the Luba context in particular. My emphasis is on the fractals of indigenous African design that influenced modern computing (Eglash, 2005), which I will elaborate on in the relevant section of Theoretical, Historical and Socio-Political Context. I also make reference to race and gender, and notions of ‘Afrofuturism’ as it relates to my experience and this project. In this project I attempt to discuss how fashion and IT (via personal media) can be used as a tool for race and gender mobility, and self determination while exploring the dynamics for future advancement. Both fashion and IT in my work explore futuristic ideas of hope and identity reinvention.

My research comprises personal and general aspects: my personal experience with the internet as a contemporary instrument for communication (and a ‘gateway drug’), which looks primarily at my physical migration from the technologically underdeveloped DRC into South Africa and its more developed technologies; and, of course, a general visual perspective of information technology, to which viewers can hopefully relate.
For the practical component of the study I have used discarded computer parts that I have collected, deconstructed and recontextualised into sculptures. Some of my sculptures are also used as costumes for public or recorded performances, making reference to sartorial fashion and forms of performance in Africa, while others are abstract. My use of obsolete computer parts also informs the viewer of the process of consumption; how mass-produced objects become obsolete because of the constant need to upgrade information technology, referring to environmental issues by recycling.

The foundation of my project is a visual representation that refers to the internet through fashionable personal accessories and consumerism in contemporary urban African society, rather than an examination of global technological phenomena (although there are places where they overlap). This document is therefore focused on the dynamic and aesthetic qualities of IT as a social trend, taking into account its consumerist nature and impacts. To illustrate this approach, in addition to drawing specific meaning from African fashion, I refer to some aspects within cultural and virtual anthropology which I view more as a virtual community than a study of virtual data. Based on the analogies that I use to visually portray contemporary technology in the context of Africa, I include 'pop' anthropological references to give more meaning to my research.

I use digital and virtual (or cyber) as equivalents most of the time. They are two interrelated properties that cannot be separated. For instance, one needs a physical device (cell phone or computer keyboard), onto which symbols, numbers and letters are inscribed, in order to type their virtual representations on the screen, or, in the case of a touch screen, everything is already virtually represented but still subsequently typed or ‘chosen’. However, my point is that in the same way that one needs a body to think, so software needs hardware to be effective. My work acts as a bridge, a physical representation via which viewers can begin to discuss virtual identity. It presents a relationship of these entities while linking me to my immediate social environment. My Luba heritage also influences my approach when searching for meaning in numerical symbolism with which to reference a digital Africa. Included too are the roles of visual arts and masquerade in traditional Luba politics, the symbolism of a body, and how Luba history is passed on through art (Roberts and Roberts, 2007).

2 Theoretical, Historical and Socio-Political Contexts

Both fashion and information technology use products that connect Africa to major global centres of production. The more fashionable they are, the more potentially addictive they become. In the case of IT, the virtual world can be seen to subtly reconfigure our psychological landscape and we easily develop dependence and
addiction, and an electronic personality which could be compared to clothing trends, as a facade or a reinvention of the self.

In my artistic approach I regard the body (my body) as a ‘multi-dimensional medium’, which has the ability of simultaneously being physical, abstract, virtual, individual and social in the environment in which I live. This individualized and social body is a medium of transformation, socially constructed and increasingly on show as a vehicle of consumption where social status is linked to the visible exterior of the physical self (Shilling, 2005: 2). I look at the notion of hybridity and rebirth, the mixture between human and machine, which are increasingly integrated with new technology like digital eyewear (Google Glass), accessories such as watches and bracelets (iWatch), and human microchip implants. I am not drawing literally from futuristic films such as Cyborg and Avatar, but rather extracting from their ideas in order to cover the understanding of my context. To borrow Tim Jordan’s (1999) words: ‘The computer age has turned us all into cyborgs of one type or another.’ Sherry Turkle (2011) also defines cyborgs as people using personal media, and in this way my ‘techno-body’ in a suit could be considered a cyborg, or perhaps a pseudo-cyborg that has risen from discarded technology as a form of ‘prosthetic identity’.10

I refer to the sartorial ‘self-stylisation’ or ‘self-recreation’ of a dandy persona in a cosmopolitan space to interpret aspects of IT obsession and transformation, drawing on aspects of black diasporic dandyism and the contemporary DRC dandies’ addiction to haute couture and style, in the form of some of the objects I have made and the performances in which I use them.

In this regard, it would be useful to define the value that the body, my body, has in relation to space, and in this case I draw inspiration from the city of Kinshasa, where I come from. In his essay, La ville de Kinshasa, une architecture du verbe (2006), the anthropologist Filip De Boeck describes it as one of the African cities experiencing very rapid population growth, with approximately six or seven million inhabitants, after Lagos in Nigeria with thirteen million inhabitants. These urban agglomerations cause more infrastructural problems, and therefore Kinshasa’s housing shortage worsens by at least 200 000 houses annually.

Something particularly interesting in De Boeck’s analysis, which I have reflected on since my childhood, is the ability that the ‘body-subject’ has to transcend this rather chaotic urban situation, which means that the body reconstitutes alternatives for survival. In Kinshasa, says De Boeck, ‘it is the physical body that determines the urban social body’ (De Boeck, 2006). Because of the chaos and extreme poverty that many Kinshasa residents experience, society has given a lot more value to the ‘cult of the
body’, which each Kinois\textsuperscript{11} shapes and presents in public, according to their own dreams and aspirations, and in order to ‘access’ certain inaccessible social statures.\textsuperscript{12} This is not just fashion, but the human body itself, as a crude instrument, becoming ‘architecture’ that reinvents and indulges\textsuperscript{13} itself every day.

Apart from devoting considerable energy to survival, both men and women spend a lot more of it, and time, making their bodies instruments of beauty and perfection, in areas such as sport, hairdressing (with sophisticated styles that take hours to complete) and dance, to name but a few. They constantly and obsessively embellish their bodies with ornaments, wigs (for women) and lightening cosmetics, as a critical aesthetic deployment and then walk the streets to see, but especially to be seen. To paraphrase De Boeck: Kinshasa, above all, is a corporeal city: where stone and concrete are missing or falling apart, the city turns to another material, that of the human body. This ‘desiring machine’ gives some order to Kinshasa’s chaos. Or, better, it is these bodies that impose on the city their own relational logic. The human body is one of the few sites where Kinshasa may transcend the crude functionality of life perceived as mere survival. But it is also the place where experiences, as well as personal and collective fantasies, meet and merge; where desire and disgust, anguish and dreams become reality. The body always creates a capital gain, an elusive aesthetic that the city itself, nor its architecture of decline, does not offer (ibid.). People’s activities as part of a gradual urban development place the body in a new setting: what was rather more intimate becomes a theatre for all. And so, Kinshasa is ‘a city of flâneurs,\textsuperscript{14} sensual and very proud’ people who have made of the body a language of protest and hope.

Having the human body as material, Kinshasa has turned its back on officials, colonial and post-colonial, who were once setting the rhythm of its destiny. It has opted for utopia – or heterotopias, to compensate for the false promises constantly made by the state about building infrastructure in the city\textsuperscript{15} (De Boeck in Edensor and Jayne, 2012: 323-325). Theorist AbduMaliq Simone in his text \textit{People as Infrastructure} (2004) also adds to this.

De Boeck concludes his essay by asking the question, ‘Where does Kinshasa reinvent itself?’ He refers to Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopias,\textsuperscript{16} and answers that Kinshasa is invented\textsuperscript{17} or reinvented daily in people’s imagination. Foucault uses the term heterotopia to describe spaces that function in juxtaposition in a single place, that have more layers of meaning or relationships to other places – physical and mental spaces, such as the space of a phone call, the moment when you see yourself in the mirror,\textsuperscript{18} or the garden as the smallest fraction of the world that contains the totality of it (Foucault, 1984: 46-49).
And according to Foucault, if utopia cannot be realized, it will indeed be a place without a real location, a category that exists only by analogy or imagination. On the contrary, heterotopia is a utopia that is achieved, carried out to actual places where it is possible to think or live together, such as prisons, boarding schools, psychiatric institutions, theatres, museums and so on (De Boeck, 2006), (ibid).

The concept of a mirror, according to Foucault, is a metaphor for ‘the duality and contradictions’, ‘the reality and the unreality of utopian projects’. This mirror symbolises utopia because your image reflected in it does not exist, but at the same time this mirror, as a real object, is also a heterotopia because it shapes the way you relate to your own image (Johnson, 2006: 75-90).

The virtual world, in the case of my work, portrays an unreal urban landscape, but the digital device through which it is portrayed is a tangible object (taken as a mirror) that allows one to interact and reimagine one’s identity. My heterotopias also reside in my remaking of both social stature and digital personality with costumes constructed from discarded electronic remnants, costumes that are not practically and daily wearable, but rather wearable for a performance in which these ideas of social stature and digital personality are discussed. The body in the suit is regarded as a form of ritualised body which also symbolises the digital personality or digitalised body in the manner of Foucault's heterotopic or transitory spaces, which are not freely accessible and contain a system of opening and closing requiring a gesture or ritual. The works Techno Dandy and Web Jacket, for example, symbolise ritualised gestures; especially Techno Dandy, which mimics a Sapeur in worshipping digital/personal media and accessories through daily rituals in a transitory online space, a space of illusion or compensation.19

For De Boeck in Foucault's terms, the Kinois have developed 'an architecture of rhetoric' as a viable space where they can realize their dreams, reconquer and redesign the city. This is considered an escape, as in the context of ‘sartorial language’ – ‘the art of speech being the ultimate tool for self-realization, the site of “no-place”, the opportunity to project in order to make the impossible possible, the unthinkable thinkable, the unbearable bearable and the unspeakable expressible’ (De Boeck, 2006), (De Boeck in Edensor and Jayne, 2012: 323-325).

An important form of expression in this regard is the dandy in contemporary Kinshasa, the ‘Sapeur’, as coined in Francophone Africa, referring to one who dresses with the highest elegance, sophistication and class.

The character of the black dandy originates from the eighteenth century, when slaves were extravagantly dressed (mostly in redingotes) 20 by their masters to fit their luxurious surroundings, especially in England. A ‘conspicuous consumption’ prevailed
amongst the British elite, who were eager to own slaves as part of their ‘luxury items’, as a way of impressing others and improving their social status (Miller, 2009: 35-40). This specific ethos was amplified by playwrights in their inclusion of slaves as ‘co-actors’ in theatre – similar to the blackface minstrels\(^\text{22}\) who were prominent in a racialised America at the time (ibid.).

This black dandyism affected identity formation in an emerging cosmopolitan commodity culture, in England particularly.\(^\text{21}\) From ‘prestige slaves’ and minstrels to free Africans later, black dandies redesigned their image using dress, styles, gestures and wit as a form of self-determination and resistance to the status that had been imposed on them. They apparently became a symbol of society and fashion in England, and were subsequently joined by African-American refugees who fled slavery and war in America (Miller, 2009:71).

![Figures 3 and 4: White dandies, each in a redingote, with a walking stick and top hat.](image)

![Figure 5: Julius Soubise as Mungo Macaroni.](image)

![Figure 6: William Henry Lane (known as 'Master Juba'), in Rhode Island, USA, ca. 1848, doing his 'Juba dance', a mix of the (African) shuffle and slide and (European) jig, reel and clog steps. Lane was one of the first black minstrels in the USA.](image)
2.1 Fashion in the Congos

Modern dandyism in both the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo is thought to have originated during the 1920s and 30s, inspired by a political figure, Andre Matsoua, who served in the French army and lived in Paris. In 1922 he returned, with a wardrobe full of expensive French suits, to Congo-Brazzaville, where he experienced oppression and incarceration because of his human rights and freedom-fighting activities (MessyNessy 2001: para 4, 5), (Procrastination: Cultural Explorations, C.E. n.d.).

However, fashion in the DRC had various other influences at that time, such as the Dutch wax print\textsuperscript{23} (especially for women), the film versions of \textit{The Three Musketeers} and cowboy Westerns, British rock stars particularly Mick Jagger (after whom the Congolese Sapeur The Colonel Jagger was nicknamed), and American Zoot Suits.

In the early 1930s in Leopoldville, the imported wax print became famous during the rapid urban emergence and gave a new perspective of the city. For example, the wax wrap in its decoration for women became a mirror of cultural values in a changing society, at the intersection between tradition and modernity. It was used as a canvas to comment on everyday issues, portraying both relationships between men and women and their roles in society, encouraging polygamy through leisure and indulgence [Figure 7]. With diverse patterns and names such as ‘Liso ya pite’, (sexual lust of the eye), ‘l’œil de ma rivale’ (my rival’s eye), the famous ‘mon mari est capable’ (my husband is capable) or the classics ‘ABC’ and ‘Chignon de la princesse Mathilde’ (Princess Mathilde’s ponytail), the various motifs expressed the wax textiles' social character. Political and religious leaders used wax prints as signposts for advertising and propaganda, and proverbs and biblical verses also formed part of their decoration. The names given to these prints reflected rapid shifts in their consumption too, as one succeeded another, and provoked all kinds of humorous commentaries from a popular local radio station, ‘Radio-Trottoir’ (De Boeck, 2006).
In the late 1950s a youth subculture called ‘Le Billisme’, inspired by Western movies, emerged in Leopoldville. Theatres were located in the black neighbourhoods of a city that was still experiencing severe racial discrimination. Buffalo Bill (from which the French expression ‘Le Billisme’ was derived) was an actor who became the idol of many young Congolese, and set the rules for male fashion especially, although young Congolese women could also be seen in the street, parading in jeans, with a scarf around the neck and sometimes even a lasso (ibid.).
2.2 The Influence of La SAPE in the Contemporary DRC

*The aesthetic matters to black folk not as an escapist dream, but as a weapon.*
(Miller, 2009: 147)

The acronym SAPE, which stands for ‘Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes’, is a contemporary equivalent of the ‘Mod movement’ in both Congos. Later the acronym became known as Society of Artists and Persons of Elegance. The acronym also matches the French slang word ‘sape’.

With its beginnings in 1970 in Congo-Brazzaville, La SAPE officially made its mark on Kinshasa after 1980 through the iconic Papa Wemba, an international musician from Congo-Kinshasa who enjoys the title *Le Roi de La SAPE* (King of SAPE) because of his international popularity and taste in *haute couture* (Barnett, 2012). The movement was magnified by other popular musicians and Kinois elite who shopped abroad and knew their *griffes* (designer labels) very well. A new generation of practitioners of this style is known as Sapeurs: a society of dapper dressers or revellers and elegant people who have turned fashion into a form of ‘near-religion (dubbed “Kitendi”, the religion of the cloth), complete with its “Grand Priest”, the classiest of dressers, and its “deities”, the international designers’ (Wrong, 2000:174). As Papa Wemba sang later: ‘Don't give up the clothes – it's our religion.’ (*The dandies of Congo*, D.C. n.d.).

![Figure 11: Papa Wemba, King of SAPE and Rumba Rock, wearing a Cavalli fur coat on stage in 2009. – Unknown photographer.](image1)

![Figure 12: Papa Wemba: ‘Expression is key, expression is freedom, and expression is fashion.’ – Photo: Pyke.](image2)
This particular Congolese subculture is a means of self-expression, a strange mixture of Africa, Paris, the British pop scene and the American zoot suit. Concerts are always used as fashion events, with Sapeurs showing off their Yves St Laurent, Jean Paul Gaultier, Gucci and Yamamoto outfits, to name a few labels. In the DRC, it is a taste that is most of the time set against the environments in which people live. Because of these poor neighbourhoods, Sapeurs attract attention and are sometimes dismissed as ‘dreamers’ or ‘clothes worshippers’, but they would rather consider themselves artists who, as Michela Wrong (2000: 176) says, ‘Push sartorial elegance to a point where it [becomes] far more than self-indulgence. It [becomes] a mission.’

In the age of colonialism, imperialism, revolution and nation-building, black dandies started combining the political, social and cultural ‘power of visibility’ in places such as Vauxhall, London, which Miles Ogborn (1997: 450, 453) describes as ‘a key site in eighteenth-century cultural production’. It later became known as the Hungry Gaze – ‘a veritable outdoor theatre with daily performances by the social elite, eager to attain social status through notice’ (Miller, 2009: 68-71). Similarly, Sapeurs are too well dressed to be hidden from the public. Their allure is dynamic, and is intended to attract a gaze. Those in the diaspora gather in their favourite places such as Château Rouge and the Place Vendôme in Paris, as well as Quartier Matongé, a Belgian version of the Matongé neighbourhood in Kinshasa (Wrong, 2000: 51-54).

Sapeurs pay great attention to detail, and to their combination of colours. They know how to *debarquer* (to never, but never, go unnoticed). Michela Wrong (2000: 175) describes this as the art of appearance, saying: ‘A Sapeur’s walk is a form in itself, a
mixture of swagger and stroll as individualistic as a graffiti artist's tag. ... You lollop, you almost dance. It's almost each man's way of standing out from the crowd.'

This display is also perceived as a kind of objectionable action and appearance against persistent dictatorial regimes in the DRC (formerly Zaire). In other words, Sapeurs manifest ambivalent attitudes which are both beautiful and confusing – a rather disguised weapon of expressing revolt against many years of the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, the former president of the DRC. Mobutu banned Western dress and Christian names as symbols of colonisation, and imposed the abacost 34 (French term for ‘down with costumes’), a monotonous, Maoist-style 35 uniform, on Congolese men. Women had to wear the African Fabric or Dutch Print, known in the Congo/Zaire as Wax Hollandais or Super Wax, and later Super Soso, a Chinese version of the Dutch Print.36

Figure 14: A Sapeur wearing a shirt with 4-metre-long sleeves takes part in an annual pilgrimage to Gombe cemetery in Kinshasa, to pay tribute to Strevos Niarcos. – Photo: Junior D Kannah/AFP/Getty Images.

Figure 15: Sapeurs proudly walking an avenue of Kinshasa Township. – Photo: Per-Anders Pettersson.
Unable to politically and economically oppose successive dictatorial regimes, Sapeurs artistically transcend this monotony in the hope of a larger cultural transition; they see their transcendence as a form of agency to compensate for political and economic deprivation. This could also be compared to Ross Posnock’s (1995: 506) ‘pragmatic political thinking in the realm of aesthetic’,\textsuperscript{37} which more often leads to the transcendence of colour lines within a racialised Western system than to a confrontation with them. He describes a dandy as a ‘political aesthete’, a figure that uses beauty to liberate and empower efforts for justice.\textsuperscript{38} He posits W.E.B. Du Bois’ understanding and promotion of the aesthetic (in the USA) as essential to those whose bodies and even imagination have been excessively under surveillance.

Du Bois’ complexity of an ‘activist dandy as a race man’ (an anti-racist dandy as opposed to an anti-race one) elucidates a logic of dandyism concerned with revolutionary thinking about race, gender, sexuality and nationhood, and African-Americans’ struggle for civil rights. To reiterate, the performance of black identity, which began as a white fantasy of black reality, was later adapted into a new cultural domain by blacks themselves. It was apparent in cosmopolitan spaces such as Harlem, where this black identity (re)creation revealed a result of ‘artists’ mastery of form and deformation of mastery’ – the redesigning of dandyism (Miller, 2009: 87, 145-147).

2.2.1 The Politics of Reinvention

Certain Sapeurs’ outfits are exaggerated, which could also reveal the idea of reinventing a foreign culture as an autonomous form. In so doing, they combine multiple identities into one and transcend ‘cultural nominalism’\textsuperscript{39} in their performance of race, gender binarism and sexuality. This multiplicity is represented as a sign of modernism. Although Sapeurs are mainly men (and often not homosexual), they sometimes portray gender transition through the embodiment of an effeminate man – a combination of tastes and attitudes (Feldman, 1986: 4).

In parallel to the above is the global growth of information technology; owning a Telecel, a chunky mobile phone provided by the Telecel Telecommunication Company\textsuperscript{40} in the mid-1980s, was a mark of prestige and distinction between the elite and the ‘ones on the periphery’ in Zaire. Luxury prevailed over necessity as the ultimate language of self-expression (Wrong, 2000: 129-130, 179).

Sapeurs’ promotion of a transcultural and transgendered conceptualisation against a dictatorial Congolese regime is a form of resistance and defence of both men’s and women’s rights, which is reflective of what Monica Miller (2009:179) describes as a
'liberating challenge to patriarchy'. She states: ‘If the dandy’s attention to style and cultivation to artificiality of the self is traditionally labelled a feminine trait in a patriarchal world, then the figure’s status as an analogue to women and the feminine, rather than an opposite, breaks down the gender divide, presenting a liberating challenge to patriarchy for women and men.’

Sapeurs were regarded as one of the major facilitators of women’s dress code emancipation in Mobutu’s Zaire; as ‘prophets of post-ethnicity’, to use Posnock’s term. Firstly, through self-determination they managed to influence women’s fashion and ‘self-recreation’, and secondly, female Sapeurs started to develop through their male fellows’ transgendered dress codes. Sapeurs also express a psychological need to escape the ‘delimiting stereotypes’ of poverty and mediocrity associated with Africans, and to explore multiple possibilities of self-reinvention within the currently restricted Congolese society. Although they express the sophistication of *haute couture* as a community, each Sapeur develops their own image of dandyism – ‘individuality within a group identity and authenticity in a multiplicity’. For them, it is more than just a desire to exhibit an unconventional aesthetic or a frustrated wish to be white or *évolué*. It is a mission, and they will succeed in it. As Ann Douglas (1995: 323, 213) puts it: ‘Artistic and literary achievement could do more... than any economic or political gains they might achieve.’

It is these aspects of fashion, resistance, transformation of the body and reinvention that interest me in the production of my own work.

Figure 16: Sapeur and anti-colonial activist Maurice Loubaki and companion in Paris in 1931, from Didier Gondola, ‘La Sape Exposed!’ p. 163. An African who happened to be dandified and ‘dignified’ by French *haute couture* was usually labelled *mundele ndombe*, ‘white with black skin’.
Figure 17: A joyful exhibition of young Sapeurs proudly displaying their designer clothes in tribute to Strevos Niarcos, in so doing turning the peaceful cemetery of Gombe in Kinshasa into a fashion podium. Note the female Sapeur in yellow costume. – Photo: Emmanuel Peuchot (AFP).

Figure 18: Sapeurs showing off their garments in Kinshasa, DRC. Note the woman, second from right, in a black redingote. – Photo: Errol Barnett (CNN).

Figure 19: Mzee Kindingu, a member of La SAPE movement, poses for a photographer in Kinshasa. Sapeurs use their bodies as living works of art, and describe their garments as bilele: dazzling beauty. – Photo: Junior D. Kannah (AFP/Getty).
2.3 Culture and Power: Mobutu Sese Seko – The Cult of Personality

The inclusion of Mobutu Sese Seko as a character in my works *Googling my Dreams* and the *Self-Portraits (Techno Dandy)* series is driven by the need to support an argument parallel to that of the Sapeurs, but also by the performance value Mobutu gave to his body in public. Although I (like many Congolese) did not support his dictatorial regime, I was nevertheless fascinated by his ability to make fashion and style supplements of power. Mobutu had, as Michela Wrong (2000: 75) says, ‘a gift for the grand gesture, a stylish bravado that captured the imagination’.

Like the Sapeurs who transformed their bodies into media of Western dress codes – via ‘the power of visualization’, Mobutu was equally a ‘master’ of this power in a rather African way, distinguishing himself as a political figure with a hat and cane.
In fact, the use of canes and leopard-skin hats was considered a major supplement of power in the Congolese traditional and political arenas years before independence. But in becoming president of an autocratic regime, Mobutu first overshadowed other politicians who used similar hats and canes, and then banned their use, in order to be the ‘only one’ and therefore form a personality cult (which also became an inspiration for Sapeurs later). Like many African leaders, he ‘created a mythological portrait of himself as chief of the Zairian people’ – a tribal chieftain who has the best of everything. By using the leopard-skin hat as a trademark, Mobutu added a personal mythological symbolism that identified him.44 ‘This trademark [became] a curious juxtaposition of machismo and decadence, which he had made by a fashion designer in Paris (no designer’s name noted), with a collection of at least seven at hand’ (Wrong, 2000: 69).

Mobutu’s cane is also significant because it has the fractal characters in African symbolism, featuring sculptured figures decreasing in size. This will be discussed in the part of this document regarding the influence of fractals in modern computing.

Mobutu also enhanced his personality cult through his charisma and sense of ‘self-worth’. As Francis Monheim, a Belgian journalist who met him, described: ‘Those who had brushed against Mobutu rarely forgot the experience. All remarked on an extraordinary personal charisma’ (Wrong, 2000: 75). Mobutu's costume, next to the Sapeurs', shows a mixed relationship between colonisation and independence, or dictatorship and democracy; the use of one's body as an object or subject, or both, onto which hegemonic measures, and one’s will to overcome them, are applied.
I find that Samuel Fosso’s work *The Chief (the one who sold Africa to the colonists)* (1997), captures and comments on much of what I have said about African fashion, and the Sapeurs’ and Mobutu’s power of visibility.
2.5 The Influence of African Fractals in Modern Computing

Some of my artwork relates directly to the human body in the form of costumes or parts thereof, but other works, made from the same materials, are abstract. These refer to the fractals mentioned above in regard to Mobutu's cane.

Dr. Ron Eglash (2005) has established that the integration of graphics and geometric patterns in modern computing, as well as the development of mathematics, make use of the African tradition of fractals. During a journey through Africa to research this logic, he discovered that ninety percent of the cultures in Africa already have it. The aesthetic principle for the computer comes from this platform; it features the same pattern that allows for the organising of space. ‘Shape and number are not only the universal rules of measurement and logic,’ he says, ‘they are also cultural tools that can be used for expressing particular social ideas and thinking in different areas of life. They are, as Claude Levi Strauss would put it, “good to think with”’ (Eglash, 2005: 4). African fractals are considered intuitive resources that have a mysterious aspect. But some fractals are very sophisticated algorithms. As Dr. Eglash adds in a video: ‘What appears to be an unconscious or accidental pattern might actually have an intentional mathematical component. There are different kinds of uses of fractals in Africa but it’s a shared technology.’

African artisans have developed a wide range of tools, techniques and design practices based on the conscious application of scaling geometry. Fractal characteristics are present in both African scaling geometry and numeric systems. For example, the cultural theme of doubling numbers is inherent in African societies that revere the sacredness of twins, spirit doubles and the notion of doubling associated with material objects. The Ishango bones from the Congo, for instance, which are around 8,000 years old, show a doubling sequence and mathematical value. And in the sand designs (called Lusona) of the Chokwe people of Angola, each grid or iteration of the algorithm represents the next iteration of the myth, the next level of the Lusona initiation. Such doubling is fundamentally a counting system in modern times (Eglash, 2005: 69, 89), but as Dr. Eglash confirms: ‘It is true that many cases of African arithmetic are based on multiples of two... [B]ase-2 systems are not crude artefacts from forgotten past, but they have surprising mathematical significance, not only to African fractals, but to the Western history of mathematics and computing as well’ (ibid.).
The *owari* board game from Ghana is played throughout Africa in various forms – *mancala, onweso, ayo, bao, giuthi, lela, tei* and *songo*, to name just a few. The game's central idea of self-replicating patterns 'is at the heart of some sophisticated mathematical concepts'. The mathematician John von Neumann, who made a major contribution to the modern computer, was also the founder of the mathematics of self-organisation systems (Eglash, 2005: 101), (Zaslavsky, 1973).

In addition, African sculptures and masks, with their scaling, are useful studies in relation to mathematics, in the sense that the features are enlarged exponentially in successive iterations (Thompson, 1917, cited in Eglash, 2005: 84).

In this project I make reference to fractals in the progressively smaller works such as *Fractals*; and *Untitled 1* and *2*, in which I use computer parts of diverse shapes and sizes, such as cables on geometric looms. Weaving computer cables also refers to a virtual community, as we are increasingly enmeshed in a network system (the 'global village'). On the one hand, I refer to the computer as a tool of communication via the reference to fractals and the culture of language called the palaver, and on the other, to a cultural practice of the Kuba in the DRC where men, women and children gather to weave ‘Le Velours Du Kasaï’ (geometric cloths) and to communicate (Svenson, 1986: para 2 and 3).

De Boeck refers to the palaver as not just talking together, but ‘prolonged and idle discussion’ in the African tradition, which exists both in terms of relationships and connections between people and built public spaces. It is thought of as an act of ‘weaving’ the social world, and relates to my use of weaving computer cables (De Boeck, 1994).
2.5.1 Modern Computing and Luba Aesthetics

This section highlights my Luba heritage, in terms of art making and its connection to social effectiveness and human agency, which, in relation to modern computing, is an inspiration to my work. According to Luba culture, the outward formal iconography of Luba objects is directly connected to their effectiveness. Luba arts in both past and contemporary times are dynamic agents of social, political and spiritual transformation, in other words they are arts of action (as are most traditional African arts), which have ‘crossed thresholds between divinity and the human world’, and are ‘capable of preserving stability or effecting change in people's lives depending upon the ways they..."
are used’ (Roberts and Roberts, 2007: 7, 10-11). For example, the Luba memory boards called *lukasa*[^50] help to maintain and transmit historical knowledge.

The connection that I make between Luba arts and my work primarily refers to the mutual agency of humans and objects. In the context of Luba culture, human ‘agency’ on one hand refers to the people who govern (or resist) the power structure in which they live as well as objects used as prosthetics, or elements of power invested in them conventionally but also spiritually, such as sceptres, *lukasa* memory boards, honorary hats and pieces of cloth, which define one’s status (Gell, 1998, cited in Roberts & Roberts, 2007: 10). These objects on the other hand exert ‘efficacy’ and ‘agency’, from which power emanates or can be attracted. Although there is an interdependency between humans and objects (as with *lukasa*), it is believed that these art objects possess power on their own.

Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts (2007: 10-11) argue that ‘...if humans determine the meanings, uses, abilities and contexts of objects, then they may also be or become in control of their own destinies. Objects can then be used as forms of resistance, contestation and shifting identity in an ever-changing world.’ They conclude: ‘Luba create and use objects, but in some senses even as they do so, they themselves are created and used by objects.’ And this has been done through spiritual agency, leading to social transformation.

This could also be interpreted as the human body being the centre of manipulation of devices and virtual sociability or community (Dourish, 2001: 99-100). However, as with Luba objects, there is an interdependency of digital objects that have taken on a life of their own, by their automation (Turkle, 1995: 34-35). The relevance to my work is that I am visually revisiting (or resisting) the hegemonic structure of mining wealth and the negative impacts of e-waste, as well as contemporary technology, particularly in my country, by metaphorically reimagining it through masquerade costuming, which can in turn be associated with the social life of a Sapeur.

Returning to *lukasa* memory boards, one can also draw analogies between them and modern-day digital devices and computer motherboards, in terms of their aesthetic value in relation to their social effectiveness. A memory board may be appreciated for its appearance, but it is definitely a ‘communication artefact’. ‘Through *lukasa*, one may learn almost everything that can be known about Luba royalty... and in particular, its many expectations’ (Roberts and Roberts, 2007: 27).

Providing a mathematical map, the *bana balute* (men of memory) run their fingertips across the surface of a *lukasa* or point to its features while reciting genealogies. The
beads compose the inside part of the device and show fractal scaling. They are the actual elements associated with memory, which is partly based on digital coding, and colour, a geometry of ideas, meaning language in the Luba context, ‘since like beads, memories can be “strung together” to create history or narrate relevant circumstances’. The reading of them is a performance. Some lukasa have incised geometric patterns on their backs, referring to a tortoise’s carapace. Like the inner beaded frontlet, the outside part maps social relations and instigates mnemonic narrations. And their patterns represent secrecy or interdictions called bizila, which constitute the heart of Luba politics, for supernatural agency can be harnessed only through strict observance of ritual procedures. (Roberts and Roberts, 2007: 26-31), (Eglash, 2005: 166). This is reminiscent of a modern digital device or computer keyboard.

Figures 35-38: Lukasa (memory board). There are different kinds of lukasa, depending on tribal affiliation. Some feature the carved head of a woman.

Additionally, I am interested in Luba masquerade and ritual, particularly regarding gender and spiritual authority. In relation to this, I see the body drawn into the virtual world of the internet daily, ‘a netizen’ in a ritual deployed by the power of the screen, whether that of a computer, TV, smart phone or tablet.
3 Contemporary Practice
3.1 Identity and Diaspora: The Influence of Place

In this chapter I reference a number of contemporary artists whose work relates in different ways to that which has informed my own.

Sapeurs’ style, particularly in their self-absorbed manners and worshipping of designer clothes, corresponds with the online narcissism or ‘narcisurfing’ phenomenon that exists, which is mirrored by the shift from ‘e’ to ‘i’ prefixes in internet URLs, electronic apps and gadgets like iTunes, iPhones and iPads (Aboujaoude, 2001: 69).

Iké Udé subscribes to the notion of narcissism, or more precisely to a ‘redemptive narcissism’. As a stylist and artist, he literally lives as an ‘unmitigated aesthete’.

Udé’s work The Regarded Self (1995) is a subversive piece that could be considered a mockery of movie posters. It features two images of Udé positioned one in front of the other. In both of them Udé wears a wig. In one image he is wearing a dark menswear suit, while the other shows him in an antique white kimono. The latter figure is gazing at his perfectly painted face in a handheld mirror; the figure in the suit is looking over the shoulder of the first subject at the same mirror, about to adjust his hair with his left hand. Regarding this work the artist explains that he ‘deploys narcissism as a strategy to negotiate stereotypes of masculinity and sexuality while interrogating the relationship between public and private selves’ (Miller, 2009: 255-258).
I am interested in Iké Udé as an artist and dandy because he illustrates, or performs, the concept of ‘visualization of Afro-cosmopolitanism’ to the limit; he pushes the dandy's art to the extreme where he is ‘endlessly creating himself’, to use Franz Fanon's term (Fanon cited in Miller, 2009). He performs multiple ‘traditions of masquerade in his art and life’ (Miller, 2009: 255-258). Udé is a ‘sartorial anarchist, who considers himself a dandy by default or a post-dandy’, because, according to him, he does not use clothes as fashion ‘but more as indices of culture’ (Billard, 2013: para 3, 4). It is via this logic that I produce ‘costume sculptures’, not to make a simple fashion statement but rather to portray the impact of digital identity today. Reminiscent of a Sapeur, my garments use style and the notion of self; reinventing and transforming the body as a form of resistance or defence against the technological underdevelopment and vulnerability to fashionable trends of the African continent – despite its massive resources.

To Udé, the mirror is an instrument for contemplation, meditation and scrutiny of the self, not just an object of vanity. He explains: ‘The mirror for the redeemed narcissist is not a mere site at which he can perform such base functions as decoration and adornment. Rather the mirror serves as a location that allows “The Regarded Self” a sacred and intense solitude by which he can negotiate and renegotiate his superior self at all cost’ (Udé in Nka, 1995: 17).

Hence, electronic apps and gadgets can be seen as replacing the mirror to explore the notion of the self in online narcissism, which is my interest, precisely, in relation to the psychological impact of FOMO. My Techno Dandy is intended to simultaneously symbolise the pain of a continent that grapples with e-waste and the detritus of obsolete technology, and the narcissism of keeping up with technological fashions. This vulnerability is also comparable to the Sapeurs in their bright suits, ‘keeping their dreams alive, around the edge of despair and a backdrop of an extreme poverty without tumbling in’ (Wrong, 2000: 179).

Figure 41: Yinka Shonibare, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their heads (1998).
Yinka Shonibare to some extent subverts expectations and distorts the familiar while also linking to the idea of the self-expression or self-definition of ‘modern identity’. His costumes in a work like *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their heads* (1998) combine Victorian style and the ‘African’ wax print textiles mentioned earlier, which represents the interaction of class and culture; specifically, the African fabric evokes immigrant communities in England (Enwezor, O in Farrell, L.A., 2003: 168). Shonibare describes himself as ‘a poet of cloth’ who ‘has found beauty one of the most radically subversive strategies to counter Eurocentric hegemony’. Like Shonibare’s, my work occupies a space of contradiction. As he says, ‘the artist is sceptical by nature’ – his work represents a ‘beautiful confusion’, a narrative of seduction and surprise (Miller, 2009: 266, 268).

I have found common concerns with Shonibare’s regarding African fabric’s origin and concepts. In his work Shonibare uses wax print to comment on African realities through Victorian dress codes. He also exposes both African and European cultures as one bodily expression. The ‘beautiful confusion’ reflected by the combination of both Victorian style and African textile represents differences of class and culture, and is naturally drawn from his combined Nigerian and English heritage (Enwezor, O in Farrell, L.A. 2003: 168), (Miller, 2009: 266, 268).

In my ‘wearable sculptures’, I also draw from both Western and African fashion, using the body as a means of expression to comment on African realities, but focusing on the transformation and reinvention of the human body – the African human body, my body – within the digitalized world.

![Figure 42: Nick Cave, Soundsuit (2011).](image)
In his own way, Cave combines visual art, performance and fashion; in other words movement, dance and theatre intersect with sculpture and assemblage, which link to my own concerns.

His suits, which he sometimes calls *Soundsuits* because they generate noise while moving or dancing, are wearable sculptures, and some of them reference African ceremonial costumes (Sutton, 2008). They are full-body outfits made from discarded objects found in antique shops and flea markets. Their ambiguity as part sculpture, part costume, is revealed through the variety of these objects, such as buttons, beads, twigs, plastic bags, synthetic fur and so on, which form a kind of armour. ‘I built this sort of suit of armour, and by putting it on, I realised that I could make a sound from moving in it,’ Cave says. He continues: ‘It made me think of ideas around protest, and how we should be a voice and speak louder.’

The *Soundsuits* are often very colourful works of art, which could be interpreted in many ways. They appear as camouflage or a mask, creating a second skin that conceals race, gender, and class, and forcing the viewer to look without judgment. As with some of my work, they are crafted to be displayed as objects as well as presented in performances (Smee, 2014).

Figure 43: Nick Cave, *Speak Louder I* (2011). Figure 44: Nick Cave, *Speak Louder II* (2011).
The works *Speak Louder I and II* (2011) are made from thousands of buttons sewn together, the first set being dark and metallic, the second being white. They give the impression of a shiny coat, with a strange fluidity that is reminiscent of liquid metal, a texture that is created in a similar way to my keyboard surfaces. Cave’s use of different kinds of disciplines in a single expression, encourages my motive of using fashion, performance and sculpture, sometimes combined as one form of expression.

I have an interest in Meschac Gaba’s work, particularly his ‘wig architecture’, such as *Flatiron Building, New York* (2008); *Rivington Place, London* (2006); and *Disa Park, Cape Town* (2007). They are wearable sculptures and embellishments for the body,
meant to be performed. The expressive, synthetic hair extensions exude vanity and fantasy. The artist was evidently inspired by African hairdressing styles in combination with his experience of Western and African urban settings.

In my work I produce wigs and hats as part of costumes that are a combination of both African and Western styles of accoutrement and expressions of status in urban space. I use the combination as a reflection on the assimilation of styles and the trajectory of materials and objects from Africa to the West and back, with regard to mining, production, trade, obsolescence and disposal, recreating the residue (e-waste) into another form of expression.

In Gaba’s work the combination is indicative of a cultural exchange: people from the African diaspora, who make a living in hairdressing jobs, could be seen as a symbol of trade and economic migration. In *Rivington Place, London* (2006), Gaba interprets notions of place in the context of architectural landmarks across the world. In his performances the artist focuses on poetically and metaphorically illustrating the meanings and qualities of those buildings, their functionality within both African and Western spaces – the image of a developed world imprinted on an African way of life, and vice versa (Perryer, 2009: 4-7).

El Anatsui recycles materials and combines them to create new meaning. The meticulous assemblage and stitching of fragments in his works refers to the history of his material, a conversation between Africa and the rest of the world with regard to colonial exports, (which I also address in my work, albeit somewhat differently); for example, the alcohol brought by Europeans to exchange for slaves along the West African coast (The Big Art Project [BA], n.d), (Young, n.d). *Fading Cloth* (2005), made up of liquor bottle caps, expresses this, but also the notion of passage of time. *Fresh and Fading Memories* (2007) is representative of the latter too. Anatsui purposely allows
time to impact on the work, as he wants his art, like life, to remain in a state of change (Binder 2011). That is why the artist encourages curators who are installing his work to interact with it and manipulate it as determined by the space. Placed on the wall, the pieces are always draped, folded and hung to give them different forms.

The material I use is more rigid, and not as faded as Anatsui's, but its recycled, changeable aspect and relation to time are nonetheless associated. It has acquired the veneer and residue of use, such as tonal shifts in the weaving and on the surfaces of the computer keys.

3.2 (My) Bodies in Space: Symbolism, Gender and Race

3.2.1 Artistic Approach

Focusing on the question of e-waste in Africa, while unpacking the idea of a futuristic body in the realm of contemporary African technology, I aim to engage the viewer with the issue of a technologically enslaved body in a consumer culture, and also with the subjugation of the ‘black’ African body in the context of slave labour, whether it applies to the mining of resources or the collection of e-waste.

I am looking at this subjugated body as a location which is ‘both productive of, and receptive to, the powers of, society’ – a non-passive ‘location on which the technological designs, political and informational elites are imprinted’ (Drykton, 1996, cited in Shilling, 2005: 185). In addition, cyberspace reinforces relations of dominance and subordination between the developed and developing worlds, as well as within the developing world. This means that the commercial and communicative possibilities provided by the internet link individuals and countries of the developing world with those of the developed world, and thus create a Western-oriented increase of social divisions within non-Western localities (ibid.). Moreover, the body acts as a source of transformation and ‘a recipient of collective symbolism’, for example, texting messages in different codes and abbreviations, which become more like rules. We then ‘inhabit conversations as embodied phenomena in the everyday world’, affecting our spoken languages, gaze and posture (Dourish, 2001: 102).

By positioning my body in the context of the aforementioned virtuality, I consider the criticality and materiality of this body-subject within the complexity that is cyberspace, a space of illusion, metaphor, distance and change, which is nevertheless present in our everyday lives. This proceeds to alter our bodies into forms of rapidly disappearing remnants of pre-technological culture, especially for those interested in the meeting of
men and machines, as has occurred with the development of cyborgs. Cyberspace also provides people with the opportunity of extending their experience of self-identity or various versions of individuality, allowing them to program their appearances and project a version of themselves that is ‘inherently theatrical’ (Shilling, 2005: 5, 189).

The multi-dimensional contexts of this body could also mean ‘body of thought’, ‘physical body’, ‘abstract or social body’, and be categorised into the binarisms of mind/body or mind/brain and culture/nature. I look at these binarisms in relation to physical/virtual or physical/social computing, which conveys my reflection in the realm of transcending of the physical body to the virtual body as a matter of regeneration or reimagination – this is represented through my tangible works of art.

The idea of identity reinvention within both physical and virtual spaces also draws from the notion of race – my body as a black African man in relation to technological and environmental problems; a technologized body that has transcended or been divorced from current socio-economic, political and racial boundaries and limitations.

In comparison to fashion clothing, cyber-technology provides a more common ground where identity, gender and race can be reinvented or not specified. In other words, cyber-technology is an alternative, where new forms of extended virtual society, individual and collective ‘prosthetic identities’ are reconstructed (Simmel cited in Shilling, 2005: 186-188). My body in digital costume during a performance also acts as a symbol of a ‘futuristic’ black digital identity.

![Figure 51: From the Self-Portraits (Web Jacket) series (2015).](image)
Figure 52: From the Self-Portraits (Techno Dandy) series (2015).

In the *Liquid Blackness* project, Alessandra Raengo echoes Harry Elam’s assertion that ‘in contemporary culture, blackness is able to “travel on its own”, separate and distinct from black people’. Raengo adds that this detachability of blackness from black subjectivity, identity, and history ‘remains exceedingly attractive and possible’ in mainstream society, and that it opens up possibilities for artists who use it to ‘leverage contemporary forms of mobility in blackness’.

The works of contemporary artists such as Wangechi Mutu, Wanuri Kahiu and D. Denenge Akpem to name a few correspond to mine in their understanding and positioning of the black body in relation to space and time, and its perception within a given society. They have reimagined notions of blackness and visualized creative and symbolic dimensions of the future in their own ways, but which resonate with black science fiction and movies (Gaskins, 2014).

Regarding the idea of African digital identity, my work could be presented not only as a document for the historical records of information technology in Africa, but also a tool for an imaginary future.

In her essay *Race as Technology*, Beth Coleman (2009) gives us a foundation of the social imaginary in which race and gender have moved away from the ‘biological and genetic systems that have historically dominated its definition and toward human agency.’ Coleman presents a view of race as a technological instrument or system that is ‘denatured from its historical roots’ and ‘freely engaged as a productive tool’ (ibid.).

Contemporary black artists (particularly those mentioned above) often reject conventional notions or images of blackness by replacing them with reimagined realities. Their works exist between the symbolic and the real, as avatars whose bodies
are alternate and hybrid, cyborg-like identities, surrounded by an environment that stimulates the viewer's awareness of the future.

Wangechi Mutu's video *The End of Eating Everything* (2013) shows the head of musician and singer Santigold consuming flocks of black birds. Slowly, the frame expands to reveal her body in massive form, moving as if it had multiple implanted limbs. This work describes a female ‘pseudo-cyborg’ with medusoid tentacles whose body gets bigger and bigger because of all things she had consumed.

Figure 53: Wangechi Mutu, still from *The End of Eating Everything* (2013). Animated video, 8 minutes 10 seconds.

In *Pumzi* (2009), a 23-minute film, Wanuri Kahiu portrays visions of the future while emphasizing the issues of waste disposal and environmental destruction, and the position of humans in relation to them. The character Asha, more scientist than cyborg, escapes enslavement and ecological devastation by sacrificing her body to grow a germinating seed (Gaskins, 2014). In her article *Pumzi and the Politics of Trash*, Delinda Collier (n.d) exposes the criticality of Afrofuturism in regard to technology development in a post-apocalyptic environment, where obsolescence has to be reimagined in the context of capitalising it into a resource commodity. She says:

By introducing my essay with *Pumzi*, however, I suggest that the regime of representation of ‘Africa’ and even the developing world is currently undergoing change. Kahiu herself calls *Pumzi* an exploration of Afrofuturism, which has, since the 1960s, been concerned with a renewal of the obsolescent as a technique of consciousness and agency. Its theorists have proposed a different relationship to objects and technology especially, working the material as a standing reserve always ready to be engaged against the grain of planned obsolescence.
Afrofuturism, a branch of Afrocentrism, is an ideology which revisits the past in order to (re)construct the future. My work proposes ‘liberation and location’, and I am also inspired by D. Denenge Akpem’s work, which deals with the past, present and the future simultaneously and attempts to articulate concepts and realities that are beyond words. Her practice mixes installation, performance, and sound, paying homage to primogenitors and future griots of histories, written and unwritten (Hazel, 2012). In her work *Constructing Future Forms: A Performance-Lecture on Afro-Futurism and Fashion* (2012), Akpem explores the intention and manifestation of self and community within the context of Afrofuturism, as infinitely dimensional. She says: ‘For myself, Afrofuturism springs from core beliefs about black liberation’ (ibid.).

Black futurism is a form of creative expression that questions the conventional limits of black subjectivity. The works mentioned above open up a conversation for artists to engage in the processes of an immersive ‘mobility of blackness’ around the world (ibid). My work relates to these examples in terms of the body as a vehicle that reinvents and transforms blackness (the way it is usually and stereotypically portrayed), not only the black body as such, but Africa in general, metaphorically seen as a body (a work of art).
that is representative of futuristic ideas of blackness. Because Africa is changing, the way I use e-waste in my work can be seen as a proposal of futuristic ideas. My performance *Techno Dandy* expresses the concept of rebirth, linking the past, present and future: from a techno trash man, exposed to e-waste dangers, to a techno dandy – from waste to style.

My *Techno Dandy* is not a ‘race man’. Rather, he draws from W.E.B. Du Bois’ ideology to represent similar personas, and to subtly insert, through art and beauty, a mark of resistance against race, technology and capitalism’s existential crisis in Africa. And particularly against the technologically underdeveloped DRC being an e-waste dumping zone despite its (sometimes illegal) export of minerals that advance technology globally (Friends of the Congo [FC], n.d.).

In borrowing the logic of dress codes and the symbolism of African fractals, as well as the notion of ‘mobile blackness’, I reimagine an African digital identity. My aim in this context is to explore the idea of a ‘futuristic’ rebirth in a digital Africa that has transcended social and racial boundaries. This is a non-literal expression of style, rhythm and bodily movement in a public space, where the audience can see my (trans)formation and reinvention of the body, a social imagination that subverts the narrative. To phrase this differently, in my work I am looking to defamiliarise myself with conventional notions and narrations of identity in urban spaces, and hoping, through subversive tactics, to visually unpack a capitalistic and predatory technology.

### 3.3 Digital Identity and Art

#### 3.3.1 Self-Determination in the Realm of Digital Aesthetics

My performances *Techno Dandy* and *Web Jacket* personify the existing dynamic between physical and virtual spaces. Looking at digital technology, which takes the shape of a garment or a sculpture, so as to metaphorically propose that viewers regard digital technology through my perspective, and, in so doing, perceive cultural expression, social status, virtual identity, style and alienation.

I investigate the appropriation of digital or virtual identity as self-determination. In *Life on the Screen* (1995: 31), Sherry Turkle explains such appropriation thus:

People choose to personalize and customize their computers. And they have very different styles both of using computers and interpreting their meanings... It is up to individuals to make out what the legacy of personality, history, and culture causes them to see. Just as different
people take up the computer in different ways, so do different cultures. Indeed, from the very beginning of its mass deployment, computer technology encouraged a variety of cultures in which a wide range of social, artistic, and political values found expression.

4 Method and Process

4.1 Collecting Materials

My work was inspired by regularly visiting a technician to have my second-hand laptop fixed. The piles of discarded computer parts at his workshop looked like sculpture installations to me. I therefore started obsessively collecting and storing them myself. In the process I started to question issues regarding contemporary information technology and the rapid change in the consumption of products as a result of rampant capitalism.

In addition to personally obtaining e-waste, I work with Ecycle, an electronic recycling company. Collecting materials for my artwork is a primary challenge because the more I proceed, the more material I need. As a result, trying to recycle almost all the components in a creative way has become a major part of my process.

4.2 Reconstructing Beauty from the Obsolete

When constructing wearable sculptures, I align fashion and digital and personal media to provide a structure to my interpretation of contemporary technology. Firstly, clothing plays a corrective role in relation to the body, a certain way of presenting oneself to the world, a rectified presence. Secondly, social communication offers us the space to create a fictitious or improved profile, which, in my context, refers to objects I make from e-waste to subversively reimagine beauty or lifestyle.

As Geraldine Bloustien and Denise Wood (2013: 54) have said:
Clothes, physique, gait, gesture, hair and particularly the face of one’s avatar are just as important in virtual worlds as in actual environments as indicators of how one wants one's character and personality to be perceived in particular social contexts.

Figure 58: The miracle of Kinshasa is that despite the chaos of this capital city, artists survive and thrive. A catwalk performance by Kinshasa’s young Sapeurs: fashionistas parade down one of the trashiest streets of the Matongé neighbourhood, wearing **haute couture**. Extreme in self-expression, some spend most of their earnings on designer apparel. – Photo: Pascal Maitre.

Figure 59: Congolese gentlemen in Brazzaville in 2009, ‘dignified and defiant’, juxtaposed with a pile of trash. – Photo: Daniele Tamagni.

In *Pumzi and the Politics of Trash*, Delinda Collier provides an understanding of the black African body as ‘dignified and defiant’ in relation to the politics of waste. She refers to a work by Nigerian photographer Emeka Okereke, *Suffering and Smiling 2* (2004), from the photographic collective ‘Depth of Field’. This black and white photo shows a rather well-dressed, smiling man sitting on a rubbish heap. He has a cell phone
in each hand, one of which is held to his ear. The man’s smile, white shirt and shiny shoes contrast starkly with the trash all around him. The reading of this work is ambivalent – ironic but realistic, and could be considered what Collier calls ‘normalising the crisis of waste management’ (Collier, n.d.).

Figure 60: Wanuri Kahiu, still from *Pumzi* (2009). 23 minutes.

Figure 61: Emeka Okereke, *Suffering and Smiling 2* (2004).

The materiality of reused computer parts, including, keys, mice and cables, is evidence of a human imprint. The physicality felt in these remnants reveals how the relationship of the body to language, thought and intention is translated into a virtual space.
Figure 62: From the *Self-Portraits (Techno Dandy)* series (2015).
5 Conclusion

Throughout this text I have discussed political, aesthetic, cultural and psychological aspects of digital identity and its impacts, in order to present an intersection between my theoretical and practical components, which also comment on oppressive capitalism and the desire and need to consume contemporary technology in Africa, and the DRC in particular.

I chose to focus on the aesthetic values and meanings of digital identity and its impacts within urban African, and more especially Congolese, society, not only because it is where I come from, but because it is a place where people, despite the chaos, use fashion as a lifestyle, a tool to fit in, and a medium of defiance. I also looked at the psychological characteristics of technology consumption as it forms our identity in urban society, creating an addictive nature as the internet becomes a force that increasingly reshapes our lives.

I preferred to work with electronic waste, specifically computer parts as a source material available to me, transforming and reshaping them into fashionable items – reminiscent of a ‘cyber-citizen’. My interest in this project was not to portray virtual lives by working with new media or similar virtual forms of expression, but to represent the virtual world with tangible and discarded components that I collected in order to question socio-political, technological and environmental problems in Africa (whilst being aware that these problems also affect other parts of the world.).

I included fashion as an integral part of my project for this reason: as an analogy from which to draw socio-political and aesthetic strategies for examining contemporary technology’s effects, in the context of communication and self-determination. And I felt it necessary to engage in an elaborative historical approach, starting from the black ‘prestige slaves’ of the eighteenth century, to black diasporic dandies’ involvement as ‘creatures as well as creators’ of commodity culture, and as modern ‘political aesthetes’. These include the Sapeurs of the DRC, who strive (both locally and in the diaspora) to reach their goals of advancement.

I am concerned with the human body in this project because it emphasizes how virtual worlds could extend perceptions of the body via the use of technological devices as additional elements in our modern expression, hereby transforming us into a type of cyborg. This body also portrays the relationship between the offline and the online worlds in a constant, back-and-forth journey. In this document I have explained my experience with the body as a ‘site for transformation’: taking the digital identity/world as an escape or an alternative – or, in the words of Foucault, as a ‘heterotopic space’,
through which to reimagine and refashion a chaotic contemporary DRC.

Because my research includes the discussion of futuristic ideas and concepts while using obsolete technology and African memories, my work falls within the context of Afrofuturism (and even Afrosurrealism). It is in this spirit that I chose to revisit the past (and present) of the fractal nature of African geometric symbolism, to metaphorically present a contemporary digital continent that is constantly changing. Apart from gaining inspiration from Sapeurs, the conception of my costumes and performances is rooted in Luba masquerade rituals, which I compare to the embodiment of a cyber-community through people's daily use of digital media.

In situating myself in the context of African contemporary art and technology, my aim is to add what is in many ways a non-literal, ambiguous, indeterminate reading of aspects of our society and its issues, but also a mediation.

6 Catalogue

The practical work submitted for this degree is constructed mainly from computer keyboards and cables, and various materials as substrates, such as wood, remote controls, clothes and shoes. In addition to sculptured objects, videos and photographs featuring them and my body are integral to the project.

6.1 Video Performance and Photography

I have considered concepts of self-determination and representation within the context of performance, and the relationship between embodiment and space. As Anthony Elliott (2001: 99) would say: ‘The body remains an integral aspect of the (inner) self and personal identity within consumer culture and its key marker of distinction. It is the site of intensified self-management, self-regulation and self-mastery, even in virtual environments.’ The purpose of portraying my body in a specific space is to convey to the audience my experience as a migrant in both physical and virtual spaces.

My performances are constructed for site-specific and public environments. Regarding the former, a suitable environment is one that is e-waste based, whether it is an electronic recycling site or an e-waste dump. Through this I hope to engage the viewer with the chaotic world of waste, revealing modern technological advancement as the source of it, and its potential as an environmental hazard if not cautiously managed and recycled. For instance, I have used Ecycle Electronic Recycling, situated in Paarl, as both a source of material and a location for recorded performances.
Within this project, my body acts as a ‘prosthetic memory’ or ‘prosthetic identity’, symbolically representing my inner experiences with, and anxieties about, the virtual world as well as e-waste, and the implications for human beings involved in technology-related mining and dumping in Africa. Using photography as an additional medium can extend ways of positioning and narrating myself in a space, and also evoke aspects of the narcissism associated with what I have called ‘fashionable addiction’.

6.2 Web Jacket

The Web Jacket is representative of a digitally enslaved body who has moved to the internet – a kind of ‘permanency’ in the virtual world, while still offline. It is inspired by a straitjacket. I relate to it as a schizophrenic personality that I inevitably experience daily within a virtual world. Like many people, I am anxious not to miss out on news, updates and fashions, and so feel the need to stay online through a cell phone, which qualifies me as a web addict!

The video work is an indoor performance in which I present myself wearing a straitjacket made of computer keys, cables, belts and used clothes. The costume is comprised of three parts, including a long-sleeved shirt that ties my arms behind my back, a pair of shorts and a hat in the form of a helmet with cables hanging down as hair. There is also a pile of white computer keys on the floor, which I intend to step on while performing. Black sheets are used in the background and on the floor, to create an interesting contrast with the white computer keys. It is a nine-minute video performance in which I constantly jump, dance and shake the garment, screaming while trying to get out of it. These activities produce a sound reminiscent of Nick Cave’s costumes. The second part of the video is in slow motion, and is accompanied by ‘M’bula’, a composition by the well-known Congolese musician Lokua Kanza, which adds to the effect of the screaming.
Figure 72: Web Jacket (2015). Computer parts, clothes and belts. 215 x 55 x 65 cm.
Figure 73: *Self-Portrait 1* (2015). C-Print. 56 x 81 cm.

Figure 74: *Self-Portrait 2* (2015). C-Print. 56 x 81 cm.
6.3 Techno Dandy: A Suit of Disagreement

My Techno Dandy can be seen as a warrior, inspired by nineteenth-century French and English redingotes and medieval armour. This redingote is covered with black computer keys and forms a second skin on a tailored black cloth. Its elbows have separate covers made from knee guards that I also worked on with computer keys. These allow me to bend my arms easily while moving and give the costume the impression of armour. It has an accompanying top hat that is also studded with keys, and a modified walking stick. Inside the redingote is an additional cover or ‘shirt’ made with computer cables hanging to the knees, which is inspired by medieval chainmail. The shoes are comical and worn with socks woven from coloured cables. They are also intended to complement the subversive nature of the garment, which forms an allegory of a body in auto-recovery from diverse technological injuries.

The Techno Dandy is a person who dons the outfit for a parade and therefore performs several characters. He embodies hope for a future where access to technology is more widespread in Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular.

My performances in Cape Town (as a start) will also highlight imposed systems, and my adaptation to them. Aligning myself with the strutting Sapeurs of the DRC, I observe and am observed, I participate and, through sartorial performances, emphasize my own self-determinacy. Cape Town has many politically, historically and socio-economically loaded spaces, so where I choose to perform is vital to the meaning of the work. By constructing my own paths through the city, or following well-known pedestrian routes, I will have the opportunity to practise further autonomy and identity reinvention (De Certeau, 1984).
Figure 84: *Techno Dandy* (2015). Computer parts, fibreglass, clothes and shoes. Dimensions variable.
Figure 85: *Self-Portrait 3* (2015). C-Print, 56 x 81 cm.

Figure 86: *Self-Portrait 4* (2015). C-Print. 56 x 81 cm.
Figure 87: Self-Portrait 5 (2015). C-Print. 56 x 81 cm.

Figure 88: Self-Portrait 6 (2015). C-Print. 56 x 81 cm.
6.4 Digital Bags

I produced twenty bags by gluing computer keys onto black, handmade cotton bags, after having borrowed the design from the ‘tourist bags’ commonly seen around Cape Town markets. I titled them Digital Bags. All identical in their material and form, the bags are given flexibility by their smaller computer keys, allowing them to be manipulated. They also provide additional meanings by distorting expectations of their familiar usage. When displayed, they infer mobility and displacement – my displacement as a migrant. The intention behind them is one of permanent movement, reminiscent of my impermanency as a foreign citizen between two homes – between two spaces – and of the ‘netizen’ who moves between being online and offline.

6.5 Fractals

There is a sense of incompletion in the woven works that together make up *Fractals*. Each is residual in nature (because of the obsolescence of the material); the texture of the canvas of cables has unravelled extremities. The seven canvasses are presented as fabrics producing fibres – imagined, potential fabrics for costumes – in one row, decreasing in size from 50 cm square to 12.5 cm square. *Fractals* represents the infinity of an elusive virtual world. The primary material used also carries the residue of a functional purpose on the surface, and the history of information that once passed through it.

Figure 92: *Fractals* (2015). Woven computer cables and wood. Dimensions variable.
6.6 Untitled 1 and 2

*Untitled 1* and 2 are similar in meaning to the previous cable installation. The former is presented in fractal formation and made mostly of black cables, whereas these larger works are made mostly of lighter cables, and displayed singularly. Like the *Fractals* installation piece, the presence of wooden stretchers in *Untitled 1* and 2 gives them the additional meaning of a loom. Symbolically, we are enmeshed in a world of the internet, and this virtual world is continually redefining our identity.

Figures 93 and 94: *Untitled 1* and 2 (2015). Woven computer cables and wood. 120 x 60 cm.
6.7 Techno Addict

*Techno Addict* falls into the same category of intention as *Techno Dandy*: self-determinacy through sartorial strategy representing digital identity. I used a jacket and shoes, to which I added black, white and grey computer keys. I decided not to use a mannequin or other props, which might have rendered the work a mere fashion statement, and not ambiguous enough. This is one of the cases in which I drew on Yinka Shonibare’s work. As he does, I would say that my work situates itself in the context of contradictions; what you see isn’t what you get, but rather a subversion that tricks and challenges the mind (Miller, 2009: 266, 268).

6.8 Googling my Dreams

This work is an installation of hats and walking sticks, embellishments and accoutrements of style. I have attached computer parts to readymade hats and wooden and plastic sticks. All are lined up against a wall. The idea is to portray self-invention in a virtual world; how the latter provides me with a space to reinvent myself, in parallel with the cosmopolitan yet divided society I currently live in. I therefore perceive the internet as a heterotopic space that provides alternative answers to my questions concerning language, nationhood, race and origin.

Figure 97: Googling my Dreams (2015). Computer parts, game controllers, hats, wooden and plastic sticks. Dimensions variable.
6.9 Techno Trash Bin

I reinforced a large, woven industrial plastic bag, used for transporting substances including waste and rubble, with primer, fibreglass and resin to give it a final shape. I then covered the inside with black cloth and the outside with computer keys. The woven bag has been repurposed; the empty black interior of Techno Trash Bin symbolizes chaos – and this work represents Africa as an e-waste dumping zone for the developed world.

At the centre of my project is a material that I work with daily, but is toxic. While trying to protect myself from the multiple hazards of e-waste, I sympathise with people, especially the youth across Africa (and the world), who are buying and manipulating it, unprotected and unaware of the grave risks it poses to them, as well as to animals and the environment. According to environmentalists, the toxic materials found in computer equipment and other e-waste, including lead, cadmium, chromium, mercury, and barium, affect the brain and the kidneys. The older the computer, the higher the level of toxic elements (Farid, 2012).
Figure 98: *Techno Trash Bin* (2015). Computer keys, found bag and cloth. 114 x 97 x 70 cm.
6.10 Narcisurfing Netizenship

In this work, I am looking at the power that the screen holds over visual aesthetic judgment. It is quite common today to see people projected on society via media imagery. Aesthetic values are reviewed according to the influence given to the screen (Turkle, 1995: 45). With regard to this, I would say that we all have been programmed by images in the media in the digital age. The power of modern media has somehow granted us a corrupted eye, remapping and reshaping in our brains a stereotypical sense of beauty, a fashion-conscious way of living and perceiving the rest of the world.

The top part of the sculpture is presented with cables spreading from it, whether onto a wall or the floor. Its dimensions vary according to the space. Parts of the legs and stand are covered with keys. And I inserted a camera’s zoom lens as a penis that can be adjusted to different sizes.

6.11 E-Munkishi

This work is a large cloak made with fabric, resin, fibreglass and computer parts. The interior is hollow. The left ‘hand’ holds a sceptre while the right is filled with cables hanging down to the floor.

*Munkishi* is a Luba term which means a spirit (with the prefix *Ba-* for many spirits), either good or bad, at the service of diviners called *Bilumbu*.58 As *Bilumbu* perform rituals, so the use of the internet is a daily ritual for many people. Hence *E-Munkishi* represents the power of the internet over people's lives, which is both good and bad.

Figure 104: *E-Munkishi* (2015). Computer parts, fibreglass, resin, cloth and found objects. 681 x 200 x 115 cm.
7 End Notes

1. FOMO is defined as a person having to be in on everything (relative to FOMS: Fear Of Missing Something, or MIA: Missing In Action). Its symptoms are an obsession with always keeping up to date in terms of trends and events, for example, when one constantly texts friends to find out what they are up to, or checks social networks every 30 seconds. Psychologically, it can be viewed as ‘pain relief’, and often involves the love of fashion and the sacrifices one is willing to make for it (Grohol, 2011).

2. Technology is a broad area, for which I tend to use the term information technology (IT). However, to avoid repetition, in certain places in this document I use synonymous terms such as telecommunication technology or digital media.

3. ‘The Congo possesses 64 percent of the world’s coltan. When coltan is refined it becomes a heat resistant powder that can hold a high electric charge. The properties of refined coltan are a vital element in creating devices that store energy or capacitors, which are used in a vast array of small electronic devices, especially in mobile phones, laptop computers, pagers, and other electronic devices’ (Friends of the Congo [F.C], n.d.).

4. Apart from worldwide internet connection facilities, globalization has generated free trade beyond borders and created a wider market of products and services. Big corporate companies from Western countries such as the United States, as well as corporations from China and Russia, benefit from exploiting cheap labour when manufacturing goods in the developing or ‘majority world’ (Africa, in this case), and also from running associated low-cost services, such as call centres. However, the same process benefits some Africans themselves economically, in generating developing markets where new consumers use facilities at a low cost. The more technology is upgraded, the more consumers and services expand, which benefits both the West and Africa (Ankara, 2013).

5. According to the Basel Action Network (BAN), only half the computers and other electronic components sent to Africa are reused; the rest is non-functional and irreparable and therefore dumped locally and ultimately burnt, causing serious health issues through the contamination of soil and water supplies with toxic lead, mercury, beryllium and cadmium. Countries like Ghana and Nigeria are just a few of those experiencing terrible e-waste effects. The identities or origins of the technological trash are easily found out because of the brand names and tags remaining on the equipment. China, for instance, is one the world’s major technology producers and e-waste dumpers, including within its own borders, such as at the Guiyu site in Guangdong province. https://repurposefall2011.wordpress.com/2011/10/21/our-ewaste-our-permanent-error/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtT2EZ_d3Xk&spfreload=10 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pr1zQrXM_7s


7. Virtual anthropology is a new science that combines diverse fields of study such as anthropology, medicine, computing, scientific visualisation, industrial design and engineering. It proceeds by a 3D preparation of specimens, replacing their missing parts by analysing and reconstructing them one or many at a time, and finally produces real objects from virtual models. This tool is used by many disciplines to access and share data (Weber, Gerhard W. & Bookstein, Fred L., 2011).

8. This opens up the binarism of ‘tangible and social computing’ or ‘actual/virtual’ interactions. To paraphrase Paul Dourish (2001: 99), we inhabit our bodies and they in turn inhabit the world, with seamless connections back and forth. As physical beings, we cannot escape the world of physical objects we come into contact with, such as lifting or pushing these objects around, nor avoid experiencing the consequences of physical phenomena such as gravity, inertia, mass and
friction. However, our daily experience is social as well as physical, as we interact daily with other people and we live in a world that is socially constructed.

9. For the purposes of this document, I will focus on the West as it is directly relevant to various subjects that I am interested in, such as slavery and fashion, resulting in black diasporic dandyism or Afro-Dandyism, by which Congolese fashion trends were influenced: how black people in the diaspora used fashion as a tool for self-determination. I also look at technological ‘enslavement’ – to mining resources and e-waste dumping in Africa, most of the time by Western countries. However, I do include additional references to the triangular relationship between Africa, the West and Asia (particularly China) in regard to both fashion and technology. As examples regarding fashion: former DRC/Zaire president Mobutu Sese Seko’s costume is a mixture of Western and Mao suits (see The Influence of LA SAPE in the Contemporary DRC), and the Dutch wax print was originally intended for Indonesian people, but ended up in Africa and became thought of as an African fabric (see Fashion in the Congos, footnote 23).

10. According to anthropologists there has been a tendency in social studies to use terms such as ‘prosthetic memory’ or ‘prosthetic identity’ when referring to the body being supplemented by any mechanistic device, while prostheses have historically referred to artificial body parts intended to restore the body’s functioning. In this instance, collected computer parts (mainly) are stripped down and used to construct a new identity.

11. Pronounced ‘kēnua’: slang for Kinshasa residents compared to Brazzavillois or Brazzaville residents.

12. I am aware that this is not just a DRC-based phenomenon. Similar forms of ‘street sartorial expression’ are present in various parts of Africa, such as the ‘Skothane’ in South Africa.


14. *Flâneur* is a French term that peaked in popularity in nineteenth-century Paris, and was used to describe a fashionable wanderer, streetwalker or stroller with no fixed purpose. (Procrastination: Cultural Exploration. [C.E.] n.d. An Interdisciplinary Conversation at the University of Oxford). See: http://procrastinationoxford.org/2014/05/09/the-flaneur/

15. Joseph Kabila, current president of the DRC, aimed to boost the socio-economic and architectural infrastructure of the DRC, and particularly of Kinshasa, with a project called ‘Cinq Chantiers’ (Five Worksites). In addition he proposed to build a new city called ‘La Cité du Fleuve’ (The River City) on an island a few hundred kilometres from Kinshasa. It was finally built, but is apparently not for the common poor population, as it is an expensive area only for rich locals, expats and tourists. Which leaves the majority of the population with only one option: hoping for better days. See:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyW8ZIDuXls&spfreload=10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcHmjvEcWnE, also see, Urban Theory beyond The West – Spectral Kinshasa: Building the City through an Architecture of Words. (De Boeck in Edensor and Jayne, 2012).

16. Foucault defines these heterotopias in different categories, including: ‘crisis heterotopia’, in which a crisis such as the painful transition from one identity to another is externalised in the form of a period (for example, military service, boarding schooling, adolescence, pregnancy and old age), ‘heterotopias of deviation’ (psychiatric institutions, prisons, nursing homes) and those that gather individuals together in an urban area, or ‘heterotopias of time accumulation’ (such as bars, theatres, cinemas, stadiums and museums) (De Boeck, 2006), (Foucault, 1984: 46–49). I also present various kinds of heterotopia in my work, including: a ‘crisis heterotopia’ – my self-identification as a Congolese migrant using art forms in the public space (also as a ‘heterotopia of time’); ‘heterotopias of deviation’ – or my anxiety through the *Web Jacket*; the heterotopias of a
single, real place – my body as the vessel of an everyday digital experience (also as a migrant); and 'heterotopias of time', in relation to the whole body of work.

17. Following the idea of Professor V.Y. Mudimbe, who says in The Invention of Africa (1988) that Africa is an artificial invention, first through colonialism and later with the movement of the oppositions supported by the West to undermine the independence that had been gained.


19. In addition to the different heterotopic spaces that Foucault describes, their sacred principle is that they have precise and determined functions in relation to other spaces in society – the heterotopic spaces could be defined as spaces of illusion or transition and of compensation (such as the nineteenth-century English colonies in the new world); Foucault gives us a pertinent example of a boat as a floating space, not fixed to any other space except the infinity of the sea (Jones, V. 2010), (Foucault, 1984: 46-49), (Johnson, 2006: 75-90).

20. The redingote (or redingotte, redingot) is a type of coat that has had several forms over time. The name is derived from a French alteration of the English ‘riding coat’, an example of reborrowing. The first form of the redingote arose in the eighteenth century, when it was used for travel on horseback. This coat was a bulky, utilitarian garment. It evolved into a fashionable accessory in the last two decades of that century, when women began wearing it in a perfectly tailored style. Italian fashionistas also picked it up, adapting it for more formal occasions (Walton, 2013). See: http://18thcand19thc.blogspot.com/2013/11/redingote.html

21. See Mungo Macaroni (in the Padlock); the term was used to describe black actors, and was given to the first black minstrels in theatres in England and the USA. Also a caricatural portrayal, characterised by an ‘ironic verbosity emanating from a black body, in fancy dress’. And later the term Mungo Macaroni was used to describe a black dandy who was sometimes pejoratively called ‘a fop’ – Julius Soubise as Mungo Macaroni (object and subject of the empire) (Miller, 2009: 32, 69).

22. Monica L. Miller (2009: 39) explains: ‘Black slaves resident in England from the time of their first landing in the 1550s through to the eighteenth century were often used and regarded as luxury items and ornaments rather than as labourers. They were therefore dandified, dressed in a hyper-haute version of the latest fashions.’

23. The fabric is a ‘Dutch print’ made for Indonesians, who rejected it as a fake product, causing it to eventually end up in Africa. On their long journey to Indonesia, Dutch colonials built stations in Africa as stop-off points which facilitated the introduction of the Dutch fabric that was not meant for Africans in the first place. Dutch colonials also moved West Africans to the colony of Indonesia as soldiers. On their return to Africa, they brought along with them similar fabrics as gifts to their families (African Fabrics, 2011).

24. This loosely translates as the Society of Entertainers and Elegant People.


26. Between 1970 and 1980, Papa Wemba returned from his tours of Paris modelling a plethora of flamboyant European designer clothes. He and other musicians and ‘Grand priests’ of La SAPE, such as King Kester Emeneya and Strevos Niarcos Mombele (claimed to be ‘The Prophet of La SAPE’), fuelled the fever for French fashion by spending tens of thousands of dollars on outfits by European designers such as Versace, Gaultier, Cavalli, J. M. Weston, and many more (Sahara Vibe, S.V. 2008). Haute couture was already known and celebrated in Congo-Brazzaville as a mere cult of dressing well, inspired by Brazzaville’s political activists once based in Paris, such as Maurice Loubaki and Andre Matsoua. However, it was introduced to Kinshasa as a movement or

27. French jargon, literally meaning claws or nails; used in French and Linguala or Lingála in the context of a designer label. Sapeurs’ vocabulary influenced the explosion of Lingála (the most spoken language of DRC, also popular in Brazzaville), a city language which is a mixture of French, Swahili and sometimes English, and which runs hand in hand with the Lingála music phenomenon (Wrong, 2000: 174).

28. Sapeurs argue that a real Sapeur belongs to the SAPE movement, considering its ‘missionary’ ideology that goes beyond fashion. This is different from a sapeur, who’s uniquely concerned with individualist elegance.

29. This oversized suit was both an outrageous style and a statement of defiance. Inspired by African-American youth fashion and jazz culture during the Forties, then co-opted by a generation of Mexican Americans, it involved big hats and suits for men, and miniskirts, long jackets and socks for women. Zoot suiters asserted themselves in the face of widespread discrimination, but only on special occasions, because their suits were considered luxury items due to the amount of material and tailoring they required. ‘Unwritten rules demanded that people of color remain unseen and unheard in public spaces, but the zoot suit, with broad shoulders, narrow waist, and ballooned pants, was loud and bold. Zoot-suited young men (and some young women) held themselves upright and walked with a confident swagger that seemed to flow from the very fashion itself’ (People & Events: The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, [PE], n. d), (Ariel. War, Politics & Suits: The Zoot Suit, [ZS], n.d.).


31. The community is regarded as a quasi-religion with members worshipping haute couture as the cult of the cloth, or religion Kitendi (the religion of the cloth) in Lingála. Therefore the title ‘the Pope of La SAPE’ was also given to Papa Wemba as leader of La SAPE.

32. The Hungry Gaze was The Macaronies’ strategy in the eighteenth century. It was a space of public attraction, presenting fabulous outfits, where one could watch others and be watched. They combined fantasy, panorama and phantasmagoria (Miller, 2009: 68-71). The Macaronies were a group of foppish men in 1760s and 1770s London, who were ostentatious dressers and consummate consumers of foreign goods. They named themselves The Macaronies after returning from a European tour, and intensified their engagement with commodity culture (Miller, 2009: 67, 176-218).

33. Matongé neighbourhood is a Congolese part of Brussels located near Chaussée de Wavre and Porte de Namur, which derives its name from Matongé district of Kinshasa. After the independence of the Belgian Congo in 1960, an aristocratic philanthropist called Monique Van der Straten founded Maisaf (an abbreviation of Maison Africaine or African House), which served as a centre for Africans and a residence for university students from the Belgian Congo. The independence of the Congo increased the flow of migrants to Belgium, and Brussels’ malls proliferated with cafés, restaurants, jewellers, hairdressers, exotic groceries and wax shops. Far from being a ghetto, Matongé is a Mecca of African elegance. Over 45 black African nationalities are present in the neighbourhood, and lovers of Africa come strolling and shopping in it (Beddington, 2013), (Abruzzini, 2013), (Wrong, 2000: 51-54).

34. A lightweight short or long-sleeved suit, worn without a tie. A combination of the European business suit and the Mao jacket.
35. The Communist Mao Zedong of China, who introduced a radical suit as a symbol of resistance to Western Capitalism. It became best known as the Mao suit or jacket, and was even imitated later by Western people.


37. Based on William James' Pragmatic Philosophy that energises the aesthetic, hereby turning art into that which produces ‘a productive skepticism toward the fixity of essence and identity’ (Posnock, 1995: 504-506; Miller 2009: 164, 168).

38. I am referring to The Harlem Renaissance in 1920 in the USA; the African-American struggle for social recognition in defining modern identity in terms of race, gender and sexuality. And also to The Macaronies (Miller, 2009: 67, 176-218).

39. The recognition that classifications are simply convenient labels (Miller, 2009: 168).

40. Started by a young American looking to create job opportunities in Africa, Telecel replaced the Belgians' dysfunctional telephone network.


42. Literally an evolved or developed person who went through education or assimilation, and accepted European values and patterns of behaviour. In the 1950s in the Belgian Congo, local Congolese were forced to learn European ways of life to fit into the colonised society. After being given time to practise how to dress, eat and talk like a European, one had to pass a test to prove that he or she had become an evolué (or new elite) and could receive a card from colonial administrators to be allowed into the city amongst the Belgian expats. The term was also used to describe the growing native middle class in the years leading up to independence. The Lingála term was mundele ndombe, ‘whites with black skins’. Its equivalent existed in Congo-Brazzaville as well (Mulumba, 2007: para 5, 6), (Tshimanga, 1982), (Procrastination: Cultural Explorations. [C.E.] n.d. An Interdisciplinary Conversation at the University of Oxford).


44. Mobutu placed the leopard at the centre of his coming-of-age fable. It was his personal insignia, a symbol of pride, strength and courage (Wrong, 2000: 69).

45. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXRvwk12atw

46. Ancient Egyptian mathematicians made use of powers of two as well. And Claudia Zaslavsky in Africa Counts (1973) provides archeological evidence suggesting that Egypt’s use of base-2 calculations was derived from the use of base-2 in Sub-Saharan Africa.

47. The unusual groupings of the notches on the Ishango bones, discovered in what was then the Belgian Congo, suggested that it was some sort of a Stone Age calculation tool. The bone revealed that early civilization had mastered arithmetic series and even the concept of prime numbers.

48. The Kuba kingdom (also Bakuba or Bushongo) initially was a sixteenth-century historical Central African state bordered by the Sankuru, Lulua, and Kasai (of the Luba tribe) rivers in the south-east of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). The kingdom was a conglomerate of several smaller Bushongo-speaking principalities as well as the Kete, Coofa,
Mbeengi and the Cwa Pygmies. The original Kuba migrated during the sixteenth century from the north. Nineteen different ethnic groups are included in the kingdom today, and are presided over by the nyim, or king. (Bortolot, 2000).

49. Most Bantu languages make use of this term (la palabre in French) to refer to both language and the loom that serves to weave raphia fibres (De Boeck, 2006).

50. They sometimes take the form of a woman’s or tortoise's body with a carved head. This object exhibits no signs of age or use.


52. Elias Aboujaoude (2001: 69) explains narcissurfing as googling yourself to measure your online presence. He says that this experience has been triggered by personal or ‘I-media’, and finally compares virtual presence – or omnipresence – to that of the Judeo-Christian God.

53. A result of a post-Fanonian project that uses Fanon’s work on the visual impact of the black body against homophobia and sexism. The term ‘redemptive narcissism’ was coined by Lyle Ashton Harris in an interview about how Franz Fanon had influenced him. He defines redemptive narcissism as self-love as a form of resistance to the tyranny of mediocrity (Miller, 2009: 246-247).

54. A Research Project on Blackness and Aesthetics. Department of Communication, Georgia State University coordinated by Alessandra Raengo (Raengo, Liquid Blackness [LB], n.d.).

55. Ecycle's Head Office is in the town of Paarl, in the Western Cape province of South Africa. But the company has drop-off points all around the province, so that people can get rid of their defunct electronic equipment without having to go all the way to Paarl. I have been collaborating with the company for two years, since I started my MFA Degree. Florian Schiller and Laurentius Fullard, the two men in charge of the Head Office, have been a great help to me in consistently collecting and dropping quantities of material at my studio, enabling me to produce my MFA work. See: http://www.ecycle.co.za/

56. The music is used with the artist's permission.

57. From recycling operations, the result of a programmed obsolescence.

58. They are the equivalent of South African sangomas. The root of the word nkishi (or nkisi) is shared with many other Bantu-speaking peoples across Africa, and is associated with objects and related practices that have potent transformative power. Bankishi are particular spirits thought to have specialized abilities such as identifying, tracking and trapping thieves and other evil-doers; retrieving lost articles; curing sterility; revealing prophecy through dreams; and assuring general well-being. According to the Luba, figures are powerless until charged with magical substances (Roberts and Roberts, 2007: 45-49, 50).
8 References


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9 List of Illustrations


Figure 17 Les Sapeurs. Source: LePost archives/Le Huffington Post. Available : http://www.starducongo.com/La-joyeuse-exhibition-des-sapeurs-dans-un-cimetiere-de-Kinshasa_a3205.html [2015, January 19]. Figure 18 Sapeurs showing off their garments in

**Figure 19** Mzee Kindingu, a member of La SAPE. Source: Fine & Dandy: From Solange to Guinness. Available: http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/02/14/fine-dandy-from-solange-to-guinness-les-sapeurs-stay-stylish-in-annual-pilgrimage/ [2015, January 19].


**Figure 21** The cult of elegance. Source: Tosinger’s blog. Available: http://www.fashionprojects.org/ [2015 January 25].

**Figure 22** President Mobutu with Etienne Tshisekedi and Justin Bomboko. Source: Vigilance RDC. Available: http://vigilancerdc.afrikblog.com/archives/2011/12/22/23025598.html [2015, January 20].


**Figure 24** Mobutu ‘King of Zaire’. Source: The Xenophile Historian. Available: http://xenohistorian.faithweb.com/africa/af09b.html [2015, January 20].


**Figure 27** Maurice Mbikayi. From the *Self-Portraits (Techno Dandy)* series (2015). **Figure 28** Samuel Fosso. *Le Chef* (Celui qui a vendu l’Afrique aux colons). Source: Fashion Project. Available: http://www.fashionprojects.org/ [2015 January 25].


**Figure 30** Lusona drawing: trees of the ancestors. Source: Lusona: recursive Eulerian paths. Available: http://www.ccd.rpi.edu/eglash/temp/CS%20RPI/5.7/Chapter%205.7b.html [2014, December 16].


**Figure 33** Maurice Mbikayi. *Untitled 1* (2015). **Figure 34** Maurice Mbikayi. Detail from *Fractals* (2015).

**Figure 35** Lukasa memory board. Source: Photo.net. Available: http://photo.net/photodb/photo?photo_id=1271296 [2014, December 16].

**Figure 36** Lukasa memory board. Source: Annenberg Learner, art through time. Available: http://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/214/index.html [2014, December 16].


**Figure 38** Lukasa memory board. Source: Robotic Librarian. Available: https://mechanicrobotic.wordpress.com/2007/07/01/robotic-mnemonic/lukasa-memory-board-of-the-luba-people/ [2014, November 16].

**Figure 39** Iké Udé. *The Regarded Self* (1995). Source:
BBC News Africa. Available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16053483 [2015, January 19]. Figure 62 Maurice Mbikayi From the Self-Portraits (Techno Dandy) series (2015). Figure 63 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 64 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 65 Maurice Mbikayi. Still from Web Jacket (2015). Figure 66 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 67 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 68 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 69 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 70 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 71 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015), Video still. Figure 72 Maurice Mbikayi. Web Jacket (2015). Figure 73 Maurice Mbikayi. Self-Portrait 1 (2015). Figure 74 Maurice Mbikayi. Self-Portrait 2 (2015). Figure 75 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 76 Maurice Mbikayi. Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 77 Maurice Mbikayi. Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 78 Maurice Mbikayi. Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 79 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 80 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 81 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 82 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 83 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Dandy (2015), Video still. Figure 84 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Dandy (2015). Figure 85 Maurice Mbikayi. Self-Portrait 3 (2015). Figure 86 Maurice Mbikayi. Self-Portrait 4 (2015). Figure 87 Maurice Mbikayi. Self-Portrait 5 (2015). Figure 88 Maurice Mbikayi. Self-Portrait 6 (2015). Figure 89 Maurice Mbikayi. Digital Bags (2015), Detail. Figure 90 Maurice Mbikayi. Digital Bags (2015), Detail. Figure 91 Maurice Mbikayi. Digital Bags (2015), Detail. Figure 92 Maurice Mbikayi. Fractals (2015). Figure 93 Maurice Mbikayi. Untitled 1 (2015). Figure 94 Maurice Mbikayi. Untitled 2 (2015). Figure 95 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Addict (2015). Figure 96 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Addict (2015). Figure 97 Maurice Mbikayi. Googling my Dreams (2015). Figure 98 Maurice Mbikayi. Techno Trash Bin (2015). Figure 99 Maurice Mbikayi. Narcisurfing Netizenship (2015). Figure 100 Maurice Mbikayi. Narcisurfing Netizenship (2015). Figure 101. Maurice Mbikayi. Narcisurfing Netizenship (2015). Figure 102 Maurice Mbikayi. Narcisurfing Netizenship (2015), Detail. Figure 103 Maurice Mbikayi. Narcisurfing Netizenship (2015), Detail. Figure 104 Maurice Mbikayi. E-Munkishi (2015).