

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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All photography credits for my body of work: Ashley Walters and Carlos Marzia

To my parents, Pierre and Henriette.

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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.¹ My primary reason for connecting African fashion with contemporary computer technology² 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),³ 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.⁴

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).⁵ 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 particular 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 identification⁶ 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 anthropology⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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 Kinois¹¹ shapes and presents in public, according to their own dreams and aspirations, and in order to 'access' certain inaccessible social statures.¹² This is not just fashion, but the human body itself, as a crude instrument, becoming 'architecture' that reinvents and indulges¹³ 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*,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 city¹⁵ (De Boeck in Edensor and Jayne, 2012: 323-325). Theorist AbduMaliq Simone in his text *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,¹⁶ and answers that Kinshasa is invented¹⁷ 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,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 minstrels²² 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.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.



Figure 5: Julius Soubise as Mungo Macaroni.



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.

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 print²³ (especially for women), the film versions of *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).



Figure 7: *Depara, Night & Day in Kinshasa (1955-1965)*. Courtesy of Maison Revue Noire. – Photo: Jean Depara.

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.*).



Figures 8-10: Kinshasa/Leopoldville's ambiance (1951 - 1975). In these photos, from left to right: a young woman, a young man, and a group of two boys and two girls dressed in ‘Le Billisme’ style of cowboy hats, scarves and jeans as well as boots. – Photos: Jean Depara.

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’,²⁴ 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-Kinshasa²⁵ who enjoys the title *Le Roi de La SAPE* (King of SAPE) because of his international popularity and taste in *haute couture*²⁶ (Barnett, 2012). The movement was magnified by other popular musicians and Kinshasa elite who shopped abroad and knew their *griffes*²⁷ (designer labels) very well. A new generation of practitioners of this style is known as Sapeurs:²⁸ 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.



Figure 12: Papa Wemba: ‘Expression is key, expression is freedom, and expression is fashion.’ – Photo: Pyke.

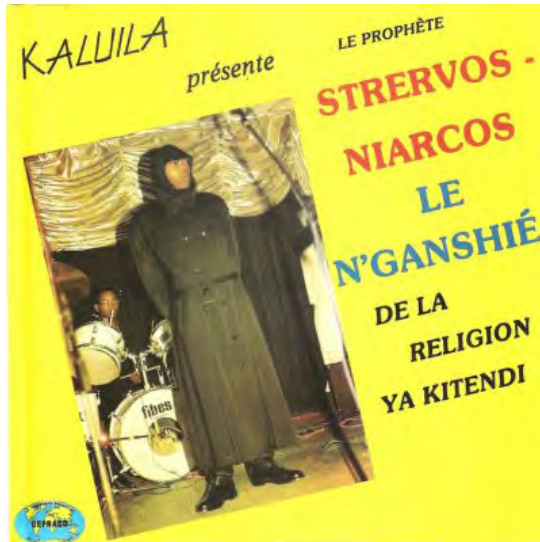


Figure 13: Strevos Niarcos (1952-1995), close friend of Papa Wemba, co-founder and 'prophet' of La SAPE movement. He is still remembered and venerated by Sapeurs. – Unknown photographer.

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.²⁹ 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 sartorial³⁰ elegance to a point where it [becomes] far more than self-indulgence. It [becomes] a mission.'³¹

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 Gaze³² – '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,³³ 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-style³⁵ 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',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.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'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 Company⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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 *evolué*.⁴² 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.'⁴³ 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).



Figure 20: A Sapeur photographed with curious clothing in memory of the founder of La Sape, Strevos Niarcos . – Photo: Junior D. Kannah/AFP.



Figure 21: 'The cult of elegance'.
– Photo: Google Images.

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.



Figure 22: From left to right, Etienne Tshisekedi, President Mobutu and Justin Bomboko wearing leopard-skin hats.
– Unknown photographer.



Figure 23: President Mobutu in June 1983, in Lubumbashi.
– Photo: Pascal MAITRE/J.A.

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 SESE SEKO K NGBENDU NGBENDU
Figure 24: Mobutu, 'King of Zaire'.
– Unknown photographer.



Figure 25: Meeting at Tata Raphael Stadium. –
Photo: COR/AFP (Getty Images).

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.



Figure 26: A Sapeur dressed in Mobutu's style. Unknown photographer.



Figure 27: From the *Self-Portraits (Techno Dandy)* series—(2015).

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



Figure 28: Samuel Fosso, *The Chief (the one who sold Africa to the colonists)*, from the 'Self-Portraits' series (1997). This artwork was the title image for the Africa Remix catalogue (Hayward Gallery, London, 2005).

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.'⁴⁵

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 numbers⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.).



Fig. 1.3.1. Left: The Ishango bone. Based upon an image from the Royal Institute for Natural Sciences of Belgium in Brussels. Right: The numerology of the countable notches arranged on the stick. After D. Huylebrouck, "Afrika, die Wiege der Mathematik", *Ethnomathematik, Spektrum der Wissenschaft* 2 (2006), 10-15.

Figure 29: The Ishango bones.

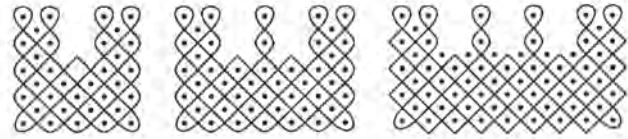


Figure 30: Lusona drawing of 'Myombo' – trees of the ancestors.

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 Kuba⁴⁸ in the DRC where men, women and children gather to weave 'Le Velours Du Kasai' (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'⁴⁹ 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).



Figure 31: Geometric Motif Kuba Cloth.



Figure 32: Le Velours Du Kasai.



Figure 33: *Untitled 1* (2015). Woven computer Cables, and wood. 120cm x 60 cmx.



Figure 34: *Fractals* (2015) detail. Woven computer cables, and wood. 44 x 44 cm.

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.

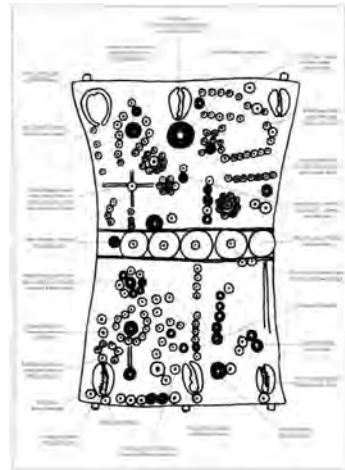
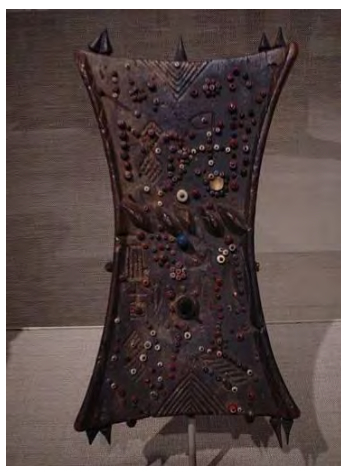
Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts (2007: 10-11) argue that '...if humans determine the meanings, uses, abilities and contexts of objects, then they may also be or become in control of their own destinies. Objects can then be used as forms of resistance, contestation and shifting identity in an 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'⁵¹ 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'⁵² 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).



Figure 39: Iké Udé, *The Regarded Self* (1995).



Figure 40: Iké Udé, *Sartorial Anarchy #30* (2013).

Iké Udé subscribes to the notion of narcissism, or more precisely to a 'redemptive narcissism'.⁵³ 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).

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).



Figure 45: From the *Self-Portraits (Web Jacket)* series (2015).

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.



Figure 46: Meschac Gaba, *Flatiron Building*, New York (2008).



Figure 47: Meschac Gaba, *MAVA project (Musée d'art de la vie active)* (2010-2011).
Courtesy In Situ/Fabienne Leclerc, Paris, and McCaffrey Fine Art, New York.

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).



Figures 48-50: From left to right, El Anatsui, *Fading Cloth* (2005); *Fresh and Fading Memories* (2007); *Peak Project* (1999).

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 transcendence 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).



Figure 52: From the *Self-Portraits (Techno Dandy)* series (2015).

In the *Liquid Blackness*⁵⁴ 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, 8minutes 10 secondes.

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.



Figures 54 and 55: Wanuri Kahi, stills from *Pumzi* (2009), 23 minutes.

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.).



Figure 56: D. Denenge Akpem, Costume portraits from *Rapunzel Revisited* (2006). – Image Credit: Matt ‘Motep’ Woods.

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,⁵⁵ 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.



Figure 57: Ecycle in Paarl (2015). – Photo: Ashley Walters.

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,⁵⁶ which adds to the effect of the screaming.

Figures 63-71: Stills from *Web Jacket* (2015). Video, colour, sound. 9 minutes.









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.

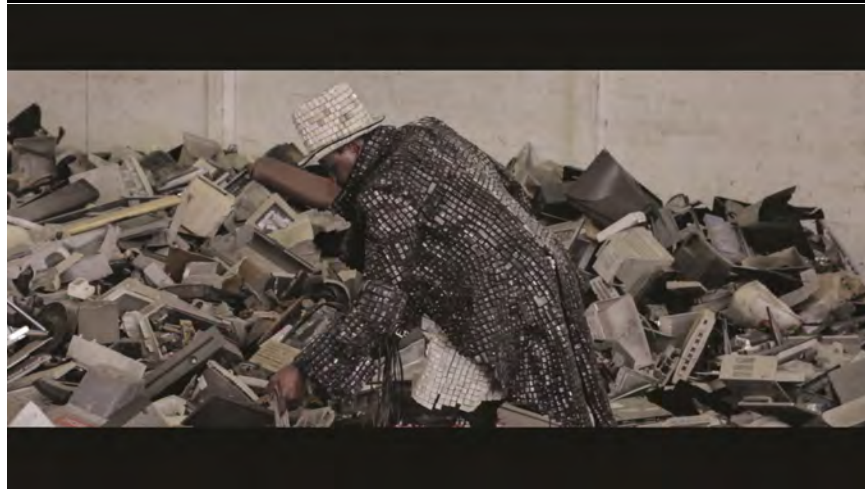
6.3 Techno Dandy: A Suit of Disagreement

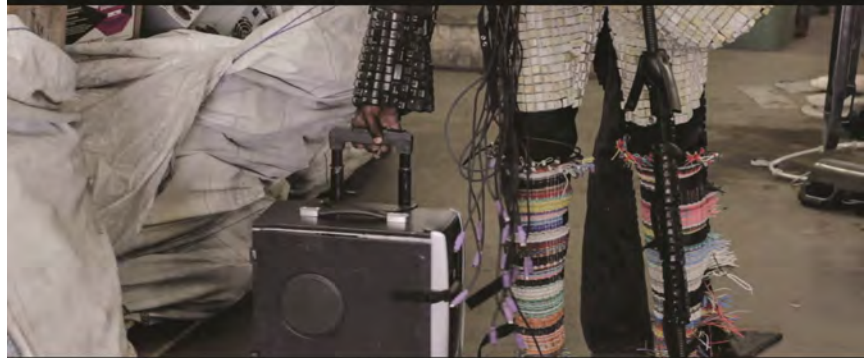
My *Techno Dandy* can be seen as a warrior, inspired by nineteenth-century French and English redingotes and medieval armour. This redingote is covered with black computer keys and forms a second skin on a tailored black cloth. Its elbows have separate covers made from knee guards that I also worked 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).

Figures 75-83: Stills from *Techno Dandy* (2015). Video, colour, sound. 12 minutes.





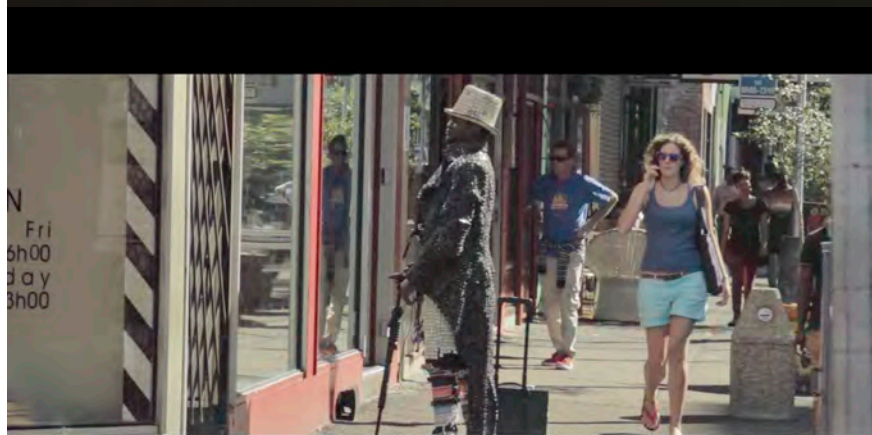




Figure 84: *Techno Dandy* (2015). Computer parts, fibreglass, clothes and shoes. Dimensions variable.



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.



Figures 89-91: *Digital Bags* (2015) installation detail. Computer keys and cloth. Dimensions variable.

6.5 Fractals

There is a sense of incompleteness in the woven works that together make up *Fractals*. Each is residual⁵⁷ 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).



Figures 95 and 96: *Techno Addict* (2015). Computer keys, clothes and shoes. Dimensions variable.

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).

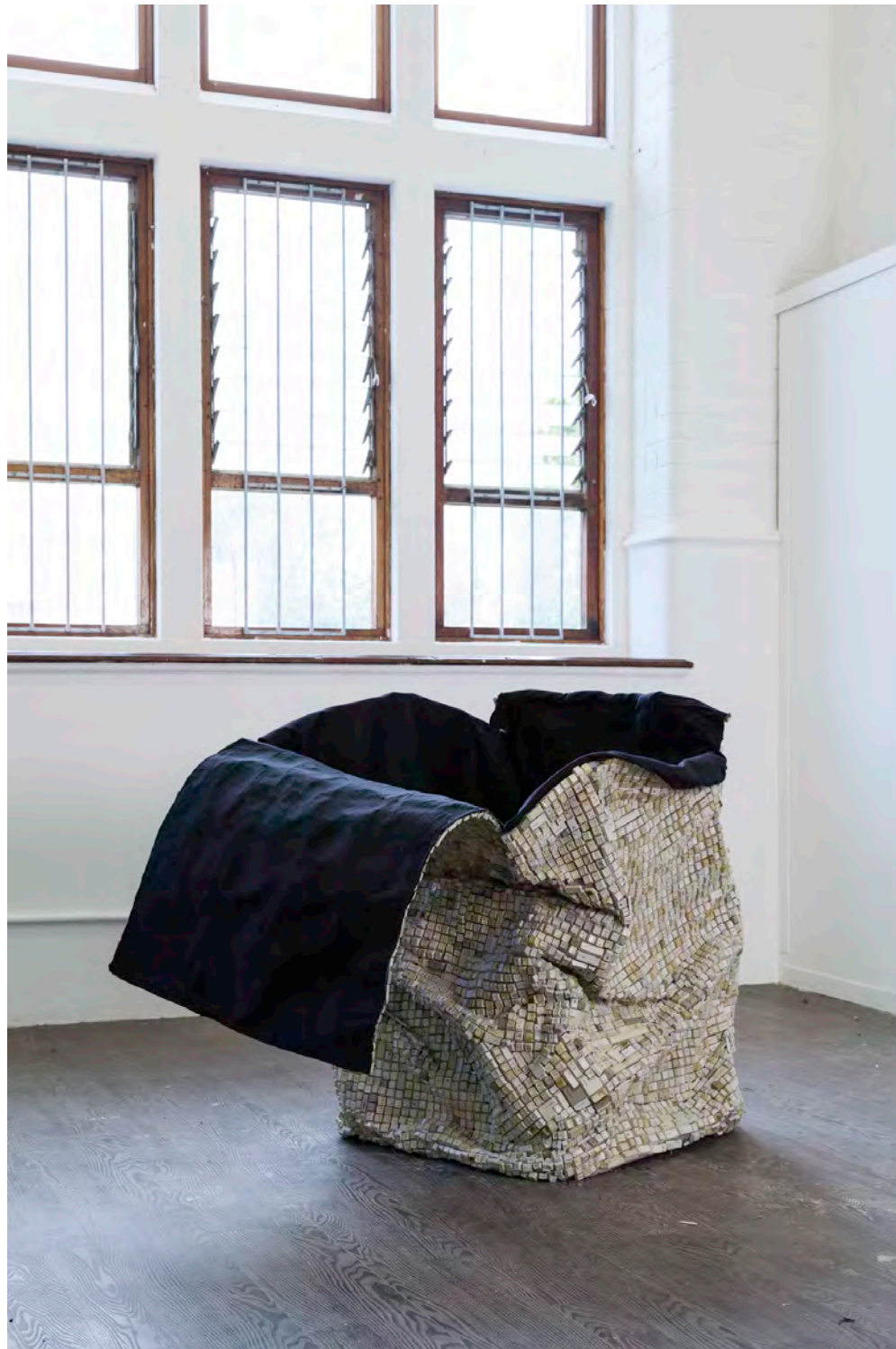
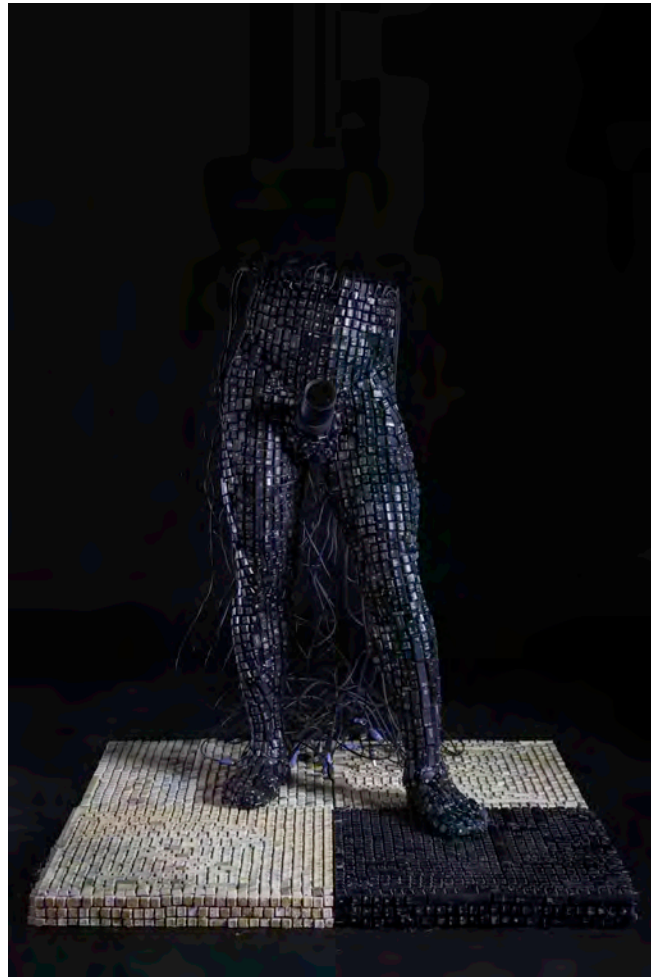


Figure 98: *Techno Trash Bin* (2015). Computer keys, found bag and cloth. 114 x 97 x 70 cm.

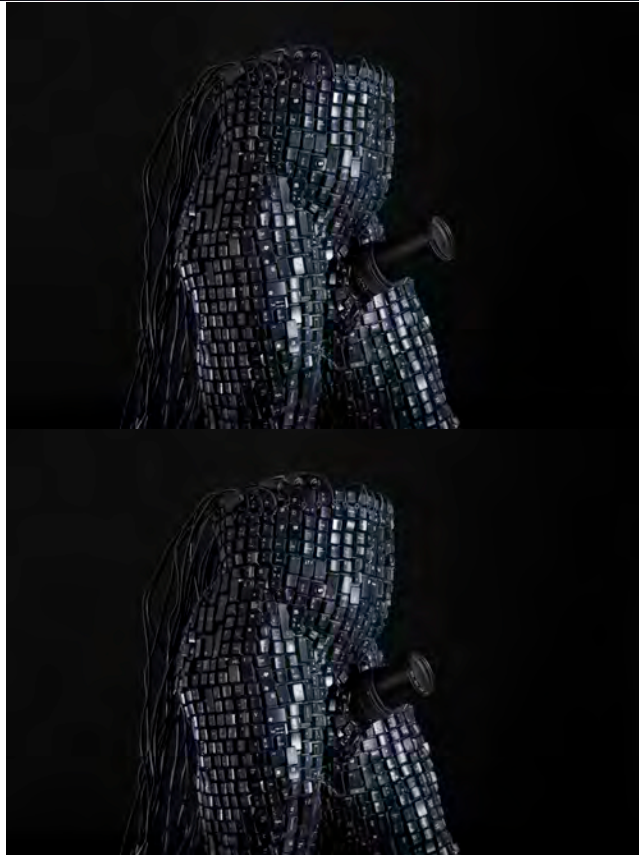
6.10 Narcisurfing Netizenship

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.



Figures 99-103: *Narcisurfing Netizenship* (2015). Computer keys, cables, fibreglass and wood. 145 x 110 x 100 cm.



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
6. See: Lang-Chapin *Congo Expedition, 1909-1915* (Kasfir, 2007: 203).
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 Afrodandyism, 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 \ 'kēnuɑ\ : 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.
13. (Ngoye, 1993).
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=OyW8ZIDuXIs&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.
18. (Johnson, 2006: 75-90).
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.
25. <http://saharanvibe.blogspot.com/2008/12/papa-wemba.html>
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

religion by Papa Wemba and Strevos Niarcos,
<http://www.aozj17.dsl.pipex.com/ReligionYaKitende.html>

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.).
30. See Scott Schuman: *The Sartorialist* (2009).
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.
36. See: *"African Fabrics": The History of Dutch Wax Prints* – Guest Blog by Eccentric Yoruba (2011: para 16).
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.
41. Andreas Huyssen observes: 'Modernism has women or the feminized as its "equivalent"'– *Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other* in *After the Great Divide* (1986) (Huyssen, 1986: 44-62; Miller, 2009: 179).
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).
43. Douglas, A. 1995. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: USA.
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.
51. In his book *Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality*, Elias Aboujaoude (2001: 16) describes citizens who have migrated into the internet as 'netizens', which defines contemporary society as a virtual community.
52. Elias Aboujaoude (2001: 69) explains narcisurfing 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).

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9 List of Illustrations

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<http://www.themorningnews.org/gallery/permanent-error> [2015 January 28]. **Figure 3** White dandies, each in a redingote, with a walking stick and top hat. Source: Jane Austen's World. Available: <https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2013/06/21/regency-fashion-mens-breeches-pantaloons-and-trousers/> [2015 January 28]. **Figure 4** White dandies, each in a redingote, with a walking stick and hat. Source: A Swaggering Work of Bravado and Subterfuge.

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