

# The Question Is: **WHAT IS DIGITAL ART?**

The answer to this lies in the nature of the response to technology rather than in any narrow understanding of medium,

**WRITES TEGAN BRISTOW**



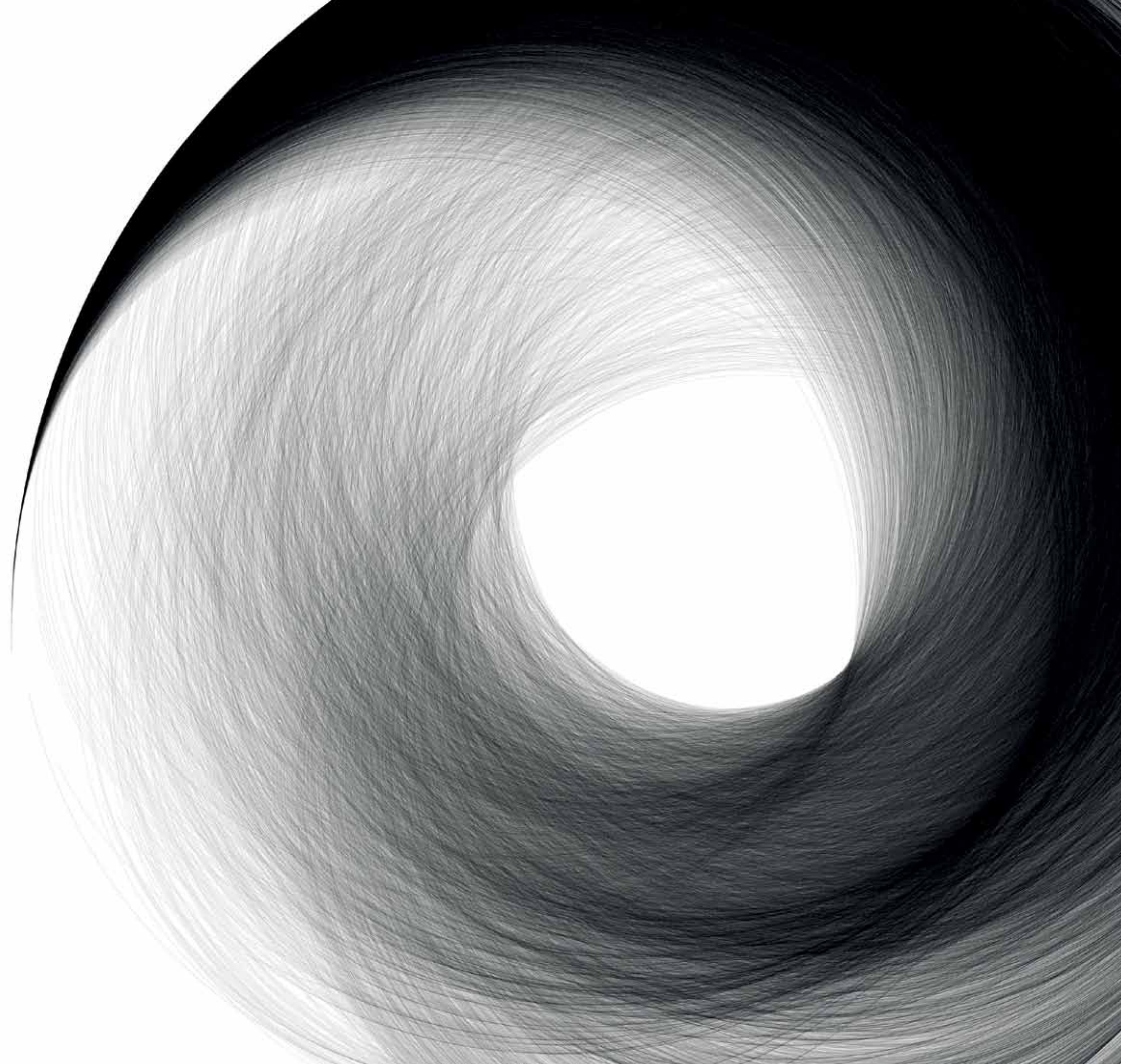
**ABOVE** Michelle Son, *To Whom it May Concern: Antagonism of the Template Aesthetic*, 2010, installation view

**RIGHT** Stefanus Rademeyer, *Enso (detail)*, 2010, pigment ink on archival cotton paper, 110 x 110cm

Since so much contemporary art is linked to a digital form of making somewhere in its development trajectory, is the term 'digital art' even valid? Would, for instance, the video and sound works of Minette Vári or James Webb qualify? Their production mechanisms certainly are digital: Vári's composited video or morphing motion graphics and Webb's sound works are made and manipulated digitally. Webb even moved into the realm of electronics with his small specifically designed circuit boards for a 2006 Morse Code light work. Webb describes the medium of the work as 'electricity', but the constructed form that controls that electricity is a circuit of logic gates and switches.

So surely digital art is not work that simply has digitality and technology at its core medium. The definition or categorisation needs to extend past the means of production. Contemporary art-making has long passed categorisation through medium specificity and in this context, digital or 'technology art' as a categorisation or definition needs to be more than a definition of medium. So it would be helpful to explain it rather as being 'of the digital': art that comments on and grapples with the culture of technology in contemporary culture.

A 'culture of technology' should be understood as the environment and use of technology in a particular region. A culture of technology in Western Europe, for instance, is largely driven by scientific exploration and the technology that is developed from this exploration. Artists



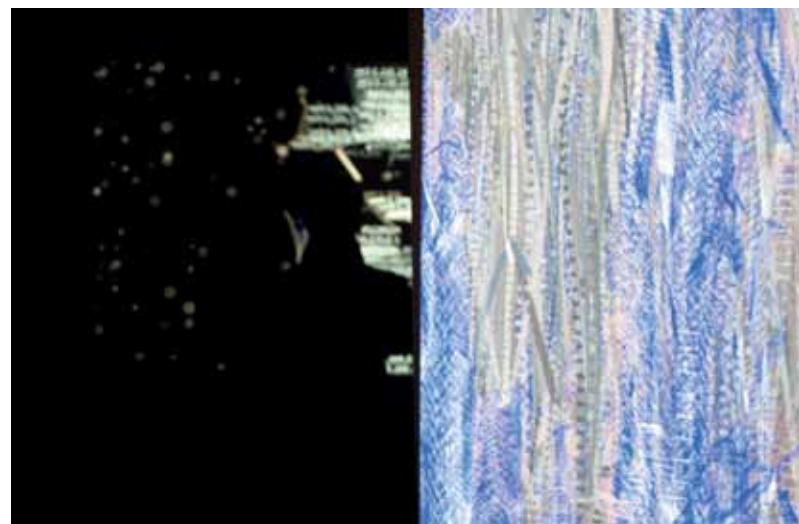




**ABOVE** Jean Katambayi Mukendi, *Simulen*, 2010, mixed-media installation. Photo: Nathalie Aubret

**ABOVE RIGHT** Maia Grotepass, *NullPointerException*, 2011, installation view with *innitBefore* (foreground) and *commit\_ofen*

**FACING PAGE** Michelle Son, *To Whom it May Concern: Antagonism of the Template Aesthetic*, 2010, installation view



reflect on this culture of technology as an act of direct commentary on technology's shifting of and impact on culture, but also, more interestingly, by using technology itself as the primary medium in which to make this critical reflection. Obvious examples of this are the numerous artists in the USA and Europe working from the mid-fifties to the present, who address the consensus of cybernetics – the study of systems and feedback loops that are the basis of how computers, artificial intelligence and our communication and power grids operate. An artist like Roy Ascott, for instance, has made a direct association between cybernetics and consciousness, introducing into contemporary art and culture an understanding of how our cultural consciousness is associated with areas of investigation such as telematics. Edward Shanken writes that the term 'telematics' was coined in 1978 by Simon Nora and Alain Minc:

*Above all, insofar as it is responsible for an upheaval in the processing and storage of data, it will alter the entire nervous system of social organization ... This increasing interconnection between computers and telecommunications – which we will term "telematics" – opens radically new horizons.<sup>1</sup>*

This particular association to cybernetic theory is of course not necessarily regional, and has come to be part of a larger global culture of technology. Several South African artists work within this realm. Stefanus Rademeyer is deeply involved in investigating the mathematical patterns and formations of visual algorithmic structures that have emerged from systems theories. In a text about his solo exhibition

*Resonant Structures* with the Goodman Gallery in 2010/11, he writes about a

*...symbolic system, a highly formalised language. Mathematical language is a logical and coherent system. It's incredibly specific and is always used from an analytical perspective to solve rational problems or propose logical theorems. So, I thought, what if I apply those logical principles creatively?*

This statement on the gallery website goes on to describe Rademeyer's use of the process of coding in computer programmes for the generation of these works and to explain that the prints are captured images in a moment in time: "The prints are static images of this dynamic process. One can compare it to an image of a river flowing that is captured in a photograph. They're residual of a process." Rademeyer's work addresses an area of our global technology culture that is developing and unfolding around us and is becoming embedded in cultural mechanisms of communicating and knowing. But what of a culture of technology that is more regional, more specific to the technology concerns of regions in Africa? A culture of technology in Africa may have shifted concerns to that of a global technology culture, as it is strongly led by needs and bonded to a socio-cultural system of knowledge transfer.<sup>2</sup> Jean Katambayi Mukendi of the DRC was featured first in the *Signals From the South* exhibition that was part of the PixelAche Helsinki festival in 2010. Mukendi's work deals with a systems concern that is specific to his culture of technology. A work like *Simulen* (2010), for instance, is a prototype design for the automatic correction



of power distribution, made by Mukendi as a solution to the inconsistencies and problems of the Lubumbashi power grid. The prototype offers a new organisation system and a mechanism for educating people about rewiring that system. This piece has given rise to other conceptually driven prototypes by Mukendi on power and time structures that are very closely linked to an ecological understanding of the earth. Can the works of Rademeyer and Mukendi be called digital or technology art? Mukendi in particular occupies the role of cultural scientist rather than contemporary artist. Does this mean that the technology artist needs to play a polyphibic role,<sup>3</sup> between art and science? Do they need to adapt their work in both these strata to successfully and critically address our particular culture of technology? Or to a time in African cultural practice when the artist functioned as a sort of shaman or genius initiator? The digital or technology artist is also an information and systems engineer. The digital artist can also be a technologist, using code as a medium and making new ways of interacting with computers, in order to make the necessary cultural commentary. In her collection of works broadly titled 'NullPointerException', Maia Grotepass has literary written executable artworks in code. The pieces are not generative like Rademeyer's, but digitally interactive. Each work uses the Xbox Kinect sensor as its primary mechanism for sensing and audience interaction. Once sensed, the audience member can participate in an artwork that uses them

visually in a performative and transformative enquiry into the subtleties of system code and algorithms. Grotepass acts as an engineer who, through artistic intentions, gives the audience a performed glimpse not only of a different interface with technology, but also of what it means to be a creative coder. Grotepass is both a hacker, in that she uses an already existing sensing system in the Xbox Kinect, and a creator, in that she hand-codes a live, executable interactive artwork that reflects her particular engagement with a culture of technology. The possibility that an artist working in this environment will at some point hack and make use of existing adopted hard- and software to achieve their critical and engaging forms, is high. We are handed technologies that are intended to help us complete tasks, play games and generate content. Yet are they really what we want? And should we be so blindly led to transform our environment without stepping back to look for new solutions, something that can be done through a cultural discourse? An aesthetic and very humorous approach to critiquing the nature of the computers that are part of our daily existence can be found in the musings and artworks of Michelle Son (especially in her series of works 'Michine'). Her installation *To Whom It May Concern: Antagonism of the Template Aesthetic* date) recreates an 'office' environment "based on the preset templates of Microsoft Word". Her documentation video explains that "Users are immersed in a hyper real office environment where the virtual becomes tactile and the

template is embellished." Various sensors embedded in the 'office environment' present and activate digital and analogue 'features' in the environment. There are also non-triggered 'features', one of which is a series of auto-summarised books. The installation is a conceptual and aesthetic critique of the forms of software that we buy. It allows us to step back and really look at the aesthetic and cultural forms that are emerging through and around us. Digital or technology art is driven by the need for a sensitive balance between both a medium-driven concern and the particular politics of that concern. It is a reflection of and on a technology culture, an attempt to reconcile a global system with a local position. South African digital artists help us to understand and directly engage with a culture of technology that is particularly our own.

1. Simon Nora and Alain Minc. *The Computerization of Society*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1980, 4–5.  
2. V.K. Omoka, 'Applied Science and Technology: A Kenyan Case Consideration of their Interrelationship' in K.K. Prah, *Culture, Gender, Science and Technology in Africa*. Namibia: EdHarp Publishers, 1991.  
3. Ziva Ljubec, 'Indifference as Involvement: Tactics of a "Mediumistic Being" Trespassing the Media, Disrupting the Interfaces' in *Presence in the Mindfield: Art, Identity and the Technology of Transformation*. Lisbon: Universidade de Aveiro Press, 2011.

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