

SEARCH

Pixels, Position and Popular Culture: notes towards an understanding of an emerging digital aesthetic in South Africa

South Africa's position as a gateway to many destinations within Africa has afforded it a strong position in terms of a melting pot of not only the local diverse cultures and communities but an influx of communities from most African states.

Digital culture in South Africa is developing at a rapid rate with digital activities responding to the international corporate counterparts that have been taking ownership of spaces such as the Web. The web, like any space, is being colonized by those who understand how to use the medium to their advantage. While there have been independence fighters that have tried to break down the dystopian arrangements that have manifested themselves through the dictates of the online powers, these are starting to show neo-colonialist tendencies, especially in terms of the commercial power of the Internet. Those that were disempowered should be taking on the medium and becoming active participants. This is, however, not always the case. While in South Africa the design industry and the online empowerment developments are slowly taking shape through corporations connecting underprivileged communities to the Web, it is still the minorities that are dominant in the field of online interaction. While there are some attempts to encourage integration of multicultural and multiracial studio practices (mainly in advertising to address particular target audiences), the Web environment currently seems rather untouched by these efforts.

Clearly, access to the medium and education in appropriate and more inclusive knowledge systems has a strong influence on this. The short history of the creative uses of technology in South Africa (television, for example, was only introduced in 1975) and the apartheid struggle affecting the creative developments through cultural boycotts has caused various creative industries to have to play a type of catch-up with their international First World contemporaries. Even more so, the non-white population was radically excluded from an education process that encouraged local creative practitioners and specifically silenced the public voice of a local integrated identity. Ethnic groups affected most by oppression during apartheid have been developing a public presence in the local context specifically in the last few years, access to which was previously prevented by a lack of education and opportunity. This presence is not a purely responsive one to the injustices of the past—we have surpassed this—but rather a presence in the form of a public cultural identity that is shaping itself. This is clearly visible in the urban youth music scene, which is currently the most prominent cultural phenomenon happening on that platform.

Music radio as a popular media platform is accounting for much development of popular cultural movements among communities that are not directly involved in new media use or design. This is particularly true of the urban, Black youth community. Previously disempowered communities are making their mark, very often becoming community drivers by promoting an identity both as building an image

and cultural identity for an audience as well as a corporate motivation, which at times leaves the realm of entertainment and business and can become political. An example of this is the attitude and phenomenon of kwaito, an urban hybrid music and fashion culture mixing contemporary pop, house and hip-hop with pantsula, jazz and other urban street cultures from '50s and '60s and providing urban youth with their own voices, just like local slam poetry and its relationship to hip-hop and rap.



There have been intense developments to turn the image and culture surrounding music into a larger and more encompassing force. www.rage.co.za is a case in point, representing "South African Street Culture Online" and comprising one part of Black Rage Productions that encompass a series of projects propagating urban culture locally. As the popularity of music-driven pop culture manifests itself in certain online zines and Internet publicity drives, there is uncertainty as to whether Web-design is informed by the translation of a localized culture or feeds into contemporary international design criteria or trends.

Similarly, educational systems until recently instilled aspirations of international design and art heroes dictating the type of practice that might provide the local practitioner or learner with opportunities on the international scene. Contemporary discourse, however, is turning the focus back to the local context in order to build on its potential. Interest is currently zoned in on home ground with local campaigns around national South African pride (certain products are branded Proudly South African), major international events such as the annual Design Indaba in Cape Town, and public art and design initiatives towards inner city regeneration in Johannesburg. Less culturally oriented but nonetheless important events are still worth mentioning including the World Summit for Sustainable Development 2002 in Johannesburg, and national social awareness campaigns—for example, to fight ignorance and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

When addressing 'unplugged' communities from a South African position, one is constantly reminded of the digital divide that is growing as the knowledge and complexities of online culture and its global power struggles are expanding. The communities that seem to be distanced from this digital culture are, however, starting to be involved in the process by different media that shift the parameters of who is 'unplugged' and what this actually means. Considering the high costs of computers and the availability

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of related computer literacy training in South Africa, mobile phones appear to provide an intermediary link in the path to digital communication and a plugged-in networked culture. This is particularly prevalent within youth culture where issues of status and ownership regarding current and upcoming mobile technology function at a highly competitive level. Mobile telecommunications is one area in South Africa that has effectively targeted and reached a large portion of the population in the urban environment. Addressing this population would mean to plug into its systems and communicate on its platforms. If one looks at companies such as *exactmobile* and individual campaigns by the mobile service providers, they have clearly tapped into that market by providing content and strategies specific to the technology and the audience, as well as others such as large retail stores also seeing the value of providing sms updates and communication services to their clients. Where the technology encompasses such a large and diverse audience in South Africa, the question that remains is how to address this diversity in an effective way and how the content is designed for not only different cultural backgrounds and races but language difficulties (there are eleven official languages in South Africa) and a high level of illiteracy.

SEARCH at the electrolobby

For the *electrolobby* of the festival, The Trinity Session and its project *_sanman* (Southern African New Media Art Network) present SEARCH. This is a programme that commences in South Africa with research and workshops, extends to Linz with invited collaborating guests and results in a common project or production. SEARCH aims to expose certain processes developing in South Africa that are contributing to appropriating a global language in digital cultural practice such as responsive communication, design and subversive strategies. With racial issues in South Africa having been endlessly addressed on political, academic and theoretical levels, the aim of SEARCH is not also to renegotiate historical events and their effects, but rather the current position of strong cultures and the opportunities they pose for development of an online presence and expression.

Invited South African contributors include a range of candidates and include Web designers and programmers, digital composers, critical commentators and theorists on digital culture in South Africa and contemporary Net and popular culture activists. Members of this SEARCH team, presenting their practices and attitudes to the digital urban culture as it exists in South Africa and debating and strategizing processes, aims to collaborate on a project. This project manifests itself in South Africa, expands in the *electrolobby* and eventually exists as a product of SEARCH and gets branded, packaged and marketed on completion in South Africa for implementation. With support from the Ars Electronica Festival and The Trinity Session (*_sanman*) as well as resources from The | PREMISES, the implementation will include workshops, forums and events within various unplugged communities across South Africa and possibly into Southern Africa.