

## Project Overview

# Digital Imaginaries

A project in three cities:

Dakar via Afro-Pixel, Kér Thoisanne

Johannesburg via WAM & Fak'ugesi Festival

Karlsruhe via the ZKM

## Project Introduction

Articulating digital technologies and Africa together is an opportunity to re-evaluate the dominant imaginaries that shape contemporary digital practices. That at least is our starting premise. To put it to the test, we invite artists and writers to Dakar, Johannesburg and Karlsruhe. The resulting works expose, disrupt, hack or subvert dominant digital imaginaries to propose alternative configurations of the digital.

Contemporary understandings of the social, the body, of self, politics, otherness and of truth are unthinkable without digital technologies. The digitalisation of our most inward and most expansive practices, however, is not a question of technology alone. How digital technologies affect who we are, what we do, and how we relate is not inherent to the technologies. We speak of “digital imaginaries” to remind us that digital technologies are not self-evident, universal or just technical but are configured in a historically contingent field. A field of technological imaginaries that is constituted by our collective struggles and dreams as much as our infrastructures and interfaces. A field that, for all that is new in digital practices, still echoes the old refrain of techno-scientific progress.

The spectre of a monolithic Africa that, leapfrogging and rising as it will, is never quite catching up with the Global North has not gone away. There are large parts of the population across Africa without internet access. Sure enough, access is rapidly increasing. The value derived from the expansion of digital practice, however, is still largely extracted in the in the Global North. At the same time, digital infrastructure projects increasingly link African sites directly with Chinese and Indian ones. Bypassing the networks of the Global North, they demonstrate that the violent colonial European origin myth of technology can no longer be sustained. It is abundantly clear now, that no site is in control of the technological field. Yet, what is less clear, is which possibilities this multiplication of centres opens for those concerned with de-colonial configurations of digital practice?

Large-scale Indian-African trials with digital medical care, biometric population registration or drone flight, or the sophisticated digital profiling and targeting of voters with manipulative videos during the 2015 Nigerian election hardly provide resources for imagining more desirable digital futures. According to Joseph Tonda, they are better understood as evidence of a screen-mediated postcolonial imperialism: evidence that Africa is subjected to “the same liberal techno-capitalist economic regime as the rest of the world.” The digitalisation of Africa, in his line of thought, perpetuates the ghosting of non-western technological histories and realities. Africa’s digitalisation, here, is understood as part of an expansive, liberal, techno-capitalist project. A project that, by perpetuating imaginaries of techno-scientific progress, suppressing non-western imaginaries and configurations of technology. We wish to add that the South and the North cannot be mapped onto the southern hemisphere or Europe and

Northern America. Instead, South and North, should be understood as formations that are distributed around the globe.

## Dakar: Non-Aligned Utopias

If these acts of suppression are impoverishing digital imaginaries, we should be able to recover resources for alternative configurations of the digital by paying attention to de-colonial digital practices, whether they emerge in Africa, Europe or elsewhere. Thus, at least, is the utopian premise of digital non-alignment. A premise that energises experiments with alternative forms of digital production and local digital cultures. It is to this energy and the initiatives and experiments that nurture it that the first chapter of the Digital Imaginaries project in Dakar is dedicated. Our partner in Dakar, the digital arts Afropixel festival is run by the independent art space Kér Thiosanne that has pioneered digital arts in francophone Africa. Kér Thiosanne's way of drawing international and global southern art circuits together with digital makers and neighbourhood initiatives can be understood as an ongoing experiment in digital non-alignment, and the search for digital practice suitable to Senegal. Beyond Kér Thiosanne, the city of Dakar too gives vitality to the proposition of non-alignment. Senghor's conviction, that cultural productions are central to the possibility of non-aligned Senegalese positionalities is lively here. So, is his proposition that African positionalities are important to the reconfiguration of richer universals. Afropixel #6, Digital Imaginaries: Non-Aligned Utopias revisits the old struggle for non-aligned African positionalities under the conditions of contemporary digital practices.

The festival will include public debates on non-alignment and digital production in Senegal, artist residencies by François Knotze, Marcus Neustetter and Tabita Razaire, workshops on typography and digital production, bicycle-powered projectors and the construction of the space station, a pan-African digital production platform designed by DK Ossey and Yasmine Abbas.

## Johannesburg: Premonition

Following the question of utopia, in Johannesburg we choose to inquire into the sense of premonition characteristic of the city. Premonition as a mode of knowing the future that might allow us to draw connections between de-colonial forms of knowing and globalised digital regimes. Large-scale climate models and the algorithms that influence credit ratings, insurance policies and social media feeds largely define how uncertain futures are anticipated and shaped. Currently a fundamental shift takes place from statistical probability to the algorithmic approximation of innumerable interdependent variables. This move from modernist forecasting to artificial intelligence (AI) marks a major rift in technological imaginaries as it blurs the division between mathematical and other forms of foretelling. It collapses mathematics into divination.

In Johannesburg the tension between the sense of great potential alongside fear and anxiety is palpable. It is manifest in the tension between urban confidence in mastering the future and a deep sense of insecurity articulated in a pervasive security infrastructure and endless mundane precautionary techniques. The screen-mediated cosmopolitanism of the city is pulsating with nervous energy. It is with this digitally mediated ambivalent sentiment of

premonition that we invite artists and writers to address their encounters with this elusive metropolis.

The extensive African archive of the Wits Art Museum and its inner-city location make it an exiting exploratory location for thinking about alternative computational imaginaries in contemporary Africa. Objects from the WAM collections cover areas such as divination and other spiritual practices, some of which will prompt digital responses and sound installations that engage with time travel, explorations of ancestral realms and of the ongoing anxiety that pervades city life. Doing so in partnership with the Fak'ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival is to relate to the cultures and initiatives of African innovation and digitisation.

## **Karlsruhe: Situating Digital Imaginaries**

East, West, South and North do not refer to parts of the globe but to imaginaries that are in global circulation. There are moments of East, West, South and North in Dakar, in Johannesburg and also in Karlsruhe. The third chapter of “Digital Imaginaries” in Karlsruhe takes seriously that African positionalities contribute to universals that are legible around the world. Situating the works that emerged in response to Dakar and Johannesburg in Karlsruhe, is to show that they matter in a provincial German town. Not as evidence of otherness, but because here too the questions they raise about possible alternative configurations of the digital are relevant.

## **Digital Imaginaries Dates**

### **Afropixel: Non-Aligned Utopias I Dakar**

Afropixel workshops & residencies **15 Feb - 12 May 2018**

Afropixel festival **1-12 May 2018**

### **Wits Art Museum & Fak'ugesi Festival: Premonition I Johannesburg**

WAM Exhibition **24 July - 23 September 2018**

Fak'ugesi Festival **31 August - 9 September**

### **ZKM: Situating Digital Imaginaries I Karlsruhe**

ZKM Exhibition **31 October 2018 - February 2019**

## **Publication**

Following the three events in Dakar, Johannesburg and Karlsruhe we will publish a joined publication, in which we will establish tentative and partial connections between the three sites. The peer-reviewed, edited collection will be available in print and for free online in June 2019.

## **Partners**

The Digital Imaginaries project is a collaboration between the independent art space Kér Thiosanne and the Afropixel festival for digital and social innovation in Dakar, the Wits Art

Museum and the Fak'ugesi African digital innovation festival in Johannesburg, and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe.

The project is funded by the TURN fund of the German Federal Cultural Foundation as well as the Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit, Pro Helvetia, Point Sud, La Francophonie, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Arts Collaboratory and the Institute Français.

## **Project Team**

Scientific adviser and project initiator: **Richard Rottenburg**

Project curators: **Julien McHardy, Oulimata Gueye**

Afropixel artistic director: **Marion Louisgrand Sylla**

Afropixel curators: **Oulimata Gaye, Daniel Sciboz, Julien McHardy**

Afropixel Producers: **Martha Cisse, Marion Aïdara**

Fak'ugesi Festival Director: **Tegan Bristow**.

Wits Art Museum, Curators: **Fiona Rankin-Smith, Tegan Bristow, Julien McHardy**

ZKM curators: **Philipp Ziegler, Oulimata Gueye, Julien McHardy**

Participating artists: **Younes Baba-Ali, Tegan Bristow, Marcus Neustetter, François Knoetze, Tabita Rezaire, Komborerai Chapfka, DK Osseo-Asare, Yasmine Abbas, Minnette Vari, Marigold Beads, Russel Hlongwane, Alex Coehlo, Joao Roxo, and Students of the Digital Art Theory Course, Wits Digital Arts.**

### *Digital Imaginaries: Premonitions*

On 6<sup>th</sup> September between 10:00 and 17:00 at Wits Art Museum a workshop with talks and discussions is hosted by Fak'ugesi Festival in association with the artistic research project *Digital Imaginaries*. The workshop and the related art exhibition at WAM are the second leg of a three city project, which started in Dakar, Senegal in May and will conclude in Karlsruhe, Germany in November 2018. The workshop is also part of *Fak'ugesi Talks: Premonition and Digital Imaginaries* – a series of talks that explore how digital data practices shift how uncertain futures are anticipated.

The workshop takes place alongside the exhibition to engage an exploratory debate on questions surrounding artistic research, digital data, and decolonisation in a globalised information society. Program will include a tour of the exhibition and a focus on the subject of vernacular algorithms, followed by a series of talks with leading theorists, philosophers and artists including Sarah Nuttal, Achille Mbembe, Richard Rottenburg, Oulimata Gueye and more.

*Digital Imaginaries* is a joined project of Kér Thiossane and Afropixel Festival in Dakar, Wits Art Museum and Fak'ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival in Johannesburg, and the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, funded by the TURN fund of the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes). The workshop series *Competences and Visions for the Digitization of Africa* in Dakar and Johannesburg is financed by the GIZ commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.