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South African digital art practice: an exploration of the altermodern

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Appendix 3:

Interview Tegan Bristow

Wits School of Arts, Johannesburg, 9 February 2012

Work: *Internet Art in the Global South* (2009) (curated online exhibition)

Carly Whitaker: This is just to state that Tegan Bristow has signed the confidentiality form stating that anything I write about her, she can read and anything she doesn't like I will retract.

Tegan Bristow: Yes.

CW: This questionnaire is in fulfilment of my (Carly Whitaker) Masters Research Paper titled *"South African Digital Art Practice: An exploration of the Altermodern"*. The Altermodern is a critical theory developed by Nicolas Bourriaud which he has established through his own curatorial methods. The theory seeks to develop a new frame work for a new modernism which he has observed developing and places it with in a global dynamic. It is a distinct move away from post modernism and post colonialism. He observes the way in which we inhabit the world and the way in which artists navigate through the different cultures as traversing in space and time creating a global dialogue. My thesis aims to explore this new theory in relation to South African digital art in hope that in can provide an adequate framework for critical engagement and future development of the field.

This questionnaire aims to explore the artist's level of engagement conceptually within a global context and in relation to the digital medium by looking at their practice, process and work.

SECTION 1: GENERAL

This section is focused towards a general understanding of how the curator perceives their own global context in relation to a South African one and in relation to the medium.

1. **CW:** Having been based in South Africa, you have been identified by yourself and the press as a South African curator concerned with digital media, how do you understand your practice and how it is received in a global context?

TB: I understand my practice as a researcher more than a curator, but in the process of researching I'm curating. I understand it as a role that needs to be played in identifying and showcasing digital arts practice in South Africa, Southern Africa with regards to how it is received in the global context. I feel that there is a lot of dominance in digital arts practice based on previous practice and concepts from Europe and North America and I would like to identify South African practice as something different. In terms of how it is received in a global context to addressing and having an understanding and seeing what comes out of South Africa.

2. **CW:** Do you perceive yourself as a global curator? How and Why?

TB: I don't perceive myself as a global curator, I see myself as playing a very specific role in South Africa and even that role is in a context of a global form. Digital art being a

global form, there is a link in the pure medium to a global form, but I don't see myself as particularly global. I see myself as very as a curator dealing with the content of South Africa.

CW: So you would define yourself as a South African researcher?

TB: Yes.

3. **CW:** Do conceptually situate the way in which you curate in a South African context?

TB: Yes, I do. It's very important for me to highlight South African practice, to make it available and to create discourse around it.

4. **CW:** Does the use of the digital as a medium or a tool for your curating influence your understanding of a global context?

TB: Yes, the work that I look at is very specifically digital media so it does affect it yes. I do understand digital art in light of a more global understanding of information of context. I don't see it like a painting where it can be quite singular outside of a global context.

5. **CW:** Does the medium enable you to participate in a global dialogue or context?

TB: Yes, it does. The internet is a globally networked medium, by sharing work online you're able to be part of the global context in that way. Even in the work curated Internet Art in the Global South, was global because it dealt with the global south, but that was South America, South Africa, India and Asia. That already connected four continents together simply by the fact that were online and dealing with similar topics.

6. **CW:** Do you perceive South Africa as being part of a networked global culture? How?

TB: I do, purely by the fact that there's the internet and we are able to understand and connect with other cultures and other ways of doing things. I think the computer itself is a global form that everybody's using; it's the same protocol, the same language that everybody across the world is engaging with on a very code driven level. So they might be speaking Spanish or Portuguese or English, but the form and the medium is exactly the same. So by addressing the medium as a global medium, in the context of a specific situation in the globe, that's where I find it interesting. A South African or South American artists working with a global medium will identify themselves and situate themselves differently from how a North American or European artist might. I think it has a lot to do with the relationship of power plays and ownership of information and who sort of holds those strings. That's why I think that it's important to address digital arts.

SECTION 2: WORK DESCRIPTION

This section addresses specifically the engagement with the digital and the exhibition being discussed. It explores the curatorial process and engagement with the exhibition.

Internet Art in the Global South (2009) is an online exhibition curated for the Joburg Art Fair in 2009.

7. **CW:** Can you tell me a bit about the exhibition and your process behind it?

TB: the exhibition is an online showcase of numerous that were already in existence including some new works that were made for the show and this was based on a call by myself to artists in South Africa in particular. The exhibition started out as a research project in which I was interested to find out who in South Africa was actually practicing digital art

and as an opportunity to showcase artists that I knew were practicing. It played multiple levels. On one hand it was a showcase for works that I knew existed and had never been shown before and on the other hand it was a call for people to produce work for it or put work forward for it. And then following that there was a process where I invited people from the Upgrade International Network which is a global network of digital arts organisers and artists, there are nodes all over the world, I basically sent out a call to the entire network and asked them if they had seen or heard of any artists connected to the Global South who were making Internet art. I got quite a number of suggestions back and introductions to artists which was great. It was kind of a threefold process in that way.

8. **CW:** What were your reasons for selecting the internet as a digital medium and having an online exhibition?

TB: Internet art is an area of research that I look at here at the university and is also an interesting global medium where people can create and showcase without necessarily go through a gallery or any kind of normal means. Because of that reason it's very rarely dealt with by galleries or public institutions because it is a difficult medium. But it is a very open and democratic medium and I was interested in understanding out who was making internet art in South Africa.

9. **CW:** How did you choose to display the exhibition?

TB: We showcased all the works through links to a sort of framing website and the purposes of the exhibition were explained as well as grouping the pieces into different categories. The reason that I did that was that because of it being shown at the 2009 Art Fair was also a mechanism for educating the public in what Internet art is. I think that the

understanding of internet art for the public is that its pictures of paintings on the internet, rather than the actual medium being used as a creative tool. So by separating them into eight countries was a way of highlight the global south aspect of it and to identify who was making work in different places and give people the ability to compare on that level. Then I also categorised them into their sort of genre. Genre I kind of looked at mapping, location driven things, which was dealt with a lot, blog driven things, code driven things, different ways of making art through the internet.

10. **CW:** How does the exhibiting of the work alter the way in which it is manifested and received?

TB: It's a website, but at the Joburg Art Fair, it was shown on 5 iMacs. It was a very difficult way for people to understand looking at art in that way in a very public space. I think the understanding that because there were computers there, people thought tool for going to check their emails or something like that and didn't really understand that it was a showcase of work that exists online. But I think that once people got the idea of what it was, that it was a new idea obviously, they were very intrigued and spent time looking at the other works despite feeling confused.

11. **CW:** How was the exhibition received by the public viewing it?

TB: There was a lot of interest in what it was, but also a little bit of confusion. The understanding of art in the South African public, specifically the public for Joburg Art Fair art is something that you've bought because it's a very commercial thing, art is something that you've bought and you put on your wall and that's how you enjoy it, it is an investment something that you can look at. The understanding that art that exists in an online platform

seems strange. I think that that is just a matter of exposure and understanding. The more kind of creative practice that's enjoyed online, whether it's at your office or in passing or something that you link to somebody else to go and have a look at, that kind of critical creative practice is something that is becoming more prevalent but also something that is not necessarily part of an understanding of a commercial art world. In terms of the public at the Joburg Art Fair, that was their reception, but outside of that anybody who's interested in digital art or internet art have found the website to be a very interesting resource for understanding potentially what it can be.

12. **CW:** Has the exhibition been displayed again, other than remaining online?

    TB: No.

13. **CW:** Do you think that the medium enables you to participate/curate in more of a global dialogue or context?

    TB: Absolutely. I think that the ability to simply email members of the Upgrade International Network and ask them if they'd ever seen work or encountered any. A lot of them are curators, one of them is Turbulence, based in Boston which basically curates and commissions internet artwork. The ability for them to just link to me an artwork without necessarily having to transport it from America to here or form India to here is very, very exciting. They had had archives and lists of stuff they had they'd commissioned or had seen before. It was a very easy exhibition to put together. All I had to do was get some computers, make sure that there was a framing website which obviously cost money, but wouldn't have cost as much as bringing out twenty artworks from around the world.

14. **CW:** Does the geographical focus of the exhibition affect the way in which the works are viewed?

TB: Absolutely, the way I've separated them into countries very specifically is an opportunity for comparison; to understand the different aesthetics that are coming from different places, the different interests and how people are addressing the global network from those different places. I think that the internet art is always reflective of its own medium just as much as when you paint you think a lot about the colour. There is always an aspect of medium in the process of making the work, in terms of conceptualising it. The geographical location of global versus local is very much prevalent in all of those works.

SECTION 3: CONCEPTS and CONTEXT

This section explores the conceptual development of the work and the outcome of it in relation to the digital medium. It also looks at the global nature of the form in relation to the work and practice.

In **Internet Art in the Global South 2009 (curated online exhibition)** concept such as **mapping, displacement, network, dynamic narratives, journeys and translation** are dealt with and emerge.

15. **CW:** Do you think that these concepts

- **Mapping**
- **Displacement**
- **Network**
- **Dynamic**
- **Narratives**

- **Journeys**
- **Translation**

which emerge are linked to your being a South African artist, the medium, your global positioning or all of them?

TB: Mapping I think is very much linked to all three of them. I'll begin with the medium, it's a possibility, it's easy to make mapping works on the internet because of Google Maps and various other mapping devices, it's a possibility, a dynamic form that's easy to use. It is also a dynamic form which has become a tool through the internet, like Google Maps and GPS wouldn't work without the internet, so they literally go hand in hand. It has also become a way for people to look at themselves in a different way, and the context of location and the things that happen in places. So for instance two of the pieces that were on Internet Art in the Global South were by Ismail Farouk, one of them looked specifically at the Soweto Uprising in Soweto, which is very much a location based, it happened at a specific location, but its historical. It allows the location to reflect the historical form and uses a map as a way to tell a story of something that happened; so rather than happening over time, it happened over a space. The other piece looked at the inner city which is a location which is not a visited location. It was called "Jay walk" and it invited people to visit it, tag it and follow tours that the public could make themselves. I noticed that the South American works didn't really have any mapping in them and neither did the Asian works. It made me realise that there's something about territory in Africa which is very specific to the politics of Africa. That politics is very much a global politics, it's not just about being here, it's about being located in something much bigger. Displacement is located to a centre and if we understand the centre as the West (North America and Europe), which is the centre of technology which is sort of where the controlling space of

the internet is basically and the people who sort of own the information. Everything disseminates from there rather than the other way round. There is a natural sense of displacement with that because the first world versus the third world is a displacement, a displacement from the centre where the first world is understood as a centre and a lot of artist particularly outside of that centre deal with that and this huge global medium is an opportunity to deal with that directly because it gets viewed, the actual medium is from that centre, but it's been used worldwide. Network I think the work is all network and it is using the Internet, which is a network space and the criticality of that is very important. It is important for artists to critique what that network is and how it functions and I think that's what internet art has tried to do on many levels. The dynamic, I think the medium itself is dynamic, I don't see that kind of dynamic form being particularly connected to South Africa or particularly global, I think it's just the nature of its form really. Narratives in any kind of practice and in any kind of critique or storytelling, which is pretty much creative practice, is story telling in it there's painting, animation even mapping and narrative in it. Just as much as dynamic as a form of the actual medium, narrative is a form of creativity and it's not specific to South Africa or to global positioning. I think it's just part of what it is. Journeys, I think the idea of a journey and displacement are very closely linked together, that there's a centre and then there's things away from a centre. I think the way that people, particularly in South Africa, move around a lot and there's this big immigrant and refugee communities of people moving and shifting that the idea of journey and change are very much linked to being South African and African in a global place, in a global position. Translation, translation is difficult because there are different ways of understanding translation. Translation is the translation of language and obviously in a global form there is always translation of language. Definitely the South American counties are very concerned with the

fact that the internet is a very English driven thing and that there is no true understanding of the Spanish form or the Latin form in the internet and that it's very much a sideline thing; so that's translation on language. There are levels of translation of understanding; I believe that the idea of displacement is very much an idea of translation as well. If you standing at the centre and looking out that's fine, but if you standing on the outside looking in, you looking at the world from a very different view point and if most of the commentary is coming from the centre then as an artist you will need to sort of translate your view point to that centre.

16. **CW:** Does the use of the digital as a medium or a tool for your exhibition affect your concept or curatorial statement? How and why?

TB: I think yes, it was very specific, driven around the internet and what the internet is and how people are using it so absolutely and making work for the internet. It was very specifically not real world art on the internet, it was actually using the internet as a medium for everything that I had with it.

17. **CW:** Does this relate to the global nature and characteristic of the medium? Why?

TB: Again, I think the idea of displacement and the centre and the understanding of what the centre internet is or how it's been told to us that it should be does change the characteristics of the medium, because it opens up the possibility for critique and it also allows for people to challenge that protocol so to speak.

18. **CW:** What were your reasons for selecting specific artists from the 'global south' for the exhibition (say, as oppose to only South Africans or Africans)?

TB: The Joburg Art Fair was trying to identify itself as an Art Fair in Africa and they also wanted to link themselves to a bigger market so they commissioned this idea of looking at the Global South generally.

19. **CW:** Did your position as a South African affect or influence selecting worlds from the Global South at all? How?

TB: Absolutely, I think there's a different kind of aesthetic coming from the South American work and a different kind of aesthetic coming from the Asian work, I know for a fact that a lot of people found the Korean work difficult to understand and I think that I understood it better and I think that I understood it because I'd lived in Asia and I had an understanding of the kind of humour and bizarity that comes with that culture. I know South Africans that hadn't found it very difficult to understand and obviously I chose works that were partially in English. So for instance a lot of the South American work id didn't include that I'd seen because it wasn't all in English or didn't have part that were in English. It would have been very difficult for the public that I was expecting to view it, to actually view it.

20. **CW:** As a South African artist yourself what are the challenges posed with curating online exhibitions?

TB: Online exhibitions are very easy to curate. There are really no problems; you just need to find a website which frames them. I think there's a real lack of interest in the art world because it's very difficult to sell. The South African art world is very much driven by a commercial form rather than a critical creative form. The opportunities don't exist very often despite them being quite easy to do. The artists actually hosted all of the works which I think is something that is a problem with internet art generally in the world that who is

responsible for hosting and looking after the upkeep of those works. So some of the works for instance are now down because the companies' or the individual's works have now closed them. So to curate something for a short period of time, but to collect and to sell is very difficult.

The digital as a medium is connected to the global dynamic, therefore working with this medium reflects this. I am interested in whether or not the curator makes this part of their process and selection of specific works and how the artists' process the intended outcomes of works.

21. **CW:** The medium is part of the artists' process, for you does the work of art exist in the result and the outcome when you finally show the work (exhibiting) or does it exist in the process of creating, in the interaction that the medium allows for?

TB: I think every single artwork is entirely different, particularly with internet artwork where there is a lot of opportunity for engagement. The process of engaging with an online community in the process of developing creative innovation so to speak would mean that it was a very process driven thing and the exciting part is people getting involved in that action rather than in an outcome where it might be a digital work but it will have a printed form in the end that gets sold. Or it will be a digital work that gets shown online, but is to be viewed online as a picture as an end product. Even at that end product online, the dynamic form means that it's never static so there's a sense of participation in it. Digital art work is always moving between states I think, I think it depends on the actual concept of the work and what the artists is trying to achieve with that work.

22. **CW:** The digital medium is a networked medium and global form does your curatorial process and the exhibition itself reflect this, or is it simply about the medium and exploring its own potential through an exhibition?

TB: I think it's both, I think the medium and exploring it through an exhibition and understanding it as a form and there's a criticality in the use of the network and what it means and how it's placed in a bigger, global form. I think that criticality is reflected in the concepts and what the artists have made. That's important to me too.

23. **CW:** Do you think there is a need to classify or position the work selected and the exhibition within a global context? Why?

TB: I definitely think so, even though it's a difficult thing. I've chosen works specifically from a South Africa, South America, India and Asia because they are there, but I feel that the reflections that the artists made by those artists in those places, need to be understood in a global context and need to be seen in a global context because they speak of a global context. So for them to be viewed solely as South African and not related to what the network allows them to be would be silly.

Thank you very much!