

Digital Art: Decolonising the Internet via Tabita Rezaire.

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The Internet is exploitative, exclusionary, classist, patriarchal, racist, homophobic, transphobic, fatphobic, coercive and manipulative. We need to decolonise and heal our technologies. Healing is resistance.

-Tabita Rezaire¹

The proliferation of the technology in our daily routine is so pervasive that it is increasingly difficult to imagine a world that is not influenced by it and vice versa. Within technology, I am interested in the internet. The internet is a source of learning, entertainment, communication and storage among other uses. As much as it is useful, there are problematic aspects of it as well. The news of data mining by Cambridge Analytica for instance was particularly disturbing for many users and had big effects like the contestation of recent Kenyan and United States elections². Other problems like cyber bullying and state surveillance are concerns in the virtual world. Coming to terms with its problematic aspects brings up the question, do we discard the internet? That may be a feasible answer for some. I am interested in how we can begin to use the internet we already have in intentional and informed ways so as not to reinscribe its problematic structures. I look at digital art as a way to try and forge new ways of interacting with the internet by looking at how a digital artist, Tabita Rezaire occupies that space.

In this paper, I explore, Tabita Rezaire's digital art work to find strategies on how to work within the oppressive world on the internet. A French-born Guyanese/Danish digital artist, she practices digital healing activism "as a strategy to envision decolonial technologies through

¹ Tabita Rezaire, *Exotic Trade*, website, <http://tabitarezaire.com/exotictrade.html>.

² Larry Madowo, "How Cambridge Analytica Poisoned Kenya's Democracy." *The Washington Post*, Mar 21, 2018, accessed December 12, 2018.

which we can ‘holistically connect to ourselves, to one another, to the earth and to the multiverse’³. In her art, she uncovers the exploitative mechanics that make the internet possible therefore breaking down its façade of a ‘global space’ that is ‘free and accessible’ to all. As an artist whose work exists on the internet, there comes the question how one can occupy the space whose mechanics are oppressive in the first place and attempt to decolonise it? To this she answers in one of her pieces, “The Internet is not a place of non-rights, and despite a coercive environment, it is possible to challenge the unilateral and unbalanced relationship that exists between the western connected world and the Global South.”⁴ Within her work, she resists the western hegemonies that map the internet by refusing to be a passive user and instead approaches it suspiciously.

In an interview for ‘*Unlabelled Magazine*’ conducted by Phendu Kuta, Tabita was asked whether she had any positive aspects of the internet, she responded, “Of course! I also love the Internet, don't get me wrong but I'm just trying to be critical of the spaces that I inhabit”⁵. Instead of discarding the internet, she leads us to take up a more active role in our own use of the internet space. It is in being critical that I locate the first steps towards possible solutions on what to do with the web that has become such a big part of our lives. Her response instead encourages us to hold the duality of loving the internet and acknowledging the oppressive mechanisms that it runs on. Provided there is data connection you can interact with others and form social connections, have access to a range of information and express ideas. But data connection comes with a lot of implications within the capitalist society. By examining her digital art work, I show how Tabita

³ Tabita Rezaire, *Exotic Trade*, website, <http://tabitarezaire.com/exotictrade.html>.

⁴ Tabita Rezaire, “Afro Cyber Resistance: South African Internet Art.” *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, vol. 12 no. 2 (2014): 187.

⁵ Rezaire, Tabita, By Kuta, Phendu, “A Personal Interview & Photo Shoot with Artist Tabita Rezaire.” *Unlabelled Magazine*, May 3, 2017.

is critical of the internet in her practice, point out the potential of digital art to rework internet exploitations and show how we can incorporate that into our own use of the internet.

What is digital art? I use Christiane Paul's definition in her book *Digital Art* as a starting point. She says that the term 'digital art' has itself become an umbrella for such a broad range of artistic works and practices that it does not describe one unified set of aesthetics.⁶ Therefore attempts to fit it into a singular definition does not contain the many forms within itself. She instead outlines a way to differentiate types of digital art. "One of the basic but crucial distinctions made here is that between art that uses digital technologies as a *tool* for creation of traditional art objects...and art that employs these technologies as its very own *medium* being produced, stored and presented exclusively in the digital format."⁷ The opening quote in this essay is from Tabita's 2017 solo exhibit, 'Exotic Trade' at the Goodman gallery in Johannesburg where she took her audience through a combination of video, audio, yoga, digital prints and installations to communicate concepts of digital colonialism and healing, black womxn's sexualities and their exploitation, African spirituality and forms of knowledge. Though her work was exhibited in a gallery, because it utilizes video and digital prints, it was uploaded to sites such as vimeo.com, a video sharing website and her own website where they reside long after the exhibition. I categorize her work under the second distinction. One that uses technology as a medium.

The first step to re-forming our relationship with the internet is to understand exactly what we are working with. As aforementioned, the internet has been successful at obscuring the mechanics that function in the background. Richard Hill in his work, *Internet Governance: The*

⁶ Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, (New York: Thames & Hudson inc., 2003), 7.

⁷ Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, (New York: Thames & Hudson inc., 2003), 8.

Last Gasp of Colonialism, or Imperialism by Other Means? charts a history of the internet governance to assert that the relationship between the ‘developed countries’ and ‘developing countries’ is a colonial one. He shows the role of the United States in policy making and the economic aspect of the internet. When he wrote this, the United States maintained control of agencies like ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) and the DNS (Domain Name System). This ensured the government had control over policy making and assigning of domain names. He also points out to the “general dominance by US companies of many key sectors of information and communication technologies (ICTs).”⁸ The dominance of these companies serves to consolidate the economic hold of the United States.

Richard Hill lays out two methods of internet ownership: ‘receiver pays’ and ‘multistakeholder’ approach. In 2001, the internet was still on the former model where the user pays for the information that they get. He points out that in this model, “relatively poor country will obtain less information than a relatively rich country, simply because the relatively poor country has less money to spend.”⁹ In his paper, he pushes for the multistakeholder approach that minimizes the control that the US government has on the internet. This approach, which has been defined as engaging “technologists, the private sector and civil society in a bottom-up, consensus driven approach to standards setting, Internet development, and management”¹⁰ He states that “an insistence on US (or developed country) control of Internet governance is indeed an example of colonialism (including at times the denigration of ability of developing country representatives

⁸ Richard Hill, Chapter 4 “Internet Governance: The Last Gasp of Colonialism, or Imperialism by Other Means?” In *The Evolution of Global Internet Governance*, eds. Radu R., Chenou JM., Weber R. Springer (Berlin, Heidelberg, 2014) 82.

⁹ Ibid, 84.

¹⁰ Ibid, 85.

to understand the issues and to take appropriate decisions on their own).”¹¹ He further states that US’s ability to enforce its policies and shape the internet’s discourse is a form of imperialism. Richard Hill’s paper, we find that the history of internet governance is colonial. Although ICANN is a not-for profit volunteer organization now, a lot about the early structuring of the internet is still reflected on the way that it functions in the present day.

The colonial and imperialist history of internet governance mirrors that of the physical reality between the western world and the global south. In her work ‘AFRO CYBER RESISTANCE’ in 2014, Tabita explores the questions like “is the internet a colonized space” and “can it be a space for dissent?”¹². The work is both in video format as a video essay-that I classify as digital art- and a paper in the *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*. The video shows her moving image edited in front of a collaged backdrop first that switches into a plain pink and purple gradient background. She also edits different icons that highlight her subject material. Both the paper, “*Afro cyber resistance: South African internet art*” and video essay explore other digital artists in south Africa who have used the online platform to reconstruct the representation of Africans on the internet by engaging in what she identifies as cultural and social resistance. She explores Chimurenga’s Wikiafrica project, CussGroup’s Video Party and Bogosi Sekhukhuni’s Virus SS 16.¹³ The work by the different artists takes on different issues that have little representation or large misinformation about Africa.

Though the video essay (digital art) and the paper talk about the same subject, they are strikingly different in presentation. In the organization of the two mediums, the video essay

¹¹ Ibid, 86.

¹² Tabita Rezaire, *AFRO CYBER RESISTANCE*, 2014; vimeo.com, 2014. Video, min 2:08.

¹³ Tabita Rezaire, “Afro Cyber Resistance: South African Internet Art.” *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, vol. 12 no. 2 (2014): 187.

achieves something that the paper does not. In the video, she edits screen recordings of the work that she uses as explores like Bogosi Sekhukhunisa's virus SS 16. On the other hand, the paper, has screenshots of the different pieces and where she does not, her descriptions serve the purpose of signaling the work. Paul notes that "Digital technologies add an extra dimension to the composure and collage, for disparate elements can be blended more seamlessly, with the focus being on a 'new' simulated form of reality rather than on the juxtaposition of components with a distance spatial or temporal history. Digital collages and composites often constitute a shift from the affirmation of boundaries to their erasure."¹⁴ Paul states that the digital collages in digital art allow for a merging of two elements to create a new simulated reality. In that simulated reality, new ways of seeing the material are generated. In this case, the video essay establishes a new way of interacting with academic papers that talk about internet art. In the video, as she describes the work of the CUSS Group's 'Video party', the screen recording is edited to appear alongside her talking about it. One's experience reading the paper does not match up because one can only imagine what she is referring to. Her video work breaks down the inaccessibility of the visual referent that the paper talks about and in fact brings it closer to us. The video is embedded on her website and uploaded via vimeo. This means that users who do not have access to the journal can also access the conversation about digital colonialism. The digital art work creates a new discursive space that is located outside of an academic space that is mostly only accessible through attachment to an institution.

Having identified digital art as an umbrella for a range of many works, Paul breaks down the work into different forms. One of them is 'internet art'. She identifies the origins of the web.

¹⁴ Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, (New York: Thames & Hudson inc., 2003), 31.

“The world wide web as we know it today was conceptualized in early 1990s by Tim Berners’-Lee and CERN (the European Particle Physics Laboratory with the intention to build a ‘distributed collaborative multimedia information system’.¹⁵ She explains that it works on ‘the transfer protocol system (http) that allows one to access documents written in HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) a language that makes it possible to establish links between documents and arbitrary nodes.¹⁶ This is how all information is made legible to users. She notes that “the early WWW was dominated by education and research institutions, a largely unregulated space for free information sharing.¹⁷ This however was changed when what she calls the ‘commercial colonization’ of the internet came about and internet art is “characterized by the tension between the philosophy of the free information space and the proximity to a commercial context.”¹⁸

Paul notes that the early internet art was text heavy and often conceptual. This was because it was still in the developmental stages. Tabita Rezaire’s homepage is dominated by a collage of visuals. It has a moving image of her in an animal print cat suit, fur coat, sunglasses and a long leash around her neck and the phrase ‘Exotic Trade’ as the central image. Behind her is a blue landscape that is a google earth image of the biosphere. There are two GIF’s of fire enclosed in purple triangles by each side of her. Icons of water fountains shaped like vulvas on the top left, a picture of an eye written ‘Malaxa’ and an icon with the letters ‘ntu’ the top right. A symbol and the word ‘Seneb’ twirling on the bottom right. On the bottom left, there is a heart-shaped hard drive and a satellite antenna. The icons lead to other pages with her website. The

¹⁵ Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson inc., 2003), 111.

¹⁶ Ibid, 111.

¹⁷ Ibid, 111.

¹⁸ Ibid, 112.

organization not only serves to decorate the interface, but builds a visual language to connect to the content of her artwork therefore being a piece of internet art in itself. The concept of ‘competing elements’ is useful in framing Rezaire’s internet art.

In Aylish Wood’s book, *Digital Encounters*, she explores different interfaces that mark and guide the user’s interaction with digital material. By exploring the different interfaces, she shows that “they too reveal the changing technological landscape we inhabit”.¹⁹ She explores the relationship between digital technologies and various digital media like film stretching into gaming and digital installations. Her discussion of the interfaces foregrounds that they direct our experiences with technology but also ultimately with our world since their proliferation is undeniable. She introduces ‘competing elements’ that “puts viewers in the position of having to distribute their attention between characters and effects on the interface of the screen”²⁰. Because she is working within the film media, she sites digital effects in movies as competing elements that work in different ways with the narrative, but compete for a viewer’s attention. Considering websites, she says “Two particularly strong examples of competing elements are television news broadcasts and webpages in which words and images compete for a viewer’s attention.”²¹ She continues to say that even though competing elements are present in these two mediums, there has been little scholarship on it. Tabita Rezaire’s website and art work are arranged by editing different images together to produce a collage effect that creates the ‘new’ simulated reality Paul refers to. I identify these edits as the competing elements.

Wood makes that argument that instead of looking at competing elements in cinema as serving to split the user’s attention, we should instead look at them as a way to give the user

¹⁹ Aylish Wood, *Digital Encounters* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 3

²⁰ Ibid, 8

²¹ Ibid, 74.

some agency. She states that, “the competing elements of interfaces offer a different mode of experience and perception, one in which agency can be gained through the process of making sense of the fragmented images. The need for a viewer to make a synthesis of the competing elements of an image, rather than simply be directed by them, affords agency to that viewer”.²² By arranging her website in such a way that the user can choose which icon they want to select to explore her page, she sets the images up as competing elements that. Wood defines agency in this case as the process of making meaning for oneself with the digital interactions. Within the internet space, that I have established as oppressive, Tabita’s internet art via her website allows her users some room to make meaning of her work by themselves because they decide which icon to click on that takes them to different links. They too can get some agency in the somewhat overdetermined virtual world.

Within her other pieces like her video work, Tabita employs competitive elements not to give the user agency per se, but to bring different images into conversation with one another on the screen that create a new critical space to discuss the internet. Wood thinks of digital effects as an example of competitive elements within cinema. She uses the example of split screen effect as a competitive element and says that it expands the narrative space.²³ It achieves this by showing parallel actions that she says gives the viewer two narrative elements at which to look. This expansion of narrative space in this context, I read as being similar to the ‘critical space’ Tabita Rezaire creates for the internet. Digital art is a good tool for decontextualizing different images and concepts to communicate new ideas.

²² Ibid, 79.

²³ Ibid, 49.

In another piece called 'Deep Down Tidal (2017)', Tabita explores the concept of electronic colonialism by tracking the infrastructure of the internet. The video starts²⁴ with a user on phone talking to her friend. She is sitting in front of a cloud that is placed in space. The user talks about being banned from Facebook after posting that white people should return indigenous land. The video cuts to the phrase 'This phone call was brought to you by electronic colonialism' against a rainy backdrop. The video then cuts to a shot with different images of Google's search page floating on the screen that point to its racist algorithms when searches about black people are keyed. Meanwhile, user's phone conversation plays in the background where she continues saying that Facebook is racist. She talks about the unnecessary expense on data needed to access the internet. The video then cuts to another shot with the question, 'Google why you mad????' with multiple images of a popular meme bouncing around and a backdrop of satellite picture of earth. I have picked an excerpt of the video to show the competing elements that are always within her pieces. 'Deep Down Tidal' is also a video essay.

I identify the collage and composites that Paul refers to as the competing elements in digital art. Just as the competing elements expand the narrative space in the cinema so do the edits in her video. By cutting the phone call conversation with the google search algorithms for example, she points to the different ways that electronic colonialism manifests itself. I recognize that different readers will organize the competing elements and make sense of them differently and this is my reading. In another point of the video²⁵, she edits the map of old colonial trade routes with images of ships and fiber optic cables that run on the ocean floor against the background of the biosphere to illustrate the architecture of the internet. She also edits the text,

²⁴ Tabita Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal*, 2017; vimeo.com, 2014. Video, min 1:08-1:30.

²⁵ Tabita Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal*, 2017; vimeo.com, 2014. Video, min 5:23-6:50.

“Our communication system is layered into a geopolitical matrix of preexisting colonial routes”, “the 19th century copper telegraph cables followed colonial era shipping routes and most modern optic cables follow these routes”²⁶ Paul says that “one of the pragmatic aspects of digital practice is that information can be infinitely developed, recycled and reproduced in various contexts-it can breed new ideas through recombination.”²⁷ The recombination is achieved by the editing of the various competing elements. Her work reveals the architecture of the internet that is always hidden and with it the internet’s oppressive relationships. The ability for digital art to combine these otherwise physically separate concepts allow it to create a discursive space for anyone who visits Tabita’s video about the mechanisms of the internet.

I turn to her self-portrait series, ‘INNER FIRE (2016-2017)’²⁸ where she explores different power structures around money, sexuality, race and healing. By placing herself as the subject of the portraits one could read that she is also making a connection of how they relate to her identities both in the virtual and digital world. Conversations about the relationship between users and their avatars sometimes take the approach that our virtual world is separate from our physical world. In their work, ‘*Pluralistic Presence: Practicing Embodiment with My Avatar*’, Sita Popat and Kelly Preece inspect the physical/virtual binary by observing relationship between physical bodies and their representation in telematic performance. They make the larger argument that perhaps the boundary drawn between virtual and physical is not as stable as we think. They examine two projects: *Projecting performance and Telematic dreaming*. The projects use technological interfaces that produce a virtual avatar that presents the performer in a

²⁶ Tabita Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal*, 2017; vimeo.com, 2014. Video, min 6:24.

²⁷ Ibid, 70.

²⁸ Tabita Rezaire, *Offering*, website, <http://tabitarezaire.com/offering.html>

different location from her body.²⁹ The projects, through virtual mapping enabled users to connect their physical bodies to the virtual representation of their bodies and further than that, attach their motor activity. This allowed for the users to experience a doubling presence where “the physical and virtual realms intersect”. They bring up the concept ‘embodied agency’ that is established when the motor activity in the digital sphere is linked to the physical body. Through this interaction, because the virtual and the physical body correspond, “agency, and thus presence is passed from the the body to the avatar, with motor activity as its engine to enable interaction on the virtual realm.³⁰ They note that motor activity is essential to the crossings between those realms. They conclude that “My avatar is the digital entity infused with my agency driven by my motor activity at the interface.”³¹

Although there is no continuous motor connection between Tabita and her self-portraits, the connection may have been made in the process of posing for the photographs that she edits into the prints. Popat and Preece insist that the connection is not made ‘representationalist verisimilitude’. A reading of the self-portraits as representational makes them static and does not take into account the active choices made by the artists to inhabit the space of the subject. As the subject of her work, she makes takes the active role of organizing the concepts within the print. In her piece, ‘colorism kills’, she sits in the center of the image with text around her of phrases said to lightskin black women that reflect the discrimination against darker skinned black women whose origins are antiblack racism. She is a light skin black woman who is affected by colorism since it paints her as exotic which is dehumanizing to her while at the same time affords her

²⁹ Sita Popat and Kelly Preece, Pluralistic presence: Practicing Embodiment with My Avatar, In *Identity, Performance and Technology: Practices of Empowerment, Embodiment and Technicity*, eds. Susan Broadhurst and Josephine (Machon, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), 163

³⁰ Ibid, 165.

³¹ Ibid, 173.

privilege over dark skin women although it is still within an oppressive space. Centering herself in her image is making an active connection between her avatar and herself. Her gaze in the picture is directed to the audience as is she is directly saying to us, 'colorism kills'. By including herself in her work, she is also actively as she said earlier 'being critical of the spaces that [she] inhabits'.

In conclusion, digital art, has the potential to help us reform our relationship with the internet. It has the ability to create discursive spaces where different concepts are put in conversation to engender new conversations that can lead to answers on how we can occupy the internet space. Tabita's work leads by example when she confronts the hegemonies on the internet and exposes them through her art work. She does not passively use the internet, but instead is suspicious of its functioning. She creates her own space-in her art- for agency where she challenges the unilateral and unbalanced relationship that exists between the western connected world and the Global South. As users, we can start educating ourselves about the different powers that lay claim on the internet. We can also start thinking of our avatars not as separate entities from our physical bodies, but our digital entities. Once we do this, we can stop being passive users of the internet and use our agency to be critical of and decolonise the internet.

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