Rogue Processes

Speculative Techno-Visions on the Post-Pandemic South African Art Scene

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Introduction

After a National State of Disaster was declared on 15 March 2020, the South African art sector took up 4IR technologies and participated in a large-scale virtual migration that affected almost all sectors of South African society. Virtual viewing rooms and online exhibitions became commonplace as artists continued to grapple with their disrupted lived experience and the need to "up-skill" their digital know-how to remain relevant. In some sense we have arrived at a critical juncture, long envisioned as the moment when most relations to the outside world will be facilitated through online means. Coupled with the purported catalytic potential ascribed to the pandemic, we could find ourselves at the advent of what some herald as a new utopian world. For others, however, the moment could signal a complete retreat into simulation, where we stand to lose all connection with the real world.

To gain insight into how this current moment holds up to either enchanted or disenchanted scenarios of our digital futures, I probe, as curator, shifts in spectatorship, creative processes, and the consumption of or participation with artworks during this liminal period. My case study is the *Interface* exhibition I curated with Teboho Mokhothu for the University of the Free State Art Gallery in 2022, which specifically interrogates the digital showcasing of art. What

changes can be observed regarding the dispositions and engagement of spectators? Will virtual technologies be taken up readily by audiences as a tool to engage the self-reflective and critical functions of art, and in which ways? How do these findings compare to what has been envisioned for societies in relation to the digital by past thinkers and techno-theoreticians, and what does this indicate for the 4IR's future development in South Africa?

It is important to point out that much of what has been speculated about the digital impact on society – whether it be idealistic or cynical – is founded on the premise that the virtual is separate from the physical or material world. When Margaret Wertheim wrote *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* in 1999, she argued that the enchantment that the virtual held for society at the time was predominantly spatial in nature and underpinned by the age-old dualism that separated body and soul. Deeply entrenched within the medieval Christian worldview was the notion that there is a spiritual and physical realm. Scientific advancement and its disenchantments reduced this to a mono-dimensional understanding of space: that physical, or scientific, space is the only "real" one. Through this we can easily understand why the virtual realm, as a response to this reductionism, incited quasi-religious responses. As a new "real" environment, completely separate from the physical, it could bring a "new world" into being, in which we could mystically transcend our physical states and become virtually omnipotent (Wertheim 1999:30-39). The internet would address inequalities by granting access to unlimited information, regardless of social standing, gender, race, or disability. Wertheim cites early crusaders for the internet like robotics experts Hans Moravec and Kevin Kelly. The latter was editor of *Wired* magazine, who fervently believed that without the need for bodily presence, one was also freed from the inequalities and oppressions that are part and parcel of one's physical state (Wertheim 1999:286).

It is, however, exactly this separation between the physical and the virtual realms that alarmed other thinkers on the subject. In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image*

Culture, Vivian Sobchack (2005) articulates the concern that postmodern culture, mediated through a myriad of screens and interfaces, will be characterised by a free-floating, existential presence that is phonemically diffused, spatially decentered, weakly temporalized, and disembodied. She sketches a digital domain that constitutes a system of simulation that leads to a free-floating levelling of values that foregoes explicit interest and grounded investment in the human body and enworlded action (Sobchack 2016:117). To Sobchack, that electronic media is plural above all constitutes a mode of perception that is disengaged from any true sense of moral gravity.

The work of Francois Knoetze and the Lo-Def Film Factory collective, particularly in the four-part film series *Core Dump* (–2018-2019) (Figure 3.1), directly engages with this kind of Western techno-idealism, and more specifically the exploitation of African countries that ensues from it. It also articulates how many of the fearful speculations described by techno-theoreticians like Sobchack have come to be realised, to the detriment of society. The series explores the relationship between digital technology, cybernetics, colonialism, and the re-enchanted notion of a "Non-Aligned Humanist Utopia" (Knoetze, n.d.). In *Core Dump – Dakar* (2018), we encounter a self-augmented cyborg – a bodily amalgamation of flesh and electronic waste – that strides, and dances, through present-day Dakar. The film is made up of assemblages of found footage, performance documentation, and recorded interviews that form narrative portraits of the "uncertainty in the nervous system of the digital earth" (Knoetze n.d.:1). The conceptual framework draws from audio-visual archives, and responds to the pan-African, Marxist utopias of early African cinema (specifically Ousmane Sembene's films), and a range of writers and thinkers – from Donna Haraway, Sylvia Wynter and Louis Chude-Sokei to Gayatri Spivak, Franz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire.

Figure 3.1: *Core Dump – Dakar* (2018), Francois Knoetze, video 12 min 8 sec.

I refer to the work throughout this essay to serve as a measuring stick to gauge the currently changed dispositions of participants and spectators who seem to blend the physical and virtual more seamlessly than before – the *fleshiness* of the cyborg's digital integration being a main focal point. Furthermore, the film's makeshift aesthetic serves to contrast

sharply with pristine gallery environments and as such introduces a "rogue" creative and artistic engagement that I believe characterises a younger generation's relationship to virtual technologies.

In 2020, the UFS Art Gallery, like so many others, sought alternative, online means through which it could continue to bring art to the public and serve its communities. Each new exhibition was installed and recorded as a 360-degree virtual tour that was uploaded online. The link was then distributed through the gallery mailing list for people to access. The distribution of the link to the virtual tour was accompanied by a more considered and informative social media campaign on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. These platforms, when accessed, would again read as "curated" fragments of each exhibition.

Figure 3.2: *Interface* exhibition, Johannes Stegmann Art Gallery, UFS, Bloemfontein. 8 June–29 July 2022.

The *Interface* exhibition evolved from a fascination with such exercises in curating exhibitions for digital audiences, since *showcasing* and encountering art through a set of diverse interfaces leave us with so much to disentangle.

Participating artists were initially invited to consider and respond to the following prompts:

- Is there a culture to online art-viewing and the online dissemination of art?
- Has materiality become outdated?
- How do interfaces dictate content?
- Does digitally disseminated art challenge power hierarchies?

- Are there other power structures at play and how, why, and for how long are we paying attention?

As such the *Interface* exhibition offered a meeting point among artists, users, technologies, and audiences, and each selected work represented a specific point of departure when considering the "interface" and its implications. The exhibition was initially showcased as an online site in October 2021 that comprised a digital gallery and a page for each artist. The on-site iteration of the exhibition then took place subsequently in June-July 2022.

The "fleshing out" process of translating digital and digitised artworks into an on-site space once again stimulated a prolific exchange between virtual and "real" realms, and among artists, curators, and artworks, especially considering that the on-site exhibition would again be recorded digitally and distributed as a virtual tour. The process of thinking through and linking digital artworks that are installed in an on-site space, to a virtual tour and gallery page in a curatorially considered manner, proved to be surprisingly challenging. The process of producing and curating the exhibition yielded a continuous layering of the "real" place and its digital simulations. It is this process of considering the experience of both gallery attendees and virtual spectators for each individual artwork that yielded particularly valuable insights for discussion here.

My first observation that is substantiated by the selected artworks is that, although the virtual experience might engender "a free-floating existential presence" (Sobchack 2016:117), there *is* a taxation at play when we spend our time online.

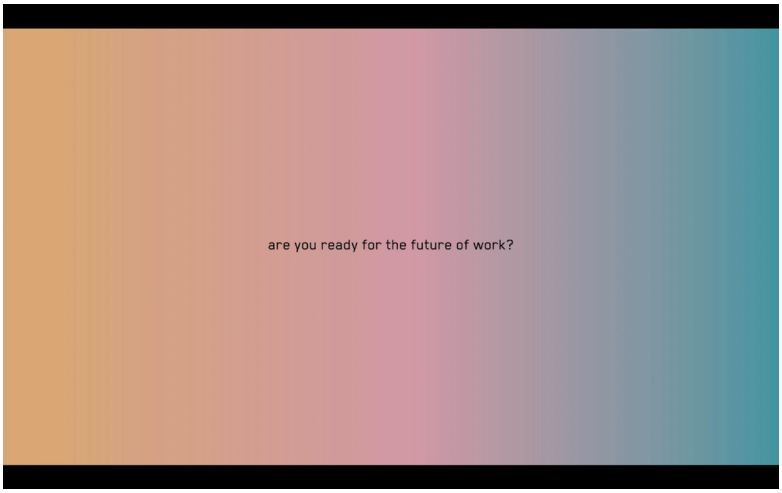


Figure 3.3: Still from *The Future of Work* (2020) from *Sorry for the Delayed Response*, Naadira Patel Video 5 min 58 sec (http://interface-exhibition.com/naadira-patel/).

Naadira Patel's video series *Sorry for the Delayed Response* was selected for the exhibition since it interrogates new, interfacing socialities, digital dependency, and workday conditions. The videos feature a rolling cascade of everyday online communications that are interspersed with quiet contemplations such as "Hallo is this working?", "I hope this finds you well", "Sorry I was muted", "Participating in virtual activism", "What is work time?", "What is free time?", "Have you been productive today?", "I just couldn't bring myself to reply", "Please let me know if this is manageable?", "Free delivery", and "Contagious conspiracies'' that seem to characterise our new modes of being as "always on and always online" (*The Future of Work* 2020).

Patel's strategy is simple. Imitating what could have been 5 minutes of idle online scrolling in anyone's workday, it resonates deeply with experiences that became particularly pronounced during lockdown. The accompanying music is sombre and hypnotic and facilitates a slow, palpable crescendo of anxiety. The speaker in the video is bodiless, yet the droning dissonance and discomfort is felt viscerally, as a physical

sensation – something close to an electronic hum – a buzzing just behind one's eyes. This has become familiar to us since the pandemic and terms like "languishing" or "online fatigue" have become common parlance, when we describe the specific type of exhaustion that characterised being always on, always online, and with little physical relation to others.

To Vivian Sobchack (2016:89), each new visual technology – the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic – is subjectively incorporated into society as new modes of perception that facilitate distinct ways of being embodied and existentially present. Electronic media above all constitute a way of being in the world that is defused and, in comparison with the photographic and cinematic, belonging to no-one. To Sobchack, "electronic space cannot be inhabited by anybody that is not also an electronic body" and the disembodiment that is referenced in Patel's work would be the result of a dispersion, an "insubstantial transmission across a flimsy network of nodal points" (2016:116). Although the "image of the body" is continually emphasised, online engagement of this nature has the effect of free-floating subjectivity, and marginalises the *carnal* experience of the physical body. To Sobchack (2016:117), the dislocation from embodied experience poses a real moral or existential threat, as defused embodiment would reprieve those conditioned by these perceptual technologies from truly "feeling" for and investing in the state of the world. This concern is validated in *Sorry for the Delayed Response* through an awareness of a despondent, grinding sense of futility.

I wonder, however, what Sobchack would make of this very specific exhaustion, thematised in Patel's engagement with our online existence? The bodily sensations resulting from online modes of being are very *carnal* reactions to the diffusion Sobchack speaks of. The dispersion of embodiment and subjectivity that electronic media affords us is not that "free". It is taxing in many ways, and if there is a cost, the notion of investment and value cannot be completely negligible.

Core Dump continuously returns to this theme, that through technological advancement, the body *has* become electronic and that this fusion is mainly exploitative. Perhaps we could entertain the notion that the strange buzzing sensation behind our eyes when we have been working online is an electronic hum resulting from our cognition being extended into that of the machine's for too long. Currently, people are growing more suspicious of algorithms and screens that arrest and condition our attention to the ends of the companies (for example Facebook and Instagram), that have explicit marketing value in keeping us online. Knoetze shows how this is a mirroring of the material exploitation (the extraction of resources to create electronic equipment, and landfills piling up with electronic waste) and the exploitation of labourers in tech factories that affects African countries particularly, and is a continuation of established patterns of imperialism.

Core Dump makes viewers pertinently aware that the virtual domain did not realise a more just, equal, utopian world. The resources to fuel this space and the system that upholds it, whether it be of attention, labour, or material, are extracted exploitatively and detrimentally to especially citizens of African countries like Senegal that are vulnerable to new colonising capitalist ventures due to economic challenges. The film additionally hints at the emergence of a carnal or bodily/digital fusion that would indicate that the dualism that fuels techno-utopianism is receding. Perhaps, though, it would then also push back against disengagement or disinvestment purported by theoreticians like Sobchack.

Spectator engagement at the UFS Art Gallery hints at a noticeable retraction from virtual envelopment and for other related and important reasons: expressed in *Sorry for the Delayed Response* is a complete collapse in experiential differentiation between work, play, recreation, shopping, and socialisation – which were all engaged with on screen. It has been theorised that the "hyperreal implosion of the real and its simulacra" (Sobchack, 2016:115) made possible by electronic media, will result in a very uniform set of experiences in our

daily lives. With art being viewed exclusively online, and thus adding another simulated digital layer to replace gallery spaces, this implosion was complete.

When considering the simulation of a gallery space, we should also take a moment for the curatorial consideration of comparing online and on-site gallery visitors' "movements" in these spaces. When curating an on-site gallery, one naturally considers which artworks would arrest visitors' attention, which ones are in dialogue with one another, and place them in proximity, but rarely in any strict "order" to interpret. Visitors are free to move sporadically between artworks and still feel a sense of cohesiveness. This is not the case for virtual tours where "ease" and the need to avoid navigational confusion is paramount. Online viewers are guided through the space in a preconfigured manner by "hubs" and navigation buttons, and all information on artworks is presented instantaneously. In the simulation of the gallery space, one is subject to (not so many) "prefigured options" (Van de Vall, 2008:12) and the chance for surprise or the unexpected is suppressed. This once again imitates online engagement where interaction is prefigured, but also in the "lessons" from online marketing applied here – that one "loses" one's audience the moment that they feel confused or frustrated when navigating a site.

It is a valuable realisation then that the virtual gallery space, as a substitute for the on-site one, was not necessarily embraced. Even though the UFS Art Gallery's virtual tours were more "accessible", they only saw a very small fraction of the visitation compared to on-site exhibitions at first. Since there was so little to differentiate the experience of viewing art online from any other online activity, audiences were saturated with these experiences. I believe that many other online art initiatives can report similar findings.

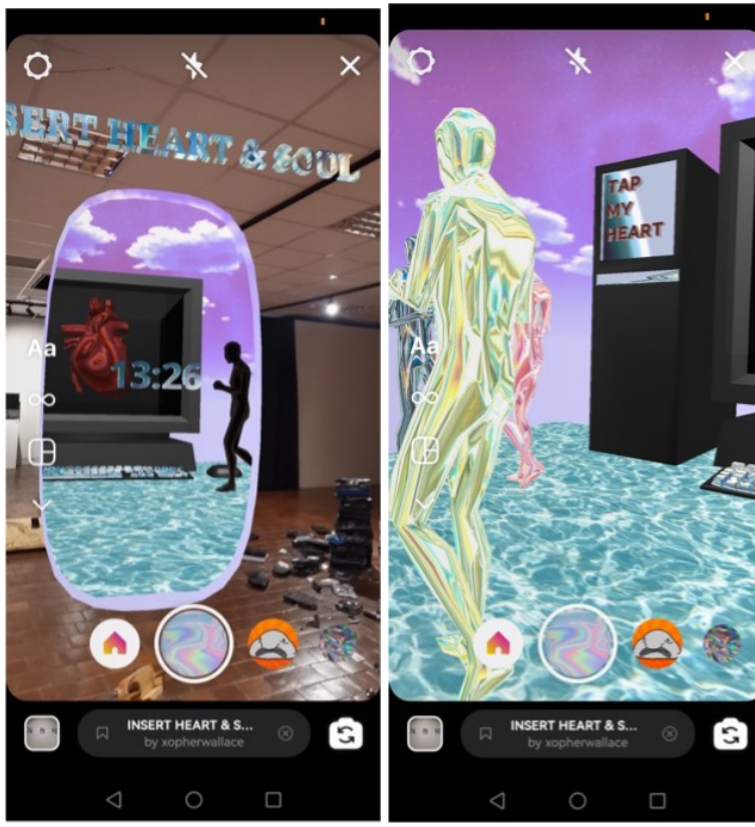
This is an important insight: that in this current cultural moment, *because* of the experiences people had during the pandemic, there might not be any real *desire* to supplant bodily, temporal experiences with exclusively virtual ones – at least not when it comes to the experience of art. Perhaps this is

heartening: that audiences or viewers still require something more from engaging with artworks than the endless stream of information and stimulation that the virtual domain can provide.

Should we take the above as an indication that virtual showcasing of art will not retain any real relevance, that it would only provide superficial, disengaged means for the viewing of artworks? Further investigation into spectator engagement and interaction with artworks during the exhibition would suggest otherwise. As Verbreek (2005:111) notes: "a specific technology may invite certain uses and inhibit others, but neither the invitation nor the inhibition is absolute".

It is necessary, though, to look at the full range of technologies that audiences use to access virtual extensions of exhibition spaces and artworks. For this I turn to the work of Xopher Wallace, which is deeply imbedded in online social networking platforms. For the *Interface* exhibition, it took the form of Augmented Reality (AR) Instagram filters. Wallace's work was selected because it so clearly speaks to the social vocabulary and lived experiences of audiences, especially students, whose lives are enmeshed with online technologies. Additionally, as the work would be "invincible" or inaccessible in the on-site space without the use of a smartphone, it foregrounds the inseverable connection we have adopted towards our phones.

Viewers gained access to the work in the gallery space through their phones by scanning printed out QR codes which opened the filter on Xopher's Instagram profile. The filters were then supplanted on the surroundings, now the gallery space, that was recorded by the viewer's phone's camera.



Augmented Reality, Instagram

Curating the work for an online audience, however, presented an interesting discontinuity. Since Instagram filters cannot be accessed through laptops or desktops, it became clear that a secondary handheld device would have to be used by online visitors to scan the codes on the webpage. Through an odd duplication of screens, the work became somehow severed from its original usual online existence. It functioned more clearly when accessible in the gallery space – despite not being truly present – in conjunction with visitors'

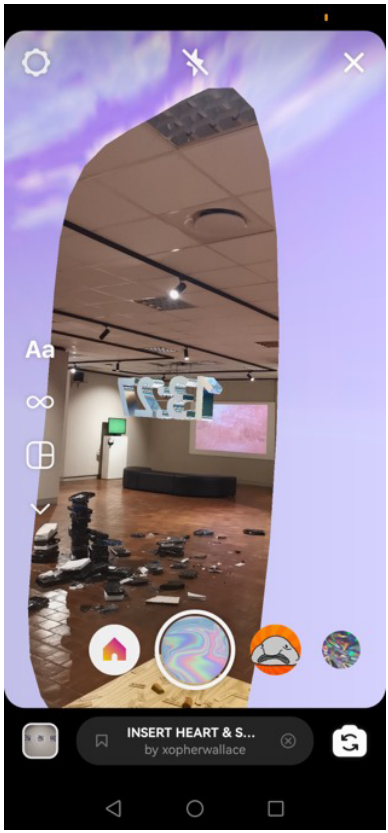


Figure 3.4: *Insert Heart and Soul* (2021), Xopher Wallace, Scannable QR code.

smartphones. These artworks aren't "located" merely online, but in proximity to the ever-present smartphone in the hands of users.

When Sobchack wrote on how electronic media "phenomenologically diffuses the fleshly presence of the human body" (2016:118), she might not have anticipated to what extent the smartphone would come to function as a complete and prevailing extension of the body.

Figure 3.5: *Mind Blowing Selfie Sword (you won't believe number three!)* (2019). Allen Laing. Genuine yellow wood, Merbau, Kiaat, Karee and cellphone.

This is exemplified in Allen Laing's work *Selfie Sword* included in the *Interface* exhibition. Importantly, however, Allen's work does not speak to any kind of idealism regarding bodily and technological co-evolution. He shows us, rather, that the "fusion" between bodies and digital devices is unavoidable, and resistance is comically futile. Moreover, he shows that, through our devices, we are compromised within a system that feeds off our (defused) attention and that our relationship with the digital domain remains ambiguous.

Similarly, the cyborg in *Core Dump* becomes a kind of martyr for the digital age, choosing to incorporate painful digital augmentations that would make him "one with all

things", and thus powerful enough to resist those "who control the machines". The white plastic mask that the cyborg incorporates indicates that we have extended our capacity for expression, communication, and cognition into external but attached devices as flickering projections on lit screens. The smartphone engenders *fused*, *hybrid* experiences, where one's attention seemingly seamlessly extends into the virtual and functions as extensions of our bodies.

Returning to spectators' engagement at the UFS Art Gallery, there is again a marked shift that underscores a more integrated, hybrid bodily and digital experience for gallery visitors – not only regarding the use of smartphones, but the attendance of virtual tours as well. As bodily experience in the gallery became more available to viewers, there was a notable, gradual warming towards virtual experience. As restrictions were lifted progressing through 2020 and 2021, virtual tours were accessed and remarked upon more frequently. During the *Interface* exhibition, gallery visitors reported that they would visit the gallery and then go home and scroll through the online site again to supplement their experience. Viewers remarked that the tours felt like "a game", where initially tours were met with frustration since the software and mode of display was unfamiliar to them. Although many factors are at play, it does indicate that viewers, over time and through exposure, acquired the skills and disposition to approach virtual gallery spaces with an enhanced capacity for enquiry and in-depth reflective engagement.

And then, of course, it should be noted that the viewers who scan, click, record, and play – who fully engage with the virtual component of artworks – are generally of a younger generation. They are far less hesitant to "touch the artworks" (the devices installed in the gallery that facilitate engagement with online artworks) and we cannot fail to mention the obligatory selfie that solidifies their experience.

Returning to *Core Dump*, I would like to emphasise the film's aesthetics and production processes. The "makeshift" aesthetic embraced by Knoetze and the Lo-Def Film Factory

Crew emphasises the transmission of ideas and experience above high production value (Knoetze n.d.:1). While watching the films, one is continually struck by how "easy" it would be to replicate. Anyone with access to a camera phone, some props, and basic film editing software would in theory be able to create something similar. The Lo-Def Film Factory's work is purposefully demonstrative and they attempt to incentivise their audiences and various collaborators to tell their own stories and make art outside of institutional structures.

In *Core Dump,* Knoetze's cyborg inhabits the streets of a desolate and, in many instances, underdeveloped Dakar. It is of note that Knoetze foregrounds this version of Dakar, which is otherwise known for its influential and affluent art scene. In the introductory essay of the exhibition, *Post African Futures* by Tegan Bristow (2017:6), she mentions that digital and communications technology are used in the most interesting ways in heterotopic spaces such us informal settlements. The reason is that these are some of the most culturally diverse locations in each city, housing not only regional migrants but also immigrants and refugees from across the continent. Since "culture" is negotiated in these spaces, more boundaries are being crossed between language and habits, and it is a location where survival and innovation are being tested daily. Bristow (2017:6) mentions that the most defined criticism of the globalised information economy evolves from these spaces, but does not expand on exactly how in the essay, leaving it to the included artwork to do so.

In Knoetze's work we see something of this navigation in "underdeveloped" spaces between survival, innovation, and play that technologies are an intricate part of. Knoetze's engagement with the human and environmental challenges in the face of technological advancement "suggests that the crucial technologies involved in moving towards a more just and equitable world are less physical than they are social" (Knoetze n.d.:1). *Core Dump* emerges from the dystopian landfills of consumer culture as an imaginary space for a new, inclusive humanism that underscores relationality and interhuman narratives (Knoetze n.d.:1).

There is something to take away from this for the South African art scene. If it wants to engage new technologies as reflective tools and not just as a superficial addition of yet more digital images, it might do well to consider which technologies are already used as a bodily extension to innovate and survive and in which ways. To consider how these technologies are deeply social, how virtual spaces can become more "populated" and less prescriptive, it should perhaps consider how it could allow for a roguishness that puts more opportunity for participation in the hands of users so that something new and unexpected could evolve from interaction with artworks on these platforms.

In *At the Edge of Vision,* Van de Vall (2008:166) concludes that the same technologies that tend to diffuse our sense of time, space, and embodiment may be employed in practices that reflect on that diffusion and exemplify new ways of configuring a sense of physical and moral gravity. To Van de Vall (2008: 166), it is clear that it is precisely because we are so enmeshed in the virtual domain that defies our accustomed beacons for interpretation and judgement that we might need new kinds of tools – aesthetic "forms" rather than concepts – to guide us in the absence of signposts or maps.

The case study of the *Interface* exhibition suggests that present-day spectators, audiences, and users have taken up a "hybrid" approach to virtual technologies and cultivated the necessary disposition towards these technologies to access them as reflective tools. The professed dualism that separates the virtual from the physical, that fuels fantasies of a new utopian world as well as fears of a disconnection from "the real" alike, seem to be receding. Rather, there seem to be imaginative relations to technologies that function as seemingly natural extensions of the body. There is desire for experiences where the virtual imaginatively elongates what is accessible, or "sharable", in any given moment, but is still very much located and contextualised firmly in the material world. Virtual technologies understood as an imaginative "extension" of experience, cognition, and awareness also means that we are extending the vast socio-political and

environmental challenges of our age into the virtual realm and not leaving it or our bodies behind.

Virtual platforms for showcasing art, like the online *Interface* exhibition, could similarly be understood as a "digital extension" that could enhance and extend spectators' capacity to engage with the virtual world in a self-reflective and critically engaged manner. In this addition of experiential layers, the smartphone represents a highly accessible, affordable technology that places engagement, dissemination, and participation in the *hands* of users.

To conclude: in *Core Dump,* we encounter an augmented figure that straddles the physical and virtual, and an engagement that doesn't recede from the real world into utopian idealism. Importantly, and despite being critical of technological advancement, *Core Dump* (2018) revels in the act of storytelling and the digital domain's capacity to proliferate without restriction or credentials. The production techniques we encounter are subversive, since they undermine standards of presentability that are set by gatekeepers in the service of art galleries. Knoetze purposefully makes use of "low" technologies to produce work *because* it would be so easy to imitate and easy to teach oneself. The South African art scene would do well to note and respond to the rogue inclinations of a younger generation of 4IR users that has the technological means *in their hands* to insert and create for themselves, and so set the terms of their own engagement.

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