

# FASHIONABLE ADDICTION

The Impact of Digital Identity through the Cult of the Body (an African Perspective with particular reference to the Democratic Republic of Congo)



MAURICE MBIKAYI



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**M**y MFA project consists of sculpture installations, videos and images that, together with the written text, comment on the impact of information technology on society. I refer to my own experience and developments in fashion and access to information technology (IT) in my home country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), with a focus on Kinshasa. I also explore aspects of the consumerist nature of IT in Africa more broadly and how this generates trends relating to 'FOMO', an internet slang acronym for the Fear Of Missing Out. My primary reason for connecting African fashion with contemporary computer technology is because both concern Western products being utilised in Africa in the context of self-determination.

The African continent is a source of mining wealth, for example coltan (short for columbite-tantalite),<sup>1</sup> a mineral widely used in technology. The DRC is one of the major coltan-producing countries, and yet it is technologically underdeveloped or limited itself because of an oppressive capitalism. However, some of these minerals return to Africa in the form of products and create new consumers, desires and services in emerging contemporary technology contexts. In the process of upgrading to higher levels of technology, the developed world often uses Africa as a dumping zone for electronic waste (e-waste), with no regard for the environmental and human impact.

I draw an analogy between the consumption of IT and African fashion, and specifically with my own country's culture of dressing-up, which has developed into a kind of doctrine (the 'cult of the cloth' or 'cult of elegance') and an expression of resistance. The analogy is linked to the desire to stay up to date with IT, which can lead to addiction.

My research comprises personal and general aspects: my personal experience with the internet as a contemporary instrument for communication (and a 'gateway drug'), which looks mainly at my physical migration from the technologically underdeveloped DRC into South Africa and its more developed technologies; and, of course, a general visual perspective of IT, to which viewers can hopefully relate.

For the practical component of the study I have used discarded computer parts that I have collected, deconstructed and recontextualised into sculptures. Some of my sculptures are also used as costumes for public or recorded performances, making reference to sartorial fashion and forms of performance in Africa, while others are abstract.

<sup>1</sup> The Congo possesses 64 percent of the world's coltan. When coltan is refined it becomes a heat resistant powder that can hold a high electric charge. The properties of refined coltan are a vital element in creating devices that store energy or capacitors, which are used in a vast array of small electronic devices, especially in mobile phones, laptop computers, pagers, and other electronic devices' (Friends of the Congo [F.C], n.d.).

The practical work submitted for this degree, constructed mainly from computer keyboards and cables, and various materials as substrates such as remote controls, wood, clothes and shoes. In addition to sculptured objects, videos and photographs featuring them and my body are integral to the project.

### **Video Performance and Photography**

I have considered concepts of self-determination and representation within the context of performance, and the relationship between embodiment and space. To paraphrase Anthony Elliott (2001: 99), the body remains an integral aspect of the (inner) self and personal identity within consumer culture and its key marker of distinction, it is the site of intensified self-management, self-regulation and self-mastery, even in virtual environments. The purpose of portraying my body in a specific space is to convey to the audience my experience as a migrant in both physical and virtual spaces.

My performances are constructed for site-specific and public environments. Regarding the former, a suitable environment would be e-waste based, whether it is an electronic recycling site or an e-waste dump, through which I hope to engage the viewer with the chaotic world of waste, revealing modern technological advancement as the source of this waste, and its potential as an environmental hazard when not cautiously managed and recycled. For instance, Ecycle Electronic Recycling, situated in Paarl, was used both as a source of material and a location for recorded performances.

Within this project, my body acts as a 'prosthetic memory' or 'prosthetic identity', symbolically representing my inner experiences with, and anxieties about, the virtual world as well as e-waste, and the implications for human beings involved in mining and dumping in Africa. Using photography as an additional medium can extend ways of positioning and narrating myself in a space, and also evoke aspects of the narcissism associated with what I have called 'fashionable addiction'.

### Web Jacket

The *Web Jacket* is representative of a digitally enslaved body who has moved to the internet – a kind of ‘permanency’ in the virtual world, while still offline. It is inspired by a straitjacket. I relate to it as a schizophrenic personality that I inevitably experience daily within a virtual world. Like many people, I am anxious not to miss out on news, updates and fashions, and so feel the need to ‘permanently’ stay online through a cell phone, which qualifies me as a web addict!

The video work is an indoor performance in which I present myself wearing a straitjacket made of computer keys, cables, belts and used clothes. The costume is comprised of three parts, including a long-sleeved shirt that ties my arms behind my back, a pair of shorts and a hat in the form of a helmet with cables hanging down as hair. There is also a pile of white computer keys on the floor, which I intend to step on while performing. Black sheets are used in the background and on the floor, to create an interesting contrast with the white computer keys. It is a nine-minute video performance in which I constantly jump, dance and shake the garment, screaming while trying to get out of it. These activities produce a sound reminiscent of Nick Cave’s costumes. The second part of the video is in slow motion, and is accompanied by ‘M’bula’, a composition by the well-known Congolese musician Lokua Kanza,<sup>2</sup> which adds to the effect of the screaming.

<sup>2</sup> The music is used with the artist’s permission.





**Web Jacket, 2015**

Computer parts, clothes and belts

215 x 55 x 65 cm





**Techno Dandy, 2015**

Video, colour, sound

12 minutes

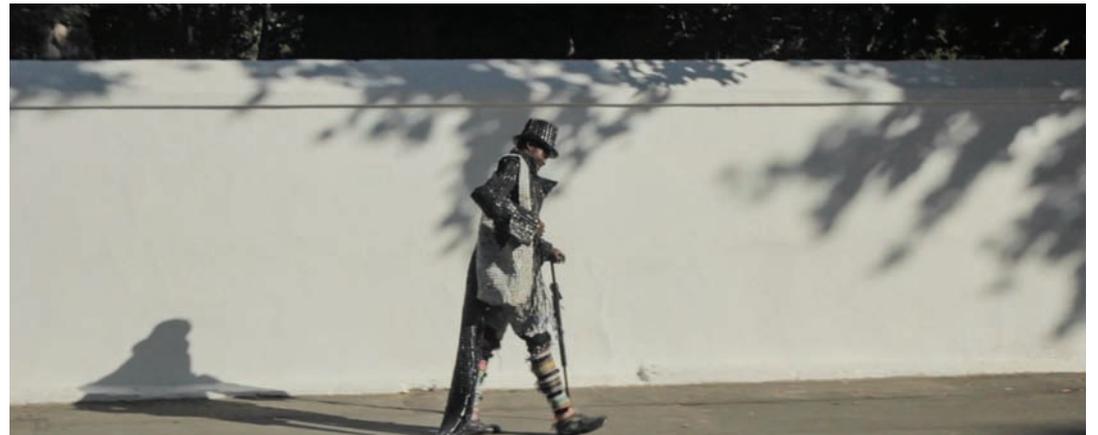
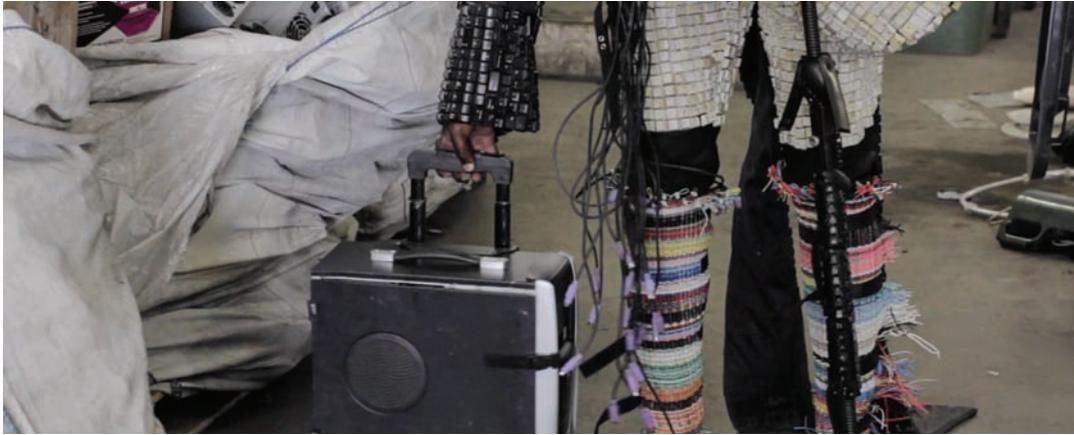
**Techno Dandy: A Suit of Disagreement**

My *Techno Dandy* can be seen as a warrior, inspired by nineteenth-century French and English redingotes and medieval armour. This redingote is covered with black computer keys and forms a second skin on a tailored black cloth. Its elbows have separate covers made from knee guards that I also worked on with computer keys. These allow me to bend my arms easily while moving and give the costume the impression of armour. It has an accompanying top hat that is also studded with keys, and a modified walking stick. Inside the redingote is an additional cover or 'shirt' made with computer cables hanging to the knees, which is inspired by medieval chainmail. The shoes are comical and worn with socks woven from coloured cables. The shoes and socks are also intended to complement the subversive nature of the garment, which forms an allegory of a body in auto-recovery from diverse technological injuries.

The *Techno Dandy* is a person who dons the outfit for a parade and therefore performs several characters. He embodies hope for the future, where access to technology is more widespread in Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular.

My performances in Cape Town (as a start) will also highlight imposed systems, and my adaptation to them. Aligning myself with the strutting Sapeurs of the DRC, I observe and am observed, I participate and, through sartorial performances, emphasize my own self-determinacy. Cape Town has many politically, historically and socio-economically loaded spaces, so where I choose to perform is vital to the meaning of the work. By constructing my own paths through the city, or following well-known pedestrian routes, I will have the opportunity to practise further autonomy and identity reinvention (De Certeau 1984).





**Techno Dandy, 2015**

Computer parts, fibreglass, clothes and shoes

Dimensions variable



**Self-Portrait 3, 2015**

C-print  
56 x 81 cm

**Self-Portrait 4, 2015**

C-print  
56 x 81 cm

**Self-Portrait 5, 2015**

C-print  
56 x 81 cm

**Self-Portrait 6, 2015**

C-print  
56 x 81 cm

**Digital Bags, 2015**

Computer keys and cloth  
Dimensions variable  
Installation detail

**Digital Bags**

I produced twenty bags by gluing computer keys onto black, handmade cotton bags, after having borrowed the design from the 'tourist bags' commonly seen around Cape Town markets. I titled them *Digital Bags*. All identical in their material and form, the bags are given flexibility by their smaller computer keys, allowing them to be manipulated. They also provide additional meanings by distorting expectations of their familiar usage. When displayed, they infer mobility and displacement – my displacement as a migrant. The intention behind them is one of permanent movement, reminiscent of my impermanency as a foreign citizen between two homes – between two spaces – and of the 'netizen' who moves between being online and offline.





**Fractals, 2015**

Computer cables, wood  
Dimensions variable

**Fractals**

There is a sense of incompleteness in these woven works. Each is residual<sup>3</sup> in nature (because of the obsolescence of the material); the texture of the canvas of cables has unravelled extremities. The canvasses are presented as fabrics producing fibres – imagined, potential fabrics for costumes – in one row comprising seven canvasses. These decrease from 50 cm square to 12.5 cm square. *Fractals* represent the infinity of an elusive virtual world. They also carry the residue of a functional purpose on the surface, and the history of information that once passed through them.



<sup>3</sup> From recycling operations, the result of a programmed obsolescence.



**Untitled 1, 2015**

Computer cables and wood  
120 x 60 cm

**Untitled 1 and 2**

*Untitled 1* and *2* are similar in meaning to the previous cable installation. The former is presented in fractal formation of mostly black cables, whereas these are mostly white cables, displayed singularly and different in size. Like the *Fractals* installation piece, the presence of stretchers in these two works gives them the additional meaning of a loom. Symbolically, we are enmeshed in a world of the internet, and this virtual world is continually redefining our identity.



**Untitled 2, 2015**

Computer cables and wood  
120 x 60 cm



**Techno Addict**, 2015

Computer keys, clothes, shoes  
Dimensions variable

**Addict**

*Techno Addict* falls into the same category of intention as *Techno Dandy*: self-determinacy through sartorial strategy representing digital identity. I used a jacket and shoes, to which I added black, white and grey computer keys. I decided not to use a mannequin or other props, which might have rendered the work a mere fashion statement, and not ambiguous enough. This is one of the cases in which I drew on Yinka Shonibare's work. As he does, I would say that my work situates itself in the context of contradictions; what you see isn't what you get, but rather a subversion that tricks and challenges the mind (Miller, 2009: 266, 268).





**Googling my Dreams, 2015**

Computer parts, game controllers, hats, wooden and plastic sticks  
Dimensions variable

**Googling my Dreams**

This work is an installation of hats and walking sticks, embellishments and accoutrements of style. I have attached computer parts to readymade hats and wooden and plastic sticks. All are lined up against a wall. The idea is to portray self-invention in a virtual world; how the latter provides me with a space to reinvent myself, in parallel with the cosmopolitan yet divided society I currently live in. I therefore perceive the internet as a heterotopic space that provides alternative answers to my questions concerning language, nationhood, race and origin.



**Techno Trash Bin, 2015**

Computer keys, found bag, fibreglass and clothes  
114 x 97 x 70 cm

**Techno Trash Bin**

I reinforced a large, woven industrial plastic bag, used for transporting substances including waste and rubble, with primer, fibreglass and resin to give it a final shape. I then covered the inside with black cloth and the outside with computer keys. The woven bag has been repurposed. The empty black view inside symbolizes chaos – this project represents Africa as an e-waste dumping zone for the developed world. At the centre of my project is a material that I work with daily, but is toxic. While trying to protect myself from the multiple hazards of e-waste, I sympathise with people, especially the youth across Africa (and the world), who are buying and manipulating it unprotected and unaware of the grave risks it poses to them, as well as to animals and the environment.

According to environmentalists, the toxic materials found in computer equipment and other e-waste, including lead, cadmium, chromium, mercury, and barium, affect the brain and the kidneys. The older the computer, the higher the level of toxic elements (Farid, 2012).



**Narcisurfing Netizenship, 2015**

Computer keys, cables, fibreglass and wood  
145 x 110 x 100 cm

**Narcisurfing Netizenship**

In this work, I am looking at the power that the screen holds over visual aesthetic judgment. It is quite common today to see people projected on society via media imagery. Aesthetic values are reviewed according to the influence given to the screen (Turkle, 1995: 45). With regard to this, I would say that we all have been programmed by images in the media in the digital age. The power of modern media has somehow granted us a corrupted eye, remapping and reshaping in our brains a stereotypical sense of beauty, a fashion-conscious way of living and perceiving the rest of the world.

The top part of the sculpture is presented with cables spreading from it, whether onto a wall or the floor. Its dimensions vary according to the space. Parts of the legs and stand are covered with keys. And I inserted a camera's zoom lens as a penis that can be adjusted to different sizes.







**E-Munkishi, 2015**

Computer parts, fibreglass, resin, clothes and found objects  
681 x 200 x 115 cm

**E-Munkishi**

This work is a large cloak made with fabric, resin, fibreglass and computer parts. The interior is hollow. The left 'hand' holds a sceptre while the right is filled with cables hanging down to the floor.

*Munkishi* is a Luba term which means a spirit (with the prefix *Ba-* for many spirits), either good or bad, at the service of diviners called *Bilumbu*.<sup>4</sup> As *Bilumbu* perform rituals, so the use of the internet is a daily ritual for many people. Hence *E-Munkishi* represents the power of the internet over people's lives, which is both good and bad.

<sup>4</sup> They are the equivalent of South African sangomas. The root of the word *nkishi* (or *nkisi*) is shared with many other Bantu-speaking peoples across Africa, and is associated with objects and related practices that have potent transformative power. *Bankishi* are particular spirits thought to have specialized abilities such as identifying, tracking and trapping thieves and other evil-doers; retrieving lost articles; curing sterility; revealing prophecy through dreams; and assuring general well-being. According to the Luba, figures are powerless until charged with magical substances (Roberts and Roberts, 2007: 45-49, 50).





Ecycle Electronic Recycling, 2015. Paarl, Western Cape.

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