

Turning a Little into a lot: Africa's maker culture

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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The maker culture's on the rise. Different from the manufacturing process where replicas are churned out, it signals a return to the basics and designing and making with a strong sense of personalisation. Here's how elements are popping up in video...

The latest maker toys, from PixelStick to projection mapping and animated LED bike wheels to hacked Xbox Kinect imagery have been worked into Fly On The Wall director Bryan Little's 'The World Needs More of You' Adforce spot for Vigo, Namibia Breweries' non-alcoholic malt drink.

It's intriguing as it's quite futuristic, yet everything in the ad is already available. It also marks one of PixelStick's first uses in video.

The ad spot was co-produced with Cyclone Films and With Milk on Panasonic E-series lenses, while the soundtrack featured a collaboration between Tumi, Nonku Phiri, Simphiwe Tshabalala from The Brother Moves On, and sound designer Simon Kohler or Sylvan Aztok. It all comes together in a uniquely African way. The ad's embedded below to give you an idea:

See? Fascinating. I chatted to Little about how this is a celebration of urban Africa's emerging maker culture...

■ 1. Explain the rise of the maker culture.

Little: Basically the maker culture is about a DIY approach to technology and culture production. A maker will take apart a 1990's Nintendo and re-wire it to make beats to use in an electro track. A maker might connect 200 LEDs on a rod, controlled with a self-coded Arduino chip to make a PixelStick that can be used in photography to 'light paint' images magically in the air.

It is a similar sensibility to punk rock 'Xerox zines', more nerdy, but somehow ultra-cool. It's the realm of hackers, coders and makers.

These people are the real key holders I think, and if they don't hold the key they will make one - or hack and redesign the world so you don't need a key. It is open source, inclusive and exciting. The maker culture is where the real relationships and boundaries are explored between people and technology.

■ 2. Does African maker culture differ from the global movement?

Little: I'm not sure it does. Obviously there are bright centres of maker culture in Europe and the States, but in general I think the maker culture doesn't suffer from boundaries. The African predisposition to ultra-resourcefulness and innovation is a perfect fit with the maker ideology.



Credit: Suicide Monkey

There are makers in SA. Paul Mesarcik and his team are making the '[Lumkani](#),' which is essentially a networked heat detector that will help detect and curb the devastating effects of shack fires in high density, low income, informal settlements.

Another great local maker collective is [Thingking](#).

■ 3. Tell us more about your work with Vigo.

Little: The agency called me six months before the shoot to connect with the maker team Hirsch & Mann to help conceptualise a campaign that would be relevant and exciting to Southern Africa.

We came up with the idea of a giant machine that could sample people's biometrics, like their heart beat, brain waves, and muscle movements, and use that data to live power DIY instruments in the 'cloud' and essentially create a music track from everyone who is plugged into the system.

The idea was to make a music track from the bodies of the people in the different cities, creating a soundtrack that would be the 'pulse' of each city - excuse the pun. It was a very ambitious project and one I was stoked to be so integrally a part of.

■ 4. *How were the toys incorporated into the non-alcoholic malt drink ad?*

Little: Once we knew what we would be building and the experience we wanted to create for the public, it was then my job to create a 'trailer' that would tease people into wanting to know more about the installation.

I dived into one of my favourite worlds - the makers - and explored all the visual elements that I could use.

For example, LED technology has exploded into pop culture and I wanted that aesthetic to be a big part of the commercial. We wrapped dancers in programmed LEDs, we had animated LED bicycle spokes, everything glowed to the ethereal, vibrant, visual twang of the little programmable light sources. We hacked Sony Xbox Kinect cameras, filming with them live and projecting into the studio space as a live visual element as the team was building. This hacked imagery has a super futuristic feel and fit perfect with the concept. I essentially wanted to create a near future saturation of this maker culture in an African context.

■ 5. *PixelStick's already popular in photography, explain how you used it for one of its first uses in video.*

Little: The PixelStick is a genius invention. I have been looking at playing with one for ages. Conceived and created by the Brooklyn-based maker team [Bitbanger Labs](#), it has become hugely popular in stills photography. What I wanted to do was to use the stick to create animated imagery i.e. imagery that moves in the frame. After a lot of research, I couldn't find any examples of this, other than sequences of a static image to create 'video.' I called on the tech gurus at [Lucan Visuals](#) and I think we tried something never done before. Even the Bitbanger guys got excited about it and asked to see our results. We ended up with an epic little sequence of a lion charging across a downtown Jozi rooftop.

■ 6. *The music plays in so well. How did that come about?*

Little: The music was created from recordings of the 'cloud.' The instruments were a strange collection of strings suspended in Perspex boxes, ping pong balls dropping on tangkis, and PVC pipes played by robot armatures. Simon Kohler, my go-to sound guru, created the beat from recordings of the instruments and we were super lucky to get a personal hero, Tumi Molekane, to write some verse for us, and to feature the vocals of the ultra-talented and beautiful Nonku Phiri.

We're sure to see more of this type of innovation and collaboration in future as the maker trend gathers momentum.

[Click here](#) to read more about [Fly on the Wall](#) filmmaker Bryan Little and the Endemic Project, his first experiment in a new way of filmmaking, and [here](#) to view his reel.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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