



Game Changers | *Samson Kambalu and his idea of play in art and life*

Being Game Changers today is quite challenging: the world we live in is very competitive and to make a difference we are asked to be creative, curious and inspiring; all whilst standing out from the crowd. Amongst the incredible group of Game Changers reunited to take part at TEDxROME's session, Malawian artist and writer Samson Kambalu has been invited to represent the visual arts sector.

Kambalu's work ranges across various media from drawings to paintings and from installations to videos. Using both literature and performance he playfully employs excess, transgression, humour and wit to test the boundaries of received ideas regarding history, art, identity, religion and individual freedom.



The Goalkeeper, 2000

Internationally renowned, his work has been displayed all around the world, including Tokyo's International Art Festival in 2009, Liverpool's Biennial in 2004 and 2016, Dakar's Biennale in 2014 and Venice's Biennale in 2015 and will soon be displayed at 2016's Dakar Biennale, 2016's Liverpool Biennale, Art Basel and Frieze

When interviewing Samson Kambalu here in London, we tried to understand what it takes to be a Game Changer in the Contemporary Art World, analysing how he uses his art as a tool to make a difference in present and future societies.

GRIOT: You have been invited to TEDxRome to represent all those artists who are Game Changers in our society. To what extent do you think the visual Contemporary arts can change the way people feel and perceive the world, leading individuals to a better future?

Samson Kambalu: By reminding people what the gift is. I see this as the role of Contemporary Art. Getting people to think what it means to give and what the gift is. To talk about the gift is to look at art properly, beyond commodity, beyond art as investment, beyond art as fashion.

Art comes from the gift economy. Nowadays everything is commercialised. When you do something now, you have to explain what you are doing in terms of its practicality. Art is one area where it's not very clear what you get out of it; it's almost intangible. What you get from art can't be calculated and it makes it a special profession because most professions now are utilitarian. Therefore art is a single place in contemporary society where its significance lies elsewhere.

The Guardian newspaper described you as "one of the artists to colour the future". One of the objects associated to your practice is the Holy Ball - a soccer ball plastered with pages ripped from the Bible. Through this work you say you invite people to "exercise and exorcise" by kicking this object. What kind of reactions have you gained from this work? In what way is it making a change in the contemporary Art world?

I grew up in Malawi and religion is still significant there. Usually Europeans don't want to listen or hear about religion because they think that the European society has moved on from religion, that it's a secondary society, making it very hard to get Europeans to be interested in it.

I guess Holy Ball is liked by both religious people and non-religious people. If I stood in the street with a bible, no one would talk to me, but whenever I have a ball in my hands everybody wants to talk to me.

So I have been able to talk about some very important issues using the ball.



Holy Ball Exercises and Exorcism - Artsadmin, London, 2010

The ball has acted as a common mediator between the past and the present. You'd be surprised how some people read the pages glued on the ball, some people kick it, some think it shouldn't be done, some people think it's good. Everybody has an opinion.

The Holy Ball is open to interpretation: everybody brings his or her own story to it and that art's point for me. Art is about creating relations, connecting people who otherwise wouldn't be connected. The Holy Ball makes the world fresh. It looks at religion with the future in mind.

Your work is inspired by Malawi, a country where you have a tradition called Nyau that incorporates sophisticated reverse role-playing, proverbs, mimicking and satire in performances, portraying a playful approach to life. When describing your work you talk about "creative play". Is this approach to art and life what sets you apart from the rest of the individuals and artists?

You may ask "why play?" Malawi is not a commodity society. It's still a gift society. Societies in Africa, in fact, operate on the gift.

For instance, if I make money, it all goes to my relatives to share, because it's a sharing economy; but the problem with sharing is that it brings resentment.

When you give somebody something then they feel obliged to give it back. So giving and taking is not necessarily easy. Chewa, my tribe in Malawi, has play. When you are playing, it's like when you are partying: you can drink all the drinks without feeling guilty.

The Chewa has play to orchestrate the distribution of the gift, and masks orchestrate the play. When the masks come out the party begins: people dance and share without thinking.



I think for me this is the role of the Contemporary Artist. The Contemporary Artist can now orchestrate gift-giving in play. I feel that as a Contemporary artist I am playing the role of an African mask to orchestrate play, to create relations, to connect people, to make the world a better place.

You have written an autobiographical book awarded Winner of the National Book Tokens 'Global Reads' Prize titled *The Jive Talker*. In this book you introduce us to Malawi, but also to a little boy obsessed with Michael Jackson, Nietzsche and Frida Kahlo. Do you think that to be successful in the future you must study and look up to the leaders of the past? Could you please describe how the individuals mentioned above have influenced your work?

They say that technology turned the world into a photograph. So technology has made the world small: you can't hide now. We all imagine ourselves as a contingency of history, as part of history, and we have to study what's gone before to learn from it. You can no longer look at the world as a kind of loco. I think for me success everywhere is looking at the world as a cosmopolitan.

Whether you are Italian or African or American I think now to function we have to look at the world as one: it makes you more versatile. If you look at the bigger picture it's easier for you to adjust to things. The same as an artist: you have to be aware of what's happening, where things are coming from and what technology is bringing to you. You have to learn and play with history. I don't think there is a way of avoiding that.

Is it true that when you were eleven you founded your own religion, Holyballism? What exactly is Holyballism? What's the importance of this religion in your life and art? What's the role it played in your career?

I grew up with Christianity and Nyau religion. The Chewa find religion in play. In Christianity the sense of play has been lost. But if you look at the primitive Christianity, it all begins in play. If you look at the catacombs in Rome, what the Christians were doing at the beginning was so playful, and Christ says "...the greatest among you should become like the youngest..." [Bible, Luk 22:26].

When I started to reevaluate my Christian upbringing it was a question of reintroducing play in religion, hence turning my bible into a volleyball. Finding religion in play is to embrace a thing that reunites the African religion to the Western one. I was brought up with the two. So when I started playing, I was no longer divided: I could go to Africa, to Rome, and feel at home. Play is universal and play in religion for me is the truth in religion.



Bride and Groom (the artist) with Holly Ball, 2001

In an interview for the Venice Biennale you said that the future for you is “creativity, play, cosmopolitanism, the world as one. United in play”. As an Artist born and raised in Africa, do you feel that you and your art are helping your continent and home country? If yes, how?

I mentally work in Africa all the time. I always talk about Nyau, the importance of play and gift-giving. That’s what I do: I talk about my work and talk about Africa.

I am proud to be Chewa, to be truly African, but not a cliché or what people expect. For me Africa is a very dynamic and modern place built around play, and to build a society around play means we create our meanings from nothing.

This is the African way of doing things. Africa is a place of improvisation and this is what I’m bringing in my work, taking Malawi everywhere with me. The Africans always look at the world as one. In Africa there’s universality; divisions are colonial histories.

Also, by bringing in this philosophy I connect people through my work, and that’s a very African thing to do. I bring African time that has no beginning or end: it’s a nonlinear time: focused in the present; it’s more a sake. I try to enjoy the present moment as much as possible. I try to make people aware of the here and now. So this is another way Africa is with me: my hunt for the instant, for the moment.



Holy Ball ‘Excercises and Exorcism’ – Chancellor College, Zomba, Malawi, 2000

One thing that stroke me about your path is that you have a BA in Fine Art and Ethnomusicology at the University of Malawi; a MA in Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University and a PhD at Chelsea College of Art and Design. What do you think is the role of education for artists' success?

In Africa initiation into adulthood is about getting to know your society top to bottom. For me education serves that. But education can also be a good bohemian.

So don't think that I'm just in school to learn, I'm there because I love to read. For me reading and studying is a lifestyle; it's the origin of education. It's how the Greeks and the romans thought about education, as a lifestyle. Studying wasn't about getting a promotion; it was about virtues. Education can be fun.

What is your next step as a Game Changer?

I told you about my shows coming up, but for me publishing my PhD thesis on Nyau Philosophy would make me very proud. Nyau Philosophy explains how the gift animates, various aspects of African society and my art. It talks about the gift and not the commodity. If you know what the gift is you'll be able to understand the thinking and the merits of African Society. I want to introduce the world to Nyau philosophy.

By Aloisia Leopardi. Published on March 31, 2016.