

# Mousse Magazine

CONVERSATIONS

## Brushing History against the Grain: Samson Kambalu and Vincent Meessen



The exhibition *History Without A Past*, currently on view at Mu.ZEE, Ostend, features recent work by Samson Kambalu and Vincent Meessen. Of all the currents of ideas revealed by 1968, the Situationist International (1957–72) is probably the most enduring. Situationism was conceived by its adherents led by Guy Debord as a response to the failures of both the Marxists and the artistic avant-gardes, from Dada to the Lettrists. Since its self-dissolution in 1972, it has nurtured several generations of activists, intellectuals, and artists who have drawn on its texts to radically criticize what makes modernity in our societies: subversion in art, from Dada to Happenings; the conceptions of the city inherited from Le Corbusier; consumerism of material

# Mousse Magazine

goods and leisure; the system of media representation. In this conversation, the artists give detailed accounts of the narratives and constellations operative in their work, sharing radical perspectives on the historical and contemporary ramifications of the SI toward Africa and the West. Meessen and Kambalu expand on art and cinema as a socialized and politicized praxis, laying the ground for internationalist forms and alliances in the present.

KARIMA BOUDOU: Known as a group of artists, writers, and social critics, the Situationist International was formally constituted as SI at a conference in Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy, in July 1957. Early on, their claim was to eradicate capitalism through the revolutionization of everyday life. When and in what circumstances did you first encounter the trajectory of SI? What impression did their writings and ideas have on you, as much on the personal plane as on the theoretical and political ones?

SAMSON KAMBALU: I have been in art school all my life, one way or another, so Situationism—which extended from Dada and Surrealism as a form of socialized and politicized art—was always around, as part of my Western education. It didn't mean much to me then, as I was busy painting and trying to play guitar. One day in 2000 while taking a break in my studio in Zomba, Malawi, I heard something like a voice, a calling: to make *Holy Ball*, a football plastered with pages of the Bible. I did that work by cutting up my Bible carefully and using PVA glues to plaster its pages onto a smooth plastic football. When the ball dried, it gleamed in my hand. This is when I quit painting at once to become a “conceptual artist.” I took the ball to the marketplace and had a kick about with bemused hawkers and vendors. Then I took the ball to a schoolyard, where I had an oblivious kick with some Sunday school kids. I finished the day at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College, where I was an associate, and had more kicking of the ball, “exercising and exorcising,” with my students there. Some thought *Holy Ball* was blasphemous; others loved the new ritual and my personal take on scripture and religion. It was the birth of a specific philosophy of life that I called “Holyballism.” It brought me much closer to my art audience than painting ever did. Months later, I was on an artist residency in Amsterdam, at the Thami Mnyele Foundation. It was around then that I realized I had been a Situationist all along. As an African, it was very natural

# Mousse Magazine

switching from a mimetic practice to a socialized and politicized praxis. To me, Situationism is closest to my experience of art in Malawi, extending all the way to its traditional conception in the villages.

VINCENT MEESEN: I first read Guy Debord (1931–1994) in the early 1990s and then became interested in the Belgian members of the SI, but also in the internationalist aspect through my own collective and activist practice with undocumented people coming from all over the world. In 2008 I exhibited the photographs of the Situationist Congress, which took place in Antwerp in 1962, the moment when artists were expelled. Since then, I have been interested in this anti-art turning point insofar as it has an obvious historical significance, but also more generally in the kind of belief and affect that can be invested in a tactical practice at the borders of politics and poetics. What remains fascinating in retrospect is the mixture between the prescience of certain key issues and the ways of manifesting them and of opposing political and artistic doxas with a radical and unbridled imagination.

KB: This first encounter leads me to expand with you on a second one. I am referring to the year 2015 and the city of Venice in Italy: a context and a temporality that already contained the premises of your exhibition *History Without A Past* at Mu.ZEE. Could you look back on this moment in the contexts of the Belgian Pavilion as well as Okwui Enwezor's exhibition *All the World's Futures*?

VM: A lot of people remember *Personne et les autres*, the collective Belgian Pavilion, for the quality of the works displayed and the dialogues established between them. This was also the first Biennale directed by an African-born curator, which gave some specific resonance to our transcontinental proposal. The city of Venice played a great role in the Situationist imagination, and therefore I thought that raising the questions of the disappearance of internationalism, which had shaped the artistic avant-garde since Dada and put it in relation to the renegotiation of colonial modernity, could be a very relevant challenge.

SK: When I first met Okwui Enwezor in New York, I was doing a fellowship at Yale looking at psychogeography in the work of William Blake. It was at Yale that I stumbled on the archive of the Italian Situationist Gianfranco Sanguinetti, which had been sold to the university under controversial circumstances. When Okwui invited me to Venice, I included a proposal to take Sanguinetti's archive, which I had photographed in full, back to Italy. There I shared it with the public in the Situationist spirit of the potlatch. Sanguinetti sued us, but he lost the case as his archive encouraged free copyright. I came across the work of Vincent Meessen at the Belgian Pavilion then and realized we crossed paths through Situationism—him toward Africa and me toward the West. *History Without A Past* is an inevitable pairing.

# Mousse Magazine

KB: At Mu.ZEE, you expand and formalize this pairing while sharing similar ideas and, at the same time, very different trajectories. This duo exhibition marks a friendship and a collaboration, first implicitly and then formally. You make it clear that you expect us to walk through an itinerary that we have to take through the cracks, folds, and fissures of (art) history. How do you, as artists and filmmakers, decenter the attention from the usual Debordian and Parisian bedrocks of SI? I am referring to the way your practices are deeply rooted in research in several private and public archives, including the Gianfranco Sanguinetti papers at Yale University; the archive of Raoul Vaneigem in Belgium; Patrick Straram's archive in Montreal; or the private archive of the Blondin Diop family in Dakar, to name a few. How do you combine this with the method of *détournement* by taking preexisting materials and mixing them together to highlight the underlying ideology of the original ones—but, most crucially, to focus on less visible figures of history?

VM: My proposals do not aim to restore something that would have been lost, but to critically reactivate certain facts, forms, and elements that allow us to continue to think about art in political terms. And this implies historical and critical knowledge. The construction of the present is done from the past and its materials. This past is not fixed and inert, it is alive and moving. It is in motion, as Walter Benjamin understood well. Questions remain unanswered. There are several subversive qualities of practices that give voice to memories and subjectivities that have been overlooked. They allow voices that question the authority of facts and reopen possibilities to blocked or hindered situations. How then do this history and our own current (hi)story resonate with each other?

SK: My political position living in Europe was to stay true to the event of *Holy Ball*—whatever had happened there, I would follow it through. It was my moment of “Paul on the road to Damascus.” I read a lot of philosophy—Nietzsche was a favorite—and inevitably I started writing. It was a period of reflection and reevaluation of my postcolonial African upbringing by way of Nyau and Continental philosophy. I spent those early years in the United Kingdom as a writer and performance artist. I rarely showed my work in the art world, and I wanted to create my own audience. When my first book, the autobiographical novel *The Jive Talker*, was published in 2008 and translated into German, I spent years on a reading tour around Europe. I took my *Holy Ball* with me. This is when I discovered that film was also at work in my socialized approach to art—it was actually central, more central than the *Holy Ball*—and I started making “Nyau” films, which I distributed on Facebook. At that time, I revisited a lot of New Wave cinema. I remember the surrealism of encountering Omar Blondin Diop in Jean-Luc Godard's film *La Chinoise* (1967) then.

That Situationism was never really an art movement could be true. Like Surrealism, it stood outside art history in its insistence on art beyond capital and the mimetic paradigm. This means you can find ready Situationism anywhere around the world—not just

# Mousse Magazine

Guy Debord and company in Paris. The Situationists wanted art as infrastructure rather than mere superstructure as it is conceived in the West. Art as infrastructure is what is normal in Malawi. In my opinion, to be a Malawian is to be well versed in Situationism. We have a subversive masking tradition and philosophy of excess called Nyau in Malawi stretching back to ancient times—its relationship to society bears all the marks of Situationism. It is not surprising that the Situationists looked to other cultures around the world for an alternative conception of art. Ready models could be found out there if one was looking.

KB: Omar Blondin Diop (1946–1973) and John Chilembwe (1870–1915) are two figures who enter into a dialogue in the exhibition. I am thinking here of Vincent's last film and modular display *Quelle que soit la longueur de la nuit... le soleil finit toujours par se lever* (2020), which brings to light Omar's trajectory as influenced by the SI between Nanterre and Dakar, and Samson's installation *Chilembwe Hat Room* (2020), echoing Chilembwe—an important figure in the history of rebellion in your country Malawi. Who were Omar Blondin Diop and John Chilembwe? How do you retrace through a dense and meticulous work full of ellipses the lives, ideas, and trajectories of these figures who forged themselves on the hope of decolonization? And how do you shed new light on the issues of this period? Can you reveal a glimpse of the social, historical, and political conditions of Dakar and Malawi in those respective times, and how this feeds into your work?

SK: I see in John Chilembwe a prototype of a modern Malawian Situationist. He is actually named after Kasiya Maliro, a principal Chewa masquerade structure which disguises [itself] as an antelope—*chilembwe* in Chichewa. His approach to colonial resistance was performative. After training as a Baptist preacher in America at the end of the nineteenth century and passing through London, he came back to Malawi, then Nyasaland, as a “dandy.” Fashion and prodigious industry is where he identified a place for Africans to re-create their identity for modern times. As a preacher, he baptized anybody who came to him, unlike colonial missionaries who excluded many. Chilembwe was for a radical generosity and equality of all people. His approach to life was inspired by Nyau animatic philosophy and radical democracy. He was opposed by the colonials for his approach and was killed in 1915 by colonial police. Chilembwe left a series of arresting photographs that have inspired fidelity to his egalitarian cause. These photographs are no less powerful than a good mask inspiring people to self-respect and radical political action. Chilembwe's performative political activism has inspired my own approach to conceptual art, photography, and filmmaking.

VM: When Omar Blondin Diop died in a prison cell in Gorée (Senegal) in 1973, he was a brilliant young philosophy student who had played himself in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*, an ex-May '68 militant from Nanterre University who had been connected with the Parisian avant-garde. Before jail, he managed to open new paths to some enlightened souls in Dakar, including the then eighteen-year-old Issa Samb, one of the future founders of the Laboratoire Agit'Art in 1974. As I speak to you today, more than

# Mousse Magazine

forty-five years after his death disguised as a suicide, the Blondin Diop family is still demanding the reopening of the investigation. There is a justice that has not been made through law and therefore an injustice that remains. My new film is an attempt to get out of this culture of amnesia, to break the circle of repetition. It moves toward an alternative version and offers a counternarrative. The fruit of this investigation brings out a complex figure, a character whose body is resurrected by Jean-Luc Godard's cinema but also by the memories of his brothers and friends. And there, through editing, I try to find a correctness, *une justesse* as we say in French, while testing the capacity of a movie to actualize Godard's *La Chinoise*. This very ambitious task requires both play—the acting of nonactors, young people playing themselves—and the seriousness of witnesses who have directly suffered this injustice.

KB: By contrast with Guy Debord, who was “serious” but affable, always “theorizing,” the work and terms of Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) with his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*<sup>2</sup> (1938) provide important references and a productive ground within your project at Mu.ZEE. How do you achieve the possibility of “only playing” with “extreme seriousness” through multiple points and movements within the exhibition? I am thinking specifically of Samson's work *Game of War* (2015), as well as Vincent's *Travaux pratiques (à la chinoise)* (2018).

SK: It's never “only playing.” Playing here is a form of gift-giving—we continue the Situationist obsession with the creative potlatch—art as a form of radical generosity. Play is one way art becomes infrastructure within everyday life rather than remaining in the mimetic superstructure paradigm and subject to capital. Play allows us to exchange ideas on a deeper level. Play cancels out obligations and “pettiness” in mere exchange, and this is most probably the reason Huizinga finds play at the heart of real culture, and why the Situationists employed play as strategy to keep reification at bay. The kind of playing we are doing here is what Nyau culture would describe as *gule wamkulu*, “the great play.” It's a form of play on a universal scale.

VM: The work you mentioned, *Travaux pratiques*, is made of tangrams. With this Chinese game, we experience the border between abstraction and figuration. We have abstract forms that we put together like pieces of a free puzzle; we build, and that draws possibly thousands of basic figures. One could call it... assemblage or... montage, which is both a technique and a method.

But instead of a game, I would rather see the exhibition approached as play. It is made up of an improvised dialogue between our artworks and all these overlaps, sometimes unexpected, suggesting that we are concerted when, in fact, we are not really. I think that what predominates in the exhibition, much more than the game, even if it is not highlighted as such, is the question of

# Mousse Magazine

sovereignty outside the nation-state. Sovereignty still and is always complicated by the links with the colonizers of yesterday or of today, the difficult pan-African sovereignty, or even, in Samson's case, the sovereignty of the artist-king who makes flags for all of us who are still prisoners of the national identities of the nineteenth century. Opening the exhibition on Brexit day will for sure remain in our memory for long.

KB: You identify, in the line of the Situationist International, the medium of film as an effective means of *détournement*. Samson, how do you unfold this in the exhibition through Nyau cinema and Nyau culture focusing on the gift? Vincent, in your film *Quelle que soit la longueur de la nuit (...)*, one of the protagonists says these words with incredible accuracy: "Questions are very important, they clarify things." To what extent could that statement be the role of cinema as you stand for it? I am saying this in relation to struggling peoples who seek elements in history to consolidate their own position. This reminds me of a particular passage in your film, Vincent, with the Y'en a marre collective: a group of Senegalese musicians and rappers fighting for the emancipation of youth and the underclass. You bring in rapper and activist Malal Tall a.k.a. Fou Malade; in that sense, how does music become a tool for protest of Senegalese youth in your film?

VM: Like in Burkina, the rappers in Senegal were central in the civil revolution. But I think music is much more central in *One.Two.Three* (2015), the filmic, musical and performative work which I did in Congo with Joseph Mbelolo, a former Congolese student of Raoul Vaneigem, who took part in different Situationist activities in the mid-1960s. Let's not forget, history is only an abstraction that is superimposed on the action of bodies, the men and women who make history. The Situ will always reconcile us with the idea that an active minority can impact the course of history and make legible and sensitive the main issues to transform a world captured by a few according to methods that have remained those of colonial capitalism. The long version of the film will show that the Situ had a significant impact on the Dakar avant-garde thanks to Omar Blondin Diop and some of his brothers and thanks to Omar's close friendship with Issa Samb, one of the founders of the Laboratoire Agit'Art. This moving collective has forged a syncretic practice at the frontiers of art, performance, philosophy, urban intervention, and sometimes even animist curative practices that call for a cult of alliance and foundation with ancestral spirits. The rapper and militant nicknamed Fou Malade, which means "sick madman," takes his pseudonym from a poem written by a wandering poet who was a patient of the Fann ethnopsychiatric clinic before becoming a member of the Laboratoire Agit'Art. The poet Thierno Seydou Sall, who recently exhibited at the Berlin HKW, plays himself in my film. This new film organizes the transmission in the present of a veiled and neglected history. I hope it can help rebuild decisive links between the struggles of different generations in Senegal—and, if

# Mousse Magazine

need be, serve as an attempt to recover a confiscated capacity in the West to develop practices that “make society” by enlisting all together animated and unanimated beings.

SK: Film was as ubiquitous as masks growing up. Film and studio photography had taken the place of masks in creating situations in post-Chilembwe Malawi. We went to Catholic Church halls, one of them St. Pius in Blantyre, to see fancy projectionists who would mix these film strips, reels, and posted fancy posters on trees. Western films would be chopped up live for a nonlinear presentation that captures “African time” better. It was a lively affair filled with levity. A James Bond film could turn into a Bruce Lee one in the next frame. The audience participated in comments and chants. They smoked and shared food and drink. I think this was a modern-day Gule Wamkulu event, a form of gift-giving orchestrated by play affected by “masks,” in this case the anonymous movie star. We called it Nyau cinema. It created a creative, active, and generous audience akin to that of early film and which the Situationists tried to recreate with these unconventional film presentations. A real playing person is a generous person. When I started making my films in Europe, I kept them socialized. They were nonlinear, filmed by strangers, and site-specific, and I shared them on Facebook first. That is where they were discovered as works of art. From there, Okwui Enwezor invited me to Venice.

KB: In a communiqué from the Situationist International dated December 9, 1970, concerning Raoul Vaneigem, Guy Debord claims that “[...] the professional historians only follow [history].” In her book *Surrealism: Inside the Magnetic Fields / Penelope Rosemont*<sup>3</sup> (2019), Penelope Rosemont—a writer and painter, who co-organized a Surrealist group in the United States with Franklin Rosemont—recalls her encounters with Guy Debord, Alice Becker-Ho, and Mustapha Khayati in Paris in the mid-1960s. She develops an analogy between Surrealism and Situationism as an encounter between King Kong and Godzilla. If we were to leave behind Debordian history lessons as well as monsters from American popular culture, to what extent does *History Without A Past* try to overcome the paradox of a museum presentation that addresses the issue of missed and unfinished revolutions?

VM: The metaphor of the great apes seems to designate a form of fight of primitive giants. For me, this comparison speaks perhaps more of the gigantic force of these imaginaries of refusal and revolt against a rational, warlike, and destructive colonial modernity. Debord’s take on historians could be read as a critique of evolution, opposing the continuum of history, its reassuring order inherited from natural science. By historicizing or museifying the Situationists only through past artefacts, one disembodies them a little more.



ce as a heteronomous practice enjoying a temporary zone of autonomy: the museum or the art center, as long as it is not a market antechamber, mausoleum, or crypt—a space of denial, to use another heavy and dark metaphor.

A mask is also known as *chirombo*, “a beast.” It alludes to the universal self in us that is revealed at play, by the gift-giving self. It might as well create as it destroys sometimes. If not in play, the beast will find (not always nice) a way to get back home. The dissolution of Situationism for strategy was actually suggested by Guy Debord, realizing that in late capitalism, all had been reified and made spectacle, but through tactical maneuvering, as he suggests in his *A Game of War*, situations could be created and the gift could be given still. Museums remain one of the public spaces where real exchange can happen even after their reification. We speak of art and museums for want of better words. They are just part of a game in the larger scheme of things. What is most important is that a situation is created and a gift is

*Without A Past* reveals between the lines Jean-Luc Godard’s thoughts on the “imagined and material” museum. A museum allows you to bring your works closely together and confront them, to bring them out of the museum through various tactics to make them live and breathe. What importance do you give to the value of the encounter in your works—do you compare and juxtapose each other endlessly?

The gift-giving is always the world in front of you. My encounter with Vincent’s work is an assurance that the gift will always come. It’s a cause for optimism for a more generous, creative, and diverse world.

The encounter is always central since it is always what sets me in motion. I think reciprocity is also key to this exhibition: one traveling in the West to recapture something from the original Situ spirit in dialogue with a European traveling to Africa to recapture the sense of the Situationist influence in Congo or Senegal... there isn’t a need to possess or to claim something but [a]nticipating a memory for the future. We try to create co-presence, to make sense today in our despairing context. Out of reciprocity comes a positivity that definitively lies in the common.

# Mousse Magazine

[1] Samson Kambalu, *The Jive Talker* (New York: Free Press, 2008).

[2] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

[3] Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealism: Inside the Magnetic Fields / Penelope Rosemont* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2019), 165.

Samson Kambalu (b. 1975) is an artist and a writer working in a variety of media, including site-specific installation, video, performance, and literature. His work is autobiographical and approaches art as an arena for critical thought and sovereign activities. Born in Malawi, Kambalu creates work that fuses aspects of the Nyau gift-giving culture of the Chewa; the anti-reification theories of the Situationist movement; and the Protestant tradition of inquiry, criticism, and dissent. His first book, an autobiographical novel of his childhood upbringing in Africa, *The Jive Talker*,<sup>1</sup> was published by Jonathan Cape in 2008 and toured Europe for four years. He has been featured in major exhibitions and projects worldwide, including the Dakar Biennale (2014, 2016); Tokyo International Art Festival (2009); and the Liverpool Biennial (2004, 2016). He was included in *All the World's Futures*, Venice Biennale 2015, curated by Okwui Enwezor. Kambalu studied at the University of Malawi (BA, fine art and ethnomusicology); Nottingham Trent University (MA, fine art), and Chelsea College of Art and Design (PhD, fine art). Kambalu has won research fellowships with Yale University and the Smithsonian Institution, and he has recently been appointed associate professor of fine art at Ruskin School of Art and a fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford University.

Vincent Meessen (b. 1971) lives and works in Brussels. His artistic work maintains a polemical and sensible relation to the writing of history and the Westernization of imaginaries. He decenters and multiplies gazes and perspectives to explore the variety of ways in which colonial modernity has impacted the fabric of contemporary subjectivities. He is a member of Jubilee, a platform for artistic research and production. With *Personne et les autres*, a collective exhibition at the Belgian Pavilion of the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), Meessen represented Belgium with ten invited artists from four continents. Recent other biennale participations include ... *and other such stories*, Chicago Architecture Biennial (2019); *Généalogies futures, récits depuis l'équateur*, Biennale de Lubumbashi (2019); *Fracas et frêles bruits*, Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse (2018); *Proregress*, Shanghai Biennale (2018–19); and *Gestures and Archives of the Present, Genealogies of the Future*, Taipei Biennale (2016). His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions most recently at the Power Plant, Toronto (2019); Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal (2018); Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris (2018); and WIELS, Brussels (2016). An evolving duo show with the late Congolese painter Thela Tendu has toured to BOZAR, Brussels (2017); Kunsthalle Basel (2014); and KIOSK, Ghent (2013).

Karima Boudou (b. 1987) is an art historian and a curator. Trained in art history (Montpellier, Rennes) and philosophy (Nanterre), she participated in the Curatorial Training Programme at De Appel, Amsterdam, in 2012–13. In the past eight years, she has organized research projects, exhibitions, conferences, and publications in Europe and Morocco. Her work intersects theoretically and practically with postcolonial theory and the reactualization of archives and decentered histories of modern and contemporary art, considering strategically the politics of vision and visibility in art history. In 2017 she was a Research Fellow at MAC VAL Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, where she conducted research in the archive of Raoul-Jean Moulin. Her most recent work, reactivated from Morocco, is invested in new research lines on the life and oeuvre of African American Surrealist Ted Joans. This three-day public forum drew points and lines between private American and Dutch archives by reactualizing the legacies of artists and writers of African descent in the international Surrealist movement. Boudou has lectured about the writers Jean Genet and Mohamed Leftah and the artists Glenn Ligon, Danh Vo, Dave McKenzie, and

# Mousse Magazine

David Hammons. She has written for exhibition catalogues (Mu.ZEE, Ostend, Belgium; Le Cube, Rabat, Morocco) and magazines (*Mousse, Ibraaz, rekt:verso*).