

Scholar and Slacker

The Malawi-born, Oxford-based artist discusses Nyau films, the luxury of time, thinking as a form of gift-giving and how Situationism is the most African art in the West.

Samson Kambalu interviewed by David Barrett

(6) *Your writings are good but not nearly as good as yours.*

[illegible]

(b) Despite this mixed record, you act – you expect to act – like you are a genius. You are not.

Capsules, Mountains & Forts, 2016, installation detail

David Barrett: We're sitting in the State Room at Magdalen College in Oxford, where you are now an associate professor and fellow in fine art. The room connects the dons' Senior Common Room with the college president's lodgings and is filled with historical paintings and artefacts. It feels like a bubble, a room outside time.

Samson Kambalu: There is something political about the sense of time in Oxford that I like. I'm practising a politics of time as a luxury that I inherited growing up in Malawi.

Time itself is a luxury?

In the West, time is money, it's 'let's go to work'. In Malawi there is lots of time, luxurious time. This sense of time is also found in Europe around historical monuments, parks or palaces, where you see beggars and vagabonds and migrants, people with lots of time on their hands.

Is this what inspired 'Postcards from the Last Century', your show at Peer?

Yes, because it seemed that places picturesque enough to be postcards are also places where people like me hang out. There is a grand statue, and underneath there are these hustlers and idlers. But postcards exclude these people, so I thought I would include them.

That sense of unhurried time enables you to make your films and interventions.

Definitely. You walk the city on a *dérive* and see these characters. You see that guy crossing the road, so you go there and you ask a stranger to film you. What I did this time was set up a camera in front of the monuments and just hung out and things happened. I wanted a static camera so that the image would be like a postcard.

Some of the films are shot around Martin Heidegger's cottage in the Black Forest.

My studio here in Magdalen is Dylan Thomas's former cottage. I haven't confronted Dylan Thomas head on yet, but I thought, 'I know another cottage', and that's Heidegger's, so I went there to see if it would give me a perspective on this one.

You have a long-standing interest in German romanticism, particularly the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, and in Germany you also made films around Bayreuth, the home of Wagnerian opera.

For me as an African, German idealism is an entry point to western culture because it says that at the heart of the soul is something mysterious - a kind of madness. It is not the rational man of the Enlightenment, but rather a dark night of the soul that is, in my opinion,



Pushing a Wheelbarrow Through History, 2018, video

very African. The tribal mask doesn't hide, it reveals the poetic inner core at the soul of the human being. So I have always been drawn to German philosophy.

The idea of the gift also springs from my interest in African conscience, a gift which translates as time. People think the gift is the object, but actually the gift is time, luxurious time – time outside of necessity. And Heidegger has interesting things to say about the gift, like the way he sees real thinking as a form of gift-giving. Thinking is usually associated with logic, but Heidegger would say that logic is a denial, a negation of thinking. In the West, you are terrified of where that thinking might take you, so you start creating closed models, but real thinking is a form of dandyism, like taking a stroll.

This is thinking as an action – not thinking so you can build products and profit or whatever – but thinking as a poetic exercise. The equivalent of walking round a monument or around the city. I went to Heidegger's cottage just to hang out. I saw the family of Heidegger and they showed me around.

You have a couple of wall texts at Peer describing films you made there. One reads: 'In Todtnauberg, Heidegger's great granddaughter looks at the visitor, then sticks her finger into a crevice in her great grandfather's picnic table. The finger fits perfectly.'

We were making films around the house and, eventually, the granddaughter put her finger in the side of the table then called us to have a look. It was a very small gesture, simply inserting her little finger in the crevice, but I think she had finally understood what was happening. This was the Nyau moment, a small gesture revealing a changed perception.

The other synopsis describes an impossible scene: 'In Todtnauberg, a visitor walks up a footpath leading to Heidegger's Hut. Without opening it, he walks right through the door like a ghost, and comes out through the side wall.'

My films are animations, they are cut to make these simple visual effects. The film is severed because those cuts include moments of history. One of those moments could be war, and in the exhibition I included African soldiers from the First and Second World Wars.

There is a connection between African dandies and the Wars. When soldiers from the King's African Rifles – the British African contingent – returned from war, they brought with them fancy clothes from Paris and Asia. They would dress up and hang around, and I grew up with these characters. They would dress up in fancy suits, inside mud huts and surrounded by dust, and there was something political about that because Africa was associated with the world of work, but here were Africans wearing suits and just hanging about with a non-linear sense of time. I don't usually make these historical references explicit in my work. To date they have been represented by the cut animating the films, but I have been very generous with this show!

The figures in the semi-transparent images on the windows at Peer are not African soldiers.

The guy in the window is Harry Johnston. He was in Africa on several expeditions as an artist – having studied at the Royal Academy – and after surviving a lot of these treks they made him a consul in order to pacify the last remaining chiefs and form the British Central Africa Protectorate in 1889, renamed

Nyasaland in 1907 and eventually Malawi when it achieved independence in 1964. This is a posed picture with a captured African prisoner and a contingent of Sikh soldiers. Harry used to import Sikh soldiers from India – my great grandfather was Indian.

The man with the bare torso and his hands behind his is back, is he an African prisoner?

Yes, held captive by the Sikh soldiers. And alongside is this little white guy, that's Harry. He got his knight-hood after pacifying Malawi. The photograph shows that the British Empire was put together by the rabble – vagabonds, adventurers, explorers, artists.

You gave the work an art-historical title, *Ecce Homo*.

Yes, Harry the artist stages this painterly composition. He takes the local and presents him as Christ, with himself as a Roman general on the side. I was researching Harry's history – I thought Malawi had a mild form of colonialism, but that is a fantasy. The truth is that by the 20th century, by the time this photograph was taken, Africa had been dismantled. But what I'm trying to say is that an African spirit still survived. It's not like Africans are forever seeing themselves as victims – life went on.

The cardboard cut-out figures inside the gallery, are they returning soldiers? Where are they from?

They are sourced from the same archive, the Weston Library here in Oxford. I thought that if they were on the floor they would be sunk in as if guarding the floor, as if the ground you are standing on is unstable. You could be walking on water.

Why cardboard cut-outs?

A lot of the African soldiers were cannon fodder. The French, especially, were notorious for putting these soldiers on the front line – they were cheap, you could order them. So, cardboard. In Malawi we have respect for the thing that falls away, the remainder, the leftover. This is what is used to make masks, the material itself is not something you should treasure. This definition of art, where art is what falls to the ground, I like this ambivalence. And in New Orleans now they make cardboard cut-outs of people who have died and they march through the streets with them.

The postcards in the Peer show are stills from your films, but they are laid out in postcard racks and look a little like Eadweard Muybridge's early stop-motion experiments.

Yes, and again Muybridge was touched by a non-linear sense of time from the native Indians that he hung out with across the Americas. If you scrutinise Muybridge moving west, there is a lot of this repetitious sense of time. Photography usually takes the masterpiece and

throws away everything else, but I'm interested in what's left out. I think a more inclusive world is more interesting.

Is that why the flag works in the show seem quite political?

The flags turn something symbolic into something temporal.

They're banners, like you might find on a march – you can carry them about.

Literally mobile, yes, but they are also aesthetically mobile. The compositions are very transitional, unlike flags, which represent a static national identity. I make them by crashing together different flags on my phone as I am vagabonding about the city. If I'm not making my films, I will sit down somewhere and make some flags.

You think you're being a vagabond but in fact you're busy generating content, being productive.

I am being productive. This is what Africans have always done. You have time as an artist, what do you do? You make abstractions. The patterns are not dissimilar to African tribal markings, like Kuba textiles.

The titles are pointedly anti-nationalist: *The Country Drowning in Unhealthy Nationalism* or *The Country as a Failed Idea*.

I started making them in this transitional period of Brexit. I'm a cosmopolitan. I believe in people, I'm not too sure about countries. I think there should be a thousand countries every day. I like the idea that every moment is a country of its own.

Another thing I inherited in Africa was Christianity, and we didn't go to Christianity blindly – we liked this idea of universalism. The idea of the universal is in the Nyau, the native Malawian animistic belief system. We see Christ as a Nyau figure, a mask figure. What does Christ do? He resurrects. That's a Nyau movement – he dies, resurrection.

Very non-linear.

Exactly, and this Nyau movement alludes to a certain immanence. A life beyond life, the eternal life. The death drive in psychoanalysis, if you like, a life that goes on after temporal life is done. Christ is like a sacred zombie, a Nyau Christ. There is no difference in seeing a mask dance or seeing a Nyau movement or Christ dying and rising, it's the same.

You have previously talked about the mask dance as being related to the gift economy, the idea that there is no obligation because the masked figure is outside of society.

I am not interested in the gift as an object. The gift is time. People come into the show and experience a particular sense of time. When I am making the films I am able to spend time with people without them realising it. 'What are you doing?', they ask. 'I'm going to film you.' And they stop to give me their time.



'Postcards from the Last Century', exterior view at Peer, London

Marcel Mauss observed that the gift creates an obligation to respond with a gift in return, but the mask is an exuberance that gives without debt.

Because you can't repay the mask.

Exactly, because you don't know who it is. When the mask gives, it just gives, it cannot be repaid. You give your wealth to the mask and the wealth is distributed without obligation for reciprocity.

People say we should give gifts in the shows. No, I am not interested in the gift as an object. The gift is time. People come into the show and experience a particular sense of time. When I am making the films I am able to spend time with people without them realising it. 'What are you doing?', they ask. 'I'm going to film you.' And they stop to give me their time. They hold the camera and film for me, then I edit the film and send them the link.

You see the film as a whole social interaction, not just a clip of video.

And the good thing is we are meeting through art. When you introduce art, people are pushed into this playful time where they are prepared to give generously without being aware that they are giving or taking. The mask is central to African societies because it can generate this sense of time and unobligated exchange. When I was growing up, film had taken the place of masks.

In the wall texts at your Whitechapel Gallery show in 2016, 'Introduction to Nyau Cinema', you described the performing projectionists at the Nyau cinema screenings of your youth.

Our projectionists didn't hide in a little booth, they were in the centre of the room. They were travelling projectionists and they would have ribbons of film hanging off their white coats, a magnifier in their hand for scanning through the footage, preparing it, getting ready for the next clip, exactly like a DJ mixing tracks. Shuffling their reels, checking the right one, putting it against the light as the clips were playing. We spent all night at these events. My parents used to think we were in the bedroom but we were not, me and my brother, we were at the cinema. The audience would respond to the footage, shout out, they would develop responses to certain favourite clips. Charlie Chaplin always used to open the show, or Buster Keaton.



Sanguinetti Theses, 2015

You had to have a Charlie Chaplin moment, then you would move to the other action.

So it wasn't about going to see a single narrative movie, shown from start to finish. Nyau cinema was an event, a live mixing of clips.

Right, and there were favourite posters, too, and the posters would not necessarily show what you were going to see in the movie.

They were just to advertise a coming cinema event.

The dispositivity of it was remarkable. I think in my work I am exploring this cinema dispositive, from literature and performance to how film is distributed. The internet has brought a chaos to how we view cinema which is similar to the chaos of the Nyau cinema in Malawi.

I did a lot of my PhD research in internet cafes and I loved to peep at what other people were doing there. Someone would be learning how to fly a plane, someone would be on a Skype call to Kenya, someone else would be learning how to do art. So the internet cafe had an interesting vibe, another kind of cinematic experience. Much of it has gone now, too, because of smartphones. But I like the freedom that has been brought by the internet. I made my career here because of the internet, distributing my films through Facebook.

Reflecting the idea that Nyau cinema is not a static film but an event, your exhibition design is often complex, too. You paint the walls, scatter items on the floor, create viewing booths. Your show at the Whitechapel had a magazine-like layout to it. Do you think about exhibition-making as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*?

Yes, it is the whole cinematic dispositive. In Malawi we saw films in different spaces - markets, church halls - and my 'Nyau Cinema' work is not just about the moving image on the wall, it's everything. It's the fact that the films start their life online. It's the fact that they are shot at specific sites. It's that they are projected at a specific place.

At Peer, I saw the two rooms as two photograms with a dividing line down the middle. So I had to change the colour of the middle to emphasise that you are moving from one room to another. I don't understand why museums and galleries go on with white walls, I don't know what a white wall means in this day and age, other than the convenience of trying to sell your

I always say that Situationism is the most African art I have ever seen in the West. This is because the situationists think art has to be an infrastructure, not a superstructure. In Africa, art is infrastructure. It starts with the economy, with everyday life, and then art manifests. Art doesn't start on canvas and then go into everyday life, it's the other way around.

idea to the lowest common denominator. The white wall is a problem and every artist has to solve it. In this case, I saw the window as a film negative, so we have these stained-glass windows, if you like, a kind of film strip. I liked the ghostly look, the way it connects the two worlds, how the past is projecting into the future, affecting how we do things now with this window. When you look behind you see this history on the window and it seems to be moving everything in the room. I want to create an environment, an immersive show. I am a conceptual artist but I am not satisfied with just ideas. I don't like this notion that you can walk into a show and just live in your head.

I was wondering about the title of the Peer show, 'Postcards from the Last Century'. Is that 'last century' as in 'the previous century' or as in 'the final century', because this might be the last century in which we are around?

I like the double reading. The gift is very much about mortality, too. The masks are known to come from the dead, they are undead. I talked about zombie Christ, that's because the masks are seen not as the dead or the living, but as the undead. Eternal immanence itself, things that go on. With 'Postcards from the Last Century' I am alluding to an inaccessible past. But there is also the rise in nationalism today, this whole toxic atmosphere.

A lot of the films have an obviously fake historical aesthetic. Your ten rules of Nyau cinema insist, for example, that 'the editing must be limited to the aesthetics of primitive film and silent cinema', even though they are videos shot on a digital camera.

I am playing with time. Technology enables you to disrupt time, like the railway did, which changed the way we understood time and space, or now the internet has done. What does the past mean now? A child can go online and learn how to play the blues, or rock or rap. It is all there on one surface. I had another life as a blues musician in a local club, and I learned to play by watching old blues footage of Lightning Hopkins. But the blues is not the past. Am I trying to be in the past? No, but I like this sense that I could have elements of anachronism, the displacement of time, which is an allusion to eternal immanence, sovereign time. In the films I might look like I am in the past but, look around, there are many contemporary elements. Again, it's non-linear – there is no past, there is only the present.

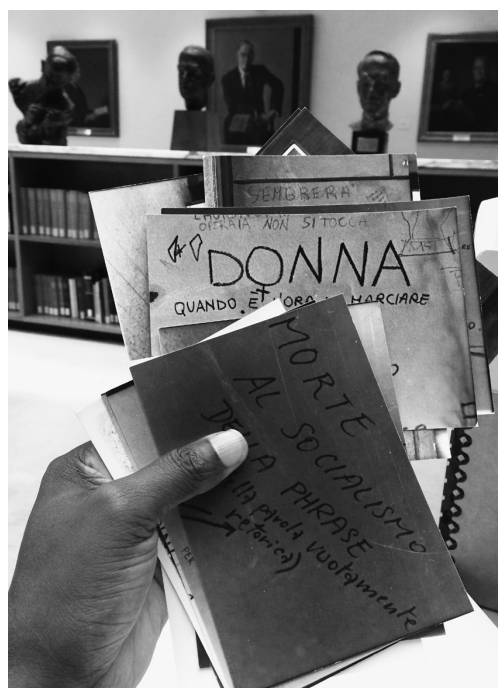
In the video *Pushing a Wheelbarrow Through History* you are at a historical re-enactment when you suddenly pick up a wheelbarrow and wander around this medieval milieu.

With this wheelbarrow – I think I was in Warwick – I thought that this might disrupt history, which is put there usually by the powerful, and by putting the

image in sepia I immediately begin to have a conversation with the imaginaries of the place. Trust me, sepia film is how the West has constructed its historical imaginary. Those clips that we see from the past, the Second World War obsession in this country, they're Nyau films. They're nothing to do with the past. They have a sense of time or mortality, they are transcendence. You may think you are watching a documentary about the past but actually it is a way of transporting yourself into a universal time.

Maybe that is why Instagram is popular. Why do people want to filter themselves? I doubt they want to be in the past, I think they want to rise above the everyday to another sense of time, a luxurious time. That sense of time is subversive because it is outside the world of work. So to practise this non-linear sense of time is to go against what society is expecting of you. It's a place where you find personal sovereignty. And filtering the films allows me to transgress norms. As soon as I have speeded up the motion in my films, already I am having a conversation with the past. I can *détourner* a lot of things from history simply by doing that, by speeding up my walk like Charlie Chaplin.

You used the word *détourner* – the situationists are another influence of yours. Your work for the 2015 Venice Biennale, *Sanguinetti Breakout Area*, examined the sale of Gianfranco Sanguinetti's archive to Yale, a tangled tale of anarchic freedoms becoming ensnared in bitter battles over property rights. Were you surprised that the work provoked the legal reaction that became your 2016 work *Capsules, Mountains and Forts*?



Sanguinetti Breakout Area, 2015, detail

I had a fellowship at Yale in the last year of my PhD at Chelsea, and at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library I came across this Situationist archive the university had just bought, the Sanguinetti archive. I heard that it had been bought under controversial circumstances, so I thought I would just take it back, I would just have it in my possession, all of it – I held each item in my hand and photographed them all over a period of four months.

This became the huge book work, *Sanguinetti Theses*.

When I presented it at Venice we were sued by Sanguinetti, but he lost because the archive is full of advocacy that there should be no copyright. But I am interested in the situationists because they also practised this non-linear sense of time. They used to hang out about town. Some people say the situationists never made art, but when you look at the archive it is full of dandy photographs of them hanging about doing nothing – and that is a lot of work, a lot of art!

I always say that Situationism is the most African art I have ever seen in the West. This is because the situationists think art has to be an infrastructure, not a superstructure. In Africa, art is infrastructure. It starts with the economy, with everyday life, and then art manifests. Art doesn't start on canvas and then go into everyday life, it's the other way around. I grew up amongst art and it was always a praxis. The woman who was painting her house to live in it, not just to display it. The ritual that is being designed, the work of art you put in your pocket, the work of art you plant in your field. The situationists advocated that art should be hung in pubs, not galleries. For me the

most advanced contemporary African art has always been photography because of its social performative elements, the studios that were set up where you could dress up and perform rituals in front of the camera.

What about academic ritual? You seem quite happy in places such as Oxford, Yale, the Smithsonian. These elite academic institutions don't seem to feel the same time pressures as newer universities and instead retain buffering rituals. Even just the term times, for instance, where the academic year in Oxford – three eight-week terms – covers less than half a calendar year. These institutions have a way of making time for themselves.

I don't know how long that will last after Brexit. There is always the American pressure and some politicians seem hell-bent on making Oxford utilitarian. But university was never a place for just finding a job. What I am talking about is at home here. I have never been convinced about modern art and Oxford, but contemporary art is of this place because contemporary art is also very socialised.

It's important to discuss all these aspects because for me the work is a whole praxis, there is no point in discussing just the work in the space. And this is the basis of true scholarship, luxurious time. After all, the real meaning of 'scholar' – its Greek root – is slacker.

David Barrett is deputy editor of *Art Monthly*.

Samson Kambulu's exhibition 'Postcards from the Last Century' continues at Peer, London to 28 March.



'Postcards from the Last Century', installation view at Peer, London