

## Clarifications concerning Samson Kambalu

Though I am hesitant to give Samson Kambalu any publicity whatsoever, because, as a “contemporary artist,” his primary goal is to generate it, I feel I need clarify the nature of the relationship between his *Sanguinetti Breakout Area* (an installation at the 2015 Venice Biennale) and my open letter to Gianfranco Sanguinetti dated 20 December 2013,<sup>1</sup> which is included in it.

My letter, which was primarily motivated by the way Sanguinetti had been treating me (pretending to collaborate on an anthology, while actually using me to conduct a long-awaited counter-attack against Guy Debord, as well as withholding from me the fact that he’d sold his archives to the Beinecke Collection at Yale University), was reproduced as a gigantic wall poster and included in Kambalu’s installation without my knowledge and, obviously, without my permission. That’s Kambalu’s method: stealth. He used it on Sanguinetti and Yale, too: he told neither of them that he was going to use the photographs that, unauthorized, he’d taken while visiting the Beinecke to create an installation at the Venice Biennale; he asked neither one for permission; he simply did it, stealthily. Kambalu obviously felt that he was entitled to act in this fashion. That’s what individual artistic freedom is all about, right?

Upon learning of the contents of Kambalu’s installation through a third-party, that is to say, quite by accident (I might never have found out about it), I addressed an email to Okwui Enwezor, the curator of the exhibition.<sup>2</sup> I asked that the reproduction of my letter be presented in full – various decontextualized photographs had been replaced upon it, thus rendering much of it unreadable – or be removed from the exhibition. I was ignored by both Enwezor and Kambalu,<sup>3</sup> as was Sanguinetti, who also wrote to complain, at around the same time, but for different reasons (he still retained full copyright control over the material in question, while I didn’t). It is not known if Yale University ever made any complaints of its own.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.notbored.org/breaking-bad.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.notbored.org/SamsonKambalu.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Roxana Azimi, “The Italian Writer Sanguinetti lodges a complaint against the Venice Biennale,” *Le Monde*, 19 October 2015, my translation: “But Bill Brown isn’t any happier with appearing in the Venetian installation. On 28 May, Kambalu posted to his Twitter feed an email that the translator had addressed to Okwui Enwezor, the Biennale’s commissioner. He demanded that his missive to Sanguinetti be withdrawn from the exhibition because, according to him, it couldn’t be properly read by the public. ‘I didn’t respond to him,’ Samson Kambalu admits.”

Sanguinetti went on to sue Kambalu and the Venice Biennale for copyright infringement. In answer to this lawsuit, Kambalu finally produced an artist's statement about his installation. It was dated 20 October 2015 and signed by its author one week later. Rather awkwardly titled "Why Situationism? Why Sanguinetti Breakout Area? Nyau," this statement is a single, poorly written, two-and-a-half-page-long paragraph. Among other inanities, it proclaims that the situationists "developed different playful creative devices in which the gift could be given without incurring a debt – detournment, psychogeography and unitary urbanism." In point of fact, *détournement* (note the correct spelling) is a form of *theft*, not gift-giving; psychogeography is the "scientific" mapping of the emotions produced by particular physical spaces and thus has nothing at all to do with gift-giving; and unitary urbanism was the situationists' short-lived attempt to counter the activity and propaganda of the pro-capitalist "urbanists" of the early 1960s. Once again, the connection to "gift-giving" is non-existent.

Another passage in Kambalu's statement demonstrates his inability to actually understand the meanings of the buzzwords he is repeating.

I employed the Situationist detourning technique of the 'graffiti photo' to detourne not only Sanguinetti's papers, through creative play, but also the academic architecture of the Beinecke Library. Sanguinetti's papers were lifted up and photographed. I was not the first one to approach academia as a form of play and gift giving through this act of detournment.

There's no such thing as "the Situationist detourning technique of the 'graffiti photo.'" A phrase that doesn't appear anywhere in situationist literature, "graffiti photo" is something that Kambalu has imported into it. And what does it mean? A photograph of graffiti? If so, then the *détournement* (if any) would be in the graffiti, in the graffiti's relationship to a famous quote or saying, and not in the photograph taken of it. But Kambalu wrote no graffiti; all he did was take unauthorized photographs, something that any asshole with a cell phone can do. These snapshots show Sanguinetti's former possessions held aloft instead of lying upon a table? That's utterly fascinating, I'm sure, but it's not *détournement*, not by a long stretch.

According to Kambalu, "when Okwui Enwezor saw my Nyau Cinema in Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg and invited me to propose work for Venice Biennale 2015, I decided to take Sanguinetti's papers back to Italy." But Kambalu did no such thing, of course. He only took *his camera* to Italy, which was where his unauthorized photographs were printed out. No matter. Once he'd completed

his work and departed from Yale, Kambalu was in a position to turn around and stab it in the back.

“I had remembered how the French government had to intervene to stop Yale from taking Guy Debord’s archive to America – before the University finally succeeded in acquiring Situationist material though one of the last members of Situationists International, Sanguinetti,” he writes, as if Yale were the “bad guy” in this story. It appears that Kambalu doesn’t know or has forgotten that the French government’s “intervention” was an extremely controversial action, one that was far more hypocritical and cynical than Yale’s relatively uncomplicated desire to purchase Debord’s archives, because it involved the declaration of those archives to be a “national treasure.”

Silent during those events, which stretched over the course of four years (2009-2013), Kambalu only recently decided to speak up about them. But what exactly is he against? Is he against Yale’s purchase of Sanguinetti’s archives? No, he’s against Sanguinetti’s decision to sell them in the first place. “Maybe Sanguinetti had needed the money,” he says, perhaps knowing nothing of the man’s personal wealth or, perhaps knowing all about it, he is speaking in a tone that was meant to be cutting and ironic.

In any case, Kambalu was going to step into Guy Debord’s shoes – for wasn’t it always Debord who, when the SI still existed, ruled in cases in which a comrade had erred? – and teach Sanguinetti a lesson for what Kambalu calls his “seeming betrayal of the Situationist movement.” Kambalu writes, “It was a conceptual taking of the archive back to Italy –an extension of the detouring of the archive that I had begun in the Beinecke Library. [...] Taking the archive back to Italy would be my gift to Sanguinetti.” But is saying *fuck you* to someone giving him a gift?

A genuine situationist *détourns* (steals) and gives the booty to the people in the street, to the people who are actively struggling against their oppression. If he were a genuine situationist, Kambalu would have given the booty stolen from Yale to, say, the on-going “No TAV” occupation in Italy’s Susa Valley. But Kambalu is not a situationist; indeed, he would appear to be an *anti-situationist*. For what did he do with the swag he’d pinched from Yale? He delivered it to the Venice Biennale, to the cultural spectacle – in order words, to the very place that the situationists rejected from the outset and all through their existence as members of a revolutionary organization.

How did my letter to Sanguinetti get mixed up in this shit show? According to Kambalu, “I installed the work in the Arsenale using aspects of Guy Debord’s little known board game he invented, after disbanding SI to allow for a more inclusive and strategic approach to subversion and situations - the Game of War - and also incorporated an angry letter of protest of the sale of the archive from

Sanguinetti's translator Bill Brown." Not just Sanguinetti, but Debord and Bill Brown, too. Quite a hodge-podge, huh?

You might think, dear reader, that Kambalu would have approached me as a potential ally. Didn't we both oppose the sale of Sanguinetti's archives to Yale? Yes, we did. But as previously noted, Kambalu treated me just as he treated Yale and Sanguinetti: he didn't say anything about his plans and then refused to answer complaints after those plans had been put into action. And why did he do that? Because as a relatively young, up-and-coming individual who specializes in the production of "contemporary art" – that is to say, as an opportunist who would have been roundly criticized, if not ostracized, by the situationists for his uncritical adherence to an obsolete and demonstrably ineffective form of artist practice – Samson Kambalu doesn't practice the very thing that made the situationists who they were: collective action. Working with others as equals would restrict his artistic freedom, I suppose.

He writes, "*Sanguinetti Breakout Area* is made up of disagreeing parties but within the heat of exchange and betrayals the Situationist gift could be passed on – from Guy Debord to Sanguinetti, from Sanguinetti to Bill Brown, from Bill Brown to Samson Kambalu, from Samson Kambalu to Venice and to the world." This is a field dominated by individuals, not by groups, with Debord (of course) at the head of the line.

According to Kambalu, it was Debord alone who wrapped up "the Situationist gift," not Debord in close association with Constant, Jorn and Bernstein and/or Debord in close association with Vienet, Vaneigem and Khayati. And get this: Debord didn't give "the Situationist gift" to the world but to Sanguinetti and to Sanguinetti alone, as if it were a bag that contained the SI's gold<sup>4</sup> and Sanguinetti was now its guardian. And Gianfranco didn't give the Great Golden Gift to the world, either. He gave it to me and to me alone. And then I, too, despite the fact that my letter was an open one and published on the Internet, I somehow managed to bequeath the Great Gift to a single person, to an opportunist named Samson Kambalu, who, seeking to make a name for himself, at long last bequeathed it "to Venice and to the world." Hallelujah!

And what exactly was given or passed on in this heroic fairytale? Mighty Samson doesn't say. For him, gift-giving is a matter of form alone; the *content*, the thing inside the nicely decorated box, doesn't seem to matter. Thus, if you wrap it up as a really nice-looking present, even "*fuck you*" is a gift.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Touched by enemy hands, the gold of the International turns to coal," originally published in Italian in *Internazionale Situazionista: Journal of the Italian Section of the Situationist International*, #1 July 1969: <http://www.notbored.org/touched.html>.

This skew is what allows Kambalu to say that “the Situationist gift” went “from Sanguinetti to Bill Brown,” when neither *détournement* nor potlatch was a part of my relationship with Gianfranco. Though I never received any money from him (I never asked for any), he sent me nothing “for free,” as “a gift.” He sent me texts to translate and include in an anthology of his writings. However briefly, we were collaborators in a collective project, not the hyper-individualized exchangers of gifts. The vacuity of Kambalu’s conception of “the Situationist gift” (a brightly decorated, empty box) is also what allows him to say that it “passed” from me to him, when, in fact, all he did was copy and paste a text I’d written and posted on-line. And that text wasn’t satiric or parodic, nor was it written using any “Situationist detouring techniques”: it was a simple and straightforward denunciation.

How did I come to know that the Court of Venice had ruled against Sanguinetti? Oddly enough because Samson Kambalu himself told me. On 11 November 2015, the NOT BORED! website received an email that was addressed to me personally. It carried the news of what Kambalu’s blog calls the “victory in Venice.”

Dear Bill Brown

Please see the link to the Judge’s ruling on the Sanguinetti v Biennale - Kambalu case in Venice. A full transcript follows soon.

<http://samsonkambalu.com/2015/11/10/news-33/>

Best regards

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He’s a *devious* little fucker, isn’t he? “Best regards” – who is trying to kid? Of course, he didn’t write to me because we are on “the same side,” the “winning” side, as it turns out. He wrote me to gloat. I tried to answer this provocation without taking the bait. “Why is it that you only contact me now, and not back when you chose to use my letter to Sanguinetti as the justification and support structure for your installation?” I asked him. Not surprisingly, I received no response.

But is Samson Kambalu *really* the victor in this case? Well, let’s open up the box and examine the gift that the Business Division of the Court of Venice has just given the world. In the very awkward words of its ruling,

The whole installation has its creative consistency and is a message of sarcastic criticism clearly coming from Kambalu, thus it cannot be considered a mere counterfeiting or a plagiarism of Sanguinetti’s

works or of part of them, as the presence of the aforesaid creativity constitutes the parody exception, according to the principles stated in the decision of the European Court of Justice n. 201 of 3.9.2014 (C-201/2013), being parody clearly recognized as a constitutional right according to art. 21 and 33 of the Constitution.

That is to say, Kambalu didn't win this case; he certainly didn't "resist capital," strike a blow against "the commodity" or advance the interests of the Malawi gift-based economy, which are the goals set forth at the beginning of his artist's statement. No, this case was launched and lost by Sanguinetti, and he lost it because recent "advances" in the technology of capitalism – in particular, the introduction and widespread use of the Internet – have required subtle but profound changes in the very laws that, perhaps naively, he'd counted on to support him, the very laws that, back in the 1950s and 1960s, were implicitly ridiculed when the situationists included anti-copyright notices in their tracts and journals.

To ensure and facilitate the perpetual creation of monetary value in an era in which "goods in common" and sharing are proliferating, business law no longer gives primacy to ownership (the exclusive ownership of valuable commodities); instead, it gives primacy to distribution (the means by which those commodities are made to circulate). As a result, though the short-term value of individual commodities has been diminished, their long-term profitability has been increased because they can be recycled endlessly, even to the point of parody and beyond.

In this new environment, such once-subversive practices as *détournement*, psychogeography and unitary urbanism need no longer be feared, ignored or neutralized by the spectacle. In fact, the craftiest among the politicians, the advertisers and the salespeople, and even a few "contemporary artists," realized as long ago as the 1980s that the spectacle (and their respective roles within it) could thrive by adopting and promoting those very practices. Of course, the spectacle can't very well thank the situationists for these gifts, and so it mocks them, instead.

The Court of Venice's ruling is a case in point. Sanguinetti's membership in the Situationist International (the SI) was *totally irrelevant* to his lawsuit against Kambalu, which was brought as a private citizen, not as Gianfranco Sanguinetti, ex-member of the SI. The situationists disbanded way back in 1971, which means that, for more than 40 years now, Sanguinetti and all the other ex-situs have been free to act as they please, that is to say, to benefit from all of the rights and privileges that other members of society enjoy, without the fear of sanction from or judgment by anyone or anything other than History. And it was Guy Debord himself who established these simple facts in the 1970s and 1980s, when he copyrighted his books and successfully sued several newspapers that had defamed

him. After Debord's suicide in 1994, his estate used those copyrights to suppress at least two "infringers" (Jean-Francois Martos and Alex Galloway).

And yet here is the Court of Venice, apparently ignorant of these facts, claiming that, "As a whole, using the language of the situationist movement thanks to the use of the *détournement*, of scandal, mockery, [Kambalu] underlined the contradiction between the theorized fight to commodification of the claimant's intellectual work and the sale by Sanguinetti of his works." But this "contradiction" – this alleged "escape of Sanguinetti from his situationist ideal" – they aren't established facts. They are merely contentions made by Kambalu. They are his justifications for his "counter-attack" against Sanguinetti and his supports for the claim that his installation wasn't an instance of blatant copyright infringement, but a parody. Rather than try to ascertain if Sanguinetti's "contradiction" and "escape" are in fact real things – *but how could it do so in the absence of Guy Debord and his SI, both of which are long gone?* – the Court of Venice simply took Kambalu's word for it.<sup>5</sup>

And so, let this be Samson Kambalu's claim to fame: a parody of a parody, he's the first "situationist artist" of the Twenty-First Century to be defended by the State, not attacked by it.

Bill Brown  
19 November 2015

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<sup>5</sup> This certainly wasn't the first time that an Italian judge had taken someone's word about Gianfranco Sanguinetti without bothering to substantiate any of it. Back in the 1970s, despite the fact that the SI had dissolved in 1971, the various parts of the Italian State – the conservative politicians, the political divisions of the federal police and the domestic intelligence agents – found it expedient to pretend that the SI was still in existence and secretly at work "behind the scenes." These lies provided a distraction from, if not a convenient explanation for the fact that subversive activity in Italy hadn't abated since 1971, but had grown and spread. Unfortunately for Gianfranco Sanguinetti, who was falsely portrayed as the "leader" of the situationist movement in Italy, the maintenance of these lies required the police to routinely harass, search and arrest him.