

“The Italian writer Sanguinetti lodges a complaint against the Venice Biennale”

By Roxana Azimi¹

Can an artist freely use the archives of a famous situationist to feed his own work, an installation displayed at the Venice Biennale? Such is the dilemma that the Italian justice system must settle. A former member of the Situationist International, which was a libertarian movement founded in 1957 by the French revolutionary Guy Debord, the Italian writer Gianfranco Sanguinetti has attacked the Venice Biennale. The cause of his complaint? An installation by Samson Kambalu titled *Sanguinetti break out area*,² notably composed of photos that the public is invited to handle.

According to the writer, the artist, originally from Malawi, flouted his copyrights and, without his permission, reproduced the entirety of the archives sold to Yale University’s Beinecke Library in the United States in 2013.³

On 8 May [2015], Sanguinetti sent an email to the Venice Biennale. The staggers of the exhibition informed him that [in their opinion] the use of those documents was towards cultural ends and, consequently, was lawful.

But the theoretician⁴ had a different take: he made a complaint to the Tribunal of Venice on 14 July. “Our legislation certainly doesn’t authorize a third party to photograph the entirety of the archives of an artist for supposedly cultural ends, to copy an incalculable number of photos, sketches and literary works, and still less the right to display reproductions [of these items] in an exhibition, without even notifying the creator, and to invite visitors to photograph and share them on the Internet in their turn,” one can read in the complaint. The writer seeks the dismantling of the installation and a penalty of 20,000 Euros for each day of delay.

Summoned to appear on 4 November, Samson Kambala is dismayed. “My intention in this installation was to make a gift, which is at the heart of the thesis

¹ Published in *Le Monde*, 19 October 2015. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 20 October 2015.

² English in original.

³ Kambalu certainly violated the rules of the Beinecke Collection, which he read and signed. Those rules explicitly forbid the taking and/or reproduction of unauthorized photographs of its materials.

⁴ The author of this fact-deprived piece fails to mention a single one of Sanguinetti’s books, which, of course, include *On Terrorism and the State*, first published in 1979. Nor does she mention any of texts Bill Brown has written or translated. At least one of them is relevant here: his translation of Sanguinetti’s *On Terrorism and the State* (Colossal Books, 2014).

that I'm working on," he confides. "I am quite shocked that Sanguinetti has started a proceeding when situationism rejected all forms of copyright and acted through scandal and détournement."

The bulletin of the Situationist International said it well: "All the texts published in *Internationale situationniste* call be freely reproduced, translated or adapted, even without indication of origin." There's the paradox of Sanguinetti's complaint: after having praised appropriation and satire for years, he is now attacking an artist who practices détournement in the very line of the situationists. . . The sprinkler doesn't like to be watered.⁵

In its defense, the Venice Biennale declared that "exhibition in a public place doesn't figure in the creator's rights to exclusive usage." A judgment handed down by the Tribunal of Milan in 1995 stipulated that satire can be made without the consent of the author of the work parodied.⁶ Another verdict, this time from 2013 and the European Court of Justice, says that parody is protected by the right to free expression and isn't constrained by the rights of the author parodied.

What also bothered Sanguinetti is the fact that Samson Kambalu exposed his contradictions. Rather than give his archives to an institution,⁷ the writer chose to sell them for 650,000 Euros via Christie's⁸ after having denounced the commercialization of art reduced to the status of the commodity. Thus Kambalu reproduced on a wall an insulting letter that the English translator⁹ Bill Brown addressed to the writer in December 2013: "Selling off your rat-eaten papers is certainly not something that a true revolutionary would do, especially if he is already rich enough to own vineyards and collections of art."

But Bill Brown isn't any happier with appearing in the Venetian installation. On 28 May, Kambala posted to his Twitter feed an email that the translator had addressed to Okwui Enwezor, the Biennale's commissioner.¹⁰ He demanded that his missive to Sanguinetti be withdrawn from the exhibition because, according to

⁵ This one-sided editorializing completely ignores the simple facts that the SI disbanded in 1972; that the SI's remarks concerning the contents of its journal cannot be willy-nilly extended to everything Sanguinetti did before and after he was a situationist; that détournement is not "satire," but critique; and that Kambala did *nothing* to "détourne" or even "parody" the texts and images that he stole and reproduced. If any parody or critique was made, it was through his mobilization of Bill Brown's open letter to Sanguinetti, which was published on 20 December 2013: <http://www.notbored.org/breaking-bad.pdf>.

⁶ But this ruling concerned an individual work of art and not *the entirety* of an artist's works.

⁷ This objection was not in fact raised by Kambalu, but by Bill Brown.

⁸ We believe it was Sotheby's.

⁹ Bill Brown is in fact an American.

¹⁰ Sent out and published nearly three weeks before that, on 8 May 2015: <http://www.notbored.org/SamsonKambalu.pdf>.

him, it couldn't be properly read by the public.¹¹ "I didn't respond to him," Samson Kambalu admits.¹² For him, a big part of this commotion has to do with misplaced questions of ego. "My proposition to Venice is in favor of art and freedom of expression," he insists. "The rest is beyond me."

¹¹ Because many parts of it were blocked from view by random photos that Kambalu had placed upon it.

¹² He also failed to contact Brown before he decided to use Brown's letter in his installation.