Installation view, Stevenson, Cape Town, 2014

TIME IS A GIFT

Samson Kambalu in conversation with **Kabelo Malatsie** and **Marc Barben**
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KM What's your take on Africa in terms of the politics of the art world? Is art simply art, or does it matter where it comes from?

SK I think the place where you grew up can influence the way you look at the world, and that is what I'm interested in – staying true to myself, to my experience as an artist, and following my passions and desires from there. The thing is, many people identify with that: it doesn't matter where you come from, if you stay true to a certain experience, people identify that in a work of art. No matter where you are or where you made that work, people are bound to feel that energy. It happens in writing, in music. That is what I'm looking for, and so I have always guarded against art history books or institutions of art that would push me into experiences or a kind of art that is not mine, like I'm supposed to tow somebody else's line. I think for me the most important thing growing up was critical thinking. And if you know what critical thinking is, you can use it anywhere. From an early age my father taught us to have an opinion of the world, so when I started studying art at secondary school it wasn't just a matter of taking everything that was thrown at me. At times I had to stop and say, why should I follow that, do I identify with that? But of course my education as an artist was basic. I had to study painting, drawing, landscapes, portraits, stuff like that. At university I decided that I would become a professional artist and that's when I started questioning and scrutinising art and making choices. Of course most of the schools I went to had a British kind of education …

MB The 'Eton of Africa'.

SK Yes, when I finished at Kamuzu Academy I started experimenting with modern art and looking at my painting differently – my painting before had been traditional – and they [my teachers] were shocked. It was a very traditional grammar school; even Picasso was shocking. I was interested in Picasso's use of masks at the beginning of the century; when I was a painter that is what I was drawn to. And these masks drew me into wanting to find the Africa that Picasso was perhaps trying to capture through the masks, and this took me beyond art into philosophy and anthropology. For instance I realised that the problem of representation has never been a problem in African art because we never had the Renaissance … The art that I grew up seeing in Malawi had no problem, it had a different conception of art. So when I started asking what art speaks to me, I was no longer interested in the question of representation and its long history in Western art. When art moves beyond representation, let's say when Warhol comes in and shows a Brillo box, or when Duchamp questions the nature of art, that's when modern art starts to interest me. You could even say [when it] moves into everyday life. When I started to become more interested in art and life itself, from Dada to Surrealism and eventually the Situationists, this is where I could identify and locate art as I experienced it growing up in Africa.

MB You said that you've been doing research about the Situationists, and that their ideas are more akin to African cultural philosophy than any other Western artists you have encountered. Can you talk more about this?

SK I think Achille Mbembe articulates it very well in *On the Postcolony*, how playful African culture is and how modern even; in a way it's not a static place. The masks, for instance, among the Chewa – it's not about the object, it's more about the way of life that was built around these masks.

MB It's ritual and performance and play …

SK Yes, but the ritual that is dramatised in masks manifests even in everyday life, in initiation … the masks are always present. They inspire a more playful approach to life. Johan Huizinga, a Dutch thinker, wrote a book called *Homo Ludens – Playing Man*, where he traces many aspects of culture from play, including education, politics, law – they originate from play and later on get standardised. And the Situationists adopted that, and not only adopted play but also the economics that come with it, like gift-giving, where a society is built around not the selling of commodities but the distribution of gifts. The problematic of the gift, which preoccupied philosophers like Bataille and influenced the

Snowball, 2015

Situationists, is what I also follow. And once you know what the gift is, you begin to understand many aspects of the nuances of contemporary Africa, the way Africans do things, their concept of time, how they conduct business, relationships …

It is precisely the problem of the gift that made the Chewa choose play as a way of being in the world, and it is also the problem of the gift that was the urgency behind the Situationists' play, because through play the gift can move. You can mitigate some of the problems that come with distributing the gift through play; when you are playing together you can share ideas without realising that you are sharing. Because sometimes people don't easily receive the gift. This is the problem when Nietzsche says, how can I give knowledge to people without inciting petty exchange? Because once a gift is given people feel obliged to return it and sometimes that can lead to pettiness. People like Derrida say that when you give a gift properly, it's not seen. Once a gift is seen as a gift, it's no longer a gift.

It's a long story but this is essentially why a tribe like the Chewa would adopt play as the centre of their conception of culture. At Nyau festivals excess wealth was distributed or destroyed. Chewa masks conducted a form of ongoing potlatch where excess crops or wealth were literally destroyed. So when the Nyau masks came out, they would run through the village and if you had any property outside, or food, it would

be destroyed. There would be all sorts of ways to fine people, and so you would pay. You could say the Nyau mask was like a form of cathedral where excess wealth that was circulating around the village was siphoned off to maintain social equilibrium. The gift is the surplus that's left when the villages have harvested enough for survival; what's left is gifted and it has to be passed on or destroyed. If it's allowed within the system it creates some social imbalance, even catastrophe. These are complex questions but there's a truth, a certain common sense.

KM When we were in Dakar you were speaking about the masks and how you employ them in your films. You don't necessarily wear the masks but there is a performative embodiment of wearing the mask in your dress sense and in the films themselves.

SK Yes. When you look at the photographs of Malick Sidibé these could very well be photographs of my parents. I grew up around flamboyantly dressed people – well, not always flamboyant but there was a consciousness of fashion, of a 'look'. I think generally where I grew up, in Malawi, we like to dress up. You wonder where this comes from, and it's because we inherited a certain conception of time from the villages that still hangs around; it's in Dakar, it's in Johannesburg. In this alternative conception of time, time is literally something to be wasted, not managed or capitalised. It still influences a lot of aspects of contemporary African culture. I didn't grow up in intense consumerism as I am now in London, I think Malawi was different ... That alternative conception of time still influences me because I only left Africa when I was 24 and I still have the tendencies ... my use of speech, time, is very different and I have to work so hard to keep up with this efficient use of time. Unlike London where you turn up on time, you plan things ahead, five years ahead, you know, in Africa once the basic necessities are met the rest of the time was wasted, in a glorious way, through creativity and play. Surplus time would be used in initiations, in Nyau dances ...

KM Yesterday you talked about how the Egyptians used building the pyramids as a way of wasting time; initiation, festivals and all these things fall into the waste of time by giving, I imagine, communities some common place of conversing. Essentially there's a mutuality that happens when you are wasting time.

SK Yes, it's the building of intimacy. The waste of time is itself a form of gift-giving; at its best it creates intimacy. Unlike commodities, which separate people – you go into a shop, you exchange your transaction and that's it – when somebody is given a gift you open up a possibility for intimacy. So this conception of time where the drive is toward a certain intimacy, love, is still there. Once

the traditional culture was taken away either by missionaries or by modernisation, the African still had a sense of time and they embraced that in different ways. For instance you still see a lot of dandies in Africa, in Congo or in the photographs of Malick Sidibé or in Johannesburg; people dressing up, but also just hanging out, going into town to hang out and waste time. It's not entirely irrational, there's some logic to it which perhaps an artist can make conscious.

KM When I think of dandies I think of Oscar Wilde. He and Alexandre Dumas are for me the big dandies of European literature and life. Wilde wrote so much on wasting time and flamboyance and for him I think excess was almost the reason to be alive, rather than the idea of work. When I met you in Dakar that's the person I thought of.

SK It's true. The idea of the dandy was present in a sense in people like Baudelaire or the man who wrote the short story *The Man of the Crowd*, the American gothic writer –

MB Edgar Allan Poe.

SK Yes. There's a man in a crowd, this guy with a strange face, and the writer follows this man, and he spends all his time drifting, he doesn't seem to be heading anywhere, until the writer decides that this man with the strange face, his whole purpose is that he just drifts, there's no other purpose.

MB That sounds like the Situationist International idea of the dérive.

SK That's right. He's this prototype of psycho-geography, of deriving. The dandy is actually a Nyau if you like; the dandy is a remnant of the gift economy that was even in Europe before industrialisation, before the Reformation, so he lingers on as this man with a strange face. You could see this man as a Nyau that's been displaced from the village – he practices gift-giving but in a different way. So the Situationists drifted around the city instead of wearing a mask. One doesn't know what the Situationists, or this man with a strange face, were doing when they were drifting but I imagine in my films if a Nyau was displaced from my village into town, does he become a dandy, if you would like to call him that? We have to be careful, I don't like the interpretation of dandy as it was given by Guinness [in their advertisements starring Congolese sapeurs] where the dandy is associated with men who work hard and then dress up in their leisure time. This is a totally corrupt interpretation.

KM I don't imagine Oscar Wilde worked hard at all.

A Road in the Country Side, 2014

SK The real dandy doesn't do much work; he avoids it if he can. It's only from necessity … To dress up on a Sunday so you can work hard the rest of the week, that's not what we're talking about. The real dandy will survive by other means. His preoccupation is with gift-giving and he will be resourceful, but not necessarily pick up a full-time job. And so people like we artists have to be resourceful; you have to find ways to make a living. I've been studying the private photographs of the Situationists like Sanguinetti and Debord – they are always wearing hats, they dress up and hang about town. [People said] 'The Situationists don't seem to have made a lot of work,' and I said, 'What are you talking about? It's all in the photographs.' Not all dandies look like dandies, you don't have to be over the top.

KM I guess that comes back to the idea of the mask, that you don't necessarily need the mask –

SK To be a mask, exactly. That's it, all I do is to imagine, to document … In my films, it's not just about the end product – you should also imagine me in the process of making the work.

MB The art of everyday life … It's not necessarily you doing social commentary or critique, it's you trying to live the art.

SK That's right, it's the way I cope with living in a city like London, with drifting around the world if you like, through my work. It's how I make sense of living in the world now, a world that's constantly changing, so I insert myself through that world, through that movement.

MB It's almost like there's an incompatibility between where you come from and where you are now. And where you are now everyone has been too close to see the active aspects of their environments and you're performing to make them aware of everyday rituals.

SK Exactly! It's what we do to cope with the environment. In a lot of the videos, the stuff that I do, the activities that I end up doing, are what I would do if I visited any park, and I'm thinking, I jump up and down on a bench, these are aspects that a dandy, a drifter [might perform to] disrupt the utilitarian interpretation of the city. And so for me my walk is for its own sake, it's not that I am going to work; the process is living. A lot of movement in town can be utilitarian, where people are walking to go to shop … Whereas the dandy … you can even bring in aspects of Charlie Chaplin as a guy who is going about just creating drama as a way of wasting the day. It's a very optimistic interpretation of time where there's no need to hurry.

KM The videos are spontaneous – you walk around with your camera and when the ideas spring to mind –

SK I stop a stranger and say, 'Can you film me?', so it's also a way of relating. I do a performance which totally mystifies the stranger and so I am the man with the strange face at that moment. I have the idea in my head but the fact that I can stop and do a totally abstract performance for a stranger who is holding my camera is also part of it. When people watch the videos they should also imagine the way I made it, so they can see the abstract work behind it … So yes, there's the intervention and the interaction with people I otherwise would not speak to. I have made friends like that; I have met people in parks, in museums, on the street. It's a way of creating a situation if you like, spaces of intimacy and sovereign moments.

MB Can you talk a bit about *Holyballism* and your relationship with religion?

SK *Holyballism* is an attempt at a modern-day Nyau religion, what the Chewa call 'Gule Wamkulu', literally 'The Great Play'. But this is a very archaic form of religion. Gule Wamkulu or say Nyau masks often come into conflict with the world of priests and chiefs. The Chewa establishments don't always like Nyau masks because they exist outside common morality, beyond good and evil as Nietzsche would put it, and

are therefore hard to control and regulate. The Gule Wamkulu mask is even older than the concept of religion or God among the Chewa. When I became preoccupied with the concept of the gift, of time, of play, I decided to give this interpretation and treatment to my modern religious heritage, [which is] Christian, because I was brought up by a Presbyterian father and a Catholic mother …

KM Yesterday we were talking about the differences between the Lutheran church and the Catholic, which is a bit more time wasting and excessive.

SK The thing is that in making the *Holy Ball* I have taken something very puritan … The Catholics are not bothered about the Bible in the same way Protestants are. So by turning the Holy Bible into a *Holy Ball* I bring some sort of Catholicism to it but also Nyau. When people gather around the *Holy Ball* I often think of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* – the play unfolding around the ball taking the place of the drama around the cosmic Christ. I look for common denominators in all religions, like play in Catholicism and play in Protestantism. You can bring play into these otherwise puritan and sterile environments … I've taken play into films and I've come up with Nyau cinema, I've taken play into religion and come up with *Holyballism*, I took play into novel writing and I came up with *The Jive Talker* …Huizinga traced the origins of academia

I Hold up a Tree in 1936, 2015

in play, so one could even regard my current research work as a form of gift-giving, or Nyau.

KM I see that there are 10 rules of Nyau cinema: how were these conceived?

SK They just kind of wrote themselves over time. Let's say I make the film longer than a minute, somehow it doesn't work. A lot of my films are made by walking and when you're walking there are these passing moments – somebody crossing the road, a car passing by. These are the duration of the film.

MB The city becomes special, as it was for the Situationists, in a sense because the city encapsulates all of the ideas that run through your project: modernisation, industrialisation, the Reformation, and then there's the incompatibility with where you were …but of course you were at the 'Eton of Africa' which was in a sense an incubator and then you go home and have a very different life, and then you go to Europe or America and it becomes even more different.

SK Yes, but there are elements of Nyau even in Western society, I've just tried to highlight them. For instance I was interested in following the Reformation in history; I was interested in the so-called English Dissenters – the Ranters, the Diggers, the Levellers – who proposed a very radical interpretation of religion,

like the Ranters said, 'If there is God we are God.' They used to perform these quirky acts in public to show their radical subjectivity. I like aspects of the Reformation and aspects of Catholicism that are immediate and playful like that; there are many.

KM There are obviously the Situationists who you are busy reading about for your thesis, so you have the idea of the city as a space, there's an orderliness to a city in how it is conceived.

SK The Situationist, Constant, constructed a series of works called 'New Babylon', and his interpretation of the city was play; he says that we have enough technology to make room for us, for a lot of play. You know we were discussing how a high percentage of people were involved in farming and then suddenly machines came and even now work is being phased out through computers and so within that, what is the conception of a city? What do we do with the time that is left on our hands since machines took over, since computers took over? I think somebody realised this hence the invention of the iPhone – they know that more and more time is freed and clever people are capitalising on this. But the alternative to your iPhone is this city of play where the city is designed not only for function or profit but rather to allow for the production of intimacy or play. And for me this interpretation of the city is already there in Africa. The Chewa call it *mzinda*. For instance, when you go to Dakar people wonder why the buildings are never finished and it's because there's a different perception of time there. You don't know why the guy is building, it might not be for the same reason. Maybe he didn't want to build a functional house. It's a kind of rebellion and the building of this utterly useless architecture is equivalent for me to building a cathedral, which is also ultimately useless.

So Africa is a place of what Guy Debord called unconscious situationism. Which leads us to Meschac Gaba, one of the catalysts of my PhD research, who realised the radicality of the urban African marketplace and has used it to construct works of art that challenge the status quo in the globalised world. The tendencies in a lot of contemporary art can be informative, and we can learn a lot from the nuance of the urban African environment by tracing where it comes from and why. In these days when we are talking about ethical living, alternative lifestyles, it's not so ridiculous to study these alternative conceptions of time or the urban space. Aspects of unconscious situationism are very prominent in a lot of contemporary African cities but there are pockets in Westernised places where you can find them. For instance I am interested in the idea of the bureau, the internet café, as a place of infinite possibility.

Where I live in London the bureau is where Africans converge. I came across a curious bureau

in Harlesden and I went inside and saw somebody learning how to fly an aeroplane, somebody chatting to their relatives back home, people playing games … They send money home there, through Western Union, which is also a form of expenditure; they do photocopying, bootlegging things … My videos can be seen in this context. I want to walk the city and eventually if I want to rest I can go into a bureau and watch my videos – hence putting them on YouTube and various social networking sites as interventions. I could extend time-wasting by entering a bureau and watching my films for new perspectives. The bureau can also be a space where convention is questioned, where utilitarian conceptions of the city can be questioned, you understand? You should just visit any bureau, even in Johannesburg, and see the aesthetic … I intend to make an intervention in a real bureau in London or even build it from scratch. I want to explore issues like money transfer, why people send money back home. We know that the money that Africans send home from the West outstrips aid altogether, and this money is often not really for profit, it's subsistence, because if you send a significant amount of money it will be questioned; it's just sending money to your relatives so they can buy basic things or they can dress up.

KM Talking about money, you mentioned the difference between aid and charity and gift-giving. Can you describe this again?

SK Charity is one-sided, demeaning in that it doesn't allow mutuality; the whole point of a gift is to create intimacy, that's why a gift is given. Now, if you don't allow that gift to be returned, it becomes something else; it becomes charity, it becomes demeaning. When we talk about gift-giving it shouldn't be confused with charity. With charity you don't even meet the person who is giving you the aid, so you can't even say thank you.

MB It's bureaucratic.

SK Yes, you could say that charity is assigned, it has limits, like 90 percent will go to charity, it's calculated, it's become bureaucratised, while on the other hand gift-giving is much more complex. You could say the proper gift is beyond calculation.

MB Do you consider your writing as part of your artistic practice? Are you a writer and an artist, or just an artist?

SK I want to live, I am a liver [of life], I would rather be called a liver than an artist. I'm more interested in livers than artists and art comes in because I want to live, you know. For me it all comes from Nyau, the problem with the gift, the problem with surplus. My philosophy towards life is optimistic: there's no need to panic, we've got plenty of food, plenty of time, let's play. And Nyau

manifests itself in many ways. Among the Chewa, Nyau manifests through play, through literature, through music, through dance, and it's the same in my work. I have a certain philosophy that manifests itself in many ways: in my films, in my writing, in my installations, in site-specific work, projects, the way I relate with people in everyday life. I'm not really interested in one particular medium but in a particular philosophy, yes, my philosophy is very focused, very specific and it's against the utilitarian world we find ourselves in. I think my work is about disrupting utility and function.

KM Nyau cinema speaks about transgression. What is transgression?

SK Transgression is not mere negation. Transgression can make even more apparent the very thing you are transgressing; it can be used to highlight a certain thing. Where negation does away with what you are criticising, transgression highlights, makes things clear, makes people look differently at the very object that you are transgressing.

KM Is there a difference between subversion and transgression?

SK Maybe some subversion can be transgressive but some can be pure negation. If transgression is not considered it can be pure negation, it doesn't create possibilities. But transgression allows many perspectives to flourish on some aspect that you are transgressing. It allows other views or possibilities to come through. It's not merely a negative action, it's not mere destruction of something. It opens up new possibilities. I think transgression is also a recognition of a certain basic structure. There's a difference between a transgressor and let's say a libertine. Transgression is quite different from a total negation, which is what a libertine is about, you negate; I think transgression is more a conversation in society, a process.

Runner, 2014

KM I keep going back to the mask, the Gule Wamkulu. Would that be transgressive? You spoke about how when [society] needed to get rid of excess the witch doctor would play the transgressor, so if there was somebody with a whole lot of surplus, what they would do is that the witch doctor would find them with some sort of sin and fine them for absolution. So perhaps transgression is something that the Chewa use over and over again as a way of maintaining social equilibrium.

SK Yes, maintaining equilibrium but also rejuvenating society. At the festivals when the masks come out the Chewa are much more relaxed; the whole society is allowed to transgress and breathe. Once the masks

are away the taboos can set back in. Taboo can even be said to be a way of coercing society to give gifts still. You know, different cultures have always struggled with how to maintain the distribution of the gift. In modern times some African countries have resorted to dictators but in more sophisticated settings the gift would have been distributed in more subtle ways; people would give the gift of surplus by, say, the fear of witchcraft and of breaking taboo. For instance, among the Chewa if there's a lot of surplus in society then taboo is increased so you can hardly move without being fined, without giving a goat. So taboo is a way of allowing this surplus to be expended prodigiously, to let society breathe.

I think that at the essence of this is a very optimistic interpretation of being in the world. In other words, the gift is about living in the moment. It's about life. It's not about a life of deferral, it's a very optimistic interpretation of being in the world, that everything is fine, we've got enough, don't worry. Art can be used to live and create new possibilities of living by transgressing yourself. We have 10 rules of Nyau cinema but there's no fourth rule, which is perhaps a rule of transgression, that even the Nyau rules themselves can be transgressed, and that's the moment when you create new possibilities. But the rules of Nyau cinema are not forced … If you look at Nyau I used to wonder why the Gule Wamkulu masks always used what I would call base material, the semiotic, things that are left over. This is Nyau, it's a worship of excess material, things you cannot use, that are thrown on the floor. My Nyau cinema films, if you watch them, have been constructed from stuff that an editor would edit out of the film and leave on the floor.

MB Except for the mushroom clouds – did you make those?

SK Yes, this is something that was in my studio. But even *Two Mushroom Clouds* would have had sound, maybe a speech that was shown on TV. What I'm showing with the mushroom cloud is something that I just picked up, that was left over. When I made the mushroom cloud I imagined to myself that it's a kind of bizarre award. I don't want to give the game away but that's what inspired … I don't know what exactly but there's a relationship between the sepia look and the mushroom clouds, there's a lot of associations … That guy [in the film] could be a scientist, he could be an apocalyptic figure.

MB What's interesting is the introduction of new technology. With the sepia-toned film, this technology is now available for the first time and people are using it … And here you are with your iPhone and you're using a new technology, you're using the access to be able to record on the fly whenever you need to.

KM I guess the other important thing is social media and the internet, and how you put all your films on Facebook and YouTube. On the one hand there's excess in that you've made hundreds of films, and the other thing is the accessibility of the films in that anyone can view them.

SK The films started out as interventions on Facebook. I make them and I don't put much comment and they just pass through the feed. And people watch them – when I meet my friends they talk to me about these films … Facebook is a place where people gather to waste time, if you like. I know somebody could be making a profit out of it, but there can be room for gifts to be given … Every now and then somebody watches my films and they give me feedback and we have a conversation. For me, art is one thing, for instance, my conception of films is art but if you were to look at my films as art world, then you could say the films are not finished until they are shown in a gallery. But people shouldn't confuse what happens in art and everyday life and let's say the necessities of the art world. For me if those films are art in everyday life they are infinite, I will continue making them as a way of living; as long as I live they have to come through. And they will be accessible and how special they are depends on who is looking at them. But what's most important for me is the exercise of a certain urgency, of life. I don't necessarily even make them to be accessible. I've never been good with small talk. People put small talk on Facebook … Even in everyday life small talk is particularly hard for me. And art has always functioned as the way that I communicate with people. Either I make art or I fade into obscurity. I want to live, I want to be involved in small talk, at least I can announce my presence by putting my aesthetic interests [forward]. It's a desire to communicate. For me art is the way I've connected to people. And that's why some of the films may end up on Facebook. I'm not thinking of how much the films are worth or how accessible they are, I just want to say I'm alive, here, this is what I saw today, share some moments that I saw passing today …they are very social. As I say I am interested in art in everyday life so involving those films in interaction online is part of this.

MB Something important that you haven't touched on is the research on William Blake that you're doing as part of your PhD. Blake, like you, was a writer and an artist … and religion is a major factor in both of your work. Could you speak about how he enters into your research and what effect he might have had on your practice?

SK William Blake was like a prototype Situationist. He was a psychogeographer, he was a drifter. He composed all his poems walking. Like Nietzsche,

who says, don't write anything down until you're on your feet, don't trust an idea that was not conceived while you were walking: so he used to walk around with a notebook. The same with Blake: he composed all his poems walking around the streets of London. A lot of people that look like angels in his work, when you scrutinise them – and I'm doing this at Yale – are actually beggars; tramps become angels, chimney smoke becomes like clouds or the sky becomes text … He saw all kinds of fairies and monsters when he was walking around. He saw angels and fallen angels but usually when I'm walking around I see tramps, I see all kinds of historical characters, and these manifest in my videos, and so this is where we meet. It's not so obvious in Blake but actually the whole of his process is about movement, about energy, drifting through the city seeing poetry and exuberance. These are the things that are interesting even in Nyau, because Nyau is about exuberance, about energy; Nyau is in a sense energy but perhaps an energy that becomes more apparent in its freedom. Some energy you can use, some energy you can't contain. It's the energy of Nyau; the energy that moves a gift. We are really making giant strides here but basically Blake's poems were a way of coping with London when it was industrialising. He would have thought it was a totally impossible place but he tried to make something positive out of it. That I admire a lot because this is what I'm doing when I approach as a city as a place of possibility.

MB You've been living in England since you were 24, for the past 15 years. What is it like going back to Malawi, and how often do you go?

SK I haven't been to Malawi since 2002, partly because this is when my mother passed away. My mother was like home for me, because we were always drifting up and down the country, we didn't stay in one place for long. We don't have a family home anymore, so if I go to Malawi I am in a strange land, as I am in London. We grew up in urban areas … my father's job was always up and down the country, so the idea of moving from place to place is not new. I also wanted to acclimatise so I've stayed in the West long enough to get rid of the sentimentality that I normally would have for Malawi. And the works that I've made now are truly about the moment, they are not about my nostalgia for Africa, they are about the past but not necessarily wanting to go to it but to keep moving, moving forward. It's not like I've totally cut myself off from Africa but I know how to find Africa here in London, I know how to find Africa in New York.

KM What would be Africa then, if you can find it?

SK When I say Africa I'm just saying that I know how to find a gift. So it's a loose word, it's for lack of a better word. When I say Africa I'm saying that I can find the gift walking the streets of London, the gift

which moved Nyau or Chewa society. I can find it in pockets in urban areas, in the bureau for instance as stated earlier. I can find the gift in Blake; I can find Nyau in Blake. I've found Nyau in the Situationists, I've found Nyau in the Ranters, and in Gaba's *Museum of Contemporary African Art*. My work as an artist is animated by the gift. I am interested in things that unite all these aspects rather than what divides them. Nyau is energy, Nyau is universal, you can find its movement in all kinds of places.

KM You have expressed interest in Diogenes elsewhere, can you explain how you relate to his philosophy?

SK Diogenes was a great ranter. He said he belonged nowhere, rather claimed to be 'a citizen of the world'. Diogenes, you could say, was a kind of Nyau with his preoccupation with sovereignty above all else … He used to perform all kinds of quirky acts in public, like carrying a lamp in daylight and walking backwards into a theatre. His home was an old barrel in the marketplace, his constant companions dogs. That's a kind of Nyau for me. A Nyau mask expresses sovereignty and this sovereignty is a conception of being in the world on a universal scale, if you like, and I think this what Diogenes is about.

People think identity is something you have to go back to Nigeria to get, or go back to South Africa to get, or 'Oh, I'm English, I have to go back to England

Homage to the Square, 2013

to get my identity', and they go there and they don't find it. Personally, I am at home anywhere. You say, how long ago have you visited Malawi? I haven't been in a while but I didn't think I needed to be in Malawi to feel Malawian.

MB I was asking more how your engagement with Malawi has changed.

SK The first thing I did when I moved to the West was to spend years writing a memoir about growing up in Malawi, so in a way I have spent many years back in Malawi, even while living in England, because I had to write a memoir that traces me from the age of zero to 24. And that is a lot of material to go through because you don't just end up with a book, you have to explore ... So I have explored Africa intensely, I still do, through the meditation of my work, through memoir writing ... But I think the thing it gives you when you move out of a country is perspective. I think perhaps I wouldn't have seen Malawi that way if I had written the book in Malawi. So it helped to look at things differently. It's a deliberate, self-imposed exile, if you like. And it has helped my artistic development, that perspective, moving away. As I get older I want to go back and see my old friends ... But for the time being I have been interested in art and living rather than personal sentiment.

So yes, I should like to think I am a citizen of the world too. I follow Diogenes there. I think that this is why I also like Gaba's work, because of his emphasis on a certain drift, a certain attitude. He emphasises certain characteristics of being in the world ... The look for me is almost irrelevant, because the look, surface, is deceptive; for me that's not what makes an African, or a Malawian, it's not how you dress or look. It's a certain attitude, a certain spirit, certain tendencies, your interpretation of time, economics. I'm sure if you were to take a tribesman, a Chewa tribesman, if he lived in a skyscraper he wouldn't be making masks of animals. Even now Chewa masks have changed – they have bicycles, cars ... they reflect psychogeography. I don't have to live in New York and make animal masks, it doesn't make sense because masks came out of psychogeography, masks are a way of coping with what's around you. If you take a tribesman from Malawi to New York, he will not be making an elephant because he doesn't see an elephant in the bush, he doesn't see a tree, he will busy himself with –

KM What he sees, with what's around him –

SK It's immediate. This is the universality of art. But you can even take the angle of religious revaluation after what Nietzsche has described as the 'death of God', which preoccupies the other side of my work. Some people think religion is naivety, a mere superstition. People who think that miss the whole

Overleaf Installation view, Stevenson, Johannesburg, 2014

point of religion – religion, like art, is its own truth. If you understand what the gift means, the Nyau masks don't 'represent' – a lot of people say they represent ancestral spirits. They *are* ancestral spirits. If you know the meaning of play, you don't even need to believe in God or ancestral spirits.

KM Yesterday you were saying you have a friend who was talking about 'the African God', trying to find an African God. And thinking back I remember people in my home town who were praying to God not in a Christian way or a Muslim way – I don't remember anyone being specific about God. It was a fluid and personal thing.

SK In Africa even when you pray to a fetish or a thing, if it doesn't give us answers we discard it, burn it and make another one.