Samson Kambalu: For me, remembering, it’s almost like a creative exercise to try to get back to the present moment by the way of the past. It’s how history is used. It’s not so much about being remembered in history, but how remembering structures the present. Not so much, were you there or not. A good piece of history can empower.

Etel Adnan: They tell me there are four seasons, but I live in the fifth one, which is your space and your time.

Barbara Chase-Riboud: People who should have monuments, but who do not. The invisibles of history.

Gaylene Gould: Welcome to REWORLDING, a Serpentine Podcast series with me, Gaylene Gould. I’m a creative director and broadcaster, and I’m on the hunt for urgent new ideas. But before we move forward, I want to look back. As a child of empire (I’m of Caribbean descent), I’m pretty traumatised by history, and I want to explore how we might need to rethink our relationship to history in order to shape a new collective future.

Samson Kambalu: Well, this is, it’s a small... I have to tune in...

Gaylene Gould: One artist who is also thinking about this is Samson Kambalu, Malawian-born of the Chewa people. Samson Kambalu works in a variety of media: installation, video, performance, and literature. And to add to this polymathic list, he’s also a keen amateur blues guitarist. His work mixes Situationism, which is the idea that art should be lived rather than merely displayed, with African Nyau tradition of the masked performance. He can often be seen cropping up in his absurdist short films, like a postmodern Charlie Chaplin. His latest and largest work is the Fourth Plinth installation in Trafalgar Square. Antelope is inspired by a little-known Malawian freedom fighter, John Chilembwe, and features two differently-scaled, hat-wearing men. I went to meet Kambalu at the hallowed Oxford University, where he works as a fine art Fellow, to find out more.
Oxford University porter: [slightly distant, from a room ahead] Hello.

Gaylene Gould: Hello, we’re looking for the porter’s lodge.

Oxford University porter: You’ve found it!

Gaylene Gould: Oh, amazing! We’re here to meet Samson Kambalu. [now, in the studio]: Samson does indeed live his art, known for his natty dandified style and statement headwear that day. He looked cool, like his step from a spaghetti western right into a Blaxploitation movie. The baddest guy on the quad. Black boots, silver threaded suit matched with a fetching fur-collared black coat, topped by a black stetson. [walking down a stone corridor with the sound of footsteps on flagstones] What’s a special occasion? You’re like, ‘It’s Wednesday.’

Samson Kambalu: Yeah, yeah. I used to wonder why that is, but the more I research into the histories of dress in Africa, it actually begins to make sense...

Gaylene Gould: [back in the studio] We headed over to his office to continue chatting, starting with the historical and political relevance of his dress.

Samson Kambalu: I hadn’t realised that they had this history, that they couldn’t wear a hat, that the African during colonial times couldn’t wear hat in front of white people. [upbeat music changes tempo and continues with new motifs] Apparently, some of the colonials would say, “Oh, but we need hats for the sun. What do you Africans need the hat for?” But when I was growing up in Malawi, there were a lot of hats around. People wore hats. I guess maybe there was a time in Europe when you had to wear a hat, I remember... You know that hats have always come with rules about who gets to wear it, and when and what. It’s not only between Africans and Europeans, but also here. It’s the equivalent of in the Middle Ages, (the question of) who gets to carry a sword. I transform when I put on a hat. All of a sudden, I bounce for myself! [music fades] But it also points to traditions of masking that are everywhere in Africa.

Why masking? Because it alludes to that sense of time that I grew up with. So, by putting on a hat, maintaining a certain sense of play and humour about life, for me that empowers me. Now, when I let go of my humour, sense of play, then I’m playing a game that I’m not really good at. That’s when I feel I will really be weakened. But for me, if I stay with the hat, I’m in my element and when I’m in my element, I can be of use to the world – even to people who don’t come from Africa! [with humour] I really do think that.

Gaylene Gould: I’m curious about where you may begin, and particularly with this character, Chilembwe, the kind of energy that... I’m looking at this photo now of these two men standing beside each other. These kind of objects of memory can hold great power. In a way you’re carrying the spirit of Chilembwe, would you say?

Samson Kambalu: When I first saw the photograph, when I came here, I was doing some research in the colonial library here. It’s the Western library, and I came across this photograph and I didn’t know,
why is this so numinous? What am I attracted to this particular photograph? I knew that he was a freedom fighter, Chilembwe, but I didn't know why this particular photograph has that effect on me. And I was looking for this particular hat around London until I discovered I can’t find it because actually it looks that way because he’s wearing sideways. He has the ribbon at the back. Then I began to investigate and research. Why is he putting emphasis on his hat? Then I realised that actually it also isn’t quite a law, but Black people were not allowed to wear hats in front of white people during colonial times. And so, this was a photograph he made as an act of defiance.

I hear that he distributed it amongst his followers. Chilembwe had a lot of sponsors from America, Black churches. So, he built this magnificent church in Africa to rival the white missions. And of course, the white missions didn’t like that, because their missions were raising an African who is subordinate to the white. And so whenever [Chilembwe’s followers] built a church, they [the white missions] destroyed it. The schools, they destroyed, but he kept building it with the help from his friends, some of whom were well-wishing white people too, I must say. And months after he took these photographs in defiance, he was killed in an uprising to fight against these injustices that a Black person can’t have a mission. So, the hat become a medal for not just the hard hat, but for who is allowed to do what. Those problems, you still have them now today.

Gaylene Gould: Yeah, and the actual masks that people made and wore... Tell me a bit more about the tradition of those masks. I was hearing about the relationship to ancestry and the dead, and a way to raise the dead. And I’m really interested in your thoughts – as someone who is of that tradition – on that: your thoughts on the past, history, the dead and how that merges with where we are now in Oxford.

Samson Kambalu: I like masking because it’s not actually a metaphysic. It’s a science masking in Africa is animatic. The idea of masks in Africa is even older than the idea of God in Nyau masking God comes and does. Jesus comes and does on the arena. So, what comes first is the mask. I guess this isn’t the same as in Christianity, with ‘in the beginning was the word’. Well, that’s not true. You see, I think what comes first is the deep. Nyau deals with the ‘less than nothing’. The Chewa, my tribe are called those people of the lake [repeats in Nyanja, the language of the Chewa]. It’s not lake as in an (actual) lake, lake, but it’s like a metaphorical lake, like the Dead Sea where nothing loves. Africans will bring out masks to destabilise so that the world is created anew. So, I learned from masking in Africa that art is about speaking truth to power. It’s not just something that complements power. So, my work is playful. It seeks to question received ideas, and destabilise and intervene. There’s a lot of that in my work. It’s a pain for those in authority, I think! [laughs heartily]

[theme-music: sustained, intriguing, evolving electronic tones, including low-pitched surges, high-pitched notes, and occasional crackling]

Gaylene Gould: Samson’s ideas are deep and rich, and given that, I was struck by how lightly he approaches history given the weighty reality of colonialism and also how his approach opens up new thinking about history. So, to get into it and other things, joining me is Yesomi Umolu, who’s the Director of Curatorial Affairs and Public Practice at Serpentine. Thanks for coming, Yesomi.
Yesomi Umolu: Thank you for having me, Gaylene.

Gaylene Gould: I mean, this episode is about remembering and looking at history differently. What does Samson’s work offer us in that regard, then?

Yesomi Umolu: I think it’s definitely to think about history as not being a singular story and how actually one does have the agency and opportunity today to redefine history through one’s own individual lens. And I think that’s really what’s special about Samson. He really leans into his very singular perspective as a Malawian-born artist who learnt a lot about African masking traditions while at the same time also learning about European traditions, living in Malawi at a certain time, and then finding himself in Europe and thinking about what about the European (cultural) landscape draws on the African continent.

[10:00]

[music fades] And I think that lens and his confidence to inhabit his perspective and to use that to look back on history is really very inspiring. He teaches us a lesson actually about how sometimes history can feel very monolithic, something that's completely written, and it must be studied, but it cannot be reinterpreted or reframed.

But by using aspects of play and creativity and thinking about one’s own individuality, I think there’s that sense of being able to approach history in a far more open way. But I think that, actually, this idea of play and him masking himself and there’s that (question) of, is he a fiction? There’s the persona that he presents to you, is that actually a fiction? And is that something that he has constructed through a variety of historical influences or is it how he is indeed. And there are people who speak more to the past than other people. They have some sort of intangible connection to the past. And I feel that Samson definitely represents that in his persona and fully embodies that in some ways. Some of those are practically, through his dress, but I actually do think in the ways that he thinks, and that he exists in the world, he has that very direct connection to the past.

Gaylene Gould: Yeah, I think you’re right. I really felt that too. Seeing him, there’s a way in which he can almost bridge the gap between the past and the present in a very elegant way. He seems to be able to do that, to manage that fluidity really well. And I felt a bit like the spirit of Chilembwe lives through him. He’s interested in Chilembwe. Yeah, I like that idea of him being a spirit that somehow has connected to the past in that way.

[theme-music returns: sustained, intriguing, evolving electronic tones]

Zing Tsjeng: If we rewrite history, I think it expands our understanding of what’s possible. Well, I don’t actually the term rewrite, because it implies something’s being written over. But if we challenge these dominant discourses around history, what we do is actually expand our understanding of history itself.

Gaylene Gould: So, this idea that Samson brought up, of speaking truth to power, is right at the heart of the work of journalist Zing Tsjeng. Zing is a journalist, presenter, author, and the editor-in-chief of
Vice UK and US. She has written a book called *Forgotten Women*, which is going to be out in March 2023, which explores the lives of remarkable women who had been forgotten over time in their field.

**Zing Tsjeng:** I got taught this idea of history at school where women are like a footnote, right? The bonus DVD feature of the main narrative of history. They have as much of a right to be part of history, and they have been part of history as much as men have, but they weren’t given that spotlight that men have been given historically over time. And that’s why I became really passionate about women’s histories. I was writing these books during the time of Trump and all these terrible things were happening for gender equality around the world. But actually, working on the books kind of made me realise that the women who made a mark on history, they had to battle a lot of struggles in order to make that mark on history. They’ve had to work for their right to vote, for their right to create art, for their right to write books and great literature for their right to participate in science and technology.

And while this could be really depressing because you look at it and you’re like, ‘Oh God, we’ve been doing this for so long, when is it ever going to stop?’ For me, I looked at it and thought to myself, really what I’m doing is standing on the shoulders of giants here, which is what all women are doing, really. [theme music transitions into warm, gentle, chord-like tones with slower high-pitched motifs] We’re coming from this history of people who have really beaten the odds to get to where they were. There were so many women who did incredible things and in their time those accomplishments were not really recognised. They were bad-mouthed, they were slandered, they were libelled, they were passed off as a joke, but they continued doing it regardless. And what I took away from writing (the book) is a sense of persistence. It’s about finding out who you are, what you’re about, what you want to do with your life, and just getting out of there and doing it, which I think is a really valuable life lesson.

What history does is that it offers us a view that nothing is permanent. If you rolled back history, all the way back, to the time of the Romans, people living in that era did not ever think the empire was *really* going to collapse. They saw it lasting pretty much forever, and then it did collapse. Roll back in time to a time when women didn’t have the vote. A lot of people thought that women would never ever get the vote, that they never should get the vote, and lo and behold, women did get the vote. So, I think that when we look at history, we need to kind of understand that the biggest thing it teaches us is that nothing is ever permanent. And that change when it comes can come on really quickly or really slowly, but that it’s inevitable if you’re talking about social change, about progressive movements.

Even if you look back to pre-industrial revolution, when the weekend did not exist as a concept and that trade unions had to fight for it to be implemented, and now everyone is like, ‘Oh yeah, Saturday and Sunday, no work. That’s the lesson that history teaches us: that what we think of as immovable, unchangeable, permanent institutions or processes or mindsets, these things are all up for grabs. They might be up for grabs in the next century, the next decade, the next five years or the next year. What that timeframe looks like is completely up to us. [music transitions briefly into energetic, percussive electronic music then stops; we hear only voices in the studio]

**Gaylene Gould:** Thank you, Zing for offering this, for reminding us. We kind of know this, but actually when you are living in your moment, it’s really easy to forget that actually you’re part of a continuum, right?
Yesomi Umolu: And I think that again, maybe connecting Samson’s words to Zing’s words in terms of that idea of a self-determination, you just got to get out there and you got to do it. And I think that clearly, (Zing) is motivated by that. She’s motivated by, I guess maybe a personal project to reframe history. And I think Samson is in the same way, and I think they provide a model for how people who live today, whatever your interest areas are, to be kind of empowered enough to look back on history and to find those openings where we can actually break into the permanence that is history as we perceive it. The permanence that is the past. There’s how we actually start to inhabit that and how through inhabiting that and telling those hidden narratives or those forgotten or lost narratives or those narratives that are there, but they are, as she says, they kind of are footnotes, how we can attend to them a little bit more in the present day.

Gaylene Gould: I love this practice of Samson and Zing to actually actively go and find those figures (in response to whom) they’re like, ‘Oh, these are my people.’

Yesomi Umolu: I also think it’s really important (to think about how) we often think, in the present day, that in order to move forward, in order for progress to be achieved, we need to do something completely different and completely radical. You have to break the mould in order for the cycle to end. But actually, when you look back on history, you will find that actually there are examples, there are precedents, and you don’t have to start from zero, but you can actually start from something that is pre-existing and that gives you the possibility to move forward. And I think there’s something about Zing’s project that is to say: to acknowledge the women in the past is to actually think about the women in the future. It’s to think about me in my present day and my reality and the progressive status of women now. And to think about where they might go in the future. And this idea that nothing is permanent. And I think that’s something that’s actually really powerful to understand about the past, that it actually can give you instructions for reworlding and the future.

Gaylene Gould: It’s reminding me, like you were saying, Yesomi, that we’re on the same continuum. We’re part of a continuum. History doesn’t end, we’re actually in it. And that the other thing that you also reminded me of (thank you, thank you, thank you!), is that when I remember from the struggles, the challenges, the conversations, the difficult conversations are happening now, that it’s not abnormal to have difficult conversations in every single generation, that we are part of a continuum of difficult conversations and there will be different ones in the future. And so, I like what you were saying about this idea of how we can learn from how those conversations were handled in the past. And I was thinking about this idea of not being separated from history, but being part of it and thinking about people like Kambalu and Chilembwe, and that actually, even though they’re separated by century, they’re kind of still best pals! Do you know what I mean? There’s a friendship, there’s a relationship there between these people.

Yesomi Umolu: Yeah, it’s really beautiful that you put it in that way actually, because history is not something to be feared and not something to run away from, right? (There’s the idea that) we run into the future, away from history. Actually, it’s something to be close with, to be friends with and to become well-acquainted with in order to help us understand ourselves in the present moment, but also where we might go in the future.
Barbara Chase-Riboud: I make Cleopatra a modern woman, simple as that.

Yesomi Umolu: We just heard the voice of Barbara Chase-Riboud, who's an American artist who's been living and working in Europe for decades. And recently I had the pleasure of curating her first major solo exhibition at Serpentine. And it's really interesting to think about Barbara and what she represents. She is in her 80s, an incredibly accomplished practitioner who has lived across continents and travelled further field, she's pretty much circumnavigated the globe. And even today, we think about her as a rarity. In reading a lot of our visitor comments of the Serpentine, a lot of people are surprised that this is the first time that they've learned about Barbara Chase-Riboud and this wonderful, really well-accomplished sculptor. And the fact that she was a woman working in the '60s and the '70s in bronze and what seems to be a very unusual material for women working at that time. Often, I think she's described as someone who's forgotten, but actually I think that she was always present, in a way in which actually she was acknowledged by her peers. She was living and working in a really vibrant community of artists and writers in Paris in the 1960s, and she was aligned with a number of other progressive artistic movements at that time. And so she was always there, but was maybe little-explored and maybe she just took a position that did not necessarily align itself with what the dominant narratives were of the moment. So, I wouldn't like to think that she was forgotten because I think there's certain people who know Barbara's work and who have followed it across time and who acknowledge its influence and its impact. It's just that those might not have been the dominant voices up until this very moment. [music fades]

Gaylene Gould: It's interesting with Barbara Chase-Riboud in terms of the approach she's taking to, again, telling history in a different way, in terms of her work. Can you tell us a little bit about her relationship to monuments and memorialising, I guess.

Yesomi Umolu: Yeah. The exhibition of Barbara's work at Serpentine presents sculptures and drawings by the artist from as early as the late 1950s, all the way up to the present day. The most recent sculpture in that exhibition was produced in 2021, almost seven decades of artistic production. And we really see Barbara's evolution of her style. She starts off really interested in sculpture, really interested in drawings, interested in history and the past, and thinking about monuments, the way that we represent history architecturally and spatially through monuments. And then she's starting to think about the figure and how sculpture, bronze sculpture in particular, historically has been a way to depict key figures and key voices within civilisations. And in these works, she's thinking about narratives around key individuals such as Malcolm X, Cleopatra, Josephine Baker, and she's thinking about making sculptures around these significant and seminal historical figures. Now we can say that they all are (seminal). Also, there are drawings that she produces later on in the 1990s that return to this idea of the monument, thinking about: how might you create a monument to someone like Nelson Mandela or create a monument to the Queen of Sheba?
They were larger than life and they’re in some ways larger than history, right? So how do you represent them? You can’t just represent them through a very beautiful portrait. There has to be something more in that, right? And so she’s making these beautiful imagined monuments where she’s ruminating on what might it mean to kind of monumentalise, to historicise these great lives, these great individuals. And I think that something really fascinating about this project as a whole is that she is this archæologist of knowledge, and she’s a historian, she’s a public historian and she’s using her sculptures and she’s using her drawings and she’s using her writing to attend to figures who may be minor figures or major figures depending on what perspective you take on their influence in the world. And she’s using those to think about how we might represent them in the present day.

[intriguing, sustained, high-pitched musical tones return]

**Barbara Chase-Riboud:** The poems are all sonnets. They tell the story of Cleopatra, but they tell her in a modern way, and she is the symbol of modernity as far as the power of women are concerned. The Monument Drawings were made especially to people who should have monuments, but who do not: the invisibles of history. And you have to read the titles of the drawings, and you probably have to look them up in an encyclopedia because they’re not part of the canon of history and they should be.

**Gaylene Gould:** Wow. I’ve loved this project, I think first of all, yes, yes, yes about Cleopatra. I’ve always been fascinated by her as a leadership figure, as someone who has been in leadership positions. There are very few great women that litter history. And so, being able to draw that out, to reposition her, but also with imagined monuments (in Barbara’s drawings)... I mean, do you think from Barbara’s point of view, if she had the choice, she would’ve made these monuments? Or was the process just about the imagination?

**Yesomi Umolu:** She did make monuments. She did make some public sculpture and a number of monuments that actually deal with the transatlantic slave trade, she made a monument to an African burial ground in New York. There was a public art piece that was commissioned to think about the interred figures of Africans, some of whom would have been enslaved and some of whom would have been freed, and what might it mean to represent their lives, which are so little documented. [music fades] She’s made other public artworks as well. But I think that this idea of drawing... Barbara studied architecture and in architectural practice, drawing is used not just to depict what I want to build, but it is also a utopian tool. A lot of utopian architecture only exists in drawing form. And I kind of like to think about Barbara’s drawings and monuments as a sort of utopian world that she’s imagining, especially if we think about the present day.

There’s so many conversations around public sculpture: who are the most visible figures in our public spaces, whose histories are accounted for and whose histories are not accounted for? And how we struggle today to think about how to insert into public space those who have been marginalised. And I think Barbara is occupying a utopian space that is actually hopefully going to be made real as we contend with all of these challenging questions today. And actually, I think that utopian space is made real in a work like Antelope by Samson Kambalu, right? He has actually realised a monument that would have been unimaginable, I think, certainly decades ago, maybe even [Gaylene also says simultaneously] five years ago!
The fact that you would have the Fourth Plinth, which is a major site in a major public square in London, which was the seat of empire a certain point, and you would have a freedom fighter being a key protagonist in this sculpture. It is and was unimaginable up until the moment that Samson decided to make this work. And the work is so beautiful. I’ve seen it in person. And actually, from wherever you look at it, from whichever perspective you look at it, his play with perspective in sort of trying to adjust the relationship between Chilembwe, who was this African revolutionary, and the other character, this European missionary figure, Chilembwe somehow always holds the most powerful position. And I think that’s really interesting, and it’s really fascinating to think about the relationship with someone like Barbara Chase-Riboud and her project of imagining monuments and Samson’s realisation of that. So, maybe somehow Barbara and Samson are friends.

Gaylene Gould: Yeah, it’s like the perfect dinner party. You want Cleopatra, Chilembwe, Barbara, it would be amazing. But that brings us nicely to the conversation that I had with Samson about history and monuments and the relationship between the two.

[30:00]

Samson Kambalu: There’s a lot of memory in my work. For me, remembering is almost like a creative exercise. To spring off of a certain awareness from the past to something else, to try to get back to the present moment by the way of the past. So, I could talk about the failure of memory, it’s precisely what I’m trying to work with. Perhaps I’m trying to advocate for a memory that fails. It’s how history is used. It’s not so much about being remembered in history, it’s how history is employed that I’m concerned with. How remembering structures the present is what I’m interested in. Not so much ‘were you there or not?’, but more, ‘how does this memory implicate me?’

Gaylene Gould: I’m curious about you making Antelope while you are here, based in Oxford, surrounded by... I mean, just walking down from the station, all the way along, there are monuments, you pass a Cecil Rhodes monument. I’m wondering about how that might have affected your approach to thinking about such a public monument in Trafalgar Square. It’s probably the most public monument that you could make.

Samson Kambalu: Yeah, in the world. Yes, I think so. I don’t know if, had they approached me in London, whether I would have suggested Antelope, but then I moved here in 2017. I was in the art world, and the whole time I thought the world had moved forward. My friends have been, since I moved to Europe in 2000, my friends have been from all over the world. And I thought, wow, the world had moved on. But I was surprised when I went out of London how these issues still linger. I mean, the art world is so deceptive. It looks accommodating, diverse anything goes, but a lot of the world outside London is still steeped in colonial legacies.

And it’s more so at Oxford. I’m surprised. I mean, colonialism is charged with unhealthy romance, rather than reality. And I had to address those issues somehow when I was approached. And as I say, the first thing I did was to visit the Western library. This is where all the colonial mandarins from throughout the British Empire dumped their stuff. The stuff at Western library hasn’t even been sorted out. You can just go family photographs of mandarins. And I came across this photograph and I
thought from my experience to address issues of entitlement, because some people still believe in these kinds of racialised hierarchies.

Gaylene Gould: And what do you think, I mean, it's great that description of the library, I can almost kind of smell it in some ways, but what power do you think historic objects hold and why?

Samson Kambalu: I think that people think that Cecil Rhodes standing there is harmless. It’s not. All these children come to Oxford, they see these white men on the walls and that tells them that who is the boss. Cecil Rhodes towers there above Jesus and God and above pharaohs and kings and queens. And people think that’s fine and that’s how they also are when they come here to study, they go away with these hierarchies in their heads that, okay, it’s a white man who is at the top and everybody else. So it’s not harmless, the way Black people are represented in photographs has an effect here, so John Chilembwe doing this, for me, his message is like, "Make your own images or otherwise somebody else is going to make images for you." And photography and film is big in my practice, is central to my practice, for me it takes a place of masking.

You should know that the Black identity has almost, perhaps in contemporary times, has been exclusively created by film, starting with films that sought to denigrate Black peoples, like Griffith, The Birth of a Nation, a negative representation Black peoples in the media. They way photographic companies don’t care about putting lenses that capture the Black skin truthfully, the racism in that. Images have been at the forefront of demeaning of Black peoples throughout the world. And photography, image-making is a big battlefield. So happy first time when I was in high school to watch MTV, seeing Black kids and Black people being put centre. And in good light, I mean, I grew up with MTV and I was like, “Wow, I didn’t know Black people can look so beautiful even if they’re in ugly situations.” At least it was though they’re still...

I mean, you can see the way the kids handle the camera in hip hop. They know that’s a battlefield. The camera is always held low and they’re higher, and they have to stoop, if you look at NWA or whatever, they have to like for rap, they have to stoop down. They know the power, and how the way camera is held defines you. And for me, the battlefield of image making is also in masking in Africa. The people are always trying to destabilise the images of subjugation that the chiefs or people in authority are trying to impose on the people. The masks come out to parody the structures of power. To parody the images of power, to destabilise these hierarchies. I’m up for that. For me, that’s what I feel art is about. Yeah, I’m not interested in representation. I’m interested in paradigms. And I personally think that the biggest loss is the African paradigm that I’m trying to retrieve in my work.

And I may look Western, but the paradigm I’m pursuing is pretty radical, perhaps controversial in the work I’m proposing. It’s like Chilembwe proposing a horizontal view of the world. Well, Nelson is representing a vertical one, and I’m with Chilembwe on this horizontal one because I believe in this equality, but not equality in any wishy washy way. It’s just that equality that comes through more generosity. Everybody has to bring to the table what they’re able to do. Everybody has something to contribute. If you’ve been given more, more will be expected from you.

And I think the economy of looking out for each other, of community advocating, is what I’m for. This is what Chilembwe’s suggesting. And brand or individualism, I don’t know. I think that we all can employ our egos to the greater good. I’m not saying people should have an egoistic character, but... I’m
hoping that I can use my gifts to help society at large rather than always thinking about my own private gain. The idea of self-sacrifice appeals to me, but it’s controversial in a society that believes in living a life of selfishness and self-serving. I think a gift economy can be functioning, and a gift economy has been here on Earth longer than capitalism anyway. There have been whole civilisations that have functioned on the gift. So what I’m advocating for is not necessarily just utopian. [with emphasis]: I think you can have a flourishing society of luxury. And perhaps for me, it’s talking about the gift, and perhaps proposing Chilembwe is also trying to propose an alternative world. Why? Because the system that we have now is pretty destructive.

Gaylene Gould: I’m curious about... Because there is something about history belonging to somebody, right? This idea that the past belongs to people and therefore you can't intervene.

Samson Kambalu: I don’t know. History is the prerogative of the historian and the say it’s always written by winners and I’m an advocate of a more accommodating approach to history. Almost something perhaps closer to myth. I think perhaps even myth is more truthful than history. History is the powerful, trying to interpret an otherwise complex reality to their needs. Myth allows you, everybody, to come in and contribute their own meaning. So, I’m more interested in the idea of mythologising John Chilembwe than even historicising him. He becomes for me a myth. A myth that’s standing there on Trafalgar Square serving anybody. [theme music: warm harpsichord-like chords and sequences in hopeful, ambitious-sounding surges] You don’t have to come from Malawi to know or to identify with what he’s standing for.

Gaylene Gould: There’s so much here that opened my synapses up. Let’s start with the end. This idea of myth being more interesting or having more possibility than history. I think it’s something in that. It reminds me of what good works of art do.

Yesomi Umolu: Maybe to connect back to Cleopatra and a lot of the myths that have circulated about Cleopatra, especially her relationship with Mark Anthony and how she’s been seen through the lens of desire. And yes, that’s fascinating and it’s fascinating to unpick those myths and maybe to discover new ones about a figure like Cleopatra and to not just discover new ones, but to write new ones about them.

And I think that there’s something about... [theme music evolves into calmer, still warm mood with sustained, venturing notes] Myth is also about fiction to a certain extent as Samson alludes to, if history is the search for truth, a search for facts, then myth is about a sort of fictionalising of the past. But fictionalising, I think, doesn’t mean speaking the untruth. I think fictionalising means speaking from different perspectives, right? Everyone inhabits fictions, right? We kind of imagine the world the way that we want to imagine the world, right? And history is often written by the most dominant people, imagining the world in the way that they want to imagine it. [theme music transitions back into upbeat, repetitive, high-pitched sequences of melodic electronic tones] So, myth-making I think as he says, it’s more accommodating because maybe it means that more people can write history or rethink history or reframe history.

[40:00]
Thinking about memory takes me to a performance by late Lebanese American poet and artist Etel Adnan and British composer Gavin Bryars at an event that Serpentine held in 2012, called The Memory Marathon, in homage to the historian Eric Hobsbawm. [theme music replaced by sombre piano]

**Etel Adnan** [reading her poem ‘Five Senses for One Death’ over piano music by Gavin Bryars]: Wax around you, we sealed you in order to look straight at the sun. We saw a black veil on the holy circle. Five fingers, five senses, five candles for one death. Not to see anymore, but inward, not to know, but to own self, sealed, sealed, oh sea with no tide.

**Yesomi Umolu:** [piano replaced by upbeat theme music] When asked about memory for the Marathon, Etel Adnan was inspired by Hobsbawm’s idea of a protest against forgetting. And she wanted to perform her poem called ‘Five Senses for One Death’. In this piece, we hear mystical descriptions of embalming rituals and grieving, but then we also hear about the deceased person reaching out and touching the speaker. [music switches back to sombre piano and continues]

**Etel Adnan:** Your eyes are sinking into the Pacific. I am cutting through them. They carried your body over the shrubs of Mount Shasta and dumped mine in a reservoir bearing your name. They carried your body on Mount Tamalpais and drowned mine by Stinson Beach. They carried your body on Mount Boctezuma, buried mine in a hole under the floor of an ocean. It took five trees to make a coffin until summer rains washed out the bed sheets. Light on tapique, pressed itself through your flesh and walked along the five branches of your nerves. They dropped your body on a rock next to an Indian God. My knees worshiped both. We smelled each rock, bush and root to track down your flesh and bones, scattered from Alaska to the Andes, but California was a place. [piano music solidifies into deeper chords] They tell me there are four seasons, but I live in the fifth one, which is your space and your time. A volcano opened in your flesh, no, no volcano, but a solar bolt coming down your arm and bursting into fingers. [unusual, melancholy, reflective intervals in the piano music] Fingers that carry the flame along my spine as ice coating fire and moving on their own. [piano music ends]

**Gaylene Gould:** Oh, it gives me shivers, that piece. There’s something about this other idea of the past being about our relationship with the dead. How the dead are still with us. There’s something really moving about that.

**Yesomi Umolu:** I guess this makes me think about how we lay the past to rest and what position do we want to take in looking towards the past. Is it something that we address with a mournful tone, with regret, with disdain? Or is it something that we kind of accept as being useful, as being productive, as having moments of joy, and us being maybe reinvigorated by the possibility that something did happen in the past, whether or not there were positive or negative aspects to it. And maybe to go full circle, I think that something really beautiful about Samson and his personality and his persona is that it comes from a place of, as you say, a place of play and conviviality and positivity towards the past, even though some of the things that he’s attending to are very, very violent, they’re very disturbing. But, as he said, if he did not inhabit this persona, this positive, playful, comedic, irreverent persona, he would be somebody else. So, his work wouldn’t have the resonance.
Gaylene Gould: Yeah, I think so. And it also brings me back to Zing as well. This idea of how do we lay to rest? How do we give space to those people who may not have had rituals to lay them to rest? And in a way, the work that Samson is doing, the work that Zing is doing, is allowing us to offer a ritual to those people that we may have yet to know existed. [theme music returns with sustained, intriguing and warm electronic tones]

Zing Tsjeng: There were all these people, in my books, women, who were actually saying, 'Hey, what if we just thought a little bit bigger here, and we came up with an alternative view of the future and what it could be like, where it includes people like me who can contribute this to society?' That’s really valuable because it essentially is a form of science fiction. Science fiction is often thought of as a kind of exercise in dystopia where we’re talking about terrible futures that might happen. But when we talk about history and when we try and expand this idea of what history is about and whose voices we hear from in history, it’s actually creating a positive science fiction where you’re talking about a future where these voices have been heard, a future where these lives mattered.

And I think it’s almost like a role model for what we’re trying to do in the present day, where we’re like, actually what we’re doing right now to build a better society seems really hard and difficult. But all these people hundreds of years ago were actually trying to do that in their own small way. And in a way it’s kind of giving us strength to look forward to the future.

Gaylene Gould: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think this idea of remembering as a creative act, remembering as science fiction, that those women in the past had their own outlandish kind of visions of the future. And how do we wrap all of that in not just what happened, but what they dreamed. Yesomi, thank you so much for helping me remember through this episode. And before you leave us, I’d just like to ask you what one thing might you want us to remember?

Yesomi Umolu: Thinking about the work that we did recently with Barbara Chase-Riboud, it’s to remember to be persistent. [theme music switches back to warm harpsichord-like chords and sequences with hopeful, ambitious-sounding surges] Because I think that her work and her practice has been about a certain persistence, but also commitment to speaking through her own voice and telling her own narrative, irrespective of whether or not there are others listening. And I think that’s really quite important as we think about remembering and reworlding. Yes, reworlding is a collective art, but a collective act can also be formed by individual activations or individual agitations. And if we continue to remember to be committed to our individual parts, then that collective act, I think, will coalesce very nicely. [deeper chords and sparkling, high-pitched sounds]

Gaylene Gould: I love that. Thank you so much Yesomi. I think this episode has been incredibly rich in ideas and perspective and in many ways we’ve remembered, but it feels like it’s been an act of stories, of science fiction stories, of imagining, and I’m still trying to rearrange these puzzle pieces from the past that will help me think of this wiser future world. So, I asked Samson what he thinks we need.

Samson Kambalu: We need more art, we need more parties, more enjoyment, [laughs heartily] for an ethical world.
Gaylene Gould: [with a smile] More natty clothes?

Samson Kambalu: Yes, more natty clothes! You know what I mean? If people lived just for a nice glass of wine with a good jacket, the world would become better.

Gaylene Gould: [chuckling] Yes! [claps] Amen to that! [music transitions back to upbeat theme music]

[50:00]

Today, I’ve learnt that how we remember and what we choose to remember not only affects the world we live in today, but also the world we’ll go on to create. It’s like, rather than being taught history, we need to be taught how to remember that the dead continue to live beside us. And rather than being separated from history, we too live beside the dead. I like this idea that in the new world, myth will supersede history, that each of us will be encouraged to contribute our own meaning of the past. That storytelling about what came before can be imaginative and won’t only be the preserve of the powerful. Samson’s commitment to literally wearing history in the present as an act of self-realisation is a wonderful way to actively remember in our lives. Not to fix, but to shift, to open up possibilities, to unpin. Most importantly, these artists reminded me to elevate the historic moments of generosity and possibility rather than the imperial historical narratives that are so often pedalled. To conquer is the entitlement to lay claim to someone else. However, to refocus on those overlooked fragments of history that suggest more generous ways of being, is a way to lay claim to ourselves. So, where are the stories of generosity and possibility within your own histories? And how might you wear them today? What monuments will you imagine? And who should we not forget?

[upbeat theme music continues, then concludes] [we hear the beginnings of KMRU’s Temporary Stored under Gaylene’s outro and KMRU’s intro: sustained, mysterious mid-pitched drone sound with archival recording of traditional vocals with repeated phrases]

Serpentine Podcast REWORLDING is presented by me, Gaylene Gould. The series was produced by Katie Callin with production support from Nada Smiljanic at Reduced Listening and curated by the Serpentine Editorial team, Hanna Girma and Fiona Glen. Thanks to all members of Serpentine’s Programmes, Communications and Audiences teams for their direction and contribution. Special thanks to Serpentine’s leadership team, Bettina Korek, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Yesomi Umolu.

The theme music for REWORLDING was conceived and produced by KMRU. Our thanks go to all guests, contributors and advisors on REWORLDING. Now, I’m leaving you with one final look back, in order to look forward. As I’ve just said, our theme music for this series was conceived and produced by KMRU, a leading sound artist based between Nairobi and Berlin. I want to leave you now with a piece of his called Temporary Stored that really reflects some of the things we’ve been exploring today. Here he is to introduce it.

KMRU: I use lots of field recordings in my work where there are different spaces and places and I can learn from them or incorporate them in my music. I’m always trying to find or provoke different ways of listening to sound or people or things. So, Temporary Stored, the project began actually maybe two years ago when a friend of mine told me about the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Belgium, which holds lots of recordings and music from Eastern and Central Africa from 1912 onwards. And I ended up choosing almost 108 recordings. Listening back to the recordings for the very first time was
intriguing because most of them were quite musical, and I thought they would be pure field recordings. But I was thinking a lot about the conversation that has been happening with museums and repatriation and giving back to where these objects are from. But most of this (conversation) was from a tangible approach where these artifacts are stored in museums, and there was no conversation happening with the recordings which are temporary stored in these museums.

And I wanted to approach it from a sonic thought, where also the sounds that have been recorded were sort of stolen in a way. And things from the past are opaque and considered in a way that they cannot be used in the future. But with sounds, I think sounds transcend this idea of past and future because there’s like this connection where we can still hear the past through sound. And when we’re listening, there’s still a connection with the past and I think sound is one of the mediums which maybe best connects the future in the past. Yeah, maybe *Temporary Stored* could be a bridge.

*Temporary Stored* by KMRU. A highly layered audio work bringing together: rustling sounds reminiscent of archives and analogue tape being handled; deep resonant tones like electronic reverberations or beaten metal; repetitive percussive sounds; birdsong; distant captured vocals from field recordings in African languages that slip in and out, as if overheard from passers-by or through a radio, sometimes layered out of audibility, sometimes popping into the foreground; single resonant musical tones, perhaps from tubular bells, which punctuate the music like beeps; waves of higher-pitched sustained tones rising and falling. Energy builds, then calms towards the end of the piece, which concludes with voices singing and chanting, overheard speech and a final resounding tone.