Exhibitions

Samson Kambalu
Kate MacGarry
London 9 September to 15 October
Whitechapel Gallery
London 23 August to 8 January

Samson Kambalu’s Sanguineti Breakout Area, originally presented at last year’s Venice Biennale, is a complicated installation consisting of dozens of photographs, a lengthy wall text, some modular furniture and an archive-boxed book as thick as your leg. It sounds dry, but it isn’t. It sounds like it needs a little background, and it does. In 2014, Kambalu, who was born in Malawi in 1975 but who has lived in the UK for the past couple of decades, was on a fellowship at Yale when he encountered the archive of Situationist International member Gianfranco Sanguineti, the collection having been acquired by the institution’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library the year before. The sale of such material is controversial; in 2009, Yale had applied for an export licence for Guy Debord’s archive but the French culture minister designated it a national treasure – despite Debord being vehemently anti-state – and the Bibliothèque nationale de France raised the million-plus euros required to purchase the collection from Debord’s second wife, Alice Becker-Ho. The sale of Sanguineti’s archive was controversial too, partly because it contains items by other SI members – including around 600 letters and a number of drawings by Debord, for example – and so could perhaps be considered the property of the wider SI group, but mainly it was controversial because property itself is not a concept that the expressly anti-capitalist group in its heyday would have been comfortable applying to its own productions and ephemera.

The Sanguineti sale certainly got the goat of Bill Brown, who for more than three decades has been translating SI texts for his Not Bored! project; when he learned of the commercialisation and institutionalisation of the archive, Brown broke off relations with Sanguineti via a vitriolic but entertaining letter proclaiming: 1) You are a liar … 2) You are a sell out … 3) You are a fool … , which Kambalu runs as a vinyl wall text across the gallery. The text is partially obscured by an array of photographs Kambalu took of the archive items while in the Yale library; letters, drawings, snapshots and so on are seen held in Kambalu’s hand with the modernist rooms of the vaulted research archive behind. In this way, Kambalu simultaneously claims the archive for himself and for a wider public while also emphasising its institutional owner – a kind of intellectual pickpocketing performed in plain sight. In the gallery, three expansive sets of around 3,000 of these images are also bound as doormat tomes titled Gianfranco Sanguineti: Theses. And that modular furniture dotted around the installation? It is based on scaled-up tokens from Debord’s The Game of War – Kambalu’s project is clearly a game of power plays and countermoves, played out in the milieu of a spent dissident culture.

To fully understand Sanguineti Breakout Area, it helps first to see other projects by Kambalu, such as his Introduction to Nyau Cinema, a new work at the Whitechapel Gallery. Here the artist presents ten of his ‘Nyau Cinema’ series of short black-and-white films, most of which depict him performing pointy acts of slapstick: in Cathedral simple jump cuts make him appear to magically walk through the building’s buttress walls (Christian colonialists considered Nyau cinema a backward cult), in Superfly he thrashes on the floor like a dying fly (in mockery of Hastings Banda, Malawi’s president for life, and his ceremonial fly-whisk) and in I Take My Place in History he steps up to pose alongside white classical sculptures in a museum storeroom. Arranged on the walls like a magazine spread, the videos intersperse a text that describes the Nyau cinema of Kambalu’s youth, where film screenings were open participatory events overseen by ringmaster projectionists who would cut together different films to produce exuberant, anti-authoritarian, gift-economy-based celebrations – Kambalu considers these events to be ‘situations’ in the SI sense of visceral lived experience in opposition to the mediated products of conventional commercial cinema.

While the essay is fascinating, the work does little to progress beyond this form; it does, however, show how the artist has long embraced Situationist philosophies. This warmth also explains the cutting ridicule so apparent in Sanguineti Breakout Area, where the commercialisation and recuperation of the anti-capitalist archive are adeptly skewed and Debord’s war game becomes an R&R prop for technocapitalism’s kidult worker bees. The presentation at Kate MacGarry doesn’t end with the Venetian work, however; it also includes a coda, Capsules, Mountains and Forts. This publication gathers together literature triggered by the Venice presentation; a letter from Brown to Biennale curator Okwui Enwezor insisting that his text and name be removed from the artwork and, more substantially, a legal challenge from Sanguineti over the installation in which he claimed that Kambalu’s use of his archive breached both his copyright and his privacy, and that the publication bearing his name was counterfeit. The Italian court ruled in Kambalu’s favour, the insightful judgment concluding that ‘the work conveys the Situationist message of sarcastic criticism’. In other words, Kambalu’s détournement of the archive is a Situationist critique of the very notion of the commercialisation of a Situationist archive. The irony is that the artist now employing anti-authoritarian Situationist
strategies, Kambalu, required the machinery of the state to
defend himself against a Situationist claiming ownership of
intellectual property. Where does this leave us? Ensnared
in a realm where anarchists have become prison guards, and
where it seems that protests is possible only through subtle
negotiation with the institutions of authority – be they cultural,
legal, educational or commercial. This is a realm where
Kambalu's supple sleight of hand is most definitely required.

David Barrett is associate editor of Art Monthly.

Reading as Art

Bury Art Museum 26 August to 19 November

'If used to be an artist,' says Kenneth Goldsmith, 'then I became a
poet, then a writer. Now when asked, I simply refer to myself as a
word processor.' Much the same, or similar, might have been said
by most of the other contributors to Simon Morris's exhibition,
which assembles current work that explores the potential of the
act of reading as art, attempting in various ways to identify the
difference between looking at something and reading it. Morris
has selected recent works that appropriate existing texts as their
material and others which emphasise the essential material
qualities of the support on which words appear or might appear – a
page of a book, a single sheet of paper, a blank computer screen.
Wandering through the exhibition, trying to get to the measure of
it, the initial impression is that it offers comparatively little to read.
The overwhelming impact is one of blankness, removal, erasure,
disappearance. The prevailing colouring is that of the monochrome
or parchment coloured hues of echt paper-based Conceptual Art.
Here is a small blank white page, signed by the seminal concrete
poet Eugen Gomringer, in homage to Laurence Sterne. There is the
dense sepulchral blackness of Nick Thurston's elaborately achieved
obliteration of a textual artwork by Joseph Kosuth.

One body of works in the exhibition involves monumental
accumulations of appropriated texts, dismantled and remade.
Carol Sommers has painstakingly located all the sentences within
Iris Murdoch's entire oeuvre of 26 published novels that describe
the states of mind of her fictional female characters. Collated in
strict alphabetical order and run on continuously like an extremely
long prose poem, these myriad sentences form a substantial
paperback book. If a page is read at random in an orthodox way,
the effect is mystifyingly coherent and certainly poetic. Sommers'
book is accompanied in this exhibition by an exploded installation
version comprising hundreds of single book pages pinned to the
gallery wall, each blank apart from a single sentence printed in its
original place on the page. The air within the exhibition is not silent; it is full of sounds
derived from words being printed, erased or read aloud. The
poet Rob Fitterman has amalgamated hundreds of anonymous
expressions of disaffection, disappointment and isolation found
on blogs and online posts to form a book-length poem. For
this exhibition, however, Fitterman reads his text out loud, his
disembodied voice relayed through a single standing loudspeaker
the height of a person. Fitterman's relentlessly downbeat
monologue does tend to condition the viewer's responses to
other unrelated works nearby. Goldsmith's seven long montages
of appropriated texts from archival radio and TV broadcasts,
Seven American Deaths and Disasters, 2013, remind me of the
montaged newsreel sections of John Dos Passos's 1930s novels.
Originally in book form, Goldsmith's texts here have been 're-
mediated' on seven digital screens, appearing to materialise on
them as if they were being typed 'live' somewhere out of sight by
seven clattering manual typewriters.

According to Morris, several of these works touch upon Marcel
Duchamp's concept of the 'infrathin', the space that hovers or
flutters between two almost imperceptibly different states. For
Morris, a characteristic work by American 'conceptual sculptor' Tom

Jeremie Bennequin
Édouard Poirot
Wishing 2005-15

Kate Briggs
Paper Star Poem
2016