

Exhibitions

Samson Kambalu

Kate MacGarry London 9 September to 15 October

Whitechapel Gallery London 23 August to

8 January

Samson Kambalu's *Sanguinetti 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 Sanguinetti, 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 Sanguinetti'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 Sanguinetti 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 Sanguinetti 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 doorstep tomes titled *Gianfranco Sanguinetti 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 *Sanguinetti 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 pointed 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 *Sanguinetti Breakout Area*, where the commercialisation and recuperation of the anti-capitalist archive are adeptly skewered 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 Sanguinetti 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

Samson Kambalu
'Capsules, Mountains
and Forts'
installation view



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 protest 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

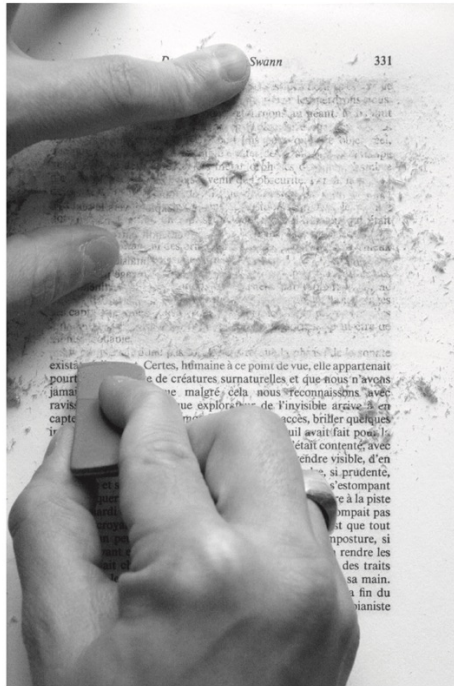
Bury Art Museum 26 August to 19 November

'I 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 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.

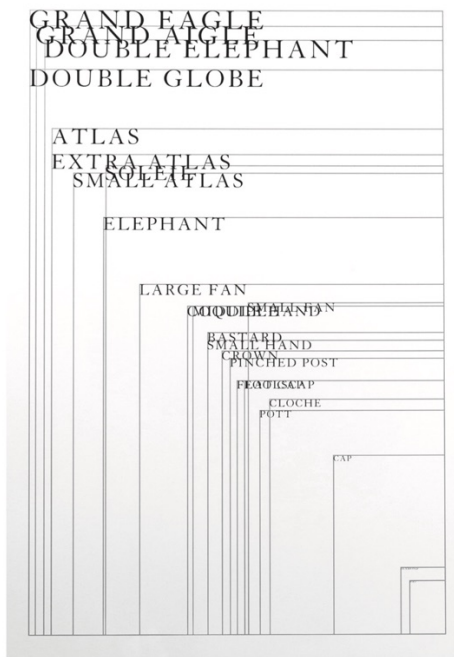
One body of works in the exhibition involves monumental accumulations of appropriated texts, dismantled and remade. Carol Sommer has painstakingly located all the sentences within Iris Murdoch's entire oeuvre of 26 published novels that describe the states of mind of her fictional female characters. 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 cogent and certainly poetic. Sommer's 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 deriving 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-



Jeremie Bennequin
Eroded Proust
Writing 2005-15

Kate Briggs
Paper Size Poem
2016



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