

Tessa Solomon, "Samson Young's Sonic Explorations Reveal Unseen Histories of Territories, Conflict, and Separation," *ArtNews*, April 19, 2021.

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Samson Young.
SALLY JUBB, COURTESY TALBOT RICE GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Birdsongs burst from behind the crowd, or maybe just ahead of it, in the corner. Its trills bounce and ricochet off the gallery walls. The sounds clearly denote distress. Eventually its source is revealed: high above, a performer dressed in a police uniform plays along to a tape of birdsongs with a bird whistle. The architect of the performance, **Samson Young**, projects the sound through a long-range acoustic device—a non-lethal sonic weapon designed to scare away birds but more ominously used by law enforcement to disperse protestors. At full volume, it can cause permanent hearing loss.

Petzel

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He performed the piece, titled *Canon*, continuously over several hours at Art Basel in Switzerland in 2016. Audience members wandered through rooms filled with materials related to the 1979 Vietnamese refugee crisis, when 2,700 asylum seekers were stranded aboard a cargo vessel for four months after being denied entry to Hong Kong.

Like most of Young’s recent work, it confronted the historical misuse of sound as a tool to corral listeners behind borders. It was also an invitation to imagine how sound can transcend confinement: the birdsong of *Canon* rebuked the device’s aural violence.

“I became interested in notions of conflict in part because of the increasingly unfree and tense political environment at home,” Young told *ARTnews* in an email interview, referring to Hong Kong, where he was born and continues to live and work. “I was dealing with these issues in a broader sense, sometimes incorporating found materials. They were usually mixed with elements that referred to Hong Kong (e.g., the colonial-era Hong Kong police uniform that the performer wore in *Canon*.)”

Over the past ten years, Young’s work has shown at institutions worldwide, including the Guggenheim Museum, M+ Pavilion, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. In 2017 he represented Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale. His profile skyrocketed after he won the inaugural edition of the Art Basel–BMW Art Journey Award in 2015. The winning project, “For Whom the Bell Tolls: A Journey Into the Sonic History of Conflict,” brought him to five continents where he studied bells as symbol of peace and war.

Now, the artist has attained new representation with New York’s **Petzel Gallery**. He will continue to be represented by Edouard Malingue Gallery in Hong Kong and Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, Germany.

Young will show new works on paper in Petzel’s upcoming group show, opening May 4 at the gallery’s Upper East Side location, followed by a presentation in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale this fall. His first solo exhibition with Petzel is planned for 2022. This fall he’ll also debut *Container*, a collaboration with musicians from the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble and Hamburg’s Ensemble Resonanz.

“I’ve been impressed for years by his talent in weaving together image and sound, and his diligent notation systems are reminiscent of the practices of many of the gallery’s artists,” Friedrich Petzel, the gallery’s founder, said in a statement.

Though rooted in classical composition—he holds a Ph.D. in music composition from Princeton—Young’s practice spans interactive performance, film, animations, and 3-D printing.

Like modernist composers John Cage and Gyorgy Ligeti, whose frustrations with music tradition led to conceptual breakthroughs, Young explores the tonality of the world. Cage’s landmark

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performance, 4’33”, in which the deliberate absence of sound extends for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, extenuating the natural sounds of the environment, is one source of artistic inspiration.

For Young’s work *Muted Situations #22: Muted Tchaikovsky’s 5th* (2018), the artist instructed the Flora Sinfonie Orchester of Cologne to play with muted instruments. He then heightened the other sounds that would normally be masked during a performance: breathing, turning pages of sheet music, the movement of fingers across keys and strings. As one of the most-played pieces of music in history, a ghost of the melody for Tchaikovsky’s 5th symphony took shape over the concert hall.

A desire to add physicality to sound and silence also runs through Young’s work. For his breakout piece, *Liquid Borders* (2012–14), he visited the restricted zone along the Hong Kong–Mainland China border, two bodies physically separated by a wall of wired fence and water. Having obtained a permit to enter the zone (which was then at a risk of shrinking even further), Young placed contact microphones on the border wall to record the sonic atmosphere of the divide—vibrations of the metal, running water from the Shenzhen River, the rush of wind akin to a passing train.

Young devotes long hours to research into the history of conflict sites. For *Liquid Borders*, he archived photographs of the border as well as the government permits he received for the project. He transcribed the recordings into drawn “soundscape sketches,” which is now a regular part of his practice. When assembled, the pieces of *Liquid Borders* speak to the scars left on the landscape by the nation’s geopolitical reality. Fences, while never really equipped to keep the determined out, are still pernicious symbols.

Questions of territories continue to appear in Young’s work, even as he moves from drawings into more technological means of communication. Lately, Young has been devising a new musical composition system by connecting 3-D printed objects to a sensor-based program—a musical instrument and score, of sorts. The program’s coding processes chapters of the core Taoist text *Dao De Jing* and translates them into “a panopticon of sensing-instruments.”

“A conversation about sound is very much tied to a conversation about technological development,” Young said. “It is technology, specifically the invention of recording technology, that untethered sound from its source, and gave it physical properties and plasticity. Sometimes, when a new technology becomes available it creates a fundamental shift in perception.”

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