

ArtReview

Samson Young

Mark Rappolt Features 06 August 2018 ArtReview



Michael Schiefel recording his performance for 'When I have fears that I may cease to be, what would you give in exchange for your soul', 2016 soundwalk. Image: courtesy the artist and Frieze, London

Editor's note: Samson Young has been invited to kick off 'Talks on Music and the Arts' held at Kunsthau Bregenz, during which the gallery's director Thomas D. Trummer will host four artists in discussions around the meaning of music and sound in their work. Young will also present his talk alongside a live performance on 9 August.

Like much of the best contemporary art, that produced by Samson Young exists at the moment when concept and reality touch, only to then recoil and ricochet their separate ways. Perhaps the most literal demonstration of this can be found in his live performance work *Nocturne* (2015), shown that year at Team Gallery, New York. For much of the almost two months of his solo

Petzel

Mark Rappolt, "Samson Young," *Art Review*, August 6, 2018.

exhibition (titled *Pastoral Music*) the artist would sit in the middle of the gallery space (otherwise decorated with his drawings), and use a series of everyday materials and a large marching-drum to create Foley-effect explosions to accompany a six-hour video of found and edited footage of nighttime bombing raids (largely conducted by the US in the Middle East). Fed through a computer and broadcast via a radio station, the sound of dirt, lightly dropped on a microphone, or of a fan blowing some rice paper, or of a gentle tapping of the drum became that of a bomb going off somewhere in, say, Baghdad. Physically the set-up (of artist, mikes, computer, monitor and a variety of tools) is complicated; conceptually the work is simple, bringing together a series of binaries – truth and falsehood, the real and invented, the micro and the macro, the mediated and the directly experienced, cause and effect – and letting the viewer, or listener, imagine the consequences of their collision in this live reconstruction of dead events. We might, for example, think about news pitched as entertainment, which was the vehicle through which much of the world experienced the events recorded in Young's bombing videos, via news feeds and other media. A longer encounter with the work might lead to meditation on the meaning of 'monotony' too.

The work combines seeming innocence with an underlying and sinister demonstration of power

Of, course, this artist's work is anything but monotonous. Trained in classical music composition, Hong Kong-born and based, Young is generally described as a 'sound artist' but that's a categorisation the experience of his work suggests he actually escapes. While Young continues to work as a composer, his work in the realm of art mixes live and recorded sound, performance, video and drawing in increasingly complex ways. *When I have fears that I may cease to be, what would you give in exchange for your soul* (2016) was a sound walk produced for last year's Frieze Art Fair in London. Its title fuses the opening line of an early nineteenth-century mock-Elizabethan sonnet by Romantic poet John Keats with the title of a twentieth-century country gospel song; the narrative of the walk, inspired by Graham Green's novel *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), a wartime tale of paranoia and espionage, took the form of a series of surveillance reports on a bookseller called Lok and was supplied via headphones and an iPod. Like much of Young's work it took the form of a constellation of influences and ideas mapped out over space and time. It incorporated videos activated at specific locations in the fair, an archived playlist, a live performance by singer Michael Schiefel (whispered in your ear), and by Young himself (accessed by calling his mobile at the end of the tour). Besides its evocation of the disturbing disappearance of five Hong Kong-based booksellers and subsequent reappearance following a period of detention in mainland China in 2015, and the unsettling effect that had on the Special Administrative Region, the work had the more immediately disorienting effect of strobing you in and out of the space of the art fair itself as if you were trapped on some defective *Star Trek* transporter deck, continually ricocheting from one space to another. Reports on Lok were accessed at 'the gallery where Regina works' or the 'tour desk where Lillian works' in a way that balanced an increasing intimacy with the bookseller with your increasing intimacy with the space and operations of the art fair. Although, for all that, you felt truly intimate with

Petzel

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neither at the same time: the walk effectively disengaged you from the other works in the fair and offered only fleeting glimpses of the life of Lok.

Young's particular brand of subtle politics also surfaced in *Canon* (2015). Performed as part of the Unlimited section of last year's Art Basel, it featured the artist, dressed as a Hong Kong policeman, standing on a scissor-lift, using bird whistles to project bird sound through the exhibition hall with the help of a Long Range Acoustic Device (conventionally used to scare off pest birds or, by riot police, to disperse crowds). The work combined seeming innocence (and a certain Romanticism, that is present in much of Young's output) with an underlying and sinister demonstration of power. The performance was accompanied by a caged room filled with Young's drawings of distressed bird sounds, which, like much of his graphic work, recalls the onomatopoeic works of Dada and Kurt Schwitters, or the graphic works of Asger Jorn combined with a messy form of mapmaking.

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Young's genre-defying artworks are currently enjoying the kind of 'moment' that will make him seem ubiquitous this summer. Having won the inaugural BMW Art Journey award in 2015 he is now a finalist for the 2017 Absolut Art Award. His 56-minute composition *Such Sweet Thunder* (2017), a meditation on the social function of bells derived from research conducted during the artist's BMW Art Journey, is currently part of the radio programme at Documenta 14. His five-part radio series, *One of Two Stories, or Both (Field Bagatelles)*, inspired by stories of seventeenth-century Chinese migrants travelling to Europe on foot, will be performed live and broadcast as part of this summer's Manchester International Festival. And before that he will represent Hong Kong at this year's Venice Biennale.

While the exact nature of *Sounds for Disaster Relief*, the work he will produce for Venice, is shrouded in the usual veil of secrecy, it is, appropriately at a time when so much contemporary art seems driven by a social and socially conscious turn (perhaps the result of a paranoia about its relevance to the rapidly changing world in which it exists), inspired by the fad for charity pop singles – notably Band Aid's *Do They Know It's Christmas* (1984) and USA for Africa's *We Are The World* (1985) – during the early 1980s. For Young, the mix of good intentions, lyrics that reflect patronising colonial attitudes of them and us, and such songs' reflection of the neoliberal politics of Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher offer not an opportunity for mockery, but rather an opportunity (in the wake of recent remakes of some of those songs, and the continuing appeal of the charity single in Hong Kong) to measure where such efforts and such relationships sit now. And naturally it will involve his own 'super messed-up' remakes of some of the originals. Perhaps these will be a perfect reflection of the increasingly complex 'super messed-up' world of today.

Petzel

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Songs for Disaster Relief was on show at the Hong Kong Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 13 May – 28 November 2017.

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