

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, September 26, 2017.



Yeewan Koon,

What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's *Songs For Disaster Relief*



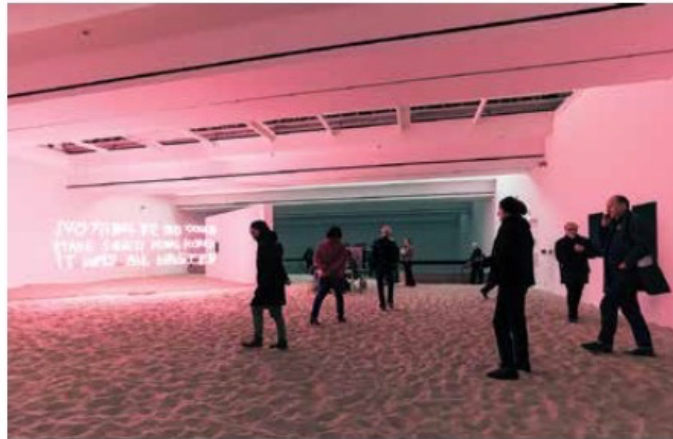
The ambitious theme of this year's 57th Venice Biennale is *Viva Arte Viva*, a rallying call by curator Christine Marcel for art to reconnect with a world that has been fractured by individualism and indifference. Although there are times when that idea descended into a retro-hippie display of the healing powers of art, there were also artworks that tackled the theme with political insightfulness and emotional depth. One presentation worthy of note was *Samson Young: Songs for Disaster Relief* at the Hong Kong Pavilion, which consisted of audio components, video, sculpture, two-dimensional works, performance, and installations, and was organized by M+ with guest curator Kwok Ying.

Entrance to Hong Kong Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

Petzel

Yeewan Koon, “What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young’s Songs For Disaster Relief,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, September 26, 2017.

Samson Young, installation view at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2016. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy Gallerie Giesla Capitain, Cologne, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.



In recent years, Samson Young has been making his mark on the international stage with shows at Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (2015), Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2016), and Frieze London (2016). Although he is often referred to as a sound artist, it is a definition that fails to do justice to his multidisciplinary portfolio and to the complexity of his projects, which combine an array of different, sometimes disparate sources, concepts, and processes. For example, for Frieze London, his *When I have fears that I may cease to be, what would you give in exchange for your soul* was a sound walk whose title was a mashup of a sonnet by John Keats and a country gospel song.¹ Participants went through the fair listening to a dedicated playlist on earphones, with instructions to walk through the fair, sometimes with visuals on an iPad, and sometimes the directions would lead to a live performance by Michael Schiefel. At the end of the sound walk, participants were given Samson Young's telephone number, and if they dialed this number, he would sing them a tune from wherever he was.

Samson Young, *When I have fears that I may cease to be*, 2016, interactive artwork. Photo: Dennis Man Wing Leung, Courtesy of the artist and Frieze London.

The walk was inspired by the classic espionage film *Ministry of Fear* (Fritz Lang, 1944) based on a story by Graham Greene, and involved a series of surveillance reports by a Hong Kong bookseller known only as Lok. It evoked, without being too heavy-handed, the recent news of the kidnapping of four Hong Kong booksellers by mainland China



authorities, and its implications for the future of freedom of expression in Britain's former colony.² But arguably more effective was how Samson Young transported participants into an alternate fictional world through sensory engagement from their vantage point within the spatial reality of Frieze's white tent.

In Venice, *Songs for Disaster Relief* also blended the imagined with the actual. The conceptual seeds of this project began when Samson Young

Petzel

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, September 26, 2017.



heard the 2010 remake of the 1985 charity single classic *We Are The World*³ in aid of victims of the Haiti earthquake. Samson Young, a trained musician and composer, was disconcerted by this reiteration of an iconic Band Aid song, which he describes as being “out of time” with its excessive use of auto-tuning that jarred with the emotions of the song and rendering it anachronistic.⁴ While he found the remake wanting, the song did prompt his interest in looking at charity singles and exploring different interventions to create remixes that stretch the conceptual and sonic ranges of these songs.

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

The conceit of the structure of the exhibition is as an EP album composed of remakes or responses to three classic charity singles: *Do They Know It's Christmas?* (1984), *We Are the World* (1985), and *Many Hearts Prevail* (1991), a Cantonese version of *Bridge Over Troubled Waters*.⁵ Samson Young's “remakes” are a series of projects entitled *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the mythmaker who fell to earth)*, *We are the World as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir*, and *Lullaby (World Music)*. Each project consists of many different works, but together they share one a common interest: Samson Young examines the 1980s/1990s humanitarian pop-music world projects through the lens of failed aspirations, and, in different ways, his works reflect back on our own sense of social responsibility and choice.

The first two rooms of the Hong Kong pavilion are dedicated to *Palazzo Gundane*. During Samson Young's research on charity singles in the 1980s, he came across a story of a group of unemployed musicians in Cape Town, led by singer-songwriter Boomtown Gundane, who made a song in response to another 1980s charity classic: *Do They Know It's Christmas?*. Boomtown Gundane's response song was aptly titled *Yes We Do*, with the

Petzel

Yeewan Koon, “What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young’s Songs For Disaster Relief,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, September 26, 2017.



Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl record, felt-tip pen on vinyl cover, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

funds apparently going toward educational programs on contraceptives and safe sex. If the 1980s charity singles promoted a distinct blend of altruism and pop music glamour that, while well-intended, exploited the narrative of a third world country that needs to be saved, Boomtown’s provocatively sassy response provides a much-needed African voice that challenged this image of the benevolent West.

The brilliance of this response was further capped when Samson Young later discovered that the story of *Yes We Do* was a fake article that originated from a satirical website in South Africa. While current affairs may uphold this fake news as being “in time” in a post-Trump world, far more compelling was the audacious wit of an African response to Euro-American celebrity advocacy. The fact that the singer Boomtown Gundane never existed is almost incidental to this powerful narrative.

Samson Young takes the story as a point of departure to recreate another “Boomtown Gundane.” He was a rigger in the oil fields of Williston, North Dakota (one of the earliest boomtowns), and his real name is Michael Schiefel (a real artist who often collaborates with Samson Young), while his performance name is Boomtown Gundane. Boomtown loves cowboy movies, and country music, and hangs out in a bohemian-style room, and of course makes records that reach platinum status. Powerful narratives can be created by the biography of one person, and fiction gives us access to the inaccessible through the invention of possibilities. Samson Young, in these two connected rooms, presents a meta-fiction that presents Boomtown Gundane as a person, alter ego, and conceptual structure.

The first room pays homage to Gundane’s music career with walls covered in “platinum” records made up of collages from found objects, gold gilding,

Petzel

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief,"
Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, September 26, 2017.

and drawings. In the centre of the room is *Winged Victory*, the "key visual" for the concert promoting the album featuring songs inspired by *Yes We Do*. *Winged Victory*, a 3D-printed sculptural model with a grey and green patina that is a mashup of Ronald Reagan, Pythagoras, and a space station that clashes with a military bugle. It references Reagan's unsuccessful Star Wars program, which asked scientists to devise a missile defense program that would make nuclear weapons obsolete. It was intended to be a type of bargaining chip to help end the Cold War, but this proved counterproductive. Throughout the 1980s, Reagan's refusal to give up the Star Wars program was one of the sticking points that prevented any arms agreement between America and the Soviet Union. As an example of thwarted ambitions, it was a spectacular one. Samson Young chose Pythagoras based on an anecdote that this classical figure would hold his geometry classes hidden behind curtains, as he believed that his students could better concentrate on the sound of his voice without the distraction of his physical presence.



Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

The disconnection between a sound and its source is known as "acousmatic sound," a term coined by Pierre Schaeffer in 1955.⁶ This is a listening paradigm where, by ignoring the sound source, one must refocus attention to the different types of sonic properties that without their signifiers can generate an abstract aestheticized experience. This is something at the heart of many of Samson Young's works that involves sonic fragments and sound objects. For example, he examined night bombings in war zone areas in *Nocturne* (2015), and recordings of bells at historical war sites in *For Whom the Bell Tolls: A Journey into the Sonic History of Conflicts* (2015).



Visually, *Winged Victory* lies recumbent like a fallen classical ruin that captures the subtitle of *The mythmaker who fell to Earth of Palazzo Gundane*. Its individual, grey-green components are enmeshed with each other at different angles so that there

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

Petzel

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief,"
Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, September 26, 2017.

is no one position that allows a complete view. Our mythmaker lies on a mirror that further erases clear definitions between the forms. That lack of clarity compliments a work where the conceptual lines between individuals are blurred and where there is no clear boundary between fact and fiction. It is not surprising that one of the influences in this project is Joseph Beuys, who constructed a fictional account of his own artistic life and used metaphorical and mythical speech to create an alternate persona (*Lebenslauf/Werklauf*, 1964–1970).⁷ *Palazzo Gundane* can similarly be seen as Samson Young's creative autobiography, where the figure of Boomtown, and/or Michael Schiefel takes on aspects of Samson Young's life and persona, but, ultimately, our fictional hero maintains an agency separate from his maker.

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane* (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth), 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.



In the next room, Samson Young has created an intimate space, a cross between a bohemian café and a private living room. Projected onto one of the curtains is an MTV video of Boomtown Gandane/Michael Schiefel singing songs from the "album" related to *Winged Victory* and against a backdrop of the North Dakota industrial landscape. The draped curtains refer back to Pythagoras, a metaphorical reminder of the disconnection between sound and its maker, which is the sonic heart of this room. For example, there are video animations of motifs of children taken from the album cover of *Do They Know It's Christmas?* and now isolated as singular imagery onto a bright empty television screen. The children from the original album cover were Victorian-style images, but now they are transformed into bright, pixelated versions dancing to manipulated versions of the 1980s classic. The overall visual effect is one of anachronism, and this complements the artist's edited abstract compositions, which displace the easy melody of the original. Again the relationship between sound source, mediated sound, and listener is intertwined and creates an experiential encounter through a metaphorical "curtain" of Boomtown Gundane that shrouds the referential properties of the charity single.

Unraveling the many threads of ideas that are tightly bound into *palazzo Gundane* is both frustrating and inspiring. It is like having a conversation composed of stops and starts, of non-sequiturs and anacoluthon, and where logic and fantasy are placed on equal footing. Nonetheless, overall the works exert a sense of urgency even if we cannot quite place our finger on the

Petzel

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief,"
Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, September 26, 2017.



anxiety. Perhaps it is in the way that Samson Young mixes technology with a post-Cold War 1980s world that reminds us we are living in a moment of fanatical leaders, unfinished wars, and untrustworthy superpowers, when the hardline politics of Thatcher, Reagan, and Gorbachev are echoed too loudly.



In *We Are the World*, as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir, Samson Young returns to more familiar territory. This piece continues his interest in muted sound, in which he cancels out the main layer of sound to reveal the underlying "noise" of a

sonic situation. Past situations include a string quartet (*Muted Situation #1, Muted Classical Quartet*, 2014) and Chinese lion dance (*Muted Situation #2, Muted Lion Dance*, 2014). In these he overturned the hierarchy of sound so that instead of the celebratory drumming that often accompanies a lion dance, the audience was left with the pattering of feet, exchanges between the performers, and the harsh breathing of men performing athletic leaps. In *We Are the World*, as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir, one of Hong Kong's oldest choirs (the FTU) performs in full evening splendor against a backdrop of yellow curtains. Visually, it is a recording that is straightforward and sincere, but by taking away the top layer of sound, we are left with muted whispers and snatches of breath even as the singers exaggerate each word with stretched mouths and impassioned faces. The choir belongs to a political faction of the "Old Left" Beijing Chinese nationalists and part of the conservative bloc in HK that clashes with the liberal pro-democracy groups fighting for universal suffrage. But what is the political efficacy of a group whose rendition of *We Are the World*, instead of being a bracing anthem, is turned into, through being muted, an almost desperate appeal for global togetherness?

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane* (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth), 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: Samson Young, *We Are the World*, as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir, 2017, video and multi-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

Petzel

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief,"
Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, September 26, 2017.

This idea of giving presence to either absent or suppressed voices continues into the courtyard with *Risers*, where a colourful empty stage sits against
.....
go about their daily chores, creating a stark contrast between the world of art and everyday life. This disconnection continues with a wall-mounted, neon-light quotation of a statement Mao Zedong made at a speech in 1956 for students who were to go to Russia to study: "The world is yours, as well as ours, but basically yours." This was the same year Mao launched the One Hundred Flowers campaign to encourage intellectuals to openly voice their criticisms against the government, purportedly in an effort to liberalize the political climate (although in reality this led to the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 to purge alleged "rightists" who voiced dissent, including students who went to Russia). This later campaign showed how the world was never the students', or at least did not belong to any student who failed to follow the directives of the State. The empty gaiety of the stage and the no less hollow ambition of Mao's statement correspond to the conceit behind the muted sounds of the choir recording. Overall this remake is perhaps the most explicit example of failed aspirations.

Samson Young, *Risers*, 2017,
neon, modular stage platforms
(wood, water resistant carpet).
Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy
of the artist.



Petzel

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief,"
Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, September 26, 2017.

Lullaby (World Music) is a video soundtrack remake of a Cantonese cover of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* that raised money for the Eastern China flood of 1991. In the film, we see Samson Young standing on a boat with his back toward the audience and singing a song composed of numbers rather than words. The numbers, sung in Cantonese, refer to the large digital screen used during the fundraiser to chart the steady climb of the money being raised. For Samson Young, this song, in a pre-handover Hong Kong, was a demonstration of Chinese nationalism in the early 1990s, but today Hong Kong's relationship with mainland China is tense. It is impossible to look at the current political climate without reference to the Umbrella Movement in 2014 when an unprecedented number of students and the members of the public occupied public roads in Admiralty, Mong Kok, and Causeway Bay and for seventy-nine days brought the country to a standstill. In particular it was a galvanizing moment for students who traditionally were less politically active, and drew attention to the question of universal suffrage and freedom of expression. The artist captures that tension by filming his boat journey, which remains continuously at a distance from landfall, at the point where the marine territories of China and Hong Kong connect. In this quiet rendition, Samson Young's repetition of numbers emphasizes a journey that never reaches its destination. But what is most evident here, as we have journeyed through the digital fragmentations of Boomtown Gundane with its numerous layers of voices and the muted singing of the FTU choir, here we have the recovery of the singular human voice, performing without props and technology.



The final piece is a quiet end to an exhibition that crossed many different media. Samson Young's ideas can be overwhelming, but at a time when anti-intellectualism is commonplace and in a Biennale with too many superficial works, his show provided a much-needed

Installation view of *Lullaby (World Music)*, 2017, video, soundtrack and stainless steel. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

respite, even if at times a viewer may be left wondering how all these pieces fit together. Where Samson Young excels is the fluidity of his engagement with different genres, as he mixes concept, fiction, and reality into a polyphony of voices that continually demands that viewers think, and then rethink, their own perspectives. If the layering of ideas and references tests the extent to which clarity of ideas is needed in any artwork, it is at the level of emotions and experience where viewers can readily engage with the works. By focusing on historical moments when there were large-scale outpourings of charitable goodwill, Samson Young also asks of us, what are the ethics of choice? How do we choose what to do to ensure that our actions have impact? Can meaningful aspirations succeed? These may be sobering thoughts, but his works also exert an emotional presence and reinforce, even when distorted or muted, the relevance of the human voice. In so doing, they suggest that we have not quite forsaken hope. Viva Arte Viva.

Yeewan Koon, "What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's Songs For Disaster Relief,"
Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, September 26, 2017.

Notes

- ¹ The Keats poem is "When I Have Fears That I Cease to Be" (written in 1818, published in 1848), and the country gospel song is Doc Watson's "What Would You Give in Exchange For Your Soul" (on the album *The Three Pickers*, 2003).
- ² In 2015, five booksellers in Hong Kong disappeared from China, Hong Kong, and Thailand. They were later found to be held in custody in mainland China for "illegal activities," raising international controversy regarding the role of publishers and freedom of expression in Hong Kong. In 2016, one of the booksellers was released and held a news conference detailing his confinement and the coercion he experienced to make a televised confession. For more on this topic, read Pen America's *Special Report: Writing on the Wall: Disappeared Booksellers and Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong* (November 2016), https://pen.org/sites/default/files/PEN-America_Writing-on-the-Wall_Hong-Kong-Report.pdf.
- ³ The 1985 version of "We Are The World" was recorded by United Support of Artists (USA) for Africa. It was written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and produced by Quincy Jones. This song was a worldwide hit and raised over sixty-three million US dollars.
- ⁴ Ying Kwok and Sonia So with Doryun Chong, "In Conversation with Samson Young," in *E-Catalogue: Songs for Disaster Relief: Catalogue* (Hong Kong: M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, 2017), 54.
- ⁵ "Do They Know It's Christmas" is a song written by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure in response to the 1983–85 famine in Ethiopia. The two songwriters created a group of British singers known as Band Aid and recorded the song on November 25, 1984. The song sold a million copies in the first week. It was re-recorded three times, in 1989, 2004, and 2014, also for charity. "Many Hearts Prevailed" (滄海桑田心) is the most successful charity single in Hong Kong history. Based on the tune of "Bridge over Troubled Water," the Chinese lyrics are by Lai-Mau Chow. The song, along with a benefit concert and government support, altogether raised over 470 million HKD in ten days. More recently, a cover of "Bridge Over Troubled Water" with fifty British musicians was released to raise money for victims of the Grenfell Tower fire (June 2017).
- ⁶ For an introduction to acousmatic sound, see Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- ⁷ There are other references to Joseph Beuys, including the use of gold leaf to partially cover some of the award-winning "records" by Boomtown Gundane. In Beuys's famous performance piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (November 26, 1965), he covers his head with honey and, later, gold leaf, where the gold represented the sun, power, and wealth and the honey of rebirth. By referring to Beuys, Young highlights the performativity of Boomtown Gundane.

This review was first published in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* Vol. 16 No. 5 (September/October 2017). 原文刊於《典藏》國際版第15卷2017年9-10月。

<http://www.aicahk.org/eng/issuesdetail.asp?id=669&pg=1>