

Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Booming: Samson Young," *Mousse Magazine*, October – November 2016.

Mousse Magazine



Samson Young, *So You Are Old By the Time You Reach the Island*, video shooting documentation, BMW Art Journey at Art Basel Hong Kong, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong



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Samson Young, *Liquid Borders* series, field work documentation, 2012.
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CONVERSATIONS Mousse 55

Booming: Samson Young

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by Hans Ulrich Obrist

Samson Young is a sound artist and composer from Hong Kong whose interests range from the politics behind classical Western music writing systems and the collective unit represented by orchestras, to the possible relations between sounds and warfare (sound as a weapon, or explosions as vehicles of overwhelming information), to the recording, notation, and sketching of bells as artifacts that define limits and can unite or separate communities and individuals.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Your training is in music. What caused you to move to media and visual arts?

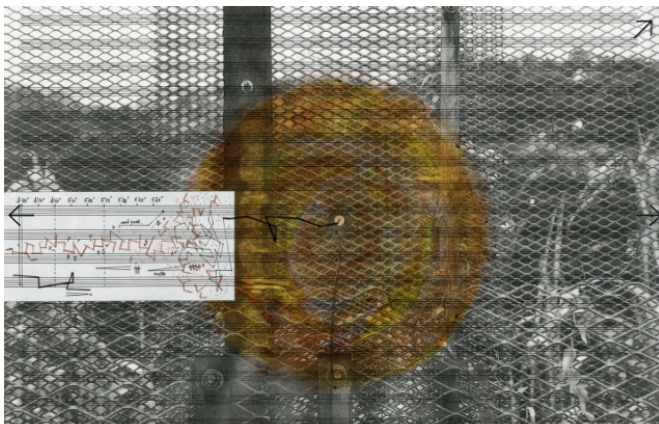
SAMSON YOUNG: It was an organic process. It began when I met several new media artists as friends. After my undergraduate years in Sydney, I came back to Hong Kong to earn some money and complete my master's degree before I went to the United States for my doctorate. I encountered this new media art organization in Hong Kong called Videotage. I would not have branched out without them. I had a friend, Christopher Lau, who at the time he was working as a technical director at Videotage. He's actually a programmer by training, and studied math, and he was making all of these weird things. The two of us, and a poet named Ron Lam, formed an artist collective called Emergency Lab.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Samson Young, *Pastoral Music (But It Is Entirely Hollow)*, Shing Mun Redoubt field work documentation, May 25, 2014.
© Samson Young. Courtesy: the artist and Team Gallery, New York. Photo: Dennis Man Wing Leun



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Samson Young, *Liquid Borders IV (Mai Po & Luk Keng)*, 2014.
© Samson Young. Courtesy: the artist and Team Gallery, New York.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Samson Young, *SDHK 2015, Pastoral Music* installation view at Team Gallery, New York, 2015.
© Samson Young. Courtesy: Team Gallery, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse

HUO: Is Ron Lam still writing poetry?

SY: No, she's a travelogue writer now, based in Kyoto. And Chris doesn't make video art any more. But I absorbed what they both did, and it's become part of my practice.

When we worked together, we would begin a collaboration with me making the music.

Then later on, we would switch roles. Maybe Ron would start making the music, and Chris would start doing the text.

HUO: As Etel Adnan says: identity shifts, identity is a choice. Did Emergency Lab have a manifesto?

SY: Not really. It was very casual. That was the reason for the name, actually, because we were always doing things at the last minute. After I moved to the United States, given the geographical separation it became easier for me to do things myself rather than collaborating with people overseas.

HUO: Is that why you started making videos?

SY: Yes, I figured that if I wanted to have a video as a backdrop to my music, I should learn to do it myself. I didn't think much then about whether it would look professional or not.

HUO: Can you give me an example?

SY: I did a very conceptual cello piece with me playing ping pong in a Teletubby costume, with a cellist onstage with a music stand.

HUO: I'd love to see that.

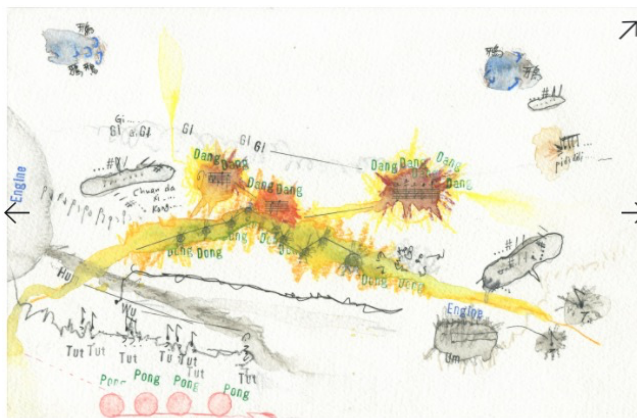
SY: It's kind of ridiculous! I'll let you see it, but I'll never do it again! There I am in the background in my Teletubby costume,

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Samson Young, *Catalogue d'Oiseaux (32 northern mockingbird songs at dawn)*, 2016.
© Samson Young. Courtesy: Team Gallery, New York



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Samson Young, *Landscape (Peter and Paul Cathedral, St. Petersburg, Russia, Aug 31 2015, 14:45-16:00)*, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne



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Samson Young, *Liquid Borders*, 2012-2014.
© Samson Young. Courtesy: Team Gallery, New York

drinking tea. It's really weird. There was a time when I had more humor in my work. It was also crazy because it was in the context of Princeton's graduate music department, and the professors were like, "What's going on?!" The next day it was on the front page of the student paper, with the big head of my Teletubby costume.

I branched out from there. I accumulated knowledge that way: learn how to do video for one piece; learn how to make electronics and circuits for the next piece; learn how to edit it together with collages of text for the next piece. Along the way, after having undertaken many little experiments, I ended up with a palette of skills that is wider than a typical composer's. Now that I have all these abilities at my disposal, I always think, well, what can I do with them?

HUO: So that's the technology and media part. What about the drawn scores?

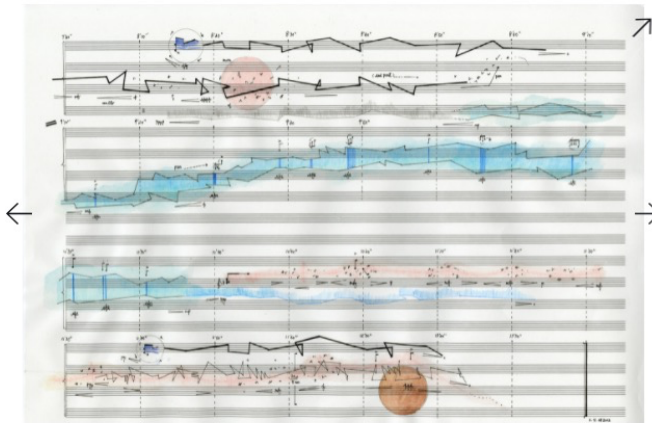
SY: Those came from a much earlier moment. As a composer these days, in your training, you generally use the computer to make scores. But in my first year as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney, one professor made us hand-write all our compositions. She thought it was important. I really enjoyed that, so I continue to do it.

HUO: You know my Instagram. I believe in the saving of handwriting, because it's something that's about to disappear. There's a kind of extinction of handwriting.

SY: Precisely. Comparing music made before computer-generated scores with music made after, I perceive a shift in the way the composer works. This is a wild

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Samson Young, *Liquid Borders*, 2012-2014.
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theory, and I don't know if anyone else has tried to articulate this, but I do think that American minimalist music, like Steve Reich and Philip Glass, has been very much facilitated by the fact that we can now write music in the computer. It's easy to take one passage and then repeat it, and make it longer, with a simple copy and paste, copy and paste. Whereas if you're handwriting the score, you can physically feel the stamina required to write out the same passage over, say, twenty bars.

HUO: It's repetition and difference.

SY: I take a lot of pleasure in the drawing of a score. I care about how it looks visually. I remember my friends at school commenting on that, saying, you're spending more time on making the score look beautiful than you are on thinking about the music. But I didn't understand why that would be a criticism. I want my scores to look beautiful. So I think my drawing practice comes from that. I think of it as drawing musical notation, drawing scores.

HUO: Let's talk about the explosion sound project, *Pastoral Music*.

SY: In that I'm investigating the sounds of explosions. I'm very interested in sounds that are condensed, and an explosion is super condensed. An explosion is one split second, but in the moment, there's so much information. It's an information overload, like a camera's flash. I'm fascinated by sounds like that because I think they defy logic. First of all, you can't hear everything in the moment; you miss information. Your ear drops information in order to process the moment. Second, it has to do with technology. We were never able to hear these really condensed sounds in their entirety until two pieces of technology came about: recording technology and sound analysis software. Before that, when you heard an explosion, after it was gone, the information was lost. It's only now, with these technologies, that we can go back to a sound and listen to it again and again and analyze it. If you look at the spectrogram of an explosion sound, it becomes obvious how many things you are not hearing. So what winds up happening is that in that split second, your mind "fills in the gap" to imagine the totality of this information overload. So the image of a sound in the spectrogram reminds us that hearing is a condition that we *aspire* to; we aspire to hear as much as possible, but our bodies won't do it. So for me, sound analysis software created this historic moment, not unlike that moment when astronauts first left the Earth and took a picture of our planet from space. That image of the Earth from outer-space, in which the "world" we live in is presented to us as a small circle surrounded by vast spans of nothingness, forever changed our understanding of size and scale. The spectrogram changed our relationship to hearing in the same way—the boundaries

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and limits of auditory perception have been redrawn. Explosion sounds and bell sounds are similar in that they are both dense, condensed, overloaded.

HUO: How do you formalize them?

SY: I feed them through sound analysis software, and I look at the resulting spectrogram. That informs me about what pitches, what qualities, I’m not hearing. I then proceed to make a graphical transcription of the sound. There’s always certain sonic qualities such as pitch material that I try to be more literal about in my transcriptions. For such qualities, I rely more on traditional musical notation. But traditional notation has a habit of disregarding certain sonic features, and is terribly ineffective when it comes to describing qualities that has more to do with energy than information. So for things like how the condensed sounds unlock, how it develops and reverberates through space—for those I need to rely on visual metaphors. I suppose my approach is methodological but not scientific. There is of course already a long tradition of representation of sound and music in visual art: Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee... People always talk about the musicality in the visual. When you look at a Kandinsky, he’s obviously very successful in coming up with general descriptions of what the music is. But when you respond to a full musical composition—like a jazz composition or a symphony—and represent that information on a canvas, two things happen: first, you end up responding to the *idea* of a musical composition, and second, you invariably end up with general accounts of what the music is. Those are interesting and fun, but what I’m interested in are shorter moments, because by zooming into these short energies I reveal to you what I am hearing, and while the audience might or might not agree with my take on things, we can at least agree that there is much more in that sound to what we can perceive on the surface. This dialogue is not about verification, or who has better ears, but more about giving you access to the fact that I can try to but I will fail at communicating with you. I can’t make you hear a sound as yellow, but I encourage you to become aware of that fact that I am experiencing this peculiar thing that is called hearing in colors, which you might also know, but there is no way to synchronize that experience and probably there is no need to. It is enough that you recognize that something in me is similar to what is also in you.

To take a step back, to root everything in music: composers have always been interested in the representation of sound, and notation has evolved as technology develops. Take for instance a composer like Olivier Messiaen, who went out into the field and tried to make accurate descriptions of bird songs. If he’d had the technology we have now, I think he would have tried to notate the bird sounds very differently. He would try to be extremely detailed about the spectral qualities.

HUO: He would use computers?

SY: He would definitely use computers.

HUO: So would John Cage.

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SY: I think so. Composers and musicians are always at the forefront of responding to technology. If you look at the development of the modern piano, it has adopted technological advances every step along the way: from the wooden frame, to the mechanics that allow you to create a soft sound and a loud sound. Then comes industrialization and a metal frame, which amplified the piano, made it louder. Then the electronic keyboard. You would never hear a composer say, "I'm writing this piece of music just because I want to show off this new Korg synthesizer," but they are always the first to respond to shifts in technology. Musical instruments are technology.

HUO: You describe that there is this overload in the explosions. I was once in Korea, at a monastery, and they ring these bells early in the morning, at 5 a.m. It was complete sensory overload.

SY: I love sensory overload because in those moments you can't process it all, so you kind of give up. You suspend logic, and are then relying on your sensory apparatus. What makes this wonderful is that it's like a game; you can't fully comprehend all that you're hearing, but you can totally imagine somebody hearing the same thing, and you know what that thing is. It becomes a perfect way to imagine another consciousness. Iris Murdoch's writing often talks about the importance of being able to imagine others' consciousness. To imagine you're hearing the same thing as somebody else, that you can't fully process, is a wonderful way to know that there's this other consciousness at the opposite end of the table. We are hearing the same sound, but I know we're not really hearing the same thing, but I can acknowledge that, and can imagine what you're experiencing. Remember the handwriting sample I did for you: "My dear friend, what is on your mind?" I think this becomes a great way to ask that question. "My friend, what is on your mind?" I can't know. We're hearing different things, and that's OK. That's why information overloads are good. They are not about verification.

HUO: In the BMW project you did research globally, with many bells—collecting bells, in a sense.

SY: Fieldwork is important as a way to figure things out through going around to many places.

HUO: Learning from bells. Like Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's book *Learning from Las Vegas*.

SY: For me field work is a way to think through issues, to arrive at a nuanced position on certain topics, but this is mostly done to satisfy an internal need, rather than to sway anybody's opinion. So my work is not political in that sense, but of course a nuanced position on things affects how I vote, how I consume, who I admire, who I support, how I run my nonprofit.

HUO: You have a nonprofit?

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SY: Yes, it's called Contemporary Musiking (CMHK). It's an Arts Council-funded organization, running for about three years now. We support emerging sound artists in Hong Kong, and we have an overseas exchange program. We do social engagement projects as well.

An example of how I process issues through field work is the *Liquid Borders* project, in which I visited the restricted zones between Hong Kong and China, walking along the entire border between the two regions and archived the vibration of the border fences. A point of departure for the project is the complicated relationship between Hong Kong and China, the differences in values and ideologies between the two regions, but also a deep conservatism and the fear of the unknown that fuse discrimination of new immigrants. The border is important psychologically for the people of Hong Kong, it's our “last frontier” and people fear losing it. But if it's so important to us then where is it? What does it look like? What does it sound like? Is it fragile or robust? What does it keep away and what gets through? So the task that I'd designed for myself—to archive the fences between Hong Kong and China in its entirety—is really just an excuse for me to walk along the border and see/hear it for what it is.

HUO: What would be the endpoint of the bell project? You mentioned once that the bell sounds will all come together in a musical work, and you want an orchestra to become an extension of the reverberation of the bells, and you'll do a multichannel sound piece with your recordings. Is that all still going to happen?

SY: All of those things are still in the plan. I am planning to write an orchestral composition. I'm talking with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta, and we're going to try and program it for 2018. I'm going to make a bunch of drawings of just the bell sounds that will be similar to the explosion sound project, in that they focus on shorter moments. I'm probably going to show them in Düsseldorf at the end of this year.

What I like about the process is that I've done all this research, and all of these different works will happen only when the moment is right. It's kind of like the bell and its reverberations: the moment happened, and then it might resonate, and I might make another work about it five or ten years later. The bell recording trip was such an important educational process, it has changed the way I think about certain things. It's going to reverberate throughout different facets of my practice.

HUO: I saw your excellent *Pastoral Music* exhibition at Team Gallery in New York last year. There you created a situation of a gallery show with scores, and an installation in the middle. Sometimes you would be there, live in the space performing, but when I was there, you were away and the exhibition still worked—you could be present or absent.

SY: That show was the explosion research project that came before the bells. It started with explosions and expanded into looking at how sound has always been used in warfare, and the reverse: how people remember and experience warfare through its sounds. I read a great book about how veterans who fought in the Gulf War remember it through hearing. They give these intricate descriptions. Of course, in the book they're in the form of text, but they vividly describe

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how to decipher where a bomb is dropping: in your neighborhood, or somewhere far away, to determine if you need to run or not. And as you know, historically sound has been used as a weapon, as psychological warfare and a way to intimidate the enemy. My projects are always very messy. If you remember the drawings on the walls at Team Gallery one was called *SDIHK*, those were military strategies but described with musical notation. *SDIHK* stands for Strategic Defense Initiative of Hong Kong. I was thinking about the Ghost Army of World War II, a tactical deception unit. The Americans had sound engineers and musicians making these fake radio broadcasts, and playing back sounds of explosions into the battlefield as decoys. So they were essentially musicians as soldiers. At first my project was about sound and war, but it eventually became about what musicians and people working with sound *could* do in times of conflict. If there is a war in Hong Kong what is something that I could do?

HUO: What can art do?

SY: Yes. Of course there's things you can already imagine, such as propaganda, trying to sway opinion. But if you look at history, artists have had other roles to play as well.

HUO: More and more people live in cities. Rem Koolhaas says that we should not focus only on the city, but also on the countryside. Is *Pastoral Music* intended to bring us away from the city, into a more rural or serene context?

SY: Since the Industrial Revolution, people have romanticized nature. Today places of conflict have become our new sites to romanticize. Remember how the CNN and cable news channels reported the shock and awe campaign during the Gulf War for instance, we experienced images and sounds of bombs dropping for hours on end. There are also hundreds of home-made night bombing and warzone videos on YouTube, and they get hundreds of thousands of hits. This is obviously hugely problematic, but there's no denying that some people find these images incredibly seductive—they look and sound like gentle and distinct fireworks, which is very different from the overly dramatized depiction of war that we are so used in the cinema. But when suicide bombs hit a major city in the West it is such a big rupture because people never imagined being so close to the scenes of action.

HUO: That's what you meant by “pastoral”?

SY: Yes.

HUO: You've made these great books of scores that are connected to your installations: to the bells, and the explosions, and other pieces. They are also autonomous artworks. You use drawing, mapping, stamps, watercolor, charcoal. Can you tell me about them?

SY: I started doing them because I needed something to keep me occupied while waiting for the bells. The bells don't ring for you; you have to wait for them. I don't draw landscapes, but I guess these sound sketches are the equivalent of a kind of landscape art for somebody who

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works with sound, drawing what I'm hearing rather than what I'm seeing, in the field. So it's both a diary, and also a way to prevent boredom while I am waiting for a sound to happen. I became fascinated with the process and that in turn encouraged me to stay longer in one place. For example, at Rouen Cathedral in France, at each hour the bells are slightly different. I stayed there for a long time, and produced many different drawings throughout the day.

HUO: And you continue to do them.

SY: Yes. I'm actually going on a container ship residency, and will do seascape sound drawings all the time I'm on board. And what I'm drawing will always be different. It's kind of like long-exposure photography.

HUO: Do the war drawings continue also?

SY: The war drawings will continue. I like using notation to describe things. Actually I've realized that a lot of what I do is transcription, as opposed to composition, and I think this is an important distinction. Composers generally use notation as a tool to produce an end point, to bring about a musical performance. Whereas I'm using notation to reverse back from an end point, from an already-existing sound back to its representation. I'm always transcribing. I haven't entirely figured this out yet, but I think it's important. I'm on to something.

Artist and composer Samson Young (1979) studied music, philosophy and gender studies at the University of Sydney and holds a Ph.D. in Music Composition from Princeton University. Young's diverse practice draws from the avant-garde compositional traditions of aleatoric music, musique concrète, and graphical notation. His drawing, radio broadcast, performance and composition touch upon the recurring topics of conflict, war, and political frontiers. Young was the inaugural winner of the BMW Art Journey Award at the Art Basel Hong Kong 2015. Young will represent his native Hong Kong at the 2017 Venice Biennale.

Hans Ulrich Obrist (1968, Zurich, Switzerland) is Co-Director of the Serpentine Galleries, London. Prior to this, he was the Curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Since his first show *World Soup* (The Kitchen Show) in 1991, he has curated more than 300 shows.

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