

Linnea Semmerling, “‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ – on the work of Samson Young – Reflection #12,” *Metropolis M*, July 10, 2019.

Metropolis M



‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ - on the work of Samson Young - Reflections #12

10.07.2019 | FEATURE — Linnea Semmerling



Samson Young's work is often extremely seductive but with a vicious political edge to it (with commentaries on military strategies, bells, weapons and Band Aid). His remarkable sound artworks are now on show at Looiersgracht 60 in a duoshow with Steffani Jemison organized in collaboration with De Appel.

The Kunsthalle Düsseldorf is transformed into a sandy landscape of neon pink and bright green with a soundscape of lusty bird songs and quietly thundering bomb detonations. It was just a momentary glimpse at Samson Young's (1979) extensive and exceptionally productive creative practice spanning from experimental music to contemporary art, from ornithology to military history, and from sonic weapons to popular charity singles. Nevertheless, the show provided an insightful soundbite of the Hong Kong-based artist's work and foreshadowed a busy year in Europe that will include *documenta14* as well as the Hong Kong pavilion on the 57th Venice Biennale.

Petzel

Linnea Semmerling, “‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ – on the work of Samson Young – Reflection #12,” *Metropolis M*, July 10, 2019.

The bird songs at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf were part of the performance installation *Canon* (2016). Upon entering the gallery, visitors found themselves in front of – or behind? – a high wire fence next to a steel bench. On the other side of the fence, a performer in military uniform stood next to the large black sound canon LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device). This broadcasting system projects sound on a distance of up to an entire kilometre, and is used all over the world by police and military forces to break up protests. However, the technology – highly contested for its capability of causing long-term hearing damage – does not only work as a disciplinary tool for human beings, it is also commonly used to repel pest birds from private properties such as airport runways or nuclear power facilities. Sitting on the bench, visitors could hear the bird songs of performer Maryanne Piper come together with Young’s pre-recorded bird songs and some electronics to form an elusive yet luring piece of music. The scenery generated a sense of forceful displacement from which not even birds appeared to be exempt. A pink bird bath was burbling on the ground next to the bench. The playful fountain turned out to be made out of a 3D-printed replica of the pink water buckets that the Vietnamese refugees who arrived in Hong Kong in the late seventies received when they were detained. The bird bath was in fact a human bath, drinking vessel, and cookware all in one, drawing visitors into the existential dimension of migration. In a way that is quite typical for Young’s installations, *Canon* puts its visitors in experimental situations by evoking historical events, amplifying their soundtracks and testing their technological conditions. The visitors’ status is somewhat in between that of an accomplice and a guinea pig in the artist’s equally critical and nostalgic scrutinization of auditory technologies and the politics of listening that evolve in conjunction with these technologies’ military as well as civic development and application.

Young’s explorations of various sound technologies go hand in hand with his interest in our perceptual conditions and interpretive understandings. This experiential dimension comes to the fore in his fascination with explosions as condensed sound, constituting an information overload the dimension of which we can only come to grasp through recording technologies and sound analysis software. He is convinced that the spectrogram changed our relationship with hearing, redrawing the boundaries and limits of auditory perception. ‘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 will not do

Petzel

Linnea Semmerling, “‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ – on the work of Samson Young – Reflection #12,” *Metropolis M*, July 10, 2019.

it.’¹ In his performance *Nocturne* (2015), Young further explores the ontological and phenomenological dimension of bomb detonations mediated through broadcasting technologies. As a tube TV screens the muted footage of night bombings from the Gaza strip, the Gulf War, or ISIS, Young develops a live soundtrack from a wide range of sound sources (such as a bass drum, Tupperware, tea leaves, cooking paper, or an airsoft pistol) using unconventional Foley techniques. Visitors can listen to his playing on analogue hand-held radio transmitters after having set them to the particular frequency he has pirated for the purpose. The noise of the ether mystifies the small percussive gestures and quiet intimacy of Young’s disciplined dubbing performance to become a gruesomely brutal soundtrack to the televised wars.

His graphical notations in particular throw up questions about the similarities of military strategizing and musical compositions as well as their actualization in battles and concerts. We get a sense of peace as a matter of vibrations



Installation shot 'Decoders-Recorders', a dual solo exhibition with Steffani Jemison and Samson Young, co-presented by De Appel and Looiersgracht 60. Photograph by LNDWstudio. Courtesy of Looiersgracht 60 / De Appel

Petzel

Linnea Semmerling, “‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ – on the work of Samson Young – Reflection #12,” *Metropolis M*, July 10, 2019.



Installation shot 'Decoders-Recorders', a dual solo exhibition with Steffani Jemison and Samson Young, co-presented by De Appel and Looiersgracht 60. Photograph by LNDWstudio. Courtesy of Looiersgracht 60 / De Appel



Installation shot 'Decoders-Recorders', a dual solo exhibition with Steffani Jemison and Samson Young, co-presented by De Appel and Looiersgracht 60. Photograph by LNDWstudio. Courtesy of Looiersgracht 60 / De Appel

Petzel

Linnea Semmerling, “‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ – on the work of Samson Young – Reflection #12,” *Metropolis M*, July 10, 2019.

Bells are another overwhelming sound technology that Young investigates in his ongoing field recording, sound mapping and multimedia walking project *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (2015 - ongoing). During this ‘journey into the sonic history of conflicts’, he has been traveling to places such as Fez in Morocco, Bydgoszcz in Poland, or Mandalay in Myanmar to study the local bells as they demarcate geopolitical territories, issue authoritarian commands, structure cultural rituals, and initiate spiritual ceremonies. In his travelogues, he describes how his interest in bells and weapons is not only connected through the fact that they are the only pre-industrial sounds that were louder than natural phenomena, but also through the widespread convention of melting bells for ammunition in times of war. The sound drawings that he has been making on location while waiting for the next bell ringing are meant to lay the foundations for an orchestral composition that is still in the making. Despite his PhD in music composition and high estimation for the visual appearance of his handwritten scores, Young stresses that his current notational experiments on site are merely exercises in transcription. This thinking is in line with much of his earlier work that explores the power relationships implied in the notational systems and performance conventions of classical music. His graphical notations in particular throw up questions about the similarities of military strategizing and musical compositions as well as their actualization in battles and concerts. We get a sense of peace as a matter of vibrations.

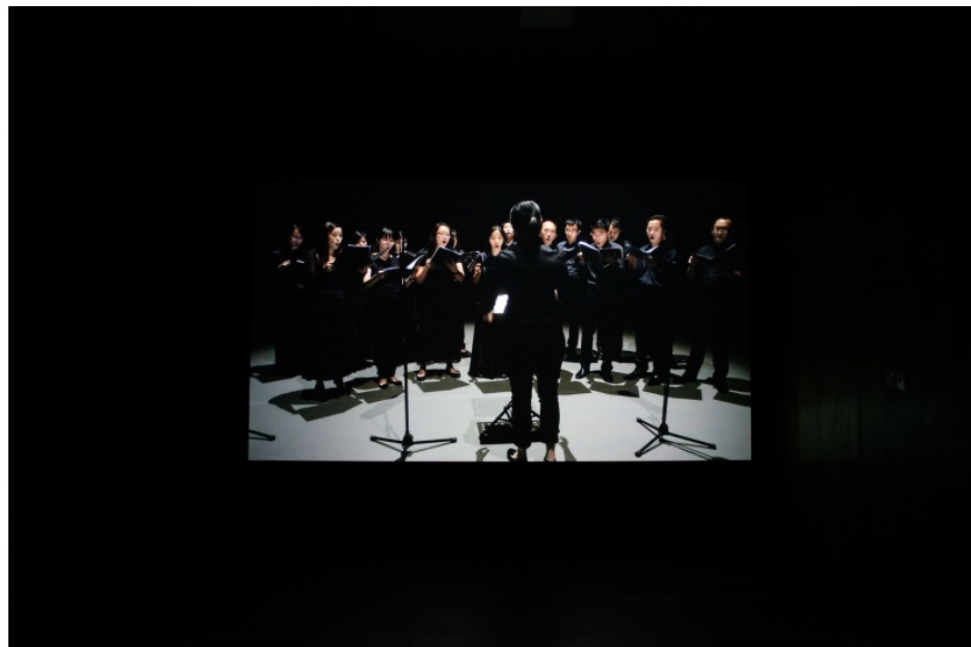
For the Hong Kong pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2017, Young explored new dimensions of these peace vibes. His exhibition *Songs for Disaster Relief* (2017) is conceived as a music album unfolding in space and inspired by the popularization of charity singles in the eighties. In 1984, the celebrity supergroup Band Aid formed to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia by recording *Do they know it's Christmas?*. With joint forces, Bono, Sting, Duran Duran, Boy George, Phil Collins, Paul Weller, Bananarama and Bob Geldorf, among others, carolled about the spreading of joy in a world of plenty. ‘There’s a world outside your window / And it’s a world of dread and fear / Where the only water flowing is the bitter sting of tears / And the Christmas bells that ring there / Are the clanging chimes of doom / Well, tonight, thank God it’s them instead of you’. The British pop artist Peter Blake created the single’s record sleeve by collaging Victorian cut-outs of rosy-cheeked, white children playing with their Christmas gifts together with black-and-white photographs of malnourished black children with food in their hands. The record became the fastest selling hit in the UK chart history, and had sold 11.7 million copies worldwide by the end of the eighties. Young critically investigates the rise of these kinds of charity singles as a culturally transformative event curiously coinciding with the globalization of the

Petzel

Linnea Semmerling, “‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ – on the work of Samson Young – Reflection #12,” *Metropolis M*, July 10, 2019.



Installation shot 'Decoders-Recorders', a dual solo exhibition with Steffani Jemison and Samson Young, co-presented by De Appel and Looiersgracht 60. Photograph by LNDWstudio. Courtesy of Looiersgracht 60 / De Appel



Installation shot 'Decoders-Recorders', a dual solo exhibition with Steffani Jemison and Samson Young, co-presented by De Appel and Looiersgracht 60. Photograph by LNDWstudio. Courtesy of Looiersgracht 60 / De Appel

popular music industry and the solidification of neo-liberalism. However, he also senses a certain purity in the era's relentless aspiration, communal strife, and

Linnea Semmerling, “‘Hearing is a condition that we aspire to’ – on the work of Samson Young – Reflection #12,” *Metropolis M*, July 10, 2019.

unshakeable beliefs. This makes him aim for this new body of work to become ‘an urgent and perpetual plea-for-action that aspires to nothing’.

At Looiersgracht60 Young presents Muted Chorus, the fifth iteration of Young’s Muted Situation series, a set of video installations that depict choral compositional performances (directed by Young) in which certain layers are intentionally muted, in order to recalibrate the way we perceive them. For Young, this deliberate suppression of the previously dominant voices “is a way to uncover the unheard and the marginalised, or to make apparent certain assumptions about hearing and sounding.” Alongside this and another video work, Lullaby (World Music), Decoders-Recorders includes a set of new, large-scale drawings, many shown here for the first time, titled Ancillary Motion. These works depart from the artist’s well-known notational sound drawings and instead take the form of coded, experimental scores dedicated to a specific instrument. The exhibition will further include collages from the series To Fanon, in which Young has obscured his own scores with print materials rendering them un-playable but living on instead as a visual key to the artist’s process. (source: press release De Appel)

DIT ARTIKEL IS GEPUBLICEERD IN METROPOLIS M Nr 2-2017 VENICE BIENNALE GUIDE. METROPOLIS M KRIJGT GEEN SUBSIDIE. STEUN METROPOLIS M, NEEM EEN ABONNEMENT. ALS JE NU EEN JAARABONNEMENT AFSLUIT, STUREN WE JE HET NIEUWSTE NUMMER GRATIS OP. MAIL JE NAAM EN ADRES NAAR KAROLIEN@METROPOLISM.COM

1 Samson Young in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist for *Mousse Magazine* 55, September 2016, p.50

Decoders-Recorders, with Samson Young and Steffani Jemison, Looiersgracht60 in collaboration with De Appel, Looiersgracht60, Amsterdam, on show until 1 september 2019. On July 27 there will be an exclusive walkthrough of the exhibition with Samson Linnea Semmerling
is curator, researcher en schrijver

https://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/38738_samson_young_de_appel_looiersgracht60