

Real Music

Samson Young

Talbot Rice Gallery and the University of Edinburgh are proud to present the first solo exhibition in the UK by acclaimed Hong Kong artist and composer, Samson Young (b. 1979). Young's installations, performances, videos and works on paper – all vibrating with colour and sound – are studies of the impossible, the hypothetical and the all too real. Straddling experimental worlds of art and music and informed by intensive research - processes, his artworks move us to look, listen and imagine, while drawing attention to how often our perception is blinkered.

At the heart of the exhibition is an ambitious collaboration with the University of Edinburgh's Next Generation Sound Synthesis (NESS) research group, who have developed pioneering software that can generate the sound of virtual instruments. For historians this offers the opportunity to hear lost objects, while for Samson Young it became an opportunity to hear the impossible. A demonstration of the catalyst that is the University of Edinburgh, where the meeting of contemporary art, research and resources can suddenly open up opportunities for innovation, it led to the newly commissioned 'Possible Music #2.' Young's critical questioning of authenticity in music and in culture runs throughout the exhibition with 'Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th,' a muted rendition of the canonical piece; 'The world falls apart into facts,' a new film about the misconstrued translation of the Chinese 'Molihua (Lotus Flower)' song; 'Orchestrations,'

Young's playful visual scores; and pieces from the University of Edinburgh's historic collections.

'Real Music' is a title and a provocation to unfix notions of authenticity at play in music, sculpture and society. Music and the visual arts are both disciplines plagued, bounded and sometimes policed by ideas of authenticity, attracting both purists and iconoclasts. Conflicts around authorship, legitimacy and accuracy are instrumentalised – and at times weaponised – on the stages of history, the sciences, popular culture, leisure, tourism, consumer goods, politics and interpersonal relations. Authenticity is also entangled with power, with proclamations of authenticity revealing deep relations to authority.

This exhibition has been jointly developed by Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, and Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, and is accompanied by a catalogue published by Koenig Books, London, available at Talbot Rice Gallery during the exhibition. That the *Real Music* exhibition and accompanying publication have been produced by two galleries embedded in educational settings demonstrates the vital, research-driven contribution that universities can make to contemporary art production today.

Samson Young

'Possible Music #2,' 2019

3D-printed nylon, soft pastel, Jesmonite, polyurethane foam, timber, plywood, plaster, paint, bronze, 16-channel sound installation, 10 short compositions at regular intervals

In developing this exhibition, Young collaborated closely with the Next Generation Sound Synthesis (NESS) research group within the University of Edinburgh, utilising the NESS-created system that simulates the sound of vanished or hypothetical musical instruments in a specific environment. A new series of sound installations entitled 'Possible Music,' 2018– ongoing, was borne of this encounter. The artist then composed music for instruments that could never exist. How would a bugle sound, for instance, if it was activated by the fiery breath of a dragon, and superheated to 300 degrees Celsius? 'Possible Music #2,' commissioned for the Georgian Gallery, bends the rules of both music and sculpture. Within Young's sound garden, a field of speakers sprout towards the cupolas overhead, while 3D-printed, bronze and Jesmonite sculptural forms allude to a colossal, oversized brass instrument emerging from the carpeted earth.

Young complicates the production of the objects by using both digital and analogue processes – sometimes employing one to produce the other. While his sculptural forms are created

entirely from digital hypotheses, they are manifested alternatively in 3D-print, craft techniques and foundry casting. Whether through ancient or data-driven techniques, the experience of *Possible Music* is at once experimentally futuristic and archaeologically suggestive.

Commissioned and co-produced by Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, and Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, with support from the Keir Foundation. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

‘Orchestrations,’ 2019

Ink, pastel, colour pencil and watercolour on paper with artist frame (3D-printed PLA), each 30 × 21 cm

Drawing has long played a role for Young in depicting the world of sound – describing what is heard rather than seen. His colourful and textured graphic scores and ongoing series of sound drawings notate bells, birdsong and explosions on paper, or visually represent sounds in different landscapes.

In Young’s words, ‘orchestration is the art of combining instrumental timbre to achieve specific sounds, colours, textures or effects. Within these drawings I am thinking of orchestration as a metaphor for the assemblage of people, and the combination of sounds and voices that these assemblies generate – specifically in situations of mass protests. These are

mixed in with hypothetical orchestrations (e.g., the sound of a contrabass pitched above a piccolo).” The series questions what is possible in reality and what barriers delimit our imagination.

All works courtesy the artist unless states otherwise.

Samson Young

'Muted Situations #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th,' 2018 single-channel HD colour video, 12-channel sound installation, carpet, 45 mins

Alongside Young's new artworks the exhibition features 'Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th,' 2018, originally commissioned by the 21st Biennale of Sydney. It is part of a major strand in Young's practice – the series of 'muted' performances that the artist has been producing as video and sound installations since 2014, working in collaboration with different ensembles and orchestras. In 'Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th,' we witness Thomas Jung conducting Cologne's Flora Sinfonie Orchester in a muted performance of Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*. Young's script for this performance explains, 'In these "muted performances" a specific layer of sound, usually the most audible layer, is consciously suppressed. As a result, the other layers of sonic texture will re-emerge as the foreground. In the case of 'Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th,' it is the pitched layer that is being consciously suppressed. This is achieved through a series of workshops and in close collaboration with the musicians.' Gripped with the same intensity of a normal performance and responding to the bodies of the musicians with familiar passion and fervour, the muted instruments emit

the odd squeak or errant toot, as the concentrated exertion of not bowing the strings or not blowing the horns is defeated by muscle memory.

The exploration of silence has a long history in experimental music. Famously, experiencing an anechoic chamber at Harvard University (a space designed to cut out every sound), John Cage heard the sound of his own heartbeat and central nervous system and concluded that there was no such thing as silence.

Cage's work '4'33"' involved a concert pianist sitting down, opening a piano lid and then simply waiting that length of time, focusing the audience's attention upon all the other noises of the concert hall and its surroundings. For Cage this was a way of allowing sounds to 'be themselves'. Conversely, Samson Young makes work that opposes the idea that sounds can ever transcend a specific cultural and political situation, shifting the emphasis from silence in itself to the constructed mutedness of a situation.

In his words, 'If Cagean silence is sort of idealistic in its reliance on and its trust of the frame, then mutedness is pragmatic in its trust of the experiment and the process to produce surprising results. Who knew an orchestra of muted strings vis-a-vis the orchestration of 'Tchaikovsky (Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th' (2018)) would sound like the sea? With the

Muted Situations series, you just don't know until you start workshopping the pieces with the performers. The score isn't this perfect thing where the work is. The work is in the process and the result of the process, which include also all the different ways that it exceeds and falls short of the vision as outlined in the blueprint.'

Samson Young

'The world falls apart into facts,' 2019

2-channel HD video, colour, sound (*Horse Togaku* for harpsichord, voices, automated-percussions, electronics, a tourist wind instrument and a horse), 25 mins

Also created by Samson Young for 'Real Music' is a video performance-lecture titled 'The world falls apart into facts,' which derives from the artist's extensive research into 'Molihua (Jasmine Flower),' as well as a fantastical counterfactual account of a 'Togaku' (music from the Tang dynasty) piece, replete with a harpsichordist and ensemble in fruit costumes.

A well-known Chinese folk song, 'Molihua (Jasmine Flower)' was transcribed for Western audiences in the late eighteenth century, although it is believed to have originated much earlier. Adopting artist Paul Carter's understanding of echoic mimicry, Young uses the genealogy of 'Molihua' as a case study about cross-cultural encounters. The version of the song we now understand to be synonymous with Chinese culture actually most closely resembles the version transcribed by English statesman John Barrow while on the first British embassy to China. Barrow's tune and accompanying travelogue exploded in popularity across Europe, eventually making it back to its 'native' land, before being reabsorbed into Chinese identity.

With other cases of such encounters, including Kenny G's influence on Hong Kong pop music and centuries-unchanged Japanese 'Togaku' now used as one of few extant sources of Tang dynasty court music, Young considers what it means to hear with the ears of an Other and questions notions of cultural purity and authenticity at large.

One of the first versions of 'Molihua' that was disseminated to Western audiences was an arrangement published by Karl Kambra circa 1796. John Barrow's first-hand account published as the tome 'Travels in China' in 1804, which also includes this score, is on display in the exhibition. Folded into Young's two-channel video is also his exploration of a class of musical instruments often described as 'tourist instruments', examples of which form part of a historical collection held at the University of Edinburgh's St Cecilia's Hall. Items from the collection – the rgya-gling (monastic oboe) and a miniature bridge-harp or harp-lute – also feature in the exhibition. Typically created for a foreign market, these instruments perform their cultural dissonance, being markedly different from the originals they are modelled on.

Two paintings complete Young's exploration of 'Molihua': Pieter Neefs the Elder's 'Interior of a Cathedral' from the University's Torrie Collection; and a damaged Cantonese 'export painting'. The Cantonese 'export painting' is for Young another example

of the effect of realising one's own culture in a foreign tongue – this time, in painting. In Samson's words, these paintings from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, were 'aimed predominantly for the Western market using "Western" techniques. But, of course, due to lack of training, these imitations do not really look like the Western ideal that these Chinese artists attempted to copy. Rather than viewing these imperfections as flaws, I find myself really drawn to them – like an accent, an effigy of a pre-linguistic self, a version of these artists before the trauma of becoming a model minority or a reasonable merchant.'

Pieter Neefs the Elder's *Interior of a Cathedral*, a treasure from the University's Torrie Collection, was made after many of the churches in Western Europe were damaged during the iconoclastic events of the Reformation. Like many Dutch and Flemish painters, Pieter Neefs the Elder adapted perspective techniques to paint both real and fictional spaces. At the time of this painting – as Catholicism was re-established – efforts were being made to restore these buildings, demonstrated here by the suspended altar pieces that were known to be in disrepair at the time of painting.

In the context of 'Real Music,' the historical contradictions of this period and the assemblage of artistic devices might

suggest a complex reality in which the possibility of authentic and coherent spaces are brought into question.

University collections

Sir John Barrow (1764–1848)

‘Travels in China: containing descriptions, observations, and comparisons, made and collected in the course of a short residence at the imperial palace of Yuen-Min-Yuen, and on a subsequent journey through the country from Peking to Canton...,’ second edition, London, 1806

Illustrations by Hickey, W. Alexander, and S. Daniell; engraved by T. Medland and Neele

University of Edinburgh, Special Collections: SD 6593

Pieter Neefs the Elder (1578–1661)

‘Interior of a Cathedral,’ no date

oil on panel, 29 × 39 cm

Torrie Collection, University of Edinburgh. Accession no. EU0726

‘Rgya-gling (Monastic oboe), Nepal,’ pre-1971

Tourist instrument, wood and metal rings with semi-precious stones, chain, bell of metal alloy, 58 cm, MIMEd 3673, Gift of Geoffrey Samuel, 1996

Musical Instrument Collection, University of Edinburgh

‘Kora (Bridge-harp), The Gambia,’ c.1970

Tourist instrument, resonator made of gourd, sound-table of

buckskin tacked with iron nails, 4 strings, 59 cm

MIMEd 1514, Gift of W.H. Stevenson

Musical Instrument Collection, University of Edinburgh

Samson Young collection

Canton school export painting, c.1900

oil on paper mounted on framed panel 94 × 173 × 2 cm

Catalogue

‘Samson Young: Real Music’

Contributions by Stefan Bilbao, Alexandra Chang, Charlotte Day, Tessa Giblin, Alexander Rehding, Joel Stern, Samson Young

‘Real Music’ provides insight into the artist’s widely acclaimed practice to date. The first to draw out the reverse ethnographic lens that informs his practice, it features essays by Alexander Rehding, Alexandra Chang and Joel Stern traversing ethnomusicology, identity politics and the broader sonic context of Young’s work. Introduced by Tessa Giblin and Charlotte Day, Directors of the Talbot Rice Gallery and Monash University Museum of Art respectively, it also includes a conversation with Stefan Bilbao about NESS research and its application in Young’s work.

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Edition of 1000

Editors: Tessa Giblin and Charlotte Day Design: Stuart Geddes and Žiga Testen Language: English

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'Real Music' is available to purchase at Talbot Rice Gallery
Please enquire at the front desk

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MUMA Curators – Exhibitions: Francis Parker and Research: Melissa Ratliff.

Finally, we extend our most sincere thanks to Samson Young, whose practice freely moves between analogue and digital media, a broad range of formats and mediums, as well as disciplines and cultural and physical borders. Young is a deep thinker and avid producer of ideas whose imagination knows no bounds.

Film credits

'The world falls apart into facts,' 2019

Director, composer and scriptwriter: Samson Young

Horse Togaku musicians: Leon Chu (voice), Cherry Shi (voice),

Geneva Fung (harpsichord), Samson Young (native American style tourist instrument)

Production management: Jones Lee

Sound editing: Samson Young and Teeda Lee

Sound technician: Teeda Lee

Video editing: Samson Young and Vvzela Qu

Camera operators: Ip Yiu Tung Zachary, Lau Chun

Sing, Leung Tin Chun Jimmy, Lee Chun Wai and Leung Ho

Sing Documentation photography: Lily Yiyi Chan

Voiceover: Dr Christian Weikop

Production assistants: Vvzela Qu, Teeda Lee and Christie

Wong Courtesy of the artist

'Muted Situations #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th,' 2018

Musicians: Flora Sinfonie Orchester

Director: Thomas Jung

Sound and video editing: Samson Young and Vvzela Qu.w

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Visual Arts Centre of the Leisure and Cultural
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Courtesy of the artist; Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong;
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Curated by Tessa Giblin and Charlotte Day

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The University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge,
Edinburgh, EH8 9YL, UK