

SOUND AND FURY

Gregor Quack on Samson Young



From left: View of "Samson Young: A dark theme keeps me here, I'll make a broken music," 2016–17. Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. From left: *Nocturne*, 2014; *Canon*, 2016. View of "Samson Young: A dark theme keeps me here, I'll make a broken music," 2016–17. Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. From left: *Stanley*, 2014; *Nocturne*, 2014. Photos: Simon Vogel.

OVER THE COURSE of Samson Young's first solo exhibition in Europe, the world outside seemed to catch up. A somber realism pervaded the show, which was curated by Jasmina Merz and on view at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf this past winter, and it was only as its eleven-week run unfolded that its uncanny relevance to current events became clear. Spanning the full range of Young's practice, the presentation included video work, suites of tenderly serious notation drawings, and a recorded sound piece broadcast in coordination with the ringing of the bells of a nearby church. Yet, in keeping with the artist's long-standing interest in avant-garde chance operations and aleatoric music, the exhibition's focal point was two live sound pieces, both performed continuously in the galleries save for a short lunch break each day.

The first, *Canon*, 2016, occupied the majority of the exhibition's expansive main floor: Visitors could observe the performance only from a corner cordoned off by construction fencing. Peering through the steel mesh, they could make out something like a cross between a police searchlight and a teenager's boom box standing in the opposite corner of the room—a long-range acoustic device (LRAD). This product is marketed as a non-lethal weapon, designed to aid law enforcement in dispersing protestors; it is also, less ominously, used to scare birds away from private property. In Young's hands, the apparatus projected brief bursts of bird sounds across the room. A uniformed performer posi-

tioned next to the device, Maryanne Piper, responded to each blast of sound with a series of improvised whistles and chirps. Piper's performance helps us imagine a way to counter the oppressive nature of this technology. To act out a situation in which birds talk back to a device designed to harass them was to suggest the possibility that humans, also, could reimagine the LRAD as a two-way medium, responding to its violent noise attacks with their own aural assaults.

If *Canon* depended in part on the performer's virtuosic bird impressions, *Nocturne*, 2014, the piece dominating the floor above, consisted of another live performer demonstrating as much endurance as skill. For the show's first week, the artist himself played this role. Then the Venezuelan pianist and composer Marko Ivčić took over. Their task was to use a bountiful array of conventional and improvised percussion instruments to create a continuous sound track of explosions. These accompanied the images shown on a flickering video monitor nearby, which consisted of a stream of silent, eerily green-hued infrared news-footage clips of air raids on Middle Eastern cities from Aleppo to Baghdad. In the same institution where Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, 1968–72, once taught an art establishment invested in rigid categorization to embrace its own complexity as a tool to analyze the chaos of the outside world, Young used the hybridities and confusions endemic to contemporary art to

defamiliarize an established practice of the news media, which is that of rendering disaster palatable by serving it in digestible, often medium-specific (sound-only, image-only) slices.

Over the course of a few weeks, both the show's internal conditions and its place in the world shifted. As LRADS became a fixture in the images of a reescalated conflict at Standing Rock, in the Dakotas, proliferating on the news and across social media, Piper's chirps seemed to grow simultaneously wearier and more practiced. As the swearing in of Donald "bomb the hell out of ISIS" Trump was broadcast on television screens around the world, the explosive sound track of *Nocturne* seemed more aggressively percussive. If at first the exhibition had appeared to foreground Young's precise depictions of the complex mediation of contemporary violence, by the time it closed, the almost desperate undertones of the artist's clinical analysis had emerged as the real crux of the show. As a text accompanying the exhibition revealed, Young's self-characterization as a producer of "broken music" comes from the first lines of a poem by Theodore Roethke. In that poem's last line, the stubborn persistence of "a dark theme [that] keeps me here" gives way to disbelief and disillusion: "I see, in evening air, / How slowly dark comes down on what we do." □

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