

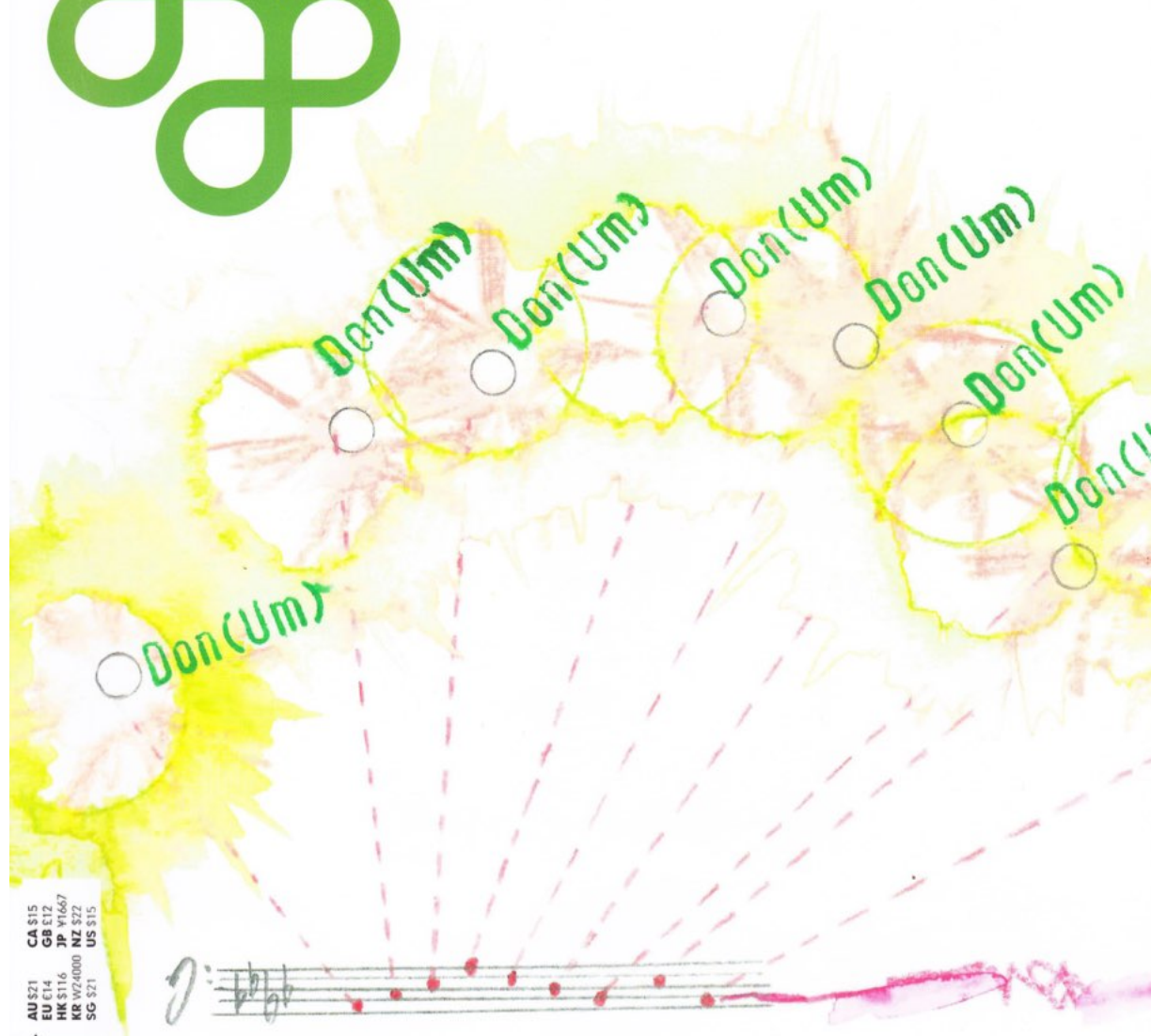
May 2017  
ArtAsiaPacific  
'Samson Young Chasing Frontiers'

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Contemporary Visual Culture

SAMSON YOUNG, MANUEL OCAMPO, TINTIN WULIA,  
LEE WAN, SAHAND HESAMIYAN, VENICE BIENNALE

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4:00pm

PUM

PUM

Chiu

PUM

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PUM

PUM

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3:30pm

DONG

DO

DONG

Fff

Fff

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S a m s o n

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PUM

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Boy with panini

DONG

# CHASING FRONTIERS

Fff Fff

mf

HA HA

HA

HA

HA HA

HA

HA HA

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG







(Previous spread)

**LANDSCHAFT (ROUEN CATHEDRAL, (SIDE GARDEN) (SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT POSITION)), AUGUST 22, 3:15 p.m.–4:15 p.m.),** watercolor, color pencil, pencil, ink, stamp on paper, 18.6 x 27.5 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, top)

**CANON (AS YOU SET OUT FOR ITHAKA, HOPE THE VOYAGE IS A LONG ONE),**

2016, documentation of sound performance for one performer with Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), presented at Art Basel, Switzerland, 2016. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and Team Gallery, New York.

(Opposite page, bottom)

**TO FANON (THAT DOLPHIN-TORN, THAT GONG-TORMENTED SEA)**

(detail), 2016, pastel, colored pencil, xerox print, silk screen print and mixed media on original composition manuscripts, suite of 8: 30 x 42 cm each. Courtesy the artist.\*

(This page)

**FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS: A JOURNEY INTO THE SONIC HISTORY OF CONFLICTS, 2015–**, documentation of the artist during his research in Mandalay, Myanmar. Courtesy the artist.



Over millennia of human expression, we have continually shifted our comprehension of sound and its relationship to us, plunging ever deeper into mysterious, entropic fugues of noise. Twentieth-century musicians such as John Cage and György Ligeti, who felt constricted by the musical traditions of their predecessors and contemporaries, attempted to orchestrate new experiences of listening. Cage's infamous *4'33"* (1952) is void of even a single note, pushing forth the sounds of silence around the audience; in contrast, Ligeti's *Atmosphères* (1961), used by director Stanley Kubrick in his 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, conjures a cluster of tones that, to the listener's ear, seem textureless, endless, as if one or a thousand notes were being played. Both pieces have since been canonized as acts of musical genius and performance art.

Artist Samson Young takes this fascination further—to him, sound is essentially a concept in flux. In his work spanning 13 years to date, he has not only fractured our common perceptions and the actual language of musicality itself, but also propelled himself into roles and projects that define, and then defy, those boundaries. For example, in the ongoing series "To Fanon" (2015–), he scribbles over his old, previously played manuscripts, rendering the scores unreadable or altered, in an act of musical rebirth. Young has also confounded expectations of pitch and melody, and navigated cultural and historical associations with specific sounds. This was seen at Art Basel, in June 2016, when he presented *Canon (as you set out for Ithaka, hope the voyage is a long one)* (2016). Donning a retired law enforcement uniform, he blasted distressed avian calls from a sound cannon—a device typically deployed by police to break up protests, as it can spit a precise and deafening beam of sound up to 1,000 meters away—as a powerful report on migration and homecoming. And for his latest project, sponsored by BMW Art Journey, "For Whom the Bell Tolls: A Journey Into the Sonic History of Conflicts" (2015–), he recorded bells of importance across 23 locations, from Los Angeles to the French village of Labrousse, researching and writing essays on the individual aural landscapes fraught with history. In Nuremberg, Germany, for example, Young noted that a particular bell was looted by the Nazis due to the metal's increased value during World War II, but was ultimately not melted down solely because of its cultural significance.

Whether swinging clear-toned, gigantic bells, or redacting past compositions—his own musical history—with color pencils, Young asks questions at the heart of all his works: Who are these sounds for? What do these sounds mean? To me—and to you?

## An Era of Aspirations

The prolific mid-20th-century Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu once wrote: "Music is not merely notes on paper. It begins with an active listening to sound." For Young, who was born in Hong Kong in 1979, sound hummed its way into his life at an early age, and he was awakened to this act of listening and interpreting quite naturally.

During Young's childhood, the port city was a bustling nexus of financial, cultural and industrial activity. Scrappy upstarts bloomed alongside international conglomerates. Some of the artist's earliest memories were of the world of sound traveling to him through the spinning crackle of a record and a radio's palm-sized speakers. Speaking from his industrial studio in Hong Kong, Young recalled that his mother worked at the technical appliances company General Electric. Once a year, she would bring home a cardboard box the size of a paperback book; within it would be the latest model of a portable radio set assembled in the factory where she was employed. Young infrequently saw his father, an entrepreneur who founded a travel agency, but he remembers his obsession with music, which manifested in towers of LaserDiscs and cutting-edge audio gadgets. This in turn fueled Young's love of video games and media. "That was really an era of aspirations. Everyone aspired to a certain lifestyle, beautiful things," he stated wistfully. "It was a special moment for Hong Kong. It was before Tiananmen Square happened.



There was still some time left on the clock before the handover [of sovereignty to mainland China, in 1997]. The economy in the city really started to pick up in a big way.”

Young remembers a happy, carefree school life, where students were more likely to be sparring in friendly rivalries in the yard than swarming through the streets in mass protest, which was the case decades later with the youth-led, pro-democracy Umbrella Movement protests of 2014. Among his peers, the artist was not a dominant personality, but he was likable, sharing common pop culture interests in video games, Cantopop and *manhua* comics. (To this day, his favorite Sanrio character is the smiley golden retriever Pompompurin, who wears a soft brown beret “like an artist.”) Once, he tried to borrow a plastic Atari game cartridge from his friend, although he only had a Nintendo game console. “I was so convinced that if I was able to insert the whole thing into the reading slot that when I turned on the machine something was going to happen,” Young said. “I thought: *just let me try*. I think that statement itself is kind of beautiful.”

Young has no recollection of what happened afterward, but the idea of finding newfound synergy by jamming together two ill-fitting elements stuck with him throughout his formative years—and continues to drive his practice today. This indefatigable persistence is at the crux of his work, despite the era of aspirations ending abruptly after the massacre of Tiananmen Square in 1989, which preyed on nationalistic tensions in the lead-up to the 1997 handover. Hong Kong entered a strange new millennium rife with political tension and identity conflict.

Some of his works from two decades later are attempts to ameliorate and untangle these situations. *The Coffee Cantata* (Institute of Fictional Ethnomusicology) (2015) is a project that the artist developed after discovering that his father had, in the 1980s, purchased a barren plot of land in Rio Del Oro Valley, in Valencia County, New Mexico. As it turns out, his father was not the lone proprietor—in fact, dozens of Hong Kong businessmen like him had been scammed into purchasing the land, with the promise that it would soon become NASA’s next space station headquarters. “If you look at the whole area, there are wastelands owned by Lee and Chen and Yeung and whatnot. But nothing happened there. There are no

**“There was probably nothing further from my world of music. I saw people doing all these really weird things with the computer and I think a light bulb just went on.”**





(Opposite page)

**THE COFFEE CANTATA (INSTITUTE OF FICTIONAL ETHNOMUSICOLOGY)** (detail), 2015, created in collaboration with Michael Schiefel (jazz vocalist) and Priman Lee (stage designer), video (original song), C-prints on aluminum, neon sign, objects, documents and performance, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

(This page)

**PO MEANS ORDINARY IN CHINESE,** 2007, still from performance video: 9 min. Courtesy the artist.



pipes. Not even electricity." Spurred by this tale of foolish speculation, Young collaborated with jazz vocalist Michael Schiefel and stage designer Priman Lee to write a contemporary adaptation of Bach's *Schweigst Stille, Plaudert Nicht* ("Be Quiet, Stop Chattering") (1732–34), in which the protagonist waxes lyrical about the wonders of coffee. They cooked up a fictional character, Michael Kar Fai Young ("That's me and him [Schiefel] combined. It's my way of putting myself in my pieces . . . he's crazy, super nervous . . . just like me!"), who operates a coffee station in a caravan on the land purchased by Young senior, and spends the long, arid desert days pouring hot drinks for no one. As Young envisioned it, at night the caravan would unfold and transform into a jazz club where Michael sings. The premise is as outlandish as the work was unaffordable: only one portion of the piece could be carried out, but it was important, for the artist and his team to plan the artwork as if they had no limitations—as if they had all the money in the world and all their dreams could be fulfilled.

Young exhibited this work at the nonprofit arts space Oil in Hong Kong in 2015, featuring a costume for the fictional Michael Kar Fai Young, papers pertaining to the land ownership and mysterious crib notes referencing a myriad of sources, from the works of *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) director David Lynch to French cultural theorist Paul Virilio. A video, which is a recording of the only event to take place within the desert, sees Schiefel performing as Michael Kar Fai Young among the saltbush and yucca. With only his voice, a microphone and a sampler, he adapts Bach's "Coffee Cantata" using a host of sounds, from the guttural to the airiest of falsetto touches. Clear notes float in the landscape, crystallizing a dialectical image of Young's childhood, of a lost generation of dreams, and of humanity's constant, often futile, search for something better.

## The Samson Chord

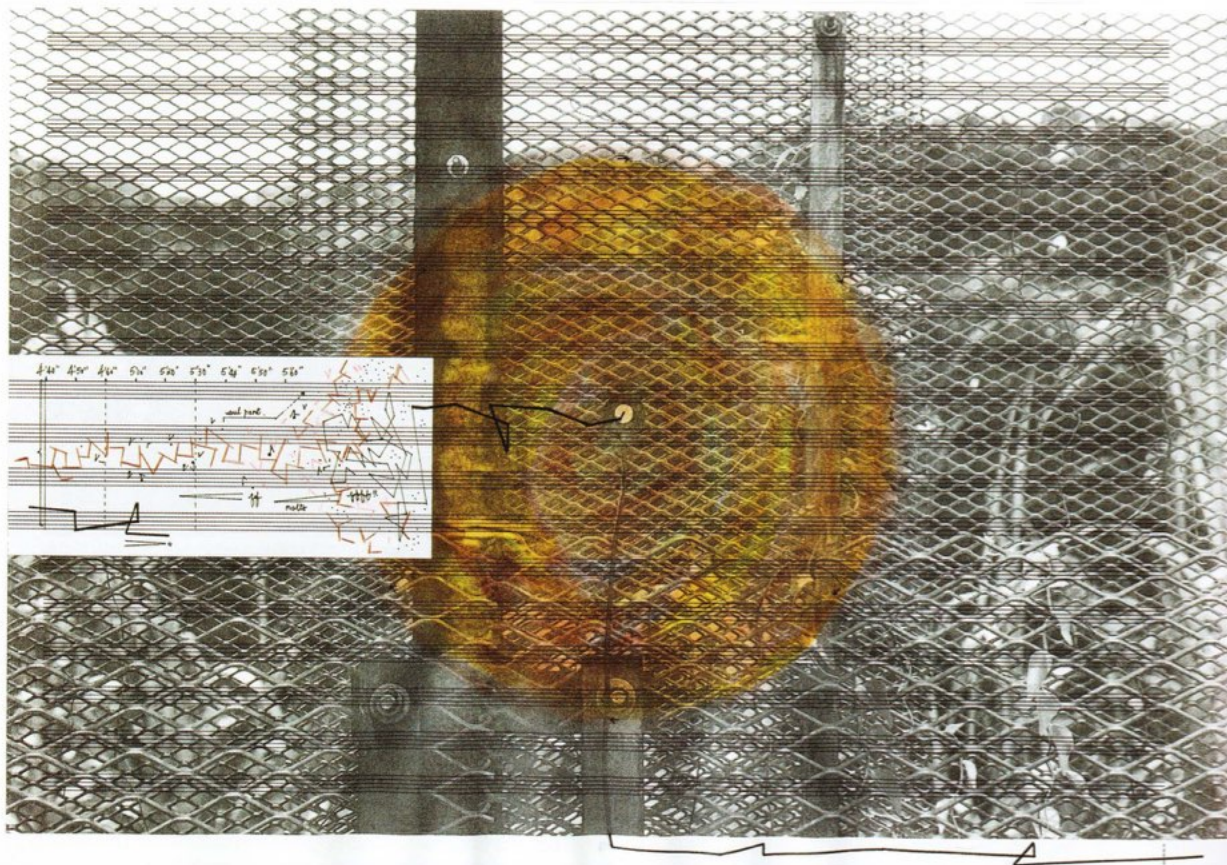
Soon after the handover in 1997, long shadows were cast over Hong Kong. Pressured by waves of paranoia due to the impending transfer of power to China, the teenage Young and his family uprooted to Sydney. The story of his family's immigration to Australia—which at the time was roiled by xenophobic parliament member Pauline Hanson and her right-wing party, One Nation—would be the start of Young's metaphorical bildungsroman. In high school, he excelled at art and music but found the atmosphere discriminatory, especially toward those of Asian descent, and he struggled with his sexuality. In a series of essays recounting the journey for "For Whom the Bell Tolls," he explained that he would "sneak out to the family vehicle, map and torch in hand, and drive up to two hours to some random older boy's or man's house—mostly white, more often man than boy."

The very concept of these boundaries of sexuality and ethnicity tugged and gnawed at him. On his website, [thismusicisfalse.com](http://thismusicisfalse.com), this anguish can still be read in the artist's distinctive, tart language: "Stop telling me to stop dichotomizing the East and the West. I am not done yet. Stop delegitimizing my site of resistance. Somebody else's version of permeability always wins, and then I get pushed to keep moving along, when my lived reality is actually anchored unless I'm pushed or pulled."

Young enrolled in a BA in both music and psychology at the University of Sydney, from which he graduated in 2002. His intent was never to follow through with the latter subject, however, and he dropped it after a few semesters. Music became his lifeblood and a way of measuring his developing synesthesia; for example, he saw the key of C Major as a pleasant, canary yellow. "Funnily enough, I think my artistic side and my musical side really started to flourish in Australia, in a way they probably wouldn't have if I was still in Hong Kong," Young mused. As an undergraduate, he learned about the rigorous structures of the Western classical music lineage—Mozart, Beethoven, Handel—which historically spotlights pitch as dominant over rhythm or articulation. He composed and performed pieces for string quartets and orchestras in elegiac styles.

However, when Young moved back to Hong Kong in 2004 to continue his music studies for an MPhil at the University of Hong Kong, his impressions of music and music-making evolved. After his migration from pre-handover Hong Kong to Australia and to post-handover Hong Kong, he felt new impetus to upbraid perimeters surrounding not just music, but sound itself—perhaps as an anarchic reaction to the world changing around him and the narrow focus of music that he had been taught. He began spending his days at the nonprofit arts space Videotage, where he discovered the genre of new-media art and started collaborating with figures such as poet Ron Lam and video artist Christopher Lau. "There was probably nothing further from my world of music," Young said of what he experienced at the time. "I saw people doing all these really weird things with the computer and I think a light bulb just went on because I had always been into computers and playing video games, and then I saw how people could actually combine an artistic interest with these things." Young's earliest works that transgressed the limitations of classical Western music includes the video work *Po Means Ordinary in Chinese* (2007), in which the artist and a friend donned Teletubby suits and explored Hong Kong against a voiceover of Deng Xiaoping's famous 1989 speech, "Build Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," rendered with text-to-speech technology. The same year, Lau and Young made *Happiest Hour*, a sound and audio installation of gutted and rewired Nintendo Gameboys that won the Bloomberg Emerging





Artist Award. He graduated from the University of Hong Kong and “composed” the radical *Brahms String Quartet No. 1 Mv. 1* (2007/2010).

In this work, Young instructed four professional singers with speakerphones to perform Brahms’s score exactly as written on the page, but with one major difference: they were to completely ignore pitch. What resulted is a cacophony of almost nonsensical voices that resemble the original score just enough to make it identifiable. Young had, in just under seven minutes, overturned a significant aspect of classical Western musical language, just as another composer, Richard Wagner, had radically done in the 1870s with his famous “Tristan Chord,” which at the time was the first move toward atonality in Western musical history.

By the time Young embarked on the “Liquid Borders” (2012–14) project, he had completed his four-year PhD in music composition at Princeton University in the United States, formed a band, founded the nonprofit, educational music platform Contemporary Musiking Hong Kong and written four theatrical musicals and dozens of compositions and performances. This included *Memorizing the Tristan Chord (Institute of Fictional Ethnomusicology)* (2013), which was a tribute to Wagner’s shattering of traditional music to make way for the modern. For this, Young enlisted Cantonese speakers to “sing” Chinese words whose tones corresponded with ascending notes of the Tristan chord: what arose were short, abstract song lines such as “End of year / Go downstairs / Sell records” and “Says who / Without her (him) / But loving her (him).”

In “Liquid Borders,” Young plumbed the relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong. He ventured into the “Frontier Closed Area,” an enclosure of no man’s land forbidden to the public until 2012, when the government decided to gradually dissolve the boundary area. News of the imminent liquidation of the border was nightmare fuel for Hongkongers who rejected the incursion of mainland sentiment. This did not include Young. Instead, he was





(Opposite page, top)  
**LIQUID BORDERS IV (MAI PO & LUK KENG)**, 2014, ink, pencil, mixed media, watercolor on paper, set of 2: 28 x 40 cm each. Courtesy the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**MEMORIZING THE TRISTAN CHORD (INSTITUTE OF FICTIONAL ETHNOMUSICOLOGY)**, 2013, stills from video with sound. Courtesy the artist.

(This page)  
**PASTORAL MUSIC (BUT IT IS ENTIRELY HOLLOW)**, 2014–, fieldwork documentation in Hong Kong. Photo by Dennis Man Wing Leung. Courtesy the artist.

**“It’s really, at the end,  
 about fear of death,  
 and what it means to  
 live in fear of death,  
 knowing that you could  
 disappear anytime.”**

intrigued by how fear was deposited in objects and landscapes, such as in a generic strip of earth that might signify boiling-point tensions between two territories. “I started thinking about that border and how we are so nervous about it—that it symbolizes so much, it has so much weight, and I haven’t even seen it physically. I don’t know where it is, what it looks like and what it sounds like.” Young wasn’t, he insists, trying to produce agitprop, although critics have repeatedly attempted to color the project as either anti- or pro-Beijing. “I wanted to arrive at some sort of position *after* I’d made the work,” he said. He captured the vibrations emanating from the security border fences, menacingly snarled with barbed wire, with contact microphones and hydrophones. In a series of accompanying graphical notations, Young condenses and collapses decades of anxiety into clear, continuous and circular lines spiked with geometric shapes. Tiny triangles occur, like miniature, repetitive knots of palpable tension.

Although almost all of Young’s works have roots in Hong Kong’s history, he increasingly hews to the current era of universal disillusionment, resistance and trauma. The live performance and installation works *Pastoral Music (But It Is Entirely Hollow)* (2014–) and *Stanley* (2014) tussle with specific sites of battle and conflict in Hong Kong’s territory, revisiting themes of borders and enemy state lines. His work for the 2016 Frieze Projects in London, the pop-up installation *When I have fears that I may cease to be, what would you give in exchange for your soul* (2016), germinated from the highly reported news of five Hong Kong-based booksellers who had suspiciously disappeared in recent months, starting with the first case at the end of 2015. However, only a glimmer of a reference to those incidents appears in one of the six “surveillance report” scenes he created for the multimedia walk, where a fictional, anxious bookseller has commissioned a private investigator to track suspicious activity. Participants felt a heightened sense of unease, as if they were being watched. About the work, Young stated, ominously: “It’s really, at the end, about fear of death, and what it means to live in fear of death, knowing that you could disappear anytime.”

### **This Music is False**

When Young was five years old in Hong Kong, Irish-British supergroup Band Aid—which included Bob Geldof, George Michael, Sting and Bono—released the first version of *Do They Know It’s Christmas?* in November 1984 in London. The song climbed to the top of the charts by Christmas morning, pouring funds into anti-famine relief in Ethiopia. This sparked a wave of similar efforts. In the United States, the Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie song *We Are the World* (1985) became a household tune and dozens of similar hits followed, all funneling royalties into Africa. Meanwhile, Hong Kong was still reveling in the queer and wild—and aspirational—age of Cantopop with leading figures such as Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui. It wasn’t



WHEN I HAVE FEARS THAT I MAY  
CEASE TO BE, WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE  
IN EXCHANGE FOR YOUR SOUL, 2016,  
fieldwork documentation in Hong Kong. Photo  
by Dennis Man Wing Leung. Courtesy the artist.







until Young was in his early 20s that charity singles became popularized in the city, by which time these songs had dropped off in the Western hemisphere. When they arrived in Hong Kong, they no longer were zeitgeists of an era of neoliberalist attitudes and fetishization of conditions in third world countries. Instead, the songs were absorbed in their pure form.

This trajectory of a pop genre inspired Young to create his latest project to be unveiled for Hong Kong's participation at the 57th Venice Biennale. In his exploration of the phenomenon of charity singles and their presentation in Asia, he stumbled across an "African singer," Boomtown Gundane, who had released a snarky response to *Do They Know It's Christmas?* Gundane titled his song *Yes, We Do* and donated profits to contraceptive programs in the United Kingdom.

"I found this piece of news and I got all excited. I was going to find and interview this guy and make something for the Biennale. And you know what, I later found out that it was not real, it's fake news," Young said, laughing. "But then I started to imagine this whole scenario . . ." Cue the reappearance of Michael Kar Fai Young. The artist fabricated a narrative recounting the backstory of Michael, aka Boomtown Gundane, as a descendant of the Chinese immigrants who moved to California during the gold rush. Michael, Young added with a laugh, lives in a motel in the middle of an oil field in North Dakota, and is "totally crazy." The installation, titled *Palazzo Gundane* as a tribute to Joseph Beuys's shrine-like work *Palazzo Regale* (1985), will feature a vitrine containing a 1.8-meter-tall statue of Boomtown—an idolatrous image that is marketed for the singer's world tour—and an installation playing an original song by Young.

*We Are the World* is also reinterpreted for the Venice Biennale. Young had asked Hong Kong's Federation of Trade Unions, an openly pro-Beijing political and labor group, to "sing" a muted, mouthed version of the song. The lyrics—which could be misconstrued as representative of American imperialism—uncannily match the contemporary, megalomaniacal values forced onto Chinese citizens: "We are the world / We are the children / We are the ones who make a brighter day." Surprisingly, the Federation agreed to the task, which encouraged Young to explore an open dialogue that rejects the idea of echo chambers. Here, again, Young forces together two odd scenarios—a 1985 US hit single about third-world aid and a chorus of staunchly nationalistic figures—and believes that a message will arise naturally from the outcome.

In the span of just a few years, Young has risen quickly to impact the international art scene. In 2015, he scooped up the generously funded BMW Art Journey prize. The following year, he presented solo shows for the first time in India, at Experimenter gallery in Kolkata, and then in Germany, at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf for "A Dark Theme Keeps Me Here, I'll Make a Broken Music." (The title, ironically, references *In Evening Air*, Theodore Roethke's 1964 poem about the depression that attaches itself to creativity.) That same year, he holed up in a 12-square-foot cabin aboard a cargo ship for the inaugural Container Artist Residency, creating a new series of sound drawings. This year in 2017, aside from participating in the Venice Biennale, he will show works at Documenta 14, and then present his first solo exhibition with Hong Kong gallery Edouard Malingue in November. In 2018, the "For Whom the Bell Tolls" project will wrap up as Young produces a composition with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta, with the recordings of bells.

In the catalog for "For Whom the Bell Tolls," the artist notes the hypnotic effect of metal striking metal, and the ring's ability to rouse people either to battle or prayer. The bell and its echoes, however, remain cold and insensitive to the effects they have. Their emotional singing is false. This research harks back to Young's earliest fascinations with sound simply being an aspiration, a concept that humanity has ascribed so many memories, fears and dreams to. "It draws the world in but also keeps it at arm's length," he writes. "For all and for nobody it tolls." That may be true of bells. However, it seems that Samson Young's mission is to immerse us in the stories of the soundscapes around us, from the explicit to the hidden, and to urge us to simply listen. 🎧