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Samson Young Interviewed by Katherine Adams

*Composing with generative constraints to explore situated listening.*



Samson Young, *Refrains and variations*, 2023, solo performer with computer, MIDI breath controller, automated percussion instruments, speakers, color spotlight, color LED lightbulbs, repurposed bottles,

carton box, plastic sheets, carpet, dimensions variable, duration 6 hours. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York City.

Artist Samson Young is known for an artistic practice that blends compositional experimentation and conceptual rigor with works that span sound, video, installation, and performance. His works have transcribed the sonic environments of spaces of conflict and addressed the social infrastructures of orchestral music. He has probed the latent, technical excesses of classical performance and explored novel forms of technologically mediated composition. Notably, Young's work has often tracked aesthetic resonances across different artistic modalities by putting text, image, and sound into generative confrontation. Samson and I met over a studio visit in the summer of 2022 when he was preparing an exhibition focused on noise and low-level, ambient sounds. In the conversation below we met again to speak about randomization as a tool for improvisatory frameworks, exploring spectatorship through formal means, and other aspects of the work in his new exhibition, *Frames and variations*, at Petzel.

—Katherine Adams

### **Katherine Adams**

You've spoken previously about wanting to examine the institutional conditions of compositional music. Your work in *Frames and variations* exposes a lot of the mechanics of music recording and performance. It also uses technical elements of theater and its dramaturgy to configure sound in space. Would you say this exhibition also relates to your inquiry into certain institutional conditions of performing?

### **Samson Young**

I am still interested in this conversation about spectatorship, the audience as situated listeners, and so on; but I've been trying to process these questions more formally as features of the experience of the work itself and rely a little less on references. I still find it hard not to want to talk about reference, but I also think that it is possible to enter these conversations through thick descriptions.

Detail of Samson Young, *Variations of 96 chords in space (feat. William Lane)*, 2022–23, 4-channel videos with 6 channels of audio (composition for viola, crotales, woodblock, self-playing piano, e-bows on piano strings, electronic sounds, water fountain, painted screens, and custom software), duration variable. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York City.

**KA**

Some of your works directly prior to this had used AI and generative algorithms. For the new work *Variations of 96 chords in space* (2022–23), you've again used programming, partly as an improvisational tool that scores the work. Could you share a bit about how you've used randomization here?

**SY**

The last phase of my work that you mentioned, which involved AI and got me writing codes intensely again, reminded me that a vast space exists between a fully intended thing and a fully random event, but that these are not oppositional ways of thinking and making. Randomization has always been a part of my process, but I probably wasn't as open about it in the past and certainly not thinking about it as much.

**KA**

What was your compositional process? How did you work between the planned and randomized parts of the music in *Frames and variations*?

**SY**

The music started with ninety-six chord-and-color pairs. I have relied on my cross-modal imagination in my sound drawings in the past, but this was the first time I formalized it into a sort of system.

For the viola part, which was performed by William Lane, I arranged the chords into ninety-six short musical phrases. To indicate a "peak" in the phrase, I drew a box in the score around a smaller group of notes in each sequence. William decided on the rhythm, the dynamics, and playing techniques of the notes in each sequence. The peak of the phrase always landed on the "sync point," which was given to William as a time point in seconds.

The sync point design of the score helped to ensure that William could improvise a musical phrase in different ways, but when versions of the musical phrases are put back together they tend to create this heterophonic effect that I find quite beautiful. Heterophony drove this exercise musically. This is the idea that you can start with vertical stacks of sounds or phrases and pull them apart in many different ways, and it still gives you the possibility of hearing them together at a later time.

The piano part, which involved no human player, was generated by an improvisation program that I wrote. There are some other instruments as well, such as wood block, crotales, e-bows, electronic sounds, and so on; and in general these other instruments serve to articulate the sync points.

Installation view of Samson Young, *Variations of 96 chords in space (feat. William Lane)*, 2022–23, 4-channel videos with 6 channels of audio (composition for viola, crotales, woodblock, self-playing piano, e-bows on piano strings, electronic sounds, water fountain, painted screens, and custom software), duration variable. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York City.

**KA**

Can you say more about how the musical texture of heterophony figures in your work?

**SY**

Heterophony is an interesting way to build complexities. There you have parts *sort of* doing the same thing, but each in their own configuration, in their own register, and with varying degrees of continuity and overlap. Another point about heterophony is that you can create parts that develop independently, which will maintain their independence in the listening experience even when they do function as a whole. As an audience member I could variously focus on the individual lines or the overall effect. Parts don't blend into a vertical sound

but weave in and out of shifting processes. Heterophony is how I build a lot of my compositions, especially when the form has scale.

With this new work's use of heterophonic textures—such as the woodblock, the painted screens that featured Chinese motifs (scholar's rock, architectural motifs), the crotales, and the Tibetan singing bowl that's been made into a water fountain—the combined effect for me is a sort of ritual theater, but I cannot say that I intended the work to be a “minor composition.” The sound objects were what I had in the studio; the painted screens were sourced by a friend who helped me with the film, whose day job is Chinese opera production, so Chinese opera-set warehouses were the contacts that he had.

## KA

Do you have a more longstanding interest in ritual theater? Here it appears more contingently, but some of your past work has sometimes been talked about in connection to ritual or has that as an undertone through its references.

## SY

A more recent work of mine that is associated with ritual theater is *Sonata for smoke* (2021). This video work came out of a residency at a Zen temple in Kyoto. The work focused on the sound of smoke, the choreography of microphones and cameras, and the movement of theatrical elements. The final scene of the video involved the burning of a large paper boat. While *Sonata for smoke* contains symbols of ritual, to me its ritualistic qualities are crucially also formal—durations, articulations, synchronicities, and so on—and the pacing of these formal features gives a different experience of time and the way elements return.

## KA

There is a fascinating interplay between source and sound in *Variations of 96 chords in space*, which is the result of close attention to staging and, as you've noted, the choreography sometimes deliberately obscuring or revealing the sources of sound.

## SY

The composition also involved the choreography of microphones and other movable elements such as speakers, screens, and lights. In the choreography, I tried to highlight the fact that the sounds, the locations where the sounds are captured, and our hypothetical locations as listeners are all positions with vectors.

A lot of what I am thinking about here has to do with a feeling of slight disorientation, which is the combined effect of the video frame and the moving

sound source or the moving microphones. The spatialization of the video and audio channels in the installation I hope will add to that effect.

For example, there are two sources of water sounds in this work: an actual water fountain and a sound recording of bubbling water. In the front-of-room footage, the audience is looking at the room from where the audience's seats are located while listening to the room through a mic that is placed at the same location. In this frame, it's not easy to tell that the water is a mediated source. But when this front-of-room frame is contrasted with a second frame of footage—in which you can see and hear the operator slowly raise the boom mic right up to the speaker cone—the audience can begin to notice this spatial quality.

Samson Young, *Refrains and variations*, 2023, solo performer with computer, MIDI breath controller, automated percussion instruments, speakers, color spotlight, color LED lightbulbs, repurposed bottles, carton box, plastic sheets, carpet, dimensions variable, duration 6 hours. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York City.

## KA

Could you share a bit about how you approached the visual effects in these video works? Sometimes there's a sort of double-exposure effect that blends two shots of the same space, which superimposes different figures or introduces new levels of light saturation.

**SY**

We filmed each “chord” twice over two weeks with different instruments. Elements in the second week sometimes retraced and other times doubled positions of the elements from the first week. In the room-doubling effect you mentioned, I was trying to show these moments of synchronicity across time.

**KA**

You mentioned that in 2022 you had recently moved toward a new strain of research that focuses on low, ambient, or background noises. Would you say you are still exploring that here, perhaps even in visual terms?

**SY**

It is related in that I am still staying with and exploring this space between randomness and intentionality, but I think when we last spoke, and up until the last exhibition I made, I was still thinking about noise as a narrating element, whereas now I am trying to let ideas find their own way into the experience of the work.

**KA**

In that vein, I’m wondering about your choice to work more formally in this new exhibition—without references, as you’d put it. A lot of your work has focused on the sonic environments of spaces that are quite explicitly politicized.

**SY**

I think that having clear political referents has been the expectation, but I want to try to approach things differently. But these are not mutually exclusive ways of thinking, of course.

[Samson Young: Frames and variations](#) is on view at Petzel in New York City until March 4.

*Katherine C. M. Adams is a writer and curator based in New York City.*

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