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ArtReview

“Samson Young on the Edge of Intelligibility”

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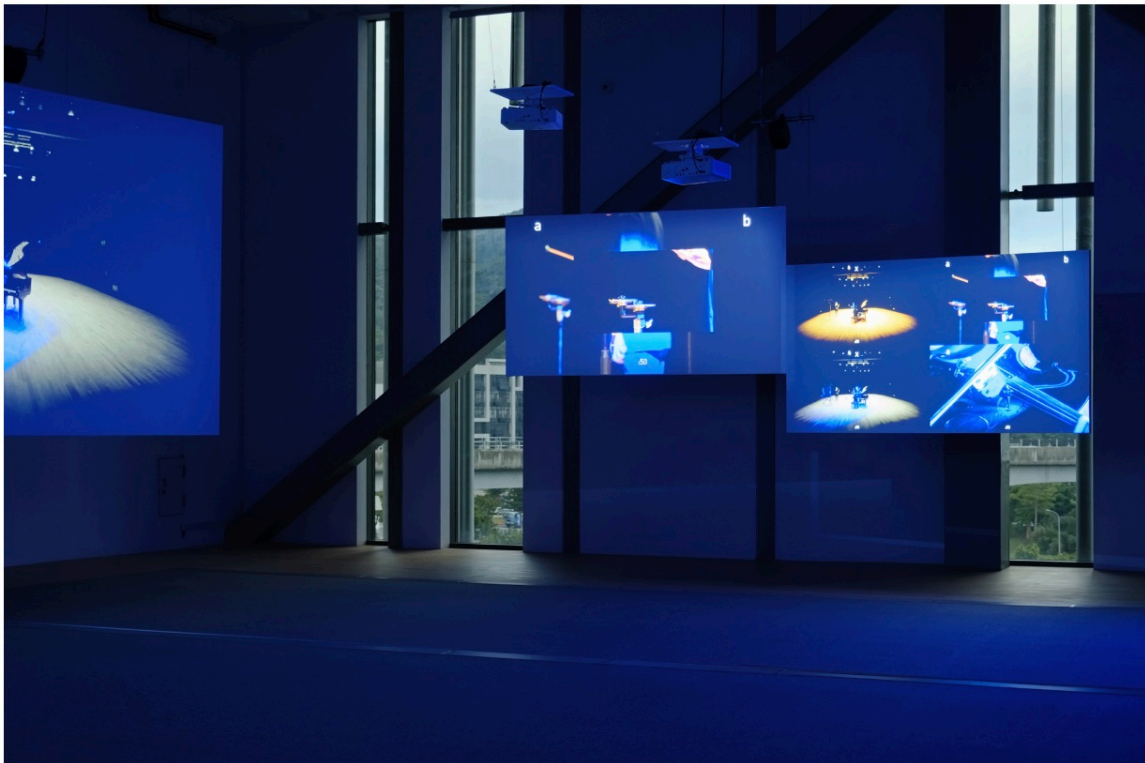
Samson Young, *Pavilion*, 2025 (installation view). Photo: Chu Chi-hung. Courtesy the artist and NTCAM

In *Pavilion* at the New Taipei City Art Museum, the artist provides a darker vision of current technological realities

Charles and Ray Eames might be best known for furniture design, but the duo were also accomplished filmmakers and exhibition designers. For the 1964 New York World’s Fair, they designed the pavilion for the computing giant IBM and produced a multiscreen film called *THINK*, which outlined how computing is an extension of human problem-solving, and is fundamentally a tool to aid humankind. Playing on 22 screens, the installation featured a crisp and exhilarating montage comprising fast-cut images and film clips, including those of urban planning, railway systems and a hostess planning the seating for a dinner.

Using *THINK* as a point of reference, Hong Kong artist Samson Young debuts a major multi-screen video installation at the New Taipei City Art Museum, *Pavilion* (2025), which provides a darker vision of current technological realities. Here, artificial intelligence has displaced the centrality of the human being as a source of creativity, self-expression and control. The scale of the work alone dwarfs the human viewer. With seven huge screens positioned above the audience like in an Omnimax theatre, *Pavilion* bombards the viewer with a stream of images partially generated by AI, where narratives are scrambled and pictures morph from one to the next in jumpy rhythms.

The visual style is extravagantly glitchy and nonsensical, in the manner of ironic AI-generated imagery favoured by some new media artists to demonstrate its blithe weirdness. Recurring image is related to sports meets, where we see images of stadium tracks and ski slopes, the competitors flat, waddling rectangular panes. Another thematic thread is the interiors of spaceships; the exhibition text says that Young was inspired by Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and its famous AI antagonist, HAL 9000. And yet another recurring idea is of wunderkammers, or cabinets of curiosities, which refers to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European tradition of collecting objects to build a microcosmic view of the world. Young considers these cabinets of curiosities to be early forerunners of 'databases', and his video screens, arranged like a cupboard with its doors open, can be seen as his modern-day update of that. But instead of a careful selection of static objects to represent a view of the world, here we have a constantly changing stream of data that teeters on the edge of intelligibility.



Variations of 96 chords in space, 2023 (installation view). Photo: Chu Chi-hung. Courtesy the artist and NTCAM

Accompanying this spectacle are heroic choral works composed by Young in the style of classical requiems. Performed by the Taipei Male Choir, the music generates a grandiose atmosphere of elegy and generalised anxiety. But it's unclear what's being mourned. The death of techno-optimism of the era of *THINK?* The supposed end of a stable vantage point from which we can apprehend the world? The ruined utopianism of sports events and its misplaced hopes of international cooperation? All these anxieties are neither illuminated nor pushed to a level of real discomfort. The chief feeling I get is alienation, but you could say that is the point of this hi-tech, avant-garde opera, the key purpose of which is to demonstrate the power and opacity of algorithmic thinking.

Over in another gallery is Young's work *Variations of 96 chords in space* (2023), a sound-and-video installation exploring Young's interest in chance operations in music. The screens play a series of short videoclips featuring various instruments, some of which are played by Young and another performer, including a viola, crotales and a self-playing piano. Each clip begins with the screen being filled with a certain Pantone colour, whose number is shown, and this colour then guides the musical composition that follows. During my visit, there are clips associated with shades of blue, fuchsia and orange; the sounds included the plucking of stringed instruments, the tinkling of crotales and the bubbling of a mini fountain in a Tibetan singing bowl. There is a complicated system – partly designed by Young, partly computer-generated – behind how the elements in each clip are decided, such as the instrument played, the notes played and the

type of microphone used to record the sound. After these different actions are recorded, a software stitches the scenes together in different ways so that the content of each clip itself is never the same. Their order of appearance is also shuffled. Admittedly, you don't need to understand the mechanics of the system to experience the work. But an encounter with the randomised short clips feels dry, procedural, almost mathematical: as if they were playing by the invisible rules of what remains essentially a private game.

Pavilion at New Taipei City Art Museum, [through 4 January](#)

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