

# **The Sound Canon of Samson Young**

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*The subject can only know itself as an object, yet as such,  
it fails to know itself as that which knows, since it knows  
not as an object, but only in and as an act.<sup>1</sup>*

Bombs rain down on Beirut, on Palestinian villages, on Kabul, on Mosul. The small video monitor replays the evidence. Silently, the night sky is illuminated by teams of scratchy green trails scuffling across the screen, or all at once by flashes that overpower the camera's sensors, leaving the screen momentarily blank. For six consecutive hours, day after day, Samson Young is the video's lonely witness, but also its interpreter, and ultimately, its collaborator. He provides the sound that is absent from the video, tapping the skin of an overturned bass drum, trickling sand onto a crumpled plastic wrapper, aiming canned air into the face of a microphone. As the footage on the screen loops, we are aware that the catastrophic violence of these missiles and bombs has already been done. Its victims are dead or contending with their injuries and losses. Yet the evidence replays again and again and again and again and again: a Nietzschean nightmare.

At the risk of repeating an evacuated situationist bromide, our experience of all manner of contemporary phenomena comes to us second-hand, flattened, Photoshopped, and fantasised. From toothpaste to travel, from economic security to geopolitical conflict, we engage our desires and demons at a distance, separated from physical and emotional contact by the buffer of technology. Screens and speakers transmit distant realities while at the same time removing us from the pleasures and pains of contact. Contemporaneity

is defined by an array of distancing effects, some of them spatial, some ideological, some technological.

In *Nocturne* (2015), Samson Young engages the screen. The screen engages the camera. The camera engages the luminous traces of missiles, bombs, and artillery: indexes of the U.S.-led bombings of predominantly Muslim populations. And we engage Young's engagement, mediated though it may be, with the actuality of these ghastly acts of violence. We are Young's audience. Some of us are there in the gallery with him, sharing time and space. Others engage Young's performance via additional screens and speakers, further removed from the chain of input and output, transmission and reception.

Young is our avatar audience, literalising the old metaphor 'theatre of war'. The theatre is now a televisual production. And Young, as its audience, sits at a kind of command centre, equipped with vocational apparatus. Young's situation is the mirror image of the directors of this theatre's 'stage'. At a drone base in Nevada, the role of 'pilot' is re-created with robotic verisimilitude. Like Young, the 'pilots' are surrounded by a panoply of specialised gear. They carry out their pitiless attacks from the safe remove of virtuality. Necessarily, the language used to describe these scenes has frequent recourse to scare quotes as a way of maintaining the meaningful distinction between genuine and figurative identification. This constitutes—in the field of language—yet another distanced relationship. Their victims (no scare quotes) are thousands of miles away, inhabiting different times of day, living and working in different cultural contexts, eating different foods in the shelter of different architectures. As has always been the case, difference runs interference, allowing the actor to act without the ethical inconvenience of identifying with the human beings at the receiving end of his or her transmission.

But this is where Young's intervention starts to accrue substance. We, too, are the transmission's receivers; we are its audience. So familiar are the scenes of tracers lacerating a section of a distant night sky, framed at 16:9 aspect ratio by the hi-def screens mounted on the walls in front of our sectional sofas. Distance and difference inure us as well. We are denied the radical identification that might inspire us to oppose

the operative policies, technologies, and ideologies. Both identification and opposition evaporate.

Even as we stand in the real time and real space of the gallery, with Young and his apparatus, we are pushed away from the actual. The screen upon which Young watches the war footage is small. It is not intended for our viewing, but merely for Young's—a kind of televisual score for his sonic accompaniment. The sounds of Young's foley effects are quiet in the space; paltry in comparison to the vivid violence of the coalition bombings. To get the full sonic effect of Young's activities, one must pick up one of the portable FM radios in the gallery and tune in to the indicated frequency. When one places the small receiver to the ear, Young's delicate gestures, amplified for transmission and playback, start to insinuate the awesome terror of aerial bombardment. Again, one is not there at the site of the bombings. One is not then at the time of the bombings. One is separated from the actual via the technological mediation of space and time. But the employment of media techniques and technologies—the video playback, the foley, the FM radios—doesn't merely reinforce the distancing effects of contemporaneity; or at least it doesn't have to. By making us so aware of the exaggerated mediation of the chain of events, by implicating us in the extenuation of culpability, Young subverts the distancing effects of media, not by lifting the curtain of mediality, but by baring its device; by putting us in more direct contact with the curtain itself, its logic and deceptions. We only perceive the ghost when, counterintuitively, it is concealed by its sheet.

So Young goes back to the playbook of the avant-garde, resuscitating Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie* (estrangement), in which the structure of the work is exposed as a construction. Shklovsky called it 'baring the device'. We might think of the scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the curtain is pulled back to expose one Oscar Zoroaster Phadrig Isaac Norman Henkle Emmannuel Ambroise Diggs, who, thanks to the dual devices of the loudspeaker and the curtain, is able to operate and rule as the powerful wizard.

The curtain is often invoked as the master metaphor for our contemporary experience of music. The metaphor is borrowed not from L. Frank Baum but Pythagoras, who lectured from behind a curtain, leaving his students—the *akousmatakoí*—to listen intently to his lectures without the distraction of the visual. We speak of ‘acousmatic sound’, which is disconnected from its source and from visual, textual, or contextual clues that would inevitably shape or shade our understanding of what we are hearing. In modern aurality, the fabric of the curtain is replaced by technology: microphonic diaphragms, analog and digital media, amplifiers, and speaker cones. Whether ancient or contemporary, the upshot of the curtain metaphor is that we are separated from the sources of what we listen to, and from the conditions of production. The curtain obscures the what, when, where, who, and why. Stick on skin or synthesised emulation? Yesterday or 1968? Here or there? Hoomii throat singers or Brooklyn hipsters? Accompaniment for ecstatic spiritual practices or crass TV advertisements?

In much of what we lately call sound art, the acousmatic curtain drapes itself over the work, while also enveloping, shrouding, tenting—stick with me here, I’m about to make up a verb—*enghosting* a vast expanse of other forces, entities, intentions, and receptions not properly *of* the work. Many artists working with sound are loathe to acknowledge that sonic fabric is always also social fabric. Draped like a sheet over the elsewhere-ness of its production, sound gives form to the apparently empty space between its sources and its intended receivers. Regardless of the artist’s intention, the by-whom and the for-whom are revealed to be more deeply and meaningfully constitutive than anything measured in decibels or hertz.

Sound is described as ephemeral, immersive, ineffable. More often than not—too often, to be honest—these adjectives are applied as mythifications, or worse yet, mystifications, of sound’s capacities. Some would like to believe that sound offers freedom from the stultifying entrapments of language. Without syntax, without semantics, without grammar, sound can go where, and do what, language cannot. Sound, so the story goes, can access states of emotion, affect, perception, and spirit in ways that language, forever chained to the rigid grid of signification, cannot. Sound—as a discipline, as a material, as

a medium, as a community—comforts itself with the assurance that it is freer than language, freer than thought. It is at once more fluid and more gaseous than the solidity of linguistic reference. Sound is atmospheric, ambient, ghostlike. Sound escapes the grid, or as Barthes might have said, it outruns the paradigm. In theory and in practice, this conception of sound—Frances Dyson calls it the ‘rhetoric of immateriality’—is often meant as a celebration of sound’s privileges.<sup>2</sup> But many of these same qualities can be invoked in less celebratory ways. If we think of our contemporaneity as it is thought by Baudrillard or Debord, or David Harvey, then immateriality takes on a less benign hue. Ghostliness invokes not Casper the Friendly Ghost, but Caspar Weinberger, U.S. Secretary of Defense under President Ronald Reagan.

The acousmatics of the neoliberal condition play out in stark and devastating fashion in contemporary warfare: time-based, immersive, remote. For the victims of U.S.-led attacks in the Middle East, from the Gulf War to bombings of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, time is experienced in myriad nesting frames: the instant of the explosion, the protracted duration of the siege, the casting anticipation of the next attack or, hopefully, of the end. The immersion is physical (smoke, shrapnel, rubble) and mental (fear, anxiety, anticipation). But the source of the terror is remote, delivered namelessly, facelessly, at a distance: by a fighter jet at 20,000 feet, by a ship in the Gulf, or by a drone operator in Nevada.

Disparate but not dispirited, sound behaves like all manner of contemporary phantasmagoria: simulacra, becoming, and the trace; capital, debt, and surveillance. Samson Young’s work shrouds the ghosts of global contemporaneity in sonic fabric: a double haunting that makes forms and forces apparent. What is revealed, of course, is not a secret substance, but a constitutive ever-elseness. Sound is never present, but always elsewhere and elsewhen: faraway thunder, forever late to lightning’s party. And sound is always haunted by that which is other than sound: by else-sound. In its textility as much as its textuality, sound is a fabric of citations, its ontology always deferred by, and to, the thousand sources of culture that speak in, of, and through it. Sound is haunted—

possessed in multiple senses—by its sources. Each haunting, each possession, is both specific and contingent.

Fredric Jameson, writing about George Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', suggests that as capitalism reorders our understanding of material equivalence, it also reorders our understanding of the relations between materials and their qualities. Capital reduces the distinctions between vastly different objects, generating false equivalencies via the quantification of money. Jameson writes:

If all these objects have become equivalent as commodities, if money has levelled their intrinsic differences as individual things, one may now purchase as it were their various, henceforth semiautonomous, qualities or perceptual features; and both color and shape free themselves from their former vehicles and come to live independent existences as fields of perception and as artistic raw materials.<sup>3</sup>

Jameson detects in the vast twentieth-century expansion of capitalism a paradigm shift that licenses the idea of abstraction in the visual arts. And while I'm wary of amplifying Jameson's hunch into anything like a causal claim, I do want to investigate the theme of abstraction as it is applied in both the thinking of what we might refer to as the 'neoliberal condition' and the thinking of art.

As writers including Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Theodor Adorno have noted, the abstract equivalence upon which capitalism rests is a social phenomenon, granted validity only by its activation by human beings in their day-to-day interactions. As Sohn-Rethel says, abstraction 'exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it. . . . It is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions.'<sup>4</sup> Adorno writes that abstraction 'lies not in the abstracting mode of thought of the sociologist, but in society itself'.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the logic of neoliberalism and its various handmaidens has only expanded and accelerated the degree to which abstraction is constituted by, and is constitutive of, the fabric of our lives.

Some would argue that sound is the abstract artistic medium par excellence. When Walter Pater declares that the other arts aspire to the condition of music, when Kandinsky finds his permission in Schoenberg, when Schaeffer isolates the *objet sonore*, each is proposing that music, and by implication sound, is an asignifying, nonrepresentational medium; that it is not burdened, as language and images are, with the obligation to indicate something else in the world. By this logic, sound's privilege is a product of its abstraction. Sound is self-contained, self-referential—indeed self-identical—in a way that words and pictures can only dream of. Take, as a recent example, an article by Alyssa Buffenstein in *Artnet News* from August 2016 that opens by saying: 'For some, abstraction might mean non-figurative painting, but today's hottest emotive medium is so abstract it can't be seen, touched, or felt. There's no arguing that sound art is having a moment.'<sup>6</sup>

We can go back now and retrieve Jameson's claims for abstraction. The issue isn't the liberation of colour and shape, metaphorically free of use value and reassigned as tokens of aesthetic exchange. No, the abstraction in question has nothing to do with Clement Greenberg. The abstraction of sound as it is imagined—stereotypically, but by no means solely—by Buffenstein is the abstraction of capital itself. Capital is invisible, merely represented, fleetingly and symbolically, by scraps of paper and minted metal. Capital itself is nowhere and nothing. It represents value that no longer attaches to any material thing in the world. The gold standard was abandoned by the United States in 1933. And in 1944, at the Bretton Woods Conference, the U.S. dollar was established as the international reserve currency, meaning that the value of other currencies is now measured against the dollar, which has no intrinsic value of its own. Postwar capital, then, does not attach to any measurable real value in the material world. It is in this sense that we must refer to capital as an abstraction. It thus becomes a little less comfortable—and a lot less celebratory—to refer to sound as abstract.

Neoliberal logic has increasingly consolidated around calls for globalism and free trade. As with so much of the language of neoliberalism, these words don't mean exactly what they seem to. Globalism, for instance, refers specifically to the free passage of goods and capital across national borders. Human beings, on the other hand, are severely restricted

in their freedom of movement. It is far easier (i.e., more profitable) to move capital to where tax and labour laws are favourable than it is to change the tax and labour laws at home. So corporations routinely outsource resources, infrastructure, and labour (but not labourers) to developing countries with more lax regulations. What's free in neoliberal globalism is capital, not people.

This freedom is facilitated by the rapidly accelerating sophistication of computer-based systems. The temporal and spatial logics of the neoliberal market have been dramatically expanded by information and transportation technologies. Supply chains are now global and close to instantaneous. 'Just-in-time' models of production and distribution allow wares to reach us from distant elsewheres, wearables from who-knows-where. Francis Fukuyama, author of *The End of History and the Last Man* and once-upon-a-time bogeyman of the American Left, observes that 'The bargaining advantages of unions are quickly undermined by employers who can threaten to relocate . . . to a completely different country.'<sup>7</sup>

Capital is further abstracted in the realm of the digital. Simulacral representations of value stand in for the representations of national currency. Neoliberalism realises that the trenches of class warfare are no longer dug in the fields of labour but are now cut through the razor-thin space between the ones and zeroes of the doubled virtuality of contemporary techno-capitalism: electronic currency transfers and algorithmic trading. Capital migrates with the stealth and ease of a spectre. As Fukuyama points out, 'Capital has always had collective-action advantages over labour, because it is more concentrated and easier to coordinate. . . . And capital's advantages only increase with the high degree of capital mobility that has arisen in today's globalised world. Labour has become more mobile as well, but it is far more constrained.'<sup>8</sup> The movement of people needn't be a significant concern, so long as capital is temporally and spatially mercurial.

Movement is a key concern of Samson Young's *Canon* (2016). Presented at Art Basel Switzerland, this work inserts itself into one of the hubs of the art world. Exhibited for an audience who, due to their status as agents of a global market, enjoy the unfettered



migration of capital, the piece questions the meaning of the word ‘freedom’ when used as a modifier of either ‘markets’ or ‘movement’. The politics of migration are, of course, anything but simple. *Canon* meets the issue on its own terms, weaving together multiple references in the form of text, technology, object, and image, asking us to consider the principle of freedom of movement as it pertains to migratory birds, capital, sound, and human beings.

Similarly, the work’s title encompasses multiple meanings. It might refer, for instance, to a canon, a musical work in which a single theme is repeated but offset, allowing the melody to generate new, unexpectedly complex structures. Perched upon an industrial scissor lift above the vast expanse of Art Basel, Young stands at attention, dressed in the uniform of the Hong Kong colonial police circa 1979, and issues an incessant flutter of imitation bird calls. As with *Nocturne*, if you are near enough you can hear his sound-making in the realness of shared time and space. But again, there is an elsewhere towards which his activities are directed. The bird calls are delivered across the hall by a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) to the ears of those gathered in a designated space designed by Young. The LRAD is commonly known as a sound cannon (thus denoting a second, homonymous significance to the work’s title). The LRAD is designed to project a concentrated beam of sound across long distances. Typically, it is used as an implement of control. Police use LRADs to issue warnings to crowds. At sites such as airports and nuclear power plants, they are employed to disperse flocks of birds that can create public safety hazards. LRADs have also been used as weapons, capable of causing permanent hearing damage by directing sounds up to 2,000 metres at a volume of 150 decibels.

A canon is also a criterion of judgement, as well as the set of examples that meet this criterion. Ecclesiastical canon law is the exclusive set of principles that regulates the church within, and apart from, the broader laws of the state. The canon of Western art designates the select subset of works that defines an accepted narrative and hierarchy of values from within a much larger set of unruly practices. Canons establish zones of inclusion and, as a result, zones of exclusion. But as we know—as Edward Said has so convincingly shown us—the qualities that define the included are, in fact, produced as

the antithesis of the qualities ascribed to the excluded.<sup>9</sup> The canon as criterion is nothing more than the self-regulatory rejection of the anti-canon. We assume that the Japanese nightingale responds to the call of other Japanese nightingales, positively identifying its own call amid the cacophony of other species' calls. But it is just as likely that the Japanese Nightingale recognises its own call as the call that is *not* that of any other bird. The call of the Japanese Nightingale is the not-call of the Cape May Warbler, the not-call of the Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, the not-call of the Bank Swallow.

We are not so different. The identities we assume and ascribe are constructed around the arbitrary, exclusionary falsehoods of canonical criteria. When, in 1979, the cargo ship *Skyluck* arrived in Victoria Harbour carrying 3,000 Vietnamese refugees, it was not given permission by the Hong Kong colonial authorities to land. For twenty-three weeks, the ship operated as a floating prison, its passengers quarantined offshore, until its anchor chains were severed and the vessel beached at nearby Lamma Island. The state is defined as that entity which wields the monopolistic control of two powers: the authority to create money, and the legal employment of violence. The force of the canon authorises the force of the cannon, and vice versa.

Young's LRAD bird calls are directed across the exhibition space to a small receiving room furnished with a metal bench bearing the name of the *Skyluck* and a small, red plastic basin identical to those provided to the ship-bound refugees for bathing, eating, and storing personal items. Young's uniform establishes him as the symbolic embodiment of the Hong Kong colonial officer. He manifests the directionality of power: positioned atop the lift as if atop a guard tower, training his cannon on the spectator who temporarily occupies the space of the *Skyluck* furnished with the red, plastic basin.

Bird calls facilitate an evolutionarily programmed migration from one continent to another. The birds move like capital under neoliberalism, fluidly and unhindered. Their calls move with them and freely beyond them, distinct yet unafflicted by sharing space with other calls, other sounds, other species. *Canon* appropriates their calls and makes of

them an apparatus of control. The Vietnamese refugees are not as free as birds; not as free as their calls; not as free as capital under neoliberalism.

Haunting the canonised space of Art Basel, Young's *Canon* complicates the simple tune of free markets and freedom of movement. The work forces us to realise that a term like 'globalisation' describes the shrouded motive of neoliberalism: to set capital free while demobilising human beings both geographically and politically. The art world is asked to sing with and against its own melody, simultaneously canonising and decanonising, including by means of exclusion. At global art gatherings, the space of the gallery has swelled, taking on the dimensions and ambience of American-style retailers like Walmart or Costco. The white cube aspires to the condition of the big box. Ghosts stroll its aisles, perusing objects purported to be the most sophisticated products that the culture has to offer. Beneath their sheets lurks the vacant, symbolic space of capital. As ghosts, they move freely through walls and across borders—not because they are a different class of being, somehow ontogenetically distinct from the labouring rabble trapped by the shackles of employment, tribal loyalties, or national borders. Their freedom is granted by the freedom of capital itself. As agents of the global art market, they cross borders in the manner of drug mules, licensed not by their personal sovereignty, but by dint of the value stored upon their person.

By the time you read this, you will know things that I, as I write it, do not. But the wisdom of Samson Young's work can be instructive for us both. For me, it is January 2017. I am at my desk in Chicago, at the centre of what we now must sceptically call the 'United' States. I realise that works of art, and discourse, and history, and our interactions with each other, are all subject to new and intense pressures. Questions of who we are and what we do must now respond to urgent, unreasonable demands. By the time you read this, the savagery of Donald Trump's presidency will have assumed unpredictably monstrous forms. What first announced itself with his patently racist ban on refugees from predominantly Muslim countries will have metastasised into other gestures of paranoiac exclusion. Our very ability to process such a heinous lack of compassion and such utter disregard for justice and rule of law depends on our ability to confront the

history of our own exclusions: personal, familial, communal, ethnic, racial, national. Our ability to respond to the exigencies of this what-once-was-old-is-new-again political order depends on our ability to be self-critical and adaptable. We can no longer blithely accept the bestowal of privileges upon certain peoples or practices. Everything is fair game for critical re-evaluation, for deconstruction, and for reconstruction. Our canons must be reimagined as anti-canons: apparatus of contravention. The canon's exclusionary power must be directed at its own authority. Therein, finally, lies freedom.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne, 'Introduction', *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Dyson, *The Tone of Our Times* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Culture and Finance Capital', *The Cultural Turn* (New York: Verso, 2009), 151.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Leigh Claire La Berge, 'The Rules of Abstraction: Methods and Discourses of Finance', in *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 118, ed. Aaron Carico and Dara Orenstein (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014): 99–100.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology* (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 31–32.

<sup>6</sup> Alyssa Buffenstein, '12 Sound Artists Changing Your Perception of Art', *Artnet News*, (August 4, 2016): <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/12-sound-artists-changing-perception-art-587054>.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 'American Political Decay or Renewal? The Meaning of the 2016 Election', *Foreign Affairs*, (June 13, 2016): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/american-political-decay-or-renewal>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), *passim*.