

## ART The Artist Making Spooky Appropriations of Pop Songs in Venice

Samson Young's Hong Kong pavilion at the Venice Biennale is conceived as an album unfolding in space. SLEEK met the artist to through it track by track



– Video still from Palazzo Gundane

Ever since Samson Young was selected for the BMW Art Journey in 2015, things have taken off for the sound and performance artist. One year after his travels, during which he recorded the sounds of historically significant church bells on five different continents, Young had his first solo exhibition in Europe at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. Visitors could witness Young reenact the sounds of muted war videos using household items and make the sounds of distressed birds appear using a LRAD sound cannon usually deployed by law enforcement against protesters. Now, just few months later, his works are being presented at both documenta 14 and the Venice Biennale. Representing Hong Kong in Venice, Young has turned the national pavilion into a wacky living room filled with ghostly appropriations of pop songs. The colourful exhibition once again proves that the trained musician is a master of translating the profound research that underlies his works into installations that are as visually stunning as they are sonically innovative. We met him in Venice to learn more about the ideas behind his show.

**Your pavilion is centred around the subject of charity singles such as “Do They Know It’s Christmas” and “We Are The World”. What inspired you to investigate this subject?**

A while ago, I saw the 2014 remake of “Do They Know It’s Christmas” on TV. To me, it looked a little strange and felt somewhat out of time. I started to ask myself why I felt that sense of discomfort and out-of-time-ness. Why did this remake feel so strange to me?

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I’m not sure how much money that would  
raise” – Samson Young*

**Have you found an answer to that question?**

I make works about things I don’t understand. They are a way for me to process information. Often, I will come to some sort of conclusion or opinion a few months after the show, but the show itself is just a way for me to process things and work them through. I think there are many reasons, but whether one of them is prevailing, I don’t know yet.

**Do you think it might have to do with a heightened cultural sensitivity that nowadays adds a neo-colonialist ring to summons such as “feed the world”?**

There’s many more complexities – economic reasons related to the state of the popular music industry now and then, for example. If you tried to make a charity single now, I’m not sure how much money that would raise. There’s also the aspect of style – different genres coming in and out of vogue. But yes, I personally think that the most difficult aspect is this neo-colonial aspiration. It certainly is problematic and worth addressing, but at the same time, we are talking about artists who wanted to do good using the means they were given and who, in the end, raised significant amounts of money. So how do you reconcile cultural issues which, with the benefit of historical hindsight, we acknowledge are problematic, but which were sparked by aspirations that are not necessarily sinister? That’s the question I try to focus on in the show.



– Risers, 2017. Neon, modular stage platforms (wood, water- resistant carpet). Courtesy of the artist.

**How does the quote “the world is yours but also ours but mostly yours” that is displayed in the pavilion’s patio and leads the way into the show relate to that question?**

It can also be seen as a gesture of trying to make the world better that, in hindsight, turn out to be problematic. This quote was taken from a speech Mao gave in 1957 during his second and last visit to Moscow. At that time, the Soviet Union had just sent a satellite into space ahead of the Americans. For a window of two to three years, there was a real reason for optimism. Of course, as we now know, everything went downhill after that. But that instant marked an interesting moment in terms of what we talked about – a certain purity of aspiration and systems, which then, of course, changes and evolves all the time, and ultimately becomes corrupted by personal interests. Historically, that quote was interesting for that reason. But I am also interested in its surface quality. Taken entirely out of context, it is super-ambiguous and crazy-weird – who is You, who is Me? The relationship between subject and addressee is really fluid.

**Is the font which you use for neon pieces like this one your own handwriting?**

Yes, it’s always my handwriting. I enjoy making neon pieces out of it, I like bright and saturated colours.





– Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth), 2017. Silk-screen print on vinyl cover, felt tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation and 10-channel sound installation. Courtesy of the artist.

**That’s definitely palpable throughout the whole exhibition, especially in the largest room of the venue, where you present a distorted audio mashup of “Do They Know It’s Christmas” and “We Are The World” within the surroundings of a wacky living room. How did you pick the personal objects spread across the room, such as the books lying on the side tables?**

The room belongs to my main piece, which is the depiction of a fictional character. The whole story has to do with this musician by the name of Boomtown Gundane who had created a response song to “Do They Know It’s Christmas” – which I at first thought was a real story, but turned out to be fake news. So I took that idea and just went with it. The room is his living room, and the objects are his personal memorabilia. This meta-fiction also has autobiographical elements to it – there are bits of my family history, my interests, and my inclination towards furniture that is weird and ugly.

*“It’s very difficult to make out where I actually stand politically, and people will see different things in the performance depending on where they stand” –  
Samson Young*

**In the living room, two flat screens show animations of children floating around against monochrome backdrops, adding to the eerie atmosphere of the audio presented. What inspired these characters?**

On the album cover of “Do They Know It’s Christmas”, there are a boy and a girl right in the centre. I made them into 3D characters and then I gave them something to do. The girl with the drum is doing this strange breakdance, and the boy is casting magic and doing swordfighting without a weapon – it’s kind of weird like that.



- We Are the World, as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir, 2017. Video and multi-channel sound installation Courtesy of the artist.

**In the next room, a video shows a choir perform We Are The World. However, the vocalists are whispering instead of singing. What was the reasoning behind that?**

I’ve used this technique before – I call it muted performances. It’s like you had a remote control that can mute one particular layer of sound. Other sounds that are usually not audible emerge because of this – the breathing and the whispering, the moving of the body and the turning of the pages are all present. I’ve specifically chosen the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Union Choir as my performers. Given the history of the choir, the song and the technique, it sets off a complex world of intertextuality and motion that is hard to pin down politically. I’m interested in the fact that by combining these different things, it’s very difficult to make out where I actually stand politically, and people will see different things in the performance depending on where they stand.



### How do you construct such broad spatial and sonic installations?

Although this show is very visual, the formal thread that ties everything together is the free configuration of the human voice: in the main room you have the voice of the singer, Michael, from ten different speakers, doing this massive chorus of voices, all coming from one person – the sound is very thin, always a bit ephemeral and a little suppressed. With the Mao quote, you have no sound, but the statement has a very loud voice behind it. And finally, for the last piece of the show, you have me singing in the middle of the ocean – a voice that is isolated.

*“I think art making is always political, but the decision of how you frame the abstract distance between arts and politics, that’s a manner of curatorial rationale” – Samson Young*



– Lullaby (World Music), 2017. Video, soundtrack and stainless steel. Courtesy of the artist.

**You've studied many things, among them philosophy and gender studies. How is this socio-political background reflected in your works?**

It's not consciously reflected, but I think that it comes through in a way that is a little more subconscious. I was interested in these questions, and they continue to interest me.

**This year's Biennale seems rather apolitical, especially in comparison to Okwui Enwezor's 2015 edition. What do you think about curator Christine Macel's decision to not directly address current issues?**

I think art making is always political, but the decision of how you frame the abstract distance between arts and politics, that's a manner of curatorial rationale. I mean, we are talking about different levels of politics – there are politics that are more internal as well as politics that are more about external worlds and systems of organisation. I do not agree nor disagree with her rhetoric. I personally make works in which I process information and questions that I do not understand, so the goal is not really to sway opinion. However, I will usually arrive at some sort of position afterwards. And that affects how I vote, who I choose to work with, how I run my non-profit China Mobile Hong Kong... Those are modest goals, but they do have an impact for me on a personal level. But it's hard to tell how it is to other people, and that is not a level of communication that I can ensure.

**Besides the Biennale, you are also participating in this year's documenta. Will you be showing two different pieces in Athens and Kassel?**

I am actually doing a radio piece. By the time Kassel opens, it will have made the tour from Athens and arrived at the FM station in Kassel. It is an hour-long sound collage made from the bell sounds I recorded during my BMW Art Journey, the first piece actually constructed out of these sounds. Although the work can also be accessed on the documenta website, it really is made for FM listening.

**What other projects are you working on at the moment?**

I am currently working on a radio drama for Manchester International Festival. Although I really enjoy working visually, I like that idea of me going back to my roots of being a composer for both this work and the documenta piece.