DIALOGUE

Sound as Knowledge: A Dialogue with Samson Young

Samson Young[1] and Lucy Cotter[2]
[1] Composer, artist, HK
[2] Independent writer and curator, NL
Corresponding author: Lucy Cotter (lucy_cotter@yahoo.com)

Dialogue between Samson Young and Lucy Cotter, exploring sound as a multi-faceted medium of artistic research.

Lucy Cotter: Sound isn't necessarily the first medium people think about when they consider artistic research, but it's widely used by artists. You work as a composer and a visual artist, often weaving unexpected sounds and images together to build up scenarios that seem to cut across time and space. Of course you were already doing sound performances with projects like the *iphone Orchestra* (2009–10), but the transition into visual art allowed you to engage with sound as history, opening the way for your current major research projects *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (2015) and *Pastoral Music (But It Is Entirely Hollow)* (2014). It seems to me that *Liquid Borders* (2012–14) was the turning point for this way of working, a project in which you charted the entire border between Hong Kong and China through sound. How did that project come about?

Samson Young: The *Liquid Borders* project was partly a response to an announcement in 2012 by the then Hong Kong government that they were going to develop the buffer zone between Hong Kong and China, building residential and commercial spaces in that area. I became very interested in the anxiety that prompted, as well as the parallel high school student-led resistance to the government's plan to insert national education into the school curriculum. Thinking about the border as such a charged physical and psychological barrier, I realized that, like most people in Hong Kong, I had never seen it. It was always a closed area that you needed to apply for a permit to enter. So my original intention was to design an exercise to walk the border. I thought that if I took recordings in a methodical way it would allow me to go see all these sights and give me time to think about its significance. So it started as an archiving exercise, collecting sounds and taking photographs of their locations. Then when an occasion arose, I started to think about what I could do to make something out of those recordings and photographs. While I had been in several exhibitions, I had my first solo gallery show for *Liquid Borders* [at the a.m. space in Hong Kong (2014)], so I had to really think about what to do; think about how, as a composer, I could make an exhibition.

LC: You also developed your own form of graphic notation for *Liquid Borders*, which relates to the "sound drawings" you are currently using to document located sound across several continents. Was that an important part of your transition to working as a visual artist?

SY: I had previously collaborated with a visual artist and a digital poet, but when we weren't able to continue, following my move to the U.S. to study, I started to work in these other media myself. That's really how I got into visual art. The *Liquid Borders* exhibition was the first time I showed graphic notation as something to look at, but graphical notation had always been a part of my compositional practice before. When I write music for ensembles, especially when I write for Chamber Ensemble, I tend to use a lot of graphic notation. I do electro-acoustic music, which means there is a live ensemble playing along to an electronic backing track, as it were, but for the ensemble to be able to follow the electronic track, they need some sort of a visual cue. So I spent a considerable amount of time trying to notate and transcribe the electronic sound of my own composition into scores so that the musicians could understand where they are in the music.

With the graphic score for the *Liquid Borders* project, I was also going back to the pleasure I had found as a student writing scores by hand. They had an architectural quality to them, with lines going everywhere. I was rediscovering that part of me outside of the musical part. Of course there's a long history of graphical scores in contemporary music, but I think they're appreciated very differently in the musical context. Even really ornate scores like composer Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* remain rather functional.

LC: In the *Nocturne* project (2015), you presented sound drawings of historic firearms together with a sound performance based on night bombings in the Gaza strip and other contemporary war locations, which people could experience live and through a radio broadcast. What were you thinking about in bringing these sounds into the gallery space?

SY: At the time I was mostly thinking about the density of explosion sounds, which are very quick, but have a lot of information packed into them. I wanted to make a graphical score of those sounds. I went through this process of looking at the spectrogram and repeatedly listening to the sounds so that I was able to spread them out on a two dimensional plane and try to unpack them. I also started to think about that in relation to modernist painters who had done the reverse, compressing large temporal spans of music on a canvas. The studies of historic firearms were done first, before I did the *Nocturne* performance and radio work, they prepared me for them.

LC: Can we talk about the experience of the viewer in the *Nocturne* exhibition? You had on-site radio broadcasts of a performance by you in which you use percussion and foley effects to recreate the sounds of bombings from the Gaza strip and other locations. The sound and the rhythm resonated physically in your body; it was deeply evocative of experiences that you would not usually have outside of a war zone. For me this is an example of how knowledge can be created and held in the body as a form of resonance. What was the significance for you personally in taking explosion into another very specific location, the gallery space?

SY: I think I was starting to think about how to compose a space through that exhibition. When the audience walked into the gallery, they could see me doing the performance. They did hear some sound but the sound was very soft, because it was not amplified. It was me lightly tapping on a drum or a dropping some debris on foil or using compressed gas and things like that. They saw this whole theatrical dance but it was only when they picked up the radio and tuned it to the radio station then they started to hear these sounds extremely amplified and distorted. Because it was coming out of a radio it had this lo-fi quality about it. There was another layer of experience when the audience took the radio and walked around the gallery space. They walked behind me and saw that that's what I was doing. I think the viewer felt that they were at a different proximity from the sound that they were hearing and by extension, their proximity to me. When people saw that I was focused on the screen showing the footage of the bombings, and not looking at them, they came really close to me. There is something very interesting about what happens when the performer is focused on something; it gives the audience license to look at the performer in this very close way.

That experience itself, listening to the radio and then suddenly becoming aware of the process, is something we experience in everyday life but we're not very aware of it. I can think of two classic moments when that happens. One is when you see a radio broadcast booth outside doing a mobile broadcast and you're listening to the radio, so you hear it and you see it. I think there's something very shocking about that; it breaks something. The other is when you're at a concert, in a smaller space, and all of a sudden the amplification malfunctions and you don't hear the amplification any more through the speaker, but you're hearing either the voice itself or the acoustic instrument without amplification. I think that is also quite shocking, because all of a sudden you become aware of the fact that what you've been listening has this process of mediation that is enabled by technology, by systems.

LC: Is there an implicit critique for you in exposing that kind of mediation or creating a different relationship to it, let's say, through the *Nocturne* project as a whole?

SY: Yes, I think so, but I don't have a clear sense of exactly what I'm trying to critique. I just know that there are certain things I find to be perplexing or shocking, like that moment that I've just been talking about, to do with how we receive information. I feel there's a very strong sense of romanticising very extreme situations. Not only in the media, but even potentially in my doing this performance, even though I'm coming to it with a critical attitude. As part of my research for this piece I read an article by Lawrence Weschler,

published in *The New Yorker* in 2005, which was about *Jarhead* (2005) a war drama with an anti-war agenda. Weschler was questioning whether all simulations of warfare, be they in video games or cinema, are pornographic in nature and essentially pro-war? Another example that he gave was *Apocalypse Now*. Of course it's very critical of the Vietnam war, but nowadays you cannot have an airstrike anywhere in the world without hearing the Wagner music that was playing through the helicopters in the film. In the American military today it is Wagner most of the time, so it's almost as if *Apocalypse Now* gave this thing a language. When I was making the *Nocturne* piece, I was also struggling with the ethics of that. Those questions also had a very specific context for me at that time because it was around the time of the Umbrella Movement. Although it was a civic protest and very peaceful, there were also talks among young people about more violent and armed resistance, in a way that I found very dangerous. I cannot think of a city that is more shielded from the reality of the Second World War than Hong Kong. In terms of greater China in general, Hong Kong has been relatively untouched by war and it's not something that we talk about a lot in our history. I am all for democratic aspirations for the city state, but I do think about why some people romanticize the escalation of violence as a possible solution for what we want to achieve politically. There's almost a glorifying, heroic quality in the way people talk about violent options. I find that quite disturbing, but I don't want to dismiss it. I want to understand it because it also perplexes me.

LC: You devote an incredible amount of time to open up the complexity of these kinds of questions, especially in your current research projects, which you expect to take several years. Can we talk about your ongoing project *Pastoral Music (But It Is Entirely Hollow)*, which uses sound performance as a way to revisit the Gin Drinker's Line, a defence line in Hong Kong built by the British in the 1930s which fell to the Japanese in a matter of hours during the war. What kind of research goes into a piece like this? Do you also read extensively?

SY: Making work is a good way to devote or systemise a chunk of your attention to something that you can go back to and revisit. Clearly, with the *Pastoral Music* project, I've looked very closely at how Hong Kong lost the war. As you mentioned, I'm slowly visiting all of the remaining relics of the Gin Drinker's Line, which consists of abandoned bunkers, tunnels, gun batteries and pillboxes, and I'm making recordings of myself singing a Cantonese nursery rhyme in these highly reverberant concrete structures. I've also been looking at the history of sound as a weapon, recently as well as in the distant past. Simple things like drumming and how it is psychological and has been used as a way to intimidate the enemy. Steven Goodman's book *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear* was really interesting on this subject. I was also inspired by J. Martin Daughtry's book *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* about how people remember conflict. Gulf War veterans and other people were asked to describe what they heard, how they remember the conflict through hearing. There are chapters upon chapters of these very descriptive accounts with veterans going into details like "When we heard a sound of this particular quality we knew the bombing was far away, but if the sound was like this, we knew we have to get away from the window". I also came across a website for veterans to share their campaign playlists, the music they would put on their iPod when they go on a campaign or on patrol. It also looked into the history of when the iPod started to become an essential item for people being sent on a military campaign. Before they went, they would get a packing list of mundane items like foot powder and at some point the iPod became a part of that packing list. The CD player was never a packing list item, but at a very specific time the iPod entered the packing list. I was looking into all of that.

   I found it a very interesting example of how there is an opportunity to tell a history that has been told many times through the sense of hearing. I'm fascinated by that. In *Pastoral Music* I undertake a very simple thing of singing inside underground bunkers and concrete tunnels, along the Gin Drinkers Line that I mentioned before, using the natural acoustics of these spaces as a natural reverb for my voice. This work is partly motivated by thinking about the experience of being in a tunnel as a soldier when an attack is imminent. What are you listening out for? Are you hearing footsteps or sound coming back at you? How does that make a relationship between you and the person you are listening out for? Both of you are essentially doing the same thing. When it's dark in a tunnel, you rely on your sense of hearing. You are listening to each other and trying to figure out where the other is, but you also kind of inhabit each other's mind. You're performing the same kind of mental process. That's why I picked that song, *Of Forests and Pastures*, for *Pastoral Music (But It Is Entirely Hollow)*. It's a very specific nursery rhyme which begins with a picturesque green landscape, but it ends with the line "My dear friend, what's on your mind?". For me that's a perfect trajectory of the project, beginning with this romanticisation, but ending with a question that is very personal. If you

don't call them your enemy and you call them your friend and you're actually going through the same kind of mental process, you gain access to the other in a different way. For me it's a perfect way to wrap up the whole thinking.

LC: As part of your other ongoing research project, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, you have already undertaken a journey across five continents in order to re-tell histories that have been told many times through the presence of bells, the sound of bells. In the overall project there's an underlying exercise of mapping but it's a kind of eccentric mapping, following a route produced by a sequence of individual bells. It's an artistic as much as a historic mapping in that sense. Why did you choose bells as the subject through which to examine such a large geographic and temporal span?

SY: I am very interested in how the auditory range of bells also defines territories, separating one community from another along cultural, religious, or ideological fault lines. It was also a natural extension from the previous project, *Nocturne*, which looked at explosion sounds. Bell sounds and explosion sounds are similar in that they both have an incredible density, but there also are historic coincidences about bells and sounds of explosions and weapons. If you think about the time before industrialisation, you really only get two classes of objects that would be able to produce a sound that is louder than the sound of natural phenomena or earthquakes or natural disasters—cannons and bells. Historically, whenever there's a war and there's a shortage of metal—and this happened all the way up to the Second World War—different regimes would always go to the church bells as their store of surplus metal to be used in warfare. They would melt them down and make weapons out of them. After the war was over, there are many examples of the cannons being melted down for metal to recast bells, as in the case of the Pummerin, which had Turkish cannons from the Siege of Vienna. I find that connection interesting. In terms of designing the research trip and the process, there are so many bells that could be recorded and visited, I needed to limit my scope somewhat, so I chose to continue with the things that had a natural connection to my last project. It seemed logical to look into bells as a way to think about the history of conflict and that's really how it started. Also, on the acoustic level, after the explosion part, I became interested in sounds that are extremely dense. It gave me the opportunity to listen to these sounds and try to tease out the sound.

LC: Artists often stumble on the most amazing research materials. You had an incredible experience of looking through archives from The Bell Graveyard, a site in Hamburg where bells that were decommissioned after the war have been collected. I am curious to know whether that archive is well known, or whether your project is something that gives it a different place in the public eye.

SY: The bell graveyard is in Hamburg but the archive record of these bells is now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremburg. I was surprised when I visited the museum and they told me that before me, only one researcher had visited or wanted to use that archive. I was really surprised because there's a wealth of material there. That's what makes research so fascinating, that there are these treasures just sitting in libraries and in archives waiting to be discovered. I guess we're all too busy to think about them. I thought legally the fate of the bells was such an interesting problem. I wonder why it hasn't been talked about more. There are many bells which are now still in Germany but their rightful owners are elsewhere. I wonder whether people are going to have that conversation.

LC: Because art is post-disciplinary it allows for people to think across different problematics. When you think about the bells you seem to be weaving different histories—social histories, war histories, very local histories, sound histories—many different areas that might be very difficult to bring to together otherwise. I was just listening to *Such Sweet Thunder* (2017), the composition you made for documenta 14, which was one output of the project, in which you weave together narrative stories, linguistic sounds and sound that is abstract but very evocative of the visual and many other qualities.[1]

SY: When I was doing these bell recordings, I didn't think too much about what I would make of it all at the end. I just went and did the collecting first. Of course, a lot of material is generated during the process,

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[1] Such Sweet Thunder (2017) can be listened to on the documenta 14 website: http://www.documenta14.de/en/public-radio/14748/such-sweet-thunder.

but the documentary radio piece for documenta was the first time I tried to draw on this collection of material as a totality and make something of it. I think of my works as creating glitches, maybe not glitches, but a very interesting chemistry takes place when you take two things that on the surface don't seem like they're related but you try to find a relationship between them. Something happens in the process and you break the form that usually contains these things. I use the term "form" in a very general sense. I think our activities and our politics are organised by forms. Like the forms of rhythm, the biological clock against the institutional calendar that makes you want to do something, as well as festivities that get re-articulated. We are always living with these forms, but when you make a cross-disciplinary work, you have the opportunity to bring these forms and rhythms of things together and paradoxically, they become a bit disintegrated, and you start to loosen things up. It's not a big gesture, but I think there's something important about it. When you do that, you momentarily disrupt the system and the form. Perhaps afterwards the form keeps re-articulating the old way that it has always been doing. But at least for that moment when you are there, when you're doing that thing, the rhythm has been disrupted. For me that's interesting, it's important.

LC: Can we talk about *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)* (2017), your project for the Hong Kong pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which took the form of the charity pop song as its departure point. You were interested in a particular history of charity songs in the 80s, how they were taken up in the Asian context and the afterlife they have there. In my experience of it, the installation seemed to open up a space that was simultaneously in the past and in the future. It seemed to me that you were rethinking a certain postcolonial space through form in that piece.

SY: The Venice piece is still a bit fuzzy in my head. I usually need some time after a piece is made to talk about what I did. Speaking more generally, I would say that I often begin with complexities and issues that I want to deal with. I have a critical attitude towards them but in the end what I want to figure out is what makes me feel uncomfortable. Most of the time I don't arrive at a solution but I feel that the making is the way to process all of this. When I think about the colonial history of Hong Kong, for example, it's conflictual in the sense that the way I think, the way I structure the world and the way power and class are arranged in Hong Kong all have to do with colonial history. However, at the same time, I also acknowledge the fact that I've never heard my voice from the outside, I've never known a different reality to this. There is also a certain affinity to this colonial history. Things about the colonial history, which many people in Hong Kong and I myself personally cling to and remember with fondness. So how do you reconcile that really weird mix of things that doesn't lend itself to the formulation of a coherent position?

   That might be one thing that music is pretty good at. I don't know how you felt about the Venice work, but in my mind the symbols and the things I am trying to present in terms of information are super dense and confusing because many things come together and it's almost too much. But the affective quality of it in terms of how the music makes you feel is, for me, very clear. Is this moving or is it distant or is this music making me feel like there's an emptiness? I think those affective qualities in my music are often very apparent. I think that's maybe one way I deal with this and try to process it and at the same time not allow the work to become so simple that it can be distilled into a position. Not because it's a cool thing to do that, but because that's how my brain works. In my mind it's a mess of things.

LC: There are so many musical components to that exhibition. One is the installation where these songs come back in these small video pieces with an animated character, another is the choir re-singing one of those songs through whispers which is kind of a ghostly process somehow. You also have a video work that is done with numbers—you mentioned somewhere that you're interested in George Lam's cantopop covers of classical tunes with numbers of lyrics. Can you say something about those musical choices for the piece?

SY: A lot of the things that happened just felt right. Although there are many different kinds of things going on in the piece, what brought them all together for me were the different reconfigurations of the human voice. In the more elaborate curtained room there's a chorus of many voices but it's really only from one singer and then in the next room you have an actual chorus, but the result sounds very thin, it's very ephemeral. When you're outside the pavilion in the courtyard there's an empty stage and no actual voice that you hear, but the wall text is very loud and clear. Finally in the video piece installed in the tunnel, you have my own voice doing the singing. So the human voice is one thing. Also with this project I was returning a bit to my early interest in music theatre. In my early days as a composer, I made a whole bunch of music theatre pieces. They're not really like music theatre in a very narrative sense, they're more like instrumental compo-

sitions that are narratively driven; they wouldn't have voice or lyrics. I was already using a multimedia setting then, with theatrical elements and video in the show. I think with the Venice exhibition, I was also returning to the idea of music theatre a little bit. Aside from the underlying theme of the charity single, those two things tied everything together for me.

LC: Can we talk about fiction? You researched a singer-songwriter who turned out to be a fake news character to create a kind of fictive domestic space in Venice, but I also see that fictive quality coming even more strongly to the fore in other pieces like the installation and performance in *When I have fear that I may cease to be, what would you give in exchange for your soul* (2016) or the video work and installation for *The Coffee Cantata (Institute of Fictional Ethnomusicology)* (2015). I notice you particularly going into this fictive space in your collaborations with Michael Schiefel, who's a very experimental vocalist in his own right. There's such a broad span within your work from archival based field work, observational and auditory field recordings to this very fictional space, all of which you keep intact. In fact this fictive space is also based partly on research through literature so the two get blurred somehow. I would love to hear you say something about the fictive and what you think it makes possible in terms of knowledge production.

SY: It's true that when I do pieces that have a natural fiction element to them it's almost always when Michael is involved. It really started with *The Coffee Cantata* and then after that we collaborated on other pieces. I really enjoy the more research based factual pieces, but it's a different kind of approach in terms of my distance to the subject material. I'm a little bit the audience in the piece, standing outside of it in terms of how I dissect the process. With the fiction pieces, usually what happens is that there's a body of research that has to do with some facts or weird things that I've discovered, but then through the natural fiction that arises I'm able to insert some of my personal history into it—family history or personal experiences. Actual events that have happened to me can become a part of the piece. Sometimes these are accidents and random events that you then incorporate into this fictional narrative, and they almost feel inevitable after the fact. I'm very interested in that phenomenon.

   In *When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be* there was a scene of Michael and me smoking inside of a burnt down market. That happened because when Michael came to Hong Kong to film, the second day of filming there was a fire in the famous fruit market. It was a very old market that was fully functioning before it got burned down. We had planned to do one of the scenes there anyway, but my producer called me up and said, "The path that you wanted to walk has been burnt down." I sort of froze for a couple of minutes and then I called him back and said, "That's great, we should go inside." Then I changed some of the sequence of events so we were able to go inside one of these burnt down fruit stalls and do one of the scenes. These things just happen—it's unfortunate that the fruit stand got burned down—and then this random event gets written into the piece and you organise the scene and the information. You give them a form and a structure so they become inevitable; they feel like they have always been there. I also think of that in the larger sense of how history becomes solidified. Events when they're happening in real time never feel inevitable, it feels like things just pop up and events just happen; that they are shocking and surprising and a little random but when you look back in twenty years, especially after they have been written into history in a specific way, they look as though they were inevitable. It was always meant to happen that way; one thing was leading to another. Or at least that's how we give them form or how we give them a position in the way that we write history. I don't know if I'm consciously trying to deal with all of those issues in my narrative but I'm certainly interested in that as a larger process.

LC: I wonder if you also think about this in terms of decolonising knowledge? I know that during your studies you were very critical of the place of Western music in Asia and how this particular music history is imposed as *the* music and so on. That seemed to be an early driving force and I see it coming back in more complex ways later in your practice, even through this move into fiction.

SY: It is an important line of thought that I still think about, but it probably has more to do with how I continuously deal with my place in the system, in what I'm doing, where I stand and how I deal with the people around me, with the events or non-events around me. It's a continuous and internal conversation and sometimes those internal conversations take an external form. I write about it, I make notes and make clarifications for myself but it's a personal struggle and I deal with it on a daily basis. I think I am also dealing with it more directly in another ongoing project, called *Orchestrations* that I haven't really made public yet. It is an ongoing research and a rather large project that is very far from finished. I am mainly looking

at how different groups have appropriated the term "orchestra" to describe what they do. I film community orchestras and Chinese orchestras and the Gamelan—they sometimes call themselves the Javanese Gamelan Orchestra—and I also have a project called *The Laptop Orchestra*. I think I would need to film a lot more before I could start to write about what it is or put it on my website as an ongoing project. I need more clarity and I need to film in more locations. Part of what makes this difficult is because a lot of the examples that I have collected so far in the film are from Hong Kong. I did a small film screening of this project in Hong Kong in 2015, but I feel that I need to be in many different places and different cultures, dealing more with this terminology of orchestra, to even begin to formulate an opinion of what I'm doing. It's going to be a project that lasts for much longer, I think. I am already planning a trip for this to a community orchestra in Zurich in 2019.

Samson Young (Hong Kong, 1979) is an artist and composer based in Hong Kong, who holds a PhD in Music Composition from Princeton University (2013). Young represented Hong Kong at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017) and participated in documenta 14 (2017). Solo exhibitions include *A Dark Theme Keeps Me Here, I'll Make a Broken Music*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2016) and *The Mastery of Language Affords Remarkable Power* at Experimenter, India (2016) and Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan (2015). Group exhibitions include 4 A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney; Center of Contemporary Art, Seattle; Arko Art Center, Seoul; Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland; Asia Triennial Manchester. A member of numerous bands, Young has collaborated with orchestras worldwide, participating in festivals internationally. He is the recipient of the BMW Art Journey Award 2015, Artist of the Year (Hong Kong Arts Development Council, 2013), Prix Ars Electronica (2012) and Bloomberg Emerging Artist Award (2007).

Lucy Cotter is an independent writer and curator whose practice explores contemporary art's relationship with aesthetics, politics and the unknown. She was curator of the Dutch pavilion of the 57th Venice Biennale 2017, presenting *Cinema Olanda* with artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh. www.lucycotter.org/.

Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.