

Sound, Embodiment and Displacement: Listening to Borders in the Art of Samson Young

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## ABSTRACT

Borders today are commonly perceived as sites of tension and conflict. Whether conceptualized as territorial borders that purport to physically separate nations or social, political and cultural borders that ideologically split individuals, the idea of a border as impenetrable and divisive boundary obscures what can pass through. Sound, as a force capable of moving through objects and individuals, demonstrates that borders are in fact permeable, especially to that which is invisible to the eye. This paper seeks to offer an alternative conceptualization of the border through a sound-based methodology, drawing on the works of sound studies scholars like Brandon LaBelle (*Sonic Agency*, 2019) and writing on modernity and the self such as Steven Connor's "The Modern Auditory I" (1997). By examining three works by the Hong Kong-based multimedia artist Samson Young — *Liquid Borders* (2012-2014), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (2015), and *Nocturne* (2015) — which combine sound and visual imagery, I suggest that Young's use of sound and image in these works allows a unique experience of embodied displacement that both grounds the audience in their own embodied subjectivity while simultaneously displacing them in order to imagine the experiences of others. Ultimately, through an analysis of Young's works focusing on national borders, I hope to demonstrate how sound can not only disrupt common conceptualizations of borders but also present an alternative framework for understanding and being in the world that, when paired with vision, can offer an embodied method of capturing the experience of subjectivity as being both a part of and apart from the world.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

What does a border sound like? How can sound act as a medium or a bridge to span different positions while heightening awareness of one's own body, subjectivity, and grounding? Can it enhance relations across borders—interpersonal, psychological, social, cultural, political? These are the kinds of questions posed in the work of Hong-Kong based multimedia artist, Samson Young. In his well-known project *Liquid Borders* (2012—2014) for instance, Young created an audible interpretation of the border between Hong Kong and mainland China by recording sounds in the Frontier Closed Area, the border region that separates Hong Kong from Shenzhen, and reworking them into a series of sound compositions. What results is a symphony of rumbling, clashing, rushes of noise and slow drips of water that echo in stillness; the sounds of tension and unease that, among other things, exist at Hong Kong's borders. The composition is unsettling precisely because we rarely pause, in a moment of stillness and attentiveness, to think about—or listen to—what a highly contested border space might sound like. The sonic imaginary of Hong Kong's border that is constructed suggests that border spaces are both sites of rumbling clashes as well as odd tension and stillness found in silences that may be less expected. It also offers an alternative conception of border spaces through a sonic framework that illuminates how many things that are invisible to the eye, like sound, can move through borders.

Young is uniquely positioned to examine the sounds of borders, especially those that can stem from differences in or conflicts between social, political, or cultural positionality. He is not only formally trained as a musician and composer, but also is intimately familiar with conflicts

of national identity and place. Though the artist was born in Hong Kong, he was also raised in Australia, where he attended university, and returned briefly to Hong Kong before beginning doctoral studies in the United States. In fact, Young's doctoral dissertation, titled "Reading Contemporary Chinese Music: Reconsidering Identity and Cultural Politics in Analysis," stemmed from his own experiences as an artist "born of multiple ethnic and national origins who considers himself a composer, sound artist and critic all in one."<sup>1</sup> The thesis analyzed the effect of globalized and transnational Chinese modernity in recent works of contemporary Chinese composers. Since publishing his dissertation in 2008, Young has become well-known in contemporary art circles for his innovative use of sound in his work, which often probes themes like borders, warfare, identity, and community, to name just a few. Though Young is formally trained as a composer, his works often involve drawings, video, performance, and installation, in addition to sound. However, according to the artist, sound and music have given him a certain framework for understanding the world and it is through this sonic framework that Young asks us to listen closely in order to understand the world, and each other, differently.<sup>2</sup> To this end, Young's work utilizes sound as a connective medium that can flow across and through people and spaces in order to prompt us to rethink how we might relate differently to others in a space of deep listening.

The social and political tensions that the artist experienced growing up in Hong Kong and draws from as inspiration for projects like *Liquid Borders* are rooted in the territory's ambiguous status as a Special Autonomous Region of China, due to be re-integrated into China in 2047. The

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<sup>1</sup> Kar Fai Samson Young, Paul Lansky, Steve Mackey, Dan Trueman, Dmitri Tymoczko, and Barbara White. "Reading Contemporary Chinese Music: Reconsidering Identity and Cultural Politics in Analysis". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1314568223/>. iv.

<sup>2</sup> Samson Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Hatje Cantz, 2016) 9.

border created during Britain's colonial rule over Hong Kong from 1841 – 1997 set Hong Kong on the path “from fishing village to British colony to global city to one of China's Special Administrative Regions.”<sup>3</sup> Due to systems of colonialism and capitalism, Hong Kongers have come to understand their identity as distinctly different from that of mainland Chinese citizens, an identity that is demarcated by the territory's geographic border. Experiences of what it means to be a Chinese Hong Konger in East Asia, along with what it means to be a Chinese Hong Konger in Western countries like Australia and the United States, seem to have inspired an interest in Young to understand others with positionalities, subjectivities, or perspectives different from his own. Being made aware of one's own position while attempting to understand and empathize with the positionality of others is a thread that runs through many of Young's projects, which the artist likens to “imagining another consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> This is a concept the artist has frequently mentioned and seems to figure as one of his primary concerns, and one of major themes in his art. In a roundtable discussion with other members of Hong Kong's arts community in 2014, Young described how he is

always trying to imagine a different situation to the one I am currently in. It's like an imagination of being able to see one's face from the outside. But nobody has seen their face outside of their body. You only see yourself in mirrors or videos. It's never your own face from the outside.<sup>5</sup>

This statement is illustrative of the artist's consistent concern with imagining a position outside of his own, which perhaps stems from his own experiences of cultural difference. Although it is

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<sup>3</sup>Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 2.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Booming: Samson Young,” *Mousse Magazine* 55 (2016). <http://moussemagazine.it/samson-young-hans-ulrich-obrist-2016/>

<sup>5</sup>Oscar Ho, Frank Vigneron, Lam Tung-Pang, Samson Young, and Dean Chan. “Undoing Nationalism, Fabricating Transnationalism.” *Third Text* 28, no. 1 (2014): 95.

impossible to ever fully experience what someone else is thinking, feeling, or experiencing, in order to relate to other human beings, we must do our best to imagine.

Sound, which is the backbone of Young's disciplinary training, serves as his primary tool in exploring this concern. Despite using a variety of media, the artist's works tend to have a thematic focus on sound as a subject in itself, emphasizing that although art is often implicitly assumed to be a visual experience, sound art, or art that foregrounds an audible experience, has been increasingly accepted within the boundaries of contemporary art discourse since it began to emerge from the interstices between art, music, and sound and collect momentum in the 1960s. One of the foremost scholars on sound art, Brandon LaBelle, suggests in his 2006 book *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* that artists in the 1960s began to use sound to place increasing emphasis on environment over object, and on a multiplicity of viewpoints and positions rather than a singular perspective.<sup>6</sup> Echoing this idea, scholar Steven Connor, a theorist of postmodern culture whose research interests includes the history of sound, wrote in his 1996 essay "The Modern Auditory I" that

the idea of the auditory self provides a way of positing and beginning to experience a subjectivity organized around the principles of openness, responsiveness and acknowledgement of the world rather than violent alienation from it. The auditory self discovers itself in the midst of the world and the manner of its inherence in it, not least because the act of hearing seems to take place in and through the body.<sup>7</sup>

While sound waves are vibrations passing over and through surfaces, sound is not an object in itself, but rather a force with the ability to heighten its listener's awareness of and sense of being

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<sup>6</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum International, 2006) xi-xii.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Connor, "The Modern Auditory I" in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Roy Porter (London; New York: Routledge, 1997) 219.

in specific environments and situations. Sound waves can also bring a heightened attention to the resonances felt passing over and through the body of a listener, leading to what Connor describes as the auditory self: “not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noise, and music travel.”<sup>8</sup> Thus the act of hearing moves beyond traditional notions of bodily boundaries because sound waves flow from the world into and through the body, highlighting the body’s porousness to the world around it. Building on Connor’s metaphor, if the auditory self is indeed a permeable membrane, then sound waves are the medium that can traverse through and also potentially connect multiple individuals in a single moment.

Connor’s theory of the auditory self stands in contrast to a more common conception of the self/alterity in a visual field. Many theorists have explored the centrality of vision to Western thought and culture, what scholar Martin Jay calls ocularcentricism, or the privileging of sight over the other senses. Jay outlines this history in *Downcast Eyes*, writing that “the externality of sight allows the observer to avoid direct engagement with the object of his gaze,”<sup>9</sup> giving rise to the distinction between subject and object and the idea of objectivity, or things in the world existing as distinct and separate entities from oneself. Jay also outlines a deepening suspicion of the eye in philosophy and social theory in the twentieth century which gives context to Connor’s argument.<sup>10</sup> By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenologists suggested that “there is no ‘view from nowhere’ for even the most scrupulously ‘detached’ observer.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, everything seen—every view, every image, every photograph—is representative of *someone* or *something’s* gaze. Sight can be an embodied sense when accompanied by an awareness of whose gaze one is

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<sup>8</sup> Connor, *The Modern Auditory I*, 207.

<sup>9</sup> [Martin Jay, \*Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought\* \(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993\) 24.](#)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 212.

<sup>11</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 17.

seeing from, and when acknowledged as part of a larger sensorium, including other senses such as sound, touch, and taste.

It is to this end that sight and hearing can serve as useful complements to each other; while sight is in discourse and cultural habit less obviously embodied, individuals can feel themselves in a bodily sense as a part of the world more readily through hearing. For example, not only can the booming of a loud bass line in a nightclub be felt as physical resonances in one's chest, but processes of sound localization in the brain also give one a sense of spatial awareness, thanks to binaural hearing, or listening with both ears. The human ear can localize a sound in space along both horizontal (azimuth) and vertical (elevation) planes due to cues from differences in signals arriving at each ear (called interaural time difference) as well as learned interference patterns from the unique physiology of one's own body.<sup>12</sup> Hearing can also help us detect the distance of a sound relative to one's own body; variations in intensity levels of sound and cues from reverberation give an indication of the movement, and thus the distance, of the sound source.<sup>13</sup> These capabilities of hearing, evidenced in studies in the field of psychoacoustics, support phenomenology scholars like Connor's attempts to "redescribe subjectivity in terms of embodiedness,"<sup>14</sup> based on how sound waves are both physically felt and also inform a sense of bodily presence and location in the world.

Furthermore, many sound studies scholars have also written about sound's potentially affective, relational qualities that can lend to it an experience of empathy and connectedness, sometimes referred to as "sympathetic vibrations." This potential is described by LaBelle in his

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<sup>12</sup> Antoine Lorenzi, Anthony Gentil, Sam Irving, "Localisation," *Journey Into the World of Hearing*, Association NeurOrielle, 4 November 2019. <http://www.cochlea.eu/en/sound/psychoacoustics/localisation>

<sup>13</sup> Lorenzi et. al, "Localisation."

<sup>14</sup> Connor, 219.

most recent book as “sonic agency,” a force that can connect people, evoke empathy, and perhaps even generate collective understanding and action in a way that does not efface difference.<sup>15</sup> LaBelle positions sound and experiences of listening as means of transmitting affect due to sound’s capacity to be shared—literally a force moving through bodies.<sup>16</sup> Through deep listening, or what LaBelle calls a sonic sensibility, he suggests that it can become possible to

nurture modes of engaged attention, for listening is often relating us to the depths of others, and which may extend across bodies and things, persons and places: sound is a medium enabling animate contact that, in oscillating and vibrating over and through all types of bodies and things, produces complex ecologies of matter and energy, subjects and objects... sound and listening are highly adept as carriers of compassion.<sup>17</sup>

For example, when people gather in protests, part of what makes solidarity and togetherness so palpable is hearing the shuffling of others’ feet or their voices all around you. Even a so-called “silent” protest would make the sounds of others’ bodies more audible, in a sense indexical. These qualities of sound—its potential as an affective and relational force, as well as hearing’s capability to allow a sense of position and embodiedness in the world—make it a useful tool for Young in attempting to approximate experiences of “imagining another consciousness” for his works’ audiences without the audience losing awareness of their own subjectivity. In this way, a sonic agency opens pathways for individuals to connect to others through empathy and relationality.

Three of the artist’s works in particular—*Liquid Borders* (2012 – 2014) as well as *Nocturne* (2015) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (2015)—make this goal of sonic agency evident

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<sup>15</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018) 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

through another important strategy, that of embodied displacement. In this context, embodied refers to reinstating an awareness of experiencing subjectivity as mediated through the physical, material body, while displacement describes the experience of dislocation from a particular place or position of passivity. As described above, the vibrations of sound waves can be a particularly useful medium for feeling the body and its position, while practices of deep listening can help transport a listener into different locations. These three works first of all make use of recordings that are evocative of specific geographic locations and situations. The sounds of the environments that Young presents to his audiences invite an embodied sense of spatial awareness to places and spaces very distant from the immediate spaces in which the artworks are presented. Visual aids such as photographs and drawings encourage audiences to imagine the environments that they hear, but because Young's works are framed as artworks, audiences can also simultaneously remain aware of their own positions in a contemporary art context. The experiences of embodied displacement help the audience imagine a sense of subjectivity outside of their own and rethink implicit assumptions in their own positionalities, experiences, and world views. In this way, *Nocturne*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *Liquid Borders* ultimately utilize sound as a medium to generate experiences of embodied displacement that prompt us to rethink how we might relate differently to others in a space of deep listening, or a sonic sensibility. For the artist, the importance of this may be in finding new strategies of understanding and relating to others despite difference and across borders, such as those that demarcate what it means to be a Chinese Hong Konger both in the city of Hong Kong as well as in other countries like Australia and the United States.

In order to demonstrate how Young's work formulates new strategies of understanding and relation, I will examine *Nocturne*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Liquid Borders* in this

sequence in order to show how these works channel sound and hearing's relational and physiological qualities to create an experience of embodied displacement and with it, sonic agency. Chapter 1 will focus on *Nocturne*, which explores sound's affective properties through focusing thematically on the sounds of violence in war. War is a violent act or performance of tension and conflict that has historical roots in claims to territory—in other words, war has historically been fought over demarcations of borders and often still is today. To explore this product of border conflict in *Nocturne*, the artist used performance as a method of investigating the nuances of sonic violence through recreating recorded sounds of warfare with live Foley techniques in the setting of a gallery, which were simultaneously amplified and broadcasted over an FM radio frequency on handheld radios made available to the gallery's visitors. Hearing the transmission and amplification of Young's performed sounds over radio while simultaneously experiencing the performance as artwork in a gallery space prompted a dual experience of listening that encouraged visitors to imagine and empathize with those who have experienced the trauma of sonic warfare while simultaneously holding an awareness of their own positionality as privileged viewers of a work of contemporary art.

Chapter 2 will follow the violence of weaponized sound with an analysis of one of Young's projects that demonstrates the opposite; sound's powerful potential to form connections of understanding, and how sonic objects may function as connective nodes within a community. This work, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, is the result of a months-long journey across several continents undertaken by Young in order to research bells as both material and sonic objects. The artist's investigation of bells is rooted in their material history as both objects used in times of war as well as to bring communities together. The sound of a bell represents a localized resonance that is often highly characteristic of the community it is a part of, creating a sense of

togetherness and local geography. The propagation of a bell's toll can also be a means of representing the boundaries of a community by virtue of including all who hear its sound. However, Young's project expands the notion of who may hear a bell toll. The artist's findings are presented in a publication which documents the journey through photographs, writing, soundscape sketches, and scannable audio recordings, and are accompanied by an archive of audio recordings of each bell and its surroundings that is accessible online. By recording the resonances of geographically and culturally rooted bells and making these available online as well as in a published book, the artist uses multiple modes of mediation to expand the audible range of each bell and thus notions of what community might mean. Through both visual, material elements and audible, immaterial components, the project's output mimics those same properties of bells and ultimately allows individuals to access and experience a given environment's sounds, prompting an imagination of embodiment in a sonic architecture rooted in the brain's ability to localize sound. The results of the artist's object-focused research ultimately frame bells as nodes in a network of sound-based relations, which promote a wider sense of connection, community, and imagining of others.

Finally, Chapter 3 will return to *Liquid Borders*, a geographically specific project focused around sounds that the artist collected in the Frontier Closed Area along the border between Hong Kong and China with contact microphones and hydrophones. These field recordings were then manipulated into a series of compositions and presented alongside graphical notations, photographs, and annotated cartography in an exhibition at AM Gallery in Hong Kong in 2014. The project is an effort to sonically capture and map a rapidly disappearing border that is the locus point of tension and division between Hong Kong and China, and within Hong Kong itself. The artist's response to the tension and anxiety felt around this border took the form of

documenting the border with imagery and sound to create an alternative experience of what the Hong Kong border actually looks and sounds like today. *Liquid Borders* ultimately works to unsettle the common beliefs, perceptions, and feelings that many people may have about Hong Kong's border in order to open up new potential for contact and understanding around the issue of the border.

An examination of Hong Kong's border spaces is particularly timely given that tensions in Hong Kong have boiled over in numerous anti-government protests since May 2019. While Hong Kong's current government, led by its Chief Executive Carrie Lam, is considered to be pro-establishment (i.e., pro-Beijing), anger at the city's governing officials triggered by a now-scraped extradition bill is expressed often as anger at mainland China. Identities and positions formed around political tensions seem to be hardening, and Young's alternative presentation of the border's sounds and imagery, though made between 2012—2014, is more relevant now than ever. *Liquid Borders* is a project that encourages its audience to rethink what a border really is—as its title suggests, the artist offers a notion that a border is, rather than a wall, something liquid and dynamic, open to penetration and always in motion. *Liquid Borders*, along with *Nocturne* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, asks for a consideration of and empathy towards others, along with an awareness and understanding of difference. In a world where political leaders threaten to build walls around national borders, racial violence and right wing populism is experiencing a frightening resurgence, and discourses framing migrants seeking to apply for refugee status as security threats are rampant, the ability and willingness to understand different frameworks of viewing, listening to, and interpreting the world is more desperately needed than ever. Young's works are important because they ask us to consider differences demarcated by hard borders as

liquid, if only we too are willing to let our own positionalities flow in response to and responsibility towards being an embodied being engaged as a part of the world alongside others.

## CHAPTER TWO

## NOCTURNE

Though many sound theorists working on the affective capabilities of sound focus on its relational, connective and empathetic qualities, it is important to note how sound has been and continues to be instrumentalized by states, governments, and other actors for the opposite purposes—namely, to create fear, conflict, and division. The paradox of this is clear. Although sound is an invisible force unhindered by physical boundaries, it surely has been used to reinforce psychic and physical boundaries, especially in times of war. One of Young’s projects, *Nocturne* (2015),<sup>18</sup> takes a close look at how sound’s capacity to deeply effect us can, and has been, used for violence. Sound has been weaponized in the interest of territorial warfare for centuries, from drums on battlefields meant to intimidate the enemy to devices like the “Squawk Box” that used ultrasound as a tool for “nonviolent” crowd dispersal and social control.<sup>19</sup> These are just two examples out of many referenced in *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, a recent book by Steve Goodman which explores the idea of “affective tonality,” or sound’s ability to modulate mood, which Goodman describes in the context of sonic warfare as “an immersive atmosphere or ambience of fear and dread.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, affective tonality refers to the ways in which sound can effect not only the emotions, psychology, and physiology of a population, but also the structure of the environment in which a population resides.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <https://vimeo.com/146790656>

<sup>19</sup> Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (MIT Press, 2010) 20.

<sup>20</sup> Goodman, xiv

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

The idea of affective tonality is an appealing point of entry for an artist, particularly one who works with sound. Affect is what many artists strive for in their work—in other words, to communicate a feeling, emotion, or mood—and in *Nocturne*, Young positions himself as an artist rather than a soldier responsible for both constructing and exposing the kind of affective tonality Goodman describes in regard to sonic warfare. *Nocturne* was a performance staged as part of an exhibition at Team Gallery in New York in 2015 called *Pastoral Music*. For the performance, Young sat in the space of the gallery for six hours per day for the length of the exhibition (roughly forty-five days), watching a looped montage of muted video recordings of night bombings collected from YouTube—mostly U.S. attacks in the Middle East, ranging from the Gulf War to ISIS<sup>22</sup>—which he had edited into a six hour film. The footage documents the methods used in modern warfare to seize territory and demarcate boundaries of power and control—not only geographic boundaries, but also ideological boundaries as the U.S. has sought to maintain and expand its influence and ideals of democracy on distant populations, while enacting violence on those same populations. The selection of footage from the U.S. wars in the Middle East is particularly important because these wars marked the beginning of 24/7 live, televised media coverage of warfare in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the space of a New York art gallery, these televised warfare clips emphasized the mediation and distance that U.S. civilians experienced from the wars that their government has carried out overseas, many of which are no longer termed “wars” in the traditional sense yet utilize the same violent tactics.

As this footage was played on a small muted television screen in the gallery, the artist wore a headset that gave only him access to the diegetic sound. He then used a variety of

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<sup>22</sup> “Pastoral Music,” Team Gallery, 2015.

[http://www.teamgal.com/artists/samson\\_young/exhibitions/324/pastoral\\_music](http://www.teamgal.com/artists/samson_young/exhibitions/324/pastoral_music)

household objects and Foley techniques to reproduce the sounds of explosions, gunshots and debris as accurately as possible in the gallery. Foley effects, named after Jack Foley, who established the modern techniques still used today, are typically used to reproduce everyday sound effects to be added after filming. Common techniques include snapping celery to recreate the sound of bones breaking or using coconut shells to mimic the sound of a horse walking.

Young's live sound effects, such as tapping his fingertips against the surface of a large bass drum beside a contact microphone to mimic the sounds of bombs dropping, were then broadcast on-site via pirate radio frequencies, accessible via FM receivers within and outside of the gallery.<sup>23</sup>

Young performed each day in the gallery dressed in olive fatigue colors and combat boots, posing as a soldier in training to fabricate sounds of war for combat. The artist was stationed in the middle of Team Gallery's minimalist white space in front of an old Sony television set playing muted black and white footage of night raids, concentrating on the footage for visual cues such as a flash of light from a bomb dropping. On the floor beside him, a fan blew and rustled the plastic bags attached to it, mimicking the subtle crackle of audio feedback. The artist's "set" consisted of various household objects and several instruments, ranging from Tupperware, cornflakes and tea leaves to a bass drum, thunder sheet, and contact microphone.<sup>24</sup> By employing Foley techniques, such as tapping fingers against the bass drum near a contact microphone or sprinkling tea leaves over a plastic bag, Young replicated sounds like gunfire and explosions mostly at a distance heard in the video footage.

Finally, handmade graphical notations hung on the gallery's minimalist white walls, framing the artist's actions as an artistic, and even musical, performance, despite the jarring and

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<sup>23</sup> "Pastoral Music." Team Gallery, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> "Pastoral Music," Team Gallery.

potentially traumatic resonances he produced. Staging this performance of wartime sounds in the space of an art gallery and mediating those fabricated sounds through television and radio ultimately allowed a dual aural experience for the audience in which even the “live” or “real” sound was obviously fabricated. This overlay of orchestrated sounds of war to media footage created an experience of embodied displacement that allowed the audience to consider the reality of and uses of the footage and the original bombings themselves. Taken out of the typical, distanced media viewing experience and witnessing the artist’s own orchestration of menacing sound puts viewers in a better position to consider the uses and abuses of sonic warfare in contemporary global society, and also to consider what someone must feel “on the ground” when experiencing sonic warfare, all the while without forgetting their own positionality as viewers in the space of an art gallery.

Young took as a starting point the historical weaponization of sound in modern warfare, particularly by the United States, to look at how sound has been used in warfare and, conversely, how people remember and experience warfare through its sounds.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. army’s militarization of sound into a modern weapon of warfare initially stemmed from an accidental discovery; when the military realized that the characteristic screaming whine of dive bombers plunging out of the sky could induce panic and terror, it became clear that sound could be a powerful weapon.<sup>26</sup> A foundational reference point for Young in contextualizing the involvement of not only sound but also artists and musicians in warfare was the “Ghost Army” unit, the 23<sup>rd</sup> special troops that operated in Europe during World War II. This unit consisted mostly of artists—for example, sound technicians, architects, musicians, actors, painters, and set

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<sup>25</sup> Obrist, “Booming: Samson Young.”

<sup>26</sup> Goodman, 42.

designers<sup>27</sup>—who aimed “to trick the enemy into reacting against the presence of a nonexistent phantom army”<sup>28</sup> through both visual and sonic deception. Using fabricated sounds of troops, tanks, and landing craft, as well as an array of props like inflatable tanks, the unit manufactured a visual and audible experience of battle in order to confuse and distract enemies, allowing the actual troops on the ground to maneuver elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the audible experience manufactured, the fabricated sounds of war generated what Goodman calls an affective ecology of fear.<sup>30</sup>

*Nocturne* attempted to replicate this same ecology of fear through the affective tonality of warfare in the space of a gallery with sounds and images of war that would resonate with a contemporary audience, many of whom had likely grown up with the same warfare broadcasted live on their own television screens in their homes. Writing on spectacle and media propaganda during the war on Iraq, Douglas Kellner points out that “whereas during Gulf War I, CNN was the only network live in Baghdad... there were over twenty broadcasting networks in Baghdad for the 2003 Iraq war, including several Arab networks, and the different TV companies presented the war quite diversely.”<sup>31</sup> More specifically, “U.S. television coverage tended toward pro-military patriotism, propaganda, and technological fetishism, celebrating the weapons of war and military humanism, highlighting the achievements and heroism of the U.S. troops. Other global broadcasting networks, however, were highly critical of the U.S. and U.K. military and often presented highly negative spectacles of the assault on Iraq and the shock and awe hi-tech

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<sup>27</sup> “Pastoral Music.” Team Gallery, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Goodman, 41

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Media Propaganda and Spectacle in the War on Iraq: A Critique of U.S. Broadcasting Networks,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 4, no. 3 (August 2004): 2.

massacre.”<sup>32</sup> Kellner accurately points out that because the U.S. wars in the Middle East were “as much for public opinion and political agendas as for military goals,”<sup>33</sup> the role of the media could not be overstated. Embedded television reporters essentially acted as propagandists, showing heroic, triumphant, and sanitized images of war that did not capture the ecology of fear felt by the civilian populations on the ground. Live broadcasting also served as a way of conveying information for both civilians and even military personnel in real time; in an article titled “The Television War,” Jacqueline E. Sharkey wrote that

On March 19, CNN reporter Walter Rodgers told viewers about "a charming vignette." It involved members of the U.S. Army 7th Cavalry, who learned about the start of the war in Iraq not from their superiors but from Rodgers, who was embedded with the unit. When the correspondent told the troops that the U.S. had launched airstrikes at Baghdad, marking the beginning of the war, they were "dumbfounded," Rodgers said. "CNN viewers in the United States and around the world actually knew about the attack on Baghdad...before any of the soldiers here in the field.”<sup>34</sup>

The speed with which news and imagery of the war circulated thanks to cable news networks and new video and communications technology was unprecedented, influencing both public opinion and military decisions. However, Sharkey points out that the imagery transmitted over television broadcast provided a palatable taste of war for the public, citing a study conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism of over forty hours of coverage by ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox early in the Iraq War.<sup>35</sup> The study found that although approximately half the reports from embedded journalists showed conflict, not a single one depicted people hit by weapons, much less civilian suffering, causing Paul McMasters, former First Amendment ombudsman for the

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<sup>32</sup> Kellner, “Media Propaganda,” 5.

<sup>33</sup> Kellner, “Media Propaganda,” 3.

<sup>34</sup> Jacqueline E. Sharkey, “The Television War,” *American Journalism Review* 25, no. 4 (May 2003): 18.

<sup>35</sup> Sharkey, 21.

Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, to comment that “we're willing to send young people over to experience the reality of war, but we're not willing to look at it.”<sup>36</sup>

Capturing the ecology of fear experienced by civilian populations caught in the Middle East wars—as well as understanding the role of artists and other creatives in weaponizing sound to induce fear—are crucial starting points for understanding the themes Young explores in *Nocturne*. The artist explains that

I was thinking about the Ghost Army of World War II, a tactical deception unit. The Americans had sound engineers and musicians making these fake radio broadcasts, and playing back sounds of explosions into the battlefield as decoys. So they were essentially musicians as soldiers. At first my project was about sound and war, but it eventually became about what musicians and people working with sound *could* do in times of conflict. If there is a war in Hong Kong what is something that I could do?<sup>37</sup>

For an artist or musician, creating an affective tonality of fear through the illusion of battle with sound effects like Foley techniques is an alternative way to participate in a conflict without tactical combat training. Thus *Nocturne* was conceived of by the artist as a “Sonic Warfare Training Program.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Sharkey, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Obrist, “Booming: Samson Young.”

<sup>38</sup> “Pastoral Music,” Team Gallery.



Figure 2.1 Installation detail. Samson Young, *Nocturne*, 2015. Courtesy Team Gallery.

Because the artist was centered in the middle of the wide, empty space of the gallery, the sounds of violence replicated were soft, as if muted or insulated by the silent, still space around them. However, Young's performance was simultaneously broadcast over an FM radio frequency, which was transmitted to both handheld radios available in the gallery for visitors but also accessible for anyone outside the gallery to tune in. Young explains from his perspective as the performer that

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.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Samson Young and Lucy Cotter, "Sound as Knowledge: A Dialogue with Samson Young," *MaHKUscript. Journal of Fine Art Research* 2, no.1 (2017): <https://www.mahkuscript.com/articles/10.5334/mjfar.26/>

Reviews of this exhibition allow more insight into the viewers' experiences; for instance, Sara Marcus, a writer for *Artforum*, reported that "the muted bombing footage plays out as an abstract ballet of light, but Young's work forces us, pressing transistor radios to our ears, into an intimate encounter with the sound of violence."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, independent curator Lucy Cotter described her experience of *Nocturne* as follows: "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."<sup>41</sup> Both of these accounts touch on how the transmission of the performance over radio, held up to the audience's ears, forced a more intimate encounter with the sounds of violence within the safe space of an art gallery. Team Gallery's white cube interior, lined with the artist's framed, hand-drawn graphical notations, provided an incongruous atmosphere for listening to the sounds of warfare, making the experience all the more surreal, disjointed and jarring, placing violence within a highly aestheticized, privileged context.

Many visitors to a contemporary art gallery located in Manhattan are likely from a largely middle- and upper-class demographic. They may not have the experiences of war or violence to immediately translate the sounds Young recreates into knowledge or memories of trauma. But it is still possible to relate the sounds and rhythms produced in the gallery to those of a war zone, because what *Nocturne* asks for is imagination, understanding, and empathy towards those who do possess such embodied knowledge and traumatic memory. The audience is not traumatized by a weaponized sonic agency in the gallery space, but instead asked to sympathize with those who have been in zones of conflict, to listen deeply and imagine the sites and causes of such tones,

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<sup>40</sup> Sara Marcus, "Samson Young," Critics' Picks, *Artforum*, 4 December 2015.  
<https://www.artforum.com/picks/team-gallery-wooster-street-56466>

<sup>41</sup> Young and Cotter, "Sound as Knowledge."

however manufactured.<sup>42</sup> The artist cites J. Martin Daughtry's book *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* as a point of reference for the creation of *Nocturne*. Daughtry's book details many first-hand accounts of those involved in the Gulf War and Iraq War describing how they remember conflict through hearing. For instance, Daughtry describes how in Iraq during 2006, a son and his mother "became connoisseurs of the belliphonic sounds in their neighborhood."<sup>43</sup> The son, Tareq, describes how by listening to gunfire, he and his mother "can recognize if it's an AK-14 or RPK or PKC or it's a sniper shot ... and if it's an American bullet or an Iraqi bullet. Iraqi bullets make a lot of loud [noise]. [I] like American [bullets]—it's more silence. [laughter]."<sup>44</sup> While Young's audience at Team Gallery likely did not have the wartime experiences to distinguish different types of bullets by the sound of the gunfire, it is striking that Tareq, an Iraqi, jokingly says he likes American bullets because they are quieter.

The atmosphere of the white-walled gallery lined with framed, hand-drawn graphic notations was also critically important in functioning as a marker to remind the audience of their own positionality, as privileged occupiers of a space of safety and comfort, while they are asked to experience an affective tonality of violence and imagine experiences of wartime trauma. Furthermore, the space also influenced how visitors interacted with the performer. Young noted that during the performance,

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

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<sup>42</sup> Joe Bucciero, "Composing a Symphony of War with Instruments and Everyday Objects," Galleries, Hyperallergic, 9 December 2015. <https://hyperallergic.com/253983/composing-a-symphony-of-war-with-instruments-and-everyday-objects/>

<sup>43</sup> J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 276.

<sup>44</sup> Daughtry, *ibid.*

performer is focused on something; it gives the audience license to look at the performer in this very close way.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 2.2 Installation detail. Samson Young, *Nocturne*, 2015. Courtesy Team Gallery.

In this case, the audience seemed to treat the artist as a part of the exhibition itself and came quite close to Young, as if he were truly a part of the art, due to the spatial and conceptual distancing created by the atmosphere of the art gallery. The Foley techniques that the artist employed in the performance also served to create an effect of distancing, through the replication of violent sounds with miscellaneous, everyday objects like Tupperware and tea leaves that have no connotation of violence. While this method of replication may seem like a simulation—defined by Baudrillard as “not simply to feign. . . feigning or dissimulation leaves the reality intact. . . whereas simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’”<sup>46</sup>—Young’s performance does not rely on the intent to deceive. The live Foley techniques replicate and reproduce martial sounds, but the environment of the gallery, including the graphical scores hanging as framed artworks on the walls, distances the performance from what it imitates and conceptually frames it as a work of art, making no attempt to deceive its audience into believing they are under a threat of real danger. Young’s artistic performance is distanced from the reality

<sup>45</sup> Young and Cotter, “Sound as Knowledge.”

<sup>46</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, 1983) 5.

of warfare; the audience is not asked to confuse the two. Yet the artistic performance is a real praxis for imagining and feeling what is real to others in conditions of warfare, while being made distinctly aware of what one's own positionality is by virtue of the space they are occupying.. Similarly, the audience watching Young perform was also prompted to question whether their experience of warfare as mediated through distance and television broadcasting is actually "real." Although the exhibition was marked by visible martial signifiers like the artist's dress and the language used in the graphic scores, the linchpin that held together the safe, aestheticized atmosphere with the imagined violence of sonic warfare was the transmission of the performance over FM radio.

Upon arriving at the gallery, many visitors did not initially realize that what Young was doing as a performer was related to what they were hearing on the handheld FM radios available to them. The artist noted that when people wandered closer to him, they began to realize his actions correlated with what they heard through the radios, and described this realization as similar to the moment "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... all of a sudden you become aware of the fact that what you've been listening to has this process of mediation that is enabled by technology."<sup>47</sup> The sounds the artist produced with Foley techniques were quite soft and muted as the vibrations grew weaker travelling through the sparse, empty space of the gallery, but those same sounds were amplified when transmitted over the radio, becoming much more aggressive and disturbing. The transmission of radio waves functioned similarly to what Connor describes as "a literalization of the Romantic idealization of sound, which stressed the capacity of sound both to pervade and to integrate objects and entities which the eye kept separate."<sup>48</sup> In this case, the radio transmission

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<sup>47</sup> Young and Cotter, "Sound as Knowledge."

<sup>48</sup> Connor, 207.

brought together what the eye saw—an artistic performance staged in a white-walled art gallery—with what the transmitted sounds encouraged the audience to imagine.



*Figure 2.3 Installation view. Samson Young, Nocturne, 2015. Courtesy Team Gallery.*

In this way, the radio transmission of the artist’s live performance functions as a doubling process that plays with how we receive and process visual and audible information --- the sounds heard over the radio simultaneously do and do not line up with the sounds and actions offered as aural and visual input to the audience in the gallery space due to technological mediation. Because this mismatch between senses requires a kind of psychic labor in order to negotiate and imagine what is missing,<sup>49</sup> the radio’s voice allows for the imagination of another person’s experience while the viewer is still physically grounded in his or her experience in the space of the gallery. In this way, the radio acted as a “hinge, placing us

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<sup>49</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 37.

between the uncertainties intrinsic to hearing and the work needed to wrestle with the ongoing drama of the seen.”<sup>50</sup>

The gap between what is audible and what is visible is a productive space to work within, due to the mental labor required to imagine the two aligning, as Young demonstrates in *Nocturne*. However, in terms of weaponizing sound, the military has also realized that sound’s fear-inducing capabilities can be enhanced with the impairment of vision and working within this productive gap. As Goodman explains, “the less effective the enemy’s visual capabilities, the more powerful sonic deception could be. Visual concealment by smoke or the dark of night obviously assisted the process.”<sup>51</sup> Connor concurs:

The terror of the air-raid consists in its grotesquely widened bifurcation of visibility and hearing. On the one hand, there is the dominative distance of the bomber’s aerial perspective, or the even greater and more decorporealized ballistic visibility of the guided missile; on the other, there is the absolute deprivation of sight for the victims of the air-raid on the ground, compelled as they are to rely on hearing to give them information about the incoming bombs.<sup>52</sup>

Put another way, victims of air raids must rely almost entirely on the temporal and locational knowledge conveyed by sound in order to survive. That temporal and locational knowledge can then become tied to memory: according to Tina Mannisto-Funke, “once an enduring bodily and sensory memory has been created, it can function as a centerpiece of a broader memory and trigger remembering... the reason for a singular sensory experience being imprinted in memory is often a strong emotion that has been connected to it at the moment of the experience.”<sup>53</sup> Sound

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>51</sup> Goodman, 42.

<sup>52</sup> Connor, 210.

<sup>53</sup> Tiina Mannisto-Funk, “Pieces of Music as Memory Capsules,” in Marcel Cobussen, Vincent Meelbend, and Barry Truax, *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art* (Routledge Ltd - M.U.A., 2016) 236.

vibrations—physical resonances in the body—can act as such triggers for memories of trauma and forms of embodied knowledge.

This is precisely the phenomenon that Cotter spoke of when describing *Nocturne*'s sounds and rhythms as an example of how resonances held in the body can be a form of knowledge, which directly relates to the kind of embodied, sonic knowledge that Daughtry describes through veterans' accounts in *Listening to War*. Echoing Tareq's story, one former Iraqi veteran recalled an instance in which he was able to identify in mere seconds, by the acoustic signature of a cruise missile, that the missile was headed away from his apartment but the explosion would be close enough to be deafening, prompting him to yank out his hearing aid just in time.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Connor describes how "the inhabitants of cities subjected to aerial bombardment during the Second World War and after have had to learn new skills of orienting themselves in this deadly new auditory field without clear coordinates or dimensions, but in which the tiniest variations in pitch and timbre can mean obliteration."<sup>55</sup> As previously mentioned, although it is unlikely that Team Gallery's visitors had the kind of wartime experiences to translate *Nocturne*'s sounds into embodied knowledge, the first step is for the audience to feel these sounds as physically resonant in their bodies, then make the mental step towards imagining what that could mean to another person, precisely as Cotter describes.

That the mental leap asked of *Nocturne*'s audience is a reality for many victims of war is also evidenced by a study published in 2016 by Carolyn Birdsall, which illustrates how sound and vision can act as sensory inputs that triggers memory in the context of war and violence. Birdsall interviewed elderly people who experienced aerial attacks during World War II in

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<sup>54</sup> Daughtry, 28-29.

<sup>55</sup> Connor, 211.

Germany and collected oral histories of their sound memories of the war. One interviewee's commentary on modern, televised warfare is particularly enlightening, demonstrating how memory can bring the past into the present: "You know, when I was watching TV when the Iraq War began, would you believe that it seemed like it was there again. I woke up screaming from my bed, because the bombs were falling again and the devil knows what else... For that reason, I don't watch TV anymore."<sup>56</sup> According to Birdsall, this kind of response is indicative of how televised U.S. aerial bombings in the Middle East, much like the footage that Young pieced together as a score for *Nocturne*, served as audiovisual prompts for her interviewees to recall their own wartime experiences of military attack and urban destruction.<sup>57</sup> The interviewees also frequently mentioned that the sounds of sirens and alarms functioned as triggers for panic and recollecting memories of bombs falling close to home.<sup>58</sup> Clearly, audiovisual media can have powerful emotional and psychological effects through the triggering processes of remembering or embodied knowledge based on past experiences.

The accounts from Birdsall's interviewees have another striking resonance with the work exhibited in *Pastoral Music*, specifically in the way speech is used to represent or mimic sounds of warfare. For Birdsall's interviewees, gunfire was often verbalized as 'ra-ta-ta-ta-ta', while other vocalizations included 'dadadada' or 'tic tic tic' in reference to radio fanfare, 'chk chk chk' for signal jamming, and 'boom boom boom' to describe the sound of illegal BBC radio.<sup>59</sup> Young's graphic notations displayed on the walls of the gallery during *Pastoral Music* used almost identical speech patterns to indicate the direction, shape and diffusion of sound is

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<sup>56</sup> Carolyn Birdsall, "Sound Memory: A Critical Concept for Researching Memories of Conflict and War," *Memory, place and identity: commemoration and remembrance of war and conflict* (2016): 115.

<sup>57</sup> Birdsall, 115.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>59</sup> Birdsall, 125.

depicted in watercolor (which is perhaps evidence of the artist's experiences of synesthesia and corresponding tendency to associate certain colors with specific tones.<sup>60</sup>) Young utilized small stamped words such as "BOP," "TA," and "BAANG" in some cases rather than musical notes to represent sound. An explosive "BOOM," "ZHOW", and "ZZ ZZ" noise is portrayed with a whirling circle of murky green-brown, while rising bursts of "AA AA" are shown in a gradient green-yellow and chaotic, falling "DO DO DO"s are surrounded by clouds of sky blue. These vocalizations approximate the aural experience of sound, though it is impossible to precisely communicate an experience of sound, or color, through language to another person. As Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in *Remarks on Colour*, "I can never be certain that my "blue" is your "blue"; I can only persuade you to share a consensual language-game whose referents are sufficiently stable to function."<sup>61</sup> As the testimonies of Birdsall's interviewees demonstrate, the verbal referents Young uses in his graphical notations indeed seem to be stable enough to function as signifiers of sonic violence.

These graphic notations were done by the artist after careful listening to the edited film of wartime clips prior to the exhibition. Despite being marked with expressions like "Feigned withdrawal: moderato" and "Exposed flank: spirit," lending the sounds resonating in the gallery an additional warlike resonance,<sup>62</sup> the notations, compounded by the sparse white walls of the gallery, literally framed Young's actions as art. As one review of the exhibition pointed out, the addition of the graphic notations connects Young's performance and wider practice to the avant-garde composers of the 1950s and '60s like John Cage and Cornelius Cardew, who created

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<sup>60</sup> Oliver Giles, "Hong Kong Artist Samson Young On The Methods Behind His "Sound Drawings"," Generation T, 3 October 2017. <https://generationt.asia/ideas/art-talk-samson-young-on-sound-drawing>

<sup>61</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein and G.E.M. Anscombe, *Remarks on Colour* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977)

<sup>62</sup> "Pastoral Music," Team Gallery.

comparable graphic scores.<sup>63</sup> However, the drawings included in *Pastoral Music* are transcriptions rather than scores, having been made after careful listening to recorded sounds, and thus function as a form of visual phonography and result of deep listening rather than a set of instructions. Furthermore, in contrast to the graphic scores of Cage or Cardew, Young's transcriptions exist freely in negative space without an organizing structure of staves. Sometimes small sections of staves are included, referencing a particular note within a much greater sound that has an overall timbre and color of its own. These sound drawings are evidence of Young's training as a composer and how it frames his world view; they are deeply detailed yet simultaneously abstracted, what Christopher Cox describes as "a musical score, a set of performance instructions, a map, a landscape painting, a soundscape recording" all at once.<sup>64</sup> These graphic notations, informed by both the artist's disciplinary training as a composer and his own sensory experiences of sound and color, demonstrate that Young's practice nonetheless strives to combine the audible with the visual in order to create a more imaginative, relational experience between individuals who have experienced sonic warfare and those who have not.

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<sup>63</sup> Bucciero, "Composing a Symphony of War."

<sup>64</sup> Jasmina Merz, Anna Brohm, Gregor Jansen, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, *Samson Young: A dark theme keeps me here, I'll make a broken music* (Wien, Austria: Vfmk Verlag für modern Kunst GmbH, 2016): 3.

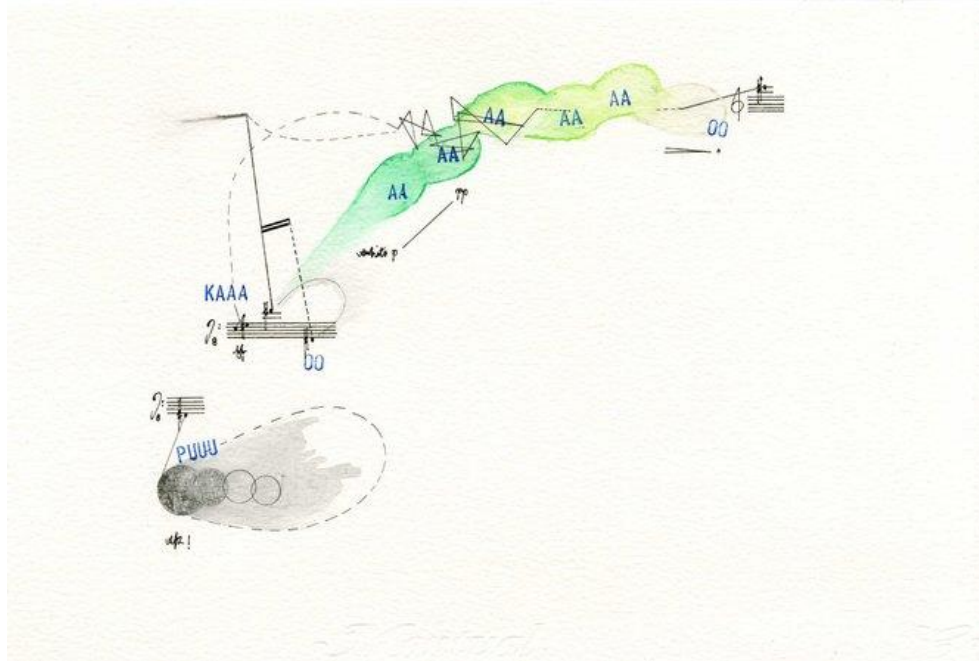


Figure 2.4 Graphic Score. Samson Young, *Pastoral Music*, 2015. Courtesy Team Gallery.

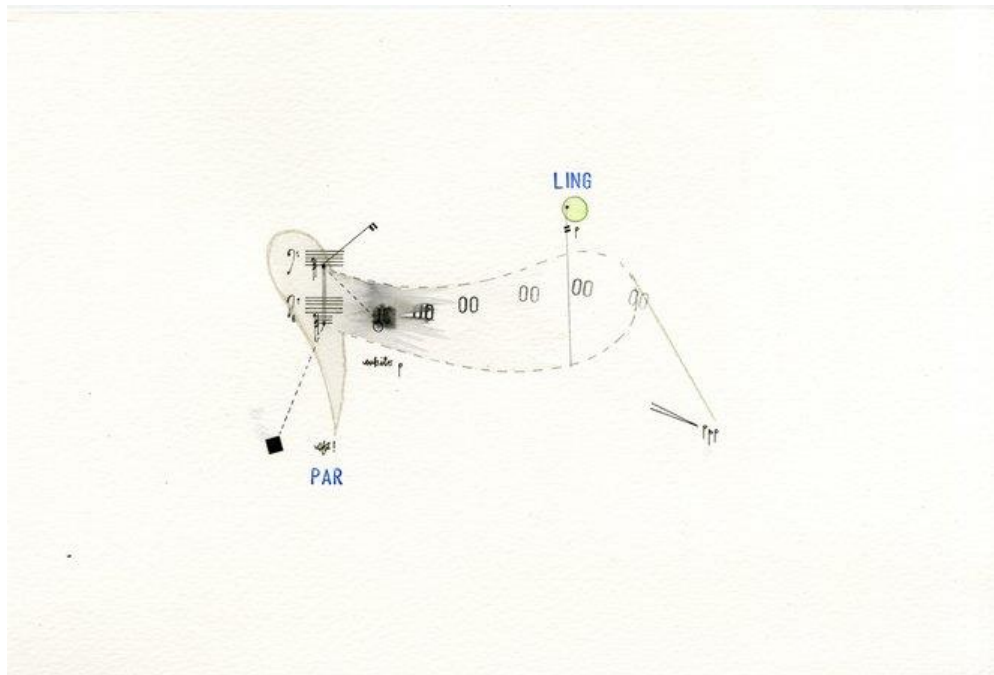


Figure 2.5. Graphic Score. Samson Young, *Pastoral Music*, 2015. Courtesy Team Gallery.

*Nocturne*'s affective capability rests on the dual aural experience, which enables the audience to put themselves in the shoes of someone who has experienced sonic warfare without forgetting their own positionality in the space of the gallery, aided by the visual graphic notations on the gallery's walls. Due to the radio's ability to let the audience listen to both what is "there" and what is "mediated," a unique, simultaneous awareness of self and other is encouraged. Being made aware of one's own position while attempting to understand and empathize with the positionality of others is a thread that runs through many of Young's projects, relating back to his desire to imagine "being able to see his own face from the outside." Sound vibration, as a relational medium which traverses mind and body, subject and object, is especially useful as a means of imagining an embodied self and other.<sup>65</sup> However, like any double-edged sword, the powerful affective potential of sound waves varies depending on intent; affective tonality can be utilized for violence, but may also be a powerful means of relationality and drawing people together. While *Nocturne*'s thematic focus explores how sonic vibrations can be used to cause terrible emotional, psychological, and physiological effects in warfare and other violent means, another of Young's projects pushes affective tonality's potential in the opposite direction to explore the possibility of using sound vibrations as a basis for forming bonds of connection, community and understanding.

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<sup>65</sup> Goodman, xiv.

## CHAPTER THREE

## FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

Following on the heels of *Nocturne*, in 2015 Young was chosen as the inaugural winner of the BMW Art Journey award, which provides funding for an emerging artist to research, network, and create new work anywhere in the world. Young's proposed project for this award, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, built on his fascination with sound and military technology. However, while *Nocturne* had explored military campaigns utilizing sonic warfare and its resulting psychological and physiological effects, the focus of this new project shifted to how particular sonic objects—bells—may use sound as a medium to draw people together through an affective tonality that creates a feeling of community, at times signally a threat or call to action, but more commonly used to signal a call to prayer or remembrance. Bells, the artist pointed out in his project proposal, have historically been made of essentially the same materials as cannons. In times of war, bells would be melted down to create cannons, while in times of peace bells would be recast from surplus weapons;<sup>66</sup> thus the very materiality of bells as objects is complicit in both violence and peace, much the same way sound might be complicit in each process depending on human intent.

To explore this possibility, Young proposed a roughly year-long journey across several continents to research, notate and record historically significant bells that might otherwise be inaccessible to him due to geographic remoteness or other limitations. The project ultimately resulted in visual artwork, photographic documentation, short essays, and an archive of field

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<sup>66</sup> "Samson Young," BMW Art Journey, 2015. <https://www.bmw-art-journey.com/artists/2015-hong-kong>

recordings. The aforementioned components and a selection of the field recordings were presented in the form of a book, titled *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, while the entire archive of recordings is available online through Soundcloud's audio streaming platform. In sum, through both visual, material elements and audible, immaterial components, the project's output mimics, extends, and virtualizes those same properties of bells, ultimately allowing individuals to access and experience not only a particular bell's toll but also its environment's affective tonality. The virtual dimensions of the piece displaces the audiences' hearing from their own location and prompts them to imagine feeling their own bodies in distant locations, offering a glimpse into the embodied position of another.

In order to understand how Young positions bells as objects that may utilize affective tonality to enhance an awareness of others' physical and perceptual experiences, it will be useful to begin by analyzing bells from two standpoints: as physical, material objects, and as sonic objects that produce vibrations, which extend beyond the physical object. To begin from a material approach, bells are fascinating objects of research for a journey across many cultural contexts because bells have been created and used in almost all cultures across the world at some point in history, possibly as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE in Neolithic China. The artist believes that the forms and functions of bells have connections that are common across cultures, stating that

Each culture has its own use and form of bells. China has ritual bells, and of course, bells are very important in Buddhism. In Europe, bells call to prayer. There are secular bells, used to mark time. And bells also spread through missionaries and via conquest. Different cultures adopt bells for different purposes. In Buddhist temples, bells are rung a certain way, while the British came up

with their own form of bellringing. Despite this diversity, as a physical object, bells retain a common form. They all look somewhat similar, and that has to do with acoustic science.<sup>67</sup>

As percussive instruments, the auditory tones of a bell depend largely on the material it is made from, how it is rung, and the shape in which it is cast. Bells' incredibly loud, resonant tones have been used for various communication purposes in different cultural and historical contexts, as the artist mentioned above, such as for religious or ritual significance, community gathering, time-telling, and funerary purposes.

Funerary tolls are a particularly strong point of reference, given the title of the project that not only quotes Hemingway's novel of the same name, but also a well-known quote from John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.<sup>68</sup>

Donne's quote was written in 1624 when he was under quarantine and seriously ill, and at the time, ringing of church bells was a practice used to announce a death. In writing that "no man is an island" and "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind," Donne implies that humanity is interconnected and every loss of a life is a loss from the whole of humanity. In other words, the toll of the bell in this context can be read as an acoustic commemoration of the loss of an individual from the fabric of a community. In addition to funerary commemoration, bells' loud tones were also critical to communication before the

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<sup>67</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> John Donne, "Meditation XVII" in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions Together with Death's Duel* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1959) 108-109.

industrial revolution; prior to industrialization, the only man-made objects capable of making sounds louder than those of nature were weapons like cannons and bells.<sup>69</sup> The tolls of a bell that resonate over a community help give shape to a soundscape that articulates the civic identity of a particular place. The bell's toll thus creates connection and a sense of belonging, but that same sense of belonging can also become the foundation for cultural and political boundaries. Hence the artist's interest in the sonic and material connections between bells and weapons like cannons; both are sources of extremely loud, condensed noise which can transform in material shape and sonic effect depending on what the situation required.

For example, one of the bells documented in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the Pummerin—the largest bell in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna—was cast out of three hundred cannons left behind during the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1705. When it was destroyed during World War II, a new Pummerin was created in 1951 out of the remains of the original bell and metal from Turkish cannons in Vienna's military museum.<sup>70</sup> However, history has also seen bells sourced as raw material during wartime; after World War II initially broke out, the Nazis drew up a plan of what resources would be required for the war and believed that metal would be in short supply—so metal was acquired by confiscating church bells from across Germany and the annexed territories, to be melted down into raw materials for weapons and other purposes.<sup>71</sup> Thus the material that bells and weapons like cannons are made from is a kind of pendulum that can swing back and forth infinitely depending on the historical moment and human intent.

Bells like the Pummerin should also be understood as physical, material objects that document and tell the histories of the circumstances and intent that shaped their creation. For

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<sup>69</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>71</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 37.

example, many bells are made for the explicit purpose of historical commemoration, such as war memorial bells and carillons. One such case that Young documented in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is the Loughsborough carillon, which was created as a war memorial in honor of British soldiers who lost their lives in World War I. At the end of World War I, the citizens of Loughsborough purportedly chose a carillon as a form of memorial because “many lives had been lost in the fields of Flanders where the melodious sound from the many carillons in the area could be heard.”<sup>72</sup> This idea was not unique to Loughsborough; many cities in the UK and the US, as well as in Europe, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, have created carillons as war memorials, as is documented by the Network of War Memorial and Peace Carillons, an organization dedicated to honoring and preserving memorial war carillons worldwide as well as promoting peace.<sup>73</sup> This organization’s documentation shows that bells in memorial carillons often contain inscriptions honoring individuals who lost their lives in war as well as calls for peace; for instance, an inscription on the University of Sydney War Memorial Carillon reads “These also shall be held in grateful memory and shall be sung for ever by the bells” before listing the names of fallen soldiers.<sup>74</sup> Inscriptions render such commemorative bells as historical texts that can be “read,” not only literally, but also as material artifacts that were imbued with sentiments of the social atmosphere at the time they were made and act as conduits that help us understand past circumstances and decisions. These inscriptions also reinforce the idea that bells are objects with dual, seemingly opposing associations: although they memorialize lives lost in war and call for

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<sup>72</sup> “Loughsborough, War Memorial Carillon (United Kingdom),” War Memorial and Peace Carillons, 2020. <https://www.peacecarillons.org/carillons-and-peace/ww-i-memorial-carillons/loughsborough-war-memorial-carillon-united-kingdom/>

<sup>73</sup> “About Us,” War Memorial and Peace Carillons, 2020. <https://www.peacecarillons.org/about-us/>

<sup>74</sup> “Sydney, University of Sydney War Memorial Carillon (Australia),” War Memorial and Peace Carillons, 2020. <https://www.peacecarillons.org/carillons-and-peace/ww-i-memorial-carillons/university-of-sydney-war-memorial-carillon-sydney-australia/>

peace, these bells simultaneously commemorate war and create a community identity associated with remembering it.

The atmosphere and community surrounding each bell is also captured in addition to the material bell itself in Young's published book, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which acts as a document that records his investigations of bells with both text and imagery. The book is organized as a sort of travelogue, containing sections pertaining to each city the artist visited for research, such as Mandalay, Mombasa, St. Petersburg, and Los Angeles, to name just a few. Each place-based section—Myanmar, for example—is structured with a short introductory essay by Young, followed by photographic documentation of the location, the architectural home of the bell, people in the community the artist interacted with, and sometimes historical photographs as well, in addition to imagery of the bell in question itself. The introductory text to each section functions as historical context and explanation as to why the artist chose a particular site and bell to research. Young writes at the start of the Myanmar section that the Mingun Bell in Mandalay, his chosen object of research in Myanmar, is “significant not only because of its size, but because its construction involved thousands of slaves, who were also involved in the building of the never-finished Mingun Pagoda. That unpopular project contributed towards the dynasty's demise.”<sup>75</sup> The Mingun Pagoda is an incomplete monument begun by King Bodawpaya in 1790 using thousands of prisoners of war and slaves for construction labor. The construction took such a heavy toll on his people that a prophecy was allegedly created to manipulate the king's superstition: “as soon as the building of the pagoda was over, the country would also be gone.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, the Mingun Bell is also a reflection of King Bodawpaya's

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<sup>75</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 19.

<sup>76</sup> “Mingun – Mandalay,” Gandawun Shwe Bagan, 2001. <https://gandawunshwebagan.com/mandalay/mingun.html>

grandiose ambitions; it is the second-largest ringing bell in the world, weighing 90 tons. The artist's above statement illustrates that the Mingun Bell is of interest not only because of its sonic properties—shaped by its massive size—but also because of the complex social and political history that it acts as a material document of, intertwining notions of Buddhism with traces of forced labor and extravagant monarchic ambition.

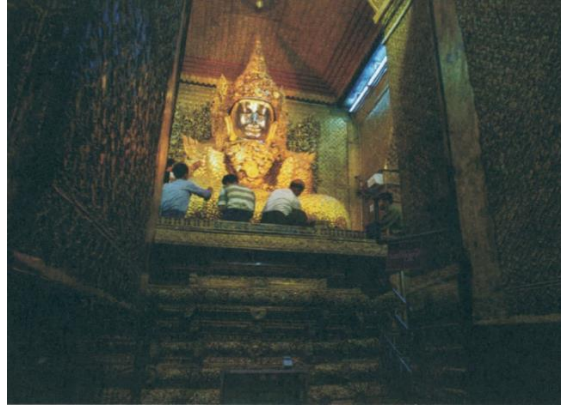
Although the Mingun Bell is the primary focus of Young's research in Myanmar, the artist also recorded smaller temple bells in other locations around Mandalay, including the temple bell at Mandalay Hill, which he describes as “the stage for one of the toughest battles of the Burma campaign during World War II.”<sup>77</sup> The accompanying images in the following pages of this section are the artist's photographs of temple bells and interiors, including an image of several men seated before a massive golden Buddha image inside a temple, presumably the Mingun Pagoda. In contrast to the artist's own photographs, on the last page there is a black and white photograph of two soldiers dressed in 20<sup>th</sup> century-era military regalia and holding rifles, standing amidst debris in front of a temple. The grainy black and white quality of the photo clearly marks it as historical in contrast to the artist's own color images on previous pages; in the book's list of illustrations, this photograph is captioned as “*Burma/Myanmar: Two British Army soldiers patrol the ruins of Bahe during the Allied advance on Japanese-held Mandalay, Bahe, Shan State, January 1945.*”<sup>78</sup> The inclusion of this historical photograph demonstrates an effort by the artist to draw connections between the past and present: from King Bodawpaya's misguided construction project to the British colonial occupation and World War II battles resulting from Japanese invasion, bells seem to function as tangible objects of focus in tracing

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<sup>77</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

histories of power in Myanmar. Bells as material documents are a point of entry for the artist to understand complex histories of power, colonialism, and war, and the accompanying texts and images in the book work to relate these histories.



*Figure 3.1. Mingun Pagoda, Myanmar. Samson Young, For Whom the Bell Tolls, p.22.*



Myanmar

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Figure 3.2. Mingun Pagoda, Myanmar. Samson Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, p.23.



*Figure 3.3. View near Mingun Pagoda, Myanmar. Samson Young, For Whom the Bell Tolls, p.24.*



*Figure 3.4. Burma/Myanmar: Two British Army soldiers patrol the ruins of Bahe during the Allied advance on Japanese-held Mandalay. Bahe, Shan State, 1945. Copyright akg-images/Pictures from History. Samson Young, For Whom the Bell Tolls, p.25*

The book, while providing important visual documentation, also importantly functions as an interactive object that allows readers access to each bell's sound. Codes are embedded in the pages of the book that, when scanned with a mobile phone app, bring up Young's specific field recordings on the user's phone. For example, on page 23 of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, a soft red sphere around the page number at the lower right corner indicates that this page is "audible," and when scanned with an application called CP Clicker, the artist's field recording of the Mingun Bell becomes accessible on the user's mobile phone. This recording is also available on the artist's Soundcloud platform,<sup>79</sup> along with many more recordings of other bells that the artist encountered in each location. In this way, the intimate, handheld format of the book becomes a tool to virtually access the digital recordings of the analog bells.

The mediation of technology allows an audible experience of a particular bell's tones in its unique spatial context. In the Mingun Bell recording, we hear not just the bell's long, resonant decay with each steady toll, but also its sonic environment. There are high tones of distant bird calls, a lower, perhaps reptilian animal noise around the eighth bell toll, and an indistinct, continual crackling that evokes rain dripping from foliage—or perhaps this is just my mind's eye, prompted by the images of Myanmar provided in the book, such as the photograph of dense green foliage surrounding a body of water.<sup>80</sup> Thus the resonance of the bell's toll, along with its audible and visual environment, becomes perceptible to a listener thousands of miles from Myanmar due to the mediation of recording technology and photography.

However, the recordings are not merely a reflection of the artist's audible experience at a given moment. Recording technology captures and makes a listener aware of many minute

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<sup>79</sup> Young, "Aug 06, Mingun Bell," ("For Whom the Bell Tolls," Soundcloud)  
<https://soundcloud.com/samsonyoung/aug06>

<sup>80</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 24.

sounds that the brain would ordinarily filter out as white noise, such as the crackling that could be perceived as rain drops. Sound is a form of information, and the way the brain receives and perceives that information is not simply reliant on the mechanical function of our ears. Although much of what we hear is partly defined and limited by the mechanics of our ears, as David Byrne points out,

there are things we “hear” that have nothing to do with the physics of the eardrum and the auditory canal. We can, for example, isolate the voice of someone talking to us in a noisy environment. Repetitious sounds, the sound of waves or constant traffic, become somewhat inaudible to us after a while. We have the ability to selectively hear just the stuff we’re interested in and make the rest recede into some distant acoustic background.<sup>81</sup>

In Young’s field recordings, the “voice” of interest in the noisy environment that our brains are attuned to. However, the bell tolls are not constantly present throughout the field recordings; much of the time, what is sonically captured is the environmental noise. During these moments when the bell’s voice is absent, the listener pays much more attention to the other smaller, repetitious, background noises, as if searching for another voice to focus on. In this way, through the recording’s ability to heighten awareness of such background sounds, the listener is more readily able to imagine a sonic architecture in a given locale. The book’s photographs also act as supplementary aids to this sonic architecture, giving the mind visuals to build an imagined environment from.

Although *For Whom the Bell Tolls* focuses on each bell as a primary “voice,” the project also manages to capture the sonic environment around each bell—in other words, Young’s field recordings are not only of bells’ tolls but also of the affective tonality of the environment each

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<sup>81</sup> David Byrne, *How Music Works* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2012) 123.

bell is located within. This is significant because it is the affective tonality of the bell's surroundings that helps displace and reembody a listener into a distant environment, a process which is reliant on the brain's ability to localize sound. A bell's toll, as previously described, is incredibly loud and resonant, so much so that it tends to feel almost immersive to the listener, making it difficult for the brain to detect what direction the toll is coming from. However, smaller sounds, which become more audible in the absence of bell tolls, are much easier for the brain to locate in imagined space in relation to the listener's bodily position. As mentioned in the introduction, binaural hearing gives humans the ability to locate a sound's source in space along horizontal and vertical planes due to the timing difference in which the sound arrives at each ear. Much modern recording technology makes use of this ability through binaural recording to create the experience of a three-dimensional audio environment for the listener. With a pair of headphones, it quickly becomes apparent upon listening to Young's field recordings that some of the sounds in the recorded environment arrive at one ear before the other, if heard in the other ear at all, giving the listener a strong sense of where along the horizontal plane a sound's source should be located relative to the body.

This locational effect is visually evidenced in the artist's series of soundscape sketches that are included within in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Young's "Landschaft" series ("landscape" in German) is included in the middle of the text as several pages of drawings depicting the sonic environment the artist observed while waiting for and recording certain bells. These drawings are aesthetically quite similar to the graphic notations included in *Pastoral Music*; however, rather than transcriptions carefully composed after listening to recorded sounds many times over, these sketches were made rather hastily and spontaneously on site in the moment of occurrence and perception. Through watercolor, colored pencil, ink, and stamps this series represents on paper a

visualization of a total acoustic environment, surrounding one wherever they may be.<sup>82</sup> But unlike in a typical landscape painting or photograph, which both have a tendency to flatten and freeze time, the artist claims that his soundscape sketches place the passage of time at the forefront of the image.<sup>83</sup> Specific, momentary sounds in time are not presented in a linear system; instead, the locations of sounds in the compositions are depicted based on their relative location to the artist as listener. In an interview, Young explained his methodology as follows:

I'm always in the middle of the image, and sounds that are to my left are on the left side of the drawing and sounds that are to my right are on the right side of the drawing. So when you see a line that is going from left to right, literally what is happening is that that sound is passing right in front of me. Like luggage going from left to right, or a vehicle.<sup>84</sup>

The artist's description makes it evident that his own embodied position is central to composing the soundscape sketches. The specific example Young details above is illustrated in the soundscape sketch titled "Rouen Cathedral, August 23, 10:50 a.m. – 12:05 p.m."<sup>85</sup> where three areas in the composition are stamped blue with letters reading "Man with luggage," accompanied by splotches of gray watercolor and long black horizontal lines marked with smaller vertical ones. Upon listening to an overlapping field recording via Soundcloud—"August 23, Rouen Cathedral, at 12:00 (drones)"—one can indeed hear the sounds of a wheeled suitcase being rolled over uneven stones, creating consistent punctuations of sound presumably represented by the artist's black lines marked with perpendicular scores. While the "DOM" and "DONG" stamps shaded in yellow appear to travel through the space, making it difficult to pinpoint visually where the bell might be in space relative to the artist as listener, sounds like the

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<sup>82</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *A Sound Education* (Ontario: Arcana Editions, 1992) 8.

<sup>83</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 67.

<sup>84</sup> Giles, "Hong Kong Artist Samson Young On The Methods Behind His "Sound Drawings"."

<sup>85</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 74-75.

man with luggage or the “CHIU” of bird chirps are represented as more discrete units, making it easier to pinpoint where the bird or the man with luggage is located in space, assuming the artist locates himself in the middle of the image.

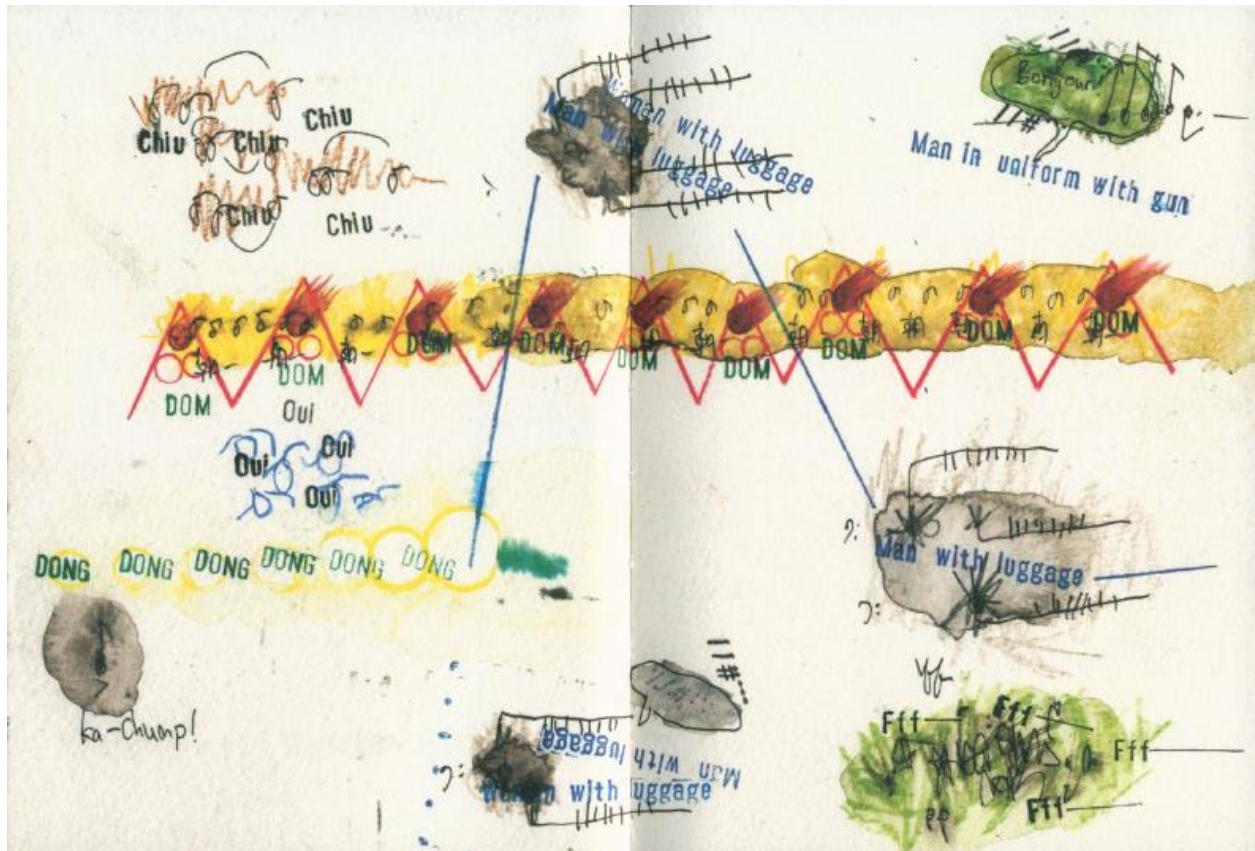


Figure 3.5 *Landscape (Rouen Cathedral, August 23, 10:50 a.m. - 12:05 p.m.)* Samson Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, p.74-75.

Although a viewer and listener can decipher location based on binaural hearing and the artist’s logic in composing the image, other choices that characterize the composition of each soundscape sketch, such as colors and shapes, are less easy to interpret. These choices are likely influenced by a less translatable logic of personal perception unique to the artist. However, choosing a soundscape from the publication and attempting to listen along with an exactly

corresponding field recording scanned from the publication or on Soundcloud in order to precisely “interpret” the soundscape is, according to the artist, unnecessary. Young claims that he is not seeking objectivity or verification through his drawings, but rather describes them as “systematic and methodological but not scientific,”<sup>86</sup> referring to his personal decisions to represent certain sounds with particular shapes and colors. He explains that

I can’t make you hear a sound as yellow, but I encourage you to become aware of that fact that I am experiencing this peculiar thing that is called hearing in colors, which you might also know, but there is no way to synchronize that experience and probably there is no need to. It is enough that you recognize that something in me is similar to what is also in you.<sup>87</sup>

Young has previously commented that he perceives certain notes or pitches as specific colors, likely referring to the experience of synesthesia.<sup>88</sup> Such a perceptual experience is indeed impossible to fully convey to another person, but according to the artist, synchronizing that experience is actually not necessary. What is more important is recognizing that difference of perceptual experience without effacing it. The idiosyncrasies of the soundscape drawings render them very specific to Young’s personal experiences and creative interpretations, essentially highly subjective visualizations of sonic landscapes that operate as part of a broader strategy to encourage the audience to recognize and differentiate sound filtered through and colored by human perception rather than technology.

Another important role of the soundscape drawings is to encourage the reader-listener to imagine themselves in the physical space of the field recording through deep listening. As the artist explained, the soundscape drawings are organized according to spatial perception, not

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<sup>86</sup> Merz et. al., 27.

<sup>87</sup> Obrist, “Booming: Samson Young.”

<sup>88</sup> Giles, “Hong Kong Artist Samson Young On The Methods Behind His “Sound Drawings”.”

temporal occurrence. By understanding the artist's methodology, in which sounds are located in the composition according to *where*, not *when*, they were heard, the listener becomes better equipped to listen deeply to the field recordings, build an imaginary sonic architecture based on localizing sounds and referencing visual cues in book's photographs and sketches, and locate his or her bodily self within it. For instance, when listening to "August 23, Rouen Cathedral at 12:00 (drones)"<sup>89</sup> through headphones, the high chirping of a bird is heard through the right ear, giving the listener the sensation that the bird is located to their right. The cathedral's bells, whose tolls are by far the largest voice in the sonic environment, can be heard mostly in the left ear but bleed over slightly into the right as if due to the power of their reverberations to move through the body. At approximately 1:45, the sound of footsteps shuffle from the right ear to the left, giving the listener the sense that someone is passing by them and walking towards their left. Similarly, from 4:20 – 4:30, a suitcase rolling across uneven pavement or stones moves distinctly from left to right, and a young child's cry at 5:10 is heard at the lower right.

These interpretations are made possible not only through binaural hearing, but also likely due to binaural recording, a method that uses two microphones in order to create the experience of a three-dimensional audio environment for the listener. This technique makes use of the brain's sound localization capabilities to tap into the listener's imagination, which is the first step to encourage bodily displacement in order to prompt imagination and awareness of others. Listeners who access the field recordings online can begin to imagine themselves bodily present in each space Young has recorded by virtue of hearing's spatial and locational capabilities, hearing what individuals who inhabit these spaces hear as an ordinary part of the sonic

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<sup>89</sup> Young, "Aug 23, Rouen Cathedral at 12:00 (drones)," ("For Whom the Bell Tolls," Soundcloud) <https://soundcloud.com/samsonyoung/aug-23-rouen-cathedral-at-1200-drones>

architecture they live amidst. By being momentarily transported out of their own sonic environment, listeners imagine and consider what a consciousness different from their own immediately hears and senses relative to the body in their sonic environment. The soundscape drawings underline the locational logic the artist utilizes, and photographs included in the publication offer visual prompts of the landscape that encourage the audience to think beyond themselves and their own immediate environment to build imagined surroundings.

The inclusion of visual media such as photographs and sketches also help to sustain the viewer's awareness of the materiality of bells as symbolic objects located in physical, tangible environments while simultaneously understanding bells as sonic objects that produce sounds that travel through space to affect listeners. Young explains in the introduction of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that

Bells are such beautiful physical objects that sometimes that's what we focus on. But what my musical training has given me is this enhanced attention to the way the sound actually spreads, and how the sounds that bells produce become this network of relations. I really think of bells both as stationary physical objects and something fluid and dynamic that draws communities in— something that spreads out and gathers, calling together individuals in a community, just by virtue of the sound being heard in its vicinity.<sup>90</sup>

As previously discussed in this chapter, the purposes for which sounds like bell tolls are used varies greatly depending on historical context. Similarly to how bells have been made from and into weapons like cannons, sound itself has also been weaponized, as illustrated by the sonic warfare referenced in *Nocturne*. However, Young's interest in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* seems to be not only in tapping into affective tonality in order to displace and reembody, but also in

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<sup>90</sup> Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 9.

prompting his audience to become more aware of others despite having, in the artist's words, "different centres of consciousness that are as real as our own."<sup>91</sup> The "network of relations" that the artist discusses can be conceptualized in two ways: physically/materially and virtually. First, as illustrated by examples like the Pummerin, the Loughsborough carillon, and the Mingun bell, bells are material objects embedded in communities that can act as physical manifestations of facets of civic identity, such as patriotism and religious belief. They are also historical documents that commemorate certain narratives upon which community identity is constructed, and the toll of a bell travelling through a landscape is a reminder of that identity to all those who hear it. However, because the artist uploaded field recordings of each bell as well as its sonic environment online, the field recordings also become the basis for a virtual network. The advantage of a virtual network as opposed to a physical, material one is that, by capturing and converting a momentary sonic experience into a replicable, storable media file, that sonic experience becomes almost infinitely accessible. Individuals scattered across the world can sonically connect to different locales, giving someone who lives in Hawaii a brief glimpse of what someone living in Myanmar or Germany hears as a daily part of their audible environment.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* derives its value from the effects of displacement and the ear's ability to build a sonic architecture based on Young's recordings, aided by the visuals included in the publication, which offer imagery to supplement building an imagined environment as well as a coloring of awareness of the uniqueness of individual human perception. While the project could have taken the more typical form of an exhibition, in which case only a small group of people would have had access to the physical space within a given span of time, creating distributable products ultimately makes this project exponentially more accessible and not reliant

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 49.

on an individual's presence in a specific location at a given time. By producing a project in the form of a book, a material object which is replicable and distributable, as well as uploading an archive of field recordings online, the overall project of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* becomes accessible to anyone with A.) a copy of the book and smartphone, or B.) an internet-connected device. Thus the kind of relationality that this project strives for doesn't depend on being in the same physical space. Instead, the recording—through both technology and human subjectivity—acts as a medium that impels deep listening to a space's affective tone and also become aware of how another might perceive it. Both audio and visuals work to make the affective tonality of Young's chosen environments replicable and accessible to anyone in any given time or location (granted, an internet connection is still necessary.) Through deep listening, the artist's recordings can reattune a body to a different space and, referring back to Cotter, the fabricated experience of bodily displacement into a distant sonic environment reveals how the body processes sound as knowledge. As previously mentioned, this strategy is a step towards using sound to encourage imagination and awareness of others located sometimes thousands of miles away in locales across the globe. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*' research locations are spread across the world, but deep listening, as well as the virtual network the project employs, helps to disrupt the spatial distance and geographic borders that separate individuals.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## LIQUID BORDERS

The themes of borders, conflict, and identity that Young works to open up and deconstruct on a global level in *Nocturne* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* can be better contextualized by returning to one of Young's earliest projects, titled *Liquid Borders* (2012 - 2014), which was originally presented at Hong Kong gallery AM Space in 2014 and explicit in its mediation on national borders. This work used field recordings of Hong Kong's border spaces, along with photographs and graphic notations, to evoke the border's landscape and affective tonality. The field recordings were arranged and mixed by the artist into compositions, which the audience could listen to through headphones connected to small, portable mp3 devices while walking through the gallery. What is most striking about the piece is that although it is purportedly about geopolitical borders between HK and China, the sounds and images throughout the piece focused mostly on nature.

*Liquid Borders* takes as its starting point the geopolitical tensions and feelings of anxiety that exist around this border due to Hong Kong's ambiguous political status as a Special Administrative Region under the "One Country, Two Systems" policy. By investigating the border space between Hong Kong and China, this project explores on a micro level the relationships between communities that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* expands to a macro, global level. While *For Whom the Bell Tolls* frames bells as nodes in a network of community-based relations that work to articulate civic identity, national or political borders can also be conceived of as the coalescing and hardening of such identity into a discrete territory. National borders

demarcate the idea of an imagined community,<sup>92</sup> which is made up of many smaller, local communities, some of which may or may not identify with each other. However, the belief in the imagined national community allows a conceptualization of borders as both secure bounds that keep those who are similar safely contained within a fixed territory, and as fences and walls that keep out those who are different. This mentality of belonging to a separate, defined community is particularly apparent in Hong Kong, where the border between the city and mainland China is of utmost importance to the city's inhabitants. Although common discourse around borders evokes the image of hardened, impenetrable divisions, finding alternate frameworks for rethinking the idea of a physical border space is also useful to rethinking less tangible kinds of borders that separate individuals.

The idea of “liquid” borders not only references one of Young's field recording techniques—using hydrophones to record the sound of running water at the borders that sonically captures a physical border—but also refers to ideological borders such as those Hong Kongers perceive between themselves and mainland Chinese citizens. According to the artist,

The border is important psychologically for the people of Hong Kong, it's our “last frontier” and people fear losing it. But if it's so important to us then where is it? What does it look like? What does it sound like? Is it fragile or robust? What does it keep away and what gets through?<sup>93</sup>

As his statement illustrates, Young believes Hong Kongers value the border and are afraid that it will disappear, if the city is absorbed into and enclosed by a tightly entrenched Chinese national identity. As the border currently stands, Hong Kong has greater access to the rest of the world than mainland China does; thus his project works to both address and question the source of

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<sup>92</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>93</sup> Obrist, “Booming: Samson Young.”

Hong Kong's anxiety of losing its cosmopolitan identity. By re-grounding his audience in the landscape and soundscape of the physical border, the disjunction between the sights and sounds of this territory and feelings of anxiety suggests that what Hong Kongers truly fear is not the disappearance of the material, territorial border located in the landscape, but the disappearance of the ideological border, or the imagined community of their city as a global megalopolis that would be absorbed into a new logic of Chinese national borders. In other words, *Liquid Borders* documents Hong Kong's border territory with a combination of sound and image in such a way that reembodies its audience in order to displace their expectations and assumptions about the border territory in order to make clear the real source of the anxiety felt as well as demonstrate that borders are, as the title implies, liquid—fluid, in between states, and constantly in motion.

To understand *Liquid Borders*' implications, it is important to revisit the history that shaped the territory and community of what is now considered Hong Kong today. Regarding Hong Kong's historical trajectory, perhaps one of the most important processes that shaped Hong Kong as a distinct territorial entity was British colonization. The island was occupied by the British during the first Opium War in 1841 and later ceded by China to Britain; the Kowloon Peninsula followed in 1860 after the second Opium War and then the New Territories in 1898 under a ninety-nine-year lease to the British. Thus, as scholar of Chinese history Leo K. Shin writes in his article "The 'National Question' and the Stories of Hong Kong, the legacy of British colonialism literally shapes Hong Kong's borders today: Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories are the three distinct regions that make up the region's political geography."<sup>94</sup> European trade and imperial ambition more generally also played a role in Hong Kong's

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<sup>94</sup> Leo K. Shin, "The 'National Question' and the Stories of Hong Kong," in Yiu-wai Chiu, *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium: Hong Kong As Method* (Singapore: Springer, 2017) 140.

historical development; the region was mostly small fishing villages until European traders arrived and made use of the harbor as a convenient port for commerce. On this point, the well-known scholar on Hong Kong history and culture Akbar Abbas points out that “in contrast to other colonial cities (say, in India, Africa, or South America) Hong Kong has no precolonial past to speak of... there are records of human settlement on the island going back at least to the Sung dynasty. But the history of Hong Kong, in terms that are relevant to what it has become today, has effectively been a history of colonialism.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, Hong Kong’s history in modernity has been largely shaped by experiencing a position of increasing economic importance under British colonialism, and with this system’s collapse and the rise of the global economy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new perception of its “independence.” The political borders constructed by colonialism that separated Hong Kong from mainland China developed into more deep-rooted social, cultural, and psychological borders, entrenched by the city’s political and economic distance from China during times of turmoil under the PRC government in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hong Kong’s history of colonialism, capitalism, and political separation from China, according to Abbas, “has produced many instances of mutual mistrust and misunderstanding with one side demonizing the other. It is not true, as some might wish to believe, that if you scratch the surface of a Hong Kong person you will find a Chinese identity waiting to be reborn. The Hong Kong person is now a bird of a different feather.”<sup>96</sup> In other words, political borders become marked on bodies; whether one considers oneself Chinese or a Hong Konger first or second, the way that the Hong Kong and Chinese governments legally differentiate the two has a very real effect on where these bodies can be, what they can do, and how they can move.

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<sup>95</sup> Abbas, 2.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Hong Kong's political autonomy stems from the Basic Law, a piece of legislation known as the city's mini-constitution, which grants the city executive, legislative and independent judicial power, as well as exemption from applying national laws to Hong Kong (except for exceptions provided in Annex III). According to the "One Country, Two Systems" policy, Hong Kong will retain its status as a Special Administrative Region until 2047, when the territory will be returned to mainland China. However, the sensation of time running out is a strong source of anxiety for Hong Kong citizens, many of whom feel their identity is now fundamentally different from that of a mainland Chinese citizen, as described by Abbas. Shin also writes that

recent efforts to articulate a Hong Kong identity have no doubt been triggered by the perception that the local ways of life are fast disappearing... [it is not] always self-evident how the "local ways of life" should be understood or what, precisely, have been Hong Kong's "core values." Still, impression is a form of reality.<sup>97</sup>

However, whatever these "core values" might be, Shin argues that while "in many ways, it is the last of such perceived shortcomings of the post-colonial administrations that has contributed the most to what may be referred as the "indigenous turn"<sup>98</sup> in Hong Kong society, nonetheless "the British rule of Hong Kong did foster among the territory's residents a distinct outlook and a separate identity,"<sup>99</sup> leading to a feeling of loss amidst the transformations that took place in the city leading up to, during and after the handover.

The reason for the sense of anxiety and loss that Hong Kongers feel is the topic that Young questions and complicates with *Liquid Borders* by offering grounded sounds and imagery of the physical Hong Kong border. The material, geographical basis of the border runs for

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<sup>97</sup> Shin, 135 – 136.

<sup>98</sup> Shin, 136.

<sup>99</sup> Shin, 143.

nineteen miles between Hong Kong's New Territories and Shenzhen. Hong Kong borders Shenzhen, perhaps China's most rapidly developing city, yet the two cities are physically separated by both wired fencing and bodies of water such as the Sham Chun (Shenzhen) River. Entrance is forbidden into the restricted border area between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, called the Frontier Closed Area, without an official permit. In 2005 there was a proposal to drastically reduce the Frontier Closed Area, and in April 2012, Hong Kong's government announced it would be pursuing a policy that would gradually reduce the area, meaning that the buffering Frontier Closed Area would shrink, leading to fears that the border might eventually disappear as well. For this reason, in 2012 Young decided to explore Hong Kong's relationship with the mainland firsthand in order to experience the spatiality of Hong Kong's colonial history for himself, explaining that he "became very interested in why I am operating as an artist in Hong Kong and what it actually means. I don't really have an answer, which is why I am doing this work." Indeed, many Hong Kongers, like Young may have never seen the border in person, but the specter of a rapidly shrinking unknown seems to loom heavily in the collective consciousness. As the artist put it:

This wall, under the duress of circumstances, takes on a new metaphysical significance: marking our frontiers, this old, worn-out wall will keep Hong Kong people safe (and sound) and cushion us against an oppressive urgency for as long as it stands... Yet I'm overwhelmed with a sense of urgency to make a record of things and people before this wall disappears for good.<sup>100</sup>

The urgency Young expresses to record things and people before the border "disappears for good" is an apt reflection of the anxiety Hong Kongers feel in response to the encroaching

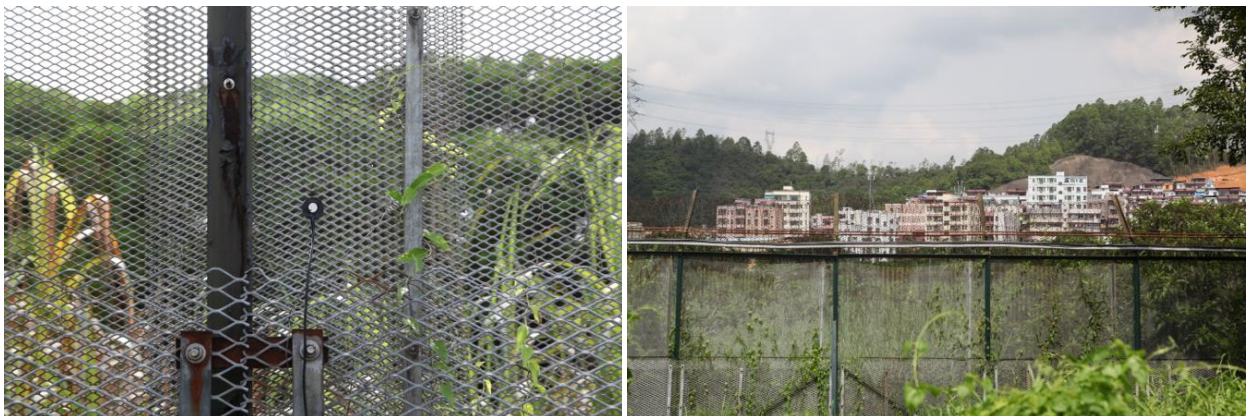
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<sup>100</sup> Samson Young, "楊嘉輝 Samson YOUNG 《我想看見所有：暴力邊界計劃 2012-2014》 I wanted to see everything: The Liquid Borders Project 2012-2014," am space, Facebook, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1455776961321668/>

political and cultural influence of the mainland and a driving force behind the creation of *Liquid Borders*. The artist's response also suggests that he recognizes the ideological, or "metaphysical," significance of the Hong Kong border as both a safeguard against Chinese state oppression and a demarcation of cultures and values. His response implies that what Hong Kongers desire in reaction to the threat they perceive to their identity is a promise of maintaining their imagined community as both Hong Kongers and cosmopolitan, an ideological notion physically symbolized by the bounds of the Hong Kong-China territorial border. Young's artistic response, to document the materiality of that border territory, ultimately works to demonstrate that the borders, both physical and ideological, are liquid and porous, hence why the "imagined community" is only ever imagined.

To make *Liquid Borders*, Young visited the restricted zones in the Frontier Closed Area over a period of two years, from 2012 to 2014. The artist travelled systematically from west to east, starting at the edge of the border and working his way inward, sometimes applying for permits but often trespassing in order to access the enclosed area. He used contact microphones to record the vibration of the fence as well as hydrophones to capture the Sham Chun River's running water, the two entities that physically constitute the border between Hong Kong and China. Young then manipulated these field recordings into sound compositions and also produced annotated cartography and graphical notations inspired by the soundscape of the border to accompany the compositions. The photographs and graphical notations are similar in style to those found in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; both act as visual documents of a specific locality as well as the artist's interpretation of that locality's soundscape. The photographs were taken in the Frontier Closed Area during the artist's trips and act as documentation and visualization of the material border. However, they also serve as witness to Young's experiences of exploring the

border, an area which is theoretically off-limits, though access is not policed strictly. This contradiction is evidenced by the photographs below: one depicts a weathered sign at the border reading “No entry without a written permit,” while another captures a neatly cut square hole in the wire body of the fence. Much like Hong Kongers’ fears of the border zone, the rhetoric of securitization surrounding the border seems threatening, but Young’s photographs reveal that the physical territory at the border actually appears quite innocuous. The photographs mostly capture seemingly bucolic, unoccupied surrounds: scenes of rolling hills and greenery appear quiet and peaceful, while other photographs show buildings under construction, built right up to the fence. However, except for one image of a policeman’s back, in all ten photographs there is hardly any human presence besides Young himself. The lack of human presence lends the photographs a sense of quiet emptiness, as if all is calm and peaceful at the physical border despite the tensions pervading the thoughts and feelings of most people living nearby. Despite the presence of chain-link fences, the land itself continues to flow tranquilly from one side to the other, suggesting that tension is not located in the land, but rather the barrier that humans have constructed atop it.



*Figure 4.1 and 4.2, Field work documentation. Liquid Borders, Samson Young, 2012-2014.*



Figure 4.3 and 4.4, Field work documentation. *Liquid Borders*, Samson Young, 2012-2014.

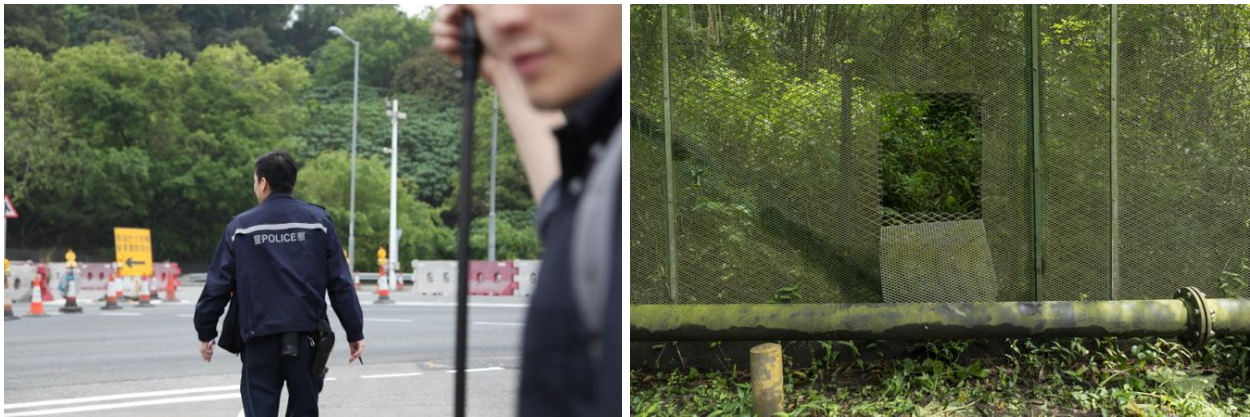


Figure 4.5 and 4.6, Field work documentation. *Liquid Borders*, Samson Young, 2012-2014.



Figure 4.7 and 4.8, Field work documentation. *Liquid Borders*, Samson Young, 2012-2014.

Furthermore, the artist's account of the process of entering the Frontier Closed Area over a two-year period is also revealing of the inconsistent attitudes regarding enforcement at the border. Despite the threatening rhetoric on signage and presence of border guards, the actual security of the border is negligible, with sections of the fence often in disrepair due to typhoon winds, while the border guards stationed in the area are seemingly inattentive and apathetic at worst and inconsistent at best. In a public forum at Art Asia Archive in 2013, Young offered the following account of one of his experiences at the border:

I was trying to stick contact microphones on the fences to record and a border guard started getting really nervous; he thought I was going to blow up the fence or something [laughter]. I couldn't continue to record, so I started to talk to the guard. And then he said to me that I shouldn't record here, that it is a sensitive area, that there are CCTV cameras, but that I could record 'there', that area is okay! And then he went on to tell me that when there is a typhoon sometimes the gates get blown wide open and it takes weeks for them to go back up. And then, I think why do you care that I am sticking something on the fence? Why were you so nervous about it in the first place?<sup>101</sup>

Young also stated that other border guards told him there are CCTV cameras all over the Frontier Closed Area, but no one actually watched them. He notes that the conversations he had with the border guards were "interesting because it reflects how we've no idea why the border is so significant, and as real as our anxiety is, the reason is less perceptible."<sup>102</sup> What is conveyed through the photographs—as well as the sounds he records, which I will discuss shortly—is instead a sense of contradiction: is the intimidating rhetoric empty, enforced by security that does not police? The stillness and quiet the images convey contradicts a popular imaginary of the

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<sup>101</sup> Samson Young, "Presentation by Samson Young," Presentation at Asia Art Archive in America (Brooklyn, NY, 30 March 2013) <http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/presentation-by-samson-young-2/>

<sup>102</sup> Annabel Yung, "Samson Young's Liquid Borders project aims to preserve natural sounds," South China Morning Post, April 19, 2014. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/48hrs/article/1471728/samson-youngs-liquid-borders-project-aims-preserve-natural-sounds>

border as a place characterized by checkpoints and tense securitization of legal processes like immigration and customs. His photographs, which suggest that territorial borders are not as secure as we may imagine them to be, imply that many things seem to be able to pass through, both visible and invisible. The physical, material border—rusting metal embedded in nature—is a contradiction and a construct, because many things pass through it due to its own inherent porousness, as well as neglect by those who claim to securitize it. It is a real material object, but it is also simultaneously a liquidous fiction—its impenetrability is only ever imagined.

*Liquid Borders*' sound compositions, recorded in these same locations, also work to question the idea of a physical border as contradictory, constructed, and fictitious by examining how that border holds up to that which is unseen. The four sound compositions are made of field recordings captured in the Frontier Closed Area and are titled according to the location within the border area where Young took the recordings used for each: "Liquid Borders I (Tsim Bei Tsui & Sha Tau Kok)," "Liquid Borders II (Tak Yuet Lau & Lo Wo)," "Liquid Borders III (Yuen Long & Lok Ma Chau)," and "Liquid Borders IV (Mai Po & Luk Keng.)" The field recordings captured the sounds of vibrating fence wires as air moved through via contact microphones as well as the sound of running water via hydrophones, but sometimes the mics picked up other incidental sounds like birds or rustling leaves. These compositions were originally presented on audio headsets at Young's 2014 exhibition at Hong Kong-based gallery AM Space, titled "I wanted to see everything: The Liquid Borders Project 2012-2014." Upon entering the exhibition, visitors were able to don headsets that played the sound compositions while looking at the visual imagery of the photographs and graphical notations as well as maps marked with the locations of the recordings. At first, the approach of pairing soundscape with landscape seems straightforward: sound helps to displace and then reembody the listener into a

remote location, while imagery of that location help the listener build an imagined environment in the mind's eye. However, making the mental connection in origin between sound and image in *Liquid Borders* was not as straightforward, as the contact microphones and hydrophones distort, amplify, and abstract the vibrations captured. I focus my analysis of *Liquid Borders*' sound compositions here on just one of the four compositions, "Liquid Borders I (Tsim Bei Tsui & Sha Tau Kok)" in order to employ deep listening to analyze the structure, texture and arrangement of the composition.

In terms of geographical context, "Liquid Borders I (Tsim Bei Tsui & Shau Tau Kok)" points listeners to two source locations where Young recorded. Tsim Bei Tsui is a wetland park located on Shenzhen Bay, in the northwest of Hong Kong, while Sha Tau Kok is a region in the northeast of Hong Kong situated on Starling Inlet with its northern border delineated by the Frontier Closed Area. The bodies of water in these locations are significant to the overall framework of "Liquid Borders I," as the sounds in this composition seem to be muffled and distorted in a way that evokes listening underwater (likely due to the effects of recording with a hydrophone) and also emphasizes the fluid nature of the material borders represented. The piece is thirteen minutes and eleven seconds long,<sup>103</sup> beginning with continuous dark, hard-edged noises, almost akin to rocks or metal grinding underwater. Around one minute and fifteen seconds into the recording, a deep, low, round sound resonates outwards and shortly after, these darker, lower sounds subside slightly. Soon sharper, brighter, resounding knocks and clatters augment the composition and the density of the sounds slowly increases in tempo, as if something is rushing towards the listener from far away. At the four minute mark, the low,

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<sup>103</sup> Fluid Noise, "楊嘉輝-Samson YOUNG - "Liquid Borders" at F. Noise 02 / 噪流零貳 (Full Version)," *Youtube* video, 13'27", 5 February 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6hh8W-Uu\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6hh8W-Uu_k)

resonate round sounds and higher, sharper knocks and clatters become even more tightly layered. The fast rushing, flowing, and clanging grows into a cacophony of noise, becoming somewhat discomfiting. The density and volume of the composition picks up yet again around the seven-and-a-half-minute mark. As a listener, I can feel these rushing resonances in my body and the persistent flood of noise becomes almost anxiety-provoking as tension builds into a dense, loud climax.

After another minute and a half, around nine minutes into the piece, this densely layered noise suddenly subsides into only the sound of dripping water. The drips and movement of water echo as the lower, rounded resonances become sparser and slowly fade away, giving the listener a sense of an empty space inside of which this sound might refract. Compared to the overwhelmingly dense noises roaring into a blur just seconds ago, the sudden stillness induces a bit of curious relief, as if tension of the composition's climax has built into a breaking point. Then, at around ten minutes and forty-five seconds, something odd happens; a sort of fuzzy, arrhythmic harmony, reminiscent of the chords of a stringed instrument, builds into a sort of shimmering, ethereal atmosphere, augmented by soft, melodic humming introduced around twelve minutes and forty-six seconds. Compared with the loud, rushing, grating noises heard earlier in the composition, this feels like an exhale, a release of breath as tension leaves the body and the arrangement settles gently into its resolution. The sounds are reminiscent of natural surroundings and inform an embodied sense of spatial awareness, supported by the imagery displayed in the photographs. Driven by wind or water, the sonic forces that the artist recorded are also evocative of motion—fluid forces capable of permeating and flowing through constructed borders.

Throughout “Liquid Borders I,” distortion renders the sounds recorded into the composition abstracted; the sounds’ sources are not easily identifiable, despite the photographs displayed in the gallery space that make the location where Young recorded clear. The artist could have recorded more readily identifiable sounds that are evocative of border spaces, such as checkpoints, roads, or voices of border guards, or even more recognizable “natural” sounds of the border (wind, rivers, etc.) that are visible in his pictures. But instead, he chose to record sounds that, like the photographs, counter popular public imagination or discourse of what a border space might be. This double gap in alignment between what is imagined and experienced, as well as between what is seen and heard, allows the artist to take advantage of the imaginative possibilities of the acousmatic, or a sound whose source is not seen. As Connor explains in greater detail, the acousmatic exists

between sound and vision, and is to be identified with neither, but rather with a complex and fascinating process of transfer and interchange between them, in which we must see their sound and hear their physical shape, location and movement. The passage of hearing and vision into one another induced by the insufficiency of stimulus induces the compensatory involvement of other senses too, as we begin to supply by imaginary tactile means.<sup>104</sup>

In other words, listening again and again to the abstracted, elemental sounds of “Liquid Borders I” prompts visitors to question what it is that they hear and see and hold those sounds “within a framework of deep attention.”<sup>105</sup> Regarding the acousmatic, LaBelle also suggests that “the question ‘what did you hear?’ may also incite an unsteady process of association and imagination, imbuing our listening with what we might like to hear, or what we thought we

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<sup>104</sup> Connor, 222.

<sup>105</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 37.

heard.”<sup>106</sup> Thus imagination is allowed to fill in the gaps of information, and the personal associations and experiences the listener brings to the space of listening becomes even more significant. The attempt on the part of the individual to fill the gap between hearing and vision helps us move beyond a physical and material conceptualization of a border to a more invisible, fluid understanding of border space. For example, Jasmina Merz, one of the curators of Young’s solo exhibition *A Dark Theme Keeps Me Here, I’ll Make a Broken Music* at the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf in 2016 (at which *Liquid Borders*’ sound compositions were also used) describes the compositions as “at once ominous and bucolic, hinting at latent forces that are indeterminately natural, human, and mechanical. Menacing knocks and clatter mix with rushes of broadband noise, serenely resonant drones, and muted bits of voices, birdsong, and water flow.”<sup>107</sup> That Merz characterizes the tone of the composition as both ominous and bucolic is not only suggestive of the associations she may have of Hong Kong’s border spaces, but also evokes the contradictory nature of the border itself.

The ambiguity of the sounds heard in “Liquid Borders I” is, in this way, more productive than, for instance, a straightforward recording of securitized border checkpoints, because it allows the audience to engage in an imaginative process and bring their own knowledge, experience, and emotions to the work. In the original installation of this work at AM Space, the audience donned headphones to listen to the compositions on portable devices, quietly ensconcing themselves in their own sonic bubbles while viewing photographs, maps, and graphic notations hung on the walls of the gallery. These visual cues tease at the sources of the audio, inciting the listener’s imagination even further with suggestive hints of the cause of certain

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Merz et. al, 40.

sounds. However, Young only goes this far in revealing his sources; his compositions implicitly ask the audience to use their own imaginations and experiences to meet him halfway. For example, one reporter's review of the exhibition described how "The sounds I heard felt like wisps of colliding planets in the stratosphere. When the wind was involved it sounded like approaching trains."<sup>108</sup> The effect of amplification transformed natural sounds that are typically perceived as soft and quotidian into something machine-like and ominous. This effect is almost a reversal of what Young presents with his photographs: while the photographs' close examination of the material border reveal something thought to be threatening as quite innocuous, the amplification of the border's sounds does the reverse. This contradiction suggests that borders can seem both harmless and threatening, depending on how close or distant one is. In other words, positionality or distance to or from the border matters, which is precisely why the individual subjectivity that the audience brings to the work is so critical and generative. *Liquid Borders* gathers people in a gallery space and offers them a visual and aural representation of Hong Kong's border spaces that may counter their previously held beliefs and assumptions about what that space looked and sounded like. The headphones allow for private contemplation of one's own thoughts and sensations first in relation to the sound and visual imagery; when the headphones come off, the relational potential of the conversation starting with "What did you hear?" can begin to unfold.

Although there was nothing explicitly controversial or political about the sounds or photographs that Young presented, the very idea of documenting Hong Kong's borders is evocative of the political issues that exist between Hong Kong and mainland China. This

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<sup>108</sup> Ellen Pearlman, "The Sound of Two Borders Dissolving," *Hyperallergic*, 16 April 2014. <https://hyperallergic.com/120628/the-sound-of-two-borders-dissolving/>

unspoken implication was not lost on the audience; the aforementioned reporter stated that after listening to the compositions, “I realized I was, in effect, listening to an interpretation of the sound of cracks in ideology, both Hong Kong’s and the Mainland’s.”<sup>109</sup> This reporter’s description demonstrates that the knowledge she brought to the exhibition influenced her interpretation of the sounds Young offered and evoked the idea of an ideological border. Though Young composed his sound works by using selective samples of the field recordings to crop, chop, and frame the composition’s arrangement in the same way one might compose a photograph, the acousmatic gap ultimately created space for reflection and conversation around experiences of the border and the reason for the anxiety. In this way, *Liquid Borders* prompts its audience to bring together their own preexisting beliefs, experiences, and imaginaries of the Hong Kong border with the sounds and imagery Young has documented in order to form a new perception or imaginary of what a border space is and can be.

The unique beliefs and experiences that individuals bring to *Liquid Borders* are also echoed by perceptual differences in viewing or listening to the artwork. Each individual’s perception of the work is influenced by their distinctive physiology, which the installation’s audience may not be immediately aware of. Young gestures to these differences in perception in his series of graphic notations, the third component of *Liquid Borders*. The artist’s drawings represent attempts to re-transcribe the recorded sounds into notation, an effort to convert the audible into a visual map for the audience to “follow” while they listen. This is demonstrated by one of the graphical notations for *Liquid Borders* seen in the figure below.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

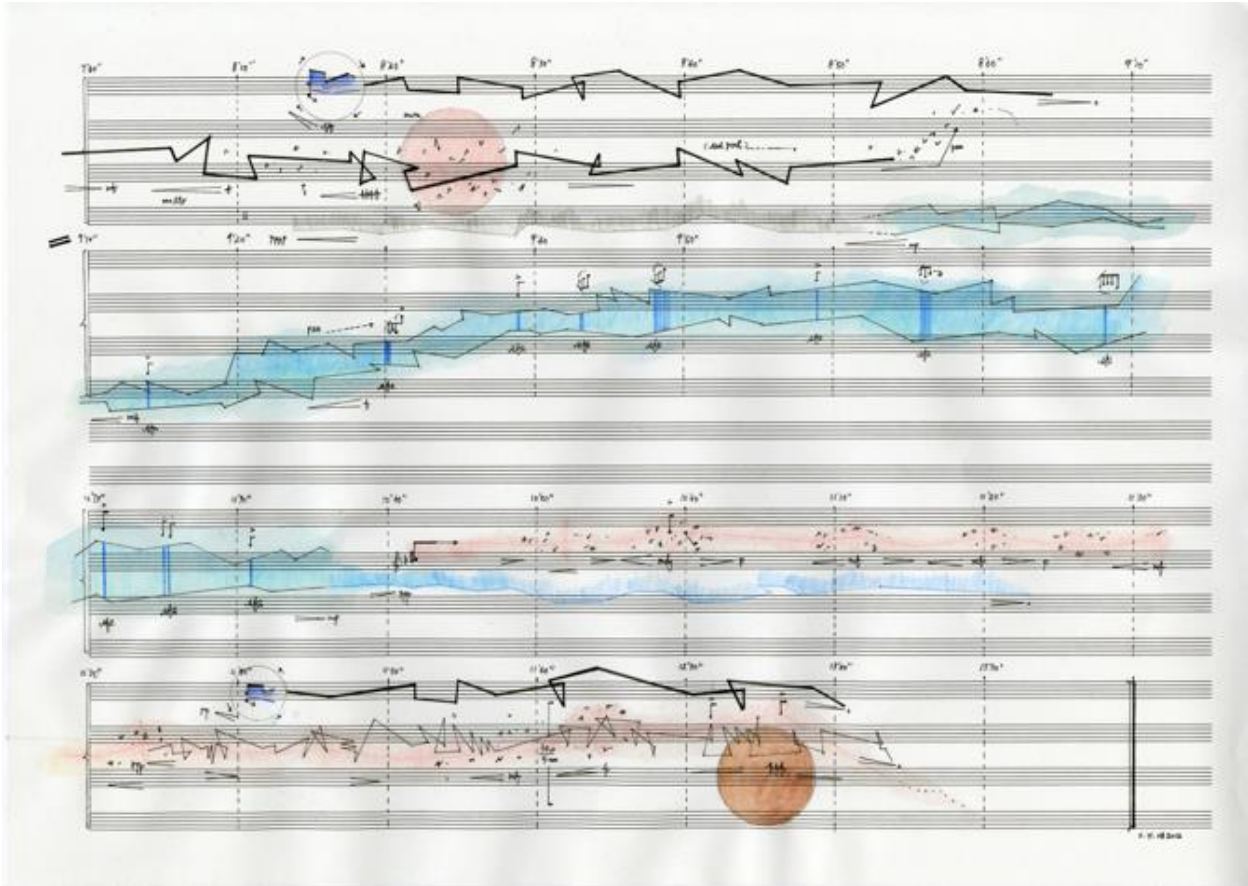


Figure 4.9 Artwork Detail 03. *Liquid Borders*, Samson Young, 2012-2014.

As shown in the image, Young transcribes his graphical notations using absolute time, where every bar spans ten seconds, rather than using meter (relative time) as is typically done in musical notation. Using Detail 03 as an example, the graphical notation acts as a visual guide to the sound composition of *Liquid Borders I* for the listener: blue shaded areas correspond with the sound of watery drips and orange areas represent ethereal, shimmering harmonies while the darkened lines (seen in the first and last bars) refer the continuous low, resonant grinding sounds, and the soft orange circles match up with the sounds of humming heard towards the end of the composition. While the graphical notations are quite abstracted, they represent an approximation that allows the audience to at least gain an awareness of the artist's personal perceptual

experience of the border's sounds. Taken together, the audible and the visible create the fullest approximation of what the artist experiences as a synesthete with extensive musical training. The idiosyncrasies of the drawings render them very specific to Young's personal experiences and creative interpretations, essentially highly subjective visualizations of sonic maps of the border that simultaneously inspire an awareness of another's perception and imagination while operating as part of a broader strategy to encourage deep listening.

By asking for deep listening to the sounds of Hong Kong's geographic, material borders while viewing highly individualistic, visualized perceptions of those sounds, the artwork also asks its audience to question the borders around which we each construct our own identities—ideological, political, cultural, and otherwise—and how solid, or fluid, those borders are. By prompting these questions, *Liquid Borders* also sets the stage for the two projects that follow—*Nocturne* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—which expand the ideas surrounding borders set forth here to a more global scale. From *Liquid Borders*, the two later projects explore how sound can shape notions of community immediately and virtually, as well as become utilized in violence that crosses borders. A position of mobility that facilitates border-crossing (a position also marked by privilege), no doubt enables Young to experience and conceptualize borders as liquid, and how violence, as well as community, can be enacted across borders.

Young is well-positioned to critique borders in this way as his own background characterizes him as an “itinerant,” defined by LaBelle as “a product of its surroundings and its travels; and what it carries forward is an assemblage of interactions. In this regard, an itinerant is a subject of the world, a foreigner with multiple languages, an *interlect* embodying the

potentiality of a certain cosmopolitanism.”<sup>110</sup> This description is an apt characterization of Young, who has lived in places like Hong Kong, Australia, and the U.S., and now resides in Hong Kong again. However, such a transitive, fluid identity is by no means unique to Young; it is quite common in the increasingly transnational world in which we live, yet modern society enforces a type of policing or settling of itinerant bodies,<sup>111</sup> evidenced by objects like the passport, birth certificate, or visa that seek to control movement across borders—such objects say, *Though you may cross borders, you belong here, to this (imagined) community*. Systems of the nation state strive to fix identity and root individuals in a place of origin as a means of control, LaBelle suggests that itinerancy can be an act of resistance: it is “an agentive position constructed from itinerancy may support connections and coalitions... across a range of locations, communities, voices, and histories... it may greatly assist in the struggles embedded within the act of crossing borders,”<sup>112</sup> which not only applies to physical borders, but also ideological ones such as those Hong Kongers perceive between themselves and mainland Chinese citizens. Sound, as a vibrating, energetic force, is fluid, dynamic, and moving; it “puts bodies and things into motion by *extending* their reach; a literal *moving away* that, in doing so, shifts our perceptual frame from its material anchoring, its source, toward an evanescent becoming.”<sup>113</sup> This motion of expansion may allow space for a better understanding of social, political and cultural differences. There are many things that escape our vision; individual bodies are constructed as personal borders, both material and ideological—invisible to the eye are things that move through that border, much like the water or wind that moves through a chain-link fence. We don’t see our interconnectedness, our porousness to the world we are a part of, or the

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<sup>110</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 109.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>112</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 109-110.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

invisible forces like sound that move through us. But by listening to sound, which can not only travel through bodies and things but also extend the limits of the body, sound reveals borders to be liquid and permeable, much as we ourselves are “membranes that allow voices, noise and music to travel through us.”<sup>114</sup>

In this regard, it is important to remember that *Liquid Borders*' field recordings are combined and arranged in deliberate ways by the artist, who is a musical composer by training. The field recordings here are mixed into compositions, which indicates an intent by the artist to shape the audience's impression of the sound and guide them toward rethinking border spaces in certain ways. The compositions are also structured much like music—'Liquid Borders I' is arranged in such a way that it has momentum and movement, with a sort of introduction, building climax, and resolution much like a piece of music. And music, as many psychology studies have illustrated,<sup>115</sup> has ways of bypassing the reasoning centers of our brains and directly tapping into our emotions.<sup>116</sup> In music are combinations of sounds, rhythms, and vocal textures that can communicate and tell us “how other people view the world—people we have never met, sometimes people who are no longer alive... [it] embodies the way those people think and feel: we enter into new worlds—their worlds—and though our perception of those worlds might not be 100 percent accurate, encountering them can be transformative.”<sup>117</sup> *Liquid Borders*' compositions seem to occupy a gray, or rather, *liquid* border space between field recording and

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<sup>114</sup> Connor, 207.

<sup>115</sup> K. R. Scherer, “Which emotions can be induced by music? What are the underlying mechanisms? And how can we measure them?” *Journal of New Music Research* 33, no.3 (2004): 239–251; C Mohn, H. Argstatter, & F. W. Wilker, “Perception of six basic emotions in music,” *Psychology of Music* 39, no.4 (2011): 503–517; C. L. Krumhansl, “An exploratory study of musical emotions and psychophysiology,” *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology = Revue canadienne de psychologie expérimentale* 51, no.4 (1997): 336–353.

<sup>116</sup> Byrne, 99.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

music, enabling the artist to tap into some of music's affective capabilities to allow the audience to feel on an emotional level his interpretation as well as their experiences of the border.

With *Liquid Borders*' specific focus on the tension, anxiety and division between Hong Kong and China, Young asks his viewers: "How can I overcome the prejudices of the bits and pieces of mysteries that reside within me, and how can I break through the prejudices that are anchored in the mysteries of others, so that together with them we may create something beautiful out of something that is ugly?"<sup>118</sup> *Liquid Borders* suggests that we can begin to do so through deep listening, "which accentuates sound's capacity to extend away from bodies and things...to request from us another view onto the world, one imbued with ambiguity."<sup>119</sup> This sort of listening, combined with Young's visual interpretations, allows the audience of *Liquid Borders* to use their own knowledge, feelings, and imagination in combination with the perspective that Young presents in order to begin grappling with alternative representations of border spaces that are, as project's title suggests, liquid and always in motion, subject to change. While *Liquid Borders* is an explicit mediation on the fluidity and permeability of the borders between Hong Kong and China, this project also serves as a foundation for the artist to begin exploring similar themes on a global scale, as seen in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Nocturne*.

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<sup>118</sup> Vilem Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 15.

<sup>119</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 33.

## CONCLUSION

*Liquid Borders*, a project finished in 2014, sets up Young's exploration of borders as constructs that purport to separate, divide, and create distance in a more global context through *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Nocturne*, which subsequently followed in 2015. The artist's disciplinary training as a musician and composer and interest in "imagining another consciousness" lead to a framework of understanding that utilizes sound as a means of expanding notions of border crossing and broadening sensations of borders with the ultimate goal of acknowledging and comprehending difference. Though it is impossible to ever fully see (or hear) in someone else's position without mediation, Young's works allow a momentary disembodied experience with sound and image that approximates an imagination of such a positionality that might fleetingly communicate how other people may view the world. Sound, in its reliance on and connection to a source—whether the source is an object, event, experience, phenomena—is "dependent," and incomplete. As Connor points out in "The Modern Auditory I," "We ask of a sound 'What was that?', meaning 'Who was that?', or 'Where did that come from?' We do not naturally ask of an image 'What sound does this make?'"<sup>120</sup> However, *Nocturne*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *Liquid Borders* prove that asking of a border 'What sound does this make?' is in fact a useful and productive question that draws attention to the less visible things that move through borders.

*Nocturne*, with its focus on mediating fabricated sounds of warfare in the space of an art gallery, forces its audience to become aware of the borders—personal, cultural, geographic—that

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<sup>120</sup> Connor, 213.

separate themselves as viewers of an art performance from victims exposed to and entrained by the sounds of war. This work asks its audience what it means to sympathize with victims of war who are different and distant from oneself through the same images of war that have become commonplace on our television networks. However, *Nocturne* also momentarily transgresses such boundaries by bringing the sounds of war physically into the space and body of the viewer. The beauty is in the dual mediation, allowing the audience to maintain an awareness of their spatial location in a safe, aestheticized space while also bringing the resonances of war intimately into the body.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, on the other hand, works to expand the experience of embodied dislocation that is hinted at in *Nocturne*. Bells, taken as material and sonic objects that have implications in both war and community togetherness, are positioned as dialectic nodes in a network of relations. Through multiple modes of mediation—sound and imagery, text and internet—the artist expands the audible range of each bell as well as its environment. By taking advantage of the brain’s ability to localize sounds in space relative to the body, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* prompts its audience to imagine feeling their bodies physically displaced into distant locations, offering a glimpse into the embodied position of another through imagined proprioception. Furthermore, while the sound of a bell’s toll may help articulate the soundscape that shapes a community’s civic identity, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* expands the notion of such a community identity by making these sounds accessible to anyone via online streaming.

*Liquid Borders*, which was finished one year prior to *Nocturne* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, might be considered the inspiration for both of these later projects. *Liquid Borders* is an exploration of borders, community, identity, and conflict in the very localized space of Hong Kong, while the two later projects expand these same themes beyond the focus of a specific

geographic region. The idea of community identity is central to *Liquid Borders*, in which the artist documents the physical territory of Hong Kong's border with sound and imagery in order to reattune the audience with the grounded, material reality of that border space. This space, which is perceived by many Hong Kongers as a separating safeguard between Hong Kong and mainland China, is shown to be porous—open to not only sound but also the natural environment around it. What Young's project suggests is that what many Hong Kongers desire is not necessarily the fortification of the territorial border, but rather a continuing resonance with the cosmopolitan ideology that is symbolized by those territorial bounds and the imagined community it protects. By displacing the audience with amplified, abstracted, and rearranged field recordings of the border, *Liquid Borders* ultimately strives to demonstrate that borders, both physical and ideological, are porous and fluid and appear secure or weak depending on one's distance from and position relative to it. In this way, the artwork also asks its audience to question the borders around which we each construct our own identities—ideological, political, cultural, and otherwise—and how solid, or fluid, those borders are.

These three works demonstrate that borders—cultural, national, ideological, to name just a few—are worth listening to because the act of listening reveals them to be fluid constructs that, in common discourse and from a distance, appeal strongly to our sense of security in keeping the world apart and detached. These projects help us conceive of an alternate idea of borders as liquid, porous, and membranous, open to things passing through that are invisible to the eye. In a world currently structured by borders and divided by perceived difference, the importance of this idea should not be understated. One of the conditions of sound itself is the absence of boundaries in space: this is why sound, in reference to bodies, is often described as relational. Sound waves not only move through bodies, but are physically felt and also inform a sense of bodily presence

and location in the world. These are the qualities that Young's projects rely on in order to generate experiences that prompt us to rethink how we might relate differently to ourselves, our surroundings, and others in a space of deep listening.

In terms of such an auditory conceptualization of the self, Connor also writes that “the idea or ideal of a self structured around the experience of hearing... encounters a serious difficulty. For, perhaps because of the very dominance of the visual paradigm in conceptions of the self, the auditory or acoustic has often been experienced and represented, not as a principle of strength, but as a disintegrative principle.”<sup>121</sup> Sound, as opposed to vision, is sometimes thought to be the weaker sense because it is always dependent on something else, a temporal and durational force that is a result of an event rather than a material object that can be held and captured, illustrated by the question we often ask of sound, ‘Where did that come from?’ However, sound's weakness, its relation to and dependency on other objects and events, should be put forward as a position of strength that allows us to slow down and reattune to ourselves and others.<sup>122</sup> It is from a position of weakness and interdependency that sound is a useful force in allowing us to become more aware and understanding of each other. In order to relate better to one another, perhaps there is a need to imagine ourselves around a disintegrative principle, one that allows us to conceive of ourselves as membranes open to and a part of the world, permeable to things that are not readily visible, in addition to a more classical conception of the self as a distinctly separate entity operating apart from it.

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<sup>121</sup> Connor, 213.

<sup>122</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 20.

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