

# 11 Phonography: Samson Young's Sonic Art

Christopher Cox



1 The ongoing vitality of these concerns is indicated by a spate of recent exhibitions that present genealogies of contemporary audio-visual crossovers—for example, *Sons & Lumières* (Centre Pompidou, 2005). *Visual Music* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles/Hirschhorn Museum, 2005). *What Sound Does a Color Make?* (Eyebeam, 2005). *See This Sound* (Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2009–10), and *Art or Sound* (Fondazione Prada, Venice, 2014).

A yellow arc splashes across the page like an unruly river bursting its banks. Above and below, fragments of hand-drawn musical staves and notation collide with onomatopoeic phrases stamped and scribbled across the white field. A group of bulbous cells float around the center, each of them marked with stray eighth notes, Chinese characters, hashtags, and backslashes. The word “Engine” is stamped in blue at the far left and again in the lower right.

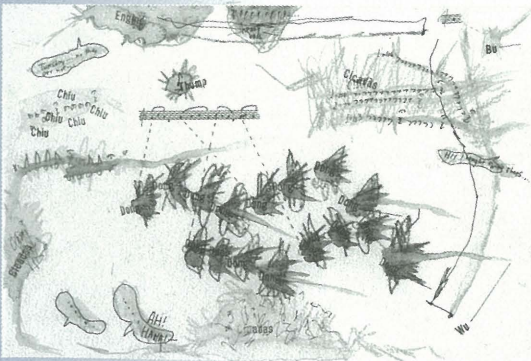
What exactly is this object? Is it a musical score, a set of performance instructions, a map, a landscape painting, a soundscape recording? Curiously, it is all these things. One among several works in composer/sound artist Samson Young’s ongoing *Landschaft* series (2015–), this “sound drawing” is an effort to capture, record, and map the sonic terrain of a particular landscape at a particular moment in time. Young’s work consistently blurs notation with transcription, drawing with recording, image with sound in a practice that explores the history and possibilities of phonography in all the richness of that term.

### Image and Sound

Young’s “sound drawings” resonate with key turning points in the history of twentieth-century visual art and musical experimentation.

His efforts to draw or paint sounds invite comparison with those of pioneering abstractionists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Marsden Hartley, and František Kupka, who attempted to translate sound into image. For Kandinsky and his compatriots, instrumental music—that supremely non-representational art form—served as a model and justification for the perilous move from figuration to pictorial abstraction. In turn, the work of these early abstractionists became a key precedent for artists throughout the

twentieth century looking to develop correspondences between music and the visual arts and, in the early twenty-first century, for those experimenting with digital media platforms that enable translations across the audio-visual divide.<sup>1</sup>



Young acknowledges this lineage. Like his predecessors, he accepts the notion of “the musicality of the visual” and finds it equally legitimate to think of music in terms of “lines, shapes, repetitions, relationships, tensions, [and] relaxations.”<sup>2</sup> Yet he distances himself from the “visual music” tradition in important ways. The early abstractionists attempted to display a general musicality in their canvases, or to render the rhythmic and harmonic sensations of an entire musical composition (a Schoenberg string quartet, for example, or a Bach fugue). Young’s project is far more specific and targeted: to render particular moments in the life of sounds. Sound is fugitive, but image can capture it in its passing. Young zooms in on the briefest of sonic events—the shot of a pistol, the ringing of a bell—and reveals them in all their dizzying complexity. In doing so, he relies on tools that were unavailable to the earlier avant-garde, particularly spectrographic software that enables microsonic analysis. Since the advent of such tools, waveforms have become daily features of our lives, displayed on SoundCloud streams and radio station logos, serving as generic icons of the sonic. Young aims to capture not only a collection of frequencies and their unfolding in time but also the timbre, texture, and affective resonance of sounds. For example, his rendering of gunfire from a Remington Rolling Block rifle (in the *Studies for Pastoral Music* series, 2015) isolates at least seven different sonic events, presented as yellow and brown circles, rectangles, and lines supplemented with musical symbols and onomatopoetic phrases. Young captures the ringing of the enormous Mingun temple bell in Myanmar in a drawing (*DONG!*, 2015) that is even more complex and evocative: a crescent formed by five distinct streams, clouds, or masses that partially overlap with one another and are crossed by smaller, more transparent figures. Though a transcription of a sonic event, the drawing is presented in the manner of a score, complete with musical directions, dynamic markings, pitch indications, and the phrase “from me / flows what / you call / time,” a passage from the Japanese poet Makoto Ooka used as the title of a 1990 symphonic composition by the composer Toru Takemitsu.

### Music and Noise

Young approaches drawing as both a visual artist and a composer. Yet, while his early modernist forbears were inspired by the abstractness of music, Young is drawn to the concreteness of noise. His drawings tend

2 “Booming: Samson Young,” by Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Mousse* 55 (September 2016): 50, and <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo-mm?id=1418>; and Samson Young, “On Drawing Sound,” [http://thismusicisfalse.com/\\_ON-DRAWING-SOUND\\_](http://thismusicisfalse.com/_ON-DRAWING-SOUND_).



- 3 Luigi Russolo, "The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto," in *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon, 1986). An excerpt from this manifesto appears in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).
- 4 See Edgard Varèse, "The Liberation of Sound," John Cage, "Future of Music: Credo," and Pierre Schaeffer, "Acousmatics," in *Audio Culture*.
- 5 R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (1977), reissued as *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 274. See also Schafer's "The Music of the Environment," in *Audio Culture*.

to render not musical compositions but worldly sound: the chatter of insects, the rumble of car engines, military explosions, the clamor of bells. In this respect, Young is less akin to the pioneers of pictorial abstraction than he is to the early-twentieth-century founders of experimental music and sound art—for example, the painter-turned-composer Luigi Russolo, who attempted to compose music from the din of the city (screeching trams, flapping awnings, rolling shop shutters, etc.), giving pitches to each of these sounds and orchestrating them together into a new "art of noises."<sup>3</sup> Russolo's shift from the visual to the sonic was inspired by his mentor Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's effort to render noise as text in his concrete poem *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914), which captured the cannon fire and grenade explosions of the First Balkan War in a flurry of onomatopoeia and creative typography. This Futurist fascination with noise was furthered by Edgard Varèse, John Cage, and finally by Pierre Schaeffer, who, in the late 1940s, renounced the "abstract music" of the conventional orchestra in favor of what he termed *musique concrète*, sound compositions spliced together from recordings of everyday noises, most famously the chugging and howling of railroad trains.<sup>4</sup>

Schaeffer wished to sever sounds from their sources and contexts in order to present them as entities in their own right ("sonorous objects") rather than as mere attributes or properties of the things that produce them. Young, however, is perfectly happy to reveal sounds in context. His drawings are often indeed *maps* that locate sounds in space and time, situating them in a landscape—or rather, a "soundscape," a term coined in the late 1960s by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer to describe "any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field for study."<sup>5</sup> Ecological concerns were central to Schafer's project, which was concerned with mapping changes to the acoustic environment in order to foster an awareness of noise pollution and endangered sounds. Yet his aims were also artistic. In Schafer's conception, we are all performers in the world soundscape and have the capacity to become its composers, too, shaping it to meet the aesthetic, biological, psychological, and political needs and desires of our fellow human beings and of the other living things with which we share the planet. Like Russolo, Varèse, Cage, and Schaeffer, Schafer didn't privilege the noises made by humans but considered

all sounds—natural, animal, human, mechanical—as contributing equally to the soundscape.

### Landscape and Soundscape

One of the most important and influential outcomes of Schafer's project was the development of "soundscape composition" or "field recording," the practice of capturing the sounds of a particular environment and presenting them for aesthetic (and often scientific, moral, or political) consideration. Field recording is a key aspect of Young's work as well, combining with sound drawing to generate a robust sense of sonic space. In *Liquid Borders* (2012–14), for example, he provided an audio-visual map of the restricted Frontier Closed Area between Hong Kong and mainland China. Established in 1951, this border zone is demarcated by the Shenzhen River and a series of chain-link fences enclosing what was initially eleven square miles of land that, with little human traffic, has become a *de facto* nature sanctuary. *Liquid Borders* reveals the eerie juxtapositions and contradictions of this liminal space that flimsily separates one China from another. Using contact microphones attached to the fence wires, and hydrophones submerged into the river, Young composed a set of soundscape compositions that are 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. The artist transcribed these compositions into a series of scores filled with jagged lines, colored fields, and conventional notation, appearing simultaneously musical, seismographic, and topographical. Filling out this connection between sound and geography, Young initially exhibited these recordings and notations alongside maps of the border zone and photos of his excursions in the field.<sup>6</sup>

### Transcription and Score

A score is generally a set of instructions for generating a performance, whereas a *transcription* is a depiction of a performance after the fact. Young's sound drawings shuttle

- 6 Young no longer exhibits this audio and visual material together, worrying that doing so encourages the impulse to verify sound with image and vice versa. Severing this relationship, he finds, produces a gap that sparks the imagination.





7 For broad histories of musical memory, notation, and recording, see Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), and Chris Cutler, "Necessity and Choice in Musical Forms: Concerning Musical and Technical Means and Political Needs," in *File Under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music* (New York: Autonomia, 1993).

between these two poles and the temporalities of *before* and *after* which they involve. In doing so, these works prompt us to acknowledge that a score is always already a transcription and vice versa. For millennia, human beings made music and sang songs without a score (that is, without a textual template to guide performance); and much of the time they still do.<sup>7</sup> Such oral/aural communities and contexts capture evanescent sound through repetition and the biological and cultural memory it generates. Musical notation was initially nothing more than an aid to this biological memory. The gradual development of the conventional musical score in the late Middle Ages and its full flowering in early modern Europe were largely responses to economic changes and commercial needs—specifically, the need to capture the flow of music in the form of fixed works attributed to particular authors or composers. The score shifted music from the ear to the eye, asserting the primacy of the visual and the graphic in the production of music. Indeed, the visual score came to govern musical performance, which was held accountable to it. Even so, prior to becoming a method of *producing* music, the score was a method of audio *recording*: a means by which to capture sound and transmit it to future performers and audiences.

In European art music, the score remained the primary means of musical recording and transmission until well into the twentieth century. The late nineteenth century, however, witnessed the invention of a new form of sonic capture and memory which eventually put musical notation under strain: electronic audio recording. Written notation could capture key elements of musical production: pitch, duration, key, meter, tempo, dynamics, etc. But electronic audio recording could register far more—indeed, could capture actual performances. Moreover, whereas written notation recorded *musical sounds*, audio recording could register *any sound whatsoever*: music, speech, noise, non-musical sound, etc. Audio recording thus made possible new forms of musical production such as *musique concrète* and electronic music, forms that were registered, edited, and played back on tape. Composers who worked with these new forms of music no longer required notation to *produce* their compositions; but many looked for new forms of new graphic means to *transcribe* them, adopting new symbols and languages that transformed musical notation into a form of visual art.

Composers of experimental music also contributed to the development of the score as visual art. Frustrated by the fixity of the traditional musical score and its attribution to a single author, and also inspired by the richness of jazz and other improvisatory musical practices, composers such as Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and Cornelius Cardew generated "graphic scores" that left many musical decisions to performers. Each score tended to form its own visual world, often mixing elements of traditional notation with idiosyncratic marks and symbols that were intentionally indeterminate. The result was often that no two performances of the score sounded alike. Thus, the score ceased to determine musical performance uniquely; sound and image became untethered from one another, each an art form of its own.

Young's sound drawings actively engage this history of the musical score. In the first place, they highlight the nature of the score as a form of sound recording, a way to capture and examine ever-changing soundscapes and ephemeral events. At the same time, they resonate with the history of transcribing electronic music. The errant lines and colored blocks of the *Liquid Borders* notations recall graphic innovations in the scores for Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Kontakte* (1958–60) and Bernard Parmegiani's *Violostries* (1964). Young's *Landschaft* drawings and his *Studies for Pastoral Music* more readily summon the visual language of graphic scores—for example, Wolff's *Edges* (1968), Cardew's *Treatise* (1963–67), or the symbology developed in Anthony Braxton's titles and notation. Crucially, Young's works on paper create a resonance between the composer's sonic imagination and that of the viewer, rigorously describing and notating sounds, but in such a way as to affirm the unbridgeable gap between sound and image, artist and viewer. This gap is not the indication of a failure—for example, the failure of any recording apparatus (biological, written, or mechanical) to register sound faithfully. Rather, it is a generative space that enables each side of the gap (sound/image, artist/viewer) to produce something different and new: a new image, sound, idea, or connection.

### Exclusion and Inclusion

John Cage once remarked that, "when you get right down to it, a composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do," responding that he found this to be "an unattractive way of getting



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The ideology of the conventional musical score and the hegemony of the European classical music tradition are also evident to Young as an Asian composer and artist educated in the West. Refusing either to submit to that hegemony or to “self-Orientalize,” Young often mounts projects that “creatively misread” the classical canon.<sup>11</sup> A 2013 project, *Memorizing the Tristan Chord*, for example, celebrated the bicentennial of Richard Wagner’s birth by inviting dozens of amateur performers to sing Cantonese phrases that tonally map



onto the famous passage from the opening of *Tristan and Isolde*, which contains the famous "Tristan chord." Wagner's music thus became a machine for generating Dadaist haiku in Chinese: "end of a month / late / all of my salary"; "apple / papaya / getting a ride"; etc. *The Coffee Cantata* (2015) reimagines J.S. Bach's *Schweigt stille, plaudert nicht*, a comic opera about the virtues and vices of addiction to caffeine. In Young's fictional scenario, a paranoid jazz singer who runs a coffee caravan improvises variations on Bach's opera to an imaginary audience in the New Mexico desert on land actually purchased for the artist in the 1980s by his father. The piece thus figures the multiple dislocations and awkward translations that characterize our early-twenty-first-century globalized world of international trade and land speculation.

In an earlier project, Young invited four singers to perform the first movement of Brahms's String Quartet No. 1, following everything in the score but the pitch material. The resulting performance inverts the hierarchy of the score, foregrounding elements (particularly rhythm and dynamics) that are ordinarily subordinated to pitch. This same desire to flip foreground and background, and to reverse the relationships between dominant and subordinate elements, is further developed in Young's *Muted Situations* project (2014), the first iteration of which called for "a performance of the entirety of a string quartet of the classical period composed by a European male composer without projecting the musical notes." The documented performance of this piece highlights the gestural choreography of ensemble playing, the sounds of the performers' breathing and physical movements, and the unintentional, pizzicato sounds of fingers on fretboards. This "situation" certainly alludes to Cage's seminal composition 4'33", in which the performer is called upon to make no intentional sound. Yet Young is quick to note that *muted* is not identical with *silence*.<sup>12</sup> He is less interested in Cage's project of disclosing the sounds of the environment than in a different, more directly political project: revealing and inverting established aesthetic, sensory, and political hierarchies. This emphasis is made evident in subsequent proposals for "muted situations." The new *Muted Boxing Match* silences the cheering of the crowd and the commentary of the announcers but not the impact of the boxers' blows. A *Muted Non-Violent Protest* would eliminate the shouting of slogans and chanting of songs but not the sounds of collective movements and the actions of the authorities.

12 See Young, "Muted Situations," <http://www.files.thismusicisfalse.com/Dock/MutedSituations.pdf>.



### Sound and Warfare

Muting and politics are crucial to another recent project as well, Young's 2015 performance piece *Nocturne*. Seated at a table in the gallery, and surrounded by various objects for sound making, Young stares intently at internet-sourced video footage of contemporary warfare, muting the screen sound and replacing it with a live soundtrack in the manner of a foley artist. Here again we find the disjunction and conjunction between image and sound, past and present. Our initial interest is drawn to the skill with which the artist matches sound to image and simulates the noises of war. Yet we quickly become aware of the dark resonance of this situation, in which warfare is brought to us live in the gallery space, the past becoming present, the elsewhere becoming here. We are reminded of the fact that, for many of us, the images and sounds of war are primarily media representations, whether YouTube documentation, war films, or video games—a fact that Young highlights in his role as a foley artist—that is, a specialist in making screen sound more vivid, real, and present via everyday materials that have nothing to do with bombs, grenades, and



other life-threatening hardware. Found footage becomes a score for performance. Noise becomes music (the “nocturne” of the title), and music noise—a complex tangle of relations that Young exposes without trying to resolve or dissolve.

Young’s most recent project, *Canon* (2016), approaches this set of problems from the other end, drawing even closer connections between sound and warfare. Here, Young’s “instrument” is a piece of military hardware that has become increasingly utilized over the past two decades: the Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), a sonic weapon used to shoot precise beams of high-frequency, high-decibel sound over long distances in order to disperse crowds and disorient opponents. It turns out that LRADs are also used to disperse birds on airport runways and private property. Combining these various aspects, the artist (dressed in military uniform and elevated on a platform) uses an LRAD to shoot bird calls across the gallery space to a park bench, where these sounds appear as auditory hallucinations. The piece alludes to a venerable musical fascination with birds (notably, composer Olivier Messiaen’s *Catalogue d’oiseaux* [1958]), creatures who not only “sing” but pay no attention to the political borders we draw or the divisions between public and private we impose. Detouring the military and commercial use of acoustic weapons, *Canon* celebrates birdsong as a figure for the broader field of sound, which leaks across borders and refuses to be contained.

These projects enable us to see and hear a politics throughout Young’s work—a constant crossing of boundaries and oppositions that, instead of dividing, create generative gaps across which flash productive sparks and resonances. Without dissolving these oppositions into some undifferentiated unity, Young’s work leaps back and forth across (and into) the breach between sound and image, music and noise, landscape and soundscape, transcription and score, the sonic and the political in endlessly generative and provocative iterations that allow us to dispense with the vague term “sound artist” and, instead, to describe Young with the more apt and precise term: “phono-grapher,” an artist who writes or draws (with) sounds.