Samson Young
he represented Hong Kong with a solo project titled Songs for Disaster Relief at the 57th Venice Biennale. He was the recipient of the BMW Art Journey Award, a Prix Ars Electronica Award of Distinction in Sound Art and Digital Music, and in 2020 he was awarded the inaugural Uli Sigg Prize. He has exhibited at venues such as the Guggenheim Museum, New York; Gropius Bau, Berlin; Performa 19, New York; Biennale of Sydney; Shanghai Biennale; National Museum of Art, Osaka; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; Ars Electronica, Linz; documenta 14: documenta radio; and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, among others. Recent solo projects include: the De Appel, Amsterdam; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf; Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; SMART Museum, Chicago; Centre for Contemporary Chinese Art, Manchester; Manchester International Festival; M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; Ryosoku-in at the Kenninji Temple, Kyoto; Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne; and Jameel Art Centre, Dubai, among others. Samson Young studied music, philosophy and gender studies. He was Hong Kong Sinfonietta's Artist Associate in 2008, and graduated with a Ph.D. in Music Composition from Princeton University in 2013. Young is the founder of CMHK, and a member of the Tomato Grey artist collective.

Exhibition setup: GODO Co., Ltd.
Video setup: Yuma Saito, Takuya Matsumi
Subtitle translation: Japan Visualmedia Translation Academy (JVTA)
Graphic Design: Aiko Koike
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Coordination: Keisuke Nakaya (Kyoto Art Center)

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Sponsored by PORTER'S PAINTS
Supported by Hong Kong Arts Development Council
Presented by Kyoto Experiment

Samson Young

The World Falls Apart Into Facts

9.30 (Sat)-10.22 (Sun)
10:00-20:00

*Open until 22:00 on 9.30 (Sat).
*Gallery tour by the artist on 9.30 (Sat) from 12:30.

South Gallery,
KYOTO ART CENTER

The World Falls Apart Into Facts

2019 / revised 2020
2 channels-video with 2-channel sound, 3d printed PLA, repurposed found objects (opium pipe, tourist instrument, original print edition of John Barrow's Travels in China); video duration 6:17 and 25:34

For this work, the artist conducted a research project that follows the genealogy of the Chinese folk song Molihua (Jasmine Flower), a tune of some national significance that is frequently performed in the context of cultural diplomacy - official state visits and the olympics, for instance. The tune can also be heard as a quotation in the famous opera Turandot. Molihua was 'imported' into Europe through the British Empire's encounter with the imperial Qing court during the Macartney Embassy, and after a period of propagation and rearrangement in Europe, the tune was 're-imported' back into China in its modified form. The artist compares and contrasts the song's transmission history with that of the melody of Japanese Togaku - court music that was imported into Japan from China during the Tang dynasty, which has since become as one of few extant sources of Tang music. In one of the video channels, a horse lectures the audience on the complexity of musical genealogy. In another channel, we hear an original composition that is played by, among other instruments, a touristic souvenir-instrument. Through the work, the artist examines the interactions that occur when a piece of music crosses cultures, to consider what it means to hear with the ears of another, and questions the notions of cultural purity and authenticity at large.

Music composition, text, set design, video editing
Samson Young

Performance
Geneva Fung, Samson Young, the Chinese University of Hong Kong Chorus conducted by Leon Chu, and Christie Wong

Voice over
Dr. Christian Weikop

Videography
Ip Yiu Tung Zachary, Lau Chun Sing, Fung Kai Cheuk, Leung Tin Chun Jimmy, Lee Chun Wai, Leung Ho Sing

Production management
@Jones Lee Production: Christy Ko, Donna Loy, Vivian Leung, Chan Chak Kwan, Ray Wong, Jones Lee, "Jonathan," Henry Fung, Edward Lau, "Rocky," "Elephant," "Him," Sissy Tang

Sound recording
Samson Young, Teeda Lee

3d-printing technical support
Andrew Crowe @Meta Objects

3d models
Modified from "Venus de Milo (Aphrodite of Milos)" & "Discobolus (The Discus Thrower)", SMK National Gallery of Denmark @Turbosquid; "The Three Graces at the Hermitage Museum, Russia" & "Michelangelo's David in the Accademia di Belle Arti of Florence, Italy", Peter Edwards (Cool3DModels) @Thingiverse (https://www.thingiverse.com/thing:2445605) & (https://www.thingiverse.com/thing:2445538), CC by 2.0; "Robin the thinker", lampmaker @Thingiverse (https://www.thingiverse.com/thing:34343), CC by 2.0; "The Thinker at the Musée Rodin, France", Bruce Stevens @Thingiverse (https://www.thingiverse.com/thing:2201627), CC by 2.0; "Marsyas", The Metropolitan Museum of Art @Thingiverse (https://www.thingiverse.com/thing:24042), CC by-sa 3.0.

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Alex Rehding; Tessa Giblin; Talbot Rice Gallery, St. Cecilia's Hall, and the Reid School of Music at the University of Edinburgh

Interview with Samson Young

Inspired by "Mo Li Hua," the Chinese folk song that has enjoyed a curious history and become widely known outside its native country, Young has incorporated a strong sense of local regionality into his exhibition at the festival. Young visited Kyoto in the early summer to conduct research for the work. One of the festival's co-directors, Yoko Kawasaki, sat down with him to discuss the work's message and his creative aspirations.

Origins of the Work

Yoko Kawasaki: Your work at Kyoto Experiment is based on the Chinese folk song "Mo Li Hua" (Jasmine Flower). The song was introduced to Europe via the British Empire, specifically the diplomat John Barrow. It spread widely across Europe and then subsequently returned to China, where it received renewed attention. For this edition of Kyoto Experiment, we are exploring how language changes and the fluidity of cultural identity, which is ultimately constructed through those shifts. What's so interesting about your work is how it questions so-called cultural purity and correctness, and the affinity of that with the issues we want to think about at the festival this year prompted us to invite you to participate. First, could you please tell us how you became aware of the historical and cultural trajectory of "Mo Li Hua"?

Samson Young: "Mo Li Hua" is well known and taught in schools, but to most people it's simply a folk song. It's colonial history, and how it was "reimported" into China was not something that is known to most people. A musicologist friend of mine alerted me to a manuscript of Mo Li Hua, which was displayed in an exhibition he co-curated. From this manuscript I learned that Mo Li Hua was transcribed for publication in English as far back as 1804. That was what initially got me interested in the song. And then I also learned of a harpsichord version of it scored by the composer Karl Kambra.

Kawasaki: This interested you because there were no harpsichord versions of the song in China at the time?

Young: For me, the "song" is the melody. I imagined that if the song had any accompaniment it would be heterophonic embellishment of the melody. I then got to thinking, why add a harpsichord accompaniment? The melody that we know now as Mo Li Hua is the closest to the John Barrow version from 1804, and this version was probably transcribed on the spot. While I wonder how accurate the transcription was, the fact remains that it closely resembles the version of the song that I know. This became quite interesting to me. Did we adopt the 1804 transcription over other versions? And did this version have a "British" origin, instead of "Chinese?"

Horse Imagery in the Work

Kawasaki: The work comprises two videos and objects. In one of the videos, a horse gives a lecture on musical genealogy, using the examples of "Mo Li Hua," Kenny G and Cantopop, and Japanese togaku (Tang-dynasty music and dance in Japan). The other video features Horse Togaku, a piece of music composed by yourself and performed by a group of musicians wearing fruit costumes and playing souvenir instruments. Horses appear not only in the lecture footage but also the musical performance. In this way, horses seem to have important symbolism in the work. Why did you choose horses?

Young: In Cantonese, we have a saying that literally translates as something like "The cow's head does not fit the horse's mouth." It refers to a breakdown in communication, or the inability to communicate. But when this expression is used in Cantonese it's not always negative. Sometimes, it just highlights the absurdity of an impossible situation. I had this expression in mind when conjuring the images of the horse, and the person wearing a cow mask. I wanted to make an ensemble composition with these layers of complexities. I also thought it might be a good idea to have a horse give the lecture as the information delivered is very dry. The lecture is basically the genealogy of the music narrated by a voice with an austere British accent.

Kawasaki: Though you are dealing with things that are quite contextually complex, the work is visually humorous, which confers a kind of fictionality on everything. I would like to ask about the music played in the work. Is it based on the John Barrow version of "Mo Li Hua," which you then deconstructed?

Young: The singers in the performance were singing the Barrow transcription of the lyrics, while the melody is based on both the Karl Kambra and Barrow versions. I added the harpsichord accompaniment, which references the Kambra version, and then some electronic music and cluster chords that referenced the sound of togaku music. And then the whole thing is slowed down a lot, so you don't really get sense of the melody anymore.

Kawasaki: The various things that appear in the lecture also feature in the performance. It's like you are mixing all these elements together?

Young: I referenced elements of the lecture in the performance, though the lecture itself has more information. The lecture traces a history, whereas the performance is eclectic and humorous. Mo Li Hua is performed in official ceremonies and at occasions of cultural diplomacy. My piece is a response to the contexts in which the song often appears.

Past Artistic Practice

Kawasaki: In your practice to date, you have worked with sound and music alongside creating interdisciplinary installations and performances. One aspect of your work, and which I think is evident in The World Falls Apart Into Facts, is that you are upending the things we perceive. That is, you are suggesting that behind what we see and hear in our everyday lives there are these other things. Your work inverts certain social or cultural elements that are imprinted on our minds. Moreover, you deal with these themes in at times humorous or ironic ways, and it is this style that makes your work so interesting. Did you have a response to that interpretation?

Young: I am interested in different perspectives. John Barrow version of Mo Li Hua offers an image of the song that is different to the one that I am already familiar with. For me, this is like hearing your own culture through a different set of ears. It's not possible to embody somebody else's listening body, but that's an interesting thought experiment to try.

Encounters with Musical Instrument Souvenirs in Kyoto

Kawasaki: The World Falls Apart Into Facts has already been shown in Japan on two previous occasions. How was the process of the research you have done in Kyoto for this new exhibition of the work?

Young: This is a very short trip, but I am sourcing local instruments sold as souvenirs in Kyoto. These are musical instruments that are playable, but are also meant for touristic consumption. In the Cantonese region, we have this genre of art called trade paintings. They are oil painting of Cantonese seascapes or landscapes, but painted with Western techniques and intended for export to the west. So maybe there is a similarity between these trade paintings and the musical instrument souvenirs. I found these shell flutes. They came with a card with instructions on how to play them printed on the back, and a postcard printed on the front, so the instruments have a double function. This will be shown with the work, along with other objects, including the John Barrow book.