

## Samson Young *Frames and variations*

Ekphrasis, or the translation of an image into words, is a shadow following many histories of visual art. As a literary device, ekphrasis promises, perhaps falsely, a separation of form and subject so that an artwork's content might be poured from one vessel into another.

Samson Young's recent video installation, *Variations of 96 chords in space (feat. William Lane)* (2022–2023), one of two works at his debut solo exhibition at New York's Petzel Gallery, proposed not an ekphrasis from image to text, but from color to sound. I hesitate to call this a work of synesthesia because the associations drawn between the seen form and heard form were not at all instantaneous, or quasi-neurological. Rather, *Variations* asked: what would it mean to purposefully carry color into sound, and to do so methodically, rather than interpretatively?

To describe *Variations* requires a complex ekphrasis. Firstly, the artist assigned 96 RGB color codes to musical chords and then allocated different camera angles to the four types of microphones used

in the sound recording. These "color chords" were played on various musical instruments, once by Young and once by the performer William Lane, and filmed from all four angles. The video is slow and diagrammatic, and admittedly, often a bit tedious. Twelve shades of yellow, then the same number of greens, blues and so on, are each "played" for 60 or 90 seconds. Occasionally, what the artist calls "color mixing events" interrupt this steady catalogue, for instance, in a combination of 34 (blue) and 80 (pink) or 0 (cream) and 50 (indigo). In these rare moments, the conjuncture of simple chords creates the rudimentary rumblings of a melody.

Through a set of complex maneuvers, Young had transferred color into music, and sound into cinematic perspective, performing a kind of alchemy. But it was alchemy without wonder—an ekphrasis that perfectly describes every inch of its object but loses all the affective qualities in the process.

Young's live performance, *Refrains and variations* (2023), did something different.

Rather than translate from eye to ear, the artist performed something like a negative ekphrasis: tearing open the audio-visual composite so that the senses seemed further apart and fundamentally untranslatable. I watched the artist perform through a constructed window with sheer curtains, much like the ones the character of Jeff

Jefferies spies through in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* (1954), from which Young took inspiration. I could make out the artist's movements in the room beyond, but only just. Presented with a mid-century lounge chair, a lamp, and a single set of headphones in a quasi-domestic space, I sat down to watch and listen.

Young performed for an exclusive audience of one. For hours at a time, he recorded his immediate sonic environment via a binaural microphone headset. Every sound that entered the artist's orbit traveled directly into the ear of the visitor, launching a series of uncanny intimacies despite his physical distance. I heard the ruffling noise of a cardboard box placed over his head, the chime of a singing bowl, and the faint notes of a pop song. I heard sound dampen and abruptly intensify as he placed his hands on and off the headset. I listened to a space that I could never quite locate, or that I only determined retroactively. At one point, he came right up the glass dividing us and began to write on the small section of wall between the two windows. He sounded incredibly close, was so close, and yet I couldn't reconcile that scratching of the pencil with the gap between us.

Inviting the audience to hear through his ears is indeed a form of "hospitality," as Young puts it. However, it is hospitality with a frosty manner, inviting two subjects to hear together but never meet. Unlike the video, the gesture here is simple but rattling. When sound and sight are placed out of sync, our coordinates for relation momentarily collapse and perhaps open another way of facing (or hearing) the other.

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Installation view of SAMSON YOUNG's *Variations of 96 chords in space (feat. William Lane)*, 2022–23, four-channel video installation with six channels of audio (composition for viola, crotales, woodblock, self-playing piano, e-bows on piano strings, electronic sounds, water fountain, painted screens, and custom software), dimensions variable, duration average: 2 hr 10 min, at "Frames and variations," Petzel Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo by Daniel Polonsky. Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery.

