social change brought on by the pace of the industrial revolution and modernity, the concept of utopia denoted a “desire for a different, better way of being.” Kang was a reformist and his vision of the promise of a radically transformed and improved life was similarly provoked out of dissatisfaction—with the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the adoption of science and technology from abroad, and the start of the Chinese Civil War.

Today, utopia provides a similar escape—a counterpoint to the neoliberal economy and the new world order—and this thread runs throughout Samson Young’s exhibition Silver moon or golden star, which will you buy of me? At the core of the exhibition are three music videos that collectively form a song cycle Young calls the Utopia Trilogy (2018–19)—an EP, if you will, that extends into the dystopian, retrotopian, and heterotopian—followed by a fourth video, The world falls apart into facts #2 (The Dream Seller by E. Markham Lee as performed by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Chorus) (2019), that documents the surreal performance of a song about dreamscapes being bought and sold. The immersive animations and installations of Silver moon or golden star take up the suggestion of recent scholars that rather than thinking about how utopia might be organized, we should instead consider how it is felt.

No longer an ideal that is not present, that can only be striven toward, utopia is something that can be experienced affectively, in “small incremental moments” provided by collective performative events. If utopia is an invention of the imagination that can be thought, felt, and experienced, Young’s work asks, what is its sound?

Sounding the Everyday, Sounding Power
Young’s work, in the simplest of terms, makes audible the sounds that envelope, order, and structure daily life. He remixes and recomposes famous songs heard over and over again on the radio, quotidian noises rarely noticed, unintentional or overlooked melodies, and even sounds that don’t yet exist. In making these tones and textures strange, Young brings our attention to them, allowing us to simultaneously hear power and mute it. His compositions are playful considerations of cultural politics, the ethics of musical appropriation, and sound as a metaphor for cultural resonance and resistance. Sound emerges from the background as an experience that subliminally shapes and controls our daily lives, and yet is joyous, hopeful, and sometimes euphoric.
Making visible what might be too complex for the ear to hear fully, Young’s earliest sound drawings deconstruct sound as a device that shapes geographical space. For Liquid Borders (2012–14) (fig. 1), Young walked along the fenced separation of Hong Kong and mainland China, recording audio and transcribing it into drawings. As graphical notations, these “soundscape sketches” map noises demarcating, or permeating, a boundary. For Whom the Bell Tolls (2015) (fig. 2) considers the historical significance of certain bells, and how the reach of a bell’s sound could define territorial boundaries. For two months, Young traveled around the world ringing and listening to bells, recording their sounds, and interviewing their current custodians as well as contemporary bell makers. Young’s research captures how the sounds of bells are entangled with particularities of place, religion, cultural identity, and politics.

For Young, a bell is like an explosion: a type of sound overload. The politics and violence of such powerful sounds are an important facet of his practice. The performance Nocturne (2015) (fig. 3) recreated the sounds of night bombings in the Middle East as aired on broadcast television: Young edited found footage from YouTube into a silent video—or score—for a Foley artist to produce live sound effects using a drum set and household items including rice, tea leaves, and Tupperware. This terrorizing soundtrack could be accessed by the work’s audience through its transmission to portable FM radios, available to carry throughout the exhibition space.

The next year, Young shifted from making
audible the damage of war to reckoning with the weaponization of sound. At Art Basel in 2016, for the work Canon (fig. 4), he “fired” bird calls using a Long Range Acoustic Device, capable of broadcasting at volumes loud enough to induce, from afar, permanent hearing loss. LRADs are typically deployed to disperse protesting crowds or repel birds on airport runways and at nuclear facilities. Inspired by the “songs of birds we do not want,” Young began to consider how birds learn their calls through imitation, which prompted him to remember how he and his primary school friends in Hong Kong had once mimicked Vietnamese refugee radio. In Basel, in between bird calls projected by the LRAD, Young inserted his own live imitations of what he recalled of Vietnamese radio, appropriating the sonic weapon as a “nonlethal” device for passing on categories of knowledge and miscommunications alike.

Young originally trained as a composer, and his practice inverts, invents, and imagines new possibilities for sound understood as music. In 2014, he began staging a series of Muted Situations, performances in which the volume of instruments and voices is reduced almost completely. In his description:

Mute is not silence. Muting is not the same as doing nothing. Rather, the act of muting is an intensely focused re-imagination and re-construction of the auditory. It involves the conscious suppression of dominant voices, as a way to uncover the unheard and the marginalised, or to make apparent certain assumptions about hearing and sounding.\

For Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky’s 5th (2018) (fig. 5), Young reduced a symphony orchestra’s output to its physical movements—bows brushed against strings, fingers pressed on keys—and in doing so amplified the actions of the musicians’ bodies in space. As art historian Anthony Leung explains, “The ‘beauty’ of these experiments in sonic muting lies in the way in which their ‘inaudibility’ only points to the ‘violence of what is audible’—hearing without listening doesn’t mean harmonious silence; very possibly it is a form of enforced imagining, which commits violence through the medium of sound.”

For his presentation Songs for Disaster Relief (2017), at the Hong Kong Pavilion of the Fifty-Seventh Venice Biennale, Young exposed the contested histories of certain songs in international circulation. The exhibition explored the proliferation in the 1980s of charity singles written by European and American superstars “to raise awareness and mobilize aid for African famines”—a phenomenon of late Cold War optimism. In the course of his research, Young heard of a mocking response to Bob Geldoff’s song for Band Aid, “Do They Know It’s Christmas” (1984)—a South African band’s song “Yes They Do!” Though
the story proves not to be true, its appeal incriminates a form of armchair charity as misplaced and merely aspirational. Young’s installation at the Hong Kong Pavilion connected different time periods and historical figures through songs emitted from a multichannel speaker system in an uncanny living room overlaid with screens (fig. 6). The soundtrack, props, and onscreen animations strung together disparate places and times—London, North Dakota, and South Africa in the 1980s; Los Angeles in 1985; Hong Kong in 1991; and Moscow in 1957—formulating a new model for exploring tectonic transnational shifts. Included within the presentation was Young’s Muted Situation #21 (2017) (fig. 7), a video featuring members of the Kwan Sing Choir, a “workers club” at the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, whispering the lyrics to Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie’s iconic “We Are the World” (1985). In modifying the ensemble (swapping out the original assembly of celebrities) and modulating the song’s delivery, Young recast the philanthropic image of the original performance to uncover the economies backing its message. Obliquely, Young’s journeying between times and places suggests alternative global histories and recalls Kang Youwei’s One World theory, founded on the universal humanity of international peoples.

In recent years, Young has collaborated with Next Generation Sound Synthesis (NESS), a project at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland that produces computer software for the generation of “synthetic” sound. Using NESS-designed programs, he has modeled plans for physics-defying instruments—a twenty-foot-long trumpet, a football-field-sized bugle to be played by a dragon with fire breath (300 degrees Celsius). The resulting series, Possible Music (2018) (fig. 8), marks a turn in Young’s practice, from calling attention to sounds to inventing them.

All Roads Lead to Chicago, circa 1933
Young’s exhibition Silver moon or golden star dwells on the 1933 Chicago world’s fair (fig. 9), and also passes through the Chinese diaspora, Republican China, the Great Depression, Hong Kong shopping malls, and future highways. Combining the register of the music video—represented in the recent Utopia Trilogy, around which the exhibition is structured—with archival materials, sound drawings, and 3D-printed sculptures, Young animates cacophonous dreamscapes of seemingly divergent and disparate themes, historical events, and
musicalities. In each video, a central male character spirals out of control—running, floating, multiplying, and falling as he attempts to navigate oddly placeless worlds that morph as they offer objects and ideals both enticing and dangerous. Each music video is set in a different space of the everyday—the car, the store, the home—made possible by modernity’s, and then neoliberal capitalism’s, promotion of consumerism.

Consumerist fantasies were everywhere in evidence at the 1933 world’s fair, where multinational exhibitions proclaimed the motto “Science finds, industry applies, man confirms.” The fair’s title, “A Century of Progress,” advocated optimism just four years after the crash of the US stock market, not long after the First World War, and in the same year that President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated the New Deal. Indeed, the 1933 edition’s promotion of the economy provided a model for the next decade-plus of world’s fairs and signified a larger shift in international fair culture and diplomacy, from national pavilions to corporate showcases. National pavilions reinforcing imperialism had comprised the original European expositions, but during the cross-Atlantic recession many governments could not afford to mount such displays. American corporations stepped in to display not only goods but the very production processes used to make them, including working assembly lines (figs. 10, 11). Dioramas, murals, moving images, and didactic texts attempted to humanize new industries and ways of life, and they encouraged public spending as a remedy to an economy supposedly weakened by underconsumption.

Reflecting a move in the US financial system from a model based on land acquisition and individual entrepreneurship to corporate accumulation, the increasing complexity of consumer culture tacitly anticipated a new world order, wherein a distinctly American form idealism would prevail.
Thousands of cars delivered visitors to a fair that aggressively marketed the automobile as an example of scientific progress and modern convenience. In advertisements and popular culture, the car had become synonymous with freedom and unprecedented mobility, yet cars were still dangerous, loud machines that needed to be regulated and engineered; “mass adoption created mass chaos that threatened everyone’s safety,” and necessitated driver-safety campaigns. Young’s first music video, *The highway is like a lion’s mouth* (2018) offers a safety jingle that emphasizes the car as both symbol of optimism and source of anxiety, mixing various and incessant safety directions—“mobile off, seatbelt on,” “look left, look right,” “aware today, alive tomorrow.” From the “horseless carriage” of the early twentieth century to the dawn of driverless personal transport, cars have promised development and also posed a physical threat and facilitated forms of political control. The video’s central character is constantly on the verge of being pulled apart as he navigates driving through obstacles in a video game landscape of race tracks and monopoly boards. He speeds across the recently opened sea bridge connecting Hong Kong to Macau and mainland China—an engineering feat that is more political symbol of mainland China’s administrative control over the Special Administrative Regions than practical thoroughfare.

Around the perimeter of *The highway’s* installation, robotized “lemons,” in the work *Line follower* (2019), drive along a prescribed black path, as defective cars might in a fully automated future. *The highway* is also accompanied by a series of drawings, *My car makes noises* (2018), that visualize the actual sounds cars make due to safety technologies, including those designed to effect a sense of security—for example, the hard thud of a car door as it closes. The drawings also playfully record defective cars might in a fully automated future. *The highway*, which concludes with a warning: “You don’t own the road.”

From the automobile, Young shifts his focus for the next music video to the shopping mall (which the automobile’s large-scale adoption made possible in North America). *Da Da Company* (2019) juxtaposes utopian notions from both sides of the Pacific, placing Won Alexander Cumyow—a acolyte of Kang Youwei born in 1861 in British Columbia, present-day Canada—in a consumerist disaster scenario set to a soundtrack that reconfigures the beloved Rodgers and Hammerstein show tune “My Favorite Things” (1959). The Chinese-Canadian is entranced in an 1980s-era mall as he frantically attempts to secure the return of the emperor to Peking. Young stages nostalgic longing as a retrotopian impulse in *Da Da Company*, where the future exists as a restoration of “a vaguely remembered past,” to borrow a phrase from theorist Zygmunt Bauman. Won’s reconstructionist tendencies are allegorized in Young’s animation of a construction worker futilely pushing against falling water in the soon–flooded mall, where dynastic antiques and trash alike float by as the debris of overconsumption; meanwhile, the mood of nostalgic reverie persists, enhanced by interspersed clips of arcade games, the 1988 Chinese television documentary *Heshang* (*River Elegy*), and the 1994 Taiwanese movie *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

*Da Da Company* is situated, in *Silver moon or golden star*, within Young’s staging of a rundown storeroom, complete with dropped ceiling and outmoded office chairs, in which hang his series of photographs *City Garden* (2019). These images capture the current incarnation of the shopping mall near Young’s childhood home in Hong Kong that once housed a *Da Da Company* department store. Over time, the mall’s occupants have changed from retail and commercial shops to “cram schools” and storefront churches. The music video ends sharply with static-laced footage of a 1980s television commercial enticing Hong Kong viewers to move to Singapore; its insidious refrain—“It’s a heaven over there”—suggests that mainland China’s narrative of reconstruction might not provide its promised benefits.

Returning to Chicago and 1933, the *Utopia Trilogy’s* third video, *Houses of Tomorrow* (2019), is set in two model homes constructed at the world’s fair to advertise the modern American dream, centered on the home “as the primary engine for consumerism.” The newest consumer appliances, foods, and building construction were highlighted in the Armco–Ferro House, which Young shows restored to its original early 1930s splendor. The second model home, architect George Fred Keck’s *House of Tomorrow—a machine à habiter* (machine for living)—once demonstrated an efficiency that “entirely upset the conventional ideas of a home” (fig. 12). In Young’s reimagining of modern domestic life, Keck’s structure is vacant and stripped to the studs—laying bare the physical deterioration of this particular vision of the future.
Houses of Tomorrow revisits a specifically American vein of progressive thinking, its degeneration, and how it has been exported around the world. As the music video follows a lone performer singing “Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?”—a Bing Crosby hit in 1933—international forces persistently interject into a conventional vision of American domesticity, including a creeping Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) soldier. In 1933, the Nationalist (Kuomintang) government in China was under attack by both the insurgent Communist party and Japanese forces (then occupying Manchuria). While political disarray and social upheaval foreclosed the possibility that the Chinese government might organize a pavilion for Chicago, China was nonetheless represented by a privately sponsored Chinese-style courtyard pavilion, a reconstructed Buddhist shrine, and a display on the railroad in Japanese Manchuria. Translated into Chinese as wanguo bolanhui (萬國博覽會, “ten thousand nations' exhibitions”), world’s fairs represented coerced multinational engagement and constituted an aspect of the country’s modernization. Set within this literal “political theater,” the third music video draws out not only these stately international relations but also the essentialist theories of race, culture, class, and hygiene that informed them. Animated within Houses of Tomorrow are busts sculpted by Malvina Hoffman for the Races of Mankind exhibition at the Field Museum in Chicago (Fig. 13), which opened during the fair. Eventually, Young burns it all down, setting the houses ablaze in the video.

A fourth, nonanimated video accompanies the Utopia Trilogy in Silver moon or golden star. Titled The world falls apart into facts #2 (The Dream Seller by E. Markham Lee as performed by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Chorus), it documents a performance of the song “The Dream-seller” (1904; music by E. Markham Lee, lyrics by A. H. Hyatt). This final tune, sung by the student chorus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, combines capitalist desire with orientalist fantasy to imagine, in Young’s description, “a cow’s dream of a horse.” As with the other musical numbers playing throughout the exhibition, sonic manipulations render the song disorienting. Young’s interpretation of “The Dream-seller”—music traditionally arranged for a children’s choir—once heard is both familiar and strange.

From Houses of Tomorrow to the World of Tomorrow
The 1933 world’s fair in Chicago was among the first to market utopia as a future for ready consumption. Six years after the Chicago fair, New York hosted another version of the international exposition, titled “The World of Tomorrow” (1939–40). On its grounds, Salvador Dalí...
staged a pavilion, the “Dream of Venus,” that beckoned visitors into a dreamworld gone surrealistic, to be entered by passing through a giant pair of legs. Inside the fun house were two swimming pools with live, scantily clad women gliding past a landscape of mermaids, dancing lobsters, and other signifiers of the libidinous imaginary (fig. 14). It appeared as a hedonistic transgression at a fair otherwise espousing the idealist and progressive vision of a budding consumer consciousness—selling not just a genuine vision of utopia that could come about in the next two decades but also commercial products and mass entertainment.16

Like Dalí’s unexpected pavilion, Young’s Utopia Trilogy transports the viewer through a series of immersive spaces. Each music video turns on its head a familiar genre of song: the safety jingle, which in

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an anxiety-inducing reminder of 24-7 vigilance; the show tune, which transforms the protection and freedom of the automobile into

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warning against falling prey to the taunt of the chorus in the “The Dream-seller”—“Silver moon or golden star, which will you buy of me?” Utopia cannot be bought and sold; instead, as Young observes, optimism needs to be paid attention to and carefully maintained.

NOTES

3. Ruth Lechts, quoted in Howard P. Segal, Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 17.
10. Ibid., 20.
12. “It is very odd. It crosses that much of the sea, and yet ordinary people cannot use it. What’s the point of that?” said Claudia Mo, a pro-democracy lawmaker in Hong Kong. “This project is so obviously a political symbol. I’m now really worried about the tourism.”” Quoted in Stephen Hui, “World’s longest bridge-tunnel opens in China, crossing the world’s largest bridge-tunnel in Hong Kong, which is the longest in the world,” South China Morning Post, October 23, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/sex-politics/article/2159572/worlds-longest-bridge-tunnel-opens-china.
13. At the time, China was struggling to reaffirm and also modernize its national identity after losing territory to foreign powers, especially the Japanese in the First Sino-Japanese War, leading to an intellectual movement for self-strengthening. While living in exile in Canada, Kang Youwei founded the Society to Preserve the Emperor, petitioning for the reestablishment of the Qing Emperor.
16. Schrenk, Building a Century of Progress, 139.
19. Howard P. Segal, Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 37.