

Edouard Malingue Gallery

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Curatorial text by Helen Pheby

Quest for Quiet

Tianyou Huang

Su-Mei Tse

Samson Young

Venue

St Saviour's, Aberdeen Park,
N5 2AR, London, UK

Opening

7 November | 6 – 9 PM

Date

8 November – 21 December 2019

Opening hours

Tue – Sat, 11 – 6PM

or by appointment

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As Head of Curatorial Programme at Yorkshire Sculpture Park I have the privilege of living and working in my home county but visiting London often. As the train approaches Kings Cross station I have noticed that I take a deep breath before being immersed in the life of the city, where the sky is only seen between buildings and the noise is relentless. On the return journey the concrete gives way to green and I breathe out. The space around me expands. I appreciate the breath in and the breath out. The duality. The exhibition Quest for Quiet is intended to be a space to breathe out, for calm and contemplation.

Quiet is not silent, it is not the complete absence of sound. It is to be in a situation where we can hear our own thoughts, notice the buzz of an insect and the wind in trees, be able to concentrate on a text, an artwork, a building. London is one of the busiest places on the planet – a cacophony of transport, machinery, and other man-made noise. Chatter. In Western Apache tradition it is an insult to chatter at someone because "persons who speak too much insult the imaginative capabilities of other people, blocking their thinking." [1]

Quest for Quiet in the sanctuary setting of St Saviour's church, Highbury, is a space for pause and appreciation. Churches once offered regular respite from the toils of the everyday, a physical and mental escape from daily labours. Even for those who couldn't read, the church service was a familiar ritual, a place to focus on higher things. As the Industrial Age gathered steam and smoke, and daily life became increasingly dirty and noisy, the church must have offered even more solace.

Consecrated in 1866, St Saviour's was designed by William White and its ornate surface decorations reflect the Pre-Raphaelite fashion of its time. The eye is drawn to the beautiful stained glass windows, altar mosaics and ornate details painted onto the masonry itself. No viewpoint is left untouched in this celebration, not only of the divine, but also of human creativity.

We now have new ways of living and churches are no longer the social and spiritual centres of communities. The only Grade I listed building in Islington, St Saviour's entered a new lease of life under the direction of The Florence Trust, established by Patrick Hamilton in 1988, and now operates as St Saviour's artist studios.

The project space has been temporarily adopted by Edouard Malingue Gallery and programmed by Associate Director Jennifer Caroline Ellis. Established in 2010 and with bases in Hong Kong and Shanghai, Edouard Malingue Gallery builds critical dialogues between Asian and international contemporary artists, curators and institutions through exhibitions and interventions in public spaces. The Gallery has a global presence through pop-up projects and artist participations in international exhibitions and biennials, such as Ho Tzu Nyen at the 2019 Sharjah Biennial. The presentation of Wong Ping at Frieze 2018 resulted in the artist being awarded the inaugural Camden Arts Centre Emerging Arts Prize and exhibition with the prestigious institution.

I was delighted to be invited to collaborate on a project by Jennifer and Edouard because their mission aligns with YSP's – to support exceptional artists and create opportunities for their voices to be heard and shared. In a post truth and digital world, in which we are bombarded by algorithm-generated chatter, it is vital to have the quiet space and opportunity to listen to authentic thoughts. We are living in a digital age that we have embraced for convenience but we are not yet technologically wise enough to sift the facts from the formidable tide of information that we are submerged by each day. Each of our clicks refines a personally-designed online universe that, through predicting our thoughts, defines and reinforces those thoughts and creates our individual echo chambers. Quest for Quiet invites us to switch our devices to silent and to consider work by three artists that responds to the architecture, but also the ways of behaving that the space has held throughout most of its history.

The relevance of echo is at the heart of *The World Falls Apart* (2019) by Samson Young (born 1979 Hong Kong), an internationally-respected artist and composer known especially for sound art and installations. The two-part video lecture presented back-to-back analyses echoic mimicry through three research examples in relation to language, understanding, cultural difference and appropriation and the meaning of sound art itself. He says "in this context it refers to cases where mishearing is directed right back at the speaking subject, which the subject mimics, which in turn contributes towards the speaking subject's sense of self." [2]

As a curator with a specialism in sculpture, sound art is an exciting but not always familiar medium. One of my favourite tote bags is from the Women's Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, bearing the slogan "Museums are awesome because everyone shuts the fuck up". Having been trained in quietly analysing the meaning of a carved stroke or spatial environment, sound art disrupts my traditional experience of the museum, particularly when the artist's voice is there to impart ideas directly. Through examples such as a 19th-century British interpretation of the popular Chinese song *Molihua*, Young draws out how the cross-cultural misunderstanding of language, pronunciation and sounds reveals subconscious, and often conscious, cultural bias. A previous iteration of this work bore the subtitle (Or, 3 attempts at hearing outside of my own fucking head), which highlights an interesting dimension in the relationship between the artist and person experiencing their work. Whereas I enter an exhibition for contemplation perhaps the artist is compelled to communicate, through whatever media of specialisation, in their own quest for quiet. The process of sharing a thought inducing a calmer mind.

Su-Mei Tse (born 1973, Luxemburg) came to prominence aged just 30 when she represented her country at the Venice Biennale and was given the highest award of the Golden Lion. The pavilion included *L'Echo* (2003) a visually epic video of the artist playing cello in a green mountainous landscape, whilst dressed in red, the music distorted by its own echoes fed back by the topography of the natural environment. Tse is a professionally-trained cellist who grew up in a house filled with sound; her British mother a pianist and her Chinese father a violinist. But this was the sound of repetitive rehearsal, of dedicated musicianship that shared into the air carefully crafted and composed notes. Although known for her sound work, one of Tse's key works is *Chambre Sourde* (2003), a completely sound-proofed room in which the visitor can only hear their own breathe and heart beating. It takes a practitioner with a profound understanding of the sensibility of

sound to appreciate and share the importance of quiet. In St Saviour's Tse shares three photographic works developed during her residency at the Villa Medici, Rome, in 2014–15, which are informed by the rich heritage of the context, the lives that have passed through it and its strong associations with art history, patronage and studio practice. She acknowledges the glorious past of the place and its people, made more familiar to us through being on first name terms. The subject of each portrait bust has long since ceased to exist as flesh or idol, their permanent effigies themselves worn by time, and we are thus confronted with the fact that time is fleeting, including our own. These three works were shown in the solo exhibition *Elegy* at Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, in 2017 alongside video, installation, mirrored works and a fountain piece, whose constantly circulating water gave sound to the experience – all intended to disrupt the viewer's perception of the space.

Tianyou Huang (born 1992, Huangshi, China) was the 2018 YSP/RCA Graduate Award recipient and has just begun a PhD by practice at the University of Leeds, which will research and create new works in exploration of the absurd. A uniquely human perception, absurdity seems to have no purpose, other than to make us smile and put things in perspective – to ensure we don't take ourselves too seriously.

The Graduate Award programme is part of YSP's commitment to creating opportunities for talent development in sculpture. There is an identified gap in provision upon graduation in the vital transition period from being a student to being an independent artist, especially given the physical space, equipment and resources needed to work in sculpture. Myself and the fellow judges, including former Tate Curator and YSP Trustee Judy Collins, were impressed greatly by Huang's mature insight into the human condition. During his on-site residency at YSP – which included access to making studios, technical support and critical conversation – Huang created the captivating work *Cubes* by taking Perspex lids from previous sculpture displays and putting them on the grass, creating the situation for a natural fog to cloud towards the tops of the cases. A highly simple yet effective intervention it demonstrates Huang's sensibility for place and allowing others to share his perception and appreciation. For another YSP work *The mirror in the water*, Huang appropriated a mirrored wardrobe door and floated it on the river that runs through YSP, confusing the orientation and surface of material and experience, sky and water, up and down. In a reworking of that idea for *Quest for Quiet, The Third Space* (2019) draws the eye heavenward though we are facing hell. It is so named because the first space is the physical one between the mirror and water surface; the second is the inner, visual, space of the reflection of the ceiling; the third is the space it creates in the viewer's mind. We gain a unique echo view of the architectural details of the church, in which generations of people including the poet John Betjeman offered their voice to the rafters and beyond. Betjeman described his experience of worshipping in this chapel in the poem *St Saviour's, Aberdeen Park, Highbury, London, N:*

"To shadowy stained-glass matins or gas-lit evensong
And back in a country quiet with doffing of chimney hats.
Great red church of my parents, cruciform crossing they knew –
Over these same encaustics they and their parents trod
Bound through a red-brick transept for a once familiar pew
Where the organ set them singing and the sermon let them nod
And up this coloured brickwork the same long shadows grew

As these in the stencilled chancel where I kneel in the presence of God" [3]

The unrehearsed spoken word is fleeting, can be ill considered and open to misinterpretation. This is why important things are put in writing. More insidiously, we treat chatter in the same way, but it is increasingly crafted and directed at us, intended to manipulate on an individual and societal level. It encourages us to buy things we don't need and at worst changes the course of political and world histories. Through the carefully curated Edouard Malingue Gallery programme, St Saviour's becomes a counter-point to the echo chambers out in the noisy world that are contributing to increasingly polarised and ill informed thought and action. A space to consider and clear our thoughts.

[1] Keith H Basso *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* 1996, University of New Mexico Press, np

[2] Samson Young *3 Cases of Echoic Mimicry (Or, 3 Attempts at Hearing Outside of my Own Fucking Head)* www.thismusicisfalse.com/text last accessed 19-10-19

[3] John Betjeman *St Saviour's, Aberdeen Park, Highbury, London, N* in 'John Betjeman Collected Poems', John Murray Publishers, 1958, np