



Zarouhie Abdalian

MATRIX 249 AUGUST 2 – SEPTEMBER 29, 2013

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Well I've got a hammer
And I've got a bell
And I've got a song to sing
All over this land
It's the hammer of justice
It's the bell of freedom
It's the song about love between my brothers and my sisters
All over this land
—Pete Seeger and Lee Hays

In 1949 Pete Seeger and Lee Hays wrote and first performed what would become their influential civil rights song, “If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song).” It was considered a dangerous song at the time—dangerous for what it supported: the progressive labor movement and freedom of expression during Senator Joseph McCarthy’s chilling attempts to silence those with outspoken far-left opinions. In fact, Seeger’s band, The Weavers, stopped playing the song in public after Seeger was assaulted at a Labor Day concert in Peekskill, New York. The song was revived when Peter, Paul, and Mary released a recording in 1962, and it subsequently gained a wide following, recorded by everyone from Trini Lopez to Aretha Franklin. Since then it has become an anthem of the civil rights movement and, tellingly, the chosen song of WikiLeaks.¹

For her solo exhibition **MATRIX 249**, Zarouhie Abdalian reflects on this song, sound ecologies, bells, public space, and much more in a series of minimalist, conceptual sculptures displayed in BAM/PFA’s Gallery A that enact an oscillating relationship between the audible and the inaudible, the visible and the invisible. She made these works specifically for this exhibition and conceived of them in relation to a major public art commission that will be presented in downtown Oakland beginning in September 2013 (as part of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s 2012 *SECA Art Award* exhibition).

In *Ad libitum* (*If I Had a Hammer*), the artist extends a long brass instrument wire on the concrete wall of the gallery, placing bone bridge saddles along the string at various intervals that visually express the collection of pitches in “If I Had a Hammer.” Although one might be tempted to pluck the string to hear these various pitches, or read the saddles as markers of the musical notes, the melody of the song is left up to the viewer to silently intuit. Two additional sculptures, *As a demonstration* and *Each envelope as before*, stand on either end of the gallery, with the muted rendering of the Seeger and Hays song vaguely connecting them. *As a demonstration* consists of a continuously ringing electric alarm bell inside a vacuum chamber. As we see the metronomic hammering of the bell, we realize that we should also hear the noise it generates; yet since the sound does not have a medium to travel through, the hammering is inaudible. This quiet chamber, moreover, evokes another one: the anechoic chamber that informed John Cage’s theories about silence. It wasn’t until he stood inside this room, void of any sound, that he became sonically attuned to the vibrations of his own body, and later arrived at the conclusion that silence was full of the most extraordinary

sounds. Abdalian’s sculpture further recalls Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* (1963–65), a sealed-off Perspex-cube containing a small amount of water that responds to the light and temperature of its environs. Yet in contrast to Haacke’s work, Abdalian’s clear cube is autonomous, unaffected by its setting. Its meaning, however, amplifies when considered in relation to the neighboring objects.

The last sculpture in the exhibition, entitled *Each envelope as before*, exemplifies the inverse of the silently ringing bell. In contrast, one can hear it upon approach, as it shares air with the exterior space. Inside an opaque black vitrine, little hammers tap the interior of the rectilinear box, articulating its shape and volume, at approximately the same rate that the hammer hits the bell inside *As a demonstration*. In *Each envelope as before*, we hear the hammers, but we can’t see them. Together these two works operate dialectically with two of our primary senses, sight and sound, with one sense acting as a perceptual foil for the other: what is heard cannot be seen and what is seen cannot be heard.

Less than six miles away from BAM/PFA, one finds the final piece of the quartet, a sonorous public artwork made for downtown Oakland, sited around Frank Ogawa Plaza, which will be activated at different times of the day between September 14 and November 17, 2013. Just adjacent to Oakland City Hall, the plaza is a historic area comprising a commodious amphitheater for public gatherings and a raised lawn known as “the commons” that during the workweek teems with office workers coming in and out of the surrounding buildings and people breaking for lunch outdoors. The site is named after a Japanese American, Oakland-based public servant and civil rights leader, and typically hosts an annual art festival. More recently it was the primary camp for the Occupy movement in Oakland. Having seen this space activated by Occupy gatherings, Abdalian was impressed by the site’s potential to anchor community events. The work consists of five brass bells on rooftops of various private and public buildings, with the plaza acting as a rough center.² The bells sound together once a day, at randomly determined times, punctuating a moment for those both inside the nearby buildings and those roaming around outside. Like the hammers tapping inside *Each envelope as before*, the bells are not visible, and thus one experiences the unexpected ringing without a visual referent. Abdalian is from New Orleans, and grew up hearing the sound of the city’s bells. Her memory of this informs her desire to work with bells in an urban setting. Moreover, after Hurricane Katrina, she was displaced from New Orleans and moved to Philadelphia for three years, the home of the now silent Liberty Bell.

Abdalian’s works in **MATRIX 249** and the public artwork together traverse a complicated acoustic network, one that moves among interior and exterior spaces, noise that is generated but later silenced, sound that is heard but remains unseen, sound that is “seen” but not heard, and the organizing potential of public space. Together these works subtly encourage the spectator to ruminate on the many fluctuations of silence, and the many voices embedded therein: the silencing of the Seeger and Hays song during the Red Scare, the evacuation of Occupy Oakland from Frank Ogawa Plaza, WikiLeaks, a fleeting memory of New Orleans, the crack in the Liberty Bell. It is almost as if Abdalian’s bells in downtown Oakland are surrogate voices. And if they indeed are, let them ring, *ad libitum*.

Apsara DiQuinzio

CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR



1. WikiLeaks, wikileaks.org/wiki/Inspirational_Material, accessed June 14, 2013.
2. At the time of this writing, the work was not yet titled.

THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE
BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM
PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE SUPPORT OF
THE BAM/PFA TRUSTEES.

FRONT
Electronic alarm bell
Photo: Zarouhie Abdalian

LEFT
Downtown Oakland
Photo: Zarouhie Abdalian

ABOVE
Production drawing for
As a demonstration, 2013

Production drawing for
Each envelope as before, 2013

Photos courtesy of the artist



Biography

Zarouhie Abdalian received her M.F.A. from California College of the Arts in 2010 and a B.A. from Tulane University in 2003. Since then she has exhibited solo projects and participated in many group exhibitions, both in the Bay Area and abroad, including *Shanghai Biennial: Reactivation*, Shanghai, 2012; the *Moscow International Biennial for Young Art*, Moscow, 2012; *Material Information*, Kunstindustrie Museum, Bergen, Norway, 2012; *When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2012; *Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial)*, 2011, Istanbul; and *A Floorless Room Without Walls*, The Lab, San Francisco, 2011; among others. Additionally, she will be included in the upcoming *Prospect.3*, New Orleans, opening in 2014, as well as the *2012 SECA Art Award*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. As part of that exhibition, she will have a public art commission on view in downtown Oakland, near Frank Ogawa Plaza, from September 14 to November 17, 2013. She lives and works in Oakland, and is represented by Altman Siegel, San Francisco.



Works in the Exhibition

As a demonstration
2013
Plexiglass vacuum chamber, alarm bell, steel, and mixed media
22 x 22 x 25 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Each envelope as before
2013
Plexiglass vitrine, sound makers, and mixed media
47 3/4 x 70 x 38 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Ad libitum (If I Had a Hammer)
2013
Bone, instrument wire, and tuner
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

ABOVE
Flutter, 2010; Mylar, tactile transducers, infra-sonic sine sweeps, wall text; approx. 96 x 110 in.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

Public Program

Friday, August 2, 2013

6:30 Conversation with the artist and curator

7:30 L@TE: Friday Nights @ BAM/PFA
Sounding the Path of the Signal
Programmed by Zarouhie Abdalian

Each of the works in this program proposes a novel treatment of the interaction between sound and the specific site of its production.

Pauline Oliveros: *Single Stroke Roll* (1988)

Maryanne Amacher: *Dense Boogie 1*
from *Sound Characters* (1999)

Peter Ablinger: *The Real as Imaginary* (2012)

Alvin Lucier: *Silver Streetcar for the Orchestra* (1988)

James Tenney: *Hocket for Henry Cowell* from *Three Pieces for Drum Quartet* (1974)

Maryanne Amacher: *Chorale 1* from *Sound Characters* (1999)

John Cage: *o'oo" (4'33" No. 2)* (1962)

Alvin Lucier: *Vespers* (1967)

Performed by William Winant, Joseph Rosenzweig, and others.