

Studio international

Zarouhie Abdalian interview: 'It's important for work to be challenging and perhaps even difficult'

By A Will Brown

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Zarouhie Abdalian. Occasional Music, 2013. Brass bells, electronics. Dimensions variable. Public installation commissioned for SFMOMA SECA award in downtown Oakland, CA. Courtesy the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Zarouhie Abdalian is an artist who works with a wide array of materials, ideas and contexts, frequently employing site-specific installations that incorporate sound and sculpture. Her works, which engage compelling social and political histories as well as contemporary moments, range from delicate and sensitively crafted to bold and weighty, and incorporate commonplace or familiar materials, sights, sounds and ideas that affect viewers directly.
A Will Brown: Zarouhie, can you give a brief summary of what you are working on and what shows you have coming up?

Zarouhie Abdalian: At the moment, I'm focusing on a couple of projects: next up is a site-responsive outdoor installation for Prospect.3: Notes for Now in New Orleans and, immediately following that, I am showing some new sculptures at Altman Siegel in San Francisco. Early next year, I'll present a piece, *A Slight Gestuary*, at Lulu in Mexico City.

AWB: Do you have any forthcoming projects or exhibitions that are dramatically different for you?

ZA: The gallery show for Altman Siegel is pretty different. It will be my first solo for a commercial space, and working within this context has been quite challenging. Generally, even if it is a solo presentation, I make one piece for a show, often some sort of

installation that derives a significant portion of its meaning from the physical space and time in which it appears. Or, as in the case of my exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum [MATRIX 249, 2013], I made a constellation of objects whose meaning comes both from the context provided by the site and from the context the objects offer each other. For this forthcoming gallery show, however, I have wanted to make works that make sense as objects in a commercial gallery existing together, but which might also function independently of their location and of one another. In other words, I'd like the context of the space and the types of transactions that are possible for objects in a commercial gallery to influence the objects I make, which might ideally admit some of the conditions of their own viability.



Zarouhie Abdalian. a caveat, a decoy, 2014. Window, sound, and owl decoy. Dimensions variable. Installation for 8th Berlin Biennale at Kunst Werke, Berlin. Photograph: Joseph Kadow. Courtesy the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

AWB: Your work is always so sensitive and thoughtful, particularly to specific architectural spaces, forgotten or overlooked histories and social

situations, sounds or contexts. Can you explain your project for the Eighth Berlin Biennale and how it played into the context and site of the exhibition and the history of the biennale?

ZA: This work, titled *a caveat, a decoy* (2014), was presented in the stairway of Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art and consists of an open window, sound and a decoy owl. The viewer first encounters the work from the base of the stairwell: faintly, from several stories up, the popular lied *Nacht und Träume* (D827) by Franz Schubert (1825) echoes through the staircase. Though audible from this point, the artwork is positioned as the last (or one of the last) artworks encountered in the biennale, as a sort of coda to it. So after viewing most of the biennale, the viewer reaches the uppermost window in the stairwell, which is opened to the outside view, sounds and air, but is also guarded by a cheap plastic owl decoy, a tool that ostensibly functions to deter birds from entering the space. It is here that one can appreciate the lied: a night song, the tone wistful and one of yearning, set to Matthäus von Collin's poem translated from the original German here:

*Holy night, you sink down;
Dreams, too, drift down
Like your moonlight through space,
Through the quiet hearts of men;
They listen with delight
Calling out when day awakens:
Return, holy night!
Fair dreams, return!*

Biennales are meant to present "relevant" contemporary art, and biennale curators often try to pick out contemporary art that (they imagine) reflects the social and political realities of the time, while simultaneously accounting for the local context of their exhibition. I wanted to respond to this troublesome construct, as it was part of the context in which my sculpture would appear. Thus, opening the exhibition venue's window to the outside world is qualified by the placement of the decoy at the threshold, signalling that some parts of what is outside are not desired or invited to enter. One might also be prompted to recall the wise owl (and, hopefully, that's a bit humorous here as it's a plastic dummy "garden defence" owl) and, more specifically, Hegel's Owl of Minerva in the caveat at the end of the introduction in *Philosophy of Right* – the Owl as a metaphor for the philosopher who always comes too late to the world's events, flying only at dusk. Compounding this situation, the soprano sings of longing for the night and even of the desire to escape

the day. As this lied is exceptionally beautiful and the situation with the owl somewhat peculiar, the viewer might pause here at the window, assessing the Berlin panorama to which the window opens, punctuated (from left to right) by the Fernsehturm, the Berliner Dom, and the Neue Synagoge.

AWB: How do you approach your audience when making an artwork? How concerned are you with balancing how much you challenge your viewer and letting them into an idea easily?

ZA: I think it's important for work to be challenging and perhaps even difficult. Though I consider the specific audience for each work and exhibition, in general, I think of this audience as open and creative. I thus try to make work that is worth thinking about over time, but that might also be experienced in an immediate way. For instance, many works affect the body of the viewer in space, and this might be a viewer's initial entry into a piece. I also usually work with materials that are common or familiar, so that an installation doesn't feel entirely outside a viewer's everyday experiences, even if I am trying to effect some sort of strangeness through the configuration of these materials in space. Anyway, to answer your question, what I try to do is let people into a work easily enough that, if they're interested, they won't be totally alienated by the sometimes challenging ideas and relationships I myself am grappling with through the work.

AWB: Looking back on the past few years and your success in solo and group exhibitions, how have your work and your approach to making work changed or shifted?

ZA: I've been interested in working with non-traditional or more public spaces for about a decade and have done so. Over the past few years, most of the exhibitions that I've done involve new commissions for site-responsive work; I spend relatively little time making objects in the studio. My ongoing concern is to conceive work that makes sense for the site and the time of its installation. Because the shows I've done have been in far-flung places and in a broad range of types of venues and presented in a range of exhibition formats, this has challenged me to develop what site-responsiveness means for my work in terms of process and installation in these drastically different contexts. For instance, developing a piece for a familiar square near my house is quite different from developing a work in a derelict shop window on a Shanghai thoroughfare. What has shifted recently is that I am more confident working in a range of spaces and can be

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a bit more specific about the types of interactions I'm interested in having with other artists, curators and venues. I've also been able to understand and reflect on various art exhibition contexts, such as the biennial or the museum, and this reflection has influenced the direction of several works that more specifically account for some of the terms unique to these contexts.

AWB: At times you work collaboratively with your partner, Joseph Rosenzweig. When did you decide to work collaboratively and what was the first project you worked on together? How does your process change with collaborative work? Do you bring one side and Joseph the other? What parts of the work do you two bring – sculpture, musical composition, writing?

ZA: Joseph is involved in nearly every project I present, though we have only presented collaborations a few times. Our collaborations began seven years ago. So far, there have not been neat delimitations between the types of work we bring to a collaboration; we both have backgrounds in music and art and also write ... though so far, Joseph produces the majority our texts, while I deal more with logistical and production concerns. Joseph is further invested in performance and speech and his research extends to political economy and philosophy. I am perhaps a bit more concerned with place and materiality and interested in interactions between people at places in a more discrete or localised way. These various concerns and aptitudes play into our "solo" projects and collaborations. However, what distinguishes our collaborative work so far (I am thinking particularly of *A Production* (2011) and *Blockings* (2014), as well as a new piece to be presented late next year) is an engagement with the material conditions and discursive terms under which the visibility of artworks is maintained.

AWB: Tell me about your work currently at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery in the Audible Spaces exhibition.

ZA: This piece was commissioned by, and conceived for, the David Winton Bell Gallery at the List Art Centre. With the work, I was interested in proposing an experimental architecture that imagines many different types of bodies negotiating the space (not just, for instance, able-bodied males) and that would be transformative but nearly without material. (During my first visit to the gallery, I was reading Elizabeth Grosz's *Architecture from the Outside* (2001), and this writing, as well as the existing architecture of the Philip Johnson-designed List Art Centre, surely influenced the

direction I took.) The work I installed is *In Unison* (2014) and consists of loudspeakers, sine wave tones, glass vessels and water.



Zarouhie Abdalian. *In Unison* (detail), 2014. Loudspeakers, sine tones, glass vessels, water. Dimensions variable. Photograph: Matthew Clowney. Courtesy the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Throughout the gallery, a number of identical loudspeakers emit the same high frequency sine wave. These loudspeakers are highly directional, so the sound waves reflect off surfaces of the room as they move through the air, reaching the ears of the viewer in varying intensities, seeming to move or change direction as the viewer's body interacts with the space. For instance, while standing still, the viewer/auditor might experience the sound moving around her (due, in part, to phasing) or, without looking, might hear the bodies of other viewers moving through space (as this movement of bodies modulates the tones). The body of the auditor modulates her experience of the space. By way of binaural beating – by the unique situation of her head in space – each viewer's experience will be unique, though the space is effectively uniform.

The glass vessels in this work are presented on pedestals so they address the viewer from a height near her own head. They might be thought of as surrogate bodies and enact a flipped analogy to the sound: the sound component starts with sameness, and inevitably produces difference; the vessels, on the other hand, are all different sizes and shapes but have been "tuned" by the addition of water so as to produce the same frequency. Through and across the glass and water, light (and so not only the sound) reflects and refracts. These resonant bodies are, however, silent.

The piece is about the situation of the auditor in space, rather than what the auditor is hearing, and in fact, what exactly is being heard is entirely determined by the

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auditor's situation in a space. The vessels visibly delineate the contours of spaces that echo and complicate those that the effects of the sound in the gallery seem to suggest. The spaces that one hears aren't easily mapped (and might contradict) the stock-still rectilinear space defined by the gallery walls, floor and ceiling.

AWB: What exhibitions, shows, or artworks have you been looking at or gone to recently? Have you seen an exhibition or an artist's work that you felt strongly about?

ZA: I don't get out much, but there have been a number of things that I've been to see in recent months that I've found compelling and challenging: these include Roscoe Mitchell's composition *Angel City*, Tara McDowell's exhibition *Nothing Beside Remains*, Javier Téllez's film *Letter on the Blind For the Use of Those Who See* (2007), and a performance by *Voicehandler* (Jacob Felix Heule and Danishta Rivero). There are also a couple of exhibitions I've been returning to recently. Though I saw the exhibition in 2002, I've been revisiting *Raised to the Trade: Creole Building Arts of New Orleans* through its catalogue. This exhibition, organised by John Hankins, prompts the viewer to more closely consider the built environment and material of New Orleans from artistic and historical positions and through the knowledge and insights of master craftspeople. I've also been looking at a small display at the Exploratorium in San Francisco of objects showing different types of wear. The objects were culled from Exploratorium exhibitions. Those objects whose wear shows evidence of use over time particularly captivate me.

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<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/zarouhie-abdalian-eighth-berlin-biennale-altman-siegel>