

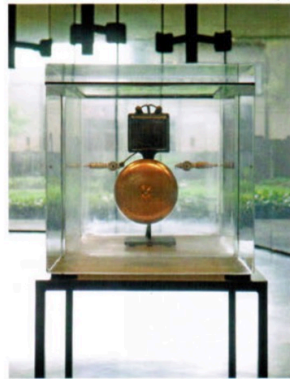
Artforum
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BERKELEY, CA

Zarouhie Abdalian

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM
AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Zarouhie Abdalian's first solo museum exhibition, organized by Apsara DiQuinzio as part of the Matrix program at BAM/PFA, presented a triad of sculptures that treated sound as both medium and metaphor. Upon entering the gallery, one heard a metronomic tapping or clicking, though its source—six tiny mechanical hammers—remained hidden



Zarouhie Abdalian. *As a demonstration*, 2013. acrylic vacuum chamber, electric bell, steel. 58 x 24 x 27".

inside an oblong black vitrine, which evoked the lacquered surface of a grand piano. Titled *Each envelope as before* (all works 2013), the piece literally reflected its architectural surroundings while expressing its own interior volume as something audible rather than visual. This situation was inverted in a work across the room titled *As a demonstration*, which featured an alarm bell that was visibly ringing but eerily silent, encased in a transparent vacuumed cube. Finally, *Ad Libitum (If I Had a Hammer)* reinforced these abstract investigations with a concrete political referent. Consisting of a long brass string stretched across the gallery's wall on bone frets as if on the neck of a gigantic guitar, the piece essentially transformed the museum into a chordophone, tuned to the five pitches that make up the chorus to the titular civil rights anthem—a melody that remained latent, never to be played during the exhibition.

Originally written by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays in 1949 in support of the Progressive movement at the height of McCarthyism (and most recently adopted by WikiLeaks), "If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)" celebrates the exuberance of sound as a symbol of free speech and expression, and, by extension, collective resistance to oppression of all kinds. By contrast, Abdalian's installation portrayed stifled and unrealized sound, foregrounding, among other things, the hermetic sterility of the white cube. Her work's formal reductiveness and self-reflexivity revealed an obvious indebtedness to Minimalism and Conceptual art—Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, 1965, and Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, immediately come to mind—as well as to more recently evolved notions of "site," since Abdalian engaged not merely the physical space but the institutional and sociopolitical conditions that inform it, both within the museum/gallery and beyond.

Those ideas were made even more explicit in a fourth work, which the Oakland-based artist conceived as an adjunct to this show: *Occasional Music*—an outdoor sound installation commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in tandem with its granting Abdalian the 2012 SECA (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art) Award. For this piece, five brass ship bells were placed on rooftops and programmed to ring at sporadic, predetermined times for several minutes each day near Frank H. Ogawa Plaza in downtown Oakland. A popular site for protesting and community gathering, the plaza was most recently home to the city's Occupy encampment. (In an earlier work, *Flutter*, 2010, Abdalian had placed sheets of quivering Mylar in windows facing the street when demonstrations were held there during the trial of the policeman charged with killing Oscar Grant.)

While Abdalian employs sound as a symbol of public voice—alternately amplified or suppressed—her work resists simple equations that would pit the hushed sanctity of the cultural institution against the ringing reverberations of its public counterpart. Indeed, as history demonstrates, the separation is not so clear-cut, and conditions of freedom and repression are present in both spheres. Seeger and Hays were, after all, blacklisted by the FBI in the 1950s; the official displacement of Occupy protestors in Oakland and elsewhere speaks for itself. Meanwhile, Abdalian's sculptures at BAM/PFA subtly directed attention to the conditions of both hearing and vision, and to how these senses are regulated through conventions of display and behavior in an exhibition setting. By literally instrumentalizing the museum, Abdalian's work effectively suggested that this and other art spaces, in their very silence and stillness, in their removal from traditional forms of activism, may offer a realm of reflection that is every bit as vital to political effectiveness.

—Gwen Allen