

Harbour, Aaron and Jackie Im. "Having Been Held Under the Sway." *Fillip* (Issue No. 19 Spring 2014, pgs. 77-83)

Zarouhie Abdalian with
Aaron Harbour and Jackie Im

Having Been Held Under the Sway

Aaron Harbour and Jackie Im – The great bulk of your works are sensitive to context, produced to fit within or react to sites with wide-ranging characteristics. Often your work touches on formerly vacant or abandoned spaces and the places where the material aspects of a particular site break down. Two projects that come to mind include *Away Setting*, which you did for the 2012 Shanghai Biennale at the MacMillan Building, and the pieces *Certain Spanning Trees* (2010–11) and *In the Offing* (2010), for SC13 [Showcase No. 13], an exhibition space sited in and around a glass case rented at the San Francisco Antique and Design Mall by Chris Fitzpatrick and Post Brothers, who curated it.

Zarouhie Abdalian – Even though I am dealing with a specific space, it is important to me to work with features that are repeated in the everyday peregrinations of the spectator. I've focused on features such as cracks in a cement floor, a disused room, a shop window, even white walls. The two pieces that I made for SC13 both used parts of the exhibition environment specific to that show but that were also routinely repeated within and beyond the site of the exhibition. *In the Offing* transformed the glass door of the showcase itself by darkly tinting it with "limo" film for a couple of weeks, and *Certain Spanning Trees* filled an existing crack in the concrete floor incrementally over the six-month duration of the exhibition.

In Shanghai, *Away Setting* consisted of a dozen or so incandescent and fluorescent bulbs on randomized timers that lit an abandoned and decaying former kitchen space within a largely unused building. This space—like many of the other storefront spaces within the MacMillan Building—was inaccessible for the duration of the exhibition; it could only be viewed from the walkway outside, and so the work formed a sort of

shifting tableau with over a thousand possible instances. Treating the everyday features of a space with quotidian, familiar, or utilitarian materials, I like to allow the work to extend into other spaces and possibly into the everyday of the viewer, even while the "meaning" of the artwork is expressed as a function of the specific material conditions under which it is nominated as such. In these works you mention, cracks and decaying materials serve as evidence of the transformation of a site over time. In other words, these elements are significant to my work because their forms express historical processes.

Harbour and Im – We're interested that you mention decay as evidence of a site's transformation. Since your projects are very much about spaces and their contexts, we wondered how much historical research goes into your work? In *Having Been Held Under the Sway* (2011), a site-specific sculpture you made for the Istanbul Biennial that year, tactile transducers were hidden in the walls of a room and continuously transmitted tones that fall below the threshold of human hearing, but the bass provides an effect that one feels, bodily. The audible sounds in this space were from the sound waves' effects on the room's materials. The only visual part of this installation is a plumb bob, whose use is compromised because of the vibration of the room. There is obviously a lot of history to contend with; how much of that context did you take in and at what point did you let your firsthand experience of the location inform what you wanted to do? Did you want to keep it open enough for viewers to engage with and come to the work with their own personal associations?

Abdalian – I actually don't want to keep things so open; that is, I'm not pressing for the viewer to "complete" the work. In the works, I commit to certain ideas and feelings and structure them around these associations. I do, however, often think about the way a viewer might immediately relate to a work, with no background about me or art history or whatever. So even though there is plenty to be gleaned from my installations insofar as they're considered within their physical and historical context, they also often connect to a

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viewer through her body. Whether this is through infrasonic sound waves she feels in her body, a reflection she sees of herself, or an acoustic experience that changes as she moves through space, the senses provide a very direct and immediate pathway through which the artwork is experienced.

When I was doing research for the Istanbul Biennial, I started by reflecting on my own relationship to that place, which I first knew through my family's oral histories, which took place east of Istanbul in Anatolia during the Ottoman Empire. These stories are viscerally present for me—they have been part of me as long as I can remember—but my family's stories about this place either end with the deaths of relatives there around 1915 (during the Armenian genocide) or with a change in setting for those who were able to flee. So I read the memoirs of several Istanbulites, then read historical texts and contemporary Turkish newspaper articles, studied the Turkish language for a couple of months, considered the physical site of the exhibition as it had been described to me, and, finally, travelled to Istanbul to be at the site and make a piece over a six-week period. The resulting artwork, *Having Been Held Under the Sway* (2011), is very much about the expression of historical forces, but it's not topical or about a single event.

Harbour and Im – Sound is a frequent component of your work, but as often as you include audible sound, your work also evokes a potential or inaudible sound—as in your works for the UC Berkeley Art Museum exhibition. *MATRIX 249: Ad libitum (If I Had a Hammer)* (2013) resembles an instrument but is silent and *As a demonstration* (2013) renders sound waves inaudible through the use of a vacuum chamber. Could you speak broadly about how sound (and its refusal) operates in your practice? As far as we know, you are not a musician (though some artists working with sound are closet band members, or vice versa).

Abdalian – It's a big stretch to say that artists who work with sound are necessarily in bands or are necessarily musicians or are even very concerned with music. There is a diverse range of artists that prove the contrary: artists like Christine Koslov, Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, Rivane

Neuenschwander, Paul Kos, Robert Morris, et al., all of whom use sound simply as another material that engages with the language of art and the structures through/in which art operates. Though I myself am a classically trained pianist, the way I use sound in my work is not musical. (On the other hand, there are musicians or composers like Alvin Lucier who use sound in arguably “non-musical” ways.) I use sound to articulate the space and material of a site. That is, I'm not interested in using sound insofar as it “represents” anything (much less, another space); instead, I'm interested in how a space or material is expressed and modulated under the condition of excitation. My works generally concern the response of a space as opposed to the impulse, which necessarily precedes it. In *Having Been Held Under the Sway*, I use infrasonic sinewaves—really low frequencies that one feels in the body rather than hears—as a means of articulating the physical materials of a room. These sound waves cause stress on the drywall and studs of the room in which the work exists, and the stress and movement of these materials is all that's ultimately audible; the only other component of the work—a plumb bob—functions to register this perturbation, to *respond*, even as its conventional use is compromised in doing so. Other works similarly use an otherwise unremarkable signal to articulate the physical features of a space, which might be an architectural space or a space created in the context of a sculpture: in both *Each envelope as before* (2013) as well as *Occasional Music* (2013), an impulse registers within and against the materials that form the work. In the former, the materials/space is that of sculpture within a gallery, and in the latter, the space is that of the city and the myriad occlusions that characterize it. In *As a demonstration*, sound isn't “erased” exactly—it's just that the sound waves are inaudible because of the material components (or lack thereof) in the work. In order to be heard, sound needs a medium to travel through, and within the near vacuum conditions of an acrylic chamber, the air has almost no material. In the work, a sound producing action is visible: a bell slightly shudders on its axis each time the hammer hits it, yet despite the visual evidence of action, sound cannot propagate due to the lack of

molecular density within the air of the chamber.

The materials of *Ad libitum (If I Had a Hammer)*—bone saddles, a tuner, and a brass wire—could all be used to form an instrument whose body, in this case, is the wall of the museum. In this sculpture, the wire is divided into intervals and these intervals express the pitches that comprise the song “If I Had a Hammer.” The title of the piece functions doubly as description and direction in the way dynamic markings (such as *con brio* or *staccato*) in music function. As you note, however, the work is mute and not played, and like museum wall texts, is experienced by reading. Though one may be among others during the act of reading museum walls, this is a solitary experience that directly contrasts to the necessarily social act of sounding an instrument. Thus, this work makes a distinction between the solitary and the social while it operates according to rules of the museum: objects are off limits and not to be touched, and museum objects still address the Kantian disinterested spectator. I’m interested in objects that confront the rules or structure of museum spaces, rather than, say, require a parallel set of rules (as in the hyper-interactive exhibitions such as Carsten Höller’s *Experience* [2011–12] at the New Museum that seem to have emerged over the past couple of decades).

Harbour and Im – We were very taken by a comment you made in regards to the political potential of art in the catalogue for the 2011 Istanbul Biennial: *Art strikes me as a weak tool for effecting political change. On the other hand, I often want my work to initiate a kind of epistemological rift. A successful work might act a bit like a speed bump: It may not change your path, but it registers, and for a moment, you move differently.*¹ Here, you are talking about art’s potential to interject, to cause a slowing down, or to make speedier or visible through interruption. Is this a fair characterization of that brief (but potent) quote?

Abdalian – I believe what I said is not necessarily that one slows down, but that one “takes notice and, if only momentarily, moves differently.” The speed bump is also relatively commonplace and repeated in the environment. Perhaps this

last point is more important, as the driver does not merely remember the jolt of the bump, but encountering this bit of raised earth in other locations, she registers the signal with a new sense of its implication. Since this metaphor speaks to you, I wonder if there are times when an artwork has had this effect for you? Or if you can talk about why this metaphor seems to work?

Harbour and Im – This sense is possibly present in any work that affects us in a dramatic way. Nina Beier’s piece *The Complete Works* (2009–10) had such an impact. In it, a dancer recalled and performed all of the dances she had ever performed in order. This work consists of this evocative set of instructions, and prior to seeing it this description operated as a form of the work. Experienced live at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts as part of the artist’s exhibition *What Follows Will Follow II* (2010), the work’s duration coupled with the performer’s willingness to be quite transparent in her process of recalling the entirety of her practice in stuttered gesture clusters produced an unforeseen and altogether strange, intense sense of time. The speed bump’s potential as a register of site, a mapping device . . . we think the political potency of art may relate directly to its ability to create or direct attention to alternative temporalities and paseses, moments of partial stoppage.

Abdalian – I’m not interested in evoking “alternatives” to the world in which we currently live; rather, I would like to call attention to the systems—however latent or obscured—that order this world and the art it engenders.

Harbour and Im – Maybe what we are interested in is not so much art’s proposition of alternatives to the existing world but rather alternative registers within which to view this world. Is it possible that along with redirecting an audience’s attention, art suggests the possibility to see life differently, outside of routine and the mundane?

Abdalian – I’m invested in the existing relationships we have to places and to each other. I can get behind art that endeavours to find a way to see beyond the devices and interests that obfuscate or

pervert these connections. That being said, I think I work with the routine or the everyday precisely because the effects of defamiliarization are more pronounced in doing so.

Harbour and Im – The idea of the commons seems vital to both your works at the Berkeley Art Museum and the commissioned project you made for the SFMOMA SECA award, *Occasional Music* (2013), in which brass bells, situated on rooftops around Frank Ogawa Plaza, each play a series of randomized rhythmic structures for several minutes once a day at a randomly predetermined time. We’re thinking specifically of Michael Hardt’s notion of the “common” as expanded in Jodi Dean’s *The Communist Horizon* (2012), in which she writes: *What resonates to one, what is available as a resource for thinking and relating to others, is always already distanced, dissipated, or bracketed—whether temporally, tribally, topically, or topographically.*²

The complex relation between what is available to be communicated or otherwise shared and the circumstances that bar or limit this seems key to your piece *As a demonstration*, in which a potentially loud alarm rings “silently” within a near vacuum. Does a notion of the commons inform your practice and, if so, how do you engage with it?

Abdalian – It seems that, as always, it is in the action of language (i.e., semiotic systems) that Dean identifies the primary mechanism by which difference can be understood as “always already.” I can briefly describe how language accounts for some of the divisions expressed in my work, though I’m generally more occupied with the problem of engaging the viewer’s experience of material boundaries in space.

For example, while *Occasional Music* is available to any able-hearing person within the range of its sounding, the status of its auditors is unquestionably subject to the strictures of language. The work functions doubly as (unavoidably) public sound (the function of which is unknown) and as a scheduled artwork, which is designated by the institution that announces it as such. So even while the air that the work sets in motion spans various jurisdictions (private space, public space,

state-owned space), there’s always the possibility of a bracketing (one might say an “enclosure,” except for the risk of trivializing the very material history of “primitive accumulation”) occurring at the level of the message, which is something like, “you are hailed as an appreciator of art authorized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.”

Perhaps something similar is at work in *As a demonstration* if you accept a vitrine as emblematic of “the code” of the museum. In this case, the bell’s sound—or rather, the very air through which it travels—is attenuated by a component of the museum’s apparatus and the function of the alarm bell is thereby compromised.

Still, as I intimated earlier, however much my work seems to engage with a “notion of the commons”—much less Dean’s formulation thereof—I’d have grave reservations nominating my artworks as instruments for the critique of political economy. Or at least there are at hand much more expedient instruments designed to confront the historical conditions under which quite real “enclosures of the commons” have been extorted or justified.

Harbour and Im – In relation to both the notion of art as a political speed bump and the commons, let’s speak about your public installation for SECA, which was sited at Frank Ogawa/Oscar Grant Plaza, made famous by the events of Occupy Oakland. Although the Occupy camp is no longer there, its ghost haunts the space for some. To remind us of Occupy, perhaps, you placed bells in your installation, which signal the past even though there is no longer a mass occupation of that space. To be frank, the plaza has reverted to what it was before—a largely empty space, save for the lunchtime crowds that convene there—and it seems that the further away we move from Occupy, the less charged the space becomes. And the reverse: the more normalized the space becomes (the grass has returned, etc.), the less potent the memory of its occupation becomes. In this way, your installation acts as both a commemoration of the community action that took place there but also it seems elegiac, a mournful reminder of the death of a movement. Could you speak more about this project and its connection to Occupy?

Abdalian – OK, before I answer this question, I

want acknowledge that you are coming to the work making a few assertions with which I take issue. First, that the signal of bells in any landscape reads primarily as memorialization. (Since you asked this question before you experienced the work, what is your actual reading of the work in downtown Oakland?) It is one association, but there are many others that are perhaps more familiar: bells as a call to service, as markers of the passage of time, as alarms, etc. Second, you seem to say that Occupy no longer exists. The legacy of the Occupy movement remains vital and the site of the encampment needs no memorialization. The legacy as I see it can be made out in the diverse network of activists who were connected at the height of the movement two years ago and who continue to organize. The effects of the movement can be seen more broadly in the focus it brought to systemic economic inequality and racial injustice, as well as—and this may be more keenly felt in Oakland—the hypocrisy and brutality of the police. These grievances continue to be addressed both “in the mainstream” and on the ground. Finally, you seem to assume that the plaza is a neutral space except during those early days of Occupy. Let’s acknowledge that this plaza and this intersection are multidimensional and have a history that predates and supersedes the Occupy encampment. People continue to use the plaza for protest and public speech as they have done at this site since at least the 1940s. The space, admittedly, is also used for recreation. And in addition to the plaza as a space for communing, for festivals, for taking breaks from work, this intersection at 14th and Broadway is a transit hub, and throughout the week and weekend, many travellers move through this site.

During Occupy, people put a lot on the line to develop—in practice—“the notion of the commons.” The plaza was one contested space, but these concerns played out in the streets and other “public” spaces across Oakland and many other cities.

Back to *Occasional Music* and your question. Certainly Occupy has been one of the most important and visible ways this space has been used recently, but the tone of *Occasional Music* is not elegiac. *Occasional Music* takes shape in the

present, is different every day, and is experienced variously according to a viewer’s position and movement through the space. In randomizing the activation of the ringing throughout the day, I mean for the signals to hail a range of auditors, some of whom are engaged in activities other than evaluating artwork and some who have shown up for that express purpose. The latter public barely announces itself as such except that those people happen to be located in the space at the time of the ringing. That is, there is nothing delimiting the space of “the work” and there’s no object on which the viewer can fix her gaze. In fact, there’s hardly an ideal listening position; the listener might be situated at innumerable different points in the *open*—as opposed to the “empty”—space of the plaza. Partially because of this, the status of the work’s “participants” is ambiguous.

In a way, the openness of the plaza is its most salient characteristic; during the time when Occupy Oakland’s general assemblies were more regularly attended, the space served less to demonstrate the mass of people involved (to say, city hall) than it did to force mutual recognition; you couldn’t show up without being seen, without being implicated.

Harbour and Im – We certainly don’t think of the square as neutral, having spent a great deal of time there before and after the encampment. We think commonality is a main difference between the current state of Occupy and what we would, perhaps incorrectly, describe as its peak. The various meetings and organizational processes occurring currently (in the fall of 2013) are open and welcoming, but out of the public eye (due to a mix of media focus and scale). But there was a point when a critical mass was reached, during which the movement’s intrusion into daily urban life forced the discussion outside of limited circles—Occupy as a magnetic force drawing and magnifying dissent—and this is missed. We’ve been thinking a lot about that experience in relation to the refugee camp. In a sense the difference is one of necessity, with the Occupy Oakland camp being necessary but less urgent than a refugee camp. But it could be easily argued that what happened around the US during the Occupy protests of 2011

arose from vital needs. There is something potent we think in the figure of the lone person in his or her car, stuck in traffic behind a protest or, say, the bicycle assemblies associated with Critical Mass rides. The camp, as sign of the incommensurability of contemporary liberal capitalism and justice, had a powerful resonance outside of Occupy's participants.

Abdalian – You, understandably, place a great deal of value on the camp as an image of the 99%—a “sign” of this disenfranchised, dispossessed group. I agree with you that the camps were important for their imagery and for what they represent: notably a place to experiment and develop of-fensives against the destructive situations capitalism creates. And indeed, there are lessons to be gleaned from the performance of the encampment. For example, Occupy's insistence on the camp as an “autonomous zone” was naive. Occupy was arguably over invested in that utopia (“no place”). For one thing, even while the camps attempted to offer alternatives to the economic, political, and social systems that prevail from its “outside,” the very space of the camp was run through—even constituted—by those systems. I share the critique Jasper Bernes raises, that *the camp, as an end in itself, depends upon the fantasy of creating communism in a small park, ignoring the larger social context on which it depends. . . . There was no way for the camps to persevere and fix the problems they encountered, at least not without a radical transformation and expansion of the ground on which they were constructed.*³

Perhaps this transformation will ensue, in part, because of the galvanizing stimulus of the Occupy camps and assemblies and because of the myriad communities Occupy connects through a lateral network that isn't synonymous with Occupy but owes its breadth, in part, to Occupy. In time we must reconsider the form of the camp, but I'm presently more interested in the political and social actions engendered therein, which must now happen outside the camp; for instance, the prisoner solidarity movement, foreclosure defense for families, the recent fast-food workers strike, etc. This activism existed before but was expanded and connected through Occupy.

Harbour and Im – Perhaps we can talk a bit about your upcoming project for Prospect.3, the biennial in New Orleans. Prospect is an opportunity to produce new works in a wide variety of sites—and not simply a presentation of esteemed practices like other US biennials such as the Whitney and Carnegie International. Having grown up in New Orleans and having its landscape inform you, how are you approaching this project? Obviously we're still a ways away from the opening in October 2014, but maybe you could talk broadly about it. How has the process of working on this context been different from others—perhaps others where your connection to the place isn't as personal?

Abdalian – This is the first biennial in which I'll take part that I've seen previous instalments of. So not only do I have a long relationship with the city, but, more importantly, I have observed the various efforts to propose Prospect as specific to New Orleans. Prospect.1, which happened in 2008, shaped the way I approach context specificity and think about the functions of artwork within a city. There were things that worked really well in that initial iteration; for instance, the exhibition drew visitors through the city for a purpose other than disaster tourism, and perhaps because the exhibition occurred in New Orleans only three years after Hurricane Katrina, many artists felt compelled to respond to the extraordinary context in which their work appeared. For Prospect.3, I was interested to find a publicly accessible space to work with and was drawn to sites on the Mississippi River.

Harbour and Im – Finally, your works typically use minimal means, a combination of bare materials and what is already present at a site. Do you use a minimum of aesthetic gestures as an expedient—avoiding evidence of the hand, for example—in order to focus upon the content of the work (or, say, to allow the work to more keenly focus the viewer's attention on the world), or do you feel there is a latent, unexplored potential in, say, minimalist music and art to involve context more closely?

Abdalian – If the works are subtle, this is born from an effort to allow the site to speak for itself; the hand

is perhaps then reduced to a qualifying gesture. Whether the site is a museum or a public space, I'm interested in the interaction of the artwork and its site because this interaction, for me, is part of the work's content. The artwork is experienced *within* the site, as opposed to *at* the site.

About the Authors

Zarouhie Abdalian is an artist currently based in Oakland, CA. She has had solo exhibitions at Dillard University Art Gallery, New Orleans, and at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Her work has been presented in numerous international exhibitions, including at the 8th Berlin Biennale, the 2nd CAFAM Biennial, Beijing, and the 12th Istanbul Biennial. In 2012, she received SFMOMA's SECA Art Award and in 2014 she will present solo exhibitions at David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, and at Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Aaron Harbour is an Oakland-based curator, writer, and artist. He is Co-director of Et al., a gallery program in San Francisco, and has additionally curated exhibitions at the Popular Workshop, Important Projects, NADA Miami and New York, MacArthur B Arthur, Liminal Space, and Royal Nonesuch Gallery, among others. He runs *Curiously Direct*, an art criticism blog on Facebook, and has additionally written for *Art Practical*, *Decoy Magazine*, *Art Cards*, and several small publications and artist catalogues.

Jackie Im is a curator and writer based in Oakland, CA. She has contributed to exhibitions at the Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art, the Walter and McBean Galleries at SFIA, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Queens Nails, the Mills College Art Museum, and MacArthur B Arthur. She holds a BA in Art History from Mills College and an MA in Curatorial Practice from California College of the Arts. She is currently Co-director of Et al., a gallery in San Francisco's Chinatown, with Facundo Argañaraz and Aaron Harbour.

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