

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc



Heather Phillipson, *Halah!* (2013)

Heather Phillipson

Yes, Surprising Is Existence In The Post-vegetal Cosmorama –

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK
Other orifices beside the mouth feature in Heather Phillipson's solo show, entitled *Yes, Surprising Is Existence In The Post-vegetal Cosmorama* –. Most notably, looking back after passing through one doorway garlanded with artificial flowers brings the realisation that you have just been birthed from between the thighs of a structure redolent of Niki de Saint Phalle's 1966 installation *HON – en katedral*. With characteristic Phillipson humour, it also resembles two giant bananas. But her main fascination is the mouth, its status as permeable border and unreliable mediator between self and exterior, and the three videos shown in custom-built environments here all lead viewers to experience the world through this ever restless frame.

Entering the exhibition through a distinctly vulval archway, a narrow red corridor leads to a mouth-like space with rounded walls and soft, white cushions, the setting for *Immediately And For A Short Time Balloons Weapons Too-tight Clothing Worries Of All Kinds* (2013). Here, among a gaudy collage of blandly gesturing TV presenters, street scenes, syrupy Easy Listening music, footage of Phillipson's hands leafing through an atlas and superimposed text – “*funky shops*”, “*hi dad*” – the mouth is revealed as a site of anxiety. Degraded advertising footage shows a woman blithely cleaning her teeth with a device worn on her finger, and frequent interruptions come from the strident beep of an alarm clock and shots of a ‘Now wash your hands’ sign. Meanwhile, Phillipson narrates the process of waking up, struck afresh by the bizarreness and mundanity of her

existence, speaking to both herself and the viewers in a part-reassuring, part-deadpan tone that resembles the rambling internal explanations we often offer our own inner critics.

Viewed from inside a speedboat beached amid a sea of water bottles, its fluid progress halted, *Halah!* (2013) sets footage of tunnels and gushing water against more agile speech, the mouth describing itself with ease – “*your lips, your teeth, your gums, the tip of the tongue*” – and looping deftly through tongue-twisters. For all the enjoyment, there's a sense of danger, possibly echoing Phillipson's experience working with poetry, that words could become uncontrollable and run away with themselves: “*I hope this doesn't leave a bad taste*” she muses in her narration.

Indeed, the third video, *A Is To D What E Is To H* (2011), suggests how, if mental hygiene is not maintained, words can

easily become infected and treacherous. Projected onto the inner windscreen of a Peugeot 406 saloon car painted bright yellow and sitting in a blood-like patch of red, the film recounts how Phillipson wanted to make a story about French cuisine. Or was that French kissing? The phrases become entangled; the car-wash sloshing wetly against the windscreen would suggest the latter, and from there on her account of an orally satisfying encounter in France becomes embroiled in double entendres, as uneasy about its desires as the soundtrack, which jumps from Saint-Saëns' “*Aquarium*” to Technotronic's “*Pump Up The Jam*”.

On exiting, I felt something like a piece of chewing gum that had spent the last hour swirling around someone's mouth, absorbing flavours and buffeted by words, before being spat out into the world.
Abi Bliss

Zarouhie Abdalian

Matrix 249

UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, USA

The Oakland based sound, sculpture and installation artist Zarouhie Abdalian's work uses silence and invisibility to push the outer reaches of perception, often in dialogue with the location of her work. The artist's first museum exhibition features three new works that variously deconstruct the American civil rights-era song “*If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)*” by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, which was famously covered by Peter, Paul and Mary, Aretha Franklin, The Four Tops and many others. The main refrain expresses the power of three tools, a hammer, a bell and a song, which the lyrics proclaim represent justice,

freedom and love. For the exhibition, Abdalian builds her own hammer, bell and song. Each of these works is displayed with a limit or an omission, perhaps to indicate that the struggle which motivated Seeger and Hays in 1949 is still ongoing.

For *Each Envelope As Before*, a number of small hammers are encased inside a black plexiglass vitrine. The hidden hammers furiously tap away at their box, echoing out through the Berkeley Art Museum's open, cavernous architecture. Facing the vitrine a few steps away, *As A Demonstration* sits on a pedestal, an alarm bell in a clear vacuum chamber, whose silent ringing is seemingly in time with the hammers. Nearby, *Ab Libitum (If I Had a Hammer)* runs instrument wire across a jutting, rough cement wall, with bone bridge saddles holding the

strings in place. The position of the saddles visually represents the pitches within the song, although the work is not meant to be played but read by the viewer.

It's no accident that Abdalian decided to centre the show around a popular protest song in Berkeley, a city whose history is emblematic of student revolt and the progressive movement. Place is always a factor in her work, such as in her 2011 site-specific sound installation at the Istanbul Biennial, *Having Been Held Under The Sway*, where tactile transducers emitting infrasonic test tones rattled the walls of an empty white room. The work seemed to capture the underlying tension and restlessness brought on by the Arab Spring of that year. Similarly, there's a tacit message to Abdalian's choice to

dissect “*If I Had A Hammer*” in Berkeley.

The restraint placed on the sculptures suggests that the principles of justice, freedom and love advocated in the song remain out of reach. At the same time, Abdalian's use of silence and concealment signal their modified tactical currency in a new era, one typified by the creepings of big data and the threat of algorithmic legibility.

As the artist acknowledges, WikiLeaks made “*If I Had A Hammer*” its official anthem, posting the lyrics on the “*Inspirational Material*” page of their website. Clearly, the ambitions of hammers, bells and songs remain the same, although the ways and means of the game itself have changed.
Ceci Moss