

Art in America

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CORRALES, N.M.

Christine Wallers and Steve Peters at Old San Ysidro Church

The Alchemy of Desire, an installation by artist Christine Wallers and composer Steve Peters in a small, empty, deconsecrated adobe church, consisted of 13 large, polished-brass bowls, each resting on a square steel plate suspended not far above the floor by wires running from the exposed beams. Eight hung in the nave and three in the apse, with an additional two in the transept. Unseen transducers were screwed under each bowl, with an additional six mounted in the ceiling. These directed sound through the metal, causing the bowls to sing. The sound was based on several voices reading 300 people's written wishes for a better world.

Each bowl had a different level of electronic processing that reduced the comprehensible words into increasingly pure tones, which were then transmitted so that they were barely audible. The sound was nearly abstract at the entry and became increasingly recognizable as the product of human voices as you approached the apse.

Contemporary art that has as its subject contemplation and, essentially, prayer, is open to accusations of New Age cliché and risks having its intention far override execution. But like Wolfgang Laib, Wallers and Peters managed to create a space that invited viewers to appreciate perceptual increments, here the subtlety of metal on metal and barely heard sound. You had to lean in, to slow down. You were quietly conscious of your own heightened attention to the work as you experienced it. Shifting focus between structure and substance, the pair produced a kind of synesthesia—a sense of listening to what is seen, or seeing what is heard.

The success of *The Alchemy of Desire* was in the undeniable and easily accessible plenitude that comes from simplicity of means, carefully worked out. The combination of rigorously reductive design with highly technical rendering of sound helped to erase the sectarian specificity of the Old San Ysidro Church and avoided smothering aspirations with too much fancy and fantasy. At the same time, the voices made the viewer feel a part of the endless continuity of hopes. —Aline Brandauer