

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

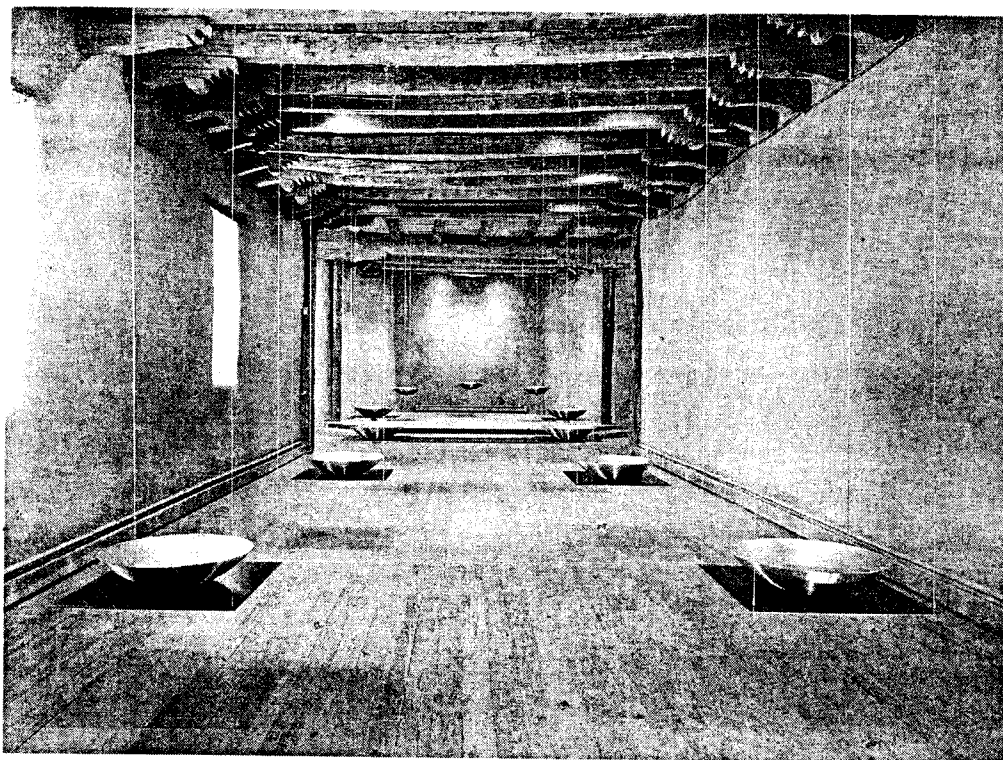
CHRISTINE WALLERS AND STEVE PETERS ALCHEMY OF DESIRE

OLD SAN YSIDRO CHURCH
CORRALES, NEW MEXICO

"The spiritual in art requires strategies for its protection. It is easily debased, or simply mistaid, by too many or incorrect words. It can become a burden for artists who acknowledge a metaphysical dimension but do not wish to be construed as 'spiritual,' as if they were wearing clerical garb and must behave. And then, no matter how 'spiritual' the artist, his or her struggle is to achieve a sensuous sign astonishing in its own right."

—Robert Lipsey, "An Art of Our Own," in brochure for *Alchemy of Desire*

Astonishing in its own right. Unless it finds other receptive and suitable sites outside Corrales, *The Alchemy of Desire*, an installation by visual artist Christine Wallers and sound artist Steve Peters, may have the distinction of being one of the strongest works ever missed in New Mexico. Its brief tenure at the Old San Ysidro Church over two weekends in September transfixed those who experienced it. On entering the west portal, a visitor easily takes in the whole space of the interior, from the nave or body of the church to the crossing space—its arms extending on either side to form the transept—and beyond to the confines of the altar, in the chancel. The eye's traverse to the east end follows a procession of paired, parallel rows of floating brass bowls, some two feet in diameter at the rim, resting on flat raw-steel plates secured at the corners by cables suspended from the beamed ceiling. Serving as side-aisles, the two rows of suspended vessels hang like thuribles, four on each side, their height increased by precise increments, rising like incense as they approach the altar. The silence is palpable—made so by the whispers.



Installation view

Voices, recorded and acoustically refined into tonal whispers, emanate from a central speaker and six transducers at various points in the ceiling—the latter devices serve to convey sound through an object. Below, a transducer is attached to the bottom of each vessel to capture and amplify the transmitted sound, converting each brass basin into a speaker cone. The sound amplified by the brass vessels and the lights that highlight their chased metallic hollows combine to evoke a pervasive sense of limpid water in each basin. The overall effect is singular and seamless. The old adobe church itself seems tremulous in response, as if its walls were stirring to the voices of silence, to a dormant memory of its former sacred functions.

As art, *The Alchemy of Desire* is a virtuoso blend of sound and object intended to produce an aesthetic event. As installation, it serves to define the unique integrative power of this hybrid genre, one that is more often a reflexive symptom of the increasing displacement of modern life than a studied response to it. The evolution of this genre seems to validate, even mock, the insights of cultural historian André Malraux, who in his landmark essay "Museum without Walls" wrote of the modern rendering of the seamless weave of culture and its artistic expressions, a phenomenon manifest in the rise of the museum: "[Museums] have imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude towards the work of art. For they have tended to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions and to transform even portraits into pictures....In the past a Gothic statue was a component part of the Cathedral...the modern art gallery not only isolates the work of art from its context but

makes it forgather with rival or even hostile works. It is a confrontation of metamorphoses." (trans., Stuart Gilbert.)

Installation—when it is not the puerile cant or conceptualist pap of an artist's ego—can give potent voice to this confrontation. But its great virtue is instanced in a rare occasion like *Alchemy*, where the work transcends the needed cathartic effect achieved by capturing our modern sense of displacement to impose on its disparate objects and images not merely an artistic unity, but an aesthetic one. This integrative experience in *Alchemy* is poignantly conveyed in the personal "prayers" for the world that were solicited by the artists prior to the installation, and rendered digitally into barely audible sounds as expressive—and mute—as any Gregorian chant—a process, in the words of the artists' statement, "of taking other people's wishes into ourselves, giving voice to them, creating a safe place for them."

As installation, the metamorphoses of *Alchemy* confront the displacement of the "art object" of the museum or gallery—even of installation itself. On the level of metaphor, its visible signs and audible imagery address the estrangement of faith, and of the spiritual, from contemporary life. The inspired ensemble of *The Alchemy of Desire* became "a sensuous sign astonishing in its own right."

Steve Peters has two CDs available: *Emanations* (00 Discs #0034); *In Memory of the Four Winds* (Pianissimo #01). *Transilluminate*, a solo exhibition of work by Christine Wallers, is on view during November at Whelan Gallery in Santa Fe.

RICHARD TOBIN

wishes for the world

Art exhibit at the Old San Ysidro Church incorporates whisperings of people's dreams into sculpture

By Wesley Pulka
For the Journal

Christine Wallers and Steve Peters have filled the Old San Ysidro Church with moans and whispers in their "The Alchemy of Desire" sculpture and sound installation open today through Sunday.

The whispers were created from recordings made by 32 people reading 300 answers to the question: "What is (are) your deepest wish(es) for the world at this moment?"

Waller and Peters mailed and e-mailed that question around the world to friends and strangers, and they got back more than 300 replies. A 300-page written text accompanies the exhibition. Responses came from all over America, Asia, Europe and Australia.

"Our idea was to reproduce the experience of prayer and meditation without sectarian bias," Peters said. "We also wanted people to think beyond their personal needs. We got the idea from our own question about this old church. If these walls could speak, what would they say? We wanted to be conduits for the answer."

Waller is a visual artist with an interest in environmental issues and conceptual art, and Peters is a contemporary composer and producer. They met two years ago following a conversation Peters had with artist Reggie Gammon.

"I was visiting Reggie in his studio and sharing some of my ideas

when he asked me if I knew Christine," Peters said. "I looked up her Web site and decided that Reggie was right about us having similar attitudes about art."

The two started talking about working together in the fall of 1998. The result of that interaction is a sculpture consisting of 13 large brass bowls on square platforms suspended from the ceiling by braided wire. The sound comes from transducers mounted on the bottoms of the bowls and on the wooden ceiling.

Peters said a transducer is an audio speaker without a cone. By mounting one on the bottom of each bowl, he is able to create a complete speaker and transmit sound into the room. The same principle applies to the wooden ceiling, which vibrates like a speaker.

If you go

WHAT: "The Alchemy of Desire," a mixed-media sculpture and sound installation by Christine Wallers and Steve Peters

WHEN: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. today, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: Old San Ysidro Church, Old Church Road, Corrales

HOW MUCH: Free



ROSE PALMISANO/JOURNAL

CHURCH SPACE: Christine Wallers, left, and Steve Peters take a break in their "Alchemy of Desire" sculpture and sound installation at the Old San Ysidro Church in Corrales. Their mixed-media work will be on display starting today.

The combined sounds from the bowls and ceiling create an eerie atmosphere that reaches the senses at the liminal edge. Wallers' original concept included water in the bowls that would vibrate and reflect light throughout the space but a high volume of sound would be required to move the water.

During the assembly stage of the project, Peters and Wallers decided that the water would spoil the subtlety of the installation. They wanted to emulate the experience of private prayer that had taken place in the church for generations.

"We felt that the building was a vessel that was filled with all of this intention," Wallers said. "How could we materialize that intention? We also felt compelled to respect the building and the parishioners who had prayed there before its de-consecration."

Because of the busy schedule at

the church — which is used by community groups and artists and for public meetings — Wallers and Peters were not able to experience the work until its final installation in the building.

They had constructed 20 bowls but decided on 13 during the all-day and all-night assembly process.

"We let the space dictate how it was to be used. We weren't trying to symbolize anything. The number of vessels and the sound level are right for the building," Wallers said, in reference to the number 13 being a possible representation of Christ and his 12 disciples.

Waller studied at the Chicago Art Institute and Columbia College, where she received a bachelor's of fine arts degree. She came to New Mexico 11 years ago following a trip through Mexico.

"I had been accepted into Rutgers and Cranbrook for graduate

school, but I found them to be too much like where I had already been. I wanted to get away from Chicago where I grew up and push myself to a new level of experience. When I visited Mexico, I felt the strong culture and pull of history that I can't put into words. But I decided it was too complicated to live and study there."

"When I came through New Mexico, I found that same deep culture and history so I decided to be here for a while," Wallers said.

She said one of the attractions of New Mexico were the old churches that dot the landscape. Every fall, she makes a pilgrimage to as many churches as she can.

"I'm really glad that the project worked out in San Ysidro because I had first visited the church about seven years ago and found it to be an interesting place," Wallers said.

Waller is represented in New

Mexico by Whelan Gallery in Santa Fe. Her solo show opens there on Nov. 3.

Peters received his bachelor's of arts degree at Evergreen College in Washington. After graduating, he pursued advanced meditation training and training on musical instruments, including old-time fiddling, Javanese gamelan and Middle Eastern drumming.

He has produced and participated in more than 100 recordings and performances. Peters is the founder of Nonsequitur Inc. a private non-profit corporation producing recordings, performances and exhibits of experimental music, sound and inter-media arts in Albuquerque since 1989.

Waller and Peters plan to publish the written portion of the work with photographs of the installation and a CD of the sounds as a limited-edition artist book.