

Hedrick D.

Sound-track to reality

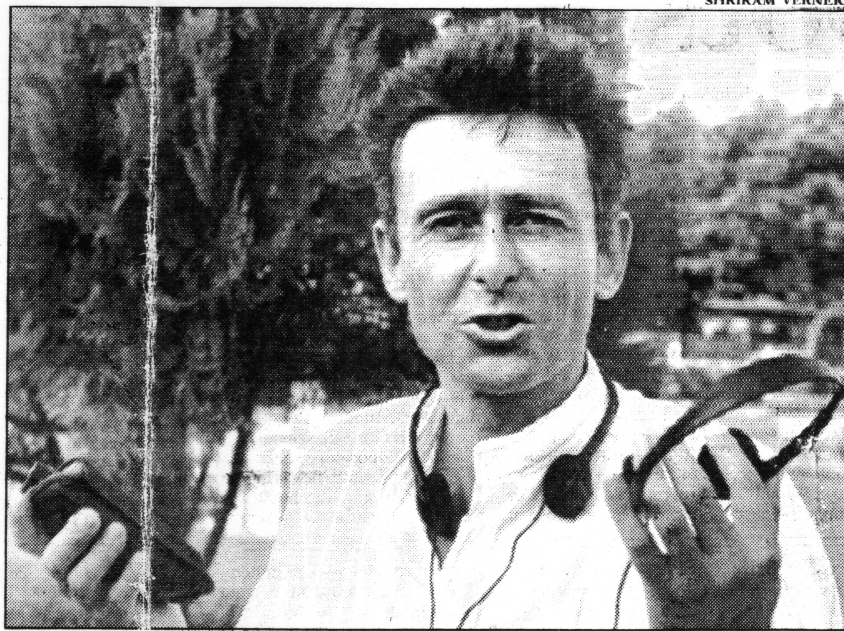
Ranjit Hoskote discovers the true meaning of ritual on the 'sound-walk' on which German artist Walter Siegfried conducts the interested. This is part of the Max Mueller Bhavan's seminar on Space at the NCPA

SHIRIKAM VERNEKA

WALTER Siegfried's new planet is tricky; he glides serenely across its surface, having described himself as a *Grenzganger*, or border-walker. For the rest of us, the Walkman-induced dimension of consciousness turns the world inside-out: the gravel crunches in our ears, even when we're walking on flagstones; the trees before our eyes are quiet, but their birds call out within our heads. Our movements are less unthinking, more alert.

Walter Siegfried's work is in formed by studies in psychology, art-history, and music; and shaped by the conviction that "art must break out of the museum, out of its own fictive world, and turn back to reality". His 'sound-track to reality' — the walk we've just taken — has literally grown, therefore, out of his immediate context. As a participant in the Max Muller Bhavan's seminar on *Space*, Siegfried has spent the last week in the NCPA complex; his strolls around it, when recorded, have provided him with an 'acoustic topography', which is then counterposed to the 'concrete space' of the stroll he conducts, so that it is a subtle *sur* reality which we immerse ourselves in, when we set out.

"I don't want to impose an order from the mind," he says, preferring to let a form emerge from the material itself, from the "different musicalities of different listeners". In discussion, he traces this attitude back to a confrontation with Central Europe's historical crisis, and to Tzara and Duchamp's mutinies against the conventional, framed art of the owned artefact. Hence, the moustachioed Mona Lisa, the cycle-wheel on the pedestal, the



Walter Siegfried: "Art must break out of the museum"

commode. Objects, normally banished from the regime of high art, aggressively located in its terrain. Or high art held up to ridicule.

Siegfried's own generation has developed beyond this adolescent stage of demonstration; besides himself, artists like Fridhelm Klein, Michaela Schleunung, Hella Berent, and Fritz Rahmann, have reacted against "the production-consumption economy's art of solidity", its art of having, possession, residues, by moving towards an art of being, participation, and process. In expressive terms, this has meant a renunciation of the spatial arts (to use

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Lessing's phrase) — painting, sculpture, architecture — and an embracing of the temporal arts, of dance and music, disembodied forms which float, allude to absences, possibilities.

The political choice implicit in Siegfried's own art is clear: he rejects the notion of captured form, in favour of fluidity; he abstracts features from the fabric of living, but returns them to the locus of their origin, without exploitative material interference.

And in this, he differs from the Duchamp perspective, reflecting that "the artistic attitude must regain its ability to engage in what may seem to be, ordinary. For Duchamp, the ordinary object was merely an emblem of defiance against the canon; to Siegfried the ordinary has an inherent value. Saturated by excessive imitation, the Duchamp manner has now been institutionalised in another canon; Siegfried's creations are far too gracefully mobile to be pinned down.

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A further twist is acquired when the artist observes that "aesthetics has a function, to determine a mode of behaviour in relation to the environment", suggesting that art is a medium by which communication between humanity and nature may be renewed. None of this proposes the automatism thought to characterise installation art; the ordinary, for Siegfried, is not identical with the normal, but with the overlooked. He de-familiarises, to re-acquaint. And whilst the Duchampist installation is a ready-made object isolated from its usual context, Siegfried's work involves conscious composition. Far from being an arbitrary aggregation of elements, his sound-track evinces a polyphonic structure, counterpointing motifs, various times of day; the rhythm of horses in the evening breaks into our expectations at dawn; the waking birds intrude into our picture of noon; motor-launches speak of a different period than do cows, and fast cars collide with crickets stilling at midnight.

Irresistibly, the sound-walk develops in a ritual time; and passages, stations, gestures of observation and awaiting, the peripatetic motion translate as a *parikrama*, and the true meaning of the ritual dawns on one. The awareness of the ecology — if only the NCPA's ecology — is heightened; the cinnamon cat, the cattle, the alarm siren, the ochre stones, the exhaust fan, the amused guards cease to be unnoticed predicates, are of importance to the passing mind.

Oscillating between a programme of *motifs* and the abstraction of concrete music, poised between the cyclical import of ritual polyphony and the linearity of 'concrete space' — travel, Walter Siegfried's sound-walk illuminates what he has elsewhere termed the 'thickness of reality'.

He waves us to a pause. I hear his voice from a later conversation: "We have lost the sense of the density of reality; we can't wait for the dense moment to show itself." ■
