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## A Parisian Landmark Heard in a New Light

By JOHN ROCKWELL,

The Arc de Triomphe is not only one of the most famous tourist attractions in Paris, it is also a sacred national site, where a flame burns for France's unknown soldier. But until the end of August, it has been transformed into a vanguard artwork by an American sound artist, Bill Fontana, and Paris seems pleased.

As you approach the arch from below, through the two tunnels leading under the endlessly revolving traffic of the Etoile, ocean waves from hidden loudspeakers caress the ear. The exterior of the arch has been subtly festooned with 20 beige loudspeakers, on two levels. They project more sea sounds, from gentle swooshes to thunderous crashes, toward street level, transmitted live by digital phone lines from Normandy.

On top of the arch, a place with fabulous views in all directions, 16 more loudspeakers project live sounds of Paris, from whatever direction you're looking: a Metro station, the bell tower of the Hotel de Ville, tourists buzzing in front of the "Mona Lisa," diners chatting at the Cafe Deux Magots and La Coupole, travelers at the Gare de Lyons, promenaders in the Jardin de Luxembourg and the Bagatelle, traders yelling and shouting at the Bourse and more. Island of Relative Peace

The piece is called "Sound Island" because, Mr. Fontana explains, the rush of liquid sound projecting from the arch is supposed to isolate those standing underneath it from the honk and roar of traffic (there is no sound projected directly beneath the arch). Just how complete the illusion is depends on the volume of the waves and the willingness of an observer to concentrate. "If you really stop and pay attention," Mr. Fontana insisted last week, "you have this really amazing sensation of cars circling the monument and you don't hear them."

Curiously, Mr. Fontana, whose very name sounds wet, is but one of two California artists in their 40's named Bill who have prominent installations with watery themes in Paris just now. Both installations are connected, directly or at one remove, with John G. Hanhardt, the curator of video and film at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

The other artist is Bill Viola, from Long Beach (Mr. Fontana has lived in the San Francisco area since 1978, though he says he may now relocate to Paris). Mr. Viola was just chosen as the official United States representative to the 1995 Venice Biennale. His "Stations," a serene yet vaguely troubling video installation with a generous sonic component, is in a basement "black box" space at the new American Center in the Bercy district of Paris.

The center, in Frank Gehry's wonderfully cockeyed yet eminently practical building, finally opened its doors on June 7. And though organizational problems persist -- an executive director has yet to be chosen, for one thing -- it has got down to the business of presenting exhibitions, performances, conferences, video and film screenings and installations.

"Stations" is, so far, the most impressive. On view at the center until December, it offers five vertically hung video screens that, in the darkened room, reflect onto five slabs of shiny black granite. Suspended on the screens are the upside-down, life-size images of five naked people: a 7-year-old boy, a man of 87, a couple, each of whom is 30, and a very pregnant woman around 40.

The room is filled with the gurgling sounds of water. Occasionally, a head will disappear from view, leaving reflecting rings as it pokes above the surface (this is at the bottom of the screen) for air. Bodies drift and bob, somewhere between the womb and a laboratory pickling jar. After a while, on different cycles, one figure or another will drift off screen, leaving it dark and blank. Then there is a sudden crash of churning, bubbling water as the figure plunges in (from below), and that cycle begins again.

Mr. Hanhardt of the Whitney was the curator for Mr. Viola's piece, which was commissioned for the center by the Bohen

Foundation, of which Frederick B. Henry, the new co-chairman of the center and its dominant force, is president. Mr. Hanhardt also arranged for a piece by Mr. Fontana for the Whitney in 1991: in that piece, the artist recreated the sound of Niagara Falls on the museum's outside walls. It was that piece, the artist reports, that gave him the idea for "Sound Island" at the Arc de Triomphe.

Mr. Fontana presented the idea -- along with another, as yet uncommissioned project called "Falling Voices," in which the sounds of Paris's old central market, Les Halles, are to be reborn in a park that now stands on part of that site -- at an exhibition last winter called "Paris Ville Lumiere." The exhibition was held at the Espace Electra, a Left Bank gallery run by the state electricity monopoly, Electricite de France. Avoiding Red Tape

The Arc de Triomphe idea attracted attention in all the right places. In amazingly rapid time, compared with the delays caused by the controversies surrounding so many American public-art pieces and also with the norm in bureaucratized France, official hurdles were cleared. The project was officially approved on April 7 and inaugurated by Jacques Toubon, the Minister of Culture, on June 5.

Cleverly -- Mr. Fontana calls it a "fantastic coincidence" -- a new idea was added to the piece after its winter presentation. That was to make the sea sounds come from Normandy beachheads, hence linking the work not only to France's heroic past but also to the 50th anniversary of the D-Day invasion and of the liberation of Paris, on Aug. 25.

With that link, Mr. Fontana was able to allay concerns of the Conservators of the Flame, who oversee the shrine to France's unknown soldier. "Those old soldiers with their medals have held daily ceremonies since 1921 and this American artist comes along and proposes to cover their monument with sound," he said. "I think they've been remarkably open-minded about it." Mr. Fontana added that during their ceremonies, he turns down the volume a bit.

Mr. Fontana has a considerable track record worldwide since 1976, but had no projects heretofore realized in Paris. That he could gain access to such a landmark had something to do with a special cross-departmental division within the Ministry of Culture that is intended to cut through red tape. It was this division, along with the plastic arts division, that gave final approval and provided financial support in cooperation with the City of Paris, A.T. & T. and other corporate sponsors. Response -- both in Paris newspapers and, Mr. Fontana says, from members of the public, who are given "Sound Island" brochures when they purchase tickets to go up to the top of the arch -- has been friendly and favorable.

Mr. Fontana is a sound artist, which means he makes art out of sound. Some might call that music, but like other such artists -- Max Neuhaus, Liz Phillips and Brian Eno in his ambient mode -- he has received nearly all his support from museums and visual-arts patrons. He says he's used to it.

"I wish that people interested in music would be interested in this work, but in fact it's the people in the visual arts who seem to understand it a lot more," Mr. Fontana said. "I think the artistic questions this kind of piece gets into are questions that visual artists have dealt with."