

Soundscapes R Us

By Kyle Gann

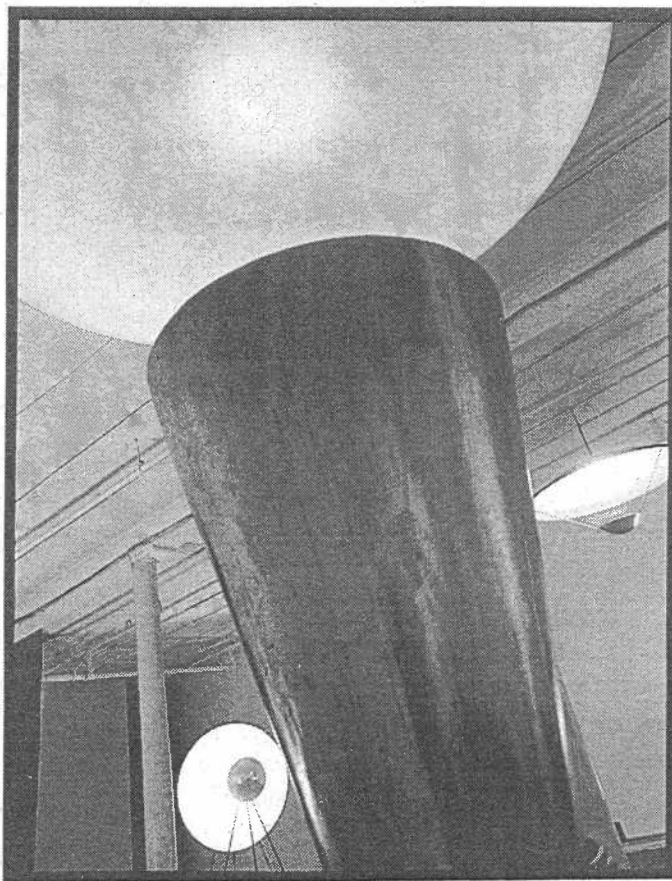
Bill and Mary Buchen

A 2000-year-old bell from Burma, crickets from Guatemala, frog croaks from Bali and Mexico, the burbling of a Mr. Coffee machine, a Thai farmer's pig call, the great chime in Venice's St. Mark's Square, a mullah's overamplified wailings from an Indian mosque—these are some of the hundred-plus sounds in Bill and Mary Buchen's *Sound Engine*, on exhibit through June 20 at Art in General (Tuesdays through Saturdays, 12 to 6, 79 Walker Street, 219-0473). The Buchens travel the world with DAT recorders (last year they spent four months in India), bringing back a sampler full of sonic landscapes. At the installation, strolling listeners trigger the sampler, causing it to shoot sounds into parabolic dishes, which in turn sonically remap the space.

The secret of appreciating a good sound installation is to stick around, and in this case to keep moving. You'll spot the light sensors that translate motions into signals for the unseen souped-up Akai sampler, but resist the temptation to wave your hand in front of them like a kid playing with an automatic door. The noises are layered with cinematic realism—a temple bell rings above, roosters crow yonder, children cavort behind you—and are best absorbed at a casual pace. The Buchens are afraid it will ruin the piece's mys-

tery to reveal that the sensor nearest the black curtain opens up the next of the 29 soundscapes, but I want you to hear the exhausting variety of clangs and calls, the totality of which would occupy at least an hour. If you go with the right attitude, you'll have the right experience.

Sound Engine, though, is only one Buchen project, and if you agree with me that new music ultimately has to get out into the real world, their other activities are even more exciting. This September, when new elementary school P.S. 23 opens in the South Bronx (Washington Avenue and 182nd



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The installation generates 29 sonic fields.

Street), it will have in front a sound park that the Buchens are designing and assembling. The park is part of New York City's Percent for Art program, under which each new city-owned building must delegate 1 per cent of its total construction budget to art. In the P.S. 23 case that comes to \$200,000—"a real budget," the Buchens agree.

"When you design for K through five you get down like this," says Bill, dropping to his knees to suggest a kid's perspective. South Bronx youths will surely receive a buzz from the concrete bench the Buchens have designed with tubes running through it, so kids can whisper to their friends 10 feet away on the opposite side. "This is an idea of passive sound sculpture," Bill says. "If you don't relate with it, it doesn't make any sound."

Nearby will be two sets of bronze tables and seats that are actually drums, their surfaces varying in thickness to provide different pitches. A center table is for group jamming, the seats are for competitions and smaller kids; Bill, trained in the arts of jazz and Indian drumming (Mary started as a visual artist), demonstrates impressively on a model. The Buchens have already built drumyards at Candlestick State Recreation Area in San Francisco and Socrates Sculpture Park by the East River at Long Island City, and they have another planned for the Liberty Science Center going up in Jersey City.

Other pieces planned for P.S. 23 revel in acoustics; in the "Parabolic Bench" kids can reverb their voices between two steel dishes. Since the school involved the Buchens from the ground up, no son-

ic opportunity has been overlooked. "There's a law," Bill explains, "that you have to build a detention tank underneath the playground so that rainwater isn't flushed out into the streets, causing flooding. We noticed this, and said, Here's an untapped acoustic space. What do we do with it? It's below our feet, we can't see it. So we're going to drill holes into it so children can have access to this cave." The "Echo Chamber," as they're calling it, will have three pipes, one for speaking, two for listening, and children can hear their voices resonate through the underground. Again, since the world-tripping Buchens are into tunings, the pipes will differ in length for different frequencies.

In fact, the Buchens love to subvert rigid Euramerican sound environments. They were delighted to find that the school budget called for a carillon. "However," notes Mary, "the plans called for this carillon to play Westminster chimes every hour on the hour, and we said, 'Ooh, this is boring.'" Bill: "I thought it was a melody of oppression." Mary: "So we proposed to change the bells to a five-note pentatonic scale, and to add a programmable keyboard so that students or teachers can program any tune they want, up to eight tunes, and can change it all the time." Nice idea.

Being cast in bronze and steel even as you read this, the pieces are as vandal-proof as anything gets. My first taste of the Buchens' work was a 1982 wind harp on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, which got pushed over after one day. "We've learned a lot since then," says Bill. "In a world of things that may not work, this is going to work." ■

LOVE HURTS