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Writings

## NADA - an Experience in Sound

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*Nada* is a sound installation about listening. It wants to open our ears and provide a time and place to explore a most essential aspect of our lives - sound. It is a listening journey from noise to silence, from the external to the internal, from acoustic onslaught to acoustic subtlety, from worldly to sacred sound experiences. The installation challenges ingrained listening habits, numbed ears, hurried behaviour. As one moves through the installation certain questions become inevitable: What kind of listeners, what kind of soundmakers are we? How is it possible that our urban soundscapes assault our ears and bodies and intrude into our innermost space of silence. How could we let this happen?

*Nada* invites us to grapple with these questions. At the same time, it is a journey to discover listening itself, to allow our inner being to be touched through the act of listening. It is a safe place where all sounds can be invited into open ears, where ears can be curious, where they can search and discover.

The seed for this installation was planted in 1992 when I was invited by Max Mueller Bhavan (the German Goethe Institut) in Delhi to conduct a soundscape workshop. Two young architect students, Savinder Anand and Mona Madan, were among the 15 or so participants. Four years later - by this time they had established their own architecture business, had participated in a few more soundscape workshops, and had done much of their own reading and research - they decided that some action regarding soundscape activities in India was long overdue. They came up with the idea for *Nada*. I was invited to collaborate on the project as composer/sound designer. Veena Sharma, also a participant in the 1992 workshop, contributed to the installation with her deep knowledge about sound and the sacred. Financial support for the project came from Max Mueller Bhavan in Delhi, and the building - the Mati Ghar (the mud house) - was made available by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

The Mati Ghar is a circular structure made of mud or earth, which was dug up from its immediate surroundings, hence the name. Around a central, circular room are situated two arcade-like galleries with many connecting archways. Upstairs above the centre is another circular space with a dome. When we first visited the building in January of 1997 we felt that the building was ideal for the installation and especially suited for the concept of a listening journey, leading from the external sound world to the internal. Very quickly it became clear that the *shape* of the building was ideal, but the *acoustics* were not. It was extremely reverberant in places and acoustically so transparent, that Mona and Savinder had to modify it substantially for optional listening. Here their architectural know-how became an absolute necessity before any sounds could be introduced into the building. Once this most important foundation was laid,

some flexibility was created for placement of loudspeakers. Amit Chandra was brought in to take care of this aspect of the installation. He built 22 speakers and "wired" the building in ways that created four listening spaces of great clarity and each one with its own acoustic character. Visitors had the pleasure of experiencing a place where sound - and spending conscious listening time in a designed soundscape - really took the priority. Precisely because of the acoustic clarity in these four sound spaces, ears were drawn spontaneously and naturally towards this composed world of sounds. Three of the soundscape compositions had been created by Mona Madan and myself and the fourth one for the silent/sacred space - the *Soniferous Garden*- had been composed by myself. All pieces are based on sounds recorded in Delhi, Rishikesh and in parts of Goa, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, between 1992 and 1998.

Even though we came from different cultural backgrounds, a strong resonance existed between the four main people, Savinder, Mona, Veena and myself, who created this installation. As Veena Sharma said, "Although the idea of soundscape came from Canada originally, the recognition of the importance of sound is universal. Every culture, every tradition has used sound to contact the Divine. So, even if the idea soundscape emphasizes listening to the environment, it transcends cultural barriers. It sets up a resonance between peoples at a fundamental level when we manage to cut through the divisive character of noise. To contact the subtlety of sound is to contact the ocean of consciousness from where everything arises. To contact sound in its subtlety is to become creative, to be whole, to be sound."

*Nada* is a journey through four different listening spaces, entitled *Soundwall*, *Soundcity*, *Soundwalk* and *Soniferous Garden*. It begins outside with three panels introducing the subjects of listening and soundscape.

*For just a moment*

*can you drop your inhibitions  
your pre-conceived notions  
can you forget where you have come from  
where you have to go  
who you are  
where you will be*

*can you let your love & hate  
anger & pain  
sorrow & joy  
can you forget everything  
can you just - listen*

*listen  
listen*

While reading the panels the visitor hears mostly the sounds of the nearby street, which is heavily trafficked, the sounds of birds in the immediate, park-like surroundings, occasional sounds of people working nearby, voices and also the first fragments of *Soundwall*. The visitor then walks along a channel-like pathway towards the Mati Ghar, where the rest of the installation takes place. Ten loudspeakers are placed on both sides of the pathway. It is as if one is walking through a stereo sound channel, from the walls of which emanates a dense sonic quilt of both the composed and the live urban soundscape of New Delhi. This is the noisiest and acoustically most dense soundscape of the installation.

Panels with questions like "what is your favourite sound environment in New Delhi," or, "which sounds do you hear through your left ear", are placed along this pathway. A sound journal entry about traffic and horn blowing in New Delhi and a sound level meter with explanations of the decibel A and C scale, are placed just beyond the *Soundwall*. From this location the meter measures

continuously the current sound levels that are created by the combination of the live and the recorded soundscapes. Over the two weeks of the installation the meter fluctuated roughly between 67 and 77 decibels on the A scale. On rare occasions - usually during mid-morning lulls in the street ambience and during pauses on the tape - it would go down to circa 62 dBA. The C-scale surprisingly measured no more than 5 decibels higher most of the time.

The next three listening spaces are all indoors. But before entering the building, we are informed about noise on one panel and about the structure of the installation on another one. As we enter the building, several panels inform about the human dimension in the soundscape, about acoustic community and the vibrating sound universe within human beings. While reading we can still hear some of the sounds from outside and at the same time, some fragments of the next listening space, *Soundcity*, reach us faintly. By the time we enter *Soundcity*, the sounds from outside have receded completely and most of the broadband, flat-line sounds of urban environments have been stripped away. In *Soundcity* human sounds from many places in India - voices, footsteps, breathing, music making, playing, work sounds where human body rhythms are still audible, chanting, bell ringing, etc. - make up a lively soundscape in this acoustically very clear, round gallery. It is a transparent soundscape, presenting a human acoustic community where all sounds of human life are clearly audible and not masked by broadband sounds, a type of ideal soundscape. This is a quiet, well-insulated listening space with jute paneling on ceiling and walls and jute matting on the floor. The light is dim, some cushions on the floor and some chairs invite to sit down and spend time listening. Four small panels along the walls provide the only visual focus - with questions such as "why are you so terrified of silence - have you heard anyone sing today - what is your favourite sound environment here - what is the quietest sound you can hear?"

After *Soundcity*, we enter an informational space with many panels and two listening stations. Soundscape terminology is explained, examples of soundwalks in many places of the world are displayed, information about the World Soundscape Project and its work in the seventies, about the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology and its current activities, and some panels and CDs expose us to the work of other soundscape work in various parts of the world. While spending time in this place we hear sounds quietly spilling in from *Soundcity* as well as from the next listening space, *Soundwalk*. It creates an interesting background collage of sonic India. Before entering this space, several panels inform us about the natural soundscape.

*Soundwalk* occurs in a long, wide corridor, along which one can walk and listen to the sounds of nature in India. It is a hi-fi place, with clear acoustics, but not as insulated as *Soundcity*. The sounds here are crisp with an almost forest-like reverberance. Panels with questions such as, "can you hear your footsteps here - can you hear the sound of your clothing here - how many airplanes have you heard today," etc. are the only visual aspects of this space. If one wishes to spend time, one can sit down on cushions along the corridor. This soundscape composition does not only take us into uninhabited natural places of India but also into villages. Many villages in India are hi-fi environments as very few motorized sounds invade their natural and quiet atmosphere. The sounds of the inhabitants and of their daily activities do not mask the natural sounds. They all occur in peaceful coexistence. In India "natural soundscape" very often means inhabited, rural soundscape. Rarely does one find completely uninhabited wilderness environments. This is audible in *Soundwalk*.

As we walk upstairs, gradually leaving the natural soundscape behind us, we encounter panels that speak about silence, inform about mantra, the sounding body, Om, sacred sounds. Slowly we get sonic glimpses of the *Soniferous Garden* as we approach the central dome space. Before entering the last listening space we see an image of the Tibetan poet and mystic Milarepa sitting in his famous listening posture, with his right hand cupped over his right ear and we are asked to

*Enter the garden of sacred sounds with a concentrated mind.  
Sit still in a comfortable position.  
Let the sounds float around and into the body, effortlessly.  
Join in and chant the sound Om or Hum, whichever is more pleasing.  
Listen to the resonance of the sound.  
Close the ears with index fingers, chant hum and experience the resonance  
within.  
In moments of silence stretch the ears to hear the farthest star.  
Experience the stillness of sound.  
While leaving the space retain the inner resonance to experience the world  
anew.*

We now enter a circular room with a domed ceiling. A skylight in the top of the dome lets in daylight and creates a soft atmosphere. The walls are covered with jute panels, the floor with jute matting and above, the dome is painted in sky-like colours. Cushions and a few chairs are scattered throughout the space. Six loudspeakers are placed around the periphery of the room. It is the most reverberant of all four spaces and acoustically the most interesting space. If one sits in the centre, directly under the skylight, it is as if one sits very much inside the sounds that are broadcast from the speakers. Most of these sounds are very quiet, gathering mysteriously above in the dome and reflecting down onto the listener in the centre. If one claps one's hands loudly from this same position one can hear multiple echoes bouncing off the rounded walls of the dome.

The soundscape composed for this space consists of sounds from sacred places in India: temple bells, muezzins calling, prayers from Hindu temples and Gurdwaras, churchbells, om, etc. One also hears water sounds, the sounds of chimes, some soft breathing sounds, and a drone which underlies the whole piece and weaves in and out of silence throughout. Occasionally human voices appear, such as Swami Brahmananda asking "what is God", other people saying names of various Hindu Gods and Goddesses, a whispering voice saying the word "silence" and quoting Kirpal Singh "When there is no sound, hearing is most alert" (actually an excerpt from my very first composition "*Whisper Study*"). Occasional silences punctuate the flow of this piece. Om occurs repeatedly throughout the piece, inviting the visitor to join in. Two volunteers are always present in this space and chant the om live when it occurs on tape and may sometimes continue on for a while and gradually blend in with the tape sounds that follow. It is a calming soundscape, intended to give the listener a chance to relax and reflect and if desired to join in with the soundmaking.

Most visitors emerge from this installation feeling less hectic, looking much more relaxed than when they first entered. Many comments in the guest book confirm these impressions. Here are a few examples:

*A sigh of relief we only get here.  
The best section is the upstairs hall where you really find all sounds  
coming to a halt - silence.  
Took me back years: we used to go up to Rishikesh as children and learn to  
say Om correctly.  
I have no words at the moment to express all that I have gone through.  
It touched deep inside - perhaps in the place of no sound.  
I carry this silence with me.  
I am speechless. Thank you!*

Soundscape work without the journey into the inner world of listening is devoid of meaning. Listening as a totality, from the external to the internal, seeking information about the whole spectrum of sound and its meanings, from noise to silence to sacred, is what gives soundscape work its depth. *Nada* offers that spectrum of experience. Visitors who are willing and able to take the time for listening and informing themselves, for spending time in the *Soniferous Garden* and letting calm spread through them, they really do get the most out of the installation. The sacred is deeply meaningful in this culture and many

visitors, indeed, welcomed the opportunity to get in touch with inner stillness and the sacred aspects of sound. It was a familiar place for most and many participated in the chanting of Om.

On the other hand, I have noticed that Indian visitors tend to relate less clearly to the environmental aspects of soundscape work. Why listen to the environment? - what is soundscape? - are frequently-asked questions, even after hearing the soundscape compositions and reading the information on the panels. And often our answers are met with puzzlement and more questions. Soundscape listening, which is both analytical and contemplative in character, *seems rather alien* to many in this culture. And as a result, most visitors simply walked through the first three spaces of Nada, only stopping for short times to listen. However, once they had spent time in the final space, the Soniferous Garden, and had allowed themselves to find inner calm, they could make sense of the whole installation retroactively. The connection between the environmental issues of noise pollution in today's urban environments and the health and sacredness of our inner sound world was made at that point. Some people even returned for a second visit and tended to spend more time listening to the other sections of the installation.

NADA installation

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