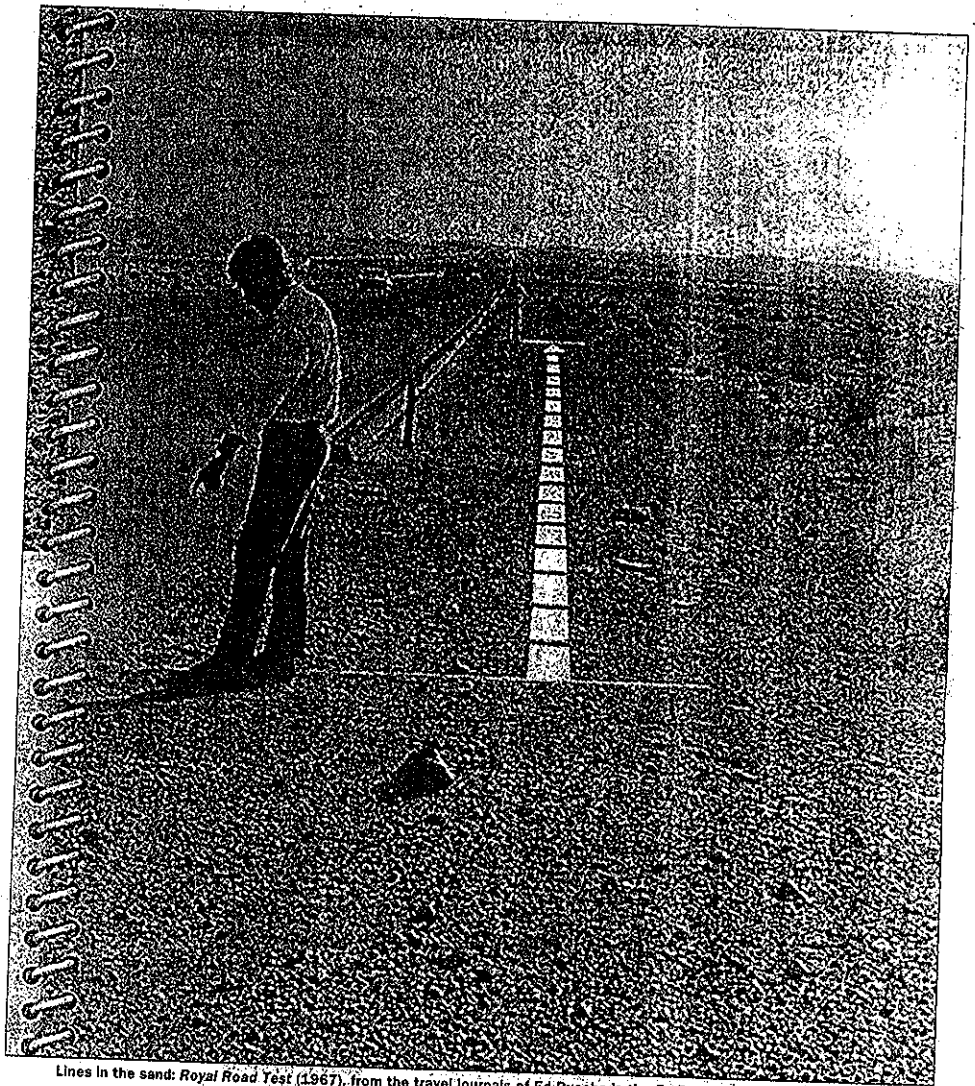


Taylor, John Russell, "Road from nowhere", The London Times, September 25, 2002

⑫ visual art  
**Road  
 from  
 nowhere**



**EXHIBITIONS** A group show about travel is too conceptual, while an installation show has theatrical flair, **John Russell Taylor** finds



Lines in the sand: *Royal Road Test* (1967), from the travel journals of Ed Ruscha in the *En Route* show at the Serpentine

It all depends on what you mean by travel. The premise of *En Route*, the new group show at the Serpentine Gallery, is that artists travel, probably more than ever before, and many of them take that travel as the basis of their work. For some, the act of travelling is in itself the work of art, and tangible evidence of it — sticks and stones picked up along the way, photographs of "Where I went on my walk across Patagonia", statements printed as wall texts — are merely by-products.

Value judgments reserved, this all makes perfect sense. All aficionados of contemporary British art will know, for example, of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, both of whom are included in this show. Long produces exquisitely calculated floor installations of stones gathered during his journeys (as in his current show at Tate St Ives) and wall paintings made of mud from significant places along the way.

In *En Route*, however, Long's contribution is strictly conceptual: a wall text reading "A line of 33 stones a walk of 13 days/A stone placed on the road each day along a walk of 1,030 miles in 33 days from the southernmost point of mainland Britain/The Lizard to Dunnet Head/1998". It is all set in clean capitals, red and black, and does indeed tell us what the artistic point of the walk was, though some may well feel that the aesthetic satisfaction to be gained from merely reading the text on a gallery wall is minimal. At least it is self-explanatory, as is, for example, Francis Alÿs's *Narcourisma/Copenhagen* May 6-12, 1996, which consists of a colour photograph of feet walking across an interestingly patterned stretch of Tarmac and a brief text explaining that the artist is walking round the city for seven consecutive days, each day under

the influence of a different drug. But what, then, should we make of Gabriel Orozco's piece? A whole small gallery is taken up with, in the centre, a seemingly random assemblage of battered plastic buckets and fragments of wood and metal, while on the walls are pinned up a series of rather murky, faded Polaroids of similar. These all, apparently, relate to something called the Penske Work Project. A lengthy explanation in the catalogue reveals that Orozco trawled Manhattan with a removals truck, and whenever he found curious pieces of builder's waste, first photographed them in situ, then loaded them on to the truck for later reconstruction. Put like that, it all seems rather interesting. But surely more for the artist than for his eventual audience?

Not all the works in the show are so rigorously conceptual. There is an amusing video by Andrea Fraser, *Little Frank and his Carp*, in which she appears as an ecstatic visitor to the Guggenheim Bilbao, who takes the tour guide's invitation to caress the sensuous curves of the walls all too literally. There are artist's books by Ed Ruscha, including his photographs of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and his folding panorama of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). There are glossy in-flight magazine-type photographs of airliners at rest in world airports by Peter Fischli

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and David Weiss. There is a huge painting by Franz Ackermann, *Abschied auf See*, a dazzlingly coloured abstraction which, we are told (again, if we read the catalogue), represents jumbled recollections of "buildings and other urban elements" glimpsed on his travels.

Fair enough, everything here does seem in some way to relate to artists' peregrinations, even if the link is sometimes tenuous at best. But what distinguishes the Fischli/Weiss photographs from actual travel magazine illustrations? Or for that matter Richard Wentworth's photographs from his open-ended series *Making Do and Getting By*, recording faintly squalid areas of London, which are included, from, say, Martin Parr's pictures of the underside of British life, which are not? Is it merely the fashion in which the artists, or their galleries, present themselves, the image of the artist rather than the image of the art?

Lothar Hempel is as much of a conceptual artist as any at the Serpentine, though, one would gather, much more of a stay-at-home. But clearly he believes that the term "visual art" should mean what it says, and so em-

bodies his concepts in much more palpable form. For *Propaganda* at the ICA, his first major public show in Britain, he has made a series of extremely elaborate installations, occupying the whole of the (considerable) gallery space available.

The essence of Hempel's art is theatrical. But it is a theatre which is full of contradictions and reversals. We may think we are going into the show as spectators, but we suddenly find that the tables have been turned on us, and willy-nilly we are the principal participants. In *Strike*, the installation in the lower gallery, one wanders past a setting which has been described as a medieval-style house without walls. Inside it are puppets and two-dimensional cut-out figures, arranged as a sort of tableau in which the spectator's only duty is to observe. But then, eerily, it comes to seem as though we are under scrutiny from them. Especially as, from the deserted café in the skeletal street outside the house, the aroma of coffee gently percolates, as though those who consumed it have just vacated their places.

In the upper galleries are two more installations. The effect of

**En Route**  
 Serpentine Gallery  
 ★★★★★  
**Lothar Hempel**  
 ICA  
 ★★★★★

*Machine Heart* is even more theatrical. In a shiny grey metal cube, open on one side, there is an elaborate tableau, the various characters being represented by shiny, highly finished cut-outs, the clinical, monochromatic setting contrasting vividly with the brilliant colours of the outside. The reference to a proscenium theatre is inescapable, and yet at every point this perception is subverted, Hempel being enough of a surrealist constantly to throw us off balance. He sneaks in discordant elements, discrepancies of scale and mood which may, as in classic Surrealism, shock us into free association.

Also upstairs is a smaller but no less disturbing installation, *Abstract Socialism*, in which a Bismarck bicycle is the principal element, spinning aimlessly on and amid a geometrical arrange-

ment, an audience almost of diverse shapes. Each of these three installations is, further to confuse the senses, accompanied by a video which embodies the same scenario from three different angles, providing a rather eerie counterpart by its shadowy use of the same props and settings, so that each seems to interfuse the other.

Hempel's works often involve lengthy texts as well as photographs, video and sound installations, and this show is no exception: the three sections are linked together by collages of stories from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Allegedly, one must add, since the stories themselves are of a bizarre cast which seems unlikely in that newspaper's sober pages. The texts are there mainly to heighten the sense of alienation and dissociation rather than to explain or indoctrinate. Here the installations are allowed to speak for themselves and leave us to make up our own minds as to their significance.

En Route, Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, W2 (020-7298 1515), until October 27. Lothar Hempel, ICA, The Mall, SW1 (020-7330 6393), until November 3.