

Sickert (2005)

for solo bassoon and electronics

In 1934, Virginia Woolf described her experience of the artworks of English impressionist painter Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942), a friend of Degas and Whistler, and a man who shared Woolf's eccentric relationship to Edwardian society: "To me Sickert always seems more of a novelist than a biographer... He likes to set his characters in motion, to watch them in action. As I remember, his show was full of pictures that might be stories.... The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis; it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot, to hear what they are saying." Manousakis seems to have engaged in a similar process in his own "conversation" with Sickert's *Mornington Crescent nude*.

In fact, stories have circulated around Sickert's paintings since the 1890s. This particular canvas is one of many he painted after the murder of a prostitute in north London's East End, and together such works have fueled speculation (recently rekindled by mystery writer Patricia Cornwell) that Sickert was the notorious "Jack the Ripper." Whatever the facts of the case—and they are hotly debated—Sickert captured his model prostitute's attitude of sordid nonchalance. Manousakis's *Sickert* is neither sordid nor nonchalant, but it does seem to mirror the painting's subtitle "contre-jour," or "lit from behind," in the electronic halo that often surrounds the solo bassoon part without revealing its source. Written for Georgios N. Faroungias, the bassoon part exists in an uneasy space between foreground and background, as Manousakis himself observes: "The performer is at times autonomous and at times so much involved in the tape part that you cannot really distinguish the sound of each medium. That is my intention in *Sickert*—a game of dominance between the two realities."

Beth Levy / San Francisco Contemporary Music Players