

A CONVERSATION WITH MAX NEUHAUS

Ulrich Loock

The impetus for my first sound installation in 1967 was an interest in working with a public at large. Inserting works into their daily domain in such a way that people could find them in their own time and on their own terms. Disguising them within their environments in such a way that people discovered them for themselves and took possession of them, led by their curiosity into listening.

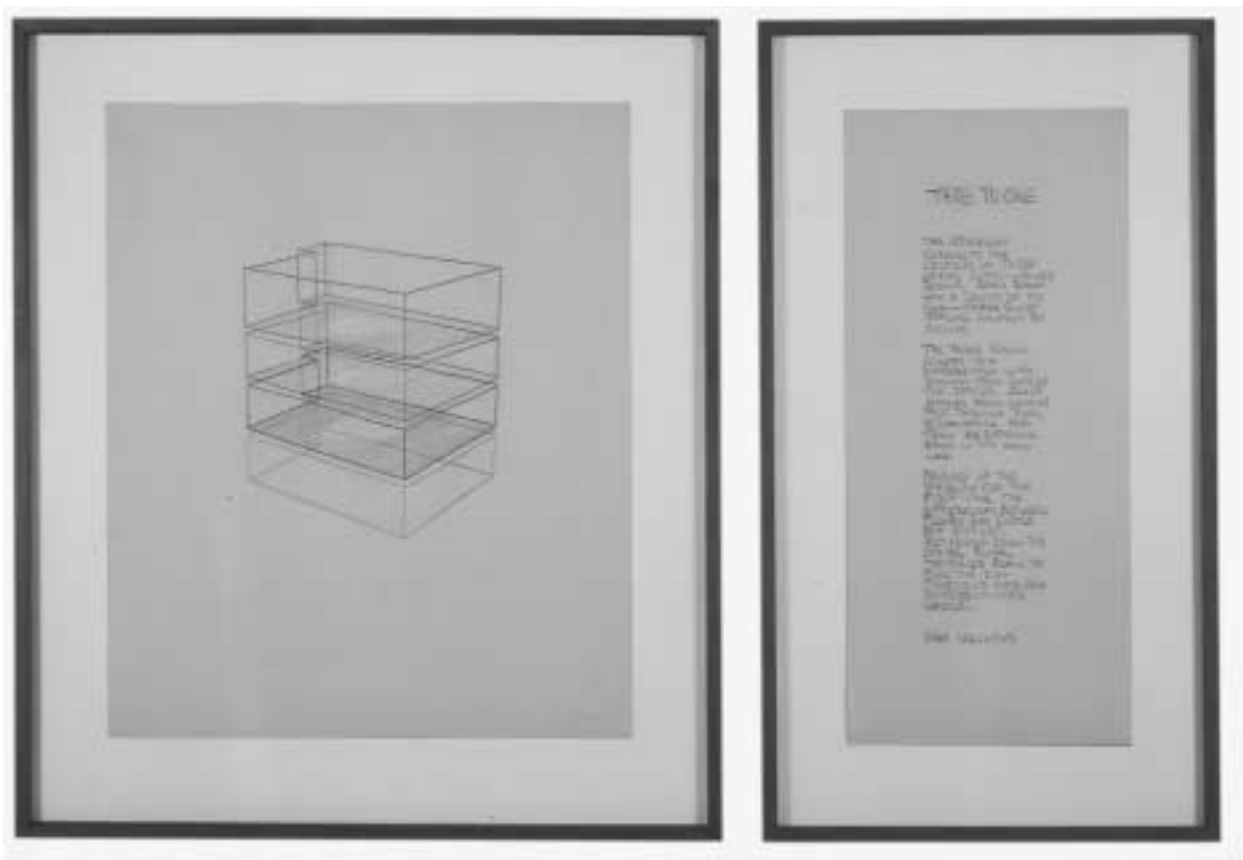
—Max Neuhaus¹

MAX NEUHAUS WAS RENOWNED FOR HIS INTERPRETATION OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC while still in his twenties. In the early 1960's, he toured America and Europe as a percussion soloist first with Boulez, and then with Stockhausen, and gave solo recitals at Carnegie Hall and in European capitals. The world of the percussionist is one focused on sound timbre: Neuhaus traveled with one thousand kilos of percussion instruments to perform his solo repertoire. He extended this palette of sound color by inventing several early electro-acoustic instruments. His solo album recorded for Columbia Masterworks in 1968 stands as one of the first examples of what is now called live electronic music.

Neuhaus went on to pioneer artistic activities outside conventional cultural contexts and began to realize sound works anonymously in public places, developing art forms of his own. Utilizing the sense of sound and people's reactions to it that he acquired after fourteen years as a musician, he began to make sound works that were neither music nor events and coined the term "sound installation" to describe them. Starting from the premise that our sense of place depends on what we hear as well as what we see, he utilized a given social and aural context as a foundation to build a new perception of place with sound. With the realization of these nonvisual artworks for museums in America and Europe, he became the first to extend sound as a primary medium into the plastic arts.

Over the last thirty some years he has created a large number of sound works for various environments, including permanent works in the United States (Times Square in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago) and Europe (Domaine de Kerguehennec, Locmine, France; CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France; the AOK Building, Kassel, Germany; the Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland; and the Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Italy) along with numerous short-term works in museums and exhibitions (the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Clocktower in New York City; ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, France; the Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland; Documenta 6 and 9, Kassel, Germany and the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy) and numerous one person exhibitions of his drawings.

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Three to One, colored pencil on paper, 89 x 74 cm, 89 x 40 cm, 1992.
Sound Work Reference: Collection: Documenta, Location: AOK Building, Kassel, Germany, Dimensions: 7 x 16 x 3 m, 7 x 16 x 3 m, 7 x 16 x 3 m, Extant: 1992–present.
Photo courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

Loock: Your sound works in general cannot be experienced apart from the space where they exist. They cannot be recorded. They're not only aural experience, they are connected to a certain given space. But on the other hand they are not "site specific." This is an interesting contradiction, don't you think?

Neuhaus: I do, yes. People's first assumption usually is that they are some new form of music. In fact they differ in two principal ways from music. One is that they're not a succession of sound events in time, which is one of the basic definitions of music: a series of sound events that progress from one to the other and that draw a line in time. The other difference is that the sound is not the work; the sound is the material that I make the place out of, that I transform the space into a place with. So recording this material and playing it back somewhere else is as silly as taking the paint off the canvas and thinking it's still the painting.

Loock: So these works are not about the experience of the space or of the architecture itself; they are not about, say, any institutional or cultural implications of the space you're using. But what they are doing is forming a place of their own.

Neuhaus: Indeed. The social context, the physical context, the architectural context, the acoustical context are my building blocks; they're my

bricks and mortar. They don't determine what I build; they are what I build with.

Loock: In a work of yours, a person's perceptual focus changes from visual to aural, which means that the place that is created by perceiving your work takes you out of the actual physical space you've entered.

Neuhaus: Yes, you move into another place. Most of us are visually oriented, so that shift from visual to aural in itself is a mover. My interest as an artist is in speaking with the spirit; and what we are really talking about here is my means of managing to do this. We are living in a time in which it's harder to make this communication; the routes are overused, the paths more disguised.

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Loock: Usually your works are produced and perceived in the context of the visual arts. What are the implications of switching from the visual to the aural?

Neuhaus: People tend to assume that we perceive the plastic arts only with our eyes. The contemporary definition includes the creation or transformation of a space as sculpture. Since we perceive space with our ears as well, why does it have to be visible?

My sound works have no visible component. If the sound sources cannot be placed out of sight, I make them look like something else: in a context where people assume the work is visual, it would be silly to let them assume I was proposing a loud-speaker as an artwork.

Loock: Do you have any specific ideas about essential differences between visual perception and visual orientation versus aural perception and aural orientation in the world?

Neuhaus: I personally perceive the world aurally rather than visually. I recognize voices before faces; I know who's on the phone before I know them face to face, and many times I don't recognize people face to face until I hear the voice.

We know that the aural and the visual are complementary perceptual systems. Ear is complementary to eye; each one fills in holes in the other's picture. People say that since the invention of the printing press we've become more and more visually oriented. Before that, history was aural. If we go back to very early man, survival depended in many cases more on the aural than the visual; in a forest we could hear danger further than we could see it. We've turned ourselves over in some ways; still, our aural mind is by no means in a state of atrophy. The fact that we can speak and understand language is an incredibly complex aural feat. That we can further distinguish the difference in origin of a person from the way he speaks—this is a level of nuance that still can't be analyzed by computer science. We can't measure it, yet everyone does it without thinking.

Vision is more conscious than hearing, but that doesn't mean the aural is less powerful. We think about our eyes, we're more conscious of what we see. Most of us while listening to someone talk don't even realize we're hearing.

Loock: I think the visual sense has much more to do with identifying things, with grasping things, while hearing doesn't identify in the same

way. It is not so much about objects; it seems more about events.

Neuhaus: Working with sound by definition makes what I do intangible, which is a good place to start if one is trying to talk to the spirit.

Loock: I think that is a very important point. The visual has a tendency to make things tangible. And probably this historic shift to the visual has to do with the development of society and of means of production. The aural is not as useful at manipulating things, objects, goods.

Neuhaus: But it can change our perception of things radically even though it's immaterial.

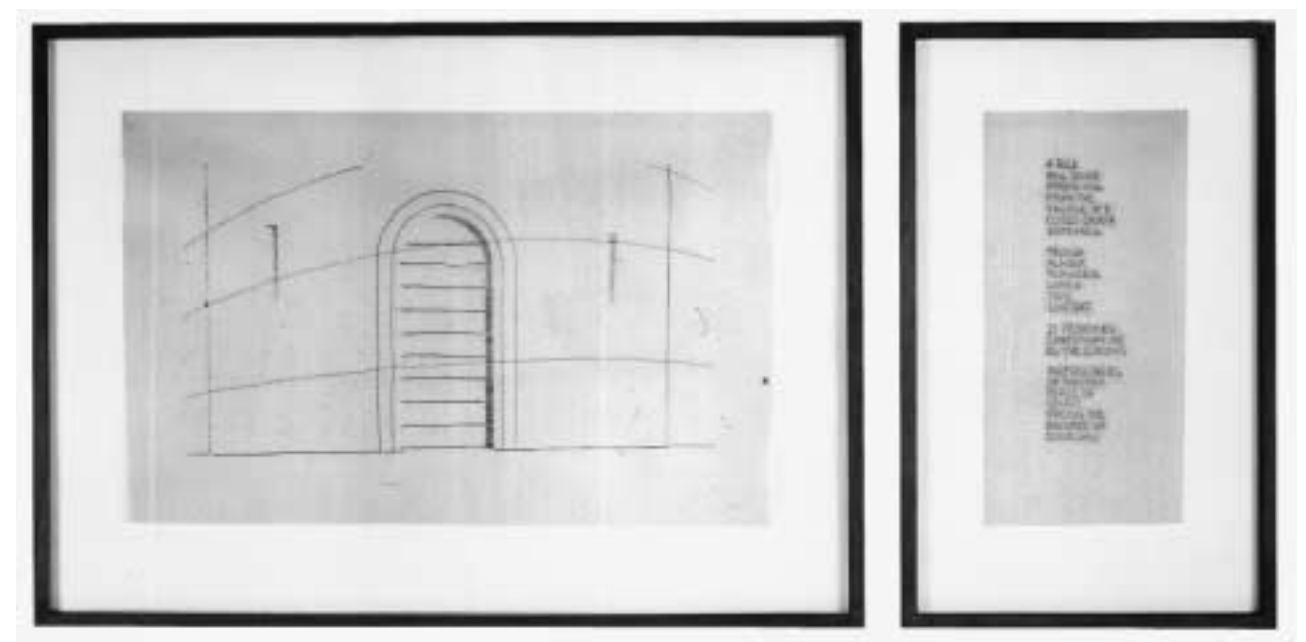
Loock: You can hear things you cannot see.

Neuhaus: It's a more direct channel to the unconscious, I think.

Loock: And the aural is culturally not as loaded as the visual. The aural seems to be freer of cultural baggage, of cultural definitions.

Neuhaus: I think it is, but it depends on which part of the aural. Cultures often develop a very codified sound language, called music, which is quite loaded. We also have spoken language, this culturally specific means of articulating ideas, which uses the ear. Once you move outside these two areas, though, there is a huge expanse of free territory. This is the sound terri-

A Bell for Sankt Caecilien, colored pencil on paper, 57 x 90 cm, 57 x 28 cm, 1993.
Sound Work Reference: Location: Park adjacent to Koenischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, Dimensions: 10 x 20 m, Extant: 1989–1991.
Photo courtesy Lisson Gallery, London





Suspended Sound Line, colored pencil on paper, 64 x 70 cm, 64 x 52 cm, 1999.
Sound Work Reference: Collection: Kunst im oeffentlichen Raum die Stadt Bern, Location: Lorrainestrasse 1, Bern, Switzerland, Dimensions: 3 x 30 m, Extant: 1999–present.
Photo courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

tory I work in. It’s uncoded. You don’t need to know anything to experience a work of mine, all you need to do is listen.

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Loock: Let’s talk about the difference of your artistic practice to music. You come from the field of music; and probably your work has developed in relation to things we all know about, John Cage’s works, say, which most of the time are situated in the context of music. You don’t situate yourself in this context. So how is your sound work different from music?

Neuhaus: I think there are these two points I mentioned earlier. One, I don’t make a series of sound events in time, which progress in time; that is a basic definition of music. You don’t come to a sound work of mine at the beginning and leave at the end. I build sound continuums without beginning or end. At the time of my first installation some thirty years ago, this was a very radical idea—for some it still is.

But the most important point is that in music the sound is the work and in what I do the sound is the means of making the work, the means of transforming space into new place.

Loock: In your work there exists a notion of anonymity. I am referring to some public works which are not labeled at all or just very margin-

ally. For instance, *Times Square* has been anonymous and unexplained at the site for more than ten years now.

Neuhaus: Fourteen. Whether or not I make a work anonymous has to do with the context. Not all my works are anonymous. *Times Square*’s anonymity is a doorway, an entrance to this work. The dilemma of having no way to explain this sound is a stimulus at first provoking curiosity; you think it almost could be an accident, but it doesn’t sound like an accident, and before you know it, you’re in it.

Loock: Right. I also think this uncertainty about whether it is a work, something that has been installed deliberately to make a difference, or just maybe some technical occurrence that comes from the subway keeps the work as far as possible away from cultural appropriation.

Neuhaus: Most of the people who don’t know what it is take it as a beautiful anomaly in the city that they found, something which is inadvertent, which they take as their own. I think the best way of putting it is that by not claiming it myself I allow them to claim it. That’s what I was trying to do. It’s their experience, it’s not mine; they should claim it.

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Loock: Let’s talk about concepts of public artworks.

Neuhaus: When I first became interested in working in the public domain in the mid-sixties, there were practically no other contemporary artists working in the field; no one was interested. Instead, they were all struggling to get their work into museums. Now it’s become an industry. For years I’ve ignored

requests to send my slides to slide registries, thinking that anyone who asks for slides of invisible works is certainly of too mean an intelligence to be able to commission me. Occasionally I get a request for tapes of my work, instead, but as the sound in my work has no meaning without the place—like the paint without its canvas—this in the end is just as bad.

But I’d like to go back to the subject of the site specific. I think all art is, in one sense, site specific. Traditional art forms are specific to the very consistent site of the museum and its sculpture garden. Not that museums aren’t different, but the paintings are usually hung on white walls and sculpture is most commonly shown on grass.

When we move to another site, it demands that we develop new forms. The world outside the museum is not a sculpture garden. We can not, but more importantly we should not, try to make it one. The new forms also must respect the fact that these places are a public domain, they belong to the public.

Loock: It seems to me that a work like *Times Square* is not making the assumptions that most public art does. It can either be perceived or not. In these works there is no idea of confrontation; there is no idea of forcing people to change their consciousness. It seems to be something which is so discreet that it can be

easily ignored; and if you don’t want to ignore it you can hear it, you can listen to it, you can make use of it.

Neuhaus: I believe the aesthetic experience is not something you can promote or even teach. Although it is natural to all, each person has it only when he or she is ready—when he or she and an artwork somehow meet.

The first works that I did were for a public at large; they were about taking myself out of the confined public of contemporary music and moving to a broader public. I had a deep belief that I could deal in a complex way with people in their everyday lives. I didn’t want to make simple pieces for a simple people but something very special accessible to anyone who was ready to hear it. I didn’t want to confront them with it—the opposite—to make something which they could find, to make the work in such a way that it leads to discovery, that they discover it rather than have it pushed upon them.

Edited transcript from Max Neuhaus, *Elusive Sources* and “Like” Spaces, (*Turin: Giorgio Persano, 1990*).

Ulrich Loock is currently the director of the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne.

Notes

1. “The Institutional Beast,” *Max Neuhaus, sound works*, volume 1, *inscription* (OstfildernStuttgart: Cantz 1994).

Site of *Times Square* on pedestrian island between 46th and 45th Streets, New York City.
Sound Work Reference: Dimensions: triangle 6 x 12 m, Extant: 1977-1992.
Photo by Max Neuhaus



The work is located on a pedestrian island: a triangle formed by the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, between 46th and 45th Streets, in New York City’s Times Square.

The aural and visual environment is rich and complex. It includes large billboards, moving neon signs, office buildings, hotels, theaters, porno centers and electronic game emporiums. Its population is equally diverse including tourists, theatergoers, commuters, pimps, shoppers, hucksters and office workers. Most people are in motion, passing through the square. The island, as it is the junction of several of the square’s pathways, is sometimes crossed by a thousand or more people in an hour.

The work is an invisible unmarked block of sound on the north end of the island. Its sonority, a rich harmonic sound texture resembling the after ring of large bells, is an impossibility within its context. Many who pass through it, however, can dismiss it as an unusual machinery sound from below ground. For those who find and accept the sound’s impossibility though, the island becomes a different place, separate, but including its surroundings. These people, having no way of knowing that it has been deliberately made, usually claim the work as a place of their own discovering.

n.b. *Times Square* has been inactive since 1992.