

Max Neuhaus' transition from dramatically under-dressed percussionist to a maker of nearly imperceptible sound installations.

by MIKE BULLOCK

The intent of this bi-weekly column, *Drinking Water in the Crosswalk*, is to delineate the branches, roots, and vines that run through and connect twenty-first century sound practices. Noise, sound art, freely improvised music, electroacoustic music, phonography - everything that can be put under the umbrella of self-idiomatic music - all grow together through their communities of makers and supporters. I will attempt to trace the connections of thought, decision-making, and histories, not in order to *define* these forms, but to understand the growth patterns. - *Mike Bullock*

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ELECTRONICS & PERCUSSION
FIVE REALIZATIONS BY MAX NEUHAUS



SILVANO BUSSETTI: CUEIR PUDR BATTERON
LARRY BROWN: FOUR SYSTEMS/2KAP/LEINZ STICKHAUSEN ZYALUS
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Where does "music" leave off and "sound art" begin? There is already a lot of ink out there on this question, and I don't plan to reinvent those wheels, many of which are perfectly round and roll just fine on their own. But one major difference that occurs to me is that music is expected to entertain; it's a performing art. Many artists who work with sound occupy a

grey zone between the "fine arts" - the ones that hold still or wait patiently in a museum for you to grant them a visit - and the "performing arts," which try to make you hold still long enough for them to visit you. One of the running themes in this bi-weekly column will be studies of artists - whether they are called musicians or sound artists or whatever - who address the burden of entertainment. I'll start with **Max Neuhaus**, the avant garde percussionist with a busy performance and recording career who one day decided to drop it all and start making quiet, nearly invisible installations that weave sound into architecture and public works. **Neuhaus** changed from a performing musician to an installation artist because he felt suffocated by "the onus of entertainment." He wanted to make sounds that people could come to on their own, even accidentally. As an installation artist, **Neuhaus** could refuse to grab people, and not insist on their awareness; as a performer - especially as a famously shirtless percussionist (witness the cover of "Electronics & Percussion" on Sony Classical) - he felt he did not have that option.

The following is based on some thoughts I had after first experiencing Neuhaus' Times Square sound installation in March 2009, one month after his death at 69. It also draws on the seminal collection *Max Neuhaus Sound Works Vol. I-III* published by Cantz Verlag.

In his essay from that collection, **Carter Ratcliff** claims that "music has no permanent relationship to space," and the creation of musical space is a work of engineering, not music. One could extend **Ratcliff's** statements to the supposed difference between composer and performer. Case in point, the Western classical music hierarchy (quickly and bluntly summarized): composing, which hardly makes a peep, is considered the highest musical activity; conducting, which is soundless, is the next step down, the right hand of the composer; performing, which makes almost all of the sound, is craftsmanship at best and labor at worst; and audio engineering, architecture, and acoustics - which really determine what people hear - are not considered musical activities at all. **Neuhaus** was well-suited to undermine this hierarchy by his previous role within it as a "modern classical music" insider.

Ratcliff again: "Whenever he [Neuhaus] accepts a museum as a site for an

installation, he tries to remove some portion of the space from its privileged condition. Neuhaus at work in a museum is like a sceptic fixing up a portion of an abbey or a church as ordinary living quarters." **Neuhaus** avoids the precious, and avoids drawing attention to himself. In his music, **Neuhaus** turned away from the privilege of the stage and the power it gave him. In his installations, he also undermines the site's power.

The intersection of **Neuhaus** with self-idiomatic music is not in the refusal of music-ness in favor of art-ness, but in the return to awareness of the social, quotidian, and accidental dimensions of sounding places. More than Cagean awareness, it is taking the site as your instrument - and further still, taking yourself (ears, body, thoughts) as the instrument of the site.

The **Neuhaus** Times Square piece is a perfect example: there is no plaque. It was switched off for many years and then turned back on recently with little fanfare. It is like a noise or punk gig advertised through word of mouth, or not at all. Unannounced, unassuming, un-entertaining, nonetheless it changes the character of that little patch of Times Square in ways that make pedestrians stop and listen and think about sound in one of the noisiest, busiest places in the world. And they may not even realize they are hearing a work of art; they may even think this was their own private discovery, and in a way they are right. A completely normal moment, as if you are breathing or drinking water, but stopping in a crosswalk to do so.

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