

Franz Kaiser "Creating a new place in space...", 1988

For a celebrated young percussionist to suddenly give up performing when at the height of success might appear surprising; but today, some twenty years later, the step he made fits in as part of a logical evolution. It is not so much that Max Neuhaus' reasons seem like the ambition of some virtuoso, but more the kind of thinking which led certain sculptors to abandon the pedestal in the past. He no longer wanted to project his sounds on the public from the stage, in the highly structured context of a concert, but rather present individuals with them in their daily lives.

The space of a concert hall is merely a technical element. Neuhaus makes the space part of the work itself _ an idea of work which can no longer be understood as part of any kind of aesthetic category of music. Freed from all inherited ritual, the place Max Neuhaus chooses to work in is initially nothing more than an aural space. Every place has its own noises, dictated by particular sources, the shape and mass of the volume of air, the way its different surfaces reverberate sound, anything which resonates, unpredictable outside events, etc.

The work in Grenoble, like many of Max Neuhaus' sound installations is a static aural topography, made to be heard and interpreted individually by listeners as they move through it. (Another type of work based on moving sound images will not be discussed here). As a visitor enters the main hall and advances into the middle of the space, when he gets to the second pillar he suddenly hears a sort of lapping sound which may remind him of a stream of water _ or is it rain on the glass roof? The right direction, in fact, for the sound indubitably comes from the roof. When he moves a few metres to the right or left, the sound disappears and he can't help becoming aware of the air-conditioning. If he listens more carefully to the lapping sound, it becomes clear there is nothing natural about it at all. It is perhaps possible to recognize that it is an electronically-generated, shimmering sound image which clearly follows a constant ascending movement. Moving lengthways through the space, the sound can be localized quite precisely along its axis. Its intensity increases near the middle of this axis and diminishes again as one moves into the distance. However, it is never loud_ If it is raining on the glass roof, the sound is almost inaudible.

In a way, Max Neuhaus is repeating with aural means what Richard Long showed before him visually with 30 tons of anthracite: a line 2 metres wide and 60 metres long lengthways in space. Nevertheless, the two pieces were conceived independently of each other. In fact, Neuhaus' work had been finished before that of Richard Long. All sound-generating facilities and the computer programs were invisibly installed during Long's show, just waiting to being switched on. This axis is quite simply the most obvious line in the space. Neuhaus, however,

does not limit himself to that. He includes the whole space in his work. One's perception wavers between the image for the eye and the sound image for the ear.

What Neuhaus adds to this environment can perhaps be compared to Carl Andr_'s sheets of steel: it can often hardly be noticed at first, you have to listen. However, once you are aware of his addition, all sound present can only be heard in relation to it. For instance noises like the air-conditioning or the traffic outside, which you don't normally hear because they are too monotonous, play a new role as components of the physical fact of being there in that precise space, the place in question. To describe such a work of art by just the added sound image would be in no way exhaustive; the work transforms the place and all that is visible and audible into a new entity.

The noises which give a place its character are constantly changing and stem from many different sources; and the added man-made sound should be close to these given characteristics, since it must become an integral part of them. By superimposing different sound systems and the constant modifications this leads to, you can create and develop exceedingly complex sound structures. In this process computers are used to 'create, store, reconstitute and compare' a sound's micro-structures. When Neuhaus started to work with computers it was technically not possible to control multiple sound sources by a remote means. In order to have the possibility of changing any parameter from anywhere in a given space, he devised remote control for a central computer and a network of sound synthesis computers.

Despite the use of this advanced technology, Neuhaus' work is not in the least conceptual. Neither the computer programs nor the sound sources' technical characteristics can be determined theoretically in advance. Although it is possible to put forward a few suppositions as far as the space is concerned, their accuracy and significance nevertheless have to be explored, which becomes a way of building the sound image piece by piece. To explore a space, Neuhaus uses sound which is standardized and precisely orientated: certain pitches from the audible spectrum are arranged into a sequence which is repeated at varying speeds, and a horn-type loudspeaker allows the sound to be directed precisely. As it is easy to manoeuvre, different positions and directions can be tried out and the reflecting qualities of the space's walls tested at will. The only instrument of measurement used here though is the human ear, which makes Max Neuhaus' process _ and this may seem paradoxical _ similar to that of a more classical artist; but it is just this leading-edge technology which enables him to hear what he has programmed on the computer immediately.

These 'measurements' result in speakers being specially designed for the space and a programme being defined for each computer which is stored in a EPROM (Electrically Programmable Read Only Memory), each of which constitutes a layer of the final sound of the work. These are

the technical conditions of the work, which remain invisible. The person visiting the exhibition sees nothing but empty space; all he can count on are his ears.

As a result the work cannot be communicated by photograph. It is no accident that Max Neuhaus is one of the few artists who explain their work. He has done it more and more over recent years, adding sketches a little like an architect's drawings. This should not be misunderstood as a symptom of some vague fear that perhaps his work might not be sufficiently well understood on its own. In the end, these drawings and explanations are the evidence which remains of his temporary installations. Not everybody is able to go to New York, Chicago, Kergu_hennec or Pistoia to visit his rare permanent installations. It is however important not to confuse these drawings and explanations with the sound work: all they are are traces and Neuhaus thinks it important they be presented separately. 'To shape, define, transform, create with sound only_' Neuhaus remains an artist beyond categories _ a status which he seems to enjoy. Even today he cannot deny his affiliation with music and the creative means he employs are still extremely unusual in the visual arts, even though their spectrum has considerably widened.

Because of its radical nature and the total implication of both space and listener it demands, Max Neuhaus' work is one of the most convincing contributions made by contemporary artists in the domain of 'site specific work'.