

MN, Interview with Doris von Drathen. 12.7. 1992

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DvD: I think that one thing in particular is relating the Moment Pieces and the Time Pieces, and maybe all your work, and it is what you call the "frame of mind". I was thinking that if you want to understand something, the basic questions are always when and where, that is time and place, and one of the essential points in your work is exactly to get these two points together.

MN: Certainly in a large sense, but in fact the works which are about place deliberately are outside the time continuum: I mean that the work itself is outside the time continuum, whilst the perceiver is within his own time. In fact, one of their ideas is that the perceiver can find them in his own time and move through them in his own time, whereas in the traditional sound art of music the time is part of the work, so that one is not free to move through it in time. All of the work does not change in time, but it generates for each individual a place for him to have his own time...

DvD: This is, I think, what I intended, that is to say that these moment pieces act onto one's perception of time and place. They give you a sort of conscious feeling about something which we could call a hic et nunc , and I think that this is the most acute and the most conscious way to feel your own existence.

MN: Yes, and this is the other side. First, I was talking about the Place Pieces, but the Moment Pieces, even if they are called Time Pieces, actually generate that realization of place when they happen. So they use time and let the perceiver find himself in his own place, while the place works let him find himself in his own time.

DvD: When we were in Kassel and there was this problem with your work covered by the outside noises, I thought that this may be another point of your work. In fact, we are living more and more with these covered sounds: for instance, when you are in the Jardins du Luxembourg, in Paris, there is no place where the sound of the wind in the trees is not covered by the sound of the traffic outside. The fact that your work can be covered by other sounds, on the other hand, is precisely what your work is showing.

MN: It is probably within the general area of what art is. One of the fortunes of the artist is to reexpose. You are referring to the part of Three to One where I talk about the outside sounds coming in. Yes, it is built with the aural environment of that building as a premise. The reason I

included that idea in the text is that most people would assume that those sounds were negative, so by talking about them, coming in, covering, reexposing, it makes them not reject those sounds out of hand, so to speak. The strange thing about that text is that probably it would not be necessary unless this work were part of an exhibition; the exhibition, I think, is a very dangerous environment for art, but it does not mean it is necessarily bad, a little danger is always interesting. However, if that piece were in that building, just as a normal functioning building, I would not have used the text; people would find it and have the time to find it in their own way; but, as the viewer in that exhibition is very focused, as a limited demand of time, is expecting, in that context, a visual work, this preface is necessary.

DvD: What I meant by referring to the fact that your work was covered by the outside noise of the bull-dozers, is that the risk of your work is to be covered. I think that, in a way, this is also showing that there are a lot of positive noises, like birds singing, or the wind in the trees, that are covered by the sound of the traffic, or by other sounds linked to our industrial civilization.

MN: Those sounds are as much part of our life as our visual environment; we do not consider only wilderness as an ideal environment, we accept all of our visual environment even if we do not like some parts of it. However, aurally, we seem, in general, to be a little more naïve. A part of it comes from this idea that most sound art is produced in a space which is acoustically black, it is built to exclude other sounds, so we have this idea that we can shape something with sound that can live in the normal environment. That is another question. Before, when they were doing the construction, essentially they had changed the aural foundation of the piece, because that piece was not built for that construction. What was surprising to me is that it was very hard for people to realize what was happening there, why there was that problem on that first day, but yet the visual analogy would have been the same bull-dozer temporarily covering the visual work on the press day: nobody would have allowed that. However, it is an interesting point in a way: how separate we maintain this visual acuteness and how different it is from our aural acuteness.

DvD: Maybe, you could talk a little bit about the quality of the sound in this piece. What has striken me when we were talking about the quality of the sound, is that whilst I was using the criteria of "high" and "low" tones, you told me that this was not correct, and that the quality was more complex...

MN: The kind of sounds I use and the sound levels I use... Analitically, I am not sure why this happens, but I get it to happen, the first perception being a very simple one, where you almost hear one thing, in this case three different things, three choices. You first perceive the change between them... It is very strange: some people hear the first sound as soon as they walk in

the space on the ground floor; others, just do not receive it until they go through the first one and go into the second one. These are the two extremes of approach in a way. What happens when you stay in the space is almost what happens when you are in a room without much light in it: your focus changes, so you begin to see much more the sound and it takes on a different dimension. The sound, in fact, is very rich and you begin to see it after a few minutes, when your focus gets into it. In this particular piece there also is an harmonical relationship which people from music recognize immediately and in fact take as the work itself. But that harmonical relationship is really more about a distraction, a deliberate distraction so that they almost forget about focusing; because that focusing process is very hard to do consciously, it is very easy to do unconsciously, it happens automatically. So, in a way, these are automatic structures for those people who are involved in automatic structures as a way of telling them to look over there...that the piece is over there.

DvD: The most surprising point for me was that when we were talking about the piece I thought there were two different sounds, a higher one and a lower one, and the third one was like harmony between these two; but, then you told me that it was quite another quality, that every sound is, in some way, always the same sound, but it is just opening or not opening...

MN: They all have common components in them, but the components have different relationships with each one. But, we are almost getting into the technique of the piece. There is a large contradiction in the physicality of the work. It is physically impossible in three spaces like those which are connected by a large opening to make three different sounds. My technical dilemma was how to do that. So, by utilizing the components that go between all the floors in a different way, each sound on each floor, each floor perceptually becomes different. But, also the idea that after hearing all three, they begin to combine into one; is the perceiver's perception of that unity. After you've heard those common components in their three different contexts, then they begin to blurr into one.

DvD: I did not want to go so much into technique. My point was to see how different these sounds are from music sounds, so different from our cultural experience of sound perception. It is not like perceiving a music sound, but it is really like a sound in its own.

MN: Yes, those people who are not able to find the sound until they have gone through the first one and encounter the second one, always say that the first time they heard the sound on the first floor, they thought it was the sound of the room. Which for me is a kind of ideal compliment; one of the things I try to do is to make a sound which is almost plausible within its context, at first encounter, and the point where the person realizes that it is not plausible in its context is when he jumps into the piece, and he's swimming on his own from then on. That

is a way of working which I use many many times in the place pieces: it is usually the way I build the entrance to the work.

DvD: Yesterday we talked a lot about this comparison with the plastic work or visual work. The getting together of the sound and place is like a landscape in itself, like constructing a brain, like constructing something in itself, so you do not need to make a comparison. What I would like to define more is this other category outside music and visual arts, which comes out of your work...

MN: One of the most clear statements I found about what I do is to point out to people that we perceive space visually but also, at the same time, that all of us perceive space through our ears. I am interested in dealing with the mind as many artists are and the ear is an opening into the mind, that once one steps out of the codified languages of music and verbal language one has a very clean, free territory and that is the territory I am in. One can shape the space physically, which means we perceive it visually, or aurally, which means we perceive it more through our ears than through our eyes. There is a huge amount of difference between these two perceptual systems, perhaps not so much in our early life, but when we mature and enter into the social life. In this century, the visual is dominant in the conscious mind and the aural is less dominant, is more subconscious. By going in the ear I circumvent this conscious, analytical attitude, to some extent...

DvD: What I was really out for was to go quite through this classical experiences of perception, like having music as the standard aural art and painting or sculpture as standard visual arts and see whether it was possible to define a new category, like creating space by sound, having the shape of a sound, or having the shape of a place drawn out by sound...

MN: By talking about the difference between the visual and the aural I did not mean to imply that there is no visual change, like there probably is an aural change if you shape a space visually. We are one thing, the mind is one thing, whatever the stimulus is, on a whole level. The impressive thing for me, in Hamburg, is that people said that, even though those two spaces were visually identical, for many people they looked very different. I am not so interested in defining a category; I always feel uncomfortable and have the impression not to do my job well if people can categorize. On the other hand, I am also not interested so much in inventing something new; I just follow the poles of my ideas and they happen to take me to a different place than most people, but my goal is not to invent a new art or a new art form. It is just where my nose has led me.

DvD: One of the first times we were talking about your work, I asked whether you thought it possible to construct a space by sound and you denied this very firmly. But, on the other hand, what you are doing is like giving a shape to sound.

MN: Well, in fact I do construct a space by sound. The piece in Times Square is a very good example; it is outside, in the middle of a large plaza, and you have this huge block of sound, which is almost like a wall which you walk into; even though invisible and untangible it is a very definite place in the middle of an open space.

DvD: What you say about the Time Square piece, or the Celle piece makes me think that there is a space constructed by sound...

MN: Yes, more like a mist, which has no defined lines. From an architect's point of view, because he is a physical shaper of space, the idea of creating a perceptual space is impossible. What I do with place pieces is to transform and generate a new perception of a given place, a place from my imagination, not a real place.

DvD: This image of having immaterial walls, like walls of sound, is very interesting, because, in fact, it is an everyday experience to pass from one space defined by sound to another; when you are inside and you go outside, if you are in a car...

MN: Usually, it is fairly homogeneous, there are no abrupt lines because sound does not go around corners, it gets transformed when it goes around a corner, but it does not stop like our visual world when it is behind a wall. We unconsciously assume that the sound world is more homogeneous than the visual world, things can come from a very long distance and be present. Sometimes I like to do things to contradict that, like this "Three to One".

DvD: I would really like to talk about your way to work with immaterial things; the most astonishing experience for people when facing your work is to search pieces and not to find them, because there is not anything to see. But, maybe, what they perceive is not as immaterial as that, it is just another material...

MN: It is not a material in the way we normally use the word, it is not something you can touch. But, I think that the real problem lies in that artists have been stuck with material mediums for most of their history and this has led to the forced assumption that the material

thing is the art - it becomes sellable, it becomes a product - but I do not think that any serious artist is involved in the material, it is just the vehicle... I happen to live in a time when one, for the first time, can shape something like sound, and that is my vehicle. Most people are working on the assumption that the material is the work, but it never is.

DvD: Maybe we should talk about some of your pieces and see the difference between them, for instance, between the Moment Piece in Bern and the Place Piece in Documenta. I think that the Bern piece is maybe not so much about place, but more about silence, about having the feeling that you can hear silence in a certain form, even if you have sound; it is like creating the feeling of celebrating silence...

MN: Not so much. The place is the city with all sorts of sounds. I think it is more about what I said in the beginning: using time to create a place, where the Place Works use place to create a certain time. The idea of silence is not so much part of it because it is meant, once again, as a re-exposure. For most people, the sound is imperceptible when it is there because it is growing so slowly and it is so integrated into what you expect in the environment, but its sudden cessation exposes all the things that were there in a new way; all the things that you were seeing as everyday life jump out. It needs sound to work, it needs the sound to be there to pull itself out of it to expose. That is why silence is so strange...

DvD: Maybe I should explain better what I meant. This sound, which lasts only a few minutes, is like a bell sound, very enveloping and is in a way enveloping all the other sounds you are hearing. Maybe, silence is not the appropriate word, but I see this sound as a peaceful one. When the sound is off, you have the feeling that all the sounds from the everyday life are coming up again, in their crudest form, whilst when you were hearing the sound there was another dimension to it, it was like standing up and looking, like when you are sitting in a train and you are hearing music and the landscape looks so peaceful because you have a distance. That is what I meant by silence: a peaceful atmosphere, a distance...

MN: Well, you went to the work to deliberately find it; which is fine, because the piece exists in all its possibilities. However, its overall concept is very long term and is something you live with: that is why it covers so much area and why it is always there. Certainly, if you are listening to it and you know it is coming at a certain time you hear it, but if you live and walk through that place normally, even though you know it is there you stop hearing it until it stops. It is a beautiful sound but I never felt robbed of it when it disappears...

DvD: My feeling, when it stops, is to have lost something. Other people I talked to had the same feeling of the loss of something beautiful, the loss of beauty...

MN: Well it is not lost, it comes again...!

DvD: What I would like to talk about, is the distance your sound installations maybe create. When you are going into these pieces you are really in another place, you are distant from the everyday problems or feelings and I think this is one of the most interesting aspects of it. I think that the basic function of an art-work is to create what Warburg calls "Denkraum der Besonderheit", and I think it is great to have created it in such a simple way, without drama, without pathos.

MN: First of all, I am always very surprised when people say that my pieces are very meditative. One would say they have forgotten what art is. I do not like the word meditative, but I think that the individual process of experience in a work of art is what every artist tries to build and it is something very difficult to build and for many perceivers to find. We build edifices for it to happen, but in many ways they are counter-productive: the museum can be both negative and positive- you walk in, your frame of mind changes and you expect certain things in there. I feel that the most rich experience of a work of art is indeed when one is surprised by it in some way; if you announce it and deliberate it and tour people through it, in fact you destroy almost the possibility for it to really happen on an individual level. It is a kind of dilemma: how one does make a work within a cultural context that allows that surprise to happen, when people are expecting. Those are the real challenges. The pieces of mine that exist in museums or very clear cultural contexts are, in a way, the hardest to do, to get that to happen in spite of this cultural self-consciousness produced by the cultural context. Museums and exhibitions are very dangerous places for art.

DvD: That is why you wanted your Time Square piece to remain anonymous...

MN: Exactly. With that work it goes a little beyond it. It is a very well-known work in a surprisingly broad spectrum of population, but if it is well-known how do I still get that surprise to happen? One way, since we identify reality with what we can see, is to insist that it is unmarked, so, even though people know it is there, even on a map somewhere, when you get there there is not anything visual to say this is it; so, you still have to confirm its existence and to accept its existence, only through your ear. It is always free.

DvD: I think that your pieces make one feel terribly unsure, because we lost the instinct to trust our ears. In front of your piece, at the Documenta, people were scared not to hear the right thing...

MN: It always amazes me how many stark contradictions the human mind can hold with utter ease. Here you just said that it is very hard to believe our ears, but the main form of communication between human beings is through sound and it is an incredibly complex process. It is not totally understood how we can actually do it. Whenever somebody walks through a piece of mine and says he does not like music and does not know anything about sound or acoustics, I just start talking him about the mechanism of understanding language and how much more complicated it is than listening to music. Anybody who can talk can hear a work of mine, that is a much better criteria. In fact, usually the people who have an orientation towards music have more difficulties with my work, because their expectations are so firmly rooted in another place, in another activity, in another art form. There is no space for them between the codified language of music and the codified language of verbal speech, it does not exist, they cannot conceive of any other space between them or around them; so they can never get out of either one and they can never connect to either, which is rather strange. We only have these two codified languages, but the speech one is so automatic that people deny in a verbal conversation that sound can have any effect on them; they are producing this complicated sound, they are listening to it, they are analyzing it, they are getting a meaning from it and they talk about the inaptitude of sound at the same time. I love this contradiction.

DvD: I read a study by ..., a californian searcher, who says that only 7% of communication is based on verbal sounds, whilst all the rest is linked to the context, to gestures, to the sound of the language and not so much to the content...

MN: Yes, but when we talk on the telephone, we get rid of all verbal gestures; we have aural gestures which for a long time the telephone industry did not believe were information, and one of the reasons we have such a bad fidelity on the telephone is they are only taking into account the word information. The aural gesture is very important. It depends on each individual; the more people are comfortable talking on the telephone, the more information they are able to get through their ears; the less comfortable they are, the more information they want to get, in communication, through their eyes. We do not consciously realize how much information we get out of inflexion... Until the last few years, science has refused to accept the fact that there is this information; the scientists weak point is that if they cannot measure it they cannot use it, therefore they tend to think it does not exist until they can quantify it. And even in the past few years, this subject has been considered as a sort of excentric area within science, it is not quite pure, because it is so complex. There is so much

information there and it is so strange to see it in its scientific form, because it is basically describing, in a very primitive way, something which we learnt to do with an incredibly acute skill at the age of 6 months and that we carry throughout all life. To see this delineated description of various characteristics of voice is incredibly crude compared to the reality we experience and which we cannot explain of course; but it is a first analysis. It is so rich, we can also understand animals through that tongue; it is quite universal, it is something, perhaps, we were even born with, an incredibly complex language.

DvD: What is incredible is that the technique is so much developed in other ways and the sound technique of human being is so few explored...

MN: I think it is also this problem of tangibility. Science really needs to grab a hold on measure and it is much easier to measure something you can see. Also, the whole technique of sound is very recent in history; we have only been able to record a sound for half a century, whilst we have been able to make a mark on a wall for a couple of hundred million years.

DvD: Maybe this is exactly the difficulty about your work: that people cannot record it or possess it in a way...

MN: Well, it is the beauty of this work! A work of art which can be measured and codified is dead in some ways.

DvD: Let us go back to the difference between Moment Pieces and Place Pieces. When you say that a Time Piece is constructing a place or a space with sound, what would be the difference between your piece in Bern, where you recognize that you heard something in the moment it is gone...

MN: I do not think that they construct places, but they cause this realization of place to happen when they disappear; in the same way that the Place Pieces do not construct time but they allow your own realization of time to happen within their static nature. It is a wonderful kind of balance. Time Pieces depend more on a long term relationship to function, they are something which really needs to be lived in, a little shift on a regular time basis throughout the day that you forget about, that you encounter again... In some way I envy the people in the Kunsthalle Bern, because, although I made this piece and I know it intimately through making it, they can spend more time with it than I did. They had three years with it, whilst I do not have the dimension of experience with it that they have, and I made it... It was a strange piece to

build because of its time nature; it stretched the process out too, because I had to compare to different things, so I had to wait for that time...

DvD: Are there other Moment Pieces?

MN: Yes, but not any prominent ones. I first began experimenting with this idea about making a sound by taking a sound away. This had occurred as a kind of idea to me but I wanted to see how people felt about it; so, I built some alarm clocks which in fact function in this way. I could not find out much about this idea just by talking to people, but connecting it with sleep I felt it would be a little closer; their reactions, in that way, were real information. It was not a scientific investigation, it was just talking to people about their feelings. It is not something that happens in nature so much; things do not change suddenly in that way. It happens in the modern world a lot; the most startling thing in the everyday life has always been for me the coffee-grinding machine in a café. The café is so noisy that, when somebody puts the machine on, you do not know that it is there, but it is really a loud sound that makes talking very hard. So it is quite amazing, but your mind just puts it in the class of the sounds of the café; and then, when it is finished, there is just this huge drop...! It is fairly rare that that happens in the everyday life; I always loved that moment...

DvD: I think all your work is about not showing what it is giving, or working with a shadow..

MN: We can make visual analogies which are very clear and common, but somehow I always feel that our sense of sound is not very well developed intellectually. Something and nothing are two basic things to work with; for me it is obvious, in some way I am working with nothing at that level. The Time Pieces are also connected to ideas we always have seemed to have in societies about sounds, signals. This idea is not very well articulated in most of history; most writing about history is more about visual environment than about sound environment. Some specific people have done some research, but it is very hard to find; people talk about a sound made a thousand years ago, but there are no records, you cannot make a drawing of a sound. It started to become clear in history, in Western culture, with the church sound signals, which, in fact, five hundred years ago, were the first kind of broadcasting, the first kind of information, of community. The whole idea that the cities were divided up into parishes is the perfect example of this: if you were outside the sound of the bell you had no information, you were outside the community. This sound signal is a communicator over all area simultaneously, it is the first concept of large scale broadcasting, the first concept of media; which means that you can get information without actually being in the place, that the information can be transmitted. So, in a way, the basic idea of my work is to be without place, it encompasses

rather than being only, that is the real difference. For a place work you have to go to the place, for a time work you just have to be open for the time.

DvD: In some way, it is also creating a place or enlarging it...

MN: Yes, but it is the realization of "being here", whilst in the place pieces it is this time continuum that you generate for yourself. Each one generates in the individual the opposite of what it is: the Place Pieces generate time in the individual and the Moment Pieces generate a moment of being in their place. Place pieces generate a period of being in their time.

DvD: But, generally, for people who go and see or listen to a place piece, it is also a moment, because they are entering and going back afterwards.

MN: In an exhibition yes, because people see exhibitions that way; they go and see this work and that work and they go back. But, it also depends on the kind of the exhibition: the exhibition in two identical rooms was in one city for three months, so it was an entity where people went after the opening, it was there, it was part of the city for that period of time; whereas for the exhibition at the Documenta, since no one lives in Kassel, people are coming, and they are allowed two days to get through two hundred works. It is a different context. Another reason for that text, was to deal with that kind of situation.

DvD: Maybe we could talk more about constructing moments and constructing places... I do not want to come immediately to the drawing system, but just this idea of having walls of sound or having a place described by sound like the time piece. Even in the Documenta, even if there was a space and a sound in it and the sound shaped by the space who was already there, on the other hand you had quite a different feeling of the space. For me it was like opening the space and looking much more outside, than getting in this space without sound. Let us talk about the process of constructing. In German, we have two words which could define a space constructed by sound: one is "klangraum" and the other one is "geraume zeit", which means a very extended time. What interests me a lot in your pieces is these limits of when and where, and that is what our existence is about. In some way, your pieces seem to me to construct space and time according to the same conception of "klangraum" or "geraume zeit".

MN: The thing that makes Time Pieces different from Moment Pieces is in fact that the Moment Pieces are conceived as being in all places, but only occurring for a moment in all

those places, whereas the Place Pieces are conceived as always being there, they cannot be removed from the place. The sound is not the place, is only the vehicle to make the place.

DvD: Yes, but in the piece of Bern, the sound is related to the place, it comes out of the place...

MN: Within the concept of the piece it could be infinite in space, it would not change it. Within its "Klangraum" it is always there and it would be equal, you can be any place within its "Klangraum" and have it happen at that moment.

DvD: Maybe it is becoming very abstract to talk about constructing space and time with the sound, without talking about the drawings. What you see when you see the drawings is really this architectural structure. Do you construct the sound first with the drawing or do you make the drawing after having constructed the sound?

MN: It depends on which kind of drawing it is. The process of building sound in either case is an intuitive one by ear, of trying, modifying, comparing, adding, the same process that artists always used: I think it is very hard to make a good painting if you start out knowing what you are going to paint. It is the difference between painting and illustrating, I guess. For me, the process is the same and it does not have any form; I am not trying to find a sound, I am just working until it works, which is the best way to work, I feel. You shape it until you know it is shaped, but while you are shaping it you go on working without really knowing what you are shaping. It is probably the primary technique that all artists have: keeping themselves from knowing what they are doing. So, making a drawing in that process is useless, but, sometimes, in order to shape a sound in space I have to explain a problem to myself about what it is happening with sound in a space. So, I go out of the mode of shaping it directly by ear and I start thinking "If I do this, and this and this, that should happen", even if I know that it won't happen, but by observing what should happen and comparing it with what does happen I begin to get a grip on this situation. The only way to think about those problems is just to draw: so, those are really working drawings where I am trying to explain something to myself, usually in a special context...because you are here dealing with the topography of the space, that is to deal with it in time, while drawing can deal with it by transferring it into another medium and I can look at it in a different way. You can only explore the topography by ear, by walking through it - it is a point by point exploration - by snapping it into a visual world I can examine it, imagine I examine it with my ear all at once. It is like a tool, but not a tool in making the sound, but in moving things around. It is not the traditional idea of drawing it on paper and then having it executed. First of all I do not have to communicate; even if I make a piece as huge as a Time Piece, which is a couple of kilometers in diameter, I do not need a bunch of

workmen to make it. I make it with my own hand and my own ear, no matter what the scale is. The traditional role of drawings as blue-prints for something which has to be made by many people is not necessary there either. In the Elusive Sources pieces, in order to create this illusion where you find a sound and then it disappears or it moves in the room, it is like solving the problem of a very complicated billiard shot, with something you cannot see. You have to get the ball to go into the hole, without being able to see the ball or see the balls in between. You can only know when it goes in the hole. A lot of the drawings are about that kind of situations.

DvD: Do'nt you think that people may understand your drawings as a visual part of your work?

MN: In a way it is a beauty of making sound works and drawings. No one can really do that. It must be terrible for a visual sculptor to make drawings of his work and have to deal with photographs, because they are reductions, no matter what he does. I am free of that, because I am not producing anything, because it is a different medium. Would not they be happy if they could make a sound as a model! There can be no confusion, since they are different mediums, but it does cause people a lot of confusion about why I am making a drawing, since you can only hear my works; but this is just a confusion about what kind of drawings they are.

DvD: What is so strange about these drawings is that they have a real aesthetical quality; they are rather technical, but they give you a great pleasure when you look at them. Maybe you do not understand immediately what it is about, like for architectural drawings, but they are beautiful...

MN: There is another kind of drawing, which is deliberate, which is the drawing afterwards, the drawing with text. I think that their basic function is also deliberate: this kind of preface, this kind of re-shaping the preconceptions around the work, without describing it, without trying to duplicate it on paper, but setting up, clearing the ground around the work of what people expect to be; using both a visual image and a verbal image mixed in different ways to clear that ground. The working drawings are almost unconscious, because I am making a drawing to go somewhere, to figure out something, whilst these are very conscious prefaces. I like this mixture of the two panels; it separates it even more not only to have a medium which is visual for something which is sound and a medium which is verbal and then to combine the visual and the verbal with the same ideas, trading and passing ideas between them. There are some other drawings, which are more a kind of "how I did it" drawings, because people get so frustrated sometimes and I do not mind explaining... Sometimes, I do them looking back to each point and describing them. They are notes to myself and to people, sort of note-books. They are notations of a process.

DvD: What would you think of somebody who would just buy a drawing of yours without having the sound piece?

MN: It usually makes them very very curious. But why not? I never want the drawings shown with the work. They are not meant as the work in the work. Except for the preface ones which are sometimes shown before it; but certainly the "how I did it" drawings and the working drawings do not belong to the work. They are not a perception in the work, they are just a reflection in the work; so, their best place is separate from the work.

DvD: One drawing which impressed me a lot is the one in the Park of Celle. In the first instance I thought it was about brain and ears, and I thought it was very strange to have the perception and the place together.

MN: I look at all the works as really not definers of a frame of mind in each individual, but as catalysts for shifts in frame of mind. I am not concerned in each individual's frame of mind. I am just a mover.

DvD: Let us talk again about these outside pieces. When you are building the Times Square piece, with all the sounds of traffic around, and then pieces like the one in Celle or the one in Kerguehennec, what is the difference between the first situation and being outside, creating a sound space in the nature...

MN: It is a question that comes up a lot. People find it strange that I could make a piece in the middle of Times Square as a kind of archetype of all these public Place Pieces, because of its context, because of its being a well-known place, because of its image of being the most technical place in the world, but I really do not have a hierarchy of sounds. For me, there was not such a big change, they were just different sounds, a different canvas to work on...

DvD: However, the perception is different: in Times Square there are so many people every day, and maybe in Bern too, whilst in Celle or in Kerguehennec the environment is much more quiet. And the way of integrating the sound in the environment must be different too.

MN: Sure, it is a different surface to work on. The sound, in Times Square, was placed in the middle of the space; in Kerguehennec it is hard to find. But, in fact, in Times Square it is

almost invisible, aurally too. But, it is really just a different surface. The surface is not so much loaded for me. It is also a question I get asked in Europe more than in America, because the European concept of nature is a funny one as opposed to the American and I have not been really able to define it completely. American's nature is taking a kind of common place every day because there is so much land that it is there, it is not something special; whereas there is this very developed idea of nature in European mind which I always felt it was too artificial for me to think about in that way. For me, Times Square is as much landscape as Kerguehenec.

DvD: What if you put the sound of Times Square in Kerguehenec? Would it be more audible or less audible?

MN: You could not escape it, it would cover the whole park. At times of the day, in Times Square, there are thousands of people; perhaps 2% of them are not able to dismiss it as something which is an accident . Most people are able to dismiss it as something which is strange but is there; 2% find it strange and wonderful, but they still think it is an accident, they cannot find anything; and there are those people who know about it and find a place to come back... One of the basic ideas is that nobody perceives a work of art unless he is ready to perceive it. In modern museum practice they try to force feed people. In Times Square, people do not have a chance to find the piece until they are ready to find it; but, on the other hand, instead of being something rare, after fifteen years it has become common place, it is always there, they can find it. Lots of people are terrified by the fact that 99% of the people who walk over do not get it, but that is an idea which is connected to music, box-office or museum.

DvD: Why do you think that this Siren Project was running out of those pieces? I thought it was quite connected.

MN: In the beginning, when I had the idea, it was just another idea and even while doing it I did not try to place it anywhere. But, what I found was happening was in fact that people placed me, in society, as an artist. If I had only been known as an engineer, in fact the ideas I was proposing would have been very plausible, but I was an artist and the preconceptions about what artists are supposed to do and actually do in society made my very rational proposals seem completely mad.

DvD: I thought that the best goal for an artist would be precisely to change something in everyday life...

MN: What I proposed in Times Square, as an artist, was in fact a very practical solution of a problem. Still, I find that some of the hardest minds to change about this project are the ones that think I am making an art-work out of it. In fact, I got interested in solving a technical problem and I did it, that is all. I happened to be also an artist. Like anybody else I am just one person, but when the ideas go out in other people's mind the desire people have to categorize transforms them into something else. I do what I do and it is all one thing.

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DvD: Let us go back to the Moment Pieces...

MN: Like many American artists, when I began to work I did not place myself in history and it is a general American belief that history does not exist because it does not affect this country. It is both positive and negative: you are free, your feet are not attached to the earth. The Time Piece idea began with this idea of contrast and the opposite nature. When we make something, we do think of making something, and if we are making sound we make the sound. I was fascinated by the idea of making something by not making something and by the exploration of what that was and then realizing that at one point this idea about perception got plugged into an idea about society. I did not have the idea of making this absence of sound happen in a room for people to go into it. When I thought about taking this perceptual idea, the first idea I had was that it was broadcast which connected it and then I realized that every other aural signal is in fact making the sound and it is about the meaning of making sounds in succession. The whole communication network of Africa is sound. It is an idea about community, so I have connected it to this idea of history, and it was the first time I ever really had to realize that something was connected to something in the past. If you can step back a while, then it becomes very primitive to think about communicating with sound by hearing a big piece of metal especially in a time when you can do anything you want with sound... In a way, sound signals, even in the wilderness, are the opposite side of visual, we can only see so far, we can only see danger so far, we can hear it where our eyes cannot see, and we can know more about it by seeing it, when we can see it then we can know about what we cannot see; it is a balance between the eye and the ear. The ear hears at a distance; we can hear a thunderstorm 20 km. away before we see clouds. This whole other nature of sound has been in the fluid we breathe, whereas the eye can only go so far as the first object. Another property of sound is that it covers itself in a way that a visual does not cover itself. When one sound is covered with another sound we really deny that we could hear the other sound, it seems unrealistic. The nature of these Moment Pieces is connecting with people regardless of place, which makes them the opposite of the Place Pieces. The piece exists whether you are walking down that street or that street, or whether you are sitting in the Kunsthalle, which is very much different from most works of art in general.

DvD: What I find interesting about the Moment Pieces is that the first time I saw one of those I compared it with the idea of having an image and then switching it off; but then I realised that it was the opposite, because it is what is happening after the interruption, the after-ring, which makes the piece.

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DvD: There is one expression which came up several times and which I liked very much: "clearing up the place". I am not sure that I understood it in the sense you used it. For me it meant that your work clears up the mind from the everyday concerns...

MN: For me this is what every work of art that works does. I cannot really talk about that because I never experienced it as a viewer. The connection between what I know of a piece when I am building it and what I know the final perceiver knows of it is not one that I analyze very much; it is something I know very well through a lot of experience with sound and people, but it is not an analytical thing. I know this kind of things happen and sometimes when I finish a work I take some people through it before it opens to get a feedback range of what they are hearing, but I never really know what is going on in their minds. In a way it is none of my business; I am concerned with the catalyst, the initiator, but their individual pathways are very private.

DvD: I do not agree with that. I think you should know something about the effect of your sound. I cannot imagine that you are not aware of the typical sensation one gets in front of your work. There is a sound which is like listening to silence or a sound which produces a feeling of silence...

MN: It depends again on the work. In a work like Times Square there is no need to alter your aural focus; you alter your contextual focus when you find that piece, it is very much there, whereas a piece like Three to One you really have to change the scale of how you hear. I think that this change of aural scale produces what you refer to. I see this as a kind of beginning point: when you change scale then you start to look at things differently. When some people look at painting their visual scale also changes. The difficulty, for most people, is to realize that the same thing can happen with the ear.

DvD: What is interesting in your work is that the sound is so close to an ordinary sound. How do you manage to change the scale?

MN: This is an important point, a deliberate point of making the sound almost plausible within the space. It also leaves it hidden and means you can only find it by finding it, by getting to the point where you can hear it. I always thought that, on both a level, when it is a very soft piece and the almost plausibility of the sounds are things that draw you in in a different way than if the sound were over either in its nature or in its level. It is also a basic idea of my work that it is there and it is not there. The beautiful thing about the piece of Chicago is that it is huge and loud, but yet many people deny its existence. I like this contradiction.

DvD: Nevertheless, I would like to insist on the point that there are sounds which have a strong aesthetic quality and can make you feel peaceful...

MN: The major amount of energy and effort that I put into a piece is the construction of its sound. The real effort comes in this process of placing the first sound in the space, listening to it and finding the next thing to try; it is a process of learning on my part about sound in that place, in a place that not only is acoustic, but is also this imaginary place that I want to build, and defining this imaginary place by defining many things, comparing them over time. In the beginning, the differences between the things I try are very large, but as the definition of this imaginary place progresses, the sound of this imaginary place progresses too and they become closer. Again, it is not something where I consciously know what I am doing; I try to do the opposite, not to know what I am doing, which is really the difference between the rational process and the artistic one. Partly, also, I can never talk about what you are talking about because I am never there, I am in the position of the maker...

DvD: Would you say that the beauty of the sound would be the greatest satisfaction in your work?

MN: It is tragic that we used up this word beauty. I would say yes in its most original sense, but certainly it does not mean that I only make beautiful sounds. What I usually say is that I work until the piece works, like many other artists, and the real skill is knowing when it works. In bad art-works it is always clear that that point never happened: either the artist never got there, or he went past it.

DvD: In the beginning, we were talking about covered sound. Do you think that sound is more easily covered than visual things?

MN: I do not think so. I was not talking so much about covering; Three to One is more about mixing, about the transformation that happens when two sounds mix, which is very different from what happens when two visual images mix. My talking about it in the work's text preface was a way of freeing people from the need to think that that space had to be quiet to hear the piece, to tell them that those outdoor sounds were things I worked with when I built the work. I worked by projecting a specific acoustic environment because that environment was not actually there a lot of the time when I was building it. So, it was very carefully made. In that particular piece, there is a reoccurring event which is the hiss of cars beginning to move on the main street that cuts the plaza in half because of the traffic light timing; so, there is a period when there is a continuous time, then it stops when the cars stop; it is always different depending whether a truck stopped or a motorcycle, or whether it is the morning of a weekday or the morning of a Sunday. All those were components of the work and my bringing them up in the process is really the result of most sound art being made in an acoustic black room where there is no sound. The sound for me is not the piece, the places; and this idea, given our current definition of sound, is a very hard one to get across; even though many people can accept it intellectually, to really accept it perceptually because of this musical adaptation, this artificial place in the sound in a black room, means pointing out the sound. I find it just very natural to work with: sound is sound.

DvD: When you say that you are not creating a sound for a place but more with the place or with the space, then what is coming out is really a third element, like sound and space together in one time...

MN: It is building a place from my imagination from a given place.

DvD: I think you are working about the idea of covered sensation, which appears constantly as a kind of frustration in our everyday life.

MN: I do not look at man-made sound as being bad. It is a naive way of looking to world; visually we do not do it, we do not think that every man-made structure is ugly. One interesting point is the difference between the moment you first walk into a space and it is not clear that a sound is there and as you look forward in this a shift of scale happens, it starts as being what could be almost a room sound, it becomes huge as you enter into it and then you get into into another perception space because of this change of scale. I am always amazed myself by the difference between being outside of that scale and going into it. When I am building a work, I have to go away from that ; at the end of the process, when I am making very small changes to what that sound is, I can only do those changes by leaving the work on overnight and coming back to it in the morning after sleeping and after having walked in the

outside environment. After ten days of building this thing I know its inner structure and how it is made and how it sounds; so, it is a deliberate pulling back. In working the sound, the only way you can get distance is over time, whilst when you are working with a visual image you can walk back from it. I am always amazed by the difference between the moment I first walk in the space after a night of not hearing this thing and two seconds afterwards, when I am back into the world where I was making it: for me, it is a very crucial point in building the piece. I am working with that "entrance". I call it the "entrance", because if you do not go through that entrance you do not go through the work. I suppose it is a very deliberate demand that the perceiver enters the work or he has nothing, which is a very reasonable demand for an artist to make. I feel sorry for those painters, this 80's way of seeing a group show of, walking as fast as you can through as many rooms as you can catching as many images as possible. Every painter is a victim of that. This is about image and comparison, it is about consumption. I made it impossible for people to consume my work in that way. It is made for each person to possess but not to consume, in this modern, negative conditions. You cannot record it and go away with it; it is only in your mind. There is no way of making a post-card of it, or a tee-shirt...

DvD: The way to possess it would be the one you describe for the Times Square piece, that if you do not put a label on the piece, or you do not make it recognizable from the outside, people could think that it is a very specific and a very subjective experience of discovering a very strange sound.

MN: With each place and each condition it is a different kind of problem to get that to happen. To get it to happen in a museum is more difficult. In the piece of Chicago there is exactly that situation: everyone knows the piece is there, but many people walk through it and do not know it is there. At the same time it is easy to do it if you make a very soft sound, that no one hears; but this is a huge sound. In terms of virtuosity, I consider that being able to do that in that situation is the other extreme of Times Square. Times Square is not a place where you expect cultural intervention; if there is one, you expect to see it and it must be very large and huge to match this grossness of the square. It was not hard to make something that people had to find in that situation, but, on the contrary, to do that in a museum where people are focused and looking for it, is really hard.

DvD: One point which seems important to me is that, since the entrance into the piece is rather subtle and rather difficult, the experience of finding the piece might seem to people as a very personal and subjective experience, like a success...

MN: Subjectivity and personal experience are almost the primary definitions of what art is. I want to counter this idea that, because I work with sound and in an invisible way in a visual context, I am doing something different.

DvD: There are different ways of getting into the mind of people. Are you out for changing something in the mind of people?

MN: No more than a painter can say that a painting is supposed to make you feel whatever. I think that one of the worst things one would want to do as an artist is to manipulate. My work is not about manipulation; it is about catalyzation.

DvD: Your work could work as a catalyst but also as a catharsis...

MN: It depends whether you are a good artist or a bad artist...

DvD: So, you believe that art can change something in people's mind. I do not think this is such an obvious thing for an artist as you seem to consider it, because a whole generation of artists are just not believing in something like getting a better world: you see what you see etc.

MN: I think that they say so not because they are not interested in it, but it is just their reaction to talking about what they do... I think we just come through a decade of aesthetic corruption that we have seen for a couple of hundred years, which in some way destroyed the magic of what it is and certainly destroyed the power. It is a pity we lost the word utopia too, because now, when you use that word, you lose credibility immediately. We are living in such a pragmatic time that it becomes foolish to even think about it, but I do not think it is foolish at all, I think it is very real and many good artists demonstrate it.

DvD: Maybe we could replace the word utopia by the word "vision"?

MN: A very strong belief in the spiritual power of art.

DvD: At some point you said that you thought that the ear is closer to the spirit than the eye. Do you really believe that?

MN: Certainly it is closer to my spirit. I think what I was referring to is the role that the ear had before we became so visually oriented. It always had this connection to spirit because we could not touch and we could not shape with the ear. It is very recent that we take real information through the eye; most of our history has come through the ear. It depends on each civilization: not even 50% of the people were able to read before 1850. In ancient Greece only an élite could read. It is really a major change in the mind, because also, by writing, things lose their fluidity; as they become stable and accurate, the ability of the mind to change them and transform them is gone. It is a major change in our psychology, in the whole idea of memory: paper remembers very accurately. It concretizes something which was vague, which in some aspects is good and in some other aspects is bad. It changed our idea of the world in an incredible way: it made it more concrete, it made it more tangible.

DvD: So, you think you discovered a fresh field to go into the mind of people?

MN: As I said before we have two codified sound languages, music and verbal language, but there is a huge territory in between them where we operate. It was my particular fate to choose this.

DvD: When you were talking about the Moment Pieces and this idea of showing something by not showing something, it made me think of the jewish tradition where you evoke an image by not showing it, in order not to destroy the idea of God.

MN: I think it is not only the jewish tradition, it is human nature. When you discuss something, it loses privacy and you lose your private view of it in a discussion. This happens even more if the medium of communication is not verbal; this is a much greater transition than a translation, it is reforming it in a less refined way.

DvD: This idea of showing by not showing takes us back to the idea of silence...

MN: Any kind of art work that is consumed is dead. I think I just try to defend my work against that kind of death. If you state something by not stating something it means that each person states it for himself.

DvD: Since the material you work with is sound, when you take it out you work with pure "immateriality"...

MN: The process of building a Time Piece is a very strange one because you are building a sound for its after-image, so the sound you are building is not the thing you are building. It is very fascinating to construct this after-image.

DvD: For the Time Pieces it is obvious that you are creating an after-image but, on the other hand, the Moment Pieces are always creating something that is not there, something which is outside the piece.

MN: Quite amazingly, in many of the Place Pieces there is an after-image. Not so much an after-image, because the after-image is what is left when it is really gone, but in many of the works you find yourself going out of the work, being somewhere else and beginning to hear that sound. One of the nice aspects of using sounds which are close to things which can be there is that they trigger this memory and the sound that triggers that memory becomes the sound of the work; so, it appears in different places. I would not call it an after-image, it is an image of the work which gets superimposed on things or which everyday sounds evoke. The Moment Pieces and the Time Pieces are two opposites, one does what the other does not but they both do everything in a way. There must be a philosophical definition for this relationship.

DvD: Warburg talks about "Energang", which means the exchange of an alternative energy between the viewer and the work, with a hole in between, and in this hole something comes up and gets created like in the theory of uncertainty of Eisenberg.

MN: I do not like this idea. This has always been the scientist's great excuse. You are talking about the distance between the perceiver and the work itself and what happens when they move together; but I am really talking about the relationship between these two forms, Moment Pieces and Place Pieces, which refers to what we said earlier about the exchange of different kinds of time, but also this exchange of different kinds of after-image.

DvD: What I wanted to compare is this after-image with a "sight-image", or a third image coming up.

MN: It is really in between, it is connected with the space between the viewer and the work, the work being a catalyst which moves the viewer into a new place, but it is not a new place of the work, it is a new place of his own.

DvD: Is your sound work about defining a space or more about creating a new space, an imaginary or immaterial space?

MN: What I am dealing with is each person's perception of space; that is what space is for that person. I am creating a space from my imagination, using what is there as a component and adding something else which is the sound. Architecture is just one of the components I work with, but I am not interested in explaining architecture.

DvD: When you talk of this staircase like a column of air you define a sort of immaterial space in a material space.

MN: The column of air is more a realization about the physics of sound. The room has such an unusual shape, six times as high as it is square; it makes really an incredible vertical space which you do not perceive because this staircase floats through it so to speak without touching the walls but in fact that is a physical reality and that is what I worked with, activating this vertical block of air. I was fascinated by being able to walk through it in three dimensions. In Times Square nobody gets off the ground, but it is a block of sound without physical walls.

DvD: Would you apply this immaterial image of space to the Three to One piece?

MN: I am more describing the material I work with, not in a spiritual space as a piece; the reason I am willing to talk about it is not the spiritual space of this piece, it is just the exterior of it. I refuse to talk about the interior. If we take Times Square piece as an example, people never see it as a block of sound, because when they find it they are in it, it is standing back. The drawings are a completely different way of talking about the ideas than the spiritual space they create. It is maybe a good point that, for instance, people do not think to the column of air that way when they go through it. They first think that they are on a stairway going to the next floor, but then they stand back from this thing and look at it from the outside, and the texts begin to probe into the inner space, they are kind of doorways, but they never get inside the space itself, and the drawings are the exterior of the work. In the Three to One we have the image of three blocks of sound stuck on top of each other. There are two views: one is from the side, there all the blocks, each block of a different colour and you see them separately;

and the other drawing is from the top down, with the blocks being transparent, so you see it from an angle and you can see the colour of each block, but also the mixture of all those blocks together. But it is still the exterior; those colours do not relate to the space, they are just linguistic inventions. If I use a colour in a drawing I do not try to contradict the perceptual feeling of the sound. They are not meant as representations. In the drawings I use perceptual colours, but not in the way I use sound, more as a way of stating something, as a word.