

Max, to get this thing going, what is the Museum of Contemporary Arts Piece properly called? Is Sound Installation adequate to cover it?

M: I think so, yeah, how do you feel about that?

Well, frankly for this purpose I am more interested in how you feel about it. Whether that is an adequate term, whether sound installation covers it.

I think so. I think that it is a neutral enough term to not have it have preconceptions that don't apply to it...It leaves the situation open, but yet it describes it, it is sound, the piece isn't anything more than the movement of that air...or air in that column. It is an installation in terms that installation implies that the piece is made for a specific location. So, I think it is good in that sense and that in a way it does not mean anything to the general public right off, and that they still have to go in and search for what it is.

Now, I have some questions later on about how people might experience the piece, do you want me to go on with those now?

Whenever, I'm ready.

Okay, I think that we will just skip around. Could you describe what you have actually created in this stairwell, your notion of what is happening there.

Well, its the first and clear situation is that it is a spacial arrangement. Actually, almost in layers. Vertical layers stacked vertically. In addition to that there is movement within the sound, each area of sound or its more complex than that actually, but areas of sound are kind of layers which (maybe one word would be Turning, revolving, not spacially revolving, but acoustically revolving.) And so, there are those two factors that as you move up the stairway, you move into a different layer, or different layer of activity in a way. At part, even if you move and make a small movement in the orientation of your ears, you are hearing that you have moved into a different acoustic layer.

So what is happening is that there is a static situation in terms of the ocillators, they are putting out a constant sound.

Right...

It changes, it is different for everybody as they move through it.

Well, actually the oscillators themselves are the beginning point in the process of generating the piece and not the final point at all because the piece is formed...although the piece begins as a number of steady pitches, when they are mixed they begin to connect with each other, and they are actually mixed differently in each one of the speakers in the column. So it is not only their mixture as they are put into the speaker, but the whole aspect that the space puts on it and the final piece is really formed within the space itself.

Well, that really goes into my next question. The work was commissioned for that particular space. Now you consulted very early on Larry Booth the architect and you made a small model. I saw in your studio of the stairwell space. How in fact did you respond to and work with the stairwell as part of your piece.

Well, I really didn't start thinking about any sound structures until I first came out there in January. I mean, even the conception of the piece was...came about originally in the one that I proposed that it was vertical layers with the 50-foot column. And, that was as much as I came with in January. When the cement block was there, the windows weren't quite in. I began with a very...with a system that would allow me to explore a lot of sounds and I guess the first part was kind of getting a feeling for what kind of resonances were in the space, and I could to that even in the unfinished stage because the low frequencies don't change. And, I think after the two week period, I had a clear idea of the nature of the piece, not it's specific content. And I realized what kind of layers were possible and what kind of things the space was going to do to the sound I put in it. And then I essentially used that information to build another system which let me explore in more detail of the detailed aspects of the piece that I could only find once the space was finished itself. I maybe speaking too specifically here..The general process was a listening one and exploration of the possibilities for work in there by listening and seeing what happened to sounds.

For example, when we were further along it was crucial at certain parts of your process, couldn't be completed until say, the tile was put on the staircase or drywall was put in the stairwell, so that in the end it was coming down to very specific thoughts as to what was there.

Right. Even a certain layer of dirt around changes things at the end. I guess that it started out as a very broad situation and gradually became narrowed, gradually as I found the piece in a way...became narrower and narrower and more detailed until the last days, actually before the opening...As you know, I made the final real decisions just about 12 hours before the piece...before the opening. That is in a way, I felt I needed, I felt responsible for using every instant of time I had to make a piece, and in fact it took me that long to reach that point. It is alot of digesting of information which isn't an analytical way of thinking, it is an intuitive one in which the process which...you can't start until you actually start working with just what you are working with. It was alot of walking up and down the stairway. And alot of very careful listening and kind of unconscious digestion of what the situation was.

It might be useful to explain when you were walking on the staircase, that you were not walking alone, that you had your terminal, your keyboards, so that you were able to respond and try out things immediately.

Yes, that was really crucial to doing the piece in anywhere near the time frame that we had planned.

Could you explain exactly what it was that you had. I know that the technology is not important, but...

In terms of the process I think that it is...not the technology but the fact that I was able to change any aspect of the sound that I was producing. The mixture in any one of the speakers, the pitch and the loudness of any one of the frequencies that was being generated from any point within the space. It may seem at first glance that like it is just a matter of time if I walk to a certain point of the space, hear something and want to change that and have to walk to another point of the space to change it and then back to the point where I heard it and see what that change was. But its alot more than time and effort, it's a wholly different process that the kind of immediatcy of having changes under your fingers lead you in totally different paths and if one had to spend the time and energy moving into another situation. It also allows you to really see the effect of the change so you really progress in a realistic way.

What do you mean by realistic?

Well, any other way,...it....sound is so, well it's easy to remember if one is used to remembering it, but it is not like a visual image where you can even make a note of it, or a sketch of it. It's literally only in your mind, and the distraction of several a minute or thirty seconds between the time you want to change something and hear the result of that change, it is, really interrupts the process and changes, the process to a degree that makes it completely different. Was that the question?

Yes, I think that covers it. At least initially. We will probably go back and forth. Let me ask the obvious question that many people have, music as we know it is technically only one aspect of the study of sound. But most people don't think of it quite that way, how does your work relate musical sounds as the (fond) of say very narrowly by someone like VonHelmholtz as periodic vibrations, I mean for most people anyone who works with sound is either a scientist or a musician, where do you fit into that?

Well, I don't know. I think catagories are as usual false, and perhaps not, they are clarifying to a certain extent but in the end truly misleading. I, in terms of Helmoser's definition of music I think its a psychoaquisitions or acquisitious definition which perhaps is not very relevant in terms of asthetics, lots of people, and it's almost a standard question to say, how do you define music. I define music by doing it. Essentially I feel the conception in most people's minds of what music and science are aren't really up to date. When I make a piece I don't think of whether it is a piece of music or whether it is a piece of sculpture. I make the piece and if one does relate to those existing categories, I fall in between, I think. But I think those catagories...I think that what I am trying to say is that those catagories in a healthy situation are always changing, and it is artists that change them.

I think we discussed once what you hoped the piece would come to be in terms of peoples response to it. I may be mistaken, but I recall that you hope that people might eventually consider it as music. Is that, am I right, or what were you saying.

No, what I am really saying there is I am very, I think, music is one of the arts that, where it's definition is most rigid, and I am very interested almost as a side issue to what I do, in expanding the definition of that word in peoples minds. I don't really, look.....
(position)-(musician) is that once I make a piece its there, and how people want to think about it is really up to them. And that people will approach it from many different directions and perhaps the most positive situation is where they do approach it from as many different directions as possible.

The museum had the jazz festival here last week, the AACM and apparently one of the musicians without being told what was going on, kind of got into the staircase and immediately responded to what was going on. And, other people can walk in and the responses have generally been three,... people have either loved it, been aware of it and hated it, or though we had very noisy air conditioning. But this trained musician really did respond to it. Do you think that people who have more of a background or perhaps more open are going to respond to it as a work of art rather than as a "sound", that they will put more of an asthetic content into it.?

Well, in a way, the point of response is almost deliberate in the piece. It's almost as the piece is disguised, not only visually does this little visual impact of it in there as possible, but also in an audible way. The fact that it does come close to a large feature of it comes very close to what people would think of as air sounds, air conditioning sounds or movement sounds. It is in a way an introduction or in a way, I am interested in a kind of stimulating process of discovery, and if the situation is defined and has clear boundaries that process does not happen. It is something that I am realizing about my work that has not been a conscious effort but both the piece in Times Square and the piece at (MOMA) (MOHMA), have that aspect, they are both kind of disguised in their existing sound environment. And, go on from that point.

Both in the Museum of Contemporary Art, it is within the context of a museum even though it is not in "a specific are space", it is not in a gallery, and people, many people know that it is there, does the fact that many people come expecting to hear it, change it for you?

Not really, because they are not usually expecting what it is. So I think, the situation still remains.

How would you recommend someone, if this is not contradictory to what you just said, but how would you suggest someone experience the MCCA work-how much time, is there a specific starting point, is there any sequence that might be more enjoyable, or more interesting than another?

No. Not really, you know, and again, it is a question that one could relate to a piece of sculpture. Would one, ..would the artist say, the first point you have to look at the piece from is here, and then you should move to the right and spend 10 minutes looking at this side, and they should.....it is very much the same with this.

But there is a slightly different aspect to it. In that a sculpture is an image even though it is in three dimensions and it requires you to walk around it in time, so to speak, your piece is very subtle. There are analogies perhaps with looking at stained glass in the interior of a church that you have to let your eyes adjust to the darkness to see the actual color in order to give time for the glare, of the after image from the outside light to disappear. Do you have to kind of ready yourself for it, or do you have to sit or do you have to do something to kind of tune in to your sound installation to get the most out of it.?

I think it is a process that everybody does almost automatically. When they go into a situation, as if one goes into a concert hall to hear a concert, one's all focus is very much different than on the street, and if one goes into a museum, one's visual focus I think changes. I feel that really, that our focus should be extended beyond both of those places, both orally and visually. And, that is one of the nice pieces about the, ...in fact the pieces in the stairwell, because it is a part of the museum but it is not where people are used to focusing, and its not visual which is in the museum....

(SIDE TWO)

The one record that I made of that repertoire has actually freed me from traveling around the world and remaking those particular kinds of sound and allowed me to move further.

Some composers, apparently, I don't know this, but I assume that most every composer at some point was a practicing or performing musician, or at least they were an instrumentalist in some way. Do you feel that you could have done what you have done without having had this experience as a percussionist? Do you feel it was necessary for you to become a composer having been a performer?

I don't know. I learned certainly a great deal about people and the way they hear, and about sound itself. You made instruments.

You made instruments?

Yes, I played a lot of concerts. That was very valuable I think, but on the other hand, that period of my life almost seems as though it didn't exist now. That person perhaps is like a brother of mine who I know fairly well... ..but it doesn't seem to be me any more.

Well, that was ten years ago, where do you think you will be in the next ten years? Where would you like to be?....In terms of the pieces you would like to do in the future, and perhaps I should mention that your

pieces have already ranged from things involving, I think satellites?....

Not quite yet....

Okay, C.B. radio, public air waves, underwater pieces, now you are working on one that would involve a kind of random operation of a piece of an entire city, every time an emergency vehicle goes anywhere. Where would you like to be, what kind of a role...what would you like to be doing in ten years?

That is hard to say....What pieces I will be doing, I haven't thought of them yet...

But I mean in terms of.....Do you see your work becoming increasingly environmental or are these environmental projects really the only practical way to realize these pieces?

I am also at the same time I am interested in dealing with individuals as an artist, and the whole side that I haven't really explored yet and one which traditionally artists have been involved in making pieces which perhaps only one person hears. I don't...I think that is simultaneous that I can do that simultaneous with what I do now. What I feel very much and want to do is to be able to put myself in a position where I am able to implement an idea when I have it no matter how large it is, and I want the freedom to really function in my society rather than being a decoration to it, or a minstrel to it. Those are very antiquated and limited roles.

Can you see yourself as an advisor in terms of soundscape?

No. I mean this project, the siren project, it is much more than being an advisor to a committee which is determining what something should sound like. I think that there are a lot of pitfalls in the committee's situation. I think for many reasons, it is the reason we have many of the situations that we have, that by its nature it has to be a compromise. It's a very topical issue for me right now. It is the issue that I have to define with this particular project. The siren project. Whether...how I function as an artist within that context, and I haven't defined it yet.

Computers play a role in your work. And the forecasts for a new generation of computer technology suggests that it is even going to be easier for the man on the street to incorporate computers in his or her life. Do you foresee making pieces that might be available to the man on the street, of your work, where they don't have to come into a museum.

I have been interested in that situation for a long time, It has been possible. The early piece in 1968 which was called Telephone Access, and it was simply a form of computer set up at a telephone number which responded to sounds. It was a one to one relationship. People would call the number and make a sound and the system would make another sound back. Very much different from the public radio pieces which also have telephone input. It was really letting a person explore the way this system was transforming what they had done. An oral conversation, a non-verbal oral conversation. I think that technology has opened up a lot of possibilities. I really think that the word technology is such a mis-nomer. A 100 years ago or 200 years ago, the pencil was high-tech. It simply

is an available material. There is a mystery that surrounds it because the knowledge about it is not a common knowledge. I think that will change within a generation or so. Using a computer will become as common as using a pencil.

Have you ever done anything with bio-feedback?

I never have.

Totally internal sound?.....self-generated, a sort of internalized sound source?

No, I have never worked in that area. It is a little scary to me to put electrodes on and have it directly change my mind. For me, it just becomes a way of generating and molding sounds that I have no other way of doing. It is much more than a new instrument it is a whole new.....opens up whole areas which one could never attack with mechanical technology. The whole siren project, the reason it is feasible is that it became economically important to put an electronic siren on a car rather than a mechanical one. So, changing the sounds and putting in a new circuit board that generates a sound, whereas if it were mechanical it would mean changing the whole structure or whatever was generating the sound. Can you hold on one second John?

I don't feel that I have been too suc-sinked.

I think that is very hard to be. I have been asking and thinking two things, one, Chicago Faces and all sorts of material that we might be able to use in another interview. What questions haven't I asked that you would like to answer?

The technology one was a good one. I don't know how clearly I got it across....

I think that came across very well. I am just curious about how you see the MCA project in regard to other projects. What particular problems... did working here help you to solve. Be very frank in terms of was it an occasion to realize that it was something that you really wanted to do, or was it an occasion to realize something..??

It was both in a way. Because of my use of alot of expensive equipment I am kind of hampered. I think that no matter what kind of artist one is, if you are a painter, or anything else the process is continuous, and in many ways relate to research and development. It is sitting there trying things, thinking about things. At this point in my own organization of myself and how I get things going, I am limited to only being able to do alot of that research in the context of a specific project. It is almost like having to have to stop thinking for a little while until the project begins, which is difficult to do. The progress from piece to piece for me is a continual, in a way, of doing the piece, the MCA was picking up from the point I left off at the last work which was Mo-Ma, and moving on from there.....

Do you think the fact that this is a permanent piece will help other permanent pieces to come into being?

Yes. I think the concept.....

Something you don't turn off, if it really happens this way that that will ...music, our associations are always that music or sound is such a temporary, intermittent phenomena.

I think one can write about the concept of having a permanent sound work and talk about it, but the real effect of having one that works is much stronger in getting the idea across. Yes, it is very different. People think of music as having a beginning and an end. But that is really, ...it just happens to be a practicality of that instrumentation. There is no reason it has to be there. We have, and maybe it is my fault too here in the conversation, we got to the point of almost classifying me now as a musician, and classifying this piece as a piece of music which is something I don't want to do actually.

Do you consider, we have talked about this before, in this piece are you a composer, sculpturer, and environmental artist, or any of those things or all of those things.

I guess I am all of those things. And what we are doing here is we are trying to relate a person's activity to classifications which were formed from past activity after that activity was over usually. You are more of a historian than I am, and so you canthe feeling I have is that, yes, it relates to music because it is sound and yes, it relates to sculpture because it deals with space and it forms a space, even though it doesn't do it visually.

You know, I was thinking about the possibilities that really presented themselves by working in a stairwell that a number of your pieces say, pieces at PSI from what I gather you encountered them more or less in a static space. You kind of approach them, and you could move around the space but essentially you are moving around on the horizontal. Whereas in the stairwell, because it is a circular stairwell, you are not only ascending and going up or down, but you are also moving closer and then further away from the sound source. So it really one of the most complex situations that you could have been offered to work with.

Yes. The stairway really makes a three dimensional path through that space which I haven't done before. It was in a way the most complex piece I have ever done. I mean, there were aspects of the piece at Mo-Ma which were vertical too, the fact that the sound covered the garden and the upper plaza so that when one walked up the stairs that was not in any way so clear and not so much in focus as here, which was really being able to move in three ways.

Let me ask you a question that to me is very basic. It is the sort of thing I have been getting into as a historian, that has been very out of fashion for a long, long time....because it assumed that one read in (attentions-intentions) Why do you do these pieces? I have certain theories about why Matece Matis made his work, there were certain....he wanted to accomplish something, it was very complex and in sum it had to do with making something better...Why do you do these pieces?

I don't know. It really is a complex question.

What do you hope to achieve by having made these pieces? What do you hope people will get out of it?

Well, let me start back at another point. The only thing I really know about why I do pieces is that I have an idea and I get very excited about doing the idea, and I do it. That is as much as I know about it within myself. I have talked about it before and believe there are, that I am very interested in getting people to use their ears. I am interested in expanding what most people think of as music, of expanding that word.

Are you teaching then in a way?

I think in one sense, not so much teaching, that is what artists do. I was going to say, it is not so much teaching, but it is showing something special which you as an artist find, and.....

You are trying to share your perceptions?

No....because you spend your time in a very much different way than most people that you come upon things that they wouldn'tit is a way of....yes it is sharing.

That's a nice way to end.

Yes, it is.

Is Dennis there?

Yes.

I think we ended it on a very nice note.

Do you think we are really going to carry it into music there by all of this conversation, or do you think we got out of it at the end there.

Well, you could maybe clarify...It's not music in any....it's music to the degree that it uses sound, it is just like people who use kind of words out of context, like free verse, or concrete poetry. You are using words or even syllables or sounds, they are related to words and they are related to grammar and syntechs, in the same way it is much more abstract in pure use of sound that you are into.

Well, I noticed that before your saying that there was a difference between music and sound. I don't think there really is.

I'm not saying there is, I just raised that as someones question obviously, is this music or what is it?

Yeah,.....bec.....

At one point we discussed this and you suggested to me anyway, although it is sound I had the feeling that you hoped that eventually people

would become sufficiently sensitive to this sort of thing and they would begin to see aspects of music in it, in that it would be music in the sense of a pleasure source, as opposed to something that was interesting or a phenomena. But I may be mistaken.

I don't quite understand it.....

Well, their definition of music, it would expand and encompass what you do.

I think, or maybe the definition between the two ideas of sculpture and music would disappear.

You know Michael Asher did a column of air as a sculpture in 1969 a show at the Whitney. It was a vertical column of air, sort of a square column of air, and in your talking about the columns of air and the sculpture and so on, it is absolutely right. It is just something that one doesn't see but apparently you perceived it by sticking your hand into it.

.....my ears into it...oh, you mean Asher's column...was it moving?

Yeah, it was moving, and that is kind of what it was. There was a kind of air source below created somehow within these parameters, a column of moving air. You couldn't see it but you could put your hand into it and feel it, beyond a certain point it didn't exist. It was formed, forming an invisible configuration.

It wasn't surrounded by walls?

No, it was in the middle of the room, or something.

I haven't,...when I say moving air, I mean in a very detailed sense, and in the sense that most of it goes, that that movement is perceived by our ears not by the sense of touch.

I have my little book here, and what amazed me under this definition of sound it says, "any vibration in the air, or other medium, some types of which are able to cause a sensation of hearing." That sound in it's strictest sense is not necessarily something you can even hear.

And they confine it to air.....

Independent of whether it is heard or not.

It is also...there is sound in water. It's I guess,...or do they say any medium.

Any medium, but they say some types of which are able to cause the sensation of hearing, so there must be other kinds of sounds which, in addition to the ultra-sonic and all of that sort of thing...it is fascinating.

You did get into infrasonic or ultrasonic in your MCA piece. Everything that you calculated and worked with was determined to be within the audible range?

Yeah, the piece at the _____ or alot of it wasn't.
It was working with people's ears.

Max, I think you have,....are you happy with the distinction you made between what you do and music?

I guess, it depends what is pulled out of it. I don't know whether I can clarify it more. The only thing that is lingering is that we talked so much in the other vein, just in terms of quantity....We have gone over the issue itself and dealt with it clearly.....

What would you want to say, do you want to say anything more about sound...?

No. I think we have it. It is just the emphasis and how they edit it.

One thing I am not clear about, we avoided it...in a way. But we called it a sound installation. And your role in making it was sort of a composite composer/sculpturer, or what would you call yourself?

That's fine.

Anything other than that?

Nothing that really applies to the aesthetics of the piece.

Okay. For the sake of the ground foundation, should we say anything more about architecture? (ha, ha)

Would you say that your piece modifies one's experience of the the stairwell as much as the stairwell modified the experience of the piece...? ...Although there was a chicken and the egg, there's now, it is reciprocal.

I think the best answer to that is your reaction to,.... when we were listening to it and we had to turn it off to change the power supply, and you felt that the walls would fall down.

Yes, it was really quite remarkable. Okay, good.... Well, I think we will catch it here and see what we come up with and if we need to do a supplementary one at some point we will....

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