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The practice of listening to the city in Max Neuhaus's approach

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Abstract

From 1966, the American artist Max Neuhaus shifted away from his career as a percussionist and transitioned towards sound art. The central focus of each artwork by Neuhaus is listening. Based on the existing sound resources in urban environment, Neuhaus developed his very pioneering approach by revealing inaudible or barely audible sounds of various spaces. His inaugural performance, "Listen" (1966-1976), encouraged the public to engage in active listening, thereby rediscovering the sonic dimension of their everyday lives. My recommendation in this paper is to explore how Neuhaus' "process" and "method" of listening, which he developed through his performances and walks, can be applied to environmental and music listening. For Neuhaus, the discovery of the complex sound dimension of the urban space and its perpetual changes is a training of the ear, but also, it is what provides the key to create and discover urban sound installations.

Keywords: Listening process; urban soundwalk; environmental listening

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1 Introduction

The familiarity of our daily life environments influences the way that we experience them. The way that we perceive these places individually and/or collectively guide our attention and our “aural perception”. Listening is a first step to discovering the sound content of an urban environment. However, according to geographer Michel Lussault (LUSSAULT, 2007) we can define a "spatial identity" from the set of values fixed in a space. This spatial identity is a “collective reference”, constructed and invented by the people of a society: the people who are involved and live in it. In a similar vision, the architect and geographer Pascal Amphoux (AMPHOUX, 2003) correlates the sonic identity of a city with the multiple perceptions of the individuals who use the place. The gathering and crossing of all these perceptions give us a sight of the sound identity of the city. Furthermore, when an urban sound event, performance, installation, or walk comes into the city, it can highly modify the way we listen to it. In the analysis process of urban sound art, it is necessary to consider the complex and shifting sound dimension of urban space. The urban sound art, just like the urban sound space, can be perceived and experienced in different ways by all individuals. Both the starting and arrival point for each artwork by Max Neuhaus is listening. He moved from music as a percussionist to sound as a sound artist looking for new ways of listening. For Neuhaus, moving from inside the concert hall to outside in the city, and listening to our environment, were the first steps of this listening transformation.

> The first works that I did were about that public; they were about taking myself out of the confined public of contemporary music and moving to a broader public, a deep belief that I could deal in a complex way with people in their everyday lives, not making a simple piece for a simple people but making something very special accessible to anyone of those people who were ready to hear it, but not confronting them with it. It's making something which they can find, making the work in such a way that it leads to discovery, that you discover it rather than having it imposed upon you. (NEUHAUS, LOOCK, 1994, pp.134-135)

The artist and theorist Brandon LaBelle (2012) underlines the specificity of Neuhaus’s ideas of listening, as a cultural and politic vision and related to artistic activity in the urban space and its critical perspective.

> […] sound and space intermesh in the fabrication of urban conditions, the sociality of the built environment, and artistic practice converse. […] Such perspective finds articulation in a form of modulating the built environment-reflecting back, recording, and transforming, shifting perspective and turning environments into instruments, of performance and audition, Neuhaus creates audible commentary on how public space is conceived. (pp.159-160)

Communicating through sounds and having social interactions with a large public was fundamental in Neuhaus’s career change process. By gathering people to participate in a

listening activity, Neuhaus was providing collective experiences of the urban environment. A question comes to mind: what are the moments of listening in our daily life? A few days ago, walking on my way to Philharmonie de Paris for a concert in the Grand Salle Pierre Boulez, many people were walking in the same direction, most of them probably going to the concert. I was asking myself: when and where does listening begin? At the beginning of the concert? When we get inside the concert hall? Or even on the way to the concert hall?

2 "LISTEN"

The displacement of listening is the key point of the very first independent work of Neuhaus as a sound artist, entitled LISTEN. It was a series of some fifteen sound walks that the artist organized over a period of thirteen years in the United States and Canada. An organized time to listen to the environment. Neuhaus takes the audience back to the field, the birthplace of urban sounds. Other forms of this project include articles, postcards, and posters like the famous one with the view under the Brooklyn Bridge and the word LISTEN on it. Neuhaus talks about his interest in the sounds of everyday life, similar to John Cage. Furthermore, the act of listening to our environment in a group, produces a common experience.

> Art instead of being an object made by one person is a process set in motion by a group of people. Art's socialized. It isn't someone saying something, but people doing things, giving everyone (including those involved) the opportunity to have experiences they would not otherwise have had. (CAGE, 1969, p.151)

As Cage emphasized on the quality of achieving the experiences together through an artwork, Neuhaus noticed from the first walks, a behavioral change related to these shared moments of listening. By leading the group of people silently, he recognized that his active listening is "contagious". Another quality mentioned by Cage in this extract is to consider the art as a "process set" which is also obvious in Neuhaus's method. His experience as a professional musician, playing and recording the contemporary music repertoire, led him to rethink the context of listening.

> As a percussionist I had been directly involved in the gradual insertion of everyday sounds into the concert hall, from Russolo through Edgard Varese and finally to John Cage where live street sounds were brought directly into the hall. […] I became interested in going a step further. Why limit listening to the concert hall? Instead of bringing these sounds into the hall, why not simply take the audience outside? (NEUHAUS, 1990, p.63).

Neuhaus's approach for the first version of LISTEN was not only to take out a group of people to listen to the city. The music seems to play the role of intermediate in the process of listening displacement. Neuhaus's walk began with listening to urban sounds and ended by

listening to a few percussion pieces in the intimate context of his studio in SoHo. For this first walk, Neuhaus (1990) mentioned that he had stamped the word "LISTEN" on the hand of every participant. He pointed out an interesting observation he had made earlier: as the street crossed paths with a power plant, there arose an impressive and thunderous rumbling sound. They continued their journey, crossing the highway and walking along the reverberating noise of passing tires. They strolled along the riverside for a few blocks, later returning over a pedestrian bridge and listening to the soundmark of the Puerto Rican area in Manhattan, finally arriving at his studio. What we see on the invitation of LISTEN's first version (March 27, 1966) "Concert of Traveled and Traveling music" might refer to moving from listening to the city sound environment into listening to music, which is the opposite way that led Neuhaus from concert hall to city listening. The invitation which was orally communicable also gives an idea of the concert program and composers. One question comes to mind: "what was the listening walk influence on the music listening afterward?". If we consider the program of Neuhaus on that evening, as a whole, it seems an efficient ear training which benefits a variety of listening aims.

3 Listening to the city

A listening practice oriented on the city could not be dissociated from its ecological dimension, the correlation between sound and its environment. Daniele Balit (2016) art historian and curator, highlights the historical context of New York's urban changes between 1960 and 1970, and the "de-industrialization" of this city in a context of economic and social change. New ways of experimenting and investing in the urban environment by artists in that context, is according to him, the result of the transformations of this period.

In other versions of LISTEN, sometimes Neuhaus "repurposed" an invitation to give a lecture or play the percussion by making a new framework to spread his idea of listening out of conventional context, just as he did for his piece Public Supply[2] from1966. What Neuhaus calls "Lecture Demonstrations" are a version of LISTEN, which in contrast with the first version doesn't include music performance. The meeting point is the concert hall or conference room and again Neuhaus (1990) brings his audience outside for a silent sound walk, stamping on their hands the word LISTEN, in his words: "the rubber stamp was the lecture and the walk the demonstration" (p.64). The walk not only replaces a concert, but also a talk.

[2] Neuhaus was to be interviewed by the music director of WBAI radio and it was on this occasion that the artist came up with the idea for the work. Rather than giving an interview, he wanted to create a work that would open the radio studio to the outside world via the telephone, thus creating a space for communication.

The listening walk versions were just one of the multiple forms of the LISTEN project. The famous opinion editorial that Neuhaus published in the New York Times on December 06, 1974, was, in his words, “the largest version of LISTEN”. The Op-Ed page[3], one of the most popular pages in the newspaper, was a response to a pamphlet by the Department of Air Resources who published earlier that year, “Noise Pollution Makes You Sick”. Neuhaus’s article is a clear statement to show that the act of listening to our environment is a more complex topic than just noise pollution.

Noise pollution and nuisance are among the most common issues in urban development projects. Emily Thompson's research on the historiography of noise pollution highlights the antiquity of these problems in society, dating back to prehistoric times. However, the author observes a concentration of these phenomena with the rise of large cities and the advent of industry. The founding of the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise by American physicist Julia Barnett Rice at the beginning of the 20th century in New York City is one consequence of this phenomenon. Around 1929, the noise abatement movement continued with The New York City's Noise Abatement Commission, where acoustics experts employed Thomas Edison's phonograph as an instrument for noise measurement, using the decibel as a unit of measurement. The commission also utilized public surveys to understand the impact of noise pollution on citizens' daily lives. In 1930, their comprehensive report "City Noise" presented the results of their fieldwork and proposed technical solutions and laws for better management of city noise. These efforts have continued, providing insights into the soundscape of New York City since the early 20th century. Although the main focus is on the issue of noise and noise pollution in the city, written and sound archives, reports, laws, and public actions shed light on the entire urban soundscape. Neuhaus' critique of the article “Noise Pollution Makes You Sick” is an essential reflection on listening and how the sonic identity of our urban environment is as important as its visual identity.

> Through extreme exaggeration of the effects of sound on the human mind and body, this propaganda has so frightened people that it has created "noise" in many places where there was none before, and in effect robbed us of the ability to listen to our environment. […] we need aural as well as visual privacy, but silencing our public environment is the acoustic equivalent of sainting it black. Certainly, just as our eyes are for seeing. our ears are for hearing. (NEUHAUS, 1974, p.39)

[3] See Socolow, Michael J., "A Profitable Public Sphere: The Creation of the New York Times Op-Ed Page" (2010). Communication and Journalism Faculty Scholarship. 2
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cmj_facpub

Going to encounter the people in public spaces was part of Neuhaus' approach to relocate the listening from its conventional places to everyday life. On September 6, 1966, Neuhaus played his first version of *American Can* in the framework of the 4th Annual Avant Garde Festival, which was held at The Central Park Conservatory Pond. Numerous tin cans of the manufacturer American Can Company were used for this happening-performance[4]. The instruction[5] was to distribute them on the ground of a populated area so that they completely cover the ground, while specifying that the ground must be hard enough so that the sound produced by the movement of the cans is audible. Later in the same year, on December 31, he performed *Fontana Mix-Feed* (1965 -1968), one of the most remarkable interpretations of Fontana Mix by John Cage, again in Mall in Central Park. Neuhaus declared later that *American Can* with *Listen* were a part of his "sound oriented pieces for situations other than that of the concert hall[6]."

At the end of the sixties, other urban events and performances happened such as Pauline Oliveros' lecture-performance *Some Sound Observations* in 1968. Charles Eppley (2017) in his PhD dissertation on Neuhaus works highlights the similarity of Oliveros and Neuhaus in their way of listening:

> Like Neuhaus – and unlike Cage – Oliveros does not approach noise as a new musical material, but as a didactic tool to frame new methods and theories of listening. […] Oliveros and Neuhaus point to sound as environment itself, beyond music and the hierarchies of composition, but also performance and spectatorship (p.114).

In the case of *STREET WORKS* organized by poet and artist John Perreault in collaboration with poet Hannah Weine and painter Marjorie Strider, between 1969 and 1970, numerous artists were involved. John Perreault (1969) describes these events as a "change of consciousness".

> In general, rather than adding something to the street environment, a Street Works brings the street environment, just as it is, for better or for worse, into consciousness. This includes not only how the street looks just what it is used for and by whom. This change of consciousness is a value in itself and is more important than questions or whether or not a particular Street Works is or is not a work of art[7] (p.16).

Neuhaus' practice over the years refers to this conscious relationship with the urban space, where he creates a space within the space using sound. The last version of LISTEN according to the artist is a postcard version, and the recipient of this card is free to place the word

[4] See Max Neuhaus's webpage on American Can, also Eppley, Charles. *Soundsites: Max Neuhaus, Site-Specificity, and the Materiality of Sound as Place*. 2017. Stony Brook University, PhD dissertation, p.108-110.

[5] See Max Neuhaus American Can announcement,1966, Neuhaus's webpage.

[6] See Max Neuhaus on American Can, Neuhaus's webpage, © Copyright Max Neuhaus 1968. Image source and program: https://www.fondazionebonotto.org/en/collection/fluxus/moormancharlotte/10/2446.html

[7] See Lapalu, Sophie. (2020). *Street Works. New York 1969*. Saint-Denis : Presses universitaires de Vincennes.

"LISTEN" in the place of his choice. This approach could serve to engage and enhance listening for each individual, providing participants with the freedom and responsibility to make their own choices. The sound gives the possibility to act in the city in an invisible way and engage the senses of an audience who is a simple passer-by. Neuhaus' famous *Times Square* installation (1977-1992 and 2000-present) is in the same way a remarkable example of a sonic encounter and being conscious of our urban environment.

4 Conclusion

“I suppose the real definition of this series of pieces is the use of the word LISTEN to refocus people's aural perspective. I began to think of other ways of using it” (NEUHAUS, 1990, p.6). What could be other ways of using LISTEN today? All the various versions of this work led us to this question. Do we need to separate listening to the sonic environment and listening to music?

During the periods that I compose in my home studio, I usually take a break to go jogging outside. This has always been one of the richest experiences of listening to my environment: the streets, the crossroads, the little paths inside the park. It is the sequence of the two activities of listening, one for composition and the other while jogging, which causes a transition of listening. So, we can consider the second listening as a continuation of the first one.

In a similar way, the listening process that Neuhaus sets up through the very first version of LISTEN is a sequence made of listening moments: and a “listening transition”. The urban sound art as installations can then generate a new listening experience, or even a rediscovery of a place through sound, helping us to become aware of our environment and its transformations over time. Neuhaus' "process" and "method" for exploring the intricate sound dimension of urban spaces and their constant transformations not only serve as an ear-training but also unlock the pathway to discovering urban sound arts. Framing these listening experiences as a “sequence of listening moments” could be a way to examine the reciprocal influences of each listening moment. Can we consider this approach as a method which is adjustable to all our conscious listening inside and outside?

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