

## Max Neuhaus - Time Pieces

The concept of using sound to form a common moment within a community, periodically throughout the day is an ancient one. It continues in present day society in the form of church bells and public clocks. The idea for the Time Pieces is to form these common moments with silence rather than sound.

The Time Piece concept constitutes a form for a series of sound works of different characters -- although they share a common principle, each work is specific to the character of its site as a whole and the different places within it.

A key idea of these works is their integration into the life of their communities -- that they become unifiers, spiritually tying together a community's diverse places and activities momentarily throughout the day.

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Although the idea of creating public silences is a new one, city wide sound signals have been used for simultaneous communication among the inhabitants of communities in both eastern and western civilizations, since antiquity. In Europe, by the late 700s, in fact, the church bell had become a definitive force in communities. It not only announced church services, deaths, births, fire, revolt and festivals but it was such a strong unifying force that the limits of the community itself were defined by its range -- if you lived beyond where you could hear it, you lacked the daily information necessary to be a participant in society.

Four hundred years later the church bell had become united with the mechanical clock. The bell no longer just announced special events but provided a communal time base for the general coordination of activities. In present day society most of these minute by minute functions have been taken over by radio and television. The intrinsic natures of these media generalize and depersonalize these functions.

The Time Pieces are neither makers of announcements nor keepers of time, as such. They are reinstatements and extensions of the direct joining force of aural communal signals.

The first realization of the idea, or really the principle, was in the form of a silent alarm clock -- a nice contradiction in terms. It was an object two by sixteen by one inches with a time display and control buttons on the left side of the larger surface and round screen covering a small speaker on the far right. Shortly before the alarm time a tone would begin very softly and build until the alarm time when it would abruptly go silent. The sudden change from sound to silence was what woke people up. For me it was a way of exploring how people noticed taking away a sound as opposed to making one.

Each person adjusted the pitch of the tone to their own upper limit of hearing. At that frequency which is different for each person, sound has a very special character. It is there but at the same time almost not there -- more of a presence than a sound. I loaned the first ones to people and talked to them about what it was like, getting a feel for the range of reactions.

**In 1982 I was asked to participate in the biannual of the Whitney Museum in New York.**

**I proposed a realization of the idea that would function as a silent public clock for the immediate neighborhood surrounding the museum. It was not approved by the museum administration. I've since found that it is the scale of the idea that alarms many bureaucrats. They are unable to see the nature of its reality -- an aural event more subtle than most street sounds.**

**They proposed I do a version for the sculpture court at the front of the museum. I agreed, although I didn't like the idea of turning the idea into an exhibit, I decided it could be another step in the exploration -- a machete for a full scale version. I wanted to try an idea. Instead of adding a sound and taking it away I decided to gradually recolor the sounds that were already there and then take the coloration away. The work picked up the live sounds of Madison Avenue re-colored them and shifted them slightly in time. Once every fifteen minutes this live process was slowly mixed with the uncolored sounds coming directly from the street, gradually adding a layer of color to the street sounds. Unnoticed while it was there, this layer became apparent as a sense of silence or aural clarity when it disappeared at each quarter hour.**

**The nature of the silent moment in each different work is determined by the character of the sound that produces it when it disappears. For the few seconds after the sound has gone, what could be described as a transparent aural afterimage is superimposed on the everyday sounds of the environment. The idea I am working with when I am building the sound is actually the shaping of this transparent afterimage -- building a silence with a sound.**

**Max Neuhaus**

**The final sonority which I chose for Bern is plausible in its context. Although it sounds like neither it recalls the sounds of both bells and airplanes, two common features in the local aural environment. It is also quite beautiful.**

**In the course of making proposals for these works, it became clear that the proposal of the idea was much more frightening than its subtle reality. In 1988, as an example of the reality, I decided to do a short term version of the concept for the Kunsthalle in Bern, Switzerland. The work encompasses a large active plaza, several parks and a pathway through a woods leading down to a river.**