Locational Listening

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> *The sound is not the work; the sound is the material that I make the place out of. . . . The social context, the physical context, the architectural context, the acoustical context are my building blocks.*
> —Max Neuhaus

I.

In his own estimation, the first independent work Max Neuhaus made as a visual artist was also the first in what was to become a series of some fifteen works grouped under the collective title *Listen*. Inaugurated in February 1966, they continued intermittently for more than a decade. The earliest were promenades, their itineraries and schedules determined by the artist, who led the tours, offering no commentary.[1] Announced as concert programs, they were broadcast by word of mouth: participants were met by the artist at designated meeting points at prearranged times. After he had stamped the word *LISTEN* on their hands, Neuhaus took them on a walk that followed a carefully designated route, during which they encountered a series of soundscapes that included the heavy rumble generated by a Con Edison power plant, the vibrant street noise of a congested Puerto Rican neighborhood, and the roar of a freeway. Concluding the program was a solo performance at Neuhaus's studio comprising percussion pieces by John Cage, Morton Feldman, the artist himself, and others. Later *Listen* excursions, often to otherwise inaccessible industrial locations, took on the label "lecture demonstrations": like their predecessors, they were designed "to refocus people's aural perspective."[2] Each trip's aural composite was carefully scripted by the artist, though participants heard only whatever they individually concentrated on. Chance inevitably played a role in Neuhaus's art—given that horns blare, sirens scream, tires squeal, and children shriek, along with other uncontrollable and unpredictable explosions—but, compared with its part in the works of Cage in particular, its impact was strictly contained. Not only were the structures of his *Listen* "scores" predetermined, so were the basic acoustic materials. With that initial sortie, he galvanized his audience to leave the precincts of the auditorium and to enter the urban outdoors and thus to

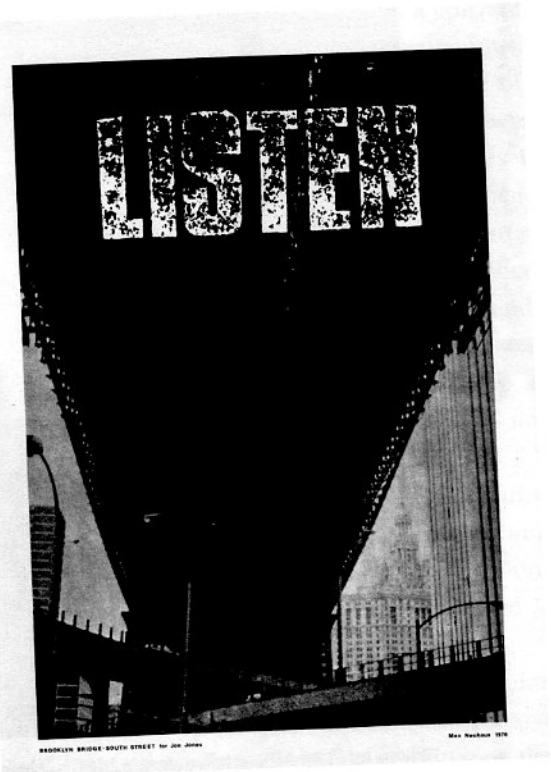
engage dynamically rather than passively as they did in a conventional concert situation; he limned a kind of manifesto. By "equating percussion music to urban environmental sounds and allying machine noise with the soundscape of an ethnic-minority neighborhood," Neuhaus announced the manmade urban realm was to be his preferred matrix, and its physical, architectural, and social contexts his building blocks, as Branden W. Joseph notes.[3] Of course, each pedestrian's experience would be subtly different: each would necessarily be subjective—but perhaps not more so than in any musical performance, where concentration, attention, focus, reflection, emotion, and memory shape and filter what is heard and how it is received, and possibly even less so, given that the title the artist chose for these polemical works was not simply a sign, a mark of attendance at a social situation like a hand stamp at a disco or club. Neuhaus's stencil is, instead, an injunction, one that is made all the more insistent by his use of a typeface of bold, blocky capital letters: "LISTEN."[4] The engaged, alert mode of hearing—"deep listening"—required to navigate his urban field trips transformed them into something more consequential than casual. A "more finely tuned and focused attentiveness . . . comes into play," Alex Potts argues, "once one apprehends something out of the ordinary and experiences the heightened level of awareness associated with aesthetic experience."[5]

Given that the artist himself led these field trips, he presumably set the pace, allocating a length of time to each particular soundscape. Moreover, since he issued neither maps nor sets of instructions for individuals to follow on their own, his lecture demonstrations could no more be imagined in advance than could they be independent of their creator. They consequently bear little in common with either contemporary Fluxus events or Happenings, to which they are sometimes compared. Neuhaus did not privilege the insignificant and humble, as did, say, Dick Higgins or Allan Kaprow; he did not desire to fuse art with life's mundanities, rely on the aleatory, or embrace an unbounded temporality that accommodated the whims of his participants.[6] And, even though he hoped to expand his audience beyond the elitist circles he associated with the customary concert-hall crowd, and though he, too, chose to work in free, readily accessible public spaces with what he would later term "uncodified" sounds, he essentially believed that the creation of great art was a stringent disciplinary practice.[7]

Since little documentation remains from those early field trips beyond cursory verbal accounts and sundry photographs, it is problematic to draw detailed conclusions about the aural life of their environments. Several photographs taken on these early field trips by Peter Moore, although probably not commissioned by the artist, are nonetheless revealing.[8] In one hitherto unpublished shot, a hand bearing Neuhaus's tell-tale stencil is framed against an industrial backdrop dominated by a smokestack

Photo by Peter Moore taken during Max Neuhaus's *Listen* sound walk, beginning on the corner of Avenue D and East 14th Street, New York, March 27, 1966

and juxtaposed with a street sign that commands the observer, or, better, the would-be listener, to "stop." The combination of asymmetrical composition, vertiginous viewpoint, and high-contrast black-and-white tonal range, together with the textual play, is in direct homage to Constructivist photography produced in the twenties and thirties in the Soviet Union by Alexander Rodchenko and his peers. Moore's knowing reference to a moment when industrialization was championed by artists and others as crucial to the process of modernization, and thereby key to implementing a modernist ideology, seems ironic in the context of New York City in the late sixties. For at that very moment, as witnessed in Danny Lyon's seminal series of images published in 1969, *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan*, the city was experiencing a phase of deindustrialization, which would result in the unprecedented decline and demolition of its waterfront, manufacturing districts, and even some residential neighborhoods (including those where Neuhaus and his peers lived and worked and where most of his Manhattan-based field trips would take place).



Max Neuhaus, *Listen* poster showing the Brooklyn Bridge taken from South Street, 1976

The *Listen* walks had been performative and participatory; more conceptual variants of the series then followed. One was an Op-Ed piece for the *New York Times*, published on December 6, 1974, which chastised the city's bureaucrats for unduly treating all urban sound as an irritant: "the basic point being that by arbitrarily condemning most man-made sounds as noise, they were making noise where it never existed before," Neuhaus wrote.[9] In addition, he made his own publications, notably posters and even a postcard in the form of a sticker, "a decal with the word outlined in open letters, to be placed in locations selected by its recipients."[10] With these last works in the *Listen* series, he finally relinquished agency to his audience, encouraging them, in turn, to engage others in an aural appreciation of the urban environment. Like Moore's photos, the images that Neuhaus used for his posters acknowledge the grandeur and drama of the city's industrial infrastructure. Among the most memorable is one, from 1976, that features the Brooklyn Bridge (which, when traffic flowed over its grated surfaces, emitted a deep tone that the artist relished): shot from below, the monumen-

tal steel structure pictured on the poster turns into an emphatic dark wedge that boldly bisects the composition; at its base, two freeways cross; over it float gritty letters spelling out *LISTEN*.[11]

During this first decade of his career (from about 1966 to 1977), Neuhaus preferred sites that encompassed both relatively neglected and highly trafficked outdoor urban locations; most had a markedly industrial timbre. Gradually, he eliminated all effects of the performative, which he saw as the province of music, and began to engage with his audience more collaboratively, as glimpsed in another of Moore's shots, this one taken during an event known as *American Can,* staged during the winter of 1966–67 in Staten Island's Clove Lakes Park and other locations around the city. Participants were invited to bounce or slide the cans that carpeted the ground, though whether they were given additional directions and temporal guidelines is no longer known.[12] A commonplace activity, usually associated with melancholic, aimless wandering and purposeless play, seems to have been detourned here by Neuhaus into a constructive collective action. Tellingly, the crowd generated the sound component of the work; it did not preexist as in his *Listen* series. It was no longer found sound.[13]

Shortly after, in *Fan Music* (1967), which he described as his first Place work, Neuhaus transferred performative agency to the site itself by harnessing solar power to generate sonic change. The artwork became responsive to atmospheric conditions, to humidity and temperature. Sited on the rooftops of four adjacent buildings on the Bowery, the piece comprised photovoltaic cells placed behind rotating fan blades, which, in turn, activated loudspeakers that broadcast sounds whose tone and volume were affected by a range of weather-related factors. Visitors could come and go at will over the four-day period of the work's installation; they could also experience it from multiple positions, from each of which the piece would sound different. Although *Fan Music* was installed only briefly, it signals a crucial shift away from "event" and toward "place," in that it utilized a fixed site (albeit temporary) and engaged immaterial features of that site. Moreover, for the first time in his practice, by amplifying and supplementing the existing soundscape, Neuhaus generated a new one.[14]

Leaving the skies in the early seventies, Neuhaus next immersed himself in aquatic realms. Creating a series titled *Water Whistle*, he allowed his audiences to access the works' acoustics while swimming or floating. After presenting fourteen of these works in pools across North America, he focused in late spring 1974 on New York City, where—with sponsorship from the three leading galleries of the day, Leo Castelli, Sonnabend, and John Weber—he launched new versions in a trio of outdoor facilities heated to a comfortable ninety-three degrees. By means of hoses of various lengths and diameters capped with whistlelike contraptions, Neuhaus created a sonic

topography at once steady and full of subtle variations. "Being immersed in the musical experience was not a metaphor here but a fact," Al Brunelle wrote in a thoughtful analysis of these engaging public works.[15] Although initially struck by only the shrill sounds, swimmers soon honed their ability to discriminate among the more finely calibrated tones. Moreover, the comfortable warmth of the water induced a sensation that the acoustic element was being experienced not only through the ears but through the skin, to the point where, Brunelle writes, it finally appeared as though "the music didn't have much to do any more with either ears or skin and seemed to be dreamy, dark shifting vapors of mood."[16] Eluding easy classification, these concert events once again freed participants to orchestrate their own experience, finding and fine-tuning the range of available sounds as they moved through the water, exploring the sculptural topography.

At about this time, Neuhaus finally circumvented the event-based character of many of his previous works by returning to more anonymous, transitional urban spaces. *Walkthrough* (1973–77), the first of two related installations, occupied an overtly transitional space, the arcade of the Jay Street–Borough Hall subway station in Brooklyn. There he introduced a series of pings and clicks, some more hollow than others, which seemed to move around the space. Unsigned and unmarked, this piece lasted some four years, until a subway official, irritated by its invasion of what he considered his terrain, dismantled it. That same year, 1977, Neuhaus turned his attention to a remarkable acoustic chamber in a subway ventilation shaft in midtown Manhattan. Installing equipment at this public and yet undefined, "leftover," and easily accessible Manhattan site again required the approval of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Located on the north end of a triangular pedestrian island between Forty-fifth and Forty-sixth streets at the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, it was part of an area long celebrated as the "Crossroads of the World" but run-down and seedy by the early seventies. Well known for its illicit traffic, it was home to porn cinemas, drug dealing, prostitution, cruising, petty crime, and vagrants. Neuhaus's plan to install a public sculpture—albeit an invisible one—in what remained a glamorous and legendary, though tarnished, location required considerable bravura.

The artistic ethos that inflected his bold gesture of (re)claiming this landmark for the wider public was one he now shared with a number of his peers. Neuhaus could no longer feel himself isolated, if he ever had.[17] In 1970, Richard Serra had persuaded the local police to allow him to install a sculpture in a cul-de-sac in the South Bronx. This neglected, crime-ridden area proved to be a place that most of the artist's friends and peers considered too dangerous to visit, so few actually saw the sculpture. It is unlikely that the local inhabitants paid any attention either to this unmarked and anonymous

industrial artifact, whether or not they considered it an artwork. (Anonymity would be the key term that, several years later, Neuhaus hoped would frame his similarly unmarked sound piece in midtown Manhattan.[18]) That same year, 1970, independent curator and artist Willoughby Sharp initiated a series of projects with twenty-seven artists, including Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, and Serra, on Pier 18, one of many deserted and decaying piers then lining the Hudson.[19] And, though he had previously only found suitable places in the outer boroughs and cities elsewhere in the country, Gordon Matta-Clark also decided on the abandoned West Side piers as the most appropriate location for a major work in Manhattan. In a clandestine, unauthorized guerrilla action, he created one of his most ambitious works, *Day's End*, on Pier 52 in the summer of 1975.[20] So inaccessible and dangerous was its site that when his friends and other art-world avatars wished to see it, he was obliged to allow only guided tours.[21] Not long after, the police denied all access. Douglas Crimp writes in a groundbreaking evocation of the deindustrializing city as the prime site for artists and others to engage: "the subject and site of Matta-Clark's art was the city itself, the city experienced simultaneously as neglected and usable, as dilapidated and beautiful, as loss and possibility."[22] In contrast to the dramatic, even heroic, portrayal of the Brooklyn Bridge in his 1976 poster, Neuhaus discerned in Times Square an ambience more aligned with that of sites favored by Matta-Clark and Serra. The grimy and neglected physical context of the work was conjured in the poster he designed to mark its inauguration by a series of repeating images, like a filmstrip, that limns the transient, ever-changing nature of the locale. (Another sequence of images shows the installation of the equipment, a focus on physical labor that is exceptional in the artist's oeuvre.)

While Neuhaus, Matta-Clark, and Serra (with his *St. John's Rotary Arc* [1980]) would all make their most ambitious and remarkable public works for New York City in what might then have been described as "leftover" public space,[23] none of these artists were opposed in principle to institutional venues or to public patronage. All responded opportunistically—that is, pragmatically rather than ideologically—to commissions and invitations of diverse kinds.[24] For all three, the spatial and physical character of a site in effect constituted its aesthetic potential, but also crucial was its accessibility (hypothetically, at least) by a wide range of people. In pursuit of an antielitist stance, no markers indicating the entity as an artwork were deemed necessary: it was up to each individual to experience it in any terms he or she chose. The radical politic informing Neuhaus's realization of *Times Square* in 1977 was not just a product of that antiestablishment era but also his recurrent concern. When, in 2002, *Times Square* was restored and relaunched under the auspices of Dia Art Foundation, Neuhaus was still adamant that there be no signage.[25] With no plaque recording the

name of the piece, the artist, the sponsors, or the owners on the site, there is nothing to signify the presence of an artwork.

If a low public profile was essential to the identity and ethos of this work, the question of its maintenance was of the highest order; strict vigilance was required from the institution to which it had been entrusted. Dia's technician and the artist himself would inspect the site daily via a webcam.[26] While Neuhaus embraced the myriad activities and temporary interventions that now make this one of the most highly trafficked vehicular and pedestrian areas in the city, he could not abide the ongoing presence of street musicians, in particular the self-styled Naked Cowboy, who regularly used the triangular grating as a makeshift stage. Frequent email and telephone bulletins would arrive from southern Italy (where Neuhaus had been living since the 1990s), advising Dia of ingenious ways in which it might discourage, if not forcibly evict, the busker from his daily perch. At first, this barrage of missives was mistakenly received as humorous, petulant grandstanding rather than as deadly serious demands; however, their persistence and increasingly aggravated tone—rare lapses in the artist's usual courtly demeanor—revealed them as products of principle. More was at issue than the gimmickry in the ersatz popular entertainer's pose designed to attract tourists. His long-term presence on the site was anathema to Neuhaus because in giving a focus to the pedestrian island it transformed that nondescript, mundane place of transit, where passersby, if attentive to their aural environment, could encounter an unexpectedly resonant presence. By destabilizing the aural and visual ecology of the site, the constant presence of the Naked Cowboy became, for the artist, not only an affront but a violation.

As the economic climate in the United States worsened in the later seventies and public arts funding in large part dried up, Neuhaus and his peers began to receive more commissions from European institutions for works in public venues. Partly as a result of finding himself working more frequently there, Neuhaus relocated to Europe in the mid-eighties. Neither he, Serra (after his controversial *Tilted Arc* was installed in Federal Plaza in 1981), nor Matta-Clark (who died in 1978) would again make large-scale outdoor works in New York City.[27] During the eighties and nineties, Neuhaus, who occasionally created works for commercial galleries and for international group shows like Documenta, sought whenever possible to ensure that his pieces would become permanent, as had occurred in 1992 with *Three to One*, a piece he installed in the AOK health-insurance building in Kassel. Among his key commissions from this period were a number of what he termed Place works that were sited in more or less transitional spaces—that is, sites that were not, in themselves, destinations, but were thoroughfares to places elsewhere: a small park adjacent to the Musée Rath, Geneva

(*Promenade du Pin* [2002–present]); a footbridge in Bern (*Suspended Sound Line* [1999–present]); and the historic atrium that marked the entrance to the Castello di Rivoli, Turin (*Untitled* [1996–present]). Writing of these Place works in 1997, Neuhaus stated: "Unlike music where the sound is the artwork, here sound is used as a subtle tool to shape a new perception of space."[28] Two words are critical here: "subtle" and "perception." The works were subtle because they were made of and from their site—that is, with the constituents of their site as their bricks and mortar. Hence the sounds were not easily recognized as aberrant, unlike, say, the clicks at Jay Street. And they offered an unprecedented way of perceiving the site. That is, because their invisibility and muted acoustics rendered them elusive, the audience was required to be proactive rather than simply reactive, as was the audience for the early *Listen* pieces, when it was the percussive barrage of sound that characterized each work as much as the aural environment. By the mid-seventies it was less the work of Cage than that of Morton Feldman that seems to have offered Neuhaus fresh guidance. Writing about Feldman's piano works of the early sixties, the British composer Cornelius Cardew had argued that "Feldman sees the sounds as reverberating endlessly, never getting lost, changing their resonances as they die away, or rather do not die away, but recede from our ears, and soft because softness is compelling, because an insidious invasion of our senses is more effective than a frontal attack, because our ears must strain to catch the music." In Cardew's opinion, audiences "must become more sensitive before they [can] perceive the world of sound in which Feldman's music takes place."[29] Something similar may be said of the soundscapes that followed *Times Square*. Whether in Geneva, Bern, or outside Turin, Neuhaus's Place pieces are most often found in natural or rural settings, with none of the textural qualities of dense, bustling midtown Manhattan. Even so, what they share with Times Square is more significant than how they differ, for the same methodology is employed in each context. The soundscape is constructed from the location's acoustic and other features; it is then introduced on site in such a way that a bystander must pay close attention, first, to apprehend it and, then, to explore its sonic topography—the means to a new apprehension of the context.

II.

In recent years, Neuhaus divided his time mostly between Place and Moment works. In the latter group, to which *Time Piece Beacon* (2005–present) belongs, periodic, almost imperceptible, sonic tones gradually build up over several minutes, then abruptly cease at a designated moment—the hour, in the case of Dia's piece. This

sudden absence produces what at first seems to be a silence, a silence that to many people proves more audible than was the sound's presence. For, in what is perceived as silence is the ambient sound particular to that site in that particular instant. The last Moment work Neuhaus created, in 2007, was commissioned by the small German town of Stommeln-Pulheim. The arrest of the low, almost inaudible, hum, again created from and in relation to its sonic environment—a site fronting a former synagogue—marks the halachic hours of the Jewish ritual day.[30] Recalling another absence—that of the town's former Jewish population—this work, in addressing historical memory, takes on an overtly memorializing dimension rare in Neuhaus's oeuvre. Previously, issues relating to a site's history concerned him less than its sociopolitics.[31]

As issues of identity and history come to the fore in the Moment pieces, so do notions of community. Whatever sense of collectivity is generated by a Place work like *Times Square* is a function of serendipity, of coexistence and contiguity; it automatically involves those who recognize and engage with the work. Yet, as Branden Joseph argues, referencing Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*, this fugitive community implies and entails nothing beyond itself at that moment: it is built on "adjacency rather than identification with whatever exclusionary ideal."[32] In contrast to the Place pieces, the Moment works operate on two distinct registers. The uninitiated, the casual passersby, attend to the silence, which they experience more in their bodies than in their minds. However, for those who become familiar with a Moment piece, and who therefore experience it as a part of their daily soundscape, the sound, too, plays a role. Sometimes consciously, often almost unconsciously, its iteration is registered as each hour approaches.

The regular and frequent whistles from passing trains, counterpoints to *Time Piece Beacon*'s precisely scheduled interventions, are similarly impossible to ignore: they, too, are integral to the site's sonic texture. Yet, though also periodic, they do not share the invincible regularity—the reliability—of this Moment piece and so lack its deterministic authority. Moreover, their sound is commonplace and generic, whereas that of *Time Piece Beacon* is singular. At once unique and instantly identifiable, Neuhaus's piece functions as a timekeeper whose auditory code imparts identity to the terrain within its sonic reach, effecting a kind of social bond, however rudimentary its basis.

While *Time Piece Beacon* has a distinctive acoustic signature, its low, ringing harmonic tone has been likened, by the artist himself as well as others, to the sound of bells: it evokes not merely the function but the character and rhetoric of campanology in rural places in times past.[33] As Alain Corbin reveals in his fascinating study *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, the ringing of bells traditionally served multiple roles—in addition to providing an index of collective

sensibilities, it fulfilled various communicative agendas: public and private, secular and religious, exceptional and mundane, singular and regulatory, festive and tragic.[34] The unique sound of a hand-cast bell in a clarion ensured that the compass of its reach would identify the community when no other form of communication could range so far so fast and none could prove so resourceful and distinctive. Audible to virtually everyone within its sonic field, it demarcated space acoustically and imparted identity by drawing boundaries to shared territory.[35]

The people who frequent Dia:Beacon could be said to constitute a small, temporary, and quite specialized community, in contrast to, say, the considerably larger, stable, and more diverse citizenry of Graz, Austria, whose town square is the site of another work in the Moment series. By reactivating older notions of community, both works provide an occasion for thinking about the identity, desirability, and viability of community: to its current relevance as well as its historical legacy. In one of his few statements about historical change, Neuhaus argued that by about AD 1100, "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." He noted that today "most of these minute by minute functions have been taken over by radio and television." By his reckoning, this change entailed a loss measurable in terms of the particularity and individuality of place and, hence, of community: "The intrinsic nature of these media generalizes and depersonalizes functions," he concluded.[36] His succinct overview contains a clear expression of the sociopolitical dimension at the core of this final series of works and implies a potentially stronger notion of community than that which, pace Joseph, pertains to the Place pieces. For, in addition to confirming the value Neuhaus attributed to any significant work of art in the public sphere, this statement highlights a key function he now required of locational—and even, perhaps, localized—listening.