Moment and Place:
Art in the Arena of the Everyday

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Max Neuhaus is a rather special case. In the 1960s and early 1970s, he established his practice—first as a performing musician and then as an artist—at a time when the idea of breaking down boundaries between art forms was being widely promoted. However, he stands out in this moment of avant-garde experimentation as one of the few figures whose work truly straddled the separate arenas of music or sound performance and art based on what Neuhaus called a “plastic sense.” His earlier professional involvement with sound production was brought to bear on a practice that conventionally stayed within the visual, spatial, and tactile parameters specific to three-dimensional art. Like many phenomenologically oriented visual artists, he saw his work as constituted through the audience’s immediate perceptual engagement with it. As it operated at several different levels of sensory awareness, however, a problem also facing a number of other artists at the time became particularly acute in his case: his work could not be reproduced, even inadequately, in photographic images.

Neuhaus’s attempt to “shape, transform, create specific place, with sound only,” echoes important tendencies in Minimalist and Postminimalist sculpture, site-specific art, and Land Art of the late 1960s and early 1970s—work conceived as an intervention in space rather than as a sculpted, modeled, or found object. It is important to stress these affinities because the formal and phenomenological aspects of Neuhaus’s work set it apart from the Antiform and Conceptualist currents that were also prevalent at the time. Two tendencies operate in his work. Its more formal-seeming aspect relates to the Minimalist and Postminimalist preoccupation with the way a work shapes its immediate environment and with the kinesthetic rather than purely visual effects this produces. There is also a more politically charged side to his work, rooted in the libertarian avant-garde of the earlier 1960s, the moment of Fluxus and Happenings and of free interchange between visual art and performance. He shared
with figures such as John Cage and Allan Kaprow a strong commitment to renegotiating the boundaries between art and life.

Neuhaus systematically pursued a project that situated itself within the arena of the everyday at the same time that it activated a heightened sensory awareness. In political terms, this meant he needed to find a way to radically democratize an audience's mode of engagement with his work, without selling out to consumerist demands for entertainment. Neuhaus was fascinated by the idea of staging an aesthetic experience that was so embedded in an everyday experience of a place that one could choose to attend to the work or simply let it pass by. If it enhanced one's attentiveness, this effect was not to be felt as imposed but as generated from a willing engagement with the specific environment of the work. Along with this commitment to democratizing the artwork's address came Neuhaus's particular interest in conceiving projects for heavily trafficked public areas. Without a doubt, he authored some of the most significant projects of this kind, managing to operate largely without the ideological baggage that art fashioned for a high-profile urban site tends to carry.

**Space and Time**

Space and place are key terms in Neuhaus's writing about the principles of his art, and he was explicit that these were preoccupations he shared primarily with sculptors and other artists working in three dimensions. He explained this bond in a 1983 interview, when he was still using the term sound installation for his work:

In terms of classification, I'd move the [sound] installations into the purview of the visual arts even though they have no visual component, because the visual arts, in the plastic sense, have dealt with space. Sculptors define and transform spaces. I create, transform, and change spaces by adding sound.

Succinctly: "I use sound to change the way we perceive a space." This idea that an artwork should change one's apprehension of the space it occupies echoes the concerns of Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, who attempted to activate a temporal dynamic that played out in a viewer's circulation around or through their work. A significant difference, however, in Neuhaus's case, is the medium; the sound in his work engages issues of temporality at a different level. At the same time, he was driven by a desire to distinguish his practice clearly from musical performance and its distinctive time-based character. He argued that the continuity of sound in his work differentiated it from the temporal articulation of a piece of music, in that there was no definable beginning or end and no cumulative progression, even when the sound varied in time. There was, too, no identifiable moment of performance. For him, the spatial location of sound was paramount, so that, in contrast to musical performance, sound did not entirely constitute the work. Rather, it functioned as a means of realizing ends that ultimately manifested themselves in spatial terms. Even so, he did not dispute that a temporal dynamic entered into an audience's spatial experience of his sound work. Tracing a trajectory through the environment that a work defined, he or she would inevitably find that the tenor of the sound, and, hence, the distinctive apprehension of space created by the sound, changed over time.

Neuhaus was fascinated by this temporal dynamic because it was not preprogrammed but instead set by the listener-viewer's relatively freewheeling and self-determined journey through a work's spatial arena. Unlike a performance event, it provided an experience that the viewer could initiate and sever more or less at will, and was anchored in a sense of something unchanging and persistent and clearly located in space. Neuhaus summarized this in a program note he wrote in 1974: "Traditionally composers have located the elements of a composition in time. One idea which I am interested in is locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time." In his later projects, Neuhaus sometimes experimented with punctuating the audience's spatial experience with sound events. Sound would emerge slowly from the ambience, growing from barely perceptible tones, and would then suddenly cut off, at which point the listener would perceive the presence of sound through its cessation, an effect comparable to that of an afterimage. Neuhaus came to distinguish between these "Moment" works and what he came to call "Place" works, where the sound, even if changing, was continuous, with no clear temporal articulation. His explanation of this distinction indicates that he did not separate out spatial from temporal works; rather, he was differentiating modalities of work that combined spatial and temporal effects. With the Moment pieces, the sound event permeates the entire area of the work at the same time it stimulates a heightened awareness of the particular place one happens to be occupying while listening to it. With the Place works, the sound varies slightly if one moves around but does not if one stands in one place. In mapping out the work's spatial parameters, however, one becomes acutely aware of the temporal nature of the particular trajectory one is tracing. Just as Moment pieces focus attention on an individually experienced sense of space, so Place pieces make one aware of being caught up in an individually experienced sense of time. As Neuhaus put it, the thing that makes moment pieces different from place pieces is that the moment pieces are all in places, but only occur for a moment in all those places; while the place pieces are only in one place, but are continuous which are always there.
The moment pieces don’t 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. Each one generates in the perceiver the opposite of what it is: the moment pieces generate an instant of being in one’s own place; place pieces generate a period of being in one’s own time. They are two opposites; each one in what the other is not.  

Neuhaus’s description of place in his work is reminiscent of André’s famous designation of his work as place. While Neuhaus used sound, André deployed low-profile, minimal sculptural interventions to create a sense of place within a relatively neutral spatial environment. One might also compare the way one approaches André’s floor pieces, particularly those made from thin copper or steel “tiles,” to the way one comes upon Neuhaus’s sound pieces. Flat on the floor and, hence, out of any immediate sight lines, André’s floor works are at first inconspicuous, almost invisible. Yet in time they become strongly present, changing the space they occupy. Similarly, Neuhaus designed his sound pieces with minimal means, low-level sounds that almost blend into the ambient noise. On first entering the arena in which the sound can be heard, one may not be at all aware of anything other than the noises normally associated with the place. But once one notices the sound, it can become engulfing to the point that one believes one still hears it even after having moved outside its range. 

There are also clear differences in the aims of the two artists—for one thing, in works by André, the source of one’s reconfigured sense of space is visible and tangible. By contrast, the sources of Neuhaus’s sound are hidden. The way the sound spreads through the environment and changes direction by bouncing off surfaces, and the way it mingles with, interferes with, and is disrupted by sounds coming from other sources, make it impossible to pinpoint its source. The ear cannot locate the source of a sound with anything like the accuracy that the eye can situate an object it sees. With Neuhaus, the aesthetic experience is not based in or focused on an object. The perceptible materiality of the work is constituted entirely by sound effects and the inflection they give to the place where one happens to be standing. Minimalist art, such as André’s tiles, Judd’s “specific objects,” Morris’s ultracel geometric shapes, or Richard Serra’s massive sheets of Cor-Ten steel, may partially dismantle the conventional habit of locating the essence of a work of art in an object of some kind because the intensity and interest of the perceptual experience being offered are incommensurate with the bare simplicity of the visual form. An object, though, still plays a significant role in one’s experience of the work.

There is one further important distinction to be made between Neuhaus’s Place pieces and most Minimalist art, and that is the all-enveloping nature of the former. A work of his sets up an aural-spatial environment that surrounds one upon entering its ambit. The sound infuses a fairly extensive space around its source. The spatial effect of most Minimalist art, by contrast, is more circumscribed, usually only being fully felt in a delimited area in the immediate vicinity of the object or structure defining it, at least before the fashion for large-scale integrated installations took over in the 1980s. The closest contemporaneous parallels are to be found in Dan Flavin’s installations with fluorescent lights. His installation in New York’s Kornblee Gallery in 1967, for example, was designed to reshape one’s visual sense of a whole room through strategically placed fluorescent-light fixtures. Their green light permeated the whole space, rather like a sound, diffusing over the surfaces—to the point that, after a period of
time, the eye’s accommodation to the green coloration made it seem as if the interior of the room were neutral in color and anything outside took on a complementary rose tint. The light almost dissolved the enclosing walls and ceiling, while its varying intensity and cast shadows created a ghost spatial structuring that Judd once aptly described as an “interior exoskeleton.” Nevertheless, Flavin’s fluorescent tubes are definable objects that could still be seen to constitute the core of the work.

Art and Life

On numerous occasions, Neuhaus suggested that he envisioned his work as impinging on everyday experience. Such comments are as attuned to the political dynamic of the interactions he set up as they are to the phenomenological refinements of the experience he offered. This political dimension comes out of a democratic desire to break down, blur, or thoroughly reconfigure the boundary between art and the everyday. This imperative played an important role in avant-garde initiatives of the 1960s, particularly in the earlier part of the decade. Unlike Kaprow, however, who was one of the more radical proponents of an art that would integrate with everyday life, Neuhaus did not have in mind work that would be taken as non-art. Though his sound pieces can easily be ignored or neglected by someone who passes through them and does not attend to their subtle modifications of the aural environment (even works made for museum settings can be disregarded), once a work does enter one’s consciousness, it only achieves its effect, in Neuhaus’s view, if it is listened to closely and given the focused attention one would accord a work of art. He thus conceived his work as both merging into the everyday aural ambience of a place and clearly differentiating itself from background noise. Appropriately, then, he consistently deployed “artificial” electronic sounds that he generated himself rather than recordings of noises from the lived environment.

In sum, his work involves its audience in an experience that moves between the low-level attentiveness that operates as one casually navigates an environment and the more finely tuned and focused attentiveness that comes into play once one apprehends something out of the ordinary and experiences the heightened level of awareness associated with aesthetic experience. What prompts someone passing through one of his sound works to take note of it is an awareness of the artificiality or implausibility of a sound effect that at first seems part of a relatively uniform continuum of ambient noise but then stands out from this background because of its slight incongruity. This holds, too, for the Moment pieces, where a sound that blends with the aural texture of an environment suddenly draws attention to itself by coming to an end. Neuhaus was seeking an alternative to the deliberately staged performance, wanting to get away from “the onus of entertainment.” He was also suspicious of the contemplative or meditative refinements associated with work realized in the concert hall or gallery. The attentiveness he had in mind was of a different kind: “Some people call my work meditative because of this need to focus. I don’t like the baggage the word carries.”

It is in his more public work, like Times Square (1977–92; 2000–present), located in a heavily used urban environment, that the democratizing of aesthetic experience he was seeking becomes particularly evident. He was not critiquing the aesthetic as inherently elitist but instead seeking to reconfigure it so that it would be rooted in one’s more open and freely experienced interactions with things. Such an understanding sets his work within an American tradition of democratic pragmatism, but it also has affinities with the matter-of-fact, empirical outlook of early speculation, during the Enlightenment period, about aesthetic experience. In a passage from an interview titled “The Institutional Beast,” he explains:

I am always surprised when people ask me why I am interested in working in such places [on the street or in mass-transit systems]—as if these places were somehow unworthy of serious aesthetic endeavors. The idea being, I suppose, that unless we carefully prepare and maintain special places like museums and concert halls, and educate audiences in how to perceive works of art within them, the aesthetic experience cannot occur.

I feel the opposite, i.e. that the aesthetic experience is natural to the human being, a phenomenon of living, and further that it is highly unique to each individual.

This critique of the conventional isolation of aesthetic experience within specialized art spaces was not something that Neuhaus took at absolute face value; he has made many works for art-world contexts, if usually marginal, nondisplay spaces, such as exteriors and entrances, stairwells, and other avenues of circulation. Furthermore, the politics informing his comments on the quasi-elitist isolation of art in specially designated spaces can only be understood properly if seen in relation to his equally negative statements about ersatz antiesthetic and antilestist gestures toward egalitarianism spewed by commercialized culture and globalization. Public art, as typically conceived, he thought of as “urban decor” that had become part of the “cultural trash of the mainstream.” Attacking the contemporary political debasement of democracy, he protested:
This poor word, recently mauled as a euphemism for capitalism by the free boosters to justify global economic exploitation . . . in the process applied to the arts as a justification for mediocrity (a more broad-based line of products). And leading then, through further semantic confusion, to "non-elite" art—not a bad idea if applied to the audience of art (why should the appreciation of art be limited to those with insider knowledge?)—but becomes a disaster when applied to the art itself. . . . The accomplishment of a work of art is not a common occurrence; it is rare because it is difficult. When it happens it is always extraordinary.17

A nagging question intrudes here. Let’s take Neuhauß’s best-known piece, the humming sound emerging from beneath the grating of a subway ventilator shaft on a traffic island in New York’s Times Square, as an example: are casual passersby actually unexpectedly arrested by the sound, and do they find it in any way unusual or special? Or does its public effectiveness largely derive from the impact it has on art-world people who know something is there and consciously seek out an aesthetic experience in this visually and aurally dense environment? They are given the opportunity to apprehend the work in such a way that it does not seem “deliberately made” and so can “claim the work as a place of their own discovering.”18 That was certainly how I experienced it when I first came across it. I spent a good deal of time wandering one evening around the wrong end of Times Square, near the army recruiting center, at times imagining I was hearing the work. I only happened to come across it just as I had given up hope of ever finding it. So it was a kind of discovery. I did not feel compelled to take note of it or see it as something special; the sound I heard could simply have been ambient noise coming from machinery below the grate, yet it had a subtly pleasurable, enveloping quality that couldn’t be assimilated to the hum of a machine.

The democratic aspiration embodied in the conception of this work, however, has little to do with the actual impact it makes on the majority of people circulating through Times Square. It has much more to do with its informal mode of address. Its subtleties are such that someone from outside the art world might conceivably pick up on them and become intrigued by them. This apparent openness to the perceptual awareness of the casual passerby is more a utopian aspiration than something that could be substantiated by a survey of audience responses.19

Particularly intriguing is the nature of the “public” experience the work offers. There one is, loitering over a subway grate (and possibly, for some passerby, loitering to no good intent), exposed to a hyperactive urban environment and somewhat distracted by the visual stimulation, especially that emitted from electronic signage. Yet one is also caught up in a world of one’s own, engrossed in listening to a just-perceptible sound whose tonalities are a little indeterminate and unstable, shifting as one moves around yet insistently there once one has tuned into them. This is a peculiarly telling instance of a common experience in a public environment—momentarily feeling isolated by one’s own response to something that catches one’s attention. A work of art sited in the public sphere is public in character usually only in a very limited sense, in that it is designed to attract attention and occupy a public space. Actual responses to it, however, inasmuch as they occur, are hardly public in character. If perchance a work makes an impression on a passerby, it does so by way of that person’s private, individual responses to it, even as these are played out in a public arena. Neuhauß’s Times Square highlights this alternation between public sitting and private awareness, which might be seen as the very condition of art situated in the urban spaces of a mass society that is also profoundly individualistic.
For all its weighty substance and extent, Serra’s Tilted Arc (1981), which was removed from New York’s Federal Plaza after a controversial public protest, has certain affinities with Neuhauß’s Times Square. In many ways, it would have been similarly apprehended by passersby, at least by those who were not consumed by blind indignation at the obstacle looming before them. Serra’s work was conceived not only as a thing or object but as an intervention that would alter one’s perception of the space in which it was sited. The work was not simply a carved piece of steel in a city square; it was also the sense of place its presence created for those encountering and walking around it, a localized restaging of the urban environment that operated at an intangible visual and spatial, as well as at a more literal tactile, level. Neuhauß’s account of how one might ideally engage with a sound work situated in a public place offers a quite plausible way of imagining the experience to be had in a sympathetic encounter with Tilted Arc: “one can move through [the] topography [of a work] at one’s own pace, stop where one wants to. One has the freedom to form an experience of the work for oneself but not impose it on anyone else.”

However, the rhetorical mode of address that would have operated in a close encounter between Tilted Arc and a passerby clearly differentiates it from Times Square. Neuhauß explained how in working “in the public sphere, I am not interested in generating a confrontation. I feel like I am working in a space which is theirs [that is, belonging to the people who are using the space]. The public works are all deliberately pitched at a threshold of perception, a point where people can notice them or not notice them.”

In producing work that does not strive to transform the environment where it is placed, Neuhauß was effectively abandoning the revolutionary and radically progressive, collectivist aspirations that motivated many of the early modernists, aspirations that still reverberated in the post–World War II period of reconstruction and social-democratic reform. Neuhauß’s works create minor interruptions or hiatuses in the sensory fabric of the everyday environment that may only be noticed by the occasional passerby. However, even assertive large-scale public sculpture nowadays is largely ignored as part of the background visual noise of a cityscape. A public sound work by Neuhauß at least offers the possibility for a compelling aesthetic experience, undiluted by vacuous pretensions of moralizing public purpose or by the banalities of consumerist entertainment.

Neuhauß’s work could be seen as an attempt, which has proved successful, to square the circle of creating contemporary public art. How is one to make public art for a society that is intensely individualistic and whose public spaces, while shared by and open to a multitude of people, atomize the perceptual and mental world of those passing through it? Compounding this problem is the issue of sustaining a commitment to making work that is genuinely democratic in its address, while operating in a context regulated by a hierarchical network of politics and finance. Neuhauß negotiated this situation by producing work that is both there and not there, almost imperceptible yet insistently present for the individual who happens to focus on it.
Notes

1 Max Neuhaus, interview by William Duckworth (1984), in Max Neuhaus: Sound Works, vol. 1, Inscription (Dottlers-Rail, Germany: Cantz, 1996), p. 42. Also at http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography/Duckworth.pdf. In addition to providing a collection of interviews and writings by Max Neuhaus, Inscription contains illuminating critical commentaries on Neuhaus’s work, such as those by Calvin Tomkins and Jean-Christophe Ammann. Several of the commentaries describe various sound installations in detail.

2 Neuhaus was more systematic in his refusal of photographic reproduction than almost any of his phenomenologically oriented contemporaries, devising a schema for presenting his work that actively blocks the works being considered in terms of a single image or sound recording and instead takes the form of an interplay between different levels of representation, schematic drawings on the one hand and verbal summation on the other. See Neuhaus, conversation with Ulrich Loock (1990), in Max Neuhaus: Sound Works, vol. 1, Inscription, p. 131, and Neuhaus, “Notes on the Drawings,” in Max Neuhaus: Sound Works, vol. 2, Drawings (Dottlers-Rail, Germany: Cantz, 1996), pp. 9-11. On the often carefully contrived photographic imaging of Minimalist work, see any “The Minimalist Object and the Photographic Image,” in Sculpture and Photogeneity: Envisioning the Third Dimension, ed. Geraldine Johnson (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 181-98.

3 The new explorations into the kinetic experience of sculpture were formulated most explicitly by Robert Morris in his “Notes on Sculpture,” Artforum 4, no. 6 (February 1966), p. 44, and “Notes on Sculpture, Part II,” Artforum 5, no. 2 (October 1966), pp. 21-23.

4 For a particularly acute analysis of this problematic, see Mircea Eliade, One Place after Another: Space-Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

5 Neuhaus, interview by Duckworth, p. 42.


8 Neuhaus spells this out in a conversation with Ulrich Loock, conducted in 1990 (see conversation with Loock, in Max Neuhaus: Sound Works, vol. 1, Inscription, p. 143).


13 Max Neuhaus, “Notes on Place and Moment,” p. 98.


15 Max Neuhaus, “Notes on Place and Moment,” p. 98.

16 Max Neuhaus, “The Institutional Beast” (1994), in Max Neuhaus: Sound Works, vol. 1, Inscription, p. 82; also at http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography/InstitutionalBeast.htm. Some of Neuhaus’s earliest works, such as the series of “sound walls” titled Listen (1966-78), when he was working in a more informal mode similar to that of Happenings and Fluxus artists, involved activities in which audiences were asked to listen. See Allan Kaprow, “Education of the Un-Artist, Part III,” in Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 138-59.


19 Neuhaus often argued that there was no real way of understanding audience response, given its variable, unpredictable, and individual nature. See, for example, “Lecture at the Selby Museum, Tokyo,” p. 63, and “Lecture at the University of Miami,” in Max Neuhaus: Sound Works, vol. 1, Inscription, p. 74, also at http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography/Tokyo.htm.

20 Neuhaus, “Lecture at the University of Miami,” p. 73. The comments were made in 1984, the same year the controversy around Titled Arc was raging.

21 Neuhaus, “Lecture at the Selby Museum, Tokyo,” p. 64. See also his comments specifically on Titled Square (“Lecture at the University of Miami,” p. 72).