

DORIS VON DRATHEN

MAX NEUHAUS

Invisible sculpture

molded sound

The unheard-of and the unutterable are one and the same. Whether the "absolute sound" without beginning or end embraces the entire cosmos, as Vedic science holds; or the principle of the "logos" is the foundation of the universe, as Heraclitus declared; or Yahweh's "Word" creates light, as in the Old Testament—all are agreed that in the beginning there comes sound. Sound possesses primal creative energy. For human kind, it remains at once unheard and unutterable.

The modality of behavior which characterizes modern civilization seems diametrically opposed to ancient writings concerning the mystery of creation. It is as if the visual emphasis of cities, housing, and gardens had displaced the ear to the perimeter of

consciousness. We have lost the exalted cultural sense expressed in the Greek or Roman amphitheaters—those constructions so reminiscent of the ear which nowadays we marvel at for their miraculous acoustics—or in the art of medieval churches, which were built (as if such a procedure were only natural) in obedience to many kinds of rules, including those of ideal resonance. Our sense of hearing has degenerated to such an extent that an artist such as Max Neuhaus, who has devoted his efforts to sound and its spatial values, speaks of "open terrain" and "new territory" when describing his explorations beyond music and language. Max Neuhaus began performing in public as a drummer in 1954 at the age of fourteen. By the time his career as a solo percussionist was at its peak, following his work with Boulez, Stockhausen, and Cage in the '60s and all the concert hall experiments with everyday sounds, he was itching to put his own ideas into practice. Rather than have

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everyday sounds experienced in aesthetic contexts, on the contrary he wanted to guide the audience through the aural spaces of their immediate surroundings. As if determined to bring home to his "listeners" their own faculty as "resonance chambers,"⁽¹⁾ he accompanied them—for an event entitled LISTEN (1966)—through areas of Manhattan which were particularly rich in sound and had distinctive aural characteristics.

Nearly ten years later, at Times Square, he created the first permanent acoustic space. A virtuoso work, of a kind. In the middle of the noisiest square in New York, Neuhaus put up an invisible space marked off by acoustic walls. Initially it is imperceptible because the sound enters its acoustic environment stealthily, an intruder in disguise, and is in any case cognate with that environment, so that only gradually does it reveal its own alien character. But those who locate that sound experience it as an acoustic threshold crossing into a clearly defined space which continually sounds across the years, day and night, without interruption. It is not something that happens. It is something that is. It exists. An invisible sculpture. Molded sound, precisely formed within defined limits. It was the first time that technology had made such an option possible, and the first time anyone had had the idea of using these media to such artistic

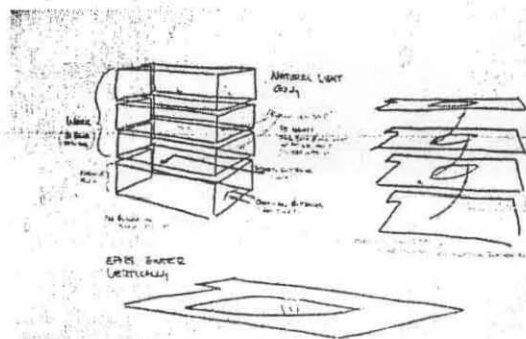
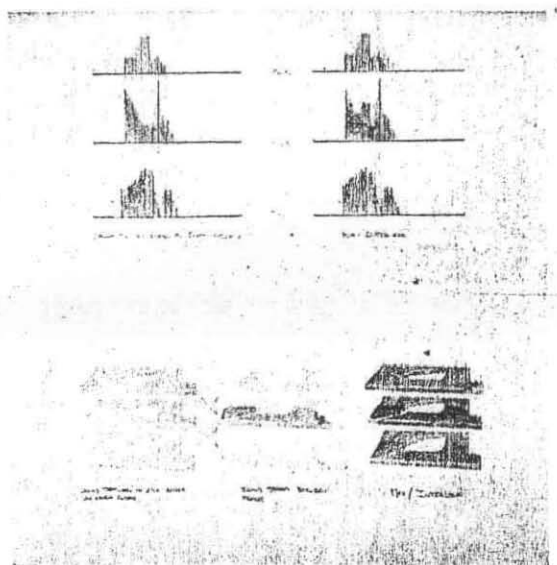
and skillful effect. In a square where the noise level was low, the sound would drown out everything else; in Times Square it is barely perceptible. On the one hand it uses automobile and aircraft noises, and on the other it mixes in peaceful sounds such as tolling bells and organ music. The aural impression impacts most powerfully on the memory when you leave the acoustic space and it is suddenly absent.

Of course, Neuhaus is a formidable virtuoso: for example, in a sound installation in an open stairwell such as that in the Chicago Museum (1979), the sound altered in open space as you changed your position, acquiring different acoustic qualities—a technique that would baffle sound technicians and which cannot be measured. But the artistic quality of this work resides in the phenomenon of a sound-and-time space defining itself as something distinct and alien within a given interior or exterior space. The use of sound compositions and acoustic reflections, verging on the magical, is solely a means to the end of establishing a new space created by the artistic, intuitive imagination.

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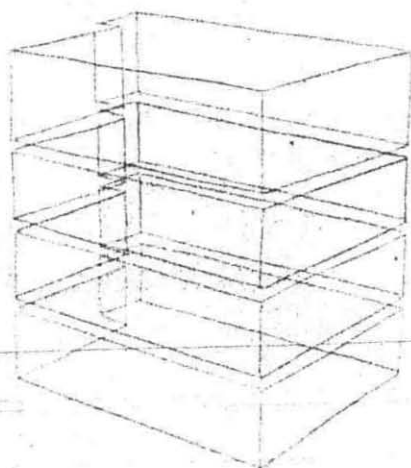
MAX NEUHAUS, THREE TO ONE, DRAWING 4, SPATIAL INTERLOCK AND DRAWING 5, HARMONIC INTERLOCK, 1992, colored pencil on velum, 17½ x 33" each / Farbstift auf Pergamentpapier, je 44 x 84 cm.

MAX NEUHAUS, THREE TO ONE, DRAWING 1, SPACES, 1992, colored pencil on velum, 16½ x 25½" / Farbstift auf Pergamentpapier, 41 x 64 cm. (PHOTOS: FRANÇOIS POIVRET)



MAX NEUHAUS, *THREE TO ONE*, 1992, colored pencil on velum, $35\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{1}{2}$ " and $35\frac{1}{2} \times 15\frac{1}{4}$ " /

Farbstift auf Pergamentpapier, 90×75 cm und 90×40 cm. (PHOTO: FRANÇOIS POIVRET)



THREE TO ONE

THE STAIRWAY
CONNECTS THE
CENTERS OF THREE
LARGE, GUTTERED
ROOMS. EACH ROOM
HAS A SOUND OF ITS
OWN—THREE QUIET
SPACES, COLORED BY
SOUND.

THE THREE SOUND
COLORS MIX
DIFFERENTLY WITH
SOUNDS FROM OUTSIDE
THE SPACES. SOUND
IMAGES FROM OUTSIDE
THE THROAT THIN,
RECOLORING AND
THEN REEXPOSING
EACH IN ITS OWN
WAY.

PASSING UP THE
STAIRWAY FOR THE
FIRST TIME, THE
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN
FLOORS ARE SUBTLE
BUT DISTINCT.
RETURNING DOWN THE
STAIRS, AURAL
MEMORIES BEGIN TO
FUZE THE DIS-
TINCTIOUS INTO ONE
DISTINGUISHED
WHOLE.

MAX NEUHAUS

THREE TO ONE

THE STAIRWAY CONNECTS THE CENTERS OF THREE
GLASSWALLED ROOMS. EACH ROOM HAS A SOUND
OF ITS OWN—THREE QUIET SPACES COLORED BY SOUND.

THE THREE SOUND COLORS MIX DIFFERENTLY WITH
SOUNDS FROM OUTSIDE THE SPACES. SOUND IMAGES FROM
OUTSIDE PASS THROUGH THEM, RECOLORING
AND THEN REEXPOSING EACH IN ITS OWN WAY.

PASSING UP THE STAIRWAY FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FLOORS ARE SUBTLE BUT DISTINCT.
RETURNING DOWN THE STAIRS, AURAL MEMORIES BEGIN TO
FUZE THE DISTINCTIONS INTO ONE DIFFERENTIATED WHOLE.

MAX NEUHAUS

DREI BIS EINS

EIN TREPPENHAUS WINDET SICH DURCH DIE MITTE
VON DREI RÄUMEN MIT GLASWÄNDEN – DREI RUHIGE RÄUME,
DIE MIT KLANG GEFÄRBT SIND.

DIE DREI KLANGFARBEN MISCHEN SICH UNTERSCHIEDLICH
MIT DEN GERÄUSCHEN DES AUSSENRAUMES. KLANGBILDER
VON AUSSEN DURCHDRINGEN SIE, GEBEN IHNEN NEUE FARBE
UND ENTHÜLLEN JEDE WIEDER AUF IHRE ART.

WENN MAN DAS TREPPENHAUS ZUM ERSTEN MAL HOCHGEHT,
SIND DIE UNTERSCHIEDE IN DEN STOCKWERKEN SUBTIL,
ABER WAHRNEHMBAR. STEIGT MAN DIE TREPPE WIEDER
HINUNTER, VERSCHMELZEN HÖRERINNERUNGEN DIE UNTER-
SCHIEDE ZU EINEM DIFFERENZIIERTEN GANZEN.

MAX NEUHAUS

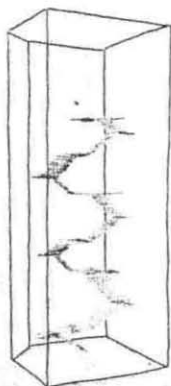
Neuhaus does not in fact calculate his spaces. He trusts his ears. He tries it out on the spot till the sound is right and the space is right. At times, drawings may help define and place a particular area more precisely or sound out acoustic reflections. But a sound installation is never finally established on the basis of such drawings. Setting up the acoustic space is a matter of purely intuitive experimentation. Drawings and texts possess great significance as a reflective medium and are a constituent of Neuhaus's work in their own right. The drawings are done in pencil and crayon. The pencil indicates the area and the crayon the sound. The way various acoustic qualities are juxtaposed like new walls beside existing walls or criss-cross the space like energy currents is simplicity itself. The drawings have none of the function of musical notation, in fact, but rather recall the tentative definition of electrical, nerve or brain impulses. Neuhaus distinguishes between the "working-learning drawings" and the "how-I-did-it drawings"—the proposals and the diptychs consisting of text and drawing. For Neuhaus, the diptychs constitute a vital establishment of distance, affording an overview of the work. For those who experience the work, they are a complex means of approaching it: what the text cannot express, the drawings fill in, and vice versa.

The diptychs of text and drawing sometimes operate as a kind of foreword: in advance, they preclude crass misunderstanding and, in restrained descriptive terms, prepare us for the experience—as at *documenta IX*, for instance, where the text accompanying *THREE TO ONE* drew attention to three distinct acoustic tonalities that could be heard in the stairwell of Kassel's AOK health insurance building. But of course the texts are merely tangential to the essential, inexplicable, immeasurable core of the work: the mystery of a relative space.

Sounds from outside penetrate into the entrance hall and commingle with the recollection of that outside which we bring with us, in the inner ear. The alien sound is already there, but for most people it is not yet perceptible. As if in disguise, it makes its presence gradually felt as we approach the stairs running the height of the building. It becomes clearer and clearer, and becomes a certainty: a calm, full-

bodied, vibrant note that seems to feel, to "sound out," the first floor landing with real precision. As we climb higher, some hear the sound at a lower pitch—but in Neuhaus's terms it becomes more open while remaining as complex. On the second landing, the note fills the space up to the brim, making it seem greater than the space below. On the stairs to the third level, our ear is now so practised that we can indeed distinguish an acoustic threshold. The top-most space seems to expand as the two notes converge, seeming to become a whole open landscape of a space.

It is sheer prejudice, then, to suppose this work invisible. Acoustic installations create a new experience of space, one which is visual in nature too. The impression of an alien sound and time is registered in a visual alteration of the space or even, in fact, in the recognition of an altogether new space. The given available space, be it man-made or natural, which is customarily represented in perspective, is not a norm; rather, it is a phenomenon in a state of flux. Max Raphael gave an unrivaled account of this when he wrote: "Space is a general category. Everything that would be manifest as a phenomenon can only be such if it takes on spatial qualities. Thus it is not enough to say that space is the external manifestation of the form, since space is more than mere form, or at least not simply an abstract form entirely independent of its content; since things require manifestation that have no real presence in the environment and thus cannot be represented by environmental space either; and since space and time, though different, are inseparable."²) Examining the entire history of art, Max Raphael distinguishes the space of the dreamworld, the space of the unconscious, in Hals or Velázquez; the space of transition from this world to the beyond in Tintoretto or Hugo van der Goes; the space of absolute being in the stained glass of Gothic cathedrals; the space of infinite emptiness, in the Egyptians; the space of infinite amplitude or fulfillment, of the soul's inner attunement, the space of contemplation in the Indians; the space of charged energy between this world and the beyond in El Greco; the space of this world's dissolution in Bosch; and, indeed, Raphael continues the list to include spaces of life, of death, of formal con-



THE ROOM HAS UNUSUAL PROPORTIONS: ALMOST SQUARE AND FOUR STORIES HIGH. IT ALSO OFFERS A MEANS OF EXPLORATION IN THREE DIMENSIONS—A FLOATING STAIRWAY FROM TOP TO BOTTOM.

THE WORK OCCUPIES THE TWO EXTREMES OF THE SOUND SPECTRUM. THE LOWS ARE COMPOSED OF RESONANCES OF THE SPACE AND, THOUGH LOUD, ARE HIDDEN IN THEIR RESEMBLANCE TO THE SOUNDS OF FLOWING AIR. THE HIGHS ARE SOFT LINES WHICH PENETRATE THE SPACE AT VARIOUS LEVELS.

TOGETHER THEY FORM A SONIC STRUCTURE BOTH DELICATE AND MASSIVE, BUT WHICH NEVERTHELESS REMAINS MORE OF A PRESENCE THAN A SOUND.

MAX NEUHAUS

UNTITLED CHICAGO

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OHNE TITEL, CHICAGO

DER RAUM HAT UNGEWÖHNLICHE PROPORTIONEN: FAST QUADRATISCH UND VIER STOCKWERKE HOCH. ER BIETET AUCH DIE MÖGLICHKEIT DER DREIDIMENSIONALEN ERFORSCHUNG – VON OBEN BIS UNTEN EIN SCHWEBENDES TREPPENHAUS.

DIE ARBEIT BESETZT DIE BEIDEN EXTREME DES TONSPKTRUMS. DIE TIEFEN TÖNE BILDEN SICH AUS RAUM-RESONANZEN, UND, OBWOHL SIE LAUT SIND, BLEIBEN SIE VERSTECKT, DA SIE DEN GERÄUSCHEN EINES LUFTSTROMS GLEICHEN. DIE HOHEN TÖNE BILDEN WEICHE LINIEN, DIE DEN RAUM AUF VERSCHIEDENEN EBENEN DURCHDRINGEN.

ZUSAMMEN BILDEN SIE EINE KLANGSTRUKTUR, DIE SOWOHL ZART ALS AUCH DICHT IST, DIE ABER TROTZDEM EHER EINE PRÄSENZ ALS EINEN SOUND DARSTELLT.

MAX NEUHAUS

MAX NEUHAUS, UNTITLED,
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO, 1992,
pencil on velum, 35½ x 22" and 35½ x 15¼" /
Farbstift auf Pergamentpapier, 90 x 56 cm und 90 x 40 cm.

sciousness, of chaotic unconsciousness, of static being, of metamorphosis, and of transparency. Max Raphael concludes that "anything that would be perceived by the external senses must take on that spatial (and temporal) form that accords with its own content."³

In a series of works, Neuhaus has presented spaces identical in their contours, light values, and moods by using different sound installations: for example, the TWO IDENTICAL ROOMS (1989) for Harald Szeemann's exhibition in the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, the startling virtuosity of which consisted not only in the different experience of the spaces but also in the fact that the sound did not issue from the wide entrance. One of the most striking spatial

displacements Neuhaus has achieved was in the Karsten Greve Gallery in Cologne. In a tiny kitchenette that opened off a larger room, he located barely perceptible acoustic signals that would, strictly speaking, have been characteristic of vastly spacious halls and vaults. The eye saw a cramped cabinet space but the ear registered the large sounds and echoes we hear in a big space. The eye enjoyed a clear gain. But not for long. When you moved into the exhibition room, with its normal sound character unchanged, it suddenly seemed to have shrunk—the ear had established new relations, and the eye suffered a loss.

To present something by the absence of the intrusion, to whet attention by removing an alien sound; is the motif of the MOMENT PIECES, which are

juxtaposed against the PLACES. We are all familiar with the phenomenon. An electric coffee grinder is loudly rattling away in a café, say, the sound unnoticed in the general noise of the café, and then suddenly the machine is switched off—and the cessation of the sound is experienced as an advent of silence. The café seems larger. We find our tête-à-tête more pleasant.

The Kunsthalle in Berne is situated on one of the busiest squares in the town. The noise of trams and cars provided a daily backdrop and setting for the alien sound Neuhaus installed there. The title of the work was TIME PIECE, Kunsthalle Bern (1989). A few minutes before every hour and half hour, the note fades in, only to break off abruptly on the dot of the hour or half hour. That is to say: the work operates like a clock, marking time by means of silence. What is more remarkable is the use of something that is merely there in order to point up its own absence: what counts is the aftermath of the sound. Most passers-by and museum-goers experience this similarly: the note itself exists in memory. When the note ceases, the auditory sense consciously registers that it has been perceiving something that is suddenly no longer there, and it hankers after the missing tone. In comparison with other aural installations which do consist of some kind of material—sound material, sound texture—the MOMENT PIECES are genuinely immaterial. The aftermath of the sound which the works prepare is an experience located in the hearer's own inner ear. In the aftermath, though, the place itself seems suddenly altered. The eye begins to seek what the ear now misses, and discovers the place anew in the process. The PLACES strangely exchange roles with the MOMENT PIECES. While the PLACES tend to throw us upon our sense of time and almost make us forget the place, the MOMENT or TIME PIECES sharpen the attention we pay to the place and prompt us to a real experience of our own presence in a given place.

—This dispensing with a definable something; this use of something purely as a preparation for the moment when it is removed, perhaps recalls the phenomenon of negative sculptures—as if the relativity of zero had been displaced, as Walter de Maria did in his *Vertical Kilometer of Earth* at the 1977 *documenta*.

But Neuhaus himself, asked if he is consciously working with a philosophy that entails dispensing with images (in the broader sense), replies laconically, "I'm just working with something and nothing."⁴¹ Observations Adorno made—such as "Non-being in works of art is a constellation of being"⁵¹—or hair-splitting such as Cage's thoughts on the "nothing in between" that "is neither being nor nothingness"⁶¹ are foreign to Neuhaus.

Beside Cage's orientally-influenced view of a filled silence innocent of purpose, the peacefulness and contemplativeness of Neuhaus's works seems almost pragmatic. He is most certainly not innocent of purpose when he sends gallery-goers or passers-by into his sound and time spaces. The work he does on these entrances is of a sophisticated nature, aimed at making the work as powerful a subjective discovery as possible for every individual. He counts on the ear being closer to immediate perception than the eye. The tranquillity and the spiritual energy manifest in his works are free of emotionalism and mysticism alike; rather, they are pure. They are islands in the prevailing barbarization and banalization. Neuhaus himself calls his works "catalysts"; and it is true that they can open our ears to other registers of consciousness for the perception of small changes, of minute differences, of immeasurably slight displacements. This is the register of contemplation in a state of the highest alertness. And it is in this sense that the sound spaces initiate a catalytic process: in the sense of a catharsis that is no longer necessary in order to refine human kind, as in the classical understanding of the term, but rather has long since become a question of survival.

(Translation: Michael Hulse)

1) Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens*, Paris, 1985, p. 146: "[...] mon corps entier, boîte à musique ou à langage, caisse de résonance, airain retentissant [...]"

2) Max Raphael, *Raumgestaltungen*, Frankfurt, 1969, p. 62.

3) Ibid, pp. 62 and 63.

4) Max Neuhaus in an unpublished interview with the present writer, July 1992.

5) Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt, 1973, p. 204.

6) John Cage, in Thomas Dreher, *Après John Cage: Zeit in der Kunst der sechziger Jahre—von Fluxus-Events zu interaktiven Multi-Monitor-Installationen* (catalogue), Munich, 1991, p. 61.