

The *Time Piece* for the Stommeln Synagogue

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Max Neuhaus' works are made with sounds that he 'builds' from what he hears within their intended sites. None of his pieces arises 'out of nothing'. In this way he always returns to the moment in 1966 when he cut short his brilliant early career as a percussion virtuoso, stamped the word 'listen' on the palms of friends and instructed them to walk with him through the city and listen to all the existing noises there. At the beginning of the construction of a new work all that can be heard are the sounds of the site's surroundings, whether it be the rustle of the wind in the trees in a park or the noise of a city traffic intersection. Then, as the work develops, a new electronically created sound becomes audible within the aural environment. This Neuhaus increasingly modifies and refines until it corresponds to an idea that can be realised not as a project, but only as an experiment and an echo.

Neuhaus' sound works are not music. Music can be said to consist of organising time through sounds arranged in a particular way. Even a work that calls into question essential views about music, John Cage's *4'33"*, is still fundamentally defined by the measurement of time, set out in a score. Organised temporality lifts music out of the continuum of tirelessly changing sounds and forms a time-space, a spatially and temporally bounded zone in which the listener immerses himself, which immediately surrounds him and from which he cannot simply close himself off. The physiological difference between ear and eye reflects the difference between the objects of hearing and seeing – the subject sees himself as facing and confronting the latter, as he never does with sound. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk believes in the potential of music to lead us out of the 'world as a totality of noise' and remind us of the 'archaic euphony of the pre-world interior', the harmony of maternal sounds, which it was our incomparable privilege to hear as we floated in the womb.

Max Neuhaus designates his *Time Pieces* as a different form within his oeuvre. In these works there is no constant sound; and *Time Pieces* do not create a bounded, well-defined place to which the listener goes voluntarily or discovers by chance. The sound of a *Time Piece* comes over us wherever we happen to be within its range. Or rather it is the sudden absence of the sound that comes over us. The sound of a *Time Piece* begins imperceptibly, swells and breaks off a few minutes later. Only in that moment is it actually perceived, as an 'after-image', once it has disappeared, as a moment of unexpected silence. With a *Time Piece* we awaken from the timelessly enraptured state of listening to the sound of a *Place Work*. In a single moment of silence we are pulled back into the world of everyday noises, the passing of time resumes. In fact, Max Neuhaus gathered his first experiences of this kind when he planned to construct an alarm-clock whose signal was to consist in the withdrawal of a sound. The moment of silence, the lack of the interrupted sound, coincides with the return of all noises without the sound that had been added to them with increasing volume. Freed from its mounting presence, they sound as if they have been cleansed. That is the wonderful thing about the world of sounds to which a *Time Piece* awakens us, the fact that it appears transfigured. It is exactly the same world as ever, but more radiant than before. Thus the awakening from the enraptured trance at the sounding place of the work means turning towards a world which has for a moment abandoned all that is repellent about the continuous sounds that have become an ignored habit, which Peter Sloterdijk terms 'totality of noise'. We long for nothing so much as this new, fresh world.

The work for the synagogue in Stommeln, placed out of respect not inside its inner space but outside it, in the town square adjacent to the building, is a *Time Piece*. The artist describes the sound of this work as follows: 'In *Time Piece Stommeln* I've managed to make a sound that you

Unlike music, in his *Place Works*, Max Neuhaus places a single sound in the existing aural context. This sound, even though it has a vibrant inner complexity, does not undergo a temporal development. Its time is endless, recognising no difference between past, present and future. Neuhaus defines a sounding area with boundaries which can be sharply drawn. Thus he replaces the temporal condition of music with the 'place' of a sound. Insofar as the place's constant sound originates in the noise or the rustle to which it reconnects, Max Neuhaus' work is free of the distain that music displays towards environmental sounds, and also free of the fascination of noise and silence that advanced music – Russolo and Cage – seeks to incorporate. The sound of a work by Max Neuhaus belongs to the sounds present in its environment, whatever form they may take, and at the same time it is distinguished from them – sometimes so little that it can barely be perceived, or the sound is assumed to be a 'natural' ambient noise. Elaborately designed, the sound does not exclude the ambient noises, but incorporates them, providing them with a particular quality which Neuhaus describes as a sonic 're-colouring'.

The formation of a place has been one of the crucial concerns of sculpture since the sixties. It no longer seeks to face the beholding and moving individual as a form or structure, as an object in relation to a subject. But even in the 'expanded field of sculpture' (Rosalind Krauss), mazes, surfaces made of metal plates, steel walls and earth banks in the desert all rely on the subject-body as a solid unit, and demand that it make sure of itself in an even intensified manner. On the other hand the place of Neuhaus' work, free of all physical mass, neither music nor sculpture, promises to exonerate the subject from the compulsion to self-assertion. We enter a sounding zone, as we immerse ourselves in the time-space of music, but without being released from everyday noises. And we are released from them nonetheless, in that as we listen to the constructed sound they reach our ears, along with it, coloured

really don't hear until just before it actually disappears. Over the past several weeks, working with the complex sounds of traffic moving around the small square adjacent to the synagogue, I've built a sound texture which transforms these sounds. It integrates itself within them by blending with them and tracking them, changing itself with their changes. This texture is made up of low, powerful ingredients that have a wonderful kind of grace. As it grows you realize that there is also a fundamental harmony within it. It is only at the very end of each sounding that it emerges from its ambient, shows itself and disappears.'

Neuhaus organised earlier *Time Pieces* in such a way that the moment of silence occurred at familiar times of day, on the hour, the half hour. An obvious reference here is the church bells that summon the faithful to worship at fixed times and contribute, wherever they are heard, to the formation of a sense of community, and thus also confirming the exclusion from that community of those who do not belong to the same religion, the same people. But the place set for Neuhaus' work in Stommel is a former Jewish house of prayer, one of the few synagogues in Germany that survived the Nazi terror undamaged, as the Jewish community found itself forced in 1937 to sell the building to a farmer, who used it as a shed. The synagogue had not actually been used for prayer since the twenties, however. Neuhaus decided to make this *Time Piece* sound twelve times a day, according to the division of the time between sunrise and sunset into twelve ritual hours – 'Zmanim' – as required by Jewish law. As the times of sunrise and sunset shift throughout the whole year, the Zmanim, and the times when Neuhaus' work can be heard, diverge from the standard time which also governs the times of Christian services. In this way *Time Piece Stommel* becomes a sign of respect for the exterminated Jewish people, its law and its religion. Neuhaus says he wanted to give voice to this 'vacant house of spirit', to give a voice to a building in which chanting has not been heard for more than eighty years, with a sound which originated from the noise of contemporary everyday life and is given back to it, and which breaks off at

by it, in a way that we have never heard them before. The difference arises out of the fact that the sounds are no longer merely present, undesired, obtrusive, a disturbance of whatever our momentary concerns might be, but that they are sought with the ear as special sensations, rich offerings of a despised world. They convey the strange experience of an immanent transcendence. We cut ourselves off from the world which is defined by sound, daily traffic, the rustling of the trees, as it is foreign and unwelcome to us, although at the same time we strive to open ourselves into it. We do not leave it, however. We are at a place in which this world is transformed, in which we ourselves enter a curious state of ambiguity, abandoned to the sounds and noises as in a trance, as we want nothing but to hear what is to be heard, to succumb to the sound of the work, the noise of the traffic and the rustling of the trees. The duration of this immersion depends on our own time, it lasts until we walk on. It could be endless, unlike when we hear music which forms and bounds our time.

the hour of prayer: superimposed a commemoration of the voices silenced by the Nazis, and an awakening into a transfigured world of sound in a moment of silence. It is a sign of the strength rather than the weakness of an art work if it is impossible conceptually to comprehend its echo in all its details. With regard to Neuhaus' *Time Piece Stommel*, the connection with the Jewish house of prayer is a matter of circumstances. Structurally, however, his work has been concerned from the outset with the acknowledgement of such circumstances.

Ulrich Loock, Porto 2007