Max Neuhaus and the space-sound

Neuhaus took his first steps beyond the borders of music with 'Public Supply One', a work made in conjunction with WBAI in New York City in 1966. Here the artist ceased to consider music as a product and started to treat it as an activity. Neuhaus invited listeners to phone in and make sounds in a live broadcast, he adjusted the levels of these sounds and grouped and combined listeners. With this work, music ceased to be a one-way language from a performer to the public and became a process of two-way communication, a collective, non-predictable activity.

In 1977, he placed an anonymous block of sound on a pedestrian island in the center of New York’s Times Square. It remained for fifteen years and now has been reinstated permanently. By not admitting authorship of the work, the creator delegated to the listener the task of discovering it as a work of art.

The innovative inventiveness of this artist resides principally in encouraging the user to play a role that is not only participatory, as in the case of John Cage's work, but fundamental to the actual work. Neuhaus reduces his own role to that of being a link interfacing the two factors (the work and its user). By maintaining his anonymity with regard to the user, he favors interaction and analogy.

Sound for Neuhaus is not the work but the catalyst for the listener’s own experience stimulated by that sound. In this shift from the visual-tactile to the heard, in which space is more heard than seen, sound takes on an unusual consistency and structure, the "space-sound": a spatial architecture no longer perceived through sight but heard. A world no longer linked to the codes and structure of language and its meanings but to a constructed location for the new dimension of the possible at the border of the impossible. Neuhaus' work may thus be defined as "a disposition of sounds in space and a sonorous definition of place".

In Neuhaus’ works, the source of sound is never visible. In the case of "Infinite Lines from Elusive Sources" the walls of the gallery were empty, the only element present was sound – a series of clicks heard in some places and not in others. The series of clicks seemed to develop an infinite line - “a phrase that evolves in perpetuity". The sounds and their variations thus formed invisible weaves winding through the room.

Through this shift of art from the visual-tactile to the auditory field, that is to hearing the space rather than seeing it, Neuhaus' work occupies a clear place in history: the sound is not the work, but becomes the catalyst involving the listener in a new aesthetic process. Since all the usual visual structures of art, such as texts and images, have been removed, the listener must come to terms with the new dimension of the almost imperceptible. This takes form in the possible "infinite lines" which the sounds form like invisible weaves around the room. The artist, who has become the "interface" between the spatial and sonorous dimension, manages in this way to highlight the disposition of the sounds in space, together with providing a sonorous definition of the place.

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