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# THE NEW YORKER



RIFE

# ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

## HEAR

I HAVE always been fascinated by people who make it big in one field and then decide to chuck that and do something else. A man makes a pile of money in designer watchbands, for example, and walks away from it to become a teacher, a rancher, or, what's more likely these days, a video artist. In Max Neuhaus's case, the switch was more subtle but no less dramatic. A virtuoso percussionist with a master's degree from the Manhattan School of Music, Neuhaus toured the United States and Europe in the mid-nineteen-sixties giving solo recitals of percussion works by Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, and other modernist composers. Along the way, he found himself becoming increasingly disenchanted with the whole idea of concert halls, performances, and virtuosity itself. In 1968, he quit performing. He cut a record for Columbia Masterworks that more or less summed up his concert work to date, put his two thousand pounds of percussion equipment in storage, and went out to become a maker of "sound environments" in the world at large—places whose ambience is defined or altered by the electronic sound systems that he secretes within them. The

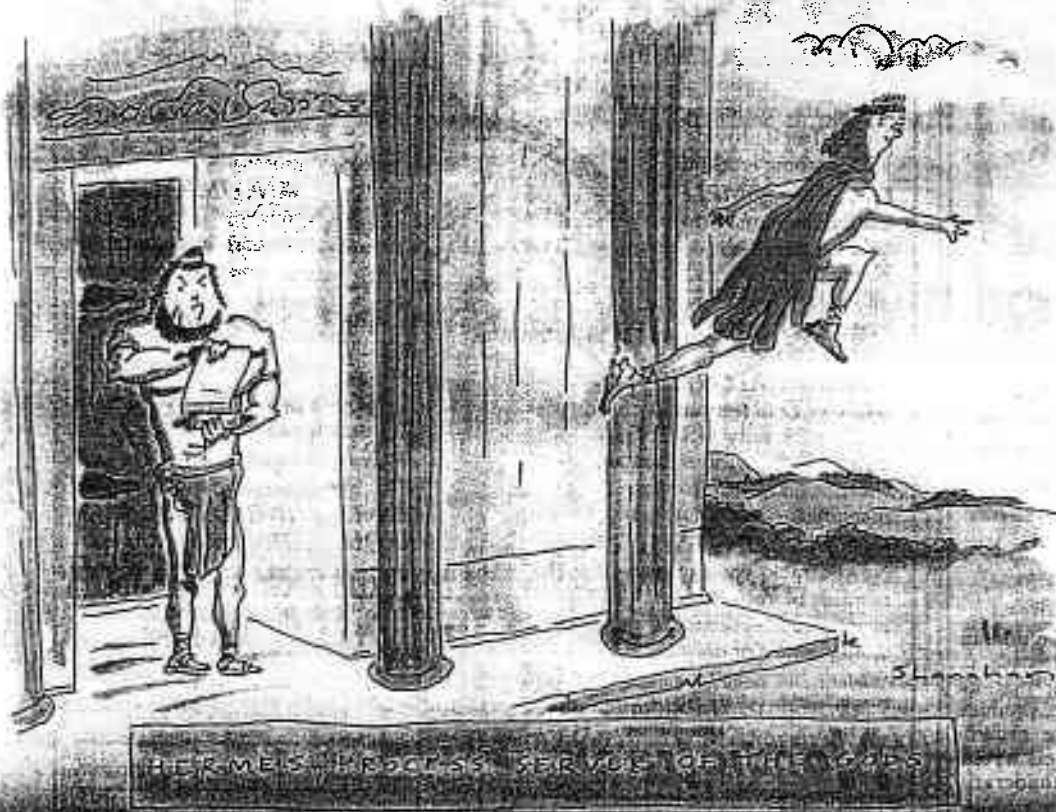
best-known of these environments (although not many people are aware of it) is the narrow pedestrian island that separates Broadway from Seventh Avenue between Forty-fifth and Forty-sixth. If you walk briskly across, you can easily miss it, but if you stand there for a few moments you will hear, above the roar and screech of Times Square traffic, a deep, resonant, harmonic hum, something like the aftertone of a very large bell. It comes from a loudspeaker mounted in a hole underneath the steel grating, and it is a wonderfully satisfying sound.

Neuhaus's second career has not made him rich, and it has certainly not made him famous. A bachelor with few personal needs, he gets by for the most part on commissions from public and private sources, many of which have to do with the art world, and not the music world. The Kunsthalle in Bern, Switzerland, has commissioned a sound installation from Neuhaus, and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts and several other museums in this country have expressed interest recently in having him do something. This is fine with Neuhaus, who takes his opportunities as they come. All the same, he

finds it amazing that contemporary culture remains so backward, aurally speaking. In spite of the efforts of Cage and others to shake up our musical thinking—to "let sounds be themselves," as Cage has said—the repertory in most of our concert halls remains rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the vast possibilities of new aural topographies lie virtually untapped. "Visual artists have been able to change the way we look at the world in this century," Neuhaus said to me one day this summer. "We have no trouble finding beauty in aspects of the urban scene that were not made to be beautiful, but we're stuck with this naïve idea that the only nice sounds are nature sounds. The visual artists have been able to make marks on walls for thousands of years, of course, while we've been able really to capture sound for only about forty years—since the invention of audiotape—so the lag is understandable, but I'm always surprised by it all the same. For a primitive man living in the forest, his ears were a lot more important than his eyes; he could hear danger much farther away than he could see it. We still sense the size and nature

of a space with our ears as well as our eyes. But our culture is so visual that we tend to forget about the aural side of things."

A tall, round-faced man whose rimless glasses give him a slightly myopic look, Neuhaus had just turned forty-nine when I looked him up in Paris last August. (He spends much of his time in Paris, which he finds more affordable than New York.) We had known each other since the sixties, and, aside from having put on a few extra pounds, he seemed to me to have changed very little over the last two decades—the same nondescript clothes, friendly manner, and readiness to laugh





uproariously at the vicissitudes of his life. He comes from Port Arthur, Texas, a grimy oil town that was also the improbable birthplace of Robert Rauschenberg and Janis Joplin, and, like them, he has travelled a long way from his origins. His father was a chemical engineer who moved around a lot; Neuhaus spent his formative years in Port Arthur; Fishkill and Pleasantville, New York; and Houston. When I saw him last summer, he was just back from a two-week sojourn in Bern, where he had finished installing the Kunsthalle piece. This one was going to be considerably different from his usual sound installations, he said. (Although it was fully installed, it was not to be turned on for several months.) Instead of using sound to create a sense of place, as he often does, in Bern he was programming a moment of silence, an aural afterimage, over an area adjacent to the museum. "The way it's done is by introducing a sound into that space and increasing its volume so slowly, for a period of about five minutes, that you don't notice it," he told me. "On the hour and on the half-hour, the sound stops. The first time you'll notice it is when it's taken away, and you'll be left with the natural environment in a state of relief. There's no real vocabulary for what I'm talking about, but it's like a sort of clearing."

The concept for this piece dates back to the nineteen-seventies, when Neuhaus experimented with alarm clocks that woke you up by the abrupt cessation of a gradually intensifying tone. Another version of the idea was realized in 1983 at the Whitney Museum; Neuhaus installed an acoustic system in the museum's outdoor sculpture court which altered and relayed the traffic sounds on Madison Avenue, increasing in volume and then suddenly shutting itself off, but the results did not please him. "The problem was that it was in the context of a museum exhibition, so most people went out and *tried* to hear it," he said. "Very frustrating." What Neuhaus wants is for people to come upon his sound environments accidentally and respond to them without preconceived ideas or expectations.

Neuhaus likes to talk about "building" sounds for particular sites. He does this electronically, using small computers to generate and shape sound

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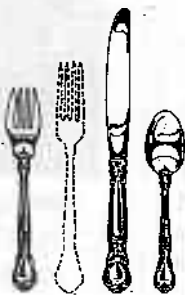
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waves, and feeding these directly into loudspeakers. "When I stopped being a performer, I wasn't interested in taped music," he told me. "I spent part of 1968 and '69 in residence at the Bell Labs in New Jersey, learning how to construct electronic circuits that generated sound. Since then, computers have become the ideal means of doing this. It's like a palette—the first paint we've ever had for sound. I've been able to design a way of building sounds that allows me to use my ear as a painter uses his eye." For the Kunsthalle he built a sound that has three components. One is a bell-like texture. (Bern has many churches and a well-loved public clock.) Another is a sound something like that of an airplane engine, and the third is a small melody that he sneaked in between the others. "The result is a beautiful sound," he said. "Too beautiful, according to Ulrich Loock, the Kunsthalle's director, who commissioned the piece. It's produced by hidden loudspeakers—in my work the speakers are always concealed, so the system producing the sound doesn't become a physical reference. Here they are positioned so as to adjust to the terrain, which is an area about a hundred and fifty metres in diameter; there's a plaza in front of the Kunsthalle, a couple of parks on either side, and then a very deep wooded ravine. Of course, the Bern city fathers don't know anything about this yet. Loock will have to persuade them to accept it, but museum directors in Europe have a lot more public clout than those in America. We're talking about starting up the system sometime around New Year's."

Neuhaus has installed two other permanent sound works in Europe. A private client engaged him to do a piece on a wooded hillside near the Tuscan town of Pistoia, in Italy. After studying the site for six weeks, Neuhaus came up with two pairs of soft, high-frequency sounds emanating from four hidden speakers; the aural mixture—a high-pitched ringing—recalls insect noises without actually sounding like them. The French Ministry of Culture commissioned the other piece, which surrounds a lake on the grounds of a state-owned chateau in Brittany. Here, again, there are four sound sources (speakers), two on either side of the

lake, cunningly directed to produce a low humming sound that seems to be moving around on the surface of the lake and, sometimes, coming from the trees around it. Neuhaus's most ambitious European project, however, which has been in the works for fifteen years, is still unrealized. He took me to the site, which is an interminably long pedestrian tunnel at the Montparnasse-Bienvenue station of the Paris Métro. Something like eighty thousand people pass through it on a normal day, he told me, on three moving sidewalks. "It's the length of two football fields, but the arched ceiling doesn't offer any visual point of reference, so it actually looks shorter than it is. People rushing through keep expecting it to end before it does. One of my basic concepts here is to replace the missing visual reference with an aural one—to articulate the journey with sound."

The tunnel, which we got to after a complicated odyssey of right-angle turns, pneumatic swinging doors, and one-way corridors, was incomparably dreary. Dimly lit, with walls and ceiling an insipid dun color, it seemed to weigh unkindly on the multitudes we saw moving through it, with eyes lowered. Neuhaus couldn't explain why he had suddenly decided, on seeing it for the first time, in 1973, that he had to do something there. "It was just after I found the site for the Times Square piece, and it became the same sort of fixation," he said. "I had no idea what I was going to end up with, but somehow I knew just what to do."



Although it took ten years of on-and-off negotiations with the Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens to get any action on his proposal, Neuhaus has nothing but praise for the French transit authorities. "The Métro people have been wonderful," he said. "It's a huge

bureaucracy, but they've been interested, intelligent, and helpful. They even came up with an eighty-thousand-dollar grant to let me get started. My problem has really been with the Ministry of Culture. I finally got permission to build the piece in 1984, when Jack Lang was Minister. But then, two years ago, when Jacques Chirac became Premier, Lang was kicked out, and the new régime proceeded to undo most of the projects he had started. My project wasn't called off, but I got no



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encouragement and no funding. Now Lang is back, so I'm hopeful. My budget for the project is nine million francs, which is about one and a half million dollars. The Métro is putting up a third, and it will maintain the piece for ninety-nine years, which I guess is as long as anything is expected to last. A corporate sponsor has agreed to put up a third, and the Ministry of Culture is supposed to put up the final third."

We were standing on one of the moving sidewalks by this time, rumbling along on the right-hand side of its rubberized tread, so people in a hurry could stride purposefully past. Neuhaus pointed to a lighting panel running the entire length of the tunnel on both sides, a few feet above head height, and said that his sound system would be going in there. There would be two hundred computers, a hundred on each side, each of them an independent sound generator but all of them linked in a sound-synthesis network that would be activated by remote control. "I'll have the ability to do anything I want here," he said happily. "I can move sounds around, have them respond to one another and to other sounds in the tunnel—the possibilities are endless."

I asked what sort of sound pattern he had in mind for the Métro.

He laughed. "That's the problem question," he said. "In doing a piece like this, I deliberately try *not* to know what kind of sound I'm going to put in until I put it in. All I can say is that it will be very specific to this place. Now the biggest sound in here is the sound of the huge machine that drives the moving sidewalk. That's my starting point, sonically. I can alter that in the same way that painters alter color—you know, by putting another color next to it that changes both colors. Same principle. The work will go in three stages. First, I'll construct and install the sound network. Second, I'll work alone on the site, building the sounds, listening and adjusting, gradually tuning the sound to the place. That will be done at night—or, rather, after one o'clock in the morning, when the Métro shuts down. The final stage of the tuning will take place in the daytime, with the public in the space, so I can kind of get a sense of what's going on in people's minds when they hear it. But I won't really know what

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it will sound like until I finish it."

Neuhaus has already spent many hours in the tunnel after 1 A.M., testing and experimenting, and he is on relaxed terms with the Paris clochards who like to sleep on the relatively soft tread of the no-longer-moving sidewalk. "At first, when I came in, they thought I was a cop," he said. "But then I brought in all the electronics, and they got very curious. I'd tell them I was doing an acoustical survey. They used to like to curl up and sleep near where I was working, and I would sort of stumble over them, but I developed an antidote. If they slept too close, I'd just turn on the *tapis roulant* and move them down a way."

IT was close to 1 P.M. when we emerged from underground into the sunlight of an August Saturday in Paris. Time for lunch. We went across town to Bofinger, the venerable *brasserie* just off the Place de la Bastille, where the sound level was strangely elevated by the recurrent clatter of breaking plates. Food and wine *commandés*, we got to talking about the problem of immateriality in Neuhaus's work. "If somebody was going to make a steel sculpture two hundred metres long and five metres high—the dimensions of the Métro tunnel—a budget of one and a half million wouldn't seem like much," he said. "But the fact that my work can't be seen or touched, and that I can't even tell people ahead of time what it's going to be like—well, as you can imagine, there are difficulties." It took him four years to persuade the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority to let him "sound" the ventilation chamber under the street in Times Square—not so long when you compare it with the fourteen-plus years for the Paris Métro project, but then the size and the scope of the Times Square piece are far, far smaller. Because the M.T.A. said that it couldn't negotiate with an individual, Neuhaus set up a nonprofit foundation called Hear, but the state agency that approves nonprofit organizations told him that the name was too ambiguous; he made it Hybrid Energies for Acoustic Resources, or HEAR, and it got approved. The M.T.A. still had plenty of objections. "For one, they said the traffic island would have to be rebuilt to accommodate the crowds of people who would collect there if they heard sounds coming from under-

ground," he told me. "I took photos that New Year's Eve showing the island packed with people. The next year, they blocked off the island on New Year's Eve."

Neuhaus applied to the New York State Council on the Arts for a grant to pay for the Times Square piece. After many delays, the Council's professional staff approved his request, but when it came before the Council at a public meeting Mrs. Richard Rodgers, the widow of the composer, and a longtime member of the Council, made a speech against it, saying that it was "not a responsible way to spend the public's money," and the funding was vetoed. Neuhaus finally scraped together the money himself. He got grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, and borrowed the rest from friends, most of whom thought he was out of his mind: Why would anybody want to spend all that money to put electronic sounds in a hole under the street? This was in 1976, well before the new public art came into vogue.

In 1977, Neuhaus received a fellowship from a West German cultural-exchange program, which required him to spend a year in Berlin. He put the Times Square project on hold. That summer, he came back to finish the piece, and ran afoul of an ancient feud between the transit people and Con Edison. The voltage in the subway was too high for his hookup, but Con Edison refused to let its line be connected to M.T.A. property. Neuhaus finally got an independent maintenance company to dig up the sidewalk and connect him to the nearest street lamp, and in September of 1977 the piece went into operation, without fanfare or public notice. Neuhaus wouldn't let the M.T.A. put up a plaque explaining what it was. He wanted people to discover it on their

own, without explanation. Since 1977, he has been getting letters and postcards from people who have learned that he is the one responsible for that amazing sound, which they have been taking their friends to hear, thinking that it was their own discovery. This response makes him feel that the work is a success.

Neuhaus turned the sound off for a period of several months in 1986, putting it on strike, so to speak. "The electricity dilemma was getting to me," he said. "Every time there was street work in the vicinity, it would accidentally get disconnected. A work as immaterial as that really has to be permanently there—it doesn't function at all if it's only sometimes there. I had to solve that somehow, so I just turned it off. The Arts in Transit program of the M.T.A. finally stepped in, and got the M.T.A. to run a wire up the tunnel to the Forty-ninth Street station. In 1987, it was reinaugurated, with a small press conference, but there's still no plaque. My one concession may be to let the city put it on tourist maps, although I have no idea what they'd call it. 'Max's Noise'?"

During the last year or so, Neuhaus has toyed with the idea of making some money from his work. This heretical notion has led him to place some of his drawings for sound installation on consignment in art galleries, and also to conceive a series of "works for one person." One of these works had been installed for the last six months at the Galerie Ghislaine-Hussenot, in the Marais district of Paris, and after lunch he took me there. The gallery was officially closed for August, but he had a key. It was a good space, as they say in the art world—a large, high-ceilinged room with a skylight, white walls (empty of art just then), a concrete floor, and a flight of steps leading to a small balcony. Neuhaus fished a roll of plastic tape out of a desk drawer in the gallery office and climbed the steps. "The piece is activated by a photoelectric cell up here, which turns it on late in the day, when the light drops to a certain level," he explained. "But I can turn it on by putting a piece of tape over the cell. It takes a couple of minutes to start up."

By the time he rejoined me on the ground floor, I was hearing quiet pings; or clicks, that seemed to be coming from the opposite wall of the room. Their rhythm was irregular, speeding



up and slowing down, and they also got louder and then softer; it was a lulling, peaceful sort of sound, which reminded me of tree frogs in a swamp in May. "The trick is to decide where it's coming from," Neuhaus said. We walked slowly to the other side of the room, where the clicks seemed to originate, but as we approached it they shifted a hundred and eighty degrees and seemed to be coming from the side we had left. "It's kind of an endless phrase," he said. "The three elements—pitch, loudness, and speed—operate independently of one another, and there's a random factor thrown in, so the same combination never repeats." He pointed out the sound source, which I had been unable to find—a small speaker mounted on a steel crossbeam up near the skylight. (The sound was being generated by a computer in the office.) As Neuhaus explained it, the sound from the speaker was directed so that it hit one wall, bounced across to hit the opposite wall, and then ricocheted off the floor and across to the opposite wall: wherever you stood in the room, it came at you from somewhere else. I thought it was a fine sound, and said so. He agreed. It could be bought, he said, for twenty-five thousand dollars. The fee included custom installation in the buyer's home, with Neuhaus tuning the sound to its new surroundings.

Neuhaus seemed neither surprised nor distressed that, to date, nobody had expressed any interest in buying it. The profit motive burns rather feebly in his breast, I suspect, as perhaps it should in the breast of a maker of aural topographies. He would like to make some money, but mainly in order to realize some of his more quixotic projects, such as Audium, a telephone-radio hookup that would enable people worldwide to call in, contribute voice sounds of their own choosing, and hear them altered, mixed, and enhanced by Electronics Maestro Neuhaus. He had done several versions of this idea—the first one over New York's radio station WBAI, in 1966, and the last a two-hour nationwide program on National Public Radio, in 1977.

The most quixotic of all Neuhaus's ideas, though, and the one that most clearly reveals him as an old-fashioned utopian, is the siren project. About ten

years ago, it occurred to him that the sirens on police cars, ambulances, and fire engines were a form of sonic terrorism, and that this was not only undesirable but unnecessary. The notion of developing a better siren stuck in his head for two reasons: "It was a challenge to those mediocre minds who always say you can't change the world, and nobody had ever worked on it before."




U-TAM

Neuhaus did some research. He learned that in New York City the first fire engines were pulled by men on foot, who were preceded through the narrow streets by another man, blowing a trumpet. The trumpet eventually gave way to loud bells, and the bells were succeeded, in the early internal-combustion era, by a primitive whistle that was attached to the vehicle's exhaust pipe. "It made an incredibly loud scream," Neuhaus told me. Sometime in the nineteenth century, the modern siren was invented. It consisted of two perforated metal disks, mounted side by side so that they sliced up the air between them when they turned. The siren-makers didn't do any sound research; they simply used a technique that produced the rising and falling siren that we know today. In Europe, the early sirens sounded very much like the trumpeter who used to clear a path for the king, and when electronic sound generation came in the new sirens imitated that rather kingly sound: "Tah-dah, tah-dah." The third sound in use today was adapted from the dive signal of submarines in the Second World War—a sort of fast, upswEEPing hoot.

"As it turns out, all these sounds are easy to hear but hard to place," Neuhaus said. "We have a very delicate internal mechanism for locating sounds. It depends on the minute differences in the way our two ears hear the onset of the sound. The mechanism works wonderfully for the sound of a twig snapping, but it's quite useless for continuous sounds, without clear beginnings. That's the reason a lot of people just sort of freeze when they're driving in traffic and they hear a siren—they can't figure out where the damn thing is coming from."

Armed with his new learning, in 1982 Neuhaus managed to get representatives of New York's Police Department, Fire Department, and mu-

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nicipal hospitals to meet with him. He explained that with the new electronic equipment available it was possible to make an incredibly wide range of sounds, among which were some that would certainly alert people more efficiently than the present sirens, and not reduce them to panic. The police were quite interested, he said. After asking a lot of questions, they agreed that a better siren could make their life easier. The only trouble was that nobody wanted to put up the money. Neuhaus figured that he needed about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to make a prototype. "I went first to the scientific community, but they weren't interested, because I wasn't a scientist," he said. "Then I tried the arts community, but the attitude there was 'No, thanks. It's a science project.' So, very naïvely, I just went out on my own and started working on it, thinking that surely somebody would see the light and decide to back me. I took a couple of squad cars the Police Department had lent me, and spent several days driving them around on an abandoned airfield—Floyd Bennett Field, in Brooklyn—making sound tests. I spent quite a bit of money that I didn't have, and bankrupted my nonprofit foundation. The last thing I tried was a venture-capital argument. I knew that perhaps sixty million dollars a year was spent in this country to replace worn-out sirens on emergency vehicles, and it seemed to me that a new, improved sound could easily break into the market. No takers. I found out that the venture part of venture capitalism is basically a myth. Just recently, though, I've found a backer for the basic research. I'll be doing some more tests this fall, out in California. I know it can be done." —CALVIN TOMKINS

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