

For an Ecological Music – Max Neuhaus

Daniele Balit

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/17143>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.17143

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2015

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Daniele Balit, « *For an Ecological Music – Max Neuhaus* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 44 | Printemps/Été 2015, Online since 01 June 2016, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/17143> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.17143

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

For an Ecological Music – Max Neuhaus

Daniele Balit

Translation : Simon Pleasance

EDITOR'S NOTE

Thanks to the partnership between the Centre national des arts plastiques (cnap) and *Critique d'art*, it is possible to shed light on policies supporting art theory and art criticism by offering a platform to one of the winners of the Art Theory and Criticism prize in each issue. Hailing from very varied areas of interest and with very different approaches, the five winners for the year 2014 share in common the fact that they underwrite subjects that have remained on the sidelines of publications and exhibitions in France. Valérie Da Costa proposes a debut monograph on the sculpted œuvre of Pino Pascali, a “comet artist” whose prolific and multi-faceted output challenges such canonical categories as *arte povera*. Olivier Schefer’s forthcoming book grants a central place to science-fiction as a conceptual and aesthetic matrix of Robert Smithson’s art. Aiming at a work in exhibition form, Marianne Derrien takes a close look at contemporary art by way of the notions of the occult and alchemy, and magic, black and white. The originality of the collaboration between the art critic Christophe Domino and the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko has to do as much with the aim of a World Institute for the Abolition of War in Paris as with the “hypothesis of a political art” today, not forgetting the heuristic interest of the actual relationship of “critical accompaniment” that connects them.

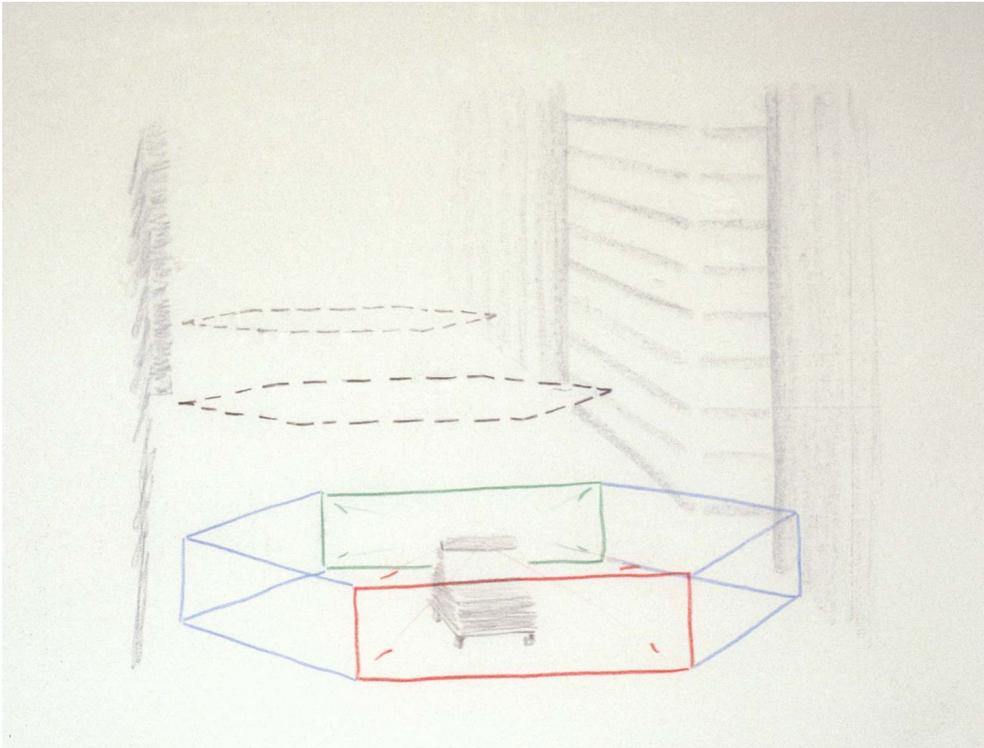
Daniele Balit, for his part, broaches the relation between art and public place through the study of the sound installations produced and projected by Max Neuhaus, aimed at the post-industrial urban environment. Well removed from the Futurist desire to subject life to an overall aesthetic principal, Neuhaus’s approach puts the author on the back burner and, through the attention paid to “listening to listening”, deals with the cohabitation of sounds in the city rather than their systematic organization. It is in this sense that the concept of “ecological music” assumes its full breadth. This subtly contextualized case study reminds us of the importance of a history at the crossroads of several paths, beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Elitza Dulguerova

- 1 Silence is static whereas sounds, noises and smells are dynamic. It was Carlo Carrà who declared as much, in 1913, reckoning that the moment had come for painting, that art of silence, to leave its hieratic space and launch itself into the conquest of modern society's speeded-up space/time-frames.¹ The pictorial languages must henceforth be capable of expressing a “plastic equivalent” of the variety of sensory stimulations offered by the modern city, with its “theatres, music-halls, cinemas, brothels, harbours, garages, hospitals and industries”.² A picture such as *Dinamismo di un'automobile* by Luigi Russolo (1912-13) captures a vehicle passing at full speed—nothing less than a revelatory experience for the Futurists, capable, in a split second, of doing away with an age-old tradition of aesthetic values, from the *Nike* or Winged Victory of Samothrace (see the famous words of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti) to the musical harmonies of the Pastoral and Eroica symphonies.³ If the succession of angles dominating the stage seems to correspond to the “shock of acute angles”, those “Angles of the will” inventoried by Carrà among Futurist tools of representation, it also very well illustrates the physical phenomenon of sound propagation. The gradual approach of the sound waves seems, in particular, to reproduce the frequency variation of the Doppler effect, a phenomenon of perceptive alteration produced by the movement of the sound source, experiencing which is quite common in towns and cities, when, for example, emergency vehicles pass with their sirens blaring. As is specified by the repertory of sound effects drawn up by Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, in the Doppler effect, rather than the sound source, “it is the relation between the observer and the emitting object which is altered”. What is involved is a “relative anamorphosis of the original signal”. Because the effect—the authors explain—“does not just point to the necessary cause which, in the end, turns out to underpin its existence, it is still the trace of an event [...]. [The effect refers] to all the conditions surrounding the existence of the object and to the way it appears in such a situation. The perceptible “effect” is, from this viewpoint, immediately linked to a circumstantial cause”.⁴ Seen from this angle, a painting like Giacomo Balla's *Velocità astratta + rumore* (1913-14) (the central part of a triptych depicting the three temporal states of an approaching car, which then passes, and drives away) also evokes this phenomenology of the traces of events which Augoyard and Torgue talk about.⁵ Balla's transcription is presented like a constellation of forms representing the moment of greatest intensity of the acoustic energy, and its dispersal in many different centres and directions. The poetics of the Futurist sensation thus extracts the phenomenon from the simple relation of causality, and re-places it at the heart of its circumstantial causes. In this way, it constitutes a significant precedent with phenomenological approaches to the sound dimension which will carry on experimenting with their plastic possibilities.
- 2 Half a century later, Max Neuhaus produced his project *Listen*, nothing less than a listener's manifesto, organized from 1966 on in different formats: lecture, newspaper article, post card, self-adhesive sticker, poster, as well as sound walks in New York neighbourhoods. This pivotal work in the artist's career, somewhere between musical field and artistic field, carries on the conquest of the “infinite variety of noise-sounds” declaimed by Luigi Russolo in his famous manifesto, not without inheriting his fascination with the industrial city and its infrastructures. If one of the stages of the walk is dedicated to listening to the sounds of an electric power station, the one that leads the group of participants to park under the Brooklyn Bridge once again involves passing vehicles, this time perceived as a flow of sound released by the traffic, magnified by the

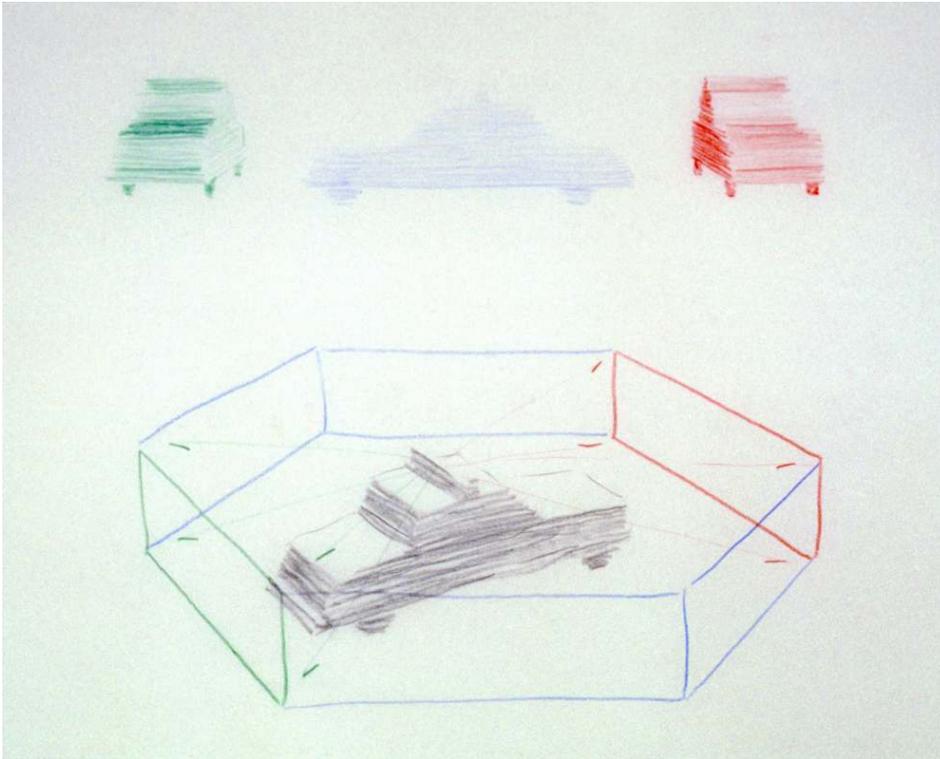
bridge's vibrating energy. However, even though there is a continuity between Russolo's "modern ear" and the choreographed listening of *Listen*, the historical transition between the two periods is not made without breaks. We must not in fact forget that the urban territory of New York occupied by *Listen* was that of a city subjected to a major process of de-industrialization caused by the crisis of the 1960s and 1970s. That change in the landscape of modernity represented a crucial resource for the artistic community of downtown Manhattan, which made it an object of experimentation and conquest (starting with the conversion of abandoned premises into lofts and exhibition spaces). On the other hand, some of its leading figures definitely dealt with the implications of all this. As Gordon Matta-Clark emphasized: "[...] the availability of empty and neglected structures was a prime textural reminder of the ongoing fallacy of renewal through modernization".⁶ Like Gordon Matta-Clark, and Richard Serra, Max Neuhaus is among those artists who, through their contextual explorations, have confronted a "left over public space" gaining ground in New York's neighbourhoods, with all the ambivalence that that implied, somewhere between degradation and freedom of experimentation.⁷ "The omnipresence of emptiness, of abandoned housing and imminent demolition gave me the freedom to experiment with the multiple alternatives to one's life in a box as well as popular attitudes about the need for enclosure".⁸ Listening to the modern city is in this sense less linked to a process of de-contextualization and representation of the acoustic environment than to an attempt to question and play a direct part in the heterogeneity of a territory undergoing changes, together with its conflictual and problematic aspects.

- 3 This possibility of coming up with alternatives to the barriers imposed by the concert hall pushed Max Neuhaus to take the decision to abandon his career as a percussionist in order to re-situate music "outside, in the open air",⁹ and in so doing draw closer to the field of *in situ* and extra-muros sculpture. We are acquainted, furthermore, with his criticism of Luigi Russolo, Edgar Varèse and John Cage: the sonic avant-garde aims at impressing the audience more "through the scandal of 'ordinary' sounds placed in a 'sacred' place, than through the sounds themselves"; without the audience being able to "re-use that experience from a new perspective on the sounds of their day-to-day lives".¹⁰



Max Neuhaus, Spaces sound burst at an optimum distance regardless of speed, Siren Project, Drawing #1, 1991. Ink and colored pencil on paper, 91 x 110 cm © Estate of Max Neuhaus

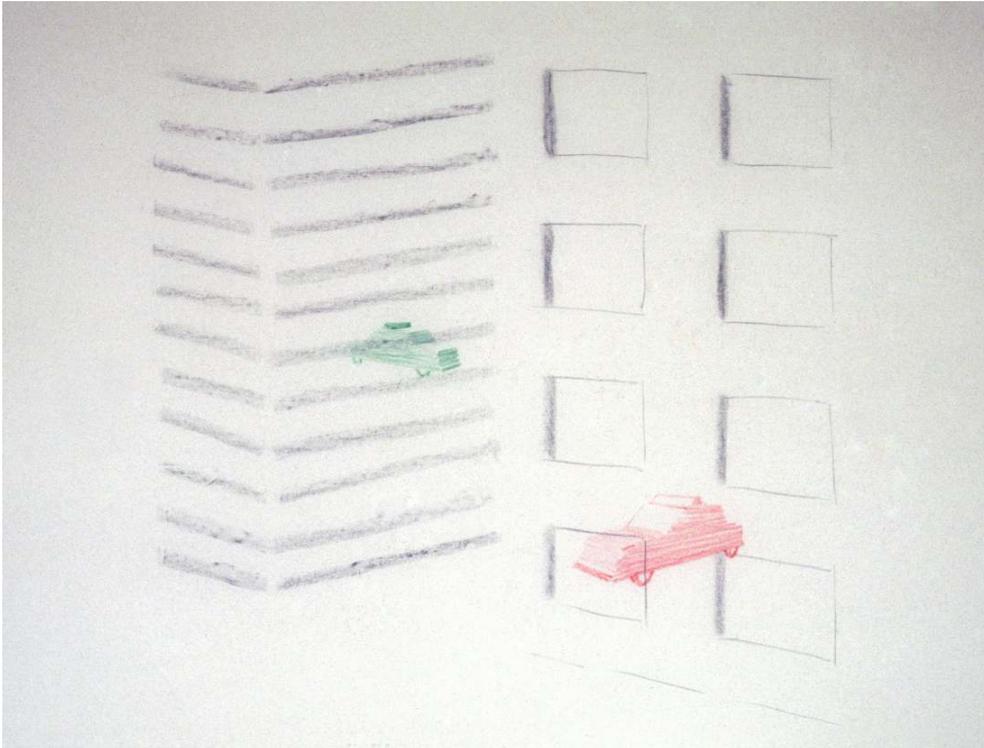
- 4 Seen in this light, the gradual abandonment of musical conventions is achieved through the realization of novel social situations: such as the underwater music of the *Water Whistle* series (1974), produced in several swimming pools in the United States, which is perceived through epidemic contact, no less;¹¹ or that of *Drive-in Music* (1967), to be re-modulated, via the car radio, while driving your own car through a succession of broadcasting zones; or the sound sources dispersed over the roofs of the city in *Fan Music* (1967), sounds reacting to the variations of the sun, humidity and temperature, which “produced sonorities which intermixed to form a continuous aural topography across the urban terrain”.¹² Thanks to this topographical approach, Max Neuhaus re-thought the foundations of the musical experience. This involved establishing ecosystems based on processes of converting existing sounds, filtering, and liaising phenomena, taking into account the time-frames and the different ways of listening of people passing through their regions. This project, which we might define as an attempt to adapt to the environment, became more radical with installations like *Walk Through* (1973-1977), situated in the passage of a Brooklyn subway station, and *Times Square* (1977-1992, re-installed in 2002), using that famous “crossroads of the world” with its sounds “almost plausible with the context”.¹³



Max Neuhaus, Controlled tone color dispersion and the resulting aural images of the car, Siren Project, Drawing #3, 1991. Ink and colored pencil on paper, 91 x 110 cm © Estate of Max Neuhaus

- 5 Not only were the sites chosen to construct the acoustic environments more exposed to the antagonisms and complexity of the city's social fabric—be it a particularly neglected place as in the case of *Walk Through*, or an extremely dense one in the case of *Times Square* --, but those installations also entail a form of hitherto unused time-frame, extending it to cycles spanning several months, and even to the state of a permanent sound work.
- 6 Added to these factors was Max Neuhaus's rejection of signs, thus depriving the work of its auteur status. "I never do a piece where I'm not sure that 50 percent of the people who come across it will walk right through it without hearing it", he explained.¹⁴ So Max Neuhaus's aesthetics based its relation to reality less on a *mimesis* than on a form of mimetism. It was a question of conceiving of an art capable of "being hidden in the environment" to the point of becoming invisible¹⁵—the ultimate realization of an ecological project involving cohabitation between art and everyday life.¹⁶
- 7 It is henceforth possible to understand to what degree the claim of a "capacity to listen to our environment",¹⁷ displayed by the series *Listen*, had a different connotation of the position of Russolo and the Futurists. Not only was Russolo's idea of adapting the ear to modern life subsumed to a process of imitating "noise-sounds" and musical representation, but the stance of the author of *The Art of Noises* thus remained firmly rooted in a concept of aesthetic objectivation: through the rejection of traditional harmony and noise enhancement. His manifesto merely shifted the object designating the "beautiful" to establish a new order of hierarchies. The politics of listening applied by Max Neuhaus tried, on the contrary, to get rid of hierarchies. While the *in situ* installations aspired to a democratization of the artistic experience, in *Listen* it is the acoustic heterogeneity of the New York neighbourhoods (including that of the Porto Rican ethnic minority) that is defended against any form of discrimination against sounds

regarded as “undesirable”—a stance that would find its counterpart in an op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* in 1974, in which he warned against the discriminatory attitudes of activists campaigning against noise pollution.¹⁸ As was underscored by Branden W. Joseph, “the aesthetic refusal to distinguish between proper and improper sounds relates to a political refusal to discriminate between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ inhabitants of the urban public sphere”.¹⁹ Such issues are broached on a pragmatic level in the artist’s urban development and sound design projects. It was by trying to “improve the world” that he in fact developed a project such as *Sirens* (1978), arising out of the confrontation with “one of the largest sonic events in daily life”: the passage of a siren through a city.²⁰ So for several years he would devote himself to developing a new sound system for emergency vehicles, for which he eventually obtained an official patent.²¹



Max Neuhaus, Aural images of hidden cars, Siren Project, Drawing #4, 1991. Ink and colored pencil on paper, 91 x 112 cm © Estate of Max Neuhaus

- 8 The series of drawings produced in 1991 to illustrate the project helps us to observe a way of representing the sonic phenomenon of the passage of vehicles which differs from the above-mentioned Futurist works. Although the chromatic choices are not as harsh (the three principal colours, red, green and blue, being in fact the same as those used by Balla), the “angles of will” and the jolts of acoustic energy of Russolo and Balla gave way to much more defined forms: geometric sonic volumes drawn with pencil, as well as arrows indicating the directions of diffusion. Likewise, the distances between the sound waves of the Doppler effect represented by Luigi Russolo became, in Max Neuhaus’s drawings, much more clearly defined and regular: we can recognize a series of sonic events set at a distance and interspersed with silences, corresponding to a sonic design aimed at better locating the sounds of the sirens. “I was able to give cars a sonic form”, he declared.²² Be it on the social level (that of sonic design) or the aesthetic one (*in situ* installations), that shift from the representation of the phenomenon to its making responded to a desire to act on the environment. A form of involvement which, in

listening practices, put the stress on the role of the subject, and turned the notion of soundscape into an issue of social construction.²³ Accordingly, this poetics of space in Max Neuhaus's work was also a politics of space, because the need to control the sound, and "give shape" to it, rather than predetermining the listening, left him free to forge his experience of it, beyond any imposition. There is no such thing as intrinsically bad sound—as Max Neuhaus was at pains to point out during his lectures around *Sirens*. Just like an "ecology of sound", art was thenceforth practiced through a form of "attention to the sounds that we add to the environment".²⁴ It is a matter, above all, of learning how to listen; or rather of listening to listening.

NOTES

1. Carrà, Carlo. "La Peinture des sons, bruits et odeurs" (1913), in Giovanni Lista, *Futurisme, manifestes, documents, proclamations*, Lausanne : L'Age d'Homme, 1973, p. 182
2. *Op. cit.*, p. 185
3. Cf. Russolo, Luigi. *L'Art des Bruits*, (1913), Paris : Allia, 2003
4. Augoyard, Jean-François. Torgue, Henry. *A l'Ecoute de l'environnement - Répertoire des effets sonores*, Marseille : Parenthèses, 1995, p. 10
5. The work is held at the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation in Venice.
6. Matta-Clark, Gordon. Moure, Gloria. *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings*, Barcelona : Polígrafa, 2006, p. 141.
7. Cf. Cooke, Lynne. "Locational Listening", *Max Neuhaus: Times Square, Time Piece Beacon*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 2009, p. 35
8. Matta-Clark, *Ibid.*
9. Neuhaus, Max in : "Music Below" *The New Yorker*, 5 June 1978, p. 28
10. Neuhaus, Max. "Listen" (1988, 1990, 2004), republished on <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography>
11. Before producing *Water Whistle*, Max Neuhaus spent a long period on a ship to study underwater sounds.
12. According to the text belonging to the drawing *Fan Music* of 1993.
13. Neuhaus, Max. "Notes on Place and Moment" (1993), republished on <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography>
14. Neuhaus, Max in : Zuckerman, Alicia. "Max Neuhaus: Times Square", *EMF - Arts Electric*, 2002 (http://www.emf.org/artselectric/stories/2002/020530_neuhaus.html)
15. Neuhaus, Max. "Lecture at the Seibu Museum Tokyo" (1982), republished on <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography>
16. John Cage was the first to talk about "ecological music", imagining a form of symbiosis with the world. Cf. Cage, John. *Pour les oiseaux : entretiens avec Daniel Charles*, Paris : L'Herne, 2002, p. 264
17. Neuhaus, Max. " BANG, BOOoom, ThumP, EEEK, tinkle", *New York Times*, 6 December 1974, p. 39
18. *Ibid.*

19. Joseph, Branden W. "An Implication of an Implication", *Max Neuhaus : Times Square...* op. cit., p. 60.
20. Neuhaus, Max. "Sirens", (2003), republished on <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography>.
21. However, despite the availability shown by the police institution, Max Neuhaus would not manage to industrialize his system.
22. Neuhaus, Max. "Sirens", *Op. cit.*
23. On this idea see: Thompson, Emily. *The Soundscape of Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004.
24. Neuhaus, Max. "Sound Design", republished on <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/bibliography>