

An Implication of an Implication

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Carter Ratcliff, one of the most frequent commentators on Max Neuhaus's art, once characterized its politics as "an implication of an implication."¹ Reading through the not-insignificant literature devoted to Neuhaus's sound works only reinforces such an impression. On account, perhaps, of the formal, even formalist nature of his molding of acoustic material—an impression additionally fostered by the elegant drawings by which his sound works are insufficiently (as the artist noted) represented—critics have been led to discuss his work predominantly, if not solely, in aesthetic and experiential terms.² Yet, as with others of Neuhaus's generation of Minimal and Postminimal sculptors, composers, and filmmakers, the impetus behind his art was, in fact, thoroughly political; indeed, politics, as we shall see, was the very precondition of his move from the realm of music into that of art. It is therefore worth while to investigate Neuhaus's practice, as it emerged in the 1960s and continued until his death in February 2009, from this angle. In order to bring out this aspect of his production, however, we will begin neither with an artwork nor with a musical performance but with a *New York Times* editorial Neuhaus published on December 6, 1974.

I. Listen

Submitted as "Noise Pollution Propaganda Makes Noise" and appearing under the unfortunately cartoonish title "BANG, BOOoom; Thump, EEEK, tinkle," the editorial by Neuhaus, identified only as "a composer," responded to a pamphlet published by the Department of Air Resources of the New York City Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), "Noise Makes You Sick."³ Noise pollution had been in the news frequently over the preceding months, owing to the repercussions of the federal Noise Control Act of 1972. New Jersey public-utilities officials opened 1974 with an inquiry into excessive

noise produced by the Erie Lackawanna Railway's freight lines.⁴ In March, the nation's first toll-road noise regulations were implemented on the New Jersey Turnpike, an action followed in October by the federal EPA's issuing noise-control standards for interstate-highway trucking.⁵ In June, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development misapplied noise regulations intended for airport traffic in order to refuse funding for government-subsidized housing in the predominantly African American New York neighborhoods of Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Brownsville.⁶ Earlier that month, the *New York Times* had weighed in with an editorial against excessive automobile horns during parade-route traffic jams, declaring that "noise pollution is a serious affront to city dwellers" and that there was no "excuse for allowing a flagrant and unnecessary assault on the population's ears and nerves."⁷ Reports in October indicated that the city EPA was in turmoil under incoming mayor Abraham David "Abe" Beame, with "Civil Servant clerks . . . from the Air Resources Department's Bureau of Noise Abatement . . . doing nothing, because . . . the professionals they worked for are gone," a situation that did little to deter letter writers from likening noise to smoking and calling for suppression of "the plague of transistor radios" in public space.⁸

Neuhaus's Op-Ed ran distinctly counter to the tide of public opinion, declaring in its first line, "The popular concept of 'noise pollution' is a dangerously misleading one."⁹ Neuhaus indicated that the Department of Air Resources's pamphlet discussed noise in purely physiological terms, bypassing the social dimension of sound within the "public environment." According to the city EPA, loud sounds, regardless of source or context, have detrimental effects on the ear, brain, glands, and internal organs. (In actuality, as Neuhaus noted, "the reaction doesn't normally go as far as the glands and internal organs.") "Through extreme exaggeration of the effects of sound on the human mind and body," he contended, "this propaganda has so frightened people that it has created 'noise' in many places where there was none before, and in effect robbed us of the ability to listen to our environment." In contrast to physiology, Neuhaus emphasized people's capacity to adapt to acoustic shocks, observing, "A human being conditions himself fairly quickly to what is 'loud or unexpected' in his particular environment," and, "certainly the modern urban dweller is not put in a state of fright (except of course when there is actual danger) very often by the sounds around him."

Neuhaus did not speak out indiscriminately against noise abatement. He noted that the environment contained truly "ear-damaging sounds" and granted an evident "need to be able to rest from sound just as we do from visual stimulation." Instead, what he contested was the establishment of rigid distinctions between proper and improper sounds, allowable and excluded noises. "Surely," he maintained, "several hundred years of musical history can be of value: At the very least, they can show us that our response to sound



Donald Laird, "Experiments on the Physiological Cost of Noise," 1929. From the *Journal of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology*, no. 4 (January 1929), p. 253, fig. 1.

is subjective—that no sound is intrinsically bad. How we hear it depends a great deal on how we have been conditioned to hear it." Needless to say, the subtlety of Neuhaus's argument was lost on many readers. Nicholas Bergman of Citizens for a Quieter City responded angrily, denouncing Neuhaus's position and, citing the dangers of hearing loss, all but proposing a ban on amplified music in the name of public safety.¹⁰

Neuhaus was entering an area of long-standing contention. The Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise was founded in New York City in 1906, and in 1929 New York's health commissioner appointed the nation's first noise-abatement commission in response to studies such as those by Donald Laird, which documented a connection between noise, inefficiency, and detrimental physiological response.¹¹ Despite economic and physiological justifications, however, civic noise regulations, as Emily Thompson has argued, were thoroughly political and disproportionately applied to lower-class and minority populations. In the 1930s, as Thompson has shown, distinct anxieties about recent demographic changes crystallized around the discursive treatment of jazz, which likened the urban mechanical noise of modernization to the music of the city's increasing African American population.¹² Legal constraints on so-called noise pollution were written and subjectively enforced so as to target populations and avocations that did not fit with the white "middle-class vision of a well-ordered city."¹³

As a virtuoso percussionist, Neuhaus had participated throughout the 1960s in an avant-garde music scene wherein issues of noise, sound, and social discrimination were explicitly debated.¹⁴ In "Lecture on Nothing," of 1950, avant-garde composer John Cage had pointedly, if subtly, likened the issue of noise to that of social justice,

declaring, "I liked noises just as much as I had liked single sounds. Noises, too, had been discriminated against; and being American, having been trained to be sentimental, I fought for noises. I liked being on the side of the underdog."¹⁵ Earlier in his career, Cage had briefly aligned his percussion aesthetic with that of jazz, seeing in the latter both advanced rhythmic structures and a laudable political model of collective improvisation.¹⁶ By the late 1940s, however, he had distanced himself from jazz, subtly disparaging it (and folk music) as "not cultivated species, growing best when left wild."¹⁷ By 1964, the political implications of avant-garde music had been taken up by artist, composer, and radical philosopher Henry Flynt, who pressed Cage and others by arguing that a truly progressive avant-garde had to ally itself explicitly with oppressed populations, particularly African Americans, by approaching not only jazz but also indigenous forms of blues and rock and roll. Anything less could only be considered—as Flynt charged in public protests against Karlheinz Stockhausen—"Racism in Music."¹⁸ Neuhaus could hardly have been unaware of Flynt's position; not only did the two travel in some of the same circles but Neuhaus performed in both concerts that Flynt and associates had picketed under the guise of Action against Cultural Imperialism.¹⁹ By the end of 1974, when Neuhaus's Op-Ed appeared, both Stockhausen and Cage would be under attack from an increasingly politicized group of composers, most notably Cornelius Cardew, whose positions Neuhaus would likely also have known.²⁰

In addition to resonating with the contentious history of noise abatement in New York and the political debates in the musical avant-garde, Neuhaus's Op-Ed also alluded to his own contemporary production. His call to rectify misleading antinoise propaganda by "showing people other ways to listen to their surroundings" indirectly referenced his *Listen* pieces (1966–76), in which he posterized acoustically interesting sites such as the Brooklyn Bridge with signs reading "LISTEN" or stamped the word on individuals' hands and led them on "field trips thru found sound environments" to enhance their auditory appreciation.²¹ Neuhaus's initial *Listen* event—which he considered his "first independent work as an artist"—took place in February 1966.²² Beginning on East Fourteenth Street in Manhattan's East Village, Neuhaus led listeners through the "spectacularly massive rumbling" of the Con Edison power plant that rises on both sides of the street between Avenues C and D, continued along the automobile-filled East River Drive, passed "through the Puerto Rican street life of the lower east side," and ended at his studio for a percussion concert.²³ The itinerary formed an implicit manifesto, equating percussion music to urban environmental sounds and allying machine noise with the soundscape of an ethnic-minority neighborhood. Such interconnections made explicit what was tacit in Neuhaus's Op-Ed: 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.

II. Times Square

By the end of 1974, when his Op-Ed appeared, Neuhaus had been planning the sound work that would become known as *Times Square* (1977–92; 2002–present) for more than a year. Located at the north end of a small triangular traffic island between Forty-fifth and Forty-sixth streets at the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue in Manhattan, the piece, completed in 1977, consists of a range of closely related tones that well up from beneath a metal subway grating. In today’s art world, filled with officially sanctioned, site-specific Postminimal sculpture, it is difficult to conceive of how odd Neuhaus’s proposal initially seemed. Henry Romney called it “the zaniest” proposition ever received by the Rockefeller Foundation (which nonetheless awarded Neuhaus a grant of \$4,525 toward its completion).²⁴

As Neuhaus explained to fellow sound artist Christina Kubisch, his decision to leave concert performance behind to erect soundscapes within more freely accessible public spaces was “political,” conditioned by “his realization that music had to communicate with a different public in different spaces.”²⁵ Voicing an anti-institutional position at one with the times, Neuhaus told Amy Hiffner in 1974 that it was “ridiculous to be cooped up in a concert hall situation” when there were “tremendous opportunities for making music accessible to people.”²⁶ As he reiterated his thinking more recently:

My premise in leaving Carnegie Hall and going to Times Square was that I felt that I could deal, in a serious way, with a broad spectrum of people who were not necessarily culturally initiated, not by reducing or simplifying what I did but by using an uncodified language, not assuming any specific knowledge of the listener and taking the new context seriously, building upon what was really there, not for a context that was not, like a museum or concert hall.²⁷

Unmarked, unsigned, apparently unauthored, *Times Square* aims to instantiate an explicitly antiauthoritarian form of public art, refusing to dictate the terms of aesthetic experience or even that the experience is, per se, aesthetic. Kubisch described the effect as advancing a “strong tendency towards Intimism . . . excluding any personal relationship with the author. Thus, after having been in the spotlight for a long time, the artist is running away from the field of action, leaving his work to stand on its own.”²⁸ “Having no way of knowing that it has been deliberately made,” asserted Neuhaus of *Times Square*, uninformed percipients “usually claim the work as a place of their own discovering.”²⁹

