

Max Neuhaus Times Square, 1977

The work is located on a pedestrian island: a triangle formed by the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, between Forty-Sixth and Forty-Fifth Streets, in New York City's Times Square.

The aural and visual environment is rich and complex. It includes large billboards, moving neon signs, office buildings, hotels, theaters, porno centers and electronic game emporiums. Its population is equally diverse, including tourists, theatregoers, commuters, pimps, shoppers, hucksters and office workers. Most people are in motion, passing through the square. The island, as it is the junction of several of the square's pathways, is sometimes crossed by a thousand or more people in an hour.

The work is an invisible unmarked block of sound on the north end of the island. Its sonority, a rich harmonic sound texture resembling the after ring of large bells, is an impossibility within its context. Many who pass through it, however, can dismiss it as an unusual machinery sound from below ground.

For those who find and accept the sound's impossibility though, the island becomes a different place, separate, but including its surroundings. These people, having no way of knowing that it has been deliberately made, usually claim the work as a place of their own discovering.

—Max Neuhaus¹

Below a triangular pedestrian plaza, formerly an island, situated at Times Square is Max Neuhaus's work of the same name. As listeners walk along Broadway between 45th and 46th Streets in New York City, a deep and slightly pulsating drone can be heard. The sound emanates from a subway steam escape hatch that is visible below a grate in the street. The noise changes in pitch, timbre, and tone as passersby move their physical positions. *Times Square*—erected in 1977, shut off in 1992, and reactivated ten years later—now exists as both a key example of Neuhaus's environmental work with sound and of the broader postwar embrace of sound as medium in art. *Times Square* belongs in part to the historical impulses of Postminimalism, site-specific art, and experimental music. Today, under Dia's stewardship, it is audible twenty-four hours, seven days a week, and remains an ongoing interlocutor with the city's mercurial topographies.

Born in 1939, Neuhaus began to develop his prodigious talents as a percussionist in New York at age fourteen within the city's jazz scene. While training at the Manhattan School of Music, Neuhaus encountered the work of American composers such as John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Harry Partch, and would later tour with the European musical innovators Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

After recording an album with Columbia Masterworks in 1968, Neuhaus left the music world for what he imagined as the expanded possibilities of the visual arts and would eventually reject the phrase “sound art.” His early works of the mid-1960s, consonant with the practices of figures like Gordon Matta-Clark and Richard Serra, explored the sonic contingencies of physical sites relayed through technological and medial experimentation. For the four-day duration of *Fan Music* (1967), for example, listeners encountered amplified sounds powered by solar-powered cells behind rotating fan blades atop buildings on the Bowery. The work inaugurated what Neuhaus called his Place pieces, whereby the real conditions of a location in part determined the aesthetic experience. In the case of *Fan Music*, weather invariably controlled the rotation of the fan blades and by extension, the work's sonic amplification. Neuhaus also engaged specific urban architectures, as in *Walkthrough* (1973–77), a series of mobile clicks and pings in the arcade of the Jay Street–Borough Hall (now Jay Street–MetroTech) subway station in Brooklyn. As the artist succinctly described such works: “I use sound to change the way we perceive a space.”²

For *Times Square*, Neuhaus again adapted New York's transit infrastructure for aural means. Beginning in 1973, the artist entered into four years of negotiations with the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and the city's largest energy company, Consolidated Edison (Con Edison), before he received permission to install any equipment. As the MTA would not collaborate with a private individual, Neuhaus founded a nonprofit titled Hybrid Energies for Acoustic Resources (HEAR) to facilitate production. HEAR would go bankrupt around 1982, when Neuhaus financed a piece that sought to replace police and ambulance sirens with better designed and more euphonious sounds.

To construct *Times Square*, Neuhaus climbed into a vent shaft beneath a street grate and installed a loudspeaker and homemade electronic sound generators. The internal subway voltage proved too high to power the work, and Con Edison refused to join a line to MTA property, forcing Neuhaus to hire an independent maintenance company to improvise a connection to a nearby street lamp. The end result, completed in September 1977, was a subterranean tone audible on the street, a sound Neuhaus later likened to an “after ring of large bells.”³ The artist refused any public signage indicating the artwork, so that *Times Square* would operate in total anonymity for the everyday New Yorker.

As Neuhaus's career shifted to European commissions in the following years, he could no longer adequately supervise the maintenance of *Times Square*. Powering the piece continued to be a problem, and in 1992 the work was disconnected. A decade later, as American critical attention returned to Neuhaus's oeuvre, gallerist Christine Burgin endeavored to revive *Times Square*. In collaboration with Burgin, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, Times Square Business Improvement District, and other unaffiliated individuals, Neuhaus relaunched the work, eventually amplifying its volume to account for the area's increased noise. Following the relaunch, he donated *Times Square* to Dia Art Foundation. Dia later commissioned another work, *Time Piece Beacon*, which was realized in 2005 at Dia:Beacon in Beacon, New York. Before his death in 2009, the artist instituted technical fail-safe measures and held a daily watch over the work via webcam, even scheming to discourage the presence of Times Square street musicians and their compromising sonance.⁴

Following the tenants of musical innovators like Cage, Neuhaus sought to expand the live artistic encounter with sound beyond the standard institution of the concert venue. Yet *Times Square* refuses art's total assimilation to everyday life, a philosophy endorsed by the artist's contemporaries in Fluxus and related movements. Instead, *Times Square* queries the nature of public experience. Neuhaus described the sounds of his installations as “plausible” in a given location. In the case of *Times Square*, the drone is only *possibly* part of the subway's soundscape.⁵ An inquisitiveness unfolds, in which the city dweller instinctually asks what is customary to an urban environment and what is mutable. “I wanted a work that wouldn't need indoctrination,” Neuhaus once stated. “The whole idea is that people discover it for themselves. They can't explain it. They take possession of it as their own discovery.”⁶ From today's perspective, one discovery in *Times Square* is of Times Square's perpetual alteration, its shift from a de facto red-light district of the 1970s to the pedestrian-only plaza that it is today.

Max Neuhaus
Times Square, 1977

notes

1. This statement appears in Max Neuhaus's circumscription drawing for *Times Square* (1977), which was made in 1992.
2. Max Neuhaus, "Lecture at the Seibu Museum Tokyo," in *Max Neuhaus: Sound Works*, vol. 1, *Inscription* (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz, 1994), p. 60.
3. See Neuhaus's circumscription drawing.
4. See Lynne Cooke, introduction to *Max Neuhaus*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly with Barbara Schröder (New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 26.
5. Mike Zwerin, "Max Neuhaus's 'Sound Works' Listen to Surroundings: Been There, Heard That," *New York Times*, November 17, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/17/style/IHT-max-neuhauss-sound-works-listen-to-surroundings-been-there-heard.html>.
6. Neuhaus, quoted in Sam Roberts, "Something Fresh Wafting up from a Times Square Grate: Art," *New York Times*, March 26, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/26/nyregion/something-fresh-wafting-up-from-a-times-square-grate-art.html>.

Max Neuhaus was born in 1939 in Beaumont, Texas, and spent most of his childhood in Fishkill, New York. From 1957 to 1961, he studied music at the Manhattan School of Music. In 1958 Neuhaus met John Cage; this encounter determined his decision to become a professional percussionist. After a solo tour in Europe in 1965, he began developing projects that went beyond the strictly musical realm; among them were site-specific pieces that he was the first to call "sound installations." As Neuhaus started a research residency in 1968 at the Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey, he ceased performing as a musician and fully devoted himself to sound art. Since then, his work has been exhibited internationally in museums and galleries, including solo shows at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1978), Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris (1983), and the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland (1989). He was also included in Documenta in Kassel, Germany, the Venice Biennale, and the Whitney Biennial in New York. In 2008 an exhibition of Neuhaus's drawings was organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, which coincided with the inauguration of a new installation, *Sound Line*. Neuhaus passed away in Maratea, Italy, in 2009.

selected bibliography

Biserna, Elena. "Site-Specific Exhibition and Reexhibition Strategies: Max Neuhaus's Times Square." In *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, edited by Julia Noordegraaf, Cosetta G. Saba, Barbara Le Maître, and Vinzenz Hediger, pp. 370–75. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013.

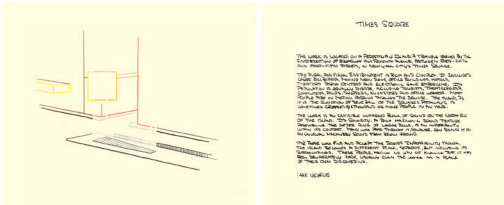
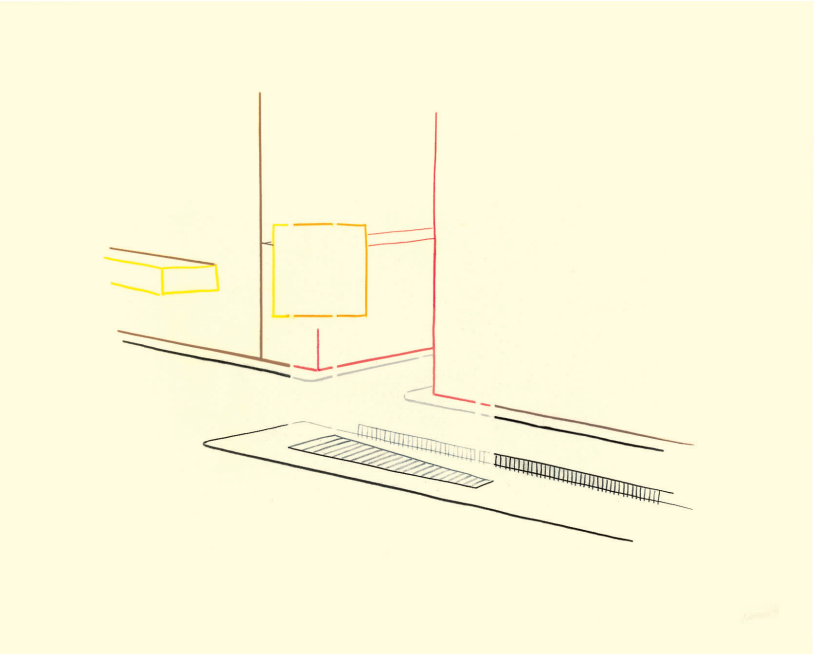
Cooke, Lynne, and Karen Kelly with Barbara Schröder, eds. *Max Neuhaus*. New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009.

Cox, Christoph. "Enduring Work: Max Neuhaus." *Artforum* 47, no. 9 (May 2009), pp. 49–52. <https://www.artforum.com/print/200905/max-neuhaus-22607>.

Tomkins, Calvin. "Hear." *New Yorker*, October 24, 1988, pp. 110–20.

Times Square, 1977
Digital sound signal
Dia Art Foundation

Dia Art Foundation
Founded in 1974, Dia is committed to advancing, realizing, and preserving the vision of artists. Dia fulfills its mission by commissioning single artist projects, organizing exhibitions, realizing site-specific installations, and collecting in-depth the work of a focused group of artists of the 1960s and 1970s. For more information, visit www.diaart.org.



Cover: Max Neuhaus, *Times Square*, 1992 (detail view; illustrated in full above). Dia Art Foundation. © The Estate of Max Neuhaus

Dia Art Foundation
Triangular pedestrian plaza at Broadway and 7th Avenue,
between 45th and 46th Streets, New York City
www.diaart.org