

Notes on Place and Moment

I

The major amount of energy that I put into making a work is in the construction of its sound. The real effort comes there – the process of placing the first sound in the space, listening to it and finding the next thing to try. It is a process of learning, on my part, about sound in that place, in the place that exists before I begin, but also this imaginary place or moment that I want to build.

In the beginning, the differences between the things I try are large. As my definition of this imaginary place or moment progresses, the sound of this imaginary entity progresses too and they become closer.

In these works I am not trying to build a sound image for its listeners to hear; I am building a sound to bring this imaginary place or moment of mine alive. I see these works not as definers of a single frame of mind for all individuals, but as catalysts for shifts in frame of mind. I am not concerned with a specific individual's frame of mind.

Sometimes when I finish a work I take several people through it before it opens to get a sense of the range of what they are hearing, but I am not interested in knowing what they are experiencing. In a way it is none of my business. I am concerned with the catalyst, the initiator; their individual pathways are very private, their own.

I think that it is this, the individual's process of experience in a work of art, that artists try to initiate.

II

In these imaginary places that I build, often the moment the listener first walks into the space, it is not clear that a sound is there. But as you begin to focus, a shift of scale happens. At first you hear what could almost be a room sound, which then suddenly becomes huge. As you enter into it, you move into another perception of space because of the change of scale.

I am always amazed, myself, by the difference between being outside of that scale and going into it. When I am building a work, near the end of the process when I am making the very small changes to the sound, after ten days of building it, I know its inner structure, how it is made, how it sounds. I leave the work on overnight and come back to it in the morning after sleeping and after having walked outside, pulling back. In working a sound, the only way you can get distance is over time, unlike working with something you can see, where you can step back from it in space.

I am always amazed by the difference between the moment I first walk in the space after a night of not hearing it, and two seconds afterwards, when I am back into the world where I was making it. It is a crucial point in building the piece. I am working with the plausibility of its sound.

I often make a sound which is almost plausible within its context when you first encounter it. The point where a person realizes that it is not plausible is when he jumps into the piece; he's swimming on his own from then on. It is a way of working which I use often in the

place pieces; it is usually the way I build the entrance to the work.

I call it the entrance, because if you do not go through this refocusing you do not get through to the work. Some people call my work meditative because of this need to focus. I don't like the baggage the word carries. These works demand only attention; they cannot be consumed in passing.

With each place and each condition it is a different kind of problem to get that to happen. To get it to happen in a museum is more difficult. In the work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, there is exactly that situation: everyone knows the piece is there, but many people walk through it and do not hear it.

This is an important point, a deliberate point of making the sound almost plausible within the space. It also leaves it hidden and means you can only find it by bringing yourself to the point where you can hear it. A beautiful thing about the piece in Chicago is that, although its sounds are huge and loud, because of the plausibility of these sounds, many people still after fourteen years deny it exists.

On the other hand, I sometimes construct an almost physical place with sound. The piece in Times Square is a good example; it is outside, in the middle of a large open plaza. It's a large block of sound, which you walk into. Even though invisible and intangible, it is like a solid place in the middle of this open space.

Times Square is not a place where you expect cultural intervention; if there is one, you expect to see and hear it. It was not hard to make something that people had to find in that situation. There, there is no need to alter your

aural focus; you alter your contextual focus when you find that work.

In very subtle works like *Three to One*, the 'almost plausibility' of the sounds are things that draw you in, in a different way than if the sound were overt either in its character or in its loudness – the quality that it is both there and not there.

You change the scale of how you hear. When you change scale, you start to look at things differently. When you look at painting your visual scale also changes. The same thing can happen with sound.

There is a wonderful contradiction in *Three to One* that not many people see, although they all hear it without realizing it. The three spaces, although visually distinct, are for the ear one large space because of the opening for the stairway connecting them in their centers. Yet when you first encounter these spaces you hear separate sounds on each floor, three distinct layers in what is acoustically one space.

It took me a while after I had finished it to figure out how I had done it. In fact, certain parts of each floor's sound spread to all the spaces. These common components are perceived completely differently, though, when they mix with the sounds specific to each floor. By utilizing the components that go between all the floors in a different way in each place, the same thing on each floor is heard as something completely different.

But this changes after you have been in the work for a while.

After you've heard these common components in their three different contexts, your memory comes into play. The sounds of the three floors fuse into one whole with many variations – the perceiver's perception of the unity.

III

In the seventies, I began experimenting with the idea of making a sound by taking a sound away. This had occurred to me as an idea, but I wanted to see how other people felt about it. I could not find out much by just asking people directly, so I built some alarm clocks which functioned in this way. By connecting it with sleep I thought it would be closer to the reality; their reactions, in that way, would be real information. It was not a scientific investigation. I was talking to people about their feelings with this experience.

This idea is not something that happens in nature; continuous things do not disappear suddenly in this way. Yet it happens in the modern world. The most startling example for me in everyday life has always been the coffee-grinding machine in a café. When somebody turns the machine on in a noisy café, you do not register it. It just seems to make talking a little harder.

That is quite amazing in itself, because the sound is quite loud. But your mind just puts it in the class of the sounds that are an expected part of the café and goes on with what it was doing.

Then, when it is finished and suddenly stops, there is a huge silence which envelopes the café, even though it is still very noisy. I've always loved that moment.

The moment or time pieces are also connected to ideas we may have always had in societies about sounds: signals. Concepts about sound are not well articulated in history. Most writing about history is more about visual and social environment than about sound. It is very hard to find out what our sound world was like before sound recordings. How can you know about a sound made a

thousand years ago? There are no records.

But it is clear that, in Western culture five hundred years ago, sound signals from the church were an early form of broadcasting. Cities were divided up into parishes whose borders were fixed by the range of their church bells. If you were outside the sound of the bell, you had no information; you were outside the community.

A sound signal is a unifier and communicator over a whole area simultaneously. It is perhaps the first concept of large scale broadcasting, the concept of a medium that many can get information from without actually being in one place, that the information can be transmitted to many places at the same time, unifying them.

The basic idea of the moment works is to be without place; they encompass places rather than being only in one. That is the real difference. For a place work you have to go to the place; for a moment work you can be in any of many places at the moment.

These moment works depend on a long term relationship in order to function; they need to be lived in – a small shift on a regular basis throughout the day, that you forget about, and then encounter again. They cannot be visited like an exhibition.

I envy the people near the Kunsthalle Bern. Although I made this work and know it intimately through making it, they know it better than I do. They have spent more time with it than I have. They've had three years with it.

It was a strange piece to build because I was building a sound for its afterimage.

IV

The sound I was building is not the thing I was building; I was building the thing that happens when the sound disappears. It's fascinating to construct. It's also strange because of its time scale; in order to hear it disappear, I had to wait for it to grow each time.

In many of the place pieces there is an afterimage also, but of a different kind. After leaving the work, you can find yourself beginning to hear the work's sound in other places. By building sounds for these works which are close to things which can be there, outside sounds can trigger a memory. Then that outside sound becomes the sound of the work. It's not the afterimage of a moment work; it is an image of the work which gets superimposed on things or which everyday sounds evoke.

These terms 'place' and 'moment' which I use and within which I work have evolved into general forms – two complementary areas within which I group individual works. The thing that makes moment pieces different from place pieces is that the moment pieces are in all places, but only occur for a moment in all those places; while the place pieces are only in one place, but are continuums which are always there.

The moment pieces don't construct places, but they cause this realization of place to happen when they disappear; in the same way that the place pieces do not construct time, but they allow your own realization of time to happen within their static nature.

Each one generates in the perceiver the opposite of what it is: the moment pieces generate an instant of being in one's own place; place pieces generate a period of being in one's own time. They are two opposites; each one is what the other is not.

Max Neuhaus, 1993

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