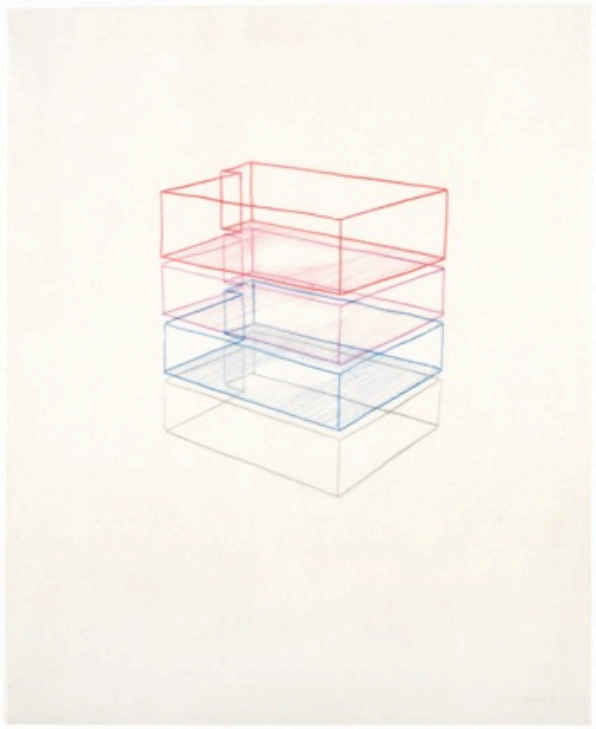
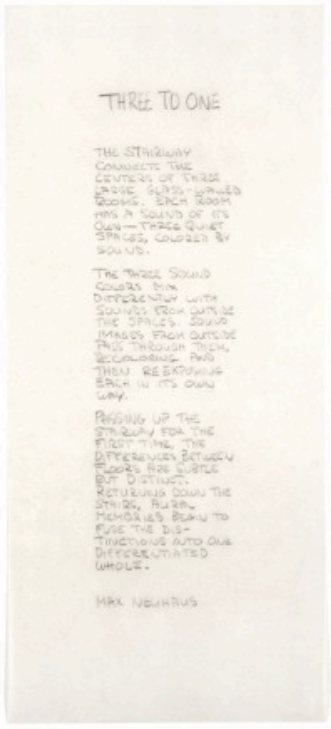
Interview: Max Neuhaus

by Andrea Grover





Max Neuhaus, *Three to One*, 1992
Colored pencil on paper
35-1/4 x 29-1/8; 35-1/4 x 15-3/4 inches
Collection of the artist
Sound Work References:
Exhibition: Documenta 9
Collection: Documenta
Location: AOK Building, Kassel, Germany
Dimensions: 7 x 16 x 3 meters; 7 x 16 x 3 meters; 7 x 16 x 3 meters
Extant: 1992–Present

Andrea Grover interviewed the artist Max Neuhaus on the occasion of the opening of his permanent sound installation *Sound Figure*, and his accompanying drawing exhibition *Circumscription Drawings*, on view through August 10, 2008, at The Menil Collection. Born in 1939 in Beaumont, Texas, Neuhaus was a prodigious interpreter of contemporary music by his twenties and simultaneously saw the limitations of understanding sound as purely a time-based medium. In the late 1960s, he began using sound as a sculptural medium and coined the term *sound installation*—a term that conceived of sound as both infinite and volumetric. His subsequent body of work realized sound as sculpture in public spaces, from swimming pools to Times Square. Many of his sound works are marked by extraordinary subtlety and are often undiscovered until, as he describes, *one is ready to discover them*. His installation, *Sound Figure*, begins approximately twenty feet north of the main entrance to the Menil Collection and forms

an invisible sound space that can be passed through; once inside the sound, you hear it and when you step outside, it disappears. In addition to working in sound, Neuhaus has long been engaged with drawing. His *Circumscription Drawings* consist of two panels with image and text and act as contemplations after a sound work is complete. Now living in Capri, Italy, Neuhaus is considered a pioneer and primary influence among contemporary practitioners of sound art.

***...might be good*: You started your career as a percussion soloist. What was the shift that brought you to begin thinking about sound as a kind of plastic art, as spatial rather than time-based?**

Max Neuhaus: This question is a little hard to answer because I have never functioned in a theoretical way. I follow my nose. I was very fortunate to be successful at a very young age, and that gave me perspective. I was 24, and I should have been 44 because it usually takes that long to get where I was. To be that young and energetic in the middle of that career, to have these other ideas about sound—and I didn't question them, I just acted on them. At one point it became clear that I couldn't be both a percussion soloist and a sound artist, so I just stopped being a solo percussionist and started doing what I do now.

...mbg: Did your work begin with sound works, drawings and texts as they are in this exhibition? Was it all simultaneous?

MN: No, I began doing the drawings much later. In the beginning, I just did the sound works, but at one point at the end of the 80s it became clear that I was functioning in the world of contemporary art, which is a world of exhibitions. It's not just that these works are site specific—they are much more than that. They are made *out of* the site. The site itself is the physical part of the work, it's the material. So when I made a work for an exhibition, once the exhibition was over, the work was destroyed. It took a while to get people to understand this idea because people assume that anything to do with sound is temporary—it's an event. Our whole experience of sound, from the first sounds you hear in the womb, represents something that *happened*. Yet my idea was the opposite of that. It's pulling sound out of time and putting it in place. It's turning the whole idea upside down. I realized I had to find a way to talk about these works that had been destroyed and a way to publish them, because after the fact, they existed only through word of mouth. But then again, having witnessed a lot of murders of artworks [laughs], I didn't want to kill them either.

...mbg: I get the sense that you are very precise, because you create drawings of the sound works, write prose about the work and design the equipment and the devices for playback. But ultimately your work is inserted into an existing sound context, and everything else is

somewhat left to chance. Is your precision early on in the process because of your expectation that the site cannot be controlled?

MN: No, it's just the nature of the realization of these ideas. The [*Circumscription*] drawings are always made after the sound work. When I finish a work, I don't really know what it is. It takes me a little while to figure out what I've done, and only once I figure it out can I do one of these drawings. Not only are my drawings unusual in that they have a component which is verbal, which is not part of our Western tradition of drawing, but also, instead of being a plan for the sound, they are a stimulus for reflection on the sound after the fact. The precision? I was trained as a musician, of course, so I learned a certain amount of precision through that discipline.

…mbg: It seems like you were interested in networks very early on. One of your early projects, *Public Supply* (1966), combined a radio station with the telephone network: callers made sound into their telephones and you mixed their voices together. And today you have the web project, Auracle, described as a networked sound instrument, controlled by the voice and played and heard over the Internet. Did you think of sound as a way to connect people, as transcultural—a term you've used—and of electronics as a way to connect hundreds of thousands of people?

MN: Well, electronics was just the means to produce these works. I wasn't very good at science in school. In high school I never got calculus or algebra. But when computers came around, I knew I needed to learn how to program. I built interfaces for myself to build a piece. I don't build the sounds of these works in my studio; I have to build them on site. I always say it's the site that's the physical part of the work. I have to apply sound to it and I can only apply it in place. So the sound for this new work at The Menil was built out on the site.

…mbg: Right, it's not like they can send you a schematic for the sound of the area.

MN: Yes, but also, like you brought up before, it's not that I take a chance with the ambient environment. I spend ten days in it, which means that, although it can change, I know it very well. I know what's going to happen in it, what could happen in it, and what its acoustics are. It's as variable as light would be on a physical sculpture, which changes all the time.

…mbg: So you always build the work on-site?

MN: Yes. I build the work out of the site. The sound works are really sculptures. They're not formed of brick or steel, but they're formed with sound. Instead of being perceived physically with the eye they're

perceived aurally. We perceive space just as much with ears as with eyes.

...mbg: I read in your biography that you lived on a boat in 1969 on the East Coast. Were you practicing as an artist when you moved onto the boat?

MN: Yes, I had made this record of my percussion repertoire for Columbia Masterworks. Instead of thinking of this as a career move, for me it was a way out because I didn't have to throw all of that away, it was preserved in the best way possible. Columbia was rather surprised that I'd stopped performing.

...mbg: So your first sound works happened while you were still a percussionist?

MN: Yes, the first aural topography was 1967 and I made the record for Columbia in 1968. To me now, one year seems like so little time, but it is when you get close to seventy [laughs]. When you're in your twenties in one year you can change the world, of course.

...mbg: Did living on the boat have anything to do with the way that you conceptualize sound?

MN: Well, a whole series of works came out of it. But my impetus was that I had left Houston for Manhattan in 1957 and I'd been living on Manhattan island for all that time and I wanted to escape. At first I rented a farm in Vermont, and worked there for a while. But then I realized that Vermont is not a very nice place to live. It's very cold; the snow stays on the ground until May. Then I read somewhere that if you lived on a boat, you could put it anywhere. So it questions this whole idea of land and the idea of ownership of land. And so I decided to live on a boat.

...mbg: It was the 60s, after all [laughs].

MN: [laughs] Right! I drove to Florida and bought the first boat that I found, which turned out to be a terrible boat. It was a houseboat built by a plumber. I luckily sold it in Miami, and with the money came back to New York. At the Bronxonia Yacht Club, I found this classic 1932 motor cruiser. I didn't look at her name until after I finished buying her. I looked at the back and it was *Melody*.

...mbg: How serendipitous! I just watched a documentary on the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader about his final performance [*In Search of the Miraculous*] and his subsequent disappearance crossing the Atlantic. His boat was called *Ocean Wave*. I think boat names are prophetic.

MN: Indeed! You're not supposed to change them. But before I

eventually took this boat down the East Coast and across the Gulf Stream and into the Bahamas, I stayed in Manhattan because it needed some repairs. I lived at the West 79th Street Boat Basin.

...mbg: I know it well—it's still there.

MN: Yes. I got a call from someone who was programming at New York University who asked me to think about doing a piece. When you're in a boat on a river like the Hudson, you hear everything passing through the water. So I had begun thinking about sound in water already. I thought about making a work *through* water. I remember going to Columbia and talking to some acousticians who said, "you can't do that, it won't work, because water is compressed as much as it can be." I went down to the boat, took a hose on the dock, and I stuck a police whistle on the end of it. I put it under water in the Hudson, and it made a sound. So in fact, I was blowing this whistle with water.

When this call came in from NYU, I said, "OK, but does NYU have a swimming pool?" He said, "Well yeah, but..." and I said, "You get the pool, and I'll do the work." This was the first work, called *Water Whistle*, in 1971. Then I began a series, again each one in a different pool. I would travel with a set of hoses and whistles, and I built a network in the pool for each one, because although pools all look the same from the top - rectangular, the cross sections are always complex. These works were also pushing this idea of installation. I was still tied to this idea that I was making sound, and therefore it had to be an event. I insisted we do the *Water Whistle* piece for twelve hours. I wanted the piece to be available for people to come and go. I wanted to get away from this idea that music—like a concert—started and ended, which sounds simple now. But in those days it had people in the avant-garde world saying, "well, he's doing a twelve hour piece, we have to go for the whole thing" [laughs]. But I was trying to establish this idea of a sound installation.

...mbg: So it began in the pool at NYU, and then where else did it go? Were they all public pools?

MN: There were various pools. The next call came from a woman who was working in the performance section at the Walker Arts Center, who said that she wanted to do a piece on New Year's Eve in Minneapolis, so she commandeered a pool. I needed to be able to heat up the pool to around body temperature. How does an audience listen to a piece that's underwater? I found that if you lie on your back your ears automatically go under water, and your nose and mouth are out, so it was very simple in fact to listen. But if you start to listen you stop moving, and if the water is normal swimming temperature, you'd get hypothermia after about five minutes.

…mbg: What's really beautiful about this work is that you were physically immersing your audience in water. There must have been all sorts of references to the womb, maybe not in the quality of the sound, but in the way that we hear our first sounds through fluid.

MN: Yes, but what the newspapers were more about, is how "He's all wet" [laughs]. In the 60s, even contemporary music was still very formal and I'd performed, as a percussionist, in tails and a white tie. And then take this audience, and get them to take their clothes off and put on a bathing suit—I mean they've never seen each other before, and they get in the water together. And it was wonderful.

…mbg: Let's talk about the work that you've developed for the Menil Collection, *Sound Figure*. How did your relationship with the museum begin?

MN: I visited the site before and after the museum was done. Just after the construction, I visited Dominique [de Menil]. She brought me to the museum, but it was still surrounded by a plywood fence and there was mud out front.

…mbg: And there was mud out front just recently, thanks to Michael Heizer [and the completion of his installation *Circumflex*].

MN: Yes, I heard. Bad boy [laughs]. Anyway, I came back when Joseph [Helfenstein] was here and he asked me to think about a work. So I remembered that visit [with Dominique], and I remember that I had thought of these outdoor spaces, these pocket gardens, when I had walked through with her many years before. So that's where I thought I should start: I looked around, thought of a number of ideas and then got really fascinated with the walkway itself.

…mbg: This is the walkway on the north end?

MN: Yes, the main entrance. It was more of a combination of the form, which I'd developed back in 1999 which I call Sound Volumes; they're outdoor works that are very highly defined sound spaces. Literally, if you're a few inches away from them you don't hear anything, and if you walk into them they're there, and if you walk out of them, they disappear. And I wanted to put something like this, in the main entrance of the museum, something which is unmarked, invisible and subtle to the point that you cannot hear it, but always there. And so we agreed to do it on the walkway. So, I selected the site in October 1976 and I came back and built the sound in October of 2007.

…mbg: So when you develop a site-specific piece like this one, is it in concert with the architecture and the use of the space?

MN: It's everything about the space; I have to find a way of really embedding sound in the place both acoustically and psychologically. It's very important that you don't know where the sound is coming from. Otherwise, if you see a loudspeaker, then in the context of sculpture, the loud speaker becomes a sculptural element. But as I started to say, it's everything about the space—how it's used, its acoustics, the sounds that already exist there. That's my point of departure; that's my foundation. I try to arrive without the preconception even of the first sound. Then I put in a sound and I listen, then I put another sound and I listen, and then I compare that.

…mbg: Something that I found really interesting in reading about your work is that you originated new concepts of aural urban design. By utilizing all of your knowledge of sound technology and the psychology of sound you were able to design more humane and safe sounds for emergency vehicles. Do you think that these new concepts of aural urban design are outside of your artistic practice?

MN: Yes. There are people who believe that anything an artist does it art. But I'm not one of them. I'm acting as an engineer or an inventor and using my special experience and my special skills and my insight, too.

…mbg: Has this new technology or this new approach been utilized?

MN: I now realize that it's about fifty years ahead of its time. Around 2050 keep your ears open [laughs].

…mbg: It makes sense because so much of your work seemed like it really predicted a movement that would come to much later.

MN: Yes. I tell the whole story, which is a wonderful kind of odyssey over twelve years, on my website. There's a text called *Siren*. One of the most startling ideas for people was that I wanted to build an aural image for the [emergency vehicle] so that you could hear intuitively where it was, which direction it was going, and how fast it was going. The problem is that in open areas of highways, or in cities, there are so many sound reflectors, that you don't know where [the siren] is coming from, and you don't know what to do. This is a patented technique now; I mean I got the first patent for sound ever issued because sound is supposed to be copyrighted.

…mbg: Was that challenging?

MN: Very. But I wanted to implement it to make it financially viable in some way. So we went through the process of the patent, with forty-six claims from 1992, so it's expired now, and anybody can steal it. That's the first step.

…mbg: Oh, I won't put that in print!

MN: [laughs] That's OK. I want somebody to steal it! I've always been fascinated by sound. It's my world. It's to a point where I don't recognize people's faces. I recognize their voices. Once I know them, as a voice, I never forget the voice. Even people I haven't seen in thirty years could call me up and I'd know exactly who they are. But if I were to see them on the street, I wouldn't. And it goes as far as my wife. She once met me at the airport, and she was standing there as I came out with my bags, and I smiled at her, because she's a very beautiful woman, but I kept walking. She didn't believe it. And then she realized I thought I was smiling at another woman [laughs].

…mbg: You were cheating! I have one last thought before we wrap up: The Menil Collection seems like the perfect place for you because they really embrace the intangible.

MN: Yes, of course. It's partly the legacy of Dominique. This is an exceptional institution in the world, especially as the art world has become more and more about commerce. This is one of the few places where we can say, "No. This is what a museum is."

Andrea Grover is the Co-Founder and Artistic Director of Aurora Picture Show, a microcinema housed in her home— a former church building in Houston's Sunset Heights.

0 Comments