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CHAPTER 10.4c: Site-specific Exhibition and Re-Exhibition Strategies: Max Neuhaus's *Times Square*¹

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Times Square is a permanent sound installation created in 1977 by Max Neuhaus in New York. Often considered a pioneering example of sound art, this work should also be regarded as one of the first time-based site-specific artworks in public space. The installation was active until 1992, when Neuhaus decided to stop it because of his inability to continue to monitor it by himself. After ten years, thanks to the initiative of the Christine Burgin Gallery, the artist re-installed *Times Square* on its site, making the work accessible again 24 hours a day and, subsequently, donating it to the Dia Foundation.

The re-installation process is of particular interest because it took the form of a recreation of the work by the artist himself and can lead us to consider some core issues of the relationship between exhibition and re-exhibition with a focus on site-specificity. The first part of this article aims at investigating *Times Square*'s relationship with context and audience in the framework of coeval site-specific and public art practices; the second part describes the reinstallation project, while the third discusses this work in the context of current preservation strategies taking in consideration the roles of the artist, of technology, and the notions of authenticity and identity of the artwork. These issues are involved in the multilayered relationship between preservation and exhibition decisions transforming re-installation, as we will see, in a new “creative process.”

Times Square, 1977: In Situ Sounds

Max Neuhaus' *Times Square* is a complex sound topography – a volume defined by acoustic intangible boundaries – created by continuous synthetic sounds diffused in an underground chamber, part of the subway ventilation system, in a triangular pedestrian island on Broadway, between 45th and 46th streets: a crowded and cacophonous place crossed every day by thousands of passers-by (fig.1).

¹ I would like to deeply thank Silvia Neuhaus, Patrick Heilman, Christine Burgin and Cory Mathews for generously providing valuable and essential information and documents without which this text would not have been possible.

Like all of Neuhaus' other installations, it was created through a long process of analysis, investigation and experimentation *in situ*. In the case of *Times Square*, as the artist declared,

I began making the piece by investigating what the resonant frequencies of the chamber were. The next step was a gradual process of selecting which resonances to use and how to use them. I finally determined a set of sonorities, four independent processes, which activate the resonances I chose, activate the chamber. These resonance-stimulator sounds are produced with a synthesis circuit and come out of a large loudspeaker horn, one by two meters. (Neuhaus, 1982: 66)²

The sounds audible in the pedestrian island, coming from the chamber through the grating, are the result of the interaction between the frequencies and the acoustic characteristics of the architecture: they result in a continuous drone, “a rich harmonic sound texture resembling the after ring of large bells” (Neuhaus, 1983: 17). The sound installation is thus physically bound to the architectural context: the underground space becomes a resonant chamber creating a continuous sound field, which can be experienced by the listener moving on the grate.

Max Neuhaus' *place works*, and *Times Square* in particular, should be considered in the framework of a wider area of research that – rejecting a conception of art as production of objects and refusing modernist art's self-referential autonomy – turned to the creation of site-specific works. In the case of Neuhaus, an artist with an important musical background, the medium is sound. Deliberately abandoning musical official circuits, the artist led some of the post-Cagean legacy's ideas to extreme consequences and re-territorialized them into the art system. Firmly convinced of the hearing's possibilities to strongly influence the perception of

² Even if some details of the original technical equipment are not clear, comparing the documentation I was able to find, I may suppose that, in 1977, the sound system was composed by custom sound synthesis electronic circuits, an amplifier and the large horn-like loudspeaker Neuhaus mentions. In a proposal submitted in March 1974 to the Rockefeller Foundation, and conserved in its archive (“Subway Vent. A proposal for a sound installation for Times Square,” 1974, p. 5, folder entitled “Hear.Inc. 2 1975-1978,” box R1672, series 200R, Record Group A81, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York) Neuhaus described the project technologies (Max Neuhaus, “Electronic components and sub-assemblies; Loudspeaker – Klipsch model K-D-FB; Amplifier – Bozak CMA-1-120”) and mentioned the “Design of sound generating unit” suggesting the design of specific electronics for the installation. One of Neuhaus' *drawings* (Neuhaus, 1983: 17) shows that this resonance system was originally located at the left side of the triangular-shaped chamber's base. It remains unclear if other speakers were used: in one photograph (fig.2), it is possible to see also two high frequency horns. Some images of the equipment installation are included in a video by John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald (1982, <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/neuhaus-tsq.htm>) and in the poster for *Times Square* (published in Cooke, Kelly, 2009: 25).

space, Neuhaus operated a fundamental change of paradigm, “that of removing sound from time and putting it, instead, in space” (Neuhaus, 1994: 5), creating installations to be experienced perceptually by an audience which is free to manage both the spatial and the temporal dimension moving within them. These works are thus aligned with the phenomenology-oriented site-specific practices which, according to Miwon Kwon, “focused on establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site, and demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work’s completion” (2002: 11-12). *Times Square*’s form is not autonomous, but dependent on the context and the audience’s experience.

Moreover, the relationship with site is, in the artist’s intention, not limited to its architectural level. He affirmed, “They [*place works*] shape, transform, create, define a specific space with sound only. They exist not in isolation, but within their context, the context of their sound environment, their visual environment, and their social environment” (1982: 58). *Times Square* was not commissioned; it is the result of an independent project carried out independently by the artist for about three years (See Tomkins, 1988). The artist repeatedly told that the idea of this work was born by his fascination for this place, New York’s “most public of places”. This choice is based on the will to involve a wider audience outside the constrictive boundaries of cultural institutions. The necessity of expanding art’s audience and working in everyday contexts is shared by a large group of artists between the 1960s and the 1970s and, since the mid-1970s, also some of the organizations promoting public art in the US – first of all the NEA, which provided funds for *Times Square* – acknowledged the new site-specific post-minimalist instances (Lacy, 1995: 21-24. For an overview of exhibition spaces at the origins of installation art: Reiss, 2001).

Seen from this perspective, the installation seems to elude the two public art paradigms which, according to Kwon, were prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s: the “art-in-public-spaces” – renowned artist’s sculptures indifferent to their context installed in public space – and the “art-as-public-space” – design-oriented urban interventions (2002: 56-82). Neuhaus’s approach appears more similar to Richard Serra’s *Titled Arc* (1981): the two artists share the same refusal of the two public art models described by Kwon and the same understanding of site-specificity and permanence, even if the “interruptive and interventionist model of site-specificity” (Kwon, 2002: 72) proposed by Serra seems to differentiate the two works. The modes of relationship of *Times Square* with its site and audience are subtle and unobtrusive. The installation is an elusive presence: it is invisible, unmarked by any sign, and therefore anonymous, not identified as “art”; the sound texture – which resembles a bell’s

resonance – is not plausible in that place, but nevertheless familiar; the equipment is not visible. The careless passer-by may cross this space every day without recognizing its presence. It is a place to discover personally: “my idea about making works in public places is about making them accessible to people but not imposing them on people”, the artist explained (Neuhaus, 1984: 72). Neuhaus’s approach aimed at blending the work within the context and at creating an unexpected experiential involvement of the listener in his daily life.

Times Square 2002: Re-installation

Since 1977, *Times Square* had been working day and night (except for brief interruptions for maintenance problems) until 1992, when the artist, unable to continue to maintain it by himself, finally stopped it. After some years, gallerist Christine Burgin began working on the re-installation project with Neuhaus obtaining the collaboration of the MTA/Arts for Transit and the financial support of Times Square BID and private residents. The work was finally reinstated on 22 May 2002.

As the underground chamber was accessible from the subway, the original technical equipment had been stolen or lost.³ The re-installation, thus, necessarily turned in a true re-creation process carried out directly by the artist.

The original technologies were replaced by up-to-date equipment suitable for outdoor conditions. Neuhaus designed the new sound system in 2000 (fig. 3) and this project was almost respected during the re-installation: the actual audio equipment is composed by an MP3 audio player system (AM3 digital audio machine), two CROWN K2 amplifiers (one live and one backup) and two speakers and is protected by airtight enclosures and a jail cell. The artist recreated the sounds on site using Max/MSP, a visual programming language that allows real-time synthesis and signal processing. The resulting MP3 files are stored in compact flash memory cards.⁴

From the beginning, the artist planned also a monitoring system which could allow to control the installation from remote and to be alerted in case of malfunctioning: a Sine Systems RFC-1/B Remote Facilities Controller connected to landline enables to listen to the sounds (through a microphone placed in the speakers enclosure) and to check other

³ Christine Burgin, e-mail to the author, 17 June 2010.

⁴ During my research, detailed technical specifications were not found. The information about the technical equipment, the monitoring system and the maintenance program (unless otherwise specified) is the result of several e-mail exchanges (8-28 February 2011) with Patrick Heilman, Dia Foundation’s digital media specialist, who worked with Neuhaus after the donation of *Times Square* to the Dia Foundation. The information about the project designed in 2000 is drawn from Neuhaus’s equipment block diagram and a quotation form by audio consultant David Andrews dated 18 July 2000.

parameters.⁵ In addition, Neuhaus could also control the installation daily with the help of a webcam.

Following the donation of the work to the Dia Foundation in 2002, the artist instituted also a long-term preservation program including biannual visits on site (Cooke, 2009: 42). During these visits, Neuhaus continued to retune the installation: he increased the output volume because he felt that the ambient sounds had become louder and the speakers installed in 2002 were changed for anticipated longevity.⁶

If the technological components were completely replaced, the anonymous nature of the 1977 installation, instead, was fully respected. Even when the work became part of the Dia Foundation collection, no signal or plaque was used: the installation is still an anonymous and elusive presence in urban space. The only change that denotes the transition of *Times Square* from an informal system to the “institutionalization” is the power supply, which in 1977 was obtained from the public light fixture and now by an appropriate power generator.⁷

Re-Installation as Re-Creation

The re-installation of *Times Square* highlights some of the issues and challenges which conservators are facing with time-based artworks, problematising them in the framework of site-specificity.

The first issue is the role of the artist, increasingly important for conservation and documentation strategies elaborated by international networks and projects such as Variable Media, Inside Installation or Tate Modern’s conservation department. In the case of *Times Square*, the artist had a central role at the extent that he seems to assume also the conservator’s role: not only the re-installation was carried out by him personally, but he also planned a monitoring system and was directly involved in the maintenance program during the following years.⁸

Another important issue is, as Pip Laersonson writes in her interview included in this

⁵ The RFC-1/B is programmed to call every day and also to report on four failure mode of the system: “loss of signal from the loudspeaker”, “opening of the locked door to the cage”, “loss of AC Power” and “change in the loudness level of the loudspeaker” (letter by David M. Andrews to Christine Burgin, 14 May 2002). The equipment block diagram shows that, in the first project, Neuhaus thought to use another system: a Sine System DAI-1.

⁶ A new more resistant formulation of speakers was chosen by the artist, who personally retuned the installation on this occasion as well, because this altered the installation’s sounds.

⁷ Christine Burgin, e-mail to the author, 17 June 2010.

⁸ This fact, on the other side, could also be the reason for the lack of detailed documentation on both the 1977 and the current installation. We could also suppose that, in the future, when the technologies used to produce and display the work may become obsolete, replacing them without the artist’s intervention may be problematic.

book, “the role and function of the technology in the artwork” (Chapter 9.4. See also Laurenson, 2004). The use of up-to-date display and production technologies confirms Neuhaus’s strictly functional conception of technology (speakers are in fact never visible in his installations). In 1984, he stated, “When I start a work, I start a process of research in technique. I am looking for the best means available at this time for this particular piece [...]. I don’t think it changes the essence of the work; it just changes the means I have to realize it” (1984: 77).

In relation to these issues, the notions of authenticity and identity of the artwork become central. In *Times Square*, not only the technologies were changed, but the sounds were recreated *ex novo*. We are not faced with a migration, but – using Variable Media terminology – with a reinterpretation of sounds. Neuhaus refused a traditional notion of authenticity based on physical integrity. On the contrary, he was interested in reconstructing the work’s “identity” adopting a notion of authenticity which we could compare to the one proposed by Laurenson – based on the “work-defining” properties – or by the Variable Media Approach’s method – based on the “medium-independent behaviours” of the work (Laurenson, 2006; Ippolito, 2003: 51). He used to recall that, “In music the sound is the work, in what I do sound is the means of making the work, the means of transforming space into place” (Neuhaus, 1990: 130). Sound has no value in itself. The properties significant to the work’s identity were not identified in the material components, but in the relationship with context and in the listener’s experience which, as we have seen, were at the basis of the “first” *Times Square* and of coeval site-specific practices.⁹

In that sense, *Times Square* shows how every reinstallation becomes also a specific and unique “creative process” in which, as Laurenson suggests, “decisions are revisited and sometimes re-made as to what aspects of the work are significant to its identity” (Laurenson, 2006).

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⁹ This case seems antithetical to the examples of relocation or re-fabrication of site-specific artworks from the 1960s and 1970s on the occasion of important exhibitions which took place in the last decades (Kwon, 2002: 33-43): site and ways of fruition remained unaltered.

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