Excerpts from a conversation between Max Neuhaus and Gregory des Jardins
Ischia, Summer 1995

About ten years ago you coined the term 'place works' as a better way to refer to some of your sound installations, because you found that people were using the latter term to describe works that were fundamentally different from your own.

Yes, the word had become so damaged by then that it no longer meant anything. People began using it for everything from endless concerts of tape music to conceptual art with spoken words and even kinetic art which happened to make sound.

My place works are about creating a new place by transforming a given place. This idea of what 'place' means in English at least, that a place is not just a physical place. The idea of place carries many aspects: the people there, the people who use it, who own it, who does what in it, its visual character, its aural character – its character. A place has a character; a space doesn't have a character. So calling them 'sound spaces' didn't make sense. They are about building a place, a new place from my imagination, out of a specific place.

What about the term 'sound works', was that formulated at the same time?

No, that was a little later as that was the real rejection of the term 'sound installation', because 'sound work' was finally a neutral term which could cover my whole oeuvre. It was clean, it's short – 'sound work', bang, no installation, no bla bla.

'Sound work' is more general than 'sound installation'.

It includes my whole oeuvre.

And 'place work' is more narrow than 'sound installation'.

More specific.

Because there are some things you would have called sound installations then that you wouldn't call place works now.

Yes, like Passages. *Drive-in Music* [1967/68; 1975] is about passage. Or all the underwater pieces, they aren't place works either.

Let's go back now to your initial realization that you could make sounds have physical shapes in space and then how you could make an artwork out of that.

It grew out of *Drive-in Music*. There I was thinking of placing sound in spatial configurations and letting people put it in their own time, building a work where there were different sounds broadcast in different areas, and letting people pass through it. But at the start of it I thought of it as music – that in fact the car going along the road in either direction 'played' the piece, the driver played the piece, a succession of sounds for each car according to its direction of passage and speed. The reason that it's not a place work is that there is only one path, so it becomes a passage for me. There it is a fixed succession.

But where is the step from that to a work where someone is not in a car but the work again sounds different according to one's location in it?

Fan Music [1968] was that. It was also one of my first steps in the discovery that I could use audio circuitry as a material to make an artwork out of sound. I found that if I put a photocell across two speaker terminals and covered up the photocell I would get one voltage and if I uncovered it I would get another, a change in voltage, that would move the speaker's cone and produce a sound. I was starting at the very source of electronic sound with this speaker and moving back and saying, OK, how do I make a work out of this. I had a fan next to me, and I realized that if I put the photocell behind it, the fan blade would create shadows on the photocell as it turned, and then realized that the shape of the shadow determined the timbre – the angle of the fan blade changed the timbre because that shaped the shadow which then became the waveform. And then realizing that it was light that was making the sound; therefore this whole thing could grow and change with light, appearing in the morning and disappearing in the evening. Then placing these fan-speaker photocell systems in various locations on the roofs to form a sound topography. I think I called it a concert, but it was an installation. It went on for three days; it arrived each day when the sun arrived and disappeared when

the sun went down. People came and went when they wanted; there was no specific time when it started or ended.

What about the transformation of the place – what is the rooftop in Manhattan as a place?

It's the remains of the land surface; it's the result. It's an outside space that's open, that's there. You think of Manhattan from the street as being enclosed canyons, but in fact there is still all this space up there, as much space as the island has. All the surface of Manhattan is in fact still there, it's just that large parts of it have been elevated to the levels of the rooftops. New Yorkers think of it as a place of solitude; when people cook up there it's the outdoors of Manhattan. But I wanted to build, to grow something on this surface. It wasn't interpreting this roof and saying this is a great place to be, or interpreting the city by making tapes of what the city might have sounded like a hundred years ago and playing them on the roof. It was growing a new imaginary place, a place from my imagination, on top of this new terrain.

It was a sound terrain built out of your proximity to a source, mixtures of different things depending on how close you were to each source. You walked through different zones of different mixtures superimposed on the real terrain, the ground, this artificial land of Manhattan. It had a different nature depending on where you were, that's the basic element that's different from music. It moves it into physical space and out of time. Meaning in speech and music appears only as their sound events unfold word by word, phrase by phrase, from moment to moment. The step, the jump, the leap that I made was taking sound out of time.

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In *Walkthrough* [1973-77], I was interested in making a work that would be anonymous. After I stopped performing I was no longer required to be a celebrity. The other part of the idea was that it would be discoverable, that anybody had the opportunity to find it.

This was a transient space, but not a passage because people moved in diverse ways. The work was subtle, but it was also very clear once you heard it. It also had this idea from *Fan Music* of connecting to its environment. Here it was sensitive to wind speed, light intensity, temperature and humidity. Connecting it to the weather made it flex.

There was also this other idea about working with a fine level of subtlety. I thought I could do it here because we notice change, even very small changes in a very familiar environment, one we encounter daily. This was a piece for the people who went in and out of that subway entrance every day; it wasn't meant for the art world, as such.

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The work at the PS1 in 1976 [untitled] was created with two high tones at the upper pitch threshold of hearing. If you take a tone and gradually raise it up, at one point it disappears. Just below that point where we can't hear any higher, as sound approaches that threshold, I noticed that the threshold wasn't a line, it was an area. It's an interesting area because, in it, the sound is both there and not there.

The text panel of the work's drawing begins: 'Two high soft tones mixing at the upper threshold of hearing'. It is a clear example of the idea that the sound itself is not the work. You don't even hear it as sound. It is the idea of using sound to add a presence, growing a new place with a sound presence.

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Because it's so different from anything that went before, how did the idea for the work for the garden of Museum of Modern Art [untitled, 1978] come about?

The overall process is always the same with me. I'm invited, I go, I look and imagine. At a certain point in one or two places, the bell rings. Then I try to find out more about these places, how they are used, how people think of them; and later I come to an agreement with the people who have invited me, about one of them as the site for the work. Next, I come back with all the tools I think I could need to find a way to get sound attached to this place. When I get it to work and I have enough information, I say, OK, build the sources this way, this big, place them here and here. After this hardware is built and installed, I come back again and I start building the sound, placing the first sound in the space, beginning the journey – the first sound leads to another sound leads to another sound leads to another sound – you're in motion.

It's a journey where I deliberately don't want to know where I'm going. You don't know how long the journey will be either. The only

thing you know is when you're on the path or off the path, and most importantly when you have arrived – when the work is there, when it's done.

How can you know that you're on the path unless you know that it's the path to X?

There is no map; the place you're going doesn't exist until you get there. The only way to get there is by the feel of the path.

With this work for MoMA, I knew from the beginning that I had a way to make very low sounds. There was a ventilation chamber beside the building, and I saw that it could be turned into a subsonic loudspeaker. I built it and started tuning. I just took it down, down and down. It could go down to ten cycles per second; we stop hearing sound as sound at about twenty-five, so this is a full octave and a half below where we stop hearing sound. It was the opposite end of aural perception than the work in the 'Rooms' exhibition at PS1 – the lower threshold.

How did you decide what the final form of it was?

I was trying textures, high and medium, but with this incredible bottom end. I noticed that some of the lows were actually resonances of the whole garden, and then one day I came back and I said, what is all this? I've got it right here, this is it, I'll just use the inaudible part.

That must have been quite a discovery because it was taking things away.

It was a nice moment, saying to myself, turn it around, turn it over.

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The space at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art was a big column of air. The stairway itself, which sort of floated in the space without touching the walls, made a three-dimensional pathway through it. I wanted to be able to activate the column from any point within it; so I said, we build this speaker system of thirty channels that goes from the floor to the ceiling, we build it into the corner, and we build a thirty-channel amplifier – a thirty-channel amplifier!

The contradiction within this work was amazing [untitled, 1979-89]. It was quite loud, but many people could walk through it and not realize it was there. When it was

finished the museum's board of directors was outraged. They said, we paid fifty thousand dollars for this sound piece and we got another twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of loudspeakers donated – (they had to use three different airplanes to transport them because the magnetism was too much for the navigation system of just one) – and nothing is here! It's the emperor's new clothes! People are like that in Chicago.

But John Neff, the director of the museum then, was completely behind the work; he fought them well and won. He first came to me and said, I know that we have this agreement that once the work was inaugurated it would never be turned off again, but I want to ask you this one favor – one evening I would like to bring the whole board into the space and turn it off for exactly thirty seconds.

I was curious, but I just said, OK. So one evening all these people were ushered into the work. He asked them all to be quiet for one minute, and then he gave the signal to the engineer to turn it off. The space just imploded, the bottom dropped out of it, it left them in a void. And then he put it back on again and walked out of the room. They never forgave us – neither him, me nor the work.

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The work for the Bell Gallery [untitled, 1983] was an amazing place to be in. It was a very subtle thing yet it was also very complex and very powerful. The illusion was complete – you felt something moving through the walls. If you were talking you didn't hear it; but if you were silent, you didn't see it but your ear saw this thing go across the room. It erected its space, articulating it by moving through it. By moving through it, it exposed it.

Like the work for Documenta 6 and the one for the botanical garden?

Yes, in general. But with those you had time to take it in; each thing that happened drew your attention because it was singular and slow, a slow pace – something happened, then nothing happened, then it happened over there. Here the event was much more complex; the events happened at about the same speed as in the other works, but the structure of the event was more elaborate in timbre and shape.

This sense of quickness here, is it done by passing things between speakers?

Yes, but in a complex way, not just one speaker to another, but different configurations of speakers to other configurations of speakers. That's what gave it a shape. Instead of being a point, it was a grouping of speakers; they formed a shape in the room. Your perception was that the shape had moved.

That's a new kind of shaping of sound; this is a moving shape.

Exactly, it's dynamic. Explosive, but contradicting the explosiveness because it was so soft. Even though it was explosive, it didn't threaten you as an explosion would – like aural lightning flashes, but very subtle and soft – lightning without the thunder.

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I was given this big sterile exhibition room on the top floor of the Museum of Modern Art in Paris [untitled, 1983]. It had this small window in the back wall, but it was blocked up. I found out about it and opened it up. I don't think anyone had ever seen this window open before. It brought the room back into the real world, back into reality in a beautiful way. The window was high up, and you could see the whole city.

The work was made from a very smooth sound texture. I built a very fine texture, really fine, many sources dispersed throughout the space each emitting slightly different clicks with colors between woody and metallic.

I've always been fascinated by a particular sound. It's an unrecordable sound in nature, the sound of a certain kind of pine tree with wind moving through it. It's a pine found in the Bahamas. The thing that's always fascinated me is that this sound is made solely from the rubbing of pine needles against one another. Its basis is an absolutely inaudible sound: you can rub two pine needles together as hard as you want and you will never hear anything. But the fact that there are five hundred thousand of them rubbing together, the accumulation – you get this incredible rustle. It's so rich because no two pine needles are exactly the same; each one is adding its own inaudible difference. That was where this work came from.

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What happens in *Sound Line* [1988]?

It's a very large space, originally built for manufacturing water pipe, huge water mains. Completely cleaned up now and vast. A long way when you walked in the entrance to the other end, and a really high roof – an incredible scale. The scale was the problem for everybody. Pistoletto did wall drawings in there but as a pencil, in order to get up to the scale, he had to use a block of coal, which he drew with using both hands.

I thought at first I might make two lines, but then it became clear that it would be stronger if it was just one. More would have been less. This fundamental contradiction of making a line out of sound, confining sound to a line. It was made from a sound texture, a complex texture like the museum in Paris in a way, but not fine at all, much thicker grains, so it was like being in a box of rattling wooden balls, but much softer, of course. It seemed to come straight down from the ceiling. There was nothing marking it there or on the floor. This vast exhibition space which ten other artists had tried in some way to make a mark on before me. To have it completely empty was a contradiction to all its history, its exhibition history; but to have it completely full too even though what was there was invisible. The line was clear and so vast.

It had a really hard edge. Jacques Gillot, the director, told me that sometimes during the exhibition, while he was walking quickly across the space absorbed in some problem, he would forget it was there and run into it. He said he always felt like he was smacked in the face. He'd be walking across the space to get to the shop or something, and bam! It was the confrontation with the contradiction, a confrontation with yourself from this contradiction.

You don't know it's there at all – it's silent unless you're in it?

Absolutely. Jacques told me a wonderful story. Shortly after the opening he had a visit from a museum director from China. He said he took him into the room without telling him anything and let him walk forward alone. First he started looking around for a visual work when all of a sudden he entered into the line. Jacques said he got a startled expression, but the main thing was that he started laughing, almost hysterically – he laughed for five minutes.

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What I want to focus on is the notion of announcing a work. Walking through the small park beside Sankt Cäcilien you're struck with the contradiction that there seems to be a bell coming from there and it can't be there, so you go over.

Exactly. I don't think of the bell sound as the piece [*A Bell for St. Cäcilien*, 1989-91]. The bell isn't the work; it's the announcement, the work's entrance. This bell sound – it's not a regular ringing, and it's much higher than any kind of bell the church would have. Still, you are next to two churches, so it's plausible but at the same time it's not plausible. And there is also the fact that when you notice it and look for it, you find it appears from the face of this bricked-up church, from the façade itself.

I built two parts to the work's sound – the stroke made as a real bell but higher than it should be, and then the after-ring – it dies away but in a way it doesn't die away. It's long. It varies. There's a progression of timbre for each after-ring that contradicts what you expect a bell to do – its length and its development. When you're inside the after-ring, it is only just in front of the bricked-up entrance of the church. You also hear the bell strike, but it's the after-ring that creates the place of the work.

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As the work in Hamburg is the first of the Like Spaces, how had the idea come about?

For a number of years, I had been interested in juxtaposing two identical spaces where the only difference between them was sound. It worked very well there at the Deichtorhallen; the contrast was large [*Two 'Identical' Rooms*, 1989]. The sound on one side was a fluid. Once you focused on it, you were completely immersed in it; yet it was so soft you could unfocus at any time. The other space was a mixture of hollow woody sounds – a dense texture. But here it was sitting above your head, like a ceiling. People felt this space was much larger than the one with the fluid, yet they both had exactly the same shape and dimensions.

It was sixty meters between these two spaces; the exhibition visitor had to walk through the show to get from one to the other. I hoped that his experience would be something like: come across one room, find it empty, find the sound work, listen and go out, saying, OK, that's Neuhaus' sound work, and then start through the rest of the

exhibition, and maybe half an hour later find the inverse of that room on the other side.

Part of my impetus for making a work this way could also have been to silence the Doubting Thomases, those people who were so convinced that they perceived space solely through their eyes that they thought this idea of transforming a space with sound alone was just talk. It was so nice to say: if it's just rhetoric, why do you think this room bigger than that one?

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For the work in Dallas, I chose one room [*Two Sides of the 'Same' Room*, 1990]. I had some alternatives; I had thought about doing two rooms but since I had worked with this form already in Hamburg, I wanted to go on. I ended up going to the extreme, making two sounds in one room. Both sounded the same but created completely different feelings in you, even though consciously you couldn't tell the difference between them.

I really had to work on it. When I am building textures, what I am doing is comparing sounds. That's the process, making one sound then comparing it with another, choosing one of them and comparing that with another. The closer I get to the sound I want, the more similar these sounds become. Here at one point I realized I had two sounds that I could barely tell the difference between, but something different was happening in each. The sounds were very, very different, but you just didn't hear it.

I think the confusing thing about explaining this work is that people don't understand how we hear, that we don't hear reality any more than we see reality. We build what we hear in our mind. And I'd found a way to have the mind build, in its conscious perception, the same thing for each sound; but in fact each sound was different. That was the key; that made the contradiction.

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Was the second elusive-source work about getting lost [*Infinite Lines from Elusive Sources II*, 1990-93]?

And finding your way back. These elusive-source works are places also. They take you on a journey, but it's a journey in a place. It's such a different way of defining a place than with a sound texture. With all the other works we've talked about we've begun to form a

definition of this idea of place. This work stretches the definition we've established, but then again it doesn't. It is place; it is a labyrinth.

All the pieces are about moving you into a new place. I think the consistent thing, then, we keep coming back to is that it's not the sound that's the work in these sound works; it's sound as a vehicle for getting something to happen within the listeners.

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A place work can only be made in its particular space, but usually you have only a limited time to build the piece on site. How do you prepare yourself for that?

You can only acoustically illuminate a space with sound. The space is pitch black aurally when it's silent and I walk in. Many times as I'm doing a site survey I snap my fingers. That gives me a lot of information, it tells me a lot; but it doesn't start the sound idea, yet. I don't start thinking about what kind of sound I will make in there at this time. That happens when I'm in there with the final sound system installed and the means to build and try different sounds.

The process of creating a work progresses through two distinct phases – first finding how to attach sound to the space and then building the work by building its sound. It's almost two different people within me, completely different people. One is an engineer who thinks like an engineer, who builds tools and who hires other engineers to build things. And the other is the user of these tools. It's hard to make the transition. But when I finally get in that space and start to build the work's sound I can no longer be the engineer. That's the point when I don't care about technique. I'm in the car, this is the steering wheel, this is the gas. There's no time to repair it, baby, get going, stay on the road!

Usually, like in *Three to One* [1992-present], I first go in and work with sound to find out how to get it on the walls, to embed it in the space. I went to Kassel and designed the speaker system, the system of sound sources in May 1991. After that, during the period when this hardware was being built and installed, I started building tools for the next phase. In designing the sources I had learned that I had this problem of somehow making three layers in what was acoustically one space and that it was going to be hard. I began building software that allowed me to switch sounds around, to take a layer that I had on one floor and put it on another, to switch them around very easily. It's that kind of problem. I knew what I was going to be doing was comparing this floor and that floor. Then I was going to find a sound that I'd like; but then I'd want to try it up there, then somewhere else. It was a new problem which I could prepare for beforehand without knowing anything about how sound would react in the spaces.

When I am preparing to work in a space, I also build a kind of library of, not sound textures, but foundations for them. It's like building a palette. I built a 'sound palette' beforehand, because the building of the palette is again an engineering problem. It's the way of getting things arranged. You have something to draw on; you don't have to start mixing from scratch. You've got basic 'sound pigments' there; you know you can build a lot from this pigment or this pigment. You don't try to build the texture; you just get the pigments placed on the palette and ready for mixing.

In October I went back to start building the sound. It's always different, depending on what I know and how much time I have to build it. The pressure is knowing that at one moment I've got to go in there and run with whatever tools I've got, and this car had better be ready. I can always go back, but there's an inherent time limit too. Two weeks of working on a sound is a long period of time because it's so abstract. You're shaping something which you can only hear; you're forming it. It's hard going on for more than two weeks on the same road. If you go on longer you can find yourself on another road going in another direction. Making a work is somehow jumping into this thing and getting to the end of the road before you run out of concentration and focus and energy.