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A Sound From Underground

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

"It sounds like it has something to do with church," said Jimmy Viducic, between bites of a ham sandwich on a sidewalk in Times Square. "But I think it's a generator."

Mr. Viducic was onto something—and, much to his surprise, actually *on* the something in question. Beneath his feet, sending a confounding sound through a subway grate into the open air, was a public art work with more than 25 years' of story to tell: Max Neuhaus's "Times Square."



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The Estate of Max Neuhaus

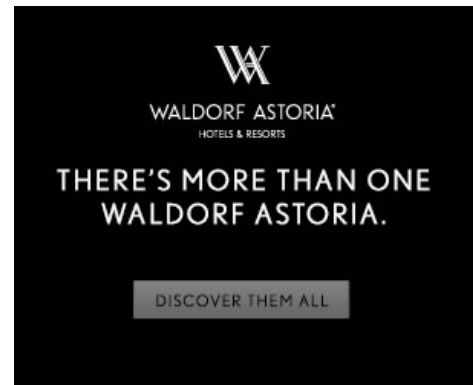
The artist Max Neuhaus installing his sound piece 'Times Square,' beneath a stretch of sidewalk at Broadway and 46th Street, in 1977.

The work is seldom even recognized. Mr. Viducic, an ironworker and sometime security guard on a lunch break from work, had no idea it was there, nor did the scores of tourists strolling through the "Crossroads of the World." But the droning, moaning sound-installation has been active, day and night, for decades, beginning in 1977 and, after 10 years out of service, again since 2002.

The project is maintained by Dia Art Foundation, the enterprise behind such other momentous works as "The New York Earth Room" (a room in SoHo filled with 140 tons of dirt) and "The Broken Kilometer" (a collection of golden rods, arranged on a floor in an empty loft, that pieced together would span nearly a mile).

For his project, Neuhaus, a New York artist and musician who died in 2009 at age 69, sought a more bustling, public setting where very passerby could interact with the piece. So to Times Square he went, with a large industrial speaker and permission to wire it up underground.

These days the piece, which is invisible in every way but audible to anyone who pays attention, is maintained by a Dia foundation team led by Patrick Heilman, who checks in remotely with the sound each day. Or rather, it checks in with him, by way of computerized calls to his phone.



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"It reaches out every day at noon," Mr. Heilman said. "If it happens to ring in while I'm talking to somebody, I like to put it on speaker. It's part of the texture of my day."

On the line, beneath the robotic voice of a computer identifying itself, is the beguiling sound conceived for "Times Square": a delicate electronic din that is both wispy and dense, ephemeral and everlasting. It's like the soul of the city itself sighing and seething at once.

"When you're listening to the piece, it's not like you're doing anything that somebody would perceive as different than anybody just standing there," said Mr. Heilman, standing in position over the spot on a triangular stretch of sidewalk at Broadway and 46th Street.

That was part of the idea.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

Patrick Heilman stands atop the installation "Times Square," which he monitors remotely by phone every day.

"It's imperceptible for the most part," said Branden W. Joseph, an art historian at Columbia University who has studied Neuhaus's work. "It was made to not be seen or necessarily even realized. It was important to him that people be able to experience it without assigning to it the name of an artist or that it was even an art work. He had this idea that people would find it and think of it as a significant spot only for them."

Indeed, for those in on the secret—there is no sign or marker to make its presence known—"Times Square" can provide a transporting experience that is grounded, paradoxically, in the particularities of its place.

"The Naked Cowboy was the bane of his existence," Mr. Heilman said of Neuhaus, who, before he died, monitored the piece via webcam. "He was very vigilant about it, and it's kind of hard to hear it correctly with a guy in his underwear playing guitar on top. But there's only so much you can do."

In fact, integrating the sound of "Times Square" with Times Square itself was important to Neuhaus, who concocted other sound projects for municipal city settings such as swimming pools and power plants. For "Times Square," he set up in a subterranean chamber adjoining the subway station nearby. Among the piece's working parts, still in constant operation, are a weatherproof stadium speaker, an amplifier and an MP3 player of a kind used for amusement parks.

"It's always on, and it was designed to take care of itself," said Mr. Heilman, who ventures underground once a year for a maintenance trip and, on rare occasions, to attend to other issues that arise.

The last one was this past summer, after his regular robo-call failed to materialize. "We determined that the line was dead, so I made arrangements with the MTA to go and check on it," he said. "It turned out the original cabinet from the 1970s phase had come off the wall and sheared the phone line. It took that kind of intervention to break the system."

Nonetheless, the all-day, every-day sound of "Times Square" carried on uninterrupted. "It was just the monitoring system that had failed," Mr. Heilman said. "The piece was still playing, as it does."

A version of this article appeared December 27, 2012, on page A15 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: A Sound From Underground.

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