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RELEASE: AT WILL

AN ARTIST'S "LOOK" AT SOUND -- QUIET ROOM AT MODERN MUSEUM

Sound and its effect is being investigated by scientists, engineers and acoustical experts in business and industry. Now, an artist is taking a "look" at sound in an exhibit opening today at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

For the exhibit, entitled "Spaces," the gallery has been divided into rooms for each of six participating artists. Each artist was free to deal with the enclosed area as he saw fit.

One of the artists, Michael Asher of Los Angeles, created perhaps the only quiet spot in New York -- a space of perfect tranquility in which there are no echoes or reverberations. His dimly lighted, low-ceiling, bare white room (21' x 23') is lined with Owens-Corning Fiberglas Corp. acoustical materials.

"My aim," says the artist, "was to create an environment in which walls, floor and ceiling and outside sounds do not distract or cause diversions from the perceptual experience."

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* Please note: cap "F" one "S"

"The important thing will be to experience what is taking place free from outside influences. Experiencing will very naturally explain the piece to the viewer."

Solves Three Types of Sound Problems

Mr. Asher created his quiet-room by eliminating three types of noise: Structure-bond noise transmitted through the building's construction, equipment noise from air conditioning equipment, and airborne noise from corridors.

Based on an analysis of these noise sources, Fiberglas acoustical products were applied to all six planes of the room -- walls, floor and ceiling -- to achieve the acoustically dead condition. In all, more than 5,000 sq ft of nubby glass cloth were applied over three layers of Fiberglas insulating material. Seams were covered with a joint sealing compound textured to match surface of the material.

Significance Cited

Michael Asher's subject choice reflects the growing concern with the acoustical chaos surrounding the lives of millions of Americans.

Medical experts say that continuous exposure to 85 decibels or more can cause hearing loss. This is alarming news for city dwellers, since the average decibel reading on a New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston or Los Angeles street corner during the rush hour hovers around 95 decibels. Intermittent automobile horns, sirens, jackhammers, grinding garbage trucks, and air compressors send the sound barometer soaring into the pain threshold area of 130 decibels -- a threat to both hearing and sanity.

Why do we put up with it? "One of the reasons the public has been apathetic to the rising menace of sound pollution is that it is so pervasive," says Hale Sabine, manager of the Owens-Corning Fiberglas Corp. Sound Laboratory in Granville, Ohio. "We are aware of loud, unexpected noises, but we can always move away from them. A jackhammer on a sidewalk assaults our ears and we move away. But if we live in an apartment where we constantly hear our neighbors, or if we live near an airport, we can't move away and that's when we're motivated to take action.

"People are becoming more aware of the problem of noise, as evidenced by Mr. Asher's choice of subject for his exhibit.

"While this room is an extreme situation, varying degrees of solution can be attained with the same methods and materials used by Mr. Asher. Utilizing current knowledge of building design we can improve sound conditions in other environments -- the home, office, or industrial situation."

Michael Asher's "quiet room" was destined to help visitors to realize, by its absence, the overpowering effect sound has on our lives. By "participating" in the super-quiet room -- by experiencing a condition conducive to uninterrupted thought and contemplation -- the visitor may realize the effects of excessive sound on his day-to-day life.

Hopefully, this realization may help disprove the prediction of former Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and acoustics expert Dr. Leo Beranek who predicts that "a century from now, man in search of a quiet spot may have no place to go.