

## LISTEN

The impetus for the title was twofold. The simple clear meaning of the word, to pay attention aurally, and its clean visual shape – LISTEN – when capitalized. It was also its imperative meaning – partly I must admit, as a private joke between myself and my then current lover, a French-Bulgarian girl, who used to shout it before she began to throw things at me when she was angry.

It was my first independent work as an artist in 1966. As a percussionist I had been directly involved in the gradual insertion of everyday sound into the concert hall, from Russolo through Varese and finally to Cage who brought live street sounds directly into the hall.

I saw these activities as a way of giving aesthetic credence to these sounds – something I was all for – but I began to question the effectiveness of the method. Most members of the audience seemed more impressed with the scandal than the sounds, and few were able to carry the experience over to a new perspective on the sounds of their daily lives.

I became interested in going a step further. Why limit listening to the concert hall? Instead of bringing these sounds into the hall, why not simply take the audience outside – a demonstration in situ?

The first performance was for a small group of invited friends. I asked them to meet me on the corner of Avenue D and West 14th Street in Manhattan. I rubber-stamped LISTEN on each person's hand and began walking with them down 14th Street towards the East River. At that point the street bisects a power plant and, as I had noticed previously, one

hears some spectacularly massive rumbling. We continued, crossing the highway and walking along the sound of its tire wash, down river for a few blocks, re-crossing over a pedestrian bridge, passing through the Puerto Rican street life of the lower east side to my studio, where I performed some percussion pieces for them.

After a while I began to do these works as 'Lecture Demonstrations'; the rubber stamp was the lecture and the walk the demonstration. I would ask the audience at a concert or lecture to collect outside the hall, stamp their hands and lead them through their everyday environment. Saying nothing, I would simply concentrate on listening, and start walking. At first, they would be a little embarrassed, of course, but the focus was generally contagious. The group would proceed silently, and by the time we returned to the hall many had found a new way to listen for themselves.

Of course, there were a few 'mishaps'. I remember one in particular at a university somewhere in Iowa. The faculty must have thought I was actually going to give a talk. They were nonplused when I told the students to leave the hall, but fortunately not quick-witted enough to figure out a way of contradicting the day's 'guest lecturer'. The students were more than happy to escape and take a walk. Several hundred of us formed a silent parade through the streets of this small town – it must have been Ames. The faculty was so enraged that, to a man, they boycotted the elaborate lunch they had prepared for me after the lecture.

A number of years later, when Murray Schafer's soundscape project became known, I am sure these academics didn't have any problem accepting similar ideas. But the reality – not being safely contained between the covers of a book – was quite another matter. I suppose the real definition of this series of works is the use of the word LISTEN to refocus people's aural perspective. I began to think of other ways of using it. (The Iowa experience had blacklisted me as a university lecturer.)

The largest version of the work (1 million people) was certainly an opinion editorial, which I wrote for the New York Times in 1974, condemning the silly bureaucrats of the Department of Air Resources for making too much noise.

Unable to do their real job of cleaning up the air that New Yorkers breathed, they naively applied their energies to 'cleaning up' the sound of the city. To keep their pot boiling, they published a pamphlet entitled 'Noise Pollution Makes You Sick'. I countered with 'Noise Propaganda Makes Noise', the basic point being that by arbitrarily condemning most man-made sounds as noise they were making noise where it never existed before. The worst result of their meddling is the people one has seen blasting their ears out (quite literally) with walkmen while riding the subway, convinced that they are protecting their ears from the subway sounds which are,

in fact, not nearly as loud as the ones inside their ears from their walkmen.

There were other manifestations of the idea. I organized 'field-trips' to places which were generally inaccessible and had sounds which could never be captured on a recording. I also did some versions as publications. One of these was a poster with a view looking up from under the Brooklyn Bridge, with the word LISTEN stamped in large letters on the underside of the bridge. It came from a long fascination of mine with sounds of traffic moving across that bridge – the rich sound texture formed from hundreds of tires rolling over the open grating of the roadbed, each with a different speed and tread.

The developers of the South Street seaport project, which is near the bridge, always felt that its sound would limit real estate values in the area. In the late eighties they succeeded in convincing the city to pave over the open grating with asphalt. Afterwards, they discovered that this tremendous added weight caused serious structural problems in the bridge. There is still a sound, but it is not as interesting as it was before the repaving.

In 1978 I published a do-it-yourself version – a postcard in the form of a decal with the word outlined in open letters, to be placed in locations selected by its recipients.

Max Neuhaus  
1988, 1990, 2004