

Listen

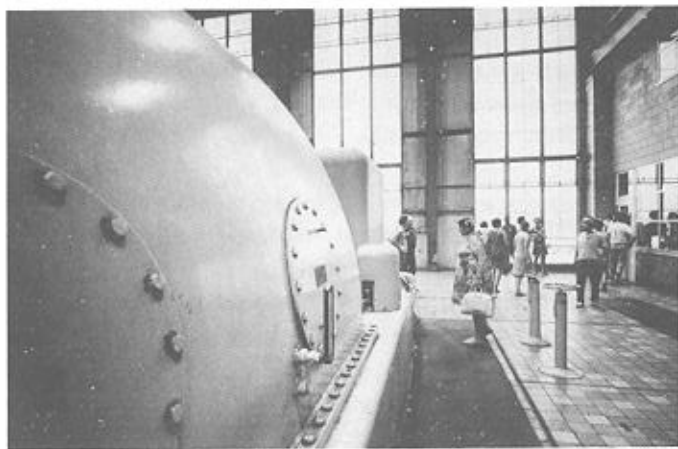
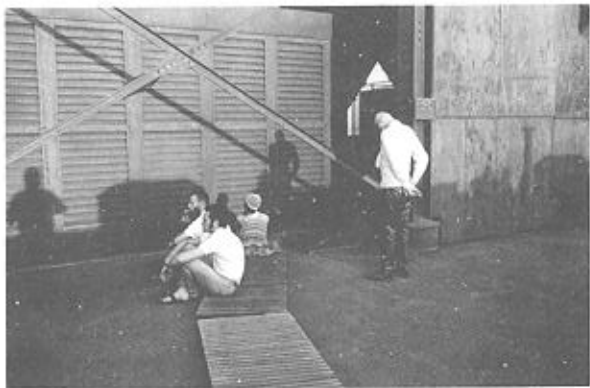
Max Neuhaus

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 – partly, I must admit, as a private joke between me and my then current lover, a large French-Bulgarian woman, who when angry used to shout it before she began to throw things – its imperative meaning.

LISTEN was my first independent work as an artist. 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 where live street sounds were brought directly into the hall. I saw these activities as a way of giving aesthetic credence to these sounds – something I was all for. I began to question the effectiveness of the methods, though. Most members of the audience seemed more impressed with the scandal than with the sounds, and few were able to carry the experience over into an appreciation of these sounds in 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 can hear some spectacularly massive rumbling. We continued, crossing the highway and walking, alongside 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.



Listen, 1968. Photos: Peter Moore.

After a while I began to do these works as 'Lecture Demonstrations.' The rubber stamp was the lecture and the walk was the demonstration. I would ask the audience at a concert or lecture to collect outside the hall, would 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.

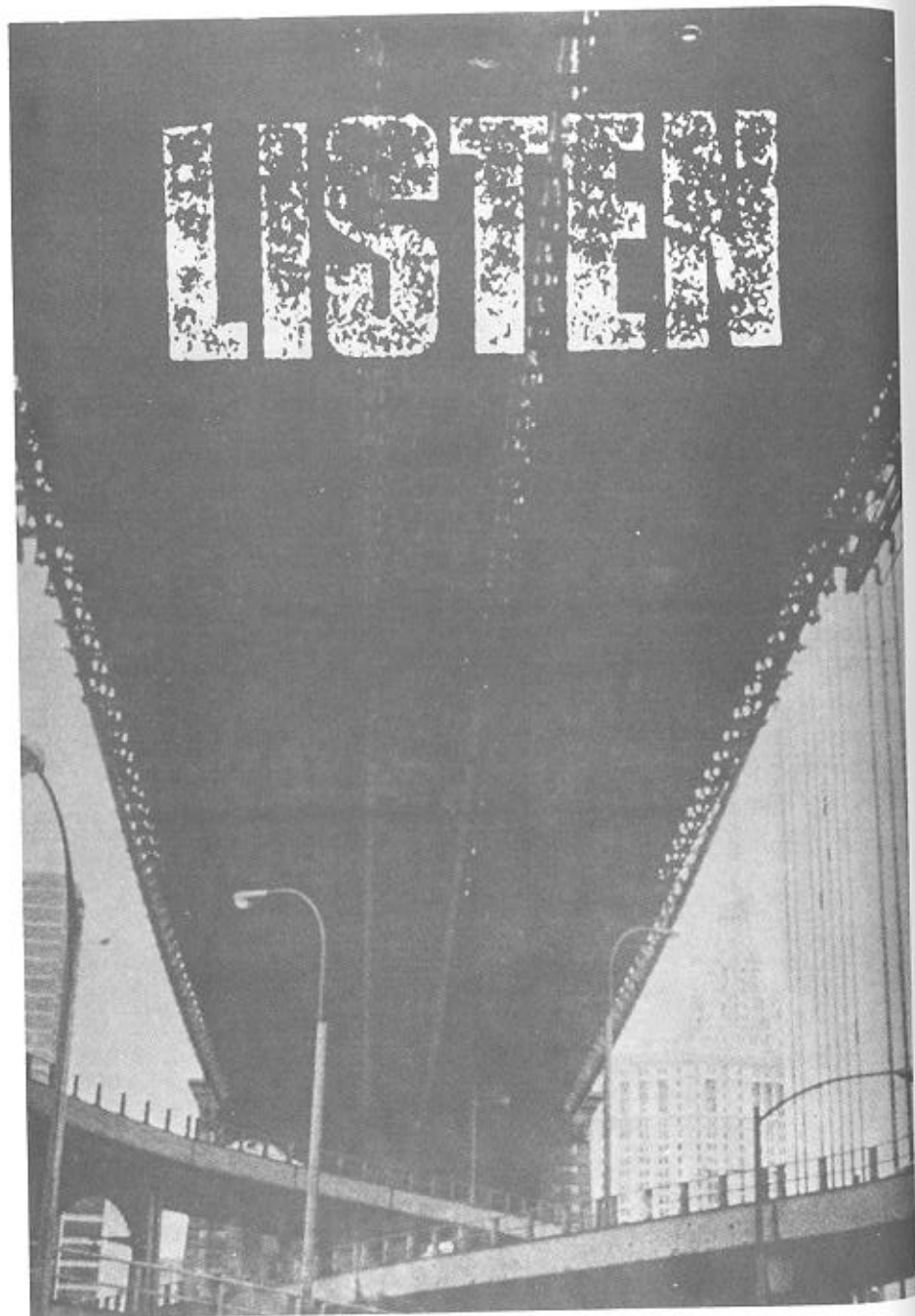
Of course, there were a few 'mishaps.' I remember one in particular at a university somewhere in Iowa. The faculty must have thought I was actually going to give a talk. They were nonplussed when I told the students to leave the hall, but, fortunately, not quick-witted enough to figure out a way of contradicting 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. I quite happily ate a lot of meat and potatoes.

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. The reality, though, was quite another matter – not being safely contained between the covers of a book.

I suppose the real definition of this series of pieces 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 university lecturer.)

The largest version of the work (one million people) was an opinion editorial that 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 naïvely 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 most tragic 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, much less loud.

There were other manifestations of the idea. I organized 'field-trips' to places that were generally inaccessible and had sounds that 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. This idea 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 road-bed – each with a different speed and tread.

The last work in the series was a do-it-yourself version. I published a postcard, in the form of a decal with the word LISTEN outlined in open letters, to be placed in locations selected by its recipients.

Listen, (poster), 1976.