

## Poetry battles honking horns in New York

### Lead-in

Look at these typical noise pollution problems in cities. Which do you think are the most serious? Why? Discuss with a partner.

- 1 Traffic noise
  - engines running constantly
  - bad-tempered motorists honking their horns
  - cars rushing by on fly-overs
- 2 Children playing in the street
- 3 Young people having parties late at night
- 4 Bars closing late
- 5 Noisy neighbours – rowing, playing music
- 6 Roadworks
- 7 Dogs barking
- 8 Planes flying over

If you lived in an inner-city area, how would you respond to noise pollution? Think about the ideas below.

- Ignore it
- Confront the people responsible for the noise
- Yell at the people responsible for the noise
- Threaten or physically attack the people responsible for the noise
- Demonstrate
- Start a petition
- Write letters of complaint to the local government
- Write poetry
- Get involved in other forms of non-violent protest

### Reading 1

You are going to read a newspaper article about one man's unusual response to noise pollution in his district of New York.

Look at the questions below then read the passage.

- 1 What sort of noise pollution does Aaron Naparstek object to?
- 2 What does he do about it?
- 3 How would you describe his response?

reasonable	justified	weird	innovative	pointless
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**New York noise**  
 by **Oliver Burkeman**

The honking of horns, as anyone who has tried to get more than a few consecutive minutes of sleep in New York will tell you, is one of the city's most widely enjoyed communal pastimes. But Aaron Naparstek has had enough of it. On one occasion, the 31-year-old website developer approached the open window of a 4x4, waited for the driver to finish honking, offered a polite "excuse me" and then yelled "Ho-o-o-o-o-onk!" in his face. (The response was blind fury.) Then a few months ago he snapped and threw three eggs from the window of his Brooklyn apartment on to the windscreen of a car honking loudly below. But the driver threatened to kill him. So, nobly, he chose the path of non-violence. He started writing anti-honking haiku verses - honku, he called them - and taped them to local lampposts:

*Oh, forget Enron  
 The problem around here is  
 All the damn honking*

"Then this really weird thing started happening," Naparstek says. "All these other haiku started appearing that I hadn't written." Naparstek's section of Brooklyn is now covered in anti-honking poetry, written by everyone from scary environmental activist

types to militant revolutionaries:

*Patience slowly fades  
 Residents stock up their eggs  
 That day is coming soon.*

Inevitably Naparstek has started a website - [www.honku.org](http://www.honku.org) - and now people from across the country send him news of their own anti-honking campaigns. Poetry, it turns out, can change the world after all (if you've got enough sellotape). Then, just recently, anti-anti-honking haiku started to appear, taped up by locals who thought Naparstek should stop worrying about honking and start worrying about starving children, say, or war in the Middle East instead. Naparstek has an answer for that. "Stop me if this is too tenuous," he says, "but they talk about the violence in the Middle East like it's a force of nature, like it's beyond our control. But actually it's kind of like the honking - the violence is man-made. If we can figure out how to stop honking on Clinton Street, I think we could learn some things that we could use on a macro level." He pauses for a moment. "I told you it was tenuous."

*The Guardian Weekly 18-4-2002, page 11*

**Glossary**

4x4 =	a four wheel drive vehicle, like a jeep or land rover
haiku =	a style of three line poem, originally from Japan, in which the first line has five syllables, the second seven and the third five.
he snapped =	he lost his patience
Enron =	a major American company that recently caused a scandal by going bankrupt because of corrupt mismanagement
on a macro level =	on a large international scale

Reading 2

The tone of the passage is humorous and ironic. Discuss the phrases from the passage below with a partner. In what way are they humorous or ironic? Refer to the context, and think about the words in *italics* in particular.

- 1 The honking of horns...is one of the city's *most widely enjoyed communal pastimes*.
- 2 *nobly*, he chose the path of non-violence.
- 3 written by *everyone from scary environmental activist types to militant revolutionaries*
- 4 *Inevitably* Naparstek has started a website
- 5 Poetry, it turns out, can change the world after all (if you've got enough sellotape)
- 6 Stop me if this is too *tenuous*

What do you think the writer of this article thinks of Naparstek?

**Vocabulary in context**

Look at these words from the passage. Which of these types of people are most likely to take direct, violent action, and which are more likely to be involved in non-violent protest?

militants	activists	revolutionaries
campaigners	environmentalists	

Look at the ways of taking action below. Which are likely to be done by militant extremists? Which are likely to be done by non-violent campaigners?

sign a petition	take direct action	lobby the government
go on a demonstration	fire bomb the police	organise a peaceful protest
throw eggs	start a riot	

**Follow-up**

Work in small groups. Think of something that you all feel very strongly about and would like to change. It could be something on an international level, like the destruction of the ozone layer or blood sports, or something more particular, like irregular buses, or noisy students in class. Plan a campaign to change things. Think of at least five things you will do. Try to be creative rather than violent, like Aaron Naparstek.

Write a haiku to complain about the subject you feel strongly about.