

'You're twisting my melon man'

Noise Water Meat (A History of Sound in the Arts)

Douglas Kahn
£24.95, ISBN 0-262-11242-4, MIT Press

It just deliberately ignores huge developments, movements and forms of music in favour of devising fables from his own vain contemplations. Revealed is a man who is shall we say... a plastic jug short of a full tuppaware set. But the omissions are no loss: there is rather, a feeling of relief that he said nothing about—say the whole of Jazz and Blues. Anyone with the misfortune to be set this as desired reading as part of some dubious media course will probably find themselves going back to the introduction to find out what the hell he is on about. His statements on his intentions are a whisker away from satire:

"The book focuses on inscriptive practices (but is in no way restricted to them), whereas ideas of vibration and transmission occur only intermittently and have not been addressed directly. The book ends with a contrast between the manner in which, with Burroughs's virus, inscription has been sunk from the surface of bodies into each and every cell (a shift that itself should complicate notions about writing or inscribing on bodies), and the energetic configuration and situation of bodies and environments found in Artaud's post-Rodez work and McClure's meat science. Their use of energetic flows, derived from Eastern bodily practices and elsewhere, poses a challenge to techniques and tropes of inscription that have so strongly informed and problematized modernism and suggests that any theorization of contemporary aurality will have to take into account not only the changed status of inscription and the historical background of transmission but also a figure or phenomenon, particle and wave, capable of spatial elaboration and vica versa, which supersedes both."

So to utterly baffle the *potential* reader Khan has chosen to 'contrast'—read perform the Vulcan mind meld with—Burroughs (now that Wild Bill is safely full fathom five he feels comfortable to exhibit his tiresome interpretations out of the range of gun fire) with Artaud (let me take you to Junkie Town!) Just in case that accidentally produces clarity of thought he will inject some McClure: that's Michael, not Troy. Any persistent bloodhounds will be shaken off the trail of meaning by the contortions of some ersatz Kundalini Yoga. He also couples all this with uncritical musings on William Reich and—read them and weep—L. Ron Hubbard. To go to such lengths to appear sophisticated must be a cry for help.

Unbelievably that was presented as an incentive to read this book. The pretence is that it is some kind of new synthesis or approach to 'the' history of sound in the avant-garde, yet if we dipped in at *any* point we read a poor misunderstood re-hash of better material.

In actuality—if that is not too intrusive—the book is an out-of-focus reinforcement dealing with *ascription*: the old quasi-religious academic technique of giving the amen to something. This is performed by a mind wash with all manner of acid-casualty-cosmic-debris which was *inscribed* in his brain at some mid-eighties-post-modern-love-in

at a US west coast far-out, terminally groovy 'educational establishment.' So on a more prosaic level—leaving aside the Goddess Shakti amongst many other thousands of mutually exclusive terms he uses—it's a series of various lectures (largely made up of quotes: some of which are interesting, and padding) with his musing in between like some insipid but foul-smelling glue. Reading his prose you get the feeling that the verbs and adjectives are squabbling amongst themselves trying to run away from a series of oxymorons: "As a dead Aristotle might have said." (page 221)

He is a devotee of the late John Cage—who I have always thought seemed a bit of a non-event compared to Victor Borge?!...

Much in the way people talk about architecture as frozen music he has tried to merge...well who am I kidding I haven't got a clue what he's trying to do. The book is impossible to read because you disagree with every sentence. The Kundalini yoga stuff, which just cuts in at any time like somebody selling Hare Krishna on the streets, is like Newtonian Physics compared with his own scribbling which sound like a cross between an encyclopedia salesman and some old showbiz whore on the chat show circuit.

To properly review this book you would have to hire a group of highly dedicated and knowledgeable experts, get them to take years to sift through this thoroughly and *then* you could come to the conclusion—which you knew all along—that this is an institutionalised academic talking to other institutionalised academics. And who would want to listen to that?

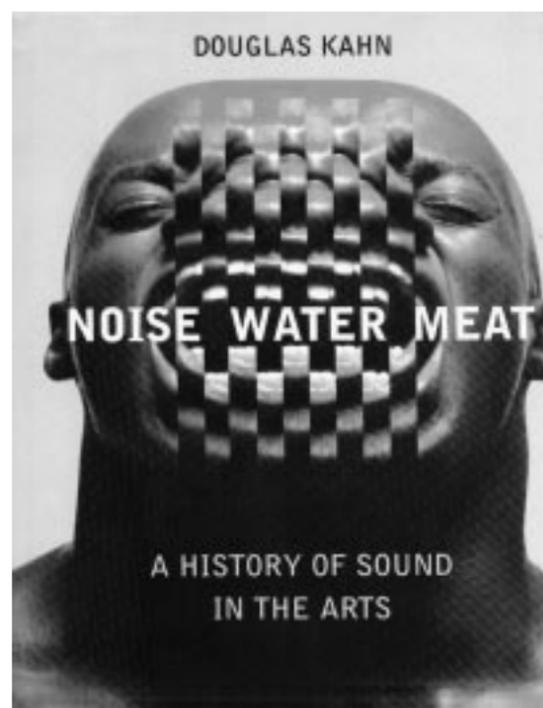
The quick way to review the book—the method adopted tonight—is to go in through the back door: i.e. look up the index and bibliography, weigh what he's selling, check for contentious authors—he seems to be trying to replicate what Attali did in 'Noise'—unravel his position on key issues; look what he recycles; look who he criticises, look who he flatters and so on...

His general tone indicates that Douglas Khan will probably never leave the safety of the institution and join us on the streets. The students have left the auditorium but the professor, thumbs behind lapels, still bellows out The Word:

"John Cage appears throughout the book and is the subject of an entire section. He would occupy a central position within any discussion of sound and art in this century because of the importance and influence across the arts of his music, writings, and ideas about sound throughout his long and prolific career. Moreover, like Artaud he connects the first half with the second half of the century, but unlike Artaud he lived to see the second half, almost all of it."

When it comes to other theorists and musicians who are of an independent disposition and whose existence and creative outlook could be said to challenge his worship of an image of Cage he has constructed for himself, they are either wholly or partially ignored or the subject of snide or pitifully inadequate remarks. Or all three in the case of Pierre Schaeffer where the writing is nothing more than a mis-reading of an interview in *Re Records Magazine* (vol. 2 Number 1) in 1987.

Unable to write anything of any consequence



on the matter he offers selective quotes to dismiss Schaeffer (known for his seminal work in the late 40s with electronic recording at Radio-diffusion-Television Francaise (RTF) in Paris, where he produced several short studies in what he called *Musique concrete*).

Uncomprehending of Schaeffer's artistic honesty and specific terms of reference he prefers to throw up a puerile after-dinner anecdote—thinly disguised self-indulgence concerning you know who:

"He returned to the notion that no music was possible outside of conventional musical sounds: "It took me forty years to conclude that nothing is possible outside DoReMi...In other words, I wasted my life." In 1988 I had occasion to describe Schaeffer's lament to John Cage over the dinner table. He quickly responded. "He should have kept going up the scale!"

It would seem no dissent from this transparently foolish orthodoxy is tolerated. Despite the fact that he knows nothing about what has been going on in Europe, he has detected that Chris Cutler, the editor of *Re Records* has committed a crime against the inquisition leading him to pronounce his own aut'o-da-fé:

"After reviewing an article on the history of live electronic music, he [Cutler] felt compelled to "resist the unquestioning inclusion of a randomly derived aleatory and raw environmental sound in what we understand when we use the work [sic] *music*." Pitted specifically against the threat posed by Cage, he argued:

If, suddenly, *all sound* is "music", then by definition, there can be no such thing as sound that is *not* music. The word *music* becomes meaningless, or rather it means "sound". But *sound* already means that. And when the word *music* has been long minted and nurtured to refer to a *particular* activity in respect to sound—namely, its conscious and deliberate organization within a definite aesthetic and tradition—I can see no convincing argument at this late stage for throwing these useful limitations into the dustbin."

That's not good enough for professor Khan:

"Cutler tries to fend off the totalization of Cagean thought, at a time when so much Cagean thought had been benignly internalized, by rhetorically positing music *as we know it* and politically marginalizing the other through common sense. The problems with Cage's notion that all sound is music, which do not revolve around a music/not-music distinction, will be taken up in chapter 6."

No we are not to use common sense, we are to bow to whatever has been benignly inserted into us—here you have his intentions in a nut shell: we must be followers: now bend over. His chapter 6 vaunts itself as if it laid out some grand unification theory relating to Cage's interest in sub-atomic vibration. It maintains that if everything vibrates all the time then everything is always emitting sound, Cutler's useful distinction on the human level of language and terms is just not dealt with.

Much the same can be said of his pat descriptions of *the life* (read *the myth*) of Burroughs: they are treatments of grotesque veneration. Burroughs' irony remains undetected. Symbolism becomes reality in the 'analysis'—if you can call this guff analysis:

"The Other half had become all others, they had become all, and the *theys* were not necessarily biotic. Organism has shifted the rise of the inorganic to the fall of the inorganic, all on the wings of the life and death struggle of the virus, the internecine being of the virus, fuckin' transitional bastard." (page 321)

The insidious elements to his ideas on Burroughs are evident with well-rehearsed exclusions which reveal that Professor Khan is just like all The Others:

"His own work was deeply informed by a variety of scientific and quasi-scientific theories—by an obsession with *fact*, as he was quick to say. It was within this culture of fact that this notion of the virus grew and subsequently became well known among a broad range of people, especially the beat and beyond literati, heady punks, and other subcultured individuals, cybertypes, and urban degenerate renegades."

You know: street scum—the people who don't count. *Where exactly did this the culture of fact lead to, could that be academia perchance?*

His observations are that an essay on Burroughs' audio experiments "broke the scholarly ice on the topic of sound and voice..." The footnotes reveal that this is from a magazine Khan edited, published by MIT in 1992. So pathetic a claim to fame necessitates that he has to discredit everybody else with any knowledge of Burroughs. Bad Karma Khan.

It should be pointed out that this book, in as much as it deals with music, succeeds in one thing: it excludes almost all of the music which almost every potential reader has ever held with lifelong affection or gained pleasure from. Imagine if you will a book which mentions Yoko Ono (even her plumbing) but pretends the Beatles did not exist. And she should think herself lucky: he states

quite clearly that he is excluding women due to "practicalities of time and resources." He is not clear at all why the music of "Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Colman, and others and of African-American poetries and linguistic play" are excluded, he would appear to explain this by saying that there is "still much work to be done." Yes and part of that is tackling meaningless exclusion.

The real reason though is to amplify a smug little coterie's, cliques and claques which he aspires to join rather than analyse.