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

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 tapware set. But the omis-
sions are no less, 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 whisks
er 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 Kahn 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 pro-
duced several short studies in what he called Musique concrète.

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 pro-
duced several short studies in what he called Musique concrète.

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

“...to a word—DanReMi... In other words, I wasted my life.” In 1981 he 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 autodà-fe: “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 word [sic] music.” Pithed specifically against the threat posed by Cage, he argued.

‘you’re twisting my melon man’
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 nutshell: 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’s 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 intermezzo 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 Coleman, 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 daques which he aspires to join rather than analyse.