

## Epiphanies

From human conductors to electrical ones, **Douglas Kahn** has a lightbulb moment when considering the connections between manmade and earth energy sources



Shu Lea Cheang and Martin Howse, *Composting The City. Composting The Net*

**Recently, in Riga,** I attended *Composting The City. Composting The Net*, a performance by Shu Lea Cheang and Martin Howse. As I remember it, Cheang generated visuals projected along the length of the floor while a synthesized voice read through artists' mailing list archives. She looped the last sentences of the posted materials in the top half of the projection in both sight and in sound, repeating and recycling them until they seemed to succumb to the weight of the mute archives waiting above them, and were then finally released to fall to the bottom of the frame. The way the letters scattered and fell looked like something between Guillaume Apollinaire's graphic poem *It's Raining* (1918) and silt drifting down in cascading layers. Virtual plants sprouted and grew where they settled on the ground. It was an ever evolving picture of composted posts, a fading collective past regenerating new forms.

Martin Howse stood at a long table of electronics and open circuits, upon which he heaped handfuls of compost, vegetables and other scraps decomposing into soil, changing the sound. He was composing composting, cycling circuits through earth-information. After a pile had built up, he put on a glove that had small bayonet contacts on the fingers wired into the system. In the past, when musicians donned such a glove, it was to generate sound and music by gauging proximity to the body and movement of the hand, much in the same way that theremin performers re-enacted the gestures of an orchestral conductor. But Howse used the thermal dampness of the compost as a conductor of electricity, an earth circuit through which signals were fed.

Traditional conductors scroll through the text of a notated score in an effort to reactivate dead composers, whereas Howse wrote his code to work underground like microbes and worms feeding off different forms of detritus. There is a political motivation for Howse, having extended Situationist psychogeography to engage a psychogeophysics. When he raised his hand and dug it into the soil, into the earth, a whole new battery of sounds were heard. It was phenomenal. Electricity always seeks a ground; he had grounded electronic music. It was more than a gesture; it was an epiphany.

As a historian, I don't get out as much as I should, at least not to places where these things happen. Much of my time is spent getting to know dead strangers,

attending events uninvited years too late, and staring backwards through the lifelong glints of the living. It is a lifestyle in a faded and fading past that ideally regenerates dead things like compost.

I have little interest in the religiosity of the Christian epiphany and other forms of fandom because they deny, hasten or celebrate death rather than let it enfold like silt. But both terms did grow in a rich field of words with the same root: *-phane*, to appear or to render visible to the mind. Of the others in the field – phantom, phantasm, fantasy, fancy, sycophant, profane, etc – I prefer phenomena and epiphenomena because they suggest a remove from personal likes and dislikes, which I like.

More mundanely my epiphanies, if that is what they are, proceed from and to confusion, a non-revelation. Grounded in routine labour and garden variety realisations, if something flashes with revelatory brilliance it illuminates a vast field of questioning, requiring even more work. The flash never indelibly fixes a single image in high resolution, but produces a productive confusion.

Two such quasi-epiphanies motivated my recent book, *Earth Sound Earth Signal*. The first was a concept that occurred to the US composer Alvin Lucier in reference to his works from the mid-1960s involving brainwaves and natural radio: natural electromagnetic sound. It appeared to me to be at once apt and oxymoronic. Although I had been his student, it left me a bit lost. How could such sounds be natural when they required technological mediation to be heard, especially given the gulf between nature and technology?

This gulf becomes bridged, however, with a focus on the energies that flow between and among things, as well as being independent of things. Too often the optic remains fixed upon engineered objects and perceiving subjects rather than, say, how energies transform from one state to another. Lucier's concept of natural electromagnetic sound encapsulated the trade of the two major energy forms in classical physics – mechanics (acoustics) and electromagnetism – or sound and signal. While others were feeding an impulse into a synthesizer, having it run through the circuit until it came out of a speaker as sound, Lucier in effect broke open the circuit to let in air, and brought the surrounding space into technological circuit as a modulator among others.

These energies, ubiquitous in nature, have been at the basis of telecommunications technologies and scientific instrumentation since the 19th century, when nature itself began to be brought into the various circuits of media. Now that most music is electronic music, the nature of sparking and vibrating is everywhere, including in what we imagine to be pure expressions of technology.

The second quasi-epiphany was a statement by the Australian artist Joyce Hinterding that humans have the conceit "they have authored electricity". Clear enough. That conceit can't keep happening, but how did that happen and keep happening in the first place? Her statement was not limited to electrical generation, electrical motors and grids, but extended also to the technological control of electromagnetism in telecommunications. Thus, naturally occurring control and accidents posed copyright issues for human authorship of media networks before humans began staking property claims among one another. She was not looking to rewind to the past to un-write anything, but insisted instead upon ecopolitical and poetical turns situated among larger spheres of energy coursing through and modulating bodies and the environment.

Artists responsive to contemporary conditions often require reconfigured histories, ones written from the grassroots up; they suffer when they are weighed down by histories already written from received Olympian complacencies; they are buried prematurely by the dead. Histories of electronic music have been parades of technological control devices, with no regard to the energies they controlled. John Cage opened music to sound from the perspective of the listener, but sound needs to be opened to other energies. In an ecopolitics that resists channelling all phenomena through human criteria, sound becomes one energy among others, and hearing becomes one transductive moment among others. One can listen without being a perceiving subject summoning sensate dominion. And rather than godly incarnations of old school epiphanies, we should worm our way through the spent and dead in an attempt to regenerate new life. That electronic music and sound perform an important role may be counterintuitive, but all the more brilliant as a result. □ Douglas Kahn's *Earth Sound Earth Signal: Energies And Earth Magnitudes In The Arts* is published by University Of California Press