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What a Great Idea It Is: Cory Arcangel on 200-Plus Hours of Music by Tony Conrad
BY Cory Arcangel POSTED 04/05/17 10:51 AM



JAN INGE HAGA/COURTESY ARCANGEL SURFWARE
Listening to Tony Conrad by phone.

In the 2010s, Tony Conrad often invited me to speak in his class at the Department of Media Studies at the University at Buffalo. Usually Tony and I would Skype in to his class from his apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The best part of these speaking gigs was hanging out with Tony afterward. Tony and I had met a few years earlier while rooming across from each other at Bard MFA; being both from Buffalo, we had a lot to talk about. What I looked forward to more than anything would be asking Tony, “What are you working on?” This question was like lobbing a softie to Roger Federer, and soon thereafter we would be floating in the absurd, absolutely hilarious, and inspiring world of his creative life. I use the term “creative life” broadly—it was hard to think of Tony as just an artist, composer, writer, or any of the commonly used creative containers. To me, he seemed more like one of the computer-programming geniuses I knew in school combined with my favorite standup comedian and a character from the far end of cable access (which, incredibly, Tony actually was in Buffalo).

The first time I asked Tony what he was working on, he explained to me that he had an upcoming

performance in the UK and later that week was meeting an engineer to see if it was possible to build a radio that played all frequencies at the same time, which he was hoping to enlist for this upcoming performance. The conversation quickly went from how such a machine might be possible to related matters of antennas, the rectifying properties of crystals, cosmic magnetic fields, Pauline Oliveros, and other subjects I can't recall. I kept thinking—and told him a few times—what a great idea!

It was in one of these conversations that I first learned of Music and the Mind of the World—or “Music and the Mind of the Word” as Tony also sometimes referred to it—Tony's 200-plus-hour piano opus. Tony explained that the project had begun in the 1970s and lasted for a few years (seven, it turned out), during which he recorded every encounter he had with a piano. The project, previously unreleased and unknown, was again on Tony's radar nearly 30 years later, because music was no longer tied to a physical medium and publishing the work in its entirety was finally within the realm of possibility. Needless to say, the project stuck in my mind.

The last time I saw Tony was in the winter of 2015, when I visited Buffalo to speak in his class. I took the Amtrak from New York, where I was living at the time. The train arrived four hours late on top of an already eight-hour ride, due to a massive snowstorm that started in Hudson and stretched all the way across the state to Buffalo. Tony picked me up at the train station in his car. It was laughably cold—so cold a sneeze would turn into an ice cloud (it ended up being the coldest Western New York February in recorded history). My first impression of Tony in our shared hometown: his gloves! Tony wasn't wearing conventional winter gloves but, instead, elbow-long yellow rubber gloves—the kind you would get at a True Value to scrub a floor. Had Tony not learned anything after 40 years in Buffalo? My question was answered by my second impression: Tony knew how to drive in a snowstorm! Alone on the deserted streets, the ride was flawless—slow and steady. FYI: Things like these are matters of life and death in Buffalo.

Later during this same trip, I inquired about Music and the Mind of the World, as was my habit every time I talked with Tony since learning of the work, and that's when I first saw the actual cassette tapes. Tony had a pile of them next to a dual cassette player on his desk in the apartment he lived in with his wife Paige. Maybe it was because of the bitter cold or that I was from a snowplowing family and had spent many evenings driving with my father through deserted streets in snowstorms—or maybe because Tony was the model of what an artist could be that I aspired to while growing up—but it was then that I had a deceptively simple thought: why don't I help Tony with this mind-bendingly huge project? After all, Tony probably had better things to do and, over the years, I had gotten pretty good at organizing and publishing large amounts of information and hard-to-access data. In fact, I liked to do it. So I mentioned it to Tony, something like, “Why don't I take this off your hands?” Tony thought it was a good idea. The project started in earnest in the fall later that year, and we worked on it until Tony's passing. It has launched this week:

<http://musicandthemindofthe.world/>

Tony once said to me that “life is too rich to finish everything.” For Tony, this was true. Like a smokestack burning off excess fuel—Tony's former students used to say he had “genius to burn”—he had an army of ideas, some finished, some in progress, some new, some old, all ready to go, on and on, seemingly never ending. Speaking of which: I am not sure if his infinity radio ever got made, but he finished Music and the Mind of the World in 1982. And, my good god, what a great idea it is.

<Below are 10 picks from Music and the Mind of the World...>

ABOVE Tuesday, September 20, 1977. University at Buffalo, New York

ABOVE Tuesday, September 20, 1977. University at Buffalo, New York

ABOVE Tuesday, September 20, 1977.

ABOVE Thursday, September 29, 1977.

ABOVE Thursday, September 29, 1977.

ABOVE Thursday, September 29, 1977.

ABOVE Friday, September 30, 1977. University at Buffalo, New York

ABOVE Friday, September 30, 1977. University at Buffalo, New York

ABOVE Friday, September 30, 1977. University at Buffalo, New York

ABOVE Friday, September 30, 1977. University at Buffalo, New York

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