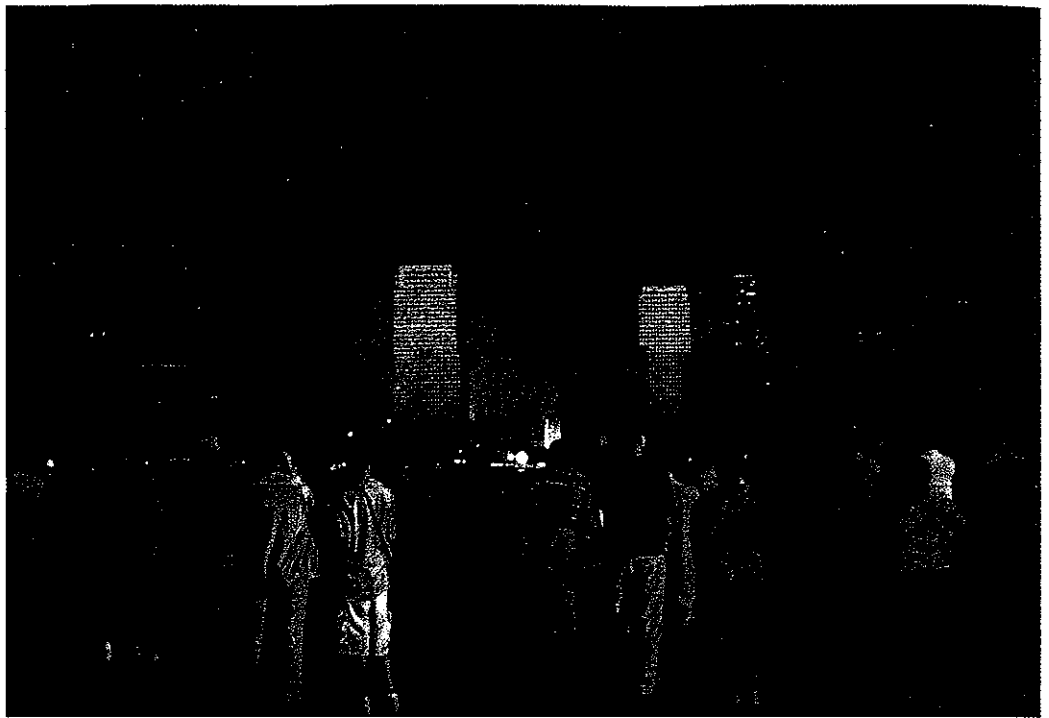


Epiphanies

A decade on from the 11 September 2001 attack on New York City's World Trade Center, Hua Hsu recalls the mundane writing tasks that got him through the day



Of the sundry anxieties that seized me as I watched the North Tower fall to the ground, perhaps the most singular was this: how am I possibly going to finish that review for *The Wire*? This was a shamefully, cosmically unimportant thing to be worried about, particularly on a day of such obvious heft. I had awoken that morning to a phone call, a friend begging to know if my then-girlfriend, who lived in Manhattan, was all right. I didn't understand what he was going on about. New York had been attacked, he explained, his description of what he was seeing on television dissolving into an imagist poem of glass and steel. It was still early, when any rumour seemed believable enough. He mentioned something about car bombs "everywhere" and I hung up to start watching television.

I had just returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts the previous day, and all my things, save for my TV, laptop, futon and two records, were still in storage. I watched the replays of the planes smacking into the buildings and went online to read and commiserate with friends. I checked my email. I saw that I had received a message from an editor at *The Wire*, and I suddenly remembered that I owed the magazine a review. Sorry about what's happening, the message read, but we *really* need that review. It's already very late.

I was slightly miffed by the polite brusqueness of this message, which explained that the magazine needed my review by the end of the day, if possible, sorry again to skip-trace in the shadow of such calamitous events. I knew that it was my fault for having been so delinquent, and decided that this was as good a way as any to spend the day. I had been assigned to review *Tellus Tools*, a double LP compilation of pieces drawn from New York's famed *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine* of the 1980s and early 90s. I left my apartment and headed into the

day's sublime blue in search of a record player on which to listen to it.

I ended up at Other Music, a record store in Harvard Square where some friends worked. We talked about how "crazy" things were and I asked if I could commandeer their record player for this review I had to write. It felt strange to have purpose, no matter how minor or self-rationalised. This was a day of communal activity – grieving, conspiring, storytelling, space-filling chatter. We had a patriotic duty to stay home from school, close shop early, get drunk in the afternoon and do nothing but watch television. But the message from *The Wire* had reminded me that the world had not stopped, just certain parts of the United States. On the scale of acceptable things to do that day, I decided that writing a record review was no better or worse than wallowing.

I forced myself to concentrate on what I was hearing: drone and collage, an episode of early 1980s screwball rap taped off the radio, fingers slowly dipping into cold cream, a woman's half-sensual, half-terrifying moans, the drench of power electronics and "cold crush cacophony". There was no narrative to *Tellus Tools*; these tracks shared a common provenance and a certain intrepid spirit, but little else. I took notes. The world was in tumult and I had to come up with a new way to describe how a guitar sounds.

I finished using their record player and bought three CDs for their trouble: DJ Scud, Bombardier and N1tro's *Three The Hardway*, for its promise of cathartic, scabrous, unholy noise; the *Mottomo Otomo* compilation, to luxuriate in the possibility of more peaceful wanderings and improvisations; and a live Sun Ra disc, for we seemed, finally, to arrive at his prophecy. It was "after the end of the world" – didn't we know that yet? I bought some beer and headed home to write.

Great, visionary novelists have described their frustrations in those moments right after 11 September, when their characters refused to surrender to their whims – when playing with characters in the first place seemed banal and cowardly. I was just a lowly music critic trying to meet a deadline. I was not contributing to the day's work. Criticism does not aspire to bring people comfort in times of suffering or hasten their escape to a magical otherworld. In the barest, most modest sense, it reminds us to be deliberative – about what we are hearing or seeing, and possibly about the world beyond, as well. To ponder mystery is not to destroy it. On a day of noble sacrifice throughout New York City, nobody needed me to sit in my apartment and consider the context of Kiki Smith & David Wojnarowicz's "Life Wants To Live", the awful soundtrack to a domestic dispute, or to time-travel through shards of early 1980s New York radio. But it felt necessary to withdraw from the nation, if for a few hours, and to think and write instead of just feel and watch.

My laptop screen was a riot of open windows. On one side was the draft of my review. Open chat boxes fringed the bottom of the page. In an adjacent window, I dived headlong into oceans of data, chatroom debates and emails about an obscure Japanese sect that had claimed responsibility for the attacks. Some day we would return to caring about insignificant things and tracing trivial micro-histories that were not in the service of consensus. In a few weeks' time, someone would come upon a short review touting the modest contributions and bygone idealisms of an obscure New York sound art collective. And some time beyond that, a day that seemed grave and interminable would be seen for what it was: tragedy made legible to future citizens by newspaper headlines, emails and photographs, like lines pressed onto black wax. □