



001

EDICIONES CONQUISTA

ZINE 001

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THE REINVENTION OF POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES THROUGH MUSIC PRACTICE: YASUNAO TONE

texto

- Andrea Ancira

In my inclination for searching the music that I have not yet heard, I have found a special fascination for experimental music and all its forms. In this essay I would like to suggest that certain ways of composing, performing, recording, disseminating, and consuming sound can be translated into different understandings and practices of politics. By making a close reading of the work of Japanese musician and composer Yasunao Tone, I will try to suggest that the dissent embedded in his experimental practices (new forms of composing, playing and perceiving music) disarticulate, interrupt and disfigure the quotidian, becoming a central element in the political-aesthetic dimension of life.

Although Yasunao Tone's work has become a common reference in contemporary experimental music, especially in the noise and improvisation music scene, his work is not bounded to music. His artistic practice should be understood within the broad-based theoretical rejection of formal boundaries, genres and other assumptions across the entire artistic field. Therefore it would be more accurate to locate his work within the Fluxus and proto-fluxus avant-garde movements. His desire to penetrate the true nature of things without the abstract mediation of formalistic materialism, hased him to challenge the limits of genre bodies and traditional artistic and musical procedures through the experimentation of sound, literature and playback media.

In his quest for true sonic materiality, Tone became interested in the manipulation of technology and began experimenting with CDs and CD players in the early 1980's.

In 1985, he produced his first "wounded CD" by attaching pinhole-punctured transparent tape to commercial CDs in order to override the CD player's error-correction system and produce sporadic bursts of white noise. Inspired by the surrealist automatism of Breton, he uses these playback devices as a revelation of the real functioning of thought by automatic playing (Ashley, et al., 2006). In his work, the primary content of the sound processed by the CD player is composed precisely of those sounds that the system is designed to eliminate.

By exploring the inherent noise of these systems, the mediation process between recorded sound and its playback, which is supposed to remain hidden, is made visible. Hainge (2007) argues that the elevation of this "meta-noise" as the level of primary content of the musical piece represents a rupture for the listener because it suggests and demands a different musical receptivity than other musical performances.

Tone's experimental practice with CD players could be interpreted as a deconstruction of the high-fidelity discourse which strives to create or to simulate a transparent experience that transcends mediation "where the medium produces a perfect symmetry between copy and original and, thereby, erases itself" (Cascone, 2000, p.17). However I would like to suggest that there is a deeper concern in Tone's practice that goes beyond his obvious but not superficial criticism towards this medium: he explores the crucial role of mediation in the construction of meaning.

His experimentation with CD players introduces unpredictability, or rather, forms of mistake that generate new meanings. The *Musica Iconologos* CD and his *Solo for Wounded* CD, deconstruct the idea of an original work, or more so, its origin. In these projects, the system as the primary source or the grand referent to which all meaning in recorded media revolves is deferred and made perpetually unavailable.

— X —
"An imaginative
function that allows
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Tone works with noise in relation to information, messages, codes, and meaning, challenging the valorization of message over material, communication over noise and meaning over code. In this sense, Tone makes the functionality of text or language meet the disfunctionality of machines as producers of meaning ensuring a direct affective aesthetic experience (LaBelle, 2006). His specific way of mutating pieces of information or material into another articulates an imperative to transgress the hierarchical structures by which meaning operates. The conversion of image, text or code into a systematic progression of noise undermines the ability for meaning to piece back together the immanent shattered forms of sound.

In this sense, Tone's work does not only reveal the inherent error or noise in playback media, but by driving playback tools into territory where undesired elements of the media become the focus of music creation, it exhausts the residual outcome of reproduction, defying the move towards recuperated meaning.

In his work, Yasunao Tone has found a way to deviate from the original purpose of the CD player thereby developing a totally new field he calls "paramedia". He describes it as a kind of parasitic technology that alters existing languages leading altogether to different significations (Cox & Warner, 2004). He explains that by blocking one or two bits of the information that is written in the CD, the information is apparently distorted but actually it becomes totally different (p. 341). Tone's deviation of technology challenges and expands the medium's purpose. He takes the passive and transparent tools of playback and manipulates, cracks, and sometimes breaks them into new forms for creating original compositions, unique performance tools and new instruments (Caleb, 2009). He also incorporates the element of difference and opposition in his work through the misuse of

this reproduction media. As part of the experimental scene, he belongs to the minority that diverges from the dominant order therefore his practices seek to transform rather than reflect a given order through the exercise of freedom. By not knowing the outcome, not being totally in control, and accepting that randomness, the exercise of freedom is constantly present in his indeterminate compositions and performances.

The most obvious example of how his work enacts the pendular movement between popular and avant-garde is his deviation practice of technology: "A new technology or a new medium appears, and the artist usually enlarges or deviates the use of the technology (...) the manufacturers always force us to use a product their way. A medium always has some telos; however, people find a way to deviate from the original purpose of the medium and develop a totally new field. (Cox & Warner, p. 244) This form of appropriation by the artist is re-appropriated by the media and so on. These deviations make visible the infinite possibilities of a future-to-come.

While Tone's cracked CD technique is the first thing that strikes the public in his performances, what I would like to highlight is how through the appropriation of technologies he suggests the reinvention of political subjectivities through the construction of new meanings.

By defying determinate composition techniques and misusing technology, Tone expands the expressive possibilities of enunciation and communication of his medium. His practice attempts to challenge legitimate ways to make and listen music, therefore it is in the order of the immediate sensory experience that this effect is revealed. His music requires a movement of de-identification. In the case of the listener, he assigns the audience with an active rather than a contemplative role by allowing infinite ways to appreciate and give meaning to a work.

Experimental practices in music have an imaginative function that allows a community to define itself in terms of division and participation. This leads a society to project new paths and reconfigure its codes articulating open spaces of confrontation in which power relations are constantly being challenged. A close reading of Tone's work reveals how these artistic practices generate political subjects both in the field of art/music and in relation to the whole community, not because they are explicitly related to a position in a given social order, but because they allow and suggest different ways of distribution of the sensible space (Rancière, 2009).

This shows how music is a space where the social imaginary can be reconfigured. David Panagia (2009) explains that this happens in the emotional level (to which every human being has access) and it is in the emotional level as well, where art is conferred of a democratic sense since it allows the development of a political community through the realization of spaces that express a community's most present views; views that perhaps haven't been translated into laws or institutions yet, but that give a very specific shape to each society.



“META-NOISE”

Represents a rupture for the listener because its a different musical receptivity than other musical performances.



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