

Chapter 14

Language Games: Yasunao Tone and the Mechanics of Information

Soundscape composition relies upon the belief that the “meaning” of sound must always lead to the truth: the primary soundscape tells no lies. Thus, soundscape speaks a universal language while remaining particular and specific; and soundscape work strives toward harmony by listening to the environment as a trace or embodiment of universal life. “The drive toward synchronicity and harmony is elemental and universal so it becomes comprehensible that the ‘hidden’ harmony without ourselves provides us with the strength to find the ‘hidden’ harmony in the cosmos and universe”¹—inner, bodily space aligned with the inner, cosmic space through tonal sympathy.

Acoustic ecology raises the lingering issue around sound’s ontological status, privileging sound’s elusiveness to the particulars of language and the specifics of cultural meaning. By seeking universal truths, acoustic ecology defines sound by its ability to “take us back to a world in which the barriers between self and objects are dissolved.”² As music moves closer to sound, as can be seen in the developments of experimental music of the last forty years, and into sound art, we can witness this further—that sound is often understood to step aside from the denotative, banal, and quotidian tongue, finding its force in the connotative as often defined through sensation and the emotive, in the trembling of listening and the vibrations of physical matter.

Acoustic ecology epitomizes an acoustical epistemology that embraces sound as ephemeral, elusive to language, sensorial and primary, while at the same time searching to discursively categorize, analyze, and legislate sound: to locate its situatedness within a cultural time. This seems to take us back to Cage’s own paradox: of liberating sound from the saddle of musical referentiality to hear sound as it is, while at the same time repressing the significations all sounds carry with them, as culturally determined. The paradox though is at the fore of an experimental practice that seeks to *discover* how sounds mean: Cage’s problematic is not so much

contradictory but an experiment in pursuing sound, seeking out its definitions and where it may lead. In this regard, discursive tussles that attempt to resolve Cage's own paradox seem to fall short in identifying the paradox itself as part of his practice, and also, as part of a general engagement with auditory experience, which seems to unavoidably remain bound to speak toward essentialist and universal experience while navigating through cultural spheres in which such experience is given specific meaning. Does characterizing sound as essential ephemera afford us the chance to create refuge from the tensions within specified, cultural meanings? Do such sonorous leaps of faith aid in transcending the inherent difficulties of social mortality? Following acoustic ecology, does sound offer a last exit on the highway of culture that falls short of delivering up the sought-after "zone of silence," the Ursound of our primordial orchestra? To follow the emanation of all sound back toward where it originates, as our own womb of sonorous beginning?

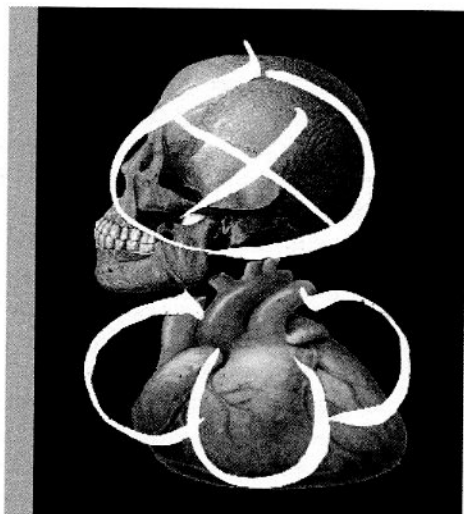
As James Lastra points out, sound is marked both by its presence *and* its absence, for "at an 'original' sound event we all recognize that each auditor gets a slightly different sense of the sound, depending on his or her location and the directedness of his or her hearing," which seems to imply that "there is no strictly definable 'original' event" and that "every hearing is in some way absent."³ Therefore, to a certain degree it is impossible to define a sound outside of a particular manifestation as fully present. In this way, sound is always understood and experienced as being integrated and originating within the specifics of a given moment, from a particular condition, whether that sound is live or recorded, spoken or sung—for "the historical happening of the sound event, its spatio-temporal specificity, always appears to escape our apprehension."⁴ For Lastra, the "fullness" of sound partially escapes being present to our listening, because it can never be fully grasped in all its completion. Instead, it remains bound to an unknowable plenitude, an unlocatable origin, while in the same move delivering up a sense of total presence. The absence of sound is at one and the same time its presence. As he summarizes, "we need not relinquish the original, the real, or the authentic, but we must recognize that these experiences and values, too, are products of historically defined conditions, and that their emergence, like the emergence of representations of those phenomena, follows certain rules."⁵ For acoustic ecology, we might ask: why is it necessary at this historical stage to create the very possibility of an authentic listening predicated on the Ursound of its original birth? It is obvious that Schafer and soundscape work seek an escape route from the noise of the world to replenish perception with the fullness of sound's harmonious potential. That it strives against sound's haunting absence by reclaiming an imaginary fullness of presence uncovers a pervasive need to locate lost meaning: the primary voice of an imaginary song. What must be emphasized is that the seemingly contradictory and paradoxical move across sound's essential and cultural meanings occur precisely through a cultural opening or possibility that supplies the very language of the essential: that is to say, sound's categorization as ephemeral,

replenishing, and primary phenomena coming to us from a cosmic, mythological origin occurs *through* the cultural production of things like musical composition and its discourse, however academic or esoteric.

Peripheries

Soundscape work, as I've argued, makes available the intensities and complexities of location and its sounds by accentuating difference, displacement, alien relation; that is, by surprising the ear with sounds from afar, or from too close. Thus, it emphasizes sound by being true to the found: the integrity of soundscape work is that it attempts to tell the truth, to locate origin, capturing, harnessing, finding, and researching the environment, its inhabitants, and delivering up its ecological reality. Soundscape work tries to be honest to a given location and what is found there, to reveal the path to inner journey, without labyrinths or tricks. In doing so, though, it may in the end overlook its own contradictions and their productive potential: that is to say, the alien relation, the displacement, and the difference may be utilized as operative terms in making work, as labyrinthine journeys that immerse a listener not so much within a plenitude of poetics but within a system of confrontation: where sound's absence may speak. The artist Yasunao Tone explores such strategies by implementing difference and discrepancy, noise and its features, as makers of meaning. Tone's work charts the peripheries of meaning by introducing noise into the equation. Whereas soundscape work aims to minimize "translation" so as to get at the real, Tone embraces translation as an overall strategy. Such interest plays out throughout his career, from early projects and compositions employing graphic notation that lend to stimulating an array of interpretive results, as in his work *Anagram for Strings* (1962), to later works, such as *Molecular Music* (1983), based on translating or transmuting live projected images into sonic events. For Tone, forms of mutating one piece of information or material into another articulates a greater impulse or imperative to transgress the hierarchical structures by which meaning operates. Converting image or text or code into a systematic progression of noise, Tone undermines the ability for meaning to arrest the very material output of his own work, to piece back together the shattered form. Tone's "interest is not in disclosing, but in exhausting"⁶ the residual outcome by continually countering the move toward recuperated meaning.

With his more recent work, translation is cultivated so as to arrive at increasingly diverse forms of noise. Like many of his works, his recent project *Man'yōshū* begins with text, here with the artist inputting eighth-century Japanese poems (from the *Man'yōshū* anthology) into the computer. Working with these, a library of 2,400 sounds is created by using computer software (C-programming)⁷ whose combinations and permutations correspond to the 4,516 poems of the anthology itself. This aural translation of the Chinese characters rewrites the visuality of language into a sonic equivalent. Working with translation systems that use language



Yasunao Tone, *Musica Iconologos*, 1993. Coding of images, Chinese characters superimposed on images, from which the characters are derived. left: a Chinese character “meng” (meanings: the first month of the year, first born boy) right: a Chinese character “si” (meanings: to think, thought).

to create sound, the *Man'yoshu* audio work⁸ follows from his previous *Musica Iconologos* (1992). This project was based on using the words from an ancient Chinese text and translating them also into sound. To achieve this though, Tone converted the characters of the text first into pictures found from various sources, such as a baby eating and a man holding his arms out. Each image mirrors the original characters, which in themselves are ideogrammatic rather than strictly phonetic. He then scanned the images into the computer, transforming them into digital code: 0's and 1's that were then further transformed into sound waves. The work thus creates a sound file out of the original text. As Tone proposes, the text is now no longer about delivering a message but about producing an addition, for “when you play the CD what you receive is not images as message, but sound which is simply an excess.” This excess functions to strip away the original referent (text) so as to arrive at pure noise, for there is no longer any message, any original host to which the parasite of sound may play: the CD is parasite without host.

For live performances, Tone has used this CD, and the sound library from the *Man'yoshu* project, by treating, abusing, or “wounding” CDs: by puncturing holes, scratching the surfaces, covering the CD laser with Scotch tape, the CDs are manipulated like a primary matter, performed as brut technology furthered by his use of the CD player as an instrument: speeding up, slowing down, skipping across CD tracks, spitting out fragmented and frenetic noise that not so much

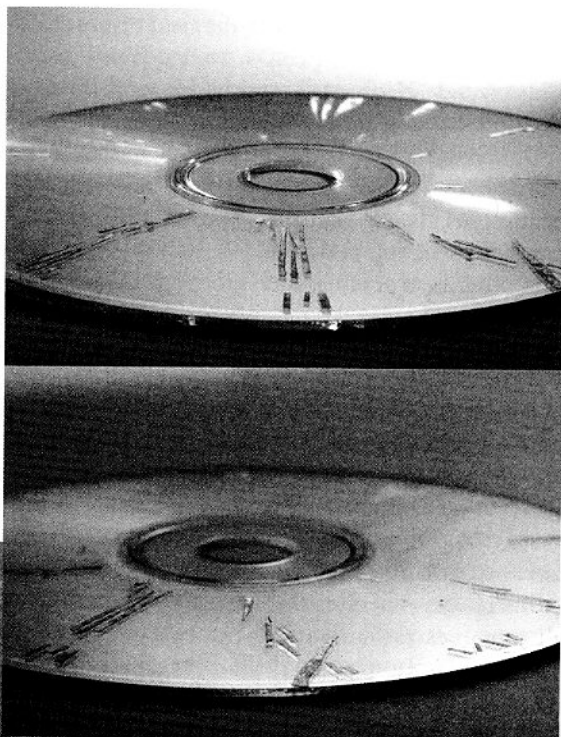
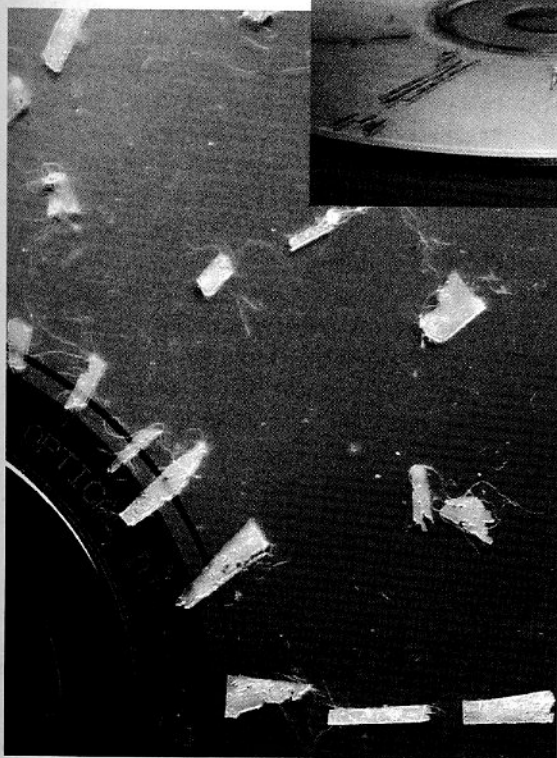
destroys as adds a further layer to the original sounds. What is left is another form of articulation, a highly brutal orchestration of textual material, of code and its translation, technologized as a unit of data fed across the flickering electronics of the CD eye that grabs hold of cut-up information—where the functionality of text meets the disfunctionality of broken machines.

The play with pure noise for Tone is always in relation to information, messages, codes, and meaning—in essence, to the hierarchy of language that values message over material, communication over noise, meaning over code. Tone's *Parasite/Noise*, presented at the Yokohama Triennial in 2001, further staged language as noise by situating it within an exhibition context. Functioning as an altered audio guide to the exhibition, *Parasite/Noise* consisted of headsets that “play a text [passages from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* project] read aloud which has nothing to do with the exhibited works themselves,”¹⁰ thereby creating disjunction between what is seen and what is heard, between the “meaning” of the art work witnessed and the meaning of the words heard. As Tone posits, the work is a “pseudo audio guide” that uncovers such guides as interfaces between audience and art, and further, between sound and its referent. For Tone, this interface offers the chance not so much to convey the appropriate message but to redirect meaning by sabotaging the one-to-one equation—of what the Museum says and what the artwork does, of what the voice states and what one sees. Here, the official language of the art exhibition is short-circuited through what Tone terms “paramedia”—a kind of parasitic technology altering existing languages to lead to altogether different significations. For the work functions as excess, as secret static inside the exhibition experience, amplified through a visitor's journey in and around the space and its informational discrepancies. The work introduces unpredictability, or rather, forms of mistake that generate new meaning. As in the *Musica Iconologos* CD and his *Solo for Wounded* CD, from 1997, the Yokohama project looks for routes out of the idea of an original work, or more so, from the point of origin: the primary source, the original meaning, the grand referent to which all meaning revolves is indefinitely deferred and made perpetually unavailable.

Noise Aesthetics

Tone's *disinforming* projects harness noise as potential for other forms of communication, not of messages but of pure drive, not of content but of form. Such methods, though, inadvertently fall back upon how one might approach acts of communication, inserting the glitch into information theory. Recalling Tone's involvement with Group Ongaku in the late 1950s and 1960s, along with his Surrealistic leanings, noise may be paralleled with methods of collage, which break conventional readings of images, words, and objects. Here, techniques of “making strange” the familiar leads to rupturing the seemingly natural world of signs. The

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Yasunao Tone, *Solo for Wounded CD*, 1997. Treatment of CD surfaces. Photo by Gary McCraw.

language of noise inserts into the field of musicality signifying ruptures—as witnessed in groups like P16.D4, Hafler Trio, PGR, The Haters, Throbbing Gristle, Einstürzende Neubauten, and Nurse with Wound, whose sonic forays not only define a cultural moment but new musical possibilities. All coming to the fore from the late 1970s through the 1980s, and generally aligned within the Industrial music context, these groups intensify the sonic palette by combining punk sensibilities, art theory, agit-prop tactics, and new technologies. Appropriating and sampling existing audio, and building lo-fi electronics, home-built percussion and other instruments, such groups, while operating along different trajectories, point toward noise as a new musical language for expressing antagonism and hostility toward the status quo. Yet, the very content of much of this work rides on its very texture, supplying lyrical content with the promise of disruption delivered by the sheer deployment of noise: noise serves to literally embody musical intent.

The production of noise finds its pure objectification in the works of Aube, Japanese artist working throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and aligned with the general wave of Japanese Noise Music begun in the 1980s. His work is directed by a strict appropriation of a single object: water fan, plastic material, fish bowl, fluorescent lamps. Applying various electronics, originally with consumer guitar pedal effects and other small electronics, the single object is used to pull out, produce, and extract all possible noises. Aube abstracts the found object, turning the domestic landscape into a volumetric and controlled noise machine.

As in Tone's technological, paramedia methods, what such work produces is not only a shock to the musical ear but a shock to the operations of information by recasting objects, instruments, and musical materiality into other forms, usages, and meanings—and ultimately, mobilizes the potential of noise to communicate the uncommunicable, summarized by Paul Lemos from the group Controlled Bleeding: "I have no interest whatsoever in physical violence—no attempt is to channel mental and emotional violence into a creative medium. It reflects the frustration that comes in realizing one's own inability to affect the political system, and one's own insignificance in the scope of the masses—their are no complaints or solutions suggested."¹¹ In this regard, there is no message *per se*, no meaning relying upon an existing system of code, but a sidestepping of such systems through the mechanics of noise and their machines. In this regard, noise seems to veer off the path of cause and effect, for it does not so much signal change, or announce the new, but rather occupies the space between: following Tone, it is a parasite on the field of language, working on the territory defined by code, but producing an entirely different result than meaning, one of noise. While Jacques Attali develops a reading to noise as one heralding the coming transformations, revolutions, and alterations in the symbolic system—of musical languages, economic structures, societal relations—what Tone, and others propose is noise as a meta-operation: it directs a certain understanding onto the field of the symbolic, onto the territory of code, without putting into practice the very code. It directs the ear not to escape routes or alternatives, to "complaints

suggestions," but to the mechanics at work in the system. Here, a theory of noise is defined by its ability to remain an operation rather than a sign, to always remain a pure drive away from heralding anything. In listening to Tone's informational parasitic manipulations, noise does not seem so much to function as a "simulacrum of murder," enacting on the terrain of the symbolic, a battle with meaning, but rather to skirt the arresting systems of signification that require and rely upon meaning.

Out-of-Sync

Tone's pseudo audio guide relies upon our own tendency to match what we see with what we hear—to complete the picture by synchronizing our senses into a total perceptual truth, and further, to believe our senses. Through methods of translation, intervention, and the dysfunctional, excess is inserted into the equation, disrupting through a kind of overwriting the communicational promise of listening. Incorporating Benjamin's *Arcades* project into the work seems to further Tone's usurping of the one-to-one equation of textual information. Structured as an investigative probing of the contemporary urban condition as found in the motif and reality of the Parisian Arcades of the 1930s, Benjamin's unfinished work is a kind of kaleidoscopic transversal of the city itself: fragmentary, simultaneous, multiple, full of detail and yet radically incomplete, immersive and labyrinthine, the writing lends a dizzying effect to a reader's experience.

On another level, the Yokohama project gains in effect by employing the use of headphones, for headphones define a very different acoustic reality to that of our physical position. They intervene by imposing a given soundtrack across one's sense of place. Headphones play a crucial part in *Parasite/Noise*, for they aid in the transposition of one reality onto another, and the fostering of an alteration of truth. They situate listeners inside the actual *and* the virtual, the live and the recorded, thereby leading them through a labyrinth of information and its ultimate lack of cohesion. One walks through the exhibition, approaching artworks, unaware that what one is hearing—in the form of Benjamin's labyrinthine cataloging of the urban environment, itself a maze without a center—is totally unconnected to the exhibition. One looks for connections, and most likely finds them, by believing in the mechanism, in the mechanics of information and its control: that what I hear provides me with insight into what I see.

The use of headphones, and the making of what we might call a "soundscape of the mind," is used most poignantly and repeatedly in the work of Janet Cardiff. Her project *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* (1999) brings to the fore headphonic space as catalyst for the mixing of realities by situating the body in a complicated time and space. Indicative of her sound walks, *The Missing Voice* consists of a prepared audio recording that participants listen to while walking. The recordings operate by directing them on a walk, in this case, around the East End of London. Listening to a woman's voice telling you which way to turn, what to

look for, and referring to sights and sounds of the city unsettles one's sense of awareness: we hear the city (recording) but sounds do not link up to what we are actually seeing (real). Staging such a jag in time and space, our sense of self is unsettled, for the instability of reference leads to an uncertain reality, where the body literally falls out of time: as a participant, one has no sense of destination, no sense of ultimate aim; instead, listening, we surrender to the voice, encountering the uncertainties and fluctuations of meaning. Such uncertainties are extended through the voice we hear, which stages a "murder mystery" in which fragments of clues are given that never completely add up. This is compounded by the multiplication of voices and narrators, all of which contribute to a schizophrenic rupture, for each voice breaks apart the singularity of perspective and understanding. "One speaks a clipped voice and guides you through the city, another narrates in a confessional mode. Still another speaks in the detached third person and yet another sounds highly mediated as she talks into a portable recorder."¹² In this way, the walk is both an auditory experience and a language game in which a listener becomes entangled in an uncertain reality.

Cardiff transposes one acoustical space onto another—I hear location through its past recording, while confronting its current state or condition: a car zooms by but I hear something else on the headphones. Place is displaced and then, through an acoustical sleight-of-hand, replaced, made concrete through temporal encounters. Here, interaction is not so much brought to the fore through my making something happen—rather, I am inserted into an active situation in which my own movements, my own listening, my own encountering of overlapping narratives falls in and out of synchronization. Out of sync is spatial, temporal, and information-based: I'm on a street that is no longer confined to visual referent; time is agitated through the overlapping and intersecting of different presences; and my understanding of where I am, what I'm doing and where I'm going is given a jolt, making uneasy my sense of location—and, more important, as to what or whom to trust.

Cardiff's play relies upon the headphonic, as a psychological opportunity to literally split the listening body: to create an envelope in which to unhinge time and place, dislocate one's bearings. The artist Christina Kubisch, in turn, often puts to use headphones and their locational potential to arrive at forms of more intimate listening. Working as a musician and artist since the late 1970s, Kubisch's sound installation work is often concerned with positioning a listener within a nexus of acoustical elements. Using electromagnetic cables and special induction headphones, the artist creates environments in which sound is channelled through networks of cables wrapped around trees and climbing up walls and around pillars, forming a loose sculptural presence through which a visitor walks. Sound is transmitted from the cables and to a person's headphones, creating a sensitive space of listening, for volume changes quite dramatically as one is either near or far from a cable, mixing sounds by one's movements through and among the cables, each of which may contain variations on a sound source.



Christina Kubisch, *Oasis*, 2000

Orchestrating sound and space, Kubisch invites a listener into a seemingly private world of sound, where headphones and a multiplicity of sound sources seem to magically invade a space without leaving a trace: invisible, delicate, intimate, sounds come from all around, trickling into one's ear, fading in and out as one discovers all the points of possible listening, all the gathered compositions that continually shift. Here, headphones surprise a listener; as with Cardiff, Kubisch harnesses the total intimacy of headphones to create juxtaposed splits: where the sounds of animals in a forest appear on the terrace of the Hayward gallery in London, or within a basement gallery in Pittsburgh. Such dichotomies startle the ear by figuring imaginary events that appear only within the private domain of the individual ear, operating by what Kubisch calls "creative listening," in which "the structure of the composition is combined with sequences of tone and movement . . ." where "the audience is able to move freely between various acoustic fields . . . enabling them to discover ever new and individual sound combinations."¹³

Informational Splits

For Tone, information is of paramount concern. The transposition of one reality onto another at the core of soundscape composition, for Tone, does not so much inaugurate a journey into the Ursound, the primary origin where truth resides,

but positions one on the surface of an uncertain reality. This is spatial, as far as noise and headphonic space force us out of sync, and informative, where the message is always free from referent, as oscillation between presence and absence. As discussed, recorded place mingles with actual place to spark a rich production of the imagination. One is aware of the distant while recognizing its disjunction with the immediate. Tone's *disinforming* system marks this transposition as potentially subversive, because what one hears may not actually be as innocent as it sounds, where the production of noise may cast light onto the governing modes by which information is channelled, given access, and deemed accurate. Tone's *Parasite/Noise* is just that: a production of noise that feeds off the channels of information, creating a view onto meanings at work. This difference could be stated as noise's potential. Whereas Bernhard Leitner's *Headscapes* is a physiognomic and neurological space for creating spatial articulations through the movement of a purely sonic figure, Tone's *Headscapes* is one of critical agitation: a noisy figure that plays havoc with meaning.

Fiction or Fact?

Tone's audio work cracks open sound's production to reveal the inherent confusions, where its absence produces not so much repressed trauma but positive glimpses onto multiplicity, difference, pure static. His work feeds off text and language in order to reveal, to pull back another layer of meaning as a sonic rewriting, accentuating that sound and its referent may not always be aligned, that sound and its origin may not always be as present and benevolent as one imagines.

What Tone reminds acoustic ecology, and the work of soundscape composition, is that to tell the truth about a place does not necessarily occur through opening the gateways of recording, relying on the magic mimesis of microphones and digital memory, for recording by nature is always already a form of mediation, writing, and production: it is information determined by the mechanism of technology, the displacement and placement of one location on to another, the making strange of sound's origin by alienating it, all of which could be heard as forms of noise, which may in the end only highlight the power of forms of fiction to deliver truth. Tone's use of technology, mediation, and code and its messages fixes itself on the moment where simulation becomes its own reality, code its own message, noise the origin of sound's essence. His productions of noise, of pure glitch, which Torben Sangild defines as "the beauty of malfunction . . . focus[ing] on . . . irrationality, inefficacy and absurdity in digital technology,"¹⁴ echoes Achim Szepanski when he defines digital noise as "clicks and cuts . . . [which] are omnipresent and non-referential . . . point[ing] to something else. . . Here, one hears the in-between, the leaps that connect loops and transitions."¹⁵ Technological noise does not so much signal cause and effect, but operates as a metasignal, of connectivity, of transition, of interface: and the music of noise, a parasite spinning its own network.