

Noise: Tone, Paramedia and Multiplicity

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Abstract

Noise: Tone, Paramedia and Multiplicity explores the influence of Michel Serres' writing around noise, along with Dick Higgins' concept of intermedia, on Fluxus artist Yasunao Tone's work. Here I discuss Tone's audiovisual performance at the UTS Music.Sound.Design Symposium in 2008, drawing on my own discussions with the artist as well as his writing and that of Higgins and Serres. I show not only that Tone's use of noise in performance is based on Serres' theory of the *parasite* but, further, that his work serves as an exemplar of Serres' metaphysics of noise. In his book *Genesis*, Serres proposes a metaphysics of noise that emphasises multiplicity. He argues that *noise* – a particular use of the term that he coins and I will explain – forms a backdrop to all that is meaningful. This is demonstrated in Tone's performance, which involves the artist copying Chinese characters at random using a WACOM tablet, his transcriptions projected before the audience and used to indeterminately influence a Max/MSP based software system producing audio through an eight channel surround system. Further, I argue that Tone's work can best be understood as a performed encounter with *noise*.

Key words: Paramedia, tone, multiplicity

INTRODUCTION

I organised for Yasunao Tone to attend the UTS Music.Sound.Design Symposium in 2008 and it is the performance he gave as part of that event I will discuss in this paper. Tone is well known for his live performances using prepared CDs but has also produced a significant body of work based on the use of a WACOM tablet to transcribe Chinese characters into noise, including his performance at UTS. The performance, based on one he gave for Lovebytes 2007 in Sheffield, England titled *495,63*, involved the artist transcribing a series of Chinese characters in Japanese calligraphic style. The characters were both projected on a screen in front of the audience and fed into a Max/MSP based software system, which in turn produced a complex flood of noise using an eight channel surround audio system. The performance lasted almost an hour and by the end most of the audience had left. It was in witnessing this that I began to consider Tone's work in new ways.

Meeting Tone for the first time at Sydney Airport in 2008 I asked him how his concert in Melbourne went. Organising for him to attend the symposium I had booked his flight through Melbourne as he wished to perform there. He said that the PA was impressive, the venue had been full and to his knowledge no one had left during the performance.

Pleased things had gone smoothly, I told him that was great to hear, but he wasn't so sure. I asked why and he said, 'if no one leaves, is it really that interesting?'

It would be easy to suggest that Tone's comment was indicative of arrogance on his part. A disregard for the audience, maybe. Perhaps his way of saying, who cares if you listen? But I do not think any of these are the case. Instead, I find, it exemplifies Tone's interest in producing encounters with *noise*.

TONE

Tone is an artist who has worked with sound for decades and was involved with Fluxus. Caleb Kelly (formerly Stuart) offers a thorough account of the history of Tone's work in his essay 'Yasunao Tone's Wounded and Skipping Compact Discs: From Improvisation and Indeterminate Composition to Glitching CDs' (2002). Tone is now most well known for his performances using prepared CDs, to which he applies scotch tape and other preparations before playing them. This causes the CD players to fail and, rather than successfully play the recording on the CD, spit apparently random pitches and bursts of noise. In his book *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction*, Kelly has recorded Tone's explanation of how he developed the technique:

'I called my audiophile friend who owned a Swiss-made CD player and asked about it. It was a simpler method than I suspected. I bought a copy of Debussy's Preludes and brought it to my friend's place. By his engineer friend's suggestion, we simply made many pinholes on bits of Scotch tape and stuck it on the bottom of a CD. I had many trials and errors. I was pleased with the result because the CD player behaved frantically and out of control' (Tone cited in Kelly 2009, p.236).

Due to the sound he achieves with what he calls his *wounded CDs*, Tone's work has commonly been described as *glitch* – referring to the so called *post-digital* style of electronic music that developed in the 1990s and proliferated early this century – but this label represents at best a limited understanding of his work. He is, I find, focused on dealing with what exists outside meaning – that is, *noise*. To this end, his release *Musica Iconologos*, and in particular his explanation of it, is of interest here. He explains in his article 'John Cage and Recording' that to produce the release he scanned images and had a computer store the resulting data as sound files, which in turn were encoded to the individual CDs when they were manufactured (Tone 2003, p.12). He claims:

'Now, when playing the CD, what is received are not images as message, but sound that is simply an excess. According to information theory the resultant sound is nothing other than noise. As the French word for (static) noise, *parasite*, indicates, noise is parasitic on its host, that is, the message. But in this case there is no host, only a parasite on the CD. Therefore, this CD is pure noise. Technically speaking, the sound of the CD is digital noise' (Tone 2003, p.12).

Here Tone is referencing Michel Serres' theory of the parasite. Serres' theory suggests that parasitic noise exists with, and indeed in, every signal, with all meaning in the world, that 'mistakes, wavy lines, confusion, obscurity are part of knowledge; noise is

part of communication' (2007, p.12). This regard for the unmeaningful is central to the significance of Tone's practice. Nonetheless, I find Tone's claim that the CD is pure noise inaccurate. Even if the content of the CD is noise when produced, that it can then be listened to as music means it is in some way meaningful.

As Federico Marulanda notes in his essay 'From Logogram to Noise' in *Yasunao Tone: Noise Media Language*, writing about Tone's release *Wounded Man'yo 2/2000* – produced using the ancient *Man'yoshu* poems and a similar technique to *Musica Iconologos* – Tone's 'sonic transliteration of the *Man'yoshu* poems represents a deliberate effort to recuperate, and then dissipate, specific bits of information, leaving as a trace only noise' (Marulanda nd, 90). Specifically, Tone's work explores the dissolution of meaning that occurs in any act of transcription, demonstrating that both meaning and noise are part of all communication.

Therefore, as with *Musica Iconologos* and *Wounded Man'yo 2/2000*, it is possible to approach *495,63* and Tone's performance at UTS as works concerned primarily with the production and dissolution of meaning. Similarly, Tone's work with wounded CDs can be read in this way. For his performance in Sydney, Tone dedicated his attention to fastidiously copying Chinese characters from a book he picked up in nearby Chinatown earlier that day, choosing them at random and without being able to read them but attempting to transcribe them as accurately and beautifully, meaningfully, as possible. Each was wiped from the screen once complete, having offered some, seemingly indeterminate, input to the spatialisation of noise around the room that was carried out by the Max/MSP system, itself drawing on sound files stored on the computer's hard drive along with a live audio stream coming from a radio. Fitting its indefinite qualities, the piece Tone performed in Sydney was not even named because the name of its predecessor – *495,63* – refers to the call number of the library book Tone chose to transcribe for that performance. In Sydney he did not find a suitable book in the university library and so chose instead to make the most of the proximity of the venue to Chinatown and find one in a bookshop there instead.

PARAMEDIA

Despite the proliferation of academic discussion around Tone's work in recent years, there has been little examination of the role of Serres' theory in Tone's practice. As I have already shown, Serres' approach to noise and in particular his book *The Parasite* has had a marked influence on Tone.

In French, as well as, as Serres puts it, 'to eat next to' (2007, 7), parasite means noise, specifically static or interference. It is the significance of these multiple meanings that Serres explores in his theory of the parasite and Tone exploits in his work. He claims, 'what passes might be a message but parasites (static) prevent it from being heard, and sometimes, from being sent' (Serres 2007, pp.10-11). The parasite is interference as a kind of difference that exists in relationship to a given signal. It cannot exist independently. As Serres writes, 'the difference is part of the thing itself, and perhaps it even produces the thing' (2007, p.13). He refers here to Deleuze's theory of *difference*, not the difference between things but abstract difference as an underlying principle.

Tone has developed his own concept – *paramedia*. He uses it to refer to artistic practices, including his own, that employ technologies in ways which deviate from their intended use, parasitising the technology (Marclay & Tone 2006, p.344). Along with its relationship to Serres’ theory of the parasite, Tone’s paramedia can be approached as a development of the Fluxus concept *intermedia*.

Although often treated as synonymous with, or perhaps a precursor to, multimedia, the term intermedia was coined by Dick Higgins in the 1960s and refers to art that involves the crossing of boundaries between media – an often overlooked fact that is, as I will show, instructive when in explaining Tone’s work. Higgins explains the term in his essay 'Statement on Intermedia,' arguing that 'due to the spread of mass literacy, to television and the transistor radio, our sensitivities have changed' and as a result what he calls the 'intermedial approach' (1966) to the arts emerged, emphasising the dialectic between media.

Based on Higgins explanation, Tone’s paramedia is an extension of the notion of intermedia. He demonstrates the same interest in a variety of media common to many Fluxus artists. However, rather than emphasising dialectics between media, he emphasises a dialectic within media, a dialectic between signal and noise, host and parasite. Although, the dialectic between the host and a parasite is not a stable one for - 'the parasited one parasites the parasites' – the process of parasitism is ongoing’ (Serres 2007, p.13).

MULTIPLICITY

In his book *Genesis*, originally written in French, Serres proposes a metaphysics of noise that emphasises the multiple and encompasses all examples of noise, including the parasite (2009). He argues that 'noise cannot be a phenomenon; every phenomenon is separated from it, a silhouette on a backdrop, like a beacon against the fog' (Serres 2009, p.13). 'What are called phenomena alone are known and knowable', he claims (Serres 2009, p.18). Whenever sound is perceived it is surrounded by and drenched in noise. Importantly, though, in Serres’ conception noise precedes and underlies not only all sound, but everything.

Frances Dyson comments that the 'ceaseless movement' of noise 'between signal, music, rumor, and language unhinges any dialectic with which it is engaged, or to which it is applied' (Dyson 2009, p.188). This both offers some assistance in explaining the relationship of Serres’ theory to Tone’s work and articulates the difficulty faced in doing so because, inevitably, such a task involves communicating, meaningfully, theory and practice that is principally focused on exploring what lies outside the meaningful.

Explaining his concept of *noise*, Serres argues that 'the *noise* is incapable of differentiation, everything in it is indistinguishable' (2009, p.118). He uses an archaic French word, *noise*, meaning 'ado, strife, contention' (Serres 2009, p.141). This is in contrast to *bruit*, which is the French for noise in the more common auditory, scientific and information theory senses of the word (Serres 2009, p.141). In the English

translation of *Genesis*, *noise* is distinguished from other kinds of noise with the use of italics, as I have done here. His point is that if *noise* is what lies beyond meaning then it is necessarily, in any kind of pure form, not only indecipherable but inconceivable. This *noise* is distinct from but inclusive of noise in all other senses.

Noise, as conceived by Serres, is chaos, the undifferentiated, the possible. Consequently, the noises people hear are only ever at most a momentary suggestion of an all encompassing *noise* that exists as an inaccessible multiplicity. Serres argues that 'noises that come and go are contingent on an observer, they hinge on a listening post, on a channel, on an aperture, open or closed, door or window' (Serres 2009, 62-63). That is, noises depend on a subject, a listener or viewer. These noises, I find, in that moment in which they pierce right through me when I hear them, can give an inkling of the multiplicity but never constitute it themselves – when I hear something I regard as noise just in perceiving it I render it meaningful, even if only in the subtlest way, diffusing and discarding it. Specific noises are thus examples of noise that, for Serres, 'is a turbulence, it is order and disorder at the same time, order revolving on itself through repetition and redundancy, disorder through chance occurrences' (2009, 59). Turbulence is the closest individuals get to *noise*.

It is turbulence that Tone produces in drawing out *noise* in his paramedia explorations. He makes a cacophony in which meaning surfaces only to disappear once more, not a singular, determined, meaning but a range of potential meanings. Listening and watching, witnessing, Tone's performance in Sydney I found that I was confronted with a disjuncture between his *work*, which I could see, and the excess it created, which I could only hear – the characters he drew projected on a screen as signal and the noise heard as parasite. Bits of discernible radio transmissions, granulation and static bobbed to the surface only to disappear again, denied even a discrete source as they were strewn around the room using the multichannel setup. I was challenged to chart my own passage through the signals and noise that comprised the work, apprehending the *noise* along the way. Tone had constructed a situation in which he himself, as much as audiences, was confronted with *noise*. The *noise* his work produces is as much *noise* for him as it is for audiences, each of us left to attempt to parse it ourselves.

Noise is not a resource for Tone to draw upon, to aestheticise or recuperate – as, for instance, for musicians making noise-music or composers using aleatoric processes – it is the unmeaningful that occurs in and around the meaningful. In dialogue with the work of Serres and Higgins, Tone uses aesthetic, formal and procedural choices to create turbulence. He introduces indeterminacy in all these facets of his work to create a delicately balanced mess of meaning and noise, exposing himself and audiences to the other that is *noise*.

Transcribing Chinese characters using Japanese calligraphic technique and projecting them onto a screen before an audience comprised mostly of native English speakers at the UTS Music.Sound.Design Symposium, Tone performed the complexity of communication, the multiple literacies and processes involved. He showed the presence of noise in communication and the place of *noise* as ground to that communication.

Noise is, as exemplified in Tone's work, a fertile and nourishing outside that overflows any and all boundaries, productively challenging the confines of meaning, identity and individuality – a multiplicity full of potential meanings, which only form when found by audiences. I find, therefore, in interpreting Tone's comment that if no one leaves one of his performances then perhaps the work is redundant – overdetermined, too clear and successful in communicating an accepted meaning, too easily navigable and enjoyable and as such perhaps for him not that interesting.

Nevertheless, far from being disinterested in the reactions of audiences I find Tone to be acutely aware of the plurality of perspectives that comprise them. His work extends across the visual and auditory and moves between order and chaos, offering an opportunity to apprehend, if only for a moment, *noise* as it spills turbulently into the meaningful, known, world. He achieves this by avoiding codifying works with his own meanings. He evacuates meaning in favour of the parasite within and the *noise* around. He creates turbulence and in so doing allows for the multiplicity of meanings and noises that emerge in the process. Tone places himself in the role of messenger, attempting to translate and communicate, but refusing to offer a specific, intended, meaning and offering instead an encounter with *noise*.

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