

WIRED

Tricky

Return of the prodigal

Joe McPhee
Michel Chion

Digital dancehall
King Jammy to Cutty Ranks

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Tricky photographed by Jake Walters

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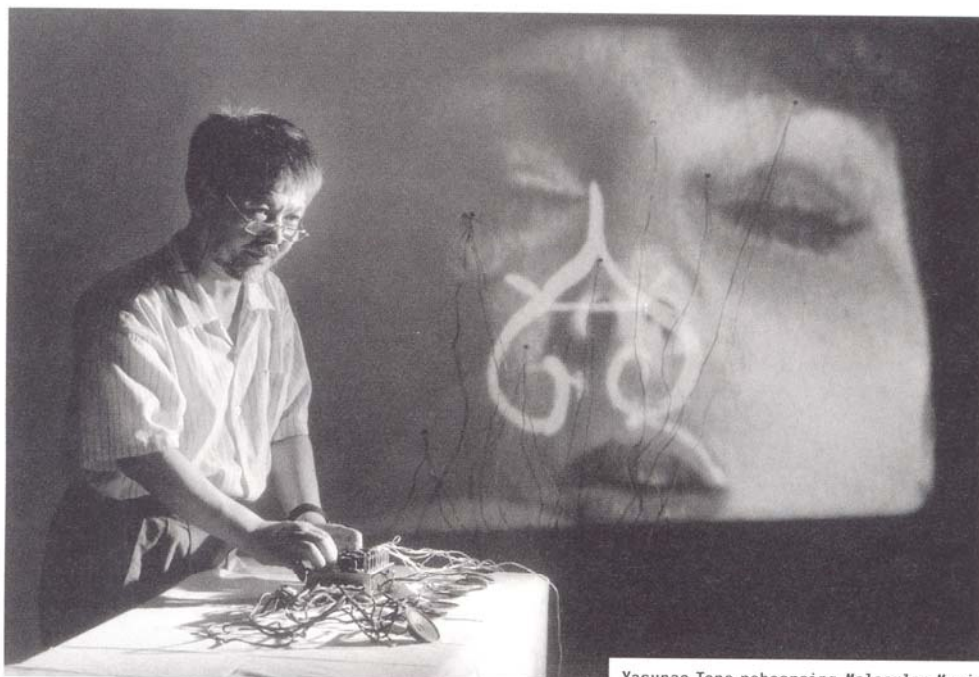
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Yasunao Tone rehearsing *Molecular Music*

Yasunao Tone: Noise Media Language

Various authors

ERRANT BODIES PRESS PBK+CD \$25

One imagines that the very idea of listenability means little to Japanese sound artist and intermedia conceptualist Yasunao Tone.

Aside from *Palimpsest*, his uncharacteristically mellow duo with Florian Hecker, the recorded documents of Tone's work are singularly brutal in their use of flat, textureless computer generated noise. In terms of a musical experience, they are intensely irritating, often virtually unlistenable. Most of what gets described as noise ends up as being musical to some degree – in its emotional venting, its deliberate attempt to create an anti-music, or perhaps in its performers' unconscious grounding in the dynamics of rock. There is always something meaningful that gets

conveyed. But Tone's noise, whether he's disrupting the information transferral process of CDs with Scotch tape or translating eighth century Japanese court poetry into frenetic glitch, is precisely targeted as a strategy to disrupt communication and to resist the construction of meaning, particularly language based meaning. In his intellectual rigour and the clarity of the linkages he creates with the historical avant garde, Tone is a very long way indeed from Wolf Eyes.

Noise Media Language is volume four in Errant Bodies Press's Critical Ear series (previous volumes have focused on Christof Migone and John Duncan). It's brief (just over 100 well-illustrated pages), but it manages to give a fuller account than any to date in English of the length and breadth of Tone's artistic concerns. Scholars and sympathisers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds

each contribute short essays on specific aspects of the work, and there's a short interview with the man himself. The book is handsomely illustrated with performance photographs and reproductions of graphic scores, and concludes with a very useful chronology, discography and bibliography. The book comes with an accompanying CD, though slightly disappointingly the pieces are all from performances in the 80s and 90s.

While most will have become aware of Tone in the 90s with the release of *Musica Iconologos* and *Solo For Wounded CD*, his career in the avant garde goes right back to the political and artistic ferment of early 60s Tokyo. The standout essays are those that shed light on these lesser-known phases. William Marotti chooses Tone's involvement in the improvisational unit Group Ongaku (though Marotti makes a strong case that they should

actually be referred to as the Music Group) alongside Takehisa Kosugi and Chieko Shiomi. Marotti sites Tone in the socio-cultural and intellectual context of early 60s Tokyo, and does sterling work in explicating the dense linkages between Tone's student fascination with the literature of surrealism, Group Ongaku's use of automatism as a musical process, and the wider artistic concern with "quodidial actuality". Dasha Dekleva's account of collaborative performance pieces with figures such as Hi-Red Center and Merce Cunningham is equally revealing and betrays an occasional and gratifying sense of humour – Tone's concern with precisely how works of art are mediated to an audience seems to be a thread that runs through his whole career. A great introduction to understanding why this specific noise annoys.

ALAN CUMMINGS

Great Satan's Rage: American Negativity And Rap/Metal In The Age Of Supercapitalism

Scott Wilson

MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS HBK £55

What happens to the gesture of artistic transgression when we find ourselves in a situation in which transgression becomes the law? This is the question that haunts Scott Wilson's book. When capitalism, or as he prefers "supercapitalism", embodies excess and transgression, sweeping away tradition in an orgy of creative destruction and destroying entire economies, the negations of many artists look like pale shadows compared to the work of the IMF and the World Bank. The traction that artistic transgression had is lost when those techniques are recuperated, to use the old 60s word, by a capitalism that is only too willing to commodify our dissent.

Wilson's unlikely and implausible answer to this question is to find in American rap and nu Metal of the 1990s a hyper-negativity that in its excess and self-disgust somehow ruptures with the rule of the commodity.

In an even more unlikely manoeuvre, Wilson reads this outburst of negativity, which he limits to a predictable list of mainstream artists (although the arch practitioner of such 'transgression', Marilyn Manson, is only mentioned in passing), as the flipside of the 'end of history' thesis promoted by Francis Fukuyama and other American followers of the conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss. Whereas the Straussians try to find some solution to contain the negativity left adrift by the end of history, Wilson argues that the 'rage' of American music in the 90s explores what Georges Bataille called 'unemployed negativity' for its own sake. While it might appear neat to equate Slipknot

with Bataille, it's difficult to make much of this comparison. In fact what seems more likely to be shared between the Straussians and this marketed transgression is cynicism with regard to audience, whether the American people are considered beneath the understanding of high politics or only worthy of recycled riffs on the theme of the unshockable hip versus the scandalised squares.

Trying to save the transgression model from this kind of cynicism, Wilson constantly searches for some uncommodifiable 'X' of excess in US rap and Metal. The result is a highly unstable combination of quasi-Baudrillardian pessimism, in which capitalism everywhere suborns and neutralises transgression, coupled to the old cultural studies model of the subversive consumer, in which somehow the consumer turns commodified music to their own ends.

The difficulty is that this matrix is part of the problem rather than part of the solution: it flatters both a sense of powerlessness (why not sell out if capitalism is the only game in town?) and a false sense of activity (my adolescent rage is rupturing with the system). By confining himself to the mainstream, Wilson locks himself into the contradictions of the commodity, torn between conformity and (pseudo-) dissent without thinking of the commodity as contradiction.

What Wilson also underestimates is the cartoonish or camp tone of transgression in rap and nu Metal. This is best captured in an exchange from Gregg Araki's film *Nowhere* (1997) in which a character tells the story of an old man dying and then being found half eaten by his faithful dog. His girlfriend replies "Dogs eating people is cool". Whether it's radical or subversive is another matter.

BENJAMIN NOYS