

YASUNAO TONE
Noise Media Language

With contributions by Robert Ashley,
Dasha Dekleva William Marotti,
Federico Marulanda, Hans Ulrich Obrist,
and Achim Wollscheid.

Digital music, performative technologies, and interventionist sound installation all come to the fore in the visionary work of Yasunao Tone. Since the early 1960s Tone has charted a vigilantly unique conceptual and aesthetic territory. Operating on the fringes of the Japanese art scene throughout the sixties as part of the avant-garde performance group Ongaku and the conceptual interventionist collective Hi Red Center, then as part of Fluxus, composing "events" and improvisational music, as well as compositions for Merce Cunningham's Dance Company (alongside John Cage), a member of Team Random (the first computer art group organized in Japan), Tone's work is unabashedly avant-garde. A recent recipient of the Prix Ars Electronica Golden Nica Prize in Digital Music, Tone continues today to spearhead a radical approach to artistic methods, engaging questions of noise, language, and systems of representation through the manipulation of digital mechanisms. Emphatically individual, politically suggestive, conceptually specific, Tone stands as an exemplary figure engaged in a progressively contemporary project.

Forming the fourth volume in the Critical Ear series, "Yasunao Tone - Noise Media Language" catalogues the artist's career through documentation of seminal projects, and raises pertinent issues related to digital media, computer-based art, and musical strategies. With contributions by Robert Ashley, Dasha Dekleva, William Marotti, Federico Marulanda and Achim Wollscheid, and an interview with the artist by Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Yasunao Tone - Noise Media Language" is an indispensable monograph on this enigmatic artist.

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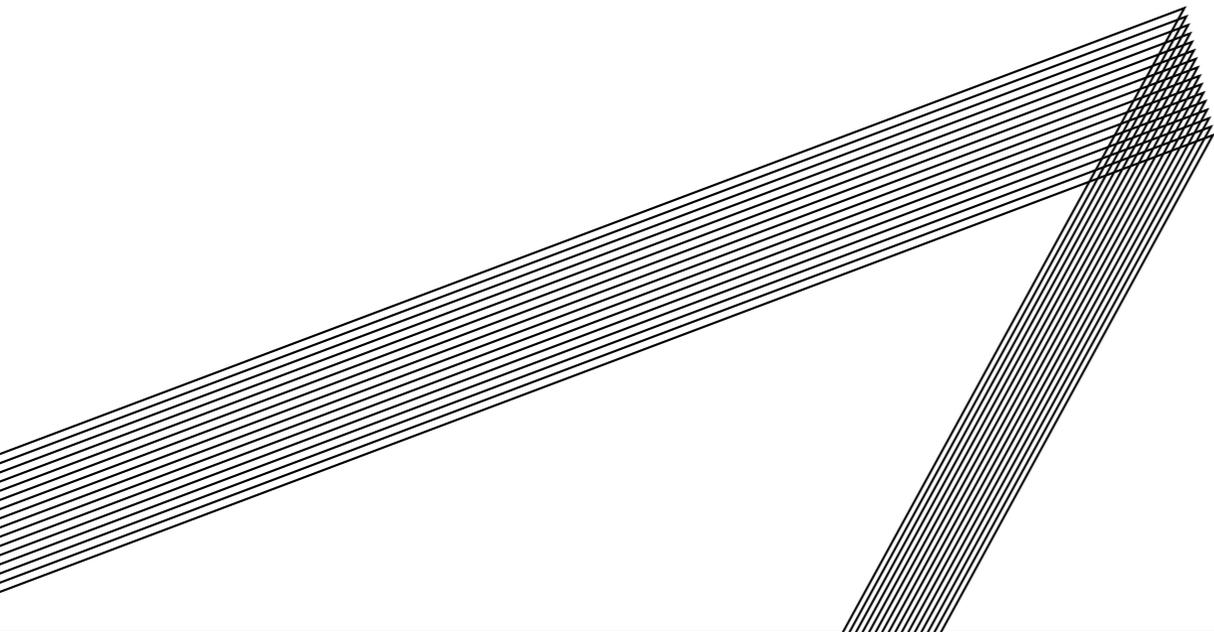


Errant Bodies Press

YASUNAO TONE

NOISE MEDIA LANGUAGE





**Sounding the Everyday:
the Music group¹ and
Yasunao Tone's early work**

by William A. Marotti

"The marvelous must be made by all,
and not by one alone."

Louis Aragon, "Challenge to Art"

YASUNAO TONE'S² early works encompass a bewildering variety of experiments in writing, art, composition and performance. While we can also identify within these works the first signs of his life – long interests in signification, sound, process and temporality, I propose to frame several within their moment of production – the explosive, playful exploration of art, politics and the everyday world in a time of mass protests and political transformations from the late 1950s through the 1960s – to recognize Tone's distinct contributions and participation within this insurgent cultural productivity. Briefly stated, this time period charts the take-off point for Japan's "high-growth economics" and the entrenchment of single-party rule, a rule strategically represented as beneficently guaranteeing growth's material rewards and consequent national prestige. And although growth returned Japan to regional and global prominence, it was as a nation born anew, one whose economic prosperity marked its departure from its recent past as inflictor and sufferer of violence, occupation, and hardship. Domestically, after the strikes and huge demonstrations leading up to the revision and renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty ("Anpo") in June of 1960, the state's embrace of high-growth economics and a new "low posture" defused the protests with an ostensibly non-confrontational, non-military national program promising material benefits for all: "income doubling" within the decade. The fact that this economic recovery and prosperity was directly linked to America's Cold War posture and post-1945 Asian wars did not blunt its effectiveness in diverting opposition and gaining widespread support for government policies.³

1. I am departing from the conventional rendering of the group's title as either "Group Music" or "Group Ongaku" for several reasons set forth later in the article.

2. Tone is the family name and Yasunao his given name. The name order is reversed from the Japanese for consistency within this volume.

3. Japan's initial economic recovery was through multi-billion dollar procurements from the Korean War, as well as the American efforts to safeguard Japan's Asian hinterland, a major contributing cause for escalating American involvement in Vietnam (ultimately yielding an additional several billion dollars for the Japanese economy). See Michael Schaller, *Altered States: The United States and Japan Since the Occupation* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

In 1956, the White Paper on the Economy proclaimed that the “end of the postwar” had been marked by the economic shift from mere enthusiastic recovery, now achieved, to a sober program of modernization and stable growth – one that would entail a variety of shared “burdens.” The takeoff of the economy and the advent of postwar mass culture in the fifties wrought tremendous changes in the everyday lives of millions of Japanese. Its myriad virtues were proclaimed by a hitherto unparalleled surge in advertising, while joint corporate and governmental efforts such as the New Life Movement mobilized citizens, especially housewives, to manage its more troublesome effects (simultaneously representing them as manageable on the family and local level).⁴ Events such as the imperial wedding of 1959 and the associated celebration of the crown prince and princess’s middle-class, nuclear family lifestyles, fused state, nation, imperial family, and mass culture together within a consumer present apparently immune from troubling historical connections. Thus, when the ruling party made its guarantee of material well-being the centerpiece of its political legitimacy in mid-1960, it moved onto a terrain already highly managed and depoliticized.

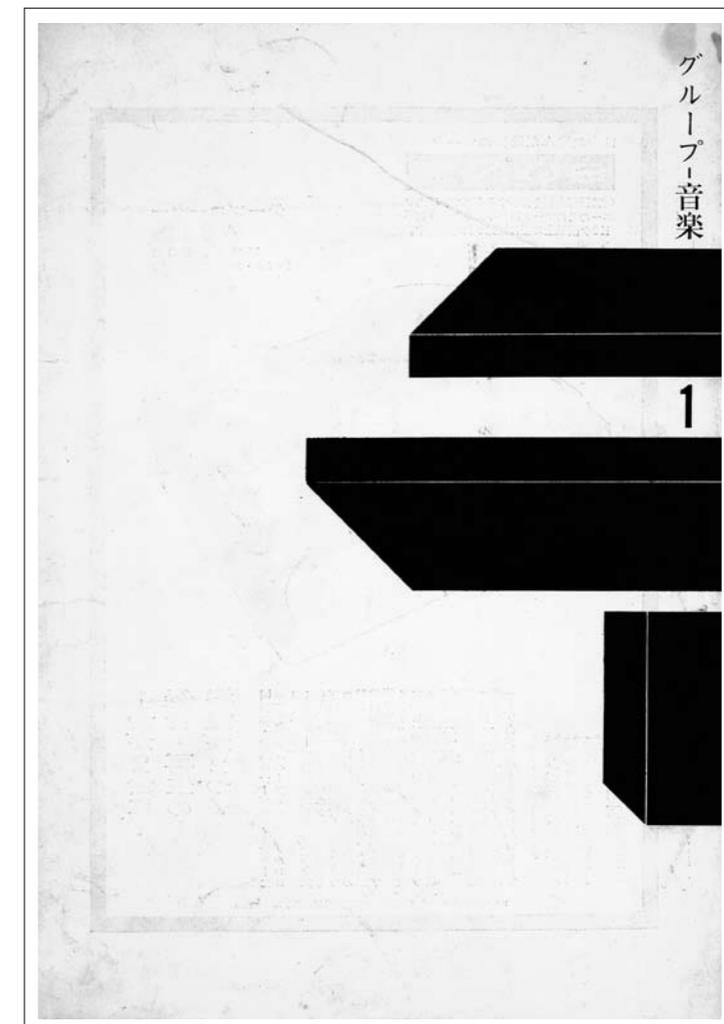
What does this have to do with art and music? This same time period marks a remarkably productive period for avant-garde production and performance; Tone’s activities fit within a wide diversity of experiments notable for their insistent disregard of formal conventions in the shared attempt to explore, interact with, and transform quotidian actuality. Individually and in groups, artists attempted to step beyond conventionalities to investigate the concrete structures and practices of the everyday world: its forms and sounds, its debris (relics of the economic expansion), its transforming lived spaces, and, at its base, the human body and its gestures, habits, and excesses. In Tone’s case, his entry into this developing avant-garde scene in Japan came through a developing interest in the historical avant-garde that was first realized in practice via his participation in the collective improvisational work of the Music group.

And while this sort of work was informed by (and participated in) international artistic and musical trends such as Concrete Music, Cage’s experiments, Pollock’s action painting, Art autre/Art informel and its creation of a local “sensation,”⁵ the avant-garde focus on the everyday world simultaneously inflected it with the particular, complex political relevance of that world for Japan ca. 1960. Its representation dominated by affirmative advertising,

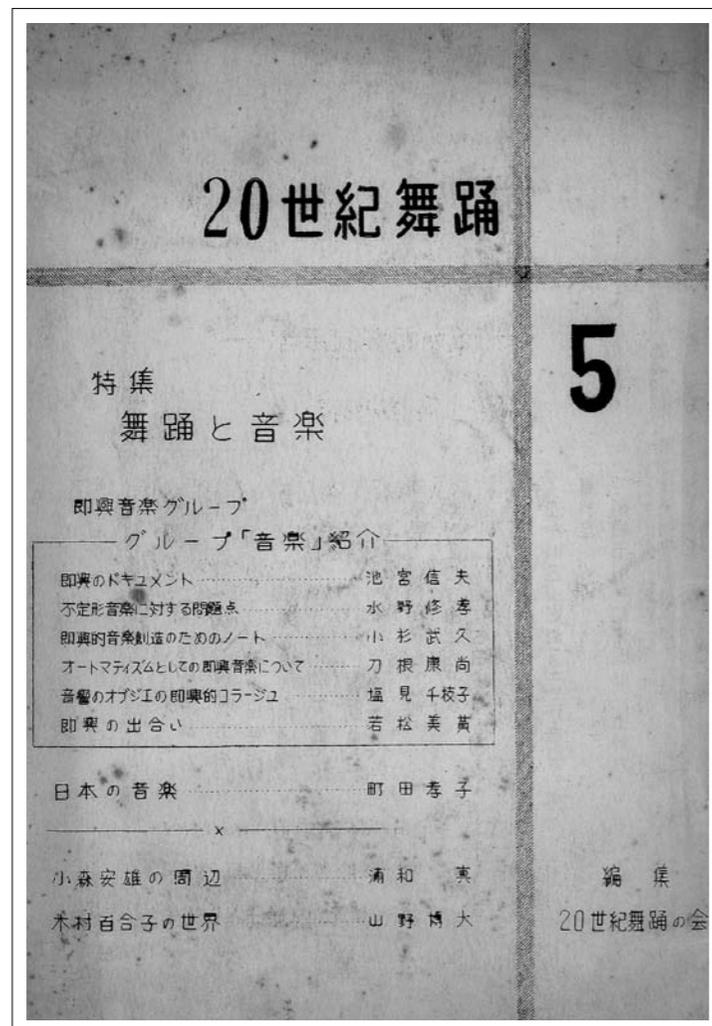
4. Simon Partner, *Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the Making of the Japanese Consumer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Takeda Hiroko, *The Political Economy of Reproduction in Japan: Between Nation-State and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2005). As scholars such as

Takabatake Michitoshi have pointed out, the limitations of neighborhood activism made protest emerging from them highly co-optable, contributing to the dissolution of protest following the Anpo protests. Takabatake Michitoshi, “Citizen’s Movements: Organizing the Spontaneous,” in J. Victor Koschmann, ed. *Authority and the Individual in Japan* (Tokyo: Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1978), 189-199.

5. The phrase is Takiguchi Shūzo’s. See Yoshida Yoshie, *Kaitaigeki no maku orite-roku jū nendai zen’ei bijutsushi*, (Tokyo: Zoukeisha, 1982) 73.



Cover,
“Group Ongaku,”
Issue # 1, 1961



Cover
"20 seiki Buyou,"
Issue #5, 1960

light journalism, and semi-governmental management, everyday life presented a potentially high stakes venue for artistic investigation – particularly one concerned with bringing out “actuality” and rejecting convention, hierarchy, management, and domination. It was paradoxically centered by the state as a depoliticizing focal point for politics, all the while remaining directly linked to a cold war military alliance with the United States that determined the form by which Japan would renew and continue its historical relationships with Asia. Although the art that engaged with this everyday world typically adopted a playful, rather than trenchantly critical, character – at least initially – the particular attractiveness of such play to the artists involved must be understood in part as partaking in the political charge inherent to such investigations. For Tone and his compatriots, however, such politics were inherent to their musical project.

Engagement with the Historic Avant-Garde

Yasunao Tone’s path into this particular nexus of art and performance both echoes and departs from the routes of many of his contemporaries and future collaborators. Tone’s engagement with the historic avant-garde and modernist movements, including Surrealism, was nurtured and expanded through contact with its original participants and commentators. His high-school interests in Japanese avant-garde poetry and prose of the 1920s and 1930s expanded into a broad interest in modernist works of the interwar period after entering the Literature program at Chiba National University (1953- 1957).

Tone especially recalls the influence of Assistant Professor Shigenobu Tsuneyoshi and instructor Kurita Isamu. At the university, Shigenobu led Tone and other students in a two-year ongoing project of translating Blanchot’s *La Part du feu*, and lectured on *L’Espace littéraire*.⁶ Kurita and Tone met informally on numerous occasions, during which Kurita elaborated upon aspects of as-yet-untranslated works by Bataille, particularly his anthropological reflections, “general economy,” and “philosophy of expenditure.”⁷ Kurita in turn introduced Tone to the contemporary active critics and poets of his own generation, including Ôoka Makoto, Tôno Yoshiaki,⁸ and Iijima Kôichi. Meanwhile, Tone continued to seek out copies of prewar avant-garde journals such as “Shi to Shiron,”

6. Shigenobu’s translation of the former was published in 1958.

7. Yasunao Tone, interview by author, 17 January 2006; personal communication with author, 2 February 2006.

8. Credited for reviving the hotly debated term, “anti-art” (*hangeijutsu*), through his March 2, 1960 review in the *Yomiuri Shinbun* of works at the 12th Yomiuri Independent exhibition in Tokyo.

“Ge.Gjggam.Prrr.Gjmgem,” “Bara•Majutsu•Gakusetsu,” and “Fukuikutaru Kafu-yo,” hunting down the traces of a suppressed Japanese avant-garde, including the work of Murayama Tomoyoshi and his associated group, Mavo.⁹ His wide-ranging studies culminated in a graduation thesis on the Japanese Surrealists, for which Tone conducted interviews with some of the principals of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, including Kitazono Katsue (1902-78),¹⁰ Takiguchi Shûzô (1903-79), Kihara Kôichi (1922-79), and Yamanaka Sansei (1905-77).¹¹ In considering domestic participation in international Surrealism, Tone still especially recalls Takiguchi’s comment during the interview that “we tried to be as faithful as possible to Breton’s doctrine, which, he confessed, was a mistake.”¹² By the time of his graduation in 1957, Tone was immersed in a set of debates on art, criticism, and the historic avant-garde at the very moment of their transformation in both practice and criticism. He had also notably reached this position principally through a serious and sustained engagement with the work of an indigenous avant-garde, reflecting historically on their own complex mediations and participation in an at-once local and international twentieth-century relation of art and politics.

The Politics of Improvisation

Tone’s subsequent path, ostensibly from literature to music, is in fact broader and more complex. It must be viewed within the broad-based theoretical rejection of formal boundaries, genres, and other commonplace assumptions across the entire field of artistic endeavor that particularly marked the late-50s and early 60s art scene. Yet the specificity of Tone’s artistic development illustrates the multiplicity of distinct theoretical and practical paths leading to participation within what was nonetheless a shared conversation across art forms and practices.

To attempt a conceptual and performative link between poetry and music was to risk at least a certain culturalist presumption of their unity, as classical poetry in Japanese¹³ is understood as poems/songs, or *uta*. Within the poetic avant-garde, the performance of Kitazono Katsue’s work at the time perhaps exemplified a further mis-step along the path between poetry and music: in the late 1950s his works were recited to musical accompaniment

9. In English, see Jennifer Weisenfeld’s *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1905-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Tone also recalls Murayama’s other claim to fame: his prewar Ninja pulp serials, which might be credited with the later boom in Ninja-related works post-WWII.

10. Especially notable as Kitazono has only a single published interview from his long career.

11. Tone’s best friend had chosen Hori Tatsuo’s work for a thesis topic, and, as Hori had been influenced by Philippe Soupault (with Breton and Aragon, one of the three founders of the magazine, *Littérature*, in 1919), was thus able to write on Soupault as well, while still satisfying the Japanese Literature concentration. Realizing that such a strategy would allow for additional latitude to take up broader research in his thesis, Tone cast about for a suitable topic. He later reflected, “I struck on the

idea of doing a literary history of Japanese Surrealism, and perhaps with that all of my preferences to date were born (laughs).” Yasunao Tone, unpublished interview by Takashima Naoyuki and Shimazaki Tsutomu, Oiso, 1991.

12. Yasunao Tone, personal communication with author, 24 January 2006. Takiguchi was a key translator and critical interlocutor of Breton in Japan. Miryam Sas more charitably describes Takiguchi’s complex negotiations with Breton as “[m]oving toward

in an operatic style (much to Kitazono’s annoyance).¹⁴ Tone’s path emerged neither out of culturalism nor direct assimilation, but rather from his specific understandings of the politics and productivity inherent in poetic and musical innovation.

Mizuno Shûko, Tone’s classmate from Chiba National University, had gone on to enter Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, or Geidai, and had been improvising with fellow musicology classmate Kosugi Takehisa, in what Tone describes as a “kind of dialog on cello and violin.” After playing him a tape from these sessions, Kosugi invited Tone to join them, unprejudiced and in fact utterly unmindful of Tone’s degree of musical training – which was then nonexistent. This gesture by Kosugi in itself had a deep impact upon Tone as a realization in practice of a leveling impulse he subscribed to theoretically. Tone bought a saxophone from Kosugi, purchased a Sony open reel tape recorder, and began participating.¹⁵ Also joining the collective were Shiomi Chieko, Tsuge Gen’ichi, and Tojima Mikio of the Musicology Program – which addressed historical, theoretical, philosophical and ethnomusicological perspectives on music – and Tanno Yumiko of the Vocal Music program. Tone was the only non-student member. Mizuno’s home provided a key venue for some of their earliest group improvisational efforts.

Their experiments were further encouraged and facilitated by the young ethnomusicologist, Koizumi Fumio:¹⁶ after joining the Geidai faculty part-time in September of 1959, he gave the performers the run of the ethnomusicology studio and its collections of instruments – an incomparable venue within which improvisation could encompass a “music” that freely crossed from orchestral to ethnic instruments, technology, and daily objects, melding sound production from devices associated with vastly different forms of sonic practices.¹⁷ Tone recalls that they carried on such improvisations at the studio daily from mid-1958.¹⁸ Geidai itself was becoming a center for experimental practices and rethinking of artistic boundaries: for example, incorporating experts in science, and, in music, continuing the investigations into ethnomusicology that yielded the studio’s treasure trove of instruments from around the world. For the group’s performers, each of these instruments embodied different potentials, freedoms, and critical potentials. The different “ethnic” instruments were each bound to a complex performance tradition outside of a western orchestral frame – and thus provided a variety of rich alternatives to the latter’s conceptual dominance of music with its particular, narrow, and oppressive systematicity. Such perspectives in

and away from Breton at once...” Sas, *Fault Lines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 120.

13. Such as the *Man’yôshû*, later explored by Tone in his work. We might also look to the connection with the Chinese *Shijing*, or *Book of Songs/Odes*.

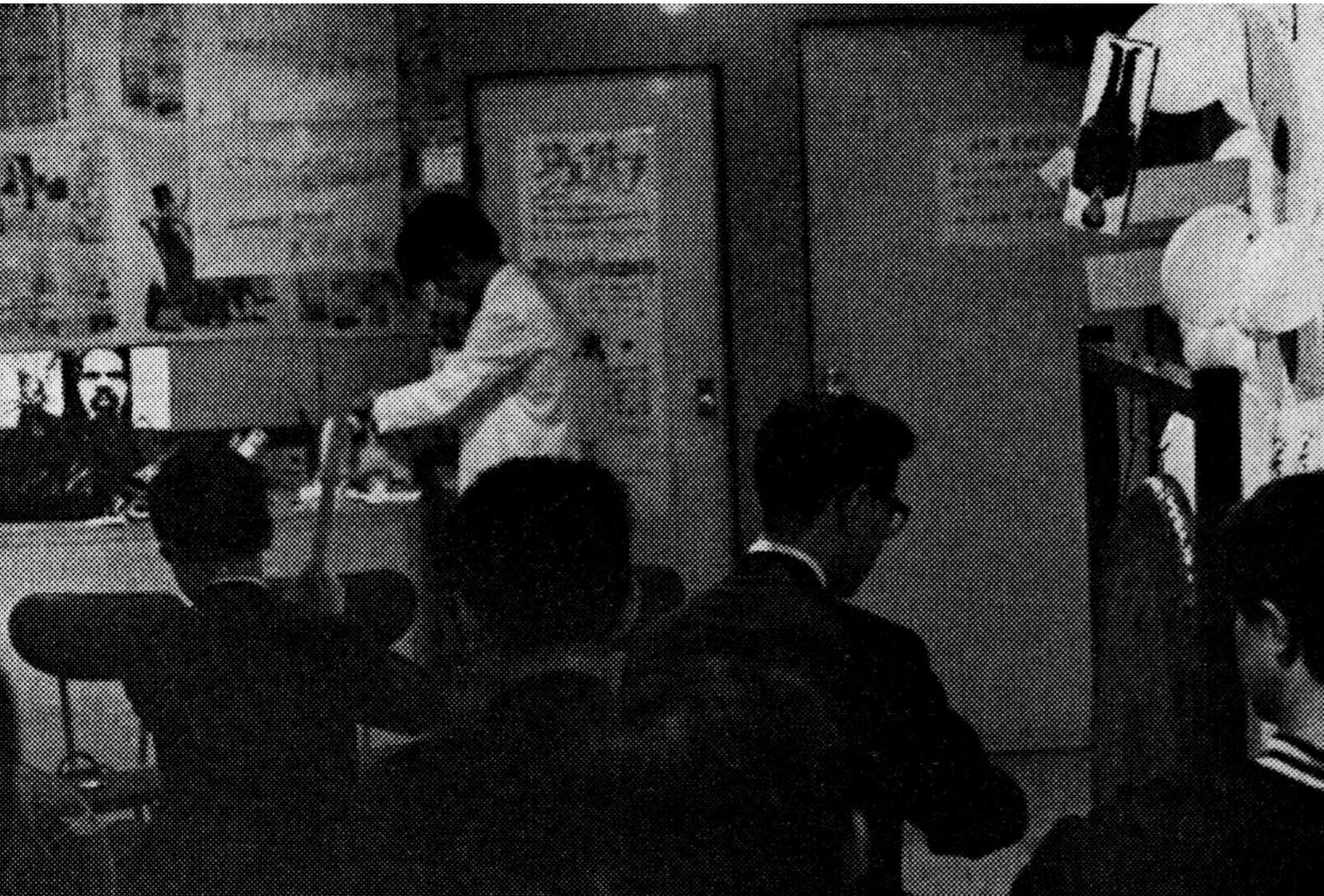
14. “Kitazono Katue’s Sole Interview, Yû 8 (1975),” translated in Solt, “Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitazono Katue (1902-1978)” (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1989), 767-8.

15. “Interview: Yasunao Tone,” *Revue et Corrigée*, no. 46 (6-15), 7; *Yasunao Tone*, (Nagoya: Aichi Geijutsu Bunka Center, 2001).

16. Koizumi was an expert at the time in both South Indian and Japanese traditional music forms. He joined the Geidai faculty full-time in April of 1960.

17. Such positive support made a deep impression on Tone, especially Koizumi’s kindness in giving the group free reign in the studio amongst its valuable instruments. Yasunao Tone, interview by author, 17 January 2006. Mizuno’s home was the other principal rehearsal space.

18. Yasunao Tone, unpublished interview by Takashima Naoyuki and Shimazaki Tsutomu, Oiso, 1991.



Toshi Ichiyanagi (second from left)
and Yasaunao Tone (standing, in white jacket)
playing "400 for Henry Flynt" by La Monte Young
at Fluxus Week, Tokyo Fluxus festival,
Crystal Gallery, Tokyo, Sept. 8- 14, 1965.
Quarterly "Gendai Bijutsu," P.57, # 7, 1965

turn also allowed the group to explore simultaneously the European classical instruments in the studio, but with a newfound sense of freedom from orchestral tradition and a renewed interest in the sonic possibilities of these instruments. They found pleasure in exploring, for example, the sonic capabilities of stringed instruments, by playing them against the grain – either through bringing in techniques from other performance traditions, or even in a literal sense, by playing their wooden parts.

Tone's retrospective sense is that at the time, music was an art form acutely lagging behind its contemporaries, a "ghetto" of stultifying formal conventions; its hidebound nature thus promised an attractively wide range of possibilities for transformative practice. Tone and Kosugi were especially critical of the contemporary formalistic experimentations in music in the 1950s (in particular, play with dodecaphony and varieties of serial music), their paucity in comparison to contemporary innovations in the visual arts, and their sterility in comparison to ethnomusicology's revelations of alternative, richer practices to be found in gamelan and in the music of India. Tone recalls reflecting on this situation at the time, and wondering, "why must we bear such things in the age of Pollock?"¹⁹ Visual arts were indeed the reference point for avant-garde transformation, particularly Pollock, whose name acted as a kind of shorthand for a range of action-experimentation that Tone saw as compatible in spirit with the critical contrasts derived from ethnomusicology.

Attention to contemporary international avant-gardism, ethnographic perspectives, and an engagement with a historical avant-garde as conceptual reference points broadly typified the contemporary surge of avant-garde activity in Japan in its simultaneous impetus from both international developments and its own local eclecticism. As reflected in their early writings, the group perceived themselves as musical innovators in the company of others, both local and internationally based, making similar efforts in a variety of artistic and performance areas – efforts which ultimately aimed at producing art that would throw off conventional and genre constraints to better grasp reality. Indeed, Tone's first essay on the group's activities, from August of 1960, advances considerable claims of progress in this direction, describing the group's "chance encounter" with "an experiment concerning an absolutely new music."²⁰ The key to this achievement, according to Tone's essay, was the group's pursuit, and perhaps even realization, of automatism. In automatism we in turn find the origin of the group's name, and identify, for Tone, its potent political aspirations.

19. "Interview," *Revue et Corrigée*, no. 46, 7; Yasunao Tone, interview by author, 17 January 2006.

20. Yasunao Tone, "Ôtomatizumu to shite no sokkyōgaku nit suite," *Nijū seiki buyō*, no. 5 (August 20, 1960), 15.

21. The event, held on September 26, 1960, was sponsored by Nijū seiki buyō no kai, a group of critics and directors. In addition to the newly named Music group, the event featured Wakamatsu Miki, Tsuda Nobuaki, Ishizaki Midori, Yokoi Atsuko, Sugata Keiko, Nara Kamiya, Aoi Yōko, Ichikawa Akira, Fujī Kō, and the Kuni Chiya Dancers.

This first essay of Tone's, and the group's adoption of a name, were both occasioned in August of 1960 by a special introduction in the fifth issue of Nijū seiki buyō [20th Century Dance] in anticipation of the group's performance at the "Nijū seiki buyō no kai" event the following month at the Kuni Chiya Dance Institute.²¹ The group had performed publicly for the first time the previous year, in support of the Kuni Chiya Dancers at the Toshima Kōkaidō in Ikebukuro – but without a name. The connection with the dance world had arisen from Mizuno's part-time job, accompanying the Kuni Chiya Dancers on piano.²² Kuni Chiya had generously allowed the group use of the rehearsal space for their improvisations during the dancers' rehearsals, and through this connection arose the opportunity to make a larger, public debut.²³

While the group had been improvising together since the previous year, Tone's essay, "On Improvised Music as Automatism," specified a more recent origin for the practice that defined the group's activities: "In May of 1960 the members of our group chanced to encounter [sōgū shita] an experiment concerning an absolutely new music. It was an improvisational work of *musique concrète* done collectively."²⁴ Tone's earnest description of this encounter captures his passionate desire to bring to humanity, through a new music, a discovery as momentous as Surrealism's practice of automatic writing. It also locates his and the group's project within a diverse avant-garde involved in exploring and transforming the world of the actual, the world of the everyday.

Tone indicated that their works' divergence from prior forms of *musique concrète* rested on two procedural refinements: "our adoption of improvisation within *musique concrète*, and our recording of the actual sound without the addition of any mechanical processing to preserve the purity of the spontaneous method..." Both aspects were vital, however, to creating and preserving the twin aspects of their momentous discovery. First, according to Tone, group improvisation might escape egotism and humanism in seeking "to attain the universality of automatism, Jung's Collective Unconscious at the base of each Personal Unconscious."²⁶

Here, Tone proclaimed their desire to realize, sonically, nothing less than the Surrealist quest for what Blanchot called "the revelation of the real functioning of thought by automatic writing."²⁷ They would simultaneously avoid the perils of egotism, which would often lose rapport with the characteristics of the materials and "descend into mere ornament."²⁸ The materials for their sound works could instead lead them to true sonic materiality: "...our

22. Kuni Chiya was of the Neue Tanz school of dance; her husband was in the upper ranks of the Socialist Party.

23. Our retrospective view of this activity must not reduce it into the confines of genre. Tone emphasizes that this was not an interaction between musicians and dancer, but rather, according to the group's conception and practice, one between artistic

productions that both featured visual and sonic components in their performance. Yasunao Tone, interview by author, 17 January 2006.

24. "*Gutai ongaku*," rubied as "*myōjiku konkurēto*." Tone, "Ôtomatizumu to shite..." 15.

25. *Idem*.

26. Tone, "Ôtomatizumu to shite..." 16.

27. Blanchot, "Reflections on Surrealism," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, 92.

28. Tone, "Ôtomatizumu to shite..." 16, quoting Tono Yoshiaki's criticism of Miro's pure spontaneous method.

pure spontaneous method was no simple improvised performance, but rather a utilitarian improvisational musical performance based on *musique concrète*, concrete sounds [gutaiteki na onkyô].”²⁹ Freed of egotism through group improvisation, the performers in turn could encounter the pure materiality of sounds – in fact, a second, unconscious world of things. This could then be preserved on tape, without further manipulation, as a successfully realized work.

Tone’s essay asserts their unprejudiced approach to sound-emitting materials in a simple list of everyday items whose order equalizes and disregards classic distinctions between musical and non-musical objects:

“...we prepared a variety of materials for music concrète for recording onto the tape. Numerous items such as drum cans, washtubs, water jugs, forks, plates, hangers, metal and wood dolls, a vacuum, ‘Go’ stones, cups, radio, gardening reference books, a wall clock, cello, a rubber ball, an alto saxophone, prepared piano, etc. were readied as sound sources.”³⁰ His description of their pivotal May, 1960 improvised interactions with these “sound sources” asserts their deep spontaneity, as an encounter between a universalized mind moved by the actuality of things:

Once we started the tape to make a recording, the innumerable sound materials arranged before us strangely and intensely impressed us with a sonic image. Our improvisational performance then began completely spontaneously. And thus, these innumerable emitted sounds that in everyday life go unnoticed or are recognized only out of necessity made us feel as if with the movement and collision of the materials themselves, the items cancelled themselves out, and we could grasp their materialized unconscious breath.³¹

29. Idem.

30. Tone, “Ôtomatizumu to shite...,” 15.

31. Idem.

Tone explicitly identifies the historical antecedent for this discovery:

In this manner our first experimental work was completed, but we at once noticed that it was a method analogous to that defined in the first Manifesto of Surrealism: [Surrealism, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express –] verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner, the actual functioning of thought. . . . Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.’ We were excited by this discovery, and decided to continue it consciously. And so our second work, “Automatism No. 1” was completed.³²

Tone goes on to compare their methods directly to those of the collaborative work by Soupault and Breton, “Les champs magnetiques” (The Magnetic Fields) – the first product, according to Breton, of their marathon sessions of automatic writing, and hence the first Surrealist work. The very title, “Automatism No. 1” – that is, the first automatism – implies this relationship (with an additional pun supplied by the means for the work’s creation and preservation: literally, by magnetic fields, i.e. magnetic tape recording).³³ All of these parallels, quotations and examples mark the essay with Tone’s aspiration to share in an analogous program of discovery and creation – a pretension closely related to the group’s decision, that very month, to name the collective the Music group [*gurûpu ongaku*].

Tone’s identification of the original practice of automatic writing as the historical analog of the group’s musical practice, and the group’s designation of their second, intentionally-produced improvised work as “Automatism No. 1,” both speak to the gravity with which they regarded their activities – but this was a seriousness that emerged from, and was bound up with, a playful exploration of sonic possibilities. This serious play in the service of investigating actuality – closely associated with a complex but ultimately liberational politics – places the group squarely within a broader contemporary avant-garde community in Japan.³⁴ The group’s choice of name in August of 1960, however, sought to ground their current practice as succeeding to, as well as revising, the politics of a famous historical avant-garde.

32. Idem. The work may be heard on Group ONGAKU, “Automatism (ôtomatizumu)”, *music of group ONGAKU*, Hear Sound Art Library 002, 1996.

33. Tone, “Ôtomatizumu to shite...,” 16; André Breton, *Conversations: the Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Marlowe and Co., 1993), 43.

34. See William Marotti, “Political aesthetics: activism, everyday life, and Art’s Object in 1960s Japan,” *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* (forthcoming).

In his essay, “Reflections on Surrealism,” Maurice Blanchot considered the continuing legacy and potentials of the Surrealist movement from a post-WWII perspective – in which it was seemingly at once everywhere and nowhere. At Chiba National University, this had been the first essay from *La Part du feu* Tone translated in Professor Shigenobu’s class. Blanchot argues that the automatic message was Surrealism’s “central discovery,” one in which the freeing of words is bound directly to the possibility of human emancipation. Its politics was inextricably bound to the aspirations of Marxism, and amounted to a kind of alternative materialism:

...[L]anguage disappears as an instrument, but only because it has become subject...
When surrealists speak of ‘freeing’ words, of treating them other than as little servants, it is a veritable social revindication they have in view. There are men and a class of men that others think of as instruments and elements of exchange: in both cases, freedom, the possibility for man to be the subject, is called directly into question... On one hand, in automatic writing... the word and my freedom are now no more than one... But on another side, this freedom of words means that words become free for themselves: ...words have their own spontaneity.³⁵

Blanchot’s complex argument expounds upon Surrealism’s simultaneous banishment of prior literature and art while persistently resorting to literary and artistic means, insisting that its political commitment and freedom were indissociable from those means – and those means, from revolutionary politics.

Tone himself has spoken of the extent to which he felt dogged in the 1950s by the dominance in criticism of a kind of reductive materialism, one that, for example, disparaged the better indigenous Surrealist works for their frivolity, and lack of “value as thought” [*shisôse*] – that is, their lack of weighty engagement with the conventionally-identified issues for political criticism.³⁶ In fine arts this desire for immediate, tangible political commitment was manifested in the artistic preference for Socialist Realist work, and in literature, in a decline in critical popularity of much of the work of the interwar modernists (as well as a dismissal of the centrality of Freud’s insights to Surrealism).³⁷ Tone’s response had been to gravitate to that which had been devalued, gaining an interest in issues of language and repetition – for example, in the works of Gertrude Stein – that would

35. Blanchot, “Reflections,” 88, emphasis added.

36. Yasunao Tone, unpublished interview by Takashima Naoyuki and Shimazaki Tsutomu, Oiso, 1991.

37. Tone criticized the post-WWII reception of Surrealism, and in particular, the work of members of the Surrealism Study Group (including Tōno Yoshiaki, Ōoka Makoto, Iijima Kōichi, and several others, all Tokyo University graduates roughly five years older than Tone), for neglecting-by intent or by ignorance-the centrality of Freud to Surrealism. Tone had attempted to join the group in the late 1950s, but was refused admission.

38. As Tone puts it, “The best stuff was disparaged, called frivolous, without value as thought. So I thought I’d like to become frivolous.” By the same token, while Tone had political concerns, he disliked literature that got too “political” – that wore its politics cheaply. Yasunao Tone, unpublished interview by Takashima Naoyuki and Shimazaki Tsutomu, Oiso, 1991.

both become lifelong, and lead through Surrealism on to an increasing appreciation for Dada.³⁸ By the time of the group’s adopting of their name, we can see a synthesis in Tone’s writing by which the group’s practice is related to a politics of culture, one authorized through the practices of a historical avant-garde (including not only the Surrealists, but a broad range of related explorations, including the Surrealism-related ethnographic considerations of Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille). The continuing attraction and relevance of such historical practices, in turn, and their productive potential once reconfigured, may well have been mediated and strengthened for Tone by his encounters with arguments such as Blanchot’s.

In Blanchot’s essay, automatism’s potential “emancipation of words” posits the indissociability of human emancipation and language, where “my freedom” is bound to that of words acting for themselves, words given over to their own sensual spontaneity. Blanchot’s analysis gave political weight and validity to the kind of investigative play with language, composition, improvisation and sound that continued to attract Tone’s interest. Such valorization would have been reinforced by Shigenobu’s confiding to Tone of his disappointment in the other students’ appreciation of automatic writing: he both echoed Blanchot’s supreme valuation of the practice and intimated that Tone had achieved an initiate’s perspective – a compliment that Tone still recalled nearly four decades afterwards.³⁹

The first three chapters of “Les champs magnetiques” had been published in 1919 in the pages of *Littérature* [Literature], the magazine founded that spring by Aragon, Soupault, and Breton. When Tone proposed to name their collective the Music group, he had this historic magazine’s title in mind.⁴⁰ The group’s adoption of the name, Music, asserts the same combination of antiphrasis and urgent supplantation, humiliation and liberation, which Breton, Aragon, and Soupault entitled their magazine, in which nascent Surrealist and Dada works appeared side by side.⁴¹ In *Littérature*, “literature” was to be mocked, but also freed, via new writings generated by new procedures such as the automatic message. When the editors posed their survey question – why do you write? – as a “trap” to bait contemporary authors (whose answers were printed “in order of mediocrity”) the question nonetheless remained central to their own enterprise, and was bound up with the question of method.⁴² Blanchot’s essay emphasized the urgent seriousness behind the more obvious mocking, antiphrasical relationship to literature evident in both the magazine’s title and the notorious survey’s question: “We remember that the first

39. Yasunao Tone, personal communication, 5 December 2005; *Revue et Corrigée*, no. 46, 7.

40. Tone added “group” to avoid the confusion that might result from referring to the group as just “music” [ongaku] (Japanese permits no capitalization). Yasunao Tone, interview by author, 17 January 2006; Yasunao Tone,

unpublished interview by Takashima Naoyuki and Shimazaki Tsutomu, Oiso, 1991.

It is for this reason that I have abandoned the common practice of referring to the group as “Group Ongaku” (or “group ONGAKU,” as on their HEAR sound art library cd) as the non-translation of the Japanese word for music, *ongaku*, obscures this central relationship to Music as a whole.

41. Breton stresses the contemporaneity of Dada and Surrealist practice in this formative period, as evidenced within this and other magazines ca. 1919-20. Breton, *Conversations*, 44. The magazine’s title was by Valéry, in ironic quotation of the last line of “Art Poétique” by Verlaine: “And all the rest is literature.” Breton, *Conversations*, 34.

42. Breton, *Conversations*, 43.

journal of those who were going to become surrealists was called *Literature*. Nor was this ironic.”⁴³ As Blanchot argued, “Words are free, and perhaps they can free us; one has only to follow them, to abandon oneself to them, to place all the resources of invention and memory at their service.” In the magazine, writing would continue, urgently, but “literature” could not remain as it had been constituted: it needed to be rethought at the deepest levels. No poetry after Auschwitz, proclaimed Adorno; but earlier, for Breton and his compatriots, no literature after WWI.

For Tone, asserting the deeply analogical relationship between the Music group’s and that of the formative years of the Surrealists did not mean a simple repetition of this historical gesture. For Blanchot, our freedom was bound to that of words. With the Music group, Tone and his compatriots would free not words, however, but sounds and things. As his 1960 text asserts, their procedures could reveal the “materialized unconscious breath” of the items of the everyday world, the hushed whispers of things speaking their secrets. Freed of “egotism,” “electronic manipulations,” the assumptions of the traditional categories and very definition of music, their practice would encounter the “concrete,” the “true” through a “spontaneous,” “utilitarian,” “pure” improvisational encounter with sound objects. Tone’s descriptive vocabulary resonates with the desire to penetrate to the true nature of things without the abstract mediation of formalistic materialism, and without the limits of traditional artistic and musical procedures and without genre boundaries. In this they joined in the contemporary quest to investigate actuality through art.

Having developed through an ethnomusicologically-informed improvisational practice of instrumental tradition-leveling in the Geidai studios, the group’s practice now aspired to complete and move beyond the original project of *musique concrète*, to “have you see the true form of the *objet sonore* in which the degrees of transparency and opacity, dampness and hardness resound within the tempest of immediacy [*chokusetsusei*].”⁴⁴ “*Objet sonore*” [sound object] derived from a certain European conceptual vocabulary, in which a given sounding body could produce a variety of sonic objects; in contrast to the presumed invariability of a note, the sound object would be linked to time and location.⁴⁵ Here, Tone speaks of it as revelatory of the “tempest” of the immediate,

a messenger bearing secrets of a non-static world of actuality. In this way, Tone’s concept of their actions brought the notion of an *objet sonore* into a wider set of discourses and practices in the contemporary avant-garde concerning the “objet,” in which the gesture of setting any item forth – be it a well-formed work, found object, installation, or even the artist’s performing body itself – was to call for a radical scrutiny of the item in question. Such tactics were notable particularly among the young artists involved with the yearly, anarchic art exhibition, the Yomiuri Indépendant; the members of group Music had myriad connections with these artists. Particularly in the case of Tone and Kosugi, these sorts of resonances in the group’s practice would lead to a continuing expansion of their own work to join with these broader experiments. Thus, while divergences among group members would lead to the Music group’s fragmentation, both Kosugi and Tone would submit works for this exhibition, beginning with Tone in 1962. I will close with a brief examination of this work, which demonstrates Tone’s particular route within this expanding field of avant-garde investigation and provocation.

Tone at the Yomiuri Indépendant: *Objet* and Immediacy

Tone was close to a number of artists prominent at the Yomiuri Indépendant exhibitions; in addition to visiting the exhibitions themselves from around 1960 onwards, he spent time with Neo Dada during their gatherings at Yoshimura Masunobu’s atelier, the “White House,” in Shinjuku, and was invited to participate in a number of subsequent events. Tone and Kosugi in particular became notable for their participation in a wide range of artistic practices and events, epitomizing the tendency at the time for avant-garde activity to disregard prior practical and genre-based separations, combining in new, productive experimental forms.

In 1962, Tone made his first submission in the Yomiuri Indépendant exhibition, “Têpu rekôdâ” [Tape Recorder], a piece that went through several evolutions before its final form. Tone had initially thought to submit a reel to reel tape machine (this was before the days of small, portable recording and playback devices), but, losing his nerve, painted the device in the hopes of its being more readily accepted. Dissatisfied with this, he then engulfed

43. Blanchot, “Reflections...,” 90.

43. Blanchot, “Reflections...,” 90.

44. Tone, “Ôtomatizumu to shite...,” 16. Tone explicitly speaks of their aspiration to go beyond Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry’s practices of *musique concrète*.

45. The note is abstract. As Tone wrote in 1961, “[t]he pure musical note - it is not sound, but rather the concept of sound [oto no gainen] itself. That is because it is nothing but a point in a coordinate system. Compared to the sounds of the natural world that encloses us, it is like

a deformed pet animal that we have made over the years.” Yasunao Tone, “Han’ongaku no hô e,” *Gurûpu ongaku I* (concert program), Sôgetsu Kaikan Hall, September 15, 1961.

the entire device in a large white cloth bag of Kosugi's, and, with a thirty to forty minute endless loop tape loaded into the device, submitted the exhibit as a "sculpture."⁴⁶ Tone would go daily to the exhibition and switch on the machine which, hidden within the cloth, would produce intermittent, curious sounds.⁴⁷ The title of the piece gave away the nature of the joke, if read (the presence of a hidden tape recorder that made a shapeless lump of a cloth bag produce sound), but the work itself assumed a shape similar to many partially or fully concealed *objets* designed to provoke curiosity and further interrogation. Tone's innovation to the practice of *objet* at the exhibition was to integrate sound into the work, and while other exhibits that year were sound-emitting, Tone's was perhaps the first to make its sonic component the very focus of the attention the *objet* commanded.⁴⁸

Tone's official submission for the final exhibition in 1963, "Something Happened," though little-remarked upon in print, presented a truly uncanny *objet*.⁴⁹ While other artists presented works that literally extended out into the everyday world, Tone's brought the everyday world into the museum.⁵⁰ With the assistance of a friend on the staff of the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, Tone was able to get a stereotype mold [shikei] for the newspaper printed on the opening day of the exhibition.⁵¹ Tone then poured plaster into the mold to produce a solid plaster version of that day's paper.⁵² He then entered this work the same day, again as a sculpture. Viewers were then greeted by the strange sight of a work that somehow, despite its rock-solid form, reproduced that most impermanent but eminently topical of printed items, the newspaper of the day. The page reproduced by Tone featured an article on the exhibition itself, further heightening the work's paradoxical topicality. Events were fixed in stone – or rather, plaster – and, by the same token, the artwork was able to achieve ultimate topicality, to achieve the speed necessary to grasp the fleeting moment of the everyday. Without sound, the work "spoke" to the events in progress in its very location – as yet another form of Tone's investigation of "immediacy" through its objets.

46. Seki Shin'ichi, *Nihon andependan ten: Zenkiroku 1949-1963* (Tokyo: Sôbisha, 1993), 253. All exhibits had to be submitted under conventional categories, no matter how bizarre their form. Thus Kazakura Shô's 1962 submission, "sairen" [Siren], for example, a wall-mounted air-siren that would inflate and blow an attached plastic bag around with its fan when switched on, was entered as a "painting." Ibid, 250.

47. The tape, unfortunately, was stolen during the course of the exhibition, from which point the work became silent. Yasunao Tone, unpublished interview by Takashima Naoyuki and Shimazaki Tsutomu, Oiso, 1991.

48. Takiguchi Shûzô, reflecting on Tone's piece in the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, commented that "Finally, the art museum has produced sound." Takiguchi Shûzô, "'Sakuhin' no kiki: dai jûsankai yomiuri andependanten," in *Korekushon Takiguchi Shûzô 7*, ed. Ôoka Makoto (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobo, 1992) 431.

49. The name was in English. Seki, *Nihon andependan ten*, 268. Tone also participated in the unofficial stunt of the "miniature restaurant" with Akasegawa Genpei, Kosugi, Nakanishi, Tanikawa Kôichi, and Kazakura Shô. See *Akasegawa Genpei, Ima ya akushon aru nomi! 'Yomiuri andependan' to iu genshō* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shôbō, 1985), 196-7. Tone did notice Jasper Johns appreciating his work; this was the year that Johns proclaimed the Yomiuri Independant "the liveliest group performance in the world." "Interview," *Revue et Corrigée*, no. 46, 8.

Experiments in Agitation

During the same time period that the members of group Music were composing "Automatism No. 1," Japan was erupting in ever-larger demonstrations in opposition to the revision and renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (Anpo). All of the group members participated in the demonstrations in different capacities, though Tone, since he was no longer a student, lacked a ready entry to the highly organized and self-segregated protest groups.⁵³ As a group, however, the members of the collective staged a little-marked and little-remembered event that nonetheless speaks to their self-understanding of the political potentials of their work during this crucially formative period.

While the Anpo protests filled the streets by the Diet and by the Prime Minister's residence, the members of the collective took their distinctive experiments in improvisation and performance to the streets. They had been in the habit of borrowing the light van from Tone's family business (Gosan'ya Shôji) to conduct private improvised tailgate performances in different locations – for themselves alone – but on this occasion, according to Tone, they all climbed into the van and, with Tone at the wheel, rode through the streets performing their distinctive music. Lacking loudspeakers, their performance ebbed and flowed unnoticed and unheard by other drivers, distant demonstrators, or residents as the van sped along the streets. As fusions of art and political action go, this would seem to have been a fairly unproductive experiment.⁵⁴ Yet to understand the ways in which this action made sense is to return us to the complex world of art, politics, and the everyday world from which many of Tone's lifelong interests and experiments originate.

If the likelihood of the performance's having immediate effects was minimal, it nonetheless marks an attempt to conduct politics directly out of artistic performance: not as an adjunct to protest, nor through the conventional forms of agit-prop, but rather, through the political potentials of their practice itself. It also testifies to the group's consciousness of those potentials during this key, formative period. On the one hand, the action makes some sort of sense as protest only if one appreciates their aspirations of the moment: to fulfill a political legacy inherited from the historical avant-garde.⁵⁵ On the other, their attempt to bring their art into contact with the movement

50. These works included Takamatsu Jirô's "Himo" [Cord], to which a line was attached extending the work through the museum and all the way to nearby Ueno station, and Nakanishi Natsuyuki's "Kurippu wa kakuhan kôdô o shuchô suru" ["Clothespins assert agitating action"], where clothespins were either picked up or attached to passersby. See Marotti, "Political Aesthetics."

51. This was the actual mold used to generate the plates for printing the paper.

52. Tone had planned to produce one of these for each day of the exhibition, but it turned out to be too much trouble to repeat the gag. Yasunao Tone, interview by author, 17 January 2006.

53. He did join the protest by cultural workers a day or two after the June 15, 1960 death of Kanba Michiko, in which the famous television star, Hongô Jun (son of stage actor Hongô Shin), purportedly screamed "murderers!" at the charging

riot police. Yasunao Tone, personal communication with author, 2 February 2006.

54. "It doesn't [really] sound like a protest. On the highway, people don't pay attention, so it's not very effective (laughs)." Yasunao Tone, interview by author, 17 January 2006.

55. As Tone reflected, "If someone had asked us then we probably could have explained much more clearly, but now it's so remote..." Yasunao Tone, interview with the author, 17 January 2006.

within the city's expanding arteries – where economic change was bringing about massive transformations in life and work patterns – joined with a broader tendency to investigate and interact with the spaces of daily life.

Two years later, Yasunao Tone and fellow Music group member Kosugi Takehisa engaged in a related experiment in bringing their techniques into direct contact with the everyday world through improvisational action. Again, the venue was a space of commuting and circulation central to the contemporary transformations in daily life in the capital, but one allowing for a real possibility of interaction: the circular Yamanote-sen train line ringing central Tokyo. In this 1962 event, artists carrying strange art objects boarded Tokyo's central circular subway line, the Yamanote, put on white face paint, and proceeded to improvise ritualistic happenings in the train cars and in extended performances on station platforms. Separately from the main group of artists (which included Tone's friend, Nakanishi Natsuyuki, Takamatsu Jirô, and Kawani Hiroshi), Tone and Kosugi arrived with mobile tape players and boarded the trains. Tone and Kosugi were to have joined with the main group when it made its way to a rendezvous at the Ikebukuro station, but Nakanishi's nerves gave out at Ueno, bringing about a premature end for the main group's activities. Tone and Kosugi on their own completed a circumnavigation of the system, interposing sound and the train environment.⁵⁶

The planning for the event anticipated the possibility of their improvisatory actions having direct effects upon the other commuters, the involuntary witnesses to the event. The manifesto for the event imagined possibilities for the "agitation" of its witnesses, using a physics-influenced vocabulary of voids, aggregates, molecular attraction, and agitation – much as Tone had in his 1960 essay, and again in "Han'ongaku no hô e," his note in the September, 1961 program brochure for the Music group's performance at Sôgetsu Kaikan Hall.⁵⁷ Seeking a way to describe their intentions outside of conventional artistic notions, Tone and the other artists conceptualized their art's potential to explore and interact with the everyday world through a scientific, albeit imaginative, account of concrete actuality.

Subsequent to the performance, round-table discussions in late 1962 with Kawani Hiroshi and Imaizumi Yoshihiko, the editors of the radical art magazine, *Image* [*Keishô*], and artists Akasegawa Genpei and Kinoshita Shin led to the theoretical foregrounding of the anarchism-associated concept of "direct action" [chokusetsu kôdô] in their artistic practice itself as it expanded into intensified, critical and provocative engagement with everyday life – including Akasegawa's 1000-yen project.⁵⁸ When Akasegawa was prosecuted, Tone became an active member of the supporting discussion group, and testified for the defense at trial. While Akasegawa was ultimately convicted, Tone's testimony led to a subsequent escalation in his own critical and theoretical writings: it is from this point that Tone came into his own as a critic.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Tone is one of a number of artists in Japan and elsewhere who, in the 1960s, working across forms and genres, created a kind of investigative art practice and innovative aesthetic oppositionality. While his work also remains ground-breaking as art and music, returning to Tone's route into artistic performance reveals his distinctive contribution to an insurgent avant-garde. The issues such work raises not only add to our understanding of the particular politics of culture in Japan in the 1960s, but also open out onto the global stage, illuminating aspects of the 1960s as a global moment. Like many of his contemporaries, Tone drew upon historical and current avant-garde theory and practice (including both Euro-American and domestic work) and enlivened it within a specific Japanese context. His work demonstrates how the artistic and political are inseparably bound, especially in moments of crisis. If one of the products of his early experimentation has been a long, fruitful, and distinguished career as an artist, performer, and critic, we can also appreciate its particular origins: Tone's distinct route into the broader forms of artistic and political action of the global 1960s.

56. The details of their actions remain unclear, even in Tone's memory. He vaguely remembers recording and playing train noises, but it is unclear whether a suitable portable recording device existed at the time. Tone suspects that they used a radio in some way. Yasunao Tone, personal communication to author, 5 August 2005.

57. See Yasunao Tone, "Han'ongaku no hô e," in *Gurûpu ongaku I* (concert program), Sôgetsu Kaikan Hall, September 15, 1961. Akasegawa Genpei's early writings and contemporaneous works (such as his wrapping pieces) also feature a similar recourse to scientific language and procedures - as do those of a number of associated artists.

58. See "Chokusetsu kôdô no kizashi: hitotsu no jikkenrei nit suite," *Keishô* 7 (February, 1963), 15-23, and "Chokusetsu kôdô no kizashi II" *Keishô* 8 (June, 1963), 1-18.

59. Yasunao Tone, personal communication with the author, 2 February 2006 (confirming an observation by Kawani Hiroshi in *Bijutsu Techô*). The writing also was what made Tone finally financially independent from his family.

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