

Textural Luxury

The guitar is still privileged as the source of noise. There needs to be renewed awareness of the capacity of the synthesizer and sampling to produce filthy noxious tones. There needs to be a realization of how far rock noise trails behind the avant garde and new jazz. People have to attend to the possibilities for the human voice opened up by Diamanda Galas and Tim Buckley; listen again to Faust, Can, Hendrix, Sun Ra, Cabaret Voltaire, Suicide . . .

The Voice

All this depends still on the assumption that noise is a state with defined boundaries. But if noise is the point at which language buckles and culture fails, then you could argue that noise occurs in moments, tiny breakages and stresses dispersed all over the surface of music, all kinds of music. Maybe we should listen out for the noise in the voices of Kristin Hersh, Tim Buckley, Prince, Michael Jackson—the way they chew and twist language not for any decipherable, expressive reason [. . .], but for the gratuitous voluptuousness of utterance itself. In their voices, you can hear a surplus of form over content, of genotext over phenotext, semiotic over symbolic, Barthes's "grain" (the resistance of the body to the voice) over technique. Of "telling" over "story" [. . .]

Dirtish v. Uneath

There seem to be two choices in noise right now, two routes to oblivion. One is the noise/horror interface, in which violent imagery and musical dissonance are applied concussively, inducing a shell-shocked state of catatonia [. . .] The alternative? [. . .] Noise/horror undoes the self by confronting it with the other that dwells within it, the monstrous potential latent in us all, waiting to be catalysed by an extreme predicament; what I've called the new psychedelia undoes the self by letting it drift off and disappear into the otherworldly.

Noise/horror strikes me as a limited form of self-destruction, that can only yield diminishing returns. Compare its claustrophobic confines and concealed machismo with the open spaces and fragility of the new psychedelia [. . .]

Frost in Music

Both "strategies" are alike in one thing—they demand from the listener an immobility—one stunned, the other spellbound. Unlike the soulboys or decent songwriters, resistance does not take the form of becoming a subject, but through becoming an object. Refusing (at least in the domain of leisure) to deploy power over the self; to escape, for a few blissful moments, the network of meaning and concern.

11

The Beauty of Noise: An Interview With Masami Akita of Merzbow

Merzbow is the recording name of sound artist Masami Akita (1956–), the most well known of the Japanese noise artists that also includes Boredoms, Ruins, Fushitsusha, Masonna, and Melt Banana. The name Merzbow is taken from the *magnum opus* of German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, who called his architectural installation the *Merzbau*. Inspired, on the one hand, by Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism, and, on the other hand, by the Japanese strain of sado-masochism exemplified by the writer Yukio Mishima, Merzbow has been continually fascinated by noise as both sonic detritus and vehicle for spiritual ecstasy. An astonishingly prolific artist, the Australian label Extreme recently released a 50-CD retrospective of Merzbow's vast output over his 20-year career. The following interview was conducted by Chad Hensley for *Seconds Magazine*.

What first attracted you to Noise?

I was influenced by aggressive blues rock guitar sounds like Jimi Hendrix, Lou Reed, Robert Fripp and fuzz organ sounds such as Mike Ratledge of Soft Machine. But the most structured Noise influence would have to be free jazz such as Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and Frank Wright. I saw the Cecil Taylor Unit in 1973 and it was very influential. I was a drummer for a free-form rock band in the late '70s and I became very interested in the pulse beat of the drums within free jazz. I thought it was more aggressive than rock drums. I also became interested in electronic kinds of sounds. I started listening to more electro-acoustic music like Pierre Henry, Stockhausen, François Bayle, Gordon Mumma and Xenakis. Then I found the forum for mixing these influences into pure electronic noise. I was trying to create an extreme form of free music. In the beginning, I had a very conceptual mind set. I tried to quit using any instruments which related to, or were played by, the human body. It was then that I found tape. I tried to just be the operator of

the tape machine—I'm glad that tape is a very anonymous media. My early live performances were very dis-human and dis-communicative. I was using a slide projector in a dark room at that point. I was concentrating on studio works until 1989 then I assembled some basic equipment before I started doing live Noise performances. Equipment included an audio mixer, contact mic, delay, distortion, ring modulator and bowed metal instruments. Basically, my main sound was created by mixer feedback. It was not until after 1990, on my first American tour, that I started performing live Noise Music for presentation to audiences. The first US tour was a turning point for finding a certain pleasure in using the body in the performance. Right now I'm using mixer feedback with filters, ring, DOD Buzz Box, DOD Meat Box, and a Korg multi-distortion unit. I am using more physically rooted Noise Music not as conceptually anti-instrument and anti-body as before. If music was sex, Merzbow would be pornography.

In America, pornography is often viewed as vulgar and offensive—especially to women. Are you implying that Merzbow is for men?

No. I mean that pornography is the unconsciousness of sex. So, Noise is the unconsciousness of music. It's completely misunderstood if Merzbow is music for men. Merzbow is not male or female. Merzbow is erotic like a car crash can be related to genital intercourse. The sound of Merzbow is like Orgone energy—the color of shiny silver.

How did you get involved with tape trading through the mail in the early '80s?

When I started Merzbow the idea was to make cheap cassettes which could also be fetish objects. I recorded them very cheaply and then packaged them with pornography. I got very involved with the mail art network which included home tapers like Maurizio Bianchi, Jupiter Larsen of Haters, and Trax of Italy. Just as Dadaist Kurt Schwitters made art from objects picked up off the street, I made sound from the scum that surrounds my life. I was very inspired by the Surrealist idea "Everything is Erotic, Everywhere Erotic." So, for me Noise is the most erotic form of sound. The word "noise" has been used in Western Europe since Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noises*. However, industrial music used "noise" as a kind of technique. Western Noise is often too conceptual and academic. Japanese Noise relishes the ecstasy of sound itself.

You have been quoted as saying, "There are no special images of ideology behind Merzbow"—unlike the early industrialists such as Throbbing Gristle, SPK, and Whitehouse that used shocking imagery. Yet you have repeatedly used pornography. Isn't pornography a shocking image that creates a certain ideology, whether intended or not?

I have two directions in the use of pornography. In my early cassettes and mail art projects I used lots of pornography. I made many collages using pornography as it was a very important item in my mail art/mail music. I thought my cheap Noise cassettes were of the same value as cheap mail order pornography. These activities were called "Pornoise." In this direction, I would say that I used pornography for its anti-social, cut-up value in information theory. I soon started to release Merzbow vinyl which was very different from the cassettes of this same time period. I

think my vinyl works concentrated more on sound itself because I think vinyl is a more static medium. So, Merzbow went in two separate directions in the '80s—a cassette direction and a vinyl direction. In the '90s, these directions were mixed for one Merzbow [...]

What kind of reaction did you get when you started performing in Japan?

In Japan, the Noise audience looks very normal. I think most of them are middle-class salary men. Recently, we have more young, underground music types coming to a show. In the early days, the reaction was nothing. People thought that the music was just too difficult and loud. Recently, more people know how to comprehend my music. Many people have said they could get into a trance from the music. This is a better way of understanding Merzbow [...]

How has growing up in Japan effected your Noise creation?

Sometimes, I would like to kill the much too noisy Japanese by my own Noise. The effects of Japanese culture are too much noise everywhere. I want to make silence by my Noise. Maybe, that is a fascist way of using sound.