

Yasunao Tone
Region Of Paramedia

Artists Space, New York, US

Yasunao Tone is perhaps most associated with the CD (and, later, MP3) experiments he has undertaken since the mid-1980s. In such experiments, Tone augments digital media with physical materials, like tape, or with code to introduce errors into an otherwise pristine playback system. "Machines are designed not to make mistakes," he has said, but, "[in] our behaviour we often make mistakes".

His statement suggests an interest in destabilising distinctions between man and machine, an interest which conditions, too, the epithet he applies to the CDs. They are not "broken", in Tone's parlance, but "wounded", an adjective reserved for living things. Several wounded CDs are on display in his first retrospective exhibition Regions Of Paramedia, at Artists Space, New York. Flecks of tape radiate across their shining surfaces, the material's diaphanous appearance belying the aural severity of its effect: as the tape blocks both normal audio transmission and the devices' error-correction software, it generates unreproducible bursts of noise. This capability for artistic production to be, in Tone's words, "simultaneously multipliable and nonrepetitive", is the crux of his "paramedia". The term derives, in part, from another organic metaphor: parasite.

Tone adapted the metaphor from Michel Serres, whose theory of the parasite posits its multiple French definitions (as biological agent and, literally, static) as interdependent. Yet, if Tone articulated his concept in the 80s, after Serres had been translated to English – and after the invention of the CD – Region Of Paramedia demonstrates it as a basic principle of his oeuvre going back to the early 60s, when he entered Tokyo's vibrant avant garde. In a scene that privileged both structured and spontaneous performance, via what Reiko Tomii has called "collaborative collectivism", Tone formed the improvisation unit Group Ongaku (Music Group), participated in actions by Hi-Red Center, and frequented the nightclub Killer Joe's.

Region Of Paramedia provides documentation of these activities in the form of posters, scores, documents and video clips, including of a televised performance with Toshi Ichiyanagi. There, as elsewhere, Tone employed everyday objects to interrupt expected musical development. But, like Serres, he manifests immaterial "parasites" as

well, namely through language. For his score to Kenji Kanesaka's film *Hopscotch* (1967), also on view, Tone prodded collaborators to react to the multivalent word *hiku* and correlated their varied responses to colours and, then, sounds.

While the exhibition insists on the importance of Tokyo to Tone's artistic incubation, it dedicates more floor space to his work since moving to New York in 1973. There is a scatter of sounds, videos and archival materials documenting performances with an array of collaborators, including Merce Cunningham, Senga Nengudi and Barbara Held. His compositions for the latter rely, like *Hopscotch*, upon complex processes of translation – in one case, of eighth century Japanese poetry – into musical notes. *Lyrictron* (1989), one of several custom instruments on display, performs a flute to haiku conversion, while Tone's first album *Musica Iconologos* (1993) culled its indeterminate audio from Chinese characters rendered as digital images.

In a corresponding text, Tone explains that "music resides not only in layers of sounds and scores but also in images, text and that uncanny place where the four intersect". If the art he and his peers developed in the early 60s endeared them to practitioners like Dick Higgins – whose concept of intermedia lent its name to a 1969 festival organised by Tone, Takehisa Kosugi and Mieko Shiomi – Region Of Paramedia signals a slight, but key, difference. For Higgins, intermedia occupies the "uncharted land" between media. Paramedia feeds instead on collapse, on a fraught, indeed uncanny, situation in which people cultivate shifting plays of identification with things, languages, sounds.

Joe Bucciero



Installation views from Yasunao Tone's Region Of Paramedia (2023)