

## Yasunao Tone: *Region of Paramedia*

by Mark Bloch



Installation view: Yasunao Tone: *Region of Paramedia*, Artists Space, New York, 2023. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak.

The sonorous rumblings of Artists Space's deep, overdue investigation into the work of performance, sound, and digital composition pioneer Yasunao Tone takes us from the early 1960s to the present via the artist's examinations into emerging technologies, and their use and misuse in the creation of sound. Curator Danielle A. Jackson has compiled a comprehensive exhibition of rare ephemera, ranging from Tone's irreverent graphic scores to manipulated sound objects and gizmos to performative actions imaginatively documented.

Manifesting its title, *Region of Paramedia*, the show is steeped in unsettling, unpredictable, and unstable artistic forms, genres, and social expectations. Tone aims to preserve pure spontaneity by embracing the world of the actual and everyday in multipliable yet non-repetitive ways. He rearranges patterns, translates images into sound, and diverts technological devices from their intended purposes. Notably, he is known as father of the "Glitch" for groundbreaking modifications he made to pre-recorded compact discs and CD players in the mid-1980s that delighted John Cage then, and continue to light up Gen Z audiences today. His *Music for 2 CD Players* (1985) is available to experience as audio, video, timecode, in photos and as perforated CDs hung on the wall.

After completing an early treatise on Dada and Surrealism in 1957, where he interviewed prominent figures of the 20th century avant-garde in his native Japan, Tone embarked upon innovating projects and events with various art groups that put him on the map as a theorist as well as a practitioner. Through these collaborations, he methodically began rejecting the 12-tone music considered *de rigueur* at that time in post-war Japan. He saw these new *musique concrete* improvisations and interventions as extensions of Surrealist automatic writing. On view at Artists Space, a notated "diagram" in the form of a paper ring placed over a clock with a rotating second hand, for example, determined the pumping motion of a performer's feet using the pedals on an electric Chinese-made instrument in *Music for Reed Organ* (1963).

Energized by the matter-of-fact title of the Dada magazine *Littérature*, Tone called his early collective Group Ongaku, which translates to "Music Group." Three audio recordings from 1960–61 experiments are available for listening. Tone's score "Anagram for Strings," (seen in an ink and pencil drawing, 1961) became a piece performed during the earliest Flux-manifestations led in Europe by George Maciunas, who later published it. Tone rejected serialism and adjacent Western trends seeking pure sound, later isolating the rise of pure noise in a system, calling it "a parasite without a host." Surviving paperwork, posters, photos and video from several different incarnations show him as comfortable with the freely improvising Group Ongaku, as with the short-lived "creative destruction" of the Neo-Dada Organizers and the conspiratorial social interventions of Hi-Red Center. The latter included colleagues who would later join him in a Japanese branch of Fluxus, as seen in rare *Asahi News* footage from 1961 capturing a Group Ongaku performance with Toshi Ichiyanagi, then Yoko Ono's husband.

Maciunas continued to embrace Tone after his move to the United States in 1972, cementing his Fluxus reputation. He gravitated to the prolific range of dancers, visual artists, and musicians in Manhattan that included Cage, Merce Cunningham, Allan Kaprow, and Charlotte Moorman, who curated annual Avant Garde Festivals around New York. In posters and photos from the 1970s, Tone can be seen in Flux-performances, Flux-tours around Soho, and in video shot by Larry Miller in 1979 at The Kitchen, where he irons a shirt wrapped around a hot electric guitar.



Installation view: Yasunao Tone: *Region of Paramedia*. (Film used in *Molecular Music*, 1982; *Device for Molecular Music*, 1982; *Yasunao Tone performing Music for 2 CD Players*, 1985), Artists Space, New York, 2023. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak.

Six slide shows document other notable projects, each illuminated by photographs, flyers and brochures including "Communication with Mr. Pi" from the 11th Avant Garde Festival at Shea Stadium, November 16, 1974; "Snow Event" (1977) also seen in a Robert Watts Estate video; and a "multi performance" piece done with Kaprow at the ascendant Cal Arts in 1972 in Valencia, California.

Later, Tone translated images into language and then sound with "Molecular Music" (1982), in which light sensors on a screen surface interpreted 16mm images of characters from Chinese poetry, sending information to instruments. The collaged transitions from photographs to superimposed, brushstroke characters are as moving as the eventual audible results. In "Musica Iconologos" (1992), he advanced this idea digitally.



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Tone's numerous collaborations with Cunningham and flautist Barbara Held receive extensive and elegant explorations. A landing and the lower floor of Artists Space allow detailed perusal of the Cunningham Dance Studio activities, including a detailed Westbeth floor plan Tone drafted in 1975 with a sketch for *Clockwork* (1974) nearby. Upstairs, the entire south wall of the gallery is devoted to a timeline of scores and photographs laying out of his creative co-ownership with Held of their flute works. Opposite this installation, TV monitors feature both Held's flute performances and Cunningham's dancers in motion, all performing these collaborative efforts. Every experiment from Tone's vast oeuvre benefits from his thoroughgoing scrutiny, which is revealed throughout this exhibition.