

A Deafening Noise: Noise Music and Non-Normate Bodies

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CW: Mild Gore (Page 12)

*The subliminal message of most music is that the universe is essentially benign, that if there is sadness or tragedy, this is resolved at the level of some higher harmony. Noise troubles that worldview.*<sup>1</sup>



*Masonna performing*

Japanese Noise music, originating in the “livehouse” experimental music culture, and particularly in Osaka, in the 1980s is a form of artistic practice comprising both a particular form of sound art and its accompanying mode of embodied expression. A noise performance typical of this era is enacted by one or more Noisicians, who are often salaried workers with office jobs performing Noise and engaging with its culture when not fulfilling the obligations of their nine-to-fives. These livehouse spaces that birthed Noise were tiny, cramped, and difficult to find

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, Simon. “Noise,” in *Audio Culture* ed. Christopher Cox and Simon Warner. New York: Continuum, 2006.

without maps compiled by experimental music communities and posted in Noise zines. On stage, a performer would likely be surrounded by a sea of guitar pedals, mixers, and audio cable spaghetti. A typical performance begins when a Noisician chains together his equipment and allowing it to spring to life with a sea of Noise. One of these shows may end as early as thirty seconds later, though some Noise musicians are known to produce extended sets. Generally, even with prior knowledge of a performer's style and body of work, the length of one of these sets is unpredictable. As a member of a Noise audience, one never totally knows what they are getting themselves into. Recordings of these performances are often made through damaged or modified recording systems present in Noise venues. These are then "mastered" to sound even more clipped, present, and "inside your head" and are dubbed onto cassettes for distribution through international fan communities.

The sound of Noise is generated through the creation of feedback via the chaining together of, often heavily modified, consumer electronics equipment such as mixers and guitar effects pedals. While some performers employ an input device such as a contact or vocal microphone, the sound is often generated through hum, hiss, and other imperfections in the signal chain being amplified and fed back against themselves.

The performance art, dance, or embodied performance aspect of this music is a powerful and chaotic release of bodily energy. In a feedback loop between the bodies of the performer and the noise that is produced, a connection emerges between the movement of the performer, the fiddling around with the equipment on stage, and the changing timbres of the sheets of noise; though this connection is often difficult to pinpoint. Sometimes, a theatrical gesture in which the performer seems to relinquish control of their bodies to the noise will result in a sudden shift in

volume or texture, and sometimes the general sound content will stay the same. Often, equipment will fail onstage after a few minutes, triggering a premature ending to a show.

It often feels like there is a sort of overlap or overdetermination between the *strange* contorting bodies onstage and the destroyed, prosthetized, reconstructed, skeletons of their equipment. The sound is coming from all sorts of non-normative bodies, and there is an aspect of entanglement where it becomes difficult to locate particularities of the sound in the object-subject signal path that constructs Noise. In the words of Incapacitants' Mikawa Toshiji, "I move a lot don't I? But it has nothing to do with the sound. Probably I would be able to produce the same sound without moving. But it would be *different*- probably to the audience, it would be totally different." While noise (with a little n, meaning aperiodic sounds as distinct from Noise as a discrete social phenomenon) is a crucial component of many musics, Noise practice as we consider it today is primarily an export of late 20th century Japan, and thus that will be the temporo-geographical focus of this paper. While this music certainly has predecessors and influences (free jazz, european high modernism, futurism, music concrète), I would argue that Noise as I am examining in this paper (as a way of thinking about sounds, bodies, and spaces) did not exist before the intense local and global circulation engendered by this Osaka cafe culture in the 80s.

*As the Noise builds, Mikawa grips the flimsy table holding his gear and begins to shake it- or rather, the table begins to shake when his shaking body takes hold and tries to steady itself- and the pedals begin to bounce up and down and crash into one another. Finally, he pushed down on the table, and the folding legs first buckle and then slide underneath, and the table collapses.<sup>2</sup>*

*But the movement is very important. When I jump up and land, I might change the effects very impulsively[...]<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Novak, David. *Japanoise: Music At The Edge of Circulation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Masonna. 1,2,3,4. Interview by Thomas Venker, 2015.

*Aesthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies.*<sup>4</sup>

If one accepts the embodied account of aesthetics, that is that we experience aesthetic objects as analogies for the morphology and behavior of bodies, even the most “absolute” forms of musicking begin to tell stories about bodies of different shapes and structures. Acoustic music requires bodily mediation via a performer, but even the bare performance instructions for a Beethoven symphony can be read to represent narratives of bodily fortitude, frailty, normativity, and transgression. In other words, representations and narrativization of disability are constantly popping up in unexpected musical contexts. Noise, which puts a spotlight on the bodies of performers and audience members as well as producing and aestheticizing their temporary non-normativity, seems not only to be easy to read through this lense, but demands it to form a coherent picture of the practice. Central to the project of Noise is making the fragility and contingency of bodies visible as well as celebrating and creating bodily difference. It does this in a number of ways, producing effects that can be tracked in various subdisciplines of disability studies. These include, but are not limited to critical inquiry into physical disability, madness, idiocy, and deafness. This paper will also discuss the complexities of unifying these perspectives under the umbrella of disability, and Noise’s unique ability to couple them. The paper will also explore resonances of trauma theory.

### **Noise And Physical Disability**

*What we find in some pop music is that it offers a validating space for the invalid- or, more accurately, that pop’s cultural workers, some of the disabled ones, have sought to carve out within it such a space of validation.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> McKay, George. *Shakin’ All Over: Popular Music and Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Pop music has a long history of engaging with disability, in ways that are sometimes liberating or validating for practitioners and sometimes tokenizing and ableist. Noise music extends pop music's project of validating bodily difference through an amplification of what McKay characterizes as the "more dramatic and frightening symptoms in the onstage performance of rock."<sup>6</sup> Popular music styles such as experimental rock and free jazz are acknowledged influences of performers like Masonna, Merzbow, and others. These performers take pop music's "controlled bodily chaos" and transform it into something that is authentically unpredictable, dangerous, and potentially crippling. Contemporary descriptions of this form of on stage performance often invoke the language of physical disability, characterizing it as "contortive," "spastic," and "out of control" (the later intersecting with representations of madness and idiocy). Though these performers typically did not have visible physical disabilities, they make their bodies non-normative for the duration of a performance. These performances are, in a literal sense, physically disabling. Masonna, whose performances are often under two minutes in their entirety, describes the goal of his stage performances as maintaining "full power" for as long as possible before losing concentration, hurting himself, or the gear giving out. In this sense, something or someone must "break" or lose their ability to function within the context of the performance to act as a signal to audience and performer that the performance is over. As a result of this process, a becoming physically disabled, either on the part of performer, audience, or equipment is not only built into the performance but has a structural role as a sort of teleological marker. Bodily transformation is not only a part of the performance, it actually serves a role creating the form, duration, and structure of the music.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

It is important to note that this reforming of bodies and of equipment during the course of a performance is essentially an inversion of the overcoming narratives we see in common practice music as well as normative literary representations of disability. Instead of imperfection, fuzziness, uncountable variance from normative models (statistical noise) being cured or killed through the teleological unfolding of a work, things become fuzzier and more imperfect. Instead of curing or killing, noise complicates or brings to life.

Noise, when it is performed in the characteristic small spaces that hold 20-50 occupants, does not have the same sort of clear separation between performer and audience that is seen in many forms of music and sound art.<sup>7</sup> The event on stage, and its attendant representations of physical disability, carry over into the audience. They often engage in similar forms of embodied performance. The same sense of abandoning autonomous control of the body to the intersubjective experience of the encounter as well as the whims of the noise itself reflects disability's making-conscious cultural myths of autonomy. Experiencing physical disability (as well as other modes of disability examined in this paper) leads to new consciousness of just how indebted to others, and to various collectives and cultural formations, we are in our daily life, regardless of how we relate to the continuum of disability. Here I see an affinity with Noise, and its ability through sheer overpower and jouissance to cause a "destabilization of the codes by which we make sense of the world"<sup>8</sup> and thereby derive new understandings of our relationships to and enmeshment in culture. It is therefore no surprise to me that, though they often do not explicitly make the connection in their sound practice, performers like Merzbow espouse

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<sup>7</sup> Though, this was not true in early noise shows. In an interview from 1999, Merzbow describes how noise audiences in the early 80s were made up mostly of salarymen who did not know how to react to his performances. He says, "In the early days, the reaction was nothing. People thought that the music was just too difficult and loud."

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, Simon. "Noise," in *Audio Culture* ed. Christopher Cox and Simon Warner. New York: Continuum, 2006.

environmentalist and post-humanist politics that highlight subjective enmeshment in ecosystems and environments and downplay the exceptionalism of human agency.

### **Noise, Madness, and Idiocy**

The interior, affective world of noise as experienced both by performers and audience also represents and produces non-normative means of experiencing and being in the world that resonate with critical discourse on and cultural representations of madness and idiocy. In *Extraordinary Measures*, Joseph Straus divides the way madness is understood historically into three categories which have generally been progressed through over time. These are religious, medical and sociocultural. Noise performance seems to skip the medical model and represent the non-normative affective states of its participants as a sort of religious ritual and simultaneously a secular, postmodern celebration of interior difference. Following from Noise's process of obliteration of subjectivity (as I discussed in reference to physical disability and environmentalism), an affective representation of an obliterated subject emerges in the inner world of the Noisician. Like in Schizophrenia as it was originally posited by Bleuler:

*The psychic complexes do not combine in a conglomeration of strivings with a unified resultant as they do in a healthy person; rather, one set of complexes dominates the personality for a time, while the other group of ideas or drives are 'split off' and seem either partly or completely impotent.*

*-Bleuler (via Straus)<sup>9</sup>*

the subject loses its unity and becomes, like the noise, a set of competing, chaotic complexes, feeding back against each other. From this emerges a sort of ecstatic (in the literal definition, self-transcendent) emergent sonic and affective reality. In this sense the Noisician acts as a sort

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<sup>9</sup> Straus, Joseph. *Musical Modernism*.



of secular holy fool, capable of, through ritual, taking the noise-substrate of industrial capitalism and creating the opportunity for a sacred transgression and transcendence of those conditions.

Merzbow says, “The effects of Japanese culture are too much noise everywhere. I want to make silence by my Noise.”<sup>10</sup>

Idiocy remains one of the most difficult disability conditions to theorize in part due to the perception that those who experience it are culturally coded as unable to self-narrativize. An inability to effectively communicate one’s inner world is seen as a hallmark of the condition(s). However, there is emerging scholarship on the topic, including Trent’s *Inventing the Feeble Mind* in which the effects of narratives of “gaining” autonomy and “overcoming” bodily contingency on the lives of people who experience intellectual disability. Again, here Noise turns disability related overcoming narratives on their head. Instead of discovering coherency, autonomy subjectivity, and a shared language with the normate culture, Noise plunges into mental contingency and a stubborn unwillingness to “express” through the culturally accepted semantics of expression.

If one were to behave, in a restaurant or an airport, the way that Incapacitants do on stage, one would make a scene and likely be coded as insane or an idiot. While there are certainly different behavioral expectations for people on and off stage, the sort of embodied performance characteristic of Noise is not accepted as normative social behavior in any other context. Here I see an affinity between these two meanings of scene: a productive cultural milieu and a disruption of social order. In Noise practice, these definitions are unified. While such a scene would, in an airport, prompt a normate stare, and an internal subjective process of

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<sup>10</sup> Merzbow. *The Beauty of Noise*. Interview by Chad Hensely, 1999.

disciplining/surveilling the body of the disruptor, this does not happen in a Noise performance, since the audience is also complicit in the disruption.

### **A Deafening Noise**

Perhaps the most clearly “audible” process of amplifying difference happening in Noise music is the literal and figurative deafening that it engenders. Noise, at the volume it occurs at in these small shows, ceases to be experienced (even by normate/non-expert listeners) purely as sound. It becomes a predominantly vibrotactile sensation experienced internally. Here we see more elision between the embodied performance of Noise and the sound component in that it is primarily meant to be *felt* (in the words of one listener, “you can feel your whole body react,”) often in ways that are amplified by the invocation of punishing or masochistic embodied imagery. Noise performers sometimes choose names for live projects and recordings that characterize these qualities of endurance as the involuntary suffering of pain, illness, and violence (e.g., *Sickness*, *Pain Jerk*).” This embodied (non-aural) sensation is in service of the social project of Noise: these personal, introspective experiences of bodily trauma are experienced collectively as citizens of a listening community. Since the “punishing” quality of noise is vibrotactile as much as it is aural, this masochistic project of inclusion makes no distinction between d/Deaf and hearing subject. The sublime extremity of Noise produces a particular form of coesthesia: a sort of sensory excess/overflow where the power of noise is too great to be absorbed by any single sense. It becomes its own compound sensory experience formed by the short-circuiting and feeding back of the other more conventionally/medically delimited senses, and thus can adapt and accommodate an “absence” of one or more of those.

In fact, Noise tends to *make* its audience Deaf through its social project (abolishment of musical meaning, radical performative inclusivity) and deaf through its sheer volume (tinnitus, temporary loss of hearing). Though Deaf scholars often actively enforce a boundary between Deaf scholarship and cultural disability studies by asserting that Deafness is not a disability but a cultural milieu (and by extension reinscribing the convention that asserts that those are discrete categories), it is relevant to look at the similarity of this process to the other forms of crippling/locating and destigmatizing bodily difference found in Noise.

### **Noise and Its Intersectional Formation of Bodily Difference**

While all three of these disability studies subdisciplines have distinct resonances in Noise music, the most relevant approach seems to me one that highlights the interpenetrations between these. In a process that is sort of an expansion of the sensory coupling accomplished by Noise (as discussed before in reference to tactile and auditory sensation), Noise seems to meld all of bodily experience and reality into a single response to the Noise, and thus it creates a general form of difference and reformation more so than it cripps particular sensory or experiential parameters.

Under the weight of Noise: smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing collapse into each other producing a sort of *compound bodily difference*. Through this unique sensory experience, another aspect of disability consciousness emerges in Noise music: the construction of community around its unique form of being in the world. It creates a scene around creating a scene. Like many other forms of subcultural musicking, the culture of the music is a co-creation of performers and fan communities. In addition to the immediate value of the Noise performance as a social gathering, Noise's project of bodily difference brings people together after the fact:

around tape trading networks and forums, zines and other underground publications, and in specialist Noise music cafes that collect rare recordings and ephemera. Here Noise once again breaks down boundaries: between discourse and practice, performer and consumer, and so on. The intersubjective performance of Noise music taste and knowledge becomes a site to bring people together outside of the livehouse, and to create a feedback loop between reception and performance: Noise's effect on the body produces a fan response that then produces more effects on the body.

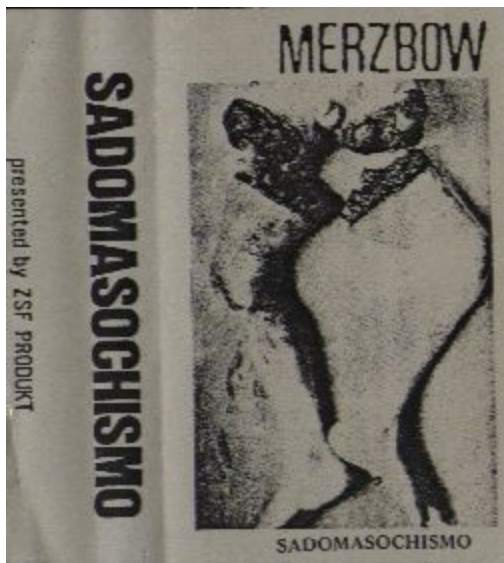
### **Noise and Trauma**

The relationship between trauma and disability is complex. While one does not want to erase the experience of trauma in people experiencing disability conditions that engender it, many experiences that are located under the umbrella of disability do not produce any trauma outside of the cultural stigma associated with them (deafness, etc.).

There does seem though, to be both an implicit and explicit connection to the experience of trauma in Noise music. In interviews Merzbow describes sadomasochism as an aesthetic interest in general, and a sort of erotic preoccupation with pain seems to be a theme in a lot of Japanese Noise Music. In addition to the BDSM aesthetic influence, there is a larger usage of trauma (to the ears, subjectivities, sensibilities) of audience members and performers alike to create a sense of "liveness" (Novak) and to situate the Noise in a discrete time and place. This process can be seen acting on a larger scale in cases of historical trauma and artistic responses to it. In *Performing Pain*, Marina Cizmiciu claims that Eastern European music Post WWII, sought to establish temporality through a focus on memory.

*As a consequence, the cultural and musical interest in memory from the late 1960s through the 1980s served as a realignment of the normative linear “historical axis.”<sup>11</sup>*

Noise music is different in that it does not use memory so explicitly (though it is shot through with memories and connotations: in the equipment, in the gestures of the performers, in the space, in the Noise itself), though it responds to trauma in a similar way. The major difference is that, in a much more literal sense, Noise music actually causes the trauma whereas composers like Schnittke and Gorecki were responding to a broad cultural trauma. However, the effect is the same. Noise music creates a time and place, its liveness is an expression of its own self-constructed history.



*Album Cover: Merzbow “Sadomasochismo”, demonstrating an interest in BDSM as well as explicit resonances of physical disability.*

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<sup>11</sup> Cizmic, Maria. *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

## Conclusions: Noise Is Reconfiguration

In the course of this paper I have mentioned Noise breaking (bodies, equipment, conventions, temporalities, subjectivities, minds, etc.) but that language is not completely accurate. Disability consciousness is relevant to understanding Noise music because it helps us to see that Noise is not breaking these things but reforming and reconfiguring them into non-normative morphologies that celebrate difference. A hissing mixer (that may have been intentionally circuit bent, damaged by spilled liquid etc.) which would, in any other musical context, be invalid or deformed, becomes a resource that can be mined for aesthetic content. An “out of control” audience member<sup>12</sup> would, in most any other private or public context, be arrested or subjected to a medical intervention. In Noise, this non-normative behavior becomes a form of expression: a reconfigured way of being in the world.

I also extended David Novak’s materialist metaphor about feedback (Noise’s cultural feedback mirrors the means by which it actualizes sound) to bodies. Noise, like disability aesthetics, is produced through feedback loops and overflow of experience and bodily materiality. Non-normate Bodies create the experience of Noise, and Noise is the experience of non-normative bodies. Neither directly produces the other, they are co-produced (the chicken and the egg).

Finally, Noise goes beyond simply celebrating non-normative morphologies, and it actually creates them. The process of generating Noise is a process of crippling audio equipment,

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<sup>12</sup> David Novak recounts his experience at a Hijokaidan concert:

*I witnessed a man suddenly begin to thrash around in the back of the room about twenty minutes into the performance, eventually crashing to the ground. Unsure if he was in the throes of an epileptic fit, I looked over to see Noise performer Hayashi Naoto sitting on top of the man, holding him down so that he would not continue to strike out, apparently involuntarily, into the crowded space around him... Hayashi brushed off the abnormality of his reaction, saying imply, ‘he got into it’.*

human bodies, subjectivities, and cultures. It makes apparent, in a very immediate way, the power dynamics of normative aesthetics and thereby opens doors to new ways to think about sound, community, and our bodies.

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