Music for Bondage Performance:

The Eroticism of Japanese Noise

Didi Chang-Park

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Dr. James Steichen

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I. Introduction

"If Music was sex, Merzbow would be pornography," remarks Masami Akita in a 1999 interview. In a characteristically gnomic style, the prolific Japanese noise musician, best known by his stage name Merzbow, sums up his musical oeuvre. Having released over 400 albums in the past 34 years, Merzbow has become the paragon of Japanoise, a genre of loud, harsh, improvised cacophony that emerged in Osaka, Japan during the 1980s. Originally trained as a painter and art historian, Merzbow is a multifaceted creator whose work in film and writing reveal an expansive fascination with erotic history and culture. His work for Japanese rope bondage collective *Kinbiken* as both a composer and a cinematographer demonstrates a diverse aesthetic engagement with eroticism, and his numerous publications documenting Japanese erotic history establish his intellectual knowledge of the field (Novak 242). Just this cursory look at Merzbow's extramusical work render the connections between eroticism and his art unmistakable. Yet it remains unclear exactly how Merzbow's noise constitutes erotic experience, considering its abstract, impenetrable soundscape. What makes Merzbow's noise pornographic, or more broadly, erotic? Using the philosophical theory of Georges Bataille and a historical investigation of Japanese sadomasochistic culture, I begin an exploration of Merzbow's noise music as a form of sonic erotic transgression.

Japanese noise music: loud, abrasive, and extreme, has made its reputation as one of the most radical and strange musical genres of the present day. Deriving its sound world from a variety of countercultural American music of the 60s and 70s, Japanoise has blended and perverted its disparate musical influences to the point of unrecognizable cacophony. It distantly cites the free jazz of Cecil Taylor, the overdriven guitar riffs of Jimi Hendrix, and the electroacoustic compositions of Karlheinz Stockhausen, but creates a cyborgian sound world of machinic noise

that could not derive from any acoustic instrument (Bailey 127). The starting point of the genre can be traced back to the 1950s culture of *jazu-kissa* ("jazz café") in the Kansai region of Japan, where imported records of American jazz would be curated by café owners not as background music but as the center of attention for a silent, contemplative clientele. This culture of serious listening grew into a broader underground culture of experimental jam-sessions and performance which incorporated the psychedelia and progressive rock of 1960s American culture. The first Japanese noise music acts grew out of this Bohemian scene in the 1970s, and though it is impossible to strictly define the sound world of the genre, Japanoise generally consists of white noise, electronic feedback, distortion, and high volumes (Novak 94). It gradually made its way back to North America through the fame of several Japanese noise artists, including Hijokaidan, The Boredoms, Masonna, and Merzbow, who began to perform and release their recordings abroad (Novak 12). Today Japanoise continues to develop through this network of circulation between Japan and the West, evolving into an increasingly transnational art form.

With such an interesting relationship to cultural exchange and global flows of information, Japanoise has garnered substantial scholarly attention as a cross-cultural media phenomenon. David Novak's landmark book *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation,* the only book-length scholarly work written on Japanoise thus far, explores how the art form's reliance on circulation between Japan and North America connects it to the rising predominance of information exchange in metropolitan modernity. While fascinating, Novak's book does not focus its analysis on Japanoise as an autonomous art form. If anything it paints a portrait of Japanoise as a sonification of the entrails of information itself, which does not speak to the erotic, transgressive aspects of noise that Merzbow and other noisicians allude to so insistently. Other scholarship that does explore the transgressive aspects of Japanoise has articulated interesting connections be-

tween Bataillean eroticism, death, and noise, but either fails to analyze the music of Merzbow with much specificity or to take into account Merzbow's professed influences, particularly his interest in Japanese eroticism.

This essay endeavors to uncover the erotics of Merzbow's noise music through the close listening of his albums *Music for Bondage Performance* and *Venereology*. Using the theory of Merzbow's primary Western erotic influence Georges Bataille and the cultural history of Japanese sadomasochistic practices as vehicles for analysis, one finds that the two albums' contrasting representations of eroticism in noise: internal torment and external assault respectively, engender opposing, yet complementary erotic experiences that ultimately meditate on the impossibility of death and the irreconcilability of transgression.

II. Merzbow, Merzbau

While it is not always appropriate to analyze art using the artist's intention and biography, Merzbow is a case of an artist whose extramusical influences are inextricable from his musical output. Though he was a drummer in various rock bands throughout high school, Merzbow focused on the visual arts in college as a painting and art history major at Tamagawa University (Pouncey). He eventually found that the presentation of his art in galleries felt too conservative and indirect, and turned to noise as a more visceral artistic medium. Still, Merzbow maintains that "music and art is not separate. I mix rock sounds and art together." Clearly, his noise project, named after the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters' architectural assemblage *Merzbau,* began as a culmination of his college exposure to the visual arts: particularly the Dadaist, Surrealist, and Fluxus movements ("Beauty of Noise," "Beyond Ultra Violence"). The *Merzbau,* initially named *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery,* was Schwitters' way of constructing a space for himself using the trash and detritus around him, and Merzbow does something similar, only with sound.

As Merzbow knew all too well, this artistic practice of collecting and manipulating sonic junk was deeply entrenched in eroticism. The Dada obsession with the detritus, the shit of the world, was quickly subsumed into the Surrealist art movement, which would more overtly probe the sexual undercurrents of the Freudian *id* (Tzara 1). Surrealism understandably forms the basis of eroticism in Merzbow's noise: "probably the most influential Surrealist concept for me is: 'Everything is erotic, everywhere erotic.' Noise is the most erotic form of sound, that's why all of my works relate to the erotic" (Pouncey). When Merzbow states, "If music was sex, Merzbow would be pornography," he elaborates that "pornography is the unconsciousness of sex. So, Noise is the unconsciousness of music […] 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" ("Beauty of Noise"). In this series of aphorisms he alludes to the Freudian concept of *eros* and *thanatos*, science-fiction writer J.G. Ballard's exploration of this binary through car crash fetishism, and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich's invention of the libidinal substance and life force Orgone (Bailey 126; Reich 377). Eroticism is truly everywhere.

Merzbow links the erotic and the collage of Dada most explicitly in the album *Pornoise/ 1kg* (1984), one of his earliest projects. The noise album was conceived in tandem with the mail art project *Pornoise,* in which he collaged one kilogram of pornography found in Tokyo subway trash cans to mail to his classmates. In using these collages as album art for *Pornoise/1kg,* Merzbow juxtaposes the visual pornographic collage with the collage of industrial noise. Yet this establishes pornography as a medium used for "its anti-social, cut-up value in information theory" and not for its eroticism ("The Beauty of Noise"). This pornographic sexuality is distinctly different from the eroticism of *Music for Bondage Performance* (1991), which uses photographs from intimate *kinbaku,* or Japanese rope bondage performances, that Merzbow had actually seen

and composed music for. As he describes, these images are not pornographic, but are used for their "documentary value," perhaps documenting an eroticism and intimacy that the *Pornoise* collages could never contain ("The Beauty of Noise"). In *Music for Bondage Performance* and subsequent works, Merzbow moves towards eroticism and away from the pornographic, trash aesthetic of his name, admitting that "this does not matter as much to me now. The name is only important to my early work, which I thought related to the concept of Merzbau" (Pouncey).

Released seven years after *Pornoise/1kg, Music for Bondage Performance* is a compilation of soundtracks composed for kinbaku and erotic *harakiri* scenes for Right Brain, a Tokyo *pinku eiga,* or erotic film producer (Wilson). The album derives its emotional and aesthetic significance from Japanese erotic culture and the Bataillean concept of transgression, not the antics of the Dadaists or Surrealists. In engaging with the music it is thus essential to develop an understanding of Japanese sadomasochistic practice, specifically of the kinbaku and harakiri scenes that the music is meant to accompany, which have developed complex emotional undertones over centuries due to their historic usage as methods of disciplinary torture. It is also equally important to engage with the theory of philosopher Georges Bataille, whose study of the links between eroticism, transgression, and death provide important insights into the greater ontological significance of sadomasochistic eroticism.

III. Erotic Transgression

Like Western sadomasochistic practices, which are often derived from Christian martyrdom and involve emotional undertones of guilt as associated with original sin, Japanese sadomasochistic practices are largely derived from historical Japanese penal codes and gain their psychological impetus from the associated emotional weight of shame. Kinbaku and harakiri both emerged from the elaborate official punishments of the Edo era, during which the Tokugawa

shogunate had instilled a strict social order and an isolationist foreign policy in efforts to unify the state. Japanese warriors were commonly taught *hojōjutsu,* the martial art of restraining one's opponent with rope. While not physically painful, being restrained by rope in the style of hojōjutsu was considered one of the most humiliating punishments, and the martial art has lived on as a beautiful and emotionally impactful cultural phenomenon (Master "K" 12). Many of the knots and rope patterns of hojōjutsu are utilized in kinbaku, though all practices have been adapted to be as safe as possible for the one being bound. The more painful rope patterns used for torture and interrogation, *ebi-zeme* and *tsuri-zeme,* shrimp tie and suspension, have also become staples of kinbaku, and are capable of inducing much greater intensities of masochistic pleasure (Master "K" 20). Harakiri, a form of ritual suicide, is not widely regarded as a sadomasochistic fetish and largely remains a historical Japanese phenomenon. Embedded in the *bushido* code of samurai warrior values, it was designated for samurai who had committed serious crimes, been captured by an opponent, or had otherwise brought themselves to shame (Master "K" 18). During the Edo era, harakiri became a highly formalized, public performance in which the samurai, dressed in a white kimono, would eat a final meal and write a death poem before making a fatal left-to-right slice on his abdomen. In the few contemporary harakiri fetish films that exist, a woman engages in a similar practice, though this is almost always simulated with a great deal of fake blood and acting.

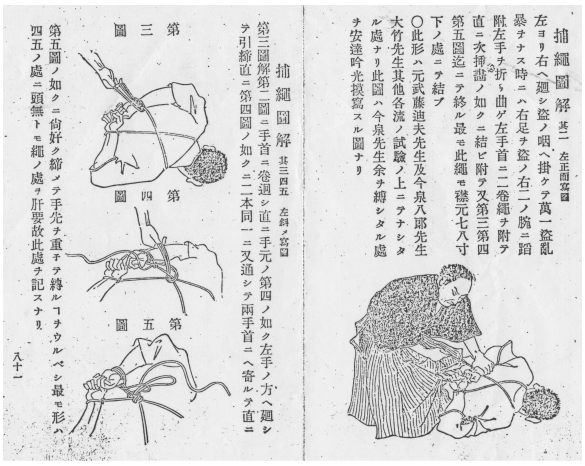

Fig. 1. Illustration of hojōjutsu technique from the Meiji era. Source: "Shinkage-ryu Jujutsu." Araki Ryu Torite Kogusoku. N.p., n.d. Web. 07 Dec. 2015.

These official forms of torture and punishment later became aestheticized in Kabuki theatre and Butoh dance, which often relied on violence and cruelty for dramatic effect, and *seme-e*, a specific subgenre of erotic *ukiyo-e* prints that depicted sadistic acts (Master "K" 23). It is this transference of the actual acts of torture and humiliation to the artistic realm which lead to the modern day bondage scene in Japan, where masochistic women, and sometimes men, are tied up by skilled rope masters, and where, to a lesser extent, simulated harakiri can be depicted as an erotic act in pornographic films. As consensual and risk-aware practices, they now involve the exploration of emotional struggle and pain without true degradation, and in erotic harakiri, a flirtation with death without actually dying.

The bodily exploration of sensitive emotional states: pain, vulnerability, and even death, is explored deeply by one of Merzbow's most notable intellectual influences, Georges Bataille. A mid 20th century french philosopher who was fascinated by human sacrifice, death, religiosity, and eroticism, Bataille authored the philosophical treatise *Erotism: Death and Sensuality,* which links the crossing-over of life to death with the temporary loss of subjectivity experienced in the act of transgressing a taboo. Bataille's foundational premise is that people are fundamentally discontinuous with each other, and that the impossibility for people to be truly connected and in touch with each other is bridged, to some extent, by eroticism and death: "[D]iscontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death" (Bataille 13). Using a variety of case studies: murder, religious sacrifice, Christianity, mysticism, incest, and the fetishes of De Sade, among others, Bataille illustrates the polymorphous ways in which eroticism permeates the issue of discontinuity and death. Merzbow has particularly praised the way Bataille connects mysticism and eroticism: "The departure of the soul,

which is practised in yoga, when the soul leaves the body for a short period is according to Bataille the same sensation as making love" ("Beyond Ultra Violence"). This ecstasy is central to many sadomasochistic practices, of which kinbaku, erotic harakiri, and even Merzbow's noise music, are no exception.

IV. *Music for Bondage Performance*

Fig. 2. *Music for Bondage Performance*

Music for Bondage Performance (1991), a compilation of noise composed specifically for these consensual, erotic kinbaku and harakiri scenes, is not as harsh and loud as one might expect for subject matter that so explicitly involves sadomasochism and pain. It has a relatively small dynamic range and more of an ambient texture than many of his harsher works, blending quiet drones with sound samples that range from metallic clangs and squeaks to airy flute-like sounds that recall the meditative qualities of traditional Japanese *shakuhachi*. Quite strikingly, the album barely makes use of any tape loops, a signature technique of Japanoise. Endemic to Merzbow's work, tape loops are continuous repetitions of a sound sample that may endow a noise track with

a frenzied dance beat or a grinding, hellish sense of inevitability. Without them, *Music for Bondage Performance* has a distinctly transparent sonic texture and a timeless quality.

This minimal soundscape evokes many aspects of bondage performance, from the respectful, sensitive nature of the act to the psychological journey of the bound. The rope master must be sensitive to the bound person's pain, and the intimate, mutual trust between the two must never be broken. In the liner notes for the album, Merzbow states that "the exchange of passion between the active and passive subjects is an axis upon which the act revolves." Because this personal exchange is the center of the bondage performance, the music cannot be too obtrusive. *Music for Bondage Performance* also decenters the spectator in certain ways, emphasizing the experience of the bound woman through sound. Tense, slow scraping metal noises aestheticize her physical and psychological pain as she endures being tied into uncomfortable positions for long periods of time. The focus on the bound woman's subjectivity is not just an artifact of the music — Merzbow states that "one of the most distinctive facets of the club is that the bondage women participate of their own free will," and Chimuo Nureki, the famed rope artist involved in the kinbaku scenes, reveals that he created his bondage club Kinbiken "to provide a facility for masochistic women, who are often misunderstood and therefore despised." ("Music for Bondage Performance"). Rope bondage, often described as calming and meditative, allows the bound to aestheticize struggles through the medium of the body in what is not catharsis, but a deeply reflective journey through pain. Merzbow's music simply aids this bondage aesthetic.

In this bondage struggle lies the possibility of bondage ecstasy: quiet, blissful ego-death, a feeling of complete and total calm. As Bataille might describe it, this transgression is analogous to death. The liner notes explain such a state in terms of "overcoming:" "[t]he women present in Akita's club are there because they want to be. Their aim is not to be tortured but rather to allow

his/herself to be overcome; to lose themselves without losing themselves" ("Music for Bondage Performance"). To Japanoise scholar Paul Hegarty, "Japanese rope bondage stands as a figure for a certain listening: bound for aesthetics, the tied person feels more embodied than ever, in a Bataillean erotics that denies completion, control, orgasm (as the endpoint, purpose, and so on). If Japanese noise is zen, it is also rope bondage" ("Noise/Music" 134). In terms of the music, this state of overcoming lies essentially in its timelessness. The lack of tape loops in *Music for Bondage Performance* allows the timelessness of death, or ecstasy, to become central to the experience of the music. In one exception, the death drive is represented by the opposite: an insistent rhythmic pulse heightens the sense of time prior to death in an erotic harakiri scene. The "Lost Paradise" theme, created for a harakiri video that Merzbow directed, is the only track with tape loops, and its fast, regular rhythmic beat heightens the ritual aspects of the performance as well as its inexorable trajectory toward death. Because harakiri actually depicts death, time is more relevant to the act. While the disembowelment is simulated, it is precisely this simulation of death, this impossible approach to death, which creates the sense of eroticism. It is just one more instantiation of Bataillean erotic transgression, this time a literal transgression of life that ends in the ecstasy of death, of internal organs spilling out to the external world.

III. Venereology

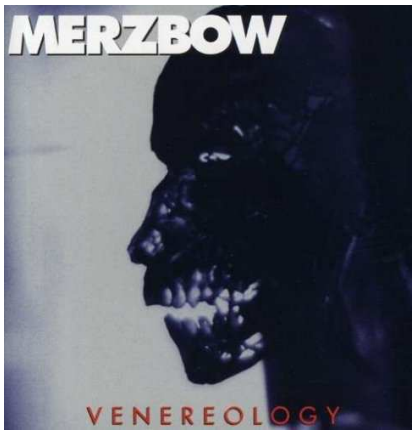

Fig. 3. *Venereology*

In contrast, the album *Venereology* (1994), created just three years later, features some of the loudest and noisiest sounds of Merzbow's recorded output. Released under the heavy metal label Relapse Records, it began Merzbow's foray into a sound replete with grindcore and death metal influences. The album is mastered at a very high volume and is full of tape loops, so its sound differs from that of *Music for Bondage Performance* in almost every aspect. *Venereology* also has much more diffuse erotic associations. Its title refers to venereal diseases, and one track on the album, "Ananga Ranga," is named after a sixteenth-century Indian sex manual that instructs a husband on how to best pleasure his wife, emphasizing harmony and peace in their sexual life. Without a clear erotic theme to refer to, how does *Venereology* function as erotic noise?

In some ways, the loudness and maximalism of *Venereology* can be perceived as more exciting and transformative for the listener. It is transgressive in its sonic extremity. The music gains a forward drive from its regular rhythmic pulse, and the sheer volume of the album induces physiological changes in the listener's body that may translate into a heightened psychological state. *Venereology* assaults the listener from the outside and attempts to brings her somewhere greater, deemphasizing internal struggle. The "departure of the soul" as described by Bataille is to be experienced directly by the listener of *Venereology;* the album is so intense to listen to that it might induce an disembodiment, a sonic limit-experience. Hegarty explains in his essay "Brace and embrace: Masochism in noise performance" how Japanese noise performance actually creates a sadomasochistic erotic experience through unexpected vacillations between statis and viscerality. They attack the senses in such a way that decenters them, like the decentering of the genital areas in masochistic eroticism ("Brace and Embrace" 140). Though the vacillations between stasis and viscerality refer specifically to the performance style of a different noise musi-

cian, Masonna, the described attack on the senses is clearly manifest in Merzbow's music, especially so in the album *Venereology*.

Yet it would be an oversimplification to mark Merzbow's louder noise music as limited to producing an external, transformative pain. Bataille emphasizes the fact that eroticism is always centered in the inner psyche: "Eroticism is one aspect of the inner life of man. We fail to realize this because man is everlastingly in search of an object *outside* himself but this object answers the *innerness* of the desire" (Bataille 29). In a metaphor which could quite aptly describe the experience of either listening to *Venereology* or engaging in rope bondage, Bataille writes:

> Man achieves his inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels that he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside that resists him. He goes beyond the objective awareness bound by the walls of the chrysalis and this process, too, is linked with the turning topsy-turvy of his original mode of being." (Bataille 39)

One must remember that listening to *Venereology,* just like engaging in rope bondage, is a consensual act — the noise fan submits herself to the ear-splitting noise not just to transcend herself, but to address inner struggle in a sensitive way. Perhaps the key difference between *Music for Bondage Performance* and *Venereology* is simply that the main subject of the former is the bound person, while the main subject of the latter is the listener herself.

The final point of analysis is again the death drive. How does *Venereology* approach death? The sheer intensity of the music is capable of creating a similar experience to the bliss of the bound woman. As one Merzbow concertgoer describes, "I felt as though I could have just laid on the floor and drifted off to sleep while it washed over me" (Pouncey). It is notable that this person describes the state of ecstasy as "sleep," bringing up the fact that erotic transgression usually leads only to a temporary loss of subjectivity. Like the bound person, suspended in the air

and vulnerable for what feels like eternity, the listener is ultimately in a transitional state, and will be freed eventually. The bound woman is not bound forever, the listener of *Venereology* does not sleep forever. And thus neither dies. The impossibility of death is immanent in noise: death is used as a force of destabilizing incommensurability. In the words of noise scholar Adam Potts, "Death is essential to the economy of Japanoise not simply as part of an active will towards dispersion but as an interior condition that destabilises the 'certainty' of negativity and radicalism. The image of death in the aesthetic of Japanoise does not thematise impossibility made possible, rather it helps visualise the radical uncertainty of its economy" (Potts 3). Because erotic transgression does not constitute death, there is always an internal struggle; what Merzbow states about bondage allowing the subject "to be overcome; to lose themselves without losing themselves" resonates well with this. Similarly, the terrifying loudness of *Venereology* binds the listener, bringing her closer, but never to true ego-death, allowing her to embark on a tortuous psychological journey through the music.

IV. Conclusion

Thus the seemingly opposed internal and external transgressions are two faces of a singular death. *Music for Bondage Performance* functions through its sonic control and *Venereology* through its sonic excess, but both approach ecstasy: the spareness of the the former evokes blissful ego-death through the body of a bound woman, while the overwhelming noise of the latter compels the listener to experience ego-death herself. United under death's impossibility, *Music for Bondage Performance* and *Venereology* both meditate on the irreconcilable. To argue over whether noise is a form of external assault and transgression of the impossible, or an internal, sensitive, consensual power exchange, is simply to reflect on how intimately intertwined these

two types of eroticism and noise are. As Bataille discusses, inner experience is fundamental to desires for outward transgression. Eroticism is a Möbius strip of desires.

This lack of defined edges, this circling of limits, is a theme that applies not only to the eroticism of noise but to Merzbow's work as a global ambassador of Japanese noise music. He bridges the gap between West and East in his panoply of Western and Japanese artistic influences: Cecil Taylor, Frank Zappa, Iannis Xenakis, Kurt Schwitters, Salvador Dalí, Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Georges Bataille, Seiu Ito, Kabuki theatre, Butoh dance, Kinbaku. He creates eroticism in his music that relies on a very universal "inner experience" that is independent of the type of transgression involved, whether that be through shame or sin. But is the eroticism of Japanoise truly universal? Perhaps it is troublesome that the theory of Bataille be used so extensively considering the Christian bias to his work. Despite stating that "Nothing binds me to a particular tradition," Bataille equates transgression with sin:

> [I]n the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist: that is the experience of sin. That experience leads to the completed transgression, the successful transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it […] This is religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely to terror, intense pleasure and anguish. (Bataille 38)

Japanese religiosity, and by association, eroticism, is distinctly different from Western Christianity in that its transgression lies broadly in the realm of shame rather than sin. However, Bataille's analysis arguably still holds because the tension between internal struggle and external transgression is the same across differing belief systems. Transgression, whether through sin or shame, is fundamentally still transgression.

Nonetheless, Merzbow continually centers Japan in his work. In many interviews, he emphasizes the imagination of Japanese sexual culture, unfettered by Western notions of guilt and sin ("Music for Bondage Performance," "The Beauty of Noise"). While fascinated by the treatment of sexuality in the works of Bataille, Freud, Breton, and Kraft-Ebbing, he seems to believe that the varied, imaginative eroticism of practices like kinbaku could not have arisen anywhere but in Japan. To Merzbow, Japan is the "sadomasochistic kingdom of the world" ("Music for Bondage Performance"). Correspondingly, distinctive musical tradition of Japanoise could not have arisen anywhere but in the underground jazz cafés of post-war Japan. Due to the hegemony and imperialism of the West, it is unsurprising that cultural artifacts, from Dolphy to Dadaism, would make their way into Japan. But it is the incubation of this material in the hands of artists who had grown up with Shinto and Buddhist belief systems, Kabuki theatre and Butoh dance, erotic shunga prints, and kinbaku, which has made Japanoise such a unique yet global art form. Like the junk pornography that has wormed its way through the subconscious of our sexual culture, Western cultural ephemera finds itself consolidated through Japanoise, an art that resonates with our inner desires for erotic transgression.

Closely linked with both its circulation patterns and its inherent eroticism, Japanese noise music embraces a liminality, a fundamental irreconcilability between West and East and between life and death. Citing the various cultures and noises of modernity without creating any singular portrait of the world, it rides a never-ending wave of globalization. Noise transgressively approaches the ecstasy of death yet necessarily revels in the embodied inner experience, thus inhabiting the space between *eros* and *thanatos*. By approaching, but never making pretensions of reaching the other side, Japanoise lies on both sides of every struggle, and is deeply intimate with our mental lives.

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