

Merzbow

Swiss Institute; Fri 6

Tonic; Sat 7

As an aesthetic philosophy, Dada is so self-negating that Tristan Tzara regarded his break from the movement he founded as one of his own most defining Dadaist acts. Similarly, Japan's Masami Akita, a.k.a. Merzbow, has managed to turn the antiart premise of creating sound with broken equipment into a platform for more than 20 years of rigorous production. Akita named his project Merzbow after Kurt Schwitters's notion of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork (the *Merzbau* was an attempt to contain his life's work in a single building), and he pays frequent homage to Dada, Surrealist automatism, Dubuffet's Art Brut and Japanese bondage pornography, embracing everything likely to keep him at a distance from mainstream or even "alternative" cultural acceptance.

Counting at least 150 records in his discography, topped off by 2001's 50-CD *Merzbox*, Akita has gained near ubiquity among record collectors and chroniclers of underground culture. Often casually summarized as "noise," his records contain little conventional rhythm or melody and are primarily concerned with timbre—buzzing, scraping, howling and overloading the circuits. It's the sound of machines, and furthermore, machines that are disintegrating. His two most recent releases (out of half a dozen this year), *Merzbow* (Opposite) and *Ikebukuro Dada* (Circumvent Recordings), don't depart dramatically from this approach, as four-note fragments of melody will emerge briefly before

being subsumed by waves of distortion. *Ikebukuro Dada*'s standout is "mb 162.2," which sounds like a hybrid of a string quartet and a mechanical device in need of oiling.

While not known for any particular live theatrics, the sheer intensity of Merzbow's music should make for a compelling performance. The Swiss Institute show, in particular, will take place amid a display of "failed" paintings by Jutta Koether and Steven Parrino. Koether's works look like an explosion in a black-paint factory, but they also repay closer looking, as neatly scripted apothegms are written onto the canvas. Similarly, Merzbow's music springs from failure or unintended results of the artistic process, but also rewards attention. Despite its forbidding surface, it offers a lot of finer detail, and the appreciation of small differences and gradual changes becomes the basis for the listening experience.—*Bob Bannister*

