

Berlin, October 2012

Dear Fatima and Irene,

We are thinking a lot about Pauline Oliveros's score at the moment--thank you so much for calling our attention to the piece and sharing the documentation of the performance at the Tate, which you organized earlier this year! The title--To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of their Desperation--(hey!) is just amazing, and it really challenges us in how to describe the piece properly in terms of feminist/queer politics.

It's so interesting that Oliveros created that score, which seems--besides the title--to work in a quite abstract way, exhausted of any meaning, but actually conceived as the most direct feminist critique and vision, don't you think? We are attentive to the fact that this score is about power. Inspired by Solanas's SCUM Manifesto,⁽¹⁾ Pauline Oliveros attempts to produce a formal structure which seeks to overthrow hierarchies. Can music propose a model for a more equal distribution of rights, for negotiating the tensions between individuals and a group? The score mentions that if anyone becomes dominant, the rest of the group should come up and absorb that dominance back into the texture of the piece. The score is based on really minimalist elements, the elementary colored lights--red, yellow, and blue--structuring the piece (and producing quite different atmospheres and feelings as we realized), the free choice of five very long tones multiplied by six performers (including dissonances between the tones), and listening: the performers are imitating each others' tones and modulations in the central part of the score.

The score has now really grabbed us: we would like to try to make a filmed version out of it. But how? As we kept on watching the Tate documentation, we noticed how "watching" kept us from "listening" to the piece. As soon as we stopped "watching" it, the piece became so much more interesting. Will this be a film about this contradiction? We will see. We came up with the first idea that we would like to use the camera as a kind of instrument in the piece as well. Can the camera visualize the "listening"? We were talking the other day about Gayatri Spivak, who writes about the ability to listen and that the problem is not that the subaltern can't speak, but that somebody has to learn to listen.⁽²⁾ How can we connect this to Oliveros's ideas about "deep listening"? In one of her books she says that at a certain point she became more interested in listening to sounds than in manipulating them.

If the abstractness of the piece follows Oliveros's wish of cutting ties with the conventions, norms, and institutions of music, this distance might produce another form of politics, which enables us to connect signs with new aesthetic and affective meanings. The challenge of the film could be that all the choices we make (the appearance of the performers, the work of the camera, the editing, the visualization of listening) will contribute in the directing of new fantasies, around which emotions arise or are supported, and which appear to be future, possible, or desirable:

"archiving the future for the sisters of the future," as Pauline Oliveros put it so nicely.(3)

Your "sisters,"
Renate and Pauline

P.S. As we were thinking about which musicians and performers to invite, we found a quite explicit letter by Pauline Oliveros to Kate Millet (which you might know already), in which she refused an invitation to the first 'Women's Music Festival': "I am not sure at all that it is 'SAFE' to borrow forms which continue a sexist message such as rock, rhythm and blues, sonatas, symphonies, etc. Maybe we have to search around and find something else. Maybe we have to give up what we know and love in order to come to a tone (sic) understanding of the meaning or effect of 'MUSIC' on us feminists."(4) We are interested in the implications of this statement. What does it mean in terms of choosing instruments for the piece? We tend to wish to invite musicians from our community, who come from electronic/underground backgrounds, people who have played in bands, etc., and to create a different setting than the previous performances of the score that we are aware of, which were made by orchestras and which used quite classical instruments. We actually want electric guitars, synthesizers, and attitude. We are thinking of inviting Peaches for example for the voice, whom we have wanted to work with for a long time. We also would like to work with Verity Susman, whom you invited to be part of the Tate performance, and who has both a band and a composer's background. What do you think?

(1) The Scum Manifesto is a radical feminist manifesto written by Valerie Solanas in 1967.

(2) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, The Spivak Reader, eds. D. Landy and G. Maclean (London: Routledge, 1996), 289.

(3) Pauline Oliveros, artist talk and performance at Tate Modern, May 3, 2012.

(4) In Martha Mockus, Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality (New York: Routledge, 2008), 47.