New Release of Sonic Meditations by Pauline Oliveros

Reviewed by TheWire

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here – a study in reckless excess." Which is something of an understatement.

He is writing, of course, about his long engagement with tai chi, and in particular, his relationships with his teacher, Master Ren GuangYi. He started to become seriously involved with Chinese martial arts, and later tai chi, in the early 1980s: his brother-in-law was a serious student of the arts.

For Reed, taking on a systemic study that was first physical and then spiritual enabled him to break away from the destructive cycles – that "reckless excess" – that had held him for so long. He credits tai chi as saving his life: quite possibly the discipline that tai chi requires helped extend it, at any rate.

The Art Of The Straight Line is a curious book. Edited by Reed's partner Laurie Anderson, with Stephan Berwick, Bob Currie and Scott Richman, variously friends, collaborators and martial arts instructors, the book is an assemblage of voices above all, a kind of oral history about Reed's tai chi life. He wrote about tai chi, brought it (and Master Ren) on stage with him, taught the art, but, at the time of his death in 2013, the notes and sketches of forms (the choreographed sequences through which tai chi flows) were piecemeal.

Anderson et al have collated Reed's writings, along with testimonials for tai chi (and Reed's relationship with it) from many of their friends, among them Jonathan Richman, Iggy Pop, Wim Wenders, Tony Visconti, Metallica's Lars Ulrich and Master Ren himself. There are enough ordinary voices here – ie, the not so famous fellow travellers – to ground the book on a more level playing field. These friend-authored vignettes show more private, and personable, aspects of Reed. There is something sweet about Reed and Sterling Morrison showing the teenage Richman – a major Velvet Underground fan – how to shape certain forms or achieve certain sounds. It's the kind of insider anecdote that gives one pause to reappraise a figure, who for many (especially journalists) was experienced as fiercely antagonistic.

What is the art of the straight line, Anderson asks in her foreword to this book: "Tai chi is made up of circles, circles within circles." The straight line is, she suggests, a way of keeping one's orientation intact, of finding a way through intricacies, and that's where the artistry comes in. For Reed, a proselytiser for tai chi, this straight line also joined up philosophy, art, physical action and mental well-being in a flow of energy – qi – that, at its best, embraced everything, from the electric drones of guitar noise to the arc of a carefully executed arm movement.

Louise Gray

Linger On: The Velvet Underground
Ignacio Julià
Ecstatic Peace Library Hbk 244 pp

In recent years, fans of The Velvet Underground have been treated to a number of substantial projects that both further our understanding and continue the mythology of the group. First Todd Haynes's superlative documentary, then Lou Reed's ongoing archival project, and now *Linger On* – the archive of Spanish journalist Ignacio Julià presented as a luxurious book by Ecstatic Peace Library.

Like Haynes's documentary, *Linger On* is fundamentally a fan object, stemming from the author's lifelong "romance" with the band. Julià's interviews with band members and associates are punctuated with photo spreads, reviews and texts on elements of Velvet Underground history and aesthetics, like an upmarket, expanded fanzine. Its cover is a stylised version of the pulpy book the band took their name from, and a spread early on tells us the band's astrological make-up – two Pisces, two Virgos – in a nod to both the fannish enthusiasm of the project and The Velvets' mystical alchemy.

The band's story is told in retrospect, their members interviewed multiple times from the late 1970s onwards, with considerable shifting memories and contradictions between accounts. Through these recollections, The Velvet Underground's three year existence in their best known iteration – Lou Reed, Sterling Morrison, Moe Tucker and John Cale – becomes more enigmatic over the course of the book. Pivotal moments are revealed in anecdotal asides, like "Sister Ray" originating from a Chicago gig without Lou Reed, and with the band members on entirely different instruments.

The band is treated as a catalyst and a lingering presence, existing concurrently with its members' subsequent lives and careers. Julià makes deft connections between the violence and European sensibilities of Cale's *Paris 1919* and Reed's *Berlin*, and reports vividly from The Velvet Underground's 1993 reunion, as well as Cale and Reed's 1989 *Songs For Drella* collaboration. Both musicians are, of course, on fine petty form throughout, and their bitchy stories and contrary attitudes are their own kind of mythos. In one interview Cale claims that he's not interested in making records, as they are "a supreme waste of petroleum-based resources", although he changes his mind later. Sterling Morrison is charming and wry, even in what is likely his last interview, just weeks before his 1995 death.

Julià's 1978 interview with Nico is astonishing, both for her chillingly casual allusions to Nazi sympathy, and for her poetic take on her musical process: "It's not a harmonium, it's an orchestra," she says of her core instrument. Two interviews with Moe Tucker offer a rare insight into the work – and often challenging life – of an overlooked group member, who speaks especially candidly about turning the limitations of her songwriting and singing into a guiding force of her solo work.

Linger On ends fittingly with a conversation between Julià and fellow fan Todd Haynes. Reading this rich book, I thought about my own relationship with The Velvets – as will surely every fan who gets their hands on it. Even though I've spent over 20 years of my life listening to them, and estimate I've heard their debut at least a thousand times, I still feel somewhat unqualified to present anything like a definitive take. The crux of their appeal is inherently unknowable, and so any writing about them has to not only be confident in absorbing this mystery, but furthering it. *Linger On* has a central tension, an almost sensually alluring reveal/conceal of its subject, that fans will recognise as a mirroring of this peerless group.

Claire Biddles

Sonic Meditations
Pauline Oliveros
PoP&MoM Pbk 33 pp

In a 2002 interview with Miya Masaoka, Pauline Oliveros cited Yoko Ono's event scores as one of three key milestones in her own development. Nowhere is this admiration clearer than in the spellbinding concision of the early 1970s text instruction scores that comprise Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations*: the perfect format to crystallise a longstanding interest in composing structures for group improvisation, inaugurating the paradigm shift to listening as the central locus of her composition. While the ubiquity of Ono's scores were cemented in her book *Grapefruit* (1964) with its many editions, it is both noteworthy, and perhaps surprising given how synonymous her *Sonic Meditations* has become with Oliveros's own oeuvre, all the more so posthumously, that this handsome yet unassuming purple gloss volume is their first stand-alone book.

As much as sharing in this wider avant garde lineage, *Sonic Meditations* has had its own distinct publishing history as the kernels of what would come to be termed Deep Listening, with its proliferating communities of practice, beautifully reflected in this new book. The genesis of *Sonic Meditations* is in the ♀'s Ensemble that met weekly in Oliveros's own home, collapsing the performer/audience hierarchy through a shared listening. *Teach Yourself To Fly*, *Greeting Meditation* and several more are listed as repertoire in an unpublished 1971 ♀'s Ensemble information pamphlet in Oliveros's archive. The scores themselves were first printed the following year in the tenth issue of *Source*, guest edited by Alvin and Mary Lucier. By no means Oliveros's first contribution to this influential score magazine, they are hand-written, overlaid onto photos of the ♀'s Ensemble, interjecting the DIY feminism of the earlier pamphlet in a manifesto-like electricity that propels this new body of work and thought into the hands of Oliveros's composer peers. By contrast, the later 1974 *Sonic Meditations* edition by her music publisher Smith Publications has the solemn print and layout of more generic sheet music, available over subsequent decades in Smith's catalogue by mail order – while the works also proliferated amid texts by Oliveros and others, shared in letters, photocopies, PDFs, and of course through their myriad performances.

The new book's core comprises the *Sonic Meditations* 1– 25 "dedicated to the ♀'s Ensemble and Amelia Earhart" alongside Oliveros's two introductions, exactly as in the 1974 Smith edition. Yet here they are flipped from horizontal manuscript into compact pamphlet and sandwiched between fore- and afterwords by Anne Bourne and Ed McKeon, each with their own respective proximities to the works, plus "a few messages from friends" Annea Lockwood, Laurie Spiegel et

al. Moreover, the publisher is PoP&MoM, an acronym for Pauline Oliveros Publications and Ministry of Maât, the latter Oliveros's widow Ione's overlapping project: literally keeping it in the family. Most striking is the inclusion of four photo portraits of Oliveros by artist Fred Lonidier from a 1971 trip to the Joshua Tree desert: clad in sturdy androgynous workwear that reads as high hipster today, she sits cross-legged on a smooth boulder in enigmatic shadow in the cover image. Lonidier's sister Lynn was a founder member of ♀'s Ensemble, here setting *Sonic Meditations* in the time and (Southern Californian) space of their origins. Re-inserting some of that earlier electricity, the portraits elicit Oliveros's silent power, instituting her own strength in order to diffuse it outwards to others. As in turn the scores themselves do: each an exacting proposition offered to us for our own collaboration in the very many moments that have and will come to pass, "liquid tools" as McKeon puts it so eloquently in his text. It is a disarming modesty, thoroughly resonant with the works themselves, that gives this book its immediacy: to be slipped into a back pocket or handbag, read, annotated and performed with or by many new hands and ears. Ultimately this shift into book form marks a profound critical mass of interest in Oliveros as a composer, artist and thinker that now extends well beyond the worlds of new music – while still here rooted in an intimate network of friends and colleagues.

Irene Revell

Sonorous Desert: What Deep Listening Taught Early Christian Monks – And What It Can Teach Us

Kim Haines-Eitzen

Princeton University Press Hbk 145 pp

For Kim Haines-Eitzen, the desert is both biblical and personal. An American, she spent her childhood in the Middle East, or Near East, reared by parents who, inspired by their Mennonite heritage, had moved from the US to Jordan to study Arabic and do humanitarian work. Born in the late 1960s, she associates her experience with serenity and fear alike, with the quiet expanse of the Sinai and the sirens of the 1973 Yom Kippur war. The shore of the Red Sea was her holiday playground.

Now a Cornell University professor of religion, Haines-Eitzen seeks to merge the personal and the biblical in a slim volume with a vaguely self-help-ish subtitle, *Sonorous Desert: What Deep Listening Taught Early Christian Monks – And What It Can Teach Us*. She achieves this goal through the humble act of sitting quietly, much like the hermits of yore.

Unlike those hermits, however, she has audio recording gear in tow. Since 2012, Haines-Eitzen has documented the sound of the places she visits and where she lives. The poetic codas to each chapter feature QR codes that, given the context, can be mistaken for the ornate initials that decorated ancient manuscripts. These link to online recordings she made around the world. Her tracks transport the listener to places like her family's retreat in Arizona and the canyons of the Wadi Qelt in the Judean Desert.

The key word is retreat. Despite the monastic act's association with solitude, a monastery is itself a community, and thus the notion of self-exile gets revealed here as something more akin to migration: from one life to another, from exterior to interior. In Haines-Eitzen's telling, such paradoxes inherent in the monastic impulse run deep. While Trappists take vows of silence, most monastic life is simply remote. Less explored in the book is the contrast (even conflict?) between personal discovery and selfless divinity.

The narrative moves back and forth between the wired present and the mythic past. In meaningful ways, little has changed, least of all the human propensity to complain about noise pollution. An early avatar of this disgruntlement is Antony, a celebrated hermit from roughly 1800 years ago who "left the noise and distractions of city life for the quiet of the desert".

We abandon civilization alongside Antony, and with other monastic aspirants. The ancient ones include the saints John Climacus, Paul, George of Choziba, and Eucherius, who said "no sound is heard in the desert save the voice of God". Haines-Eitzen politely disagrees: the desert is rich with sound. We witness her personal revelations (sometimes repetitively) in this regard, such as the idea that to listen while recording is to listen intently, and to relisten through the ears of the machine is to hear what one might not have otherwise. Likewise, she stops trying to capture the world "pure and pristine", without people in it, and comes to appreciate humans' sonic place in the environment. We also visit reverberant cave chapels, ponder the animism belied by Western monotheism, and learn lots of cool ancient Greek onomatopoeia.

Sonorous Desert is a book about seekers, among them the widely travelled author herself. Modern figures cited include Edward Abbey, Virginia Woolf, Gordon Hempton and Thomas Merton, each arriving at the same conclusion: the quest for external silence is ultimately one for internal peace. (Oddly, that list doesn't include Pauline Oliveros, who is synonymous with the deep listening mentioned in the book's subtitle.) Wandering into the desert provides a metaphor for the effort and time required. As Haines-Eitzen quotes Merton from 1962, foreseeing smartphone apps like Calm and Headspace half a century hence, "You can't have interior silence just by pushing a button."

Marc Weidenbaum

Listen: Jeph Jerman In Conversation With Aram Yardumian

Aram Yardumian, Steve Jansen & Jeph Jerman

Errant Bodies Press Pbk 144 pp

About 20 years ago, Jeph Jerman came home one evening to find a rabbit lying on his porch. Living out by the desert in central Arizona, cottontails were a pretty common sight. But there was something different about this one. It didn't move away when Jerman approached. "I eventually realised it must be sick," he tells Aram Yardumian in the long interview making up the bulk of this book, "so I watched it for about 24 hours." To make the creature more comfortable, he made a sort of deathbed for it out of grass. But he couldn't quite bring himself to put it out of its misery. And then he noticed, "It was making these sounds, something I'd not heard before." He recorded it.

Mixed in with the howling drone of desert winds and what might either be a vibraphone or the ident of a train station tannoy, that rabbit's dying breath sounds oddly squeaky, raspy. If I hadn't been told what it was, I probably would have guessed duck. But knowing the story can't help but add a layer of pathos to the track. When the piece was published on the *Compost And Height* website, it attracted "a lot of negative comments". Jerman himself had "felt weird about it". The recording languished on a shelf for some years before he mixed it into a piece of music. But the fact that he did – and that he had recorded it in the first place – exemplifies the peculiar openness Jerman exhibits towards sound, his restless curiosity and a certain odd mix of homespun simplicity and avant garde weirdness. "These were sounds that wouldn't be heard in any other circumstances," he tells Yardumian. "I find it impossible to separate the recording of the rabbit from the memory of the circumstance."

For much of *Listen*'s 144 pages, we are treated to a curious game of cat and mouse, as Yardumian repeatedly tries to find a frame of reference within which to place the work while Jerman deftly bats each one away. With increasing desperation, the former brings up such aesthetic-historical tentpoles as the 1980s tape underground, the Nurse With Wound list, ideas connected to acoustic ecology, Surrealist automatic writing, John Cage, minimalism… Each time, Jerman politely demurs. "To be honest," he says, of his first 1980s recordings, "I was just recording stuff that I thought might be interesting to listen to myself." His feelings about the work haven't changed much since. "If I find a sound interesting, I'll try and record it for later listening or use," he says. "Everything else is just folly, really." But in among this loose to and fro, there emerges an engrossing portrait of a singular artist.

Jerman can boast a discography running into the hundreds, most of it on tape or CD-R. He has collaborated with the likes of Al Margolis, Aaron Dilloway, Merzbow, Eric Lunde, and even – thanks largely to Thurston Moore – played Lollapalooza. Much of that output is fascinating, ranging from field recordings to (weird) rock bands, prepared guitars and jury-rigged instruments built from scratch, records made with the low frequency waves of the Earth's magnetosphere, and records made by dragging a tree through the streets. There is a fidgety, compulsive character to Jerman's oeuvre, a constant questing after sounds, patterns, rhythms, processes, relayed with what strikes me as a peculiarly American matter of factness, as if these were not really works of bizarre avant garde art but simply so many hand carved wooden chairs or patchwork quilts. But underlying that practicality there is a folk metaphysics that insists sounds are no more than sounds, needing no wider frame of reference – even as the hoarse squeak of a chronically ill bunny still points unfailingly towards the memory of witnessing its demise.

Robert Barry