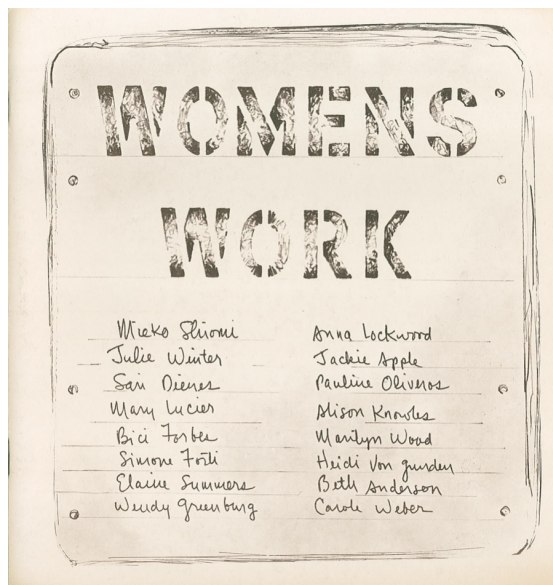


# Keeping Score: “With Womens Work” at Issue Project Room

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Within the ecosystem of publications documenting the heterogeneous art world of the 1960s and 1970s, the first issue of the little-known 1975 magazine *Womens Work* stands as a modest but critical volume. A slim booklet printed in brown ink on beige paper, it contains thirty-two pages of event scores, elliptical texts written as instructions for performative actions. The genre is typically associated with a motley group of male Fluxus artists, particularly George Maciunas and La Monte Young. Together with Jackson Mac Low, they produced the book *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1963), a compendium of these emergent language notations, with works by Yoko Ono and Simone Forti as the lone contributions by women. *Womens Work*, by contrast, announced an irruption of text-based scores by a network of female practitioners working across music, dance, performance, and visual art. Emerging at the height of second wave feminism, the publication highlighted both the messy interdisciplinarity inherent to experimental artmaking in the postwar period and the women left out of narratives around it. The second and final issue of the magazine, published in 1978, took the form of a fold-out poster containing photographs and reproductions that are less immediately readable as instructional scores; Primary Information produced a facsimile edition of both issues in 2019. For the digital performance series “With Womens Work,” presented by Issue Project Room in Brooklyn (through May 5), an international roster of female-identifying artists was invited to interpret and respond to the 1975 scores, offering an opportunity to revisit this important publication and consider its continued resonance today.



Cover of *Womens Work* volume 1, 1975.  
Courtesy Annea Lockwood

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*Womens Work* was co-edited and self-published by Fluxus artist Alison Knowles and experimental composer Annea Lockwood (then a music professor at Hunter College), who were frustrated by the lack of opportunities for women in the male-dominated intermedia circles of 1970s New York. The first such publication anthologizing instructional text-scores by women artists, it seemed to offer a response to the ironic question posed by Pauline Oliveros, a celebrated experimental musician, in a 1970 *New York Times* article: “Why have



there been no ‘great’ women composers?” (This question was famously extended to women artists the following year in an *ARTNews* essay by art historian Linda Nochlin). *Womens Work* was a collective endeavor—“put together by all of us,” according to the magazine’s copyright page—with the sixteen contributors helping to collate and distribute the limited print run. A statement of female camaraderie, this notice also signaled the shared intellectual and practical labor required to produce the publication. The cover announced the title of the magazine in a hard-edged stencil recalling construction signage (“men at work”) with the participating artists’ names listed in cursive script below, a fusion of graphic styles coded as masculine and feminine.

KEEP THE NEXT SOUND YOU HEAR  
 IN MIND  
 FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT HALF HOUR

PAULINE OLIVEROS

EN ROUTE  
 TO OBERLIN CONSERVATORY  
 FEBRUARY 20, 1975

AMERICAN AIRLINES

Pauline Oliveros score, included in *Womens Work* volume 1,  
 1975. Courtesy Issue Project Room

The published text scores ranged from prescriptive to abstract, calling on the reader to perform a procedure or set of fixed actions, to interpret an open-ended instruction, or to construct a material object. Some expressly engage in a feminist critique of gender performance, such as Bici Forbes's directives to complete tasks around themes such as "maternity leave" and "home economics," giving parameters in the latter instance for a ceremonial party game ("Invited guests each bring something of their own that they treasure. Items are passed around, with or without comment, and then burned.") Some are engaged with modern dance, namely Simone Forti's handwritten score for performers to accelerate and make strange a quotidian movement ("At least five and as many as thousands of people walk in and out among eachother [sic] passing as fast as possible, as close as possible while never touching, and making a buzzing sound.") Others are prosaic, like *Experiment* by the polymath artist Sari Dienes, which asks the reader to care for a piece of copper wire, or a meditative notation by Oliveros imploring the performer to "keep the next sound you hear in mind for at least the next half hour." Still others are durational, like Lockwood's iconoclastic *Piano Transplants* series (begun in 1968), which invites performers to slowly drown, burn, or bury the instrument. Both violent and comically absurd, this translocation of pianos from the concert hall to the natural world marks a productive response not only to the masculine canon of experimental music but also to the masculinized field of Land art then gaining currency. Knowles's recursive *Proposition IV (Squid)* provides a framework for constructing one's own score using sets of randomized data.

Unlike the text scores included in *An Anthology*, many of which functioned primarily as conceptual language objects (for instance, Young's 1960 "Piano Piece for David Tudor #3": "most of them / were very old grasshoppers"), the scores of *Womens Work* were explicitly intended to be realized. Knowles and Lockwood's note on the magazine's copyright page, "These scores are ready for you to do," underscores this imperative. The performance

notations of *Womens Work* are, in other words, urgent feminist exhortations to make noise. Thus rather than “never done,” as the idiomatic expression claims, *Womens Work* pointedly calls upon women to “do” the performative work inscribed within its pages.



Still from Mariana Valencia's *Dearest*, 2021. Courtesy Issue Project Room.

Issue Project Room's "With Womens Work" series makes space for this subjective experimentation. Embracing the publication's intermedia ethos, the performances span multiple media, from video to sound art to dance. The pre-recorded works, each of which respond to a different instructional score, premiere as free livestreams on the organization's website every week and are permanently archived for viewing online. Issue has made good use of this digital programming model since the pandemic shuttered its Brooklyn performance space. Past online projects include "Isolated Field Recordings," which was organized mere weeks into the start of New York's lockdown, in April 2020, and aimed to bridge the distance between artists and audiences by offering a sonic glimpse into solitary creative practice under quarantine.

"With Womens Work" began on February 3 with a composition by Berlin-based sound artist crys cole responding to Beth Anderson's *Valid for Life*, a graphic score featuring the letter R in varying typefaces and font sizes. Anderson's instructions call for the gentle amplification of a "long, soft, full, round roll" performed on a trio of stringed instruments and drums. cole's answer, *Valid ForeverrrRrrRRrrr... (pt.1)*, abandons conventional musical means, creating a more quotidian soundtrack out of heavy balls, coins, and rolls of transparent paper flung across the artist's studio floor. Set into motion by an unseen hand, these objects create muted but unmistakable tonal qualities, producing a haptic acknowledgement of the cascading trill evoked by Anderson's score.

Another project, by vocal experimentalist Julia Santoli with Caroline Partamian and Suzueri, explored the materiality of sound through a composition marrying piano, voice, electronics, and numerous percussion instruments. (Partamian also publishes *Weird Babes*, a zine containing drawings, illustrations, and graphic musical notations by primarily female artists in the vein of *Womens Work*.) Each artist recorded sonic interpretations of the visual



textures captured on screen in an accompanying video by Santoli and filmmaker Bayley Sweitzer—a pile of dust, melting tin foil, prismatic light cast on a blank wall. Titled *Soleil Solace*, the collective performance reinterprets *Sole Source* by musicologist Heidi Von Gunden. The originating text asked a barefoot and blindfolded ensemble of musicians to use a patchwork quilt as a score, traversing its surface to respond to different textures with shifts in sonic frequency, energy, and quality. *Soleil Solace* translates the underfoot tactility of Van Gunden’s notation to an optical experience. The result is an audio-visual tapestry with variations in pitch, timbre, and intensity, registered in distinct musical chapters for each section of the video. Israeli composer Maayan Tsadka moved her performance outdoors to focus on the indeterminate sounds of the natural world, a practice she terms “sonic botany.” Interpreting Lockwood’s *Piano Transplants* as an invitation to make music in and with the environment, Tsadka’s *Sonic Botany: RA’ASH ADAMA (earthnoise)* uses found organic matter as musical instruments, playing a leaf like a kazoo or using a tuning fork to tap the vibratory properties of a tree.

In forsaking literal readings of the 1975 compendium, the performances presented in “With Womens Work” demonstrate the enduring adaptability of historical text scores and their allure for a new generation of female-identifying artists working in experimental music and performance. They also expose the continued need for platforms that make these and other marginalized practices visible. The composers of *Womens Work* could not have anticipated the extraordinary challenges facing such communities today. Yet, like the magazine’s text scores, they are vibrantly and dynamically alive.