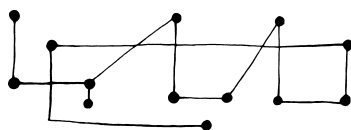


## HERSELF AS MUSIC†



DOROTA CZERNER

From where I sit in the third row, I can see the stage shine. Light floor against the darker wood of acoustic panels, the massive black speakers on metal stands. The piano, discreetly pushed to the back of the space, is there as a reminder of the delicate position of the listener at a “live” concert of electronic music. For a while the eyes wander in search of the instrument, the performer, until finally the dimmer-switch plunges the auditorium into darkness, allowing one to enter the paradise of hearing. Does music need a stage? From my vantage point in the hall of the Kraków Academy of Music, I can examine every detail of the empty space, where in a moment, in accordance with the evening’s program, the composition “on the way to becoming . . .”<sup>1</sup> will play. The drama composed by Elaine Radoff Barkin will begin.

For a moment, I forget my nervousness at being the Polish translator of the text. From among the heads of people who came out to discover works of the composers associated with Open Space<sup>2</sup> on a dark December evening (1st *PAFME/2006*)<sup>3</sup>, I allow myself to explore the geometric patterns of the wooden blocks that recall the aesthetics of a Japanese meditation hall. My eyes are drawn to the black contours that meander into a mosaic of interlocking rectangles. I follow the

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thread, lose the thread, slowly entering the contemplation of this conspicuous absence. Whose? Somewhere “on the way . . .”, I note that by pure coincidence the staging would please Samuel Beckett. Like a lonely leafless tree in the desolate landscape of *Waiting for Godot*, the absurdly silent Steinway contains the whole world. Within it, the sense of expectation, transitioning from one state to another, the absence of anything well-defined itself becomes a presence.

I think of the trim permutations of Beckett’s short prose whose skeletal echoes can be heard in the lines of Elaine’s text. The rhythmic structures built around the *until*, brought to a boil by the energy of her own creative occasion, the single word eager to punctuate Elaine’s own sentences from within. Her *untils* surfacing in the form of hot springs, as if under some internal pressure of Beckettian phrase faithfully preserved by auditory memory.

Two distinct voices and two different sensibilities—a cosmopolitan Irish expat who wrote in French, and a New York-born Jewish-American composer—permeate each other on the first reading of “on the way to becoming . . .”, with Beckett’s structures under-imposed beneath Elaine Barkin’s intimate thoughts. The first of many tools that she uses to throw people off the trail and by doing so, to illustrate her point. One of many ways by which she “tries others on . . .”. First at the level of text, we experience the *performativity*<sup>4</sup> of this composition. Through its form alone, the writing strives to dissimulate the identity of the author. In the blink of an eye, Elaine puts on the mask of another writer’s syntax, only to bring out her own voice from underneath, in the following moment. (Or is it just another semblance of *Her* voice?) The utterance literally carries out the action of which it speaks.

What could be more fascinating than listening to the object-instrument that gave birth to the thought? Her voice? Her touch on the keyboard?

In this *found place* created by life itself and the program presenting several composers on the same evening, even inside the space that invites further interpenetration of musical substance, the blurring of identities is only superficial. A unique signature written somewhere at the bedrock of her work, constantly swept by tides of literary and musical influences, cannot be erased. The listener’s confusion is also an illusion. “The artist is present.”<sup>5</sup>

Between her own pauses before the next *until*—what is read, or heard?

The sound of “U” as in you. U as in U-turn, a permanent condition of backpedaling on one’s own intuitions or pronouncements, and attentions given to those coming from other directions under the guise

of delicate trajectories of personal affiliations. U-shaped bends designed to trap problematic fumes of undesired returns from inevitable afterthoughts. The secondary U-turns of positive doubling back before going forward in a stronger, decorative topstitch. And lastly, U as in a uterine vase-like shape that stands ready to collect those fluid affinities. Of self to others; others to self.

The voice of the artist sounds in the dark. Our surrender to the polyphony of *hers* is the only way of hearing who's there and what's there. After all, this could be illusory too, an acoustical effect known as the *beau geste*. Like a lone wolf's song, amplified by the landscape, she could be manifesting/signaling the presence of more than herself, while offering a mere multiplication of "selves" echoed by a hollow in a forest. Pressed by the invisible voices of the Underworld, Orpheus panicked, fixing Eurydice's identity onto a single pin-up image he could cherish and "muse" himself with. It was her multifold contradictions, perhaps the identity composed from many women, young and old, that he could not endure.

Eighty-seven words written on a postcard; this is how much text-libretto came from Samuel Beckett in response to Morton Feldman's invitation to collaborate on a piece that became known as the anti-opera *Neither*. Elaine's monologue has a similar format. Not a poem, not a short story, but according to the composer's intention, a "soliloquy." Unlike arguably the most memorable female soliloquy (albeit construed by a man) of twentieth-century literature—the monologue of Molly Bloom that begins and ends with "yes"—the thoughts of Elaine Barkin never fall for the power of what James Joyce deemed "the female word." Even though the first speaking episode of the collage begins with a barely audible whisper, the listener would be mistaken to hear any of such "acquiescence . . . the end of all resistance"<sup>6</sup> that Joyce attributed to the women's psyche. Unless . . . True, the lips take off softly. The utterance pools out from under the noise to insinuate itself into the strident twang of a string instrument that seems to struggle with its own identity. Yet the speaking marks the turning of a tide. One of many gestures of such "would be" attempts at merging. At an improbable takeover. And while a home-made monochord explores its single string condition of yearning, in vain, for a harmonic relationship, a gust of whispering gains speed. This incursion increases in intensity without quite making the point, at least not by means of thought. Rather, the point is made by the simple perseverance of the voice in articulating, almost mechanically, the sentences of the text. Like an invisible mother-spider in the dark, the language spreads the web of an acoustic mask. Now and then, underneath, the string discovers a melodic fragment. For a moment,

eruptions of discordant noise continue competing with the voice. Going where the voice hangs, switching places, background to foreground.

What is Elaine Barkin's soliloquy? Is it the monologue of a solitary walker, speaking under her breath for the benefit of no-one besides herself; a peripatetic note to be explored in some further, more formal musings? Or is it more of a theatrical ploy, used to affect the audience?

To reach herself she only needs to murmur. But were she to raise her head with an ironic grin and put on a touch of lipstick, then a mirror might prove necessary. A mirror implies an audience of at least one. Since we decided to introduce "on the way to becoming . . ." in the context of a concert performance, we have been alluding to the stage. A theater of impermanence, in which the presence of the main actor has, through the peeling of onion-like layers, deconstructed itself to invisibility. Only a purely hypothetical existence of any core. And yet *Her* presence is something that won't go away.

In his study *Philosophy of Drama*<sup>7</sup>, the Polish philosopher Józef Tischner formulated the concept of man as a dramatic entity. If an individual life is a participation in a drama, then we need to consider the specificity of dramatic time and the ways in which we enter temporal relationships with other actors/characters of "the same play." Using classical Husserlian terms, the author first sees the stage and props as objects of our *intentional acts*.

He then asks us to register an inherent but unstated question as to what its actors are in relation to one other and to their world. While another person is not an object, according to Sartre she may be, and often is *objectified*, at least to some degree. Tischner proposes that one essential aspect of dramatic time consists in its enhanced possibility of weaving together two modalities of interpersonal relations—namely, the dialogical opening<sup>8</sup> and the objectification. In theater, the apartness of addressing another person as a person, or the same person as an object, or even, conceivably, any material stage element as a person . . . , dissolves into the fabric of one single drama.

I have known persons so anxious to have their dress become them, as to convert it, at length, into their proper self, and thus actually to become the dress. (Coleridge)

Using herself as a mask-like continuum, or others as masks for herself, Elaine throws a subjective and individual experience of the world (namely, her own) at the mercy of an objectifying gaze. By doing so consciously, she enters the space of a dialogue, in which she is not afraid to expose her "remaining rawness, selfness." Presumably, the

nakedness of that which defines the possibility of any encounter, any conversation—i.e., the face of the other.

For our purposes, the English word “becoming” can be deconstructed into two elements: “be” and “coming.” The first points to being, being-there<sup>9</sup>; the second, to the movement toward something, or someone. Taken together, they mean coming into being, entering a place where we can exist in a different way. In Elaine’s dramatic structure she/the protagonist may assume another shape or turn into someone else by “entering the role.” Like an actor who puts on a costume, tries on a prosthetic nose, studies gait, and after a dozen or so attempts rises to the challenge by donning an entirely new character. But even if in the process of “taking others on” Elaine aligns with Stanislavski’s art of experiencing, her own “method” seems to be only skin deep. Each instance of becoming is lightly feathered, its effects fleeting. And having just activated subconscious processes of merging by another touch of the piano, she is already on the move. Ready to unbecome again.

Until perhaps in a final episode of mimetic possession, her utterance becomes a translation of itself, or *her-self* that has not yet emerged. Its flesh by then sculpted by invisible stretch marks of time that tighten desire and focus her expression, in counterpoint to the white topology of skin.

What do all actors around the world have in common? Even if they don’t speak the same language, and before any gestures give away their cultural background? Eugenio Barba, an Italian theater director, speaks of *Sats*, a Norwegian word that designates the quality of the energy you have in the moment before you move, or before you act. Suspended, “in immobility in motion, *Sats* is impulse and counterimpulse.”<sup>10</sup>

Dwelling, we might say, *until*.

Dorota Czerner, May 11, 2022

On the way to becoming we most of us try others on. Not whole bodies. Those parts whose fit might still enable pores to breathe. Ultra tight fits unintentionally wanted by some constrain, intentionally put upon also constrain. The longer the wear the less the bind feels. Wanting fitness at first is all. Itself gets used to. Until. The want to become again revives. We cast off second hands exposing our remaining rawness, selfness. Ourselves becoming again consolidated. Refit. Until. Awareness momentarily that superficialities may become our real thing. Fitness is no longer all. When

unawareness of prosthetic appliance environs us we are not us. Then to divest to unbecome to become. And reinvest ourselves with discards of now our own former molting. Or refashion from some scratch never wholly unloosed of old fits. Or invent new starts. Or even as it were to unbecomingly flounder. And reimage ourselves barely unwontedly as we reimagine fitting ourselves all out. Conjoining our unbound first hands. Until.

ERB

From "Four Texts," *Perspectives of New Music* 23/1: 107 (1984).  
Reprinted in Elaine Radoff Barkin, "e: an anthology, music, texts & graphics (1975–1995)," *The Open Space magazine* 1997: 116.

## NOTES

1. Elaine R Barkin, “on the way to becoming . . .” (a soliloquy), (text 1984: tapemix 1985). From: Open Space CD3, Elaine Barkin, Five Collages. Bandcamp: <https://theopenspace.bandcamp.com/track/five-collages-part-i-on-the-way-to-becoming>.
2. OPEN SPACE was conceived in 1988 in a collaborative effort by the composers Benjamin Boretz, J. K. Randall, and Elaine Barkin. “The Open Space Magazine” was inaugurated as both a print and web magazine in 1999 with Mary Lee Roberts and Tildy Bayar joining the editorial staff. Dorota Czerner became a co-editor in 2003. See: <https://the-open-space.org>.
3. First edition of the Polish American Festival of Electroacoustic Music, December 15–17, 2006, Kraków—music from Polish Society for Electroacoustic Music and Open Space.
4. We are using the philosopher J. L. Austin’s speech act distinction (from the ’50s, later called *illocutionary act*), referring to utterances that perform the action of which they speak, e.g., I promise, I accuse, etc. — actions performed in the very saying.
5. The phrase alludes to the title of a performance by Marina Abramović, 2010, MoMA, New York.
6. James Joyce, in: letter to Frank Budgen of August 16, 1921.
7. Józef Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu (Philosophy of Drama)*, ed. Znak, Kraków, 2012.
8. Drawing on the tradition known as the philosophy of encounter, Tischner introduces the concept of dialogical opening by referring to the works of Emmanuel Lévinas and Martin Buber, the originators of this school of thinking.
9. Being-there corresponds to the German term *Dasein* as formulated by Martin Heidegger. It is also translated as “existence.”
10. We discovered the notion of *Sats* via a *SEGAL TALK* with Anne Bogart (speaking with Frank Hentschker, livestreamed on May 27, 2020), who brings it up in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and our need to develop the right kind of preparedness before taking action. See also Eugenio Barba, *Excerpts from the Paper Canoe* <https://archives.evergreen.edu/webpages/curricular/2002-2003/fopa/theatre/texts/barba.htm> (accessed on May 28, 2022).