

*Stepping in the Tracks of Someone Else,
or Looking Back (and Forth) at Else*

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In a poem entitled *Orfeo* and collected in her *Vita Nova* (1999), the celebrated American poet Louise Glück points out the unstable, painful, but intrinsically creative position of the mythological poet:

I have lost my Eurydice,
I have lost my lover,
and suddenly I am speaking French
and it seems to me I have never been in better voice;
it seems these songs
are songs of a high order.

And it seems one is somehow expected to apologize
for being an artist,
as though it were not entirely human to notice these fine points.
And who knows, perhaps the gods never spoke to me in Dis,
never singled me out,
perhaps it was an illusion.

O Eurydice, you who married me for my singing,
why do you turn on me, wanting human comfort?
Who knows what you'll tell the furies
when you see them again.

Tell them I have lost my beloved;
I am completely alone now.
Tell them there is no music like this
Without real grief.

In Dis, I sang to them; they will remember me.

Soon after Eurydice's death, this Orpheus is suddenly able to speak French. His new voice is admittedly better than any other he has ever spoken before. These new songs are of a *high order*. The personal loss seems to inscribe (again) this new embodiment of the ancient character in a long history of tragic (and artistic) losses. The French epigraph to the poem, indeed, is a quotation from Ranieri de' Calzabigi's *libretto* for Christoph Willibald Gluck's famous opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762): "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice...". And, of course, the very title of Louise Glück's collection immediately brings to mind Dante's seminal work of the same title. Dante's *Vita Nova* is a retrospective meditation on the making of poetry, the author's own practice of life, in connection to the loss of the beloved woman. What Dante realizes throughout the *Vita nova* is that his calling on

Beatrice comes (always) after Beatrice's calling on him. Beatrice's calling, moreover, did not stop at the moment of her bodily death. She keeps having an effect on how he lives; as a never fully attainable point of attraction, she keeps directing his actions. In her death she powerfully reveals her *otherness*, the radical impossibility of being fully assimilated into his verse. By reconsidering his own love poetry, Dante is compelled to both perform and acquire awareness of a mutation in his writing. Is this simply an introjection? I think not. As Rainer Maria Rilke openly declares in his *Duino Elegies*, our relation to the other, what can never be reduced to the same, is a perpetual act of invocation. Dante, therefore, is following in the tracks of someone else, and only in this way can he finally become the *author* he wants to be. In a sense, Orpheus is not just a mythological character; he is a sort of open site on which the artist can inscribe him or her self.

Sabine Kuehnle's outstanding installation *Orpheus & Else oder die Überfülle des Lebendigen* is an operation of this kind. She inscribes her own work in the work of an extraordinary female Orpheus, the German painter and poet Else Blankenhorn. We soon see how this Orpheus is also Eurydice; it could not be otherwise. In a sort of inherent recursiveness, the contemporary artist opens her act of inscription also to the viewer. As we step slowly into her installation, we find ourselves in a room where the work of creative memory is active all around us. The sand on the floor both preserves the visitor's footprints and gives him/her the soft sensation of going into another realm. It is an inner but concrete dimension in which the act of memory is not just the intentional recovery of some more or less forgotten past, but a peculiar possibility of creation which (every time) recognizes itself as an individual act that is positioned at the point of conjunction with someone else's creative acts.

A one-hour loop of the sky over the Bellevue mental institution in Switzerland, where Else was hospitalized until nearly the end of her life, is projected on the floor. The world is not simply upside down, any delimitation between sky and earth, as well as between world and underworld, is considered unnecessary. We are caught up in an operation of constant generation: forms of life are continuously created in Else's work; she does not want to give life a rigid form. In a process that is endless, never fully accomplished, Kuehnle brings Else back to life in this room. The objects we see all around us reveal no idea of completeness: basic matter prevails over finished shape. A strong creative power is embedded in the brokenness and incompleteness of forms. The black wooden structure that could have been the traditional ladder ascending to heaven is interrupted, and some of Else's drawings and imaginary musical scores are hanging on it or lying on a broken board at its base. We are in the basement of a huge building that is today the Atelierfrankfurt. The cold underground room itself has a history that deserves attention: it was the storage room for milk products of the local market. Kuehnle does not miss the suggestion of preservation and liquidness

that the white wall tiling of the room implies. She only covered some tiles whose ceramic glaze flaked off with a layer of gold leaf, the same gold she scattered on the tree roots positioned upside down on round mirrors.

Although a sensation of endless process is perceptible everywhere, all the elements in the room show a significant cohesion. It is not the finished and enclosed *work of art* that is exhibited there; the very *working of art* unfolds around us. For Else as much as for Kuehnle art is a life process, not a final accomplishment. And yet this working is not at all chaotic. Else Blankenhorn was about 35 when she started painting and about 47 when she died, in those twelve years of intense and secluded work she built an entire world up, a world in which she could live, have relations, and play some sort of role. Her art was never to be sold piece by piece; every single piece was part of the world she decided to live in. We can look for psychological reasons behind her decision to cloister herself in the mental hospital without any external injunction: the death of both her father and grandmother in the same year, or the unhappy outcome of her love for a man who married her best friend and who would later become the Kaiser Wilhelm II of her imaginary world. In any event, we will never identify the actual cause of her renunciation of the (real) world in order to be embraced by a world of her own creation. In a sense, her undertaking could be seen as an extreme embodiment of what any (real) artist is called to do.

This universe needed a purpose and form of organization in which she could be involved. Else's lucid (and Modernist) delusion could not be just a chaotic accumulation of imaginary fragments; her work shows rather her intense effort at ordering specific activities within that world. Being herself both Orpheus the artist and the deceased Eurydice, she wants to bring dead people back from the underworld, and more importantly, to take care of them. For this purpose she needs money, a huge amount of money, and consequently, she produced in large quantities those astonishing banknotes which are both pieces of art and means of actual transactions. For these same people she designed a huge house full of graves. They all needed a lot of space and she conceived infinite architectures to house them. It would appear that the action of bringing them back from death is not meant to restore them to life as such, to retrace the precise boundaries between life and death, earth and underworld. Else's world is a mixture of both things, a dimension in which the dead come back to help constitute the living. There are drawings in her production that show a larger female character, clearly herself, and a series of smaller, winged figures that fly towards her. Surprisingly, all these little angelic women resemble the bigger one: they are shaped, elegantly dressed, and finely combed exactly like her. Moving toward the larger figure, even so far as entering into her, they contribute to the formation of Else. The dead are not to be resurrected as a

good deed in itself; they are meant to be part of the living, with whom they are summoned to mingle intimately.

As an artist, Else Blankenhorn knows that to create means also to take care of what has been already created and only apparently left behind. Her person, as much as her world, is constituted by all those dead people and she aims at bringing this fundamental understanding to the fore. The work of mourning is a work of *poiesis* in which the dead do not come back to life as discrete and autonomous bodies to reclaim their old lives; they rather come to constitute the living. And the living being is compelled to realize that his or her voice (in the general sense of individual expression) is not shaped by the rejection of those who are gone, is not established in opposition to them. The living being keeps turning toward the dead as much as the dead keep coming back and calling on the living, as Eurydice did. Orpheus' act of *respicere* was not a one-time action with all its tragic consequences. The first time he turns back to look at Eurydice walking behind him, Orpheus establishes a repetition which changes his own *self* forever. The "better voice" of the poet who has experienced a loss so painful – the gap suddenly opened in the order of the real by the death of a beloved person – is a voice that has lost its imaginary self-sufficiency. In order to have access to the dimension where life and death are indistinguishable, the subject must undo his or her own customary solid self and be willing to work at the ongoing creation of a new self which accepts the structural presence of the other in itself.

The creative subject is called to progressively recognize the presence of the other in himself or herself, to realize that the new voice is no longer only *his* or *her* voice. The subject does not restore some previous subjectivity after mourning, merely forgetting what has been lost or interiorizing it as a reassuring and harmless image. The subject, or the instance that says *I*, has been constitutively changed by a radical experience. The other forcibly becomes part of the creative or experiencing *I*; the latter may or may not be aware of what is happening. This otherness inside the subject is not a *secret* in Nicolas Abraham's and Maria Torok's sense of something that is provisionally unknown, but that could be eventually known under different conditions. It is rather a *secret* in Jacques Derrida's sense of something that will stay so forever but is capable of generation as an obscure point of attraction. In these terms, artistic work will always revolve around that missing magnetic point. *Unsayability* turns into *ineffability*, an impossibility is changed into a never-ending effort at making. Art is never either able to attain and reveal that secret nor to abandon it forgetting its secretness. This way, both artistic creation and the work of mourning reveal themselves to be endless processes, continuous acts of *poiesis*, or practices of life. To put it briefly, the only possible ethics of mourning appears to be a *poiesis*, a process of creation that recognizes its being as at least partially motivated, formed, and nourished by the lost other.

Else Blankenhorn never intended to show her art to anyone. She wanted to protect the world she was nurturing around her. This was her own ongoing process until her death in 1920. The dialogue with the dead, the effort to rescue them, and the attempt at organizing a space to host them, were what she committed herself to doing during the long years at the mental institution. In the room that Sabine Kuehnle, in her turn, arranged to house Else's world, we can feel this ongoing process of hosting: a table and two stools support the idea of being in a place where someone or something is still at work. Massive tree roots are placed upside down on round mirrors. Gold dust, a bright element that can be found underground, is scattered over them. Human arms (one masculine and one feminine) hang over two of these roots suspended on a wire. There is a constructive tension in the stretching of these arms towards the underworld. The idea of communication between different realms is palpable. The roots on this side suggest that we are actually underground and that trunks and foliage grow on the other side. True life seems to flourish underground. The symbolic tree of life is reversed. The borders between the two dimensions blur in this secret room of creative memory.

Kuehnle's work has something to do with intertextuality. Lamps, open architectures, and other symbolic elements are directly taken from Else's works. It is an old story: no work of art is completely original. As the ancient Greek poet Bacchylides already knew, every artist derives his or her knowledge (*sophia*) from the knowledge of preceding artists. However, there is no competition or assimilation in Kuehnle's approach: reproductions of Else's drawings, paintings, music scores, poems, and banknotes are displayed all around the room as the works of someone else. A picture of Else is there to watch over the scene. Communication defeats opposition. The entire installation is put under the protection of a little red fir that is often present in Else's poetry and drawings. This private symbol is not clearly interpretable, but undoubtedly, the little fir is a highly meaningful presence for Else. It is probably envisioned as an element of protection. Kuehnle takes the symbol from Else's imagination and employs it in her work to look after the space wherein Else is being brought back to life. The other's imagination helps Kuehnle create a place where both artists can be alive together. The new creative subjectivity is somehow realized by the creation of a preceding one; an intimate dialogue with the dead artist brings the living one forth.

In one of Else's paintings hanging on the wall, the marriage with Kaiser Wilhelm II seems to draw her out of the tomb as in a powerful mystical ritual. In this case she is the dead and the male character brings her back to life. In Else Blankenhorn's total artwork it is not clear who is dead and who is alive. A reference to another ancient mythological character is fairly detectable: Persephone, the young woman abducted by the god-king of the underworld, sought for by her mother, and eventually restored to the world above. This is not only a story of crossing the border between life

and death; it is also a myth of repetition, of the endless circularity of nature. Orpheus' myth of personal elegiac grief combines with a myth of cyclical natural revitalization. Else the artist and Else the woman are deeply constituted by the double dimension she belongs to. The universe wherein she had a role and a mission is not just an imaginary escape from our (real) world; it was rather a constitutive operation. It is astonishing how rational this activity appears to be: she calculated the enormous costs of the enterprise, she planned her mission in every detail, and finally, she knew that this endless work – a work of infinite mourning – would not only rescue all those people from their eternal oblivion, but could also save herself from disappearance. Looking at Sabine Kuehnle's powerful installation, it is clear that Else succeeded.