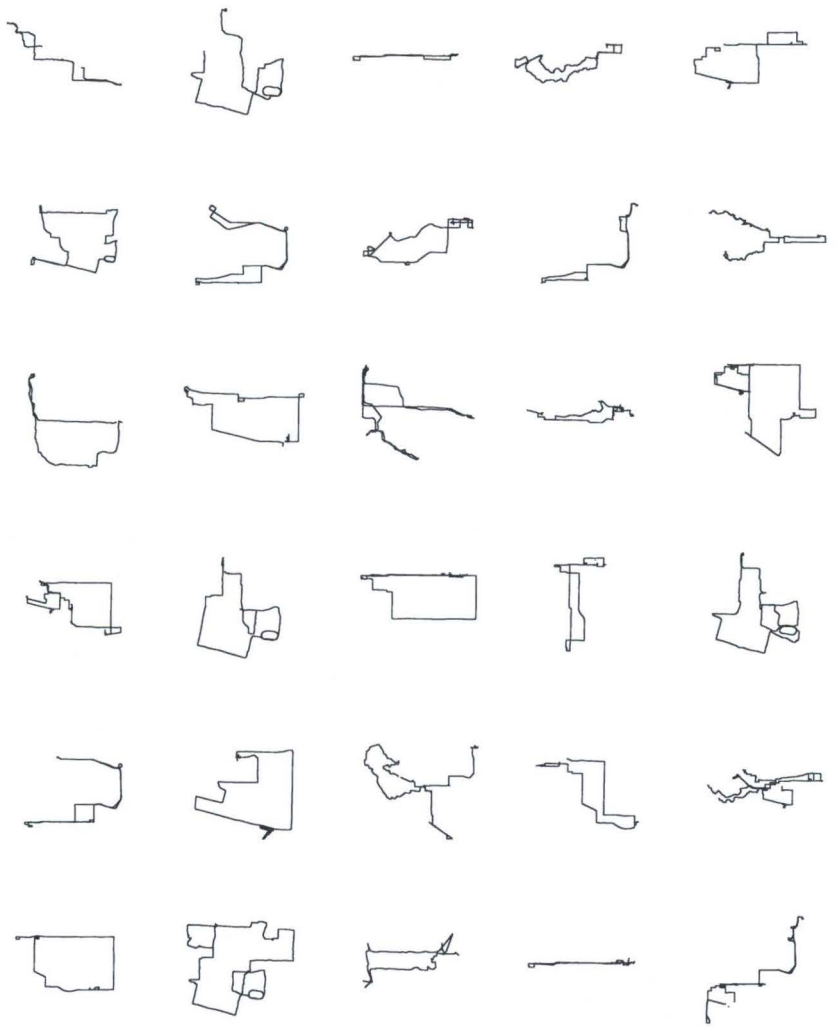

Ruth Scheuing, *GPS Tracks July 2008*, 2010,
digital print, 46 × 46 × 5 cm

Thea Bowering & Sheila Heti / "a portrait of thinking": Sheila Heti and Thea Bowering on the phone

When I reach Sheila Heti in Toronto, she has recently returned from teaching a course on character at Columbia University, and is halfway through the run of her surrealist play All Our Happy Days Are Stupid *staged at Videofag, a tiny theatre in Kensington Market, Toronto. Her friends make up the cast, and every night is sold out. Because her body of work is already expansive and composed of diverse, unusual projects, I ask Heti what areas she'd like to cover in this interview—"whatever you're most curious about," she replies. "Curious" is the word Margaux Williamson chooses to characterize Heti, in the voice-over of her experimental documentary film* Teenager Hamlet, *where Heti plays the role of "The Interviewer" in a Nico/Cindy Sherman-like blonde wig and big glasses. I cannot help comparing the self-made momentum and playfulness that charge Heti's art world with that of Andy Warhol's factory in New York. She admits to thinking of Warhol often and seems to share his curiosity about people. Curiosity is the constant of Heti's projects that allows for the variables: multi-media approaches for sourcing and presenting material, movement across disciplines, breaks with formal and ideological conventions. When I reach her, she appears to be enjoying a relaxed contentment that her play and, perhaps, this period in her career are providing. Despite the fact that her writing has been translated into twelve languages (including Serbian, Vietnamese, and Danish), and has attracted rave reviews in New York and London, Heti is very much a Toronto writer, she will tell you, happiest when working with her local friends and peers. So this is where we begin.*

Thea Bowering: This issue of *TCR* includes a number of artworks about geography and ways of locating oneself in the world, so I thought I'd start by asking you what it is that keeps you living in Toronto and how Toronto supports your writing and figures in your writing, as a real place but also an imaginary city?

Sheila Heti: Well, I've lived in Toronto more or less all of my life with short escapes to Montreal and New York, but basically it's been Toronto. Aside from *How Should a Person Be?* place kind of disappears in my work, like in *The Middle Stories*,

for instance. It's as though the action happens in a studio theatre where all the walls are painted black. For me, if you're in a place for twenty or thirty years, you don't notice it anymore. It almost becomes a black or invisible backdrop. Place feels so inevitable, or so obvious. Even though as I go through my day I feel very embedded in this particular neighbourhood, in this particular city, and I love it, I didn't always. I think for ten years, through my twenties, I was always wanting to leave and feeling: Why am I here? Why can't I get somewhere else? There were family reasons for why I was here, rational reasons, but I think there were also spiritual reasons. I have a strange certainty about being in Toronto. I feel like a tree in the soil here. The idea of transplanting myself seems kind of artificial.

TB: Reading your work I was looking for city markers. In *How Should a Person Be?* you mention the Toronto bar "The Communist's Daughter," and that is one of the few actual places that you name. As you said you are in the city. It's a blank-walled studio set. But it got me thinking: could you set or even write this novel in small town Canada because the anxiety around how a person should be partly comes from big city options. Performance of identity might respond to other anxieties in a smaller city or town.

SH: Yeah, and I have no idea what it is to live in a small town but I imagine it's very different from living in a bigger city. There are certain Toronto markers that recur in all my work. Like streetcars. There's something about the streetcars that travel through Toronto—they're part of the sound of the city that one has an attachment to for some reason. I always want streetcars in my work. The way they glide and that kind of gliding feeling you have in your heart when you're on them. So for me it wasn't a question of Toronto versus a small town; in my head it's always been Toronto versus a larger place like New York. I would never live in a smaller town. I don't think that I would enjoy that. I might enjoy living in the country though.

TB: I was thinking about New York a lot as I was reading your work. You say here that you're rooted in Toronto and elsewhere you say that not everyone can live in New York. This issue of *TCR* has a piece on Gertrude Stein and I was thinking of her book, *Paris, France*, where she talks about writers having two countries: the one where they physically live, and the one in which they live internally, and she talks about this second one as a romantic place, not real, but where they live *really*.

I'm wondering if New York is your other "country"? Do you live there in an internal sense, as a writer? In your imagination?

SH: Yeah, well, it's hard not to think about New York because for me the movies of Woody Allen were a huge part of my childhood and youth and for me he portrayed a certain way of life that seemed accessible and desirable. New York meant a lot to me on a mythical level. But, living in Toronto, I would rather live in Toronto. I do live in Toronto. I appreciate that I had to discover what this city is for myself. I couldn't discover Toronto through art. I had to discover it through living.

New York is a city many people discover through art, and you have a feeling when you're quite young that the only legitimate paths you can take are the paths that other people have taken. It takes time to figure out a city that doesn't tell you how to be an artist in it. And I think Toronto is that kind of place. I mean, there are a lot of artists in Toronto, but all the people I know, at least, had to figure out what it means to be an artist here. It means something different from being in a place with a lot more money, with many more obvious social rewards, with a cultural legacy of being a place that really appreciates art. I don't think that Toronto's that sort of place. I don't think Canada is that sort of place. So it's harder to figure out. And I think it ends up being that the relationship between one's peers becomes more important. In New York, the relationship you have is also to cultural authorities, who you admire and who have a lot of power and a lot to give you. That's not the case here. I'm not somebody who wants to learn from my elders. I'd rather learn from my peers. But I think if I had grown up in a place like New York, maybe I would have more of a relationship with my elders.

In any case, to get back to your question, I don't think in my case Toronto/New York is at all a problem on the order of what Gertrude Stein is talking about. I don't live there in my imagination. I don't live in Toronto in my imagination, either. I don't really live in any particular city in my imagination. I don't care that much about cities.

TB: After Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize in literature you were one of the authors *The New Yorker* chose to comment on what Alice Munro means to them. You would rather learn from your immediate peers; however, in your response, you do name Munro as a significant elder, focusing on the things to admire about her as

a master: her seriousness, consistency, single-mindedness, generosity towards her readers. Considering that her way of living as a writer, as you describe it, is very different from yours—you give and conduct many interviews, you write book reviews, you involve yourself in many projects related to applied philosophy—would you describe Munro as a model for you?

SH: Perhaps. Just because I do all those things you say I do, doesn't mean I am completely sure that it's the right way to go about it. At a certain level, you just have to be yourself and perhaps she doesn't enjoy interviews, or writing book reviews, whereas I sometimes do. But as a model of seriousness, yes, she's certainly that for me. I don't think you learn from other writers how to be the kind of writer they are. The great writers—you learn from them that, oh, the only realistic thing to do is to be like yourself as much as possible, without compromise. So there's a lot to learn from her in terms of how she lived and seemed to make professional and artistic and personal choices all from the same place. But then, I don't know her—I'm only speaking about her from the point of view of someone looking at a public image.

TB: Sometimes we love and admire writing that is very unlike our own. Your writing is very different from Munro's. In your work we don't find the anatomizing of place that Atwood says characterizes Munro's work. Munro's stories are often structured around repressed truths in a small town setting; they locate the universal in the particular. Place as you say, disappears in your work, is replaced by the overt and imperfect process of thinking, which stems from your love of philosophy. You are more excited by an interesting experiment than working towards a perfect work. What do you most admire about Munro's style, then, that is different from your own, but that you can learn from?

SH: I don't learn from her style. I couldn't write the way she writes, because I'm not her, and it wouldn't interest me, and you can't write in a manner that isn't native to you. I don't see the world she does, so how could I write that way? I pay attention to different things from her, my mind and heart work in different ways, my experiences are different, what I read is likely different. If you try to imitate some writer's style it's going to be completely false in your hands; I don't think writing style is technique—I think it's an expression of a unique soul. It's a way of being,

not a series of tricks. I do admire that she's trying to tell the truth as she sees it—the truth about life. And that she does what she does perfectly. There's a lot to learn in that and a lot to admire about that, but I would never study a writer and try to figure out how they structure, or compose individual sentences, or describe things.

TB: *How Should a Person Be?* is very much a novel that deals with the idea of contemporaneity, making visible your present place in the world. We can look at the question, How should a person be? in relation to a number of themes in the book: sex, being a young woman, an artist, a moral person, but the idea of being contemporary seems to encompass all of that. The two themes I picked up early on in your prologue are themes of ugliness and of fame. And again, that made me think of Stein who said contemporary art always looks ugly at first and then it becomes beautiful over time. So could you speak about that preoccupation with ugly art in relation to being contemporary?

SH: I thought a lot about that quote. I thought it was Picasso but maybe they both said it in different ways. I know that Picasso said an original work of art is always ugly at first to its creator. So I guess they were both thinking a lot about that, and I was thinking a lot about that when I wrote this book: how you have to sometimes break down your ideas of what beauty is in order to have some air flowing through your process. If you're just trying to make something beautiful, which we all are—beauty is compelling—you're going to go towards a certain shape, let's say, or towards a certain narrative structure. You're trying to do something well. But the only way you can do something well, I think, is if at first you have some model in your mind of what the good is. To do something that doesn't move towards this picture that you have in your head of what you want the work to be, that's a very difficult thing to do. And you kind of have to trick yourself, and be vigilant. I mean all editing is always in the direction of greater clarity, toward communicating in a more precise way that's related to beauty. To try to edit, not in the direction of beauty is really hard. But all of that felt really necessary for me because, I mean it seems crazy to say that this is true of somebody so young, but I felt that I'd reached a dead end. When I was working on *Ticknor* I was really trying to make something absolutely perfect and I knew that I couldn't do that again. I felt it would be dead if I tried to do that again. In truth, *How Should a Person Be?* isn't the book of mine that I like the most. I prefer *Ticknor* or even *The Middle Stories*. *How Should a Person Be?*

is very much against my innate aesthetic. It makes me uncomfortable to have put out something that isn't, in my mind, beautiful or perfect, even though this book has had the biggest response. So I think there is something to be said for making yourself uncomfortable, and for questioning your instinct to please some internalized aesthetic criteria. Maybe there's something lifeless about that, on some level.

TB: It's your version of the ugly painting. And as a reader, too, one really has to stick with you through the book. The reader feels all the things that you're feeling. But at the end there is some redemption. There's a sense that, much like with Margaux's painting, there's that line she can't avoid, her hand, that signature line of beauty...

SH: Right.

TB: ...that makes its way through. I felt that there was this possibility of beauty again.

SH: Maybe you have to break it down first, though. I don't feel suspicious now in the same way that I did before about my assumptions about what a novel should be. I don't feel suspicious about what I'm drawn to in art.

TB: You would write another novel then. You would write a novel that would attempt beauty, perhaps.

SH: Yeah, and I wouldn't feel that I couldn't. I actually wrote a novel really quickly, in about a week, a couple months after finally handing in the manuscript for *How Should a Person Be?* There was just this part of me that had to do that. And it's a narrative, totally fiction, and I think there was this part of me that had been repressed, that had to be repressed, so: let me tell a story! And it just came out. I don't know if it's any good, but it felt really good to do it. So, restraining the novel impulse for so long, it was interesting to see that it really wanted to express itself. There is something true about that kind of storytelling, something deep. It's not just a model that we imitate because we see it in the world and we've read it. I think there is something about fictional storytelling that is very deep, and it's not only a cultural inheritance, it's a human impulse.

TB: Is this novel going to be published? What is it about?

SH: It's a love story but very dark. I don't know if it's going to be published. I'm still looking at it, wondering about it.

TB: So in terms of a return from writing against your impulses... I do sense a break with a lot of things, in *How Should Person Be?* One of them being history. Not only a sense of place, and beauty, and capital A artists. There is a break with a lot of things we expect to find when reading a book about art, that we don't get in that novel. One of the things I'm wondering about, you're going to be the opening night featured writer at The Jewish Book Festival in Vancouver.

SH: Yeah, I think Bill Richardson might be interviewing me there, or somebody else, I'm not sure who.

TB: So then, how do you move from writing this kind of book, about being contemporary without a lot of history—someone mentioned you don't talk about your parents, your family doesn't appear in this book, there aren't art history lessons to be learned from this book—so how do you go back into talking about history, can you talk about what your focus might be at this festival?

SH: Well, I'll just answer the questions they'll ask me, I'm not like a keynote speaker.

TB: So what was your interest in being part of that festival?

SH: It's just that the person who asked me is a close friend of the family and I just sort of said yes. I've got two male friends who just had babies and they live in Victoria, and I kind of want to see them, in their new lives and congratulate them, so I was like: I'll take the trip!

TB: What's your relationship to Western Canada?

SH: My father and his family lived in Vancouver when they came from Hungary, so all his closest friends and childhood friends are in Vancouver. I visited a lot growing up. I feel a small sort of family connection to it, but apart from that, I've never lived there. I have some old friends there, too.

TB: Do you have a sense of the writing happening there? The writers, the approach to writing that happens there? I mean, geography for example figures a lot

in Western Canadian writing. The coast is very different from the interior, and the writing is often very informed by landscape, stories of immigration, you know, we're on the edge of the world in Vancouver.

SH: Well I don't have a deep knowledge of West Coast writing and I wouldn't want to generalize about it.

TB: I'd like to talk to you a bit about your process and your poetics. Each book and each project is such a different experiment from the one before. Is there a way in which they link towards some kind developing theory of writing?

SH: No. I wouldn't go that far. I just do what I need to do for each book.

TB: Thinking about the role of art in the world, I watched Margaux Williamson's movie, *Teenager Hamlet*, and found that the idea of Hamlet as a man of action who is unable to act in the world seemed very contemporary. You talk about wanting to write a book that's close to the world and that takes from the world. You play an interviewer in Margaux's film and there is a scene where you ask another artist: can't art be at the centre of society? How do you see the role of art in the world?

SH: For me it's always like a place from which to ask questions. And it's a philosophical aid. But I don't think everybody uses it for that and I don't think everyone has to. Whenever I encounter anything by Lisa Moore, I see that for her, art and writing is about a sensual experience of the world and communicating the sensual, literally the smell of things and the feel of things. For me that's nothing close to what I care about. But I would never be crazy enough to say that there is one role for art in the world. It's the prerogative of each individual artist to decide for themselves what its role is, and what they're doing it for. And I think for a lot of people there is no role; they just do it because they love to do it and that's totally legitimate. It doesn't have to have a role. I think that it can't have one role. I think people read for lots of different reasons. I think people go to museums for lots of different reasons. I just like philosophical thinking. I use art for that. But I don't think there's anything right about that. I almost feel bad about that. Like, why can't a painting just be a painting? Why do you have to use it to think about things? I feel like that's a misuse of art, but it's what my mind likes to do most. And I think for me, to make books that are a portrait of thinking, that's very satisfying, but that's

because I like thinking. I prefer thinking to feeling. I like conversations so if I can make a book that reflects thinking and conversation that's very native to what I enjoy.

TB: I think I read at one point that you called *How Should a Person Be?* a painterly book. And I was curious what you meant, because it's such an intellectual book and because I think of painterly books as being imagistic or being conscious of the language as an object on the page. Do you still think of it that way? How is it a painterly book if it's primarily a book about thinking?

SH: I use the word painterly to mean loose. I think when painters say painterly they mean that the brush stroke is very loose so that's how I meant it.

TB: I was really interested in the project where you read part of *How Should a Person Be?* at MOMA in front of the Picasso painting...

SH: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.*

TB: How was it being in the aura of a painting when you're reading from your own work rather than just thinking about the painting? Were you facing the painting? Were you facing the audience? How was that experience for you?

SH: I decided to face the painting. And I read the Israel part of the novel, "An Interlude for Fucking." It was a really emotional experience for me. I felt very shaken and my heart was beating very fast. Kenny [Kenneth Goldsmith] allowed us to choose the painting or work of art we wanted to read beside and I chose that one because I had studied art history and to me, and not just to me, that was the great modernist work, and what a dream it would be to create a work of art that important and that great, that violent and even misogynistic, and there was something really primal and exciting about that painting. And then to read—I hadn't really thought it out that much, but thinking about it afterwards—to read the passage from the book that is basically cock *worship*, made me so humiliated and also angry at this painting and what it represented and how the myth of the male artist, Picasso, and this painting had loomed so big in my mind as this oppressive example that only with the greatest effort would I be able to reach. I feel so differently about art now. I don't feel like there's Picasso up there in the sky. So it was kind of amazing. I think that it was just right. Just right to finally come back and counter

this work of art with my own work of art. It was neat. It was revisiting an old idea with my idea of what genius could or should mean. A more female idea and a more contemporary idea.

TB: That's interesting in relation to wanting to work with your peers. Because this is sort of an exchange with someone who's great who you suddenly realize is in a sense a peer. Here you are standing next to him and having this exchange.

SH: Yeah, a conversation. But I also felt happy that I'd made myself into an artist. I remember when I studied the painting, I was just in school and I had no idea if I was going to be able to do what I most wanted to do. I had all those feelings. Well, I'm glad that I worked hard.

TB: This issue of *TCR* includes a story from *The Middle Stories* that you wrote over a decade ago or more. So how does it feel looking back now over what you were doing in *The Middle Stories*? Since we're talking about ideas that you had at the beginning of your career and re-visiting them, I'd also like to talk about the play.

SH: In the moment of working I always feel like I'm not working, somehow. And I don't know why that is. Even when I was writing *The Middle Stories* or *How Should a Person Be?* I was like, I'm not really working. But in retrospect I think, oh, I had such will. I was working. I think with *The Middle Stories* or *How Should a Person Be?* it was the same thing. I was really trying to get somewhere, very sincerely.

TB: Do you see elements in the language that are similar? Can you look back at *The Middle Stories*, I know the form is different, but can you say: oh that was what I was doing! I've developed that idea now. I can see what I wanted to get at back then and I've developed that now and maybe more fully.

SH: No, no, no. I don't feel they're the same project in that way. I don't think about it in terms of the language. But I do think in both cases I was trying to turn myself into the kind of person that could write that stuff. With *The Middle Stories*, I was thinking about Warhol, I guess I still think of him a lot, and I was thinking: I want to turn myself into a machine that writes stories. So I wasn't thinking about the stories quite as much as the kind of process an entity would use to create those stories. With *How Should a Person Be?* I wanted to write the book as a writer not at

her desk. In both cases, my body, or my process, was more important to get right than the result.

TB: Right, and that comes across, that you're very much about the process and I like the idea of a machine—that ties into Warhol's idea of factory where he's making paintings very fast. I know that you wrote many of *The Middle Stories* very quickly, and then you picked the best, and that that energy comes through.

I'd like to talk about the play now because it's your most current finished project. You're right in the middle of the run of *All Our Happy Days are Stupid*, an account of two families from the same suburban neighbourhood who run into each other on vacation in Paris. Disillusioned by the real Paris, the wives bicker; one of the children goes missing; and responses among the adults vary.

You've said that the novel was written to contend with the failure of the play. It was the play that wouldn't be written and its anxious energy that fueled the novel. Can you talk about how all that history comes into the experience of seeing the play finally written, produced, and performed?

SH: Well, it just feels really good. And I feel so much gratitude to these people for doing it. And I feel that these are the right people to be doing it. This is the right director, these are the right actors, this is the right space, this is the right time. It couldn't be better. And it wasn't through anything *I* did. Contrary to what I was saying earlier about will, this didn't happen because I willed it. For the first time in my life, I'm experiencing my art being given to me from without, rather than something I'm working to create. Jordan Tannahill is directing this play and I'm experiencing it as a gift because the play was so dead and I never tried to produce it after 2006. And there's something neat about the fact that the director was fourteen when I wrote it! Now he has his own space, and it feels nice that something that was a failure could be brought back as a success. I'm very happy with it, everyone's happy with it. That it can be brought back as a success through somebody else's artistic process, I've never experienced that before. It's kind of magical. Just to see what happens! For me art has always been a tremendous act of will.

TB: I'm wondering if it's like the collaboration that happens with the music. I know Dan [Bejar] from Destroyer has done the music for the play.

SH: He wrote the music twelve years ago.

TB: He wrote the music twelve years ago! How did that come about?

SH: He read the script and then wrote the songs. I knew him because my then-husband Carl Wilson is a friend of his sister's, and a music critic, and he was just like, oh maybe Dan should write the music. I sent Dan the script and he wrote the songs. And then when the play wasn't produced, he put some of the songs on one of his albums, *Your Blues*.

TB: I know some playwrights are jealous of their every word. I think Samuel Beckett had to be at every production and every word had to be performed perfectly. How much did you influence the production? Were you happy to let other people not only collaborate with you but also change things, contribute ideas, take over?

SH: Yeah, I didn't go to rehearsals much and I just trusted them to do what they did with it. I didn't consult on the set or the costumes. And I love what they've done with it. But if an actor gets a line wrong, I'm not happy about that. I'd rather everyone say the lines exactly as they are.

TB: Woody Allen, for instance, is okay with a script being loose or changed. But maybe that's more a director's point of view than a writer's.

SH: The language of *All Our Happy Days are Stupid* is kind of stylized, so I don't feel that it works when it becomes casual. Which is usually what happens when an actor gets it wrong, it just becomes more colloquial. The language in the play isn't super colloquial.

TB: How did you come up with the dialogue? Because it's quite different from the novel where you use tape recordings and a more colloquial language. It's a surreal play—was that again the idea, that you wanted a new approach to dialogue?

SH: I wrote the play way before the novel. I wrote the play in 2001. I didn't begin writing *How Should a Person Be?* until 2005. So stylistically the play has much more in common with *The Middle Stories*.

TB: So it hasn't changed at all then.

SH: No I didn't re-write it. I gave it to them as it was when I abandoned it.

TB: A reviewer in the *Globe and Mail* said with total certainty that the character of Mrs. Oddi was a stand-in for Sheila Heti, and I'm wondering since you named your novel's main character after yourself, if you're concerned now that readers and critics are going to look to insert the author Sheila Heti into all your work? Even though this is a surreal play, people seem to want to do that now with your work.

SH: They do that with everybody's work, even if you write the most fictional, separate-from-your-life stuff possible, they'll always want to say *this* character is the author. In fact, on some level, all the characters are always the author, no matter what you're writing. Because you can only know other humans through your own experiences of being a human. I wouldn't say Mrs. Oddi is any more me than Daniel, or Mrs. Sing or any other of the characters. But this is one reviewer's idea.

TB: You've said elsewhere that we are all fictions, anyway. There are so many ways to understand and approach character. The most outdated is that the character is a stand-in for the author. E. M. Forster identified round and flat characters; Cixous taught us that characterization is produced by restricting the imaginary with codes and conventions. You've gone about writing character in many different ways. In the *The Middle Stories*, the stories resemble fables, and while the characters seem somewhat flat, there is a hint of psychology to them. After writing *Ticknor*, you said you were tired of inventing characters and putting them through their paces. However, character remained central in *How Should a Person Be?* You were now dealing with pages and pages of transcribed conversations with Margaux, for example, to create character. Can you talk about how your many approaches to writing character influenced how you taught your course on character at Columbia University this past fall? Did you offer your students experimental exercises? a history of conventions and the undoing of those conventions, for example?

SH: We read a lot, including character writing of the 17th century—it's a form that no longer exists, in which people would write character sketches—I guess we'd call them types like The Milkmaid or The Pretender to Learning or The Dunce. It's fascinating that people would simply write characters detached from any story or any apparent use, almost like a taxonomy of human behaviour, a very rudimentary

precursor to contemporary psychology. So we read different things and wrote various things and we even, as a class, interviewed one of the students and then wrote monologues in her voice, which was very interesting. We read these aloud in class with the student present and then asked the student how it felt, and monitored our own nervousness about writing about someone who would read what we wrote about them. I don't have a theory of character—we were just trying things out and trying to complicate the idea of character. I'm always fascinated by character because in life, character is contained by the body of the person. But what happens when you get rid of the body and you're dealing with words, or you're dealing with names? What is the container of that character? Is it just the name you give it? What does "believable" mean when humans are so changeable? What does consistency mean?

TB: I want to ask you about the idea of being *done* a project. I was interested reading you saying that when you're working on something that you're inside a certain character, you're in a mode of looking at the world for the duration of the writing. So now that this play that you've been sitting with is done, is it a bigger ending than other endings because of how long it's been with you? Are you letting go of a certain way of being in the world, now that it's done?

SH: I wouldn't go that far, but it is a relief. But I wouldn't say that when I wrote *that* play that I was some other self in any way. I mean, I wrote the play very quickly. It feels more immersive with novels. If you're writing something for five years, gradually over time you change because of what you're writing, and you have to see the world through that lens. I didn't feel that with this play. But I do feel that something's ended with this play being done. There's kind of peace. Because you thought something was so horrible for over a decade and then it's produced and it's not horrible, it's pretty wonderful. And people like it, and people are having fun doing it. So having written this thing that is the source of this pleasure that we're all taking, it feels like a relief. Art doesn't only have to be this beautiful thing you're trying to create, it can be a moment in time that a lot of people are experiencing together, and *that's* what the play is. As much as a play is for the audience, I think always, if you're at all in theatre, you understand that the real pleasure, and greatness, is for the people involved in it. The bigger production is the experience of doing it with people you love and that you come to love. There's more art energy

there, for that collective of people, than there necessarily is for somebody sitting in the audience.

TB: So how do you think of the audience, in this case? Are you more conscious of the audience than you were of the reader and how the reader figured in the work? Is the audience a participant as well?

SH: Well I mean they react. They laugh or they don't laugh. Certainly they animate the play with their attitude towards it. That's why people say: oh that was a great audience! or that wasn't such a good audience. Their presence hugely affects the performance. But it doesn't affect the *play*. It affects that particular night.

TB: Can I ask you a couple questions about *Women in Clothes: Why We Wear What We Wear* since this is a current project and it also seems to have a lot to do with performance. It's a book that will include essays by established writers like Miranda July and Rachel Kushner; it's also informed by crowd-sourced survey responses. I'm wondering how you came up with the survey questions. Was the central idea in the survey the idea of performing femininity, or performing gender?

SH: To me it was much simpler than that. I literally felt I want to dress better. I thought, I want to know what other women think about when they get dressed. How do they think about an outfit? How do they think about what they buy? I feel that for most of my life I haven't put much thought into this area, or just minimal thought. I've had other things I wanted to think about more. But I was just like, I want to think about that right now. I want to dress better. So I went to the bookstore and I was looking for a book about what women think about when they stand in front of their closet or in front of their mirror in the morning. I thought maybe I can learn how to dress through reading something like that, because I'm always interested in understanding the world through seeing how other minds understand the world. A fashion magazine shows you what things, outfits, look like, but I wanted to know what the brain that puts that outfit together is thinking. But there wasn't any book like that. So I just thought, I'll make that book so I can read it. I asked Heidi [Julavits] and Leanne [Shapton] if they would do it with me. So I guess the idea of the survey came about because the only way to find out what I wanted to find out was to ask people what they think when they go shopping, what they think when they put together an outfit, and so on.

TB: The questions are very thoughtful. About there not being a book like that, one that answers those questions, one that separates women's thoughts from their dress, if we look to fiction, specifically to nineteenth century fiction, this seems to be where women begin to be written as constructed by their dress. Baudelaire actually said woman and her dress are an indistinguishable unity. The new urban woman was seen as a false surface and a construct of high capitalism. I think it's interesting that your survey questions *are* about style and fashion but also they want to relate the inside and outside to each other and undo that established perception of women and dress.

SH: Yeah, it's interesting.

TB: I thought you might want to respond to that: to the history of women and how they've been perceived as fashion objects. You're writing a book on that seemingly superficial subject but in a much deeper way.

SH: Yeah, it's a very relaxing book to put together. It's relaxing to see all the very different agendas women have with their dress. When you look at anything through fashion media it seems there's one brain behind it. When you read this book, everybody is responding individually to their environment, their personal history, and their financial situation. It's so personal, why a woman puts on these pants. To understand what a woman is thinking kind of frees you from this—not that I was so under its spell, but I think the spell exists in the culture—frees you from this idea of the template of a woman, and gives you permission to be an individual. What I thought was going to happen when I wrote this book was that I was going to learn a lot about techniques, that I was going to be a better dresser, but what the material we're receiving is actually doing is making me a lot more confident and comfortable with whatever the hell I want to do, dressing-wise. The message of fashion media is entirely the opposite: it's like, everything you're doing is wrong. So it's not what I expected would happen when I began this book, but I prefer it to what I imagined.

TB: I took the survey and I was fascinated with how it probed into memory and how much it connected to other parts of my life. It wasn't just reserved for fashion. Style's tentacles can reach into many areas of your being.

SH: And it weirdly ends up being an anti-consumerist book. I don't think anyone's going to go away from reading this book and feel like they have to buy a lot of stuff.

TB: No, if anything, they might relook at everything they already have. And just lay it out.

SH: Exactly. You're already dressing every day. Clearly you're doing fine.

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