

Caroline Polachek on making work that's useful



January 19, 2017 - Caroline Polachek is a musician and songwriter based in Brooklyn. She was the frontwoman for Chairlift from 2005 until 2017, and released her debut solo album, *Arcadia*, under the name Ramona Lisa in 2014. She wrote and produced Beyoncé's 2013 single "No Angel." Her new solo album, *Drawing The Target Around The Arrow*, premieres with this discussion. She's releasing it on Panonica, a subsidiary of Bella Union, under her initials, CEP. The label's run by her friend, Mark Byrne. She notes: "The only other thing released on it is Ramona Lisa, so it's essentially an art project."

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2810 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

You're known as a singer. I'm interested in your decision to do something without vocals. The record's minimal. It's not pop. You described it as something for dance performances or yoga or just walking.

I've always been a synth player since I was a kid. I had keyboards to play on from the age of seven. I started playing with sine waves as a composition tool around 2012. I got frustrated around then by how genre specific so many different sounds were, that they instantly evoked an instrument or a style. I wanted a totally neutral writing tool. I wanted to hear pure notes.

I found a very simple sine wave plug-in and started using that as a writing tool for the Ramona Lisa album. When I started playing with phasing, with phasing one note against each other, it was like, "Oh my god, I just want to mute everything else and just listen to this."

Once in awhile, when I needed an ear break from working on whatever I was working on, I'd start a new session to play around with just the sine waves, and would save it. At first, I did it just for myself. I didn't even take it very seriously. I thought, "This is cool. I want to listen to this." Once I started accumulating enough of them to listen to a series of them, I realized, "Wait a minute, this is essentially what I want to listen to a lot of the time."

I started using the recordings just for getting things done. Like getting up in the morning, doing email, going to bed at night, for when I was feeling really stressed out on the train. I'd put them on. I was compelled by how functional it was and it felt strange to me that I'd never really looked at music that way before. I'd always approached music as being a narrative or being aesthetic or having meaning by way of reference or being political, and I'd never looked at it just so cleanly as, "This is useful." That was very exciting to me.

Naturally I did want to experiment with putting vocals on it because that's sort of what I do. I tried half the record with vocals on it. I actually recorded it and I realized the whole thing falls apart once you put vocals on it. It becomes distracting. For me, it takes the pleasure out of it because I'm suddenly hearing myself. It loses its conceptual purity.

Where's the title from?

It comes from the 18th century Jewish Lithuanian preacher, Dubno Maggid. It was an explanation he gave when asked how he came up with his short fables:

"Once I was walking in the forest, and saw tree after tree with a target drawn on it, and at the center of each target an arrow. I then came upon a little boy with a bow in his hand." "Are you the one who shot all these arrows?," I asked. "Yes!" he replied. "Then how did you always hit the center of the target?," I asked. "Simple," said the boy, "first I shoot the arrow, then I draw the target."

Making these pieces in a very intuitive way was essentially "shooting the arrow" where it wanted to go, then drawing the target around it. It's about honoring your impulses and working with what you have in front of you.

For the release, are you going to include a description regarding your intentions behind it? "Hey, here's some suggestions on how to use this thing.."

At the beginning, that's what I wanted to do, and the more I thought about it, the more I became aware that so much advertising language now is just telling people what to do. You're on the subway, it'll say, "Do this. Don't do this." Like the Nike slogan, "Just do it." Being surrounded by that kind of language is really oppressive. I was thinking to myself, "Well if this music will be useful to people, they're gonna hear the use for it right away. They're gonna just do it. They're just gonna use it."

I also realized that the things I use it for might not be what other people use it for. I didn't want to necessarily plant the seed that this is a relaxing record. Some people might use it for weight lifting. I wanted to leave the door open.

Ideally it would be appropriated in all sorts of ways... used by physical therapists and also under a really hard rap verse. That would be ideal.

You wrote a song for Beyoncé a couple years ago. Chairlift, your main project, recently broke up, but you're doing a final tour soon. Both of those things are situated more in the pop realm. How do you imagine people viewing the shift into something experimental?

I've tried to not worry about that. I have faith that new work connects the dots of past work. I think one of the big disconnects for people is gonna be that up until this point it's never really been clear what my relationship with production has been, compared to the clear authorship of singing. Especially when there are other names in it, especially men's names, listeners aren't sure who's doing what.

This is something Björk has talked about—when people went around saying Arca produced the last album.

It's totally true. I was at a party over the weekend. The Haxan Cloak came up in conversation and a good friend of mine, who's a massive Björk fan, contextualized Haxan Cloak to someone else by saying, "Oh, he produced the last Björk record," and I said, "No, he did not! He mixed it!"

This was a woman who said this, and she's a feminist, and she's a producer, the last person who should be making that assumption. But I think, unfortunately, history still informs a lot of how we see archetypes. Like, "Oh, he's a man who was involved, he must have been a producer." And I think because that's still the status quo, it's not gonna change until we get a ton more examples of females as engineers and producers.

Chairlift gets that all the time, and Patrick's really good about saying, "Actually, we both produced this." And that assumption isn't Patrick's fault whatsoever. More often than not, journalists will also say that Patrick produced "No Angel" and I wrote it, when actually I did both.

Do you imagine that people will recognize you more as a producer now?

My hope is that people will sort of realize that I've been in there the whole time. And also that it might make people look at what I do next a little bit differently.

You're releasing it under your initials. What was your decision to do that versus making it another Ramona Lisa project?

Ramona Lisa was a narrative and theatrical project, with a set of metaphors and imagery that glued it all together. It was important for me to finish that project a year after it surfaced, so for the whole thing to have a start date and a death date. That was actually a huge motivating factor, knowing that it was going to have this death. Needing to check off

all the boxes before that happened.

I didn't want to blend that pastoral, feminized world with this album. This feels much more neutral to me, and much more open, and kind of much less referential. Not to say that one's better than the other. I just wanted to keep them separated.

There's a lack of agenda here. I'm not trying to insert a personality in any way. The last two records I made were deeply personal and diaristic and emotional, and it was nice to take a break from talking at the listener with this one. That's also why I wanted to give away the record for free. It feels more like a gift, rather than, "I have made this tower in my likeness, admire it now!" It was like, "Here is something you can use if you'd like to. It's there."

Sometimes I worry I'm adding to the devaluing of music by giving away a record for free, but I do feel like that's the most agency I have at this point, is to not charge. And maybe that's sad, or indicative of something that the most significant action I can take is to give it away!

When you're working on a project, do you find it's useful to set parameters? Like the Ramona Lisa project taking exactly one year. Or this came about by taking a break from something else. You're productive as a musician—do you need these kind of things to keep you going?

Limitations are definitely inspiring. Because I jump around so much, I find limitations really give strength to projects. It forces a through-line. With Ramona Lisa, the restriction was making the whole thing on my laptop for no money, and then with this, it was like, "Okay, can we do that but now restricted to one instrument?"

The big surprise to me, looking back at it once it was all mastered, was that the most rudimentary music I've ever made is the most futuristic. It's kind of a paradox, because I've always thought of "futuristic music" as the presence of strange new sounds, not the absence of familiar ones.

You're not going into something knowing exactly what's going to happen; it's more like a learning experience.

Definitely. I keep learning over and over and over again in different ways to just obey my intuition, and if I like the results, I don't need to answer any other questions.

You said you wanted to remove the baggage from the collection. How did you decide to title the songs versus leaving them untitled?

Using titles at all was tricky. At first I was just naming things by the time of day that I made them, and then I started realizing that they evoked these really consistent images. I actually doubted at first whether or not I should include those visuals because I thought I might prevent people from seeing something else. But then I just realized it's so much fun! It's so much fun to bridge that gap between a description and a sound. So why would I not?

You have the Chairlift farewell tour later on in 2017. Does it feel weird to be making new stuff, and then going back to play older music?

It doesn't feel weird. I've always, for better or for worse, been working on two things at once, and that's kind of the way I like it. So, it feels kind of beautiful to just be split—I'm actually split three ways right now, because obviously the Chairlift wrap-up is coming, and that feels like a nod to the past, and then this record's coming out.

I'm also knee-deep into the next record that I'm working on, which is a vocal record. In a way, this record feels like an intermission, like a bit of a silence between these two other periods.

Do you plan to play the CEP songs live?

Yes! I'm performing it twice at National Sawdust with a choir, so all this is being arranged with a 12-piece vocal ensemble, which is going to sound amazing. Even just working with the choral director, Vince Peterson... It's been interesting looking at these things in terms of entertainment, because you have people sitting in a room. There's a stage. There's an expectation of entertainment. That's already the opposite of what this music was trying to do.

So, I'm trying to see how little we can get away with in terms of... dynamics. Can we be so loyal to the repetition within these pieces, and make it so beautiful, that it's enough on it's own?

With the new stuff you're working on, are you continuing to do more challenging, minimal stuff, or do you find yourself wanting to move more into a pop realm?

Part of what I love about pop is the challenging, minimal aspect of it. The best pop productions are lean, the best pop songs are minimal. So, for me, they're very related.

The thing that I'm really interested at this point is just getting straight to an emotional core in lyric writing and in melodies, and not getting lost in the sauce—because believe me I love getting lost in the sauce. Really stripping things back requires the most bravery and the most focus. I've been writing on piano recently, which is a new thing, and kind of terrifying for me because there's nothing to hide behind. I've been performing a little bit on piano, too, and that, to me, feels totally related to this record, just how timeless and pure it is.

As someone who's done a lot of different kinds of things, and has a ton of experience in different musical realms, have you ever thought of teaching music?

I'm actually working on a file that I've been adding to for the last year or so called, "Things I wish I'd known as a young musician." Maybe one day I'll publish it, but I keep thinking of things in the shower, like, "Oh, I gotta add that. Oh, I gotta add that." It's mostly meant for a female musician, because we deal with a different kind of thing, at least for now. But yeah, I think about that all the time, and I could see myself teaching at some point in the future.

I feel like I've never properly had a mentor in this industry. The closest person that I can call a mentor is my opera teacher, Pam Kuhn. The work I do with her is a totally different style of singing than I do for my own work that I release, and I love that separation, that kind of zero-baggage zone. She's become like a mentor to me, but interestingly, she can't give me advice on the sort of industry side because she's coming from a very different world. I really envy people who have that.

Would you ever write an opera?

If there was a story, a complex story that all fit together, that was really possessing me, then yes. I do sometimes approach songs like arias, and a lot of the last Chairlift record, I approached as straight-up as musical theater! I guess I really get off on cross-training, and seeing one genre through the lens of another.

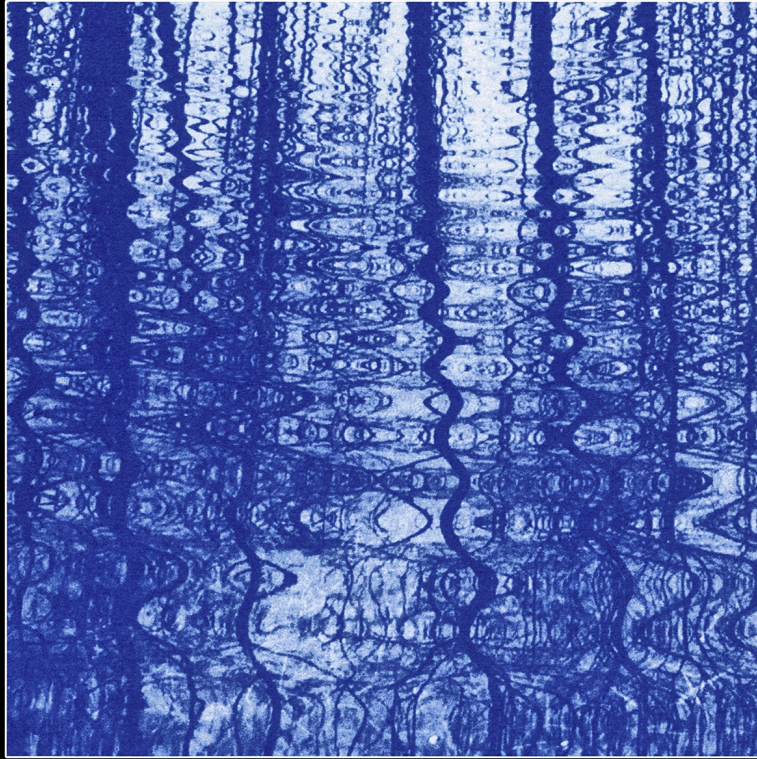
You seem to be in a good spot. You've had a successful band, you wrote a song for arguably one of the biggest pop stars in the world, and now you're able to do an experimental record. Do you ever think "I want to just try a bunch of different things"?

I was thinking about this yesterday. I realized that a lot of people have been saying, "Oh, that's so you, that's so you," and more often than not, they're right. That's the great thing about having enough work finally be out there that people understand. The fact that the work starts to take on a life of its own and people are processing it, it's really exciting and gives me a lot of confidence. There's less and less you need to explain.

I wish, as a younger artist, I'd known that as you have more work out there, you have this base to lean on, and there's this context for things that you do, which is both exciting and a relief.

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[Download the album as a .zip \(339mb\)](#)



CEP ~~~~~ DRAWING THE TARGET AROUND THE ARROW

A few things I wish I'd known when I was just starting out by Caroline Polachek:

- You can always say no to being photographed in front of a logo.
- You can bring your own recorder to record interviews.
- It's lovely to tell anyone working at the venue "thank you for having us" on the way out.
- The audience is just as vulnerable as you are.
- No such thing as a show that doesn't matter.
- Take archiving seriously.
- Don't insult your past work, even if you can't relate to it anymore.
- References are useful for communicating, but they can be a trap.
- When you find something that works, repeat it shamelessly.
- Get the makeup off as soon as you can.
- Here's how to sleep on the plane:
 - * glass of red wine
 - * earplugs
 - * headphones on over the earplugs
 - * Harold Budd - [Avalon Sutra](#)
 - * jacket or blanket over your head and torso arms crossed and folded in front of your body, hands tucked into your snug seatbelt to support your lower back.

Name
Caroline Polachek

Vocation

Musician, Songwriter

Fact

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Photo: Amanda Vincelli