

A space where parallel universes meet

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Hace un par de años, cuando empecé a escribir mi ensayo en estudios visuales *Espectropolíticas*, asistí por primera vez a una de las performances de Mette Edvardsen. Entonces estaba investigando otras formas de ver fuera de nuestra visión habitual y normativa. Me preguntaba cómo podemos conectar con algo, ver algo, que ni siquiera podemos imaginar. O, cómo podemos llegar a entender lo que todavía no ha pasado pero que *ya* está ahí, observándonos. Movida por estas cuestiones le propuse a Mette conversar sobre sus invocaciones visuales.

La visualidad en el trabajo de Mette es limítrofe y opera en la brecha entre el mundo que vemos y nuestras ideas sobre él, entre el aquí y el allí. Sus trabajos son una escritura corpórea en el espacio-tiempo que es aditiva y sustractiva a su vez. Como un escrito que traza y borra, que se mueve y se detiene, que mira las cosas que no están ahí y recupera lo que sí está. Así nos lo explica en la conversación que compartimos con vosotrxs y que decidimos no traducir al castellano para no desviar el sentido de las palabras, ya que, para Mette, las palabras son la fórmula mágica que nos permite acceder al espacio donde se dan encuentro universos paralelos.

NÚRIA GÓMEZ GABRIEL –Mette, before we begin, I would like to ask you about this parallel universe you yearn to be in contact with. What are you working on now?

METTE EDVARDSEN –For the piece *Black* (2011) I was thinking about a parallel universe as a way to expand the connections, or imagination if you like, to the (physical) space we are in. As if trying to explain the ‘missing link’.

The objects that ‘appear’, where do they come from? So, to make something abstract very concrete and tangible, and then to follow that thought, even if in a playful way, adding on the imagination of what is not here – but may exist elsewhere. I don’t use the term parallel universes in this way for my other works, but if we think of it poetically, these are the different spaces within us, each of us. I work on micro-actions, to practice listening, imagining, being/ presence. It’s about opening up other spaces in the imagination, to construct something else. My last piece *Penelope sleeps* (2019), made in collaboration with composer Matteo Fargion, is an opera written as an essay. It was about the voice and the internal space. How can we create a situation for an internal journey, one that is not dictated by the narrative, but where the narrative yields to us, brings us along, creating a field for us to rest upon, to wander and digress. My task, as I saw it, was not to write a story but to write *in time*. A space to enter and listen, to be in parallel universes.

NGG –I went into Auditorio 400 in the Nouvel building of the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid and sat down on the stage of the theatre. To my left there were many empty seats in the sloped stalls, pushed back into the darkness. You then came near and called on the first object of those that make up the scenography of your piece. A table. Or the idea of a table. Pronounced eight times. Calling the object by its name eight times to make it visible to our imagination. Just like the eight beats laid out for a dance or the eight hours prescribed by a doctor. A table, an apple, a bottle of water, a corner, slipping, falling, drawing near... but only your body and your voice are physically present in the theatre. In the description of *Black*, you comment that «a world will become visible», set «between here and there», and this makes me think of the number eight as a magical formula. What is it that an eight cannot enumerate?

ME –That’s an interesting question – what it *cannot* enumerate – because when I started making *Black* I had the feeling that it could be everything, at least everything that I could pronounce. I am not really working with what is *before* language here, but I am starting in an empty space. I wanted to begin with ‘nothing’. Then through naming and relating to things, I make them appear. Of course I question or play with what is there, here, what we can ‘see’ (imagine). For instance the table and the chair *visibly* move, and there are the traces of the cup and the book, the drop of coffee from the spoon, and dust that accumulates. The «world that becomes visible» is made up of the things we build in the space, that we see or project into space – words spoken in the repetition of eight or my body relating to them. Then there are also gaps, other words like adjectives, pronouns – thoughts, associations – but it’s not all meaning, the next thing can also be generated by sound and rhythm. So the repetition of eight was some kind of magic formula. It made it possible to make things appear, not just as an idea, but also to make it ‘physical’ by insisting on it. It was the time of a thought.

NGG –Now that a few months have gone by since your solo performance at Auditorio 400 in the Museo Reina Sofia, I recall the experience as a ritual or game of magic, with occult influences, like a spell working like a vision machine. In his definition of the term *spell* (*conjuration* in French), French philosopher Jacques Derrida speaks of a political alliance, at times secret in nature, of a plot or conspiracy that strives to neutralise a hegemony or overthrow an existing power («The exorcising of spirits by invocation», «the exercise of magical or occult influence»). In this regard, do you believe that *Black* works like a spell or incantation? What or who does it see in us over the course of the performance?

ME –Language or action can work as a kind of spell or incantation. You say something, do something, and it becomes real. What has been interesting for me is to work with the imagination. Not only in the sense of our capacity to imagine something that is not there, to ‘fill in the gap’ so to speak, but to really enter this imagination, at first a bit playful, but then once we go with it, we can do a lot. What I am proposing is a certain kind of writing, I would call it like that, and this could be the first level of a possible reading. But then it is what the reading does, offers, what spaces it opens. So as audience you can imagine the things in space, and you can follow the scene as it is unfolding. But it is really an invitation to go further inside, to see what is there, to build in the imagination and project that back into space, and to keep what has been created in space (memory). I am interested in this

activation. Sometimes people will tell me about things they ‘see’ in the space that I have never mentioned. Oftentimes people see a bed, for example, even if I never mention it. It has also happened that when people see the piece for the second time, they say “but when I saw the piece the first time, there was a table there?” This is interesting, we are really co-writing in the act of experiencing.

NGG –This experience of community writing that you describe, capable of affecting the vision of whoever is listening, makes me think of darkness as a vernacular technology. In 2016 I was with Sivia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson at the CA2M Image Symposium on the subject of “Black Screen or White Screen: The Power of Watching Images Together”. In their *Dark Matter Cinema Tarot*, Maglioni and Thomson invoke the spectators that are now members of their Nocturnal Committee. Dark matter cinema tarot is nothing other than an excuse to initiate speculative description and collective fabulation through images from the history of cinema, «suspended between contingency and fatality». We might say that what these artists postulate is a community of intersubjective visualisation. It is not the image that is projected into the eyes of the spectator, but the eyes of the spectator that are projected into the image. In the end, they turn cinema into a collective image, or just as well the image of a collective. The projection of a desire. Have you ever thought of your work as vernacular technology? How would you describe the communities of visualisation that accompany you in the performative space? What do you think their projection of desire might be?

ME –I like the image of the eyes of the spectator being projected into the image, that they project the image. The theatre is a perfect space for projection, and for activation of the imagination. This has been important for me, coming from dance, to consider that dance or performance is not primarily a visual art form, but that other senses are involved. We experience through our bodies, listening, feeling, sensing. Images are being created, but it doesn't mean that it (the work, the piece) is visual. I am interested in this kind of making of images, one that addresses the imagination. From a visual point of view I think that my pieces are not very satisfactory. There is not so much going on visually. Of course there are things to ‘see’, and there is work on how the pieces are composed in space, but it is more to set up the conditions for a certain experience to take place. The empty space, in the theatre, activates us just like that. It's a space full of memories of pasts and presents. We are constantly projecting desire upon it. Even when nothing is happening, we are waiting for it to happen.

NGG –You say that the objects appear on the stage as if they were to exist in a parallel universe where they might disappear and appear («So the instant they appear on stage, they are missing somewhere else. Like in a parallel universe objects disappear from, and reappear»). This leads me to an idea of spectral reality and the staging of a darkness that might work as a space of expropriation, displacement or negation of meaning. This *other* world that these objects belong to—what is it like?

ME –This is a way to consider that the things really exist. That it's not because we do not see them that they are not there. In *Black* it can be proposed as a game that we imagine that we see the things as I call them out or relate to them in space, but perhaps it's not just a game? What if we for a moment consider that the things are there, only that they are invisible? Or instead of thinking that we are imagining that there is something there, but in fact we ‘know’ that there's nothing there – why not pull the thought further? Where do these things come from all of a sudden? How were they made? Is there a parallel universe where they exist, and once called upon they disappear from that universe and appear here for a moment. Then, how is it in a space, where the things you are surrounded by suddenly disappear and reappear? It's interesting to think the thoughts further to see what it means. What if some things get lost, or stuck somewhere in between the two? I sometimes bring with me some of the objects I have painted black, in order to make them disappear, to put on display after the performance. These objects, like the water bottle, sponge, apple, cup – once painted black almost seem unreal. Like they are impressions, some other matter, neither real nor unreal. Maybe they are, in fact, stuck between these two parallel worlds.

NGG –Your performance *No Title* (2014) makes me think of Democritus and his radical gesture of obliteration.

He pulled his eyes out of their sockets because the view of a gorgeous garden made it impossible for him to concentrate on what he really wanted to see. Vision is identifying. Are we to gouge our eyes out, or should we *return them to the body anew?*

ME –In *No Title* the fact of closing my eyes, to not see, was an important gesture for the piece. I was working with negation as a specific feature of language, as a sort of mirror piece to *Black*. Where in *Black* I could make things appear by naming them and relating to them in space, in *No Title* I would say they were ‘gone’, or not there – even double negation, *not not* there. Instead of moving further inside (in the space), as in *Black*, *No Title* was a movement towards the outside, to what is not here, or is gone, to the far away, in space and in time. But it was also a double movement in that in order to say that something is gone, I have to first bring it up, affirm it. It was also interesting to observe that some things are easier to erase than others. I like the expression ‘to return them to the body anew’, and I think by removing one of the senses, that of seeing, it did exactly intensify the relation to the body being in space, naturally for me, but also apparently for the audience. That was interesting to experience. We need to feel, to listen, to sense with our bodies. Sometimes we cannot see with eyes open. That’s interesting. Or like Democritus, what we see is too much and overwhelming, sight distracts us from thought. It’s not about not seeing, but to be able to see, like you say – to return the eyes to the body anew.

NGG –This idea of recovering material sensible to our bare eyes is, in fact, one of the central reflections found in the text *Visión periférica. Ojos para un mundo común* [Peripheral Vision: Eyes for a Common World], by Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés. Her essay considers our condition of «spectators of the world» in a critique of how vision is captured in Western societies, with the resulting social and political effects. «Global capitalism cancels out all invisibility, all non-knowing, in favour of its unique present truth», writes Garcés. Our eyes are «static holes in service to a superior organ of vision». Yet as she observes in her text, paraphrasing studies by Rancière, it does not make much sense to pretend to rescue the spectator by activating inclusion in a supposed community, or forcing participation in a collective event, because the spectator does not need to be redeemed. Still, we do need to «conquer our eyes together so that they might learn to see what there is *between* us, and thus escape from consented visualities». Peripheral vision relates what is focussed with what is unfocused, the visible with the invisible, what is here with what is no longer here. This is why I think your performance *No Title* has a lot to do with this idea of peripheral vision, since it works with the unfocussed blur, making things disappear and returning us to the experience of the invisible. I think of *No Title* as a psycho-magical technique of de-identification. A session of collective hypnosis. I love to imagine a world where the inhabitants have the capacity to make the things that weigh on their lives and oppress them disappear (no longer be seen), thanks to the power of their words. Have you ever performed *No Title* (or any of your other performance pieces) outside of theatrical space?

ME –*No Title* has been performed both in theatres, or so-called black box spaces, as well as galleries. But continuing on what you say about the ‘peripheral vision’, the ‘theatrical space’ also exists through a performative gesture. So the theatrical space is always there, even when it isn’t. Then each space is specific and has its own history and details, but the reference space is still there somewhere. In the piece in a book, *every now and then* (2009), the performance took place inside a book. The piece challenged, in that way, the notion of performance, yet maintaining its relationship to it as a practice and a situation. In the library piece, for instance, where we learn books by heart (*Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*), the theatrical space is not in the foreground – we are books – and different spaces are coexisting at the same time. In *I can’t quite place it* (2015) I was placing a table with chairs on the street, completely out of any apparent context. Nevertheless, the theatrical space was being summoned.

NGG –Finally I’d like to ask you about the piece *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (2010), where you work on the dystopia of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, you postulate the memorisation of a book as a form of rewriting by means of the voice and memory («Books are read to remember and written to forget»). Turning something into a movie or a book is to propose a game of promiscuity. Or perhaps of dispossession. Where do the

words of a book go when they are erased from its pages? Where do the images of a film go when they vanish from the screen?

ME –What are the words of a book on its pages without the reader? What are the images of the film on the screen on their own, when nobody is watching? It's not happening on the screen, or on the page. It travels from there, perhaps also to there. One always writes for someone. Whether someone reads it or not, I believe there is always an intension of an address, however indirect it may be. I think works of art, books, films, never exist in one place only. It's interesting to think of it as a dispossession, that makes sense. I think that must be a premise. Not knowing where it comes from or where it's going to. It's not about communication, but it's about opening different spaces, traveling between. This is the space of art.

The choreographies of Mette Edvarsen (1970, Lørenskog) are situated in the transitional space between the visual and the performing arts. Edvarsen has worked as a dancer and performer for several companies and projects but since 2002 she has been developing her own work as an artist. She presented her first retrospective at the Black Box Theatre in Oslo in 2015 and has participated in living arts programmes such as Idiorritmias (2018) at MACBA (Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona) and Estudio (2019) at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid. Mette Edvardsen, is structurally supported by Norsk Kulturråd (2017 -2020), BUDA Arts Centre Kortrijk (2017 – 2020) and apap-Performing Europe 2020 – a project co-funded by Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. She is associated artist at Centre Chorégraphique National de Caen en Normandie (France) for the period 2019-2021. She is currently a research fellow at Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Her interest in experimenting with word and gesture as an artistic potential challenges the limits of visibility and of that which we perceive as an identifiable reality. Although his works as a medium in *Black* (2011) or *No Title* (2014) are proposed as exercises of magical invocation, which have the power to make apparently non-existent objects appear, in projects like *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, operative since 2010, she makes possible, collectively, the dystopia imagined by the writer Ray Bradbury in his novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953): she creates a living library. We talked to her about the possibility of opening new spaces through art capables of bringing together radical imagination and collective vision.

Núria Gómez Gabriel

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