

My Life as a Book¹

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I have titled this piece *My life as a book*, but perhaps I should have written, *My life as a cat*.

I am *I am a Cat* by Soseki Natsume. The book originally appeared in Japanese in 1905 and I am the English translation from 1972. This is how I begin when I introduce myself to a new 'reader' in the project *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*.² Those who have read the book, either with me or in the paper edition, know that the story is told through the eyes of a cat, not that this is particularly important for the project.

In the project *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* a group of people (performers) select a book that they want to memorize, or learn 'by heart' to use the more poetic phrase. Together they form a collection of 'living books'. The idea stems from Ray Bradbury's 1953 vision of the future, *Fahrenheit 451*, which describes a society where books are forbidden because they are deemed to be dangerous. The purpose of firefighters is no longer to extinguish flames but to set fire to books. Censorship, too, is a core issue. *Time has fallen asleep* moves on from where the book ends: where the protagonist has made his escape, joining an underground movement where people learn books by heart to preserve them for the future. We are not undertaking an adaptation of *Fahrenheit* but we have developed learning by heart as a practice and are exploring what it means.

The idea for the project began to take shape in 2008 as an indirect reaction to, and reflection upon, the construction of the seed vault on the Svalbard archipelago, a repository for plant seeds from the whole world that lies deep in the bedrock not far from Longyearbyen. To help

protect the existing plant-life on Earth from various global catastrophes, millions of seeds have been stored in the permafrost. There is something both fantastic and absurd about this project, prompting me to think about preservation and the scale in which we view the future.

The first time we presented the project was at a public library during the Playground Festival at Stuk in Leuven, Belgium, in 2010. This is how it works: we have a book-list from which library visitors – the audience – can choose a book they wish to 'read' and 'the book' (performer) takes the reader to a place in the library and recites the content. On the first occasion, we were seven performers or 'books'. It was an experiment and no plans or promises had been made as to how it should be developed, taken on tour or presented again. First, we wanted to see what it involved and what occurred. Before the first week at the library was over, we already knew that we were not yet finished: we wondered about how much we could learn. How did memory function over the course of time? How long did it last? As a practice, we found that it gave us a great deal back, not simply the number of pages we memorized from the books but also what arose from doing so, from the process itself. And perhaps this is the core of the whole project: what does it mean to develop a practice? The value of something in itself rather than for something else; a practice does not necessarily lead to any objective but is something we do over an extended time.

Since then we have presented the project in twenty-five different cities and have developed a collection of more than sixty book titles – in English, Norwegian, Dutch, Arabic, French,

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² 'Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine' is a quotation from *Dreamthorp: A Book of Essays* by Alexander Smith (1865), it appears unreferenced in *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury 1991: 37). For more information about the project see www.timehasfallenasleepintheafternoon.sunshine.be

German, Polish, Greek, Italian, Estonian and Swedish. The project is usually presented inside a library. This was not a choice made on account of any symbolic value but because of the library's functions. One visits the library to read and borrow books – and it is a place to be. On a few occasions, the project has also been presented in other spaces: in a bookstore, park or museum. In Palestine, for example, we used a bookstore since the libraries were not open to everyone and were therefore exclusive. Libraries are generally public spaces where several activities occur at once and they have totally different conventions from a theatre space. Inside the library, we cannot know or control what is happening at any given time. The project is a one-to-one experience and there is no direction or choreography beyond the two people sitting down together somewhere. From the outside, it looks no different from any other situation where two people sit together chatting. For the spectator, it is an experience rather than mere observation. Maybe this is the performing arts' innermost nature: one performer and an audience of one. The book becomes alive for the reader through the reader; the 'book' requires the reader to exist as a 'book'.

Since the library is a public space, it has always been important to offer books in the local language in addition to English as our shared working language. In this way, the collection has grown over time and helped maintain the practice of performing the book, reciting the book. We are often a combination of what we call 'old' and 'new' books; we learn and relearn. Performers chose their own book. This is part of the project. This was important to me, first, because a person memorizing a book is going to spend a lot of time with it; second, self-motivation seemed important – it is not a choice imposed from 'outside'. The collection is not supposed to represent a vision, mine or anybody else's. We do not work on the basis of content, or historically or politically or in terms of genre, style, subject or literary canon. The project is not really *about* the book; the book is almost like a side effect. Of course, the book is

important, both to the person who learns it and the person who reads it, but in principle it could be any book.

We are often asked if it is possible to learn a whole book by heart. More than anything else, achieving this is probably a question of time and how thick the book is. Actors of course do such things all the time but we don't go to the theatre to be impressed by the actors having learned their lines. All the same, it's a little bit different to memorize a book in this way. A book is more than the story it tells. We try to 'become' the book, get close to the words, language and form rather than interpret it. When we learn a book by heart, it's like we are undertaking an extremely close reading of the book, and we momentarily step into the role of the person writing. The language is important. For us, the goal is not to have learned the whole book by heart before we begin reciting it – or 'being read' as we say. We are developing learning by heart as a practice. It's about being engaged in doing it and not just the idea, as a concept, of learning the first page and then talking about 'being a book'. Rather, we learn so much that we have to come up with a strategy, both to enable our own experience and to be able to share the reading experience with the 'reader' (the audience). But no matter how well you learn something, you need to keep on practicing or you will forget it again. If *War and Peace* is the book you have chosen to 'be', maybe you will already have forgotten the beginning before you get to the end. Seen in this way, learning a book by heart is a continuous process; there is no final result to achieve.

I believe that memory is radical in our time. Forgetting has become a virtue and a quality; memory has become superfluous and unusable. In step with the acceleration of our time, it is more important to be able to navigate and move on, and technology does not simply make information available; it shapes the way we relate to it and what information is. But learning by heart is not about acquiring knowledge, at least not in the form of information. In a world that is defined by the new at all times, memory may be seen as resistance to forgetting, and



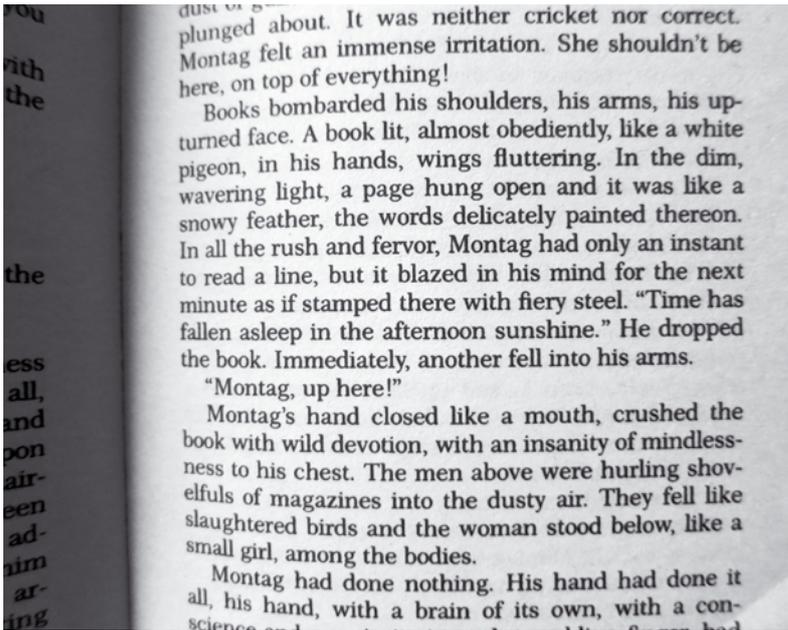
■ Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine, Sydney Biennale, 2016. Photo by Document Photography

learning by heart as a gesture against efficacy and utility. If the purpose is to preserve these books for the future, there is perhaps more suitable technology or at least technology that is simpler and more efficient – as well as longer lasting. Learning by heart has a long history and is still practiced in several cultures. Developing it as a practice and sharing it with an audience as an art project is primarily to create an experience. I don't wish to claim that we add anything to the literary work in itself, but we do create a reading experience. The situation that arises between performer and audience, or 'book' and 'reader', is an intimate one. The book is only there for the reader. It talks to the reader and meets the reader's eye but does not cross over into a social relation that 'wants anything' from the reader other than to be read. The experience of memory, of the person who has – is – this book, this text, these poems, creates a *space* to which the reader can give him or herself.

What is memory and how does it work? We talk about 'becoming' a book and the book also becomes part of us. It affects our language; sentences from our books may pop up in

different situations. There are different types of memory. The content we want to learn word for word. We are often asked if we have learned any memory tricks. We haven't, but then again the purpose is not to memorize most or memorize the quickest. It is not to show virtuosity; it is the process we are interested in. Memory can function in relation to content and meaning in a direct sense – visual memory to the page, sentences and words, and aural memory to rhythms and sounds when we hear ourselves speak it. Muscular memory, too – just like we orient ourselves in relation to the space, tempo, rhythm and intentions in dance, we also need to learn to coordinate the tongue in the mouth to be able to pronounce sentences and words. We discovered, moreover, that being able to pronounce a word was more closely bound to the memory of it than the understanding of it – that it was more important to be able to pronounce a word in order to be able to remember it than to know what it meant.

We experimented later with what we call 'second-generation' books – books we learn by heart from another 'living book', that is to say by oral/aural transfer and not from paper. This



■ (Bradbury 1991 [1953]: 37)
Photo by Mette Edvardsen

process gave rise to new questions concerning the source. Is the source accurate? Can we trust it? Was that really the way it was? Was that what you said last time? How can one go back and check what is correct? As a learning process, this was interesting both for the book and the person learning it. Generally speaking, learning by means of such oral/aural transfer was much faster, but at the same time we were able to dedicate less time to this mode of learning per day because it was so demanding and intense. The person learning has nothing to hold on to, no words on a page, no visualization beyond what they create themselves. For the 'books', it was also a review of their own process, in the memory, but now with the whole text in place. We were able to see connections and linguistic details that the first-time learner has no access to. This made things easier.

Following on from this came the idea of 're-writing'. In 2014, we began to write things down again from memory. Following the *Fahrenheit 451* idea a bit further for a moment, we imagined a society where books have become legal again and the books that have been memorized and exist in the memory can be written down and become book-objects again. How will these new versions be written? What will occur during the course of the process?

Once more as an experiment, and without deciding very much beforehand, we started out with this as both intention and springboard. It wasn't to do with being 'correct' in relation to the original but in relation to the version we have in our memory. Our memorizing of the book we recite aims to be as close to the original as we are able. But memory is not stable; it changes. And to what extent have the book and the text changed over time? At the time of writing, eleven books are being (re)written down. *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* has now become a publisher and the first book in the series came out in October 2015, in a print run of 350. In 2016 three 'new' books have already been published, and there are three more on their way.

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