

NERO

Library of Living Books. Conversation with Mette Edvardsen

26 April 2017

Conversation with the Norwegian artist and performer Mette Edvardsen about her library of living and published books *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, presented at Live Arts Week VI, curated by Xing in Bologna (26-29 April 2017)



Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, Sydney Biennial, 2016

Piersandra Di Matteo: *A group of people have memorized books chosen by themselves, and delivered them orally, in an intimate (one to one) relation, to a listener in the halls and corridors of libraries in Amsterdam, Jerusalem, Salzburg, Inderøy, Oslo, Brussels, Bologna, Santarcangelo... This is Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine, a performance project that you conceived a few years ago and that continues to give life to books and words by authors working in quite different literary genres. Let's take a step backwards: how was the idea for this library of living books born?*

Mette Edvardsen: It is difficult to trace the exact beginning of this project. Like with other works, I often find that there can be several starting points uncovering each other making it hard to name one origin. 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 Island in the north of Norway, a repository for plant seeds from the whole world which lies deep in the mountains, 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 scientific endeavour, and about preservation (and especially in relation to my art) and the scale in which we view the future. A place between generosity and control, naivety and practical sense, romanticism and pragmatism, visions and lack of visions, proposals and projections. What do we bring with us for the future? What remains for the future to get from us? Can we imagine the world without us?

Forgetting has become a virtue and a quality. Memory has become superfluous and redundant. In step with the acceleration of our time, it is more important to be able to 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 in form of information – putting amounts of information into one's head or mind.

In a world which is defined by novelty at all times, memory may be seen as a resistance to forgetting and 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 which is simpler and more efficient – as well as longer lasting.

P.M.: *Learning by heart has a long history and is still practiced in a number of cultures...*

M.E.: Yes, and 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. We are founding a reading experience. The situation which 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 which '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.

P.M.: *In 2014, Live Arts Week III hosted the project in the Biblioteca Salaborsa – a huge library with open shelves in the heart of Bologna – inviting artists and performers to vocalise entire parts of a book. Why is it so important for you for this oral-aural exchange to come about in the corridors or rooms of a library?*

M.E.: Libraries provide a good context for the books to be read, but also to just be there. And I think that this is interesting in relation to the performing arts practice, in terms of a space and mode of being. How can we be in space in another way, what can we share together? Libraries are one of the few spaces that are still open and free for the public. It is a good place to practice, and also to meet readers. It is a place to be. But the project was not initially made for the library, it was not chosen for any symbolic meaning, more practical. I was thinking about the book, the format of the book and of reading, more than the library. The library was a natural consequence. It was important though to not be in a theatre, which is the context where I usually show my work. When we are reciting our books to readers, it is of course also a performance, but still a different kind than what it would be within the conventions of the theatre. We wanted to do it one-to-one, a book and a reader, and for this the library is perfect. The idea was to *become the book*, not make an interpretation of a book.

The library is a *soft space*, one that we cannot control, design or choreograph. There is life inside the library, and we exist inside of that, not in isolation. However, it does happen that we do the project in other spaces or contexts (but not on stage). When we were in Palestine, for instance, the libraries were not accessible for everyone, and we did it in a bookshop instead. In that case the library would have been very performative, and also very charged with added meaning, even if extremely beautiful. Of course, one can read a book anywhere. And I enjoy this transgressive potentiality of the project. We don't need a backdrop with books for it to take place, but bookshelves give a nice relation.



P.M.: *This project transforms the solitary act of reading – that decisive encounter with an author and a story able to set in place a deep dialogue – into a rendezvous that lives in vocal space and implies a willingness to listen. The literary work comes to life and thus expands into a close acoustic relation mediated by other people's words. What role does listening have in your work? The establishment of this acoustic space made available for a relation?*

M.E.: In this case, it is about reading together. As a "book", I am not only repeating the same chapter again and again to hundreds of times to different readers, it is an *act of reading together*. It is a performance, but it also an encounter – with a book. And listening is the key to enter, but then I still consider it as reading. Also when we are reading a paper-book silently by ourselves, there is a voice there, internally. That is where the writing and the reading meet. As a "book", it is a continuous oscillation between being a reader and a writer, as the text is unfolding. It is never just one position, as we are not acting or interpreting the text, but trying to *become* it. The moment we decided to write down from memory, the question of the text was brought up again in very direct or concrete way.

But listening is important in the work, I would even say this in general in my work, but more and more in the work with language. For me, dance is not primarily a visual art form. The senses are working together, seeing, listening, feeling – but also imagining, remembering. This is all part of experiencing.

P.M.: *Learning an entire book by heart requires a long, methodical and disciplined work. It is an apprenticeship in the writing and the language of an author. And it calls for the reader to make a hermeneutic effort, that takes shape in the pauses, intonation, fabric of the prose, mouthing, tics of fonation, so as to give voice to the characters. The operation of memorizing many pages has a complex complicity with forgetfulness, with oblivion, with a blank. What is involved here is not the muscular effort that goes into a perfect re-citation, but rather a privilege given to the literary word and to the (intimate) relation with a listener...*

M.E.: Yes, it is definitely about listening. But the muscular memory is important too. I think the English word of *embodiment* is a good word. What I realised quite soon when trying to learn my book by heart was that, contrary to my belief, the understanding of a word's meaning is less important to be able to memorise it than the capacity to pronounce the word. So to be able to coordinate my mouth and tongue to be able to say the word, then hear it, created a stronger bound to memory than knowing what that particular word actually means. I find that very interesting. Also at the beginning the visual of the page would help me to memorise or navigate my text. But after a while the visual memory of the page disappeared, and the text is more related to sound and rhythm, the flow. Which of course is very interesting in relation to the language, of what is writing. And in this way learning by heart is not about acquiring content, or as I said earlier, about putting information into the head. Memory does not only reside in the head, or located the brain. To me memory is very physical. When I am quietly going through my book in my mind, as it were, there is an ever so slight movement happening inside of me, inside my body, like the nervous system engages in the process.

When I am speaking my book, reciting, for readers I am not afraid of forgetting. I know it is in there somewhere. If a blank appears, and this sometimes happens, I just wait a moment, or go back a few sentences, and then usually with the flow of the writing it comes back. I have spoken the first part of my book so many times, that I think I will never forget it. It is interesting that at some point the book is growing thick with added memories from previous readers or spaces or moments, like another layer that is on top of the writing. There is also a capacity to think other thoughts while reading (speaking), that's how strong the rhythm and writing is inscribed in the memory. Sometimes I can catch myself wondering if I have spoken a certain part, that I have no recollection of it, but I just have to trust that I most probably did as I am already in the next paragraph.

P.M.: *The project is now going through a new phase of development that makes reading, memorising and rewriting plummet into a single process. Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine has in fact become a publishing house for these books. After years of learning them by heart, some of these books are finding their way back onto the page as "rewritings by heart". The printed editions of a few living books – such as *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* by Herman Melville and so on – will be on display at LOCALEDUE during LAW. The books – published in various formats and with quite different layouts (some transcribed by hand) – bear the traces of the passage through orality, the mnemonic manipulations and interpolations due to the process of memorisation, consumption owing to repetitions*

and the passage of time. Graphically, some literally contain the bustle of the body, by breathing the pulsional and bodily marks of the voice into the writing, thus giving life to an “other” book. What does this new operation imply?

M.E.: The rewriting was not present as an idea at the beginning of the project. In fact, the whole project has been developing with its own time and questions. At some point, after having been with the books for some years, I was just curious what it would mean to write them down. Similarly simple as the initial idea of learning books by heart, the idea was to bring these versions of the books we have in our minds, or hearts, back to paper. If we for a moment think the fiction of Fahrenheit 451 (Ray Bradbury, 1953) a bit further, and imagine that now the “dark ages” are over and books are again legal, and all these memorized versions can be written down again.

For us, you can say that the project now unfolds in three stages: the *learning by heart*, the *transmission* (reciting the books to readers), and finally the *rewriting*. Like when we started with the project, what was important for me was that we share the intention of what we are doing, but then to see how we all find our ways with it. So for the rewriting there were no rules, as such, but a shared interest in that process – and of course also the curiosity of what these versions would be like. How much had they changed? How much was forgotten?

I didn't know yet if we would publish them. I was first interested to see what it brought up, what these versions could be. I did not consider copyright issues and so on to start with. I wanted that we would first make our experience with the process, so that it is not about that. Later of course, this was interesting part of the process of rewriting and editing the books.



Books published by the publishing house Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine

P.M.: And then...

M.E.: We organized sessions together in the Royal Library in Brussels, who very kindly gave us a space where we could sit and write. During this process we exchanged about what came up, different choices we were confronted with, like punctuation, the relation to the page, to the object book and so on. Similarly to when we are speaking our books, we are all trying to be as close as possible to the original, not for the sake of being correct but because there is another space that opens up in the writing. But of course, we are well aware that memory is deceptive and surely the books have changed over time. When we started to write, the idea was not to correct our rewritten version with the original. Once we had our versions written down, we could compare to see the differences, how it had changed. In some of the editions these changes, or mistakes if you like, are also made visible.

I am interested in the dimension of these books as possible versions. It is of course always made clear that this is not the original text of its author, which is very important. Not only towards the original work, or the author, but also because the dimension of this edition having passed through the process of memory I think is an interesting experience.

P.M.: During the opening of Live Arts Week VI, in the P420 gallery, you will rewrite by heart one of the texts you learned a long time ago...

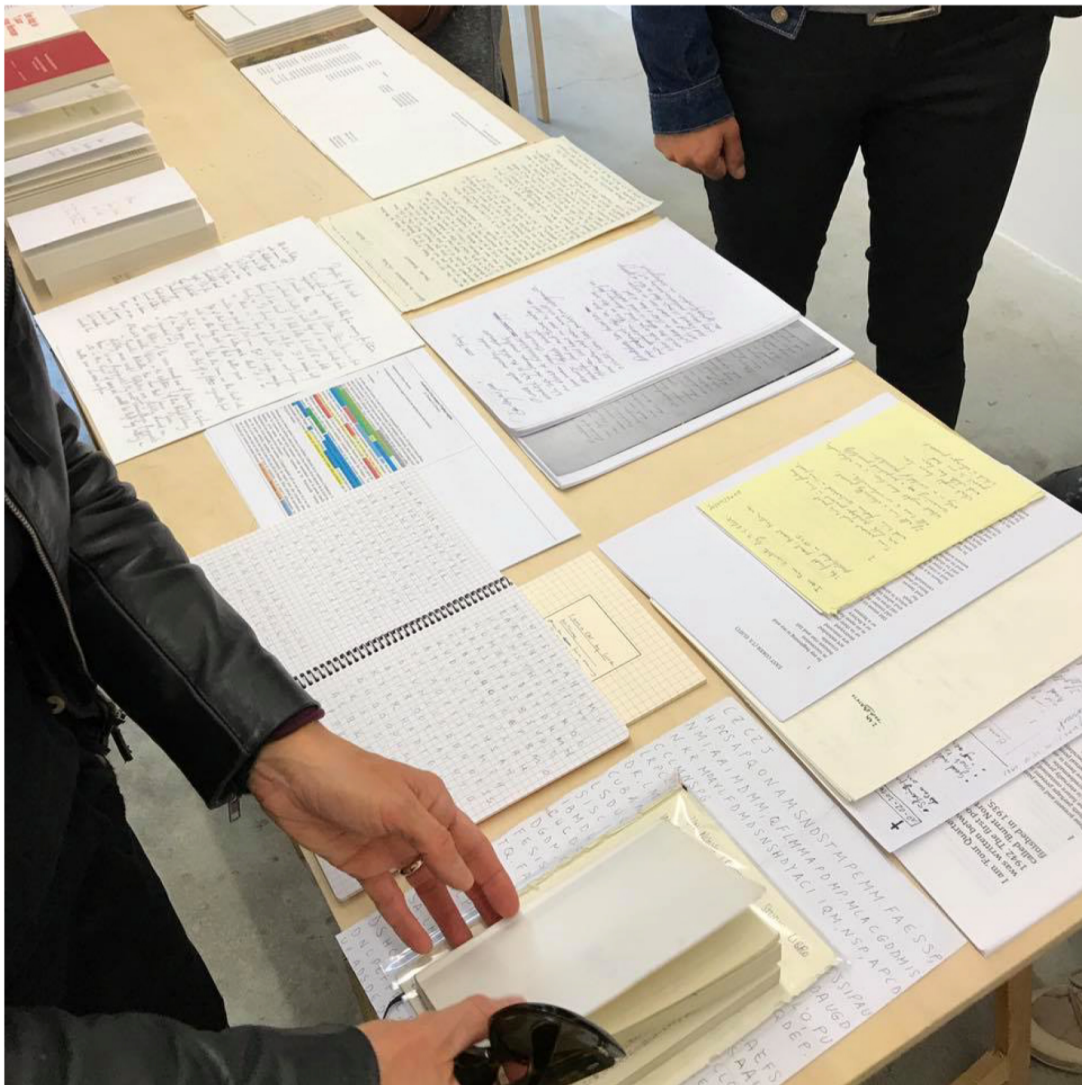
M.E.: I will write the first part of the first book I did, am... *I am a Cat* by Soseki Natsume. When we do the project in libraries each reading lasts for about half an hour, and that brings me half way through the first part. Then if the reader comes back, which sometimes happens, we read until the end of the first story, so another half hour. Writing is much slower than reading, not only on that my hand writes slower than the speed of my speaking, but as a consequence it also interrupts my flow and therefore my memory at times. It takes me about 4 – 5 hours to write it down. Also, the feedback of the page is very different when handwriting on paper or a notebook, or writing on a keyboard looking at a computer screen. I have also typed this first part of the book and it is being published on paper these days.

P.M.: *Your work often overlaps or alternates between the voice and writing. Could you say a few words about the role taken on by the voice in your more recent projects?*

M.E.: When I made *Black* in 2011 it was the beginning of a cycle of works, followed by *No Title* (2014) and *We to be* (2015), which are all working with language and voice in different ways. *Black* was about naming and affirming, *No Title* about negating and in *We to be* I was working with the tenses past and future. I consider these three pieces now as a trilogy. But it did not start with an interest in language as such, but the language is there in order for something to take place.

I consider choreography as writing, which doesn't mean that it has to be language, but also not an opposite to language. For me the writing takes place in space, not on the page. In *We to be* I challenged this idea in making a piece where everything takes place through language. I wrote a play that I read out loud for the audience, seated together with the audience looking at an empty stage (or dark stage).

In my latest piece *oslo* which premiered a few weeks ago, the text now moves away from me, or at least my voice, and enters the space through LED displays which the audience reads, and then further into space with more voices. This was an interesting step for me to make, that the text leaves me. All of these works are solo pieces, as many of my pieces are, but I hardly think of them as solo pieces. For me the writing and the text also includes the space, how things take place, the time we spend there. And as you mentioned listening before, I think this is a big part of experiencing a performance, how we are there, what spaces it opens in the imagination. It is a space of reading too.



Mette Edvardsen, books exhibition at LOCALEDUE, Live ARTS Week VI 2017



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Mette Edvardsen, norwegian artist living in Bruxelles, works in the performing arts field while also exploring other media and formats such as video and books. For several years she danced and performed with Les Ballets C. de la B., with Hans Van den Broeck and Christine de Smedt, and in pieces by ZOO/Thomas Hauert, Bock&Vincenzi, Mårten Spångberg, Lynda Gaudreau, deepblue and others. She created and produced two pieces in collaboration with Lilia Mestre, and the project *Sauna in Exile* in collaboration with Heine R. Avdal, Liv Hanne Haugen and Lawrence Malstaf (2002/2004). She choreographed and danced a version of Thomas Lehmen's *Schreibstück* with Christine de Smedt and Mårten Spångberg in 2004. Her own work includes the pieces *Private collection* (2002), *Time will show (detail)*(2004), *Opening* (2005-2006), *The way/you move* (installation, 2006), *or else nobody will know* (2007), *every now and then* (2009), *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*(2010), *Black* (2011), *No Title* (2014) and the video works *Stills* (2002), *coffee* (2006), *cigarette* (2008) and *Faits divers* (2008). She presents her works internationally and continues to develop projects with other artists, both as a collaborator and as a performer.

www.metteedvardsen.be

Live Arts week IV details:

Wednesday 26 april 2017

5–10pm

P420 Mette Edvardsen ^(N/B)

Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine (re-writing)

performance, italian première, production Xing/Live Arts Week

6-10pm

LOCALEDUE Mette Edvardsen ^(N/B)

Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine (publishing house)

books exhibition, italian première

This interview is part of the new series **VOICETOPIA**.

Conceived for NERO and curated by **Piersandra Di Matteo**, it is a space dedicated to the performing arts, contemporary theatre, performative formats as procedural phenomena, the topology of speech and tactics of interaction between practices and theoretical hypotheses, a platform for dialogue with artists, curators, performers.