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Mette Edvardsen: ‘If forgetting is important, then so is remembering’

The dancer, choreographer and performer talks about memorising books and then retelling them, and exploring the possibilities and limits of language

by VERONICA SIMPSON

In 2010, Norwegian artist Mette Edvardsen (b1970) made a work about remembering: a performance piece, it entailed a heroic feat of memorising, asking half a dozen individuals to learn a book and then retell it, like a “living library”. Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine¹ was inspired by Ray Bradbury’s science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*, proposing a time when books would be forbidden and happiness attained through an absence of knowledge. Edvardsen’s piece has gone on to be performed all over the world, resonating with audiences from Sydney to Palestine, and provoking re-evaluations of the slow arts of reading, recital and storytelling.

Bradbury’s vision resonated with Edvardsen’s concerns that culture itself is being eroded through our ability to instantaneously acquire - and forget - knowledge via online media. “Books are read to remember and written to forget,” she has said. “To memorise a book, or more poetically ‘to learn a book by heart’, is in a way a rewriting of that book. In the process of memorising, the reader, for a moment, steps into the place of the writer, or rather he/she is becoming the book.”

Edvardsen originally gave the idea away at an auction, during an artist event, thinking she would not have the necessary time or funding to bring it to life. A fierce bidding contest ensued, and the winning institutions (two Belgian arts organisations) commissioned Edvardsen to develop and perform the piece. But although she has established herself as the author of the work, where time and budgets do not make it feasible for her to perform it, she has been encouraging organisations all over the world to stage their own versions. This generosity and participatory spirit is one of the things that attracted Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk and Eva González-Sancho, curators for a new Oslo public art biennial, to invite Edvardsen to their three-day symposium in November 2016. Following a two-year research project, called Oslo Pilot, Edvardsen was one of four artists the curators singled out as creators of the kind of public art they hoped to programme for the forthcoming biennial. Eeg-Tverbakk said: “We see this as an opportunity to create another way of

thinking about what art in public space can be."

Edvardsen trained as a dancer, performing with Les ballets C de la B under Hans van den Broeck (1996-2000) and Christine de Smedt (2000-05). She continues to perform and choreograph her own dance work, but has developed a number of other performance art pieces that interrogate language, narratives, storytelling and the meaning of memory and experience in new and powerful ways.

Her trilogy Black (2011), No Title (2014) and We to be (2015) explores the possibilities and limits of language and how it extends into real space. Her latest piece Oslo (2016) takes that theme of generating presence and imagination through language and gesture, but extends it into the whole theatre space, multiplying the voices, actions and imaginations. Other works include videos Stills (2002), coffee (2006), cigarette (2008) and Faits divers (2008). She is based in Brussels and Oslo.

Veronica Simpson: Tell me what sparked the idea for Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine. I believe it was inspired by an experience with a seed bank in Norway?

Mette Edvardsen: On an island in north Norway, where there is permafrost because it's so cold, there is a repository of seeds from the whole world. It's a scientific project, a collection of edible plants, seeds, stored there in preparation for a future catastrophe. There's something fascinating here, that I often find with my performing art pieces. I am sometimes invited into museums to do my pieces, which are the same pieces - they're just located in a different context – and often I am asked by the museum director: how can I preserve this? How can I acquire this piece? For me, that's problematic. It's a performance. We're operating in very different systems of duration and economy (to the acquisition and cataloguing of artworks). But I'm also thinking: why do you want to preserve it? There's this obsession with keeping, documenting, storing and because we're also developing technology for that, it's encouraged. But you have to ask: What are we doing? How can these two things be thrown together? That's why I think the relationship to memory is extremely interesting because if you say nowadays that people are forgetting because you need to be able to forget in order to be quick enough to access knowhow, to navigate, as all you need to do is just look it up. But if forgetting is important, then so is remembering. We can't just (expect machines to) store things. We also have to know things.

VS: You mean, you can't build knowledge out of soundbites: you need to be able to accumulate and build on knowledge, to acquire a bedrock of understanding in order for that knowledge to evolve?

ME: Yes, there's something we are missing. Of course, you could say there is something generous about thinking about plants for the future. But there is also something worrying about it: what future are you thinking of? It's like I heard someone say once that in Nazi architecture, the

buildings were designed with a vision of what they would look like as ruins.

I wanted to do something that would investigate what is knowledge, if you don't need to learn things by heart because you can look them up? But that's not the point of learning things by heart. It's about the kind of imagination that it sets in motion: this process, I think, is the point of it. That's why I think no one is learning textbooks - what's the point? That's about getting information. But a poem is not only about understanding the meaning of a poem: it's the texture of it, the rhythm, the musicality.

VS: In your presentation (at the Oslo Pilot symposium), you talked about yourself and the performers being inhabited by a book, or the book being inhabited by the reader, almost as a reciprocal, living exchange. One of your “books” was present, and talked about what it was like to live with these stories as part of one’s embodied knowledge and a vehicle for experience. How have you built up your core team of performers and books?

ME: It started to grow when we were asked to perform in different countries. There are always different constellations to do with availability and language. And how many books do we bring? What is the language combination of the place? It has exploded that idea of (the finite performance).

VS: But you were describing how the work keeps evolving into new versions of itself.

ME: Yes, the first step was learning the books by heart, and the second was to recite them. And then part of these first steps was with a second generation of “books” - people learning the book orally from one of us. The third part is writing it down from memory. We are asking the “books” to write down again their version of the story they have been telling and retelling, to make new publications. We are bringing these books back to paper.

VS: It seems as if this work could be infinite – it has so many more evolutions within it; you may never be finished with it!

ME: I don't feel I'm finished with the first or the second (version) either. You could have all kinds of different (variants): what happens already, inside of our practice, is that maybe you learned that book and you want to learn the translation of that same book in another language, or the original if it was a translation, which is a very interesting thing to have inside - or to change the book, to see what the different books ask of us in a different way. There is a girl who was doing Faust by Goethe: she's now going back to [Christopher] Marlowe's Dr Faustus as the original source. In a sense, there are many extensions of the same idea.

I'm spending quite a lot of my time with this project, and I'm interested to be with it. The exchange is still there for me. I'm not (interested in) administrating a thing that's sent out and

carries my name.

VS: You have spoken about not being interested in recording it – not wanting to entertain the idea of fixing it or capturing it for your museum clients. I am very interested in the fact that, as museums and galleries increasingly encourage people to photograph and record their experiences of art, there are a number of artists – for example, Tino Sehgal – who refuse to have their work recorded.

ME: For me, first of all, it's so difficult to document it, because of the format itself. In this case, you experience the work. You can look at me, or you can look around the room (while I am reading to you), but it's not so interesting. For someone to film us talking now, this would be pretty much what it looks like. And in that way you reduce it – you think you get what it is. And then it defeats the objective. And what we did once to try it out was to audio record us, to keep a trace. We went through the process of then speaking the books for each other, so we have listened to the recording, but we didn't feel good about that reading because there's something about the awareness of that recording being made [that] alters the experience. It's such a small thing in a way. And to document even in pictures, I guard against even in the performance context: if you were my reader and someone was going to take a picture, it would intrude into the experience.

VS: As somebody trained in dance, where everything has to be so precise and orchestrated – the gestures, the lighting, the interactions - how have you been able to introduce these additional layers of interaction with the public with all the chaos or serendipity that might entail?

ME: Yes, it's very different from when I'm doing the work on stage, where you control your part and what's taking place. Whereas, in this work, we are part of the life that is going on around us. And the library, bookshops, parks, public spaces are interesting for this because of that. It's more like a soft space. I'm not improvising, because the book is stable.

VS: So the book provides the structure?

ME: Yes, in that sense, it's extremely precise. The idea is that the space is soft, or fluid, it has not got hard contours. It is also very nice when you're sitting between shelves in a library and someone might be passing by, looking for books on the shelf behind and they just [she demonstrates, placing her hands gently on my shoulders] move you to one side. That sort of gesture is completely natural. That space and that openness for the work has to be there. It is performative, but it's not only performative.

VS: It was fascinating to hear one of your “books” – Kristien –describe how the memorising of the book becomes a physical thing, something as much to do with what is happening in your mouth as your mind. She said that when someone corrects her pronunciation, it affects her ability to perform, because she has to change the physical shape of her mouth. It is revealing all kinds of things about

patterns and repetition and inhabiting and physically owning a piece of work.

ME: It's funny that, in London, when we did the project there, (programmed by Dance Umbrella, it took place in Islington Library), someone from the ballet scene wrote a review and ended his review saying: "It brings us back to the core of dance." I thought that was very interesting. I'm not going to argue to say this is dance. But there's something in the practice of this that is not so different in the sense of orientation and memory.

VS: And inhabiting a work. It's quite mind-blowing to think about memorising an entire piece of literature. How long does that take?

ME: It's very difficult to say, because we do it over time. In the beginning, I wondered how much would be possible. I chose a book that was very thick, as if to say: "I'm never going to do that." The achievement is less the point than the fact that it's ongoing, which is very much closer to my art form: it's very much closer to what we're doing. This is the thing we share, and you keep on doing it. You mount it, you take it down, you do it. This connects to me. This is what's interesting.

We share this notion whether the piece is extremely written or improvised. In the real sense, we are practising it. We are doing it again, doing it again. That is true in relation to memory: even if you know it by heart, if you don't do it again, it's going to disappear. That was the connection with memory and new technologies: we have to do what we're doing, live the life we're living.

VS: Do you feel that your work is situated in the world of performance art?

ME: I think I situate myself in the performing arts. I come from dance, choreography. It's the black box space. The theatre is still something I'm interested in. And this work also. We have been invited to do it on stage, but I don't want to do that. But still, even if I think this belongs in the library or another context, it springs out of that tradition.

VS: It has been an exciting period recently, with dance moving into the gallery, of site-specific performance work that brings a whole new audience to what you do, and a whole new environment to your usual audience.

ME: It's very interesting when the walls are falling a bit ... but there are some different logistics that are not completely compatible, certainly, when you think of the economy and how do we take care of the work. A lot of the time, you can see pieces that are from the performing arts being brought into museums, but with less good conditions for the artists and for the audience - because you're sitting on the floor and the lights are not good. But new opportunities and collaborations arise that were not the original aim at all. We can be invited to a literature festival, and it's very interesting. Then we have another kind of conversation.

VS: It seems that one of the most fascinating ingredients you are working with is serendipity – it comes up at every stage; the evolution of the work itself, the new

places and contexts you are getting involved in.

ME: Yes, and that is true of the books, of the 68 titles that we have in our collection now. There are some that have been with the project once or twice, and I don't know if we will be able to present them again, which is mainly to do with language: if the book's in Estonian [we may not perform it] unless we're in Estonia again. It has also been interesting to see the different people I get to meet, also the ones who are "books"... this context makes me work with people I maybe wouldn't otherwise have known and we are close and share something, yet we know very little of each other's life. This is a nice quality that this project allows for.

VS: How have the themes and ideas developed through Time has fallen asleep ... informed your other work? Have any dance pieces you have devised during the past five years taken on some of the ideas in this work and elaborated on them, and, if so, how?

ME: I have been exploring the use of language in my other works alongside Time has fallen asleep... The use of language was fairly new to me when I started the project. I had worked mainly with handling objects, actions and movement in space. Until then, my pieces were rather mute. But the shift towards language also in my stage performances was more a result of questioning my use of objects and my relations with them, rather than an interest in language as such. Words came with the removal of objects. I wanted to explore the possibilities and limits of language and how it extends into real space.

In the performances Black (2011), No Title (2014) and We to be (2015), I worked with language as material, and in specific and different ways for each piece: language as affirmation and naming, in order to make "things" appear; then, later, as negation and then the tenses. Language has been a way to work and access imagination and I think of it as writing in time and space. So the text is more than the words that I say; it is also the space, the time, the presence of the audience, and what is taking place.

But, yes, working with the project Time has fallen asleep ... all along has definitely informed me. I would even say it has changed me, and it has certainly changed me as a reader. In my work, there is a sense of one thing leading to the next, even if this may not be a linear development, but lines and threads that are crossing and connecting. In some sense, the series of performances for the stage have been developing next to the project with the "books", side by side.

For Time has fallen asleep ... there is an inner progression within the project itself, and the practice unfolds in three stages. First learning by heart, then reciting the book for readers (also including the experiment of passing on orally, what we call "second-generation books"), and, finally, the rewriting, where we write down the version we now have in memory back to paper. These are all sides of the same thing, but each of these stages brings up different issues and new questions.

Reference

1. “Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine” is a sentence from a book by Alexander Smith, which appears in *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (1953)
- Mette Edvardsen will be performing *No Title at Skogen*, Gothenburg, Sweden, on 18 and 19 January 2017, and *Black and No Title at the Dansehallerne Copenhagen*, Denmark, on 4 April 2017.
Oslo will be performed at the *Black Box Teater*, Oslo, Norway, on 9, 10 and 11 March 2017, and at *Performatik*, Kaaistudio's, Brussels, on 28 and 29 March 2017.



Mette Edvardsen performing Black in Madrid, 2016.



Mette Edvardsen. Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine, 2016.



Mette Edvardsen. Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine, 2016.



Mette Edvardsen. Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine, 2016.



Mette Edvardsen. Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine, 2016.



Mette Edvardsen performing No Title at Far Festival Nyon, 2014.



Mette Edvardsen performing No Title in Madrid, 2016. Photograph: Maria Eugenia Serrano Diez.



Mette Edvardsen performing No Title in Madrid, 2016. Photograph: Maria Eugenia Serrano Diez.



Mette Edvardsen performing No Title at Live Arts Week III, Xing (Bologna), 2014. Photograph: Massimiliano Donati.



Mette Edvardsen performing Black in Madrid, 2016. Photograph: Maria Eugenia Serrano Diez.



Mette Edvardsen performing Black in Madrid, 2016. Photograph: Maria Eugenia Serrano Diez.



Mette Edvardsen. Black. Still life. Photograph: Gaetano Cammarota