

Lizzie Thomson

Thoughts on Performing (inside a work / as a work / as work) at Newtown Library

“But when we sit together, close,” said Bernard, “we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory.”

—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1931, 9)



Fig. 1. Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, Performance during opening hours at Newtown Library, 15-19 March 2016 for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artist.

The following thoughts are based on my fading memory of performing *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (2010-ongoing) by choreographer Mette Edvardsen. I attempt to articulate aspects of the relational fields that exist firstly between a performer and a performance work, and secondly between a performer, performance work, and an

audience. I see these relational fields as “unsubstantial territories”, or partial forms that are precarious, transient, and porous. My interest in offering a text written from the perspective of a performer is inspired (from a distance) by dancer Chrysa Parkinson and her research into developing methods for documenting performers’ experiences of work, as distinct from the more common practices of writing about performance from the perspectives of the audience, choreographer, director and dramaturg.¹

Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine is a project that Edvardsen has been developing and performing in collaboration with a growing number of performers since 2010. The project borrows its title and initial idea from Ray Bradbury’s futuristic novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which describes a society where books are banned and burned. Resistance takes the form of people secretly memorising entire classics, such as Plato’s *Republic*, so that even when the material books are gone the words may persist and be passed on from person to person, body to body. Edvardsen’s project brings Bradbury’s proposition into practice, with real people committing to the task of memorising a book of their choice. These performers form a library of living books that are available to be “read” by visitors, in the intimate situation of one-on-one encounters (Edvardsen, n. d.).

The iteration of Edvardsen’s project that I worked in took place at the Newtown Library, on Gadigal land, in what is now known as Sydney. It was part of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, in 2016.² Six books were present for this version. Mette Edvardsen is *I am a cat* by Soseki Natsume, Angela Goh is *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* by Tom Robbins, Rhiannon Newton is *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, Patricia Wood is *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, Kristien van den Brande is *Bartleby the Scrivener* by Herman Melville, and I am *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf.

One

It is Saturday March 12, 2016, and I am perched on the back of a green and yellow plastic boat, in an ocean-themed children’s playground. My friend Alex perches beside me and together we ride the waves, as our Captain Rainer, also being Alex’s three-year old son, steers the ship. Mid-voyage, a small girl climbs into the boat. “Oh look we have another passenger!” exclaims Alex. But the small girl is annoyed and makes her way to the front of the ship. “I’m not a passenger. I’m The Captain.” She turns to me and flings a loosely pointed hand at me; an indignant throw-away gesture, and she mutters, “You’re the waves.”

Two

It is Sunday morning March 13, 2016. I am standing outside the Newtown Library waiting to begin Edvardsen’s project. I have been working towards this day for seven weeks. We now have two days to prepare together before embarking on a week of performing. Over these two days we “read” one another. I read *Orlando* as though I am eagerly trying to learn more about myself as *The Waves*, as if studying a family member for common traits. And there they are—those familiar long rambling sentences with

incredibly detailed descriptions, rich with colour and sensation, and a feeling of endlessness as one phrase follows another and yet another with tireless intensity. I came into this project as a lover of succinct sentences, and a sceptic of anything remotely metaphorical. Now I am captivated by Woolf's poetic, rhythmic use of language and her intense attention to the craft of writing. In her diary, while writing *The Waves*, Woolf asks, "I say to myself instinctively 'What's the phrase for that?' and try to make more and more vivid the roughness of the air current and the tremor of the rook's wings slicing as if the air were full of ridges and ripples and roughnesses. ... But what a little I can get down into my pen of what is so vivid to my eyes, and not only to my eyes; also to some nervous fibre, or fanlike membrane in my species" (2003, 128).



Fig. 2. Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, Performance during opening hours at Newtown Library, 15-19 March 2016 for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artist.

Three

The weeks of becoming *The Waves* take place during some particularly hot and humid weather in Sydney. I spend hours sitting very still in front of a fan learning sections of text, followed by swims at the local pool. This period of memorisation is an intense and immersive process. It is not something that can be half-done, but requires a focus of attention that completely consumes me. The phrasing and musicality of *The Waves* start to saturate my own writing, speaking, dreaming. I cannot tell you where exactly the words take up residence in my body, only how this process of embodiment produces unfamiliar sensations (especially inside my brain) and new ways of attending to a very particular content, or world, that begins to restructure my sense of being in time.

I rely on the rhythmic composition of the language in order to remember *The Waves*, and this rhythm seems to drive the book each time I speak it. I need to train myself not to rock to and fro in time with its words. I learn to pause and suspend its powerful surge at irregular intervals so as to avoid feeling hypnotised, or sea-sick, as if I am on a boat... Or sometimes the pauses arise involuntarily from a moment of forgetting where I am on the page, a momentary break of attention, but then without warning the order of the words suddenly continues to flow again, as if memory is fuelled by some inexplicable, magical force. At other times, the repetitive act of speaking the same organisation of words over and over again takes me into a state of heightened sensation, venturing out past comprehension, where the words arrive as noises linked by a strangely melodic song. There is only a mouth, tongue and lungs moving in ways that bypass my consciousness and produce this stream of glossolalia and vocal clatters. The swift disappearance of intelligibility is unsettling. I shift my attention to remember that these noises are words, and these words carry meaning... but it is an effort to re-find the literal sense of the words, once they are so well embodied as noise and rhythmic composition.

Four

Our days of performing are framed by the opening hours of the library, from about 10am until 5.30pm. This allows us to be read about eight times per day. We begin each encounter with a new reader by introducing ourselves, "I am *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf." Edvardsen's insistence that we are books opens up space to sidestep performance as representation. We do not aim to deliver theatrical interpretations of our books, nor are we storytellers. We are the books themselves. This process of becoming not only changes us, but also the books. In this transition from printed edition to corporeal edition, I lose my pages, page numbers, and much of my grammatical punctuation. Yet with this loss, perhaps I gain back a little of Woolf's desire for her language to be in close proximity to "some nervous fibre, or fanlike membrane in my species" (Woolf 2003, 128).

My constitution as a book however is not straightforward. Far less stable than printed matter, my precarious existence as *The Waves* depends on memory. The task of becoming a corporeal book is eternally incomplete. It requires an ongoing labour of attention in order to maintain sufficient closeness with the words, and therefore with the work. The ever-present possibility of forgetting words intensifies my relationship to the project and to the event of performing. There is something at stake that is not quite controllable.

Five

Although I refer to the process of becoming *The Waves* as a process of embodiment, the book is never contained within my bodily self, but exists in excess of my body, both spatially and temporally. I perceive the process more as an encounter between two volatile beings, made possible by an intensely focused quality of attention and persistent practice of remembering.

Following a reading by colleague Justine Shih Pearson, she observes that the words do not appear to be rising up from within my body and out my mouth, but rather rushing toward me, and that I seem to be almost eating each word as it hurtles toward my mouth (Pearson 2017).³ This eating is not about consuming the words however, but a fleeting act of making them audible and flicking them back out into the world again toward the reader. Whilst we both sit relatively still in our chairs, the words bounce back and forth between us.

As a performer, speaking the words of a book authored by Virginia Woolf, whilst working within a project authored by another artist, I do not own the material that I am working with. This particular process of engaging with material—momentarily receiving it as it rushes toward me, only to press it immediately back outside to where it has come from, and to where it can realise its social potential—is similar to a process of a kind of temporary embodiment that I have been exploring in other projects.⁴ It is a strategy for resisting the push to claim some thing, or some territory, as your own. Although it is important to value the work of performers in recognition of their part in authoring a performance, there is also something of value in how performers engage intimately with the material of a work without asserting individual ownership over it.

Six

Each reading with a new audience member is surprisingly idiosyncratic. In *The Waves*, Woolf employs a strategy of describing singular events, such as a kiss, over and over again from different character's perspectives, and this creates a kind of looping of time where the same moment is continually propelled into the future (like the ceaseless motion of waves breaking over and over). And in a similar way, the event of speaking the book repeatedly for new readers allows time to spill back and forth across the past, present and future. It is a process of re-entering the same events again and again, as well as a gathering of different readers' perceptions of the book, as each meeting with the force of the waves takes shape under a new time of day and tone of light.

We sit together on two library stools, in between shelves of books in the library. We loosely mark this territory with a shared will to read together. And although reading a book inside a library is a well-practiced activity, in this particular situation we need to work out how to do this together; how to sit, to speak, to listen, when to converse, where to look... Unlike performing in a performance venue, here in the library we are visitors sharing the space with other visitors, who are not here to experience a performance. We are entering an existing territory with its own habits and rhythms, and attempting to set up camp in ways that do not interrupt these multiple attentions. Edvardsen speaks of the library as providing a "soft space" for this project, "a sort of fluid state between different layers of space existing together, simultaneously" (Edvardsen and Ingvartsen 2016, 73–74). I understand a "soft space" here as a responsive space, rather than a defensive space. It is a space in which a soft spectatorship emerges, where the edges between us that distinguish our roles become porous. We both become witnesses to the event of the book, and both become performers in this intimate encounter. At times too, the rhythms

and noises of fellow living books drift into our own space, and other visitors move us on slightly so as to access a printed book on a shelf.

Seven

It is a year and a half since I performed *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf in the context of *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*. As a book, I am now disintegrating. Or perhaps *The Waves* are in a process of passing through me. In an essay on the work of Virginia Woolf, Rosi Braidotti writes of Woolf's "ability to present her life as a gesture of passing through, i.e., of writing 'as if already gone'" (Braidotti 2011, 155). Many of the words, which I worked so hard at remembering, have now gone. What is left is an experience of the inherent motion in Woolf's language. *The Waves* continues to rock my body to and fro, and the strange melodic song is still singing in the space around us.

"If I wake in the night, I feel along the shelf for a book. Swelling, perpetually augmented, there is a vast accumulation of unrecorded matter in my head. Now and then, I break off a lump, Shakespeare it may be, it may be some old woman called Peck; and say to myself, smoking a cigarette in bed, 'That's Shakespeare. That's Peck' with a certainty of recognition and a shock of knowledge which is endlessly delightful."

—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1931, 196)

Notes

1. See Stockholm University of the Arts, *Documenting Experiential Authorship*, a course led by Chrysa Parkinson from 2015 to 2017, <http://www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/research-projects/documenting%20experiential-authorship>.
2. *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* was presented by the 20th Biennale of Sydney as part of *The Future of Disappearance*, a project curated by one of the "curatorial attachés" André Lepecki: <https://www.biennaleofsydney.com.au/20bos/exhibition/special-projects/the-future-of-disappearance/>.
3. Interestingly, in an essay on the writing of Virginia Woolf titled "Intensive Genre and the Demise of Gender," Rosi Braidotti discusses the process of becoming as an encounter with the outside where "life" rushes toward the senses (Braidotti 2011, 152).
4. I have been developing a series of works that look at my embodied memory of jazz dance as a process for reflecting on the influence of African American aesthetics on Western dance practices and bodies. In these works, I consider jazz dance as existing as a continuum, which I loosely 'try on' and then take off again. <https://www.lizziethomson.net/>

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LIZZIE THOMSON is a choreographer and performer. Her practice interrogates processes of embodiment as they relate to cultural, historic and temporal forces. Her work draws on both choreographic and sculptural processes and takes multiple forms including performance, video installation, text and sculpture. She regularly collaborates with artists and thinkers including Erin Brannigan, Brian Fuata, Agatha Gothe-Snape and Jane McKernan. Lizzie is currently a PhD candidate in the School of Arts and Media at the University of NSW

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