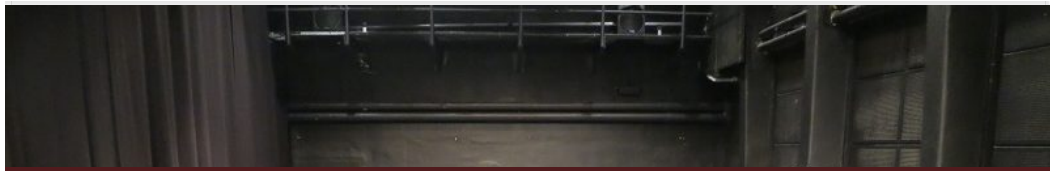


Critical Stages/Scènes critiques

The IATC journal/Revue de l'AICT – December/Décembre 2019: Issue No 20



SPECIAL TOPIC

ESSAYS

NATIONAL REPORTS

CONFERENCES

INTERVIEWS

CRITICS ON CRITICISM



[Click here for a text-only ToC.](#)

Editorial Note

Essays

Movement through Language: A Reflection on the Use of Spoken Text in Dance Performances

Rosa Lambert

Rosa Lambert*

Abstract



We have a good

reason to celebrate!

Today, the Belgian dance scene features many international choreographers whose works explore how spoken text can contribute to the creation of dance. As a consequence, their works reveal the interconnections and affiliations between language and movement. In this essay, Rosa Lambert examines two solo performances by Mette Edvardsen, *Black* (2011) and *No Title* (2014), to demonstrate how a redefinition of dance beyond physical movement is both the subject of contemporary experiments and of recent theoretical reflections.

Keywords: *Black*, *No Title*, Mette Edvardsen, post-dance, language choreography

Introduction

Today, the Belgian dance scene is populated by a number of international choreographers whose works push dance beyond its traditional boundaries of physical movement. In the works of Daniel Linehan, Mette Edvardsen, Bryana Fritz, Mette Ingvartsen, Eleanor Bauer and Louis Vanhaverbeke (amongst others), we can observe an eagerness to explore how other materials, such as spoken text, contribute to the creation of dance. In contrast with prevailing assumptions of dance being antithetical to language,^[1] these works reveal the capacity of language to provoke movement.

In this essay, I will focus on two solo performances by Mette Edvardsen, *Black* (2011) and *No Title* (2014), to demonstrate how a redefinition of dance beyond physical movement is both the subject of contemporary experiments and of recent theoretical reflections.

February 2011, Brussels. Mette Edvardsen enters an empty stage. She puts her hands in front of her, as if she was placing them on a desk. She looks at her hands, cautiously. Pronounces: “table,

CS Issue No 20
Section Editors &
Editorial Board

Section Editors: Bios
Editorial Board

Re-Orienting Arab
Theatre and
Performance: New
Political Aesthetics

Call for Papers & Essays –
Critical Stages/Scènes
critiques (#22, 2020)
[More here](#)

Theatre Criticism
for Young
Audiences: New
Directions

Call for Papers & Essays –
Critical Stages/Scènes
critiques (#22, 2020)
[More here](#)

CS/Sc Newsletter

[Sign up](#)

[Contact CS/Sc](#)

table, table, table, table, table, table, table.” She moves one hand to her back: “chair, chair, chair, chair, chair, chair, chair, chair.”^[2] Placing her two hands above her, looking upwards: “lamp, lamp, lamp, lamp, lamp, lamp, lamp, lamp.” For the rest of the performance, Edvardsen walks throughout the space, points at invisible objects in the room and makes them appear by naming these objects eight times each. This elegantly simple, rhythmic construction sparks the audience’s imagination. Because the words refer to objects that are not present in the room, they trigger us to construct a mental image of them. This results in an oscillation between reality and imagination: while the objects remain nonexistent, the repetitions help us evoke them in our mind. Paradoxically, the objects appear remarkably present through their absence.

February 2014, Brussels. Mette Edvardsen enters an empty stage, eyes closed. She stands still, waits for several seconds. Utters: “the beginning.” She waits for several seconds more: “is gone. The space is empty.” Pause. “And gone. The prompter has turned off his reading lamp, and gone.” With her eyes closed during the entire performance, she evokes a variety of things, such as “the distinction between writing and drawing,” “Krushchev’s cat,” “waiting in lines,” that are all “gone.” However, pointing at an object’s disappearance does not result in its withdrawal, but rather in its presence. As Edvardsen suggests, “it is not enough to say that something is gone in order to make it disappear” (“Double-interview” 73). Even though the objects are “gone,” listeners are still triggered to imagine this object. As a result, there is not only an oscillation between reality and imagination (as we see within *Black*), but there is also a constant oscillation between presence and absence on the level of the text itself.

Video 1

Mette Edvardsen - Time has fallen asleep in th...

[Click here for the CS/Sc contact form](#)

Special Pages

[International Theatre and Performing Arts Festival Guide](#)

[Inter-Connecting: A Collection of Useful Links](#)

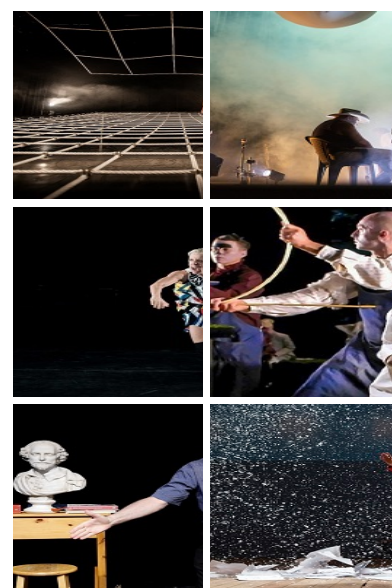
Notices

[Publication Ethics / Éthique de publication](#)

[Submission Guidelines / Soumission d'articles](#)

[Style Sheet / Protocole abrégé](#)

CS/Sc Issues





Since 2002, Edvardsen has been creating a fascinating and diverse oeuvre of works, comprised of solo as well as collective performances. She has worked with objects and technologies (*Private Collection*, 2002; *Time Will Show (Detail)*, 2004; *We to Be*, 2015), collaborated with musician Matteo Fargion (*oslo*, 2017; *Penelope Sleeps*, 2019) and initiated a library of living books (*Time Has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine*, 2010-ongoing). In recent years, language has become a recurring element within her canon of work. She has radically moved words into the realm of dance: “In *Black* I discovered the efficiency of language to name and make appear, and in *No Title* I was negating and looking into what is not. And I found a certain elasticity in language, in the possibilities and limits of language, of naming and knowing” (“Double-interview” 75). For Edvardsen, using language in dance is a way to “widen the notion of what dance could be” (“The Picture of a Stone” 219).

Movement—gone?

While contemporary choreographers have been experimenting with different ways to connect language and dance, dance scholars have been making attempts to define dance beyond the confines of physical movement. At the outset of these attempts stands the notion of “exhausting dance,” coined by dance scholar André Lepecki in his eponymous book, *Exhausting Dance* (2006). Lepecki defines this concept in relation to Bruce Nauman’s, Juan Dominguez’s, Xavier Le Roy’s, Jérôme Bel’s, Trisha Brown’s, La Ribot’s, William Pope’s and Vera Mantero’s desires to withdraw from virtuous, flowing movement (5). Building on the work of dance historian Mark Franko, Lepecki emphasizes that “aligning



CS Supporters

dance's being with movement . . . is a fairly recent historical development" (2). While modernist dancers foregrounded this alignment, Lepecki contends that recent contemporary choreographers "exhaust" the bond between dance and physical movement (4), creating "dances that refuse to be confined to a constant 'flow or continuum of movement'" (5). He uses the concept "exhausting dance" to analyze these works, and contributes to an understanding of dance that retires from producing virtuous bodily movement.

If we agree upon a definition of dance that is no longer restricted to the enactment of moving bodies, then what, truly, is the material that dance is made of? In the case of *Black* and *No Title*, it seems that dance, in its departure from the (human) body, moves towards other elements of performance, such as language. In her analysis of Edvardsen's *Black*, dance scholar Efrosini Protopapa convincingly revisits Lepecki's notion of exhaustion. She highlights that exhaustion should not be understood as an endpoint, "but rather as an opening out of new possibilities in/for dance" (168).

According to Protopapa, contemporary choreographers are "questioning what dance can do for them" and "in so doing, they find themselves working with a variety of tools and fields of knowledge" (180). Thus, Protopapa indicates that the contemporary exhaustion of movement does not imply a standstill within dance. Rather, in recent works, dance has not been restricted to the portrayal of physical movements. It has instead been expressed through other media, such as the organization of objects, words, mathematics and philosophy (Protopapa 180). Therefore, she does not describe Edvardsen's *Black* as a dance without movement, but as "a dance that remains largely immaterial" (184).

In his reflection on the nature of dance vis-à-vis body movement, dancer and theorist Mårten Spångberg develops a similar argument. In the final chapter of the book *Post-Dance*



The views and opinions expressed in Critical Stages/Scènes critiques are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the journal

Limitation de responsabilité : Les articles publiés dans Critical Stages/Scènes critiques expriment l'opinion de leurs auteurs et ne reflètent pas nécessairement la politique officielle ou la position de la revue

(2017), which he co-edited with Mette Edvardsen and Danjel Andersson, he explains how contemporary experiments in dance and choreography can be assembled under the notion of “post-dance.” This term covers a variety of practices that all reflect on the medium of dance by transforming it from within: it “is always-already an exhausted dance but doesn’t care about it any longer and explores what else it can be” (Vujanović 46).

Spångberg’s chapter advocates for the artistic value of contemporary experiments within dance, even though performers no longer use physical movement to create “dance” (350). To allow for a broader understanding of what dance exactly entails, Spångberg sets off with enlarging the definitions of both “dance” and “choreography.” Dance is defined as pure movement, while choreography is understood to be the structure or pattern that works to tame movement. By removing the human dancer from both definitions, he makes room for the idea of “a choreographer whose expression happens to be literature” (363). As such, Spångberg considers “literary structures” as solid principles which evoke movement, and he includes them in the realm of dance and choreography (372).

In comparison with Lepecki and Protopapa, Spångberg’s argument allows a more radical understanding of texts as “choreographic structures” (364). The convoluted relationship between text and choreography is illustrated by the following fragment in Edvardsen’s *No Title*. While Edvardsen utters: “B-gone, A-gone, going from B to A is gone, C . . . gone,” she seemingly announces the disappearance of choreography, since, following Lepecki, “Going from A to B to C” can be understood as a choreographic pattern (*Singularities* 68).



No Title by Mette Edvardsen. Created by Mette Edvardsen. February 4, 2014.
Kaaistudio's, Brussels. Photo: Mette Edvardsen

However, Lepecki seems to overlook a crucial dynamic that structures *No Title*; namely, the impossibility to make something entirely disappear simply by claiming it is “gone.” Subsequently, choreography has not entirely disappeared, because *language* is dancing. Interestingly, Edvardsen does in fact go from one point to another in space while uttering this sentence, which further expresses the incomplete withdrawal from choreography. Finally, the phrase “going from B to A to C” can refer to the use of letters, words and language as a choreographic structure—which adds yet another layer to the interpretation of this fragment.

As such, this fragment points to the complexity of the relationship between language and choreography. This fragment embodies a prime concern within dance scholarship; namely, the question of how to define the ontology of choreography. Based on the etymology of choreography (*choreo/graphein*), questions have been raised as to whether or not choreography can be seen as a particular form of (bodily) writing (Gardner 2008; Foster 2010; Franko 2011). Interestingly, because she uses

spoken language instead of physical movement, Edvardsen's works reassesses this relation between language and choreography. She gives a twist to their presumed relation: choreography is not only a form of bodily writing, and it can in fact reside within language itself, in the form of words that are pronounced on stage.

Moving Words

What form does language take when it is created as dance? In *Black*, dance is articulated through the composition of words. This is done, for example, by manner in which the last “table” in “table table table table table table table table” raises slightly upwards and how Edvardsen's pronunciation of “full full full full full full full full,” during the watering of her invisible plant, sounds exactly like sloshing water pouring out of a full water bottle. Furthermore, in *No Title*, dance is expressed in the repetition of the “me—not gone”-phrase that is altered slightly each time it occurs. For example, first, we hear “me—not god, not all, not gone,” and, later on, “I was not here, I was not gone.” The repetitions of and variations on this phrase are the linguistic equivalent of repetitions of and variations on a particular moving sequence that reappears throughout a dance with human bodies. As such, the phrases' rhythmic structures provoke a sense of movement in language.

Video 2

Mette Edvardsen | Black



In *Black*, dance is articulated through the composition of words

Moreover, the physical endeavor of pronouncing words also connects language to movement. The seemingly evident observation that speech is language filtered through a voice, supported by a body and projected in to space (Fischer-Lichte 125) helps to consider language as something that can produce movement and dance. A review of *No Title* beautifully describes how the text is fully entangled with Edvardsen's body:

“Edvardsen's voice does not simply pronounce words but expresses its own muscular quality” (Minns and Albano 2018). In other words, Edvardsen thinks—and talks—as a choreographer. This is, for instance, discernible in how she embodies, pronounces and articulates the various repetitions that occur in *Black*. The eight-fold repetition of certain words is clearly a difficult task, since we witness Edvardsen's mouth and jaw muscles struggle with the pronunciation of “particle particle particle particle particle particle particle.”

Towards the end of *No Title*, Edvardsen speeds up the rhythm of her text, and, after a while, it is no longer possible to hear each and every single word or phrase. This is similar to how a dancer's virtuous and rapid (physical) movements hinder us from being able to observe each individual gesture. As Edvardsen explains, the act of embodying words allows her to foreground the rhythmic qualities of a text: “a poem is not only about understanding the meaning of a poem: it is the texture of it, the rhythm, the musicality” (Simpson 2016). Edvardsen's works foreground how the pronunciation of a word is in fact a physical activity. This stems from her roots as a choreographer; she makes precise choices in the way in which her body interacts with the text. In other words, the rhythm of the text intensifies the physical act of pronunciation and, in

foregrounding both these rhythmic and physical aspects of language, Edvardsen creates a dance through words.

Moving Imagination

The rhythm of the text and the way in which the body engages with the words work together to create a sense of dance within language. Moreover, the text is structured on a semantic level through the constant interplay between presence and absence (*Black*), and between appearance and disappearance (*No Title*). The continuous friction that results from this has a peculiar effect on the audience's imagination. The empty space in which the words are pronounced contrasts with the way in which the rhythm of the text explicitly triggers the listeners to envisage the word's references. In other words, the audience is constantly swaying between what is present in their minds and what is absent on stage. In this sense, the text produces a sense of motion, now located within the imagination of the audience.

The previously mentioned sequence of *No Title*, in which Edvardsen announces the disappearance of choreography, exemplifies this dynamic. It almost seems as if the echoes of the words compose a choreographic pattern on the empty space. Immediately after she announces the (impossible) disappearance of choreography ("Going from B to A to C—gone"), she draws a line and writes next to it "line." Then, she attempts to remove this actual line and the word "line" with her hands (see Figure 2). Because her eyes are closed, she is not able to remove the chalk and after a few seconds, she is wiping the floor next to the line. This simple action is preceded by an enumeration of various things that appear vividly present, precisely by virtue of the fact that they were claimed to be "gone." In combination with the different words that still linger around in the space, her failed attempt of wiping the floor shows how it is impossible to successfully delete something when it has already entered the performance space.



Black by Mette Edvardsen. Created by Mette Edvardsen. February 24, 2011.
Kaaistudio's, Brussel. Photo: Justin Yockney

A similar strategy is at work in *Black*. Throughout this performance, the repetition of the words “table” and “chair” occur several times. The first time she pronounces these words, Edvardsen clearly situates the table and the chair within the space: her gestures mark the contours of the furniture. However, after several repetitions, the words are no longer precisely marked in space, because Edvardsen ceases to make gestures that depict the position of these words. Nevertheless, we still remember exactly where the furniture was placed originally,

because the previous utterances and their accompanying gestures still echo through the space. The patterns that arise here, from words emerged out of bodies, with accompanying gestures through space, can be considered choreographic structures.

Therefore, the audience's imagination and memory are central within both pieces. As Edvardsen points out: "for me art needs to be about imagination and the capacity to evoke, to create poetry, to make things up and propose visions" ("Double-interview" 73). Unfolding through empty spaces, with Edvardsen as the only presence in the room, *Black* and *No Title* invite us to actively participate, situate, color, and imagine the objects to which Edvardsen's words refer. In other words, the repetition of each word in *Black* "creates a peculiar focus in which appearance and disappearance, beginning and ending are intertwined" (Peeters 19). In *No Title*, the negated thing appears precisely by virtue of negation. As Edvardsen explains: "through language another access to imagination opened, I found" (73). Therefore, "it is not so much an interest in language as such but more what it makes possible" (75). In Edvardsen's hands, words become fluid, start to dance, through an empty space, evoking images in the minds of the audience.

Concluding Remarks

In *Black* and *No Title*, the organization of words in time and space turns language into dance. Because words will never fully turn into mere sounds, a remnant of their meaning continues to shine through them. The relationship between language and movement operates on several levels: through the internal rhythm of language, through the entanglement between text and body, and through the ability of language to set the imagination of the audience in motion. The words of *Black* and *No Title*, intertwined with Edvardsen's body, vibrate through space, guide the spectators' imagination and, therefore, dance.

The use of spoken language in dance performances is an

important feature of the contemporary Belgian dance scene. By building on recent theoretical studies that investigate the nature of dance, I tried to illustrate how Edvardsen's *Black* and *No Title* mirror these claims; namely, that dance can express itself beyond physical movement. These performances experiment with the capacity of words to flicker, fumble and slip through (imaginary) spaces.

Endnotes

^[1] See, for instance Muto (2016); Cvejic (2015); Franko (2011) and Gardner (2008). These authors elaborate on the relation between dance and language through the notion of “choreography” as dance-writing. Their writings offer nuanced readings of dance in relation to language.

^[2] Unspecified quotes refer to sections in the performances in which Mette Edvardsen pronounces these sentences. The sentences or paragraphs in which these quotes are embedded clarify whether they are from either *Black* or *No Title*.

Bibliography

- Alano, Caterina, and Nicholas Minns. “Mette Edvardsen, No Title, Fest en Fest, Laurie Grove Studios.” Review. *Writing About Dance*. 20 July 2018.
- Cvejic, Bojana. *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in Contemporary Dance and Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Edvardsen, Mette. *Black*. Performance, 24 Feb. 2011, Kaaistudio's, Brussels.
- . “No Title.” Performance, 4 Feb. 2014, Kaaistudio's, Brussels.

- . “The Picture of a Stone.” *Post-Dance*, edited by Danjel Andersson et al., MDT, 2017, pp. 216–21.
- . *Not Not Nothing*. Varamo Press, 2019.
- Edwardsen, Mette, and Mette Ingvarstsen. “Double-interview between Mette Edwardsen and Mette Ingvarstsen.” *Choreography*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 70–76.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. Routledge, 2004.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. *Choreographing Empathy*. Routledge, 2010.
- Franko, Mark. “Writing for the Body.” *Common Knowledge*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 321–34.
- Gardner, Sally. “Notes on Choreography.” *Performance Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2008, pp. 55–60.
- Lepecki, André. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. Routledge, 2006.
- . *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*. Routledge, 2016.
- Muto, Daisuke. “Choreography as Meshwork: The Production of Motion and the Vernacular.” *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion*, edited by Thomas DeFrantz and Philipa Rothfield, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 31–50.
- Peeters, Jeroen. *Something, Some Things, Something Else*. Varamo Press, 2019.
- Protopapa, Efrosini. “Contemporary Choreographic Practice: From Exhaustion to Possibilising.” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2016, pp. 168–182.
- Simpson, Veronica. Interview by Mette Edwardsen. *Studio International*, 27 Dec. 2016.

Spångberg, Mårten. “Post-dance, an Advocacy.” *Post-Dance*, edited by Danjel Andersson et al., MDT, 2017, pp. 349–93.

Vujanović, Ana. “A Late Night Theory of Post-Dance, a self-interview.” *Post-Dance*, edited by Danjel Andersson et al., MDT, 2017, pp. 44–66.



***Rosa Lambert** has obtained a Master in Theatre and Film studies in 2017 and is currently working on an FWO-funded PhD project in performance studies at the University of Antwerp (*Research Centre for Visual Poetics*). In her project “Moving With(in) Language: Kinetic Textuality in Contemporary Performing Arts,” she looks into the affiliation between language and movement, as exposed within the work of contemporary theatre, performance and dance artists.

Share this:

Tweet

Share 1

Share

Post

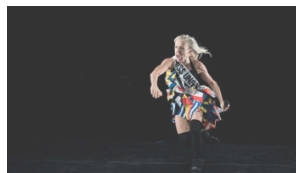
Save



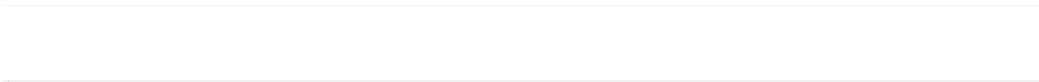
Dance and Age



Creating Dance with Elders, and How to See It: Company of Elders in the World Gold Theatre Festival



Age on Stage



← To Become Merged in the Sea . . . or On Old Women on Stage

Insupportable vieillesse ? →

👍 You May Also Like



Introductory Words



On Dramaturgy of Care and Encounter in the Theatres of Multilingualism: Interview with Ayham Majid Agha



City Narratives in European Performances of Crisis: The Examples of Athens and Nicosia

[Contact C&S](#) / [Publication Ethics](#)

[Critical Stages/Scènes critiques e-ISSN:2409-7411](#)



All articles published by C&S are licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0](#)