

Mette Edvardsen, No Title

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A woman stands on an empty stage. golden light bouncing off her pale pink top. She closes her eyes. She tells us that the beginning is gone.

She tells us of many things that are gone. Silence is gone. She extends her arms up, outwards and down: the shadows – that moved briefly and silently across the stage floor – are now gone. She wobbles on one foot, stills, and then places the other back down again: balance is gone. Each proclamation brings us closer to this absent thing; we observe it in its moment of disappearance.

Gone, gone, gone. Each intonation a gong: atomic, resonant, ceremonial, irreversible. The sound becomes as much a material or force as much as the communication of an idea. Edvartsen's voice is strikingly beautiful: stern and resonant and clipped and rounded and low. She pays subtle attention to the rhythms and ordering of things. Time is revealed to be one of the few consistent elements of this performance of continually-proclaimed nothing.

Gone gone gone. Endless gone-ness. Endless loss. An endless series of things that can only be recognised once lost. Nothingness grows, shows its fullness, and is repeatedly evacuated. I think of a series of collages by Vlatka Horvat, 'The Past is Another Country' (<http://www.vlatkahorvat.com/portfolios/the-past-is-another/>), in which Horvat has cut rough blocks of nothing into old family photos. The structures which maintained the distinctions between here and there have been erased; individuals are anonymised and stranded; bodies are isolated from the landscapes in which they had grown to fit. Throughout both of these works is the sense of devastation, of some terrible traumatic past, in the aftermath of which one has the shame and bewilderment to still be living. Living one moment to the next, one loss to the next. Gone: distinctions, orientation, innocence, decency, hope. Gone: not in explosive destruction, but in the more quiet absence of a fading memory, a change of name, a departure, a death.

But then 'gone' is gone. She instead speaks of 'not'. Not standing, not sitting, not continuing, not staying still: she contorts around these choreographic prohibitions and finds ways to inhabit and moving around the stage. She is a master of nothing, of holding nothing, of being held in nothing. And I think: "yes, this is clever". But I begin to feel like there's something deeply European — deeply white? — to this endless negation: a Modernist mourning and melancholy that wraps itself lovingly in absence and ruin. What does it mean to persist in the negative? I think of Fred Moten's proposition that absence – the absence of the ship's hold in the Middle Passage – forms the ontological origin of African-American experience: "to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other". Something is lost, it's gone: but what do you choose to do from here? To choose to reach out to one another, to speak, to sound a note; or to maintain this nothing?

But then, absence is shattered: Edvartsen does something. She transforms herself through a simple and utterly unnerving illusion. Still blinded, she looks out at us with a paper-y substitution for eyes. A terrifying vision of inhuman perfection; something close but so distant from us: a statue, a puppet, a cyborg, AI. She (they? it?) gropes gently for the pillars and hanging black fabric at the edges of the space. She approaches us, looming in the shadows at our side, and dispassionately resumes informing us of everything that is gone. But rather than residing in self-delighting games before, she remorselessly tells us of everything that will now be gone, that we know is already going to be gone. The climate: gone. The possibility of the future: gone. The possibility of the past being anything else: gone. We are living on borrowed time, living in the end times, living without really realising we're dead yet.

She leaves. The lights stay with us: darkness is gone. We look at what's not there. Forgetting is gone. Not knowing is gone, ignorance is gone, naivety is gone. We're left with what we know, which is nothing. We are left with nothing and knowing nothing, with knowing the something of

nothing; and knowing that we cannot un-know this nothing.

She is gone. We wait. We know the performance is over. Despite being so clearly one of the most brilliant performance shown in the UK in recent months, the performance I have been waiting for – hungering for – it feels utterly impossible to applaud.

Paul Hughes

Photo credit: Arya Dil

