

# Double Interview between

# Mette Ingvarstsen and Mette Edvardsen

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This double interview was done while sitting together in one room writing and exchanging questions and answers simultaneously. Both parts were made in parallel and started from the same question. This text is a response to the invitation we received to write together about methodologies and modes of production in relation to our work. We have used the format of the double interview as a collaborative tool to discuss, share and think together about our practices.

## What concerns you the most for the moment in relation to making your work?

I am thinking a lot about the quality of performing within one of my previous pieces called “69 positions”. I am thinking about it because I am in the middle of writing a book about this performance, where I try to document the performance itself, but also my thoughts behind it and the concerns it came out of. The piece is a guided tour in 3 parts, in which I am restaging sexual performances from the 1960’s, performances from my own working history, as well as describing contemporary sexual practices that can be found within our society today. The piece lasts almost 2 hours and I spend at least one and a half hour performing naked among the spectators, who are free to move around me as they like within a kind of exhibition set up with images, texts and videos on the walls.

In the text that I am working on, I am for the moment busy with articulating how the actually performing produces a “soft” encounter with the public, where questions precipitated by sexuality, nudity and their relation to politics can be experienced by an audience, without this proposing a confrontational or aggressive situation, that could lead to an easy rejection of the topics at stake.

**What do you mean with a “soft” encounter?**

I am thinking both about the fact that you are naked and we, the audience are not, but also about the proximity and time spent in space together. It is as if we create a space in that time, even if it is one that is changing. There is a directness of the address, it feels very open, and yet I am never losing my “place” as audience in that I feel that I need to behave or do or be in another way – even if there is a part which includes interaction. What changes is how I see, think, relate to you, and to the space I am in. Is this also part of what you call “soft” encounter?

Right now I am trying to create conditions for work where formats of different kinds can exist next to each other in a somewhat equal way. This is not new for my practice, but still it is not so obvious that works of different formats exist as such, by themselves. This is partly due to the project logic under which I have organized my work for many years, but also because the more ‘regular’ pieces are the ones that get invited and presented in theatres and festivals. So even for myself it feels like that these works, the pieces, gain another status in my practice, in the care and time I spend with them. In the last years I have developed works that grow out of the project frame, because they continue to evolve over a long period of time, new forms are being explored, new formats emerge – or some works are on an extremely short term and almost invisible as formats. These works however, are equally part of the development of my artistic practice as a whole, and from the moment I decided to also take better care of these works I could sense a shift and an opening in how I develop and consider them. So recently I have tried to actively reorganize my work so that I can regard all these aspects more attentively.

**I would like to know more about the almost invisible formats of work that you describe. Could you give an example of what such a format of work could be? On a more social or political level I am also interested in whether or not you considered this approach a mode of consciously resisting the increasing demand for visibility, self-exposure and self-promotion that is growing not only in the arts but also in the rest of society today?**

Last year I made a work called “*I can’t quite place it*”. It was presented during a symposium ‘Imagining Commons’

What I am trying to figure out is how the *softness* of the encounter is actually created by how I am performing; in how I am adapting the fixed script to the situation in relation to the audience each night. When I started working on the piece I wrote a small text called "soft choreography", where I tried to elaborate a form of theater that would not be based on a clear distinction between the performer and the spectator, or between the auditorium and the stage. When I wrote that text, I thought I would make a performance that would differ quite radically from night to night, that would be half improvised and dependent on the reactions and participation of the audience. In the end I ended up making a performance where the script is actually very fixed. Nevertheless, I feel that when I perform it, I am in a constant negotiation with the affects and sensations created by how the audience reacts.

I think what you say about feeling that you never losing your "place" as an audience, has to do with the soft encounter I am searching for. I am trying, through the direct address, the openness with which I look and interact with people, to create a space that feels intimate and safe, at the same time as being fully public. (this is quite a challenge as normally the feeling of being intimate and safe belongs to non-public spaces).

In most of the performances people do step into action in the piece, which blurs the border between being a spectator and a performer. Some spectators dance, some enter into sexual positions with me while I'm naked and they are dressed and some even agree to perform an orgasm choir in front of the entire audience. I have a feeling that this form of direct participation becomes possible due to the softness of the encounter. It might also happen because the entire piece actually deals with how participation is not just something you do, but also something you negotiate whether you want to do or not. Participation happens also in the way people position themselves within the space, the closeness or the distance they take to what is presented, the gaze and the social control that takes place in the room.

**From what you say here about the participation of the audience, one way to understand this is that it is in fact quite a "hard" space, that I as an audience am participating in, as a spectator and performer, whether I want it or not. Because even if I say no, I am still "trapped" inside of that space, that piece, and cannot lean into the dark, in my safe (and soft) seat. So I am as you say, negotiating how I perform myself in that context or**

organised by Volt in Bergen. In this context I placed a table outside, on the street, and the idea was to engage with passers-by, to try to rethink context. I was sitting on one side of the table and there were two chairs on the other side of the table for the audience to sit down with me, or they could stand next to the table. I wanted to create a common space, a new space, a common ground where we could enter imagination and some sort of experience of a shared situation. For me this was equally a piece, even if it would just exist in small moments. In the context of the symposium program the work was announced to take place in a certain place of the city, and during a certain amount of time, about four hours. The table being an object out of place, or misplaced, was a visible intervention though not that imposing. I had a pencil and a paper, and I would consider the table to be a table, but also a space. I was working with micro and macro dimensions in order to create or propose different spaces to appear, and a certain 'writing' to take place. When this would work, the audiences there would enter this imaginary world with me, and we would experience it together. There was no structure or score, but different strategies available for me to use and play with at any time, including what I would do, how the environment around would interact and what this would create together. For this work to actually work, I think this nearly invisible set-up is necessary. If this would be proposed as my next piece in the foyer of a theatre or somewhere in a festival context, I think it would be more difficult to make it happen. But still the reflection about context, relation to space, how to work with imagination and the writing is as valid as in other works I do. But I needed this more discrete situation for it to take place. It could be that I will develop the work with the table in other formats too. The table and chairs are recurrent objects in my work. But this kind of open writing is unusual for me.

The fact of insisting on the continuity of my practice is a way for me to not only resist the increasing demand of visibility and production, but in order to insist on the work as a whole, that the work is more than the pieces we do. This is of course also a political stance. The pieces are not isolated ideas, but grow out of a development and process, in tension with each other. I think this is also the reason why I wish to bring the attention to smaller things, to other things – not only the projects that are touring. There is a constant dialogue between the work and what it needs, and what it needs me to do.

**You mention imagination as a practice you propose to do collectively with an audience**

**situation either way, that there is not much room for choice. I am interested in this notion of space, and what makes a space. I think that the "soft" encounter has also a lot to do with the eye contact. What is your experience of that, what does that do? It is hard to imagine a "hard" space when we are looking into each others eyes.**

You are right, soft does not mean easy. I do know that the experience of being in the space, where the audience has to negotiate their position as spectators is a much harder situation than then when they are invited to sink into their soft seats in the dark. The performance is surely also about that, the discomfort and the negotiation. I think the fact that I am performing in so close proximity to the audience and that eye contact is permanently used throughout the entire piece helps to dissolve this potentially difficult situation. What interests me is also the social aspect of coming together to look at something in the theater, and how what is shown creates a social reaction. (which is of course always the case in theater, but sometimes this is made more or less explicit and visible.)

To me the question of the how to deal with the public has always be very important and I have made many different performances where I experiment with the format of presentation. I often made pieces where the configuration of the audience is completely different from the frontal one that continues to dominate.

**I am thinking that "soft" and "hard" is about a certain definition of space, a perception of it rather than difficult or easy. In this sense I think that the eye contact you establish, next to being a direct address and a way to bring the audience with you, it is precisely proposing another kind of space – a space within a space, and perhaps this could be in plural. That there is a certain elasticity, again, of space. So something that is soft has a capacity to be elastic, and something hard does not. I think that also in other pieces you have made there is a sense of space in this way, even with audience being seated – frontally or on all sides. If I think about "Giant City" and "evaporated landscapes", where the audience is seated around or on two sides, but also "The Artificial Nature Project" where the audience is seated frontally. Perhaps it is too quick of a gesture to**

**member in "I can't quite place it". To explicitly ask the spectator to imagine together with you is an interesting move in your work, because imagination seems to me, to already have been one of the main strategies in several of your more recent stage works. (I am thinking about "Black" and "No Title" in specific). Could you say more about how imagination is one of the long-term interests you have developed over several works and through different contexts and formats? And perhaps also something about how the possibilities of our imagination (as spectators) change depending on the format the imagination is presented in?**

For me art needs to be about imagination and the capacity to evoke, to create poetry, to make things up and propose visions. It can of course be about other things too. But you are right, imagination has for me been a strategy and desire in making work for a long time. As an artist I want to propose something, not just show or represent ideas, but to create an experience, to invite the audience into something, to open new or other spaces in or through our imagination. It is the only thing I can do. I don't know anything else or more or better about life or the world than what the audience knows already. I believe that imagination is an important tool, in life and in art. How can we change something if we cannot imagine other ways it could be? When this works, experience (or experiencing) and transformation (of some kind) can take place.

In the pieces that you mention ("*Black*" and "*No Title*") I was exploring the limits and possibilities of language. Through language another access to imagination opened, I found. Language is both very concrete and abstract at the same time. It allowed for another kind of writing, language offered capacities that are different from when working with objects or movements in space. The relation to space itself also changed, it was at the same time more and less there, present. I think now of what you say about "soft" encounters, I think of the space through language as a "soft space". And even more so in the work "*Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*" where we have learned books by heart and spend time in libraries as 'living books'. Readings take place as one-to-one encounters and as we are in a public space (a library) the activity around is ongoing and not something we can decide or control. The space here is both important as a context, and at the same time non-existent. There is a sort of fluid state between

say now that these are all “soft spaces”, but I find it interesting to consider how all of these pieces propose a certain elastic space, even if in different ways. Scale also play in here as an important element I find, the distance of the audience – close or far, and the mere size of the space itself. Can you say something about how you work with space in these pieces and how it is part of the writing of the work?

I love the idea of the elasticity of space, it is a word that funnily enough also came up in a conversation I had with someone yesterday about the notion of soft choreography. In the original very short text that I wrote about soft choreography, I was opposing it to hard choreography. I defined hard choreography as the type of pieces that have no space for deviance, where the presence or absence of the audience does not change the choreography, which is any way written down to the smallest detail. With your question now I understand that it is not so simple!!! In the text there is also a part about how soft choreography creates soft space; an undivided space where the performers and the spectator can circulate freely and where bodies are part of creating the scenic room. This is in fact not very far from “Giant City”, where as you mention above the spectators are sitting on four sides becoming an integral part of the scenography, where the audience also physically participate in how the show comes across.

In all the works you mention above, I have been working on notions of immateriality. On understanding movement as something that does not only take place within bodies, but also between bodies, objects, environments, spaces, thoughts and imaginations.

Proximity to the choreography I think is also crucial, for instance in “evaporated landscapes” the audience is literally sitting with their feet in the dry-ice that cover the stage that is only 5 x 8 meters. In that piece we (myself, lighting designer Minna Tikkinen and musician Gerald Kurdian) worked on how to create changes in scale, even when the audience do not move around during the performance. The first scene in the performance is a model landscape seen from a bird-eye perspective, like looking down on a mountain chain, a sea or a cloud formation. Then we create a more human perspective, where the materials are flying in the air in front of the eyes of the spectators and in the end they end up underneath a red sky (created by smoke and a thin line of light), as if they would be looking from a frog-eye perspective.

different layers of space existing together, simultaneously. This elasticity of space, and of language, I find very interesting to work with.

**I had a very strong experience of listening to one of the books in “Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine”. The book was Crash by J.G. Ballard, and I was picked up by the book (man) and lead through the space to some backroom of the library, no longer open to a visiting public. We sat down in front of each other and he started talking. The experience was very strong because I could smell the real books on the shelves, but not the man who was sitting in front of me telling me about the car crash and the sexual desire that it produced in the characters. By listening to his story I got very interested in the potential of language to create sensation, the relationship between language and the body – evoked actually by the absence of the real bodies that the book described. In your work called “No Title”, you also use language to evoke things that are no longer there. Could you speak about the structure of language that you use to achieve this form of imagination and sensation?**

Well, first of all Ballard’s writing is amazing! For me to listen to Crash being spoken by heart, embodied but not performed, brings the language and the writing really to the foreground. In relation to space, I would like to add as well the space of reading, what is the space of reading? It is the places we go to through the writing, how we imagine them, but there is also another kind of space. This is interesting to me when we are proposing these kinds of reading experiences for audiences.

Language offers certain capacities for me to work with when making my pieces. I work with language as material. I am not a writer, but I conceive of what I do as writing - writing in space and in time. In the first place I am interested in how to write in space, then occasionally this can also extend to work on a page. Having made the piece “Black”, where language (words) made it possible to make things appear and to affirm the existence of things, “No Title” proposed another feature, namely that of negation. 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

The size and set up of the space is always very important, it changes everything! I like to do silly experiments like testing when the size of a dance floor stops looking like a dance floor. 10 x 10 is the most conventional and if you use that you know that you inscribe yourself into the history of dance in a particular way. If you make a 5 x 5 stage with people sitting on all sides you immediately have to reconsider everything (of course other inscriptions into history as well). I like to search for the how the configuration of the space is directly connected to the topics of interest I want to explore within a specific piece. Then (and this is horrible) there is always the economic conditions to take into consideration, knowing that strange and experimental formats are very welcome by theaters as long as they can still sell their tickets. This means that experimenting with formats and frames of performance, implicitly also is a way of experimenting with the modes of production and circulation that exist within the performing arts.

**With your work, and certainly over the last years, you address a very important question about the distribution of space in our field today. Typically experimental work is presented in the small venues and is not so easily admitted into the larger venues. As you say yourself here above, just the mere size of space changes everything. So it is an obvious equation to make, experimental work cannot only be for small sized venues, some works need a big space in order to be done. And needless to point out here is the importance of experimental work within any field. By insisting on working on a large scale with experimental work (big spaces and many performers), you produce resistance to this way of operating. It is easy to understand how this must be important for you in order to make the work you want to make, so artistically motivated. But also to bring that thought further, as a political stance - in relation to the audience, to the field, and to the future of our art form. Can you say something about your thoughts on this?**

I think it is very important to think about the transformation of the big stages; what is possible to present on them, what kind of experiments one can be allowed to do there and how this can push the limits of those spaces further. It is important for several reasons. First

knowing. You can easily make something appear by naming it, but it is not enough to say that something is gone in order to make it disappear. In this gap I could work, with the power of evocation, to imagine, to feel, to think, to see, to remember – both what is there and not there. Trying to remove or negate in the imagination is an interesting process. Through negation I could in “No Title” move further out, not only in space but also in time, and in what kinds of topics I would address. For this another writing was needed. I was not only playing with words and what is here or not, but I was moving through all together different constructions in the writing. In “Black” I used repetition, for example, as a way to make things physical, to insist on them being there. In “No Title” I performed the piece with my eyes closed, and by this proposing another address and relation to the words I speak in space. Later, with the piece that followed, “We to be”, I worked with the tenses (past and future). This allowed for another access to the moment and the imagination of what is taking place. In these pieces I work in a theatre space, and I write with the space. The texts do not precede the pieces but they are the pieces. All this to say that I cannot separate the writing (in language) from the rest so easily, it is operating within the work and perhaps it is not so much an interest in language as such but more what it makes possible.

**The elasticity of time and space that you manage to create by bringing the outside world into the theatre in “No Title” – by naming what which is not there – is astonishing. Do you think we could finish this interview by reading a little extract selected by you from your script of “No Title”, where this notion of bringing the outside in becomes clear?**

Ok, here you have to imagine me in space with my eyes closed. I trace a circle with one arm towards what I think is the back of the space, then I say:

the sun – gone up and gone down  
the distant horizon –  
the sea itself – a boat disappearing out of sight

mountains – earth threatens to erase sky  
birds – migrating  
thoughts – drifting away

I can see everything and nothing at the same

because it is very sad if big theater become reduced to entertainment businesses devoid of any critical or experimental potential. Second because if big stages are reserved for non-experimental entertainment work – which to a large extent is still the case today, the space for smaller scale experimental work could become very hard to preserve. At least this is something I have been speculating about; is there a link to be made between small scale experiments and big scale performances, that could help to defend the need to support the experimental scene?

Then, on a more personal level, the link between small scale and large scale experiments is something very stimulating to try to figure out. What are the relations within my work, from one scale to another. How do questions translate from one frame to another, what do I learn from my living room experiments and how do I take this experiences with me when I work on small or larger stages. I think it is good to always come back to the living room (micro levels of production), it is where it all starts, at least recently this is how it has been for me.

time  
everything is gone – not everything  
nothing is gone – not nothing

not a sound  
not a wind  
not a thought

not awake  
not asleep  
not a dream

a shooting star  
one more  
or, less