

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: EDWARD THOMASSON

Edward Thomasson

The Present Tense

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Laura Wilson: I'd like to start by asking you about why you chose *The Present Tense* as the title for the video?

Edward Thomasson: I've had it in my head for a long time as a potential title. Actually, it came from an interview with Dennis Potter. There's a very moving interview with Potter and Melvyn Bragg from 1994, where Potter spoke about his terminal illness and how this gave his experience of the world a heightened intensity. He talks about doing the washing up and looking outside, and feeling the most present he had ever felt. He talks about blossom being the most blossomy blossom – the best blossom he had ever seen – and everything being so much more intense. He used 'the present tense' at some point to describe this feeling. There was such an emotional clarity in what he was describing in that interview. I began thinking about the idea of writing a voice over in the present tense. I was interested in how that would work for an audience – for a character to be doing something and describing it at the same time.

LW: Could you talk about the decisions you made about the work's presentation in the gallery?

ET: I thought that using a poster to introduce the video at the entrance to the exhibition would help to present the work as a collective endeavour. I made painted drawings of some of the cast members and then designed the poster in a way that refers to a film or theatre playbill. I wanted to frame the video as the culmination of a working process – the actors and the composer Soosan Lolovar, working with me to realise what I'd written – rather than the video being a singly-authored narrative.

Inside the gallery I've created tiered seating using plastic chairs of different heights to make a mini auditorium. The video meanders somewhere between a theatrical engagement and a cinematic engagement, in a playful way. The presentation is meant to oscillate between these two modes of viewing.

LW: So, the audience's physical relationship to the screen is important?

ET: Yes. I thought a lot about how to position the audience in relation to the projected image. In the work itself there's a focus on how proximity and distance alter our ways of seeing. This is reflected in the position of the camera in relation to the performances – there are severe close ups and almost full body shots, shots through glass and so on, so the audience is reminded of this formally and physically. There's a bit where one of the characters talks about not being able to see things clearly from up close, and that you need to move out to see the whole picture. The police describe how they have to get very close in order to understand someone. I wanted these things also to happen in the way the video is shot and presented. The size of the screen is important too; it helps to create an almost overwhelming sense of scale in the close-ups.

LW: Could you talk about the way the video is constructed? How do the three storylines sit alongside each other and how do they overlap?

ET: I wrote the script as three distinct situations – the first is a session between a therapist and a young client; in the second, a group of police officers present a sung demonstration in a room that looks like a school or youth centre; and the third focuses on a character, Wendi, who carries out a number of mindfulness exercises in order to attempt a personal rethinking or re-authorship of her life. These exercises ask her to focus on what is happening in the present moment but the things she chooses to look at are all in progress – she looks at the plan for a building, at her healing wound, and then she looks at the final stages of a construction process. She tries to focus on the present but can't escape the history and future implicit in the things around her. The idea that things don't have a fixed temporality, and the way in which this unfixed temporality affects our perceptions, is something that is represented in all the different situations in the video.

The demonstration by the police takes the form of a song and acts as the musical underscoring for the video. The police sing about the difficulties they face when attempting to read the actions of civilians in the street and the role of 'stop and search' procedures. They sing 'you're never going to know where someone's been, or where they're going to go'. In reality there are 'short hands' that are used by police in the street – quicker ways of reading people – which has led to so much contention around 'stop and search'. When I was researching for

the video I looked at how the police had attempted to bridge gaps in communication through public initiatives like a campaign in Hampshire called 'Know Your Rights'. The basic idea was that if you knew your rights in stop and search, then you would have a greater understanding of the process and why it was happening. To promote the scheme, the police performed a large-scale flash mob style dance in a town square. I like the idea of the police engaging people in this way - how song and dance work for the audience in musicals.

I conceived the third storyline, the therapy session, as a shifting foundation for the video. The therapist is using a kind of skewed Sand Play process – it's not an accurate representation of the therapy – but I suppose what I wanted in that scene was for the boy and the therapist to be working together to move the story along. The reason I used Sand Play was because I wanted to create a sense of a constant shifting or erasing and restructuring, and sand does that really well. This provides a metaphor for the other narratives and it creates a sense that the sandpit directs the storytelling process – almost like a storyboard – as if the focus of the video can be altered by what's being drawn in the sand.

LW: This shifting and restructuring happens throughout the video – the characters are trying to make changes in various ways but environments are transforming as well, and narratives move back and forth. How do you see all those shifts coming together spatially and temporally?

ET: When I wrote the script I was really clear about the points of intersection, so the timeline of the action was important. At some point in each sequence, one of the characters looks out of the window at the building site, each observing the process of demolition and rebuilding at different stages. So, the police officer looks out of the window and sees the building being demolished, then the therapist sees the digger cleaning up the demolition, and later on, when the building is nearly done, Wendi is seen with a new hairdo. There's also the process of healing that implies a certain passage of time. This is the narrative movement that I had in my head but what has come out in the video is perhaps a more meandering exploration of change and presence, a sort of fable without a moral.

LW: Could you talk more about the bodily transformations that take place, for example the healing of the wound on the knee?

ET: When I started thinking about the video I was interested in placing a transforming landscape alongside a transforming body – in how

the building of a building related to the building of a performance somehow. I was interested in the way that amateur performers can come together in a room once a week to construct characters, which they then take away again, back into their everyday lives. I'm interested in this flux between theatricality and everyday experience, and how this can relate to regeneration in some way.

More specifically I was keen to explore the idea of the body as a construction site, and identity as a site for authorship and re-authorship. Throughout the eighteen-month *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* and in preparation for the play I presented last Summer, a lot of my research revolved around narrative therapy and how storytelling is used as a way of describing the past and imagining, or reimagining, a future. This gives the act of storytelling a purposefulness. The process of therapeutic story-making is something that I wanted to try and re-enact within the structure of the video itself, so that the audience, as well as the actors, might be engaged in some kind of therapeutic muddling through together.

LW: How does this ‘muddling through together’ relate to your ideas about the role of the individual within the group?

ET: This is at the root of what the video asks – how can we see and know someone else? These questions came out of thinking about the implications of the residency more broadly; about bringing a group of people who didn't know each other together to make a single thing.

LW: So the work is a reflection on the process of working with the model of the theatre group – where a production happens because a group of people are brought together and as a result of regular rehearsals the production is then realized to a live audience. With a film or video the process is fragmented over time, with the ultimate realization of the work being in the final edit, that editing process being set apart from the actors.

ET: Yes, exactly. I worked with the group on the play – *Between You and Me*, presented as part of Chisenhale's *Offsite* programme in Summer 2013 – and working with the actors group again on this video has really highlighted to me how theatre is much more of a collective endeavour. In the past, I've referred to theatre as a framework for collective acts of storytelling, which is how I would like my videos to operate. Translating this idea into a moving image is an interesting challenge, but it hadn't occurred to me until my experience last year, how much more acute the feeling of collective endeavor is when

putting on a play. Then coming back to making a video, you see that it's a more alienated process. I think that this feeling comes across in the narrative.

You were appointed as the *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* artist in November 2012, in the wake of the London Olympics, and the major regeneration that had happened in the east end to accommodate it. This residency in partnership with Create, invited you to respond specifically to people living or working within this context, how did you respond to this commissioning process?

Working with a group of non-professional performers was something that I had been thinking about doing for a long time. I was interested in how amateur theatre groups worked and how their participants shifted between everyday experience and theatrical enactment, transforming into characters for an evening after a days work. I'd been interested in how this related more generally to my interest in performance and the boundaries of where performance happened. This residency was a perfect opportunity for me to explore some of these ideas head on. Firstly, I was able to actually set up an amateur theatre group. Through an auditioning process we set about bringing people from the local area together who had an interest in performing, who were either already engaged in some kind of amateur performance group or were keen to begin to be. When we started to meet once a month, the focus of our initial workshopping process was specifically about ideas of transformation: how actors transform from themselves into characters, how landscapes transform through regeneration and how people could change themselves and each other through elaborate acts of storytelling. These initial explorations in the workshops have formed the basis of both the play and the video that I've worked on with this group. In the video, I directly reintroduced a cycle of urban regeneration, as a way to revisit some of these initial explorations.

Between those initial explorations at the beginning of the residency up until the presentation of this video now, eighteen months has gone by. What has the length of the residency implied for how you worked with the group?

Working towards the play last year was an intense process. Initially we met once a month on a Sunday in the studio at Chisenhale Gallery, and as we worked towards the presentation of the piece last July, we were meeting once a week. The play felt to me to be an appropriate way to celebrate the group and mid-point of the residency, and gave us, as an amateur theatre group, a clear objective to work towards. The play

really consolidated us as a group and following its presentation we met a couple of months later, after the summer, to begin to think about what we had done and how I was planning to move the project forward. Following that meeting I set about constructing a story that cast the group members as fictional characters within a narrative. When we met again, we read this story together and chatted about how I planned to make it work as a video. In my mind, this was a way of reimagining how the amateur theatre group could operate within this context. I had written the story with this particular group of actors in mind. It is this sort of extended engagement with a set of performers who met regularly over a long period of time that could only be possible in the context of the residency.

LW: The play was presented at The Glass House, a Community Centre near Chisenhale Gallery, at the mid-point of your residency. As I understand it, this was the first time you had presented a live work, aside from the collaborative practice you have with the artist Lucy Beech, which often manifests as performance. How did the play contribute to the development of the video and the exhibition?

ET: When I was making the play, I was thinking of the theatrical frame – the stage – almost as the video frame. The space within the frame is where you find the strategy to tell the story. I found that the strategy I'd put together had a much more immediate relationship with the audience. It's obvious that this would happen in a theatrical context, but I was excited by it because what I'd been looking for in my videos was exactly that sort of relationship.

In previous works I have often considered the individual in relation to the group. The voice-over is one technique I've used to set up this relationship: the character, in this case Wendi, shares her thoughts directly with the audience and not by communicating with the rest of the group. In the case of the play, because everyone is in the same room at the same time, I felt I had to be a lot more direct about those relationships. I suppose that's why I was particularly mindful of the camera when I was writing *The Present Tense*. I thought about what was specific about the camera that couldn't be achieved live.

LW: You've worked with actors in previous videos, for example, *Inside* (2012) and *Just about Managing* (2012). How does working with non-professional actors differ from the way you usually work?

ET: It is important for me that the members of the group are framed as non-professional performers, rather than non-actors. They already

have an active interest in performance, whether it's acting or singing in a choir. For example, Wendi Sheard, the central protagonist, runs an amateur theatre company herself. She was much more familiar with how to run a rehearsal than I was, which was really helpful. When we brought the group together, I didn't approach them any differently to actors that I have invited to take part in my work in the past – the only difference was the practical limitation on how often we could meet.

In making the video, the way I worked with performers was fairly immediate: a culmination of the context and costumes, and how they performed in response to these specific things. I'm really interested in how costume works. For example, with the police officers, their uniforms describe the situation – the costume did the narrative work.

LW: Could you talk about how you have used song as a strategy for story telling and how this relates to musical theatre?

ET: In the play, the narrative was described through the sung text, and the spoken dialogue was mainly presented through a series of monologues, which described the emotional experience of the central characters. These two different modes of delivery became layers of storytelling. In the video there are three different modes, or layers: the singing describes a situation in close-up detail; the dialogue spoken by the therapist thematically reinforces the idea of constructing a narrative (at times she says what will happen next); and Wendi's voiceover is spoken directly to the audience as she works through her mindfulness exercises. Her monologue is written in the present tense, it's not describing something in the past; it's inviting the audience to be party to that process, immersed in the present.

I'm interested in musical theatre, and theatrical mechanisms in general, as ways of constructing empathy, and achieving a level of engagement with an audience. In the video there is an audience for the police officers' performance and we see their reactions and engagement. Music is important as a way of moving through all these layers, and sort of gluing them together at the same time.

LW: The music also has a function in propelling the narrative forward. In the video there is a drumbeat, which guides you through the film.

ET: I haven't used drums before. This was something Soosan and I talked about before she composed the music. Some of the musical references I gave her were quite drum-heavy. The music that Soosan

wrote is great because it works really well as a filmic soundtrack, but could also pass as a pop song, or the sort of song that you could imagine Police officers might come up with.

LW: When we were filming earlier this year, your script and shot list was annotated with various stills from films. One I remember in particular was a woman lying on the floor in a red suit and this shot is mirrored within the video when Wendi falls to the ground. Could you talk about these references and how they manifest within the work?

ET: The still you're talking about is from *Broken Embraces* by Pedro Almodóvar. He's someone I constantly come back to. The way that I construct shots comes out of a learned aesthetic resulting from the amount of television and cinema that I watch. It's an amalgamation of different visual references. In the same document that you mentioned, there were screen grabs from the BBC TV series *Silk*. There's an interview sequence in *Silk* that I watched after we'd shot the scene of the therapist and the young boy and after seeing it I decided to go back and reshoot this scene.

LW: In relation to crime dramas, like *Silk*, I wanted to ask you about detective work as a theme that has followed through from the play into the film – how we are somehow always trying to figure each other out. In the film the police officers sing: “Look for clues, play detective, helps to use a sense of perspective...”

ET: When I started working on this project, I was thinking about communication and miscommunication, and how narratives are constructed to bridge gaps in comprehension. I was thinking about how this relates to detective work. The role of the detective is to piece-together meaning from what scraps of information are available. I was thinking about Miss Marple and amateur detectives who try to make sense of other people's actions in public. I was interested in how an audience comes to an episode of Miss Marple or another whodunit. The amateur detective is a sort of proxy for the audience. The facts you're presented with as the viewer are almost the same as what's presented to Miss Marple, so you cast yourself in the role of the problem-solver – you're an active participant in the unpacking of the action, and the building of meaning. When I was making the video I was thinking about this as a useful way to think about everyday attempts to find meaning and make sense of each other, and how this could be reenacted in the gallery.

I'm interested in where you position the work within a wider context, what you think about making this kind of work in the gallery and its impact and engagement with the gallery's history and audiences. Why are you working in this particular way and making work look this way right now in 2014?

This presentation in the gallery marks the end of the process I have referred to. This work now is a sort of punctuation in the process, like the play was. The play allowed me to explore the ideas around performance, performed narratives and everyday life within a theatrical framework. It has repositioned this exploration into another framework, with it's own specific implications, namely viewing recorded, rather than live, storytelling. In both cases, I'm interested in how the audience is implicated in the work. In the play I wanted there to be a sense of the audience being 'cast' as an audience, and what that meant. Here, as I mentioned in a previous question, I wanted there to be a sense that the audience is tied up in the search for meaning, like in a whodunit, or even in a therapeutic dialogue.

I suppose it comes back to the individual within the group, how, as one body, you engage with the world. For me, this is characterised by continuous engagement with sets of narratives. The processes that I have developed to make videos and other works, attempt in some way to explore the implications of the performance of these narratives in the world, by re-performing them. This reenactment is a way of exploring how collective narratives might impact on us as individuals. I like the idea that the process makes them more precarious, less fixed. More generally I'm interested in how performance and storytelling are mediating strategies within interpersonal interaction, and even more broadly, why we need stories and why we need each other or why we need to know each other. Joan Didion says in her book *The White Album*, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live", and that idea has always stuck with me. Presenting this within the gallery, I'm interested in constructing a presentation that implies the collective viewing of a collective act of story telling, so that these engagements with narrative that I'm talking about in the world, are reflexively reenacted within the limits of the exhibition space.

Edward Thomasson interviewed by Laura Wilson, Offsite and Education Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, June 2014. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.