

That Whip of Sparks

Some Notes on Alice Oswald

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TOWARDS THE END of September, I went to see Brink Productions' adaptation of Alice Oswald's poem *Memorial* (2011) at the Barbican. It was ambitious, featuring a chorus of two hundred or so choreographed performers accompanying a minimalist orchestral arrangement, the stage at times flooded with bodies standing for the excavated Greek and Trojan soldiers of Oswald's poem, what she refers to as her 'translation of the *Iliad*'s atmosphere'. The poem itself was delivered by the Australian actor Helen Morse, whose command of the poetry I can't contest: at the very least, her recital of the poem constitutes a feat of memory of the kind I've long since given up, though there were moments of what seemed like genuine pity leaking through her voice. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling conscious that I wasn't hearing Oswald speak the poetry herself, that just as the American imprint of *Memorial* is subtitled a 'version' of the *Iliad*, so Morse's delivery of the poem was somehow other than the original: not worse, but not *it*.

Oswald has performed *Memorial*, several times, in its entirety, though it seems unlikely that she'll resurrect the poem anytime soon. 'It's very horrible to do,' she suggests to Max Porter in an interview for *The White Review*: 'Before I do it I have this feeling of pressure. This line of soldiers queuing up that has to move through my head. I have every muscle tensed.' Oswald's reputation as a memorable and captivating reader of her poems was all but cemented around the time of these performances. 'I saw you recite the whole poem in Edinburgh,' says Porter in the same interview, 'and – as I'm sure you're sick of hearing – it was a shattering physical and emotional experience, quite unlike anything I've ever seen.' To those, like me, who failed to witness one of these recitals, there are a handful of recordings available online (try the Hay Festival's 'Hay Player') and even a seventy-seven-minute Faber Audio CD, which Andrew Motion included in his list of 'The 10 best recordings of poets' reading their work. And yet, like Morse's version of the poem, these recordings serve only to increase my sense of having not been present at the time. As for the publications themselves, reading Oswald's poetry on the page, especially her longer pieces – I'm thinking of *Memorial*, certainly, and *Dart* (2002), but also of 'Dunt' and 'Tithonus' from *Falling Awake* (2016) – feels increasingly like coming face to face with the record of an event I failed to attend, as though the printed text of each poem amounts to a kind of visual documentation of its faded oral/aural life, at best a sort of hardened echo.

In an important sense, this frustration seems appropriate. Oswald's interest in the Homeric tradition of oral poetry is well worn, bearing heavily on the tension between her poetry as it exists in performance and as it then comes to appear in print. I'm not that interested to draw a comparison between Oswald's writing and the world of contemporary performance poetry, which I basically don't know anything about. But I am interested to

suggest a view of Oswald's poetry alongside several artists to whom the importance of documentation plays a significant role in the completion and reception of their work, a way of holding back a trace of what would otherwise be lost. For Oswald, some idea of transience is integral to oral poetry, and to Homer in particular. '[The *Odyssey*] is after all an oral poem, composed in performance,' she writes for the *Telegraph* in 2014, 'like snow, perfectly formed and ready to vanish. It is not a spatial text, but something temporal and sounded, which can only proceed as it were by melting':

Like when god throws a star
And everyone looks up
To see that whip of sparks
And then it's gone

You don't have to read much of Oswald's poetry to get a feel for her habit of tuning into other voices. The cast of *Dart* is wide, each character delivering their lines in as much time as it takes the river to wash over them. The same goes for *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009), the most dramatic (and overtly Beckettian) of Oswald's books to date, whose dramatis personae cycle through the poem's nightly phases with the coming and retreating of the tide. A great many of the shorter poems crackle in and out of voices, too, often giving brief voice to the voiceless – see 'A Winged Seed' or 'Autobiography of a Stone' from *Woods etc.* (2005), or the eponymous 'Thing in the Gap-Stone Style' – all of which contribute to a general sense that voice, in Oswald's poetry, is momentary, never more than a single breath away from being lost, or cracked, or paused, or faded out, as visualised by the dissolving stanzas at the close of *Falling Awake*. Hughes's riddling 'Wodwo' certainly seems to be nosing around here, but there's a harsher side to Oswald's heteroglossia which makes me think of Beckett's *Play* (c.1963), where three urn-bound lovers are rapidly and irregularly spotlighted into action, only permitted to speak (or are they being forced?) – Beckett's stage directions use the word 'provoked' – as and when the light directs them to.

The reason for mentioning all this is to suggest that Oswald's interest in poetic voice relates importantly to her poetry in performance, to its oral lifespan, and to the relationship between her poems as they're spoken and as they turn out on the page. This isn't a new question, but it's one to which Oswald seems especially attuned. 'She instructed her audience to put away their books, as she would be speaking by heart,' wrote Claire Armistead of one of Oswald's performances in 2016: 'Forget the fixed text, because I like the idea of poems being these melting ice shapes that vanish and are only there in the moment.'

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In 1974, at the Galleria Studio Morra in Naples, Italy, the Serbian artist Marina Abramović delivered the first and only performance of her artwork, *Rhythm 0*. 'My plan was to go to the gallery and just stand there,' she recalls in her recent memoir, *Walk Through Walls* (2016), 'behind a table containing seventy-two objects: A hammer. A saw. A feather. A fork. A bottle of perfume. A bowler hat. [...] Pins. Lipstick. Sugar. A Polaroid camera. Various other things. And a pistol, and one bullet lying next to it.' The performance lasted a total of six hours, beginning at eight p.m., during which time the audience were invited to use the objects on the artist 'as desired'. After three hours activity escalated quickly, culminating in a scuffle as members of the audience stepped in to forcibly remove a man from the gallery for placing the loaded pistol in Abramović's hand, the barrel turned towards her neck. 'And then, at two a.m., the gallerist came and told me the six hours were up,' writes Abramović: 'I stopped staring and looked directly at the audience [...] And a strange thing happened: at this moment, the people who were still there suddenly became afraid of me. As I walked toward them, they ran out of the gallery.'

As with the majority of Abramović's performance artworks – beginning with the first of her 'Rhythm' series, *Rhythm 10* (1973), in which she attempts to stab a sequence of kitchen knives back and forth between her outstretched fingers at increasing speeds – *Rhythm 10* survives only in photographs. For many, these are the only way to experience Abramović's work and (for the most part) they exist as the only remnants of – and indeed, like all photographs, go some way to emphasising – the transience that they preserve. Max Porter alludes to Abramović briefly in *The White Review* interview. 'That's something I'm more and more interested in,' replies Oswald. '[T]here is still nothing like the physical fact of a human offering you something.'

Though of a very different kind, Oswald's recitals – particularly of her long-form pieces *Dart*, *Memorial* and 'Tithonus' – involve a level of endurance that reminds me of Abramović. More than this, however, I'm drawn to the idea that publications of Oswald's poetry behave in some way like the photographs left over from Abramović's performances, as though the poems on the page refer in kind to a performance that has long since been and gone. This is something that seems to guide the poetry of Sean Borodale, whose most-recent collection *Asylum* (2018) continues his practice of recording on-site compositions, part of his ongoing project to develop a poetic form he calls the *lyrigraph*, 'in which the moment of writing is an intentional performance' of which, 'The text is [a] record; a transcript of [the] live experience of the performance of writing.'

Borodale has also written about his habit of 'writing whilst walking', whereby 'the act of walking [generates] the metabolic rate or poetic pulse of the poem-in-progress', prominent in the development of *Notes for an Atlas* (2003), a three-hundred-and-seventy-page topographical poem composed during a fifty-mile excursion around London. Imagining the poem as the real-time record of a walk-in-progress recalls the 'songlines' of Australian aboriginal communities, as documented by Bruce Chatwin in the 1980s, where the landscape is sung into existence for the duration of a

given journey, the lyric description exactly corresponding to the unfolding geography, imbued with narrative significance, a kind of oral mapping process, part cartography, part creation myth. Oswald's own familiarity with the songlines is clear from *Dart* – she describes the poem as 'a songline from the source to the sea' – and she includes a translation of the aboriginal 'Song-Cycle of the Moon-Bone' in her anthology, *The Thunder Meters* (2005). But the songlines link her thinking once more to Abramović, who spent several months with the Pintupi aboriginals in 1981, accompanied by her then artistic and romantic partner, Ulay. As Abramović recalls, learning about (and living with) the songlines played a significant role in the development of her performance art: 'You look at this landscape, and hear this story, and it's not that it happened in the past, it's not something in the future. It's happening now. It is always now. It has never 'happened.' It is happening. This was a revolutionary concept to me – all my ideas about existing in the present came from there.'

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The American essayist and critic Rebecca Solnit has considered songlines, too. In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), she uses them to illustrate a point about the connection between narrative and traveling. 'The songlines are tools of navigation across the deep desert,' she writes, 'while the landscape is a mnemonic device for remembering the stories: in other words, the story is a map, the landscape a narrative.' Later in the same book, she refers to Abramović and Ulay's piece 'The Lovers' (1988), known also as the 'Great Wall Walk'. Conceived a few years prior to its execution, the walk is primed with narrative significance. Beginning at opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, the two intended to walk towards each other – each traveling a distance of 2,500 kilometres – meeting in the middle after three months, where they planned to marry. By 1988, the three-month journey came to mark the end of their romantic and professional relationship, each step taking them closer to an inevitable separation. In addition to the usual photographs, *The Lovers* is preserved in a documentary film directed for the BBC by Murray Grigor, which shows the sad and awkward moment when Abramović and Ulay meet. Abramović is quiet, hardly speaking, her face occasionally obscured by a red flag. Eventually, she starts to cry, emotionally and physically exhausted.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, published five years after *Wanderlust* in 2005, Solnit turns her attention to 'one of the first of a new kind of photograph to become important in [the 1960s]', winding the clock back nearly thirty years from 'The Lovers' to consider the rise of photography as a means of preserving artworks that were 'too remote, too ephemeral, [or] too personal to be seen otherwise, [...] that could not be exhibited and would otherwise be lost, so the photograph stands in for [them]'. The photograph in question is Yves Klein's 'Leap into the Void'. Made in October 1960, the picture shows a quiet Parisian street, empty but for a single figure on a bicycle, seemingly oblivious to the extraordinary scene behind him: a man with tousled hair, impeccably dressed in a dark suit, leaping out across the street as if to launch himself into the air. Striking though the image is, the

picture is a fake. It's actually two photographs, taken and stitched together for Klein by the photographic partners Harry Shunk and János Kender. But Klein did leap, into a tarpaulin held taught for him by ten judokas – Klein achieved a fourth *dan* black belt on a fifteen-month trip to Japan in 1953 – cropped from the photograph in favour of an empty street. And yet, despite the forgery, for Solnit, the photograph remains 'the only trace or souvenir of the work of art, which is the leap itself.'

One way to contextualise the 'Leap into the Void' is as part of Klein's attempts to get away from the material. In a lecture delivered to the Sorbonne in 1959 he explains the development of his 'blue period', which produced perhaps the most famous and recognisable of all his works, featuring his patented International Klein Blue, a deep shade of ultramarine that came to dominate his art. Klein describes his discovery of monochromatic painting alongside the feeling 'more and more' that the predominant elements of figurative (and even abstract) painting – 'the lines [...] the contours, the forms, the perspectives', etc. – were nothing more than 'bars on the window of a prison'. 'The painter of the future will be a colorist of a kind never seen before,' he continues. 'And without doubt it is through color that I have little by little become acquainted with the Immaterial.' The 'Leap', to my mind, shows this acquaintance almost literally, Klein suspended in mid-air, surrounded by nothing, his trailing foot a hair away from lifting off. As Solnit writes of the picture, Klein leaps 'as though he need not even think of landing, [...] as though he were entering the weightless realm of space or the timeless realm of the photograph that would hold him up above the ground forever'. And so the picture is a kind of blueprint, a premature expression of the relationship between performance and documentation – between the artwork and its footprint – that would capture the imagination of Abramović and others in the early 1970s.

Several years before Klein's 'Leap', another artist had been working to preserve the image of the body 'entering the weightless realm of space'. Beginning his career as a documentary photographer on the streets of New York City in the 1930s, Aaron Siskind developed an interest in the camera's ability to transform action into abstract shape. He began to photograph the feats and twists of acrobatic divers, mid-fall, capturing their bodies in a void of empty space with the aid of a high-contrast development process. The resulting series, which Siskind added to for over a decade, is *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation* (c.1953–65). Though I don't think Siskind ever considered his photographs to be the 'trace or souvenir', as Solnit has it, of the divers' jumps, the pictures certainly call out to Klein. I'm not sure he ever saw them, suffering a fatal heart attack – his third that year – in 1962. An image from Siskind's series, number 474, appeared on the cover of *Falling Awake* in 2016.

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'The Era of Various Views On What One Would Have Done Had One Lived Longer', reads the final line of Anne Carson's poem 'Eras of Yves Klein', one of twenty-two individual chapbooks that make up her recent publication *Float*, also published in 2016. Running roughly chronologically, the poem imbues Klein's life and artwork

with a sense of inbuilt transience. Each line presents a detail from the artist's life, some personal, some professional, no sooner offered than moved through into another stage: 'The Era of Proposing Plans for a City Built of Compressed Air Currents / The Era of Asking Aunt Rose for a Citroën / The Era of Filling Pages of One's Notebook with the Word "Humility"', etc. The whole poem reads something like a lean and trimmed biography of Klein, affectionately sending up his artistic innovations and eccentricities. It is Carson's way of holding back the artwork that was Klein himself.

Looking back through *Float* to find the Klein poem I came across an additional pamphlet of 'Performance Notes', detailing the performance particulars of nine of the collection's parts, suggesting something of Carson's own attentiveness to the relationship between performance, text and transience. One note refers to the essay 'Cassandra Float Can', a lecture in three parts, 'first presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2008, accompanied in performance by images of the works of Gordon Matta-Clark [...] carried about the room by nine to twelve volunteers'. Here's the moment from that essay where Carson turns to Matta-Clark, an architect-turned-artist from New York whose best-known work was made during the 1970s:

Not one of GMC's artworks is extant. To know what they were like you have to consult the archival photographs or ask people who saw them. What GMC liked to do was cut things, usually big things. He split a house in half in New Jersey in 1974. [...] He made a diagonal pattern of spherical cuts up through the floors, ceilings, and roof of a Chicago apartment complex in 1978. These structures were all slated for demolition before he found them and he got permission to intervene in and alter the process of ruin. His best-known work is one for which he did not get permission. In 1975, prowling around the NYC waterfront, he found an abandoned pier that appealed to him. He broke into Pier 52 and spent two months making cuts twenty to thirty feet long and ten to eighteen inches thick in the corrugated steel of the wharf building.

The Pier 52 piece was 'Day's End'. It stood in place for two years before it was eventually demolished by the city's Economic Development Agency in 1977, a year before Matta-Clark's death from pancreatic cancer, aged thirty-five, only a year older than Klein. Like 'The Lovers', 'Day's End' is survived not only by photographs but in a film, a silent twenty-three-minute sequence showing Matta-Clark at work removing huge sections of steel and wood from the building's walls and floor. As he and his team carefully remove the largest, sail-shaped piece, the dim interior is flooded with light. It's almost too much for the camera to handle, bleaching the footage.

I haven't worked out who shot the film. It's usually attributed to Matta-Clark, despite the fact that he appears so often in the frame. While looking around for who might be responsible I came across a striking photograph, taken in 1971. It shows Matta-Clark, suspended by his ankle from the metal frame of another New York City pier building, silhouetted against a pale grey sky, his free leg bent, looking like a trussed-up outlaw, waiting to be tried, or a hanging escapist. The photograph is part of a series, 'Parked Island Barges on the Hudson', docu-

menting Matta-Clark at work on another project. The photographs are taken by Harry Shunk and János Kender, the same photographers who – eleven years previously – had also captured Yves Klein leaping out across the street.

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Matta-Clark's incisions appear to comment on several things: on the nature of residential and commercial architectural design, on the division between interior and exterior living, on the processes of urban demolition and renewal. Above all, they are about duration, one eye fixed on their inevitable destruction. With their emphasis on endurance, Abramović and Ulay's artworks are about duration, too, carried out with the same knowledge that, at some point, every performance must come to an end. The cruelty of 'The Lovers' is that it plays this paradigm out twice, the walk referring not only to its own completion but to the end of their relationship.

The first artist to consider walking as an aesthetic act in its own right, so the story goes, was the English sculptor Richard Long. In 1967 he produced his famous photograph, 'A Line Made by Walking'. The picture shows an empty field scored by a single narrow line, the result of his walking up and down repeatedly along the same straight length of grass. As with Klein's leap, it is the walk and not the photograph which is the work of art. Over the years, Long has developed several ways to document his work, from tracing his walks back onto Ordnance Survey maps to textually recording them in a kind of concrete poem (see *DARTMOOR TIME* from 1995).

There's a lot that could be said of the relationship between Long and Oswald's work, not least about song-lines, or the significance of transience, or about their shared interests in water, time, and measurement, or the reproduction of Long's 'Walking a Circle in Mist', Scotland' (1986) on the hardback cover of *The Thunder Mutters*, or even about their respective connections to Dartmoor National Park, where a great many of Long's walks have taken place. But I'm not going to say that here because I don't think I've got space. Instead, I want to think about the word *trace*, as in 'the track made by the passage of any person or thing', but also the 'vestiges or marks' that indicate 'a former presence' (according to the *OED*).

The word appears often in the discussion of photography. Rebecca Solnit has already used it once in this essay, discussing 'Leap into the Void': 'the only trace or souvenir of the work of art, which is the leap itself'. It's an important word for John Berger, also, appearing in 'Uses of Photography', an essay from 1978 dedicated to Susan Sontag. Sontag's own book, *On Photography*, was published the previous year, compiled from a series of essays she had recently completed for the *New York Review of Books*. '[A] photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image),' she writes, 'it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.' 'A Line Made by Walking' is two traces in one: it shows a trace and *is* a trace, both at the same time. It's an important word to hold in mind when thinking about Long, or Matta-Clark, or Yves Klein, or Abramović. It's an important word for Oswald, too, who identifies in Homer's poetry a lingering trace of the real world. 'A tree in a Homer poem really is a tree – not Homer's tree, but

a green, leafy, real thing,' she says to Sarah Crown in an interview from 2011: 'The puzzle I've spent my writing life trying to solve is, how does he do that?'

This may conjure Jack Spicer's lemons, but it also shares in something Oswald finds in Hughes, a way of summoning up the real, 'brought back into being in the medium of language'. 'It was a new idea to me', she writes in an article for the *Guardian* in 2005, in which she describes her early encounters with Hughes's poetry:

that instead of describing something (which always involves a separation between you and the object) you could replay it alive in the form of sound. You could use poetry to reveal what it sounds like being outdoors: the overlapping of thousands of different noises: the rain's rhythm, the wind's rhythm in the leaves, the tunes of engines, the beat of footsteps.

For Oswald, Hughes and Homer's poetry behaves like Sontag's photographs: it is 'directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask'. There's something about the aural quality of language – 'the form of sound', both tangible and not – inherent to this process. I wonder if it has anything to do with *enargeia*, a Greek word meaning something like 'bright unbearable reality', which governs Oswald's translations of Homer in *Memorial*:

Like when god throws a star
And everyone looks up
To see that whip of sparks

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Discussion of Oswald's poetry (as far as I can tell) has tended to focus on her position at the front of a long line of British 'Nature Poets', stretching back at least as far as the Romantics, from Wordsworth, Clare and Hardy through to Hopkins, Thomas and Ted Hughes. The hope of this essay has been to widen the lens, suggesting a parallel chain of references. Another hope – by way of the artists mentioned – has been to emphasise the importance of Oswald's poetry in performance. To ignore this aspect of her work, it seems to me, is to ignore a whole side of the coin. Returning once more to the Porter interview, Oswald is on the verge of saying this herself. 'I originally took to reading my poems out loud,' she says, 'because I found people didn't read the tunes properly on the page': 'A tune (to me) is a tension – its ending is stretched from its beginning and you can't cut it without losing that tension [...] [It's] one of the reasons I almost can't bear to put poems in books any more.'