

Performance Philosophy: Figures of Doing-thinking

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I want to begin by congratulating Agnes on her book and the impressive body of practice it exposes. As part of the celebration of the launch of this project, Agnes kindly invited me to say a few words this evening on the topic of Performance Philosophy, as a growing area of research that forms part of the context in which Agnes situates her work.

For those of you to whom this term may be unfamiliar, Performance Philosophy is an emerging field of interdisciplinary research in arts practice and scholarship open to all those concerned with the relationship between performance and philosophy. The first inklings of this development began in around 2008-2009, when myself and other colleagues sensed that there might be something like a 'philosophical turn' taking place within Theatre and Performance Studies. That is, following the so-called 'theory explosion' that affected most disciplines in the arts and humanities from the 1970s and 80s, it seemed to us as if increasing numbers of performance researchers were taking more than a passing interest in philosophy – and indeed, an interest in philosophies including but also outside of those of semiotics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and Marxism, that had already been absorbed as fundamental methodologies for performance analysis. Now, performance researchers were also looking to thinkers like Agamben, Badiou, Bergson, Deleuze, Irigaray, and Nancy, for resources with which to support a deeper analysis of some of the field's key concepts: presence, liveness, embodiment, community.

However, by 2012, we had come to appreciate that this growing interest in the relationship between performance and philosophy was by no means unique to the field of Theatre and Performance Studies, nor indeed to Dance Studies or Music – both of which might too be described as having taken a philosophical turn in the last decade. Philosophers, too, it seemed, were taking an unprecedented interest in performance. For instance, having largely ignored theatre and performance in the rest of its history, recent years had suddenly seen the publication of a series of books by those philosophers we in the UK would describe as coming from the 'analytic' or 'Anglo-American' tradition: James Hamilton's *The Art of Theater* (2007); Paul Woodruff's *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched* (2008); David Davies' *Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (2011); Noel Carroll's *Living in an Artworld* (2012); and the anthology *Staging Philosophy* (2006), edited by David Zucker Saltz and David Krasner, which includes a number of essays that take an analytic philosophical approach to theatre. This list has since been expanded by Tzachi Zamir's *Acts: Theater, Philosophy and the Performing Self* (2014); and Tom Stern's *Philosophy and Theatre: An Introduction* (2014). Likewise, despite previously having tended to pay more attention to cinema and literature, rather than performance, so-called 'continental' or European philosophers too, seemed to be involved in their own

‘theatrical’ and/or ‘performative turn’: particularly in the work of Alain Badiou, Hélène Cixous, François Laruelle and Jacques Rancière. Notorious – almost certainly mistakenly or at least simplistically – for its anti-theatrical prejudice, its distrust of theatre as the art of appearances and illusion that could not be further removed from the truth-seeking often used to identify itself, philosophy seemed to have located new value in engaging with its former nemesis. And much more than this besides, there were also working groups being formed, international conferences and festivals being held, all focused on the encounter between philosophy and performance.

And so, in the autumn of 2012, a group of eleven of us, launched the professional association and research network called Performance Philosophy. On the one hand, the association was founded in recognition of the fact that the last fifteen years had seen this unprecedented surge of international and interdisciplinary interest in the performance-philosophy relationship. But at the same time, the launch of Performance Philosophy was also a kind of performative act in itself, insofar as it simultaneously sought to bring a new field into existence – to make a field out of all these dispersed and somewhat isolated activities through the act of naming it.

And we chose the name Performance Philosophy quite deliberately, avoiding the separation of the two terms by an ‘and’ or a hyphen or a slash, with a view to – we hoped – leaving open the question of the *nature* of the relationship between them. For some critics, like Martin Puchner, this gesture signaled a simultaneously naïve and dangerous ambition, namely: to fuse or unite performance and philosophy at the expense of acknowledging the profound and significant differences between them. Exhorting us to ‘Mind the Gap’, Puchner has said: “What makes the study of theatre and philosophy interesting, even thrilling, is the very fact that the two are so utterly and irreconcilably different. It is the *and* that makes all the difference; it is the gap between theatre and philosophy that makes the study of their relation interesting, and even possible, in the first place. The study of theatre and philosophy should take its point of departure from this gap, and this gap should remain at the forefront of our inquiry” (Puchner 2013: 543).

However, much depends on what we mean by ‘philosophy’ and ‘theatre’ or performance in this context – how they are being identified such that they can be declared to be so fundamentally distinct. For his part, when Puchner says ‘philosophy’ and ‘theatre’, he is referring to both understood as ‘intellectual traditions’ and ‘academic disciplines’ in their institutional setting, where, he suggests, philosophy has substantially more power and prestige attached to it than theatre and performance. And indeed, I would accept that the use of the term ‘philosophy’ to designate an academic area of study or institutional department, has a specific history that one could contrast with the history of the use of the term ‘theatre’ in the same context. Indeed, it is clear that, in some contexts, the boundaries of what counts as “proper philosophy” are still rigorously policed – albeit that this can also involve the exclusion

of some minority practices *within* philosophy as an academic discipline, as much as those originating in other disciplines altogether.

But I am still not proposing what would be a misguided, imperialistic agenda to replace Philosophy and Performance Studies – as academic disciplines – with Performance Philosophy as “one, shared field of inquiry”. What I am disputing, is that ‘performance’ and ‘philosophy’ are reducible to these institutional histories; that it is the academic or university context alone that conditions their respective identities. Performance and philosophy are much more than this. And indeed, partly on account of this excess, I am not sure that they have identities or essences at all, such that we could make any hard and fast claims about their distinction. And I am not alone in this view. In terms of philosophy, even staying within the language of disciplines, Jacques Derrida once remarked: “I must honestly say that now, less than ever, do I know what philosophy is ... It is as impossible to say what philosophy is not as it is to say what it is. In all the other disciplines ... there is philosophy” (in Mullarkey 2009: xvi). Countless philosophers have sought to address the question, ‘what is philosophy?’, returning to declare: it is “rational enquiry concerned with establishing knowledge and truth” (dictionary); it is the creation of concepts (Deleuze); it is “relearning to look at the world” (Merleau-Ponty). But with no consensus emerging, it seems that the fact that philosophy has neither a definite subject matter nor an approach specific to it contributes to its ongoing identity crisis.

And, likewise, if there is any emerging consensus in Performance Studies, it is that – as Shannon Jackson puts it – “The term performance remains resolutely imprecise” (Jackson). That is – whilst some, such as Marina Abramović, continue to define performance and specifically performance art according to a rather simplistic opposition to theatre – where the former is real and the latter fake – I would suggest that the majority of researchers are closer to Agnes’ own view: namely that “*there are as many definitions of performance art as there are performance artists*”. Or indeed, we might go further and support RoseLee Goldberg’s view that, “Any strict definition [of performance] would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself” – in a manner that suggests that undefinability or a resistance to identity and identification is, paradoxically, precisely what defines performance as such (Performance Art 2001).

In this respect, a lack of identity or essence need not be seen as a bad thing – either for philosophy or performance. Articulated positively, this is simply another way of acknowledging their multiplicity or plurality and their ongoing transformation as processes rather than objects; their constant mutation and self-differentiation in relation to the other processes they encounter. Even if we seek to identify philosophy as a historical object it is one that has always already included an engagement with bodily practices; for instance, in the case of Nietzsche who famously declared that “All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking”, and stated: “We do not belong to those who have ideas only among books, when stimulated by books. It is our habit to think

outdoors – walking, leaping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or near the sea where even the trails become thoughtful. Our first questions about the value of a book, of a human being, or a musical composition are: Can they walk? Even more, can they dance?”. For Nietzsche, ways of life or modes of embodiment enable distinctive qualities of thought – for which his own preference was that borne of movement and the open air, rather than those of the cramped and closeted scholar hunched over his desk. It is a mistake to say “I think” because it fools us into imagining a subject behind the act; instead, he argued, “The basis of thought is first and foremost the act, and only secondarily the agent” (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*). As such, throughout various stages of his life, Nietzsche experimented with a range of different practices, living out a multitude of thinking-bodies both to escape and re-make himself anew – from an ascetic phase where he ate a strict diet and restricted himself to no more than four hours sleep a night, to his later life by which stage he was almost blind but continued to walk in solitude for six to eight hours a day, on well trodden mountain paths his body knew by heart. In this context, Agnes’ statement that “*there are as many definitions of performance art as there are performance artists*” pleasingly begs the question of *who* we might be willing to include in the category of ‘performance artists’ – Nietzsche too, or Diogenes the Cynic philosopher who lived like a dog or Saint Simeon the holy fool as much as Agnes herself, perhaps?

Who, but also *what*. That is, for me, another value of the resistance to a limited definition of performance and thought is that it provides an opportunity to revisit the status of the nonhuman.

In her essay in *The Big Toe*, Amelia Jones suggests that performance theory has shied away from so-called ‘inanimate art’ in favour of a focus on the live, human body. However, she argues that “Attending to inanimate or hybrid art forms... is an important way of clarifying what exactly we mean by performativity” (Jones 2015: 49). But Jones seems to stop short of allowing a performativity of things, remaining instead with the less controversial claim that “*Things* are necessarily involved when performativity occurs. *Things* are the points of reference that connect subjects, objects, and other subjects” (51). Jones still speaks of materials as being ‘manipulated’ in performance, and as being *activated by human artists*, and of inanimate works of art that foreground their quality of ‘having-been made’. My own interest lies in the extent to which the reverse might also be the case: in a characterization of nonhuman materiality as performer and performative process in ways that might be described as activating, manipulating or making the human – a reorientation of power which we might well sense in Agnes’ work. Or again, whereas Jones insists that the nonhuman materials of art are “always connected viscerally to an original, creative, incarnate intentionality”, I am concerned with the prospect that nonhuman materiality might have the capacity to introduce us to new ways of understanding what counts as thought and performance, beyond intention.

I am struck by the quotation from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* on the back cover of the book – one that, read in isolation, clearly endorses the exclusive privilege of Man –

as the only living being capable, as much on account of his posture as anything else, of transcending his embodiment in a “lofty thought” understood to justify his dominance over all other forms of life. It reads: “While the other animals are bent downward, looking at the ground, man was given an upward countenance, and was ordered to behold the sky and lift his erected face toward the stars”. But counterposed alongside Agnes’ stooped, unsteady and apparently unseeing stance; we re-read the quotation as an invitation to disorder precisely this transcendent figure and with it to dismantle the conventional hierarchy of human and nonhuman animals. Or again, whilst Ovid associates this upward-gazing figure with Promethean ambition, Agnes’ image reminds us that it might equally be associated with the man often described as the first philosopher, Thales – a pre-Socratic thinker who is said to have fallen into a well whilst gazing at the stars. According to Socrates’ narrative, the philosopher’s fall is witnessed by a young girl who laughs at him: “because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet. The same jest,” Socrates concludes “applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy”. And so begins a long tradition in which philosophy is as much the object of ridicule often in the theatre, as performance has been the focus of anti-theatrical sentiment at the hands of philosophy. But rather than entrench this opposition of performance and philosophy, embodied action and lofty thought, Agnes’ posture is perhaps a manifestation of another mode of *thinking as performance*, to some extent inspired by rather than defined against the downward bending animal. But this is not a simple reversal where star-gazing is exchanged for downcast eyes. Rather, as Branko Boero Imwinkelried’s essay in the book on Agnes’ piece *Vertigo of the Mind* (2013) suggests, this might also be a mode of existence that detaches the traditional correlation of knowledge with vision, metaphysical seeing with the sense of sight, rather than touch, smell, hearing and so forth. Whilst scholars frequently recall the shared etymology of theatre and theory in the Greek root *thea* meaning sight or view, and hence conclude that both practices “share an investment in seeing” (Puchner 2013: 541), we could equally note the way that such an investment often leads towards objectification and a presumed separation of spectator and the world he claims to know. All the better then to picture the performance philosopher as a precarious figure, only just balanced on the rocks, as she feels her way forward.

In her generous summary of the impact of this new field on her practice, Agnes wrote: “I am interested in Performance Philosophy because it helped me find some formulations applicable to my practice which I had been searching for for a long time”. In particular, she noted her appreciation for the “conception of performance as a way of challenging our way of thinking and as an attempt to redefine thinking itself”. And indeed, this latter sentiment gets us straight to the heart of the stakes of performance philosophy, for me too: namely the possibility of a reciprocally transformative encounter between the two such that performance might put pressure on extant definitions of philosophy and thought, but also – vice versa – that philosophy might present a positive resistance to attempts to secure an ontology of performance. That is, at the heart of this new field, at least for me, is an invitation to examine the

possibilities of an encounter between performance and philosophy beyond the application of existing philosophical concepts to so-called 'examples' of performance practice. Or again, whilst the use of performance to illustrate philosophy may well have pedagogical value (and indeed be more difficult to avoid than we might think), the more exciting and challenging prospect of Performance Philosophy lies in the exploration of new ways of thinking or doing philosophy in and as performance. A core task here would be to investigate *how performance thinks*, and to take care to attend to how this thinking operates in ways that might resist our existing understandings of thought and philosophy, particularly in terms of their presumed relationships to language, embodied practices and, I'll suggest, the nonhuman. At the same time, this agenda supports the contemporary return to the idea of philosophy itself as a practice or a way of life, as performance or performative. By no means necessarily or entirely an elite text- or desk-bound

enterprise that attempts to identify the fundamental nature of existence from a safe distance, or one that interprets the world rather than changing it, Performance Philosophy calls on us to produce philosophy as a thinking-doing with the capacity to get things done. How we understand performance, philosophy and thought all have the potential to be transformed by this encounter, if we enter into it with a sufficient degree of openness.