



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

PERFORMANCEPHILOSOPHY: SOME PERSPECTIVES ON THE HELSINKI BIENNALE 2022

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Introduction

Hosted by Helsinki's University of the Arts in collaboration with the Performance Philosophy Network, this event comprised interactive live / virtual events over a period of four days. Six international key groups, including one from Argentina and another from Russia, met during the months leading up to the conference in order to structure a combined presentation whose title had been selected in advance. Equally diverse in terms of subject matter were a total of twenty-two individual / group panel presentations that comprised a variety of papers, performances, workshops and recitals. Parallel to these activities an ongoing Pop-up Picnic took place in the large entrance hall that initiated interventions for conference participants to meet socially. A key question of the conference was 'How Does Performance Philosophy Collaborate?' Throughout this ReView I shall refer by way of example to two previous biennial conferences: *Between Institution and Intoxication: How Does Performance Philosophy Intervene?* (Amsterdam 2019, Franzen and van Balen 2019) and *How does performance philosophy act? Ethos, ethics, ethnography* (Prague 2017, <http://web.flu.cas.cz/ppprague2017/>); as well as 'interim events' that Performance Philosophy supported between the biennial conferences, such as 'Pragmatics: Practice: Praxis', a three-day workshop in 2017 in Sydney organized by Erin Brannigan, Oliver Feltham, Barbara Formis, and Theron Schmidt (<https://www.performancephilosophy.org/events/>); 'Getting Bread', a one-day workshop for Philosophy as Performance in Hanover, Germany, in 2016, organized by Rüdiger H. Rimpler (<https://gettingbread.wordpress.com>); and 'Know thyself/ Gnothi seauton', a "No Paper"

conference” in Prague in 2014, organized by Alice Koubová (<https://youtu.be/t-PmFrU3RrU>). All of these can be found on the Performance Philosophy website.

A conference community

This contribution stems from the perspective of a curious witness and not a presenter, at the Helsinki conference. Its focus is made even more complex by the inclusion of both live and virtual presentations for the first time at a biennale. In this light, Simon Makhali, Anna Suchard, and Carolin Bebek from the Bremen Centre for Performance Studies proposed methods for establishing exchange between individuals. This was realized through the possible choice of a personal hybrid “mate”, with whom one connected via a digital device and communicated during a session. Thus a particular rhythm of response on the part of these two individuals became possible in the form of a parallel dialogue commenting on the event in real time. It was conceived under the concept of an “event dramaturgy to crosslink the two spheres”. Such innovative sessions, entitled “Interspace / Interlude”, occurred during the whole conference and took the form of ongoing events under the subtitle “PPPPP (Performance Philosophy Problems Pop-up Picnic)” (Performance Philosophy 2022). Participants could withdraw or engage at any time with others in suitably furnished, designated spaces around the large entrance area. Such interludes acknowledged the multiple needs of a conference community engaging with their contemporaries in the same time-space. Their aim was to playfully question ways in which people can act and gather during or between sessions and attempt to address the social component of a performance philosophy conference as a problem within itself.

Although chiefly concerned with the hybrid issue of online and live participation at Helsinki, this contribution on the part of its initiators highlighted a need for flexibility within the structure of the programmed events themselves. My question, however, remains as to how successful the Bremen group’s experiment proved to be, given the demands of a program in which live participants were faced with a full schedule and their own varying levels of technological competence. Interesting to note, in this context, is that two of its instigators, Simon Makhali and Carolin Bebek, were co-convenors of the 2017 biennale in Prague entitled “How does Performance Philosophy act?” Recognition on their part of the key role to be played by forms of social interaction between live participants became implicated years later into a hybrid format. The Prague event was conceived as a performance-in-itself, experimenting with new dramaturgical formats in a genuine search for alternatives. I shall return to these in more detail during the course of the essay.

The replacement at Helsinki of traditional keynote presentations by key groups reflected a move towards a more democratic direction when compared to the usual conference structure. Combining a small number of individuals around a commonly-proposed title, live and online discussions were held between them during a pre-conference period. Ideas were then filtered down to an agreed format and shared with the conference audience. This was in contrast to panels, where a number of individual or group presenters were placed together in sessions loosely connected together in terms of a general theme by the conference organisers. By definition, a working group in this context would indicate processes of decision-making on the part of the

organisers or key groups, prior to the conference. Key groups were a welcome alternative, particularly those open to active audience involvement during their presentation. Sometimes the arena was widened to include responses on all possible levels, whether gestural or vocal, according to each individual. Their place within the conference worked well and I would strongly propose an increase in number, perhaps replacing paper presentations altogether. Such a practice was echoed during the Prague biennale, where lecture panels became the basis for collective exchange on the part of the contributors and not the result of individual research.

With regard to some presentations, general discussion would have been welcomed as an alternative to the formality of individual questions and answers. I note that at the Prague interim event of 2014 there was no paper and question-time format. All panels were discussed in dialogue within a structure of cross-mapping between them. Although I was not present at the Prague event, I imagine this would have taken the form of an open session where all presenters, together with participants, exchanged comparisons and connections between related themes. At Helsinki, such an approach would have allowed for more of a sharing process to occur, and avoided the frustration of thoughts not being aired to the group due to a lack of time. A plurality of response methods increases the field of diversity with regard to each person's rhythm and calls on structures in which this can take place. I recall a session at Helsinki, for example, where audience feedback was too intense for the presenters to absorb after the very different demands of their performance-lecture. The switch from performance to analysis via question and answer was too harsh. More time and space was needed in which to exchange. A missing component could have been acknowledged here, one that would have valued a more relaxed discussion in a less time-bound situation. Indeed, it could be a fundamental argument for the *rhuthmos* (Barthes 2013, 7) of a looser, more flexible session structure. This term, a predecessor of the word *rhythm*, refers to a changeable pattern, a flowing arrangement that can be improvised or configured.

As a Performance Philosophy 'interim event' in 2014, Alice Koubová from the Department of Contemporary Continental Philosophy at Prague University had taken the radical step of organizing the above-mentioned No Paper Conference. It focussed in particular on forms of 'public thinking' for philosophers in place of prepared papers, deconstructing forms of interaction between its participants by offering a free space for a variety of expression formats within an experimental dimension. I wonder if this step led to a more continued presence of conference members. Where do feelings of inclusion and the possibility of contributing, in whatever form and without pressure, stand in relation to this? Surely each person's presence, whether physical or virtual, is valued in such a context, whether or not they actually say anything.

Presentation formats and themes

At this point I return to Helsinki and an analysis of the presentations, the majority of which were structured as individual papers comprising panels. These included some workshops and performance-lectures / demonstrations, of which roughly ten involved an engagement of direct audience practice. Below is a summary of themes (which by their very nature often overlapped with others) and their chosen formats. Thematic problems addressed at the conference are listed

as subject headings alongside the format chosen for their presentations and include key groups as well as individual/group panels:

<u>Subject:</u>	<u>Chosen format:</u>
Theory / Practice re-framing	Key Groups, papers, workshop
Collaboration	Key Groups, paper, performance lectures
Artistic Practice	Papers, lecture-performances Workshop-demonstrations
Information consumption	Workshop, papers
Colonization and ethics	Papers
Environments and virtuality	Papers, workshop
Illness and special needs	Key Group, paper
Ongoing interventions	"Pop-up picnic"

I propose to address one of these themes, namely collaboration, by means of a methodology with examples as to how it could be experientially explored through a process of *doing*, thus bringing the rhythms of performance and philosophy more closely aligned together. Barthes' term *idiorrhythmy* (2013, 6), comprising *idios* (particular) and *rhuthmos* (rhythm), refers to any community that respects each individual's own personal rhythm. It can be applied here in a metaphorical sense if we examine the potentially diverse rhythms of thinking and doing inherent to these two practices. In essence they involve processes of thought generated through and with the body. Their collective existence places theory and practice in an evolving space of mutual interaction. At the same time, major differences between paces of thinking and doing, when applied to this space, can disturb, disrupt, or even positively influence a change. Such difficulties become manifestly clear during an event that combines them.

Under the heading "Collaboration", I counted a chosen format of seven papers, one key group, two performative gatherings, and one screened presentation of a theatre piece. Examples of *doing* collaboration with an audience were limited to two, namely "Poetics of Friction" (Panel 18) and "The Minutes of the Hildegard of Bingen Society for Gardening Companions" (Panel 13). Briefly outlined, the former concerned the problem of mutual understanding, putting into practice a system of call and response between the three panellists and the audience by means of spoken words, screened images, and handout materials. The latter involved a participatory performance-lecture together with the audience, staging a real or imagined gathering. In both cases, any unconscious structures of power between presenters and audience were dissolved in order to reach a level of reciprocal understanding. Such diversity of materials and spontaneity of situations would encourage an individually rhythmic-based response. Doing was combined with thinking as bodies moved and talked.

Regarding the key group, the seven papers, and the screened excerpts from a theatre production, my query remains the following: are there similar methodologies of *doing*, such as the ones applied

to the presentations described above, that could have allowed the content of these latter formats to be communicated on a more experiential level with an audience? Clearly the structure of both examples cited above relied on direct collaboration amongst participants in the form of responses and were facilitated either by an emphasis on 'staging' a speculative meeting or by instigating spontaneous vocal reactions that rebounded from each other. The methodology used by each differed: in "Poetics of Friction" it centred on collecting and re-examining histories, whereas with "The Minutes of the Hildegard of Bingen Society for Gardening Companions", a play between one person's and another's interpretations of words, images, or other materials helped to dissolve barriers of comprehension between them. With regard to the structure of these presentations, does the solution then lie in creating more—or only—key groups, along the lines of a No Paper conference, as proposed earlier in this essay? Would this lead to more practice-based thought? Could such key group sessions be led in the future by practitioners as a way of gently guiding participants into a hybrid field of *do-* / (performing) *think-* / (philosophizing) *-ing* in order to encourage a more balanced relationship between their paces of activity?

Some previous contexts

By way of a previous encounter with this question I refer to a chapter of the *Routledge Companion to Performance Philosophy* entitled "Daring to transform academic routines: Cultures of knowledge and their performances" by Jörg Holkenbrink and Anna Seitz (2020). Both are practitioners from the Theatre der Versammlung (Theatre of Assemblage) and describe their involvement in a production entitled *Am seidenen Faden* (At the Silk Thread) performed at a funeral parlour in Bremen, Germany. The chapter describes how an audience is greeted, the arrangement of the space, the structuring of time, forms of acting, and a discussion in the form of a "memory stage" (204) by the spectators. Basically, this practice allows for specialist disciplines to be brought into performance work whilst performative methods are applied to specialist areas. Practical and aesthetic approaches are interchanged with theoretical perspectives on reality. There is an integration of different forms of knowledge by applying theatre anthropology to the community. Issues of power between participants are dissolved here by a cross-over of disciplines, resulting in a flow of rhythms between the personal and the public.

Again, the Prague biennale conference springs to mind as a precursor to the above: here the audience divided themselves into two groups, namely theory and practice, and approached pre-determined thematic fields, surrounded by their own particular formats and disciplines, from the perspective of making reciprocal connections. Both examples—the one cited in the *Routledge Companion to Performance Philosophy*, the other based on a dramaturgical application within a conference event itself—offer solutions as to how specialist areas of knowledge can be incorporated into performance. Other interim events organized under the Performance Philosophy umbrella that reflect this concern include "Getting Bread", a workshop on philosophy *as* performance (2016) and "Pragmatics: Practice: Praxis" in the following year, a workshop dedicated to the exchange of practice within different fields and methods to produce hybrid

models of these. Such an approach would generate an understanding of the different 'rhythms' inherent to each field through a process of direct experience.

The Amsterdam Biennale of 2019 entitled "Between Institution and Intoxication: How does Performance Philosophy Intervene?" included a number of workshops as well as parallel events such as performances, exhibitions, and installations in the foyers of the buildings. Indeed, interventions occurred, whether spontaneous or planned, between some of the presentations, including my own, which was titled "An Expansion of the Admissible: Sound Theatre as Interference". A colleague and I agreed to enter spontaneously into dialogue in the form of an intervention during each other's presentations. One was made in the form of non-verbal interruptions that simultaneously echoed and played with fragments from a spoken presentation. These issued from the auditorium area and were performed through a small megaphone equipped with sound processing filters. The other was a piece of live performance art following a presentation of *Fragmanin*, a sound installation by Leona Jones, that also took the audience by surprise.. Movement, gesture, vocal and percussive sound gave embodied form to content that had previously been relayed through loudspeakers, with myself as performer leading the audience as they exited down a staircase into the foyer. Such collisions of pace between doing and thinking caused a disruptive shift to occur, engendering shock, surprise, moments of suspension, and re-evaluation.

Space and language

This leads directly on to my next point concerning the spaces available in a Performance Philosophy conference, one that contains unusual demands when compared to those of events normally understood under this term. It contains a plea for a practical consideration of spaces within institutions that allow for flexibility in the form of communicative living. Such venues continue to remain problematic but have been extended somewhat thanks to the imagination of the organisers. Perhaps lecture-theatres should be avoided altogether, along with Powerpoint presentations and panels seated in front of fixed audience rows. Indeed, are seats always necessary? If so, then perhaps a semi-circular or circular format would encourage eye contact and acknowledge the bodily presence of people, thus generating an atmosphere of trust amongst participants who are mostly meeting for the first time. A non-hierarchical, non-linear grouping does much to create this dynamic. Spaces at Helsinki that allowed for movement, so that the body negotiated freely in relation to others and to objects such as chairs, floors, cushions, technology, or lighting, proved highly successful in this regard.

Indeed, the main reception area was used in a welcoming way, containing furnished areas for repose or interaction with others, according to the stipulations of the Bremen group's "Interspace / Interlude". These were well-considered in order to allow for a diversity of individual needs. I wonder, however, if the seating arrangement for general reception presentations could have incorporated more of the above suggestions and avoided the lecture-hall formality of a screen and presenters standing on a podium. Do we still need a structure of chairs placed in lines and a view of the back of someone's head? Comfortable floors, well-placed technological devices, objects,

suitable lighting, and ventilation are all important in encouraging a good ambience. They generate an environment that challenges any pre-conceptions of behaviour by people used to traditional conference formalities.

Regarding the themes listed earlier in my analysis, could the book of abstracts be indicated in an alternative way to names and titles, in order to keep the journey and development of each presentation more open(-ended) and creative? Often the presence of titles proves to be reductionist rather than expansive in its affect. The densely-written format of a programme often proves an impossible tome to negotiate in the middle of a conference, whether read in virtual or hardback form. Why is such an innovative movement such as Performance Philosophy still using traditional structures of introduction? Given that most people access this information in virtual form surely other methods of programme presentation involving sound and image could be incorporated. Do we need academic terms such as 'abstract', or for that matter 'key groups' and 'panels', in a context that includes performance in its field? My plea is ultimately for a more playful approach to a seemingly unquestioned practice, one that would address an imbalance between the two disciplines. It calls for the radical potential of *rhuthmos* to be applied by inviting changeable alternatives into the arena.

The ultimate challenge for Performance Philosophy conference-goers, for whom doing and thinking are combined into whatever chosen form of expression, is to explore multiple modes of the above besides that of verbal syntax: "a matter of fracturing the fixity of language and drawing closer to our fundamental discontinuity" (Barthes 2013, 19). Such a discontinuity avoids the lure of progressive, directive discourse and, as the author points out, deconstructs meta-language. Perhaps it is the lived experience of the above quotation, of our fragmented conscious states, that allows for the emergence of unconscious knowledge through doing. There are, after all, many ways in which an individual can insert themselves into a social code—for example, by way of movement, gesture, sound, or image, all of which are very familiar to practitioners of performance. Such an approach favours a lived reflection of our everyday consciousness, experienced by an acknowledgement of our discontinuous states, our vacant spaces without verbal definition, our playful fluctuations. This relates to *idiorrhhythmic* forms of individual expression that can allow for a space of *being*. Methods of response to the different rhythms of verbal, musical, or gestural language are at the core of understanding if there is to be genuine interaction between participants coming from both disciplines. Generated freely and spontaneously, not only within the time allocated to a session but extending above and beyond it, they address the importance of acknowledging a balance between value-systems of expression. Examples of the above surfaced during Panel 20 of the Helsinki conference with Riku Laakkonen's workshop 'How Agency can be Studied when doing the Art of Expressive Objects' and Esa Kirkkopelto's 'Floating Bodies, Performing Signifiers'. The first concerned 'the bodily-material interaction of human subjects and objects' whilst the second demonstrated 'how the scenic performance problematizes our conceptions of body and language' (Performance Philosophy 2022).

The hybrid and the social

Linked to the above concerns is a social factor highlighted by vigorous attempts on the part of “Interspace / Interlude” to engage live and virtual audiences in mutual communication at Helsinki. This innovative component of the conference had to do with the presence of a superb and helpful technical team engaged by the University of the Arts to facilitate such a complicated digitally hybrid event. Small / large screens, headsets, loudspeakers and computer microphones acted as unobtrusive interfaces between two sets of participants. It was for me by far the most experimental and imaginative approach that I have experienced in similar situations to date, representing genuine solutions to the problem of facilitating exchange within the content and format of two realities. Highly diverse rhythms of space and time were brought together. However, the presence of such devices in a situation where a live audience had varied experience in dealing with them sometimes generated an unsatisfactory in-between space or *no-man’s-land* as both worlds attempted to combine in the mind of a confused participant. One solution was offered by the aforementioned coupling of hybrid ‘mates’ who could respect each others’ different rhythms of response on a one-to-one basis and adjust accordingly. Both live and online members interacted with presenters during key-group events, such as the one from Argentina entitled “Hacia Helsinki – Helsinki Bound”. In this case the live audience were encouraged to exit their chairs, leave their devices, and enter a relaxing, comfortable floor space in order to simply watch, listen and intervene in a virtual performance of texts, readings, sounds and actions.

The experiential energy-fields created within a hybrid gathering are very different to a live, in-person event. In this context they raised the question as to how the component of *doing*, something so fundamental to the nature of performance philosophy, can be incorporated into such a framework. If a live version of the biennale has proved problematic in the past regarding content and format, I wonder how this has been confounded, challenged or even improved by the addition of a virtual component. A possible answer would lie within a mixture of all three affects. There is still a feeling of discomfort on the part of a live audience when faced with the potential power hegemony of virtual reality. Emphasis is laid on its visual impact, sound often remaining of a frustratingly poor quality. One is less likely to intervene with a comment or a question if the virtual presenter cannot always see, let alone hear, the questioner. Discussion between hybrid participants remains on a much more formal, necessarily sequential level because of time-delays and the risk of interruption, either verbal or technical. Spontaneous interjections become much more difficult to comprehend when synchronicity is vital. Furthermore, exchange remains essentially discursive rather than performative due to the different spatial dimensions involved.

From a live audience perspective, I often found hybrid situations alienating as they incur no sense of real contact. A gap occurs in which meaningful exchange becomes difficult. The energy present within a shared physical space, comparable to that of engaging with a live performance, is missing. Body and mind do not respond on a perceptively physical level when other bodies are missing from the same space. And if the number of online participants outweighs that of people physically present in a room there is indeed a perceptual sagging of energy within the live environment. The term *social presence* comes to mind in this context. Challenges include problems of concentration,

as inevitable technical issues intervene during a presentation. However, in all, the virtual presence of people contributing in real time from all over the world opened out the enormous dimensions of such an event by greatly enlarging its live and online audiences. It would never have been possible to witness such a concentration of divergences and multiple rhythms of exchange between members. Perhaps, as our engagement with digital means increases in the future, hybrid events will reveal other new and improved possibilities for negotiating these realities on an experiential level that become seamless.

This brings me back once again to Makhali, Suchard, and Bebek, and their “Performance Philosophy Problems Pop-up Picnics” and “Digital Mates”. Their focus on interpersonal relations during the Helsinki conference made a fundamentally important point: namely, that it is vital to encourage real social intervention in between sessions as much as during them. In this way, the *idiorrhythm* of each individual becomes respected by a group as trust is increasingly generated between its members. Socially organized outings, such as local cultural events and eating and drinking venues are important and should be taken into consideration during the planning. The best conversations often occur during external trips, allowing participants a welcome perspective of time and space for deeper exchange, plus a chance to reflect off-site. Such an experimental project as the “Artistic Dinners” organized at Prague 2017 took participants into the city to explore actual sites of thinking and doing hosted by the local population, bridging a gap between the *island* of an institution and its surrounding cultural context. I have had very positive experience of similar events at previous conferences and welcomed those that avoided the formality of a costly dinner that not all participants can or want to afford. Such a divisive structure, unfortunately common to many events, is elitist, both economically and politically speaking. However, the Performance Philosophy biennales have avoided such a pitfall by including a dinner in the registration fee. Indeed, the setting of a dinner onstage in one of the university theatres at the Amsterdam event was a nice touch in this respect. Lighting created a warm ambience and informality was ensured by its relaxed proceedings.

Conclusion

The above reflections could potentially allow for more genuine meeting points, interaction, and exchange between hybrid participants in the future. It has been valuable to re-examine previous biennales and interim events from the perspective of pinpointing strategies that were employed to introduce a fresh approach to the very particular concerns of performance philosophy within a conference situation. To summarize, the following suggestions have emerged during the course of this essay with regard to future considerations:

- The importance of social gatherings, both live and virtual, during the event (“Interspace / Interlude” 2022)
- No division between performance and philosophy, rather a conference *as* performance (Prague Biennale 2017)
- The importance of key groups (Helsinki Biennale 2022)
- Collective exchange / no question-answer formats / a cross-referencing of panels (Prague 2017)
- No Paper conferences (Prague 2014)

- Performative engagement with audiences through *doing* / performance of knowledge (Holkenbrink and Seitz, Prague 2017)
- Philosophy *as* performance ("Getting Bread" 2016)
- Exchange towards hybrid models of practice as a method ("Pragmatics: Practice: Praxis" 2017)
- Interventions (Amsterdam Biennale 2019)
- Organization of spaces / places / objects / importance of ambience (Helsinki 2022)
- Multi-faceted modes of communication / expression aside from written / spoken (all events)
- External social / cultural events (Prague 2017)
- Guidance with digital forms of live / virtual interactivity ("Interspace / Interlude")

In light of these, I would propose the biennale held at Prague in 2017 as an experimental model to be developed in the future. Although not personally experienced, its ethos of performativity as a first instance, along with an openness towards finding new organizational formats, come closest, in my view, to reflecting the ongoing nature of research characteristic of Performance Philosophy. Returning to Holkenbrink and Seitz's insightful essay described earlier, it seems that a real integration of knowledge can take place through performance, thus ultimately avoiding any dichotomy between practice and theory. Many of the issues I have highlighted in this essay concern social factors such as hybrid communication methods, meeting points between participants, collaboration, session spaces, and multiple forms of expression. Respect for everyone's personal rhythm is expanded by these means, a respect that generates a feeling of trust within a (con)temporary society present at a conference gathering of this kind.

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Biography

Independent composer/researcher Dr Caroline Wilkins comes from a background of new music performance, composition and theatre, and has worked extensively on solo and collaborative productions involving these. Her particular interest lies in creating new forms of presentation, whether in the field of inter-medial sound theatre, sound poetry or performance art. Current activities include conference presentations and academic publications. Website: <http://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/artist/wilkins-caroline>

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