



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

FOR WHAT DO WE NEED PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY?

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I was asked to write a manifesto for performance philosophy. I am not sure if I am able to do so, but I think there is something constitutive in this uncertainty. Allow me to explain why. I will consider the issue from both sides, from the perspectives of performance and philosophy. Neither of them is necessarily an academic practice, but together they constitute a potential new field of academic 'studies'. The problem is to understand why an intellectual practice develops, or has to develop, in this kind of direction. Insofar as this evolution is worth supporting, it has to have a rationality of its own, an intrinsic force or *conatus*, that cannot be reduced to mere prevailing political and economic changes and respective individual choices.

One of the biggest changes in the new millennium that has shaped the research field in the performing arts is the emergence of performance practitioners (performers, directors, dramaturges, choreographers, composers, scenographers, and all kinds of designers) as academic researchers. These people have not been automatically welcomed into academic communities. Performing arts as a field of study in which research was dominated by the humanities is now considered from new perspectives. These new points of view do not coincide with existing research paradigms but do not yet support their own, and there is even doubt as to whether they need any established paradigms at all! The situation has led to a new type of ignorance and wondering, the nature of which is philosophical in many ways. 'Artistic research', 'practice-based research', or whatever one wishes to call it, has had recourse to philosophy in order to justify its existence and legitimize itself in the eyes of others. Disciplinarily, its main interlocutor has been the academic study of the arts (in fields such as Performance Studies, Theatre and Dance Studies, and Cultural Studies, for example). Philosophy is clearly something in common among artists and those who study the arts, a field in which their interrelation should

be negotiated. However, artists turning to philosophy and philosophers inherently risk remaining unilateral: such thinkers tend to be used as ultimate authorities, whose role in the discourse is to frame the area of questioning and to define its basic orientation. There is no question of criticizing or challenging Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Dewey or Wittgenstein through one's own humble practice! From the point of view of the artist, however, this kind of preliminary delimitation is deeply compromising. From the philosophical point of view, in turn, the relation itself remains *unphilosophical*. When, then, do artist-researchers really think philosophically? Methodological and epistemological issues related to the field are usually left to philosophers of science or academic ideologues. It is good to be aware of these discussions, but such issues are rarely the main source of their inquiry when artists start to carry out research. What is more important is to recognize the genuine nature, in other words the *philosophical bearing*, of the questions practitioners present to their artistic and academic communities as well as to a wider society. In any case, this is what every artist-researcher or researching practitioner tends to articulate in his or her research, which, like any institutional practice, is *self-legitimizing*. It is a tendency that implies the risk of institutionalization or academicisation in the arts, but also provides the means for criticizing and avoiding it if this basic institutional activity is simultaneously understood as philosophical practice.

Performance philosophy opens up a field in which performance, performance makers and performers can make contact with philosophical thinking without the advocacy of intermediary disciplines and in equal dialogue with them, learn to think in their own terms, and become understood by others. This is why it could, and often also should, constitute the most concrete form of thinking that 1) takes place at the very level of performance practice with its material, corporeal and institutional arrangements and the related power play or struggle these arrangements imply; 2) takes into account the wide range of research on these questions, but returns to that discussion over and over again on the level of the artistic medium; and 3) applies that medium in a way that indicates both the possibility of change and a way to bring it about in critical relation to the given institutional order of things.

Philosophically, there are no such institutional pressures. Philosophical thinking has its recognizable performative aspect, which is stronger in certain thinkers than in others. The degree of performativity is not dependent on whether an author writes or not. One can write performatively and philosophy can be, and has been practiced by highly performative means. The field of performance philosophy has at least two origins in this respect. It evolved from two types of *performing ethos*, epitomized by Diogenes of Sinope and Socrates. Many thinkers in the history of Western philosophy taking a more discursive approach have used one or the other of these more performative thinkers as a model for their own performativity. When we, as philosophers, ask what performance philosophy is or implies, our main problem does not lie in choosing which figure to follow. As in the performing arts, the after-life of any *philosophical performance* depends crucially on documentation, archiving, and writing - on the media of repetition, remembering and translation. This was the case with the aforementioned Greek figures. On the one hand, the challenge facing every performance artist is to make his or her practice repeatable, quotable, translatable, and transmittable. Mere archiving techniques do not

make a performance last, however; it does not last if it does not *return*, in other words if it does not have a significant philosophical bearing. On the other hand, the originality of philosophical thinking may also be related to its performative force. The critical question concerning the future of a philosopher's work is not whether it is 'dead' or 'living', but whether it continues to perform or not...

Perhaps the relation and tension between performance and philosophy in "performance philosophy" should be understood in terms of *this* connection – the one that prevails or not between the performance and its after-life – which is never guaranteed or assured. Something in this very relation, something much more than the show itself, *wants to become manifest*, but it cannot do so without a new kind of cooperation and dialogue between performers and thinkers, between us and within each one of us. *Let us give it a helping hand!*

Biography

Esa Kirkkopelto is a philosopher, artist-researcher, performer, former theatre director and playwright, convener of *Other Spaces* live art collective. Since 2007, he has been working at the Theatre Academy (University of Arts Helsinki) as professor of artistic research. His research focuses on the deconstruction of the performing body both in theory and in practice. Since 2008, he has conducted a collective research project "Actor's Art in Modern Times" on the psychophysical actor training. He is the responsible leader of the Doctoral Programme of Artistic Research (Theatre Academy, Academy of Fine Arts, Sibelius Academy & Aalto University), as well as Asian Art and Performance Consortium (Theatre Academy Helsinki & Academy of Fine Arts) 2012-2014. He completed his PhD in philosophy in 2002 at the University of Strasbourg. Author of *Le théâtre de l'expérience. Contributions à la théorie de la scène* (Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne 2008). He is a core convener of *Performance Philosophy*, a member of the editorial board of *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* and the convener of the "International Platform for Performer Training" which gathered for the first time in Helsinki in January 2014.

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