



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## THINKING WITHOUT AUTHORITY: PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY AS THE DEMOCRACY OF THOUGHT

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Perhaps nowhere else does the controversy of performance philosophy show itself so explicitly as at the moment of its very first utterance: in the announcement – as contentious to some as it is impertinent, no doubt, to others – that performance philosophy ‘stages a new field.’ What does such an announcement betray if it is not the presumption of foundation: that a new *discipline* has broken surface, that an upstart knowledge has muscled its way on to the broader field of older and more venerable forms of enquiry; that a brash demand has been made that it receive recognition and a certain entitlement in respect of its claim to autonomy – in short, that it be dignified with that same esteem owing to every disciplinary subject (however loosely defined) insofar as it represents a discrete field of knowledge. But performance philosophy is answerable to two fundamental rebukes for its apparent impudence: first that it is no more than an imposter and charlatan at the court of the ‘queen of all disciplines’,<sup>1</sup> philosophy, where it has had the temerity to trespass; and, second, that it is a mere usurper and interloper within the rather less secure, but none the less, well-established ‘conglomerate’ of disciplines (to employ Margaret Mead’s description of anthropology) that make up the field of theatre and performance studies (Mead 1995, 3). If it is – at best – a mere subset of existing philosophy, or – as appears more likely – not philosophy at all but an ingenious ‘rebranding’ of the existing field of performance studies under a different guise, then in neither case can it lay any claim to the status of a new ‘field’. What does a cursory glance at those disparate tendrils, fronds and vines of research activity cultivated on this field disclose but the fact that performance philosophy is united neither by its object nor by its method, and that in lieu of either it no more announces a new programme of study any more than it conforms to the minimal standards of coherence that we would expect of any legitimate

discipline, without which no guaranteed pattern of enquiry is able to be specified, and none of its data verified. If it is a field it is as if one can plant almost anything in it, as long as the weeds and wildflowers that grow there derive their sustenance from the basic formula that “performance philosophy = [any] performance *y*’ + [any] philosopher *x*.”

Confronted with the scandal of such an impertinent thought the following essay attempts to make some headway with redistributing the terms of this problem – not by following the tortuous path of defending the indefensible – but by seizing upon the radicality inherent in the proposition that lies at the heart of Performance Philosophy itself. The title – “Thinking without Authority, performance philosophy *as* the democracy of thought” – is ‘borrowed’ almost verbatim from Laura Cull’s essay, ‘Performing Philosophy – Staging a New Field’ which is published in the collection of essays, *Encounters in Performance Philosophy* (as part of the new Palgrave series ‘Performance Philosophy’). In fact, I would like to take this opportunity to consider performance philosophy in relation to what Cull, who is following the French philosopher François Laruelle, terms ‘the democracy of thought’. This, to my mind, denotes the radical ambition of performance philosophy, although the scope of that ambition has perhaps not yet been fully assayed, interrogated or understood. Cull herself begins on a modest note, writing at the beginning of her chapter that she aims to provide a context and introduction to the emerging field of performance philosophy. But of course what the essay does is far more than simply provide a context by which we might understand how those multiple, and sometimes opposing endeavours, converge on that community of scholars who would happily identify themselves as ‘performance philosophers’. If the essay seeks to announce the emergence of a new field, it does not do so by merely stipulating its existence: it also convokes that field by setting it forth in relation to that which is without doubt most challenging for it. In the first instance, that challenge is to think through the possibility that performance is itself a kind of philosophical endeavour, that performance ‘thinks’.

But what to be precise is so challenging in the statement ‘performance thinks’? I think we can begin see the nature of the challenge when we realise that whatever challenges us also *accuses* us. To hear the phrase ‘performance thinks’ in the accusatory voice is to confront the demand that we must fundamentally re-evaluate our assumptions in our approaches to thinking about performance; we must abandon our habitual way of doing things. The challenge is encapsulated in the question: is the relationship between philosophy and performance merely a ‘one way street’? Must it always be, in Cull’s words, a matter of ‘application’ – a matter of applying a pre-existing theory to an object (in the case of *a* performance); or – seen from the perspective of the object – as a use of performance to exemplify a particular theoretical argument. The accusatory voice, if we have an ear for it, declares that we who have a concern for performance as an art form, we who claim to understand it best, do not – for all our laudatory pronouncements, our clever critiques, our incisive ‘readings’ and our superior insights – do it the justice of letting it ‘think for itself’. Where do we begin if not from the presupposition that performance or theatre does *not* think? It is only because it does not think that we are compelled to then take upon ourselves the task of thinking for it. But thinking *for* something is always to place thinking *before* the thing: even when our thinking expresses our *love* for it. What, indeed, is philosophy if it is not precisely this gesture of solicitude and passion? – as Giorgio Agamben points out the ‘intimacy between

friendship and philosophy is so profound that philosophy contains the *philos*, the friend, in its very name' (Agamben 2009, 25). And yet, however solicitous one's intentions may be, and however much one conceives the act of thinking as the extreme gesture of friendship, such acts of 'philosophilia' implicitly betray an authoritarian reflex that deprives performance of its autonomy; that sees in 'performance-as-illustration' the demonstration and exercise of the sovereign power of truly transcendent thought – one that precisely reduces performance to the predicative *object* of thought.

In this way we produce philosophies 'of' performance, but we deny performance the right to speak to us philosophically. Thus does an ill-fated passion lead one to betray one's friends! And yet what draws us to theatre, and to performance, gives the lie to each of our attempts to think on behalf of performance/theatre, and here is the basic paradox: for what draws us to think 'about performance' is nothing less than the fact – to borrow Alain Badiou's well-known axiom – that 'theatre thinks' (Badiou 2005, 72).<sup>3</sup>

It is in relation to this challenge, this accusation, and this axiom that performance philosophy claims to do something radical. To experience this radicalism is exceptionally difficult, not because it is complex, but because it possesses a disarming simplicity. It challenges us to abandon that 'principle of sufficient philosophy' – as Laruelle aptly calls it – which philosophers of performance are so enamoured of. To put this in rather more precise terms, it challenges us to abandon philosophy's claim to transcendental authority, although it should be understood that this is by no means a call to abandon philosophy as such or to 'overcome' it. Performance philosophy is not an 'anti-philosophy' any more than it is its negation ("performance philosophy =  $\neg$  philosophy"). Let me try to explain what this means by raising an obvious objection: what is performance philosophy if it is *not* a philosophy of performance? Cull tells us that performance philosophy designates 'simply, a different kind of thinking... one that challenges philosophy's tendency to conceive itself as the highest form of thinking' (Cull 2014, 29). Already one understands a line of demarcation has been drawn here – and that performance philosophy is not just yet *another* philosophy any more than it is just another re-launching of performance theory. (In fact, on the contrary, performance philosophy is precisely not a theory *of* performance at all.) This circumvention is by no means to be thought trivially, then, although to see this we need first put the proposition to the test.

It would be easy to agree that performance or theatre thinks if by that we mean one of two things. First, that theatre thinks in the sense that those who make it – the scenographers, directors, actors and so on have a share in that human activity we call 'thinking'. Aside from being trivial this usually reduces to the basic distinction of an essentially *technical* determination of thought as opposed to a philosophical one – a thought that applies itself to resolving practical problems, and is rather less concerned with determining, for example, the truth or falsity of a proposition which is the province of philosophy proper. It is thinking but it is not 'thought' in any profound sense. Second, we say that theatre is 'thoughtful' in that (at its best) a play may inspire us to think 'about' its content: we say a good performance not only moved us but that it stimulated us intellectually. Performance acts as a medium bearing ideas, issues and messages of the kind that are of concern to us. It is, after all, a human medium; it speaks directly to us. And it is these ideas, issues and messages that

can be reported and translated into pieces of critical writing where the 'meaning' of the show, or the 'intention' of the theatre makers – received but barely understood by the average theatre audience – is finally illuminated by the perceptive critic. But neither technical nor critical and hermeneutic thinking are intended here: the challenge rather is to see performance not as represented in *another* thought, but simply as thought itself – to see 'performance as philosophy' (Cull 2014, 20).

But there is a further, more fundamental issue and problem here: if performance really is a different *kind* of thinking to philosophy, as Cull asserts, then performance philosophy itself is already not 'a philosophy', but something distinguished 'in kind'. So if the first two objections sought to distinguish the mode of thinking ascribed to performance and theatre by 'degree', as being *less* than philosophical, the second seems to render the very idea of performance philosophy nonsensical by suggesting its absolute difference from philosophy. If its mode of thought is distinct in kind, then how can it share an identity with philosophy at all? How can there be a performance philosophy? Here we return to the claim that theatre is an event of thought, or that performance thinks – that theatre and performance philosophises, yet in a way that distinguishes it from philosophy's own performance. As a result we are returned, inexorably, to an ambiguity from which we have not managed to escape and can hardly have claimed to have clarified.

So, let us ask again: what is performance philosophy?

In order to begin to address what this question is asking, I would like to change its terms for a moment by raising a different question – that of philosophy's own performance. In the first instance, one can see that there is nestled within the question 'what is performance philosophy?' another question that philosophy not only recognises, but takes to be its own most concern. After all, does not every philosopher ask themselves (when they are 'old enough' as Deleuze once said) the following question: 'What is philosophy?' And when they ask this question do they not have precisely the question of philosophy's own performance and performativity in view? When Kant asked himself the question, for instance, it was in order to assert the conviction that philosophy's dignity derived from the superior analytic power of philosophical determination over all other forms of knowledge: 'According to its *world* concept [philosophy] is the science of the ultimate ends of human reason' and for this reason it is philosophy that 'first gives value to all other cognitions' (Kant 1988, 27). The function of philosophy is not just to govern its own thought – but *all* thought.

Now Deleuze, who also asked this question when he was old enough, provided – in his own way – an answer that (not unlike Heidegger who had asked the same question before him) encompassed philosophy as a whole. That is, he answered it in part as an urgent historical problematic that is not reducible to the history of ideas, in order thereby to derive its transcendental function, which is to say, its proper authority and its essential definition. What is philosophy – performatively viewed – for Deleuze? Philosophy is the 'discipline that consists of creating concepts,' (Deleuze 1991, 473) while the philosopher is a 'conceptual persona' (Descartes, Kant, Badiou...) who must be understood precisely in relation to a specific performativity: 'To create concepts... is to do something' (Deleuze 1991, 475). But – quite opposed to Heidegger, in fact – Deleuze raises the

question 'what is philosophy' not in order to begin preparations for the 'destruktion' of metaphysics, but to defend philosophy against its 'insolent and calamitous rivals' (477) – for example, those contemporary sophists, the marketing men who appropriate the nomenclature of the 'concept' to peddle products and flog commodities. If they are sophists it is because they are dealers of pseudo concepts, and their monstrous fabrications are really falsifications and forgeries rather than genuine creations. The philosopher, by contrast, assumes the 'exclusive' right to the concept in its legitimate and true sense: it is this right that gives philosophy its historic 'function' (476) – albeit not any 'privilege' for Deleuze – for there are, he says, 'other ways of thinking and creating, other models of ideation that do not have to pass through concepts' (476). However, while the 'sciences, arts and philosophies are all equal creators... it falls to philosophy alone to create concepts in the strict sense' (474). The philosopher has an important job to do then – to create and polish concepts – to furnish them so that others may make use of them (philosophers of performance for example).<sup>4</sup>

So here we have a glimpse of the philosopher's answer to the question of philosophy's own performance – one that responds to the urgent call to preserve philosophy's place, against the usurpers who flood the marketplace with those pseudo concepts that bear the signature, not of great thinkers, but of salesmen. Two things to observe here in relation to Deleuze's response, however: First that the question 'what is philosophy?' arrives at no philosophical solution, since there is no answer that can provide philosophy with its own concept. There is no principle of sufficient reason, as Heidegger once said, to ground the thinking practiced by philosophy as such. The question 'what is philosophy' is thus to be understood not as a strict philosophical question, but as a question about its performativity. And yet as such it points to that which every performance of philosophy necessarily presupposes – that every philosophical assignment begins with a *decision*. To answer the question 'what is philosophy' is not just to decide what philosophy itself *is vis-a-vis* what it *does*, however; it is to decide thereby on the *whole* of the Real: 'To philosophize is to decide Reality and the thoughts that result from this' (Laruelle [1998] 2009, 56). This decisional structure, writes Laruelle, constitutes the very 'architecture' of philosophy. It is the 'invariant' of all philosophy regardless of the specific claims made on the basis of a particular philosophical outlook in contrast to another (Laruelle 2013, 233). To say it is invariant is to not to say that all philosophy says the same thing, but rather that all philosophy shares a structural identity insofar as each seeks to represent the 'true' Real. Philosophy puts itself *before* and *above* the Real – in the *act* of decision – and in this way assumes, says Laruelle, 'the position of transcendence'<sup>5</sup> (Laruelle 2013, 235) with respect to the Real. By the same token, this condemns philosophy to a perpetual state of *polemos*: what is philosophy if not an interminable positional struggle, between competing claims made on the Real? As Kant famously wrote, 'Every philosophical thinker builds his own work... on the ruins of another' (Kant 1988, 29). And the problem that arises from the history of philosophical agonistics, once one has the invariant structure of philosophical decision in view, is how one decides between the different philosophies; how one decides between 'undecidables'? Or, to put the same point otherwise, philosophical decision, while by no means arbitrary, is always ultimately without foundation. Lacking an ultimate ground in the sufficiency of its own reason, every decision must be seen to be radically contingent.<sup>6</sup> For philosophy's own 'narcissistic' imaginary, however, it is always a necessary contingency without

which there would be no nomenclature of thought at all. This is the syntactical style which distinguishes philosophy's own performance – the performative 'logic' of concept formation – according to what we might identify as the fundamental *disposition* of the philosophical attitude (Laruelle 2013, 233).

There are two senses in which we might understand philosophy through its disposition. The first pertains to the structural apparatus of philosophy; the second to its temperament. What is an apparatus, or a *dispositif*, as Michel Foucault once called it? An apparatus 'has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*' (Foucault 1980, 195). When Heidegger asks, for example, 'what is philosophy?' in his eponymous lecture, what is announced there by way of response to the question is described not just as '*a*' but as '*the* historical question of our Western-European actuality' (Heidegger 2003, 41). Invoking a philosophical *dispositif* is always performed (in Heidegger at least) for the sake of the salvation of man. There are, to be sure, many kinds of apparatus – and Agamben is no doubt right in defining the 'extreme phase of capitalist development in which we live as a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses' (Agamben 2009, 15). Nevertheless, I do not think it is too farfetched to say (if we borrow Laruelle's notion that philosophy is a transcendental-empirico doublet) that it is the *philosophical* apparatus as such that acts and that has always acted as a kind of benchmark for all others: it is the *dispositif* of all the *dispositifs* – the apparatus of apparatuses. Its dynamics of freedom and obligation, determination and indetermination, identity and difference, knowledge and power, and so on, procures a compositional mix of transcendent knowledge *and* a non-discursive or 'immanent' content. What the philosophical apparatus institutes is that 'ontological difference' over which philosophy ranges, in virtue of which its determinations are produced for the sake of governing its objects – and by means of which philosophy is able to position itself as the ultimate legislator of the world.

That is to say, viewed generally, a philosophical *dispositif* is precisely a syntactical structuring of *things*: an ordering and arranging of things according to their conceptual or definitional predications. The philosophical apparatus is always an attempt at synthetic mediation, or of analytic separation, and a pre-disposing of the world according to the sufficiency of its representation. It acts as a kind of 'mirror' upon whose reflective surface, the Real is alienated (Laruelle 2013, 135). *Disponere* means to arrange; and *ponere* – to position, to place and put things in their proper place. Thus will philosophy's temperament be defined by its taste for order and for conceptual mastery over the dimension of what is non-philosophical. As Laruelle writes: 'Each philosophy defines a non-philosophical margin that it tolerates, circumscribes, reappropriates, or which it uses in order to expropriate itself: as beyond or other to philosophical mastery' (Laruelle 2013, 2). It is, above all, the philosophical apparatus, then, that acts as a kind of apportioning machine that 'cuts' the Real – 'auto-découpage' as Laruelle calls it – and that renders philosophy, through the 'auto' positional act of decision, as always transcendent to the object of decision. What 'auto position' bestows upon philosophy is, in other words, its epistemological or ontological priority over the represented object. Philosophical decision is thus always a sovereign decision, and one that simultaneously asserts philosophy's sovereignty in the order of knowledge. This hierarchical logic, however, which belongs foremost to the economy of knowledge produced by



the apparatus of philosophy – insofar as it enacts a *sovereign* decision – both institutes the law and places philosophy, at the same time, in a permanent quandary where it is seen as both ‘judge and exception’ (Laruelle 2013, 45). With respect to the Real, however, the law instituted by philosophy is in force, but in the final instance has no ‘power’ of determination over it. The reason for this goes to the heart of Laruelle’s insight into the radical autonomy and indifference of the Real to philosophical determination: ‘The Real does not allow that it be seized or captured as a thing by a mirror which alienates it in an image or an intention of it. The Real is not an object or representation and consequently auto-representation’ (Laruelle 2013, 137). Confronted with such an insight – that philosophy ‘does not reach the Real’ (Laruelle 2013, 5) – the challenge laid down by Laruelle to philosophy will be wholly singular: ‘to postulate – through a thought adequate to the Real – a type of experience or of the Real that escapes auto-positioning’ [sic] (Laruelle 2013, 4-5). To ‘refuse’ the ‘principal pretension’ of philosophy is not to abandon philosophy altogether, but it is to introduce the ‘democracy of thought’ *into* philosophy. However, to *enact* such a refusal, I would suggest – to ‘democratise’ philosophy – requires nothing more nor less than the suspension of philosophy *as an apparatus*.

It is precisely here that the ‘radical’ nature of Laruelle’s thought converges with the radical implications of performance philosophy and *its* challenge. So how might all of this help us to elucidate the question of what performance philosophy is itself? And, relatedly, of what its ‘field’ is? In the first place, we can say that this question (which is the question of the performance of performance philosophy) is to be understood in strictly non-philosophical terms – that is to say, it begins with the radical gesture of accepting philosophy’s fundamental contingency although not its *necessity* as per its own decisional apparatus (that philosophy has no priority over other forms of thought and that it does not speak for the Real as a whole). Let us, in fact, begin by drawing an equivalence here by saying that if ‘non-philosophy’ or non-standard philosophy, as Laruelle sometimes calls it, is not itself *a* philosophy so much as it is the practice of re-orientating philosophy to this ‘non-philosophical’ margin in a non-appropriative way, then might not performance philosophy be the procedure of introducing democracy into ‘theories’ of performance in order to dissolve their own transcendental status? It is in relation to this non-appropriating gesture vis-à-vis performance that we can begin to understand how performance philosophy itself emerges – or might be construed – through its alignment with what Laruelle designates as ‘non-standard’ philosophy, which is to say, with that ‘new democratic order of thought’ that refuses philosophy’s game of domination and mastery (Laruelle 2013, 13). Laruelle writes:

If philosophy has only been and only ever will be an opinion and a poorly thought out passion, then the question is of passing from its state of war and of competition, a state of exploitation of thought and as such of man, to its civil state, which we want to call human and democratic (Laruelle 2013, 13).

And yet it is not simply a matter of drawing an equivalence here by saying that just as non-standard philosophy dismantles philosophy’s *dispositif*, through the organon of non-philosophy, so performance philosophy dismantles the *dispositifs* of the philosophies of performance (or theatre). Were that the case we would once again surely miss the radical potency promised by the

proposition of performance philosophy – that ‘performance thinks’ – that it too enacts a democracy of thought. It is for this reason that performance philosophy both is and is not the same thing as performance *as* philosophy. For what it also acknowledges is that performance is itself a thought *of* the Real – understanding the ‘of’ here grammatically as indicating the genitive case: performance as ‘possession’ by the Real – as a part of the Real; and as being overdetermined by it.

It is for this reason that I would say, first and foremost, performance philosophy should in fact be thought less as designating a field so much as asserting a hypothesis – a hypothesis that returns us (‘in the last instance’ as Laruelle might say) to performance. Specifically, it is the hypothesis that we must hold to such that thinking *alongside*, *through* and *with* performance might begin on the basis of an equality of thought rather than as a determining thought. This is the radical and non-trivial hypothesis contained in the statement ‘performance thinks’. This does not mean that when performance and theatre ‘thinks’ it must think ‘philosophically.’ Such a generalised demand would hardly lead to a more capacious understanding of performance philosophy; nor, conversely, should such a hypothesis ever be simply reduced to a verifiable or non-verifiable fact of the matter – as though it were something simply to be proven or disproven. As a hypothesis, performance philosophy must be tested in ‘the field’ – certainly – as per the singularity of the individual case. Still, the hypothesis of performance philosophy remains irreducible to the particular. Only as such might we maintain it in its radicality as instituting the organon of an *equalising thought* that is able to hold open the field of performance philosophy. The reason for this might be seen once we understand that it is the hypothesis of a generic suspension of the constitutive role of conceptualising thought with respect to the determination of its object. This is what I think is indicated in the *challenge* encapsulated in the proclamation (not that performance thinks but that it thinks (non)philosophically), which challenges us to act on the basis of the presupposition of the *equality* of thought and thinkers. As such it is the hypothesis of the *revolt* of thought: a revolt that brings thinking back from its transcendental and normative pretensions, and its flirtation with power, to its properly democratic dimension, as the thought of the one and the ‘anyone’. In this sense, performance philosophy could well be conceived as building on the foundations – utopian as they may well appear – laid out by Laruelle for a non-standard philosophical project, which calls for a radical egalitarian approach to thinking by repealing the authority contained in the philosophical *dispositif*. The effect of such an ‘utopian’ approach would be as startling to the field of performance as it already is to the epistemological field of philosophy itself, where it has already begun a ‘necessary mutation [that] change[s] the very concept of thought, in its relations to philosophy and to other forms of knowledge... an inversion that concerns a reversal of old hierarchies, but through a formulation of a new type of primacy without relationships of domination; without relations in general’ (Laruelle 2012, 232).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Martin Puchner's comment in the unpublished talk, 'Theatre and Philosophy: Please Mind the Gap': 'How can an art form with a weak and self-doubting intellectual tradition attached to it be brought into a level playing field with the Dowager Queen of the university?' (cited in Cull 2014, 21).

<sup>2</sup> This question provided the impetus behind this paper, and was posed by Broderick Chow at a research seminar held at Brunel University on 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> It should be said, although I do not have the space to develop this idea here that in fact Badiou's axiom 'theatre thinks' is by no means the same as Cull's axiom 'performance thinks' – and not least because Badiou reinstates the imperial dimension of philosophical thought in requiring that each event of theatre think its own idea, that is, the 'idea of theatre' itself of which it remains an incomplete attempt.

<sup>4</sup> Thus surreptitiously does hierarchy reassert itself at the very moment Deleuze equalises 'thought'!

<sup>5</sup> 'Under whatever form we take it, transcendence is the heart of Decision and what conditions it as auto-position, and the mixture of auto-position is existence under which transcendence gives itself as Decision's essence' (Laruelle 2013, 245).

<sup>6</sup> It is radically contingent because philosophical decision is always an operation of thought that is grounded in an attempted 'self-grounding' (see Anthony Paul Smith's discussion on this point in Smith 2012, 22-23).

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