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Performance as Philosophy: Responding to the Problem of 'Application'

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This article begins from the premise that a 'critical turning point' has been reached in terms of the relationship between performance and philosophy. Theatre and performance scholars are becoming increasingly engaged in philosophical discourse and there are growing amounts of work that take philosophy – from the work of Plato to Heidegger and Deleuze – as their guiding methodology for performance analysis. However, this article argues that we need to go further in questioning how we use philosophy in relation to performance, and that theatre and performance scholarship should attempt to go beyond merely applying philosophical concepts to performance 'examples'. One way to do this, the article suggests, is by questioning the very distinction between performance and philosophy, for instance by exploring the idea of performance as philosophy. The article concludes by drawing from the work of figures such as Allan Kaprow, Henri Bergson, François Laruelle and John Mullarkey to argue that philosophers and performance scholars alike might extend their conception of what counts as thinking to include not only activities like performance, but embodied experiences and material processes of all kinds.

What is the relationship between performance and philosophy? What is it about the contemporary context that seems to make the question of this relationship so urgent, interesting or attractive to so many in the field of theatre and performance studies now? Why, in other words, might the question of philosophy appear in this issue of *Theatre Research International* concerned with 'critical turning points' in theatre and performance scholarship? Of course, in the space of this article, I will not be able to answer any of these questions in anything but a highly partial, incomplete and, no doubt, personal way. And yet a sense of the need to evaluate the current state and potential futures of the field of theatre and performance studies demands that they be asked and that an answer be attempted. In order to continue to cultivate the emerging subfield of performance and philosophy, I would argue that we need to ask ourselves what it is that we want from philosophy, and, furthermore, to examine what philosophy brings to those who engage with it in relation to performance.

By way of introduction, it is perhaps worth relating that my own engagement with philosophy did originate, somewhat reactively, in a kind of dissatisfaction with the available discourses for explaining how the arts worked and why they mattered. That is, I came to value philosophy as a discourse that allowed me, in turn, to value the seemingly ineffable or even superficial or 'meaningless' aspects of performance practice (from the point of view of linguistically, semiotically, representationally focused modes

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of analysis), insofar as these aspects could be understood differently, via philosophy, as art's affective presence and material force. As such, I might begin by suggesting that what we need to return to or revisit is less philosophy *per se*, but specific philosophies insofar as they allow us to rehabilitate the very categories that were so thoroughly deconstructed in the last 'theory explosion':[1] 'presence', 'the body', 'the voice', 'community' and so forth. For instance, philosophies like those of Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson seem to provide a sound conceptual basis from which to argue that the ephemeral, material work of performance does not need an interpreting, anthropocentric subject standing outside it in order for it to have 'meaning'. Rather, we can activate these materialist philosophies in order to rethink 'meaning' itself, in terms of affect and becoming, or as a transformation of the audience that takes place on the level of the body through participation. Furthermore, as I will go on to discuss in what follows, these philosophies provide us with the resources to rethink performance itself as a kind of philosophy, and indeed to reconceive what counts as philosophy.[2]

Before I develop and explore the stakes of this claim, I want to begin by addressing one of the main problems that seems to have troubled the relationship between performance and philosophy; that is, the tendency of both sides merely to apply philosophy to performance. Second, I will briefly compare two accounts of the experience of 'waiting' – one that comes from the French philosopher Henri Bergson and one that comes from the American artist Allan Kaprow – in order to suggest an alternative to application, but also to emphasize the indeterminate nature of the distinction between the activities that we call 'performance' and 'philosophy'. Finally, I return to this tentative proposition that the rare marriage[3] between performance and philosophy is at its richest and most egalitarian if philosophy is willing to encounter performance as thinking, and as that which might extend what philosophy counts as thinking – a discussion that will also lead us to question the implications of the provocative idea that *everything* (not just subjects or minds) *thinks*. But first: application.

Problems in 'a rare marriage': on application

Although, etymologically, 'apply' comes from the Latin *applicare*, which simply means 'bring things in contact with one another', the notion of 'application' in terms of scholarship has come to connote a kind of methodological hylomorphism, in which a fixed idea is superimposed upon a pliant example, a predetermined theory over a passive practice. Application implies the subordination of the powers of one practice or process to the needs and goals of another, the instrumentalization of the example for the purposes of an argument which has little interest in the example itself beyond its value for that argument.

In the light of such connotations, interdisciplinary scholars in general (myself included) are often at pains to insist that what they are doing does not involve the 'mere application' of ideas taken from one discipline to another, or from theory into practice. Nevertheless, David Saltz argues that performance theorists

> typically *apply* theories by scholars in other disciplines such as philosophy ... If someone we respect has published a theoretical assertion that sounds good and supports

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> our own position, we uncritically adopt and apply the assertion . . . Because performance theory very rarely advances original arguments in support of the philosophical principles it adopts . . . we are often merely theoretical parasites.[4]

Even if we were to wish to temper Saltz's characterization of the parasitic nature of performance studies, it does seem fair to note the extent to which performance theorists' encounters with philosophy tend to be coloured by the pursuit of 'method'; we often look to philosophy for the next new method (to Deleuze, to Badiou, to Quentin Meillassoux) with which to analyse performance, as if all philosophy could be condensed to a singular and coherent methodology. And that is before we have even considered the problematic (as well as productive) implications of transplanting such a method from the philosophical environment in which it was cultivated into the unfamiliar territory of performance. Prominent scholars have warned against such an approach with regard to Deleuze. For instance, Claire Colebrook suggests,

> There is a problem with talking about 'method' in Deleuze, simply because his whole approach to life and thinking set itself against any idea that we should approach problems with ready-made schemas, questions or systems . . . Philosophy, especially, ought to be creative and responsive, forming its questions through what it encounters . . . If Deleuze has a method it is that we should never have *a* method, but should allow ourselves to become in relation to what we are seeking to understand.[5]

Of course, the problem of application also pertains to philosophers, who are arguably not averse to being parasitic on the arts. For Martha Nussbaum, for instance, it is all too often that art is 'simply being used as a primer for Philosophy 101'.[6] Similarly, in his 2006 book *Filmosophy*, Daniel Frampton notes the way in which philosophy might use film, particularly as part of its pedagogy, but only insofar as films are seen as containing 'stories and characterisations that helpfully *illustrate* well-known philosophical ideas', rather than looking to the presentation of ideas by the cinematic form itself.[7] This is what Frampton calls 'film "plus" philosophy', a mode of relation which he criticizes both for its condescending stance and for its failure to actually tell us something about film (as well as about philosophy).[8] Practitioners are positioned as needing to learn from philosophers here, rather than as equal contributors to a two-way flow of ideas, albeit they can also be backhandedly praised when they get a philosophical idea 'right' (that is, when they illustrate it effectively).

Likewise, philosophers have often framed theatre as in need of the philosopher in order for the ideas embedded within it to be fully articulated. This question of 'need' also figures strongly in both Derrida and Adorno's response to Beckett's work as that which both resists and demands philosophical interpretation; or further, it is the very resistance of Beckett's work to philosophy that seems to demand philosophizing. As Richard J. Lane has helpfully summarized,

> This paradox would simply disappear if the critic believed that the work of philosophy could completely account for the artwork, or, if the critic decided that the artwork was not in need of interpretation: perhaps it is non-conceptual, or, perhaps it always already communicates what it wants to say, but in a language entirely other to philosophy.[9]

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To go beyond application, then, we might suggest, the philosopher or philosophically minded performance theorists' study of a given play or performance must allow new ideas to be created, ideas that the thinker has not already developed on the basis of some other encounter. We have to be convinced that theatre and performance are doing something for the thinking and to the thinker; that it is through theatre, and indeed through *this particular aspect* of theatre alone, that this thought has emerged. Correlatively, performance practice might be seen to avoid application when it conceives itself as a way of thinking rather than as the mere demonstration of existing ideas. Allan Kaprow, for instance, saw little value in generating artworks that 'remain only an illustration of a thought' rather than providing participants with what he called an 'experienced insight'[10]: an event of embodied thinking by the participant in the act of doing, which is not the same as the recognition of some underlying metaphorical meaning of the work determined in advance by the artist. To make performances that stage what we already know is not a valuable activity, for Kaprow, in contrast to creating the conditions for experiments the results of which remain unknown.

If one of the problems of application is that the concept or theory applied remains rigidly unaltered or insensitively untouched by the singularity of that to which it is applied, then the aim of conjoining performance and philosophy might, by contrast, aspire to generate *new ideas of both* on the basis of a mutually transformative encounter, or what Isabelle Stengers calls 'reciprocal capture': 'a *dual* process of identity construction'.[11] We do not yet know what performance or philosophy can do. Therefore, perhaps, we cannot and should not try to answer the question 'what is philosophy?' or 'what is performance?' because to provide an answer 'would presuppose the possibility of a judgment about what a philosopher . . . can become', what a theatre-maker can become.[12]

Bergson the artist, Kaprow the philosopher

Allow me to develop an example. In the collection of texts that make up Bergson's last published work, *The Creative Mind*, a provocative tension is set up between the powers of philosophy and the powers of art in relation to Bergson's overall project to bring perception closer to the reality of indivisible change. On the one hand, we might note that Bergson puts forward a metaphysically privileged idea of the artist – as one who sees the world in a direct, rather than utilitarian, fashion.[13] Ordinarily, Bergson suggests, the faculties of perception and action are attached to one another with the result that perception tends 'to turn away from what it has a material interest in *not* seeing'.[14] 'Life demands that we put on blinders', Bergson argues, and, as such, philosophy should allow itself to be *inspired by the artist*, who can 'lead us to a completer perception of reality by means of a certain displacement of our attention' away from the merely useful.[15] On the other hand, though, despite this privileging of the artist, it is often philosophy rather than art that Bergson credits with the power to reveal the indivisibility of past and present; it is through philosophy that our perception is ultimately mobilized and revivified. Art merely 'enriches our present', Bergson argues in *The Creative Mind*, 'but it scarcely enables us to go beyond it' in order to witness the fundamental change that constitutes metaphysical reality.[16]

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In contrast, I would suggest that we challenge the very notion of philosophy and art as distinct activities, or, put differently, that we expand our understandings of the forms and kinds of activity that might count as philosophy or art. In part, the resources to do this come from Bergson himself, for instance in the famous example – cited by Deleuze in *Bergsonism* – of the one who must wait for the sugar to melt in a glass of water. Bergson says,

> If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not . . . mathematical time. [Rather] It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*.[17]

Philosophy here is equated with the perception of duration, as that which might take place through an embodied experience of waiting; that is, through what was then a relatively ordinary action, available to all.

And I want to suggest that this revelatory yet democratic nature of waiting for the sugar to melt resonates with the participatory works that Kaprow referred to as his 'Activities' rather than 'Happenings'. That is, if Bergson wants to frame the event of waiting for the sugar to melt as a philosophical activity, Kaprow's practice provides us with the resources to understand it as an aesthetic activity (or, correlatively, for us to understand Bergson's example as art). For instance, here is the score or instructions for an Activity by Kaprow called *Level* from 1970:

> placing a block of ice and bale of straw
> near each other somewhere
> ice melting slowly
> reducing bale, straw by straw
> (keeping pace with the ice)
> until nothing remains.[18]

While art historian Annette Leddy has interpreted this work biographically and metaphorically,[19] I would argue that what matters about *Level* is what happens to us as participants as we reduce the bale straw by straw, trying to match our own rhythm of action with that of the ice as it perceives the heat of the sun. Might such an example be considered performance as philosophy, or philosophy as performance, within an experiment where what distinguishes both terms from each other, and indeed from other terms such as 'experience' or simply 'life', remains creatively undetermined? Or, further, is it that all experience, all material encounters, are already thoughtful, and that the activities that we are accustomed to referring to as 'performance' and 'philosophy' simply allow us to *attend* to the kinds of thinking that matter enacts on its own terms?

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Concluding thoughts

For some, though, to say that performance *is* philosophy (or experience *is* thinking) risks rendering 'philosophy' a term that means everything and nothing; it is to dissolve the identity of philosophy altogether. As John Mullarkey has described, although the 'extension, or diffusion, of philosophy into other fields has always been there in the various "philosophies of" – "of history", "of science", "of art", and so on, from its very beginning',[20] the contemporary acceleration of this phenomenon has begun to cause some anxiety:

> What worries some philosophers, moreover, is that this process of diffusion is proliferating at an alarming rate in what is an apparent philosophization of everything, one that threatens to leave philosophy nowhere precisely because it is everywhere. Philosophy will have lost its own identity.[21]

But is there more at stake in such concerns than a kind of disciplinary territorialism on the one hand – the triggering of some self-protective mechanism in the face of an imaginary imperial takeover by the non-discipline of philosophy – and on the other a fear on the part of philosophers that 'proper philosophy' might become extinct in a generalized post-disciplinary academy? Surely, as François Laruelle has suggested, the project is not 'to think *without* philosophy but to think without the *authority* of philosophy', to challenge philosophy's right to determine who or what thinks or does not think, where and when thinking is going on and when it is not.[22] That is, it may well be the very engagement with (non-)philosophies like Laruelle's that encourages us to move away from the application of the theoretical models we already possess and towards an embodied encounter with the resistant materiality of performance's thinking: its embodied-thinking, participatory-thinking, or durational-thinking – encounters that generate new ideas of what thought is and where, when and how it occurs.

Existing discourse emerging from the field of practice-as-research has already gone some way to explore the nature of performance's kind of thinking, taking a particular and strategically necessary interest in how performance practice produces new knowledge. But the production of knowledge is arguably only one definition of thinking, or specifically of 'research', to which we might add many others; indeed, rather than *applying* this definition of thinking to practice (as if it were the same as text-based research), perhaps we might also look to performance itself to produce new ideas of what thinking is. As I noted at the start of this article, a limit point of the argument I am making might invite us to conclude that there are as many ways of thinking as there are different activities or processes, or, further, to conclude that *everything* thinks. That is, we might conclude that thinking is going on not only in performance (and certainly not only in performance because it tends to involve human bodies), but in all things (and therefore in all human, but also non-human, aspects of performance). Indeed Mullarkey has already proposed as much, arguing, 'We should no longer think of thought as something representing passive things, but rather as something *that things do themselves alongside us*'.[23] 'My' body, for example, is doing its own kind of thinking alongside 'me' as I work in the studio. The ice is thinking in its own way in response

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to the heat of the palm of my hand, of the sun. The stakes of this claim seem too great to try and unfold here. I can only conclude by proposing that they will involve the ethical: a demand to consider what new responsibilities we might have – as practitioners, academics, audience members, humans – in relation to all these thinking things.

NOTES

1 The notion of a 'theory explosion' has been taken up and discussed by a number of scholars in theatre and performance studies, such as Janelle Reinelt, Joseph Roach and Jon McKenzie, and indeed across the arts and humanities more broadly. In general, this refers to the translation, dissemination and subsequent influence of key structuralist and then post-structuralist texts (including those by Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault) on the study of the arts and humanities in anglophone universities, starting in the 1970s and 1980s. In their 'General Introduction' to the first edition of *Critical Theory and Performance*, editors Reinelt and Roach provide a very helpful account of the specific impact of the 'theory explosion' on theatre and performance studies: 'There has been a theory explosion, and it has had important consequences for both theater studies and other humanities as well. First, it has enlarged the conception of performance in ways not envisaged in the traditional study of drama and therefore reduced some of the separation of specialities between theater history, theory/criticism, and theater practice . . . Second, the "new" theory has returned the humanities to philosophy . . . In fact, much of the "new theory" derives from the work of philosophers . . . Derrida's critique of metaphysics, Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology, J.L. Austin's speech/act theory, and Jean-François Lyotard's conception of the postmodern'. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, eds., *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 4.

2 I would also like to suggest at this point that the term 'philosophy' might now be more conceptually useful or appropriate than the term 'theory'. This is by no means to dismiss the value of the group of discourses that tend to be referred to as 'theory' or 'critical theory', particularly for the articulation of the relationship between performance and identity politics. However, the term 'theory' is still often opposed to or distinguished from 'practice' in a potentially problematic manner. It seems to allow us to forget that thinking, theorizing, analysing, criticizing and so forth *are practices too*; it seems to encourage the application of theories to practices, as if practices were not also already engaged in their own kinds of thinking, theorizing, analysing, criticizing and so forth.

3 In the Cinema books, Deleuze speaks of Alain Resnais's films as the invention of 'a rare marriage between philosophy and cinema'. See Gilles Deleuze in John Mullarkey, *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 79.

4 David Saltz, 'Why Performance Theory Needs Philosophy', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 16, 1 (2001), pp. 149–54, here p. 154, emphasis as original.

5 Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 46, emphasis as original.

6 Martha Nussbaum, 'Stages of Thought', *The New Republic* (2008), available at http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/stages-thought

7 Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), p. 9, emphasis as original.

8 Ibid.

9 Richard J. Lane, 'Introduction', in *idem*, ed., *Beckett and Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2002), pp. 1–8, here p. 2.

10 Allan Kaprow, *7 Environments* (Naples and Milan: Studio Morra and Fondazione Mudima, 1992), p. 25.

11 Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 36, emphasis as original.

12 Ibid., p. 59.

13 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Citadel Press, 1992), p. 138.

14 Ibid., p. 137, emphasis added.

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 157.
17 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1911), p. 10, emphasis as original.
18 Allan Kaprow in Annette Leddy and Eva Meyer-Hermann, eds., *Allan Kaprow: Art as Life* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), p. 46.
19 See Leddy and Meyer-Hermann, *Allan Kaprow*, p. 46.
20 John Mullarkey, *Refractions of Reality*: *Philosophy and the Moving Image* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. xvi
21 Ibid., p. xvii.
22 François Laruelle in John Mullarkey, *Refractions of Reality*: *Philosophy and the Moving Image* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. xiii, my translation, emphasis added.
23 Mullarkey, *Refractions of Reality*, p. 207, emphasis as original.

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