

# The 'B' in Philosophy

Hester Reeve

Presented at "What is Performance Philosophy?" University of Surrey 2013



Hester Reeve *Deliverance II*, 2007

In this paper I will be speaking about my own work; I am an artist first and foremost (also a 'performer,' to coincide with the conference theme, but as in live art which is experimental and non theatrical). I claim this identity position quite consciously and with a little difficulty (the term has a lot of baggage and because I share Kaprow's "nice irony" that, "The art-not-art dialectic is essential").<sup>1</sup> This first piece that I am showing, *Deliverance II*, is very much about being an artist and challenging what we think artists do rather than being about 'something.'

I am also a theorist, but in Irit Rogoff's definition of the term:

A theorist is one who has been undone by theory...If one shares this set of perspectives then one cannot ask the question of 'what is an artist?' without asking 'what is a theorist?'<sup>2</sup>

So, I maintain the identity position of an artist but, ironically, we can see in the above live art document that I am stating, instead, that "I am a philosopher." Of course, I state this as an artist and as part of a two-day durational live art performance.

This contradiction is a good way to start this paper, 'The 'B' in Philosophy.' The 'B' here stands principally for Being, an age old area of concern for philosophy and yet as I have it in the title, the 'B' literally upsets the letter order of the term philosophy just as fully considering Being – a considered existence lived out in the world – upsets the traditional notion of what philosophers do (write books). But I don't suggest this disruption to be destructive, but rather to suggest that in their extreme risks, art and philosophy might be one and the same thing. However, we might miss it in the rare circumstances that it did occur because we are so performed by a longstanding divide between what art and philosophy supposedly do. Nonetheless, my practice of making art is as much thinking abstractly as it is making via matter and undertaking a Masters in philosophy was more constructive to my work than doing my degree in fine art had been.

It is interesting to note that whilst philosophers rarely credit any 'certain' artists (for not all artists would be in the running) for their philosophical achievements that some artists have long been ready to recognise certain philosophers as artists. Paul Valery claimed of Plato and Spinoza that even if their ideas can be refuted, their thoughts remain astonishing works of art.<sup>3</sup> However, I can't 'become' as an artist without philosophy, and it is Arendt, a philosopher, who I turn to in order to explicate:

The immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought...Works of art are thought-things, but this does not prevent their being things.<sup>4</sup>

This combination of thought and thing is the risk that an artwork is open to, but I am as interested in crossing the supposed divide between art and philosophy and ask, therefore, in what way is philosophy a thing-in-the-world?

---

<sup>1</sup> Allan Kaprow "Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life" (ed. Jeff Kelley), University of California Press, 1996, pp. 98-9)

<sup>2</sup> Irit Rogoff "What is a theorist?" <http://www.kein.org/node/62>, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Allan Kaprow *ibid*, p. 82

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt "The Human Condition" (1958), Doubleday Anchor Books 1959, p. 47, p. 48

In *Deliverance II* I am cheekily spelling out “I am a philosopher” by marking the paper with kisses, lips inked up with the colour of blood. This was to acknowledge a violence or a violation within the performance’s modus operandi which was an act of resistance against the prevailing expectation on me as an artist. Namely my being expected to perform value in a designated location at a specified time and in front of an audience as if, to quote something Michael Corris once remarked to me when discussing the piece, we artists are seen as nothing more than “cheerleaders of communication.” I saw the action as a subversive piece of graffiti sprawled across the gallery floor; I made the work in the gallery during the lead up to the festival and then rolled it up when the show officially opened.



Hester Reeve *Deliverance II*, Prestival, Harris Art Gallery, 2007

It was a laborious two day task, I should say that it was an immense effort to claim that I am a philosopher. I’m interested here in not just claiming art as a species of philosophical agency, but also insisting on a bodily involved discipline linked to the idea-world. I hadn’t planned for the supplicating stance in the kneeling but I liked the inference of commitment and goodness contrasted with that of my bloodied mouth – as if I was a hooligan who had started a brawl in the gallery.

I resist this inherited paradigm whereby art is valued in terms of its audience because it inevitably means art is formed via communication before it is recognized as an act of thinking a new beginning. And it seems this capacity for action –something I feel comes from the extreme risks of art and philosophy alike- is at stake in today’s world. Again, I quote Arendt from “The Human Condition”:

In this existentially most important aspect, action, too, has become an experience for the privileged few, and those few who still know what it means

to act may well be even fewer than the artists, their experience even rarer than the genuine experience of and love for the world.<sup>5</sup>



Hester Reeve *Being & Time*, Text Festival II, Bury City Art Gallery, 2005

The title of this work, 'Being & Time' plays with Heidegger's famous tome "Being and Time" and for three months I sat as an exhibit in a gallery reading and copying out by hand the book – dedicating my being and my time to the immense task of reading his book. Whilst perhaps it is only in philosophy that human endeavour can clearly focus in on the elusive ontological issue of being, such endeavour is held in words, not deeds. This artwork wanted to ask what role do such important words play in lived life today where they exist largely shut tight in books, books that are within Universities for the most part. I'm not suggesting that Heidegger should be popularised or that philosophy should not be written down (by Heidegger's own calling, "Language is the House of Being" and I don't entirely disagree). I did this piece, on one hand, to be able to dedicate my time and being to "Being and Time," to underscore the rare endurance that is required to write or read philosophy and, on the other hand, to underscore how increasingly exceptional it is to have such an opportunity to do so in the type of world we live in today.

In the work I expose the book in public, I gave it centre stage of an art gallery as a thing of cultural value. I wrote out onto human size panels that were framed and hung in the gallery, spatialising the book as it were. I was also playing with speaking back to philosophy by challenging the tradition that philosophy belongs in books by simultaneously reading and performing a "commitment via the shape of a life" in a public space.

Returning to Irit Rotgoff's definition of a theorist, I ask: To what extent do philosophers become 'undone' by their philosophy? What do philosophers risk in their life as a response to their own thoughts? I am being demanding, asking after some sort of responsibility. This is not to be didactic but because something is at stake once our thoughts are written. In "Giving an Account Of Oneself" Judith Butler invokes Foucault:

---

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt *ibid* p. 297

Thus if I question the regime of truth, I question too, the regime through which being, and my own ontological status, is allocated. Critique is not merely *of* a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility within which practices and institutions appear, it also implies that I come into question for myself...self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperilling the very possibility of being recognized by others...the normative horizon within which I see the other or, indeed, within which the other sees and listens and knows and recognizes is also subject to a critical opening... In Foucault's view, this opening calls into question the limits of established regimes of truth, and there a certain risking of the self becomes, he claims, the sign of virtue.<sup>6</sup>

It is a tricky issue – particularly if one looks at the rare case of Heidegger, a philosopher who did take action in life on the basis of his philosophy. If anything, his misguided affiliation with Nazi politics would seem to act as a warning against philosophers doing anything outside of writing books. Of course, I would disagree, but the relationship is extremely risky. So perhaps, art – as in 'art-not-art'- is the place where philosophy can best *act*?



---

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler "Giving an Account of Oneself" Fordham University Press, 2005, pp. 23-24

This art work – if it can fit under a category at all - is more of a strategy. It cannot be exhibited at all. The above is an image of a tattoo on my ankle, so it is actually more me than anything else but it gets to the nub of a lot of my concerns with regards the standard oppositional tendency in describing the relationship between art and philosophy.

It arose in response to reading "What is Philosophy?" by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. HRH.the is not a pseudonym but a 'conceptual persona,' a strategy they claim exclusive to philosophy and not art. They maintain that conceptual personae are rare, subterranean aspects of certain philosophical texts, figures that make certain thoughts possible and which have no existence outside of the texts they function within and hence no relation to real life. So Nietzsche's Zarathustra is a good example of a conceptual persona operating within a philosophical text.

Via HRH.the I am cheekily contesting Deleuze and Guattari's confidence in the residence in thought that philosopher's exclusively occupy (they of course value art, but state art cannot have conceptual personae, it has aesthetic figures that operate purely via sensuous affect); I am speaking out within philosophical discourse for a philosophical credence for art. This project has a political dimension. Philosophers have always spoken of art, sometimes in the past outlining when it was and was not of value, but seem little aware of or wanting to be affected by the philosophical thoughts of certain artists (of course not all artists adopt a philosophical practice) or philosophical provocations of certain art works. There does seem to be a cultural blind spot with this regard and in both disciplines. I take Joseph Kosuth's famous essay 'Art after Philosophy' as a key case in point here.<sup>7</sup> Here he outlines a very clear case for art's capacity as a philosophical enterprise (in fact he claims art takes over after the end of philosophy). An artwork's very essence had become, in his exegesis, a conceptual questioning after what art is in a way that philosophy, in his thinking, had ceased to be able to question what its own self was. So, for Kosuth, art was no longer an aesthetic project or principally about the art object, it was a self-governing on-going philosophical operation that didn't need philosophy traditionally understood. Despite the essay's constant circulation in art schools, this significant point of his text has touched little in terms of artists' identities or education. As the artist Robert Smithson shrewdly pointed out, "Critics, by focusing on the "art object" deprive the artists of any existence in the world of both mind and matter."<sup>8</sup> But there is little rumble from the studios, so to speak.

But, back to celebrating philosophy qua philosophy. I find Deleuze and Guattari's outline of the functioning of the conceptual personae hugely creative, as it is intended to be. They attest to the conceptual personae's significance and affect residing in the movement of thought they allow for, as opposed to any specific words they might say:

The conceptual persona is not the philosopher's representative but, rather, the reverse: the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona...I am no

---

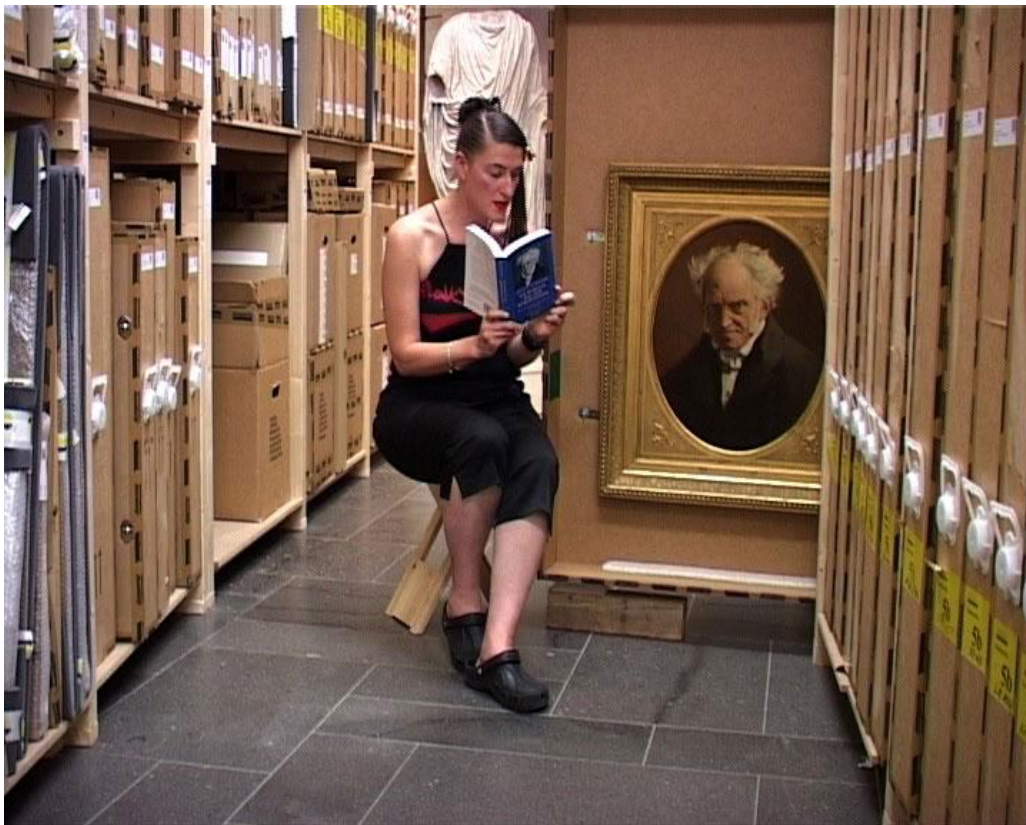
<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kosuth 'Art After Philosophy' (1969) in Joseph Kosuth "Art After Philosophy and After" MIT Press, 1991, pp.13-32

<sup>8</sup> Robert Smithson, 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects' (1968), in Robert Smithson "Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings" University of California Press, 1996, pp.111-2.

longer myself but thought's aptitude for finding itself and spreading across a plane that passes through me in several places.<sup>9</sup>

Via HRH.the I am suggesting my art practice is at heart an operation of thought, some sort of broadly conceived philosophical text, one lived out via embodied art performances. It is not HRH.the who lives it out, it is me. HRH.the cannot be visualised, it is not an anthropomorphic figure, it is more an image of thought that somehow makes my art works possible. None the less, I had it tattooed on my body, as some sort of commitment and so that my body, a 'life-shape,' was taken into account in terms of anyone viewing the philosophical text I am creating; if one is open to art, qua art-philosophy, operating through oneself, one has to accept to be changed in the process. To be changed in the process is also to take the risk of becoming unrecognizable. This seems exciting, if against the grain of current art practice.

Incidentally – HRH does not stand for Her Royal Highness, but for Hester Reeve Honestly. I am consciously attempting to disrupt habits of thought and cultural motifs. The 'the' is to acknowledge the role that language plays in constructing the sense of self/singularity in the first place, it is almost a nonsense denoting nothing in itself and yet making specificity possible (in my mother tongue of English that is).



Hester Reeve *The Critical Girlfriend*, Schloss Wilhelmshohe, Kassel, 2007

---

<sup>9</sup> Giles Deleuze & Felix Guattari "What is Philosophy?" (1991) Verso, 1994, p.64

This is a still from the work screened at this conference yesterday, 'The Critical Girlfriend' from 2007. It's from my on-going series 'Site Specific Readings to Camera' most of which have not been shown (I am not sure how best to display them or where to display them). These works, like 'Being & Time,' explore the place of philosophical thought in everyday life and each exposes a book in a certain site that brings out the work's 'contemporary bite' and continue the challenge of 'the question 'what kind of thing is an artist?' by situating the figure of the artist utilising established philosophical thought as a medium. I only use texts by dead thinkers because I am interested in allowing dead humans to have an impact on living individuals. So, with this series of works, I am less trying to advertise the philosophers per se and more trying to raise a broad challenge in the spirit of Sloterdijk's call for philosophical *practice* akin to, "You must change your life!" Perhaps here the B in philosophy stands less for Being and more for Becoming.<sup>10</sup>

In this work I read a section from Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation" besides Angilbert Göbel's famous portrait of him which is reproduced on many of the book's covers. The painting was temporarily in the storage basement of the Schloss Wilhelmshöhe Museum, Kassel, where many old masters had been stored to make way for Documenta 12 exhibits in the public galleries. I wanted to question what exactly was meant by contemporary art, emphasised by my choosing to read out the ideas of a philosopher largely disregarded today for his views on art. (In fact, aspects of Schopenhauer become relevant to concerns I am trying to push. For this piece, I read out Section 49 from Volume 1 where Schopenhauer states that art is akin to the Idea, disclaiming Plato for only applying the term to concepts).<sup>11</sup>

(continued -)

---

<sup>10</sup> Peter Sloterdijk "You Must Change Your Life" Polity, 2012

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer "The World as Will and Representation Volume 1" (1819), Dover Publications, 1969, pp.233-236.

To contextualise the relevance, I quote from page 235:

"Finally, we can express the distinction between concept and Idea figuratively, by saying that the *concept* is like a dead receptacle in which whatever has been put actually lies side by side, but from which no more can be taken out (by analytical judgements) than has been put in (by synthetical reflection). The *Idea*, on the other hand, develops in him who has grasped its representations that are new as regards the concept of the same name; it is like a living organism, developing itself and endowed with generative force, which brings forth that which was not previously put into it."





Hester Reeve *Virtuouso - Dismembered Sonata for Hannah Arendt*, 2013, Bristol City Hall/Arnolfini, 2013

But, I wish to talk more about a more recent work in this series, 'Virtuouso - Dismembered Sonata for Hannah Arendt,' 2013, performed in Bristol and screened at Arnolfini. The book here is Hannah Arendt's "The Human Condition" and the 'reading' was carried out in College Green, in front of Bristol City Hall in the midst of people hanging out, church bells ringing and a demonstration occurring in the background. Unlike all my other site-specific readings, here I was silent and read to myself, but as I read I tapped my body with a piano key (the sound it created was amplified via a small microphone) to foreground the body's presence within the reading of ideas; to suggest the body as a virtuouso instrument of thought but one preparing for action (tapping as an action to wake up the body to respond in life to the provocation of the philosophy. I was framed by the dismembered keys of a piano spread around me. It is since this piece that I have been developing the notion of these performances as themselves a hybrid type of art-philosophical writing, a proto writing or an integrationalist text which seeks to re-invigorate the 'social code' and, perhaps ironically, since I am silent, calls after the potentiality of any individual's voice. It was interesting that after I had finished the work, some teenagers came up to me and asked a little nervously if I had been casting a spell? It was rewarding that they had interpreted what I was doing as public entertainment and that no one on the green 'gathered around.'

This thinking about certain live art works as a proto philosophical text is in its early state but suffice to say, I have found it really elucidating to turn to ancient Greek theories of rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> In that cultural and historical context, the primary concern in relation to the art of language was its link to the artistry of being a citizen – which is not to suggest a good citizen is she who makes artwork, the ancient Greeks had a far broader conception of what art, *techne*, could include amongst human activity and skill than we do today. In ancient Greece, striving for virtuousness, *arete*, was not only a common goal of a citizen but interestingly, in terms of my position, an activity that was seen not, as it is today, as abstract philosophy but as a bodily phenomenon, often entwined with athletics where the term *metis* acknowledged a type of knowing or bodily intelligence measured through one's actions or public speech making. In a surprisingly contemporary sounding account, an individual, for the ancient Greeks, was not viewed as an enclosed identity but one made up of forces (including the social). This understanding did not lead to a moral relativism but a commitment to individual acts of honour since it is always acts of individuals that connect individuals into the given social reality. This is a far more digestible account of morality where virtue was related to art and skill within everyday life rather than to universal, moralising experts:

In other words, one cannot just *be* virtuous; one must become virtuosity itself by performing and hence embodying virtuous actions in public. *Arete* was...not a *telos* but, but rather a constant call to action that produced particular habits. In short, virtuous movements produced a repeated style of living-the economy of *arête* was a decidedly bodily phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

In ancient Greece, the Olympic Games form the example par excellence, where the honour being striven after was not just athletic but also poetic and philosophical. Contests included public speeches and recitals. Now, I am not wanting to suggest that all forms of live art equate to virtuous actions (most contemporary artists would have a huge problem with that for not entirely non-understandable reasons). What I find so useful is this conflation between the athletic prowess (i.e. the body) and rhetoric (i.e. language) standing as a publically acknowledged text of virtue.

Foucault writes of this ethical model with enthusiasm in his 'Technology of the Self' series and in particular in the essay "What is Critique?"<sup>14</sup> Focusing upon the value of an art of existence, Foucault also wanted to maintain a boundary between discourse and lived experience (Kaprow's 'art-not-art' tension) whilst insisting on an equivalence between how one speaks (writes) and how one actually lives (does), what the ancient Greeks termed *parrhesia*. This *parrhesia* which, Foucault argues, is embodied by Socrates' courageous speech in Plato's "Apology" is not so much freedom of speech but rather a freedom *to* speak. The onus comes back, according to Butler, to the individual subject and their commitment to act; the momentous words that Socrates proclaims are granted less by the assembly who have called him to bar, and come into being more through Socrates own risking of himself (in that he gives a truthful account of himself and, in so doing, questions the limits of the socially established regimes of truth).

---

<sup>12</sup> The following passages about ancient Greek culture are taken from my chapter 'But the real work was to place a stone in my mouth (please remember that I did that)' in 'The Text Festivals: Language, Art and Material Poetry,' edited by Tony Lopez, University of Plymouth Press (forthcoming 2013)

<sup>13</sup> Debra Hawke "Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece" University of Texas Press 2005, p.18

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault "What is Critique?" in "The Politics of Truth" Semiotext(e) 1997

Thus *parrhesia* stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to *akrasia* and there is something to this notion of *akrasia*, this lacking of command over oneself within the larger moral picture, which I am challenging through embodied durational action. Live art action means I can at least suspend normality and rearrange what it means to have or run one's life for three hours or three months even. Returning to Foucault's account of Socrates' *parrhesia*:

[T]he target of this new *parrhesia* is not to persuade the Assembly, but to convince someone that he must take care of himself and of others; and this means that he must change his life.<sup>15</sup>

A government can never challenge you to be free, only another individual can do that (and that can be a dead philosopher through their writing or a living person through their actions).

## Conclusion

Key to this talk is an exploration of the relationship between thought and the body, between ideas and matter and between philosophy and action-in-the-world. As such, the priority, within my own work as an artist, becomes centred on a species of philosophical agency made possible via live art performance. I'm not in any position to state its value, it's certainly not a theory of performance philosophy, but exercising its possibility as a 'member of society' in the type of cultural reality we occupy today seems significant and extremely creative. I find Sloterdijk insightful here and fittingly, I quote from a book titled "The Art of Philosophy":

Practice, or exercise, is the oldest form of self referential training with the most momentous consequences. Its results do not influence external circumstances or objects, as in the labour or production process; they develop the practicing person himself and get him "into shape" as the subject-that-can.<sup>16</sup>

However, I do want to relate the process to making art. For all the prepositional and philosophical nature of art a la Kosuth's essay 'Art After Philosophy' (which I follow) art's very significance seems to be in its thinkingness manifesting through matter, the seeking of a life practice premised on making *something* outside of words. Kosuth too wants art works, wants to be an artist and not a philosopher, and claimed so to me in his Rome studio surrounded by shelves of philosophy books.<sup>17</sup> This 'thing' aspect of art can be as aesthetically powerful in its own right as it is conceptually reflexive – one thinks less of Kosuth's art works and more of Cezanne's.

But since I am not using recognizable tropes such as painting, the way my art works, my art things, relate to the viewer is problematic. They do not capitulate to what Sloterdijk terms "models of intelligence viewed from the outside"<sup>18</sup> and so I've often been charged by curators

---

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault "Fearless Speech" 2001, p.106. Referenced in Judith Butler "Giving an Account of Oneself" Fordham University Press 2005, p.130

<sup>16</sup> Peter Sloterdijk "The Art of Philosophy" (2010), Columbia University Press, 2012, p.6

<sup>17</sup> Hester Reeve Interview with Joseph Kosuth conducted in 2008 as part of a forthcoming publication "The Mattering of Philosophy"

<sup>18</sup> Peter Sloterdijk *ibid* p.78

that my work is 'incoherent' (because they are working to a model that artist and art works communicate and communicate in terms of their audience as opposed to in terms of the Idea) and, in any case, it is perhaps the thinking behind them and the risk of self they incorporate which is where the purchase is; the art works are secondary but no less significant. The documentation does not seek to communicate the thinking behind the work, more they are 'images of that it was done.' Perhaps we might talk of an aesthetics of possibility inherent in the documentation? I do, of course, hope there is an audience –somehow- for my work, and I do hope they feel somehow challenged, that is, 'loved' in Arendt's sense of the world having been loved.