

How do we know what we know?

A report on the *Gnothi Seauton – No Paper Conference* at the Institute of
Philosophy, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic

October 24-27, 2014

The ancient imperative *Gnothi Seauton* (“Know thyself”) has been a longstanding subject of debate throughout the history of philosophy. The *Gnothi Seauton - No Paper Conference*, organized by Alice Koubová (Institute of Philosophy, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic) and Jan Puc (Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, The Charles University in Prague) made an attempt to revisit and revitalize the debate around the question of self-knowledge from a particular transdisciplinary perspective, bringing together experts working at the intersection between performance and philosophy: philosophers, performers, performance researchers, artistic researchers. The event was realized in cooperation with several international partners (*M-body*, Freiburg/Germany; *Soundcheck Philosophie*, Halle/Germany; *Philosophy on Stage*, Vienna/Austria) and sponsored by the international research network *Performance Philosophy* as well as by the Czech-based project *Philosophy in Experiment*. (See also <http://web.flu.cas.cz/filosofievexperimentu/nopaper/>)

The aim of the conference was twofold: First, to reflect on the relationship between self-knowledge and knowledge produced in the domains of philosophy and performance. Second, to go beyond the conventional frame of an academic conference. Presenters were asked not to simply read out fixed texts, but, instead, to step out of the habitual setting and to get engaged with the performative situation of presenting their knowledge and ideas. In the call for contributions, the link between the theme of the conference and this experimental and performative format was stated as follows: “It is relevant to ask what the relationship is between self-knowledge and habit, and whether we are able to discover something in the communication itself when we are delivering an impromptu lecture, or what impact the presentation format has on the lucidity and intelligibility of the ideas for the others and for us as well.”

I was invited by the organizers to join the conference not as speaker, but as a participant observer with a background as artistic researcher in dance. This background shapes my perception of the event and what follows is obviously a highly subjective review. I will first outline some of the issues underlying the topic of the conference and then describe in more detail my impressions of the impact the experimental *No Paper*-format had on the character of the meeting.

The topic and the aims of the conference touch on issues that have been the subject of debate in the field of artistic research for some time, already. There is a certain unease with the standard format of academic knowledge dissemination at conferences and symposia. By and large, this format follows a similar scheme: Written texts are lectured in 20 minutes, often accompanied by a power point presentation and concluded by a short discussion.

In the context of artistic research, this standard academic format proved to be no longer sufficient, because it is not able to adequately accommodate the non-conceptual cognitive content created in and embodied through artistic processes (Borgdorff 2012). The articulation of this content makes it necessary to include other, non-linguistic forms of expression, for example its performative enactment. The question of format, however, is related to a more fundamental issue: Academic research *privileges* propositional knowledge (*knowing that*) over other non-conceptual modes such as practical, tacit, implicit or embodied knowledge (*knowing how*) that are more common to artistic practices. In artistic research, this imbalance has been the subject of fierce criticism, and there has been a strong push to explore and develop alternative approaches that combine multiple modes of knowledge-making and its dissemination in the form of lecture-performances, lecture-demonstrations, installations, performances, workshops and participatory forms actively including the audience in the research process (Nelson 2013). What is at stake at the intersection between art and academia, and in a similar way at the intersection between performance and philosophy, is no less than an epistemological shift of paradigms towards *performative research* (Hasemann 2006) as a new model next to quantitative and qualitative models. It is against the background of this paradigmatic epistemological shift that the *Gnothi Seauton – No Paper Conference* took place.

The conference was opened by an informal get-together where the participants introduced themselves and shared some of their thoughts related to the conference theme amongst the gathered group. This was followed by a series of presentations during the next three days. Instead of the usual combination of keynote lectures followed by panels, all contributions were attended by the whole group. The modes of presentation differed considerably, ranging from free

speech, improvised monologues and performances to more participatory and interactive approaches in which the group was instructed to physically explore and participate in a collective process of doing-thinking.

To give just a few examples: *Howard Lotker*, drawing on the philosopher Douglas Harding and on his own performance research, guided us through some perception tasks to make us aware of our own particular phenomenological position. In a free speech *Andrew Haas* developed his ideas about the impossibility of self-knowledge. *Milena Fridmanova* chose a similar mode and identified the problem of philosophical discourse about self-knowledge in its avoidance of the *personal*, proposing to draw on *experience* as a source of knowledge arising from the process of change, instead. *Candice Salyers* performed a solo dance piece and asked the audience to reflect on the question what meaning the dancer's knowledge has for us. *Larissa Lily* guided us through some body awareness tasks, taking turns with *Carsten Friberg* who shared his thoughts about the relational and enactive character of knowledge. *Elke Mark* opened with a short introductory talk our doors of perception and took us on a silent performance walk through the streets of Prague, making us aware of the performative power of language in activating our sensuous knowledge. *Martin Dornberg* staged a performance of philosophical thinking that followed no linear logic or rational reasoning, but that released the affective potential of his ideas, making his thinking intensely *felt* and *sensible* to the audience.

The *No Paper*-format of the conference provided the time and space for this kind of performative intensifications. It sparked the presenter's spontaneity and often made them chose a more open style of communication. The insecurity and vulnerability that went along with these unfamiliar ways of presenting is usually eschewed in the academic realm where rhetoric brilliance and intellectual virtuosity are highly valued. However, in the setting of this conference, the fact that each one was equally challenged to drop standard procedures created an atmosphere of shared risk-taking, trust and complicity.

This unusual conference setting was fostered by a carefully deliberated preparation and dramaturgy of the event. For example, the conference guide that was sent out prior to the event did neither contain abstracts nor biographies of

the participants, with the effect that the immediate face-to-face encounter between the participants during and between each presentation was in some way more innocent and more important than professional status, academic rank or institutional affiliation. Instead of a large amount of participants, the organizers chose to keep the number very small (around 25), which allowed more time to get to know each other and increased the intensity and depth of exchange at the meeting. The conference venues were distributed over the old city centre of Prague: a small theatre, a rehearsal space, a dance hall, a club - but never a standard lecture hall. The geographic and architectural distribution of conference sites forced us to frequently mobilize and relocate ourselves; this regularly disrupted, in a positive way, the potentially numbing effect of sitting and listening in the same room all the time; it also created gaps and intervals in our collective stream of consciousness, enabling new openings to other physical and mental spaces, directing our attention somewhere else, allowing us to digest and reflect while we were walking disoriented through the labyrinthian streets of the old city of Prague.

On the one hand, the experimental format of the conference was a real challenge for the participants. To let go of the security conveyed by habit and convention raised the level of anxiety, more so for some maybe than for others. Even though the organizers clearly stated in the call that 'rhetorical or esthetic brilliance is not expected, and neither is originality at all cost, or great entertainment' - nevertheless, one cannot deny a certain pressure of performance and fear of judgement. Both are present in standard conferences, as well, but conveniently wrapped by academic customs. A weakness of this experimental format may be that there is too much concern for formal aspects of the presentation and that the clarity of its propositional content gets blurred or that it fades into the background. With regard to the aims of the conference, however, this 'failure' could be seen as a success because it enables new self-knowledge and a better understanding of how one's habits of thinking and doing shape the outcomes of one's own research.

In my perception, the *No Paper*-format productively uprooted many of the standard values and codes of academic behavior and created a very intimate and

generous atmosphere of collaboration. The formal, compositional and dramaturgical choices by the organizers made a significant impact on the dynamics, the ethics and the state of mind of the conference. The point was not to be smart in delivering one's own knowledge and to criticize or even combat the philosophical position of the other. The atmosphere was not competitive, but critically constructive, supportive, empathic and inclusive. Disagreement could be voiced without being met by hostility.

Many presentations succeeded to open up the relationship between presenter and audience, so that the listener became an active witness rather than a passive receiver. In some contributions, the audience was even empowered to become co-researchers. This turned the conference into a laboratory of ideas and practices, where the making and sharing of knowledge was less an individual undertaking, than a relational and collaborative process. It fostered a sense of a common endeavor, like being in a rehearsal for a group performance, and the mode of communication shifted its character from monologue to metalogue, from representational to explorative and performative. This collective enactment of philosophical thinking, engendered as a combination of various modes of knowing and reflecting, and embodied by a multiplicity of participants, reconfirmed the notion that all knowledge is situated, relative, provisional – and performative.

References:

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