PERFORMANCE VIDEO LABS: A PRIMER

This primer offers some new ways of working with video in performance practice. It is designed for theatre and dance companies but can be used by any group or team that practices regularly together. The techniques were developed by **Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Agnieszka Mendel, and members of the Embodied Research Working Group**.[1] You are free to adapt and share all or part of this primer, with proper attribution (CC-BY).

There is a lot of information in this primer. Each section offers a series of exercises for integrating video creation into your practice. The exercises are listed from the simplest to the most complex. **I am available to consult on integrating these ideas into your own process.** Throughout 2019, I am offering free consultation to participating companies, to learn how these ideas can work for professional artists. To book a session, visit **https://calendly.com/benspatz**

> *Technology note:* This primer does not focus on video technology. Everything described here can be done with a mobile phone, if that is what you have. Of course, a higher quality camera and microphone will give you better visual and audio quality. (We mostly used a Nikon D750 DSLR camera, sometimes with a RØDE or Zoom mic.) Not to mention action cameras and motion capture! There are many online resources for technology advice, but this primer focuses on the ethical and epistemological aspects of video.

I. WORKING WITH VIDEO LABS

1) Videographer: The simplest way to start is to bring a video camera into your regular practice. Anyone who wants to can pick up the camera and start recording. That person becomes a videographer temporarily. They should not try to capture an artistic work, but focus on *whatever is happening in the space.* Conversations and moments of confusion can be just as valuable as beautiful or artistically successful moments. Everyone should try being the videographer.

2) Three Roles: To create a more dynamic and unpredictable lab, assign everyone to one of the following three roles: *practitioner, director, videographer*. Each practitioner (or performer) is responsible for their own practice. The director can also be thought of as a choreographer or composer: someone who gives instructions to another. Each lab session can be as short as ten minutes or as long as five hours. Organize several lab sessions together, so that people can try different roles, and to see how the shifting power dynamics change what happens.

3) Rotation Cycles: To dive deeper into research, set up a rotation schedule in which each person takes on each role. Decide how long each session will last — for example, if you have three people and three hours, each person can explore each role for one hour. If you keep the same rotation schedule for several days or weeks, you will find yourselves deeply exploring multiple related territories of practice, without ever creating a fixed performance.

4) Lab Design: Once you have experimented with a fixed rotation schedule, you may want to become more intentional with your lab design. Individuals may find themselves drawn towards a particular role or relationship, saying: "I want to do more videography" or "I want to be directed by her" or "I want to direct him." Create a schedule at the beginning of the day or week, assigning different roles in each session to satisfy as many of these desires as possible.

5) Notation: To specify lab design more precisely, you can use the Dynamic Configurations notation, which looks like this: **[AB]<C/D**. That formula means: *A and B are in the space of practice; A is responsible for specified material while B is improvising; C directs them; D is videographer.* Using the notation takes some practice, but it can be very powerful.

II. WORKING WITH VIDEO MATERIALS

1) Rewatching: If you do any of the above, you will end up with recorded video material — perhaps a lot of it! This material is co-created by everyone who appears in it as well as by the videographer. The simplest first step is to watch the material together and discuss it. What is shown in the video? How does this relate to your memories of what happened? It may be a good idea to audio record your conversations about the video material.

2) Catalogue: The simplest way to curate meaningful selections from the video material, which still honors the co-creation process, is to make a "Catalogue." Divide the video materials among the participants and have each person choose a certain number of clips. Choose a maximum number and duration of clips — for example, each person can choose up to six clips, lasting no more than five minutes each. Each person then proposes a title for their selections. The selections (in-point and out-point) and titles should be agreed by everyone together.

3) Publish: You can publish a Catalogue like this on your company website, alongside other kinds of video. Unlike conventional performance documentation and marketing materials, these video selections do not point towards a finished artistic product. Instead, they may offer visitors an intimate glimpse of your process. Publish the clips along with their titles. An example of how this can look is the Songwork Catalogue: **http://urbanresearchtheater.com/songwork/**

4) Commentary: To add more detail and context to your published catalogue, supplement the video selections with written commentary. Each person involved should have the opportunity to write a comment. Writing comments on video selections can spark interesting conversations about your practice, with the short video clip and title providing a clear focus point.

5) Video Essays: A more complex way to work with and publish your video materials is by creating video essays. Using any video editing software (such as iMovie or Adobe Premiere), you can put together video clips from the same or different sessions, along with voiceovers and textual commentary. Video essays can be very complex and very rewarding undertakings. For some high quality video essays, visit **https://jer.openlibhums.org/1/volume/1/issue/1/**

Authorship note: The authorship of videos can be complex. We reject the idea that the videographer or project director "owns" the material and emphasize the authority of practitioners. For videos with minimal or no editing, such as the selections in a Catalogue, we recommend that all participants be listed as co-authors in alphabetical order. For videos with a strong editorial voice, we recommend that co-authors are listed in two tiers, separated by "with", as in: **"Diaspora," by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Agnieszka Mendel, and Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz <http://gps.psi-web.org/issue-2-1/diaspora/>.**

III. "NO TABLE"

We have explored the above techniques in detail and can attest to their ability to generate rich laboratory sessions and video materials. A remaining question is how to organize participatory events using these ideas. **No Table** is an open lab structure that allows participants to move freely through the roles. *The main challenge is what to do with the video footage afterwards!*

No Table is a response to Lois Weaver's "Long Table": **http://www.split-britches.com/longtable/**

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Define a space of practice, with one or two chairs. Announce the rules
in advance or post them on the wall. An audience of any size can
observe, with people rotating into and out of the space at will. One
person at a time can sit in each chair and give verbal analysis or
instructions. Up to five people can be in the space as non-speaking
practitioners. Up to three can be videographers, using their own or
provided cameras. Work together. Anyone can change roles at any time.
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