Ben Spatz
Making a Laboratory: Dynamic Configurations with Transversal Video (2020)

What is embodied research? How is it related to the epistemology of audio-visuality? How does laboratoriality work outside of the techno-scientific and inside the paradigm of artistic research? And how does all this relate to other cultural and political contexts? In this oral introduction Ben Spatz talks us through the epistemological concerns and methodological discoveries found in their book *Making a Laboratory: Dynamic Configurations with Transversal Video* (New York: Punctum, 2020). Following on from their previous work in post-Grotowskian training using song, embodiment and laboratory practice, Spatz outlines their new methodology of 'DCTV' as a queer feminist mode of inquiry that examines power, identity, and documentation processes.

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[00:00:15 to 00:01:28] Montage of video material from Ben Spatz's Urban Research Theatre by Juan Salazar

[00:01:30] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The short title is *Making a Laboratory*, which is the broad conceptual title. And then it has a subtitle, which actually is not a very good subtitle from a book perspective. It's intended to be really technically specific, so it's almost – it's not intentionally inaccessible but I didn't think of it as part of what would be a good name for a book. The subtitle is 'Dynamic Configurations with Transversal Video', which is actually a specification of the research method that I'm proposing in this book.

[00:02:05] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

This book is the culmination of almost 20 years of research across artistic practice, scholarly work and just my life. It, for me, is the culmination of everything that went before in a sense. I mean, in book form it's not the only culmination – there are videos attached to it and practices that are attached to it that are equally important. But as far as a book is concerned, this is kind of the endpoint of something – it's the beginning of everything else. But as far as publications [are concerned], I almost want to say that the other two books that I published with Routledge are preludes to this. They outline a theoretical framework that I was hoping would enable it to be possible to jump to a really rigorous practice research, but as I wrote those I couldn't really imagine what that would look like until this stuff happened. So it's hard to know how far to trace it back, but it goes back to the first things that I started to try to direct like almost 20 years ago after I finished undergraduate, where they were just these very messy but very alive things, and I was struggling with, like, what is the form? How can this be repeatable and yet also alive? And all of those questions that then led me through different artistic practices and then back into graduate school and then into practice as research. And all those questions are kind of – so for me this is... I feel a little bit irrational about it, but it's like this is the thing, you know, skip everything else. It's maybe not that easy to read, but it's very short. This is everything.

[00:04:10] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

That's an interesting question. In a sense, it's almost not that... The central thing in the book is not a

scholarly argument. The central thing in the book is a research method which has a lot of the features of an argument. I think often people think of a research method as being a little bit less than a fully developed argument, but with this experience I'm experiencing it the other way around where it's like a lot of arguments were needed to get to the point where there could be something that was coherent enough and rich enough to call it a 'method'.

The central thing is really a method. It's a set of interlocking techniques which include reinterpretations of things that happen in performance spaces and in embodied practice spaces, and then ways to interrupt those and short-circuit those specifically with video – but not only. So there's a lot of actual arguments attached to that – probably a lot of arguments put forward in here – that are not fully developed because I wanted to really put the method out there and I wanted to offer the contexts that for me are very important to it. So there's a lot of kind of like: 'Well, it could do this, or you could think of it this way, maybe it's this' – because I don't really know. It's a case where this method thing crystallised, changed my whole way of thinking about everything and I'm still running to catch up with it. So there are a lot of different arguments about what happens in performance spaces. What is embodied research? What is embodied practice? What's going on in all these spaces that we're so interested in? How can we share them? What is video? What is the epistemology of video? What are the politics of video? How does all this relate to other cultural, political contexts? Too many to list, but they're all attached to a practical method.

[00:06:20] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

I don't want to sound too zealous, but I don't think there is another book that does that, actually. There are more and more books about practice research, performance as research, artistic research, research creation, practice-based research, et cetera. Most of them are anthologies, actually, and in those there are chapters which lay out something like methods, although I tend to think that mostly what we find is methodology in the sense that we find discussions of relationships between pre-existing methods. They're kind of things that – there are new relationships and that's often what's going on there, is that there's new relationships between practice and research, or between theory and practice, or between art making artistic production and academia. This for me is different because what I think it is – and I'm open to being proven wrong – but it seems to me that it has a singularity to it where, as a single method – and again, you know, often we think of a method as a little bit less than a full methodology. But again, it's reversed for me in this case where I felt like, finally, it's not just methodology! It's not just a discussion of how different methods relate, but that there's an actual thing here that didn't exist before. Something different is happening here – and it's a method. So that kind of crystallisation...

I hope that what it contributes is twofold. I mean, on one level, I hope that people will use this specific method – although of course it will always have to be adapted, but I think there are certain tools in here [for] thinking about what happens in these spaces and what the relationship is to the archive, to discourse, that are applicable. But I think and also hope that just the idea of putting out a method as an output, as a discovery is something that actually... To be honest, practice research and artistic research tend to move away from that, sometimes very explicitly, and say: 'We don't do methods', or: 'We can't do methods, we don't want to do methods, methods are restrictive' – and I don't think that's true. I think that there are situations in which a method is much more significant as a discovery than any kind of critical or philosophical articulation.

This book, also to mention, is part of an imprint that I launched with Punctum, with this as the first one. It's an imprint that's intended to publish small books in which the central contribution is a method of research that has not existed before and then with a critical context, so that you have critical contexts, you have theoretical contexts, you have arguments, but they're all hanging off of this practical methodological contribution. Hopefully this will just be the first. There are two or three already in the works, where these are hopefully a series of books that people can pick up when they're on those crossroads and on those edges between practice and research, between artistic production and the university, and say: 'Well, what would it look like to design my research concretely

in this way or in this other way or in this other way or in this other way?' And of course it doesn't get rid of any of the other methodologies that we have: phenomenological, any of the critical theory frameworks, any of the empirical or quantitative, qualitative frameworks. But I think that that conversation is open, it's a place that we're not seeing as bold an intervention as we could, although it's not easy. I mean, I started by saying it took ten years, 15 years to get from the first seeds of this to what I feel comfortable calling a method. You don't wake up one day and say let's invent a method. It's really hard, you know, it's equally hard as inventing a theory.

[00:10:30] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE AND WHY?

I was just describing this to someone and it's a bit wild in the sense that I think that every chapter engages with a different field to a certain extent. But essentially, the book has a very clear symmetrical structure. There are four central chapters that outline the method and there's one that comes before that, and one that comes after that. So six total. And there's a preface.

The first chapter is actually not about the specific method that's proposed in the book. It's an engagement with social epistemology, science and technology studies, philosophy of science, and it's something that comes out of the method, it's some thinking that I've done because of this. But it's not specifically about the details of it. It's about 'what is a laboratory' essentially, and can we reclaim from social epistemology, from laboratory studies – critical laboratory studies? Can we derive from that a kind of definition of the laboratory that would be really epistemologically rigorous and which would include, necessarily include techno-scientific, techno-science laboratories, but which would not be limited to techno-science laboratory, so that we could then really know what we're talking about when we say we're making a laboratory? What does it mean to make a laboratory? Then the next four chapters are the method in detail. They are named after the two parts of the methods, so 'dynamic configurations with transversal video'. There's two chapters about dynamic configurations. The first one lays it out in technical terms, and the second one – so, really the third chapter goes into some theoretical depth about what is happening there. And I now think maybe I should have reversed the order of those two chapters, but it's too late. Then the next – the fourth and fifth – are about transversal video. One is about the implementation of transfer – so, video in the lab and what that means, what it does. And the next one is about: well, if you do that, then you end up with video. And of course, in today's world, it's like, well, what does that mean? Is this video that's going to go on Netflix? Probably not. So where is it going to go? Is this research data? What kind of data is it? You know, you could do quantitative or qualitative studies on this data, but I don't think that's the most interesting thing. This is the kind of question of what do you do with the data.

And then there's a final chapter called 'Towards a Queer Laboratory', which again zooms out a little bit. It's still based on this method, but it zooms out and engages more with queer theory, really, and critical theory in terms of what I think – and here's where I might totally be wrong about certain things – but what I think is happening in this lab as I try to articulate why its structure has been so exciting to me. So the first chapter is engaging with science and technology studies. The second one is kind of engaging in and/or inspired by contemporary music because it uses notation. The next one is very much about actor training – the actor-director dynamic especially. The next one is about the process of holding the camera, so it's engaging with kind of the documentary action. The next one is about video art, the context of video discourse, videography, videographic film criticism, for example. And the last one is engaging with queer theory and critical theory. So it's kind of a big arc, but that is the arc of all the work I've been doing. As I look at it that way, it does hopefully make sense.

[00:14:00] HOW ENJOYABLE OR DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

It was easy to write. I'm not sure it was enjoyable, but it was easy. It felt like on the one hand, people are asking me to come and share some of the work I've been doing, although mostly they're asking me that because of my first book, and they don't realise – you know, they think I'm going to come and talk about technique from a theoretical epistemological perspective. Really what I want to do is tell everyone to start moving around and using video cameras in different ways and working with power

dynamics in different ways. But I still felt like I needed to quickly get something out there relatively quickly – it's been three years – but get something out there that I could point to, to say if we've done a one-day workshop or a three-day workshop, we've played around with these power dynamics but you can't get from that what's possible in six months. So I wanted to quickly put something down that was what I think is happening. It flowed out very quickly. If I were writing it now, I can think of some ways to make it more accessible, the flow. Like I'd probably start, as I said, with – I'd switch chapter two and three to introduce the dynamics before the notation, because I think if you don't understand the dynamics and you get to the notation and the notation seems like: 'What's the point of it?' Whereas if you're thinking about the dynamics, then you say: 'Oh wait maybe we could use notation for this.'

It was a situation where I was feverish with this thing I wanted to share, and I didn't feel like I could wait until I was able to craft it perfectly poetically, or... You know, I feel like everything I'm writing now, of course, is still about this same thing and will be, probably, for at least ten years, if not longer. So, hopefully there'll be plenty of chances to introduce it in different ways, with different formats for different audiences. But I just felt a need to get down what is going on. Like, okay, what did we do? And then, why did that happen? And then, what is this video stuff that came out? And what could be done with it? And what does it all mean? So I just put it down there as best as I could. And I hope that the interest, the value of it will outweigh any clunkiness in the structure.

[00:16:25] WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

Oh goodness that's really hard... I can't choose a favourite one. But I guess I'll say there may be two ends to that. There are some passages that make pretty bold claims about the potential of artistic research and the potential of re-appropriated videography, specifically, to fundamentally challenge and transform what we understand as knowledge. You know, that's got me thinking about the power of the written word, the hegemony of the written word and logocentrism in academia, but also in a larger sense in the history of colonialism and the power of that alphabetic writing system, which I'm now trying to further research and contextualise alongside non-alphabetic systems of writing and, of course, non-written contexts. There are some claims about that which the publisher Punctum, when they did the announcement of it, chose some stuff about that which I think is important because it says really what's at stake here, which, you know, if that's true then you could potentially redesign the university, reshape the university in a different way.

What I'm trying to get out – which is, you know, only touched on here and I'm still wrestling with it – is just completely different relationships to embodiment, to identity, to place, that happen in video. They're different from writing, and of course people have always said that about video and film, but to re-appropriate that power from the perspective of the practitioner is something that's the crux of it. At the same time, for me the core of it is actually the chapter that's about the dynamics, which is about the core relationships that I'm suggesting structure spaces of experimental practice including performing arts, but not only performing arts, which is in a nutshell the relationship of a practitioner to some memorised embodied material that they're practising, the relationship between practitioners in a defined space of practice and the directorial relation – that word director is tricky, as you well know. But something like this external perspective and even how to define that, there's something there that for me is almost the heart of it. And that's where I go furthest with the critical theory. I'm describing actor-director relations but I've already written an article (2010) where I talk about that in terms of 'mystic priest', Christian medieval visionary pairs. And then I link that to BDSM and kink with the topping and bottoming power dynamics.

I then go back to that and I bring it to Agamben (2016) and say that actually his zoe/bios is the best hook that I can find as a really abstract but powerful way to understand this thing, which is much more than what we think of as the actor-director relation. It's a fundamental relationship between two people when it's been agreed that the work that they're sharing is located in one person's body. This is something so fundamental that when we say: 'Let's work together, but the work is in my body', and immediately there's a power dynamic, there's a vulnerability, there's different kinds of power, because there's the power of the person whose body it's in, and the power of the person whose body it's not

in. You know, everything is at stake there.

So for me that's the heart of it, and the most important, but I don't think that's the most accessible or the boldest kind of thing that will hook other people. But there's something that's really the heart of it for me in that kind of analysis, the exploration of those fundamental dynamics that structure these spaces of practice.

Transcription by Nick Awde

Clips Summary

[00:00:15 to 00:01:28] Montage of video material from Ben Spatz's Urban Research Theatre by Juan Salazar

Works Cited

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Audio available at www.auralia.space/library2-benspatz/.

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