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Spatz, Ben

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“What do we document? Dense video and the epistemology of practice”

FINAL DRAFT chapter contribution to

Documenting Performance: The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving

Ben Spatz

University of Huddersfield

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1. Document, event, technique

Much recent thinking about performance documentation has coalesced around an apparent opposition between the relative stability of the document and the ontological ephemerality of the live event. Indeed, if we begin from the problem of translating a singular and ephemeral event into a stable document, then failure is guaranteed from the start. Understood as an inherently transient moment, performance “cannot be saved, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan 1993: 146). But the problem of documentation is illusory insofar as the performing arts have no special claim to ephemerality. As I have argued elsewhere, it is not performance but life in general — the world, the real, *being* itself — that escapes documentary capture (Spatz 2015a: 234). In fact, the questions faced by a documentarian are not entirely different to those faced by a director or choreographer who works through the craft of composition to condense various embodied and dramaturgical materials into a repeatable performance score. Nor do the spectators who attend such a performance necessarily have better or more direct access to the underlying processes that gave rise to it than do those who encounter the work through written or recorded documents. Understood in this way, documentation poses not the insoluble problem of grasping the ungraspable but rather the concrete challenge of isolating and articulating those aspects of a practice that can be shared and transmitted through the available tools. As the tools change, the potential for sharing and transmission also changes.

Both transmissible documents and live performance events owe their existence to underlying phenomena that structure practice over time. Rather than opposing these two kinds of phenomenon as ontological opposites, I would like to consider some of the ways in which specific kinds of events and documents relate to the practices from which they emerge. To document performance is, as Phelan says, impossible. What can be documented is practice — which is the basis of performance — as well perhaps as the structure of practice, including transmissible knowledge or technique. As soon as we begin to refocus our discussion on practice and technique rather than performance, much of the conceptual twisting around issues of liveness and ephemerality evaporates. Instead we are left with two different and complementary strategies for encountering performance: documents and performances. Just as performances may be shared with many

different types and sizes of audience, there are many different kinds of document with different possible relationships to practice. Many documents, like many performances, aim to reach a broad and general audience. But there are also documents that aim to share the detailed structure and content of practice with a specific community of knowledge and/or practice. It is the latter that I want to consider here.

2. In praise of video

The past decade has witnessed an explosion of documentary forms related to performance. Beginning with the advent of inexpensive digital photo and video technologies and amplified exponentially by the internet, the possibilities for performance documentation seem increasingly endless. While I cannot attempt a survey of the field here, I do want to map a few significant points in the landscape, which can serve as key references for the approach I have been developing in my own work. First there are the various configurations of book or booklet and DVD, such as those produced by Paxton (2008), Zarrilli (2009), Allegue et al. (2009), Hodge (2013), and Hulton and Kapsali (2015).¹ These are important landmarks in the development of performance documentation, yet the format of the DVD already feels outdated in comparison with what can be realized online. DVD menus are notoriously clumsy to navigate and video distributed in this format is limited to Standard Definition resolution (720 x 480). In addition, while it is difficult to estimate the precise longevity of optical media, the possibility of data loss through physical deterioration is especially significant with physical objects like DVDs, which may remain untouched in an archive for many years. With even the commercial film industry increasingly moving toward streaming media, it seems unlikely that the DVD format can tell us much about the future of performance documentation.

Shifting to online digital spaces, we must first take note of the high-end, custom-designed online databases that have been produced for well-known choreographers like Siobhan Davies and William Forsythe (Siobhan Davies Replay 2007; Motion Bank 2013; see also Whatley and Varney 2009). These are extraordinary in their breadth and undeniably important in theorizing the future of performance documentation. However, the scale of such ventures means that a plethora of material may be available without any clear routes for navigating through it. In addition, the production and maintenance of such bespoke databases — to say nothing of their continual updating — is an expensive project requiring the skills of digital archivists and programmers as well as scholars of performance. Notwithstanding their value for the field at large, the cost and complexity of these projects rules them out as models for individual scholars and practitioners developing documentation strategies on a smaller scale. Instead, such individuals and small groups may have recourse to online platforms like WordPress, which supports University of Winchester's *Experiences & Intensities* series (E&I 2015) and the new website of the journal *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* (TDPT 2015); the Research Catalogue, developed to support the *Journal for Artistic Research* (JAR 2015); and Scalar, a creation of the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture in California, which has been selected by *TDR* as the basis for its online space (Mee 2013: 150). The aim of these platforms is precisely to make multimedia publication available to those without the skills or resources to design and code their own digital archives.

Excitement about the possibilities for digital documentation of performance is at a high point, as demonstrated by a slew of recent edited collections including *The Performing Subject in the Space of Technology* (Causey et al. 2015), *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science* (Shaughnessy 2013), *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (Borggreen and Gade 2013), and *Sensualities/Textualities and Technologies* (Broadhurst and Machon 2009). In all of this, one apparently simple approach to documentation has gone curiously unremarked and uncelebrated: that of video itself as a linear framework with potentially nonlinear content. Before offering my own thoughts on this form, I would like to mention some of the ways in which the potential of video is being explored in other fields.² First, as one might expect, the video essay has become an important genre of critical work in film and media studies. The online journal *[in]Transition* bills itself as “the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic film and moving image studies” (Media Commons 2015). The advantage for film and media scholars is that the object of their analysis is already available to them through vast reserves of digital video. Their task is to continue and expand the critical work already taking place in forums like *Cinema Journal* by developing new modes of composition in which analysis and its object are contained within the same frame. *[in]Transition*’s website contains a wealth of online and print resources dealing with the video essay, ranging from the aesthetics of composition to the legality of fair use, which have much to offer those concerned with performance documentation. Further afield, a much simpler version of the video essay has become an important way to share clinical medical knowledge through channels like the *Journal of Visualized Experiments* — “the world’s first peer reviewed scientific video journal” (JoVE 2015) — and *The New England Journal of Medicine*’s multimedia section (NEJM 2015).

I am frankly surprised that the video essay has not already come to greater prominence in performance studies and related fields. While platforms like the Research Catalogue, Scalar, and *Experiments & Intensities* offer exciting design potentials, publications developed for those digital environments are not guaranteed to last beyond them. Video files, in contrast — as one of the basic building blocks of digital space — are more technologically robust. They can be easily transferred from one platform to another, hosted on multiple platforms at once, and scaled down to smaller resolutions as needed. Massive video hosting websites like YouTube and Vimeo can serve as backups or even primary servers for peer-reviewed journals. While all digital media must be continually ported from one technological generation to the next in order to remain accessible — and this is a serious issue for digital archivists — an MP4 file produced in 2015 is more likely to be readable in 2020 than a custom-built web interface. To produce edited video documents one of course needs a bit of editing skill, as well as access to a computer and a working copy of Adobe Premiere, FinalCut Pro, or at least iMovie, but such resources are well on their way to becoming as commonplace as the word processing tools now used to produce books and articles.

What platforms like Scalar and the Research Catalogue offer in formal innovation is exchanged for the well-tested rhetoric of the linear motion picture, which has more than one hundred years of history. The standalone video may not be the most exciting form of “new media,” but it is tried and true as a medium of both expression and communication. Why then is the video essay or its equivalent not already accepted as a basic form of contribution to the major peer-reviewed journals in our field? Why is there no journal of

performance studies that accepts contributions only or primarily in this form? It would appear that, in our zeal to explore the ever-expanding nonlinear spatiality of the web, we have skipped over the apparently simpler genre of the audiovisual. I propose that such forms may be worth revisiting now, keeping in mind both the advantages and limitations of these various forms and formats.

[ILLUSTRATIONS GO HERE — SEE BELOW]

3. Dense video and digital epistemology

The new WordPress blog associated with the journal *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* includes a “Studio” section “dedicated to the audio-visual documentation of training practices.” Among the first round of posts was a four-minute video I produced called “Sequence of Four Exercise-Actions,” which documents a training session I led at the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research in Huddersfield (Spatz 2015b). In this video, I explored for the first time some of the more complex editing and montage techniques that can be used to increase what I call the *density* of a video document. Through carefully placed embedded video citations and textual annotations, I attempted to guide the viewer toward a richer understanding of the documented practice by enfolding multilayered, nonlinear content within the overall linear structure of a four-minute video. Within its limited scope, I considered this video successful and soon undertook another project with more ambitious aims. This second video, “Judaica: Designing a Laboratory for Song-Action,” is still in draft stage and remains unpublished as of this writing. It differs from the first in several respects and raises a number of additional challenges, which I will address below. First, however, I want to say a bit more about what I mean by density in this context.

I take the density of a document to be the richness of information found in any given frame or excerpt. The density of prose can be increased by the use of footnotes, parenthetical annotations, citations and references, specialized language, longer or more elaborate sentence structures, and other textual complexities that tend to distinguish academic writing from popular nonfiction. A similar range can be elaborated for video: What we might call a simple linear video is one consisting of a single take, an uninterrupted recording that documents a moment of practice. In order to stand as a citable document in the growing archive of our field, I propose that such a video ought to at least have two basic elements of what is now called metadata: a title frame — identifying the author, practitioners, location, and date — and continuous time code, which is essential for stable referencing. Beyond those two basic elements there are myriad ways in which the density of a video document might be increased. The training video “Sequence of Four Exercise-Actions” contains several different types of textual annotation running across the bottom of the frame, including the names and roles of practitioners; names and descriptions of the exercises shown; references to books and articles that analyze related practices; and pedagogically oriented commentary. It also includes several excerpts of secondary video and one embedded still image, which are embedded within the main frame and run parallel to it. The embedded video comes from two sources: from the same training session — for example, to show what happened before or after the four minutes documented in the main

video — and from an earlier set of videos in which the same exercises are practiced by the person who invented them and taught them to me (Balduzzi 2013; and see Spatz 2014). At one point, three videos are juxtaposed within the same frame to demonstrate how a given exercise may be “transmitted from person to person, traveling across space and time” (Spatz 2015b: 03:02-03:12).

The second video, “Judaica: Designing a Laboratory for Song-Action,” is considerably longer than the first, its current version running twenty minutes rather than four. As in the difference between a four-page article and a twenty-page article, the larger duration poses additional problems in terms of structure and organization. More significantly, the second video, because it documents a practice in which song and speech have central importance, grapples with differences in how visual and aural materials are received. In the first video, I was able to present four continuous minutes of recorded footage with additional videos layered on top. This worked because the soundtracks of the embedded videos could be muted without too much loss of information. But while two videos can be placed within the same frame without interfering with each another, two audio tracks playing simultaneously quickly become confused and confusing. Thus, if I want to compare two performances of the same song, their juxtaposition must involve sequential rather than simultaneous montage. This makes continuity a problem: If I choose to include five or ten minutes of continuous audio recording, I am limited in the extent to which I can embed or layer additional audio tracks on top. This may seem merely a logistical issue, but I think it suggests the extent to which audiovisual recording remains underexplored as a mode of performance documentation, particularly in academic contexts where density is desirable. Those who find academic reading pleasurable enjoy the density that skilled writers are able to achieve through the careful shaping of sentences and paragraphs as well as parenthetical statements, footnotes, and the other nonlinear techniques mentioned above. It is this that I believe we have yet to explore fully in the context of video as scholarly medium.

The challenges facing those who might want to produce *dense video documents*, for example as research outcomes of an embodied research practice, are numerous. They range from logistical concerns — such as finding a workspace with a visually clean backdrop (compare Spatz 2015b with Balduzzi 2013) and compensating one or more skilled videographers — to those that are critical, aesthetic, and editorial. The spatial and temporal relationships among video channels, audio channels, textual annotation, and other media all must be considered in the context of a project’s scope and duration and what it aims to document. In a sense, none of these challenges is merely logistical. Taken together, they suggest a new “digital epistemology” (e.g., CRASSH 2015) that arguably has already changed the way we understand what we are doing when we move, dance, sing, speak, interact, improvise, tell stories, walk through a city, or whatever else may be captured on video. In the two experimental prototypes discussed here, I aimed to create documents that would be dense enough to deserve multiple viewings and which might, like a good article, cause the viewer to stop and rewind while watching in order to more fully appreciate their layers of juxtaposed, intermedial content. In erring towards density, I may have risked letting the pace become too fast and the screen too busy, to the point where clarity may be lost. But that is a matter of style. My point here is that performance studies has yet to begin a serious, field-wide investigation of video as a medium through which to document and articulate the performance-oriented practices that concern us.

4. What do we document?

To return to the epistemological considerations from which I began: Neither of the cited video documents refers specifically to performance in the sense of documenting an ephemeral public event. The first, shorter video focuses on a training session in which I worked with university students in the context of an undergraduate Drama course. The embodied event that took place on that day in August 2015 is of no particular significance. Rather, the video aims to articulate some of the underlying layers of technique that structured the documented practice. The second video is more complex, not only because of its duration and the fact that it documents vocal as well as physical practice but also because it is intended as a document of research rather than training.³ But this document also does not focus upon a single performance event or production. Instead it centers on a two-month period of intensive embodied research in August and September 2015, while also situating this period within the larger ongoing Judaica Project. To that end, video excerpts from theatrical performances in September at University of Huddersfield are included alongside others that document both performances and moments of studio practice that took place in New York City in 2012 and 2013. The longest excerpt in the document is of a studio research session in which only two people, Sióbhán Harrison and myself, were present. Hence neither of these documents can be said to document “performance” in the limited sense of a singular, ephemeral event. Rather than documenting performance, they should be understood as functioning in parallel to live performances in that they too offer composed surfaces through which to glimpse the depth and complexity of ongoing practices. The crucial difference, of course, is that these video surfaces are intended for a geographically and temporally dispersed audience of engaged peers rather than for a local audience.

Performing arts discourse tends to accord primary significance to public performances and to treat the practices that give rise to them as preparatory in nature (either “training” or “rehearsal”). Yet for many performing artists this hierarchy is reversed, with the public event of performance serving to make possible — both socially and financially — a deeper and more intimate studio practice. While both of these approaches are legitimate, here I am invoking a third possibility in which the circulating document has primary status. Such an explicit de-emphasis of both long-term practice and public performance may at first strike those in both camps as anathema. How cold to put the document first! But a closer examination of academic knowledge transmission — whether in the humanities or sciences — reveals that there is nothing cold about document-oriented practices. Scholarly research, whether individual or collaborative, is reliant upon the circulation of documents. Although this does give documents a kind of ontological priority, it is clear at least in academic fields that documents have historically served to found and support communities of knowledge rather than to displace them. Indeed, it is arguably only because of transmissible documents that fields such as mathematics, philosophy, sociology, literature, and history exist. What fields of practice might come into being through the development of substantial, well-organized, and diverse dense video archives? What communities of knowledge might become possible when video can be shared, annotated and excerpted

as easily as text? What territories of research will become accessible when practice and performance begin to organize themselves around the production of documents rather than treating them as secondary byproducts?

I have no wish to devalue those practices that are oriented towards performance or which take sustained embodied practice itself to be inherently valuable. I only wish to observe that, alongside those long-standing traditions, a third domain is emerging in which the circulation of multimedia documents takes on primary importance. We do not yet know how this domain will relate to those of performance and performance studies. Neither, at this time, can we say what forms those documents will eventually take or how they will achieve their particular epistemic densities. Let us not then be too quick to dismiss video, which after all is the most recent substantive documentary medium to have emerged from the technological explosion that defines our era. The internet is a space but not yet a medium; video is already both.

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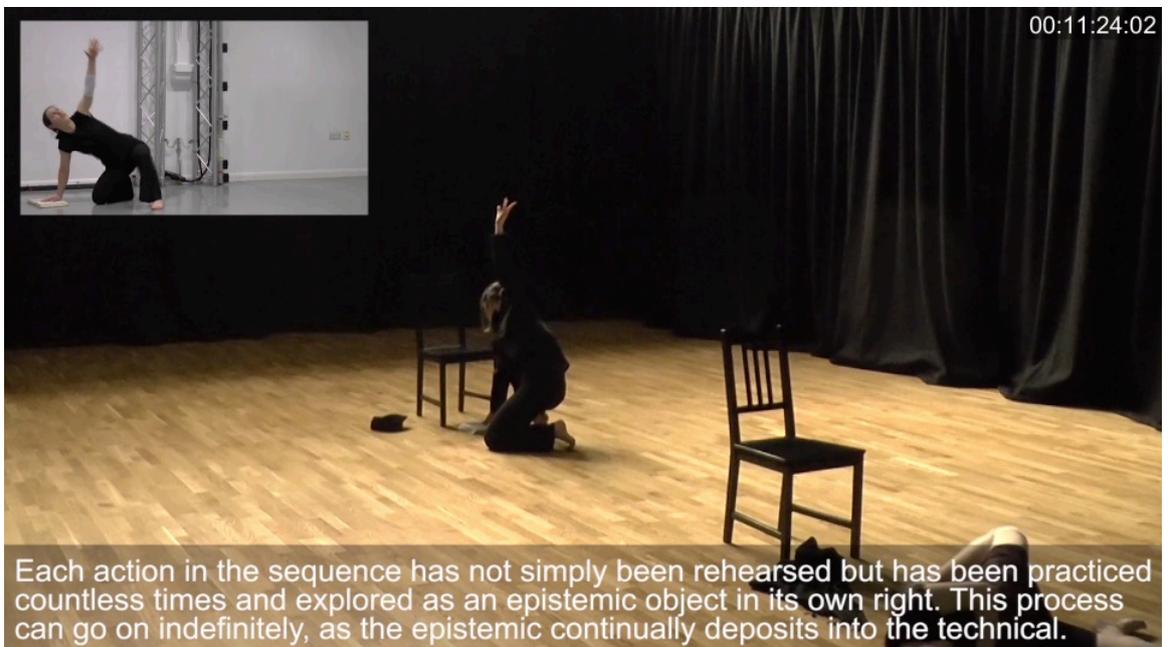
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ILLUSTRATIONS



"Sequence of Four Exercise-Actions," dense video documenting a training session led by Ben Spatz after the work of Massimiliano Balduzzi. Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research, University of Huddersfield, August 2015. Practitioners: Ben Spatz, Sobhia Jones, Chris Lomax, Massimiliano Balduzzi.



"Judaica: Designing a Laboratory for Song-Action," dense video documenting the Judaica Project 2012-2015. Urban Research Theater and the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research, November 2015 (draft version). Practitioners: Ben Spatz, Sióbhán Harrison, Jennifer Parkin.

¹ Peter Hulton has long been a leading creator of such works, through the Arts Archives (2015) at Exeter and more recently as the digital producer of several of the projects mentioned here. For additional examples of academic publications involving DVDs, see Camilleri (2015: 28) and Spatz (2015a: 242-47).

² Video here refers to integrated audiovisual recording, as in common usage, not to silent video.

³ Those engaged with Practice as Research in the UK will understand the importance of producing assessable research documents for the REF. But anyone who is interested in establishing a rigorous epistemological basis for embodied and artistic practice within academia will recognize the importance of such documents with regard to peer review and other mechanisms of synchronic and diachronic rigor (Spatz 2015a: 234-42).