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The Scottish Journal of Performance
Volume 7, Issue 1; June 2022
ISSN: 2054-1953 (Print) / ISSN: 2054-1961 (Online)

Publication details: <http://www.scottishjournalofperformance.org>

To cite this article: Bianchi, V., Mastrominico, B., and Schrag, A., 2022. Seminar Report: Not fewer resources, but different: Creative responses to practice and research during Covid-19. *Scottish Journal of Performance*, 7(1): pp.115–128.

To link to this article: <http://doi.org/10.14439/sjop.2022.0701.08>



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SEMINAR REPORT:

Not fewer resources, but different: Creative responses to practice and research during Covid-19

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DOI: 10.14439/sjop.2022.0701.08

Publication date: 30 June 2022

The cultural and creative industries have been one of the hardest-hit by the international Covid-19 pandemic. In the wake of this seismic shift, there has been a proliferation of events and publications exploring how artists have responded to living and working in a pandemic. There exists a sense of lamenting those things that seem lost or, at the very least, placed on pause. However, while Covid-19 has undoubtedly had a lasting impact on practitioners, the temporary digitisation of artistic practice has resulted in new possibilities for practice and national / international collaboration. It was this sense of possibility that was the focus of a seminar series recently held at Queen Margaret University, which forefronted the potential positive adaptations within practice research due to Covid-19. Certainly, the cultural and creative domains have been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 crisis, but the series aimed to argue that creative practitioners are experts in exploring new ways of thinking and being and suggested that in these difficult times we don't have fewer resources; rather we have different resources. The central thrust of these seminars, therefore, was to reflect on positive changes to practice.

Keywords: online performance, covid adaptation, practice research, media, performance

This report offers an account of the three seminars. The events emerged from the newly formed *Practice Research Cluster: Finding and Using Creative Knowledge*¹ that operates as a part of the Centre for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies at Queen Margaret University. The Cluster was formed with the recognition that cultural work often operates in affective, ephemeral, relational and active modes: its unique knowledge lies in the production and reception of cultural work, and such knowledge is difficult to translate into linear, rationalised, and traditional formats. Working across production and reception of cultural work, as well as other expressive forms, the Practice Research Cluster focuses on the expansion of practice research and to support 'practice' as a research tool. Each seminar has been reviewed by different members of the research cluster, giving unique insights into each event.

Seminar 1: Filmmaking Practice in the Time of Covid-19

BIANCA MASTROMINICO

Witnessing a discussion about filmmaking on the video conferencing platform Zoom proved slightly unsettling, as the event was inflicting a dose of remoteness and hybridity upon a discourse already focused on the immateriality of the celluloid. The seminar, which aimed at exploring how filmmaking had changed and adapted during the pandemic both within the academy and as a creative industry, invited guest speakers to consider the resulting changes to protocols in a positive and forward-thinking way, also looking at what might be retained in a post-pandemic future.

Dr. Itandehui Jansen and Rhys Smith presented their ongoing practice-led research aimed at mapping the digital distribution of independent films in order to

‘distinguish best practice’, while Freya Billington considered how film education has been challenged in a higher education context and shared innovative patterns of engagement with both students and the industry via social media. Lili Sandelin provided an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on film production, highlighting the many challenges that film crews are facing, while Andrew Rooke's presentation discussed practice research in its adaptation to the digital.

Jansen and Smith, both operating from a filmmaker's perspective within an academic research context, focused on Film Festivals before and after Covid and how they have adapted to the limitations and restrictions imposed by the pandemic, adopting ‘unusual and creative hybrid solutions’. Using distribution of their own films as a case study, the researchers highlighted the importance of film festivals as vital circuits for small independent films, for which avenues of distribution are much less clear than for mainstream cinema, firmly housed on streaming platforms such as Netflix or MUBI. In future stages of the research, Jansen and Smith aim at exploring ‘opportunities and possibilities to create audience engagement and build communities around online screening of small independent films’ as well as looking at successful stories and solutions to improve digital distribution.

As a filmmaker and pedagogue, Billington focused on how repeated lockdowns impacted on her practice-based subject and the need to find solutions to keep students ‘engaged and on track’ through a way of teaching which is ‘responsive, adaptable and interactive’. This led her to create an Instagram event called *Tea at 3 with Mam Fromage*, aimed at reflecting how the filmmaking sector was coping with the Covid restrictions through informal conversations with a broad range of guests ‘from all sorts of disciplines, different levels in the industry and different types of work engagement’. Notwithstanding online fatigue and the scarcity of university budgets in

replicating the new industry models in line with Covid guidelines, Billington's positive adaptation enabled new strategies of participation in film education while connecting professionals, learners and teachers in one (digital) interactive community, and in so doing innovating her pedagogy of filmmaking in ways that were impossible to predict before Covid-19.

As a freelance producer, production manager and academic, Sandelin highlighted some of the major issues which brought film shoots to a standstill, such as insurance not covering for Covid, provoking huge losses and budget cuts, or productions being stuck abroad in difficult situations, as well as postponement of smaller independent shoots and the creation of the new job role of Covid Supervisors. While the online move of development, casting and meetings worked well, Sandelin also considered affordability, pointing at the discrepancy between big films which could absorb the costs of self-isolating their cast and crews, while smaller crews had to think more creatively about how to achieve 'a visual sense of filmmaking' with what was available, and in a safe way. Despite the 'headaches' of pre-planning and rescheduling—which is now the new normal in film production—Sandelin identified positive adaptations in 'having more time to develop the stories, much lighter shooting days and healthier ways of shooting film' as well as more international collaboration in post-production.

As a PhD graduate in the middle of a pandemic, Rooke had to reconsider his filmmaking-based research methods for his project on 'how male intimacy is performed cinematically'. While the original research entailed working as a director with actors in a physical space to explore 'homosocial intimacy', the inability to create that space during lockdown resulted in a 'remote acting exercise' called *Digital Intimacy*, with local actors performing a scripted sequence as friends on a Zoom call in a 'display of homosocial bonding'. In testing the waters of filmmaking as recordings of live performance through and on digital (be it Zoom or mobile phone cameras), Rookes online adaptation of his practice research project

opens a window into the digital as an alternative practice for filmmaking, beyond broadcasting or streaming of regular films, and as a process which generates ‘a different knowledge’.

For a post-Covid reboot of the industry, one particular question has arisen from this seminar: with so many flaws in the system beforehand, would we return to the old normal? At the end of the online discussion, the shift in reflection and understanding provoked by each individual contribution of knowledge was palpable: filmmaking as we know it has been shaken, and it is now re-emerging from the Covid battleground as a mode of cultural production which needs to reframe its sustainability, politics and working approaches. What clearly emerged from the discussion was: a focus on de-colonising film, locality, and local resources; the wellbeing and employability of film crews and graduating students; protocols and good practice for mitigating stress in the workplace and finding a holistic approach to counter the ruthlessness of filmmaking as the ‘norm’; equality in accessing resources and community building through a fair distribution of independent films.

As we cannot live without each other and our stories—and the pandemic has heightened the importance of this—what are the new attitudes filmmakers and educators can bring to the cinematic ‘gaze’ to capture our fast-changing world under Covid in all its complexity? Perhaps it is time for re-thinking and for reflection.

Seminar 2: Practice Research in the Time of Covid-19

VICTORIA BIANCHI

The second event in the seminar series concerned the differing approaches academics and practitioners have

used to carry out practice research in the time of Covid-19. Dr. Anthony Schrag and Dr. Ann-Christine Simke chaired the seminar, along with invited speakers Dr. Stacey Sacks and Dr. Viviana Checchia. Sacks' presentation focused primarily on her PhD research into decolonisation of the mind (specifically in relation to Southern African culture), whereas Checchia's work is rooted explicitly in community arts practice. Furthermore, the form of these presentations echoed the locus of their enquiries: Sacks offered an embodied, performative piece alongside Checchia's more conversational, communal discussion. What emerged from these ostensibly separate works, however, were a number of thematic commonalities and shared questions of the current landscape of digital practice research, and what the future might hold. The following section of this report will focus on the points of connection across the presentations and the discussion; what we can learn from this digital turn, how corporeal connections can adapt, and how we can slow down.

In a similar vein to others in the seminar series, this event was distinctly marked by an atmosphere of optimism. The theme that we have 'not fewer but different' resources available to us was continually revisited reflecting the notion that we may not have chosen this shift, but asking what can we gain from it? Sacks, for example, posed the question of which potentials might emerge in these new interfaces? In her performance, Sacks was able to specifically frame what she wanted the audience to see. My focus, placed upon her digitally-framed face, was pulled to the shift in pace and tone of her presentation when she switched between reading from her paper and speaking off-the-cuff, as it were. This renewed attention on the presenter, far closer to an audience than in a large lecture hall, were mirrored in Sacks' description of how we listen, and how we must learn to engage with the words of others in a more attentive, Barthesian manner. There emerged a hypersensitivity to every aspect of Sacks' presentation, a new level of attentiveness that Sacks herself was calling for in her own research. Checchia's presentation took forward this enquiry of what we might gain from this new format of working, arguing

that we may be at the inception of a new ontological paradigm. Her work, which focuses on what she has termed 'collective contagion' asks whether we are more open to discussion and exploration now that we are forced to be comfortable with the unknown. Throughout her paper, Checchia continued to revisit the idea that this style of working is not new, but there has never been a universal necessity to question or embrace it before 2020. She proposed that we must take on this opportunity to fully explore the digital as an integrated tool for art and for community-building, rather than a secondary option. That humans cannot gather, however, continued to be a topic of debate for the panel. It is this question of community and presence, therefore, that will be explored next.

Both Checchia and Sacks' work were unified by the same inherent issue that the majority of artists and creators have experienced since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic; how can a process that involves corporeal (inter)action be translated online? This presented a specific obstacle for Sacks' research, which drew from a range of embodied approaches including improvisation, clowning and play. Checchia, on the other hand, noted that much of her previous work involved engaging with communities, walking around cities, meeting people for coffee and inviting people to her home for dinner. The intricate networks of community and of improvisational practice are not dissimilar: both rely on chance, and on human connection as a springboard. In a climate where many elements of chance and connection have been removed from our daily lives, the question that remains is whether these practices can flourish. It was clear from the seminar that we are currently in a position of having more questions than answers. Checchia referred to online processes she had used in the past where young Palestinian artists were able to collaborate with those living in the West Bank. She noted that,

Being Palestinian does not mean you can enter the West Bank, so projects took place online in order to maintain equitable experiences. These systems give us the opportunity to find new ways of sharing knowledge across borders, even if they can't replace the 'real'.

This notion that the digital can afford us opportunities for connection that the 'real' world cannot offered a tone of hopefulness throughout the seminar. Sacks, for example, discussed how she had found generative connections between the digital format and the theme of segregation so prevalent in her work.

The seminar was bookended by an advocacy for a slower approach to art, research and practice. In Sacks' opening presentation she discussed how the pace of her work has shifted and that findings occur in an incremental manner, which seemed to align somewhat with the stilted, paused nature of the life amidst Covid-19. In one of the closing remarks, Simke argued that there is a necessity to embrace this slowness, that just 'cramming in more stuff just because it's digital' might not be the most useful way to approach our current circumstances. Furthermore, Checchia and Schrag reflected on the waiting and the pauses that seem to permeate pandemic culture: waiting at the start of a Zoom call, accepting that emails cannot be responded to so quickly, taking more time to build links within a community. As with every point or theme that was raised throughout the seminar, however, there was an acknowledgement that there are caveats to this slowing of working life. Deadlines and meetings and submission dates continue to pervade the careers of academics and researchers, even when the rest of the world appears to be at a standstill. The ability to find the benefits of online creativity, to foster a community, and to force ourselves to slow down come with conditions, that are aligned with privilege. These messages, however, of what we might gain from our digital turn, how we might connect, and how we might embrace slowness / stillness arose as key aspects of evolving practice research within a digital, distanced context.

Seminar 3: Liveness in Digital Creative Processes in the time of Covid19

ANTHONY SCHRAG

The final seminar aimed to explore 'liveness' and how those who work in embodied practices were (re)considering their work in this complicated time: it reflected on issues of interactivity and participation, as well as corporality, chance, and how to sustain collaborative, responsive practices.

As with the Film seminar above, there was a jarring 'meta'-ness in viewing a discussion *about* performances on the internet *via* the internet, and the intersection of the medium and the message is still as closely intertwined as McLuhan suggested in 1964 (McLuhan, 1964). Indeed, reflecting on historical insights about media is a helpful place to begin, and it is useful to remember that in its inception, the aim of 'digital domain' (the internet) was to be 'interactive'; designed as a system of connectivity and it embedded that approach into its very name. As such, the 'problem' of how practitioners interact with audiences is not a new one. Indeed, this was a concern addressed by Dr. Christina Papagiannouli who confidently began the seminar by reminding us that live digital performances have existed in variety of guises for decades; and that the tools available for such performances are not particularly new. Rather, she suggested we are becoming more confident and nuanced with these tools, and there is no need for us to 'reinvent the wheel' in regard to live, digital performances. As such, the 'problems' of digital liveness—body, materiality and space—are not problems *per se*, but rather are a red herring to the contexts of participation and interactivity. Consider the distinction between television (now almost exclusively a digital medium) and a digital performance—the main difference lies in the ability of a live audience to subtly alter the experience by their 'live' presence. A live audience's intangible moods can fire a performer onwards or

dampen them down like a cold towel: so, too, should live audiences be able to impact and affect digital performances. In this way, they become participants rather than passive audiences, enacting the performer / audience feedback loop. As such, Covid has forced digital performances to consider going beyond mere broadcast and to explore the interactive context of the web: Papagiannouli sees this as potential to expand inclusion and giving more space for access as well as the chance to develop new forms of performance.

Dr. Paul Sadot similarly embraced the potentiality of the digital context, and his presentation also harked back to a historical framing that referenced the early architectures of the internet as distributed, non-hierarchical mechanism. For him, the pandemic has placed the means of production into individual creatives' hands: no longer controlled by the gatekeepers of the big companies or producers, the covid-shift has political potentialities that allow makers to bypass standardised ways of theatre. Serendipitously, his presentation involved a technical glitch that highlighted the realities of working with digital tools which are not fully developed. However, he argued practitioners embrace the precarity of such interruptions as they bring us back to 'liveness'—of the chaos of *not knowing*. The jeopardy of such glitches is exciting and we should welcome the ghosts in the machine. Indeed, this potential highlights that performers don't have to create 'theatre' on the screen, but use the skills, histories, tools and contexts of theatre to make something new: a DIY Digi-corporeality.

The collective Digi-corporeality of Sadot's suggestion was counteracted by the physical / corporeal interventions proposed by Dr. Victoria Bianchi and Stephanie Arsoska. To reflect on shared and contrasting issues both in a classroom setting but also in performative contexts, their work focused on the importance of 'doing' rather than mediating creativity via the screen. Like the digital glitches and ghosts Sadot suggested we embrace, Bianchi and Arsoska used dice to invoke chance microtasks—for example, a '2' meant walking for 1 min, and a '4' might

mean writing without stopping for 3 min—which would then be enacted in our own space, individually yet collectively. As such, the asynchronous work of teaching and working online found moments of connection in these chance encounters and improvisations. These shared chance microtasks act to keep disparate performers / students linked and—from a practice research perspective—there was something effectively simple in the ability to share *via doing* something physical. While we could not *be* together, these chance interventions allowed a certain collective activity that was effortlessly simple but highly effective.

Bianca Mastrominico and John Dean are similarly fighting against the remoteness and awkward disconnection that Covid has wrought, and they reflected on how they have adapted their practice to this digital form: not only the process, but also the encounter. Working with performer Madeleine Worrall they described being led by the medium itself, exploring the struggles with the context of Zoom performances as the professional and the domestic and performers began to collapse and merge. Indeed, the overwhelming and ubiquitous nature of the internet was present in these reflections: on the internet, the screen becomes an equal and active performer, sometimes leading and sometimes overwhelming the work itself: where does the single body exist when we are constantly all interconnected? How do we retain self? How can they find a more ‘human’ performance exchange, rather than relying purely on the digital functionality? When we disconnect from Zoom, does the digital body also disperse? Where does it go and how does this digital haunting continue? While their practice is currently exploring the answers to these questions the ghosts of history ask the question: if the context is half the work, is the decision to go *beyond* the screen, or go *into* the screen? Indeed, as practice research is concerned with *doing* could we consider Covid as a productive mechanism that is pushing practice in interesting ways towards new ways of being?

Conclusion

Reflecting upon this seminar series, what becomes clear is that the digital is not simply a format through which these works were developed, but an active agent in the formation of art, research and praxis. In the late 1960s, Barbara Steveni of The Artist Placement Group (APG) coined the term 'The Context is Half The Work' (Artist Placement Group, 1966). It was a slogan for their sculptural and participatory work that was aligned with the post-studio, conceptual art tendencies of the time. What she meant by this phrase was that the situations surrounding the work—its context—was as important to the meaning and understanding as the piece of work itself. The APG 'placed' artists in specific contexts, organisations such as the Hille Furniture Group, British Steel, The Coal Board, or the Scottish Office and invited them to respond to the particular aspects, limitations and ecologies of these situations. They all but invented the modern day 'artist residency' in which an artist is located in a place and responds to that place.

It may seem odd to reference such a dated, sculptural process when reflecting on the very modern issues of Covid, however, the notion of a 'context being half the work' had conceptual resonance to the content and manner of all the sessions. The combination of lockdown's limitations and mechanisms of the internet have not resulted in less work: rather, there seems to be a recognition of *new* work emerging. Indeed, this was a common theme from all participants of these seminars: the work occurring now *because* of Covid is not supplanting 'older' ways of making: but rather, the work is changing, merging, and finding hybrid forms: different ways of making due to shifts in finance structures; different practices emerging because of technological capacities; different types of engagement that the pandemic has engendered. This is not something to be feared, rather, there are opportunities in and amongst the threats to the cultural sector. The aim now is to focus on the practice itself in order to develop and nurture these cultural expressions.

Notes

1. The *Practice Research Cluster: Finding and Using Creative Knowledge* is a subset of the Centre for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies (CCCMS) at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, which carries out world-class internationally excellent research on cultural and creative industries, communication management and public relations, film and media. The Centre aims to deliver exploratory reflective research of relevance to practice communities, policy-makers and the wider society.^[1]

Details of the Seminars

Online Seminar 1: *Filmmaking Practice in the Time of Covid-19*
January 25th 2021, Online

Speakers:

Dr. Itandehui Jansen, Lecturer in Film and TV, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh.

Rhys Smith, Producer, Risky Whisky production company.

Freya Billington, Creative Consultant & Programme Leader of BA Honours Filmmaking, Boomsatsuma.

Lili Sandelin, Producer, North Isle Productions.

Andrew Rooke, Lecturer in Media Practice, Queen Margaret University..

Online Seminar 2: *Practice Research in the Time of Covid-19*
January 26th 2021, Online

Speakers:

Dr. Stacey Stacks, Researcher, Stockholm University of the Art.

Dr. Viviana Checchia, Senior Lecturer - The Crafts and Fine Art Unit, University of Gothenburg.

Dr. Anthony Schrag, Senior Lecturer in Cultural Policy and Arts Management, Queen Margaret University.

Dr. Ann-Christine Simke, Lecturer, Queen Margaret University.

Online Seminar 3: *Liveness in Digital Creative Processes in the time of Covid19* January 27th 2021, Online

Speakers:

Dr. Christina Papagiannouli, Research Fellow-Performance and Interactive & Immersive Technology, University of South Wales.

Dr. Victoria Bianchi, Lecturer in Drama & Performance, Queen Margaret University.

Stephanie Arsoska, Associate Artist of Duende Theatre Company, and Assistant Lecturer in Drama & Performance, Queen Margaret University.

Dr. Paul Sadot, Visiting Research Fellow in Performing Arts at The Centre for Interdisciplinary Performative Arts (CIPA), Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Bianca Mastrominico, Co-artistic director of Organic Theatre, Programme Leader of BA (Hons) Performance and MA Digital Performance, Queen Margaret University.

John Dean, Co-artistic director of Organic Theatre, Senior Lecturer and Head of Division for Media, Communication and Performing Arts, Queen Margaret University.

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