

Field Notes on Pandemic Teaching: 3

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This is the third installment in a narrative survey of educators around the globe on the challenges of the massive move to online teaching. Some challenges are practical and logistical; others are more conceptual, political, and even philosophical, involving the importance of campus community, the role of schools in providing for the wellbeing of students, and passionate convictions about the nature of learning and the transmission of knowledge. How will the current adaptations infect our understandings of studio and seminar instruction, in which the tools might be digital but the teaching is individualized and immersive, grounded in time and place, rooted in embodied encounters that allow for serendipitous discovery?

Don'ts.

I don't want to compare online teaching to classroom. I don't want my brain to be rewired to accept this as the new normal, ever. I don't want students to change their expectations, to get used to attending classes while slumped on their sofas. I don't want institutions, increasingly focused on budgets, to get used to this approximation of being in a room together without being in a room together. I'm telling myself that this is a one-time-only experiment, not uninteresting. I don't have much power over these don'ts, and I worry about this. How to overcome the passivity and solitude of our current situation, as professors, neighbors, citizens, people? How to teach a new generation of artists to think otherwise, now, while locked into a monitor? And after? What do I want this *after* to look like? What *will* this after look like?

The malware that is Zoom. This, for the moment, is what's left to us, as I start the meeting of my Video 1 class, the big rectangle becoming populated by smaller ones. I feel lucky that our group had already been established, over six weeks in real space. We run off this memory of each other's warmth, of sitting around a table, someone closing the curtain, someone rushing to turn out lights, me jumping up to the computer, the blackboard. I am a physical teacher. No Zoom glimpse of a chartreuse wall or dog knocking over a plant will make up for this.

My students refer to our "pods," having all watched the reality show *Love is Blind*, in which speed-dating partners sequestered in what the show calls pods can talk, but not see each other. Each Zoom pod is different — the chintz or paisley curtains of a parent's dining room; a cat-scratched couch with mustard throw; pajamas. A chilly outdoors, student huddled in a wool hat, behind her a prison fence where inmates shout. A flash of a pet cockatoo. *Screech*. A shadow crosses the background, head down, carrying a beverage. A siren. From outside my window, or theirs?

These details, these hastily sketched pixelated spaces, take up my mental processing power. All these rectangles filled with pixels approximating human form. My brain starts privileging the present; the near past is forgotten. Did that student answer already? What did they say? This is headache inducing.



[via Twitter]

But it could be worse. I teach the moving image. Watching videos virtually is not the worst translation of the medium. Size and resolution vary, but a video — whether at an art house like Film Forum in Manhattan or on Netflix on a laptop on a kitchen table — is still a video on a screen. This experience makes me mourn, once again, the end of cinema: the sound of seats shifting, the laughter, the infectious coughing, purses opening in unison during a weepy scene. My class is suddenly an uneven playing field, in that some have cameras and computers, and some don't. I now teach scarcity, which, for me, is a known terrain. Independent filmmakers and video artists are always *without*; lacking equipment, budget, crew, locations, permission. We live in the land of making-do, of bending form and process toward what we can get. The university's lovely cameras, tripods, microphones, which the students have painstakingly learned to use, are now behind locked doors — so I cheerlead excitement for making do without them. What can we shoot, from the vantage point of a bedroom, a fire escape, a backyard? Skype interviews? The riches of footage from the internet? The results are surprisingly good, some even astonishing. There is one resource we suddenly have in abundance: time.

In so-called studio visits, conversations have changed. We are no longer focused on objects, but on each other's faces in medium to extreme closeup. The space between us is collapsed and we talk in a more personal way. An opening question, *how are you doing?*, is fraught. Everyone is holding their breaths, a makeshift spell against bad news. We talk a lot about words, reading and writing. Studio work, object making, has gotten a lot smaller or is posited in the future conditional. Most exciting, we talk about a radical reevaluation of ideas and themes. How are things changing? What is worth doing? What is at stake? If we are paying attention, if we are up for it, we can see the world reveal itself — even as we see, each day, the same view outside the same window. Gray, sunny, gray. Do we ... *how* do we ... *how must* we speak in and to this cracked-open world?

— Shelly Silver

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