

PODCASTS ON PROCESS

Narrated + Curated by Kirsten Marie Walsh

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EPISODE Transcript

COLLABORATION—METHODS + MODES (32:37)

How can a group of collaborators practice as individuals, create as a group, and answer to a director simultaneously? Liz Lerman actively describes herself as “agitator, instigator, and synthesizer”, and her work is fostered by a philosophy rooted in collaboration. This episode explores how Lerman’s work develops with a multi-disciplinary team, and examines other possible modes of collaboration.

WELCOME

KIRSTEN WALSH Hello again and welcome! My name is Kirsten Walsh, and you are listening to Podcasts on Process. This series takes a peek into the creative process of artists, and tries to pull out the tools of their work. In these inaugural episodes we will be looking at the work and creative practice of choreographer Liz Lerman. We’re now on episode 2 — collaboration. But before we start, just a few reminders.

Podcasts on Process is supported by Baltimore-based organization The Contemporary. And the series is also supported by the Curatorial Practice MFA program at the Maryland Institute College of Art. I hope you consider Podcasts on Process two ways: You are welcome to listen to the series as as a full narrative, from episodes 1 to 6, or you can listen topic by topic, one tool at a time.

In the first episode we took a quick look at Liz Lerman’s career, but if you are here just for the collaboration episode, this episode, I highly encourage you take a few minutes and go back to Episode One. Get yourself a foundation for Liz’s work, before listening to more.

COLLABORATION

KIRSTEN I mentioned earlier that the topic for this episode is collaboration. To me, the definition of collaboration can be a little messy and a little difficult to unravel at times. Does leadership play a part in collaboration? Could we call it brainstorming? What does a good collaborative project look like? And how many voices and opinions can be apart of that experience?

So, Liz Lerman has this gesture. And if you’ve spent any amount of time with her, you’ll know what I’m talking about. She starts with her hands one above the other. Thumb and forefinger kind of pinched, like she’s holding a piece of thread. And this imaginary thread is stretched vertically. And then she take that thread and tilts it 90 degrees, so that you have a horizontal line. When Liz is describing an experience, a project, an interaction — and especially when she’s talking about hierarchies — she’s asking herself and her audience to think horizontally—along a spectrum. Every conversation I’ve had with her in the last year, we’ve always ended up on this idea. And she inevitably makes this gesture. She’s asking: what’s the horizontal line, what’s the spectrum, of possibilities?

In this episode on collaboration, we are going to be talking about several modes of working collaborative. We’ll consider what’s exists along the spectrum of collaboration. As always, you’ll

hear from me and Liz. And then we are going to talk to several folks who've worked with Liz on a performance. And finally you'll hear from George Ciscle. Now, I might be playing favorites here with George. He's the director of the MFA in Curatorial Practice program, my program. CP, as we lovingly call it, advocates for consensus building within our graduate experience, and in our personal projects. We do our best to build consensus, and not confirm an idea based solely on the greatest majority in the room.

Collaboration is at the core of the both Liz's practice and the Curatorial Practice program. When we met for our interview, Liz and I, I was particularly curious what she consider her role to be in that kind of collaborative environment.

VOICES

KIRSTEN ...And then watch it swim around for awhile. In that rattling around, bumping around kind of way. But also watching you negotiate 15 to 20 voices, at any given break, even if it was only 2 minutes. And then watching you let others try certain things. We had the conversation then because you asked me—we were chatting about some difficulties that I had had in a classroom setting with a method of collaboration. That is, if 10 people are there you each are 1/10 of the pie—equal ownership, equal authorship, equal weight. And you asked me, what do you think the future of collaboration is? Do you think the method that, me as Kirsten was working under, is sustainable? Is possible? And we had come to the idea about a synthesizer, and that's your role. What does your head look like during a rehearsal? What's going on in there trying to negotiate?

LIZ LERMAN I would say that in Healing Wars I am instigator, agitator, synthesizer, and producer, if I raise the money. So, in that way, people will cede me in those roles—c-e-d-e—at any time if I want to step up and say "no, its this", everybody in the room, whether they liked it or not would adjust.

But I think theoretically Kirsten, if we are going to talk about forms of collaboration, I think you could set up between what I just described myself in Healing Wars and you at "one tenth of", there are so many versions in there. I would always personally always advocate that someone is possibly instigator and synthesizer. And that that person can change.

KIRSTEN This past year I had the opportunity to witness a portion of the development of Liz's newest work, Healing Wars. First at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography, or MANCC for short. The team was there, in Tallahassee, Florida, as the second of two residencies around the performance. And again, I watched 2 weeks of rehearsals prior to the performance's world premiere at Arena Stage in Washington D.C. Both times I was overwhelmed with the number of contributing voices in a single conversation. At any given time a group of 20 or more people could be on stage or nearby. And all of them providing different kinds of feedback to one another and to Liz. I asked Liz how she can consider all of those voices at once.

LIZ I enjoy hearing all of those voices. I find it really like, "oh, that's so interesting". I find that if I have to make a decision fast, if I am hearing a lot of voices, I'm not so happy. I've worked so long with performers in a collaborative environment, that if a performer has an idea and they express it. They'll say, "I think we could do blah, blah," I will say to them, "make it happen, let me see it." Not, "oh, I'll try that. Everybody could you...?" I'd rather Ted [Johnson] just make it happen. And then I can look and we can talk, and then they step back in.

So, we are good at that. People know if they express something, and it's important enough—now sometimes, they'll say something else, [and I'll say] "oh, that's a good idea. Everybody hear that? Try it! Go!" So, I am arbitrating a lot, but I don't want to try to make someone else's vision come true. I want them to put it in front of me and I can decide if we are keeping it or not, or if that's a worthy path. Do you get the difference?

KIRSTEN I've tried several times to go back to my notes from the residency and rehearsals that I watched, and count up the number of people who "on stage" making Healing Wars happen. If I have my numbers correct, we are looking at upwards of 15 to 20 people, on any given day, at any given hour. One of these folks was David Reynoso -- the scenic and costume designer on the performance. I was very excited to talk to David, one because he has a great laugh and two, because he has a very different role in supporting Healing Wars.

DAVID REYNOSO

KIRSTEN How would you identify yourself if you couldn't use the word costume designer or scenic designer? Would you call yourself a designer? Would you call yourself an artist? How would you frame yourself if you couldn't explain that to someone else? How could you generalize yourself as a maker?

DAVID REYNOSO Yes. I think it's sort of like a 3-dimensional illustrator.

KIRSTEN Watching the group make work together, can you talk a little bit about how you factored into that and how you would insert certain opinions, or ideas, and where you would step back. Your part in the process or how it worked.

DAVID Absolutely. It certainly was for me, it felt like a more unusual experience than I have been used to working with. In particular, I think it was interesting to feel like everything that was discussed or thrown out in the room was of consideration. And I think if I am being completely honest, it was also one of those situations that felt kind of, it was a bit daunting. Because of the fact that, like you said, it was leaps and bounds between where we were at MANCC and then all of a sudden at Arena. Everything in some ways was all theory in that room, until we really put it on stage.

And in regards to my role, being responsible in collaboration with other designers, responsible for the visual vocabulary of the piece—in particular, the scenery and the costumes. It was important to me that everything we were going to be able to absorb on a visual level supported the discoveries that were happening in the rehearsal room. And so, a lot of times I was just a fly on the wall, watching the performers and Liz interact with each other, and also interact with the different contemporary veterans. But I also invited them to be part of discussion about exciting things that were found everyday.

KIRSTEN I believe David has one of the trickiest jobs in supporting these performances. And just to make this clear again for listeners, Healing Wars is a living, breathing document. In the sense that it's under constant flux and change. In the matter of 3 weeks between a residency in Florida and rehearsal in D.C., the movement and imagery in Healing Wars changed pretty dramatically on several levels. Costume design can be a bit more nimble and can respond to how the performance is changing. The scenery on the other hand, needs to be "set in stone" before the team arrives on set. The scenic design must be responsive and concrete, all at once.

DAVID So in some ways scenic design is what I like consider establishing the rules of the game. I always say what a great sports player or basketball player is that they know the rules and boundaries of the court, of the game, but however knowing how do you play within those boundaries. What are you able to do? I think that's what makes a really great sports player. And so in some ways creating the set is establishing those boundaries.

KIRSTEN Already we are hearing from David that his vision and role were interconnected with another's. Here he goes on to describe the collaborative work environment on *Healing Wars*.

DAVID Its incredibly collaborative, and any idea is a good idea no matter where it comes from. Its my favorite type of way to work. Its an interesting double-edged sword. In some ways I find—gosh, I hate to even say this!—in some ways it's kind of like entering into a relationship with somebody. You have to know that there is a risk involved in this relationship. But, you hope that you have enough communication there that you are establishing again, some boundaries, so that then when these boundaries are set there is freedom within those boundaries to then do everything that your heart might desire.

I do find that what made it possible for me—I can only speak for myself—to feel completely at liberty to suggest something that way out of my realm of expertise in a collaborative environment—I mean I didn't just stick to scenic design and the costumes design. We would have conversation about the lighting design, and we would have conversations about the sound design. We would have conversation about movement, and the projections. It was all open dialogue. I have had experiences like that in the past with other theater productions, but not to the extent where it was almost expected that you all spoke up about something.

I absolutely loved it. And I think it was better for it. The old adage is true that two heads are better than one. I know that that also is terrifying to the way some people make theater. Because it is important to also know that it only worked because Liz in some ways—and maybe not always super apparent to us and that was her tricky and magic—is that she really was at the helm of things. So despite the fact that there were conversations that happened that she wasn't fully present for, she ultimately was at the helm. And I think we were all looking to her for final yes and no.

KIRSTEN How did Liz set the parameters? How did she create the environment that allowed you folks to work like that? You've been working together 2 to 3 years now as a group on this particular project, is that right?

DAVID Yeah, close to. The thing that strikes me about Liz is that she is an incredibly curious person. And it seems that she doesn't want to rob herself of the opportunity to see beyond what is in her scope by not being open to someone else's input.

KIRSTEN That's a very eloquent way of putting that.

DAVID And because of it there is a fearlessness that come with that. We can all speak to this, when you are around people who have that security you are immediately put at ease. As opposed to [someone saying] they may want that kind of environment, but they may not have that sense of security in themselves and in the process. I think that if there is any sort of agitation in the mix it would immediately strike panic in the rest of the team. And immediately we would all [say], "What

are we doing here? What are we doing?!" From the exterior it seemed like Liz was always fearless about the unknown. I imagine that the other designers, and other performers had moments internally where you do start to wonder, "What ARE we doing? What are we making? We have this deadline. We are putting on a show. What is this show? What are we doing? When is this going to come together? When is it going to start making sense on a bigger picture?"

You would then calm down and think, alright well Liz doesn't seem so scared! Maybe it going to be ok! And I think because of it, it made it so that you were able to walk on water. To be able to feel like someone was telling you, "No, no no. The water is fine. Keep going." She helped cultivate that fearlessness in all of us.

KIRSTEN I think you are getting a sense from David's descriptions of how this team of designers and performers work together. And it gets back to how Liz was describing herself -- as agitator, instigator and synthesizer. Watching the team exchange ideas, elicit feedback and develop the performance together is slightly miraculous and a little mysterious all at the same time. As a fly on the wall this past year I'm still not sure I can tag the specific techniques of how to make this form of collaboration work, but I certainly knew it when saw it!

GEORGE CISCLE, CURATOR

GEORGE CISCLE George Ciscle, I am curator-in-residence and director of the Curatorial Practice MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

KIRSTEN I've heard that voice almost everyday in the classroom since I started my graduate education at MICA. George developed the Curatorial Practice program, the first Master of Fine Arts of its kind in the US, in 2011. He's been at MICA as the curator-in-residence for almost 20 years, beginning his work with the Exhibition Development Seminar, or EDS.

What is curatorial practice as a profession? I think I'm still learning all of the possible hats a curator can wear, but very basically a curator is traditionally defined as the keeper or custodian of a museum or an institution's collection. Contemporary curators can also be synthesizers, selecting artworks sometimes under a theme, or observers, or as act platforms, or—my favorite synonym of a curator—as a cultural producer.

The mission statement of this MFA program in Curatorial Practice describes connecting art, artist and audience together. The program asks students to considered what an expanded definition of a curator can look like. Here's George describing CP so eloquently.

GEORGE I guess for Curatorial Practice [I left it] as an open-ended definition intentionally because it is a field that has expanded and become very much interdisciplinary, especially in the last 20 years or so. Which is the time period that I have been at MICA working with the undergraduate curatorial program. And so, what I have seen, and I guess what the program was designed to do, was really to not just examine, explore and investigate the current field—so to speak, and what is going on with curators—but I think more importantly what the potential of the relationship of that practice is to the larger world, to the world outside of ourselves, outside of curators, outside of artists and the art world itself.

KIRSTEN Its difficult to describe and give full justice to the full curriculum, but a CP education, along with a host of other courses, includes two major projects: Practicum and Thesis. Practicum is

the introduction into the program's core values. We learn to work collaboratively with each other, with the artists, our audience and our community partners, as a model for our own thesis projects.

It is also almost impossible to summarize the path of George Ciscle's career. Each step in his personal and professional development clearly supported the next endeavor. George has been developing his teaching model throughout his career as an educator. And what is clear about his teaching and [his] curatorial practice, collaborative partnerships have been a key aspect. I asked George about his background in the arts, and how his teaching philosophy developed.

GEORGE In terms of my own life prior to all of this?

It goes back to when I was in college. So in college I was very much involved in and exposed to theater and dance. Prior to that I very much was insular and independent kind of person, and individual to the point of being reclusive. When I got to college I was introduced and exposed to theater and dance. Theater, in terms of, not just studying, but in terms of making plays [looking at] O'Neill, Strindberg and Ibsen—many of the greats. And in terms of dance at that time Martha Graham. And from Martha Graham learning about Isamu Noguchi and how at that time period, and we are talking about the 60s, was rich with collaboration between disciplines—so whether it was music and dance and theater, and poetry. I was really embroiled in that. My training in college was looking at that potential between those relationships between those disciplines. It was very much about working obviously as a team. It was also looking at that what we were doing was in the service of an artist. Whether it was a playwright or a choreographer, whoever it may be, but that's what we were all doing as a team. And we all had that goal. And then looking at that point, of course, it was the director. It was the director who would take that role. And for good and bad, my experience with that was authoritarian. I very much rebelled against that.

ARTIST AND CURATOR

KIRSTEN At this same time George was examining two courses before him, that of the teacher and the other as an artist.

GEORGE To me an artist is someone who—they are an artist [because] they have no other choices. This is what they do. I realized I had other choices. I didn't necessarily need to make that sculpture. I didn't have to make that sculpture. And I didn't necessarily have anything to SAY with that sculpture. Right? It's the world I wanted to be in basically! And so, once I realized that then that other awakening after graduating, "You are not an artist. You are someone who wants to work with artists and with art, and be around it. And you need to figure out creatively what that might be."

KIRSTEN I posed Liz's model of "agitator, instigator and synthesizer" to George in our conversation, and how I have reflected back on our program's model of collaboration in comparison to Liz's.

GEORGE Liz is a visionary, ok. I am not either. I don't see myself that way at all. Even though people will sort of force, and impose that definition on you because they don't really understand what the process is in what we are talking about.

KIRSTEN The curatorial process?

GEORGE Yes, in terms of CP, and in terms of the pedagogy of the program. Liz is not just an artist and a visionary, but she is very much unique in terms of she is a collaborator. As we know, the majority of artists and visionaries are not collaborators, at all. That's not a critical statement at all. We are just saying in terms of the spectrum, the range of artists and artistic practice, that Liz is very unique in that regard. She is someone that is open and informed by the collaboration of all these other people and creative individuals.

Students from Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) worked with guest curator George Ciscle to present the first retrospective of the Baltimore-based artist Elizabeth Talford Scott in Eyewinkers, Tumble Turds and Candlebugs: The Art of Elizabeth Talford Scott at MICA's Meyerhoff and Decker galleries.

KIRSTEN As student curators, we have interpreted "collaboration" to mean a group of students working with a group of artists, and their partners. But is the work of a curator equal to a synthesizer? Or perhaps another way to ask it is: for student curators how would the learning outcomes change if the artist was the synthesizer?

GEORGE So I have seen it in EDS occasionally, that rare artist that works like Liz, that is very much inspired in form by those students in the class, or the environment that they've set up, or the community that they are bringing in. And it informs that artist's work and the artist acknowledges it. Even though during it the artist may not even realize it's going on. I've seen that happen through EDS. It's interesting in terms of CP. There are no instances of anyone working with individual artists.

Ok, I can understand justifications why Practicum, there's 10 of you [curators]. But when you are doing 10 different individual thesis work who says you can't just do a show with one artist, and work for two years with them. But no one has. And so to me, it's very interesting to see the difference. And to be honest with you, it's part of my sabbatical's realization, some of these things we are talking about. It's very interesting that the kind of results creatively and in terms of sustained outcomes that some of these projects that EDS did, came out of some of these individual artist projects. Not out of any group thematic shows. Why hasn't that happened at the level of CP. I don't know the answer to that. But without question, on the surface that is different than Liz's [methods], but there is no that [CP students] could not have chosen to work with...

KIRSTEN In the sense that a single artist for Practicum show would exist in a lot of ways that someone might exist as a synthesizer.

GEORGE Exactly right! Or with their individual thesis shows. I'm not sure again why that hasn't happened. But it is a very recent realization on my own. And is that something that needs to be more openly and outwardly talked about with students from the get-go.

PARTICIPATE

KIRSTEN I would love your feedback and your response to the creative challenges. After you listen please go to podcastsonprocess.com. If you find yourself inspired by a topic, use the hashtag #podcastsonprocess. Alternatively, you are welcome to record your response! There's a phone number listed under the "Respond" page of the website, and that's where you can leave me a voicemail. I'll be updating the site regularly with your responses!

So here's your creative challenge for this episode: What's your definition of a good collaborative project or experience? I challenge you to find a way to capture your answer visually. Take a photo and on Facebook or Instagram, tag your answer with our hashtag. You can also upload your photo by visiting the website. And thank you!

This episode and the whole series would not be possible without the incredible team around me. So I have to say thank you to a few folks. Thank you to the faculty of Curatorial Practice, to my extraordinary mentors, and to my support team from The Contemporary. The music you'll hear in this series was composed and recorded by the remarkable Ruby Fulton and the band, Nudie Suits. And thank you to Estelle Kline and Sean Tubbs, my audio engineer magicians. Thank you to my dear classmates and beautiful friends in Curatorial Practice and to my husband, my unwavering volunteer and MacGuyver on all of this.

And last but not least thank you to Liz Lerman, the stunning artist who graciously opened up her life and process to me.