

Filmmaking as Performance

[Lior Shamriz]

SATURDAY

I'm invited by Kristof to take part in the collective project "The Powerhouse": For 5 days they are taking over the permanent-set at the California Art Institute (CalArts). The permanent set was brought from a set of a "Harvard Dorm" in a TV Series from the early 1980s. In this space the collective of "The Powerhouse" is curating an exhibition (that opens on the first evening), performing a play (on the last day), having two people living there 24/7 and filming a movie. The place is filmed with 3 cameras (go-pros, broadcast camera), and a live edit of the cameras is streamed live on the internet and in the institute's café. The project is supposed to challenge the notion of singular authorship.

[Pictures from the set are here: <http://trakal.net/theexhibition/collection-of-interior-shots-2/>]

I'm invited to direct the film. In exchange for my 5 days of work I will receive 10 days from Kristof and Ramzi (who works with him on the project) for my film shoot in February. It's a good bargain (400%).

At the point when I'm entering the project there's already a script, a cast and shooting schedule. However, I am promised to have freedom to shoot my own film, have it on my name inside the project.

The shoot is scheduled for 5 days, Thursday to Monday, 10am – 8pm. I will have two assistants – Ramzi (as AD) and Kristof (as gaffer). I will also have variable number of crew persons and actors. The result, I am told, will be a film *about* the "Powerhouse" edited from footage from the broadcast & surveillance cameras together with my footage.

Before they send me the script I make sure that I have total freedom to change whatever I want and to "use the script as an entry point".

I make sure that I'm invited to "perform the act of filmmaking" and not act a character of a filmmaker for 5 days.

I ask to be reimbursed for gasoline, to have food and to have a small space where I can take pauses during the shooting.

I ask to have the option to remove my name if I wish.

I ask about the performers – potential nudity (as this is usually a fair indicator of how open people are).

After receiving the script, I quickly go over it on my smartphone, mistakenly thinking it to be only 5 pages long, with 5 scenes = very spongy.

[The script is here: http://spektakulativ.com/files/powerhouse/Powerhouse_Script.pdf]

I agree to take part in the project.

I am told that as part of the project I'm supposed to be a film director who wishes to be a curator. I ignore this request throughout the whole process.

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TUESDAY

Two days before the project begins we meet for the first time.

Seeing the printed script I understand that the script is actually more than 30 pages long, 5 scenes.

The film centers on a character of a curator. There are about 10 characters.

The scenes are as follow:

- 1) Lamonika the curator meets Dirtworm the artist
- 2) Lamonika is having a dinner at a house of a gallery owner together with his wife, two collectors and a lover of one of the collectors
- 3) Lamonika works with her assistant in her little studio
- 4) Lamonika's exhibition is being installed

- 5) The opening of the exhibition. A critic is visiting, and there are a few guests who share their impressions

Most performers are non-professionals: Mostly art students, some film students, one is a first-year theater student.

The leading role – Lamonika the curator, is given to Brigitte, a critical-studies student.

The cast & crew are students - very busy writing journals about the classes they visit, collecting points for their degrees and following reading assignments, don't have much time for artistic collaborations, so they are scheduled to be on set as little as possible.

I ask Ramzi to have a rehearsal a day before we start. I ask to be able to meet everyone together first, to explain the situation.

I decide to film one shot per day, this way it doesn't matter how I will be edited.

My film will only be edited into a film *documenting* the performance, not as an individual piece. Since this external documentation is beyond my authority, and as this text that I'm now writing is the only documentation that I will have (I'm not taking still photos, and not keeping the tapes) – clearly my main focus is on the actual time of filming – This is a 5 days performance, not a 5 days shooting of a film.

WEDNESDAY

I'm coming prepared to explain my approach to the project to the cast that I asked to gather but only Brigitte (the potential lead role of Lamonika) is there with me. The rest of the cast is coming only for a short hour or less - they just pop up, introduce themselves and disappear.

I don't get a chance to present my perspective on project to the people I'll be directing.

I use the little rehearsal time I have to do a reading of the script, since I still haven't read it.

By the end of Wednesday I realize that I, Ramzi and Kristof are the only ones who are seriously involved with the film. All the rest are just visitors. I'm getting upset that I'm going to waste a week of my time, realizing a project that has already been molded – the cast has already been chosen and everyone is already scheduled to come and wait for their close-ups. I will have little freedom to actually create something substantial. I feel being expected to come and film art-students reading lines from a long script about relationships between artists, curators and collectors.

I decide to take a whole different approach to the situation and be more violent and subversive.

THURSDAY

We are supposed to shoot the last scene – the opening of the exhibition.

I'm assigned Matthew to be the "critic". Brigitte is Lamonika the curator.

There will be real audience in the evening – people who come for the opening of the exhibition.

I'm preparing one dolly shot – Matthew the critic in "corner time" – standing at a corner of the room, facing the wall, hands on his head. The camera moves backward from a close-up of his face to a "fullshot" of him with the upper body of Brigitte, who is in front of him.

I direct him to beg her to be able to say what he things.

The camera moves very slowly – taking 5 minutes to move less than 5 meters, so the whole situation is almost static. After some 7-8 minutes the camera should go back, closer to his face, and he, after receiving permission, will turn around and tell her his opinion.

Matthew is cooperative. He agrees to take off his pants and put on red boxers that I give him.

My main purpose is to have the "critic", a student in the institute, stand in the corner for a long time, wearing underwear, begging to talk. By "a long time" I include rehearsals and the general time that takes to prepare the shot.

We are rehearsing the shot but I know that it will be different when random people come, fellow students and teachers, and the embarrassment will be more real.

We light the scene nicely and work on the movement together with Ramzi and a film student who is the crew person of the day. We have set-lights hanging from the top, we have an industry level dolly, and we record the sound of the scene.

Despite Ramzi's requests, I refuse to turn the camera and show to the place where most of the crowd should later hang out.

Since the other cameras are capturing the room anyway, there will be a documentation of the fact that there was a "random" crowd in the room. I concentrate on a concise shot, reduced in the volume of information it gives a potential audience.

We rehearse and also shoot a 10 minutes take before the guests arrive.

We decide to prolong the duration to a 30 minutes take.

I want the interaction between the critic and the curator to be minimal. He's there anyway - it's more about duration and humiliation than dialogue.

I tell Matthew to say only 10 short sentences during the whole shot, and Brigitte is requested to reply only 3 times.

In the rest of the time she should step out of the interaction with him and chat with the crowd.

Since she doesn't believe she can improvise the chats, we assign potential partners for that.

When the moment comes, I tell the crowd in the space that they don't have to stay in a specific place, they can walk wherever they want.

I give an action. Matthew starts begging and the camera moves backward.

Brigitte is unable to perform in the “real” crowd – whenever she leaves Matthew she is lost and in need of guidance. I have to be the one pulling her out of the interaction with Matthew and the one who is chatting with her as her eyes are lost in space.

The crowd, about 20 people, vanishes less than one minute into the filming. Their embarrassment is real – they don’t want to be in the scene and hide themselves in the kitchen.

FRIDAY

We are supposed to shoot the dinner scene (scene 2): Lamonika the curator (Brigitte), at the house of a gallery owner and his wife, two collectors and a lover of one of them.

After feeling some bad energy from Brigitte (I heard her say to a friend that what we did the day before was a “pervert scene”), I decide to try and bring love to the set.

Since the “gallery owner’s wife” is the only acting student we have, I decide to center the scene on her. I ask her if she’s comfortable with her body and with fooling around and she says “yes sure” .

My intention is to have the actors touch each other throughout the day.

I plan a very basic dolly-shot (the gallery-owner’s-wife gets out of the kitchen, dolly back, camera slowly moves over the people on the table following the action). The gallery owner, a German, is to tell a story about how when he was a boy, a friend of the family took them to see Ithaca and how this friend is now poor, and how funny this is (Schadenfreude). Then his wife will ask for some affection, she will approach the gay couple and ask them to show her that they are actually a couple doing a public display of affection. Then she will hug

Lamonika the curator who should reply “Why are you so good to me”, then they will move to the other collector.

There is a long scene written for this day, full of dialogue. I ask the actors to read the text, as I’m leaving the room and take a break. I know that I’m not intending to film this script, I only want a documentation of it – so having them read while the broadcast cameras are recording is enough for my purpose.

After a long hour or so, the reading is finished. The set designer brings the food (props) I asked for: Juicy brown meat and big crabs. When she complains that there are not enough plates I suggest she puts the food on the printed scripts, so at least there will be some use for it.

My main purpose in this day is to have the actors touch and kiss each other as much as possible, either during “rehearsals” or “filming”.

Almost all the participants are prude. None wants to show any part of his/her body. Brigitte keeps being hostile to any physical experimentation.

We rehearse the shot the whole day: I cut it into pieces, rehearsing only the parts where people are supposed to be touching each other. I try to get them to touch each other and kiss as much as possible during the whole rehearsal. But the participants are very shy, conscious. They know that their voice is heard at the institute’s busy café (I’m only told about this later that day), so some are obsessed with bragging about the celebrities that they met (highbrow celebs of course), while eating their big crabs.

Around 5:25 pm, when everyone and everything is ready, I tell Ramzi the AD to be the one giving action. At the moment that I’m supposed to give the final ‘action’, I go away “to the restroom”. Taking my time away.

Although everyone knows what to do in the shot, the fact that I’m not interested to actually film the shot makes people lose their motivation.

Instead, Ramzi let the camera run, and the group indulges in twenty minutes of theological chat about contemporary art schools and institutions.

The shooting ends in a very bad feeling for everyone, including me. I'm thinking that I don't want to do this anymore. Especially not with Brigitte.

Kristof wants to talk about it. We sit together with Ramzi. The broadcast cameras are running. I explain that I'm not happy with the performers I was assigned to work with, particularly Brigitte, who is not the right person for this performance. I explain that I'm looking for shameless free people, not prude careerists who focus only on portfolios and networking. I express a wish to find shameless people to work with.

Ramzi offers himself. "You can do anything to me. I'm the perfect guy for you. Drag me, put stuff in my ass, whatever".

I offer to talk with Brigitte to see if there's any reason to keep her in the project. Ramzi offers to talk with her first. After an hour she texts me with an invitation to visit her room. There, the first thing I say is "You don't have to do it if you don't want to" – I'm sincere. I sense she wanted me to beg her to stay. Instead I try to explain to her in a non-judgmental way that it's not about "her as a person", but simply about being a performer in this specific work, since she is very conscious and not open to experimentations - conscious of her body, looking for "reasons".

At some point she shamelessly says: "I can't do it, because I'm a communist". In reply I try to show her where she stands exactly and how meaningless, or even offensive her declaration is. Her version of communism reminds me of the early 20th century Kibbutz members of Israel, who didn't mind abusing the labor of the Palestinians around them as long as they can have their imagined "utopian collectives", fenced and protected from a truly fair interaction with the world. I try to explain to her that I prefer a multiplicity of voices rather than unisons.

It's obvious that she thinks of me as some sort of a dictator – something that happens often when working with non-professionals who don't really want to perform but rather to have the experience of performance, like tourists in a city.

Brigitte is replaced by Ramzi the AD who will play the curator from the next day on.

SATURDAY

We shoot scene 3 - between the assistant and the curator.

I put music when we are working, in order to charge the set with the energy that I want.

I already asked, in advance, for a dog cage for the assistant character. But since now there's a male-female relationship, Ramzi offers to go himself into the cage and keep the assistant, who's a woman, outside it.

He wants to cut his hair for the role, I suggest we do it on camera while he's in the cage. The hair is to be cut with nails-scissors so the process will be very slow.

The purpose of the day is to create a spaceless, timeless mise-en-abyme while having the assistant in a dog cage for a long time. We decide on a one-hour shot – the longest we can do with the video camera that we have.

I instruct the 'assistant', who is sitting outside the cage to unwrap and then peel oranges and pomegranates, eat them and sometimes feed Ramzi with them.

Ramzi, inside the cage, on a laptop, is watching the online stream of the "Powerhouse" website.

One of the broadcast camera is pointed "over his shoulder", so it can create a "mise en abyme" effect with a delay of 20 seconds that take the broadcast to be streamed online.

We prepare theatrical light on the cage, highlighting the performers, prepare the background, and I feel that our action charges the space with strong energy.

We shoot it for an hour.

Throughout the day I had a good energy on the set. The cast&crew and visitors show curiosity and excitement to what we are doing.

During the day I realize that I fell in love with one of the visitors, a person that was hanging around but wasn't part of our team. Upon seeing Ramzi inside the cage, this person says "This looks ...". And doesn't continue – as if he wasn't sure if it looks "great" or "disturbing".

SUNDAY

On the next day we are supposed to shoot Scene 1 – between Dirtworm the artist and Lamonika the curator. The artist is supposed to be Jessy, whose actual art work is there

But I ask to replace him – a very heterosexual male art student, with Anna, Ramzi's ex who gave a psychedelic yoga lesson on the first day in the "powerhouse". I'm strongly attracted by her open energy.

There's a delicate situation with the text that I give Ramzi to read because Anna is an ex-girlfriend of Ramzi. I explain to them that the text is not theirs but mine. Anna defines it in a precise way by saying: "It doesn't come from the scene".

I'm using the set as itself - Ramzi and Anna are meeting at the "powerhouse".

The scene is as follow:

- Camera starts watching Anna entering the set.
- She notices Ramzi on the right side
- The camera pans right to Ramzi, who is in full nudity holding a joint (I tell them that this doesn't have to be a real joint, but of course, as I expect, they decide to smoke a real one).
- Anna comes in, says hello.
- He puts on his cloths because "there's no reason for me to be naked in this scene",
- While dressing up, they talk about what they were *supposed* to do in the scene (They were supposed to be Ramzi as Lamonika the curator and Anna as Dirtworm the artist, discussing Dirtworm's work).
- As he finishes dressing up, Ramzi says that instead of that scene, he's required to read a text.

- I am entering the frame, giving him the page he needs to read with my text.
- They go to sit at the corner of the room, that looks a little like a porch,
- The camera slowly gets closer to them until we have a two-shot of them sitting.
- As Ramzi finishes reading the text, I play the song "Sing a song for you" by Tim Buckley, as they touch and comfort each other. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6frpebzfMvs>)
- The camera slowly "dollies out"

I ask them to come up with the names of their "meta characters". Ramzi chooses "Cody" and Anna chooses "Shamiz".

We rehearse the scene again and again.

In advance, I asked for 25 copies to be printed of the one-page-text I wrote.

[The text is here: http://spektakulativ.com/files/powerhouse/Day_4.pdf]

With every take, I'm folding a new copy of the printed text, like a letter, off camera, and I hand it to Ramzi. This way, from one rehearsal to the next, the space is filled with my love-letter, having it spread all over the place, giving random visitors the opportunity to read it, charging the room with my words.

I'm interested in the energy that will arise from the repetition of:

- * Ramzi's full nudity, dressing up, undressing again.
- * Smoking a joint indoors, inside our space which is inside the institute
- * Having the actors declare what they should be doing (this way I have a totally "transparent" situation where everyone – cast, crew and visitors – are all on the same "dramatic sphere")
- * Having Ramzi and Anna sit on the 'balcony', gently touching each other
- * Playing the tender song repeatedly on set
- * The tender movement of the camera at the end of the scene, with our crew operating the movement.

This way I'm moving between a charge of anarchistic energy (the scene's beginning) to the tenderness that arises at the end of the shot.

By the last take, the crew and people on the set are happy, clapping their hands when the takes are done.

Even though I feel we're done, the actors and the crew are asking for another one, perhaps simply because they wanted to re-experience the situation.

After this 'encore' take, I thank everybody, and say that we need 6 guns for the next day.

MONDAY

I bring two texts:

- 1) 43 different translations to chapter 43 from the Tao Te Ching
(homage to Caroline Bergvall)

[The text is here: http://spektakulativ.com/files/powerhouse/Tao_Te_Ching_1copy.pdf]

- 2) Two excerpts from poems by Pablo Neruda -
Residencia en la tierra,
Explico Algunas Cosas
(homage to Berio's Coro)

[The text is here: http://spektakulativ.com/files/powerhouse/Pablo_Neruda_20copies.pdf]

I ask to print 20 copies of the page with the quotes from Neruda,
and one copy of the 43 pages with the different translations to Tao Te Ching.

I remind the team that I asked for guns, either props or real. (I want to charge the set with killing instruments)

After a while it appears that it is impossible to bring them to the set:

- 1) Guns or things that look like guns / props , are not allowed at CalArts
- 2) The prop shop at CalArts doesn't have gun props
- 3) WalMart's toy guns look ridiculously unrealistic.
- 4) Some students have guns but they are afraid to bring them to the campus

We buy two ridiculous toy guns from WalMart.

I ask for knives.

I start filming: I'm shooting a collection of static shots with people reading. Either Julien reading in Spanish the Neruda excerpts, or different, sometimes random persons, reading one translation of the Tao Te Ching chapter.

We get three kitchen knives and one "designer" knife of a student. I play with the knives, offer them to people, and at some point dance with them

I play youtube clips of mass executions in Syria to the camera, in between the readings. There are guns there. And shootings too.

[Here is one of these horrible clips: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FADJK4HzDKE>]

Sharing our space, the theater team is preparing their 5 o'clock show.

I'm trying to slowly "fade out", let others take over: I'm making less and less decisions. I let others (the assistants, Willy, Kristof) choose where to have the camera, how the frame will be, who will read.

Since there are pauses between different shots, and since there is no designated ending to this filming process, it is also unclear when exactly the filming will be "concluded".

Kristof is filming the people as I move to the back room and play some music on the keyboard, sometimes accompanying the readings.

I leave the set.

L.S

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