

Zoom Tools for Improvisation

This list is mainly inspired by research from [oetherside collective](#)'s weekly practices since March 2020. We called it "Zoom Cinema". See a tiny window into that work [here](#). But I've also taken learnings from Zoom dance/dj parties, and exploring with other improvisers. [The Architects' Improvisation Assembly](#) inspired me to finally sit down and write this document. Thank you to [Lily Kind](#) for editing it!

Working in Zoom, each performer becomes their own lighting director, scenographer, costume director. Everyone must be both director and a performer.

There are TOO MANY tools and options listed here. As with any score, it's helpful to decide which ones are in play and which ones are out. Research each one as its own exercise or task and see what fits your purposes.

I use "computer" to mean the device through which you are connected to Zoom, as the majority of my explorations have been using a Macbook laptop. In most instances you can translate "computer" phone or tablet, although Zoom's mobile features sometimes differ from desktop.

- Sarah Chien

Entrances and Exits (also Endings and Beginnings)

Individual Control

- Turn off/on your video.
 - How many video frames fill your screen completely? For me, it is often four. If I adjust the size of my Zoom window it is fewer.
- Turn off/on your mic.
- [Leave your video on, but exit the frame of your video](#). Try entering the frame from different sides/angles.
 - Find the place in your room where you can watch your screen but not be in the frame. This is a useful spot to remember!
 - See what happens if all participants have empty rooms. What does it evoke?
- Cover the camera on your computer or phone with an object to make your zoom frame appear to be just that color. You may need to re-adjust your screen brightness settings if you have a Mac.

- **Utilitarian actions:** sometimes you are dancing and you want to turn off your video or unmute yourself but you aren't conveniently positioned near your computer. Instead of contriving a way to get to your computer as part of the performance, just drop what you are doing, walk over to your computer and do it. The clunkiness of the moment will be short-lived. It will be easier for other performers to understand what you are doing and why. Sometimes you have to switch from performer to stagehand. Why not be obvious?

Host/Cohost Control, aka “God Powers”

As the host of a meeting, if you turn off someone else's video or mic, it is possible that they will not be able to turn it back on. If you decide to do this, especially mid-score, it is helpful to use the option “ask ____ to turn on their video/mic” soon after.

Using your God Power can feel scary, but can also be a gift. It puts you in the technical director seat, able to “black out” or “mute” someone at will. Consider the moments when something has come to an end but the performer finishes far away from the computer, or a musician has hands on their instrument.

- Turn off/on a participant's video
- Turn off/on a participant's mic
- End the Meeting to boldly end the score (thanks Pam Vail)
- Spotlight one participant (puts the main “speaker” focus on them)*.

You can share God Power by inviting more than one person to be a cohost. Try changing who exercises God Powers each meeting.

Spotlighting is helpful in large groups when not all the participants can fit on one screen. In ∞therside we don't use spotlighting, as it takes away from the ability of the whole ensemble to craft what everyone sees. We work with a maximum of eight people so individual control works well. However, in the Architects' Assembly, Donnell Williams used it beautifully as a compositional choice that showcased each participant. Spotlighting is an essential part of [Zoom parties](#), and also good for audience participation during performance events.

Leading and Following

Ways to Amplify

- Do the same movement, perhaps not necessarily in the same direction or place in space.
 - What shared physical scores or vocabulary does your group already know?
- Use the same camera angle as someone else, especially if that angle is unique

- Stand/sit/pause in the same relative position in your space (i.e: everyone on one side of their screen)
- Cross the frame, repeatedly (see entrances and exits)
- Body parts, close to the camera. Hands and feet only.
- See [Cinema tricks and images](#)- any of these work well amplified in a group

In my experience with Zoom, joining-in on an idea, or copying, is really useful. In non-Zoom work, sometimes these choices can feel trite, but on Zoom they can help draw attention to what is happening and amplify someone else's choice or a collective theme... Moreover, audience members may struggle to focus if each frame is frantically moving in their own unique way. "Less is more" we keep reminding ourselves in ∞therside. Amplifying techniques can bring visual cohesiveness.

Ways to Invite

- Use your mic and say what you need/want out loud!
- Write it on a piece of paper, and hold that up to the screen.
- Chat box function.
- Make a strong choice and stick with it (important in any improvisation). Since there are so many things to look at, sometimes you have to stay with something longer for it to be read or noticed.

Ways to Support

- Moving far away from the camera, so that you fade into the background but are still present.
- Pausa (stay in your space, camera on, but stop moving, create a tableau)
- Camera off, speak or add sound
- Find an image in your environment that illustrates what someone is speaking about
- Using one body part close to the camera, while someone else's whole body is in the frame. Hand to point and indicate can be a good one.
- Rename Yourself¹: participants can click on their name and rename themselves. Change your name to display a poetic response like "lying next to you" or "yes".

Solos/Duets/Trios etc

In ∞therside, we like to work with the "hide non-video participants" setting turned on. This is because when there are fewer videos on, Zoom reconfigures the video frames to make each one bigger. We imagine that we are composing for the Zoom recording. In Zoom, each participant has

¹ Thanks to Architects' Improvisation Assembly

the power to adjust what they see on their screen (highlighting one person's frame, condensing their viewing window, etc), but if we imagine the recording then we are thinking about what the view would be like without additional customization. This is perhaps the closest to a shared perspective.

We use video on/off as a form of entering and exiting. We do this because it allows us all to control the number of people who are "in". By turning off our videos we leave space for the remaining frames to take over more screen space. You can either take your video off if you don't feel like you are contributing, or take your video off in order to shine more light on others..

We play with configurations of dancers and musicians, just as we would in physical space.

- Use "gallery" view + "hide non video participants" when making a duet/trio/quartet to see both yourself and everyone else.
- Pin the person you are making a duet with so that you only see them, and perhaps yourself as a smaller frame.
- Decide the number of videos that will be "in" at any given time (like the "round robin" from contact improv)
- Especially for practice exercises, coming close to the camera (so that your face fills the square) when watching/speaking can be a good clear way to indicate who is "performing" and who is "witnessing". This is helpful if you want to leave all cameras on.
- Use the spotlight feature to create solos, the "spotlighter" essentially becomes a director or lighting designer. Spotlight is a host/cohost power that causes one video to take over the entire screen. Participants can then click "gallery view" to go back to seeing the grid. The person who is spotlighted can also choose to cancel the spotlight if they don't want to be featured.

Tasks

[David Zambrano](#)'s score, *Passing Through*, has three common tasks that every group tries to accomplish during a performance, at least once but perhaps more.. The tasks are: general pausa, general exit, and "river" (everyone following the same pathway through space). No one knows when they will happen, but everyone puts attention towards making them happen. I've been wondering what those tasks could be on Zoom. Here's a brainstorm:

- One dancing solo
- One image
- Musician only video(s)
- Everybody follows one solo
- Everybody turns off screen
- Everybody only making images

- Everybody only doing movement
- General Exit (all cameras on, all spaces empty)
- General Pausa (everyone in frame, paused in their space)
- Duet: image + dance
- Duet: dance + music

Audio Solutions/Challenges

As an ensemble of musicians and dancers, this has been our biggest challenge. As far as we can tell, only one musician can play at a time. In ∞therside, we default to mics off. Dancers do this so that musicians have the best chance of being heard. Musicians practice spontaneously entering and leaving and picking up where each other left off. Each dancer also has permission to un-mute themselves to add voice, both text and singing. This gets into the discussion of mastery of disciplines and roles in an ensemble (when should dancers make sound? When should musicians make visuals?)- a larger question all-together!

- Zoom is optimized for voice, so for acoustic instruments, those that have a singular tone or voice-like quality sound the best. For example, horns, woodwinds, guitar played as a melody (not strumming).
- Musicians and host should all have [enable original sound](#) option configured and use direct inputs into the computer for electronic sound.
- Musicians look great when they put their camera angle close up on just a part of their instrument, like a dancer might do to frame a part of their body. Hands on the guitar, fingers on the keyboard, the bell of the alto sax, etc.
- Musicians can try all mics on, if some/all are using more ambient sounds, Zoom will privilege some sounds over others- often in surprising ways. But don't do this if you want the high quality pure sound from each individual.
- Play recorded tracks by simply unmuting yourself and playing sound from your computer into your space (play that sound loud, as it will be a little distorted as it travels through the room back to your computer).
- Unmute yourself and let your environment's ambient sound be heard.

Cinema Tricks & Images

- Focus your camera on something in your environment: the sky, a section of your room, a place where the light falls in a beautiful way.
- Focus your camera on an object and then animate that object. The object needs to be close to the camera for it to read. You can also develop a solo with that object. Plants are an easy choice.
- If you wish to draw, position your camera at an angle from above, whereby only your hand and the paper are in focus.
- Log in with two devices, a laptop and a phone. Turn them on and off depending on the angle you want. Phones work well with creative mounts ([i like this one](#)).
- Focus on a clock or a countdown timer as a way to show time
- Play with how close or far you are to the camera.

In ∞thertside we are debating how to define an “image”, but in general I’d say it’s doing something specifically for the Zoom screen, creating a film-like moment. It’s often up close, slow and or rhythmic or repetitive.

Exercise: one performer proposes an image, the others respond in dancing.

Exercise: one performer proposes a clear movement idea, the others support with images.

Creative Experiments

Fuck the Screen

Ignore the screen

Sometimes we worry about what the screen attention is doing to our composing/creating attention and presence. We have tried everyone keeping their camera on but dimming or covering their screen so that the only witness to what we make is the Zoom recording itself. Similarly, we also tried lowering the sound so that the computer was recording, but we could not hear as we composed.

We have also tried different duet/trio configurations wherein some people are able to see the screen and others are not.

Film a dancer dancing with the Zoom screen²

What does it look like to reveal the process that is happening “behind the scenes”?

The performer in the room needs to log in on two computers, one that is in the frame, one that is for the performers’ reference. The reference computer should be camera-on (but self view can be off) so that Zoom performers can see what is happening in the filming room, and the room performer gets a sense of what is on the screen. Whew!

- For legibility on a small screen, solos worked best



Questions

We’re still looking for answers/ideas, feel free to offer your thoughts as comments on this doc!

- Different Tools for Endings?
- Is there a way to call in the whole group, for a sudden spontaneous but coordinated entrance?

² thanks Mirko Lancerotto and Francesca Caselli

- Catching things too slowly- how can performers pick up on and support ideas that others offer without a delay?
- How to support without interrupting, taking focus, changing the idea?
- More audio solutions for working simultaneously with multiple musicians.

Bonus: Zoom Party Tricks

At the beginning of the pandemic, my DJ friend [Gabriel Willow](#) threw some amazing Zoom parties and his enthusiasm pulled me in! I adapted what we'd been learning improvising with ∞therside, to be "party tricks" that make the room fun and engaging and help keep everyone "dancing". Zoom parties are part dancing, part collective TV-show. The more people are creating movement on their screen the more engaged everyone stays. [Spotlighting](#) is essential at Zoom parties- when the spotlight's on you, ham it up!

Prep

- know your the borders of your camera frame (where in your room will you be seen or not seen?)
- see what colors look good in contrast to your room's background and lighting
- more light is better

1. upper body bounce

just keep bopping to keep the party energy going

-> variation: zoom background bounce
 put a virtual background and just bounce in and out

2. solo soul train

walk towards and away from camera

3. footwork!

Just focus the camera on feet

-> variation: camera on any body part

4. face spin

hold machine close to face and spin around

5. dance partner

grab a pet, kid, or large stuffed animal and show it to the screen

6. paper guest

An image of someone famous (ex: RBG), a cartoon character, draw it and hold it to the camera
You can also hold up a happy birthday sign, or another hand-written message!

7. silhouette

dance in front of a bright light

8. Costume change!

Everyone gets excited when you change looks

9. Be a chat cheerleader!

Get in the chat and complement people for cool backgrounds, home setups, dance moves, etc.