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CURATING DIGITAL RECORDS OF PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Defining the nature of performances is at the root of all difficulties regarding their representation. This paper presents the work of AHDS Performing Arts, a UK national organisation for research into, advice on, and curation of digital content related to the performing arts disciplines. Recent research has concentrated on digital representations of performance and how they can be curated for lasting value, investigating the challenges of creating and curating representations of a complex and ephemeral art form and the need for subject-specific expertise. This paper presents an overview of the work of AHDS Performing Arts and introduces the issues relevant to research and practice of digital curation of performance materials.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past eleven years the Arts and Humanities Data Service Performing Arts subject centre (AHDS Performing Arts)[1] has preserved digital data in the long term, promoted good practice in the creation and use of digital data, provided technical advice to the research community, and pursued research into the unique challenges offered by digital representations of an ephemeral art form. For the last three years, this service was hosted by the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute (HATII) at the University of Glasgow.[2]

[1] http://www.ahds.ac.uk/performingarts
[2] http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/

AHDS Performing Arts closed down at the end of March 2008 as a result of the decision taken by Arts and Humanities Research Council in March 2007 to cease funding the AHDS.[3] This paper will briefly discuss the legacy of the service in terms of its best practice in data curation, knowledge transfer to Performing Arts communities, and provision of high quality and dependable digital resources related to music, dance, theatre, radio, film, television, and performance, for the UK research and teaching community. The paper will then discuss the challenges faced by the creation and interpretation of representations of performance data, drawing on our research over the past few years.

THE LEGACY OF A NATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR DATA CURATION

AHDS Performing Arts has safeguarded the digital products of research from over 60 projects related to theatre, music, broadcasting, film, and live art, and all collections are still freely available to the public through our Web portal.[4] However, in addition to preserving and making accessible content, the legacy of the service is much further-reaching. The AHDS provided a national approach to developing best practice in digital curation, whilst maintaining the subject-based expertise so important for offering appropriate strategies and advice in domains with very specific needs, such as Performing Arts. This expertise has, slowly but surely, filtered out into communities of stakeholders from practitioners seeking advice on copyright to academic researchers and funding organisations. Like the collections themselves, this body of knowledge on how best to create, manage, and preserve digital content is freely available through the AHDS Website; a resource of significant value, increasingly so now that there is no national organisation devoted to helping content creators and users in the arts and humanities. However, in terms of this paper, the most significant legacy left by AHDS Performing Arts is in the building up of communities of research and practice over the past few years; networks of performers

[3] See Jones, Abbott, & Ross (2008) 'Risk Assessment for AHDS Performing Arts Collections: A Response to the Withdrawal of Core Funding' for an investigation into the implications of this decision.
[4] http://www.ahds.ac.uk/performingarts/collections/index.htm

and academics engaged with digital technologies and how they can be used and exploited to increase the lasting value of their performances.

REPRESENTATIONS OF PERFORMANCE

> "[A] work of art born on the stage lives only for a moment, and no matter how beautiful it may be it cannot be commanded to stay with us."[5]

Defining the nature of performances is at the root of all difficulties regarding their representation. Performances are live events, the enactment of which does not endure through time and this transience is their defining characteristic. Peggy Phelan states that performance "becomes itself through disappearance."[6] The temporal nature of performance causes tension; the fear of loss leads to an urgent desire to counter this through documenting, while the loss inherent in this process leaves many dissatisfied with the outcome. Representations such as photographs, videos, or audio recordings are often discounted as inadequate and unfaithful. The archiving of such representations can also be misleading: they capture a single moment of time or a single performance event in a much larger work which is continually evolving over time rather than reflecting the entire process of creating and enacting performances. These records provide an individual access point but only offer a very narrow perspective - each reproducing merely one aspect of the performance. Inevitably they also incorporate multiple losses and additions – the translation from performance to representation is never 1:1. Arguably if we create multiple representations, as a whole they will bring us closer to the elusive 'truth'. However, if the representations simply reflect specifics – the costumes, the script, details of the venue and time period – to what extent does this actually reflect the performance itself?

Practitioners of performing arts have been struggling with this issue for some time. Sophia Lycouris views the representations we create as a "manifestation of registered

[5] Stanislavski (1987) p.570, (first published 1924).
[6] Phelan (1993) p.146.

concerns" rather than an attempt to reconstruct the original.[7] Capturing the 'essence' of the performance as opposed to reflecting a single so-called objective reality is an increasingly common strategy for documenters. Moreover, those characteristics previously largely ignored by performance archives (for example, the relationships between performer and audience) now generate both a notable concern and a challenge to attempt to capture and preserve, requiring considerable expertise and judgement from both documenters and performers alike.[8] Another emerging perspective is that memory is the most appropriate site for records of performance as its fluidity and fallibility more closely echo the ephemeral nature of performance.

If performance archives are to respond to these concerns then perhaps the traditional notion of a record as a fixed, authoritative representation of an event should be expanded. Performances are constantly evolving so the method of capturing and fixing a snapshot is somewhat incongruous. Moreover the possibility that one viewpoint or interpretation could be valued over others and presented as the single authoritative account by virtue of being archived is strongly opposed.

APPRAISAL OF PERFORMANCE DATA

Documenters of performance share the archival process of appraisal. The selection of certain features of a performance work allows (and in fact enforces) an edited representation. Performers can restrict the material they make available in order to reinforce a particular identity for themselves and their works, or choose to only include representations which show their work in the best light. Whilst this attitude may seem manipulative, archival representations of transient works or repertoire are never accurate, they do not represent the 'truth' of the performance in the first place, and there are concerns from artists and curators alike that the archival record can mistakenly stand in for, or even supplant the lost performance.[9] However, just as archivists reappraise and assess the value of objects differently over time, artists'

[7] Lycouris (2002).
[8] *Cf.* Melrose (2007).
[9] *Cf.* Reason (2003).

attitudes towards their works also change. For example, for years the Australian writer Patrick White was adamant that everything but his official publications should be destroyed.

> "My MSS are destroyed as soon as the books are printed. I put very little into notebooks, don't keep my friends' letters as I urge them not to keep mine, and anything unfinished when I die is to be burnt. The final versions of my books are what I want people to see and if there is anything of importance to me, it will be in those."[10]

Towards the end of his life, however, White encouraged his friends who had previously ignored his wishes to make these personal writings available to his biographer, in order to provide a different insight into his creative works. This shows that artistic intent can change over time and that often multiple points of access to works are desired contrary to previous indications. It is also compelling evidence that it is **not** sufficient to view works as singular, complete, discrete objects and that a range of representations, be they direct or contextual, are necessary to gain a balanced view of the work.

For performance, there is no 'final version' which can be seen, and the supplementary or deliberately documented records, along with the embodied knowledge and experiences of the audience and performers are all that remains. There is a wide range of factors affecting the decisions behind what to document, its appraisal, and how it is made available (for example in UK Higher Education documentation of performance research is often a requirement of funding). If artists actively choose to document their work they may perform for two audiences: those present and those who will only experience the performance at a remove, through documentation. This decision in turn could impose boundaries on the performance, for example futilely trying to ensure a consistent experience for both sets of audiences. One of the major challenges curators and users face is attempting to discern the underlying influences behind the creation of a performance archive or repertoire.

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[10] White, P. *Letters*, Marr, D. (ed.) (1994) Random House – Sydney, Australia, p. 492. Quoted in McKemmish (2001).

Appraisal is inherently problematic because it is based on notions of value and taps into the old archival debate of whether the creator or archivist defines value.[11] It is therefore questionable how accurate representations can ever be. If an artist is embarrassed by her early works, finding them crude and unsophisticated, how likely is it that she would choose to make them publicly available, even if they captured the beginnings of her style? Arguably the archivist would be more detached and approach the decision more objectively, considering the value and use of the records more broadly. The archivist however brings her own bias to the decision, due to resource constraints, the collection remit, her personal definition of value, intuition, and political restraints. Power underpins exclusion and inclusion in the records, whether this is the power of an artist over her work or the influence of an authoritarian regime where official memory is sanitised.

Arguably **all** archiving is performance: records are surrogates that provide a window onto past moments that can never be recreated; and users interact with these records in a performance to reinterpret this past. In his introduction to *Scrolling Forward* David Levy reflects on a receipt, referring to it as 'a snapshot of something that happened at another time and place'. He discusses the wealth of detail to be gleaned from this seemingly insignificant document, before concluding that its conventional form enables it to perform its function as proof of purchase.[12] Accepted forms of evidence for financial transactions are well-established. The question of how performances should be represented however is still widely contested. Some methods such as writing, photography and video-recording predominate but none has become the de facto standard.

THE ARCHIVE AND THE REPERTOIRE

In order to delve further into the challenges faced when attempting to create and/or archive representations of performance, it is necessary to reconsider our starting

[11] *Cf.* the work of Hilary Jenkinson and Theodore Schellenberg; an ongoing debate.
[12] Levy (2001) pp 7-12.

premise that performance is defined by its disappearance. Diana Taylor draws a distinction between deliberately constructed material representations – such as paper programmes and photographs - that she terms the *archive*, and the immaterial experiences, memories, and invisible imprints on minds bodies and spaces, that she terms the *repertoire*. If we consider embodied knowledge and the development of performers' signature practices, each instantiation of a performance can itself be thought of as simply one part of an ongoing creative process that is constantly feeding back into itself. The identification of immaterial traces that are in a constant state of re-enactment counters the notion that performance disappears, and problematises our strategies for archiving performance. Archives tend to focus on a single end product, yet performances are constantly in a state of becoming and have no definable end. The archive consequently enforces a false sense of completeness on a performance event that is part of a much wider work. When we talk about preserving the *repertoire*, we tend to impose upon it the language and strategies of the archive with its notion of the immutable and objective record. Immaterial signifiers tend to be transformed into more easily managed objects, by for example, making a video recording of a storyteller. The performance itself is not captured, the recording of it becomes as Phelan states "something other than performance"[13] and as such these are not acts of representation but of transformation. The challenge is not to attempt to separate individual instantiations of a performance from the process of their creation, or turn the immaterial into a digital archival object which is by its very nature unrepresentative, but to recognise the value of each form, potentially bringing the archive and the repertoire together to communicate meaning.

If we consider records in their broadest sense to include these immaterial traces we realise the archive is infinite and that only a fraction of the material that provides evidence of the past can ever be housed within the traditional confines of the archive. Enduring material has traditionally been given more academic authority than the ephemeral or repertoire. One possible reason for this dominance is that archival representations separate the source of knowledge from the reader whereas the repertoire requires presence for the transmission of meaning and is therefore

[13] Phelan (1993) p.146.

perceived as inaccessible and subjective. The archive and repertoire each exceed the limitations of the other; by bringing them together and allowing them to work in tandem we can realise the full value of each.

CONCLUSION

Given the challenges apparent in creating archives of performance data and finding ways to unlock the value in intangible or experiential knowledge, how can we limit misrepresentation when delivering content to future users? The first step is to acknowledge and make explicit that performance does not fit literary or traditional archival models, and that each single representation or record incorporates both losses and additions to the passed event. Expert performers and documenters are still wrestling with solutions. Through our work at AHDS Performing Arts we believe that it is crucially important to multiply rather than close down the points of access to performances and creative processes by creating and curating records of different kinds (including those relevant to the repertoire as well as the archive)[14] and by making documentation and appraisal decisions as transparent as possible.

Digital Performing Arts data are particularly crucial to researcher and practitioners as there exists no 'original' to refer back to. However, as these data offer many different perspectives onto a performance and its context, they tend to be highly varied (producing lots of different files) and extremely complex (often resulting in very large files and/or the need for complex applications to handle the data) and are particularly challenging to curate in terms of file size and complexity. Furthermore, in order to curate data of lasting value to Performing Arts communities into the future, it is necessary to have a very sound theoretical understanding of how digital data represents the Performing Arts from which is was produced, and how these data can be created, curated, and used for maximum value in the years to come.

[14] For example oral history collections create archival objects from subjective re-performances, other recent work engages with creating 'evolving archives' (such as the Live Archives wiki: http://www.livearchives.org/)or re-enactments based on archival and repertoire materials (for example the Performing the Archive project: http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/?t=3&st=2)

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