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'The Biscuit Town': Digital Practice, Spatiality and Discoverability in Reading's Heritage Sector

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This paper focuses on two artistic research projects created in collaboration with museums in Reading, UK; the hybrid-media installation *The First World War in Biscuits* (2014), shown in a 'white cube' gallery in Reading Museum and the online resource *War Child: Meditating on an Archive* (2016): www.war-child-archive.com.

The paper analyses approaches taken during the projects' development to matters of spatial and digital curation. It considers how they engaged with the idea of collaboratively-produced 'histories from below' and with the cultural heritage sector priority of discoverability. It concludes by noting some emerging questions connected with the projects' longer-term physical and virtual materialisation.

Introduction: Artistic Research and 'Histories from Below'

> Histories from below are facilitated when archivists, curators and researchers see archiving […] as […] a shared […] participatory process [involving] broadening definitions of sources and evidence […]. [This] will require […] developing archiving practices from below. (Myers & Grosvenor 2018: 29)

This paper focuses on two archive-based artistic research projects created in collaboration with local museums in Reading, UK, for which, as a practitioner working outside the heritage sector, I developed histories and archiving practices 'from below'.[1]

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[1] My creative team for these projects comprised: Dr James Rattee, film-maker; Sonya Chenery, PhD student; Laura Farrell, researcher. At MERL our principal collaborators were Kate Arnold-Forster, Caroline Gould and Guy Baxter. At Reading Museum our principal collaborator was Brendan Carr.

The political and ideological implications of telling histories 'from below' can be gauged by invoking the tradition's emphasis on democratising history's subject matter, both through sustained re-evaluation of what constitutes source material and of how it is understood. When relationships between formal narratives, 'subjective experiences and individual and collective memories' of the past are problematised, their impacts on our present 'subjectivities and identifications' are re-exposed (Myles & Grosvenor 2018: 10).

In their AHRC Connected Communities document, referring to the heritage sector, Myles and Grosvenor note that 'central to many attempts to build collaborative research practices is a turn towards […] arts methodologies in order to engage with different forms of knowledge'. (2018: 6) The projects discussed here exemplify this turn. They were created between 2014–16 with Reading Museum (RM) and the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), which also houses a number of the University of Reading's Special Collections.

The projects have emerged at a time when the 'digital revolution's' impact across cultural and academic sectors comes under increasing scrutiny, and when the proliferation of technologies and digital platforms available to arts practitioners opens up how histories from below can be told, distributed and archived. Within the heritage sector, Research Libraries UK's (RLUK's) Special Collections Programme (SCLP) posited collaboration and discoverability as key areas affected by both the increasing pace of digital transformation and challenging economic climate (Kamposiori & Crossley 2019). At the same time, the rise of Digital Humanities has seen a wealth of resonant scholarship, including practice-led, in the fields of new media art, performance studies and museology. This continues to engage with central themes of (digital) curation, conservation, performativity, connectivity and searchability, and sheds light in these contexts on cross-sector collaborations between creative practitioners and cultural heritage institutions (e.g. Graham 2014; Graham & Cook 2015; Gough & Roms 2002; Guy 2016; Kholeif 2019; Lovejoy, Paul & Vesna 2011; Paul 2009; Paul & Arnold 2016).

This paper actively addresses these contexts. It considers how my collaboration with two smaller-scale museums not located in large metropolitan centres, whose

remits are not exclusively focused on the development, preservation and exhibition of historical or contemporary *art,* is pragmatically shaping the formal and spatial evolution of two lower-budget creative projects. With an eye to increasing both the local and wider visibility of their resource-wealth through artistic research, this feat has been attempted to support communities both within and beyond the museums' walls, during a period of great socio-political and economic transformation.

The projects were part of Reading Connections, specifically its Reading at War (RaW) strand. This was a multi-faceted Arts Council England-funded collaboration between the two museums. My discrete projects resulted in two digital artworks that drew on in-house archives whose discoverability the museums were keen to enhance. Considered in light of Jacques Derrida's exploration of the etymology of 'archive', alongside the practice of making history from below, both artworks investigated intersections between local and global, private and public spheres of influence, through their handling, animating, re-mediating and re-archiving of materials stemming from two international conflicts (Derrida 1996).

The 2014 project was a live hybrid-media museum installation, first shown within a 'white cube' gallery at RM. Entitled *The First World War in Biscuits* (FWWB), it combined video and audio recordings with archival materials and artefacts from the Huntley & Palmers (H&P) collection. Through spotlighting a cluster of one-hundred-year-old army ration biscuits held in the collection, the installation considered this Reading biscuit manufacturer's role during the 1914–18 conflict from the vantage point of its centenary. Though, like many local museums, RM often incorporates video and audio materials in its exhibitions, usually the media are regarded as channels for conveying 'primary evidence'. In this context FWWB was a significant departure in its aesthetic approach to questions of archive interpretation. Nevertheless, its physical spatiality needed to be carefully constrained by conventions of exhibition determined by gallery curators.

Drawing on the Evacuee Archive, which encompasses materials relating to World War 2 (WW2), the 2016 project yielded an object-centric, digital-born web-resource entitled *War Child: Meditating on an Archive* (WCMA): www.war-child-archive.com.

Here, through dialogue with its Reading-born originator still resident nearby, this collection becomes a departure-point for reflection on his own compulsion to archive. In generating an online repository for these exchanges, WCMA harnesses the medium-specificity of a purchased open-access internet platform to 'meditate' on interrelated themes of in/tangibility, remembering and historiography. My project explored the boundaries between internet platform as interpretative tool and artistic medium. Never designed for exhibition within a physical space, its creation raised fruitful questions about the integration of net-art into MERL's established physical and digital practices.

'We still assume that physical rather than virtual experience is more authentic' notes Kholeif (2019: 91), asking 'how many of us remember using the internet as a tool to enhance and even spark real world interactions?' (2019: 90). Perhaps within the broader UK cultural heritage sector, partly given the challenging economic circumstances identified by the Mendoza Review (Stephens 2017), the former statement is and to some extent must, remain likely. However, museums are also fertile contexts for sparking real world interactions through opening up new relationships between these apparent polarities. There is no doubt that local museums remain alive to experimentation and are sensitive to Kholeif's curatorially-inflected perception that 'one must learn to control the digital debris around them' (2019: 89).

Project 1: The First World War in Biscuits (FWWB)

I was invited to contribute to the RaW exhibition, planned to coincide with the World War 1 (WW1) centenary; a temporary exhibition of several months' duration shown in RM's large rectangular Madejski gallery. The overall RaW exhibition brief was broad: to consider the impact of conflict on Reading during defined periods of the town's existence. WW1 was to be positioned within the exhibition's narrative as one of a series of such impacts – an unusual approach in the context of centenary commemorations – yet nevertheless established as its centre-point, given the centenary's immediate socio-cultural resonance. Consequently, a number of curators worked on separate historically-defined sections of the

physical exhibition, two of whom were available for consultation. The constraints for my own section were budgetary, aesthetic and spatial; a specific area of the gallery facing its main entrance door was allocated. Anything my creative team produced deploying video formats needed to be silent, with sound accessible only through headphones.

Initially, RM presented an inventory of its WW1 artefacts, primarily weapons and medals. I was struck by a handful of one-hundred-year-old army ration biscuits, each with discrete, though not uniformly discoverable, provenance. Evidently from their design, a range of categories were produced. Numbers had been imprinted into baking moulds along with the manufacturer's name, thus coding specific recipe use and biscuit form, and indicating systematic allocation of different categories to a range of conflict zones. This in a process that finally saw the majority combined with liquid during cooking by soldiers, to 'bulk up' their rationed meals. Pithy military humour associated with these unyielding, vital, foodstuffs abounded. Several century-old biscuits on RM's list were in various stages of deconstruction. In the centenary's context, their time-riven textures and compromised structural integrity endowed a certain expressivity; if ever you wanted to see a Paul Nash battle-scape 'naturally' expressed through biscuit medium, here it was. Others looked remarkably intact. Yet the most striking had been artistically modified by soldiers and sent to their families from the trenches. Even at that stage, these uneaten objects had undergone re-mediation and endurance.

Huntley & Palmers initially created them; a biscuit and cake manufacturer that remained for decades a mainstay of employment within Reading. They established themselves as a household name and a global brand, primarily through inventive approaches to advertising, perpetual recipe and biscuit re-design and not least their employment of business travellers, who bore sample biscuits and a crisp approach to high-level trade and diplomacy across the empire-shaped globe. Interestingly, Huntley & Palmers was a Quaker enterprise yet, notwithstanding, the time came when the British government instructed them to contribute on an unprecedented scale to the WW1 effort.

On encountering RM's resilient collection of artistically-modified army biscuits, they seemed to convey not only the creativity and vulnerability of soldiers in war, their everyday needs, but also the significance of H&P's work to individuals in crisis situations. Included are examples adapted as frames for photographs, which remain intact within them. These include images of Henry Kitchener's be-whiskered face glaring potently at the viewer, an unidentified woman wearing a pale-coloured blouse, a portrait photograph of a uniformed, youthful soldier, which he himself cut into a heart shape, affixed to the surface of a H&P's and sent to his mother from the front. Another biscuit has been used as a canvas for producing a delicate, skilfully-rendered colour image. Yet others were inscribed with messages and sent through the post. One retains its postage label, affixed with string threaded through standard perforations in the biscuits' surface design, still bearing the destination address. Shaping the biscuits' now-inedible materiality are formal, aesthetic and organic imprints of 'making' as collective, durational endeavour; existential crisis has been 'baked into' these hybrid-media creations. I adopted them as key players in the project, amplifying the notion of spatio-temporal layering and collective endeavour to produce a hybrid media design. The biscuits also became visual centrepieces of the broader exhibition.

A key question my installation explored, meeting with RM's objectives, was how a Quaker enterprise, arguably pacifistic, and simultaneously a globally-recognised business both benefitting from and representing Empire, behaved when the government required contribution to the war effort. This applied to conscription of sections of its workforce and impacts on manufacturing processes and capabilities, but also to the mass production, packaging and transportation of army biscuits – and later shell-cases – to theatres of war. The installation aimed to address these events, whilst incorporating any narratively and thematically supplementary artefacts intended by RM for the display. These included a First World War-period sentry-box biscuit tin from the H&P gallery, located a few steps away from the Madejski gallery. Here, in a permanent exhibition, the story of the factory's evolution is told through an array of labelled artefacts and some additional interactive resources, such as audio recordings of former factory workers accessible through headphones. Consequently,

my Madejski gallery installation needed to interlock with two distinct exhibitions, one permanent and one temporary. Then, the former had no focus on the First World War. As a direct result of my installation, following RaW, the aged biscuits found their way from their usual location, entrenched in the out-of-town museum store near Reading's Recycling Plant, into the permanent exhibition. The installation's digital components have yet to transition.

The installation's clearly-defined constituent parts ultimately enabled its tour as a versatile, free-standing exhibit adaptable to varied spaces. It had further outings to Reading's Whiteknights Studio Trail (without the biscuits) and Colchester's The Minories art gallery (with the biscuits), supported by the AHRC-funded Everyday Lives in War Research Centre. News of the project reached colleagues at The National Archives. In 2018, for their Explore Your Archives campaign, we worked together on developing the Edible Archives strand. Thus, the 'heart shaped biscuit' found its way onto breakfast television, accompanied by a descendant of the soldier in the heart-shaped photograph. Consequently, the collection's discoverability had been enhanced, as had the profiles of its Reading-based custodians.

My approach to engaging with this mutually-developed installation brief also underpinned WCMI, the web-based project considered subsequently. Following six months' preparation, FWWB comprised several elements. Firstly, three videos, shown on a triptych of large LCD screens, affixed to flats bearing a vastly-enlarged 19th century colour print backdrop of the H&P factory. Secondly, three edited interviews uploaded onto a conventional museum audio-bank that could be accessed using a landline-style receiver. Thirdly, a small 'ration biscuit selection', chosen in consultation with the exhibition's curators, alongside contextualising materials pertinent to the factory's wartime role and impact on employees joining the armed forces. These objects were displayed in two conventional 360-degree museum cases.

The juxtaposed, looped videos played silently, creating affective movement-rhythms through their stylistic contrasts; an unusual aesthetic within the broader 'static', object-centric exhibition. It invited visitors to re-calibrate their viewing behaviours and adjust their proxemic alignments with the screens and each other. Notably, the installation encouraged clustering and lingering within an intimately

configured section of the gallery. The films were designed to collectively capture varying historiographic tendencies towards reflection on WW1 emerging in the context of the centenary. For example, the left-hand screen demonstrated the collection's scope, showing items absent from the installation. The collection is vast, embraces materials from around two centuries and is split across three key sites: RM, MERL and an outlying store. RM holds the artefacts and MERL primarily paper-based materials. There is no closed material, rendering the collection comparatively straightforward to access, though handling and release regulations, whether in MERL's reading room or RM's stores, affect conditions for working with items, not least during filming.

This left-hand installation video was thirty minutes long. It used an early film aesthetic complete with narrative inter-titles, though was created in colour. It bound with them imagery of archival materials into a concentrated linear narrative tracing the factory's decision-making between 1914–18. This included photographs, recipes, advertising materials, minutes of managers' meetings and letters. By creating digital opportunities for perceiving typically less visible textures, details and colour gradations of analogue materials, the use of a macro-lens and the overall presentational scale enabled seeing visitors to establish hyper-intimate relationships with the represented materials. This strategy was key in intensifying the 'live' presence of objects within the physical exhibition and in enacting a process of 'animation'. It was enhanced through filming the objects during handling by an archival visitor who was never shown, evoking tactility. This contemporary footage of the archive was intercut with some instances of early documentary footage, for example, a clip of a royal visit to the factory. The editing style was alert to the screen's potential position within a gallery space, and the time estimated for a reading viewer to engage with the narrative; in Colchester's The Minories, we were able to provide visitor seating.

The centrally-located film was significantly shorter. The portrait TV and the display case housing the aged biscuits were spatially aligned so that, upon entering the gallery a visitor would likely encounter, within their sightline, an overlay of screen-surface with acrylic case. Contrastive in its haptic tendencies with the left-hand

screen's episodic, optic tone, the central editing style produced a fluid rhythm bent on harnessing and interpreting the biscuits' materialities. Mobilely lit, these were captured by macro lens in shadowy glimpses, fashioning tones of brooding reflection framed by darkness. The biscuits' age was highlighted. Their 'banal' physical properties were celebrated, conjuring metaphors for 'histories from below'. Consequently, any affixed photographs, or other modifications, surfaced partially into view on a scale that dramatically promoted these aggregate objects' defamiliarization. Nutritionally void, witty and even sentimental, their value was now ambiguous (though we did see a similar, unmodified one selling on eBay for $40,000).

The right-hand installation film explored how soldiers used army biscuits for cooking. Re-enactment remains key to conflict representation and commemoration, not least pertaining to WW1. During the centenary it ranged from outdoor gatherings of costumed re-enactors engaging with visitors at/near significant sites, such as Belgium's Passchendaele Museum, through to UK-based commemorative projects in which groups of actors embodying WW1 soldiers presented themselves at urban locations to perform, without necessarily engaging directly with the public (Higgins 2016). For this particular video, research led me to Andrew Robertshaw: historian, re-enactor, and creator of a 'WW1 trench complex' in his back garden. For the filming, I purchased reproduction ration biscuits from a re-enactment website (thankfully shelling out significantly below $40,000); these were not imprinted with the H&P logo. We descended into the trench complex to capture Robertshaw's rendition of cooking with rations. I had previously rejected his suggestion for donning a reconstructed soldier's uniform, in order to sustain reflexivity within the representation. Consequently, he is shown in the trench wearing his own clothing, cooking a meal that incorporates an army biscuit apparently baked using an authentic recipe. His full face is never visible; his handling of packaged reproduction ingredients is focal, supported by establishing shots of the trench complex, while on-screen text introduces the given circumstances for the filming.

In Colchester's The Minories, the installation's audio interviews could be accessed via mp3 players tucked inside H&P's 'trio nest of tins', a reproduction available from RM's gift shop. The interviews were conducted with WW1 food historian, Rachel

Duffett, discussing the broader context of food production during the conflict, local historian David Bilton, reviewing how Reading residents working in the factory were affected and Andrew Robertshaw, our re-enactor, former curator at the National Army Museum. He provided more detail concerning physical conditions in the trenches.

My key intentions for the installation were to curate different 'ways of showing', to 'hold' within the designated gallery area multiple renditions of materiality, and to invoke multivocality in history-making. I aimed to produce an 'aggregate space […] that combined a multitude of materials, perspectives, and themes' (Grau 2016: 30) and thus increase alertness to different forms of labour associated with the conflict. For a visitor with sufficient time and capacity to engage, a sense of patterning may have been noted in, for example, witnessing manifestations of modified biscuits refracted across media channels. Through its formal and stylistic conventions, FWWB revealed its underpinning research processes, drawing on the model of an 'art system [that] increasingly transforms itself into a type of organism comprising slices that organize themselves while the user has an opportunity to experience and produce combinatory meaning.' (Grau 2016: 24). The project presented Reading Museum with a new approach to expressing local legacies that also enabled the biscuits' refraction across media channels *beyond* the immediate vicinity, ironically 'culminating' in their televisual manifestation on BBC Breakfast.

Project 2: War Child: Meditating on an Archive (WCMI)

In collaboration with MERL, where the formal Evacuee Archive is held, and building on FWWB, I developed the online project WCMI. Here, questions around curating the archived past resurface. An open brief with fewer spatial constraints supported my sense of experimentation. Interested in exploring how the archive's discoverability might be enhanced through virtual means, my creative team turned to Wix, a purchasable web-design platform. The resource produced dovetails with the archive, functioning as both its digital extension and one of its potential gateways, providing the URL continues to appear via other contextually relevant physical/virtual networks. Notably, only a handful of materials from this archive are exhibited in MERL's re-furbished galleries.

WCMI reveals a lineage of influence from FWWB through its object-centric approach to video and digital photographic imagery, its incorporation of edited audio-materials and its reflexive articulation of research and curatorial processes. However, creating this work took two years, a time-intensive aspect determined by the archive's qualities and how they governed interactions shaping its digital birth. WCMI is not a 'conventional' digitization project; it is not a database or tool for improving the archive's searchability. Conceptualized as a musing, or meditation, it takes a particular view of the archive, communicating information not readily obtainable by someone straightforwardly accessing the physical collection. Additionally, in gathering and incorporating new source material, WCMI enacts archiving 'from below'.

The Evacuee Archive is comprised of research materials acquired by Martin Parsons, a historian of WW2 UK child evacuation. Now retired from the University of Reading, he has been passing materials to MERL. The archive encompasses evidence of Parsons' research and teaching activities: article drafts; dissertations; letters concerning acquisition. It includes items from the war period, alongside testimony of former evacuees, relatives and host family members written and audio-recorded later. The collection also contains acquisitions donated by other people. Invariably, individuals are named and situations outlined, hence its potential sensitivity. As my project began, MERL instigated a thorough process of seeking relevant permissions for this 'emerging collection' and opening files where possible. Already this indicates that cross-institutional mediators were collaboratively addressing questions of ethics and representation. The question of what was communicable about the archive in a widely disseminatable digital forum quickly became acute, especially given the conflict's comparative temporal proximity and intergenerational legacies. Even on this discrete scale

> [i]dentifying and protecting personal information in […] digitization initiatives remains a challenging task. It requires establishing new policies, practices, and workflows to be able to balance the right to be forgotten with other rights, such as intellectual freedom. (Manzuch 2017: 8)

A strong rationale for attempting the artistic research was not only the current context of global displacement but also how concerns about immigration have manifested themselves in political discourse within the UK. Parsons' own research with former evacuees and war children has led him to work with the charity Beyond Conflict, which provides mental health support for children in conflict zones and refugees, a vital context for understanding the personal drivers for Parsons' (and my own) research.

> Sources become archives through acts of agency [...] 'Community archive' [...] refers to both heritage focussed endeavours and those more politically motivated activist archives. They thus come out of both the affective and activist traditions of history from below. (Myers & Grosvenor 2018: 28)

Parsons attended a research performance I began curating in 2013 in collaboration with my mother, entitled Surviving Objects (SO). It focuses on her experience as a child refugee during WW2 (Murjas: 2019).

> Co-produced histories may start out as intimate, local or group stories. As affective and activist histories, they often tell stories of everyday life or narrate the histories of groups. (Myers & Grosvenor 2018: 31)

SO and Parsons' experience of it formed a prism for our conversations. Frequently, we touched on the Evacuee Archive, and dialogue increasingly shaped my thinking about the project. Unsurprisingly, it also reflected generative processes for the formal archive itself, specifically Parsons' exchanges with former evacuees. Eventually, I made the decision to treat this dialogue as testimony; Parsons' testimony as a researcher. Ultimately, conversations came to form the project's 'spine', and feature as edited fragments throughout the website. We talked in locations significant to Parsons, his old school, his home and MERL, thus identifying a foundational subjective 'geography' for the artwork. In each, the portable voice recorder captured qualities of our given environment, including sounds of its functioning and handling. On the website, this assists in conveying a sense of time passing, but combined with fragmentary

presentations of us talking, it also highlights both the dialogue's materiality and the 'efficacy and capacity of the human voice in translating, transforming and transposing the museum artefact and the voice as its own mode of translation of material culture.' (Byrne 2012: 24)

The ongoing transfer-process of Parsons' collection to MERL performed the archive's porosity. Both he and his daughters described how much of the material they consider part of the formal archive is still in the family home. Here, their own cataloguing process ensues – namely, discerning what will be kept and what passed to MERL after Parsons' death. While working on WCMI Parsons' mother passed away. He found himself travelling to her home to exact an inter-linked process, reflected in the website's conversation fragments. This sense of archive as continuum, transitioning formal and personal spaces connected with Parsons' life and simultaneously extended through MERL's acquisition process, resonated not only with its infiltration of the emerging digital platform WCMI, but also the collated narratives of childhood displacement underpinning the endeavour. The website gradually grew into one of this hybrid-archive's multiple sites through our aggregation, within Wix's constraints, of video, photographic, textual and audio materials.

WCMI interlaces several contextual strands. It communicates aspects of the British government's home and overseas child evacuation policy through edited conversations with Parsons about his research. Thus, one receives not only factual information about policy but also the researcher's perspective. One receives it by listening to his voice, which carries indicators of mood, tone, emotional investment. WCMI contains information about how Parsons' research transformed over time, his visits to archives to unearth hidden sources, and the logistics and personal implications of passing material to MERL. As such, through a series of meta-narratives, the artwork vents its curiosity about the origins of a specific archive. WCMI also journeys 'inwards' to touch the personal impact of researching on Parsons, his family and friends. It foregrounds implications of engaging with war children's testimonies, with questions of attachment, loss and separation that impact on a researcher's understanding and well-being. Simultaneously, the site makes explicit through its layered aesthetic the research route forged by its creative team, including in its

textual communication of the actual journeys taken and the personal significance to us of witnessing.

> Every art project is embedded in a context, but audiences of digital art might require layers of contextual information, both relating to the materiality of the work and the logic behind its process, and transcending the work itself. (Paul 2016: 9)

WCMI's liminality, its perpetual emphasis on displacement, is further fuelled by an underpinning conceit of the conversation process; questioning Parsons about which defined number of items he would rescue should fire break out in the archive. Without my stipulating that the archive could be broadly conceptualized, Parsons readily conceived of it as the sum total of his research. Consequently, a number of items that he chose to rescue were extraneous to MERL's formal archive. They included a personal Finnish Evacuee Association badge – Parsons being an honorary member – and a doll which he initially thought was held in MERL but which no-one has, in spite of their best efforts, ever found.

A further related structuring idea for WCMI is the 'mixed-media book'; pages like virtual 'slices', narratively bound. Each object 'rescued' from the fire anchors an individual webpage. Each webpage digitally-holds various object-specific combinations of video, discrete sound clips from the edited conversations, re-mediated photographic images and multifarious textual information. The aesthetic shaping of each page also references the idea of layering, expressed through available strategies for viewing imagery enabled by Wix. For example, individual cells 'holding' photographic images can be expanded in size from within a thematically collated, compressed group of cells. This can build a sense of mobility as viewers engage with it (ideally on a pc, as handheld devices will not manage as well with download and scaling). Reflections on tactility are expressed through one's interplay with the object's intangible screen rendering. In the archive, you would likely have to wear gloves to handle some of these objects, in the surveilled context of a reading room. Onscreen, a degree of image plasticity, combined with the close-up effects, enables

an impression of privileged intimacy, lending the archive qualities of unprecedented malleability. You can directly touch the onscreen surfaces of the represented objects in the privacy of your front room, if you want to. Thus, you can play with the idea of being 'on site' rather than 'on a website'.

The webpages described above, dedicated to objects, are interleaved with webpages that textually tell the story of journeys taken to meet Parsons in my (iconic and cranky) old VW Beetle. As the narrative unfolds, the Beetle gradually deteriorates and eventually its petrol flap has to be secured with gaffer tape obtained from the theatre technicians' cupboard in my University department. These 'inter-chapters' take a temporally linear approach to narrating engagement with Parsons, like diary reflections on an evolving relationship and on the process of saying goodbye. They enact displacement, and homeward bound-ness. I themed the edited audio clips presented on these pages around key aspects of evacuation policy and experience, and also the story of the archive's growth. The clips are clearly visible as fragments and individually titled, in an attempt to signal absences; the artwork can imply but cannot contain everything. Overall, these webpages lack the visual mobility of the object pages because video and photographic imagery are less prominent. However, one might, for example, open an audio-clip and leave it playing while viewing and/or reading the latter. The web-platform enables malleability in terms of engagement, increasing the likelihood of forging individual pathways through the 'book's' layered geographies and temporalities.

> Meaning can develop by chance, experiment, and well-directed strategy. Active, "combining" users become the source for generating art and meaning if the artist leaves enough degrees of freedom to them to engage. (Grau 2016: 24)

The videos in WCMI have various functions. The majority embedded in the object pages use the same macro-lens technique shown on FWWB's central screen, though filmed in daylight. We see certain objects, like the baby's gas mask, being physically manipulated, and below this, on the same webpage, a juxtaposed 'concertina' effect

of accompanying digital stills picking out 'microscopic details'. However, with a baby's gas mask (currently kept in Parsons' home) there are no ethical considerations relating to its visual representation. Contrastingly, for the webpage focused on a batch of children's letters (held within the formal archive), questions of protecting confidentiality become more acute. It is for issues like this that the project underwent particular scrutiny from MERL's curators. Responsively, the macro-lens footage occasionally creates effects of partial obscurement, which can dramatize a choice to conceal or reveal whenever desirable. Thus, only glimpses of names and addresses may emerge, by necessity, as the mobile lens skirts object surfaces, or as objects are shown during handling by an anonymous archive visitor. This aesthetic approach enacts confidentiality. Equivalent questions around permission were addressed with Parsons and his family, who encountered WCMI at various production stages. That much of Parsons' research on war children is in the public domain is also key here. The 'final' webpage of our collectively-authored 'virtual book' directly evokes his family's collective-creation of the analogue photographic cover-image for one of his 'physical books'.

Finally, two video clips are included in WCMI that bear no direct relationship to the 'saved objects.' One shows Parsons walking his dog in the woods, and the other working in his stained-glass studio; significant personal sites. Importantly, in neither video is Parsons' face rendered visible. Strategically, the only faces seen on WCMI are digital representations of analogue-born materials; in photographs of evacuees or their families, or else those featured on archival ephemera, such as postcards.

> [M]edia arts' complexity nowadays is produced through interaction and variability, simultaneity, sequentiality, and narration. […] [C]onnected polydimensional visual spaces of experience and immersion can be created, image spaces open for unfolding and compression, development or evolution […]. (Grau 2016: 30)

WCMI's form has evolved through collaboration with museum professionals and historians, and such polydimensionality, sparked by the mutual checks and balances of dialogic curatorship, has produced collectively-authored 'histories from below'.

Conclusion: Digital/Spatial Paradoxes

Both FWWB and WCMI have engendered new modes of collaborative curatorial practice in specific heritage sector contexts located in one town – the 'Biscuit Town', as it has sometimes been known. Both have drawn on the experiences and expertise of local people to create archiving practices and histories 'from below'. The ways these artworks behave reflects the networks and relationalities of collaborative developmental work. The form they take, their digital strategies, have rendered this work, and the 'matter' that has channelled it, more discoverable, more 'present'. This carries a sense of potential; my artistic research has served its local contexts and has been reciprocally shared with varied interested parties. FWWB toured and produced wider collaborations with The National Archives and BBC, for example, meaning our network expanded to embrace other communities of curators, archivists and audiences around a specific collection. WCMA's URL has been embedded within RLUK's recently revamped website alongside two short commissioned videos about its making and navigation, increasing both its and the Evacuee Archive's broader searchability – and discoverability – in relevant professional contexts. With Kate Arnold-Forster, director of MERL, I have also been invited to deliver joint papers about the projects at cross-sector conferences: Discovering Collections: Discovering Communities (DCDC), RLUK, Universeum.

Still, enticing questions arise about these projects' continued evolution. For FWWB, which began as a hybrid-media installation in a live exhibition context, one developmental route appears to be onto a web-based platform. This in turn may become a pathway towards additional touring of the installation itself; the project's online existence will make it possible to illustrate its potential as a live, hybrid-media event. Given the fact that the archive is open, it will likely become possible for any online resource to solicit direct viewer engagement. This could generate possibilities for new online content, in the form of broader public contributions and interactions. Such growth would potentially signify a further regeneration of the Huntley & Palmers collection. Notably, the process of arranging for the biscuits to leave RM, and furthermore leave the town, to be exhibited elsewhere, is time-consuming and questions are bound to be asked regarding how many more journeys they can sustain

without crumbling into silent obsolescence. Honestly, their physical conservation is a priority (partly heightened by their recent TV stardom) and the live installation lacks flavour without them.

For WCMI, the website has needed to remain closed, in terms of protecting its integrity as a sensitive resource. Any interactive possibilities facilitated by the website-building platform have been disabled for ethical reasons, and we would not wish to build a series of social media connections into the resource framework, given the overtly personal nature of some of the material it holds. However, the question of how this resource exists alongside, or is integrated within, MERL's own digital resources and online presence, is an ongoing question. In other words, 'where' is it? If WCMI is intended to act as a gateway to the archive, how does that translate into creating active links between it and MERL's public-facing digital presence and extremely savvy social media strategy? Will MERL decide that WCMI is an interpretation of the archive that should exist beyond its own digital scope? To what extent can the practice-led methodology that informed WCMI's development co-exist with MERL's curatorial methodologies, and continue to address its target audiences in a museologically acceptable way? Perhaps ironically, a key development in ongoing dialogue about the project involves its possible transformation into a gallery installation, and the option of touring this in ways that incorporate material objects. While privately browsing the resource can lend the research experience intimate focus, the energies of collective witnessing are of course currently missing from WCMI's performance history. In 2017 the resource was incorporated into an installation in MERL's Reading Room, as part of the AHRC's Being Human Festival. Groups of visitors browsed it on computer screens, then moved into the centre of the space to handle physical materials from the Evacuee Archive itself, laid out on a long table, under the watchful eye of a curator. The spirited dialogue generated by this social experience of moving between different resource-types was notable, particularly since former evacuees, many of whom Parsons knew, and their descendants, participated. Perhaps it is a logical next step for WCMI to be developed into a gallery installation where the visceral experience of sharing dialogue that lay at the centre of the project's development is once again enabled and enacted.

What seems vital is that the original community and audience networks, energies and resources that shaped the works are currently 'dormant', and that new contexts and evolutions in digital culture will invariably remodel not only their 'characteristics and […] behaviors' (Graham & Cook 2010: 303), but also my own artistic practice and research questions.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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