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Redefining the performing arts archive

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Abstract

This paper investigates representations of performance and the role of the archive. Notions of record and archive are critically investigated, raising questions about applying traditional archival definitions to the performing arts. Defining the nature of performances is at the root of all difficulties regarding their representation. Performances are live events, so for many people the idea of recording them for posterity is inappropriate. The challenge of creating and curating representations of an ephemeral art form are explored and performance-specific concepts of record and archive are posited. An open model of archives, encouraging multiple representations and allowing for creative reuse and reinterpretation to keep the spirit of the performance alive, is envisaged as the future of the performing arts archive.

Keywords

Performing arts; The archive; Record; Representation; Fixity; Liveness.

Introduction

Until April 2008 the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute¹ (HATII) at the University of Glasgow hosted the performing arts centre of the Arts and Humanities Data Service² (AHDS Performing Arts). AHDS Performing Arts collected and safeguarded digital research outputs from over 60 projects relating to theatre, music, broadcasting, film, and live art. AHDS also provided guidance on best practice in digital curation, whilst maintaining the subject-based expertise so important for domains with specific needs. In 2007 Sarah Jones and Daisy Abbott of AHDS Performing Arts came together given their backgrounds in archives and performance studies to consider how performances can be represented and how they remain present through tangible records and immaterial traces.

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

¹ Details on HATII can be seen on the centre's website at: <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/>

² To access AHDS Performing Arts collections and guidance see: <http://ahds.ac.uk/performingarts/>

receipt, referring to it as “a snapshot of something that happened at another time and place” (Levy 2001). 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. 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. Funding council demands for tangible outputs have heightened these issues, prompting AHDS Performing Arts to run a summer school in July 2007 to explore the questions surrounding representing and archiving performance.³

This paper begins by addressing representations of performance, considering what the significant properties are that we are trying to capture. Discussion moves onto how decisions as to what constitutes a *record* of performance affect our understanding of the archive itself, closing with ideas of how creative reuse can keep the spirit of performance records alive.

Representations of performance

Records of performance have multiple purposes. Some will be factual, such as listings databases to record that an event took place at a particular place and time. Others will attempt to capture the event so others can view or experience it. Since many performers use archives as sources of inspiration for new works, performance records should arguably be more creative and experimental in nature. When discussing representations of performance in this paper, the term *representation*, is used in the way presented by Geoffrey Yeo, namely that representations are surrogates, or “things which stand for something else” (Yeo 2008). In order to accurately represent performance, such representations should do more than merely document the facts. This paper will argue that representations of performance echo its nature and inspire in their users the experience of the event.

[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 (Stanislavski 1987).

Defining the nature of performances is at the root of all difficulties regarding their representation. As the quote from Stanislavski shows, performances are live events, the enactment of which does not endure through time. This has led many scholars to declare transience to be the principle characteristic of performance, with Peggy Phelan for example arguing that performance “becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 1993). It is worth reflecting for a moment on the meaning of this in terms of archiving. If the significant property

³ A report on the summer school with video clips and presentation slides is available at: <http://ahds.ac.uk/performingarts/news/reports/summer-school-07.htm>

of performance is its transience, are all attempts to archive performance futile? Are we trying to capture something at the very point at which it slips away?

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. The representations that are usually created, such as the photographs and drawings, are often discounted as inadequate and unfaithful – they provide a window onto an event yet do not recreate the experience. All archivists will face this same quandary, particularly when documenting dramatic periods and events such as demonstrations, battles and outpourings of grief such as public funerals. How do you capture the mood of the time or reflect what it meant to take part in or live through such experiences? Can we provide a fair and reliable version of the past through the records we create and select for posterity, when so much of human experience is inherently interactive, experiential and performative?

The archiving of performance representations can also be misleading: it's not always clear for example if they stem from rehearsals or a specific performance, or even if they simply reflect ideas that were discounted. These records though provide an access point, albeit only from a very narrow perspective as each reproduces 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?

Practitioners have been struggling with this issue. Sophia Lycouris views the representations we create as a "manifestation of registered concerns" rather than an attempt to reconstruct the original (Lycouris 2002). She hopes to capture the essence of performance as opposed to reflecting a reality. If the most significant property of a performance is the relationships between performer and audience, then perhaps we should formulate records along the lines of a music score, that when interpreted will re-inspire that experience in the user. Others have argued that memory is the most appropriate site for records of performance as its fluidity and fallibility more closely echo its nature (Reason 2003; Barba 1992). If performance archives are to respond to these concerns then perhaps the traditional approach to archiving, which asserts authenticity by fixing records in the state in which they enter the archive, should be reconsidered. It's worth referring back to the summer school here to reference some anxieties. Performances are constantly evolving so the method of capturing and fixing a snapshot is perceived by many as 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 by performance scholars, like Auslander and Reason, just as it is by postmodern archival thinkers, such as Cook and Harris.

To lead into the discussion on the role of performance archives we could reconsider the starting premise that performance is defined by its disappearance. Diana Taylor draws a distinction between deliberately constructed material representations - paper programmes and photographs - that she terms the *archive*, and the memory of things, invisible imprints on minds bodies and spaces, that she terms the *repertoire* (Taylor 2005). If we consider the development of performers' signature practices and embodied knowledge (i.e. non-explicit knowledge that forms the basis of instinct, urges and unconscious reactions, and is constantly shaped by our experiences), 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. At the same time however it problematises the approach of capturing fixed snapshots such as production stills, video recordings and scripts so a physical trace of the event remains. If we accept that performance lives on of its own accord in immaterial traces, without the intervention of the archivist, how do we allow these remnants to form part of the performance archive?

The archive

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 are often transferred into easily managed objects, by for example, making a video recording of a storyteller. Of course, the performance itself is not captured, the recording of it becomes as Phelan states "something other than performance" (Phelan 1993). Whilst attempts to capture and preserve intangible traces are laudable, they are not acts of representation but of transformation. The challenge should not be seen as translating the immaterial into a linguistic expression but recognising the value of each form and bringing them together.

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 so-called 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 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.

An example of bringing together these forms of knowledge was related by Sita Popat at the AHDS summer school in 2007. Sita was involved in the Performance Robotics Project, which sought ways for humans and robots to work together (Popat Palmer 2005). One of the collaborations was between Elizabeth Collier, a student dancer, and Zephyrus, a prototype robot. Zephyrus had a rectangular body with six legs but no knee-joints. Over the course of the week Liz embodied Zephyrus, watching the robot closely to adopt its movement qualities and restrictions to translate that experience into her own body. Her embodied knowledge as a dancer enabled her to experiment and develop movements currently beyond the robot, discovering for example that although her limbs were straight, if she pulled them together sharply she was able to make small jumping movements. On the final day an engineer asked if she could try to stand as Zephyrus, as this was currently well beyond design possibilities. Liz improvised and by working the rhythm through her hands and feet, staying within the movement parameters as far as possible, she finally achieved a standing position.

Changes in a robot's design require the building of new robots and there is little opportunity to see what will actually happen until the product is built. As a dancer Liz provided more than an approximation of the movement, considerably opening up the field of experimentation. Seeing Liz embody Zephyrus gave the engineers an overview of the potential within the robot, allowing them to see possibilities towards which they could then design. Embodied knowledge was crucial to the redesign process, but could only play a part through Liz. The knowledge of movement would lose meaning if split from her, in the same way that the repertoire loses much of its meaning if placed within the confines of the archive.

While discussing the archive it is useful to reiterate briefly the significance of process to 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's part of a much wider work. It is impractical to separate individual instantiations of a performance from the process of their creation, and unrepresentative to force them to fit this model of archives. Instead we should explore models that encourage records to evolve and be contested as performance itself constantly develops and is reinterpreted. Verne Harris put forward a similar argument in a keynote address at the *Cultural Value of Oral History* conference in 2007. Discussing the challenges of running the Nelson Mandela archive, he called for archives to be open to interrogation, arguing they are not something to be preserved or kept static, rather that they only have a meaning and legacy through living on (Harris 2007).

Opening up the archive to reuse

Two points to draw out of the discussion to conclude are: first that the archive should not be confined by traditional definitions - that we should recognise immaterial traces and embodied knowledge as records; and second that process is central to performance so should be reflected in our approach to representing and archiving. One response to these points is that the restrictions we place on the archive should be reconsidered. If we accept that records exist outside traditional confines, effort should be directed to the fruitful coexistence of the various forms, rather than guarding boundaries and asserting the authority of the tangible. Equally if creative process and audience experience are essential characteristics of performance then capturing and freezing fleeting moments is inappropriate. To maintain its significance, the archive, like a language, must be open to change and remain in active use.

In relation to performance, fixity is viewed by many as a constraining property (Auslander 1999; Reason 2006; Schneider 2001). If we regard memory and other mutable forms as more appropriate, then perhaps our approach to archiving performance should be more permissive of change. Tangible records will certainly deteriorate over time and their interpretation will vary considerably. Since change is inevitable perhaps the rhetoric of the archive should move away from notions of fixed, stable records to accept, and perhaps even encourage, variability. Looking to other disciplines may suggest future directions. In the *Performing the Archive* fellowship⁴ at Bristol University, Dr Paul Clarke is proposing possible models, suggesting performance archives be reflective, open to multiplicity and accepting of content that is ephemeral and indiscrete.

Arguably the key to preservation is reuse. Records could be said to perform when they're used and there is a possibility for them to be reinvented as new performance events. Auslander has explored the performativity of performance documentation (Auslander 2006). The work of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) Living Archive is a prime example of encouraging creative reuse. Rather than leaving records of past performances on the shelves, workshops are run to encourage the archive to be used as a source of inspiration for new works. The work of artists such as Ruth Maclennan⁵ and Gustav Deutsch⁶ also demonstrates how archive material can be recontextualised and re-presented to audiences. If

⁴ Details of the research project are available on Dr Clarke's homepage at:

http://www.bristol.ac.uk/drama/staff_research/paul_clarke/

⁵ Details of Ruth's use of archives as a source of inspiration can be seen in her residency at LSE archives which resulted in the piece *The Gatekeepers*. For details see Sue Donnelly, *Art in the Archives: An Artist's Residency in the Archives of the London School of Economics* at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/08spring/donnelly.shtm> Details of Ruth's

work, including the collaboration with Uriel Orlow *Re:Archive* is at: <http://www.ruthmaclennan.com/>

⁶ Gustav Deutsch has reused footage of orphaned works held in European audiovisual collections, piecing short snippets together to create new works <http://www.gustavdeutsch.net>

we lock materials away and prevent change they will rapidly become irrelevant; the archive only has a legacy through living on.

We should encourage dialogue and allow records to be re-performed and re-contextualised so their relevance and meaning map across the changes of time. Despite differences in instruments and venues a modern day Bach concert would be equally valid to today's audience as an 18th century recital would have been at that time. It's impossible for records to capture the atmosphere and experience of any given moment, but perhaps if we view them as a score or formula to be reinterpreted we can help people come closer to understanding the past. Above all, performances are live events: if the representations and performance archives we create are to be a fitting reflection, they too should embody this spirit.

The lessons learned by AHDS Performing Arts arguably have much broader significance than just for performance archives. The whole of life could be viewed as a performance: as Shakespeare penned, 'all the world's a stage' - life, like performance, is a series of complex interactions and events, constantly in flux. The records we create can only provide clues to this past reality. The challenges posed by archiving performance resonate strongly in the concerns of digital archivists, as digital records are inherently performative, only coming into existence when the correct code executes the data to render a meaningful output. How we capture a fleeting presence, that only occurs when we bring several elements together at the right time and in the right way, will become a key challenge for all archivists. Performance scholars are looking to archival theory to address the challenge of representing performance. Perhaps we too should look outside our disciplinary frame of reference to consider alternative perspectives on the future of the archive.

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