Documenting Performance Art for the Archive

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Paul Hurley's 'Becoming Snail'.

Background

The University of Bristol's Theatre Collection, held by the Department of Drama, Film and Television, is a special collection and registered public museum. It is the second largest performance-themed research collection in the UK, and consists of a variety of physical and digital sub-collections. A significant part of the collection investigates live art (also known as performance art), an art form which blends theatre, installation, and conceptual art. There are several challenges involved with creating and managing a collection which represents the history of performance art, including issues to do with the ephemerality of the art form and a subsequent need for clear and representative documentation accompanied by accurate metadata.

In 2009 the Theatre Collection held a three day workshop in order to test a workflow designed to support the archiving of live artwork. The real world example used to test the process was a performance by artist Paul Hurley entitled 'Becoming Snail'. Paul Hurley is a PhD researcher within Bristol's Department of Drama, Film and Television.

A detailed record of the event was created for deposit within the Theatre Collection for use by other researchers. This record is a truly rich reflection of the work, assembled through negotiation between the collection and the artist and consists of more than 50 individual digital documents. This record or 'score' for 'Becoming Snail' has since been used as an exemplar for the documentation of other live art works, and the development of this 'score' will form the focus for this case study.

Expectations

Performance art (or live art), often seen as a transitory art form, in fact has long lasting interest for both artist and scholar. An innovative and cross discipline effort is required in order to archive such artworks which do not have a single material manifestation. Challenges relating to metadata cannot be underestimated, as well as rights issues and the preservation of non-text documentation.

There is a tendency amongst performance art researchers and archivists to rely on video as the sole record of a work, despite recognising the distinction between the live work and its document. Video has become the dominant and accepted mode for documenting live events - amongst artists, programmers, curators, and researchers.

Key challenges are:

- Metadata about *how* a document relates to a work is often nonexistent.
- Confusion exists around the difference between a work *made for video* and documentation of a work intended to be *live*. The danger exists of a user associating any lack of quality in a video production with a lack in quality in the performance itself.
- Any single method of documentation has its own limitations (for instance, video is essentially a 2D technique attempting to describe 3D space).

Paul Hurley's 'Becoming Snail' (detail).

Paul Hurley's 'Becoming Snail'.

Approach

This project adopted a standardised 'metadata first' approach. A granular catalogue record (or 'score') was created for the work which was then populated with data of different types (videos of the performance, video interviews with the artist, scans of related promotional material, digital photographs of objects involved). This helped to de-centralise any single form of documentation.
The process began with a brief interview with the artist which helped establish the most important aspects of the work to be performed, from here *Element types* (see below) were agreed upon. This provided an idea of what the focus of the documentation process during the performance would be, and also provided information in order to interview the artist. Interview material would later form part of the work's score.

The final score consists of the following types of records:

- *Score-level information* is data relating to the record itself. For example the name of the author/s of the record would be score-level information.

- *Work-level information* is data relating to the *whole* of the work (that is, *all* versions of the work). An interview with the artist would be work-level information.

- *Version-level information* is data relating to specific instance of the work. A promotional poster for an individual performance would be version-level information.

- *Elements records* which contain data relating to defined parts of a specific version of a work. These records were further divided into 'types'. For 'Becoming Snail' these were:
    - *Objects* - the category used to describe tangible items which become part of the work.
    - *Garments* - the category used to describe special object type worn as clothing.
    - *Roles* - generalised parts played out in order to realise a performance. If an individual is actually named, the individual is instead a *creator* or *collaborator*.
    - *Spatial & locative* - data necessary to site the work within a context (such as venue or a specified season of the year).
    - *Audio visual & electronic* - describes electrical or media-based elements which form part of the work.

In order to populate fields, a number of metadata standards were used. These included Simple Dublin Core for high level information and to provide interoperability via the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH); MPEG-7, for media-specific technical metadata; RightsMD for rights-related data; and PREMIS for preservation metadata. An in-house word list was also drawn upon.

The relationships described here are based upon the MPEG-21 standard and can be automatically implemented by any software supporting MPEG-21. If a software system does not support MPEG-21 the same types of relationships can be described informally within any system which permits adequate customisation.

Once completed, the score for 'Becoming Snail' was made accessible to researchers via the University of Bristol's Theatre Collection. Rather than a separate set of digital documents, the score provides a means by which:

- Researchers can examine the work as a whole with the voice of the artist describing the inspiration behind, and meaning of, the work.
- The work can be assessed both internally and externally.
- The work can be associated with other works from other collections in an interoperable manner.
- The artist himself may refer to, or even recreate, the work at a later date.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Theatre Collection has now adopted the score-based approach to building archival records which reflect live art works. It has become the standard in-house method to generate new records and it is hoped that scores might be created for older works too. The Theatre Collection will have made 1,200 scores freely available via a dedicated online platform by the end of 2011.

The Theatre Collection is not funded as an 'open' national repository and has limited ability to collect and manage performance-related data. But researcher-practitioners who have been invited to contribute to the collections have overwhelmingly been in favour of representing their work in this way.

A very similar approach has proven to be useful when archiving other types of artwork as part of the Variable Media Art Project. Richard Reinhart's Media Art Notation System is fully compatible with the Theatre Collection's approach and has been applied to video art, sculpture, software art, and installation.

Encouraging the artist to see the repository as a creative platform where records can be partly shaped by them can lead to rich catalogue information. However, a delicate balance has to be found between standardisation (to support interoperability) and forcing a work into an inflexible and unsuitable system.

Any system used to achieve these aims, whether a formalised 'conceptual model' or a less formal in-house system guided by policy documents, should attempt to retain some level of interoperability.

The key aspect of this project was to separate out conceptual aspects of a work from digital documentation relating to those aspects. Therefore, it would be possible for a performance to have no related documentation and yet still have a place within the repository and the wider scholarly record.

Key Points

- Live/performance art should be included within the scholarly record, but achieving this is challenging. Not only are non-text media types often involved, but complex relationships between digital documents are likely to exist.
- Standardisation is vital if collections are to share records, but given the diversity of artwork, some ability to tailor each record is also required.

- Negotiation between a repository and the artist is very important if the record is to truly reflect the work. Aspects defined as important by the artist should certainly be represented.

- The usefulness of the record can also benefit from the contributions of others (e.g. collaborators, audience members, funders, exhibitors). This might be achieved by inclusion of interview material.

- Establishing what is the work and what is documentation of the work through a system of clearly defined relationships between digital documents is necessary.

- 'Versioning' of a work can be challenging but this too can be covered by a system of clearly defined relationships.

- The system selected needs be granular to allow collection managers to assign as much or as little data to a score as is deemed appropriate.

- This same approach is applicable to any art form which has a live or ephemeral aspect (e.g. installation, software art, or conceptual work) not just performance/live art.

- Clearly differentiating between a *work* and *documents relating* to a work has also proved useful for describing more traditional art forms such as painting (see the work of the Variable Media project).

References

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http://dublincore.org

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University of Bristol Theatre Collection Museum
http://www.bris.ac.uk/theatrecollection

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