

At the intersection of performance, the archive and the digital

A review of a collaboration between Digital Curation and Performance postgraduate students

Richard HIGGS, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Keywords: *Heritage in dialogue — Education — Embodiment — Digital Curation — Archives*

CHNT Reference: Higgs, R. (2022). 'At the intersection of performance, the archive and the digital: a review of a collaboration between Digital Curation and Performance postgraduate students', in CHNT Editorial board. *Proceedings of the 27th International Conference on Cultural Heritage and New Technologies, November 2022*. Heidelberg: Propylaeum.

DOI:

Long abstract

Performing the archive has an established academic and theoretical history, particularly since the publication of Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), a seminal work that muses on the entanglement of memory, embodiment and cultural heritage, and highlights the haunting of histories of conquest and oppression in the embodying processes of performance. Since then, technological developments, not the least being the massive migration to digital and online resources for performance thrown into relief by the restrictions imposed by the COVID pandemic, have placed resources in the hands of performers in the form of new platforms for performance as well as access to historical and cultural artefacts and the means to manipulate those artefacts in new and profoundly different ways.

At the same time, the affordances and limitations of virtuality have troubled contemporary notions of history and historical objects in the digital world, raising the call for epistemological and ontological frameworks in cultural history that can accommodate both the unruly nature of the digital artefact and the growing consciousness of world views and organisations of knowledge that have previously been marginalised through colonialism, oppression and imperialism (Bonacchi & Krzyzanska, 2019; Purkis, 2017). Furthermore, traditional conceptualisations of the/a metaverse that focus primarily on virtual or augmented reality may marginalise both the liminal space interpenetrated by the virtual and real subject, and metaverses that can be brought into existence without the need for expensive technology that is beyond the reach of historically marginalised societies.

This paper presents a review of an initiative undertaken in 2022 at the University of Cape Town between the Department of Knowledge and Information Stewardship (DKIS) and the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies (CTDPS). The Masters students in the MPhil specialising in Digital Curation and MA in Performance Studies, respectively, were required to collaborate on the conceptualisation of a project that would bring at least two archives into dialogue with one another,

while simultaneously troubling notions of the archive and cultural heritage, incorporating the digital in some way, theoretically and practically tackling issues of (dis-)embodiment, decoloniality, ontology and silence, and curating meaning from cultural artefacts. The Digital Curation students were expected to serve as consultants to the Performance students on the basis of the theoretical expertise that they had gained in the coursework to date, and to gain from the Performance students an appreciation for both the limits and the affordances of virtualisation and dematerialisation as they apply to the body, space and information. The output of the workshop for the Digital Curation students was a critical essay that reflected on the workshops and the conceptualisation of their respective projects, in the context of what they had learned in the application of Digital Curation theory and how it interfaces with historicity and with the dualities of embodiment and virtualisation.

The review begins with an outline of the philosophical and theoretical concepts to which the Digital Curation students had been exposed as part of the course and in preparation for the collaborative workshops with their CTDPs peers, drawing from Phenomenology, Information Science, Information Technology, Posthumanism, media theory, semiotics and more.

The objectives of the workshop and assessment exercise are then described in the context of the learning outcomes of the Digital Curation Masters curriculum. This is followed by a description of the workshop activities in the two-day collaboration. A short presentation of the four Digital Curation/Performance projects that were conceptualised by the students is followed by an evaluation of the initiative, including student feedback and assessment, the range and quality of the final products, challenges encountered, and considerations for further applications of the initiative. The resourceful *bricolages* of limited-resource metaverses envisioned, which place emphasis on connection, rather than on expensive technology infrastructure, are considered as a range of alternatives to resource-intensive protection and sharing of cultural heritage in a cyber environment. Finally, a pedagogical review considers the wider implications for Cultural Heritage education that incorporates both the virtual and the physical in new and challenging ways.

Conflict of Interests Disclosure

None

Author Contributions

Please list the contributions of the project participants here, according to the CRediT system. See specific descriptions of the role here: (<http://credit.niso.org/>). **Please omit non-applicable roles.**

Conceptualization: Richard HIGGS, Mbongeni MTSHALI

Data curation: Richard HIGGS

Formal Analysis: Richard HIGGS

Funding acquisition:

Investigation: Richard HIGGS

Methodology: Richard HIGGS, Mbongeni MTSHALI

Project Administration: Richard HIGGS, Mbongeni MTSHALI

Resources:

Software:

Supervision:

Validation:

Visualization:

Writing – original draft: Richard HIGGS

Writing – review & editing: Richard HIGGS

References

- Bonacchi, C and Krzyzanska, M. (2019). 'Digital Heritage Research re-theorised: epistemologies and ontologies in a world of big data', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25(12), pp. 1235-1247. DOI: [10.1080/13527258.2019.1578989](https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1578989)
- Purkis, H. (2017). 'Making digital heritage about people's life stories', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23(5), pp. 434-444. DOI: [10.1080/13527258.2016.1190392](https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2016.1190392)
- Taylor, D. (2003). *The Archive and the Repertoire: performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.