

## DRHA Panel: Appraisal

As Daisy has shown, much is lost in the transition from performance to document; presence can't be documented - we can attempt to transcribe visceral impressions in linguistic form but the two won't perfectly equate. Our document and preservation decisions however influence how we can later view events and what avenues of study are opened up. I'm going to think of appraisal in two senses: that of the creator's selection process (how decisions on what to document and the process of documenting affect understanding) and that of the archivist and how curatorial decisions can skew the meaning of the records.

Just for clarification when I use the terms document and archive I'm using them in the traditional sense, thinking of documents as intentionally created material representations, such as programmes, photographs and notebooks, rather than serendipitous traces. While I say 'intentionally created' I don't mean to suggest that they're created specifically for the archive or a particular audience, rather simply that they're recorded in tangible form as opposed to the repertoire. I think the discussion may get overcomplicated if we try to think of appraisal in terms of embodied knowledge or the 'repertoire' because it's questionable how much power we have over our memory and to what extent we can actively choose to remember and forget.

- **Documentation decisions of the creator**

What a performer chooses to document and make available is similar to the archival process of appraisal. By selecting to represent and preserve certain features of a performance the artist is able to present an edited, approved image. Works felt to be unreflective, things that didn't turn out quite as planned or commissions that were very prescriptive and produced performances at odds with the overall body of work, can remain undocumented or the documentation can be concealed or destroyed. Artists can restrict the material they make available to reinforce a particular identity and downplay parts of their character they would rather keep hidden. The image an author chooses to disclose in a biography, for example, can be in sharp contrast with the image that comes across in private works or in correspondence with friends and relatives.

Just as archivists reappraise and assess the value of objects differently over time, artists' attitudes towards their works also change. For years Patrick White was adamant that everything but his official publications (mss, notebooks, correspondence) should be destroyed, as the image he wanted people to see would be in these. Towards the end of his life though his privacy mattered less and he encouraged his friends who'd previously ignored his wishes to make these personal writings available to his biographer. There is a whole range of factors affecting what is documented and what is made available and one of the main challenges users face is trying to discern what the underlying influences / layerings are.

We should also consider what prompted the decision to document and how the process of documentation shapes the performance. If documentation is a requirement of funding it's likely to be framed by criteria set out by the funding body. The modern recordkeeping environment offers an extreme example of how regulation impacts on practice; FoI legislation has led some government committees to do away with minute taking since anything set down on paper is discoverable. Knowing a performance is going to be documented could have similar consequences: a stand-up comic, for example, may decide not be quite so risqué. If artists actively choose to document their work they may perform for two audiences: those present and those who'll only experience it through the documentation. Does this also impose boundaries on the performance to ensure the same message comes across in both circumstances?

- **Curation decisions of the archivist**

I want to move on now to think about the archival process of appraisal. I realise more people are probably from a performance background so I'm going to take a few minutes to briefly outline the history of archival approaches. The first main theorist on appraisal was Hilary Jenkinson, Deputy Keeper of Public Records in TNA in the 1920s. Jenkinson was very uneasy with the idea of the archivist having an active role in deciding what would be preserved for the future, arguing that only the creator fully understood the records and consequently was the only one who could make informed decisions about what could be taken out of the collections without individual records losing meaning. The next few decades saw a rapid growth in the volume of records created, leading Theodore Schellenberg, an archivist at NARA, to move away from the idea of the archivist remaining impartial, instead putting forward a system of ranking records in terms of their primary evidential value and secondary cultural and historical values. This basic idea of attributing value to records is still in use today, although instead of considering records on a case by case basis, most archives now perform macro-appraisal, a process of assessing the value of the functions of an organisation (and consequently the records created in these activities) rather than the individual records.

Appraisal is inherently problematic because it's based on notions of value, and whether it's left to the creator or archivist to define this, it's questionable how accurate a representation we can ever achieve. 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 be the power of an artist over her work or the influence of an authoritarian regime where official memory is sanitised.

- **Solutions**

So what can we do to try to limit the way the archive misrepresents? As Daisy commented performance doesn't necessarily fit literary models - we can't represent the intangible / the experience and we have to accept these limitations. No single representation can capture the entirety of a performance either: some forms may capture some aspects well but every representation will incorporate additions and losses. The response to these issues at the summer school was that it's crucially important to multiply rather than close down the points of access to performances and creative processes. The Patrick White example demonstrates the value of this since his biographer could only get a coherent picture of him by listening to the multiple voices that existed across the entire body of records.

Documentation and appraisal decisions hinge on cultural biases and assumptions. A skilled reading of the records can tell us a lot about past societies and their values. The fact that The National Archives has very few records of the anti-slave trade movement but entire series of slave registers speaks volumes about the views of the ruling classes in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Although we can interpret the records to try to establish why certain things were documented and kept, ideally the decisions themselves would be documented. If artists made their documentation decisions explicit and explained what they were trying to achieve it would be easier for users to contextualise the records and recognise biases. Moreover if archivists articulated their assumptions and made the appraisal process transparent it would open collections up to contestation.

- **Concluding remarks**

How likely is it though that this would happen? Do we have the resources to create multiple forms of documentation / access points to a performance? And if we go down the road of creating documentation about our decision to document, where do we draw the line? It's also questionable whether we are aware of our biases and therefore able to make them explicit - or does this level of awareness only come in retrospect? Hugh Taylor questions this when discussing appraisal, asking:

*“Has the archivist yet learned to recognise the ‘text’ which evokes the context of their times”*

The fact that many artistic and appraisal decisions are based on intuition further challenges the idea that we can explain ourselves through documentation - what do you do if you can't articulate why you made a particular decision? It's worth bearing in mind that archivists called for appraisals to be documented in the 1980s and created various forms and checklists for this to be done. Nevertheless the process of documenting appraisals is still not widely practiced - the practicalities of the situation are often that you're under pressure, you need to make a decision quickly and you certainly don't have time to start making notes to explain what you're doing.

My own personal decision is that regardless of these constraints archivists need to document appraisals. I'm not entirely sure how practical it is to expect creators to explain their biases and how that affects what records are left to enable performances to be studied, but records gain authority when they are placed in the archive so it's fundamental archivists are transparent about their influence. I want to read out a definition of the archive by Achille Mbembe, one of the contributors to the *Refiguring the Archive* event held in South Africa in 1998:

*“the archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority... (it) is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and selection... The archive is therefore not a piece of data but a status.”*

Many archivists still hold on to the notion that they're neutral and objective. We know that what makes its way into 'permanent' documentary form is just a fragment / a few traces of the past. Archives only intend to keep between 1-5% of this so the idea of that this material is objective and representative is completely untenable - as Verne Harris, a South African archivist states the archive is just a 'sliver of a window onto an event.' Archivists need to move away from the idea that people should implicitly trust their judgement - that they're professionals and will make the right decision. It's only by making ourselves accountable, by documenting our decisions, that the archive can be opened up to debate.

*Having said that, I recently made up a photo album for my parents of my brother, my sister and me growing up, and in true archival style I wanted to make sure the definitive picture of me through the years was representative - out went the photos of me with buck teeth and ones where I'm sulking and in came the photos that made me look the cutest. I fear that as we strive for objectivity, we will always be fighting a losing battle.*

So I'll now pass you over to Hannah who'll think about the archival meaning of authenticity and whether has any relevance in a performing arts context.

- Who has the right to appraise?
  - Should the viewpoint of the creator / user / curator be privileged over others?
- Do we need to document creation and appraisal decisions to mitigate the loss that's inherent in these processes?
- Can we articulate our biases?
  - Does it matter if we can't / choose not to?