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Bodies of Knowledge

Experiencing the Archive: A Case Study to Re-Activate Memory through Digital Interaction

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Abstract

From the early 2000s, archives and cultural institutions have been confronted with the repercussions of an unprecedented digital revolution. Web 2.0 technologies have accelerated management and organisational processes that were already in place, enabling the digitisation of huge amounts of data. A process that has undoubtedly facilitated the preservation and use of these materials, but which has nevertheless brought to light new problems. These include the oblivion and non-use of digitised materials, which often remain unknown and unnecessarily processed if not supported by promotion and enhancement policies. Furthermore, new digital ways of engaging visitors are challenging traditional models of power and negotiation of meaning, but cultural institutions are not always ready to respond and support such practices effectively.

The paper presents the case study of a smart interactive environment created in 2019 for the Temporary Slovene Dance Archive of the Metelkova Museum of Contemporary Art in Ljubljana. Through this work I critically discuss the role of design in respect to actions of retrieval and reinterpretation of digital heritage beyond the simple search of metadata on digital platforms. In addition the project proposes a physical experience to stimulate public use and understanding of archives.

1. Introduction

"Is a Museum a Database?" provocatively asked Mike Pepi on *e-flux* in December 2014 (Pepi, 2014). Although raised almost a decade ago, his question stimulates a reflection that is still relevant today with respect to the technological context we refer to when talking about archives. Pepi's text portrays museums in the Western world facing an unprecedented technological turn that, in a short time, has led them to a rapid and progressive digitisation of their archives and collections. A shift that has engaged cultural institutions (and not only) changing their methods missions and access. If these processes have simplified many procedures, at the same time institutions are not always prepared for such structural changes and are forced to reshape their offer and role just in order to remain relevant.

In the paper I retrace some of the stages of this ongoing digitisation process and look at the role that design can play in rethinking and reactivating the memory and narrative of these digitised materials, making them productive materials again. If facilitating access to materials was the priority, today the challenge is to find ways to use these collections beyond simply searching on online platforms. Furthermore it is relevant to understand how digital data can be opened up not only as research information, but also to stimulate a different use and understanding by the public.

I will refer in particular to a case study of a smart interactive environment, within which the visitors were invited to actively interact with the materials on display. The project was developed in collaboration with the Temporary Archive of Slovenian Dance at the Metelkova Museum of Contemporary

Art in Ljubljana, on the occasion of the BIO 26 Design Biennial. The work provided an opportunity to interrogate the types of knowledge that archives embody and enact and how these relate – or could relate – to design. The presentation of this project is an attempt to offer a practical example of interdisciplinary practice in response to these questions.

2. Identification of the Research Field

From the early 2000s, cultural institutions – museums, archives, libraries – have been confronted with the repercussions of the innovative pressures of Web 2.0 technologies. Powerful digital tools have made available and encouraged simplified and open archiving and sharing of materials and information beyond the physical on-site visit. The experiences of the last decade by some of the world's most important museums and libraries work as an example, such as the practice of the Met or the Cooper Hewitt in New York, or the V&A Museum in London, or the Rijks Studio project of the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam, or the open policies adopted by the Staatsbibliothek Berlin and the New York Public Library. Entire collections with hundreds of thousands of materials in 2-D and 3-D have been photographed or scanned and rendered in very high resolution and made accessible to the entire audience of digital visitors.

Although by their nature, museums and archives have different approaches to the accessibility of their holdings – the former are oriented towards a broad use by a wide public with different purposes, while the latter are mainly aimed at purpose-driven users –, both face similar challenges today. These new digital archives undoubtedly facilitate the work

of specialised audiences whose research is supported with very high-resolution materials accessible without temporal or spatial limitations. But the radical element of these operations lies in the access and sharing extended to a much wider public. A potential that invests the archives of the present towards the future, offering them new possibilities for sharing, fruition, and activation, especially where these practices are facilitated and supported by policies of free access and replication without copyright. This approach is implemented with varying degrees of openness, ranging from permission for personal or non-commercial use, to availability under Creative Commons licences, to complete freedom of use.

These have been – and still are – intense and enthusiastic operations, but in many cases they prove to be inadequate in respect to long-term project planning and uncritical to their manyfold consequences. On a functional level, they lack in respect to access, use and reuse of these materials that often remain unused. But these operations are problematic as well with respect to the consequences on an economic, political and ethical level. Especially when it comes to collaborations with private companies, the decision to digitise collections opens up the traditional functions and missions of the museum to the neo-capitalist logic of the economic market. There are currently huge data centres scattered all over the world containing billions of digitised images, texts and materials. Although these data seem to be without matter, instead they occupy physical space. After initially providing the public with access to previously inaccessible materials, the challenge today for institutions seems to find new ways to revive and constructively use these vast digital data collection.

As written by Lev Manovich (Manovich, 2001), databases do not create narratives per se, but provide the rules and structures upon which information can be transformed into a narrative. While museums are physical repositories that create worlds by framing objects and structuring possible narratives, archives are technologies that reproduce rigid logics of categorization and separation in an attempt to index and order materials. They format what is knowable, what can become history, what of the past can be preserved and possibly experienced in the future. But, as Manovich says, if the museum requires and produces narrative, database logic eschews narrative in favor of orderly and efficient retrieval for the end user. Additional human planning and mediation is therefore always necessary in order to make sense of and produce tangible narratives around the archived materials.

In the move to systematically digitise and make images accessible, not everyone starts on equal terms. Although Rick Prelinger defines access as the main feature of the 21st century archive (Prelinger, 2007), without practical and economic support it is an uphill climb. Various platforms have offered to make their services available to institutions and universities over time, from Shared Shelf Commons, Flickr's The Commons, to the better-known Google Arts and Culture to name but a few. Operations orchestrated, sponsored and supported in most cases by private companies, with which museums enter into collaboration contracts, but which bring with them legitimate questions regarding the transfer of collections, commodification effects of the works involved, as well as in most cases the complete decontextualization of works with respect to their initial meaning and physical or digital context.

As also pointed out by Daniel Palmer (2014), these images and the modes of digital participation they promote "lack the original object's material conditions and the contemplative possibilities offered by the heterotopia of a gallery space." However, technology has not only facilitated the digitisation of materials, it has opened up unforeseen venues for participation. New ways of engaging visitors challenge the traditional power relations that have sustained archives and collections from the Enlightenment to the present. The way in which visitor participation is mediated is radically changed by digital culture. Visiting a digital archive today not only results in the enjoyment of content, but potentially also in its reworking and replication in real time. The digital reproduction of reference materials has changed the way we produce culture. We mix, remix, republish content in a constant flow of data that redefines the experience of the archive on digital platforms, producing new materials.

As described by Fabio Viola (2022), museums and cultural institutions in the last decade have seen their role transform from that of *cultural attractors* – physical places where visitors go in person to consult or view works – to that of *cultural activators* – hybrid spaces of sharing and interaction for actions of reappropriation and free circulation of preserved materials. This is a historic change in the mission of cultural institutions, with a revolutionary potential to horizontalize the processes taking place within them, opening up towards a dialogue made up of a heterogeneity of voices. This change sees the works in the collection regenerate and evolve outside the original medium, through the communities that arise around that content and no longer simply around the container.

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This phenomenon recontextualises the gallery space and creates alternative modes of interpretation that exist alongside the official museum narrative. Visitor appropriation is a significant and challenging phenomenon: there is a shift from a traditional visiting model to one in which visitors are invited to become creative and active members of a cultural community. Although one may find self-directed participation irreverent, many visitors and non-visitors can relate to these images and stories more easily than with traditional institutional narratives. The creative content produced by visitors often has a vernacular or viral quality that encourages sharing.

In this regard, Bradburne (2001, p. 79) states how archives and museums must offer "facilities which can be used, rather than just visited".

Nowadays, however, the interfaces of these digital archives are often still very technical and repulsive to the non-experts in terms of design and usability. They are digitised collections of data and information that tend to meet the needs of a researcher audience, often interested in consulting specific materials, not so much in having an unexpected or discoverable experience of the preserved heritage. Even in the most virtuous cases, there is no real interaction with the user, who is mostly invited to a mere chronological or thematic reading. As Mitchel Whitelaw, who has worked with museums and libraries to digitise and visualise their collections, writes, "[…] search, as the dominant interface to our cultural collections, is inadequate. Keyword search is ungenerous: it demands a query, discourages exploration, and withholds more than it provides" (Whitelaw, 2015).

3. References to Case Studies

In most cases, therefore, there seems to be no correspondence between the needs of a digital, participative user and the interfaces provided by cultural heritage institutions. And even in the most successful cases these are often operations that only large museums or those with large financial resources can afford.

Analysing the attempts to make vast amounts of data findable, Google Arts and Culture project[1] is impressive. For years Google has been engaged in an operation to "organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful".[2] There are so many ways that the various catalogued collections can be reorganized and visualized for users. Google has not only committed itself to making digital tours of the world's most famous museums available, but also collaborates with artists and creative programmers in interpreting new systems of access to archived materials. There is a whole section called *experiments* where one can find proposals and interpretations of filed visual data. These are often experiential and immersive solutions, sometimes even overwhelming. An operation that is not without its problems: Pepi's analysis accurately (2019) critiques how cultural institutions voluntarily transform their cultural capital into the preferred formats of digital platforms. "[…] the institution – tasked with holding cultural objects in the public trust – moves the aesthetic experience into a hardware apparatus whose proprietary format is dictated by a private company".

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1   https://artsandculture.google.com
2   https://about.google

This challenge was faced by the Metropolitan Museum in New York to interrogate its collection, which includes more than 492,000 images of public-domain artworks, available for free and unrestricted use. To bring its collection closer to the public, in December 2019 the museum, in collaboration with Microsoft and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), explored new ways to access the collections through artificial intelligence in a hackathon session. Among other results, *Artwork of the Day* creates a tailormade and individual experience for each user by analysing open datasets, geo-localising whereabouts, weather, news and historical data related to the user and proposing an image from its archive. Another project developed, *Storyteller*, uses Microsoft's artificial intelligence to choose artworks from the Met's collection that illustrate whatever story is being told or whatever conversation is being held. Through voice recognition, a discussion can be translated into images using the collection's archive. These projects manifest the intention to bring the public closer to the vastness of a collection, but once again open up questions regarding collaboration with companies that respond to a private economic agenda, speculation, commodification of the works, surveillance, privacy and use of the personal data of the users involved.

A small-scale example is the archive of the Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. The HNI represents an interesting model and is constantly looking for solutions for the use of its digitised heritage. The museum hosts an important collection of drawings, photographs and models from the archives of Dutch architects and planners which, once digitised, have been made available for online viewing on the museum's website.

The search portal, developed in collaboration with Studio Moniker, provides a random and surprising discovery experience of the materials in the collection.[3] By following the lines on archived drawings and images, individual materials are opened and made searchable by matching the movements of the mouse cursor on the screen, thus offering the possibility of an unexpected fruition of the museum's digital catalogue.

5 eyes / Hyperstacks, curated by James Bridle for the V&A Museum in London, an exhibition project born in an artistic research context, is another work that interprets and critiques the conventional archival format. A part of the museum's extremely rich collection was filmed and interpreted through artificial intelligence, used to explore the connections between objects and collections, thus creating new possible narratives. The project was presented on the occasion of the exhibition *All of This Belongs to You*, with the stated aim of exploring the role of contemporary public institutions responsible for a national collection. Opened in April 2015, the exhibition was also fully available as an online archive.[4] Part of the work attempted to address the violent and colonial history of a significant part of the collection, using the algorithm as a deliberate ploy to circumvent issues of institutional guilt and shame. This example shows how interdisciplinary solutions might lead to more complex and articulated results in respect to the use of data and the application of new technologies.

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3   http://collectie.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/

4   http://hyper-stacks.com
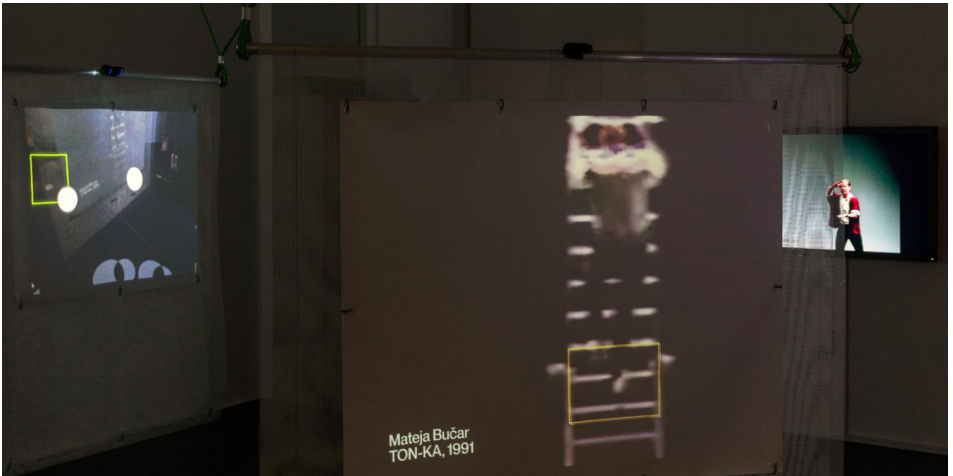
Figure 1. *Bodies of Knowledge*: exhibition view of the spatial installation.

4. Bodies of Knowledge: The Context of an Experimental Project

Within this context of reference, I would like to present and critically discuss a design installation which, through a smart interactive environment, has attempted to address and propose a possible approach to reactivate a digital archive and the historical memory of the materials stored in it through the physical interaction of visitors.

The *Bodies of Knowledge* project – developed by an interdisciplinary team of designers[5] during the last edition of the Ljubljana Design Biennial (November 2019 - February 2020) – questioned the contemporary role of museums and archives as custodian and producer institutions of culture in a digitised society. The work aimed in particular to stimulate a different

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5   Design Mentors: Paolo Patelli; Knowledge Mentor: Ida Hiršenfelder; Project Manager: Matevž Straus; Team: Cyrus Clarke, Giulia Cordin, Juliana Lewis, Luigi Savio, Monika Seyfried.

use and understanding of archives and collections by museum communities. What kinds of knowledge do archives and collections embody and enact? How do they relate, or could they relate, to design? How can design engage these archives and their heritage?

For the practical development of the project, two national institutions, Moderna Galerija | Museum of Modern Art and +MSUM | Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, opened their physical and digital archives to the working team for collaboration. In the first museum, the spatial installation was realized.[6] For the development of the project the team focused in particular on the Temporary Archive of Slovenian Dance, which is part of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova. Today, visitors to dance archives are generally considered spectators, invited to sit and look at screens or at pages of text. Cultural memory is preserved in time capsules of videos, images, props and historical newspapers with which visitors are confronted through static acts of witnessing, remembering and annotating, but without moving. The historical memory of dance is thus experienced outside the body, frozen in time, encapsulated in publications or in digital data and pixels on screens. In contrast, we wanted to ensure that visitors could reconnect with the essential physicality of dance in its archive. With these considerations in mind, the *Bodies of Knowledge* project proposed to supplement the current static archives of dance with a living archive, exploring embodied alternatives to the current archival paradigm.

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6   A video of the installation is available at this link: https://vimeo.com/394189416?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=5819722

Figures 2–3. *Bodies of Knowledge*: visitor interacting with the interactive environment.

5. Bodies of Knowledge: Experimentation and Results

The Temporary Archive of Slovenian Dance in Ljubljana is a growing collection of materials from the field of contemporary dance, established by Slovenian dance historian, curator and activist Rok Vervar. The archive was opened to the public in 2012 and in 2018 the entire collection was moved to the Metelkova Museum of Contemporary Art in Ljubljana as a temporal installation. Most of the material concerns contemporary performing arts, dance and theatre from the Slovenian non-institutional scene of the last 20 years.

We set out to present the digital data not just as research information, but to open it up to a physical experience, to stimulate the public's use and understanding of the archive and collection. In the spirit of modern dance, we wanted to break the internal logic of the archive by releasing the emancipatory power of movement. In this way, *Bodies of Knowledge* seamlessly integrates physical and digital space: Historiographical structures dissolve, allowing alternative narratives generated by the visitor him or herself to emerge.

In the exhibition set up, three screens focused each on a specific body part, in detail: hands, legs, head. Appropriating the digital surveillance tools of Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition technologies, images of visitors' bodies were captured by three cameras. These recordings were analysed, categorised and sectioned by the programs for inclusion in the spatial visualisation. Once the movements mapped by the software were recognised as sufficiently similar, they activated matching archival video footage of original performances on the screens within the exhibition. For example, the rec-

ognition of a visitor's hand activated a selection of archival material in which other hands appear; a downward movement of the visitor brings falls, failures and releases into the space. In this way, the archival content accessible within the space merges existing archive footage of local choreographers with user-generated footage in real time. The archive is transformed from a site of knowledge retrieval to a site of knowledge production, disassembling and mobilising its documents, technologies and institutional frameworks into new compositions. The physical and digital space is seamlessly integrated, including the visitors, their bodies and their movements within the architecture of the archive, conceptually and spatially.

6. Conclusions

Although in this case the project focuses specifically on a dance archive, the work opens up interesting possibilities for exploring the potential of design to interpret, (re-)organise, transmit and revive the information digitised in archives in participatory and active ways. The experience of the *Bodies of Knowledge* project offered the opportunity to renegotiate the way materials are accessed, retrieved, digitised and activated, reducing the gap between the end user and the institution producing culture. In this way, stored materials are freed from digital oblivion. The challenge is to imagine, support and facilitate emerging modes of digital participation in a way that protects but at the same time emancipates collections. The Ljubljana experience highlights how an interdisciplinary dialogue can lead to effective solutions through interlinking transdisciplinary practices and perspectives. Such operations are still rare, but in specific contexts have led to virtuous

results. The hope is that with the help of a critical and ethical use of new technologies such practices will be increasingly implemented. These choices would allow to critically investigate the construction and use of archives as well as to question hierarchies of user and provider with the aim to stimulate a civic agency.

This is, on the one hand, to rethink up-to-date and contemporary methods of making archives accessible in response to contemporary challenges. On the other hand, a porosity of the institutions in leaving space for the activities of the public can create new dialogues and uses of the materials in the collection, fostering physical, cognitive and emotional interaction.

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She has been a visiting researcher and teacher at Birmingham City University, at the Swedish School of Textile and the Faculty of Architecture in Lisbon, and taught in several other international workshops.
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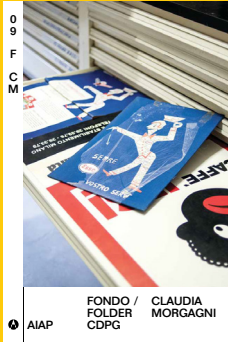yi.zhang@polimi.it
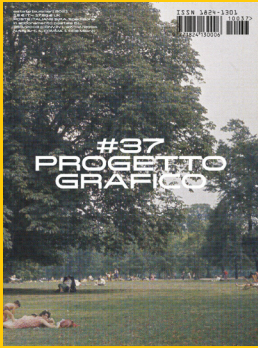
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