LIVE ART, ALIVE IN TIME

Report from the IETM Porto Plenary Meeting, 26 – 29 April 2018

by Vassilka Shishkova

Live art, alive in time

How can we extend the life of the performing arts beyond their conventional live existence? With this question in mind, Carlos Costa and the team of Visões Úteis, Portugal, have developed their website in a way it can display and share the documentation of their artistic practices: scenarios, videos from rehearsals and performances, photos, articles and so on. But what will happen if the website is no longer maintained? Where will all these documents go?

This is not an issue only for Visões Úteis, it affects live arts altogether: how could they leave a prominent trace in the history of art if their work is not preserved? Why are there just a few archives dedicated to preserving the memory of live arts? Documenting live arts is giving them the chance to travel through time – otherwise, the work "fades away" – "… And if we don't manage to travel in time, we are not kept in the memory of the society / community", Carlos concluded.

Some might want to resolve technical issues like preserving the documents in an archive for many decades in the future – like some academic researchers Carlos has discussed with this strategic question concerning the live arts.

Others, Carlos including, think that having the conversation about archives and archiving is already an action. It also partially answers the question what we can do immediately.

The session presented three cases of performing art archives:

• a national one: the Brazilian contemporary dance archive (analogue hard copy catalogue, video collection, and a database (active in the period 2001 - 2009),

• an organisational one: Gulbenkian Foundation ACARTE department (digital web based timeline),

Moderator: Carlos Costa, Artistic Director at Visões Úteis, Portugal

Speakers:

Ana Bigotte Vieira, Researcher, Portugal

Sonia Sobral, Researcher and Curator, Brazil

Dimitry Ovtchinnikoff, General Administrator at Maison de la Danse, France

• an international one: numeri dance (multipurpose, multimedia web 2.0 platform).

The session also touched upon some theory concerning archives, and hosted a conversation about the multifaceted concept of an archive: technical matters, but also, issues of power - politics, aesthetics, economy.

The national mapping of Brazilian contemporary dance scene

The Cartographies, a programme of Itau cultural, was established with the mission of collecting, organising and qualifying information about Brazilian arts. In 2000, as a result of numerous concept, content, and production discussions, it initiated the Rumos Dança programme, the national mapping of Brazilian contemporary dance scene. More than 10 year work on mapping and archiving contemporary dance in Brazil was presented by Sonia Sobral, researcher and curator at Itaú Cultural (1999-2016).

That was the era before the online networks, so an analogue network had to be established in order to collect the vast amount of data about dance in the 27 states of Brazil – information about educational institutions for dance, festivals, dance critics, governmental and non-governmental policies for dance, etc. It was presented in a database and a cartography book distributed to dance colleges, festivals, arts libraries, etc.

And then, all sorts of methodological questions pop up: "How do you start to delimit, identify and understand the findings? And how do you organise and present them in a circumstantial map?" – Sonia marked a few of those questions.

Overcoming the initial ignorance about what contemporary dance is throughout the vast and diverse territories of Brazil to its fringes, the team of researchers involved collected samples of dance from all over the country. They have met hundreds of professionals and studied numerous art venues. Then a big meeting was held in Sao Paulo where more than one hundred artists researches, curators, programmers met, and held workshops, discussions, videodance sessions, etc.

The result of this endeavour was the first edition of Rumos Dança catalogue. Here are links to parts from the 2009/2010 catalogue:

• Criações e Contextos - Rumos Dança - 2009/2010

• Mapas e Contextos - Rumos Dança - 2009/2010

• Imagens e Movimentos - Rumos Dança - 2009/2010

The Rumos Dança catalogue had 5 editions till 2011 when the programme was completed. For that time Rumos provided a 6-month scholarship to study and research dance, and developed a show case that allowed artists to present their projects in Sao Paulo for programmers and curators, who in turn got the rare chance to see works from all over Brazil. According to Sonia, the most valuable contribution was the opportunity to gather regularly more than 100 artists, art professionals, researchers, curators together for 9 days in Sao Paulo in forums like this and give them space to talk, to create, complain, laugh together…

The concept of the live arts archive

Ana Bigotte Vieira, an academic researcher in the field of performing arts, contemporary history, and contemporary culture based in Portugal introduced some basic distinctions and concepts one has to acknowledge regarding archives of / for (live) arts.

To begin with, we should admit that the existence of the internet has affected profoundly the way we think of time and space today and the way we document events, the way we organise documentation in archives, and the way we present, communicate (with) these archives. Internet has allowed for simultaneities to be noticed, and new subjects, outside the established centres, to be acknowledged as worthy of entering the social memory, i.e. as subjects and objects for/of archiving.

> *"We were able to increase respect towards dance as an art form that produces knowledge. We connected researchers, programmers, curators, dancers, choreographers and teachers. We processed risks and increased the audience for dance. We started discussing our work with each other, and above all, we reduced distances in every way. And it is impossible to say what was created because of these encounters among people … The things we cannot measure are probably the most important ones."*
>
> *Sonia Sobral on the legacy of Rumos Dança*

Then, it is essential to examine the reasons for and the approaches to archiving, along with what Ana pointed to constitute the phenomenon of the archive: "its subjects, its objects, the kind of narrative it displays, what can be seen as missing, the very accessibility of the materials, the choreographies of access it entails". Ana distinguished between two major approaches towards the live arts artefacts:

• the 'classical' history of arts approach is centred on art work in the tradition of the great artist's "masterpiece", i.e. the focus is on "the work per se instead of the process that allowed for the materialisation of the work itself", as Ana put it, and

• the social sciences perspective on live arts is focused on the event and on what allowed for its materialisation, rather than focusing on the supposed evanescence of the live masterpiece.

According to Ana, the second approach would streamline the complex process of archiving live arts by borrowing tools and methods from contemporary historiography, along with its methodological discussions on the very nature, function and use of sources and documents.

If the social sciences approach is applied on live arts, then oral first person testimonies and second hand accounts, written documents functioning as primary sources (such as catalogues and institutional information) and secondary sources (such as late journalistic analysis), recorded images (TV or video) or any digital traces of an online event (such as live streams, chats, etc.) can be regarded as sources of memory. Additionally, rehearsals, working stages and processes, audience discussions and so on would be counted as equally worthy of keeping the memory about as 'the masterpiece' itself.

In this case, again, comes a series of decisions to be made:

What should be archived? And what not? Why? With what purposes? By whom? For whom? When? What would be presented from the archive and what would remain 'archived'?

Furthermore, Ana suggested that the archive does not stand apart from its subject: "Archives act along with the narratives that support and are supported by them. In this sense, they can be regarded as practices or as gestures, gestures of selection: into the archive or from the archive."

The digital archive of ACARTE

The second part of her presentation Ana dedicated to the digital archive she elaborated for her PhD research which explored the activity of the ACARTE department (the department of contemporary performing arts practices) of the Gulbenkian Foundation between 1984 and 1989 in the wider context of the cultural transformation that occurred in Portugal after it joined the European Union in the 1980s. Thriving with activities and bold artistic projects in such fields as performance art, dance,

theatre, music, experimental cinema, cartoons and literature, among other genres, ACARTE was in the avant-garde of contemporary art scene in Portugal. In 2003, after going through several changes, ACARTE eventually closed, leaving its archives uncatalogued and untreated, with no systematic full-length work on that subject.

After an extensive research, evolving around organising, selecting, digitalising, analysing and presenting each initiative, the digital ACARTE 1984–1989 archive was elaborated. Its interface is chronologically organised as an interactive timeline and allows for a comprehensive view of the department's activities in that period, both as individually standing events and as thematic initiatives. The interface gives options to search by year, genre, artist and keyword. The documents that form the body of the archive encompass selected catalogues and photographs, credits for the works, excerpts from the press and extracts of the curatorial and artistic notes of intentions, as well as the documents of the events. All these were made available in digital format.

Ana's aim was not only presenting the findings of her PhD research in a visually comprehensive and technologically advanced way. With more than 300 uploaded events, the ACARTE 1984–1989 Timeline proved to be a research tool on cultural transformations in the 1980s, and on performing arts both in Portugal and in the early EEC of the 1980s and 1990s. "By crafting the ACARTE Timeline 1984–1989, I hope to create a commons tool that will allow for a better understanding of what was at stake in Perdigão's curadoria da falta, namely the heteroclite and diverse ways in which ACARTE marked its time in the 1980s.", Ana declared.

To get further insight in Ana's research, you may want to check:

• The ACARTE Digital Timeline, 1984-1989, a "commons tool", by Ana Bigotte Vieira (page 76-83 here)

• "I guess you guys aren't ready for that yet... but your kids are gonna love it" - part 1

ACARTE Timeline 1984–1989, main interface. © Ana Bigotte Viera

• "I guess you guys aren't ready for that yet... but your kids are gonna love it" - part 2

• Some bibliography, as well as Ana's essays on the topic of art archives: here.

The international multimedia dance platform: Numeridance.tv

Dimitry Ovtchinnikoff, the general administrator at Maison de la Danse, France, presented their multimedia dance platform called Numeridance. Everything started when the Ministry of Culture of France designed a programme for funding the digitalisation of cultural and art companies' works. When this opportunity popped out, Maison de la Dance had a huge amount of video records which they had no idea how to distribute and communicate outside the company. For one thing they were sure: they wanted a live archive for their live artworks...

So Numeridance, which started from the idea of a live archive for a well-established art organisation, is now an interactive web platform in its third edition that is:

•bilingual, international, offering more than 3000 videos from almost 200 contributing organisations;

• multimedia, adaptive to contents, truly interactive: allowing to make personal collections, share, play games and so on;

• faster and more stable streaming, accommodating growing numbers of visitors;

•multipurposed, offering educational recourses, detailed filters to search and research, search history, favourites list;

• various options to contribute and present works, and to share them on the social media;

• complying with all and any copyright policies;

• free of charge for users and with reasonable prices for contributing organisations.

Generally, the platform features four major divisions: Videoteque, Themas, Tadaam!, and ND Lab.

Videoteque allows viewing more than 3000 videos: dance performances, rehearsals, interviews, etc. by almost 200 organisations from around the world. The detailed search engine gives options to filter content by genre, author, country, title... Each video is accompanied by as much information as possible: choreographer, director, but also music, costume design, etc.

Themas gives options to use the multimedia collection as innovative tool for education and research. One can discover the world of dance through web documentaries, journeys, and virtual displays. The exploration can go from artists, organisations, and art pieces to art movements or social topics and historical events.

Tadaaam! is dedicated to the audiences and the dancers of the future: to the children who are interested in dance. With a lot of quizzes, quests, and games, Tadaam! is meant to be an exciting introduction to the world of dance, but also, to assist teachers serving as an educational library for their classes. In fact, it is not a 'kids only' area. One of the games - My dance company could surely be interesting to play for anyone.

ND Lab section presents a selection of audio-visual productions for the web: 360° videos, web docs, web series, timelines etc., allowing for exploring dance in all forms, genres, and styles.

Anyone can browse the content or register for free and make use of the online tools such as saved search history and favourites, playlist exchange, participative projects, options for sharing on social media platforms... This elaborate online platform, coordinated by Maison de la Dance, has been developed hand-in-hand with the French National Centre for Dance (CND) and has been supported by the BNP Paribas Foundation and the French Ministry for Culture. To maintain advertisement-free, it also relies on personal donations and on the financial participation from the website contributors who pay a small fee in order to publish their content on the platform.

From its initial conception, Numeridance was designed to be a community platform for artists, producers, companies, institutions, theatres, festivals, National Choreographic Centres... The communication goes both ways, Dimitry explained. The professional community contributes by proposing their video collections and web content to be curated on the platform and plays important role in its development and financing. The platform also serves as an online resource dedicated to artistic and cultural education which is increasingly
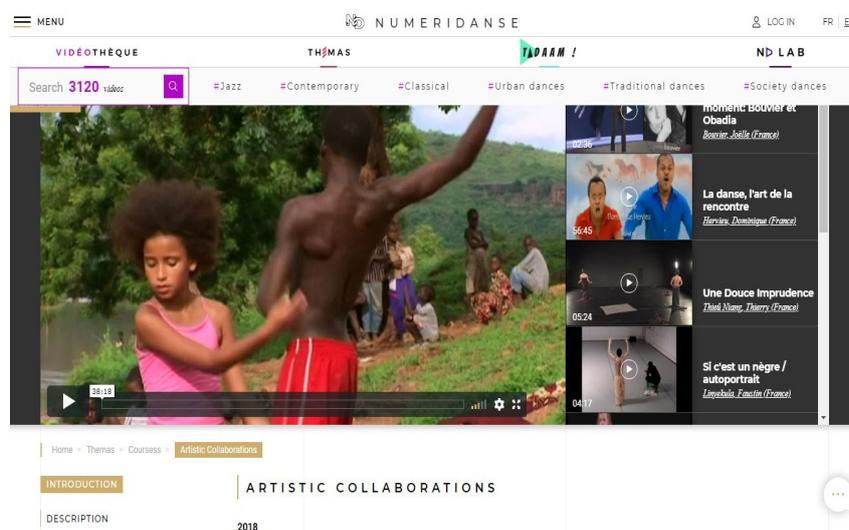
A screenshot from the Numeridance website

utilised by schools and universities to build the discourse of dance for their students. But it is as open as possible: everyone can join.

Performing art archives: between politics, aesthetics, and economy

Introducing the discussion, Carlos Costa underlined that there are several pivotal questions that everyone who is to establish and maintain an archive has to deal with, and will be constantly dealing with. Those are questions of politics, aesthetics, and economy that are quite often interweaved. Carlos urged the group to share their thoughts and ideas how to possibly tackle those complex questions.

Questions of power / politics

Obviously, no archive can contain everything, so there is someone who makes the choice what should be documented in the archive and what – not. Who decides what is going to be saved and why? Who sets the objectives of the archive, its purpose, and determines its possible uses?

Are artists in control of how their work is being documented? Do they have power to influence what should be included in an archive?

Questions of economy

Powerful organisations have resources to document their work, organise it, and store it into archives... What happens with the smaller organisations, with individual artists: who would take care of documenting and archiving their work?

Is the archive a tool for exploring the past or rather for establishing connections and collaborations for the future? In this case, what happens to those outside the archive?

How are copyright issues resolved, especially in cases of collective art pieces, of commissioned works and so on? How are the documents in the open access archives protected from copyright infringement?

What happens with the archive collection when the organisation ceases to exist, is it possible to maintain it?

Questions of aesthetics

When it comes to preparing a document of a live performance art piece, video is the usual media of choice. But it should be well noted that what we see in a video is quite different from what we witness as an audience when seeing a performance live. Even nowadays social media livestreaming gives a different view than actually witnessing the work first hand. As Carlos put it, the video document in the case of live arts is the meeting point between the performance and the image, and there is a higher risk in not giving a precise idea, than for example,

in visual art or in literature (although there also is often no equivalency between the artwork and its documental representation in the archive either).

So, when the video is merely a document of a live artwork, and when, at what conditions it can become an artwork in its own merit?

What would you do if the live event is worthy but its video record is of poor quality (and vice versa)?

Does the new video piece shift the audience's attention from live to the digital at some point?

Trying to address those questions but knowing they will constantly remain 'open' when it comes to live arts archives, Sonia, Ana, Dimitry and Carlos shared some insights from their practice.

Regarding access to archives, Dimitry offered the example of Numeridance, where bigger organisations can promote individual artists or small companies to be included in the archive for their expense. And instead of splitting the dance scene along some 'power centres', the platform became a positive example of an equal approach: "we unite and we share", Dimitry stated.

As for copyrights, Numeridance platform has a dedicated workflow of ensuring the copyrights of the works are cleared. Typically, it is the company contributor who settles them, but on certain occasions, when a piece is considered important for understanding contemporary dance, Numeridance pays royalties for that piece. That was the case with Josephine Becker's Banana Dance, for example. And if Numeridance were to be taken down, the copyright will return to the video owners.

Looking back at her practice of mapping contemporary dance scene in Brazil, Sonia shared that her biggest worry was that people would easily say: this is contemporary dance in Brazil. While it was certainly not, it was only the fractions that managed to get into that particular edition of the mapping.

Regarding the purposes to use an archive of contemporary performing arts, there is indeed a wide variety. Some would use it to learn and research, others may utilise it to identify potential partners, to programme a festival or just to 'see how the land lies'.

Carlos found it particularly interesting how the new ways of documenting can alter our perceptions of live arts. Before, there was only the memory of the performance and the memory of the feelings and thoughts it evoked. And possibly, a memory of a conversation with others about the performance. Now, with current ways of documenting, livestreaming, uploading on social media, sharing, we can gather memories of the performance, rehearsals, dramaturgy books, interviews with artists, behind the scenes stories, social media publications, media coverage, reviews... In the future, all this will surely alter the way we remember things, live art pieces, in particular.

Ana noted that when we start planning and designing our archives we also think of the way we will present them: will there be an online video collection, a documentary film, will there be behind the scenes shots and interviews, will the piece be presented in full length or not; and so on. That adds yet another layer of subjectivity to our choices what to document and what to enter the archive.

Dimitry added that there are very different documenting practices. Some choose to have a still camera to emulate a real-life audience member view. Others shoot in different angles and montage the video with close shots, audience reactions and so on. Additionally, there is specific dramaturgy for digital media if one wants to make art out of a document of live art.

But most often, archives do not offer a full-length video coverage of a performance, but an excerpt of it. So the archive could not replace the performance itself because of their different nature.

"Live arts are an ancient art form so we might borrow means of expression from other arts so that we continue to travel in time", Sonia suggested.