

## Data Salon #9 Briefing Challenging Histories: Performance Archives and Cultural Data

**Date:** November 27th 2020

**Location:** Online

**Conveners:** Lizzie Muller and Keir Winesmith

**Speakers:** Dr. Jonathan Bollen, Senior Lecturer, Theatre and Performance Studies, UNSW and Claire Eggleston, Senior Librarian, AGNSW

**Guest host:** Dr. Erin Brannigan, Senior Lecturer, Theatre and Performance, UNSW

Guest hosted by Dr Erin Brannigan this salon addressed cultural data in relation to performance. It focused on the work of archives and data-bases in shaping histories and contemporary understandings of performance. Our two key examples were the exhibition [Pat Larter: Get Arted](#) (that was on show at AGNSW at the time of the salon) and the [AusStage database](#) of Australian Live Performance.

### Key themes:

#### Hierarchies in data

The implicit and explicit hierarchies embedded in cultural memory institutions (museums, archives, libraries) that tend to privilege art collections over archives, and visual over performance art (ie. stable static objects over ephemeral and lived forms of cultural expression). Including a recognition that these hierarchies are gendered.

#### Gaps and traces

Claire Eggleston described gaps that exist in performance archives which tend to be based on traces rather than on systematically recorded information. She reflected on how practices might need to change to address these gaps, and the growing interface between archival practice and conservation and curation practice, that is beginning to challenge institutional hierarchies.

#### Between repertoire and archive: The work of the imagination

The question of how archives are experienced and how they work to support histories. This was framed in terms of the relationship between lived, embodied performances/acts (repertoire) and the material traces it leaves (archive). We discussed how to work in the gap between these two to *animate the archive through imagination*.

#### Disbursed and networked

Jonathan described working across performance data-bases internationally and the use of digital driven techniques to “accumulate virtually what is materially very distributed”. He introduced the AusStage database as a virtual collection that links to a very disbursed and distributed performing arts collections in australia.

### **Data persistence and history making**

We discussed how the work of activating performance archives could interface with the Sydney Culture Network in terms of how performance materials are picked up, amplified, reused and made public. There are particular opportunities for working with contemporary artists to investigate data and help us to connect with art from the past.

### **Potential for living archives**

Reflecting on the traditional role of archives as places to care for the remains of live artworks after their death, Claire asked (rhetorically) how to get the archivists “out of the funeral parlour”. Jonathan pointed out that many digital collection techniques (e.g. motion capture) claim to capture “life” but are in fact not about sustaining the life of a social practice through embodied experience and lines of learning. To do this archives need to activate and engage with the relational networks and live context of artefacts and traces.

### **Cultural data at scale**

We talked about the different stories that data can tell (a favourite topic at all data salons) depending on the different scales at work. Jonathan showed a fantastic example of a forthcoming exhibition (at the [UNSW Library](#)) that visualises large amounts of data relating to Australian performance over 100 years. He described some fascinating insights that can come from viewing data at this scale, including understanding shifts in business and production models that map onto gender shifts in the performing arts workforce during events like the second world war. He described the importance of connecting large scale patterns like this with the capacity to zoom in to intimate case studies through individual artefacts.

### **About the Data Salon:**

The Salon series provides a unique forum to share experiences, strategies, and tools for leveraging data across the Sydney Culture Network (SCN). With invited talks, discussion and show-and-share opportunities the salons explore how data-led research and innovation informs a holistic view of audience experience and institutional practices to influence daily decision making, strategic planning and sectoral collaboration.

2021 Salon conveners: Megan Lawrence and Rory McKay.

Salon founders and 2019/2020 conveners: Lizzie Muller and Keir Winesmith.

The salon is held bi-monthly on the last Friday of the month.