

# Archives and the Dancing Body

Archival practices and how they relate and reveal processes of knowing is relevant to current discussions within the cultural heritage sector. The idea that the archive is a static repository of history is increasingly being challenged by artists, dance companies, archivists and academics. The experiences and embodied ways of knowing can be revealed through archiving dance and the dancing body offers an entry point to reflect on existing archival structures and institutions that might be expanded and reframed in order to account for the moving body and interdisciplinary modes of working and documenting. This capacity-building event presented four different dance archives (Chisenhale Dance Space Archive, UK; the Eva Schul Archive, Brazil; Siobhan Davies' Replay, UK; and the Decoda / Summer Dancing Festival Archive, UK) sharing the technical and artistic aspects of the projects, and opening up to discussion.

## Themes explored at the event included:

- Access and tech: the development of digital tools in relation to archives
- How do we give visibility to the works/archives outside of Europe/North America? Questions related to language (English as lingua franca).
- How do we recognise the social and the personal in the archive? How much can we access the lived experience of social subjects through archival material when the subject might be untraceable or deceased; what is the role of archives in this?

## Key takeaways:

- Structural limitations pertaining to dance archives: the power of collective (as well as individual) archives in understanding the work and historically the social and political context in which works were made. Do dance collectives pose additional challenges within the archive? How can the collective be archived or recognised as well as the individual work? What more can be done with existing historic material (archived or not) to promote accessibility and to continue to challenge what is being archived and how?
- The need to promote information in as many formats as possible: facilitate embodied and experiential histories e.g. oral histories enhance legibility of existing archival documents; oral history as a method that coincides with archival study brings unauthorised forms of knowledge and narrative into critical consciousness and acknowledges their legitimacy.
- Think about what information is included - non-dominant narratives, what might be excluded from archives (friendships, lived experiences, personal testimony, conversations) - the need to situate the personal within the scholarly interpretation of the archival material, informal knowledges in the production of counter-historical narratives.
- The supposed difficulty in archiving the ephemeral places the work in a position to challenge traditional modes of archiving - opportunity to rethink the archive because of the different qualities that it holds in comparison to documenting other forms of history.
- How to create situations where archival material continues to generate and where it can be participatory, where it can be reconstructed, recreated, re-made?

- The problem of embodied knowledge of oral histories relies on accessing people related to work - relies on people being alive and well – a reminder that this work is urgent, should act sooner rather than later to change and challenge how things are accessed and are accessible
- Broaden contextual information- active connections to other archives, promote interdisciplinarity; connections between public resources, public art collections and exhibitions, situate dance work within collective context within its broader social, political and cultural context.
- Consider different ways of working with archival material - archival studies, oral histories and curation interlink in a very productive way that allows for embodied knowledge located in the individual and collective body to be accessed and shared. Historical material as a site for discussion, collaboration and enquiry - the potential for new connections, relationships and knowledge which create synergies with both the material and with one another as processes to be formed; research itself adopts performative qualities.
- Participatory archiving - engaging archivists and historians with community members to share the work of archiving, a really productive way to move forward.
- 'Immersive archives', embodied approaches to archives, moving and dancing with archives as a constantly evolving, iterative process - dancing with material remains and 'leftovers' in this process.
- The value of the place of personal memory and remembering in the archive
- What do we value? What does value mean in the context of archives? How do we place value on historical materials? What is absent? What is made visible or becomes invisible?
- Accessibility and sustainability - the 'lifetime' of a digital archive, the inherent vulnerability in digital archives.
- How do archives become visible through digital platforms and catalogues? Are they more visible and accessible than 'analogue' archives? Or is this an assumption?
- How can dance archives be accessible? A shift in an understanding of archives from storage to thinking about it in terms of access?
- Balance between the need to preserve, conserve and safeguard content and for the archive to be alive, e.g. through 'performing the archive'
- Archives and documents as 'living organisms' - what does the generative archive look like?

**Video:** <https://youtu.be/IBwCiwQ6LNQ>