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Who is archiving what, where and when?

By Henrik Frisk

Introduction

What is data and what is an archive of data? What kind of information does a piece of artistic research data contain and who is equipped to decipher it? I do not think that artistic research data is necessarily different from, say, research data in the humanities, at least not in principle. I do think, however, that the specificity of artistic research data sometimes makes it more difficult to handle, which in turn makes it is easy to mistake the raw data for information, as if the data itself is enough. Any data stored always points to a situation, and while it is true that one of the fundamental thoughts behind open data is that any researcher can take any piece of data and use, modify, and share without restriction, it is reasonable to ask what the meaning of the data is in artistic research without its context. Also, the downside of this openness is that any kind of strange and superficial correlation can be validated with a sufficiently large collection of data even if originally this data may have had a completely different meaning.

Even before approaching the question of what a piece of data signifies by itself, the question of how something becomes data is of relevance and in this essay the examples that follow are from the field of artistic research in music. Today the digital domain is almost ubiquitous, and it is easy to forget the often irreversible process of digitally encoding a real-world sound for example. The attempt to document a musical practice nearly always also involves a transformation into the digital realm at some point – both in the ways that the actual process is encoded, and in the way it is archived, and meta-data is applied to it. Unless the performance already was completely digital – which is hard to imagine being possible – these transformations are made through several different pathways. However, the encoding of the object of documen-

tation must be preceded by the most central question: *what* do I document? Often the documentation involves a reduction of the thing documented. For example, an excerpt in the form of an audio file may be documented and archived to prove a point in the research, leaving parts of the performance, the instrument played on, and perhaps even the context aside. Clearly, not everything can be discussed at the same time. Even so, without proper meta-data about where and how this sound was recorded, and by whom, I doubt this piece of research data can be useful to anyone except maybe the researcher from whose practice the excerpt was extracted.

Memory and meaning

The argument that I will pursue in this short essay is that there is an important connection between the person collecting the data, the time and place it was collected, how the data is encoded, and what it can possibly say about either of those things, or in and of itself. A composition that is a part of an artistic research project will undoubtedly generate a lot of material that has no obvious connection to the artistic result, perhaps not even to the artistic process. When the decision to document is made, what happened that gave rise to the impulse of documenting a particular instance? Whose impulse was it? Whoever came to think about documenting this instance may have information about it that may or may not be part of the actual documentation. It is not obvious that the documentation itself reveals this information. From this follows an even larger question: What kind of knowledge does the researcher need to possess, about research, research data, or artistic practice to make the judgement that a particular sketch or output is a valuable piece of research data for a particular project? Obviously, a thorough research method will be of great help here, but what happens to this sketch when it is documented, transferred to the digital domain, and archived? How can the researcher be sure that the correct information is stored for the data to reveal something about the process? As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the fallacy here is to mistake the data in and of itself for information. An argument could be made that if only enough of these sketches are collected and documented they will reveal something important about the process, but how are the readers of the archive, they who re-collect the data, going to disentangle this knowledge from the collection?

Cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin discusses the challenges of documentation in his work "Excavation and Memory". He does so

in a broader sense involving memory, history, and understanding, but it is nevertheless of relevance to the discussion in this text. In an attempt to go beyond the simple cataloguing or logging of knowledge he emphasises the importance of both the *what* and the *how* of documentation:

And the man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them. Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.¹

In fact, Benjamin highlights not only the *how* and the *what*, but points to the impact of who remembers through this archive. He considers the thing found as something that has an inherent value, but the *meaning* of this object is dependent on other perspectives, such as the place, and more specifically, the strata in which the object was collected. It is of crucial importance for the reader of the archive to be able to connect past to present, that is, connecting the time of the collecting to the time of the reading. I can have knowledge of the object, but failing to reconnect it to its origin will result in a failure to realise the value of it in its past and present context. Objects can be stored and accumulated *ad infinitum* without really generating new knowledge. The “richest prize” that Benjamin is referring to is won when we manage to synthesise the past with the present and integrate history in the current world.

Returning to the artistic research example above, the sketch that was derived in the process of composing is collected from a stratum of data of all kinds. Following Benjamin, the position of this sketch in relation to the mass of material from which it originates is of crucial importance. In a wider sense this location can be understood as the context of the research process, but it goes beyond merely collecting information about the situation. There needs to be a proper understanding of what was before and after it, what its relation to the whole is, and what else happened in its proximity. Furthermore, the person storing the data should be present in such a way that when, at a later stage, this piece of

1 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*. (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 576.

data is accessed this person has a role similar to that of an author to a text. They should leave a trace in the data that is accessible but which does not define it.

Perhaps the similarity with Benjamin's thoughts on the meaning of memory through history is not great enough to draw wide-ranging conclusions when thinking about research data. I nevertheless believe there is merit in the idea that both the archivist and the context of the thing archived influence the value of an artistic research data archive as a repository of knowledge.

The musical archive

There are some striking examples of what happens to an archive when these properties are ignored. The commercial music streaming services are a contemporary example of the predominant focus on the collection of objects at the expense of context and meta-data. As a consequence, the data made available to the consumer through these services, out of which any one listener will only encounter a fraction of the objects collected, propagates the false image of listening to music as an activity that only involves the ears. That music is self-sufficient, a form of communication beyond language, is a recurring idea but the experience is the result of many other impressions other than just the heard music. Imagine for example how knowledge about the origin of a piece of music can alter the listening experience. In the past the record cover served as a proxy through which this extra information could be accessed.

The very idea of collecting large amounts of data without order or consideration – more is more – is of course consistent with the rest of the internet, probably the largest “archive” ever created, and, as such, with a complete absence of structure. In fact, this modernist, or rather post-modernist concept of a structure without centre is at the very heart of the internet. It was the governing feature that built this humongous digital pandemonium only paving the way for the next brilliant idea: to sell the service that brings structure to the unstructured. To create structure where there is none has been very lucrative for the big internet search companies and similar ventures that gather loosely structured information and present it in user friendly ways. These companies were the archaeologists of contemporary media, and the new large language models (LLM) used by the many AI services merely exploit and breed on the data. Neither of these need to establish the precise origin of their findings as long as the information appears valid to the user.

An archive of musical material most often archives representations of musical content, and to be meaningful it must go beyond a mere collection

of musical resources such as recordings and scores, where origin is of great importance. For the right reader, an archived score can relatively easily give an accurate impression of the music but is a poor representation of the actual sounds. A recording of a performance is a more accurate representation of the sound, but a poor representation of the material and embodied performance. Furthermore, it is not easy to deduce to what extent a recording is an accurate description of what was played in the moment, or if it is a version that has been edited and, from a certain point of view, improved. There is a continuum between the two categories of what we might call the raw documentation and the edited recording. Both are reductions of the materiality of the performance made to fit the archivable documentation format, but with extensive editing the documentary aspect of the concert recording is gradually lost. However, an edited recording that also includes a detailed documentation of how the editing was done along with *all* of the recordings can reveal details about the performance as well as the recording that were not there before. This requires that the archive is constructed to allow for this. The archive, however, structures itself and demands the kind of recording it needs to fulfil its own goals and only that which *can* be archived will be archived. How, then, could an archive of musical data be structured so that it permits an understanding of the thing archived, considering the context in which it is read? How can we avoid being cheated of the richest prize, as Benjamin puts it?

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida points to the dangers of the structures of the archival process:

[...] the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.²

Even the *wish* to archive and to make content accessible in a structured format creates delimitation and determined articulations that exclude as much as it makes available. In a related discussion on photography Derrida asks the question: “How to imagine an archive that is somehow immediate, a present that *consists* of its own memory or its own reproduction?”³ This question resonates well with Benjamin’s exploration above. Setting aside the fact that, in the age of AI the photograph will never again be an unambiguous

2 J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 17.

3 J. Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography* (Stanford University Press, 2010), p.1.

reproduction, nor will it consist of its own memory, it is possible to imagine how the act of documenting something creates an archive that is a snapshot of an event. Be it a photograph or an audio recording this archived object is a trace of what happened in that precise moment and when the moment has vanished the impression remains in the archive:

If the archive is constituted by the present itself, it is therefore necessary that the present, in its structure, be dividable even while remaining unique, irreplaceable and self-identical. The structure of the present must be divided so that, even as the present is lost, the archive remains and refers to it as to a non-reproducible referent, in irreplaceable place.⁴

Following this line of thought both the thing archived and the place from which it emanates are at the very core of the structure of the archive, in a way that is not dissimilar to how human memory works. Time moves on and changes the imprint over time. Hence, Derrida's deconstruction of the archive is situated in a psychoanalytical framework that rests on the notion of the impression, inscription and recording of the unconscious. In that sense the archive, in an act of repression, may also restructure that which it archives. Say that the composition from the artistic research process above is archived, both in its components and its sketches, along with all the background information. There is no guarantee that all this material, even if it has been captured with the appropriate meta-data, produces a work that even partly resembles the original work. Even if the non-reproducible referent is present, even if the present is segmented, so is the current present and it will always have an important impact on the possible ways in which the data may be understood. However, that artistic practice is not reproducible is a quality and not a problem and it would be futile to attempt to build an archive for exact replication. Contrary to what one may initially believe, the more extensive the archive of an artistic research process archive that documents the musical practice, the more manifold the possible interpretations of this data—more data does not necessarily result in higher resolution. The archive's foremost quality is that it participates in the restructuring of the ontology of the work it documents, and nurtures new works rather than reproducing old ones. This idea of a (false) memory machine leads us into a discussion concerning the inscription and printing of the different capacities of the human psyche. In what ways do we consider this archive to be different from our own memory?

⁴ Derrida, 2010, p. 3.

The argument of this essay has been that in the context of documenting an artistic research practice it matters who collects data, in a way that is similar to how it matters when and in what context the data was collected. This would allow a reader to understand the information through the lens of the archivist, that is the researcher, and the place, which could potentially increase the meaning of the archived thing. The impact of the moment of documentation can be understood by thinking about a recording of a rehearsal where a passage is repeated over and over again. Not knowing the precise time of the excerpts in relation to the original time distorts the message greatly. Listening to these recordings with hindsight adds a new present to them, which will alter the impression of them and of their original time and place. Finally, the importance of the location may perhaps best be understood as it was described earlier, as a piece of stratified documentation.

Concluding remark

The structure of the archive is of great importance. The archive writes itself to a certain degree and it builds and develops its structure over time. Or, as put by Derrida: “Archivable meaning is also and in advance co-determined by the structure that archives. It begins with the printer”.⁵ He brings together the printer with the printed in a similar way to how Benjamin puts the focus on the archivist. It is a mistake to view the archive as a neutral repository for research data. Successful archiving requires acknowledging that the archive actively shapes its content, necessitating the inclusion of comprehensive meta-information with the archived material. This is some of the knowledge a researcher needs to have about the process of documenting and archiving artistic research data.

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5 Derrida 1998, p. 18.