1. Introduction

John Ambrogio has just been conferred with a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Digital Arts degree *cum laude*, after concluding a two-year course offered by the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences (MaKS) of the University of Malta. A course that was facilitated by an Endeavour Scholarship award.

While the first and second semesters (2015/16) of the course were predominantly lecture-based, the second year (2016/2017) was entirely dedicated to literature review and field research to realise a final project and a contextual dissertation which John titled, *The Archive of the Dancing Body*.

2. About the MFA degree course

In his paper, *Researching Art and Design through Practice: A critical engagement with context*, Professor Vince Briffa - Head, Department of Digital Arts, writes that the MFA in Digital Arts is a taught, practice-based Master’s degree, that covers and crosses between areas of visual production and research, with students’ outcomes sited within the digital arts, the plastic arts, visual communications, the moving image and photography” (Briffa, 2014, p. 223).

From a professional career perspective, the University of Arts of San Francisco, considers an MFA as the new MBA and while extolling its value in executive positions, it headlines that *Silicon Valley Hires MFAs*, citing that “A Forbes story from 2015 revealed that ‘throughout the major U.S. tech hubs, whether Silicon Valley or Seattle, Boston or Austin, Tex., software companies are discovering that liberal arts thinking makes them stronger. …”’ (Academy of Art University, 2017)

3. The Archive – From Antiquity to the Cloud

In his contextual review John focused on the major transformations which the Archive has undergone throughout the millennia. Patricia C. Franks goes back as far as the 8th Millennium BCE, when ancient agriculturalists inscribed clay tokens with reed implements as tangible and portable memory aids (Franks, 2013). Then around 700 BCE, the Muses, nymph-like tropes for
inspiration, progeny of Zeus and the Titan, Mnemosyne, the embodiment of memory, through their performatve acts of poetry, music, song and dance, inspired the mythical Hesiod to recount history to the rulers of his time.

However, it was not until the alphabet was created by the classical Greeks, that the *arkheion*, came into being. It was a store of knowledge with a fixed shelter where the *archons*, or superior magistrates, exercised their political power by interpreting the written archive. A model that lasted for many centuries only to be challenged by the French revolution in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} Century, when the people got access to state archives and could interpret them without the hermeneutic intervention of latter day archons, or the political class (Derrida, p. 4).

The next transformation took place in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} Century caused by the widespread use of the World Wide Web, eMail and RSS feeds. This was soon to be followed by Cloud Computing and the Internet as a crowd-sourcing repository democratised further by the Web 2.0 paradigm, or the Social Media, that is rapidly becoming the virtual archive of first instance for the textual and visual records of large portions of humanity.

Furthermore, and in order to provide a back-drop to the way in which non-indigenous dance genres have been imported, appropriated, developed and performed by Maltese practitioners, historiographies of the dance genres under investigation, are also part of John’s contextual review 4.

4. Preserving Dance Heritage

The aim of John’s project is to raise awareness on the need to preserve and curate born-digital records within Malta’s performing arts domain in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century and beyond. With this in mind, his objective was to design a blueprint of processes crafted as close as possible to the principles and recommended flows laid out by the *lingua franca* for digital preservation - the Open Archival Information System (OAIS) reference model formulated by the Consultative Committee for Space Data Systems (CCSDS, 2012), a system that is intended primarily for digital institutional repositories.

5. Researching the Legal Framework

John is concerned that large volumes of discrete data objects and artefacts, that could be part of national memory and, or, intangible cultural
heritage, are presently running the risk of never being captured and curated in an institutional grade archive. His research included a review of the provisions of the National Archives Act - Cap.477; Malta Libraries Act – Cap. 511; Cultural Heritage Act – Cap.445; Copyright Act – Cap. 415 and the Data Protection Act – Cap 440, of the laws of Malta and their respective relevance to the preservation of audio-visual records from producers, theatres and content providers. This, so as to discover if the present legal framework is adequately providing for the long-term curation of born-digital records. That is, records which are not intended to have an analogue equivalent either as the originating source or because of conversion to analogue form” (Harvey, 2010, p. 46). Or as UNESCO guidelines state, “Where resources are ‘born digital’, there is no other format but the digital original” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 28).

6. **The Practice-led Research Paradigm**

In an effort to establish the reasons why and what digital records need to be selected and preserved, John went on to investigate the production processes of exotic and contemporary dance in the studios of Maltese dance companies, as a potential use-case for his process blueprint. The methodology applied was the “Multi-Method of Performative Research” (Haseman, 2009, p. 151), identified by Brad Haseman, as the optimal model for practice-led research. This is a reciprocating research methodology that engages the researcher as a practicing audio-visual creative, to visually record and document the transformative processes and ephemera that dance artists follow and produce in creating their performative art.

7. **Recording Content – Pre-production phases**

John’s ethnographic field research was thus more focused on the creation of dance art rather than on the final performance *per se*. In one instance, his research discovered that in one exotic genre, that of Flamenco and Spanish dance, the hours dedicated to studio and choreographic perfection phase registered a 99:1 ratio for every hour of stage performance time.

Comparatively, it was found that contemporary dance, the other genre being researched, produced much higher ratios of pre-production times but this may be specific to the particular entities that John was investigating. These were, the Dance Studies Department of the School of Performing arts at the University of Malta and the ŻfinMalta Ensemble. The former an academic
entity showcasing third year bachelor’s degree students and, the latter, the national dance company that employs full-time dancers.

8. Making Connections

The first phase of the research was conducted within the inner sanctums of dance creation through what Sara Pink calls “emplaced sensory participation” (Pink, 2015). Consequently, and armed with the acquired epistemic inflation, including the identification of a number of stakeholders, for the second research phase, John adopted a rhizomatic approach to interview a number of key players that cooperate symbiotically within the dance art domain. This phase was deemed necessary, to assess the propensity of specific theatres and dances companies, to embark on their own project for an in-house digital repository of works captured only in digital form.

9. Assessing Maturity and Capability Levels

This part of the field research was carried with questionnaires compiled from the digital preservation model that is based on the “…UK Office of Government Commerce’s Prince 2 maturity model (P2MM), a framework for assessing an organisation’s project management capabilities. This defines a five-step scale of ‘maturity levels’ corresponding to the sophistication of an organisation’s processes . . . ” (Brown, 2013, p. 86). In the process, to also assess their strategic intent and vision to have their works, their repertoire, or annals of staged performances, ingested and preserved in a trusted digital repository (Ambrogio, 2017). A situation assessment of current digital preservation policies, if in force, was also part of this inquiry.

10. Findings

After concluding his research phase, John found that:

1) State theatres, do have analogue archives under a physical shelter but preservation policies are fragmented while curation typically depends on one person. Born digital records of audio-visual content of performances in the state theatres researched, are yet to be catalogued in a digital asset register and no “legal deposits” of audio-visual documents from public performances are submitted to the National Library.
2) The National Archives does have plans for an institutional grade digital repository but the lack of facilities and resources seem to be a constant constraint in accelerating its execution.

3) The dance companies reviewed all have some form of analogue and born digital records. However, the ones interviewed struggle to organise their past legacy of dance art in a formal archive that can be accessed by practitioners and their communities. It was also found that Social Media is being used as a temporary online repository for still and moving imagery of rehearsals as an *aide memoire* for revision during the perfective stages of choreographic steps and somatic movements.

4) All the managers and artistic directors of the theatres and dance companies which John researched are aware of the need to develop a digital preservation process flow but, up to the conclusion of John’s research, none of them had a defined roadmap for developing the process. Thus, no entity under review could be graded higher than 1 in the scale of 5 in the P2MM model.

5) John found that, having been setup only four years ago, the ŻfinMalta Ensemble (ŻMDE) does not have a legacy archive and, apart from the printed material, most of its performance records are born digital. A selection of the ŻMDE’s works can be found on its official web site, on Vimeo and a dedicated Facebook page. However, no authenticated (via checksums) videos and images of ŻMDE rehearsals and stage productions and ephemera, were being channelled to the National Archives, as a matter of course, as provided by the Act governing records generated by the public service.

6) The OAR @UoM hosted by the Library department at the University of Malta is the only OAIS compliant repository that John could trace in Malta. Besides academic texts, it allows for the ingestion of authenticated audio-visual records, including selected material from private entities that can be classed as suitable for research and academic purposes.

7) At a national level Malta lacks a policy for the preservation of born digital records produced from all the domains of the performing arts or those from other areas of intangible cultural heritage.

8) During the final stages of his research phase John also noted that on the 12th April 2017, a National Audiovisual Steering Committee was setup up between the National Archives, The University of Malta, MCAST, PBS, DOI and M3P foundation who all signed an agreement to digitize audiovisual records of historical importance.

This digitization of legacy analogue material is a welcome initiative. However, it needs to be complemented with a national digital preservation and curation policy as well as a plan for the commissioning of a robust datacentre this is located and administered in Malta. Digitization is a conversion process that creates a digital object from a physical artefact. On the other hand, curation is concerned with the preservation of that record in a specific data format, stored
on a resilient and scalable data processing system that is periodically migrated to the constantly changing technology platforms and data formats. A discipline that relies heavily on Information and Communication Technology domain experts in a close relationship with experts from the performative arts’ domain, library officers, and data scientists who are increasingly becoming vital for mining archival records from the Social Media and Big Data sources and for presenting them as meaningful content to researchers and interested communities.

11. Risks: Fragile Digital=Frustrated Archaeology

John’s research identified a number of risks at all levels of the micro and macro sectors of the performing arts industries.

Of major concern is the non-recording of spatial-temporal artistic processes and performances coupled with the accidental erasure or the loss of digital records due to the fragility of the digital medium.

The lack of written histories of the pioneers in dance schooling, and their contributions to Maltese performative arts is risking the loss of a collective cultural identity. This lacuna results in a scarcity of research material for academic and educational purposes and is considered by practitioners, as a risk to the continuing development of Malta’s cultural landscape.

At the level of the private organisation, the lack of a structured digital record-keeping process for the archiving of their audio-visual records, is a risk to their reputational goodwill and for sustaining their company’s presence as a player in the arts domain.

12. Towards a Common Specification – E-Ark Project

In formulating an initial blueprint of the record-keeping processes of the dance companies, as a notional use-case, John relied on the recommendations and common specification documents released by the E-Ark Project team at the conclusion of a pilot project to create solutions for digital record keeping over time. The E-Ark was a 3-year (2014-2017) multinational research project co-funded by the European Commission under its ICT Policy Support Programme (PSP) within its Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP) to address these challenges. In co-operation with commercial systems providers, E-ARK piloted a pan-European methodology for electronic document archiving, synthesising existing national and international best practices, to keep records and databases authentic and usable over time. Its work was concluded in
January 2017 and its recommendations have been handed over to the DLM Forum who has formally launched the Digital Archiving Standards Board (DAS Board) to guarantee the sustainability and further development of digital archiving standards.

**Recommendations**

At a macro level, and as a cultural imperative, Malta needs to have a trusted digital archive dedicated to the domain of the performing arts. An institutional grade repository, built to industry standards, as testimony of our past and as a live facility to showcase current works that amongst other attributes, acknowledge the origins of local dance schooling.

An archive that should also serve as a repository for all forms of Maltese cultural heritage and be part of a preservation strategy in line with the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage\(^1\), as well as the Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage\(^2\). A living archive of collections of digital objects, born digital or digitized, emanating from audio-visual practitioners who follow and document the ephemeral performing arts.

It is also recommended that the National Archives proactively intervenes to audit the analogue material that lies in private ballet schools from which scores of present day practitioners had graduated and who passionately keep their practice going out of sheer dedication to their dance genre as an existential prerogative.

As the digital age progresses relentlessly, it is hoped that this research will instigate a wide consultation process to help craft a national strategy for the preservation of born digital audio-visual collections of discreet objects and artefacts produced by the performing arts.

At the micro level of the organisation, a number dance practitioners need to convene to create a dance heritage foundation with a mission to curate Malta’s dance heritage and to oversee the creation and maintenance of their digital archive.

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“*Investing in human capital to create more opportunities and promote the well-being of society*”.

\(^1\) http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention
Master of Fine Arts in Digital Arts – Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, University of Malta – Research Project by John Ambrogio completed on the 9th July 2017.

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